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No Uglies: Rejection and Utopia in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*

Abstract

What motivates cruelty against video game characters designed to be friendly? Using human-to-NPC interactions within the game *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* as a case study, this paper seeks to define what aspects of a cozy game contribute towards public displays of aggression or kindness toward the game's characters. An examination of public forums dedicated to discussing villagers deemed *ugly* reveals the importance of parasocial connections in the utopian community planning aspects of *Animal Crossing*'s gameplay. The resulting online discourse surrounding ethical treatment of villagers becomes part of players' conceptions of their role as social planner in-game, further solidifying which behaviors and objectives will yield them the coziest experience. Paratext, therefore, plays an active role in the conception and socialization of *Animal Crossing* players' utopian urban projects.

Keywords: Animal Crossing, utopia, empathy, cruelty, paratext, community

Content warning: hateful language, swearing, descriptions of graphic violence.

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Introduction

The *Animal Crossing* franchise, founded in 2001 and most recently updated in 2020, can be understood as a sort of ur-text, or the originating point, for the cozy gaming subgenre. Although their aesthetics and mechanics have existed in gaming for decades, cozy games can be separated from their counterparts by their adherence to a philosophy of gaming as a restorative, pleasurable, and anti-stress practice. Tanya X Short and other participants of a workshop that concluded with a report on coziness (2018) describe several means by which cozy games are effectively designed: in addition to inviting audiovisual qualities, coziness is achieved through guiding principles such as self-determination, mundanity, narrative intimacy, and evocations of nostalgia. Importantly, cozy games embody several or all these traits simultaneously, encouraging players to cultivate psychological, rather than physical, needs through the ritual of play. Equally essential to a definition of cozy gaming is its usefulness as a reactive movement, where gameplay is therapeutic and dissociated from external political and cultural systems of discord. As described by Agata Waszkiewicz and Martyna Bakun (2020), cozy games create "a fantasy of stability and safety" for players (p. 228). Scholarly works focusing on cozy gaming frequently cite *Animal Crossing* and its prosocial, utopic use of these themes as the distinctive allure of cozy games for players and fan communities (Short et al., 2018). However, many *Animal Crossing* players online also enjoy ridiculing certain *villagers* (plush anthropomorphic animals which serve as the game's non-playable characters) based on their personalities and appearances – sharply opposing the game's cheery, peaceful demeanor. In response, many of the most widely disliked villagers have developed disproportionately sized fan clubs dedicated to their protection and defense in both public and private forms of play.

This is not to suggest that players engaging in the rejection of villagers are somehow less invested in the cozy qualities of *Animal Crossing* games. Rather, it highlights a compelling tension within cozy gaming's utopian ideals: while some *Animal Crossing* players find comfort through socializing with any character, others derive pleasure primarily from the selective assembly of beloved villagers. For these players, the presence of an "ugly" (a popular term used in online forums and the opposite of a "dreamie," a player's favorite or most desired villager) creates a frustrating obstacle to their enjoyment of the cozy qualities of the game, namely its promise of a utopic web of uncomplicated prosocial relationships. If *Animal Crossing* implicitly encourages certain social behavior, how can a cozy game respond when players behave in opposition to the norm? In other words, is the player ultimately responsible for perpetuating a game's sense of coziness? And if so, whose sense of coziness is being crafted: theirs, or the world's? The following sections will examine both ideologies' forms of interaction online and in-game. Featured displays of aggression and charity demonstrate how player behavior is constructed

simultaneously through intentional gameplay and role-playing within the world of *Animal Crossing*, and also via interaction and recollection with other fans through virtual message boards. The frictions and overlaps within these communities serve to highlight the significance of paratexts – user-generated materials that supplement and annotate a work's meaning – to cozy gaming as a subgenre, and how they influence the often-solitary experience of enjoying a cozy game.

Methodologies

While each successive game within the *Animal Crossing* franchise provides the player with familiar sets of objectives and gameplay mechanics, this article will primarily examine the phenomenon of villager-player relationships within the newest entry into the franchise, *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (Nintendo, 2020). This is attributable to the game's wider array of villagers for the player to encounter, the game's explicit themes of total spatial customization of the player's home island, and the large and active current player base. This final point holds particular weight, as *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* experienced additional cultural and commercial acclaim upon release due to its proximity to many early quarantine orders during the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020. The many cozy elements of the game's design offered a surrogate space for social interaction in a time of extreme isolation, providing players with the capacity to give and receive social care separate from the anxieties and tragedies of uncertain times (Zhu, 2020, p. 158). As a result, *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* offers unique insights into the needs and behaviors of cozy gaming communities.

Although in-game patterns of play are essential to understanding player behavior, they do not tell the full story. Community engagement with a game's narrative often occurs beyond the borders of the game world, most notably through social networks. This dimension of interactivity is considered paratext: material that "develops around or adds to the main text(s) of the videogame['s] narratives" (Mukherjee, 2016, p. 60). Paratext can act as an extension of the player's gaming experience, reconfiguring and assigning additional meaning to choices, behaviors, and mechanics beyond the original vision of the developer. Employed in fan communities as an essential aspect of expressing a work's meaning or value, paratext in gaming is most frequently articulated through the recording of unique play histories and related discussions, which publicize narratives of player experience (Mukherjee, 2015; Geraghty, 2015; Švelch, 2017). In the case of gaming, this content can also be understood as an affective force capable of shaping cultural discourse. The production and consumption of online paratexts within a game's greater community not only provides venues for community activity, but also manufactures perceived best practices in-game, which are used to indicate insider

status and achieve artificial or tangible goals (Consalvo, 2017, p. 177). For a cozy game like *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, paratextual content often focuses on idealized displays of comfort and pleasure during one's gameplay. This paper will primarily feature such paratexts, gathered from online discussion boards dedicated specifically to *Animal Crossing*. Quotations from community members were collected from publicly available forum posts made on the websites reddit.com, belltreeforums.com, and gamefaqs.com. In accordance with suggestions made by Shi Min Chua (2022) on the ethics of digital ethnographic data, the identity of their posters and the source website in question will be anonymized in most circumstances to retain a sense of digital privacy.

Coziness through sociality

Animal Crossing is, at its very nature, a game about socializing (Cesar, 2020). While players are certainly permitted to ignore their villagers and focus on more individual tasks, positive social interaction is essentially unavoidable during gameplay. Villagers will approach players looking for friendly conversation, will mail the player gifts, and will even throw players a surprise party on their birthday. Subsequently, worthwhile parasocial relationships become essential to the player's enjoyment of the game's world. *Animal Crossing* fosters these relationships through several design strategies: characters are assigned distinct personality traits and idiosyncrasies (such as sporty, sleepy, or snooty), which manifest to the player through nicknames, behaviors, and home décor. These encourage players to form parasocial relationships with villagers, fostering genuine excitement at the prospect of positive engagement with them (Pearce et al., 2022). These engagements can be considered quintessentially prosocial: moments where the player feels surrounded by a community of friends and loved ones.

While *Animal Crossing*'s visual and mechanical design embodies many of the traits frequently found within modern cozy games, much of this cozy aesthetic is articulated through the game's encouragement of prosocial contact. To appeal to cozy ideals more powerfully, villagers are designed to embody different identities of cuteness and comfort predictably: Stitches, a stuffed teddy bear, sleepily occupies a plush and pastel home décor set, while the fashion-minded Fuchsia resides in a chic house of red and pink furniture, cracking sarcastic comments on the player's wardrobe. Villagers are designed not only to be players' friends, but predictable social assets, presenting as "an appealing means to experience comfort in a way that can be managed and controlled" (Rose, 2023, p. 7). Managing one's villager population, therefore, is essential to maximizing the enjoyment of an *Animal Crossing* experience, leading many players to seek out information on desirable villagers among gaming communities.

Discussion ranges from forum posts about personal dreamies to massive, crowdsourced polls ranking villager preference monthly on websites such as animalcrossingportal.com (2023). The sheer popularity of the most treasured villagers has even spurred grassroots marketplaces between players, in which both virtual and/or literal currency is traded for beloved villagers (players pay to visit others' islands, which allow them to recruit dreamies). Such industries capitalize on the success of *Animal Crossing*'s prosocial fantasies within players, which have extended demand for villagers beyond the developer's intended acquisition channels (Blom, 2022). For players engaging in this side of the game through purchases, trades, or discussions, the formula becomes clear: the more desired villagers – i.e., the more friends – on the island, the cozier the experience.

Rejection and revulsion: The plight of Rodney

The semi-random processes used to assign villagers to islands, coupled with the sheer number of residents potentially available at any given time, means that players are rarely able to predict which characters they will initially encounter. Considering that players may have a proclivity towards certain types or aesthetics of villagers, those who both defy expectations and deprive players of an anticipated dreamie can be met with hostility and disgust. Characters deemed uglies by fans often have less traditionally cute designs, possess a personality that some players find less appealing, or have a décor set perceived to clash with the player's sensibilities. In other cases, a villager may not be widely disliked, but still holds a negative connotation in a player's mind due to a personal vendetta. Active hostility towards such characters takes several forms: for example, they can be hit with bug-catching nets, or their homes can be vandalized with derogatory objects or signs. In response, villagers will often voice their disapproval or hurt from these actions, marking them as antisocial – actively malicious – by both the player and the game's internal logic.

Where these forms of aggression develop most fascinatingly, however, is online. In a similar manner to engagement surrounding dreamies, digital communities dedicated to discussing *Animal Crossing* allow players to share, encourage, and elaborate upon antisocial urges toward uglies. "I just wanna break his neck and toss him out in the sea," one commenter, referring to a villager named Sherb, writes on a forum discussing the least favorite villagers. Another poster describes the mouse villager Moose as an "absolute neckbearded fuck […] he's SO UGLY, the day he asked to move was the happiest day of my life."[1]

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[1] In order to maintain anonymity of the authors of the forum posts, the author decided to not include specific references.

The most illuminating example of this phenomenon comes from a reddit community called r/FuckRodney. Rodney, the subject of the forum, is a hamster villager present in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*. With a smug demeanor, droopy eyes, and buck teeth, Rodney is generally unpopular among players, often ranking near the bottom of favorability polls. Members of the subreddit regularly share images and text posts expressing their hatred for Rodney in a myriad of violent acts: one poster describes Rodney as a "disgusting, obese, ugly, and worthless specimen," while another created a crude .gif of Rodney's head exploding from his body, unleashing a puddle of pixelated blood.

Figure 1. A player-staged scene of villagers attacking Rodney. Many of these characters consistently rank among the top 25 most popular characters within polls.
Source: https://www.inverse.com/gaming/animal-crossing-new-horizons-rodney-reddit-worst-
-villagers (accessed on January 15, 2024)

While much of this content conveys a sense of ironic fan participation, it is important to highlight that the level of commitment to abusing Rodney frequently transcends parody: acts are articulated with attention to detail, and popular posts' comments become increasingly referential and elaborate with time. These physical and behavioral patterns of carnage might be understood as an inseparable part of socializing with *Animal Crossing*'s greater cast of characters. Emma Reay (2022) identifies video game avatars and non-playable actors in cozy games like *Animal Crossing* as instances of the "Blithe Child" character: a toylike form typified by its innocence, plasticity, and passivity. By being presented to the player as child-friendly in harmless contexts, a Blithe Child object is configured as one capable of withstanding violence and experimentation in order to empower the player with

a sense of autonomy in their playstyle (Reay, 2022, p. 113). Due to the doll-like image of the character in question, aggression is simply considered another facet of the gaming experience.

Though some members of r/FuckRodney likely feel they are engaging in harmless play, others utilize the platform to voice genuine distress at the presence of an intruder within their paradise, an unwanted tenant forced upon them without their consent. As one reddit user states, "I hate [Rodney] so much! He has such a good spot in my island but he is the one on the plot. I really want him to leave." When considering that some players experience coziness in-game primarily through maximizing prosocial relationships with characters perceived as friends, antisocial behavior towards Rodney can be understood as a public assertion of the player's demands and social needs within the game. Short et al. (2018) identify non-consensual social presence as a design factor which can negate coziness during play. These relationships, they note, can impact players' experiences substantially, and can feel "threatening, or just suggest an unsought expectation of interaction, reciprocation, or responsibility" (n.p.). Rejecting villagers via ostentatious displays of hatred is itself an inherently social act within the larger *Animal Crossing* community, reinforcing the idea of characters as intentionally selected assets to support the player's comfort. This, coupled with the reliance upon player action for the game world to function, sees violence as a tool to perfect and occasionally rehabilitate cozy experiences amidst disruptions.

Defenders of the ugly

Nevertheless, likeability is within the eye of the beholder: some players have taken to defending the villagers on grounds that their rejection is undeserved or excessive. In the case of Rodney, for instance, a competing community – r/RespectRodney – was created, expressly for the purpose of demonstrating support and prosocial interactions between him and players. Through fanart and in-game screenshots, users describe Rodney as their "bestest pal" and "finally getting the respect he deserves." Here, the paratextual support of Rodney is as critical to players' roles as good virtual neighbors are in-game prosocial behavior. As Jeffrey Ho and Ryan Ng (2022) describe, the instinct to defend and care for Rodney is rooted in a feeling of virtual proximity and victimization, which in turn create empathy towards Rodney's paratextual condemnation.

Moreover, Rodney's public suffering potentially increases a player's altruism: when examining anthropomorphic representations of unattractive endangered species, Alvin A.Y.-H. Chan (2012) asserts that demonstrations of the species' sufferings were more valuable in generating viewer empathy than other scenes of behavior. Rodney's widespread reputation online as a notable ugly, while marking

him for violence, also galvanizes a player base that ties their experience of coziness to an empathetic, stewardly treatment of all villagers. Many players who likely may have never encountered Rodney or kept their friendship with him private instead feel empowered to vocalize their support: to quote one reddit user in 2022, "[a]ll these cute little animals want is to be our friend, but we draw the line with them and judge them entirely based on skin-deep appearances." Actively avoiding antisocial behavior at all costs becomes an intentional aspect of their gameplay, motivated primarily through their empathetic engagement with anti-ugly paratext online.

Paratext, utopia, and community

The sharing of distinct character interactions online not only reinforces paratextual engagement, but also player perceptions that villager relationships are unique and spontaneous (Rose, 2023). Importantly, no distinction between prosocial and antisocial relationships is made here. Through hating or adoring uglies, players are constructing their gameplay experience's core values and goals, which are in turn validated through solidarity with others online. For these players, *Animal Crossing* is made cozier by the discourse, despite seeing their relationships with villagers as personal. Relationships are determined through player opinion, and the actions players take to support or construct these dynamics forge narrative throughlines to their experience (Kouratoras, 2022). This narrative is the central crux to *Animal Crossing*: how will you govern among this community?

It is no surprise that this narrative, plainly containing utopian subtext, includes utopian tools through which players can progress their narrative. By the parameters laid forth by Michał Kłosiński's (2018) analysis of the utopia in gaming, *Animal Crossing* players engage with these tools by commanding direct control over the social and cultural forces governing their virtual settings, including civil engineering, material culture such as flags and anthems, and the selection (or aspiration towards) an idealized roster of villagers. In doing so, players are naturally motivated to create a community which improves upon their perceived experiences within their non-virtual lives. Pursuing the game's objectives and narratives, all directing the player towards this utopian ideal, allows the player to feel in control of their time and as though they are positively contributing to a project (Xong et al., 2021). Interestingly, these are the very same mechanics which have been used to describe *Animal Crossing* as cozy. Here, coziness and utopia can be understood as identical, if not deeply interconnected philosophies within the game. Prosocial or antisocial behaviors towards characters are not only attempts to foster a cozy playing experience but are themselves utopic sentiments. Here,

villager value exists on a spectrum between creators and recipients – features of a personal utopia, or the inheritors of a utopia built for them.

How players determine the characters' roles in their utopia largely relies on two key factors: the perceived autonomy of the villagers and the desired aesthetic, if any, of the player's island. Players are less likely to empathize with characters they view as inherently programmed entities, incapable of creative expression (Harth, 2017). In the case of *Animal Crossing*, individuals who interact with villagers frequently find them repeating conversations and jokes, lessening their perceived agency in the game world (Xong et al., 2021). One forum poster describes this succinctly, stating "[villagers] are decorative at best as none of them have a real personality. Having two of the same kind on your island means getting the same boring conversations again and again." In these cases, such players might experience no social benefits whatsoever, particularly in limiting feelings of social isolation (Lewis et al., 2021). For these players, there is little sense in considering villagers beyond their role as Blithe Child objects or as decorative utility to the player's personal vision of coziness. However, other players view these imperfections as character quirks in addition to programming limitations. These players are motivated to embrace villager autonomy as a necessary aspect of the game's suspension of disbelief, growing to love them as people despite their limited personality (Harth, 2017). Juxtaposed with a utopia that pictures villagers as ornamental, these players might include imagined character input as a continuation of play.

Beyond personalities, villagers may simply fit a certain visual genre more effectively than others, leading to greater perceived value. The virtually limitless options for stylistic and referential world design afforded to the player allows for the creation of meticulous and artistic renditions of popular aesthetics. For many players, villagers play an active role in this design: for example, an island presenting as a busy city block may be amplified by the presence of punk rock or food-themed characters. Paratext generated by other players can provide inspiration and references for a pleasing experience, creating a tangible focus for a player's utopian ideals. This paratext frequently includes recommendations on which villagers would fit the desired aesthetic and contribute to overall coziness. Their personalities may still be important to these players but are viewed as secondary or subordinate to the values communicated by their visual appeal. When villagers clash with a highly aestheticized island, the resulting visual interruption can feel like an obstacle towards utopian realizations.

In an interview with Patricia Hernandez (2020), one player vocalizes this frustration, stating "Now that I can meticulously plan every inch of my island, crafting my own experience and expressing myself through city planning, I am a lot more bothered by seeing villagers who don't match my vision" (n.p.). Conversely, paratext towards designing utopic spaces for the joy and comfort of individual

villagers also exists. In the expansion pack for *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, titled *Animal Crossing: Happy Home Paradise*, villagers not currently residing on a player's island can have a home designed by the player to their specifications. With the requirement of permanent residency removed, players are made to feel a sense of accomplishment in designing the utopian home for any character they wish, frequently sharing design inspirations through paratext repositories such as forums and video sharing channels.

TOP COTTAGECORE VILLAGERS FOR YOUR COTTAGECORE THEMED ISLAND | Animal Crossing New Horizons

Katie on Calla Cove
91.1K subscribers

Figure 2. An example of villager-planning paratext. Here, the Youtuber is providing advice on selecting cottagecore villagers, characters aligning with a traditional cozy aesthetic. Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AODHXGS2YuQ (accessed on January 15, 2024)

Conclusion

Both prosocial and antisocial behaviors towards non-playable characters in virtual landscapes can be understood as the player responding to the conditions laid forth by the game's world. In the case of *Animal Crossing*, a game whose essential objectives are tied to maximizing the level of relaxation and parasocial bonding between the player and their villagers, both behaviors are motivated by the innate desire to engage in a utopian social network, wherein the player plays the dual

roles of designer and beneficiary. The presence of a particular dreamie or ugly is significant for the stability of players' utopic visions, reconfiguring excessive prosocial and antisocial behavior as necessary expressions of joy, frustration, contentment, and ambition. These emotions are amplified through the game's paratext, itself a complex social network with differing utopic visions. Players form their utopian social perspectives both internally and in response to paratextual recommendations and condemnations of certain villagers. From this case study, it is clear that coziness in gaming is more than simply mechanics and aesthetics: coziness can also be understood as the interaction between the game's objectives, community paratexts which codify coziness, and the utopian aspirations of the player within the game's world. Approaching future cozy game studies through an examination of the tensions and connections between these three forces will allow for more nuanced perspectives on player communities and motivations. Only then can a cozy experience be guaranteed for everyone – ugly and dreamie alike.

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Ludography

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