Playing A|part Together in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT
This paper explains how *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* allowed players to "play a|part together" during the COVID-19 pandemic. It describes how this life simulation game helped to fulfill the needs for sociability during the lockdown, based on the conclusions of a collective autoethnography and computer-assisted text analysis. It examines how the game's affordances helped or prevented players in overcoming physical isolation when they were confined to their house or practicing social distancing. It also investigates the appropriations made by players to tailor the game to their social needs in this unprecedented context.

Keywords
Video game, pandemic, sociability, lockdown, isolation

INTRODUCTION
The life simulation game *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (*AC:NH*) (Nintendo 2020), which allows players to build an island, decorate their home and visit other players, was highly successful during the COVID-19 pandemic. Six weeks after its release on March 20, 2020, Nintendo had already sold 13 million copies (Nintendo 2020). Several journalists and researchers attributed this phenomenal success to the need for social interactions during the lockdown (Lamy 2020; Lucas and Gleeson 2020; Sylvestre 2020; Vossen 2020; Woitier 2020). However, it remained unclear as why *AC:NH* was preferred to other video games, beyond its perfect release timing a few weeks after the beginning of the confinement.

This paper explains how *AC:NH* allowed players to "play a|part together" as suggested by the slogan that the World Health Organization launched in collaboration with the game industry during the pandemic. It describes how this life simulation game helped to fulfill the needs for sociability during the lockdown, based on a collective autoethnography and computer-assisted text analysis more largely aimed to understand for what purposes the game was played in that specific situation. It examines how the game's affordances helped or prevented players in overcoming physical isolation when they were confined to their house or practicing social distancing. It also investigates players' appropriations of the game as they tailor it to their social needs in this unprecedented context.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK
Our research borrows from uses and gratifications theory (UGT), which seeks to understand the various reasons why individuals turn to a particular media (Blumler et al. 1974; Katz et al. 1973). This theory is functionalist and empirical; it aims to identify

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which functions a media fulfills for a given audience with the help of field studies. Unlike other types of media reception studies, UGT emphasizes the audience's uses of a media rather than the effects of a media on an audience. In other words, it consists of studying how the audience uses a media and for what purposes, rather than the impact of a media on consumers' opinions and behaviours. UGT presupposes that audience members are active since they are free to: choose the media they consume according to their needs, negotiate the meaning of their messages, and use them as they see fit. It also assumes that uses and gratifications differ according to the consumers' psychological and social situations. These particularities shape their expectations towards the media, but also the way they interact with it and their involvement in related activities (Katz et al. 1973). UGT tends to ignore the influence of the media on the audience as well as the power relations and the socio-political issues that result from it. However, it does not mean denying the existence of such influence and power relations, but simply focusing on other aspects of the relationship between the media and their audience.

One of the needs media can fulfill according to UGT is the need for social integration (interacting with family members and friends, etc.) (Gurevitch et al. 1973). Human beings are fundamentally gregarious: they need to interact with their loved ones to feel good. However, in the pandemic context, social contacts had become more difficult, if not impossible. When several countries implemented lockdown measures to reduce face-to-face interactions, many people suffered from loneliness and isolation. The term "sociability" better describes what was sought-after during the pandemic. Coined by the German sociologist Simmel (1949), it describes a type of social relationship in which individuals seek nothing else than the relationship itself. Unlike instrumental social associations aimed at the acquisition of a status, at gaining power, or necessary for work and survival, sociability is akin to play: it is intrinsically motivated, autotelic and free. Simmel therefore considers sociability as "the play-form of association" (1949, 255).

While many are still skeptical about the possibility of establishing genuine friendships in online games, Bonenfant (2011) defends the idea that sincere friendships can be developed or consolidated in digital environments. However, online social relationships are based on different repertoires of signs and modes of communication, compared to face-to-face relationships, such as chat, emoticons, avatar gestures, etc. (Bonenfant 2011). Even the avatars' positions can be a way to communicate emotions. Taylor gives the examples of two players in *The Dreamscape* (Stratagem Corporation) who positioned their avatar side by side to signal their intimacy, and of two other players who placed their avatar face-to-face to express their anger (2002, 50). She also mentions a group of players who all dressed in black to signal their shared political affiliation during a protest (2002, 46).

Even if online social interactions are mediated by technological devices, they are as "real" as physical interactions since they generate tangible emotions. As Bonenfant explains, this is possible because of human's ability to sense the presence of others and to read emotions from abstract signs (2011, 214). Taylor, for example, highlights the case of one player who feels a "rush of endorphins" each time her avatar receives an "appropriately placed hug" (2002, 49).

UGT has already been used to understand the needs fulfilled by video games (Phillips et al. 1995; Selnow 1984). For example, Sherry and Lucas (2003) identified different reasons for playing (competition, challenge, social interactions, distraction, fantasy and excitement) and later used this typology to assess gender differences in regards to players' motivations (Lucas et al. 2004). Wu, Shu-Ching and Tsai (2010), for their part, studied the influence of three needs identified in UGT (achievement, pleasure, social

interactions) on the motivation and the feeling of presence among MMORPG players. While UGT generally focuses on the uses of a media or a media genre, our research team studied the uses of a particular video game in the specific context of the COVID-19 outbreak.

To do so, we firstly inquired about its "affordances". Coined by the psychologist Gibson (1979) to refer to what an environment offers to a given animal, this concept is employed in game studies to describe the uses that a game environment allows or promotes. In game design, affordances are conceived as the ability of an object to suggest its possible uses, while the psychological approach – favored in our research – is interested in the possibilities of action that players are aware of. For this reason, we identified the affordances of *AC:NH* based on an analysis of players' testimonials rather than a textual analysis.

We were also interested in the players' appropriations of the game to better satisfy their needs during the pandemic. According to etymology, the term "to appropriate" means "to make fit for a use", whereas the term "appropriation" means "the state of what is adapted for something" (our translation, Bonenfant 2015, 80). The appropriation of a video game therefore involves to bank on its possible uses to adapt it to one's particular needs. This often implies to interpret the rules of the game creatively. Because of this interpretative freedom, players' gaming practices are never entirely determined by the games' rules, and new uses can emerge during gameplay (Bonenfant 2015). Unlike transgression, appropriation does not involve breaking the rules of a game; it is rather about taking advantage of the possibilities it offers to use it in a way that was not imagined by other players or planned by the designers.

METHODOLOGY

Since our research team is composed of eleven researchers who played *AC:NH* during the pandemic, we opted for a collective autoethnography and used pseudonyms to refer to the autoethnographers as to protect their anonymity.

According to Ellis (2004), this qualitative research method helps to understand a specific socio-cultural context based on the researchers' autobiographical accounts which relate their personal experiences. Anderson (2006) distinguishes two forms of autoethnography: the evocative and the analytical. The analytical approach – that we chose for this research – focuses on autobiographical narratives in which interpretation and analysis already play a large part.

While autoethnographies are generally performed by a single researcher, there are also "polyphonic" autoethnographies in which several voices resonate together (Chang et al. 2013, 17). In the context of our research, we opted for a "concurrent collaboration" autoethnography that allows researchers to write individually on the same subject before bringing their testimony together (2013, 44). This method involves allowing space and time for individual reflection, before grouping the stories and highlighting their similarities as well as their peculiarities.

In the context of our study, the eleven researchers who played *AC:NH* during the pandemic were asked to recount in a journal at least five significant moments from their gaming experiences, while putting them into context with their offline life situation. As Ellis (2004) points out, writing has a central place in an autoethnography, because it allows one to remember and reinterpret lived situations. Thus, the guidelines for writing the journals were rather open and the adoption of literary writing encouraged.

The journals were encoded by a subgroup of five researchers from our team, based on the categories identified in UGT (deductive approach). They, however, remained open

to the emergence of new categories and subcategories (inductive approach). Overall, they identified six needs that *AC:NH* helped fulfilling during confinement: a need for social interactions, a need for rest, a need to escape from their house, a need for an emotional outlet regarding the situation, a need for productivity, and a need for identity expression. While a more extensive account of the results will be published in the journal *Kinephanos*, this article solely focuses on the need for social interactions to match DiGRA's 2022 thematic "Bringing Worlds Together".

Epistemologically, our autoethnographic approach is based on Jenning's (2018) notion of "situated play", which acknowledges the influence of the players' life context and socio-cultural affiliations on how they interpret games; an approach inspired by Haraway's (1988) notion of "situated knowledge". In the case of our collective autoethnography, the recounted play experience is multi-situated as it brings together different perspectives in terms of gender, age group, family situation, and socio-economic status. However, it remains partial since all of our team autoethnographers live in Quebec (Canada) and are affiliated with the Université du Québec à Montréal as students, researchers, or professors. Therefore, they are likely to have encountered similar obstacles during the pandemic.

In addition to this relative homogeneity of voices, another limitation of our polyphonic autoethnography is that the combined roles of researcher and participant might have influenced the autoethnographers testimonies and analysis. This subjectivity is, however, in line with Haraway's (1988) epistemology, as she criticizes the imperative of objectivity that presupposes neutrality and argues in favor of a biased, situated, and embodied mode of knowledge production. It is also in line with the analytical autoethnographic approach which is based on dense interpretations of lived experiences rather than mere descriptions (Geertz 1973, 27).

To compensate for this assumed subjectivity, we nonetheless supplemented our collective autoethnography with a computer-assisted text analysis of more than four million testimonials about *AC:NH* posted on Twitter. We targeted this platform given its importance for exchanging tips and views about video games, as well as because *AC:NH* was the most mentioned game on Twitter in 2020. A subgroup of three researchers from our team used the Twitter API to harvest tweets associated with the hashtags #animalcrossing, #acnh, #animalcrossingnewhorizons, #animalcrossingcommunity and #acnhcommunity between March 17 and June 21, 2020 (a period corresponding to the pandemic's first wave). After removing tweets in other languages than English and tweets without text, the corpus consisted of 4,244,752 tweets posted by 671,949 different users. KHcoder software was used to analyze the frequency of key terms and create networks of word associations related to different lexical fields. These results were then compared with the qualitative analysis of the journals written by our autoethnographers.

This methodology also has its own limitations; it is impossible to determine if topics are often addressed in tweets because players experimented it or because it got a lot of press and came to the public attention. The fact that the tweets were collected during the pandemic's first wave however helps to circumvent this issue.

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

For several of our team's autoethnographers, *AC:NH* helped to satisfy their needs for sociability during the lockdown. Since Geneviève lived alone, it was a blessing for her to be able to interact with her friends on their respective island: "it was a way of being together without being able to meet physically". For Charles and Kayla, playing at *AC:NH* was also an opportunity to reconnect with a friend that they had not seen for a

while. For instance, the game allowed Elias to catch up with a cousin that he was not able to see over Christmas.

However, as some autoethnographers point out, *AC:NH* does not have many features that allow sociability. Indeed, the game's platform does not afford verbal communication and, in absence of a computer keyboard, chatting remains inconvenient. To overcome these limitations, several autoethnographers often used, while playing, other communication platforms that allow to write or talk, such as Discord, WhatsApp or Messenger.

> We quickly migrated to other platforms to talk to each other since the game's communication system was not optimal: the number of characters per message is very limited and writing via the game's chat is a long and difficult task. (Geneviève)

André, Geneviève and Charles also used their avatar's "reactions" (programmed animations that express frustration, surprise, etc.) or perform goofy movements to establish non-verbal communication with other players or to express their feelings:

> I was always looking for innovative ways to express myself in front of my friends. For example, one day I was chasing a friend with an axe and hitting her repeatedly. At first glance, this action seems violent and toxic. However, in context, it is rather a form of non-verbal language which reinforces the cohesion and the humorous tone. Similarly, hitting someone with a net or a shovel can be interpreted as a mark of affection and friendship. (André)

Their testimony shows that *AC:NH* players have, in some ways, created a new language with its own codes which could be difficult to understand for the uninitiated.

Other autoethnographic accounts suggest that a sense of physical closeness to other players is possible in *AC:NH*. While Jackie was away from their family members and missed them very much, they had a magical evening in the game with their sister. Their respective avatar sat side by side and watched the sky for the next shooting star:

> The physical distance from the "real world" that separated us no longer existed. The two characters on the island were our reality; the "true reality" did not exist anymore. The virtual had become reality and it was as if we were sitting next to each other, chatting with the family, like we did when we were children in front of real shooting stars. (Jackie)

This testimony is a good illustration of Taylor's (2002) idea that the proximity of avatars' bodies can induce feelings similar to those of physical proximity.

Charles and Geneviève, for their part, underline the importance of the in-game cellphone's camera to immortalize moments of sociability in the game: "These first encounters in *AC:NH* were punctuated by several photoshoots where we captured these moments spent together in the game. [...] These photos are memories of the moments we lived in the game which have replaced those we could not live face-to-face" (Geneviève).

One autoethnographic account suggests that interactions among players do not only happen within the game, but also on related forums. Shortly after the release of the game, Hélène went on the *Animal Crossing New Horizons Qc* Facebook group where players shared their experiences, related anecdotes, and asked questions about the game. According to her testimony, this forum provided some players with what

McGonigal calls “ambient sociability”, which is a “very casual form of social interaction” that does “not create direct bonds” but does “satisfy our craving to feel connected to others” as it “creates a kind of social expansiveness in our lives” and “a feeling of inclusion in a social scene” (McGonigal 2010, 90).

Our computer-assisted textual analysis of the tweets about *AC:NH* published during the first wave of the pandemic also demonstrates that the game provided opportunities of sociability during the lockdown. By isolating a lexical field associated with the notion of pandemic ('pandemic', 'confinement', 'isolation', 'shutdown', 'stayathome', 'stay home', 'quarantine', 'lockdown', 'corona', 'covid', 'virus', 'coronavirus', 'covid19', 'covid-19'), we obtained a sub-corpus composed of 47,643 tweets. At the center of the main lexical node of this sub-corpus, we find the terms “friend” and “hang”. This shows that the game is primarily perceived by players as a social space where they can spend time with their friends during the lockdown.

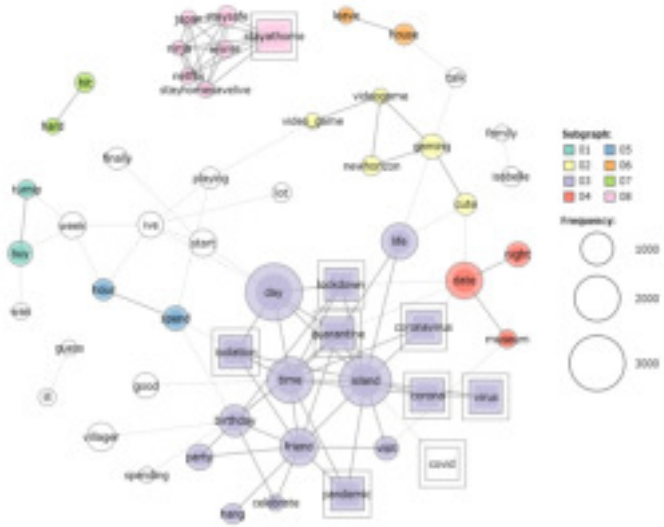

Figure 1: Lexical nodes associated with the lexical field of the concept “pandemic”.

Beside the difficulty to sustain a deep bond of friendship during the pandemic, romantic relationships have also been affected. Kayla, for example, had not been able to see her boyfriend during the lockdown. One day, she felt particularly frustrated by the situation and decided to orchestrate a wedding ceremony with their two avatars, using different items to create the right ambiance. She also appropriated the object “beauty mask” to make it look like her boyfriend had crushed the wedding cake on her avatar’s face. She took some pictures of the event that she later shared with her boyfriend and her sister. This sort of “photo-novel” made them laugh and allowed her to “vent her anger with self-derision”.

Figure 2: Wedding ceremony on Kayla's Island

Playing *AC:NH* in "party play" mode (which allows a maximum of four players on the same console) gave the opportunity to Charles and his girlfriend, who were confined in their apartment with their roommate, to break the routine and strengthen their relationship around a common interest that fed their discussions: "In an unusual way, our couple routine settled down through *Animal Crossing*, insofar as it became a space of our own" (Charles).

Although no autoethnographer addressed the subject of new romantic encounters in *AC:NH*, the computer-assisted textual analysis shows that it was a common practice within the players' community. By extracting the tweets associated with the lexical field of the notion "date" from the main corpus ('edating', 'edate', ' date ', 'dating', 'playdate', 'datenight', 'animalcrossingdate', 'acnhdate', 'datemate', 'quanrantinedate'), we obtained a sub-corpus consisting of 16,626 tweets. One of the most frequent lexical nodes found in these tweets combines the terms "date", "night" and "museum".

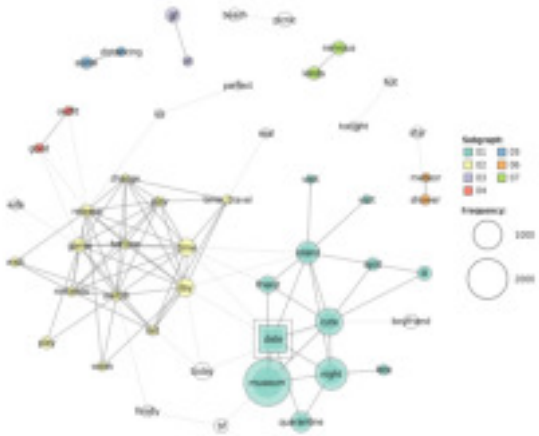

Figure 3: Lexical nodes associated with the lexical field of the notion "date".

In these tweets, the players describe the game as an activity that allows to strengthen their bond with their life partner, but also as a suitable place for a first romantic encounter. They share thoughts on the game mechanics that make it easier to organize romantic activities, including catching insects, fishing, and watching shooting stars in the moonlight. Other players talk about the appropriation of the game's items to organize activities that are not explicitly encouraged by the game, such as a picnic on the beach. Many players refer to the museum as the ideal place for a romantic outing because its artefacts and creatures inspire conversation topics: "when you can't go out for *real* dates cause the countries [sic] in lockdown, virtual museum date it is", says

one tweet. In addition, one of the generated lexical nodes indicates the high frequency of this particular expression within the corpus: “first date, kinda nervous”. However, a qualitative reading of these tweets and a careful examination of the pictures attached to them revealed that many players are in fact sarcastically dating villagers, which are non-playable characters (NPCs). Therefore, the use of this expression on Twitter does not guarantee the realization of a romance between players.

Nonetheless, NPCs have also helped to fil a need for social interactions for some autoethnographers, even if the interactions with them are somehow “futile”, given the false choices of dialogue available to the players (Cesar 2020). For these autoethnographers, their constant presence and their responsiveness strengthened their emotional attachment to them. Daniela, for example, was so much seduced by the weightlifter ostrich named Sprocket that she wanted to time travel to see it more often (this practice consists of changing the date of the console to progress faster or to replay a special event). That day, she realized how lonely she was: “I was so alone, in another country during a pandemic, that I was starting to have feelings for a robot ostrich addicted to the gym!” Charles, for his part, developed a sense of attachment and bonding with a lazy, eccentric, and funny ostrich named Cranston. Being greeted by it every morning was a small relief from his lack of social contact. He also experienced a touching moment when NPCs threw a surprise party for his birthday:

> As I was walking around the island, I decided to stop by Cranston’s house to say hello and surprise! Several characters – those I talk to more often – gathered to wish me happy birthday with a cake, festivities, and good words. [...] my digital friends give me cakes and cupcakes to share with everyone so that all villagers can participate in this festivity organized in my honor. It was a unique moment, full of binary warmth, enthusiasm, and gaiety. (Charles)

Figure 4: Birthday party organized by NPCs on Charles’s island.

In the same vein, chatting with villagers became one of Hélène’s greatest pleasures in the game. She even developed the habit of organizing a small party every time one of them was leaving her island. She would have liked the game to offer the possibility of framing the pictures she took with the NPCs and giving the frames to them as gifts to express her affection.

Figure 5: Birthday party organized by Hélène on her island for the departure of Aaron.

Not all autoethnographers shared this attachment to the villagers. Elias was, for his part, annoyed by the endless and repetitive dialogues with NPCs which appeared to him as automatons more than lovable pets. Unfortunately, the data collected do not allow us to discuss the differences between sociability with NPCs and sociability with other players, but this seems to be one interesting avenue for future researches.

Besides, one should not assume that these online interactions with players and NPCs perfectly met the player's needs for sociability during the pandemic. As Bonenfant explains, online interactions are complementary to face-to-face interactions; they multiply the spaces where social interactions can be sustained (2011, 222-223). The impossibility of physical proximity with relatives and friends during the lockdown remained difficult for most autoethnographers. Even if Charles enjoyed his birthday party in *AC:NH*, it could not replace the physical celebration that he wished to have with his loved ones. He also deplores the fact that his avatar had more physical contact with villagers than he did with his friends.

Moreover, not all social relationships in *AC:NH* are about sociability. Indeed, the social relationships that take place in the game are often utilitarian when it comes to, for example, exchanging resources to progress more quickly. Given how little time André could invest in the game, for example, he joined a local support network on Facebook that makes it easier to collaborate, sell resources and donate items. Although there are social interactions during these exchanges, they do not qualify as sociability since they serve a specific purpose. These utilitarian relationships can hardly break the sense of isolation that many felt during the pandemic. However, it is interesting to note that, according to our collective autoethnography, utilitarian relationships were more often established with strangers than with friends. It also happened for some autoethnographers that an initially utilitarian social relationship turns into sociability. Geneviève recounts, for example, the moment when she met a friend to exchange resources and ended up "spending the evening on her island having so much fun that the time flew by". She further asserts that her social relationships in *AC:NH* have become more and more "utilitarian" over time: rather than meeting her friends just to hang out, she now mainly do so to obtain items and collect resources. We can therefore conclude that the type of social relations players get involve in can change according to the contexts and should not be understood as stable and mutually exclusive categories.

CONCLUSION

Our collective autoethnography and computer-assisted text analysis revealed that the needs for sociability –i.e., the need to spend time with other individuals for the simple pleasure of being together – was exacerbated by the lockdown measures during the pandemic. In this context, many players benefited from the possibilities of sociability and romance (between players, but also with NPCs) offered by the life simulation game

AC:NH. Since the communication tools provided by the game (chat, reactions, gestures, etc.) do not allow optimal interactions and communication, many players used external communication tools to reinforce the quality of their social interactions. They also established a humoristic non-verbal language that is unique to the game and that reinforces the feeling of cohesion among the players community. Because of the limited affordances of the game, appropriating its features creatively became a good way for many players to shape the game to their sociability needs.

It would be interesting to study, in further research, how *AC:NH* enabled players to participate in socialization rituals (family reunion, party, happy hour, etc.) and rites of passage (birthday, graduation, wedding, funeral, etc.) during the lockdown, thanks to the wide range of objects available on the market and to the possibility of importing photos and writing on posters. Although this aspect did not come out in the testimonies of the team's autoethnographers, the term "pandemic" is often associated with the words "celebrate", "friend", "birthday" and "party" in our computer-assisted textual analysis.

Our collective autoethnography and computer-assisted text analysis allowed us to identify other needs that could be fulfilled by *AC:NH* during the confinement (relaxation, escapism, emotional outlet, productivity and expression of identity). This research entire conclusions will be published in French in the bilingual journal *Kinephanos* issue "Le jeu vidéo en temps de pandémie: remède ou échappatoire".

It would also be interesting to study how *AC:NH* responded to the need for activism of some players at a moment when public protests were prohibited, restricted or dangerous to human health. The pandemic began shortly after the protests in Hong Kong against the Chinese regime and was still ongoing on during the numerous protests against systemic racism following the assassination of the African-American George Floyd during a police intervention. According to newspaper articles, these protests were carried over into the game thanks to the creative appropriations of the tools that allowed players to personalize signs, clothes and flags with pixel art (BBC, 2020; Hernandez, 2020). The players then used social media like Twitter to circulate images of their online protests. Our computer-assisted textual analysis confirms the importance of this phenomenon. By isolating a lexical field associated with the notion of mobilization, we obtained a sub-corpus composed of 38,464 tweets. Since *AC:NH* was quickly banned in China, and since political actions are most effective when they are rooted in a physical location (Gerbaudo, 2012), we can, however, wonder to what extent *AC:NH* has been able to satisfy this need for activism.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Homo Ludens is a research group based in Université du Québec à Montréal (Quebec, Canada) that includes dozens of members. This article presents the results of a study directed by Gabrielle Trépanier-Jobin (theoretical framework), Débora Krischke Leitão (collective autoethnography) and Jérémie Pelletier-Gagnon (computer-assisted text analysis). Members of the groups who specifically worked on the aspect of sociability addressed in this article are, in alphabetical order: Pierre-Gabriel Dumoulin, Laurence Grondin-Robillard, Laura Iseut Lafrance St-Martin and Débora Krischke Leitão. Other members of the group who were involved in the research are, in alphabetical order: Stéphanie Auger-Caron, Chloé Champoux-Rhéaume, Isabelle Desjardins, Patrick Deslauriers, Louis-David Lalancette-Renaud, Xavier Martel-Lachance, Samuel Poirier-Poulin, Mathilde Savoie, and Élodie Simard.