Modding Leisure: Content Creation in
Animal Crossing: New Horizons

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In March 2020, Nintendo released *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (*ACNH*), the latest installment in their life-simulation videogame series. Amidst a global lockdown, the game spirited players away to an idyllic island they could develop and decorate at the behest of an entrepreneurial raccoon named Tom Nook. Like earlier titles in the series, the game brought together a vast online community of players who continue to trade items, share custom patterns, and post screenshots that flaunt their in-game creations. This co-creative practice is what Henry Jenkin has called "participatory culture" (2006), a term that challenges historical notions of the passive consumer by suggesting that, through interactive and networked communication, media users can become active contributors to culture. On platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and Tumblr, thousands of players have circulated millions of images of their virtual islands, generating massive followings and becoming so-called social media influencers for their game-based content creation.

This paper addresses participatory culture through a study of the impact that software modification (modding) had on players who approached *ACNH* as content creators rather than as gamers. By considering the actual and everyday practices of *ACNH* content creators and by examining the motivations behind their unsanctioned engagements with Nintendo's intellectual property, this paper offers two salient interventions into scholarship on modding. First, it challenges inherited assumptions about who mods videogames by giving voice to a community in which men do not constitute the majority of the membership. Second, it introduces novel reasons for why participants undertake the unremunerated labor of modding in the first place—not to pursue or flaunt technical expertise but rather as an extension of their content creation practices on social media platforms.

Methodologically, this emergent project engages in several approaches, including participatory research, auto-ethnography, and semi-structured interviews conducted with English-speaking members of the community. Over the span of two years, I observed thousands of *ACNH* posts on Twitter, Instagram, and, to a lesser extent, Tumblr. I supplement this research with auto-ethnographic reflections on my own experiences as a modder and content creator within this milieu. I contend that this participatory ethnography—not simply observing online communities at a distance but actively engaging in their practices on their own terms—is valuable for understanding the experiences and practices under discussion. That said, as a scholar, I have an ethical responsibility to the communities I study, and this rings particularly true when participants sit at the margins of a male-dominated practice that already inhabits a legal gray area. This is, in part, why interviews are crucial to this project; interviews are conducted with participants' informed consent and a clearly communicated right to withdraw. To protect members of the community, observational information has been generalized, and interviewee names are anonymized in the presentation.

Although *ACNH* modding has existed since the game's release, it reached its zenith in August 2022 after a YouTube video of a modded island went viral. Players who had grown resentful of Nintendo's lack of ongoing updates after the first year saw these unsanctioned alterations as an intriguing way to rekindle interest in their waning social media presence. Over the span of several weeks, hundreds of players gathered on Discord to meticulously reverse-engineer Nintendo's graphical assets and to release a bevy of new items with which players could decorate their islands and share screenshots on social media.

For most *ACNH* modders, this was their first foray into software hacking. The result is a somewhat utopian vision that challenges the assumptions we have about modders as lone, often-male computer engineers who refuse to divulge their computational discoveries. Instead, the leading participants in the *ACNH* modding community are individuals who are traditionally found at the margins of gaming (namely women and non-binary people), inviting a new demographic to software hacking practices (Fron et al. 2007, Sihvonen 2011). Because most of these participants are first and foremost content creators, they approach modding far more publicly than hackers historically have in the past. On Twitter and in Discord servers, many *ACNH* modders share tutorials and assist with troubleshooting to remove technical barriers to access. In this community, we therefore find a radical challenge to the secrecy and gatekeeping characteristic not only of hacking but also of the videogame industry more broadly (O'Donnel 2014).

In recent years, scholars have outlined several reasons why videogame players might choose to mod their games. These include showcasing technical expertise (Coleman and Golub 2008); translating games for new audiences (Consalvo 2016); and returning to beloved intellectual properties out of feelings of nostalgia (Postigo 2008). *ACNH* is unique in that the overarching purpose of modding is to allow players to take more attractive screenshots to post on social media. Reskinning (changing the textures of an existing item) and model swapping (replacing existing items with new 3D models) are techniques that offer players the opportunity to decorate their in-game islands in novel and artistic ways. Unlike most mods where gameplay is the end goal, mods here are merely a creative means through which players can produce new content for their social media accounts.

Because the majority of participants in the *ACNH* modding community approach the practice through their capacity as content creators, this community thus eschews the anonymity of hardware hacking in favor of public performances of the constructed self. *ACNH* modders brazenly and publicly share their files online, exchange resources, and otherwise amplify their content—even though it operates in a legally gray area relative to Nintendo's Terms of Service.

As is the case with many forms of videogame hacking, *ACNH* modders exchange their labor for cultural rather than financial capital. Coined by Pierre Bourdieu, the term "cultural capital" (1984) refers to the accumulation of knowledge and skills that confer social status upon an individual. By showcasing and circulating their files, modders acquire cultural capital in the form of likes, views, and shares on social media. One of the most salient aspects of the *ACNH* community is thus the unique way that participants place value on content rather than code. Previous studies on modding communities have argued that modders acquire cultural capital based on the skill with which they can exploit videogames' technical architecture (Consalvo 2007), but *ACNH* modders place comparatively little value on technical expertise. Given that content creators acquire authority, status, and prestige through the production and circulation of island screenshots, the aesthetics, creativity, and versatility of the mods is where participants ascribe the most value.

However, the other side of content creation is the way that the voluntary, unwaged labor of participatory culture can easily become subsumed under structures of capitalist commodity culture, moving from an enjoyable activity to exploitative, unremunerated work (Terranova 2000, Wirman 2009). This phenomenon is not unique to modding but is rather a larger symptom of what Srnicek calls "platform capitalism" (2016), the expanding and extractive scale at which data and user behavior drive the rapid expansion of platforms, often at the consumer's expense. Daily posting schedules, hours of commenting, and long nights reskinning models began to take their toll. As October 2022 rolled around, many content creators ceased producing mods and even stopped playing *ACNH* altogether, citing a profound feeling of burnout. The idyllic life-simulation game had crossed the line into work; the hazy border between production and consumption ended up reifying corporate strategies.

Although *ACNH* modding is no longer as popular as it was months ago, the immense but short-lived online gathering of hundreds of players who had never thought of themselves as videogame hackers is an interesting moment in videogame history. *ACNH* modding empowered individuals who have often found themselves on the margins of the industry to explore videogame software in novel ways; through collaborative efforts in online spaces, these participants developed considerable technical literacy in a short period of time and have challenged expectations not only about who mods videogames but also about how these mods are used.

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