

Playing with *Animal Crossing*. A data-based analysis of regional and transregional practices in the Japanese, Korean and Chinese YouTube space

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, video sharing and streaming platforms like YouTube, Bilibili, or Twitch.tv have become important spaces for engaging with, appropriating and thus playing with videogames. Let's Plays, video walkthroughs, game-based commentaries and adaptations are more than extensions or "paratexts" to the games (Consalvo 2017, Roth 2022). They have developed into widely shared and at the same time regionally and culturally specific cultural practices (Ackermann 2017; Katō 2017; Taylor 2018).

Focusing on Japanese, Korean and Chinese language videos about *Atsumare dōbutsu no mori* (Nintendo, 2020, Engl.: *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, hereafter ACNH), this paper examines how these practices result in regional or transregional spaces or engagement with videogames on YouTube. The increasing globalization of YouTube and its popularity in Japan and Korea notwithstanding, the platform has also become an increasingly fragmented, nationalized space dominated by recommendations based on geopolitical categories (Burgess and Green 2018: 130–135). Such fragmentation takes place both due to the ways in which the platform configures space and draws boundaries, and due to regionally specific expectations, practices, languages and actors. Regional stars like *Hikakin* [ヒカキン], who dominates the Japanese Let's Play scene, or *The Common Siblings* [흔한남매], a very popular Let's Player duo producing content in Korean, are good examples of the ways in which the Let's Play as a form may be shared across regions, but is instantiated with regional specificity in terms of contents and styles.

By mapping out the user interactions related to popular videos about ACNH in Japanese, Korean and Chinese, I show that the YouTube space on ACNH is indeed both transregionally interconnected and regionally specific. The analysis draws on the

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100 most viewed YouTube videos in each language, examining different distributions of video content type, user networks, comment languages and user networks. The results indicate that, whereas entertainment-oriented Let's Plays tend to be regional phenomena, videos that play with the content of the game and adapt it in parodic or artistic ways are capable of transgressing language and other regional boundaries much more readily.

These results draw attention to the plurality of ways in which videogames are played with. Whereas popular titles such as ACNH are frequently perceived as “global,” their various related practices differ significantly. By showing how different types of content contribute to such regionalization or to transgressing – in this case language-based – boundaries, I highlight the distinct spatiality involved in practices of playing with videogames on YouTube. While qualitative approaches to let's plays have been proposed in the past (Radde-Antweiler and Zeiler 2015), methodologies for dealing with large quantities of YouTube data capable of considering regional and transregional practices from a distance are still scarce (Burgess and Green 2018, 17). In addition to presenting its findings on playing with ACNH on YouTube, the paper thus also showcases a new method for approaching videogame culture and its spatiality, and concludes by critically evaluating this method.

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