Welcome to My Crib: Player Creativity in Animal Crossing

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ABSTRACT

Player creativity in commercial games is often framed through external measures rather than players' own accounts of creative experiences. In this paper, I explore how *Animal Crossing: New* Horizons (ACNH) becomes a site of situated, sociocultural creativity by conducting in-game, ethnographically-informed interviews with eight players during "island tours." I examine how players conceptualize creativity as a process of worldbuilding, negotiation with/against game constraints, and co-creation with both human and nonhuman audiences. My findings show that ACNH affords small-scale creative labor that is expressive and relational, shaped by the game's material and aesthetic conditions. By positioning ACNH as a meaningful site for understanding digital creative practice, this paper offers a qualitative account of in-game creativity grounded in player narratives and demonstrates the value of in-game interviewing for game studies research.

Keywords

Creativity, digital ethnography, *Animal Crossing*

INTRODUCTION

Nourishing creativity, particularly in young people, is essential for our modern societies and culture (Y. J. Kim and Shute 2015). Video games are promising sites for creative engagement, as they are "inherently creative and playful endeavors that are well suited to stimulate the creative process" (Bowman et al. 2015, 41). At the same time, video games are deeply embedded in everyday life; for many, digital play is part of daily routines rather than exceptional activity. This paper considers what it means for such an ordinary activity to foster creativity in people more broadly.

There is a growing body of literature which seeks to interrogate the ways games and creativity might be linked, but much of this work focuses on quantifying creativity (Hall et al. 2020b) or examines it primarily on the production side (e.g. game development, modding, or educational games explicitly designed to foster creativity). Less attention has been paid to how players themselves *experience* creativity in commercial games – and whether they even see what they do as creative.

In this paper, I focus on *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (ACNH) (Figure 1) as a case through which to explore in-game creative experiences. ACNH is widely regarded as a

Proceedings of DiGRA 2026

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creative game: players cultivate islands, build spaces, design clothing, and curate environments which reflect personal taste, mood, and identity. During its rapid rise in 2020 and 2021, social media was saturated with island layouts, custom patterns, themed builds, and design tutorials, signaling not only widespread creative engagement, but also, a shared cultural understanding of ACNH as a creative platform. Precisely because creativity is so visible and celebrated in this game, ACNH provides an ideal starting point for examining how players themselves make sense of their creative practices inside of gameworlds. Yet, despite its reputation, the ways players understand their own creativity, and how this connects to broader theories of creativity, remain underexplored.

Figure 1: Players greeting the researcher at their island entrances at the start of the in-game interview tours.

I report on eight in-game interviews with ACNH players, conducted as "island tours." Rather than interviewing players about creativity in the abstract, I met them in situ, walking through spaces they had built and asking them how they made sense of their design decisions. My aim is not to generalize to all ACNH players, but to offer a rich, situated account of how some players conceptualize in-game creativity and how their practices are shaped by ACNH's system, its constraints, and their sociocultural contexts.

Guided by sociocultural theories of creativity, particularly Glăveanu's Five A's framework (2013), I treat creativity as relational and contextual rather than as a trait or output. I focus on the interplay between actors (players), actions (designing, decorating, curating), artifacts (islands, items, layouts), audiences (player, visitor, imagined others, social media publics), and affordances (game mechanics, constraints, community norms). This leads to the guiding research question: how do players conceptualize in-game creativity while playing *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*?

My contribution is threefold. Firstly, I articulate how players frame and articulate their own creativity in ACNH, drawing out tensions between agency and constraint and online and offline identities. Secondly, I show how players use ACNH to design experiences for themselves and others, often treating the game as a co-creative partner that both enables and limits what they can do. Finally, I develop in-game island tours as a reflexive ethnographic method for studying creativity as lived practice. I do not make claims about ACNH as a universal "creative engine." Instead, I position this work as an exploratory qualitative study which sits alongside, and pushes back against, more instrumental approaches to measuring game-based creativity.

BACKGROUND

Creativity as Sociocultural, Situated Practice

Creativity is difficult to define, and at times, problematic to measure (Plucker et al. 2004). I approach creativity as a fundamental human capacity which is distributed, relational, and situated – not as a rare trait possessed by exceptional individuals. Glăveanu's sociocultural theory of creativity argues that we should move away from this notion of an isolated creator, and instead towards systems of relations between actor, action, artifact, audience, and affordances, the Five A's (Vlad Petre Glăveanu 2013; Vlad P. Glăveanu 2020). In this work, I use Glăveanu and Beghetto's definition of creativity: an experience, composed of "novel person–world encounters grounded in meaningful actions and interactions, which are marked by the principles of: open-endedness, nonlinearity, pluri-perspectives and future-orientation" (2021, 76). Notably, this means that understanding one individual's creativity requires an understanding of their sociocultural context, as creativity is a convergence of the material, the social, and the psychological (Vlad P. Glăveanu 2020).

From this perspective, creativity is (1) embedded in context, (2) relational and dialogic, and (3) mundane as well as extraordinary. It is shaped by cultural values, histories, norms, and material conditions. Newness and value are negotiated with real and/or imagined audiences. And, everyday creative acts – arranging a room, styling an outfit, building out a virtual world – are meaningful sites of creative practice.

Taking such a situated perspective on creativity then problematizes over-reliance on static and quantitative measures: these creativity measures alone should not be used as the sole conceptualization of creativity (Plucker et al. 2004). Instead, Herman and Hwang argue that researchers should take on user-centered perspectives on creativity (2024). Therefore, this paper focuses on the lived experiences of players in the wild, focusing on their existing digital environments.

Intersections of Games and Creativity

It has long been a topic of conversation how video games may influence creative practices, as they "are a technology borne of and tailor-made to foster creativity" (Bowman et al. 2015, 54). Work at this intersection tends to cluster around three core areas: (1) creativity in game development processes (Giannakos and Jaccheri 2018; Tavinor 2015); (2) serious and educational games designed to foster creativity (Rafner 2021; Tanimoto and Inie 2023); and (3) sandbox and user-generated content games, where the focus is more often on creative affordances and outputs (Fan et al. 2022; Ellison and Drew 2020; Rahimi et al. 2024). These approaches have yielded important insights, but they often treat creativity as something that can be measured from the outside, rather than explored as something players themselves negotiate and narrate. Further, gameplay in and of itself is a creative process (Bowman et al. 2015). As such, while the aforementioned studies offer insights into the complexities of gaming and creativity, it is also crucial to study the games that people are playing as part of their daily lives.

To distinguish creativity during gameplay with commercial video games from game design and skills learning, this paper uses the phrase *in-game creativity*. A small, but growing, body of work has begun to conceptualize this. Namely, Hall, Stickler, Herodotou, and Iacovides have jointly authored three relevant papers (2020a, 2020b, 2021). They offer three useful frames for understanding in-game creativity – ways of thinking, constructing in game, and games as an art form (Hall et al. 2020b) – as well as three classifications of in-game creative expressions: creativity as problem solving, creativity as appropriation, and creativity as affective change (Hall et al. 2020a). Hall et al. further identify a series of game design affordances which shape creative play, including open-ended structures, opportunities for exploration and customization, environmental interaction, replayability, and player content creation (2021). These forms of creative engagement also sit within broader participatory cultures surrounding games, where remixing and co-creation increasingly blur distinctions between audiences and creators. This paper builds on these foundations by focusing directly on how players themselves articulate and make sense of their creative experiences in a commercial title.

Sandbox games are often singled out as being uniquely positioned for in-game creativity (Hall et al. 2020a; Rahimi and Shute 2021). *Minecraft* is typically seen as the ideal game to measure creativity due to its sandbox affordances – it "is a game especially tuned to foster creativity" (Blanco-Herrera et al. 2019). Many studies on creativity in *Minecraft* assess creative experiences (or lack of them) with quantitative measures (Blanco-Herrera et al. 2019; Fan et al. 2022; Rahimi et al. 2024).

Therefore, ACNH was chosen as it is simultaneously considered to be a sandbox (particularly when we consider how players build and construct their islands) and life simulation game (players go through various routines, like fishing and paying off a mortgage). As Hall et al. have found creative expression depends on the type of game (2020a), this research focuses on ACNH in-depth in order to identify more nuanced sociocultural in-game creative experiences. This allows for an exploration of in-game creativity with and through a game that is widely played and, based on previous literature, has inherent affordances lending to creative expression.

Animal Crossing: New Horizons as a Creative Site

In ACNH, players move to a deserted island and gradually transform it into a lived-in world. Players can terraform the land, place buildings, decorate interiors and exteriors, design custom patterns, collect items, and interact with animal villagers and visiting players. Gameplay is organized around everyday activities – fishing, gardening, crafting, decorating – rather than explicit win states. ACNH is the fifth main *Animal Crossing* game, released March 20, 2020 (Nintendo 2020).

ACNH was released during the COVID-19 pandemic, when many took to gaming to cope with the changing world (Ballou et al. 2022; Kleinman et al. 2021). Due to the timing of its release, and its profound cultural impact, most studies on ACNH took place during/right after the COVID-19 pandemic (Comerford 2021; Coroller and Flinois 2023; Hsieh et al. 2021; Lewis et al. 2021; Martinez et al. 2022; Pearce et al. 2022; Tong et al. 2021; Yee and Sng 2022). However, many continued playing ACNH well past government-mandated lockdowns. This paper explores players' experiences in ACNH after the pandemic, in the summer of 2022, after lockdown restrictions were eased in many countries. Rather than investigating the unique dynamics between the pandemic and gaming, this paper explored potential creative impacts through ACNH more broadly, *after* the pandemic.

ACNH was chosen partly due to the influence on players' lives, which these previous studies examine in detail, but also for its potential as a creative site. Previous studies have been to explore creative potentials in ACNH, with portions of their findings discussing co-creation practices (Comerford 2021; Martinez et al. 2022) and self-expression through personas (Comerford 2021). In an ethnography of interactivity and user-generated content in *Animal Crossing: Wild World*, a previous *Animal Crossing* game, Kim argues that players can experience in-game creativity by commenting on and creating new narratives, but "the degree of their creativity is conditioned by underlying themes of the texts" . These studies begin to paint a picture of how creative play might be enacted through ACNH; however, more work is needed to dive into the nuances of player experiences of creativity. As such, this paper seeks to add to these works by understanding players' perceptions of in-game creativity.

METHODS

Approach

To understand how players conceptualize in-game creativity, I take an ethnographically informed qualitative approach. I treat creativity as action-in-context and focus on rich, situated accounts (rather than breadth or representativeness). This aligns with sociocultural perspectives on creativity and with reflexive thematic analysis as my analytic method. In practical terms, this meant meeting players where their creative practices unfold: inside the game. I conducted in-game interviews in ACNH, combining participant observation and semi-structured interviewing during island tours.

Materials

This study was conducted across two linked virtual sites: ACNH, where the island tours and in-game actions took place, and Discord, where voice chat was hosted alongside the game. ACNH allows players to visit each other's islands using online play. I visited

each participant's island with my own character, while we spoke in real time over Discord. This setup mirrored how many players already play ACNH with friends.

Participants

Eight players took part in the study. All were over 18 and located in English-speaking Global North contexts (US, UK, Canada, Australia). Participants were recruited via social media (Twitter/X, Instagram, Reddit) and ACNH-specific forums, where I posted invitations for "island tours" as part of research on how people create in ACNH. The inclusion criteria were: playing ACNH at least one hour per week at the time of the study and willingness to host an island tour and be interviewed in English over Discord.

Participants varied considerably in play history and engagement, from several months to multiple years of play and approximately 100-800+ hours. Some identified as working in creative professions (e.g., design, arts), while others did not consider themselves "creative" outside the game. I deliberately did not collect detailed demographic data (e.g., occupation, income), as my focus was on contextualized narratives rather than patterns across categories. Future work could explore how occupational or demographic factors relate to in-game creativity.

Participants are identified by their character and island names (e.g. "Katie, Del Mar"). While often considered best practice to pseudonymize all participants in qualitative research (Heaton 2022), others argue that in creative production, anonymity/pseudonymity might require further consideration (Boellstorff et al. 2012; Fleur and DeWinter 2021). The premise of this study is that players *can* experience creativity while playing. Players may view the artifacts they share (such as designed characters or spaces) explicitly as their creative output. As such, *all* players should have the right to be named, to have some attribution to their creative outputs, if desired. Some opted to use pseudonymized character names, others preferred to keep their in-game names. This choice, and the use of island/character names rather than legal names, was discussed during consent and approved by the University of Oxford's ethics review process.

In-game Interviews and Island Tours

I adapted virtual world ethnographic interviews (Boellstorff 2015; Boellstorff et al. 2012; Hine 2000; Nardi 2010) to the context of ACNH. In-game interviews are a reflexive ethnographic method: a fluid combination of participant observation and ethnographic interviewing conducted in situ (Boellstorff et al. 2012). Being in the same virtual space allowed me to see what participants were describing, for them to show rather than only tell.

Each session had two intertwined components: island tours and follow-up questions. I asked participants to "show me around your island" and let them decide the route and pacing. They walked me through exterior spaces, interiors, and sometimes villagers' homes and shops. As we walked, they narrated what we were seeing, explained design choices, and reflected on what felt "finished," "in progress," or "not creative at all." Then, throughout and after the tour, I followed a semi-structured interview script, asking about their experiences creating inside ACNH, how they understood creativity in general and in the game, moments or areas they felt were especially creative, and inspirations, constraints, and influences.

Being with players in-game allowed for a better conceptualization of their interpretations and interactions with the gameworld and typical gameplay. Players were able to show specific activities, NPCs (non-playable characters), items, and more while describing their own reflections. There are also in-game interactions that are specific to *ACNH*, such as using reactions to communicate or changing into costumes (Figure 2). Playing with participants allowed for insights into how they see and experience the game that might be lost in other traditional methods, such as semi-structured interviews.

Figure 2: A screenshot of an interview with Mik (Mannahatta). Mik (left) is showing the researcher (right) their favorite costumes.

Interviews averaged around 55 minutes (range: ~37–75 minutes). Three shorter interviews were with players who felt their islands were still "under construction," which itself shaped how they spoke about creativity and unfinishedness. All gameplay was recorded from my Nintendo Switch; audio was recorded via Discord and later transcribed verbatim.

Reflexive Thematic Analysis

I analyzed the data using reflexive thematic analysis (TA), following Braun and Clarke's guidelines (Braun and Clarke 2006, 2022; Braun et al. 2022). I explicitly adopt a reflexive stance: I am not a neutral coder extracting themes but an interpretive researcher whose own experiences and assumptions shape the analysis.

My process was:

1. **Familiarization.** After transcription, I re-watched the recorded island tours while reading the transcripts, taking notes on moments where participants named creativity, expressed pride or discomfort, talked about copying, or described constraints.

2. **Coding.** I coded the transcripts in detail, tagging segments related to creative processes, interactions with the game's systems, references to audiences, and links between in-game and offline identities. While sociocultural theories of creativity informed the broader framing of the study, the coding process was

primarily inductive, allowing themes to emerge from participants' accounts and in-game interactions.

3. **Generating initial themes.** I clustered codes into provisional patterns—for example, around "creative space," "working with/against constraints," "designing for others," and "identity traces."

4. **Reviewing and refining themes.** I iteratively merged, split, and re-scoped themes to focus on patterns of *shared meaning* underpinned by core concepts. This led to four main themes.

5. **Defining and naming themes.** I refined each theme's focus and boundaries, ensuring they spoke directly to the research question and to the theoretical framing of creativity as sociocultural.

6. **Writing.** I wrote the results as thematic narratives, weaving in participant quotes and my own interpretive commentary.

I conducted the analysis myself, consistent with reflexive TA's emphasis on depth and coherence over inter-rater reliability. To support transparency, I include a thematic map and detailed description of how I moved from data to themes, and I reflect on my positionality as a player-researcher.

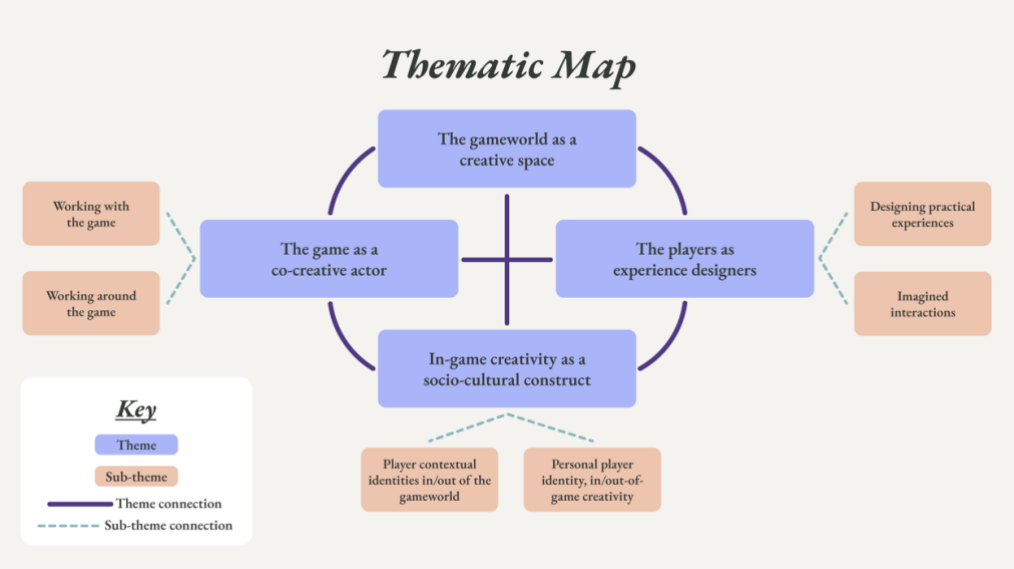

Figure 3: Thematic map, including the four themes and the six sub-themes

I first played ACNH during the pandemic and, by the time of this study, had logged over 150 hours. I was familiar with the game's mechanics, update cycles, and online culture, and I had my own experiences of designing and redesigning islands. This helped build rapport with participants: we could share a shorthand for certain items, frustrations, or update changes. At the same time, I had stopped playing regularly by 2021. I was curious why others were still returning to their islands long after lockdowns had ended, and what kept the game meaningful. This curiosity shaped my focus on creativity as an ongoing practice rather than a temporary pandemic coping strategy. I remained attentive to how my own affection for ACNH might incline me to

over-romanticize it and deliberately looked for points of tension and ambivalence in participants' accounts.

FINDINGS: PLAYERS' CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF IN-GAME CREATIVITY IN ACNH

I identified four interrelated themes through which players conceptualized their in-game creativity: (1) the gameworld as a creative space; (2) co-creating with and against the game; (3) players as experience designers; (4) in-game creativity as a sociocultural construct.

The Gameworld as a Creative Space

Participants consistently described ACNH as "fun and creative" (Avery, Maple Grove), often framing the island as a canvas. One player, Jimothy (Sakurajima), put it succinctly: the island is "just a canvas that you can paint these different micro experiences on." Others talked about "seeing the artistry that people have in creating" (Dia, Mt Cranchy) when visiting other islands, highlighting that creativity is both practiced and recognized socially.

For some, ACNH extended existing creative identities. Participants who identified as artists or designers outside the game described playing as "another creative outlet" (Kai, Auberi Cove), but not simply a one-to-one transfer of skills. One participant contrasted their ACNH process (visioning and directly executing without sketching) to the more formal planning they would do in their professional work. The gameworld invited different creative rhythms.

For others, ACNH enabled creative expression despite a perceived lack of offline creativity. A few explicitly said they were "not creative" in everyday life, but felt that ACNH "allows me to be creative in a way that that fits me" (Diana, Themyscira) by lowering the barrier to doing "creative things" without needing to draw or build physically.

In some ways, players felt that the visual progress in ACNH works differently from other games:

> "The visual aspect of progress that this game presents ... Once everything comes into fruition, it's very gratifying to see that your efforts have paid off in a more visual manner than, say, other games where there's not a reminder of what has transpired before" (Mik, Mannahatta)

Here, the gameworld functions as a *mediated creative space*, where players negotiate what counts as "their" creativity. This includes not only original designs but also remixing and curating existing patterns and ideas drawn from the community. Several participants openly acknowledged copying or adapting designs they had seen on social media. Rather than seeing this as "cheating," they framed it as part of a shared creative ecosystem, aligning with sociocultural views of creativity as dialogic and collective rather than purely original. The game's environment and possibilities to freely experiment culminate in a uniquely playful and visually rewarding creative experience for players.

Co-creating With and Against the Game

Participants rarely spoke as if they were creating in a vacuum. Instead, they framed their creative work as a negotiation with ACNH's systems, its constraints and quirks. Part of the game's appeal, and what makes this type of play so conducive to creative expression for some, is the constraints of the game itself: "it is part of working in that realm of design, where you get excited by the idea of working under some constraints" (Kai, Auberi Cove). Players are not being creative on their own, and they felt the most creative when they embraced ACNH as a sandbox game with sprawling design possibilities. This section explores what it meant to players to design and create inside of the gameworld, focusing on how they work *with* the game and simultaneously work *around* the game.

Sometimes, constraints *sparked* creativity. Limited item storage pushed one player to "do some cleanup" (Diana, Themyscira) that became a full redesign. Seasonal bushes that only bloom at certain times inspired another to design a "lunar park" (Figure 4), using the staggered blooms as a visual clock to mark the passage of time (Mik, Mannahatta). Players described "working within the confines of what the game lets you do" (Jimothy, Sakurajima) embracing the "natural form" of their island or building around oddly shaped cliffs the game had generated (Dia, Mt Cranchy).

Figure 4: Mik (Mannahatta) shows the researcher his "lunar park". The left screenshot displays the top half of this park, with the bushes on the left in bloom. The right screenshot shows the bottom half of the park. In ACNH, players can plant bushes around their island, but they only bloom during specific seasons. Originally frustrated by this, Mik (Mannahatta) did not want to change out his bushes every season. Instead, he created a garden as a visual seasonal indicator.

At other times, constraints were experienced as frustrating limits. A recurring theme was the lack of interactivity of many objects: the lifeguard stands no one can sit in or the café where villagers never actually drink coffee. Players responded by imaginatively filling in the gaps, but they were also acutely aware of where the game "wouldn't let" them realize their visions. For example, there are often items players want but are unable to acquire. Participants enjoyed working around this, leveraging objects the game gave them to create a representation of their ideas. Multiple participants strategically placed "gyroids" (small statues) to symbolize pets, shop owners, and more. Dia (Mt Cranchy) illustrates this in her special greenhouse:

> "To anyone else, this is my little greenhouse. But in actuality it's my grow room. Those are my marijuana plants. Because what I'm jonesing for is the glowing moss jar, because I want to put those shelves up. This one [a gyroid] looks like a little bong." (Dia, Mt Cranchy, Figure 5)

Figure 5: Dia (Mt Cranchy, right) shows the researcher (left) her grow room she designed in her house. There are no marijuana plants in the game, but Dia used other available items to create this space.

Players also reflected on the fact that their creative agency is ultimately bounded by Nintendo's decisions. Update cycles introduced new items or mechanics but could also close off exploits or design tricks. Participants were aware that they could not fundamentally alter the game's core systems without leaving the sanctioned space of ACNH. Compared to a blank canvas, their creative actions were always channeled through pre-designed tools and rules.

Working with and around the game led to specific moments of creativity for these players. In some ways, the players were deciding for themselves how to behave. However, they were responding to what the game would, and would not, allow them to do. Sometimes they listened to the game, sometimes they did not. Regardless, the game takes on some agency, influencing the players' decisions. Here, ACNH becomes an actor in players' co-creative experiences.

Players as Experience Designers

Participants did not just talk about decorating; they talked about designing *experiences* for themselves, visitors, and even non-human entities. Jimothy

(Sakurajima) described ACNH as “painting an experience for yourself and other people.” Katie (Del Mar) asks herself when designing, “how do I walk someone through this who isn’t my mum or sister, who are here all the time?”

I use “experience designers” deliberately here: players were thinking about routes, rhythms, sightlines, and interactions. They considered practical experiences, imagined traffic, and narrative moments. For practical experiences, players designed efficient paths between key locations, setting up workspaces for crafting or gardening, and balancing aesthetics with functional layouts. They also designed for imagined traffic by building cozy entryways “in case you want to sit and chill as you come off from the airport,” or arranging furniture to imply everyday routines that the game does not animate. Finally, they created narrative experiences, creating roped-off workspaces for NPCs, themed districts, or vignettes that tell small stories, even when villagers never actually use those spaces (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Diana (Themyscira, left) designed a workspace for Blathers, an NPC. Blathers is never able to access the space, but Diana roped off the area so no other players or NPCs would enter.

These practices blur the line between player and designer. Players take on design thinking – even if they do not name it that – when they plan how visitors will move, what they will see first, and how spaces will feel. At the same time, their agency as “designers” is constrained, as discussed above: they cannot implement new systems or behaviors, only configure what the game offers.

This theme speaks to broader questions in game studies about who designs game experiences: formal game designers, players, or both. Playing ACNH “is just really cultivating an environment, and I really think it’s meaningful to care about that” (Dia, Mt Cranchy). Here, we can understand the player to take on the role as experience designers, creative actors in ways different from that of the game itself.

In-game Creativity as a Sociocultural Construct

Finally, participants repeatedly linked their creative choices in ACNH to their sociocultural contexts and personal histories. Creativity did not float free from

identity; it was entangled with memories, places, fandoms, and aspirations. Some players used ACNH to recreate offline environments: a childhood kitchen with black-and-white tiles, a holiday beach town, a favorite street from where they grew up. Others built idealized spaces, "dream vacation homes," that were not possible for them offline but felt emotionally resonant. Players also wove in cultural references: naming islands after fictional locations, designing outfits based on beloved characters, or building shrines to specific media. Mik (Manhatta) described their island as "a random assortment of cultural and bio items," where each part tied to "something in my past or something that's part of my culture."

Importantly, this was not a one-way flow from offline to online. For several participants, their ACNH islands subtly shifted how they saw their offline environments. Dia (Mt Cranchy) noticed that the ethos of her island, a place of "good food and good books," mirrored what she valued in her physical home once she'd reflected on it.

In Glăveanu's terms, we can see creativity here as a sociocultural act: players co-construct meaning with artefacts, audiences, and cultural histories. As Katie (Del Mar) synthesized: "In the whole universe of this game, I could do anything I want. And I'm so often creating stuff in my real life." Diana (Themyscira), at the end of her tour, said, "I think that my island's a reflection of me." In-game creativity is not just "expressing oneself" but negotiating which aspects of identity to highlight or reimagine in a playful, mediated space.

DISCUSSION

This study explored four core themes regarding creativity in *ACNH*. Participants perceived ACNH's sandbox affordances as fostering creativity, supporting prior research on sandbox games as creative spaces (Rahimi et al. 2024). Creativity often emerged through interaction with the game itself, with players describing a sense of co-creating with or against the game. In this way, ACNH can be seen as a potential actor in the creative process rather than a neutral tool. Findings also highlight players as *experience designers*, crafting spaces not solely for aesthetic appeal but for interactive engagement. This builds on previous work that frames game modders as game designers (Gallagher 2021): ACNH shifts players from passive consumers to active creators of their own experiences (Gee 2014). Further, by actively acknowledging players to be *designers* and *creative agents* within games reinforces their creative identity, irrespective of how they might identify outside of the game.

As such, to address the RQ, participants viewed ACNH as a hybrid between a game and a creative tool. As Mik (Mannahatta) noted, ACNH "definitely has a creative outlet to it … but it does withhold certain items from you … so it still feels like a game." Dia (Mt Cranchy) similarly described it as "such a fine line right now, between being a game versus a tool." This aligns with prior work on games as creative tools (Bowman et al. 2015). Notably, both self-identified creative players and those who did not consider themselves creatively engaged in in-game creativity. For some, ACNH offered a creative outlet unavailable in their daily lives, distinct from traditional forms of creativity.

Players' sociocultural contexts were integral to how they conceptualized creativity, extending games research by demonstrating that creativity cannot be separated from identity. Glăveanu's Five A's framework helps make sense of these dynamics. Players

(actors) engaged in creative actions through decorating, curating, and remixing; islands became artifacts shaped through the affordances and constraints of ACNH; and creativity was continually negotiated in relation to audiences, including visitors, online communities, NPCs, and imagined future players. Further, each player's creative experience is unique, influenced by their background and motivations. This was reflected in the diversity of islands visited: from Maple Grove's "trash city island" aesthetic to Sakurajima's Japanese-inspired landscapes. This supports the body of literature discussing the role of identity and cultural contexts in gameplay, such as character names and gamertags (Crenshaw and Nardi 2014). For Diana, Themyscira was a nod to her childhood, while for Mik, Mannahatta referenced his home. For this reason, I purposefully referred to participants by their character and island names: these forms of identification are intricately linked to in-game creativity.

Creativity as co-authored, constrained, curated

This study contributes a player-centered account of in-game creativity that foregrounds three tensions. First, it highlights a tension between originality and copying. Participants openly adapted designs from others, yet still felt their islands were "theirs," often pointing to subtle differences or to the way they assembled influences. This challenges narrow definitions of creativity that equate it with originality and aligns with sociocultural views where creativity is inherently dialogic and intertextual. Second, players experienced ACNH as both enabling and limiting. Constraints sometimes sparked inventive workarounds; at other times, they truncated ideas. Creativity here is not limitless freedom but skillful navigation of a designed possibility space. This adds nuance to celebratory narratives of sandbox games as purely "open" creative tools.

Third, players balanced between self-expression and world-building for others, whether they were other players visiting, NPC interactions, or imagined roleplaying scenarios. They created spaces that felt deeply personal, but they also curated those spaces for anticipated audiences (friends, visitors, social media, NPCs). Creativity involved imagining how others would interpret the island. This extends discussions of player creativity beyond building static artefacts to designing choreographed experiences.

Recognizing gameplay itself as a creative act was important to participants. They wanted others – their peers, loved ones, developers, and researchers – to acknowledge these experiences. Glăveanu outlined four barriers that prevent people from thinking and acting creatively: a lack of (1) resources, (2) self-awareness of one's creative potential, (3) opportunities to engage in creative activities, and (4) recognition of creativity by others (Sternberg et al. 2024). Many participants lacked the second, not seeing themselves as creative, or the third, lacking real-world opportunities for creative expression. Critically, they also lacked the fourth: external validation of their creativity.

As Glăveanu states, "being creative means more than doing creative things – it often requires an understanding of oneself as someone who is capable of creativity and enjoys creating" (Sternberg et al. 2024, 163). This is a prime opportunity for developers and researchers to more explicitly frame as a potentially creative

endeavor. If framed correctly, the games industry and researchers can acknowledge in-game creativity as a valid creative experience for potentially billions.

In-game Island Tours as Creativity Research

Methodologically, this work illustrates the value of in-game interviews and island tours for studying creativity as lived practice. Being in the game anchors discussion in concrete artefacts and actions, reducing reliance on abstract recall. It also encourages participants to show micro-decisions they might otherwise overlook. Such in situ methodological approaches create a shared, playful context that can support rapport and reflexivity.

At the same time, the approach has limitations. The sample is small (n=8) and skewed towards players who care enough about their islands to volunteer for an in-game tour. Interviews captured a snapshot in time, not longitudinal creative trajectories. My positionality as an ACNH player likely made it easier to empathize with participants, but may also have made me more inclined to see creativity where others might see routine play. I do not claim saturation or generalizability. Instead, I offer this as a qualitative vignette that complements more extensive quantitative or mixed-methods work on games and creativity. In this paper, I show how in-game ethnographic methods can surface the texture of creative practice that purely survey-based approaches might miss.

Implications for Game Studies and Design

For game studies, this work suggests several directions:

1. Treating creativity in commercial games as relational practice rather than just as output or trait.
2. Paying attention to how copying, remixing, and curation function as meaningful creative acts in game communities.
3. Examining how economic and design decisions (updates, item drops) shape the conditions under which players can be creative.

For designers, I cautiously gesture toward a few implications, while acknowledging the small scale of this study:

1. Design for interpretable constraints. Participants often thrived when constraints were understandable and could be creatively exploited (e.g., seasonal bushes as a “clock”). Opaque or arbitrary limits felt less generative.
2. Support experience design, not just object placement. Tools that help players choreograph flows, narratives, and interactions (even imagined ones) may better align with how they actually think about creativity.
3. Respect sociocultural embedding. Players bring their histories, cultures, and aspirations into gameworlds. Designing with this in mind, including flexible naming, decoration, and referencing systems, can support more diverse forms of creative worldbuilding.

I am careful not to overstate these as universal “guidelines.” They are grounded in the experiences of a specific group of ACNH players, but they may resonate with broader trends in sandbox and life-simulation games.

Limitations and Future Work

This study is intentionally small-scale and exploratory. It focuses on eight players from the Anglophone Global North, all of whom were comfortable giving tours in English and had sufficient confidence in their islands to participate. Creativity is likely experienced differently in other regions, communities, and play cultures. Interviews captured a single moment in each player's creative trajectory.

Building on these findings, several avenues for future work emerge. Longitudinal studies following how islands evolve over time, or how players move between games (e.g., ACNH, Minecraft, The Sims), could deepen understanding of how in-game creativity develops. Future work might also: compare how creativity is experienced in ACNH and other sandbox/life-sim games, especially those with different constraint regimes; examine moments where constraints hinder creativity (e.g., grind, burnout, update fatigue), not just where they inspire it; integrate perspectives from digital ethnography, participatory design, or player-designer collaborations to explore co-authorship more explicitly.

CONCLUSION

Through in-game island tours with eight ACNH players, I have explored how players conceptualize their own creativity in a popular commercial game. Instead of treating creativity as something that can be captured through scores or isolated tasks, I have framed it as a sociocultural, situated practice that emerges at the intersection of players' histories, the game's affordances and constraints, and the audiences – real and imagined – for whom islands are built. Players in this study experienced ACNH as a creative space where they could experiment with identity, design experiences for others, and negotiate agency within tight design boundaries. They copied, remixed, curated, and imagined, often in ways that blur lines between play and design, originality and repetition, online and offline.

For game studies, I hope this work contributes a grounded, player-centered account of in-game creativity in ACNH, and a reminder that creativity research in games benefits from asking not only "what do games afford?" but also "how do players themselves understand what they are doing?" For designers, I suggest that supporting creativity may mean thinking less about providing endless tools and more about enabling meaningful, legible, and culturally resonant practices of co-creation.

Ultimately, ACNH is not just a site where creativity can be measured; it is a site where creativity is lived, contested, and narrated, one island tour at a time.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Joanna Rivera-Carlisle and Dr. Jaimie Lee Freeman for their support and edits on this paper and Dr. Kathryn Eccles and Dr. Laura Herman for their long conversations with me around the interplay between creativity and digital technologies. I also thank the reviewers for their constructive feedback and all the participants who kindly welcomed me to their islands.

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