

**The Success of Nintendo and *Animal Crossing*:
New Horizons During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

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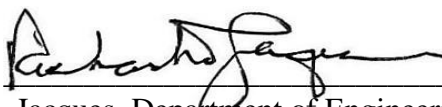
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On my honor as a University Student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments.

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Abstract

The primary objective of this thesis is to analyze the effects of COVID-19 on video game activity and explore why and how a game, specifically *Animal Crossing: New Horizons (ACNH)*, was able to flourish during this time. Using the STS framework of Social Construction of Technology (SCOT), I will explore the demand of the Nintendo Switch console during COVID-19, the use of *ACNH* to fulfill the desire for interaction during the pandemic, and the use of *ACNH* as a platform to escape the real world while giving players control of a place resembling the real world. This paper will elaborate on how technology was able to fulfill these societal desires, which ultimately led to the prosperity and success of the Nintendo Switch and *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* during uncertain times with the outbreak of COVID-19, while offering analysis and insight on related aspects from an ethical perspective.

Introduction

With the widespread presence of video games and the current situation with the COVID-19 pandemic, my STS research topic is to study the burst of demand and success of the Nintendo Switch and Nintendo's game, *Animal Crossing: New Horizons (ACNH)*. Video games have already been a common and integral part of some people's lives as technology continues to develop and prosper. Due to this unprecedented outbreak, various precautions have been enforced, such as social distancing and small gatherings. The fear of contracting COVID-19 through social interaction with others has been present since the beginning of the outbreak in the United States. This has led to increased isolation for people, as friends and family members are no longer able to interact and meet each other as freely as before. As a result, video games have become a common source of entertainment and a way to interact with others. Personally, I have picked up a new video game since the pandemic started, and saw many friends play new games or even bought a Nintendo Switch console. As many people are aware, *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* became a global sensation since its release in March 2020. Many of my friends bought a Nintendo Switch to just play this game, and many stores reported being out of stock of this console during the spring and summer of 2020. With this game, the *Animal Crossing* series has surged in popularity during COVID-19 and had a wide presence across social media platforms. I wanted to research and further understand the statistics behind the surge of demand for the Nintendo Switch and what aspects of *Animal Crossing* made it the most popular game towards the beginning of the outbreak. This paper analyzes how COVID-19 had a main role in the demand for the Nintendo Switch and the success of *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, due to a combination of the current state of the world and societal desires, while offering analytical insight from an ethical and STS perspective.

STS Framework

The STS framework utilized for this paper is the Social Construction of Technology (SCOT). The origin of this theory is Trevor Pinch and Wiebe Bijker's article from 1987, "The Social Construction of Facts and Artifacts: Or How the Sociology of Science and the Sociology of Technology Might Benefit Each Other." The main idea behind this theory is that social structures have the ability to influence and be influenced by the development of technology. SCOT consists of four main components: interpretive flexibility, the concept of the relevant social group, closure and stabilization, and the wider context (Klein & Kleinman, 2002).

Methodology

The main goals of this study are to explore and analyze the success and prosperity of the Nintendo Switch and *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, focusing on how they fulfill the needs and desires of society during COVID-19. As COVID-19, the sudden burst in demand for the Nintendo Switch, and the success of *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* are more recent events, the main sources of information and analysis were credible articles posted online. A few scholarly journals and research papers on my topic have been published, so these were utilized as well. While making use of these sources, it is important to be aware of any potential bias the authors may have. The sources used had little to no bias as they provided relevant statistics and insight. Incorporating a blend of articles and academic work, I successfully present a research paper that explores the success of Nintendo's Switch and *ACNH*, while providing analysis on STS and ethical components of consideration.

Demand for the Nintendo Switch and Response to the Limited-Edition Console

To celebrate the release of *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, Nintendo announced that they were creating a limited-edition *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*-themed Switch console.

This edition of the console features *ACNH* graphics on the back of the console and charging dock, as well as pastel green and blue controllers. They were released in the United States on March 13, 2020 and were priced at \$299, which is the same price as a standard Nintendo Switch (Levin, 2020). Due to *Animal Crossing* having a lot of fans, the appeal of the console's design, and the hype surrounding the release of *ACNH*, this limited-edition console was in high demand. Following its official release to the public, many stores quickly sold out of this popular item. People began searching multiple stores to find it, with one of my friends getting his at a Target 30 minutes away and another friend drove to a GameStop in another state to purchase one.

After the limited-edition version of the Switch was out of stock in stores, some of those who had acquired this product in high demand sought to profit off those who were eagerly hoping to get their hands on it. People began to take advantage of this situation by selling their *ACNH* Switch online through third-party sellers, listing their consoles at prices over two times the regular cost. Sellers on Amazon have listed it for at least \$650, while eBay prices went up to \$1,078 (Knoder & Werth, 2020). After months of the limited-edition console being out of stock, Nintendo finally restocked this themed Switch in October 2020, which was available to be purchased at the standard cost (Huang, 2020). Nintendo continues to release more of the *ACNH* Switch, causing prices of this console on third-party sellers to drop to somewhat more reasonable prices, but slightly higher than that of the standard retail price.

With the release of the *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*-themed Switch, various social responses can be seen due to this new technology that is in high demand, making the SCOT framework highly applicable. First, the popularity and desire for this console were evident through stores across the nation selling out quickly, and instances where individuals traveled varying distances to get their hands on this limited-edition Switch. While the Nintendo Switch

had already been available prior, a newer version of the console was highly desired due to having a new design that was inspired by *ACNH*. It is also important to consider how some individuals approached this situation of stores being out of stock and the societal demand for the console by taking advantage of this circumstance. This calls into question whether third-party sites, such as Amazon and eBay, should have regulations over prices to control grossly inflated prices for products in demand by mitigating or preventing instances of goods being sold well above retail price. Ethically, people can view this situation as unjust and immoral as people are using their position and power to profit off others given a circumstance. One possible action would be implementing an indicator that the item being viewed is priced extremely high compared to what is expected. However, others could feel that if the price of a good they are selling is controlled, then this is unfair regulation over their items. Another belief is that reasonable people would be willing not to make the purchase, and the price of the new technology would have to naturally be lowered to sell the good. Individuals could also be seen as having the right over their own money, and if they are willing to pay excessive amounts for something they desire, they can make that choice by their own free will.

The outbreak of COVID-19 has undoubtedly led to an increase in video game activity due to social distancing and preventative measures. As people are stuck at home, millions of people have turned to video games for safe and fun social interaction. Nintendo Co Ltd.'s profits increased by over 400% in its fiscal first quarter in 2020, which ended June 30th, as the demand for the Switch console and games skyrocketed during the COVID-19 pandemic. More than 5.7 million Switch consoles were shipped in the quarter, up 166.6% year over year. With the demand for the Switch due to stay-at-home orders and other safety precautions, Nintendo ran into supply issues due to factory shutdowns in China. This resulted in component shortages and slowed

output for factors in Vietnam, where the Switch is manufactured. As of August 6, 2020, there was still a shortage of the Switch and Switch-Lite at retailers across the globe (Haider, 2020).

Popularity and Impact of *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*

The main driver for Switch sales was due to one game, *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, which was released on March 20, 2020. The *Animal Crossing* series has been around for almost 20 years, but only really exploded and became a worldwide sensation last year. Around 11 million units of *ACNH* by the end of March 2020 and 10.6 million units of the game sold within 2020's June quarter (MacDonald, 2020). Pictures and clips of the game have been seen on all social media platforms since its release and it has been played by celebrities, popular gamers, and influencers. Within a few weeks of its release, it became the number one trending game in Japan, U.S., South Korea, France, and Spain. Rishi Chandra, the global head of gaming partnerships at Twitter, noted that this game became the number one most-talked-about game in the world. He mentioned that this feat was impressive as it dethroned *Fate/Grand Order*, which held that title for almost two years, and *Fortnite*. Since the game's launch, conversation volume has increased over 1000% and the number of people tweeting about it grew over 400%.

Within a few weeks of the game's release, there were more than 38 million tweets about it. Many people celebrated the game's ability to provide comfort and social interaction during a time of isolation. Joseph Gorordo, a vice president of outreach for a chain of music-based alcohol and drug treatment centers, used *Animal Crossing* to connect with his clients while practicing social distancing. He believes that the game offers a haven, particularly for millennials, and can provide players with a feeling of empowerment and community, especially since people are being told to stay at home during the pandemic (Khan, 2020). Kyrie Caldwell, a video game researcher at UW-Madison Wisconsin Center for Education Research, said that

ACNH probably would have been a popular game in any situation as it is from Nintendo.

However, he believes that the isolation people experience due to the pandemic and various health measures led to skyrocketed purchases and playtime (Mesch, 2020). Nick Fiondella, a gamer and a streamer, states that *ACNH* is a “super casual” game that is relaxing but also has opportunities for players to meet others online within the game. He notes that these elements appeal to both hardcore and more casual players (Huddleston Jr., 2020). With social distancing and stay-at-home measures in place, the Nintendo Switch and *ACNH* offer a source of entertainment and leisure for people.

The psychological success of this phenomenon can be analyzed in two main components. The Nintendo Switch and *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* fulfills people’s desire for interaction by getting rid of the loneliness that people are unwilling to experience. Additionally, this game is a platform for people to escape difficulties in real life and experience a more harmonious, tranquil life (Zhu, 2020).

***Animal Crossing: New Horizons* Fostering Interaction**

As the ability for interaction has become restricted due to COVID-19, *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* offers multiple ways for players to feel that sense of interaction. In *ACNH*, there are residents on your island, known as villagers. These characters consist of a wide array of animals, ranging from cats to penguins, and will have one of eight distinct personalities, such as peppy, jock, and lazy (Lowry, Holly, & Nelson, 2020). Villagers have their own unique appearance, voice, and background music. This resembles a society that is composed of people with different looks, interests, and behaviors. Players can interact with these villagers by chatting with them, giving them gifts, and even coordinating expressions and gestures. As an *Animal Crossing* player, Mesch states that “I wasn’t alone – I was, of course, surrounded by the cute

animal residents of my island” (Mesch, 2020). With all the different types of characters and their varying characteristics that players can interact with, this mimics real life.

Another vital feature of *ACNH* is the ability to connect friends together. Players can fly to each other’s islands, via an airport on their island, using a code and internet connection. This allows people to show their island to their friends, interact with different characters, and even shop at each other’s stores. Players also can chat with each other in-game. The game’s creators at Nintendo found the virality of the game validating as they intended for it to be shared. Hisashi Nogami, the *Animal Crossing* series producer, believes that those who have been playing longer would have more knowledge and tips, and could share this information with others. Aya Kyogoku said that *Animal Crossing* is a communication game. She hopes that with the game, people enjoy communicating with each other, whether that is through playing the game with others or simply talking about the game (MacDonald, 2020). Researcher Caldwell shared that she has video chatted with a friend talking about life and the game, while both were playing the game on their Switches. She also described that *ACNH* gives players the experience of traveling to visit friends and family and how she was surprised by how nice it felt when she visited her brother’s island (Mesch, 2020). Those who have spent lots of time and effort designing their island have even shared their island’s code with the public online. This shows how excited people are to show others their island and that people want to visit other players’ islands. People have designed their island to all sorts of themes, ranging from *The Office* to *The Legend of Zelda* (Spear, 2020). *ACNH* can effectively serve as a platform that allows users to experience interaction through different in-game characters, as well as real people.

With *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* being a way to connect people and serve as a platform for communication, it is important to assess how technology influences society and

ethical components that come with this. This game allows players from anywhere in the world to chat with each other, but this can lead to negative, unintentional outcomes. If players use certain language towards each other in the game, this would call into question whether some form of chat moderation or filter should be applied. Hateful comments or violent ideas could be shared by players. As players can meet up in *ACNH* and chat, another possible source of concern would be bullying and harassment. Over a digital platform, this could be easily done and methods might need to be in place to keep people accountable. A way to mitigate this in *ACNH* would be allowing players to mute or block players who are not respectful. While ways could be implemented to ensure proper behavior and communication, some may believe that it would infringe on their right to free speech. A majority of players most likely will not use foul language or hateful speech, but potential instances should be considered, and measures could be put into place for Nintendo products, like *ACNH*, as they exist in some other gaming platforms.

Animal Crossing: New Horizons as a Way to Escape the World

Although *Animal Crossing* is a game, it resembles the world and way of life that everyone is familiar with. The game draws parallels with the real world that continues whether you are playing or not. Time passes as in real life, the weather and seasons change, the villagers converse with each other and you, and the various aspects of the island feel interconnected. Players have daily tasks, such as shaking trees to collect fruit, digging up fossils, fishing, and catching bugs with a net. In doing so, players are rewarded with points for completing these tasks. Players can also pay off mortgages for their home, craft items, create their character's outfit, plant flowers, and redesign their island. By having a world that is filled with activities, as well as giving players the freedom to do as they choose and the flexibility to be creative, this

resembles a world that players have control. The daily tasks offer a sense of responsibility and achievement, while redesigning the island allows players to see their thoughts come to life.

Mesch shared that she feels that “players have a lot of control over what happens on their islands, something that I and many others have felt we’ve lost with the uncertainty of the pandemic.” She also noted that seeing her island grow and thrive felt like a “utopian opposite” of life presently, as some local businesses are struggling and family, friends, and neighbors are feeling disconnected from each other (Mesch, 2020). Romana Ramzan, a lecturer at Glasgow Caledonian University, mentioned that there exists no nastiness or violence in this game, and people can get absorbed into day-to-day aspects without any real-world consequences. Players have the control to do whatever they may desire on any given day (Zhu, 2020). Ultimately, *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* offers players the ability to create an island to their liking and have ownership, while incorporating various real-life activities in a peaceful, digital world.

Analyzing this from the other perspective, this virtual dreamland only allows users to temporarily escape reality and the feeling of escapism cannot last forever. According to a prior study by Hussain and Griffiths (2009), more than one-third of gamers stated that escape and relaxation were the main reasons for playing. A different study on online gaming found that escapism was the best predictor for Internet addiction, as people used gaming to avoid thinking about real problems facing them. Potential negative outcomes of this feeling of escapism by playing *ACNH* on people’s psychological well-being could be studied in the future (Zhu, 2020). The influence video games can have on an individual’s way of life should be addressed with respect to STS and ethics. Technology and video games have the ability to impact how players perceive things, interact with other human beings, and behave. Players should hopefully be cognizant of how playing these games affect them as a person, and be held accountable for their

actions. While people often find video games as enjoyable, fun, and relaxing, it is important to be responsible as well. Some players may spend long periods of time playing games, and in doing so they neglect other important aspects of their lives. Video games can be seen as a distraction from school assignments, cleanliness, and typical tasks of daily life. Additionally, spending a lot of time on games may lead people to become addicted. Addiction is always a concern related to video games, no matter the age or background of a player, involving time and potentially money.

This raises the point if *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* is a relaxing game that mirrors reality, should the game or Nintendo's Switch incorporate a way for players to be conscious of the amount of time spent playing? While some people are good at controlling how much time they spend on video games, others may not. In terms of the Nintendo Switch, reminders or pop-ups could be utilized to notify the users if they have been consistently playing for a long duration of time. *ACNH* could incorporate a form of these messages in the gameplay through interactions between the characters and the player. The game's villagers could mention how they have seen the player around for a certain number of hours, which would be a subtle way to allow the players to recognize how long they have been playing. While some would support utilizing these methods to increase awareness while playing video games, others may view this as something that would diminish the user experience. Additionally, while *ACNH* resembles the world in a carefree manner, some players may need to recognize that this is a game to make sure that their perception of reality is not warped. These aspects could be considered by not only Nintendo, but also other gaming companies to assess whether they are promoting health checks to users as a way to ensure best practices and mitigate addiction.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic provided a situation that allowed for the Nintendo Switch to

reach an all-time high in demand, as well as the success and popularity of one game, *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*. As social distancing created a greater sense of isolation and loneliness, the Nintendo Switch and *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, are able to fulfill people's desires for interaction and socialization during these unprecedented times. This game not only connects friends and family from any location, but also provides a space resembling the real world that players had control over. The Social Construction of Technology framework was utilized to assess social factors that made the Nintendo Switch and *ACNH* so popular and successful in the last year, as well as address social responses that occurred from the demand. Various ethical aspects were addressed. Third-party websites could implement measures, such as including warning notifications, to address individuals taking advantage of a situation and selling goods at inflated prices. Chat filters and moderation could be utilized to mitigate harassment and improper social behavior in games when players interact with each other. Subtle reminders about how long a player has been playing can be incorporated within games and by game console companies to help prevent video game addiction and be concerned with mental health.

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