

Article

An autistic ethnographic case study of *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*

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Abstract: *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (ACNH) is a widely popular life simulation game known for its calming, non-competitive environment. This study examines how the game's mechanics and design specifically appeal to autistic players, providing a sense of structure, control, and opportunities for creative expression. By combining game design analysis and ethnographic methods and further enriching the findings with insights gathered from autistic players on social media, this research explores the intersection between neurodiversity and player experience. The analysis highlights key elements such as the game's predictable routines, highly customizable environments, and simplified, non-intrusive social interactions with both NPCs and other players. These characteristics align with the sensory, cognitive, and social preferences of neurotypical individuals, offering escapism that reduces anxiety and promotes a sense of autonomy. The ethnographic case study, complemented by feedback from autistic players online, sheds light on the lived experiences of these players, demonstrating how ACNH fosters relaxation, creativity, and emotional well-being. This research contributes to discussions on inclusive game design, suggesting that games like ACNH can provide meaningful, positive experiences for neurotypical communities, ultimately fostering greater accessibility and inclusion in digital environments.

Keywords: autism; neurodiversity; universal game design; player experience; accessibility; animal crossing

1. Introduction

1.1. An overview of *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*

Animal Crossing: New Horizons (ACNH), released by Nintendo in March 2020, became a cultural phenomenon, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. The game's appeal lies in its highly customizable, non-competitive environment, where players manage a deserted island, gather resources, and engage with anthropomorphic villagers. ACNH operates in real-time, with day-night cycles and seasonal events, allowing players to set their own pace without the pressure of objectives or time constraints [1]. The game's unique balance of creativity, routine, and calm helped it resonate with players seeking refuge from the anxieties and uncertainties of the pandemic [2,3].

Animal Crossing offered more than mere entertainment; it became a psychological sanctuary for many, fostering positive mental health outcomes and providing a way to combat isolation and stress during lockdowns [4,5]. This was particularly evident among neuroatypical individuals, especially autistic players, for whom the game's predictable routines, structured social interactions, and extensive customization aligned with their cognitive and sensory preferences [6,7]. The game's focus on creating safe, slow-paced environments also reflected a broader societal shift

towards “slowness,” as seen in its alignment with Shinto-inspired mindfulness and a growing desire for tranquility [8,9].

1.2. An overview of autism and gaming

Recent studies suggest that autistic individuals may be particularly drawn to video games, both as a means of social engagement and as a form of escapism. Games can offer structured and easily controllable environments, which align well with the preferences and cognitive profiles often associated with autism [10–14]. Research has also begun to explore the correlation between certain autistic traits and preferences for specific game genres or mechanics. For instance, structured and predictable gameplay (often found in simulation or strategy games) may be particularly appealing due to the importance of routine, repetition, and order in many autistic experiences [15]. Moreover, video games offer opportunities for independent activity, visual and cognitive stimulation, and controlled social interactions, which are frequently cited as valuable by autistic players [16–19].

1.3. Objective of this article

However, this area remains significantly underexplored. Despite the growing visibility of autistic gamers and increasing interest in inclusive game design, there is a notable lack of research on their gaming preferences, motivations, and experiences across different genres. More empirical studies are needed to better understand how autistic players engage with video games and how specific mechanics may support or hinder their enjoyment, autonomy, and well-being.

This study thus aims to explore why ACNH seems to be particularly appreciated by some autistic players. By examining the game’s mechanics and conducting an ethnographic case study, we will investigate how ACNH’s design (emphasizing predictability, controlled social interactions, and customization) may meet the preferences and play styles of neuroatypical individuals.

2. Materials and methods

This study employs a dual methodological approach to explore how ACNH could support neuroatypical players, specifically those on the autism spectrum. The first part focuses on the analysis of the game mechanics, while the second part is based on a single-case ethnographic study, providing a comprehensive understanding of both the technical and experiential dimensions of gameplay.

The analysis of the game mechanics [20] highlights key elements that make ACNH particularly appealing to neuroatypical players. The game’s non-competitive nature, real-time progression, and customizable environment offer players a sense of control over their surroundings, catering to preferences for structure and predictability [1]. These mechanics, along with the ability to establish routines and manage social interactions in a low-pressure setting, support emotional regulation and provide comfort for players who benefit from predictable environments [21]. To further frame this analysis, the study draws on the Mechanics–Dynamics–Aesthetics (MDA) framework [22] which conceptualizes the relationship between a game’s formal design and the player’s experiential engagement. While not used as a prescriptive coding tool,

the MDA model has guided this exploratory study by offering a structured lens through which to understand how ACNH's mechanics (e.g., real-time cycles, collecting, crafting), its dynamics (e.g., routine-building, freedom of pacing), and its aesthetics (e.g., calm atmosphere, creative expression, sensory comfort) align with the specific preferences and needs of some autistic players. This perspective supports a nuanced reading of the game not only as a system of rules and affordances but also as an emotional and sensory space that fosters autonomy, relaxation, and imaginative self-expression. This framework not only guided the identification of relevant mechanics and dynamics in the game but also informed the structure of section 3.1, which analyzes how these design elements shape the gaming experience of the autistic player.

To complement this, the study includes an ethnographic case study of a single neuroatypical (autistic) player. Ethnographic methods are effective in capturing the personal, lived experiences of individuals, providing deep insights into how players interact with and interpret game mechanics [23,24]. The case study was carried out in several phases. First, preliminary observations were conducted through public discussions on forums and social media platforms where (autistic) players shared their experiences with ACNH. This initial exploratory step helped identify recurring themes and guided the formulation of interview questions. Following this, I established direct contact with a participant who identifies as autistic and is an experienced ACNH player. We conducted several semi-structured interviews, each lasting approximately one hour. These interviews explored the participant's emotional responses to the game, preferred playstyle, use of routines, and experiences with in-game social interactions. In addition to these interviews, I was able to observe the participant playing the game in real time during multiple sessions. These live observations provided further insight into how she navigated the game environment, made choices, and responded to sensory and interactive elements.

Although single-case studies may be critiqued for limited generalizability [25], they offer a rich, focused exploration of individual experiences that can lead to theoretical generalizations [26]. This study also draws from the theoretical framework of "reflective simulation," where the game fosters introspective and meaningful experiences for the player [27]. Single-case studies enable researchers to draw significant theoretical insights without the need for broader empirical validation, as they focus on uncovering specific interactions and responses within the case. This approach has been recognized for its ability to generate empirical generalizations, particularly in complex social science contexts [28]. Single-case ethnographies are particularly relevant for studying neuroatypical players, whose experiences may be deeply personal and highly individualized [29]. The use of a mini-ethnographic case study [30] allows the study to remain feasible and manageable within the constraints of time and resources while still providing a depth of understanding. Data for the ethnographic case study was collected through semi-structured interviews and direct observation of the players' in-game behavior over a series of sessions. The interviews explored the player's emotional responses, use of routines, and engagement with social interactions within the game. This approach not only captures how the player experiences the game but also provides valuable insights into how ACNH meets their preferences for structure and predictability, allowing for both comfort and engagement.

By combining these methods, the study provides a nuanced understanding of how ACNH aligns with the preferences and needs of neuroatypical players, highlighting the broader implications of game design for supporting diverse playstyles.

3. Results and discussion

The analysis presented below follows the structure suggested by the MDA framework [22], distinguishing between the mechanics of the game, the player-generated dynamics, and the emotional and sensory aesthetics emerging from gameplay.

3.1. Analysis of game mechanics and design in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*

Analyzing the game mechanics and design of ACNH highlights how specific game elements may align with the preferences of autistic players. The game's design, which emphasizes a calm, controlled, and non-competitive experience, seems particularly well-suited for neuroatypical individuals.

3.1.1. A predictable and soothing environment with routine-building features

ACNH is distinguished by its calm and predictable environment, offering players a structured experience through its real-time day-night cycle and seasonal changes. Events like the Fishing Tourney, Bunny Day, and New Year's Day are scheduled to recur annually on set dates, providing players with a sense of stability and routine. For neuroatypical individuals, especially those on the autism spectrum, this predictability could help reduce anxiety by minimizing uncertainty and unexpected changes.

The game also fosters the creation of daily routines. Players may log in at the same time each day to perform tasks like watering plants, visiting villagers, or collecting fruit from trees. This routine-building aspect is particularly beneficial for autistic players, who often find comfort in repetition and regularity. By integrating these tasks into their gameplay, players create a consistent flow of activities that supports emotional regulation and brings a sense of order to their day.

Moreover, ACNH's absence of time limits and competitive pressure allows players to engage at their own pace. Unlike many games that emphasize speed or competition, ACNH encourages a leisurely experience where players can spend their time fishing, building, or gardening without the pressure of deadlines or external goals. This low-pressure atmosphere makes the game particularly relaxing and accessible for neuroatypical players, who may find highly competitive environments overwhelming.

The game's time management mechanics can also help players structure their real-life schedules. By incorporating gameplay into their daily routines, players can benefit from the predictability and regularity ACNH provides, allowing the game to act as a soothing and stabilizing element in their everyday lives (**Figure 1**).

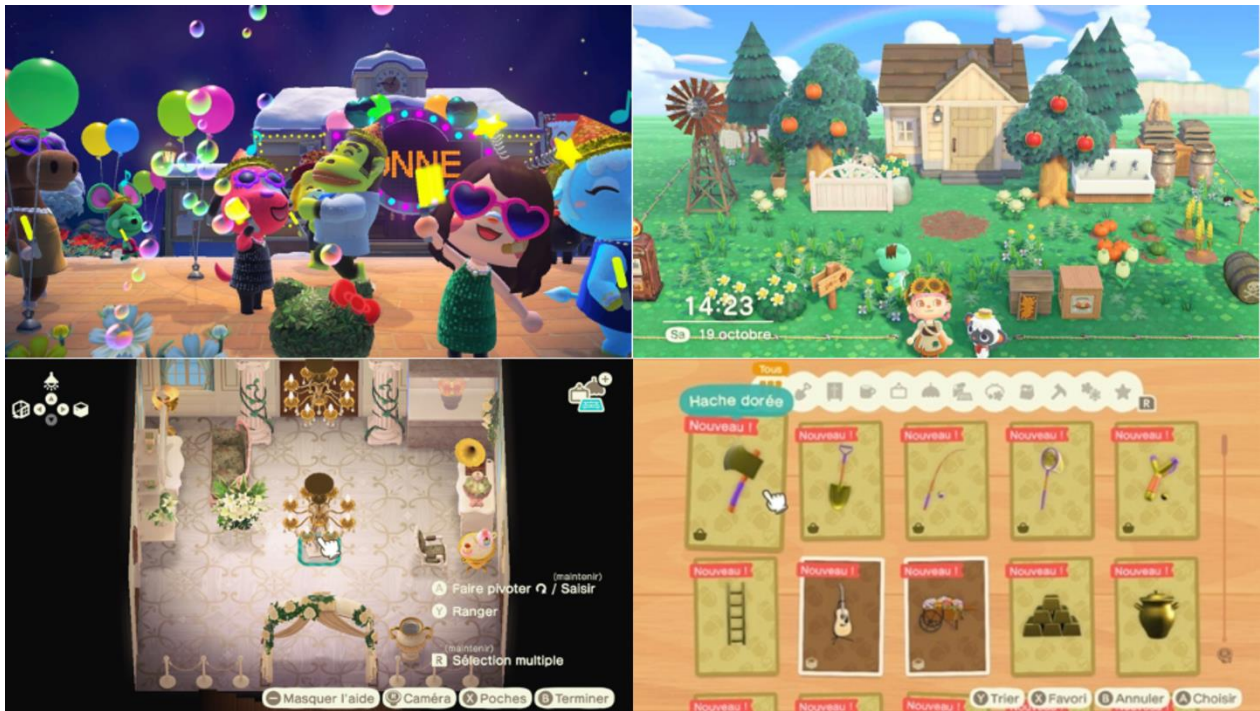


Figure 1. New Year's Eve—Poom; Poomisland/farm decor—Anoor; Azkaban/home improvement—Nayah; Skyloft/inventory and tools—Nayah, Skyloft.

3.1.2. Control, autonomy, stress-free goal management and social interactions

This high level of control fosters a sense of mastery and empowerment, providing a safe space for exploration without fear of failure. This autonomy is especially valuable for autistic individuals, who may often feel disempowered in real life due to unpredictable social interactions or external events. ACNH offers a world where nothing is imposed, and players can freely choose which parts of the game to engage with or ignore, all without negative consequences. The game's environment encourages exploration at the player's own pace, reducing the anxiety that often accompanies rigid rules or high-stakes environments.

Alongside this freedom, the game presents players with clear, manageable goals, such as fishing, collecting items, or improving the island's layout. These tasks come without time constraints or penalties for incompletion, allowing players to decide which activities to pursue, whether it's collecting seashells or planting trees. The absence of pressure and deadlines creates a relaxed atmosphere, particularly appealing to autistic individuals who may feel overwhelmed by strict objectives. ACNH also provides a gentle approach to social interactions, both with non-playable characters (NPCs) and other players. Interactions with NPCs are simple, friendly, and repetitive, with villagers offering predictable and familiar dialogue. Players can choose whether or not to engage with them, reducing the pressure that often comes with real-world social expectations. This predictable, low-stakes interaction allows players to anticipate social exchanges, making them feel safer and more in control.

Furthermore, interactions with other human players are entirely optional and can occur at a relaxed pace. Players can invite friends to visit their island but are not required to engage in direct communication or real-time interaction. This flexibility allows autistic players to socialize at a distance, maintaining full control over the

frequency and intensity of these interactions. Unlike many multiplayer games, where fast-paced communication and teamwork are essential, ACNH gives players the freedom to socialize on their own terms, making the game accessible and comfortable for those who may find traditional online interactions overwhelming.

This combination of autonomy in gameplay and control over social interactions creates a soothing, non-threatening environment where players can explore, express themselves, and connect with others at their own pace (Figures 2 and 3).



Figure 2. Picture of an empty beach—Manon; seashell/resident walking on the island—Anoor; Azkaban/museum with fossil collection—Anoor; Azkaban/character sitting next to a resident—Manon, Seashell.



Figure 3. Picture of an empty beach—Manon, seashell/resident walking on the island—Anoor, Azkaban/Halloween decoration—Anoor, Azkaban/meetings between the character and local residents—Poom, Poomisland.

3.1.3. Gentle, customizable sensory stimulation, creativity, self-expression and well-being

ACNH offers players a soothing sensory experience combined with extensive opportunities for creativity and self-expression. The game's gentle, pastel-colored visuals, natural sounds like waves and birds, and calming background music create a tranquil atmosphere. This sensory design is particularly beneficial for autistic individuals, who may be hypersensitive to intense sensory stimuli. By minimizing loud sounds or harsh visuals, ACNH helps prevent sensory overload, offering a comfortable and engaging experience.

In addition to this gentle ambiance, the game provides extensive customization options that allow players to tailor their island's design according to their sensory preferences. Players can create open, uncluttered spaces or lush, densely vegetated areas, regulating the visual complexity of their surroundings to suit their needs. This level of control over the environment helps autistic players manage distractions and avoid overstimulation, making the game a relaxing and comfortable space.

Moreover, ACNH encourages players to express their creativity in a variety of ways. From island customization and home decoration to character personalization and clothing design, players are free to explore their artistic interests without fear of judgment. This creative freedom is particularly valuable for autistic individuals, who may have specific sensory or aesthetic preferences. For example, players can design their own clothes, furniture, or even entire island layouts based on personal tastes, creating a world that reflects their unique identity.

This combination of gentle sensory stimulation, customization, and creative freedom fosters a deep sense of control and emotional comfort. By allowing players to express themselves while maintaining a soothing and non-aggressive environment, ACNH becomes an ideal space for both relaxation and self-regulation. The game serves as an immersive form of escapism, offering neuroatypical players a way to withdraw from external stressors without experiencing the cognitive or sensory fatigue often associated with more intense games.

3.2. Ethnographic analysis: The case of Anoor

This ethnographic analysis conducted with Anoor, an autistic player, sheds light on several aspects of ACNH that resonate particularly with her neuroatypical experience. By combining her personal history with the game, her routines, her relationship with control and creativity, and her sensory experiences, this study explores how ACNH contributes to her well-being and allows her to flourish in a secure, predictable, and aesthetically pleasing environment (**Figure 4**).



Figure 4. Characters and residents at the restaurant—Anoor, Azkaban/decorating a resident’s home—Anoor, Azkaban/character talking to a resident—Anoor, Azkaban/shooting star capture—Anoor, Azkaban.

3.2.1. Personal history and gameplay context

Anoor discovered ACNH shortly before its official release in 2020, either through various media outlets or via her younger brother, with whom she used to play similar games during childhood. Her primary motivation to start playing this new installment came from her positive experience with *Animal Crossing: Wild World*, a game she had played on her Nintendo DS. “I played Wild World when I was little, and I loved it,” she explains, adding that she even bought a Nintendo Switch specifically to play

ACNH. Since the game's release, Anoor has alternated between periods of intense engagement (playing daily for several months) and phases where she does not play for a year or two. This flexible approach illustrates how ACNH adapts to her personal rhythm without imposing strict objectives or deadlines, which perfectly aligns with her style of play: "I play to relax," she summarizes.

3.2.2. A predictable and soothing environment with routine-building features

For Anoor, routines within the game are crucial. She enjoys playing in the morning, describing it as a "gentle way to wake up," and follows a set of daily activities, such as checking her mail, searching for fossils, and talking to villagers. These routines provide her with a sense of stability and help structure her days within the game, a particularly appreciated feature for autistic players. "I have a little routine I follow that I really like, and it helps me start my day," she explains. Although certain game mechanics, such as the day-night cycle and seasonal events, influence players' routines, Anoor reveals that she engages in *time traveling* to adjust these elements to her own preferences, without feeling limited by the game's natural cycles. This flexibility reflects her need for control while allowing her to maintain predictable routines that facilitate her immersion (**Figure 5**).



Figure 5. Disguised characters for Halloween—Anoor, Azkaban/character on a bridge—Anoor, Azkaban/Halloween decoration—Anoor, Azkaban/character in the clothing store—Anoor, Azkaban.

3.2.3. Control, autonomy, stress-free goal management and social interactions

The ability to fully customize her island and environment is one of the aspects Anoor appreciates most in ACNH. "I'm really happy because I can choose everything," she explains, highlighting that this control allows her to create an aesthetically pleasing and intellectually stimulating environment. She compares this

freedom to that of a developer, enthusiastically describing her enjoyment in designing and decorating spaces within the game. However, this personalization can also be a source of “good stress” for her, as she constantly seeks perfection in her creations. “Decorating relaxes me, but at the same time, there’s so much at stake. I want it to be perfect, beautiful, and realistic,” she says, emphasizing the importance of creating visually appealing and realistic environments. This quest for realism and aesthetics, combined with the freedom to customize at her own pace, enhances her engagement and sense of mastery.

Social interactions in ACNH, particularly with the villagers, elicit mixed reactions from Anoor. On one hand, she enjoys her initial encounters with new villagers and invests in building relationships until she receives their photo, the ultimate sign of friendship in the game. However, after achieving this goal, the repetitive dialogues with the characters become “boring.” “It’s always the same,” she says, expressing her growing disinterest in these interactions. Moreover, Anoor prefers playing alone rather than with other players online. Although she has participated in online events with her sister-in-law or engaged in item trading with other players, she emphasizes that these interactions are mainly utilitarian. She feels no need to socialize further within the game, preferring to maintain full control over her gaming experience while avoiding the unpredictability of social interactions both online and in real life.

3.2.4. Gentle, customizable sensory stimulation, creativity, self-expression and well-being

The aesthetics and sensory atmosphere of the game play a central role in Anoor’s experience. She describes ACNH’s visuals as “very pleasant,” especially the soft colors and round shapes that create a cute and calming atmosphere. Her favorite season is autumn, due to its warm orange tones, which add to this visual harmony. However, Anoor rarely plays with the sound on, explaining that the game’s music distracts and even bothers her. She only turns on the sound when it’s needed, for example, to catch a glimpse of shooting stars or for the fishing plop. This attention to visual and auditory details reflects heightened sensory sensitivity, often present in autistic individuals, who prefer to avoid overly intense stimuli. ACNH, with its gentle, soothing visuals, perfectly aligns with Anoor’s sensory preferences, offering her a space where she can relax without experiencing cognitive or sensory overload.

Creativity plays a central role in Anoor’s gaming experience. She particularly values the freedom that ACNH offers for expressing her personality through island, house, and space customization. “It allows you to build an environment that reflects who you are,” she explains, noting that the wide variety of item collections and decoration possibilities cater to her personal tastes, such as Halloween, witches, nature, and fairy-like themes. This creative freedom is essential for Anoor, as it allows her to create aesthetically pleasing setups that resonate with her interests and identity. Anoor emphasizes that the ability to personalize even the smallest details, such as tree placement or flower arrangement, provides her with a unique sense of satisfaction. She enjoys that the game allows her to create a “very personal” and realistic space, which she imagines as a place where she could live. “I decorate as if I were going to live there,” she says, highlighting the importance of creating spaces that are not only beautiful but also practical and functional. However, she is less interested in creating

custom designs for clothing or in-game objects, preferring instead to focus on decorating larger spaces like her island or villagers' homes in the last downloadable content. What she finds most rewarding is the ability to "customize everything to the extreme," allowing her to relax and express her creativity in a tangible way.

Finally, Anoor explains how playing ACNH has had a positive impact on her emotional well-being, especially during the COVID-19 lockdown. As a grocery store manager, she faced intense stress in her professional life, and playing ACNH helped her "disconnect" from this stressful reality. "I would wake up very early, at 4 a.m., to play before work," she recalls, emphasizing how the game helped her manage her stress, even though it required some sacrifice in terms of sleep.

4. Discussion

This study aimed to explore why ACNH is particularly appreciated by autistic players, using a combination of game mechanics and design analysis and an ethnographic case study. To further enhance this perspective, an informal survey was conducted in a Facebook group dedicated to autism with the following question: "If you have played or are still playing, what do you like most about *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* as an autistic player?" The survey received eight responses, offering a variety of viewpoints on how autistic players experience ACNH. These testimonials not only corroborate the findings of the ethnographic case study but also provide nuanced insights. To preserve the anonymity of participants, pseudonyms are used in the following discussion.

One of the most consistent themes across the survey responses is the perception of ACNH as a calming and safe space. For Tara, the game provides a "soft bubble," while Clara and Paul emphasize its calm atmosphere and the charming, relatable characters, creating a refuge from everyday pressures. These views align with the experience of Anoor, our ethnographic subject, who uses the game as a tool for relaxation and structuring her time in a comforting way. This sense of safety is bolstered by the absence of real danger or competitive pressure, which is particularly appreciated by autistic players. Camille, for instance, highlights the fact that the game does not involve death or severe consequences for failure, noting that even rare in-game threats (such as scorpions or wasps) have minimal impact. This resonates with research on the importance of predictable, low-stress environments for autistic individuals [6,21], further supporting the notion that ACNH's design caters to these needs.

Another crucial aspect to consider when analyzing the appeal of ACNH to autistic players is their broader motivations and preferences for video games. Research has shown that autistic individuals may favor video game environments as a space for socialization [10,11,13], or as a form of escapism, primarily because these environments offer easily controllable and structured spaces [14]. Furthermore, there is evidence suggesting a correlation between certain autistic traits and the motivations to engage with specific types of video games [15]. Structured and predictable gameplay, for instance, tends to be particularly attractive to autistic individuals, aligning with their preference for routine, order, and repetitive behaviors. Video games like ACNH provide opportunities for independent activities and offer visual and

cognitive stimulation, elements that are often highly valued by autistic individuals [16–18]. In this context, ACNH’s combination of routine-building, creative freedom, and low-stress social interactions offers a perfect balance, allowing autistic players to engage with the game on their own terms. The structured gameplay, along with the freedom to personalize the environment, makes it a compelling option for those who seek both cognitive engagement and emotional relief. Thus, the specific types of actions available in ACNH (such as resource gathering, social simulation, and reflection) cater to the preferences of autistic players who enjoy games that allow for thoughtful planning and organization [19]. This helps explain why the game’s mechanics, which emphasize predictability and personal autonomy, resonate so strongly with this community, offering a safe, reliable space for creativity and self-expression.

Another central theme is the need for control and customization. Paul and Lea both emphasize the importance of being able to shape and personalize their game environment. Lea mentions the satisfaction she derives from modifying her island, block by block, to create a personal and perfect space, reflecting a desire for repetition and mastery. Similarly, Anoor finds great enjoyment in decorating her island, though this pursuit of perfection can sometimes lead to “good stress.” However, some responses reveal that this level of customization can also become a source of frustration. Elodie, for example, appreciates the game’s aesthetics but criticizes the number of repetitive and demanding tasks, which she feels turn the game into a stressful “race.” She mentions daily tasks such as shaking trees or watering plants, which, while optional, create a sense of obligation that undermines the relaxing nature of the game. These frustrations suggest that while ACNH’s flexibility and customization are significant strengths, they can also become burdensome when perceived as compulsory or overly repetitive.

The article also highlights an ongoing tension between the game’s promise of relaxation and the objectives it imposes. While ACNH is designed to offer a pressure-free experience, some players, like Elodie and Lea, nonetheless experience stress related to the many tasks they feel they need to complete in order to progress. Elodie describes feeling compelled to perform repetitive actions, even when they are optional, and notes that the gameplay, while seemingly soothing, can become overwhelming. Lea describes playing the game in phases, alternating between periods of intense engagement and extended breaks, depending on her commitment to creation or collection goals. This tension echoes the experiences of Anoor, who similarly alternates between phases of intensive gameplay and periods where she stops playing altogether. This indicates that while ACNH’s flexibility is a significant advantage, the repetitive tasks and long-term goals can make the experience more stressful for some players. It raises important questions about the balance between offering autonomy and imposing objectives within game design for neurodiverse players. The survey responses also reveal specific frustrations that were not as apparent in Anoor’s case. Anaïs explains that she eventually abandoned the game due to its slow pace and lack of progression, while Elodie criticizes the breakable tools and repetitive tasks as sources of pressure and frustration. These accounts demonstrate that although ACNH is widely appreciated for its relaxing atmosphere, it can also be perceived as restrictive by some players, particularly those like Elodie, who struggle with rapid decision-

making or repetitive tasks. This diversity of reactions highlights the need for game designers to offer more flexible options, allowing players to personalize not only their environment but also the structure of tasks and objectives. Introducing easier gameplay modes or less demanding daily tasks could enhance the experience for players who, like Elodie, feel overwhelmed by the constant repetition of in-game activities.

5. Limitations and future research

This study, enriched by survey responses, demonstrates that ACNH offers a safe, creative, and customizable space that aligns well with the preferences of many autistic players. The game successfully addresses specific cognitive and emotional needs, particularly in terms of control, routine, and predictability, while providing a platform for self-expression through customization. However, the study also reveals certain limitations, particularly regarding the repetitive nature of tasks and the pressure to meet progression objectives, which can turn what is intended as a relaxing experience into a source of frustration for some players. Despite the valuable insights gained from the survey, the study is limited by its small sample size and the informal nature of data collection. The Facebook group survey involved self-selected participants, introducing selection bias, and the focus on a single ethnographic case restricts the generalizability of the findings.

While the ethnographic method provides a specific and characterized view of the experience of an autistic player's experience, it is inherently limited in scope. The reliance on a single case restricts the diversity of perspectives represented, particularly in a neuroatypical population where experiences can vary widely depending on factors such as age, sex, cultural background, life experience, personal preferences, and co-occurring conditions. The findings thus should be interpreted as illustrative rather than representative. Ethnographic insights are generally valuable for generating hypotheses and identifying underexplored phenomena, but they require complementary methodologies such as quantitative studies or multi-case ethnographies to validate and generalize the observations.

Furthermore, future research should aim to include a more demographically and geographically diverse pool of participants. Cultural attitudes toward autism, gaming habits, preferences and motivations, and access to technology may significantly influence how autistic players engage with games like ACNH. Comparative studies between different countries or regions could highlight these contextual factors and show whether the interest in and effects of play are consistent across neuroatypical populations worldwide. Future research could also address these limitations by incorporating larger, more systematic samples to explore how different neuroatypical groups interact with games like ACNH. Moreover, further studies should investigate how game mechanics might be adapted to offer more inclusive experiences, such as adjustable difficulty levels or simplified gameplay modes. These adaptations would help accommodate the diverse needs, skills, and preferences of autistic players, ensuring that games like ACNH continue to provide accessible and enjoyable experiences for all, as was the case during the COVID-19 pandemic [31].

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