

Attachment, Possession or Personalization?: Why the Character Trade in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* Exploded

Joleen Blom

Postdoctoral researcher, Centre of Excellence in Game Culture Studies at Tampere University, johanna.blom@tuni.fi

Abstract

A month after the release of the video game *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (Nintendo 2020), virtual player markets arose where players could exchange characters and other goods, but this simultaneously led to players scamming each other during those trades. A year later Nintendo announced the *Amiibo Sanrio Collaboration Pack*, a set of character cards to be used in *New Horizons*, which a minute after its release was completely sold out so that consumers could only obtain the cards at private online vendors, another market economy, for a much higher price. This article is occupied with the question of why players are so willing to go through such great lengths to obtain virtual characters they desire, even risking being deceived? What do these characters mean to them? The article argues that the affective relationships between players and virtual characters cannot be understood independently from the marketing practices of a video game. It shows how the *Animal Crossing* ludo mix strategy's uneven distribution of characters in- and outside of *New Horizons* is the underlying reason for fraudulent player practices to occur. It explains how *Animal Crossing* uses a blend of monetization approaches resembling the current game monetization trend of free-to-play games with random in-game purchases that use characters as fuel. Finally, it will argue that Nintendo needs to foster a community infrastructure that facilitates a safe exchange of the villagers and other items but due to its neglect to do so, it is actually the player market economies instead that are fostering such responsible gameplay.

Introduction

Within a month after its release, entire player market economies had sprung up around *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (Nintendo 2020), a video game that revolves around collecting, possessing, and personalizing your own island. These market economies were meant to help players accelerate decorating their islands (Alexandra 2020; Hernandez 2020), but they eventually led to players risking losing any in-game resources they spent hours to collect just to obtain virtual characters. One character in particular attracted the desire of many players: the cute little cat villager Raymond. However, the caveat here was that as a new character to the *Animal Crossing* franchise, players could only obtain Raymond—and any other new villagers to *New Horizons*—through the game's mechanic of randomly assigning these characters to a player's island. This mechanic ignited an online player market economy where players trade villagers to obtain the characters they desire, but simultaneously led to fraudulent practices of players scamming each other during those character trades.

On top of that, almost a year later, Nintendo announced the release of the *Amiibo Sanrio Collaboration Pack*, a pack of character cards that would give players additional characters and items for *New Horizons*. Yet, both *Kotaku* (Fahey 2021) and *Polygon* (Hernandez 2021), two of the largest global popular entertainment websites, reported that the cards were sold out within minutes after their release in March 2021, forcing players to buy the card packs online through private online vendors such as Amazon or Etsy for a price much higher than the official price.

Explaining the importance of affect and interaction of audiences with fictional characters in our current transmedia landscape, Lamerichs (2019) accurately asks: “[w]hat do these transmedia iterations and objects mean to their audiences?” We can convert this question for this article to the research question: “what do these villagers mean to the *Animal Crossing* players?” Such a question allows us to explore the phenomenon of the player market economies and players' motivations to engage with the *Animal Crossing* characters: why are players willing to go



through such great lengths that they risk being scammed? And, why are they eager to scam others to obtain virtual characters? This article is concerned with the research question from the frame of our current global transmedia landscape in which the Japanese culture has been playing a major role since World War II (see Steinberg 2012), including our current game culture (Consalvo 2009). We currently live in a transmedia landscape where characters have become one of the most important means for consumers to engage with media entertainment. This particularly applies to Japanese cross-media business models such as the ludo- and/or media mix that the *Animal Crossing* franchise, to which *New Horizons* belongs, employs, where characters are the devices to attach consumers to their franchise (Nakamura and Tosca 2021). The *Animal Crossing* ludo mix uses a blend of monetization approaches (a paid video game with gambling-like elements in the game system using extra-gameic products), resembling the current game monetization trend of free-to-play games with random in-game purchases, using the cute characters as fuel for its monetization. In this article, I demonstrate that the affective relationships between players and virtual characters cannot be understood independently from the marketing practices of a video game.

In this article, I will first explain how *New Horizons*' own structure, in particular its online features and uneven character distribution, leads to players creating virtual player market economies to obtain the characters they desire, risking themselves to potential fraudulent practices by others. Then I will continue to illustrate how the overall *Animal Crossing* ludo mix plays into the uneven distribution of its characters by selling extra-gameic character products, that is, additional products outside of the game to use in the game. These products are the *Amiibo* figurines and cards, Nintendo's near-field communicative toys, to offer players the opportunity to bypass the in-game villager distribution. I will explain that the uneven distribution of the *Amiibo* cards supports Nintendo's strategic choice to make the special *Amiibo Collaboration* cards exclusively available through only a single official online vendor and mobilizes consumers into a single space so that shortages of the cards would occur. In the final part, I argue that the uneven in-game and extra-gameic distribution of the villagers requires a community infrastructure that facilitates a safe exchange of the villagers and other items, encouraging responsible

gameplay, but as Nintendo neglects to do so, it is the player market economies instead that attempt to foster safe practices.

Attachment to *New Horizons*' kyara?

New Horizons' ludo mix

One of the most important aspects to understand *New Horizons* as a video game is to understand it as a product belonging to a larger commercial approach, namely a Japanese media mix— or in this case, a ludo mix. In a Japanese media mix, that is, a cross-media strategy that focuses on character proliferation, characters function as the device to connect different media and objects (Steinberg 2012, 83). Characters appear in manga, anime, games, novels, as figurines and more to attach as many consumers as possible to a franchise's products (Nakamura and Tosca 2021). As games and play increasingly occupy the main stage of several media mixes (Wirman 2021), we can call those strategies a ludo mix, a variant of a media mix in which games are the focal point of the strategy (Blom 2021). Such a term acknowledges the fact that in Japan video games are bound to different markets of game-related cultures within Japan's broader media ecosystem, fluctuating under the influence of industrial cultures (such as publishers and developers, console manufacturers etc.) and interpretative communities (player communities, fans of popular culture, popular press etc.) (Picard and Pelletier-Gagnon 2015, 3). They overlap on many fronts with popular media such as anime and manga, sharing thematic, tonal, and narrative traits (Navarro-Remesal and Loriguillo-López 2015), and, not in the least, its characters.

The strategy behind *New Horizons* is vital for its game structure. At its core, *New Horizons* is a video game that encourages players to collect, possess and personalize their islands. The game operates on a form of the 'Invest/Express' principle, common among *Social Networking Games*, which are games embedded among social networking sites such as Facebook and are particularly popular among female players (Chess 2018). According to Chess, players are expected to invest their real-world time and/or money into the game world to reap rewards of play ('express') which is referred to as "the ability to design or personalize a space according to various modes of personal styles, tastes, and gameplay needs" (2018, 107). All the main *Animal Crossing* games (not including any

spin-off games) within the franchise simulate real time and life, placing players in a village where they can decorate their house, catch bugs, fish, shop, visit a museum, dig up fossils, and in general live a quiet virtual life. Each new game repeats the same in-game mechanics and features as its predecessors within the overall *Animal Crossing* ludo mix, while simultaneously having been updated with new or adjusted features. *New Horizons*, as the newest game instalment within the ludo mix, is set on an island, and players can now personalize their islands even more than they could personalize their village in prior instalments. For example, players can now create new furniture and items through Do-It-Yourself (DIY) recipes and can adjust the shape of their island.

This is where the role of the game's characters comes in. One way in which the 'Invest/Express' principle translates is through the game's villagers, which players can use to personalize their islands, and villagers have been an integral part of the *Animal Crossing* series since the release of the first *Animal Crossing* game in 2001. In media- and ludo mixes, characters function as *kyara*. Derived from the term 'character', *kyara* is used to describe person-like visual clichés that can be recontextualized in different settings (Wilde 2019) without necessarily having to share the same identity as another of its manifestations, making it easy for game developers to proliferate a character across different games and franchises without the different character identities clashing (Blom 2021). So, villagers like Goldie from the first *Animal Crossing* game appear in the successive games including *New Horizons* and other products, making the products part of a larger whole. Additionally, any successive game instalment comes with new villagers which can take up residency in the player's game, inhabiting their villages or islands. With the release of *New Horizons*, Nintendo added characters such as Raymond, Sherb, Judy, and more, counting over 460 individual villagers who now may come to inhabit the players' islands.

Moe, kyara, and monetization

Academic work on the attachment to characters, particularly those inside a media mix, tends to discuss the desire for characters as para-social relationships, that is, as affective, romantic or intimate attachments that audiences have to these fictional entities. This desire is known as

moe, which occupies a large role in *otaku*¹ communities and is the main principle on which several media- and ludo mixes operate (Lamerichs 2018; Galbraith 2019). In his well-known work, Azuma ([2001] 2009) explains *moe* in terms of the attraction of *otaku* to cute character elements, such as cat ears or school uniforms. *Kyara* play a large role in facilitating such attachment, which is reinforced by their ability to be recontextualized in different settings. For example, unlike Azuma, Nagayama ([2014] 2021) describes *moe* as an attachment towards the character itself, as the "desire to select and extract a character from a work, turn it from a character into a "chara" (*kyara*) and personalize and possess it" (105).

In ludo mixes, *moe* is usually described in games aimed at men *and* women as a desire to have a somewhat intimate relationship with the character where the characters are treated as close companions (see Galbraith 2011; Andlauer 2018; Tosca and Klasttrup 2019). The relationships with them are popular fuel used to monetise current free-to-play games on mobile phones. Lax and Mackenzie (2019) explain that Japanese mobile phone games often rely on the *gacha* system to monetise the game. *Gacha*, deriving from *gachapon*, are small capsule machines in Japan that sell round balls containing different items, such as character figurines. By putting about 100 - 500 Japanese yen coins in one of these machines, consumers can purchase these balls which may or may not contain the item they desire. In mobile phone games, which are often free-to-play, the *gacha* mechanic translates to players making small in-game purchases, where they may or may not receive the item they want. Although players will always receive an item or character in these games, the randomness in distribution and possibility to obtain rare items or characters gives the mechanic a gambling-like element (see Shibuya et al. 2015; Steinberg 2015). Strikingly however, Lax and Mackenzie (2019, 3) report that the motivations for players in obtaining these characters do not lie exclusively in their desirability as game pieces, but also in the para-social relationships between the characters and the players, as they claim that the acquisition of the character shows the characters' reciprocity of the relationship. This perspective seems to be shared by Sellier (2021, 147) who adds that while such

¹ The Japanese term *otaku* is used to refer to men, usually between 18 - 40 years old, obsessed with geek culture such as anime, manga, and/or video games.

gacha mechanics in games are designed according to certain economic principles, they offer a long-term relationship that provide players additional possibilities to enjoy the characters they love.

Nevertheless, the *Animal Crossing* villagers' cute anthropomorphic pet-like design does not invite romantic relationships as those discussed in the articles above which all refer to person-like characters. Their pet-like design invites a different type of attachment. Allison (2006) and Turkle ([2011] 2017) discuss the *Tamagotchi* (Bandai 1996), a virtual pet from Japan. Both remark that the users' attachment to the *Tamagotchi* stems from the creature's dependence on the player for survival, dying if the player did not take care of it. Yet, the *Animal Crossing* villagers do not have such a dependence as a mechanic. They evoke Consalvo and Begy's (2015) response to Allison and Turkle, stating that another "powerful agent for forming emotional attachments" is "[p]lay itself" (101). They are, as Consalvo and Begy call it, "play companions" (112) used as means to traverse through the games, explaining the attachment players might have to the villagers.

However, it seems to me that the emotional attachment to the villagers as play companions does not sufficiently explain why players of *New Horizons* would go through such great lengths to obtain these villagers; the attempts to scam and make a profit indicate that these villagers are not necessarily treated as play companions with whom players necessarily form a close attachment. Rather, to me, the phenomenon evokes Marc Steinberg's (2015) analysis of the *Yo-kai Watch* ludo mix. *Yo-kai Watch* is a ludo mix aimed at young children based on the collection of cute pet-like characters, somewhat resembling the design of the *Animal Crossing* villagers. Through the *Yo-kai Watch* game and, later, the physical commodity of a *Yo-kai Watch*, players are encouraged to collect as many *yōkai* entities (the characters) as possible (2015, 250). Steinberg describes that in the years 2014 - 2015, consumers were encouraged to collect as many *Yo-kai Watch* goods as possible, resulting in a total mobilization of collection-based consumption and continuous shortages. Steinberg identifies two major reasons for the massive success and continuous shortages of *Yo-kai Watch* goods: 1) the anime, which he considers one of the priming elements to guide consumers in how to act by lining up *en masse* during the (bi-)yearly releases of new *Yo-kai Watch* products (2015, 253); and, 2) the capsule machines, also known as *gacha*, whose importance

for and integration in the game's narrative gives the *Yo-kai Watch* games a gambling-like element where players randomly receive items or new *yōkai* creatures to use inside their games (2015, 254). In Steinberg's explanation, the decisive elements in consumers' actions to purchase all these character goods have little to do with the affective relationship consumers may have with the characters, and all to do with the circulation and integration of different products within the game that make up the *Yo-kai Watch*' media mix. The same principle applies to the *New Horizons* in the sense that even if players may have a particular attachment to a certain villager, such affection should not be understood independently from the *Animal Crossing* ludo mix.

In the following sections, I will perform a close analysis on *New Horizons*' game structure and the player market economies arising from it, while paying specific attention to the underlying role of the *Animal Crossing* ludo mix strategy. The first section will closely examine an example from the online player market economy between players exchanging characters, demonstrating how the game's uneven distribution of the villagers in-game stimulates players to find each other for trading, and how the game's online features enable certain fraudulent player practices. In the second section, I will closely examine an example from the player market economy around Nintendo's extra-gameic *Amiibo* toys, near-field communicative character figurines and cards, which allow players to bypass the uneven villager distribution in *New Horizons*. It will explain how, as part of the *Animal Crossing* ludo mix strategy, Nintendo purposefully created a shortage of the special *Amiibo Collaboration* cards by mobilizing consumers to a single space.

Villager trading #1: a Nookazon economy

Despite the large pool of villagers that may come to live on a player's island, the main issue with the abundance of villagers is that the distribution of each individual character on its own is limited and scarce. *New Horizons*, like its predecessors, is designed so that players cannot control which villagers come to live on their island. The game assigns two random characters at the start of the game that will live on the player's island, and other villagers visit the island seemingly randomly to live there. Players can invite villagers to stay permanently on their island once they are visiting, but otherwise, it is up to chance which villager they obtain in their game.

Additionally, there is a limit of up to ten individual villagers that inhabit a single island, so that if players want a new villager, another villager has to leave first. That means that with over 460 villagers, chances are low that players obtain specific characters they might want, whereas the chances are relatively high that characters who players dislike or have no interest in come to take up space.

One way to bypass the random villager distribution that *New Horizons* offers is the mechanic of players visiting other players' islands to increase their chances of having a desired villager live on their islands. This mechanic reinforces the *kyara*-ness of the villagers, making them possessable and customisable, highly in line with the affective desire called *moe*, that Nagayama ([2014] 2021, 105) describes as extracted from a work, personalizable and possessable. *Animal Crossing* villagers can be selected and extracted from other players' islands; players are able to identify a character to their liking, take them off someone's island and bring them to their own island, where they can possess the character turning it into a villager of their own. This mechanic does not exclusively exist in *New Horizons*, but has been part of prior instalments as well, like *Animal Crossing: Wild World* (2005) and *Animal Crossing: New Leaf* (2012), which allowed players to visit each other's towns, exchange furniture and items, and invite villagers over to their town if the character was willing to leave. Yet, in these predecessors, players were rather limited in how many other players they could visit, due to hardware and software limits of the game consoles. *New Horizons*' most recent predecessor, *New Leaf*, for instance, required players to exchange Nintendo 3DS friend codes to be able to visit each other, or players had to be in the same room as each other. However, in line with the expansion of Nintendo's commercial infrastructure since *New Leaf*'s release in 2012, these online features were updated and streamlined for *New Horizons* to the extent that even strangers can visit each other's islands easily. All players need to do is to open the game's online gates for anyone who might want to visit, or—if they want to protect their game somewhat—use a Dodo code² so that only players with that code can enter the island.

² A Dodo code is an automatically generated code that players can share between each other to enter their islands. This prevents those without a code to enter the island.

This updated feature enabled the rise of the first kind of player market economies: virtual character trading. Within a couple of weeks after the release of *New Horizons*, trading economies between players on online marketplaces such as Nookazon arose (Hernandez 2020; Nookazon n.d.), entirely fan-made and unaffiliated with Nintendo or Amazon. Nookazon is a wordplay on Amazon and Tom Nook, a raccoon dog character in the *Animal Crossing* video games who provides players with loans for their houses. As the wordplay on Amazon suggests, on Nookazon players can trade, buy, and sell virtual clothing, furniture, items, and even villagers. This increases the pool of villagers that players can choose from even more, thereby reinforcing the villager's function as *kyara* that players can select from a work and possess in their own environment.

To begin with, on Nookazon, we can distinguish between two types of character trading: 1) trading the services of special serial characters; and, 2) trading villagers who live on the players' islands. The former is relatively straight-forward: serial characters, like Redd or Celeste, occasionally visit players' islands to give or sell items, furniture or DIY recipes. When an offer on Nookazon is accepted, all potential buyers have to do is to drop off the agreed amount of currency and talk to the serial character to obtain the item. This can be repeated endlessly as long as the character is on the island. The latter is more complicated because when a player sells a villager to another player, it means that it will move to the other player's island, limiting the sale of one villager exclusively to one player. Villagers are also finicky about when they can be sold: they can only be traded when the character itself decides to move from the player's island. Players can do very little to control when a villager exactly wants to move out.

Further complicating the trading process is that the price of these villagers on websites such as Nookazon depends on their popularity among players. A way to discover and decide their popularity is through Animal Crossing Portal (Animal Crossing Portal n.d.), a community website made by fans that creates tier lists, popularity ranks that order villagers based on player votes. Each month players can vote on their favourite character. To give an indication of what that looks like: in the month of June 2021, the top 10 most popular villagers in tier one were: Raymond, Marshal, Zucker, Sherb, Judy, Marina, Stitches, Audie, Beau, and Fauna. Raymond, Sherb, Judy,

and Audie are villagers newly introduced in *New Horizons*.

The prices of popular villagers can become rather high. Let’s look at Raymond, for example, who usually shares with Marshal the spot for most popular villager, alternating monthly between first and second place: Raymond is a grey cat character, sporting geeky glasses, and a grey vest. He also likes to write fan fiction and is willing to wear a maid’s dress happily. These traits made him already within a month after the *New Horizons*’ release one of the most popular villagers wanted for trading at Nookazon (Hernandez 2020). Before *New Horizons*’ 2.0 update in early November 2021, Raymond was not available through any extra-gameic resources (i.e., *Amiibo* toys, see next section). He could only be obtained through *New Horizons* itself or through online communities such as Nookazon. On Nookazon, potential buyers are commonly expected to pay with the in-game currencies of Nook Miles Tickets (NMT) or bells, which are used to, for example, visit small islands for resources, pay off house loans, and buy more furniture and items. In April 2020, Raymond was offered on Nookazon for a million bells or hundreds of NMTs. When I looked at the list of biddings in June 2021, Raymond was sold for an average of 5,000,000 bells or 250 NMTs (Figure 1). For comparison, Pancetti, the lowest rated villager ranked number 147 in the sixth tier of the July popularity list, is sold for an average of 473,750 bells or 10 NMTs (Figure

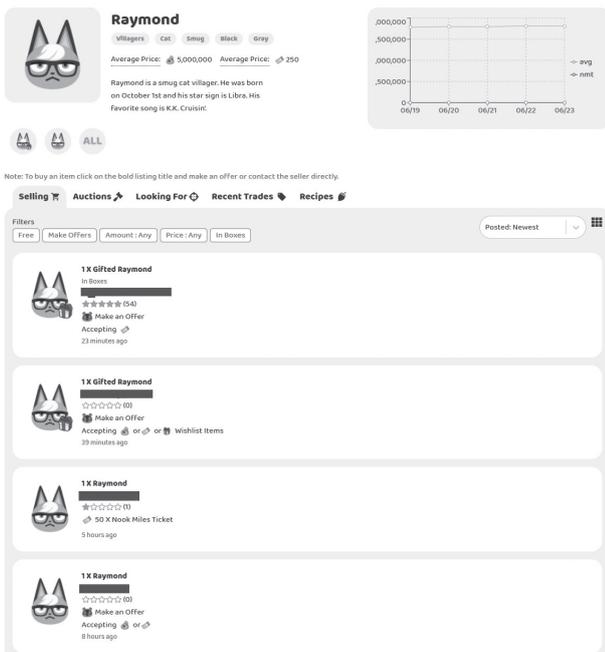


Figure 1. Raymond sold on Nookazon (users made anonymous). Screenshot taken June 2021.

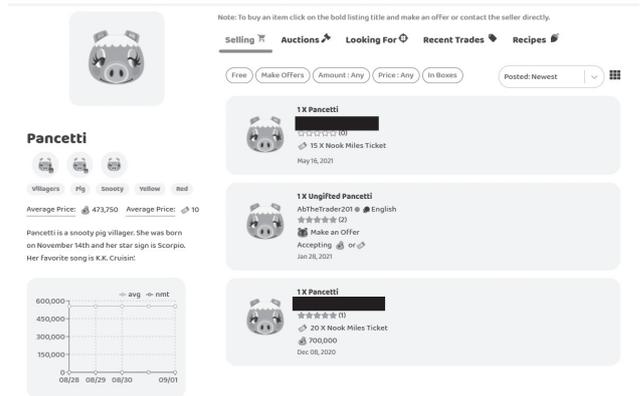


Figure 2. Pancetti sold on Nookazon (users made anonymous). Screenshot taken September 2021.

2), a price much lower than the price for which Raymond is sold.

According to Hernandez (2020) from *Polygon*, the Nookazon market is lucrative enough for players to potentially scam others with unfair trades. Such unfair practices include, for example, overpricing Raymond so that players need to gather many resources to be able to afford him or having him stolen by another player without being paid at all. The issue here is that when these fraudulent practices happen, players are exploited through the free labour in obtaining those resources. The task-driven work of obtaining the resources in *New Horizons* is what Seller (2021, 103) considers to be a form of ‘playbour’ (Kücklich 2005), performing (free) labour while playing in favour of the creator and/or developer of the game. Due to *New Horizons*’ ‘Invest/Express’ (Chess 2018) principle which uses real-world temporal constraints, the game dictates the player’s time; for example, shops are only open at certain times with a limited number of items, the turnips from the stall market only last a week, and fruits from trees only grow back after three days. Even if players tinker with the Nintendo Switch console’s time and day settings, also known as ‘time travel’ in the community, they risk several consequences such as turnips going bad, villagers feeling neglected, or weeds growing on the island (IGN 2021). Players will never be able to obtain the required resources in a single play session and even have to plan their daily schedule around performing the tasks of gathering the resources. As such, when they are then scammed from those resources, all that playbour around which they planned their days is completely undone as well, which only works in favour of the developer because that means

players have to continue playing to re-obtain any resources.

It would be easy to blame scammers for deceiving hopeful players, but I argue that it is the flaws of *New Horizons*' design that reinforces such exploitations: the game allows the host, when they have visitors on their island, to turn off their console so that all visitors will be transported back to their own islands immediately, regardless of what they were doing. This gives sellers the opportunity to turn off their console after potential buyers have dropped the amount of agreed upon currency from their inventory *before* buyers have convinced the villager to live on their island. The opposite also happens: buyers can potentially scam sellers. Players cannot control the movements of any of the islands' villagers or serial characters, and visitors can technically go everywhere on the island if players have not actively blocked certain parts by placing barriers. That means that if a buyer does not intend to pay and a seller is not paying attention, a buyer could technically find the villager they were looking for without paying the seller, convince the character to live on their island, and then just turn off their console. The villager would then move to the buyer's island without the player having paid any resources at all.

The fact that these practices occur is because Nintendo allows them to happen, neglecting the apparent need for a community infrastructure for the safe exchange of virtual characters and other items. Even after the 2.0 update in November 2021, Nintendo did not make any structural changes to the game to avoid players exploiting each other this way. That is why the *Animal Crossing* player community has taken it into their own hands to facilitate safe exchange themselves. For example, on Nookazon players have to make a profile to use the website's services so that each player's trading practices can be somewhat monitored and judged. Players can leave reviews on each other's profiles for potential buyers to know if the seller is trustworthy. This is all part of the website's *Safe Trading Guide* and terms of service (Nookazon n.d.), which contains a visiting etiquette, a reporting process, warnings, and recommended in-game practices such as how to create barriers to keep guests out of parts of the islands where they are not supposed to come and more. If players violate these rules, they can be reported and removed from the community. While the website cannot recover any lost items or villagers, the procedures in place on Nookazon decrease the chances of

players deceiving each other, leading to a safer trading and gaming environment.

Villager trading #2: the *Amiibo* distribution

The player market economy does not occur exclusively online between players of the game, because there is a second way to bypass *New Horizons*' random villager distribution in the form of Nintendo's *Amiibo* toys. For most media mixes, anime or manga are the most important means to guide consumers into buying more character goods. But, for Nintendo, which dominantly proliferates its characters through different digital games, its near-field communicative (NFC) character toys, called *Amiibo*, can be considered one of the most important group of products. These toys circulate across different ludo mixes of Nintendo and are integrated in many different games, from *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate* (2018) to *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (2017), and indeed, *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*. The NFC technology enables a two-way data transfer between toy and game console, which allows players, among others, to upload content to their games, ranging from extra items, events, and even extra characters (Nintendo n.d.). The *Amiibo* toys come in two different styles: figures and cards. The figurines were first released by Nintendo in 2014 and come in the shape of many of Nintendo's characters of different franchises. This once again reinforces the function of these figures as *kyara* who players can possess and use to personalise their game spaces. The toys appeared around the same time as when other developers were experimenting with figurines in their game series through which players could upload characters into the games, also known as the *toys-to-life* genre, such as the *Skylanders* series (Toys for Bob 2012 - 2016) or *Disney Infinity* (Avalanche Software 2013 - 2016).

As extra-gameic products, the *Amiibo* figurines offered players a degree of control over which villagers would live in the players' towns since *New Leaf*. By spending real-world money on these figurines, players were able to personalise their towns to an even greater degree, where such expenditure allowed them to even have transmedial characters from other Nintendo ludo mixes as villagers in their game such as Wolf Link, a character that originally appears in *The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess* (Nintendo 2006). But they were also able to upload already existing villagers, such as Marshall,

into their game, letting players bypass the game's random distribution of its villagers. This feature, however, was discontinued for *New Horizons*, and instead, it was transferred to the *Amiibo* cards.

Released in 2015, the *Amiibo* cards are exclusive to the *Animal Crossing* ludo mix and were initially designed for *New Leaf* where they had the same function as the figurines. This function now also exists in *New Horizons*, letting players bypass the random villager distribution. Despite that however, the distribution of these cards themselves have a catch: although there exist over 400 different cards, each with a unique villager that players could potentially upload, the cards are packaged so that upon purchase consumers *do not know which cards they buy*. When a player wants a certain villager, they first have to know in which card series a villager is located. For example, when a person wants to obtain Marshal for their game, they need to buy a card package from series three, where Marshal is located. However, the package may contain any six characters located within that series, which consists of 100 different characters overall. As the buyer will not know which characters they have bought until after the purchase, they might end up without Marshal at all. This extra-gameic distribution of cards follows the same practice as found in the sale of baseball cards or playing cards incorporated in earlier media mixes like *Pokémon* and *Yu-Gi-Oh!*, where buyers do not know which cards they buy (Ito 2007, 95 - 96). To put this practice in a historical context, Japan has a tradition of card games whose main use is gambling, also known as *karuta*, since the mid-16th century when playing cards were imported from Europe via the Dutch or Portuguese (Salter 2006, 183). Although now known for its computer games, Nintendo was initially one of Kyoto's main traditional manufacturers of such playing cards like *hanafuda* used for gambling (Salter 2006, 186). With the current extra-gameic distribution of the *Amiibo* cards, Nintendo continues its traditional craft of manufacturing cards with gambling-like elements.

The extra-gameic distribution of the *Amiibo* cards parallels the scarce distribution of the villagers in-game. As neither the extra-gameic nor the in-game distribution of the characters directly offers players the possibility to obtain desired characters such as Raymond or Marshal, consumers are instead encouraged to find other ways of procuring these cards. One such way is by purchasing individual cards from private sellers on auction websites

such as eBay or Amazon, reflecting the circulation of *Yu-Gi-Oh!* cards in Japan by physical card vendors and on the internet in the early 2000s (Ito 2007, 99). In general, the price of each individual card from private vendors is higher than the price of an officially sold package, because consumers know which cards they are buying. As is the case with the villagers sold on *Nookazon*, the price also depends on the popularity of each villager. For example, when sold by official vendors, one *Amiibo* card package, containing six cards, costs between five and twelve euro. But, during my own search on eBay, I saw that Marshal's *Amiibo* card is sold for any price between three to a hundred euro in the list of the first ten suggestions. In comparison, Pancetti was generally sold between three to ten euro³.

What reinforced the explosive trading practices of the *Amiibo* cards described above were the *Amiibo Sanrio* cards. The general *Amiibo* cards were designed for *New Horizons*' predecessor *New Leaf*, so no large shortage of these cards exists. However, the *Amiibo Sanrio* cards designed for *New Horizons* are a completely different case. Nintendo has collaborated ever since *New Leaf* with the Japanese company Sanrio, which is known for designing and distributing cute *kyara* and related products such as *Hello Kitty*. For *New Leaf*, they developed the *Amiibo* cards *Animal Crossing: New Leaf – Welcome Pack Sanrio* around 2016. In February 2021, the companies reinstated their collaboration for *New Horizons* when Nintendo (2021) announced the *Sanrio Collaboration Pack* containing the following six individual villagers, exclusively available through these cards: Rilla, Marty, Étoile, Chai, Chelsea, and Toby. Each card provides players with items, furniture, and clothing in the style of one of Sanrio's many *kyara*, which grants players more opportunities to invest money in items and villagers they otherwise would be unable to obtain in-game.

With *New Horizons*' Sanrio cards, Nintendo initially diverged from the *Amiibo* cards' extra-gameic random distribution; all six Sanrio character cards were sold in a single package, so customers knew exactly what they were buying. However, the catch was that these cards were sold exclusively through the website of the USA-based Target store so that all consumers were forced to gather into a

³ eBay automatically converts the price to the currency of the country one has set the website to, which is why all the currency is in Euro in my case.

single online space. This resulted in a shortage in March 2021, when the cards were sold out within a matter of seconds after their release. Consumers had to go to online private sellers on eBay and Etsy to purchase these cards for an incredibly high price (Hernandez 2021). Even three months after release (June 2021), the *Sanrio Collaboration* card packs were still sold on eBay for between five and 200 euro.

Player motivations: a monetization strategy

As I have shown in the previous sections, the in-game and extra-gameic character distribution in *Animal Crossing*'s ludo mix serve as incentives to encourage player attachments to the newest main game instalment, *New Horizons*, playing a decisive role in the players' behaviours and market economies. The *Animal Crossing* ludo mix resonates with the strategy of the *Yo-kai Watch* ludo mix as discussed by Steinberg (2015). He explains that in the *Yo-kai Watch* ludo mix, young players were encouraged to buy medals to use in their game through *gacha* capsule machines with different degrees of rarity (2015, 255). The use of these machines for the game system incorporates a form of gambling into the game system, "insofar as game progress can be aided by what one randomly receives at the capture machine, with a close link between in-game accumulation of medals and extra-gameic accumulation of medals by way of capsule machines" (Steinberg 2015, 250).

In *New Horizons*, the *gacha* mechanic translates to the extra-gameic *Amiibo* cards aiding the process of obtaining a villager in-game but serves solely the purpose of spending time and money on the ludo mix: *New Horizons*' in-game structure first creates the uneven distribution with the purpose of the ludo mix around it to play right into that unevenness. The game is designed so that it puts the villagers in the role of play companions, inhabiting and personalizing the players' island per the 'Invest/Express' principle. Their role as *kyara* within the overall *Animal Crossing* further reinforces this principle, allowing players to collect the creatures through in-game and extra-gameic means. However, their distribution is purposefully scarce; with over 460 villagers and an in-game mechanic that randomizes which villager comes to inhabit the island, there is little chance players actually obtain the characters they might want. The *Amiibo* cards then aid players in the game progress of personalizing their islands through the villagers, but despite their

promise to offer players the possibility to bypass the uneven distribution in-game they lead players to another uneven distribution.

The *Animal Crossing* ludo mix is designed for players to continuously spend time and money by attaching them to the franchise's characters. This is the underlying motivation for players to engage in a player market economy. The close link between the uneven in-game distribution and extra-gameic distribution of the villagers has led to an explosive trade where there are consistent shortages of *Amiibo* cards, encouraging players to pay high amounts of in-game currency, risking potentially being scammed, because the odds for securing those villagers seem higher outside of Nintendo's ludo mix approach. The extra-gameic distribution of the *Amiibo* cards parallels the villagers' randomized in-game distribution, which in turn, fits right into the contemporary trend of games using random reward mechanics (RRMs) for their monetization strategies. Nielsen and Grabarczyk (2019) define the term random reward mechanics as "the implementation of random procedures used for selection and delivery of rewards in video games" (174).

The RRM monetization trend is mirrored in, for example, lootboxes, small containers with random rewards when an objective has been met in games, which are notoriously discussed as potential gambling mechanisms (Nielsen and Grabarczyk 2019). We find the boxes in games such as the *FIFA* game series, which are forbidden by law in, for instance, the Netherlands for potentially contributing to gambling addictions (Kansspelautoriteit 2018). In Japan, *gacha* is a common RRM, particularly for mobile social games (Shibuya et al 2015) such as *Fire Emblem: Heroes* (Intelligent Systems 2017), but the *gacha* mechanic is also used for games globally and outside of Japan, such as the popular free-to-play game *Genshin Impact* (miHoYo 2020). Although players cannot win money with *gacha*, it does bear similarities with gambling due to the rare and special items one may obtain (Shibuya et al. 2015, 3). Indeed, this echoes the random villager distribution of the *Animal Crossing* ludo mix where players attempt to obtain highly desired characters such as Raymond or Marshal, demonstrating that although *New Horizons* is not free-to-play, the commercial approach surely uses those mechanics for the monetization of its products to bait people into spending time and money.

It is the incorporation of these random reward mechanics throughout the ludo mix which provides the

underlying stimulation for such player market economies to arise in the first place. One thing to keep in mind is that Nintendo could have chosen to offer the *Amiibo Sanrio* cards as downloadable content (DLC) on their online store, the Nintendo e-shop, so that players could buy them without the limited availability of these resources. But, following the previous Sanrio card collection for *New Leaf*, when it was harder for them to distribute the cards as DLC and followed the general line of incorporating playing cards in media mixes, Nintendo's strategic choice to offer *physical* cards *exclusively* on an American website when they have a well-functioning online store, resulted in a shortage that creates, to express it in Steinberg's words, "a total social mobilization in the service of the consumption of a particular product family" (2015, 247).

When a ludo mix strategy is so focused on an uneven distribution of its characters in service of the particular product family, encouraging players to spend time and money, it is not surprising that fraudulent player economies around these characters arise. We should therefore be critical of what kind of gameplay the *Animal Crossing* ludo mix actually fosters. Was it even possible for *New Horizons*' ludo mix strategy to have encouraged players to respond any differently? I argue that what Nintendo had, and still needs, to develop is a community infrastructure facilitating a safe exchange of the virtual characters and other items, but instead, due to Nintendo's neglect on fostering such an infrastructure, it is the player community instead that shows they want to encourage responsible gameplay by enforcing safe trading and gaming practices.

New Horizons shows that different types of monetization approaches have started to blend within a single ludo mix, which affects the structure of the game, the related products, and the player practices around it simultaneously. From this perspective, responsible gameplay is a highly important aspect to consider given the expectation that in-game purchases for paid random items are expected to grow over the next few years (Newzoo 2021). It is not exclusively free-to-play games that use random-reward-mechanics to monetise their commercial approaches. And these approaches do have substantial effect on the players themselves, encouraging them towards fraudulent player practices which in the end serves the commercial approach itself. As such, if we want to understand player market economies emerging from these games, we have to take the franchise's commercial

strategy into consideration, which includes not only how the game product is monetised but also its design, related products, and, of course, its characters.

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