Gods of the Sandbox

Animal Crossing: New Horizons and the Fluidity of Virtual Environments

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Introduction

In a review of *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (*AC:NH*) (2020)[1], the critic Steven Scaife lays out the long-standing appeal of the *Animal Crossing* (2001–) series of life simulation games:

> Through minutes that pass by in real time and activities that change based on month or time of day, the games cultivate a sort of relationship between players and the virtual space they eventually inhabit. We come to know its layout and its occupants, moving around the place and helping to maintain it.[2]

The *Animal Crossing* game series arrests the forward-moving, goal-oriented spatial practices that tend to define players' engagement with virtual environments. Rather than having the player traverse the landscape, venturing to one new locale after another until they get to the end of the game, they invite the player to stay in place. Their real-time clock structures practices of lingering, repetition, and habit. Players will become intimately acquainted with the paths between their in-game house, the town hall, and the shop. They will learn by heart the fruit-picking route

1. Nintendo EPD, *Animal Crossing,* Nintendo, Switch, 2020.
2. Steven Scaife, "Review: *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* Makes You the God of the Sandbox," *Slant Magazine,* April 12, 2020, https://www.slantmagazine.com/games/review-animal-crossing-new-horizons-makes-you-the-god-of-the-sandbox/.

they follow every three days; every sight and sound in the village will gain the affectionate glow of familiarity. In these ways, the village becomes a rich placescape mapped out by habit and familiarity of practice,[3] and *Animal Crossing* players experience a phenomenological sense of inhabitation of the virtual community they inhabit as "home."[4]

However, among other new features to the series, *AC:NH* grants players far-reaching, terraforming abilities, allowing them to reorganize the topography of their island at will. These features, Scaife argues, result in a fundamental shift in players' relations to the place of their virtual community, undermining this sense of inhabitation:

> Eventually, you get game-changing terrain tools to freely remap the cliffs and the water, and at that point the only thing holding your island together is any attachment you've fostered with the way things have looked for the many prior hours of play. And maybe we choose to keep things the way they are, despite the power to reshape and remake however we please. Enough of *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* is still measured and thoughtful enough to foster those connections that make the series so refreshing and vital. But it also feels tainted, with its world so much more blatantly at your mercy. Rather than a newcomer to a simulated community that was there before you, you're now the god of the sandbox.[5]

In *AC:NH,* "landscape" becomes a verb rather than a noun. With the player having near-absolute power to reshape their island at will, the spatial qualities which structure its placeness are stripped of their staying power.

This chapter takes *AC:NH* as representative—in its infinite and effortless malleability—of a fluidity that is characteristic of virtual environments as such. This fluidity of virtual environments, I argue, is both a product and a representation of a particular contemporary ontological organi-

3. Edward S. Casey, *Getting Back into Place: Towards a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993), 28–29.
4. Daniel Vella, "There's No Place Like Home: Dwelling and Being at Home in Digital Games," in *Ludotopia: Spaces, Places and Territories in Computer Games,* ed. Espen Aarseth and Stephan Günzel (Bielefeld: Transcript Publishing, 2019), 141–166; Gracie Lu Straznickas, "Not Just a Slice: *Animal Crossing* and a Life Ongoing," *Loading...The Journal of the Canadian Games Association* 13, no. 22 (2020): 72–88.
5. Scaife, "Review."

zation of the world, and of human being-in-the-world. By this understanding of the world, which I unpack with reference to the work of contemporary philosophers Byung-Chul Han and Federico Campagna, time is no longer understood as an extended duration within which cause and effect link up but is fragmented into isolated moments of pure present. Simultaneously, the world is similarly "cut up" into discrete units that can be replaced, reorganized, and replicated at will. In reflecting, and embodying, this contemporary enframing of the world, these virtual environments become non-places—possibility spaces which only accrue placeness in the momentary pauses between their fluid reconfigurations, enacting a play of placeness which I discuss in relation to two archetypical places of play: the sandbox and the playground.

Fluid Placescapes

Much writing on the virtual spaces of digital game worlds has tended to catalogue, or describe, the different topologies, features, and qualities of these spaces[6] and the ways these elements—say, maze structures[7] or open-world topographies[8]—shape the dynamics of the player's being in the space. It is not the case, though, that every game gives the player a fixed topography to navigate. In their proposed classification system for digital games, Christian Elverdam and Espen Aarseth list "environment dynamics" as one of the criteria, distinguishing between games with free, fixed, or no environment dynamics. By this criterion, games with free environment dynamics are those in which "the player is allowed to make additions or alterations to the game space."[9]

6. Mark J.P. Wolf, "Inventing Space: Towards a Taxonomy of On- and Off-Screen Space in Video Games," *Film Quarterly* 51, no. 1 (1997): 11–23, https://doi.org/10.2307/1213527; Michael Nitsche, *Video Game Spaces: Image, Play and Structure in 3D Worlds* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008); Gordon Calleja, *In-Game: From Immersion to Incorporation* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2011), 78–85; Mathias Fuchs, *Phantasmal Spaces: Archetypical Venues in Computer Games* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019).
7. Alison Gazzard, *Mazes in Videogames: Meaning, Metaphor and Design* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2013).
8. Marc Bonner, "The World-Shaped Hall: On the Architectonics of the Open World Skybox and the Ideological Implications of the 'Open World Chronotope,'" in *Game/World/Architectonics,* ed. by Marc Bonner (Heidelberg: Heidelberg University Press, 2021), 65–98.
9. Christian Elverdam and Espen Aarseth, "Game Classification as Game Design: Construction Through Critical Analysis," *Games and Culture* 2, no. 1 (2007): 3–22, 9.

A number of digital games present the player with the means to work their will upon the landscape, rendering it fluid and changeable. In this regard, *Populous* (1989)[10] is recognized as sui generis. The player is cast as a god watching over a tribe, and the game grants them the power to reshape the landscape at will by raising or lowering the terrain or creating swamps, land bridges, or volcanoes to suit their tribe's needs. *Civilization* (1991)[11] and its sequels allow the player to reshape their worlds in the shape of the Anthropocene, turning grasslands into fields, laying roads and railways, building mines, and so on. Taking this even further, *Startopia* (2001),[12] which positions the player as the manager of a space station hosting various alien races, gives players control of a biodeck—an artificial biome over which they are granted complete control—with the ability to freely determine terrain height, water level, moisture, and temperature, and to thereby reshape the ecosystem at will.

These are examples of what Georgia Leigh McGregor calls "creation space," "where the player creates all or part of game space as part of gameplay."[13] However, none of these games—nor other examples, such as *Lemmings* (1991)[14] or *The Sims* (2000),[15] that Elverdam and Aarseth and McGregor respectively cite—are virtual worlds that the player inhabits in a phenomenological sense. Since these are not games which position the player in an embodied ludic subjectivity,[16] the conditions are not met for the player to experience a sense of being-there. The player is not given an avatarial body to anchor their phenomenological relation to the game world—there is no mechanism of "incorporation," a term used by Gordon Calleja to refer to the player's experiential sense of inhabiting a game world as an embodied being. Given that, as the philosopher Edward S.

10. Bullfrog Productions, *Populous,* Electronic Arts, Amiga, 1989.
11. MicroProse, *Civilization,* MicroProse, PC, 1991.
12. Mucky Foot Productions, *Startopia,* Eidos Interactive, PC, 2001.
13. Georgia Leigh McGregor, "Situations of Play: Patterns of Spatial Use in Videogames," *Situated Play: Proceedings of DiGRA 2007 Conference,* Tokyo: 537–545, 539, http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/07312.05363.pdf.
14. DMA Design, *Lemmings,* Psygnosis, Amiga, 1991.
15. Maxis, *The Sims,* Electronic Arts, PC, 2000.
16. Daniel Vella, "Who am 'I' in the Game? A Typology of the Modes of Ludic Subjectivity," *Proceedings of the 1st International Joint Conference of DiGRA and FDG,* Dundee, 2016: 3, http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/paper_234.pdf.

Casey observes, "place is what happens between body and landscape,"[17] with no embodied presence, the player does not feel like they are in the virtual space of these games. Instead, the player interacts with the virtual space from a disembodied position that transcends the space. Appropriately, *Populous* and its successors belong to a genre called "god games."

On the other hand, games like *AC:NH, Minecraft* (2011),[18] *Dragon Quest Builders,*[19] and *LEGO® Worlds*[20] embody the player in landscapes that can be taken apart and reassembled however the player desires. Here—at least in theory—creation space is inhabited, with players having an active, bodily existence in the form of their avatar in a virtual environment they have extensive capabilities to reshape.

Bjarke Liboriussen's ethnographic study of a community of self-styled "builders" in *Second Life* (2003)[21] demonstrates the appeal of inhabiting such malleable virtual spaces. The members of this particular virtual world community found a purpose for their being-in-the-virtual-world, specifically in the building of a "castle," a project which they understood as process rather than as end result—for these players, "the building understood as *activity* is never over."[22] Rather than making possible the achievement of a final, desired form, the malleability of the virtual world—even within the constraints of the intersubjective, communal nature of the project—becomes an end in itself, allowing for a seemingly infinite play of making and remaking of place.

17. Casey, *Getting Back into Place,* 29.
18. Mojang Studios, *Minecraft,* Mojang Studios, PC, 2011.
19. Square Enix, *Dragon Quest Builders* (2016), Square Enix, PlayStation 4, 2016.
20. Traveller's Tales, *LEGO® Worlds,* Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment, PlayStation 4, 2017.
21. Linden Lab, *Second Life,* Linden Lab, PC, 2003.
22. Bjarke Liboriussen, "Collective Building Projects in *Second Life:* User Motives and Strategies Explained from an Architectural and Ethnographic Perspective," in *Virtual Worlds and Metaverse Platforms: New Communication and Identity Paradigms,* ed. Nelson Zagalo, Leonel Morgalo, and Ana Boa-Ventura (Hershey, PA: Information Science Reference, 2012): 33–46, 39.

Such examples foreground, in a particularly explicit way, the fact that virtual environments are marked by a "fluidifying sway."[23] We encounter the actual world we live in as an extent of undeniable, material facticity that is, by and large, fixed. While it is certainly possible for us to undertake to change our physical environment in some way—for example, by building a house or laying out a garden—such changes are generally difficult to realize, requiring a significant investment of time and effort, and are hard to reverse. By contrast, nothing in the virtual domain—not the environment and not our being within it—needs to take a fixed shape. Everything can change from one minute to the next, choices can be made, unmade, and remade: cause need not necessarily link with effect. Everything is fluid and changeable, and, indeed, this "fluidization" is a defining characteristic of the virtual.[24]

This malleability is a big part of the appeal of such virtual worlds. It is thanks to this fluidity of form that virtual environments, and the virtual subjectivities through which we inhabit such environments, can become the loci for existential experiments. In virtual environments, we can test out possibilities of being, reconfigure the contours of our virtual home, and change our habits and practices without any of the commitment or investment that such changes would involve in our embodied existence in the actual world.

Nonetheless, there is another side to this coin. Quite apart from any specific experiment of being we can choose to settle into in a given virtual environment, these domains give us the experience of that malleability itself—of inhabiting a place defined by its lack of fixity and resistance—that we can freely remake to our own purposes.

23. Stefano Gualeni and Daniel Vella, *Virtual Existentialism: Meaning and Subjectivity in Virtual Worlds* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 113.
24. Pierre Lévy, *Becoming Virtual: Reality in the Digital Age,* trans. Robert Bononno (New York and London: Plenum Trade, 1998), 27.

Inevitably, the way we relate to, and inhabit, such a place is going to be radically different to the ways in which we fit ourselves to the facticity of whatever actual place we call home. To be in a place, Casey writes, is to be "subject to its power"[25]—it is to fit oneself to the contours of that place, to learn the paths across it and the actions it affords. Stay in that place long enough and those paths and actions become habitual, giving us the "felt familiarity" which relates to the places in which we dwell.[26] With virtual places, matters seem different. On the one hand, the fluidity of the virtual placescape is defined by the opening up of a seemingly infinite array of possibilities to be explored. On the other hand, this lack of solidity results in a lack of commitment and spatiotemporal stability and the devaluing of any given configuration inherent in privileging this fluidity itself. And yet, though this might appear to stand in stark contrast to the relative fixity and resistance of the physical world, this fluidity reflects crucial aspects of our contemporary relationship to the actual world, as identified in the work of the contemporary philosophers Byung-Chul Han and Federico Campagna. In order to better understand the significance of these fluid virtual worlds, then, we should engage briefly with their respective works. Specifically, in the next sections of this chapter, I engage with Han's writing on the spatiotemporal discontinuities of our present being-in-the-world and Campagna's highlighting of the logic of measure as an ontological principle.

Spatiotemporal Discontinuity

In his book *The Scent of Time,* Byung-Chul Han describes what he perceives as a contemporary crisis of human being-in-the-world. The way in which the world is organized into a meaningful, coherent shape in our experience, he argues, is "based on temporal extension, on interconnections between temporal horizons."[27] The present connects to the past through memory and to the future through projects, commitments, or the anticipation of change. In this way, each moment of our experience is a part of a recognizable form. These forms can be cyclical, as in mythic

25. Casey, *Getting Back into Place,* 23.
26. Ibid., 116.
27. Byung-Chul Han, *The Scent of Time,* trans. Daniel Steuer (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017), 5.

time, with the predictable succession of the seasons, of sowing and harvest, and the rhythm of familial generations, or they can be linear, as in the teleological idea of historical progress or of advancing on a lifelong career path—in either case, there is a comprehensible shape connecting the present moment to spans of the past and the future.

In our present socio-cultural moment, however, our experience of temporal extension has broken down. Everything can be made, unmade, and remade at will. Our past choices do not form a commitment to be honored in the present—their consequences can simply be deleted. Things appear literally "out of nowhere" which were not anticipated in the past because there was nothing in the placescape of our lived experience that gave rise to them through chains of causality or intention. In the same way, our present actions lose their connections to the future. The other side of the coin of freedom is disposability—an endless starting-over—and a lack of orientation resulting from the absence of fixed prospects. As a result, we find ourselves in what Han calls "atomized time."[28] Instead of a present that is always connected to a past and a future, we find ourselves living "life as a directionless sequence of present moments" in a galaxy of "point-like presences between which there is no longer any temporal attraction."[29]

For Han, this atomization of time is inseparable from a breakdown of space. Just as we no longer have to wait until a certain time of day for our favorite TV shows to air, thanks to the instant availability of content on streaming services, distances are erased by instantaneous communication and intercontinental travel. By boarding a plane in Frankfurt and disembarking in Tokyo, there is no sense of spatial continuity or connection between the two spaces, as there would be between the start and end point of a walk. Experientially, we are simply in one place and then the other. We are never "on the way" to something, we never "wait"—the path, the in-between places disappear. Instead, everything is present at the same time; everywhere can be instantaneously accessed, the list of flight departures on an airport monitor the equivalent of the list of TV

28. Han, *The Scent of Time,* 18.
29. Ibid., 5.

shows instantly available to stream. And the technologies and conceptualities of the virtual are intrinsic to this: Pierre Lévy, in fact, speaks of the virtual as enacting a process of "deterritorialization," a breakdown of spatial and temporal unity.[30] This immediate availability of everything removes the spatial directionality of the path, or the temporal directionality of a goal or of waiting—all of which, apart from everything else, are structures of continuity. As Han writes,

> A space made up of possibilities for further connection does not have any continuity. In it, again and again, decisions are made anew, and new possibilities are pursued, making time discontinuous. No decision is final. What is suspended is linear, irreversible time.[31]

Everything, everywhere, all of the time.[32] In Han's words, "everything has the opportunity, even *must* have the opportunity, of becoming part of the present."[33] Despite the "leisurely pace" and intentionally slow movement that is characteristic of the *Animal Crossing* series,[34] *AC:NH* certainly embodies this: you can carry full-grown trees in your pockets to instantly plant them anywhere on your island, and you can choose to erase rivers, lakes, and cliffs, or bring them into being. Every possibility for your island's landscape can be immediately available.

However, when every option is available to us at any time, we become restless, literally unsettled—actual conditions and situations are overshadowed by the multitude of possibilities. As a result, "nothing is incisive, nothing final . . . due to the excessive number of possible connections, i.e. possible directions, things are rarely ever completed."[35]

30. Lévy, *Becoming Virtual,* 30.
31. Han, *The Scent of Time,* 39.
32. It is unsurprising that this phrase suddenly appears to define the cultural zeitgeist. In comedian Bo Burnham's film *Inside*—arguably as significant an artefact of pandemic-era cultural life as *AC:NH*—the song "Welcome to the Internet" summarizes the appeal (and the danger) of perpetually connected existence with the promise of "a little bit of everything all of the time." Meanwhile, at the time of writing, the film *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022) draws upon another increasingly ubiquitous trope—that of an infinite multiverse of possible worlds of which the actual world is only one configuration.
33. Han, *The Scent of Time,* 41.
34. Straznickas, "Not Just a Slice," 76.
35. Han, *The Scent of Time,* 25.

Playing any of the earlier *Animal Crossing* games, I knew that however long I would continue to inhabit that virtual community, the river flowing through it would continue to follow the same path to the same sea, and the line of cliffs on the north side of the island would remain an impassable boundary around which I would have to shape my journey as I pursue the day's errands. In *AC:NH,* this is no longer the case. If I find a ridge of cliffs tiresome to walk around, or if a river is proving to be an obstacle for a building project, I can immediately redraw the features of the landscape by placing or removing bodies of water, cliffs, and paths as I see fit. If I do not like how the changes turn out, it is trivial to undo the changes or to try again.

Certainly, reflecting Martin Heidegger's observation that "building is really dwelling,"[36] the process of building was always a key part of the player's inhabitation of their Animal Crossing village. One could lay down bridges to connect opposite riverbanks, for example, and choose where to place public buildings. Such construction projects, however, required the player to gather significant amounts of in-game resources—sometimes requiring a few days' work—and were subject to a waiting period of at least one real-time day even after the requisite resources were available. This remains the case with similar building projects in *AC:NH.* By contrast, there is no resource cost for terraforming interventions and no waiting period: every imaginable configuration of the player's island is instantly and effortlessly available.

Because of this, there is no sense of inhabiting a place in the sense of responding to the givenness of the landscape. The frequent changes a player is likely to will upon their island—when even the slightest whim can be accommodated in this regard—means that no single configuration of the island is likely to linger long. Players can take on a grand terraforming project, grow bored with it, abandon it halfway, and reshape the island in such a way as to leave no trace of it—all in the span of a couple of hours. In this light, it is likely the player will absorb an unsettled

36. Martin Heidegger, "Building Dwelling Thinking," in *Basic Writings,* ed. David Farrell Krell (London and New York: Routledge, 2004): 347–363, 350.

sense of the temporariness of their island, reflecting a contemporary culture of transience and fluidity in which, as Han writes, "ideally, a change of direction is possible at any time. There is no finality. Everything is kept in limbo."[37]

The World of Measure

While Han identifies an existential crisis in our lived world, Federico Campagna argues that, at the core of this crisis, there lies a specific ontological understanding of the world. Campagna argues that the hegemonic "reality-system" that holds sway in our present moment—the implicit set of foundational principles by which we, as a culture, understand the world, but which are so fundamental that they simply appear as the natural way the world is—is one he calls "Technic." In this way of organizing the world, the "basic ontological principle" is "measure."[38] By this term, Campagna refers, as one would imagine, to the logic of quantification and the idea that everything is measurable and reducible to numerical value—a logic we see at work in the contemporary ubiquity of practices of the quantified self, in the Google Scholar-aided quantification of academic impact, and in countless other examples.

However, for Campagna, the idea of measure goes far beyond that. First of all, he argues, "the notion of measure consists in the original act of 'cutting up' the world, in a manner that makes it available to be infinitely recombined."[39] The continuity of the world, of things and existents, of space and time, is divided up into points and organized into distinct and clearly defined categories (the organization of living things, in their infinite variation, into discrete species can be taken as an example of this). As with Han, we have here a process of atomization of our lived reality, as the world is fragmented into a set of discrete units of measure.

37. Han, *The Scent of Time,* 39.
38. Federico Campagna, *Technic and Magic: The Reconstruction of Reality* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 34.
39. Ibid.

"Measure," however, not only "cuts up" the world into categories, but also organizes these categories into a grammar of functional positions in a system. As a result, an object's category—the position it fills within the system—becomes more important than the existence of the individual thing. As Campagna says, with "measure" as a basic ontological principle, we "move from an ontology of unique and irreducible 'things,' to an ontology of positions in a series. Through this process, 'things' are reduced to equivalent units, which are present in the world only in as much as they are able to activate such grammatical positions."[40]

Campagna illustrates this point in relation to the organization of conservation and biodiversity discussions around the discourse of extinction. Such a discourse, he argues, grants no importance to the uniqueness of life that a given individual of a species represents. Instead, the importance is granted to the species-category itself. It is the category that is deemed worthy of preservation, not any of the actual lives grouped within it. This, Campagna argues, "reflects the silent consensus over a reality-system that sees serial positions such as species, as more 'real', and thus worthier of protection, that individual living things."[41] To return to an earlier example, we can also consider how, on streaming services, the unique qualities of a particular film appear to be far less important than its capacity to occupy specific category tags.

The logic of measure is, of course, the founding principle of the idea of the "digital." Digitality, after all, is based upon the rendering of information as a set of discrete, quantifiable units. To digitize a physical image (say, a painting) means to cut it up into a number of discrete pixels, each of which has a numerically defined color value in a defined series. In 8-bit color, for example, there are 256 possible color values that each pixel can take; in 24-bit color, by combining 256 possible values for each channel—red, blue, and green—each pixel can have one of 16,777,216 possible values.

40. Ibid.
41. Ibid., 39.

Obviously, in addition to "cutting up" the painting into discrete data points, a great deal is lost in such a translation. Even with the millions of possible color values in 24-bit color depth, some of the richness of color in a painting will be lost, with a smooth, organic transition between two colors rendered as a series of steps between discrete color values, and the texture and tactility of the paint will not be visible and so on. As Campagna writes, the ontology of measure smooths out the "chaos of the existent."[42]

To draw a line back to Han, what is smoothed out and elided in the language of measure—what marks the uniqueness of individual entities—often depends upon the specificity of their spatiotemporal positioning: their history, their locality. Torn from their anchorings in spatial and temporal extension, Han argues, things lose their "thingness" and become information that "can be stored and arbitrarily retrieved. If things are deprived of memory, they become information or commodities. They are pushed into a time-free, ahistorical space."[43]

At the limit point, measure leads us to the deeply-held belief that "the whole of the existent coincides with the reach of the language of information technology."[44] In other words, measure as a reality-system contains within it the concealed, but foundational, assumption that what is "real" about a thing in the world is only that which can be measured and categorized according to the digital logic of information. Everything else—which encapsulates the uniqueness of the existent—is dismissed, no longer being considered a part of reality.

Games like *AC:NH* and *Minecraft* can be taken as representations of this world of measure par excellence. It is no accident that they give us virtual worlds that are neatly cut up into squares or blocks. Just like a painting reduced to a grid of discrete pixels in its digitized form, these games give us digitized landscapes composed of discrete data points. In both games, a minimal unit of landscape is a square or cube that can be identified by

42. Ibid., 33.
43. Han, *The Scent of Time,* 6.
44. Campagna, *Technic and Magic,* 41–42.

its numerical value on two or three axes and that can take one out of a series of discrete values. A block in *Minecraft*, for example, can be a dirt block, a sand block, a stone block, a coal ore block, and so on—each is a discrete ontological value, with none of the fine gradations that might exist, for instance, in the geological makeup of a cubic meter of actual rock, between dirt, stone, and any ores that may be present. Any act of building simply involves changing blocks from one value to another (say, excavating a dirt block, thereby replacing it in that position in the game world's three-dimensional grid of blocks with an air block and then using up one stone value from the player's inventory to fill that same position in the grid with a stone block). All blocks that carry the same ontological value—all dirt blocks, for example—are precisely identical. There is no difference between one block and another of the same ontological value, and no uniqueness. Just like the toy building blocks that *Minecraft* in particular seems to explicitly refer to, they exist only to be (re)configured.

As a result, there is no value attached to any individual block. The value, instead, lies in the category itself. If the player needs a stone block to complete a building project, any individual stone block is as good as another—what matters is the category, not the individual block, which only has value insofar as it constitutes an increase in the player's stockpile of resources in the relevant category.[45] Likewise, in *AC:NH,* if you accidentally smash one of the six starting boulders on your island while getting resources out of it, it doesn't matter: another one will spawn overnight. The position of "boulder" in the system of your island has been refilled, and you are unlikely to care that it's not the same boulder.

45. Daniel Vella, "The Wanderer in the Wilderness: Minecraft, Proteus and Being in the Virtual Landscape," *Proceedings of the Philosophy of Computer Games Conference 2013*, Bergen, https://gamephilosophy2013.w.uib.no/files/2013/09/daniel-vella-the-wanderer-in-the-wilderness.pdf.

The Sandbox and the Playground

The instant availability of everything, the capacity to make and unmake at will, the resulting atomization of time, the "cutting up" of place into discrete, infinitely re-combinable units, the importance of the category over the unique thing—these describe the world as seen by Han and Campagna, and they certainly describe the virtual worlds we encounter in games like *AC:NH*.

As Scaife observed in his review, if there is any place that the game can be compared to, it is not a community with a life of its own that extends beyond the individual, but a sandbox. The sandbox is a non-place, a possibility space which is potentially anything, but it is difficult to imagine any of these potentials coalescing and lingering long enough to accrue placeness.

AC:NH, along with *Minecraft* and many of the other games listed above, invites players to build—suggesting, again, as per Heidegger, the existential linkage between dwelling and building—but what can one build in a sandbox? Nothing except a sandcastle, and a sandcastle is only a cultural metaphor for impermanence: they "fall into the sea eventually," they are what "the shimmering waves break," as Jimi Hendrix and Joanna Newsom, respectively, sing.

Of course, a particular constellation of objects brought into being in one such virtual world might form a temporary arrangement that suggests certain action possibilities and ways of being. In *AC:NH,* a semicircle of stone stools set around a campfire on a small peninsula jutting out into the sea, for example, could become a place for visiting friends to gather (see image 5.1), forming a place of habit in the virtual world that addresses players' needs for socialization, particularly at a time when lockdowns made it difficult to meet friends in person.[46] In this way, we could speak of temporary place-bubbles that hold their shape long

46. Joanna E. Lewis, Mia Trojovsky, and Molly M. Jameson, "New Social Horizons: Anxiety, Isolation, and *Animal Crossing* During the COVID-19 Pandemic," *Frontiers in Virtual Reality* 2 (2021). https://doi.org:10.3389/frvir.2021.627350.

enough to register as places, emerging out of the primordial ooze of the sandbox. Yet, these are unlikely to last long. Over and above the action possibilities suggested by a particular configuration of forms within it, the actions the sandbox affords, after all, are making and unmaking.

Image 5.1. *AC:NH. Seats around a campfire—a gathering-place for visiting friends. Image by author.*

Of course, as I have pointed out, virtual worlds in general are already more fluid and malleable, and less enduring, than the actual world. These games only push the fluidity of virtual worlds to its logical extension, giving us worlds in which nothing is of consequence.

Having said that, we do find lingering traces of other temporalities in *AC:NH:* the seasons change. Unless you wish to mess around with the system clock on your Nintendo Switch console, it is necessary to wait for a particular month to add certain fish or insects to your museum collection. Even if the game does not fully engage with the slow cyclicality of sowing, growth, and harvest in the same way as farming simulations like *Harvest Moon* (1998), plants take their time to grow, even if at a greatly accelerated pace: you plant an orange tree today with the expectation of picking fruit in three days' time. As with all plans, this requires commitment. It requires a span of time as a path between the seed of the plan

and its fruition. And, as Scaife points out in his review, it is likely players will eventually form an attachment to certain configurations of their island landscape—habit and repetition breeding familiarity and a sense of habitation that arrests the drive towards constant re-making.

As a thought experiment, it would be possible to imagine a version of *Animal Crossing* in which this temporality is extended even further—in which trees age every month, if they are not cut down, growing gnarly and venerable; in which rocks that are not broken up gather moss over the years, rather than players being able to craft a ready-made mossy rock to decorate their garden with.

At that point, though, it would be pertinent to ask: why not go out and tend to an actual garden, instead? Maybe to emphasize this stability of placeness is to turn away from the specificity of the virtual, which—as I pointed out earlier—lies precisely in such fluidity. Moreover, we could well argue that it is precisely this fluidity—this flux between possibilities—that makes these virtual environments into "playful" places. The philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer wrote about play as a "to-and-from movement," a wavering between possibilities and arrangements, like the play of waves on the shore moving back and forth, drawing ephemeral lines in the sand that are just as quickly erased and redrawn.[47] Perhaps we could say that what we have in the sandbox is a play of place, a wavering of place-forms that momentarily emerge from, and just as quickly retreat back into, the sea of possibilities, just as a set of building blocks are unlikely to retain a single configuration for very long.

Yet again, this provides a marked contrast with the kinds of places we dedicate to play in the actual world—a sandbox is very different from a playground. Playgrounds tend to be definite places, featuring quite a fixed range of structures, constructions, paths, and spaces. To return to Casey's words, when we play in a playground, we are subject to its power. The games we play in a playground might change, we might think of new patterns of behavior, new things to play, but these are all a result

47. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013): 108.

of our bodily engagement with the affordances of those structures and constructions. Even the playful relation to place inherent in the Situationist practices of the *flâneur* or the *derivé*—the conscious bracketing of everyday assumptions about urban places to open oneself up to new, unexpected possibilities as an act of resistance[48]—are relations to a fixed topography and placescape.

If you think back to the favorite playground of your childhood, its placeness is beyond question. You can map it out, you can describe the practices that made it a place for you, the practices that, through return and repetition to a place that endured, grew into habit. The shiny metal slide that was too hot to touch in the summer sun and the way it forced you to slide with your knees and arms up, the cement planters behind which you could hide in a game of hide and seek, and so on.

These are not limitations to our freedom to play. On the contrary, these are the facticities in relation to which we are free to play—they are what gives us something to play with. Eugen Fink wrote that play is always about the encounter with "resisting beings," the physical toys, playthings, or objects that structure play practices as free responses to their material contingencies, affordances, and limitations.[49] The playground, as with all places, is a resisting place. Where there is no material resistance, where we can will existents into and out of existence, there is no definite existential form to our being, and, as result, there is no place.

Similarly, in the realm of digital games, Olli Tapio Leino speaks of the "gameplay condition" as the condition of being subject to a game's digital materiality, which resists the player's projects and materially upholds the results of their decisions and choices.[50] Where there is no material resistance, where we can will existents into and out of being, there is no gameplay condition.

48. Guy Debord, "Theory of the Derivé," in *Situationist International Anthology,* ed. and trans. Ken Knabb (Berkeley, CA: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981): 50–54.
49. Eugen Fink, "Oasis of Happiness: Thoughts Toward an Ontology of Play," in *Play as Symbol of the World and Other Writings,* ed. and trans. Ian Alexander Moore and Christopher Turner (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015): 14–31, 24.
50. Olli Tapio Leino, "Understanding Games as Played: Sketch for a First-Person Perspective for Computer Game Analysis," *Philosophy of Computer Games 2009 Proceedings*, Oslo: 12.

One might well argue that this is something of an overstatement. Far from being immaterial, a sandbox is defined precisely by the material that constitutes it, and to play in a sandbox is literally to get your hands dirty with material sand. Likewise, there are hard limitations to what the player can and cannot do with their *AC:NH* island. Certain decorative items are rare and hard to obtain, and the player's landscaping plans must fit within the strict grid-based layout and limited space of their island, often requiring non-trivial consideration and thought on the part of the player. It is not surprising, given this observation, that members of the *AC:NH* online community often share videos of their landscaping efforts with an indication of the number of hours of work involved in their creation,[51] an observation which also returns us to the sense of "landscape" as an activity, and to Liboriussen's remarks regarding the act of building in virtual worlds as a self-perpetuating process performed for its own sake.

In these ways—as well as in the remnants of structured temporalities I have described above—*AC:NH* does continue to offer enough resistance and fixity to support placeness, especially if it is in the player's inclination to settle into a particular arrangement for their island landscape. This sense of the virtual environment as a stable and comprehensible placescape, however, remains in constant tension with the fluidity resulting from its existence as a set of discrete, infinitely re-combinable units, every possible combination of which is virtually present—adjacent to whatever particular configuration is currently realized.

51. To give only a couple of examples, we can mention YouTube user Chase Crossing's video "This is What 915 Hours Looks Like," uploaded on June 21, 2020, YouTube video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eBA1uOjux0c, which, at the time of writing, has a tally of 2.4 million views; and user zoenotzoey's video "my five star island tour / animal crossing new horizons," uploaded on June 7, 2020, YouTube video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WosVOABaTqI, which lists, in the description, that it is the result of "400 hours" of play.

Conclusions

Games like *AC:NH, Minecraft,* and *Dragon Quest Builders,* with their infinitely malleable landscapes, are not virtual places to be inhabited, nor playgrounds whose material resistance suggest playful responses. They are virtual sandboxes, inviting us to engage in the practice of making and remaking representations of place, fully participating in—and taking to its limit—the inherent fluidifying sway of the virtual. Accordingly, they encourage playful experimentation—it is hardly surprising that the player communities that coalesce around such games tend to be built around the sharing and appraisal of players' creative efforts.[52] To return to McGregor's term, these sandboxes are creation spaces—what is deemed to be worth sharing with the community is the crafted space not as a lived place, but as an inert, created object, an exhibition of the player's skill, creativity, and agency.

At the same time, as with any simulation, it is worth interrogating the representation of world and place that these virtual environments constitute and the foundational assumptions about "world" and "place" they embody. What virtual interiorities do these game worlds build in our experience?

What we find, in this case, are worlds "cut up" by the ontology of measure, reduced to discrete identical categories wherein no individual existent has value except as an instance of its category to be stockpiled, stripped of any meaning outside the logic of quantification: worlds that offer no material resistance to our will; worlds in which there is never any span of time between wanting something and getting it; worlds where there is no planning, no projecting into the future, no bonds of commitment, and no memory of habit where everything can be changed from one moment to the next. This is not to diminish the specific joy and wonder that such virtual worlds can, and do, give rise to—the joy of unfettered creative work and achievement, or what we could tentatively call an aes-

52. Sean C. Duncan, "*Minecraft*: Beyond Construction and Survival," *Well-Played—A Journal on Video Games, Value and Meaning* 1, no. 1 (2011): 1–22; Maria Cipollone, Catherine Schifter, and Rick A. Moffat, "*Minecraft* as a Creative Tool: A Case Study," *International Journal of Game-Based Learning* 4, no. 2 (2014): 1–14.

thetics of possibility. Nor is it to deny that there might well be tendencies towards the stabilization of more or less fixed placescapes as players grow attached to their own efforts or the contingencies and emergent habits of a particular arrangement. However, the affordances of these virtual worlds pull away from such stability, reminding us all the time that we do not need to commit, that there are other possibilities. What they give us is the aridity and lifelessness of the non-place that is the sandbox, standing in reserve for the player to make something out of it without having much of a say in the matter, unequal partners subjected to the player's agency.

This, as I have argued, does not make the virtual worlds of these games exceptional. It is in the nature of the virtual to multiply worlds, to put into question the singularity of the actual and the resistance of its facticity, to give us the illusion that we can inhabit every possible world at once, should we so wish, and to represent everything in the digital language of quantification in such a way as to make it infinitely available and re-combinable. Moreover, *AC:NH, Minecraft,* and other similar games structure a relation between the particular, realized configuration of place the player inhabits at any given time and the nebulous cloud of possible other configurations that the island's interchangeable units of landscape could be arranged into, which mirrors the relation of the virtual to the actual. In this way, virtual worlds are both a product of the reality-system and mode of being that Han and Campagna identify as being central to our contemporary moment, and a perfect representation of it.

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