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Animal Crossing as a @DigitalAltar

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## Animal Crossing As A @DigitalAltar

Lillyanne Pham

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# Animal Crossing as a @DigitalAltar

"Playing" Cards Digital Booklet  
Oct - Dec 2021

[lillyannepham.com](http://lillyannepham.com)

For Fall 2021 Art & Social Practice History at Portland State University, I explored the social simulation game *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (ACNH) as a digital altar.

I asked **How do social simulation games provide a dream space, a neighborhood btwn IRL and URL relationships? How is online gardening similar to sanctuary making, altar making?**

## ABOUT

My co-conspirators offered me ***Fuck Tom Nook***. In other words, **should we build an altar in a capitalist, escapist, and colonialist dystopia?**

This project **@digitalaltar** held space for ACNH players to 1) confront these questions & 2) flaunt their islands/works of art

These “playing” cards are an IRL materialization of @digitalaltar which is fully archived on YouTube:

**[tinyurl.com/digitalaltar](https://tinyurl.com/digitalaltar)**



 **St. Ashes**



 **lillypolis**

**Card design by & Interviewer**

Lillyanne Pham \ lillypolis

lillyannepham.com

IG: @lillyannepham

**Islands by & Interviewees**

Maria Mejia \ gumdrop

Gavrielle Thompson \ Yelapa

Bea Yeh \ Lillipad

Maria Mayorya \ MAYORYA

Chanel Matsunami Govreau \ Seafoam

Virtual Care Lab

Elenie \ Kulbiff

Richard Phu \ X Nihilo

Alice Yuan Zhang \ neütøpjå

Taylor Murray (No Island)

Maria Mayorya \ MAYORYA

Roz Crews \ frog

Candace Avalos \ TacoTown

**St. Ashes**

reddit/u/Candy-Ashes

DA-4699-7249-4778

**Twitch Tech Assistance**

Stephen Rumph \ lost

**CREDITS**

I had a couple villagers in the beginning that I didn't like. There was this one that me and my sister really wanted on our island. When we found him, he started saying a bunch of things like I am going to be patrolling at night and I am the new cop of this area. Me and my sister were like *I do not like this guy anymore.*



drop

I had a talk with my sister about where the kitchen and bathroom go. For her, it's the complete opposite. We are pretty close and we shared a room for most of our life. So, we are used to sharing things. I didn't mind it. When I got the switch, it was an impulse buy because I saw everyone enjoy it. We used to play Animal Crossing together on the Nintendo DS. So, it was sort of a given that we would play on the Switch as well.



**drop**

A lot of the rooms are cluttered and it has a lot of color. It inspired me to bring that into my real life. I used to think my room had to be sterile and clean. But, my room is really messy and I'm okay with that. I like the ability to switch around your outfits and I definitely do play a lot with my wardrobe because of it.



iPartment

When I first bought the loom, I wasn't in my weaving apprenticeship with Tita Rachel Lozada yet but I was always really drawn to it. Now, the loom has much more meaning. Being in community and having sisterhood to learn about our roots with weaving is empowering. Back then, you learned to weave because you didn't have many options. Now, there's choice. I'm still reflecting on my apprenticeship. I feel like I'm always in reflection. I do it really slow.



Yelapa



Lately, there's been themes of housing that have been coming up for me. Stable housing makes a difference in so many people's lives. I feel like that recently because it's my second year of stable housing – stable and safe housing. I feel like I'm able to do this weaving collective now. But, before, I don't feel like I could have because I wasn't in the right place.

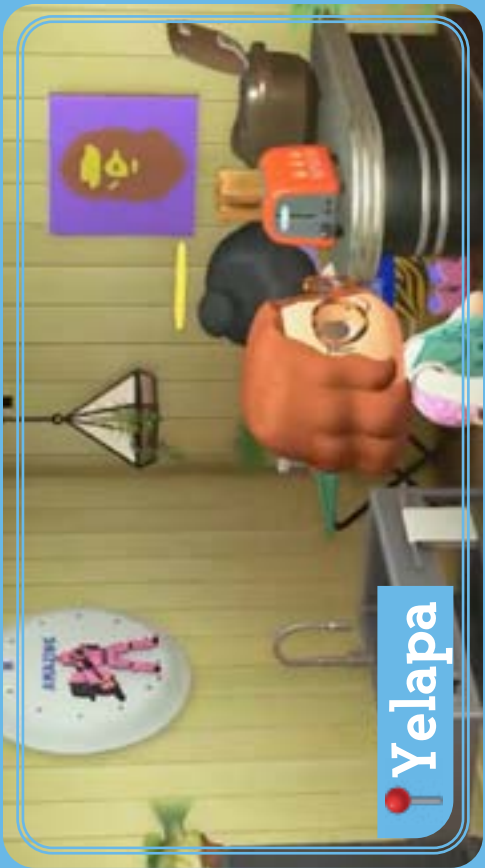


Yelapa

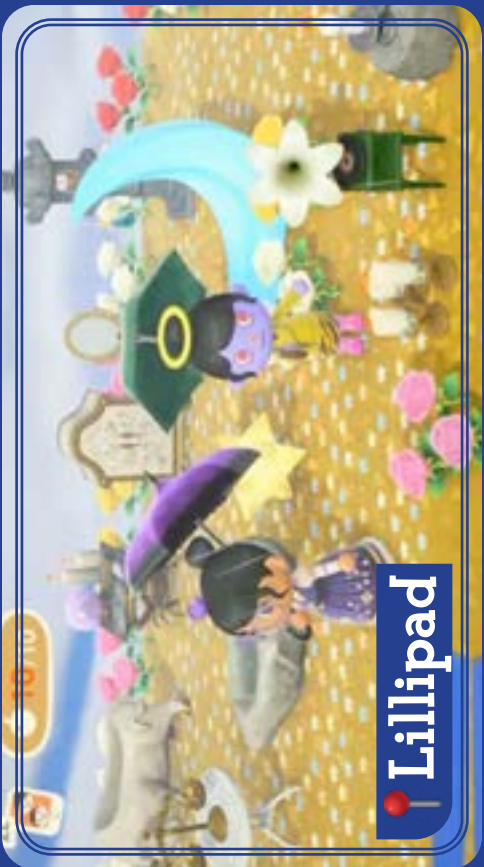
Gavrielle Thompson

Do you see this  
Bape thing?  
Jeff made that.  
He made Gucci  
patterns too. I  
was like you're  
such a hypebeast.  
He spent hella  
time on that.

 Yelapa



The stars are really common on my island because I want my residents to feel like they are magical beings.



People decide that they don't believe in science. That's great. Science doesn't need you to believe in it. When I was growing up in New York City and San Francisco, one of my favorite memories was going to the Exploratorium and going to these science centers where you got to get your hands dirty and really interact. So, I made an outdoor science center where you can have a turtle hiss at you and do experiments.



Lillipad

This little area between these houses is a homage to my dog Pelé who passed away last year at the age of seventeen. He loved to sit on the couch, barbecue, sit by the fire, and camping. This is my memorial for him.



Lillipad

This is definitely capitalist indoctrination. Your first and foremost thing is buy an area for your tent and you have to pay off your debt. I think the conversation around it can evolve. I don't think it just has to be that. At a certain point, you don't become subject to that anymore. The real joy of it is taking your time. It works on real time and you have to be patient. You have to take it slow. You have to let things go. And there is an amazing gift economy built in whether that's sharing resources, knowledge, or literally sending little gifts or notes. I think that is some of the joy and beauty of Animal Crossing.



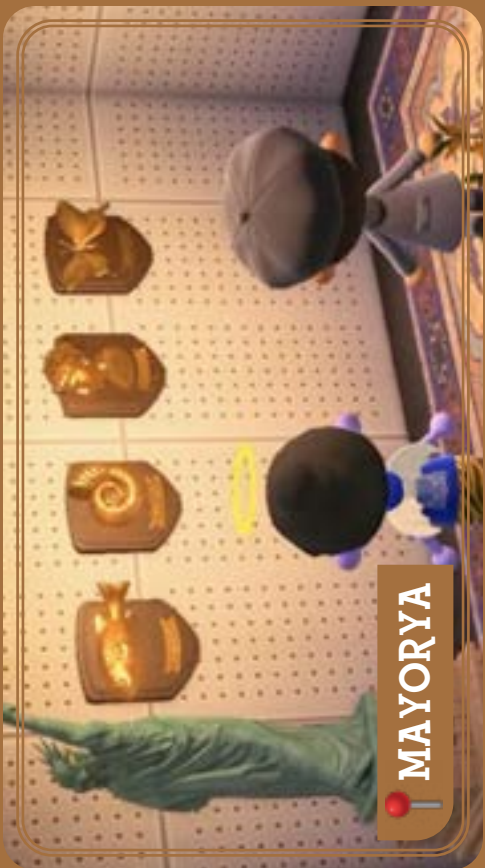
Lillipad

I think in terms of ritual. The nature of Animal Crossing is very ritualistic because there's no first, second, third level. In Animal Crossing, it's just about accomplishing what you want to accomplish. And crafting what you want to see reflected back at you. What you put into it, is what you get [...] I honestly think that Animal Crossing is the best game of 2020 because it gave people an opportunity in a non-competitive environment to create moments of connection.



Lillipad

I think the Statue of Liberty was kind of funny to get from Gulliver because he always gives me sombreros. Everytime. Like Gulliver, damn, I help you everytime I catch these little clams for you and you're going to give me another sombrero. What are you trying to do. All of the cultural appropriation in these gifts. I can't even wear the sombrero. It would not be right. So, he gave me the statue. I thought alright, okay, you might be speaking to the urban planner in me, trying to collect some of these American relics.



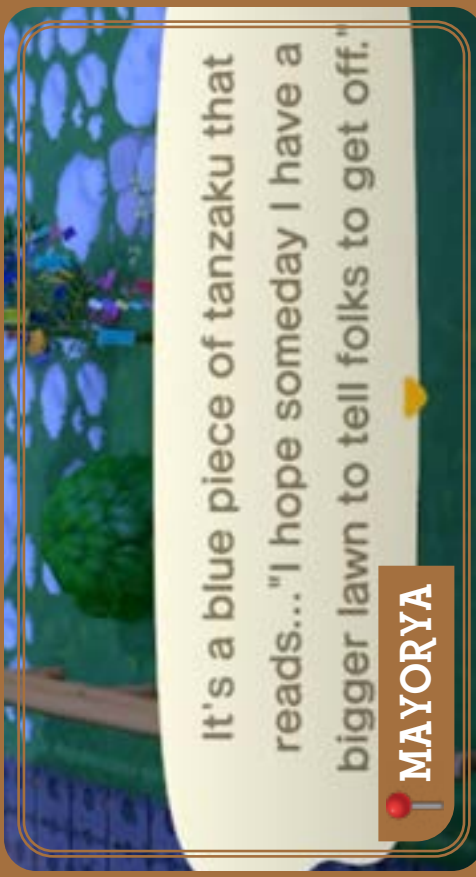
MAYORYA



[My interest in transportation] started when I was in my early 20's [...] I was working in healthcare for a long time, working with houseless youth, working with LGBTQ youth. That's where it really hit me that a lot of people struggle with transportation issues. They couldn't get to their appointments. They couldn't get housing. The best thing we could do at the clinic was give a bus card. For other folks, that was only a small relief for them. Transportation for me, day in and day out, was something I was hearing from young people that was a big issue for them. They taught me that we needed to prevent transportation inequities from happening.



**MAYORYA**



It's a blue piece of tanzaku that reads... "I hope someday I have a bigger lawn to tell folks to get off."

**MAYORYA**

The designs that inspire my work or my work that inspires my design. It feels like a scrapbook, a space, a collection of all of the things that are pleasing to me or remind me of my identity. I think even my villagers somehow reflect my circle of friends in real life. I really wanted to recruit and keep villagers who had a spunky attitude, who are reflective, sincere. Some of the dialogue that they say is so cute to me. Down to the details and human environment of this made up world, I feel like it's a good snapshot of my life and desires during such a tumultuous and scary time. The timing of COVID and me getting into this game – it just fit.

**Maria Mayorya**

The pancakes are one of the new food items. I put it there because my dad had recently passed away and his specialty was pancakes. My dad made the best pancakes. So, I leave that there for him. I think that's a big thing for me – just having those comforting things even in this space. So, when I play, I kind of think of those things. It's all intentional.



**MAYORYA**

I feel that the capitalist themes were obvious and apparent from the beginning. You get welcomed in to this island life but you meet Tom. It's not as sweet as you think. [...] I thought damn, how many trees do I have to chop and fish do I have to catch to afford this tent and the upgrade after that. I felt that, early on, you would have to invest a lot of time in this game to acquire a lot of the things that would make this game feel fulfilling. But, after witnessing how other people play the game, it's not about how much stuff you put on your island. I think it's about how you spend your time on your island. Some people would not build out their island or put custom floors down, but they sure as hell will fish all day or collect seashells and sell them.

A screenshot from a game showing a character with a yellow halo in a room with a patterned rug, wooden furniture, and pink cherry blossom plants. A name tag in the bottom right corner reads 'MAYORYA' with a red pin icon.

**MAYORYA**

**My partner and I [...] found a way to game the system and acquire tens of millions of bells in a really short amount of time. So, I will have to admit that. Maybe, I didn't earn all the things on my island with blood, sweat, and tears [...] Once I padded my bank account with all of that, I felt like I was more efficient. I think that is true in real life. People are born into wealth and have a big ass bank account from the jump, you think they're doing all of these unpaid internships and grimey jobs and doing this kind of hustle? No, they get to have hobbies without worrying about how they spend their time. I think that felt really true in this game for me.**

A screenshot from the video game Animal Crossing: New Horizons. The scene is set on a wooden pier or dock overlooking the ocean. In the foreground, a character with a large blue body and a yellow halo is visible. In the background, several other characters are standing on the pier. A red pin icon is overlaid on the bottom right of the screenshot, with the word "MAYORYA" written in white capital letters next to it.

**MAYORYA**

Every single item takes a lot of materials. The blossom lanterns take massive amounts of petals, wood, and tree branches [...] it takes a lot of collecting power. In the plaza area, I set up like five D.I.Y stations and my friends came over and they D.I.Y'ed tons. Because I was building this around the concept of an installation that was partly anti-paradise, a digital protest, to have my friends come, whether they are Asian or non-Asian, for them to know my concept and just build with me felt like allyship, community support. It was very healing to have that within the game.



Seafoam

My Japanese, Harajuku kind of town has nothing to do with the installation. But, that was a question that I had to ask myself: *if I'm going to make something really intense and slightly apocalyptic, do I really wanna live there all the time?* I think that is a metaphor on when you're under threat in your everyday life, you have to protect yourself but balance between places of respite. And, for BIPOC or Asian Americans, food or being able to go to a Chinatown and get together with friends, that's a huge part of the rest and rehabilitation – the mini paradises that we can create in these capsule moments. That's why I wanted areas that had variation and gave me joy.

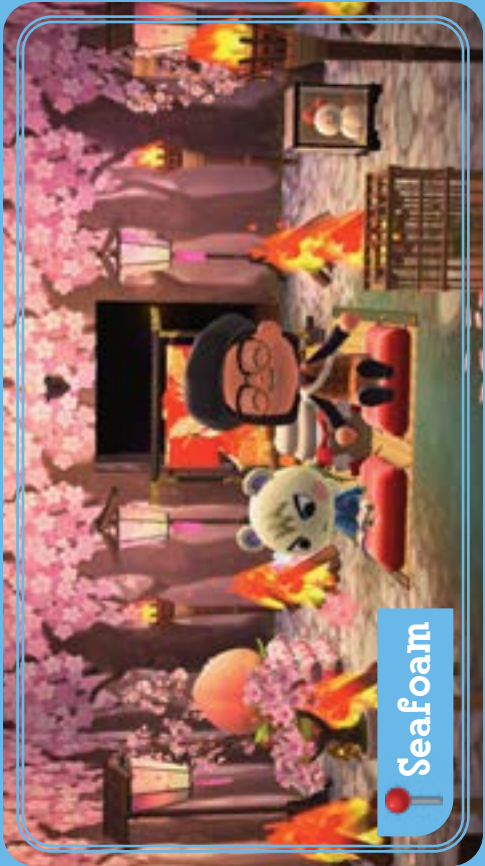


Seafoam

**Chanel Matsunami Govreau**

**I love my villagers. I have a hard time letting them go. I don't have a lot of swapping of my villagers because the friend simulation is very precious to me.**

**Seafoam**





My installation centered on the U.S. burning massive amounts of cherry blossom trees that were thought to be diseased. They were incinerated. Those images really haunted me. Within this digital context, you can't recreate that exact act in animal crossing. No matter how many fires that I put out like this, nothing will catch on fire. These trees and graves are invincible. They'll be in proximity but they are protected by the limitations of the game. We can never have this kind of image live in real life. You can't have fires and trees of this magnitude and not have them be damaged. I like how the items can combine in ways that can't be replicated in real life even though they're meant to replicate real life.



Seafoam

When your family are immigrants and you don't have access to these certain things and you see them so beautifully digitally rendered or you're able to create an environment that you don't have access to, it's a really powerful tool to share with others and for yourself. I don't think it has to be a thing you share with the public. It can be a private ritual and place to rest



Seafoam

I realized as I was creating the materials for my exhibition, playing animal crossing had trained my brain in a way to think how to define space [...] People have these programs that they can do interior or architectural design. I don't know how to use that but I know how to use Animal Crossing. [...] If I was teaching an installation class, I would encourage everyone to build an installation in animal crossing. I'm so serious. If you take an art glass class in college, it's like \$300 for your materials budget. That's a switch and you get to keep that forever. What ways can we shift on how we learn about space? I think installation is one of the most difficult art spaces to move into. Being able to express yourself and take up a whole landscape for your vision is powerful.

The logo consists of a red circle with a white dot in the center, resembling a pushpin or a stylized letter 'i', positioned to the left of the text.

Seafoam



It might be inaccessible for folks who don't have Animal Crossing or a Switch. But, I do argue that creating work –whether it's community or art work – and putting it in the context within this video game is going to make it accessible to so many other people that are not going to the art museum, not going to the gallery, that could care less about academia, but can really get down with this. If we are going to critique Animal Crossing as an art-making or community space, there are equal issues with accessibility in terms of traditional art and installation spaces.

A screenshot from the video game Animal Crossing: New Horizons. The scene is set on a beach during the day. In the foreground, a character with dark hair and a white shirt is standing on the sand. To their right, another character with purple hair and a blue shirt is visible. In the background, there are various beach items like a beach ball, a beach chair, and a beach umbrella. A 'Seafoam' label with a red pin icon is overlaid on the bottom right of the image.

Seafoam

Elenie, Richard, Alice, Taylor, Maria Mayorya, and I spent three hours talking on Discord and interacting on Richard's and Elenie's islands. Unfortunately, the audio did not record and the conversation lives only in our memories. The video of our play was luckily saved. I am of course very sad. But, I think it speaks to the beautiful nature of Animal Crossing – how we dedicate hundreds of hours to build our island to privately keep to and for ourselves, unseen and unrecognized acts of self-love and self-exploration. Bits of the conversation from what we could muster are seen in the these “playing” cards and its pamphlet.

A screenshot from the game Animal Crossing: New Horizons showing five characters on a beach. From left to right: a character with a black hat and glasses, a character with purple hair, a character with glasses and a blue shirt, a character with a blue shirt and a yellow instrument, and a character with brown hair. They are standing on a sandy beach with a large tree and a blue sky with clouds in the background.

X Nihilo

Richard showed us his grandmother's altar where an apple tree was hovering because she always gave apples to him. Next to the altar is a meditation space. We discussed the beauty of the difficult maze built around the altar. We also gave food to the altar similar to how Richard and his family engage with their in-person altar. Richard felt that building this altar space in Animal Crossing was healing since his family bonded on the game during the pandemic and the passing away of his grandparents.



X Nihilo

On X Nihilo which comes from the parmenidean saying “ex nihilo nihil fit” meaning nothing comes from nothing- Richard wanted to incorporate as many ‘worlds’ as he could on the island in order to create disparate environments that would somehow all blend together. He wanted friends who visited the island to have a somewhat interactive experience as well as to traverse the island’s narrative through play.

X Nihilo



Alice talked about the use of culturally and ethnically specific 3D models and the note of care on how to use the models by the creators. For example, in the The Stanford 3D Scanning Repository, for the Happy Buddha model, it states please remember that the Buddha is a religious symbol. Other examples were The Open Source Afro Hair Library (OS AHL) and closeisnhome.com. She offered us a space to name and critique the nuances, commodification, and appropriation of the culturally and body specific objects in Animal Crossing.



X Nihilo

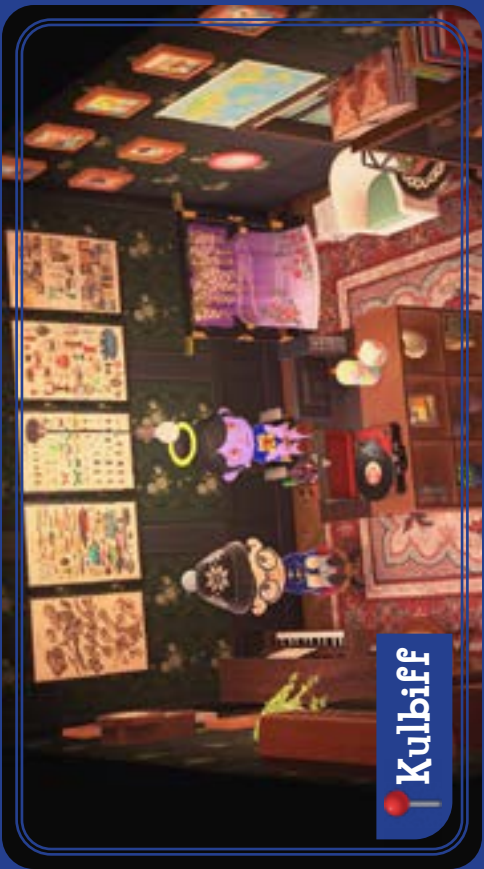


Alice's Breadcrumbs:  
Also part of my musings were that ACNH is a limited and pre-contextualized environment. Larger web ecosystem seems to rely on open source + guidance. What is cultural misuse vs natural fluidity / evolution but in the digital era? Insert criteria of "is this environment commodifiable"? Access, ownership, etc.



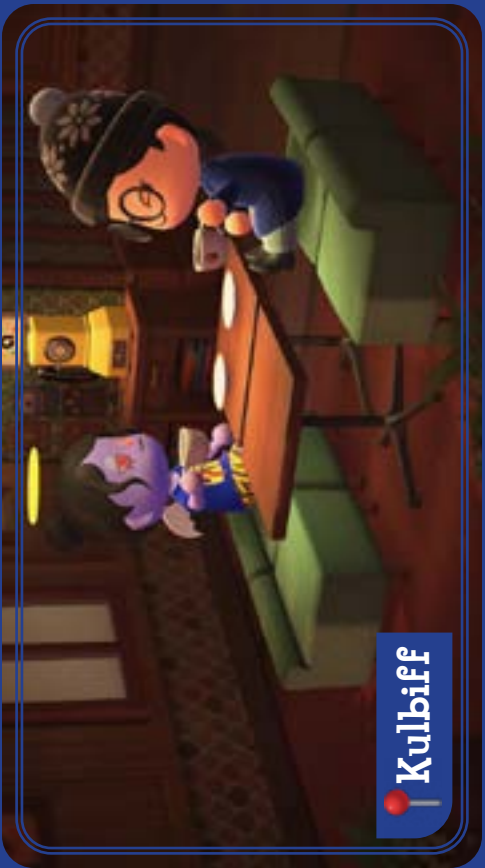
Kulbiff

Elenie created a picture wall of her villagers to make it easier to say bye to them.

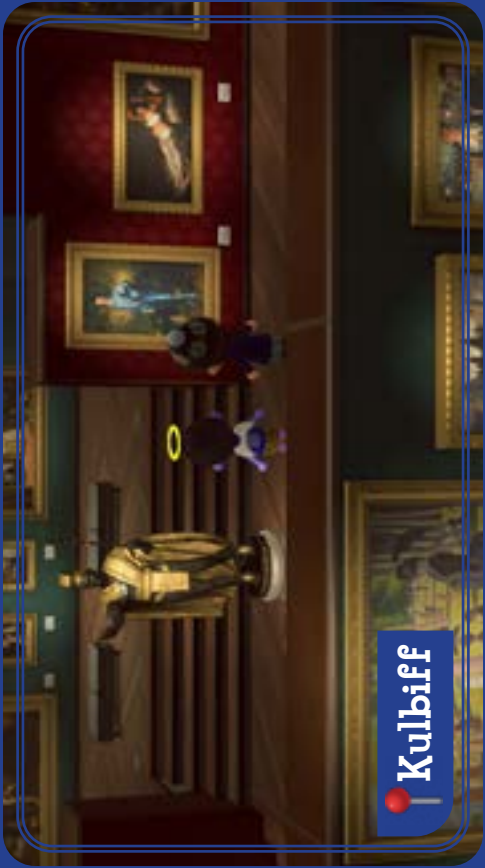


Kulbiff

For 2021 New Year's Day, Elenie celebrated the countdown with her IRL roommate and her villagers on Animal Crossing.



Elenie talked about being proud of finishing her museum. Her favorite exhibition is the art exhibit. After she collected the Blue Boy by Thomas Gainsborough (also known in-game as 'Basic Painting') in an older version of the game, she saw it in a museum after moving to LA and immediately thought of Animal Crossing.



Elenie has been looking to complete the Capricorn D.I.Y and she plans to wait another year to collect the Capricorn stars. In this, she talked about the dangers in trading with other players through online communities such as Discord and Reddit. She mentioned cases where strangers would trade bells for objects and sometimes the stranger would take the bells without properly trading. She also showed us Nookazon where we talked about the impressiveness of the game's capitalist expansion.



Kulbiff

Taylor doesn't have Animal Crossing but is interested in learning more about them which is why she decided to join today. In the past she has been interested in how video games explicitly and implicitly code behaviors as "good" or "bad" and whether or not that adheres to our own culturally accepted value system. She is also interested in how video games explore and produce intimacy like The Realistic Kissing Simulator, how games can be hacked to combat stereotypes, and also how games can be read as queer even if the maker did not intend them to be.

The discussions of cultural appropriation in Animal Crossing made Taylor wonder more about the optical dimensions of it, i.e. is it still harmful to take things from another culture outside your own if you are not doing it in public? Is there a private nature to games like animal crossing that perhaps make the cultural "borrowing" more authentic? How does this change when the culture you are appropriating might even benefit from your appropriation, i.e. like Indigenous people's selling their artwork and clothing to non-Indigenous folk?

When exploring Richard's shrine, Taylor started to consider the impermanent nature of it, as well as the social legitimacy it would be afforded, as opposed to something more traditional like a tombstone in a graveyard. She reflected on what sort of grief might manifest from the losing of the shrine itself, especially if it was unprompted i.e. if animal crossing glitched and deleted it one day. She had a digital space taken from her during the pandemic and felt an overwhelming and hard to explain type of grief wherein there was a loss of community but also a peculiar loss of place — of discord specific features like the pins and roles of the individuals, that could not be replicated.

Island hopping for ACNH today with Virtual Care Lab was the best idea yet for my Saturday. ACNH, artists, and good conversation about social constructs, life and loss, pandemics, and gaming. It's been raining all day in Portland, and I had plans to stay on the couch and revamp my island. When I get Twitch notifications from Lillyanne, I'm likely to see what's up.

Like many of us, we started playing ACNH in a very social way with friends, partners, and family. For me, that didn't last long and I kept at it, playing for myself, having no visitors on my island, until recently. Connecting with strangers about Animal Crossing is surprising but also not. It takes some coordination and commitment to game with other people, especially when enduring technical difficulties or scheduling.

I love learning different gameplay styles and the goals and motivations for other people, and relating with them on things inside and outside of the game, which is why I like making it social.

I've been fascinated about completionists as gamers, realizing I'm like that too to some degree: people who are methodical about tasks and painstakingly thorough about collecting items, fulfilling many aspects of the game, and putting in time to get what they want out of a game.

In some ways, being a completionist involves gaining satisfaction from starting and finishing something, but it's also about being driven by the dissatisfaction of missing something and not wanting that.

I definitely care about aesthetics. I'm also a perfectionist and control freak. But I think at the same time, it's a little off. It's kind of weird to me that I would be an aesthetic control freak and this is what my basement in my ACNH house looks like. It's sort of *why did I pick that baseball mitt chair*. I think the reason is it's just kind of one of the weirder objects that you can get in the game. And this giraffe floor reminds me of a tile that was in my family home growing up. [...] There are certain items that I do not have in my house for a couple different reasons. One reason is I think some items – like me having them as a white woman – feels appropriate. Other reasons are the shapes or finishes of the items.



Frog



When I figured out about ACNH, I was like there's so many parallels to Neopets [...] at the time I got it, in the cultural moment I was living, I really needed a place to go that wasn't my regular online life and also wasn't my in-person life because that didn't exist during the pandemic at the height of quarantine. I also moved from Portland to a rural place in Florida to live in a cabin that didn't have any internet. So, I was on my own out there. I think having ACNH definitely gave me an escapist respite. But, now, I don't have that same relationship to it. I think it's relaxing...





My favorite room is the fruit room. It's where I keep my fruit outfits. We have all the different fruit stuff in here. A T.V. I made this wallpaper. There's a fruit wreath, a fruit umbrella. I also have my hotdog dress in here because I like that outfit.



Taco Town

Whoever lived on my island will be showcased in this community center. I don't know if Pietro is going up there because I do not like clowns. But, there are old islanders up there. [...] My community center was the first house I made. It just felt right. I have to have a place where you can gather. I spent a lot of time in my life in community spaces, so I thought it'd be cool to have that.

This is my bestie right here, Violet. You have to meet her. I legit feel like she's my real friend. I've honestly gotten committed to my villagers. There's something about them. I buy her so many clothes. She has this gold crown. I saw her wear it the other day. *Queen*. I bought her that bread because I know she likes bread like I do. It looks like she put it out. She's so cute, pink, and sassy. That's Violet, my girl.



Tacos are my thing. It's also one of my nicknames growing up and people just know me for loving Tacos. So, the name had to be TacoTown [...] You'll notice my very Black Lives Matter forward place. I've got a Black Lives Matter sign as soon as you walk in, so you know that's what we're doing here – we're talking about Black Lives. That's the closest thing [paying homage to my non-ACNH life].



It's definitely my safe space. There's another element to ACNH which is I'm a millennial, I'm straddled by so much student loan debt. As I'm growing older, I'm just realizing the burden that has on me and how it's affecting my future. I would like to be able to have my own home someday. It kind of feels bleak sometimes. I feel like ACNH has been my way, if I could have my own home and decorate however I wanted and have money to decorate it in the ways I wanted, this is what I would do. I think that is the comfort it brings me. I'm curious how many others have experienced this. I feel like it's a really big generational thing right now. We're locked out of access to that long-term stability...

A screenshot from the video game Animal Crossing: New Horizons. The image shows a player's island named 'TacoTown'. The island is decorated with various items, including a large pink and orange structure that looks like a taco, a blue and purple structure, and several potted plants. A red location pin is placed on the island, and the name 'TacoTown' is displayed in white text on a dark background at the bottom of the screen.

TacoTown

**Maria Mejia:** As a first generation Mexican-American, my work centers around the Mexican-American experience, identity, and storytelling as a multimedia artist. Much of my inspiration comes from media consumption, the experience of a day-to-day life, and stories passed down through generations. My inspirations have allowed me to explore different themes of individuality and social change. All of my work can be found on my art instagram [artebymia](#) which acts as an archive for my projects.

**Maria Mayorya (they/she)** is a transportation planner and public health professional whose goals for her government and nonprofit work are sustainable communities and racial justice. She applies her lived experiences in Manila, Los Angeles, and Portland—from her sports fandom, queerness, and immigrant status—to her advocacy, planning, and relationships in Oregon and beyond.

**Chanel Matsunami Govreau** is an interdisciplinary artist and educator based in Brooklyn, NY. Chanel explores themes of fantasy, queerness, and Japanese-diasporic identity through installation, screen printing, photography, and performance. Being a multi-hyphenated individual -mixed race, pansexual and Asian American- they live at the intersections of sometimes disparate communities. They seek to build worlds where folks with intersectional identities can exist with infinite belonging and engage in radical play.

**Elenie** is a filmmaker from Trinidad and Tobago. She is currently based in Los Angeles.

**My name is Richard Phu** and I am an independent fashion designer from Toronto. My work explores syncretic methodologies using the site of multiple bodies for the convergence of environments. I like reading, writing and playing video games.

**Taylor** is a poet, writer, and researcher masquerading as a computer science student at the University of Michigan. She is interested in too many things to count including practices and ideology around work and leisure, white culture, spiritual practices for nonreligious people, and making inquiry-based, culturally-situated curriculums.

**Alice Yuan Zhang** is a new media artist, educator, and cultural organizer based in Los Angeles. Her practice explores relational ecologies and digital commoning.

**Gavrielle Thompson** - NO BIO

**Roz Crews** is an artist and educator considering the intersections of learning and experiencing.

**Lillyanne Pham** - [lillyannepham.com](http://lillyannepham.com)

Bea Yeh moved to Portland, Oregon from San Francisco, CA in 1999 to attend Reed College. She graduated in 2003 with a BA in English after completing her thesis exploring poetry written by Chinese immigrants while detained at the Angel Island Immigration Station from 1910 – 1940. After pursuing educational and professional experiences in Medical Anthropology and Veterinary Medicine, Bea decided to found a non-profit art organization called Cloud.Break. The mission of Cloud.Break is to curate sanctuary: to create unique art works in unexpected places where healing and dialogue can occur. Bea is an artist, environmentalist, non-profit administrator, curator, and event producer: she has worked for the Portland Institute of Contemporary Art, the Lake Oswego Festival of the Arts, and, most recently, the Pacific Northwest College of Art. Bea completed her MS in Arts Administration and Museum Studies from the University of Oregon after completing her thesis exploring how museum exhibitions can create transformative educational experiences for visitors. Social justice, empowered healing, and community fortitude are intertwined in all the work Bea undertakes including event production. As the APANO Community & Event Space Manager, Bea will bring her experience to co-create and lead a space that courageously imagines a just and equitable world where community is celebrated, and sanctuary is everywhere.

Candace Avalos is a first generation American “Blacktina”, daughter of Black Americans from the south and Guatemalan immigrants. Originally from Virginia, she received her Bachelor of Arts degree in Modern Foreign Languages, with a focus on Spanish and Italian, and Master of Education degree in College Student Personnel Administration from James Madison University. Prior to her venture into the nonprofit world, she worked at Portland State University for 8 years providing civic engagement education and advising support for student leaders. She lives in NE Portland and is an active member of her community, such as a co-founder of the Black Millennial Movement, serving on the Citizen Review Committee and Charter Review Commission for the City of Portland, as well as on the boards of Portland: Neighbors Welcome, Street Roots, and the Oregon Kickball Club. Her hobbies include watching cooking shows, reading social justice literature, playing outdoor sports, and walking and biking around Portland. Mi nombre en español es Candis Ávalos.





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