

Commentary

Commentary: Colonialist Values in Animal Crossing and Their Implications for Conservation

Alexis D. Smith 

Independent Researcher, Tallahassee, FL 32310, USA; E-Mail: athabascac@gmail.com

Abstract In the Nintendo game *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, players move to an uninhabited island and quickly become instrumental to the naming, aesthetic development, and biodiversity of the island. In some ways, the game can foster a love for and curiosity about nature. In other ways, the game reinforces harmful colonialist values and attitudes that are ultimately an obstacle to conservation in the real world. Here I critique the game values relevant to conservation, both the values that benefit and the values that hinder conservation. I discuss possibilities for a future version of the game that reinforces values better aligned with conservation.

Keywords conservation; colonialism; video games; cozy games; biodiversity; values; attitudes

1. Introduction

In Nintendo's immensely popular game *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (ACNH), players move to an uninhabited island and quickly become instrumental to the island's development. Players start on an unnamed island that only has the player's tent, two other non-player residents and their tents, and the base camp established by Tom Nook, an enterprising tanuki. The island's history prior to Nook's arrival is unclear, but Nook refers to the island as "deserted" and there are signs of a previous civilization such as trash in the waters. Nook gives players tasks to develop the island such as naming the island and fundraising for bridges and other infrastructure. Players are able to upgrade their tent and then their house room by room until their house has six rooms. Meanwhile their ability to modify the island increases. In 2020, ACNH became Nintendo's second best-selling game of all time [1].

The overarching goal of the game is simply to make the player's island "nice". There are infinite ways that a player can choose to make their island nice, but there are a few specific, although low stakes, metrics of success. In addition to receiving "Nook Miles" rewards for accomplishing tasks, players also participate in a rating system of their island, from one to five stars. Ways that players can contribute to their island's rating include planting flowers, decorating the island with furniture, attracting residents, and helping to establish a museum. Higher ratings unlock rewards. For example, once an island receives a rating of three or more stars, the island will attract the attention of K.K. Slider, a very famous musical dog. K.K. Slider will then hold a concert in town square every subsequent Saturday night. K.K. Slider's concerts are validating to the legitimacy of the island, and they make the island's residents happy. After each concert, players receive a free copy of the song performed, which they can play in a music player in their home.

The *Animal Crossing* games fall into the genre of "cozy games". Cozy games are typically non-competitive and foster feelings of satisfaction and comfort, emphasizing needs higher on Maslow's hierarchy of needs [2]. I would be remiss if I did not note here that Maslow's ideas were heavily influenced by, but not appropriately attributed to, the Siksika (Blackfoot) people [3]. Higher level needs include love and belonging, self-esteem, and self-actualization. In cozy games, the player does not struggle to survive and all basic needs are easily met, so gameplay in cozy games is often more focused on building relationships with other players and with non-player characters (NPCs), personal development, and interacting with their environment.

As a result, cozy games such as ACNH are largely about rewarding and reinforcing good values. My primary intention is not to critique the biological realism of the game, but rather to critique the values that the game reinforces, some of which are rooted in colonialism and are ultimately detrimental to the conservation of biodiversity. Conservation has its own fraught, colonialist history, which conservationists have increasingly worked to dismantle (e.g., [4]). While

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Alejandro J. Rescia Perazzo,
Complutense University of
Madrid, Spain

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the game is not explicitly intended as a conservation game, the immense popularity of ACNH means that the values put forward in the game are likely to influence society broadly [5,6]. At this stage in the biodiversity crisis, we need all hands on deck. In other words, we need all people who care about biodiversity to act in a way that benefits biodiversity. Therefore the values that are held by members of society, not just among trained conservationists, matter. Here I will critique the game values relevant to conservation, both the values that benefit and the values that hinder conservation. Then I will discuss possibilities for a future version of the game that reinforces values better aligned with conservation.

2. Game Values Relevant to Conservation

2.1. Game Values That Benefit Conservation

The game fosters a lot of curiosity and respect for biodiversity. Players can collect fish, sea creatures, and “bugs” to donate to the museum, where they can be observed alive and well in a created habitat. When a new species is encountered, players can learn more about the species from Blathers, the owl who runs the museum. A visiting non-player character, Flick, is a bug enthusiast whose art is inspired by bugs, or in his own words, “a bug buff. An insect enthusiast. An arthropod artiste. I love all bugs and their appendages!” Even though Blathers does not share Flick’s love of bugs, he still respects and reveres them, promising the player that “although bugs are the bane of [his] existence, rest assured the wretched thing will receive the best of care” in the museum. We do not all need to like a group of living creatures for that group to have the right to persist.

The game also fosters a responsibility for the environment. Players are rewarded for planting trees and flowers, as well as for removing trash from the rivers, ponds, and the sea. There are many do-it-yourself (DIY) recipes in the game, some of which use the found trash to make something of value. For example, an empty can becomes a thumb piano or a succulent plant. These items can then be given to villagers as gifts or sold at Nook’s Cranny, the general store.

While its connection to conservation is less obvious, the relationship building encouraged by the game is also beneficial to conservation. Conservation in practice has become increasingly community-based, relying on participation by stakeholders [7]. Strong relationships among community members benefit that process. In addition to greeting island residents and exchanging gifts, players can also participate in resolving minor conflicts between residents. This usually involves delivering apology gifts between residents, for which the player is rewarded with both small gifts and Nook Miles.

2.2. Game Values That Hinder Conservation

Many of the more detrimental game values are rooted in attitudes of colonialism, especially settler colonialism, in which settlers displace the indigenous peoples of a colonized area and establish a new and dominant permanent society [8]. While the stated premise of the game is that the island is uninhabited or deserted, this is a common and convenient attitude for colonization. Historically, settlers have rationalized their actions by saying that the original people are not using the land effectively or appropriately, or that the original people are lesser people. These settler colonialist attitudes are still present in the game, even if the game premise tidily erases any previous inhabitants. Of course, settler colonialist attitudes are detrimental in myriad ways, but here I will only focus on the consequences for conservation.

Players are rewarded for removing “weeds”, which are held with the same esteem as the trash pulled from the waters. The weeds appear to be more than one species, but they are never named anything other than “clump of weeds”. Players can sell weeds at Nook’s Cranny or to Leif, a visiting non-player character. Weeds are bought from the player not because they have inherent value, but because the weeds detract from a potential “pristine, weed-free” island, in the words of Leif. Weeds can also negatively impact an island’s rating, but only if the number of weeds exceeds a threshold of 100 clumps [9]. Weeds’ supposed lack of value is inconsistent with the multiple in-game recipes that require weeds. The recipe for medicine, for example, requires a wasp nest and three clumps of weeds. Hypothetically, suppose a player could eradicate all weeds from the island in the name of beautification. That player would then be wholly dependent on capitalism (i.e., buying from Nook’s Cranny) to meet their needs for medicine, losing one avenue for a relationship with the land. The representation of weeds in ACNH is more diverse, seasonally changing, and aesthetically pleasing than in previous Animal Crossing games. These factors

combined with the previously mentioned weeds threshold make the game mechanics more favorable toward weeds, however the messaging about weeds from Leif and Nook is still harmful.

Players are instead encouraged to plant cultivated flower species such as tulips, pansies, and roses, suggesting that plants' beauty is only valued if it is imposed by the colonizer. In addition to devaluing the importance of incidental plant species, encouraging introduced plant species can lead to invasions [10]. Aside from beauty, many of plants' other values are erased, such as their value to the wildlife that has such an important role in the game. Many insect species require specific larval host plants in order to reach adulthood. A well-known example (and one of the species that players can collect for the museum) is the monarch butterfly (*Danaus plexippus*), which is dependent upon milkweeds (*Asclepias spp.*) as its larval host [11]. Although they can be intentionally cultivated, milkweeds are considered weeds, which the game encourages the player to remove. In short, there is a strong disconnect between the biodiversity that the game celebrates and all of the biodiversity that is necessary to support it. Fisher et al. [12] provide a few counter-examples of plant-insect relationships, such as beetles that only spawn on tree stumps or the orchid mantis which (in the game) is only found on white flowers. These examples illustrate that there is potential for expanding plant-insect relationships within the game, but in a way that does not disproportionately favor cultivated species.

The game also encourages exploitation colonialism, in which no settlement is established but resources are exploited [8]. There are multiple other uninhabited islands to which players can travel, and the message is that the player is entitled to all other lands and resources. Once per day in exchange for 1000 Nook Miles, a kappa named Kapp'n will take the player by boat to a random resource island and wait while they take everything they can, including iron, fish, and fruit. When the player is ready to leave, Kapp'n says, "Remember, thar's no returnin' here later. Do ye have all yer booty?" Not only are players entitled to exploit these resource islands, there are no consequences to over-exploitation. To make a distinction, harvesting natural resources is not inherently exploitative, harmful, or colonialist, but a sense of entitlement to these resources is. Ho et al. [13] illustrate how players with different levels of anthropocentrism will interact with ACNH differently, for example in the methods they collect wood and how frequently they fish or collect bugs. While the game does not require over-exploitation, the reward system and the messaging encourage it.

3. Discussion: What I Would Like to See in Future Versions of the Game

There is untapped potential for the game to better connect plants to all of the game's celebrated biodiversity by acknowledging the values of plants beyond aesthetics or consumable products (e.g., wood or fruit). Particularly, the importance of plants to wildlife deserves more respect. One way this could be accomplished is for certain species of "bugs" not to be unlocked until enough of their larval host plant has been established on the island. Players could discover seeds for these plants in the same way that buried fossils are discovered, marked by a star on the ground. Leif could also sell some of these plants, sharing a small bit of information about their ecological importance.

The messaging about weeds also needs to change. While invasive plant species do exist, and even native species can spread in inconvenient ways, the encouragement to eradicate all non-cultivated plants is harmful. Instead of buying weeds because they are messy and make the island less "pristine", Leif could buy weeds because of their many uses. Here there is an opportunity to foster the same sense of wonder about plants that the game fosters about bugs, fish, and sea creatures. When a player talks to Blathers, one of the options is, "Tell me about this." A player could present a previously unassessed clump of weeds and learn that they have actually foraged the edible purple dead-nettle (*Lamium purpureum*), for example. Once they have learned a weed species and it has been added to their field guide, they will be able to distinguish that species from others because the identified weeds will look distinct on the ground.

The game should incorporate some kind of land ethic. Instead of encouraging players to exploit all resources from all islands, the game should foster a responsibility to the land that informs how much to take, how much to leave, and what to give back. Here the game designers have an entire world of potential sources of inspiration. The phrase "land ethic" was coined by Aldo Leopold [14], but land ethics long predate him. Land ethics are typically rooted both in the culture of the people and in the natural histories of the species of a region. While they are rarely formally articulated, they guide an "honorable harvest" [15].

Kimmerer provides a written list of traditionally unwritten “rules” which could help inform game mechanics, but I will also make a few suggestions. Leif could limit how many weeds of a particular species he will buy each week, which would vary based on the plant’s natural history. In the previous example of purple dead-nettle, he may inform the player that since the species is not native to the island and it grows aggressively, there is no harm in harvesting it. In contrast, milkweeds have important value to monarchs in addition to their values to humans, so he will only buy two clumps per week. There could be similar limits on fish, bugs, and sea creatures bought at Nook’s Cranny. Kapp’n could also ask players not to overharvest plants like glowing moss and climbing vines on his tours. There could be “black market” possibilities if players wanted to disregard the land ethic, potentially through Redd, the shady art dealer, but there should be consequences to making that choice. Perhaps if players choose to overexploit species and resources, the next three islands they visit will be completely barren.

While again, I am not disparaging the videogame for its departures from the biological sciences, I do believe that drawing from conservation biology fields such as restoration ecology offers a number of fun opportunities for the game to explore. For example, when island restoration ecologists want to attract certain species of seabirds back to a historic nesting site, they will sometimes use decoys of the bird species [16]. This strategy was first attempted with puffins off the coast of Maine (USA) in 1973, but has since been used to attract many other seabird species. Decoys and other social attraction methods (such as acoustic playbacks) tend to work because more than 95% of seabirds are colonial, so they are attracted to breeding sites where there are conspecifics. Among the many fashion options in ACNH there are animal hats. If players wore seabird hats, they could act as a decoy to attract seabird residents to the island. Ideally, these hats would not become available to the player until the island is adequately restored. Seabirds make important contributions to habitat quality, such as bringing marine nutrients to an island. Perhaps once a seabird has been established as an island resident, new flowers and “bugs” could be unlocked in the game. In addition to being a fun challenge in the game, active participation in restoration challenges the false dichotomy between humans and nature. Humans are not separate from nature or inherently harmful to nature; we are nature, and we can be good neighbors with other species.

Finally, I would like the reciprocity and relationship building that the game encourages with the non-player characters to be extended to residents of “resource” islands and to the land itself. It is a little too convenient to simply say that the other islands are uninhabited and therefore players are entitled to all of the islands’ resources. Players could develop these relationships by offering gifts, removing invasive species, or rematriating stolen artifacts. Incorporating these challenges could create even more possibilities consistent with the current game. For example, perhaps when the player removes an invasive species they can learn a DIY recipe for how to use it.

It is evident how thoughtfully the Animal Crossing games are created. At the same time I think it is very unlikely that the colonialist game values were intentional. Our entire world has been and continues to be shaped by colonialism, so it is sometimes difficult to see what surrounds us. The creators of this game have infinite imagination. If they accept the challenge to imagine a world that does not legitimize colonialism, it may help players imagine a better world too.

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Author Contributions

As sole author, all aspects of this work were completed by A.D. Smith.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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