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Creativity at Play: Content-Creators and Micro-Entrepreneurship in 'Animal Crossing: New Horizons'

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Digital games have evolved significantly since their emergence in the 1970s, offering users not only entertainment but also opportunities for creativity, entrepreneurship, and community building. This study explores these dynamics through a case study of Animal Crossing: New Horizons (ACNH) (Nintendo EPD, 2020), focusing specifically on a selected group of prominent content creators active on platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, Twitch, and TikTok. These individuals engage in practices that extend beyond gameplay, including streaming, digital design services, and fan-made merchandise. Drawing on a theoretical framework centred on participatory culture, platformization, and fan labour, the article investigates how ACNH (Nintendo EPD, 2020) supports hybrid models of creativity and monetization within platform economies. Based on qualitative methods —namely document analysis and semi-structured interviews— the study examines how in-game tools and

Los juegos digitales han evolucionado significativamente desde su surgimiento en la década de 1970, ofreciendo a los usuarios no solo entretenimiento, sino también oportunidades para la creatividad, el emprendimiento y la construcción de comunidades. Este estudio explora estas dinámicas a través de un estudio de caso de Animal Crossing: New Horizons (ACNH) (Nintendo EPD, 2020), centrándose específicamente en un grupo seleccionado de creadores de contenido destacados, activos en plataformas como YouTube, Instagram, Twitch y TikTok. Estos individuos desarrollan prácticas que van más allá de la jugabilidad, como el streaming, los servicios de diseño digital y la creación de productos derivados elaborados por fans. A partir de un marco teórico centrado en la cultura participativa, la plataformización y el trabajo de los fans, el artículo investiga cómo ACNH (Nintendo EPD, 2020) sostiene modelos híbridos de creatividad y monetización dentro de

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community infrastructures facilitate expressive and entrepreneurial forms of engagement for this specific profile of players. While not representative of the broader player base, the findings offer insights into how digital games can function as ecosystems where creative labour intersects with micro-entrepreneurship.

Keywords: Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, participatory culture, user-generated content, creative labour, micro-entrepreneurship.*

las economías de plataformas. Basado en métodos cualitativos —en concreto, análisis documental y entrevistas semiestructuradas—, el estudio examina cómo las herramientas del juego y las infraestructuras comunitarias facilitan formas expresivas y emprendedoras de participación para este perfil específico de jugadores. Si bien no es representativo del conjunto de la base de jugadores, los resultados ofrecen una visión de cómo los juegos digitales pueden funcionar como ecosistemas donde el trabajo creativo se entrecruza con la microempresa.

Palabras clave: Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, cultura participativa, contenido generado por usuarios, trabajo creativo, microemprendimiento.*

Digital games have evolved into complex cultural forms that extend far beyond entertainment. Since their emergence in the 1970s, games have developed into immersive environments that blend social interaction, narrative, artistic expression, and increasingly, economic activity. While gaming remains closely associated with leisure, it now also serves as a platform for creativity, entrepreneurship, and community building (Pearce, 2009; Jenkins, 2006b; Consalvo and Begy, 2016; Woodcock and Johnson, 2019).

Central to this transformation is the rise of active fan and play communities, where players engage in customization, modding, and user-generated content production (Postigo, 2007; Banks, 2013; Lamerichs, 2018). These participatory practices blur the boundaries between creators and consumers, enabling players to exercise creative agency. Digital platforms and social media further amplify these dynamics, allowing for co-authorship, community-driven innovation, and monetization through streaming, commissions, and fan-made merchandise (Postigo, 2014; Johnson and Woodcock, 2018; Taylor, 2018).

This article presents an exploratory study of *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (ACNH) (Nintendo EPD, 2020), focusing on how a specific profile of players —prominent content creators active on social media platforms— engage in creative and entrepreneurial practices within the game and its surrounding ecosystems. The research does not aim to generalize findings to the broader ACNH (Nintendo EPD, 2020) player base; rather, it seeks to understand the

experiences and strategies of a visible subset of creators whose activities exemplify the intersections of participatory culture, platformization, and fan labour.

Using qualitative methods, including document analysis and semi-structured interviews, the study investigates how in-game tools and community infrastructures support expressive and monetizable forms of engagement. By examining the motivations, practices, and challenges faced by these creators, the research contributes to ongoing discussions about digital co-creation, micro-entrepreneurship, and the evolving nature of creative labour in platform-based gaming cultures.

The article is divided into three main sections. Co-creation, creativity, and participatory culture are covered in the first section of the article, followed by hybrid models of entrepreneurship, innovation, and creativity in the second, and the presentation and analysis of ACNH (Nintendo EPD, 2020) as a case study in the third.

PARTICIPATORY CULTURE, CREATIVITY, AND CO-CREATION

The idea of participatory culture has been essential to comprehending how media consumers interact with content and with one another since the early 2000s. Low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for making and sharing creations, and a sense of social connection and shared purpose are characteristics of participatory culture, according to Jenkins (2006a, 2006b). This is seen in the rise of active communities around digital games that actively influence the experience, meaning, and even game design, going beyond simple consumption.

Co-creation and creativity exercises can be encouraged by digital games. The close relationship between play and creative thinking has been researched extensively over the years Getzels and Csikszentmihalyi (1976) propose that fosters creative problem-solving and the ability to think outside conventional boundaries. Similarly, Lieberman (1977) and Sternberg (1988) suggest that play activities encourage imaginative thinking and the exploration of make-believe realities. Howard-Jones *et al*. (2002) and Mainemelis and Ronson (2006) further investigated the cognitive benefits of play, highlighting its role in enhancing creative thinking and innovation. Russ *et al*. (1999) provided empirical evidence that play activities contribute to the development of creative skills and confidence in the creative process. On the other hand, Blanco-Herrera *et al*. (2019), Jackson (2012) and Bowman *et al*. (2015) demonstrate that games provide environments where players can experiment with different strategies and solutions, fostering creativity; while Jackson *et al*. (2012) and Hall *et al*. (2019, 2020) evince that playing digital games inspires players to take part in creative endeavours like modding and customization. According to Moffat *et al*. (2017) and Ott and Pozzi (2012), games can even help players develop their creative confidence by letting them experiment with novel ideas. Sundar and Hutton (2010) also emphasized the social aspects of creativity in digital games by highlighting how players collaborate and share their creations within gaming communities. Collectively,

these studies demonstrate that in addition to being entertaining, digital games foster creativity, community building, and co-authorship.

The idea of co-creation captures how players and developers negotiate authorship in these settings. According to Banks and Humphreys (2008), co-creation is a process in which players imaginative input becomes a part of the game's continuous life cycle, expanding its cultural presence beyond the developer's initial intentions, whether via customization, level design, or modding. Similarly, Postigo (2007) highlights how players can influence the game and its community through user-generated content, which frequently blurs the line between official and unofficial production. He builds on this discussion by exploring the ways in which fan labour functions in commercial ecosystems, emphasizing conflicts between corporate control and artistic freedom (2014).

Co-creation also occurs through group practices that influence the larger game ecosystem, in addition to individual acts of customization or creation. Lamerichs (2018) emphasizes how fan communities extend and reinterpret game narratives through textual performances like cosplay, fan fiction, and machinima, frequently questioning conventional interpretations and creating room for different voices and identities. This collaborative aspect emphasizes how authorship in games is a continuous negotiation between developers, players, and communities rather than a set or hierarchical process. Furthermore, conflicts between control and empowerment shape the negotiated realm of digital authorship. As Pearce (2009) shows in her study of emergent player communities, co-creative practices often arise in grassroots, playful settings but can come into conflict with corporate governance and intellectual property regimes. This highlights the ambivalent nature of co-creation, which oscillates between enabling participatory expression and reinforcing platform control over user practices. Taylor's (2006, 2018) work further underscores how performative and aesthetic aspects of play constitute public forms of creative authorship, particularly in live streaming, sports, and social media. These practices transform gameplay into spectator experiences and cultural performances, expanding the reach and significance of player creativity beyond the game itself.

Importantly, the social dimensions of participatory culture are equally central. According to Pearce (2009), emergent communities in games serve as venues for group play, experimentation, and identity development, once players share information, provide criticism, and collaborate on creative projects, influencing customs and procedures in the process. Taylor's (2006, 2018) work on the performative aspects of gaming further points to the ways that play becomes a site of public display and meaning-making, particularly in live streaming, social media sharing, and fan art. Lastowka (2010) points out that the aesthetic and legal dimensions of digital authorship further complicate the boundary between player and producer, as players' creations take on artistic and sometimes contested status.

While participatory practices have often been framed in terms of creativity and community, they also carry economic and entrepreneurial implications. As scholars like Postigo (2014) and Banks (2013) note, co-creation frequently intersects with the logics of platform economies, where visibility, reputation,

and sometimes monetary reward become entangled with creative expression. Although these dynamics will be explored more fully in the next section, it is important to recognize here that participatory culture is not a purely leisure-based or altruistic domain; instead, it increasingly functions within systems of value generation that reward not just play, but productive, innovative, and entrepreneurial forms of engagement.

Altogether, these practices construct a negotiated space of digital authorship, where players' creative agency coexists and interacts with developer intentions and platform constraints. Participatory culture in games enables players to become creative agents, co-authors, and community members, transforming the game into a dynamic site of cultural production. This transformation is made possible by the technical affordances of the game, the social infrastructures of its player base, and the broader media ecosystems in which play unfolds. Understanding these dimensions sets the stage for exploring how creativity in games moves beyond play into micro-entrepreneurial and economic activity, a shift that reflects wider changes in platform-based game cultures.

While participatory culture has often been celebrated for its creative and communal possibilities, it is increasingly shaped by the platform infrastructures that enable, channel, and monetize these practices. As players move between roles of co-creator, performer, and community member, their activities become deeply entangled with platform economies that capitalize on user-generated content, data flows, and affective labour. This transformation sets the stage for understanding how play becomes a site not only of creativity and social connection, but also of labour, commodification, and micro-entrepreneurial opportunity, dynamics explored in the following section on platformization, playbour, and micro-entrepreneurship.

PLATFORMIZATION, *PLAYBOUR*, AND MICRO-ENTREPRENEURSHIP

The social, cultural, and economic dynamics of gaming have been significantly altered by the conversion of digital games into platforms. Games are now platformized ecosystems that encourage ongoing engagement, user-generated content, and complex social networks rather than being isolated products (Nieborg and Poell, 2018; Woodcock and Johnson, 2019). Platformization is the term used to describe the infrastructure change where digital technologies mediate social interaction, data extraction, value generation, and cultural distribution across various scales and sectors (Dijck *et al*., 2018). Through this process, games have become key locations for user participation and have been incorporated into platform economies that are characterized by algorithmic governance, scalability, and modularity.

Players have emerged as important contributors to platform economies in this context, making it harder to distinguish between work, leisure, and entrepreneurship. By explaining how fruitful, frequently unpaid player activities create value for game companies and platforms, the concept of playbour (play

+ labour) encapsulates this fusion (Kücklich, 2005; Scholz, 2013). The cultural and commercial life cycle of games is enhanced by various practices, such as beta testing, community moderation, modding, live streaming, speedrunning, and content creation (Dyer-Witheford and Peuter, 2009; Sotamaa, 2010; Johnson, 2018). Crucially, these actions are not merely optional or lighthearted; rather, they are intricately linked to the platform logics of audience acquisition, monetization, and datafication (Nieborg and Poell, 2018; Woodcock and Johnson, 2019). Fun labour (Terranova, 2000; Bulut, 2015) is a related concept that highlights the emotional and enjoyable aspects of digital labour. Unlike traditional forms of work, fun labour thrives on passion, enjoyment, and community recognition, yet it remains productive within capitalist economies, generating surplus value for platforms and game studios. Central to this is affective labour (Hardt, 1999; Jarrett, 2016), which underpins how player enthusiasm and care become key sources of value. As Bulut (2015) argues, fun labour in gaming involves the extraction of affect, where the enthusiasm and creativity of players become raw material for commercial gain. This highlights the power and profit disparities ingrained in what appear to be voluntary activities, complicating the frequently cheerful discourse of participatory culture.

Indeed, these practices are not without cost. The rise of micro-entrepreneurship in gaming —through monetization strategies like fan merchandise, commissions, and streaming revenue— has introduced new forms of precarity and self-exploitation. As de Peuter (2011) argues, the creative economy often masks exploitative conditions under the guise of autonomy and passion. Many creators operate in environments marked by instability, algorithmic pressure, and emotional exhaustion, where the promise of visibility and income is unevenly distributed.

Srnicek (2017) further critiques platform capitalism as a system that extracts value from user activity while externalizing risk and responsibility. In the case of ACNH (Nintendo EPD, 2020) content creators, this manifests in the expectation to produce regular, engaging content across multiple platforms, often without guaranteed compensation or long-term sustainability. Interviewees like Lex Play and Crossing Channel described content creation as their primary occupation, yet also acknowledged the emotional toll and performance pressure involved in maintaining visibility and relevance.

Laszkiewicz and Kalinska-Kula (2023) highlight how digital creators —especially in influencer and gaming cultures— navigate blurred boundaries between personal identity and professional output. Their work underscores the commodification of authenticity and intimacy, where creators must continuously manage audience expectations, brand partnerships, and algorithmic trends. This dynamic was evident in the interviews, where creators spoke of burnout, content fatigue, and the need to "stay ahead" of platform changes to remain viable.

The growth of micro-entrepreneurship, where participants use their knowledge, creative outputs, and visibility to access financial opportunities, is a significant effect of platformization. This covers activities like making fan merchandise, selling in-game items or mods, providing coaching or customization services, or making money off of gameplay on Twitch, YouTube,

or Patreon (Taylor, 2018; Postigo, 2014; Johnson, 2018). Remarkably, these entrepreneurial endeavours frequently originate from amateur or grassroots communities rather than official job paths, mirroring a wider trend toward what Senft (2008) initially referred to as microcelebrity and what Abidin and Brown (2018) have proposed as microcelebrity cultures across digital media. These practices are not confined to entertainment; they embody forms of self-branding, affective labour, and algorithmic visibility, where success depends on managing authenticity, audience engagement, and platform metrics (Abidin, 2016; Khamis *et al*., 2017).

At the same time, these developments raise critical concerns around precarity, exploitation, and inequality. While some players successfully transform passion into profit, many others encounter the structural asymmetries of platform economies, where a small minority of creators capture disproportionate rewards, and labour conditions are governed by opaque algorithms and shifting platform policies (Woodcock and Johnson, 2019; Johnson, 2018). Moreover, the expectation that players continuously contribute creative labour can normalize work intensification and blur the boundaries between play, work, and identity (Peuter and Dyer-Witheford, 2005; Scholz, 2013).

Crucially, the entrepreneurial opportunities afforded by platformized games are shaped not only by technical affordances but also by social infrastructures. Nieborg and Poell (2018) emphasize how platform logics encourage modularity and scalability, making it possible for niche practices to become marketable products or services. Yet the social infrastructures of gaming, which includes community norms, governance practices, informal economies, and affective attachments, play a decisive role in shaping the kinds of entrepreneurial engagements that emerge (Pearce, 2009; Taylor, 2006; Abidin, 2016). As Jenkins (2013) and Postigo (2014) argue, fan-driven activities are frequently motivated by affective investments and social commitments, yet they also intersect with commercial interests, contributing to the production of cultural and economic value. In addition to the conflicts between autonomy and capture that define modern game cultures, this calls into question the commodification of intimacy, authenticity, and community (Taylor, 2018; Abidin and Brown, 2018).

When combined, the platformization of games, the rise of playbour and fun labour, and the development of micro-entrepreneurship indicate a shift in the cultural economy of digital games, where labour, affect, creativity, and commerce are becoming more and more entwined, presenting both chances for exploitation and chances for empowerment. Since ACNH (Nintendo EPD, 2020) offers a particularly rich case for examining these dynamics —combining practices of creativity, sociality, and entrepreneurship in a highly platformized environment— the following section uses it as a case study to help better understand this shift.

Animal Crossing: New Horizons as a Case Study

Research on digital games as cultural phenomena has increasingly focused on understanding how players use these platforms for economic activity, social interaction, and creativity. Taking this into account, this section is centred on

the presentation of ACNH (Nintendo EPD, 2020) as a case study, focusing how players make use of the community infrastructures, market-like economies, and creative affordances integrated into the game and surrounding online ecosystems. Popularity, adaptable gameplay, and its emergence as a cultural touchstone during a period of heightened social and economic precarity, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, led to the selection of this research object.

The section is structured in four sections. The first introduces the game and its key components, focusing on the features that make it especially relevant for researching creativity and community dynamics. The methods for data collection and analysis, as well as the methodological approach of the empirical research, are contextualized in the second. In the third, results are described and analysed; and in the fourth, and last section findings are discussed in the scope of the theoretical framework, taking into account the broader implications for understanding the intersections of play, creativity, and platform-mediated economies.

'Animal Crossing': 'New Horizons'

The latest game in Nintendo's *Animal Crossing* series, which was first released in 2001 under the creative direction of Katsuya Eguchi and Hisashi Nogami, is ACNH (Nintendo EPD, 2020), which was released in 2020. Players can take on the role of a human newcomer living among anthropomorphic animal villagers in this social simulation series. As a result, the game places more emphasis on daily life than on competition or combat, players are invited to gather resources, fish and garden, make friends with non-player characters (NPCs), and customize their living space. One of the series' distinguishing features is its real-time clock system, which creates a strong sense of immersion and seasonality by synchronizing in-game time with the player's first-life time and calendar.

New Horizons (Nintendo EPD, 2020) adds several new features while expanding on these fundamental mechanics. Interestingly, players now find themselves on a remote island and are entrusted with turning it into a flourishing, personalized community. The crafting system allows for the creation of furniture and tools, while online functionalities enable players to visit each other's islands and share their designs and achievements, and multiplayer play has become a central feature, reflecting Nintendo's increasing focus on social interactivity (MacDonald, 2020).

ACNH (Nintendo EPD, 2020) achieved remarkable commercial success, becoming the second best-selling game on the Nintendo Switch platform (Reynolds, 2024). Its popularity was amplified by the global COVID-19 pandemic, during which it offered a comforting and socially connected experience to players under lockdown (MacDonald, 2020). The combination of routine and freedom in the game is part of its appeal; players create personal objectives and participate in seasonal events, which fosters a sustained engagement with the game world, even though there is no set plot or win condition.

Tom Nook, the enterprising tanuki (Japanese raccoon dog) who manages the player's home loans and island development, is one of the game's most

recognizable NPCs. Nook, who represents themes of debt and capitalism, has grown to be both a beloved and divisive figure within the fan community. Another key figure is Blathers, the museum curator owl, who encourages players to collect and donate fossils, fish, insects, and artworks, tapping into the game's strong focus on collection and curation (Albiges, 2021). These characters add to the game's cyclical rhythms by gradually giving players new tasks and inspiration.

The *Animal Crossing* games, and *New Horizons* (Nintendo EPD, 2020) in particular, promote a thriving culture of player creativity and user-generated content. Players can create intricate scenes that allude to popular culture, artwork, or personal narratives, as well as clothing, interiors, and landscapes, using the in-game customization tools. This ethos of creativity is amplified by online sharing, as players exchange designs, dream codes, and island tours across social media platforms and streaming services. The intersection of gameplay, creativity, and community participation makes ACNH (Nintendo EPD, 2020) a rich site for exploring player agency, identity expression, and digital sociability, themes that will be examined through the empirical research presented in the following sections.

Methods

To assess the creative practices, motivations, and community engagements of ACNH (Nintendo EPD, 2020) players, this exploratory study draws on qualitative methods combining semi-structured interviews and document analysis. The research focuses on eight prominent content producers active across platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, Twitch, and TikTok: Ceomg, Dagnel, Graefromtrippyland, Crossing Channel, Tofupals, Lex Play, Miss_pootsie_crossing, and Dr. Dodo. In this study, a "prominent content producer" is defined as a creator whose output in the ACNH (Nintendo EPD, 2020) ecosystem fulfils at least two of the following: (a) a minimum threshold of subscriber or follower count on a primary platform; (b) sustained publishing activity over time; (c) recognition by the ACNH community (e.g., Reddit mentions, cross-platform citations); and (d) cross-platform presence (i.e., active on more than one streaming or social media outlet). The selection followed purposive sampling criteria aimed at capturing the diversity of creative practices within the ACNH (Nintendo EPD, 2020) ecosystem. The final sample balanced creators differing in content format (video essays, tutorials, aesthetic showcases), audience scale (micro- to mid-tier creators), and platform emphasis (YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, Twitch). The inclusion of these eight creators was guided by their sustained activity, visibility across fan networks, and representativeness of the main creative subcultures observed during preliminary mapping.

To provide a clearer overview of the empirical data collected, the following table summarizes key characteristics of the eight ACNH content creators interviewed for this study. The table outlines the platforms they use, the stylistic focus of their content, their monetization strategies, and the nature of their community engagement. This comparative snapshot highlights the diversity

of creative and entrepreneurial practices among prominent ACNH creators and supports the thematic analysis presented in the subsequent sections.

Table 1. Summary of interviewed ACNH content creators

Creator	Platform(s) Used	Content Style	Monetization Strategies	Community Engagement
Ceomg	YouTube, Instagram	Cozy aesthetics; viewer-submitted island tours	YouTube monetization; brand collaborations	Soft commentary; community curation
Dagnel	YouTube	Tutorials; optimization guides	Ad revenue; affiliate links; memberships	Expert–novice dynamic; algorithm-aware scheduling
Graefromtrippyland	Instagram	Anti-aesthetic builds; chaotic terraforming	Limited monetization	Disruptive design; visual experimentation
Crossing Channel	YouTube	News updates; speculation; fan polls	Ad revenue; memberships	Community voice amplification; timely updates
Tofupals	Instagram, TikTok	Pastel-toned reels; cozycore themes	Brand collaborations; design commissions	Emotional support; calm space creation
Lex Play	YouTube	Narrative builds; spatial storytelling	YouTube monetization; community commissions	Story-driven engagement; long-form content
Miss_pootsie_crossing	Instagram	Lifestyle decor; seasonal outfits	Sponsorships; affiliate partnerships	Aspirational content; influencer branding
Dr. Dodo	TikTok	Villager home makeovers; whimsical renovations	TikTok monetization; commissions	Character storytelling; lighthearted commentary

Source: Own elaboration.

The eight online interviews were conducted via Zoom, in September 2021, with ACNH content creators, selected for their visibility and influence within the community across platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and Twitch. The participants were Ceomg, Dagnel, Graefromtrippyland, Crossing Channel, Tofupals, Lex Play, Miss_pootsie_crossing, and Dr. Dodo. The interviews' script explored five thematic blocks: motivations for becoming content creators; content production practices (including platforms used, types of content, and time commitment); the economic and artistic dimensions of their work; relationships with the *Animal Crossing* fandom; and perceptions of the game's relevance and their future as creators. Sample questions included: What motivated you to become a content creator? What platforms do you use to share content? Do you earn economic benefits from your work?, and What are your plans as a creator?

Each interview lasted between 30 minutes and one hour, was recorded with the participants' permission, and was then verbatim transcribed and subjected to a thematic analysis.

In April 2025, a document analysis was conducted to complement the interviews. This involved a systematic examination of the creators' output across YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, X [previously Twitter], and Twitch, including approximately forty videos and twenty-five social media posts, as well as channel descriptions and livestream chat interactions. Table 2 presents an overview of selected ACNH (Nintendo EPD, 2020) content creators.

Table 2. Overview of selected ACNH content creators

Creator	Key Features / Content Style	Thematic Focus	Creative Practices	Audience Engagement	Platform Example
Ceomg	Dream tours, calm commentary, cozy aesthetics	Cottagecore, kidcore	Curating community islands, showcasing trends	Interactive, invites participation	YouTube: "Dream Address Tour - Cozy Cottagecore Island"; viewer-submitted island tours
Dagnel	Tutorials, optimization, glitches, speed strategies	Efficiency, mastery, progression	Systems mastery, mechanical experimentation	Expert–novice teaching	YouTube: "How to Get Infinite Bells in ACNH"; tutorial videos on villager hunting and resource optimization
Graefromtrippyland	Surreal, psychedelic, chaotic island designs	Surrealism, maximalism, anti-aesthetic	Experimental design, norm-breaking	Appeals to alternative/ countercultural players	Instagram/ Tumblr: surreal island builds and "trippy" villager photos
Crossing Channel	News updates, speculation, humour, commentary	Timeliness, community excitement, fandom events	News mediation, community amplification	Parasocial, friendly authority	YouTube: "ACNH June Update Predictions"; fan polls and event summaries
Tofupals	Calming, pastel visuals, soft aesthetic posts/videos	Cozycore, comfort, gentle escapism	Mood curation, emotional atmosphere	Creates gentle, nonjudgmental space	Instagram: soft pastel island tours; TikTok ASMR-style clips

Creator	Key Features / Content Style	Thematic Focus	Creative Practices	Audience Engagement	Platform Example
Lex Play	Narrative builds, emotional stories, character focus	Memory, nostalgia, community, storytelling	Spatial storytelling, anthropomorphizing villagers	Invites emotional engagement	YouTube: "Building a Storybook Forest for Fauna"; long-form videos blending gameplay and narration
Miss_pootsie_ crossing	High-polish, aesthetic perfection, Instagram reels	Beauty, design perfection, fashion, decor	Visual curation, meticulous staging	Aspirational, offers visual inspiration	Instagram reels on seasonal decor; coordinated outfit posts
Dr. Dodo	Memes, humour, satire, fandom critique	Humour, absurdity, player frustrations	Meme creation, rapid response to fandom trends	Highly participatory, in-jokes	Twitter/ Instagram/ TikTok memes about villager drama

Source: Own elaboration.

The analysis focused on observable patterns in tone, visual aesthetics, narrative structure, thematic focus, and audience engagement strategies, reflecting each creator's distinctive style —for instance, cozy and calming content (Ceomg, Tofupals), optimization and tutorial videos (Dagnel), surreal and experimental builds (Graefromtrippyland), narrative-driven storytelling (Lex Play), high-polish aesthetic showcases (Miss_pootsie_crossing), news and community updates (Crossing Channel), and humour— and meme-based content (Dr. Dodo). By comparing these outputs with creators' self-reported practices, the document analysis enabled triangulation and provided insight into how ACNH content is produced, consumed, and circulated across different subcultures within the fan community.

Data Analysis

In accordance with Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase methodology, thematic analysis was used to examine the empirical data, which included semi-structured interviews and document analysis. Codes were initially generated inductively from the transcripts and documents, capturing recurrent patterns in creative intent, self-presentation, and platform use. Through iterative comparison and clustering, these codes were grouped into three overarching themes: aesthetic and emotional curation, systems mastery and optimization, and experimental and narrative play; which represented the most salient intersections between creativity, labour, and platform engagement. This approach made it possible to identify recurring trends in the way ACNH (Nintendo EPD, 2020) content producers interact with the game, audience, and platform infrastructures.

The empirical data included both interview transcripts and creator-produced content. The following table (Table 3) presents a summary of observed patterns in content style, thematic focus, creative practices, and audience engagement, drawn from the document analysis. These observations provide a visual overview of how each creator's outputs reflect distinct approaches to creativity, community interaction, and cultural positioning, and serve as a bridge to the thematic analysis that follows.

Table 3. Document analysis insights of ACNH content creators

Creator	Platform / Content Style	Document Analysis Insights
Ceomg	YouTube – Dream tours, cozy aesthetics	Consistent pastel/natural visuals; soft, calming narration; emphasizes community participation; reinforces cozy, inviting mood
Dagnel	YouTube – Tutorials, optimization, glitches	Step-by-step guides; analytical tone; clear visual demonstrations; emphasizes efficiency and mastery; engages viewers in learning
Graefromtrippyland	Instagram/Tumblr – Surreal, psychedelic island builds	Bold, clashing colours; chaotic layouts; experimental and norm-breaking; appeals to countercultural audiences
Crossing Channel	YouTube – News, commentary, humour	Rapid-response content; authoritative yet friendly tone; blends humour with updates; engages community via polls and speculation
Tofupals	Instagram/TikTok – Calming, pastel posts/ videos	Soft, immersive visuals; mood curation; gentle, non-judgmental interaction; emphasizes comfort and escapism
Lex Play	YouTube – Narrative builds, emotional stories	Story-driven content with strong narrative arcs; anthropomorphizes villagers; nostalgic, emotional engagement; invites audience reflection
Miss_pootsie_ crossing	Instagram – High-polish, aesthetic reels	Meticulously staged visuals; aspirational aesthetic; blends game design with fashion/lifestyle cues; visually inspirational for audience
Dr. Dodo	Twitter/Instagram/ TikTok – Memes, humour, satire	Fast-paced humour; reactive to trends; engages community in in-jokes; satirical commentary on game mechanics and fandom culture

Source: Own elaboration.

Each theme reflects a distinct mode of creative labour, revealing how players transform leisure into entrepreneurial activity within platformized environments. While these themes emerged specifically from the practices of ACNH (Nintendo EPD, 2020) content creators, they are not exclusive to this community. In fact, they may be transposable to other game cultures, particularly those that support customization, content creation, and social sharing.

For example, narrative play and spatial storytelling are widely observed in sandbox games like Minecraft or The Sims, where players construct immersive worlds and share them through streaming or fan fiction. This aligns with Pearce's (2009) concept of "communities of play", which emphasizes emergent storytelling and collaborative meaning-making in virtual worlds, and with Jenkins' (2006b) work on participatory culture and fan-authored narratives.

Lamerichs (2018) further illustrates how fans extend game narratives through intermedial practices such as cosplay and machinima.

Systems mastery is a common theme in competitive or strategy-based games such as *Pokémon*, *League of Legends*, or *Stardew Valley*, where optimization guides and tutorials are central to community knowledge exchange. Johnson (2018) explores how players engage with game mechanics to produce expertise and value, while Taylor (2018) shows how streamers perform mastery to attract and retain audiences in live streaming environments.

Similarly, aesthetic curation is prevalent in lifestyle and simulation games like *The Sims*, *Dreamlight Valley*, or *Skate*, where visual design and mood-setting are monetized through influencer branding and social media engagement. Abidin (2016) and Khamis *et al*. (2017) describe how influencers curate affective and aesthetic personas to build visibility and brand loyalty, a dynamic clearly reflected in the practices of ACNH (Nintendo EPD, 2020) creators.

These thematic modes of creative labour also correlate with broader patterns of fan labour and audience interaction. Postigo (2014) discusses how fan labour is structured and monetized within socio-technical architectures, while Walsdorff (2022) examines the shift from unpaid modding to reimbursed creative work, highlighting the precarity of digital labour. Steinberg, Zhang, and Mukherjee (2024) argue that platform capitalism governs not only technical affordances but also cultural logics of visibility and engagement, shaping how creators navigate algorithmic pressures. Huang and Morozov (2025) further show how streamers manage affect and scheduling to sustain promotional value, a strategy mirrored in the branding and audience engagement tactics of ACNH (Nintendo EPD, 2020) creators.

Aesthetic and Emotional Curation

Several creators, such as Ceomg, Tofupals, and Miss_pootsie_crossing, center their content around visual aesthetics, emotional ambiance, and mood curation. Cozycore and cottagecore themes, gentle colour schemes, and an emphasis on creating cosy, immersive spaces are characteristics of their work. These content producers frequently refer to their work as a type of digital care, providing viewers with a kind, accepting environment for inspiration and rest. For example, Tofupals produces pastel-toned Instagram reels and relaxing TikToks that depict morning routines and tranquillity. In her interview, she emphasized the importance of "creating a calm space for people to unwind", highlighting the affective labour embedded in her content. Similarly, Ceomg's YouTube channel showcases viewer-submitted islands with soft commentary and cozy aesthetics, positioning her as a tastemaker in the cozy gaming niche. As Ceomg noted, "lots of people tell me my videos have helped them", framing her practice as emotional support for some players. These creators monetize their aesthetic labour through brand collaborations, digital design commissions, and platform monetization tools. Miss_pootsie_crossing, for instance, curates high-polish Instagram content that blends ACNH (Nintendo EPD, 2020) with lifestyle influencer culture, offering seasonal decor inspiration and coordinated outfit posts. She described her motivation as "wanting to make my mark in the world… even if it was just in

the world of Instagram and Animal Crossing", revealing how identity formation and aesthetic labour intertwine. Her aspirational content attracts sponsorships and affiliate partnerships, illustrating how aesthetic curation becomes a viable form of micro-entrepreneurship.

Systems Mastery and Optimization

Creators such as Dagnel and Crossing Channel exemplify a more strategic and mechanical engagement with ACNH (Nintendo EPD, 2020). Their content includes tutorials, optimization guides, and update speculation, reflecting a deep understanding of the game's systems. These creators adopt an expert–novice dynamic, positioning themselves as guides who help others navigate the game's complexities. Viewers can learn how to maximize efficiency, take advantage of glitches, and optimize island layouts from Dagnel's YouTube videos, like *How Fast Can You Become A MILLIONAIRE in Animal Crossing New Horizons?* In his interview, he defined his job as "teaching people how to play smarter" and stressed how crucial it is to stay ahead of algorithmic trends in order to stay visible. Affiliate links, memberships, and YouTube ad revenue are all part of his revenue-generating strategy. Dagnel explained that "reading people's comments brings me a great deal of joy", showing how expertise and community affirmation fuel his labour. Crossing Channel, meanwhile, acts as a community news hub, producing timely content on game updates, speculation, and fan polls. His videos, like Big *News JUST Announced For Animal Crossing Players!*, are designed to capture community excitement and set the discourse agenda. He described his work as "amplifying the community's voice", while also acknowledging the entrepreneurial pressures of content scheduling and audience retention. Crossing Channel described YouTube as "my full-time job", underscoring the professionalization of fan labour within platform economies. These creators exemplify knowledge entrepreneurship, turning gameplay expertise into monetizable content that serves both educational and entertainment functions.

The practices of ACNH (Nintendo EPD, 2020) content creators —particularly those involving aesthetic curation, emotional ambiance, and platform-based branding— are deeply embedded within broader trends in influencer culture. While this connection has been noted, it warrants further theoretical development. Chou *et al.* (2022) provide a valuable framework for understanding how value co-creation in livestreaming environments shapes consumer experience and influences continued engagement. Their study emphasizes how streamers simulate immersive and emotionally resonant experiences through affective performance, interactivity, and strategic visibility —elements that are central to sustaining audience loyalty and platform relevance.

These dynamics are clearly reflected in the branding and scheduling practices of ACNH (Nintendo EPD, 2020) creators, who curate cozy, aspirational, or narrative-driven content while maintaining a consistent presence across platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok. Their work exemplifies the convergence of fan labour, influencer branding, and micro-entrepreneurship,

where creative expression is tightly interwoven with audience management and monetization strategies.

This convergence aligns with the concept of microcelebrity (Senft, 2008; Abidin, 2016), which describes how individuals cultivate public personas through ongoing self-presentation, audience interaction, and algorithmic visibility. ACNH (Nintendo EPD, 2020) creators engage in microcelebrity labour by crafting emotionally engaging content, responding to followers, and adapting their aesthetic and narrative styles to platform trends. These practices are not merely expressive but are also forms of affective labour (Hardt, 1999; Jarrett, 2016), where emotional investment and relational engagement become productive forces within platform economies.

Moreover, the creators' interactions with their audiences often involve parasocial relationships —one-sided but emotionally meaningful connections that simulate intimacy and familiarity (Horton and Wohl, 1956; Abidin and Brown, 2018). These relationships are cultivated through personalized commentary, live chats, and community polls, and are instrumental in building brand loyalty and sustaining engagement. As such, the creative labour of ACNH (Nintendo EPD, 2020) content creators must be understood not only in terms of gameplay or fandom, but also within the broader context of platform-mediated influencer culture, where visibility, affect, and authenticity are commodified and strategically managed.

Experimental and Narrative Play

A third thematic cluster includes creators like Graefromtrippyland, Lex Play, and Dr. Dodo, who use ACNH (Nintendo EPD, 2020) as a platform for artistic experimentation, storytelling, and satire. Their content challenges dominant aesthetics and explores the game's potential for narrative and cultural critique. Graefromtrippyland produces different island builds that defy conventional design norms. Her Instagram posts feature clashing colours, chaotic terraforming; in her interview, she described her work as "anti-aesthetic", aimed at disrupting the perfectionism of mainstream ACNH (Nintendo EPD, 2020) content. She added, "I learnt that if you can market yourself well you can do anything", linking her experimental ethos to entrepreneurial self-reliance. Lex Play constructs emotionally driven narratives through spatial storytelling. Her YouTube series, such as "Ideas for your island", blends gameplay with narration, anthropomorphizing villagers and crafting themed environments that reflect memory and nostalgia. She noted that "it's not just about building —it's about telling a story, creating a world that feels alive". Her monetization includes long-form YouTube content and community commissions. Lex Play reflected that "through my content creation, I've been able to work alongside GUCCI, Disney, ColourPop", illustrating how narrative creativity can open professional pathways. Dr. Dodo specializes in home makeovers for ACNH (Nintendo EPD, 2020) villagers, using interior design as a form of character storytelling. Her TikTok videos showcase whimsical, themed renovations that reflect each villager's personality, often accompanied by lighthearted commentary. She referred to her work as "bringing out the soul of each home" and her content's charm, originality, and consistency have helped it

build a devoted following. As she explained, "I love it when people tell me they're inspired after watching my videos", highlighting relational creativity as central to her process. These creators serve as examples of how creative experimentation and narrative innovation can be successful business tactics, particularly when niche audiences value uniqueness and authenticity.

Cross-Cutting Dynamics

Across all three themes, several cross-cutting dynamics emerged that further illuminate the entrepreneurial dimensions of ACNH (Nintendo EPD, 2020) content creation. The first is creative labour and time investment. Time commitment ranged from part-time hobbyists to full-time creators. Lex Play and Crossing Channel described content creation as their primary occupation, while others like Tofupals balanced it with other work or studies. As Lex Play explained, "I'm a full-time YouTuber now… it's been an enlightening and inspiring process", highlighting how content creation can evolve into a sustainable career path. Crossing Channel similarly described YouTube as "my full-time job", situating his practice within the broader gig economy of platformized labour. The second is platform use and monetization, which reveals that YouTube and Instagram were the most popular platforms, although creators also used TikTok, Twitch, Ko-fi, and Etsy, and that monetization strategies include commissions, sponsorships, ad revenue, and merchandise sales. Since all creators stressed the value of community, the third is community engagement. Many described their audiences as sources of emotional support and inspiration, and a number highlighted the friendships and partnerships that developed as a result of creating content. As Tofupals noted, "I've met a lot of friends and have started a shop and all of this started with Animal Crossing art", illustrating how creative practice and community connection intertwine. Navigating platform economies is the fourth cross-cutting dynamic. Creators were well aware of algorithmic pressures, content trends, and the necessity of maintaining visibility. Their branding strategies, content formats, and production rhythms were influenced by this awareness.

Collectively, these results show how ACNH (Nintendo EPD, 2020) serves as a platform for micro-entrepreneurial experimentation in addition to being a place for play and creativity. Creators use the game's affordances and community infrastructures to increase their visibility, make money, and develop digital careers —whether through creative storytelling, strategic mastery, or aesthetic curation. These practices are a reflection of larger changes in platform-based economies, where affective labour, entrepreneurial aspirations, and creative expression are increasingly coming together. Crucially, they also draw attention to the conflicts and possibilities that occur when leisure turns into work and when monetization and algorithmic visibility collide with individual expression. In the section that follows, these dynamics are examined in more detail and these empirical findings are placed within the larger theoretical frameworks of playbour, platform governance, and the unstable circumstances of digital micro-entrepreneurship.

Discussion

The findings presented in the previous section illustrate how ACNH (Nintendo EPD, 2020) can operate as a hybrid space where creativity, community, and commerce intersect. ACNH content creators turn gameplay into a form of cultural production that is intricately woven into platform infrastructures through aesthetic curation, systems mastery, and narrative experimentation. This section highlights the opportunities and conflicts that occur when leisure turns into work by placing these practices within larger theoretical discussions on platformization, micro-entrepreneurship, and participatory culture.

Digital games foster creativity through both individual customization and social co-creation. Individual customization refers to personal, player-driven modifications within the game —such as designing island layouts, creating outfits, or decorating interiors in ACNH (Nintendo EPD, 2020). These practices are often solitary and reflect personal aesthetic choices. In contrast, social co-creation involves collaborative activities that extend beyond the game itself, including streaming, multiplayer events, and community challenges. For example, creators like Crossing Channel and Lex Play engage in co-creative practices by producing content that responds to community feedback, incorporates viewer suggestions, or facilitates shared storytelling experiences. These forms of co-creation are inherently social and rely on interaction with audiences and other creators.

The creative practices of ACNH (Nintendo EPD, 2020) content creators exemplify the dynamics of participatory culture as outlined by Jenkins (2006a, 2006b). Players are not merely consumers but active co-creators who shape the aesthetic, social, and economic life of the game. Whether through designing dream islands, producing tutorials, or crafting narrative builds, creators exercise agency and imagination in ways that extend the game's cultural footprint. However, as the data shows, this creativity is increasingly entangled with platform logics that reward visibility, consistency, and engagement metrics. The shift from play to performance, and from hobby to hustle, reflects the broader platformization of creative labour (Nieborg and Poell, 2018).

Thus participatory practices in games are not only creative but also economic. The concepts of playbour and funlabour help illuminate this intersection. Playbour —a term coined by Kücklich (2005)— refers to the fusion of play and labour, where players' activities generate value for platforms and game companies, often without formal compensation. Funlabour, as discussed by Terranova (2000) and Bulut (2015), highlights the affective and enjoyable aspects of digital labour, where passion and emotional investment become productive forces within capitalist economies.

These dynamics were evident in the interview data. Creators like Tofupals and Miss_pootsie_crossing described their work as emotionally rewarding but also demanding, noting the pressure to maintain a consistent aesthetic and engage with followers across multiple platforms. Their content —centred on cozy visuals and emotional ambiance— embodies affective labour, where emotional resonance and relational engagement are central to audience retention and monetization. Similarly, Dagnel and Crossing Channel emphasized the strategic aspects of

content creation, including algorithmic visibility and audience management, underscoring how playbour operates through knowledge production and performance.

Huang and Morozov (2025) highlight how live streamers strategically manage affect and visibility to sustain promotional value within platform economies. This involves not only curating emotionally resonant content —such as humour, intimacy, or aspirational aesthetics— but also maintaining a consistent presence across streaming schedules, social media platforms, and audience interactions. These affective performances are central to building parasocial relationships and cultivating brand loyalty, which in turn drive monetization through sponsorships, donations, and algorithmic amplification. A similar pattern is evident among ACNH (Nintendo EPD, 2020) content creators, who carefully design their online personas, align their content with seasonal or trending themes, and engage with their audiences through comments, live chats, and community polls. Their branding and scheduling practices reflect a calculated effort to remain visible and emotionally engaging in a competitive digital landscape, where promotional value is increasingly tied to affective labour and platform responsiveness.

This transformation is also particularly evident in the emergence of micro-entrepreneurial practices. Creators like Miss_pootsie_crossing and Dagnel monetize their content through sponsorships, ad revenue, and commissions, while others like Lex Play and Dr. Dodo cultivate niche audiences through storytelling. These practices align with what Abidin (2016) and Khamis *et al.* (2017) describe as microcelebrity labour: a form of self-branding that blends authenticity, affective labour, and algorithmic visibility. The quality of the content is not the only factor that determines the creators' ability to make money; they also need to be able to manage platform dynamics, establish parasocial connections, and stay active across a variety of channels. The results also highlight platform-based entrepreneurship's ambivalence. While some creators have been successful in making money from their passion, others are still in a precarious position because of the emotional demands of continuously producing content, changing audience interests, and algorithmic volatility. This illustrates the inequities of platform economies, in which the majority of creators function in an environment of uncertainty and self-exploitation, while a small number of creators receive high rewards (Woodcock and Johnson, 2019; Scholz, 2013). Here, the idea of playbour (Kücklich, 2005) is especially helpful since it illustrates how play and work are intertwined and how, in digital capitalism, enjoyment itself becomes a productive force.

As Steinberg *et al.* (2024) argue, platform capitalism not only structures the technical affordances of digital media —such as modular design, algorithmic governance, and data-driven personalization— but also shapes the cultural logics through which visibility, engagement, and monetization are pursued and valued. These logics create a competitive and performative environment in which creators must continuously adapt their content, branding, and interaction strategies to remain relevant within platform ecosystems. In the case of ACNH (Nintendo EPD, 2020) content creators, this manifests in practices such as optimizing upload schedules, curating aesthetic styles to match trending themes,

and leveraging cross-platform presence to maximize reach and revenue. Their experiences reflect the broader dynamics of platform capitalism, where creative labour is increasingly mediated by infrastructural constraints and commercial imperatives, and where success is often contingent on navigating opaque algorithms and fluctuating audience expectations.

Moreover, the study highlights the role of social infrastructures in shaping entrepreneurial outcomes. Community norms, fan cultures, and collaborative networks provide emotional support, creative inspiration, and informal mentorship. These relational dynamics are crucial for preserving the resilience and engagement of creators, but they also run the risk of becoming commodities in platform logics that prioritize engagement and virality. According to Pearce (2009) and Taylor (2018), the commodification of intimacy and authenticity raises serious questions about the ethics and sustainability of digital creative labour.

ACNH (Nintendo EPD, 2020) offers a compelling case for understanding how digital games function as ecosystems of co-creation, cultural expression, and economic activity. Different types of micro-entrepreneurship are made possible by the game's open-ended design, active fan base, and platform affordances. The way these opportunities are influenced by more significant structural factors, like platform governance, algorithmic control, and market pressures, complicates the idea that a participatory culture is only empowering. The findings call for a deeper understanding of how players navigate the risks and rewards of platform-mediated entrepreneurship as well as the ways that creativity, labour, and value intersect among contemporary game cultures.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This exploratory study investigated how a specific group of ACNH (Nintendo EPD, 2020) content creators engage in creative and entrepreneurial practices within platformized gaming environments. Through qualitative analysis of interviews and online content, the research identified three distinct modes of creative labour —narrative experimentation, systems mastery, and aesthetic curation— alongside cross-cutting dynamics such as affective labour, monetization strategies, and community engagement.

Rather than generalizing across the entire ACNH (Nintendo EPD, 2020) player base, the study focused intentionally on prominent content creators active on social media platforms. Their experiences offer insight into how digital games can serve as hybrid spaces where creativity, community, and commerce intersect. However, these findings are illustrative rather than representative, and should be understood within the context of platform visibility and creator influence.

The results align with and extend earlier research in online game communities. For example, Pearce's (2009) work on emergent player cultures emphasizes the importance of grassroots creativity and community norms in shaping digital play. The creators in this study similarly rely on informal networks, shared aesthetics, and collaborative feedback loops to sustain their visibility and

engagement. Pearce's notion of "communities of play" is reflected in the way ACNH (Nintendo EPD, 2020) creators build emotional connections with their audiences and co-create meaning through shared narratives and aesthetics.

At the same time, the findings resonate with Finja Walsdorff's (2022) analysis of modding and monetization, which highlights the precarious transition from unpaid fan labour to reimbursed creative work. ACNH (Nintendo EPD, 2020) creators navigate similar tensions, balancing passion-driven content with the pressures of algorithmic performance and monetization. Walsdorff's concept of "precarious playbour" is evident in the creators' accounts of burnout, content fatigue, and the need to maintain visibility across multiple platforms. These dynamics underscore the ambivalence of platform-based entrepreneurship, where creative autonomy is often constrained by commercial and technical infrastructures.

By situating the findings within these broader scholarly conversations, the study contributes to a growing body of literature on the intersections of digital labour, participatory culture, and platform capitalism. It reinforces the view that creative labour in gaming is not merely playful or expressive, but deeply embedded in systems of value extraction, visibility management, and emotional investment.

Future research should expand beyond this specific creator profile to include comparative analyses across different game genres, platform ecosystems, and cultural contexts. Longitudinal studies could also illuminate how creators' trajectories evolve, particularly in relation to shifting platform policies, audience dynamics, and economic sustainability. As digital games continue to blur the boundaries between leisure and labour, it becomes increasingly important to critically examine the conditions under which creative work is produced, valued, and monetized.

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