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Places, people, practices, and play: *Animal Crossing New Horizons* here and there

Peter Hourdequin [a*], Beatrice Hughes [b]

[a] *Tokoha University, Shizuoka, Japan*
[b] *University of Gloucestershire, U.K.*

🎏 Item Details

🔑 Key points

- **What is this?** It's a piece of writing exploring the development of a small international ecolinguistics pilot project that used *Animal Crossing New Horizons* (ACNH) as a vehicle to connect university students and researchers in conversation about issues of environmental and community sustainability.
- **Why did you make it?** We wanted to share and make sense of what we tried, what we learned, and we wanted to explore ideas for possible future iterations.
- **Who is it for?** People interested in exploring the use ACNH, or similar games, as a vehicle for meaningful discussion about environmental and social issues.

Tweet synopsis

Animal Crossing: New Horizons offers the opportunity to think about environmental issues locally and internationally, through the shared experience of developing a thriving island paradise. This article investigates the places, processes, and ecosophies represented in the interactions of student and faculty participants in a unique international collaboration around the game.
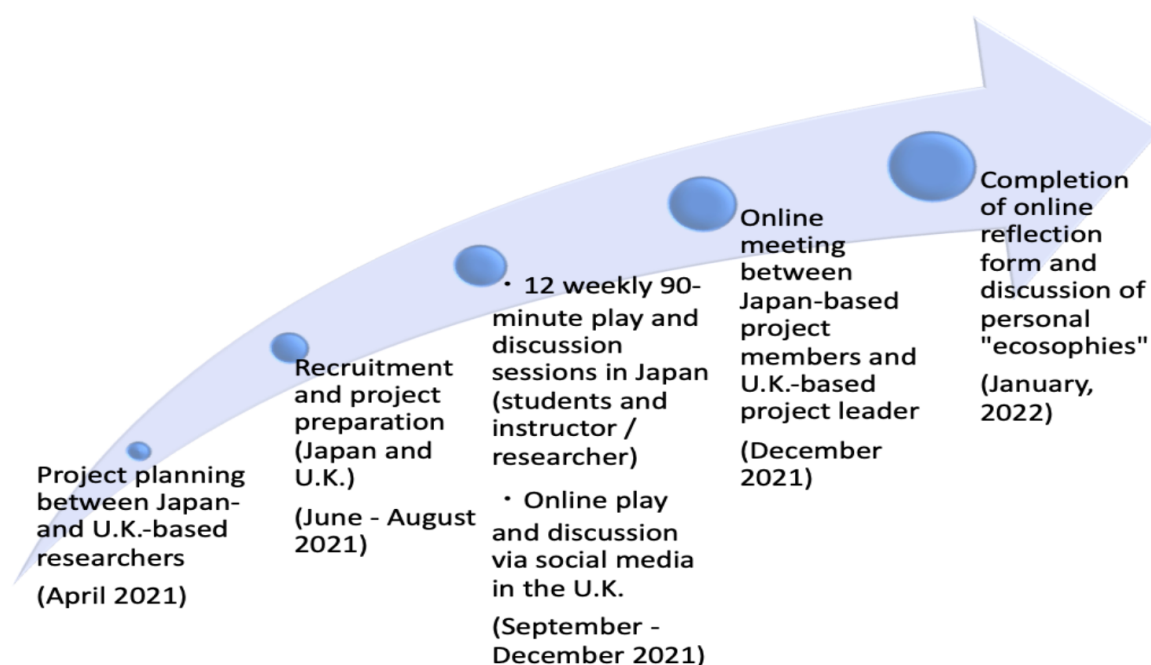
View at the LLP Playground: https://llpjournal.org/2022/09/22/hourdequin-hughes-ecolinguistics-acnh.html

* Corresponding author. *Email address:* pfh@sz.tokoha-u.ac.jp

Introduction

This playground piece shares the perspectives, purposes, and practices of two researchers in two different places who connected their interests in ecolinguistics with students through a pilot project around *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (ACNH)-a digital simulation game for Nintendo Switch. One author is an American who is a university instructor of English based in Shizuoka, Japan, and the other is a British postgraduate researcher—a Ph.D. candidate—based in The Cotswolds, U.K.

This collaboration began as an email correspondence between the authors in April 2021 and progressed to the completion of a pilot project between September 2021 and January 2022. Because of varying COVID-19 restrictions at our respective universities, the nature of the work with students on each side was different: in Japan, students met to play and discuss the game face-to-face on a weekly basis, whereas students in the U.K. played the game in their respective homes and shared and discussed issues online. At the end of the project, the Japan-based students and project leader teleconnected with the U.K.-side project leader on Zoom and via ACNH's "dream island" function for island introductions and discussions about the values we had sought to design into our respective islands. All students-participants then completed an online survey.

Project planning between Japan- and U.K.-based researchers (April 2021)

Recruitment and project preparation (Japan and U.K.) (June - August 2021)

· 12 weekly 90-minute play and discussion sessions in Japan (students and instructor / researcher)

· Online play and discussion via social media in the U.K. (September - December 2021)

Online meeting between Japan-based project members and U.K.-based project leader (December 2021)

Completion of online reflection form and discussion of personal "ecosophies" (January, 2022)

Figure 1: *A timeline of the international collaboration and pilot project described in this paper.*

This paper seeks to explore the unfolding of our collaborative pilot project around ACNH from our two place-based perspectives. Therefore, after an introduction to the theoretical background and intellectual underpinnings of our project, we will introduce our respective locales and describe the people, purposes, and practices that were connected to this collaboration in each place. Finally, we will reflect upon what we see as the meaningfulness of our interventions and collaborations, and share some key takeaways for other educators who might want to engage in similar projects.

Background

The internet has connected people (like us) across the globe and allowed for the growth and development of a wide variety of online "affinity spaces" (Gee & Hayes, 2011) in myriad virtual worlds, social networks, and on various platforms. And while online game-based affinity spaces certainly have

great value for cross-cultural and transnational learning, the distributed nature of the internet also means that many, if not most of these online "spaces" may be agnostic to the environmental concerns of specific locales. That is, the places that participants connect *from*, and the local concerns of those places may tend to be ignored by users. Many participants may join these networks as disembodied nodes making distant online "connections" rather than place-based community members sharing local histories, resources, and responsibilities. This problem is one thing we wanted to explore solutions to in our project.

Internet-enabled global networks have been growing for the past several decades, connecting people across great distances in positive ways, while also leading to well-documented psychological and social problems (see, e.g. Turkle, 2017). Exacerbating this situation in many places, COVID-19 pandemic policies have led to further atomization of some communities at the *local* level. In higher education contexts like ours, not only were university students and faculty unable to engage in study abroad during the pandemic, many individuals were isolated from their own local campuses and communities. The real social and psychological consequences of pandemic-related policies on university students and faculty communities and individuals' mental health has been a growing concern for us and many others (see, e.g., Chen & Lucock, 2022; Kita, et. al, 2022; Noda. et. al, 2021).

Given our aforementioned concern for the devaluation of place in the internet age and for the place-based community atomizing practices that took hold during the COVID-19 pandemic, we've decided to write about our experiences of this project during in a way that foregrounds commonalities in our respective "ecosophies" and the local practices we were able to engaged in with students in our respective locations.

"Ecosophy" is a term with roots in the deep ecology movement, referring to an individual's philosophy of ecological and social equilibrium. Drawing upon foundational work by Naess (1953), Drengson (2001) noted the importance of comparing ecosophies through the following means:

1. Cross cultural research;
2. Comparative studies and cultural exchanges, for example in humanities and arts;
3. Negotiated frameworks for international cooperation based on trade, disaster relief, etc.
4. Grass roots movements and NGOs such as the peace, social justice, and environmental movements;
5. Cooperative scientific and technological studies and undertakings, such as atmospheric research;
6. International networks with the development of communications, jet transport, email, the WEB, and so on. (This is not an exhaustive list.) (p.3).

Today, there are many domains where neoliberal, infinite-growth oriented discourse seems to have co-opted even the most well-intentioned of initiatives such as these "global" movements. For example, it is not hard to find instances whereby the U.N.'s noble-sounding "sustainable development goals" (SDGs) have been used by corporate, state, and municipal actors as a means for market and political gain and to support an unsustainable, human-centered growth mindset (Adelman, 2018).

Distinguishing ecosphies from other more familiar discourses, Antonioli (2018) explains that:

> In opposition to the standardized discourse about "sustainable development", which emphasizes (often in a sanctimonious and guilt inducing manner) the relations between "individuals" and their environment, ecosophy. . . . draws our attention to the plurality of ecologies, environments, habitats, that do not "surround" us as a container would envelop its contents, but that define us and that we constantly define and reconfigure in a network of relations. (para 5).

Thinking critically, dialogically, and openly with students about ecosophies (including our own) offers an opportunity for the kind of "cross-talk" that Brydon (2004) recommends as part of an autocritical postcolonial pedagogy (p.69).

Part of our own shared ecosophy is a belief that places matter, and that local realities-including the natural environment, social constraints, individual motivations, and affordances of particular research projects-should be explicated in academic (and vernacular) writing whenever possible. That is, we believe that there is value in narrating how the particulars of place-based contexts inform researcher and informant perspectives and practices. We believe this because it seems to us undeniable that human beings in particular places depend upon each other and the flora and fauna around them to survive and thrive, and that the particulars of these dependencies are too-often ignored in current English-language discourse.

In our own field of applied linguistics, other researchers have raised concerns about ways that attention to environment and place are being elided by the forces of neoliberal globalization. Stibbe (2014), for example, has argued that "mainstream linguistics has forgotten, or overlooked, the embedding of humans in larger systems that support life" (p. 585). In the same chapter, he points to the phenomena of "erasure . . . . to indicate that something important has been ignored, sidelined, or excluded from consideration within a discourse" (p. 586). As stated above, for us, that "something important," that has been ignored is *place*.

Making the case for a "commons-based discourse" in TESOL as a bulwark against the forces of neoliberalism, Katunich (2021) recently wrote that that "A commons-based discourse, politics, and social structure . . . are based instead on a respect for limits (Shiva, 2010); local traditions and shared practices (Estreva & Prakash, 2014), and conviviality (Illich, 1973)" (p. 43).

The genesis of this project in Japan relates to a desire to repurpose some of the tools of internet connectivity to focus on places and communities near and far. Might ACNH operate as what Illich (1973/2021) termed a "convivial tool" (p. 21) for players to create imaginary spaces in the game and also a "commons" around which teachers and students can exchange ideas across linguistic, cultural, and physical distances?

Our Places

This section describes the two locations where our projects took place. As we will explain in more detail later in the paper, the projects we undertook in our respective places overlapped via internet communication technology (ICT) in particular ways at particular times, but were also each rooted in the communities where we and the participants of this study live in the real world.

Shizuoka city, Japan

THE CITY

The Japan side of the project was based at a medium-sized, private, regional university in Shizuoka City, Japan. Shizuoka City is a densely populated area of approximately 690,00 residents on the Pacific coast of central Japan. It is the capital of Shizuoka Prefecture, and sits roughly halfway between Tokyo and Nagoya along Japan's pacific coast in a basin formed by the Abe river, which flows into Suruga Bay.

Figure 2: The location of Shizuoka city on Japan's central island of Honshu and a view of the city from the banks of the Abe river on the city's western edge. Note the very densely packed built environment and the lack of urban green space. Photo credits: Map image by Maximilian Dörrbecker (CC BY-SA 3.0), "Shizuoka City View" by masnoko (CC BY-SA 2.0).

The city limits of Shizuoka extend deep into the foothills of Japan's southern alps, where the densely populated urban and suburban environs of the area pictured above quickly give way to a beautiful rural countryside of orchards and farms (see the map and photo below). In this sense, the word "city" must take on a different meaning than it might be understood in Western contexts. In Japanese, the word is "shi,"[1] an administrative designation for a type of municipality that has more than 50,000 inhabitants in a certain area. However, cities like Shizuoka often extend deep into rural areas because these places do not themselves have their own municipal governance structures.

Figure 3: *Shizuoka city limits extend to many rural areas where tea plantations and small farms dominate the landscape. Photo credits:* Wikimedia maps (CC BY-SA 4.0) "Tea plantation_22" by ajari is licensed under CC BY 2.0.

Shizuoka city is renowned for its green tea and mikan (a type of Mandarin orange) production. It has a temperate climate with year-round growing seasons for a wide variety of agricultural crops. The city hosts the prefectural government offices and also contains an active international shipping port. Shizuoka city is also a stop midway between Tokyo and Nagoya on the Tokaido train line that runs between Tokyo and Kyoto.

Despite its beautiful rural regions, Shizuoka's city center and surrounding areas are often beset with heavy traffic congestion, and continuous development projects that have led to urban sprawl. Many residential neighborhoods in the city were once interspersed with rice fields, urban gardens, and other green spaces, but more and more of these are being paved over for parking lots, houses, and

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[1] 市

apartment blocks. These aesthetic changes to the landscape bely a massive drop in Japan's food self-sufficiency in the post-war era, as well a trend towards urbanization and rural depopulation (Yoshikawa, 2022).

In recent years, Shizuoka city has engaged in an aggressive push to promote the United Nations' sustainable development goals (SDGs), while taking little visible action to actually set or meet real sustainability benchmarks. In fact, while the project which will be described below was ongoing, city officials came to the university site twice to lecture students about the SDGs. The first lecture, which I attended in person, involved a simple explanation of the SDGs followed by a "workshop" in which students were asked what they were doing individually for sustainable development. The city official who presented focused on individual action rather than collective action and systemic changes, and questions about the city's own response to the environmental and social concerns represented by the SDGs were cast aside or answered only with vague platitudes.

More concerning, the city has recently used public finance initiative (PFI) legislation to advance several city development projects which many residents have opposed on environmental grounds. These projects have been strongly criticized for their environmental impacts, but also-more pointedly-for the failure of the city to allow public comment and/or involve local residents and the public at large in the planning processes. Citizens groups have formed to push back and propose their own alternative, sustainable development ideas.

THE CAMPUS

The university where this project is set, is a "regional" university in Shizuoka city to which the vast majority of students commute daily from their family homes. The university has three campuses within Shizuoka city, and one campus in another major city in the prefecture. Each campus houses multiple faculties and departments.

Figure 4: *A view of the main buildings at the campus, where this study took place. Click on the image to try a virtual tour.* Photo compliments of Tokoha University.

This project was centered at the university's largest, flagship campus in Shizuoka City (pictured above) where student participants met weekly at that campus' *Foreign Language Study Support Center* (FLSSC). FLSSC (pictured below) is a language support center meant to serve the entire university community, but it is used most often by students in the Faculty of Foreign Studies.

Figure 5: *A view of the group study area in the University's Foreign Language Study Support Center, where students engaged in ACNH game play and discussion about environmental and social issues.* We needed to be masked, distanced, and partitioned by clear plastic barriers, but we still managed to play and discuss many issues.

The Cotswolds, U.K.

The UK side of this project was located in Gloucestershire, U,K., but most interaction took place online because of COVID restrictions.

Gloucestershire is located in South West England and contains three main 'landscape areas' comprising of the Royal Forest of Dean, the Severn vale, and the Cotswolds. Populous areas of Gloucestershire are also divided by 'green belts', invisible barriers that designate areas free from any kind of urban development for the benefit of species and wildlife of that area. (Natural England, 2010).
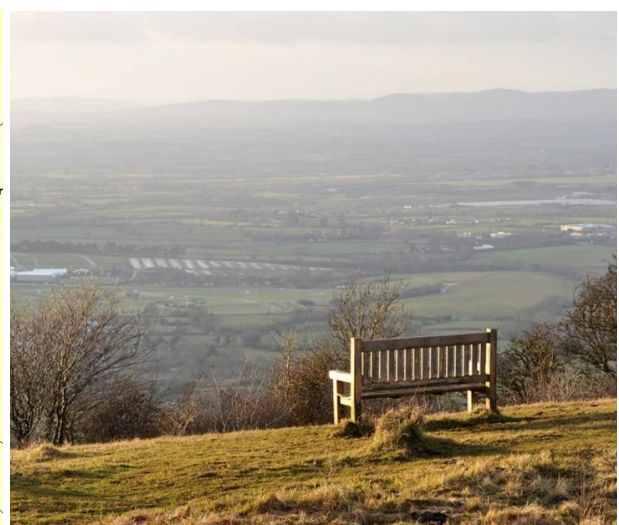
Figure 6: *The county of Gloucestershire is very hilly, and offers incredible views over the valleys. Photo credits to Gloucestershire County Council and Royal Forest of Dean.* https://www.royalforestofdean.info/maps/

The University of Gloucestershire is a fairly small university with roughly 12,000 students spread across multiple campuses throughout the local area. The Humanities campus (where I'm based) is an ivy-clad, Grade II listed Cotswold stone building that started as a teacher training college in the 1800s.

Figure 7: *Francis Close Hall, at the University of Gloucestershire campus.*

The Cotswolds have a rich, lengthy history that journeys back to Bronze and Iron Age forts - but their lasting popularity stems from their picturesque, traditional beauty in the many small villages, winding rivers, and small stone bridges. Farming and traditional craft exports are a large part of the economy of this area, with heavy agricultural exports of barley, wheat, and rapeseed. Part of the allure of the Cotswolds is certainly the significant value placed in preserving a seemingly idyllic way of living with the land and keeping close to traditional practices. The Cotswolds have been designated as an 'Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty' (AONB) in the UK since 1966, with the catchment area included in this accolade growing slightly further in 1990 to include roughly 768 sq mi. This puts emphasis on the conservation of an area due to 'significant landscape value' - in part due to the rare limestone grasslands, and endangered species that continue to populate the area - such as the Duke of Burgundy butterfly, for example. The 'Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty' lists Cotswolds as being home to:

> escarpment outliers, escarpments, rolling hills and valleys, enclosed limestone valleys, settled valleys, ironstone hills and valleys, high wolds and high wold valleys, high wold dip-slopes, dip-slope lowland and valleys, a Low limestone plateau, cornbrash lowlands, farmed slopes, a broad floodplain valley, a large pastoral lowland vale, a settled unwooded vale, and an unwooded vale. (AONB, 2006)

This status as an "Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty" motivates two enduring values in the area: preservation and conservation. The Cotswolds has a distinctly aging population, with a recent trend of the previously affordable houses in the area being purchased by wealthy city-dwellers as retirement prospects, causing prices to rise. This phenomenon points to a range of benefits and limitations of an area painted with nostalgia and natural beauty.

In the Cotswolds, residents can have locally-grown, organic vegetable boxes from local farmers hand-delivered to their door every week, and the continuing existence of a traditional milkman refilling glass bottles imbues the place with a sense of community that encourages local shopping and commerce. Limitations are more hidden, but they are evident in the uneasy attitudes towards change - even positive - and the reluctance to reform local structures to be more energy efficient. The Cotswolds have also recently entered headlines as a 'hot property' spot, an area with some of the fastest rising house prices in the UK - over 16% in 2017 alone (ONS, 2017). A disparity has developed between traditionalists who have lived in the area their entire lives and those who are holiday-home hunting, or retiring from London. This creates a contentious political atmosphere in many respects.

There is increasing recognition that holding too tightly to nostalgia can hold the area back from addressing local and global environmental problems. For instance, the AONB and efforts to conserve the visual appeal of the area limits all developments, sustainable or otherwise. The AONB states 'any schemes should ensure the conservation and enhancement of the natural beauty of the area', meaning 'not all forms of renewable energy' are 'suitable' within the AONB, such as wind turbines or solar farms (Cotswolds AONB & Watt, 2014). There is a pre-supposed public attitude towards wind turbines - that they are considered 'ugly', 'eyesore', and that this measurement of aesthetic value has precedence over their positive environmental impact.

People

In this section, we briefly describe the students who participated in our project, and how we recruited them. We also offer sketches of the authors of this paper. In *The Multilingual Instructor* (2018), Kramsch and Zhang draw upon Bourdieu's (2003) concept of "participant objectivation" as a valuable method by which teacher-researchers can situate their own subjectivity in intercultural research (Kramsch & Zhang, 2018, p. 27). In this spirit, we hope that this kind of reflexivity will help explicate the design choices we made in framing our project and in forming the questions we chose to ask.

In Shizuoka, Japan

I (Peter Hourdequin) am an American who first came to Shizuoka city, Japan in 2002 to teach English for a year, then another, before returning to the U.S. to begin graduate studies. I came back to Shizuoka in 2005, and have been working and studying here ever since. I love the outdoors, and enjoy great local opportunities for surfing, fishing, and hiking in my adoptive home.

The students who participated in the Japan side of this project responded to an open call for participation that I publicized via posters around the campus and announcements for a "virtual study abroad opportunity" to the classes I taught at the time (Figure 8, below).

Figure 8: *A poster used to recruit students at the university in Japan for participation in the project.*

For the six-month pilot stage of this project (the stage under consideration here) only two students-a male and a female-responded to the initial call for participation. Both were third year undergraduate students in the Department of British and American studies who granted informed consent after reading a bilingual project information sheet explaining participation.

Both students lived at home with their parents at the time, and commuted to the university from the west, using the Tokaido train line which runs along the coast of the island of Honshu, along the path once occupied by the historic Tōkaidō[2] highway. The female student commuted from Yaizu city, a small port town approximately 30 minutes away by local train, and the male student commuted from the next town over, Fujieda city, which is approximately 40 minutes from campus by train. Fujieda City, in fact has its own "Dream Island" in Animal Crossing that was established in 2021 through a collaboration with a local university there.

The male student in this study could be characterized as a "non-traditional" student who is significantly older than most of his peers. After a long delay in finishing high school he eventually graduated, then decided to move on to our university in order to develop his English skills so he can become a junior high school teacher himself. This student exhibited very strong dedication to the project, and also to developing his own island in his personal version of the game.

The female student is also a highly motivated undergraduate, but she is more "traditional." She told me that she is studying English just because she likes the language, and though she did not enter university with specific career ambitions, she has recently secured work at an IT firm in Tokyo where she will need to use her English skills on a daily basis.

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[2] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/T%C5%8Dkaid%C5%8D_(road)

In Gloucestershire, U.K.

I (Beatrice Hughes) am currently working on my PhD thesis at the University of Gloucestershire where I analyse tales of tanuki[3] through an eco-critical, ecolinguistic lens. My work spans the traditional, Edo folktales right up to the modern day tanuki celebrity - Tom Nook. The ideas of place overlap often with my PhD topic, as much of the fascination with tanuki comes from their liminality and ever-shifting sense of place, where they straddle two realities at all times.

The seven students who participated in the UK side of this project responded to an open call for participation largely shared through social media such as Twitter, and WhatsApp. The campus was still largely empty due to the continuing push for students to study from home, and attend Zoom lectures instead of in-person classes. Most participants live within the Gloucestershire area, or at the very least had connections with it due to the campus location. As a result of COVID restrictions, many students moved from independent student accommodation to live with their families and some participants accessed Animal Crossing through a shared 'family' Nintendo Switch Console instead of their own personal device.

There was very little 'push' applied for students to join this study, with no particular goal number of participants and informed consent was given throughout to ensure students knew that their thoughts, and eventual responses to targeted questions would be used as part of a wider study. The opportunity to participate in a small study such as this one that shared a connection with an international university was noted as a positive experience outcome for many, as they entered their studies during a period of quite isolated teaching experiences without many inter-university opportunities.

The call for participation in this project stipulated students with a pre-existing interest in ACNH, and as such everyone involved in the UK-side had their own copy of ACNH and a Nintendo Switch console they had regular access to from their own homes. This, to some extent, expects a measure of wealth that would allow for the student to be in ownership of a £300 games console and a roughly £60 game.

University of Gloucestershire has a very active Student Sustainability Society within the University where ecologically-minded students regularly meet to partake in seed-planting and other activities. The Covid-19 pandemic led to a surge in the popularity of Animal Crossing: New Horizons - meaning that many students in this society already owned a Nintendo Switch and copy of the game.

Purposes

In Shizuoka, Japan

I conceived of this project as a vehicle for connecting students to other cultures (near and far) and in order to create spaces for discussions about environmental and community ethics. Playing and "working" with my own children at home during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic revealed a lot of the literacy potential in and around ACNH (described in Hourdequin, 2019, here). I thus wanted to see how this potential could be exploited with English learners at my university.

In the Spring of 2021, I wrote the following mission statement for the project to introduce it to potential partner institutions and researchers:

> "This is a pilot study in which we are seeking to learn about how online games can be used to effectively promote language learning, cross-cultural communication, and education for

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[3] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Japanese_raccoon_dog

sustainable development. Specifically, I want to understand if the Nintendo Switch game Animal Crossing: New Horizons might function as a useful online environment for such learning. As a pilot study, this project will be exploratory by nature. I want to try different things to see what "works" so we can design a larger, more comprehensive study."

Put another way, I simply wanted to engage in an exploratoration of the possibilities of loosely structured educational activities around ACNH in my institutional context and with students and researchers in other locales in order to discuss the many ethical, political, and environmental issues that arise naturally on a shared virtual island. There are certainly other ways to access such issues with students, but *Animal Crossing* struck me as a fun and playful "convivial tool" (Illich, 1973/2021) around which these conversations might be able to take place. I thus dove into this project in order to learn by doing, simply wanting to see what kind of practices would "work" with students in my context.

As for what I mean by "work" and what would have constituted "success," these things were also ill-defined at the outset. Throughout the project's implementation, I realized some of the following questions as integral to what I was trying to discover:

1) Would I be able to gather students interested in playing ACNH and engage them in meaningful discussion about the environmental and ethical issues simulated in the game?
2) In my Japanese higher educational context, would ACNH serve as a useful tool for learning about and discussing language, culture, and the environment, as it did in my own family?
3) Without discrete tasks and "homework," how autonomous would students become in playing the game in English?
4) Would digital game-play in public spaces at the university foster community and additional participation of other students?
5) Could we build connections and opportunities for cultural exchange with participants in the U.K. through the game?

After discussing the practices that students engaged in in my context below, I will return to these questions to reflect on the project's impact.

In Gloucestershire, U.K.

I heard about this project from my Ph.D. advisor, and joined with the hope of gaining qualitative insights into ideas of 'place' through the ecolinguistic lens that I am developing within my thesis. The focus on environmental and community ethics within this project was of particular interest to me, and Peter's previous paper that explored literacy practices around ACNH through play with his children laid the foundations for a positive exploration into the learning impacts and values of ACNH.

Having these vital, real-world connections and considerations into the issues I am studying and analyzing provides a great platform for discussion, conversation, and development of ideas surrounding the world we live in and the 'stories' we live by and find within the games we play together. The inspirational merit and lasting value of these 'stories' is a huge part of my thesis work as I seek to reframe the role of the tanuki in an environmentally inspirational light. Working on this project to connect with international players and learning the 'stories' that impact them while playing was one of the key elements I found most fascinating and beneficial from my perspective.

Animal Crossing: New Horizons and the ecolinguistic interpretations of its contents make up a large section of analysis within my thesis (delving, more specifically, into Tom Nook's role) - and this project provided an opportunity for me to expand my own 'horizons' and embark on a mission to consolidate insights from international inputs.

The environmental discourse identified from in-game data could have either positive or negative inflections - either promoting sustainability, or seeming to encourage negative environmental practices - the key goal of identification being to simply identify and discuss. It was from these discussions that the students ascertained a clearer understanding of their ecological values - ecosophies - and gradually integrated these thoughts regarding environmental and community ethics into discussion.

Practices

Theoretically, this project is informed by ecological approaches to language use in the sociocultural tradition (e.g.van Lier, 2004). This tradition conceives of the learning context as an "activity space" (p.62). In analyzing what happens in activity spaces, Pennycook's (2010) perspective of "language as local practice," is important to us, as is the more recent discourse analysis of Stibbe (2014) in the field of ecolinguistics.

In this section, we share the practices that we observed and participated in at our respective places. Later, in the final section of this paper, we draw upon data we collected from participants to reflect upon what we learned from these participatory observations of practice.

In Shizuoka, Japan

Pedagogical practices

Students in this project were given access to ACNH and a Nintendo Switch console for the span of a 15-week semester. Students spent many hours playing on their own and together, and met with me for weekly 90-minute discussion and play sessions at the university's Foreign Language Study Support Center (Figure 5, above). Students were given permission to borrow the portable Switch console to play on their own or with friends elsewhere on campus. Several students who did not officially sign up for the project ended up creating their own characters and joining in group play at various times.

In the discussions, we focused on understanding idiomatic in-game text from a language-learning perspective and on discussions of the social and physical world simulated in the game. I also set up a Microsoft Teams group for the core members of the project on the Japan side. In this online space, we kept in touch about happenings in the game and also posted screenshots to share information and ask and answer questions. For example, one student noticed the interesting word play that was common when her character would catch fish. She posted about this, and this led to an exploration of some new idioms (Figure 9).
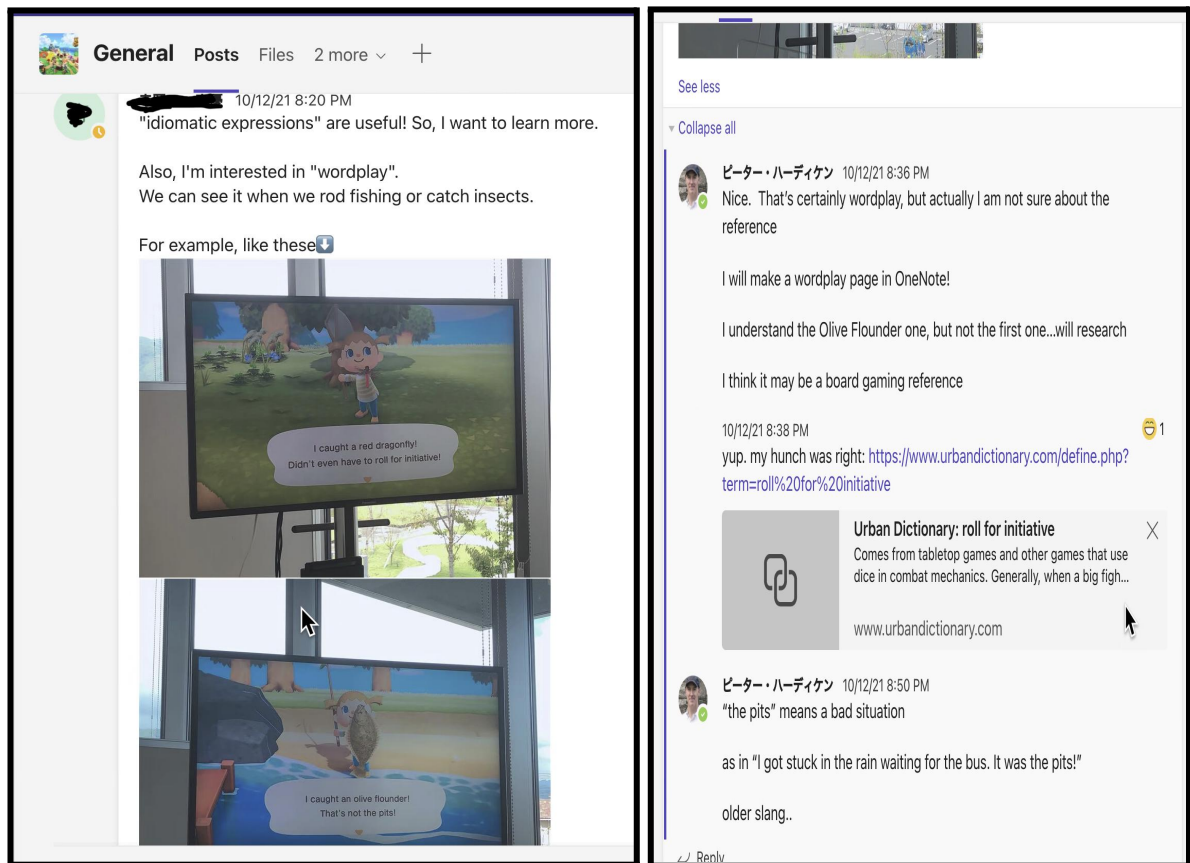
Figure 9: *Screenshot from our Microsoft TEAMS group in which a student noticed and inquired about word play "spoken" by her character in the game.*

In a OneNote notebook connected to our Microsoft Teams space, we made sections to record meeting notes (Figure 10), new language, discussions, and a section called "Tokoha Island Documents" where we wrote island policies that we agreed upon in our in-person discussions (Figures 11, 12 & 13). The meeting notes section usually included some bullet points about our activities that day and a picture of the white board used to note new in-game vocabulary and for discussions.
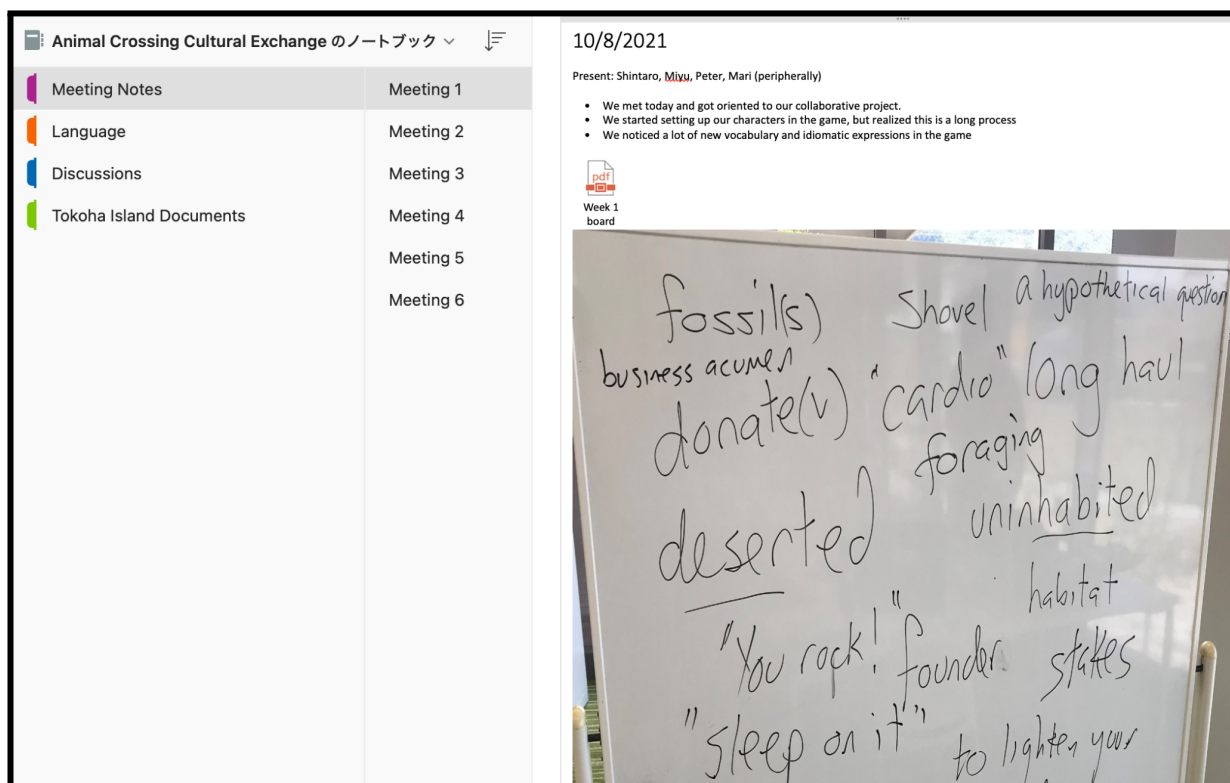
Figure 10: *A screenshot from the OneNote Notebook shared amongst the instructor and students who participated in the Japan side of this project.*

The meeting notes and other notes were discussed at the beginning and end of most sessions. Before we began playing the game, I usually connected my laptop to the monitor that we used to play ACNH on and reviewed vocabulary and discussions from the previous week. Then, after 20-30 minutes of play interspersed with discussion (about decisions that came up in the game), we usually shut off the game and focused solely on discussion. At the end of each session, I would usually connect my laptop to the monitor again. I would ask students to verbalize what we did and discussed, and I would type up the notes in real-time for everyone to see.

Amidst our open-ended learning, play, and discussion, we never got around to developing a full island constitution, but we did make notes on island policies about the use of shared items, island development, and taxation on profits from "money trees" that we grew on the island.
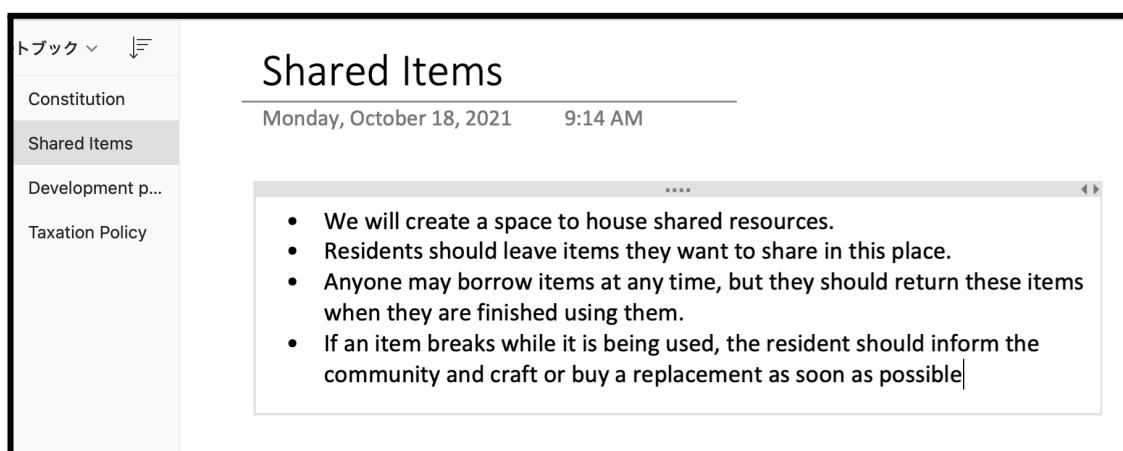
Figure 11: *A screenshot of notes made in OneNote (which I projected on a large TV monitor) based on a discussion with student participants about shared items on the island.*
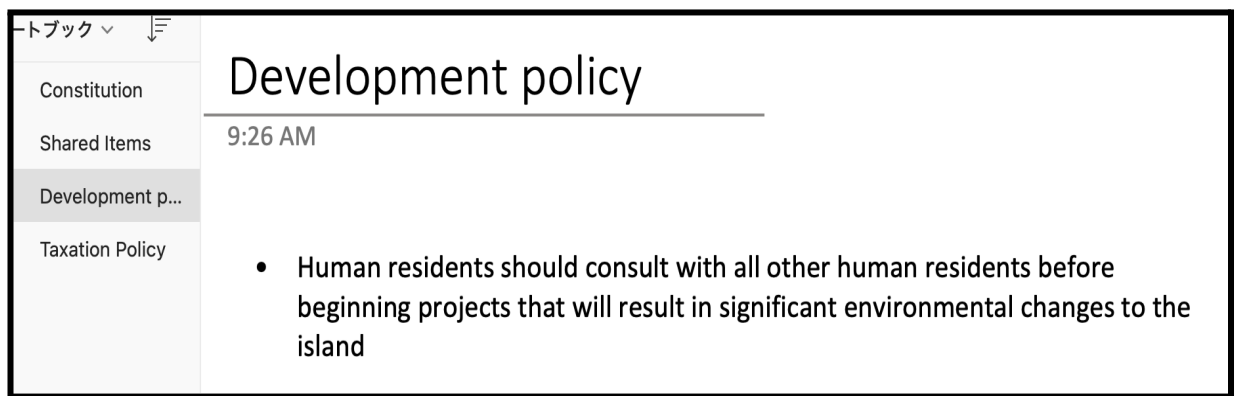
Figure 12: *A screenshot of notes made in OneNote based on a discussion with student participants about our island development policy.*
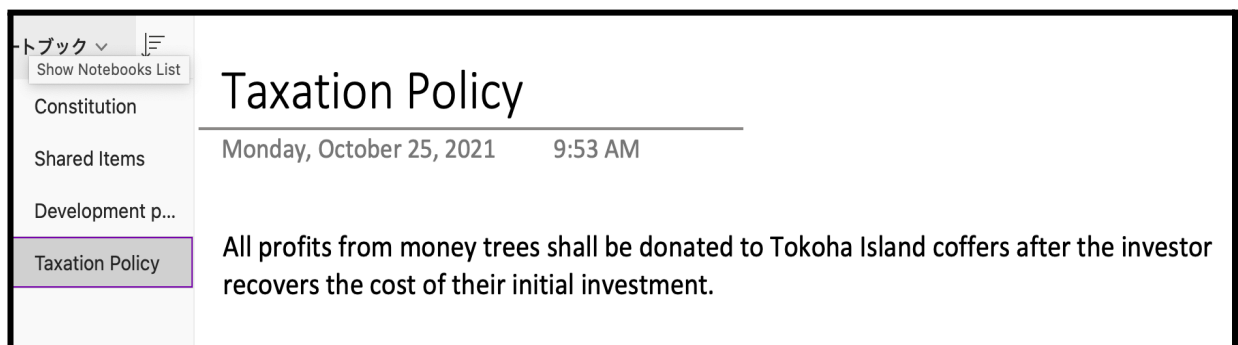
Figure 13: *A screenshot of notes made in OneNote based on a discussion with student participants about our island taxation policy.*

Online Meeting and Island Tours

One time towards the end of the term, we arranged an online meeting with my counterpart in the U.K. During the one semester trial period while COVID-19 restrictions against on-campus learning persisted in the U.K., it seemed technically impractical to arrange student to student interactions and discussions. Instead, we arranged for a teleconference in which students on the Japan side would meet (co-author) Beatrice, and tour her island before introducing their own island. The two core project members and 3 other students gathered in a group study area on their university campus, and we met with Beatrice via Zoom and in ACNH.

Figure 14: *Connecting Shizuoka city to Cotswolds, U.K. via ACNH and Zoom.*

Unfortunately, we discovered in real-time that the university's server settings did not allow us to actually visit each other's islands, so our characters could not interact in real-time. However, a workaround that Beatrice suggested was successful: we were able to visit a saved version of Beatrice's "dream island," and that of a student on the Japan side (the shared student island was not accessible because it had not been saved to the cloud yet-a technical issue we only became aware of at the time).

We met at 5pm Japan-time to account for the time difference with the U.K., and COVID-19 restrictions at our university dictated that we vacate the space we were using within the hour. This made a long discussion difficult after we had solved the technical problems, but visiting the respective dream islands nevertheless led to some interesting observations about things such as: the decor of homes, the architectural styles in each place, and the lifestyles implied by the built environment's interplay with "natural" spaces. We were able to discuss these observations when we debriefed our experience in our next regular meeting.

Because of the aforementioned time constraints and technological issues, not a lot of discussion occurred during the teleconference and play session. Mostly, it was showing and telling. Beatrice gave us a tour of her island, pointing out landscape and architectural features, as students asked some simple questions about features that interested them. For example, students asked about the small farms and gardens scattered about, the milk truck parked on the island door steps, and a structure that was under construction at the time.

Figure 15: Students direct their character to a milk truck on Beatrice's dream island and ask her about what they see

The opposite took place when the male student in our project gave everyone a tour of his dream island. Since Beatrice has been to Japan, she was excited to see many "typical" Japanese items and features incorporated into the student's island. For example, his house was laid out with Tatami mats, traditional Japanese furniture, and several appliances that are commonly seen in Japanese homes.

Hourdequin, P. & Hughes, B. (2022). Places, people, practices, and play: Animal Crossing New Horizons here and there. *Ludic Language Pedagogy, 4*, *p.*87 of 94

Outdoors, he showed us a large cycling and recreation area he had created, which also impressed everyone.

In a debriefing session after the online gathering at our next regular meeting, I led a discussion with students about some of their experience, asking them to recall what they observed on their visit to Beatrice's island and to compare what seemed to be important in that virtual place (the values of the place). Students recalled things such as milk bottles boxes on doorsteps, an English garden, a Cathedral under construction, and bicycles scattered throughout Beatrice's virtual town. We discussed what associations had with these observations and what these implied. For example, we talked about the milk delivery system represented on Beatrice's island. Students noted that similar systems were common in Japan in the past and that some people now receive other forms of food delivery.

This debriefing discussion served as a nice segway to the introduction of an online survey which Beatrice had sent (discussed below).

In Gloucestershire, U.K.

Amidst COVID-19 restrictions, students at University of Gloucestershire were not able to make use of physical university facilities. Therefore, it wasn't feasible to make any arrangements for a public-use console, and the study's participants on the U.K. side were thus limited to those who were in the financial position to already own, or share, a Nintendo Switch console.

Students would keep each-other updated informally through group chats or social media posting where they shared pictures of their islands, and any interesting screenshots of dialogue from within the game they felt held environmental discourse significance whenever something came up in-game they considered valuable to share.

Figure 16: *Students were quick to spot applicable pieces of in-game dialogue.*

When engaging with students about their island and framing actions and practices on their island in an eco-critical manner, it was important to first establish a set of ecological and environmental values they would be using to base their considerations. Using a simple structure on Google Forms, we created a short questionnaire that was shared between Japanese and UK participants that asked questions about their ACNH islands and their personal philosophies. The first question asked students

to outline their 'ecosophy', their personal philosophy regarding environmental discourse and ecological equilibrium that they use to measure data against to form opinions (Naess, 1990). Students had mixed experience with these terms prior to conducting the questionnaire, so answers varied in length and detail.

Figure 17: *Some of the questions used in the questionnaire, created using Google Forms.*

The 'ecosophy' - by nature - emphasizes the importance of individual beliefs and ethical and moral understandings (Stibbe, 2015). This can often draw out some more personal, perhaps even private, ideas regarding the world around them and it was decided to keep any recorded data from questionnaires anonymous in order to allow students to express their ecosophy fully and without fear of judgment.

Some key words generated through these discussions of ecosophy involved 'protect', 'natural/nature', and 'care'. Ideas of stewardship and the human role of protecting the environment at large, not just for future generations, but for the animals and plantlife co-existing with us were a positive trend. Interestingly, the idea of 'responsibility' was voiced in opposing constructs - one student taking full responsibility for positive change, and another saying that responsibility lies with the larger corporations and that they feel no personal obligation to change their practices until companies take action first. While there were common trends, it was valuable to see the range of ecological philosophies held by the students involved in this project. As students were unable to see one another's inputs, it also allowed for these opposite opinions to be expressed completely and any coincidental similarities to be considered organically, without discussion or embarrassment from other students influencing viewpoints.

Reflections

from Shizuoka, Japan

Here, I will return to the questions I posed above about what I hoped to learn from this pilot project:

1) *Would I be able to gather students interested in playing ACNH and engage them in meaningful discussion about the environmental and ethical issues simulated in the game?*

I was surprised that only two students initially volunteered to participate in the project. COVID-19 restrictions crushed the study abroad ambitions of many students in my department, and I had assumed that they would jump at any opportunity they found to interact in English. Since our students continued to have face-to-face classes, I recruited by giving announcements in my classes and putting up posters around campus. In the current academic year I was more successful in gathering students by advertising the project on our university's portal site, so perhaps more digital marketing of the project the first year would have helped gather more students.

Still, the students who I was able to recruit were very engaged, hard-working, and committed. Further, their activities related to ACNH in public campus spaces fostered "legitimate peripheral participation" (Lave, 1998): several of their friends also joined the activity informally by making their own characters in the game and joining in play sessions occasionally.

The two core students, however, were the only ones who participated in our weekly meetings at the university's Foreign Language Study Support Center. Here, they showed themselves to be engaged and thoughtful participants. Most weeks' sessions consisted of much more conversation and learning than gameplay. I raised many questions that I think students had not considered before, and they responded well to these prompts, sharing their views on a variety of environmental and social issues.

2) *In my Japanese higher educational context, would ACNH serve as a useful tool for learning about and discussing language, culture, and the environment as it did in my own family?*

I think ACNH did prove to be a useful vehicle for a wide range of discussions. Among other things, we discussed our expectations of privacy in the game and in real life, civic questions about private vs. common property, development and taxation policies, immigration, and the type of island environment we were attempting to develop. Because the consequences of the decisions we made were realized in the game, these discussions seemed to have more weight than those I've had with students in classroom settings, where they are more abstracted from the real world.

Additionally, I was pleasantly surprised by students' attention to word play in the utterances of various characters in the game. In our face to face and online interactions, such word play stimulated interesting and fruitful explorations of language. These explorations also likely led to students noticing new resources and practices such as turning to the internet's Urban Dictionary[4] to interpret unknown slang.

In our weekly meetings, I often prompted my students to articulate their values and practices, asking questions like:

- "What did you do on the island this week / today?",
- "Why do you think this is important?",
- "What should our island policy be about _____ (e.g. immigration)?".

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[4] https://www.urbandictionary.com/

And, though this pilot project did not attempt to test changes in students' thinking on environmental and ethical issues, my students' written responses to prompts in the questionnaire that Beatrice circulated seem to indicate that the discussions we had were useful. For example, responding to the prompt about her "personal ecosophy," one student responded that "People should live in harmony with nature, not suppress it." Another student answered the question about the "key values and philosophies" he uses and considers when playing ACNH, writing: "I consider that the balance between artificial objects and nature is important." Asked about environmental messages in the game, a participant wrote "I think the game sends messages to try to clean public space and make an island they live in better for others. For example, many players pick up weeds in residential areas or design a row of houses or streets for residents or visitors to live comfortably." The other student wrote, simply, that "Resources of every items [sic] come from nature such as woods or rocks."

These are small but useful reflections that anecdotally indicate heightened awareness about environmental issues and ideals for sustainable living.

3) *Without discrete tasks and "homework," how autonomous would students become in playing the game in English?*

Students were quite autonomous in their efforts to learn through the game. Though recruitment for this project took place during the first (Spring) semester, by the time we were able to start this project in earnest, it was the second semester. By this time, the two students who signed up had already purchased their own Nintendo Switch console, and they were enjoying the game in Japanese. This may have served a positive purpose because by the time we started setting up our island in English, they were very familiar with the game as a whole. From a language learning standpoint, their background knowledge about the game likely served them well in acquiring new vocabulary when they encountered it in the game in English.

Unfortunately, the fact that both students already had their own separate islands to work on may have siphoned some of the energy away from developments on our shared island. Students continued to borrow the Switch on their own and with friends to develop our shared island, but they also spent free time at home working on their own islands (in Japanese). Rolling out our project more quickly might have helped students become more engaged with our island.

4) *Would digital game-play in public spaces at the university foster community and additional participation?*

As noted above, playing the game in public spaces on campus led to additional student participation. Three more 3rd year students became unofficial members who frequently joined the two core members in play sessions of the game. The students would frequently reserve a group study area with a very large digital monitor in an open space near the library. The unofficial members never joined our weekly Monday morning study / play sessions, but they did enjoy the game in English with their friends. They also actively participated in our Zoom call with Beatrice in the U.K.

5) *Could we build connections and opportunities for cultural exchange with participants in the U.K. through the game?*

The group of student players on the U.K. side seemed to have been atomized by COVID restrictions and therefore did not gather for group play sessions the way we did in Japan. Though, as Beatrice has reported, there seems to have been an active online community around the game- what Gee & Hayes, 2011 (p.102) would term a "passionate affinity space"-I did not make efforts to connect my students

to this community. This is because I wanted to cultivate our local conversation first and to give students time to think deeply about their choices in the game. I felt this could be done through face-to-face interactions. Students have access to social media, and can reach out to join online affinity spaces if they choose, but I wanted them to focus on the community where they live first. And so this is what we did.

from Gloucestershire, U.K.

The cooperative element of *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* has been very beneficial for this project as it allows the touring and visiting of others islands. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic as a whole, ACNH was instrumental in allowing players all over the world to connect with friends, family, and strangers, in order to simulate interactions that would have been normal prior to the sudden extreme physical distancing. It became a way to experience a shared 'place' with others, and recreate a sense of community and collaboration within our respective 'places'.

We found a shared sense of environmental responsibility. Looking to the future, we could consider the use of the online mode and dream address to share ideas and concepts important to individuals on their island as the islands became such a hub of identity and self-expression of beliefs and values.

Social media also played an important role as some students ran Animal Crossing themed Twitter accounts as a means to share their island designs and discuss the game with like-minded players worldwide! Healthy discussion was prompted into individual island 'themes' - giving students the opportunity to reflect on their values when making decisions to design a built-up metropolis or include areas of wide open greenery. Many students identified that including natural elements like 'meadows' in their island design would improve the visual and mental appeal, leading to development of discussion as to why this was, and what merits stem from natural spaces. For many students, this was their first time articulating an 'ecosophy' values framework, and reducing their entire philosophy regarding ecological well-being into a short questionnaire answer certainly proved a significant task. Nonetheless, students were able to articulate their stances to whatever degree they felt most comfortable and the results developed great discussion into how their ecosophy could be developed, refined, and understood more effectively in the future.

These conversations are intrinsic to promoting positive environmental action, as it is only through understanding the value of the world around us that we find the true inspiration to preserve it to the best of our abilities.

Final Takeaways

This collaboration revealed great potential for collaborating locally and internationally around digital games such as *Animal Crossing New Horizons*, and also uncovered some challenges to doing so, especially amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Face-to-face play sessions and discussions with students helped to build trust and community locally. The *Animal Crossing New Horizons* simulation proved to be a "convivial tool" for playful interaction and a spark for discussions about sustainability and personal and local values.

Because ACNH can be played as a semi-cooperative simulation, teachers can structure discussions around things that need to be done or decisions that need to be made in the game. For example, simple questions like "Where shall we build our houses?" can be unpacked and can lead to rich discussions about what rights individuals should have in a community, and what freedoms should be constrained for the sake of group harmony. Or, when having moved to their island, players find themselves already deep in debt, questions can be raised about fairness, economic inequality, and

even capitalism itself. How deeply teachers can dive into such questions with students is-of course-dependent upon students' level of understanding of in-game texts, and also to existing schema and concepts carried in the minds of participants. Still, regardless of students' level, with time, scaffolding, and the repetitive practice that the game privileges, rich learning experiences are likely.

How individual teachers choose to approach the potential for dialogue around the many words, concepts, and social issues that appear in the game will vary. Teacher beliefs, contextual factors, and students' motivation and goals should dictate these choices, but we advocate a role whereby teachers draw attention to words, concepts, and issues they believe to be salient and significant. Here, we tried to show how our own concerns for place and ecosophies informed the mediated discussions we held with students and with each other. Articulating these concerns and ecosophies openly, and helping students do the same seems central to any collaborative project like this one. Doing so creates conditions for dialogue, which is fundamental to learning (and peace).

Collaboration and discussion around the game with others in far-away places is not easy. In addition to overcoming technical challenges, a lot of time needs to be spent on coordination and logistics. During the COVID-19 pandemic this proved particularly challenging: while students in Japan were able to gather in one place, the U.K.-based project leader and student participants all needed to remain isolated in their individual homes. Our plans for face-to-face group discussions in both places followed by teleconnected group discussions were thus thwarted by university policies, pushing us to find workarounds at the time. Still, students seemed to benefit from their interactions and engagements with the game and from being pushed to think critically about their own ecosophies and the game's discourses.

Close relationships between project leaders, open lines of communication, and stable institutional (and societal) conditions seem to be important factors for successful international collaborations such as this. We would recommend that other educators who might attempt projects like this look to find collaborators in other places who share not just an interest in the same game, but who also share intellectual and personal values and clear project goals. Still, such collaborators must also be flexible in order to adapt to changing conditions and constraints in each others' places.

Overall, this was a fruitful, interesting, and playful collaboration that we both enjoyed, as did our students. We hope you enjoyed reading about it.

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