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Designing the Virtual Museum with *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*

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Abstract

In the 2020 video game Animal Crossing: New Horizons, the player builds the collection of the impressive Animal Crossing Museum (ACM). Exploring the visitor experience of this video game museum's art wing from the perspective of museum professionals allows for the discovery of inventive ways to deepen connection with museum patrons in the virtual space. The ACM is more successful at engaging visitors than traditional virtual museums. It meets visitor needs by offering an immersive, interactive experience, and depends on direct action from the visitor to expand and grow its collection and space. By taking lessons from the player interaction design of the ACM, virtual museums can be designed to meet the psychological needs of visitors and build long-lasting relationships between the visitor and the institution. From the text, this essay proposes seven lessons for designing virtual museums: start with visitor experience at the center of virtual museum design, allow the visitor to collaborate on the creation of the virtual museum, make the virtual museum a habit with intermittent rewards and increased access over time, build social interaction into the virtual museum, add an avatar, show off curator personality, and address colonial roots of museums.

Keywords: museum; museum studies; video games; animal crossing; animal crossing new horizons; virtual museum; virtual museum design; online museum; interactive museum

Sitting on a train between Paris and Amsterdam with guidebooks and maps spread across our two tray tables, my mom pulled out a small notebook with her carefully researched list of artworks she wanted to see. The list would take us to the Louvre, the Musee d'Orsay, the Van Gogh Museum, and the Rijksmuseum to view some of the most famous artworks in the world. Not from a tourbook or museum website, my mother's selections were inspired by a virtual art collection she had visited daily for the past three years: the village museum in the 2020 video game *Animal Crossing: New Horizons.*

With a release date of March 20, 2020 – only five days after COVID-19 pandemic shutdowns began across the United States – *Animal Crossing: New Horizons (ACNH)* entered the market at a moment when many were desperate for cozy escapism and companionship. Unable to engage in the habits and social interactions of daily life, players flocked to this game in record-breaking droves to enjoy the virtual substitute for real community.[1] This popularity

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[1] Grubb 2020.

propelled *New Horizons* to become the 14th best-selling video game of all time.[2] *ACNH* is played in real-time; the game is set to match the player's location, and the passage of time is synched to reality. This unique tying of the in-game clock with the real world forces the player to embed *ACNH* into their daily lives to make progress in the game. Through routine effort, the player slowly builds the collection at the impressive Animal Crossing Museum (ACM) for their island community. The Museum's four wings – an aquarium, insectarium, fossil hall, and art wing complete with 43 paintings and sculptures – are beautifully designed architectural spaces filled with real-world creatures and objects collected and donated by the player.

The ACM is more successful at engaging visitors than many traditional virtual museums. By utilizing game design techniques that offer the player psychological rewards, the ACM deepens visitor experience and engagement beyond the passive servings of information that real-world institutions often rely on for their online experience. Virtual museums increase awareness of physical museum spaces[3]; the ACM has inspired players to leave their digital island paradise and travel the world to visit artworks in person.[4] Exploring the unique and often wildly engaging visitor experience of the virtual museum in *ACNH* from the perspective of museum professionals allows for the discovery of inventive ways to deepen connection with museum patrons in the virtual space.

1. Player experience in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*

New Horizons is the fifth installment in the *Animal Crossing* series of open-ended, non-linear social simulation video games for Nintendo platforms. In each offering, the player customizes a stylized avatar and moves to a small town of anthropomorphic neighbors, passing the time with relaxing activities: fishing, cooking, collecting, and socializing. Unique to *New Horizons*, the player moves to a deserted island to establish a new community of like-minded folks looking for a getaway. The ACM serves as a core institution for this up-and-coming village. The player builds the collection by donating bugs, fish, and fossils through the knowledgeable owl curator Blathers, who reacts with joy – or, in the case of insect specimens, complete revulsion – to each offering. Because the game moves in real time, the player may interact with the museum several times each day, weaving in and out of the collection as their backpack fills with new specimens. In a fascinating and troubling tie to real-world museum origins in collecting through exploration and colonial expansion, the player gains access to new areas and "uninhabited" islands as more items are donated. These islands serve as a way to plunder exotic fish and bugs for the museum with no concern for conservation or depletion of these resources on foreign lands.[5]

As the collection swells with objects, Blathers opens the art wing to the museum. While all four museum wings offer their own ideas for designing virtual museums, it is the art wing provides the most lessons. Visitors enter this expansive gallery through a marble-tiled sculpture court before meandering through painting galleries decorated with herringbone hardwood and richly colored brocade wallpaper. News gets out that this island getaway is a cultural hotbed; a suspicious art-dealing fox, Jolly Redd, anchors his

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[2] Nintendo 2024.
[3] Schweibenz 2019.
[4] Cottrell 2023.
[5] Smith 2022.

dilapidated boat the Treasure Trawler on the island's remote secret beach twice a month.[6] The player may purchase one of four generically named artworks from Redd – but there is a catch. Each piece needs to be examined carefully for authenticity, and small changes to the masterwork like the addition of crossed eyebrows or a moved arm could reveal the work as a forgery. If the player squanders their chance to buy a real artwork by purchasing a fake, they are left with a painting that fails Blathers' discerning eye and ethical standards for the museum; he would never exhibit a raccoon-colored rendition of Leonardo Da Vinci's *Lady with an Ermine.* Authentic donations are rewarded with unique, celebratory dialogue from Blathers before being displayed in the art wing with its real title and label text (a "solemn painting" is revealed to be Diego Velázquez's *Las Meninas* and a "motherly statue" Antonio del Pollaiolo's *Capitoline Wolf*). With the opportunity to purchase from Redd initially occurring only twice per month, completing the art wing could require years-long dedication and a consistent gameplay habit from the player. This daily interaction and need to examine artworks builds investment from the player, deepening their relationship with the ACM as they receive intermittent rewards of discovering and donating authentic artworks.

Many people go to museums for social interaction and to gain a sense of deeper connection to their community.[7] In a study of generation Z virtual museum visitors, users were negative about the lack of other visitors in the exhibitions.[8] The ACM directly designs for this social motivation. Players socialize with in-museum NPC (non-player character) neighbors, who are found staring in awe at recently donated objects throughout the museum, and with real-world friends who come to visit in-game. Players flocked to *ACNH* during the COVID-19 pandemic, desperately seeking the sense of normalcy and socialization that was impossible during lockdown. Many treated their island as a space to meet up with friends and enjoy unique experiences together, using the game to meet a basic psychological need for social interaction.[9] For those who treat museums as social gathering spaces, friends often visit each other's ACMs to compare collections and celebrate new acquisitions – an experience that kept my across-the-country family connected through artful conversations while we showed off our ACMs during the pandemic.

2. Lessons for designing virtual museums

As a lifelong museum goer, visiting the ACM scratched my 2020 cultural-institution itch better than the virtual offerings of my favorite museums. I was not alone in exploring digital institutions – during lockdowns, museums across the globe enhanced their online offerings and opened up novel ways for visitors to explore.[10] Attention on the intersection of video games and museums has increased in the ten years since MoMA controversially added video games to its collection.[11] Just as video games open access to new digital realms, the virtual museum gives opportunities for visitors who cannot visit a physical space – whether because of location, finances, ability, or because the cultural heritage is publicly inaccessible.[12] Institutions can learn from the tricks of engagement employed by games to keep the

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[6] The *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* version 2.0 update offered in November 2021 opened a pathway for the player to purchase artwork from Redd more frequently through the expansion of a new shopping area located on Harv's Island.

[7] Falk 2016.

[8] Komarac and Ozretić Došen 2024.

[9] Yee and Sng 2022.

[10] "Survey: Museums, Museum Professionals and COVID-19" n.d.

[11] Antonelli and Galloway 2022.

[12] Gambin et al. 2021.

player coming back for more. Sky Anderson argues that video games can be designed to serve as interactive museums with pedagogical value[13]; this approach reframes virtual museum design, centering decisions on creating engaging visitor interactions while presenting the collection and institution. This focus invites a visitor to learn naturally and follow their curiosity in the virtual museum as they might in a physical space. By taking lessons from the player interaction design of the ACM, virtual museums can be better designed to meet the psychological needs of visitors and build long-lasting relationships between the visitor and the institution.

Lesson One: Start with visitor experience at the center of virtual museum design. The ACM prioritizes player experience over the educational presentation of objects, creating an immersive museum visit for the player. Instead of beginning with how to show the collection, start with the visitor. How will they experience the virtual museum? How should they be allowed to explore? How might they make new discoveries? What needs might they be looking to meet?

Lesson Two: Allow the visitor to collaborate on the creation of the virtual museum. The ACM depends on direct action from the visitor to expand and grow its collection and space, while most real-world museums offer virtual experiences that are passive for the visitor. Virtual museums might gamify experiences where a visitor works within the collection to curate, display, and share their favorite artworks within virtual galleries.

Lesson Three: Make the virtual museum a habit with intermittent rewards and increased access over time. The ACM integrates daily touches of interaction – some time-consuming like evaluating artwork authenticity, others brief like stopping in to say hi to Blathers – building a habit of connection over time. A virtual museum might offer time-based rewards or unique artworks to visitors who engage on a regular basis. Traveling exhibitions at the museum could bring new artworks to virtual collections.

Lesson Four: Build social interaction into the virtual museum. The ACM is a cultural space for friends to gather in the digital world and meet social needs. Museums that offer virtual talks and tours in a presentational format might encourage social interaction through discussion questions and time for open-ended story sharing and reflection – a tactic that has been shown to decrease social isolation and improve physical and mental health.[14]

Lesson Five: Add an avatar. The customizable avatar in *ACNH* places the player within the familiar architecture of a prestigious museum and allows them to smoothly navigate through expansive galleries and beautiful displays. The visitor sees the museum, but they also see themselves *in* the museum. Many virtual museums offer Google-street-view-style tours from a first-person perspective that show empty galleries as if the visitor is standing alone in the museum.[15] Instead, virtual museums visitors could choose an avatar for museum exploration.

Lesson Six: Show off curator personality. Blathers adds a lovable face to the ACM and creates a personal connection with the player. Many museums use social media to show off the

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[13] Anderson 2019.
[14] Beauchet et al. 2022.
[15] The British Museum and the Louvre both offer this style of virtual tour – the MET has a similar video-based experience.

friendly staff behind the institution. Virtual museums can integrate this content as embedded videos or through interactive curator avatars that allow the visitor to ask questions.

Lesson Seven: Address colonial roots of museums. Players of *AC:NH* visit uninhabited islands to take resources and collect specimens. While no virtual museum would build in this level of intensely unethical interaction from the visitor, audiences can be engaged in conversation about the colonial legacy of museums. A museum could create exhibitions of repatriated or restituted objects within the virtual museum, allowing visitors a deeper exploration into the return of objects collected unethically.

The ACM meets visitor needs by offering an immersive, interactive experience, and depends on direct action from the visitor to expand and grow its collection and space. Most real-world museums offer virtual experiences that are passive for the visitor; information is offered up at the ready with a few clicks, focused on the age-old tradition of museum as academic informer instead of building a collaborative experience for the visitor. The tricks to develop engaging virtual experiences that keep visitors coming back long-term are commonplace in the video game industry; it is up to museums to take the lessons and implement them into their own digital realms.

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