

Digital Biedermeier

(Self-)care in Animal Crossing: New Horizons

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing periods of social distancing saw the widespread use of digital games as a 'crisis hobby,' providing distraction and comfort during this time of confinement to the home space. Surpassing the notion of the game as an escapist outlet, this article explores how *tend-and-befriend games* like Nintendo's *Animal Crossing* foster well-being and (self-)care among its players, particularly under pandemic conditions. We propose the term *Digital Biedermeier* to theorize the forms of self-care found in and around the interior spaces of these games through the lens of the historic Biedermeier period, a time likewise marked by a new-found focus on domestic spaces and the adherent practices of home-making and decorating. Departing from this notion of a digital retreat, we shed light upon the unique care structure of *Animal Crossing* by mapping the practices carried out within the game to the wider philosophical discourse around care, particularly Arendt's basic human activities of *labor*, *work*, and *action*. In doing so, the article interweaves elements of game analysis with a situated and praxeological approach that takes into account experiences and observations in online player communities.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic and the associated contact restrictions have

drastically changed our daily lives. As the coronavirus crisis is a time of uncertainty for many people, the recent months saw the development and refinement of various coping strategies designed to alleviate the effects of the 'lockdown triad' of anxiety, loneliness, and boredom. Consequently, digital games have become a popular 'crisis hobby' providing distraction and comfort during this time of social distancing. In the wake of the pandemic, these games are more in demand than ever: a representative study from 2021 shows that half of the German population now uses digital games at least occasionally (Bitkom, 2021). This pandemic has not only affected the proportion of players (from 46% in 2020 to 50% in 2021), but also the duration of play. Since the beginning of the pandemic, playing duration has increased from about five hours per week to 10 hours. Six out of 10 players also state that during the pandemic, games helped them to cope with the situation better. Even the World Health Organization (WHO), which has traditionally viewed computer games and their presumed addictive qualities rather critically, now recommends playing digital games together and promotes social connection with the hashtag *#PlayApartTogether*. Accordingly, video games have been shown to create opportunity for social contact and allow players to at least temporarily push aside COVID-related worries by escaping into mentally stimulating, virtual worlds (Barr & Copeland-Stewart, 2021, p. 14).

The most prominent exponent of this trend is Nintendo's social simulation game *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, which heavily features domestic practices like furnishing and decorating. *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* garnered considerable media attention as a COVID-related success and "lockdown phenomenon" (Barr & Copeland-Stewart, 2021, p. 7). It has been an integral part of many people's lives since its release in March 2020—eventually becoming both one of the best-selling games of 2020 in the United States and Nintendo's second biggest commercial success on the Switch console (Grubb, 2021).

The collective public and academic discourse on digital games has long revolved around their suspected potential for violence, anti-social behavior, and addiction (Kowert, Festl & Quandt, 2014; Kowert, Griffiths & Oldmeadow, 2012). In recent times, however, a growing body of literature has questioned this deficit-focused view of video games, and there have

been several attempts to position games as tools for self-improvement (e.g., McGonigal, 2015) and self-care (e.g., Halbrook et al., 2019; Kowert, 2020; Taylor et al., 2019). In this research, games increasingly appear as self-help programs that have the “potential to positively impact our psychological well-being” (Kowert, 2020, p. 159). In addition, communication researchers and media psychologists have pointed out for decades that *escapism* is a common motivator for using entertainment media and video games in particular (Reer & Quandt, 2020). The basic notion that games can temporarily increase a person’s well-being simply by acting as a distraction from their stress and worries has lately been expanded upon. Instead of merely focusing on the escapist aspect, researchers now increasingly ask *how* and *why* games can support psychological growth and self-care or help in coping with mental health issues (Kowert, 2020; Reer & Quandt, 2020).

In our paper we take an analytical look at the genre of *tend-and-befriend* games; examine how these types of games can foster well-being and (self-) care; and connect them to wider philosophical discourses about care. The games discussed have a strong focus on care, well-being and community, deliver wholesome content, and revolve around low-stress gameplay without a mandatory goal. As opposed to *fight-or-flight* titles, *tend-and-befriend* games usually invite players to take care of both a virtual world and its inhabitants (Code, 2017). We discuss these games based on an analysis of *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* and its teenage player communities. We argue that *tend-and-befriend* games in particular are sought by players in search of salutary effects and comforting messages, i.e., players that tap into video game’s potential to “[...] be used for psychological growth, as tools to help cope with depression, anxiety, and stress by fostering persistence, self-care, and resilience” (Kowert, 2020, p. 162).

Uncertainty—and the corollary feeling of living through uncertain times—is not unique to the COVID-19 pandemic. The world seems to be in a state of perpetual crisis since the so-called ‘war on terror’ and the financial crisis during the 2000s (Rheingold Institute, 2010). From this perspective, the pandemic has only accelerated and exacerbated an ongoing development. The longing for an ‘ideal world’ that has been taken up in digital games

is not a new phenomenon either. In fact, the various offshoots of the *Harvest Moon/Story of Seasons* series have had players managing their own farms since 1996, and in 2016, the farming role-playing game *Stardew Valley* became a mainstream success. It is therefore long overdue to think of *tend-and-befriend* games as media of (self-)care, whose scenarios and possible courses of action have effects that reach far beyond the escapism usually attributed to the genre.

Acknowledging the interest in digital domestic spaces underpinned by the physical isolation caused by the pandemic, we propose the titular term *Digital Biedermeier* to theorize forms of self-care found within *Animal Crossing* and the wider genre of *tend-and-befriend* games through the lens of the historic Biedermeier epoch, a time marked by practices of home-making and domestic decoration carried out in an effort to distract from and compensate for feelings of uncertainty and loss of control.

While a clear and notable interest for distraction and escape in the face of crises can be observed among players, we will show that it is precisely the move towards the private and domestic which enables them to find ways of help and improvement. After all, their withdrawal from the public is not a lonely endeavor, but one that is shared by large numbers of other players who they are connected with via social media and/or the multiplayer functionality of the game. This means that players can give and receive care and find community in their very escape. The forms of ritual cultural exchange (like practices of mourning) and concerted political activism we found in and around the game point towards real communities emerging from the *Digital Biedermeier*-cultural and political communities which are precarious in the sense that the control over their spaces still lies with the respective companies (e.g., Nintendo).



Figure 1: Collage of Tweets related to the search term pairs “Animal Crossing” & “mental health” and “Animal Crossing” & “care”.

We will proceed to build our argument in three steps: First, we specify the relationship between the current pandemic situation and the games we studied by conceptualizing their game worlds as digital interiors akin to the domestic spaces of the Biedermeier epoch and Walter Benjamin’s (2002) description of the bourgeois interior. The practices of (self-)care that take place within these interiors are then mapped onto the wider philosophical discourse on care. Here, we focus on Hannah Arendt’s (1998) three kinds of human activity in particular: *labor*, *work*, and *action*. After this theoretical discussion, we explore *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* by employing a multimodal research approach that involves both a game analysis component and a netnographic component.

Following the “Playing Research” methodology laid out by Espen Aarseth (2007), our game analysis relies on three main sources of information about *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*. These include textual information provided by players and critics, e.g., in the form of wiki entries and journalistic articles; gameplay footage obtained from streams and pre-recorded *Let’s Play* videos; and our own playing experiences. Here, we focus on the aspects of the game—variously theorized as layers (Konzack, 2002, p. 89) or building blocks (Fernández-Vara, 2019, p. 4)—most pertinent to our research interests, i.e., the core gameplay mechanics, the ludic spaces in which the game takes place, and the relationships and communities that develop within and through the game.

To gain insight into the various online communities surrounding *Animal*

Crossing, we relied on the netnographic methodology outlined by Robert V. Kozinets. This participant-observational method is grounded on online fieldwork and “uses computer-mediated communications as a source of data to arrive at the ethnographic understanding and representation of a cultural or communal phenomenon” (Kozinets, 2010, p. 60). We have explored *Animal Crossing* communities on Discord (by participating in the “Animal Crossing: New Horizons”/“acnh” server with over 500.000 members), Reddit (by joining the *subreddit* “r/AnimalCrossing” with 1.6 million members), and Twitter (by observing the #ACNH hashtag). The groups we identified correspond to the netnographic approach as they are relevant, (inter)active, substantial, heterogeneous, and data-rich (Kozinets, 2010, p. 89). From May 2020 to September 2020, we studied social interactions within these communities on a regular basis. In reference to our research topic, we have also specifically searched for keywords like “mental health,” “care,” “worry,” and “anxiety” to find out more about these particular topics in the context of *Animal Crossing*.

Our approach to analyze *Animal Crossing* aims to shed light on the playful practices of labor, work, and political action carried out within and through the game worlds of *tend-and-befriend* games.

ANIMAL CROSSING: NEW HORIZONS

The discussion about “computer games as a balm for the troubled soul” (Moorstedt, 2020) focuses on one title in particular: Nintendo’s real-time social simulation game *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, released in March 2020. The game, which offers a pleasant idyllic counter-design to the uncertain times we are currently living through, went on to sell more than 22 million copies by August of the same year (Nintendo, 2020). In the latest installment of the *Animal Crossing* series, players find themselves on an idyllic deserted island which is cultivated with their help and populated by anthropomorphic animals. Fishing, gardening, woodworking, crafting as well as decorating the virtual home are among the basic activities of the game. By offering attention and gifts, the player can also become friends with their animal neighbors. Threats and disasters do not exist on the virtual island; discord and violence are no means to advance in the game. Instead, *Animal Crossing* encourages caring and aims to achieve

an increase in well-being through meditative gameplay and a generally positive attitude. Values such as gratitude, patience, diligence, care, and solidarity underpin everything that is happening within the diegetic space.

When players first arrive at the island, they are tasked with deweeding the area; this activity is monetarily rewarded, since the weeds can be sold to the local general store. Once the island in *Animal Crossing* has been cleaned up by the player, new weeds to pull out will instantly start to grow. Upon arriving at the island, the player is also forced to take out an in-game loan to pay for their cost of travel and lodging. Since there are several chores and activities that are rewarded with in-game money, paying off a loan in *Animal Crossing* poses no great challenge. Earning money soon becomes a necessity, as resident service representative Tom Nook, a capitalist raccoon, replaces each loan with another (bigger) one in order to pay for continuous upgrades to the player's homestead. The initial tent is soon replaced by a basic house which can subsequently be expanded by adding rooms, basements and upper floors, all of which can be furnished and decorated in a multitude of ways.

Due to this underlying economic structure, *Animal Crossing* has been variously described as a critique of contemporary consumer culture (Bogost, 2007), a "pastoral-capitalist equilibrium of humdrum labor" (Bogost, 2020), and a capitalist dystopia (Rimm, 2020). These accounts point towards a possible tension between the game's capitalist logic and the framework of self-care and well-being outlined above. Consequently, the questions we ask here are: How does the game's promise to provide relief from one's daily life relate to its reproduction of the economic structures which permeate daily life in the first place? How does the game frame its capitalist base structure and how do players engage with it? And how does this impact the way in which practices of care and self-care in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* play out?

THE DIGITAL INTERIOR

To address these questions that pertain to the separation between work and leisure—or workplace and home, to put it in spatial terms—we turn to the historic example of the Biedermeier period. The term *Biedermeier*

marks a time of relative political stability in central Europe that lasted from the Congress of Vienna at the end of the Napoleonic wars in 1815 until the political upheaval of the German revolutions of 1848-1849. This term is derived from Gottlieb Biedermaier, a fictional character invented by the lawyer and writer Ludwig Eichrodt and the doctor Adolf Kußmaul. This character served to satirize and lampoon the apolitical stance and moral uprightness (German: *Biederkeit*) of a new middle class that the 19th century's rapid urbanization and industrialization had given rise to. This apolitical stance was fueled by the Carlsbad Decrees of 1819, a body of legislation aimed at restricting the (written) freedom of expression, installing censorship of the press, and dissolving political groups like fraternities. Intimidated by these laws, artists looked to benefit from the well-funded clientele of the new urban bourgeoisie who began embellishing their domestic spaces as a means of escape from the bustle of the industrialized world and the increasingly regulated sphere of political and public commitment. Thus, the studies and parlors of the time became home to ornate carpets, drapery, and of course, the eponymous Biedermeier furniture. Typical of the style are clear lines, simplicity, and elegance with a focus on material and texture—features that went on to influence the stylistic developments of the 20th century.

We posit that the ludic activities carried out by players of *tend-and-befriend* games can be seen as refigurations of these practices of home-making introduced during the Biedermeier period, as both are employed in the spirit of compensating for and recuperating from outside stress, i.e., to positively affect one's well-being.



Figure 2: Left: *Zimmerbild* (chamber painting) of a Biedermeier interior in Berlin (Leopold Zielcke, c. 1825, https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Datei:Zimmerbild_83.jpg). Right: Screenshot from *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (<https://angelbayisland.tumblr.com/post/614415076932370432/acnh-week-2-home-designs>)

The miniature worlds cultivated in titles such as *Harvest Moon* or *Animal Crossing* revive the ideals attributed to the historic period of the Biedermeier: an inward focus on the familiar and the tried and tested; the desire to furnish and design that is indispensable for creating a domestic refuge; and, finally, the protection from the outside world guaranteed by the privacy of one's home. This attitude—which can be found in most, if not all, *tend-and-befriend* games—is evidenced in reviews and social media posts (e.g., Geyer, 2020; Kayls, 2021) in which players describe feelings of security and safety that they experience as soon as they enter their virtual sanctuaries. The isolation and narrow spatial boundaries of the digital interiors in question come with the advantage that it takes almost no time for a feeling of familiarity with the environment to set in. By virtue of this quality, they offer a welcome counterpoint to the spatial and medial dissolutions of boundaries that characterize the current pandemic crisis. For neither the events of the pandemic itself nor their portrayals in the media—which seem to gain relevance for one's own affected life via the common reference point of a crisis turned global—manage to penetrate the boundaries of the curated diegetic world.¹

We can turn to Walter Benjamin's description of the emergence of the

1. In *Animal Crossing*, communication with the other players is reduced to a selection of elementary emotional expressions, gestures, and a limited chat. New content can only be added at the explicit request of the player.

bourgeois interior during the 19th century, to hone in on another pair of once distinct spheres whose diffusion was greatly sped up over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic:

For the private individual, the place of dwelling is for the first time opposed to the place of work. The former constitutes itself as the interior. Its complement is the office. The private individual, who in the office has to deal with reality, needs the domestic interior to sustain him in his illusions. (Benjamin, 2002, p. 8)

The demarcation between living space and workplace, a boundary that has long been eroded due to the state of perpetual potential availability generated by digital media, is completely dissolved in the wake of the current health crisis. In the form of quarantines, ‘home office’ and ‘home schooling,’ the pandemic takes place firstly and foremost within one’s own four walls. Consequently, the home becomes the place where “the private individual [...] has to deal with reality” (Benjamin, 1999, p. 8) by carrying out both reproductive labor *and* wage labor.² At the same time, the compensatory practices of ‘taking control’, i.e., of shaping and arranging material objects within one’s own physical interior, are visibly shifted to the digital interior—to a place of retreat of the second order, so to speak. Thus, the increasing popularity of *tend-and-befriend* games as digital havens can be explained by the previous, physical spaces of escape being colonized and re-shaped by the recent crises of the capitalist mode of production.³

Considering the capitalist logic inscribed into *Animal Crossing*, the dynamic outlined above might seem like an escape ‘out of the frying pan into the fire,’ so to speak. But the atmospheric consequence of the economic aspects of the game is an impression of *ambivalence* towards capitalism. The fantasy *Animal Crossing* offers in this way is one of ‘capitalism with a human face’ –or, to be precise, capitalism with the face of a raccoon– which chooses to gloss over the inherent hardships of the system by the

2. Benjamin’s original quotation refers to the ‘private man’ (German: *Privatmann*), eliding the reproductive work that takes place at home. One could argue that the whole dichotomy between domestic space and workplace falls apart when observed from the perspective of (dominantly female) reproductive labor.
3. It should be noted that the retreat cannot succeed completely. As will be shown in the following sections, the game world of *Animal Crossing* is also inherently capitalist to some extent.

omittance of negative consequences, i.e., ludic fail-states. In the world of the game, there are no deadlines, no interest rates attached to paying back one's loans, and no debt collectors to punish the players should they decide not to.

FEAR, ANXIETY, AND CARE

Framing the observed practices as acts of escape and retreat correlates with Martin Heidegger's understanding of care as expressed in the German word *Sorge* that signifies both connotations of care and of worry. In his conception of the term, Heidegger (1962) evokes both dimensions of its meaning while locating *Sorge* as central for the human condition (pp. 235-241). The worry-centered side of the concept is emphasized by preceding trains of thought that start with a discussion of fear (*Furcht*), which Heidegger defines as the perception of being directly threatened by a specific nearby object. He then differentiates anxiety (*Angst*) from fear as a more general sense of unease (Heidegger, 1962, pp. 228-235). This is the basis on which he introduces his concept of care—as primarily motivated by a sense of existential dread and threat. In the second step, care can also be extended to others who are experienced as just as vulnerable. The Heideggerian form of care—the concern about one's own vulnerability, mortality, and finite power—also drives many players of *Animal Crossing* back into their living rooms and in front of their game consoles. This kind of worry is based on a perspective that places a phenomenological subject at its beginning, which then fears for its continued existence as a lonely citizen. Heidegger (1962) famously describes the human condition accordingly as "Being-there as being towards death" (*Dasein als Sein zum Tode*) (pp. 296-299).

The Heideggerian concepts of fear, anxiety, and care have been formerly applied in game studies by Sebastian Möring (2013, pp. 289-294; 2019). Möring posits that many games—from the violent *Battlefield: Bad Company 2* to the cartoonish *Super Mario Brothers*, and even the nonviolent, abstract *Tetris*—exhibit a "fear structure" (Möring, 2019, p. 232) based on the player's basic fear of losing the game and not being able to continue to play (Möring, 2019, pp. 236-242). This fear structure implies a care structure which can be exemplified by games like *SimCity* (Möring, 2019, p. 242). On

one hand, *SimCity* has a fail state: Going bankrupt ends the game, thus providing a threat scenario for the player akin to that of *Tetris* or maybe even *Battlefield*. On the other hand, *SimCity's* central challenge is taking care of a simulated city. Möring even likens this task to tending a garden, offering a direct thematic connection to the subject of our paper (Möring, 2013, p. 223). In contrast, *Animal Crossing* does not have any fail state; it does not even punish the player for the most part. Worst-case scenarios include being the recipient of a bad business deal or being stung by insects and spiders, which can cause the avatar to faint, temporarily disrupting the gameplay flow.

If, following Heidegger, any care is predicated on fear and anxiety, it would be hard to explain how *Animal Crossing* could elicit enough care from players to be played. Looking at the game, players are most often engaged in making the environment nice and pretty, not in protecting it from harm; the future in *Animal Crossing* is not a threat, but a promise. The players care for the virtual environment for improvement, not preservation. It appears we are encountering at least two distinct categories of games here, the first focusing on a more pronounced fear-structure, the second on a more pronounced care-structure. Games have recently been categorized into *fight-or-flight*-oriented gameplay that features more thrilling action, or *tend-and-befriend*-gameplay that is focused on attentive care (Code, 2017)—the latter of which is exemplified by *Animal Crossing*. We do not want to perpetuate the gender-deterministic biologisms and pop-science understanding of hormones that have been invoked in this discourse in order to differentiate between the two⁴—the important differences can be abstracted from the game structures and aesthetics as we have shown above.

THREE KINDS OF HUMAN ACTIVITY: LABOR, WORK, AND ACTION

In trying to re-engage with philosophy on the basis of these observations, one arrives at *The Human Condition*, one of the major works of Hannah Arendt (1998). She posits natality as the central fact of human existence, meaning that every human is born as a newcomer into the world and thus

4. For an elaborate critique, see Stone, 2020, p. 420.

is able to make new beginnings. This concept is explained using Arendt's three kinds of human activity: *labor*, which consists of the reproductive activities concerned with the security of direct survival; *work*, which produces things that stand the test of time; and *action*, which is activity with others in public, meaning free, political action. Arendt describes these activities more specifically and in relation to natality:

Labor and work, as well as action, are also rooted in natality in so far as they have the task to provide and preserve the world for, to foresee and reckon with, the constant influx of newcomers who are born into the world as strangers. However, of the three, action has the closest connection with the human condition of natality; the new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting. In this sense of initiative, an element of action, and therefore of natality, is inherent in all human activities. Moreover, since action is the political activity par excellence, natality, and not mortality, may be the central category of political, as distinguished from metaphysical, thought. (Arendt, 1998, p. 9)

We see here a direct reversal of the centrality of death in Heidegger's thought. Vulnerability thus enters thought primarily as the vulnerability of others—that “constant influx of newcomers who are born into the world as strangers” (Arendt, 1998, p. 9) and have to be welcomed and cared for as such. Here, concern for others is the norm and concern for the self is the abstraction, not the other way around. In these reflections on the *conditio humana*, the focus shifts from Martin Heidegger's threatened subject to the integration of human beings into communities. From this perspective, a concern for one's own well-being is inseparable from the concern for others.

Similar conceptions of the human condition as a communal one can be found in other contexts as well. In our current situation, it seems fitting that Albert Camus (1997) chooses a city under the influence of a plague epidemic as the setting for his allegorical depiction of solidarity in *The Plague*. In addition, a multitude of poststructuralist theories understand individual subjects as socially produced. In a view like this, the individual subject and their freedom can be seen as a shared achievement, while avoiding sacrificing the importance of subjectivity to the primacy of the group in the process. With this in mind, it is not surprising that players seek

and find comfort in video games that focus on care—be it care for fellow creatures or the virtual environment.

Since they offer comfort in the form of care and have proven to be powerful tools for dealing with negative emotions, *tend-and-befriend* games experienced a boost in popularity in recent years. Multiplayer *tend-and-befriend* games have become digital meeting places where people can not only interact and have fun, but also support (and with that *care for*) each other by mutually fostering their virtual worlds. In *Animal Crossing*, players may visit others to water their flowers or do other chores for them.⁵ Likewise, advanced players may invite newcomers to their islands to support them by giving them access to rare items and beneficial opportunities. Examples like these make clear that *tend-and-befriend* games and the comfort they offer are not necessarily an isolationist and escapist venture. Often enough, the digital interior builds the foundation for mutual moments of care and solace. The worry-free and simplistic structure of care we see in these virtual worlds invites us to turn to each other through gameplay—not only to the game’s characters and its world, but also to the other players we meet along the way. These fruitful interactions are embedded into peaceful and welcoming environments where players never have to encounter severe obstacles, and where mutual encounters and care are desired and rewarded. As a result, games like *Animal Crossing* emphasize and promote a form of care that the world outside of these game settings and remote virtual islands often lacks.

In the beginning, we indicated that games can be used as ‘self-help programs.’ After investigating their contents and frameworks, it can be added that the *tend-and-befriend* titles discussed in this paper not only endow personal well-being and encourage self-care, but are also grounded on caring for *others*. In these ‘self-help programs,’ topics of *labor* and *work* take central thematic roles. In working through these activities and their function, we reference Hannah Arendt’s three spheres of human activity as a rough guideline for the structure of the rest of this text. Players of *Animal Crossing* maintain their environment and produce food and shelter, which means they *labor* in accordance with Arendt’s terminology. They

5. Interestingly, *Animal Crossing* encourages this mutual care by rewarding task sharing. If a player invites guests to their island to water their flowers, it dramatically increases the chances of unlocking new and rare flower types and colors.

also *work* in that they build their homes, craft furniture, and decorate the surrounding landscape, creating things that endure over time. The game even gives people the possibility to collaboratively fashion messages about how they want to live together, as we will see towards the end of the paper. This completes the three types of activity in Arendt's *Vita Activa* with the ability to *act*, which means to be political. However, since our sources do not always differentiate between *labor* and *work*, we will not use this terminology consistently within the scope of this text.

WORK AND CARE IN DIGITAL GAMES

The games we discuss in this paper give players the opportunity to digitally carry out tasks that most of them do not get to experience in their everyday lives. Allowing players to take a break from our modern and urbanized world, these games emphasize outdoor labor and handicraft: crops are cultivated and harvested in the fields, cows are milked, sheep are sheared, trees are chopped down, and the obtained products are then used for manufacturing and crafting. Consequently, the lumber and stone a player just acquired might be the foundation for their new, virtual home. In this scenario, the players operate as workers that are not alienated from the products of their own labor. Related to modern work, alienation describes two circumstances: the person working is removed from the benefits or goals of their activity under the conditions of wage labor; and the person working is removed from the finished product due to the division of labor. In *Animal Crossing*, this is not the case: all by themselves, players harvest wood from a tree they planted and directly use it to build a cabinet for their own home.

Even when players gift the products of their labor to someone else, they are already in a close personal relationship with them. In addition, they will not only be compensated materially, but will also be rewarded with enthusiastic personal gratitude. Aside from working with and for their virtual environment, *tend-and-befriend* games also encourage players to build and *work on* their relationships with other in-game characters. This is usually achieved through regular conversations, gift offerings (that sometimes have to be crafted beforehand), and errand runs. In doing so, friendship points can be raised until certain friendship goals are met.

In *Animal Crossing*, once the game's characters have reached maximum friendship level, the player's efforts will eventually be rewarded with a rare framed picture of the respective character. While players in *Animal Crossing* have to guess how high their friendship levels are, other titles like *Harvest Moon* visualize them through a 'friendship bar' that is similar to the classical health bar we see in most combat-oriented and survival video games. In *tend-and-befriend* games that possess a focus on dating (e.g., *Harvest Moon*, *Stardew Valley*), filling the friendship bar through kindness and generosity unlocks cutscenes and can lead to a romantic relationship with the game's marriage candidates. At the same time, ignoring or even mistreating non-player characters is condemned in most *tend-and-befriend* games. In older *Harvest Moon* titles, characters might move away from the virtual world if players do not talk to them. In *Animal Crossing*, villagers disappointedly comment on a player's absence and become upset if players treat them badly.

This shows that work, be it manual labor or working on relationships, is a fundamental ingredient of the player's daily routine in *tend-and-befriend* games. However, this idea which Kim (2014) describes as "game as labor, labor as game" (p. 363) can be found in other genres as well. For example, MMORPGs like *World of Warcraft* have established so-called *grinding*. A player who is *grinding* repeatedly executes certain tasks to level up their character or receive other rewards. Such tasks usually include repetitive battles against the same enemies or recurring quests. While playing video games is often described as an exciting way to escape from everyday life and its associated routines and burdens, dull practices like grinding can affect how players perceive games. For some, a *grindy* gaming session might feel like work, and gaming can become tedious or even boring in the process (Kim, 2014). As Scott Rettberg (2008) writes, "[t]hrough playing the game is itself a form of escapism from the demands of life in the real world, it is somewhat paradoxically a kind of escapism into a second professional life, a world of work" (p. 26). In *World of Warcraft*, this "second professional life" is significantly different from the labor players carry out in their everyday lives as it revolves around fantasy settings and heroic (albeit sometimes repetitive) tasks. Games like *Animal Crossing*, on the other hand, take the idea of "game as labor, labor as game" quite literally by asking their players to do mundane, true-to-life chores such as dweeding and

cleaning up their digital environment. However, whether we look at the fantastic task solving in *World of Warcraft* or the true-to-life duties in *Animal Crossing*, the principle in these games is quite similar. Both provide players with feelings of agency and accomplishment that can positively affect their well-being (Barr & Copeland-Stewart, 2021).

When discussing games and their potentially positive effects, researchers often explore which particular mechanics impact players. In this context, the concept of *flow* is often mentioned. The term, coined by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990), refers to the experience of “being in the zone” and a “state of optimal experience” (Reer & Quandt, 2020, p. 5). Flow can be achieved through absorbing activities and is not limited to entertainment media or video games (albeit having been extensively researched in this area). The inherent level of difficulty of an activity and the skills of the person who carries it out determine if the state of flow actually unfolds (Reer & Quandt, 2020). To experience flow and to prevent frustration, an optimal match between skill and task should exist so that the latter is neither perceived as too boring nor as too demanding (Klimmt, 2017). As Barr and Copeland-Stewart (2021) argue, games that successfully elicit feelings of flow “are designed to have a positive effect on players’ mood, to be enjoyable to play” (p. 10). It is worth asking whether *Animal Crossing* provides a “flow-inducing balance of challenge versus achievement” (Barr & Copeland-Stewart, 2021, p. 10). While flow in gaming is associated with genres like first-person shooters and usually not applied to the more casual *tend-and-befriend* games, tasks like decorating the virtual home or terraforming the island in *Animal Crossing* should not be underestimated. These tasks do require skill and involve a learning curve. Many players even use community guides to learn how certain tasks can be executed and how a perfect outcome can be achieved. Interestingly, flow is often broached by players themselves in regards to *Animal Crossing*’s positive impacts on their well-being and mental health. Here, the term is most likely used colloquially and related to the high levels of absorption and relaxation *Animal Crossing* players experience. However, despite including certain gameplay mechanics and reported effects that could be connected to “flow,” it should be noted that Csikszentmihalyi’s original theory can be applied to *Animal Crossing* only to a limited extent.

Much like in 'real life,'⁶ players are required to complete tasks in *Animal Crossing* repeatedly. As a result, gaming sessions can quickly evolve into a "self-disciplining process" (Kim, 2014, p. 363) that is orchestrated and monitored by the game's bookkeeping systems. *Animal Crossing* does this not only by constantly prompting the players with new chores and cluttering the environment for them to clean up, but also by ranking their virtual world according to its cleanliness. Players with a high work ethic and a tidy island can unlock new content and rewards. This provides them with a sense of achievement and purpose, which, again, can positively affect their well-being. Since *Animal Crossing* runs in real time, the recurring duties turn out to be a quite remarkable Sisyphean task: even when the console is switched-off, gameplay proceeds. In fact, when days or weeks have passed between one *Animal Crossing* session and the next, players are greeted by cockroaches in their virtual house, rampant weeds, and disappointed neighbors. However, what at first glance may seem like a punishment of the player's negligence actually can be construed as the game asking its players for care and attention. While games like *Animal Crossing* demand from their players endless and recurring care work, these games also offer diegetic characters' meaningful appreciation and rewards. Therefore, the players have to be understood as happy laborers in the style of Camus' Sisyphus.

Although taking care of virtual worlds and their inhabitants can be demanding, players take pleasure in tending to the virtual environment, as their efforts are continually praised. Finally, playing games that feel like work may also be considered as a legitimization of play. Despite researchers' efforts to increasingly highlight the positive effects gaming can have, games still have the reputation of being a waste of time (Kowert, 2020; Rettberg, 2008). Through so-called "constructivist gameplay" (Wirman, 2011, p. 223), playing games often goes hand in hand with a feeling of accomplishment which can counter possible remorse. After all,

6. Players often use the term 'real life' to refer to their life outside of a video game and its community. When speaking of 'real life' in this paper, we do not want to imply that players' experiences in the context of video games are less real or meaningful than their non-digital experiences. Following Paul Byron (2021, p. 11) we strongly believe that "we cannot return to a predigital media era, or separate digital from non-digital life" and that "we must adjust our thinking to accommodate how digital media are used by, and are useful to, young people."

if the time spent in the game feels like work, can it be considered wasted time?

Earlier, this paper indicated that most *tend-and-befriend* games, which aim for a cheerful and relaxing experience, avoid heavy topics and lack mandatory goals. While there certainly are long-term tasks like filling the in-game museum in *Animal Crossing* with exhibition pieces or catching all available fish, players always get to choose if they want to pursue a certain objective at all. Unlike other games, *Animal Crossing* does not have a real ending. Even if all base game contents are unlocked, and the secondary plot is finished, an ongoing gameplay loop with recurring tasks and possibilities is available. If players decide to work on a project, there usually is no time limit; *Animal Crossing* lets them experience its contents at their own pace. Furthermore, if something does not go smoothly, there will always be another opportunity to solve it. As Reer and Quandt (2020) state, players enjoy unlocking achievements and going through successful moments in digital games as this lets them experience self-efficacy, which can have a positive effect on their well-being (p. 5). Since there is no 'game over,' and it is basically impossible to fail in most *tend-and-befriend* games, such pleasant moments of success seem to be ever-present. In *Animal Crossing*, there will always be a second chance, and even 'gatekept' in-game content is relatively easy to obtain. For instance, if players did not attend the game's festivals, tournaments, and special event quests, they can catch up on them the next year or simply change the time settings on their Switch console to time-travel to a specific event. While some items are particularly hard to find and strictly time-locked, so that only advanced players might receive them, all eligible *Animal Crossing* content is shared within online communities, too. In this context, in-game content is traded and then exchanged via the game's multiplayer mode. By organizing their own communities and making content available through trading, players get the chance of obtaining even the rarest items and can overcome any kind of in-game barriers together.

Unlike in 'real life,' any kind of problem and challenge in games like *Animal Crossing* can be eventually solved, and even ambitious projects are generally manageable. Building a house, paying off a mortgage or catching the biggest fish might be challenging, but there are no serious obstacles

impeding players from reaching their in-game goals. Once the necessary arrangements have been made, results can immediately be seen in the virtual world. The enjoyment players experience when exerting influence on virtual worlds in video games can be explained through the psychological concept of *effectance* which refers to “the rewarding experience of imposing an effect on the environment” (Klimmt & Hartmann, 2006, p. 137). Interacting with an environment and realizing that our actions make a difference can be a source of positive emotions; and since interacting with and governing the virtual environment is one of the key ingredients of *tend-and-befriend* games, it can be argued that effectance comes into play to a large extent in this genre.

For many players, the control and impact they exert within the virtual world is meaningful as it lets them experience feelings of autonomy, competence, and mastery which can lead to a boost in confidence (Reer & Quandt, 2020, p. 9). While participating in *Animal Crossing* fan communities on Discord, we have seen teenage players discussing that they sometimes feel overwhelmed by their everyday duties and find organizing their ‘real life’ chores and schoolwork difficult, but at the same time, they can thoughtfully administer their virtual worlds and keep record of their in-game achievements, individual goals and plans.⁷ Especially for younger players, playing *tend-and-befriend* games and managing the game’s contents can thus serve as both educational as well as entertaining experiences with problem solving, strategic planning, and accounting. Some players even report that they work with elaborate notebooks that often include calculations and sources of revenue, as *tend-and-befriend* games usually have their own currency and a notable focus on earning and spending money. As a result, the player’s virtual work and labor is not only rewarded with praise and progress, but also recognized with actual in-game money. With earning money, budgeting, and thinking economically, even more everyday life matters are incorporated into *tend-and-befriend* games. If

7. Wirman (2011) points out something similar in her research on *The Sims*. Here, a player “wonders why, when baby sleeps and laundry, cleaning etc. is done, she finds it most relaxing to manage virtual Sims households” (p. 198). According to Wirman, “players use *The Sims* for escapism from their stressful everyday lives of being mothers and taking care of the home” – by doing the exact same tasks in a virtual space. However, Wirman states this space offers “both control over the things that are not under their control in real life as well as alternative fantastic and supernatural solutions to issues” (p. 198).

players want to succeed, they will have to follow capitalist logic. An example concerns buying and upgrading the virtual home in *Animal Crossing*. To be able to afford this, a loan has to be taken out. Paying back the loan requires a lot of hard labor—and once the player is finally debt-free, they are encouraged to take out yet another loan to obtain an even bigger house. The cycle thus repeats itself over and over again.

We have shown that *tend-and-befriend* games convey positivity and offer an escape from everyday life. They invite players into idyllic, remote worlds where their well-being is valued and perhaps even boosted. The strong focus on discipline, work, and money does not contradict the peaceful direction of *tend-and-befriend* games as players at all times maintain a feeling of control while managing their virtual worlds; they are usually asked to carry out tasks that are easy to grasp and feasible (Wirman, 2011, p. 198). While the world we live in, especially in times of crisis, can be perceived as confusing and unpredictable, its virtual counterpart is pre-structured by a clear set of rules, routines, and the general game predictability. Players operate within a confined space they can oversee and govern. Challenges and disturbances do emerge in *tend-and-befriend* games, but they are always solvable with ease and thus differ from the serious issues we may face in reality. For instance, if players cannot pay back *Animal Crossing's* pivotal loan, they will quickly be able to earn the needed in-game money through diligence. If their avatar or other characters get sick, a sip of easily affordable virtual medicine will cure them immediately. In conclusion, *tend-and-befriend* titles can address elements that can trigger anxiety in reality, but transfer them into a simplified “nonaggressive social world” (Grodal, 2003, p. 151). In this virtual safe space, players receive the opportunity to exercise control and are given a sense of accomplishment by overcoming obstacles without ever having to face serious consequences.

The activities outlined above fall into the realm of reproductive labor, the type of activity that characterizes the category of *labor* in the sense that Hannah Arendt uses the term. While being directly related to human mortality and vulnerability outside of games, *tend-and-befriend* games strip *labor* of its existential importance—the game continues with or without the

player's efforts. It is this form of *existential security* that can be called the defining characteristic of labor in these games.

VIRTUAL SALONS AND THE DIGITAL BIEDERMEIER INTERIOR

Practices of care and self-help can be found both in digital games and in the online communities that revolve around them. Players meet on social media and messaging platforms such as Twitter or Discord to interact with others, usually sharing related content like gameplay tips. A common practice of care within these groups is the sharing of knowledge and offering support to others. As “knowledge communities” (Gee & Hayes, 2010, p. 115), they serve as a gathering place both for beginners and experts who participate in a continuous exchange of knowledge. Tools and tutorials are shared among players, and the first steps of interested community newcomers are supported. Besides sharing game-related content and knowledge, players in gaming communities frequently discuss ‘off topic’ themes that are unrelated to the game itself.

According to Reer and Quandt (2020), clear empirical evidence states that the social environments games offer (whether through mutual gaming experiences in multiplayer mode or through gaming communities) “can have positive social outcomes, which can contribute to players’ well-being” (p. 13). Within the *Animal Crossing* community, such positive outcomes are not merely a side effect, but often actively pursued when discussions specifically address players’ well-being and the engagement in “digital peer support practices” (Byron, 2021, p. 181). Mutual care and counsel are ever-present, in subtle and indirect ways or straight forward—just like in other online communities as Byron (2021) points out—even though the *Animal Crossing* community was not explicitly established to share forms of peer support. Teenage users might vent about their everyday life, their school or their family, speak about their mental and physical health and ask for advice on topics that matter to them. Other times, care is not received through actively seeking or giving advice, but simply by “feeling seen and heard” (Byron, 2021, p. 174). According to Ryan Kelly (2020), open-minded communities like the *Animal Crossing* one are often perceived as safe spaces where members get to “express their appearance, gender, sexuality, or age that they might be too uncomfortable to do in real life” (p.

91). For teenagers in particular, these communities often are an important source of support that can positively impact other spheres of their lives as well. Interestingly, the reciprocal care that is given and received within communities like the *Animal Crossing* community often is not shared among friends or acquaintances, but among strangers (Byron, 2021, p. 175).

Within gaming communities, advice and care practices are constantly shared, expressed in fan works (e.g., fanart, memes), or transferred into the game. Some players, for instance, introduced death, mourning and remembrance to *Animal Crossing* by adding memories of their beloved ones to their games and even building burial sites for them on their islands (DaRienzo, 2020). Screenshots from the game and further information about the deceased and their relationship to the respective players were then shared within the community; there, the idea was endorsed by other players and more stories were shared. Twitter user Emiface (2020) crafted a seaside memorial for their grandmother in *Animal Crossing*, and writes:

My grandma passed at the beginning of the month and she didn't have a funeral, grave stone [sic], or memorial [...] She requested there to be nothing big done and just be cremated. But I wanted to make something special for her on my island. She and my grandpa loved going to the beach and had to stop traveling a while ago because they were getting old in age. They would've been married for 65 years this summer. I feel so upset not being able to say goodbye but now I can remember her more everyday.

In the replies, other users mention similar ideas and stories, sharing both grief and coping strategies. To add personal interests and details to their games, many *Animal Crossing* players make use of the game's design tool. With this creative tool, designs can be pixel-painted and then used in a variety of ways, e.g., as patterns for clothing, pathways or pictures to put on the wall of players' virtual houses. The tool also allows them to import images into the game via QR code. As a result, some of the aforementioned players that use *Animal Crossing* to perpetuate memories of their loved ones added pictures of deceased friends or family members to their games. The practices of creating objects that are stable enough to be shared with others and viewed online correspond to Hannah Arendt's (1998) category of *work*. Work creates things that last and give the unstable and mortal lives of humans "stability and solidity" (p. 136) through their creations.

All design tool creations can be uploaded and shared with other players. While most players share decorative designs that do not contain a particular message, others use the design tool to raise awareness for social and political issues. During the global Black Lives Matter protests following the killing of George Floyd in 2020, the Black Lives Matter slogan and activist messages were enthusiastically shared within the *Animal Crossing* community and the game itself. Dressing up their avatars in fitting attire and even preparing protest signs, players then met up in the world of *Animal Crossing* to organize virtual Black Lives Matter marches.



Figure 3: “Black Lives Matter” designs in *Animal Crossing* (ChocolateQuill, 2020).

While gaming communities primarily revolve around the discussion of video games and the distribution and endorsement of fan work, they can at the same time serve as platforms for political and social discourse. Users presumably join a gaming community to talk about a particular game, but they will likely find contributions about crucial topics such as public policy and social justice while scrolling through the community’s posts. In these secluded spaces, teenagers can find like-minded peers, engage in political topics and, as movements like the Black Lives Matter protests in *Animal Crossing* illustrate, perhaps even unite to voice their concerns. Interestingly, the discourses we see in these communities and their repeated collective action affected game developers and publishers as well in the past. As Henry Jenkins (2006) points out, online fan communities can be effective

platforms for consumer activism. Here, “[f]ans can quickly mobilize grassroots efforts to save programs or protest unpopular developments” (pp. 141-142). If enough players come together and combine their forces to protest shortcomings or social injustices in games, it is likely that developers and publishers hear them and take action. We saw this when *Harvest Moon* finally introduced same-sex marriage to the series in 2020 (something players had been demanding for years); when *The Sims* released an update in the same year that added over 100 new skin tones to the game to enable players to create accurate and diverse character models; and when *Animal Crossing* patched new hairstyle options into the game to make the player experience more inclusive.

Beyond calling attention to the characteristics or features a game lacks, players might also critically question the values and ideologies that are expressed through it and add oppositional meanings to the game. *Animal Crossing* players have often scrutinized the game’s neoliberal and consumerist bias, appropriating and reinterpreting its contents. This mode of critique epitomizes *Animal Crossing’s* conflicting nature: its game world promises refuge from the crises intimately connected to our economic system while simultaneously reproducing said system via its core gameplay. Players lampooning the game’s capitalist themes could therefore be understood as exhibiting a desire to keep the private sphere of the game separate from the economic one—a desire which would correspond to the original motivation behind the creation of the bourgeois interior as related by Walter Benjamin. A more optimistic reading would be that it is precisely this mixing of the spheres which allows reflection on the wider economic conditions through the lens of diegetic domestic spaces. Games in this context are not only the settings, but also the tools and objects of criticism. As Bogost (2008) points out: “video games are not just stages that facilitate cultural, social, or political practices; they are also media where cultural values themselves can be represented—for critique, satire, education, or commentary” (p. 119). In this view, all three human activities in accordance with Hannah Arendt are realized in the analyzed game and its communities. Action is the domain where people get together, use language, and recognize each other—the domain where “the political realm rises directly out of acting together, the ‘sharing of words and deeds’” (Arendt, 1998, p. 198).



Figure 4: Climate Activism in *Animal Crossing* (OneZero/NextGen America, 2020).

While the Biedermeier interior was originally associated with reactionist ideas and the petty bourgeoisie's retreat into the private sphere, its digital counterpart employs a similar inward movement to ultimately create wider networks of sociality and care. As the games we have discussed in this paper emphasize bourgeois practices like budgeting, furnishing, and interior decoration, they could be understood as marking a return to the values of the Biedermeier period. But the forms of mutual care we have identified are not regressive or reactionary at all. While players find comfort in the game's wholesome setting and enjoy engaging in tasks that allow them to take a break from the perpetual crises of the 'real world,' they are certainly not longing for a 'better yesterday,' but for a beneficial and considerate way to deal with uncertain present times. The retreat to an interior space, which—due to the networked nature of digital media—now acts as the location and catalyst for communication, critique and political exchange, can be compared with another term dating back to the 17th and 18th centuries: the salon. Made famous by the gatherings of French literates under the auspices of a well-respected hostess, the salon denotes both a certain spatial configuration as well as the social practice connected to it. Framing the social activities described in this text in such a fashion, the Digital Biedermeier interior emerges as a place of exchange, political engagement, and collective knowledge transfer wherein the participants

care about and for their fellow players as well as for their digital and physical surroundings.

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