Animal Crossing: New Leaf and the Diversity of Horror in Video Games

Ashley Brown
Brunel University London
Gaskell Building
Uxbridge, UB8 3PH
ashley.brown@brunel.ac.uk

Björn Berg Marklund
University of Skövde
Högskolevägen
Skövde, 541 28
bjorn.berg.marklund@his.se

ABSTRACT
This paper explores the diverse ways horror can be conveyed in games by investigating how games that are not associated with the horror genre can produce unsettling or scary experiences. To conduct this exploration, this study uses interaction mapping, as outlined by Consalvo and Dutton (2006), to examine a game that has thoroughly pleasant and cutesy trappings: *Animal Crossing: New Leaf* (Nintendo 2013). The interactions were analysed according to three themes prevalent within literature on horror and horror games: the loss of agency, the Freudian uncanny, and the Heideggerian uncanny. Ultimately, this paper demonstrates that a game which is not explicitly scary is occasionally made so through its rudimentary simulation of human behaviour and societal constructs as well as its autonomous functions and inclusion of real-world time, showing that games have very diverse means of conveying unsettling or horrifying experiences. The paper also shows how frameworks used to analyse games in the horror genre can be applicable to critical readings of non-horror games in order to understand the unexpected player reactions they can evoke.

KEYWORDS
Horror games, diversity of game horror, uncanny, agency, interaction mapping, *Animal Crossing: New Leaf*

INTRODUCTION
"… with *Animal Crossing*, our intent was to create kind of a parallel world, a world that's kind of similar to your own but also different." – Ketsuya Eguchi, producer of *Animal Crossing: New Leaf* (Nutt 2013)

"Horror is also ideal for games because it presents a familiar world but with enough of a twist to make it seem fantastic and special." – Richard Rouse (2009, p.17)

Horror, as a genre, occupies an interesting space in game studies and gaming culture. Games are often celebrated for their high potential in providing rich and varied horrifying experiences (Carr 2009; Kirkland 2009a). But, they are also often simultaneously

criticized for not utilizing this potential and instead relying on non-ludic modes of address, primarily borrowed from traditions in cinema (Rouse 2009; Kirkland, 2009b). In horror film and literature, directors and writers have authority of the viewer's gaze and can precisely control the reveal of revolting imagery or the horrifying monster. In these 'representational' mediums (Kirkland 2009), the creator has the benefit of control over pacing and perspectives, and can precisely orchestrate them to ramp up tension and horrify or disgust the audience. While games do have the same capacity to some extent, their unique modes of address, often tied to the presence of player agency, can make it more difficult to maintain pace, build tension, and present horrifying set pieces. These difficulties, as argued by other authors (Rouse 2009; Kirkland 2009b), can be one of many reasons why horror games often rely heavily on cutscenes and other methods from their cinematic roots.

But, as this paper will argue, the game medium has many diverse and unique methods of producing dread and horror. Limited agency in interactions as well as the inherent strangeness and flawed logic of games, for example, can be used to produce a type of horror that consists of a slowly creeping psychological dissonance. This type of horror can be encountered in a wide variety of games as they often unintentionally possess these unsettling elements. For example, constrictions of agency and uncanny elements, which are central aspects in horror, are part of most games simply due to technology and interface restrictions (Rouse 2009). The slightly unnatural social interactions and behaviours in games like *The Sims* (Maxis 2000), the illogical makeup of the *Pokémon* universe (Game Freak 1996-2014), and the omniscience of NPCs in *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios 2011) are examples of game elements that bear unintentional similarities to themes used in horror films and games.

The potency of this type of unintentional horror is reflected in the themes commonly used in creations made by fan communities. The strange juxtaposition of children, danger, and dark themes, the logical fallacies of game worlds, the uncanny simulated characters, and the ambiguous finiteness of an AI's perception and lifespan are often utilized by writers of horror fan-fiction (or 'creepypasta' as it is often referred to in online communities) based on games. In *The Terrible Secret of Animal Crossing* (Chewbot 2007), for example, a relatively innocent kid-friendly game takes a darker tone as the illogical nature of the game world is explored in depth and its logical fallacies are glued together into a more cohesive narrative through sinister explanations.

The themes commonly encountered in fan creations hint at the diverse types of dread and horror that games can evoke, and that it can emerge naturally in a wide variety of game genres not typically associated with horror. As *The Terrible Secret of Animal Crossing* (Chewbot 2007) example demonstrates, the logical gaps in game worlds can be read as grim signs of the world having a dark underbelly. As previously mentioned, many authors on the topic of horror games have pointed out the need for the genre to develop its own modes of address in order to mature and move away from the over-reliance on cinema and literature (Rouse 2009; Kirkland 2009b). In this paper, we intend to contribute to this discussion by examining some of the diverse and subtle ways in which games are, or can be, creepy and unsettling by looking at a game that is unintentionally so; *Animal Crossing: New Leaf* (henceforth referred to as AC:NL) for the Nintendo 3DS (Nintendo 2013).

Using AC:NL as a type of case study, this paper shows how the sensations that horror games aim to evoke can emerge from unexpected places, and not just from ones that are

explicitly horrifying. In AC:NL the player is the mayor of a small rural village inhabited by a small number of anthropomorphic animals. The themes, graphics, and audio of the game are both cutesy and kid-friendly, and the game is tailored to be a pleasant and relaxing experience according to its producer (Nutt 2013). The game does not have any explicit mandatory goals and primarily focuses on more intangible directives like the player's cultivation of friendships with the villagers, the expansion and decoration of their own home, and maintenance and decoration of the village itself. The driving mechanic in the game is the village's economy; the player can collect fish, insects, fruit, precious ore, and various other commodities to earn the game's currency in order to purchase furniture, expand their own home, decorate the village, or buy gifts for the villagers. The game also makes use of the 3DS's system clock to tie the passage of time in the village to real-world time, even when the game or console is not on. The real-world time aspect plays a large part in the game by controlling the passing of seasons (which affects the availability of certain fish and insects) and shops' opening hours. Since the system clock runs even when the game is not turned on, life in the village also continues whether the player actually plays the game or not. Flowers wilt, weeds grow, and villagers buy furniture, decorate their homes, and move in and out of the village on their own even when the player is not present.

With its open-ended nature, its rudimentary simulation of human behaviours and society, and its use of the game system's functionality to create ways for reality and gameplay to converge, AC:NL has many ways in which to produce situations that are unsettling. To analyse these types of situations and understand why they come across as creepy, this paper uses interaction mapping (Consalvo and Dutton 2006). Specifically, player and NPC interactions were analysed under three themes already prevalent within literature on horror gaming: the loss of agency, the Freudian uncanny, and the Heideggerian uncanny. Ultimately, this paper demonstrates why a game which is not explicitly scary can come across as such, and explores how the themes discussed by previous authors, and the theories behind their arguments, can emerge even in cute games and make them unsettling.

PREVIOUS LITERATURE
In order to explore how the diversity of horror manifests in AC:NL, we must first establish why elements of the game can be interpreted as being horrific or unnerving. By looking at what has been previously written, we are not only able to gain greater insight into the themes, tropes, and gameplay mechanics which are usually employed to scare players in horror games, but at the same time we will be able to synthesize those elements into codes to analyse gameplay as part of this paper's methodology- which will be detailed in the following section. A thematic analysis of existing literature has shown three key themes emerge in academic literature on horror games. These three themes are: the player's loss of agency (Rouse 2009; Perron 2009; van Elferen 2015); the Freudian uncanny (Freud 2003 [1919]; Rouse 2009; van Elferen 2012); and the Heideggerian uncanny (Heidegger 2000; van Elferen 2012). Each of these themes will be broken down and discussed below.

Loss of Agency
One of the most commented on aspect of horror games is the loss of player agency. Like their cinematic counterparts, a key way for games to instil fear into the player is to remove their sense of efficacy and control (Rouse 2009; Perron 2009; van Elferen 2015). Agency, as Janet Murray (1997) defines it, is "the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the result of our decisions and choices" (p.126). Agency is often evoked

when games are discussed as a unique storytelling medium and to distinguish games from the more 'representational' media of novels, television, or film. This is not to suggest that readers and viewers do not have agency in their interpretation of media and fandom (see Jenkins 2006), but rather to highlight one of the core differences between horror films, novels, or television shows and horror games. It is expected that in most games the player will have some agency and control over what happens to the characters on the screen, or the plot they are engaged in.

In horror games, player agency might involve destroying horrific creatures with firearms (see *Left 4 Dead* 2008-9), or running and hiding from them (see *Outlast* 2013). In a forthcoming contribution to an anthology on dark play, Isabella van Elferen (2015) establishes a continuum that categorises games in the horror genre according to the agency they afford their players. At the lightest end of the continuum are survival horror games based on the premise of fighting through hordes of monsters in post-apocalyptic settings, as in *Left 4 Dead* (Turtle Rock Studios 2008-9). These games have horrifying trappings, but functionally play out as action games or shooters with players primarily struggling to obtain superior firepower in order to survive. As such, the player largely retains the agency to neutralise threats through the discovery and implementation of weaponry. On the darker end of the spectrum is horror which limits the agency of the player through minimal access to weapons and minimal distance between monsters and the player's avatar, which increases tension and feelings of vulnerability in players (van Elferen 2015). On this side of the continuum reside games like *Clock Tower* (Human Entertainment 1995), *Amnesia: The Dark Descent* (Frictional Games 2010) and *Outlast* (Red Barrels 2013) which do not give the protagonist any weapons at all, and the only actions left available to the player is avoiding enemies, or running and hiding from them.

Freudian Uncanny

Freud's uncanny is a common concept used when trying to describe the unsettling and unnerving allure inspired by works of horror (Carr 2009; Rouse 2009; van Elferen 2012). Freud first defines the uncanny by stating, "there is no doubt that this belongs to the realm of the frightening, of what evokes fear and dread" (2003 [1919], p.194). In listing synonyms of the word in multiple languages, Freud (2003 [1919]) points out the inverse relationship uncanny (translated to German as *unheimlicher*) has to familiar (translated to *heimlich*). The inverse relationship between the antonyms uncanny and familiar has important implications for Freud. For something to be uncanny, it must also have an air of familiarity.

Building on this definition, Freud then goes on to elaborate that the uncanny is more than just a fearful or dreadful experience; it is also one which is repetitive and pleasurable. It is the seemingly oxymoronic combination of allure and repulsion, and strange and familiar, which gives the uncanny its unnerving nature. He writes, "In the unconscious mind we can recognise the dominance of a compulsion to repeat, which proceeds from instinctual impulses… It is strong enough to override the pleasure principle and lend a demonic character to certain aspects of mental life..." (Freud 2003 [1919], p.218). For Freud, anything which reminds us of this inner compulsion to repeat despite repulsion is uncanny.

In games, the uncanny manifests in two ways. The first, and perhaps most literal, is in the way artificial intelligence (AI) functions. Game designer Richard Rouse (2009) has commented that the more advanced AI becomes, the more it feels uncanny. The ways in which non-player characters (NPCs) patrol game worlds and interact with players can

fluctuate from seemingly human or natural behaviours to the glaringly robotic and stale. Even as AI programming increases in sophistication, the not-quite-human nature of AI behaviour becomes more glaring. Rouse writes, "indeed, the more realistic their behaviour and appearance become, the more the perilous 'uncanny valley' takes over the experience" (Rouse 2009, p.17). The glassy, dead-eyed stare of NPCs combined with their programmed and zombie-like movement patterns make them feel at once alive and dead, familiarly human and strangely inhuman (Carr 2009); in a word: uncanny.

The second way Freud's uncanny is often encountered in games is through the invocation of, and play with, anxieties. As Isabella van Elferen has noted, "The Freudian uncanny... is psychological and reflects multiple and discontinuous anxieties: the fears and desires that originate, are hidden and subsequently return within the individual's consciousness, which may occur in primordial or ordinary time" (2012, p.182). Not all fears and anxieties evoked by works of horror need to reference "elements such as scary animals, supernatural beings and otherworldly manifestations ..." (Therrien 2009, p.29). Although these elements are standard fare for the genre of horror, other fears and anxieties found in games has the potential to be much more subtle. Beyond the more obvious and common presence of death in games, the concepts of debt, loneliness, memory loss, loss of innocence, and of being different and alienated can be found in a number of games not bearing the horror label. As exemplified in the introduction, they can often be encountered in cutesy and kid-friendly games and horror fan-fiction around games often highlight and elaborate on these uncanny themes.

Heideggerian Uncanny

The final horror concept used in this review is the Heideggerian uncanny. While similar to the Freudian uncanny in its provocation of anxiety, the Heideggerian uncanny differs in its emphasis on temporality. Heidegger (2000) discusses the metaphysical nature of Being in relation to time outside of one's past or future projections- namely that of Nothing. As Isabella van Elferen succinctly summarises, "While Being, in Heidegger's terms, entails endurance, perpetual identity, presence at hand and actual presence... Nothing cannot entail any of these" (van Elferen 2012, p.183). Being, for Heidegger, is concerned with both the possibilities of the future and the has-been of the past, and all is viewed in relation to the Nothing which comes with death (Heidegger 2000). For Heidegger, the anxious uncanny is felt whenever an individual, that is to say the finite Being, experiences or considers the impossibility of infinite Being.

This type of uncanniness is encountered in games less frequently both in games and in scholarly examinations of them. However, in her analysis of horror game soundtracks, Isabella van Elferen (2012) has found that the disembodied and ethereal diegetic sounds can be said to approach the Heideggerian uncanny. It "...presents a relentless appearance of supernatural phenomena and with that the possibility of infinite Beings" (van Elferen 2012, p.183). For van Elferen, the player and listener is confronted with the possibility of infinite Beings through their supernatural, folkloric natures. Ghosts, vampires, and zombies, for example, not only had their human lives to Be, but also have their supernatural unlife to Be infinite. The Heideggerian uncanny can be expanded upon to consider the infinite nature of NPCs in games. In AC:NL, and other games like it, characters go about their daily routines without input from the player. Seeing changes in the village and its inhabitants upon starting the game confronts players with the uncanny- as if the game world has transcended the Nothing of powering off the console and lives infinitely beyond it.

METHODS

In order to explore the diverse ways in which games can be creepy and unnerving with AC:NL as the study object, this paper has utilised an abductive research strategy (Blaikie 2000; Mason 2002), qualitative methods of data collection, and interaction mapping (Consalvo and Dutton 2006). An 'abductive research strategy' (Blaikie 2000) is one which moves "…between everyday concepts and meanings, lay accounts, and social science explanations" (Mason, 2002, p.180). The abductive approach is suitable since the impetus to conduct the research began in the authors' own everyday experiences of being 'creeped out' while playing AC:NL. In order to subsequently establish a vocabulary to formalize the lay accounts developed during play, a thematic literature review of available research and writings on horror in video games was conducted. From the review, the authors synthesized three central themes: loss of agency; Freudian uncanny; and Heideggerian uncanny. These themes were generated through a thematic analysis which considered both frequency of application and thematic appropriateness to assist in explaining their experienced phenomena of unease whilst playing an otherwise cute, childish game.

After the generation of codes, the game was re-played with the goal of documenting gameplay that was perceived as unsettling and exemplary of the three aforementioned themes. This process was conducted according to the method of interaction mapping. Interaction mapping "...involves examining the choices that the player is offered in regards to interaction- not with objects, but with other player characters, and/ or with Non-Player Characters (NPCs)" (Consalvo and Dutton 2006, p. 6). Interaction mapping was chosen over other methodological tools described by Consalvo and Dutton (2006), such as object inventories or interface studies, since there few components of the games' visual or audio design that could be isolated and categorised as creepy, and it is primarily in the interactions between the player avatar and the NPCs wherein the cute, fun, and bright tone of the game becomes unsettling.

Following Consalvo and Dutton (2006), the interaction mapping was conducted through a recording of 'dialogue of note' as it occurred in the game. Screenshots were taken whenever an unnerving, spooky, or sinister dialogue occurred between one of the authors' characters and an NPC. The screenshots were taken directly using the Nintendo 3DS's screenshot tool and saved to an SD card and later uploaded to a computer, and notes about the players' feelings about the interaction were taken to give context to the screenshot. These were then coded according to the thematic codes pulled from the review of horror game literature.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The data collection resulted in several examples of interactions that highlight the presence of horror themes in AC:NL. As detailed in the methodology, interactions in the game were thematically analysed according to three themes from the current body of literature on games in the horror genre: player's loss of agency (Rouse 2009; Perron 2009; van Elferen 2015); the Freudian uncanny (Freud 2003 [1919]; Rouse 2009; van Elferen 2012); and the Heideggerian uncanny (Heidegger 2000; van Elferen 2012). Each of the themes from the literature have been broken down and expanded upon to more accurately account for the player-NPC interactions found in AC:NL. The first is limited and 'blind' player agency, the second is the uncanny society, and the third is the ambiguously living AI. Each of these themes will be discussed below, and collated into a broader description of the diverse ways that games like AC:NL can be unsettling in the conclusion.

Before starting out the thematic analysis, however, it is important to point out what the most frequently encountered interactions in the game are like. In AC:NL, most interactions are deliberately tailored to be somewhat circuitous, and the game focuses heavily on characterisation, player-NPC relationships, and on anchoring the gameplay in the pleasant pace of rural village life. This focus is apparent when looking at the way actions that could easily be streamlined to be quicker and require fewer inputs are kept deliberately laborious. For example, selling an item in the village's convenience store requires 13 inputs after initiating the interaction with the village's store owner – 7 of which are solely spent on progressing through dialogue screens (i.e. not on picking items, or scrolling between different menu choices). As a brief comparison, selling an item in a store in *Pokémon X* (Game Freak 2013) requires 10 inputs of which 3 are spent on dialogue progression, and both *Castlevania: Portrait of Ruin* (Konami 2006) and *Final Fantasy XII: Revenant Wings* (Think & Feel 2007) requires 7 inputs of which 1 is spent on dialogue progression. This comparison also excludes the additional greeting and farewell dialogues between the player and the store owner that starts automatically whenever the player enters or exits the store building in AC:NL. Most of AC:NL's interactions are constructed in this deliberately circuitous manner, and a lot of inputs are devoted to progressing through dialogue screens that rarely contain any new or important information. This brief comparison is an indicator that player-NPC interactions are highly prioritized in AC:NL, as dialogue and characterisation are given a lot of space in the gameplay. The game's pace and its focus on personalizing NPCs is important to consider as many of the game's unsettling elements are found in player-NPC interactions.

Limited and 'Blind' Player Agency

The first theme to be discussed is limited and blind player agency. As frequently described in literature on horror games, one common way games inspire feelings of terror in players is by taking away or limiting their agency (Rouse 2009; Perron 2009). In AC:NL, which is very kid-friendly at its core, the player is offered a relatively simple and limited array of actions. This limited range of actions can evoke feelings of being powerless or constrained for adult players, as will be detailed below.

The more superficial type of agency restriction encountered in the game is the very limited amount of options the player has to control their interactions with other characters – the most common choice the player gets is simply to "prompt continued conversation" or to "say goodbye". Even in very rudimentary dialogues, where the player has no agency beyond starting the conversation, NPC interactions often take a tone that can be read as unsettling. NPCs will occasionally berate the player, presume that he or she is angry, distrustful or tired, or has malicious intent in talking to them (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: An example of an NPC attributing negative attitudes to the player in dialogue.

Such strands of dialogue do not rely on a negative previous encounter or past history between the player and NPC in question, and any prompted NPC interaction can end with them walking away sad or disgruntled through essentially no directed exertion of agency from the player. Since the player's relationship with the villagers is a core theme of the game, the interactions that go awry through no deliberate hostility carry a significant impact and can be both frustrating and unsettling.

Other examples of agency limitations are the more rare instances when your villagers refuse to let you interact with them. This primarily occurs when the villagers are sad or angry, which can happen either as a result of an argument with another villager, or as a result of the player acting improperly or abusing them. Once a villager is made sad or angry, the player will not have any means of interaction that can cheer them up and make them talkative again (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Examples of interactions with sad NPCs, both interactions begin and end with the dialogue windows shown. The two NPCs made each other sad by getting into an argument that the player had no part in instigating or directing, and they are both inconsolable afterwards.

In a game where character interactions play a large role, this seemingly minor agency limitation becomes noteworthy, and is made more unsettling by only being tied to negative emotions. Villagers that are happy or cheerful (signified by the animal walking around and whistling a tune) can still be interacted with to the same extent as always, but sadness and anger are both 'un-curable' and are only resolved once the villager has been given sufficient time on their own to cheer up or calm down.

There are also several interactions in which AC:NL gives the player dialogue agency beyond the simple "continue conversation" and "say goodbye" options. NPCs can also present the player with quizzes, riddles, and questions, and the player is given different types of dialogue options as answers. An NPC might, for example, ask what the player thinks of their outfit, give the player several options of answers (e.g. cute, cool, stylish, etc.), but they often do so with no hints of what the NPC will interpret as a complement or an insult. These types of interactions become noteworthy because the player goes into them 'blind' since there is no way of knowing what impact their choices will have on the outcome of the dialogue. Most interactions are innocuous, and the NPC often just reacts to the player's response with some generic banter. But, the choice can also make the NPC sad or angry, or happy enough to give the player a gift. This means that the player's inputs can matter a great deal, but the game does not offer any guidance of what the correct exertions of player agency are. This is akin to an agency limitation in that it leaves the player effectively powerless in their interactions with NPCs, but the presence of choice adds additional tension to the interactions since onus is placed on the player to act correctly. Players might insult villagers on accident, and any interaction can lead to

unexpected and unsettling reactions that the player does not have any agency in rectifying.

The game contains another type of agency limitation as well: the one of presenting fake choices during interactions. A specific example of this can be found in interactions with one of the game's store owners: the pigeon barista, Brewster, in the village's coffee shop. The player can, once per day, order a cup of coffee from Brewster. Upon receiving the cup of coffee, the player is given two dialogue choices: immediately drink the coffee, or let it cool off a bit. The second choice, however, only leads to a dialogue where Brewster becomes upset and lectures or insults the player for not knowing how to drink coffee properly (see Figure 3). This dialogue is repeated infinitely if the second choice is chosen multiple times. Brewster's slightly overzealous reaction to the seemingly innocuous choice of letting your coffee cool down is another example of blind agency, but it is also one of agency limitation. The player is seemingly given options, but only one will allow them to further the interaction and they are trapped in an infinite loop of dialogue until they acquiesce and chug a cup of scalding hot coffee (as graphically represented by steam rising from the cup).

Figure 3: Brewster reacting to players wanting to wait for the coffee to cool.

All these different types of agency limitations in the NPC interactions combine to create a sensation of powerlessness that is in stark contrast with the freedom of creative expression and experimentation that the cutesy game world seems to provide the player. The game contains many interactions that conclude with: unexpected scolding because you do not adhere to the villagers' arbitrary definitions of 'correct' behaviour; you inadvertently insulting NPCs that are ostensibly your friends; or you being ascribed various negative attributes. The causality between choices and reactions is continuously obfuscated by the game, or in some cases kept completely random. The player's primary role in the game thus becomes reactive rather than proactive since they can be faced with choices, reactions, and tasks from their villagers, but have no way of deliberately prompting or affecting them due to the prevalence of limited and blind agency in the game. Essentially, the player's agency becomes that of a child, as they are faced with consequences they could not have predicted before initiating interactions, or even fully understand afterwards. These agency limitations evoke a feeling that the player's every action is being limited and directed according a strong and repressive communal will.

The Uncanny Society
As previously mentioned, the Freudian uncanny is experienced in games in many ways. The first, and more literal way, is when the player is presented with a slightly 'off' simulation of real-world objects or behaviours (Rouse 2009), and the second is through play with anxieties by engaging players in activities that combine their disparate feelings of repulsion and allure. In AC:NL both forms of the Freudian uncanny is present as the game invokes a world which is similar to our own but slightly different, and as it compels

us to engage directly with serious adult anxieties. As the introductory quote of this paper states, the game's developers aimed to create a world that is "kind of similar to your own but also different" (Nutt 2013). The results of the developers' ambition is a game world that is simultaneously different and familiar, where the villagers' day-to-day lives and mannerisms and their systems of commerce and behaviour policing all approach the Freudian uncanny (Freud 2003 [1919]) as well as the illogical and fantastical as described by Rouse (2009). The village simulation contains simplified versions of systems in the real-world; an economic system with various commodities, debt, and a stock market; a societal system with norms that can be followed or broken; and a population of individuals with their own personalities, relationships, and ambitions. The Freudian uncanny is encountered both in interactions with these bigger systems as well as in individual player-NPC interactions.

The first type of uncanniness is tied to the player's and villagers' interactions with objects that the game society treats as valuable commodities. One example of such an object is the fruits the player can collect to eat or sell. The village's store owners readily buy all types of fruits, and villagers occasionally ask the player to collect and give them a fruit to eat. This, coupled with the villagers' enjoyment of coffee, introduces the concept that consumables have value, presumably because villagers like and need to consume them. However, neither NPCs nor the player character ever actually show a need to eat (e.g. by looking hungry, getting ill, or acting sluggish), and NPCs are only shown eating when the player stumbles across a dialogue with a villager that ends with them asking for a fruit. In a game-mechanic sense, consuming coffee or fruit has no actual effect on either NPCs or the player avatar, and the consumed object simply disappears. While the consumption element is likely just intended to add some realism and flesh out the game world, it creates a thoroughly uncanny system of processes where hunger and eating is merely a display rather than a necessity. The example of consumables, and the interactions surrounding them, becomes unsettling since it is entirely superfluous mimicry of real-world organisms' behaviour. The game contains many other examples of the villagers and the village society mimicking the familiar, but they always do so without reproducing any of the pre-requisite needs or outcomes that make the actions or processes necessary or valuable in the first place. Actions and correlations that are thoroughly familiar to the player thus become unfamiliar, generating a pervasive sense of uncanniness that is felt merely by inhabiting and interacting with objects and characters in the game world.

This uncanniness can also be encountered more directly in the villagers' reaction to broken norms and incorrect etiquette. Brewster's reaction to incorrect coffee drinking mentioned previously is one example, but there is also a more pervasive one relating to the gendered clothing in the game. In the game, all clothes are described as being either 'male', 'female', or 'unisex'. If players try on or wear clothing that is not conventionally associated with their avatar's gender, the NPCs in the game will often comment on it in various ways.
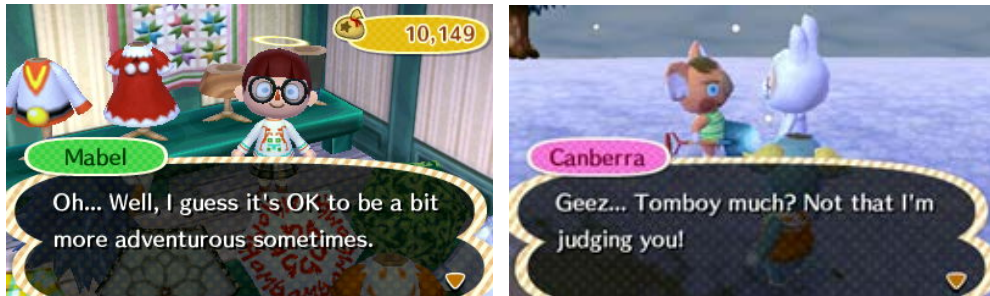
Figure 4: Left: a store owner's reaction to a male character trying on an item of clothing labelled as 'female'. Right: a villager's reaction to a female character wearing a fake beard, an item labelled as 'male'.

The NPCs do not react to the player avatar's clothing unless it is unconventional- as far as the game's conventions go. The NPCs comments in these interactions, as seen in Figure 4, are an expression of the game's simulation of social values and norms that the player's actions are evaluated against, and the execution of this simulation again evokes the uncanny. By adhering to familiar norms that exist in the real world as a result of complex cultural and societal histories, the village society that exists without that heritage becomes uncanny. Much in the same way humanoid automatons are uncanny in that they mimic human behaviour and appearance without our underlying biological and cognitive processes, the village as a society is a flawed, illogical, and hollow simulacrum of our own, and becomes unnatural and unsettling.

Adult anxieties, such as the stress evoked by the desire to be successful and accepted by peers, are also invoked through further NPC interactions. While many of the NPCs do not have defined roles or occupations, the few who do often comment on the stress and anxiety their work entails. One example of such an NPC is Pete, a pelican postman the players can occasionally encounter in the village early in the morning. After an initial friendly greeting, Pete will refuse continued interactions on account of being too busy for chatter (see Figure 5).

Figure 5: Stressed conversations with the mail deliverer.

In interactions with Pete, we see both types of uncanny: the AI mimicry at the bustle of adult working life, but also the invocation of adult stressors and anxieties. In Pete's exclamation of "AHHH!", a reflection is made on the inflexibility of working life, and failure to endure or perform under those stressful circumstances results in the loss of employment. As one of the central motivational goals of the game is to maintain a flow of income in order to expand and improve player housing and village features, the loss of livelihood reflects legitimate concerns over not only the ability to play the game well, but also the ability to be successful adults.

Figure 6: Left: encouraging dialogue after renovations are complete. Right: the 'trifling' cost of renovation work.

In the above screenshots, the player is coaxed into accepting continued and added debt by buying into the idea that larger homes are more 'homey'. The dialogue presented by Tom Nook (see Figure 6) particularly serves to highlight the uncanny play on adult anxieties. The NPCs tell players to always strive for a larger house, and also continuously encourages them to remain indebted by almost never describing their house as being good enough. The NPCs' desire and admiration for space and symbolic wealth, combined with the loans involved in house expansions since they cannot be made in cash beforehand and only in credit afterwards, evokes anxiety and create a sense of ineffectualness simultaneously. The goals successful adults are meant to achieve, such as being debt-free homeowners, are always just out of reach.

The Ambiguously 'Living' AI

Whilst the Freudian uncanny references a dread evoked by encountering something that is familiar yet different (Freud 2003 [1919]; Rouse, 2009), the Heideggerian uncanny relates to ambiguities or incongruities in the finiteness of being, perceiving, or living (Heidegger 2000). In AC:NL, these elements can be found in both the village and its inhabitants since they observe the passage of real-world time, act outside of the confines of play sessions, and often display disembodied awareness and intelligence. In short, the village and its inhabitants are ambiguously 'alive'.

The ambiguities of what the game's AI is actually capable of processing and what the limitations of their awareness are is most clearly expressed in the incongruent characteristics of the villager NPCs. The villagers, who are often presented as being child-like, cutesy, clumsy, and goofy, also have perfect memory as well as knowledge of player actions that they themselves did not witness. This type of unrealistic NPC knowledge problem is similar to the one found in, for example, the open-world role-playing fantasy game *Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim,* where all store owners in the realm somehow know that a generic potato that the player pilfered from a farm in the middle of the woods is stolen. In AC:NL, partly due to its clash with the game's cutesy presentation, this type of omniscience can feel quite unsettling or sinister, and the extent of the NPCs' awareness is never quite clear. It is simultaneously familiarly flawed and anchored in the NPCs bodies, and unnaturally perfect and ethereal.

Figure 7: Example of a reference made by one NPC to the disembodied awareness of other NPCs in the game.

Some NPCs in the game occasionally make, presumably inadvertent, references to this trait of the game's AI in interactions with the player (see Figure 7). The length the game goes to in order to present a coherent and pleasant game world with natural and 'embodied' characters makes these types of moments stand out.

The other Heideggerian concepts of ambiguous states of being and living (Heidegger 2000) primarily emerge as a result of the game progressing by "playing itself" without any exertion of agency from the player. This player independent progress is expressed partly in the state of the village itself where flowers wilt, seasons change, and weeds grow as time moves forward. But, the passage of time is also felt emotionally by the villagers themselves. If longer periods of time are allowed to pass between player-NPC interactions, the NPC will initiate the dialogue by stating exactly how many days, weeks, or months it has been since their last chat or that they have been saddened or upset by the player's absence (see Figure 8).

Figure 8: Examples of introductory dialogues with villagers after longer periods of not playing the game.

Villagers will also move out of town on their own accord if the player does not regularly start up the game and interact with them to prevent them from moving. This is coupled with the game's use of the 3DS's wireless and automatic peer-to-peer connection technology to make it possible for villagers to move into other players' villages, without specific direction from either player, if they move out of their original town. If the player has not passed another 3DS owner with AC:NL, however, the villager moves out into nothingness. The game does not inform the original player whether the villager has disappeared entirely or if they reached a new village.

The villagers' awareness of the passage of time, their departure from the player's village, and their expressions of sadness and longing when the player starts up the game after longer downtimes, all serve to exert pressure on the player. The NPCs' autonomous movement inside, between, and outside of game consoles also create an ambiguity in

their state of living and being. The society and the autonomously changing village become uncanny, and do not seem to follow the usual game ethos of existing solely for the benefit of the player. These concepts are also reinforced in dialogues with the NPC Isabelle, who is the mayor's assistant and the provider of most of the game's technical exposition. This conversation, for example, starts when the player wants to delete their village to start a new save file (the conversation cannot be screenshotted, and is therefore reproduced in text):

> Isabelle:
> - *Okay! Let's... WAIT, WHAT?!* *Isabelle starts with the same dialogue as when the player starts the game regularly, "Okay! Let's", but interrupts herself*
> - *You can't be serious.*
> - *Isabelle looks sad* *I mean, rebuild the town? That means that [town name] will be totally gone. Is that what you really want?*
> - *All the [money] you've earned... All your furniture... It will all be lost.*
> - *And those who live in this town? ALL GONE!* *the capital letters are spelled out slowly one by one*

The game frequently reinforces the notion that the NPCs in the game are alive, with personalities and ambitions that even stretch beyond the confines of the game cartridge and the player's presence. Ambitious AI that wants to achieve their own goals independently of the player is not unique to AC:NL. But, AI that has an ambition to leave a player's game cartridge entirely, even though it might lead to the NPC stepping out of existence if they do not have another player's village to move to, is relatively novel and can lead to genuinely unsettling and upsetting moments. When the lives of NPCs are shown to be precious, as exemplified in the village deletion dialogue, these concepts take on an even darker tone. The village and its inhabitants become thoroughly, in the Heideggerian sense, uncanny, and the unrelenting passage of time in the game can make even the act of not playing unsettling and tense.

CONCLUSION

Relying on previous literature on horror games, which centred on the themes of loss of agency and the Freudian and Heideggerian uncanny, this paper explored the diverse ways games can convey horror by analysing how AC:NL can be read as unsettling. By using themes from past literature to inform interaction mapping, this paper also illustrated how many of the theories used to analyse horror games and cinema also apply to games that lie far outside of the genre.

The first theme discussed was limited and blind player agency. Limiting player agency is frequently used in horror games as method of evoking feelings of powerlessness and loss of control (Rouse 2009; Perron 2009; van Elferen 2015). In AC:NL agency limitations were primarily manifested in the constrained dialogue options. Furthermore, the dialogue options' effects are often hidden from the player, forcing them to make choices blindly without insight into what the outcome of choices will be. This is exacerbated by the sometimes severe repercussions dialogue choices can have. Blind and limited agency in interactions, as encountered in AC:NL, can be a potent tool in evoking feelings of helplessness and powerlessness, which can be unnerving for adults who might be accustomed to more 'clear' agency that empowers and liberates the player.

The Freudian uncanny could also be experienced as a result of the game's unnatural and hollow mimicry of societal structures. In AC:NL, the player is frequently exposed to the

cargo cult-esque traditions underpinning the village society, where behaviours and conventions familiar to the player is simulated and followed without the presence of the historical contexts or biological needs that underpin them. Furthermore, the game also evokes adult anxieties with its perpetual cycle of debt and the, sometimes vehement, encouragement from NPCs for players to act according to the village society's conventions. The interactions with villagers that staunchly observe conventions of pleasantness and etiquette are reminiscent of themes found in horror films such as *The Stepford Wives* (Forbes 1975). In the described coffee shop interaction, for example, the player is forced into either staying in an infinite dialogue-loop with the condescending proprietor or to drink a scalding hot beverage, and the player is thus forced to do something seemingly painful in the name of refinement.

It is, of course, important to read the analysis of these themes with a certain sobriety. Both the gameplay and aesthetics of AC:NL are thoroughly kid-friendly, and children who play the game might not feel unnerved by the loss of agency or uncanny AI. But, the point of this paper is not to examine how this game in particular is read by children. The point is to demonstrate the ways in which themes usually associated with the horror genre can manifest themselves in non-horror games. As indicated by the plethora of fan creations the game has inspired, AC:NL contains many elements that are open to subversive readings. But, the framework in this paper can likely be applied for readings of other games as well, which speaks to the problems inherent in defining games by genres on the basis of their themes, trappings, or mechanics; players' subjective interpretations of content, and the vast variety of ways they can choose to interact with it, can make any game transcend, or flow between, genre labels. The results of this analysis also have potential design applications. In AC:NL, the emphasis on NPC characterisation, the player's relationship to them, and the anchoring of gameplay in real-world time, are what makes the examined interactions impactful. It is in the inconsistencies within these core themes of the game and the player's ability and inability to exert control over them that the game becomes unsettling. The blurred lines between game activity and real life produced by the use of different console functions (e.g. clocks and automatic peer-to-peer communication), and the unnatural and disembodied behaviour of NPCs in a world that is otherwise presented as thoroughly 'natural' and embodied, sometimes result in unsettling experiences. These types of mechanics and concepts might be employable to provide more diverse and subtle types of horror and dread in games - as seen in horror fan-fiction like *The Terrible Secret of Animal Crossing* (Chewbot 2007), they are already being used for those purposes by fan communities.

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