Psychology of Popular Media

"I Need to Just Have a Couple of White Claws and Play Animal Crossing Tonight": Parents Coping With Video Games During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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The COVID-19 pandemic was an incredibly stressful time for parents of school-age children. Supervising remote schooling while also balancing work and life demands, in addition to health concerns, demanded much from parents. This study considers how parents used the video game *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* to cope with pandemic-related stress. Using Reinecke and Rieger's (2021) recovery and resilience in entertaining media use model as a theoretical framework, this interview study of 33 parents from 27 families found that parents psychologically detached from their pandemic-stress laden worlds with the game, used the game to relax, found a sense of accomplishment through achieving goals via mastery experiences in the game, and appreciated the sense of control that the game afforded. An emergent code was found in that the game facilitated much-needed social connections for parents, which was part of their pandemic-stress coping. This study provides further evidence for video games as coping tools, with a specific focus on parental pandemic stress.

Public Policy Relevance Statement
This interview study looks at how parents used the video game *Animal Crossing: New Horizon* to cope with COVID-19 pandemic-related stress. Parents used the game to detach, relax, find a sense of accomplishment and control as well as facilitate social connections.

Keywords: coping, video games, animal crossing, pandemic, COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic dramatically changed the lives of people globally when suddenly many had to isolate in their homes. School children needed to transition to remote education, and many parents had to work from home while supervising their children and also helping them to cope with sudden changes in their lives such as loss of social interactions, having to deal with unfamiliar technologies, and so forth. Parents were, unsurprisingly, stressed. Serendipitously, in late March 2020, the Nintendo Switch game *Animal Crossing: New Horizons (AC:NH)*

launched and was wildly popular with people of all age groups (Minotti, 2020). News articles such as *Why Animal Crossing Is the Game for the Coronavirus Moment* (Khan, 2020), *The Quiet Revolution of Animal Crossing* (Bogost, 2020), *Animal Crossing: New Horizons' Is the Game We All Need Right Now* (Strampe, 2020), and *How 'Animal Crossing' Became Coronavirus Therapy* (Fertoli, 2020), and scholarly essays, such as the one by Zhu (2020), point to the game as a comforting escape from the stress of the pandemic.

This study considers how parents of school-age children use *AC:NH* to cope with pandemic-related stress. Parents are particularly vulnerable to pandemic-related stress due to the additional challenges of managing children at home (Verger et al., 2021), and parents who identified as gamers as well as nongamers both gravitated to video games as a way to cope.

Literature Review

Pandemic Stress

Undoubtedly, the COVID-19 pandemic has created a great deal of stress for individuals and families. Isolation, fear of illness, change in

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routines, managing children inside of the home, working from home, job loss, and concerns about family members are all pandemic-related stressors, particularly for parents (Adams et al., 2020; Brooks et al., 2020; Calarco et al., 2020; Prime et al., 2020; Verger et al., 2021; Weaver & Swank, 2021). Indeed, early research already shows that the pandemic has had a negative effect on individual mental health (Brown et al., 2020; Chu et al., 2020; Sigurvinsdottir et al., 2020). Parents have been identified as a particularly vulnerable group for the effects of pandemic stress (Brown et al., 2020; Cluver et al., 2020; Patrick et al., 2020; Russell et al., 2020).

Coping With Stress

Coping refers to "thoughts and behaviors used to manage the internal and external demands of situations that are appraised as stressful" (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004, p. 745). Stress is exposure to stimuli that are appraised as harmful or threatening beyond one's individual capacity to cope (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). During a disaster or a crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, individuals and families experience stress and need additional psychosocial and physical resources to cope with stress due to uncertainty and disruption (Prime et al., 2020).

Coping With Games

Although individuals use a number of ways to cope with stress, entertainment media is a common one (Nabi & Prestin, 2017; Nabi et al., 2017; Prestin & Nabi, 2020; Wolfers & Schneider, 2020). This is an example of what Wolfers and Schneider (2020) called a coping tool, instruments that help facilitate coping goals and behaviors and include media devices. Early research already has demonstrated that some individuals have self-reported using various media (Eden et al., 2020) and video games to cope with pandemic stress (Cahill, 2021; Nebel & Ninaus, 2020; Nabi et al., in press; Wang et al., 2020), with one study finding that 60% of all video game players and 80% of female video game players surveyed reported that they used video games as a stress reliever during the pandemic (Toledo, 2020). There is also evidence that video game playing during the pandemic (Barr & Copeland-Stewart, 2021) and specifically playing *AC:NH* is linked to well-being (Johannes et al., 2021). The connection between entertainment media and stress comes through the restoration of psychological resources, which is the process of replenishing depleted resources or rebalancing suboptimal systems (Reinecke & Eden, 2017; Reinecke et al., 2011; Rieger et al., 2014), specifically with video games (Reinecke, 2009). Although there are a number of theoretical frameworks regarding video game use, we focus on a model that explicitly considers video games for coping with stress. Reinecke and Rieger (2021) have proposed a recovery and resilience in entertaining media use model, linking entertainment use to the short-term experience of recovery and to the contribution to the long-term development of resilience-enhancing factors.

Resilience, the ability to adapt when confronted with adversity, is explored at the individual level in the present study (Afifi, 2018). Resilience is an important consideration during the pandemic, and pandemic coping is tied to pandemic resilience (Mikocka-Walus et al., 2020). Recovery in this model occurs through replenishing depleted resources through psychological detachment, relaxation, mastery experiences, and control (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007; Wulf et

al., 2019), and individuals engage in recovery experience, various activities, and behaviors, including leisure, that help the recovery process (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007; Sonnentag et al., 2011). Successful recovery restores psychological and physiological levels (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007).

Psychological detachment is the ability to "disengage oneself mentally from work" (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007, p. 205), or "switching off" mentally from work (Sonnentag & Bayer, 2005), and is related to but not identical to engagement in leisure activities (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2015). Although this is most often applied to work stress, we posit that pandemic parenting stress is not dissimilar. Work stresses are a variety of factors in the work environment that lead to strain reactions such as negative arousal or psychological impairments. They can be single events or long term (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2015). This framework has been applied to caregiving (Musacchio, 2021). Relaxation is a process that is most often associated with leisure activities (Sonnentag et al., 2011). An individual is in a state of low activation and increased positive affect (Stone et al., 1995). Control and mastery are important elements of recovery because they help to build up internal psychological resources (Reinecke & Eden, 2017). Mastery experiences include "off-job activities that distract from the job by providing challenging experiences and learning opportunities in other domains. These activities offer opportunities for experiencing competence and proficiency" (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007, p. 206). Such challenges build up internal resources, which support recovery (Reinecke, 2009) and help to compensate for a lack of positive and reinforcing experiences during periods of stress (Rieger et al., 2014). Within video games, these are various personal accomplishments related to challenge and competition, such as beating opponents or achieving goals related to a player's skills (Reinecke, 2009). As players proceed through the game, small and large achievements contribute to feelings of mastery. Through coping with increasing challenges and demands within the game, the player increases their sense of mastery and competence, building up psychological resources, which facilitates recovery (Reinecke, 2009). Control is "a person's ability to choose an action from two or more options . . . the degree to which a person can decide which activity to pursue during leisure time, as well as when and how to pursue this activity" (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007, p. 206–207). Having a greater sense of control is a critical component of recovery (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007) due to the greater sense of autonomy, which is tied to the recovery process (Rieger et al., 2014). Video games provide ample opportunities for control compared with other media (Reinecke, 2009). Control is tied to restoration of resources and aids in recovery (Reinecke, 2009). This affordance of video games' link to mental health is well-documented (Villani et al., 2018). Also, individuals with a greater sense of control during the pandemic have better mental health outcomes (Sigurvinsdottir et al., 2020).

In this study, we consider psychological detachment, relaxation, mastery experiences, and control within video game play as part of the recovery process that helps individuals cope with stress. Although much work in this area has been quantitative, we will use theoretically driven conceptual definitions from the literature to derive qualitative codes. We aim to answer the following research question: How do parents cope with pandemic-related stressors within the *AC:NH* video game?

Animal Crossing: New Horizons

AC:NH is a life simulation game (Kim, 2014) that allows players to build their life on an island along with various animal characters. *AC:NH* is an immersive game with a narrative, which Reinecke (2009) finds is important for recovery. It is a leisurely game that involves mundane activities (Comerford, 2021; Kim, 2014; Straznickas, 2020). The player takes on a role of the resident representative as they move to a deserted island, where they start collecting resources and learn skills to create different objects using those resources. During that process, the player can recruit animal villagers to move onto the island and interacts with them to build friendships. The initial goal is to reach a three-star rating for the island, which is based on the number of villagers who inhabit the island and the islands' level of decoration. If the island achieves a three-star rating, K. K. Slider, a popular singer in the Animal Crossing universe, will visit the island and hold a concert. After that milestone, players can continue to build their island at their own pace until they reach the five-star rating. Even after the five-star rating, there are many smaller goals within the game. Players can complete the catalog of items, catch all possible bugs and fish, collect and donate art and fossils to the museum, or try to get more villagers to move to their island. In addition to these game goals, players can engage in routine daily tasks such as collecting resources and interacting with AI characters. Players can also design clothing or customize the island through landscaping and decorating. Players can also engage in multiplayer activities with others locally or remotely via the Internet. In this study, families engage in coplay (Nikken & Jansz, 2006) or co-use mediation, whereby parents accompany children's media consumption (Connell et al., 2015; Schaan & Melzer, 2015), sometimes, although not always, by playing or viewing a video game together.

Method

We interviewed 27 families, including 33 parents–the focus of this study–from across the United States between August and October 2020 via Zoom. All study materials and procedures were approved by the University of Washington Human Subjects Division. We recruited families that live in the United States with school-age children that play *AC:NH* together through a number of online interest groups on *AC:NH*, including Facebook groups, an Animal Crossing–specific web forum, Animal Crossing subreddits, and Discord servers. In addition, we posted recruitment messages on a number of social media platforms to maximize our reach to eligible and interested families. In all, 135 individuals completed the recruitment screening questionnaire, and of the 135, 27 completed an interview; eight scheduled an interview but did not arrive nor respond to follow-ups; two declined to participate after reading the consent and assent documents; 24 individuals were contacted but did not respond to three requests to schedule; 27 individuals that submitted a screening questionnaire were not selected for an interview, typically because of children under age 7, which there was an abundance of in the sample; and 29 individuals who submitted a screening questionnaire were eliminated because they did not have children or their children were not school-aged. After 20 families were interviewed, the research team felt that saturation had been reached for families with younger children, so the next wave of family selection focused on families with teenagers from the pool of interested participants.

Of the 33 parents interviewed, the mean adult age was 36.82 (*SD* = 4.51). In all, 72.7% were women (*n* = 24), 24.2% were men (*n* = 8), and one participant identified as nonbinary. Nearly two thirds (63.6%) of the sample had graduated with a bachelors or had a graduate degree. In the sample, 42.2% of the households reported a yearly household income of <\$75,000 and 57.7% reported >\$75,000. The ethnic composition of our sample had 72.7% of the adults identified as White, 6.1% as Asian, 6.1% as Hispanic/Latinx, 12% as multiple types of mixed race, and 3% as Black. Family and individual descriptors and demographics are available on the project OSF page.

The interviews averaged 1.5 hr total and were conducted in three parts, starting with the session with parents and children being interviewed together, followed by a session with the children, and concluding with parents being interviewed without children present. Data from the joint portion of the interview as well as the individual parent interviews were used in the current study. Interview teams included two of the seven team members, with one member being the lead interviewer and the second member taking notes and asking clarifying questions. Families received a gift card of \$40 as compensation.

Analysis

Transcripts of interviews with parents were analyzed with thematic analysis to give descriptions to observed phenomena (Boyatzis, 1998). A framework was developed based on Sonnentag and Fritz's (2007) model, as per Reinecke and Rieger (2021). We also allowed for the identification of emergent codes and themes (Boyatzis, 1998). We followed a consensus model where we used multiple coders to code the data, discuss any discrepancies between their coded results, and reach a consensus. In the Results section, different character names from the game were used as a pseudonym for each family, and the participants chose their own individual pseudonyms.

Results

Overall

Many, if not most, participants tied their *AC:NH* playing to coping with pandemic stress. For example, Mom Flora said, "[*AC:NH*] just looked so fun and relaxing and as soon as I started playing it, I just felt so relieved of the stress of all of the stuff going on with the pandemic." Mom Amy explained that playing *AC:NH* helped her cope with her own stress, which allowed her to better deal with her children. Many parents expressed how *AC:NH* helped them deal with the stress from working and parenting simultaneously. For example, Mom Ashley had to bring her 8-year-old daughter Beatrice to sit with her in an otherwise empty office every day for most of the pandemic. Ashley is an accountant and told the interviewers that her work required close attention to detail. As Ashley explained, "I still had to go in the office and still function like I still had a normal job, and the world was still normal. But I also had to have a first grader do online classes. Oh my God, that was a shit show." Handing Beatrice the *AC:NH* game "would help her [Beatrice] be occupied so I could do my job."

Dad Steve also used *AC:NH* to occupy 10-year-old Jake: "My wife and I both work, and we had to work from home, so he really was on his own a lot, so we agreed to relax rules in terms of screen time and have him play Animal Crossing." Some parents even facilitated *AC:NH* "playdates" with their children's real-life friends, colleagues' children, and strangers' children on *AC:NH* social media groups to occupy their children.

Psychological Detachment

This is the ability to "disengage oneself mentally from work" (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007, p. 205), but in this study, we understand this as disengaging from the pandemic and pandemic-related stress. We note that Sonnentag and Fritz' framework is typically applied to work stress, but we posit that pandemic parenting has many elements similar to work stress and that not thinking about it allows for psychological detachment: Psychological detachment may even involve bringing a sense of normalcy within the virtual space of the game. Animal Crossing games have a strong sense of normativity through the mundane activities (Straznickas, 2020). In a uses and gratifications study of *AC:NH*, multiple items that can be interpreted as part of psychological detachment were reported by participants (Ng, 2021). Unsurprisingly, the idea of detachment was frequently discussed within the interviews. Participants described playing *AC:NH* as a "mental escape," a "getaway," and "a diversion from real life." Mom Meesh, who describes herself as not-a-gamer in a household full of serious gamers, explained her escape as such: "There's something really therapeutic about having your own private island that you can escape to when you can't go anywhere, so I think it helps in the mental health aspect of what we're going through now." Mom Ashley, who did not consider herself a gamer before *AC:NH*, provides an exemplar:

> It's a nice diversion, for when I play for half hour to an hour and a half, 2 hours, I'm not thinking about politics or the economy or my job or any of social or public health issues or anything like that. Yes, it's been a nice diversion so I can zone out and not have doom and gloom in my life . . . To have this nice little flicker of hope and it's a nice peaceful idyllic world, unlike the current world.

Parent CJ described this detachment as being able to "make your island have the sort of places that you wish you could be right now." Mom Lyla "never played video games before in my life," but a colleague told her about *AC:NH* and how she could play this game together with her 10-year-old gamer daughter, Evie. Evie and her father play many video games together, and Lyla was not only excited to have something special to do with Evie but also found herself playing the game after Evie was in bed to "escape from reality." She later elaborated upon her life as a working parent during the pandemic saying,

> Work was so stressful I was in tears almost every day, transitioning online and helping my kid transition and dealing with my husband and I seeing each other 24 hours a day—we're not used to that—I am kind of emotionally and mentally not in a good place. So it was a good escape for these kind of times.

A number of participants mentioned the game as a way to detach from news consumption, which was an additional pandemic stressor, describing the game as "a break from the news" or as "a break from all of the contention on social media."

Some participants had specific pandemic-related stressors that they used *AC:NH* to detach from. The entire Plucky family had COVID-19 and gamer Mom Jean said that they all played *AC:NH* together while they were ill in bed, calling the game "stress management." In another example, Dad Steve's father died from COVID-19, and the game helped him cope with this loss. Steve's 10-year-old son Jake was actively playing *AC:NH*, and Steve first watched Jake play and then began playing himself to "distract from other pieces of life." Steve considers himself a gamer, but explained that *AC:NH* was special for coping compared with the other games he plays. An additional stressor noted by some parent participants was job loss due to the pandemic, and these parents often tied their coping with their job loss to playing the game.

Although psychological detachment is usually understood as disengaging from work, some participants who had lost their jobs used the game to recreate their beloved jobs in the virtual space of their *AC:NH* island. Mom Star, who had played some video games in her youth but had not played as an adult until *AC:NH*, loved her long-time job in a movie theater. She explained that the theater closed, and "we had to deal with that loss and through that loss, I actually turned my basement [in *AC:NH*] into a movie theater . . . it really kind of worked its way into the game." Mom Mae also had to close her family business but recreated it for herself and her family to visit inside of *AC:NH*.

Relaxation

This is a process often associated with leisure activities. It is characterized by a state of low activation and increased positive affect (Stone et al., 1995). Animal Crossing is a very leisurely game (Straznickas, 2020). Although relaxation may be related to the psychological detachment described earlier, nearly all participants explicitly described the game as relaxing, peaceful, calming, or soothing. Parenting-specific stress weighed on participants like Mom Marie,

> [*AC:NH*] is stress-free. I would totally claim Animal Crossing as a coping mechanism for me because I was way stressed out during the whole pandemic, and I feel like I definitely was depressed and I know I struggled a lot. It was not a happy few months here. So to be able to finally get the kids in bed and I could just, you know, play the game for an hour—that was my relaxation.

Some aspects of the gameplay were specifically noted as relaxing, such as the background music, the pace of the game, weeding, as well as certain locations. Dad Randall tied museum visits to his ability to calm himself: "There's been a couple of nights where I couldn't sleep . . . so I would boot up the game and go over to the museum and sit in front of the aquarium and stare at the fish and calm down." Mom Zelda is a military spouse who had to quit her job because she herself is in a high-risk health category and needs to supervise remote schooling for her three teenage stepchildren, 7-year-old son, and an 11-year-old niece who moved in with them for the pandemic. She explained that she was experiencing stress due to her health concerns as well as the financial loss from her leaving her job. When asked about pandemic-related stress, she said,

There's been a tremendous amount of anxiety, there's been a tremendous amount of worry, there's been, you know, what am I gonna do about money, what are we gonna do about the kids being in school, you know, what are we gonna do with so many areas of life right now? This game has been . . . my soothing . . . it's been my . . . you know how people read books and crochet and do that sort of stuff? It's been like that for me . . . it's been my source of comfort.

Both gamer parents in the Muffy family lost their jobs due to pandemic cutbacks. At the time of the interview, the area of the country where the Muffy family lives was experiencing wildfires, and not only were they awaiting an evacuation order, but both sets of Muffy grandparents lost their homes in the fires. Mom Odie from the Muffy family and Parent Jesse from the Tammi family were glad that *AC:NH* gave their families something to do inside when they could not go outside due to the wildfire smoke. Odie said, "It was nice during the pandemic to slow down and just kind of relax and have a nice peaceful game where we could plant some flowers and go fishing."

Mastery Experience

Mastery experiences include off-job activities that distract from the job through challenging experiences and learning opportunities (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007). With video games, Reinecke and Rieger (2021) said that this includes challenges and growth opportunities within the game. Within the *AC:NH* parents, multiple participants described the effect of meeting goals within the game as giving them a sense of accomplishment. For example, Mom Gemma said,

> Early in Animal Crossing there's so much you have to do, you have to get the whole town established, you have to get everything set up, and you have to get out of your shack into a house. . . . So I felt like there were lots of easy-to-achieve concrete goals that took just enough work and were things I could finish and be like oh look I did a thing, as opposed to when you're home with your whole family during a pandemic there's always more dishes, there's always more people who need feeding, there's always more laundry . . . these [*AC:NH* tasks] were things I could do.

For Gemma, achieving in the game helped to compensate for a lack of positive and reinforcing experiences during periods of stress (Rieger et al., 2014).

Within the game, there are smaller tasks as well as larger tasks. For some, such as Mom Odie, both the large and small tasks allowed her to set goals: "During the pandemic we didn't have goals, you know, we were kind of left without knowing what do we do, and I think it was nice to have something to grasp onto." With the smaller tasks, many participants described their completion as gratifying. Mom Sarah explained this as a task taking just a few minutes and then having a reaction, "Okay, goal met. I can turn it off. These are mini goals, mini time investment, mini brain processing." Later in the game, finishing larger tasks, often tied to catching or buying all of the items in the game and completing the Museum, taking months of work, was described as satisfying by many parents. These milestones allowed Mom Amy to feel "like I'm being productive, like making something. This is appealing to me."

Many participants described their *AC:NH* goals as part of the rhythm of their lives, even describing them as ritualistic. Mom Flora described her *AC:NH* tasks as a "daily part of a routine that just helped soothe anxiety." Dad Steve said that he "gravitated" toward the "predictability" of his daily tasks. This sense of routine has been found in other *AC:NH* studies (Barr & Copeland-Stewart, 2021), being the highest rated motivation for adult *AC:NH* players (Comerford, 2021).

Control

This is understood as a person's ability to choose an action from two or more options (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007) and bring about a greater sense of autonomy, which is tied to the recovery process (Rieger et al., 2014). Within the interviews, participants articulated how *AC:NH* afforded them opportunities to have a sense of control, despite a great deal of uncertainty in their pandemic lives. For example, Mom Emma, who said that they were not a gamer family until *AC:NH*, explained, "It was like everything outside was so chaotic and that [*AC:NH*] was one place that I had control over things, so I think that helped with the stress a little bit." Later in the interview, she touched back on this when asked about the greatest benefit to her in playing the game, saying, "I think it was the control, it probably would be the big one, you know, having control over this island when I had no control over anything else." Other parent participants also articulated how the landscape and decorating design elements of the game gave them a sense of control with a "perfect island vision that I can execute." The desire to have a "perfect" island, however, was often thwarted for those parents that shared the game with their children.

Facilitate Adults Having Social Connections

An emergent code the team found with regard to individual adult coping is the pandemic-specific coping with social isolation. Indeed, individuals increased their use of mediated communication during the pandemic, which was beneficial for well-being (Brown & Greenfield, 2021; Gabbiadini et al., 2020). This included video games, which is not surprising, as the sociability affordance of video games is well documented (Jiow et al., 2017), even during the COVID-19 pandemic (Cmentowski & Krüger, 2020; Nebel & Ninaus, 2020), particularly with *AC:NH* (Comerford, 2021; Kleinman et al., 2021; Ng, 2021). We also note that other work has found that social aspects of video game play can enhance video game-related coping and recovery (Collins & Cox, 2014). As many adults stopped going to work, it reduced their exposure to others socially and professionally, and it is unsurprising that adults wanted to find alternative ways to have a sense of social connection with others. This is important because parent loneliness has been identified as a key contributor to overall mental health during the pandemic (Mikocka-Walus et al., 2020). As Mom Star said, "With COVID and with quarantine, it's [*AC:NH*] just been really great . . . it's been a really great way for people to not feel secluded." Mom Marie who had not played a video game since her childhood described it as follows:

> Great because it was for me a way for me to connect with other people. I'm a stay-at-home mom, so my only time that I would really deal with people was going to the grocery store or going to my gym or going to school as a volunteer and then that was all gone. So this [*AC:NH*] was my biggest outlet for being able to communicate with other people.

Mom Michelle described how it allowed for social distancing, "I could go visit other people's island, and it felt you were part of something and being safe and socially distant at the same time."

Most participants played *AC:NH* with existing friends. Mom Flora described *AC:NH* as a social activity.

> I play it not just with my family, but I actually have friends that play it, and so I regularly have meetings with them where we visit each other's island, and we're freaking out [about the pandemic] so it's been kind of replacing the social needs that I have because I'm kind of hanging out with people.

This also applied to connecting with family members outside of the household. Mom Emma's sibling also played *AC:NH*, and "we really didn't get to see each other anymore and that [*AC:NH*] was really the only way we were able to kind of see each other." Some participants described birthday parties, baby showers, and other social events within the game. There were also a number of families within the study with shared residential custody of their children, which had sometimes been interrupted by the pandemic. Families expressed gratitude toward the game being a way to connect with children not physically in their home. Mom Nicole described her family's relationship with her spouse's coparent as "adversarial" and explained that *AC:NH* was an incredible way for them to continue to communicate with the children, who were unable to leave their other parent's home due to the pandemic. Nicole said that there was "a lot more weight in the fact that putting avatars in the same room together is the only way that we're going to be together until this is over." Multiple divorced parents questioned if playing together with their children in the virtual space of *AC:NH* might be understood as a violation of their coparenting agreements, but all felt that it was worth the risk to continue engaging with their children. Gamer Mom Coco had to live separately from her son Lucas, age 8, for an extended period of time during the pandemic. She is an essential worker, and living apart was the safest way for her to do her job and protect her family. She and Lucas would FaceTime and play *AC:NH* together daily, and she "felt like we were still together a little bit that way."

Mom Star shared that friendships that had faded over the years were revived due to playing *AC:NH* together. Star also explained that within playing *AC:NH* with her adult friends, the conversations were not just about the game itself:

> When I started playing Animal Crossing she was like, oh my God, I have an island, please come visit, and so we just we played all the time. Even now we'll be like hey are you online and then we just start talking in general, and it leads to talks about actual life instead of just Animal Crossing.

Mom Zelda is a military spouse, and both her own family and her friends' families relocate frequently as part of their military service, and she described *AC:NH* as a "godsend" for her as a military spouse trying to maintain friendships. Mom Jean shared a vivid example where *AC:NH* allowed her to reconnect with friends from her teenage years. She said that her favorite *AC:NH* memory was a nighttime shooting stars event with two women. The three of them dressed their avatars in matching outfits and took pictures with the shooting stars as the background: "We were laughing that

because now all of our kids are around the same age, and they all play [*AC:NH*] together and here we are doing the same thing."

Some participants made friends in *AC:NH* itself, either through social media *AC:NH* groups or via mutual friends hosting people on their islands. With regard to *AC:NH* groups, which as a disclaimer were used as the primarily recruitment space for this study, some participants appreciated having social interactions with others within those groups. Certainly many participants had interactions with strangers that were entirely superficial to complete an in-game task. But sometimes while interacting with others, friendly conversations occurred and gave parents a brief sense of social engagement. Mom Michelle said, "being on [*AC:NH*] Facebook groups and having people talk and come over to my island, I felt like I was seeing people even though I wasn't necessarily." Mom Lyla expressed surprise in this sort of socializing: "I'm not usually that social with people I do not know, and it's not like me to join all of these Facebook groups. Maybe that has something to do with the pandemic." Some of these relationships with other *AC:NH* players were initially superficial for the purpose of the game but outside-of-game friendships with new people developed. Mom Coco said that she met "wonderful people" on *AC:NH* social media groups. Mom Marie similarly connected with a social media group: "I wasn't seeing any friends or anything, but all of a sudden when I would play the game and I connected with these people and on the Discord [chat app], we were having conversations." Mom Janae met new friends while on a mutual friend's island. She explained that they hit it off while playing the game, but then became Facebook friends and now have a closer friendship outside of *AC:NH* than they do inside of the game, despite never meeting. Mom Odie had a similar experience: "I've even friended people on Facebook just from Animal Crossing. I've met them through something else and then oh hey, you want to hang out and then we're friends on Facebook." For some of the parents that had stranger friendships that began on *AC:NH* social media groups, they also had their children play with the strangers' children. The parents explained that they trusted these other people because they were also parents, and they had gotten to know them over a period of time in the social media group.

However, it was not only real human social connection that adults found to help cope with the isolation stress. Interacting with the AI villager animals in the game supplemented actual human interaction for participants such as Dad Kevin, who said the game gave him "an ability to connect even if you were only connecting with AI animals that that brought a little bit of joy with simple pleasures," and Mom Michelle who said, "It was exciting to talk with 'people,' which sounds weird, talking with computer characters, but I could have a discussion [with the AI]."

Discussion

Pandemic stress is a tremendous area of concern, especially for parents. This study provided a unique opportunity to capture this stress and cope in real time. We have found qualitative support for the dimensions of Reinecke and Rieger's (2021) model of coping with video games. Within psychological detachment, *AC:NH* provides an interesting context because the user is literally on an island of their own making, which is a very detached escaping experience. The immersive virtual environment lends itself to detachment. Similarly, *AC:NH* is likely relaxing, the second dimension, due to the

slow pace of game play and lack of demanding tasks, as discussed by Straznickas (2020). Many participants described it as such. However, for those that wished, there were small and large achievements, tied to mastery experience, within the game that were quite different from other games that involve completing levels or beating a boss. Some participants were deeply appreciative of having a space to complete goals among the uncertainty of the pandemic. Finally, the game provided parents with a sense of control, which helped them deal with their stress. *AC:NH* affords an unusual amount of control and choices for gameplay due to its open environment and many opportunities for creative design through landscaping, decorating, and clothing. In total, there is evidence for both recovery through replenishment of depleted resources, and the possibility of long-term effects on resilience. Pandemic resilience is the process of adapting well during times of stress (Yıldırım & Solmaz, 2020), and pandemic coping is tied to pandemic resilience (Mikocka-Walus et al., 2020). Moreover, Prime et al. (2020) argued that families sharing time together can help promote resilience. Our emergent code of *AC:NH* facilitating adults' social connection in a time of isolation is new and important because of how much isolation impacts parental mental health during the pandemic (Mikocka-Walus et al., 2020). Parents connected with old friends and family, renewed older friendships, made new friends, as well as interacted with AI to reduce their sense of isolation, while being safe at home. There were a variety of social needs and a variety of social opportunities within the game to meet these needs.

Contributions

The pandemic had specific stressors that allow for expansion of coping theory. The pandemic-specific stressors, namely, the isolation that the pandemic demanded as well as the work–caregiving balance crisis that many families were still navigating during the time of data collection, afforded an opportunity to understand coping in real time. Parental stress during the pandemic is an important topic, and undoubtedly the effects of parental pandemic stress will be felt for years to come. We also note that some of our participants did not identify as video game players before playing *AC:NH*, or at least they had not played games since their own childhood. This provides an interesting new population to study within video game coping studies, as they typically generally focus on self-identified "gamers." Although we did not have a large enough sample of non-gamers versus gamers to draw conclusions about differences in coping behaviors, it does seem that for those parents that were new to video gaming that the novelty of using games as a coping tool is an important finding. Also given that other research has found that food and alcohol are common pandemic parenting coping strategies (Calarco et al., 2020), video games such as *AC:NH* may be a healthier alternative.

Limitations

There are a number of limitations of the current study. First, at the time of data collection, summer and early autumn of 2020, the pandemic was not over. Although this afforded a unique opportunity to interview parents and families in the middle of coping, we also anticipate that later studies will allow parents and families time to reflect upon their pandemic stress and coping. Second, we do not have strong evidence for long-term resilience, but future studies could consider this. These results do indicate that there

may be some long-term effects on parental resilience though. Third, we primarily recruited families from *AC:NH* social media groups, which indicates that they were fairly engaged players of the game. The coping behaviors and effects that we observed in these participants may not reflect the experiences of more casual players of *AC:NH*. We also may not have been able to speak with *AC:NH* playing parents that were so stressed due to the pandemic that they did not have time to participate in an interview. We do note, however, that many families that we spoke with did experience a great deal of stress and loss. Finally, we only spoke to parents about their stress and coping. Although we did speak to children about other aspects of their *AC:NH* experience, the research team decided that it would be inappropriate to discuss stress with children currently experiencing the pandemic, especially when the interviews were over Zoom, and we were not able to provide the debriefing resources that would be appropriate when asking children about sensitive topics. Future research, postpandemic, should certainly consider children's stress as well.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic was a stressful time for parents. This study considers how parents coped with pandemic-related stress with the video game *AC:NH*. This study found support for Reinecke and Rieger's (2021) recovery and resilience in entertaining media use model, as parents psychologically detached with the game, used the game to relax, found a sense of accomplishment through achieving goals via mastery experiences, and appreciated the control that the game afforded. Parents also found social connection in the game, which helped them cope with pandemic-related isolation.

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