Politics at play

Analyzing discussions on political protests in Animal Crossing – New Horizons

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Abstract

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Horizons

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Executing and performing political protests is not just for the streets. A number of political protests have been held in video games, using the features of the game to convey political messages. In a world where there is ample possibility to communicate online, players are able to discuss these protests in online communities.

In 2020, two political protests were held in the Nintendo game *Animal Crossing – New Horizons.* In this thesis, I study the reception of these protests amongst users of online forums related to the game. Online communities have been studied and the discussions on the two protests have been juxtaposed. The standpoints of users have been presented using a discourse analytical method called positioning. Then, they have been analyzed using theories on power by Michel Foucualt.

The two protests are being discussed differently. There seems to be an idea that politics have no place in these communities, but there is an apparent disagreement on what constitutes as politics. My analysis shows power relations at play; both in the discussions present and in the discussions not present. One protest is discussed far more frequently than the other, which affects the possibility to spread knowledge of the cause of the protest. From here, I conclude that the (in)ability to spread knowledge affects which protest is acceptable to discuss.

The findings of this thesis say a lot of the contemporary gamers' approach to politics and their belonging in video games or forums related to video games. This, in turn, is important knowledge for various kinds of actors.

Keywords: Foucault; political discourse; protesting; video games; Animal Crossing; ludology; online communication

Att verkställa och genomföra politiska protester sker inte bara utomhus. Ett antal politiska protester har hållits i tv-spel, där spelare använder funktioner i spelet för att förmedla politiska budskap. I en värld där det finns stora möjligheter att kommunicera online, finns också möjligheter för spelare diskutera dessa protester i onlineforum.

2020 hölls två politiska protester i Nintendo-spelet Animal Crossing – New Horizons. I den här uppsatsen studerar jag mottagandet av dessa protester bland användare av onlineforum relaterade till spelet. Onlineforum har studerats och diskussionerna kring de två protesterna har jämförts med varandra. Användarnas ståndpunkter har presenterats med hjälp av en diskursanalytisk metod kallad positionering. Sedan har de analyserats med hjälp av teorier om makt av Michel Foucualt.

De två protesterna diskuteras olika. Det verkar finnas en idé om att politik inte har någon plats i dessa forum, men det finns en uppenbar oenighet om vad som räknas som politik. Min analys visar att maktförhållanden spelar in; både i de diskussioner som är närvarande och i de diskussioner som inte är närvarande. Den ena protesten diskuteras betydligt oftare än den andra, vilket påverkar möjligheten att sprida kunskap om orsaken till protesten. Härifrån drar jag slutsatsen att (o)förmågan att sprida kunskap i sin tur påverkar vilken protest som blir acceptabel att diskutera.

Resultaten av denna uppsats säger mycket om samtida spelares inställning till politik och politikens tillhörighet i tv-spel eller forum relaterade till tv-spel. Detta är i sin tur viktig kunskap för olika slags aktörer.

Nyckelord: politisk diskurs; protester; tv-spel; ludologi; onlineforum

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Cecilia Lundström

Abbreviations

ACNH – Animal Crossing – New Horizons

CCP – Chinese Communist Party

Anti-ELAB – anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill

BLM – Black Lives Matter

NPC – non-player character

TBT – The Bell Tree (Forums)

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1.0 Introduction

"If I've learned anything from video games, it is that when you meet enemies, it means that you're going in the right direction."

(Unknown, n.d.)

Protest signs, anonymized individuals and chanting messages of justice and freedom. In many ways, they seem like typical protest rallies. But the protests considered here are virtual and exists in the video game world – the protesting individuals are playable characters with customizable appearance, living simulated lives on digital islands. In 2020, players of the video game Animal Crossing – New Horizons (further abbreviated to ACNH) executed in-game political protests, where characters and game environment were customized to form political messages. Two protests, an anti-ELAB (anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill) protest against the Hong Kong extradition treaty imposed by Chinese authorities, and a Black Lives Matter protest against racial injustice, attained the gaze of international media (The Guardian, 2020).

On a virtual island, outside a virtual home, an avatar is saying "Free Hong Kong" whilst gazing over a customized patch of land exclaiming "Free Hong Kong – Revolution Now". Another avatar is smiling in the sunset at a virtual beach, between two signs saying "Black Lives Matter" and depicting a raised fist. Images like these portray a kind of protesting which blends the virtual world and the real; issues that have little to do with ACNH still appears within the game. This is largely how the anti-ELAB and the BLM protests unfolded in Animal Crossing – New Horizons in 2020. Large-scale protest rallies, like the demonstrations that can sometimes be seen in the streets, were impossible to organize since the game only allows nine avatars at the same island (Tidmarsh 2021). Below are two images showing what a typical protest looked like.

Image belongs to @joshuawongcf on Twitter.

Image belongs to u/Emilyx666 on Reddit.

This thesis studies the reception of the protests mentioned above amongst other players of the ACNH game through scrutiny of online communities where the game is discussed.

"(…)[W]e get that there's a lot of shit in the world, but can't we just have our video games without having to hear about it?" says one of the hosts of the YouTube show Clownfish TV, in an attempt at echoing the video game communitys' general approach to politics brought into

video games (Clownfish TV, 07-08-2020). The comments to this video largely responds to this statement; viewers express how they see video games as a relaxing break from reality rather than yet another forum to discuss serious matters of the world (ibid). Of course, there are exceptions. Googling "do politics belong in video games" threw me into a rabbit hole of lengthy discussions online. Discussing politics seems stigmatized and controversial in online communities, but it seems like there have been little studies on how this stigmatization works and what debate climate it may build in the communities. This thesis will answer some of the question marks left by previous studies in this area.

Two different protests in the same game are studied. Doing this juxtaposition, rather than for example studying two protests in two games, or one protest in two games, is a conscious choice. By staying in the same game, I also stay within the same setting. Comparing two games arguably means comparing between two audiences or two kinds of forum users, which might be confusing and create misguiding results.

Discussions on these two protests are in this thesis juxtaposed and analyzed through a discourse analytical model called positioning. Positioning is deemed suitable as it arguably helps clarify and elucidate the different standpoints within the discussions. Arguably, it will help with the comparison.

Foucauldian power theory is used as it is deemed suitable to explain how the discourse is structured. In many of Foucaults' works, the focal point very much lies in the structure of a discourse[1].

There is no implication that these two protests are the only instances of political protesting in games. The anti-ELAB movement has in many ways "gamified" their protests, by creating their own protest-themed video games designed to help the revolutions (Ho 2022). Nor is ACNH the first video game to have been subject to these kinds of protest acts[2]. The reason for still picking these very protests and this very game is because it is arguably rare that two protests happen so close in time within the same video game. These circumstances arguably strengthen the validity of the results in this thesis. Had the two protests been very far from each other in time, there may be a chance of the general discussion around the online communities to have changed over time, thus placing an uncertainty on the results.

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[1] See for example Foucault (1982)
[2] See for example Cermak-Sassenrath (2018) for a discussion on political activism in video games.

The aim of this thesis is to elucidate the way players of ACNH uses online gaming forums to discuss two different political protests happening in the game – the anti-ELAB protest and the Black Lives Matter protest. This is further analyzed using theories on power by Michel Foucault and a discourse analytical approach to text called positioning. In this thesis, I will show how political discussion takes place in a digital world.

Where one protest is considered too political to discuss in ACNH related forums, the other is subject to many discussions and messages of support[3]. A juxtaposition is here argued necessary to fully highlight and elucidate the differences between the reception of the two protests. Without the juxtaposition, I risk missing large parts of what I intend to study. My aim is to study the differences in reception for two different protests. The fact that they are discussing it differently may say something about values and identity. What do players value, and where do they draw the line at things to disregard? This thesis can be seen as a first step towards answering these questions. It also highlights how power relations work in this context. Players seem to eschew politics, but what they attribute to the concept of "politics" ostensibly has much to do with power.

My research questions are:

- How are the different protest acts by the anti-ELAB and Black Lives Matter movements discussed in online forums for Animal Crossing – New Horizons?
- What role might power play in these discussions?

1.1 Disposition

This thesis has already been introduced with an aim and two research questions. From here, a brief explanation of core concepts used in this thesis are introduced. After this, a background chapter introducing the Hong Kong sovereignty conflict in China foregoes an introduction of the BLM movement and what they protest. The game *Animal Crossing – New Horizons* will also be briefly explained.

Previous research is then presented. The chapter will give a brief overview on scholars who have studied similar topics and issues. Some of these scholars will be used later on in my

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[3] See section 7 and 8 for in-depth debates and examples

analysis, but not all of them. The reason for putting them in previous research rather than the theorethical framework is that they play minor roles in my analysis.

Then, I will present possible ethical considerations, and how they have been handled to produce reliable research.

Following this, methods and material will be introduced. The art of netnography will be introduced, followed by an explanation of the material. Here, I will also state how my field work was performed, and explicate my own position. Then, the method of analysis, positioning, will be explained.

This is followed by the analysis. The discussions on both protests are presented and analyzed. The conclusion ties the analysis together, and contains suggestions on how to apply the results both within and outside academia. The thesis is finished with a glossary on some of the most commonly used phrases in the thesis.

1.2 Explanation of concepts used in this thesis

This explains some main concepts used in this thesis, but is not an exhaustive list of every concept used.

1.2.1 Conversation

This thesis uses positioning as a discourse analytical method – where the main point of analysis is conversation. Here, it is important to properly define the concept of conversation and what level of conversation the analysis is taking place at.

In this thesis, conversation is to be seen as a structure of speech-acts, which collectively form a discussion where speech-acts build power relations. In this thesis, a speech-act is spoken, written, or image-based conveyance of messages, communicated digitally. Speech-acts are not static, but one sentence can contain several different meanings and ideas simultaneously. The meaning of a speech-act can also change in accordance with the unfolding of the conversation around it. This definition of conversation and view on speech-acts ostensibly allows for a multifaceted analysis, covering more possible interpretations than if conversations and speech-acts are seen as static and impossible to change meanings of. This definition largely draws upon Bronvyn Davies & Rom Harrés' (1990), with the exception that Davies & Harré

puts a lot of emphasis on the actors. Here, the emphasis will not be put on the actors as much as on the speech-acts – *what* is said is important, not *who* said it.

When referring to "the conversation" or "the discussion" in this thesis, the conversation taking place within the online communities are intended.

1.2.2 Online communities

To date, there is no commonly agreed upon definition of the concept of online communities. The term, and idea of, online communities are old, and various ideas and definitions of it exists. This may be because the communities as well as the humans who utilize and communicate via the Internet are constantly subject to change. Starr Roxanne Hiltzs' definition given in 1984 is not as relevant today, since the concept of an online community has changed a lot (Kozinets 2010: 8). It is deemed important to assert what an online community means in this context, precisely because of the various definitions that exists and the changing nature of the matter.

In this thesis, *online community* is defined as a digital space where members of said space can discuss various matters. The following characteristics are a common nominator in this understanding of online communities; the communities are run by moderators, the discussions revolve around a certain topic (in this case, the ACNH game), and the discussions are publicly accessible. *Publicly accessible* here means that the forum is accessible to read and/or join for anyone who is eligible to access the pages. The reason for providing this clarification is that some platforms, such as The Bell Tree Forum, is accessible without a membership account, where other platforms, such as Discord, are impossible to reach unless you have a Discord account and join the server yourself. However, anyone can join the servers in question and as soon as they have joined, everything is accessible.

1.2.3 Discourse

The term *discourse* shall here be understood as Michel Foucault defines it in *The order of discourse* (1981). Foucault defines discourse as social practices which creates constructions through which power relations work. The Foucauldian discourse is always situated, and Foucault seemingly dismisses the notion that discourses are limited text or language – semiotic practices also create discourse. Discourse, says Foucault, are inextricably tied to both power and knowledge. Discourse also works as an *excluding* force, where it determines what

is forbidden to say and do, to steer actors and actions into not doing said things. Important is that power relations are *always* present in a discourse, according to Foucualt, and that the structure of the discourse determines the structure of the power negation(s) (Foucault 1981: 53).

In this article, it is assumed that the discourse of the game and the discourse of the online communities is shared – it is seen as one and the same discourse surrounding the game and the online communities. This because the online communities are seen as an elongation of the game. It is impossible to determine the precise discourse of every single instance of multiplaying[4], whereas this was determined a feasible solution.

1.3 Background

This section provides the reader with knowledge of Chinese Internet policy, the conflict between mainland China and Hong Kong, and the BLM protests. The section also provides a brief explanation of the game *Animal Crossing – New Horizons*.

1.3.1 China and the censorship of the Internet

This section gives a brief explanation on Chinese Internet policy. This to give the reader an overview of the possibilities of Internet usage in China. There is a possibility that Chinese people do not have access to the forums studied in this thesis. It is arguably important to explain why and what Chinese people may have access to instead.

Around the year 2000, Internet usage exploded in China. Suddenly, controlling information became significantly harder (Austin 2014: 49).

From initially seeking full control and sovereign power, the CCP drastically changed their mind about the Internet upon recognizing rigid control over it as unattainable. As the CCP recognized a way to utilize the formation of the internet to govern, the country begun to transition from rigid control over information by authorities to e-democracy. The idea of e-democracy is the idea that public scrutiny and criticism of the government through the Internet is healthy and represents a new form of democracy. This was part of the new kind of political reformation that the CCP were pursuing (Austin 2014: 53).

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[4] The game can be played both as a single- and a multiplayer game.

With e-democracy, the CCP could recognize and utilize the opinions of the population through the Internet (ibid). Chinese leaders did, to some extent, allow criticism and political debate online, and frequently logged onto the Internet to get a hold of the opinions and wishes of the Chinese population (Austin 2014: 57).

In *The power of the Internet in China – citizen activism online* (2008) Goubin Yang continuously draws parallels between activity online and offline. It is known that the Internet is strictly regulated in China but the kind of activity that does take place there is lesser known – there are several ways to circumvent regulations on political discussions, and discussions that "should not" exist does in fact exist online (2008: 210). A modern cultural identity has developed simultaneously with online community activity; online community activity has created a cultural revolution which constitutes a social revolution (2008: 211). Yang sees the political arena of the Internet as a direct mirror of other forms of activism in China (ibid 223).

"The expansion of tools of cultural creativity and the release of the creative energies of the common people are directly related to the extension of existing cultural forms and the appearance of new ones. An important feature of online activism is its diverse genres and rituals. These cultural forms are the vehicles of citizen activism. They are also the vehicles of popular sentiments in general. Herein lies the significance of these cultural forms. For what they express, ultimately, are the concerns and aspirations of the common people."

(Yang 2008: 216).

The Internet in China is built upon foundations which makes it hard to ensure trust in the digital environment. The trust ensured by authorities in China oftentimes revolve around preventing cyber-crimes or the spreading of false information or rumors, especially regarding the CCP (Austin 2014: 74). Nevertheless, both Austin and Yang stresses the importance of the Internet as a political weapon. The Internet may be censored, but one can still look to the activity there to see the unfolding of a new social, political, and cultural revolution. Austin goes far enough to call the current status of information freedom "at about the maximum it could be in a country that remains in practice a secret state governed by a secretive party" (2014: 87). He seems to believe it impossible to constrain the status of complete control over information in China. Further, he suggests that the tipping point, where control and censorship ultimately crumble and information start to flow freely, is near (ibid 87-88).

However, there are things to consider. Yang calls it "the digital divide"; Chinese citizenship does not equal netizenship. Parts of the population in China only have theoretical access to the

Internet and cannot actually use websites that are available to all (2008: 214-215). How close Chinese citizens are to an uncensored Internet, whatever that is, will not be speculated around since that falls outside the scope of this thesis. It is nevertheless argued that presenting a general image of the status of the Internet in China is important for the understanding of the backdrop, which is why the issue is still presented. Studies has shown that the use and access to various social media and online communications channels have been of importance to organize protest movements, and the anti-ELAB movement is no exception (Ruijgrok 2016, Frosnia 2021, Su et al 2022). This section has shown that Internet access in China is complicated, which is important to remember when reading my analysis.

1.3.2 One country versus two systems

Bueno de mesquita et al calls Hong Kong "the worlds best example of the free market economy" (1996: 17). Hong Kong is vastly different than mainland China when it comes to structure and sovereign control, and is described as very successful in an economic sense (ibid: 26).

For a long time, Chinese leaders repeated a mantra of leaving Hong Kong to develop their economy separately from mainland China. "One country, two systems", said Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping in the late 20th century, and Hong Kong was promised specific constitutional status as a special administrative region (SAR). Yet, the future of Hong Kong was subject of uncertainty for many. Chinese constitution was reputed for not being followed in practice, and Hong Kong citizens suspected that the words of leaving them alone were but words. (Bueno de Mesquita et al 1996: 30-31).

Protesting mainland China is no novel phenomenon in Hong Kong; mainland China has on numerous occasions tried to impose legislations which threatened Hong Kongs' sovereignty, which Hong Kong citizens have replied to with protests. Tung et al calls it a "protest-based checks-and-balance"– whenever attempts were made to move Hong Kong closer to mainland China economically, socially, and culturally, Hong Kong citizens managed to invoke protests large enough to cause a drawback from these attempts (2021: 291). However, this was not sustainable. When the documents signed by Britain expired, the Hong Kong government presented a controversial extradition bill that would push Hong Kong towards "one country" and away from "two systems". The bill legally allowed its Chief Executive to transfer fugitives, even those without formal extradition arrangements, to any jurisdiction within China. As the jurisdiction systems of mainland China and Hong Kong was, and still are,

widely different, there was fear that insurgents would be sent to mainland China for solely political reasons. The protests this sparked were different than previous ones, since the anti-ELAB movement that became the main protest movement, used violence – previously a taboo method amongst dissidents in Hong Kong (Tung & Kasuya 2021: 193).

It is hard to know to what extent the anti-ELAB protests are organized and by whom. Therefore, it is also impossible for me to state exactly how the offline protests are related to the online ones.

1.3.3 The Black Lives Matter movement

Trayvon Martin was not the first American to die because of his skin color – America is a country with deep rooted issues of racism. Being black in the US, like Martin was, means being constantly suspected, mistrusted, and consequently, always in danger (Woodly 2021: chap 1). On July 13th 2013, Alicia Garza witnessed the verdict fall on Martins' murderer George Zimmerman, and realized that the trial ended in acquittal on all charges for Zimmerman. A black person herself, Garza felt vulnerable and betrayed by the country she lived in. She logged on to Facebook that night, writing a long status post exclaiming "Black people. I love you. I love us. Our lives matter" (Garza :108-111). Her post went viral, and her friend and co-organiser Patrice Kahn-Cullors shared the status together with the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter. A new anti-racist movement was born (Woodly 2021: chap 1).

Goubin Yang calls it "hashtag activism"; the use of hashtags to protest on social media. #BlackLivesMatter is part of a group of hashtags forming a complete sentence with a verb "expressing a strong sense of action and force. The actions are petitioning, demanding, appealing, and protesting. They express refusals, objections, and imperatives to take immediate action" (Yang 2016: 15). These kinds of hashtags are often successful in evoking attention and creating effective protest actions (ibid). But BLM is arguably more than a hashtag. Protest rallies, both acclaimed and deplored, have been organized offline as well as in video games. Notable about the protests is that they go in waves – whilst the hashtag was coined and recognized in 2013, the movement did not gain international recognition until 2014 with the surge of protests after the killing of yet another black man, Michael Brown (Collier Hillstrom 2018: 5). The latest surge of BLM protests took place in 2020, after 46-year old George Floyd had been mistreated so badly by Minneapolis police during an arrest, that he suffocated to death (Johansen 2022: chap 8). This 2020 protest surge is the one that has

been featured in ACNH, and consequently, the discussions studied in this thesis revolves around this wave of protests.

1.3.4 Animal Crossing – New Horizons

Animal Crossing – New Horizons (ACNH) is a video game in the *Animal Crossing* video game series. It was released by Nintendo, for the Nintendo Switch device, in 2020. The game revolves around building and decorating your own island, to create a home for your own character as well as NPC:s (non-player characters) created by the game, in game and by players referred to as "villagers". It is also possible to invite other players to your island, or conversely visit the islands of other players (Animal Crossing, n.d). There seems to be no function for discussion in the very game, however, the internet holds several forums where discussions are taking place[5]. In this thesis, discussions taking place on these Internet forums are studied. Nothing in the very game is therefore studied.

2.0 Previous research

This chapter will give an overview of previous research connected to this study. The chapter presents research on ACNH, digital gaming culture, digital and analogue communication, and the digital aspects of the anti-ELAB and the BLM protests, respectively. This is no exhaustive overview. The chapter also argues for the relevance of this very study and points to a potential research gap.

When ACNH is subject of study, topics that stay "in game", rather than the community around the game, are often studied. M D Schmalzer (2020) makes a queer analysis on the gameplay where she argues that the structure of the gameplay caters to a normative "standard player" but there are ways to, through faulty controlling systems, deconstruct this player and create new ways of being inclusive within the game. Comerford (2020) discusses how the game acts as a routine builder and a way to connect with your friends through the game – however, the focus is on *how* the interaction is built, and not what people are saying and doing when they interact. Tung et al (2021) studies human interaction in relation to ACNH, but their study revolves around human interaction with non-human elements in the game (NPC, gameplay, et cetera).

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[5] Deducted from personal observations.

For the anti-ELAB movement, video games have ostensibly played a role in protesting. Both Daniel Cermak-Sassenrath (2018) and Hugh Davis (2020) discusses the role of video games in the Hong Kong protests. But oftentimes, scholars discuss the protests in relation to several video games[6], or places focus on the general discussion on the role of digital media in political protests. Some are very broad in their studies and mainly uses the anti-ELAB protest as an example of something bigger; Critical Art Ensemble (1995) discusses digital political activism as a phenomenon, and Zhang (2013) is one of many who studies the political discussion around video games in China.

The BLM movement is mostly mentioned as an example of social media based online protesting, which may not be too surprising as the movement started on social media. Dunivin et al (2022) maps how BLM discussions online are shifting the general discussion on racism in a prolonged perspective; however, their approach is mainly quantitative. However, anti-racism protests can be found in video games too. Games with anti-racist themes, pushing an anti-racist agenda, is an example (Gray & Leaonard 2018: 3-6). Nevertheless, in most forms the protests are studied, the focus seems to be on the *protest* and not on the reception of the protest. That is, scholars are interested in how the protest is built and spread, or the cause of the protest – what protesters are upset about. Since the studies are oftentimes written by other activists and/or people who are very close, geographically, culturally, or opinion-based, to the issue at hand, there could also be certain tendencies in the research. I have however taken measures to use research which is as reliable as possible.

Video game culture is subject to many ethnological studies. Jessica Enevold has studied how the image of gaming is gradually changing from a niche interest for "nerds" to incorporate anyone and becoming a natural element of entertainment in peoples' everyday lives (2009). She has also studied how the material aspects of the gaming equipment affect the experience (2014). Tom Boellstorff maps the culture and behaviour of players ethnographically in *Coming of age in Second Life* (2008). Ethnologist Bonnie Nardy studies player behaviour and activity in World of Warcraft in *My Life as a Night Elf Priest: An Anthropological Account of World of Warcraft* (2010).

Californian professor Henry Jenkins has a background in political science, communication studies and journalism. He has written several books discussing popular culture, specifically

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[6] Anti-ELAB protests did not exclusively appear in ACNH, but in other video games as well (Davies 2022).

with focus on the audiences. Fan culture, political discussions, and more is prominent in his work. Jenkins often bring in politics and discusses how the idea of "politics" if formed in a popular culture context (Jenkins, Henry. "Who the &#&% is Henry Jenkins?" n.d http://henryjenkins.org/aboutmehtml).

Finnish professor Frans Mäyrä is professor in Information Studies and Interactive Media at Tampere University, with a specialization in digital culture and game studies. He has also founded and is head of Tampere University Game Lab. He has published numerous studies on video games and video game culture, and has also published textbooks on how to perform ludology. His work is mainly meant to instruct and teach other people who wishes to study video games (Tampere University, *Frans Mäyrä*, n.d.).

American sociologist Richard Sennett is usually not associated with digital culture, but he has written about communication. In *Together* (2012), he addresses both online and offline ways of communicating, and touches upon their differences and similarities (2012: 24-28).

This study differs from previous research in several ways. Contrary to most previous research, this study focuses on the reception of the in game protest, by analysing what players are writing about it on gaming forums. It also seems rare to compare different protests within the same game. As this study proves that different protests can be discussed very differently within the same online communities, the lack of inquiry around this is ostensibly a research gap that is urgent to fill. The argument here runs, that this kind of comparison may help understanding and mapping the discussion around online communities of ACNH. When this is elucidated, it is further possible to discern player values and how they frame and discuss certain topics in a clearer way.

Studying how people acknowledge, discuss, and create different issues is typical for the cultural analyst. A study where peoples' opinions are unveiled, scrutinized, and positioned, like in this study, is then arguably a clear case of cultural analysis. But in general, the social and humanities section tend to focus on the experience of the game, rather than the communities surrounding the game. There seems to be a lack of cultural analytical perspectives in the existing research on political protesting in video games, whereby the relevance of studies like this one can be even further argued for.

3.0 Ethical considerations

Human subject research must be executed with ethical care and consideration for peoples' integrity – however, on the Internet, there is sometimes confusion around where the human subject is, and where the field is. One can imagine that posts written by anonymous users, fully aware that their posts are publicly available, should not have any say in how their posts are spread and used – however, that is not always the case (Kozinets 2010: 141). Simultaneously, receiving informed consent may not always be possible. The Association of Internet Researchs' 2019 guidelines for ethics in Internet-based research states that informed consent may not always be attainable, which is a problem (Internet Research: Ethical Guidelines 3.0 Association of Internet Researchers 2019: 11). Measurements have been taken to ensure ethical handling of the material, which are described below.

In Internet based qualitative research, it is important to differentiate the *field* (which can be studied without getting explicit consent for being studied) and the *subject* (which needs explicit consent before the material can be quoted and worked with). If the research counts as human subject research, informed consent is necessary, if not, informed consent may not be necessary (Kozinets 2010: 141).

Human subject research is research where the researcher themselves interacts with the subject – however, when the researcher simply observes what has already been written, it is considered an exempt (ibid). As I in position of researcher has refrained from intervening in the discussions studied, this material can be said to *not* constitute human subject research.

Further, measurements have been taken to ensure anonymity amongst the community members. Usernames have been redacted to mitigate ethical issues of anonymity. The Association of Internet Research deems measurements to ensure anonymity, such as this one, adequate to mitigate ethical issues (AoIR 2019: 10).

4.0 Methods and material

This section is divided into four parts. The first part explicates how the material has been collected – the art of netnography is presented and it is explained how netnography is used in the context of this thesis. The second part gives an overview of the different online communities used to gather material. The third part presents positioning, the methodology

with which the material has been studied. The chapter is finished with an explanation of how I have conducted my field work, and an exposition of my own position as a researcher.

4.1 Finding the material

During the winter of 2022, I wrote an article about the Hong Kong protests executed in *Animal Crossing – New Horizons.* I was intrigued by the phenomenon of in-game protesting and wanted to know what players thought about this. I therefore reached out to players through various online communities to ask them for interviews.

It failed tremendously.

I sent out a survey. It failed as well.

It seemed, that speaking about politics was taboo in these communities. The requests for interviews were taken down by moderators. The surveys were left unanswered.

Instead, I looked towards the discussions that were already there. I searched for different terms related to the anti-ELAB protest, and found that no, it was not very much talked about.

For this thesis, I wanted to expand on this. I started "vacuuming the Internet", as my supervisor phrased it, for instances where politics and video games collide. In the back of my head, I knew that very close to the anti-ELAB protest, a Black Lives Matter protest had taken place in ACNH. I discovered through my searches that the two protests were discussed very differently. Why? I wanted to understand how they were different, so that I could come one step closer to realize how the stigmatization of politics in online gaming forums works. I returned to the forums I had used for my article and expanded my search, to find that indeed, players are more inclined to discuss Black Lives Matter than the Hong Kong protests.

Netnography means finding ethnographic material online; however, it is more than googling (Kozinets 2010: 2). Netnography means dealing with social interactions through technology; it is not just studying words, but images, videos, sound files, web designs, and much more. There is no specified manual on how to perform netnography, nor is there a specific, delimited idea of "what a netnographer studies". This also entails that the netnographer has many different ways of conducting their research. Further; "(…) netnographic researchers are not dealing merely with words, but with images, drawings, photography, sound files, edited audiovisual presentations, website creations and other digital artifacts. Netnography provides participative guidelines, including an advocacy of the research web-page, the inclusion of

Skype interviews, and in-person participative fieldwork, in order to migrate the refined perceptivity of ethnography to online media. With methodological rigour, care and humility, netnography becomes a dance of possibilities for human understanding in social technological interaction." (Kozinets 2010: 5-6)

The discussions on the forums are mainly text based. However, images, gif files, emojis or similar may also occur, and the analysis may include these too. Everything appearing within the online community may be subject to scrutiny.

The material studied in this thesis is the result of netnographic studies. Online communities where the game is discussed have been studied, by searching for different terms and then study the results. Presented below are the communities studied. Note that the member counts are all estimates, as they are constantly changing and may not be accurate by the time of the reading of this thesis. The communities studied are the following:

- r/AnimalCrossingNewHor (Reddit forum, 239 000 members)
- Animal Crossing: New Horizons (Discord forum, 539 000 members)
- The Bell Tree Forums (forum not tied to a specific platform, 125 000 members)

In these communities, the posted and available discussions are studied, as well as the rules of conduct. Experiments have been made with searching with different phrases to see what kind of results are given. There have been *no* attempts to deliberately instigate a debate on the matter – I as an author have *not* participated in any way in these discussions.

Two factors have determined my choice of online communities. First, the correspondence to the game within the community was considered. Rather than looking for discussions on ACNH in forums that discuss video games in general, forums that specifically discusses ACNH are studied. The second factor regarded the possibility to instigate discussion. The forums chosen are popular websites and channels, since they ostensibly hold a larger amount of members, increasing the possibility to instigate discussion. The forums chosen are also specifically designed for debating. Social media platforms such as Facebook or Instagram are mainly used to consistently post updates that are not necessarily meant to create debate. The platforms used here, however, are designed to specifically instigate debate.

To increase reliability, a forum not tied to an external platform is being used as compliment. The Bell Tree forum is self-proclaimed as the largest independent forum regarding the Animal Crossing video game series (Nookipedia, n.d.). This is considered increasing reliability

because of the structure of the platform. The Bell Tree Forum is not tied to an external platform, meaning that the structure of the platform is unique for the forums. One can argue that discussions tied to external platforms might be influenced by the structure of the external platform – that the general rules and structure of Reddit, for example, controls the structure of the subreddits to such a degree that results are influenced. However, this issue is circumvented by juxtaposing forums from different platforms, and additionally add a forum which is not tied to any external platform.

The search terms are chosen after some experimenting. Searching for "china" gave similar results to "hong kong" and "hong kong protest", whereas it was omitted. However, searching for both "hong kong" and "hong kong protest" also gave similar results, but was it was nevertheless deemed fruitful to include both search terms. My reasoning behind this is that I believe it to increase validity. Was I to only search for one of the terms, the reader may wonder if search results are skewed because of the omitting. The reader may expect different results from searching for "hong kong" and "hong kong protest", respectively.

Searching for "racism" also gave similar results to searching for "blm" or "black lives matter". The reasoning behind these search terms is the same as for anti-ELAB.

The number of screen shots presented in the analysis is not exhaustive; a selection has been made, since providing a screenshot of every post and every comment is deemed both far too much for the scope of this thesis, and a bit unnecessary at times. Arguably, it is essential to present the discussions which actually discuss the issues at hand, instead of showing detailed images of every post generated by the search.

When studying online cultural and community identities, it is important to draw a line and decide what is unreasonable to count as such identities. Kozinets stresses the importance of choosing your online material with care, since doing otherwise may undermine the researchers' credibility. Further, assuming that every single interaction in a community is part of this community stretches the limits and meanings of the term (Kozinets 2015: 13). He writes:

> We can see the practice of YouTube posting as significant, surely. We can analyze the content of the posting, its relation with other posts, attendant 'minding' behaviour such as tagging, offering keywords, linking and replying to others' YouTube comments and posts. But it would be questionable to assume that this set of behaviours says anything more about the poster's lasting identity or loyalties unless we found further evidence of this in connected research.

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(ibid)

4.2 Online communities

This section will give an overview of the different platforms used to gather material on. This is done for clarity purposes; to give the reader an overview of how the platforms used for discussions are working. A thorough understanding of these platforms is argued to both ease the understanding of the analysis, and clarify the presuppositions of the conversation(s) surrounding the platform.

This section is a mix between facts deducted from previous research and observations I have made myself. When no source is presented, it is because the information has been deducted from personal opinions.

4.2.1 Reddit

With 52 million daily active users and over 138 million active topical communities (*subreddits*), Reddit has become one of the most prolific social platforms on the Internet. On Reddit, users join subreddits devoted to specific topics, for example gardening, cooking, or specific geographical locations such as *r/Sweden* or *r/Malmo*, to discuss that very topic. Each subreddit has their own specific norms, rules, and moderation (Proferes et al 2022: 1).

Reddit discussions are open to read for everyone, regardless of membership in the community. However, to start and engage in discussions, membership is required. To create a Reddit account, one needs to be above 13 years of age and choose a nickname and an avatar. Reddit members do not use their own name and/or picture, whereas the members are anonymous in the sense that their personal information is never disclosed. It is also possible to create multiple accounts, whereas users sometimes create temporary accounts, so called *throwaway accounts*, to discuss matters they do not want associated with their main account. For example, sensitive information or information that they believe may reveal too much personal information. Subreddits are both created and moderated by users. Whilst there are certain overarching rules common for all of Reddit, the subreddits follow their own rules (ibid: 2).

On Reddit, one member starts a thread which can be commented on by other members. Next to a post or comment, is a vote count surrounded by an arrow pointing up or down. Both threads and comments are voted upon by members, and the threads and comments with the most votes are being pushed upwards in the feed. Members can both vote to push a post or a

comment upwards in the feed ("upvoting") and downwards in the feed ("downvoting"). The feed then does not follow any chronological order, but the order is based on the voting. The voting is anonymous, but public, so everyone who visits Reddit can see the voting scores on each post and/or comment, albeit not which user voted for what. This leads to a situation where posts and comments may also hold negative voting scores.

Researching on Reddit is no uncomplicated matter. Some subreddits explicitly addresses research and warns or strictly regulates researchers who wishes to perform data collection (ibid). The restrictions may be because of the sensitive nature of certain forums and posts; one such example is the subreddit *r/SuicideWatch*, a peer support forum for people struggling with suicidal thoughts (Reddit, *r/SuicideWatch,* n.d.). The subreddits subject to scrutiny in this thesis do *not* explicitly prohibit or warn about data collection for researchers, whereas it is deemed ethically acceptable to perform research upon these subreddits, given that further measurements also have been employed to ensure that the research has been performed ethically.

4.2.2 Discord

Discord may seem nothing short of a chat application at first; however, Brown Jr. and Hennis demonstrates in *Digital Ethics: Rhetoric and Responsibility in Online Aggression* (2020) that the forum is much more than that. The forum is designed for gamers to chat and call each other whilst playing. Users of Discord can create their own servers, and each server may have several of their own channels, similar to chat rooms. Each server has one or more channels, and each user can be part of multiple servers. A permission-system, assigning individual users different roles with permissions that varies according to the role at hand (Brown Jr & Hennis 2020: 23-24).

Like Reddit, Discord users have the possibility to be anonymous. Users have the option of choosing their own name, but can also choose a nickname and a profile image which is not of themselves. There is a possibility to link your social media accounts to your Discord account, but this can be done without disclosing it on your Discord profile (ibid). Discord is a very "private" community space, in the sense that what is happening on the servers and in the channels are visible to members only. Unlike Reddit, then, one needs a member account and have joined a server in order to observe the activity on the server.

Discord is heavily reliant on user labor. Users must themselves organize and moderate the servers and channels. Inappropriate interactions must be dealt with by users reporting the posts to moderators. Additionally, the default settings for Discord allows anyone to join as a member without any form of verification – the only thing needed is a Discord account. This opens for many unauthorized users to intervene and post inappropriate things.

Discord as a company resides on an arms-length principle to the content on their servers, leaving as much content alone as possible in the name of free speech. The point is to avoid policing of opinions or utterances, out of fear that this will be off-putting to the users. This has, however, led to certain controversies. For example, servers created for spreading Nazi propaganda being left untouched for longer than they probably should (Brown Jr & Hennis 2020: 28).

4.2.3 The Bell Tree Forums (TBT)

Since I have found no academic sources explaining how TBT works, the explanation provided are deducted from personal observations. This also entails that detailed reasoning around aspects such as history or in-depth analysis of the structure or the interactions between members is omitted. There is a fear that going deeper than a simple observational description would become too subjective on my part, as much would have to retort to loose guesses. This is not deemed suitable academic practice, and is thus avoided.

On TBT, you need a membership account to interact with discussions at hand, however viewing the discussions are possible without one. Membership is open for anyone, and members have the option of being anonymous and chooses their own profile picture.

When entering the TBT website, one sees a headline saying *The Bell Tree Forums* with an avatar from the game next to it. The avatar changes each time you click on it or update the page. Apart from diving straight into the forums, there are also possibilities to look at a list of members, see an update on new things happening in TBT (new members, new posts, et cetera), read the rules of the forum, or follow external links to *Animal Crossing World,* a news website focusing specifically on news within the Animal Crossing video game space. There is also an external link to the Discord server for TBT (The Bell Tree Forum, n.d.).

It is not entirely clear how much responsibility falls on the moderators. It is reasonable to assume that they have the key responsibility to make sure the rules are followed, but if that

means preemptive measures or simply correcting those who have already done wrong, is not explicated.

4.3 Analysing the material

"By giving people parts in a story, whether it be explicit or implicit, a speaker makes available a subject position which the other speaker in the normal course of events would take up", writes Davies & Harré (1990: 8). "A person can be said thus to 'have been positioned' by another speaker" (ibid). Language builds discourses, which build power relations, which entails different positions to undertake or being given within the discourse. *Positioning* is a discursive analytical method which means unravelling and analysing the different positions interlocutors take and give each other. By unveiling which position the individual takes in different issues, the individual themselves are unveiled. The method focuses on language, and analyzes language usage when considering positioning (Davies & Harré 1990: 3-5). The method builds upon theories on structural power plays and discourses as presented by Michel Foucault in *The order of discourse* (1981).

The method builds upon a notion that everyone is in a constant state of positioning themselves in relation to others – no one holds a fixed position, but changes it according to the conversation or speech structure they find themselves in (Engstrand & Enberg 2020: 337).

Positioning works by operationalising Foucauldian power theory (Engstrand & Engberg 2020: 339), which further stresses the relevance of using positioning in my research. The argument runs, that by using a method which makes the theory at hand measurable and arguably easier to work with, the work process is eased, and results may be more reliable.

In this thesis, search results are presented and briefly discussed. From here, the identified positions are presented. I have also included a table to make the positions extra clear for the reader.

A researcher may be tempted to employ a Harawayan God Trick, where the own perspective and position is not regarded. What the researcher sees is considered The Truth, where in reality it is but an interpretation of a situation (Haraway 1988: 575-581).

To circumvent such a God Trick, I here explicate my own position and the shortcomings of my material gathering. The intention is not to provide an "apology" or to miscredit my role as

a researcher, but rather, to address potential shortcomings and advantages that I have being in the position I am.

First and foremost, I study discussions on political protests in Hong Kong that residents of China do not have access to. This may be a factor as to why the discussions look the way they look. Conversely, there are many Chinese online communities which have not been subject of study, as I do not understand Chinese. I recognize that the discussions I study may be skewed, as many Chinese people likely seek other communities to discuss this in – meaning I consistently miss their point of view. On the other hand, this is also part of a delimitation process; no one can study all online communities existing on the Internet.

In online communities like these, comments and posts get removed. Users get banned. And there are many people in the world without access to either the Internet, these forums, or both, as proven by for example chapter 1.3. There is also no way for me to study what is happening in private conversations or offline. The degree to which any of this, protests, discussions, or the moderation of the discussions, are organized and by whom, is nothing I can gain knowledge of. I study what appears on my screen; whilst I recognize that there are things happening behind the screen which affects what I see on the screen, this is nothing I can or aim to study.

Finally, a note on my own position. Charlotte Davies (2002) writes:

> Reflexivity, broadly defined, means a turning back on oneself, a process of self-reference. In the context of social research, reflexivity at its most immediately obvious level refers to the ways in which the products of research are affected by the personnel and process of doing research. These effects are to be found in all phases of the research process from initial selection of topic to final reporting of results. While relevant for social research in general, issues of reflexivity are particularly salient for ethnographic research in which the involvement of the researcher in the society and culture of those being studied is particularly close.

(Davies 2002: 4)

I am both interested and regularly partakes in political activities such as protests; however, I have not participated in any anti-ELAB protests, nor in any BLM protests. My white skin and my nonexistent relation to China may play a part in this; I have not even visited China or the US, save for a family vacation to New York in 2014. The issues, or the protests that led up to them, do not lie very close to me personally. I was born and raised in Sweden, and my family is Swedish.

I am however not novel to gaming; whilst not being too invested in it, I have since childhood played video games of various kinds. Nor am I new to the communities I study; I have had both a Discord and a Reddit account for years. The only community I am new to is The Bell Tree forums, where I have been a member since November 2022.

In 2020, my friends started talking about this new game. You build your own island and you can visit your friends' islands too. The game was *Animal Crossing – New Horizons*. Bored of Covid restrictions and longing for social contact, I bought the game and created my own island. To me, ACNH was a way to connect with my friends – we would discuss the game, visit each others' islands, and virtually socialize. I did not see the game-related protests in the game, but read about them in an online newspaper article later. I was also not part of any forum related to the game, meaning that the discussions I am studying now are discussions I see for the first time.

5.0 Theoretical framework

This chapter presents theories on power and resistance connected to power as understood by Michel Foucault. In this thesis, I have also included other theorists to deepen my reasoning around the theories presented by Foucault. Ludologist Frans Mäyrä, sociologist Richard Sennett, and folklorist Henry Jenkins have already been presented in chapter 2.0. These theorists do however play a minor role in my research, whereby they are not given a detailed presentation in this chapter.

5.1 The power

Michel Foucault expresses power as something created rather than possessed; through discursive practices, a power relationship is created. Who holds power over whom is determined by the discourse. At work, the boss can exercise power over their employee, but only there. When the boss and the employee leave the workplace, neither of them can exercise power over the other and the power relationship is disbanded. The relationship is mutually agreed to, meaning that the employee welcomes that the boss is exercising power over them[7] (Foucualt 1978: 94-95).

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[7] The example is my own. The theories these examples are based upon are however Foucaults'.

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Power and knowledge are inseparable, says Foucault. The more knowledge one actor holds, the more power they can exercise. Upholding power, then, oftentimes means withholding knowledge from those you wish to exercise power over – and this is why Foucault believes knowledge to always be political (1978: 98-99).

But power and knowledge have a connection that runs deeper than simply saying "knowledge equals power". Power also determines what knowledge is. Power structures build a discourse, and discourse determines which knowledge counts. What is important knowledge in one discourse is useless in the next. If one wants to attain power, it then becomes crucial to hold the right kind of knowledge for the discourse at hand (ibid).

5.2 The resistance

Power, to Foucault, is always a struggle. A power relationship is strictly between free subjects – a slave and a slave owner have no power relation between them since the slave is not free. However, going back to the previous example of the boss and the employed – the employed is a free person, meaning they can break the power relation and the discourse by for example quitting their job (1982: 790).

Consequently, this means that where there is power, there is resistance. The struggle against power is what creates power itself (1982: 780). Resistance between a boss and an employed might look like salary negotiations, unionizing, et cetera. If the boss oversteps their boundaries by for example refusing to pay salary, the employer will quit and destroy the power relations. This creates a kind of an ongoing discussion where the boss rules over the employed, but *only as long as the employed accepts the conditions for the boss to rule over them.* This also means that power relations are only built in a context where all parts involved are dependent upon each other – violence and force cannot fit into a power relation (Foucault 1982: 789).

Opposites determine each other – to figure out what insanity is, we must look to the idea of sanity. In the same way, we can discover power relations through looking at relations and struggles of resistance (Foucault 1982: 780). However, any resistance against superiority is not a power struggle. Foucualt lists six principles which constitutes a power struggle. For each principle, I have included an explanation on how this is tied to the power struggle taking place in the online communities studied in this thesis. This to clarify how the struggle researched in this paper is in fact argued to be a power struggle and nothing else.

1. A power struggle is not bound to a certain place or country. Whilst some power struggles are more present in some countries rather than others, the power struggle is not confined to a political or economic form of government. For example, the online communities studied in this thesis cross national borders, they defy time constrains as they are constantly active, and people from most countries in the world can access them[8].

2. The goal of the power struggle is *not* to "flip" the power relationship and attain the power for the own benefit, but rather to dismantle and destroy the power relationship. Here, the criterion is fulfilled by the lack of willingness to destroy the governing powers. The players of ACNH show no interest in wanting to become the new American police force, the new rulers of Hong Kong or the new moderators of the communities. They ostensibly want the old leaders to do different.

3. Those struggling are not aiming their struggle towards the *highest ranking* power executer, but the one closest to themselves. An employee does not primarily engage in power struggles with the CEO of the company they work in, but with their own team leader. Here, the criterion is fulfilled by the players discussing certain matters within the community, fully aware that those in power of the situation will in a lot of cases not see the struggles.

4. The power struggles question the status of the individual. They both determine what makes the individual an individual, and simultaneously tie the individual to their own character and status of the individual. There is no struggle regarding the individual as such but rather regarding the "government of individualization". Here, the criterion is fulfilled since the struggles keep cementing the discussants' status as players – when discussants talk, they talk about what protesters and themselves will do *as players*. When discussions are steered or shut down, they are done so with reference to what players should discuss.

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[8] I am aware that there are countries where these websites are not available, for example China. The argument is still feasible because this is a struggle that goes beyond these media as well. The power struggle that can be seen on Reddit, Discord et cetera can also be seen on websites Chinese people have access to. Foucault does not address accessibility in terms of power struggles; that is, he does not claim that there is a need for everyone to entertain the same medium and be in contact with each other to engage in the same power struggle. An employee and a boss can engage in the same kind of power struggle no matter where they are, but all employees and all bosses need not be involved in all power struggles at all times. The same is the case here; the struggle is the same across continents, across languages, no matter which platform you are on. The power struggle may not *look* the same but it *is* the same.

5. They serve to resist the effects of power linked to the privilege of knowledge; they try to dismantle the effects of the knowledge monopoly which upholds the power relations in the discourse. Here, the criterion is fulfilled by looking at the very discussions that do take place. They seem to often be messages of "spreading awareness" and similar – signaling that spreading knowledge is the key to dismantling power relations.

6. A power struggle revolves around the question, "Who are we?" By refusing and resisting existing power relations, the struggling individuals also position themselves and their status as individuals. They become "those who oppose x in society". Here, the criterion is fulfilled since the nature of the very debates are arguably about choosing sides. Are you for or against the anti-ELAB protest, are you for or against the BLM protest, the moderators, the other interlocutors, et cetera? What you answer determines who you are in this situation.

(Foucault 1982: 780-781).

6.0 Analysis

In this section, screenshots of discussions are presented. Usernames and profile pictures are censored, but different colors have been used for different users. This is to help differentiate which user says what. It will ostensibly decrease the degree of possible confusion.

6.1 The political discussion

There seems to be both written and unwritten laws against speaking politics on many gaming forums. Most forums studied have explicitly stated that they wish users to refrain from discussing certain topics, mainly meaning political ones. The most common argument for avoiding politics seems to be that moderators want to avoid heated debates, ostensibly hard to control and with a risk that more rules are overstepped.

In ACNH, there are no wars. No disasters. No major crises. In the game, you are allowed to create a life void of anything unpleasant – the game introduces itself as "your ticket to a relaxing, stress-free life" (Animal Crossing, n.d. https://www.animal-crossing.com/new-horizons/getting-started/#!/introduction/). And this depiction of ACNH as an escapist refuge from reality may explain the reluctancy amongst players to discuss politics in their forums.

Acknowledging these protests, which are so tightly related to the game, may mean accepting the dreaded reality into the "safe haven" the game ostensibly constitutes.

Nevertheless, messages of political nature are there.

Searching for "anti-elab" in the Discord servers Animal Crossing: New Horizons and The Bell Tree Forum generates zero results. "hong kong" and "hong kong protest" generates a few, however the discussions are oftentimes brief and not a lot of opinions are uttered.

Users discuss. Discord, *AnimalCrossing*.

Users discuss, cont. Discord, *AnimalCrossing*.

The above screen shot can serve as an example of how the typical discussion goes. Like above, most of the discussions end abruptly without much debate. Users express disinterest in the subject by swiftly changing topic. In the first image, the topic is brought up by a question regarding something not related to anti-ELAB at all. The protest is brought up because one member expresses disinterest in travelling to Hong Kong because of the current situation. The member immediately apologizes for bringing up "political speech". This person also gets no reactions and no replies to their comment. In the second image, the member who mentions the conflict is entirely ignored.

Here, discussing politics seems stigmatized, and like Foucault describes power relations within the discourse, this stigmatization is reinforced and welcome by the members themselves. Mentioning the protest is followed by an immediate apology, and no one picks up the topic and discusses it further – the apology is not even met. In the second image, the request for more information – or attempt to know more – is ignored. The discourse is arguably reinforcing silence around the anti-ELAB protests.

The same kind of pattern can be found on Reddit. Searching for "anti-elab" in the subreddit *r/AnimalCrossingNewHor* generates zero results, and searching for "hong kong" and "hong kong protest" generates few results, of which only one actually is addressing the anti-ELAB protests.

Front page when searching for "hong kong" and "hong kong protest". Reddit, *r/AnimalCrossingNewHor*

The only post which actually mention the protest is the top one in this image. And as can be noted, this post is not interacted with. No comments, awards, shares, or saves. From the voting score, it can even be argued that no one has up- or downvoted the post, since a Reddit post automatically is published with one upvote.

Close-up on the top post when searching for "hong kong" and "hong kong protest". Reddit, *r/AnimalCrossingNewHor.*

TBT seems a little looser on the subject of politics. Discussing politics are not explicitly prohibited but somewhat discouraged.

On TBT, the subject of the Hong Kong protests is lifted, but the discussion looks one-sided. Oftentimes, a post expressing support for the protests (or rather, antagonism against the CCP) is left with brief and generic shouts of support. However, one thing which stands out compared to the other forums is the apparent willingness to "spread the message", be it that the message is brief.

This is the longest and most informative of the search results, and it also takes a clear stand against the CCP.
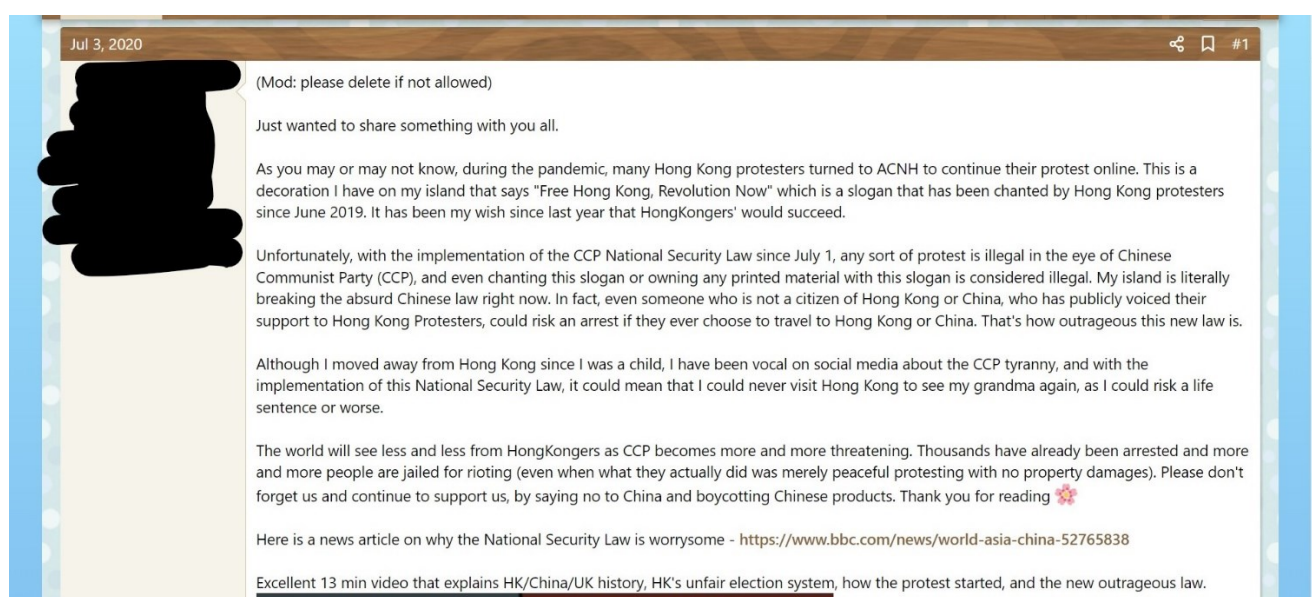
User express their support for the anti-ELAB movement. *The Bell Tree Forums.*

This post has three comments, of which one is written by the OP (original poster) themselves.

Users express their support for the anti-ELAB movement, cont. *The Bell Tree Forums.*

As can be noted, there is not much discussion even when there is a clear standpoint presented. The OP is not being shut down or actively silenced, but there is little interaction with the post, meaning that it may not be spread in the manner that might be wished.

I am attaching a visual representation of the power relations as I interpret them to look like, for clarity.

```
                    ┌─────────────────────┐
                    │  Anti-ELAB is        │
                    │  considered          │
                    │  political and       │
                    │  therefore unwanted  │
                    └─────────────────────┘
        ↗                                      ↘
┌──────────────────┐                  ┌──────────────────┐
│ Discussing anti- │                  │ Anti-ELAB is not │
│ ELAB becomes     │                  │ discussed        │
│ stigmatized      │                  │                  │
└──────────────────┘                  └──────────────────┘
        ↖                                      ↙
                    ┌─────────────────────┐
                    │  Knowledge is        │
                    │  not spread          │
                    └─────────────────────┘
```
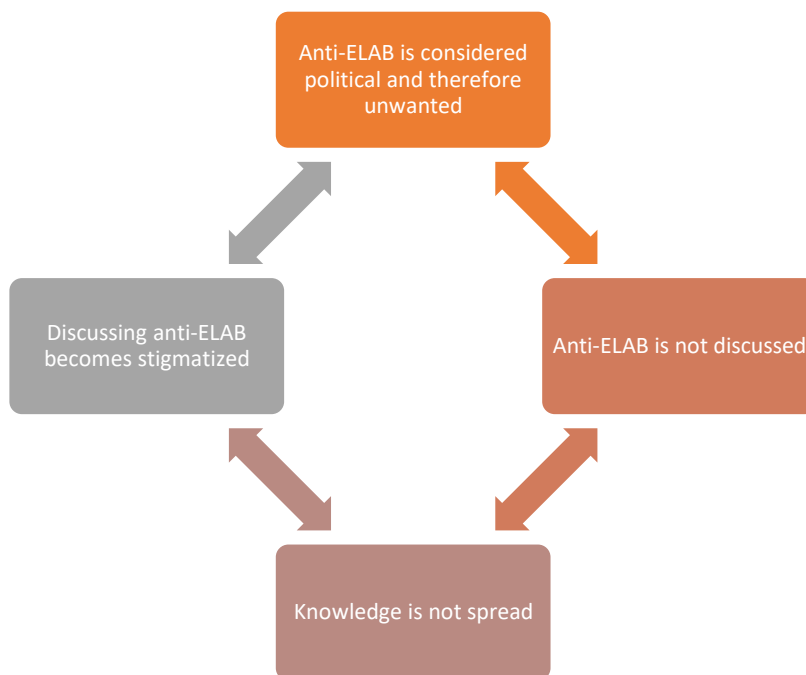
Looking at these conversations, two positions can be spotted.

First, a position of deliberate avoidance. This is especially clear in the second image. Possible attempts at instigating discussion by asking about the situation in Hong Kong is met by a prompt change of subject.

Second, a position of neglecting knowledge. For example, the interlocutor excusing themselves for "the political speech" also excuses themselves for being informed.

Both these positions signal eschewing of politics as a topic. Noteworthy is that there seems to be little denunciation of the protest; the posts that do discuss it are supportive of the protests. They are then not positions against each other per se, but positions where there is a mutual agreement to avoid political topics. These positions ostensibly make it hard to spread knowledge. Since one cannot talk about it, one cannot spread knowledge. Foucault says that knowledge and power are intimately tied in a struggle which is not static, but ever-changing (1978: 98-99). But when knowledge is not spread, power relations indeed seem "stuck" – no knowledge is spread, meaning that power relations arguably stay the way they are.

I am not implying that there is "someone" in these chat rooms hoarding all knowledge and sitting on all the power. That is not what Foucault says power relations are. I argue instead that this is an example of what Foucault means when he says that there is a mutual agreement to the power struggles (1978: 86). Rules of the channel states that political discussions are not too welcome, which ostensibly steers the discourse into one where "political speech" becomes

taboo and stigmatized. One example of such stigmatization is how the interlocutor censored in black and featuring in the first image from the Discord server *AnimalCrossing* immediately apologizes for "the political speech".

The first image from TBT also begins with something of an apology; explicating that the mod has permission to delete the post. There is an apparent consensus around not speaking about political issues. Members of these forums welcome and ease the stigmatization of certain political topics, like Foucault says that power relations are being upheld by those affected by the relations (1982: 789-790).

Avoiding the topic consequently entails avoiding debates. And no debates ostensibly mean no knowledge or information is being spread between the interlocutors. Further, the person excusing themselves for "the political speech" does so by exclaiming that they are informed about matters like these. In this context, being informed about the matter possibly becomes part of the excuse – further meaning that not only is it stigmatized to discuss this, but also to be informed about it.

The following table serves to make the positions presented clearer. Possible consequences of these positions are presented as well, these applies to the positions as a whole and are not exclusive to one or the other of the positions.

Positions	Consequences
Discussions on anti-ELAB are avoided.	Holding and spreading knowledge about anti-ELAB is controversial and stigmatized.
Discussions on anti-ELAB are actively "silenced" and considered too political to talk about. Being politically informed is negatively connoted.	

6.2 The (a)political discussion?

The topic of BLM seems to engage more than that of anti-ELAB. On the Discord server Animal Crossing: New Horizons, there is admittedly not much discussion. But the topic seems known to everyone, and the results generated are only messages of support. This in

contrast to searching for "hong kong" or "hong kong protest", where the discussions revolved around Hong Kong in general, or where simply mentioning the protest generated an immediate apology for being "political".
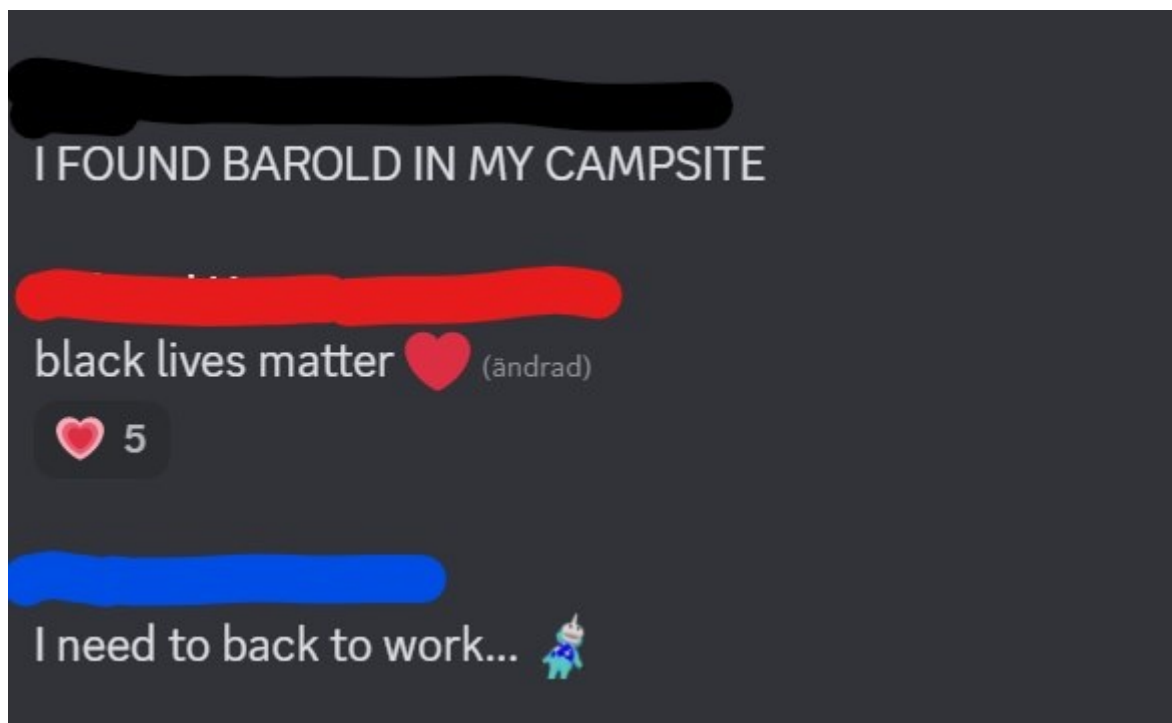
Users briefly state their support for the Black Lives Matter movement. Discord, *Animal Crossing.*
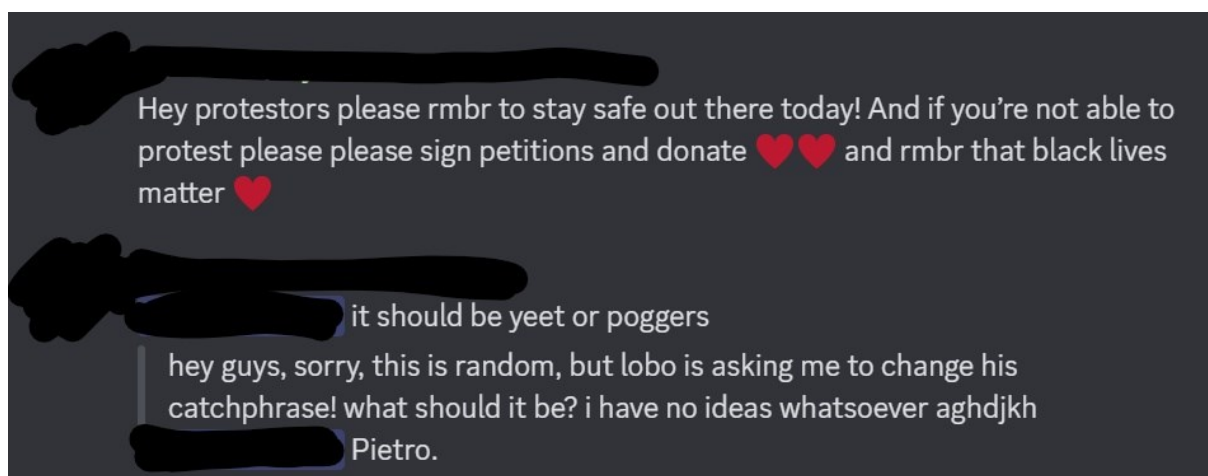
Users briefly state their support for the Black Lives Matter movement, cont. Discord, *Animal Crossing.*

These are not lengthy discussions, but they are posts which takes a stand in the issue at hand, without apologizing for bringing the topic up. Already this is more than what has been seen when looking at the anti-ELAB discussions. Noteworthy is that none of the users express opinions against BLM, albeit the opinions expressed does not seem very well-motivated. Statements such as "black lives matter ♥" (Discord, *Animal Crossing*) do clarify a position,

but they are not followed up by anything. The movement is *present*, but it is not *discussed*. This further means that knowledge around the protests is not spread. It is given that everyone knows what BLM is, and it is given that no one talks about it further than briefly expressing their support for the movement. Here, power relations seem "stuck" – when no knowledge is spread, the discussions do not move forward, and the relations stay the way they are.

On Reddit, the debates look more heated. Searching for "black lives matter" generates results that not only supports the movement, but also more lengthy debates around the subject.

This is the front page when searching for "black lives matter":

Reddit, *r/AnimalCrossingNewHor.*

As can be noted, each post is interacted with through multiple votes and comments. Initially, the posts give an impression of everyone agreeing with the BLM movement. However, this may not be the case. This is the most interacted post in the subreddit:

r/AnimalCrossingNewHor · Posted by ███████ 3 years ago

Saying black lives don't matter because all lives matter is like asking the fire department to hose every house in the neighborhood instead of focusing on the one that's on fire. Doesn't mean that the other houses don't matter, one just needs help more right now.

990 upvotes   186 comments   1 award

Analogy of burning houses saying that people of color are in danger. Reddit, *r/AnimalCrossingNewHor*.

Here, the OP is using an analogy to say that there are issues for black people which needs to be urgently cared for, whilst trying to mitigate minimizing the issues of other groups in society. Let us look closer at the comments on the post.

· 3 yr. ago

Why can't we help all burning houses at the same time, regardless of what skin color the person living there has? You know, with no specific races being helped first or last? This is stupid.

⬆ 1 ⬇   💬 Reply   Share   ···

· 3 yr. ago

The post only mentions one house on fire. Obviously if all of the houses were on fire, we would want to hose all of the houses. I don't think you completely understood the post.

⬆ 1 ⬇   💬 Reply   Share   ···

· 3 yr. ago

Then it's kinda weird to allegorize one house as an entire race. All houses can be set on fire.

⬆ 1 ⬇   💬 Reply   Share   ···

· 3 yr. ago

But one is hurting now. The post is stating that we should focus on those that need immediate help.

3 yr. ago

... Which is disproportionately black lives...

⬆ 1 ⬇ 💬 Reply Share ...
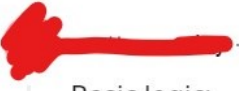
3 yr. ago

[citation needed]

⬆ 1 ⬇ 💬 Reply Share ...

3 yr. ago

oNlY bLaCk PeOpLe ArE eXpErIeNcInG pAiN

https://nypost.com/video/washington-protesters-tackle-man-ripping-up-sidewalk-with-a-hammer/

⬆ 1 ⬇ 💬 Reply Share ...

3 yr. ago

Basic logic:

Disproportionately ≠ Only

3 yr. ago

You must be lazy or ignorant.

Here

⬆ 1 ⬇ 💬 Reply Share ...

3 yr. ago

Yeah only two possibilities lol. Couldn't be that you're incorrect, just not possible

If all you have to support your point is a ideologically motivated newspaper and not, y'know, unbiased hard data, then you don't really have a point

⬆ 1 ⬇ 💬 Reply Share ...

3 yr. ago

How many citations would you like? How much research did you do before lazily typing "citation needed"

⬆ 1 ⬇ 💬 Reply Share ...

· 3 yr. ago · *edited 3 yr. ago*

I was being sarcastic. All races are experiencing pain.

⬆ 1 ⬇ 💬 Reply Share ···

3 yr. ago

In other words, even if black people are hurting more from police brutality, we should still pretend that race doesn't exist and indiscriminately help all people suffering because of cops, instead of helping the entire black race and not helping any other people dealing with police brutality.

⬆ 1 ⬇ 💬 Reply Share ···

Continue this thread →

3 yr. ago

Maybe this analogy will help you understand better...

⬆ 1 ⬇ 💬 Reply Share ···

3 yr. ago

There are multiple houses on fire. I use the #AllLivesMatter. Because although I'm white I know There are many natives who go missing and the cops never try finding them just because they are native. By not trying the cops are singling them out and killing them. All lives matter dosen't take the limelight from BLM

⬆ 0 ⬇ 💬 Reply Share ···

· 3 yr. ago

You understand that natives as you say have their own police force that is controlled by the tribal councils they are in fact certified peace officers but their jurisdiction ends at their boarders they can exercise jurisdiction over tribal members , and they have authority to arrest non members and deliver them to state or federal authorities for prosecution the federal goverment is not allowed much oversight in tribal areas. They are allowed to assist when asked but in most cases the tribal elders must agree to share the information and assist help. Just some food for thought there.

⬆ 1 ⬇ 💬 Reply Share ···

· 3 yr. ago

I'm talking about natives in non tribal areas

⬆ 1 ⬇ 💬 Reply Share ···

Users discuss to what extent people of color experience oppression. Reddit, *r/AnimalCrossingNewHor*.

As can be noted, there is some debate here. It is apparently not given to agree that the BLM movement is correct after all. These standpoints against BLM are however only seen in the comments; no anti-BLM posts are seen. On the first image, which shows the search results of "blm", one can see no posts actually taking a stand against the movement, which gives the impression that the community agrees on supporting the movement. There is no debate – until we look to the comment section. "Why can't we help all burning houses at the same time, regardless of what skin color the person living there has? You know, with no specific races being helped first or last? This is stupid." (Reddit, *r/AnimalCrossingNewHor,* n.d.). Comments like this are not starting points, but responds to previous statements.

Henry Jenkins (2006) speaks of the participatory culture. Media culture, both online and offline, is steadily growing – but there are problems with it not being attainable to everyone. Jenkins proposes that a new participatory kind of politics, one where the audience is not simply spectators but can be a part of the experience they are consuming, may make media more accessible to everyone. Nowadays, an audience is not just an audience but always has a possibility to intervene, to discuss, to be opinionated (2006: 3). Further, this means that the construction of "politics" has put those not directly involved in a peculiar situation. "Politics, as constructed by the news, becomes a spectator sport, something we watch but not do. Yet the new participatory culture offers many opportunities for youths to engage in civic debates, participate in community life, and even become political leaders, even if sometimes only through the 'second lives' offered by massively multiplayer games or online fan communities." (2006: 12).

In these posts, one can arguably find an example of Jenkins' participatory audience culture. The posts initially seem to all support the BLM movement, since all posts begin with a supportive statement. Posts generally do not begin with a statement against BLM. The debates lie in the comments – here is where people object and discuss. Politics has here, like Jenkins argues, become a spectators' game, but one where there is a constant possibility to intervene and discuss the content.

If the participatory audience instigates debates, they ostensibly also become part of the power struggle. The debates become knowledge exchanges, since information is constantly exchanged and asked for when making arguments (for example by requesting sources and citations). Foucault calls knowledge part of the ongoing power struggle (1978: 98-99), whereas this can be seen as an example of Jenkins' participatory audience culture intensifying the power struggles present.

And, after a while of debate, members of the community return to the standpoint of "no politics allowed". Note, however, the low voting score of these posts.
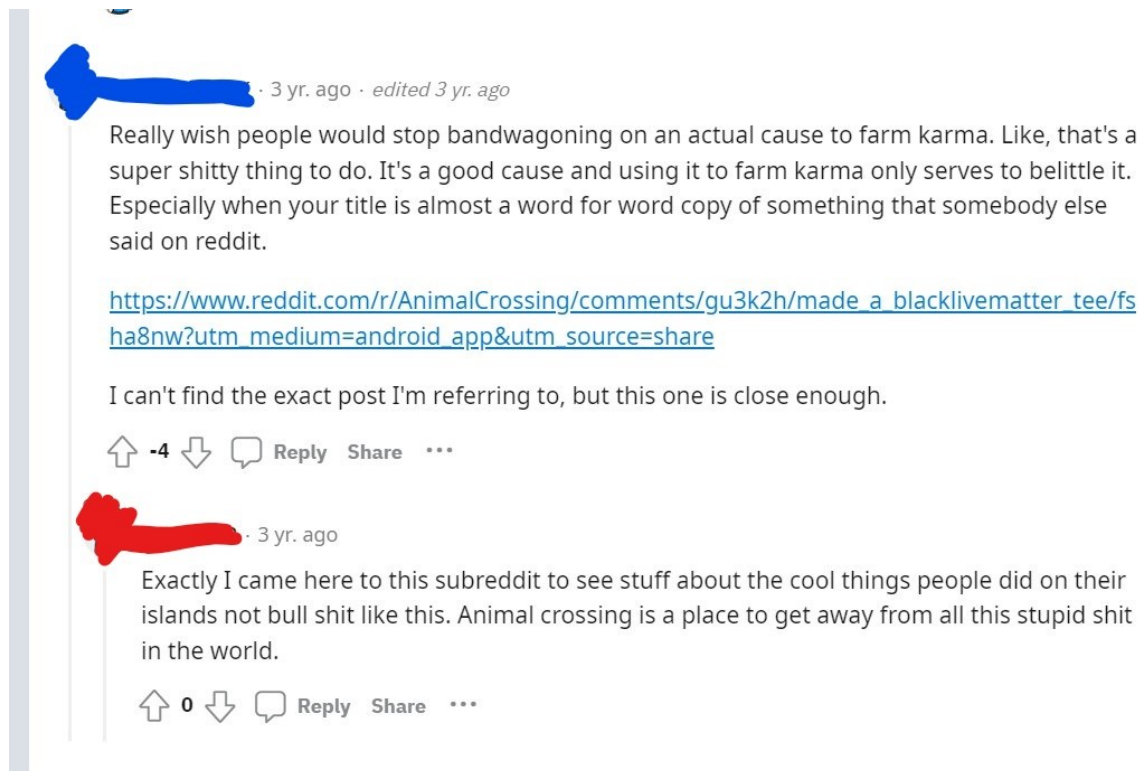
[9] Users discuss. The first interlocutor states that the post is unoriginal and therefore unwanted. The second interlocutor states that the post is unnecessary and not belonging to the community. Reddit, *r/AnimalCrossingNewHor.*

Ludologist Frans Märya (2008) discerns between multiple parts of a video game. The way it is played, the story it creates, the possible ways of winning, et cetera, is what he calls the "core". However, there is another part, which is how the game "feels" – what emotions it evokes in you whilst you play. Mäyrä calls this the "shell" of the game (Mäyrä 2008: 17). The shell in ACNH is here interpreted as that feeling of escaping reality which is advertised by Nintendo as well as other players. So, if escaping reality is a big part of the mood, bringing in that very reality in forms of protests connected to the real world becomes frowned upon, since it arguably disrupts the shell.

I argue that the shell of a game is of different importance in different games. Mäyrä differs between ludus and paida oriented games. Both types of game have a structure and a framework, but in ludus oriented games, there is a clear way of winning and finishing the game, which is lacking in a paidia oriented game (Mäyrä 2008: 18-21). In ACNH, you do not

---

[9] "Farming karma" is an expression used on Reddit.

compete or cooperate with anyone, nor do you follow a plot with a clear ending. I argue that in a paidia-oriented game like this one the shell becomes important. Without a clear way of winning, the plot becomes hazier and the mood of the game more vital. If the very objective with the game is to create a mood, destroying the mood by bringing in the reality you were supposed to escape becomes an even bigger offence than if the game was oriented towards ludus.

At one point, the idea of "keeping politics out" becomes a point of discussion as well.
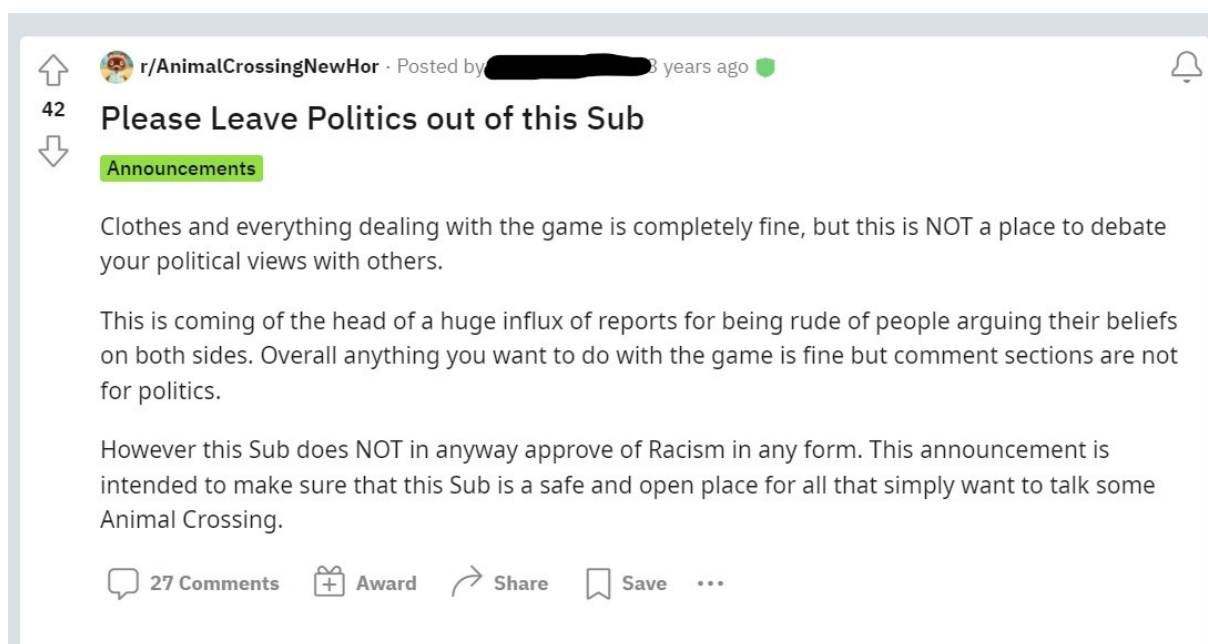
Users discuss whether Black Lives Matter constitutes politics or not. Reddit, *r/AnimalCrossingNewHor.*

So far, members of the forum seem to have been in agreement upon not discussing politics. But when moderator asks members to refrain from BLM discussions, it is not immediately met with agreement from the members.

I'm highly disappointed that you reduced BLM to politics when it isn't. This is a human rights movement. All of your comments are really ignorant and I'm upset because I really enjoyed this subreddit. You could have used this time to uplift the movement, and instead you want to play pretend neutrality when that neutrality has led to innocent lives being lost.

14   Reply Give Award Share Report Save Follow

· 3 yr. ago

I say see it as an easy way to ban the racists

16   Reply Share Report Save Follow

· 3 yr. ago

I haven't seen much politics in this sub... BLM, a human rights issue, I see as no different than people showing off their pride designs/colors. No ones saying to keep their LGBTQ off this sub because it's a political issue and kids might see it.

7   Reply Give Award Share Report Save Follow

Users discuss whether Black Lives Matter constitutes politics or not, cont. Reddit, *r/AnimalCrossingNewHor.*

The idea that BLM is different from politics permeates the discussion from here on.

· 3 yr. ago

The issue wasnt designs or anything, it was arguements in comments and people reporting everything the other person said. In general this is not a place for that, its for animal crossing

4   Reply Give Award Share Report Save Follow

· 3 yr. ago

Not trying to argue so I hope it's not taken that way. If people were arguing about another human rights issue, like LGBTQ+ rights, and someone was arguing the stance that these people don't deserve human rights, should we report those comments? Or would an admin make a post to stop reporting everything and keep politics out of the sub? If this sub doesn't shut down people advocating for less human rights than others and gives them a platform to spew their hate, then I would feel that this sub wasn't a safe space at all.

0   Reply Give Award Share Report Save Follow

· 3 yr. ago

Here's the thing. BLM is a human rights issue. Not politics. Now, how we go about correcting the issues of systemic racism (whether that's reform, defunding/abolishing the police, inaction, etc.) is politics. So, I agree with others on this sub. If posts are being taken down for BLM custom designs, well, frankly that's bullshit. But, I'm getting the impression that the problem happens to be people in the comments getting into arguments, hence overwhelming the mods. In that case, I understand. It would be nice if those in charge of the sub did stand up against the systemic racism that runs rampant in this country more explicitly, but, at the same time, I'm content with this post's message of not condoning racism and this sub being a safe space. I am in the same belief that "silence is violence" but I don't care too much if a subreddit doesn't speak up as long as it doesn't silence the voices of those trying to speak up.

⬆ 5 ⬇ 💬 Reply Give Award Share Report Save Follow

Users discuss whether Black Lives Matter constitutes politics or not, cont. Reddit, *r/AnimalCrossingNewHor.*

The debate seems even more heated on TBT. However, the debate is here largely about a controversy connected to another forum. In 2020, the website Nookazoon decided to remove certain posts discussing BLM as they were considered too controversial. This prompted several Twitter users to denounce the website and urging others to do the same (Ugames, n.d). The discussion on TBT seems very much marked by this.

May 31, 2020   #9

...said:

highly doubt twitter is gonna do anything about these tweets but it seems like some of this discussion was posted in the off-topic section of the server which is a different story. I agree off-topic discussion shouldn't be in normal trading threads but BLM in general isn't and shouldn't be a controversial issue. It's literally a human rights and civil rights violation. Similar with HK protests in Animal Crossing, people should be able talk freely about it in designated threads. The violence aspect of these protests ofc is something else.

You're right. Usually, BLM discussions tend to get heated when people chant hatred towards white people or when they support the violence done by the looters and vandals, but this time, there is no supporting the police. Everyone is going to back George Floyd and oppose the cops, so there could hardly be any controversy. If even the right-wing media is siding against the cops over the death of a black person, there's definitely a problem with the cops. However, if anyone is against George Floyd, that's when discussions like these become a problem.
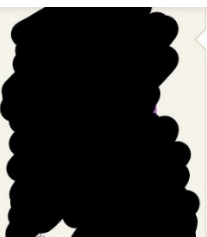
Back to the subject on how Nookazon is handling it, I think they're trying to prevent any heated discussions, but they don't understand that nobody is going to side with the four cops. The only thing that concerns me is how ___ is handling the issue. Calling for a boycott against a fansite and smearing it is not the right thing to do. Now Nookazon will be associated for silencing BLM voices than trading villagers or items. That can ruin the site, and chances are, some trolls who know very little about Animal Crossing may flood it. If you were to smear another video game fansite like this, and something like that happens, you are liable for it.

I'm no longer active on TBT. Thanks for your interactions with me.
Avatar by

Report   👍 Like

May 31, 2020   #10

I've never really understood why people think that just because you're in an Animal Crossing community, it means you have to discuss AC things only and not what's going on in the world. I personally think that it adds a lot of depth to the community being able to discuss problems by being able to connect with people on a less superficial level i.e. not just talking about gaming. As we know from here, a lot of the community is 16+ years, thus they're at the age to have opinions and know what's going on in the world. Deleting everyone's comments is not the way to handle it at all. I can see why, as they're probably trying to avoid heated arguments about the riots. But it should've been dealt with on a case by case basis. For example, if a heated argument did break out, punish the respective people involved based on who was in the right and who was in the wrong. Straight up deleting content seems like a lazy approach to me. On a side note, if they let it run as is, wouldn't that be a way to weed out problematic members?

[10]Users discuss whether political discussions have a place in forums like these. *The Bell Tree Forum*.

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[10] I do not know why this users' text is purple, it is nothing I have intervened in.

Users discuss whether political discussions have a place in forums like these, cont. *The Bell Tree Forum*.

The discussion here seems to revolve not around racism or police brutality per se, but rather about the presence or non-presence of such discussions. Note the use of the word "politics" (or grammatical variations). The word is used almost exclusively in a negative sense. Those who encourage debates not necessarily linked to ACNH, do not specify that *political* speech should be allowed. Instead, phrasings like "unrelated to Animal Crossing" are used. Users may do it subconsciously, but they are eschewing the word "politics" in any positive sense. They thus reinforce the idea that politics do not belong in these forums, simply by not bringing in any directly opposing ideas to the idea that "politics do not belong". This in accordance with the Foucauldian theory on power presented in the theory chapter (Foucault 1982) – first of all, the word "political" or variations become almost exclusively negatively connoted, in a way that it never is used in a positive sense. Now, politics has become negative. If members are to discuss matters which can be considered political, they need to call it something else.

Claiming that the BLM movement is distinct from politics arguably also means acknowledging that there is a need to make a distinction between political and apolitical. Continuously reminding each other of this distinction would then mean upholding the power relations as a struggle. This discussion hence becomes what Foucault calls the resistance in the power struggle. It becomes important to discuss what politics constitute, rather than discussing why politics should not be present in the forums.

There is another type of discussion as well.

said:

Yes and no. Considering you pretty much argued against mine and others without giving valid reasons for it and just "lol i hate black lives matter"(?? wtf are you even into history. yes they have gotten criticism but it's basically saying "lol i am a racist"..sure everyone's lives matter but.. dude) or "i am a pro-life" without giving more valid reason behind it. It's a bit hard to take you seriously when you throw things in the air randomly and always try to turn things the wrong way, or against the person you attacked.

The reason why I'm against Black Lives Matter is because they aren't really doing anything to benefit African Americans. Instead, they are anti-police. They're even against the police that do not target African Americans because of their race, but target every criminal regardless of race. And some of these guys (not all) are engaged to looting or vandalizing others' businesses. It's not worth destroying someone else's property over police shootings, court cases, or elections, especially if the property owner is irrelevant to the situation. Some Civil Rights activists have engaged in violence as well and went against morals, but that's okay because they lived through worse. But BLM was captivated by the lies of the left-wing media and defended criminals, which is why their behavior is inexcusable.

The reason why I mentioned that I will not befriend or do business with BLM supporters on this forum is because there's another member on this forum who is extremely liberal biased, as I had a bad experience with her because of her strong and upsetting biases. If you think violence, trolling, or constant complaining is acceptable by any means, then you are biased.

I don't think Black Lives Matter or their objective is evil, but what they really did was evil or at least disrespectful while some (if not most) of the cases in point don't have police brutality or racial profiling. In these cases, they were defending people that broke the law and tried to resist their arrests.

I hope that was enough reasoning about why I oppose BLM.

Last edited: Dec 7, 2017

Users discuss the Black Lives Matter movement. *The Bell Tree Forums*.

This is more about the movement itself. The first interlocutor argues that to be against racism, you must support BLM. The second interlocutor disagrees and claims that the actions of BLM do not match the spoken objective of the movement. They both agree that racism is bad, but disagree on the motives of the BLM movement. This is another example of what is presented above – a way of "twisting words" in a Foucauldian sense to create resistance within a power struggle, without directly opposing the main debate which stigmatizes discussing politics.

A third type of discussion can be seen.

Poc player here! Yeah I was annoyed that I couldn't be darkskin and more annoyed that it took them 17+ years to add that choice in. Some poc peeps probably didn't care but for many of us that did, I'm glad it's finally a choice. Took them long enough though! Honestly I don't mind people with fair skin saying black lives matter. That just means you're an ally! Now when people say that "all lives matter" that's when it's a problem. I thank you for making this thread btw. It's nice to know someone other than poc gets it. :')

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(. .)
(⊃♡

Report   👍 Like   + Quote   ↩ Reply

Jul 27, 2020   ⇄ 🔖 #3

For context, I am a white cis woman in America.

When I was a kid, I was BLOWN AWAY when I got Pokemon Crystal and you could choose to play as a **girl**. I loved, loved, LOVED Crystal. Part of it was the design of the Johto region and the beginnings of a real plot in the games, but part of it I'm sure is that I felt like my character was me. (When I played Blue, I named my character Ash, because a boy wouldn't be Melissa). I was going on a Pokemon Journey. I was going to be the very best, like no one ever was.

I am glad that media companies are being pushed to diversify in other ways, not just gender, but race and sexuality too. Its still not close to equal or perfect, but small progress is nice to see.

I'm white but I thought they would have had skin colour options since the beginning? Bit strange really it's just an option that should be there especially if you want your character to be like you. It's just quite strange how they didn't add it in the beginning I've always thought that

🙂

Report   👍 Like   + Quote   ↩ Reply

Jul 28, 2020   ⇄ 🔖 #11

I'm probably gonna get hate for this but The "Animal Crossing was originally from Japan and most of the population has fair skin" excuse is getting old. It took them 10+ years to finally add this option in even after it had became a globalized game. In 2016 when they made Welcome Amiibo they even updated the mii mask which at first didn't let you change your player's whole body to dark skin so to my understanding they knew POC were also playing this game. Why was it so hard for them to add that feature in back in 2016. Added all them little updates but still didn't add the feature to change your skin color. They literally had chances. Hell I would even say they had a change to add that feature when they decided they wanted mii masks to come into existence and I think the mii mask was introduced before New Leaf.

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Report   👍 Like   + Quote   ↩ Reply

Users discuss whether certain games are inclusive or not. *The Bell Tree Forums.*

Here, players discuss features in video games, and whether or not they are inclusive of people of color or not. The users also often state their own skin color when beginning their post.

Something seems to happen here in regards to positioning. Online, no one can see your skin color. Yet, judging from the conversation, the skin color of the interlocutors seems to matter enough for the users to explicitly state it. Members seem to believe that your skin color automatically pushes you towards one position or another – it becomes important to state what you believe "as a white person" or "as a person of color". Users then deliberately position themselves by stating their skin color.

I believe that Foucault does not sufficiently discuss social stratification as a factor when discussing power. In all the works used for this thesis, Foucault arguably fails to adequately address how some people always seem to fall on the losing end of the battle. In fact, he argues that bringing up this discussion is futile. It is not a question of "us versus them", where some people are consistently "powerful" and oppressive and others "powerless" and oppressed. Rather, the struggle is always ongoing and permeating everything in society. This is how issues become structural – everyone, even those who are against oppression, contributes to the oppressive structures because of the structure of the power relations. (Foucault 1978: 99).

I interpret this as Foucault saying that systematic oppression is more a consequence of the power struggle, rather than a struggle in itself. But users talk about skin color and systematic oppression. It seems important for them. It is possible to describe racial oppression in the US

in a similar manner as Foucault discusses power; as a permeating and ever-present force in society, created upheld by all actors within that society[11]. Systematic oppression may thus also be a power struggle in itself, instead of merely a consequence of a power struggle, like Foucault implies (1978: 99). Users do not take for granted who is oppressed and how, but actively discuss it.

I am attaching a visual representation of the power relations as I interpret them to look like, for clarity.
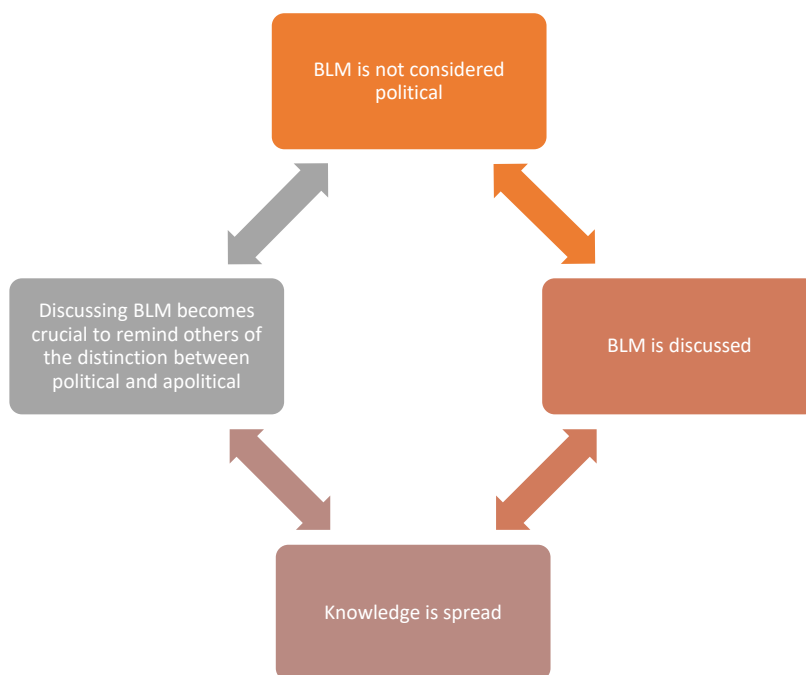
The positions here do not seem as clear cut as in the anti-ELAB case. On Discord, similar patterns as with the anti-ELAB protest can be found; there seems to be a "passive" support, with brief messages of support not really saying much about the issue. On Reddit, I find one position saying that BLM protests definitely should be discussed, and one position saying that they definitely should not. Noteworthy is that no matter which position, the majority seems to largely agree that the forum is no place for politics. The disagreement lies in the definition of politics.

On TBT, everyone is not in agreement on leaving politics out of discussion. However, there seems to be agreement on racism being undesired. Instead, the discussion here becomes one of what constitutes as racism. In more than one instance, these discussions and the discourse they unveil are examples of what Foucault is describing regarding words and their attributed

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[11] See for example Banaji et al (2021)

meanings. Everyone agrees that racism is bad, but what is racism? That question becomes foundation for debate. The Foucauldian power struggle lies not necessarily in however racism (or BLM) is good or bad, but what these notions really constitutes.

Again, the positions identified is clarified by a table. Here, too, the consequences are not tied to a specific position.

Positions	Consequences
Discussing BLM or other issues related to racism is not acceptable	Most users seem to agree that racism is not acceptable, nor is political speech-acts. But the definition of racism and political speech-acts are ostensibly not agreed upon. This is presented as a reason why there still is a discussion regarding these things present.
Not discussing BLM or other issues related to racism is not acceptable	

the shit we joke abt rn is what people will be writing essays over lol
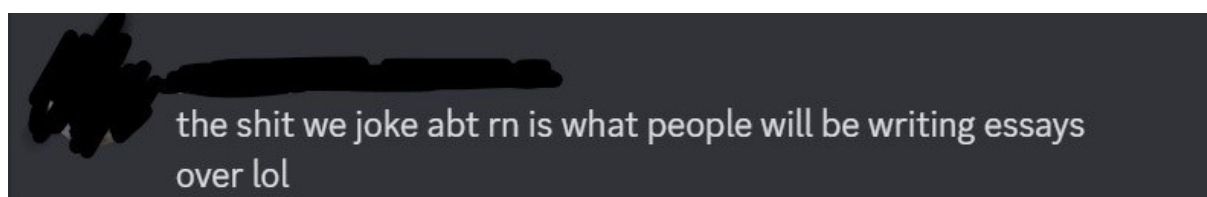
Discord, *Animal Crossing.*

6.3 The idea of politics

Jenkins does not seem to explicate whether the participatory audience culture entails an obligation to partake, just because the opportunity is there. But when members of communities are exclaiming that "silence is violence" and that "staying neutral" also means taking a stand, one can wonder if that is where we are heading.

At least when it comes to "human rights"; i.e. issues like BLM or similar to BLM. A debate can be seen here which creates politics as something separate from human rights issues. But we can also see that what is undesirable is ostensibly considered politics and what is desirable is not. The notion of "politics" then becomes negatively connoted.

But this is not all. The division between "politics" and "human rights" arguably becomes a division between what is forbidden to debate, and what is a duty to debate. It is ostensibly stigmatized to talk about the anti-ELAB protests, but it also seems stigmatized *not* to talk about the BLM protests. If power determines what knowledge is, like Foucault says, it can here be seen how power relations of the discourse represses discussions on anti-ELAB, but promotes discussions on BLM. Being informed on the anti-ELAB matter is something one should apologise for, but being informed on BLM is considered essential. By branding anti-ELAB as "politics" and BLM as "human rights", a distinction has been made regarding what should and should not be discussed.

6.4 The power and the resistance

Users agree – politics should not be discussed on video game oriented online forums. And yet, discussions can be found which could be considered political.

In these forums, it seems impossible to talk about politics whilst still calling it politics. The BLM movement calls themselves political (Black Lives Matter, n.d.), but members of these forums does not seem to want to acknowledge them as such. Here, my argument runs, that it is so stigmatized to talk about politics that no one will admit that politics is what they talk about. Instead, members call it different things to circumvent the risk of being called political.

Here is where the Foucauldian resistance plays in. Members of these forums create their own identity by choosing which debate to engage and not engage in. Allegedly, choosing right proves that you are "one of the good guys" who knows how to behave on digital forums, and choosing wrong marks you as an outcast, a bother to the members around you.

Bothersome members are banned from the forums. Power struggles where one side immediately loses are no power struggles, according to Foucault – the slave and the slave owner has no power relationship. Instead, those who wishes to resist the power structures allegedly must do so strategically. This thesis has shown some of the strategies users of online forums apply to perform resistance.

I am attaching a visual representation of the power relations as I interpret them to look like, for clarity.
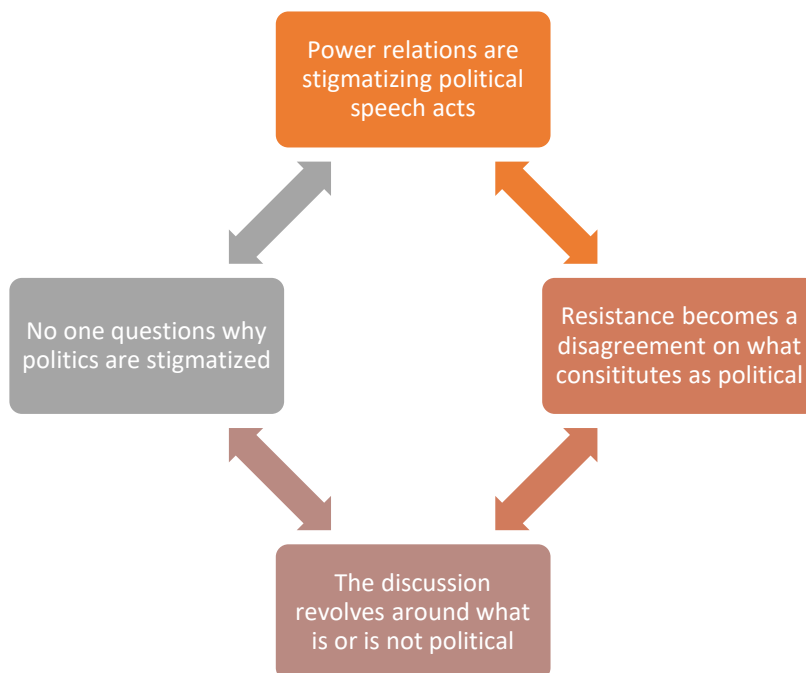
If Jenkins is correct, the participatory nature of the modern audience could be pushing the power struggle. The audience is supposed to engage – for example, by discussing the game in an online forum.

But it is unlikely that members of these forums are just members of these forums. They are likely people who engage in other things as well. Consequently, they are audiences of several things simultaneously. BLM issues may be important to discuss, but why in a forum dedicated to a Nintendo game? Here, I argue that the audiences are being "mixed" – they participate as audiences of the BLM movement, but they take that participation and move it into the gaming communities. This arguably becomes a form of resistance, but also a way of fulfilling the members' roles as participatory audience. I further argue that the reverse situation may also be happening. If the participatory nature of the audience is solidifying the discourse, it is not unreasonable to expect that the discourse is also solidifying the participatory nature of the audience. The discussion present is, as already established, one where some debates become almost a duty to continue. The notion of a participatory audience is not just pushing the power relations, the power relations are pushing the notion of a participatory audience.

American politics are increasingly looking more like a show, says Jenkins, and compares them to fandoms of any popular franchise (2006: 19). If politics are increasingly exercised like popular culture, it would make sense to increasingly incorporate politics in popular

culture. At least when it comes to American politics. Perhaps this is a contributing factor as to why the BLM movement, rooted in American politics, are more discussed than issues rooted in Chinese politics.

6.5 Beyond power

This section will serve as a counterpoint to the rest of the analysis. I here intend to challenge the theories used so far, and briefly provide other explanations. The intent is to deepen my analysis and problematize some of the theories used, to achieve a more multifaceted analysis.

Sociologist Richard Sennett (2012) means, somewhat contradictory to Foucault, that human coexistence works through cooperation rather than struggles. This cooperation works largely through dialogue and Sennett theorizes around different kinds of dialogue. In *Together,* he talks about how online communication is "compressed"; discussing online takes longer and is more complicated than doing so offline. "(…)[C]onducting a written conversation online seems painfully slow, compared with speaking to someone on the phone or face to face. New communications technologies have, however, transformed the landscape of communication." (Sennett 2012: 24)

To Sennett, there is a difference between information sharing and communication. Information sharing is precise, it is about what is being said, whilst communication is just as much about what is *not* being said. Without context, communication does not make sense. This means, that when context is stripped the interlocutors need to constantly read between the lines (Sennett 2012: 28). If Sennett is correct and online communication is compressed like this, I argue that this is exactly what is done online; online, context is stripped to some degree, since you cannot meet your interlocutor personally, which leads members to constantly read between the lines when talking. This can then lead to frequent misunderstandings. Perhaps this agreement to keep politics out is more about not being able to manage and monitor all the misunderstandings that may arise from debating and communicating online.

Sennett further means that the most potent political effects occurs when online communication simulate people to act offline (2012: 24-25). Whilst I agree that online and offline communication do not exist separate from each other, I believe Sennett underestimates online communication with this statement. He is not addressing that offline action and communication may also instigate online action, as I have proven in this thesis. Online action

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is no less of an action than offline action, and when Sennett writes that online action works best when stimulating offline action, he seems to undermine the ability of online action in itself. As proven by this thesis, online action or inaction is cause for much debate and greatly affects many online communities. I argue that online and offline communication instigate action both online and offline, and that both media is potent in their ability to bring about change.

It has already been established that I believe that Foucault does not adequately address social stratification and structural oppression when he discusses power. I argue, that when Foucault is not addressing the social stratification of society, he misses important parts of the discussion present here. What members are discussing are these very stratifications – they ask themselves "who is oppressed?", "what is political?", "whos' fight should be fought?", and they do not seem to find an agreement. I have already argued that this could be seen as a power struggle, like Foucault describes them in the works used for this thesis (Foucault 1978, Foucault 1981, Foucault 1982). But, there may be other explanations. If, like Sennett says, online communication is a compressed form of communication, politics may be mutually agreed to keep out simply because it may be difficult to discuss them properly in this forum. And a norm is formed where politics are eschewed in online communities.

7.0 Conclusions

My study has shown that members of these forums in general do not wish to associate themselves with politics, they do not want to be seen as political. However, certain discussions can be found which by some[12] is seen as political.

- How are the different protest acts by the anti-ELAB and Black Lives Matter movements discussed in online forums for Animal Crossing – New Horizons?
- What role might power play in these discussions?

As proven by this study, there seems to be a general disinterest in discussing the anti-ELAB movement, whilst the BLM movement seems almost a duty to bring up. Discussing anti-ELAB is associated with politics and hence stigmatized, whilst the BLM movement is considered apolitical but still so important that it is almost necessary to debate it.

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[12] Other members and moderators, for example

This study has unveiled a discussion where bringing up politics is stigmatized and seen as unwanted. This arguably entails power relations. Foucault describes power relations within the discourse as something created and mutually, albeit silently, agreed upon. In this context, I have showed how members of these forums seem to agree that politics are unwanted – they disregard others (and themselves) who bring up the topic, and moderators are trying to determine which discussions are politically charged and silence them as much as possible. This ties members to certain topics of discussions, and forces them to phrase themselves in certain ways.

Foucualt describes how power relations always entail some form of resistance (1978: 95). This type of resistance can be seen here as well. Whilst discussing the anti-ELAB protests are stigmatized as they are considered too political, BLM is discussed relatively frequently. When moderators and other members try to shut the discussions down, they are met with the argument that BLM is not political. Here, I argue that members attempt to circumvent the power relations at hand by relabeling the BLM movement – if it is not political, it can be discussed. This is considered the resistance within the discourse.

The discussions on the BLM movement arguably also serves as a reminder that there is a distinction between political and apolitical discussions.

Audiences are growing more and more participatory, according to Jenkins (2006). In this thesis, I argue that this participatory nature may be pushing the power relations already present within the discourse. Vice versa, the power relations which are being formed may also be forming the participatory nature of the audience.

This goes far enough to not only make discussions on BLM acceptable, but necessary. The issue is talked about as if it is members' duty to discuss it.

My analysis has shown that when the anti-ELAB protests are brought up, what is discussed is the very protest, and not what is being protested against. Users mention how mainland China has banned the game, and that there are protests in Hong Kong, but nothing about why there are protests and what they really are about. This is distinct from the BLM protests, where the discussions go straight to the issues of racism and similar, continuing the discussions the protests bring up. Users seem to already have knowledge of the issues the BLM movement is protesting. This is discussed in the analysis, and exemplified by the figures showing how the protests and their discussions are tied together. This creates a catch 22-situation; no one

discusses the anti-ELAB protests, because no one knows about it. But when no one discusses it, knowledge is not spread, and if no one knows about it, they cannot justify discussing it.

The research questions have thus been answered.

The aim of this thesis is to elucidate the way players of ACNH uses online gaming forums to discuss two different political protests happening in the game – the anti-ELAB protest and the Black Lives Matter protest. This aim has been fulfilled through positioning the standpoints of members of Internet based forums for ACNH. Further, it has been analyzed using Foucualdian theories on power.

Can a space where humans interact be free from human issues? I have in this thesis shown how political discussions take place in a digital world. These findings have proven a clash between the game and the non-game world, where politics are forbidden but may nevertheless still appear. Moderators and other members alike may try to create a politics-free space; however, the creation of such a space may be but an illusion, impossible to reach.

The research questions cover a field (the online gaming forums) material (discussions on the two protests), and theory (power theory as presented by Michel Foucault), whereby they were deemed possible to answer and relevant to the aim at hand. By positing how the different protest acts are discussed, it becomes possible to elucidate and compare the two protests, since I ask myself exactly how they look. By positing what role power plays, I ease the analyzation process and increases reliability, since this involves a theory. Both in academia and in corporate settings, there is a demand for theory being present in analysing and executing research (Sunderland 2008: 132).

7.1 Applicability

Members of forums, academia, as well as political movements, may benefit from these results.

Political movements may benefit from recognizing that their protest may not make an impact for the very players. If the goal is to incite discussion amongst players, it seems very important to frame it as non-political.

From this observation I deduct that it is important for users to already know about the protest in question to justify discussing it. For protesters to be successful amongst gamers in online

forems, they need to avoid or break the catch 22-situation described in chapter 7.0 in this thesis.

Tying the protest to a specific person might be a key factor in engaging people. BLM protests seem very personified. Protest surges are related to specific stories of specific people, and oftentimes the face of someone becomes the face of the protest as well. In the 2020 surge of BLM, George Floyd and his fate played a big part in bringing people to protest (CBS News 2021). This might be a way of putting focus on the cause of the protest (the fate of people) rather than the protest itself. Making sure that the message of the protest gets across seems crucial in order to instigate knowledge spreading and break or avoid the catch 22-situation described above.

For players, or moderators, who partake in online communities, it may be good to recognize that building online communities also means building discussions where power relations are formed. From here, a discussion can be created in symbiosis with the experience players wish for, by (ab)using power relations. On one hand, this would create a community which caters to players interests and that they enjoy. On the other hand, it may discriminate, or scare away, those who wishes to discuss certain topics in the online communities.

Further research could explore how power may be used to steer the discussion in desirable directions. Alternatively, it could be fruitful to discuss potential reasons why the discussions look the way they do. What makes members consider anti-ELAB political and BLM apolitical? Such questions have been deliberately avoided in this study, to mitigate a risk of the aim becoming too big for a Masters' Thesis. However, as stated in the beginning, this thesis can be seen as a starting point for further research in these topics.

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9.0 Appendix

9.1 Glossary

e-democracy

E-democracy means using information and communications technology to strengthen democracy, democratic institutions, and democratic processes (Council of Europe, n.d.).

Ludology

Ludology is the scientific study of games in general, and video games in particular. A ludologist can study both electronic and nonelectronic games, such as board games. (Frasca 2003).

Netizen

The expression "netizen" and grammatical variations of the expression shall be understood as "an active participant in the online community of the Internet" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). This is the official definition of the Merriam-Webster dictonary. As the expression has not been explicitly defined by scholars using it, a definition from a renowned dictionary is deemed sufficient. This definition also seems to cover what both I and previous researchers ostensibly thinks the term entails.

Non-player character (NPC)

A video game character that cannot be controlled by a player. These characters are entirely controlled by the computer program. NPC:s can fill several functions in the game; they can serve as plot driving, complete game functions, or act as assistance to the player (Techopedia, n.d. https://www.techopedia.com/definition/1920/non-player-character-npc).

Original poster (OP)

The user of a forum starting a thread. This acronym is mostly associated with Reddit, but can be used in other settings as well. OP can be an abbreviation of different things, and hence have different meanings, but in this thesis, OP stands for *original poster* (slang.net, n.d.).

Single/multiplayer game

A *single-player game* is a game designed for one player. A *multi-player game* is designed for several people. A multi-player game can be a game designed for several people to play together whilst physically also being together, or a game to be played with several other people online. When a game is designed to be played together with hundreds or thousands of other players, it is called a *massive multi-player game* (Xbox wiki, n.d.).