Creative Gaming: Making Sense of Malaysia's COVID-19 Movement Control Order Through *Animal Crossing*

TENGKU INTAN MAIMUNAH TENGKU SABRI
MD AZALANSHAH MD SYED
ROSYA IZYANIE SHAMSHUDEEN
Universiti Malaya, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

The period of Movement Control Order (MCO) has had a significant impact on the physical and mental health of Malaysians, leading many to seek comfort from video games. This study aims to go beyond the hedonistic allure of video gaming by exploring players' eudaimonic pursuits or sensemaking. Within the sociocultural framework of creativity, this study argues that Malaysian players generate meaning through creative gaming to buffer against the negative effects of the MCO lockdown. The method employed is a qualitative textual analysis of gaming paratexts produced and published in a local gaming Facebook group during the MCO. The popular Nintendo's *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (2020a) is the game in focus. The final dataset included 93 gaming paratexts from 71 unique players. The findings indicated that through creative gaming, Malaysian players made meaning of the pandemic in three ways: adapting to a new temporality, depicting the public health emergency, and dealing with the lockdown absurdities. The findings highlighted the significance of creative gaming as meaning-making to sustain players' well-being from pandemic precarity. The study is relevant in showcasing a conscious way of video gaming for the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals of SDG3 Good Health and Well-being.

Keywords: *Creativity, video game culture, COVID-19, Movement Control Order, Malaysia.*

INTRODUCTION

Considering the global and rapid spread of the COVID-19 virus, the Malaysian government has enforced extreme containment measures known as the Movement Control Order (MCO). The measures included lockdown, travel restrictions, physical distancing, and stringent personal hygiene. The MCO was first implemented on 18 March 2020 (New Straits Times, 2020) following a sudden increase in infections linked to a religious gathering (Nor Fazila et al., 2020). The highly restrictive MCO period has affected the citizens' quality of life in various domains, particularly their mental health and well-being (Anne et al., 2021; Hazlin, 2020).

Realising these negative impacts, many Malaysians turned to video games for reasons such as spending extra free time at home (Zack, 2020), unwinding (Rebecca, 2021), socialising (Mohd Farhaan, 2021) and participating in worldwide gaming campaigns of #PlayApartTogether (Business Wire, 2020) and #YANA (Webb, 2020). This is in line with the positive role of video games for escapism, cognitive stimulation, and mental health benefits, as demonstrated in international studies of the global pandemic (Barr & Copeland-Stewart, 2022; Boldi & Rapp, 2021; Marston & Kowert, 2020). A surge in video gaming consumption and purchases of video game consoles was reported among Malaysians during the MCO (Nur Huda, 2021), with approximately 21 million gamers identified in 2020 (Allcorrect Games, 2021). This established video gaming as an important part of Malaysia's COV-19 and MCO

social imagination.

Beyond the hedonistic allure of video games, this study aims to uncover an underexplored area in the current literature: players' eudaimonic pursuits or sensemaking through creative gaming. Playing video games may allow Malaysians to be creative, which cannot be achieved through passive MCO entertainment such as scrolling social media or streaming TV shows. Earlier scholarships have highlighted the role played by creativity as a tool for resilience and coping with adverse situations (e.g. Forgeard, 2013; Metzl & Morrell, 2008). In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, it has been suggested that the solution to the pandemic absurdity is to achieve creativity and personal meaning and eventually implement better coping and growth (Banerjee et al., 2020). Researchers have also stressed meaning generation through creative actions during this period to build resilience and buffer against the negative effects of the pandemic lockdown (Kapoor & Kaufman, 2020). In this line of thought, we consider that analysing the creative actions of a small subset of Malaysian players during the pandemic is relevant in building knowledge to inform the creation of projects and policies aimed at fostering creativity and well-being. Considering news reports on the instances of creative gaming by Malaysian players (Alleef, 2020; Erna, 2020b), it is important to uncover an in-depth and nuanced understanding of this gaming phenomenon. Yet because the practice is relatively new, minimal empirical work has been done to assess in detail how and why such creative practices manifest.

Our aim is to uncover Malaysian players' pursuits of meaning-making. Specifically, we study the gaming paratexts produced by Malaysian players of the video game *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (Nintendo, 2020a) or *ACNH*, which became a pandemic-era gaming phenomenon. Gaming paratexts are defined as players' activities outside the boundaries of the game, involving user-generated content often posted online. The gaming paratexts produced during this time are linked to the surrounding reality of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. In light of the MCO lockdown, creative gaming by creating paratexts could reveal the ways players expand meaning beyond the game itself and how the MCO shaped these meanings. More broadly, creative gaming offers players the means to reflect on the reality of lockdown. Early on, local media reported on the fun and thrill allure of *ACNH*, leading many Malaysians to play it and form gaming communities online (Chapree, 2021; Geraldine, 2020). Such communal involvement with popular media usually extends beyond pleasure or hedonism and is more strongly associated with the search for meaning or eudaimonic (Tsay-Vogel & Sanders, 2017). Therefore, we conducted a textual analysis to reveal the meaning-making aspect of Malaysian *ACNH* players during the MCO period. We seek to answer the research question, "How does creative gaming in *Animal Crossing* play a role in shaping Malaysian players' responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and its associated precarity?" In doing so, we argue that Malaysian *ACNH* players generate meaning through the act of creative gaming to mitigate the adverse impacts of the MCO period. In the post-pandemic world, this study of meaning-making is significant in increasing Malaysians' awareness of good health and well-being, as well as building their resilience against future health threats.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Sociocultural Approach to Creativity

The sociocultural frameworks on creativity aim to uncover the underlying structure of how creativity is operationalised. We ground the study in sociocultural theories of creativity, specifically on the Five A's framework of creativity proposed by Glăveanu (2013), for exploring creative practices of Malaysian players in the context of the MCO period. The Five A's frames

both the categories of creativity and their interaction to account for a sociocultural perspective of creativity. The framework features the 'Actor' doing the creating, the 'Action' being performed, the 'Artifact' being produced, the 'Audience' being engaged or addressed, and the 'Affordances' being used in the process.

Creative action emerged out of actor-audience relations that both produce and are mediated by the generation and use of new artifacts within a physical, social, and cultural environment. To study creative gaming practices (Action), we need to look at the interrelations between Malaysian players (Actor), the video gaming community (Audience), and the creative outputs of paratexts (Artifact) generated in the context of MCO (Affordance). The players exist only in relation to the gaming community; the creative outputs embody their cultural traditions. Creative gaming cannot take place outside of MCO. The 'Affordance' of MCO raises surrounding circumstances equal to all other aspects of the creative endeavour. Therefore, COVID-19 and the subsequent MCO period are considered an 'Affordance' that shapes the creative 'Action' of video gaming. To distinguish manifestations of creativity in video gaming, we view the action as little-c (Kaufman & Beghetto, 2009) of personal hobby and everyday creativity.

By adopting this framework, we have the necessary concept to interpret and categorise the range of creative gaming among Malaysians shaped by the affordances of the MCO period. In line with this aim, we define 'creative gaming' during MCO as the interrelating actions between the video game players, community, paratexts, and the context of the pandemic lockdown, all of which represent a combination of novelty and meaningfulness. We also referred to the scholarships by the researchers who have reiterated the importance of creativity during the restrictive lockdown, to find meaning and build resilience (Kapoor & Kaufman, 2020), to seek enjoyment, contact, and coping (Elisondo, 2022), and as an agentic response to produce creative outcomes (Beghetto, 2021). Realising the importance of creativity, there is an urgent emphasis on the need for more research on creative behaviours in a pandemic.

Video Game Paratext and the Search for Meaning
Gaming paratext refers to "the range of co-creative activities that surround the game" (Richardson et al., 2021, p. 56) as players engage outside the boundaries of the game. Players generate a rich paratextual culture by making and disseminating fan art, playthroughs, mods, wikis, cosplays, and memes, giving rise to the internet discourse surrounding games. To study video game culture and practices, Consalvo (2017, 2019) calls for a more comprehensive understanding of game paratexts. We adopted the understanding of gaming paratexts from Švelch (2020), who recommends treating paratextuality as a link between a text and the surrounding socio-historical reality without implying that they are less important or subordinate.

A society living under a pandemic lockdown searches and constructs meaning as a coping strategy (Yang et al., 2021) and resiliency to losses (Walsh, 2020). 'Meaning-making' in this sense is to understand and to give significance to the events in life, which has been associated with improvements in mental well-being and physical health (Park, 2016). It has been suggested that meaning in life can be found through engagement in activities that align with one's strengths, values, and interests, contributing to a sense of fulfilment and resilience against precarities in life (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008; Seligman, 2012). From the perspective of social constructivism, the search for meaning in life is seen as not just an individual endeavour

but is also influenced by the broader sociocultural and historical contexts. It would be interesting to further investigate how these meanings materialise in the gaming paratexts produced by video game players. Through their paratexts, we can glimpse and understand how this population makes sense of life disruptions during lockdown, with the productions being culturally and historically situated.

By focusing on Malaysian players, this research will contribute to the literature on the video gaming culture of an emerging and peripheral market dominated by global video game offerings. Scholarly discourses on Malaysian gaming communities and gaming paratext are noticeably absent, having only been briefly covered by local news outlets. Among the earliest studies of Malaysian-focused video game communities are by Benjamin (2013), who studied Malaysian guilds in the MMORPG *World of Warcraft,* and by Shifa (2017), who studied Malay women players of the Facebook game *The Sims Social*. Therefore, this study will expand the literature on Malaysian gaming culture by focusing on the gaming community of *ACNH* and the meaningful paratexts produced. Researchers have been calling for a balanced and practical approach to video gaming during the restrictive COVID-19 pandemic lockdown to support players' well-being (King et al., 2020). Amid the fallout of the MCO period, it is hoped that sense-making through the creation of gaming paratexts can fulfil this role.

Instances of Creative Gaming in and Around Animal Crossing
The *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (Nintendo, 2020a), also known as *ACNH*, is the latest franchise of the simulation series *Animal Crossing*. Launched in March 2020, it became the biggest gaming hit of the global pandemic lockdown, with sales of over 30 million copies worldwide (Nintendo, 2020b), multiple accolades (BAFTA, 2021; Golden Joystick Awards, 2020; The Game Awards, 2020), and active social media fanfare (Khan, 2020). The game simulates the daily social interactions on an island, and the primary goal is for players to increase the island's star rating, although players are free to shape their own gameplay.

It has been reported on the news that thousands of Malaysian *ACNH* players actively communicated their gameplay on social media, many of which exemplified creative gaming practices (Alleef, 2020; Erna, 2020b; Geraldine, 2020). Existing empirical research on *ACNH* – whether in a general context or specifically on creative gaming – has largely focused on Western and East Asian players and contexts (e.g. Gandolfi & Gandolfi, 2021; Pearce et al., 2021; Roth, 2022; Tong et al., 2021), thus may not be able to explain gaming practices in other regions such as Malaysia. Studies have found instances of creative gaming and paratexts in and around *ACNH*, although they did not explicitly emphasise the word 'creative gaming' (Akbar & Kusumasari, 2021; Vossen, 2021). Moreno (2020) conducted a content analysis of fan art based on ideologies of neoliberalism and sexism. Tong et al. (2021) has conducted an online surveys and remote interviews on player-generated narratives. Meanwhile, Roth (2022) analysed YouTube videos by Japanese *ACNH* players and found that the players reclaimed a sense of everydayness and cultural routines in the digital game space. Building on all these studies, our research will discover how Malaysian players interpret the game and how their paratexts expand the meanings beyond the canonical text. The findings of this research will contribute to the existing literature on creative gaming in *ACNH*, specifically by focusing on the Malaysian region and the context of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown.

METHODOLOGY

This study is guided by the following research question: "How does creative gaming in *Animal Crossing* play a role in shaping Malaysian players' responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and its associated precarity?" The relevance of studying *ACNH* as part of MCO video gaming culture is due to three reasons: commercial success, critical acclaim, and active local community on the internet (Erna, 2020a). There are three main processes involved in this study: identification, screening, and review. The Identification involved identifying the Facebook group, the time frame, the keyword search, and the manual search. The Screening involved accepting only posts in English or Malay, eliminating irrelevant posts, and accepting 93 posts in accordance with the research question. The Reviewing involved appraising the content of the paratexts and analysing them thematically.

Based on local news, we identified the gaming community 'Animal Crossing Malaysia' on Facebook as a site for over 14,000 players to engage in daily discussions as they produced and shared their own paratexts (Chapree, 2021; Geraldine, 2020). To study the gaming paratexts, we adopted the interpretive approach from Stuart Hall's (1980) idea of 'encoding/decoding'. We performed a textual analysis as the method is most suitable to capture the cultural phenomenon that occurred within the time when the texts were created, thus avoiding problems such as participant recall and recall bias. The unit of analysis is the pre-existing paratexts in the forms of textual data (text posts) as well as visual data (photo posts and video posts). The time frame of the chosen paratexts is between 1st April 2020 and 31st April 2021, that is when *ACNH* was first available to purchase and the first year into and at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Through purposive sampling, we identified relevant data using two methods: (1) keyword-based search across all group posts and (2) manual search on the group's 'Media' tab. A set of keywords were used, including 'COVID-19', 'Movement Control Order', 'creative', and 'custom designs' in both English and Malay. The manual search was done to cover posts that could not be identified with keywords but had related nuances in the visual.

A number of 93 posts made by 71 unique players related to creative gaming and meaning-making were collected and kept for analysis. As the posts were made during the actual months of MCO, they offered valuable insights into the real-time progression of the lockdown. We conducted textual analysis of the posts and carried out open coding for the construction of analytical categories. Posts written in the native Malay language were recorded verbatim and translated into English for readability. Identifying information that could potentially result in a breach of players' anonymity and privacy was removed. To answer the research question, we employed the analytic method of Reflexive Thematic Analysis of data familiarisation, coding, generating initial themes, developing themes, refining themes, and writing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2020).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Through creative gaming, Malaysian *ACNH* players produced paratexts to make sense of the restrictive period. We argue that creative gaming is an effective approach to meaning-making, thus serving to mitigate the adverse impacts of the MCO period. The players' meaning manifested not just in visible appearances but also in the expression as wide-ranging as economics, politics, and personal grief. As the paratexts were shared with the gaming group, players were able to communally reflect on their lives alongside the virus outbreak. Three

themes were identified: adapting to a new temporality, depicting the public health emergency, and dealing with the lockdown absurdities.

Theme One: Adapting to a New Temporality
We identified 60 posts that illustrate aspects of temporality, that is, the condition of being bound in time, in relation to the period of MCO. Our findings revealed that the hours players have spent in the *ACNH* video game were not only an experience in time but also an experience of time, thereby contributing to the sensemaking of the pandemic.

a. Tracking the Passage of Time
Playing *ACNH* became a temporal practice as players tracked or journaled their gaming hours. Many considered the high numbers as a badge of honour as one player recorded a whopping 525 hours of play, averaging 10 hours per day in the span of 53 days (Post 25). One other player reached 670 hours, averaging 12.6 hours per day. These players have immersed themselves in the game for a substantial part of their lockdown days, thus regarded by the community as "hardcore players", and the game is their "second life" (Post 57). Commenting on these high gaming hours, one player wrote, "Binge gaming is not healthy, but we had MCO that forced us to stay indoors, so there's that." Evidently, the enforcement of the lockdown drove most players to significant gaming hours. Time, which once seemed to be a scarce resource, became abundant, and the surplus of leisure time became clear to most players during the MCO. In tracking the gaming hours, players also reflected on their in-game progress (Post 68) and the enjoyment they had from such leisure (Post 34).

In another temporal practice, players celebrated the extension of the MCO period as it allowed them more time to play the game (Post 13). One player wrote in early January 2021, "There will be MCO 2.0 this Wednesday. Happy *Animal Crossing*, folks!" (Post 79). The post garnered over 140 likes, indicating it was a much-celebrated idea among the players. After almost a year of being under lockdown of varying intensity degrees, most players welcomed the opportunity to play the game uninterrupted under another 'full' lockdown period. Players cited the temporal opportunity to fully explore the advanced feature of terraforming, thus achieving the desired look and feel of their islands. Accordingly, the endings of MCOs were lamented. As the restrictions were gradually lifted, some players considered selling their games and consoles as they foresaw the end of their playtime (Post 38 and 61). The ending of the 'full' MCO at that time meant most players would have to get back to work or school and, thus, would no longer play as much as before. Although the MCO duration was lengthy, there exists an ephemerality or a brief existence. The opportunity to spend time for leisure, such as video gaming, is considered a privilege afforded to these players.

The notion of longing for the past or the pre-pandemic temporality permeated many accounts of players. They long for physical activities such as playing football (Post 22) and badminton (Post 32), thus recreating the sports fields in the game for substitution. This made apparent the players' nostalgic longing for the triviality of everyday life, of life without restrictions. There is also a notion of longing for what could have been as the MCO affected plans for rites of passage. Due to travel restrictions, one player celebrated her 21st birthday by playing the game alone instead of spending time with family and friends in real life (Post 35). In summary, by tracking the passage of time, Malaysian *ACNH* players eventually adapted to the new temporality of living during the MCO period. Creative gaming, particularly, was helpful in this venture.

b.   Managing Prolonged Tense Emotions

The popularity of *ACNH* among Malaysians is largely attributed to its emotional appeal. Generally, players described their feelings towards the game as "addicted" (Post 3 and 89) and "obsessed" (Post 19, 58, and 77). Through *ACNH*, players notably coped with a range of tense emotions elicited by the pandemic crisis, including "uncertainty, depression, isolation, and anxiety" (Post 39). One player even went as far as to describe *ACNH* as "the only thing that kept me sane during MCO" (Post 55). The virtual islands were described as "escape haven" and "therapy" (Post 18). Players appreciate nature in the game – seeing the blue skies, hearing the sounds of sea waves and waterfalls, and living in the moment as they work on their island.

By and large, Malaysian *ACNH* players expressed their gladness to be able to play the game. The affective emotions are juxtaposed with the pandemic outbreak happening in the real world and the tense emotions associated with it. Notably, one player sought comfort through her gameplay and the gaming community after being terminated from the workplace (Post 17). Members of the community extended well wishes to her, with some commenting that they were also facing a similar predicament. Amid the life hardships during MCO, indulging in creative gaming of *ACNH* kept players' minds off things and allowed them to escape from the crisis temporally, emotionally, and spatially. This is in line with findings from Zhu (2020) that the game provides players with a positive escapism of spiritual comfort and sustenance.

For these findings, we acknowledge that there may be a bias as these posts were self-reported mental states by the players. These players believe that *ACNH's* creative gaming has helped them to navigate the MCO temporality, which featured the struggles of the population and the widespread chaos.

c.   Embracing the Quotidian Life

As Malaysians' daily routines were halted, ACNH adapted to everyday life instead, creating an alternate way of living. Inspired by the constraints of the MCO, players came up with creative adaptations, thus demonstrating how "creativity does not only lead to societal progress through notable inventions and discoveries, it does so also (if not primarily) by changing the way people relate to the world, to others, and to themselves, making them more flexible, more open to the new" (Glăveanu et al., 2019, p. 743).

Regarding the daily routine of work, players embodied their real-life profession in the game by recreating their work uniforms, such as the Malaysian Airlines' iconic green batik-print *kebaya* (Post 7 and 10). Another halted daily routine is going to school, which prompted players to recreate school uniforms in the game to relive their schooling days (Post 6 and 11). As schools gradually opened during the MCO, COVID-19 standard operating procedures were put in place. One player recreated a scene of a teacher recording a student's body temperature in a logbook, a measure to screen for the virus (Post 42).

Other interrupted operations were the food and beverages industry, together with retail outlets. Players built their favourite restaurants and shops in the game to re-enact the act of buying and selling goods (Post 45 and 52). In a notable series of posts, one player recreated Malaysian eateries in his gameplays (Post 66, 67, 69, 71, 72, and 78). Among others, he recreated food stalls of Ramly Burger, Marrybrown, Old Town White Coffee, Secret Recipe, Ayamas, and Rotiboy. The player also designed signboards of *mamak* eateries with well-loved menus such as *roti canai* and *nasi lemak*. Explaining his creative work, the player wrote:

I love how the customisation feature works in this game. I was so inspired by the designs of players from other countries. I am a foodie myself, so I started designing local eateries as I want to make the island a local Malaysian food 'Paradise'. Hope you guys like it (Post 66).

Creative adaptations were also made to the routines of faiths and beliefs. Players recreated places of worship in the game, in particular mosques (Post 28 and 90). Prayer mats were arranged on the ground in alternate with physical distancing 'X' floor stickers, and faucets were set up for ablution. Commenting on these creations, one player suggested using the in-game item of the magazine rack as a book rest or *rehal* for al-Quran recitation. All these real-life routine behaviours have undergone creative adaptations in the virtual world as players navigate the MCO period. Meaning was made of the MCO disruptions through newfound appreciation of the daily life minutiae, previously deemed mundane, but now being seen in a new light. Clearly, the MCO period has illuminated the richness of everyday moments.

Theme Two: Depicting the Public Health Emergency
We identified 24 posts that revealed the portrayal of healthcare issues during the MCO. Integrating facets of players' real lives into the game could enhance their feelings of extended self-presence in the virtual world. Therefore, this contributes to creative gaming's role in the meaning-making of the pandemic.

a.   The Imagery of the Pandemic
Malaysian players used vivid visual imageries to mirror, evoke, and define the precarious living of the lockdown. The imageries illustrated a pivotal and unsettling chapter in Malaysia's history and reflected how the virus dictated the way people lived. One player recreated an emergency area of intensive care units with rows of hospital beds (Post 5). In contrast to the empty beds depicted in the post, the real-life Malaysian hospitals were under strain. Hospital bed occupancy was at full capacity amid surges in infection rates. Thus, the recreation of the healthcare facility in the game became a reminder of reality.

In another example, one player recreated the daily press conference by the Health Ministry about the development of the pandemic in Malaysia (Post 43). Although the player did not specify the identity of his avatar, the resemblance to the Health Director General Noor Hisham Abdullah is instantly recognisable. In this recreation, the press conference room was adorned with Health Ministry logos and Malaysian flags, cameras were set up for the live broadcast, and journalists were seated in rows, each anticipating the announcement of daily virus infections. The post has amassed over 400 likes, making it one of the most successful posts in the group. Many players praised the realistic depiction of the press conference, as the player creatively utilised the game's content and customisation feature.

Mirroring the real-life pandemic guideline, the usage of face masks as virus prevention also permeated into the game (Post 1 and 8). Reacting to the nationwide face mask mandate announced on 1st August 2020, players posted pictures of their avatars with face masks, citing real-life reasons to avoid being penalised for RM1,000 (Post 48) and to avoid the emergence of new virus clusters (Post 49). Other imageries of the lockdown include signages of the contact tracing application MySejahtera (Post 80, 81, 82, 86, and 87). By and large, these imageries of the pandemic have visually immortalised the real-life tensions of public healthcare in the virtual world. Some imageries mirrored the rather dystopian measures of

installing fences to keep the infected neighbours inside their homes (Post 64) and the patrolling of uniformed police officers (Post 83). In response to these, one player cynically commented, "The government must be so proud of you" (Post 56). It can be argued that these imageries, although with the intention to reflect on players' real lives, actually created a constant threat of mortality, one that induced perpetual anxieties. The imageries subtly affected the society at large, deeply affecting the people's thoughts. All of these were done through creative gaming by the players in response to the situational context.

b.   Public Service Announcement Through Slogans and Hashtags

Malaysian *ACNH* players integrated pandemic-related PSAs into their gameplay to raise awareness and call for action. "Stay Home" or "Stay at Home" was a common slogan promoting physical distancing by avoiding crowds, which can increase one's chances of getting and spreading the virus. During the MCO, Malaysians were mandated to stay home to limit their exposure to the virus 'out there'. Leaving home was limited to only getting groceries, medications, or other essentials. Responding to this real-life mandate, one player joked about the lockdown nonadherence in his gameplay as all his neighbours were roaming the island (Post 27). Additionally, the slogan "Stay Home" is often paired with "Stay Safe", indicating a likely consequence of doing the former (Post 62 and 63).

Besides the notion of "home" and "safety", players often included hashtags about encouraging resilience on their posts, such as #StayStrong and #WeCanDoThis (Post 31). Constant encouragement of resilience is helpful, as some may falter in navigating the hardships of the MCO period. The PSAs were often included in their gaming paratexts, either as text captions or image stickers.

Interestingly, one player highlighted a PSA that was identified in the game itself (Post 88). The character Isabelle reminds us, "Be mindful about washing your hands. And cover your mouth if you do cough or sneeze!" Although Isabelle only expressed her concerns about cold germs, her advice is also apt for COVID-19 precautions, thus making it relatable for players during the MCO period.

As such, PSAs found in Malaysian *ACNH* gameplay posts can be understood as players' collective attempts to overcome the pandemic by preventing further infections, encouraging resilience, and practising stringent hygiene. This is in line with research on Malaysian Klang Valley urbanites who experienced increased awareness from pandemic-related PSAs as the messages better equipped them to endure the MCO period (Suffian Hadi et al., 2022). Additionally, by representing the real scenarios and situations faced by Malaysians during the pandemic lockdown, these PSAs could facilitate their understanding of the message (Hasrul & Mohd Azul, 2021).

c.   Remembering Absent Friends

Losing a loved one at any time is distressing. Losing someone due to the pandemic or during the pandemic is even more stressful. It requires the response of grieving – a sorrowful reaction – on top of already precarious living. Therefore, a society experiencing losses during the MCO needs to grieve and remember. The same goes for Malaysian *ACNH* players, who engaged in creative gaming for this purpose. They built areas for graveyards and memorials in the game as remembrance for those who have passed (Post 30). One player posted pictures of a memorial park for her deceased father, which she decorated with gravestones, statues, and roses (Post 93). Visitors of the memorial park, although they may not know the deceased

personally, may also grieve because the feeling of grief over a bereavement is more pronounced in times such as the MCO. Many members expressed their condolences and offered to help by providing the needed in-game materials. The social support can facilitate grieving and unification among Malaysian players who share similar experiences during the MCO period.

In another instance of remembrance, one player found a resemblance in a game character to her real-life deceased pet dog (Post 46). The player was elated that the character could "carry on my best friend's memory even virtually". Such commemoration preserves the memories of beloved pets that have enriched people's lives. Through creative gaming, Malaysian players utilised the game for virtual remembrance of those who are absent, not just for relatives of COVID-19 victims but also for people experiencing a sense of loss in general.

Theme Three: Dealing with the Lockdown Absurdities

We identified nine posts in the group that revealed creative gaming as a medium for Malaysians to reflect on the absurd negations and continuities of life alongside the coronavirus. The MCO is regarded as a period that is contrary to all reason or common sense. Consequently, this contributes to players' meaning-making of the pandemic.

a. Reclaiming The Loss of Agency

Existential concerns were prominent as most Malaysians found themselves having no control over the pandemic situation and, ultimately, of their own lives. This led some players to try to reclaim the real-life loss of agency in the game, allowing them a feeling of choice and volition. For example, the behaviour of panic buying observed during the lockdown was simulated in *ACNH*. One player posted a clip of his avatar running across a field of turnip, a highly valuable in-game commodity (Post 4). By hoarding turnips, the player simulated the phenomenon of panic buying done in real life during the lockdown, which deals with scarcity and exclusivity when production and movement of goods were affected, thus giving a perceived agency to the hoarder.

The loss of agency can also be seen in working-from-home arrangements, whereby productivity pitfalls may occur when the line between personal space and workspace is blurred. Recreations of home-office setup were commonly done in *ACNH*. One player set up a computer desk in the middle of a room, making the wall a backdrop for conference calls and thus ensuring a bit of privacy for personal life (Post 12). Another player filled in her recreated workspace with a laptop, a monitor, office supplies, and coffee cups (Post 65). Evidently, due to the MCO, new spatial arrangements emerged as homes turned into shared spaces for work, school, meals, and leisure. It might be argued that it is irrational that in one of the rarest occurrences of a pandemic in humankind's recent history, workers were expected to maintain output and efficiency. However, the ability to work from home has also provided protection against the negative effects on the economic and health aspects of the pandemic.

The same can be said in the education sector, as school closures rendered instructors and students into distance learning. One player recreated a science classroom setting with items such as a Bunsen burner and a skeletal structure, with the island residents acting as the students (Post 26). The player recreated the classroom in remembrance of his graduating students, as their classes ended abruptly due to the MCO. He did not get the chance to say a proper farewell and thus tried to reclaim emotional control amid the uncontrollable situation.

Ultimately, when the most sense of agency is lost, and everything seems to be beyond one's personal control, all that is left is 'wishing'. One player, during a nighttime play, looked up to the shooting star in the sky and made a wish that the virus would soon disappear (Post 60). Such wishes or prayers can be melancholic, although they may empower players to have a positive outlook on the future. This is an acceptance of humans' inability to control nature and global events. All in all, even a small attempt to reclaim agency in the game is a major way for the players to deal with the lockdown absurdities.

b.   Memes as a Shared Experience

Malaysian *ACNH* players disseminated memes that captured a specific real-life moment most have experienced during the MCO. Memes are conduits for cultural conversations, typically humorous in nature, and contain implicit meaning or commentary. For instance, memes were used to express discontent about the inability to travel during the lockdown. One player posted the logo of Dodo Airlines and captioned it as "The airline that survived COVID-19" (Post 20). Unlike the global civil aviation that was put to a halt and suffered from bankruptcy due to the stay-at-home orders, the fictional Dodo Airlines was able to operate day and night, allowing players to visit other islands.

Memes were also used to express discontent about the inability to pursue one's ambition amid the lockdown. One player claimed to be a photography enthusiast and posted a comical photo of a mosquito found in the game. Written perhaps in jest, his caption reads:

> Before MCO, I was really into photography. I was really excited when I got a
> copy of *ACNH*! I can finally pursue my dream of being a wildlife photographer!
> Here's a sample shot! How did I do? (Post 40).

The text (caption) combined with the imagery (a photo of a mosquito) creates nuance – a humorous or satirical attempt to lament unpursued dreams because of the lockdown. Whether the player's background story was real or not did not matter, as the implicit commentary is more pronounced. The post garnered witty reactions from other players, with some giving appraisals of "10/10", "It's a masterpiece!" and "Try a different aperture or ISO".

Memes were also used as self-reflection. One player shared an illustration of the landlord character, Tom Nook, handing a copy of the *ACNH* game to someone who washes up on a beach (Post 29). Tom Nook is seen as a saviour by providing a haven to those in need, and the recipient is ever grateful. The player wrote:

> Relatable. I couldn't drink *the tarik* at a *mamak* or visit my favourite Starbucks
> when MCO began. Tom Nook keeps putting me in debt [from house loans],
> and I still look forward to seeing him every morning (Post 29).

Similarly, another player expressed her appreciation of the game by sharing a meme, "Thank You for Changing My Life" (Post 74). A copy of the *ACNH* game answers, "I'm literally just a video game. Please go to therapy," thus poking fun at people who credit and overly depend on popular media for the betterment of their mental health. Such memes contain ironic, nuanced meanings as well as relatability that most players share for a particular reason – *ACNH* 'saves' them from the hardships of the MCO period. Most importantly, the players

are self-aware or conscious about this indulgence. Due to the accessibility and rapid spread of the memes, they could accelerate the role of *ACNH* creative gaming in meaning-making.

Much like the 'absurd hero' of Sisyphus (Camus, 1991), to accept the absurd is to overcome it. In recognising the pandemic lockdown absurdities, Malaysian players chose to live and thus found meaning and joy in life through their *ACNH* creative gameplay and silly memes. Although the MCO period is regarded as meaningless and isolating, it is through embracing of the absurd that Malaysian players were able to uncover a source of strength. This is in line with suggestions by scholars such as Banerjee and colleagues (2020) and Kapoor and Kaufman (2020), that there is a need for people to generate personal meaning through creative actions so they cope better and become more resilient against the negative effects of the pandemic lockdown.

Importantly, based on the gaming paratexts studied, it was clear that Malaysian *ACNH* players were seeking to instil the MCO period with meaning. There is a tendency to characterise their MCO experiences through the dyadic or relational imagery of finding 'light' in the 'darkness' and through the Islamic idea of ease through hardship, which we attribute to this desire to find meaning. For example, amid the dejection of a recent work termination due to the MCO period, one player received many words of encouragement, including "Stay strong, my friend. Many other opportunities are out there" and "May God grant you abundant provisions" (Post 17). In this way, their reflections echo a wider societal imaginary that holds the MCO period as both a crisis and an opportunity. Therefore, attempts to understand any population with sensemaking should consider both the positive and negative impacts of the pandemic lockdown.

CONCLUSION

This empirical study presents the Malaysian sociocultural perspective of creative gaming. Malaysian *ACNH* players connected the real-life chaotic situations and gave meaning through their paratexts on why such situations happened, what has changed, and what it means for the future. The pandemic was made meaningful through their paratexts of strength and acceptance. This study has revealed the role of creative gaming in sensemaking during the pandemic, as depicted in the significant examples discussed. The findings are in line with previous research that people make commonality of the meanings of the pandemic in various ways (Todorova et al., 2021), thus pointing to the importance of meaning-making for sustaining well-being from pandemic precarity. Previous studies have also shown how video games facilitated meaning-making, such as having agency and fostering normalisation during the pandemic lockdown (e.g. Barr & Copeland-Stewart, 2022). Our study of Malaysian players expanded on this understanding by presenting the wide applications of *ACNH* for this purpose.

The relevance of this study is linked to the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals of SDG3 Good Health and Well-being, whereby the produced gaming paratexts could help establish players' sense of meaning in life and mindfulness amid the restrictive period of pandemic lockdown. In the context of this study of Malaysian *ACNH* players, the goal of good health and well-being is meant for all players of all ages. Players discussed vaccinations and shared information and education about healthcare. All these have increased awareness and built players' resilience against future health threats. This study makes an original and novel contribution to knowledge by featuring in-depth creative practices of Malaysian *ACNH* players. Practically, we also extend the research on video games and their potential to fulfil the fundamental need for meaning-making, especially in contexts where such needs may be

restricted. Our study is limited by the textual analysis method and the *ACNH* title; as such, future research may consider other qualitative methods and other popular titles to extend a multifaceted understanding of pandemic lockdown gaming practices.

BIODATA

Tengku Intan Maimunah Tengku Sabri is a PhD student researching gaming culture at the Department of Media and Communication Studies, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Universiti Malaya, 50603 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Her research interests span various areas of the humanities with a focus on visual and media culture. Email: intansabri@um.edu.my

Md Azalanshah Md Syed is an Associate Professor at the Department of Media and Communication Studies as well as the Deputy Dean (Value Creation and Enterprise) at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Universiti Malaya, 50603 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. His research interests cover the fields of Asian popular culture mainly on serial television drama, gender issues, and Malay studies. Email: azalan@um.edu.my

Rosya Izyanie Shamshudeen is a Senior Lecturer at the Department of Media and Communication Studies, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Universiti Malaya, 50603 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Her areas of specialisation include media studies, popular culture, screen studies, and broadcasting. She was a member of Erasmus+ research grant 2016-2018 with the project "International Media Studies". Email: rosya@um.edu.my

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