

Animal Crossing: Virtual Sandtray Integration

Zoë N. Shulman

Department of Art Therapy & Counseling, Southwestern College

AT/CN 637-B: Art Therapy/Counseling Capstone Presentations

Professor Seren Morris

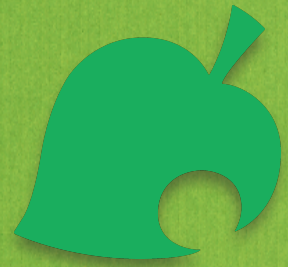
August 23, 2025



What is Animal Crossing?



- ▶ Animal Crossing. (2025, June 22). In *Wikipedia*. https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Animal_Crossing&oldid=1296791523
- ▶ **Animal Crossing** is a **social simulation video game series** developed and published by Nintendo. In the Animal Crossing games, the player assumes the role of a human character who moves into a rural village populated with anthropomorphic animals. **Gameplay is open-ended;** players have no defined objectives but are instead encouraged to spend their time in the village performing any number of activities which include **collecting items, crafting items, planting plants, landscaping, insect catching, fishing, and socializing with the village's residents.** **The player character's appearance can be modified** by buying or designing custom clothes and accessories or changing the hairstyle. **The player's house can also be furnished, decorated, and later expanded;** the player can purchase and collect furniture and place it anywhere in the house, as well as change both the wallpaper and floor designs.



My Capstone Project



- ▶ My Capstone II project used the video game Animal Crossing: New Horizons (ACNH) as a **virtual sand tray to represent, process, and integrate my internship experience.**
- ▶ Throughout the semester, I played **4 sessions** of ACNH, totaling to **11 hours of gameplay.** My session reflections and presentation took **9 additional hours to complete,** making my Capstone II project **total to 20 hours.**
- ▶ During my sessions, I designated an area of my game's island (e.g., a bedroom in my playable character's house or a garden plot) and **artfully placed objects that represented aspects of my internship that needed deeper processing.** For example, I transformed two of my villagers' houses into therapeutic spaces for my clients and chose interior decor (i.e., wallpaper, flooring, furniture, decorative objects...etc.) and character outfits and expressions that helped me to process my successes and growing edges as an art therapy intern.



Why Sand Tray?

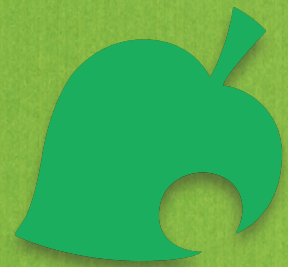


- ▶ Remey, L. (2024). Cognitive behavioral play therapy in the sand. *Journal of the World Association of Sand Therapy Professional*, 2(1), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.58997/wjstp.v2i1.72>
- ▶ Lisa Remey, MEd, LPC-S, RPT-S, NCC, IPT-CST is the owner of Bluebonnet Center for Play Therapy located in downtown New Braunfels, Texas. In Remey's article, she discusses her approaches to cognitive behavioral play therapy (CBPT). Remey explains how **sand play can be adapted to many different theoretical approaches**. Sand play can work well with CBT because **it allows clients to use imagery and develop the non-verbal language necessary to integrate their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors**. CBPT can be **both directive and non-directive, but is always client-led and keeps their treatment goals in mind**. Working within the client's treatment plan, CBPT can give clients opportunities to reveal inner narratives associated with their therapeutic goals. During the post-creation phase of the tray, clients may reflect to identify and reframe maladaptive thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.



Why Animal Crossing?

- ▶ Landrum, A. (2020, May 28). *Therapeutic gameplay in animal crossing*. Guidancett. <https://www.guidancett.com/blog/therapeutic-gameplay-in-animal-crossing>
- ▶ Guidance Tele-therapy is a tele-therapy team that provides online therapy for trauma, neurodivergence, and anxiety. On their blog, team member **Ariel Landrum, LMFT, ATR discusses therapeutic gameplay in the Animal Crossing: New Horizons video game on the Nintendo Switch**. In Animal Crossing, “players portray a human character in a village of anthropomorphic animals” and get to design their own island and dwellings. In this article, Landrum writes about **three major therapeutic benefits** to clients who play the game: 1) **open-ended and non-linear** gameplay that can spur **hope, imagination, and creativity**, 2) online peer connection as **surrogacy for missed opportunities** that can facilitate **connection, repair, and closure**, and 3) the ability to **set and achieve goals** through in-game objectives (e.g., making self-affirming statements on the village bulletin board).

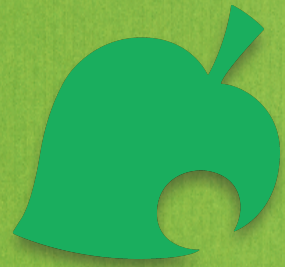


My Internship Site



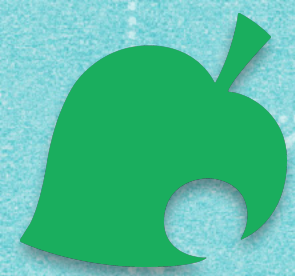
▶ My internship site is **Tierra Nueva Counseling Center** and my clients are typically low-income minorities from the greater Santa Fe, New Mexico area. My Capstone II project **utilized my self-care routine of playing ACNH** as a virtual sand tray to represent, process, and integrate my internship experience.

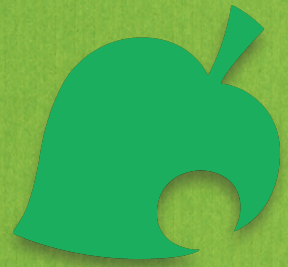
▶ I wished to explore how **the intentional playing of video games within the social simulation and sandbox genres can replicate or surpass the benefits inherent in sand tray therapy.** By completing this project and publishing the results on my e-portfolio website, **I hope to illuminate the value of this virtual therapy for the community.**



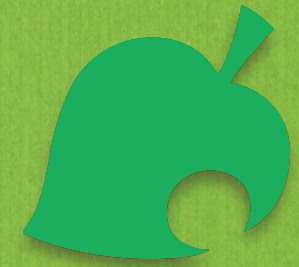
Session 1





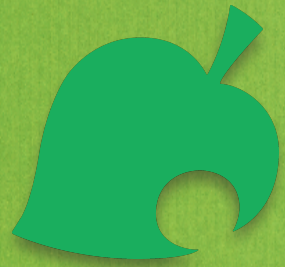


Session 1 Reflection



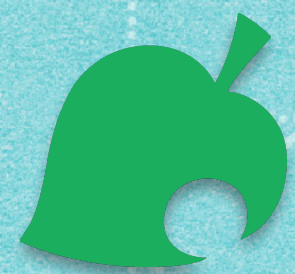
For my first ACNH session, I used **landscaping** to create a **secret cave garden**. **After having learned of my clients' trauma histories, I decided to process post-traumatic growth in the context of cultivating new opportunities.** To represent this idea visually, I created a garden with natural objects symbolizing **trauma, decay, and growth**. The cave represents trauma coming through the psyche's shadow, the mushrooms represent the decay of unhealthy thoughts, feelings, and behaviors; and the budding flowers represent new growth. Further, the act of gardening in the rain symbolized cultivating post-traumatic growth amidst sorrow. During post-traumatic growth, tears can create fertile ground for the decay of unhealthy patterns and the budding of new opportunities. In my screenshots, I used my avatar's "sit down" reaction, which reflects my ability to **stay grounded** while holding space for clients' trauma. Altogether, my secret cave garden reflects my experience of illuminating the shadow and staying grounded while helping clients tend to their post-traumatic growth.

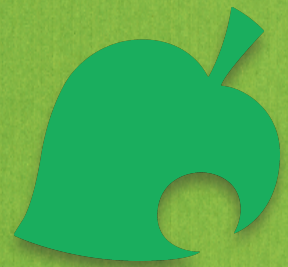




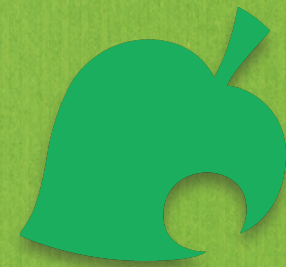
Session 2







Session 2 Reflection



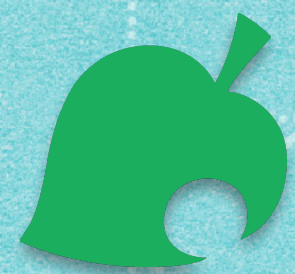
For my second ACNH session, I used furnishing and decorating to create **my personalized art therapy office**. Since I haven't had my own office throughout my internship, **I processed how I would represent my values as a therapist through interior decorating**. Within my office, I incorporated a Zen design theme and represented the most important elements that I want to bring into my art therapy office, which include **regulating and healing energy and safe working spaces for both talk therapy and art therapy**. To achieve this, I chose a soft pastel color palette, an asanoha-patterned wallpaper, regulating objects like the teddy bear, aromatic objects like candles and tea, and touches of nature. Additionally, I dressed my avatar in comfy therapist clothing and used the "listening ears" reaction to demonstrate my commitment to **active listening**. Overall, I intended to use minimal imagery to create a **visibly safe and neutral container for clients**.

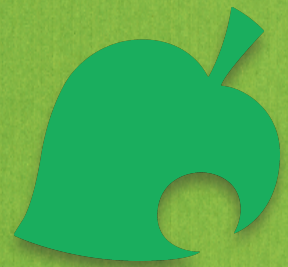




Session 3







Session 3 Reflection



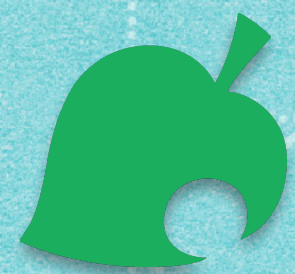
For my third ACNH session, I decided to process **how I could better support one of my client's struggling with Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD).** To achieve this, **I represented this client by furnishing and decorating one of my village resident's homes.** I chose the resident, **Nan**, who reminded me the most of this particular client. Additionally, I was able to maintain my client's confidentiality by using Nan as a representation of my client. While redesigning Nan's house, **I attempted to create a resourced space for helping the client manage their GAD symptoms.** These resources included a fan, humidifier, and ergonomic bed for better sleep; a regulating nature sound effect and teddy bear, aromatic food, a bookcase for psychoeducation, and a big window view of the client's serenity place. Redesigning Nan's house **helped me to identify better approaches and new therapeutic interventions**, such as increasing cultural humility by putting rapport before modality, motivating the client to access mindful flow states such as making art, and helping the client self-regulate using the serenity place exercise, 5 senses technique, and belly breathing. To represent myself building rapport and motivating the client, I made my avatar sit with Nan at the dinner table and use the "flourish" reaction.

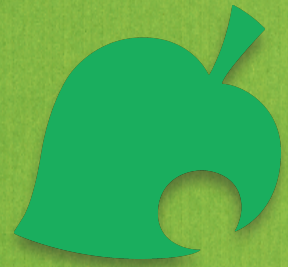




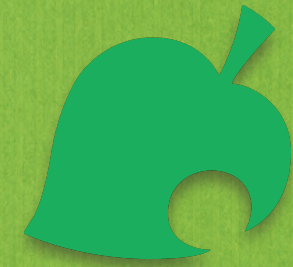
Session 4





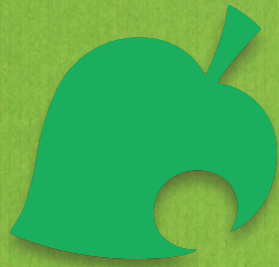


Session 4 Reflection

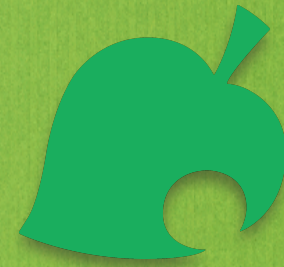


For my fourth and final ACNH session, I decided to process **how I could better support one of my client's struggling with Atypical Anorexia Nervosa (AAN)**. To achieve this, I **represented this client by furnishing and decorating one of my village resident's homes**. I chose the resident, **Ketchup**, who reminded me the most of this particular client. Additionally, I was able to maintain my client's confidentiality by using Ketchup as a representation of my client. While redesigning Ketchup's house, I **attempted to create a resourced space for helping the client manage their AAN**. To represent these resources, I connected a kitchen with an imagined serenity place. Redesigning Ketchup's house **helped me to identify better approaches and new therapeutic interventions**, such as practicing active listening when feeling triggered to stay solution-focused, helping the client develop a healthier relationship with food by reframing cognitive distortions around body shame, and providing psychoeducation about body positivity and sensory processing sensitivity. To represent myself practicing active listening and staying solution-focused, I made my avatar use the "listening ears" and "flourish" reactions.



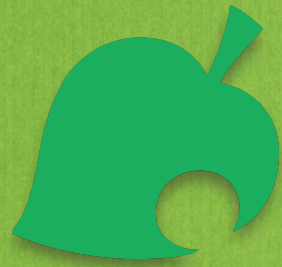


Final Reflection

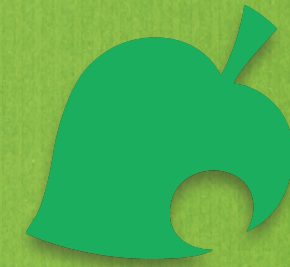


Overall, I found it **very helpful and supportive** to use ACNH as a virtual sand tray to represent, process, and integrate my internship experience. Not only had ACNH been a central part of my **self-care routine**, but playing the game with the **intention** of integrating my internship experience **helped me to represent and process ways that I could improve my therapeutic approaches and interventions with challenging clients**. This combination of self-care and integration **supported me in safely exploring solutions and expanding my window of tolerance as a therapist**. By landscaping, furnishing, and decorating spaces within ACNH, I felt I was **better able to put myself in my clients' shoes and increase self-compassion for my countertransference**. For me, **ACNH surpassed conventional sand tray therapy** in that it allowed me to represent and process my internship experience in an **interactive environment**. For example, creating my secret cave garden in a happenstance rainstorm created an unexpected layer of deeper meaning. Further, being able to interact with the unique personalities of residents in their redecorated homes helped me process my interpersonal relationships with specific clients. These moments of in-game magic are what made my Capstone II project the most fun!





References



- ▶ Animal Crossing. (2025, June 22). In *Wikipedia*. https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Animal_Crossing&oldid=1296791523
- ▶ Landrum, A. (2020, May 28). *Therapeutic gameplay in animal crossing*. Guidancett. <https://www.guidancett.com/blog/therapeutic-gameplay-in-animal-crossing>
- ▶ Remey, L. (2024). Cognitive behavioral play therapy in the sand. *Journal of the World Association of Sand Therapy Professional*, 2(1), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.58997/wjstp.v2i1.72>



Thank You!

