

Finding comfort in the mundane: How life simulation games calm quarantine anxiety

By [Anying Guo](#)

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I accidentally killed the first Tamagotchi I ever got. I didn't care for the digital pet correctly and within two days, it died. The lifeless device was stowed away by my mother in a kitchen drawer, to be forgotten forever. You can only imagine my hesitation when I stumbled across the [My Tamagotchi Forever](#) app, resurrecting painful memories of my failed attempt at parenting.

Then, work from home was extended through another month and my routine fell into a new, unknown rut. I returned to the app store and my finger hovered above the download button until I impulsively tapped it. I would try out motherhood again.

Three days later, my boyfriend and roommates sat me down, quiet, serious and very concerned. "Anying," they said in unison. "You need to stop playing Tamagotchi."

Or they said something along those lines — I was busy; My Tamagotchi toddler was demanding matcha smoothie. Around midnight, my boyfriend poked me and said, half-jokingly, "Tamagotchi is tearing our relationship apart."

My Tamagotchi Forever lives under the larger umbrella of life simulation video games. These games do what they say on the tin. They're often calm and low-stakes, setting simple, readily-achievable goals for players, and mirroring real life in their setting and aesthetic. Since the [coronavirus](#) outbreak, there's been a collective loosening on screen time usage restrictions. Even the World Health Organization is [encouraging more](#) video game play. So for those who have also lost a previous level of basic social interaction in their day-to-day routines, life sims resemble "normalcy" just enough to provide that perfect bit of social imitation. (The sense of accomplishment and dose of serotonin doled out for meeting your in-game goals doesn't hurt either.)

If we can't hug one another, maybe our digital forms could. If we can't stage a wedding, we can make a [virtual one](#).

For law student Chris An, *Animal Crossing* has been the remedy to the lacking social interaction since quarantining started. "I'm a person who derives joy from giving to others and seeing their reactions to things," the 25-year-old says. "So, I designed my island for people to come visit."

On his island, An has hidden inside jokes for his friends; he copied the face of one of his best friends and hid the image in places throughout his island. When someone comes over, they can run along with An and "find all the hidden Julians."

Stardew Valley is another obvious quarantine choice, because the game requires users to build connections with ~~townspeople~~ — culminating in marriage and the starting of a family — providing a real-world sense of purpose and

responsibility. One person told The Post that she feels like she has things more together in Stardew Valley than in real life; the game felt like an active substitute for what she's missing in the real world.

Amelia Covington, a novice gamer and field organizer in North Carolina, has been using The Sims as her outlet, often carving out time after work to sit down and play. "In some ways, it feels a bit funny to be playing a game where I am drawing entertainment from doing the same things I already have to do in my day-to-day life," Covington says, whose partner joins her after work to play a different game (he's a fan of online Magic: the Gathering). She finds the side-by-side game-playing a good way of staying connected — without feeling like she and her partner constantly need to be talking during quarantine.

Covington finds that playing The Sims makes her feel like she is caring for her mental health; it's a kind of escape from stressors that are out of her control. The game, along with the designated time for gaming, has been a welcome reprieve from the pandemic's impact on the world: a surge in national unemployment, lack of access to healthcare, growing death tolls.

"Sometimes, we need to take a break, temporarily put aside our real-life concerns, and dedicate time towards gaming," says Covington.

For Katherine Hurley, a 24-year-old investment analyst who lives alone, video games have become that exact form of escapism. As somebody who thrived on routines pre-quarantine, Animal Crossing's reward system provided her with instant gratification when she followed commands and instructions. Plus, the game became a welcome alternative to her nightly routine of scrolling through coronavirus coverage.

"If I'm listening to a podcast or doing anything media-related, it's all about coronavirus," says Hurley, who has become taken with interior design in Animal Crossing. "And you get these push notifications that are like, 'PEOPLE ARE DYING.' Animal Crossing doesn't know anything about coronavirus. They're chilling."

And though these simulation games are meant to mimic and present certain elements of our lives, they're simultaneously the distraction and relief we often need. An, Covington and Hurley are all in agreement: The games they play during quarantine have been a helpful facet of their coping strategy. They don't seem to be alone: Sales for games like Animal Crossing have exploded in the wake of coronavirus.

I've set boundaries between me and My Tamagotchi Forever — playtime is limited to breakfast and after dinner. Twice a day of planned time is better than anxiously checking on my Tamagotchi's hunger levels every other hour, but I still yearn for the blinding pastel graphics and feel bound by a parental obligation to check in on all of them — you raise one Tamagotchi at a time to adulthood, then pay them visits later on with your new baby Tamagotchi — even during work hours.

While I furiously fiddle with home furnishings and patiently spoon vegetables into my digital pet's mouth, I realize that this tingle of purpose and most of all, joy, is why I keep coming back. Not to sound too much like a boastful mother of five adult Tamagotchis, but no feeling compares to watching my Tamagotchi's happiness level rise as I bathe, feed and play with them. If taking care of an oddball digital pet during quarantine helps me cope with the rapidly disintegrating world, then so be it.

"It's like, am I doing this because I enjoy it, or am I doing it because I'm depressed?" jokes An. "I'm going to have this strong sense-memory of anxiety from this but also of the joy [the games] gave me during this time of quarantine. The

nostalgia is building with each second I play it.

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