

# ***From Role-Playing to Relationship-Watching: Parasocial Relationships in Tomodachi Life: Living the Dream***

**Xiaolei Cai**

*Communication, Beijing Jiaotong University, Beijing, China  
23322001@bjtu.edu.cn*

**Abstract.** Life simulation games have increasingly become important spaces for studying how players form emotional bonds with virtual characters. This study looks at *Tomodachi Life: Living the Dream* as a Mii-based life simulation game that reshapes player engagement from role-playing to what this study calls "relationship-watching". Unlike games centered on direct control of a protagonist, *Tomodachi Life* asks players to create Mii characters, place them in a shared island environment, and observe how their relationships develop through system-generated events. This study is based on the theory of parasocial relationships, the research of avatars and the previous research about life simulation games such as *Sims* and *Animal Crossing*. The research methods are qualitative case studies including game mechanism analysis, interface analysis and theoretical interpretation. It argues that Mii gameplay engenders emotional attachment through three interconnected processes: role projection in character creation, semi-autonomous relationship formation between Miis, and repeated care in everyday island rhythms. The study concludes that the game's parasocial appeal lies less in identifying with a single playable character than in observing, interpreting, and sharing small social events among virtual figures. The concept of relationship-watching offers a useful framework for understanding parasocial experience in interactive entertainment.

**Keywords:** Parasocial relationships, life simulation games, role projection, relationship-watching, *Tomodachi Life*

## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1. Research background and topic**

Released on April 16, 2026, *Tomodachi Life: Living the Dream* is Nintendo's latest life simulation game built around its long-running Mii character system [1]. In the game, players create Mii characters based on themselves, friends, family members, celebrities, fictional figures, or entirely original ideas, and place them on a customizable island. Then the Miis develop preferences, form relationships and generate events through the game system. The player creates the conditions for this small social world, then observes and responds to what happens within it.

This gameplay makes it a useful case for examining how life simulation games reshape the relationship between players and virtual characters. There is an emotional hook to watching the

relationships generated by the system play out, and the strong market performance only adds to the case study value. Nintendo says *Tomodachi Life: Living the Dream* reached 3.8 million units in global cumulative sell-through in two weeks from release, showing a strong audience base [2].

This study argues that it creates a distinctive form of parasocial experience. Miis occupy an ambiguous position between avatar, characters and social stand-in. As McArthur suggests, it invites a connection between avatar creation and self-representation [3]. Miis produce semi-autonomous social events, encouraging players to invest emotionally in the relationships among them.

## 1.2. Research purpose and significance

This study aims to analyze how *Tomodachi Life* shifts from role-playing to relationship-watching, and how this shift complicates parasocial relationships in digital games. Parasocial relationships usually refer to a sense of intimacy or emotional connection with media figures [4]. This notion becomes more complex in digital games because virtual characters can respond to player input and participate in procedural systems. Games like *Undertale* have shown that NPCs can become potent parasocial objects if their design encourages care, attachment, and moral reflection [5].

It expands avatar studies by looking at Miis as social actors in a life simulation system. The main focus of current work on avatars has been on customization, identity exploration and player-avatar similarity [3, 6]. These views open up the possibility of further debate about what happens after creation. This study then relates *Tomodachi Life* to more traditional life simulation games. *The Sims* studies have demonstrated how it makes domesticity, relationships, and everyday routines into systems that can be played [7]. *Animal Crossing* studies further show how virtual life can blur the lines between game and everyday life across time, space, economy, and social interaction [8]. *Tomodachi Life* is a member of this tradition, with more small-scale interpersonal observation.

## 1.3. Research method and structure

This study is qualitative in nature and follows a case study approach. It includes close reading of game mechanics, interface analysis and theoretical discussion. The analysis is based on three aspects: the Mii creation system, the relationship simulation system, and the environmental rhythms of island life. It also references existing research on avatars, parasocial relationships and life simulation games in order to place *Tomodachi Life* within a wider game studies context.

The analysis starts by presenting the theoretical basis of the study discussing parasocial relationships and role projection in digital games. It then discusses how *Tomodachi Life: Living the Dream* generates a kind of social life that becomes available for players to observe and interpret through the use of Mii creation, relationship simulation and daily island routines. On this basis, this article develops the notion of relationship-watching and shows how the game reorients player engagement away from direct role-playing and towards the care, interpretation and sharing of system-generated relationships. The conclusion discusses the limitations of this single-case study and provides directions for future research.

## 2. Theoretical framework: parasocial relationships and role projection

### 2.1. Parasocial relationships in digital entertainment

Parasocial relationships are defined as a lasting feeling of intimacy, familiarity, or emotional connection that media users develop with media figures, and parasocial interactions are the feeling

of interaction that occurs while a person is exposed to media [4]. Over the past few decades, research has moved away from the initial focus on television personalities and expanded to include parasocial relationships with fictional characters, influencers, game characters and other mediatized figures. Giles notes that parasocial experiences are now distributed across multiple media contexts, making it more difficult to define the boundary between social and parasocial experience in interactive media [9]. Digital games are a good example of this move. Players not only meet characters, but also act, choose and constantly participate in ways that may affect the game process. Game characters can respond to players and be included in recurring media routines. Jarzyna also suggests that digital-age parasocial interaction can fill social needs and create a sense of connection when direct socialization is limited [10]. This point helps to place life simulation games within the context of players' everyday mediated companionship, rather than as isolated play sessions.

In *Tomodachi Life: Living the Dream*, parasocial experience takes a relationship-centered form. Miis are typically created, named and interpreted by the player, and may be modelled on the player, real acquaintances, celebrities or fictional characters. But once these Miis are put into the island system, their habits, moods, requests, conflicts and relationships are partly generated by the game. Attachment to the player may thus result from both expected familiarity and system generated behaviour. Players may care about a single Mii, but they may also become invested in a friendship, an argument, a romantic pairing, or a surprisingly fitting interaction between two Miis. Thus, this study utilizes parasocial relationship theory to examine the combination of repeated exposure, character behavior, and player interpretation to create a sense of social presence in Mii-based life simulation. This framework also allows the transition of the study from single-character attachment to relationship-based attachment which is central to the concept of relationship-watching.

NPCs can generate strong parasocial responses when their design encourages care, moral responsibility, and emotional attachment [5]. Dialogue, repeated encounters, gameplay consequences and a character's apparent vulnerability all contribute to forming relationships with NPCs. This suggests that it's the concrete interaction design and player practice in games, rather than character images, that makes for a valuable investigation of parasocial relationships.

## 2.2. Role projection in game character systems

In this study, role projection refers to the process through which players assign aspects of the self, other people, fictional figures, social expectations, or imagined identities to a game character, and then interpret that character's later behavior through the assigned role. It is related to avatar identification, but it places more emphasis on the continuing process after character creation. A projected role becomes meaningful when the character enters a game system, acts within it, and produces outcomes that the player can recognize, explain, or reinterpret.

Avatar studies clarify the design conditions that make role projection possible. McArthur argues that Mii creation is shaped by the Mii Creator's limited but meaningful affordances, while the name "Mii" itself encourages players to read the character as a possible form of self-representation [3]. Self-avatar was defined as a user-controlled digital representation that interacts with the environment and other avatars. Appearance similarity and behavioral similarity are highlighted as key dimensions of avatar identification [11]. This framework explains how Mii characters can sustain projection by virtue of their simplified resemblance rather than visual realism: they are sufficiently recognizable to sustain identity, yet sufficiently abstract to lend themselves to humor, exaggeration, and social play. Poivet's distinction between player-controlled avatars and game-controlled NPCs sharpens the point further [12]. Miis start as personalized avatars, but as their

moods, requests, and relationships are generated by the system, they take on NPC-like qualities. They are hybrids. This allows a coexistence of player projection and system autonomy.

Existing studies of *The Sims* provide an important methodological reference for analyzing role projection in life simulation games. Developed by Maxis and published by Electronic Arts, *The Sims* is a life simulation game in which players control virtual people, build households, manage domestic spaces, and guide everyday activities such as work, friendship, romance, marriage, and family life. Nutt and Railton describe *The Sims* as a game that uses "real life" as a genre [7]. The game relies on players' shared knowledge of domestic life, family structures, work, friendship, romance, and everyday routines. Players draw on this knowledge to create narratives of social life within the constraints of the game system. This framework is useful for the present study because *Tomodachi Life* also depends on players' everyday understanding of personality, friendship, love, jealousy, embarrassment, and routine. When Mii acts in a certain way, players interpret that behavior through familiar social knowledge.

The notion of "gaming paradigm" also implies that life simulation games should be studied in terms of the relations among the game system, gameplay, player identity, and game-related social interaction [13]. This approach is valuable because meaning of play does not emerge from rules alone. And it grows through the way players bring their own identities into the game and interpret what the system produces. This is clarified in *The Sims* through discussion of "dramatic play": dramatic gameplay involves adopting a role, making it personal, performing it, expecting that the game will respond to it [14]. In *Tomodachi Life*, it comes in a lighter and more comedic form. The players create roles for Miis and then they see how the system recognizes, subverts, or unpredictably expands those roles through social events.

### 3. Mii as a life simulation system

#### 3.1. Character creation and player agency

In *Tomodachi Life: Living the Dream*, character creation is the gateway to the life simulation system. The game's Mii editor is highly customizable: players can select basic features like skin tone, hair color, eye color, face shape, hairstyle, facial features, wrinkles, shadows, and makeup-like details, and then further alter many facial parts by resizing, rotating, or changing their shape. The new Face Paint tool also allows players to add stamps or draw directly onto the face of the Mii, giving them the ability to create more specific hairstyles, facial details, non-human characteristics or highly recognizable personal designs. Players create Miis to insert personally meaningful figures into the island system. These figures can carry traces of the player's self-image, memories of real people, fan attachments, or imagined identities. In this sense, Mii creation is less a process of purely visual design than a process of role projection.

This first projection gives the player a real sense of agency. The player decides who inhabits the island, and what social references they bring to the game. But once Mii gets to island life, agency starts to change. The player is still able to feed, dress, comfort and support the Mii, but the character's behavior is increasingly dictated by the simulation system. Its moods, requests, relationships and conflicts are generated by programmed routines and event generation. Thus, the player shifts from direct design to indirect care and observation.

This change makes character creation an entry point. A Mii becomes significant not only when it is designed, but when it encounters other Miis, responds to the environment, and behaves in ways that confirm, extend, or disturb the role assigned by the player.

### 3.2. Relationship simulation and system-generated events

After character creation, the main source of social meaning in *Tomodachi Life* comes from relationship simulation. Miis are placed within a network of friendships, conflicts, romances, and everyday interactions. As the island grows, the player's attention gradually shifts from individual customization to interpersonal development. A Mii is meaningful not just because it looks like someone or carries a projected identity, but because it occupies a position within a changing social network.

This process is explained by studies of life simulation games, and *The Sims* in particular. Nutt and Railton argue that life simulation games translate everyday social relations into playable systems [7]. *Tomodachi Life* can make use of this framework, as players interpret system-generated events through familiar ideas of friendship, love, personality and conflict. The game produces events, players assign their social meaning. This interpretative process also helps to explain the dramatic involvement of these small events. Kline's idea of dramatic play further explains why these events remain engaging [14]. *Tomodachi Life* offers short social scenes, whose importance is defined by the player's expectations. Funny and emotionally engaging moments can come from unexpected combinations, unexpected actions, or actions that fit their role.

These interactions also create parasocial attachment. Individual Miis can have emotional meaning, but players often have emotional attachments to relationships, friendship groups or ongoing storylines. constant social observation of the island, through repeated requests, care routines and social events. But it's not just who the characters are, it's what happens to them over time that draws players in.

### 3.3. Everyday rhythms and environmental interaction systems

The relationship system of *Tomodachi Life* is kept alive through the persistence of daily rhythm. Like many life simulation games, it encourages revisiting rather than progress towards a single goal. The island is a constant social environment, with Miis living there, with moods, needs and relationships. Juul describes open and expressive games as a kind of play that does not direct all players to one fixed goal but allows for different player agendas and styles [15]. This perspective goes some way towards explaining why *Tomodachi Life* frames engagement in terms of observation, interpretation and social experimentation.

This temporal structure links *Tomodachi Life* with other life simulation games. Research on *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* suggests routine activities and synchronized time can blur the boundary between virtual life and everyday life [8]. This rhythm is approached more character-focused in *Tomodachi Life*. Small events such as friendships, conflicts and romances slowly accumulate into a shared social history.

There is also continuity in the spaces of the island. The settings of apartments, public facilities and shops are places where relationships are made visible through the activities of everyday life. These spaces, as well as simple care routines such as feeding, gifting, and decorating, allow players to participate in Mii life without fully controlling it. The ongoing rhythm of relationship-watching comes from repeated but limited intervention.

## 4. From role-playing to relationship-watching

### 4.1. The transformation of player position

In a lot of RPGs, agency is tied to a protagonist. The player takes on the role of a character, makes decisions through it, and perceives the game universe through embodied control. In *Tomodachi Life*, the player creates the island's population, fulfills requests, supplies resources, and watches as Miis interact with one another. Control is shared between creation, care, and interpretation.

This position could be called relationship-watching. It is an active mode of spectatorship whereby the player participates in the conditions of social life without completely determining its outcomes. A friendship, a fight, a romantic couple or even unexpected behavior is meaningful because the player interprets it through projected roles and everyday social expectations. The distance between players and Mii is thus productive. Because Miis are not entirely controlled as playable bodies, their actions may seem somewhat autonomous. The player becomes a guardian and an interpreter of social life generated by the system.

It changes the emotional center of the game. Role-playing often asks, "Who am I in this universe?" Relationship-watching asks, "What's going on between these characters, and why does it matter?" In *Tomodachi Life*, the player's devotion is more to the minute evolutions of a social network than to heroic achievement or story progression.

### 4.2. Parasocial relationship formation in Mii gameplay

The development of parasocial relationships in *Tomodachi Life* is influenced by perceived familiarity, consistent care, and perceived autonomy. Many Miis already have meaning before they act because they look like the player, a friend, a celebrity or a fictional character. This familiarity provides an emotional framework for later events. The player has already attributed a social identity to the character. So even a small interaction can appear funny, appropriate or unexpected.

The more they are looked after the first familiarity becomes a more permanent attachment. Miis want food, presents, comfort, entertainment, introductions, and help with social problems. These are simple actions, but they create a rhythm of attention. This pattern is a hybrid of transitory parasocial interaction and long-term parasocial attachment. A single request can create a short sense of interaction, while repeated visits and relationship events can create a more lasting bond.

This effect is further enhanced by perceived autonomy. When Miis form unlikely relationships, ask strange questions, or behave contrary to the player's assumptions, they begin to seem socially present. Their limited unpredictability stops them from being static products of customization. The study of *Undertale* demonstrates that game characters can become parasocially meaningful when they invite care and emotional response [5]. *Tomodachi Life* creates a lighter version of this attachment through everyday observation. The emotional object may be a single Mii, a pair of Miis, a friendship group, a romantic storyline, or the island's social atmosphere. It is also argued that digital games can support empathy and moral perspective-taking through play [16].

### 4.3. Social sharing and secondary communication

Watching relationships is easy to do outside of the game screen. Events in *Tomodachi Life* are short, readable, and often humorous, which makes them suitable for screenshots, captions, jokes, short videos, and social media posts. Strange romance, unlikely friendship or dramatic conflict. A small

story for others to interpret. The player chooses the event, frames it, and transforms system output into communicative material.

Gee and Hayes describe game analysis as encompassing gameplay, player identity, and social interactions about the game [13]. This perspective is helpful here because the meaning of Mii gameplay often continues in sharing and discussion. Moore's discussion of Mii-related encounters also suggests that Miis may circulate as social signs outside of individual play sessions [17]. They can carry personal identity, fan references, local context and social humour into wider communication.

Secondary communication makes transient phenomena durable and social, reinforcing relationship-watching. A fleeting moment in the heat of play becomes a memory when it's photographed, captioned and retold. Other viewers can laugh, judge, "ship" the characters or relate the situation to their own lives. Thus, private attachment to Mii social life is transformed into a shared media practice. *Tomodachi Life* lets players create small social events, and social platforms give those events a second life as stories.

## 5. Conclusion

This study has suggested that *Tomodachi Life: Living the Dream* changes the player's involvement from role-playing to role-watching. Its Mii system enables the projection of familiar or fantasized identities into a life simulation. System-generated relationships and everyday care routines make these figures into parasocially meaningful social actors. The concept of relationship-watching helps account for the game's attraction being in watching, interpreting and sharing small social events rather than controlling a single protagonist.

Three main limitations of this study are. First, it is qualitative textual and mechanism analysis. Thus, it can't be directly measured how different players actually experience parasocial attachment, role projection or social sharing. Second, the research is confined to a single Nintendo title. While *Tomodachi Life: Living the Dream* does a good job of making a case for the study of Mii-based life simulation, the limitation of a single-case design weakens the study's ability to make broader claims about life simulation games. 3. The game is still fresh. Player practices, fan interpretations, and community reception may continue to evolve and require further observation over time.

Future research can be built on this research by conducting player interviews, diaries of gameplay or social media content analysis. These methods would be allowed to explore how players talk about their Miis, who gets attached to, and how they turn game events into stories to tell. Comparative studies with *The Sims*, *Animal Crossing*, or other avatar-based life simulation games could further clarify how different systems structure agencies, attachment, and quotidian social play. Such work would continue to expand relationship-watching as a notion for understanding parasocial experience in interactive entertainment.

## References

- [1] Nintendo. (2026). *Tomodachi Life™: Living the Dream for Nintendo Switch™*. Nintendo. Retrieved June 16, 2026.
- [2] Nintendo Co., Ltd. (2026, May 8). *Financial results explanatory material: Fiscal year ended March 2026*.
- [3] McArthur, V. (2019). Making Mii: Studying the effects of methodological approaches and gaming contexts on avatar customization. *Behaviour & Information Technology*, 38(3), 230–243.
- [4] Tukachinsky, R., Walter, N., & Saucier, C. J. (2020). Antecedents and effects of parasocial relationships: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Communication*, 70(6), 868–894.
- [5] Elvery, G. (2023). Undertale's loveable monsters: Investigating parasocial relationships with non-player characters. *Games and Culture*, 18(4), 475–497.

- [6] Lolansen, C., Marshall, N. D., Fisher, C. T. L., & Burleigh, T. L. (2025). A decade of avatars: A systematic review of recreational gaming as a mechanism for gender identity exploration and affirmation. *International Journal of Transgender Health*, 1–24.
- [7] Nutt, D., & Raiton, D. (2003). The Sims: Real life as genre. *Information, Communication & Society*, 6(4), 577–592.
- [8] Benti, B. S., & Stadtmann, G. (2022). Borders in motion in the video game industry: An analysis based on Animal Crossing: New Horizons. *Human Behavior and Emerging Technologies*, 2022, 4452900, 7 pages.
- [9] Giles, D. (2023). Defining parasocial relationship experiences. In R. Tukachinsky Forster (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of parasocial experiences* (pp. 33–50). Oxford University Press.
- [10] Jarzyna, C. L. (2021). Parasocial interaction, the COVID-19 quarantine, and digital age media. *Human Arenas*, 4, 413–429.
- [11] Wang, H., Li, B., & Xie, T. (2022). Theory construction of self-avatar in the digital world. *Journal of Management Science*, 35(3), 116–130.
- [12] Poivet, R. (2025). Crafting virtual characters for games: A player-centered approach. In T. Guzsvinecz (Ed.), *From pixels to play: The art and science of video games* (pp. 43–56). IntechOpen.
- [13] Gee, J. P., & Hayes, E. R. (2009). "No quitting without saving after bad events": Gaming paradigms and learning in The Sims. *International Journal of Learning and Media*, 1(3), 49–65.
- [14] Kline, D. (2019). Dramatic play in The Sims. In T. X. Short & T. Adams (Eds.), *Procedural storytelling in game design* (pp. 113–125). CRC Press.
- [15] Juul, J. (2024). Without a goal: On open and expressive games. In B. Atkins & T. Krzywinska (Eds.), *Videogame, player, text*. Manchester University Press.
- [16] Schrier, K., Eskander, S., Beaudoin, G., Fisher, N., Harden, P., Levine, S., Sarnecky, K., Shaenfield, A., & Alvarico, E. (2023). Creating morality through play: Digital games, moral perspective-taking, and empathy. In H. Kapoor & J. C. Kaufman (Eds.), *Creativity and morality* (pp. 221–254). Academic Press.
- [17] Moore, K. (2018). Sort Mii out: Learning to value portable gaming encounters through Nintendo's StreetPass software. *Games and Culture*, 13(6), 587–604.