

Animal Crossing New Horizons: The [Virtual] American Dream

During the peak of shelter-in-place restrictions in the United States, the weight of daily stresses felt ten times heavier while quarantined at home. Because of this, many people turned to finding an escape in the virtual island paradise of Animal Crossing: New Horizons. Designed for the Nintendo Switch, New Horizons is the latest iteration of the social simulation game Animal Crossing that was first released in 2001 (Khan). Japanese creator Katsuya Eguchi first conceived the concept for Animal Crossing after experiencing the loneliness of moving to a new city. For the Japanese audience, it simulated a “difficult” social environment, but the creators surrounded it with relaxing activities such as bug-catching and fruit picking (Khan). They wanted to create a game that was centered around friends, family, and community, making it the perfect game to play during lockdown (Borden). Just four months after its release in March 2020, Animal Crossing: New Horizons had sold over 22 million copies worldwide (McFerran). But why has this game captured the hearts of so many people? In New Horizons, players fly solo in transforming an island into a bustling society fully equipped with shops, homes, gardens, and more. They create a virtual, idyllic world where they can be the best versions of themselves. And that is why so many people have turned to playing New Horizons during this season of COVID-19. It's a daily getaway from reality that helps players escape the struggles of the pandemic; it feigns the white-picket-fence American Dream that has become ever so elusive, while also pointing out what this dream lacks.

One of the biggest allures to the American dream is that hard work leads to life contentment and success. But in today's rat race, this seems to be impossible. After one achievement, people automatically move on to trying to obtain the next big thing in their lives, leading to a never-ending cycle of dissatisfaction. However, New Horizons gives people the

chance to take a break from this competitive life, and just slow down to create a world in whatever way they want. Players have absolute control over everything that happens to their island: they can hack away at the cliffs, terraform lakes and mountains, and plant flowers wherever they want. In other words, they get to do whatever they want to their island, whenever they want, and it doesn't matter how much progress players make each day. There's no final bosses, no enemies, no high scores, and most importantly, there's no pressure. Perhaps the game even points out the flaws of the American Dream: that this so-called dream should allow each person to advance at their own rate rather than being toxically achievement-based. However, some people question the purpose of playing a game that lacks a main objective. In an interview conducted by Ian Bogost from *The Atlantic*, interviewee Frank Lantz claims that "it is the most boring, long-winded, repetitive, condescending, infantile bullshit we've ever seen" (Bogost). Though I understand that nothing can be universally likable, I believe that the person making this claim is missing the point of the game. The beauty of New Horizons is that it is a stark contrast to the go-getter lifestyle in the real-world that can quickly lead to burnout. It is a breath of fresh air to have a place to escape from responsibilities, even if that place is a virtual island on a 4 by 9 inch screen.

While players escape to sculpting their landscapes and making customizations to their island, they don't need to worry about money as they would in real life. As an article from *The Atlantic* puts it, "In the midst of a pandemic, it's delightful to imagine doing whatever you like without worrying about making a living" (Bogost). The financial freedom that New Horizons provides is an aspect of the American Dream that is becoming harder to achieve, and it is especially important during COVID because unemployment was at an all-time low and there was a great strain on the economy. Even before the pandemic, it was becoming harder and harder to

achieve larger life milestones, such as owning property, while being self-sustaining. Although it is possible to rack up debt to Tom Nook, the raccoon landlord of the game, the payments are interest-free, and if they are made a little late, it is not the end of the world. Some people may argue that the game is teaching capitalist values, but it is quite simple for players to rack up bells, the game's currency. For instance, each player in New Horizons has a money rock, which they can hit continuously and bells will pour out. Additionally, money literally grows on trees in this game: players can plant a money tree that blooms bells. New Horizons even has its own version of stocks that come in the form of turnips. Every week, players get one chance to buy however many turnips they want, and they need to sell the turnips by the end of the week, ideally at a higher price. These stocks are low-risk until like stocks in real life because even if the turnip prices aren't ideal at your island, you can simply teleport to a friend's island if they have better turnip prices. All of this goes to show that players can achieve all aspects of the American Dream, such as owning property, decorating a dream living space, and opening small businesses, without a financial strain. Money, however, is only one of the worries that the pandemic has brought upon the country.

The American Dream implies that when someone comes to America, there will be an automatically welcoming and supportive community that is readily available. However, the pandemic has created the feeling of loneliness that comes with quarantining at home. Many people used Animal Crossing as a way to combat the feeling of isolation. Even connecting with the CPU animals in the game makes players feel like they're meeting real people because all of the animals have their own personalities: Apple the hamster is preppy and fun, Beau the deer is lazy and easygoing, and so on. Of course, people use this game to make and maintain connections with real people too. By simply teleporting to another person's island, players can

exchange gifts, frolic through flower fields together, or even play a virtual game of musical chairs (Jones). Some players even held virtual graduations and wedding ceremonies on their New Horizons island. Although these celebrations won't hold any legal weight, they can provide a way for people to cherish these special moments in their lives. It's no surprise then that New Horizons has been so successful; it is able to simulate the connection of personal interactions and translate them to real-life emotions.

To take this one step further, capitalist America condones stepping on other people to get ahead, highlighting another flaw of the American Dream that can be improved. Simon Parkin from *The New Yorker* argues that New Horizons “offers the opportunity to find purpose in mundane acts of kindness and reciprocity,” and I have to agree with this (Parkin). When tragic events happen in the world, it's easy to lose faith in humanity. But seeing random acts of kindness from strangers that just want you to succeed can make all the difference. For example, a 13-year-old boy from Worcestershire set up a subreddit that offers “the Animal Crossing equivalent of a free lunch” (Tait). Players use this platform to offer services such as pulling weeds, or gifting materials to people in need, and they do all of this for free. This is important in today's world because, amongst all of the planet's tribulations, people are willing to take time out of their days to help with tedious tasks without charging fees. This virtual animal crossing community could show young players that people can be selfless, and help older players remember the good in the world.

The parallels between the gameplay in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* and aspects of the American Dream are apparent to players, and has therefore made the game so successful in the United States. It is the perfect place to escape from the fast-paced world, and have full control over building a utopian island. And even though debt may rack up while making island

customizations, and turnip prices may not always be the best, it is easy enough to earn back the money and pay off the tally. Through all of this, players can not only easily make connections with the pudgy and loveable animal characters, but also millions of other real-world players that are using the game to escape the feeling of isolation. But all of these idyllic ideas emphasize the dreariness of our country, showing that globalization is important to improving the quality of life in different countries. By playing the Japanese game, American players are shown a life they have the potential to achieve, and they can find faith in humanity again. It opened American eyes to the wonders of financial freedom with money growing on trees and not worrying about their next achievement with the environment they have complete control over. A single game was able to make a huge impact on the lives of people around the world showing the power of globalization. This leads me to the question: what kind of impact could an even larger platform for sharing ideals make on the world?

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