

Animal Crossing gave me structure in a shapeless year

I broke ground on my *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* island, Honkland, just three days before the UK's Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced that the country was going into lockdown. I'd pitched up my tent, and I was just about to deliver a pile of materials to Timmy Nook to help him build the island's general store.

I was enjoying my first *Animal Crossing*, but I hadn't quite hit that point of "getting it" just yet. The menus were slow to navigate, and I wasn't really sure what I was working toward. Mining the most material out of each of my island rocks involved a convoluted process of digging two holes and then hitting them repeatedly over the course of several seconds. Picking fruit involved first shaking a tree and then picking up each piece individually. It felt deliberately inefficient.

A game best played in short bursts

"From this evening I must give the British people a very simple instruction: you must stay at home," the prime minister said during his address on March 23rd. "You should not be meeting friends. If your friends ask you to meet, you should say 'No.' You should not be meeting family members who do not live in your home. You should not be going shopping except for essentials like food and medicine – and you should do this as little as you can."

Inside the flat, we tried to make the best of the situation while we effectively had to press pause on our lives. Evenings out were replaced with marathon sessions of *Ticket to Ride* and *Carcassonne*. We'd watch films while simultaneously keeping a laptop open, running a Zoom call with friends we hadn't seen in months. We bought elastic resistance bands and slung

gymnastic rings over an old pull-up bar for group workouts on the weekends. And every evening, I booted up *Animal Crossing* to see what awaited me on Honkland.

The game's chore-filled early hours were exactly what I needed.

Image: Nintendo

Animal Crossing is a game best played in short bursts because the series has a unique approach to the passage of time. In most games, the time revolves around the player. It starts passing when the game starts and stops. Almost everything happens on your terms. But *Animal Crossing* takes place in real time, so if it's the middle of the night on March 23rd in the real world, then it's going to be the middle of the night on March 23rd in the game. (It's possible to change your console's built-in clock to "time travel," but for me, it ruins the fun.)

'Animal Crossing' forced me to keep track of the day of the week

The approach makes it difficult to play indefinitely each day. Your island's rocks eventually stop spitting out materials when you try to mine them, and you run out of fruit to pick from your trees. You can continue to do things like hunt down bugs and fish, but inevitably, you'll come up against a task that needs to be done tomorrow. It's a bold design that often forces you to wait, while other games often tempt you into playing just one extra hour. Ordinarily, I would have found the mechanic a little frustrating, but in a lockdown situation where time felt like it was standing still for weeks, it was exactly what I needed. I couldn't lose track of time playing it for hours; instead, I had to keep a grip on what day of the week it was.

I got to work on my island. I pruned its weeds, moved more villagers in, and started collecting critters to populate my

island's museum. I sold fruit, earned bells (read: money), and spent them on building bridges and ramps to make my island's rough terrain easier to navigate. It became a little hobby, something to check in with once a day, a little project that built up bit by bit over time.

I have considered myself incredibly lucky over the course of the past 12 months. I've thankfully been able to continue working from home, logging on to a computer at the end of my bed each day to chat with colleagues over Slack and conduct interviews over Zoom. Doing my small bit to help this year involved little more than staying at home as much as was physically possible. *Animal Crossing* made doing that a little bit more bearable.

Multiplayer helped me feel connected.

Image: Nintendo

It was *Animal Crossing's* multiplayer elements that I most needed in those first few months of lockdown. It felt like the whole world was playing the game together, as Twitter and Reddit filled up with screenshots of people's islands as well as requests to collaborate. At work, we set up a dedicated Slack channel to share our island's turnip prices. Ordinarily, you can earn a small profit by buying and selling turnips on your own island, but you can make millions if you work as a team with other players, converging on another player's island when it's offering an especially good price for turnips on any given day.

Time felt like it stood still for weeks on end this year

It's strange how, in a year when so much history was continuously happening, time felt like it stood still for weeks on end. Five days of working in my bedroom, two days of relaxing in my living room. Rinse, repeat. People joke about time passing weirdly on the internet, when events that feel

like they happened years ago actually took place just last week. This year, that weird sense of internet time seeped out into the real world. Without leaving my flat for anything more than a quick shop, it was hard to feel present in global events, no matter how important and life-changing they were for so many.

As the months went on and the internet's interest in the game waned, a steady stream of new features and in-game events gave me a reason to keep visiting Honkland. Nintendo added hedgerows and diving and new characters like Redd, a huckster who occasionally visits your island with "artwork" to sell. Celebrations like Halloween were marked with in-game events that relied on playing the game on the right day to see their content. Between big events and new feature additions, every month saw the arrival of new bugs and fish, a gentle trickle of collectibles to find before they migrated away.

It was important to have something to do, but this year especially, it was important to me to feel like time was actually passing. Like many other people, I didn't go on a summer holiday this year, and I didn't attend any Halloween parties. I didn't have a morning cycling commute to enjoy the country's summer or to see its trees gradually turn an autumnal orange. Instead, checking in on Honkland each month gave me those small reminders that the seasons were still changing.

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