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Create Your Own Escape

“Now building a house means taking out a new loan in the amount of 98,000 bells...” says Tom Nook, Animal crossings’ very own raccoon (who will take your kneecaps if you don't pay back your loan --a common joke in the Animal Crossing community used to describe one of the game’s most iconic characters). Animal Crossing was first released on the Nintendo 64 in Japan in 2001, then made its way to the North American market on Gamecube the following year. Over a span of two decades, the game has enjoyed many reboots and spinoffs, migrating from console to console (cnbc.com; achonaonline.com). Its rise to “hit” status, however, occurred earlier this year with the release of a new edition: Animal Crossing: New Horizons, also known as Nintendos’ fastest-selling game (Jr.).



(https://animalcrossing.fandom.com/wiki/Tom_Nook)

According to cultural analyst Derek Thompson in his 2018 book on cultural production, *Hit Makers*, a “hit” can be considered as “the few products and ideas that achieve extraordinary popularity and commercial success in pop culture and media” (Thompson 6). Animal Crossing: New Horizons certainly meets these criteria, establishing itself as a popular cultural phenomenon of 2020’s global pandemic. Despite its role in providing escapism at a much

needed time, I believe this product will outlast pandemic conditions, maintaining its stature as a popular gaming product for years to come.

The main objective of the game is to create your own personalized town/village to live in. While also trying to get a 5-star approval rating from your villagers who also live in the town with you as well. A couple of common goals that run through most of the games are to pay off your debt to Tom Nook for your house, unlock all the stores available in that game and get a high enough rating on your island to have the other iconic character K.K. Slider play a concert in your town. Making Animal Crossing in other words a laid-back life simulator. (Webster) This game is different though compared to other games like The Sims and Tomodachi Life is because it gives you direct control of your character. Whereas in the other games you only have limited control of what your character does. Another difference being in Animal Crossing you move to an island with humanoid-like animals populating the town when in the other two games it's humans who populate the game. One more difference between these games is that both Tomodachi Life and Sims characters age and can be seen aging whereas in Animal Crossing there are birthday days for the character but they do not physically change like in the other games. (Littlechild and Chris Littlechild) Within the Animal Crossing franchise, all have similar gameplay. This actually helped Animal Crossing become a hit because as said in this article about the main points in hitmakers "Most consumers are both *neophilic* – curious to discover new things – and deeply *neophobic* – afraid of anything that's too new. The best hit makers are gifted at creating moments of meaning by marrying new and old. So a hit is a new wine aged in old oak or a stranger who somehow feels like a friend – a familiar surprise." (Thompson) What you will discover is how similar all the games have but with new small but impactful changes. Also according to Derek Thompson, "Video games, too, are often puzzles whose interactivity offer the Wondrous click of recognition or Jolt of accomplishment"

(*Hit Makers* 58). This happens frequently in *Animal Crossing* because of the player's reaction to creating and making their own goals. A large aspect of the gameplay is about setting independent goals and accomplishing them on one's own time and terms and still be rewarded. It is giving the players a sense of accomplishment within the game. The *Animal Crossing* games don't have a defined end to them but are left open, giving the players the deciding factor to reach the end and/or accomplish everything that the game has to offer from having a fully finished museum, every item available in the game or having no debts to Tom Nook the end is decided by the user.

Since the initial release in 2001, there has been a steady increase in users. The games continually seem to sell more copies than the previous version and become more popular with every release. (Boom) With its updates came broader console compatibility, which also helped it gain popularity. However, it wasn't only the game's previous releases that helped the latest edition become such an incredible hit. As Thompson points out, organic virality is largely a myth, and it usually takes a broadcasting boost from a highly visible entity to push content to many users simultaneously. In the case of *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, something that helped the franchise was an immense, well-funded publicity boost prior to its release.



(<https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/doomguy-and-isabelle>)

When it comes to publicity, a common term or phrase is that “all publicity is good publicity.” The makers of Animal Crossing demonstrate this well: long before Animal Crossing New Horizons hit the market, user-generated memes preceded it. The memes with Animal Crossings range from previous games making jokes about certain characters, such as Tom Nook, to teaser trailers of the new game with hints at all the possibilities available in this new version. Perhaps more influential than any planned marketing, though, was the synchronicity of New Horizons release with that of Doom Eternal. Both games were set to be released on National Happiness Day: March 20th. Even Thompson acknowledges that sometimes, we simply have to appreciate the uncertainty of cultural markets because, he says resolutely, “culture is chaos” (160). While it was little more than quaint opportunism that led the producers of New Horizons and Doom to set their release day for March 20th, fans of both camps read far more into the chance occurrence, speculating on cross-collaboration between the games. Both fandoms exploded with this idea that there could be a crossover within these games between the main character in Doom and the character Isabel in Animal Crossing, basically becoming friends and bonding over

different aspects of both their games. The internet went wild with memes and fanart exploring the relationship between the two characters. This type of fan-driven flurry generated much attention towards the impending release. That even the producers of Animal Crossing were amazed by the unifying narratives of two opposing games "I think because there is a common denominator of this type of communication happening between Doom and Animal Crossing fans, and also the fact that Animal Crossing is a communication game, we're very thankful and very thrilled to see all this," Kyogoku said. "We're so excited at the same time to see how the two [fandoms] are coming together to celebrate this day."(Miranda Sanchez, IGN) speaks on the passion and involvement of each of their respective user bases. Creating this community where they both helped each other out and raised the awareness of the games and helped excite them up for their release (Miranda Sanchez, *IGN*).

Yet another significant element of the game's allure is the sense of nostalgia it elicits in players. When it comes to nostalgia, Animal Crossing uses many different aspects of their previous games and bringing them into their new game to create. One could use the example of a character bringing the same fan-favorite characters into the game making it a mission for players to try and get their favorites to move to their town. In the end product, we get the newest versions of the game with new and creative features and the best qualities from the last four games, giving us this nostalgic feel while playing the newest version. An example is that there are still original characters in the game called villagers that live in your town. You could go from one game, and then in the next release of the game, you could have the same villager in your town, giving you nostalgia for the previous game. The Producers created this by having almost the same storyline between all the games but with slight differences. An example being in Animal Crossing New Leaf, you're the mayor of a town, and your main goal is to create and upgrade your city to your liking. This storyline is almost the same as Animal Crossing New

Horizons. Still, the difference is instead of being the mayor of a town, you're the town representative, and you have just traveled to a new island where you get to create a village from scratch all by yourself in your style. It might seem Repetitive, but one way the producers were able to keep it different was by adding new things in the game, from new characters to having more freedom, being able to landscape your town, and not having just one flat surface preset for you. You can create waterfalls in forests and whole cities in the new game, which wasn't 100% available in the last few games. As Thompson said, " To grab their attention, writers often frame original ideas as a fresh combination of two familiar successes using a high-concept pitch like it's Romeo and Juliet on a sinking ship or its Toy Story with talking animals." Pg.61. Animal Crossing Perfectly used this to the best of their abilities taking the best parts of all their games and making them into one. Nostalgia wasn't the only thing to help Animal Crossing. One of the biggest things was actually pandemic.

In Derek Thompson's book, he notes that "A good headline they said is not overly familiar but rather familiar enough a welcome surprise expressed in the vernacular of its intended audience a promise to advance understanding in a broadly acceptable subject" (Thompson 67). Looking at Animal Crossing, it wasn't overly familiar. Still, it gave everyone the familiarity to control their character's life and actions when the pandemic prevented most people from controlling their lives. When it came out, Animal Crossing gave us a sense of escapism, the thing everyone kind of wanted but couldn't get, which was honestly going outside without fear, also; in March of 2020, the world went into quarantine and still is in quarantine today. No matter what, our world isn't the same. There are rules and regulations and curfews and, on top of that, an disease. Not only hurting us but the entire world. During a time like this, people just wanted a place to escape to where they didn't have to worry about standing too close to someone or having the proper masks to be safe. One main factor about Animal

Crossing was it gave people something to do tomorrow or today. "The open concept of the game has proved to be its defining feature, as the escapism aspect of the game hooks in players" (Sáez), something people needed during a time of worry and fear. This isn't a game that you can just play all in one day because Animal Crossing runs off real-world time. Tasks and other challenges in the game take multiple days to complete, and since there is no real end to Animal Crossing, it can always be changed and expanded; you could create a whole Syfy futuristic City and then the next day redo it and create a 14th-century town. One great feature was that you could invite other people to your Island in Animal Crossing. Becoming a way to communicate and interact with your friends, you haven't seen yet still feel like you're close by having your character interact and trade different items. Go swimming together, go hunting for fossils, play hide, and seek even have graduation (Pelican Magazine). Animal Crossing is one of the few escapes during a time of fear, helping people relax, and giving them a feeling of being safe when you don't know what's happening tomorrow.

Animal Crossing's potential as a long-lasting hit, many could say, is at its peak point of popularity due to being the best-selling game in its franchise and selling so many copies in such little time. (Boom) However, I think Animal Crossing will still sustain itself as a hit; yes, it has a too high standard to diminish now. Nevertheless, from what I've seen personally, the producers have done a fantastic job making something even better than before. They've done it over five times now, and every single time it keeps coming out better. No, I never played the original 2001 Animal Crossing because, at that time, I had barely been born. Yet here I am, a massive fan of the newest game of Animal Crossing. I remember my mom telling me how she played Animal Crossing as a kid. When it comes to a test of time, I believe Animal Crossing has passed it. There are not many games that you can say that they are more popular than when the original came out over 19 years ago. I do not doubt that the next Animal Crossing will be even better

than the one out right now. Who knows, in the next game, we might get voice chat or have islands that you can collaborate with your friends on where both your friends and you can create an island together through the internet. Who knows, maybe even in the next game, we might be able to negotiate with Tom nook and his prices on our houses. The possibilities are endless, and from what I know, the creators are pretty open to wanting to know what the fans wish to see; they haven't let us down before, so what's to say they won't blow this game out of the water with the next.

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- Littlechild, Chris, and Chris Littlechild (873 Articles Published) Chris is a freelance video game journalist and entertainment writer from a small town in England. While he's an ardent fan of v. "5 Things Animal Crossing Does Better Than The Sims 4 (& 5 That Sims

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This article was published by CNBC. It's about animal crossing and its impact that the game had on the console with sales and why it became so popular. This focused more on people interested in buying the game and a switch to see if the game was worth buying. The purpose of this was to tell people how popular this game got in such little time. There is no real bias in this article as it is mostly just information on the game and switches and doesn't use many personal opinions. This article was published June 2 2020 and nothing has really changed since then that makes this article more or less relevant since it has come out. The cover range of this book is about the spike in sales of the switch since Nintendo has released animal crossing. This was relevant to my topic because it gave me information and statistics about animal crossing to back up what I was saying

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Derek Thompson is an American journalist. He is a staff writer at The Atlantic, where he writes about economics, technology, and the media. Also, he hosts the podcast *Crazy/Genius* about technology, science, and culture. *Hit Makers* is his first full-length book. *Hit Makers* was published by Penguin, one of the largest publishing houses in the United States. The information in this book is about how certain things in society become cultural hits. This is aimed at individuals who want to understand more how cultural hits are made. Thompson uses a lot of personal examples to make his point in the text. No, I don't think he uses any bias in his books. He does use a lot of personal examples as well as statistics to back him up so he is not just going off his own opinion. *Hit Makers* was originally published in 2017. There was a republication in 2018 though but the book is still relevant, yes people's ideas of what's popular have changed the main theme is still the same meaning it has aged well and is still relevant. Thompson covers a range of theories and timelines in his book. This book is relevant to my paper because it helped me understand what makes something a cultural hit and what aspects help that thing react to those heights of popularity.

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