



How My Depression Ruined ‘Animal Crossing: New Horizons’

When I save, quit, and reload, I’m in control.

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This is [Controller](#), a column by Chris Karnadi on looking at the world and its discontents through the lens of video games.

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I wasted no time starting *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*. Waiting for the game for months, I felt an anticipation only heightened as the world went into lockdown. I was hoping for a virtual sanctuary to share with friends, but when I finally set up my island, I came face to face with my first villager, a gorilla wearing a pink swim cap and sunglasses named Rocket.

Classed as one of the ‘superhero’ villagers available in the game, Rocket kept on yelling at me about the importance of exercise. As a depressed and lonely human, I didn’t want to be anywhere near a superhero. As much as I enjoyed the opening stages of figuring out the game, planting trees and flowers, shopping for clothes, and fishing, I needed to get this gorilla off my island.

Animal Crossing: New Horizons sets you on an island with the series’ recurring raccoon landlord, Tom Nook. You buy an “island getaway” from Nook Inc. and start your new island life with a tent, two villagers, and little else. Found on the shores of the island, in presents, or through progressing the story,

recipes are required to craft furniture, from bookshelves to levitating moons, for your house or to gift to your quirky animal friends. Soon the deserted island feels like a home.

Released just as the world sheltered-in-place due to Covid-19, *Animal Crossing* became the game many turned to during social isolation—with over thirteen million copies sold in the first six weeks of its release. Intended to be played in daily, manageable chunks of progress, the game focuses on design and customization, alongside a social aspect of building an island community and visiting other friends' islands online. The game encourages slow play. A major building like a clothing shop is built over two days, upgrading your house with another room takes a day, bridges are also completed overnight after their cost is fully paid. But the timeline is up to you.

That the game operates in real time is a key aspect to a game like *Animal Crossing*. But some, including myself, opt to change the console's clock to manipulate the game's mechanics, what players call time travel. To speed up progress, players will move the game's clock days, sometimes years, forward. Some fans frown on the practice as fundamentally ignoring one of the principles of the game—that you play in real time and experience the seasons and days in tandem with your life.

Instead of using time-travel to move forward, I was using it to repeat events over and over until I got the villagers I wanted, leaving myself stuck in time loops.

At the advent of the pandemic, I had already been depressed for six months. I was already 'self-isolating,' having not seen anyone regularly for half of a year except my long-distance partner because I didn't have the energy or desire. I worked my office job, came home, immediately played video games along with dinner and didn't stop until I went to bed. I told myself that I would find a way out of the hole, but months passed without any reprieve. Friends texted, unsure if I had moved away because they hadn't heard from me.

At some point in this six-month stretch, I was diagnosed with major depressive disorder by a psychiatric resident who was rather casual in handing me what felt like a life's sentence. But of course, she was just connecting the dots of the symptoms I shared. Lack of motivation to write or work beyond the bare necessities, feelings of isolation, and a constant slow boil of anxiety underlying every moment. Symptoms which, after disappearing for a brief moment at the beginning of the pandemic when I was figuring out my new normal, have resurged in the past few months.

Time, at its best, is full of potential. It's a gift to live. But when I'm depressed, time undergoes alchemy. Instead of becoming a home for new memories and experiences, it condenses into a metallic block, a burden too heavy to manage. In these long stretches of lethargy in my cycles of depression, time moves too slowly to endure and too quickly to regain control of my life.

Sometimes, I want time to speed up because I know that my depression is a cycle; I long for it to pass. And on other days, I want time to slow down because I want to feel the days again instead of having them rush through my hands. More writing, more reading to finally get to, more places to pitch, more jobs to apply to. I need time.

But as the passage of time simply accumulates both in this spell of depression and the pandemic, I haven't just been depressed for a season, but the whole last year. I want time to move more quickly. And so I play video games because there, time moves more quickly. Virtual worlds are easy to enjoy and return to, often unlike the real world. But I've often felt guilty in the escape they offer.

I've spent over 300 hours in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*. I'm not sure why gaming systems track the hours. Maybe it's supposed to be an achievement. But for me, it's a rude reality check. An accusation about the amount of time that I have spent in a virtual world that is lost time for accomplishing my real world goals. Most of that time was spent having not very much fun at all. I've been grinding, looking for villagers using time travel, spending more time adjusting the game's clock than actually playing the game.

Villagers are perhaps the most cherished aspect of the *Animal Crossing* series. Up to ten of the 397 unique animals with eight different personality types can join you on your island. They randomly show up, and you can invite them to live with you. Players forge deep attachments with the characters. Crowd favorites include an albino rabbit based off of Chinese folklore about the moon named Ruby, a sky blue unicorn and gay icon named Julian, and a gray cat with heterochromia named Raymond.

I had my own list of ten dream villagers, including a pharaoh cat named Ankha with blue and yellow stripes, but had difficulty finding her when I left it up to chance. As gamers began to uncover the hidden random number generation (RNG) through which the game chooses which villager shows up in the game's random encounters, they developed a time-consuming but reliable method to look for specific villagers.

Guest villagers will regularly show up on your island's campsite, and the game will prioritize personality types that aren't already on your island. Once a villager shows up in your campsite, they won't show up again until all members of that personality type have been encountered. Using the "campsite method" as it became known to *Animal Crossing* players, I looked for Ankha.

First, I got rid of Ankha's personality type on my island. This took time because villagers can't be deleted off your island; they must ask to leave of their own volition. Then I began the process of skipping time until a new villager showed up on my island's campsite. When the first camper showed up, I had approximately a 1/90 chance of it being Ankha; not great odds, but better than 1/397. Slowly, I whittled through encounters as I skipped through weeks and weeks of in-game time, until over seventy real hours later, I finally found her.

Instead of actually playing the game, I spent those hours opening and closing the game, rerolling encounters and shifting the date on my console's clock. It wasn't fun. It was laborious and taxing. But it was an obsession that wouldn't stop until I found Ankha, no matter how long or mind-numbing the process was.

I've spent a lot of time discovering and manipulating RNG in the different games that I've played. I'll catch the same legendary Pokémon over and over until I get one with ideal stats. I'll kill the same robot over and over in *Zelda* until I earn specific rewards. There's a lot of saving and reloading until I get the results I want. It's rarely fun. It takes a lot of time.

What's life but bad RNG? When I considered applying for PhD programs, I was told that acceptance was not based on qualification, but luck. It's like playing blackjack; sometimes you just get screwed with a seven and a nine, and sometimes you get an ace and a queen. Spend enough time playing and eventually you'll win. But more often than not, the deck is stacked. I'm not even sure if all the face cards are in my deck, if I'll ever beat the house. What happens when more time won't get you better results?

My depression is often precipitated by circumstances. I haven't been able to find a job outside of a religion that I've long set aside in my personal life. Pitches are met with silence, and job applications rarely turn into interviews. I know progress in my career takes hard work and persistence, but it often feels like nothing is moving.

And even when nothing is moving forward in my life, I know that time still moves on. This world won't wait for me, even if I need the time to pick myself up again.

When I save, quit, and reload, I'm in control. I won't stop until I get what I want. Even if it takes a hundred hours, I know that I can accomplish my goals in a video game.

For me, the best part of *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* is being kind to friends and strangers. I leave surprise gifts for my friends on their islands. Visiting someone in Taiwan who was newer to the game than I was, I dropped thirty gold nuggets in front of their house, then ran away to hide a rare star-themed flooring behind a cliff for them to discover later.

Most of my friends don't play the game in the same way that I do, and it's fun to give good gifts to other people. I have more currency and rare resources than I'll ever use, and it brings joy to offer freely out of that excess when I feel so stretched thin in other parts of my life.

Even though the way I play video games isn't fun, I tend to turn to video games because they are among the few things that I still actually enjoy while depressed. Even when I spend hours on mind-numbing tasks and manipulating RNG, games are still games. When so little holds my interest, a game like *Persona 5* meets me more than halfway with an engaging story that jolts my atrophied feelings. When it feels difficult to move, I can fly through the beautifully crafted world of *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* from my couch. But I've come to discover, especially when I've played *Animal Crossing*: Though games can start as an escape, I can't fully run away.

I'm shocked at those who have built better habits this year. I look on with awe and jealousy at all the superheroes who have written daily, made professional breakthroughs, or won awards and fellowships. On my end, I've spent most of my first four months of the pandemic on my island, looking for friends.

But I couldn't embrace the relaxing nature of *Animal Crossing*. Faced with a non-goal oriented game, I made goals and then accomplished them. I might be able to escape some of the events of the world in video games, but there's no escape from myself or my neuroses because I'm still the one playing.

Video games can be a source of joy, but I can't use them as a crutch to escape my depression, because when I lean on them, they break.