

Do You Spin Your Umbrella?

Animal Crossing (GC)

2004 GUEST GAMER:

A shop called Toonmania sold Naruto headbands. They were later banned from Ventura County's public schools due to fears of gang-related activity. They were treated the same way oversized, colored socks were in indicating which suburban middle-schoolers were Crips or Bloods. My friends and I were around nine years old when Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger passed a law disallowing anyone under seventeen from buying M-rated games. It was a big deal to us. We were pissed.

Ratting around Pacific View Mall with our weekly collections of pocket change was an all-day pilgrimage of walking or riding buses. We went without supervision of any kind aside from mall security. We sometimes caused trouble. We used to shoplift Inuyasha keychains before our brains were developed enough to feel bad about it.

I'm sorry.

There used to be more cool import stores like Toonmania. We also had an EB Games (before it was GameStop) back when the mall was a bigger deal. We'd always stop by the latter, no matter what our plans were, to pore over used game bins.

Three times in my life: I was one dollar short of buying Morrowind: Game of the Year Edition and settled for the base version. (No enemy health bars. No expansion pack bundle.) We used to look at covers, read blurbs. We imagined what the games could be like. We enjoyed the separation from desire and the glow of imagination.

Some of my closest friends belonged to Mormon families with high IQs: Ron of the Slazinger family and Drew of the Mansens. Some of them are in MENSA now. These families were close friends, but opposites in many ways:

The Mansens didn't have TV or internet access until the 2010s. They were better off that way. They had a controlled, strong sense of community and shared interests that'd make the average discord-or-forum admin tear out their hair plugs in a jealous rage. They never swore. Their mother, Judith, held things together as a Target employee after her husband separated due differences of faith. I wish I could say more on the matter, but I was never allowed over on Sundays, when he visited. I only saw him once. He was white and wore a collared shirt and glasses.

The Slazingers had a mother-father duo, but the wife always cheated. The house was a dump of gummy carpets and hoarding useless plastic. They had TV. They even had porn on VHS. Ron once timed the playback just right, then called for his older sister. She walked into a giant cock springing out from jeans against a backdrop of a trailer-park. She cried.

Ron's mom once kicked a hamster ball so hard the hamster died inside it.

Both these families had older sisters who loved Harvest Moon and Animal Crossing.

As a kid, I avoided home as much as possible aside from eating and shitting and playing games and rough-housing with siblings. I didn't think of it that way back then. I just liked being with friends as much as possible. I rented games when home

but played multiplayer ones with Ron and Drew and their families. Them, and the occasional white-shirted visitors of the city's Mormon ward.

There was a Mormon named Diamond who introduced me to Final Fantasy. I liked him until he said he hated Kirby's Air Ride. Ron and Will once beat him and Daniel Slazinger (the eldest brother) in a match of Halo 2. The resulting spat ended with throwing chairs.

I never saw Diamond again after that.

I didn't know you could tilt in Super Smash Bros. games until years down the line. I was fine with taking turns on older RPGs with friends or handing around a GBA for Advanced Wars (one of the greatest games around. Period).

Sim games were always too slow to get into, logistically speaking. I could barely beat `./hack` Infection on a five day rental. I could only watch others play big investment games like Harvest Moon. Harvest Moon had time limits where you're killed by a nature goddess for not marrying fast enough. You had to balance time and resources, with animals to be bred and fed, plants to be watered, people to be doted on, etc.. The Sims: Bustin' Out was also a neighborhood favorite. I played more of it because it had local multiplayer, but our pre-teen minds eventually tired of trapping the Grim Reaper in a labyrinth of ovens and burning cribs.

Animal Crossing was different. I was occasionally saved a character slot and allowed to play for an hour at most, every now and again. It was kind of the Mansens and Slazingers to allow me such graces. Unlike most games, both families played Animal Crossing daily for long stretches of time, even if only for fifteen-minute checkups and weed pulling, or ensuring Ron or

Will or I didn't tag their gardens with raunchy floor patterns. They had several memory cards with official Animal Crossing stickers and names etched in sharpie. They pirated fruit across borders (one of the reasons they allowed us kiddies to play). They ran the turnip stock markets and messed with the game's hidden feng shui system to maximize their HRA scores (think of a Homeowner's Association forcibly rating your house by style). They even played with e-readers, the ones recently reverse-engineered to emulate with printable slips.

I couldn't fully experience the game's breadth until finding it on sale at EB Games in the summer of 2004. I bought it for twenty-three dollars. It came with a memory card. Its case clacked against a bag of jawbreakers. The AC hummed through the tall, gray-blue corridors of Pacific View Mall.

When home, my siblings and I gathered around the CRT TV in my room. It was covered in sarcasm-laden Happy Bunny stickers from Taco Bell. They were pocked with pins because they covered the speakers. I popped AnCross into the Gamecube. The screen radiated with a warmth that complimented the game's soft guitar plucks. I rarely left my door open when gaming. It risked Mom telling me to stop wasting time as she passed the hallway.

She once snapped at me for proclaiming my first Metal Gear Solid 2 clear time (nine hours at age eleven). She went out of her way to tell me, twenty years later, that she actually didn't.

Animal Crossing evoked a different atmosphere, at least on the outsider: one of sharing and warmth.

Mom flipped between tolerating games or not. Grandma, who bought our family a Gamecube in the first place, learned to hate them. She used to sneak me books about the downsides of

technology, including the famous iBrain: Surviving the Technical Alteration of the Human Mind.

This is important because Animal Crossing was a tangible, easily witnessed argument against games as isolative, desensitization devices. It was a wordless rebuke to those car rides to church where I once used the word 'decapitate' in a sentence.

"Oh, did you get that from a video game?" Grandma asked sharply.

I learned it from James Clavell's Shogun.

Animal Crossing seemed gentle. It seemed cute. Each hour and season and holiday tweaked its instrumentals as a doting mother would adjust a child's shirt collar. It convinced my siblings and I to take turns, to share without complaint or risk of genital-kicking ambushes in the hallways. Sure, there were trophies for fishing and dedications given to those who donated the most fossils to the museum, but we didn't think of those long-term goals. They were multiple loading screens away; too many to plot out on a town map's columns and rows. The game was like this by design.

Unlike later entries in the Animal Crossing series, we didn't manage mayoral duties, geoscaping, bridge-building, or trafficking villagers as twee, cross-dressed slaves to people on Tumblr for virtual currency. If your map had an inconveniently placed cliff, you found the only ramp down, which required crossing the town's only bridge over a river that stretched into the ocean. You had to deal with that. Suck it, chump.

Do you remember when I said the game 'seemed' cute? This is why. It had inalienable rules. You had to respect it. It had the

best, most dynamic villagers, ones where you extrapolated their secret relationships (real or imagined). They were jerks. They made poor decisions in diet and fashion and gossip. Even then, you lived in a small town, and in small towns word traveled fast.

The villagers' pettiness and dissonance and even reprieves held sway over you and your standing.

My favorite villager as a kid was Lobo, a wolf. His low-timbered mumble-voice and tragi-comical personality - a cranky, aloof loner who secretly pined for companionship - conjured in my mind the backstory of a quiet, retired veteran. One day, my mailbox's flagpole pinged and flickered. I got a letter from him. He moved out. I used to visit him every day, multiple times, even until it annoyed him. I pecked away at the controller's virtual keyboard to write him letters with the best spelling and punctuation I could muster.

Animal Crossing had a system for checking these things. You had to respect letter writing just as you would town navigation. The mechanics it displayed were complex enough to seem simple.

"Nobody is nice to me. Except for you. Sometimes." Lobo said this just before moving.

It caught me off-guard.

After he moved, I thought this meant nothing I did mattered.

As an adult writing this out, I realized this does matter. This is 'the matter': separation is inevitable. Lobo's letter detailed that it was time to move on. The town of Slopolis had both apples and oranges (thanks to memory card swapping with the Slazingers). During the return trip just before Lobo's

departure, a rolling blackout cut me off. I restarted the console after the lights came back on. I was 'robbed'. My avatar's eyes were gouged and his mouth hung agape.

I lost my entire inventory to bolster the prosperity of my family's town, but Lobo had other concerns. Perhaps he had concrete reasons for leaving, perhaps not. Maybe he knew I wanted him around. Maybe he didn't think about it.

Maybe he knew absence made the heart grow fonder, or that I'd grow into someone who'd get over it.

Sometimes, people left and you got the privilege of a good-bye and his best wishes. Sometimes, their meth-slinging mothers drove them to lives of begging, multiple drug addictions, gifting someone a sack of coffee only to hide it out of spite because his girlfriend didn't share weed that day, falling into cycles of lying, spurning those who helped him, and being thrown out of friends' homes and jobs until everyone hated him. C'est la vie, Will. You always wandered between the memory cards of thirty-something year old bar hipsters and Portland, Oregon (where the homeless are given a free ride to an in-state relative).

2022:

Grandma died in 2022. Two years before that, she suffered a stroke that rendered her aphasic, meaning she couldn't speak coherently. She understood what others said to her but couldn't respond. She used to be a sharp socialite and a mean bridge player. She was also a teacher, which only compounded her frustrations.

When I returned from college, I was lucky enough to find work online and live from home. I dedicated time to taking care of her and Grandpa after my siblings and mother moved half a nation away to Minnesota, where housing was cheaper and jobs were plentiful. Grandma was a small, arthritic Swede who I walked everywhere, guiding her by hand. She'd frequently give up on her vocabulary and writing exercises because they involved the same sorts of flash cards and dotted lines she used in teaching elementary school students. I couldn't blame her.

Her walker jingled with iced vodka mixers even when she wasn't supposed to drink.

I was less forgiving about that.

Grandpa and I never admitted aloud that she wouldn't get better. I'd like to think we knew all one could do was spend time with her, help her in the garden, take her on errands, and keep her happy.

A week before her passing, she suffered a second stroke. We sent her a block away to Clinic: a fancy clinic to be drip-fed until she went easy. I wouldn't recommend the place. They kept feeding her solid food despite our instructions. Mom called them up. She knew their lingo, having worked as an oncological nurse, managerial nurse, and a hospice insurance coder for over twenty years.

Exacerbated, she gave instructions to a nurse over the phone, restating the minutiae of the fluids needed, their dilutions, and not to feed Grandma solid food, because it'd just roll down her face.

"Uh. Can you come and do it?" the nurse replied.

Mom flew from Minnesota to the hellzone known as LAX, then took a shuttle to Ventura to see her mother's passing. My brother and sister joined as well. Without Grandma guiding conversations, it felt like meeting Grandpa for the first time. Everyone stayed at his place for that last week.

One evening, Mom went out to drink with friends. My siblings and I shared a fold-out bed and air mattress in the living room. By four-am, she sobbed hoarsely for what felt like hours in the guest room beside us. I stared into the support beams of the ceiling. I turned to my brother and sister. Their eyes were also open. We shared exhausted glances. We stared back at the ceiling.

Grandpa and I visited Grandma daily. She often cried and tried escaping her gurney, even when we begged her not to. I contemplated throwing a dementia patient through the wall when another slip of Clinic's nurses allowed her to stumble into our room and shatter the glass frame of a decorative photo with several limp, but resolute punches.

The hospice room had a window overlooking a terrace, which had thin, winding sidewalks and an ever-lush plastic lawn like a children's playmat. There were rubberized, simulated fire hydrants and a fake bus stop. This was because the infirm noticed them as familiar, valuable places, and also because they wanted to leave. Where would they go? I don't know. They didn't know either.

The day before Grandma passed, a patient stood under the faux bus stop's awning for an hour until a nurse came to corral him. He mumbled something about Indianapolis.

"Chiba is east of Tokyo and quite a distance from Kyoto, and when I moved there I left my family and friends behind. I realised that being close to them - being able to spend time with them, talk to them, play with them - was such a great, important thing. I wondered for a long time if there would be a way to recreate that feeling, and that was the impetus behind the original Animal Crossing."

- Katsuya Eguchi (Creator of AC). Edge Magazine.

After the funeral and my siblings' return home, we yearned to play Animal Crossing simultaneously, as if by hivemind. We ran it on an emulator with a hand-drawn texture upscaling patch. A fair amount of the textures weren't done, and still resembled fuzzy crayon drawings across low-poly paper doll models, but we didn't care.

We made our own villages, played separately, and shared screenshots. We eventually learned how to back up virtual memory cards and swap them over group-chat for cross-village action and fruit-based ecoterrorism.

We recalled being kids again, and how we used the game to see the world as a place to be involved in. We offered to help neighbors pull weeds for free. We got fat, fresh lemons as a reward and planted the seeds. None of them grew save for one bush that bears fruit to this very day. We learned to do this not because we were boxed away in sixty-plus student classrooms with post-Columbine security gates and an earth science teacher - who was later fired for having porn on his classroom computer - told us to.

We did it because a network of friends and their families were willing to share a relaxed life-sim with us, which connected our lives beyond simple hellos before retreating into our plywood-and-stucco castles.

We learned to live and share because we derived joy from it, which resided in the same joy-grouping as kicking Animal Crossing's in-game soccer balls until they soared off-screen and into a river.

You couldn't get the ball back, but if you wanted to, you could follow its bobbing mass downriver to see it swallowed by the ocean.

Time passed. Friends grew and separated. Villagers moved to your sister's town. Towns were demolished from memory cards to make room for Phantasy Star Online files.

"Welcome to Animal Crossing, the life-game that's happening every minute of every day, whether you're playing or not."

- Live Action Animal Crossing Commercial #2. 2002.

June 25, 2024. PURGATORY OF 'anusvil':

I booted up my old Gamecube copy of Animal Crossing on a Wii stuffed with flash drives and other modded appendages. I made sure to boot the game normally and not over a homebrew app, or else it'd shred the disk. Animal Crossing is a Gamecube game ported from the Nintendo 64. Aside from some higher-scaled emoticons, it made no illusions about this.

Booting Animal Crossing on a Wii-emulated Gamecube over a relatively modern Roku TV transformed the texture-work into smudged blobs.

"What took you so long?"

I was greeted by a Rhino named Tank. He asked if I wanted to enter the realm of 'anusvil' in Memory Card Slot B. I considered demolishing the town and starting anew out of instinct, but relented.

I checked the player list. There was only one. His name was 'faggot'. I thought this was one of Will's machinations, but remembered buying this memory card used from Pastime Legends, downtown. I was confused for a moment, but laughed when I realized this was a 'transitory town': one made and barely played either due to loveless utility (making a town only to harvest resources for other towns), or the owner realizing it wasn't their kind of game. It lacked shotguns and gore physics, after all.

This was surely the naming conventions of the latter.

I made a new character. Tank told me he recognized my face. The intro sequence was something I experienced so often it was a blur of tedium, despite my attempt to make the best of things.

Sometimes that happens: you half-beat a game several times over the years, resolve to beat it this time, then start up a new file only to suffer the repetition of an opening scene or tutorial.

I stepped into a town with more weeds than grass. Tom Nook bloviated as he greeted me, talking around the matter of selling me a house and how I must run a single day of part-time work for him.

Every acre I walked, I resolved to pick weeds. This was my first time peering into an old world. How old was it? Nook's final tutorial task was to write an ad for him on a bulletin board. Unlike letters, the poster's name isn't listed. You could write anything on the bulletin that sat in the center of the players' cluster of homes. Anyone who passed by and bothered to read it was subjected to your mental ejaculate.

Animal Crossing did this intentionally. This was the quaint equivalent of bathroom graffiti, but with no janitor to spray it off with bleach.

Bulletin board posts last forever.

I decided to play into 'anusvil's archeology. I accessed the bulletin board and scrolled back to the first post, which was guaranteeably written on the first day of this town's formation. And while the player's name isn't listed, the date always is.

"inb4 Tom Nook is gay" - 2013

I parsed the rest of the posts. They were writ by villagers advertising a fishing tourney and a fireworks festival:

"I totally missed the festival thanks to work. It's not like people show up anyhow." - 2018.

The worst part of the Tom Nook tutorial was when you're given a 'break' to greet everyone in town. This was before you got a map, so you could only check where villagers lived at the police station and train station.

One of the reasons I started new towns when making new files was because there were a minimum number of villagers to

meet precisely for this task. Even now, I forgot two villagers between bouts of running across town and plucking weeds.

I met Mortimer, the turtle and town mayor. He asked which family member I respected most. I chose 'grandpa' because it was the advantageous answer. Mortimer was an old man who projected onto such an answer, and he'd give me presents on an unremembered date if I answered this one question correctly. You are only asked this once. I chose my answer by instinct despite not knowing if I'd play long enough to see it bear fruit. It's Animal Crossing.

Hit with a free hand, so they say.

I met Tank. He didn't remember my face. Tank was a liar. The only other villagers worth mentioning were Paolo the elephant and Bob the cat. Bob had a grumpy, sleepy expression, but was still in good spirits. I don't know why I mentioned him aside from his charm. He had a face for adverts, that's for sure.

"Invite more people to move here. Get your friends, your sister, even your parents. We need more girls around here!" Bob said as I milked his dialogue.

Half the villagers in this town migrated from my sister's town: 'derplin'. One of them was Oxford, a not-as-cool Lobo-archetype who humble-bragged about traveling from town to town, giving both advice and insult.

"I got a suitcase full of memories and a belly full of bile," Oxford said.

Paolo was entirely unremarkable until he did something both unimaginably good and bad: he asked me to play 'left and right' with him. I never played this game, but was jolly after finally

finishing Nook's tutorial and selling a fat stack of fish and furniture. I chose right. He forced me to pay almost all my newly earned bells for a royal wallpaper. This matched the royal rug I was given earlier in exchange for doing chores. I had yet to join the HRA (you're forced to join it after a day). If you're a decoration nut, this was a heavenly rarity nailed within the first hour of play.

I'm not a decoration nut. My house consisted of hand-me-downs from doing chores for other villagers, just like my real house. I may never talk to Paolo again.

I wrote all of this in a daily planner that came with every player's house. It sat on a small, wooden box the size of an egg crate. For the longest time I forgot you could write diary entries. The controller-input keyboard didn't offer numbers, so I wrote out 'three-hundred and thirty-seven' longhand to report the number of weeds I plucked today.

You could choose whether you wanted other players to read your diary or not. I chose to leave myself as an open book, in case someone, somewhen, stops by.

June 26, 2024:

A new villager, a chicken named Ava, asked why I wore a stupid horned-hat. I loved the horned hats. I don't blame the Animal Crossing series for expanding fashion options for hats, accessories, eyewear, etc..., but I prefer the uniform characterization of players being 'weird creatures', almost like the villagers themselves, who were just animals with shirts on.

Ava gave me the choice to play aloof or divulge on the hat ordeal. I chose the latter. She flailed and backed off, claiming she didn't want to know, that it would've ruined the fun.

Mint the squirrel wanted to start a climbing club. When I expressed interest, she also backed off. She said it was just a joke.

Nook forced me to join the HRA. I was asked to join for the sake of politeness and as a jolt to my player-diodes. I chose 'no'. He blustered until I said 'yes'. I eventually relented. I had to.

2001:

The first time I rang the doorbell to Ron's house, his mom answered naked. She was four-hundred pounds. It wasn't sexy. It was impossible to look away. It was a litmus test I unfortunately passed. The Slazingers practically had no rules and became our Pleasure Island as kids. It was a place where we went to become jackasses, and we went there very often.

2013:

The caveat with Pleasure Island was that lawlessness beget lawlessness. The Slazinger children did their missions, were paired, and moved to Utah, all save for Ron, who was ever the black sheep.

This left Ron's mom free to 'adopt' homeless crackheads for rent money. Once, I beat a pier-sleeper twice my age at Gears of War 2. He threw a glass bottle at me. I ducked at the last moment, so the

bottle exploded against a wall instead of my face. Shrapnel-glitter rained over Ron's bed, where many of us huddled. It had no sheet. It had stains from where babies were born.

I noticed an aspect of Animal Crossing's 'bitchiness by design' while parsing Nook's shop for the game's basic tools: fishing rods, wood axes, bug nets, and shovels. Especially with Nook's Cranny - the lowest level of Nook's store - the selection was limited to one sale a day.

Example 1: a full town of four players, all taking turns, could lobby over who gets what tools or flowers or furniture that day. Even without meta-gaming, each home had a kiosk of four slots where you could sell, give-away, or 'display only' items.

This meant you could buy out the shovels and upsell them.

If you were alone and first with the game that day, you could buy out shovels every day, upsell them on your display, then bury all the old ones like a psychotic demon. No one else could get these shovels until they already bought one, from you.

A kid at daycare did exactly this for a month. He always got on the game an hour early, before anyone'd show up. He drove everyone crazy until a girl bit his ear open.

Example 2: If you have the ease of being an only child or a lonely adult, even solo-play had a shopping limit: there was only one medicine bottle per-day. Medicine is used to cure bee stings. If you shake trees, money, fruit, and even rare items could fall out. A beehive could also fall out.

Three beehives spawned randomly in town per-day. They were the closest thing to an enemy in the game. Unless you're a master bug-catcher in an optimal environment or positioned right next to a house to flee to, you will be stung.

When stung, all the villagers will bully you. They won't let you do chores or milk dialogue until either a day passed or you took medicine.

I later realized I was also wrong about this.

I reluctantly talked to Paolo after dedicating to him a letter on why I definitely wasn't mad he took all my money. I claimed his left-right game reflected a skilled sorcery, but that it only indulged his lesser desires of stealing my money.

He claimed I was a good writer. He showed me another letter from 'ultracats', a screen name my sister always used. I then realized the nature of Slot A's 'derpton': it was another transitory town helmed by my sister, one she only used briefly.

The letter simply said "hi". Paolo complemented its intelligence.

I plucked one-hundred and seventy-three weeds.

2006 ON TRIAL:

The Mansen family never swore. Will and I gave Drew gaff for this constantly. I knew when to back off because I cared about others' feelings and ribbing/gaffing is a measured game. Others didn't, but I never knew who wrote "Tom Nook is a dick." on their town's bulletin board. I don't even know if the Mansens resolved it. They were as tight-lipped about this slip of their virtual town's sanctity as

Minnesotans were about Stearns County Syndrome. It was a dark taboo they wrestled with on their own.

I completely forgot about this fiasco until Ron reminded me.

The Mansens didn't let Will over for two months around that time.

June 27, 2024:

It was a calm day. I gathered a few tools. It was summer. There were plenty of bugs around. I caught several drone beetles and a couple horned beetles. Bug catching was tricky. It stopped you from bolting across town at full-speed, adding another layer of respect you needed for your small, 5-by-5 acre slices of 'anusvil'. Like all major activities in Animal Crossing, it required both patience and a fast reaction time (to varying degrees).

Bug catching relied mainly on sound. A cicada's call swelled. It led you to a tree where its unriggered, cutely rotating model stood. With a net out, hold the A-button to tip-toe toward it, cocked and ready to swing. Nudge the control stick gently. Gently! Even while tip-toeing your steps are accounted for. Taking too long, stomping too fast, or bumping a tree spells doom for your catching prospects.

If you take too long to adjust your angle of attack, the bug will flee too. Maybe this is proximity. Maybe I took too heavy and clumsy of a step. Only real gamers adjust for angles. There is no camera centering in Animal Crossing. You must estimate angles and distance.

You need the spatial acuity that flourished in that sliver of time when Super Mario 64 was the norm. You had to double-jump diagonally onto that moving climbing rope or die. No! Not die. You fell down, climbed back up, then tried it again. This was arguably worse than death. There were no checkpoints. You acquainted yourself with 3D architecture just as much as the programmers did making it. You slammed your chubby vector of movement against walls, where momentum broke and he sidled against a fortress of grating bricks: a being of true presence.

You cannot adjust the camera and only press up on a control stick all the time.

I nudged a tree too hard while contemplating all this. A fat, never-before-seen horned beetle buzzed off.

It's possible to grind in Animal Crossing. Some gamers are achievers by nature. Some do it by default when framing oneself as a townie was too taxing or undoable with the repetitive archetypes of villagers; some learning and regurgitating each other's catchphrases. Some saying the exact same greetings.

Especially when playing alone, it's hard to see anything past the numbers and catalogues of the debts you 'need' to pay, or the bugs and fossils and fish and paintings you 'need' to collect and donate to the museum, or sell for more cash. What can you risk selling for money? How often do repeat amber fossils spring about? Quite often, sometimes.

Run. Fish. Bug. Shake. Never talk to anyone. Animal Crossing is a slow game to complete, if you're playing it 'honestly'.

Hank the Rooster moved in from 'derpton'. I traded him a drone beetle for a pear. If you played without a second memory card or a friend with the game, this was a bone thrown to you. There's a chance a villager you hadn't offered help wanted to try one: a rare fruit. They want to devour it for nothing but satiation.

You can eat fruit in Animal Crossing. It serves no purpose. You equip a fruit to yourself and make it disappear if you're bored or feel the need for your hydrocephalic, horned avatar to seem more real. They need sustenance. You need sustenance.

I buried the pear in hopes that it'd grow into a pear tree, so I could milk it as a regular cash source.

A second memory card can be a peasant's dream. Another town to visit is a big chance for a new fruit to pillage.

I saw Bob again, that sleepy, slobbish, jolly cat. He greeted me: "You know ol' faggot on Acre B, right. He sent me a letter. Yeah, pthhpth."

"To Bob, we should SMASH." The letter read.

"That faggot writes really smart notes, pthhpth. I'm impressed," Bob said.

I presented a fossil of a trilobite to Blathers, the owl purveyor of the local museum. He wasn't qualified to identify fossils in this first game, so you had to mail a letter to the 'Museum' with said fossil as a gift, then wait for it to be sent back, pull the gift manually from the letter into your inventory, then unwrap it.

Blathers whinged when you gave him bugs, despite being an owl. He didn't whinge when I gave him the trilobite. He instead described it as a dominating force of the Paleozoic Era. As usual, he cut himself off, but for once did so during an interesting explanation. He claimed his beak runs.

I wrote a haiku to Bob to offload a shirt as a gift.

I plucked one-hundred and fifty-eight weeds and cleared half my first house debt in a single day.

2008 SUNBLEACHED:

I was fifteen years old when I walked with Will around the usual grid of suburbia. We carried bags of two-liter Mountain Dews, the special flavors often recycled for the World of Warcraft, Call of Duty, and Halo deals.

"The European Starling came to America because some Frenchman wanted to live in the same country with all the birds mentioned in Shakespeare," Will said.

"Reminds me of introducing rabbits to Australia," I said.

"This is worse. Euro Starlings weren't introduced to solve a problem. They came for aesthetics."

"Starlings are so bad they smash eggs of hunting birds, then shit out so many of their own they overrun nests completely."

"That's crazy."

"Angela told me. She's doing Ornithology."

"She's with that Moorpark program?"

"Yeah."

"That's cool."

"She had to smash over sixty eggs once because a population box they built for local hawks was stuffed with Starling eggs."

We went back and forth. We talked about Eucalyptus being introduced to California to drain marshlands. Their desert habitat shaped them to suck down any water within a two-mile radius. However, most didn't know it'd take a century for them to really take root, which led to dried-out wastes years after the original buyers were skeletons.

Will mentioned a trucker uncle he knew in Vegas. He delivered fully-grown palm trees of over a hundred feet to be transplanted in front of casinos and as equidistant pillars along freeways. He said these palms came from nurseries, took ages to grow, and cost over ten grand to move and transplant.

I mused about how we used architecture, even through ecology, to become gods of our surroundings. I don't remember exactly what I said or how I said it. Will somehow recalled it years later after asking for a lighter.

Our reverie was interrupted by a slight bump to the shoulder.

A man in a black coat skittered past us. He was larger and nearly double our age. He punched me in the

shoulder for seemingly no reason as he passed on the sidewalk. He sneered at us from under a pair of woman's sports glasses. They still had a price sticker on the lens. His neck craned maliciously, as if anticipating a response.

We didn't give it to him. We said nothing. He said nothing. He twisted around manila cubes of housing and disappeared.

Together, we could've beaten him up, or stalked him loudly until the police got involved. This was far before local-community social media sites like Nextdoor or ubiquitous camera-phones.

He sneered at us like a stunted child getting away with a petty act. That's exactly what he did. That's what I remembered.

Will and I weren't angry. Any anger we had was overridden by something. It wasn't pity, but something else.

A block later, we passed a neighborhood watch sign. The stranger depicted in the 'no' symbol was sunbleached into nothing. His silhouette was gone, leaving a pink 'no'.

June 28, 2024:

It's July 4th according to my console's internal clock. The HRA said my house was too small for a good grade.

Bullshit.

I was stung while shaking trees and must now rectify you aren't doomed to being an outcast by the villagers for that day. My flawed childmind magnified that issue. It turned out the villagers bully you on first greetings, but relent so you may talk to them as usual.

This was a welcome correction because Nooks Cranny didn't sell medicine yet.

I bought an axe to clear roughage. This was your only means of terraforming your town and codifying walkways. It took three swings of an axe to fell a tree. If items or fruit or money was hidden in a tree, it dropped graciously for you, and isn't crushed by the crashing mass, which fades into nothing. You are left with a stump afterwards, which I always cleared with the pry of a shovel. This leaves a hole you could fill up or plant something else. The latter is a nice touch. Some areas aren't good for planting trees, but a previous tree marks a sure spot for a rare fruit to spring and grow anew.

The axe is unlike any other tool in Animal Crossing. It has a limited number of swings before breaking. As you fell trees, its inventory icon and in-game model fray. The axe's curved blade becomes a pile of unsightly bumps, then breaks.

Sadly, you can't be maimed by the shrapnel of a breaking axe. It'd be cool if you had a scar that kept one eye closed. It'd be cooler if my newly maimed eye was opposite to my swollen shut bee-stung eye, and the screen went dark, or my controls inverted to present the challenge of blindness. This didn't happen, of course, but it'd be cool.

On the beach of 'anusvil' I found Gulliver, a sailor seagull, washed ashore. He thanked me for waking him and shared a gift from a foreign place. I forgot what it was. I gave it

away soon after. Gulliver claimed he traveled to many lands, but was as airheaded as anyone else.

2014 TRAVELOGUES WON'T MAKE MONKEYS INTO MEN:

During summer, the college I attended in Sierra Nevada opened their dorms as a hotel. I couldn't blame them. The dorms were good. Each room had a toilet and shower and AC. They also hired me as an on-call room maid in exchange for living in its nearly empty halls and helping clear out the vomit-and-peanut shell laden desk drawers of the Bay Area rich kid student body, most of whom fucked off entirely and left halls full of free stuff.

I got a copy of Artdink's Tail of the Sun and a pair of Jordans for free. My trusted roomie and close friend, Caden, had the privilege of getting most of the mainline Sony platformers for his PS2: Ratchet and Clank 2, Jak and Daxter, Jak 2, and Sly Cooper.

My partner came to live with us for three months. We cooked meals over a hot plate. It was nice.

We, the student live-in maids, were kept separate from the renters and visiting students, who took 'business classes' so relaxed they wrote presentations on poster boards with colored markers from atop beds and laps like gurgling toddlers.

I also worked as a Front Desk Librarian again because the Head Librarian, Betts Markle, a saint, asked me to.

From this position, I frequently snuck large quantities of cookies, apples, and coffee for

student-maids from the transitory student classes. They were treated better than we were on-season. These snacks were spread across fancily clothed tables in front of every classroom.

I later met some of these students in the dining hall. They were rich kids and fops of the most derogatory order.

"Such a delightful time in Cambodia. I rented out one of their kids. It was a delight," someone said.

"What?" I asked. I snapped to attention and put down a copy of Michael McClure's GORF: a play about a giant flying cock in Thebes, Ancient Greece.

"I rented one of their prettyboys," the fop said. His face was round, his skin almond and creaseless. He had lush eyelashes like a geisha, or Dante from the movie Clerks.

You couldn't stop staring at them.

The fop took delight in my surprise, but frowned when I asked: "Are you telling me you fucked a kid? Don't tell me that shit."

"No! I took him to McDonalds and told him about my life."

The cynic in me wanted to say that was worse than fucking him. I could only imagine a streetwalker being picked up only for a cheap date and a one-way talk therapy session.

The fop bragged about what he ate. He recited dishes I knew nothing of.

"You know where I'd find some good lobster around here?" he asked.

We resided in Incline Village: a 2.8 mile stretch along the beautiful Lake Tahoe Basin. Incline Village was a land of rich families who wanted nothing to do with you from their lake houses nestled under Jeffrey pines. Everywhere else was a hotel, a bar, and a cheap restaurant.

"Rookies Sports Bar and Grill," I lied. It was a burger-chicken-beer joint with twenty-four televisions that were on until ten p.m. It was manned by energetic former halfway house types. The rest of them ran the 7/11, and did an excellent job scaring college kids and slobs out of driving drunk.

"May your sails stay full and your socks stay dry." - Gulliver.

Mint is an asshole. She plays at being cute but swings inconsiderate toward the end of our conversations. She isn't a queen bee or rude grrrl-type. She's just... odd. She asked if I'd fetch her watch back from Paolo.

My 'yes' option for replying to this task was: "I guess..."

I paid off Nook's debt. He asked if I wanted a bigger house. I said yes. I never said 'no' before even when I considered myself a game-decision risk taker, a button pusher.

"It's animal nature," Nook said. "With more furniture comes more happiness."

Say what you will, but he was right. I arranged a TV, a cherub statue, and a lawn chair right next to each other. The screen and cherub faced the viewer. It was a regular modern art exhibition. I had so much stuff I wanted to mess around with. I had to get a bigger house. What would I do besides getting a bigger house to fit bigger dressers and store more things I'm not actively displaying?

Nothing. That's what.

Despite Nook's simpering salesman schtick, he knew he was right. I had garbage to show off, even if it was rarely seen by myself and never seen by any other human at all, especially not 'faggot'.

I plucked eleven weeds today.

June 29, 2024. Temporal Destroyer.

It's raining in-game, complimenting the cool, coastal breeze of this summer day in California. In your inventory, you can check for decals, which could manifest as clothes, tiles on the ground, and umbrellas.

I summoned a ducky umbrella and ran around. The constant shower drummed across its stretched fabric. This is atmosphere in a video game. This is how it should be done. I heard the same drumming from other villagers, all pattering miserably with umbrellas as well. Their umbrellas were cooler than mine. Oxford had one with a wooden pattern and several arrows lodged in it, like a Sengoku-Era war film. Mitzi had an intricate doily-patterned one, with transparent spots.

I donated some live catches to the museum again. Something about Blathers' lines seemed stilted. "I must insist we leave the beast in its container." felt too long and flavorless, even for someone with the name Blathers. In later games, or at least City Folk, he'd say, "Leave the beast caged!"

The latter line sounded better, given it's a terse exclamation that shatters the owl's professional veneer.

Oxford bullied me for my ugly clothes. I wore a looping red rose pattern with a white background. It was easily my favorite pattern, and this smug buffalo hick called my tastes into question. He then offered to give me some of his cloth-slop. My anger lifted when he was thorough about it:

He'd offer a name of the pattern, wait for my reply, then request another one if I declined. I accepted the 'ugly shirt'. It was an odd, muddy looking pile of brown crags, which petered out like a mudslide onto beach sand. I took it off immediately and went back to my rose garb.

Temptation called. Yesterday, I missed the Fireworks Festival. Someone complained about it on the bulletin board again with the same post as the one I used to track the founding date of 'anusvil'.

Time is limited. Animal Crossing works off a twenty-four hour clock, just like real life. In this case, my usual play time around 6 p.m. was translated to noon. On average, I played from noon-to-2 p.m. in-game. The Fireworks Festival ran from 7-9 p.m. This meant one thing:

I'd have to bend for the sake of a full experience, but it's a slippery slope into date-skipping, holiday hopping

lawlessness. I reset the game, then cranked the in-game clock several hours ahead. I gave myself an hour and a half to explore the evening-time town, hop a train to 'derpton' on Memory Card Slot A, pillage what I could, then return for festivities.

I then realized there was no Slot A. This was why the game loaded from Slot B initially. The town of 'derpton', the one my sister made ages ago, was a memory in the literal sense. It was an event recalled by villagers who contacted it long ago. Some of them even moved to 'anusvil', but it wasn't a recent occurrence.

The old letters from my sister were relics of a lost land, a lost age.

I was presumptuous and dumb.

I also wanted another town to travel to.

Aside: Eric

On Slot A, K.K. Slider — the cool dog-man guitarist and only purveyor of musical records — greeted me. This message was so important he stopped strumming his guitar, slicing away a layer of diegetic music. It was him and I in a black abyss:

"Living alone can be a drag. Still, if you got some really tight friends somewhere nearby, then you know it'll all work out.

"Yeah, man. Friends are far out."

After this prompt, his hands snapped back to the rhythm. He strummed without missing a beat. He was divinely, effortlessly correct. Friends are important. Friends are integral to Animal Crossing.

He told me again to bring friends.

You have no friends.

You fumble onto a wooden, single-car train, one so dinky it sat behind a large freight of coal. Yes, behind it. Blackness sits outside the train's open window. The window's panes are tinted blue, only emphasizing the void beyond. There is no here. You don't have a destination: no there to compare to.

You are boldly moving into a new life, alone. You wonder, for a moment, if the blackness outside was an emulation error: that the Wii fudged on loading the backdrops.

No. It's just a tunnel.

A spectral spray of blue greets you. It stretches into a deep purple gradient in the low distance. The darkness is obscured by green smears of foliage shooting by.

An annoying blue cat named Rover approaches. He asks to sit with you. You say no. He passive-aggressively jabs you and sits across from you anyhow. His eyes are large and black. He smiles.

He says it's 2:38 a.m. on June 30 in this world with an upward inflection, as if it's a question.

You confirm this truth.

You then bully Rover as much as possible as he asks you about your plans: where you're going, your gender, etc...

Rover relents, still smiling. He gets your name. Your name is Eric. You're an abrasive, unlikable putz. You skulk around at night when no one's around. You were booted from your Section 8

housing in California. You're so stupid you didn't have a plan when you entered this train.

This train's destination is Belphedo.

Despite your thrashing, rudeness, shouting, and throwing crumpled-up pages of manga at him, Rover heads to a phone. He calls someone on the other line to set you up with your own house.

You tell him you don't need help, but he knows better. Your abrasiveness is a pitiful mask. You are embarrassing and helpless. You reek of midnight gamer goo. Rover is a saint who endures you and guides you to light.

The light comes. You step outside. It's 2:41 a.m. in Belphedo. Tom Nook rushes to greet you. He bought some houses and will now unload one onto some schmuck: Eric.

You.

Tom Nook does his simpering salesman schtick. Being an impatient gamer and expert pattern-recognizer. You mash the B-button and piss through all of it. You tune it out.

You hear the hefty sum he asks of you, though.

Before you could protest, your inventory pops up. You are bereft of possessions: no special edition Yoshi 3DS. No frankenstein'd computer rig with a library of Steam games. Your only remaining battle-ecchi manga: 'Monster Wrestling: Interspecies Combat Girls' was ammunition against Rover's onslaught.

All you have are a paltry one-thousand bells. The game highlights these bells. You are given two options: give or quit.

Quit.

"You better pay me or I'll give you... a stern talking-to!"
Tom chides.

The inventory opens up again. You're given the same choice.
Quit.

"You better pay me or I'll give you... a stern talking-to!"
Tom chides.

Quit.

You do this twelve times, but fortune never favors you. You concede and give him your only lifeline. It's not nearly enough. He demands you work for him as a part-timer at his dingy shop!

Disgusting! You avoided wagery since the dawn of time. You rescinded the right to vote and join the military. You never paid taxes because your earning bracket was too low. You lived on welfare bestowed upon you for being diagnosed with the right illness at the right age.

Nook stomps fatly back to his shop. He's so sure you'll follow suit. He thinks you're his slave..

The moment he disappears, you turn heel and try entering your new home. Your gyroid assistant locks you out. It claims it's still processing your data, and to enjoy your new job!

You lollygag as much as possible. The June night in Belphedo is humid and sticky. Tiny mosquitoes follow as you shake trees to work off aggression. Money occasionally falls from these trees. You rack up three-hundred bells right off the bat.

You bitterly wonder why again you need a job, if not only to satiate Nook's control fetish..

You meet a sheep lady, who's snoozing on her own doorstep. She screams when she sees your face. Due to decisions made on the train ride, you manifested a reptile physiognomy. Your eyes are small and set far apart like a creature of prey. Your pupils are too big. Sanpaku eyes. You wear a little smile. You were never photogenic or attractive. You know this.

You wander about the night with no house and a brain full of buzzing. You shake trees until a beehive drops. Typical Eric moment. You flee from the throng of insects, pirouette around their deadly cloud, and flee just in time inside... Nook's shop.

It's raffle day. If you buy items from Nook's, you get tickets to use in the raffle. The prizes are a gamer's paradise. You stand face-to-face with a large-scale replica of Star Fox's Arwing. You rub your greasy fingers on it.

"That's a raffle prize. I'm not giving it to an employee, now hurry along!" Nook shouts.

He demands you wear his new uniform. Whether you change right in front of him or outside, he's debasing you like a lowly creature. You go outside, throw the pale-green clothes on the ground, then return to him.

"You haven't changed yet! What did you do to your uniform? That was store property, you know!" Nook shouted. He rustled his hand beneath his apron "Great! Now I have to give you another one! Be sure to actually put it on this time!"

He gives you another one.

You leave the shop and run home. The gyroid assistant lets you in, for some reason.

You save and quit. Eric goes to sleep. Nook can suck it.

Back to 'anusvil'...

AErn awoke after a long nap. It's July 4th again, evening-time. I faced a wave of chagrin after offering a letter to my neighbor, Kit. I wanted to include a specimen for her to experiment on, a mosquito, but a ruling force reminded me I couldn't mail living creatures as presents.

Bob asks if I got fat. I admit I have. It's been hard to maintain good habits after learning my little brother got kicked out of his apartment. I'm not surprised by it, just disappointed. Bob claimed if you snacked past 6 p.m. you're guaranteed a 'one-way ticket to porkdom'. Softening the blow, he claims he wore big clothes to eat whenever he liked.

Bob was a cool dude.

I, AErn, enjoyed a firework show at the lake. You couldn't look up in Animal Crossing, but the explosions reflected off the surface of the lake's water. The night-time sky glowed with their corresponding colors.

I bought several balloons from Nook's rival, Redd. I stored a few in my closet. I ran around with one, then let it go.

It was four-hundred bells for that interaction.

July 1 2024:

I skipped my first day of this journal-review. I was busy. When I wasn't, I saw friends and mixed Midori sours for them while we chatted about workplace violations and watched MILF Manor. This was a beneficial game-plan as well, because Nook's Cranny closed for renovation.

It was now Nook N' Go.

On my way to the new, gas station-styled shop, I shook a tree and got stung by bees.

Tank and Mint moved to Belphedo.

"It looks like a bee birthday party on your face," Tabby said.

I accidentally chuffed Tabby after refusing a gift. My inventory was full after running so many errands. I tried not to sell off villager gifts and now suffered for it. I drafted several letters and stuffed them with presents to offset my burden. Tabby insisted I took his shirt. It was a simple, blue gradient.

It was now my favorite shirt.

Bob insisted he was a pro-wrestler. Insisted he didn't give autographs due to poor handwriting. I was prompted on whether to believe him or not. I chose 'yes'. He claimed I was the only one who believed that story, but claimed I brought a smile to his face. Mission accomplished.

I saw the biggest fish ever along the river. I never saw one that big in that area before. I tossed the bobber in. The fish grabbed it instantly. I hit 'A' as fast as possible. I lost. I wondered if I sucked or if there was input lag on modern televisions. I remember it was the case with Smash Bros. Melee. My partner tested the controls. Between tilting the control stick and seeing movement on-screen, he claimed there was a bit of lag.

I wondered how much emulating Gamecube games over the Wii affected input lag as well. Grandpa and Grandma gave us a

two-hundred-plus pound CRT TV built into a wooden cabinet. It sat in the garage for six years, until now. I dollied the set in and duct-taped the old Gamecube's disk tray down so it didn't spring up while reading data. The limited resolution made the smears less grating.

Redd's shop opened around 6 p.m. The 'Black' of his 'Black Market' titled tent was crossed out. There was a rare NES game on sale for twelve-thousand bells. In the old days, my grindset of fishing, bugging, etc... led to selling the load for a few thousand bells. I did this a few times a day, then gave half my earnings to repay Nook's debt. Now, I've been running errands for villagers and selling transplanted fruit. I also repaid the loan less strictly. In this case: not at all today.

I bought Clu Clu Land and set it down as a furniture item in front of the TV set. It was an emulated game within a now less-emulated game. I'm still surprised Nintendo allowed little versions of their more arcade-y NES titles. No other Animal Crossing game offered this, ever. Keep in mind this game was popular when the Gameboy Advance NES-repackages were being sold.

Clu Clu Land involves being a pink ball-creature flying around pegs. You extend your left or right hands to grab a peg and swing around it. You could also hit up or down to do similar, depending on the direction you were facing. It didn't feel intuitive like Q*Bert, in which the game's puzzle was orienting yourself around the directional buttons while facing odd angles. I accept that my complaints derive from sucking at the game.

You could cut right-angles or swing around pegs in circles. Any space between two pegs offered little gems, which

interconnected to reveal a connect-the-dots styled image. You win when you connect said dots. You lose lives if you fall down a pit, get hit by an angry spiked ball, or the time runs out. If you time out, the timer just resets and you can keep going.

Everything is a gradient between pink and red. It reminds me of flesh, almost as much as Lifesteal, which is entirely about shooting through walls of flesh and flesh-related monsters.

When you press the L, R, and Z, the NES emulation ends. Your high score is saved on a memory card, in case the friends you've friended around with during your Animal Crossing experience wanted to totally pwn your Clu Clu Land score.

I visited Belphedo, pillaged fruits, plucked their weeds, planted trees, and ran errands for villagers. A nice cat named Mitzi greeted me by saying she wanted to move away from home, even when she just got here. I wondered how much it'd suck to start a new village, only for all your cool friends to leave immediately.

Of course, I couldn't imagine myself as Eric. He hadn't left his house in days. He also wouldn't care. He lived in a metal shack with a single gyroid like a Nikolay Chernyshevsky character.

July 2: Do You Spin Your Umbrella?

Another day of June rain. I quested for villagers. They again complained of the weather, but still ambled around to chat, or game design-wise: to be patronized by me. They had

umbrellas out. I sometimes forgot to equip mine as I dug for treasure and fished.

You manually equip everything in this game, you know.

I found myself running between acres in the pouring rain, smiling and eternally unbothered. I didn't catch pneumonia and die. Aren't video games whacky?

My inventory was still full of gifts I half-cared for. The first batch of letters I sent were replied to en masse. Most of the villagers didn't understand what I was writing. Kitt didn't appreciate the 'live experimentation' schtick. I even sent a message to Mitzi in Belphedo, telling her to move here before 'dark forces both of spirit and politics' swallow her land.

I was chuffed. I immediately replied with simple letters claiming "I am your friend. I like you."- then trailing off to insult their reading comprehension. The paper set I used for these letters was called 'essay paper'. It was clearly styled for writing kana within neat squares. There are no spaces in Japanese. My letters were barely legible with English text falling out of place constantly.

I wrote so many letters (five) that it filled the post office. This forced the mailman to make all his deliveries instantly, instead of a full day's wait. As long as you spray out as many letters as possible, you can game this system.

I got my replies instantly as well. The villagers were much more receptive.

Outside, in the real world, children chattered. Our doorbell didn't work, leaving me, the room closest to the front door, to welcome everyone.

A church group visited. Four girls said hello. Their mother-or-guardian watched attentively from the sidewalk. She waved. The setting sun waved also.

They asked if I was willing to trade anything for their last item, then presented a Phillips head screw. They were in-competition with other groups for the coolest trade-ins they could manage. I had no idea what size or value everything was judged at. I assumed they didn't know either. It didn't matter. It was a reason to socialize and exchange junk.

I traded the screw for a rubbery Knuckles the Echidna keychain. They were delighted by it. I tossed the screw into a spare parts drawer in the kitchen.

I then realized that was just like an Animal Crossing aside: a side-event between the daily grind that sticks with you. Groan all you want with the video game comparison. It made me glow.

I realized Animal Crossing was a game of asides. Sometimes, magic happens. You can never tell when or where it does. You just have to roll the dice of opportunity. You just have to exist. Things will happen so long as you choose to exist.

I went back to 'anusvil'. Bob asked me if I spun my umbrella. I wasn't wearing an umbrella. I smiled passively in the sogging sop. Bob told me if I press the 'A' button I can twirl my umbrella.

I equipped one, pressed 'A', and it spun. It was a cute animation where water splashed off of it in a little, special way.

Another church group came to my door that same night. They wanted to trade a scooter. I rifled through the trash in our garage:

Roommates' stuff: Nope. A blow-up alien from an arcade: never giving that away. I tried to hand out one of five leather golf bags Grandpa Gene left behind, but it sat in the rat nest corner. Its dolly snapped on something. My partner insisted I don't unload that crap onto them.

He gave them an electronic calculator watch. The scooter now sat in our doorway.

We gave it away next morning.