



Video games: *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*

Overview

- *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* is part of a franchise of video games developed and published by Nintendo. The series has been running for over twenty years, with the original game produced in 2001.
- It was conceptualised and created by Katsuya Eguchi and Hisashi Nogami.
- *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* was initially announced for the Nintendo Switch in 2018 but wasn't released until March 2020.
- It became the first console game to reach five million digital sales within a month, with the high sales often attributed to the social distancing and stay at home orders during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* was one of the games in the series that was given extra DLC post release.

- The game won Best Family Game at The Game Awards 2020.
- *New Horizons* eclipsed the lifetime sales of all past instalments within its first six weeks of release, becoming the second-best-selling game on the Nintendo Switch system with 37.62 million sales.
- *New Horizons* grossed an estimated \$2 billion in its first year as of March 2021, the fifth highest ever first-year revenue for any video game.

This factsheet introduces *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* as a case study to explore how the media industries' processes of production, distribution and circulation affect media forms and platforms. It also considers how *New Horizons* targets, reaches and addresses customers and examines the way in which audiences have reacted to the game both as consumers and prosumers themselves.

Key terms

Digitally convergent media: Video games consoles are an excellent example of a digitally convergent device. You can not only play games but access social media, surf the internet, stream films and television programmes and upload content into cloud based servers. Cross-media content helps maximise profits and improves reach to new customers.

Production: This refers to all phases of designing, developing and making the media product; this process is addressed in this factsheet.

Distribution: This refers to all processes linked to delivering the media product to audiences both

through tangible (disc/cartridge) and digital (cloud based) media.

Consumption: Explores the way in which the media product is used by audiences for pleasure but also explores the rise of user generated content across several platforms.

Franchise: It is common for games and films to create a series of games linked by character, theme or even multiverse. A franchise is dependent on the success of the first media product.



Media industries

A recent report by the UKIE (The Association for UK Interactive Entertainment) suggests the consumer game software market was valued at £4.28bn in 2021. It has grown 11.4% in comparison to a £3.84bn total from 2019 figures. Spend on digital console games reduced by 5.59% to £1.65bn with digital PC revenues down by 7.02% to £620m. The lack of major releases such as *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* and *The Last of Us Part II* had a downward effect on the market, which should be seen in the context of the impressive performance of video games during the pandemic.

In comparison to traditional media like film, radio, print and television, video games are much younger, growing exponentially since the 1970s. This era was referred to as the golden age of the video games industry, peaking between 1978 and 1983 when the combined revenue of US arcade and home video games was worth some US\$11.8 billion – a sum that far outstripped

the profits of the American movie and music industries combined. However, rival consoles, poorly designed games and a lack of quality control meant that the market crashed heavily; by 1985 the games console industry in the US was estimated to be worth just US\$100 million. Over three decades later, the industry is enjoying a resurgence with new types of gamers and much tighter regulation, aided by key developments in internet speeds and accessibility. Video games are now culturally and financially significant across major territories (including Japan, Europe and the US) with new console and games releases from popular franchises classed as major economic events.



Animal Crossing: New Horizons

Animal Crossing: New Horizons is a game for the Nintendo Switch and Switch Lite in which the player is tasked with bringing civilisation to a deserted island. The player starts out with a shelter and some basic tools. To begin building their dream town they'll need to hunt, collect and save. There are few set missions or objectives in the game; mostly they have the freedom to do everything at their own speed. The game follows the circadian rhythm of a real-world day, so if the player accesses the game in the morning, they'll be treated to a glimpse of the in-game sunrise and be able to collect creatures that only come out at that time. Similarly, at night all the shops will be shut and most fellow islanders will have gone to bed.

The game is accessible and has few barriers to younger users; it has also proven very popular with adults and was seen as helping with loneliness during the lockdowns in the pandemic. It's creative and engaging yet also peaceful, as your character adapts to the pace of their new island life. You can invite other players to visit your island, and there is also a multiplayer option. However, you can only save one game per console, which might cause trouble if children are sharing a Switch console – this has also upset some adults.

Animal Crossing mainly focuses on its single-player elements, but some features allow you to visit other players' islands and vice versa. First, there is Party Play, which allows up to four users to play on the same island using one Switch console and one copy of the game.

Wireless Play lets up to eight people play on the same island, each using their own Switch and copy of the game. You will not need a Nintendo Online membership or internet connection to use this feature, but for it to work, all players need to be in the same room.

Finally, there is Online Play. You'll have to subscribe to the Nintendo Online service, £17.99 a year for a single membership or £31.49 a year for a family membership.

You can only access Wireless or Online Play after playing for two days. You can then visit the islands of other players who are on your friends list, or have them visit yours, by going to the Dodo Airport.

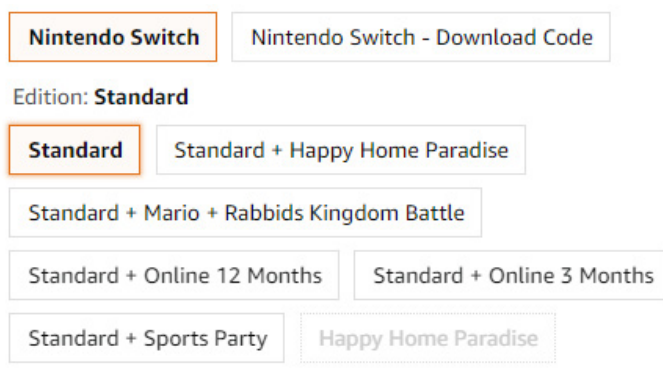
Animal Crossing doesn't offer micro-transactions or loot boxes. There is no way to speed up the game; the player simply has to wait until the next real-world day for

their buildings to be completed. This teaches children that it pays to be patient and helps naturally divide the gaming sessions into reasonable chunks of time.

However, there are certain features that require payment. For example, if you want to invite specific characters to your island, you need to purchase 'amiibo cards' for your desired character. Similarly, if you want to play online and invite other players to your island, you will need to purchase the annual Nintendo subscription.

Formats: The game is exclusive to the Nintendo Switch platform and in 2020 their own *New Horizons* edition was available.

Distribution: Versions of the game can be purchased as a cartridge or a download code. There are other add-ons including subscriptions and bonus content:



Critical reception: Currently the game is the 13th-best-selling game of all time. Reviews are largely positive across commerce sites like Amazon (4.8 out of 5) and Metacritic review (90/100). The game was nominated for a BAFTA Award in 2022 (Best Evolving Game) and has won:

- BAFTAs in 2021 for 'Game Beyond Entertainment' and 'Best Multiplayer'.
- AIAS DICE Awards 2021 Winner – Family Game of the Year
- Golden Joystick Awards 2020: Winner – Nintendo Game of the Year
- NAVGTR Awards 2021 – Winner: Game, Franchise Family
- The Game Awards 2020 – Best Family Game

Processes of production, distribution and circulation by organisations, groups and individuals in a global context

Here are some key points to consider. There are a variety of links at the end of this worksheet with references that can support the teaching of the following.

The specialised and institutionalised nature of media production, distribution and circulation.

Here you could consider how video games have developed as a medium. There are several documentaries and fan-made videos online which compare the types of games and their evolution over the years, including the improvement of graphics and capabilities of modern games. Nintendo are one of the original institutions that helped shape the industry we know today, breaking into the games console market with the 8 bit NES, Gameboy, 16 bit and then subsequent upgrades.

The company pioneered the concept of a mobile game/clock with a microprocessor and, before video games, produced games cards dating back to 1889!

The concept of *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* is simplistic in its nature, appealing heavily to children and adults because of its repetitive, safe and relaxing nature. Mining for materials, interacting with villagers and working off the console's clock means the game will always feel different at different times of the day. Not offering options to buy upgrades or loot boxes to enhance the game creates equity for the consumers.

The game is exclusive to the platform of Nintendo Switch, the company's flagship mobile gaming device, yet has a multiplayer function. Previous versions of the game were available across Nintendo 64 and GameCube.

The game was produced by one of several internal development groups: Nintendo EPD – Production Group No. 5 (Internal R&D). By keeping the development of games in-house, Nintendo can maximise their profits and maintain market exclusivity, attracting a loyal fanbase of gamers.



The relationship of recent technological change and media production, distribution and circulation.

The nature of gaming has continued to develop, with mobile gaming making a resurgence due to the rise of sophisticated mobile phone devices and improved graphics and battery capabilities. The game is the second-best-selling game of all time on Switch, behind *Mario Kart 8 Deluxe*. The simplicity of the game and interactive elements ensures universal appeal. The game can be downloaded or played using a cartridge. One criticism of the game is the fact that you can only create one island per device whereas other games, like *Minecraft*, allow you to create multiple worlds.

The pattern of release for *Animal Crossing* has been consistent with similar games and there are several patches and updates that users can download to enhance their gaming experience. One such patch was *Happy Home Paradise*, where gamers could build luxury holiday buildings.

A mobile version called *Animal Crossing: Pocket Camp* was released for Android and iOS devices to tap into other revenue. This follows the trend of games branching out to capitalise on nostalgia and the appeal of their most popular games by creating ad based or fee paying versions.

The majority of fan-made content includes tips and tricks, walkthroughs and reviews or commentaries on updates, purchases or anticipation at new content being delivered.

The significance of patterns of ownership and control, including conglomerate ownership, vertical integration and diversification.

You could focus on the developer, Nintendo Internal R&D, and look at the patterns and similarities to other successful games. The parent company originates in Japan and therefore is culturally significant, exploring the way gaming is embedded in daily life. Nintendo is a rich case study in itself and has learnt to diversify its content to remain family friendly. That said, with an estimated value of \$55 billion, it is not the most profitable of games companies but it is solely focused on gaming compared to companies like Sony or Microsoft who diversify their content and also buy up other games studios to grow more dominant.

The significance of economic factors, including commercial and not-for-profit public funding, to media industries and their products.

With the continued growth of video games, you could focus on marketing campaigns for games which often have worldwide and simultaneous releases across each video game market. Budgets for games vary and the game was kept in-house. There has only been one DLC pack and fans have criticised the lack of additional content.



How media organisations maintain, including through marketing, varieties of audiences nationally and globally.

The cultural impact of *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* is significant, and you could discuss ways in which much of the game's success was due to its role in a franchise, nostalgia, or the fact that the pandemic hit during the release window and encouraged more people to engage in positive gaming experiences. Prosumers can also share content across web forums such as Discord, Twitch or YouTube. It is recommended you search for specific examples to use in your case study preparation notes.

With the game's universal appeal and low age rating, there is huge scope for merchandising opportunities, from soft plush toys to lunchbox items, branded headphones, comics, playing cards and even licensing for games such as a Monopoly: Animal Crossing New Horizons edition.

The producers have also considered ways to capitalise on social and cultural trends. Some games allow the purchase of new skins or texture packs, however with *Animal Crossing* there is a strong focus on personalisation and customisation. Fandom sites and a wide range of official and sponsored websites provide guides for audiences to access settings and customise items, from character skin tone, hair colour and even textures on the furniture. This level of diversity and flexibility allows marketing teams to show how the game can stay relevant. Examples of this can be found in the 'Media audiences' section.

The regulatory framework of contemporary media in the UK and the impact of 'new' digital technologies on media regulation, including the role of individual producers.

A link has been included in this worksheet to the UK Video Standards Council which applies the PEGI rating system to *Animal Crossing*. It is regarded as being family friendly and is rated PEGI 3. The ESRB rates the game using different criteria, awarding it an E (suitable for everyone). You could consider whether a game such as *Animal Crossing* even needs regulating and perhaps consider more the impact of freely available, fan-made videos where language and content is likely to be more risqué and unregulated by such bodies. It is also worth considering how material is accessed and played. Some parent forums discuss the likelihood of issues children could face during online play. Again, building a detailed case study with examples will help you support any arguments relating to the need for regulation.



Media audiences

There are many discussion points to consider when looking at audience reception and use of *Animal Crossing*. The game is a global and commercial success and also praised by several high-profile critics and gaming institutions. The game has amassed such a following that there are several wikis and fan accounts discussing updates, patches and tips and tricks.

There is evidence to suggest that mobile and hand-held devices are really driving the sales of *Animal Crossing* forward. The appeal is being fuelled by a new generation of gamers who prefer hand-held devices over traditional consoles. The continued development of fan-made content across social media platforms and dedicated fan sites and blogs means that there is an active community of gamers who share a common interest linked to *Animal Crossing*.

How audiences are grouped and categorised by media industries, including by age, gender and social class, as well as by lifestyle and taste.

Animal Crossing has universal appeal. It is useful to explore how such a game can appeal to different ages, genders and audiences from different social and cultural backgrounds. The variety of different characters is certainly a contributing factor to the game's success, but as is the way in which audiences can control and shape their own worlds and create new identities through maps and craft kits.

The developers have also carefully considered how gamers can personalise and modify their avatars and items, such as furniture, through an accessible settings icon in the game. Furthermore, audiences interested in a particular topic or who want to express their identities through the game in relation to different genders or ethnicities can do so collectively online. Most recently, in August 2020, gamers brought social activism into play by donning Black Lives Matter (BLM) caps and staging in-game protests as a form of activism. Gamers, using social media platforms like Twitch, can then host or stream these protests and raise funds for various causes, which also attracts a more diverse range of gamers. This can lead to the game coming under fire, and following its use for Hong Kong pro-democracy protests it was removed from sale in China.

How media producers target, attract, reach, address and potentially construct audiences.

Animal Crossing and subsequent versions and variations of the game offer familiar pleasures to existing fans (narrative features, open world gameplay, etc.) along with new elements to target a wider audience (e.g. *Happy Home Paradise*). There already exists an established network of fans across the internet, who share game footage, tutorials and hacks so that gamers can get new experiences from the game. The ability for gamers to add levels of personalisation, such as skin tone, inclusive hair-styles and body positive imagery, has become a large focus for gaming audiences. This links to the importance of fandom as a social context and how games producers have to respond to audiences to ensure a loyal fan base.

How media industries target audiences through the content and appeal of media products and through the ways in which they are marketed, distributed and circulated.

There was a lot of anticipation for this game with a die-hard base of fans who have enjoyed playing it across different platforms. The game was initially planned for 2019 release but it was delayed, causing a 3% drop in share value for Nintendo; however the arrival of the game in 2020 made it one of the fastest selling games of all time. Subsequently, a buzz about the game was created. Having a franchise such as *Animal Crossing* can create a long-tail effect generating income across older platforms, but also creates an active audience pool which can continue to grow as further franchises develop in the coming years. Ultimately, for the game to remain a success, producers and audiences must work symbiotically to create content that meets the demands of a socially and culturally sophisticated audience who are active, creative users of mobile devices.

Candidates should spend time watching a variety of content linked to the game to understand how audiences play and interact with each other. Similarly, the marketing material for the game, both official and unofficial, should be explored to see how game elements appeal to different audiences. A wealth of

online resources exist, and articles across gaming platforms, news outlets and fan blogs will give a wider insight into the gaming industry and the success of hand-held games such as *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*.

Academic ideas and arguments

While there is NO REQUIREMENT to study the set academic ideas and arguments in relation to video games, this might be an interesting opportunity to discuss some elements of theory. You could consider introducing the following theoretical perspectives at A Level.

Regulation – Sonia Livingstone and Peter Lunt

New technologies (in this case the convergent devices with access to internet, Bluetooth, etc.) open up opportunities and risks that complicate regulation.

Cultural Industries – David Hesmondhalgh

Explore how cultural industry companies attempt to minimise risk and maximise audiences. The game has a large fan base and is owned by a global leader in gaming. Their trusted reputation for creating family

friendly games minimises risk and demonstrates that consumer confidence in Nintendo remains high.

Identity – David Gauntlett

Gauntlett conducted a series of studies based around the use of Lego to create and share ideas and has also compared this to how audiences use the internet (one giant allotment). *Making is Connecting* is all about how people build a stronger sense of self-identity through creative practices. *Animal Crossing* allowed interaction at a time when people were forced to self-isolate and stay at home. The critical response to *New Horizons* as a media product highlights how the game is a way for people to socially create and interact.

Fandom – Henry Jenkins

Video games offer social experiences (online multiplayer options) as well as communities outside of the core game experience. Jenkins' key quote 'if it doesn't spread, it's dead' can be used as a discussion point to track the birth and popularity of the franchise. Nintendo has a strong, well-developed fan base that could be researched in more detail in relation to Jenkins' ideas about participatory culture.



Resources consulted

[Animal Crossing: New Horizons](https://en.wikipedia.org) (en.wikipedia.org)

[UK Consumer Games Market Valuation 2021 – how much money did people in the UK spend on video games?](https://ukie.org.uk) (ukie.org.uk)

[Animal Crossing: New Horizons](https://parentzone.org.uk) (parentzone.org.uk)

[Animal Crossing](https://interactive.org) (interactive.org)

[Animal Crossing: New Horizons – Awards](https://imdb.com) (imdb.com)

[Nintendo History](https://nintendo.co.uk) (nintendo.co.uk)

[How the Nintendo development division is organized? Let's give a look to Nintendo EPD](https://reddit.com) (reddit.com)

[Animal Crossing: New Horizons DLC Updates and Patch Notes](https://ign.com) (ign.com)

[Animal Crossing](https://play.google.com) (play.google.com)

[animal crossing new horizons](https://youtube.com) (youtube.com)

[How Much Are The Biggest Video Game Companies Worth?](https://denofgeek.com) (denofgeek.com)

[Black Lives Matter meets Animal Crossing: how protesters take their activism into video games](https://theguardian.com) (theguardian.com)

[Animal Crossing New Horizons inclusive skin designs offer over 250 variations](https://gamesradar.com) (gamesradar.com)

For regulation see [VSC rating board](https://videostandards.org.uk) (videostandards.org.uk) versus [ESRB Ratings Guide](https://esrb.org) (esrb.org).

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