
Film Review: To Enjoy Our Cherry Pie in Community: A Commentary on *Gekijōban Dōbutsu no Mori* by Jōji Shimura

*Esai Santana and Lauren Whiting
Department of Sociology
California State University, Los Angeles*



Image of the Gekijōban Dōbutsu no Mori DVD cover. (Nookipedia 2023).

ABSTRACT

Produced in 2006, and never formally released outside of Japan, *Gekijōban Dōbutsu no Mori* - otherwise known as *Animal Forest: The Movie* - follows the journey of Ai, a young girl who transplants herself to a new town in hopes of finding her talent and goal (her cherry pie). Along the way, she experiences the highs and lows of finding an identity, a sense of purpose, and belonging in a new space. Throughout her time, she wrangles with the journey of acceptance that the grandness of life requires the acceptance that she is not the main character in other people's lives, as they have their own dreams and cherry pies. In turn, she realizes she is an interdependent element of her new community whereby she sees the greatness in others, others see the greatness in her, and she sees the greatness in herself. As a film modeled after Nintendo's *Animal Crossing: Wild World* for the DS, it encapsulates familiar, nostalgic feelings fans of the franchise experience as they learn to find their cherry pie, identity, and belonging through life simulation.

INTRODUCTION

Gekijōban Dōbutsu no Mori, translated to *Animal Forest: The Movie*, is an animated film directed by Jōji Shimura, known for his creative mastery of translating manga to film, and produced by OLM, Inc., VAP, and Nintendo. Shimura's goal was to retell the *Animal Crossing: Wild World* gaming experience on the big screen. Their faithful retelling of the gameplay experience follows Ai, a young human girl, who moves to the anthropomorphic animal town called Animal Village. The opening sequence holds a familiar formula for those who have played *Animal Crossing: Wild World*, as Ai answers the Kappa cab driver's questions about her name and reasons for moving. When she arrives at the village, nostalgia should hit any fan of the games as the opening credits play *Animal Crossing: Wild World's* "Title Screen" song. Unbeknownst to Ai, her move reflects the sociological journey of finding an identity, a sense of purpose, and belonging in a community.

SOCIOLOGICAL RELEVANCE

To expand, let's look at sociology professors Edles and Appelrouth's (2021:400-404) explanation of how Geroge Herbert Mead used symbolic interactionist methodological approaches to highlight the dialectic relationship between the self and society through social evolution during childhood development. Specifically, Mead highlighted how children often shift from internalizing the attitudes of discrete, disconnected others ("the play stage") to simultaneously internalizing the attitudes of multiple others ("the game stage") as they age. From the "game stage," Mead believed children grew to recognize "the generalized other," a phenomenon of general attitudes and beliefs rooted in the assumed roles of a person and those around them. Through these transitions, Mead pinpoints the inseparable relationship of the self and society, where the self-acts as a byproduct of how people view themselves as the subject and object through others' perceptions. With this in mind, Ai undergoes the journey of becoming part of "the generalized other" as she learns to accept how the grandness of life requires understanding that she is not the main character in other people's lives, as they have their dreams and cherry pies to pursue (a metaphor we will explain shortly). As for franchise fans,

the film encapsulates familiar, nostalgic feelings as they, too, learn to find their cherry pie, identity, and belonging through life simulation.

Returning to the film, it showcases the start of Ai's first year living in Animal Village, which is on a warm spring day. Symbolically, her first spring represents her new beginning in the village as she haphazardly tries to find her footing in a bustling environment. The villagers do not acknowledge her presence or treat her with the kindness she expected; they talk over her, run past her, and make her fall as she attempts to deliver their orders. Despite this rocky beginning, she blooms a close friendship with Margie and Rosie. In this budding relationship, Margie shares with Ai her cherry pie metaphor: people find satisfaction in the things they wish for, strive for, and actualize; whether making a cherry pie or a goal. Following this conversation, the season transitions into summer.

Summer represents Ai's growth and connection with her neighbors as she realizes the importance of cooperation, compassion, and celebrating diversity in developing her identity. For instance, the notion of cherry pies resurfaces as Ai acknowledges her neighbors' talents and goals, ranging from Margie's desire to become a fashion designer, Blather's desire to complete the museum, Yū and Alfonso's desire to find every collectible, and Hopper's desire to catch a fish. The season ends with the summer festival and the unexpected performance of "K.K. Bossa" by the famous Animalese singer K.K. Slider at Margie's request. As he plays the song, Ai realizes it highlights the wonders of venturing outside life's familiarities to chase a cherry pie.

However, the beautiful ending of summer transitions into a mournful, rainy autumn as Ai learns Margie moved away to pursue her cherry pie without letting her know. Mourning and questioning her friendships and identity, Ai heads to the local coffee shop to contemplate. While at the coffee shop, Whitney offers Ai a complex rethinking about friendships and identity: the validity of both foregoes physical proximity through the mutual belief in the self and each other to reach one another's goals. When she returns home, she finds Margie's farewell letter, reassuring Ai that she did not want to leave on a sober note and encourages Ai

to “eat her own cherry pie.” Inspired by the letter and Whitney’s words, Ai resolves to finish the tasks given to her by the mysterious messages in bottles she kept to herself throughout the film. Spending all of Autumn paving her newfound cherry pie, winter brings a tone of completion and unity as the season represents another year finished.

During the winter festival and the annual decorations competition, Ai reaches an unexpected realization as she, the entire village, and Margie (who visited on holiday) support an alien’s return to space after it used Ai’s trees to crash into the village. For their efforts, the alien’s community expressed an extravagant gratitude for Ai’s determination to support the one who fell, leaving Ai as a hero in the eyes of many and the winner of the decorations contest. Realizing that her neighbors value her as part of the village, Ai finally expresses that she is a genuine resident of Animal Village. The story ends with a new spring, where Ai reads a letter to her mother expressing how she feels at home in her new village. Alongside her letter, pictures fill the ending credits to showcase how her neighbors reached their cherry pies, such as Margie’s successful launch of her clothing line, Blathers completing the museum, and Hopper catching a fish. In the final scene, a bloomed Lily of the Valley sways in the warm breeze as Ai heads to the village’s museum to discuss astronomy with Celeste, the local astronomer.

Though the flower represents an environmentally beautiful village in the games, here, it represents the beauty of Ai solidifying herself as an interdependent element of her community whereby she sees the greatness in others, others see the greatness in her, and she sees the greatness in herself. In other words, the flower highlights how she has become part of her community’s “generalized other.” However, this metaphor does not conflict with its representation in the games, as players also undergo the rocky journey of finding their cherry pie and supporting the cherry pies of the villagers around them to create a beautiful town subjectively and objectively.

Akin to Ai in the film, the emotions she felt moving into a new space and the heartache she felt about Margie moving away mirrors the difficult experience people across the fanbase undergo. For example, TreyTheWilliam’s (2022) *Animal*

Crossing (GNC) Retrospective expressed feelings about how *Animal Crossing: Population Growing* is technologically simpler than the newest game, *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*. But, even in the simplicity of the game, he argues that *Population Growing* cultivates advanced and human-like villager personalities, creating memorable player-to-character and character-to-character friendship-building rooted in the interconnected experience of his goals aligning with the goals of the villagers. Even Lauren (one of the co-authors for this piece), who played *Animal Crossing: Wild World* in elementary school, clearly remembers their first days in their village of “Snow” and developing their identity and community purpose through taking care of their home mortgage, populating the museum, and supporting animal neighbors. However, in this simulated self and “generalized other,” she vividly recalls heartache caused by the unexpected move of her favorite villager, Pinky, and her journey of reaffirming her sense of purpose, connection, and expectations for herself and those around her. Even in the decades since Pinky’s move, Lauren hopes Pinky is happily chasing her cherry pie and is making someone’s experience with “the generalized other” brighter. Further, TreyTheWilliam conveyed feelings of missing and wondering about villagers such as Murphy and Rasher, who “moved” in his game reset, and Hank, who moved from his game file but never appeared in future games. They express how their moving equates to real-life experiences of friendships not lasting but the ability to still think about them with good intentions (TreyTheWilliam 2022). From player experiences such as these, *Gekijōban Dōbutsu no Mori* captures the adventures, emotions, and journey to develop a self and community with villagers through life simulation. Expectedly, these life lessons carry into players’ experiences of interacting with the real world as they use what they learned about cherry pies to experience the joys of strangers becoming best friends, finding support in unexpected places, and finding comfort in the uncomfortable journey of developing identity, community, and dynamic friendships wherever they go.

As the games and film encourage the development of a complex understanding of the self, friendship, and community through the lens of “the generalized other,” players learn these

relationships transcend physical proximity as both parties must wish the best for each other and themselves to achieve their cherry pies no matter where they go to find a new sense of belonging. For instance, as many transition from high school to the ‘real world’ and begin to pursue their unique cherry pies through grander and more divergent paths, they may also experience strains in friendships that were originally built upon proximity. Often, many feel discouraged by this reality and promise one another they will -always stay in touch- to maintain the familiar while pursuing the unknown. As *Animal Crossing* depicts both instances of venturing into a new life and not wanting life to change, it offers solace that physical limitations do not define the boundaries of friendship and community as everyone is part of a “generalized other” that holds norms and expectations for everyone to wish the best for each other as they actualize their dreams. Therefore, even in physical distance, friendships strengthen even as people pursue different goals through their mutual hope for the best.

For a more tangible example of players realizing the potential of “the generalized other” in real life, *Gekijōban Dōbutsu no Mori* was released only in Japan in 2006, despite amassing 1.7 billion Yen (approximately 16,216,000 USD) at the box office (Internet Archive 2012) and the franchise’s continued popularity. Adding to the surprise, Nintendo of America made a statement in 2007 expressing that they did not intend to release the film in their jurisdiction (rawmeatcowboy 2007). Because of Nintendo’s decisions, information about the movie’s promotion is limited to Japanese announcements in the magazine *Hochi Shimbun* (Groenendijk 2006), a website (Internet Archive 2007), and video trailers (OLM n.d.). Currently, any interviews with the cast and director are limited to an untranslated *Gekijōban Dōbutsu no Mori* promotional booklet available only to those who bought the Japan-exclusive movie DVD (Nintendo 2006). Irrespective of these decisions, franchise fans collaborated to create subtitled (Automatic-Reindeer14 2023) and dubbed (siilhouette 2014) adaptations to share online for all to enjoy while archiving information about the movie to wikis and WayBackMachine. Unsurprisingly, the efforts of the fan base to use their talents to reach a collective goal encapsulates the message of the film and games, sharing this community cherry pie.

CONCLUSION

Considering the insightful sociological lessons *Gekijōban Dōbutsu no Mori* and the Animal Crossing film games offer for real-life experiences, the authors wish to leave readers with the lyrics to “K.K. Bossa” as a reminder that though life may not be easy, whether it be experienced through film, game, or real life, we are not alone when it comes to the feelings and tribulations that come with navigating friendships, the desire to belong, and the individual pursuit of dreams. Notably, Ai understands “K.K. Bossa” as an inspirational song about her friendship with Margie; it is about the pursuit of dreams and taking life into your own hands to fulfill such dreams. Knowing this, Margie had to take the opportunity to fulfill her dreams and encouraged Ai to do the same. Paralleled to Ai’s experience, the song serves as a reminder that just as life does not end when friends venture out into the world to make their cherry pies, neither do ours when we pursue our own as we are all part of one large “generalized other” that hopes the best for one another and ourselves.

“K.K. Bossa”

Waves crashing down, splashes and beauty resound;
Oh, oh, oh,
Where the shore ends, become unwound.
Treasure is found down by the sands of the sea;
unlock the door, you may have the key...
Out past the door, Adventure lies;
Thrills are in store, Worthwhile and engaging.
Open your eyes, Roll on with the tide;
and maybe, you’ll find there’s a new life awaiting.
Waves crashing down, splashes and beauty resound;
Oh, oh, oh,
Where the shore ends, become unwound.
Treasure is found down by the sands of the sea:
its calling out, it’s time to be free.

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Reviews | Video Game Film | Santana and Whiting 201

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Esai Santana (He/Him) is an undergraduate senior at California State University, Los Angeles who transferred from East Los Angeles with an A.A. Degree in both Sociology and in General Studies: Social and Behavioral Sciences. Graduating in Spring 2024 with a B.A. Degree in Sociology, he joined CSF as an opportunity to connect more with his peers in sociology, step out of his comfort zone, and take an interest in publishing a journal. His main sociological research interests include inequalities, sexuality, and gender. As a video game enjoyer, he co-authored a review on *Gekijōban Dōbutsu no Mori*, a movie on the Animal Crossing Franchise focused on the development of self.

Lauren Whiting (She/They) is a Sociology M.A. student at CSULA but attended AVC for their ADT in Sociology and CSUB-AV for their B.A. in Sociology: Human Services. Lauren's sociological areas of interest cover topics such as US interactions with and perceptions of the justice system and the parent-child relationship when parenting with disabilities. For her thesis, she hopes to explore the influence of parental religiosity on the relationship between disabled parents and their children. Their passion for these topics offered them opportunities to tutor, present at six conferences, and receive various accolades. While working toward their M.A., Lauren is a case manager at a reentry nonprofit in the Antelope Valley. With a passion for supporting others, participating in CSF as a peer reviewer and media team member has offered Lauren the joy of aiding fellow students in their journey of sharing their passions with others.