

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: *A Short Hike*
Platform: PC, Switch, Xbox, PS4, PS5
Genre: Adventure
Release Date: July 30, 2019
Developer: Adam Robinson-Yu
Publisher: Whippoorwill Limited
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Adam Robinson-Yu

Overview

A Short Hike is an indie exploration game, solo developed by Adam Robinson-Yu. The player controls Claire, a young bird visiting her aunt in the scenic Hawk Peak Provincial Park. To her dismay, she has no cell phone signal, and must make her way up to the peak of the mountain in the middle of the island. The player is greeted with beautiful, pixelated and cel-shaded landscapes, spanning upwards to let you explore. They must find golden feathers to go further up the mountain, with these collectables demanding both exploration and development of bonds with different island residents.

Characters

- **Claire** – The player character, is an eccentric and endearing bird, who slowly grows more confident in herself as she's forced to venture out into the island and meet more people.
- **Aunt May** - Claire's mentor figure and guardian, encouraging her to climb the mountain and listening to Claire as she reports back to her. She's a park ranger and is well-loved by the other residents, with many of the characters recognizing Claire through their resemblance.
- **Claire's Mother** - Prior to the game, Claire's Mother went through a surgery she hadn't told Claire about, and the core motivation for Claire to reach the peak is to call her and make sure she's okay. While she only appears in text, she serves as an important motivating figure for Claire.
- **Residents** - The island is full of life, with eccentric characters scattered around the island, each helping Claire branch out. All of them have brief storylines, with Claire either learning something from them, or helping them with a problem of their own. While most of these characters are fairly inconsequential, they all serve to add to the game's atmosphere. Side quests include helping another hiker brave the climb, bringing back a young painter's passion, helping pay off another bird's college tuition, and others' lost prized possessions.

Breakdown

At face value, *A Short Hike* appears to be a simple, aptly named, brief game, but it strings together a touching narrative, primarily through nonverbal exploration and lighthearted dialogue. Like so many of its indie contemporaries, *A Short Hike* maps out the progression of unlocks and player growth with character development. While the narrative doesn't take itself too seriously, the environments and fleeting intimate moments help give the game a unique feeling of emotional catharsis.

The game begins with Claire being dropped off at the ferry to Hawk Peak by her mother, nearly falling asleep in the car, before cutting to her first day on the island. Having waited around in May's house, waiting for a call, presumably from her mother, Claire learns that there's no cell service outside of the island's peak. This throws her into adventure, embarking on a journey to reach the summit. There's little sense of urgency to the game, allowing players the luxury of exploring the game's beautiful environments at any pace.

Some feathers are hidden in platforming sections of the island, while others require the player to form bonds with the various NPCs scattered across the island. While the game nearly grants the player free reign to explore the island, there is still subtle railroading to help them find the early tutorials, with paths leading to another bird who helps teach you to fly, a rock-climbing club who helps you scale mountains, and a park ranger who sells you feathers and speaks fondly of May. While occasionally, these tutorialized segments can tend to break immersion, the charming exchanges Claire has with these people helps to ground the player in the world, with her telling them she already knows these things, *everybody* knows these things.

Part of the non-verbal, subtle influences to indicate character growth are hidden in the game's adaptive music system. Inspired by soundtracks for games like *Firewatch* and *Animal Crossing: New Leaf*, as well as artists like Sufjan Stevens and Steve Reich, the music is relaxing and ambient, using minimal, natural-sounding instruments to accompany the journey. The further up the mountain Claire goes, the more triumphant and complex the music becomes, reactive to the stark weather as the altitude increases.

When Claire reaches the peak of the mountain, the music fades out, with the only noise being the strong winds blowing through the summit. After sitting for a moment, overlooking the northern lights, Claire finally receives a call from her mother. She tells her how happy she is to hear from her, how she's hiked to the peak of Hawk Mountain to speak to her. Her mother fondly recounts her memories of hiking up the mountain with May. She comments on how big Claire is getting, how she's finally leaving the nest and won't need her anymore; Claire insists that she *does* need her, and finally asks her mother about her surgery—information that had only been told to Claire after her arrival on the island and is withheld from the player. Claire's mother tells her she didn't need to worry, and that she was afraid of getting her worked up, and they begin to bicker about whether she should have told her, before Claire tells her that she's just glad that she's okay, and that she loves her. The screen begins to rumble, and we can see that the hot springs on the summit are causing an updraft. Her mother encourages her to fly up it, lifting herself into the air, far above the island.

Afterwards, Claire can slowly descend through the island, and return to Aunt May's home, where she tells her everything she did that day. Each thing she tells her about, aside from reaching the peak, is dictated by the side quests you've completed, and helps to celebrate both Claire and the player's journey.

Strongest Element

A Short Hike's progression system functions for perfect ludonarrative harmony, with the collectibles the player finds, the skills they pick up throughout the climb, and Claire's character development. Each time you get a new golden feather, Claire can fly higher, which undermines the self-doubt and anxiety she feels at the beginning of the game. The hike can be seen as a metaphor for self-improvement, overcoming depression, or at the face value of finding the strength to climb a mountain; regardless of interpretation, the completion of the climb is imbued with quasi-ambiguous sentiment that allows the player to extrapolate their own personal takeaways.

Unsuccessful Element

While the player is rewarded with generous flexibility in how they explore the island, their interactions with characters tend to be tracked in one specific way. Upon rare occasion, the player is given dialogue choices, but generally, it's a simple "yes/no" response, one that is a means to a mechanical end, rather than a narrative one. This is likely intentional— Claire is not meant to be a blank slate protagonist and is meant to go about the game through a specific lens. However, this feels directly dissonant with the link between exploration and gameplay informing character growth; if part of the story is about making your own path, should the player not also be granted some agency in creating your own self?

Highlight

The moment when Claire calls her mother is perfectly crafted to toe the lines between personal intimacy and universality. There are bits and pieces of their experiences and relationship explicitly signaled, but the more emotional beats are spelled out in a way that the player may recognize in one of their own relationships, whether it's with one of their parents or not. This leads into the liberating flight down, accompanied by beautifully orchestrated music, as the sky shifts from gradient to gradient. As you overlook the areas you've traversed, looking much smaller than they once seemed, your final victory lap feels like a celebration not just of the game, but of life.

Critical Reception

Overall, critics were overwhelmingly receptive of *A Short Hike*, as was its audience. It currently sits at an 88 on Metacritic and a 10/10 on Steam— these are incredibly impressive scores for a solo developed game of its caliber.

Khee Hoo Chan for Gamespot gave *A Short Hike* a 9/10, praising the emotional intimacy of the game and the loving way it embraces the mundane. Similarly, for Nintendo Life,

Stuart Gipp awarded the game a 10/10, praising the fact that every section of the game felt meaningful, making for a “fat-free” experience. Writing for the Washington Post, Christopher Byrd praised the game’s lack of difficulty, although still described *A Short Hike* as an achievement in game design (although it was not given any score).

It won the grand prize and audience award at the Independent Game Festival and received several separate nominations at The Golden Joystick Awards and the D.I.C.E. Awards. Of the reviews aggregated on sites like Metacritic and OpenCritic, there are none that are anything but overwhelmingly positive. As of the completion of this essay, 14,335 of the user reviews on Steam are positive, while only 105 are negative. The negative review with the highest likes comes from a user with the name “I’m Not Sue”, who claimed that the game’s brevity leaves it with little room to shine, and that the story feels reliant upon clichés. They criticized the unconditional positivity throughout the game, and lack of significant conflict.

Lessons

- **Simplicity is key.** Less can be more for narrative, as well as gameplay and visuals. *A Short Hike* is not gimmicky or flashy in its presentation, and strips down to the essentials. Adam Robinson-Yu wanted to attempt to make a short, compelling game with visual charm, despite minimal art skills— and for what the game needed to achieve, it worked perfectly.
- **Marry gameplay and narrative.** Each aspect of the game’s design helps to either enhance or imply new information about Claire and her world. There is not a single NPC whose tutorials and side quests don’t add new charm to the world or more emotional depth.
- **Personal choice makes personal value.** Giving the player free reign in how they explore a game, rather than the illusion of choice, gives them the opportunity to craft their own story. We can feel like we’re on Claire’s journey ourselves, because we have absolute control over the way that we tackle it.

Summation

A Short Hike is a game crafted with love for video games, storytelling, and the human experience. The simplicity of the game works to its benefit, making its story accessible and timeless. Every character on the island feels like their own person, with their own lives that change as the player explores. These themes of self-improvement and overcoming hardship are almost given more weight by the levity with which they’re handled, with the charming, light-hearted dialogue making emotional moments feel even more powerful.