

Forager
James Moller
Klutch Kitten Gaming Podcast
02/14/20

Introduction:

[upbeat intro music]

Hello and welcome everyone! This is James Moller, also known as Klutch Kitten, and I'm so glad that you're here for Episode 67 of the show!

Something I hope you've noticed over your time tuning in is that the podcast has incrementally improved. Most changes have been small and iterative, but more recently I've been pursuing some bigger changes with the goal of improving the quality and focus of the podcast.

Because it's important to keep you in the loop, I want to briefly mention a couple of those changes:

First off, I realized that roundtable episodes don't exactly fit the primary goal of the show. That being said, I would be incredibly bummed if I got rid of them. So, the compromise I've come to is that they'll no longer be released in place of normal reviews; instead, they'll be bonus content released alongside a standard episode.

Second, I'm finally adding transcripts to the show. Starting with the Coffee Talk episode, there will be a link in the show notes to where you can find that information.

Beyond those two items, I have another big change in the works, so stay tuned for that news in the future!

Without further ado, let's jump into this week's review!

[transition music]

Game Facts:

Today we're going to be discussing Forager, which is a crafting and exploration game that feels a little bit like someone threw 2D Zelda, Minecraft, Stardew Valley, and an idle game into a blender to see what it would make. The primary question we have to ask ourselves then, is whether the drink ends up being one of those gross vegetable smoothies that

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pretends to taste good or whether it becomes a delicious milkshake that makes a brain freeze worth the pain.

Forager was developed by Mariano Cavallero, who is also known as HopFrog, and I appreciate the story of how this game originated because it was initially made for a game jam in just 2 weeks. It ended up winning second place in the competition, and after gaining traction on itch.io as well, HopFrog partnered with Humble Bundle to bring the game to a wider audience.

I think what's so inspiring about the story is the fact that it's developed by a single person. Just like with Concerned Ape and Stardew Valley, it always feels good to root for solo developers.

Forager ended up releasing on April 18th of 2019 for PC and on July 30th of 2019 for Switch and PS4. Currently it costs \$19.99, and according to howlongtobeat.com, it takes around 13 hours to finish the main story and upwards of 22 hours if you're a completionist! For a game that initially looks simple, there's a lot of content to consume.

Let's move on now to the narrative!

[transition music]

Narrative:

Whenever I play games where the story is not at all a core element, the beginning of this section feels so lonely! The thing is, Forager just isn't a game that's focused on narrative. You play as a little dude on a small plot of land, and although you meet characters along your journey, most of them are only there to provide quests for progression.

Even though there aren't story beats to evaluate, HopFrog still built a world with its own unique feel. Sure, there are dark dungeons with enemies and mysterious wizards to assist, but the overarching tone of the game is bright. It's a world that doesn't take itself too seriously. Foes are cute despite trying to slash your face off, unlockable outfits are completely ridiculous, and NPCs you interact with are humorous.

There's a relatively small amount of writing in the game, but what's there, despite containing some pretty wacky stuff,

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stays consistent across the board, and that's pretty much all I could ask for in a game that's mechanically focused.

Since the gameplay is what drives Forager, let's shift our gaze and dive right in.

[transition music]

Gameplay:

Before we get into the nitty-gritty, system details, let's set the scene for what Forager is. Using a 2D, top-down perspective, the game starts you out on a small island with nothing more than a pickaxe. Like any mature gamer, the first thing you do is start hitting things with your tool! You hit a tree...BOOM, wood! You hit a rock...BOOM, stone! You hit a cow...BOOM, steak! You hit a...well, you get the picture. The pickaxe hits things. Although that makes up about 50% of what you do in the game, it ends up being a bit more complex than that.

Just like in Stardew and Minecraft, you don't just hit things because you're pissed off. You hit things to farm crafting materials. Let's look at a basic example: You mine stone to build a furnace, which then allows you to build brick out of more stone and coal, which then allows you to build other structures or brick flooring or...golden boots for some reason! Everything in this game can be used to craft something else, which then can be used to craft something else!

At this point you're probably picking up on the core loop. Farming materials to craft other materials and so on, and although this is a huge part of the game, let's touch on a couple other aspects before we talk about the overall strengths and weaknesses.

Dungeons and Puzzles: These are where a lot of the Zelda influence comes into play. As you slowly expand your play space by purchasing new land, you'll stumble upon dungeons to fight your way through and also funky puzzles to solve. A puzzle could consist of interacting with an object in the correct way, deciphering a pattern in the environment, or cracking the code of a riddle. I found that these elements did an excellent job of breaking up that core loop of farming and crafting.

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The last big piece of the game that really influences your goals is the museum. You know the Community Center in Stardew? The museum is essentially that without the strings of rescuing a town that's in shambles. There are bundles for farming, crafting, foraging, and so on, and as you complete those bundles, you gain special rewards. Unlike the puzzle and dungeon aspects, which are there to provide breaths of fresh air, the museum is there to provide additional meaning to all the farming and crafting.

Now that we've touched on the main pillars of the game, let's discuss some overarching strengths and weaknesses

As a quick side-note in the spirit of vulnerability, if you've been listening to the show for any amount of time, you've probably caught onto my love for lists like this. Maybe it's a crutch or a speaking fopaux, but I adore how organized it feels.

Anyways, the first and foremost strength is how the loop is designed. In a game like Stardew Valley, there's a decent amount of grinding. You might spend three days in the mines saving up enough stone for a barn. You might spend 11 days watering seeds to reap a daily harvest of hops. You might even fish for an entire day so that you can eventually get good enough to catch a damn Octopus.

The point is that grinding in Stardew, and actually a lot of games can be tedious and time-consuming. Generally grinding provides the means to an end, but what's unique about Forager is that grinding is almost the entire point of the experience. Hold up though, before you shut off the episode and completely ignore this game, it's important to understand why it's actually okay. Unlike many games where grinding is part of a slow process, Forager creates a loop that's constantly moving.

This is where the whole idle game aspect comes into play. Most actions you do in Forager are simple and quick, and instead of rewarding deliberate and planned choices, the game rewards action.

Every second is filled with things you can do! Early on options are more limited, but once you're an hour or so in, you could be collecting materials, farming food, crafting items, brewing potions, slaying enemies, solving puzzles, catching bugs and so on. It's a little bit like when you're playing pinball and activate a multi-ball. Things get crazy and are a bit

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overwhelming, but the feeling of unlocking the combo and point potential is captivating. Forager is like a never-ending multi-ball. Juggling all of the different tasks can get crazy, but the way actions create chain-reactions of satisfaction is addicting. That was a super long-winded first strength, but I think it's a key element to the enjoyment of the game.

The second strength has to do with progression and motivation. Clearly, even a fast-paced game will lose its luster if there isn't enough depth to the experience. Thankfully, HopFrog did an outstanding job of combating boredom through the use of a skill-tree and the Museum. We've already covered how well the instant gratification aspect of the game is nailed down, but the skill-tree and Museum extend the longevity of enjoyment by creating additional layers of motivation.

When it comes to the skill tree, you only get to unlock one skill each time you level up, which can take anywhere from five to thirty-five minutes depending on how efficient you are. Right there is your medium layer of motivation. It's not instant, but it's right around the corner and feels like an actual accomplishment. It also feeds back into the core loop by providing some very useful tools. Most of the skills have to do with adding something new or increasing the efficiency of what you already have.

The deepest layer of progression and motivation is seen in the museum. Bundles are designed to take time and require a certain level of skill diversity to complete. Although you don't interact with the museum often, it provides that final, long-term level of motivation which carries you through the moments that start to feel slow.

The last gameplay strength I want to mention is simple yet important. Almost all, if not all, of the simple actions you do are fun on their own. This goes hand in hand with the sound design, but even something as basic as hitting rocks ends up being enjoyable. Likewise, combat is satisfying and easy enough to keep from becoming frustrating.

When it comes to gameplay weaknesses, there are three elements I believe could be improved.

First off, respawning after death is a pain in the ass. Maybe I missed something obvious, but when I would die, I'd be kicked to the main menu and have to load back into my save. To

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be fair, this isn't like Hotline Miami where you're dying left and right, and the game does do a good job of reloading where you were, but it took way longer to respawn than I would have liked.

Second, this could be a matter of taste, but things get pretty messy visually. When machines finish producing products and resources drop from farming, they lay on the ground until you run close enough to pick them up. On one hand, it's fun running around being a human vacuum, but as you add more resources and machines to keep track of, the visuals become a bit overwhelming. Again, maybe you'll be a fan of this aspect, but for me, I would have appreciated a cleaner look.

Last but not least, I found there to be an inherent lack of information. I'm sorry to bring it back to Stardew again, but it's the perfect comparison. If you're anything like me, you progressed a season or two into the game and decided to start an entirely new farm with all the information you learned in that time. Although Stardew can definitely be a "relax and fuck around" game, min-maxing the experience feels so good, and when you start out with next to no idea what to do, you end up wasting a lot of time on things that might not even matter!

Similarly, there's a lot of depth and choices to be made in Forager. On one hand, it's really awesome to have so much freedom: you can choose what to focus your efforts on, you can choose what direction to take your skills, and you can choose which piece of land to buy! The freedom of choice is wonderful, but I would have appreciated more direction without having to constantly go to the Wiki. For example, I only learned later on that if I had invested in magic skills early, I would have been able to increase my XP gain for everything I did. Also, because I didn't buy land in the direction of the caverns early on, the resource of bones was completely inaccessible as far as I could tell. That ended up locking me out of a bunch of items and resources for a good amount of time.

Again, there's absolutely a positive aspect to this complaint, but I found that the lack of information ended up being more of a weakness than a strength.

Let's move on now to the art and sound design!

[transition music]

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Art & Sound Design:

Visually this game is colorful, cartoony, and cute - all of which pair well with the humorous tone of the game. I wouldn't use Forager as a showpiece for the kind of artistic prowess that pixel artists can achieve, but honestly, that's okay. Even though I wasn't wowed by the art, it fit the game like a glove, and it wasn't in your face like the visuals of something like Pit People.

When it comes to the soundtrack, my opinion is very similar. The music is simple, sweet, and matches the vibe of the game. When you listen closely to the music, there's a lack of depth and complexity that I would have loved to hear, but it's not like it ruined my time with the game. It was good - no more, no less.

What I do want to praise, however, is the sound effects design. The 'clink' of mining stone, the 'ring' of scavenging gems, and the 'thunk' of hitting trees. I found the vast majority of sounds added to the feeling of gratification as I was going about my tasks. If there were any obnoxious sounds, they must not have been too bad because none come to mind.

[transition music]

Summary:

Now that we've talked about the narrative, gameplay, art and sound design, let's summarize with some positives and negatives:

First off on the positive side, the tone and feel of the world that HopFrog built fit the experience nicely. I appreciate how it's funny and loose without being obnoxious.

Second, the core loop and compelling progression system create a game that makes time melt away. Sometimes playing a game for the podcast feels like pulling teeth, but by the time I got to 5 hours, I kept convincing myself that I needed just a little bit more time for the review. It was addicting as hell!

Third, the sound effects in particular are designed in such a way that they positively impact the loop of the game. Honestly, I think HopFrog has a second career waiting for him in

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the slot machine design industry. All I can say is that I'm thankful Forager doesn't have micro transactions because I'd be broke if it did.

On the negative side, the only point I'd like to reiterate is that I would have liked a bit more guidance when it comes to skills and buying land in particular. Again, this could be a controversial complaint since I'm essentially asking for more restriction, but I personally dislike the feeling of getting an hour or two into a game and finding out that I wasn't being very efficient with my time. It just feels bad.

[transition music]

Verdict:

We've made it now to the final boss! This is the part of the podcast where I let you know whether you should slay the game and buy it, flee the game and avoid it, or farm up and wait for a sale. My verdict for Forager is to slay this game.

Initially when I started playing, I was expecting a Stardew clone, but it didn't take long to realize that Forager is a very different and special experience. For the price, you're going to get far more than your money's worth out of the time! Definitely pick this game up!

[transition music]

Conclusion:

As always, thank you all so much for taking the time to listen in! If you like the show, don't forget to give it a five star review on Apple Podcasts and tell a friend!

You can reach me with your thoughts, questions, recommendations, and flame at klutchkittengaming@gmail.com, on Instagram and Facebook @klutchkittengaming, and on Twitter @kkgpodcast.

I hope you have a lovely rest of the day, and I'll see you in game!

[upbeat outro music]