

Village Sim

Overview

Throw The Sims on a deserted island, add the ability to breed and to play when your not even there, and top it off with Tech trees and "island events", and you've got Village Sim. Well, sort of...

Gameplay (7/10)

Let me preface this part of the review by stating that there will probably be some minor spoilers thrown in, mainly because I'm not sure I can explain certain things without them. Also, just to keep this review from becoming a novella, let me encourage you to visit the forums at

<http://www.ldwsoftware.com/ubbthreads/ubbthreads.php> and peruse the board for Village Sim to get more information on what the game is all about. There's way too much to chronicle here.

You start off the game in one of three modes: Low, Medium or High (Easy, Normal and Hard in terms of difficulty). Low nets you 6 villagers and 100 food to start, Medium gives you 5 villagers and 50 food, and High sticks with 5 villagers but starts you off with 0 food. Having said that, keep in mind that the rest of the review is written from the standpoint of the Easy level, because I never ventured further than that.

In the beginning your villagers don't have much of a desire to do anything. Being the great tribal leader that you are, you coax them into being productive by dragging them over certain hotspots on the map to teach them how to do things (the berry bush instructs them in the ways of farming, while the broken hut trains them in the art of Home Depot sales!). As your villagers become more proficient at a task, they will start to do it from time to time on their own. To help this process, you can select certain skills to be a villagers' specialty, and they will gravitate towards that skill, even when there are other things to do.

There are five skills in the game: Farm/Fish, Research, Breeding, Healing and Construction. For the most part these skills are self explanatory, and they are all important for obvious reasons. One I'd like to focus on for a moment is Research. When one of your villagers researches you earn Tech points. Tech points are used to increase levels in a particular tech tree. There are six tech trees in Village Sim: Harvesting, Science, Fertility Medicine, Building and Spirituality. The first five correlate to the skills mentioned above, and Spirituality "enlightens" your villagers and I think helps them solve puzzles.

So what do the tech trees do? They allow you to get more advanced with your skills. For instance, At Harvest level 1, all you can do is pick berries from the bush. The bush will eventually be barren. At Harvesting level 2, however, you can plant a garden, thereby increasing your food supply. The same type of logic holds true for the rest of the Tech trees and their related skills. It takes some experimentation to decide what order to increase tech levels in, but I definitely recommend your first purchase be level two in Harvesting.

In addition to everything you do directly, there are two types of things you do indirectly. The first is to solve puzzles. There are 12 puzzles in the game, and once you've solved all 12 puzzles you have completed the game. The first puzzle I usually complete in the game is building the first hut (here's one of those spoilers I mentioned - I just wanted you to have an idea of what a puzzle



might be). The second thing you have little control over is Island Events. Unlike puzzles, there's no defined maximum on the number of events you will encounter. So far I've topped out at 4 events, though one of them was the same event, just for two different villagers. While you don't get to choose the events, some of them do allow you to make a decision regarding the outcome of the event.



Finally (there's much more I could write about, but it's time to wrap this up), I need to talk about the "play while you're away" option. There are four speeds in Village Sim: Paused, Slow, Normal and Fast. When the game is paused you can do things like view stats and set skill preferences, but nothing will progress in your game. However, when you have any other speed selected, time will pass whether you're playing the game or not. Basically what happens is the game takes the difference between when you last exit the game and next start it up and determines what all your villagers have been doing during that time.

I highly suggest NOT using the Fast speed when you're first starting out a game, especially if you leave the speed option set for any length of time while you're not playing the game. My first couple of full games ended rather quickly when I left the speed on fast, forgot about my village over the weekend, and came back to an island full of bones. This was both the biggest plus and biggest drawback for me. Personally, I think the game is unplayable if you have to babysit your villagers all the time. However, even using the "play while away" option, I felt very disheartened when I invested a couple of weeks in a game - on the easy level, no less - only to find out that somehow I failed and all my villagers were going to die before I even had a chance to breed some new ones. This doesn't leave me with much of a desire to play over and over again.

Graphics (6/10)

Like the other simulation products from LDW, the graphics are not breathtaking, but they serve their purpose quite adequately. The people aren't quite pixilated, but they aren't very detailed, either. The background is pleasing enough, and the interface is very well done. Nothing really stands out graphically, but in the same vein nothing is out of place.

Controls (6/10)

For the most part the controls are solid. In the map view, your only option is to click somewhere on the map to zoom in. Once zoomed in you can scroll around the map by clicking and dragging. While a nice feature, it gets to be cumbersome even with the relatively small size of the map. To select a villager, click on them when you're zoomed in. In order to entice a villager to do something specific, you must click on them and drag them to a certain destination. If you want them to pick berries, drag them to the bush at the top of the island. For the budding scientists, drag them to the table in the middle of the island. When your villagers are horny (this is your judgment call) drag a guy onto a girl or vice versa, and maybe things will click between them. This is the hardest one to pull off, because unless you hit the two of them just right they don't realize you're trying to get them together. The menus are nicely laid out and fairly intuitive. The only complaint I have here is that you need to go into the Puzzles menu option to get to the statistics for your game, which seems a bit out of place. If anything it would have made more sense to see these two options reversed - make Stats the menu option and Puzzles a button off of Stats.

Sound (8/10)

The sound in Village Sim is very well done. The effects usually match what the villagers are doing, and the music is soothing and hangs well in the background. Ironically, this is one of the first games I've played where I felt some sort of background music wasn't really necessary, due to the nature of the game mechanics. I'm glad they included a few tunes, however, as it makes the whole experience that much more pleasant.

Options (10/10)

Sound and music can both be turned on and off, and the volume of the music is configurable. There are 3 difficulty levels: Easy, Medium and Hard. In addition, you can play the game in 1 of 4 modes: Paused, Slow, Normal and Fast. Check out the Gameplay section for more details on how the mode affects the game.



Replay Value (7/10)

Intrinsically there is a lot of replay value to Village Sim. Trying to master the 3 difficulty levels alone will keep you busy thru several games. To some extent the puzzles can be solved in varying order, so there's a few more games. You can always try to continually shorten the amount of time it takes you to beat certain puzzles. Try varying the order in which you build up your technologies (again this has only limited flexibility), or try different combinations of skill sets on your people. There are likely limitless ways you can change your playing experience with this game. Personally, though, I don't know that I feel compelled to try all those combinations. I have to rate this category high because the options are there, but then I drop the score again because even though the options are there, there's not necessarily a reason or desire to use them.

Summary

Technically, I think this is one of the most advanced sims I've played on a PDA, at least in terms of options versus playability. Personally, I'm not sure that it would draw me into repeated play sessions, but if you really enjoy sim games, Village Sim is a hard one to beat.

The Good

- Decent graphics
- Plenty of gameplay
- Good sound & music
- Plays itself for you

The Bad

- Drag & drop controls were cumbersome
- Takes too long to realize you've failed

Overall Rating (7/10)