

Discounty adds some bite to cozy life sims

There's a pleasing rhythm to cozy life sims. The virtual days pass, filled with chores of tending crops or running a business, punctuated by strange mysteries or evolving relationships. At their best, these games merge busywork with exploration and storytelling, in a way that makes them hard to step away from. *Discounty*, from developer Crinkle Cut Games, applies this idea to running a small-town supermarket. And while in many ways it can still be considered "cozy" like its contemporaries, it also comes with a bit of bite.

Instead of starting up your own business from scratch, *Discounty* has you taking over a grocery franchise from your cranky aunt in a small town that has seen better days. It's a strange place; the most famous resident is the inventor of the keyring, and parts of the surrounding woods have been closed off for safety reasons. But it's still friendly and comforting in the way small towns are, with a handful of residents who you're really able to get to know over the course of the game. There's also plenty of drama.

Actually running the store is your main job. From open to close, you are the only employee, so you have to deal with everything from managing the cash register – which involves, gasp, doing math – and keeping the shelves stocked so no one complains there's no coffee or shampoo. But you also handle all the behind-the-scenes work: ordering new products, organizing the storage area, throwing out the trash, even negotiating with local vendors for fresh fish and produce. This part of the game is satisfying because it requires you to focus on what's immediately in front of you (a bunch of picky

customers) while also planning and strategizing for the future.

As you progress, your shop will expand both in terms of what you can sell and its physical size, which in turn makes the core gameplay loop more complex and challenging. In order to move things forward, though, you'll have to get involved with the townsfolk. Working with local vendors usually means doing them some kind of favor, whether it's finding some lost sheep or stocking gross Christmas-themed fish sticks. This can pull you down all kinds of narrative rabbit holes.

What's most interesting about *Discounty*'s story is how it explores a number of real-world issues in its otherwise cozy and silly world. For starters, not everyone is happy about a big chain moving into town. When I finally expanded my shop's footprint, usually a moment to celebrate in these kinds of games, everyone was mad because I did it by taking over an adjacent tea shop. The cafe had been shut down for years, but everyone still viewed it as an important part of the fabric of the community, and I was dismantling that.

Sometimes succeeding in the game isn't actually good for the town itself. And while these threads often hide their darker edge behind humor – in order to get a construction permit, I had to help a city clerk dispose of environmental impact reports – *Discounty* is surprisingly sharp with its commentary, even if it never goes especially hard at any of its targets.

That mixture of satisfying gameplay and a story that's both relatable and genuinely funny is what makes *Discounty* work so well. It's not an escape to an idyllic farm or mountain getaway. It's you doing a job that's hard and not always pretty, while trying to make the best of things. Most of us know just what that's like.

Discounty is available now on the Switch, PlayStation, Xbox, and PC.

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