

Coffee Talk
James Moller
Klutch Kitten Gaming Podcast
02/07/20

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 66 of the show!

I'm working to put a lot of my informational content at the back of the show, but whenever there are new 5-star reviews on apple podcasts, they're worth mentioning here. What's even cooler is that this week there were three new reviews! They came to us from ShadowoftheCollector, Mr.Sadface, and Round-up. From the bottom of my heart, thanks to all three of you fine people for the kind words and for listening to the podcast - Reviews like these are so encouraging and also help to boost the show's visibility.

Now that we have the important stuff out of the way, let's move on to this week's game.

[transition music]

Game Facts:

Today we're going to be looking at Coffee Talk, which is a visual novel blended with a barista simulator in a very similar vein to VA-11 HALL-A.

Coffee Talk was released on January 29th of 2020 and was developed by an Indonesian studio called Toge Productions. What's interesting about the studio is that Toge isn't just an arbitrary name - it's an Indonesian word which means 'bean sprout' and was chosen with the idea that great accomplishments can start from small and simple beginnings, just like with bean sprouts!

I really like the concept because it does an amazing job of describing where this studio started. It began back in 2009 when Kris Antoni started making Flash games with a friend as a side hustle, and at a certain point they ended up creating a hit called Infectonator. After that, the rest is history. Toge has now become a sort of flagship in the Indonesian indie scene, and the latest game they've brought us is Coffee Talk.

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Currently Coffee Talk is available for \$12.99 on PC, PS4, Switch and Xbox 1 and according to my Steam statistics, it took me about 3 hours to beat.

Given that this is a visual novel, controls are pretty straightforward, so play it on whatever suits you best.

Let's move on now to the narrative!

[transition music]

Narrative:

[begin chill lo-fi music...]

When most people consider late-night venues, they think of bars and clubs, but for me, I think of Coffee Talk - the midnight cafe I opened up in downtown Seattle. What's intriguing to me is that it doesn't attract your run-of-the-mill coffee nuts. My patrons want a place to relax after a tough day, a place to meet new friends without the aid of liquor, or a place to moonlight on their latest project. That's what makes Coffee Talk so special.

[...end chill lo-fi music]

As I mentioned a minute ago, Coffee Talk is a visual novel that's very similar to VA-11 HALL-A. Instead of playing as Jill the Bartender, you're playing as a late-night, coffee-shop owner who serves characters ranging from the typical to the out-of-this-world.

The game is set in near-future Seattle, which feels pretty familiar in the beginning, but it doesn't take long to see the infusion of fantasy themes in the game. Instead of serving exclusively humans, you'll have patrons who are sea people, Orcs, Werewolves, Succubi and Elves! Even that element isn't too shocking though when you think of the types of patrons you serve in VA-11 HALL-A. So where does that leave us? What about Coffee Talk's writing and narrative makes it stand out, and what about it may have fallen flat?

Let's start out by looking at some of the narrative strengths:

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First and foremost, the narrative and writing is cozy, which is exactly the thing I was hoping for in a coffee shop game. Many of the conversations you have are normal and every day, but even when a conversation takes a turn for the weird, there's still a sense of calm and peace about the experience. It's this sense that no matter what, the next evening you're going to open up the shop to serve more coffee and talk with more unique people

This strength leads well into our second, which is familiarity. What I mean is that as characters continue to show up and order more coffee, you start to learn their likes and dislikes. You know their go-to order and possibly even ingredients they hate. It's a really subtle aspect of the writing that lends to a sense of connection with the characters - which again leads back into that sense of safety and coziness. Even now as I'm not playing, I know that Freya always orders a Triple Espresso - that's just her.

The third narrative strength of Coffee Talk has to do with the way it softens the bite of serious topics. Racism, family dynamics, relational conflict, career disappointment...the list goes on. These all come up as you read through the game, but what I found to be particularly effective was how the fantasy elements of the setting helped to cushion the heaviness of those conversations.

Let's pretend that the game was set in real-life, current day Seattle. If I was playing through that game and topics of racism and politics came up, I would automatically be on my guard. That would be too close to home and unless the game perfectly nailed the balance of writing, those things would probably turn me off to the game.

On the flip-side, Coffee Talk is set in a familiar place with just enough change to make those topics feel less aggressive and in your face. When racism comes up it's in the context of Elves and Succubi and all the fantasy races. Clearly the writers are alluding to real-world issues, but it's presented in a way that is easier to digest.

The last narrative strength I want to mention is the inclusion of small insights into game development. Two of the characters work in the games industry, and it really felt like I was looking into the mind of some of the writers over at Toge Productions. Every time those characters talked about crunch

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time or mechanics or the difficulty of developing games, it almost felt like I was reading a game developer's journal. It was a fascinating addition that you don't see all too often in games.

Let's take a look now at some narrative weaknesses:

First off, I found there to be some small oddities in the world-building. For example, the game was set in 2020 Seattle yet people were smoking in the coffee shop. It adds a cool vibe to the game, but I've been to Seattle plenty of times, and there hasn't been a coffee shop you can smoke in since 2005. Also, the game refers to a music festival called Couchella. Clearly it's a reference to Coachella which takes place in California, but in the game world, the festival is somehow located around Seattle.

You might be thinking to yourself, "James, what the hell man? How can you be cool with Orcs in Seattle but not smoking in a coffee shop or a change in location?"

Although these are super nitpicky examples, I think my issue has to do with those choices feeling careless, and as a result, they hurt my immersion in the game. If the developer wanted to have smoking in a coffee shop, why not change the year to 2030? That's far enough out that I could trick my mind into thinking a law may have been passed to allow that again. And why not choose to parody a music festival that takes place in Washington? Or at least make it clear in the narrative that the festival changed locations.

These complaints are super detailed, but when it comes to a game where the narrative shoulders most of the weight, details are key.

The second narrative weakness has to do with the naming of your character, the coffee shop owner. Instead of presenting a story with the owner already named, it's up to you as the player to give a title to this faceless barista. In the case of Coffee Talk, I think it weakens the story. In a genre that's based on experiencing a tightly written narrative, I found it to be a striking choice. To be fair, if the game gave you a lot of agency over your character's voice and personality, it would make sense, but for a game where character dialogue is set, the choice to give players free reign over a name is confusing.

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As a quick side note, in the back of my mind, I'm laughing at how dumb this critique might sound to some of you, but just like with the smoking and festival points, the enjoyment of Coffee Talk hinges almost entirely on the narrative and world building. It's the little things that can make or break these types of games.

The last narrative weakness I want to mention is probably the least nitpicky of the three: The game tried to pack too many heavy topics into such a short experience. Don't get me wrong, I think games can be an incredible medium for working through real issues. Think back on What Remains of Edith Finch. That game handles the topic of family loss in a powerful way. The issue with Coffee Talk is that it touches on so many deep topics that it doesn't have time to properly address any of them. It's a shame since the setup for cushioning those topics was really good! If this game was 20 hours long, the developers may have been able to handle all the topics with more care, but 3 hours was not enough time.

Now that we've looked at some strengths and weaknesses of the narrative, where does that leave us overall? Despite my complaints, I did find the story to be like comfort food. I related to couple characters in particular, and for the most part the story was entertaining. Before we jump to conclusions though, let's touch on a few other elements of the game.

[transition music]

Gameplay:

Now that we know some about the narrative, what's the gameplay like? Given that this is a visual novel, it won't be surprising that there isn't a lot going on apart from the barista system.

Just like in VA-11 HALL-A, when patrons visit your shop, you get to make them a drink - don't worry though, if you're abysmally bad at making coffee in real life, this system won't drive you crazy. Overall it's pretty simple. You have three ingredient slots, and depending on which ingredients you choose, you'll make unique drinks. For example, if you put coffee in three times, you'll end up making Freya's favorite drink, a triple espresso. If you put in coffee and two servings of milk, you'll get a latte!

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When you make drinks with milk, you do also have the option of creating freeform latte art, but honestly you can only draw a penis one or two times before you feel like a middle schooler again! Because of that, after a few times I just ignored the system altogether.

When it comes to the nuance of the drink system, things start to feel a bit clunky. Since you unlock recipes by discovery, sometimes the hints patrons give you aren't enough. Also, there seems to be technique around which secondary ingredient goes in first, but there wasn't ever a good explanation as to how that works. In addition, the fact that getting a drink wrong didn't matter all that much made me care even less about learning to do it right.

In a very similar way to VA-11 HALL-A, some of the drinks can apparently affect narrative outcomes, but also similar to my critique of VA-11 HALL-A, the way drinks affect the narrative is completely unclear, so it's hard to see that as an actual mechanic.

To wrap up this section, the barista system was fine. It didn't stand out as anything special, but it also didn't detract from the story. It was kind-of just there.

[transition music]

Art & Sound Design:

Now that we've made it through the narrative and gameplay, let's discuss the art and sound design.

On the art side, Toge Productions did an incredible job. The pixel art is cozy, the animations are good, the colors are bold and the characters all look unique! I loved seeing the steam rise off drinks and the smoke drift up from cigarettes! I also like the quick animations that take place whenever you make a drink!

This goes hand in hand with the sound effects as well. There aren't a ton of sounds, but what's there is impactful. The ring of the bell on the door, the tap of footsteps walking to the counter, and the stream of freshly brewed coffee being poured in your cup. The sounds are absolutely delectable.

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When it comes to the soundtrack, it wasn't hard to win me over. The entire playlist consists of perfect coffee-shop lo-fi. Literally, if you go to Spotify and type in "coffee-shop lo-fi", you'll get an almost identical set of songs.

Since I naturally was comparing this game to VA-11 HALL-A, I did miss being able to choose the playlist of songs for the night, but there was still a feature to skip songs, so in some ways it still felt like you had control over the mood.

When I look objectively at the soundtrack, I can't say that it was especially unique, but I absolutely love the genre and it fits the mood and tone of the game so perfectly that it's hard to give it any fault.

[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, this game is like snuggling up under a warm blanket on a rainy night. The vibes are on point, and the way the game makes characters feel like friends is perfect.

Second, the art and animation work is solid. Even the visual design of the coffee shop itself lends well to the relaxed tone of the game.

Third, the sound effects and score bring the audio up to the same level of coziness as the writing.

First off on the negative side, although the inclusion of serious topics is admirable, the lack of focus leaves those elements in limbo. A "less is more approach" could have been a real boon to the writing.

Second, the aggregate of little inconsistencies in world-building hurts the narrative flow.

Third, the barista mechanics don't quite live up to expectations. The lack of system clarity leads to a mediocre experience

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[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 Coffee Talk is to farm up and wait for a sale. Conceptually, this game is gold. Creating a coffee version of VA-11 HALL-A was absolutely brilliant, but in practice, it didn't quite stick the landing. The reason my verdict is to farm up and wait for a sale is because if you're the type of person who eats up visual novels, I think you'll enjoy this game thoroughly, but if you're someone who's looking to get into the genre, this just isn't the place to start.

[transition music]

Conclusion:

As always, thank you all so much for taking the time to listen in!

If you're interested in reaching out to say "hi!", you can find me on Instagram @klutchkittengaming, on Twitter @kkgpodcast and via email at klutchkittengaming@gmail.com. Also, if you enjoy the show, I'd love it if you let a friend know. That's the best way to support the work that I do.

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

[upbeat outro music]