As the first winter comes, you realize that you have no idea of how much food is required to last through the harshest period of the year… and what is the meaning of the newly appeared snowflake icon over several houses? Building a woodcutting lodge may have been the way to avoid your villager’s health dropping through winter, giving them something to fuel the small light that ought to keep them warm, you later think.

Such thoughts and reactions are amongst the most common of those you will encounter when playing Banished. The first thing you will feel while trying to establish you village is this atmosphere of uncertainty that the games creates and it does so while still providing the means of solving every problems you might encounter. Jumping right into the game is feasible but a simple tutorial is at the player’s disposal and lays down the basics of how to get through your first year without all your citizens dying from starvation.

Banished feels like it is a pretty simple game at first glance. Only in the first minutes however, it is clear that the many little parts that make the city management system connect up together in a much more complex entity than it first looked like. Dealing with the equilibrium of gathering resources, choosing who is going to do so and assuring that there will remain some after many years of exploitation defines the game’s essence. Survival first, then sustainability.

What distinguish Banished from other city simulations is the focus on micro-management, which makes it a unique contender in the category. Many resources are to be harvested in Banished, but only a few can be at the beginning due to limitations set by your own starting resources: material, food and most importantly, villagers. The game’s tools meaning, which boldly consist in a series of building icons and villager task assignment tab (tab with which you dispatch your villagers on various kind of jobs), change throughout the game as more subtle manipulations are now deemed crucial. New strategies then arise to optimize the city’s means of resource production. The game does a great job at making the player feel that their micro-management through the citizen assignment tab is important and efficient. As more and more of the tab’s functions are used, the slowly increasing management demand assures that the player will not get overwhelmed.

Notable control is also given to the player through a small time control menu. This gives you the opportunity to learn about the rhythm of the seasons and the changing pace of your city’s growth. Acceleration and time-stopping are useful tools that give a part of flexibility to the lengthy process of building your town in real time. It also gives you the opportunity to stop the time if you ever feel overwhelmed by your new fast-forward playing style.

Basics are taught to you in the 30 minutes or so tutorial and within about an hour and a half the player will already be comfortable with the game. Over the next hours, however, the game’s complexity will continue to be unveiled and the player will continue to learn about means to survival.

The passage of time and the emergence of new needs will make sure the player introduces himself gradually to new challenges in a way that will make him feel in control without sacrificing the perception of challenge. At the beginning, food and firewood will feel like they are the most important fuel for keeping the villagers alive but general health will eventually go down, followed by happiness and luxury resources will become as important. Simple but yet accurate indicators will tell the player about the success or failure of his experiments. The feedback system being very minimalistic, it makes the game respect the player’s decisions without sacrificing any information he may want to get on the impact of his actions. The result is a feeling of freedom experienced in every action you take as the divinity behind this town’s growth. As the player progresses through the seasons and years, he will need to adapt and change the priorities on which he puts effort in order to reach the dreamed-of equilibrium that Banished players strive for. The expansion and the fulfillment of secondary needs are eventually to be addressed and the switch between fundamentals and luxury will make most of the game’s progression flow.

The game’s apparent simplicity is partially due to the graphics and art style, which remain sober while providing pleasant visuals that go hand to hand with the game’s Cartesian spirit. The neat visuals make sure nothing ever gets into the players way of understanding what is going on the screen and still make the admiration of one’s successful city possible due to the overall estheticism. This whole minimalistic-yet-charming experience is wrapped by a soundtrack that captures the imaginary of living a colonial experience such as it is offered in Banished. The background music reminds you that winter is coming or that summer is finally here without having to pay attention to it; it just fits.

While the game has a lot of potential for the many city simulator lovers, it may fall short on some points for the general audience. The ever moving objective that can be felt as the city gets bigger and that needs shift may be a short coming, considering that it is almost the only real objective by itself. The game does not offer a single player campaign with many stages or scenarios to go through to give an explicit sense of progression, which may discourage players of playing more than a couple hours. This may sound like it is not necessarily a problem, however no rewards are aver given to the player for the feats he accomplished by learning new ways of dealing with various problems presenting themselves. This can be a major issue for people who need this extra cheese at the end of a challenge to really feel rewarded. In fact, the only explicit objectives are the achievements that are accessible through the menus but they feel (and are) so remote that they are probably not a good incentive for a player to go on with the several games.

Another point, although less major, worth talking about is the presentation. This may also be relevant to the first point above: while the functionality of the menu and hud, the general presentation of the tools in the game leaves a bit to be desired from its other visual counterpart. The menus are not appealing as they could be and considering the amount of time that the player takes going through them, it would have been an easy goal to achieve to simply make it look a bit sharper. This lack of presentation leaves the game with a part of its form that does not live up to its content potential.

SUMMARY

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| --- | --- | --- |
| What it is good at:   * Efficient game mechanics * Rewarding learning curve * Successfully sets a survival atmosphere |  | What is missing:   * Explicit sense of progression * Good reward system * Attractive presentation |

Banished is a game that successfully reshape one’s thinking about city simulator games. The game achieves a high level of required micro-management by asking the player questions on how and when he wants to use his resources. Both of these questions are addressed with simple tools which take shape as the player learns to master them. This mastery will give the player a sense of control over its survival and will guide him through the challenges that shift as does the focus on resources. However, this well stitched management system lives by the side of an objective system that relies solely on the classic achievement form, leaving much to be desired.

**Screen 1 caption: “I think we should fist build a pasture for those cows”**

**Screen 2 caption: There is no such thing as admiring the result of years of labor… You survived.**