

Play Log 1: Dave the Diver

Musings on a Sushi Game and Filling Appetizers

Overarching Structure:

non-AAA games are often expected to be a meal with a main course, then maybe some sides if you can help it. After all, common wisdom and even experience tells game developers working in smaller teams to maximize their efforts with their limited hours. There's only so much content and narrative that can be meaningful and engaging in a shallow system, and oftentimes shallow systems are what you'll get when you spread your efforts too thin. Best practice for many developer teams then mirrors the model of a minimum viable product, where a compelling gameplay loop centered around as few mechanics as possible is ensured before building up on it.

I cannot speak to the game's developmental approach, but *Dave the Diver* is a game that presents much more than a meal and some sides. It instead presents us with a heaping sample platter of assorted appetizers that ends up being quite filling. Taken in isolation, the mechanics of any one event aren't especially involved or complex, but through its myriad of minigame-like events, structured so that the game successfully builds up a cohesive routine that the player must undergo everyday.

These events and minigames fall into two distinct sections to *Dave the Diver* which encompass a morning/afternoon/evening cycle. Dave dives every morning and afternoon, exploring an procedurally generated ocean world before returning to the sushi bar in the evening, where the restaurant-management sim begins. Below are some observations about the game's mechanics and larger systems that all contribute to its compelling slice-of-life/exploration experience.

Movement/UI:

On land, Dave can move back and forth across on the horizontal axis in a side view. He's able to sprint on a short stamina but that's it for movement options. The game recognizes that the movement on land is basic. Movement on land is a means to get from one location to the next. The sushi bar and the boat that Dave descends from (already such a minimal walking space itself) are not areas to be explored.



Figure 1: Dave serving at the sushi bar

Sections of the game on land could grow tedious with this limited movement and environment but the game's menus and user interface make up for that. Many of the features in the game are easily accessible at any location. The player does not have to physically walk up to the chef or the weaponsmith to unlock new things. They simply have to be in the sushi restaurant to access the bottom menu or open the 'Weapon Shop' app on Dave's phone.

As expected, *Dave the Diver* opens up once he descends into the Big Hole. Underwater, the player is able to move in any direction on screen as they swim. They must keep an eye on their oxygen, which functions as a timer that ticks down. The player must return to the surface before their oxygen tank reaches zero, but the game is rather generous in its generation of oxygen replenisher items along the sea shelves and even escape pods that automatically take the player up to the surface at lower depths. The effect then is that the player is incentivized to go deeper as through exploring further they are also likely to find extend their stay below the waves.



Figure 2: Dave diving 38.8m beneath the waves

Dave starts on the top-left quadrant of the screen every dive as well. Similar to Super Mario, this starting position leaves space on the screen to the right and below, naturally signaling to the player to go away from shore further out in the ocean as well as further down into the depths.

The Aesthetics, Sound, Vibes:

Dave the Diver is serene and simple on the surface, with its calming ambient tracks and its charming artstyle. Characters and Sealife are prominently in the foreground as pixel art sprites. The characters aren't voiced as dialogue boxes pop up either, adding to the laid-back atmosphere.

There are moments of punctuation, however, where the game goes the extra mile and truly distinguishes its style. New upgrades and acquisitions, whether that's a newly crafted weapon or a new item on the menu, come in with a completely bonkers (skippable) animation sequence, and there seem to be several different animations to keep things feeling fresh. Progression is not only varied with several different systems in place but it's also zany and done with flourish, adding to the game's charm and the player's sense of accomplishment.



Figure 3: *The Weaponsmith gets inspiration while crafting a new weapon.*

Agency:

The game centers on Dave's experiences and the agency that it affords its player naturally slots into Dave's characterization as well. It's his position as a proficient diver that attracts the attention of nonplayer characters. He gets stuff put upon him by other characters and he's the kind of quiet, upstanding guy who won't shirk his obligations. It may take him/the player a while, but the tasks put upon them will eventually get done. This, combined with the nature of the Blue Hole that he dives into, a terrain that constantly shifts, results in it being successful as a ludonarrative. Dave, in his reserved good-naturedness, limits agency and ties together all the disparate mechanics and systems that the game offers. Other character's goals become his goals, fulfilling one part of Murray's parameters for a good interactive narrative, one that is "goal driven enough to guide navigation but open-ended enough to allow free exploration" (Murray 134).

The player exercises agency through exploration of the ocean terrain, the constraints in the amount of oxygen they're running on and the increase of more challenging, profitable sea life in deeper depths being a part of a challenge that is satisfying in and of itself. They choose what fish to hunt, what areas to avoid or dive into, what resources to collect in their limited time below the waters, all in an attempt to maximize their resource collection. In the restaurant section, the player can customize how it looks, pick out menu items, have the chef develop

new recipes, and hire staff even before they have to serve a customer. All of these choices have clear consequences.

Progression:

Reduced to what it really is, progression in *Dave the Diver* is the classic “make the number go up higher and invest in things that empower the player’s ability to make the number go higher”. Coins are the sole resource tracked in the top left of the screen and coins are needed for: essential upgrades to gear, items, and hiring out staff at the restaurant. The player derives an innate satisfaction in that progress.

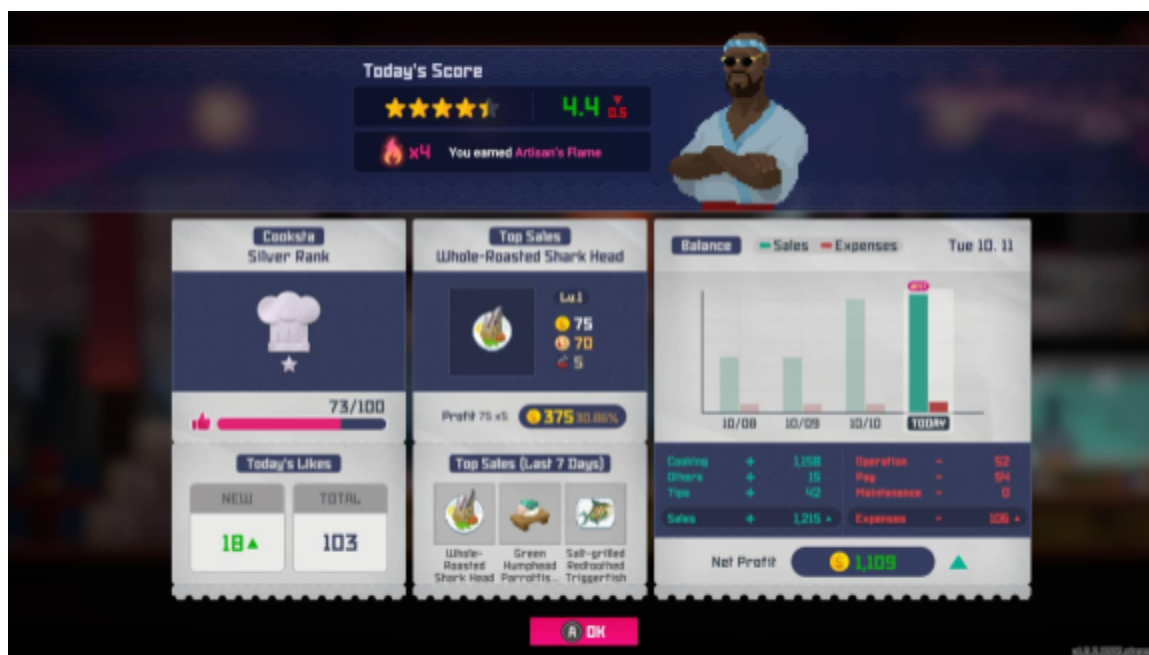


Figure 4: An end of night log following a shift

The real forward thrust of *Dave the Diver* though is that in the diving sections which make up the bulk of the game, you *can* go deeper, you *can* collect more, and that you certainly *will* discover more. Players discover and document new types of fish, craft new items to use to gather more resources, and even start to unravel side plots involving dolphin lovers and ancient civilizations. The game clearly wants to get the player involved in more than just the restaurant front, and I anticipate that later on, once the tasks in the restaurant are mostly automated by hired staff, the sushi will just be a means to get more money to explore the weird stuff.

Pacing:

There *could* be a failstate in the case that the player goes into the red from expenses with no profits but the game started you off in the negative and I'm confident it would continue to let you play if you dipped back into that territory.

The closest thing resembling a fail state I've actually experienced so far is when I got overzealous and ran out of oxygen without surfacing. What happens then is that progress is hampered. I lose out on the resources I gathered, although the game allows me to keep one. No other penalty is incurred. Time does flow on, the days are tracked, but characters and missions wait on the player (again, there's an exception here in the form of limited events that grant bonuses). This makes for a more relaxed gameplay experience, where failure is suboptimal but it never actively sets the player back for trying.