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Title: Smooth Operators Review

Publisher: Bulkypix

Developer: Heydeck Games

Genre: Simulation

Players: 1

Rated: N/A



When’s the last time your job was the focus of a novel? What about a movie? TV Show? How about a video game? Lets face it, unless you’re living the incredibly exciting life of a cop, drug dealer, vampire, teenage mother, Surgeon, space Marine, work in a restaurant of some kind, or are Mark Cuban, your career is probably underrepresented in terms of faithful representations in media – “Video Game Critic 2013” isn’t happening anytime soon folks. But that tide is changing rapidly. Farming simulators, truck driving simulators, robot vacuum simulators (seriously), and more are gaining both word-of-mouth buzz, and some critical praise too – it seems finding the joy in the mundane is what’s hot in gaming right now, a “new wave” of interactive experiences that ditches the laser guns and damsels in distress for something a little closer to home. Case-and-point: “Smooth Operators”, a charming-as-hell call center management simulator, that was recently ported to iOS.

Initially, “Smooth Operators” appears similar to games like “Tiny Tower”, “Yoot Tower”, “Sim Tower” and pretty much any other “Tower” game you can think of – tasking you with building a business literally from the ground up via convenient modules. The twist here is that you’re building a call center, and populating it with cell-center-centric employees like office workers,

call takers, project managers, janitors, and woefully under-appreciated IT staff. The goal being to meet daily inbound, outbound, and back office quotas as efficiently as possible – the more calls you take, the more money you make.

Money you'll need to replace all the hair you pulled out while playing. "Smooth Operators" is an exercise in barely-controlled chaos, each business day a balancing act of managing employees' happiness while trying to eek every last bit of productivity from them. You're consistently behind the 8-ball, worried about meeting quotas, granting vacation requests, which buildings to upgrade, under-staffing, over-staffing, and lots more. Couple that with random events like employees simply up-and-quitting over things like a lack of quality reading material during break time, *and* the fact that your progress and success is judged by a single report that comes out at the end of every day, it's easy can see why working in a call center qualifies as a high-stress gig.



The symbiotic relationship between all the different employees you can hire is both apparent and nebulous, which is good. Managers scream at employees to increase their call taking speed, IT techs kick the back of broken computers until they work, and each call taken by an employee results in a smiley face, sad face, or a L2 thought-bubble, giving you pleasant visual feedback on in-game developments while hiding the actual ones and zeroes of it all to give the game a really human feel – heck, you can even drill down to find what your techs thought of individual calls.

The 2D retro aesthetics of "Smooth Operators" greatly informs that human element, too. Office facilities provide colorful visuals and heaps of personality. Little details like bikini posters in an office, trash piling up if you fail to hire a janitor, broken computers smoking, or the building literally seeming to fall apart until a handyman is brought aboard, immediately endear you to what "Smooth Operators" has to offer. There's a "RollerCoaster Tycoon"-vibe to it all. A hard-to-quantify, staring-at-a-fish-tank-esque quality that makes the act of simply watching characters

on screen do their thing immensely enjoyable. It's one thing to hire a janitor. It's another to be able to watch him go about his shift, bathroom and lunch breaks included, tracking how much he does in a given day with fascination.

"Smooth Operators" actually has a quite a lot in common with Chris Sawyer's infinitely compelling and deceptively weighty series of theme-park sims. Namely the deceptively weighty part. The depth of this simulation is brutal. Similar to how you could adjust individual ride settings in "Tycoon", here you can educate employees, place various objects like book shelves and potted plants to increase the aesthetics of your facilities, give raises to keep disgruntled employees on board, and about a dozen or so more intimidating-but-not-overwhelming nuances. As a result you're consistently stressed out in the best way possible as you wait for your funds to tick up enough to allow a purchase of a new building, upgrade, or employee.

"Smooth Operators" falls short of "Tycoon" in one area – fun factor. While intensely compelling, the playfulness of the presentation doesn't translate to game-play. The best sim games are also puppets. Meaning that you can play them as they're intended, or bork around with the mechanics to great delight. Building a roller-coaster death-trap in "Tycoon", unleashing a tornado on your "Sim City", or seeing how many barrel rolls you can do with a 747 in a flight simulator add enormous amounts of fun, creativity, and longevity to any gaming experience. "Smooth Operators" doesn't offer this sandbox-style opportunity for misadventure, which is a minor shame. But at the same time I'm not sure how they'd fit it in without completely redesigning the core experience. Thus, "Smooth Operators" is a well built obstacle course, not a sandbox.

But that said, I really enjoy this game's depth, charisma, and attention to detail. But it may not be for everyone. The barrier to success is brick-wall thick, and it takes quite a few restarts to really understand what you're doing. Similarly, employee information is tucked away inside the game menu, versus being easily accessible like HR and vacation requests are in the top right hand corner of the screen, so assessing the mood of a manager or janitor requires an extra tap or two…Andddd considering you can manage railroads, airports, lemonade stands, kart-racing teams, kennels, an entire space program, and a variety of other more exciting businesses, you may find the idea of managing a call center a bit esoteric.

Look, "Smooth Operators" is so far up my alley it could stick bowling pins up my nose. I've worked in a call center for six years, love sim games, and enjoy getting a…slanted view of what my long-suffering superiors surely go through each day (Hi guys!). So for me this is the gaming equivalent of being Bill Clinton and sitting down to watch "Primary Colors" – the broad strokes are all too familiar, and the nuances are surprising and welcome. It's perfect for mobile devices too, fantastic in bite-sized chunks as well as extended play-sessions. It's a quality sim with quality mechanics and heaps of enduring aesthetic qualities as well. Quality

It's also a great game to play on hold.