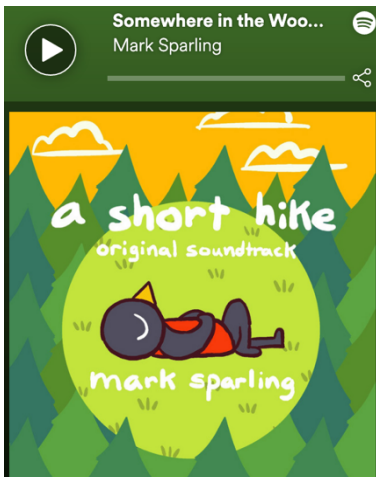


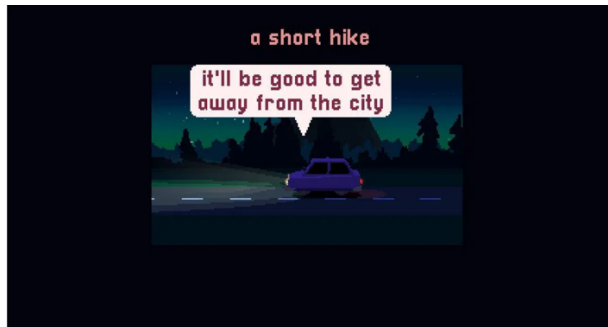
AMPERSAND



I grew up taking trips to Massachusetts to see family. The drive itself even was entertaining, as the skyline shifted to trees and the air grew cool. I would explore the old train tracks behind my aunt's coastal Cape Cod home or rummage through autumn leaves around Thanksgiving. These little memories hold so much childish wonder and joy.

It has been a long and cruel year, leaving many cooped up inside. It's hard to book a trip right now without anxiety about if and how it will occur. Vacations may feel trivial in the context of the pandemic, but freedom from banality of at home routines are something we still desperately crave. Even day trips and short drives for a change of pace and scenery provide refreshing respite.

A Short Hike, created by Adam Robinson-Yu, is definitely one of these respites. With around 20 hours of leisurely, open-world sandbox gameplay, *A Short Hike* feels like a digital weekend getaway tucked inside of an indie game.



Claire, a black bird-girl, is staying with her park ranger aunt for the weekend at Hawk Peak Provincial Park. She's awaiting an important phone call, but the only place with reception is at the top of Hawk Peak. It's a steep climb, one that requires strength and stamina that only Golden Feathers provide.

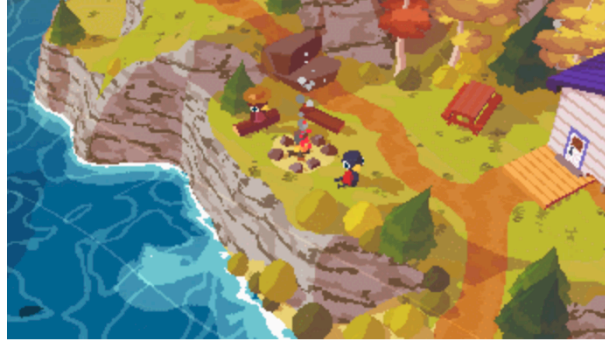
While the goal is to reach the top, the journey and Claire's progress is the heart of the gameplay. She traverses through different landscapes and weather while meeting a slew of island residents. After reaching the peak, she soars around the island, admiring just how far she's come.

Many of the golden feathers are acquired through side plots and character interaction. The human (or should I say, animal) interactions throughout are a joy—one that is especially touching given the lack of social interaction many of us have had this year. The dialogue is short and quippy, providing friendly personality and heart in small bites.



There is no true sense of time in the game, save for two brief mentions—a goat looking for his lost watch and the strawberry toast offered at the park ranger's cabin at 5 p.m. (they will always be out of strawberries). Beyond that, it doesn't matter. The only markers are the small and amusing changes to the characters around the island—a sandcastle building frog that ends up ruling a sand kingdom, a father-and-son duo that also climbs to the peak, and a painter that travels around with his canvas looking for subjects. The lack of visible time allowed me to lose many hours into this game, flying, swimming, fishing, or just standing idly by, watching the trees sway and the water flow. I discovered different areas this way—including one which houses a minigame only available on the Switch port. There's a sense of wonder and nostalgia in the solitary exploration of the island that feels like the beachside playtime of my youth as an only child.

The game's aesthetics are a delight. Part of the reason I enjoyed the exploration was because of how simple yet rich the graphics were. Much of the map is bathed in the glow of a warm, early evening. While the game takes place in the summer, it manages to give players a taste of each season in its details—secret ponds with blooming lily pads and wildflowers, rain on a gloomy graveyard, and snow-covered peaks at the top.



The soundtrack is one of the best parts of the game. Mark Sparling’s music is harmoniously layered on top of ambient background noises, allowing the natural sounds to take over in between areas before smoothly transitioning. The piano glides, supported by the soft beat of the percussion, filling the air with a sense of youthful adventure. As Claire ascends, the soundtrack grows and chills with the rising altitude and added synths. Many of the songs have found their way to my personal playlists, since they still bring me such joy outside of the game, especially when I am perched outside with a cup of coffee early in the morning.

Just like the playable protagonist Claire, I am a city slicker—only an occasional visitor to the great outdoors. I have often enjoyed, however, escaping to them virtually. I have a soft spot for calm, naturey games—ones that are easy and where no one dies. Titles like *Harvest Moon/Story of Seasons*, *Stardew Valley*, and *Animal Crossing*—blend kitschy graphics, simple gameplay, calming soundtracks, and character-driven side plots much like *A Short Hike* does. Combined with the (albeit, much smaller) free, open-world dynamic of games like *Breath of the Wild*, *A Short Hike* is a perfect title for fans looking for a similar escape and callback to their youth.

My only complaint is that *A Short Hike* ended too soon. But that’s part of its charm. Besides, isn’t that how the end of every great getaway feels?

A Short Hike is available for [the Nintendo Switch](#), [Steam](#), and [PC](#) for \$7.99. The soundtrack can be found on [Spotify](#) and is available to purchase on [Bandcamp](#).

<http://www.ampersandla.com/a-short-hike-after-a-long-summer/>