

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: Murder Dog IV: Trial of the Murder Dog
Platform: PC
Genre: Indie
Release Date: August 1st, 2011
Developer: Thecatamites
Publisher: Thecatamites
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Thecatamites

Overview

The Murder Dog is on trial in Hague for his crimes against humanity. He's charged with the murder of 1,500 people via the use of poison gas, a fire engine, and blunt force. It's up to the player to decide how he goes about his defense. With the help of a trusty commentator and your huge muscles, the player maneuvers through presenting, refuting, and destroying different pieces of evidence and witnesses (yes, pieces of witnesses), to try and prove the Murder Dog's innocence.

But is the Murder Dog innocent? The game isn't shy about that answer: a resounding no. He advocates for violence and is incapable of expressing any amount of remorse for the suffering that he has caused. Through six unique endings, the player explores different outcomes for the Murder Dog, from admitting his own guilt, to proving his innocence, to destroying the jurists. This short point and click seems at a glance absurd and without meaning, but upon further inspection one can find it poses a number of interesting questions about the nature of courtroom proceedings, the failings of the judicial court system, and the relationship between the player and their protagonist's heinous actions.

Characters

There are few named characters in Murder Dog IV: Trial of the Murder Dog, and the names of these characters are about as stiff and blunt as that of the protagonist. That said, this game is rich in character personality. The cast consists simply of the defendant, another dog excitedly following the trial, the jurists, and the witnesses. Ambiguous government officials may be seen in endgame cutscenes, but none get any more attention

than that. The framing of the trial coupled with the facelessness of the prosecution creates an interesting lense through which to view the bureaucratic elements at play.

- **The Murder Dog** – A hulking anthropomorphic dog, depicted in game with photos of a crude clay model. The Murder Dog is on trial, and only willing to comply with court proceedings to varying degrees. He is honest about his uncompromised desire to cause harm, with his first line being “My Thirst For Bloodshed Remains Voluminous”, but doesn’t think he’s done anything wrong, stating “My Only Crime Is My Love For Absolute Chaos.” He can lie, but not very convincingly. When refuting a photograph depicting him ripping a victim in half, the Murder Dog claims to have been “Trying To Put Her Back Together Again”, one of his many claims that is not only visibly untrue, but hilariously false. His strong suit is his physical strength, which he uses to intimidate witnesses into compliance. Interestingly, the Murder Dog served on the city’s police force for years before committing the crimes for which he is on trial; in other words, before his violence was perceived as criminal. The Murder Dog is a surprisingly loveable character, and if the player chooses to continue the game beyond the first choice by pleading as “not guilty” they are put in a position to find fault outside of the accused, whether that’s in the judicial system or through bigger questions of the acceptability of violence and engaging with violence through play.
- **Commentary Pooch** - Throughout the game, beneath the primary text box in which the Murder Dog and the jurists converse, there is another little dog jabbering constantly, narrating the events as they unfold in and out of the court room. This dog is not explicitly named, but refers to himself in one possible branch of a playthrough as “Commentary Pooch.” Little is known about him but he clearly functions as a narrative vessel to fill in for the Murder Dogs lack of chattiness. Commentary Pooch plays a critical part in understanding the intricacies of the Murder Dog trial, as the Commentary Pooch’s contributions set an emotional tone for the player to follow. This character is extremely playful, especially considering the subject matter. At the start of the game, Commentary Pooch admits that “It should be obvious to all involved that Murder Dog did indeed commit these murders, and would probably not hesitate to do so again!” He seems to understand the nature of the Murder Dog’s character, refering to him as “deplorable.” At the same time, Commentary Pooch understands the contrived nature of the law, stating that “the legal system must make a distinction between what we ‘know’ as individuals and what can be demonstrated with evidence in this bizarre ritualistic setting.” Interestingly, if the player chooses endings in which the Murder Dog commits acts of violence, Commentary Pooch seems excited and supportive, almost manically so, often going into lengthly monologues in support of the madness of the Murder Dog, cheering him on to “SMASH THE STATE!!! [...] HA HA HA! DESTROY EVERYTHING!!” Commentary Pooch reflects the players complicated relationship with the Murder Dog, one in which the player conciously knows the wrong that he’s done but is

still willing to engage with and revel in the fun of violence, and in which the legitimacy of the judicial system is constantly in question.

- **The Jurists** - The Jurists are a homogenous group which judges the Murder Dogs actions during the trial. The Jurists don't get many lines of dialogue and mostly function as a faceless mass representing the civilians that the Murder Dog has wronged. They aren't as readily charmed by the Murder Dogs antics as Commentary Pooch, but through the players quick witted actions the Jurists might be left without enough evidence to convict. The Jurists are the most reasonable and realistic characters in the game. That said, they are also the least interesting and have the least content through which the player might sympathize with them.
- **Police King** - Police King is one of the witnesses that can be called by the defense if the player chooses to present the Murder Dog as not guilty. Police King's character functions as an example of the absurd nature of law enforcement. Through him it is revealed that the Murder Dog used to be an officer himself, and that he was a respected member on the force. It's clear that Police King is biased towards the Murder Dog, as he initially states "You're my brother and I love you but it's my professional opinion that you've gotta be destroyed bro!", but quickly softens and reveals their shared history, dropping his testimony and stating that he "refuses to comment on the trial of the Murder Dog. He is - was - a valued law officer and we wish him well." The Police King character shows how violence for the sake of violence is wrong, but violence in the name of law enforcement is permissible in the eyes of society.

Breakdown

Murder Dog IV: Trial of the Murder Dog is an absurd ride through the flaws of the judicial system as well as a mockery of the way violence is approached, both on the part of the player and of society as a whole.

In game, the player's first choice is whether or not to proceed as pleading guilty or not guilty. At this point it's clear that the Murder Dog has murdered. If the player chooses honesty and guilt, the Murder Dog is executed and the game ends in a short and rather unfulfilling manner. In choosing to proceed as not guilty, the player has decided that the value of the entertainment of play outweighs the immorality of defending an unremorsing killer.

From this point on the game continues to pose challenges to the player. In order to defend the Murder Dog successfully and get off as not guilty, the player must destroy evidence, intimidate witnesses, and even end the life of a remaining victim who exists only as a brain floating in a jar by means of a sneaky electrocution. If this is done successfully, the Murder Dog is released back into society. It's as clean of a break as the player can get in this game, but the fact remains that the Murder Dog is unchanged and continues on with the capacity to continue causing chaos and destruction.

The game can start taking on its most honest form if the player chooses to really lean in to the Murder Dogs true colors. In one ending, should the Murder Dog murder the Jurists, escape the courtroom, and then return to Hague and destroy the Dutch Parliament,

the player is greeted with a screen of congratulations, revealing that “in staying true to your brutal ethos of absolute murder you have achieved the best, ‘canonical’ ending to Murder Dog IV.” This, the most destructive ending possible, praises the player with their ability to be honest to the Murder Dogs persona. In this case, it is acceptable to commit acts of brutality in a game because the player has succeeded in finding the way to progress in this story that is most honest to the character that they embody.

Strongest Element

The most successful aspect of this game is easily the use of character personality. Objectively, murder and destruction are bad things, but video games have a history of engaging with these topics in ways that create rewarding feedback for the player. This game fulfills that feeling beautifully. Murder Dog IV: Trial of the Murder Dog doesn't rely on the gratification of gorey graphics or a high score to accomplish this feat, instead it banks on that the player will just like the Murder Dog and want him to succeed. There's something about the stoicism with which he readily admits to his bloodlust that's appealing; he doesn't tiptoe around or attempt to justify his cruelty the way that a video game protagonist who commits violent acts might be expected to. There's also something about the way that Commentary Pooch is so easily swayed and excited by the violence that's deeply engaging. At the start of a playthrough, he seems to provide a level voice of reason, but the more a player leans into the destruction, the more the Commentary Pooch character rewards them. There's something undeniably exciting about hearing him go from detesting the Murder Dog to being on his side and proclaiming that “We'll murder forever, Murder Dog! We'll murder forever!” It's only through great writing and charming characters that the player becomes so ready to seek out an ending of such demise, and the narrative rewards it as being the truest representation of what this character would want of the situation.

Unsuccessful Element

The game lacks in letting the player know how much they've gotten out of it. The game has six different endings, but the player has no way of knowing how many of those they've accomplished. The game lacks a save mechanic, in order to go back through a certain part the player must restart the whole game. This creates a frustrating dissonance with the narrative as the player can be made insecure through their inability to know if they've actually seen all there is to see. It's entirely possible to play this game multiple times without discovering or even knowing about the existence of a “canonical” ending. Since this game is so obscure, there isn't anywhere online that the player could reference. The narrative is rich and insightful but the way the game is built doesn't enable a feeling of complete narrative fulfillment, there's always room to wonder what might be slipping by.

Highlight

The biggest turning point in Murder Dog IV: Trial of the Murder Dog is the midpoint in a playthrough of the true ending. The game begins as normal; the player pleads not guilty and can even start to make a defense for the Murder Dog, as is the most reasonable way to proceed and secure his safety. Should the player choose to interact with the Jurists before resting their case, they are given the option to “reveal plan.” If this is selected, a secondary choice to “murder everyone” is presented. If both of these options are chosen, the facade of innocence is lifted and the Murder Dog truly embodies himself and his violent ways. He escapes and, in a true ending playthrough, he returns to Hague to attack the Dutch Parliament. He barges in with a machine gun and a crazed look in his eyes and proclaims that he “wants to murder everything”, and then does that. In choosing to kill the Jurists, the player is freed in many ways. They are free of the expectations of the judicial system, and they are free to fully explore the Murder Dogs desires. Without choosing this, the most violent option, the player is still constrained to experience justice only as it is perceived by society, rather than fully embodying the character they have chosen to play the story of.

Critical Reception

There aren't very many reviews of Murder Dog IV: Trial of the Murder Dog floating around as a consequence of it being a small, free indie game. That said, every one that I've found has agreed that the game is hilarious while carrying an insightful message about the arbitrary nature of the judicial system. Rock Paper Shotgun's Brendan Cowell wrote an article about it in 2015, titled “Have You Played... Murder Dog IV: Trial of the Murder Dog?” The review is short, but overwhelmingly positive, stating that the game has “some of the funniest dialogue in indie games.” Another more robust review was conducted by Vice in 2017, titled “This Absurdist Courtroom Sim Takes Justice Out of the System,” by Cameron Kunzelman. Kunzelman positively notes the games cheeky attitude towards the courtroom, stating that it “puts pressure on the things we take for granted about the justice system, and about the notion of justice period,” and “demands a wider array of thinking.” Reviews remain true to the original work, tending towards being short and to the point. As such, I've yet to see any with much negative to say.

Lessons

- Murder Dog IV: Trial of the Murder Dog is an excellent example of creating a lasting impact with a well scoped small game. This game was made in 2 weeks, one could play through all of the endings in about an hour. That said, each ending is exciting because it allows the player to explore different angles of the protagonist and his experience in the courtroom through and in contrast to society's judiciary system. The game is small, but it's concise with its message throughout and has no shortage of exciting twists and turns. Each line contributes critical information, there's no filler or fluff.

- This shows that a game can be delightfully fun and also deal with heavy topics. Murder Dog has a comedy to it that makes it hard to keep a straight face while playing. That said, a lot of the power of its humor comes from how it pokes fun at things like the relationship between violence for the sake of violence, and violence as enforced by the police. The game is successful because the two exist in conversation with each other, the absurdist humor shines a light on the absurdness of accepting violence from authority figures. This is visible in the game's title; having a game numbered as though it was part of a series when it stands alone is fun and silly, and it's also true that hearing "IV" implies a great history of violence, although no games precede this one. This reflects the history of violence that the Murder Dog executed while on the police force, although the games for that don't exist because that story isn't one that society finds scandalous enough to tell.
- The game is successful because of how much agency it gives the player. From the very start, the player is not forced to defend the Murder Dog and his heinous crimes. From that point on there are a multitude of ways to go about trying and failing to free him, allowing the player to explore options both within what is acceptable for courtroom proceedings but also to let loose and follow through with the violence that the protagonist so clearly desires.

Summation

Murder Dog IV: Trial of the Murder Dog may seem at face value like a game that's too short, too small, and too silly to be considered worthy of note for its narrative. It proves that isn't the case, getting the most out of its playtime by being packed with comedy and critical jabs at society and authority from start to finish. It's absurdist humor and hand formed visuals create the perfect atmosphere for a game as playful and satirical as this one. This game keeps a player laughing from start to finish and still delivers a lasting impression, giving one so much to think about regarding their own relationship with the law and how they choose to engage with it, both in real life and through controlling a fictitious killer dog.