

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: Aviary Attorney
Platform: PC
Genre: Visual Novel / Adventure
Release Date: 22 December 2015
Developer: Sketchy Logic
Publisher: Sketchy Logic
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Jeremy Noghani & Mandy Lennon

Overview

In the midst of the French civil unrest of the 19th century, two birds in a world of anthropomorphized animals discover the dark truths of the French monarchy as they put their legal and detective skills to use. The player takes the role of Jayjay Falcon and Sparrowson, who are bumbling, and sometimes clueless defense attorneys. Although their law office seems to be going through some tough times, their story begins with their luck changing, as they begin to receive some unlikely clients. The game follows many of the classic hallmarks of the popular *Ace Attorney* visual novel series, consisting of investigation, interview and trial scenes.

Their cases, which are often related to murder, very slowly tie them into an overarching plot in which Paris experiences a near-revolutionary uprising as the game approaches the events of the June Rebellion. Jayjay and his assistant are gradually exposed to the economic, social and legal injustices of France, making them, along with a host of other colorful characters question the true meaning of “justice”. The game offers a number of branching stories that lead to both completely different outcomes and character arcs, as well as exploration into character psyches, providing a great deal of character development throughout the course of the narrative.

Characters

- **Jayjay Falcon** – The alcoholic, crusading falcon-lawyer of the Aviary Attorney office in Paris. He has a mysterious past, but is a valiant and devoted lawyer that truly cares about getting justice for his clientele. While he seems to have a preference to avoid violence, he can become more of a loose-cannon when under pressure. The player primarily takes control of Jayjay’s dialog and decisions throughout the game, and as such, different parts of his personality are revealed accordingly.
- **Sparrowson** – Falcon’s somewhat dim-witted, but enthusiastic assistant. While he may be naive and grossly inappropriate at times, he carries a strong moral compass, and as such he often acts as the “morality chain” for his employer, who can lose sight of right and wrong during the events that unfold. He also has a tendency to be Falcon’s support, dusting him off and setting him straight again after a crushing defeat. The player occasionally takes control of Sparrowson throughout the game, however much of the time, this is done though Falcon’s instructions.
- **Severin Cocorico** – Falcon’s long-time rival of a Rooster-prosecutor that exudes a pompous contempt for those not up to his lofty moral and intellectual standards. He is introduced as a classmate from Falcon’s law school that has trumped Jayjay numerous times in court, giving him the image of a know-it-all that strives to win. While this may seem the case, his rudeness actually comes from his stoic behavior and hell-bent attitude to find justice through the law, even willing to jeopardize his own case in the name of it.
- **Juste Volerti** – The lawfully devoted Rooster, former soldier of the French army, turned inspector. Volerti is the highly regarded, crippled war veteran that is often used to provide police statements in trials. He is aggressively nationalistic, and highly suspicious, as he works to uncover the identity of the Viridian Killer, the violent rebel that shot him in the eye two years ago during the July Revolution of 1830.
- **Leonie Beaumont** – The fearless lioness-leader of the rebellion, that strives towards a more equitable France. She wishes to bring down the monarchy and build “The Second Republic” through as little bloodshed as possible. While this is the case, she can be trigger happy, and would most definitely resort to violence if necessary. Her lust for revenge against the system is strong since her father was locked away some years ago for a petty crime, however she can quite easily be swayed into practicing a kinder justice in optimism for her vision of a new France.

- **Frere Remus & Judge Romulous** – The twin wolfish masterminds behind the rebellion, that lust for power through bloody justice. While practicing in completely different fields, as a friar, and a judge respectively, they share the same kind of ideological values in that they wish to see France ruled by logic and reason, and will support revenge-based, eye-for-an-eye type justice as seen in the bible. They together manipulate Leonie and push her towards sparking a bloody revolution to create a power-vacuum with which they can seize control of the country.

Breakdown

Aviary Attorney deftly navigates the concept of “justice” through the lens of numerous characters, utilizing a particularly relevant event in history with which to explore it. It does this using a very cleverly structured narrative, branching stories that stem from real consequences, and a host of complex characters to interact with throughout the game.

The game is structured into four acts, each culminating with a major trial scene as the first two acts begin with receiving a new client, and end with their trial’s verdict. While they could have very easily been created as throwaway cases that show the player how the game’s mechanics work, *Aviary Attorney* uses them as an opportunity to get the player invested in the overarching plot.

The first trial is designed to give the player perspective on the grossly opulent lifestyle of Paris’ bourgeois, concluding with a scene in which Jayjay realizes that he has successfully defended a guilty aristocrat that has zero remorse for her crimes. The thought to Jayjay is sickening, and the twist is meant to shock the player into feeling that the wealthy reap the rewards of injustice in this world. The second trial then provides the player with perspective on how the lives of the poor are, as the player likely ends up failing to defend an innocent man, or alternatively, accidentally convicting the poor and (also innocent) girl he was protecting.

Between these first two acts, the game attempts to invest the player in the goings on of Paris, as the rebellion gains traction in the city. As such, the story unfolds in such a way that it very carefully drags the protagonists into the events of the rebellion so seamlessly that it feels very natural moving from the courtroom to the barricades as it progresses.

Aviary Attorney offers a number of endings based on decisions and events in the game. The game’s approach to this actually has it feature multiple decision branches that each lead to real consequences such as character imprisonments, deaths and differing character arcs. *Aviary Attorney* actually makes the player’s actions count and the effects can be seen quite vividly. This engages the player with the story more heavily and places a greater amount of pressure upon each decision they make. It should however be noted that players can have the attitude of starting again if things do not work out optimally.

While there are many moments that may lead to this in the game, the designer does limit the ability of the player to go back any less than a whole chapter, generally dissuading this player behavior.

One choice consistently given to the player is their choice of investigation location. Throughout the game, days leading up to the trial may be spent investigating, however the player is only able to visit one location a day. The fact that a player may investigate the incorrect locations is made very apparent in the second trial, and tries to get the player to put more thought into their decisions. Additionally during the interviews they conduct while exploring those locations, if not done at the right time, or if they are too pushy, or not pushy enough with the interviewee they may yield poor results.

With all these factors at play, everything the player does in the game influences the course of the narrative, and as such, will see those developments reflected in the world. Like many other games, this allows for the player to have their own unique story and perspective on the game, an important feature that separates video games from other mediums of storytelling.

To complement this gameplay mechanic, all the characters are very vibrant and offer some real depth despite sometimes seeming a little simple. Upon more careful examination, many, if not all the characters introduced in the game have more dimensions than meets the eye. While contributing to the immersion factor, it more importantly leaves no situation in the game a simple “black and white” issue as every character is provided with a rich backstory in order to illustrate their perspectives. The game’s ultimate objective with this is to push the player into really considering their own perspective, by possibly causing them to question their previous understanding of the world of *Aviary Attorney*. The actions of Jayjay can be seen shifting with player’s attitudes as their understanding of justice fluctuates.

Towards the third and fourth acts, things go a little more off the rails, with decisions that decide between life and death of major characters, and the course of the entire rebellion. Jayjay’s actions and the outcomes of his cases become all the more crucial, as the game ramps up the stakes and this is truly where the character’s identities are known.

While the game’s story revolves around the protagonist, Jayjay, it uses a host of characters around him, that each have their own moments of personal growth, in order to explore the concept of justice. They are used to show differing perspectives as they player watches them on their own personal journeys. Cocorico, for example, sees his error in trusting in the law to find truth without exercising empathy. And in response, Leonie then struggles with reconciling the ideas of mercy and vengeance. This can be seen when she accepts a mock-trial in which Jayjay attempts to prove Cocorico’s innocence, as she plays the role of judge, jury and executioner. Volerti then may have his own understanding of the world altered by Jayjay’s actions during the trial, addressing his simplistic “good and evil” outlook on the world.

The point of the game is to expose the player to many ideas surrounding a single theme, being “justice”. What understanding the player comes out with by the end is a reflection of the unique journey they took during their play session. This interaction sits at the core of what gaming does best: show the player their effect. Unlike many forms of media where the audience can reflect upon and judge the actions of a character, a player can reflect upon and judge their own actions - a far more powerful tool for introspection.

Strongest Element

Aviary Attorney's greatest strength comes from its complex, branching storyline. The game sports many conclusions for many different characters - and does this better than many other modern games that often boast about their branching narrative. The flexibility provided by this allows the player to engage more heavily with the game's story as characters and their effect on the world can be seen very clearly by the end of the game. It also allows the game to not be shy of integrating gameplay fail-states as part of the story. The idea that one can fail a task but continue with the story is in many ways more engaging than traditional video game fail-states because the player must live with their actions - something that *Aviary Attorney* loves making the player do.

Unsuccessful Element

While there are many wonderful attributes to the game, it is not as successful when it comes to creating believable dialog at some points. This boils down to the fact that the game for the most part takes on the identity of a historical drama with comedic elements. As such, it contains dialog that is more befitting in tone to the social queues and niceties of 19th century Europe. This is however not upheld at times as while some characters may begin a scene speaking with that tone, the writing often slides towards a more modern and casual tone that breaks immersion at first. For example, a character that begins an interaction with ‘good day madame’ might at some point say ‘see you around’.

While this inconsistency in their dialog and manner can eventually be internalized by the player as being usual, scenes will sometimes feel a bit off from the way that characters could almost be copy-pasted into a modern world without too much of a change to their behavior. If the intent of the writer was to make the characters appear as if in their own time period, then this is occasionally broken by the simple use of a modern slang or disregard for the typical courtesy often seen in depictions of that time period. On the other hand, this could have also been better pulled off if the writer had dropped those more formal behavioral queues entirely and had the whole work read in a more modern tone. This would allow the audience to either imagine for themselves the “translation” going on, or simply see the world as a more modern society. Overall this is not an issue that renders it unplayable, however it still does not do justice to the immersion factor.

Highlight

The first trial of the game is fairly easy to win. Assuming that the player did their due diligence in speaking to all the suspects and collecting all the evidence available from the crime scenes, then making the necessary logical conclusions with supporting evidence during the trial should be relatively straight forward. This leaves the player with a feeling of arrogance in their sleuthing and lawyering abilities.

The second trial however, while seeming from the investigation stage that it would be just as simple as the first, is by no means easy. The game lures the player into thinking they have things figured out with the understanding of how the crime was committed. The game then makes it extremely clear in the trial, that no matter how much the player knows what happened, they need the appropriate evidence to convince the jury. This leads to the player (if they have not worked hard enough), feeling powerless against the inevitable guilty verdict their client, or another innocent individual receives.

The game, in essence, subverts the expectations of the player, who assumes that all cases are winnable without putting in too much effort, as can be seen in the *Phoenix Wright* series, that *Aviary Attorney* is based on. This leads to a truly amazing moment in the game, as the player shares in the feelings of guilt and motivation to work harder that player-character Jayjay would feel post-trial. As such, *Aviary Attorney* is able to emotionally manipulate the player in order to help them identify with the protagonist of the story better.

Critical Reception

Overall, *Aviary Attorney* was met with a minimal amount of media coverage from the major outlets, with much of it's criticism being centered upon its very short length of four cases over an average of 4 hours of play:

- **PC Gamer - Matt Elliot - 78/100** – Elliot praises the quality of the *Aviary Attorney's* writing, specifically noting how “The most impressive thing ... is how substantive the characters are”¹ in reference to how many of them are well fleshed out and do not feel like throwaways. While he laments the omission of maybe another case in the game, he finds a silver lining in saying that it is “a game tasty enough to leave you wanting more”².
- **Hardcore Gamer - Marcus Estrada - 1.5/5** – Estrada takes the perspective that the game is in many ways insubstantial, saying that “cases wrap up so rapidly that it's hard to even get invested in what's really going on during each one”³.

¹ Matt Elliot, *Aviary Attorney Review*, (PC Gamer, 2016).

² Ibid.

³ Marcus Estrada, *Review: Aviary Attorney*, (Hardcore Gamer, 2016).

While he does note that in the game’s narrative “there’s heart”⁴, his final verdict firmly asserts that “the core storyline is endearing enough, but it ties up too quickly”⁵.

- **Eurogamer - Johnny Chiodini** – Chiodini’s review of *Aviary Attorney* is quite positive in regard to the narrative structure and its characters as “the story’s four acts snowball quickly into a foreboding tale of murder, betrayal, espionage and revolution. The three possible endings are drastically different, each casting a new light on the main characters”⁶. However, he criticizes its length and pacing in that he “would have liked to tackle just one more case before the story really began to gather momentum”⁷.

Lessons

The above analysis highlights a number of lessons that can be taken into providing a greater understanding of game narratives in their future development:

- **Games Can be Powerful Tools for Introspection** – *Aviary Attorney* manages to harness the very unique interactivity of games in putting the player in a character’s shoes. This allows players to look back upon the game and consider the choices that they themselves have made. While many games place the player in a character’s shoes, they do not often use the opportunity to ask a question that makes the player reflect on their choices, and this can be a very interesting facet to video games.
- **Character Dialog Should be Cohesive** – As mentioned above, the game at times saw characters speaking or behaving in ways that did not entirely feel inline with the setting, as well as within their own character. This can be taken into account in future games, making sure that character dialog is internally cohesive, as well as appropriate for the setting. This can be facilitated by dialog readings during the writing process and product testing before going into full production (eg. focus groups).
- **Non-Traditional Fail-States Can be Used to Increase Stakes** – The original fail-states of games were simple “game over” screens that took you right back to the beginning - quite frustrating. In *Aviary Attorney* you can fail and it will be written into the story of the game that you, the player, failed to save your client.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Johnny Chiodini, *Aviary Attorney Review: The Defense Roosts*, (Eurogamer, 2016).

⁷ Ibid.

This can make for a more compelling and dynamic narrative where you are no longer attempting to recreate someone else's story perfectly, but rather forging your own. This may take a lot more effort, clever writing and programming on the part of the developer, but done correctly, a branching narrative can be a very rewarding mechanic to provide players.

Summation

While Sketchy Logic has not produced a blockbuster triple-A, or a runaway hit indie title, they did manage to put together a quaint, yet thoroughly complex and thought-provoking product that shows what games can do for storytelling. The effort that they went through to create such gorgeously fleshed-out characters and an interesting plot in order to discuss an idea is, I feel, well deserving of analysis. *Aviary Attorney* makes for a great example of how to build an experience that challenges the player's perspectives through a heartfelt, lovingly crafted world.