



## Désiré REVIEW

### The Good:

Neat, slightly arty graphics with some attractive scenes.

### The Bad:

Obnoxious lead character; misuses physical disability to garner sympathy; massive walls of rambling text featuring strident commentary and constant advocacy for sexual deviances; gameplay inefficiencies such as heavy backtracking, slow movement speeds, some poorly clued quests and puzzles; no sound effects or voice-acting.

### Our Verdict:

If you have a strong masochistic urge to inflict a few hours of excruciating, pretentious sociopolitical ramblings interspersed with bouts of petty cruelty and vulgarity upon yourself, *Désiré* is the game for you.



Scoring System - Editorial Policies

Written by **Shuva Raha** — September 7, 2016

A traditional adventure game with a mature content advisory is a rare beast, so when I first encountered *Désiré*, which traces the life of the eponymous colour-blind boy from his school years to adulthood, I was intrigued. More warnings ensued, starting with the opening voice-over stating that one should not be too quick to judge this self-confessed repulsive saga, until my curiosity congealed into trepidation. Of course, no amount of caution can truly prepare you facilitate the process of defecating into the mouth of a hogtied submissive in a BDSM dugout, or adequately equip you to rattle sabres with a spiteful pubic louse at the dripping, gaping orifice of its origin.

Fantastically though, these sort of (mis)adventures involving assorted sexual shenanigans are *not* the most repulsive aspect of this game, defined by writer-director Sylvain Seccia as ‘a critique of the modern world and of the perverting nature of a consumer, profit-obsessed society’. More offensive are its incessant, pretentious and myopic denouncements of the soul-crushing ‘establishment’ of gainfully employed, law-abiding citizens who are allegedly too capitalistic to appreciate the finer pleasures of life. Like the joys of relentlessly stalking a passive coworker, peddling child porn to priests, lauding a friend’s penchant for bestiality, and the ‘harmless’ fun of privately indulging one’s paedophilia.

Almost obliterated by this tiresome tactic to shock-and-awe, along with monotonous monologues dictating that unless you concur with this unhinged worldview you are an exploitative boor, is a so-so indie game that spans many decades in its five-odd hour playtime. The monochromatic, pencil sketch art style is clean and quite striking in segments; gameplay mechanics are satisfactory despite some frustrating puzzles and heavy backtracking; and given the monumental volume, the text is well-written in the literal sense. But to truly enjoy *Désiré* beyond the superficial quests, you need to embrace, at least for the duration of the game, the extreme ideology of its narrative, and that will be a very personal matter.

The story starts poignantly, with a coloured cutscene of a playschool art class. A concerned teacher asks the melancholy Désiré why he hasn’t drawn the sun as per the assignment. Amid his classmates’ titters, he replies that he has never seen the sun, as it is always night in his head. As the canvas melts into grays, time skips to 1992. Désiré is now a precocious but troubled tween, struggling with his sexuality, taunted at school, disenchanted with his loving but busy family, and seeking solace in overwrought, imaginary conversations about how one faces the harshness of life ‘cruelly alone’. His victim mentality and tendency to deceitfully acquire whatever he wants is established in a tutorial task, where he tries to create a magic spell to win the heart of a classmate while blaming fate for his misery. But what’s cute in a boy becomes plain scary when he carries on his devastatingly selfish activities well into adulthood.

The game explores four chapters of Désiré’s life. As a student in 1992, he discovers the sweet taste of vicious revenge during the course of an entire episode dedicated to manipulating his classmates and catching a libidinous adversary in the act. You meet the boy’s family, whom he deeply resents for being too materialistic, though in all interactions his photographer father, scientist mother, college-going brother and two cantankerous aunts are warm and generous towards him. In fact, no one other than a token schoolyard bully gives him a hard time; most are neutral and some are friendly, but none are spared his mean judgment calls. While much prose is dedicated to Désiré’s bitterness with his life, essentially he is a poor little rich boy, spouting dramatic dialogues like, ‘silence is the most corrosive of acids’.

The story catches up with him next in 2003, after he has been pink-slipped due to his firm outsourcing part of its operations. True to form, Désiré rants against the business head for focusing only on profits, but also displays an absurd sense of entitlement and is dismissive of his coworkers. Misdemeanours pile up quickly as he obsesses over a girl and pulls out all stops to woo her – pimping out a colleague, getting another fired, blowing his sizeable severance paycheck on mindless indulgences, and almost attempting murder.

By 2011, Désiré is a full-blown sociopath, at war with the world, having decided that ‘the best form of defence is to attack’. His crusade boasts a one-point agenda: sex – all versions and perversions of it. *Nothing else* interests him. So you delve into the psyche of a lady who is dating her dog as she is tired of men, visit imaginary brothels, partake in graphic simulations with phallic candles, and witness the suicide of a sexual deviant... all while suffering *hours* of supercilious lectures. Then out of the blue, you’re flung to the Congo in 2020. However, you’re not the only one in a time-warp: the natives are still living in

Livingstone-era mud huts with thatched roofs, selling animal parts, elephant guns and superstitious sundries. But even the time-space continuum cannot save them from Désiré's virulence as he insults and cheats them before jetting back to France for a ridiculous act of religious redemption.

Besides the stopover in Africa, the game alternates between France and the black-and-white recesses of Désiré's mind, with four to five areas per episode. The early years, for example, feature his home, school, psychiatrist's office, a newspaper stall, and his mother's lab. The second chapter allows quick-travel between areas via a subway map, but elsewhere you saunter about at Désiré's slouching, slo-mo pace. No hotspot locator and some poorly clued quests mean tons of backtracking, and without the benefit of insta-exits to other scenes, you spend a huge chunk of time ambling across screens. While the location design allows for some free exploration, overall the game is linear and at any time you have only one or two quests. Right-clicking calls up the inventory, which usually contains four or five everyday items to be combined together or with onscreen hotspots. Yet despite the limited choice, it's not always easy to figure out the matches given the oddness of some of the tasks, which leads to repetitive negative feedback.

Almost all quests involve exploiting others emotionally and/or physically, preceded by protracted but token arguments between Désiré and his righteous-but-useless moral compass. While he does spell out the objectives of each quest, you can miss these brief instructions amidst the barrage of text if you're not paying attention. Each big offence comprises a set of well-organised mini-tasks to gather items and mislead people. These may be mundane, like finding a way to photocopy incriminating documents, or more insidious, like breaking into someone's house and planting 'evidence' to frame them. A brief but interesting segment of tandem play between Désiré and a friend warrants a special mention as a rare moment of genuine camaraderie.

There are standalone puzzles too, like a game of noughts-and-crosses, a boxing match hampered by poor controls, a soccer quiz that drove me to query the obscure trivia online to bypass the boring trial-and-error, and a retro arcade game to catch falling crockery. Conversations have multiple dialogues that must be navigated in order, but you can't tell if you have all the options you need to trigger the next steps as you can talk to some characters at any time on topics that may or may not relate to your quests. Consequently, you can get stuck, wondering what you missed and where. There are only four save slots, which may be too few if you want to save at multiple milestones.

Désiré interacts with many characters and you get detailed insights into their lives and personalities – from *his* perspective. Unsurprising then, that most are perceived to be obnoxious and nefarious. No-holds-barred stereotyping belies all claims of liberal thought, with the cast of prickly teachers, mean students, pervert priests, frigid feminists, geeky climate warriors, men-hating dominatrices, stoned rockers, sycophantic employees, assorted misfits, and of course, the time-trapped natives of Africa. Désiré's wheelchair-bound buddy Andy rises above this collective awfulness to steal the show in his bit part, with impressive presence of mind and a big, generous heart.

The utter inability of the script to evolve into clever parody keeps *Désiré* from becoming the 'critique of the modern world' that it aspires to be. Its concepts and arguments are mired in dull clichés and insufferable hypocrisy, and the satire is flat and bitter. The premise of Désiré's social isolation is his inherent disability to perceive colours, posed as an emotionally crippling illness to justify his negative worldview. So it's startling when the same man who expects your unconditional sympathy for *his* disability disses the Paralympics as 'a pity party of the greedy and the righteous'. Irony hangs heavy over Désiré's tirades against the cruel, profiteering world as he goes about plotting to ruin others' lives for his own miniscule gains.

The script relentlessly needles you with conceited opinions on everything from Charlie Hebdo (which is apparently no longer liberal enough) to public transport, but does not delve into any *real* issue facing the world today, not even the social circumstances of people with disabilities. Désiré's colour-blindness features only in the prologue and the finale, and does not impact *any* activity or outcome during the game. The hours in between, once you slice through the wordy flab, ring with a shrill whine about people's right to do whatever sexually pleases them, and society's intolerance towards extreme sexual deviances.

A saving grace is the slightly-skewed, sketchbook-style monochromatic art. The scenes are neat and well-detailed, and generally pleasant except for sporadic incidences like when you end up staring at quivering genitalia, or worse, a masturbating middle-schooler. Highlights include the prettily coloured cutscene of Désiré's playschool, a day at the beach, a scene in a gazebo overlooking the Parisian nightscape, a glimpse of a subway platform through the windows of a rushing train, and a truly artistic transformation of a church.

The red crosshair cursor is difficult to track in a few scenes, but hotspots are, for the most part, easy to locate and interact with. Some of the screens scroll sideways to reveal additional areas. The characters look realistic with just a hint of caricature, and match the background art well enough if you can overlook the fact that they don't have shadows or depth while everything else does. Ambient animation is limited to an occasional television or flickering candles, but character movements are reasonably smooth. Désiré's growth from a gangly, slouchy, joyless child into a gangly, slouchy, joyless man is well-documented.

There are no sound effects or voice-overs except the French dialogues in the playschool cutscene and the brief English intro. This is somewhat disconcerting since the characters lip-sync but no sound comes out. A set of melodious piano tracks make up the background score, but they are not scene-specific and after a while fade into monotony, so I played mostly on mute. A sultry, melancholy song by a silken-voiced girl in a bar infuses one of Désiré's many maudlin moments with high drama and honest emotion.

Gameplay and technical details take a backseat to Désiré's shrill 'I'm okay, you're not okay' bluster, which at a character level is a petulant cry for attention. However, when a script clutches onto the fig leaf of physical disability to justify an onslaught of blatantly horrible, often criminal, behaviour, it must be called out on its deceit. This game would have played out *exactly* the same way, minus the first cutscene, if Désiré *wasn't* colour-blind, and it appallingly tries to use disability as a ploy to garner sympathy for a cruel, remorseless sociopath. Désiré is *not* a vulnerable boy struggling to find his place in an uncaring, fast-paced world. He lives a privileged life with a full, affectionate family and abundant luxuries – his own room, fancy goodies, even the expensive medical help he needs to combat his demons. His problem, in fact, is that he has no problem, and his idle mind is a devil's workshop.

It is theoretically possible that Désiré's awfulness is by design, and that *he* represents the malicious modern society that the game seeks to deride – brazenly selfish and highly judgmental of everyone and everything, oblivious to his own failings and sins in a deluded sense of self-righteousness. Désiré being an unreliable narrator, a poster boy for the very hypocrisy that he constantly attributes *others*, smugly blind to the irony, would indeed be a fantastic twist to the tale. But the dull literalness of the script, which never stops wallowing in self-serving victimisation, makes this unlikely. As far as I could tell, Desire's awful, but not in a chaotic, badass way. He's just awful. You don't live vicariously through him, you just want him to go away.

Besides burdening you with this dreadful lead character, the game bombards you with facetious commentary on every issue and non-issue crowding the social justice landscape, couching glib armchair analysis in verbose pontification. It then amplifies the noise with a strident rally for sexual deviances, branding those resistant to this school of thought as corrupt and intolerant. And since no sociopolitical circus is complete without a religious angle, this too is clumsily dragged in for good measure. Meanwhile, since this is an 'adventure game' and not an angst-riddled blog, there are some quests and puzzles strewn about, but these are neither the point of the game nor reason enough to play it. If you're going to step into the dark and dingy by-lanes of *Désiré's* mind, proceed at your own risk.