

The Shapeshifting Detective Review | GameGrin

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The Shapeshifting Detective from Wales Interactive cuts one seriously large slice from the weird pie. We have a full motion video (FMV) murder mystery escapade that drinks deep from the well of the supernatural, drops in tarot readers the local constabulary take seriously, some lights in the sky, alien abduction, a victim with baggage, and a finale that had me torn between gnawing curiosity and outright belly laughing hilarity. But, is it any good? Well, let us grab a magnifying glass and examine the evidence...

There I was, dropped into the sleepy little town of August to investigate the brutal murder of talented young cellist, Dorota Shaw. I am Sam, a detective with a unique and interesting talent, but more on that in a moment. The victim, Ms Shaw, was found strangled in her bedroom the night before my arrival and, in a twist I *certainly* didn't see coming, her untimely departure was foreseen by a trio of travelling tarot readers. The three ultimately failed to prevent the murderous act and now sit high atop my list of suspects. I am staying in an eerily quiet little guesthouse run by the equally eerie Violet, a woman offering less warmth than sandals in December. This could be a long day...

And so, I began my investigation. *The Shapeshifting Detective* is one of those quirky little numbers that offers an experience drenched more in storytelling than in actual traditional games playing. Rather than allowing us to control our character across a series of escapades and adventures, this game plays out in a series of talking heads conversations. The basic premise is that whichever character I had chosen to converse with will respond and react to my choice of questions much like the sort of thing we encounter in games such as *Telltale's The Walking Dead*. However, where that game is akin to watching a comic book flipping pages, *The Shapeshifting Detective* plays out with real-life actors talking directly to camera.



What this means in terms of gameplay is that *The Shapeshifting Detective* as an immersive and engaging experience largely depends upon the ability of the assembled cast of actors and the strength of the writing talent. Thankfully, both do a pretty impressive job.

The real beauty for myself in playing was coming to the conclusion that Wales Interactive hasn't taken themselves too seriously here. Sure, the subject matter is serious, and the setup and delivery is wonderfully unnerving, however, rather than playing out like some dark TV drama destined for awards, it adopts an air of old fashioned radio drama with occasionally hammy, over-the-top acting, and a wild storyline that is one part *Inspector Morse* and two parts *The Twilight Zone*. And the game is all the stronger and more enjoyable for it!

This proved beautifully refreshing, as, after the opening few minutes I was a little worried that *The Shapeshifting Detective* felt like a game out of time and step with its surroundings. In an age where we are dazzled daily by new graphical splendour and innovative ideas, this mysterious little game opted for a different direction altogether and initially, it felt quite dated. In fact, it felt like one of those old murder mystery DVD party games that were all the rage for twenty minutes in the early '00s. I have to be honest and state FMV in games hadn't really captured my attention since the *Sega Mega CD* was announced many, many years ago. Nevertheless, I ploughed on with the investigation, and without me even realising, in a matter of minutes I was lost in a thickening soupy mist of intrigue and the downright paranormal.



Now, back to the nature of Sam. The titular character we play in this murder peppered plot. The delicious twist delivered by Wales Interactive that truly demanded my attention and elevated proceedings massively is something I hinted at earlier. Sam's unique ability. Our man Sam is also a shapeshifter. What this means is that Sam can adopt the form of any of the characters he meets during the course of the investigation. For example, you could question one of the tarot readers as Sam, and then in a bid to reveal more intimate details, you could shift into another of the characters and question the original tarot reader again in the hope they will open up more or reveal something significant or previously hidden. It works brilliantly and takes a typical murder mystery into new supernatural and altogether more fantastic lands. I loved the different reactions of the characters to the various roles I could adopt, and in terms of investigation this feature really opens up the possibilities with dramatic effect.

The shapeshifting element also means we have a game that can go in various directions with each play. This is *critical*. Had *The Shapeshifting Detective* been a single straight storyline without room for alternate outcomes, then I would have been less likely to recommend it. But with the possibility for different stories to be told with each play we suddenly have great replay value and the game becomes all the more desirable.

The acting talent as I mentioned earlier is spot on, and although there are obvious high points, everyone involved delivers strong and believable performances that worked wonders in drawing me deeper into this odd and unsettling story.

In addition, during the mercifully short loading phases, we are treated to snippets of the local radio show, Nights with Poe and Munroe. These dark snippets that discuss the murder and other local weirdness raise the overall creepy ambience by immeasurable levels that in turn elevate the playing experience as a whole.



For all its positives though, *The Shapeshifting Detective* is not free from guilt itself. At times the game misses the questions you really wanted to ask as it offers players a choice of three or four possible responses during questioning, and it also felt like a lot of loose ends still hung in the air after my first complete playthrough. There was talk of aliens for example that didn't really have any outcome. There was also a moment or two I felt like I had no real control over how the game played out. I won't go into too much detail here for risk of spoilers, but I felt like a passenger or like someone reading a book rather than a player that could dictate and change the path of the plot. And finally, the climax of my first play felt a little rushed and left me quite disappointed. It had moments that were borderline ridiculous and came across as though the writers simply wanted to reach the outcome without the aid of logic.

The Shapeshifting Detective is undoubtedly a game that will divide opinion. It will leave some players cold whilst others will bask in its eerie warmth. I myself have landed somewhere in the middle. The journey was hugely enjoyable, the investigation was interesting and the shapeshifting element worked brilliantly. Every character was well acted, although one or two were very two-dimensionally written, and the ambience of the game is utterly superb, fitting the theme perfectly. However, there are moments of detachment as a player that took me out of Sam's shoes and back into my own, there are absurd moments that make little to no sense, and after one play I was left with more questions than answers.

Overall, we have a game that is brave enough to go where I hardly expected games to be willing to venture anymore. It is old school FMV, it is more story than action, it uses real actors over graphics, and it doesn't take itself too seriously. For all those reasons, and that it left me with a largely positive experience that I will definitely undertake again very soon, I can happily recommend you dip a toe or ten into the undeniably weird waters of the town of August, and *The Shapeshifting Detective*.