

# Judgement Has Passed: Capitalism and Collateral Damage in Paradise Killer



Madison Butler

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Island Sequence 24 is a picturesque paradise...for some. Paradise Killer, Kaizen Game Works, Fellow Traveler, 2020. Captured on Nintendo Switch.

*[Contains spoilers for Paradise Killer]*

*Paradise Killer* is a game about truth. To discover the truth of how and why Paradise Island's Council was brutally murdered, the immortal members of the Syndicate, the remaining half of Paradise's ruling class, enlist the aid of investigator Lady Love Dies. Part open-world investigation, part trial game, it's the player's job to collect and present evidence in a trial format and bring some form of justice to Paradise Island. However, there's more to find than just clues; Paradise, like a sparkly vaporwave mirror of the real world, is supported by a web of systems designed to keep the rich wealthy and the poor impoverished.

The trial is the main objective of the game. Once *Lady Love Dies* presents evidence, consequences swiftly follow: Death to anyone who was involved in the murders of the council members and the handful of smaller crimes that took place during the same night. But first, the player must comb every inch of the island for evidence. Doing so reveals *Lady Love Dies*'s own godlike powers. She can jump improbably high, glide across substantial gaps, and fall from great heights without consequence. She doesn't even need rest, really; the only indicator of passing time is the gentle cycle of a light and dark sky over the picturesque Paradise.

Yet the Paradise we see isn't a single island but part of a sequence. The Syndicate and the Council are responsible for planning and creating new islands, which becomes necessary when an island is corrupted by demons. *Paradise Killer* takes place during the transition from Island Sequence 24 to "Perfect 25," which the Council and Syndicate believe will be the final instance, a flawless and incorruptible paradise.

That perfection isn't without cost. As *Lady Love Dies* delves deeper into the investigation, the crystal facade begins to crack and the player learns that only atrocity beyond measure makes Paradise possible. Though each member of the Syndicate fills a vocational role, humans are brought to the island as laborers and ritually sacrificed at the end of each cycle. They're little more than toys to the Syndicate and Council, allowed only to work and sleep and forced to worship ancient and alien gods. They're expendable. Their blood is an acceptable — necessary — cost of living for the elite. The human cost is a damning indictment of the way capitalism privileges the wealthy and allows them to accumulate wealth on the backs of its poorest. It's relevant to our own world, if almost shallow in the outlandishness of its metaphor.

Though she is one of the elite, *Lady Love Dies* is in exile at the beginning of the game. For 3 million days, she has lived in a large, airy, opulent apartment that sits in the clouds above Paradise in (admittedly indulgent) exile for the crime of conspiring with the god Damned Harmony and endangering paradise. The investigation is a chance to earn a way out of exile. Despite her exile, *Lady Love Dies* is hardly an outsider to the Syndicate; 8,000 years is nothing to an immortal.

This is to say, the human sacrifice is of little consequence to her. *Paradise Killer* shows us a view of humanity through a window of aristocracy few people will ever attain, both in real life and in the world of *Paradise Killer*. *Lady Love Dies* is an outcast, but there is an

unbreachable gap between her and the humans on the island. The gap between herself and her fellow Syndicate members is much smaller. All Love Dies must do to close the gap it is solve the Council's murder and present her evidence at trial.

Though the Syndicate has pinned the murder on a demon-possessed human named Henry Division, the evidence tells a much more complicated story. The player's final task (and only task) is to present the evidence to Justice, a former Syndicate member who sacrificed their humanity to serve the island as an impartial judge.



In a world literally built in the artifice of an alternate reality, the trial is just as superficial as the rest of it. The outcome varies depending on which facts the player presents. Of course, the player can dutifully offer up evidence for each crime and distribute blame among the various other Syndicate members for their involvement. But the player can deem any of the members innocent and choose to kill them regardless; though Justice hands down the verdict, Love Dies holds the gun. Though evidence shows the Syndicate has made Henry their scapegoat, the player can still blame him for the murders, allowing the Syndicate to move on to Perfect 25. The result hardly matters to Love Dies, as she is already free from exile.

Throughout the game, Lady Love Dies often repeats the phrase “the facts and the truth are not the same.” Yet, for a game that emphasizes the importance of finding the truth, *Paradise Killer* is not all that concerned about upholding it. It is difficult to separate the definition for fact and truth, to define one without mentioning the other. But if a fact is something that is known to have happened and the truth is a conformity with fact, it is possible to tease them apart. By presenting certain facts or omitting others, Love Dies can construct a truth that is not *the* truth.

Being able to twist the facts to my liking ultimately left me with mixed feelings on the game’s end. Why go through the effort for so little consequence? Regardless of whether you exonerate Henry, he remains a human. He will die as the Island Sequence ends. Humans will still be forced into slavery on the next island while the Syndicate exploits their labor. Justice may be an objective observer, but without equally objective evidence, they cannot serve real justice.

Ultimately, though, this is what I appreciated about *Paradise Killer* — its metaphors were deeper and more thought-provoking than I initially gave credit for. Just as truth and fact exist separately, truth and justice are not the same. It simply isn’t possible for the elite governing body to hold itself accountable. Though the game presents Love Dies as an outsider, she directly benefits from human exploitation and sacrifice. She benefits from the investigation regardless of its outcome. After all, between death and exile, only one of those conditions is permanent.

Throughout the game, Lady Love Dies often talks about saving Paradise. Can Paradise be saved? *Should* Paradise be saved? Of course not. The disastrous end of Sequence 24 hardly bodes well for “Perfect” 25, and that aside, the trial changed nothing. The cruelty that makes the supposed perfection possible is irredeemable, and the extent of it makes *Paradise Killer* difficult to play. The tension between enjoying Lady Love Dies as a character and reckoning with the reality of the Syndicate’s actions is uncomfortable. But this tension is a necessary discomfort that propels *Paradise Killer* beyond the shallow lives of wealthy elites to a story about the murky depths of truth, justice, violence, and contradiction that reflects our own world.