Dial Code: Santa Claus is our new favorite holiday cult classic



Enlarge / Christmas Eve turns violent for young Thomas as Santa goes on a murderous rampage in *Dial Code: Santa Claus.*

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One year before young Macauley Culkin gleefully terrorized would-be burglars in the 1990 Christmas classic *Home Alone*, a Rambo-obsessed little boy named Thomas battled a murderous intruder in the 1989 French film *Dial Code: Santa Claus*. It's dark and violent, like all the best fairy tales, and deserves a place in the growing pantheon of alternative holiday movies for those who prefer more of an edge to their Christmas fare.

(Mild spoilers below.)

Ten-year-old Thomas comes from a long line of toy manufacturers, so naturally he has all the latest toys and gadgets to play with, plus an adorable dog named J.R. His house is an imaginative kid's dream: a large isolated manor with tons of secret rooms and passageways that his father showed him before he died. Thomas himself (sporting a rad '80s mullet) is a bit of a genius, good with computers and cobbling together elaborate contraptions out of toys and electronic parts.

Thomas finds himself home alone with his nearly-blind grandfather on Christmas eve, because his mother, as CEO of

the family toy empire, is working late to rake in all those holiday profits. He's set up an elaborate camera system to capture Santa Claus in the act of leaving presents. When "Santa" really does come down the chimney just after midnight, the boy thinks his dream has come true. But J.R. attacks the intruder, and "Santa" responds by brutally killing the dog with a cake knife. Thomas must use all his wits to protect himself and his grandfather from "Santa."

Ultimately the film is about the loss of childhood innocence.

The film was highly influential with European filmmakers at the time, in large part because director Rene Manzor turned the holy day of Christmas into a violent nightmare scenario, violating a cultural taboo. Unlike *Home Alone*, *Dial Code: Santa Claus* doesn't play the situation for laughs. It's genuinely traumatic for Thomas: he's in real peril, and this Bad Santa racks up quite a body count before his rampage ends.

Ultimately, the film is about the loss of childhood innocence. Thomas' mother wants her son to have one more year of believing in Santa Claus, a way of keeping him innocent just a bit longer. She even tries to prevent him from attempting to catch sight of Santa on Christmas Eve by warning that, if he does, Santa will get mad and turn into an ogre. From Thomas' perspective, that's precisely what happens.

- A remote estate on Christmas Eve. What could go wrong?
  American Genre Film Archive
- Thomas eagerly awaits Santa's arrival on Christmas Eve.
  YouTube/Alamo Drafthouse
- Hark! Is that a sound coming from the chimney?
  YouTube/Alamo Drafthouse
- Santa Claus makes his first appearance.
  YouTube/Alamo Drafthouse
- J.R. doesn't like intruders.
  American Genre Film Archive

- WTF? Bad Santa kills Thomas' little dog.
  YouTube/Alamo Drafthouse
- A bit more Krampus than Santa.
  YouTube/Alamo Drafthouse
- This means war.
  American Genre Film Archive
- Thomas channels his inner Rambo to take revenge.
  YouTube/Alamo Drafthouse
- Thomas has all the toys and mad maker skills.
- A booby-trapped toy train creaks toward its target.
  YouTube/Alamo Drafthouse
- Colored pencils make useful weapons.
  YouTube/Alamo Drafthouse
- A couple of darts to the neck is exactly what Santa deserves.
  YouTube/Alamo Drafthouse
- Grandpa hides in the secret toy room.
  American Genre Film Archive
- A game of cat and mouse.
  American Genre Film Archive
- American Genre Film Archive
- Santa still wants to play.
  American Genre Film Archive
- American Genre Film Archive

The film's original French title, *36.15 Code Pere Noel*, refers to an early form of the Internet in France called the Minitel (other translations include *Deadly Games, Game Over,* and *Hide and Freak*). There were mini-terminals dotted around French city streets where people could pay by the minute to log in to chat, send messages, read the news, or shop. The most common access code for the terminal was "3615." (The Minitel shut down for good in 2012. You can learn more in this article in *IEEE Spectrum*, about how the original builder, Daniel Hannaby, has uploaded the original source code to the cloud.)

The Minitel plays a key role in *Dial Code*. Thomas has a brief

chat session with Santa via the Minitel, inviting him to come to his house that night. Little does he know that his jaded best buddy, Pilou, is right: that's not really Santa on the other end. It's a mentally unstable vagabond who seems a bit too fond of children, while being quite childlike himself.

> *The similarities between the two films may well just be a coincidence.*

So, is *Home Alone* just a US knockoff, sanitized for American tastes? The jury is still out on that score. Manzor definitely noticed the similarities between the two films and threatened to sue. John Hughes, writer and producer of *Home Alone*, denied the charge, claiming he never saw Manzor's film and came up with the idea while traveling to Paris for a family vacation.

3615 Code Pere Noel was distributed everywhere except North America when it was broadly released in January 1990. The similarities may well just be a coincidence, since *Home Alone* first hit theaters on November 16 that same year. It seems unlikely the film could have been written, cast, shot, and edited in that short a time frame. [**UPDATE**: Rene Manzor told me via Twitter that *Dial Code: Santa Claus* was first screened at Cannes in May 1989. So my argument that Hughes wouldn't have had time to make his own film doesn't quite work.]

Dial Code: Santa Claus stands the test of time. Previously available only on bootleg VHS, the American Genre Film Archives restored the film and screened it at the Fantastic Fest in Austin, Texas, earlier this year. And they're screening it at select theaters all over the country through January 19 (you can find a list of screenings here), with a Blu-Ray for the US region supposedly coming soon. Snap up a copy when it does, and add it to your annual holiday viewing.

[embedded content]
Dial Code: Santa Claus trailer.
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