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Video Games are Where the Detective Story Has Always Belonged: The Progression of Detective Stories into Video Games

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Tutorial Level. An Introduction, History Lesson, and Hopefully a Thesis Statement:

Genre as it is commonly viewed is a difficult concept to deal with in fiction. It is both easily identifiable, yet difficult to quantify. Most people will look at the 1966 movie *The Good, The Bad, and the Ugly* and classify it as a western. However, for many people it would be difficult to go the other way around; in other words, we can identify a western but defining what makes a western a western is more difficult. Most description of genre is based around non-narrative based elements, which are usually visual. *The Good, The Bad, and the Ugly* is a western because it takes place in the western United States before the modern area. *Star Trek* is science fiction because it takes place in space with aliens. *The Earthsea Series* is fantasy because it has wizards and dragons. More difficult to define are the kinds of stories or themes that take place in these genres. While these elements can be interwoven with a narrative, they are not inherently so. We can have a Science Fiction story about what it would mean to meet aliens, but even if the narrative wasn't about that as long as it had aliens, we would still use the same classification. That is not to say it is impossible to interpret these genres. The world of academia has been doing so for years, taking deep dives beyond the abstract to piece together the nature of these genres. Most genres along with their nature transcend any one medium. The television show *Star Trek* and Andy Weir's book *The Martian* exist in different mediums, but both would be considered science fiction. Although this ability to go in between mediums is not a universal treat in all genres.

Most genres in the medium of video games are wholly unique to that medium. That is not to say video games haven't borrowed genres from other mediums. *Mass Effect* is a science fiction game. *Fire Emblem* is a fantasy game. Like in other mediums, these video games are labeled as science fiction/fantasy based on conventional narrative genre classification. *Mass*

Effect takes place in space and has aliens, so it is science fiction. *Fire Emblem* has wizards and dragons so it is fantasy. A more accurate representation of specific content in these games would be to classify them as an Action RPG and a Strategy Game, respectively. Genres used in other mediums are not so much applicable to content in games. Any importation is window dressing for content. But that is of course only when one takes a ludologist[1] approach to the interpretation of games. A games narrative can of course incorporate more than just surface level elements, but those elements of the genre rarely if ever actually effect or define game play. There is one major exception to this, the detective genre (to clarify, in this paper I will be using the term detective genre to encompass all mediums. I will instead use the term games to refer to video game and fiction to refer to other mediums). However, to delve into the detective game, I must first discuss the fiction that this video game genre pulls from.

Sometimes called mystery fiction or crime fiction (although the latter is broader than I will be looking at in this paper) detective fiction is commonly cited as being created by Edgar Allan Poe in his short story "The Murders in the Rue Morgue", although there is some contention about that. David Grossvogel in his their book *Mystery and Its Fiction: From Oedipus to Agatha Christie* goes much future back to the story of "Oedipus Rex". However, I would argue that while "Oedipus Rex" share elements with detective fiction, it is also distinctly not a piece of detective fiction. Certainly, the story of "Oedipus Rex" does have a mystery involving a murder as one of the central elements in the plot, and the mystery is resolved by the story's end. This does not make the work a detective story, however. After all, those are just surface level elements. This will be explored in detail later next chapter, but the detective genre is more than

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[1] Someone who primarily looks at video games through the ludonarratives or the narratives created from a player interacting with a game

just a story with a mystery driving it. It is a narrative that exists where the major action is the protagonist solving a mystery. That is not to say that a detective story has to be about the mystery in an all-encompassing way. After all, as Barry Forshaw has said in his book, *Crime Uncovered: Detective*, "Apart from the sheer pleasure of reading a good detective novel, the 'added value' in many of the best examples has long been the implicit (or sometimes explicit) element of social criticism freighted in by the more challenging writers. Among popular literary genres, only science fiction has rivalled the crime novel in 'holding the mirror up to nature' (or society)" (7-8). Instead, it is to say that the actions of the plot are largely focused around how the detective (regardless of the form they take) works to solve the mystery. That's not say that Poe was simply a literary genius for creating a brand-new genre from nothing. "Oedipus Rex" could never be a detective story if only because of when it was created.

Fig. 1. A painting called *The Nightwatch* by Rembrandt depicting police work in London of this time period

For fiction about the solving of mysteries (these mysteries almost always being crimes) there needs to be a modern understanding of the police's place in society. This is one of the reasons why the broad genre of crime fiction did not involve solving crimes for a long time. As Martin Priestman says in *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction*, "the literature of the eighteenth century is suffused with crime but handles it in a wholly different way from that of the nineteenth and twentieth. Looking back across those centuries, it is easy to trace this difference to the penal realities of the time: the absence of any reliable system of policing, or of the detection of criminals on any routine basis" (7). Prior to 1829 the English-speaking world didn't have an entire group of people to stop local crimes. Instead, crimes were supposed to be stopped by citizens on the street (or a volunteer watch depending on where one lived) as a form of civic duty [Fig1]. Neighborhoods also had a Beadle, "whose duties were, *inter alia*, to patrol the streets, spend evenings at the watch house, and supervise the watch" (Durston 43). In their book Burglars and Bobbies, Gregory J. Durston saw this this as a fairly outdated system as, despite the population dramatically increasing over half a century, law enforcement remained unchanged in scope[2] (43). The effectiveness of the practice aside, this form of crime prevention creates an idea of the nature of crime as being only something that exists in the present and only be dealt with in the present. It would not be until the creation of the profession thief taker[3] that this shift on the view of crime would take place. Crimes were no longer an event that took place

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[2] Most Beadles did have some watchmen assisting them, but the Beadle was the only one actually paid by the government

[3] Functionally a bounty hunter who would locate a criminal then help negotiate the return of a stolen item. In practice those in this job were corrupt and usually in cahoots with said thieves such as London's self-proclaimed Thief Taker General Johnathan Wild

in the moment that could be either be stopped or not. Now crimes were something that could

have happened in the past, but then could be corrected in the present. This is a mentality that

needs to exist to ever create a narrative about uncovering the nature of a crime and figuring out

who the perpetrator is after the moment of crime. And thus the narrative of trying to uncover a

previously perpetrated crime was created with the advent Poe's short story.

      Poe in fact goes beyond just the starting of this genre, but also explaining the very appeal

of the genre, which is the thrill of analysis. In the beginning of "The Murders in the Rue

Morgue," Poe lays out the appeal of the detective genre:

> As the strong man exults in his physical ability, delighting in such exercises as
> call his muscles into action, so glories the analyst in that moral activity which
> disentangles. He derives pleasure from even the most trivial occupations bringing
> his talent into play. He is fond of enigmas, of conundrums, of hieroglyphics;
> exhibiting in his solutions of each a degree of acumen which appears to the
> ordinary apprehension præternatural. His results, brought about by the very soul
> and essence of method, have, in truth, the whole air of intuition. (Poe 369)

As Poe describes it, the thrill of mystery is the analysis of the mystery and attempting to remove

the mystery from a sequence of events. This narration of course is given by the unnamed

assistant of the detective of the short story and is given as a meditation on the nature of analysis,

the commentary still works to explain the appeal of the genre the audience. Certainly part of it

comes from the "moral activity" of seeing someone correct the wrong done by a criminal, but I

would argue that the true enjoyment of detective works like Poe's lies in trying to solve the

mystery with the characters in the book (Poe 369). It is from these short stories[4] that the drive for

unraveling mystery and the genre that allows just a practice really being to take off. Given that

Poe started the genre, his depiction of what it means to analysis is also typically reflected in that

appeal. In their article "Murder as a Fine Art" Joseph Moldenhauer describes one of the two

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[4] Poe wrote 2 sequels stories staring the same characters after the success of "The Murders in the Rue Morgue"

kinds of Poe protagonists, "The protagonist-persona of these works, whether detective or landscape architect or literature, masters every enigma and places every discordant fragment of his experience into a coherent design" (830). It is not just the act of deduction, but also the power fantasy of working through details and thus understanding a situation to a great degree.

Detective fiction does not stay like that, however. Some mysteries are revealed to the audience at the very beginning, thus preventing the audience from solving it in the first place, such as most episodes of the TV show *Columbo* where the opening scene is usually a murder being committed followed by how the perpetrator covers it up. Other stories still focus not so much on the original crime's unraveling to, but rather on a larger mystery that the detective must navigate and solve like in the TV show *Twin Peaks* which originally starts with a murder, but is about much more then that overall. Other still remove the disconnect of time between mystery and action of solving it bringing both into a conflict in the present like in the episode of *Bones* "Aliens in a Spaceship" where the characters must follow clues in order to uncover the location of two people kidnapped and suffocating. Some people have tried to divide the detective genre even more such as John Irwin, "I use the term *analytic detective fiction* here to distinguish the genre invented by Poe in the Dupin tales of the 1840s from stories whose main character is a detective but whose main concern is not analysis but adventure, stories whose true genre is less detective fiction than the quest romance" (941). Although I would still argue that, despite the variation present, all mentioned still fall under the banner of the detective story. After all they still all have plots that focus around the uncovering of a mystery. They also almost all fall under a Holmes and Watson dynamic when it comes to the depiction of the story.

As characters in the English lexicon go, Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson need no grand introduction. From these characters the long-lasting dynamic of the detective and the assistant is

popularized. It should be mentioned that Arthur Conan Doyle was not the first person to write a detective story like this. Poe's "The Murder at the Rue More" stars the unofficial detective C. Auguste Dupin along with the nameless narrator as his companion for the adventure. Despite the advantage of time and even Doyle's own inspiration (some would say theft) from Poe's own works, Holmes and Watson have clearly won the battle of cultural importance. After all unlike Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson, we do not see Dupin and nameless friend teaming up with Batman in cartoons[5]. As such the roles will be referred to as a Holmes and Watson.

Beyond just this dynamic existence, it is used to allow the audience to interact with the mystery. The narrator and the way in which the audience experiences the mystery can be seen as the Watson of the story. That way information can be presented to the audience, but the information is not filtered through the lens of someone who is actively trying to analyze the clues presented. For an example of what this means, while not narration in the sense that we hear the voice of the character commentating, the first episode of the 2010 BBC show *Sherlock* through various edits and text overlays gives the audience an investigation through Holmes' perspective. By doing this the show not only highlights the clues that Holmes sees, but presents the deduction he makes in real time [Fig2]. A Watson acting as narrator in contrast would simply display the information, not make the deduction. Certainly, the details of this change when changing mediums. Point of view narration, while not rare in visual mediums like television and movies such as the previously mentioned *Sherlock*, is far less ubiquitous then in mediums with a written element like prose. A Watson is always present, however, in these visual works. If we look at a Watson as the non-analytical perspective through which the audience gets to view the mystery, then the camera that is used to show us the world becomes a Watson itself regardless of if the

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[5] Batman The Brave and The Bold: *Trials of the Demon!*

detective has any sidekick with them. The Holmes also has a function beyond just existing as the primary character. The Holmes is the fact checker for the audience as well as the goal. As the audience sees the same things that Holmes does as Watson we get to see if we noticed the same thing and arrived to the same correct conclusions. With this frame for detective fiction in mind it becomes clear that the true appeal of the detective story is that the reader is Watson trying to be Holmes.
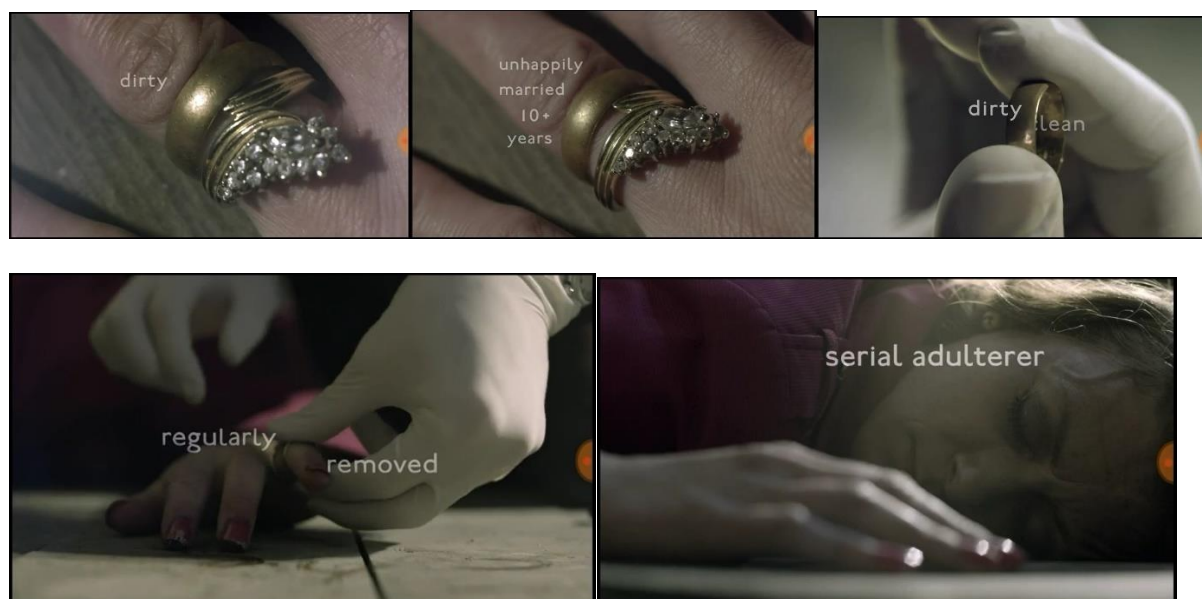

Fig. 2. Images from Episode 1 of Series 1 of *Sherlock* "A Study In Pink". Images in order from Left to Right. Text Depicts Sherlock's observations and deduction as they happen.

That appeal of being Sherlock Holmes is of the game of analysis. In the beginning of "Murders in the Rue Morgue" while Poe is still trying to define what analysis means. Following his comparison to strength, Poe juxtapose it with ingenuity, "The analytical power should not be confounded with simple ingenuity; for while the analyst is necessarily ingenious, the ingenious man is often remarkably incapable of analysis" (371). In order to explore the differences games are used as examples, specifically chess for ingenuity and the card game hoyle for analysis. For

ingenuity, it is described to be a part of analysis but analysis is not part of ingenuity, "A chess-player, for example, does the one without effort at the other" (369). Ingenuity is seen as an act of memorization and application. To be skilled at chess you have to know a lot of different moves and counter movies. Hoyle on the other hand is framed about taking in information in and gaining mastery through the conclusions made:

> The necessary knowledge is that of what to observe. Our player confines himself not at all; nor, because the game is the object, does he reject deductions from things external to the game…The first two or three rounds having been played, he is in full possession of the contents of each hand, and thenceforward puts down his cards with as absolute a precision of purpose as if the rest of the party had turned outward the faces of their own (370-371).

This is what it means to analyze, to observe and gain all necessary information to understand all aspects of a situation. A Sherlock Holmes then embodies that ability and also points to the appeal of being this character for the audience. It's no accident that the example of analysis is a game, one where you specifically play against other people. To fully analyze a game of Hoyle is to have a mastery over your opponents. To analyze is to win against others. To analyze is to be Sherlock Holmes. So to be Sherlock Holmes is to win against others through analysis which is then the appeal of the audience to try and be this idea.

Unfortunately, despite this appeal of trying to be Sherlock Holmes, the audience is forced to stay as Watson with detective fiction. After all, to be Holmes the reader would at minimum need to be able to tell the work their deduction and at most be able to actively decide the course of investigation. In the traditional mediums of detective fiction doing something like this would be largely impossible. It is this fact that makes me so fascinated with the detective genre as it relates to video games. After all, unlike other mediums, video games are interactive in nature. The audience may be a passive observer of events, but the player is an active participant in the narrative. As such the video game is the natural evolution of the detective genre. However, this

genre adaptation to a new medium has not been uniformed. Instead, the genre adaptation process has created a large spectrum of games in which the two ends of said spectrum, I will argue, are two different video game genres. This spectrum ranges from extremely faithful adaptions of tradition detective fiction to completely abstracted stories that could only work in the medium of video games. Despite this range however, the detective video game has achieved what every detective book, tv show, and movie has always tried to do. It has made the audience Sherlock Holmes.

Level 1. In The Beginning…:

Before truly discussing how the detective genre has been adapted into the interactive medium of video games, I think it is important to both talk about the nature of the detective genre and the nature of the video game medium. We shall start with the former. And the first thing that should be addressed is the actual name of the genre. For most people the term Mystery Genre and Detective Genre are largely interchangeable. Even in the world of academia where minute details and specificity are coveted these are not viewed as similar genres but as the same genre. For the purposes of this paper, I will be using the term Detective Fiction when referring to detective stories of traditional mediums while detective genre will be used to refer to all detective stories regardless of medium. I bring up this discrepancy of name however not just for the sake of clarification but to say that it is fascinating that these two names exist because together they successfully capture the nature of the detective/mystery genre.

The mystery genre as the name suggests is one revolving around mystery although this exact mystery difference from the common vernacular in this genre as Randy Abbot says in their article "Roots of Mystery and Detective Fiction": "Mystery, as the is word now commonly understood, is the unknown, the unanswered. This is a very different meaning from that used in

mystery novels, in which mystery goes from being only one of the elements in a story to being the central purpose of a story" (1891). Outside of this genre a mystery is simply an element of the unknown, a fact lost to either audience, character, or both. In this form a mystery is under no obligation to resolve itself, or to be anything more than a mystery. Certainly, that can still be the case even if this always unanswered question exists as the major focal point of the story. However an unsolved mystery are not put into the Mystery genre. Instead scholars typically give these their own classification relative to other genre. For example Tzetan Todarov has examined the space between reality and the supernature in fiction and classifies the space where it is unknown what state the work is in as the fantastic[6]. So the presence of mystery itself does not constitute the Mystery Genre even if the focus of the story is of said Mystery.

The Detective Genre, as the name suggests, involves a detective as the focal point. This is not inherently literal however. Instead a character (usually the protagonist) takes the role of a detective. In their book *Crime Uncovered: Detective* Barry Forshaw says, "In an increasingly unstable world (where, for example, the rise of totalitarian religious fundamentalism has spread from theocratic countries to the secular West), novels featuring detectives are particularly satisfying in that we are invited to relish the chaos unleashed by the crime and criminals before the status quo is re-established" (7). Of course not every story that rights a wrong in the world falls into this genre. Ask someone if *Iron Man* was a detective story and the best you will get is a joke about how Robert Downey Jr. also played Sherlock Homes. Instead the detective story involves the detective (armature or professional) fixing the would through the interaction and

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[6] The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre

uncovering of a mystery. By solving the unknown they have corrected something. This is what it means to be a detective story. It is a story that is focused on the unraveling of a mystery.

If we accept this as the definition of a Detective story, namely a plot focused on a mystery and the process of uncovering it, then this leads to the unique relationship and disconnect between the story and plot of any individual work. As Martin Priestman says in their book *Crime Fiction: From Poe to the Present* that:

> The detective whodunnit focuses primarily on identifying the perpetrator of a crime which for most of the story or novel already lies in the past…this placing of the major event in a concealed 'first story' which has taken place prior to most of the narrated action compels the 'second story' of the latter to be relatively static, focusing our attention on a slow process of uncovering (and sometimes on the practical difficulties of narrative itself), rather than on any very meaningful or character-revealing action. The only such 'action' to which we can look forward – the final unmasking of the perpetrator – can happen only once, at the very end, which is also the moment when the hitherto concealed 'first story' comes to be told in its entirety…this strangely split-level narrative approach is only an intensification of the split in all fiction between what Russian Formalist critics, following Aristotle, have defined as 'story' (what is actually supposed to have happened) and 'plot' (the way we are told about it) (6).

So with this framework in mind it is clear that while we the audience follow the action of the present with the detective, the true story being told to the audience is one of someone committing a crime, and possibly them trying to cover up said crime depending on the complexity of the investigation. Thus any detective fiction can be seen as a form of nonlinear storytelling. After all, we almost always start these stories at the very ending. In the classic murder story, we always start with only one piece of the story known to us, the very ending leading to a death. Now despite this focus on the story of the detective genre, the plot is still equally important. After all, while the focus of an individual work may be on the mystery, it is the appeal of the genre to live through the plot.

I talked about this during the introduction, but to reiterate that point, a major appeal of the detective genre is that of living out the fantasy of being a detective and solving a crime. We always strive to be Sherlock Holmes trying to solve the crime before the actual Holmes discovers the truth. In that way, we derive a deeper meaning from the introduction of the first detective story:

> Whist has long been noted for its influence upon what is termed the calculating power; and men of the highest order of intellect have been known to take an apparently unaccountable delight in it, while eschewing chess as frivolous. Beyond doubt there is nothing of a similar nature so greatly tasking the faculty of analysis. The best chess-player in Christendom may be little more than the best player of chess; but proficiency in whist implies capacity for success in all those more important undertakings where mind struggles with mind. When I say proficiency, I mean that perfection in the game which includes a comprehension of all the sources whence legitimate advantage may be derived (Poe 369).

Certainly, this shows the appeal of analyzing a mystery[7] and why the audience would ever want to take on that role in the first place, but it is also a challenge. Can you, the audience figure out what happened with the same information before the detective does? Although in truth, this is a false challenge. After all, in the non-interactive mediums, the audience will always be Dr. Watson.

While I have talked about the internal structure of the detective story up until this point, an outline of a metatextual structure of the genre will be useful as well. For this I shall be using Sherlock Holmes as a baseline for my classification. The reason for this is that while Doyle was not the first mystery writer, his characters and names have captured the public consciousness and have thus more directly influenced our views of Detective Fiction.[8] The Watson is the both the point of view and the audience. After all, despite having the series named after him, Holmes is

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[7] Especially compared to what it sees as a simpler mental game in chess

[8] After all, I imagine you, my thesis panel didn't bat an eye when I said the fantasy was to be Sherlock Holmes a paragraph ago

not the point of view of characters in Doyle's stories. It is Dr. Watson. This serves a utilitarian purpose for the challenge presented in a mystery. It allows the audience to see everything that Holmes sees without having his thoughts piecing the clues together. With this idea, the Dr. Watson can extend beyond just a character. After all, the observations and narrations of Dr. Watson is only needed in mediums with no visual element of storytelling. In a movie, the audience gets to literally see everything that Holmes does, thus the camera is now the Dr. Watson. Watson in this way represents a one of the two elements of time that narrative theorist view. As all narratives have two times present, the way a story is told (present) and the actual story being told (past). Watson as narrator even reflects this directly as many of Doyal's short stories being with a direct acknowledgment that Watson in recounting an adventure he had. This is of course no to say that Watson does not have a use as a character. Dr. Watson ensures that Holmes has someone readily present to have the mystery and it's machination explained to once it is time for the reveal. The Dr. Watson also extends beyond the view and in fact encompasses the reader as well, but to explain why that is, an explanation needs to be given on the nature of the Holmes character.

In terms of the challenge presented by the genre, Holmes is the work checking if you got it correct. While of course the Holmes can be fallible, by the end of the work we can trust that the truth that he presents to us is accurate. As such we can see if our own deductions were correct by comparing it to our Holmes. In the actual text of detective fiction, the Holmes is the one who investigates and solves the crime, and while that is an obvious comment it reaches a more fundamental meaning. The Sherlock Holmes is the one who not only solves the crime, but who allows the plot to move forward. It would be tempting to say that the Audience can be the Holmes if we do solve the crime without having been told. However, the Detective Plot is one of

Holmes solving the mystery yet it does not matter if you have solved the mystery or not. The audience is simply the Dr. Watson, the watcher to the genius of Holmes.

If Watson is the reader point of view, and Holmes is the genius detective with the answers, then who is the writer or game designer? It feels odd to put them in this Watson and Holmes framework. I'm tempted to cast the creator of these works of detective fiction as an antagonist to the in this greater detective story, a Moriarty to the Holmes and Watson. After all, Moriarty does create a mystery that Holmes must solve. The creator does the same, to a very literal degree crafting the mystery that Holmes will solve. However, this doesn't quite work. After all, Moriarty isn't trying to actually allow Holmes to solve the mystery. Most antagonists are trying to get away with a crime and thus in context are not trying to be caught. The author is contrast is trying to not only make a mystery that can be solved but will be solved. Even if the audience doesn't have the details to figure out the mystery themselves, the mystery at the focal point must be resolved through an investigation. If not, then as discussed we do not have a detective story. In contrast, in-story intent may not really matter in this case. After all, regardless of the desire to not uncover a mystery doesn't mean that no mystery is solved, quite the opposite in fact. In story the mystery, especially one designed by a perpetrator, is designed to trick anyone looking into the matter. The author does the same with the audience. So is the author a Moriarty? Yes and No. No in the sense as I have previously mentioned. It is a mystery designed to be solved. However, a good game designer wants to make the player think that he, the designer, is Moriarty. After all, if part of the appeal of solving a mystery is the challenge, then we would need someone to overcome. While we have the Moriarties in story, we also always have the Moriarties of the writers who test us.

It is through this framework that we can see a drive towards a transition in mediums. There is an obvious flaw in the detective genre where the appeal is to be Sherlock Holmes yet the audience is stuck as Watson. Sadly, there isn't much that can be done about that simply due to limitations of the medium. While the challenge to solve the case is present, it's an empty challenge really as the mystery is solved if the audience succeeds or not. This is what makes this transition of detective fiction from traditional mediums to the interactive medium of video games so interesting. With a more complex audience interaction with the work, the roles of Holmes and Watson shift. What's more, the challenge is no longer empty when a work can actually respond to the deductions of the player. As such, the detective genre in video games is not simply another genre adaptation but the natural next step for the genre as a whole.

But before exploring that next step, I want to take a closer look at a classic example of detective fiction. After all if I'm going to be looking at how a genre is adapted between mediums it will be useful to have a baseline to compare it to, and this is the Sherlock Holmes short story "The Speckled Band". As a short story "The Speckled Band" is focused near completely on the mystery at hand with the Watson and Holmes dynamic clearly labeled. "The Speckled Band" is designed to be fairly reader friendly in their ability to engage with the mystery themselves. I see it as a solid step before we get to interactivity in the detective genre.

The story itself involves Holmes and Watson investigating the murder of Julia, a woman who died two year prior. The duo is tasked with investigating by Julia's still alive sister Helen Stoner who now fears for her own life and wants to know how her sister died. The investigation begins with a conversation between Stoner, Holmes, and Watson as the latter two as well as the audience receives the following information. Helen's stepfather Dr. Roylott is an ill-tempered man and was on hard times until he married Helen's wealthy mother. He also allows Romani

people to set up camp on his property and has imported a few Indian animals. Helen and Julia are set to get a large amount of money once they marry. Shortly after Julia got engaged she was moved to a different room where she died. All the doors are locked at night due to wild animals. On the night of her death, Helen rushed into her room and heard her dying words, "O, my God! Helen! It was the band! The speckled band" as well as a metal clanging sound and a whistle (Doyle 158). Helen is about to be married and has moved into the same room next to that of her stepfather. Helen has heard the same whistle and metal that she heard the night her sister died. From all this information the audience can draw a few conclusions.

The first clue the audience gets to this mystery is actually one not seen by the characters in the story namely, the title itself, "The Speckled Band". Before even reading the story the title provides a clue to the reader that a speckled band may be important during the story. When Helen recounts the words of her dead sister, the audience is now primed to start thinking about the band critically. To an extent, the audience is prompted to look at it critically by having it be the title, but I don't think that so much matters in this case as the text itself does bring note of it (I bring up prompting now largely to refer to it later in this essay when it is more relevant). Aside from that not much else can be drawn from that unless a particular reader happens to know a lot about snakes and realize the mention of a cheetah and baboon were clues to make one think what else Dr. Roylott could have used. Instead, this leads the audience to keep this image in their head as the investigation continues. Something that the reader will probably piece together is the murderer and motivation. Dr. Roylott orders both moves into the room right when each sister was to be married, which would lead to decreased funds for himself. This is both a quickly solved mystery and quickly rewarded and Dr. Roylott comes to threaten Holmes soon after

Helen leaves. The true mystery to be solved then is how exactly he murdered his stepdaughter and that leads to the actual crime scene investigation.

Investigating the room from Watson's perspective goes to show two things to Holmes and the audience. The first was that Helen's comment of it being locked is confirmed with it clear that if it was locked no one was getting in. Second was a string in the room recently installed but which doesn't work since there are no servants in the house. Exploring the doctor's actual room next door reveals a saucer of milk that you would expect for cat, but the family has none save for the cheetah. Concluding the investigation, Holmes makes a plan for that night, even saying that he thinks he knows what happened. The audience has now seen everything they need to solve the case, even if they haven't realized it yet. To help the audience follow along, what follows is a conversation between Holmes and Watson. Watson says that he doesn't know what is going on while Holmes responds with every interesting detail he found in the investigation. Yet he doesn't draw any conclusions from these details. Doyle is essentially making it easier for the audience to feel smarter as the story is not only reviewing the facts but is also noting everything that the reader may have missed as they were brought along on the investigation as well. Now, they don't have to investigate, just figure out how it was all put together. The story then rests[9] for a bit so the audience can continue to read and think about the case more before Holmes confirms a snake was used to kill Julia.

What is so great about this story from an investigation perspective is how it works with the audience. Watson is in a lot of ways an unthinking observer from whom the audience learns. Holmes also helps guide the audience in solving the mystery, not just by noting what he takes

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[9] Rest in the sense that there is no more investigation as Holmes and Watson are now preforming a stake out

interest in during the investigation, but by signposting that the audience now has everything it needs to solve the case. Doyle then has Holmes lay out all the important pieces of information to Watson (the audience) yet doesn't connect them yet. Instead, he allows space to still allow the audience to figure it out. As a work, this story is designed for someone to engage with it, and it is almost a shame that it came about at a time before modern interactive mediums. But of course this is not simply an exploration of this individual text. Instead I'm using it here as a more structuralist style. This text represents an idea of writing a mystery in a way that the audience can interact and solve it. As the genre is adapted into different mediums, how much of this is actually adapted into the playable world of video games will be explored later. But of course, this short story exists more or less in a default space of the detective genre, coming from one of the pioneers of it. The detective genre is more than that default, and thus more than the default is being adapted. So, a subgenre deserves a mention.

That subgenre is the Detective Thriller. Later in this paper, I shall be discussing the shifting roles of Holmes and Watson when the genre is adapted into video games. One of those video games, *Among Us*, shifts not only the Holmes and Watson, but also the Moriarty away from the typical relation in detective fiction. In order to properly discuss how that happened. I need to discuss the unique subgenre that it is adapting, the Detective Thriller. Subgenres are nothing unique of course as we humans naturally like to group and organize everything. The Detective Genre is no exception, with a number of subcategories such as Young Adult Detective, Science Fiction Detective, Historical Detective. However, most of these subgenres aren't really worth mentioning in the context of this thesis[10], but the Detective Thriller is fairly unique as I

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[10] Most outlined in *Critical Survey of Mystery and Detective Fiction* are simply combinations of other genres such as Fantasy Detective Fiction or Historical Detective Fiction. None of these alter the underlining structure the way the Thriller detective genre does.

have discussed the Detective Genre. While describing it in their book *Critical Survey of Mystery and Detective Fiction*, Carl Rollyson defines this subgenre as, "Closely related to mystery stories as well, thrillers portray worlds in which protagonists are pitted against fast-breaking events, convo-luted criminal and political conspiracies, spies, and serial killers" (2112). A Thriller can be defined in large part by its action, how it thrills the reader. That thrill can't really exist in the 'story' of detective fiction as that is in the past and static. We know how it ends since our Holmes starts with a dead body. Thus, the spies and political intrigue both exist in the 'plot' of a work as well as giving context to the mystery. The Detective genre no longer is just an exploration of the past to find a truth. The act of investigation is now directly tied to a tension that exists in the present 'plot' beyond jut uncovering the truth. The simplest example of this would be the need to solve a murder to catch a serial killer before they kill again. The act of solving the murder is now more important than just solving a crime.

Level 2. The Game is a Foot:

With the detective genre explored, it is now time to look towards video games as a medium. While it would be tempting to define the medium as narrative that involves play or interaction, that would be a bit too broad for our discussion. After all, does this not define any sort of game whether it be a card game, a sport, or a boardgame as well as video games? Instead in their book *Storyplaying: Agency and Narrative in Video Games,* Sebastian Domsch argues that one of the defining elements to what makes a video game unique not just from other mediums, but from other games as well, is rules:

> Different media have different sets of rules for how to properly use them. These rules are often not absolutely binding, but are implicit suggestions. The rules for using a codex book run somewhat like this: Start reading at the first page, when you have read the first page, turn to the next; repeat this process until the last page. Of course I am able to start reading a novel from the middle, and I can

easily skip pages or return to the beginning, but I know that I am not following the rules. In this sense, the rules of what we will call passive media do not allow or enable action by the user to change their perceptible form in more than one way. That is to say: two different kinds of input cannot lead to two different forms of presentation. In this sense, passive media usually have only a single option for right usage. Following this rule will always lead to the same palpable result. Two different, albeit 'correct' uses of a 'passive' novel or movie for instance cannot differ in what is being presented to the user (6)

All it takes is one look at the rules of monopoly begging the play group to not use house rules to see that people are not bound by the rules of most traditional games. Yes, video games have the audience interacting with a world and setting that are fixed and limited by the game world around them. The course of narrative is then limited and can only really be interacted with if the player has a deep knowledge of coding and programing. It is not so simple as everyone agreeing that if you land on Free Parking you get all the money in the pot. Although, while I do agree with Domsch's view of defining video games overall, I would add on the extra stipulation that the rules are unchangeable in the moment of play. After all, a major hallmark of modern gaming culture are communities that work to break the rules laid out by original game designers.

I would be remiss if this discussion of a player's ability to not break the rules of the world didn't discuss Video Game Modifications (commonly shortened to Mods). Mods are edits to a game that can range from minor changes like a fast walk speed to the addition of new characters and story elements [Fig3]. While modding can require an in depth knowledge of game programming, third party tools and programs do exist to mod games. However, some games have very much embraced modding, such as *Monster Prom*, which has a system built into it to allow people to create and integrate mods into the base game. With mods being so prevalent in modern game spaces, it can seem difficult to argue that games involve rules. Michela Fiordo believes that mods "highlight one of the most prevalent struggles of the digital age—the struggle for control between users and authors" (740). While this is definitely a worthwhile topic to get

into (as a number of people have both morally and legally), I don't think that criticism is directly

relevant to the video games I shall be looking at in this paper. I will explain why later. Instead, I

bring up the existence of mods beyond this discussion of rules to discuss an interpretation of the

meaning of mods on a meta level provided by an unknown author[11] in their article "Spare the

Mod: In Support of Total-Conversion Modified Video Games", "While video game players are

often portrayed as passive consumers of content, many players in fact contribute substantially to

their own entertainment experience, as well as to others" (789). And really, I think the very act of

creating mods for these games can be seen as a reflection of a major tenet of video games,

agency.

Fig. 3. Game Mod from game Monster Prom. Mod is called "Adam Sandler". To the right is

Damien LaVey (from the game). To the left is Adam Sandler (not from the game)

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[11] I have look, and I honestly don't know who wrote this

While rules are certainly an important aspect, I do not want to understate the role interaction holds in a game. After all, while Domsch does bring up the novel as an example of an agreed upon yet not enforced rule, with video games being the exception, I would point to live plays where the audience very much does not have control over the order in which they can experience the narrative. And while an audience can end the narrative for themselves at any point by leaving, that is true for any work that we are not being forced to experience. We all choose where it ends for us. Video games in contrast always involve the player in making choices based on the situation they find themselves in. It is that reason why some people like game critic Keith Stuart says, "Perhaps games aren't really about power, they're actually more about agency – the idea that we can have any sort of influence and control over what happens to us, and the world around us" (Stuart). Another way of looking at it is to say that games are defined as narrative that reflect player interaction. That is not to say that the whole plot is dictated by player choice. After all, the player does not really control the adventure Sherlock Holmes goes on in the 2016 game *Sherlock Holmes: The Devil's Daughter*. The player is just in charge of solving the case for Sherlock Holmes. Instead of that the experience a player has with a game is defined by the elements of interaction. It is for that reason that these forms of interaction are what is used to give video games their genre.

Level 3 And time for More Tutorials:

Video Game genres are developed differently than other mediums. They honestly reflect the way that games are defined, they are the systems according to within players interact with the game. For example, a first-person shooter has the player fire a gun from the first-person perspective. A rhythm game has a large focus on music and usually evolves player input in time with a song. It is the way in which the player plays and thus interacts with the game. That is not

to say that video games do not have these other genres. As I brought up in my first section, games like *Mass Effect* and *Fire Emblem* are Science Fiction and Fantasy games respectively, yet these labels don't necessarily reflect the gameplay. A shooter is still a shooter regardless if the thing the player is shooting is a magic crossbow or a laser rifle. The adaption of these genres may give context to the mechanics at play, but they do not as a whole define how the game is generally classified. In that way it more allows the player to fill in various roles throughout the game. While this seems like the natural place to truly begin talking about the detective genre in games, I will instead bring up one more topic before getting there, the means of interpreting games through the frame of Traditional Narrative and Ludonarrative.

When discussing Video Games as an art form there are really two different fields of thought, epitomized by Narratologists and Ludologists. Narratologists offer a means to interpret games through a similar lens of television and movies where they look at the various plot points, or what would typically be called cut scenes in video games. To use the previously mentioned Sherlock Holmes games as an example, a Narratologist would just look at the elements that most resemble other mediums like those with pre written actions, scripts, and acting – the passive elements of the game. Ludologists in contrast don't see games as just the narrative that is similar to other mediums:

> When ludologists claim that video games are not narratives, they are giving a partial answer to the question: what is the essence of a video game? Their answer to this is, correctly, that the essence of a video game, its differentia specifica , is not captured by cataloguing them as just another form of narrative. Or, to put it another way: what differentiates them from other narratives is not the fact that they are narratives. When, on the other hand, narratologists make the claim that video games are narratives, they are (or they should be) talking about the properties that video games have or contain. In this sense, video games are narratives because they contain narratives (just like a picture might be a narrative because it contains one, without losing its differentia specifica as a visual image) (Domesch13)

Although it is worth saying that even Domsch's definition still a bit off. While his talk of

narratologists is sound, the implication of his talk is that games are more than just narrative. In

contrast I would say that video game narratives are more than just the classical understanding of

narrative. After all, a classical narrative is composed by a creator(s) and experienced passively.

However, even if the effect of the narrative by the player is limited, the hallmark of video games

is interactions. But even if that game play is the core element of a game, that does not mean that

traditional narrative beats do not still exist in the game. In *The Devil's Daughter* I may argue the

cutscenes or the gameplay produce more narrative than the other, but to only discuss one of them

would be to ignore a whole aspect of a work. Instead both need to be considered when it comes

to the videogame narrative. So the Ludologist looks at more than just the narrative beats of the

game or the actual game play. This makes sense as Bryan Carr says in their article "Applying

Cultural and Critical Theory to Video Game Aesthetics":

> Unlike many other visual forms, the off-screen space in games can often be just as important as what is happening on the screen. In a film, what happens out of frame does not in a tangible sense exist- it is visual information that has simply been left out, and does not have direct impact on the narrative or meaning of the visuals. In a video game, enemies, obstacles, and other events that require the player's attention may be congregating in the off-screen space (4).

A game is in that case viewed holistically as an experience that the player goes through. That

experience can then involve a traditional narrative, but it should not then consist solely of those

plot points. Now, while we can look at both of these styles as just analysis, we can in turn look at

them in terms of plot creation as well.

A Narrativist approach to gameplay would involve making a game narrative reflective of

narratives in other mediums. While it is not usually the way in which video games are created, it

would be useful to look at it as if a video game was a movie that was then broken up with

gameplay added into it. The previously mentioned off screen time would then be turned into

games. The plot is removed from the gameplay as the player cannot influence the plot, only moving the plot along by completing an arbitrary task[12]. This is present in games like the story light game *Super Mario Odyssey* or story rich game *Tales of Symphonia.* Both require the player to overcome the challenges halting them getting to the next location for narrative. This style of game structure can probably be seen the easiest with the cutscene. A cutscene can simply be defined as a moment when gameplay stops and a movie devoid of interaction plays. In their Youtube video "Cutscenes – A Powerful (and Misused) Narrative Design Tool – Extra Credits" game designer and artist James Portnow and Daniel Floyd bring up a common use of the cutscene, "cutscenes are often thought as rewards for the player" (3:09-3:12). These are rewards that inherently don't allow player input aside from just getting there.

A Ludologist approach to gameplay would involve designing a game narrative through the interactive elements of the game. In terms of creation, in a Game Developers Conference (GDC) talk titled *Storytelling with Verbs: Integrating Gameplay and Narrative* Kaitlin Tremblay says, "Narrative Design is designing stories from the building blocks of gameplay that's because at it's core interactive gameplay is a combination of actions or interactions and narrative" (1:00-1:10). This can take the form of presenting plot and character to the player, "All gameplay actions imply how the character you're controlling behaves. They also tell us the rules of the world. A world where guns exist and where characters are more willing to use them is a very different world where characters fight with sticks or monkeys fight with knives" (2:15-2:32). The game *Yakuza 0* (the number not letter) is in a lot of ways about spectacle with the player controlling the character Kazuma Kiryu in gang fights. However the player only gets to do

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[12] I use arbitrary is this sense to say that the actions taken in the game do not actually affect the plot, not that the two don't relate.

combat when an NPC starts the fight. The game not letting the player beat up everyone on the

streets says something about the character of Kiryu especially next to games like the Grand Theft

Auto series, in which the player can punch anyone. A Ludologist game play design goes beyond

adding more flavor to various story elements and into something referred to as Emergent

Gameplay which Frederic Seraphine defines in their article/blog post "Ludonarrative

Dissonance: Is Storytelling About Reaching Harmony?" as "Games that don't have a specific

story to tell but offering many potentialities of stories to be experienced by the player"

(Seraphine). To explain exactly what this means let's look Tremblay's example of the story lite

game of Tetris:

> As you are playing, you are rotating pieces, setting up scenarios, and waiting for the right piece to complete your lines. As you are doing this you are experiencing an emotional range that is telling your player story. Things might start out pretty calm and you are pretty calm then you start to get excited and then you get a little anxious and then you get even more anxious as your boxes keep growing and you haven't received the notorious straight piece yet and you get frustrated when you fail to turn a piece properly in time and then finally you get the straight piece. You slide it over. It drops and everything disappears. You feel the catharsis in that moment and you can return to your previous calm state but now with an added layer of pride, relief, tension, some kind of emotion layered on top. That's a story. It is emergent, it is player driven, but it is still a story. So while you are basically only doing a set of action, rotate, drop, clear, there is a clear emotional arch that feels like a story. There is conflict, there is victory. There is defeat. And there are mappable tropes on top of it such as an underdog win or total domination or undefeated champ. So for Tetris, look at it this way. Anticipation leads to tension, which leads to catharsis which guess what, that's a story. It is an emotional story (5:19-6:48)

The story presented through the game of Tetris is not a traditional narrative. These nontraditional

narrative elements are not so much enhancing a traditional narrative but at creating their our

ludonarrative. While a Narrativist would ignore this narrative, a Ludologist would look at the

story as the experience that the player has while interacting with the video game.

Although it is worth mentioning that some people don't even think video games have narrative. In classic narrative theory time plays an important role in our understanding as narrative. Gerard Genette for example says "Narrative is a ... double temporal sequence ...: There is the time of the thing told and the time of the narrative (the time of the signified and the time of the signifier) … it invites us to consider that one of the functions of narrative is to invent one time scheme in terms of another time scheme" (33). The narration, the actual act of telling us the story is in the present tense where the actual story being told is inherently in the past tense. This is the way narrative works. Video games in contrast do not work this way as Jesper Juul bring up:

> It is clear that the events represented cannot be past or prior, since we as players can influence them. By pressing the CTRL key, we fire the current weapon, which influences the game world. In this way, the game constructs the story time as synchronous with narrative time and reading/viewing time: the story time is now. Now, not just in the sense that the viewer witnesses events now, but in the sense that the events are happening now (2001).

While I don't agree with the concept that narrative is inherently antithetical to video games, as I have already discussed the narrative of the present in the ludonarrative, this is one of the reasons why I give concepts like characters and cutscenes in video games the term traditional narrative. After all the traditional narrative acts as a background as to why the player does the actions that they do in the ludonarrative. Thus, the traditional narrative exists in the past tense.

While these styles of game design sound directly opposed to each other (which they are from an interaction perspective), they are not mutually exclusive. In fact, many games use both methods of construction when it comes to game narrative. The previous example of *Yakuza 0* uses the ludonarrative elements of Kiryu's inability to fight random people to show his kindness compared to the rest of the world, further emphasizing the narrativist plot outside of player control. It can be deeper however such as in the 2015 indie game *Undertale* where the number of

monsters the player kills dictates the NPCs and cutscenes that the player gets to interact with. The game reflects in the traditional narrative the choices that the player makes in the interactive sections. That is not to say it always lines up as well. Take a game like the 2014 remake *Thief* where the Player Character Garrett (a seasoned thief) is lecturing Erin (a hotshot rookie), "It's not how much you steal. It's what you steal" (*Thief* Tutorial). This is then in direct contrast to the fact that the player has been able, before and after this cutscene, to break into random houses and steal whatever they want. This conflict is called Ludonarative Dissonance, a term coined by then game critic now lead game developer for studio Ubisoft, Clint Hocking, in a blog post titled "Ludonarrative Dissonance in Bioshock" where, as the name suggests, Hocking discusses the phenomenon in the then recently released game *Bioshock*:

> By throwing the narrative and ludic elements of the work into opposition, the game seems to openly mock the player for having believed in the fiction of the game at all. The leveraging of the game's narrative structure against its ludic structure all but destroys the player's ability to feel connected to either, forcing the player to either abandon the game in protest (which I almost did) or simply accept that the game cannot be enjoyed as both a game and a story, and to then finish it for the mere sake of finishing it. (Hocking)

Even when the two are interwoven, a game will typically focus on one narrative style over another. In both two good examples of *Yakuza 0* and *Undertale* the plot was still focused on either a ludonarrative or a traditional narrative. In *Yakuza 0* the gameplay helped reinforce the cutscenes. In *Undertale* the cutscenes helped reflect the gameplay choices. A decision has to be made then in the development cycle whether a game will follow a Narrativist or Ludologist approach. And it is at this creative decision where the adaptation of detective stories into video games begins to divide.

I would argue that the detective genre has transformed into two different genres during the transition from traditional mediums to video games. I mentioned in a previous chapter that

the detective genre in traditional mediums is defined by a plot focused on a mystery with the main action focused on the uncovering of that mystery. I also brough up that a major appeal of the detective genre was the thrill of figuring out the mystery, of feeling like Sherlock Holmes. Of course in video games the player has the ability to not just feel like Sherlock Holmes but to control him, sometimes literally.[13] However, when designing a game, a developer must decide what form of story they wish to create as this decision would lead to two different genres, what I have decided to call the Detective Game and the Mystery Game. These genres fall on the spectrum of Ludologist to Narrativist which in turn lines them up to answer the question who is Sherlock Holmes?

In the Detective Game, the player is Sherlock Holmes. The plot of uncovering a mystery is still the same but this genre seeks to turn the investigation itself into a game. In his video essay "What Makes a Good Detective Game," game critic Mark Brown outlines the elements of investigation that are adapted into gameplay[14]. "Gather information, Expose Lies, Follow Leads, Find Connections, Make Deductions, Make an Accusation" (15:31-15:42). Some or all of these elements are turned into gameplay through various means. The core however is that narrative progress in the game is dictated by the player's ability to solve the case. The game is then just a means to test the player to see if they have figured out the game. This is why then I have decided to name this genre the Detective Game as it truly lives up to the original challenge to solve the case that other mediums failed to live up to.

In contrast, the Mystery Game has the player control Sherlock Holmes. While this may seem like the same thing as the Detective Game, it speaks to a different role that the player has in

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[13] See the many games based on Sherlock Holmes

[14] It should be noted that in his video Brown was using the 2003 movie *Mystic River* as his frame of reference.

the narrative. Certainly this genre still has a plot focused around an overarching mystery, it is the Mystery Genre after all. It probably even adapts the same points that Brown mentioned earlier and may even turn those elements into a form of gameplay. However, in the Mystery Genre, it does not matter if they player solves the mystery. Similar to a Sherlock Holmes story, the detective which the player controls will solve the case. Take the game *Firewatc,* for example, where the player controls the character Henry as he investigates the mystery of the forest he works at. There is a mystery present that is solved, but the game does not have game systems in place to allow the player to solve the mystery. Instead, all the player can do is wander around the forest as Henry figures out what is going on.

This is why I decided to go with the name Detective Fiction all the way back in my first chapter. The Detective Video Game is the extension of the appeal of Detective Fiction. I've elected to have them keep a similar name in order to better represent that extension of appeal.

Level 4. Let's All Pretend to be Sherlock Holmes:

The Mystery Video Game is what is created when detective fiction is adapted through a narrative approach. Using the preexisting framework, the player takes on the traditional role of the audience in the detective fiction, simply a passive viewer in events. Even if the narrative is designed in a way that allows the player to interpret and understand the past narrative (like in the previously discussed "The Speckled Band"), they are still only passive observers in it (like the previously discussed "The Speckled Ban"). The player is not the Sherlock Holmes of the story, even if they control them. The quintessential example of this in my opinion is the *Batman Arkham Series*. In this series, the player takes on the role of Batman as he goes on various adventures. As one of his taglines is "The World Greatest Detective" this means that on occasion the player must use Batman's detective skills to solve a problem, but as I said they are Batman's

detective skills, not the player's. Take an early moment from the second game, *Batman Arkham City*. The characters Batman and Catwoman were just shot at and Batman is trying to figure out where the shot came from. To do this the player goes over to the window and marks where the bullet came in. They then go to where the bullet landed and mark that. Once the player does that, the game will create a line between these two points and the camera will pan out of the building to show the player exactly where they need to go next [Fig4]. While the player does have to physically do the action of walking to each spot, the game does all the solving for the player. This is highlighted even more with the option Detective Mode. In game Detective Mode is basically a filter that can be put over the game that shows enemies through walls, interactable objects, and items of interest. While it might be technically optional, it practically isn't. This game has a very muted color palette and very dark lighting which can make details hard to pick out. In order to not have Batman fumble around in the dark, the player needs to have detective mode to truly understand a space. There are also instances where Batman has to track people down, but that is only possible in detective mode where the clues to track are highlighted [Fig]. The player has no substantial input in figuring things out through the series. That is not to say that the player is completely removed from input as the player is able to explore a large open space and engage in a lot of combat. The elements of deduction are completely removed from the realm of player interaction.
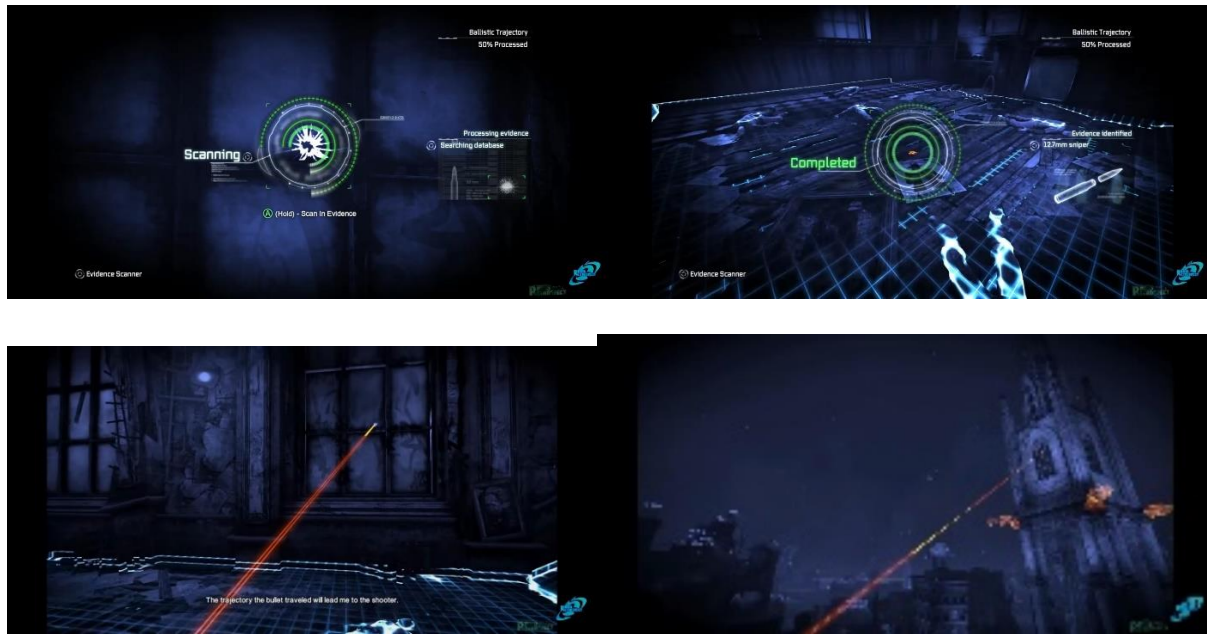
Fig. 4. Screen Shots taken from RabidRetrospectGames on *Youtube*

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-L-OILLzrOQ&t=1877s

It could be argued that I am being unfair to these games which wouldn't be an unjustified response. After all, solving mysteries is not how the game is advertised with the various tags on Steam not mentioning any mystery solving. However, I would argue that it still presents a mystery the same way as a mystery game, where the player is just a passive observer of a case being solved with some ludonarrative dissonance existing between the plot (figuring out criminal plans) and gameplay (punching everyone). But this is more like a tacked on element of mystery. Batman is the world's greatest detective, so to fully feel like Batman the player needs to have Batman solve things, even if that player has no ability to do it themselves. This is all however, a worst-case scenario of the mystery game. Instead, let's look at what happens when the mystery and gameplay are parallel to each other.

Some Mystery Games use the mystery they work around to enhance the analytical gameplay. I mentioned in the previous section that games that use both Ludonarrative and

Traditional Narrative in equal ratio don't really exist. One is being used to enhance the other.

The *Professor Layton series* is one such example. All the games in the series follow the similar

premise of Professor Hershel Layton and assistant Luke Triton going to a location in order to

solve a mystery. Throughout the game's story, they travel around the location, meet various

people, find clues, and uncover the truth of the situation. And as can be expected from this game

being brought up in this section, the player has no input on solving the case. Layton is very much

the Sherlock of his story, with the player witnessing him solve the case. The player knows where

to go to investigate because the professor says where to go. The professor points out the

takeaway from encounters. The professor is the one who eventually does the reveals who is

behind the mystery.[15] This is a mystery game as I have explained it. However, what makes this

game interesting is how the mystery of the plot relates to the gameplay.

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[15] He is also an English gentleman who brings everyone into a room where he unravels the mystery to the group.
The series is very open about its inspirations.

Fig. 5. Puzzle Space in *Portal*. Screen Shots taken from Bolloxed in *YouTube*.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0P2dzIa6pZY&t=354s

The mystery is designed to put the player in an analytical mind. *Professor Layton* is a Puzzle game where the game will present various puzzles to the player in order to progress. These puzzles are often enough, however, completely removed from the rest of the game, and I mean that in two senses. The first is a direct physical (in game) separation from the main game world and the puzzles. The puzzles in the game *Portal* for example take place in the same world that the character explores in [Fig5]. In contrast the puzzles in *Professor Layton* are removed from the world with a unique puzzle interface being used [Fig6]. These puzzles are also largely disconnected from the actual events of the story. Certainly, we have some instances like in *Professor Layton vs. Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney* where the player must figure out the correct way to fight a knight reflecting the fact that Professor Layton is currently being attacked by a knight. This is largely an outlier, however, as the most tie-in the player is given to a puzzle is that an NPC is saying they have a problem, and that problem is the puzzles. But as I said, these puzzles then have nothing to do with the actual plot and thus the investigation in which Layton finds himself. The reason for this is that while the plot is focused on a mystery, the game as a whole is focused on the puzzles. The plot of a mystery involves going around, exploring an area, looking at environments in fine detail, and talking to people. It is through these actions of detective work that the player is presented the bulk of the game play, the puzzles. The gameplay and traditional plot do not work together to in order to create a uniform ludonarrative, nor do the two elements clash with each other to create an example of ludonarrative dissonance. Instead, the traditional detective story just exists to create justification for the gameplay elements. So in this

context, the player not solving a mystery is perfectly acceptable. After all, the game is not

designed to allow the player to solve the mystery, but rather to solve the puzzles.
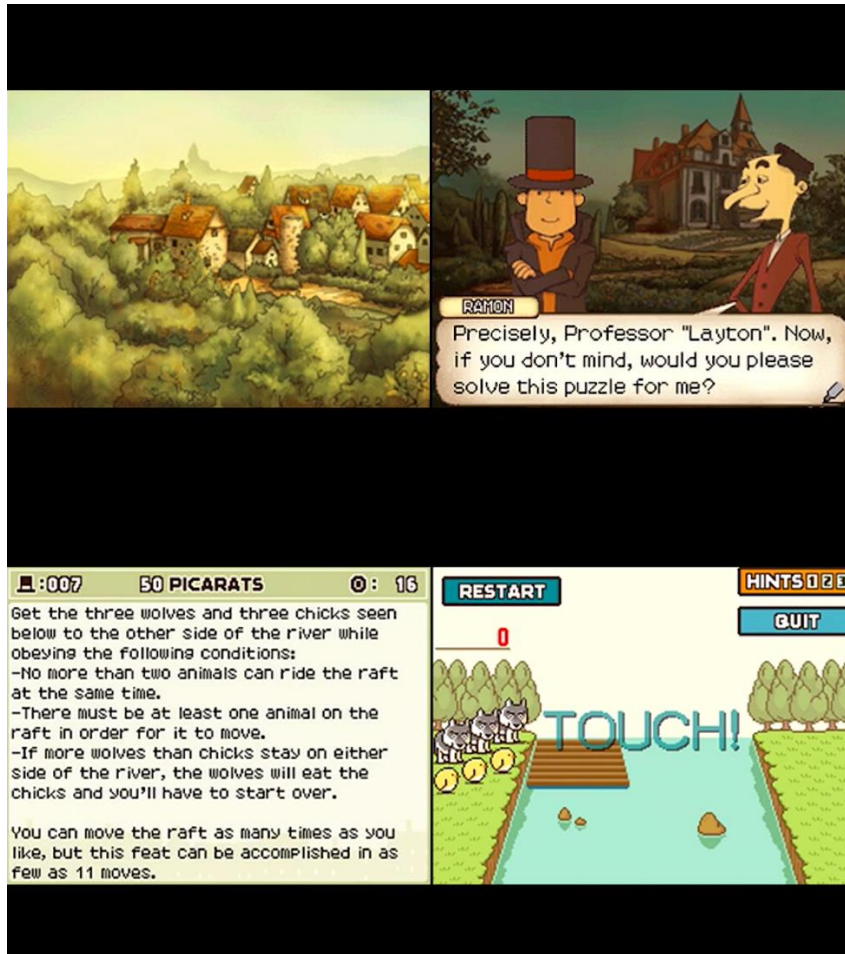

Fig. 6. Demonstrating the difference between Narrative Spaces (Top) and Puzzles Solving
Spaces (Bottom)

Now the obvious follow up question to this claim would be, what is the difference

between a mystery and a puzzle? After all I think most people would claim that really good

mysteries are puzzles for people to solve. So if puzzles and mysteries are so connected, why

make a difference between them for this paper? While I think an actual game developer could

create a better distinction then I could at the moment, for the purposes of the detective genre, the

difference between a puzzle and a mystery is a past narrative. A *Professor Layton* puzzle may

ask a player a variation of the fox, hen, grain puzzle [Fig7]. That puzzle will create a narrative

focused around said puzzle that the player experiences, yet this objective is not focused on

solving a past narrative that defines detective fiction. It is just a narrative focus on the present.

There is still a classic detective story in here with its own past narrative, but they are firmly
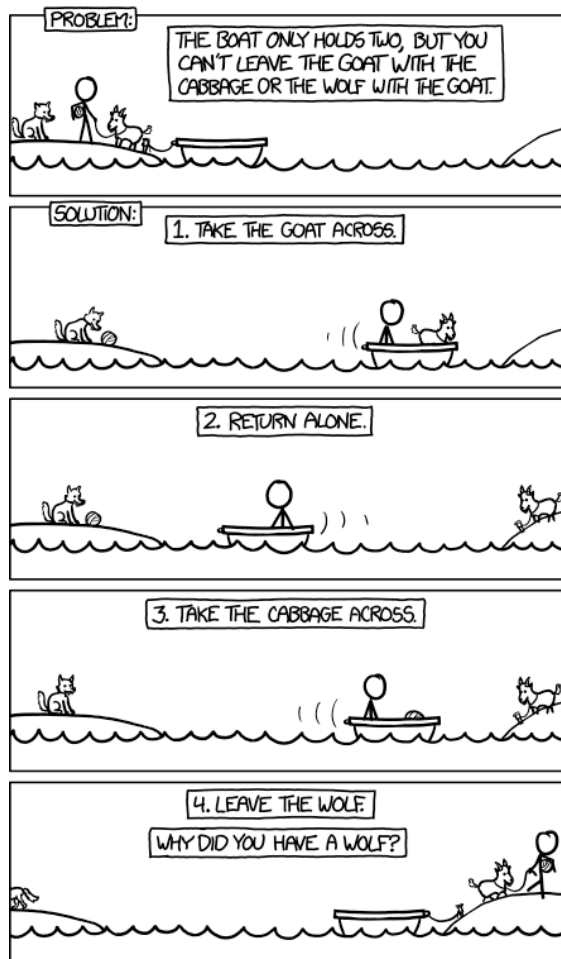
removed from the narrative of the puzzles.

Fig. 7. Randall Munroe's comic "Boat Logic" https://xkcd.com/1134/

     Some mystery games still have the player solve a mystery, even if the solving is still

unimportant. I mentioned before how the *Professor Layton* series has a traditional detective story

in between the puzzles. Layton is the Sherlock Holmes. Luke (along with the player) is the

Watson. And as is traditional for these narratives, Layton is the one who solves the case, and to

allow the player a chance to see if they also figured out the mystery. But what happens then when a game developer removes non-player characters from a story? Games like *Subnatuica* or *The Witness* have no other interactable characters save for the one the player controls.[16] *Subnautica* as a game finds the player character on a space ship that crashed in an alien ocean. After a while in game the player sees a rescue ship coming to pick them up only for it to be shot down by an unknown sort from under the water. A mystery is then established of what that was and why it shot both you and them down. In *The Witness* the player, after completing the tutorial, finds themselves on what seems to be an ruined island full of stone statues. What exactly happened to these people and to the island is a mystery. For both game, there are no Sherlock Holmes figures to solve the mystery as there is no ability to solve. Instead, the mystery is in place to incentivize the player in exploring the world. In that way it is the same as *Professor Layton,* with the mystery designed as a way to get the player into the various gameplay elements unrelated to the solving of the case presented. In *Subnautica*, it is very easy (although incredibly tedious) to survive by just staying in the very first area so for the player to see everything the game has to offer. The mystery of what is going on acts as an enticement for the player. In this case, however, it is a player driven progress instead of a plot driven one as the player is the one who ultimately decides to solve figure out what is going on. Despite that player's own initiative to look into the game's past narrative I would still place this game and other games like it into the mystery genre. After all, the mystery is not presented in a way for the player to solve.

There is no Holmes because there is nothing to check to see if the player understands what is going on. Earlier I brought up the fact that in traditional defective fiction, the Sherlock

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[16] *Subnautica has other characters in the sense of people who existed in the past narrative being uncovered, but they are long sense dead.*

Holmes of a story acts as a way to test the audience and to see if they were able to solve the mystery by comparing their results to the Sherlock Holmes, who in story is able to look at the various clues presented and uncover the past narrative. As mentioned earlier, however, no other characters exist in *Subnautica*. As such, the Sherlock Holmes has to take on a new role, the clues and information that lead to the unraveling of the mystery. In order to solve the mystery of the ocean, the player will end up exploring abandoned alien ruins where they can find various records and logs from old aliens that explain the history of things on this planet. These logs are very straight forward about what is happening and require no reading between the lines on the player's part. They are clues to what happened in these waters, yet don't allow much in the way of solving. They simply require more logs to understand what is going on. And of course, all these logs can be mentally skipped by the player as they continue to explore the oceans not thinking about the mystery that is being unraveled around them.

Beyond a mystery acting as a way to motivate the player into action, it can also act as a tone setter and reflect the actual gameplay of a work. *The Witness* and *Professor Layton* are both puzzle games and thus their gameplay is largely analytical. Having a mystery that surrounds the gameplay reflects the analytical mindset that the player is already feeling. Regardless of if the player can actually solve anything, in the moment it feels like it fits together. The focus on the mystery can also be on the unknown part of it. In *Subnautica*, while you explore the ocean, the fact that the player doesn't know what is going on plot wise adds to the sense of unknown while exploring the alien planet, or in the game *Firewatch* where the unknown elements of the mystery are designed to create anxiety in the player that the characters in the game are feeling. The mystery sets the tone.

It is of course worth mentioning that most people wouldn't define games like *Subnautica* of the *Batman Arkham* games as mystery games. *Subnautica* would more commonly be called a survival game (which I shall bring up again later) where *Batman* would be a brawler. I would agree with anyone who says these games are those genres. As I've mentioned earlier, video game genres are based largely around modes of interaction. The Mystery Games does not inherently affect the gameplay. Instead, just as with science fiction or fantasy in video games it gives the actions the player preforms context. If the Mystery Game were to affect the gameplay more directly then it would no longer be a mystery game but a Detective Game.

Level 5. Detective Game on the Nile:

With the mystery game discussed, it is time to move onto the Detective Game. The Detective Video Game is one where the main action of the game is solving a mystery and uncovering the past narrative. The player has become the Holmes of the story as progression in the game is now determined by a player's ability to solve a mystery. It is no longer a passive experience that is inherent within the realm of traditional narrative. The actions of Sherlock Holmes that had always be relegated to the past by the nature of narrative has now be brough into the present as we as players take on the role and actions for our ludonarrative. It is also narrative that transcends the actual game. In their video essay "What Makes a Good Detective Game," game critic Mark Brown says, "We have to take the information out of the game world and into our head, or perhaps into a note pad, and working on it before slapping it back into the game and seeing if we are right" (12:05-12:14). Our Ludonarrative is then the journey we as players go through to figure out what is going on. The game is simply the Watson who gives us our unbiased view of the world and information we need. This is now a complete role reversal from detective fiction as we now embody Holmes with the Watson being removed from us. This

is still an adaptation, however. So, what many gave developers have done is correlate the elements of deduction from other mediums "Gather information, Expose Lies, Follow Leads, Find Connections, Make Deductions, Make an Accusation" (Brown 15:31-15:42). As I mention earlier, this is an outline created from how an investigation was present in a detective movie. And some games do follow this path very closely. 2011 *L.A. Noire,* for example, is designed to be an homage to old noire detective movies with the player taking on the role of police detective Cole Phelps as he climbs through the ranks of the L.A.P.D. As such, it follows Brown's layout fairly closely from the first exploration of the crime scene to the final confrontation in the interrogation room. However, it is still a structure that was meant to be viewed by an audience, not interacted with by a player. So, despite the fact that there are elements of deductions in pointing out lies with evidence and an open world of a recreated Los Angeles, the game is still very limiting in how the player can actually go about solving the case. So while you are still Holmes in the sense that you get to solve a case, by adhering to the narrative structure of detective fiction, the player is basically Holmes on a one way track. A more useful, if not broader, frame to look at these games would be through Investigation and Questioning. Investigation in this case refers to how the player learns information. Questioning is then how the game tests the player, to see if they understand the past narrative. Still, the more detailed breakdown supplied by Brown is useful, not necessarily in how the detective narrative is adapted, but instead in how an individual game goes about Investigations and Questioning. Games that are trying to adapt the stories of other mediums into games will follow Brown's layout fairly directly. Unfortunately, as seen with the Mystery Game, adhering closely to the structure of other mediums can inadvertently limit a players ability to embody Holmes. To explore this topic in relation to a detective game, I want to talk about the *Ace Attorney* series.

The *Ace Attorney* series is a detective video game that started with the 2001 game *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney* for the Gameboy Advance. The series follows defense attorney Phoenix Wright[17] as he works to solve various cases to prove his clients' innocent in court. Of the detective games I'll be looking at in depth, this series follows Browns layout the most as the series is styled after court room dramas, thus not just adapting a genre and concept, but an actual type of narrative within that genre. It is not exact, just the game represents more of the individual elements associated with traditional detective fiction. The game is largely divided up into two parts, the investigation and the trials. The investigation days are where the player learns about the events and gathers clues relating to the case. The player is given a set number of locations that they can explore. In each location, the player can click on various objects throughout and talk to various NPCs in these areas to gain an understanding of events, with particular pieces of evidence being added towards the player's Court Record [Fig8]. This leads to the first problem when trying to adapt the genre, leading the player. Adding to the court records is automatic when the player finds something useful This is true for basically any game that has an equivalent like in the previously mentioned *L.A. Noire*. But by doing this, it removes some of the investigative work from the player. Similar to the title of "The Speckled Band", the player now knows what is important instantly without having to figuring it out on their own. However, in Ace Attorney's case, this is largely unavoidable due to how the game tests the player during the trials.

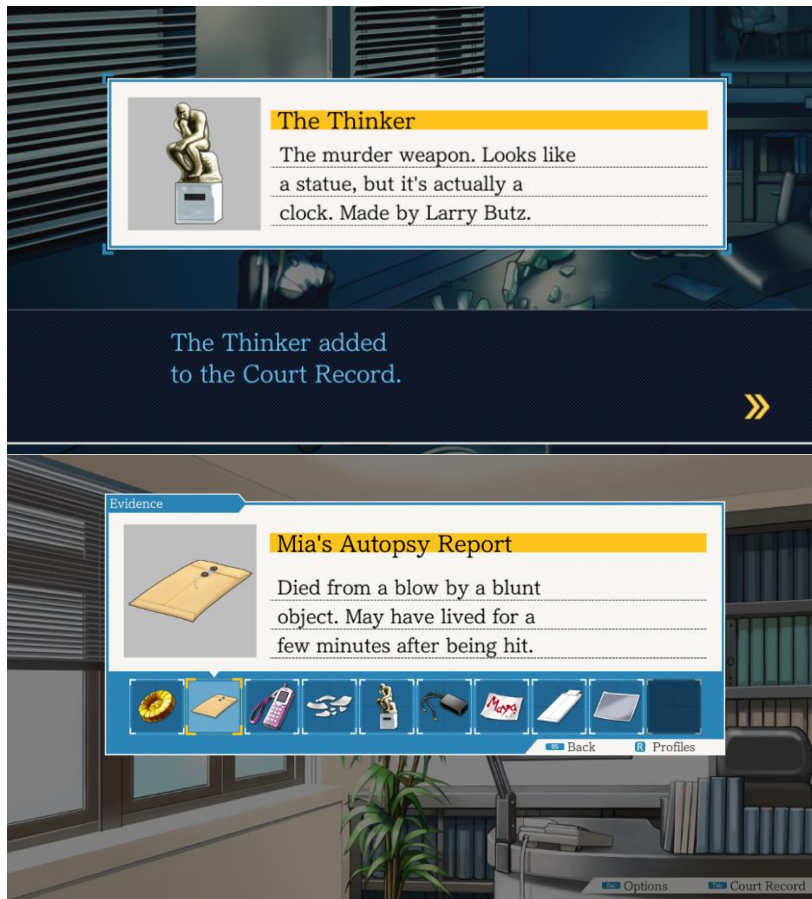---

[17] Along with others as the series goes on

Fig. 8. Screen Shots from *Phoenix Wright Ace Attorney*. Finding Evidence (Top). Looking

Through Evidence Folder (Bottom)

The *Ace Attorney* trials are a mixture of Exposing Lies, Following Leads, and Make an

Accusation. Not resembling any actual real-world trial, the trials of these games all center around

the testimony and cross examination. In the Testimony, a character involved in the case will give

a testimony broken up into various statements within [Fig9]. Then the cross examination begins,

where the player can do one of two things. The first is that they can press a section of the

testimony. This is how the player can follow leads and gain more information of a topic which

can lead to more evidence or added statements to a testimony. The second and main point of

progression for the trial section is to Object to a witness's statement. The point of almost any

testimony is to figure out what is wrong and then to Object to it. However, it is more than just

pointing out that it is wrong. To Object the player must go to the specific statement that is wrong, and then present the evidence that shows why that statement is wrong. This is how the game tests the player to see if they understand the mystery. Taking on the role of a defense attorney all cases begin with the client being seen as guilty[18]. As such, to prove that the various accusations and testimony lodged by everyone else our incorrect, the player is proving at the same time why their client didn't do it. By doing this the player demonstrates that they not only understand what about a statement is incorrect to the past narrative but understands how their evidence relates to the actual case at hand. This is why evidence was pointed out and collected. If the player simply had to point out which statement was wrong then the player could easily just brute force the problem, objecting to every statement until they got it right. By adding the extra step of matching the correct evidence to a statement (especially when there can be hundreds of different combinations in a single cross examination) it becomes a lot less practical to brute force the answer,[19] thus requiring the player to think through what they are presented with and what evidence they have. This not only lets the player feel smart for understanding the case, but also for being able to prove someone else wrong. This is not, however, a perfect system through which to make the player Sherlock Holmes.

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[18] It is worth mentioning that this series is largely a commentary on the Japanese legal system where defendants are guilty until proven innocent.

[19] I should at least mention that it is possible to still brute force it of course. I myself have been so stuck before that I did just go through every combination until I got it.

Fig. 9. The Testimony of character Detective Dick Gumshoe that we as players must find fault in

What prevents this video game from allowing the player from completely being Sherlock

Holmes is the present narrative that it is trying to portray. This fact can be highlighted fairly well

with the game's protagonist. Similar to Layton, Phoenix Wright is a character removed from the

player. Certainly, it is not to the same extent as with Layton coming up with all the answers on

his own (as mentioned, the player still has to show that they understand what's going on to

progress), but Wright is still a character within the courtroom drama being presented. This can

lead to a disconnect between player and character. Sometimes Wright can have already figured

something out that the player is struggling with, although that isn't too bad as by doing that as

when Wright does that then at least keys in the player that they have the information they need to

solve mystery. Where the disconnect between player and character becomes worse however is

when they player solves something before Phoenix does. To give a specific example, the third case of the second game *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney Justice for All* has a moment when it is revealed that a witness saw the culprit (someone who looked like our defendant) fly away from the murder. While playing the case with a group of friends this had us all confused as that both shouldn't be possible (our client is a magician who specializes in flight and tells us that he can only do that with special rigging, so doing it outside like this shouldn't be possible) yet we also have pictures of the crime scene with only footprints of the victim and none of the culprit. However, the moment we learned of the existence of a bust made in the likeness of our client we figured it out. Whoever killed the victim used it to frame our client and just pulled up the bust from a nearby building to make it appear like flight. Despite us figuring that out the moment we saw it, as players, as Holmes, we could do nothing with this information. We simply had to wait until the game actually asks up the question relating to the bust. The reason for this is because of the structure of the plot. After all, this series is trying to act as a courtroom drama. How the mystery unfolds is part of that plot, so even if the player figures out the mystery quickly, they have no means of telling the game that they solved it. By trying to adapt to much of the genre it is adapting, it has prevented the player from truly feeling like a detective. To refer back to my previous literary example, this game is trying to adapt "The Speckled Band" as a whole, not the appeal of the genre. I would still classify an Ace Attorney game as a detective game, but trying adapt traditional narrative the designers are not allowing the players to be Holmes in full. In order to go a step closure to allowing the player to be Sherlock Holmes, a video game needs to take another step away from its inspiration. This is where the indie game *Her Story* comes in.
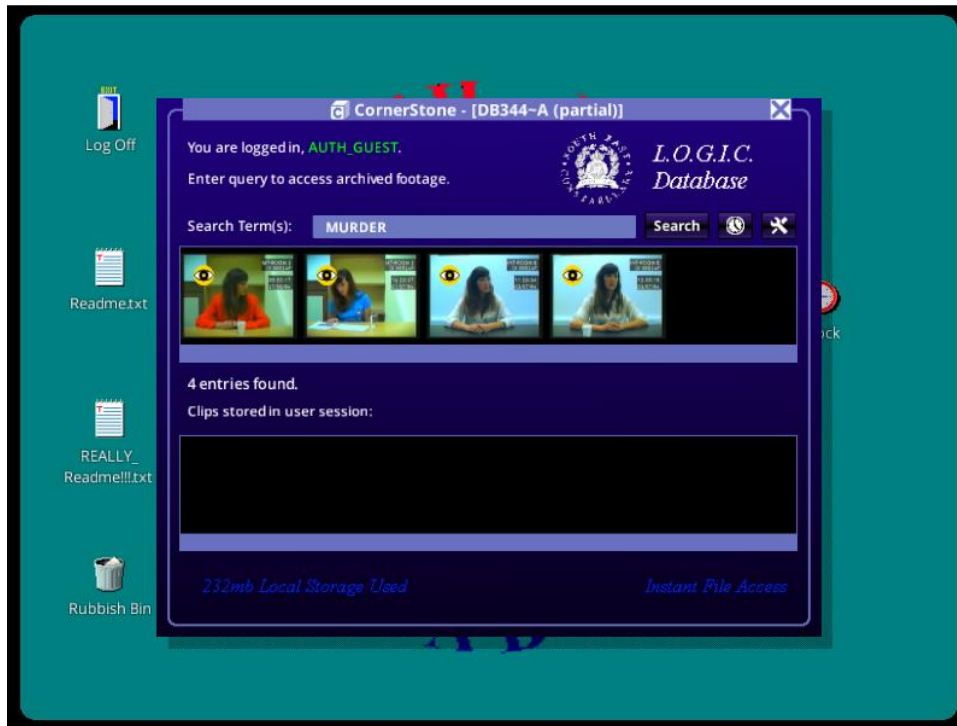
Fig. 10. Search results for the first term from *Her Story*

Her Story, released 2015 by indie developer Sam Barlow, completely removes Sherlock

Holmes from the work and simply allows the game to be Watson. When the player first turns on

Her Story, they are greeted with an in-game desktop with a search system called L.O.G.I.C.

Database already having the word "MURDER" in the search bar[20]. Once the player clicks search,

they are greeted with 4 short videos of a single woman during multiple interviews [Fig10][21].

From these clips the concept is laid out: a man named Simon was murdered, this woman is

involved, and to solve the case the player will have to look through various interviews of this

woman to solve the case. This game is basically all Investigation with a focus on Gathering

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[20] There are also two unopened documents off to the side called "Readme.txt" and "REALLY_readme.txt" that the player can open to get some instructions on how to play.

[21] It should be noted that by default game does not look like this. Instead it has a glare filter over it with the image slightly distorted to make look like it is being viewed by an old box monitor. There is an option in the game setting to remove the glare which I did to make the screen shots clearer.

Information and Following Leads. It does this by allowing the player to access any clip through the search bar. The player simply types in any word they want and if that word or words appear in a clip, it will pull up the first five clips that has that word in it. So the player could type in the word 'the' and the game would show that it was in 164 of the clips: however, it would only show the first five. This system allows the player to not cheat the system to get all the answers, but also allows them a lot of freedom to explore the case in any direction they wanted and follow their own curiosity. The game doesn't have any clip non-accessible to the player which in turns allows the player to follow their own leads and curiosity. To enter anecdotal space to explain this in action, I had my cousin play this game in preparation for this writing. During one of the interview clips, my cousin noticed the woman being interviewed had a tattoo of an snake coiled around an apple. He was positive she hadn't had that in earlier clips so he decided to type in 'Tattoo'. There he found a clip in which she said "I got it to experience my individuality" (Clip D161). My cousin though on that for a second before typing in 'Eve' and got brand new clips from about two young girls named Hannah (the interviewed) and Eve (a friend she grew up with). The word Tattoo was never highlighted by the player and the word Eve is not mentioned in any clips he had seen. My cousin had to notice that himself (Gathering Information) and figure out what the Tattoo meant without prompting (Make Deductions). By allowing the player to explore the mystery unhalted, it allows the player to follow their own intuition and curiosity. As a further extent of that player driven investigation, the player gets to decide when the investigation is over.

The game never once asks the player who murdered Simon. It more just assumes that you will figure it out at a certain point. Instead, after watching enough clips (along with a few specific ones) the game in the form of someone in a chat box asks if the player (or more

specifically the character they are controlling) has seen all they need to. The player then can type in yes which is then followed by the credits roll. They can also click no and continue to search through the clips. In a Steam Discussion page back from 2015 a user by the name of mysterychips said, "It's up to you to decide when you are satisfied with the information you have found" (Mysterychips). As the Sherlock Holmes of a detective story is not just the one who solves the case, but also confirms to the audience they got the answer right, this game has made the player Holmes completely. The player is in complete control as the detective to look up 'body' to learn where it was found, to realize that mirrors and reflections have been a common theme thus searching 'twins', or even just to wonder what happens when you type in 'Her Story'. The player then decides if they're correct taking on Holmes once more by deciding when to leave the case.

Unfortunately, there are a handful of problems from a gameplay standpoint by completely removing Sherlock Holmes and giving it to the player. The first is a similar problem to *Ace Attorney* where the player solves the mystery faster than the game. To refer back to my time with my cousin, after he played it for a few hours, he told me what he thought had happened. He had in fact solved everything yet the game didn't pull up the chat to roll credits just because he hadn't seen one or two extra clips. By removing a Holmes to check your answer, the game can only really end by turning it off. The second is that a player can be wrong about the mystery. I showed this to a friend at one point who never picked up on the fact that these interviews were being done by two different women (Hannah and Eve). He just thought that it was one woman with Dissociative Identity Disorder. He was wrong, but he still finished the game thinking he had solved it. The third is a sense of achievement. While I still stand by the fact that the detective genre's main appeal is to be Sherlock Holmes, even the mysteries that

Holmes solves in his stories serve a purpose. The forum quote that I mention earlier was actually

trying to answer a question, "I realize that we are supposed to look through the clips and find out

something... but what? And when we do find it out, what next?" (DylanBain). After getting the

previous mentioned answer, the original posted asked, "how do I decide when I am satisfied?"

(DylanBain). Without someone asking who did it, the desire to be Holmes can fall flat. So for the

adaptation of the detective genre in video games a game needs to let the player be Sherlock

Holmes in how they approach the case, but to still have some way of checking the player and

keeping that Holmes within the work. If *Ace Attorney* didn't go far enough away from the

detective fiction that inspired it, *Her Story* could be seen as going the opposite way. By

completely removing the Holmes from the game something is clearly lost as nothing exists to

check the player and nothing exists to act as a drive for the player. Both of which is the role of a

Holmes in a story. As such, for the last detective game I will talk about, I want to take a step

back towards the realm of literature, but only enough add in a Holmes back in where *Her Story*

was missing it.

Fig. 11. Screen Shots of finding a body, going back in time, and witnessing the moment of death

The Return of the Obra Dinn was released in 2018 and developed by indie game

developer Lucas Pope. The game places the player into the role of an unnamed Insurance Agent

who has been tasked with investigating a formally lost at sea ship, the Obra Dinn. When the ship

originally left port it had 60 people on it. In order to figure out what happened on the ship, the

player is given a magical pocket watch called the Momentum Morum[22]. With it the player can

approach a dead body and travel back in time to the moment of their death (as well as hear what

was happening right before) [Fig 11]. What makes this game so interesting as a detective game is

the relationship between uncovering the past narrative and the elements of deduction. The way in

which the player learns about the past narrative and what happened on the ship is pretty straight

forward all things considered. Like most narratives uncovered we start at the end of the story

with a dead body on the deck of the ship. What follows is a fairly simple chain of events. If a

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[22] As the game tells us, it means remember death

door is unlocked in the memory, it then becomes unlocked in the present. As an oversimplification, the player, goes into the past, the past has a door unlocked, the player goes through the door into the present. Especially compared to *Her Story,* where the player could experience the story in any order driven by curiosity, *The Return of the Obra Dinn* is incredibly linear in how the player is exposed to the narrative (even with the player shown events out of chronological order). Certainly, there are places where the player can go in different directions, but only in the way to see a different sequence of memories before another. Even then, the journal that the player has marks all the locations where they can investigate. Uncovering the past narrative is not the actual deductive part of the game. Instead, the memories and past narrative is simply a clue for the player. As mentioned prior, figuring out what exactly happened is fairly easy. The game even puts the events in order for the player. Instead the game presents various hints and clues in the past towards the true mystery of the game, which are the identities and fates of those on the ship.
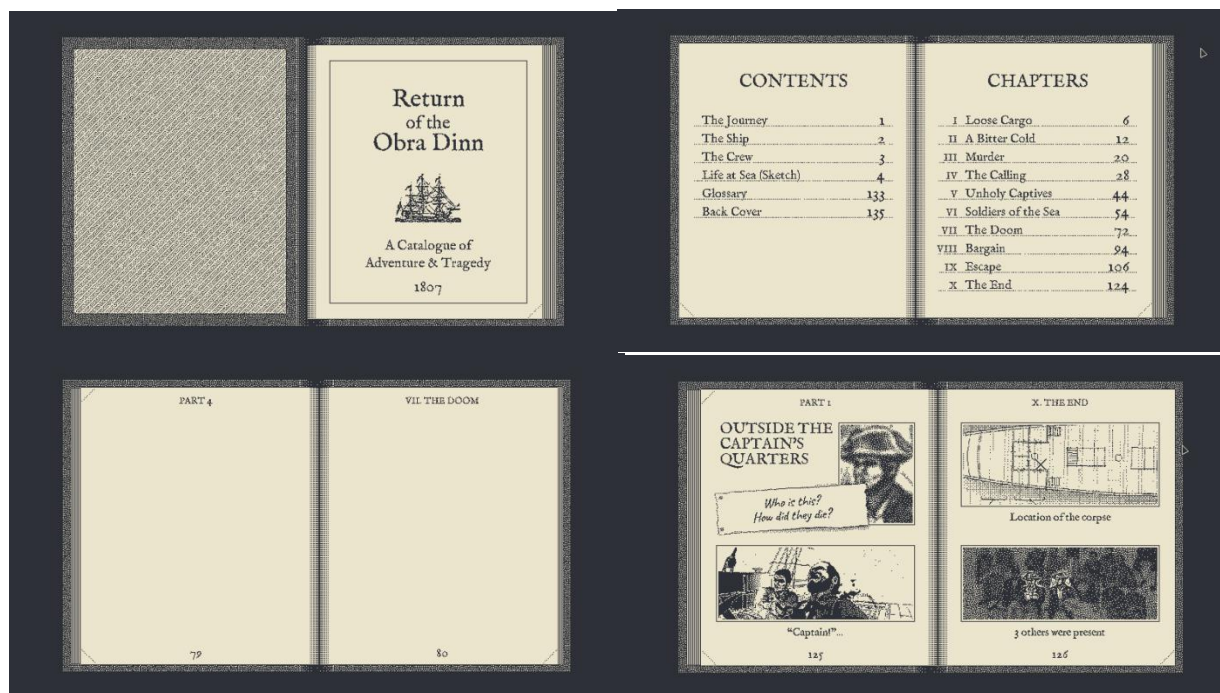

Fig. 12. Various Pages from the Journal that the player is given

At the start of the game the player is given two items. One is the previously mentioned pocket watch. The other is a journal. The journal provides the player with various information, one of which is a goal. When starting the game, most of the book will be completely blank. It will be filled in automatically once the player goes into the past. The journal also provides information such as a few pictures made of the crew, a ship map, and a glossary for anyone who isn't familiar with ship terminology [Fig12]. The most important thing that the journal does is fill out the role of Holmes, not as one who solves the crime, but as the device to check if the player is correct in their deduction. Once the player has explored a memory, the journal will open up to that place in the story. The player is then asked two questions, Who is this and How did they die (and who killed them if necessary)? How they die is almost never an issue. If you see someone point a gun that was just fired at someone who is currently falling backwards, then you can tell they were shot. The difficulty comes in figuring out the identities of those present. Definitive information on an identity is rare during someone's death. So in order to solve a singular identity the player must take information they have gleamed from multiple memories, environmental information, and information about the crew layout. This can be as simple as noticing that this one man is next to the wheel in most memories and in the crew portrait. It can be assumed then that he is the Helmsman. But sometimes it will require the player notice a number of details, put them together and follow that train of thought to uncover an identity. When I played the game the first time and had uncovered all of the past narrative I could, I set out to figure out all the identities that I couldn't while going through. I first started at a memory in the crew quarters. I started there because I learned that all the hammocks were labeled with numbers from the crew register, so if I could figure out who slept where I could figure out who they were. While there I saw an empty hammock with a pipe hanging next to it. Three other hammocks were empty, and

three people were at a table nearby playing cards, so I gathered that one of them was the pipe

owner. To figure out whom the pipe belonged to, I went through every single memory that these

three appeared in (the game keeps track of where everyone was in the past, it just doesn't tell you

who they are) until I found one of them smoking that pipe. This pipe was also not highlighted by

the game in any way as special like in an *Ace Attorney* game. Instead, they player has must be

watchful and keep an eye out for details. And they have to do this sixty times, for each person on

board. To follow Brown's framework for detective adaption again, *Return of the Obra Dinn*

meets all of the points except for Exposing Lies which makes sense as no one else is alive on the

ship to lie to the player. Instead, the player, especially after all of the ship is unlocked, has free

rein to explore the past for various clues, piece them together with various information, follow

up on hunches, and finally Make an Accusation in the form of answering who an individual is.

But on the note of answering the question, while the game will tell the player if their guess is

correct, it will not tell right away. Instead, the game will only confirm if the player is right if the

player gets three fates correct. Sure, this may be unrealistic, and the game doesn't even have any

in-story reason as to why this happens. Yet by abstracting the method of confirming, the player

isn't simply able to brute force a solution since many pieces must be correct. I would even go as

so far to say that this abstraction is what makes this game work at all.

The key to making a good modern detective game is to move away from traditional

detective fiction structure and introduce more abstract styles of investigation. While I still like

the *Ace Attorney* series a fair bit, I think it is clear that I have a preference towards *Her Story* and

Obra Dinn. I think these two games are great examples of actually allowing the player to feel

like Sherlock Holmes which is interesting given the fact that Holmes would never solve a case

like this; no one would solve a case like this. Historian Robert Whitaker likens *Obra Dinn* to

what it is like to be an historian, but also almost a fantasy of what he wishes it was like, "I would love to have that three fates correct come up in the archive. That would be amazing" (8:54-9:02). In the context of the world of *Her Story* the search engine that the player uses to look through clips is horrible. The person who decided to only show the first 5 clips of any search deserves to be fired. However, none of that really matters as these systems still allow for analytical freedom and feedback for the player. *Ace Attorney* is limited by the fact that it is trying to make the player feel like they are in a court room drama like they may see on TV. *Her Story* and *Obra Dinn* are willing to move away and abstract the methods of solving to truly allow the player the ability to be a detective. This divergence from preestablished roles can even be seen in what the player is figuring out. For both of these games, the initial mystery that is presented is not difficult to uncover. *Her Story* isn't really about uncovering the murderer of Simon. In the fourth clip, the player sees that the woman being interviewed is asking for a lawyer. While in the real world that is not indicative of guilt, in fiction it almost always is. Instead it is about learning and understanding the lives of Hannah and Eve. *Return of the Obra Dinn* is not about figuring out what happened on the ship, but instead understanding who the people on the ship were.

Level 6. Try Not To Pull A Punch or The Thrill Will Be Gone:

So, the Detective video game shifts the role of Watson away from the player and the role of Holmes goes mostly to the player. The role of Moriarty then remains unchanged as the role of the creator of the mystery, the author (or game designer with the transfer of mediums). This is of course only discussing the default detective genre. As I mentioned earlier in my paper, Thriller Detective fiction is fairly unique compared to other subgenres. Where we can classify the focus of any given detective story on uncovering a past narrative with little focus on the present, the Thriller Detective brings the focus to the present narrative while still trying to uncover a past

narrative. With a shift in focus, attempting to adapt this subgenre leads to fairly different outcomes then others including not just a shift of Watson and Holmes, but of Moriarty as well away from the creator of a game. But I think to really delve into that topic we must first ask a question first. Can the Thriller, the subset of the detective genre where the action of the detective actively informs the narrative, truly ever exist in video games?

Certainly, it can exist within the mystery game. After all, there is a clear disconnect between game play and narrative as described earlier. In the game *Firewatch* the fact that the exploration of a space, the interaction of objects in the world, and even dialogue are all major aspects of the gameplay, none of these really effect the actual plot of characters Henry and Delilah as they try to figure out a conspiracy that involves them and a mysterious man watching them. Those gameplay actions are certainly informed by the plot happening around the player, but those choices are not reflected in the larger narrative. Instead, the actions that the player takes only really effects things in the micro, what Delilah's sketch looks like, if Henry gets a pet turtle, and most prevalently how long it takes to get to the next plot point. Narrativist games have a much easier transition sense gameplay is not inherently related to the player interaction in the mystery game.

Detective games on the other hand, being stories based equally off of game play don't have the same ability to do thriller. The game series *Danganrampa* follows a similar approach to the previously mentioned *Ace Attorney* series. A murder has taken place, you search around a given area to gather clues and pieces of information, then in a court room style section of the game you use the evidence you've collected, along with any you get during the trial, to find contradictions within other character's statements. An interesting element added to this discussion however is the text surrounding these investigations. Going into great detail of any of

these game's plots are not greatly need, but a common summarization would be that a group of

characters (yourself included) are trapped in a location with no way to escape. The only way to

get out is to kill someone and not get caught. Then follows the trail. If everyone figures out who

the murder is then they are killed. However, if the murder gets away everyone else is killed. This

instantly creates a space for the detective thriller story as your life now depends on your ability

to solve the case. However, this only works from the narrativist view. After all, if you do fail the

case, you die and you get a game over screen. Then the game just brings you back to the last

check point and you try again. The consequence for the thriller isn't really there.

Now of course we know as gluttons for fiction that the danger presented to a character in

a thriller is not real, so it is not that inherent lack of actual danger to the player that I think is

lacking. In a game, for tension to tie in with game play a consequence needs to exist. Games

have a number of ways to give consequence for a player (some implementation of a score that

can grade the player for example) however detective games have a unique challenge. As is the

nature of the genre, it is a plot that is focused around the uncovering of events. As such if the

player hasn't figured out the mystery (or at least the part of the mystery that the game is testing

the player on in the moment) then the plot stops. This isn't so much a problem in many detective

games as it just allows you the opportunity to think about the mystery some more. However,

when you add an element of thriller to it, the narrative tension becomes an empty threat in the

gameplay. To help sell the notion of tension *Danganrompa* has a timer during the elements of

game play where you have to prove your understanding of the case. However, if you fail within

the time all the game does mechanically is restart itself thus neutralizing any of the thriller.

To further explore this concept I want to take a quick step away from the genre I am

discussing and look at the game *Subnautica*. I've brought up the game before as mystery game in

plot rather then gameplay, but for this diversion it will be worth getting into now. *Subnautica* is a

survival game where the player is put into an ocean with the goal of surviving and exploring the

water they've found themselves in. Both of these objectives are hindered by the giant and

dangerous alien aquatic life found in this ocean. What's more is that this is a game with no

weapons to kill these monsters[23] that are trying very hard to kill you which makes them terrifying

to encounter. However monsters designed to scare the player as well as act as a tangible threat in

game have a problem. In their video essay "How *Subnautica* uses TERROR" game critic Adam

Millard say:

> Well yeah, sure these monsters are scary when you start out, but you'll get sick of
> them once they've killed you a million times right? This is a common horror
> game problem, the baddies in [Resident Evil 7] for example stop being scary once
> you've died to them a few times. That's not just because the illusion of real
> danger is broke, but also because losing in a video game actually gives your brain
> some breathing room. You get a change to respawn, recenter yourself in a safe
> environment and think clearly for a change about where and how you died, what
> caused it, and how you can prevent it, lessening the threat some of these big
> monsters, especially the leviathans pose (9:12-9:45).

This notion of failure in horror games applies to the thriller detective game as well where the

tension is lost if you fail to find the answer within the timer of *Danganrompa*. However, Millard

goes a step forward with his analysis to explain how *Subnautica* doesn't fall into this same horror

game trap:

> *Subnautica* pulls all of its punches, it's almost insultingly easy... Ghost
>
> leviathans… they've got an AI quirk that causes them to de-aggro[24] once they

---

[23] It is worth mentioning that the player can kill the aquatic creatures. They are given a knife at the very beginning of the game, but it deals so little damage to any creature that it's not worth using outside of the very beginning of the game. Furthermore even if the player uses the knife to kill a creature, no loot is dropped which is the common reward to defeating a creature in survival games such as *Minecraft* or *Don't Starve*. This essentially removes all major motivation to impractically kill these creatures

[24] Aggro is a video game term short for Aggression. As a term it is used to describe the mechaninces in the games that a system uses to figure out what to attack and sometimes how aggressively to do so.

land a charge attack to freak you out but not actually kill you. Reaper leviathans

have this awesomely brutal grab attack they can do on seamoths and prawn

suits[25]. Guess what? This attack only does about fifty percent of the seamoth's

health in damage and half that to suits. This means that unless you were already

on death's door, you've a pretty good shot at booking it out of there before they

can attack again. Hell, even if you're completely unarmored and not in a vehicle,

they still can't kill you in a single hit. All that goes without mentioning the fact

that pretty much every enemy in the game…is either way slower than you are or

is way less maneuverable. You can escape even leviathans by just running away

at a slight angle, putting you out of the range of their charge. Crucially though,

they'll still follow you and roar, giving you a good scare and the feeling you only

made it out by the skin of your teeth even though you weren't in any real danger

at all (9:47-11:00)

That is to say what makes *Subnautica* work as a game of tension is that the danger is just an

illusion, so you don't get taken out of the experience. *Danganrompa* is essentially trying the

same thing. As a game it doesn't want you to fail as evident by the fact that there is nothing after

failure except trying again, but it still want to tell a specific tension filled story within its thriller

setting. Thus *Danganrompa* and games like it fail as thrillers.

This is not to say this style of detective game cannot act as a thriller. In the indie game

Aviary Attorney, the third case in the game, it is possible to fail the case by not finding all the

evidence or failing to present it at the right moment. If you do fail, then a major character dies. If

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[25] Terms in game for your mini-sub and swim gear respectfully

you succeed in the case, then that character lives. Both events lead to different mysteries for the last case of the game. However, this can still produce some problems with the thriller on a metatextual level. To enter the realm of anecdotal space for a minute, group of my friends were all playing the *Aviary Attorney* together. When we finally got the 3rd case we failed and the character died. By majority vote, we instantly reloaded the case and tried again. This time we succeeded and went on to a different case. We as players decided to do ourselves what the mechanics of *Danganrompa* were doing for us automatically, destroying tension. *Danganrompa* wants to put the player in role of Sam Spade from the Dashiell Hammett's story *The Maltese Falcon.* Have the player forced to feel the tension of if you can't solve the consequences you might die, but when the tension is destroyed that feeling is unattainable. In order to make a true thriller detective game, one needs to rethink how a detective game would be structed in the first place. One such game is *Among Us*.

But before we talk about *Among Us*, it is important to discuss the genre it comes from, the Social Deduction genre. While popularized by physical card games like *Werewolf* or *Secret Hitler*, the creators of such games typically point to a singular game/psychological experiment as the inspiration, *Mafia* created by Dimma Davidoff.[26] The game itself was created in Moscow in 1986 with the core of the game being of an "informed minority vs. uninformed majority" (Davidoff). The Informed Minority have the information of who they are and in turn that everyone else is not a minority. The Uninformed Majority has no such knowledge, only knowing that others exist and usually the number of this other group. The game play and goals of the two

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[26] It is worth mentioning that while you can buy a copy of the game *Werewolf* published by Bezier game, it is worth mentioning that people still can and do play this game without buying products. It is a game in terms of a set of rules (Like *Truth or Dare*, *Beer Pong*, or *FizzBuzz*) then a product. These rules as game is either called Werewolf or Mafia although premise is still basically the same. However the origins of these game are still traced back to Davidoff and his did call his game *Mafia*. As such when I refer to *Mafia*, I am referencing Davidoff's creation.

groups are aseconess. The Uninformed Majority is tasked with figuring out who the others are and removing them from the group by a majority vote. The Informed Minority's goal is to both to not get caught and to remove everyone else in the game. The Informed Minority also typically get a chance actively remove someone from a game without challenge. Some variations on this structure has more roles and sub-groups within Majority and Minority, but they still all follow this same structure. Figure out who the enemy is before they kill you all and kill everyone before they figure it out. On the surface it seems like these *Mafia* inspired Social Deduction game are the Thriller Detective game I was looking for. However, this is only surface level as most of these games faulter in the second half of the genre's name.

The problem with Social Deduction games[27] is that it is incredibly hard to lay out a situation that actually allows players to engage with deduction. Now, certainly a detective game does not have to have actual physical clues in order to exist in a genre. That in and of itself implies that you can only create deductions with physical clues. However, let's look at the gameplay loop of a normal game a werewolf, after all roles are assigned. First everyone who has the ability to do a task does so secretly. Then everyone learns the aftermath of those events. Then people discuss to figure out who the Informed Minority is, the decided to vote or not, then the loop repeats until either all Informed Minorities are removed or all Uninformed Majorities are removed. The problem lays in the fact most of these games by their nature cannot provide information to their players. Thus deduction can only be based on two things, who is already dead and asking yes or no question about identity. The first one is obvious. If you've been killed by the mafia in a game of *Mafia* then you are not mafia although this is not really useful information to rule out suspects. Instead, the weight of investigation then falls to the

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[27] Not a judgment on the genre, just in relation to the frame I am using

interrogation which is lackluster. While certainly any question can be asked, but since all roles are hidden except to the individuals of that group all questions boil down to at the end of the day, 'Are you who you say you are?'. And since there does not exist a way to truly confirm this without removing them or being them, the meaning of that the name of the genre refers to understanding lies that your friends tell. Some games try to rectify this such as *Ultimate Werewolf* that has an optional role called the detective that during the secret action step mentioned earlier can learn if someone is a werewolf or not. However, this is not deduction. This is pointing at someone and being told an answer and doesn't require any analysis on their part. Then from there it turns into the same question as before, "Are you who you say you are?". So this genre does enter into the realm of Thriller, but not really into the realm of Detective thriller. In truth it wouldn't be until recently that a game came along that acted as a Social Deduction Detective Thriller game.
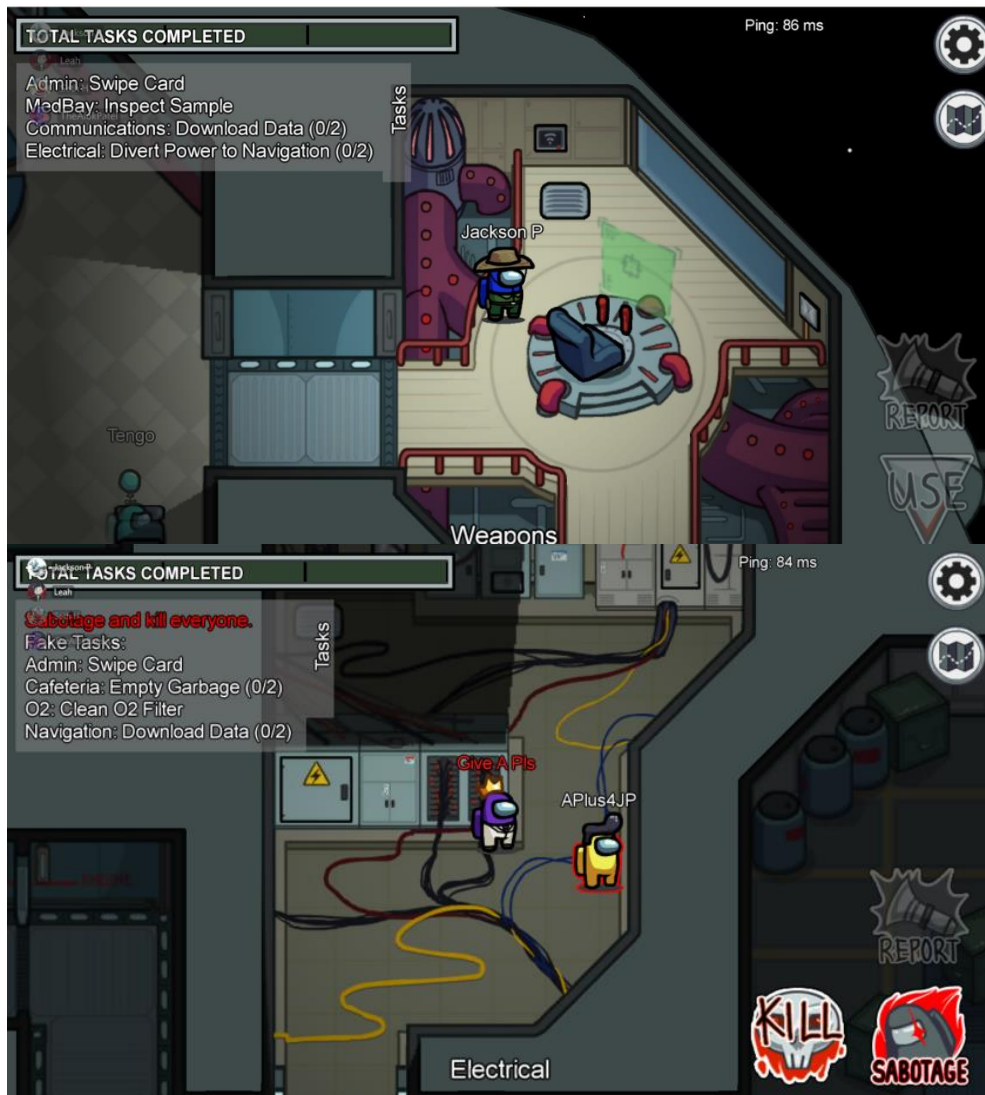
Fig. 13. Top image is of Crew (Jackson P) walking around looking for tasks to complete. Bottom image is of Imposter (Give A Pls) about to kill a Crew member

Originally coming out for mobile devices in 2018, then getting a large boost in popularity in 2020, *Among Us* is not the first Social Deduction game that came about in the digital world of video games. These games, along with *Among Us*, still follow the same core idea of their gaming ancestry, "Informed Minority [Imposters] vs Uniformed Majority [Crew]" (Davidoff). However, *Among Us* does one thing different to move it outside of Social Deduction and into Detective Thriller – it provides a space. Instead of a time where the Imposters can automatically kill

someone like in its contemporaries, *Among Us* provides a time where people can travel around a given space. In this space The Crew are given a list of tasks that forces them to travel around. If all the tasks are complete then the crew automatically wins. At this time the Imposters are also tasked with killing everyone on the ship at the same time [Fig 13]. Imposters are also given the ability to sabotage various parts of the map with some being as mundane as closing a door while others will lead to an automatic victory if the crew does not fix it soon. Once a body is found or a meeting is called then the space is halted as all players discuss and choose to vote someone out if they want [Fig 14]. While these debates do still boil down to the core question of "Are you who you say you are?" claims can now be made about observations. Were two people alone for a while and neither were killed? They might both say that the other could have killed but didn't so they are clear. Did you notice that a player going the opposite way as you yet you still find them in the place you were going? And of course sense all of this takes place in a location in real time you could very easily walk in on someone committing the murder creating some pretty hard evidence against you. By having this take place in a virtual space, all observations becomes clue to the case, but not just who the Imposter is, but who the crew is as well. After all, if you can confirm someone is a crew member then you automatically know what they say is the truth. So with your own observation combined with those that you trust or at least confirm are telling the truth now, the investigation comes in order to figure out everyone's identity. It is through this gameplay of space and observation that allows this game to enter the detective genre. What allows it to be a thriller then is it's direct consequences.
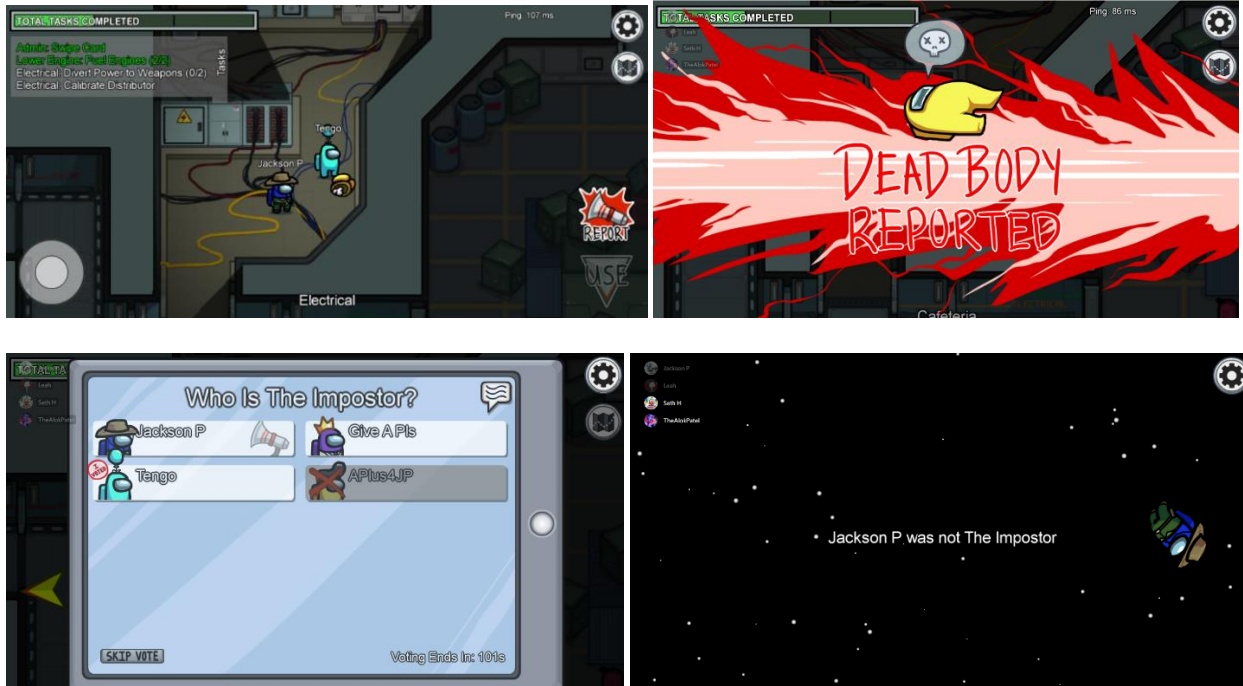
Fig 14. A selection four images. The first (top left) is find a body. Followed by a body being reported, that players discussing who did it, and then a player being ejected.

For *Among Us*, the game actually ends if the crew cannot identify the Imposters soon enough. Unlike the previous mention *Danganrompa*, there is no set ending that the game's narrative is trying to achieve. As such it can really end at any moment, both for the whole game or yourself specifically. Voting without 100% confidence in your choice could mean that you're about to vote a crew member out, give the imposters one less person to kill. Teaming up with someone can mean that a third person won't come in to kill you without getting caught but your buddy might be an imposter themselves. Going to fix a sabotage will help the crew, but it might also be a trap that will kill you. All action brings with it a danger that can't be undone. The most effect way to protect yourself from the present danger is to observe, discuss, and deduce the identity of the Imposters. Near the beginning of this paper, when I was defining my concept of a Holmes and Watson, I brought up the idea of the Moriarty as the one who makes the mystery. At

the time I equated that role to the creator of the work, the author or game designer(s). In this case, however, the Moriarties are other players. Sure, the players don't have the ability to create these elaborate murder plots like in "The Speckled Band", but aside from killing everyone an Imposter should be creating a situation where the truth of what happened is a mystery to the crew. And sometimes this means that the mystery is too hard to solve and Moriarty wins. Sometimes enough people notice things and put them together, allowing Sherlock to win. By creating this thriller detective game in *Among Us*, the developers at Inner Sloth have created a battle of wits simulator between Holmes and Moriarty.[28]

Level 7. Build A Detective:

Up until this point, while I have talked about specific games, I have also talked about them in relationship to a larger whole as well as with other games to make up that piece. This will be the exception to that trend as the 2019 game *Disco Elysium* which is unique enough to warrant its own mention. After all, if I am discussing the two points of the Mystery Game and Detective Game, then to be through I need to look at the game that falls in the middle of the two. As for grouping, you as the player do not solve the murder that acts as the focus of the game. Instead the detective you control, whose name is probably Harry, is the one who makes the deductions. Connecting the dots between two clues is all done by Harry. The most input that you the player can give in these moments of investigation is controlling where the detective goes, what items to click on, and what questions to ask[29][Fig 15]. In that sense it appears that this is

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[28] In a perfect world at least. Sometimes crew members walk into the room right as the Imposter kills someone. And thus, the case is solved!

[29] Although this last one is largely inconsequential as you can go back and pick all the dialogue options most of the time

clearly a mystery game. However, what muddies this interpretation is the fact that while the

player does not solve the mystery, they do get to decided *how* the mystery gets solved.
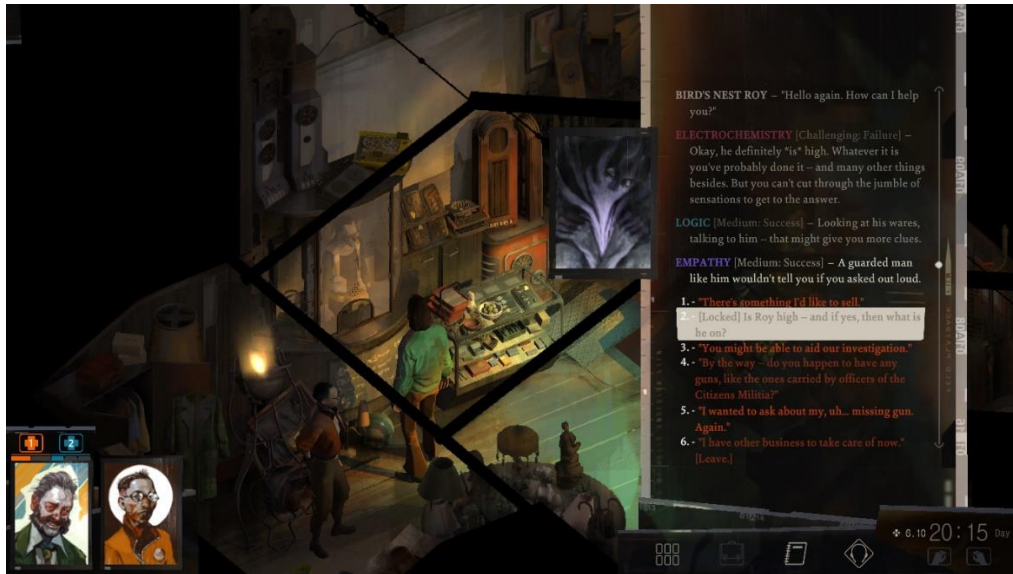

Fig. 15. Interviewing a Shop Owner with multiple conversation topics

I alluded to this a second ago, but our main character Harry has amnesia[30]. The main

player character with amnesia is a common story telling archetype in video games. Game

developers James Portnow and Daniel Floyd in a YouTube video called "Amnesia and Story

Structure - Character Development in Fallout: New Vegas - Extra Credits" explain very

succinctly why this character trait is so common in player characters, "So, why amnesia? Well

because it is a cheap way to get away with never having an Act One" and skip right to the action

of Act Two (4:19-4:23). Having a character with amnesia allows for action to start without

having to worry about the build up and background from Act One. Since video games are an

interactive medium, it's understandable why a game developer would want to skip right to the

action and thus the core interactive elements of their game. However, this logic does not really

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[30] The fictionalized version of amnesia where a character forgets every personal detail of their lives

translate to the detective genre. To enter a detective game en medius res is to enter the mystery already partially uncovered or to through you into a case with only part of the information. It defeats the purpose of trying to solve a mystery when presented like that[31]. As such the meaning behind this artistic choice also comes from the other major reason to have an amnesiac character, to have a blank slate as a character.
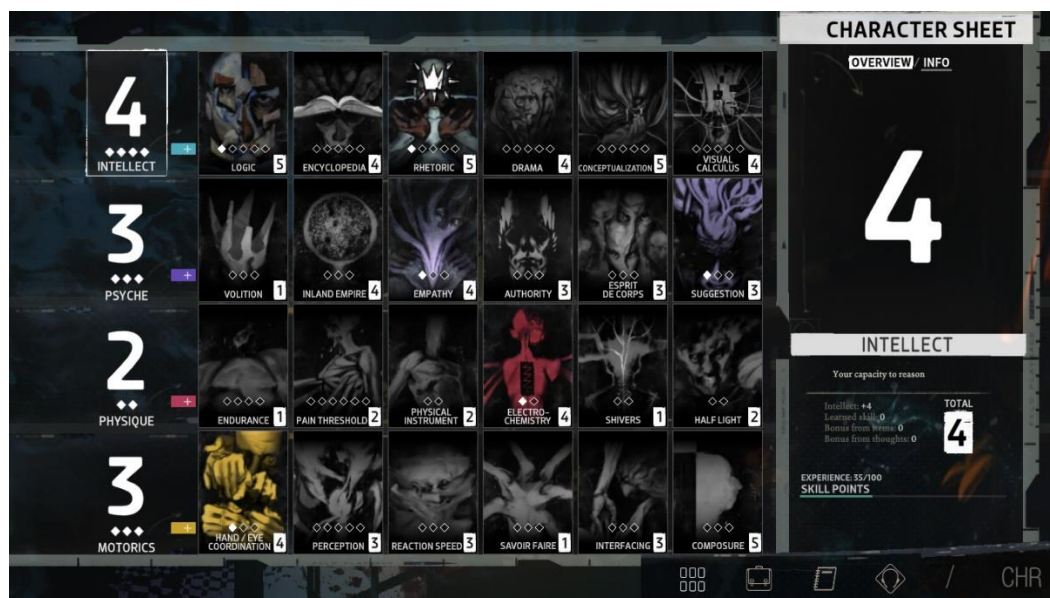

Fig. 16. All the various stats the player can customize

By having a character start a story with amnesia a game developer has a way to put a person into a situation but with without any personality traits that would have developed from living a life. This then in turn allows the player to project onto the player character and decide who they are. It is that notion that truly set *Disco Elysium* apart from it's contemporaries. In marketing, the tagline of *Disco Elysium* is "What kind of Cop are you?" which in turn is the true core gameplay of *Disco Elysium* (Title Screen). At the very start of the game before learning

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[31] The first case in the second Ace Attorney game *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney – Justice for All* did actually do this during the first case, but that was to conceive of a situation where the main character Phoenix (protagonist of the first few games) would have to be explained the rules of the court for the tutorial. He got better by the end

anything else the player gets to look at all the states in the game. There are three main states: Intellect "Your capacity for reason", Psyche "Your power to influence yourself and others", Physique "How well your body is built", and Motorics "How well you move your body" (State Screen). Once the player picks which states to be good or bad at[32] the states open up again to reveal 6 more states behind each main state that the player can further increase[Fig16]. After all, "how well you move your body" can mean how quickly you can pull out a gun, Reaction Speed, or how well you can keep a trait face, Composure. Your Intellect can be your ability to recreate events based on the clues presented, Visual Calculus, or your ability to understand conversation and the underline meaning of words, Rhetoric. Once selected, it is through these states that the player gets to see the world of *Disco Elysium* through as these states will give passive commentary on the events Harry and by extension the player are experiencing. This can be seen after a woman finishes talking and Empathy tells you that the woman is uncomfortable with the conversation, or seeing an odd event and using Visual Calculus to recreate it [Fig 17]. These states are used actively as well as you'll need to succeed a check[33] in order to gain information such as Endurance in order to approach a rotting body with out vomiting or being to keep a clear head while drinking with Electrochemistry.

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[32] Alternatively the player can pick one of 3 default sets called Thinker, Sensitive, and Physical
[33] A term originating from Dungeons and Dragons. It is where success on a task is determined randomly yet character states still effect outcome
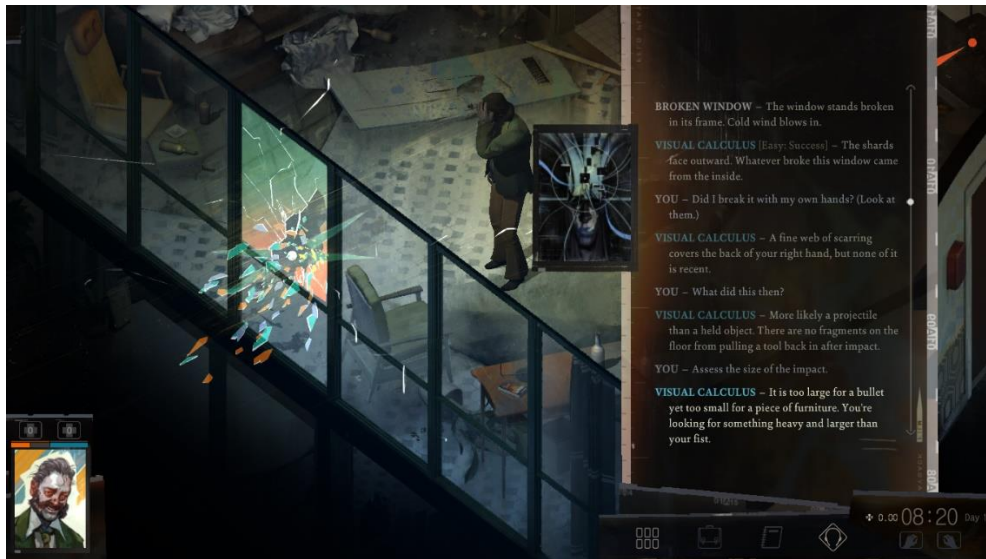
Fig 17. Using Visual Calculus to figure out a broken window

By turning the major gameplay of *Disco Elysium* into customizing your detective

(throughout the game you still have the ability to alter your states) it still allows the player the

freedom to approach the problem of solving the mystery in any way that they like similar to

abstracted detective games I've previously discussed. If the player wants to emulate Sherlock

Holmes by being able to observe the world around them and reconstruct events then they can do

that. If they want to play a cop who uses force and intimidation such as in *Dirty Harry,* then that

can be done. All the actual deduction is automatic, the way that information is gathered and

deductions happen is the play's choice. Thus it is a mystery game, but it is a mystery game that

the player gets to design.

Level 8. The Killer Revealed:

A Detective Story is inherently a challenge and an assigner of roles. We as the audience

are traditionally the passive observers trying to follow and catch up with a detective. We are the

Watson. That detective is the one we are trying to reach. They are the one who advances the

story and they are also the one who reveals the truth to the audience, to let them know if they solved the case or not. They are the Holmes. We also have the one who crafts the mystery, not simply in story, but also outside of it; the one who creates a mystery to trick people, but also to ultimately be solved by the Holmes. They are the Moriarty. Despite being assigned the role of the passive Watson, from the beginning of the genre we have been challenged to strive beyond that and become the Holmes of the story and solve the mystery presented ourselves. Some Arthur Conan Doyle stories are even designed with the very idea that the audience will try to actively engage with the audience. Despite that attempt of engagement, these roles are fairly stuck in place regardless of whether the detective story is in its original medium of prose, or in an adapted medium such as theater, movie, or television. Even within the comparatively unique subgenre of the Thriller Detective story, the focus of events still have the set roles. That is then until we get into the newer realm of video games.

As a medium, video games are largely defined by their interaction with the player of a work, regardless of whether the player can actually affect the plot. As such it doesn't just make sense to adapt the detective genre into this new medium. The video game is where the detective story has always belonged. It is the medium that can finally allow the inherent challenge to be fulfilled. Creators can now make narratives that require the audience to solve the mystery presented, not just check to see if they were correct as the story goes on. However, that doesn't mean that the transition to a video game narrative is uniformed.

Adapting the detective genre into video games is more of a spectrum then anything else. After all, as there are two different ways to discuss video game narratives, it can be said that there are two different ways to create a game narrative as well. Through these two different styles actually split detective fiction into two different video game genres, what I am choosing to

call the Mystery Game and the Detective Game. The Mystery Game follows closely to

traditional narrative convention where the story being told is largely removed from the choices

and interactions made during gameplay such as in the *Professor Layton* series. The player may

control the protagonist Layton, but he as a character is the one to actually solve the case around

which the game's narrative revolves around. The roles that a detective story traditionally offers

are still in effect. The Detective Game in contrast takes the roles and reverses it. In the game *Her*

Story, the Watson is solely disconnected from the player as they fulling adopt the role of Holmes,

investigating the game there own way (within the limits of the game) and even deciding when

the case is solved. Although as I said, this adaptation process is a spectrum. We also have games

like *Return of the Obra Dinn* that largely remove the Holmes from the game except for a system

to check if the player solved the mystery correctly. We even have odder cases like *Disco Elysium*

where the characters in the game solve the case for the player, but the main gameplay is the

player deciding how the case gets solved. Or delving into the Detective Thriller game like

Among Us which alters the Holmes and Watson like other detective games, but also shifts the

Moriarty away from game designers and into the hands of the players (albeit different players

than the ones who are Holmes).

So many of these games have found success in trying to fulfill that original challenge and

appeal of deduction by being willing to move away from the traditional narratives presented in

detective fiction and instead focus on the ludonarratives that can be made only in this medium.

As more games are made and experimented with in this new medium, I am excited to see how

the detective genre grows and changes. After all, every video game I've talked about came out

within the last two decades. Who can say what new innovations may arise in the years to come?

How will we be given information and how will we be expected to solve it? I look forward to

becoming Holmes once more when I see it happen.

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