

Game Narrative Through the Detective Lens



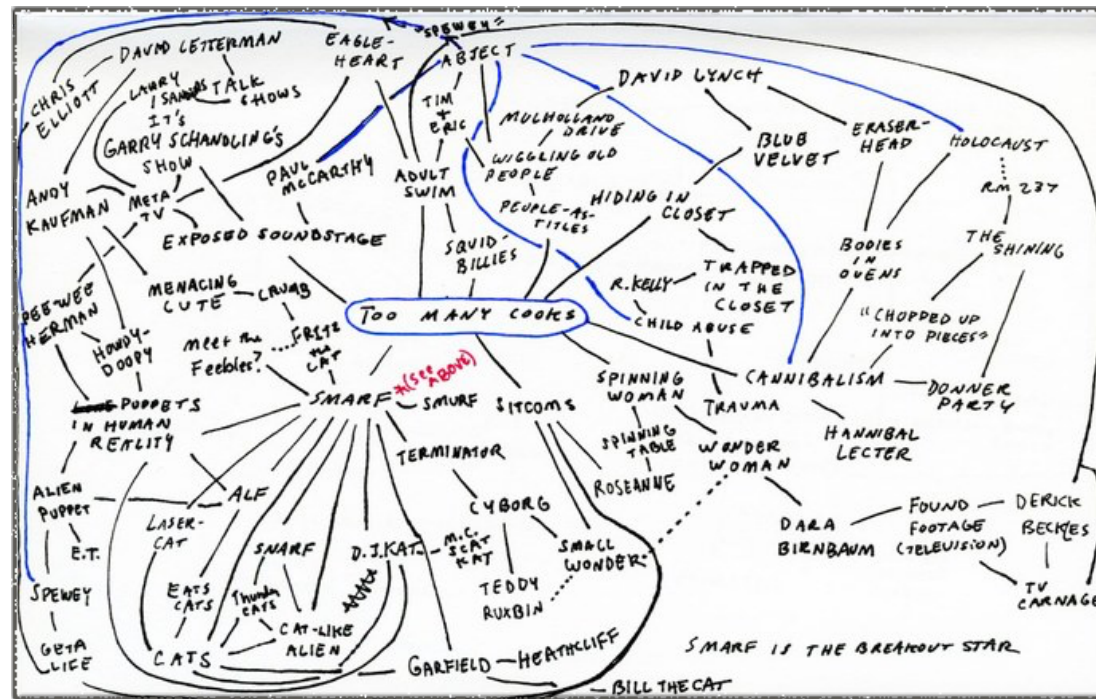
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Narrative and Games

It's a thing. Get over it.

Taxonomies & Frameworks



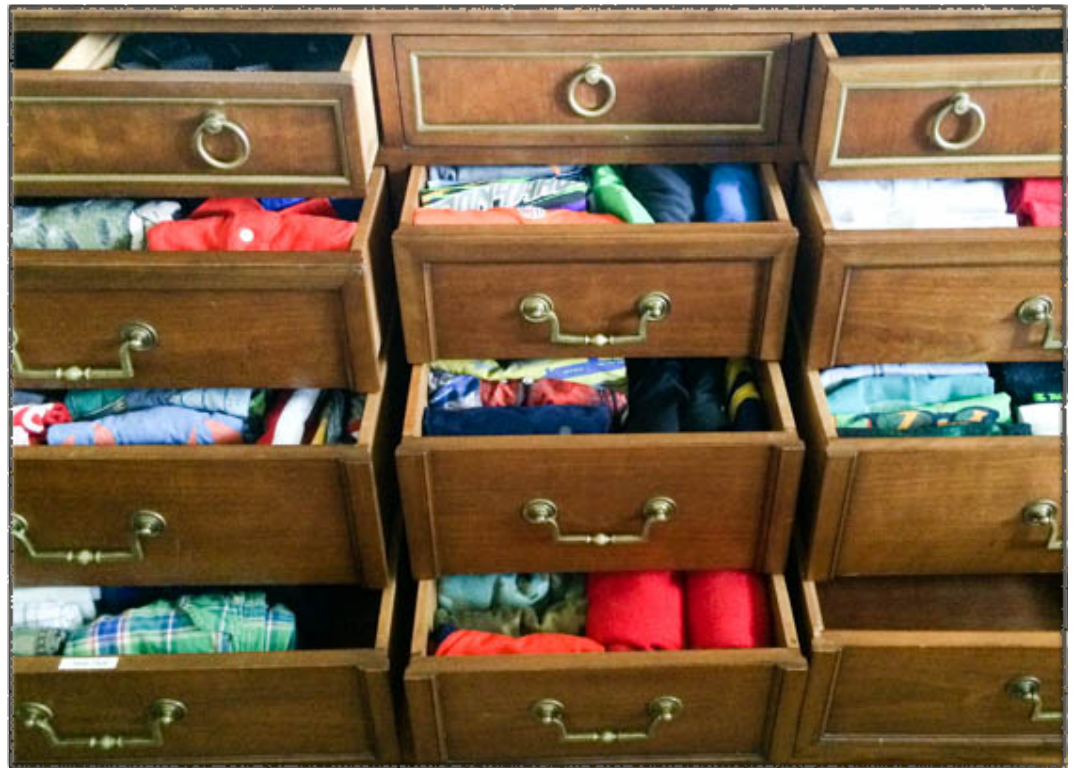
Credit: John Hogan

Murray, Janet Horowitz. *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2001.

Jenkins, Henry. “Game Design as Narrative Architecture.” In *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, edited by Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan, 118–30. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004.

The Problem of Top-Down Approaches

- ❖ Deductive methods help classify.
- ❖ How do we decide the categories?
- ❖ What happens to works that don't fit the classification?



The Inductive Method

- ❖ Using examples first - from specific to general to develop theoretical concepts.
 - ❖ Genette, Gérard. *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1980.
 - ❖ Proust's *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu* to understand time in narrative.
 - ❖ Montfort, Nick. *Twisty Little Passages: An Approach to Interactive Fiction*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003.
 - ❖ Interactive Fiction as Riddles
 - ❖ Suits, Bernard. “The Detective Story: A Case Study of Games in Literature.” *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* 12, no. 2 (1985): 200–219.
 - ❖ Five-minute mysteries as games

The Inductive Method

- ❖ Theories may be easier to remember because they are **situated**.
- ❖ Compare texts with each other, rather than abstract labels.

Detective Stories as a Lens



- ❖ Detective / Mysteries are playful stories.
- ❖ Large corpus of pre-existing criticism.
- ❖ Across Media: books, films - now games!

My proposal

- ❖ Using detective stories and games as a field to inquire on the narrative form of games, as well as their status as narrative cultural artifacts.

Detective Stories as a Lens

- ❖ Detective stories are a game to be played by the reader.
- ❖ It's a puzzle in the form of a story.
- ❖ The author also plays a game with the reader: giving obstacles that make it hard to figure out who the culprit is.

Suits, Bernard. "The Detective Story: A Case Study of Games in Literature." *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* 12, no. 2 (1985): 200–219.



Detective Stories as Games



Story Structure

Whodunit vs Thriller

Detective stories have two levels:

- ❖ **the story of the crime:** events in absentia
- ❖ **the story of the investigation:** what happens as the detective solves the case.

Todorov, Tzvetan. “The Typology of Detective Fiction.” *The Poetics of Prose*, 1977, 42–52.

Whodunit vs Thriller

Whodunit

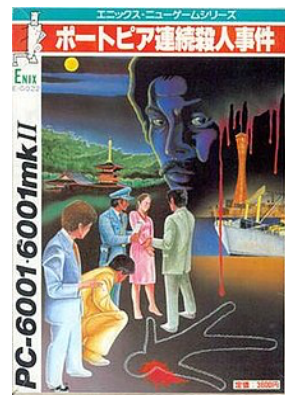
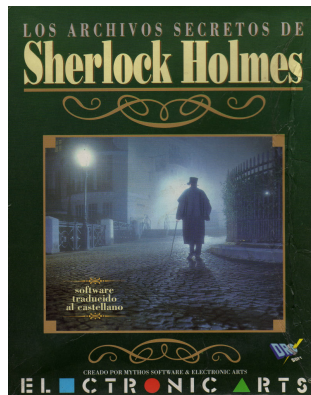
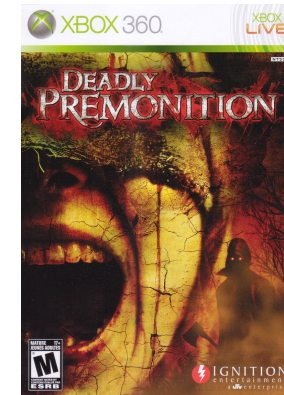
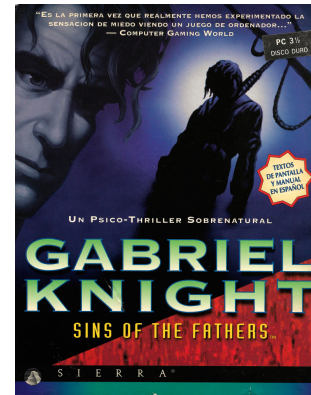
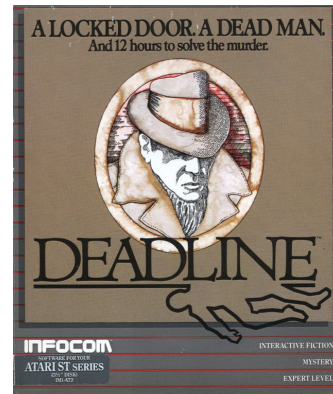
- The story of the crime is the prevalent; the story of the investigation is retelling it.
- Focus on the crime.
- Drive of reader is curiosity.

Thriller

- The story of the crime is an excuse to trigger the story of the investigation; the investigation takes over.
- Focus on the detective
- Drive of the reader is suspense.

Todorov, Tzvetan. “The Typology of Detective Fiction.” *The Poetics of Prose*, 1977, 42–52.

Whodunit vs Thriller



Fernandez Vara, Clara. “Detective Stories in Digital Games: The Case of the Vanishing Exegesis.” presented at the Electronic Literature Organization Conference, Milwaukee, WI, June 19, 2014.

Stories in Games

Game narratives can have two levels:

- ❖ **the story of the world:** what has happened before the player starts the game, events in absentia.
- ❖ **the story of the player:** what happens as the player plays.

Story of the World



Gone Home (2013)



Everybody's Gone to the Rapture (2015)



Her Story (2015)

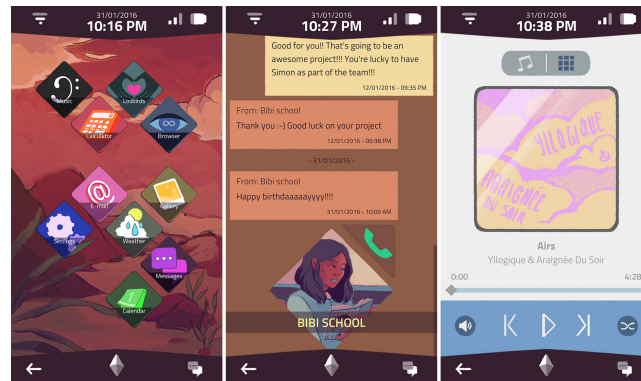
Story of the Player



The Last of Us (2013)



Civilization VI (2016)



A Normal Lost Phone (2017)

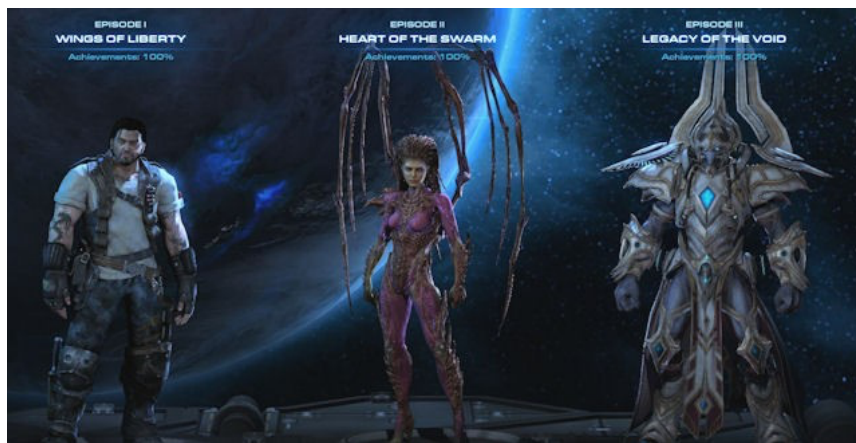
Story of the world and the player



Bioshock (2007)



Portal 2 (2011)



Starcraft 2 (2010)



Dishonored 2 (2016)

Questions

- ❖ How do online multiplayer games address the two-levels of the stories?
- ❖ How do local multiplayer create the two-level narratives (if at all)?
- ❖ How do the different frames of augmented reality games incorporate the two story levels (or not)?

Behavioural Scripts

Restoration of Behavior



Schechner, Richard. *Between theater and anthropology*.

University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010.

Fernandez Vara, Clara. “The Game’s Afoot: Designing Sherlock Holmes.”

In *Proceedings of DiGRA 2013: Defragging Game Studies*. Atlanta, GA, 2013.

Behavioural Scripts in Games

- ❖ Game designers create behavioural scripts for players to restore (rather than focus on systems).
- ❖ Adapting a detective story has to focus on the behaviors, rather than the solution.
- ❖ If the player knows the story, then there is no mystery.

Questions

- ❖ Games provide players a range to interpret the behaviours to be restored in a game (e.g. speedruns, permadeath runs, streaming.). What does that mean in a story-driven game?

Other Narrative Aspects

- ❖ Spatial Storytelling.

Fernandez Vara, Clara. "Game Spaces Speak Volumes: Indexical Storytelling." In *Proceedings of Think Design Play: Digital Games Research Association Conference 2011*. Utrecht, 2011.

- ❖ Postmodern approaches to narrative.

Fernandez-Vara, Clara. "Digital Games: The New Frontier of Postmodern Detective Fiction." Electronic Literature Organization: The End(s) of Electronic Literature. Bergen, Norway, 2015.

- ❖ Gender and Representation.

Conclusion

- ❖ The relationship between games and narrative through the lens of detective / mystery stories shows there are many ramifications and different aspects.
- ❖ And yet, there will be gaps and exceptions - but we do want to identify those as well.



Thank you!

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- ❖ These slides:
<http://tiny.cc/DetectiveGameLens>