

Crime Plays Workshop: Exploring how Games can innovate within the crime and detective genre.

DiGRA 2026 Maynooth, Ireland

Organisers/Chairs

Dr Dean Bowman is Senior Lecturer on the TIGA and Rookies award winning Games Art and Design course at Norwich University of the Arts. His research specialisms include game studies, cultural theory, narratology, transmedia storytelling, fan studies and production studies and he is an ardent fan of golden age detective fiction.

Dr James McLean is Lecturer in and Programme Director for both Media and Communication and Media Production at the University of Hull. Previously he had 10 years' experience freelancing in pre-production and design working on television, books, and video games. His research interests focus on the processes of professional media production and draws upon research into adaptation, genre, transmedia storytelling, and the transnational movement of media properties.

Participants & position papers

All participants have been invited to speak as contributors to our forthcoming book 'Crime Does Play: Detective Fiction and Videogames'.

David Ten Cate

'The Dialectical Detective: Sherlock Holmes Beyond Ratiocination in Modern Frogwares Games'

Drawing on theories of adaptation and a critical analysis of detective fiction as the embodiment of enlightenment rationality, this paper explores the development of choice-based narrative strategies in Frogwares Sherlock Holmes games.

Steven Gotzler

'The Detections of Totality: Cognitive Mapping in *Disco Elysium's* Thought Cabinet'

Taking Frederic Jameson's (2016) reading of Raymond Chandler and his idea of cognitive mapping as a starting point, this paper explores how *Disco Elysium's* approach to space challenges a tendency in detective fiction towards totalising approaches to reality.

Jon Stone

'"Greasy Little Men Who Snoop": The Video Game Detective as Lockpick, Interloper, Mischief-Maker'

This paper counters the tendency to view the detective as a heroic or moral entity, instead drawing on Cawelti's (1975) idea of detectives as 'cowboy' figures taking a disordered and amoral approach to problem solving closer to notions of play.

Josh Hussey

"A mask I wore as I approached, I was what I am not:" Voice and Affective Participation in Detective Fiction Games

This paper explores the affective dimension of detective fiction and how the user interface allows the player to participate in the process, with a special focus on the SCUMM interface of early Lucas Arts Adventure Games.

Clara Fernandez Vara (Online)

'The Origins of Japanese Detective Games'

This paper explores the flow of detective stories and detective games between the Anglo-American tradition and Japan with a focus on the Phoenix Wright series.

Cass Barkman (Online)

'The Case of the Mysterious Videogame Narrative'

Drawing ideas from both early games like Colossal Cave Adventure and early, formative accounts of gaming such as Mary Anne Buckle's 1985 thesis, this paper explores how mystery narratives can be a productive means through which to understand videogame narrative design more broadly.

Nele Van de Mosselaer & Stefano Gualeni (Online)

'Being and Crime: Ontological Investigations in Postmodern Detective Videogames'

Approaching detective fiction from the perspective of postmodern theory this paper explores how detective fiction destabilizes epistemological and ontological frameworks.

Outline

Led in the box office by Kenneth Branagh's lavishly budgeted Agatha Christie adaptations and in the bookshop by Richard Osman's *Thursday Murder Club*, detective fiction seems to be enjoying a cultural renaissance. Videogames are also extensively experimenting within this genre. Growing out of traditions of point and click adventures (Blade Runner, Broken Sword) and Visual Novels (Portopia Murder Case, Phoenix Wright) many designers are now incorporating more deliberate and complex systems to allow the player to take on the role of a detective. A growing body of academic thought has begun to emerge (Okabe, 2019; Larsen and Schoenau-Fog, 2020; Fernández-Vara, 2021; Ramos, 2021) on this often overlooked and under-appreciated genre.

This workshop seeks to explore the rich links crime fiction and videogames, especially this growing body of deduction based indie games – The Case/Rise of the Golden Idol,

The Return of the Obra Dinn, The Root Trees Are Dead, Shadows of Doubt – and how they go about systematising processes of deduction and detection into gameplay mechanics from murder walls to mind palaces. These games are challenging game design orthodoxies and conventions of detective literature alike by incorporating novel aesthetics and mechanics that emphasise thought over action. The videogame industry has, over several decades, dedicated innumerable resources to refining the nuanced experience of firing a gun or punching a face, but comparatively little in investigating the aftermath of such activities. This is the domain of detective fiction, a growing and exciting branch of puzzle game design that seeks to put intellectual activities of ratiocination and deduction front and foremost.

The session is led by Dr James McLean (University of Hull) and Dr Dean Bowman (Norwich University of the Arts) who are editing the forthcoming book 'Crime Does Play: Detective Fiction and Videogames' from Bloomsbury Academic. Each of the 7 presenters will deliver a 10-minute position papers based on the chapters they have written for the book.

The second half of the session will be a large panel discussion drawing the audience into the discussion. The subject of the discussion could touch on the following points:

Pleasure, morality and murder – What are the cultural and ethical considerations of the way crime fiction broadly, and detective fiction specifically, act as entertainments to be consumed.

Intersectionality and crime – What are the racial and sexual biases inherent in classical crime fiction and how are modern writers creating diversity within the field? Are videogames contributing to this movement?

The contribution of videogames to crime fiction – in what ways can games not only adapt or remediate stories of detection but can use the unique characteristics of the medium to contribute new ideas to the field?

The contribution of crime fiction to videogames – How can the rich history of crime fiction inform videogame design creating new experiences for the player?

Procedural rhetorics of crime – how do the mechanics of detective games present arguments on the themes of justice, law enforcement and criminality.

Information management – how do these games function as systems of information. What mechanics allow players to sort evidence, make deductions and present their findings.

Roleplaying the detective – How do games simulate the role of detective and position the player within the world's fiction. What does this reveal about social attitudes to law enforcement, forensics and the legal system?

We hope that this session will add to the growing and exciting scholarship around detective games and offer a space of reflection and critical analysis for a genre that has exploded in popularity across all media in the last decade.

Works Cited

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