

# The Playful Pleasures of the Videogame Detective Board

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## Keywords

Mysteries, Detective Fiction, Puzzles, Networks

## INTRODUCTION

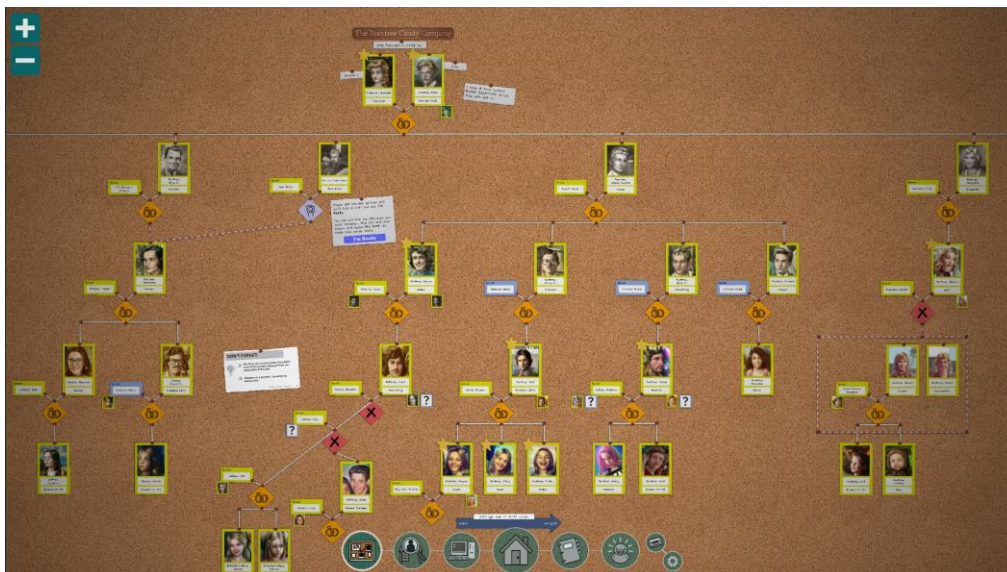
Detective boards are a common device in narrative media, appearing across popular film, television shows and videogames (Gilmore, n.d.). This paper will provide a close analysis of the role of the detective board in videogames and argue that they are a dual ludic and narrative device that shapes player behaviour and narrative sense-making, and highlights the relationship between videogame narrative design and detective fiction. The detective board elicits the same pleasure of solving a puzzle – it becomes the structure through which a player’s knowledge and progress is tracked and rewarded. I will argue this through the contrasting analysis of the detective boards in two videogames, *The Roottrees are Dead* (Evil Trout Inc. 2025) and *A Hand with Many Fingers* (Colestia 2020), and how they shape player behaviour and comprehension. *The Roottrees are Dead* offers a detective board as ludic device that helps shape the player’s understanding of the game’s narrative through a networked and genealogical structure, while also prescriptively shaping knowledge accumulation through ludic goals. *A Hand with Many Fingers*, in contrast, offers a free play detective board oriented around the freeform comprehension of diffused real-world conspiratorial networks.

Detective boards also foreground the relationship between mysteries and narrative game design that others have already outlined (Suits 1985; Buckles 1985, 87; Fernández-Vara’s 2018; 2023; Ryan 2004; 2009). The detective genre is “playful by nature” (Fernández-Vara 2023, 49) in how it tests audiences to figure out the solution to its mysteries before getting to the end. Detective fiction leaves informational gaps for the reader to fill in, eliciting Danesi’s (2002, 35) “puzzle instinct” that compels us to uncover missing information. Detective boards have been used in several recent videogames, including *Outer Wilds* (Mobius Digital 2019), *Alan Wake 2* (Remedy Entertainment 2023) and *Tactical Breach Wizards* (Suspicious Developments 2024) though, in the interest of scope, this paper focuses on two videogames that foreground both structured (ludic) and freeform (paidia) detective boards, *The Roottrees are Dead* and *A Hand with Many Fingers*.

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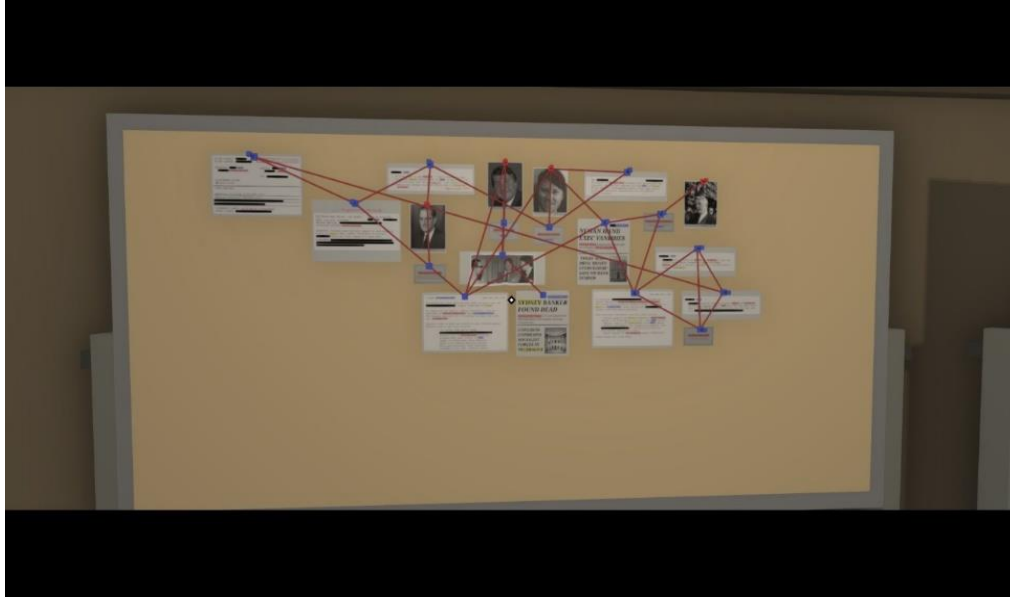
*The Roottrees are Dead* focuses on filling in a detective board depicting a genealogical lineage of a wealthy fictional family and primes the player to think about its narrative through a goal-oriented networked structure that must be constructed retroactively. *Roottree's* central goal is to fill in the details of the entire Roottree family tree by determining each living relative's name, occupation and picture across multiple generations and fifty characters (see figure 1). *Roottree*, through both its story and the design of the detective board, elicits comparisons to the structure of the network (Jagoda 2016) and the network narrative (Bordwell 2007; Campora 2014; Narine 2010; Kerr 2010). Network narratives refer to stories with multiple protagonists or causal threads that overlap and interweave with one another to create a tangled web or social 'network' of dispersed connections. *Roottrees'* network narrative does not develop in real time and must be constructed retroactively through filling gaps in the board, which the player does so by using a fictionalised web browser and physical evidence. This process of reconstruction neatly highlights Fernández-Vara's (2023, 49) description of mysteries and games being centered on filling gaps or "elisions", but it is also a prescriptive and structured process, where overall comprehension of *Roottree's* actual narrative becomes secondary to uncovering specific, and sometimes minor, details to fill in the ludic structure of the board. This is comparable to how the detective board is used in other videogames such as *Alan Wake 2* and *Outer Wilds*; as something that tracks ludic progress and informational gaps and has a shaping effect on how the player perceives a game's narrative.



**Figure 1.** *The Roottrees Are Dead's* detective board. Screenshot captured by author.

In contrast, *A Hand With Many Fingers* offers a far more freeform detective board. Focused on the solving of a real-world conspiracy by trawling through a physical archive, *Many Fingers* requires players to approach its discovery in a slow and analogue way that emphasises the player's own autonomy in both choosing what research threads to follow and in designing the board itself (Kunzelman 2022, 99). Unlike *Roottrees*, *Many Fingers* also allows the player to freely arrange information on its two corkboards however they desire, turning the detective board into a site of free play, or paidia (Ryan 2009), and giving players the tools to playfully shape their own understanding of the game's narrative. Given it depicts the networked series of relationships of a real-world CIA-backed conspiracy, *Many Fingers* draws comparisons

with Jagoda's (2016, 75) analysis of *Syriana* and description of the network imaginary that describes our understanding of how networks shape our world. This frames *Many Fingers'* detective board as a way to help us interrogate our own understanding of the game's story and its depicted real world geopolitical conspiracies.



**Figure 2.** *A Hand with Many Fingers'* partially completed detective board. Screenshot captured by author.

In conclusion, both games therefore offer a way to think about the playful and pleasurable experiences that the detective board as a game mechanic articulates. *The Roottrees are Dead* foregrounds the gap-ridden ludic experience of detective stories, and *A Hand with Many Fingers* offers free epistemic play that allows the player to chart their own comprehension of how imagined networks shape our understanding.

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