

Player Enjoyment Through Mechanical Engagement with Text in “The Séance of Blake Manor”

Eugenio Triana

Birmingham City University
University Row, 15 Bartholomew Row,
Birmingham, B5 5JU
eugenio.triana@bcu.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

Keywords

Adventure games, mystery stories, narrative, interactive narrative, Irish video games, Irish history

INTRODUCTION

This paper will analyse the ways in which the video game *The Séance of Blake Manor* (Spooky Doorway, 2025) utilizes game mechanics based around text manipulation and examination to engage the player in a supernatural mystery story set around the revival of Irish national identity in the late 19th century. Taking place at a séance in Western Ireland in 1897, the player takes on the role of Dublin detective Declan Ward and is immersed in a narrative at the intersection of mystery, folk horror and their ties to the roots of Irish nationalism.

The analysis of *The Séance of Blake Manor* will build on the work by Clara Fernández-Vara’s interdisciplinary approach to the mystery genre in video games. In “Game Narrative Through the Detective Lens” (2018), Fernández-Vara examines the ways in which detective and mystery stories have always contained ludic element. She quotes Bulgarian-French historian and philosopher Tzvetan Todorov’s description of the pleasure of these stories as one of reconstruction of a text the author has in mind. From Todorov’s “The Poetics of Prose” (1977): “The story of the crime happens before the story starts, while the story of the investigation is how the first story is discovered.” (Fernández-Vara, 2018). That is, the enjoyment in these stories is from the reader taking the same position as the detective in trying to anticipate and reconstruct the story that the author has in mind and has not yet revealed.

Expanding on Fernández-Vara, this paper analyses how, in games like *The Séance of Blake Manor*, the player is not only reconstructing the story internally as a reader but actively doing so mechanically through manipulation of the text itself. For example, in the adventure games that reached their height of popularity in the 80s and 90s and preceded this title, players were presented a list of nouns and a list of verbs to choose from.

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Successful advancement in these narrative focused games consisted in combining the right noun with the right verb and constructing the correct sentence to continue progressing the story.

The Séance of Blake Manor forms part of a new generation of games that have evolved the mechanics of textual manipulation in novel ways. It successfully combines many of these innovations into one experience. In the game, the player must work out the identities of twenty other guests at the manor from nouns found within its 3D environment and context clues, similar to *Return of the Obra Dinn* (Warp Digital, 3909 LLC, 2018). The player must also connect text ideas to form new deductions that will open new avenues for investigation, as in *Sherlock Holmes: Crimes & Punishments* (Frogwares, 2014). And the player will collect nouns, verbs and adjectives through an investigation of their environment and dialogues with the other guests so that they can then complete the missing gaps in sentences that deliver further clues to the mystery, as in *The Case of the Golden Idol* (Color Gray Games, 2022).

Through such a multi-varied mechanical approach of textual manipulation, players are incentivised to fully explore and learn all the secrets of Blake manor. They dialogue extensively with a wide variety of guests that represent a cross section of late 19th century Irish society. They find journals, object descriptions and other textual clues as to the growing dissatisfactions and social tensions of the time. And, as they advance in the story, they will be confronted by a supernatural curse that reveals much about the generational harm enacted on Ireland's rural populations.

The game's setting enriches this interplay between text and game mechanics. Set in 1897, Ireland was then undergoing a cultural revival in which authors such as William Butler Yeats sought to reawaken the country's sense of cultural identity by collecting the old folk stories and myths of its past. The ludic pleasures to be had in the uncovering of the central mystery and manipulation of the narrative's text mirrors the centrality of stories and storytelling to the Irish national identity.

The addition of a folk horror story to the central mystery also centres the game within a tradition of recent academic focus (such as in the work of Eugenio Triana and Tanya Krzywinska). It provides further evidence that folk horror narratives are characterised by the conflict between a supposedly sophisticated urban world and rural communities that are seen as threatening in their attachment to tradition and whose past haunts the present.

This paper will be of interest to academics focused on the relationship of narrative to gameplay and engaged in modelling how players interact with narratives. It will also be useful to scholars looking at the intersection between history, cultural identity and storytelling, and how these subjects find their expression in the medium of games. Finally, it will be of use to anyone interested in the enjoyment to be had in the myriad ways we interact with the stories we tell about each other, to each other.

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