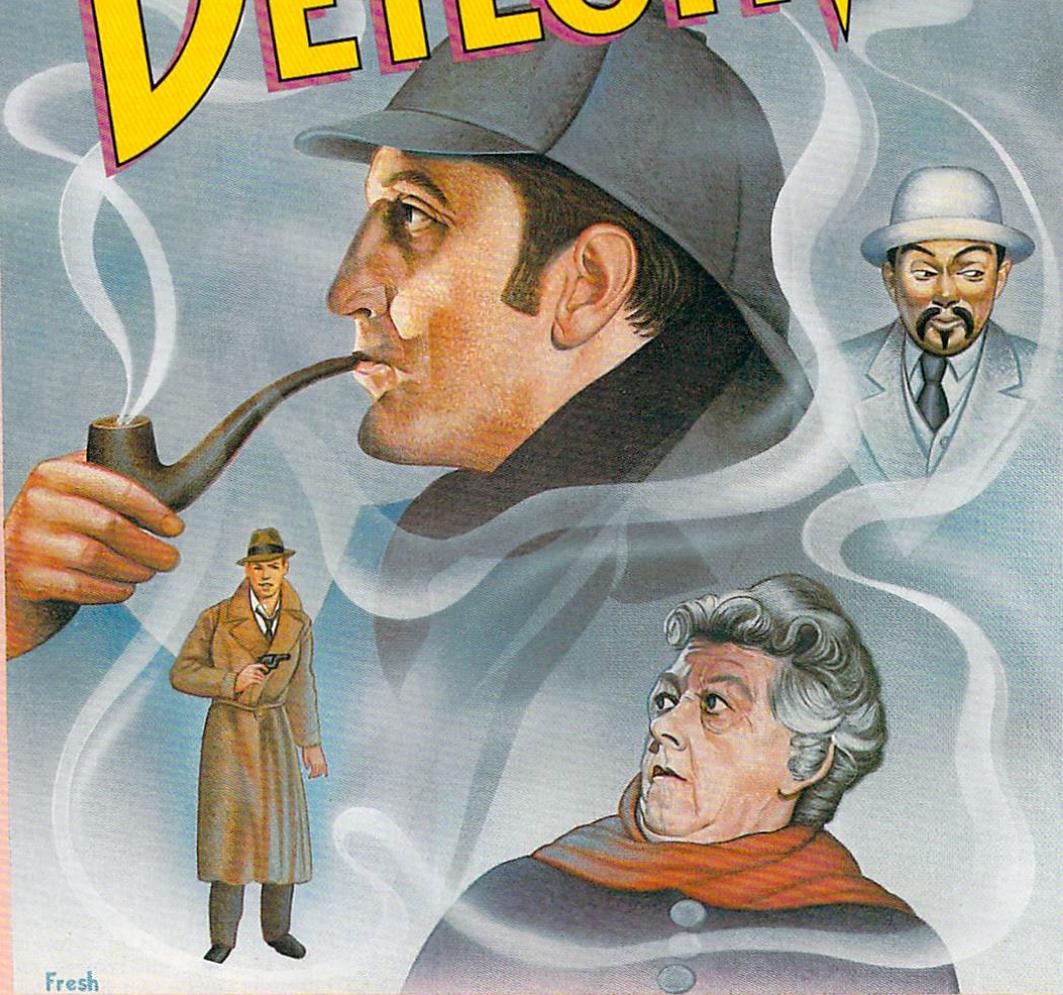


DISK-DRIVE DETECTIVES

MAKE
FICTION
COME
ALIVE
WITH
MYSTERY
GAMES:



BECOME
THE
SLEUTH
TRYING TO
CRACK
THE CASE

BY SHAY ADDAMS

Half the fun of reading a mystery novel is trying to figure out "whodunnit" before you finish the book. Disk-drive detective games are even more fun because they transport you *inside* the story to solve a crime. Instead of passively reading about how a detective shrewdly digs up evidence and solves the mystery,

SHAY ADDAMS wrote about "Board Games That Think" in the last issue of FAMILY COMPUTING.

you become the detective and actively participate in the drama. Cracking a case on your own—and you can't just flip to the last chapter to see who killed the butler—delivers a singular sense of accomplishment. Another important difference is that a novel's events always unfold in a fixed order set by the author. But many events in a detective game hinge on your decisions; arriving at the scene of the crime, you might choose to walk in

the front door or sneak around back to look for footprints. And though they differ in presentation, the plot twists in disk-drive detective stories are often as surprising as those in a tale by Dashiell Hammett or Raymond Chandler.

Most are adventure games in which you type actions such as "open desk" or "inspect gun for fingerprints" into the program's parser, which interprets your commands and displays

an all-text or illustrated response that varies with the program. A few detective games assume other forms that may appeal to the non-adventuring mystery fan. To get a range of gaming opinions, I asked some readers of *QuestBusters* (an adventure game newsletter I edit) and various inhabitants of CompuServe's Gaming Forum for comments on people's favorite mystery games. Their quotes follow throughout the article.

PUT ON YOUR FEDORA, AND GET TO WORK

Deadline, an all-text game from Infocom, elicited the biggest response. Patricia Fitzgibbons, who has played many mystery games, said, "I still have a soft spot for *Deadline*. I was amazed by the sophisticated prose and parser." One of the most difficult mysteries on disk, this story casts you as a police officer assigned to the murder of the wealthy Marshall Robner. In detective novels, *Deadline* would be called a "locked-room" mystery; the body is found in a study with a door that locks from the inside only. This means the first thing you must do is establish that the victim didn't commit suicide. The scene of the crime is a palatial, two-story Connecticut house, where you can grill the numerous suspects about each other as well as about any evidence you dig up. (As in most adventures, you'll have to draw a map of the game's many locations as you go along.) Your assistant, Duffy, will take items back to the station to have them analyzed for fingerprints, poison, or other clues.

Deadline's formula has been emulated often by subsequent games: After amassing enough evidence, you arrest one or more suspects, whose guilt or innocence is determined by a jury that reports its verdict months later. By talking to characters and discovering evidence, you must establish a motive, method, and opportunity in order to get a conviction. There are 24 alternative endings to *Deadline*, including one in which the grand jury dismisses the charges. (I was even arrested once and thrown off the police force!)

PRIVATE INVESTIGATORS SOLVE THE PUZZLES

A less common kind of mystery adventure has no provision for presenting evidence. It plays more like a typical adventure in which you solve a series of logical puzzles that lead to the final problem; that's when you

apprehend the outlaw. One such game is *Masquerade*. Illustrated with cartoon-like graphics, *Masquerade* sends you after a major criminal and is as deadly as *Deadline*. The puzzles are equally hard, but because you are concentrating on object-oriented puzzles, not people, the sense of participating in a novel-like mystery is somewhat diluted.

This is also true of *Mindshadow*, in which the mystery is your own name (remember Robert Ludlum's *The Bourne Identity*?). From the opening scene, which finds you stranded in a desert island, to the exciting climax when you confront a gunman in a Luxembourg hotel room, the game features colorful graphics and the most interesting story line in the series of Interplay adventures from Activision. But you won't really solve the crime by arresting anyone, only by unriddling puzzle after puzzle until you reach the conclusion. Lazy typists will appreciate the list of commonly used nouns and verbs that covers one-third of the screen; in many instances, you can issue commands by choosing words with the joystick or mouse instead of typing them in. Brightly colored graphics cover the other two-thirds of the screen.

The same user interface is employed in *Borrowed Time*, in which you play a hard-boiled private eye patterned after trenchcoat-wearing P.I.'s like Mike Hammer and Sam Spade. This caper kicks off in your office. You must study files on the suspects before setting out to rescue a kidnap victim, nab an arsonist, and apprehend the town's crime czar (by showing evidence to the police). The crime boss has put a pair of hit men on your trail, and the tense chase scenes that result often prove deadly. Graphics sparkle with spot animation that shows heads turning when you enter the bar, a phone jangling off the hook, and other diverting special effects. The only disappointment with *Borrowed Time* is the characters. They're stereotypes straight out of a pulp novel and lack the personalities of the inhabitants in other mysteries, especially the talkative souls in the Infocom games.

One of those games, *The Witness*, transports you to a ritzy southern California suburb in 1938, where the victim is gunned down before your (reading) eyes. Did Phong, the oriental butler, do it? Only by interrogating everyone and securing some incriminating evidence will you find

out. An all-text game, its best feature is the Chandleresque prose style, and authentic lingo and settings from the thirties enrich the sense of intrigue. While *The Witness* has been criticized by advanced players who were able to race right through it, that same ease-of-play makes it a good introductory case for new cops on the beat.

Another period piece, *Déjà Vu*, is set in Chicago in the forties. As often happens to detectives in mystery novels, someone has "slipped you a mick" that wiped out your memory. You awake in Joe's Bar, where you struggle to solve a murder and kidnapping, as well as remember your name. Otherwise, you'll have to take the fall for the crime. The unique presentation uses icons and windows in addition to a type-in-the-words input. You can pick up objects by dragging an icon, shaped like a pistol or other item, into your inventory window; you examine things by "clicking" on them with the mouse.

If gangland Chicago is not your milieu, book a stateroom on a 19th-century paddle-wheel riverboat in *Murder on the Mississippi*. This animated tale lets you wear the gumshoes of Sir Charles Foxworth, a British sleuth vacationing on the Delta Princess, when he stumbles across a body. Instead of typing, you make your moves by choosing actions from a menu; you explore the staterooms by guiding Foxworth and his assistant, Regis Phelps, with a joystick. "It has good music and sound effects," said Susan Riley, an avid game player, "and I like using the menu for commands."

THE PRIVATE EYE AS AN AVERAGE GUY OR GAL

As mystery games proliferated, the "player as detective" perspective was joined by a fresh viewpoint in which you participate as an ordinary citizen who must solve the crime. In *Suspect*, a text-only adventure, you're a reporter attending a costume-party ball whose hostess is found strangled by a lasso that was part of *your* cowboy outfit. Unless you can lead the cops to the real killer, they'll arrest you. James Donnelly, a Gaming Forum habitue, called it his favorite mystery. "If you lose, you haven't just lost your job [in the game], but your life as well," he said.

It's off to the circus in *Ballyhoo*, where, as an innocent bystander, you have to rescue a kidnapped girl by participating in such big-top activi-

ties as walking a tightrope, visiting the fat lady, and taming a lion. And then you've got to save the girl from a runaway gorilla! Terry Clayton said, "I liked both *Deadline* and *Suspect*, but *Ballyhoo* is my favorite mystery because it requires a lot of puzzle-solving along with collecting evidence."

In *Earthly Delights*, you awake to find a burglar stealing a painting from your living room, and you must trail him to Paris to uncover an international gang of criminals with more than art theft on their minds. "It was like a real trip to Paris," recalled my son, Noel Moore. "I saw the Eiffel Tower, Napoleon's tomb, and the Can Can dancers. And there were no terrorists to worry about, either."

THE "REAL" DETECTIVES ENTER THE CASE

The latest trend is games based on the detectives that inspired the genre—games that let you assume the identity of your favorite crime solver. Sherlock Holmes, perhaps the most famous detective of all, is the subject of games from several companies (mainly because Holmes is in the public domain and the name doesn't have to be licensed). *Sherlock Holmes in Another Bow* is the title of a game that takes place on an ocean liner. It entails five related cases that must be unraveled before you polish off the main one. The cast includes historical characters such as Henry Ford and Gertrude Stein, and the graphics are well done. But it's not my idea of an adventure since it unfolds in a linear fashion, demanding that you be in the right place at the right time. I missed having the freedom to move about at will. And the parser, despite its 2,000-word vocabulary, makes communicating with the characters more frustrating than talking to a New York cabbie! However, Byron Byrd said, "I liked the graphics and writing style, and the plot was really good because the killer has you fooled all along."

I found *Baker Street Detective* more entertaining. It offers two murder cases to investigate: one victim is a bank president, the other a government witness in an extortion trial. As you cab back and forth across London (in 1893) to a variety of atmospheric locations, you'll notice that Holmes and Watson are portrayed more convincingly here than in *Another Bow*—even without graphics. This game employs a unique method for testing the results of your investi-



DETECTIVE GAME INFORMATION

221 B Baker Street (DS), Apple, Atari, C 64/128, \$30. **Baker Street Detective (AX)**, Apple, Atari, Atari ST, C 64/128, Macintosh, \$10-\$18. **Ballyhoo (IC)**, Amiga, Apple, Atari, Atari ST, C 64/128, IBM PC/PCjr, Macintosh, Tandy Models I/III/4, \$35-\$40. **Borrowed Time (AC)**, Amiga, Apple, Atari ST, C 64/128, IBM PC/PCjr, Macintosh, \$30-\$50. **Deadline (IC)**, Amiga, Apple, Atari, Atari ST, C 64/128, IBM PC/PCjr, Macintosh, Tandy Models I/III/4, \$45-\$50. **Déjà Vu (MN)**, Macintosh, \$50. **Earthly Delights (DL)**, Apple, IBM PC, Macintosh, \$33. **High Stakes (MN)**, Apple, IBM PC/PCjr, Macintosh, \$40. **Masquerade (AE)**, Apple, C 64/128, \$35. **Mindshadow (AC)**, Amiga, Apple, Atari ST, C 64/128, IBM PC/PCjr, Macintosh, \$30-\$50. **Murder on the Mississippi (AC)**, 64K Apple, C 64/128, \$35-\$40. **Perry Mason: The Case of the Mandarin Murder (TS)**, Apple, Atari ST, C 64/128, IBM PC/PCjr, \$33-\$50. **The Scoop (TS)**, 128K Apple IIe/IIc, \$40. **Sherlock Holmes in Another Bow (BS)**, Apple, C 64/128, IBM PC/PCjr, Macintosh, \$40. **Suspect (IC)**, Amiga, Apple, Atari, Atari ST, C 64/128, IBM PC/PCjr, Macintosh, Tandy Models I/III/4, \$40-\$45. **The Witness (IC)**, Amiga, Apple, Atari, Atari ST, C 64/128, IBM PC/PCjr, Macintosh, Tandy Models I/III/4, \$35-\$40.

PUBLISHER KEY

AC: Activision, (415) 960-0410.
AE: American Eagle, (312) 792-1227.
AX: Artworx, (716) 425-2833.
BS: Bantam Software, (212) 765-6500.
DL: Dan'l Leviton Co., (714) 639-8433.
DS: Datsoft/IntelliCreations, (818) 886-5922.
IC: Infocom, (617) 492-6000.
MN: Mindscape, (312) 480-7667.
TS: Telarium/Spinnaker, (617) 494-1200.

Unless otherwise noted, minimum memory requirements are 48K for Apple II series, 48K for Atari 800/XL/XE series, 128K for IBM PC/PCjr or compatibles, and 128K for Macintosh. Titles listed for the IBM PC/PCjr will also run on many IBM PC compatibles; owing to the proliferation of compatibles, check with the program's publisher or your dealer for compatibility.

gation with an eight-question quiz that you can take up to three times during each time around. A third Holmes program, *221 B Baker Street*, includes 30 crimes to solve, and it blends animation with text. It can be played solo or with up to four people in competition.

Perry Mason, the creation of novelist Erle Stanley Gardner, always uncovers the killer by cleverly manipulating witnesses until they break down in court and confess. As Mason in *Perry Mason: The Case of the Mandarin Murder*, you must defend a woman charged with her husband's death. Paul Drake, Mason's ace detective, will race from the courtroom to sniff out evidence or pursue leads. Meanwhile, you devote your time to the duties of a lawyer: introducing evidence, objecting to the prosecutor's line of questioning, and even "whirling to face the jury" and other courtroom theatrics. *Mandarin Murder* exhibits an unusual graphics presentation. Instead of showing a full-screen picture with text below, it hangs a vertical illustration on one side and text on the other. You're offered several alternative endings, among them a hung jury. "Getting to make objections was my favorite part of the game," according to QuestBuster Ken Jameson. "The judge overrules me most of the time, but I still enjoy it."

If the idea of staying inside a courtroom throughout an entire game makes you claustrophobic, head for the racetrack in *High Stakes*. Adapted from a novel by former jockey Dick Francis, it puts you in the saddle as a wealthy British horse owner out to foil a sinister (what else!) plot to cheat you. Also set in England, Agatha Christie's *The Scoop* casts you as a newspaper reporter assigned to unravel the murder of a Mrs. Tracy. Was she knifed by the same person who killed the first reporter researching the story? As in most mystery games, you'll become just another crime statistic if you're not careful. It uses a menu filled with words you select via joystick and incorporates animation into the full-screen graphics.

What's the next trend for disk-drive detective games? Since mysteries based on detective novels have been so well received, don't be surprised if television-show detectives soon apply for work in the world of computer entertainment. I've got my fingers crossed for *64K Colombo* and *Murder, She Programmed*. 