

# SEEING BUT NOT OBSERVING WITH SHERLOCK HOLMES THE CONSULTING DETECTIVE

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## INTRODUCTION

It's quite exciting, said Sherlock Holmes, with a yawn. (A. Conan Doyle, *A Study in Scarlet*)

In this article we try to convey some of our experiences of playing the narrative crime fiction tabletop game *Sherlock Holmes – Consulting Detective* (SHCD). This game was originally published in 1981, but our experiences are based on the playing of the first six cases of the 2012 re-release of the game by Ystari Games (2017). There are also other new editions and releases for this game, and there are some differences between them, so the experience of playing them might differ from ours.

It was not chance that our path crossed with *Sherlock Holmes – Consulting Detective*. It was the game that met our criteria of being playable alone or with small group, that has an interesting theme for our taste, and it should be challenging. Selection process was carried at [boardgamegeeks.com](http://boardgamegeeks.com) (2017) from where the potential games were selected and scrutinized based on their theme and

what other players had to say about them. Through this process we came by a game that contained no dice or other means of chance, but instead relied only on textual materials in the form of casebook and related narrative materials, emphasizing decisions made by the players. A closer look at the game brought up a review by Shut Up & Sit Down (2016) which confirmed to us that this game also has the challenge that we were looking for. In example, in this particular review, reviewers can be seen lying down at the floor and comparing their notes when they are trying to solve their case, and in some points urging other players to play against their abysmal score instead of the reference score provided by the game.

Findings during the selection process intrigued our curiosity and raised our expectations on playing this game. This background information also affected the playing sessions, as we had the knowledge to be prepared. As proper detectives, we play the game with notebooks for our notes and we track our progress in the accompanying city map with stickers.

As we are not native speakers of English, we translate the narrative to our native language during the gameplay. In games narrative we form the Baker Street Irregulars led by Mr. Wiggins, who also represents the players in the games narratives. Other characters in the narrative come from Sherlock Holmes lore, including the titular consulting detective Sherlock Holmes, Dr. Watson, inspector Lestrade, and case specific characters.

Chronological order of play of the cases is not mandatory, but the rulebook suggest that the cases should be played in chronological order as the newspapers for later cases might spoil the previous cases. The in-game world is set in late-Victorian London and in the world of Sherlock Holmes. For those that are familiar with either or both of these themes, game has a familiar feel on it. Players that are unfamiliar with the era in question might have small handicap but it should not pose a threat to the

gaming experience. Knowledge about Sherlock Holmes might be helpful, but mostly specific knowledge or familiarity with him are not necessary as general knowledge about crime-fiction should be enough.

The rest of this article will include an analysis loosely based on the MDA framework (Hunicke et al, 2004), following the example of Duncan (2014). In MDA games are split in three parts (Rules, System and Fun), and these are link to their design counterparts (Mechanics, Dynamics, and Aesthetics) from which the framework gets its acronym. Our analysis mostly deals with the aesthetics of the SHCD. In MDA aesthetics describe the desirable emotions the designer wants to evoke in the player while they are playing the game. For us the sessions playing the SHCD have been rollercoasters of emotion, ranging from desperation to immense delight and joy, and for this reason we see MDA as a fitting analysis tool for it.

The following text contains spoilers that might make some of the available cases easier or unplayable for interested readers.

## MECHANICS AND DYNAMICS

There is nothing more deceptive than an obvious fact. (A. Conan Doyle, *The Boscombe Valley Mystery*)

Base components of SHCD are simple; the game provides us with the rulebook (12 A4 sized pages from cover to cover), a map of Victorian London, a directory of people and locations in London (20 A5 sized pages), newspaper issues (1 double-sided A3 per case), and a casebook containing the story for each case. There are 10 cases which all have accompanying chronological issues of *The Times* newspaper and as the later cases might employ clues from the previous issue, this part of the material accumulates with progress through the cases. Figure 1 showcases the base components, and Figure 2 a spread from the London Directory.

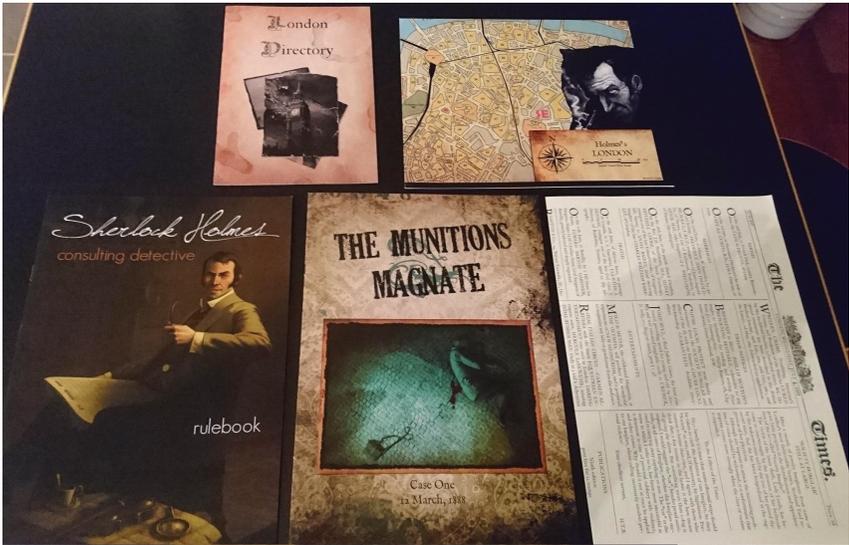


Figure 1. Base components for playing a Sherlock Holmes – Consulting Detective.

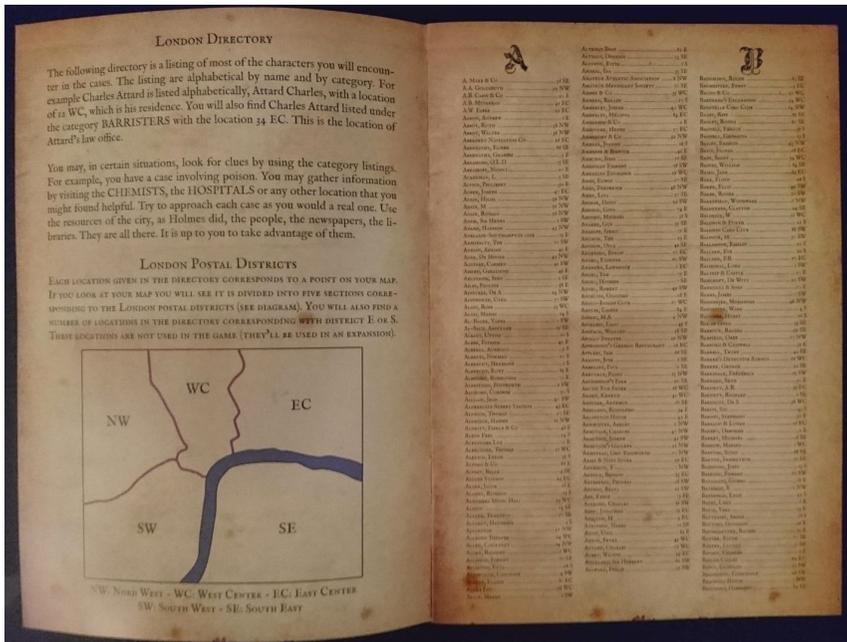


Figure 2. London Directory, demonstrating the section containing name/location pairs starting with letter A and beginning of the B section.

Every case starts with a prolog about how Sherlock gets involved with the case and which also provides the initials clues for the case. At the end of a prolog, Sherlock dispatches the players to solve the case. Thematically this in many cases involves half careless quip on how Sherlock is busy with something and how this might be good practice for the group in detective work. From this point onwards, players can at any time decide that they know enough to solve the case, in which point they go back to Sherlock and answer a series of case-related questions. Otherwise they must decide who to meet or where to go in London to get additional information in the form of documents, observations made by their characters, and short interviews with suspect and witnesses.

The choice of next location to investigate is, preferably, made based on the clues provided by the prolog, newspaper(s), and

descriptions from locations that the group has visited. In case that players get stuck, nothing prevents them from choosing any possible location or person in the directory. Each available location do not have a description in every case, so visiting some of them is not actually possible. But, for locations that are available there is a description for the players. These descriptions vary on their length and content, ranging from simple "*Jasper Meeks doesn't have any extra information to give us. You'll have to make do what you have, my friends*" to page-long stories about the location and conversations Irregulars have there with various characters. From these visits players gather the most of their clues from which they construct the case, who did what, how, when, and why. In this the game follows the familiar traditions of crime fiction, with all the familiarity of Sherlock Holmes stories.

By combining these decisions to the mental work players are doing while finding clues, eliminating suspects and solving the case, SHCD creates a strong mental engagement with itself and players. Salen and Zimmerman (2004) call this mental engagement as cognitive interactivity (or interpretive interactivity) which refers to "the psychological, emotional, and intellectual participation between a person and a system" (p. 59). In SHCD, there are at least three manifestations of cognitive interactivity in this network. First is with the game's initial prolog and following location investigations, second is then between players who discuss and interpret the pieces of narrative presented at these locations, and third when players decide that they have to consult the in-game newspapers for additional information or refresh their memory with rereading the previous clues.

If players decide that it's time to solve the case, they go to meet Sherlock and answer a series of questions. These questions are scored and compared to a baseline of 100 points, which is the default score Sherlock gets on each case. The players' score is reduced by 5 points for EACH location/person they have visited

that Sherlock did not visit. For example, if players knew how to answer to the “who, how, and why” questions correctly they would acquire a baseline score of 100 points, but if they visited 10 places that Sherlock did not visit during his investigation they get 50 points redacted from their score bringing them to total score of 50.

In short, the whole game revolves around these two main decisions: 1) can we solve the case, if not 2) then to which location in London we shall go next? All players have to go on, are the reading material the game provides and their own cognitive interaction to make this selection and to base their answers.

## AESTHETICS

You know my methods. Apply them. (A. Conan Doyle, The Sign of Four)

In MDA, aesthetics are the emotional responses evoked in the player, and they are broken down into eight types. According to Hunicke, LeBlanc and Zuber (2004) these are:

1. Sensation: Game as sense-pleasure
2. Fantasy: Game as make-believe
3. Narrative: Game as drama
4. Challenge: Game as obstacle course
5. Fellowship: Game as social framework
6. Discovery: Game as uncharted territory
7. Expression: Game as self-discovery
8. Submission: Game as pastime

In the case of SHCD, the most fitting aesthetics to discuss are the Fantasy, Narrative, Challenge, and Discovery. Fantasy and Narrative aspects of SHCD relate to its theme of Victorian/Edwardian London and the Sherlockian lore. It is possible to play the game without prior knowledge of either of these, but

that in our opinion probably causes some problems. If players do have prior knowledge of how Holmes works with cases, be the knowledge from books or movies, they can deduce much easier what information is important in the clues and what is “just a thematic filler”. Off-hand notes about muddy shoes or the size of someone’s hat has many times more value than prolonged discussions about a manservant’s schedule during the murder day.

Knowledge on these themes also increases the immersion, feeling of achievement when you overcome the challenges presented by the game and even fellowship. In our case, our familiarity with Sherlock influences greatly the way we have interpreted his quips and remarks, especially those directed to us as the Irregulars. For those that know the way he speaks to people, remarking how something “is quite obvious” when it has required great deal of work from it can be quite infuriating especially as you have just blown the case or at least the given score. This has fostered our determination as a group to up our effort in next case to beat Sherlock, making us more focused team. For some reason, the feeling of achievement is also probably greater for the fans of the Sherlockian theme as you are solving crimes assigned to you by Sherlock Holmes as a member of the Irregulars.

In SHCD, the narrative is presented in textual format, and only rarely are there any images accompanying it. This stresses the importance of words, their meanings and how they interconnect with each other and details, and also presents challenges that might not be so evident in other formats. This might also cause additional challenges in cases where players are not native speakers of the game’s language or if the game uses the old meanings of some words that players are not aware of. For example, in one of the cases (“Case Four: The Lionized Lions”) our investigation had led us to a hotel room used by our suspect who had been described as young man with athletic abilities. So

we suspected that he had climbed down from his room, using the vines on the wall as aid, thus avoiding the detection of other guests or hotel staff. But then the narrative for this location told us that the leaves of the vines looked '*dusty*', and to us *dusty* meant that nobody had been climbing on those vines as they still had *dust* on them. This derailed our investigation as this suspect was cleared by this one word and the meaning we gave to it. After the game had ended with less favorable results, we used the Google Translate to check this word, and we found out that one of the less used meaning for the word *dusty* is ... '*greyish*'. After this fiasco our attention to every word and its potential meaning in Sherlock's time has increased considerably, but still we have found out that we have fallen to similar traps again. And again. But, despite these frustrations and defeats, the game manages to evoke sense of achievement and gratification even when we fail, and we keep on playing the remaining cases.

Discovery in MDA refers to the game as uncharted territory which player are exploring. In SHCD this aspect is somewhat problematic from the viewpoint of scoring mechanism which effectively restrains player's curiosity and prevents them on acting like real detectives. As explained previously, players get minus points if they explore too many locations that Sherlock did not visit during his investigation. Typically Sherlock has only visited four locations, so this pushes players to minimize the locations they visit in order to avoid penalties and try to draw conclusions from what they were able to gather based on these few locations. Effectively this scoring mechanism denies the access to the wider narrative from the players by punishing them if they try to uncover details and visit new locations which provide them more pieces to the overall narrative of the case. This problem is most visible in cases where players early on recognize that there are two separate cases to solve. In solving both cases, the players' location count could raise so high that

additional points scored by solving the secondary case get nullified.

There are several ways to circumvent this problem if players are more interested in seeing the narrative side of the case than on scoring high at the end. First is simply to ignore the original scoring mechanism, and just see if players are able to find out the correct solution without counting the visited locations. A second circumvention, as suggested in some boardgamegeek.com discussions, is to utilize an outsider who scores the game, thus not revealing them Sherlock's solution. This is a bit problematic as the outsider should be present during the whole playtime, so that they know which questions they can ask without revealing to the players that they missed something (e.g. secondary case). In our case, typical playing time has been between 2-8 hours depending on how many places we have visited and how much we have discusses the case among our group (and also how many times during these discussions we had to walk our dogs). Yet another circumvention is to treat the case books as Choose Your Own Adventure books after the play session. The original scoring mechanism spoils the story anyway as in the scoring phase the questions presented to the players sometimes reveal things that they didn't find out during their gameplay and Sherlock's explanation of how he solved the cases reveals everything. Because of this, there is no replayability value on the cases, so after the session players can just read the case story and find out the rest of the narrative on their own.

## CONCLUSION

My name is Sherlock Holmes. It is my business to know what other people do not know. (A. Conan Doyle, *The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle*)

Members of our group do play lot of tabletop and computer games, and some of us also have experience with tabletop roleplaying games. In most of the games we play, there is a strong

element of chance, usually in the form of dice or other source of random number generation. To us, Sherlock Holmes Consulting Detective gives a different kind of a tabletop experience. In SHCD there is no chance, hence our failure or success relies only on our own abilities to spot the right clues and make the correct deductions to solve the cases. When we are solving the cases we can use our personal strengths and apply our background information to help the group reach the right solution.

SHCD achieves this by giving us a rich narrative, enabling collaboration, and by producing a sense of fun and achievements, even thru failure. Usually our cases are failures in some sense, even when we solve the case, as Holmes beats us by a large margin in the scoring phase. Other times, the game just bests us as we are trying to be too clever and end up going too deep in the clues. Refer to Figure 3, which showcases the typical setup during our sessions and also acts as an example of our glorious failure to understand what the game has been telling us.



*Figure 3. Gaming table during a case, presenting the map, in-game newspaper, and notes of four players trying to figure the meaning of a coded message.*

The situation in Figure 3 is from Case Five – The Cryptic Corpse where murdered man has been found from theatre after the play had ended. At the beginning of the game, the first set of clues contains an encrypted message, which we of course tried to solve furiously. And we did it, but that did not lead us any closer to the solution. While we were being busy thinking on how to crack the code, we had ignored several hints, direct and indirect ones, on how to really solve the meaning of the message when we went on from location to location following the other clues. This dawned on us after we read how Holmes solved the case. The comment from shopkeeper in one of the locations that said “*You must read what’s front of your eyes, that way you will save everyone time and trouble*” was suddenly very clear. What a moment before had been an impossible case, was suddenly a very simple case that we failed by being overly complicated and by misreading the clue. In this case, the intend was not to take the original ciphered message and find out how to decipher its contents. Instead, you had to look for something that was on plain sight, on the ciphered message itself. The ciphered message contained a date (5 May, 1889) and string of letters which some were lower- and others in uppercase, e.g. “*E ormji ErkiP geQi...(and continuing)*”. Date and month were both 5, something that we also had used in our attempts to decipher the message, and it was the key to reading the message. Our idea was that with the number 5 you know how to substitute the letters and then you can read the message. Instead, you simply had to count every fifth letter in columns from the message, and take the next capital letter after each of the word that were formed. This way you found out that the message in front of your eyes read: “Moriarty”, the archenemy of Sherlock Holmes. This is similar to how Pyrhönen (2010, p. 46) describes how in crime fiction readers are often given clues needed for solving the presented case, but the narrative simultaneously confuses the real meaning of these clues that only become clear in hindsight. In this case we again

went from frustration to amazement and laughter when we discovered the simple solution.

As noted in the beginning, there are other versions of this game available. Based on what we know about them, which is not much as we can't really search for information about them in fear of spoiling the cases we haven't played yet, they have the same structure, but the playing experience might differ somewhat because there are subtle differences. These changes include modified narratives to "fix" clues that have been deemed as illogical by the publisher and differences between how some clues are presented in different language editions. Interestingly there are also digital versions of this game, including the re-release of the PC version which is available on Steam. We haven't played the digital versions, but it would be interesting to see how this kind of game has been transferred to a digital medium and how well it works. Based on a short look on a series of YouTube videos about this digital version, it seems that the narrative is presented in a form of full-motion videos where actors play out the scenes from the casebook. Sherlock and Watson also have much more presence in the narrative as players seem to be guiding them around, instead of the player acting as the Baker Street Irregulars.

SHCD does frustrate us when we fail, and it frustrates us when we excel. But in either case, we are having fun at the end, be it bitter failure or sweet victory. And for that reason every game ends on a discussion on when we can meet up again and try to solve the next case.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The game is afoot. Not a word! Into your clothes and come! (A. Conan Doyle, *The Adventure of the Abbey Grange*)

I would like to thank my fellow Irregulars Lotta-Liisa Joelsson, Mikko Arvola, Veera Arvola, and Petteri Joelsson.

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