

Pick Up & Deliver 871: Mystery games redux (themestorm)

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Welcome to Pickup and Deliver, the podcast where I pick up my audio recorder as I step off the train and deliver an episode to you while I walk home. I'm Brendan Riley.

[Intro music]

Well, greetings, listeners. It's a balmy day here in suburban Chicago. We're in mid-October and the temperature is well above seventy degrees. Too hot, too hot indeed. Well, today in my games and literature class, we just started our detective fiction unit, where we read detective fiction, talk about detective fiction, and play board games related to detectives. I have the students play three games. They play Whitehall Mystery, which is a sort of lighter version of letters from Whitechapel. They play the Sherlock Files, which is a set of three one play card deck mysteries from indie boards and cards. Actually, there's a couple different editions of that, and then they play Awkward Guests, which is a deduction game in the in the realm of Clue. It's slightly different, but feels a lot like that.

So given that we started that today and I was talking with talking about mystery games with my students, I thought I'd look and see, when's the last time I talked about mystery games here on the podcast? Now I'm sure I mentioned them occasionally, but it looks like from what I could find in my searching, the last time I did an episode focused on this topic was in the two hundreds. I'll put a link to that episode here. It was a theme episode around mystery games. Like I said, it was in the two hundreds. So five seasons ago or six seasons ago. So it feels like it's time for a new or another take on it. So this is a mystery game-themed Mysteries redux.

If you are interested in talking about a variety of the mystery games that I had played as of six years ago, I encourage you to go and check out my episode on that, which I will link in the show notes. What I'm going to do today is talk about four different kinds of mystery games. Three actually, three different kinds of mystery games and some additional games that I've played since last time I made that list and what they're like. Sound good? I'm going to start with the three that I have that I use in my class.

So the first one is **Whitehall Mystery**. Whitehall mystery is a hidden movement game in the same neighborhood as something like **Fury of Dracula**, something like **letters from Whitechapel**. Or for people who don't play hobby games. **Scotland Yard**. Scotland Yard is the epitome of this kind of game, and I think a very good version of it. If you want something a little more complicated, there's also Spectre Ops. Those games have a bit more elaborate set of conditions and interactions happening in the game, but the core movement or the core action of mystery games is, as I've said, the hidden movement and hunting in Whitechapel mystery or Whitehall mystery.

The idea is that you are the killer from Letters of Whitechapel is back. He has killed someone and he's scattering their body parts around London. You, the player who is the hidden mover, is moving through London, and the players who are searching for the hidden mover play three London police officers who are running around trying to find the killer. This is a pretty simple hidden movement game when compared to something like Fury of Dracula, which has a lot more going on. But that simplicity is its purity. That's part of what makes this game really fun in its base form, Whitehall mystery might be a little too simple. The core action of the seek the killer secretly moving through the city and the constables moving and searching for them is without complication and thus pretty fun. But maybe could use a little bit more.

Fortunately, the game comes with a little bit more. One of the things you get in the game are identity cards for the constables. You get to pick. There's several different ones, and you can pick three of them to use during the game, and then the villain Gets eight special action cards that they get to use once each during the game to elude the detectives. I think this is one of those games where once you've played a few times as the detective, it's much easier to catch the villain than it is to get away. But I don't know. I haven't done very much investigating of the balance of the game.

Nonetheless, this is an interesting race game that involves some deduction and a significant level of yomi, which is the term for anticipating what the other player is going to do, or sort of reading the other player. This is at the heart of this game, because part of being the game is designed in a way that there really isn't enough

room to just block off every space. So part of what you have to do as the constables is anticipate what the killer is going to do, and vice versa. So that is Whitehall mystery.

Next up, I have two mystery games that I want to talk about in the context of story. The first of these is, as I mentioned before, **the Sherlock files**. Now, these are games I have talked about before because I have played them in a previously published form. The first time I encountered these games, they were just called Sherlock and they had been published in Europe. They were small deck games where all you did is you buy the deck of cards, you can play it one time, then you could donate it or give it away or whatever. But it is a self-contained mystery game.

The whole gimmick of the game is you get a deck of cards and you're drawing evidence, and you have to decide which evidence you want to put into play and which evidence you want to discard, and you get points for correctly identifying the relevant evidence, and you get points for correctly solving the mystery. You lose points for putting into play irrelevant evidence. So that's kind of the gimmick, the game gimmick of the story. It is an interesting mystery that is pretty engaging, story wise and fun to tackle. So that is the Sherlock file.

So when I played them originally, they were just called **Sherlock** and they were single deck cards. The first three of them are collected into a single box called the Sherlock Files. And then there are two, I think, two more Sherlock files, games from indie boards and cards that are the same mechanism. So those are that's a story game, meaning that the story is built in. The mystery that you're doing is about solving the mystery that's at the heart of the published game, which can lead to much more interesting mysteries because it doesn't need to be flexible, but also then has the problem of limited use, right?

This is the problem that's existed since, well, I guess **Sherlock Holmes consulting detective** is from the eighties, but the board game community really started wrestling with it in twenty fifteen or twenty fourteen when Time Stories came out, because Time Stories was a one play game that was fairly expensive and people were like, what a rip off to have to pay a bunch of money for this game you can play one time. These games, along with Unlock and Exit and a bunch of other games that sort of emerged after that moment. Capitalize on this idea that paying for the experience is worth it, even if you don't get multiple replays.

The other game that I've used in my class, or that's a mystery game that I've encountered that fits this catalog, is **micromacro crime city**. This is the game where you have a large map of the city, and your goal is to find the mysterious circumstances on the map and solve the mysteries that are depicted there. It's sort of like Where's Waldo with murder. And there's also like sex and drugs and crime. The first one is particularly not family friendly. And then I think they realize, because it's got a kind of cartoonish look to it, like Jim Woodring's *Frank*, they needed to be a little more explicit. So in the second one, there are some cases that are marked family friendly. And that's the implication. The exception proves the rule that the other ones are not family friendly.

This is a fun game. I really like it. I played the first one. We played most of the cases in the first one. I feel like my family didn't like it as much as I did, so I haven't played the other ones, but I am keen to try them, so at some point I will have done so. But for now I have not. That's Micro-macro Crime City. And then there is, um, one more sort of murder crime game that I've played. It's called **undo**. This is another of these single box adventure games. This one has an interesting element where you are again, putting evidence into play with the goal of solving the mystery, the evidence you're putting into play our timeline cards. So it's evidence about a thing that happened and you're trying to solve the crime that happened so you can prevent it. I guess it is like a time travel element, but the core idea of it is very similar to these other mystery games. We have a bunch of evidence that you're revealing over time, and the game is in trying to solve the mystery.

So we've got the category of adversarial mystery game with a murderer trying to hide things and other people trying to find them. Then we have the story based mystery games with something like Micro-macro Crime City. And then the third kind of game that I want to talk to you today is Deduction Games. Oh, um, actually, I'm going to put the other one that I've played that's sort of similar is Mysterium Park. I'm actually going to put this in the same category as Whitehall Mystery, in that it is about working together to solve a mystery. In this case, everybody's on the same side rather than being on opposing sides. But I feel like the idea that the mystery emerges from the cards and the players are trying to help each other solve the mystery. Makes it feel very much like Whitehall mystery, even though the gameplay is very different. If you'd like to know about more

about more about Mysterium Park, go back a couple episodes. I recently covered it in my board game espresso.

And then we have deduction games. There's a variety of different kinds of deduction games that I've played over time. In the last this last episode, I mentioned **Mastermind** and **Cryptid** as two examples of deduction games that fit. A sort of older model. Occurs to me. Now, I don't know if I mentioned the Sherlock Holmes game, Sherlock Holmes game. That's sort of like Hanabi. HMM. I'm having trouble remembering what that one's called now, but that would be another deduction. A cooperative deduction game. So I want to talk about the deduction games that I've played more recently And how those ones function.

So the first one I want to point to is awkward guests. As I mentioned before and have mentioned on when I this game has come out before awkward guests is sort of like clue on steroids or clue turned up to eleven in regular clue. There are six suspects. There's I think eight locations where the murder could happen and there's six murder weapons. And this is all similarly true in awkward guests. The difference is, in awkward guests, you have to figure out the method of murder, not just the murder weapon. And there's like twenty four of those. You have to figure out which murderer did it. There's six of those.

But you figure it out by gathering witness testimony to indicate whether they have a motive or not. Then you have to figure out whether they had opportunity, which goes to the room they were in and the path they took to the murder. Along the way, they would have had to pick up the murder weapon that they. Used to commit the murder. So there's a variety of ways that you can approach these crimes. Like clue, like clue. You gather evidence by asking questions of the other detectives and getting evidence cards from them. Unlike clue, the evidence cards are much more complicated and interwoven than the ones that you find in clue.

So it's the deduction element is much more complicated and thus much more interesting. Awkward guests is one I really like. They made a sequel, a two player game called Awkward Guests, the Berwick sisters, the cases, the Berwick cases. Two of the potential murderers in awkward guests are the Berwick sisters and in the. In that game both of the Berwick sisters have been murdered within a week of each other. You are competing, competing detectives trying to solve the murder of one of the two sisters. And you're the one providing the clues for the other of the sisters. So it's a race game where you're trying to race to solve the murder before your opponent solves the other murder. It's an interesting gimmick that works really well. I think it's a lot of fun. Like I said, it's only two players, so I haven't played it a ton, but I think it works very well. It's really interesting. Again, it's deduction though. So you are eliminating things. You're using reasoning to rule out one element or another. It works particularly well.

The last new game that I wanted to mention that goes in this category is the Martin Wallace game **PI**. Now PI is a bit of a grail game for me. It is not widely available, and whenever I do see it, it tends to cost a fair amount of money. So I haven't bought it. I don't know that I'm willing to pay a significant uptick over retail for it. If I found it for forty dollars, I'd probably buy it or maybe fifty. I don't think I'd pay eighty. So if that gives you a window, uh, PI is a really interesting deduction game. It's actually very similar to cryptid in that the board has a bunch of tokens tiles on it. And on your turn, you can investigate in a number of different ways. And the answers that you get are revealed based on what kind of investigation you do. And so over time, you start to get a picture of where the murderer and the where the murderer might be and what motive they might have, uh, and who, who they might be. So where the murder happened, the motive and the murderer. Unlike cryptid, it is meant to be a game that you play three rounds of. So the idea is you play it several times and you get points each round based on how much information you gathered. And then the person who has the most points at the end of the game is the winner. I like this game. The theme is really neat. It feels very Raymond Chandler. The deduction puzzle is pretty interesting.

Like I said, it reminds me of cryptid, which I did really like cryptid. I ended up getting rid of that because I didn't have very many people to play it with. It's one of those ones where if other people offer to play it, I certainly would enjoy it. And it's always interesting when someone else totally has the answer way before I do. That's always annoying and fun. But pie is a delightful deduction game which fits into the category of deduction games.

Well, those are the mystery games that I've encountered since last time I did a mystery episode. There are a number of mystery games I haven't played that I would love to, but I'll leave that for another conversation another time. I'm curious, what mystery games do you think I should play and which ones do you find

interesting? Head over to BoardGameGeek Guild 3269 and share your thoughts there. I'd love to know which mystery games you enjoy. Well, that's about it for me today. I want to say thanks for joining me on my walk. If you want to reach out to me, you can send me a message on BoardGameGeek. Wombat929 is my username, or you can send me a message on email Brendan at rattleboxgames dot com is your address of choice there.

Well, thanks for joining me on my walk today. I hope your next walk is as pleasant as mine was.

[exit music]

Bye bye.