

The Mystery of the Hidden Gamer: Women, Leisure, and Hidden Object Games

Shira Chess
University of Georgia
USA
schess@uga.edu

Abstract

Hidden object games are a rarely remarked upon subgenre of casual gaming. This lack of larger discussion is understandable: the games have seemingly repetitive play, predictable storylines, and subtle variations between them. This paper identifies deeper meaning and context to the hidden object game, by considering how the games create corollaries between women's leisure in the real world and the activities of the game world. Through analyzing the game play and narrative, I illustrate how the hidden object game constructs an ambiguous form of leisure that replicates domestic and emotional labor. Ultimately, this paper identifies the woman player as "hidden" through the game's complex modes of subjectivity and player embodiment.

Keywords

internet gaming; hidden object; women; gender and gaming

Introduction

Hidden object games are a rarely remarked upon subgenre of casual gaming. This lack of larger discussion is understandable: the games have repetitive play, predictable storylines, and subtle variations between them. But hidden object games also are capable of helping us learn more about their audiences. For instance, Consalvo (2009) writes about how players of *Return to Ravenhearst*, use more "hardcore" gameplay styles to troubleshoot solutions. Through this lens the following considers ways that hidden object games constructs prescriptive play, particularly for women through both game play and narrative.

Big Fish Games is one of the largest online portals of casual gaming, and publisher of several hidden object games. While the subgenre was not necessarily originally intended for women audiences (Johnson, 2010), the narrative style and genre implications of romance and mystery certainly attempt to appeal to this audience. Hidden object games include series such as *Mystery Case Files* (produced by Big Fish), *Time Mysteries*, and *Surface* (though there are hundreds of games that are not at all part of a larger series). The games are often mysteries where the player investigates crimes through a series of puzzles. In order for narratives to progress, players solve puzzles and locate items in cluttered landscapes and rooms full of "hidden" objects. I illustrate how the procedural rhetoric of the games and the narrative expectations help establish hidden object games as a subgenre meant for women.

Women & Leisure

The subgenre can be best contextualized by research previously done on women and leisure. Researchers have learned that women's leisure often varies from men's leisure, often fitting into small snippets of time. In many cases, women feel that they have no leisure time at all, or have conflicted feelings about their relationship to leisure (Deem, 1987; Wearing, 1998; Aitchison, 2003). Work and the domestic sphere play a large role in how much leisure time a woman has, as well; Hochschild (1989) argues that many women take on a so-called "second shift" where they are tasked with working both full time jobs in an office and full time jobs in the domestic sphere, making leisure difficult. With this lens, Chess (2012) argues that casual gaming, because of its ability to fit into small snippets of time, aligns with how many women already approach leisure. Similarly, she illustrates that casual games such as *Diner Dash* reinforce complexities regarding women and leisure.

The Multiple Meanings of the Hidden Object Puzzle

Hidden object games, similarly, help to reinforce a complex mode of leisure through game play practices. Many scenes in these games take place in large, cluttered rooms (seemingly organized by hoarders) full of “missing” objects that the player, as detective, must sort through. Once a hidden object has been found, it disappears from the larger image. At its core the hidden object mechanic is not a puzzle so much as a *cleaning* mechanic—the player is cleaning a messy room in an effort to bring order to a chaotic situation. Cleaning, as a leisure activity, helps establish a complicated relationship between work and leisure in the game world. By considering the interactions of hidden object games, they begin to have several possible alternative meanings, particularly in terms of maintaining a kind of domestic order. At the same time, the space can never be fully “cleaned”—only certain objects can be selected and removed from the environment. This simple mechanic, thus, implies an endless cleaning experience with little resolution or satisfaction.

Similarly, to progress narrative flow, players pick up objects throughout the game world and must use them in larger puzzles. For example, in the game *Surface: The Noise She Couldn't Make*, the player must cross water at one point. In order to cross the water, she must have previously picked up an ironing board, found elsewhere in the game. While the player might pass thousands of other representations of boards in a variety of locations in the game, it is not until she puts the ironing board in the correct location that she can move on to the next set of puzzles. This kind of puzzle combines a MacGuyver-esque logic (i.e., using things in ways other than their originally intended purposes) while simultaneously limiting the player to specific solutions. The inevitability of these mechanisms does not imply the best possible solutions, but rather, the most inconvenient solutions to complex physical problems.

Hidden Narratives

Also worth considering, there are specific narrative conventions built into the subgenre. While the overall scope of the games vary wildly (some take place in our current world, some in fantasy worlds, and others in the past or future) the setup of the hidden object games are almost all strikingly similar. The player functions as an outsider to a place where a mystery must be solved through combing through frozen-in-time geographic locations in order to find a series of physical and textual clues. The games inevitably involve some kind of victim—often women or children, but also sometimes an entire town of victims. For example, the *Ravenhearst* series has the player uncover the gothic tale of an abusive husband, whose ghostly wife (and, later, children) must be freed. *Surface: The Noise She Couldn't Make* puts the player in the role of a psychic who must venture into the mental space of a critically injured and mentally ill woman, in order to save her life. While *Grim Tales: The Stone Queen* does not have a specific female victim, the game involves rescuing an entire town. Thus, the job of the player is about rescuing others, but also often involves emotional labor. Discussed by Hochschild (2003/1983) emotional labor requires an individual to sublimate their own emotions and take on the burdens of another person's emotional state. According to Hochschild, emotional labor is primarily supplied by female labor. Thus, by solving unsolvable mysteries of victims and hearing their pitiable narratives, the player is constantly doing the work of emotional labor: fixing problems of those who cannot help themselves.

At the same time the player is invisible within the story—both literally and figuratively. The hidden object game is almost always without avatar—the player's embodiment on screen is invisible—even when using tools to solve puzzles, the tool floats mid-air in a ghostly way. Yet, in a figurative sense, the player is still invisible—she arrives after the crime or tragedy has already taken place, solving mysteries for people who cannot see nor appreciate her. The player's invisibility makes her emotional labor fruitless—there is no personal gratification in solving mysteries—her invisibility makes her incapable of recognition. In the hidden object game, the most hidden thing is the player, herself.

Conclusion: The Hidden Player

Through trading domestic labor for play while tapping into emotional labor, the hidden object game becomes a complex form of prescriptive play for women. Just as the “hidden player” nicely summarizes the player’s subjectivity and embodiment within the majority of hidden object games, the woman player of the hidden object game becomes a kind of “hidden player.” This hidden element occurs within the gaming industry (where the hidden object game is rarely discussed or acknowledged) but also as a corollary to women’s limited leisure practices in the real world. Hidden object games perform this task literally, enfolding hidden play in the game world via play that can be easily stopped and started, much like all women’s leisure. Big Fish Game’s slogan is, “A New Game Every Day!” Underlying this slogan is an invitation to the gamer—always be playing, but always be playing as the invisible purveyor of domestic and emotional labor, within the mechanics of the everyday.

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