Designing The Mystery

Elision and Exegesis in Games

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Abstract

Through the study of mystery and detective stories across media, this article aims at finding general principles to understand the nature of narrative in games. The detective genre is playful by nature, by teasing the audience to figure out the solution before getting to the end. In order to construct a mystery, these stories use artful gaps, which involve the reader/audience/players in order to decode them. Therefore, the use of informational gaps becomes essential to the practice of narrative design in games. Elision, exegesis, and metonymy are narrative devices that are basic both in mystery construction as well as in game design narrative. From these devices derives the concept of indexical storytelling, the use of indices to tell stories through the environment, which invites players to play exegetically, that is, interpreting the environment in order to understand the events that have happened in the space of the game.

The relationship between games and narrative has been explored and contested since the beginning of the field of game studies. It is often tackled from a top-down approach, using taxonomies or abstract concepts being developed and then applied to the wide corpus of games, mostly in their digital format. The goal of this article is to use a specific case study to make generalizations that allow us to understand the nature of narrative in games, and to carry out this exploration using a comparative media approach—we will discuss literature, film, and television alongside digital games. By focusing on mysteries in both fiction and digital games, we can break down how stories can be playful and games can also be a form of narrative. In particular, this article studies how informational gaps—

elisions and metonymy—encourage *exegetic play*, i.e., encouraging the reader/player to interpret information as a playful activity. My approach is that of a theorist-practitioner, so my insights derive both from the study and analysis of texts and my own practice as a game designer.

The core premise of this article is to realize that mystery stories are playful— they tease the reader to figure out the solution to a crime before they get to the end of the story.[1] A mystery is a puzzle in story form—the literary and filmic genre of the *whodunit* has also been referred to as the *clue-puzzle* genre.[2] In a mystery story, the detective has to put together the information that can be gathered through evidence, cross-questioning, and the detective's own experience, in order to solve the case. Rather than being a systemic challenge, detective stories pose an *epistemic* challenge—the mystery challenges the knowledge and understanding of our players.

The process of devising a mystery for an audience is often conceived as needing artful plotting, coming up with a series of intricate events which come together at the end when the solution is revealed. After examining a variety of texts, ranging from novels, films, television, and games, I argue that mysteries are really sets of gaps that have been artfully devised in order to play with the reader/audience/player. Leaving gaps invites the reader of the mystery, as well as the game player, to think of ways to fill them, thus activating the participatory qualities of the digital medium including videogames.[3] *Elision* can therefore be a powerful tool in narrative game design by omitting information so the player can find it or infer it. By extension, *exegesis* (i.e., interpretation of a text) can be another key game design tool by requiring players to interpret and explain a story that is presented in fragments, ambiguously, or from diverging points of view.

This article thus focuses on how the art of leaving gaps is an essential aspect of game design practice, particularly in relation to storytelling, and how interpretation and making sense of the space, objects, situations, and actions are also a type of gameplay

In order to understand the role of elision and exegesis as part of designing and playing a game, I would like to address first a persistent myth in understanding narrative, which is the supposed dichotomy between *passive* and *interactive*

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1   Suits, Bernard: "The Detective Story: A Case Study of Games in Literature," in: *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* 12, no. 2 (1985); pp. 200–219.

2   Knight, Stephen Thomas: *Crime Fiction since 1800: Detection, Death, Diversity*, Basingstoke [England]/New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2010.

3   Murray, Janet H: Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press 2001.

media. This presumed division of media assumes that when we are reading a novel or watching a movie, we understand everything intuitively because we are not making any effort, we just absorb the information. Traditional media like novels, films, and television are considered to lack the participatory properties that Murray describes as defining digital media.

A quick look at the foundations of semiotics disproves this myth—part of the process of communication involves the receiver decoding the message, and therefore being familiar with the codes used to compose it.[4] Solving a cipher requires figuring out the code used to obfuscate the message, for example. But we do not need intricate puzzles to show how we are constantly decoding the messages in the world around us—those who have learned a second language know that decoding a text that is not written in one's mother tongue can be challenging; the challenge is even more pronounced when one is listening to someone speak a language that one does not speak every day. Connecting signifiers with their signified requires an additional effort when we are not decoding our first language. Even if it is not a physical effort, it is a type of mental exertion—anyone who has been in a country where they do not speak one's first language for an extended period of time probably knows how spending a whole day listening and speaking a second language can be very tiring to one's brain

Reading can also require a mental effort even if we read in our first language or in a language in which we are fluent, as students of contemporary literature may be familiar with—the works of James Joyce, for example, can be very challenging both in terms of understanding the language, and how the events are interconnected.

In the realm of narrative comprehension, there are stories whose quality is associated with how they challenge the audience to understand them. David Lynch's *oeuvre* consists of works that often take place in unstable worlds, ruled by doubles, dreams, and nightmares, as exemplified by the TV show TWIN PEAKS (1990-1991) or the film LOST HIGHWAY (1997).[5] Lynch thrives in challenging the audience to understand his stories, and make them come to terms with the fact that they may

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4   Fiske, John: *Introduction to Communication Studies*, Florence, U.S.A: Taylor & Francis Group 2010; pp. 62-79.

5   Incidentally, these two works have also been inspirations for games—TWIN PEAKS (USA 1990-1991, D: David Lynch) has been the referent for games such as DEADLY PREMONITION (USA 2010, O: Access Games) and NELSON TETHERS PUZZLE AGENT (USA 2010, O: Telltale), whereas the story and imagery of SILENT HILL 2 (USA 2001, O: Team Silent/Konami of America) echo Lynch's LOST HIGHWAY (USA 1997, D: David Lynch.

not understand everything they see; he famously refuses to explain his works in interviews. His stories are fascinating, strange, and compelling, but the number of gaps left as well as the dream-like qualities of some characters and situations can be confusing—and that is the point.

There are media that precisely thrive in leaving gaps for the audience to fill. Comic book artist Scott McCloud explains that comic book readers understand that the actions happening from panel to panel are events that are connected, rather than separate images and ideas—readers provide closure to the images and panels.[6] McCloud also argues that when representing characters, the more abstract a representation of a character is, the more it invites the reader to amplify its meaning, to interpret it, and flesh out an abstract representation through their own reflection.[7] The more detail a visual representation of a character has, the less room the viewer has to interpret how they look, whereas more cartoonish, stylized, or abstract representations of characters have readers imagining those details themselves; having to fill these gaps thus helps readers identify and connect with the characters. It is no surprise that McCloud's book has been popular amongst game designers for years, precisely because it proposes a folk theory of how the reader is involved in interpreting a text. McCloud's theory also calls attention to how encouraging exegesis of a text, and leaving room to the reader, can also be an inextricable part of its creation.

Another example of a medium that is founded on the creation of gaps for the audience is theatre. The theatrical stage may be empty, while it is the actions of the actors, the dialogue, and some props that can help the audience imagine the locations where the action takes place. Thus, it is the actions of the actors, as well as the audience watching, that can transform any space into a theatrical stage.[8] Theatre is a metonymical medium, where the stage only presents one part of the world and its events, and the audience has to imagine the rest.

Metonymy is also essential in digital media, which is particularly obvious in early digital works. Most video games from the 1980s were text-only or had very pixelated graphics. Whereas text games required players to read and visualize the spaces described in text, similarly to a short story or a novel, the heavily pixelated graphics and limited color palette had players imagining that the colored blocks on the screen were an adventurous miner, a mining mole, or a flying bat. The

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6   McCloud, Scott: *Understanding Comics*, Harper Collins 1994; here pp. 60-74.

7   Ibid., pp. 28-53.

8   See for example how Peter Brook discusses the emptiness of the stage as a key creative element in theatre to involve the audience: Brook, Peter: *The Empty Space*, New York: Atheneum 1984.

contemporary worship of hyperrealism and visual fidelity in computer graphics often misses that the viewer still has to make sense of the images in front of them, no matter how high the screen resolution is—there are always gaps to fill.

Elision, exegesis, and metonymy are processes that involve the audience into the text in a variety of media, thus undermining the idea that many of these are 'passive'. The capability to involve the audience is not exclusive to games, and neither is the property of being playful. Playful stories are also pervading across media, creating a fertile space in which games and narrative coexist and interlace. Many TV shows thrive in playing with their audience, teasing them to figure out what is going on and what will happen next—see for example shows from the last few years such as MR. ROBOT (2015-2019), LEGION (2017-2019), or WESTWORLD (2016-present), which play with different points of view and timelines in order to intrigue the audience and keep them watching.[9] Online forums and wikis have become spaces for fans to share their interpretations and try to anticipate where the events will lead, something pioneered by TWIN PEAKS back in the 90s, which presented a deliberately baffling world that early online communities were trying to decode.[10] All these examples involve the audience, who tries to make sense of what is going on in the show, into the story—part of what keeps audiences engaged is the conversations sparked by the stories, sharing their interpretations, and trying to solve the mysteries of the story with others before the solution is revealed in a later episode.

These shows also demonstrate how part of the pleasure of stories lies precisely in that they do not have to explain everything that happens because the reader/audience/player has a natural tendency to fill in the gaps mentally. Marcel Danesi points out that at times, gaps and mysteries are irresistible, a compulsion that he calls "the puzzle instinct" and which drives us to resolve the tension created by an obvious lack of information.[11] Puzzles and mysteries, according to Danesi, "generate a feeling of suspense that calls out for relief."[12] Game designers should therefore trust that their players are willing to fill those gaps as part of gameplay,

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9   MR. ROBOT (USA 2015-2019, D: Sam Esmail); LEGION (USA 2017-2019, D: Noah Hawley); WESTWORLD (USA 2016-present, D: Various).

10   Jenkins, Henry: "Do You Enjoy Making the Rest of Us Feel Stupid?: Alt.Tv.Twinpeaks, the Trickster Author, and Viewer Mastery," in: Lavery, David (eds.): *Full of Secrets: Critical Approaches to Twin Peaks*, Contemporary Film and Television Series, Detroit: Wayne State University Press 1995, pp. 51-69.

11   Danesi, Marcel: *The Puzzle Instinct*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press 2002; pp. 35-36.

12   Ibid., p. 2.

similarly to how theatre audiences understand that a throne on a stage indicates that we are in a palace court, or how readers of Agatha Christie's novels try to solve the mystery in their head while they are reading. Mysteries are a prompt, an attractor, something that we cannot resist and need to resolve.

Part of the job of a game designer is therefore to understand their players and the different ways in which they are driven to interpret the story of the game and bring closure, at times even coming up with stories that the creators of the game had not anticipated. In the same way that theatre takes place the moment someone watches someone else act, as Peter Brook argued, games are complete the moment players participate in the game, not only as interactors but also as interpreters of the game that they are playing.[13]

Mysteries and puzzles also thrive in ambiguity—according to Helene Hovanec, the allure of puzzles is their ambiguous nature, because they conceal the answer at the same time that they demand it, spurring the player to measure their wits against whoever created the puzzle.[14] This ambiguity derives from the interdependence between the person who creates the mystery and the person who has to solve it. Bernard Suits explains that a detective story and its mystery are a game both for its author and the person trying to solve it—rather than being at odds, the author challenges the reader to find the solution, but the author does not "win" if the reader does not solve the mystery.[15] Similarly, a puzzle is not necessarily a tug-of-war—if the player is stumped by a puzzle, it may be a failure on the part of the designer if the design was not fair, i.e. the player was not provided with enough information and opportunity to solve the puzzle. Even when the solution is revealed to the player, the logic of the puzzle should make sense to them, otherwise, the player will feel cheated. That moment of revelation is what Danesi calls the "moment of insight", where the puzzle solver makes the connection between the pieces of information that are part of the puzzle, and the ambiguity is resolved.[16] The same happens with mystery stories—in order for the story to remain playful,

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13   Fernández-Vara, Clara: "Play's the Thing: A Framework to Study Videogames as Performance," in: *Breaking New Ground: Innovation in Games, Play, Practice and Theory*: International Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA) Conference. Brunel University, WestLondon, 2009, http://www.digra.org/digital-library/publications/plays-the-thing-a-framework-to-study-videogames-as-performance/

14   Hovanec, Helene. The Puzzler's Paradise—From the Garden of Eden to the Computer Age, Paddington Press Ltd. 1978; here p. 10.

15   B. Suits: "The Detective Story: A Case Study of Games in Literature," pp. 201–204.

16   M. Danesi: *The Puzzle Instinct,* pp. 27-35.

the reader/player must feel they have all the information necessary to come up with the solution on their own before reading the end, otherwise, they feel cheated.

This all leads to one of the key ideas in this article—one of the issues in discussing stories in games is that they are referred to in terms of *telling*, as if the process of storytelling was univocal and where the content is communicated one-way. As we have already seen in the examples from other media, storytelling does not only consist of an author connecting a series of events that are then transmitted and automatically understood by the audience. I prefer to invoke the term *story-building* in the context of games because it refers to both the craft of creating the pieces of the story on the part of the creator and the process of reconstruction that players have to carry out. As Peter Turchi discusses, creating a narrative starts by creating a world where those events will take place, then giving the cues to the reader/audience/players and trust that they can interpret the information the author is crafting.[17]

In the case of a mystery, the story for the audience/reader/player is like assembling pre-cut furniture, but without having all the pieces or the instruction manual. A mystery is a type of puzzle that the reader/audience/player puts together, and that they get better at reconstructing as they become familiar with similar stories. Instead of conceiving stories as a structure we fill out, such as the over-invoked three-act structure, in the context of game design and analysis, we should be thinking of stories and their components, how they may interconnect, and then how they are passed on to the audience/readers/players, who will assemble the story according to their own understanding.

I am not going to write about how to craft a mystery story, for which there is plenty of literature already.[18] In spite of what some of some fiction writing manuals may imply, it is an almost impossible task to come up with unmovable principles to design mysteries. Most of the guidelines out there tell you what *not* to do because the key to a compelling mystery is surprising the audience. For example, if we look at Ronald Knox's "Ten Commandments for Detective Novelists" from 1928, most of these commandments refer to things a mystery writer should avoid because it is either trite or because it conceals information in a way that may be

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17 Turchi, Peter: A Muse and a Maze: Writing as Puzzle, Mystery, and Magic, Trinity University Press 2014.

18 Turchi's work is a good referent to understand the nature of plotting a mystery story. Mystery writers have also written their own writing manuals, such as Grafton, Sue, (ed.): *Writing Mysteries*, Penguin 2002 and Frey, James N.: *How to Write a Damn Good Mystery: A Practical Step-by-Step Guide from Inspiration to Finished Manuscript*, St. Martin's Press 2007.

unfair to the reader. [19] Knox's commandments dictate, for example, having the murderer be someone who has been introduced early in the story, and whose behavior and thoughts could be followed by the reader, thus appealing to having fair access to the information; some of the rest of the commandments appeal to the reader being given a chance to figure out the mystery on their own. Another command advises avoiding preternatural agents or not having more than one secret room or passage per story. These were all elements that had already been used in the time Knox wrote his commandments, therefore repeating them would mean that the reader could predict what the solution was because they had read another story, rather than by analyzing the information provided. Using predictable elements also robs the reader of the delight of being surprised when the solution is revealed. Using a better-known example, having the butler be the murderer is trite and predictable, so it is not much of a mystery and there is no excitement in the revelation. Of course, some of the most interesting mysteries come from presumedly breaking these rules—the murderers in some of Agatha Christie's most famous novels have been the narrator, the whole cast of suspects, or one of the supposedly dead victims.

While I cannot come up with a series of commandments like Reverend Knox, game design can help me devise some guidelines on what makes a compelling mystery and how to create artful gaps, even if it is at an abstract level. The first set of guidelines comes from basic puzzle design, specifically narrative puzzle design, like the ones that we find in adventure games. [20] Once a designer knows what the mystery, they are posing to the player is, and its solution, they should step back and ask themselves what the player needs to know in order to solve it. For example, a puzzle may require reading the numbers in an electronic resistor, which are color-coded—this is specialized knowledge that only people familiar with electrical circuit design may know. If the designer does not expect their players to be electrical engineers or appliance repair persons, the key that connects the colors to a number should be information that the game has to provide to the player. The gap should not be the information itself, but rather the connection between the information and the solution to the puzzle.

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19   Dove, George N.: "The Rules of the Game," in: *Studies in Popular Culture* 4 (1981): 67–72, p. 69.

20   For a more detailed breakdown of the process of narrative puzzle design, see Fernández-Vara, Clara, and Scot Osterweil: "The Key to Adventure Game Design: Insight and Sense-Making,"*MITWebDomain*,October2010.https://dspace.mit.edu/handle/1721.1/100238

Another key aspect in crafting mystery stories is how part of the mystery may be embedded in the space. Spatial storytelling is a particularly apt form of telling stories in digital media—while computers are not yet great at creating believable artificial characters that players can interact with naturally, they can create spaces and objects that players can explore and manipulate. Environmental storytelling is the use of spaces to tell stories, and it is a rather popular term in game development. Many games create locations to invite the player to explore them and figure out what happened within them—Jenkins, for example, talks about *evocative spaces*, which recreate spaces that the player may be familiar with, but which they can now inhabit and explore while they recall stories that they have read or seen in other media.[21]

One clear example of games that thrive on environmental storytelling is the walking simulator genre, where the player traverses the space while gathering information that allows them to learn the stories of the people who lived in those spaces. DEAR ESTHER (2010) and WHAT REMAINS OF EDITH FINCH (2017) both make excellent use of guiding the player through their landscapes and buildings, telling the stories of the spaces where the story takes place through the items left behind, as well as through the recorded voices of the past.[22]

From environmental storytelling, the concept I propose focuses on a specific strategy that allows players to interpret a narrative space, which I call *indexical storytelling*.[23] Indexical storytelling is the practice of using indexes to construct a story. *Index* in this context is used in the Peircean sense—an index is a type of sign where the sign itself (the signifier) has a physical relationship with what it signifies (the signified).[24] For example, a signpost is oriented towards the place it signifies, while smoke in a forest signifies that there is a fire even if we cannot see the flames. Indexes allow us to tell stories visually and invite the player to close the gap. A set of events that takes place in a space will leave traces that we can interpret to figure out what has happened in that space—this is evident in the case

21 Jenkins, Henry: "Game Design as Narrative Architecture," in: Wardrip-Fruin, Noah/Harrigan, Pat (eds.), *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press 2004, pp. 118–130.

22 DEAR ESTHER (UK 2012, O: The Chinese Room); WHAT REMAINS OF EDITH FINCH (USA 2017, O: Giant Sparrow/Annapurna Interactive).

23 Fernández-Vara, Clara: "Game Spaces Speak Volumes: Indexical Storytelling," in: *Proceedings of Think Design Play: Digital Games Research Association Conference 2011*, Utrecht, 2011.

24 Peirce, Charles: *Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings*, Vol. 2, Bloomington, IL: Indiana University Press 1998; pp. 8-9.

of crime scenes. The events of the crime have left traces in the space, which the player has to interpret as clues. The game L.A. Noire (2011)[25] for example, starts each mission by having the detective visit the crime scene and gather evidence from it, which usually consists of indexes such as murder weapons, shell casings, or footprints. Interestingly, the visual indexes are complemented with text—even high-definition graphics have limitations to communicate certain pieces of information, such as texture, temperature, smell, or taste, as well as calling attention to very small details. Thus, indexes are not exclusively visual—as mentioned before, even high-resolution graphics can lead to gaps. In the case of L.A. Noire, as well as many other detective games, the indexes can only be interpreted one way in order to solve the case. The game does not allow the player to come up with alternate solutions and possibilities, but rather they work like a puzzle with one correct answer.

Players do not need to be literal detectives to read the spaces in interesting ways, however—environments can also reward players by showing them a space that has been lived in, and they can try to figure out what previous inhabitants have done. The goal is not to find a solution but learn the story by examining the spaces. This is obvious in the case of Portal (2007),[26] where we can see the traces left in the test facilities of Aperture Science by previous experimental subjects, who tried to find every nook and cranny to escape the test that they were an involuntary part of.

Another example of how detective-like work can be part of gameplay without necessarily asking the player to provide a 'correct' interpretation of the space is walking simulators, which have already been mentioned. These games thrive on ambiguity because they invite the player to explore, but there is no score or assessment on whether they are decoding the events that happened in the space in the right way. Dear Esther in particular goes all the way in creating that ambiguity, because each walkthrough of the game is different. The player explores an island where they can see shadows and hear the memories of a character who does not seem to be there—it is an island of ghosts. The locations where some of the shadows appear, where voice recordings and music cues are triggered, is determined in each playthrough at random. This makes the text unstable and therefore more dependent on the player's interpretation.

Another of The Chinese Room's games, Everybody's Gone to the Rapture (2015), also introduces the idea of spiritual traces, where the spirits of people have

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25   L.A. Noire (USA 2011, O: Team Bondi/Rockstar Games).

26   Portal (USA 2007, O: Valve).

left an imprint on the space.[27] In Rapture, the apocalypse has happened, and the events that led to it are a mystery—it is up to the player to figure out what happened by looking for the sparkling souls of the inhabitants that still float around a quaint English village.

The ghostly imprints have also been used beyond the walking simulator genre—see, for example, how in Demon's Souls (2009) the ghosts of other players show us the last few seconds of their actions before they died.[28] The glimpses of these ghosts' function both as a clue and as a warning of what dangers may lie ahead.

Demon's Souls also demonstrates that allowing players to leave traces in the world for other players to interpret can open up a lot of interesting storytelling possibilities—it is also the players who can build the stories for each other. Players can leave messages for other players embedded in the space. Each message is a mystery—they come from preset words and phrases, rather than letting players write their own, so the messages tend to be rather laconic. But players cannot be sure whether a message is meant to help them or hurt them—a dilemma arises, which is itself a mystery. Letting players create their own mysteries can thus open the gates to new storytelling possibilities in games.

The last point I would like to make is a warning—the way that I have been talking about mysteries is somewhat high-level, and I have not gone into specific mystery design techniques because I wanted to get across how mysteries are an essential way of understanding game narratives, and how they can create compelling gaps for players to fill. Detective stories and games have been an important referent to understand how elision, exegesis, and metonymy can be used as part of storytelling, but they are only the starting point to access ways to design games that encourage exegetic play.

I must also point out the difficulties of trying to instrumentalize mysteries, that is, evaluating whether a player solves the mysteries right or wrong, whether the player wins or loses. The moment when the player has to solve the case to 'win' the game, the design closes the door to a world of expressive possibilities. L.A. Noire has great ideas and intentions, but it can also be a frustrating game on many levels, many of them having to do with how awkward the system is, which evaluates whether you have solved the case or not—when the player does not get the solution right, they are told they have failed the mission and cannot tell what they

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27   Everybody's Gone to the Rapture (USA 2015, O: The Chinese Room/Sony Computer Entertainment America).

28   Demon's Souls (Japan 2009, O: From Software/Sony Computer Entertainment Japan).

missed and get no insight, while the game was telegraphing that it had to be played like a puzzle. Conversely, a game like LAMPLIGHT CITY (2018)[29] is designed precisely to let players fail to solve a case without telling them whether they got it wrong or not, so they can continue playing with the sense that they are understanding the story without feeling penalized.

There is a lot of room for games that encourage exegesis without sanctioning or rewarding a specific interpretation—HER STORY (2015)[30] is another example of a murder mystery where it is up to the player to figure out the solution to the case, but the game has no system to indicate whether the player's interpretation is right or wrong. And that is okay. Perhaps games should not always have trophies and medals for players; rather, the players should get used to uncertainty.

Instead of making games operate like skinner boxes that constantly reward and reinforce specific values, players should seek the gaps that they can fill, and seek the challenge in interpretation. Game design should seek to shake players and their pre-conceived ideas, making them used to the idea that winning may not always be possible, and that uncertainty is also an essential part of the game.

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29 LAMPLIGHT CITY (Germany 2018, O: Grundislav Games/Application Systems).

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