

# Detecting Liminality<sup>1</sup>

## The List and Symbolic Form

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### **Abstract:**

*This article examines the form of the list as a narratively liminal textual pattern that is suspended between the three symbolic forms of narrative, play, and database. Due to its affinity for enumerative structures, the detective fiction genre will serve as the background against which the cultural practice of listing and the operations it performs in the liminal spaces between symbolic forms are investigated. The new formalist concept of affordances will be employed to demonstrate the list's potential to travel and negotiate between different symbolic forms and to identify areas where the affordances of these forms overlap. Two novels by Agatha Christie will serve to illuminate the contact zone between the symbolic forms of database and narrative. The Murder Dossier novels by Dennis Wheatley will illustrate how the list-form works to fuse the symbolic forms of narrative and play through its affinity for database structures. Their allegiances with multiple symbolic forms awards Christie's and Wheatley's novels great potential for aesthetic innovation because each symbolic form offers specific strategies of meaning-making that can (re)position and (re)negotiate the role of these novels as cultural artifacts.*

### **The List and Symbolic Form**

At first glance, a simple list and a novel such as Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express* seem to have little to nothing in common. Lists condense information, narrative texts expand on an idea to create entire fictional worlds. Lists tend to not have protagonists, nor are they frequently employed to stage conflicts or rep-

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resent causal links.<sup>2</sup> Even where they do occur in literary texts, lists are frequently considered as disruptive and nonnarrative elements. And yet, detective fiction—a heavily plot-driven genre—teems with lists of suspects, of evidence, of questions, of rational conclusions, and has such lists appear in key moments of the story.

The list's "liminal status," so Gérard Genette (xi), allows it to negotiate relations between text and reader by framing or contextualizing the text it surrounds or intermits. When lists appear as diegetic texts in detective fiction, i.e., as elements of the story world, they tend to contain or conceal information vital for the solution of the case. As paratexts, for example, in the form of the table of contents or, as will be discussed below, the score sheet, they take on yet more functions that are no less essential for the story they accompany.

Both textual and paratextual lists, whatever context they originate in, share a number of recurring features that mark them as cognitive tools and as structuring devices that invite their own patterns of meaning-making. Lists are easy to navigate, provide quick access to and overview over their material, and the loose connections between their items offer various possibilities for interaction or manipulation. Through these properties, the form of the list draws on the poetics and aesthetics of what Lev Manovich designates as the symbolic form of the database (81).<sup>3</sup> Symbolic forms, so Manovich, present ways of structuring experience and hence "a model of what a world is like." Manovich describes the symbolic form of the database as consisting of a collection of items that "can be navigated in a variety of ways," that are generally open to new additions, and that, hence, follow an "anti-narrative logic" (82). Despite the list's close affinity to the characteristics of the database, its properties at times allow it to move beyond the confines of database logic and forge complex connections to other symbolic forms.

Symbolic forms can serve as useful concepts for literary analysis because they do not work in binary oppositions but rather suggest gradable categories with a prototypical center and fuzzy margins that overlap with and are not clearly separable from other symbolic forms. Recent new formalist approaches to literature have theorized this potential for variety inherent in form in terms of affordances.<sup>4</sup> Affordances can reach beyond fixed category boundaries and point out relations

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2 Among the criteria Marie-Laure Ryan lists for narrativity, we find that a story needs "anthropomorphic agents" who "must be motivated by conflicts" and that "[t]he sequence of events must form a unified causal chain and lead to closure" (194).

3 Schubert points out that Manovich appropriates the term from Erwin Panofsky and Ernst Cassirer.

4 In her recent monograph *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*, Caroline Levine defines affordance as "the potential uses or action latent in materials and designs" (6). Levine's idea of clashing forms that enable a reader to view those forms against one another and consider their mutual productivity describes a similar phenomenon to the interaction of symbolic forms discussed in this article.

that might otherwise go unnoticed. Any particular list, for example, may afford narrativity without making narrativity an inherent property of the list as a textual pattern.

Viewing the potential uses inherent in different forms in terms of affordances proves especially productive where those affordances establish contact points between two or more distinct symbolic forms. This essay will focus on such areas of intersection and use the literary genre of detective fiction as an example in order to investigate how the cultural practice of listing operates within the liminal spaces between symbolic forms and facilitates border crossings between them (see Herrmann et al. 14). I argue that the list's affinity to and situatedness between three distinct symbolic forms allows it to negotiate between the seemingly disparate phenomena of narrative, database, and play and that this form's allegiance with multiple symbolic forms awards it great potential for aesthetic innovation.

I will first demonstrate how the novels of Agatha Christie employ lists to represent consciousness and processes of rationalization through their lack of mediation. Christie's lists uncouple the representation of consciousness from mediation, which is typically considered a marker of narrativity,<sup>5</sup> and thus renegotiate the relation between the symbolic forms of database and narrative through the detective fiction genre's affinity with enumerative structures. The apparent clash between the database-like structure of Christie's lists and the narrative quality of consciousness representation that they evoke will illustrate how the list can function to bridge such apparent gaps between symbolic forms. Subsequently, I will examine how the lists in Dennis Wheatley's *Murder Dossier* novels from the 1930s function to involve the reader in a game of detection. Wheatley's lists take on a ludic function and serve as a hinge device between the symbolic forms of narrative and play through their database affordances. The *Murder Dossiers* make lists the central tool that enables these novels' aesthetic innovation through its allegiance to more than one symbolic form (see Herrmann et al. 13).

## Lists, Narrative, and Database in the Fiction of Agatha Christie

The novels of Agatha Christie teem with lists of suspects and motifs, with profiles, hypotheses and timetables, and with lists of unanswered questions. Very frequently, such lists appear at times when the investigator assembles crucial information. In Christie's 1950 novel *A Murder Is Announced*, for example, her detective,

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5 See, for example, Prince, who argues that among the various features influencing narrativity, "narrativity is affected by the amount of commentary pertaining to the situations and events represented, their representation, or the latter's context," and further names the representation of thought and consciousness as a feature frequently connected to narrativity (387).

Miss Marple, leaves the following list behind before she mysteriously vanishes: “Lamp. Violets. Where is bottle of aspirin? Delicious Death. Making enquiries. Severe affliction bravely borne. Iodine. Pearls. Letty. Berne. Old Age pension” (256). This list contains all the clues that help Miss Marple identify the murderer in the story, yet it leaves the other characters, as well as the casual reader, baffled and confused: “Does it mean anything? Anything at all? I can’t see any connection,” (256) the character who finds the list comments.

Miss Marple’s list represents her thought process as she jumps from one piece of evidence to the next, aligning each with her suspect. The sequence of words appears as a mental checklist, reducing each item to an informational core. This process of reduction eliminates the connecting principles—such as chronology or cause-effect logic—that hold the clues together from the perspective of the list-maker, and the rapid succession of items mimics the speed with which the pieces of the puzzle fall into place for Miss Marple. The mental operations Miss Marple performs here are central constituents of database logic. Miss Marple is able to “automatically classify, index, link, search, and instantly retrieve” information with the help of her mental checklist—affordances that Manovich considers to be core functions of databases (94).

Similar to direct speech, this (written) list of thoughts lacks a mediating instance. The immediacy that the form of the list affords provides direct access to Miss Marple’s thoughts and seems to condense and assemble all the important pieces of information in one place. At the same time, it conceals the pattern that connects the items and thus conveniently leaves the reader in the dark about Marple’s conclusions. Its immediacy situates Miss Marple’s list at the intersection of the symbolic forms of the database as structuring tool and narrative as characterized by “events that form a unified causal chain and lead to closure” (Ryan 194). The very process of reduction that makes Miss Marple’s list unintelligible to others and thus technically situates it outside the realm of narrative at the same time serves to represent consciousness. Through its lack of a mediating instance, the list allows the reader direct access to Marple’s thoughts—a criterion that scholars such as Gerald Prince consider a key affordance of narrative fiction (387).

The list of questions that detective Hercule Poirot writes down in *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934) similarly reminds the reader of a number of important clues and shows the progression of Poirot’s thoughts. The questions—“Why do the hands of the clock point to 1.15? Was the murder committed at that time? Was it earlier? Was it later?” (210)—build on each other and thus let the reader take part in Poirot’s reasoning process. Written down on paper, both Marple’s and Poirot’s lists serve as a device to focus and preserve their thoughts and become a problem solving tool. According to Ryan’s criteria for narrativity, a text’s “agents must be motivated by conflicts and their deeds must be aimed toward the solving of problems” (194). The

listing of Poirot's thoughts and Marple's clues on paper becomes a means for this very end.

Like other representations of consciousness, the lists in these novels stretch discourse time and slow down story time and thus arrest the continuous progression of plot. Despite this, these lists create suspense, which, Karin Kukkonen argues, is one of the three "cognitive effects of readers' engagement" with narratives. This cognitive effect arises from how Poirot's and Marple's lists oppose knowing and not knowing. It hinges on how those lists assemble clues as signposts to solutions all in one space at the same time and yet obscure the logical relation between them, and thus demonstrate to the reader the seemingly impossible task the detective is faced with. The lists leave the reader both curious about how this seemingly impossible task will be solved and worried that the character might fail to do so.

Detective fiction uses lists to engage the reader in the act of detection in a way that goes beyond how other fiction involves its readers by drawing them into fictional worlds. Agatha Christie makes frequent use of the list's affordance to create such additional engagement through its loose database-like structure that encourages interaction (see Manovich 81). The deliberate gaps lists comprise contain an implicit appeal to the reader to become active and fill them without the help of the detective. The detective fiction authors of the so-called Golden Age (1918-1939) during which Agatha Christie started publishing her novels made a special point of enabling their readers to take a more active part in their fictional investigations by drawing up rules to guarantee the principle of fair play—the idea that all clues necessary to solve the case will be included in the text and that readers therefore should have a fair chance of coming to the right solution by themselves.<sup>6</sup>

In conventional detective fiction, the reader's active involvement in putting together the puzzle the text presents is optional—the solution will be revealed in the end regardless of whether the reader 'guesses along' or not. Despite this, the offer to get involved comes with the suggestion that if the reader takes up the role of detective and accepts the investigative authority and ordering power that comes with it, they also accept the responsibility for the outcome of the investigation.<sup>7</sup> The in-

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6 According to Carl Lovitt, the Golden Age is usually dated between the First and Second World Wars. Among different scholars, dates vary slightly. For a more detailed discussion on the fair play principle in detective fiction, see Lovitt 68.

7 While Golden Age fiction invites the reader to compete with the fictional detective for the right solution, the *Murder Dossiers* discussed in the following section take this engagement one step further and make explicit that a reader who commits to solving the case presented will be responsible for its outcome. The authors' note preceding the first *Murder Dossier* volume directly asks the reader to decide "who *you* will arrest" (emphasis in original) and thus evokes the impression that the responsibility for the outcome of the investigation lies in the reader's hands.

vestigative authority this role confers upon the reader thus further contributes to an active engagement with the story.

### **“Be Your Own Detective”: Narrative, Database, and Play in the *Murder Dossiers***

The potential for interactivity already inherent in Christie's detective fiction is taken to an extreme by Dennis Wheatley's *Murder Dossiers*,<sup>8</sup> which indeed suggest the case might go unsolved if the reader does not make an effort to become involved in putting the pieces together. The *Murder Dossiers* advertise their innovative and interactive approach to the genre and, at the time of their publication, were as popular and widely known as the fiction of Agatha Christie. Wheatley's novels make their dossier format a “constitutive component of the text” and thus make database structures and list-based ordering systems a prominent feature. They take great effort to emulate a variety of documentary sources and display a strong concern for authentic representation (Codebò).

The seemingly authentic documents, notes, witness statements, and inventories that Wheatley's dossiers consist of are collected in the form of a police file and leave it mostly to the reader to piece together the plot from them. The easy access to information that comes with this format invites the reader to become active and extract information from the file. Two elements in particular distinguish the *Murder Dossiers* from other crime fiction of the age: They include actual material objects, supposedly found at the crime scene, for the reader to consider and engage with, and they explicitly ask the reader to do so.

The immediacy this invokes greatly fortifies the claim to authenticity that the first two dossiers in particular try to create. My analysis, however, will mostly focus on the fourth and last dossier, *Herewith the Clues!* (1939), in which the focus shifts to qualities connected to ‘playability’: interactivity, nonlinearity, and iteration. As listed by Stefan Schubert, these features are much more commonly found in games than in narratives.

The title of the fourth volume already hints at this shift of focus: While the first three dossiers bear titles which flaunt sensational keywords such as “murder,” “killed,” or “massacre”<sup>9</sup> that are typical of the detective fiction genre, *Herewith the Clues!* puts the emphasis on the by then well-known distinctive feature of the

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8 The *Murder Dossiers* were a joint project of Dennis Wheatley, who was responsible for the writing, and Joe Links, who was responsible for the arrangement and logistics. For reasons of simplicity, this article will only refer to Dennis Wheatley as the author.

9 The complete titles of the first three dossiers, in order, are: *Murder off Miami* (1936), *Who Killed Robert Prentice?* (1937), and *The Malinsay Massacre* (1938).

dossiers: its material clues, which allow the reader a special degree of interaction with the story. The exclamation mark is highly unusual for a detective fiction genre title and rather reminds of the way games advertise their features.<sup>10</sup> The volume's cover further capitalizes on this advertising strategy by announcing "five times as many clues as in any of the previous dossiers" in bold print across the middle of the page. This advertising strategy and the structural changes that further distinguish this dossier from its predecessors situate *Herewith the Clues!* at the borderlands of narrative and play.<sup>11</sup> The easy access to information that the list-like dossier format provides, that renders it navigable and searchable, additionally ties it to the symbolic form of the database.

The database features of the dossier format make it uniquely equipped to operate as a hinge between the symbolic forms of narrative and play. Dossier novels typically "imitate the most commonly accepted procedures for establishing truth in [the] [...] cultural context" in which they operate (Codebò), and through its proximity to the form of the police file, *Herewith the Clues!* can easily establish the context of authenticity that supports its status as a detective novel. At the same time, the dossier structure that prioritizes categories of evidence over chronological sequence invites the reader to treat the file as a kind of database and to extract information from the compiled documents. The dossier's proximity to database structures supplies the tools that enable even an amateur to navigate and interact with the material (see Codebò).

By including paratextual instructions, such as the prompt to "[b]e your own detective" printed on the jacket of *Murder off Miami* or an authorial preface that asks the reader to decide "who *you* will arrest for the 'Murder off Miami'" (inside cover), Wheatley's crime dossiers aim to merge the roles of reader and investigating officer. Lists play a central role not only in furthering such interaction through heightened reader involvement with solving the mystery that the plot presents. They also become salient with regard to the level of composition because they reorganize the dossier's structure into a more interaction-friendly and navigable pattern.

Throughout the four volumes, the material clues contained in the dossier become increasingly interactive. An innovative feature of the first volume is to hide central clues in the photographs of suspects and crime scenes it includes in order to make the reader detective look for both textual and non-textual clues. It, however, sticks to vision as the accepted and central mode of perception for both reading and

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10 Examples for this kind of advertising can, for instance, be found on the box of Hasbro's 2017 edition of *Clue*: "Now with Card Revealing Mirror!"; "Press to See Whodunit!"

11 Because of the large number of material clues included in this volume, Wheatley and Links considered to have it sold in a box rather than as a bound volume. Interestingly, the idea was not implemented because it would have placed *Herewith the Clues!* in the board game section rather than in the bookshelves of shops (see Humphreys).

detection. The importance of literal and metaphorical vision, of “seeing *as* reading” is a central and often discussed idea in most detective fiction, where “[t]he visible world [becomes] a text, the detective its astute observer and expert reader” (Smajčić 71). The second *Murder Dossier* volume takes the degree of interaction a step further by including a central clue that relies on a different channel of perception: The smell of the same perfume on two different sheets of letter paper serves as a hint that these letters must have been written by the same person. To find this clue, the reader detective has to interact with the volume as a material object in a way that goes far beyond turning pages. The fourth volume takes this trend to the extreme and includes a secret note that only discloses its invisible message if the paper is dipped in water. To unlock this clue, the reader therefore not only has to alter material that is included in the volume but even needs to resort to resources situated outside both text and paratext. A reader who commits to such interactions has to expend what Espen Aarseth calls “nontrivial effort” to make sense of the text (1). This kind of “ergodic textuality” (5) that the *Murder Dossiers* rely upon awards the reader direct influence over the further course of the story and is much more typical of games than of narratives.

Another element in which *Herewith the Clues!* foregrounds its playability is the score sheet included before the sealed section with the solution. The score sheet is preceded by another (paratextual) author’s note that spells out the rules on how to award points for each clue correctly interpreted. These rules are specific to the volume at hand and are therefore different from the (mostly unspoken) rules that define how readers approach a genre.<sup>12</sup> They rather remind of the sets of rules that can be found in game manuals made to introduce players to the specific rule set of a board game. *Herewith the Clues!* includes eight of these score sheets and therefore suggests that this game of detection is meant to be played by more than one player. The author’s note explicitly mentions that “[e]ight solution sheets are provided so that each member of the family may fill one up.” The number of sheets and the fact that a specific number of points is to be awarded for clues divided into two categories strongly invites competition between individual readers and implies that the score sheets and points awarded are to be compared between several readers or competitors. The detective who has scored the most points is supposed to emerge as the winner of the activity. The author’s note even includes a warning against cheating: “No peeping, now!” Cheating, however, is only possible if the reader is meant to perform certain tasks or actions according to a specific set of rules and if following the rules guarantees fairness among at least two different parties. The

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12 George Dove describes detective fiction as being similar to a game with a fixed set of rules agreed upon between author and reader. His rules remind of the fair play principle that dominates the Golden Age of detective fiction: “[T]he rules of the tale of detection are the rules of organized play; they exist only to make possible the playing of the game” (11).

author's note therefore refers to a situation that does not occur when one is reading a book just to follow the plot.

Interactivity, following a specific set of rules, and the element of competition that the score sheet introduces are highly unusual features of novels but standard elements in competitive (board) games such as Hasbro's *Clue*, in which players also have to solve a murder case by moving across the board and comparing and cross-referencing information on suspects, possible murder weapons, and murder scenes. Players of *Clue* are supposed to solve their case by the same principle of exclusion and comparison that readers of *Herewith the Clues!* have to apply to identify the correct murderer if they take up the dossier's repeated invitation to conduct their own investigation. By foregrounding the rules of the game that readers can engage in, Wheatley's dossier also foregrounds its ludic elements over the narrative elements it definitely possesses and thus occupies a liminal space between the symbolic forms of narrative and play.

This orientation towards aspects of play is also reflected in the structure of the dossier, for example in its section-based organization that deemphasizes linear plot structures. Lists, respectively the affordances that lists share with the database, play a major role in (re)organizing the different materials—reports, photographs, material clues, profiles, writing samples, etc.—which the dossier includes for its readers. Where the first dossier still organizes its files according to the chronology of the case, the fourth dossier groups its various document categories together into distinct sections. It opens with a series of chronologically ordered reports, followed by the material evidence, photos, and profiles, each grouped into its own section.

This structuring system constitutes a point of intersection between the symbolic forms of database and play and is emphasized over the page numbers that are generally recognized as a structuring marker for novels. Only the reports and profiles carry page numbers at all and those are printed on the upper inside corner of the pages, which makes them nearly invisible and gives more prominence to the file numbers (a date followed by a page number, with the numbering starting anew for each report) that characterize the initial collection of documents as reports. The photos and evidence pages are not numbered at all, but the photography section is instantly recognizable by the thicker and whiter paper on which the images are printed. That the dossier groups each type of evidence into a separate section makes it easier to navigate for the reader. Within these sections there are further subdivisions: The material objects, for example, are sealed into semitransparent paper bags glued to the pages, and each piece of evidence is labelled and listed as "Exhibit A," Exhibit B," etc., all the way to "P."

The list format and the affordances of the database it draws on are central not only to structuring the dossier into distinct sections that make it easy to retrieve and reconsider pieces of information but also to structuring the information provided within each section. Lists afford order, which makes them fit for structuring

large quantities of data. The list's capacity to organize and categorize knowledge becomes readily apparent in the score sheet included in *Herewith the Clues!* which the reader can use to keep track of their investigation. The prestructured format of the score sheets draw on the logic of the symbolic form of the database to provide the reader with a grid for organizing their clues that ensures information is stored in the correct space. The number of lines provided on the sheet, for instance, specifies not only how many clues can be found but also how many suspects there are and that for some of them it is necessary to correctly assign two clues to exclude them from the pool of potential perpetrators. Furthermore, the list-like array of numbered slots to enter observations in ascertains that notes are taken efficiently because of the limited amount of space available. This single sheet of limited space, in turn, ensures that the reader's notes will stay neatly arranged and easily revisable and retrievable.

The alphabetically labelled pieces of material evidence are also arranged in a list pattern. This not only puts all the material clues together in one space for easier access but also constitutes an act of categorization—another affordance the list shares with the symbolic form of the database. The list's tendency to condense information suggests that each object included in this array is clearly classified as a piece of evidence relevant to the case and that correctly interpreting any of those pieces will contribute to acquitting a character from their status as suspect. It also limits the number and kinds of objects that can serve as evidence. The labelling and putting into alphabetical order of the objects endows each of them with relevance and a clear purpose. This method of structuring and labelling evidence is closely tied to positivist ideologies, which propagate the existence of a single truth that is identifiable by the use of sensory perception and logic. This ideology of objectivity is usually taken for granted in detective fiction and is a strong undercurrent of the genre.<sup>13</sup>

The organizing and categorizing function of the list is also important when looking at Wheatley's dossier in its entirety. Presenting the material grouped into distinct sections encourages a nonlinear engagement with the text.<sup>14</sup> In order to correctly assign clues, readers need to cross-reference different document types with one another and, for example, link a material object found at the crime scene to a photograph displaying a person carrying that object with them. For this, readers need to be able to go back and forth between the separate sections quickly without spending a lot of time on locating items. The list format that organizes the

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13 The positivist understanding of objectivity as the minimization of human intervention that lets nature speak for itself was typical for the mid to late nineteenth century and is described as “mechanical objectivity” by Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison (20).

14 Nonlinearity is another affordance shared by the symbolic forms of database and play.

general structure of the dossier makes it extremely easy to navigate the sections and to locate items.

Such a nonlinear reading mode prompts the implementation of yet another criterion for playability as defined by Schubert: iteration. To eliminate each suspect correctly, the reader has to repeatedly go through the various sections, each time with their focus on a different suspect. Iteration is a rather untypical mode of reading novels, but it bears resemblance to turn-taking in board games. Games “encourage repeated playthroughs or repetitions of individual sequences” (Schubert), often associating each turn with an intermediate objective (such as buying property in *Monopoly* or ruling out a murder weapon in *Clue*) that constitutes one step on the way to achieving the main objective. This nonlinear and iterative reading strategy diverges considerably from more conventional (detective) novels, where consecutively numbered pages suggest they are to be perused in order, from beginning to end. The missing page numbers in several of the dossier sections of *Herewith the Clues!*, on the other hand, indicate that these sections are not meant to be read from beginning to end but instead used complimentary to the other sections. Although the list format rips the dossier apart into separate sections and thus disrupts linearity, it at the same time unifies the material grouped within each section and therein affords a kind of coherence that depends more on categorization than on chronology or direct causality.

Despite the strong focus on its ludic elements, *Herewith the Clues!* undeniably has a narrative core. In fact, many of the lists mentioned in this paper serve a dual or even triple function, furthering both the narrative and ludic dimensions of the text by involving the reader in the act of detection through the list’s affinity with the symbolic form of the database. The distinction between narrative and ludic lists is by no means as clear-cut as it may seem. More so than other formal elements of a fictional text, lists seem designed to offer the reader interactive potential. Thus, even the primarily narrative lists in the novels of Agatha Christie invite the reader to play detective and put the clues together before the protagonist reveals the solution. Wheatley’s primarily ludic lists, on the other hand, also display a narrative dimension. One of the pieces of evidence, for example, is a hairpin described as “of such an unusual type that it is not even stocked by the majority of hairdressers” in the solution section (*Herewith* 25.5.39/5). To correctly eliminate the right woman as a suspect, the reader has to ponder what kind of woman would wear such apparel, and take into consideration the characters’ habits, character traits, and appearance to identify the narrative context for this clue. Even the clearly ludic score sheet included in the fourth murder dossier can help the reader-detective reconstruct later on how certain suspects were eliminated and thus contribute to rearranging the separate sections of the dossier into a more coherent, causally connected order. Situated at the intersection of narrative, database and play, the short and simple form of the list contributes to this immensely. Lists order and categorize, they

unify disparate elements, condense information, and enable its neat, but variable arrangement. The concision of this form makes it an ideal tool for cross-referencing and comparing content that can be applied by characters and readers alike.

## Conclusion

As cognitive tools, lists unfold their adaptive potential within the contact zones between different symbolic forms. The unvarying yet extremely adaptable form of the list seems particularly suited to negotiate the borderlands between different symbolic forms. The lists that occur in the fiction of Agatha Christie are neither entirely narrative in the strict sense of providing linearity, causality, and coherence nor are they entirely situated outside the realm of narrative because they can create suspense and provide access to characters' thought processes. The ludic lists in Wheatley's dossiers, on the other hand, invite a nonlinear and interactive engagement with the text that reminds of the mechanics of games. They do so without entirely abandoning their narrative function to characterize and to encourage the reader to construct their own narrative from the fragments. By the very fragmentation that ties the list to the symbolic form of the database, lists invite to bridge gaps and connect positions that seem to be situated at opposite ends of a sliding scale. The appellative function and interactive potential of the list allows this form a wide variety of functions that operate outside of a binary logic.

The detective fiction genre's affinity with enumerative structures establishes a contact zone between the symbolic forms of database and narrative in the case of Agatha Christie and between database, narrative, and play in the case of Dennis Wheatley. Their allegiances with multiple symbolic forms awards Christie's and Wheatley's novels great potential for aesthetic innovation as cultural artifacts because each symbolic form offers specific strategies of meaning-making that can (re)position and (re)negotiate their role as a cultural artifact within the cultural field.

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