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The Gaming Detective: Sherlock Holmes and the Implementation of GUI in BBC One's *Sherlock*

BBC's revamped Sherlock Holmes series, *Sherlock* (Mark Gatiss and Steven Moffat, 2010), reinvigorates Sir Conan Arthur Doyle's beloved character by adding modern twists and snarky dialogue. This Blackberry wielding, nicotine-patch-addicted, quirky sociopath's new series interrogates the classic detective genre by incorporating elements of video gaming which force the audience to re-imagine subjective camera angles and information. The quasi graphic user interface (GUI) disseminated throughout the series is merely one update BBC One has used to transpose Sherlock to the twenty-first century.

My paper will analyze the use of GUI within the series focusing on its impact on diegesis, and, specifically, how information is relayed from character to spectator. In the first episode, "A Study in Pink" (Paul McGuigan, 2010), GUI is first introduced as a mass text sent to reporters at a press conference. Sherlock (Benedict Cumberbatch) sends a mass text refuting Detective Investigator Lestrade's (Rupert Graves) interpretation of a string of suicides. The word '*Wrong*' is superimposed several times onscreen as the reporters check their cell phones. In this way, the audience is receiving the text message at the same time as the reporters. This type of quasi-GUI is used again later in the episode as Dr. Watson (Martin Freeman) receives a text message which, again, flashes onscreen as the audience receives the information at the same time as Dr. Watson. However, the message relayed in this instance is problematic because Sherlock is also in the room. Now the audience is privy to information that

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Sherlock does not have. My paper will analyze the complications in diegesis stemming from this element of gaming.

GUI is used again in the episode as a map that Sherlock must navigate in his mind. The audience is invited to visit the inner-workings of the detective's brain as he transcodes his experience and knowledge of London into a GUI which he then uses to track a suspect. The camera cuts back to a medium shot of Sherlock gesturing with his hands as he interacts with the GUI in his mind. The implementation of GUI and quasi-GUI in *Sherlock* is significant because it incorporates the audience in a way that has only previously been used in gaming. I argue that the new Sherlock Holmes is amiably accentuated by the implementation of GUI, and that the detective genre has much to gain from video gaming as evidenced in BBC One's new hit series.

Blending the detective genre with other popular genres is not a new idea. Science Fiction and Detective hybrids have long been celebrated. For example, *Dr. Who* has enjoyed a long time popularity of blending these genres. It is no surprise, then, that *Sherlock* co-creator, Steven Moffet, is especially known for his work producing the popular British SF series, *Dr. Who*.

### Sherlock Holmes - The Detached Detective

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's beloved and bellicose Sherlock is based on an actual man Doyle worked with during his years as a medical professional in 19th century London. Joseph Bell was famous for drawing large conclusions from

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small observations as Doyle worked as a clerk at the Edinburgh Royal Infirmary. The now famous 221 B. Baker St. is host to thousands of Sherlock pilgrims every year. Perhaps people flock to his imaginary dwelling because Sherlock remains one of the most permanent archetypes in the detective genre. Often referred to as *The last Victorian Hero*, Sherlock Holmes is enjoying a much needed makeover in the new BBC One's updated rendition, *Sherlock*. Benedict Cumberbatch seems to emulate the deducing detective with elegance and ease and in a manner befitting of a twenty-first century tech savvy sleuth.

The fodder for Sherlock's immersion into multimedia seems written into Sherlock's hardware. Doyle once remarked to Bell, "Holmes is as inhuman as a Babbage's calculating machine and just about as likely to fall in love." In Doyle's second Sherlock installment, *The Sign of Four*, Watson describes Sherlock as, 'an automaton, a calculating machine.' In the same story, Sherlock decidedly interprets clients as units; "factor(s) in a problem." So, it is only fitting that the stolid Sherlock would easily detach from the detective genre and begin incorporating a gaming motif similar to the one used in BBC One's *Sherlock*.

### GUI and the gaming motif

\_\_\_\_\_ GUI first infiltrated our screen spaces in the early 1980s with the advent of Apple Machintosh's operating system, iOS. For the first time in history, personal computer users had a choice between text commands and point-and-click graphic icons. These easy-to-use, symbolic icons such

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as “file,” or “trash” encouraged a more user-friendly point-and-click system of computing than Microsoft’s DOS. Since Macintosh’s iOS debut, personal computing has largely adopted the GUI efforts employed by Apple.

Similarly, video games employ GUI to establish world building dynamics specific to the medium. Unlike film and television sets, video game virtual environments, often referred to as the game’s flavor, establishes the visual context for how users will navigate through the discrete units of the game’s mechanics or play structures, often referred to as ludemes. For examples, PacMan’s quest for fruit relies on his ability to dodge the ghosts, eat pac-dots and power-pellets, and, eventually, nab fruit housed in the center of the maze. Each unit of Pacman’s quest is a ludeme within the structure of the game. The maze as well as the ghosts’ shape and colors are a part of the flavor of PacMan.

### GUI in *Sherlock*

In the first episode, “A Study in Pink,” *Sherlock*’s Art Director, Dafydd Shurmer, does an excellent job of blending this facet of game design into the series by implementing GUI into Sherlock’s point of view. The first example of GUI flashes onscreen only six minutes into the episode. As previously mentioned, the word, “Wrong!,” pops across screen in multiple places over the journalists’ heads signaling the arrival of Sherlock Holmes as well as his rebuttal to Det. LeStat’s estimate of the crime scene. Thirty

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seconds later “wrong” flashes across the screen again in response to LeStrat’s proclamation that his ‘best people are working on it.’”

Essentially, this is the audience’s first introduction to Sherlock. Already he has proven himself tart, tumultuous, and tech savvy. Because the viewer does not have a visual for Sherlock, his being is represented in the snarky response to the media as well as authority figures. The fact that the “wrongs” flash onscreen similarly to points earned or lives “one-uped,” *Sherlock* is engaging its audience through a gaming motif that seems to invite the audience in; earning extra points for snarkiness.

Screens are an interesting motif in the series. Similarly to vital signs and treasury banks on the screens of gamers’ video games, the GUI used in *Sherlock* makes the user/audience member privy to diegetic information reserved solely for characters onscreen.

Blending the classical Hollywood style with video game aesthetics makes for an interesting hybrid, however, and *Sherlock* is especially adept at picking-up this hybrid. “I like to play the violin, it helps me think. Also, I don’t talk for days on end.” (10:30) Completely aware of his “high-functioning sociopath(ic)” state (57:58), Sherlock folds nicely into the video game aesthetic because he experiences the world unlike others. Using his superhuman abilities, Sherlock is able to deduce situations in a near instant.

*Sherlock* works well on both aspects of game design: ludemes and flavor.

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Flavor is an integral part of worldbuilding. Establishing the physical parameters of the episode's virtual landscape appears several times throughout the episode.

The first example of this is a series of cuts establishing the crime scene. (23:30) -

This worldbuilding montage lasts ??? seconds and encapsulates the reader in Sherlock's world. The series is constantly inviting its viewers to participate in the game of crime solving.

Twenty-five minutes into the episode, Sherlock is given two minutes to assess the latest suicide victim's crime scene. As Sherlock gathers clues, the audience is fed the same information in real time via letters that appear to loom over the object in Sherlock's point of view. "Left-handed," "Professional," "Wet..." flash onscreen. The audience gets the clues at the same time as Sherlock, essentially inviting the audience member to "play" the episode. Using all the information Sherlock possesses, audience members are invited to make their own deductions.

The strongest example of game aesthetic in *Sherlock* appears from 51:20 and lasts til 54:02 as Sherlock and Watson are wrapping-up their witty repartee in a London coffee shop. Sherlock notices a taxi seemingly studying the couple from across the street. Sherlock chases the cabby once deducing that the suspect is using a taxi to spy on Sherlock and Watson. As the cab drives away, Sherlock stops in his tracks, closes his eyes, and puts his index fingers to his temples. He is deducing his route through mental and cognitive maps of the city. Sherlock and Watson leap over buildings, climb stairs, and dodge cars similarly to the protagonists' journeys in adventure games like Bioshock, Supermario

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Bros., and Grand Theft Auto. This montage is flooded with neon lights, rapid editing, and Sherlock's adventurous theme song. The chase sequence stops with a cartoon looking "END" seemingly drawn in chalk, and reminiscent of video-games' "Game Over."

### GUI and Diegesis

Through this episode and displayed throughout the series' first three episodes, which comprise the first season, *Sherlock* is always inviting the viewer to join Sherlock and Watson on their mystery solving exploits. Shifting between Watson's perspective and Sherlock's point of view, the GUI used within the series is important because of its affect on diegesis. In narrative films, webisodes, and television shows, diegetic information reserved for protagonists and shared with spectators is typically conveyed through point of view shots. However, with the implementation of GUI, viewers are now able to decipher information at the same time as Sherlock and Watson. Although, *Sherlock* switches between Watson and Sherlock's points of view, one thing is very clear; the information shared via the gaming aesthetic incorporates an added layer to the detective genre. Real time information encourages *Sherlock* viewers to play along with the episode; gathering clues and making deductions as though they are Sherlock.

In this way, GUI acts as a suture, binding the image and the viewer into one through the gaming aesthetic layer. The detective genre and the video game aesthetic are perfectly suited for each other because both require active audiences so blending the genres doesn't necessarily change the detective

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genre, merely, it adds an additional activity layer to the genre's crime solving premise.