

# CHAPTER SIX

c0035

## Seeking

p0010

Making a game can be as simple as hiding an object and sending players on a hunt to find it. This simple mechanic of seeking out a hidden object informs everything from scavenger hunts to Easter egg hunts to hidden object video games. This simple mechanic comes with many advantages for game designers. It's straightforward and easy to implement. The idea is so simple even small children instantly understand. You can scale it from easy to difficult simply by leaving objects in the plain sight or burying them under layers of other objects. Seeking and finding mechanics tap into the natural playful instinct to find things. Just look at how peek-a-boo entertains babies for hours. The puzzlement of the search and the sheer of joy of finding the hidden object plays across their faces each time they discover it.



FIGURE  
6.1

f0080

**A child searches for Easter eggs hidden in his backyard. (WikiCommons<sup>1</sup>)**

<sup>1</sup>[commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Easter\\_egg\\_hunt.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Easter_egg_hunt.JPG), User: bobjgalindo

p0015

But this simplicity also points to the limitations of building a game entirely around seeking. It offers little in the way of strategic complexity and replayability for adults with longer memories. Scavenger hunts are closer to puzzles than games. Once you find the hidden objects, you can't really play the game again. You have already solved the game.

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Still, hidden object games have tortured players for ages. From the back cover of *Highlights* magazine exhorting you to find mistakes in the scene, to the 16<sup>th</sup> century Dutch painter Hans Holbein placing a large distorted skull across the front of his painting *The Ambassadors* (Figure 6.2), artists have long challenged viewers to decode images. As he painstakingly painted the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, Michelangelo slyly included the likeness of his enemies burning in Hell. So seeking and finding hidden objects in art has a long—if not particularly kind—history.

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I must admit that while I sometimes find myself engrossed in a hidden object game, I don't find them particularly fun. As games, they generally lack strategic depth. Instead of developing strategy, you find yourself reduced to squinting and cursing as you scan through a morass of illogical objects strewn about the game area. The seek-and-find mechanic offers less chance for creativity than matching or most other casual mechanics. The game seems to be reduced to a series of awkwardly placed roadblocks you must hurdle.

FIGURE  
6.2



f0010

**Holbein embedded at the feet of his ambassadors a distorted image of a skull to represent death. (WikiCommons<sup>2</sup>)**

<sup>2</sup>[commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Holbein-ambassadors.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Holbein-ambassadors.jpg)



p0030

Yet, I admit, I am often engaged.

p0035

The basic mechanic of a seek-and-find game is very simple. Fill the game area with a large number of objects, then give players a partial list of those objects and tell them to find them. The player finds and clicks the object. This object is crossed off the list. When the player finds all the objects on the list, they win. If you want to get really fancy, you can add a timer.

p0040

The rules for a seek-and-find game are even simpler. You can boil them down to one rule: Find all of listed objects before time runs out.

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This simplicity certainly contributes to the popularity of seek-and-find games. You come to the game already understanding how to play. Simply looking around the world has taught you almost all you need to know about the game. This makes the game uber-casual. A seek-and-find game is the basic activity of looking around for the goal item.

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This game mechanic has been applied to everything from weddings to murder mysteries and uses a relatively standard formula. Present the player with a beautiful background scene and layer on top of that a number of smaller images of objects that the player must find. New levels bring new background scenes and new objects to find.

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If matching games tap into our desire to find and match patterns, seek-and-find games tap into something even more basic: the desire to just find one thing—to spot it and say “There you are!” Instead of looking for patterns, you simply look for one object. There can be real joy in this discovery, especially if the object is hard to find. It’s analogous to the joy a bird-watcher feels upon spotting a particularly rare speckled what’s-a-ma-doodle. The satisfaction comes in part from the building tension and frustration as you search for an object and then the release of that tension when you actually find the object. You could argue that this release of tension is more elation at having finally found the object than sustained joy from consistently doing a good job. You get the same feeling when you find your misplaced car keys or discover your sunglasses on top of your head after 10 minutes scouring your apartment. But you can’t deny that a lot of people enjoy the feeling. Seek-and-find games make up a significant portion of the casual market and have proven consistently popular with a large part of the audience.

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Finding each object is a game unto itself. There is no build-up of moves as in a game like *Luxor* or *Snood*. In those games, your choices build up on themselves—you operate on a continuum of actions. In a traditional seek-and-find game, each move is entirely isolated. Finding one object doesn’t really help you find others. This makes seek-and-find games very stop and go. The experience stutters along from one object to the next, making it hard to build up a sense of flow. While not necessary, a sense of continual progress to your actions—that you are making moves and meeting increasing challenges—leads players into the flow state. If every move is unto itself, building up to that state can be difficult.

p0065

A great strength of seek-and-find games stems from their mutability to different narrative content. It’s very easy to apply seek-and-find gameplay to different stories and themes. Granted, they lend themselves most strongly to mysteries. They are often used for licensed games, perhaps because a lot of licenses revolve around





mysteries. The downloadable *CSI: New York* offers hidden object gameplay. It is such a basic form of gameplay that it doesn't overwhelm the story. Instead, because the actual mechanic and feeling it produces maps very closely to real-life activities like hunting for lost keys, the mechanic doesn't need a lot explaining or justifying. For a match-three game to work with narrative content, you have to do some tricky shoehorning. "Well, you see, the ancient Egyptians used these rolling marbles as puzzles to lock the doors to their tombs...yeah, that's what they did!" Seek-and-find games demand less explanation—you're looking for stuff, you're picking stuff out, you're shopping. We all look around the world for stuff; only the most neurotic of us line things up in groups of three.

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At its most basic, this sort of gameplay isn't terribly interesting. There isn't much to say about it on a mechanical level. That doesn't mean making seek-and-find games is easy. There is, of course, logic to hiding objects. But basic seek-and-find games require more content production than game design. They require a lot of artists to draw numerous backgrounds and objects.

s0010

## *Mystery Case Files: Huntsville*: Simple Seek-and-Find

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But like all games, the mechanic is mutating and evolving. As we've discussed, games trend toward increasingly hardcore play. Well, even a simple mechanic like seeking and finding is no different. As the fans of this mechanic play more games, they are growing more sophisticated and demanding more out of the mechanic. The game mechanic is becoming more complex as a result. Games like *Mystery Case Files: Huntsville* or *Dream Day Wedding* seem almost primitive next to more evolved versions of the game mechanic like *Dream Chronicles* and *Azada*. Interestingly, games like *Azada* bear a strong resemblance to classic adventure puzzle games like *Myst*. *Myst* came out in 1993, but the casual seek-and-find gameplay is just now catching up with this old-timer. The casual audience has evolved to the point where they want the sort of challenge that previously only serious gamers sought.


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This new breed of seek-and-find games offer a wider variety of puzzle types. Each level seems to offer some new puzzle type. It almost makes you wonder if the lack of pure hidden object levels disappoints serious fans of seek-and-find gameplay. But the games don't just add complexity and depth by throwing puzzles at the player. Some actually evolve the seek-and-find mechanic. Games like *Azada* actually try to add depth and logic by asking the player to step through a logical sequence of steps.

p0085

A traditional seek-and-find game like *MCF: Huntsville* gives the player a word and asks the player to find the graphical representation of that word. This is the prototypical mapping of a seek-and-find game (Figure 6.3).

FIGURE  
6.3

Flashlight → 

f0015

**In *MCF: Huntsville*, the player is told to look for a flashlight. They must find the graphical representation that matches the item on the list.**



p0090 However, game designers are now finding ways to make this mapping more complex and less one-to-one. Instead of providing a word and asking for the player to simply find the iconic version of it, the game puts the player in a specific situation and asks the player to solve it by finding the right tools. So now the mapping looks a bit more obtuse, as in Figure 6.4.



FIGURE 6.4

f0020 **More complicated seek-and-find games offer clues to identify the sought object, rather than simply stating what players should be looking for.**

p0095 These games are beginning to embed logic into the seek-and-find gameplay, moving them from an act of pure scanning to visual puzzle and process. These games offer not just pure pixel hunting, but the challenge of stepping through a logical process.

p0100 This style of logic is familiar to players of adventure games and role-playing games. You are constantly being given objects which you can use to overcome hurdles. But it does represent a shift in the logic of casual seek-and-find games.

p0105 This addition of logic greatly expands the potential of these games, both from a narrative and gameplay perspective.

p0110 *MCF: Huntsville* showcases the traditional seek-and-find mechanic. You play a detective trying to find clues and solve a number of mysteries. This amounts to visiting a number of different scenes and searching for objects. The game takes you to a café scene crowded with objects (Figure 6.5).

p0115 You have a limited amount of time to dig through the picture and find all of the objects the game demands. If you get stuck on an object, you can ask for a hint. When you find an object and click it, the item is removed from both the game area and the list. As the game progresses, the game gets both easier and harder. On one hand, fewer objects clutter your vision, making it easier to read the game area. But as the list dwindles, you also have fewer to choose from, leaving you with only the well-hidden objects to find.

p0120 Once you find all of the objects in the room, it's on to the next scene and a new set of hidden objects. The complexity of the game doesn't change, the objects just become harder to find.

p0125 As you can see from Figure 6.6, seek-and-find games ride a fine line between realistic and entirely surreal. To adequately hide objects, artists and game designers stuff the scenes so full of objects—from the logical to the absurd—that the scene borders on nonsensical. I mean, sure you might keep your tambourine on the bookshelf (far left, second shelf from the top) right next to the cobweb and underneath spoon, but only a slob leaves their nautilus shell right next to their axe and underneath the wooden mallard on the bookshelf.

FIGURE  
6.5



f0025

The area on the left is the game area. The list of objects you must find in the game area is on the right. (© Big Fish Games)

FIGURE  
6.6



f0030

As you find objects, they disappear from the game area and list, leaving you with fewer choices for their seeking. (© Big Fish Games)