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Five Tips for Hosting a Murder Mystery Party Game

By Steve Hatherley

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If you've not hosted a murder mystery party game before, the experience can appear to be a bit daunting. It really isn't as difficult as it may first appear - murder mystery games are very easy to host. But until you've got a one or two under your belt, these few tips should make your life a bit easier.

#1 Getting Started

Take your time. The games themselves are quite wordy and require some time to absorb. You don't need to memorise everything, but it certainly helps to know where everything is. So take your time. Print everything out and read it at leisure. You don't need to understand everything immediately - so skip over anything you find confusing and come back to it later.

At some point you'll need to start preparing the game. You'll need envelopes for each character, into which you will put the character background and whatever rules are required. That's usually two or three sheets of paper, plus possibly some item and ability cards. I usually re-read the characters as I stuff the envelopes - it reminds me of who they are and what clues and abilities they start with.

You'll probably find it useful to have a full set of the game notes to hand as well. So having stuffed the packets, you'll need to print out another set in case you need to refer to something during the game itself.

I like to have everything complete (envelopes stuffed and packed, invitations sent) at least a week in advance of the party. That reduces the likelihood of last minute rushes. They still happen, but with most of the preparations already complete, I find that last minute rushes are easier to deal with.

#2 Casting

Five Tips for Hosting a Murder Mystery Party Game

There are two ways to cast a murder mystery party game. You can either cast in advance, or do it on the day. Both have their strengths and weaknesses.

The big advantage of casting in advance is that your guests can prepare for the role. They can find appropriate costumes and props and help contribute to the atmosphere of the game. The main disadvantage is that if someone that you have given a critical character to (say, the murderer) cancels at the last minute, then you need to recast. And that may mean that someone has a quite inappropriate costume for his or her new part.

If you decide to cast on the day, you should encourage your guests to dress in an appropriate style. This may mean that you lose a little atmosphere, but does mean you're not relying on anyone particular.

A third option is to combine both. Tell some people in advance which characters they will be playing, and leave some to the last minute to cover all eventualities.

Then there's casting itself - how do you actually decide who gets which character? There's no hard and fast rule for this as nobody knows your friends the way you do. I have both cast characters on an entirely random basis and according to who was turning up. Both seem to work.

(You could of course ask your guests what sort of character they would like - but then you run the risk of someone being disappointed when you can't, for whatever reason, cast them in their preferred role.)

I don't recommend sending out the whole character background in advance. If you do that, you run the risk that your guests (particularly close friends and partners) may actually start playing before the evening! They may well accidentally give away secrets - and unintentionally spoil the evening. You also have an even bigger problem if someone drops out - you can't give their character to someone else (because they know things about their first character) so you would need to try and find an extra person from somewhere.

#3 Catering

First things first - while some murder mystery parties are designed around a sit-down meal, some are not. Instead, the players need the freedom to move around the room, to skulk in corners and to talk privately with one another. They can't do that if they are sitting down having a three-course meal.

If you do want to provide a meal, you really have two options. The first is to provide the meal in advance. Invite your guests early, feed them and then (during coffee) hand out their characters. The problem with this is that dinner parties I've been to drag on into the evening. And I've rarely wanted to do anything other than digest afterwards. Having a sit-down meal in the middle of a mystery game doesn't work either - it breaks the atmosphere and forces someone into the kitchen and away from the game.

The second option is to provide finger food - slices of pizza, a cold buffet, sandwiches or whatever takes your fancy. Finger food is ideal - it can be prepared in advance (with minimal effort in most

Five Tips for Hosting a Murder Mystery Party Game

cases) and the guests can "graze" at their leisure. You could also ask your guests to contribute to the meal to help you with the workload.

Drink is another matter altogether. It's absolutely essential to provide enough soft drinks or water. Murder mystery games are conversational, and your guests will pretty soon become very thirsty. So stock up on soda, water, coffee or juice or whatever you think people will want to drink.

Whether you serve alcohol or not is a matter of personal preference. Too much alcohol almost always ruins a game, so it needs to be moderated carefully. A little alcohol can sometimes overcome players' inhibitions and start the game rolling.

#4 Atmosphere

Murder mystery games are much improved if you make just a few efforts to generate the right atmosphere. An appropriate atmosphere helps everyone with their character, and can turn an entertaining evening into a truly memorable one.

Here, then, are a few tips on creating a good atmosphere.

Costumes: Perhaps the strongest way of creating a great atmosphere is to encourage your guests to

wear an appropriate costume. (Costumes look great in photographs as well.) If your guests are finding it hard to find a costume (not everyone has the time or money to search out a good costume), a token effort - perhaps a hat, or coat - can also work wonders.

A Sense of Space: Where you hold the murder mystery game can affect the atmosphere. If you're lucky, you'll be able to find a location suitable for the game. However, murder mystery games are rarely so lucky and are usually held in homes. With a little bit of planning, however, you can create a sense of space.

Anachronisms: For period games you might want to conceal or remove anachronistic items. Computers, lava lamps and other lightweight can be moved to a spare room. As for furniture and heavy appliances such as televisions and stereo systems, try concealing them with a cloth or blanket.

Props: Some murder mystery games involve items such as items up for auction or books for sale. As far as the game is concerned, these are usually represented by slips of card or paper - however, if you have access to suitable props, why not use them? Two caveats. First, if it's important to the mystery that nobody knows who has a certain item, it might be better keeping it as a slip of card rather than a bulky prop. Second, and I can't stress this highly enough, never use props for weapons. Period. It's just too dangerous - anyone passing may not realise that you're just playing a game and if they see someone brandishing a weapon they will call the police. It's really not worth the risk.

Sound: Period music or sound effects can be used to create an atmosphere. Large libraries often have a music section, with a wide selection of sound effects.

Five Tips for Hosting a Murder Mystery Party Game

Food: If you are preparing food you might want to provide something appropriate to the setting.

#5 Handling Questions

As written, the murder mystery games cannot answer every eventuality. Your guests are likely to be highly imaginative people. They will have ideas that nobody else has thought of - and there's only one person they can turn to: you.

Unfortunately, that means you're going to be asked questions during the evening. You can't predict some of the things that you're going to be asked - so I don't even try. My motto: expect the unexpected.

I tend to use three simple rules when it comes to answering player questions.

Is it fun? Often when a player asks something, they already have an answer in mind. If it sounds fun (which often means dramatic) then I'm likely to say yes.

Is it fair? In trying to get an advantage over another character and achieve their goals, players sometimes come up with suggestions that would upset the game for everyone else. In this case I either say no, or add enough requirements so as to make it very difficult to succeed. And then I'll give the other players plenty of opportunity to make it fail.

Make it up. Your guests haven't seen the full murder mystery document. They don't know if the game is supposed to go in a particular direction or not. The games generally go in whichever direction the players take them - but that's okay. As the players don't know that there isn't a "correct" way to run a murder mystery game (they are always different), I can therefore invent anything I think is reasonable.

And so can you - your guests won't know the difference.

Remember that the host is impartial - you shouldn't take sides. If someone wants to do something that will put him or her at a significant advantage over another character, you shouldn't necessarily forbid it - just make it difficult. Make them work for that advantage.

P.S. The more time that your guests have to read their characters and the rules, the better. I suggest allowing at least 20 minutes before the start of the game to give people time to absorb the information. That should also give them time to settle down. You'll have fewer questions if you give everyone a chance to read their characters in peace and quiet.

And Finally

Once you've run a murder mystery game once, all of the above will seem like common sense. And it is - running these games really isn't hard. They do require some work, but it is worth it. So go on - run your own murder mystery party game and have a blast.

Steve Hatherley has written, played and hosted a wide variety of murder mystery games. For more information on murder mystery games visit

or

Solving The Murder at a Murder Mystery Party

By Steve Hatherley

If you are invited to a murder mystery party you have the chance to act out the role of your favourite detective – whether it's Miss Marple, Sherlock Holmes or Inspector Morse.

While many murder mystery parties have a role specifically for the detective, everyone can join in the hunt for the murderer. Sometimes the games are written so that even the murderer doesn't know that they have committed the crime – so they can join in the fun as well.

So while these tips are particularly useful for anyone taking on the role of the detective, they will also help anyone else trying to solve the murder. (They may also help the murderer cover their trail...)

The secret to solving murder mysteries is in determining three things, the "Holy Trinity" of detection: Means, motive and opportunity.

"Means" is probably the easiest of the three to determine. By "means", I mean how the murder was carried out and usually an examination of the body will tell you this. Typical examples include stabbing, shooting, poisoning, drowning and so on.

In the case of something like poison, you might need to find out how it was administered. Was it something the victim ate or drank? Was the poison injected?

Sometimes it's not always easy to work out how the victim died – particularly if there are other wounds or marks. Also, the murder might be disguised as an accident.

Once you have determined the means, you should have more avenues of investigation. For example, if the victim was shot, who has access to a gun? This line of questioning brings us to the next in the Holy Trinity: opportunity.

"Opportunity" refers to the timing and planning of the murder, rather than the actual method of killing. In the case of a poisoning, for example, it means having the appropriate access to deliver the poison – such as in a bedtime drink, a favourite chocolate or whatever.

Opportunity also means being in the right place and time to commit the murder. Once you know where and when the dirty deed was committed, you can eliminate from your questioning anyone with a concrete alibi.

Which brings us to motive.

"Motive" answers the "why" question. Why was the victim killed?

Five Tips for Hosting a Murder Mystery Party Game

Motive can be both the easiest and hardest of the Holy Trinity to solve. Sometimes there are lots of people with a good motive to kill, and sometimes it can be hard to find anyone with any kind of motive at all.

So, the first thing you should ask is "Who benefits?" Who has the most to gain from the victim's death? And if it's not immediately obvious, then you are going to have to talk to everyone.

(And even if it is immediately obvious, you may still have to talk to everyone as the murderer isn't always the person with the most obvious motive. Things are rarely as straight-forward as that!)

If nothing else, whenever you talk to one of the other guests at a murder mystery party, you should ask them who they think killed the victim. Someone will have a clue as to the identity of the murderer, but without asking absolutely everyone, you might never find them.

You need to watch for the various tricks and twists that can confuse things further. These can include the misdirected murder (where the victim wasn't the intended victim at all but just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time) and murder-by-proxy (where the murderer isn't the one with most to gain, but is a misguided friend or servant).

Here, then, are my tips on solving a murder mystery: Find a piece of paper and write down three headings: Motive, Means and Opportunity. As the party progresses and you learn more about the murder, write down what you learn on the paper under the appropriate heading. Keep a checklist of everyone present and work through them, one by one. Most murder mystery parties have a list of characters who are present, so you can use that to make sure that you don't miss anyone.

Steve Hatherley lives in Yorkshire and enjoys hosting and playing murder mystery party games. Find out more at

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