Salter 1

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

game, infocomm, people, article, plundered, objects, hearts, interactive fiction, dismissing, conversation, salter, drew, literature, question, week, play, saving, podcast, art, title

SPEAKERS

Callie, Drew Cook

Callie 00:01
Hey Drew.

Drew Cook 00:02
Hey, Callie.

Callie 00:04
Happy February.

Drew Cook 00:05
Happy February to you. A word of warning to our listeners. One of our cats—her name is Lemur—Is occasionally scratching the back of the chair she's sitting on so we may have some strange, scratch scratch noises while we do this.

Callie 00:23
Yes, it's my chair. So as anyone who, you know, accommodates your pets will know, I'm sitting on the edge of the seat so that she can do her thing. Well, it seems fitting that we are doing a

follow up episode to Amy Briggs's 1987 Plundered Hearts right before Valentine's Day, as it is a romance game. And this follow up episode is going to be a discussion of Anastasia Salter's 2020 article published in Feminist Media Histories. The article's title is "Plundered Hearts, Infocom, Romance and the History of Feminist Game Design." Before we jump into the article, I would like to get an update from Drew about what's going on over at his blog, Gold Machine.

Drew Cook 01:24

At Gold Machine we just finished work on Enchanter, which I think went pretty well. It seems like we had a lot of readers and listeners. We also did a podcast at the same time. But now we're on infidel, which I'm excited to be writing about. I think it's one of Infocom's most controversial games, and maybe its most misunderstood. Or maybe--I can do this all day--maybe it's a game where we first start to see this idea of a game being more than an amusement coming into focus. It really questions a lot of the assumptions adventurer gamers made about playing computer and video games. I don't want to geek out too much, because obviously, we have stuff we actually need to do today. But yeah, doing Infidel and I'm enjoying myself.

Callie 02:35

Awesome! I think we should mention some schedule changes in terms of when you're actually going to be publishing your articles. You used to do three a week on one game. A very prolific writer you are, [both laugh] but now you're going to move to a one article per week model. And we are also shifting our target, release dates for the podcast as well. So ideally, we will have a new podcast for you at Gold Microphone within the first week of the month. So next up, we will have Journey.

Drew Cook 03:16

That's right Journey. And I think that's probably one of the least played games in the Infocom canon up there with... maybe Border Zone. This might be a good one for y'all to... if you were

going to skip a game and just listen to spoilers, this might be that game. This might be your way to find out all you may want to know about Journey.

Callie 03:50
Yes, we may even seen some… who's the Journey. Is it a band?

Drew Cook 03:58
[sings] "Don't stop, believin'"

Callie 04:02
[singing] "Don't stop listening to us." Talk about it. Okay. Oh, my goodness. Well, we're really excited to jump into this article. Just as a quick summary of kind of what we're going to be talking about: Anastasia Salter, who I forgot to mention, is an Associate Professor at the University of Central Florida. She is discussing how romance is a type of feminist game play, especially within the context of Plundered Hearts. So Drew, do you want to just quickly say how you interpret that?

Drew Cook 04:39
Well, I think what I'd like to do is back up and talk about why we were so interested in this article. It goes back to an open question that we had to leave our Plundered Hearts podcast with. What we saw was an incomplete critical narrative or storyline. By storyline, I just mean the things that have been said over the years about this game by players, by critics by other researchers.... The conversation as it has occurred over the years, and that conversation starts off with a game that really couldn't please anybody. There, there are men that are dismissing it as icky girl stuff, basically. And there are...

Callie 05:35
...women who are dismissing it as not being feminist enough. And I think a lot of that is centered around Lady Dimsford. As a protagonist, one of those binaries that set up is she's

not, you know, Miss Simper, lady like woman in love enough making out in the gazebo, or she's not Miss Rambo enough. So too lady like, or not man enough.

Drew Cook 06:05

We'll go into greater detail, but you boil it down to what Lady Dimsford basically had wrong with her in these early assessments was one, she was not created in order to appeal to the male gaze. That's problem one. Problem two is that she wasn't a second-wave feminism-style rejection of the feminine. Between those two things, there was nobody. It was a protagonist no one could love. Now, of course people did love her, but, by and large, that was the critical narrative. Things kind of just drifted along until the resurgence of interactive fiction in the aughts. And the narrative of that time became and remains to this day one where we say, "Oh, well, people didn't like it back then. But nowadays, there are well-regarded people in the interactive fiction community who like this game." And that's, I mean, that's great. I like the game too. 'Matter of fact, I like it a lot. But what about that criticism back then? What about this idea that you had to be either a sex pot or else a kind of "unsex me" Lady Macbeth-type figure? There was no room for anything else.

Callie 07:46

Salter does a great job of setting up this conversation. Some of those those largely dismissed points can be explored by placing Plundered Hearts in context of two other games that were released around the same time. One of those would be Infocom's own Leather Goddesses of Phobos. The other would be Sierra's Leisure Suit Larry. Positioning Plundered Hearts between those because of course, those two games are very much directed and focused on the male gaze, written by men, mostly, for men, predominantly, and Plundered Hearts is written by a woman for I think, for herself, mostly for her own enjoyment, but with the idea of including a woman player as well.

Drew Cook 08:44

Yep. So we were excited to get ahold of this article. Callie's interlibrary loan service came through. It took two weeks, but we're glad that we're finally getting a chance to talk about this with you folks. Just as a word of warning, if this is going to be kind of a more theoretical-type conversation and Gold Microphone--by design--is typically focused more on gameplay and the joy of playing. This is kind of a detour for us, but it's a detour that's important to us. If you find this uninteresting, that's totally fine. You can come back and listen to us banging our heads against the wall with Journey in a couple of weeks.

Callie 09:41

And if you're like, "Hey, I'm really digging this kind of critical attention and discussion of a game," then go check out Drew's blog because this is what he does all week long. What are some of the sources that Salter uses to build out her argument? She uses Infocom source code and documents, preserved copies of original game manuals, interviews with Infocom employees by journalists and later by game historians. The voices involved in those different sources include archivists, historians, journalists, players, creators, and scholars. We have a very full map that Psalter is bringing together to form her analysis. One interesting point that she raises is the idea of the academic as a parasite. With regard to what I just said about what Drew does, which is more of an academic approach over at Gold Machine, I was really curious: how how did that land with you, an academic as parasite?

Drew Cook 10:58

Well, I see it as a two layered thing, and I'll try not to get too rambly and off-base answering this question. I think the short, quick, dirty answer is... You know that old joke, "those who can't do teach"--you've probably heard that before. Well, there's this old gag in the humanities, that if you can't be an artist, you can teach art, or you can write about art. But you're not an artist, you know, you're basically feeding off of this creative community to make a living. Now, that's a pretty backward and ignorant way to think about things, as I think we all know. But gaming, because it is a newer field, and because a lot of people walking around today don't even think it's art.... Think about a game where people expect it to get a 90-plus Metacritic, and then it

gets 89. You get all these upset people on the internet saying, well, those people don't know games, they're not TRUE gamers, they probably didn't even beat it. This kind of... who has a right to speak? That's right, who has the right to speak about games? is an active conversation. I think it kind of gets tangled up in this, "those who can't do, teach" thing to become sometimes a very kind of toxic, exclusionary thing.

Callie 12:44

Yeah, so it's great to see Salter working in this newer, interdisciplinary space of media studies, digital media, I'm not even sure what the ordained title of this burgeoning field is. Drew, as an example from our conversation the other day about other fields, like, for example, art and art history, they have clearly defined roles: the art historian, the curator, the artists themselves, so on and so forth. There's this built-in infrastructure of how to talk about different pieces, but with game studies, those roles are not so clearly defined. I think this is where we get productive discussions of this tension between those who create, those who consume, and those who critique.

Drew Cook 13:43

Yeah, for sure. That can lead into another topic she brought up in the article: game, or fiction, or literature, or interactive fiction, interactive literature, all the different terms that are used for these media. You know, I'm old, so I'll just say it's a text adventure game. That's what they were, when I was growing up. So I'll still call them that. But people still talk about this. And, to me, these conversations are incredibly important because of where the money is. Let's say you have an English Department. The chair is a Faulkner scholar, you know, and they don't, they don't even write their own emails. They have the department assistant write their emails for them, you know, do you really want to go to that department chair and say, "I need I need a few $1,000 for me and my classmates to go to a conference on new media in Florida." Is that Professor going to do that? If you call it literature, you are at the mercy of literature and some literature departments are going to be fantastic about that. And some English departments absolutely are not. So this stuff is more than just, you know, "what's your favorite flavor ice

cream," there are often real world money, political implications of how we talk about these things. With all that said, she, she refers to Nick Monfort's argument.

Callie 15:27

Yeah, and his argument about games versus interactive fiction and kind of his resistance to using games to apply to all of you know, these interactive fictions, because they're not necessarily always about winning. And so he thinks game by using that sort of dismisses maybe the purpose intended by the work itself. And so what do you call something is it's not necessarily about winning?

Drew Cook 16:04

I'm not gonna hit above my weight [laughs]. Nick Monfort at MIT has written some great things. I'll be careful about what I say here. But I've always felt there's a different kind of concern with the word "game." And it isn't really, "can I win it?" I don't think many people walk up to a work of art, whatever it's called and ask, can I win it? I don't think that occurs to people. I think people take so much for granted that you can win in games, they don't even ask it when you play a game. I think that for a lot of people the push, the resistance, against "game" is that it sounds trivial. It doesn't sound serious. Well, why don't we call it a "dalliance?" You know, you can't win a dalliance or a "diversion" or an "amusement." Well, because those don't sound serious either. So we wouldn't want that. We want something that sounds serious, I think.

Callie 17:10

Yeah. I think that goes back to your conversation about, you know, the example of the Faulkner chair and where the money is going. If we want as people who are taking these games, literatures, fictions, seriously, there's an importance for it to be institutionally recognized as serious. What work can be done in this field, that's still very much being established.

Drew Cook 17:44

My pushback against that is more existential. I mean, if you want people to think you're serious, you should behave in a serious way. And you should do things that serious people do, I don't think you need to convince people that you're serious, I just think people can look at you and say, Wow, they're, they really taken these games seriously. You know, bring some personal intensity to things. And I'm not saying that's not what people do. But I think, the battle over breaking into an established field of art or inquiry… “if I can be a part of it, then I can be serious, too.” I think sometimes you're always going to be sort of the unwanted middle child. If you're trying to barge into other people's parties and trying to justify yourself, you're better off just saying, "This is what we're about, this is what we're going to do."

Callie 18:52

Alright, so I guess that leads us to our first audience question, which is, do you have a preference for how you refer to Infocom titles? Do you call them interactive fiction, interactive literature? A game? Interactive game? And do you regard some differently than others? With Plundered Hearts, would you consider more that more literature that more of a game and why? I think we can also tag on to this question of, Do you have anything you'd like to say about how you see the state of digital humanities or media studies and how you're navigating maybe in your own work or in the work that you enjoy reading or attending conferences for how you are seeing this field come to form?

Drew Cook 19:50

We definitely want to hear from you about that. We are always interested in your feedback, but I think this episode in particular Because it'll give us some food for thought about the way we approach things in this podcast. So we would love to hear your takes on these questions.

Callie 20:11

We can jump now to the central discussion that Salter puts forth. And that's the idea of the romance as a type of feminist game play that resists more normative male-based gameplay. A fitting place to begin is a quote from Briggs about how she sees Plundered Hearts and sets it

apart from other games by her male contemporaries. I'll read that now. "The priorities are different from those of other games, I believe in Plundered Hearts, you don't go around collecting treasure, and activity, I've always found boring and adventure games, you're trying to save people. I like to think my puzzles are more about relationships between characters than being player versus objects." Okay. I just have to quickly say I love that she calls out object-based games as being a bit boring. If we remember, Amy Briggs began as a game tester. So was no doubt testing out and playing and being potentially bored by some of those more treasure-object based games. It's interesting that Infocom's big titles like Zork are very much object based treasure hunting games. Do you want to weigh in on how you see this emphasis on relationships over objects?

Drew Cook 21:55
Well, I think it's a very important distinction. I was, while you were reading that Callie, trying to think of other Infocom games that might have this kind of relationship-focused progress or progression, and I couldn't. I couldn't really think of anything. For the most part Infocom games really are about objects. If you exclude the mysteries, of course, we just talked about Wishbringer You know, few weeks ago,

Callie 22:37
our first episode or baby episode.

Drew Cook 22:42
It's not really a treasure hunt, but it is still about finding the objects you need to get where you need to be to use the objects you need. It is very much object oriented. I think Plundered Hearts is alone. I think it's the only one.

Callie 23:02
In Enchanter the tortoise or the turtle asks you--I love that turtle, so I'm gonna use this moment to mention him again. "Are you gonna save us from this wizard?" In that case, it is about

saving lives, but you do that through objects, whereas in Plundered Hearts, that act of saving is actually interacting with characters like you are truly saving Nicolas Jameson, you are saving your father. And so that's done through relationships between characters and not the finding and use of objects.

Salter 2

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SPEAKERS

Callie, Drew Cook

Callie 00:01

This doesn't mean that objects are irrelevant to the gameplay and Plundered Hearts. Because as we know, clothing in particular is a very useful object that lady Dimsford uses to navigate navigate her role in these different relationships.

Drew Cook 00:23

Salter and Aaron Reed point out that there's a file dedicated to clothing in the Plundered Hearts source code. A lot of this source code is actually pretty straightforward to read. It's fun. I'm not a programmer, and even I can get in there and poke around a little bit. This leads to a question for the audience. In terms of the type of analysis we're talking about, you know, that Salter is doing and that these kinds of new approaches--looking at games and new media: is being able to read source code an important skill? In terms of academic training, that kind of

technical knowledge and literary critique are very different fields of inquiry, and they don't really overlap at all. What is the needed skill set for being able to speak with some sort of authority about games like this? I don't know the answer myself. I know that I couldn't look at modern 3d action games and say anything useful about the code. Hopefully, I can have an opinion on those still [laughs]. [Back to] the the significance of clothes in this game. We talked about it when we did our episode, Callie. Salter rightfully zeroes in on this as an important aspect of the game. A key part of it is that you can see in terms of the mechanism of the game mirroring something that's dramatically significant in the game. We talked a lot about how clothes tied into performativity, how they empowered the player to perform certain actions while prohibiting others. And it's, it's very interesting in terms of analysis to see the actual program alongside the actual experience and see how they mirror each other and kind of shed light on one another.

Callie 02:45

I don't have that technical skill, but... I really enjoyed seeing Salter include that because I was like, Oh, I can see clearly the priority that clothes were given, and how central they are to the design of this game. That leads us to another useful quote to consider, especially in relation to this conversation of clothing and how Lady Dimsford navigates the game. She sets up that dichotomy. This section I'm about to read includes quotes from Briggs and discussion by Salter. "The discourse even at Plundered Heart's release similarly pushed at the question of feminism, particularly given the game's association with a genre that, while mostly written and consumed by women, was still viewed as insufficiently feminist. In her Status Line interview. Briggs commented on her character’s portrayal as feminist in response to a fairly hostile question. 'You can't get anywhere in Plundered Hearts if you act as an airhead. There's your father to be rescued. Don't believe that Captain Jameson can do it alone. There's the hero to be saved from certain death several times. One doesn't have to be Miss Simper to enjoy dancing or necking in the gazebo or be Miss Rambo to defeat the bad guys. Just be yourself and do both.' The dichotomy Briggs presents, Miss Simper versus Miss Rambo, is tellingly of the time and also a false binary that portrayals of women were still grappling with, and that

video games certainly hadn't begun to confront. As a fan of the genre. Briggs was firm in her assertion that feminism and romance could coexist. Feminism does not rule out romance and romance does not necessarily have to make women weak in the cliche sense of romance novels." Thanks for bearing with me as we worked through that that quote, but I think that there are some great things to, pull out and discuss. Drew, what stood out to you?

Drew Cook 05:08

What really stands out to me is the issue we brought up at the beginning of the episode, where it really feels like Briggs and Plundered Hearts were sort of crushed between two opposing points of view. And those, of course, would be the false binary that Salter calls attention to, this idea that a woman protagonist in that day should either, you know, be should either appeal to the male gaze, and behave in stereotypically, quote unquote, "female" ways, or else should be some kind of action hero who rejects femininity altogether. And she's right, that's my memory of how things were viewed, even in the 90s when I was an undergraduate student. Things have come a long way since then. It certainly pinpoints a key issue with reception of Plundered Hearts at the time.

Callie 06:29

Absolutely. By contextualizing her discussion of Plundered Hearts, in contrast to other contemporary games at the time--Leisure Suit Larry and The Leather Goddesses of Phobos--it shows just how set apart and really forward thinking and ahead of her time Briggs really was when thinking about the role that a woman can have and the potential for navigating these relationships in games.

Drew Cook 07:18

I've got to say, as far as my understanding goes, that kind of pulling back of the camera and looking at these other works... that probably shed the most light for me. I didn't think about Leisure Suit Larry, but what a wonderful point of comparison, or even Infocom's own Leather Goddess of Phobos. That gives us a whole new way of regarding these scenarios, I think

especially that one Atari, what... ST Log? Yeah, the magazine, yeah, where they had two reviews. I mean, that just throws everything into such stark relief for me.

Callie 08:08

Exactly. I think of myself as a learner, one of the easiest, or one of the best ways that I understand something is through contrast, and when you put things that are so different from one another together, it can really bring out, you know, finer points in each one. We're about to read two reviews that were published in the same issue of ST Log that Drew just mentioned, and one of them is a review of Briggs's Plundered Hearts. The other is a review of Leisure Suit Larry. I think what Drew and I both really want to point out as a point of contrast, is: who was chosen to write these reviews?

Drew Cook 08:50

Yeah, I think that's the key point. And, also taking this as an opportunity to think about an editorial strategy that positions these two games and these two reviews in conversation with each other and asking: what ultimately is privileged by this, by this arrangement, by this construction? It's illuminating.

Callie 09:23

Yeah, absolutely. I know, we gave some humorous attention to the structure of academia. But I do like how Salter also sheds light on--like Drew said--editorial constructions and how magazines market games, how they present games, and the lasting legacy that has over how we still talk about and interpret them. I will now read from the review by Betty DeMunn. This is Is what she says: "Amy Briggs is a talent, but in my opinion wasted on the sexist plot. Sexist because one of the levels you attain on your way to a happy ending is Lady lemon sexist because it's difficult to relate to a woman who doesn't know one end of a rapier from another and isn't allowed to handle a pistol or to sharpen her dagger." And so I have to be honest, when I first read that I was sort of upset. I was like, "Well, you didn't even play the game, you didn't....." Oh my gosh, I had to pause. Here we have a woman reviewer critiquing a woman

game designer, and I was pulled into the trap of also being another woman critiquing another woman. I think that what Drew is meaning about the editorial structure of this is that, by design, it's tempting to fall into that trap. Because Betty DeMunn was not brought in to critique Leisure Suit Larry, which it would be very clear, we can all predict what she would have said about that. She was brought in to critique how feminist or not this game by a woman is.

Drew Cook 11:22

Yeah. I think that once we hear a quote from the Leisure Suit Larry thing that'll become impossible to ignore. But even now we can think we can see the formulation or the formation of that. That idea that, you know, Lady Dimsford, and therefore, Amy Briggs fails to measure up. "Not I, you know, not to me," I'm speaking as someone else now, not to me, the editor of St. Log, "obviously, you know, I don't have any special problem with this game. But this woman has a problem with this woman's game." I think once we hear the Larry thing it becomes... it starts to feel like something's been staged here.

Callie 12:21

Drew, I'm gonna give you this one to read.

Drew Cook 12:25

Okay. This is Salter talking. “Meanwhile, only a few pages away on a review of Leisure Suit Larry declares the game, ‘By far the best of recent adult games’ while warning, ‘It's still not a terrific gift for the leader of the local chapter of NOW or a member of the Moral Majority, but it guarantees hours of light hearted adventuring for more open minded adults.’”

Callie 12:59

Yeah, and NOW being the "National Organization of Women." Using Drew's word of a staging, we have here this kind of implied insider, a boys' club. You know, the adult game we'll all enjoy playing. It's for mature, open-minded adults. It's not for, you know, women involved in the National Organization of Women. And so in that way, it kind of not only dismisses maybe what

Briggs is doing and Plundered Hearts, but it also is kind of a challenge to even who Betty DeMunn is or who she represents, as someone speaking from a feminist perspective.

Drew Cook 13:51

It feels like while these women are busy sniping each other, we can enjoy this manly entertainment. You know, out on the veranda. Callie, I think you're right, there's a sense that this use of National Organization for Women even feels like it's targeting DeMunn in a way. While she's busy over there, we'll talk about this. Salter points out that while reviews and conversations and promotional material about Plundered Hearts often apologize for its woman protagonist, you know, apologize for having a woman's perspective.

Callie 14:51

if not apologize, reassure. Especially male players: "Hey, once you get past the tricky question of gender, once you get past that, you'll enjoy it. You really will. There's stuff in there for you." Salter highlights that the same reassurance is not given to potential women players of games like Leisure Suit Larry or Leather Goddesses of Phobos. Like [Larry] trying to pick up chicks, you'll enjoy it like you can get past his smarminess, you really will, ladies. An interesting thing that she points out is the marketing and the type of language used in that. So I really think we both want to compliment Salter again for the types of sources she brings together, and how that those conversations and those kinds of subtle nuances even between two reviews within the same magazine, what that does to prompt us today and pulling out those more nuanced and perhaps overlooked discussions about what this game and its legacy really means.

Drew Cook 16:13

Yep, absolutely. And I think since we've sort of promised ourselves we're not going to do a full episode on this, I think the other thing we need to talk about is the "I" methodology that's brought up in the article.

Callie 16:30

And that's "I" as in the personal pronoun. "I" not "aye" like pirates. That common phrase, like "just write it for yourself, write it for you." We clearly see between Briggs and her contemporaries, that with Leisure Suit Larry or in The Leather Goddesses of Phobos that "write it for yourself" or "write the game you want to write" is received and rewarded differently.

Drew Cook 17:14

The truth is, and I hope nobody feels overly sensitive about this, but Infocom achieved tremendous success writing for themselves. And that "self" was white and male and interested in technical matters. And the people who bought those games at the time were largely white men interested in technical matters like myself. Writing for yourself, [writing] the game you want to play would by and large be excellent advice at Infocom but it turned out to be kind of a booby trap for Briggs.

Salter 3

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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SPEAKERS

Callie, Drew Cook

Drew Cook 00:05

I think that may be everything we had on our list to talk about. I would just say in summary that Plundered Hearts decenters the male gaze in ways that are subversive and interesting. I think

this article is a very useful way to revisit some of those early critiques of the game and understand what's been missed in those conversations over the years. Ultimately there's more at stake than just, "do people like it today." I mean, people certainly like it today, but that's not news. People have been liking it since the aughts. What is there to say? How can we identify the legacy of a game like this? You know, how can we identify the ways in which it was trailblazing and momentous? And Psalter says, "feminist game design." What does feminist game design look like? And how did that idea begin to form? Those are all fascinating conversations—important--that need to happen. So I'm sure Callie, you'll have your own things to say in a minute. But for myself, I was very happy that we got a hold of this and that I have had a chance to talk with you about it today.

Callie 01:40

Yeah, absolutely. I appreciate very much how Salter put her argument together and the types of sources that she brought together because I know that I can, you know, really carry her methodology forward in my own reading and interaction with other other games. It was a great experience, [identifying] ways to have these conversations. All right. We really much very much appreciate you tuning in with us today. We look forward to our March episode of Journey and we would love to hear from you if you have any thoughts, feedback or comments related to any of our topics today. We would love to hear them.

Drew Cook 02:25

Yep. As always, we value your mail. If you're trying to play Journey at home and you're struggling getting it to work with Frotz or whatever. You can send me a message. I have some pretty good instructions for getting it to work for you. If you're wanting to play that before the podcast, I can help you out. Again, thanks for tuning in. We'll see you in just a couple of weeks. And Happy Valentine's Day.

Callie 02:54

Yeah, Happy Valentine's Day. Bye.