

Easter Eggs

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Midnight Facts for Insomniacs

Podcast Transcript

**(Note: transcript
consists of episode
outline)**

Today we're talking Easter eggs; not the kind that are hidden by rabbits, but the kind that are hidden by nerds. We're talking about the type of Easter egg that consist of special, secret, hidden content in media—primarily movies and video games—that can be discovered by viewers and

players and make you feel like a cool amateur detective when you find them, or make you feel like a loser who wasted a bunch of time and effort for zero actual payoff.

Most Easter eggs are silly garbage and do not meaningfully contribute to the user experience. But they can be fun!

If you've seen Ready Player One, you've heard the origin story of Easter Eggs. The completely inaccurate origin story of Easter eggs. A swing and a miss. Kind of a frustrating one, because that was a multi-million dollar film, they could have sprung for a fact-checker. The story from ready player one is that the first Easter egg was hidden in an Atari game from 1979 called Adventure, a videogame

with very ornate cover art featuring mazes and dragons and castles, and very primitive gameplay featuring indecipherable chunks of pixels that supposedly represented mazes and dragons and castles. In actuality the supposed "graphics" nothing more than clumsy blocks of color. The game is bizarrely credited as the first graphical videogame and...it's not. There were graphical games before, and some of them were more advanced...to call Adventure primitive would be an insult to all forms of primitiveness; cave paintings were masterpieces compared to this scribble on a digital etch-a-sketch.

Regardless, the game, if you want to call it that, was created for Atari by a programmer named

Warren Robinett. We mentioned on our videogame episode that Atari didn't like to reward or acknowledge their videogame developers via an end-credits title scroll. Because if you roll credits at the end of a game, you're equating video games with movies, and putting game developers on par with directors and artists, which could lead to individual game developers being poached by other companies and the cost of producing video games going up. As you can imagine, developers weren't super thrilled with toiling in obscurity. They wanted credit for their hard work and creativity, they wanted the world to know who was responsible for these flat chunky pixel-blips. Personally I would have

preferred obscurity. I would have been like nope, you can't prove anything. Plausible deniability. But for whatever reason Robinette wanted his name forever associated with underachievement, and he was a big fan of the hidden messages in Beatles records. So unbeknownst to Atari, he created his own hidden message. "The Easter egg is accessed by setting difficulty levels 2 or 3 and first retrieving the Gray Dot from the Black Castle catacombs. The dot is a single pixel object which is invisibly embedded in the south wall of a sealed chamber accessible only with the bridge, and the player must bounce the avatar along the bottom wall to pick it up...The player must bring the dot along with two or more

other objects to the east end of the corridor below the Golden Castle. This causes the barrier on the right side of the screen to blink rapidly, and the player avatar is then able to push through the wall into a new room displaying the words 'Created by Warren Robinett' in text which continuously changes color." Again keep in mind that these castles and bridges and walls *aren't*. There is nothing in the game you would be able to identify as the thing it is supposed to represent unless you were specifically told that it is that thing. Except the keys. They look keyish. So anyway, what a wonderful Easter Egg reward...a name.

At least real Easter eggs usually contain chocolate. This is just a random

signature. Can you imagine if you were on a real easter egg hunt and you opened an Easter egg and there was a note with some dude's name. That's a confession: this is the motherfucker who stole my chocolate.

But the game ended up selling over a million copies, because American teenagers had low expectations in 1980. This was the era of pet rocks. The Easter egg remained hidden for a year, until it was discovered by a 15-year-old kid with a lot of time on his hands and questionable taste in entertainment named Adam Clayton. Clayton promptly sent a letter to Atari informing them of what he had found. like a bitch-ass snitch. Atari assigned programmers to start digging through the

code to find it, and the guy who eventually did quipped that if he were given the freedom to make a change he would have rewritten the code to say "Fixed by Brad Stewart." I like that. But it wasn't fixed by Brad Stewart. In fact, it wasn't fixed at all. Atari's director of consumer software development, Steve Wright, savvily advocated for keeping the code, and to their credit the company followed his advice. Wright actually coined the term in an interview with the magazine *Electronic Games*. "From now on... we're going to plant little Easter eggs like that in the games." And they did, mostly.

So the Easter egg in *Adventure* marked the origin story of the *term* Easter Egg, and

the beginning of an Easter egg tradition. It cemented Easter eggs as a videogame staple. But it wasn't the first videogame Easter egg. It wasn't even the first time a developer had hidden his *name* in a game. That would be Video whizball, a videogame version of the crossfire board game from the 70s. The board game had itself been a version of air hockey in which two children sat across from each other and fired metal ball bearings at the other player's puck. It was a typical 1970s "you'll shoot your eye" out deathtrap scenario. This was a pre-litigious America which did not care about the eyeballs of the nation's children. So In the 1978 videogame version called video whizball, "After playing a

match to completion, both sides must have their square be destroyed by either the other player or by a red square. While both squares are destroyed, the player must go back to the menu to start a new match. The settings for the match must be set to Game 43 with a score of 67 to win. Once this is done, the game will load the field with the words "Reid-Selth" at the center, referring to programmer Brad Reid-Selth. The name is also indestructible."

Another fabulous reward. Not at all a waste of time and energy to curse your screen with an indestructible namedrop.

But while this was the first hidden digital signature in a game, it STILL wasn't the first Easter egg. That

honor goes to hidden content in a much earlier game, 1973s Moonlander, in which a spaceship pilot is tasked with one very specific goal. I'm not sure what the goal is, I should have looked that up.

Probably something to do with mars. I don't know.

Moonlander was created to show off the capabilities of the \$11,000 DEC G40 Vector graphics terminal, a monitor-and-light pen combo designed to display crude two-dimensional graphics that could be manipulated on-screen with the pen. The game was whipped up by contractor Jack Burness in a mere ten days, it's in one color—green lines on a black monitor—and it *still* looks a million times better than that garbage-ass Adventure game. The goal was as advertised, to

land on the moon, and if you played it a while you might notice a strange object on the moon's surface. According to a linked article on critical-hit.com, "If you can perform a successful landing next to it, you'll see your little spaceman get out of his ship and slowly wander towards it, eventually stopping at the main structure, and revealing the author's—wait, it's a McDonald's? It's a fucking McDonald's?" Unquote.

Actually, it was a McDonald's *logo*, they didn't quite have the graphics power to render an actual restaurant. So not only was this the first videogame Easter egg, it was also the first product placement. Thanks, Jack Burness. To be fair Mickey

Dees was not involved and didn't pay for the in-game plug; the Easter egg seems to have been purely intended as a joke from a time when the idea of a McDonald's on the moon seemed silly and ridiculous as opposed to now when it just seems sad and inevitable.

In the videogame Red Faction: Armageddon, beating the game allows you to unlock the ultimate weapon: a pink unicorn named "Mr. Toots" who blows laser-beam rainbows out of his ass.

Some Easter eggs are accidental, and end up spawning intentional Easter eggs down the road. And some bridge the gap between game and film. In the first Star Wars film, 1977's a new Hope,

one of the storm troopers famously bonked his head on the top of a doorway, the part of the entranceway which I recently learned is appropriately called the "head jamb." True story. So stormtroopers can't aim, and they also apparently can't duck. The 2004 Star Wars videogame battlefront, one of my all-time favorite gaming series, includes an homage to the film. In the background of a cut scene, you can watch one of the storm troopers take a header directly into the bottom of a metal staircase. I don't think the bottom of the staircase has a cute name. Toe jam? That's stupid

This one is fun. In the incredibly cheesy and

horribly dated first resident evil game (it looks terrible in retrospect), after saving a character named Jill from a descending ceiling trap, soldier Barry Burton utters the cringeworthy and poorly translated line, "that was too close! you were almost a Jill sandwich." The moment became iconic and in a subsequent zombie game called dead rising, which takes place in a mall, one of the eateries is named "Jill's sandwiches."

Here's another unorthodox Easter egg...a tangible real-world version. "If you inserted the PlayStation Castlevania disc into your CD player you can hear a warning message from protagonist, Alucard, urging you not to continue

listening to the CD. After that you can hear a sweet remixed version of the Castlevania tune which at the time you totally thought was brainwashing you or something"

One of the most famous early PC videogame Easter eggs was in 1994's doom II, during the final boss battle with the "icon of sin." If you had previously entered the "no clip" cheat code, you would find yourself battling the severed, bleeding head of one of doom's creators, John Romero. I guess this was a little bit weird if you're a fan of the guy, but on the other hand if you hated the game, it's super cathartic. That's the only reason I kept playing, was to shoot this motherfucker in that face. Regardless, blast him in the head a

couple times and watch him roar with pain, and then you win. Weird but on-brand

The original Diablo videogame featured a random herd of cows, and this led to a persistent rumor that the game included a hidden cow level that could be accessed via persistently petting specific cows. It turns out this wasn't a rumor but rather a successful trolling effort, which resulted in understandable frustration as players obsessively dragged their mice over a bunch of presumably confused and annoyed digital cows. There isn't a cow level. In THAT game. But developers got wind of the rumor and so they built a legit cow level into Diablo 2. To access it, you

needed to carry around a guy's severed pegleg and toss it into a special portal, which would open the door to...as advertised... Cows. Specifically a massive army of upright bipedal bovines relentlessly--though slowly--pursuing the player while swinging giant axes that they were somehow manipulating with their hooves.

The saddest easter eggs are the ones that no one ever finds, and the worst easter eggs are the ones that no one has found but then are preemptively revealed by their creators in a massive "spoiler alert" moment when they realize that pretty soon no one is going to care enough to keep looking. Combine the worst with the saddest, add in some shameless

promotion, and you get the Arkham City easter egg in 2009's Batman game, Arkham Asylum. The developers wanted to promote the game's upcoming sequel, the aforementioned Arkham City, so they included an entire blueprint of its game map behind a wall in the Warden's secret room. "It's not located on any of the maps. You can't see the weak wall with Batman's detective vision. And you can only blow it up with several applications of explosive foam." So there were no clues or indications that the wall was blow-upable, and unless you were some kind of videogame terrorist going around destroying every building willy nilly, like the anarchist from the Louvre pointlessly vandalizing paintings left

and right, you weren't going to stumble across this shameless product-placement easter egg. Since a promo that no one ever sees doesn't make for a great promo, after 6 months of thirstily waiting for some kind of in-game suicide bomber to expose the blueprint by reducing the entire city to rubble, Rocksteady Studios bit the bullet and just straight up announced the easter egg in a podcast.

Some Easter eggs are more creative than others. Also more sketchy, and invasive. In the popular Konami game metal gear solid, when the protagonist Solid Snake (which could not be more phallic) meets the telepathic character known as psycho mantis, the developers got clever

and honestly pretty creepy. The game actually scans your physical memory card, and if you've played any other Konami games, the Mantis will make comments such as "you like Castlevania, don't you?" Like I said. Clever but also fuck you. What else is it scanning? "You like bukkake porn, don't you?" Another Easter Egg from the metal gear solid series, this time metal gear three, is a little more harmlessly clever. There's a geriatric sniper named "the end," and you have a couple options when you confront him. You can sneak up and murder him, or you can turn off the game, chill for a while, and restart the game, at which point the old man will have died of natural causes.

Let's switch over to movie Easter eggs. We're going to spend less time on movie easter eggs, because most of them are just references to other films or inside jokes, but there are a few that I find especially clever and/or interesting. And we'll start with one that bridges the gap between videogame and film. Any Star Wars buff will be aware of the iconic moment in the first movie, 1977's *A New Hope*, in which a clumsy storm trooper in the background famously bonked his head on the top of a doorway, the part of an entranceway which I recently learned is appropriately called the "head jamb." True story. So stormtroopers can't aim, and they also apparently can't duck. Fast forward 27 years, and the 2004

Star Wars videogame Battlefront--one of my all-time favorite gaming series--includes an homage to the film. In the background of a cut scene, you can watch one of the digital storm troopers take a header directly into the bottom of a metal staircase. I don't think the bottom of the staircase has a cute name. Toe jam? That's stupid. One of the first examples of easter eggs in film may have been unintentional, and is often erroneously credited as the origin of the term easter egg, which we already explained. But that's because it's the most literal of possible Easter eggs. The story goes that when the Rocky horror picture show was being filmed way back in 1975, the cast staged an Easter egg hunt and as

often happens with Easter egg hunts, some of the eggs were never found. This is a thing. I used to run a yearly easter egg hunt at a resort, and even though those kids were candy fiends and scoured the grass like little pint-sized chocolate scarfing vacuum cleaners, for months past April the lawn mower would still be kicking up and crunching plastic eggs that somehow survived the purge. Now the story of the Rocky Horror Easter Egg Hunt may or may not be true, but what is definitely true is that you can spot literal Easter eggs in the movie. One of them is under Frank-N-Furter's throne, another near the elevator, and another in place of a light in the ballroom. Now the idea that none of the camera people,

crewmembers, gaffers, etc. noticed that there was an Easter egg on one of the light fixtures instead of a light? Sketchy. I'm more inclined to believe that these were all intentional part of the decor, but either way it makes for an interesting story and something to look for next time you're in the mood for a gender-bending time-warp.

One of my favorite examples of an Easter Egg that is really just a clever moment that most viewers don't catch: in the movie back to the future, the mall from which Marty McFly travels back in time is called Twin Pines. When he travels pack in time in the racing Delorean, he immediately mows down a pine tree. When he heads "back to the future," you

might notice that the mall has been renamed "Lone Pine Mall." To catch an Easter egg you typically have to be a super fan or especially detail-oriented.

For instance, from Captain America: The Winter Soldier, you're probably familiar with the character played in Marvel films by Samuel L. Jackson, Nick Fury. In the film, Nick Fury's gravestone features a short snippet of a Bible quote from Ezekiel 25:17. You might recognize it. The gravestone reads, "The path of the righteous man..."

Sound familiar? It's the Bible passage quoted by Samuel L. Jackson's hitman character Jules Winnfield in Pulp Fiction right before

he murders Brad. In fact it's the bible passage that Jules claims he *always* quotes before a kill, which, ok. That's very dramatic but also not very practical. I feel like most victims aren't just going to sit still while you orate. Like, "I must request that you not fight back or take any evasive action for the next 50 seconds while I deliver my murder monologue. Respect tradition." But the full biblical passage will probably ring a bell: "The path of the righteous man is beset on all sides by the inequities of the selfish and the tyranny of evil men. Blessed is he who, in the name of charity and good will, shepherds the weak through the valley of the darkness. For he is truly his brother's keeper and the finder of lost children. And I will strike

down upon thee with great vengeance and furious anger those who attempt to poison and destroy my brothers. And you will know I am the Lord when I lay my vengeance upon you." Pretty gutsy for a marvel movie to reference a Tarantino film that features homosexual rape and a gimp.

Speaking of Tarantino, he collaborated with Robert Rodriguez on the film From Dusk Till Dawn—Tarantino wrote and Rodriguez directed--and viewers who were also Tarantino fans might have noticed a cameo by a restaurant. At one point George Clooney picks up takeout from Big Kahuna Burger, which is the same chain from which the aforementioned and soon-to-be-murdered Brad from Pulp Fiction obtained his

burgers and tasty beverage. Big Kahuna Burger is a Super Easter Egg—it actually made its first appearance in Tarantino's 1992's *Reservoir Dogs* and has since become a recurring easter egg in the films of *both* directors: in addition to *Reservoir Dogs*, *Pulp Fiction*, and *From Dusk till Dawn*, it also shows up in *Four Rooms* and *Death Proof*, as well as the *Dusk till Dawn* television series.

Next Easter Egg

Indiana Jones was a collaboration between two cinematic superpowers: it was directed by Steven Spielberg from a story by George Lucas, and throughout their celebrated careers the two have frequently referenced each other's films. One of the most famous

cinematic Easter Eggs of all time: among the ancient Hieroglyphs in Indiana Jones, eagle-eyed viewers can spot both of the star wars droids C-3PO and R2D2. And since the events of Star Wars occurred a long time ago, maybe the director is implying that the droids visited earth in the distant past? C-3PO existed in a galaxy far, far away, so it seems unlikely. But how did the pyramids get built, after all? We didn't have the technology. It was R2D2.

More Lucas/Spielberg crossovers: in Lucas's 1999 abomination Star Wars, the Phantom Menace, in the Galactic Senate scene, three of the gathered alien representatives are ET's from Spielberg's ET: the extra terrestrial. And

similarly, a much less well-known but equally clever cameo: in Spielberg's holocaust epic Schindler's list, when the concentration camp prisoners are being loaded onto traincars, if you pause at just the right moment you'll find, huddled with the doomed prisoners...Jar Jar Binks. That's not true. That would be a travesty.

So Easter eggs can be fun little references and treats for superfans, but they can also be annoyingly meta and forced.

Personally, I think that Ready Player One should represent the deathknell for Easter Eggs, because it's just a disgusting mishmash of not-remotely-clever references. I rewatched it for this episode, just

because it's so notorious for being packed with supposed easter eggs which are really just cameos of every possible pop culture figure that the studio could obtain the rights to feature. Oh look, a battletoad. That's not clever, that's just a battletoad. And I don't even know what those are. I did get occasional stabs of nostalgia at the Iron Giant or a quick glimpse of Marvin the Martian etc., but there was no reason for those characters to be there, there was no thought given to the . It was quantity over quantity. That's not to say that there can't be fun references and that the Easter Eggs in that movie couldn't be clever-- one I noticed without looking it up... when the batmobile skids to a stop during a race, the

sound of its wheels dragging on the metal rails of an above-ground subway is subtly autotuned to the melody of the 1960s Batman TV-Show theme song. That to me is clever, and I didn't catch it the first time I watched the movie. So Easter Eggs can be fun and clever, but they can also be pointless and self-congratulatory.

This was a short one! If we didn't discuss your favorite movie or videogame easter egg, let us know, scroll down in the show notes and join our discord, where we'll all be comparing notes and everyone will be chastising me for all of the great easter eggs I missed. I want to hear your favorites.

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