Interview with Don Daglow re: *Amnesia*

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Preamble

This is an interview with Don Daglow, conducted via email between January 13 and July 2, 2019. Besides being a noted game developer himself, he produced the game Amnesia while at Electronic Arts, which was released in 1986 for the Apple II and other platforms.

This work received ethics approval from the University of Calgary's Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board, file REB16-1235. Both interviewer and interviewee have agreed to release this interview under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported License.[1]

Interview

(Interview questions appear in *italics*.)

Many people are familiar with your Intellivision game Utopia, but of course this was only one of many games you've created or been involved with in one way or another. Please briefly tell the backstory of how you started with game development and eventually wound up at Electronic Arts.

I got into writing computer games in 1971 at Pomona College when a pilot program funded by the Sloan Foundation put a computer terminal in our dormitory. As a grad student and then an instructor at Claremont Graduate University I maintained access

[1] https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/

to the same computer and storage tapes for nine years, which allowed me to create a number of games and other projects.

When I graduated from Pomona in 1974 and entered the workforce there was no real games industry, and I taught elementary, middle school, adult school and graduate school for six years as I worked to launch my career as a professional writer. Throughout this time I kept writing games on the mainframe for fun.

In 1975 I won a playwriting award from the National Endowment for the Humanities, and in 1979 I made my first major fiction sale to a magazine (*The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*), but by the time the novelette was published in April 1982, I was already in the games business and all of my creative energies went there.

In 1980 I had taken on an administrative role in my school district, which was very political. I learned that Mattel was advertising for game programmers for Intellivision and applied. They were initially doubtful that someone could have been writing games for nine years as of 1980, but they hired me. I ended up being Director of the Intellivision game dev team.

When the industry crashed in 1983, Trip Hawkins recruited me into Electronic Arts as one of three producers at the company.

Tell me the story of how you got involved as the producer of Amnesia when you were at EA.

Amnesia had previously been under development with the games wing of a book publisher (and I've forgotten which one). When that company exited the games industry relatively early in development I was connected to Charles Kreitzberg of Cognetics Inc. in Princeton Junction, NJ.

Charlie had built a text adventure engine, and had a script from Tom Disch for the game that they were implementing. Infocom's games had started to fade around this time, but I rationalized that this was because they came from one set of writers who worked together. I thought that a writer as unique as Disch (whose work I already knew and admired) would stand out and pump new life into the genre, so I signed the game.

I had done a lot of work with text parsers in games and non-game apps in the 1970s and early '80s so I gave the Cognetics engine a test drive and recognized it was excellent.

As producer I supervised development, did a lot of playtest and feedback, primarily working with Charlie, Kevin Bentley and the team at Cognetics. We also had a couple of meetings with Tom Disch. Shelley Day, Roland Kippenhan and David Koch also worked on the game as associate/assistant producers at EA on different versions.

I don't actually remember who introduced me to Charles Kreitzberg, whether it came directly from an external source or he had already contacted EA and was then passed to me. From there I championed the game internally and prepared the internal pitch that gained its approval. If there is any blame for believing we could resurrect text

adventures when we couldn't, I'm the one who made the acquisition decision, though I had to get budget and executive signoffs.

As a producer of the game, what jobs did you have to perform?

Under EA's system the producer was the direct supervisor and manager of the project (looking outward) and the internal champion and coordinator for the project. We supervised the creation of everything from the game to the packaging, in each case working with really talented people.

My least favorite part of the job on Amnesia was having to supervise cutting so much content when we could only get budget approval for two floppy disks.

My most favorite part came when Tom was working on the screenplay for The Brave Little Toaster, the novelette that was published in *Fantasy & Science Fiction* in 1980, two years before my novelette was in the same magazine. He was on deadline for the project and very busy, so when we needed some extra text for the security check software (to prevent piracy) I wrote the short sections "in the style of Thomas Disch" as drafts he could work from to understand what we were doing. He approved them verbatim, which to me was a huge honor. They're 4 drops in a lake of material created by Tom so they're insignificant to the work, but it meant a lot to me to have Tom's approval.

Shelley Day is credited as the associate producer on the game's "album cover." What tasks fell to her?

Associate and assistant producers supported us, and although they did a lot of admin and paperwork tasks their most important duties were a lot of playtesting – not in the QA sense, but in the, "how does this game flow and stay fun?" sense. We would then have lively discussions both internally and externally on tweaks, adjustments, issues, problems etc. Those discussions then extended to discussions with the team and we'd decide different things to try. Different APs were credited on different computer system versions, but Shelley Day, Roland Kippenhan and David Koch all deserve credit on the game.

Describe the stage of development the game was at when you first became involved.

Tom had written the script and the Cognetics team was mid-stream in implementing it in their engine. Early parts of the game were already playable.

When I contacted you for this interview, you said that you loved working on Amnesia. Why is that?

To do a concise list:

- Disch was a wonderful writer and on those occasions when I spoke to him directly was easy to work with and kick around ideas. He was never difficult or defensive and showed respect for the people around him.

- Charlie Kreitzberg, Kevin Bentley and the team were likewise a pleasure to work with – when we discussed issues it felt like we were all one team just focused on building a great game, without a lot of egos in the room. They are very intelligent guys, but highly collaborative.
- I loved – and still love – the idea of a literary text adventure, and Disch's unique writing style.

There is a script for the game available online.[2] *Is this authentic, and if so, who wrote it and how was it used during game development?*

Yes, it looks authentic and I'm glad to see that at least one of the many versions survived. The lion's share of it was written by Tom Disch himself, including virtually all of the narrative. Some of the interaction and game cues and so on were edited by Charlie and the guys at Cognetics, and to a much lesser degree by me. In playtesting we were all constantly tuning what user text entries would be accepted by the parser.

This script has several references[3] *to "Don." Is it correct to assume that you're "Don," and these are references to suggestions you made?*

That's probably the case, although it's too long ago for me to remember those details. Might be something I suggested directly, something I discussed with Charlie and that he then changed, something I passed along that included feedback from others as well, etc. All of the above kinds of interactions happened at different times, and the APs were also involved in the back and forth. Since this was before the Internet we did a lot of talking through things on the phone.

More generally, what input did you have in terms of the gameplay, implementation, or the story itself?

I don't remember specifics any more, but we'd play through the portions of the game that could be completed, over and over again as we received each updated version. I'd have a yellow pad or similar way to write things down and note comments as I played. I'd then share those notes with Charlie and Kevin. As Shelley and Roland got involved they would do so as well.

Development doesn't always go smoothly. Were there any problems during production of Amnesia?

The one that really sticks in my mind is the need to fit on two floppy disks. Some of the notes in the published script may relate to trying to get the last 50 words out of the word count so we could just fit it in. Like most games, we were also under a lot of schedule pressure.

Sherry Herrgott is credited as the test coordinator for Amnesia. How was the game tested before release?

[2] `http://ascii.textfiles.com/images/amnesia_manuscript.pdf`
[3] Pages 394, 401, 404, and 413.

Yes, EA's QA function was still in its early days at that time and Sherry led the bug testing on the game. Also a good person who was valuable to have on the project.

Writers can be notoriously quirky. How did you find working with Thomas M. Disch? Tell me about some interactions that you had with him.

We didn't get to spend a lot of time with Tom because he was so pinned down on Brave Little Toaster, but when we were together he was not at all quirky – in fact, quite the opposite, he was very professional and collaborative. His writing, however, was always absolutely strikingly unique. When you read Disch you're never reading the same old kind of story told the same old way.

My favorite memory of Tom is that we were at a trade show somewhere – maybe the 1986 CES in Chicago? I told him that I was very proud to have had the chance to work with him on the game, and that even after all the trials and tribulations (the disk cuts) I was proud of what he tried to do. He thanked me and gave me a big hug.

I recognize that, especially after the cuts, Amnesia has flaws that we all would have liked to fix. But the quality of the writing in my eyes remains compelling.

There were several people apparently involved with development at Cognetics. Kevin Bentley was the programmer; James Terry developed the "King Edward" development system that Bentley used; Charles (Charlie) Kreitzberg was a founder of Cognetics; Pat Reilly was working on a Fraggle Rock game at the same time. Did you ever all physically meet? How did interactions usually take place? (Also, if you happen to know what role Lis Romanov played – she's pictured in the game's album cover – it'd be nice to document that.)

Those credits are all correct. I spent a lot of time both in person and on the phone with Charlie and Kevin, and James was frequently making engine fixes for us. Pat also had tech knowledge that helped, though I've forgotten the details. I feel awful to say that I remember that Lis Romanov did a significant block of work, but I don't remember the specifics. As you can hear, this was a "no jerks" project!

The game's album cover also says "Dedicated to Glen Hartley." Who was Glen Hartley, and who made this dedication?

That came from Tom or Charlie, and as I recall he was Tom's literary agent. I could be wrong about that – I had only a handful of interactions with him if I'm remembering the right person, and he, too, was a collaborative part of the team.

The game comes with what (in Infocom terms) would be described as "feelies." Besides the usual manual and platform-specific instruction insert, there was a "Street and Subway Map to Manhattan" and "The X-Street Indexer," the latter being a code wheel for copy protection. Whose idea were the feelies and how did they come about?

Those were for the code wheel that was used to prevent people who made illegal copies from getting beyond a certain part of the game. As noted above, I wrote the short paragraphs that went with them. Copies of games being sold and passed around in

those days were a big part of the market, and publishers/devs never made any money off those copies.

Arguably, Amnesia came out fairly late for a text-only adventure game. What are your thoughts on that, and what do you think EA saw as the market for this game?

As it turned out, we were too late, and the marketplace had concluded that games without graphics were outdated. As noted, I believed that great, unique writing from an award-winning author would find a market, but I was wrong. I pitched that vision to the company and got the budget signoffs to do the project, because EA at that time was willing to take reasonable risks and liked doing things that were different.

Do you know how well the game sold?

I don't know numbers, but I know it didn't do well. It was less than 50K units because it did not receive any sales awards.

Beyond sales, how was the game received, and do you think it got a fair reception?

I recall some magazine reviews that were very good and some that amounted to "nice try," but there was not a lot of press coverage.

Do you recall any other stories about Amnesia's production that you haven't told so far?

I was in Princeton Junction NJ in 1985 working with Charlie, Kevin and the team when Hurricane Gloria skirted the New Jersey coast and it was a very wet and windy 24 hours!

One other note: Charlie Kreitzberg started talking to me about text markup (à la hypertext and HTML) and showed me how it worked. That was 1985, long before more than just a few researchers were interested in the space. The guy is a visionary.