



Botany Manor: a cozy game unveiling the inequalities in academia

Interview with Laure De Mey and Kitt Byrne

Botany Manor is a multiplatform game developed by the English indie studio Balloon Studios and published by Whitethorn Games. Initially released in April 2024, the game was well received by both gamers and critics.

Set in a 19th-century British manor, *Botany Manor* puts you in the role of Arabella Greene, a retired botanist researching plants for her book 'Forgotten Flora'. The game revolves around investigation and puzzle-solving, allowing Arabella to grow plants from seeds and gain a deeper understanding of their biology. While all the plants in the game are fantastical, they draw inspiration from nature, making botanical elements a central theme. As you

progress, you'll also uncover Arabella's past, her scientific career, and her experiences navigating the male-dominated world of academia.

A game infused with science and academia? That certainly piqued our interest. After completing *Botany Manor* (and loving it – we should disclose that bias here), we reached out to the team behind the game with some burning questions. In the end, we scored a double interview with creative director and programmer Laure De Mey and game designer and 2D artist Kitt Byrne.

You'll find their answers below, marked with their respective initials (LDM and KB).



Please note that the interview contains spoilers for *Botany Manor*, so we recommend finishing the game before reading further.

What inspired you to create *Botany Manor*? Was there a particular event, book, or figure in the field of botany that sparked the idea for this game?

LDM: I first came up with the idea for the game when visiting a stately home in England. There are so many games set in manor houses that have a horror or fighting theme, and I realised that I would like to play a game where the player gets to explore a place like that in a relaxing way. I was also very inspired growing up playing the *Tomb Raider* games, and specifically Lara Croft's manor.

The botany theme came about more organically as I was developing the idea further. A visit to Down House – the home of Charles Darwin – really furthered my idea of a dedicated individual who would use every corner of their home to further their research.

Someone I was particularly inspired by is Marianne North, and her extensive body of botanical paintings, which I was able to enjoy during a visit to Kew Gardens. In researching her, I discovered more about how much women have contributed to the science of botany and how at certain times in the past they have been excluded from academia, along with working class or amateur scientists.

In the game, players can cultivate various types of plants with specific needs, ranging from somewhat normal to fantastical. Did you draw inspiration from real-world plants for the in-game content? If so, which ones?

LDM: Yes, although there is a fantastical element to the game (plants don't generally grow instantly!). I felt passionate about always referencing a real life, natural example as inspiration for the plants in the game.

For example, the Ash Plume, which needed fire to germinate the seed and a specific smoke to encourage blooming, is based on pyrophyte plants like the Pine Lily.

KB: The Pixie Tears, which requires glucose rich soil to grow due to its lack of chlorophyll, bears a resemblance to Ghost Plant (*Monotropa uniflora*). The Springdance Shrub responds to rhythmic music or vibrations nearby, and this was inspired by the theory that beeswing vibrations can cause a response in a plant during pollination. There are of course more inspirations for the other plants but we'll let players discover and research those for themselves.

LDM: We also wanted to include plants that might be considered weeds, because as lovers of nature we care about rewilding and treat nature as a whole, beautiful ecosystem, instead of only selectively growing attractive plants.



Is there a particular plant in the game that is a favourite or that you are especially proud of?

KB: I keep changing my mind but my current favourite is the Nightfall. To create the visual concept, I looked at night time flowering plants, so the leaf shape is inspired by the Fishbone Cactus (*Disocactus anguliger*). I also love the lore in the game surrounding this plant.

LDM: My personal favourite plant is the Sapphire Gloom, a misunderstood mushroom that grows on trees. It was inspired by the Hazel Glove, a fungus that typically grows on hazel trees and consumes the



harmful Glue Crust fungus from their bark. From a visual point I also really love the blue colours of the Sapphire Gloom!

What kind of research went into developing the game's botanical elements and in creating its "Victorian naturalist" setting?

LDM: We undertook all sorts of research during the development of the game. This included visits to historic houses to observe the furnishings, equipment, and surface patterns, as well as lots of book-based research to learn about the history of botany and what life would have been like for our protagonist, Arabella.

KB: We created a timeline including the key developments in botany, and how this would have influenced Arabella and also her grandmother who taught Arabella botany as a child. Historic books and articles provided illuminating sources including John Lindley's statements about excluding women from botany in order for it to be taken seriously as a scientific pursuit. We found *Flora Domestica* by Elizabeth Kent, and learned about how she initially had to publish her work anonymously.

Throughout the game, we find letters that tell us more about the protagonist Arabella and her world. Such items are commonly used by games to achieve this, but in *Botany Manor*, it is a perfect fit. Correspondence between naturalists was very common, with Darwin's letters being a prime example in Biology. Did you read through some published letters to get ideas for the game?

KB: Yes, this was one of the most valuable resources we had for developing the narrative in the game. In particular, the letters and writings of Maria Jacson that we discovered in the immensely helpful book: *Cultivating Women, Cultivating Science, Flora's Daughters and Botany in England, 1760-1860*, by Ann Shteir.

Although not specific to botany, we also found the letters of Dr Agnes Bennett to her female colleagues and students at the Edinburgh Medical College for Women in the 1890s to be of great value. The supportive tone these women employed during such a challenging time for women in the field was a great inspiration.

Botany Manor captures very well many aspects of academia, from research and discovery to more unsavoury ones that we will get to later. Did anyone on the team have previous experience working in academia?

KB: I had a very brief moment working at a museum but other than that, no. However, we discovered many parallels to some of the hurdles that certain people face working in the games industry. We also reached out to friends and family who do work in present-day academia to gather their experiences and input on this theme.

LDM: I also have not worked directly in academia, but having a computer science background and working in the games industry definitely gave me some experiences and challenges to look back upon for inspiration.

Returning to the in-game correspondence, we learn that Arabella participated in scientific expeditions and fieldwork, but her knowledge and achievements were not recognized, except by a few close collaborators. This mirrors the reality faced by

women in academia back then – a famous example being British naturalist (and coolest palaeontologist ever) Mary Anning. Inequalities and lack of recognition for women (and minority groups) still plague academia today. The representation of this reality in the game is spot on, which is why we asked about past experiences in academia. How did you manage to tell this story so well?

LDM: I think we can credit this to a combination of factors: the sources we found during our research, and our own experiences working in an industry that doesn't do as well as it should in removing barriers to particular people from less advantageous backgrounds.

KB: When developing the narrative, we recorded all of the examples of discrimination or lack of recognition that we gathered from research, friends and our own experiences. From there we edited down to a few key moments that captured the tone and frustration of doing good work that gets overlooked for a seemingly unrelated arbitrary reason. It has been really validating to hear players empathising with that feeling when they play the game.





Botany Manor ends with Arabella's book not being published. As researchers, we must say that hits really close to home. Why did you choose to end the game that way?

LDM: I knew I wanted the game to end this way right from the very beginning, because to me it was the only ending that would be true to the time. Many women's works didn't get published back then, and even to this day important works are found to be wrongly credited to someone's brother or husband. I also felt the link to Arabella's 'Forgotten Flora' would be stronger if she is, among many other women, forgotten about. On top of that, being recognised publicly is not the most important thing in life, and eventually Arabella managed to create her legacy in a different way.

KB: I was passionate about this ending when I learned during development about Olive Dame Campbell. She was a folklorist who broke tradition and attended college in 1900, then spent years collecting folk songs in Appalachia while her husband was conducting social research there. Ultimately her work was published in *English Folk*

Songs from the Southern Appalachians, by Cecil Sharp and Olive D. Campbell, in 1917. However, only Cecil Sharp's name remains in contemporary discourse around folk music, an injustice that inspired the 2000 film *Songcatcher*. Olive went on to found the John C. Campbell folk school in North Carolina (named after her late husband) – a non-competitive school dedicated to improving the quality of life of local residents through crafts and traditional skills. That school still exists to this day, and it seemed like a fitting end for Arabella to also find an alternative way to bestow her passion and research to her community.

What advice would you give to aspiring game developers who want to incorporate a pinch of science into their games?

KB: Don't be afraid of doing some deep dive scientific research, and a great place to start is books written on a specific topic because they have done most of the work for you. You might be surprised at how many fans come out of the woodwork to appreciate those efforts!

LDM: I always say I am a pedantic game designer, and I try to stay as true to real-life physics as possible. That said, it's okay to bend those rules a little bit for the sake of fantasy and excitement, just try to be consistent in how you do that. In *Botany Manor* we included fantastical plants, but all the other parts of the research were very grounded and logical (if a little simplified), to foster a feeling of authenticity.

Do you have any take-home message you would like the players to get from *Botany Manor*?

KB: For me the message is about not giving up, and taking pride in your own achievements no matter how small. Even if we can't achieve some lofty ambitions, we can still make a difference to one another like Arabella does by opening her school.

LDM: I echo the above, though I also wanted to try and find a way to help people understand how it feels to be overlooked, misjudged or underestimated, so that, if they find themselves in a position to make a difference, they can make a difference and prevent that from happening to people like Arabella.

FURTHER READING

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ABOUT THE INTERVIEWEES

Kitt Byrne: I'm a game artist and game designer working at Balloon Studios. Previous games I've worked on include *Botany Manor* (Balloon Studios), *The Mermaid's Tongue* (SFB Games), *Gibbon: Beyond the Trees* (Broken Rules), and *Snipperclips Plus* (SFB Games). I've been part of BAFTA nominated and Apple Design Award winning game teams, and most recently was selected as a BAFTA Breakthrough for 2023. I enjoy creating art, narratives and puzzles the most in my work on games. I'm not nearly as good as Arabella at keeping plants alive but always have succulents and houseplants growing at home, with my favourite being *Oxalis triangularis*. I also have a soft spot for liverworts because they are so unusual looking and seem to be overlooked and treated as weeds most of the time. My favourite game at the moment is *Flock* – another science inspired game about observing and documenting fantastical creatures.

Laure De Mey: I founded Balloon Studios and most recently created and led the development team on *Botany Manor*, our debut game. Prior to this, I worked at Ustwo Games, the studio behind acclaimed titles like *Monument Valley* and *Assemble with Care*. I'm originally from Belgium, and I honed my skills as a software engineer before moving to the UK. I was named a BAFTA Breakthrough talent in 2021. My absolute favourite games tend to be very grounded and immersive, such as *Return of the Obra Dinn*, *Eastshade* and *The Forgotten City*. The game I played most recently was *Grunn*, a bit spookier than I usually would go for but I got really sucked into it anyway!