History’s first Easter egg

Rodrigo B. Salvador

Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa.

Email: salvador.rodrigo.b@gmail.com

Any gamer worth of his/her salt is well acquainted with the term “Easter egg”. It designates any sort of secret message or feature (or even inside jokes) hidden in a video game or any other kind of software. The name is obviously based on the egg hunt game that many children enjoy during Easter.

Nowadays, Easter eggs are everywhere, having spread from games and computer software to comics, TV shows, and movies. Some would even argue that they have gone too far and that we have reached a point where Marvel’s films have so many Easter eggs that they risk overtaking the main plot. Regardless, Easter eggs are something fun, that help to bring more color to any work, and are an important part of present pop culture; for instance, they are the very backbone of the novel Ready Player One. Thus, I would like to explore here the very first Easter egg in History. But first, let us see when the term was first applied.

ADVENTURE

The early history of video games is a little more dystopian than most would expect. Atari Inc. was one of the major names in the industry back in the 1970’s. The games it developed and published were very influential, but changes in the company during the late 1970’s led to some critical changes. Anonymity was to become the norm at Atari: programmers would not be credited in their creations anymore, for fear that rival companies would identify and “target” them, luring them away with higher salaries (and maybe a nicer working environment).

One of Atari’s game developers, Joseph Warren Robinett Jr. (born 1951), was then working on a game called Adventure (released in 1979–1980). When Robinett heard that programmers would not be credited, he decided to credit himself in the game. He did so by hiding the message “Created by Warren Robinett” inside a secret room in the game. Or, in Robinett’s own words:

“Atari would not give public credit to game designers. This was right after Atari had been acquired by Warner Communications. It was a power play to keep the game designers from getting recognition and therefore more bargaining power. So I created a secret room that was really hard to find, and hid my signature in it. I didn’t tell anybody (this was a hard secret to keep to myself) and let Atari
manufacture a few hundred thousand cartridges and ship them around the world.” — Robinett (in Conelly, 2003).

Steve Wright, Atari’s director of software development, had a moment of brilliant insight and pushed for the company to keep the message in the game. By his rationale, this hard-to-find secret would give players an extra reason to play the game, because it would be fun like Easter egg hunts. And just like that, the name “Easter egg” entered gaming culture: Atari decided to include Easter eggs in all their games and, by now, they have become a staple of the industry.

Robinett’s secret room was indeed not easy to find: the player had to collect an invisible item in the castle (a 1-pixel object now known as “the Grey Dot”) and use it to open a secret chamber deep in the catacombs. There, the player would find Robinett’s message, written in flashing text.

After the game was released, Robinett kept his secret, but eventually an American teenager found the message and contacted Atari. The company at first thought of removing it, but this would be absurdly expensive. However,

THE FIRST EASTER EGG

Despite Robinett’s message being the one that gave rise to the name “Easter egg”, it was not actually the first one we know of. The very first Easter egg in gaming history was only very recently discovered: the message “Hi, Ron!” in the arcade game Starship 1 (Atari, 1977), programmed by Ron Milner.

However, given that many arcade games were released prior to Starship 1, it is very likely that even older Easter eggs might be found in the future. But they will not be as old as the very first Easter egg recorded in human History. For this, we need to travel some millennia back in time.
UNCREDITED ARTISTS

Art in Ancient Egypt typically served religious or state purposes and very often, both of these realms were linked. Egyptian art was thus more functional than anything else and several artists were involved in the production of any single piece of art: from draftsmen and carvers to illustrators, painters, and scribes.

Like in Atari, these ancient artists worked in anonymity, never being credited. This was, however, the norm, and was not seen as an affront to an artist’s creativity and personal work (as it was during the early days of video games). Even so, one\(^1\) of these ancient artists decided to credit himself. His name was Senenmut.

Senenmut was born a commoner, but in a literate family, which would put him in the upper 5% of the population. He entered the service of Queen Hatshepsut, of the 18\(^{th}\) Dynasty, most likely when she was still the wife of Pharaoh Thutmose II. After the king’s death, Hatshepsut became regent while Thutmose III

\(^1\) The only other artist credited in Ancient Egypt is Imhotep, vizier of Pharaoh Djoser (3\(^{rd}\) Dynasty). Imhotep was responsible for building the first pyramid, the “Step Pyramid” of Saqqara (2667–2648 BCE). Later, Imhotep was remembered as a great sage. Many centuries later, during the Late Period, he was worshipped as an actual deity, the patron of Medicine.
was still too young to rule the country. She then became *de facto* Pharaoh (even after Thutmose III reached adulthood) and ruled Egypt from circa 1478 to 1458 BCE.

Senenmut obviously gained importance during this time: he was the steward of Hatshepsut and the tutor of her daughter Neferure, a highly-regarded position. He worked as administrator of Hatshepsut’s building projects and was also an astronomer and architect. Eventually, Senenmut would hold more than 80 titles, which included “Only friend of the Pharaoh”. The obvious important position of Senenmut and this seeming favoritism led some archeologists (based more on hopeful gossip than actual scientific investigation) to imply he was Hatshepsut’s lover.

As an architect, Senenmut’s most remarkable project was Hatshepsut’s mortuary temple at Deir el-Bahari (in ancient Thebes, modern Luxor), on the West bank of the Nile close to the Valley of the Kings. The temple, also known as “Djeser-Djeseru” (“Holy of Holies”), is one of Ancient Egypt’s most beautiful buildings, designed in several different levels linked by ascending ramps, located against the cliff’s face. It would have been even more awe-inspiring back in Hatshepsut’s day, where a sphinx-lined causeway led visitors from the valley to its grandiose entrance, marked by large pylons.

Mortuary temple of Hatshepsut. Photo by W. Hagens (2010); image retrieved from Wikimedia Commons.
The curious thing is that, going against the practice of all prior (and later) Egyptian artists and craftsmen, Senenmut decided to sign his *magnum opus*. He hid his signature behind one of the temple’s main doors: his name and an image of himself.

![Senenmut's signature: a relief with his image and name.](image)

We will never know why Senenmut decided to do this, but we can imagine that, given how remarkable a building the mortuary temple is, anyone would feel inclined to get recognition for it. So there you go, when Robinett decided to hide his own signature in a castle’s secret chamber, little did he know that a precedent had already been set 3,500 years ago: Senenmut’s Easter egg (not that Easter was already a thing back then, but you get the idea).

**REFERENCES**


ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Rodrigo Salvador is a zoologist/paleontologist and was trying really hard to write something more biologically inclined. Instead, he ended up writing his third consecutive article about Ancient Egypt. And now he will be off playing Assassin's Creed Origins.