Media Reviews

Herbarium as Occult Archive: Feminine Botanical Knowledge in Digital Games

Review by Stacey Hoffer

Throughout the nineteenth century, herbariums functioned as occult archives, or spaces where botanical knowledge operated as both scientific object and enchantment. While magical properties might appear at odds with scientific ones, this dual nature created productive tensions rather than simple contradictions. Twenty-first-century game design teams, including the creative forces behind *Strange Horticulture* (Bad Viking 2022), *Botany Manor* (Balloon Studios 2024), and *Potion Craft* (niceplay games 2021), have focused on this liminal cultural space of enchantment and empiricism. But before analyzing how these games do so, I would like to address more of the cultural context that makes their existence possible.

The herbarium as occult archive navigated not only tensions between scientific objectivity and mystical contexts, but also between feminine empowerment and patriarchal containment. Women participated actively in nineteenth-century botanical culture, creating illustrated albums and pressing specimens. Yet their work regularly crisscrossed the boundaries between scientific expertise and enforced aesthetic performance. Although societal pressures against their names in print kept their contributions anonymous, women frequently contributed to the scientific field as illustrators, botanists, and specimen collectors. Victorian gender ideology encouraged this participation, positioning women as naturally suited to botanical study, either through their alignment with natural landscapes or their supposed emotional sensitivity and moral refinement. However, as Diane Purkiss suggests in *The Witch in History* (2003), aligning women with plants and nature did not necessarily lead to feminist liberation; instead, this symbolic alignment both

constrained and enabled their botanical expertise. Women's botanical studies operated on a basis of containment, where botanical practice remained safely decorative or confined to gardens and glass houses. These practices also remained within the context of enchantment, prioritizing symbolism, sentiment, or setting over scientific accuracy. Their work often underwent commodification as accomplishment rather than expertise, a decorative hobby rather than scientific study. Even when women prioritized botanical study, they practiced in isolation from professional institutions that wielded actual scientific authority.

This tension between opportunity and constraint manifested in everything, such as botanical illustration, where women resisted scientific strictures by drawing plants in their natural habitats. There are also darker historical precedents like Giulia Tofana's "Aqua Tofana," a cosmetic created by a supposed perfumer who instead provided poisonous expedients for abusive husbands, linking feminine botanical expertise with both agency and danger. The herbarium as occult archive represents how these values culminate in the contradictory spaces where nineteenth-century women's genuine botanical knowledge existed alongside aesthetic performance.

Contemporary games like *Strange Horticulture*, *Botany Manor*, and *Potion Craft* also participate in this tradition, their cozy aesthetics and puzzle mechanics echoing the nineteenth-century tension between botanical mastery and enforced domestication, between plants as objects of serious study and plants as vehicles for feminized enchantment. *Strange Horticulture* casts players as the owner of a plant shop in England's Lake District, where over sixteen days they identify occult flora for customers, cross-referencing botanical descriptions against a large compendium. The game constrains the player behind the counter, keeping them isolated in studying the compendium. The player's agency, limited to providing delicate plants as commodities for sale, nevertheless relies on an enchanted relationship with plants and their

mysteries. *Botany Manor* follows Arabella, a Victorian botanist solving plant-based puzzles within her ancestral estate to cultivate extinct species while navigating systematic professional exclusion. She sends letters, publishes papers, and ultimately creates community in isolation, converting her manor into a school for natural science. *Potion Craft* positions the player as a medieval alchemist managing a potion shop, experimenting with ingredients on an alchemical map to discover recipes for customers ranging from healers to poisoners, reducing botanical knowledge primarily to resource management and economic exchange.

As sites where the herbarium as occult archive illustrates tensions in a gendered context, these games negotiate the structural contradiction of feminine botanical knowledge: as a potentially dangerous tool for agency, it must somehow be contained within domesticated safety. While the shopkeepers in *Strange Horticulture* and *Potion Craft* remain safe behind the counter, their plants contribute to furthering conspiracies, cultist activities, and alchemical discoveries with widespread impacts on the people living in their communities. By contrast, in *Botany Manor* the female scientist locked safely behind the garden gate sends letters, publishes papers, and continues pursuing botanical knowledge. Perhaps it is telling *Botany Manor* features the only explicitly female player character, with all the inherent containment and isolation that gendering entails. Whether blurring, reinforcing, or exploring boundaries, these games reflect how the herbarium as an occult archive continues to resist simple binaries. Instead, upon close inspection, these tensions blossom into complexities as magnificent as they are mysterious.

***Strange Horticulture*: Enchanted Agency Through Cozy Horror**

Strange Horticulture is a cozy horror game, mixing puzzles and adventures with a horizontal core mechanic where players pass plants or elixirs across the screen to patrons of a small

apothecary. Applying Carolyn Miller's genre theory, where genre is as genre does, the cozy horror genre domesticates potential threats into manageable, familiar routines. *Strange Horticulture* creates an aesthetic where supernatural threats are domesticated into daily ritual. Ancient folklore operates through familiar customer service exchanges, and mystical confrontations are prepared for with methodical care, like tending a plant. A study in contrasts, the herbarium juxtaposes mundane shop management against menacing, underlying occult mysteries. Elements like looking up and identifying plants create ludic humdrum, starkly contrasting their supernatural results.

As the owner of a plant shop in England's Lake District, the narrative spans sixteen days. During this time, players identify flora based on descriptions, cross-referencing plants against a large compendium (the archive). Sometimes new plants come via map coordinates or cryptic clues. The lush language in the game serves an occult function, with names such as "Lady of Summer" and "Forest Camphry" contrasting more ominous appellations like "Devil's Nightcap" and "Widow's Woe." In this way, *Strange Horticulture* suggests that the mystical has always been part of rural life, hidden in plain sight among herbs, maps, and the quiet rhythms of a small English town. Here, the game suggests, a knowledgeable herbalist might bind the supernatural threat, take mystical control, or join a cult's ritual depending on inclination. Either way, it's just another Thursday.

As a site recovering the dangerous qualities Victorian domestication denies, *Strange Horticulture* achieves success through a complex synthesis. The customer's requests, aligned against other requests, considered against specimens, maps, and the underlying narrative, create a web where the player must navigate multiple clues to access the story and push the narrative forward. This complexity illustrates the layered way the herbarium as occult archive functions to enchant while simultaneously achieving results with some predictability. Echoing the life-and-

death stakes apothecaries participated in during previous centuries, this game not only demonstrates how ethical agency functions in these scenarios, but also how pressure is put on the proprietor navigating these demands.

The key mechanic differentiating *Strange Horticulture*, aside from aesthetic choices and the engaging secret-society-ridden storyline, is the "mind shattering" innovation. If a player incorrectly identifies a plant more than three times, then they must solve a quick physical puzzle to metaphorically put themselves back together. Successful navigation and negotiation, then, becomes a method in which players access self-determination and self-confidence. This recovers the link between isolated, solitary study and agency. For better or worse, the herbarium as an occult archive creates an interconnected power structure, with the player apothecary at the center in this story. Careful reading reveals this as an illusion, however, as the player's agency relies on the customers and their trust in the apothecary's archival expertise.

Bypassing the male-dominated scientific fields of biology and botany, the game designers instead create a symbolic language of their own. The recoded and renamed plants in *Strange Horticulture* force the apothecary to complete the compendium through trial and error and identification, echoing the process by which plants acquired symbolic meaning in floriography. The game's herbarium functions more along these lines than Linnaean classification categories. In *Good Observers of Nature: American Women and the Scientific Study of the Natural World, 1820-1885* (2007), Tina Gianquitto describes how floriography "neatly reduced the diversity of nature to simple associations" and "exploited the emotional and devotional aspects of nature study" (1). But she continues to say how, even within this divine context, women acknowledged floriography's limitations, both as scientific and symbolic systems. Rather, as science progressed, the enchanted and rational world would continuously intersect.

As a response navigating these inherent tensions, *Strange Horticulture* presents a context where theological presence remains absent. The "transcendent" framework Charles Taylor describes in *A Secular Age* (2007) is nowhere to be found in the narrative. There is no *Strange Horticulture* advisory board, no God overseeing moral order, no religious authority structuring ethics. The game presents what Taylor would call an "immanent" enchantment, where plants possess inherent spiritual power. A priest never comes to the counter to purchase herbs for blessing or banishing, although notably, an occult priestess does, as does her chosen virgin sacrifice. These agents without religious containment operate in an ethical gray area. The choice, in all its ethical complexity, relies solely on the player to support or deter the cult's actions, either saving or condemning the sacrifice to her fate. Likewise, although the player remains buffered by the screen, the plants within the game act more like Taylor's divine spirits, animistic forces rather than agents of a deity, impacting the characters like malevolent spirits deployed by the cosmos without theological scaffolding. Therefore, the player and the characters offer an enchanted context for the herbarium as an occult archive. Each plant represents a means toward an end, whether nefarious like Aqua Tofana or inscrutable, like obscure floriographic messages with ambivalent meaning. Either way, it reveals the aesthetic enchantment for a digital age still grappling with questions concerning ethics, containment, and consequences for genuine social agency.

***Botany Manor*: Containment and Isolation as Scientific Practice**

In contrast to the wider world in *Strange Horticulture*, *Botany Manor* shows how female scientists conducted research, even when isolated and excluded from the scientific community. Instead, *Botany Manor*'s Arabella pursues research invisibly. Likewise, the player never encounters a character sketch. Instead, the character achieves results through actions. Piecing

together the puzzles each plant offers within the domestic space of the main character's ancestral home requires navigating the different names that plants and people take within different contexts. For instance, as the player solves puzzles, a new space becomes available. For one of these puzzles, the initials for the lock to the master bedroom requires the mother's maiden name, not her married name.

Identity becomes ambiguous, then, in this game with its remarkable reproduction of Victorian women's systematic scientific exclusion and, as a result, isolation. One of the narrative's climactic moments features a male professor claiming credit for a new plant discovery, which the player encounters and then pieces together. The professor remains credited, while the actual scientist (Arabella) remains an obscure amateur, barred from the field. While the setting certainly creates an enchanted aesthetic, the narrative's historical accuracy establishes its engagement with documented rather than romanticized Victorian botanical practice. In her feminist analysis of plant aesthetics from the last four centuries, Nazila Jahangir Anbardan carefully illustrates how women participated in natural science, especially through botanical illustration, although they frequently were not credited for their work. Rather, in explaining the relationship between art and science in this time period, Anbardan suggests these women were treated as "tools" or mere "ornaments" to the texts rather than scientists in their own right (57).

Botany Manor shows how this (literal) marginalization, anonymization, and isolation could impact women's scientific work. However, women botanical scientists' and illustrators' reconciliation of the subjective elements and the scientific objectivity clearly shows in their work. For example, Anbardan describes how, scientifically, plants were often illustrated without their natural environments. By contrast, women often resisted this stricture and instead illustrated the plants within their habitats, aligning more with Humboldt's ecosystem theory. Also, although

many women were socially pressured to remain anonymous, Anbardan notes how Anne Rudge received "such esteem during her lifetime that a species of water lily was named after her" (67). Names, then, hold significant weight, a value reflected in the storyline in *Botany Manor*. Several other illustrators also achieved recognition, although, like Beatrix Potter, they may have needed men to intervene in scientific society (69). Famously, Potter's uncle was responsible for promoting her illustrations to the scientific establishment. These illustrations remain so accurate as to continue to remain the standard in many contemporary botanical guides, although she was barred from ever directly addressing the scientists who used her work. Arabella, the main protagonist here, also has a friendly male relative supporting her work, although with a far more depressing outcome. At the end of the game (spoilers!) the resolution scarcely satisfies, although it is hardly surprising. The fictional Arabella's work is never published, but rather than allowing the archive to fade into obscurity, she creates a female scholarly community, converting the manor into a school for natural science.

As representative of the occult archive, *Botany Manor* deploys containment as a means to an end. The core mechanics require absolute environmental precision to solve each plant-based puzzle. Precise timing, wind direction, and even musical tones transform each plant, lending a mystical ritualization to scientific study. The puzzles' representations of literature and art, with some examples including stories, photographs, and illustrations, create magical conditions. Navigating the herbarium as an occult archive within *Botany Manor* allows players to recover the enchanted elements such research inherently contains, compensating for their character's social exclusion through digital wish fulfillment. However, it also reproduces the fantasy that feminine botanical mastery requires complete containment and isolation for safety.

***Potion Craft*: Commodification and Medieval Fantasy**

The last game in this review, *Potion Craft*, employs tropes and binaries creating a cartoon version of the herbarium that nonetheless maintains elements of mystery. With neither the dark aesthetics *Strange Horticulture* employs nor the lush enchantment central to *Botany Manor*, the sepia tones in *Potion Craft* transpose alchemical mystery to a map. The design also invokes medieval illustration, with dull colors and flat perspectives. Operating within this compendium, players become proprietors again, proffering poisons or cures as their customers request. Here, the main mechanic relies on resource management and profit optimization. Predominantly male patrons offer resources and upgrades, although a nature lover and an old witch also make cameo appearances. The player must figure out how to not only create fungible materials for economic exchange, but also how to navigate a vast, obscure, and complicated alchemical map, inching towards discovering new potions through excessive experimentation. Trial and error reveals the means to achieve the effects the customers crave, reducing the herbarium as an occult archive similar to a menu. While *Strange Horticulture* also reduces plants to properties, the plants themselves remain the focus. In *Potion Craft*, the plant becomes simply a means to an end, interchangeable with other, perhaps more effective plants or bases to craft even more powerful potions. Success here rests on remuneration, eliminating to a large extent the nuance and ethical complexities featured in both *Strange Horticulture* and *Botany Manor*.

As a site for negotiating nineteenth-century tensions in a digital media format, *Potion Craft* is a fantasy of medievalism as a Pre-Raphaelite might have imagined, more so than actually medieval, which would have rendered a more enchanted landscape. Instead, *Potion Craft* succeeds as a game predominantly when the player explores the internal landscape of the alchemical map. Using different bases, players can spend ingredients to push known boundaries, replicating how

experimentation results in new discoveries. As an example of what Taylor would call the buffered self, *Potion Craft* lives largely in the mind, making the herbarium mere means to an end. This last game, then, reflects an herbarium where the occult archive only exists to further herbal exploitation. Of course, resource management also makes a strong argument for preservation, but the investment operates within a much different framework, with vastly different stakes and ethical axes. The instrumentalization of enchantment, magic as optimization rather than a relationship with the environment, operates through extraction and mastery in contrast to the mysticism of *Strange Horticulture* or feminine agency in *Botany Manor*.

Conclusion

Rather than transcending historical frameworks, by deploying mechanics where containment, enchantment, and commodification impinge upon the herbarium as an occult archive, these games reveal the persistent tensions inherent in navigating nature, especially a gendered nature. Reflecting societal relationships with nature in the twenty-first century, they offer sites where players can participate in previous historical contexts, navigating nature as both dangerous and domesticated. While some, like *Strange Horticulture* and *Botany Manor* draw on the mystical feminine and marginalized feminine, respectively, others like *Potion Craft* reduce this agency to matters of character costume, serving a commodity culture. Whatever purpose the herbarium serves, the supernatural layer over the natural persists, creating an herbarium that always also operates as an occult archive, with all its many mycelial roots communicating messages either perceived or subconscious. Whether at play, on TikTok, or elsewhere in the digital realm, readers too will also always interact with the herbarium as an occult archive, whether aesthetically, scientifically, or otherwise—with what power, we can only dream.

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