[Theme music fades in.]

Liz: You're listening to Ouija Broads, this is Liz.

Devon: This is Devon.

Liz: I have an urban legend for you today.

Devon: Oh, cool. All right.

Liz: I love urban legends, I love weird stories, as people have probably figured out.

Devon: [laughs] No!

Liz: This is one from Portland.

Devon: Okay!

Liz: And it's one that I only encountered on the Internet, and I think the Internet has really spread it, but let me tell you how the urban legend itself goes.

Devon: Okay.

Liz: So! The story is that in Portland, Oregon, in 1981, there was a new arcade game that showed up in a couple arcades and it was bizarrely popular.

Devon: Okay?

Liz: A really strange game, but people loved it and guys would line up, like, fight over who would play next. And it was called Polybius. So the idea with Polybius is that not only was it hugely addictive, but people started to notice that weird things were happening around it.

Devon: How do you spell that?

Liz: P-O-L-Y-B-I-U-S. I'll get into the name a little bit later.

Devon: Okay.

Liz: But the urban legend says that there were a couple things that happened. One is that there were players who would have these very strange reactions. So they'd have amnesia, like, they would kind of black out while playing the game.

Devon: No way.

Liz: Or they would get night terrors, or they would get insomnia, or they would even hallucinate.

Devon: Oh, wow.

Liz: And also, the legend says that there were these Men in Black.

Devon: [excited gasp]

Liz: -- who would come to collect data from the arcade games. They would collect this information from Polybius, you know, plug into the back and do whatever.

Devon: Yeah?

Liz: Get that information. And about a month after it appeared, it disappeared, just as fast, without a trace.

Devon: No way.

Liz: Yeah, well, probably no way.

Devon: Okay. But I still--- wow, okay.

Liz: It's a fun urban legend, though. So it's developed into this complicated thing. So, Polybius does not actually seem to have a lot of documentation in the actual 80s. What seems to have popped up is that in early Internet days, so about , you know, 2000 or so--

Devon: Okay.

Liz: That's not super early, but, you know, it wasn't everybody was on the Internet.

Devon: I wasn't-- I was just barely.

Liz: Yeah.

Devon: You know I was late to it, though.

Liz: There was somebody who ran a site called Coin Op, as in like coin operated.

Devon: Yeah, okay.

Liz: He did a tip-off to a video game magazine called Game Pro, basically laying out the Polybius myth. It's the first time anybody has seen Polybius discussed in print. And, among other things, you know, it's sort of a "secrets and lies" column. And they say it's inconclusive as to whether this happened. But, you know, tons of people who were getting this magazine were like, "Ah-ha, interesting."

Devon: Okay.

Liz: "Polybius." And when people dug in, they actually found out that back in maybe 1998 or so, somebody posted about this on the Coin Op website. So as far as we can tell, that's kind of where the legend started of Polybius. And, of course, because of the way urban legends grow, it's gotten even more extreme, that it's not just that some people got sick or that it existed and it disappeared, but-- let's see-- so one variation of the legend says that, actually, a kid who got a high score was kidnapped and was taken through underground tunnels.

Devon: Whuh?

Liz: We've already talked--

Devon: [crosstalk] Yes--

Liz: --about the underground tunnels in Portland, abducted by the government. 1981 is when it allegedly came out. 1984 is when The Last Starfighter came out. Did you ever see that?

Devon: I know that name. I don't know what the game is necessarily.

Liz: I loved it. No, it's actually a movie. It came out and I think they played it on SciFi a lot and I loved it. It's about a video game called The Last Starfighter. Like an arcade game.

Devon: Yeah.

Liz: And the kid who gets the high score gets recruited by aliens who put The Last Starfighter on Earth as a way to find people who are really, really good at the skills necessary to fight whoever these aliens are fighting. It's been a while.

Devon: [laughing] This is like how the FBI or the CIA has those, those, uh, codes on their artwork out in their courtyard.

Liz: Yes!

Devon: And people think that if you crack those ciphers, it's actually a recruiting tool?

Liz: Exactly. That kind of got merged with Polybius. Some people have said that it's actually a way of recruiting people to, y'know, FBI, CIA, whatever kids think is cool out there, and people also say that the CIA was testing it as a brainwashing tool.

Devon: Okay.

Liz: Because some descriptions of the game say it was very sort of... It's non-representational. It wasn't like Tapper or Donkey Kong or something where you're like, "Okay, I'm a dude and I'm jumping." It was like, strange polygons and colors.

Devon: Okay.

Liz: One of the things that makes it either legendary or more obviously not real is that a lot of the play that they describe would be impossible with the technology that was available. You could either have raster or pixel. You couldn't intertwine them, and a lot of what they describe sounds like that.

Devon: Okay.

Liz: But, okay. That's the urban legend of Polybius and other folks, including some people that are doing a podcast and people that did documentaries have really dug into it and said, "okay, where the heck did this come from?"

Devon: Yeah

Liz: "And why is it gaining steam instead of just sort of fading out? Like, it's 2017 for another month, and I'll keep saying it's 2017 for another seven.

Devon: [laughing] Yeah, you will. All right.

[note from future Liz transcribing - there's no additional tone or inflection here that makes that exchange about 2017 make sense in context. I have no idea what I was talking about, I probably edited out part of the discussion and didn't notice until now. I'm sorry!]

Liz: You know me. But they're trying to figure out what the heck is up with this mythical arcade game. So, one of the things that makes this more plausible is that arcade games were, especially at that time, pretty... Transient? I guess, is what I'm trying to say?

Devon: Yeah.

Liz: So there were plenty of games... Like, one of the things that kind of gets mixed up is, people say it was a Tempest-like game. So, I guess Tempest was a really popular arcade game at the time. There were Tempest games in Portland at the time. So, if you weren't familiar with it, you definitely could have seen people playing this. And then somebody explained it to you later. And you're like, no, I saw Polybius.

Devon: Okay.

Liz: It sounds like it was a lot like Tempest, but people also did prototypes. And I taped that episode with Matt where I actually tie it back into Polybius because he's talking about early Mario.

Devon: Okay.

Liz: And when they were starting Donkey Kong, they put it in two arcades.

Devon: No way.

Liz: So imagine if it had never taken off. There would be people, y'know, now in their 30s and 40s being like, "I would swear that when I was a kid, I played this video game where I was this jumping man and, like, a gorilla was throwing barrels at me and shit?"

Devon: Yeah, okay.

Liz: And people will be like, "You're misremembering, you're making stuff up, you don't know what you're talking about."

Devon: Yeah.

Liz: Because they just would have pulled it, and pre-Internet era, they wouldn't have a lot of images.

Devon: Yeah.

Liz: There seem to be some pictures of Polybius around, but some of them you can prove are frauds because they're just, you know, the era is wrong, the background is wrong, you can find the original photoshopped picture--

Devon: Yeah.

Liz: -- which doesn't have Polybius in it. There's certainly a lot of people on YouTube who like to be like, "Ooh, I found an original Polybius Arcade Cabinet!" And then they go, like, digging in this dark warehouse with flashlights, and then, you know, they drop the camera and run away screaming...

Devon: Oh, God.

Devon: Yeah.

Devon: Super Blair Witch Project.

Devon: It's that type thing.

Liz: Well, and you could definitely have an old gaming cabinet from the right era, print out your own, like, banner, stick it on there, take a current picture and be like, "Dudes, I found one."

Liz: Yeah, "I found one. And, you know, I'm taking it with a potato, so you can't really, like, deconstruct it." Yeah, I'm taking a terrible picture. I'm taking like a really shakycam, you know, type thing.

Devon: Yeah

Liz: So there's a couple factors that actually could have contributed to this myth. One is that in one week, three kids in 1981 in Portland actually did get sick playing video games at arcades

Devon: What? Really?

Liz: Yeah. So remember, this is before we really knew about... I don't think most of us knew about the whole photosensitive epilepsy thing until that Pokemon thing.

Devon: Oh yeah!

Liz: So there were some video games that were really hard to watch. And even if you weren't subject to that kind of thing, they could definitely make you feel queasy or unsettled or give you a headache if you played them for too long.

Devon: For sure.

Liz: So, there's this little guy named Michael Lopez who got a migraine from playing Tempest. Apparently, he was on-- he was walking home from the arcade. He wasn't feeling good. He threw up and then he ended up falling onto a neighbor's lawn, just screaming because he felt like his head was exploding.

Devon: Oh, kiddo.

Liz: So he had migraines. This was his very first migraine he'd ever experienced. And he had no idea what the hell was happening.

Devon: Yeah.

Liz: Then-- back then, apparently 12 year olds could do this-- there is this kid named Brian Morrow who was trying to set a world record for playing Asteroids for the longest time.

Devon: Oh, kiddo.

Liz: Yeah, he played for 28 hours. All he was drinking was, like soda and orange juice.

Devon: Yeah.

Liz: --and he got incredibly sick and had to quit.

Devon: Big surprise, Brian.

Liz: Yeah. That's not good for your body! And then a week later, there was an 18 year old competitive gamer named Jeff Daly who had a heart attack when he was chasing the world record in Berserk, which is another game that was very popular at the time. This is a little bit-- we weren't quite born, this is not totally familiar to me. I think by the time you and I were in, like the arcade age range, it's more like what are they called... Why am I drawing a blank on this? I just knew it. They're not reimbursement games, but there's something like that where we get tickets. Yeah, the idea is that you play and you get tickets and you trade them in for, like, I don't know, a dusty gummy worm or whatever.

Devon: [laughs] An Airhead from even 10 years before you were born.

Liz: Yes, exactly. It's going to shatter your teeth.

Devon: Yeah, exactly.

Liz: But at this era, it was, you know, it's Asteroids and Berserk and Tempest and Galaga and Donkey Kong and so forth. The-- the playing of it was the point. And so--

Devon: Yeah

Liz: They were competitive. And they would also play for a good long time. And then a year after this, another teenager died trying to set the world record in Berserk. So--

Devon: Also of a heart attack or like, what did he die of?

Liz: Also of a heart attack. Yeah, basically, if you are young and you've got undiagnosed heart conditions and you've never before pushed yourself really, really hard doing something that's, you know, very stressful, you've got a lot of attention on you, you're not paying attention to what your body needs.

Devon: Yeah.

Liz: That can-- that can bring it out. I feel like often you see it with, like, football or--

Devon: [crosstalk] Yeah, exactly.

Devon: [crosstalk] --stress.

Liz: But this is kind of the perfect storm if you're already set up for that.

Devon: Yeah.

Liz: So these guys were making a documentary about Polybius and one of them used a phrase I like, which is they said, "When you think about it in playground years, that's enough to keep kids going forever, right?"

Devon: Yes.

Liz: So especially back in the day when you are, like, hearing about stuff maybe from your parents or through the playground grapevine, it feels like all of a sudden a ton of kids are going down playing video games in your neighborhood really fast.

Devon: Yes. Well, and there's always the kid who's going to change the story enough so that it was like his cousin's friend.

Liz: Yes. Yes. My cousin's friend was my uncle who works at Nintendo.

Devon: Yeah.

Liz: It was, you know, "And it was worse!" And it was that, you know, he was brainwashed or he was hypnotized.

Devon: Yeah.

He didn't know what was happening. You know, all of these are medically explainable things with the stimulus that these kids were undergoing, especially the ones who are like, "I'm going to stay up--" The kid who passed out after 28 hours of Asteroids was trying to make it 48.

Devon: Child!

Liz: Like, that's not good on your body.

Devon: No.

Liz: Dammit.

Devon: You at least need some pretty good amphetamines if you're going to do that.

Liz: Right? And then your heart condition goes.

Devon: Yep, there you go. I mean, like you said, it's really funny to think of it in terms of perpetuating that myth on the playground where, like, you totally hear about the-- you mentioned the kid that, you know, he got a high score? So he got drug down the tunnels in Portland? And you're like, oh, so who saw this happen? Like were-- you were in the tunnels and this kid got pulled past you? Like how would you know the story is real?

Liz: Exactly. Like who saw this? What's happening? What are you even talking about? Now, the problem with some of this is, the Men in Black thing was real.

Devon: Wait, what? In terms of video games?

Liz: The FBI was raiding arcades in Portland in the 80s.

Devon: Nuh-uh! What for?

Liz: Because arcades were places where there was a lot of drug dealing happening.

Devon: Well, yeah.

Liz: And they were a lot less safe. And it was also an era in which parents were much more concerned about what video games and computer games were doing to their kids because it was kind of a new thing.

Devon: All right.

Liz: So there was also gambling where they had these special routers. And I don't understand enough about the technology to explain this, but there would be, like, a thing that you could hook in at the back and basically people could make bets and pay out on these video games that otherwise would just be, you know, "Let me get the high score and put in my initials, or put in A-S-S, and now I'm going to be the badass."

Devon: Right!

Liz: So, you actually could have been a kid in Portland in the eighties in the arcade and see FBI agents come in and mess around with the back of an arcade game.

Devon: Oh, my gosh.

Liz: Because they would have been checking to see if it was there, if they had those things on.

Devon: Oh, my gosh.

Liz: And because the drug dealing was so prevalent, they actually used high scores, and-- This seems like a thing that in a movie, you'd be like, "What the hell are you talking about?" But if they were trying to narrow down people who may have witnessed some of these things?

Devon: Ohhhh.

Liz: They look at the high scores and say, "Okay, we have somebody whose initials line up for this, you know, you got this high score, you must have been there.

Devon: Yeah, we totally-- ASS was here at this time.

Liz: Yeah. "We have to track down ASS. ASS was here for all of this."

Devon: COK, C-O-K, better find it.

Liz: [laughing] So there's two factors that could explain kind of-- if you see those things together, you're a kid and you're like, "All right," you know, "the FBI is here, I saw it or my friend saw it. And also, these kids are getting sick...." Maybe you extrapolate from that. That could be! I mean, it would not be unprecedented for the CIA to mess with people.

Devon: Totally.

Liz: Like, we've got M.K. Ultra...

Devon: Totally.

Liz: They love to experiment with brainwashing and mind control and they use electronics.

Devon: Yeah.

Liz: Now, would they ever actually put in an arcade game? Probably not. That seems like a strange way to do it.

Devon: Yeah.

Liz: But it's the kind of thing where there's just enough reality to where some of this is coming from--

Devon: Yeah.

Liz: --that it's not like a total centaur situation where you're like, "How would that even work?"

Devon: Yeah, yeah, yeah! This isn't like, okay, you've got two rib cages? Yeah, right, dumbass. That doesn't work. It sounds like you said: all the pieces are... Almost all of the pieces are there.

Liz: Yes, but there's also a factor where it may not even have been something that arose organically in the 80s, it may have been something that somebody just made up. There's this guy whose name is... What the heck is it? Something Yogi. One of the earliest mentions that you can find on the Web-- and again, it's tricky because a lot of this, like, late 90s, early 2000s Web stuff isn't around anymore-- was a guy who was kind of known to be a goof.

Devon: Oh, okay.

Liz: So did he just appreciate and like that this myth was, you know, spreading and so he decided to spread it further? Or was he the actual start of it? And then it gets picked up, it gets discussed on the Coin Op forums, it gets put into a magazine that a lot of gamers get. And before you know it, it's everywhere as a kind of, you know, thing that people are like, "Yes, this is what happened." It's a creepypasta. And it's a thing that people put on, you know, "Five arcade games that you didn't know were as horrible as they were," or whatever. People love the story.

Devon: That's fascinating.

Liz: But there's a couple other weird--

Devon: Wait, even more? Jesus, okay.

Liz: Even more. It keeps weirding out. There's a screenshot allegedly of Polybius where it just says, you know, "Polybius copyright 1981: Sinneslochen." Saying that like, this is the company. And that-- what that means in kind of, dog German, like it's not good German? But it means like, "sense delete."

Devon: Okay.

Liz: Or you're erasing your senses or something. It's like a phrase that it's a it's a word that an actual German speaker would never put together. But it's kind of weird. And in 2006, somebody by the name of Stephen Roach comes on to CoinOp.org and says, "Yeah, actually, I worked on Polybius. There were a couple of us and we made a program... corporation or whatever called Sinnselochen. And we were hired to do this work and we made this mind control game and we didn't really know what we were doing. It was like a military tech thing and--" We don't know. But the thing is, there's a guy named Stephen Roach who actually did do brainwashing.

Devon: Oh, no way.

Liz: He was-- he and his wife ran some of those horrible behavior modification programs that people sent their kids to?

Devon: Oh!

Liz: Where it's basically like, you know, they abuse them ferociously, like so many of those are awful. But they ran one in Mexico and he and his wife are now on the run.

Devon: Oh, my gosh.

Devon: Yeah. So is it just an allusion to that? It's a very specific allusion. Is it just a coincidence that somebody used that name? Is it the actual Stephen Roach? And he thought it would be funny to jump in there like it's it's weird.

Devon: Did the original guy that put it up on Coin Op also, like-- is this, like, a master grand-daddy troll kind of thing? You just have all these pieces...

Liz: This is all he's posted.

Devon: Oh, wow. Okay.

Liz: Yeah. And somebody else has also jumped in years later and said, "No, it's B.S.. I worked on Polybius and I'm going to tell you more in a minute, stay tuned!"

Devon: Yeah. Sure.

Liz: Never seen again. So, there's a lot of fraud versions of Polybius out there. There's actually a couple that I think it'd be more accurate to say they're tributes. And so people have designed them based on what they're said to have looked like. And sometimes they even put in creepy stuff like, you know, they'll do subliminal messaging that says, you know, "kill" and "obey" and all this kind of stuff.

Devon: Yeah.

Liz: They love that kind of nonsense. And-- Or, like, there's an April Fools prank version where you install it and it makes you say a million times like, "I understand, it could mess me up, I promise I can handle it." All this kind of stuff, and then it just basically says, "This is an April Fool's prank. Share it with your friends so that you're not the only one who got screwed over by this."

Devon: Yeah, exactly, okay. I mean, that's something that modern games do. I'm trying to come up with... like, Outlast is one that my kiddo plays and then there's another one... And I can't think of it. It's a side scrolling game that's black and white. But the idea is just to create this eerie ambience, and then they throw in tiny mind-fucks like, you know, the Tyler Durden splicing a penis as one frame, you know, in a thing.

Liz: [laughs]

Devon: But it's more like, it kind of trolls your-- trolls as in, like, a fish trawler, your history to come up with names that could be yours or could be someone you know, y'know? So it'll, like whisper it, and you're like, [nervously] "Well, that's specific. You don't usually hear Devon in a video game," you know?

Liz: Mm-hmm.

Devon: Or other just kind of ,like, Skynet almost things? Where you're just like, [nervously] "Oh, that's specific enough that it's freaking me out."

Liz: Yeah. There's a version of Polybius out on the Web that's like that as well--

Devon: Oh, wow.

Liz: Where they will whisper like [whispers] "Play the game" and stuff like that--

Devon: [unhappy sound]

Liz: --at, like, really subtle levels. I have no interest in ever doing this.

Devon: No!

Liz: Yeah. Like you said, one of the tricky parts is, you could just get an old cabinet, mock it up to look like this.

Devon: Yeah.

Liz: And put on one of the various games that people have made for you.

Devon: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Liz: But every single one of these cabinets, games, alleged code, alleged circuit board-- because this is like solid-state computing at this point--

Devon: Yes.

Liz: --has been proven to be a fraud.

Devon: Okay.

Liz: They are props or they are hoaxes or they are mock-ups or whatever.

Devon: Okay.

Liz: It's caught on into people's minds so much. So it's been referenced... In The Simpsons, they have a cartoon version of Polybius?

Devon: Okay.

Liz: It's been referenced in Batman, a bar made one for Halloween.

Devon: Oh my gosh. Cool.

Liz: Yeah. So it's got this sort of life of its own at this point--

Devon: Yeah.

Liz: As a, you know... There's going to be enough people who are bouncing around on the Internet who will see some of the things that have been disproven?

Devon: Yeah.

Liz: That, you know, in ten years they're going to be like, "No, I saw Polybius! I saw it one time!" Or "I saw a picture of it and I can't find it!"

Devon: Yes.

Liz: So, you know, there's some arcade constructors named Rogue Synapse who registered the domain [pronounces it "sin-es-lo-ken" Sinneslochen.com.

Devon: Oh, Jesus.

Liz: Or [pronounces it "sin-es-lo-shen"] Sinneslochen, sorry. And they offered a free downloadable game called Polybius!

Devon: My gosh.

Liz: --based on what Stephen Roach described, yeah. It has its own life. But...

Devon: Yeah.

Liz: At this point, I think... I don't know. You can't prove a negative, right?

Devon: Right.

Liz: You can't say, just because in no candid photo of arcades from this era, did we ever see a game called Polybius....

Devon: Yeah.

Liz: That doesn't establish anything because it was not an era when, uh, people carried cameras everywhere...

Devon: Yeah.

Liz: Especially kids, especially... Why would you just, like, take pictures of your friends playing a video game? That's not very exciting.

Devon: Yeah,

Liz: Yeah. And they've never found, you know, an arcade owner who said, yes, I remember when they brought Polybius in. But again, it's one of those things where they said: it was only for a month, it was only in a couple locations in Portland.

Devon: Okay.

Liz: It was very specific and time limited. So it might be the kind of thing that was very hard to nail down. Here's the thing that makes me think this is specifically a hoax and not an urban legend that somebody added onto.

Devon: Okay.

Liz: Is Polybius is the name of a Greek historian whose specific contribution to history was to say, "If you're a historian, don't repeat stories that you haven't verified."

Devon: [starts laughing]

Liz: And he was from Arcadia.

Devon: [continues laughing]

Liz: [surprised] You love it!

Devon: I'm so happy! I want this to just be some poor, poor, like... Genius who was just-- Decided they were going to fuck with people one day and they were like, "Well, this is obvious, isn't it?" [makes weird noise that I think is this character laughing at themselves but I'm not sure to be honest] "For all my nerd friends!"

Liz: There's Polybius of Arcadia. And then there's an arcade game that has this legendary status.

Devon: Yeah. Yeah!

Liz: I think that'd be hilarious. It actually - I watched this documentary that compared it to the Pacific Tree Octopus--

Devon: Bless.

Liz: --as a thing to test and see whether people are actually paying attention to the stuff that they read on the Internet.

Devon: Okay.

Liz: Whether they're bothering to cross-reference and verify from other sources, or they just have that tendency to say, "Yeah, this sounds right."

Devon: Mm-hmm.

Liz: And especially if you were a kid in Portland in the 80s, that sounds right, because it explains stuff that you probably wanted to have explained, or fits into rumors that you probably heard.

Devon: Right. It fits into something that you've probably heard. And no one wants to be left out. You know, you don't want to be the only one that hasn't heard about this or hasn't seen it or, you, don't want to-- I mean, how do-- Like you said, you can't, you can't refute a negative and you can't... Like, if my buddy Zach says that his uncle's friend works on it, I don't... I don't fucking even know Zach's dad, how am I going to verify any of that?

Liz: Right. But it's going to-- your brain is going to store it as a "maybe." And I don't think our brains are good at storing stuff as "maybe."

Devon: Oh, yeah, I could see that.

Liz: Yeah. I think they're just kind of like "Zach's dad worked on Polybius."

Devon: Yeah.

Liz: And maybe when you think about it concretely, and directly, and actively, you're like "Zach \*said\* that his \*uncle\* worked on it." So this is like--

Devon: Yeah.

Liz: -- maybe two or three steps away. It's not firsthand like Polybius, the person, would have liked you to use, but--

Devon: Yeah

Liz: Somebody says, oh, my cousin played Polybius and had seizures. You're like, "I've heard something about Polybius. I heard about somebody working on Polybius."

Devon: Yeah. Yeah. So then they just... Those two facts reinforce each other. I mean they're not facts, but those two bits that your brain has and it's trying to make up a "maybe" now it's like nudging it into the truth.

Liz: Yes, exactly. Because you're like, okay, now I've got two sources.

Devon: Yeah.

Liz: I've heard about this more places. And it was definitely one of these things where when I was researching it? Basically every article says the same thing, which was a little exasperating and I'll share them all in our show notes. And if you read them, they can, but, um... Some people made the connection with the Stephen Roach thing, some people have really gone in into the Wayback Machine or whatever the equivalent is, and said, look, you know, we really don't see any mention of this before the year 2000 except for the actual historian. It's not something that was kicking around on the Internet. And again, absence of evidence is not evidence that thing doesn't exist.

Devon: Right.

Liz: But when you have this many potential sources of evidence that don't pan out, you can't actually get a person to come on camera and say, "Yes, this is my name, here's my driver's license. I exist. And I can prove that in 1979, I was working on this game they released. You can't get that.

Devon: Right.

Liz: You can't get a real picture. You can't get Internet evidence. You can't get firsthand reports. It seems to be something that exists in the collective consciousness rather than in reality. I think it's very cool. I think it fits into Portland and the 80s. And...

Devon: Yeah.

Liz: All our secret hopes and dreams and fears about video games is that they were doing something more than what we could see.

Devon: Yeah.

Liz: Right? That your high scores were going to qualify you to go be the Last Starfighter...

Devon: Mm-hmm.

Liz: Or if you got really good at Asteroids, you'd be famous or whatever it may be.

Devon: Yes.

Liz: Or, you know, the flip side, what the parents were concerned about. It's making the kids sick. It's hurting them. It's--

Devon: Yeah.

Liz: You know, warping their brains.

Devon: Yeah.

Liz: The whole idea that video games warp your brains is perennial, ever since we've had videogames. We're constantly confused and alarmed by what they're doing, and the more real they get, the more alarmed we are.

Devon: Mm-hmm, yeah. Yeah. You're starting to blur that line between game and reality, between online world and then with VR, actual three dimensional physical reality. Video games came out right at the same time that the satanic panic was being revived when it comes to music and like you said, it was, it was, you've got this whole generation of people who were like, the fuck is this? I don't understand it. And because I don't understand it, I'm not sure if it's okay for my kids to do yet. And if I'm not sure my instinct is to protect and to protect, I'll just ban it outright and I will listen to all the scary shit about it and take that as gospel, because it's, it's... If you get poisoned by one mushroom, you might as well just swear off mushrooms for a generation.

Liz: Yeah, sure.

Devon: Your kids are safe.

Liz: You know, they weren't wrong that arcades were sketchy, especially in those days. I mean, they were so sketchy, the FBI was raiding them.

Devon: Yeah. Stuff could have gone down.

Liz: I'm sure there was, you know... Those kids could have gotten offered drugs by, you know, the same people that give away drugs for free on Halloween.

Devon: Oh, yeah, man.

Liz: Here they come, Barbara.

Liz: So, I like it because I think it's a story that, first of all, highlights some actual weird stuff happening, like with the FBI raiding arcades and stuff, and the kids having seizures and whatnot and migraines. And it also... I think urban legends are fascinating in that they, they really illustrate how we think the world works.

Devon: Yeah.

Liz: There's some stuff that's just a lie--

Devon: Right

Liz: --And we can accept it as a lie, where somebody is like, "Oh, you know, flying cars are real!" And you're like, "I really don't think so, because I would have seen it. I would have heard about it and somebody would be making money on it."

Devon: Yeah.

Liz: But something that has the secrecy and the time-limited aspect and the very small scope, you're like, "Well, I wasn't in Portland, how do I know? I wasn't there in 1981."

Devon: Yeah.

Liz: This is how the world works. Like I think a lot of the urban legends you and I grew up with had to do with AIDS, right?

Devon: Yes, absolutely.

Liz: Because it was about, you know... It felt like this very scary thing that we didn't really understand how it worked. And of course in 1997 we did understand how AIDS worked, but there had been a whole generation who didn't and died as a result.

Devon: Yeah, oh, yeah.

Liz: So it still seemed plausible to us. You know, we're only ten, fifteen years out from people calling it, you know, GRIDS or gay cancer or whatever.

Devon: Mm-hmm.

Liz: It had this mystique, and the mystique outlasted the actual time span in which we didn't know what it was. So, you know--

Devon: Yeah.

Liz: "They're going to put a needle in the the theater seat. And when you turn around after it pokes you, there's a note that says, Congratulations, you've got AIDS," or....

Devon: Yeah

Liz: You know, somebody hurts you when you take them home and they write on your mirror in lipstick, "Congratulations, you've got AIDS." [sighs]

Devon: [laughs] You saw that TLC music video, too?

Liz: Yeah. Nobody actually is out there in the world malevolently going like, "Yes, more AIDS people!" [pauses] Well, I can't say nobody. There's always...

Devon: There's a subset there.

Liz: There's somebody for everybody out there.

Devon: Yeah.

Liz: Yeah. But this was not like a widespread--

Devon: No--

Liz: --thing, but in the early days, for a long time, we didn't know how it was spread.

Devon: No. We thought you could get it from a toilet seat.

Liz: Yeah, it could come out from anywhere and it could get you at any time.

Devon: Yeah.

Liz: It was like Freddy Krueger or something.

Devon: Yeah.

Liz: So I think we'll... I don't know. It just makes a lot of sense to me that there are myths of video games that invade your mind like that, because that's how we kind of think the world works.

Devon: It is really interesting. I love the idea of these, like, collective consciousness things and the power of suggestion and you figure out how malleable memories are. And, and, I mean, it's like the the Berenstein versus Berenstain Bears, where you've got this whole group of people, myself included, convinced it was spelled a certain way with no evidence to support that, just like general collective consciousness. So you've got a whole group of people who were in Portland at the time that probably go, "Well, yeah, I think I saw I mean, sure, I bet I saw that, that looks familiar, that sounds right." And it's just, it's... Whether it's real or not, you've got the power of suggestion, you've got, like you said, all these other things that are kind of working to help inform that it's possible and you can't refute it.

Liz: That's the story of Polybius, the Portland urban legend, slash, hoax, slash, mysterious evil arcade game. Very different than our usual stuff, right?

Devon: Like there's no people.

Liz: There's no critters.

Devon: Well, I mean, only if it's actually a hoax. It sounds like there were Men in Black, and we don't know that they aren't critters.

Liz: Yeah, there we go. Maybe it was some kind of Mind Flayer that disguises itself as an arcade game.

Devon: Oh, yeah. Lizard man in an "Egger" suit. ["Edgar" pronounced like in the Men in Black movie] Easy!

Liz: Prove me wrong!

Devon: [laughing] Whatever.

Liz: Yeah. So if you still want to play Polybius, if you want to scare yourself, you can certainly find it and do that. But in the meantime, don't trust history that you don't have from a reliable source, firsthand, if possible.

Devon: I-- probably don't trust anything I say, that I haven't already told you I researched, because I remember a lot of things poorly.

Liz: It's-- the Internet has abundantly done this to us, I think, and that even when I'm preparing for a story like this, I'm like, "Okay, well, so somebody found the Stephen Roach guy and Stephen Roach is such and such..." I don't know that! I just know that more than one source told me that.

Devon: Yup!

Liz: And I take it as accepted because these are fairly large, well-known websites. But who knows? Anybody can edit Wikipedia.

Devon: Right? Even Dan Rather was wrong at least one time when it mattered.

Liz: Yeah, maybe the Men In Black are going around and writing all these articles for these websites and saying, tell them that all the pictures of the arcade game, Polybius, are hoaxes.

Devon: That's it! They're the ones that are editing the Internet and they're taking down these sites. And then, they're also the ones that are going through and playing other video games, and when they when they type in A-S-S because it's the only joy in their sad, scary jobs.

Liz: Yes. [sound of two knocks] [nonchalantly] Oh, they're here for me.

Devon: [very distressed] Jesus Christ, what was that?! What was that? Is there-- Did you knock? Fuck you, did you knock?!

Liz: [laughing] I knocked on the wall, you chicken!

Devon: I'm not the chicken! You're the chicken. You're the one who shrieks like a banshee when your child approaches! No, I thought your family was home, but that it was a startling-- I was worried for you, Liz. I'm so sorry that my concern for my best friend makes me chicken.

Liz: [laughing]

Devon: Well!

Liz: No, [crosstalk/inaudible] from the time that I heard something and pulled my podcast nook curtain back, and saw my kid just standing there in a dark room staring at me like fucking Children of the Corn.

Devon: [laughing] The other night... so the cat gets his food on a-- we have really wide windowsills and he gets his food on the windowsill in the kitchen, which is right next to the fire escape. And he just bolted away just like, I mean, hounds of hell were after him out of the kitchen. So I knew there was something on the fire escape. And I was like, I bet it's a raccoon or a neighborhood cat. And I get over to it and I see reflective eyes. And even though I know it's a raccoon, my-- my mouth and my brain betray me and I [warbling high-pitched shriek] and Jason's like, "Is there an opera? Like what's going on over there? Things are happening?" And it's a raccoon and I know that. But my body reacted before I could stop.

Liz: "Problem!"

Devon: So I am yeah, I am a chicken.

Liz: That's okay, me too. We're appropriately cautious.

Devon: Thank you. We did not lose our instincts for self-preservation.

Liz: Everybody stay alert all the time.

Devon: Constant vigilance.

Liz: I enjoyed telling you about Polybius, that was a weird one. Had you-- You'd never heard of this, right?

Devon: No, I never heard it.

Liz: I told you "an 80s urban legend" and you were like "I don't know!"

Devon: No, and I made sure that I didn't Google. I knew it was an Oregon urban legend that you were going to tell me. And I made sure I didn't Google it. And I was thinking about telling you, like, a Pacific Northwest urban legend, and I just didn't Google that either because I didn't want it to come up. Man, I'm getting way better at that delayed gratification. I can wait, like, I can buy a Snickers and I can wait a whole hour before I eat it all now.

Liz: How much of that hour do you spend thinking about the Snickers bar?

Devon: Fifty-nine minutes.

Liz: All right. And then there's the minute when you're walking toward it.

Devon: There's a minute. Yeah there's the-- [laughs] The minute I hit myself in the head with a hammer just so I can have a moment's respite from the Snickers. Jeeesus. Food addiction is real, my friends.

Liz: It's real. Yeah. That's my latest story for you. If people want to hear all the stories before and all the stories that are going to come after... Because I don't have an end in sight, do you?

Devon: No, ma'am.

Liz: No, I definitely want us to make it to a year. I'm very proud of us for sticking with it.

Devon: Guys, by the time you've listened to this episode, we'll probably be at forty six, forty four, something like that? And all we have to do is make it to fifty two episodes. And we've been doing this for an entire year.

Liz: Yeah. I'll tell them about our new project and then if our collaborator doesn't want me to, I'll take this out.

Devon: That's great. Please do.

Liz: But one of our patrons, Elden Fragrances actually reached out and we are going to be doing a fragrance line with them.

Devon: This is gonna be so cool.

Liz: I am so excited about-- I don't think any podcast has a fragrance line.

Devon: No.

Liz: I would be shocked. But we're going to have, you know, unisex scents and all kinds of interesting stuff for you. We're kind of... We had to work out the business side of it and then we get to do the fun, creative side.

Devon: Mm-hmm.

Liz: And I think our tagline has to be "smell weird." [laughing]

Devon: See and I was going to do "smell like a broad," but I think "smell weird" is a lot smarter.

Liz: It's-- I love all of this idea, but yeah, there's a lot of inspirations in our shows that are going to go into these ideas and I'm really excited to see what Ellen is going to come up with. And once we've actually developed it all, we'll roll it out and we'll tell you a lot about it and tell you where to buy it. But we're not there yet. So in the meantime, if you just have money burning a hole in your pocket that you want to give us, you can go to Patreon dot com slash Ouija Boards, and you can-- We've got two seances up right now.

Devon: Yes.

Liz: One about our experiences with the spiritual reading, and one about the Spokane Street Motel and all the murders associated with that. Because for reasons that I get into in the actual episode, I didn't want to put it on the main feed. Lots of outtakes, lots of fun facts and behind the scenes peeks. And you can also join us on Instagram on Facebook and Twitter for your social needs. If you want to just make sure you get all the episodes... iTunes, Podbean, I'm sure there's other podcast aggregators that have picked us up, but those are the ones I know about for sure.

Devon: Yeah

Liz: Yeah! And keep coming back, we love it. Subscribe, rate, review and live weird.

Devon: Smell weird.

Liz: [laughing] Smell weird before you die!

Devon: Then die weird--

Liz: --and stay weird. Thanks for listening, everybody.

Devon: Thanks for listening, friends.

Devon: [as music fades out, delighted with herself] I got you!