EPISODE 6: ONCE.wav

[Hey guys, just wanted to pop in and say thanks again for your support. You guys spreading the word about WOE.BEGONE is so cool, please keep doing that. And Merry Christmas. As far as housekeeping goes, the Soundcloud RSS feed will stop updating soon, when I run out of free time on that platform. If you are listening to this via SoundCloud, please switch over to Anchor.fm/woebegone or search WOE.BEGONE wherever you listen to podcasts. It should be there. I also wanted to shout out our subreddit *r/woebegone,* our shitposting subreddit /r/DOGCATCHER, our twitter @woebegonepod, and our music soundcloud where I upload instrumentals of each episode soundcloud.com/thedogcatcher. Thanks guys. Enjoy the show.]

Puzzles are easy. A rat can solve a maze. Hell, even a goldfish can solve a maze. You just have to look at it, figure out what every moving part is, and then adjust every moving part until you can find the result. To make a puzzle harder, you just add more moving parts. But often this just makes it harder by making the puzzle longer, which makes it occupy more of your valuable time on this Earth. But the solution is there for anyone braindead enough to be able to tinker with it forever without losing their minds, trying each and every permutation, especially if they can find a lot of obsessive colleagues to do this do. Patience at that magnitude ceases to be a virtue, in my opinion. So when I say "easy" I don't really mean easy. More like… exceedingly possible.

The Rubik's cube, also known as the 3x3 twisty puzzle if you are referring to one made without the Rubik's brand, has 42 quintillion possible configurations. It was released before anyone knew how to solve one. There were mathematical papers written in in the 80s about solving specific layers of it. Eventually, someone took these mathematical conceptualizations of how these pieces interact and codified them into a set of movements that could reliably solve the puzzle every time. There were called "algorithms." Then those algorithms got refined and simplified until you only needed a handful of them to solve the cube. You can look up a guide to solve a Rubik's cube and end up with a solved cube in only a few minutes the first time you do it. Now there are top solvers who can solve the cube in under 4 seconds, because they can track where every piece will go as they twist the puzzle. And they've not only done this for 3x3 twisty puzzles. You can find speed solving for any size that will still hold together under its own mechanical complexity.

There is no question about whether it is possible to find the solved state of a puzzle. The only actual question is how many people will you need and how long everyone will have to bash their heads into the wall in order to find the solution. And, finally: is it worth it to solve this puzzle? Could it be worth more if left unsolved?

This is WOE.BEGONE.

[Intro theme plays.]

[WOE.BEGONE is a story that is told in order. If this is your first time listening, go back and start at episode 1. When you get back, you'll know who CANNONBALL is.]

You know how it is. Another day, another coffeeshop chat with a pseudonymous WOE.BEGONE player who wants to talk about oblique ranking criteria and hidden

technologies. Except this time, I had the upper hand. He wanted to know who the new player that passed him on the scoreboard was and I knew exactly who it was. Unfortunately for him, that information made more sense kept between me and Anne. Anne was an asset to me. It was no longer a zero sum game. With her playing, I won even if she won. It was like having 2 bingo cards.

It would be nice going into a conversation with CANNONBALL holding all the cards. As someone who had been in the game for awhile, he always seemed to be telling me about something I hadn't yet considered. He had done all the research, but he hadn't lucked into the knowledge of who was beating him.

The following is a recreation of our conversation:

"If you know where I live, then why are we still doing this at a coffeeshop?" I asked.

"Because you shouldn't trust me in your house," CANNONBALL shot back. "and vice versa."

"Oh," I said.

"I could plant a bug in your house no problem if you let me in," he said.

"I'm really not suspicious enough," I admitted. "But, before we begin with who passed you on the scoreboard, I want to pass on a message that I got from the gamerunners." CANNONBALL looked at me intently. "During one of my challenges they sent me a message saying that they had narrowed down the contingencies and that they were now in a solved state. Does that mean anything to you?"

"It means it's not magic," he said. "It's not a lot, but they are using the language of probability and not spellcasting. That means the Thibbideau stuff is still on the table."

"Right," I said. "I knew it wasn't much, which is why I didn't email you about it. But I thought I would bring it up since we were already here."

"Every bit of info counts." CANNONBALL said. "But let's talk about why I asked you to come here."

"Sure. So, I did the third challenge," I said, lowering my voice when I said the words "third challenge," as if people around him might hear it and think "oh, shit! Look at this guy! He's playing WOE.BEGONE!"

"So you did," he replied. "That's one thing that has me worried. Nothing personal, but if I want to win it's unfortunate that you and apparently someone else did the challenge so fast."

"If you don't mind me asking, how long did it take you?" I asked.

"Six years."

I was not expecting this answer. "Six years? And you stayed in the game?"

"There isn't a time limit on it and I got lucky that there weren't many players that dedicated at the time. So, yeah, six years. Reason being that it took me 2 tries."

The gears were turning slowly in my head. "Two tries?"

"I got off easy. Out in 5 years for first time offense and good behavior." He said.

"You went to jail?"

"Yep. WOE.BEGONE does not reward people who fail the challenge," he said.

"But they didn't drop you, either," I replied.

"No reason to. They would have if enough people had passed me, though. And if I hadn't got the job done the second time someone surely would have."

"I couldn't imagine having the willpower to go through all of that twice," I lied. "Did you ever consider giving up?"

"No way, man. Every day that I'm still in this game, I get one step closer to figuring out how it works.`

"And you really think that's worth it?" I asked.

"The people who run this game can do whatever they want. Like, it's hard to actually fully realize so I want you to really think about it. The richest man on earth can do many things, much more than you and me could. But ultimately he is limited by what is physically possible. He can't go back in time and erase his mistakes or make investments that would make him even richer."

"Unless the richest person on earth is running WOE.BEGONE," I said.

"Possible, but I don't think that he fits the MO," CANNONBALL said. "I think that the people that are running this are content with staying low profile, managing things from behind the scenes. They are gunning for power, but they want power without the attention. Attention would make all of this spin out of control. Attention leads to public knowledge. Imagine the average person learning that someone could be meddling in their past and there is nothing they could do about it. It would destabilize society."

"So why do you want to be able to be one of these people so badly?" I asked.

"Because I already know about WOE.BEGONE and I don't trust those people," CANNONBALL said, "but I trust me."

"I can understand that. Since the power already exists, it's important that someone with your best interests be in charge of it," I said.

"Which is why I have to know who just took over second place. The gamerunners didn't give me a name this time. They said "losers don't get bonus info," the fuckers. Did they give you any information about it?"

"Nope. I've never even seen a scoreboard. I guess they don't update it unless someone passes you, not when you pass someone else," I said. And it is true that nobody gave me any information about Anne completing the third challenge.

"I want more information on this guy that just passed me. It's not going to be easy. All we have to go on is that they are playing WOE.BEGONE. This means he probably will leave some sort of unique digital fingerprint. I don't know if I will be able to detect such a thing, but I will try my best to narrow down options. It's not impossible, I've done it before."

I was surprised. "Done what before? Tracked someone down based only on your suspicion that they were playing WOE.BEGONE?"

"Exactly," he said. "Aliza Schultz. Heard of her?"

"Nope," I said.

"You wouldn't have. She's been back to her normal life for almost half a decade now. We were building an alliance, but unfortunately I had to pass her to stay in the game so she doesn't remember me anymore. She's kept a blog for the last decade, you should check out her posts from early 2016. If you know what's going on, they are quite interesting."

I made a mental note to dig up everything I could on Aliza Schultz, along with all of the other digging I needed to be doing.

"So why do you want to dig up this 2nd place person?" I asked. "So that we can invite them into our alliance?"

"I wouldn't call what we have an alliance, exactly," Cannonball said, "though finding this 2nd place person allies our interests quite nicely. You want to stay in the lead and I don't want to fall off the leaderboard, so he's as threat to both of us. Which is why we are going to find who he is and kill him."

I spluttered. "What? Kill him?"

"You've already killed someone, Mike. You're playing WOE.BEGONE. This isn't the dirtiest thing you'll end up doing," CANNONBALL said.

I was walking a tightrope. What would I say about this situation if I didn't know that it was Anne in 2nd place? "Isn't that a huge risk? If you end up in jail again it probably won't be for just 5 years this time and someone would definitely pass you on the leaderboard."

"It's a desperation move for me and a way for you to pull way ahead. You should think about how much this would benefit you. It would actually put me in an incredibly weak spot compared to you. Think of the power you would have over me, the only other person that you know is playing the game," he said.

"That's true. But how would you even go about finding who this guy is?" I asked. I was glad that we were already off on the wrong foot by assume that the person was a guy.

"Well, if they passed me, that means that they completed challenge 3 in a timely manner. That's why I'm so far behind that even completing challenge 4 didn't bolster my score any higher than third place. That means that they killed a cop, assuming that challenge 3 is the same for all of us. I assume it was with you?" I nodded. "So, that means that there was a cop reported either missing or dead with no leads as to who could've done it somewhere in the world. I'm sure that our 2nd place player is nearby one of those missing persons incidents."

I was horrified by how sound his reasoning was. People go missing and die all the time, but how many police officers could have gone missing recently? It was going to point right to the city that Anne lives in. That's still a big search, but it narrowed it down tremendously. "That makes a lot of sense. I'll start looking into missing persons reports and see if I can find anything that matches that description." My real plan was to try and find any other city with a similar missing persons report to throw him off the trail.

"Alright then. You have your homework and I have mine," CANNONBALL said. "Let's break and maintain radio silence until one of us has a breakthrough and we'll do it all over again."

"Right." I said. CANNONBALL immediately stood up and went to walk away.

I reached a hand out to make him stop. "Wait! You've done challenge 4 already? What is it?" I asked.

"It doesn't matter what mine was. Yours will be yours. I can't tell you what that will be," he replied. "But it's going to be tough." CANNONBALL turned and briskly walked away.

So much for a conversation where I had the upper hand. I didn't even take a sip of my coffee.

After the break, I don't even have time to dig for info for CANNONBALL with all of the digging I'm doing to WOE.BEGONE. Stay with us.

[Intermission music plays.]

I was up far too long past midnight watching an absolutely awful Netflix Christmas movie when I got the next message from the gamerunners. Why are they all princesses in those movies? What does that have to do with Christmas? I think the next generation is going to grow up thinking that Christmas is somehow *about* princesses in the same way that for generations in America Christmas has been *about* bringing a pine tree inside your home and decorating it. Anyway, the text message read:

"BONUS. I bet your buddy CANNONBALL didn't tell you that we play favorites. We like winners. It's not much, but it's your chance to run up the score. It'll be easy. You're probably developing a muscle memory for this sort of thing by now. Love, W.BG." There was a sound file attached, simply titled "ONCE.wav." I opened it and it played this:

[Insert ONCE.wav]

Uhh… once? I wasn't sure what that meant. It was ostensibly a piece of a song, hence the sound of a man singing underscored by instruments. But I had never heard that song before and typing "once lyrics" into google unsurprisingly didn't yield anything useful. I tried Shazam and got nothing. I put it into a youtube video and uploaded it to see if I could get a copyright strike from using it, nope. What was this? An actual puzzle? And not "cut your dumbass arm off you idiot"? That I wasn't able to quickly use the simplest methods in order to solve it honestly made me respect it even more. This wasn't an ARG. It's just an RG, if you think about it. There isn't any spooky nonsense written in binary. 11001101010101010 HE IS WATCHING, give me a break. These guys were actually watching.

As far as bonus points were concerned, I was immediately interested. Even as a student who was doing well in class, I would always do all of the bonus material, too. I got a 104 in geometry. My 6th grade science teacher called me "the very model of avarice" when I did all of her bonus material despite having almost a 100 in her class already. I remember this vividly because I didn't know what "avarice" meant and so I didn't feel chided by it until I went home and looked it up. But then I got to feel good because I learned a new word and I could use it to sound smart around the other 6th graders. Oh, you don't know what "avarice" means, Gregg? Well it seems that someone doesn't have an avarice for knowledge, heh heh! I didn't have many friends. It's lonely at the top.

The gamerunners were right about one thing: CANNONBALL didn't tell me that the person in the lead got special challenges and opportunities to score points. If the rich get richer, that might be how CANNONBALL was able to stay in the lead even though he was spending 6 years in jail. I don't know why he wouldn't have brought it to my attention, surely I would find out about it eventually, as I had just done. Maybe if I were more prepared for it, I could run up the score faster and pull even further away from him. He was not an open tap of information and this incident made it clear that he had been keeping some things close to his chest. He had been steeped in this for so much longer than I had. Information is sacred in this game and he may have just not told me because it's impossible to tell what info could be used against you in the future. He made a tactical decision to let me in on the Charles Thibbideau stuff and by all means it paid off. He gave me the smallest amount of information he could and I returned to him with everything that I had found, which he could use to bolster his search.

My first step to solving ONCE.wav was just to listen to it over and over. I popped it into the same audio workstation I am recording this podcast with and just looped it over and over and over. And over. ONCE! ONCE! ONCE! ONCE! I started trying to pick out everything that I could hear. A male tenor voice singing the word "ONCE!" in a sort of rock/pop/folk sound, meaning not something like opera or theater. An acoustic guitar playing a basic triad chord underneath the vocals, pretty far underneath the vocals it felt like. And was that a...singing saw? Hipster nonsense. But that hipster nonsense was a pretty big clue. This led me to believe that this was either an indie folk or an indie rock song, which at least let me know where to start looking.

It's hard to make up a backstory for why you have this one second clip of a song that you don't know the name of. The story that I ended up going with is that I had a cherished mix CD that broke but I was able to rip this one segment of this song, the rest being completely ruined by scratches. I had to ignore any post asking about what timeframe it could potentially be from because the song could have been written last week or 20 years ago for all I knew. I posted on *r/tipofmytongue,* nothing. */r/indieheads,* nothing. /r/indiefolk, nothing. Lost Media Wiki, nothing. I asked my mom, nothing.

The real breakthrough only came once I had fully rotted my brain with "once!" I just kept it on a loop and listened to it while I went about my regular internet business. It was only after I had mentally separated the sounds the singer was making from real English words that I realized that he wasn't just saying "once." Listen again. [plays ONCE.wav]. Hear it? [plays ONCE.wav]. ONCE UH-. [plays ONCE.wav]. ONCE UH-. Could that be… once upon a time? What else could it be other than "once upon a time"? Once the thought occurred to me, I couldn't imagine it being any other way. I had it! I had 4 times as many words to go off of. The 4 most generic words in the English language.

Alright, google, let's do this. "Once upon a time lyrics." 57,900,000 results. I love it. Tony Bennet, Bobby Darrin, just an almost literally endless stream of obviously incorrect results. If I crossed off 1 result per second, which I thought would be easy considering many of them would be obviously false leads, I could get it done in… 1.84 years. So, not really an option if I'm trying to score point in WOE.BEGONE and not completely lose my mind trying to find the song with ONCE! In it. If "once upon a time" is even the lyric.

That's when I found lyrics.com, right on the first page of results. Lyrics.com is a database that lets you search for lyrics in the body of a song, not just the title, so if "once upon a time" appears in either, it should be there. I typed it in and… 1,540 results. That's roughly 37,500 thousand times fewer results than the google search. We're paring it down. Now all that's left to do is listen to about a thousand songs.

Once Upon a Dream by Emily Osment, nope. Ends by CLIPPING. Nope. Once Upon a Time by The Band Perry, nope. Repeat over 850 times. I would get excited every time I heard an acoustic guitar, only to be disappointed as soon as the vocals came in and it clearly wasn't the same song. It was 2:30 in the morning and I had to get up for work in less than 5 hours, when I clicked on the one song that finally ended my search.

[Play a clip of Heartbreak.]

I recognized the song instantly once I could hear the whole thing. It was famous on the dark web for its unavailability. Dark net markets would have it for sale for an extreme amount of bitcoin and you had to buy it fast, because it would be yanked almost instantly. I had never met anyone who had actually managed to buy the thing. The story goes that anyone who hears the whole song dies not long after listening to it. The subsonic frequencies create a brain wave feedback response that is ultimately fatal.

I'm kidding, that's stupid. I had never heard this song before in my life.

There it was, it was undeniable. It was surreal to hear the ONCE! Incorporated into an actual song at this point. My brain had made the original sample into a discrete thing that existed all on its own. It's like when you listen to that Rihanna song that samples Tainted Love and it just feels off because Tainted Love is so calcified a cultural object that it feels like a corruption instead of just a sample.

I had found it. And I was glad that I wasn't searching for songs *called* "Once Upon a Time" because this song wasn't called "Once Upon a Time," it was called "Heartbreak." Those were merely the first 4 lines of the first verse. I reveled in the success of finding it. I had been flying completely blind and managed to dig it up anyway, after a few days of digging. My sleuthing capabilities were at an all time high. It wasn't a bad little song, either. It was called Heartbreak.

By a band… called Cut Off Your Hands.

Oh, no. No thank you. Mias… non. Surely the puzzle was just to figure out the song and band name and to text them once I had figured it out. So that's exactly what they did, this time they hit me back immediately with a clip from my podcast, episode 3:

[Can't I just cut my arm off again?]

Well, to their credit I did say that. This was, I don't know, disappointing? It felt like the gamerunners had run out of challenges and were just stalling. Uh, we don't know, how about you cut off some more of your body parts? Stupid challenge. Stupid! Repetitive! I was going to be leaving the worst review of this game on the Unfiction forums after this.

This was just for bonus points, though, so it's not like it was the *real* challenge 4. It was just for me, so it's not like they were subjecting everyone to this repetition. And I did get to solve a cool little puzzle. And I still have that saw from last time.

On the other hand, I just learned not too long ago that Challenge 2 actually killed me and Anne had to bring me back to life. This was slightly different: this time I just had to cut off both my hands instead of my whole arm. And I had practice. *And* I still had the saw, though I guess I also knew now that the plastic sheeting didn't work. 2nd time is the charm is how the saying goes.

I'm not going to go into detail about the process this time. You've heard me describe enough bloody things on this podcast and this one isn't especially novel. It would just be gory imagery for its own sake, so I'll spare you that. Here is a bulleted list of the standout moments:

- A brief panic that I might actually die, based on my newfound knowledge that I died during challenge 2.
- A reduced timeframe based on my preparedness from challenge 2.
- It was easier to get the meat to the saw when I could use my arm and didn't have to lean in at the shoulder.
- The second hand was the hardest by far from a mental point of view.
- The flip side of that was the sunk cost fallacy. I had already done one hand so I was already invested. Except it's not a fallacy in this case, I guess. If I got the other hand off then I would win the challenge and it would reverse. If I didn't, I would be living with only one hand.
- I had to use my nose to stop the video recording, open up the text message thread of the WOE.BEGONE gamerunners, and attach the video file. No blood on my phone this time.
- I lived. Or at least I didn't die. I'm typing this script with my two hands which feel strange in a way that I can't explain, but are firmly attached to my body at the wrists.

The gamerunners responded with this: "Great job, teacher's pet. Keep working and we'll drop challenge 4 in your lap. Your heart will skip, just like mine. -W.BG" That last bit is a line from the song. I really hope that they don't mean something literal about hearts.

I was worried about challenge 4. Time kept passing and the new challenge still hadn't shown up. I knew it had to be bad, but I was also curious. When would they stop being bad and start being useful for someone? There's no point in just messing with the players forever. I had thought that the gamerunners were training and selecting players to carry out their desires for them, but cutting off my hands wasn't really something in that vein. They had always been fucking with us, but I thought that eventually they would put us to work. What's wrong, WOE.BEGONE? Have I not proven myself yet? What are you going to make me do in order to prove myself? Witness me!

The smart thing to do would be to try and get my hands on the technology that is being used to run WOE.BEGONE before it gets to the stage where they are having me do their dirty work for them. I guess that is what CANNONBALL has been saying this whole time, but I can't deny that he makes a solid argument. What has kept me from fully pursuing that route has been twofold: one, I am already winning with my current strategy and so I would risk fixing something that is not yet broken, and two, I was so at a loss on how to pursue that route that I couldn't begin even if I wanted to. The only starting point I had was a book that I didn't understand that no longer existed. That is, until CANNONBALL mentioned Aliza Schultz.

CANNONBALL undersold Aliza Schultz when he said that she was just a blogger who played WOE.BEGONE, lost, and went back to her old life. For starters, Aliza is 71 years old, which means that she was a senior citizen who decided to play WOE.BEGONE which raises all sorts of curiosities about how far she got into the game and what she was able to achieve while she was playing. WOE.BEGONE is definitely a young man's game, I can tell you that. Then there is the curious matter of how she is a theoretical physics professor who has been in the field for decades. As such, she is tenured and no amount of crazy shit she writes or published can get her fired from her job. Which leads me to the last bit of interest regarding Ms. Schultz.

That "blog" that CANNONBALL brought up is some Timecube-level shit. Just pages and pages of text that reads like complete gibberish, accompanied by some bizarre charts and graphs that almost look more artistic than they do infographical. There isn't any talk about WOE.BEGONE on here, at least not explicitly. I assume that that all went away when she lost the game. Still, what is here is promising and will take a near-endless amount of sifting through. There must have been hundreds of thousands of words on the website. For reference, a script for this podcast is about 5,000 words and takes almost 30 minutes to read aloud.

I immediately made local copies of every page on her blog on my personal computer and I plan to print them all out for even further safe-keeping as soon as I can. She and CANNONBALL must have formed an alliance because they had the same plan to win, which was to reverse engineer the tech, and Aliza was CANNONBALL's plan to actually get it done. And then Aliza was either not willing to cut her arm, kill a police officer, or whatever the fourth challenge was and dropped out, leaving CANNONBALL playing the game alone.

I'll save the technological portion of her writings for when I can understand them better, but I'll leave you with this intro to a long blog post she wrote and published on the 12th of January, 2016 titled "Forced Sabbatical":

"I'm back safe at home. They say I was standing in the middle of the street, blank look on my face. Blank look on my face. Blank look on my face. I wasn't who I was. Ten months I don't remember. Trevor was alive. They keep talking down to me. But Trevor was alive, ten months ago. How did I lose this much time? They look so damn condescending. I'm not losing it. My mom was sharp as a tack until the day she died and I'm no different. Sharp as a tack. Someone put that blank look on my face. What was I up to? There's no way that I wasted that much time. That's not like me. I'll die working. I'll work myself to death. I'm going to work myself to death, even if they won't let me go to work. Blank look on my face? I'll show them a blank look. I'll wipe that condescension right off of their smug faces."

Did I mention Ms. Aliza Schultz seems to answer every email that gets sent to her?

You've been listening to WOE.BEGONE. Next time: helpful correspondence, a change in strategy, and a challenge. Thanks for playing.

[End theme plays.]