

EPISODE 8: LIMITED HANGOUT

[Hey guys. Just wanted to say thank you again for listening to the show. It's got about 100 regular listeners at this point and almost 1,000 total plays. If you like the show so much, why don't you marry it on Patreon? The WOE.BEGONE patreon has early episodes (...when I get them done early), episode instrumentals, extra visual art, writing, music, transcripts, a discord that no one has joined yet. All the cool stuff a patreon normally has. I'm especially proud of the soundtrack for this episode, which is available now. Go to patreon.com/woe_begone and check it out. Thanks to Risky Coffee, Plumule, and Your Name for being my first patrons. And with that: enjoy the show!]

The hardest part about lying is that you can't only lie. To use an extreme example, say that I was trying to convince you that I had a law degree. I could lie and say that I went to law school, I could dress in a tailored suit and say things like "Ex Parte Garland" and "Motion For Summary Judgment" and tell you all about that little symbol that looks like 2 S's on top of each other that lawyers use. §. And you might shoot back at me with: "Well, Mike, that all sounds very impressive, just like a lawyer might say. But if you went to law school, why don't you have a job as a lawyer or even at a law firm?"

To double down on lying about everything here would be a failure on my part. If I responded by saying "I actually do work at a law firm" or even "Who is Mike? My name isn't Mike!" then every lie that I told up to that point would be forfeit. If this person already knows me as Mike and, say for instance we are co-workers who are working somewhere that isn't a law firm, then contradicting those claims would immediately expose my other claims as false. In order to tell a convincing lie, a portion of that lie must also be the truth. A much larger portion must be the truth than my "law degree" lie, mind you. No one on Earth would be convinced that I had done anything more than watched some Youtube video. But I do know what "Ex Parte Garland" means and I did go to college. The script says "got to college," which feels like a refutation in itself. Those truths that I told are used to shield the lie. The lie is the important piece of information in the conversation. It is the only thing that I am trying to communicate to you. Every other piece of the conversation is merely a tool to deliver the lie, unopposed.

Bigger, more important lies are mostly the truth. It is only the greasy, disgusting core of a betrayal or act of aggression that must be kept fully hidden. The goal is to be able to enact your heinous plan, not to keep them from ever feeling skeptical or suspicious of you. Your enemy's opinion of your standing is worthless. They can say that they saw it coming all they want, but it won't reverse their defeat. Fully blindsiding someone is great, but if your opponent knows you well and gets their wits about them, it isn't usually an option. If it is an option, you should consider loftier goals with more formidable enemies. You're capable of so much more!

Richard Nixon and co. created the term "limited hangout" to describe the practice of telling your enemy part of the truth in order to get information from them and to keep the construction of your lie believable. They meant it as "hanging" a "limited" amount of the truth out there as bait, not as a limited time to hang out with someone, which is what I always thought it meant until I looked it up. It's a very 70s way of putting things. It didn't have a perfect batting average with Nixon, what with the Watergate and all, but it is a long-standing part of CIA spycraft at this point. It works, but it can't be your only line of infosec defense.

This is a great tool to have in your arsenal, but it is also important to realize that it is a tool in the arsenal of every accomplished liar on the planet. Luckily, knowing that other good liars are doing this is a bit of information in itself. It means that the person who is lying to you might be giving you a lot of the truth as well. You can use that to try and reverse-engineer what lies at the murky core that they are trying to conceal from you. Two liars lying to each other? That's an arms race.

Four liars lying to each other? This is WOE.BEGONE.

[Intro music plays.]

The story of WOE.BEGONE is being told in order, so if this is your first time listening, go back to episode 1 and start there. When you get back, you'll know who has what information. Well, you'll know who *I* think knows what.

I know that you are all wondering about what I've decided to do about the fourth challenge. The longer I sit here with my thumb up my ass, the longer CANNONBALL and Anne have to try and pass me on the scoreboard. Note to self: idea for a quirky indie folk duo: CANNONBALL and Anne. And if Anne passes me on the scoreboard, it will be because she killed me to complete the challenge. The clock is ticking and also the clock is attached to a bomb and is counting down to zero in the Super Mario Brothers seconds that are a lot faster than regular seconds. Trust me, I haven't stopped thinking about it. You'll have to wait until the end of the episode to hear what my plan is. Not because this is a tease to get you to listen to the entire episode-- I actually have access to stats that suggests my retention time is pretty dang good when I'm trying to sing you a song, thanks for listening-- but because my decision is the synthesis of everything that I am about to tell you about my recent interactions in this world of WOE.BEGONE.

After my conversation with CANNONBALL in which he made clear his intent to kill the second place WOE.BEGONE player and his attempt to recruit me into helping him do so, I decided to call Anne at my earliest convenience-- what with her being a triple threat: my age-old friend, the WOE.BEGONE player that brought me back to life and has been instructed to take me right back out, and the second place player who has made herself CANNONBALL's target. My fate was fully intertwined with hers. I had converted too many of my Mike-bucks into Anne-tokens and there was no way to convert them back. Plus, she was my friend or whatever and I care about whether she lives or dies or some shit like that. We had spoken and emailed a few times since I helped her complete her third challenge. She was up-to-date on some of the stuff, specifically my previous interactions with CANNONBALL. Assume that she has heard pretty much all of the podcast. The following is a recreation of the phone conversation that we had:

"Hey Anne, how's it going? Have you got your fourth challenge?" I asked.

"Not yet. I'm getting antsy. I just know it is going to be something bad," she said.

"I got a bonus challenge, but not the fourth one yet," I lied.

"A bonus challenge? Like just for you?" She asked.

"They said that they like to play favorites, so since I'm in the lead, they sent me on a wild goose chase where I had to identify a song based on a tiny clip of it and once I did that I had to cut off both of my hands," I said.

"You dipshit," she said. "You risked your life in order to score more brownie points with the gamerunners? That does sound exactly like you, actually."

"It wasn't nearly as hard as the left arm challenge. Plus you can never be too far ahead in this game. We both know what happens if you start to lag behind the other players," I said. "You should be glad I'm like this. I helped get you through the third challenge, remember."

"And I am forever grateful," she said, semi-sarcastically. "But why are they keeping challenge four from us? I got my other challenges not too long after I completed the previous one, but now they're hanging us out to dry."

"I think that's exactly why they are waiting. They are letting us fester with the knowledge that it is coming. A few of us know each other now. Who knows if there are other players who are in a similar

position and are also meeting each other. It's more entertaining to give us a chance to try and figure out what is going on and what everyone's deal is," I said.

"Speaking of everyone's deal, you told me that CANNONBALL said that someone passed him on the scoreboard and you were sure it was me. What is he up to now?" She asked. "You and he are the only players that I actually know about and I don't actually *know* him."

"He's why I called. First off, CANNONBALL says that he already did challenge four, but he didn't tell me what it was. So whatever it is can't be bad enough to keep him from doing it. He was cagey about it, though, so I didn't press him on it."

"He seems like a pretty bad dude," Anne said, "So, it isn't really saying much that he's willing to do it."

"Yeah," I said.

"He's going to try to kill you," I said.

"Fucking WHAT?" She asked, curious.

"He knows you passed him up on the scoreboard. He used internet sleuthing to figure out that you live in [REDACTED] and matched that up to relevant missing persons cold cases for police officers based on the time that you would have passed his score. WOE.BEGONE gave him enough clues to start to create a profile on you. I don't think we could have done anything differently, since the score was bound to change whenever we did the challenge regardless of when or how we did it. He doesn't want to lose and so he's hunting you down and is going to make an attempt on your life. He asked me to help him," I said.

"[Extremely upset sounding] Uhhh... well, at least he tried to rope you into it. You can help him and throw him off the trail. Are you helping him right now?" She asked.

"No, I was busy tracking down the works of a physicist named Aliza Schultz. She wrote a paper where she claims that--"

She cut me off. "Shut the fuck up Mike! You had a chance to sabotage him and you spent your time looking up some physicist? You know that if I die then you die too, right?"

"I thought I was helping by not helping," I said, sheepishly.

She spoke right past me. "CANNONBALL has an ex-military background and wants to kill me! Fuck. What do I do? Do I move? Do I change my name? Dye my hair? Or is it too late for any of that and those things will just bring even more attention to me? How serious is he about this?"

"He's only narrowed it down to [REDACTED] as far as I know, but he is very resourceful. He's been playing WOE.BEGONE a lot longer than either of us."

"So on a scale from 1 to fucked, how fucked am I?" Anne asked.

"Like, Screwed.7," I said.

There was a pause. Anne responded as though a veil had been lifted.

"Well, it's all clear then," Anne said. The look in her eyes, combined with the sudden calmness frightened me. "CANNONBALL will meet you at the drop of a hat, right?"

"He has so far," I said. "What are you thinking?"

"*You can kill CANNONBALL.*"

CANNONBALL wants me to kill Anne. Anne wants me to kill CANNONBALL. WOE.BEGONE wants me to kill Matt. I need to call John to make sure that *he* doesn't want me to kill anyone before I jump to any decisions. Does Aliza Schultz want me to kill anybody? Going to the murder store, anybody need anything?

"There's a hundred reasons I don't want to kill CANNONBALL. I'm just going to start listing them until you interrupt me. Despite the nature of recent events, I don't like to take the lives of other human beings, CANNONBALL and I have only met in public because he says that he doesn't trust me and it's not like I can just stab him in front of everyone at the coffeeshop, CANNONBALL is a much

larger and much fightier guy than me and there's a probably better-than-half chance that he kills me instead, he hasn't even found you yet, CANNONBALL knows stuff that the rest of us don't and that information could come in handy if we want to win, uhh... I just really don't want to okay? Why didn't you interrupt me!?"

Anne sighed and shook her head. "Because you're right," she said. "I was a goddamn combat journalist, Mike. I know what bloodshed is like and I would like to prevent as much of it from happening as possible. It's just... I'm scared. And with the fourth challenge?"

"What about the fourth challenge?" I asked.

"Who knows what it could be, you know? It could be something really bad. Something even worse than the third challenge. Like they might make us do something unforgivable. Like hurt someone we know."

There was the tiniest slip in her voice when she started talking about the fourth challenge, like she was covering the trail to something. Did she already know what the fourth challenge was and was testing me by pretending not to know? How conniving! I should know, that's exactly what I was doing. It was a two-way limited hangout. I decided not let on that I knew that she knew that I knew that she knew what was really going on here.

"Can I come over and we can talk this all out?" She asked.

I had to think fast. "I don't think so. Not yet. I know that CANNONBALL knows where I live, so there's always a chance that he is monitoring me and my house. I don't think it is safe if a random college friend from [REDACTED] is all of a sudden at my house while he is looking for people from [REDACTED]. He already suspects me of something, anyway, he just isn't sure how much to suspect me of." That's the smart thing to do when lying to someone, right? Make a whole bunch of excuses, rapid-fire, in a row? I imagined Anne showing up to my house, knife behind her back, smile on her face. Could she do it? I had to hold her hand while she did the third challenge, for god's sake.

"That makes sense," she said. "Would you be opposed to *me* killing CANNONBALL?"

I spluttered. "I don't know, Anne. I mean... I don't know. You're talking about killing a human being here. One that I've met and spoken to, too. I know stuff about his life. It just doesn't feel right."

"Since you know about his life, you know that he hasn't lived the cleanest one," she said. "You know he's killed people."

"Anne, *we've* killed people," I said.

"But, it's not like that. It's different. He... he's done more challenges, which means that he's probably done even worse." That's it. She knows. She has to know, right? She had to be talking about CANNONBALL completing challenge 4 and being able to kill his own wife to progress in the game. She knows. Game, set, and checkmate: Mike. The baseball is in the endzone. The polo horse is in the basketball hoop-- nothing but net. I had her all figured out.

"Let me think about it, okay? There's no need to do anything drastic right now. Besides, if he kills you then I'm fucked, so I'd rather you not just charge into battle. He doesn't know that we have a connection and he doesn't know who you are yet. Plus, as far as I know he is telling me what he is thinking about his quest to kill you every step of the way. We have time to figure something out," I said. "I don't want you to have to put that on your soul. Not yet."

"Will you tell me when you get the fourth challenge? Just so I can know what I'm up against. You should get it before me," she said.

"Of course," I replied. She knew that I was lying but she didn't know that I knew that she knew. Since I completed the third challenge before her, it was almost guaranteed that I received the fourth challenge before her. "Whatever it is, we will work through it together," I said, which was true in a sense. "And, whatever it is, we will overcome it and win. And if the prize is to be able to do what the gamerunners are doing right now, we can reverse all of the terrible parts of this and even more."

"I hope so, Mike. I hope this is all worth something in the end," she said.

"Me, too."

Anne already having the fourth challenge was incredibly bad news. It makes the sticky predicament that the game has put me in all too real. Based on this conversation, I'd say that Anne is at least toying with the idea of killing me in order to progress in the game. Maybe with the intent of bringing me back using the technology once she gets her hands on it, maybe not. It's possible that she was planning to come to my house and decide on the fly whether she wanted to kill me or work with me. If she has received the challenge, there is no time left for me to buy. The time has come for decisive action and yet I feel completely paralyzed by the amount of variables abound. It's panic-inducing.

I decided to send her the Aliza Schultz blog stuff to see if she could make heads or tails of it and see if she could reach out to any of her academic contacts about it. It was something to keep her mind off of killing CANNONBALL. And killing me. Mostly to keep her from thinking about killing me. I was giving her information to hopefully prove that I was more useful alive.

...Is that what CANNONBALL was doing, too? Using information to protect himself from me?

In other news, Aliza Schultz doesn't exist. I don't mean that in the same way that "Charles Thibbideau doesn't exist anymore," as I detailed in earlier episodes. I don't think this is a WOE.BEGONE thing. I don't think that Aliza Schultz ever actually existed, in this or any other universe. Her materials didn't disappear like Thibbideau's did when WOE.BEGONE made him disappear. I can still go to her blog which is still up and read what she wrote. Anyone can. I checked from a different computer to make sure that it wasn't just my browser cookies keeping the website up. It's still there. However, I emailed the university that Aliza Schultz said that she taught at before being forced to take a sabbatical and they told me that not only had they never employed anyone by that name, but that they asked the head of the physics department and she had never even heard of a physicist by the name of Aliza Schultz.

I wasn't expecting an elderly woman to have a complete social media presence, but besides her blog and associated email address I could find absolutely nothing else about this woman. No facebook, twitter, instagram, tiktok, whatsapp, snapchat, linkedin, letterboxd, soundcloud, kitsu-- kitsu is a website for ranking and discussing anime series-- twitch, myspace, goodreads. Nothing. I couldn't even find her address or phone number in the phonebook, a thing that still exists and if anyone would be in it, it would be an elderly woman who probably still has a landline phone number.

I also did a WHOIS lookup on her website, which was a registered .com. The WHOIS information was privated, which isn't something that a normal person thinks to do unless they don't want people to know that they are the one behind the creation of a website. Not the typical M.O. of a physicist making a blog to talk about her work. I guess I could understand that if she wanted to keep her identity secret from other players during WOE.BEGONE, but this website existed both before and after her participation in WOE.BEGONE, with no change in the WHOIS history for that entire time. I understand that it is possible to keep a low profile, but Aliza Schultz seemed to be keeping a no-profile. It just didn't feel consistent with the footprint of a person that actually exists.

There's a scene from The Simpsons that feels applicable here. Milhouse accused Bart's dog, Santa's Little Helper, of eating all of his goldfish. But when he asked Bart about it, Bart told Milhouse that he never had any goldfish. "Then why did I have the bowl, Bart? Why did I have the bowl?"

Why do I have The Mechanification of Theory: A Plausible Methology for Retrocausal Informatics, CANNONBALL? Why do I have The Mechanification of Theory: A Plausible Methology for Retrocausal Informatics?

I took a closer look at the profile picture that she was using on her blog. This was the only picture of her anywhere on her website and thus the only picture I could find of her anywhere on the internet. Google image search, bing, duckduckgo, none of them returned relevant image results. It was

shrunk down to a profile picture size, so it was hard to make out any fine details in the skin, hair, eyes, or anything else. Someone could easily use a website like thispersondoesnotexist.com to generate a person that looks like this. Just keep hitting refresh until you get a picture of an old woman without any strange computation irregularities. Speaking of irregularities, though: there was the faintest line across the left part of her temple. It could have been the light, but what it looked like to me was the temple of a pair of eyeglasses. She wasn't wearing eyeglasses. It looked like a computer was generating the side of a face and included that part because it didn't know what it was actually doing. On a 300x300 pixel image, it was very faint. It actually gave the illusion that she was wearing glasses until you looked harder and couldn't see the rest of them. I guess it could be a pen or pencil perched behind her ear. It wouldn't make me suspicious except that with everything else, it starts to paint a picture of someone who doesn't really exist. Who spells "Aliza" with an "A" anyway?

Of course, I reached out again to the email that I had reached out to in last week's episode. I told Ms. Schultz that I was incredibly interested in her poetic approach to spacetime and asked if we might meet somewhere to discuss it in person. Her reply was as cryptic as ever:

"Sailing for three months. Sailing for three months with nothing but salt water to drink. It only takes a bottle and some ingenuity to desalinate the ocean. I've only got the ingenuity. I could invent a time machine if I had the right parts. Instead I'm stuck on a boat. Sailing for three months with nothing but salt water to drink. My oar can touch the bottom of the ocean. I look down. It's clear and I can see the bottom. I'm barely floating on anything at all. I stand up out of the boat. I can stand here. The water is only up to my knees. There is no land visible in any direction. I haven't seen land in months. My feet are submerged. Nothing but salt water to drink."

Not helpful. And I get the distinct impression that I'm being fucked with. The question is by whose hand the fucking-with is being perpetrated. Is it CANNONBALL? Did he send me on this wild goose chase to keep me out of his hunt for the second place player because he suspects that I have something to do with it? If I'm too busy trying to figure out this academic time travel paper, that is time that I'm not spending making sure that Anne stays hidden. Would he put together this enormous a website just for that? Was someone, maybe the gamerunners, fucking with CANNONBALL by introducing him to the Aliza Schultz stuff? They could have hired a good-enough lookalike actor to play her and meet with him. We could both be the ones who have been taken for a ride here.

Is that academic paper real in any sense? Does it have real information inside of it? It's written like an academic paper with sources cited-- a lot of them. I looked up those sources and they all seem to be legitimate and they are all saying what The Mechnification of Theory says that they are saying. If the paper accurately draws on its sources and makes logical conclusions based on them, it still might be a theory worth taking seriously. I emailed a couple of the researchers cited in the paper and they neither knew anything about the paper nor had ever heard of Aliza Schultz.

The most important question arising from this is what to do with CANNONBALL from here on out. I think it is best that I not tell him that I know about the Aliza Schultz stuff and see what information he volunteers. It would be nice to ask him for an address or something and have him either deny me that or give me an address where I learn that Schultz was fake all along (and possibly fall into a trap), but letting him know that I know isn't worth that clarification. I'm definitely going to keep digging into the Aliza Schultz stuff-- not only to see what it has to say about how WOE.BEGONE is played, but also to see what whoever planted this wanted me to see. To recap, here are my hypotheses for why the Aliza Schultz stuff even exists:

- It was manufactured by CANNONBALL to throw me and potentially other players off the important stuff while he gets down to business.
- It was invented by WOE.BEGONE to fool CANNONBALL and other players who are interested in replicating the tech for themselves. The information might be true or false. Either could help the gamerunners depending on what they want to do with players who are interested in the technological aspect of the game. If they are looking for someone who can make the tech

on their own, it's setting the players up for a Last Starfighters-esque recruitment scenario. If they are trying to keep the truth hidden, it's a big red herring.

- Aliza Schultz once existed but the gamerunners have employed some different type of mechanic to make it so that, while she has been erased, physical evidence of the documents she made while alive are still around. When Charles Thibbideau disappeared, all that remained of him was the memory of him from people who were playing the game. Her getting disappeared seems unlikely, because now there is no one in history to have created these documents.
- I created Aliza Schultz to confuse CANNONBALL, WOE.BEGONE, Anne, you the listener, or all of the above. I could have different reasons for doing this depending on who I was trying to fool. For instance, it could be to keep Anne from coming after me, to get CANNONBALL to be suspicious of me for the wrong reasons, to signal to the gamerunners that I have the power to manipulate the other players, etc. I know that this is incorrect, but you as the listener can never be sure, even if I say that someone admitted to it because it would be me reporting that information. If Anne, CANNONBALL, or WOE.BEGONE are listening, either my fabrication of the Aliza Schultz stuff or my claim to have done so will have some utility in how I want them to think about what I am up to.
- Aliza Schultz does exist and has successfully gotten herself so far off the grid that not even the people in her life remember her anymore. If this is true, maybe she could have used the WOE.BEGONE technology to achieve this. Maybe she crafted her own WOE.BEGONE machine using her engineering background and blasted herself out of this dimension altogether. I'm skeptical.

And now we are back to the cliffhanger that I left you with at the top of the episode. Whether or not I hop on a plane in the middle of a pandemic and go kill my best friend that I brought back to life will be a result of my evaluation of those variables that I have presented to you in this episode. Ultimately, it would preferable to be able to recreate the technology myself and have the power to put an end to all of this on my own terms and without killing anyone. Aliza Schultz's non-existence throws a huge wrench on whether or not it is even possible for me to do that. On the other hand, the scoreboard clock is always ticking. CANNONBALL is trying to hunt down and kill Anne, which will in turn kill me. Anne is likely trying to kill me, which would in turn kill me. Killing Matt would progress me further in the game and hopefully get me closer to some secrets. The gamerunners did say that the real work would start after the fourth challenge.

Plus, Vancouver is a long way away. Neither CANNONBALL nor Anne would be able to come after me without a huge hassle to their personal lives, especially if I didn't give them a heads-up on where I was going. Hmm, plane tickets aren't as expensive as I thought they would be. I'll have to check in an incognito browser, they might even be cheaper than that. I mean, it can't hurt to fly out there and see what happens, right?

This has been WOE.BEGONE. I hear British Columbia is beautiful in the winter. Thanks for playing.

[End theme plays.]