

## EPISODE 1: PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

I've made an egregious number of mistakes in my time. When I was in 1<sup>st</sup> grade, I got bored listening to a teacher lecturing us about Christopher Columbus on Columbus day so I tied my shoes together. A teacher finally noticed that I did this when I was tripping on my way to lunch and when she asked me what happened I panicked and said it was an accident. In 5<sup>th</sup> grade, my mother gave me \$100 for lunch money and I put it on page 100 of one of my textbooks so that I wouldn't forget where it was and then immediately forgot where it was. Mistakes are endemic to the story of Mike Walters.

My first mistake in the story of WOE.BEGONE was believing that I could be a journalist. I thought that I could simply observe from a distance without getting involved, like a biologist watching the lion take down the gazelle and not intervening. Lions must eat, after all, and something must die. I should have been a better judge of my own character than to think that I could prevent myself from participating. Even anthropologists don't fully abstain from participating in the cultures that they observe. This sort of hubris should not longer surprise me. I'm not a journalist, nor am I a professional *anything*. I'm a shitty podcaster, at best. In what conceivable universe, in what conceivable timeline, could low-rent podcaster Mike Walters consistently do the right thing? The only think that I could realistically do right is hit record and start talking.

I'll cut the shit: if you are listening to this podcast, it is almost certainly because you saw something on one of the more tasteless corners of the internet about an alternate reality game called WOE.BEGONE. After googling "WOE.BEGONE" and getting a myriad of dictionary definitions and something about Prairie Home Companion, you probably found someone trying to look cool on the internet by talking about this mysterious game. I'm not here just to be mysterious and look cool on the internet. I do hope to look cool on the internet as a side effect, however. I also plan to dive into the phenomenon of WOE.BEGONE in a way that maximizes SEO rankings by using correct capitalization and stylization of the title.

WOE.BEGONE is a competitive game with a secret ruleset. This sets it apart from most ARGs, which are usually based around some sort of content distribution, usually videos, around which a community solves rudimentary puzzles in order to unlock the next section of the plot. Instead, the secrecy of the game and its rules is maintained by the gamerunners, whom I can only assume have significant experience as black-hat hackers. Any attempt by players to communicate to people who are not yet playing are met with grieving in the form of spam, DDOS, and takedown requests. The original post that led me to investigate the game has already been removed, even though it has only been a month since it was originally posted. In all fairness, he should have seen it coming. He posted it to a major subreddit. It was bound to get attention.

I know that by starting this podcast I am setting the same thing up to happen to me, but I'm not sweating it. I keep as low a profile as possible online. There aren't many accounts that I would lose sleep over becoming compromised. My bank account is attached to an email that I don't use for anything else and isn't connected to me in any way that a hacker (or even a close friend) could ostensibly guess. The

gamerunners haven't done anything too heinous, as far as I can tell. No one has wound up dead in a gutter for telling people about the game. This is a calculated risk that I am willing to take. Maybe my high-level performance in the game will allow to escape some of the scrutiny. It's unlikely, but possible.

I didn't set out to "play the game," so much as I wanted to be able to see the game being played. Unfortunately, the only way to get to see what to happen was to sign up and feign at least some auspices of actually playing along. Pretending to be a journalist, I had a few things that I wanted to learn through my participation in the game: what the rules are, who the players are, and what happens when one of those players inevitably wins the game. My intention was never to play in order to win.

If you want to play WOE.BEGONE, the first thing you must do is stumble upon a link to the sign-up website. It's smattered across the web, so anyone with some internet savvy should be able to get there. The link that I found was to an internationalized URL. All this means is that the URL was registered with a character set that wasn't ASCII, such as Chinese. It is impossible to tell what language it was registered in just based on the URL. All that it means for the end user is that the URL looks like a gibberish string of numbers and letters. It was all on the surface web, though, no Tor browser or deep web shenanigans necessary. If you aren't viewing the website via a VPN and in incognito mode, the website will redirect you to DuckDuckGo. I imagine a 90s incarnation of this website would hit your back button for you, but browsers don't let you do that these days for good reason.

The website is a black screen with a lone prompt in the middle that just reads "PHONE NUMBER" and provides a submit form. I've heard that if you put in a number that isn't a VOIP burner number, it won't work, but there is no way that I would give this sketchy website my main phone number, so I didn't try this out for myself. This landing page was exciting because it was already more of a real-life thing than most ARGs are. There were no unlisted Youtube videos with Slenderman in them to be found. I put my burner number in, hit submit, and went to bed.

I woke up to 21 text messages. There are few things more infuriating than being awoken by a series of text message tones and not being able to mute the conversation in time. After the messages stopped flooding in, I blearily checked them. Out of the 21 messages, 20 were random characters spammed up to the character limit. Right in the middle of these messages was a message with real words in it that read:

**"CALL UP YOUR LAST EX-BOYFRIEND IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT.  
IF HE ANSWERS, HANG UP AND CALL AGAIN UNTIL IT GOES TO  
VOICEMAIL. TELL HIM ABOUT THE WORST THING THAT HE EVER  
DID TO YOU. BE SURE TO BRING UP EVERY UPSETTING DETAIL. YOU  
KNOW YOU STILLTHINK ABOUT IT. TELL HIM THAT YOU DON'T  
FORGIVE HIM. RECORD IT AND SEND US THE .MP3. -W.BG"**

I was anticipating some edgy shit. It is an ARG after all. You don't make an ARG unless you watched Donnie Darko in high school and it changed your life. I do not say this from a place of judgment. Still, this initial challenge already felt like a bridge too far. Also, when I was a kid there was a saying on the internet: "CAPS

LOCKS IS CRUISE CONTROL FOR COOL.” The saying was sarcastic, in case you couldn’t tell.

It was disappointing that the first challenge was something that I desperately didn’t want to do. I wasn’t surprised that it was something like that, but I did have to do some self-reflection in order to decide whether or not it was actually worth it for me to go through with. There wasn’t any way that I could just hit record and fake my way through it. I’m not a very good actor. I would give the game away almost immediately, not to mention that it would go against the spirit of the game, the spirit that I was so adamant about observing. It would have to be real.

I don’t know how they figured out that I had an ex-boyfriend. Maybe it was a lucky cold read? I hoped that it wasn’t the result of some black-hat hackery bullshit. I don’t think that they could find any further information about me based on the VPN IP address and VOIP burner phone number that I gave them. They weren’t asking for the most advanced “behind 7 proxies” levels of internet security, but I didn’t give them much at all to go on.

I’m tempted to keep speculating in order to stall longer. I made the call. I don’t want to talk about it, but I made this podcast specifically in order to talk about it so I’ve written myself into a corner. I can’t play the recording I took of the confession, though, for reasons that will become obvious later. To say that having to verbally relive this moment was retraumatizing would be an understatement. I’m sure that I will be sharing some horrifically personal things as the story of WOE.BEGONE continues, but it would be nice if I could make it through the first episode without having a total meltdown.

I called my ex-boyfriend John at 11:30 at night. That’s the middle of the night for me. I’m old, fuck you. John had probably just gone to bed. It had been about 2 years since we last spoke and even longer since we were together. We didn’t have a terrible breakup. It was awful, but a normal amount of awful. It boiled down to us not having too much in common, rather than anything spiteful. Our lack of commonality was at the core of the event I was going to describe on the phone, as well. Around ring three, I had an intense urge to back out and forget this even happened. I shuddered at the thought that he might answer, groggily, wondering what the hell could be so important that Mike would call him in the middle of the night, only for me to hang up and try again to get his voicemail. By the grace of God, he didn’t answer. He still had the same voicemail as he had when we were together. My heart was in my throat. I hit record on the phone recording app. John’s voicemail beeped and I started talking.

About a year into our relationship, my lifelong best friend died suddenly and unexpectedly. He died during the early afternoon, but the news trickled slowly and torturously outward over the course of the day. The air was sick from the tangle of communications from friends and family trying to figure out what had happened. John was on the way to watch a hockey match with some friends when I got the first whiff that something was wrong: an infuriating and dreadful one-two punch of text messages, “When was the last time you talked to Matt?” followed by “You’re going to want to sit down. Text me back immediately.” That is how the rumor of the news first got to me, but nothing was confirmed yet. I was at home, alone. I hate hockey and John loved it so I would often stay at home and screw around on the internet while

he went to hockey matches with his more enthusiastic friends. I called him and told him what I thought was going on. He was comforting, even concerned, but then he said that he was almost at the arena and would be home in a few hours. Stunned that he didn't pick up on my not-so-subtle cry for help, I just said "okay." I didn't even put up a fight. I spent the next several hours texting and calling friends, trying in vain to get in touch with Matt's parents, refreshing social media feeds, trying to get even in the smallest morsel of confirmation that the worst had happened. Alone.

The uneasy relief of confirmation had set in by the time that John got home a few hours later. I had, inadvisably, been drinking and was in something of a state. We got into the worst fight that I could imagine either of us getting into, neither of us being the fighting type. I've never been that worked up before or since that incident. It stopped just short of being an actual fistfight. It got heated. My body felt red hot. The arguments fractalized and we relitigated old arguments that had been put to bed months ago. I described these relitigations in my phone call, which was itself a relitigation of what happened on that horrible day. I screamed until my voice was hoarse. John did, too. I was so resentful of him for not understanding that he was supposed to come home. Looking back, I don't think that he had the context to understand what was going on fully enough to know how serious things were. I felt terrible for him now, thinking about what his mental state must have been on that day, but I didn't think that I was allowed to tell him this on the phone. My inner monologue spilled out into the phone call, like a cup that had been suddenly and fully inverted, all water moving in unison to make a forceful slap as it strikes the ground. Unbeknownst to me, all of this had stayed coiled up inside me, eager to be released. It was a small corner of my inner self that I only thought to venture into during the lowest parts of my life.

And then I told him that I didn't forgive him.

After I hung up the phone, I crouched in front of my closet that I had paced too while talking, tense on the balls of my feet, and just sat there. I didn't know what else to do but to sit there. My brain felt like there was a screen between it and my body. Something I learned after losing Matt is that this was called "depersonalization," at least according to a friend. I had never sought out therapy even though I should have. Some of this post-call freakout was recorded by my phone recording app, since I was too distraught to turn it off immediately after ending the call.

I hated myself, for bringing this all back into John's world in the middle of the night, for wanting to know about WOE.BEGONE badly enough to do all of this to myself and John all over again. I hated myself for still having these negative emotions about something that happened so long ago and that I always considered resolved. I hated myself for every other ugly, resentful story inside of me that was identical to the one that I just relived. I ended up laying on the carpet and simply crying for awhile. This all felt like a horrible mistake.

But, fuck it. I picked up my phone and texted the audio file to the WOE.BEGONE gamerunners before I could think too much about it. I had done it, so I might as well claim whatever prize I had coming as a result. It could be nothing. They might even use this recording against me as blackmail. I didn't think it would

be blackmail, but it wasn't something that I could rule out. I didn't see how a recording that amounted to "Mike Walters is really sad that his best friend died" could be useful blackmail material. More than anything else, this all felt the pure distillation of a mistake.

I woke up the next morning, surprised at how refreshed I felt. Even though I didn't get to talk to John about what happened, I did get to reckon with something that weighed more heavily on my conscience than I had realized. It felt good to be on the other side of those feelings. I got up earlier than usual and had a little more pep in my step while I was making breakfast, alone in my apartment.

It wasn't until I was in the middle of frying some eggs in my bacon fat that the consequences of the WOE.BEGONE game began to hit me.

None of it happened.

None of it. My friend who "died" is alive and living in Vancouver. He had to move away for his job. John and I never had that awful fight. We ended up breaking up at the same time as we did before, but this fight wasn't a factor in our breakup because this fight never happened. That anxious day of screaming my throat raw had completely vanished from the universe. None of it ever happened. That recording that I sent to WOE.BEGONE was gone. I never left John that voicemail bringing all of this back up to the surface. Likewise, I never texted a recording of that voicemail to WOE.BEGONE. To be clear: all of this had once happened and now none of it had ever happened. It changed. The world is different that it was before I sent that text message. It is different in the specific way that Matt never died and so the ramifications of him dying never happened. I worry that the more I try to describe it, the less clear it actually becomes.

It is excruciatingly obvious that a claim of this size requires a similarly astronomical amount of proof to overcome the arguments of the rightly skeptical. Furthermore, it is definitionally impossible to offer adequate proof that what I am saying is true, because the truth of the universe as I once knew it has been fully erased by the truth of the universe as it is now. It is easy to fabricate evidence, for instance a fake news article about Matt's death, and so improbably that any evidence is more likely a fabrication. But I know that it happened. I called up Mat and we talked, same as it ever was. I got all choked up on the phone and he awkwardly brushed past it and didn't ask further questions because he is as conflict-avoidant as I am, same as it ever was.

I can't even imagine how this reality was made possible. This happening exists fully outside of my imagining of what is possible within the physical universe. My only hope was that as I inched closer to winning WOE.BEGONE, the answer would begin to come to light. Is it a simulation? An alternate universe? Am I a character in a story about time travel? All of them seem to be equally impossible. I can assure you that not ever life alteration that will happen to me over the course of WOE.BEGONE will be quite so cheery. This game wasn't WOE.BEGONE, it was the first challenge of WOE.BEGONE. This was merely the least bloody introduction to the proverbial bloodtrail that you can use to track me now.

Waiting for the second challenge to start, a dread set in—a worry that if I lost, the events detailed in that voicemail will come barreling back into my reality.

[End Theme Plays]