

EPISODE 50: Propagation & Consolidation

I was wrong to hide from everyone. When I started, WOE.BEGONE was a secret. It had to be. I was told that there was a leaderboard and I didn't need any extra competition. It was a secret game with a secret ruleset. I cut off my hands for bonus points. That would have been for nothing if I had made the game harder for myself by recruiting other players. The one person in my life who knew about it was my fiercest rival. She would have to kill me in order to progress. After I completed the fourth challenge, it was still a secret. I was attempting to infiltrate a top secret government facility on behalf of a shadowy group of gamerunners. I was my rival's fourth challenge. My life was tied to my secrecy. I couldn't be found out. If O.V.E.R. didn't kill me, then WOE.BEGONE would.

I maintained this secrecy even after making close friends in Oldbrush Valley, but it was for a different reason. I had suffered too much. I knew what would happen to my loved ones if they decided to involve themselves in WOE.BEGONE. I considered it a type of infohazard. Just knowing about it was tantamount to danger. Speaking its name out loud, especially to someone who had never heard of it before, could yield fatal consequences from any point in time to any other point in time. That was the worst part. The consequences wouldn't even wait for the bad decisions to be made. It was too late for me, but at least I could languish so that others did not. That's what I truly believed at the time. It's what I told myself. You're protecting them.

As it turns out, people didn't want me to languish. They wanted to help. Knowledge of the certain danger involved did not abate their willingness to help me. WOE.BEGONE, as well as every other facet of this infinitely-expanding world of travel through time and space, was dark and intriguing. They wanted to help me and they wanted in. It should be no surprise that I collect acquaintances that might be interested in such things. And they were smarter than me, more driven. Some of them were, anyway. It took multiple forced hands to get me to open up: Mystery Hunter playing WOE.BEGONE, the destruction of 357A, the Flinchites' double bluff that put Edgar in danger, the message from a future Anne about the showdown in Tier 2. At some point it was too much to keep a lid on. I didn't want to keep a lid on it. I opened the floodgates. The cat was out of the bag. There are too many figures of speech to count that describe this phenomenon.

Together, we were immediately lightyears ahead of where I had been working alone, far beyond anything that I learned or obtained from working at O.V.E.R., from taking demands from WOE.BEGONE or the Flinchites. We sat up a Base out of the AirBnB that Anne had rented in order to prepare for the trip into Tier 2, then eventually into a house in the middle of nowhere, again rented by Anne for the purpose of having somewhere to operate from. We called it The Base because nobody came up with a better name and we all knew what it meant. Anne lived there and the rest of us spent as much time as we could, all of us unwilling to fully part with O.V.E.R. Edgar and I spent the most time there, but Marissa and Hunter were often available for ground support. Hunter had connections inside of O.V.E.R. and Marissa had connections outside of O.V.E.R. Chance and Shadow were still being courted but were keeping their distance.

Anne and Edgar knew things that I didn't. Anne had worked at a separate facility, her version of O.V.E.R. Edgar lived an entire year from the moment that he disappeared inside of Tier 2 and reappeared to save the day minutes later. A whole world of these sorts of things, of technology and bloodshed, of conspiracy and ulterior motives, had transpired for him without me. I didn't have to be the one to involve him. A consequence before an action. Opening a can of worms. That's another metaphor.

They weren't hiding like I had been, but they wouldn't say everything. They knew that they couldn't and I tried to be understanding. The future iteration of Anne from the recording kept stressing that once information is sent back in time, it will propagate back in time as far as it can. Information wants to be free and this technology was a brand new medium through which it could attempt to move freely. Future time travel murder plans are exactly the type of information that one does not want to move freely, so it was meted out at a snail's pace. I yearned to console Edgar, to hear what happened to him in his Lost Year, but this time I was the one who was being shut out. It would come out in bits and pieces until it was all out or the Lost Year happened in its rightful time. I had to learn to trust Edgar and Anne as they had learned to trust me.

It was so exciting in the beginning that it was easy to forget the information disparity. In addition to what they already knew, we were always learning. We had the devices that we picked up off of the Arbiters that had died in Tier 2, one of which was Ty Betteridge. We called these devices Calculators because they seemed to execute some sort of code that would calculate how to place an object in a certain time or place and because the buttons appeared to have been taken from a Texas Instruments graphing calculator. It was like the Security.exe program, but not bound to a computer in an off-limits location. The code was mysterious in its power. We didn't understand how anything worked, so we set up a battery of progressively more intricate tasks to see what variables corresponded to what actions.

The Calculators were originally set up in a configuration wherein the selected object would be moved a minuscule amount of time on the order of fractions of a second into the past and then to whatever coordinates were chosen. This would make an essentially perfect double of the object in question. The utility of this function is highly obvious as it pertains to human beings, with the one setback being that Mike Walters #2643 would need a place to live and eat just as much as his 2642 counterparts would. You can't just take him out back and put him down when you're done using him. The meeting in which I suggested as much got surprisingly heated.

Fortunately, digging through the code revealed more than we had expected. Anne discovered some settings that suggested that "excess travelers" as we had come to describe them could be "consolidated." I'm putting quotes around that. We could combine different iterations of time travelers back into one person, presumably in a way that didn't kill anyone. I was skeptical. I couldn't see a mechanism through which that was possible. Those were de facto two different people with two different minds. I knew first hand how different, how disagreeable and incoherent those minds could be. One of mine was a fucking cowboy. But I didn't have a mechanism for time travel, either, unless one is to believe in Aliza Schultz and the "retrocausal pocket," however based in fact that was. This technology could be from decades or centuries into the future. It was not contingent on my understanding.

Consolidation also gave some insight into how some things seemed to contradict each other, how sometimes WOE.BEGONE had done strange things to my mind, how sometimes people killed in their past were still alive in their present. It wasn't "time travel technology." It was a set of technologies, packaged together as a toolkit for a more general goal: to surveil and affect any event in any place at any time.

The first consolidation tests were on inanimate objects, but they didn't yield convincing results. Two objects "became" one object but it wasn't clear in what way that was. You can make one piece of paper from two by destroying one piece of paper. We needed more resilient findings. That's where the hamsters came in. Hamster 1, aka Chubbums the Wondergirl we believe to have successfully duplicated and then transported into the vacuum of space immediately after. This was a known issue. The earth is traveling around the sun at a fast pace, so if you are going to

move an object through space independent of the Earth's gravity, you need to make sure that you have calculated where in the universe the earth is, because the place it used to be is bare outer space, full of nothing and rocks and now Chubbums the Wondergirl.

Hamster 2 was a more moderate failure. The "duplication" effect was easily achieved. It was easy to practice and fine tune on inanimate objects. Hamster 2 became Hamsters 2 and 3. The failure came from the consolidation attempt. After several attempts, the results were two very exhausted hamsters, weary from the effects of the technology and joined at the hip. Their bodies were conjoined at the skin, but with no other major overlap. They were still separate beings with separate organs, including the brain. Anne, ever the least squeamish and most medically proficient, very carefully cut through the conjoined flesh and stitched them up. We decided not put them through anymore experimentation and they are living our the rest of their lives at the Base, Hamsters 2 and 3.

Hamster 4, or the Princess Daffodil Experiment, was a success. We taught one Princess Daffodil how to solve a maze and taught the other one a different maze. The combination was seemingly a success. When it was over, there was exactly 1 Princess Daffodil where 2 had been before. When shown the mazes, she was able to solve both of them with relative ease. We took this as a sign of the hamster maintaining memories of both iterations. I worried that something simpler could be the culprit-- that maybe one had been destroyed and the other's ingenuity was fueled by the desire for a milk and honey hamster treat. Princess Daffodil loves those treats more than I've ever loved anything in my life. Subsequent experiments on the Princess showed similarly promising results. She seemed content, experiencing only mild discomfort during the time travel just as you or I might.

I was afraid for the first human attempt, but not for the right reasons. It was built into a different operation. I was to stay at the Base and another Mike was to transport to a surveillance van to track down a lead on a device that Edgar knew about from his Lost Year. The experiments went fine and the mission was nearly complete when we got spotted and the other Mike Walters was shot dead, Calculator in hand. I detonated the van in order to keep the Calculator from falling into the wrong hands, leaving us with only 1 of them. The goals of the mission had shifted. Instead of consolidating 2 Mikes and seeing the results, we had to figure out how to use the technology to clean up an enormous mess.

To make matters worse, there were lights to keep on, mouths to feed, milk and honey hamster drops to buy, operations to fund, a Base to operate. But Edgar had a plan. This is WOE.BEGONE.

[INTRO THEME PLAYS.]

I landed relatively safely. My feet were under me, but I fell to my knees because I was too disoriented to land standing up. When the world was done distorting around me I took a deep breath and stood up. I tried to stand up as quickly as possible because I had not been briefed on where I was and I wanted to avoid drawing suspicion. I knew that I was going on a mission, but Edgar had kept all of the other details secret. Edgar was to give operating instructions from the Base. I fumbled in my bag and pulled out the earpiece.

"You there Edgar?" I asked.

"I am. Are you okay?" he asked.

“Yeah, I’m in,” I looked around me. I was in a small town. The weather was cold. It was overcast and I couldn’t see people out and about, so it had an air of loneliness and melancholy. “I’m in a sad little town? At a car rental place?”

“Aw, that’s no fair,” Edgar said. “Give it a shot before you knock it. Welcome to Rugby, North Dakota.”

“Edgar, why am I in Rugby, North Dakota?” I asked.

“I wanted somewhere small,” Edgar explained, “somewhere quiet, where there aren’t a lot of people watching us run our errands today. Rugby has all of the stuff we need to do what we need to do and not a lot of people. Plus, North Dakota is one of only a handful of states where you can win the lottery anonymously.”

“And how are we supposed to win the lottery? Did you travel forward and get the numbers?” I asked.

“You’re in yesterday, Mikey,” Edgar replied. “If you call yourself up, you’ll find that you’re cuddled up with me watching Under The Silver Lake.”

“Well maybe if we both try to explain it to you at the same time, we can convince you that it’s a good movie,” I said.

“Doubtful. Anyway, we need to rent a car today. Rugby isn’t exactly known for its public transportation,” he said.

“What is it known for, then?” I asked.

“It is the self-proclaimed center of North America,” he replied.

“Self-proclaimed?” I asked.

“Meaning it’s actually not the center of North America. People used to think it was,” he said.

“That’s a very sad thing to be famous for,” I replied. “You do understand that’s sad, right?”

“I guess so. Anyway, you’re going to go in and rent the Jeep Gladiator for the day. Pay in cash,” he said.

“Any reason why I need a truck in order to buy a lottery ticket?” I asked. I could see the truck in the parking lot. It was larger than anything I had experience driving, given I had driven a car for most of my life.

“It... might be more than a lottery ticket,” Edgar admitted.

“Might be?” I asked, frustrated.

“Let’s focus on one thing at a time, Mikey,” Edgar said.

I grumbled, went inside, paid for the rental, and walked outside to the truck. It was intimidatingly large.

“I feel like I failed the sort of manhood pass necessary to drive this thing,” I said into the earpiece.

“You’ll be fine. The terrain can be tough around here,” Edgar replied.

“Tough? I thought that we were just going to the gas station to get a lottery ticket,” I said.

“That’s the first goal. Let’s get through that one before we start talking about what comes after that,” he said. I started the truck and pulled out of the car rental parking lot.

“You’re going to have to navigate for me,” I said. “I don’t know where I’m going.”

“Right. And we aren’t using GPS for this one. No need to ping some satellites and let them know our exact location at an exact time,” he said. “You did leave your phone here, right?”

“Sure did,” I said. “You’re my only link to the world right now. Where am I turning on this road?”

“You’re going to drive for about 5 minutes, at which point you will come to the Victorian Dress Museum, can’t miss it. You’re going to turn right from there,” he said.

“It’s a shame there’s no time for sightseeing. I didn’t get to do any in Riga, either,” I said.

“Yeah, you’re really missing out,” Edgar replied.

After a few minutes of driving, I reached the intersection that Edgar had described. I looked in the rearview mirror as I turned the corner. “Hey, Edgar, so tell me about this guy behind me,” I said. There was a black car that had been following me since right after I left the car rental and it no longer felt like a coincidence. It had stayed behind me the whole time I had been driving. “Is this the part of the mission that isn’t the lottery ticket?”

Edgar was silent for longer than I would have liked. I was about to ask again when he timidly said “no...”

“Well, fuck,” I said. I punched the steering wheel. “We’ve got trouble. Am I going to need to handle this?”

“You can pull over and tell me where you are and I can bring you back,” he replied.

“I think that by the time I figure out where I am while I am parked, this guy will have already done whatever he wants with me,” I said. “It’s not like I can just pull up where I am on my phone. And I’d prefer not to die in the parking lot for the Victorian Dress Museum.”

“Then what are you going to do, Mike?” Suddenly Edgar sounded scared, the first time I had heard that tone in his voice since we established the Base. He was running an operation on the ground that had backfired for the first time. I couldn’t find it in myself to be frustrated at him for mismanaging the plan, for letting this creed about “propagation of information” prevent me from helping out when I’m the one who is putting my life on the line. Instead, I felt upset, knowing that he was afraid. I wanted to stop him from being afraid. That was my prevailing urge.

“Edgar, we handled something like this in Riga,” I said, keeping my voice calm. “We were tailed and things got tense, but we got it settled and none of us got hurt. We did what needed to be done and were able to get on with the fourth challenge. You’re not the only one that went away and learned about this stuff. I was gone for a long time, too. I’m going to handle this, alright?”

“I’m sorry, Mikey,” he said. “I thought I had it under control.”

“It’s okay, Edgar,” I said. “I’m used to things being out of control.” While we were talking, I had been doing the same thing that I had seen Michael do in Riga: pull off the main roads, out into the country where the likelihood that anyone would see us was much lower. The car behind me followed all of the odd turns that I made, more proof that I was in fact being tailed. I took my pistol from its holster and sat it in my lap so that I would be ready the second I got out of the car. The longer I had to digest what Michael had done in Riga, the more I was positive that he did the right thing. There were a lot of people with a lot of reasons to kill Mike Walters and none of them were going to hesitate. This person seemed like one of them. I pulled off to the side of the gravel road we were on and parked. The black car parked behind me. I grabbed my pistol and got out of the truck.

The other man had also gotten out of the car. I pointed my pistol at center mass, prepared to fire. “Whoa! Mikey!” a voice said. His hands were up. He was wearing a black cowboy hat. “Whoa! I come in peace.” It was me.

“Fuckin’ Michael?” I asked, exhausted. I lowered the gun.

“No, no. Just Mike,” he said. “Michael’s hat, though. I thought since I was gonna be in North Dakota, I might as well try to blend in. “

“Why the fuck are you here?” I asked.

“Just doing a correction,” Mike said. “Home Base doesn’t get it right all the time, especially not the time that you’re from. They get a lot better, but it’s an art, not a science. Thank God for corrections. You’re on the mission with the lottery ticket and the assassination, right?”

“Assassination?” I asked, more pointed at Edgar, who could still hear me through the earpiece. I could hear him start to splutter an explanation when my focus shifted back to Mike.

“One goal at a time, right. Wouldn’t want to Propagate,” he said. “I remember the time. It gets better, eventually. It’s not always going to be you taking Edgar and Anne’s word on what you should do. But it’s exciting, right? Everything is shiny and new and you’ve got that new Calculator to play with. Do you have an O.V.E.R. Mike yet?”

“I don’t know what that means,” I replied.

“Ah, I won’t propagate that information, then,” he said. “Anyway, we were wroooooong about the lottery ticket idea. Like pants-on-head incorrect. Hence, the correction. I’m here to stop you. Profound negative consequences if you win that thing. Definitely not worth \$256 million. Winning in a state where you can win anonymously was clever, but it wasn’t the whole equation, I’m afraid.”

“I guess if we won the lottery then your place in Riga would have probably been a lot nicer,” I said.

“It’s good to be away from that shithole, even if it’s just to warn you,” he said. “Don’t get me wrong, Riga’s nice, but the Base there can make for some uncomfortable living.”

“I’m sure one day I’ll find out,” I replied.

“The assassination goes great, by the way,” he said. “No problems, no trace of us, the perfect crime. You’re gonna need that truck, though. It’s gonna be a bumpy ride getting to somewhere that Edgar can safely get you out of. But I’ve said too much already. I don’t want to ruin the probability. Edgar will tell you everything that you need to know and you’ll forgive him for not telling you the nature of the mission sooner when you get back to Base and see his puppy dog eyes.”

“I know.” I sighed. “And I know that you can’t tell me everything that I want to know, but I have one more question that I was hoping you can answer.”

“Shoot,” Mike said.

“Was Michael fucking with me?” I asked.

Mike was quiet a moment. “Yeah...” he finally said. “So, he was fucking with you and he used to not talk like that all the time. Not when we helped you kill CANNONBALL. He started doing it for fun, but now he gets a lot of positive attention out in public. There aren’t very many American cowboys in Latvia. People get a kick out of it, so he keeps doing it. We sort of created a monster and I hope that he gets bored with it soon. At least he doesn’t do it around the apartment... very much.”

“I sort of wish that I hadn’t asked, but it seems like it’s not as bad as the worst-case scenario,” I said. “I just hope that I never have to consolidate with him or anything like that.”

“Consolidate... oh...” Mike said. “I’ve said too much. Don’t worry about it. You’re still figuring that whole thing out. You have many many years ahead of you.” He looked down at the ground. “Well, you’ve got an assassination to instigate and I need to hop on the next retrocausal pocket to Riga.” He tipped his hat to me. “I’ll be seein’ ya.”

I waved goodbye to Mike and got back into the truck, closing the door hard as I got in, a remnant of the adrenaline of the situation.

“Well, Edgar, my love,” I said, “Who is your wonderful boyfriend going to kill today? Someone from the Lost Year, no doubt.”

Edgar hesitated. There was silence on the line. “He’s done way worse than kill people. And he’ll never see it coming, Mike said it himself. And we need another Calculator. This trip is proof enough of that. When you thought you were being trailed, you could have come back to me if you had a Calculator. This one had to stay here. If we lost both of them in the field, this whole thing would be over. They can’t be duplicated and we don’t know how to make them. And we wouldn’t need one if you hadn’t blown up the other one. This guy is bad news, Mike. I can’t tell you about it right now, but if you had seen what he is capable of, you’d understand. He shouldn’t have that technology and we should--”

I cut him off. “Edgar, please shut your beautiful mouth. I’m going to do it. I trust you. And Mike made it sound like we did the right thing and he’s got 5 years of experience on me,” I said. Edgar was going to keep trying to justify the mission with as many words as he could muster unless I interrupted him.

“You’re sure?” Edgar asked. “If you want to, you can stop at the next intersection and tell me where you are and I can pull you out of there.”

“Fuck it, Edgar. I’m already out here at the center of the Earth or whatever you said it was,” I said.

“The self-proclaimed center of North America,” he corrected me.

“So let’s kill some fucking Arbiter goon or whoever and take his Calculator,” I said.

“I’m sorry, Mike,” Edgar said.

“Give me the directions,” I said, flatly and firmly.

“Oh... okay,” he said, slightly startled by my harshness. He began to give me directions to an address west of Rugby, between it and a neighboring town.

I had unwittingly caught Edgar in a vulnerable position for him. He was always methodical, careful, attentive, deliberate, but he was going to have to learn that we were playing a game with a whole new ruleset and that he couldn’t simply use grit and determination to get the right result every time. I still hadn’t come close to uncovering the Lost Year. I didn’t know what he had done during that time, but it did not spit him out a perfect time travel warrior, always 12 steps ahead. It may have given him the ability to plan an assassination, but it did not give him the resolve to perfectly see it through. Edgar was pressed up against his limits right and front of me. He knew that I could see him hitting those limits hard and in real time in front of him and it made him self-conscious. I understood perfectly. I understood why he could not accept my understanding. He couldn’t even see me. He was too distracted from seeing himself in the mirror.

The drive was painfully boring from a visual perspective. I quickly learned that the terrain wasn’t rough because it was mountainous or hilly. Everything was flat and muddy and soaked through. That’s what the truck with the extreme horsepower and four wheel drive were for. They were for even getting to the end of the muddy driveway that lead up to the house. Even with those features, it was still tricky to make it to the end of the driveway. There was no approaching stealthily. I approached in the only way that I could, navigating across a precarious path of deep mud. I could feel the truck sink and slide a little more every time I made progress. Getting down the driveway felt like it took longer than the whole rest of the drive combined, though it was likely about 5 minutes total. I got as close as I could manage, parked the truck, and got out. The mud came up to the top of my shoes and threatened to suck them off of my feet as I walked. My pistol was still in its holster. I made my way onto the porch and knocked on the door.

Fifteen seconds later, the door opened. It was a man with short black hair, clean shaven, with a slight build. I didn't recognize him. I didn't remember Edgar describing him to me. This was a complete stranger. I did not know him at all. All of a sudden, everything felt extremely wrong, but I pushed it down. The man looked at me, wordlessly. I reached for my pistol. The man reached for what I thought was a pistol in a holster as well. Fearing that he would outdraw me, I changed tactics and tackled him to the ground. I was right to worry. My pistol was still in the holster, but he already had a sizable serrated knife in his hand. I was considerably larger than him and had little trouble tackling him to the ground. He fell backwards, his hands going up over his head. I scrambled to pull the knife out of his hand but he had a white knuckle grip on it.

He slashed wildly at me, managing to cut deeply into the flesh of my right ear. I could see the blood hitting the carpet. He attempted a more tactical slash, aiming for my throat, but I used both arms and my body weight to hold onto his arm. His other arm free, he hit me in the side of the head 4 times, each of them landing on the right side. I felt a sharp stabbing pain and blood beginning to trickle down from my ear. The world grew cloudy. In a desperate attempt to get my pistol free from the holster, I changed tactics, leaned back, and kicked him away from me, giving me enough space to get to my pistol.

This disengagement also gave him a chance to slash at me. He leaped toward me as I was still on the ground. I put my legs up to block the knife and he slashed across both of my shins, cutting through my pants and drawing blood. As he landed on me, I rolled to my left side, keeping him from staying on top of me and finally offering me a shot. I shot him in the chest at extremely close range. He sputtered for a moment and then was gone. Bleeding from multiple sources and having taken several blows to the head, I laid on the carpet, stunned, as most of my body slowly became soaked in both my blood and his. I was definitely concussed again, the second time in a short window. The world throbbed around me as I lay on the bloody carpet. There was an intense pain in my right ear, as though the knife was somehow still there, sticking out of the flesh of my ear. I reached my hand up and touched it. Sharp bits of plastic and metal fell from my ear and joined the rest of the shards of plastic and metal on the ground: the earpiece. The only thing connecting me to Edgar. Edgar knew almost exactly where I was. He knew I was at a particular house, but that wasn't enough information.

I gracelessly got to my feet and searched for the Calculator in a daze. It was sitting out on the dining room table, ever at the ready. Lucky me. I still didn't know how to use it, though. It didn't work when Mikey tried to use it on himself in the mission that killed him. He died punching numbers into that thing. Edgar had told him not to mess with it, that he wouldn't be able to figure it out on his own, and he was right. But I had the Calculator. I had completed the mission. I knew that I was in North Dakota. I could make it home.

I stumbled outside. Okay, maybe I couldn't make it home until I rested for awhile. Not too long, just long enough for the world to stop crumbling around me. I was bleeding but I wasn't losing a fatal amount of blood. It was raining. The mud was getting even deeper. I looked at the truck. It was absolutely stuck. It was not going to move any time soon and the rain was going to make it worse. I looked around. It was the only truck around. "How did he get here, then?" I wondered, thinking in slow motion. "The Calculator." I think I said that part out loud. I looked down at the Calculator, then the next thing I knew I was inside the house again, then I was sitting in a kitchen chair, starting out the window at the rain, having killed someone in the center of North America because my boyfriend told me to, with no way to contact him or to escape.

That fucker. Mike lied to me.

[ENDING THEME PLAYS.]