

INTERMISSION XXI - PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION (2023 REMAKE)

Original transcript created and edited by Orion

[BEGIN Intermission XXI.]

INTRO: Hey guys! Happy intermission. Season 11 continues next week, in the meantime, here is the 2023 remake of episode one of WOE.BEGONE, Participant Observation. This was originally an award for people who got far enough into the episode 100 ARG. And astute listeners might be able to find clues as to where I was pointing the players next. This episode isn't exactly cannon, it's more like what I would have done if I had written episode one today. So, without further ado, please enjoy the 2023 remake of Participant Observation.

MIKE WALTERS: Technology is always proposed as some kind of great equalizer. Some aspect of life becomes easier for the average person, bringing the average closer to the top. Agriculture was invented and the average person can now grow their own food. The printing press was invented, and people could now procure their own news. The internet was invented, and people could do... any number of things. Ranging from work productivity, social connection, entertainment—the sky was open. Cue the techno-libertarians propositing the ushering in of a new era of unprecedented human freedom. But technology does nothing to actually level hierarchies on its own. Agriculture leads to centralization. Society is possible, but it results in feudalism. The individual is now generating capital for someone else. Printing turns into media, turns into media conglomerates. Four companies own everything. A slightly different set of four companies own everything on the internet—at least, in a real sense. You likely go whole days on the internet, only visiting huge websites owned by billion-dollar companies. Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, Reddit, *[Distorted.]* Gmail.

[Voice returns to normal.] Newt Gingrich was on the cover of *Wired* magazine in 1995, and few batted eyes about what he might actually be up to. Technology puts different people in control. But it didn't put *us* in control. And we always fall for the same trap, no matter how many times it plays out in front of us. We always think that this one will be the panacea to democratize human interaction. Even us handsome podcasters with perfect eyebrows and freshly trimmed beards and lengthy spiels about failures of technology to liberate us are prone to this. And if this sounds like a preamble leading to an omission that your humble narrator here stuck his foot in this same trap, that's because it is.

The mistake that so cursed me from the outset was me convincing myself that I could be a journalist. Anyone can be a journalist. Medium is free, and if you want people to actually see what you're doing, anyone can upload a podcast. Surely I wasn't worse than any number of low effort, high volume podcasters in the space. I have a microphone and a song in my heart, I could do this. But it turns out that actual journalists are professionals and I'm not a professional anything. It is not in my nature to simply observe, like some sort of nature documentarian watching a lion take down a gazelle and doing nothing to interfere with the circle of life. A lion must eat to survive, and something needs to die to feed the lion. Still, even the lion and the gazelle feels cosmically unfair to me, even if I can perfectly rationalize it. This inclination of mine

should have been proof enough for me to know that I cannot merely observe without participating. It is simply not within my constitution. And humans make it messier. Anthropologists have a term for this, actually. Participant observation. You cannot fully understand people without interacting with them. You can't watch them in a nature documentary. And we would know more if we had the ability to interview a lion. In what conceivable universe could some first time, low rent podcaster ever hope to stare something so great and terrible in the eye and not end up a participant.

The window for walking away has closed. All I can do now is hit the button and start recording. Well, it's software, so I'm actually clicking an icon that's a skeuomorph of a button, but I am recording. I am participating. And, as of this moment, I think I might be... winning.

I'm Mike Walters. And this is WOE.BEGONE.

[Opening theme plays.]

MIKE WALTERS: I'll cut the shit, if you're listening to this podcast, it is likely because you saw something on one of the more unpolished corners of the internet. Maybe one of those websites that one of the four megacorporations doesn't own? About a mysterious, impossible sounding online game called WOE.BEGONE. That's woe dot begone. A Google search for WOE.BEGONE ignores their period between the two parts of the word entirely, and yields dictionary definitions of the word *woebegone*, images of some kind of shark, references to *Prairie Home Companion*. I can't help but wonder if this poor search engine optimization was deliberate on the part of whoever is running this thing.

I am here to contribute my minute drop in the bucket. To provide search results, with proper spelling and capitalization, that will hopefully be what people are actually searching for when they search for WOE.BEGONE. And if I look really cool on the internet in the process, that's definitely a bonus. But let's not get ahead of ourselves.

WOE.BEGONE is an online game that skirts the definition of alternate reality game, or ARG. Like an ARG, it uses internet multimedia to create a story based around player participation. Think *Marble Hornets* or any of the myriad series like it. A story built around content distribution, usually video, around which a community solves rudimentary ciphers and puzzles in order to unlock more of the story. However, WOE.BEGONE differs from these in some major ways. It is much more *game*. A competitive game with a secret rule set. The game's secrecy and it's rules are actively maintained by its gamerunners, who enforce them through what I can only describe as a black-hat hacker skillset. Any attempt by players to communicate to non-players about the content of the game is met with grieving, DDoSing, and take down request spam. Nothing about WOE.BEGONE stays online for very long. The post that I found about WOE.BEGONE is already gone, having managed to stay up for a few hours before the inevitable. In fairness, I'm sure the original poster saw this takedown coming. He made the post in a major subreddit, one of the megacorp websites we all congregate. He was asking for attention, and he got it.

I am well aware that by starting a podcast about WOE.BEGONE, I am opening myself up to exactly this sort of scrutiny. And honestly, I'm not concerned. I'm not a hackerman, but I do have good internet hygiene. Much better than the average person, I think. I don't use my real name on important accounts. I don't post personal information on social media. Sometimes I post false personal information so that data aggregators can not get an accurate picture of me. I love baseball, and I live in Oklahoma.

Knowing that I was putting myself at risk, I actually withdrew all of my money from my bank account, which wasn't that much money, but I wanted to ensure that seizing my accounts would be fruitless. Nothing on the internet is mine. I am relatively safe. The gamerunners have not gone above and beyond the digital, as far as I know. No one has been found dead in a gutter for telling people about the mysterious online game. Not for *telling* them at least, but more on that in a later episode.

My participation in WOE.BEGONE and this podcast are both calculated risks that I have decided to take. And as I said at the start, I appear to be winning. And it is possible that my exceptional performance will grant me some leeway, a teacher's pet sort of thing. Though it is, admittedly, unlikely.

My intention was not originally to play the game, rather it was to see the game being played, as naïve as that might sound. Unfortunately, there is no spectator mode in WOE.BEGONE. In order to gain access to the game at all, I had to sign up as though I were playing. At which point I would have to play as though I was actually interested in being a player, which is fundamentally indistinguishable from actually playing. But, maintaining my faux-journalistic integrity, I did have a list of things that I wanted to observe through my participation. What the rules were, who the players were, what the win conditions were, and what the reward for winning was. Though I was playing, it was never my intention to take the game seriously or attempt to win.

In order to receive the instructions and begin playing WOE.BEGONE, you must discover the signup page, likely through some ephemeral forum post. It gets spread around the internet intermittently, so if you have internet savvy, you might be able to come across it eventually if you know what to look for. There could be many links posting to this same website, but the one that I found was a gibberish mix of numbers and letters. Sort of like the URL you would see if the characters comprising it were not Latin script, like a Japanese website, for instance. The website was on the Surface Web, though. There was no need for Tor browsers or Onion links. The website can detect IP and browser data, and if you aren't using a VPN and in incognito mode, the website will cheekily redirect you to DuckDuckGo. I suppose that the website wants to make sure its users are taking the most basic precautions. It's easy to imagine a 90s version of this website that would detect your settings and hit the browser's back button for you, or eject your CD tray, in an era where browsers would still allow websites to do things like that. The website itself is bare bone, just a black screen with white text in the middle reading "PHONE" in all caps. With a prompt under it to enter your phone number and not much happening in the background.

The post that I saw said that you need to enter a VOIP phone number or it won't work. But I would never give these people my real phone number, so that wasn't a problem. My initial impression was that this trailhead at the beginning of the game was a promising start that set it above a lot of other ARGs. Giving over a phone number leaned on the reality part of alternate reality game. I already felt more involved than I would solving a polybius square that I saw in the background of an unlisted YouTube video about Slender Man or whatever.

It was getting late when I discovered the website. I had been up all night, clicking around on PHPBB forums populated by people who missed the old internet and listening to Black Moth Super Rainbow. I typed my number into the phone field, hit enter, and went to bed.

I woke up early the next morning to my phone repeatedly going off. I *immediately* regretted leaving my phone volume on, and that my text message tone was Milhouse yelling, "Everything's coming up Milhouse". **[Text tone [repeatedly]: Everything's coming up Milhouse!]** It's a fun notification to hear once or twice a day, but it is much too long and too loud for 21 text messages in a row. I grabbed my phone blearily and in my half-sleep, but most of the messages had already been sent by the time I was able to mute my phone. At first I thought that they were all gibberish. Spam messages. Each of them full of meaningless characters. I scrolled from top to bottom and saw the same gibberish on both ends. It was only once I scrolled to the center that I saw that someone had indeed left a message for me, in all caps.

[Audio deeper and distorted.] CALL UP YOUR MOST RECENT EX-BOYFRIEND IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT. DO NOT SPEAK TO HIM IF HE ANSWERS. HANG UP AND CALL AGAIN UNTIL YOU GET HIS VOICEMAIL. REMIND HIM OF THE WORST THING THAT HE EVER DID TO YOU. MAKE NOTE OF EVERY UPSETTING DETAIL, THE ONES THAT YOU STILL THINK ABOUT. TELL YOU WHOLE STORY. THEN... *TELL HIM THAT YOU DON'T FORGIVE HIM.* RECORD THE MESSAGE AND SEND THE MP3 TO THIS NUMBER. SIGNED, W.BG.

MIKE WALTERS *[normal]:* Well, I did say that I appreciated that the alternate reality game was at least making some attempt to interfere with my reality. And I knew that I was going to be in for some edgy bullshit, it's an ARG, after all. You don't make an ARG unless you saw *Donnie Darko* at a sleepover in high school and you were never the same person after that, and I don't say that from a place of judgment or inexperience. Still, this felt like getting tossed in the deep end right off the bat. There was no tutorial, I don't know what any of the buttons do. It went from zero to calling an ex-boyfriend instantly. The all caps grated on my freshly awake eyes. You know, there was a saying back in the old days of the internet, caps lock is cruise control for cool. Cool man.

I was disappointed that the first WOE.BEGONE challenge was something that I was so averse to doing. It felt like a college weed out class. Something so hard right out of the gate so that only the most dedicated make it to the next stage. I hate being weeded out. I was successfully weeded out of a chemistry major in college, though that probably turned out for the best.

The time for self reflection had arrived; was this challenge worth the reward? And I would have to actually do it. Theoretically, someone could hit record on their phone and fake a voicemail, but I am not an actor. They would see through me immediately. And if I were being true to being a participant observer, faking it would go against the spirit of what I was trying to do. It would have to be real.

Strangely, the message seemed personalized to me? I do have an ex-boyfriend, and it is obvious to me what the worst thing he ever did to me was. Was this a lucky cold read, or did the gamerunners know something about me? I hoped, of course, that this wasn't a breach of my personal data, but I was also at a loss about where they would breach that personal data from. As I said, I am careful to muddy the waters if I'm wading through the waters at all. All the website got from me was a VPN address and a VoIP burner phone number and whatever it was able to scrape up from the virtual machine I was running it in. It wasn't behind seven proxies hyper-paranoid internet security, but I also felt like I hadn't given it enough to make inferences about my personal life. I suppose it was possible that I used the same VPN while browsing some other website, and some algorithm somewhere had connected enough dots that I didn't know that I was making in order to identify me. The dots that you don't know you are making are the ones that get you in trouble, after all. Either that or someone was spying on me through my apartment window. That's all I could figure.

I could speculate further, stall more, but I think it's time to get to the meat of it. I made the call. Of course I made the call. This was the game I had decided to report on, and they knew something about me, and I wanted to explore deeper and see if I could figure out how. That being said, this was not a fun phone call. It's actually bad enough that I don't want to talk about it. But the point of the podcast is to talk about WOE.BEGONE, and the first challenge of WOE.BEGONE was this phone call, so I have no choice. I've painted myself into a corner.

If I could, I would simply play the recording here so that you could hear it for yourself, but I don't have the recording anymore for reasons that I'll have to explain later. You don't want to hear it anyway. It's nasty. One might even call it retraumatizing. I had been instructed to describe the worst thing he ever did to me, and people are capable of doing quite awful things to each other. It was a deeply personal message. And I'm sure that I will be sharing more deeply personal things as the story of WOE.BEGONE continues. I'd like to make it to the end of the first episode without exposing you to me having a total breakdown. Maybe it's better that the recording is gone. Good riddance to bad audio.

I called John at 11:30 that night. John is his name. And 11:30 is the middle of the night for me. I'm old, fuck you. That's nearly midnight. John's old too. I knew that he would already be in bed. We hadn't spoken much after we broke up a little more than two years ago. It wasn't an eventful breakup. It was normal, slow growing apart, no drama. It was unrelated to the catastrophic event that I was calling him about. We had made some semblance of peace about that and stayed together through it. The breakup was awful, but it was a manageable kind of awful. We grew apart until we didn't have anything in common anymore. Our lack of commonality gradually became grating until it became clear to both of us that we were tolerating each other.

Roommates who shared a bed. Looking back, our lack of commonality was at the core of what made this the worst thing he ever did to me.

The phone rang. Around ring three, I had an intense urge to hang up the phone and forget any of this ever happened. I imagined in horror John answering the phone, groggily, ripped from deep sleep, that baritone “Hello?” of his made scratchy by fatigue. The word curling up in bafflement that Mike Walters was calling him in the middle of the night. “Hello?” Only for me to hang up without saying anything, only to call later again in hopes of getting his voicemail. By the grace of god, I did not have to endure his voice.

His voicemail was the same as it had been when we were dating, an automated voice telling me to please record my message at the tone. I could feel a lump in my throat. I gulped and the lump was still there. The voicemail tone played. I took a deep breath, hit record on my phone app, and began talking.

About a year into my relationship with John, my lifelong best friend, Matt, died suddenly and unexpectedly. He was hit by a car. There was no preparing for it. No easing in. Not even the kind of easing in you might get from a sudden and devastating illness. He was perfectly healthy until the instant that he was gone forever. He died during the early afternoon, and news trickled out slowly and torturously outward over the course of the day. There was the matter of attempting to render aid, identifying him, informing family. I was far enough down the line that I heard murmurs and rumors before I heard anything solid. The air was sick with the tangle of friends and family reaching out to each other to figure out what happened.

John was on his way across town to watch a hockey game with his friends when I first began to get a whiff that something had happened to Matt. It was a dreadful one-two punch of text messages. “When was the last time you heard from Matt?” and “You’re going to want to sit down. Call me *now*.” These are the worst sorts of messages one can possibly receive. There’s enough information to panic, but not enough to tell what is going on. That is how the rumor of Matt’s death first arrived to me, but nothing was confirmed. Just enough to send me into a frenzy. I was at home, alone. I hate hockey and John loves it, so it was common for me to stay at home while he went to hockey games with his more enthusiastic friends.

I needed someone to talk to. I called John in a panic. “John, something’s happened to Matt. I don’t know what yet, but I’m starting to fear the worst.” John was comforting, concerned even—about me, he wasn’t especially close to Matt. But then he said that he and his friends were about to park at the arena and that he would be home in a few hours. Stunned that John hadn’t picked up on the emotion in my voice, the implication that he should come home, all I could mutter was a meek, “Okay... okay.” I put up no resistance. It wasn’t malicious, he just didn’t understand what had happened or what I was going through.

I spent the next several hours messaging friends and family, checking social media feeds, trying in vain to get in contact with Matt’s parents, anything to get the smallest morsel of confirmation of the worst, with no hope of hearing anything else. That’s not exactly true. It’s only when hope

is subverted that you can experience despair, and I was sinking into despair. And I was all alone while doing so.

The uneasy relief of official confirmation of Matt's death had set in by the time that John got home, hours later. Hot, sharp pain had been replaced by soft, deep pain. In my desire to quell at least some of it, I had, inadvisably, been drinking and was in something of a state when he opened the door. My emotions had turned inwards and then outwards and then inwards again, finally making it out again when I saw John's face. We got in the worst fight that I have ever been in my entire life. It was the worst fight that I could imagine either of us ever getting into, neither of us being the fighting type, both of us conflict-averse. It is the hottest my body has ever run. I felt red-hot. It very nearly tipped over into being an actual fistfight.

Arguments about Matt's death and John not being there for me spiraled and fractalized into other arguments, new arguments, older arguments that had been put to bed but were now litigated through the lens of losing Matt. I described these relitigations to John's voicemail, the message itself already being a relitigation of some long dead argument. I screamed until my voice was hoarse. John did too. My neighbor came to check on us the next morning to make sure that everything was okay because he heard us screaming. I was so resentful of John for not understanding that *he was supposed to come... home.*

Looking back at it now, I don't think that John had the puzzle pieces necessary to understand how serious things were, how badly I needed not to be alone in my grief. I'm sure that I didn't articulate myself well when I called him. Yes, I think that something bad might have happened to Matt. No, I don't know what it is. No, nothing has been confirmed yet. It could have all been a misunderstanding, something not worth derailing a schedule over. It didn't inflict the same sense of dread in him as it did in me.

I felt terrible for John now, thinking about how he must have felt after misreading the situation so badly. We were in love, and the fight didn't end that. He must have felt gutted. But I didn't think that I was allowed to empathize with him in the voicemail that I was leaving for WOE.BEGONE. Instead, my inner monologue spilled out of me and into his voicemail, like water from a cup that has been suddenly and fully inverted, all of the water hitting the ground at once in one forceful slap. I couldn't stop talking. I didn't know that all of this had stayed coiled inside of me, staying small and unnoticeable, except during the lowest parts of my introspection, waiting for an opportunity like this one to leap out. And then *[Voice distorts.]* I told him that I didn't forgive him.

[Voice returns to normal.] I hung up shortly after, embarrassed and ashamed and unable to say anything else. After I hung up, I stood there in the front of my closet where I had paced to while I was speaking, crouched, perched on the balls of my feet, unable to do anything but stand there. I observed my body without feeling, as though I weren't participating in it. It felt as though there were a screen between my thoughts and the rest of me. It reminded me of how I felt the day that Matt died. I had never sought out therapy, but a friend of mine told me that this was called depersonalization and that it was a common response to trauma. I forgot to end the recording

after I ended the call, so some of this depersonalization made its way into the end of the recording. A bonus for the WOE.BEGONE gamerunners.

I hated myself once I came back down into my body. I hated myself for bringing this all back into John's world in the middle of the night. Not even for closure for myself or him, but out of a selfish pursuit of some mysterious game that I had no expectation of rewarding me for my effort, except in the form of progress to a new challenge. I hated myself for keeping these resentments so fresh and so ready for so long, under the guise of having resolved them years ago. I hated myself for every other ancient, hateful story like that one that resided in me, lying in wait for a similar opportunity to drudge it up.

I moved off the balls of my feet, onto my knees, then onto my stomach and laid there a while, sobbing. I had made a horrible mistake.

[Deep inhale and exhale.]

But, fuck it. What's done was done. I had left the voicemail, and had recorded myself leaving the voicemail. I picked up my phone, brought up the text thread with the WOE.BEGONE gamerunners, and sent them the recording, trying not to think too much about it lest I talk myself out of it. I had done the awful deed, so there was no point in letting the opportunity go to waste now. Not proceeding in WOE.BEGONE wouldn't make the voicemail go away. It was done.

I didn't expect a prize. It was possible that nothing might happen. I might have fallen into an intricate scam or some sort of blackmail trap. Though, I wasn't sure how someone could use this to scam me. 'Send us a million dollars or we let everyone know that Mike Walters is sad that his friend died'? I'm not scared of that information getting out. Maybe it was some sort of student art project. An audio collage of a bunch of people recounting the worst nights of their lives, set to some sappy music. Now that, I was afraid of. But I didn't think any of these outcomes were likely. Mostly, it just felt... like a mistake.

At some point during the night, I made it up off the floor in front of my closet and onto my bed and fell into a proper sleep. I woke up the next morning before my alarm, surprised at how refreshed I felt, in spite of everything. I didn't get closure with John, but I did allow myself to reckon with an invisible weight that I did not realize I was carrying. It felt good to emerge on the other side of those feelings. A sentiment that I swear I am paraphrasing from Bukowski, but I cannot find the source for. I got out of bed without fatigue and had some long missing vim as I went about my morning routine, alone in my apartment.

It wasn't until I was done cooking the bacon for my morning breakfast and about to fry some eggs in the bacon fat, that the consequences from the first WOE.BEGONE challenge began to dawn on me.

None of it... happened. None of it. Matt *wasn't* dead. He was alive and well, living in Vancouver. He had to move away from home for work. John and I never got into that fight. We were still

broken up, though. I was being truthful when I said that the fight had no bearing on the decision. But this low point had been stricken from our lives. That anxious day of calling my whole contacts list and screaming myself hoarse never happened. The recording that I sent to the WOE.BEGONE gamerunners was no longer on my phone. There was no voicemail waiting for John when he woke up. There was no proof that I had sent the recording to WOE.BEGONE at all.

To be perfectly clear, all of the things that I have just described had happened at one point, though they now had no longer ever happened. Something is different now. The world became a different world after I had sent the recording to WOE.BEGONE, but it is only different along one specific axis. Matt is no longer dead, and the ramifications of him being dead have been replaced with the ramifications of him being alive. I hope that that is understandable because I worry that trying to explain it further will make it less clear.

It goes without saying that a claim of this magnitude would require a nearly infinite amount of evidence to prove. It would be an astronomical change in the perspective of what is even possible in the universe. It might even be impossible to present proof about this claim, because changing the past makes the past look as though that is how it always has been. From what I can tell, I am the only one who recognizes that there are two pasts distinct from one another. I cannot prove that Matt used to be dead, because Matt didn't use to be dead. Matt is alive. I am the only one who can see both paths simultaneously.

I called Matt that morning, and he answered the phone. We talked, same as it ever was, making up for lost time. He said that it had been a long time since I called him. We told each other what we had been up to recently. I left out the part about WOE.BEGONE. At one point, I got choked up thinking about how it was real and it was Matt and he was really alive. And Matt smoothly brushed past it by keeping the conversation going, because Matt is equally as conflict avoidant as I am. Same as it ever was.

How this new reality was possible eludes my imagination. It's like trying to imagine a four-dimensional object. The brain simply cannot process the needed perspective. My only hope of having any way to understand what was going on was to keep going. To keep playing WOE.BEGONE. Is this a simulation? Have I been plopped down into some alternative universe? A literal alternative reality game? Am I a character in a work of fiction? Anything I could come up with seemed completely impossible. But this was just the beginning. This was just the first challenge. This challenge wasn't WOEBEGONE. It was the first piece of WOE.BEGONE. There would be many more challenges to come. This was the carrot before the stick. And WOE.BEGONE wasn't going to leave me with extra pep in my step for very long. Rescuing Matt was the least bloody part of the story, the beginning of a blood trail that you can use to track me now.

There was nothing left to do, but to wait for the second challenge to start. In the meantime, a quiet dread set in. If WOE.BEGONE were a game, what happens to the losers? What happens to the world contained in that voicemail, were I to come up short?

[Closing theme plays.]

AFTER-CREDITS: S, the reason that I left that Bukowski mention in the episode, even though I couldn't find the quote that I was referring to, is that I was googling strings of words that were similar to the quote, and I found this link to an ebook for a book called, "Bitchcraft: Simple Spells for Everyday Annoyances" which is funny in its own right, but you click on the link and you get these testimonials that I would like to read to you right now.

Ginny Martins writes, "Finally I get this ebook. Thanks for all these bitchcraft simple spells for everyday annoyances I can get now."

Lisa Duran writes, "Cooool I am so happy XD"

Marcus Jensen writes, "I did not think that this would work. My best friend showed me this website, and it does. I get my most wanted ebook." To which Michael Straubenson replies, "WTF this great ebook for free?!"

And finally, Hun Tzu writes, "My friends are so mad that they do not know how I have all the high quality ebook which they do not."

Thank you, I yield the rest of my time.

[END Intermission XXI.]