



CHAPTER 5

DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE: INTRODUCING “ROUTE 66”



You now have an understanding of what alternate reality gaming is all about, as you’ve been given a brief history of this exciting new gaming genre, taken a look at one of the very recent ARGs (“The Art of the Heist” in Chapter 2), and been taken on a whirlwind tour of how the first ARG was played out and solved by the Cloudmakers (Chapters 3 and 4).

For the next three chapters, you will now have an opportunity to play a sample ARG within the pages of the book. While the storyline behind this ARG is interesting (or so I hope, as every puppetmaster ultimately hopes...), there are some things you should keep in mind as you work through it:

- As you know from your review of *The Art of the Heist* and *the Beast*, the bigger, heavily produced ARGs have really pulled out all the stops to present players with an engaging and engrossing gaming environment. While somewhat off topic for this book (given it is ultimately a guide for those interested in playing ARGs), there is ongoing discussion about how successful a major ARG like *Heist* or *ilovebees* is from a marketing perspective. While we’ve certainly raised this question of “ARG as a marketing gimmick?” in this book, the fact is that there aren’t solid numbers yet to confirm or deny just how powerful of a marketing tool these games really are. At any rate, my point here is that the ARG you will see in the following pages is not, obviously, on the production level of the games you saw reviewed in Chapters 2, 3, and 4 because it is not (yet!) an ARG that has been designed to help market any product, other than this book, of course.

106 Chapter 5 ■ Down the Rabbit Hole: Introducing “Route 66”

- You also need to keep in mind that I am using the term “ARG” somewhat loosely, in terms of defining what follows. Again, if you have read Chapters 3 and 4, you know that the heavily produced and marketed ARGs utilized actual phone calls, faxes, and e-mails to players, as well as the staging of real world events. Unfortunately, the ARG you are seeing in these pages won’t be leaving you voicemails at work; still, it will ask you to go on an extended exploration of the Web and take a virtual journey across the United States, so that’s not too shabby for an ARG that depends primarily on the printed page!
- Given the limitations of a printed ARG, you will be presented with additional information as if you had actually received it yourself. Again, since it isn’t practical for this sample ARG to send you an actual e-mail, you will nevertheless see printed in the chapter the e-mail that you would otherwise “receive” if this ARG were actually being played out. Also, you will see communications and notes from other players you have teamed with to try and solve the ARG, not unlike the Cloudmakers who joined together to work through the Beast.
- Keeping all of the above in mind, the “Route 66” sample ARG will, however, ask you to interact with a Web site (described later). And if you “successfully interact” with this site (that is, successfully guess a username and password to access the site), you will not only solve the puzzle of the ARG but—just maybe!—be presented with an award for all your hard work, critical or creative thinking, and perseverance.

While this sample ARG might not take you months to figure out, it should give you an idea of what being involved in an ARG is all about.

Ready to head down the rabbit hole? I think I see it just ahead...

Background: What Is Route 66?

Before the interstate system, “Route 66” was the primary artery for traveling west across the United States. Traversing more than a dozen states as it twisted and turned through America, the two-lane highway became legendary for the travelers and legends it produced. Indeed, “Route 66” became (and remains to this day) a major ingredient in the American “collective conscience,” and our fascination with the open road.

While keeping its legendary status, Route 66 is today primarily a memory for the vast majority of those who travel via automobile. Again, the interstate system made the character and charm of the old road outdated (and, unfortunately, undesirable) as

Get Your Kicks on Route 66

If an essential identifier of Americana is the open road, then there is no better example than Highway Route 66. As one of the most famous highways in the United States (if not the world), US 66 originally began in Chicago, Illinois and ended in Santa Monica, California for a total stretch of nearly 2,500 miles.

From its inception, the highway has enjoyed an interesting history. As one of the original U.S. highways, it found perhaps its strongest advocate in Oklahoman Cyrus Avery, who insisted that the highway be given a round number, but when this was not possible, decided to settle on "66" because he thought it would be easy to remember, hear, and say.

Although the route was anything but a "direct route" (it wound throughout the Midwest, plains, and Southwest), it quickly became popular to both long-haul truckers, as well as a favored road home for returning World War II GIs. As the call of the open road became an irresistible urge for vacationing American families of the 1950s, tourism also emerged as a major component of the road, so that all types of roadside attractions and other "tourist traps" began to cover the road. In short, the road quickly took on (and has retained) a near mythical status as one of the prime representations of American popular culture. In 1946, Bobby Troup forever cemented the road into the American popular consciousness by composing his classic song, "(Get Your Kicks On) Route 66" (the song was later sung by artists as diverse as Nat King Cole and the Rolling Stones). John Steinbeck's classic depression-era novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*, also made significant use of the road as the Dust Bowl farmers of Oklahoma portrayed in the book traveled the road on their way to California. And, as you will see in the ARG portrayed in the next three chapters, the "Beat Generation" writers (especially Jack Kerouac) further helped to mythologize the road in such novels as *On the Road*. There was even a television show called *Route 66*, which ran in the early 1960s and featured the stories of two young men, driving the open roads of America, looking for adventure.

The road was officially decommissioned in 1985, as the interstate highway system and its upkeep, efficient (although somewhat characterless) mode of travel and improved use of technological innovation had made traveling Route 66 irrelevant. But given its rich history and its indelible mark on American culture, the road continues to capture the imagination of those looking to discover the great myth and legend of the American road as a symbol of freedom and wonder.

108 Chapter 5 ■ Down the Rabbit Hole: Introducing “Route 66”

travelers looked for faster (interstate) ways of driving to their destination. Today, while it is possible to piece your way across the country by following the old road, to do so requires a very good map, a lot of patience, and an ability to see through what are now ghost towns, back to a time when such places were vibrant, colorful stops on “the way West.” Figure 5.1 illustrates the path Route 66 took across the western United States.

With the advent of the interstate system, few people were interested in driving the old road, so it slowly began to slip away. Nevertheless, over the years, many enthusiast clubs and others interested in the historical preservation of the “old road” have sprung up, in an effort to keep this classic piece of Americana alive. Figures 5.2–5.5 highlight a great site—www.historic66.com—devoted to this mission (note the great title: “Where the Mother Road meets the Internet”).

Note

There are other great sites devoted exclusively to Route 66. You will see some of them over the course of this sample game, but if you simply Google the term “historic route 66,” you will see a listing of many, including the one highlighted in the figures here.

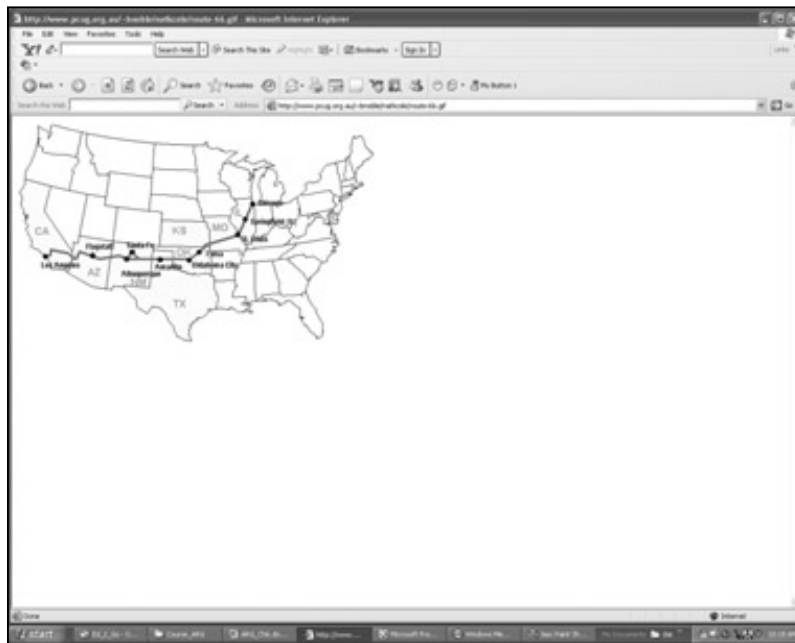


Figure 5.1 Original Route 66 path across the United States.



Figure 5.2 Home page for www.historic66.com.

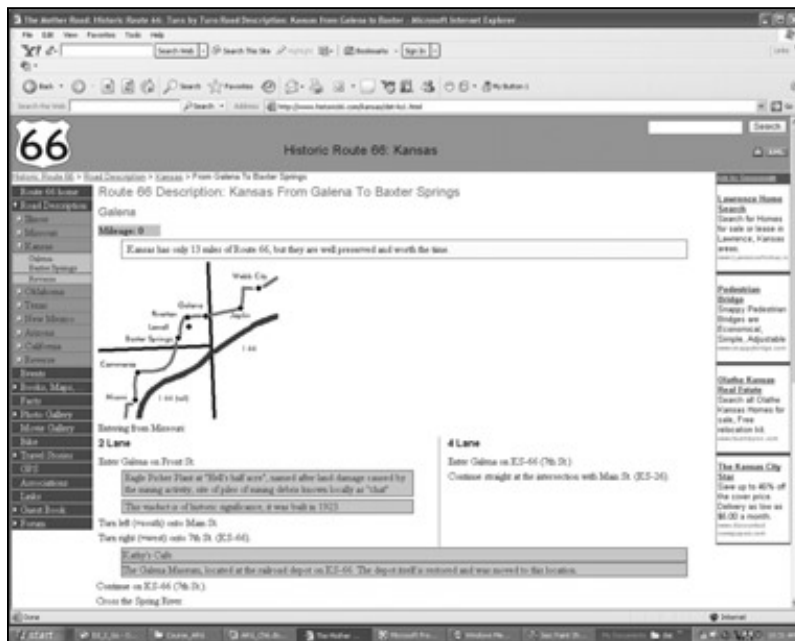


Figure 5.3 For those who want to drive the old road, detailed information on each remaining section is provided.

110 Chapter 5 ■ Down the Rabbit Hole: Introducing “Route 66”

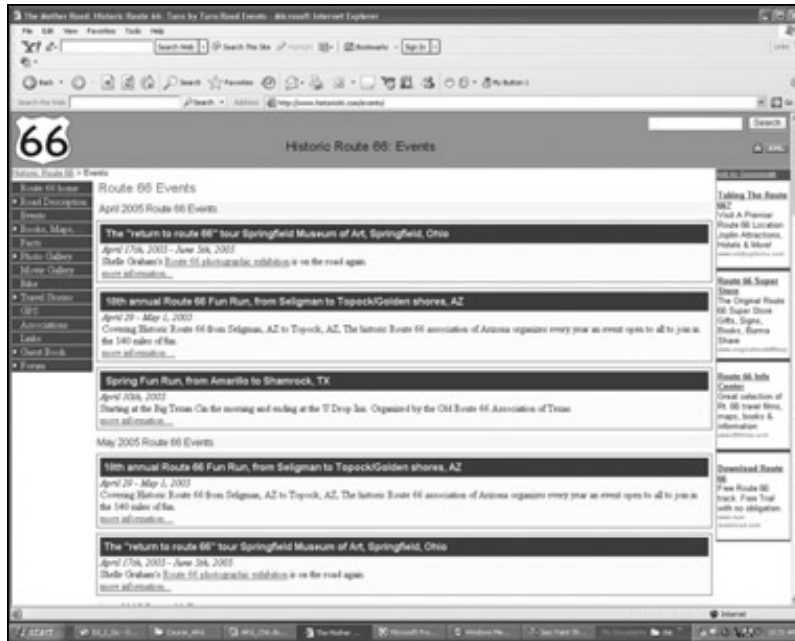


Figure 5.4 As evidence to the continued interest in the old road, current Route 66-related festivals are still ongoing.

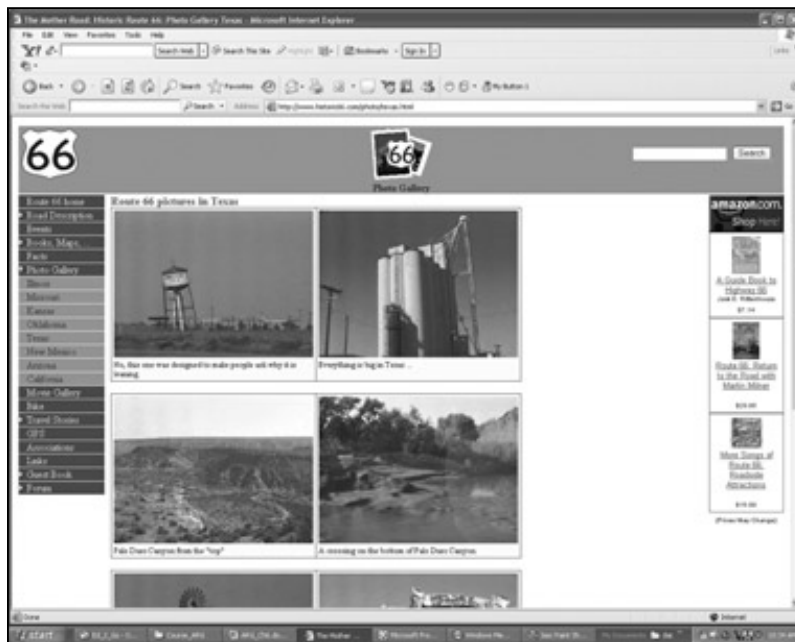


Figure 5.5 If you can only take a “virtual” trip, the site provides many terrific photos, short video clips, and text describing the road.

Route 66 is clearly a major piece of Americana, and it has been featured in countless songs, stories, and novels. In other words, it presents fertile ground for being the focus of an ARG, so without further delay, let's jump into the game.

Finding the Rabbit Hole

Since again our “printed ARG” requires you to assume or imagine some aspects of play that you otherwise might directly interact with if this were a “real world” ARG, you need to “suspend your disbelief” for a moment (which you should be doing, anyway, if you are really getting into this gaming genre!) and imagine that you are living in the vicinity of St. Louis, Missouri. As you know from your readings of actual ARGs, real physical locations can play a key factor in how the game is developed. For this ARG, we'll assume that you've caught the lucky break of living in St. Louis so that you can participate firsthand in the ARG that will be developed here. That said—and from this point forward—read the material in these chapters as if you were reading it “in real life,” so as to help simulate the experience of finding the rabbit hole for this ARG and, of course, playing it, too.

As you play through this sample ARG, again keep in mind that because of the constraints of presenting it in printed text, I have taken several liberties in how the game is presented. A typical ARG would have an active, online collaborative discussion component and would play out “in real time,” with specific clues and other pieces of information being given out on a regular (and well-organized basis). Since we can't really assume that kind of regimented approach in a printed book (since we can't, from all practical perspectives, update this book's content on a weekly basis!), I have again written this sample ARG from the perspective that you will suspend your disbelief and imagine the ARG playing out as if you were actively involved, and that you will also accept printed e-mail messages and other “...and then this happened”-type clues to simulate the typical ARG environment.

Let's Roll: Beginning the Game

One fine summer morning, while sitting in a local café enjoying a morning cappuccino, you come across an interesting (albeit short) news story in the local paper. Apparently, a certain group of mysterious travelers have been following the old Route 66 to Santa Monica, California. The group was first noticed in St. Louis. Over the last several months, every Tuesday afternoon, two or three group members would hold impromptu “town hall” discussions at the Monument to Westward Expansion (i.e., the St. Louis “Arch”). Handing out cryptic flyers with mysterious sayings printed upon them (e.g., “The Old Road is the New Road”), the group members and their afternoon discussions became a local cult attraction.

112 Chapter 5 ■ Down the Rabbit Hole: Introducing “Route 66”

Always speaking in vague (albeit interesting) generalities about their travels, the group members would proclaim that the “answers to all questions” could be found somewhere in the American southwest and only by traveling the old Route 66. What exactly those answers were—and who/what/where they were to be found—was never specifically mentioned. But the congenial nature of these strange people and the adamant conviction they expressed about their travels on the old road were engaging. Having these stories told at the Arch—a historic symbol, of course, to traveling west—only added to the intrigue.

Since today happens to be Tuesday, you decide to go down to the Arch and see if the group is there because you want to hear them talk (they are there). The reports of their “talks” were indeed very true—they speak in riddles and generalities, and don’t really seem to have much of a point other than that they have an obvious fascination with the old Route 66 and seem to be saying that many intriguing answers (although to what questions?) can be found on the old road.

Despite not making a whole lot of sense, you are intrigued enough by the group to go back the next week to hear what they might say. However, upon going back, they are nowhere to be seen. You are disappointed (and perhaps a bit curious as to what happened), but have pretty much decided they were eccentric quacks who had moved on to something else, so you decide to do the same.

But then something else very strange occurs. A few days later, you read a news story about a famous author, Martin Blackford, who is now making outrageous claims in support of what was being described as a “cult group.” When questioned by authorities, Mr. Blackford said he and his group were preparing for what was to be “the ultimate road trip, to find the meaning of life in the only place it can be found.” Concerned that such a “journey” might have unsavory and/or illegal connotations, Mr. Blackford was brought in for questioning. As he was taken into custody, Mr. Blackford was photographed wearing a t-shirt that said, “The Old Road is the New Road.”

Intrigued by this connection to the group you had listened to in St. Louis, you find the Web site for Martin Blackford. When the site loads, however, the only thing that appears on the site home page is the phrase, “Take a big gulp and swallow your blues.” What does this phrase mean? You ponder it for a few days, wondering about some hidden meaning. Entering in various key word combinations into Google, you happen upon a link to “The Blue Swallow Motel” (<http://www.route66.com/BlueSwallow/>), as shown in Figure 5.6. Its location? Tucumcari, New Mexico—a major stop in the glory days of Route 66.



Figure 5.6 Home page for the Blue Swallow Motel.

Is this all a weird coincidence? While you were never one to follow mysterious whims, you're a big fan of Martin Blackford's writing. And, despite their general weirdness, there was something in what the "travelers" had to say at those Tuesday discussions that intrigued you. What's going on out there in the vast expanse of the American southwest? What's going on out there along Route 66 that apparently has convinced one of the most well-respected authors of our time to heed its call?

You decide to listen to that call for yourself. And as you listen, you step into the world of alternate reality gaming.

How the Route 66 ARG Is Presented

Obviously, this chapter presents the introduction/background material to the ARG and establishes the role you are asked to play (i.e., pretending you live in the St. Louis metropolitan area, and so on, as mentioned above).

114 Chapter 5 ■ Down the Rabbit Hole: Introducing “Route 66”

Chapters 6 and 7 will be organized in the following manner:

- First, you will note the titles of Chapters 6 and 7 are “Parts I and II,” respectively. As we did in presenting an abridged history of how the “Beast” ARG was presented in Chapters 3 and 4, the Route 66 ARG will be divided into two major chapters, with Chapter 8 being an analysis/wrap-up of how the game might be played and its mystery solved if it were a real ARG. As I’ve stated previously, I’ve taken many, many liberties (again, because of the restrictions of a printed and otherwise static text) in presenting this material, but it should not overly distract from your enjoyment of reading through the material.
- Both Chapters 6 and 7 will present large blocks of information as if it were happening in “real time.” If you look at the Cloudmakers guide page for a history of how the Beast was played, you can see that the entries are generally grouped into major timeline headings, based on when (during actual game play in the spring/summer of 2001) the events happened in the actual game. See Figure 5.7.
- As each chapter’s section of the game is presented, each chapter will conclude with an “In Summary: What do we know now?” section.
- Finally, it should be noted that in an effort to move things along, each chapter will, to some degree, “give away” the answer to a particular puzzle or turning point in the ARG. I will be sure to note each of these with a “spoiler alert” as I have done in earlier chapters. That way, if you want to go away and think about a possible solution or just do some further investigation on your own, you’ll be sure to have plenty of advance notice before you go forward in reading the material to learn the outcome.

Note

While I certainly don’t want to withhold legitimate information from your discovery and enjoyment of playing the sample ARG (not to mention reading the entire book), keep in mind that I will only go so far in presenting the ultimate solution to the ARG. As you will see later in Chapters 6 and 7, there is a game-related Web site you will need to go to, so that you can enter a username and password in order to unlock the ultimate, final answer to the puzzle of the Route 66 ARG. While close reading of the chapters that follow will undoubtedly give you lots of critical information in discovering what that secret username/password combination is, that combination will nevertheless not ever be specifically stated within the text itself (hey, you gotta figure some things out on your own, right?).

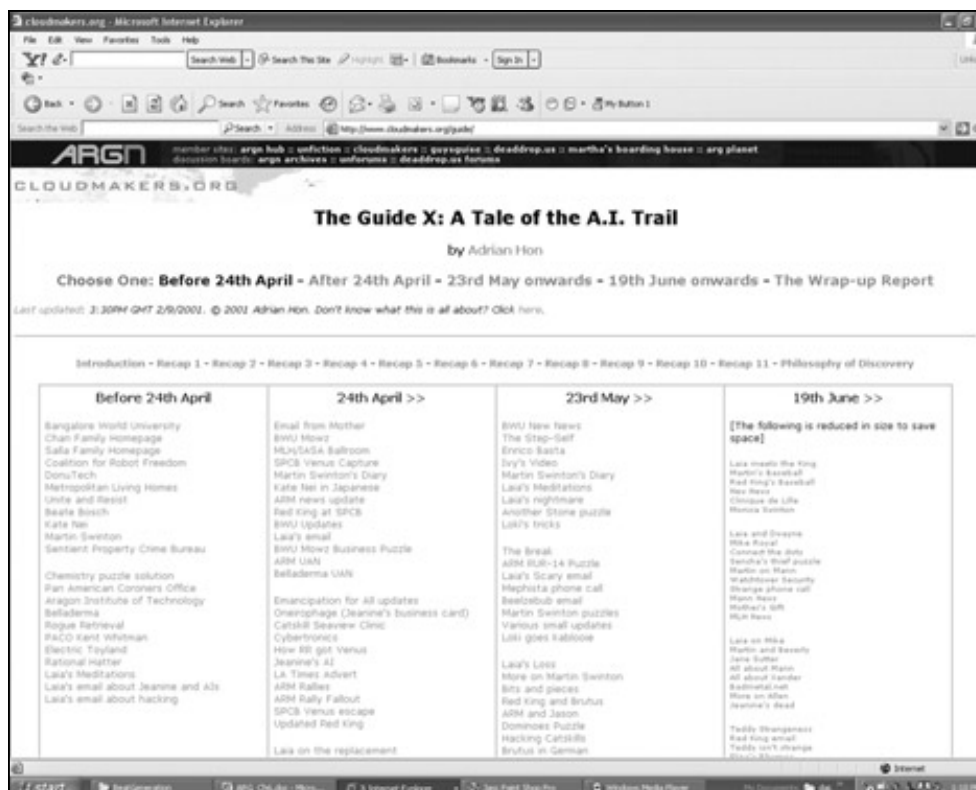


Figure 5.7 The notes on how the Beast actually played out are organized around the actual timeline of the game, as it was originally planned in the spring/summer of 2001.

Beat Background: Understanding Martin Blackford

You've been a fan of Martin Blackford's writing for some time, first discovering his books when you were a senior in high school. Blackford writes in the tradition of the "Beat Generation" authors, including such names as Jack Kerouac and William Burroughs (see Figure 5.8 and 5.9).



Figure 5.8 Jack Kerouac, best known for his novel *On the Road*.



Figure 5.9 William S. Burroughs, the "grandfather" of the Beats.

Tip

As I mentioned earlier in the chapter, having an ARG in printed book format does present some limitations with regard to how you interact with the storyline. That said, you should assume that—as written here—in fact, you do have a “history” with Martin Blackford and have been a fan of his writing since high school. Of course, Martin Blackford and his Web site (extensively illustrated through this ARG) is an entirely fictitious writer, so this history you need to assume is solely for putting the larger theme of the game into a more specific and identifiable context.

If you were to ask any given person under the age of 35 to summarize the 1950s, there is a good chance their response would include some element of popular culture. For example, they might reference *Happy Days* or *Laverne and Shirley*, two popular television shows for the 1970s that were (loosely) contextually based on the 1950s. But if you were to ask someone in their twenties to describe the 50s, their response would be even more vague, because they would try to define this period based on their one-time (and little remembered) viewing of a film like *Grease* or some ambiguous lyric from an Elvis song. And, if you were to ask older people who were actually alive during the 1950s about their recollections, their memories would probably revolve around drive-in movie theaters and a “simpler time,” albeit memories juxtaposed against the omnipresent fear of the (nuclear) arms race and the specter of the mushroom cloud.

Note

Just like Oliver Stone likes to do in his movies (the best example perhaps being his film *JFK*), I am taking “artistic liberties” in developing the storyline behind the ARG. While some characters/references are obviously real (Kerouac, Burroughs), others (Martin Blackford) are products of my imagination.

The chances are indeed very good that none of these age groups would mention the Beat Generation as representative of 1950s America, despite the enormous effect this group of writers and artists had on the cultural and political landscape, and how that influence is still being felt today. Why aren’t the Beats more widely recognized and known today? Some of the answer involves how the Beats were eclipsed—in their own time and in the pop culture pantheon of the late twentieth century—by the 1960s. Still another answer is that—especially for their time—the Beats were operating on both a metaphorical and geographical fringe. Those who considered themselves part of the “Beat Generation” were mostly located in New York and San Francisco (and

later southern California), two locales that were, again, literally and figuratively thousands of miles away from the heartland and the prevailing (conservative) currents of Eisenhower's America. By the time the Beats really entered the larger collective conscience of the American public, a new group of revolutionaries—the hippies—were taking their place.

Still the artists, musicians, and personalities of the Beat Generation remain some of the most colorful and vital individuals this country has produced. More importantly, and taken together as a single voice, they represent a group willing to speak out and revolt against a society they perceived as repressive and dangerous. And, just as importantly, they continue to serve as prime warnings of the dangers that rebellion can present to both the individual and the larger society to which it belongs. While the *zeitgeist* always fools us into thinking we are living in the penultimate days of history, few would argue that these first years of the new millennium are anything but confusing and worrisome, not just for America but for the entire world.

First Clue: The Martin Blackford Web Site

Martin Blackford fell very much in with this group. His first novel, *Crosstalk*, was similar to Kerouac's *On the Road*, but had a more quasi-spiritual overtone. Now, Mr. Blackford (who is nearly 80 years of age) appears to be causing trouble with the establishment once again, and you have a real sense of delight at thinking of Blackford begin taken into custody, sporting a t-shirt with some typically "Blackfordian" saying ("The old road is the new road.").

You've never looked at Blackford's Web site (indeed, you're not even sure if there is one), but a quick Google search quickly points to his site. The site appears similar to Figure 5.10.

When you first visited the site, you simply hit submit, and you were greeted with the usual, "This page can not be found" error. Trying other pieces of information, such as "Blackford" or "Martin," also resulted in the same error page.

However, when you entered your e-mail address, you were greeted with Figure 5.11.

You aren't sure what this means, but in typical Blackford fashion it certainly seems intriguing enough. There is something vaguely familiar about that line, "That humanity at large will be able to dispense with Artificial Paradises seems very unlikely," but you can't place it.

118 Chapter 5 ■ Down the Rabbit Hole: Introducing “Route 66”



Figure 5.10 The mysterious (okay, bland) Web site for Martin Blackford.



Figure 5.11 A response! But what does it mean?

Tip

As you've probably noticed through a review of the other ARGs, what first appears to be a meaningless clue turns out to be something very significant later. So while you can't place this line at the moment, it is something you'll want to consider. Actually, you will consider it in just a short while, so read on.

A few days later, when checking your e-mail, you notice the following message:

TO: arg_player@youbet.net

FROM: The Travelers

SUBJECT: Are you on the bus?

The road to excess leads to the palace of wisdom. But the old road leads to a new destination in the golden state. Are you on the bus or off the bus? Please decide quickly.

The Travelers

Note

For the sake of documenting this sample ARG, I'll ask that you assume the e-mail address of "arg_player@youbet.net". No, this isn't a real e-mail address (really!) so please don't try and send messages to it!

A mysterious e-mail, no doubt about it. One thing to note, though, is that "golden state" is most certainly a reference to California, as that state's motto is "the golden state." But what is all this talk of being on the bus?

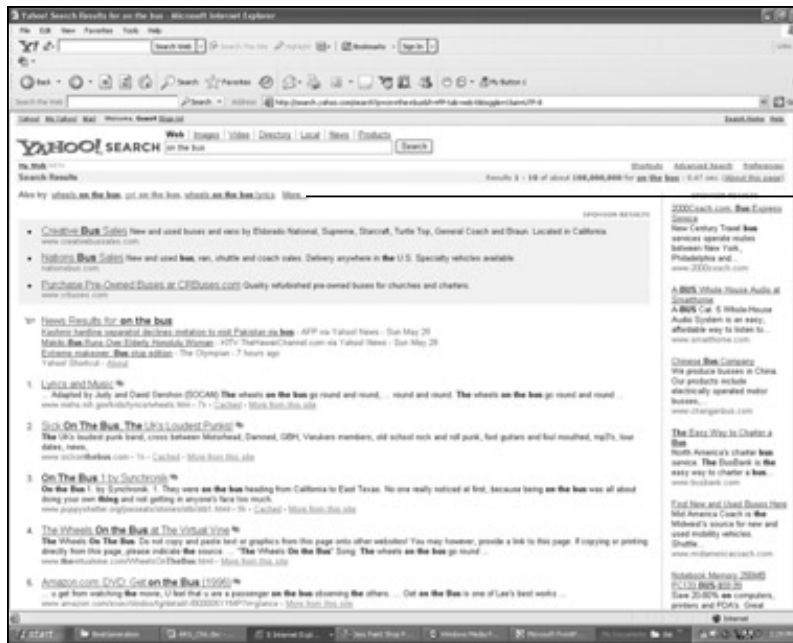
A search on Yahoo of the phrase "on the bus" gives the following typical results, as shown in Figure 5.12.

All of this or at least one specific link that is presented in the search results could be significant, but where to begin? Clicking on the alternate search phrase, "Get on the bus" results in Figure 5.13.

Tip

The results of Google and Yahoo searches are naturally subject to change, as the billions of Web pages these search engines index will change on a daily (hourly?) basis. That said, you should view the various search results illustrated in these "Route 66" chapters as examples, and in turn feel free to conduct your own searches to find out what additional clues/links you can discover on your own. This "finding things on your own" constitutes a major percentage of the fun of ARGing, not to mention providing a great context for learning about all kinds of interesting things.

120 Chapter 5 ■ Down the Rabbit Hole: Introducing “Route 66”



alternate search terms

Figure 5.12 A Yahoo search on the phrase “on the bus.”

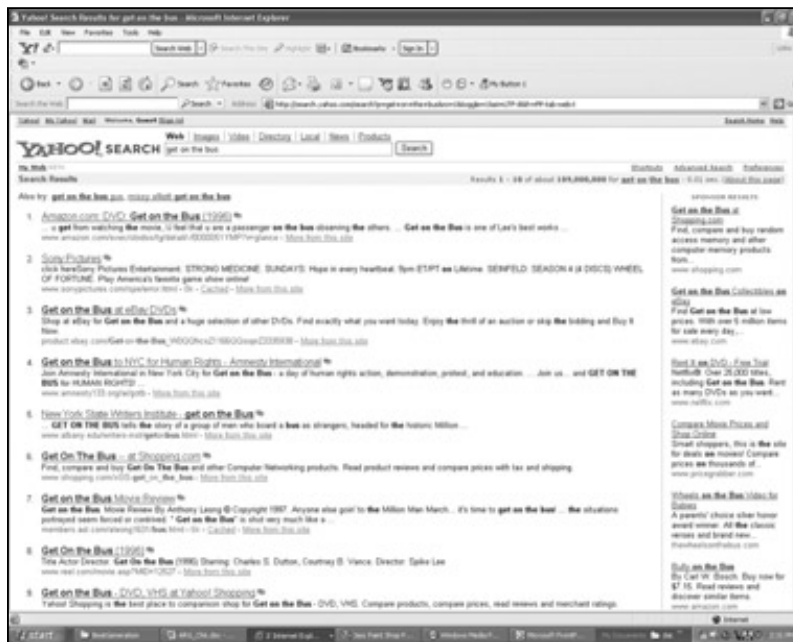


Figure 5.13 A more specific search term, but still not much help.

Beat Background: Understanding Martin Blackford 121

Where to go from here? One thing you haven't yet considered is searching on the quote that was returned on Martin Blackford's Web site when you registered your e-mail address. Going back to Yahoo, when you enter the sentence, "That humanity at large will be able to dispense with Artificial Paradises seems very unlikely," you are presented with a listing of results, many of which include the exact phrase, as shown in Figure 5.14.

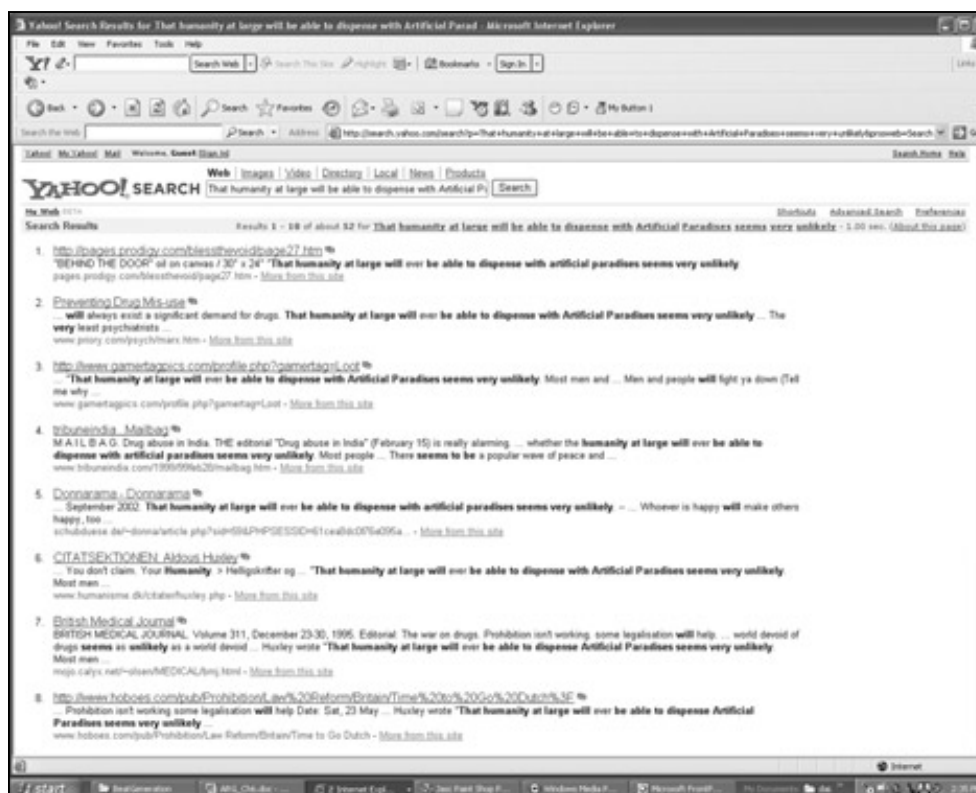


Figure 5.14 Exact hits on the search term.

Clicking through a few of them, you notice that the sentence is attributed to writer Aldous Huxley and is taken from his book, *The Doors of Perception*. This short work (which is really more of an extended essay) was notable and controversial for several reasons, not the least of which was because of its overt drug-related content. The book was Huxley's philosophical reflections on experience with taking mescaline, a very

122 Chapter 5 ■ Down the Rabbit Hole: Introducing “Route 66”

strong hallucinogenic drug (the book was also controversial because Huxley is considered one of the preeminent writers of the twentieth century, so for him to experiment with such a powerful drug was unprecedented). You know from your own interest in Blackford that he was interested in Huxley, but you don't know much about Huxley himself. Still, this must be an obvious and important reference, so you file this away for later when it probably will come into play.

Making the connection to Huxley's book was somewhat of a move forward, but what about the whole “are you on or off the bus?” For the moment you are stumped, but things will most certainly change. You just don't realize how quickly they will change!

The Beauty of Collaborative Play

While still pondering the clues from the previous section, you notice that you've received another e-mail from an address you don't recognize, with the subject line “Martin Blackford.” The e-mail reads as follows:

TO: arg_player@youbet.net
FROM: arg_player_2@somewhere.net
SUBJECT: Martin Blackford

Hello! I received your e-mail address in a message from some group calling themselves “The Travelers.” Have you by chance sent your e-mail address to the Martin Blackford Web site? I did, and received some cryptic message about being on the bus or off the bus, and it included your e-mail address as someone who might be able to help with “the journey?”

If any of this makes sense, please drop me a line.

OK, this is a little freaky. What do they mean by having your e-mail address included in the message that came from the Travelers? Clearly, whoever is behind this little mystery is also behind the Martin Blackford Web site, or at the very least has access to it in order to send your e-mail address along to someone else.

Still, you are intrigued enough with this e-mail that you've received that you decide to write back and let them know that, yes, you did enter your address at the Blackford site, and have been trying to figure out the meaning of the “on the bus/off the bus” issue. A few hours later, after responding to arg_player_2 (again, this is an obviously fake e-mail address, used just for illustrating the game), you get this response:

TO: arg_player@youbet.net
FROM: arg_player_2@somewhere.net
SUBJECT: RE: Martin Blackford

Glad to make your acquaintance. I was a bit stumped by that whole bus thing, too, but then I remembered that question of, "Are you on the bus?" being a central question from that Tom Wolfe novel, *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, about the Ken Kesey/Merry Pranksters trip. If memory serves correct, the guy who drove the bus was Neal Cassidy, who of course was the real-life pal of Jack Kerouac and a strong inspiration for one of the characters in Kerouac's novel *On the Road*. Since Blackford hung out with those guys, this surely must be a connection to the whole Beat thing?

Tip

Again, keep in mind that these e-mails you "receive," both from other players as well as the puppetmasters, are intended to be representative of the types of communication you would most likely receive if you were playing an actual ARG. For a terrific representation of the type of collaboration and "collective intelligence" that can result from these types of discussions, be sure to view the archived Cloudmaker discussions, available at <http://www.cloudmakers.org>.

Note

Designing the Web infrastructure for an ARG, from the viewpoint of a puppetmaster, is an equally fascinating topic. While the conceptualization of a story line, the construction of various Web pages, and the overall coordination required of a puppetmaster to design an ARG is beyond the ultimate scope of this book, you should nevertheless see Chapters 9 and 10 and "take a peek behind the curtain" for a general introduction to these design concepts.

Pondering this, you think to yourself that this is an interesting connection. And since this mystery is obviously dealing with something to do with being on the road/traveling, it makes sense that the Kesey reference would be connected in here somehow. So you write back to arg_player_2, letting him know that you agree with the connection and that perhaps there is something more to the Kesey reference than initially thought?

Note

The introduction of this e-mail discussion is meant to illustrate, of course, the collaborative and "collective intelligence" nature of alternate reality gaming. As you will see going forward in Chapters 6 and 7, a much greater collaborative network develops out of this initial e-mail.

Enter the Fax Machine

Having lunch in your office a few days later, you check your e-mail account to find yet another message from the Travelers. This message is described below:

TO: arg_player@youbet.net

FROM: The Travelers

SUBJECT: Are you on the bus?

The bus is getting ready to leave. Do you have your ticket? Are you on or off the bus? Please send a message to travelers@journey.net, leaving the subject line blank and including your fax number in the message body, in this format:

(xxx)-xxx-xxxx

Directions for purchasing your ticket will follow.

The Travelers

Upon receipt of this e-mail, you send a message to your (at this point) mysterious “arg_player_2” collaborator, asking if they, too, received this same e-mail. They write back indicating that yes, they did receive it and have already responded with their fax number. When they did, and about an hour after sending the message, they received the following fax:

Fancy poultry, parts sold here

Backs are cheap and wings are nearly free

Tickets are free, too, just like the ride on the blimp.

The blimp! The blimp! The Mothership! The Mothership!

The captain knows best. Even if it is just a replica. Now go back to the starting point and buy your ticket!

You go ahead and respond to the Travelers message with your fax number, and sure enough you receive the same fax about an hour later.

Same question: What does it mean? Fancy poultry? References to blimps? Nothing is clear at this point, but it is definitely intriguing. Having learned from searching on the phrase from the original Travelers e-mail, you do a search on the opening text of this message, and find that these are lyrics to a song by the artist Suzanne Vega. See Figure 5.15.

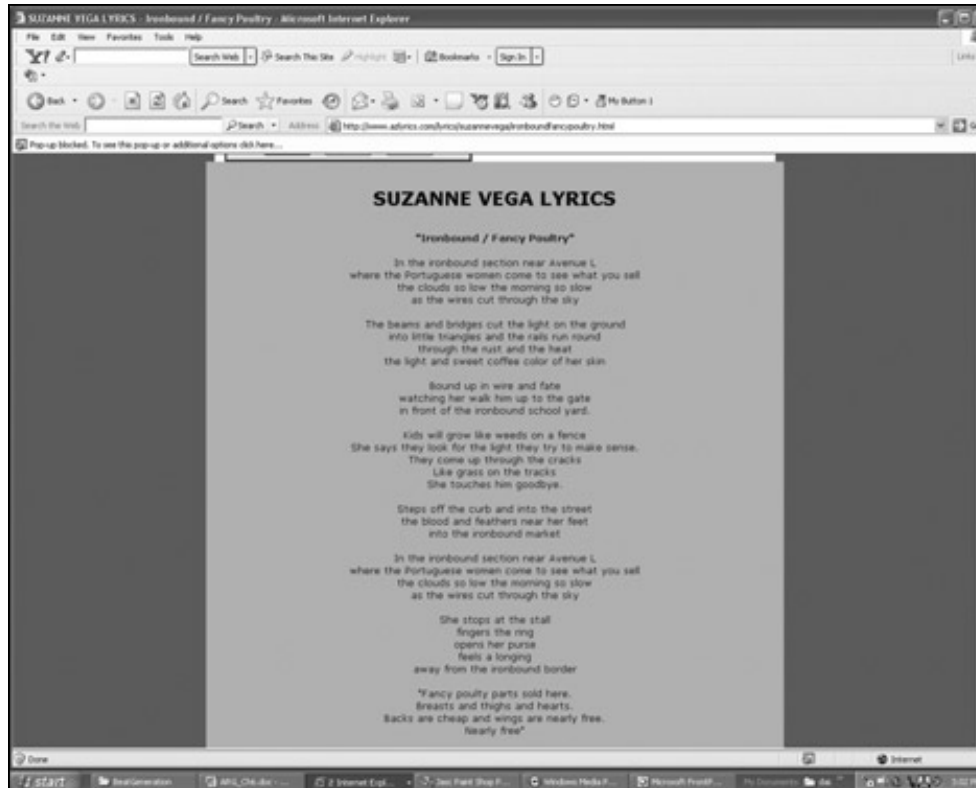


Figure 5.15 The Travelers apparently are Suzanne Vega fans!

Again, there could be some type of significance to this song, but for now you move on to searching on the other text in the fax that you've received. Searching on "The blimp the blimp the mothership the mothership" brings up a variety of hits, but nothing that looks specific. Thinking, though, that perhaps this is a song lyric (given the reference to the Vega song lyric), you try a search on the phrase "the blimp song lyric" and immediately see a direct hit, as shown in Figure 5.16.

Reading through this link, you see that these are indeed lyrics to a song entitled, "The Blimp," as recorded by an artist of the name Captain Beefheart from his 1969 album *Trout Mask Replica*. Figure 5.17 highlights what must be one of the truly original album covers of all time.

126 Chapter 5 ■ Down the Rabbit Hole: Introducing “Route 66”

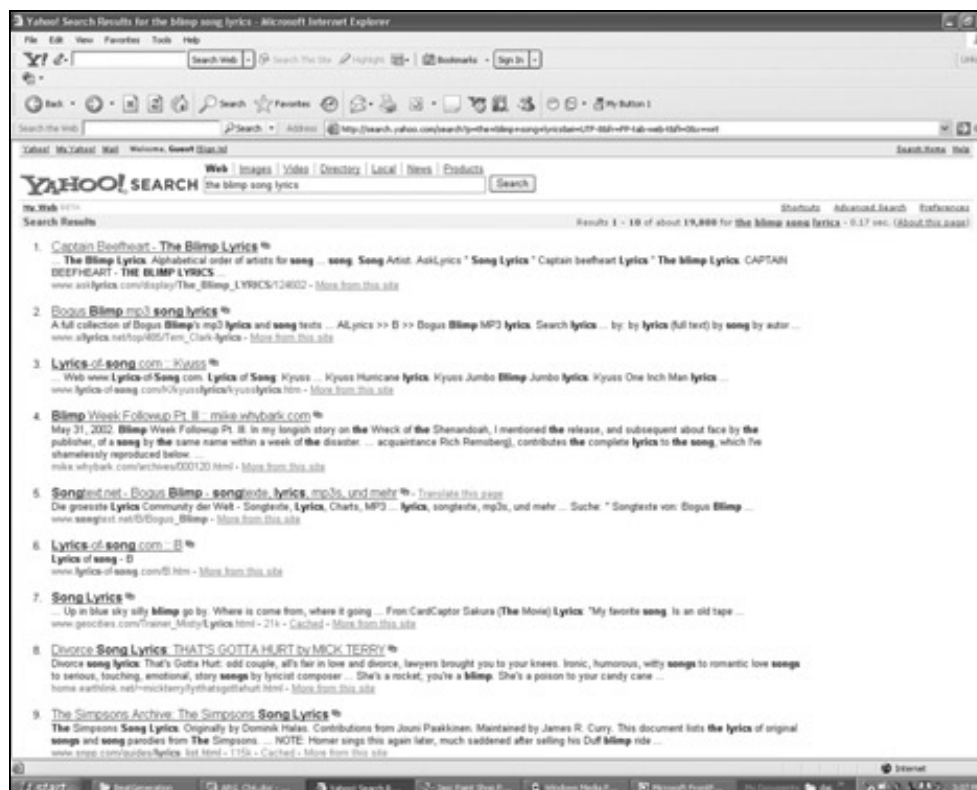


Figure 5.16 Note the first result here, which seems to be a direct hit on your search term.



Figure 5.17 The classic cover to the 1969 classic *Trout Mask Replica*.

Wait a minute! The title of this CD is *Trout Mask Replica*. Note the second part of the fax:

The captain knows best. Even if it is just a replica. Now go back to the starting point and buy your ticket!

With specific references to “the captain” and “replica,” this must be a major clue. What does “back to the starting pint” mean? Perhaps where this all began, which is the Martin Blackford Web site? Upon revisiting that site now, you see it has changed and now appears as in Figure 5.18.

You try a few different combinations before finally settling on “captain” as the username and “trout mask replica” as the password. When you do, you are presented with Figure 5.19.



Figure 5.18 A username and password are now required, but for what purpose?

128 Chapter 5 ■ Down the Rabbit Hole: Introducing “Route 66”



Figure 5.19 The username and password combination certainly worked, but only resulting in more vague and puzzling text.

Obviously, there is significance in the “first step” reference. But that is to be discovered, along with a whole new level of game play, in the next chapter.

Tip

The changing of the Blackford Web site, as illustrated in Figures 5.10 and 5.18, is indicative of the type of change you would see with a typical ARG. If you recall from how the Beast was presented, the puppetmasters would often perform weekly updates to various game-related sites, so as to keep the larger game narrative moving forward and to otherwise allow players to interact more actively with the game. For the ARG presented in these chapters, you should assume again that you are playing the game in “real time” and the changes/updates to the various sites (but specifically the Blackford site) are a related effort by the puppetmasters of *this* game to keep the game moving forward.

In Summary: What Do We Know Now?

This chapter introduced us to the “Route 66” ARG, although at this point we still don’t know that is what it is officially being called. Having followed an otherwise off-handed interest in some strange people who had been gathering around the base of the St. Louis Arch, this led us to the Web site of Martin Blackford. When we entered our e-mail address, we apparently became involved in some kind of evolving riddle. But what is more interesting is that others who supplied their e-mail addresses also have become involved and at least in one case received the e-mail address we supplied.

What do we know at this point?

- This is definitely a mystery! If it’s a game, or something more legitimate, or a combination of the two is yet to be seen.
- Others are involved in the game, and we have made initial contact with them via e-mail.
- Those behind the game are apparently related to or behind the development of the Martin Blackford Web site, and are capable of receiving and responding to requests through (so far) e-mail and fax.
- We are building a list of related names that apparently have some significance: Aldous Huxley, Ken Kesey, Tom Wolfe, Suzanne Vega, Captain Beefheart. We’ve also referenced specific works, including *The Doors of Perception*, *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, and *Trout Mask Replica*.
- Finally, we know from our interest that Martin Blackford was closely associated with the Beats, a group of writers from the 1950s of which at least two of the references above (Kesey and Wolfe) have an indirect connection.

