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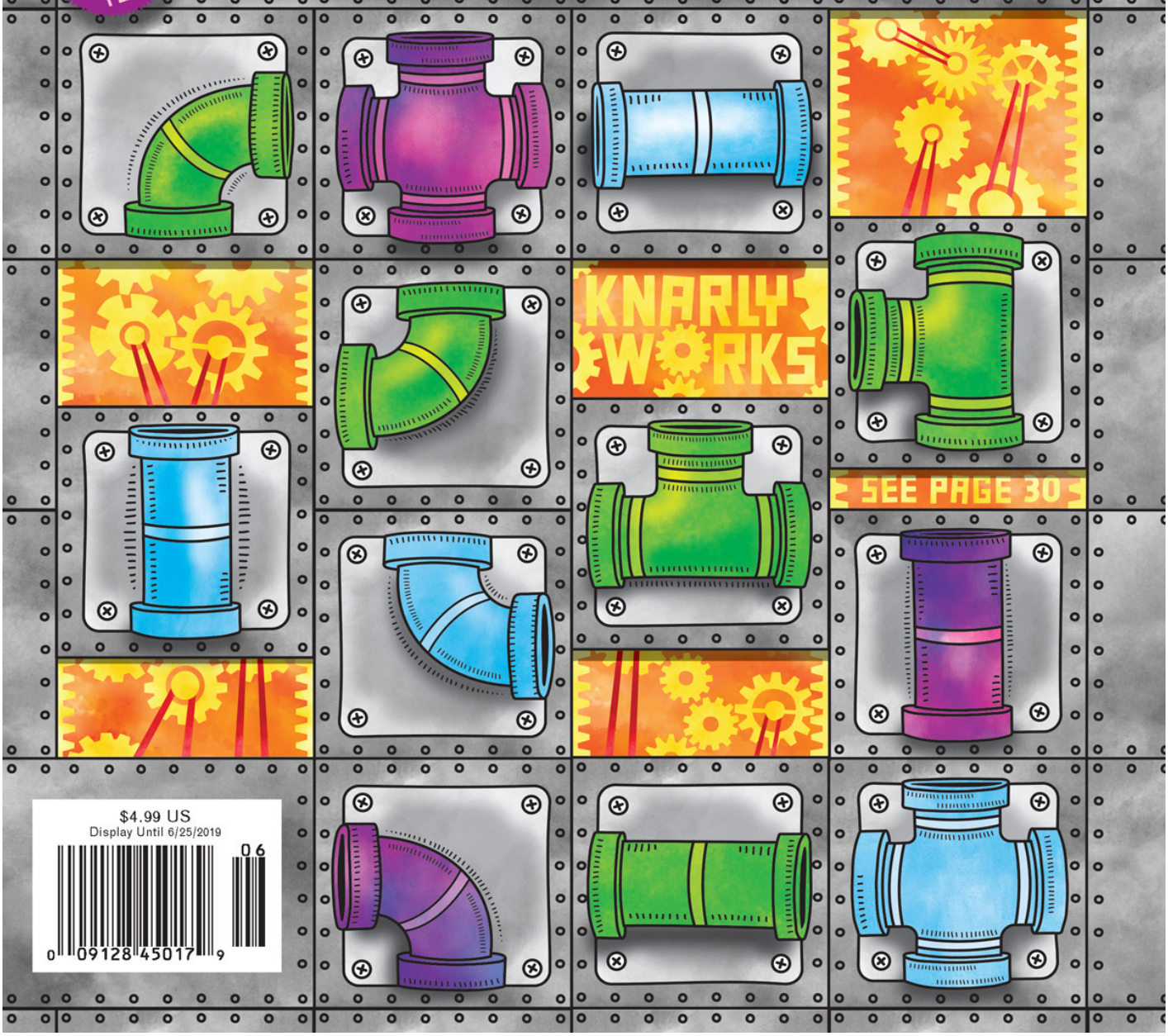

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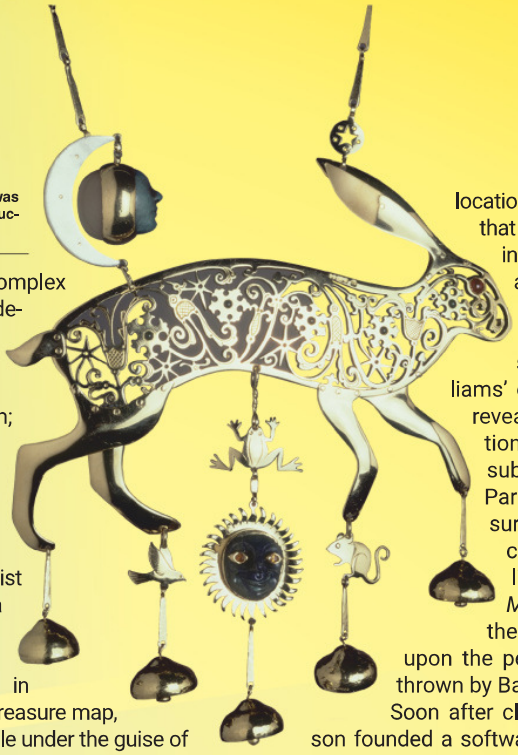
MOVING FORWARD, LOOKING BACK

ARMCHAIR TREASURE HUNTS: ROMANCE, SCANDAL, & WEALTH

By Andrew Parr

In the early 1980s, it wasn't uncommon to find eager bands of friends racing around the countryside, shovels in hand, haphazardly digging for buried treasure. These folks were not experiencing a midlife crisis, living out suppressed pirate fantasies—well, probably not all of them. Instead, they were participating in a new global phenomenon: the armchair treasure hunt.

At its core, the ATH resembles its present-day counterpart, geocaching, in that players travel to a specific destination to find a hidden item. But the differences far outweigh the similarities. Where geocaching is a carefully governed game with universally accepted rules that protect the environment and the players, armchair treasure hunts were unregulated, winner-take-all competitions. Geocachers download GPS coordinates from the internet and use them to precisely locate a hiding spot;



The gold and jewel-encrusted pendant that was the prize for *Masquerade*. It was eventually auctioned by Sotheby's for over 30,000 pounds.

ATH players had to solve a complex puzzle in a published book to determine the treasure's location. A geocacher's goal is to find a weatherproof container and then sign a logbook contained therein; armchair treasure hunters were seeking a real-life, valuable treasure, sometimes worth tens of thousands of dollars.

The ATH literary genre began in 1979 with an English author and artist named Kit Williams, who crafted a $20,000 gold and jewel-encrusted pendant, and buried it at an accessible secret location somewhere in England. Like a pirate designing a treasure map, Williams wrote *Masquerade*, a puzzle under the guise of a picture book, consisting of clue-riddled paintings that held the key to the treasure's location. Readers who could solve the difficult puzzle and determine the site of the booty were encouraged to either submit their answer to the author or proceed to the hiding spot and actually dig for the prize. An article in the July/August 1980 issue of GAMES introduced readers to *Masquerade* while the contest was in its infancy. Now that the hunt is long over, the outcome—which was more scandal than celebration—is a story worth telling.

Masquerade's puzzle was complex and elaborate. Without being explicitly instructed to do so, players had to draw lines from each depicted creature's eyes, through certain digits on its hands or feet, and out to a letter on the border of each painting. These letters spelled CATHERINE'S LONG FINGER OVER SHADOWS EARTH BURIED YELLOW AMULET MIDDAY POINTS THE HOUR IN LIGHT OF EQUINOX LOOK YOU. An additional clue was concealed in an acrostic in these words: CLOSE BY AMPTHILL. The treasure was buried in Ampthill Park, near Catherine of Aragon's monument. The shadow of the cross-shaped monument pointed to the exact location of the treasure at noon on the day of the spring or autumn equinox.

From the outset, the book was a success, selling hundreds of thousands of copies worldwide. Immediately, hopeful treasure hunters who had incorrectly interpreted the clues proceeded to dig holes on public and private property all around England. These casual excavations became so frequent that Williams had to pay for signage to discourage seekers from digging at actual locations represented in some of the paintings in the book.

The puzzle was eventually solved by two physics teachers, Mike Barker and John Rousseau, although it took almost three years. Barker and Rousseau proceeded to Ampthill Park and dug at the correct location. What they didn't realize is that they tossed the treasure aside in the discarded dirt. After a disappointing search, they left the site, empty-handed.

Meanwhile, Dugald Thompson, an associate of Williams' ex-girlfriend, tricked her into revealing the approximate location of the treasure. Thompson submitted a sketch of Ampthill Park to Williams and was assured that the location was correct. Thompson was publically declared the winner of *Masquerade*. He proceeded to the treasure site and happened upon the pendant in the discarded dirt thrown by Barker and Rousseau.

Soon after claiming the pendant, Thompson founded a software company called Haresoft and wrote a video game, Hareraiser, that offered the very same pendant as a prize to the first player to beat the game. However, Thompson's game was received very poorly by players and critics and was rumored to be unsolvable. Worse still for Thompson, during the run of his contest, it was exposed in *The Sunday Times* that he won *Masquerade* by cheating. Soon after, Thompson's company went into liquidation and the pendant was auctioned by Sotheby's for over 30,000 pounds.

Just like that, the inaugural armchair treasure hunt ended in scandal. The public wouldn't soon forget the unbridled enthusiasm of the players that led to persistent vandalism of public and private property. Financially, however, the event was a success, and that was enough to inspire other organizations to create their own armchair treasure hunts. In the time between the launch of *Masquerade* and the end of the 20th century, GAMES reported on four more ATH events. Surely, the organizers of these hunts had learned from the mistakes of *Masquerade*. Surely, companies would come up with a better way of hiding a treasure that wouldn't lead to random diggings fueled by hunches. Surely, they would commission qualified puzzle designers to create a game that was fair, challenging, and solvable, right? Alas, not. Read on.

In 1983, Cadbury's crafted a similar armchair treasure hunt in England. According to the coverage in the September 1984 issue of GAMES, a dozen gold eggs, each valued at $15,000, were buried around England. A book was written containing clues to the locations of the eggs. Once again, people were very interested in finding these treasures. But with this event, the hiding places weren't challenging enough—one egg was discovered by a child before the book was published. Even the puzzles were too easy—one treasure hunter read

One of the gold eggs uncovered by treasure hunters in the 1983 Cadbury's competition.

A bee from the cover of Kit Williams' book *The Bee on the Comb*. A contest was held to determine the book's title.

the book on his lunch break at work and dug up two eggs on his way home. Meanwhile, quiet country lanes were overrun with the traffic of egg seekers. Buses were chartered to visit (often incorrect) treasure locations so throngs of players could dig up the landscape. When all eggs were claimed, Cadbury wisely decided to never run a publicity stunt like this again.

The only subsequent ATH that seemed to learn from the mistakes of *Masquerade* was a follow-up contest by the originator of the genre, Kit Williams. In 1984, Williams wrote a sequel, which was briefly mentioned in the August 1984 issue of GAMES. Continuing in the established style of *Masquerade*, Williams created another book of paintings, but the title of the book was nowhere to be seen. That's because, in an effort to protect the lawns and parks of the world from overzealous hunters, Williams handled the treasure hunt aspect differently. This time around, he created a hidden contest of sorts: Williams tacitly signaled readers to determine the name of the book and express their answer in an interesting way. Steve Pearce of England solved the puzzles and won a golden queen bee statuette for determining the name of the book, *The Bee on the Comb*.

In January 1985, GAMES made a brief mention of *Treasure: In Search of the Golden Horse*, by Warner books. Apart from the staggering prize of a gold horse statuette and $500,000, nothing else about the contest was mentioned in the article. Yet, of all the ATH spectacles in history, this one strikes me as the most interesting.

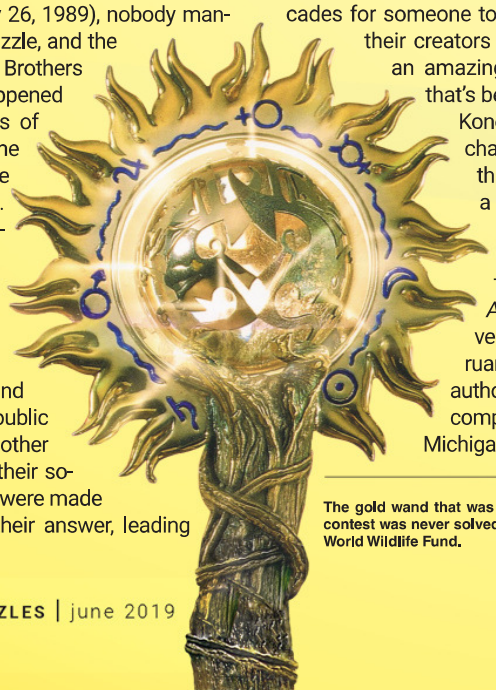
This contest was unique in that the clues were presented in two formats: book and video. The film version aired on cable TV and was available to order on VHS and laser disc. In this contest, players had to solve a rebus that would direct them to a location on public land in the United States where the treasure was buried. The statuette contained a key to a safe-deposit box that held the prize. Even with a deadline of four years (the contest closed on May 26, 1989), nobody managed to solved the challenging puzzle, and the prize money was donated to Big Brothers Big Sisters of America. What happened next was unusual: The producers of the contest chose not to reveal the solution, with the belief that the contest would be soon forgotten. However, many determined players continued to work at the puzzle, and within a year, Nick Boone and Anthony Castaneda dug up a congratulatory message near the 10th Mountain Division military memorial in Colorado. Boone and Castaneda's solution was made public and was heavily scrutinized by other players. Controversy surrounded their solution, since several leaps of logic were made from the puzzle instructions to their answer, leading many to believe that the puzzle was unsolvable and that Boone and Castaneda were guided by the producers in order to put an end to the public interest in the contest. Discussion and conspiracy theories regarding the contest still continue on the internet.

Over a decade later, GAMES presented another ATH for readers to consider. *The Merlin Mystery*, published by Warner Books, was the subject of an item in the December 1998 issue. This contest featured a prize of $100,000 cash, a bracelet, a vial of gold pellets, and a few other treasures, including a gold wand worth $25,000. All of these were contained in a solid oak chest bound by three locks. The contest had a deadline of December 31, 2001. The puzzle itself was brutally difficult. Latin names for various scientific terms were used in the rebus. Lines had to be drawn in the book in three dimensions, and readers had to sort through alchemical, astrological and heraldic cadency symbols. Over 30,000 entries were received, but none had the correct solution. The prize was donated to the World Wildlife Fund.

So, just who participates in these armchair treasure hunts? Kurt Konecny embodies the traits you'd expect of an ATH enthusiast. He's a lifelong GAMES reader who loves geocaching, ghost hunting, and, of course, solving puzzles and mysteries. His obsession with the ATH genre started when he discovered *Masquerade* at his local library as a youngster. Konecny has written several articles for the ATH website, www.mysteriouswritings.com, and has discussed various hunts on his mystery-themed podcast, *The Strange Sessions*. He spoke with me about his interest in armchair treasure hunts.

Beyond the puzzles and treasure, Konecny feels an element of romance is present in these hunts. "Right now, somewhere out there," he reasons, "there's a treasure that's within my reach. Even more so with the treasure hunts that have been left virtually abandoned. These unsolved mysteries are out there right now, patiently waiting through decades for someone to solve them and to achieve what their creators ultimately hoped for... to provide an amazing real-life adventure. And I think that's beautiful."

Konecny is very familiar with the armchair treasure hunts discussed in this article. But he also possesses a wealth of knowledge about the hunts that didn't get as much media attention during the boom of the genre. One hunt, *The Golden Apple Tale*, ran a small, one-time advertisement buried deep in the February 1983 issue of GAMES. "Both the author of the book and the publishing company were located in Grand Rapids, Michigan," Konecny explains, "so it's be-



The gold wand that was part of the prize for *The Merlin Mystery*. The contest was never solved, and the prize was eventually donated to the World Wildlife Fund.

lieved that the author self-published the book, leading most people to believe that it had a very limited and local release."

Despite its lackluster debut, Konecny says this particular hunt continues to fascinate the puzzle community, and for a very compelling reason. "One of the biggest things that makes it different from other armchair hunts is that, as far as anyone knows, it was never solved. And, while other armchair treasure hunts appear to have been painstakingly put together, with professional paintings and a lot of hype and fanfare, *The Golden Apple Tale* seems much cruder and amateurish. But rather than being a bad thing, this makes it much more endearing. This book was obviously a labor of love for someone, and looking through the book, you feel the love that the author had for what he was doing. I feel like this book deserves to be solved, if only to give it a happy ending of its own."

How does one get a copy of an obscure book from over 30 years ago? Konecny cautions that finding a print copy may be harder than finding the treasure itself. "The only copy that seems to exist is the black-and-white PDF that people have been downloading. I first heard about it when I stumbled across Tweleve, a message board dedicated to armchair hunts past and present. I saw the PDF was available for download on the site, so I decided to check it out, and quickly fell in love with it."

The hunt's puzzle isn't the only mystery about *The Golden Apple Tale*, Konecny reveals. "Nobody knows who wrote it. The book was authored by Cam Kaskgn, which is a pseudonym, and also may be a cipher. People have been trying for decades to figure out who this mysterious person is. The most prominent guess seems to be Jef Raskin, who worked at Apple Computers and was one of the pioneers of the Macintosh computer project."

Konecny say that players determined to solve the mystery of the unknown author have followed clues from beyond the covers of the book. "People have contacted Jeffery Juhas, the jeweler who created the prize, a golden apple figurine adorned with diamonds and other jewels, but Juhas has said that he only knew the author as Cam Kaskgn and never knew his real name, and that he doesn't know where the apple was buried. Efforts to contact the illustrator for the book have also been unsuccessful. Furthermore, the post office box that the solution was to be mailed to has also changed owners several times since 1982, so pretty much every path towards figuring out who the mysterious Kaskgn is has come to a dead end."

With so many active hunters sharing theories online, why hasn't this puzzle been solved yet? I asked Konecny if a solution is even a possibility after three decades. "With unsolved puzzles like this," he says, "some pieces of the puzzle that lead to the solution may involve places, physical things, or landmarks that are no longer there, making the path even more difficult than it was when it came out. But, conversely, the internet did not exist when this book came out, so between our current access to interactive maps, having all sorts of helpful resources at our fingertips, and being able to utilize groupthink, you would think that these puzzles would be easily solved now, but that's turning out to not be the case."

We've seen controversy surrounding previous hunts with puzzles that were deemed unsolvable or poorly constructed. Konecny believes the puzzle in *The Golden Apple Tale* is legit. "The crux of the puzzle seems to be a poem that is scattered throughout the book, and once the poem is put into its correct order, it should serve as a roadmap to the solution. Some parts of the poem have been solved. For example, the line 'Miss Muffet's meal didn't cost a dime' means 'free whey' which sounds like *freeway*, but a lot of the poem still has people stumped. Once all the right pieces fall into place, I think the book will be solved. I've been working on it on and off for probably the last 10 years. The section on the Tweleve website dedicated to the puzzle has slowed down considerably, but there are a lot of people who have posted their theories there and who continue to work on it as well."

If we're going to solve this puzzle, Konecny believes we need to get the right people involved. "Once the author received the correct solution and the winner traveled to the final location to retrieve the golden apple, the author was going to meet the winner there to accompany them on their adventure, so most people believe that the treasure wasn't hidden very far from the author's home of Grand Rapids, Michigan. Wisconsin and Ohio often show up as possible locations for the treasure. I personally feel that confirmation of the clues might require someone to be in the location of where the treasure is hidden. I think there just needs to be that one little aha moment, where someone makes a connection, and that starts the chain of confirmers that lead to the final location." Midwesterners, consider this your call to action.

If you'd like to take a shot at a more recent hunt, Konecny can point you in the right direction. His suggestion is the Forrest Fenn Treasure, valued at over $1 million. "People are constantly working on deciphering that poem to find the treasure box that [Fenn] hid somewhere in the Rocky Mountains."

Check out these online resources for more information about armchair treasure hunts: Tweleve.org, Mysteriouswritings.com, and Treasureclub.net. For all you midlifers with unrealized pirate fantasies, your treasure maps await! ■

The treasure box hidden somewhere in the Rocky Mountains by multimillionaire Forrest Fenn.