

We Host a Game: BANG Appétit

Daniel Mathews

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That formidable collective which has become known as Continental Breakfast — yum! — consisting of David Varodayan, Justin Ghan, Rebecca Weisinger, Prasad Ganesan, Ocie Ward, Laura Diaz, myself and a few others, hosted a BANG, a Bay Area Night Game.

Well, it wasn't really in the Bay Area and it wasn't at Night, but I'm pretty sure it was a Game. Well, maybe not a Game, but definitely a game. It was in Petaluma, a very lovely town just north of the bay area, about half an hour north of the golden gate bridge, up towards the Napa Valley. Laura and Ocie live there, which made organization much easier — so we could, for instance, crash the night there rather than driving for 90-minutes-plus back and forth from Stanford. Petaluma is a famous town, and most people not entirely alienated from Hollywood culture will have seen it at some point, even though probably not as Petaluma. For Petaluma is such a prototypical example of the mythologised American Small Town — a concept which certainly qualifies as a Capitalised Essence — that it regularly appears in Hollywood movies as the setting, or backdrop, for many scenes. If you have seen American Graffiti, or Peggy Sue Got Married, or Flubber, or Lolita (the 1997 version), or Pleasantville, you have seen Petaluma. In fact it was also in Basic Instinct, so all hetero males and queer females should have seen Petaluma!

Anyway, we went through much planning — a regular preoccupation for many months — and much discussion, selection, refinement, and argument over puzzles. I've never had such a big and fundamental argument over the theory and practice of limericks before, as to which see below. We did a test run with playtesters, the week beforehand — the team known as XX-rated couldn't play in the actual event, so they did the next big thing. (Chromosomes, not pornography.) They are even known to Melbourne University mathematicians since it seems they were in the MUMS puzzle hunt at some point. We printed and prepared and folded and photocopied and packed and generally engaged in far more practicalities and logistics than we are usually concerned with or capable of. We debated whether it was too hard, whether it was too easy, whether it was too monotonous, whether it was too diverse, ad nauseam and ad infinitum. We planned a route for our puzzlers, guiding them through many of the scenic locations of the town.

Though I digress, it's worth preserving for posterity the argument we had over limericks, completely unprecedented to my knowledge. I quote from an email of myself describing the argument:

The disagreements were over pretty much everything, including at least the following. Zeroth, on the philosophy of what poetry is and how it works. First, on what a limerick is. Second, on what the meter of a limerick is and how well it is defined. Third, on whether first letters in lines of poems have to be capitalised. Fourth, on aesthetics of various rhythms. Fifth, on the semantics of the story and tenses and whether it makes sense as a story if different tenses are used. Sixth, whether certain words are stressed. Seventh, on the number of stresses in a line, and the permissibility/desirability of certain stress patterns.

Basically, you can have your fascistic hegemonic totalitarian limerick regime, but leave me out of it. :P

May you produce a master race of perfect poems.

Dan

Many friends of ours, in the US, Canada, and Australia also looked at the puzzles as they were developed, and their help is much appreciated. By the day I think we had a really good idea of the difficulties, the different approaches and the different routes to solutions for all of our puzzles.

We were fortunate to have good weather for the day of “BANG Appétit”. We had a theme of food running through all of our puzzles. (Because we are Continental Breakfast. Yum.) In fact it was possibly the most thematically consistent BANG ever — if only because we just bent and forced any idea we had into some food-related category! We started with an easter egg hunt in a park — the teams had to find (but not eat! Well they weren't edible anyway) eggs we had hidden and guess how many there were (“eggstimation”). That was a pre-game puzzle. The first puzzle proper was a text-based puzzle ostensibly describing a Turducken, possibly the most ridiculous food in the world. (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Turducken> if you don't know what it is.) Then followed a puzzle involving wrecked limes and limericks (“lime-wrecks”) — the source of our rather hilarious arguments a few weeks earlier. (I still can't believe how much people can differ in answer to the question: “What is a limerick?”) Then, a puzzle about herbs and spices and the symmetric group (“spice rack”). After that, a puzzle where there was actually food to eat! Yum! Laura and Ocie cooked up a feast of shish-kebabs on their barbecue. The food on the shish-kebab was the puzzle. Next up, a puzzle involving spaghetti and road signs (“spaghetti junction”), yes actual spaghetti, though uncooked. And then a hexagonal-tiling/chess puzzle, pictured as honeycomb with bees on it (“Honeycomb”).

The next puzzle, “Cubist Cuisine”, consisted of a 5 x 5 array of bowls containing various foods. It was a variation on an old theme of 3-D visualization

puzzles, but it was one of the ones I created and this was my post. There was a centrally and appropriately placed gazebo in the park which we used as our staging area. David and I had worked out a rather efficient surveying technique and we taped 25 bowls to the ground along perfect Cartesian coordinate axes in no time. And then we filled some of the bowls with watermelon, ham, cheese, sugar, or croutons, to encode the puzzle. To the general public this made for more than a little curiosity.

For the kids playing in the park, they thought it was lots of fun. Clearly this was another game to play, and they “solved” the puzzle by jumping over the bowls from one end to the other, like it was hopscotch or something. When they got to the other side they declared that they had won! For their parents, they were a little apprehensive at first, but soon realized it was harmless. For other people, they wanted to know what the meaning of my art exhibit was. One lady had other concerns: she asked me not to mess with her mobile phone. Whereupon I noticed that there was a mobile phone charging in a power point which appeared to be publicly usable, on the side of the gazebo! This woman, it appeared, lived in her car and used it as a free electricity supply. Another guy, who looked rather grizzled and dishevelled, came in the gazebo and began an intense study of the array. He stood there for five minutes straight, staring, saying nothing, thinking. Then finally, having concluded his investigation, he turned to me and announced, emphatically, with great moment and consequence: “Watermelon”. I said, “yep”. And then he left.

There was one more puzzle: a rather clever puzzle of David’s entitled “All Roads Lead to a Grilled Cheese Sandwich”, based on topology and geometry of the graph of the production line of a grilled cheese sandwich. That led them to the final location — a Karaoke Bar! Whereupon there was one more puzzle, a rather fiendish meta-puzzle involving a standard-type logic puzzle, but then requiring world geography and a supplied world map and all the solution-words of all the previous puzzles.

The difficulty seemed approximately right. One of the teams powered ahead and finished far too early, they got to the bar before it opened! This was the “Burninators”, a first-rank regular BANG team (burninator? TROGDOR! <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Burninator>). They include a multiple world puzzle champion. But the rest of the teams seemed to find it at about the right level. Only a couple of teams went to a wrong location. The feedback we got was almost wholly positive. They enjoyed it, they the puzzles were good, though some of the less experience teams found it pretty tough. There were hints available, and so no team got totally frustrated at their puzzling impotence: it seemed that this worked fairly well, overall. So were are happy about that.

The puzzles and details are available at

http://www.bayareanightgame.com/index.php/Bang_15

interested should go there! We are planning to post solutions there as well — I don’t think they’ve been posted yet. I also have photos that I took of the Cubist Cuisine puzzle at

http://math.stanford.edu/~mathews/images/BANG_15/

They are not so interesting, but you will win extra points if you can find in them the mobile phone charging I mentioned earlier!

There has not been a BANG since. We suspect it is because we perfected the art form that is BANG, and now no team dares try to emulate us. But when we get our hands off of it, we acknowledge that at least one team has a BANG in the works for the next month or two.