

0046PSMX

party line

Words and Music by GREGG DIAMOND
Recorded by ANDREA TRUE CONNECTION on BUDDAH RECORDS



BUDDAH MUSIC, INC., DIAMOND TOUCH & MRI MUSIC



Party Line

the signal lives in darkness

Issue 6, Spring 2021
2020 Pandemic Review Edition



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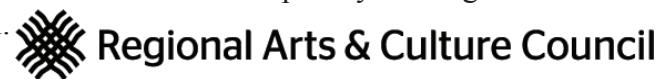
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Support Futel!

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Potential installation host? Contact us. Want to hack on Futel? See our repositories on Github. Creator of interactive audio art? We can help you implement your ideas in this exciting new format.



Dial 0 from any Futel phone, or speak to the operator at 503–468–1337, or email us at operator@futel.net, or see our website at <http://futel.net>. Thanks to everyone who has supported Futel!

Another year emphasizes the futility of making sense of what has happened! Congratulations to those of us who are still trying! Keep talking into the mouth-piece and listening to the earpiece. Make the words. Or hum. The lines must hum, keep them humming.



Futel Sanitation & Hygiene

Thank you telephone sanitizers for keeping our users safe



When the pandemic first hit Portland in early 2020 we figured we were in the wrong industry. Surprisingly, Futel phone usage did not decrease by a large amount. We realized that many people were still going to be using our phones even in hazardous conditions, so we had to make them safer.



Our solution was to implement telephone sanitation and hygiene programs. These would allow the phones to be used safely and provide a valuable service for many non-users of the phones.

Telephone Sanitation Program

The telephone sanitation program consists of a cadre of telephone sanitation engineers trained and equipped to regularly sanitize the telephones. The purpose of the program is primarily to improve the health and safety of telephone users, and secondarily to assure users that the telephones are safe to use.

Death of the Payphone

Many of the scars from amputated urban furniture are recognizable, and if the concrete is old enough the fossil record of a block will show the advances and retreats of different eras of hardware. Among the horse rings, parking meters, and bus shelters can be found several different methods for mounting payphones.

Payphone locations are especially interesting because each is a place where many people have had emotional experiences. This small concrete pad buried in leaves was the site of the payphone in front of the library on SE Belmont. It was the phone nearest my house in the late 1990s and I spent many hours here with my red box talking to people, including my mom, my girlfriend, and a publisher who owed me money.

I don't recall any particularly memorable conversations and if you find a ghost lingering here it is probably not mine, but this was a street corner where I hung out a lot, in the sun and rain, night and day. I recently walked by with my family and wasn't really able to convince them why I was so interested in this scrap of concrete.

Someone claims to have snagged a piece of the phone booth used by Jello Biafra to escape from those jocks. They were walking by when it was being demolished. After John Dillinger was shot by feds in the phone booth in front of the Biograph Theater, onlookers soaked their handkerchiefs in his blood for souvenirs. I wonder if anyone took the gory handset?



December

Detroit called! Provided them with solid Druidic advice for the New Year.

Recorded Voicemails

April 1

Caller left a good-natured personalized prank voicemail. A+

July 30

"I know this is a simulation, I just want answers."



August 1

"Hi. I found your number at a Futel phone. I just wanted to let you know you're beautiful."

August 2 "Uh, I don't really know who you are, but I would love to come check out your job. Alright"

September 9

"Hey Dru-dru, what's up, haha, just checkin' in, because you're supposed to bring the beer to the party."

October 28

“Hello, I went on a run today and found this super cool phone, so you have a wonderful day and you are so beautiful and the world is a happy place.”



Progress And Outcome

We have achieved and continue to achieve the safety improvement objectives. Keeping a sustainable volunteer force is always a challenge, and the program would benefit from an additional dedicated sanitation cohort to supplement the current volunteers, who are largely the telephone hosts and already have tasks to execute.

Hygiene Program

The hygiene program deploys hand-washing stations to every telephone location where we are able to do so. The purpose of the program is to improve the health and safety of Futel users or any other individuals who wish to use the stations.

The handwashing stations are essentially soap dispensers, water supplies,



To inform users, stickers with the date of sanitation and the engineer's handle are applied after every procedure.

While the sanitization procedure is designed to limit deleterious effects on the telephone hardware, we have had to replace some handsets and appear to be experiencing accelerated keyboard wear. The procedure does create a cool patina on the chrome, however, and makes the informational copy more challenging to read and probably more satisfying for those who attempt to do so.



Druid of Sisyphus Gardens Log



and hands free water dispensers. There are several ways to implement this, we chose to base ours on a foot operated pump drawing water from a tank to a spigot. This is an economical and robust solution but has the large drawback of being less accessible to wheelchair users and other people with limited leg mobility. The design objectives of our implementation are to provide water and soap with minimal maintenance and cleaning requirements, ruggedness when faced with careless or hostile users, and inexpensive parts to discourage theft. The pump is a rubber primer bulb under a pedal, the tank is a bucket or plastic barrel, and the spigot is PVC conduit. A wood and rebar frame anchors everything. A bottle of liquid soap is zip tied to the frame.

or any other graywater collection, the spigot just empties over the pavement. Because of this the spigot must be to the side to avoid splashing the user's foot.

Soap was difficult to acquire in the early days of the pandemic, but we were able to get a large container of blue industrial hand soap.

Progress And Outcome

We have achieved and continue to achieve the safety improvement objectives. There have been surprisingly few instances of vandalism or theft of parts and supplies.

The Druids didn't exactly keep great records in 2020 (except for September), although it was a great year (Futel-wise). We received many memorable calls from memorable callers.

April

Caller wanted to know how to turn into a dog. A Transmutation spell like Polymorph Self should work.

September 21

Caller asked if they could visit Sisyphus Gardens, I told them I'd get back to them on that. Caller then asked how long I've been a Druid and how old I was because they are interested in Druid stuff. I asked them if they had any other questions; "What's your favorite color?"

September 27

Two callers enjoying a nice mushroom time. Answered the first caller's ques-

tions about Druids and Futel. The 2nd caller said they found out about Futel from the Dream Survey YouTube. They asked if I do this all day (sure, technically) and if our phone was red like they imagined (the cord is).

September 27

Two different callers, the first caller was excited to finally talk to the Druid because they live close to the location of the first Futel. Second caller wasn't sure what to ask me, so I said I can provide Druidic advice or Druidic secrets. Provided them with a Druidic secret.

September 28

M called, they have been calling every time they find a new Futel phone!

October 25

Caller told me their pitch to Netflix and asked me what I thought. I said I try to avoid being judgmental.

FOR Good TELEPHONE SERVICE
especially on
Party Lines -

- ✓ Please be brief on all calls
- ✓ Avoid needless calls
- ✓ Space calls so other parties have a chance at the line
- ✓ Yield the line in emergencies

SINGLE LINES or
PARTY LINES....

Courtesy IS CATCHING

sorts of weird, intriguing questions re: the meaning of September 5th 2020, the Willamette Valley Dream Survey, the manifesto printed on the Futel payphones, etc. We had a long-ranging and interesting discussion about the nature of reality and the meaning of the various texts on the Futel telephone.

2020-07-25

Caller asked how to report a dream, I told them to use the directory. Caller asked what happens to the dream recordings, I replied that it was an external number and I didn't know. Caller started telling me an obviously fake dream, I suggested that they report it and hung up.

2020-08-07

What is this, is the dream survey available here, what other interesting choices are there, blah blah blah, just try it already.



2020-08-23

Caller wanted the number to report their dreams. I told her the WVDS is in the menu system, tho i could not recall where. I offered to record the callers dream in the Futel log instead. Caller dreamed they had just killed two people — they didn't recall who — and was running from the law. They found their child, confessed the crime, and they absconded together. I wished them a

better dream tonight.

2020-09-06

Caller asked how to call the Druid, I told them to use the directory.

2020-09-09

Caller's grandparents are visiting in the house upstairs. Caller also has a spider living in their window. Caller attempted to conference in the spider, but could not operate the speakerphone. Caller explained that spiders have their own telephones built into their webs. Discussed literature, comic books, etc. Then caller had to go.

2020-10-07

Caller asked for the police non-emergency number, which I provided.

2020-10-12

Heard a series of tones, after I announced myself sounded like the caller was using the phone keypad. Tried announcing myself again but when the tones stopped there was what sounded like hold music. Girl from Ipanema. Ended the call.

2020-10-22

Caller asked the Operator if they could help them reach a named individual. Operator asked for more information about them. Caller told her Nevermind, and ended the call.

2020-11-22

Caller needed to get in touch with a friend or family member but had no phone numbers. i searched for a few names for them and expect they will call back for some additional number hunting.

2020-12-08

Caller wanted the number of a motel in SW Portland, which I provided.

More Handwashing Stations





6

of those stupid name lookup sites and advised caller about their source. Caller repeated numbers to verify, I corrected two mistakes, caller apologized and said they were writing them down in the rain in Portland.



2020-06-18

Caller was confused about what they they should say after I answered their hello, I hung up.

2020-06-23

Caller wanted the number for OHSU, asked if I could forward them because they didn't have a pen. I could not but repeated the number with them.

2020-06-26

Caller wanted to know "what the fuck is a Futel?" Caller was trying to make a collect call. I suggested they try a free call instead. Caller hung up.

2020-07-01

Caller asked what time it was, I told them. I forgot to tell them that there was a utility menu entry for that.



2020-07-01

Caller asked me to call 911, I told them to hang up and call 911.

2020-07-04

Caller and friend asked why I/Futel exist. Attempted to explain. Caller hung up mid-attempt.

2020-07-13

Caller asked for the number of a Happy Valley hospital, which I provided.

2020-07-20

Caller wants to make a call, Asks if the phone is working. Explained dialing 1. Caller hung up mid-explanation.

2020-07-21

Caller reported static on the Clinton St. phone. Then she/they/it asked all

2020 Operator Log Excerpts

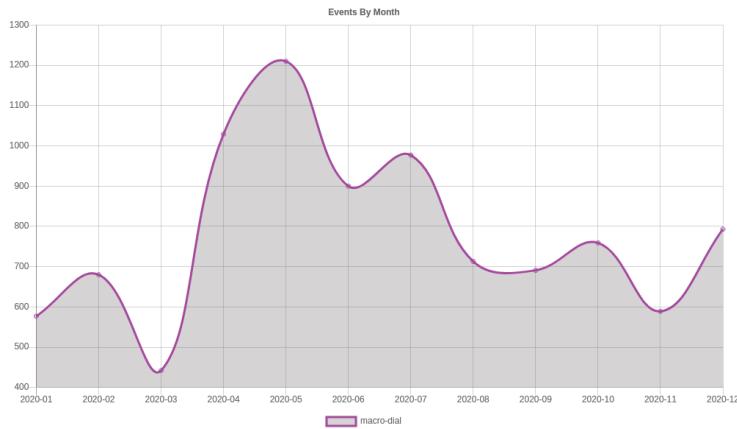
Eleven operators logged over 42 operator calls in 2020, providing information, assisting users, and sharing conversations, many quite boring but also many not boring at all. Here is a sample of logged calls, with some sensitive and many less interesting examples removed.

2020-01-07

Caller asked, "which operator is this?" I replied that it didn't matter and disconnected.

2020-01-21

Caller asked if I could place a call and gave me a number, I told them how to get a dialtone. Caller asked a long confusing question, something about whether this was a government benefit and which organizations were involved. I told them I didn't understand the question but I hoped they benefited from it. Caller talked about what they were doing, again something confusing about telecommunication abilities or maybe telepathy, I told them I was glad to hear it and said goodbye.



2020-01-31

Caller asked for the number of a retirement community.

2020-02-04

Talked with caller, who appreciated the chair. Isn't it cold there right now? You f-in know it's cold.



2020-02-05

Caller asked for a residential number. I advised that I was just googling and probably couldn't help. Caller provide a name and street in Albuquerque. I was able to recite three numbers off one

Handwashing Station Construction Notes

Manifest

- primer bulb
 - this is a rubber bulb that moves liquid in one direction between 2 barbs
- about 6 inches between barbs
- 3-9 feet vinyl tubing
 - length depends on barrel used
 - length depends on conduit used
 - inside diameter should match primer bulb barbs
- plastic barrel
- PVC conduit, elbows, barbs as needed
 - depends on barrel used

- plywood, plank, 2x4, 2x2, etc. lumber
- 6 ft rebar x2
- hinge e.g. gate or door
- soap dispenser
- zip ties
- duct tape
- strapping
- conduit brackets or plumbers tape
- screws, other fasteners
- chain or cable as needed, lock



Year in Review



Construction

Cut plywood base to size to support barrel, toes, bulb pedal. Mark where toes should go in plywood base.

Drill two holes in plywood base at circumference of barrel for rebar. Drill holes in plywood base for zip ties to attach bulb, tubing.

Screw lumber toes to base to laterally support base of barrel and protect pump pedal. Assemble pedal out of plank and hinge and attach to base with hinge toward user. Attach pump to base under hinge with zip ties.

If needed, drill holes near top of barrel for chain or cable. Drill hole in barrel lid for input conduit. Screw lumber shelf to barrel lid. Assemble spigot out of conduit and barb. Attach spigot to shelf with brackets and/or zip ties.

Place barrel on base, within toes. Hammer rebar into earth through holes in base. Zip tie rebar to shelf. Strap rebar to barrel.

Assemble input conduit, easiest is a length of conduit sawed with a 45 degree end, long enough that it can't fall in the barrel when placed in the hole.

Assemble tubing to pump. Zip tie tubing to base and rebar, routing so that toes protect tubing on base. Assemble outlet tubing to spigot. Place input conduit in hole. Thread tubing through input conduit until it nearly reaches bottom of barrel.

Zip tie and duct tape soap dispenser to rebar.

Prime pump by pouring water down output tubing until pump can be actuated.

Futel did well in 2020, considering.

We slogged through the pandemic, at least that part which has so far been experienced, and adapted to support our users with the development of the sanitation and hygiene programs.

- We deployed one new phone and many new hand washing stations.
 - Wildcard Line episode 7 was released. Contribute to the Wildcard Line from any Futel phone.
 - We completed the Hold The Phone project in partnership with Open Signal, featuring three contributing artists and funded by a RACC grant.
 - We received an Awesome Portland May 2020 People's Choice grant to support the implementation of the sanitation and hygiene programs.
- Most importantly, we continued to provide services to our phones and incoming line. Usage greatly increased
- over 22000 handset pickups
 - over 13000 calls received by the incoming line
 - 9370 outgoing calls
 - 65 calls to the Futel voice conference
 - 121 calls to the mayor of Detroit
 - 116 calls to a randomly selected American concentration camp
 - 92 calls to the Payphone Demultiplexer
 - 79 attempts to communicate with the Druids of Sisyphus Gardens
 - 45 calls to the mayor of Portland
 - 34 calls to the Willamette Valley Dream Survey



I spend an evening in my basement salvaging payphone parts, which is calming. These stupid people will never understand what it feels like to be creative and listen to others. Against my better judgement I exchange some friendly emails with a graveyard shift circuit etcher who writes about his dream communication and the phreaker history he's reading, which helps my morale. Fuck these trolls, I know what my motivations are, and I'm not going to let them get me down just because they can't fit me in their worldview.



7, Various podcasts August - October 2020

That last podcast is bothersome because "Candles" is clearly grasping at whatever he can to keep the story alive. He workshops a lot of his personal attacks against me in his double secret Discord group, but this is the first time they are published. Luckily, we are now seeing the decline of Futel as a worthwhile vehicle for cranking out content which can attract enough attention to be monetized. At this stage, it's all podcasts full of ads for podcast advertising networks.

The first set of these recycles talking points from the initial Reddit and YouTube content, just as we've seen on YouTube. The second set recycles the

first. Thankfully, the segments covering Futel and the dream surveys get smaller and smaller with each pass. Eventually the Futel content is just a quick piece in a list of short creepypasta summaries. One of the later ones is put on YouTube with video, a pair of teenagers sitting at their desks talking into webcams. It's a nice way to end the story, we hope. Go kids! Talk about weird stuff on YouTube, practice for better things!



8. Conclusion

This parade has hopefully run its course among all but the dregs and random comment threads. To anyone who comes across us while looking for spooky stories, welcome, find our phones, call your mom. To those who are trying to scrape up money or fame from this, sorry, it's a stupid way to try and grow your personal brand. Avoid live weaponized memes! There's a cultural cold war going on around you, a real war, the kind with ordinary people getting killed. The only way to win is not to play. The life of an unwitting soldier is not a happy one!



Thread chain or cable through holes in barrel. Lock to stationary object.

Notes

Barrel can be remote from pump and spigot or inaccessible, alter base in that case to support pump and spigot.

Input conduit just keeps the input at the bottom of the barrel and discourages people from yanking the tubing out, input conduit can be replaced with weight and a conduit T at end of input tubing.

Design is intended to be cheap, easy to source, annoying to steal or strip, easy to service and replace. A trap at the spigot will make pumping easier. Graywater basin has been eliminated for ease of cleaning, this means that the spigot has to be inconveniently located to keep water away from pumper's foot. This is not our best deployed design but it's cheaper (if barrels are available), easier, and less labor to build.

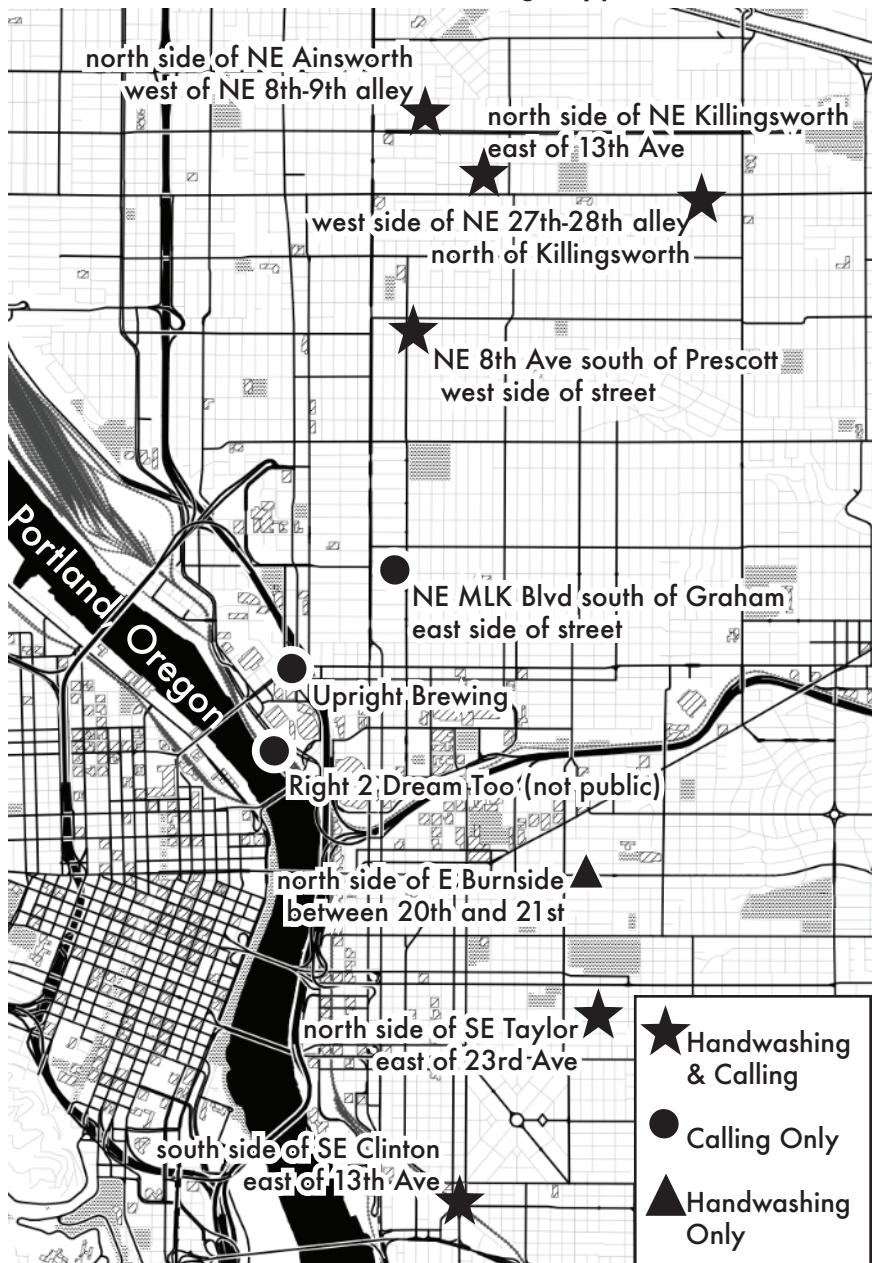


WASH YOUR HANDS!



Futel Service Map

North America's Fastest Growing Payphone Network



Service Map as of January 13, 2021

created with OpenStreetMap & Stamen's Toner tileset CC-BY-SA

One ARG guy is smart enough to seek clues not provided by "Candles", and visits our IRC channel. He actually tells us what he is looking for and is able to ask questions and read responses, so he quickly learns that there are no real ARG hints on the phones, and that it's shockingly easy to find a story that makes much more sense than a mind control cult. He checks back in with the Discord group and says that there doesn't seem to be anything to pursue. "It's nothing different than those die hard D&D kids we all knew." Since nobody has anything to refute this, there's nothing interesting for him, so he leaves. "Candles" is annoyed by this and says that he's being watched and has to go dark for a while. After a few days of rudderless discussion, everyone with even rudimentary critical thinking skills has left. It's "Candles", some trolls, and a few delusional people. One person only posts over and over about how it's all coming together and he can almost see it.



He makes an appearance on a podcast hosted by a pair of cringe frat boys, talking about his ongoing investigation and the bombshells he is about to reveal, and continuing the tradition of mispronouncing Futel and Willamette despite playing several clips which say them correctly. During the interview he plays a recording of his operator call (thanks, asshole), which I fielded without knowing who he was, and calls me an asshole for not explaining enough to him (thanks, asshole). He and his hosts whine about how spooky and unfriendly we are and how suspicious I am in particular, and then they let "Candles" talk about the hard won information he is about to drop until they have enough banter to fill an episode.



This is the most disenheartening part of the stupid saga for me. "Candles" is sharing my name and photo while making vague accusations. His moronic followers are calling me a sex criminal. I start to question my own wisdom. These feelings are familiar when working hard on a quixotic project, but with Futel I get occasional lifts from messages from strangers about how the phone have helped them. Now I'm just getting abuse. My neighborhood barista asks me if there's anything to the Reddit "rabbit hole". I stomp out and find a new place to get coffee.

there are susceptible to cult recruitment? What horrible fates occur to those who call these phone numbers?

It would be so easy to grief these people. We could divert them with sock puppets. We could set up fake backdated blogs. We could provide keys to extracting secret messages from mainstream newspaper articles that said what we wanted them to say. It is tempting to lead them along to get them off our backs, or at least burn the story out faster. But we don't want to hurt the people who are genuinely delusional, or inadvertently trigger some random violent reaction on an innocent bystander.



6. Candles August 2020

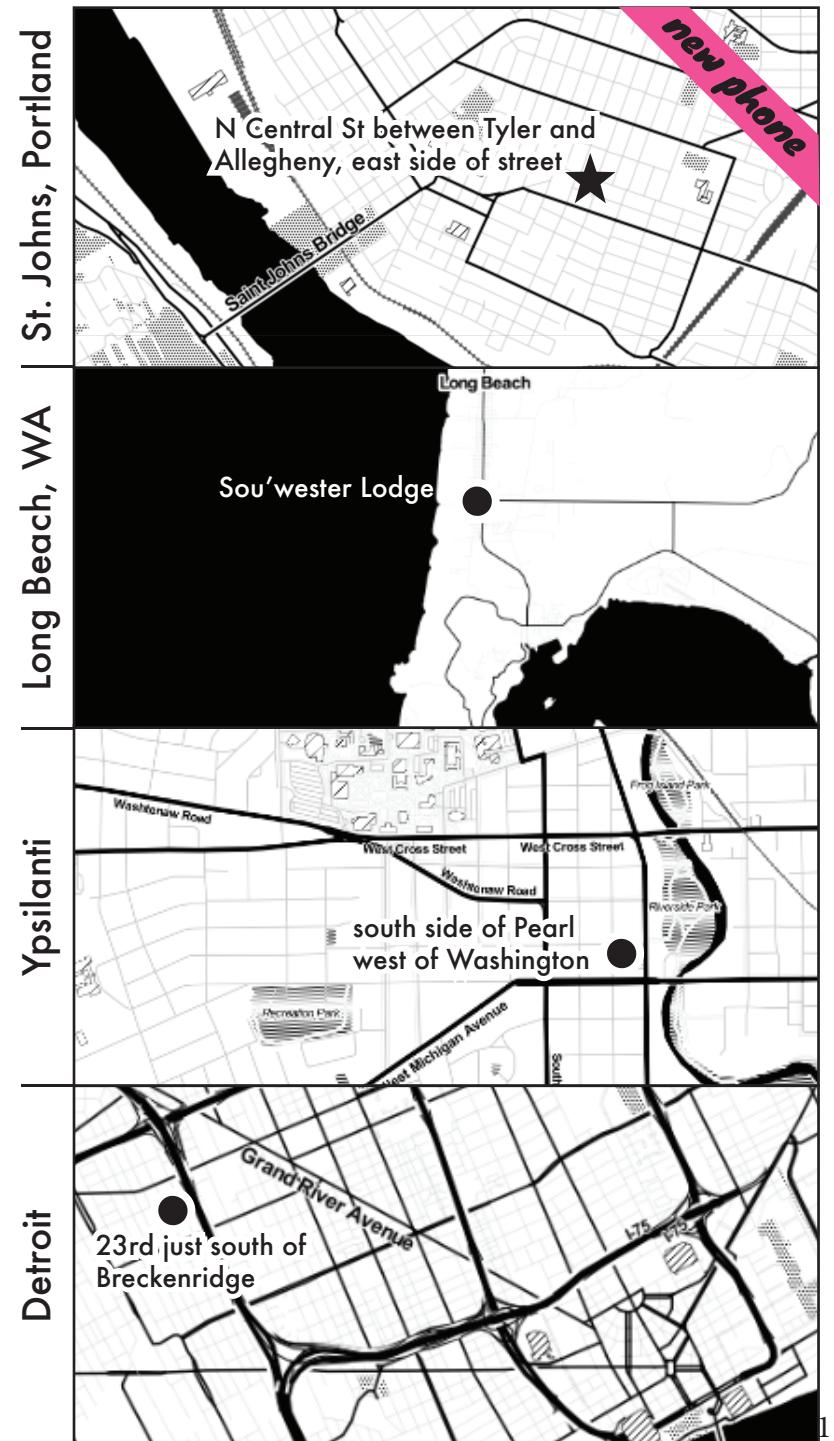
The next rung in the descent begins with "Candles". We saw him earlier when he was "moving to a more secure channel", which turned out to be his YouTube channel. "Candles" saw the fortunes available to successful YouTube slingers and decided to start his new career with a "deep dive" into the dream surveys and Futel's evil machinations.

All of "Candles" ideas, and his pronunciations of Futel and Willamette, are from the "successful YouTuber's" video, but he does have perseverance, even-

tually visiting a Futel phone in Detroit and buying all of our mail-order literature (thanks for your support!). He also has a flair for storytelling, inventing a police escort which accompanies him to the phone and drives off several shady Lincoln Town Cars with tinted windows which are later seen prowling his neighborhood. He also claims that his phone acts strangely after calling the numbers, and that he receives threatening calls and emails from Futel in response to his discoveries.

His main schtick is to find weird corners of the phone menus, embellish them, and suggest links between them and other exaggerated reports mentioned on Reddit. Like everyone else, he doesn't have any evidence for his conclusions and can only trail off about how he just can't believe an explanation that doesn't involve weird cults. Why would someone go to all this effort? There must be a reason!

"Candles" is not as worrisome because he doesn't have much of an audience and is clearly not good at what he does, but his followers are kind of sad. In one of his several "going dark" moods, he announces that Reddit is not secure enough, and herds his crew into Facebook and Discord groups with open membership.



New Phone in St. Johns

N Central Street between Tyler and Allegheny,
East side of street



a sense of curiosity. The YouTuber himself doesn't follow up, despite his ominous warnings of a deeper nefarious truth behind it. He realizes that he's already achieved peak engagement for the subject. Posts from his fans demanding that we answer his questions continue to trickle in, but without a community to fuel them, they aren't as threatening.



5. Interlude Why are we seeing this?

Now that we've encountered the first wave of YouTubers and their final boss, we may be able to understand what these people want.

The “successful YouTuber” doesn’t really care to learn anything. He just wants to let his viewers think that they are exploring a mystery. He’s found subjects and positioning for his videos that will earn him fractions of a cent for each ad impression. To optimize viewership, they can’t involve actual research, because that is boring. His users need to feel like they are intelligent and have knowledge which the masses aren’t seeking out, but they must consume it passively. If they have to actually work, for example by applying reason, they won’t feel successful anymore, because it will be difficult, and they will quit. Those who can perform basic web searches, follow documents of more

than one paragraph, and organize their ideas into logical conclusions will soon see that the exciting explanation is overwhelmingly unlikely.

The other YouTubers, Redditors, and various commenters want the same thing, they’re just not as successful. They don’t want to find anything, they want to keep looking. If they’re only doing the basic minimum of repeating conjectures, they can convince themselves that there’s something there and that they are doing important work. Because of this, the community tends to select paranoiacs, apopheniacs, and other delusional people.

We did not expect this kind of attention because Futel is a very open organization. Our implementation notes, processes, budgets, grant proposals, and code are publicly accessible. We link directly to these repositories on our website, where we invite collaborators. So many of these questions could be answered in two clicks!



An unfortunate quirk of this group is their susceptibility to being lead by the nose with a technique familiar to viewers of right wing news media, known as JAQing off, for Just Asking Questions. Is there any truth to the rumors about Futel’s link with sex trafficking? Why are Futel phones found in low income neighborhoods? Is it because people

takes the new tack of using a Patreon subscription message. This is a good angle and I decide to respond if his subscription survives until the end of the month, when he will actually be charged the five bucks, but he cancels before that happens.



In late July, he is revealed to be a You-Tuber when he releases a 40 minute video on Futel and the dream surveys. I have a grudging respect for him because he at least sees an opportunity and puts in the effort. While herding internet mouth breathers is a stupid way to try and make money, it must be recognized that when a niche exists, it will get filled. Congratulations, “successful YouTuber”, you got paid to churn out content loosely based on our work.

The video is padded with filler, including stock Portland sunsets and long stretches of him reading our essays while scrolling through our blog and pausing on photographs of Futel volunteers. Like the content we have already seen, it is uncreative and mainly regurgitates earlier Reddit posts, calling it research. In one scene he shows his web browser window as he types into the search bar, and the autocompletion suggestions scroll by, all ending with “reddit”.

of the pile. This guy knows how to lay down narration over footage of him typing into a desktop computer. The highlight is an action scene where he videos himself buying a burner phone at Walmart to protect himself from the harmful effects of calling the numbers. His knees shake, he’s pumped! But, dude, did you bring it home? Did you and your bros turn off of your phones during your shopping trip? You need at least seven proxies!

The gist of the video is that he just doesn’t get it. He gets so close! Is Futel an art project? Is it a public service? There must be more! Why would anyone go to all of this trouble? He can’t confess to entertaining a simple explanation because that won’t drive viewership.



For some reason, he mispronounces Futel as “F’tel” and Willamette as “WILL-ah-met”. This is hard to understand because he plays Futel and Willamette Valley Dream Survey recordings in his video which pronounce them correctly. Does he watch his own content? All of the subsequent videographers and podcasters will copy this pronunciation.

This video sets off the most annoying wave of commenters yet. Messages arrive on LinkedIn and GitHub. Operators start getting calls about it, but at least that method attracts people with

Conspiracy-Fueled Idiots Descend On Futel

High Anxiety But No Casualties
In Online Swarm Of Vapidity

1. Willamette Valley Dream Survey 2015

While riding my bicycle home from work in Portland’s SE Industrial District, I see a Willamette Valley Dream Survey flyer stuck to an overpass. The flyer invites the reader to call a local number and describe their dreams:

Have you been having strange dreams?

The Willamette Valley Dream Survey is investigating a recent spike in bizarre, unexplainable dreams. If you have been experiencing any unusual dream activity, you can help by reporting a summary.



many imaginative possibilities, and run by mysterious protagonists who don’t ruin it by talking. I add the number to the Futel directory.

This is the complete relationship between the Willamette Valley Dream Survey and Futel. None of the other characters in this article will claim to have any interaction with the Willamette Valley Dream Survey other than making unimaginative calls to their number.

2. Reddit May - August 2020

This is everything known to myself or any other Futel worker about the Willamette Valley Dream Survey. This article does not contain any further information about them, and none of the characters we will discuss have been able to learn anything about them, or even make plausible theories.

I am of course an immediate fan of the project, because it is based on voice-mail, has low complexity to set up but

Reddit posts about the Happy Valley Dream Survey start to appear in a mystery solving group. The Happy Valley Dream Survey is apparently a copycat project in Utah. Or maybe someone just printed out a fake flyer and photographed it, who knows.

This Reddit group is focused on arm-chair research of conspiracy theories. 13

Most participants attempt, or at least pretend, to explain mysteries like crimes or strange phenomena, but of course there are a lot of goofs just spinning tall tales and having fun.



Mixed in are the ARG, for Alternate Reality Game, players. ARGs are puzzles which interact with the real world, where clues can be found in physical locations or delivered via media like web pages, email, phone calls, and text messages. ARGs are often part of marketing campaigns, and an early instance promoted the 2001 movie Artificial Intelligence, but many are made for fun by amateurs. Some are not organized or set up in advance, but unfold as participants craft explanations and links between real life events and previously shared clues. A collaborative story is created with players trying to get their story line elements accepted by having other players build their own elements on them.

The Reddit group tries to find or invent an explanation for the Happy Valley Dream Survey. They get it backwards and claim that the Willamette Valley Dream Survey is a copy, or perhaps a branch. Someone eventually takes the time to look up the name and finds a newspaper article about Futel which describes finding the Willamette Valley Dream Survey directory entry. Commenters decide that Futel is run by one

of the surveys, with a minority proposing other hierarchies. The motivation for this is conjectured to be a scam of some kind, harvesting phone numbers, behavioral data, or psychic energy.

The story quickly gets embellished by an echo chamber effect. After a report of receiving a weird text message after calling Futel, other posts refer to those comments, magnifying them in the retelling, describing several cases of menacing calls and threatening messages. Users delete their accounts after posting, which causes a stir and amplifies their ideas. The top theories now involve cult recruitment. The ARG players try to figure out what the clues are and where they lead.



In mid-May, a link between Futel and a collaborative story called "September 5" is accepted as likely based on the strained translation of a gibberish text message. "September 5" is referred to as an ARG, but it's more of an apocalyptic prediction which some people pretend is believed by others. Reddit users make weird posts about it and try to get them repeated. There's no real structure behind it other than the world ending on September 5, but that's enough to make a post spookier by referring to the "September 5 group".

A few more posters with advanced

research skills are able to Google us. This allows them to find our web page and the conference videos that describe how and why we run Futel. A handful of Reddit posts point out that our reasons are plainly revealed, and that it doesn't seem necessary to tack a sinister occult organization on to that. These are not exciting enough to get attention, and don't advance the story.



Futel starts receiving email about all this in early May. Some ask straightforward questions about why we list the dream survey in our directory. I answer them, and a few thank me and report back fairly accurately to their Reddit groups. They are followed by people with vague questions or asking to arrange a phone call without explaining why.

At this point I become concerned about qanon pizzagate situations, and stop responding to messages. This is annoying because some of the people writing are apparently genuinely curious, including telecom geeks and phreaks, with whom it is always fun to talk. And I appreciate conspiracy theorists and have followed a lot of zines, cable access and radio shows, and newsgroups from which these internet forum dwellers descend. Not to mention the conversations and voicemails with some neuroatypical Futel participants. It's annoying to have

to ignore the sincere people.

3. First YouTuber June 2020

The story escapes Reddit with YouTube video by "Floating Head Guy". This video isn't so bad, mainly because he just summarizes what other people are repeating and knows what state Futel is based in, but the comments immediately plummet to the basic conspiracy theory of the right wing thrall: occult child sex trafficking cabals. Futel spans the continent and is clearly targeting low income neighborhoods for recruitment! One poster replaces their comment with "Moving to a more secure channel. They are watching", a now familiar way of attempting to get attention for later posts without having any actual content to share.

Someone finds another project that shares members with Futel, and asks what the connection is between the two. The next commenter says they heard it was linked to trafficking. In reality, nobody has heard of it.



4. Successful YouTuber June - July 2020

In early June, Futel gets a familiar salvo of emails, Twitter comments, and other messages from someone who has a "quick question". I notice him when he 15