

Setter's Notes

Here are some thoughts on setting the 2023 ATH, intended primarily as a resource for future setters, but maybe of interest to ATH nerds more generally.

Themes

I wanted a high-brow theme and a low-brow theme to offer something for everybody. I chose Buffy for the low-brow because I know the series well, and because of the Sunnydale / Happy Valley link to my chosen treasure location. I was originally going to do Buffy x Proust because that was the most high-brow thing I could think of. But after I came up with the Scooby Doo introduction, I wanted a "Great Dane" and I liked Kierkegaard's obsession with pseudonyms so he elbowed Proust out of the way.

Difficulty

I think the ATH is a lot more fun if you actually manage to find the treasure and have a day out rummaging through undergrowth. I tried to calibrate the difficulty of my hunt so there would be a lot of finds - and there were 18, so I was happy with that. But on the other hand, one has to respect that Pablo is supposed to be a difficult puzzle, and it has to keep teams of very clever people busy for several weeks. And one doesn't want to have the best teams all scoring close to full marks. So I tried to keep those puzzles that were necessary to find the treasure doable, whilst including some real stinkers to be the difference between the top teams. I misjudged this a bit since there were a couple of puzzles (book code, buffy episode code) that nobody got.

Side Quests

It's a well established part of the ATH that not all puzzles will necessarily help you find the treasure. As well as the usual hidden Merry Christmas message (in English and Danish) I also included some more creative tasks - including a colouring competition so even the smallest member of the family could get involved, and the opportunity to compose a haiku, devise a new slogan for the prison, and submit a photo of a pet. Some teams seemed to really enjoy this, and a lot of creativity was shown, particularly with the haikus, so I would invite future setters to consider if they want to include a similar challenge.

The Mystery of the Six-Foot Phallus

ATHers would be forgiven for being confused by the first couple of articles in the newsletter, which ended up not containing much by way of puzzles to be solved. I have to apologise to anyone who got any dodgy results from googling "six-foot phallus". Until the last minute there was a whole other puzzle within the ATH. See if you can work out where you were supposed to look for a piece of the puzzle.

*I forgot to enclose card for Nick. I hope he had a jolly day - he's a good little lad.
So not much news, which you'd expect as I am in the cells for hours designing and making
the newsletter. I'm sorry if it is dull but anything important **CLASSIFIED**
CLASSIFIED CLASSIFIED.*

is grateful for inmates' cooperation during the process, so wanted to say thank you. Except to the inmate, whoever it was, who drew **CLASSIFIED CLASSIFIED** on the shower block wall.

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Unfortunately, one of the points that was picked up in the inspection was the lack of security around our gardening tools, as they could be used in escape attempts. From now on, the pick and spade **CLASSIFIED** **CLASSIFIED** at the end of each shift. Smaller tools like the hand trowels are not currently affected, but we can consider ourselves on a yellow card with regard to those too, after a **search** of the cells revealed that one inmate was hiding a rock hammer **CLASSIFIED CLASSIFIED** **CLASSIFIED CLASSIFIED.**

Until a few days before the launch of the hunt, the Vigenere code with the final instructions to the treasure location was to be found in a classified ad in Private Eye. It was booked, paid for and accepted (and explained what the code was) weeks in advance, but they contacted me a few days before to say they wouldn't run it. So I had to quickly change things around, leaving behind a few meaningless oddities to fill some gaps, like that pesky phallus. So the moral for future setters is to be cautious about using any third parties to host parts of the hunt if these are not under your control.

Technology

Compare and contrast 2022 Daphne HQ's lavish choose your own adventure web based puzzle with my 2023 version. I am not very tech savvy so I kept things extremely simple and just used a simple website builder (wixsite) and had people progress simply by having answers to questions form part of the url for the next page.

My ATH teammate Nigel helped me with updating pablosath.com (with some very thorough and helpful instructions prepared by Dave Kee). I would say that this is the only element where I was really out of my depth and glad of a helping hand. That, and also someone to double, triple, quadruple check that had stripped any useful metadata out of the photo of the treasure site. If I had left the GPS details in the poster photo, it could have been the fastest solved treasure hunt in history.

Everything else, the Facebook page, Twitter account and the Mailchimp mailing list was very user friendly. Unfortunately Dave has had to move the mailing list elsewhere as the charges on Mailchimp were becoming prohibitively expensive.

Quotes

It turns out Soren Kierkegaard did not in fact say half of the things attributed to him on the internet. In fact, any nice pithy quotes that I thought I could do something with were almost certainly not his. Before publishing the hunt I had to take out quite a few quotes where I was unable to confirm the source. Luckily, I can pretty much recite Buffy verbatim, so no issues there.

Complaints

The main complaint I had (either sent to me directly or I could see people moaning about it when given access to a working document) was that I did not send a Merry Christmas or Happy New Year message, or otherwise send out a clue during the course of the treasure hunt. I decided not to send any additional clues because there were already plenty of finds so I knew the puzzle was solvable. But some teams who were struggling were pinning their hopes on a Christmas hint and were disappointed. So I would advise future setters to consider the Christmas / New Year hint to be an indispensable tradition and not to skip it.

The only other real complaint I had was from one solver who objected to my putting part of the puzzle on Twitter, which they told me would have been a problem for them, so that is something else for future setters to take into account.

I had no complaints about Sean Bean being missing in action (with only an extremely tenuous link being included), but I would not like this to set a precedent and would be glad to see him again in the future.

Team Creepy

Future setters should be aware of the possibility that teams may try to find information online about them personally, in an attempt to gain an advantage in solving the puzzle. I don't believe this is a widespread problem, but at least one team was very intrusive this year. Luckily there wasn't much to be gained by researching my personal life, but it was still weird and unpleasant. The team in question has been asked not to do it again, and the website will be updated to be clear that this isn't within the rules. But of course, there is no way of preventing teams from doing this on the QT. Future setters should consider using fresh pseudonyms that won't link back to them, stripping author info out of all documents, not retweeting Pablo tweets from a personal account etc. if you consider that this would be a problem for you.

Proofreaders and Test Solvers

This is a huge task over literally years of development for this hunt, and my proofreaders and test solvers have spent hours and hours helping with the hunt. Not simply test solving, but coming up with great suggestions and generally providing moral support. Nigel, Dave, Andy, James (who did a test solve before he passed away) and especially Suzanne have contributed hugely so this was really a group effort by the whole Urban Marsupial Orchestra team. All remaining errors were entirely my own work as things got moved around at the last minute.

James Medhurst Memorial Mug for Most Bonkers Theory

I was part of the team that took over the 2021 Cold Christmas ATH, set by our friend James who sadly died before it was released. We awarded a special prize in his honour for the ATHer with the most bonkers theory (James' speciality). I also awarded the prize this year, and I would be delighted if future setters would also like to continue the tradition. I ordered several mugs so can provide them for future prizegivings.

Beet
ATH 2023/2024
*And I Would Have Gotten Away
With It Too, If It Hadn't Been
For You Meddling ATHerS*