

Perhaps the oldest internet myth of all: the mystery of Ong's Hat

#Cover story #Science fiction

Michael  1E9 team
4 p.m

In the 1980s, an artist started an interactive puzzle game. It's about scientists and spiritualists who found a way to another world. Then the narrative experiment spiraled out of control. Today, many still believe that the story is true - and that there is a portal to a second Earth in the ghost town of Ong's Hat.

By Michael Fölsch
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In the early 2000s, Joseph Matheny lived in a house near Santa Cruz, California. Nothing special, as he says. But it offered plenty of space and was cheap enough to be affordable with a relative who lived on the ground floor. Matheny himself lived in the attic. Most of the time he sat in a small office and worked. One evening he heard excited footsteps in the stairwell. His roommate rushed up to him frantically. Someone was creeping around the house and looking in the windows, she said. "I was like: What?" says Joseph Matheny in an interview with 1E9. "I took my pistol and went to check." He carefully ventured down the stairs, in front of the house, onto the lawn, around the house. And sure enough: there was a man standing around on his property. Matheny shouted at him about what he wanted here.

"He babbled things that were difficult to understand," says Joseph Matheny. "He wasn't entirely in his right mind, I knew that right away." But the author, artist and part-time video game developer could hear a few words among the murmurs. And so he understood what the stranger wanted on his property. The "crazy guy" wanted to know where Matheny had hidden "the egg" and where the secret plans for traveling to other worlds were. In short: He wanted clarity about the secret of Ong's Hat. But Matheny made it clear to the stranger that There is nothing for him to find here, he should leave the premises immediately and not come back. Nothing new for Matheny. Because it was not the first and certainly not the last time that something like this happened.

Over the years, people repeatedly stood at his door and he had to scare them away with more or less effort and force. He received confusing and threatening calls. And somehow it was his own fault, says the now over 60-year-old American. After all, he gave birth to Ong's Hat: perhaps the first and almost certainly the longest-lasting Internet myth. It has inspired film, television

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and podcast makers for decades, but has also become a conspiracy theory and a cult. One that can no longer be captured. Not even from his creator.

The Pine Barrens

There is an extensive forest area in the US state of New Jersey between the east coast of the USA on one side and the foothills of the metropolis of Philadelphia on the other. The so-called Pine Barrens span more than 4,700 square kilometers in seven different counties. They are considered unique in terms of their biodiversity and to this day some patches of the sometimes almost impenetrably dense forests remain untouched. Hikers often get lost there – or even disappear, never to be seen again. Myths and legends have always surrounded the areas in and around the Pine Barrens. “There are thousands of stories,” Matheny says. “Some have a kernel of truth, others are complete nonsense.”

A lake called the Blue Hole is said to protrude infinitely deep. There is also talk of mysterious lights in the forests, huge black cats, a ghost dog and a mystical white deer. There are reports of soldiers hunting [wild people](#), cannibals, Satanists or Bigfoot in the forests. There are rumors of abandoned settlements that are not shown on any maps. At night, disembodied voices are said to echo between the trees. There are also repeated sightings of the [Jersey Devil](#), a devilish creature with a goat's head, bat wings and stubby arms that is said to attack lonely travelers.

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And then there's Ong's Hat. Initially it is just a *ghost town* in the northern part of the Pine Barrens, surrounded by forest all around and several kilometers away from the nearest larger settlement. According to legend, the obscure name comes from an expensive silk hat that a local hustler named Jacob Ong always wore. When he once received a basket, he is said to have thrown it into the crown of a tree out of desperation, where it remained hanging for years and became a symbol of the town. According to another legend, it was his lover who threw the hat into the air when she caught him with another woman. In fact, as the descendants of the Ong family say today, the name probably comes from a hut - English: hut - that a farmer in the family built as a place to stay overnight over 250 years ago.

The town is said to have never existed for much more than the hut - apart from the sheds of some alcohol smugglers - even though Ong's Hat was recorded on maps for many years. Or was there more to Ong's Hat than just this collection of barracks?

The journey to another world

A unique research duo is said to have worked at Princeton University in the 1980s. The twins Frank and Althea Dobbs are said to have worked in their laboratory to “solve the problem of n-dimensional attractors”, “unleash u [Skip to main content](#) ity” and decipher “morphogenetic fields”. They mixed

mysticism, chaos theory, physics and quantum physics. Their colleagues accused them of humbug and pseudoscience. When the university administration found out about it, both of them were thrown out. But they did not give up their research, but continued it on their own with the help of a patron - in an experimental station that they set up in an old barn in a clearing between the trees of the Pine Barrens, protected from the eyes of their skeptics: the Institute of Chaos Studies. Where Ong is said to have once thrown his hat into the treetop.

The owner of the land and financier was Wali Fard, a maverick spiritualist and importer of carpets and "other well-known Afghan products" who had already founded his Moorish Science Ashram in Ong's Hat in the 1970s: a wild community of people living in caravans, wooden huts and self-sewn tents. The members meditated, experimented with drugs, but also with technology and science to reach higher levels of consciousness, explore the meaning of life and change reality. Fard saw the Princeton scientists as spiritual like-minded people - and in their research a way to break through the boundaries of earthly existence.

The researchers, who were soon joined by other scientists, technicians and hackers, are said to have managed to do exactly that – somehow, anyway.

The group of researchers and mystics are said to have developed an egg-shaped capsule that can be used to travel to a parallel dimension. But that was more by chance. The egg, developed as an isolation tank and measuring device, was actually intended to allow a volunteer to fall into a trance, immerse themselves in the quantum level and experience the moment “in which particles become a wave”. But during a first test, the egg suddenly disappeared and reappeared after a few moments: the volunteer reported that

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he had suddenly found himself on another earth. It is just like ours, except that there have never been people there - an untouched utopia.

The group began to explore and slowly colonize the alternate world. Some members of the ashram kept jumping back and forth with the egg - until they suddenly learned that the US government had somehow caught wind of their activities. The researchers and the members of the ashram then disappeared from one day to the next. In a coordinated effort, they are said to have used the egg to bring the laboratory, the ashram and everything they needed to the other world in order to make a new beginning for the human race.



All they left behind was their empty accommodation and the emptied laboratory. From time to time, some members of the ashram will appear on *this page* - to obtain equipment, tools and other aids that are not available in the parallel world.

If you look carefully, you can still find the remains of the ashram and even the makeshift laboratory where the egg was developed and tested.

Sometimes the area should be free, but hidden behind trees. But it is also r [Skip to main content](#) secured against intruders with a fence, barbed wire and

cameras - but also in case the dimensional travelers return one day. Over the years, some people online claimed they had discovered the old commune. They even knew that the egg was still there.

But Matheny can only smile mildly. "It's great when people go with their friends, have an adventure, have a good time looking for the ashram," he says with a laugh. "But finding him? That will be difficult. Because he never existed." Ong's Hat – or more precisely: the story of the dimensional travelers in Ong's Hat – is his invention. A now very old invention.

Chaos and letters

The origin story of Ong's Hat, like the legend of Ong's Hat, begins in the 1980s. Back then, Joseph Matheny, born in Chicago, Illinois in 1961, dreamed of becoming a director - or rather, a filmmaker, as he himself puts it - and took relevant courses at his college before enrolling at a film school in San Francisco. But he wanted more. He found a lot of what he saw on the VHS cassettes or in the cinema that had been available for several years to be uncreative and boring. For his thesis, he made a film that was different.

Matheny hid several clues and puzzles in his film. These related to an accompanying short story he had written, which also included puzzles. Whoever decoded it received a date and a place where the actors from the film performed the finale live: *decentralized storytelling* is the technical term for it today. This concept was astonishing, but not everyone really understood it.

It was at this time that Matheny discovered the early Internet. This consisted primarily of a network of computers through which individual messages could be left and exchanged on a so-called mailbox - or a bulletin

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board. This world was primarily accessible to researchers and students and

to employees of large technology companies. There were private individuals using this early network, but not many. "It was exciting. I saw the potential," says Matheny. "I thought about what I could do with it. What would happen if this were combined with video, if everyone had access to it." But the Internet wasn't there yet, as he discovered.

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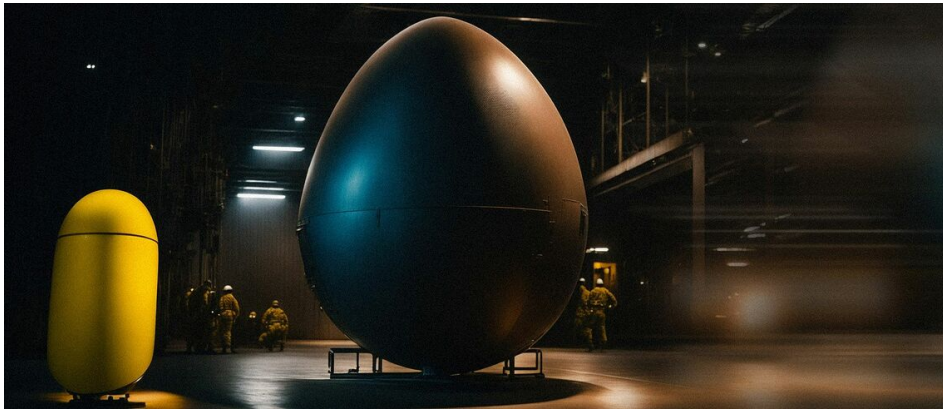
Joseph Matheny

Nevertheless, Matheny continued to dabble in computers, technology and film. In Silicon Valley, which began to develop in the mid-1980s, he roamed through various companies, developing concepts and explaining the digital world. At the same time, he continued to pursue his great passion: story-telling - in a way that was not usual. And Ong's Hat "was my first attempt at telling a really big story," recalls Matheny, laughing.

His idea? Nothing with computers or the Internet - at least not immediately, but by post. "In the '80s there was something called *mail culture*, where people sent their artwork to other people. "By post," explains the artist. "When you got a work of art, you then expanded the work, packed it up again and sent it on to other people. Something like a chain letter." But what Matheny had in mind was supposed to be bigger, more modular and somehow crazier.

The real Ong's Hat
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Matheny developed the idea of a mysterious research experiment carried out by dimension-traveling scientists and esotericists. Their origin? Not just his imagination, as he openly admits, but also an experimental short story by anarcho-writer Peter Lamborn Wilson - also known as Hakim Bey - that was published back in 1988 in the science fiction zine *Edge Detector*. It already tells the story of the Ashram in the Pine Barrens and deals with the intersection of mysticism and science. A description of the egg is also included.



Wilson claimed for a long time and with much emphasis that he did not write this text, but that it was passed on to him. But Matheny says he knows exactly what inspired Wilson to write this story: "There was this guy [Wilson] who had inherited a cabin in the Pine Barrens," says Matheny. "There were always crazy parties there. There was a celebration and very different people came together: academics, scientists, artists like me, musicians, technology guys... everyone came." This mix of people led to otherwise unimaginable debates and unique collaborations. "There were discussions between quantum physicists and poets, both of whom were really into mushrooms," says Matheny, laughing. "It was a cut through culture and society that you won't find anywhere else. This is how the idea for the ashram came about: We were the guys in the ashram. We were there celebrating and thinking up weird things."

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We were the guys in the ashram. We, who celebrated there and thought up strange things.

Joseph Matheny

Aside from the short story, Matheny borrowed many elements from the counter and pop culture of the time. He also stole some ideas from the cultural writer Robert Anton Wilson, who became famous with his absurd conspiracy novels. The satirical religion Church of the Subgenius had an influence on Ong's Hat, as did the stories from and style of the cyber culture magazine Mondo 2000 and the reports on religious organizations such as the Moorish Science Temple of [America](#). Little by little, over several weeks, the rough plot of Ong's Hat developed from all of this. But Matheny packaged his idea not just in one straight story, but in several.

Modular, decentralized... Ong's Hat should be told in the form of a kind of scavenger hunt: a *living book experiment*, as Matheny called it. Today, something like this is called an [alternate reality game](#) – ARG for short. Wilson's short story served as an opening, which Matheny converted into a kind of advertising and educational brochure for the ashram, aimed at those who are *ignorant*. “You wouldn’t be reading this pamphlet if you weren’t already halfway to the Institute of Chaos Studies,” reads the first sentence, which is followed by bizarre descriptions of “crazy mystical pamphlets,” “mail order courses on chaos magic,” and the “illegal Distribution of controlled substances” followed.

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Matheny and Wilson copied the text, with illustrations by the artist James Koehline, several times and sent it by post at the end of 1989 to several friends and acquaintances from the art and culture scene - as well as to a few total strangers who were interested in UFOs, aliens, mysticism, magic and other border issues. The duo wanted to remain anonymous as senders and posted their mail in different cities and post offices.

Some time later, a short catalog appeared for a fictional book and curios mail order that Matheny wrote and titled [*Incunabula: A Catalog of Rare Books, Manuscripts & Curiosa, Conspiracy Theory, Frontier Science & Alternative Worlds*](#). The author was listed as a rarity collector named Emory Cranston, who praised and reviewed several obscure writings on topics such as quantum mechanics, wormholes, and spiritualism - many of which were fictional, but also real. Together they provided further information about the methods, beliefs and scientific approaches of Ong's Hat researchers.

The advertisements for the fictional books in the fictional catalog “were short stories that together made a novella,” Matheny says. For some of these, he enlisted the help of his friend Nick Herbert, a physicist who was working at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory at the time. He supported the artist with abstract scientific theories and the appropriate vocabulary. Matheny had the obscure document with the eye-catching lead page printed and copied and redistributed to a select group of people who he suspected might be fascinated by it. This time he used a particularly complex detour.

“We didn’t want anyone to know that the catalog came from us,” says Matheny. “So we had it sent from Hong Kong – via a remailer service. I put the catalogs in envelopes and addressed them. Packed the envelopes into a box. It went to Hong Kong. And from there the individual

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envelopes were stamped and sent. It all seemed very mysterious.” In fact, the artist soon received messages from those who had received a “mysterious envelope with a strange catalog.” So he added more.

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Joseph Matheny

Joseph Matheny develops an alter ego that is not an artist but an investigative journalist. At the end of 1992, he wrote [an interview with the physicist Nick Herbert about quantum tantra](#) ([which, by the way, is quite serious](#)) and dimensional travel, in which both the catalog and Ong's Hat are mentioned. The author manages to sneak this interview into the legendary culture and counterculture zine *Boing-Boing* in 1993 . This was followed by an interview by Matheny with the catalog's mysterious author, who claims to have visited Java 2, the other Earth.

Matheny wanted Ong's Hat to be known. He wanted both acquaintances and strangers to come across the puzzle pieces of his story, be drawn to the mystery and captivated by the story. You should start researching, contact friends, acquaintances, nerds and geeks, come across more puzzle pieces and thus put the big picture together - alone or in a puzzle group.

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Sometimes, says Matheny, he traveled with a backpack full of catalogs and other texts. In guerrilla fashion, he stuffed them “between the pages of books in a library and placed them in weekly newspapers, as they existed in every American city at the time. I put them in mailboxes. I put them everywhere.” His friends helped him. During his travels, Wilson left copies of the brochure in cafés, bars and at concerts. And it worked. Photos and copies of the Ong's Hat puzzle texts soon appeared at conferences and in printed newsletters dealing with UFOs, science fiction, and the paranormal.

At the same time, Matheny began to gradually distribute Ong's Hat on the Internet, which in the early 1990s was still not as technically advanced as he had dreamed of, but much better than in the 80s. “I told myself this would be the new distribution method for media and storytelling,” he says. “So I started using it – even though not everything I wanted worked.” First he posted typed versions of his printed texts on bulletin boards and Usenet, and later in forums. He also sent them via email. He and Herbert even created websites for the fictional authors of the books in the catalog. “I was inspired by the audience’s reaction to what already existed,” Matheny says. “You could find Emory Cranston’s email address, the covers of the books, and the authors’ bibliographies.”

In 1995, [Incunabula.org](https://www.incunabula.org) was added, an official website for “research” a [Skip to main content](#) in which Matheny once again played the ambitious

reporter, collecting and classifying all the texts and also running a comment section, but also clearly explaining the nature of the game, although “I thought there were enough clues in the lyrics that none of this was meant seriously.”

From then on, Ong's Hat suddenly spread rapidly. At some point, Matheney transferred all of Ong's Hat material to the Internet - [and also published a CD-ROM version in 1999](#) that depicted the origins of the myth. Users of the cult free hosting service GeoCities, then forums and other debate platforms copied the content, modified it and commented on it. “I thought that was cool because that’s what it was meant to be: a collective art project,” says Matheney. “Because that's what this medium is about: communicating with people, telling stories, passing them on and seeing how they develop.” The first paranormal magazines also began to take up the mystery of Ong's Hat.

This is how new variants of the story emerged, in which the technology of interdimensional travel comes from the UFO that crashed near Roswell. Or Nazi scientists developed the egg. Or the ashram was part of the [Stargate project](#), with which US military intelligence researched, among other things, remote viewing and clairvoyance. Reports emerged from alleged community witnesses who did not participate in the dimensional magic or who said that the ashram was actually stormed by US soldiers who confiscated the egg and took it to Fort Dix. The residents would have been “disappeared”.

Other stories claimed that it was not the egg that made dimensional travel possible, but a natural rift between worlds that still existed where the barn laboratory once stood. On forums such as [Interdimension.org](#) and

On 10/31/23, 12:52 PM reports of adventurers searching the area around Ong's

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Hat, "experienced things", having visions, becoming sick or being chased by men in black suits appeared. "We didn't invent all of this," says Matheny. "But they were narratives and ideas that were out there and woven into the story. The story just kept getting bigger."

But above all: it moved further and further away from Matheny as its inventor. Instead, he himself became more and more of a mythical figure. At the beginning, the author found this exciting and observed with interest how Ong's Hat was increasingly debated and spread by convinced conspiracy theorists: not as a game, but as a myth that probably has a true origin. Matheny wanted to see where the journey would lead.

A mistake

Over several years, the myth of Ong's Hat grew and spread on the still young Internet. Matheny himself gradually withdrew, but followed the events with interest and often amusement. Because back then, many people still recognized the story's teasing wink and expanded on it in an ironic way.

Matheny had [an "interview" with former ashram residents](#) illustrated with a photo of the cast of the 70s sitcom *The Partridge Family*, which many people may have noticed. In return, members of the community published construction instructions for the egg, which stated that it absolutely requires the keypad from an Amana Touchomatic Radarange microwave oven. Or even a list of purchases that travelers from the original earth should bring with them: at the top of the list are Twinkies and shoe insoles.

The narrative experiment reached its peak in 2000 when Matheny faxed a fake press release to various newspaper editorial offices, television and radio studios, in which he reported himself as an "intrepid journalist" who had [Skip to main content](#) ts from "a group of researchers in New Jersey" "Developed

the possibility of interdimensional travel” and wanted to find out whether this story was true. He was then contacted by *Coast to Coast AM* : a legendary, nightly radio show with millions of listeners that has been reporting on UFOs, aliens and the paranormal since the late 1980s - and has repeatedly added callers and guests by telephone. For Matheny, one of his “biggest goals” at that point was to be on *Coast to Coast* . “Because I listened to it religiously myself. I was crazy about it.”

When Matheny went live into *Coast to Coast*'s studio as his reporter alter-ego

, he abruptly presented Ong's Hat to a huge audience. In the two-hour-long show, he and host Mike Siegel talked about how he and some colleagues allegedly tracked down the researchers, about the mystery, the ashram, the ghost town and the Pine Barrens. However, the audience did not learn about the history of the story and the playful nature of the story.

A portion of the existing Ong's Hat community heard the conversation and believed the author had betrayed them by pushing the game so heavily into the public eye. Anger and disappointment were the result. But there were also those who heard the broadcast and were convinced by Ong's Hat's story - and now speculated about Matheny's motives: Was he really a journalist? Or a government agent? Or... was it all just a hoax? There were also thousands who heard about the mystery for the first time and didn't understand that Ong's Hat was just a narrative experiment. Or didn't want to understand it. And that also meant trouble.

Back then people were looking for me, found out my address.

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“Back then, people were looking for me, finding out my address,” Matheny says. Some contacted him to present their own theories about dimensional travel - or even bizarre machines that they had screwed together in their garage that “of course didn't work”: zero-point energy generators, perpetual motion machines and other strange devices. Others wanted to help him with his research into Ong's Hat and claimed to have discovered secret documents and clues to the ashram themselves. Some, in turn, wanted to question him about all this and see the evidence he had for the story. Like the man who was sneaking around his house one evening. Others came to threaten him. His girlfriend at the time, his family and his employers would also have been contacted by phone and letter.

At some point it was too much for Matheny.

[On August 9, 2001, the author officially declared Ong's Hat over with the publication of a novella](#). He and Nick Herbert decided that it was best to bury the project to make room for something new. “This is not a joke,” Matheny wrote. But this announcement changed nothing – at least at first. The debates surrounding Ong's Hat continued, with new texts and histories being written by the community. And even those who were convinced that it wasn't a game were completely unimpressed by the announcement.

The end of the beginning?

“It was fun, it was a playful interaction across media boundaries,” says Matheny. In the months and years following his *Coast-to-Coast appearance*, *groups of believers and supposed gurus* even formed who claimed they knew the way to the other reality; that Matheny was a liar; that all the documents were real. After that and after people suddenly showed up at Matheny's door, h [Skip to main content](#) and complete strangers showed up at his friends and

family, it was clear: Ong's Hat was out of control. “It was never intended that way. I didn’t want and don’t want to tolerate that,” he says. “I appeared on radio shows and podcasts. I said: Hey, this is all fiction, this is not real, it's just a game. There is no hidden truth or big secret.”

It took years for the Ong's Hat community to slowly disintegrate and interest gradually faded. Nevertheless, Ong's Hat is still being passed around today as a true myth and conspiracy theory - in Facebook groups, in Telegram channels, on [YouTube](#) and in forums. That's why Matheny, who now lives in Eugene, Oregon, surrounded by forests and hiking trails, still talks about how Ong's Hat came to be and how it took on a life of its own. After all, it is still his creation - and therefore somehow his responsibility. This is sometimes frustrating and tiring. But: “If you’ve invested 30 years in an art project like this, you can’t just get rid of it,” he says.



[Matheny is therefore concerned about how the QAnon scene, for example, uses mechanics that are partly comparable and partly identical to Ong's Hat and other ARGs](#) to establish a radical and dangerous

movement. QAnon began with cryptic messages on the Internet that were fascinated by readers, interpreted, combined with other information and formed into a distorted apparent reality - a reality in which a supposed elite kidnaps poor children, drinks their blood and Donald Trump is the only one

▼ [Skip to main content](#) rulers in the shadows with brilliant moves.

QAnon took advantage of people's desire to solve puzzles and get to the bottom of a secret. "But it's not a fun game," Matheny says. "QAnon has a cult-like character." It's a game that will have winners - but in the end it won't be the players, but rather those who control the game. "Some are disenfranchised and sidelined," Matheny says. "Others are empowered by the game and use it to enrich themselves and gain advantages." At the height of QAnon, some journalists even saw the possibility that [QAnon - much like Ong's Hat - could have been an experiment or art project, that got out of control](#).

The future of Ong's Hat

Matheny has now regained at least some control of Ong's Hat. Also because Ong's Hat has been gaining awareness again in the last few years and is arousing interest among those who were not yet born when the project was conceived. Because today the guerrilla tactics and the transmedia structure of Ong's Hat are considered revolutionary and ahead of their time - far ahead, in fact. The series *Lost*, the video game *Halo 2*, the 13th season of *Doctor Who* were similarly promoted with interactive puzzle games. In addition, with [The Sun Vanished](#), [Ash Vlogs](#) and other projects around the major social media platforms, a real culture of small alternate reality games has developed, which often revolve around mystery and horror.

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And it was probably the success of the Netflix series *Stranger Things* that made Ong's Hat popular again. Because: Researchers who carry out bizarre experiments, combine esotericism and science and punch a hole in another world? The parallels cannot be overlooked. Just this year, BBC radio released the multi-part podcast [*The Incident at Ong's Hat*](#), which is based on the myth and loosely on the novella *Ong's Hat: The Beginning* by Joseph Matheny. A production that Matheny himself is not entirely satisfied with. The podcast is too “commercial” and not avant-garde enough. Nevertheless, he is pleased that Ong's Hat can reach more people in this way as clearly recognizable fiction.

Matheny still sees a great future for Ong's Hat. He hopes that the absurd story will come to the big screen. “People kept coming to me wanting to make it as a film,” he says. He always refused. But recently an author and film duo known in the indie horror genre approached him with a script for an Ong's Hat film, which surprised him. “It has integrity, it’s artistic, it’s progressive,” he enthuses. “Therefore I said: You have my blessing. Let’s do this

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together.” Pre-production is already underway and filming could start in the near future if financing is successful. He doesn't want to reveal anything more about it at the moment.

[Ong's Hat] has been growing and evolving with me for 30 years.

Joseph Matheny

As Matheny says, he himself is surprised at how much Ong's Hat still shapes his life and work today. How strongly it continues to invade his reality - even though he has also worked on numerous other projects over the years.

“[Ong's Hat] has been growing and evolving with me for 30 years,” he says. “Probably the best thing about this whole time is that I keep getting approached by young artists who tell me that I inspired them.” That’s all the work, the absurd feelings of loss of control and also “the crazy guys who “harassed me.” “Because then you get another call or email from a young person who says: You inspired me,” says Matheny. “And then I say to myself: Yes, I feel better now.”

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