

Assessment 2: Creative Portfolio

title 'Just Act Normal', Chapter One from *Angles of Time: an Orbular novel*

KWB118 Swords and Spaceships: Writing Genre

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tute Friday 11:00am–12:30pm

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words 2919 (chapter) 304 (synopsis)

Synopsis

Angles of Time: an Orbular novel

304 words

When @ngle, malcontent and drifter, escapes from a raided conference of dissidents in the city, she unplugs from the Fabric VR program to protect her anonymity, and goes bush. When she experiments with a program called Edge to hack out of the Fabric, she begins to notice unusual numerical patterns where she hadn't before. Afraid for her sanity, she seeks refuge with an enclave of 'literealists' who believe she is the manifestation of prophecy.

Naught, a disgruntled software engineer, has been exiled for research crimes and is now on the streets, his family left behind, with just a stash of cached data in his backpack. A shady character promises a return to his family if he steals and delivers a 'fragment' (a single instance of the Fabric program).

When @ngle and Naught meet, they begin to learn that their Fabric perceptions have been manipulated by hackers – they must escape the enclave and find a fabled community of dissidents to live away from online interference. Along the way, they learn some disturbing truths: reality is a projection of the mind; the truth might drive you mad; and madness is the only healthy way to respond to the truth.

According to much-debated mythology, humanity shunted itself into a parallel dimension by accident at the LHC in the early twenty-first century, and the only way to 'solve' such an interdimensional crisis was to 'treat' everyone with the

Fabric VR program, replete with installed historical memory of how the world has always been a simulation.

The community they were seeking to escape this state-sanctioned ideology is little more than a diaspora of angry factions engaged in a culture war, not the idyllic hippy commune they had imagined. So they must learn to live among what society offers, making meaning and finding purpose among the chaos of a dilapidated civilisation.

Chapter 1

Just Act Normal

Tues 29 Jan 3213

2915 words

Here on this mound of parched earth, where it is believed by some that ley lines intersect, @ngle reaches out to pat the cat walking out from behind a rock, meowing and glitching. Black with blue collar and yellow eyes, the cat represents to her, finally, a choice with repercussions more significant than whether soy-milk production will destroy orangutan habitat. So far from the so-called realities of city life that she may as well be nowhere, unplugged and possibly on the run, the blue-grey envelope of dusk is folding around her opportunity to hitch another ride from the distant highway. She'll have to spend the night in the bush. The cat dodges her pat, loops behind the rock, then emerges again, its tail flickering.

Rucksack at her feet, palms all sweaty, she's exhausted, knees trembling. Sure she's afraid, but she's imagined this for so long. *@ngle_of_time*, she thinks, *bushranger to the stars!* and laughs, a nervous guffaw. Now that it's happening she wonders whether someone wiser would regret such a longing. Being unplugged means at least two things: soon she will begin to see the world as it truly is after the Rent; and integrating this reality with the already dwindling orbmentations of the Fabric program might break her mind if she doesn't plug back in soon. The bridge below the mound is her only hope, assuming the co-ordinates she was given are correct. If she had stayed plugged in while escaping the imploded conference in Grafton, the

cookie monsters would have had the dream police on her arse before she even set out for the highway.

There's no real choice though, now that she's here. Either pursue what this cat promises, or continue suffering the crushing loneliness and nihilism of an orbmented life in the cities. When she considers the pathetic pointless vanity of it all, a vortex of suck opens inside her. A downward spiral that she feels in her bones, draining the well of her will to live.

And already there's a notification on her retina screen that she doesn't want to check. 'Hi Alert!' it says. For now, the Fabric plug symbol is greyed out, and also the location pin. The cat continues looping around the rock in perfectly replicated circles.

The Edgers had preached about this cat. 'Hermes,' they called it. Addressing him will plug you in to the Edge, apparently.

So she tries it. 'Here Hermes,' she says.

Hermes brushes her legs, then loops around the rock in the same manner as before, but on the next loop emerges with a toy hammer in its mouth. The adaptability of its patterns helps her understand that yes, it's a program, but real. As real as the Fabric orbmentations, and therefore equally comforting, though equally unreal.

After so many years of drifting in this direction, trusting Hermes feels like the only reasonable option. She looks around, like some other opportunity will present itself in this barren landscape.

Every time she moves, the onboard computer whirs in her head like a camera trying to engage an absent film. Being unplugged, the Fabric servers' pings would be bouncing off her, failing to find location and personality information. Soon the orbmentation will fade entirely, leaving behind only what remains of reality after the Rent, which is said to be a nightmare of all that was repressed into the collective shadow of humanity before the 'accident' at the Large Hadron Collider. Everything we feared lurks there, behind orbmented projections of all that we're taught to love in the Fabric. According to state-sanctioned history, people don't come back from there with their minds intact. The Edgers don't teach much about this – only coded dictums about how to cope with it: *Just act normal*, they say, because apparently Edgers are all high-school stoners.

Aligning with Edgers is not ideal, but she's tired of being a sMBhead, always lapping up state MBadata and feeding her own data back to the cookie factories. So she crouches next to the path of the cat, which now sits with the hammer in front of its paws. The landscape begins to fluxuate, and she wonders again whether she should have swallowed this stuff about *realising the cat*.

The teachings do mention this, with infamous ambiguity and funky spelling. *The cat will bring a kind of swimmingness – embrace the fluxuation.*

The dome of darkening sky, the long stretches of piebald fields, the fencelines of trees, and the dehydrated riverbed below the bridge – it all begins to feel painted on, like she could reach out and touch the daubs. She's taken progs that approximate this, but not today.

Another notification pings on her retina screen. The location pin starts to glow.

This is bad.

No one else has access to do that – not even her ICEs.

She hasn't been stealthy enough.

With her location pin externally enabled, cookie monsters everywhere will be slavering in their bedrooms, eating bowls of dicks while they fed her data through the Fabric servers to the dream police.

Picking up the hammer with jittery fingers, she stands to follow Hermes when he moves behind the rock again. Where there hadn't been before on this mound of parched earth, allegedly intersected by ley lines, she finds a cartoon-cardboard box.

She can hardly believe she's doing it, but remembers the teachings: *Trust the imagination*, say the Edgers, *and then you will see*. She learned about this at the conference, before it was imploded by the dream police. She was dubious then, and she's dubious now, but it's either this or a trip to the psych ward in the back of a paddy wagon. The landscape continues to swim in her peripheral vision as she studies the box. It feels just like cardboard and still warm from the late sun. The smell of heated plastic from the packing tape. The conference and the dream police begin to feel like a distant, unreliable memory. Music starts playing in the background like a soundtrack of homecoming – some kind of orchestral post-rock.

She checks to see if the plug symbol has been over-ridden and *Whoa, there it is!*

She's heard of this too, but never quite believed it.

In the top-right corner of her retina screen, the greyed-out plug denoting an unplugged Fabric connection has been replaced with a glowing-blue resistance fist clutching the plug. *Programs are real, yes?* go the teachings. *Fist the plug!*

So, this is the Edge.

It's no different from any other program she's run in the Fabric, and she's vaguely resentful about using a program to escape a program, but as the Edgers say, *Better the devil you don't know*. So she opens the box to find a radioactive isotope inside, next to a glass beaker marked, ostentatiously: poison, with a cartoon skull-and-cross bones drawn in chalk pen.

She lowers herself on wobbly knees to the box, where a sucking sound begins to pull at her chest. The swimmingness intensifies. The crown of her head is tingling, and she understands that to smash the beaker is to accept the requests that are pinging her onboard from the Edge. A fierce homeward yearning displaces all fear and scepticism – belonging beckons, euphoric in all its overwhelming unfamiliarity. A programmed emotion or not, the feeling is more compelling than any of @SirGetaFix's progs she ever took. Her heart has become a river pouring itself home to the ocean.

Most would doubt and run, because the freedom promised by Edger tutorials about hacking out of the Fabric is more daunting than she had anticipated. And here the teachings end. No Edger has dared to break the code that says *Don't preach the hammer*, and @ngle has never sought the walkthrough. Every wannabe Edger knows that the two outcomes of walkthroughs are expulsion from a crashed

program if you're lucky, or the myriad versions of madness that might result from causing a glitch at such a volatile place in the vast and incomprehensible program that constitutes the Fabric universe. The Edge is not called the Edge because it's some country cottage with apple pie wafting out the dormer window. It's a quagmire of confusion where it is believed that reality and virtual reality collide, and therefore infamous for leaving the unprepared irreparably catatonic.

But if she doesn't smash the beaker, then what? Wait for the dream police to drag her away? Go back to the city and resume the slow process of dying alone and unfulfilled? So she reaches down to Hermes, who allows her to pat him now, then smashes the beaker. The sucking sound engulfs her into the ultimate stoner's idea of a wormhole – flashing psychedelic colours and the sucking sound all the while, now grossly reminiscent of sausage meat being ground through a decades-old sound card.

The cardboard box becomes a wooden chest with Fisty Plug painted on. 'Snowball IX' flashes in an ID bubble above Hermes' head. The fields around her melt into a dystopian landscape overlaid with a bald African American man wearing reflector shades on his nose. Beneath his red armchair, green text appears: 'Welcome to the Dessert of the Reel ;)'. He falls through the floor and the face of a haggard old crone appears, so close that her image remains etched on @ngle's retinas when the visualisations fade away again to darkness. Even the retina screen is gone, with all its symbols, and @ngle reflects that even in dreams she has never been without it. The numbers 3:58 flash once before the sausage-grinding sound intensifies and she is spat out next to the same rock she had been crouching at the whole time.

Maybe she broke it.

A splattering sound completes the exodus, and it's all over very quickly.

She stands and feels giddy with wonder, mostly from the pace of the transgression, but also from the profound ridiculousness of the whole wormhole animation. But the river is now flowing with pearlescent water that surely could never be programmed, not even by Lanier himself. Rich and clear, frothing and turbulent in its passage among moss-covered boulders and pockets of small rock pools, the river has replaced the stagnant brown slop she saw trickling through the fields only moments ago. And on the far bank a shack with smoke wafting out of the chimney, like a set piece from some period drama.

Evidently Edgewhere now, she hadn't expected the jump to be such a lark, such a lame attempt at stoner-conspiracy comedy. The swimmingness is resolving again into an approximation of the reality she had always known, and the world before the wormhole feels like nothing but an illusion painted on the black canvas of nothingness.

So the teachings go.

This is definitely the Edge now, where preRent reality reaches from behind orbmented projections, and shadows come alive on the canvas of the collective unconscious.

Not a place to stand around pontificating for too long. But she's not ready to move yet. *There's no place like home* has wormed its way into her head, and is bouncing around in there. The post-rock fades and the onboard continues to click and clack,

trying and failing to ping the Fabric servers. Her absence will be noted soon, if it hasn't been already. She still can't bring herself to check the notifications.

No progs have come close to approximating how unreliable her whole life of earlier perception feels now. This shit is *real*, because the revolution will not be fabricated. She feels at home for once, realisation reverberating through her memory and altering everything she had ever thought about home.

She wants to just sit and watch the night bring more such mysteries, but getting to the bridge is the only part of her half-baked plan that still feels plausible.

She slings her rucksack on to her back and steps down the slope, her feet sliding through gravel and sand and clumps of grass until she emerges at the riverbank. The dwindling sun bounces off the water in shards. She stops to get a better look at the shack, the smoke now tingling her nostrils. Some enclave infrastructure, perhaps, though she doubted the existence of the so-called literealists. She tries to allow her acceptance to deepen, but she's on the edge of panic now.

'This can't be real,' she says, which is immediately answered by a gust of wind from the fields beyond the shack, carrying a voice that laughs and vibrates her eardrums when it says, *What would you know?*

She understands it's the crone from the wormhole, and her voice is not taunting, but amused and benevolent. It raises goosebumps and compels her onward, afraid that she had been brash to cross that fence into these fields, an invader of thresholds, to step so far away from the semblance of reality she had been so certain of for most of her life. The sudden fear of psychosis engulfs her as

she runs toward the bridge and away from the mound of ley lines, her pulse escalating, motivated only by what feels now like the instinct to find shelter at the bridge.

Running alongside the dubious water, frowning and breathing hard through a confused smile until she emerges under the bridge, she drops her rucksack and lets out that nervous guffaw when she sees that her camp for the night is an Edger haunt. Although, surprise surprise, from the looks of the pinups everywhere, most of those Edgers had been dudes. She won't have to do much work to set up her anonymising infrastructure. But she'll be sleeping with kaiju tits above her head. If she sleeps.

Slumping onto the ground against her rucksack, her knees allow themselves to shake again.

Tucked under the ceiling and in between the pillars of the bridge, carved out by hands and found implements and probably animals, there is a nook with crusty blankets and pillows. There is a place where the dirt has been levelled out and hardened by generations of impromptu laptop desks. Some bravo, possibly high at the time, has dared to stencil Fisty Plug on one of the pillars.

Fisty Plug.

She has entrusted her sanity to adolescent stoners who have named their resistance logo Fisty Plug.

Still, she's comforted by their hideout. Her heart begins to cool off and slow, and she directs her attention at her retina screen, where Fisty Plug is now greyed out.

Not good.

Confusing.

She grabs a water bottle from the side pocket of her rucksack and takes a slug, the water sluicing passed her heart, cooling it further. She takes a few slow breaths.

If she's no longer plugged in to the Edger program that had run the wormhole, and still not plugged in to the Fabric, then where is the river coming from? If she's not plugged in anywhere, then shouldn't she be catatonic right now? Maybe the wormhole was just a portal program. Then where has it sent her, if not Edgeward?

She jumps up and strides down to the river, dredging up all her defiance to ward off fear as she thrusts a hand under the surface. The water is wet, and she doesn't feel stupid for being surprised by that. She jogs out from under the bridge to squint at the shack, then back under the bridge, her eyes bulging to the point where she can almost feel her pupils dilating.

Her retina screen glitches.

Seriously, not good.

Spending the night in the bush, entirely unplugged, is about as safe as vaping three phials of @SirGetaFix's most outlandish algorithym progs. If nightmares are a sleeping peek into the fears of our own unconscious, spending the night out here unplugged is going to be a waking vision of all the religions' versions of hell.

It is no longer a consolation that she could disguise her location. If the blue-glowing location pin leads the dream police to a tired old bridge over a muddy

trickle, and she's wherever she is, then who will get her to the psych ward if she does need it? Still, better the devil you don't know, right? Fear of the unknown is fear of change, and fear of change is stupid. So she pulls the location scrambler from the rucksack and turns it on, undecided whether she'll activate its function. While the hardware boots, she directs her attention to the notification bell. She doesn't really want to. But knowledge is power, right?

The notifications inform her that she has been debited 5000 fabs for unauthorised activity in Grafton, her Fabric account has been suspended, and a search party deployed for her 'rescue', 358 kilometres from the site of the known infraction.

Great. *Someone* thinks they know where she is. And that number again. With her account suspended there is no way to hack back into the Fabric. But she is also not Edgeward. As far as she knows, it is unprecedented for someone to be stuck between the Fabric and the Edge. She must have broken something.

She takes another slug of water.

The location scrambler bings and its back-lighted interface glows. In the top-right corner it says 5:38PM 23 Jan 2023.

'Okay, what the actual fuck,' she says.

Just act normal, says the voice of the crone.

Fireworks of tingles go off in her crown, all down her body and into her feet.

Clutching her water bottle, lost and alone in the nether realms of the Fabric,
her heart closes over a river of tears threatening to subsume her as she watches the
darkening sky turn purple, orange, green.

exegetical notes

I have used some creative spellings that some readers have thought were typos, but which are intentiona!:))

- fluxuations (instead of fluctuations)
- literealists (instead of literalists)
- algorhythm (instead of algorithm)
- gourdamn (instead of goddamn)
 - in the post-truth age of this secondary world, the dominant religion has become gourd worship ... all praise the gourd!