

■ ■ Off Center

UNREAL ADVENTURES

EXPERIENCE THAT 'MAGIC MOMENT' IN
AN ALTERED REALITY

By Dave McCormack



Last winter, Josh Czarda did something ill advised for any upwardly mobile lawyer: He left his job at UNOS to spend time playing games.

Czarda, however, wasn't without a plan. He plunged full time into running Ravenchase Adventures, the company he founded two years earlier that hosts adventure races in cities all over the East Coast.

Joining one of Czarda's events is a bit like helping Tom Hanks try to escape from the Louvre in *The Da Vinci Code*. Czarda's latest conceit is a variation on that theme — a game called "The Heist" that's meant to simulate a bank robbery. "This is the next step in gaming," Czarda told me, of sticking players directly into the fray. "I want this to be like watching a movie, but you're in it."

Pushing for maximum suspension of disbelief, Czarda enhances the experience by incorporating an actual, albeit abandoned, downtown bank, which he rents for the afternoon, and hiring paintball-gun-toting actors to stand in as guards. The idea is simple: After several hours solving clues, players discover the location of the bank, stage a break-in, then make off with a fortune or die trying.

Yep, I was game. There was, however, one catch. Czarda expects a certain puzzle-solving ability from his players. After I phoned him asking where to show up, he e-mailed the answer embedded in a mysterious string of numbers, called a Fibonacci sequence. It was up to me to figure it out.

"89 377 377 55 1 3 13 21 233 2 4181 13 3," read the message, which also included a rhyme: "The First Fibonacci Society holds a secret safe/Deep within its darkness within a hidden place./To crack the code and yield the prize/Five tasks you must complete ..."

Shoot me: I had not the slightest friggin' clue.

I waited a full day to e-mail Czarda back, finally admitting I was just a sad bonehead after all. He kindly e-shot back the address, and that evening I found the group — three teams in total — waiting at the Farmers' Market, under the giant bell. Everyone else, evidently, including a gaggle of teenagers, had solved the riddle effortlessly.

Czarda was already passing out more clues on brittle paper and, curiously, a fanny pack full of tools: a magnifying glass, a flashlight, a codex wheel and mirror among them, the implements that would see us through the day. In his oversized cargo shorts and flashing a crooked, knowing grin, he looks like an aging skate rat, just groomed enough to be taken for the nerdy brainiac he is.

"When you get to the bank," he instructed, "use your imagination. Unless you really know what you're doing, don't try to cut the electricity."

Still pondering this weird option, I was introduced to Mike Emmons and Mary Duty, a very absorbed and imaginative couple who agreed to second as my guides for the afternoon. Emmons, heavily tattooed and tugging at his bushy handlebar moustache, handed me a pair of fake glasses, the kind with big eyebrows and a rubber nose. "You might need these," he said, and

Elaborate scenarios like this have led Mike Emmons and Mary Duty to refer to Ravenchase Adventures' reality games as "Ravenscrack."





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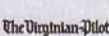
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with that, they took off speedwalking.

Emmons and Duty have become regulars on Czarda's jaunts. "We call this Ravenscrack," said Duty, as I hustled to keep up. She was referring to their mutual addiction to Czarda's plotlines. "Josh is really good at writing these things." For their fix, they pay between \$50 and \$80 each, depending on the complexity of the game and the role they take.

Guided by the loopy calligraphy of Czarda's first clue ("Up the water's gentle path/Beneath the building's hold/A clue awaits within the ground/just like buried gold..."), Emmons led us south, under the train tracks and to the Turning Basin. He was focused, intuitive, and minutes later we raced across the canal and beneath a stone arch where Emmons pounded his fist into the sand.

Sweating, he came up with a small scroll and yanked it open. It was a blank piece of paper. "It's a water clue!" he said, and we were off and speedwalking again.

In all of his adventures, Czarda incorporates each city's most overlooked details — Richmond's Christopher Newport Cross on Canal Street, for instance, or the triple-train crossing in Shockoe Bottom (unique in the United States) — working them in for surprise and complication.

"If you lived in Richmond your whole life," Emmons said of Czarda's varied plot twists, "you'll see things you never knew were here."

A few blocks later, at the fountain fronting the Martin Agency, Emmons dunked the paper, then pushed it overhead. Words emerged on the page. Our contact, it said, was at Penny Lane Pub.

We still had other clues to solve, and we raced off to James River Plaza, then the Executive Mansion, scouring historical markers and stone walls for more clues — pieces to the larger puzzle. At one point, Duty dug the codex wheel from her fanny pack and quickly decoded a lump of letters that read: ILFMDYDURXIR. "Look in the USA," she said pensively, and then it hit her: We ran to the corner and bought a newspaper — a USA Today — and found the next clue in the box.

An hour later, we burst into the beer-scented darkness of Penny Lane Pub. "Have a seat guys," said a voice, mysteriously, as we cruised past a man sitting alone at a tall table.

It was one of Czarda's actors, who offered us cigarettes, then opened a menu to reveal a secret map of the bank.

Noted on it were various details of the basement, which he claimed was wired with noise and motion-detection equipment. In its depths was a safe with a golden bust. It was up to us to formulate plan to swipe it.

We ordered a Guinness — beer drinking, somehow, is also integral to this nutty sport — and Emmons, who is a corrections officer in Chesterfield County, dreamed up our a plan of attack.

The bank was a seedy, age-worn shell of a building, with blacked-out glass doors and vacant flagpoles. Nevertheless, Emmons took my wrists behind my back. "Bounty hunters!" he announced, while Duty, tight on our heels, barged in and asked to use the phone.

The guard played along while Emmons surprised and overtook him, tossing me his loaded paintball gun. From a glass case against the wall, he fished a key using a magnet on the end of a string; this unlocked the door to the basement. We crouched and hustled silently downstairs into the darkness.

The mole, it turned out, wasn't kidding about security. Czarda had the place rigged with a gnarly web of laser motion sensors that required ninja-like skills to negotiate. As we crept through the darkness, the alarm suddenly shrieked to life, and we ran for it.

Guided by his flashlight, Emmons bum-rushed the safe; we heard the shout of guards in a nearby room. While he fumbled with the combination — embedded in yet another of Czarda's earlier clues — I stood there like a loon waiting to be hosed down with multi-colored machine gun fire.

Though I was too swept up in the commotion at the time, it occurred to me later that this was the magic moment Czarda had worked so hard to create. Three hours spent moving deeper and deeper through this labyrinth of twisted clues, and here we were, up on the balls of our feet, our hearts pounding in the dark.

Emmons, for his part, finally cracked the safe. While I watched his back, he palmed the gold bust, tucked it under his arm like a football and we hoofed it, bursting up a flight of stairs and out the back door, unscathed, breathing heavy and laughing, all the way into daylight, and back to reality. ■

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