

What really happened in Skinner



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What *really* happened in Skinner

How far would you go to find out the truth? That’s what amateur investigative journalist and UO alum Marlowe Verne must discover for herself when she puts together a string of clues surrounding mysterious disappearances all linked to Skinner Island. Along with a ragtag group of friends—old and new—Verne attempts to decode the island’s strange history and how an occult group called Auremana (pronounced ORR-uh-mana) is woven into it.

Except, Skinner Island, anchored right off the coast of Florence, Oregon, doesn’t actually exist. It’s the setting of the Ambie award-nominated podcast [What Happened in Skinner](#) dreamed up in part by real-life UO alum, Eugene native, and cofounder of the University Film Organization, Aaron Blanton, BA ’13 (cinema). Beginning as a short film called *Skinner 1929*, it won the director’s prize at FilmQuest in November 2021, and was filmed in part at the Shelton McMurphey Johnson house in Eugene. Originally intended as the sole installment of the franchise, Blanton and co-showrunner Katrina Braun instead decided to expand the story into an alternate reality game (ARG) which aligned with the podcast. That way, listeners could try to solve the mystery of Auremana for themselves as new episodes were released.

“We liked the lore that we built and the characters so much so that we didn’t just want to stop it there,” says Blanton. “We had more of this story that we wanted to tell with no money to tell it so the question became ‘How do we take this very big concept and make it without having to wait 10 years for someone to fund it?’ And a podcast was the perfect way to do that.”

Eventually, Blanton and Braun built their own ragtag team to take on the challenge of creating *Skinner*. Produced without investors, in living rooms via Zoom and across time zones, the show wouldn’t be the same without the writing talents of Oregon natives Kaitlyn Gaskill, Sam Morrison, and Annika Bennett—all of whom Blanton met during his time in Eugene.



Photo courtesy of Aaron Blanton

“It definitely got intense. Our show was longer than the extended *Lord of the Rings* and we produced the whole thing in three months—all while running the ARG, dropping physical clues around the world, etc. It was exhilarating and terrifying all at the same time. There were many, *many* all nighters pulled,” Blanton says about production.

All that effort paid off, however, as the show was an almost overnight success, with coverage in *The Hollywood Reporter* and more than 700 people signing up to join the Discord community dedicated to solving the clues dropped by the ARG.

“All of a sudden, we had this very tight-knit cult following where people started becoming friends and an honest-to-god community sprang up. They’ve been incredibly supportive,” Blanton says about the fans of the show.

But that success came with its own challenges; none of Blanton’s team members are coders or game designers, yet somehow, they had to keep up with a voracious and intimately involved audience on a time-crunch.

“One of our pivotal websites was a countdown clock. So, we *had* to get the episodes done on time because the ARG demanded it. And we couldn’t sneakily change that, because the community was so sharp that they caught every little thing we did. There were a couple of times where they outsmarted us,” he says.

At other times, the community became frustrated with the character choices in the podcast, but Blanton says that those choices were intentional. Each of the characters comes to Skinner with their own backgrounds and philosophies, and then Skinner challenges those ideals. Blanton and Braun hope that listeners use the podcast to reflect on those themes.

“Ultimately, it’s a story about religion, and the contrasting ways people interact with it. And a lot of other sticking points come up around legacy, privilege, a whole lot of things. We lure you in with the spooky mystery, and then sneak in a lot of deeper questions beneath the excitement,” he says.

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The podcast ended in January of 2022, in alignment with the mysterious countdown clock featured as part of the ARG. But since then, it’s been nominated for the Ambie Award for Best Indie Podcast—something Blanton calls an “honor” but which came as no surprise to his former instructor and the current Associate Dean for Undergraduate Affairs at the UO School of Journalism and Communication, Deb Morrison.

“Aaron proved to everyone early on that he would make his way creating wonderful, thoughtful work for audiences. *What Happened in Skinner* is more proof of that. It’s an engaging story with Oregon as the star,” she says.

Fans of podcasts like *Limetown*, *The Old Gods of Appalachia*, and *The Magnus Archives*, as well as those who enjoy high fantasy, true crime, and thrillers with a touch of northwest Gothicism are the ones who should keep their eyes on *Skinner* and all of Blanton’s future endeavors. He predicts that Hollywood-backed fictional podcasts are about to explode in popularity and says that when they do, he wants to be at the forefront of that movement.

“We designed a vast world for this, and *What Happened in Skinner* is just the beginning. While the podcast is focused on Skinner Island, there are other events happening nationwide. The ARG hinted at that, but we have 200 years of backstory that we haven’t even touched on yet. There’s a lot more Auremana yet to come,” he says.

So next time instead of wondering "What happened in *Skinner?*", you might be asking, "Where is the next *Skinner?*"

- By Sage Kiernan-Sherrow, MA '21 (*journalism*)



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