

The Game
By Chris Nagele

There are many things worth knowing about Gods; they are nearly omniscient, sometimes omnipotent, and somewhat omnibenevolent. Yet despite possessing all these fine characteristics, they struggle to agree on the rules of the Game.

The year is 1999, and the Game is coming to a head for the first time in several decades. For those readers who don't know, the Game was invented many millennia ago when the Gods realized that human society would never progress past the farming village stage if all of the houses kept exploding courtesy of well placed lightning bolts.

You see, at that time, the sole past time of the Gods was destroying the civilizations coaxed into being by other Gods whenever those civilizations reached a modest level, and after the 356th destruction of the quaint little hamlet Pok, the eponymous God railed into the abyss.

'My sisters, my brothers! Look at what we have become! We think nothing of the abject squalor and misery which our childish conflicts inflict upon the poor humans. I ask you, how have such splendid beings such as ourselves sunk to this level of depravity?'

The abyss answered back in the voice of Pok's half cousin Zok, 'It's your own fault for naming the village after yourself Pok. How could any of us resist such an obvious target, especially with your impeccably organized rows? Cousin Yok's huts are much more challenging to hit.'

Pok seethed. Although he had destroyed his fair share of villages the world over, he did not live for the destruction; no, he knew that it was his purpose to create, to foster the civilization of the otherwise dim witted humans. After all, he was omnibenevolent, or so he had heard.

'Brethren, we cannot ever continue this ceaseless struggle, lest we destroy the humans entirely and then how could we demonstrate our merit?'

Xor, king of the Gods had been dozing off, as he did most of the time when he was not smiting the villages of his wife, Nor, but something in the breath of the universe brushed against him at that very moment and he heard the truth within Pok's plea.

So it was that Xor and Nor and Pok and Zok, and the whole pantheon of Gods had agreed to the Game. The rules were simple. Everything would proceed as it had before, but the winner would be determined not only by whose people flourished, but also by how little a God *appeared* to help their people. Thus the days of lightning storms and fire tornadoes were replaced by centuries of slowly increasing technology as well as obvious efforts to appear to be doing very little at all.

Pok had taken to reading--- though he already knew everything, there was a certain satisfaction in the turning of pages--- while lounging in the most crowded gardens of the cloud palaces, while Xor had moved his naps to a more public balcony, where his impressive repose was on full display.

The Game had worked incredibly well up until this very moment, with only minor bouts of all out destruction ornamenting the pages of human history. But now, the Game faced a test it had never before weathered--- what were the rules? You see, up until this moment, the winner of the Game had always been obvious. For a while, Pok's Greeks were triumphant before being

usurped by Zok's Han, who were in turn outclassed by Nor's Romans and so on throughout history.

But as civilization progressed, so did the skill of the lazing Gods. Eventually, Xor figured out that instead of representing England with her physicist Isaac Newton, he could instead represent physicists the world over. This discovery was followed by a rush of Gods to academic persuasions, which naturally caused an explosion of the world's literature and technology.

Eventually, the Gods had gotten so good that none of them could tell who the winner was anymore, a situation which led to ever more audacious moves in the Game, until finally the question of legality had emerged.

Xor shook his head wearily; he hadn't had a nap in more than twenty minutes, and it was showing. 'I'm sorry Pok, but even if I agreed with you that the move was illegal, I would be accused of being impartial because of the overlap between physics and mathematics.'

Pok, the current God of mathematicians threw up his hands in exasperation, 'But it can't be legal, she wants to alter every computer in the world!'

Zok, the [newly minted] Goddess of computer scientists hadn't lost her composure and was reclining on a divan, one hand not quite busy with a game of extra slow tetris on her silver laptop. 'Dearest cousin, are you suggesting that tweaking a few circuits would be a strenuous activity for me?'

Pok visibly brought his anger under control before responding, 'It may only require moving electrons around, but the result would change the course of history, and I might add, save your industry.' (Pok did not yet consider computer science to be a science).

Nor, who had been doing yoga for 16 weeks straight interjected, 'Zok dearest, your cousin has a point. Despite not requiring any great amount of effort, what you intend would influence the future to such a degree that none could claim you had not tried to do so.' The other three looked at Nor in surprise. Usually her yoga sessions stretched for at least a year; to stop one abruptly required something special. 'However, it may in a certain sense still fall within the rules of the Game. In order to find out, we have to find a Judge.'

A shocked silence filled the room, 'What is a Judge?' Pok asked. Of course he knew the answer, but in these situations *someone* has to ask.

Nor yawned, her husband's impatience must have been getting to her, 'A Judge is someone who can tell us whether or not Zok can fix the Y2K problem without violating the rules of the game.'

Now reader I am sure you have heard of the Y2K paranoia and dismissed it as nonsense the moment it left your crazy Uncle's mouth, however, please direct your certainty elsewhere. Y2K was real, and it was much worse than anyone at the time feared. Indeed, had not Zok intervened, every computer on earth would have exploded at the fell stroke of midnight on January 1st, 2000 (timezone specific of course).

This story, reader, is the recount of the trip of four Gods to the city of Washington to find a Judge to save the world.

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'I don't understand why we can't get a God to be the Judge! What about wassername?' grumbled Zok.

Pok responded, 'Which wassername? There's a whole Pantheon of wassernames.'

Xor chose this moment to open one sleep tinted eye, 'It doesn't matter who you can dig up Zok, they all have some stake in the Game. The whole point is that everyone participates so we don't have one of your 3rd cousins unleashing more tidal waves in the desert.' Xor sighed. He was getting the feeling that his next nap might be some way off. 'No, the only way to adjudicate this is to find a suitable human Judge.'

The four Gods were silent at this. Although they took great joy in their subtle manipulations of human society, they did not have much respect for the ground dwellers, and the thought of being judged by them led to some trepidation.

Nor considered her husband shrewdly, 'So who will this human judge be?'

Zok perked up at this, 'Surely it should be a random human. I can write a quick program using a random number generator...'

Her fingers had no sooner flown to the keys then Nor cut in, 'That may not be the best idea. The humans have a fairy tale with just this premise, and it ends with everyone dying. Besides, since when have you needed a computer to do something like choose a human randomly?'

'Computers are actually quite fun if you would give them a try Aunt Nor. Just because they can't do anything useful doesn't mean they have no value.'

The other three turned as one to stare at Zok.

'Sure.'

'If you say so.'

'I'll try one tomorrow.'

Xor felt that the conversation was drifting even more than his eyelids, 'How about the Supreme Court of the United States? Many of the mortals seem to think that is the best court.'

Pok shook his head, 'The thing with that one is there are seven justices and only four of us.'

The others nodded as if this was sound logic--- which it may well have been to the deified mind.

'Well what's the second best court?'

Zok made a show of consulting her laptop, 'Looks like the most powerful court with three judges is a district court in Washington DC.' She looked up, beaming.

Nor stood, 'Well, there's no time like the present.' She gave a sly wave and there was a zap--- not the sound of a zap, more the idea of a zap--- and then the room was empty.

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The honorable Ellen Smith, Seth Markand, and Jay Ramirez were the sort of humans who had succeeded in life. They had gone to the best schools, made the best friends, and gotten the best jobs. But this case would never be described as the best of anything. Forty two different companies were suing the District of Columbia because Congress, in all its wisdom,

was awful at running a city. For the past month, the three judges had done their best to sift through a noble but idiotic piece of legislation and considered questions such as 'how many employees must be present at a Maryland office to allow an associated DC office to list birthday cake as a tax deduction?'

It was then with some surprise that when Judge Smith asked, 'What's next on today's docket?', the response was definitely not, 'DC sanitation workers union statements regarding season tickets to the Nationals,' and much more along the lines of 'Pok vs Zok.'

At this surprising pronouncement, Judge Smith looked up, as did everyone else in the courtroom (as a rule, people in courtrooms look down), and saw, standing in the middle of Washington DC circuit courtroom #3, four outlandishly dressed beings. At this moment, reader, I feel it necessary to describe the appearance of our four Gods, in order to fully impart the shock quickly filling the room of otherwise somber professionals.

On the left facing the judges stood Xor. He was tall, but not towering, though like a certain tower he did appear to be leaning dangerously to one side. Xor was dressed in a grey bathrobe with pink polka dot pjs underneath. Most Gods change their appearance with regularity, but for the past century, the only change in Xor's wardrobe had been the color of the polka dots--- one of the benefits of being king he told himself.

Next to Xor stood his slightly shorter, but significantly more stable wife Nor. She was still wearing her black, skin tight yoga outfit, but had donned a svelte grey blazer over it. She usually wore her auburn hair down to her neck, but during the teleportation to earth she had arranged it in a beautiful interlocking rendition of something--- many of the humans would spend most of the trial frantically trying to figure out which famous painting was hidden in her locks.

Continuing down the line, a hint of normality was restored with Zok. As with many Gods who take on a new role in the Pantheon, the Goddess of computer scientists was currently imitating her devotees. Large wire rim glasses matched her brown tweed suit and slim grey tie. There stood a portrait of academia, ready to wield chalk or keystroke at a moment's notice.

Finally we come to Pok who, like many mathematicians, ignored the dress code completely. He wore an oversized white tank top with the words, 'save the kitkats' emblazoned on both front and back. The shirt was accompanied by baggy green athletic shorts and an LA Lakers hat aligned with the brim pointing along the angle $e / (2 \pi)$.

None of the four were wearing shoes.

Judge Smith was a daughter of procedure, but even she struggled with her next sentence, 'I take it one of you is Pok?'

Pok raised his hand dutifully.

'And Zok?'

Zok smiled and gave a head tilt.

'And do you two-' she looked around the courtroom desperately searching for the right word, but ultimately ended up skipping it, '-have representation?'

Xor and Nor exchanged a bemused glance. Nor spoke first, 'I am Nor, for the plaintiff.'

Judge Smith also struggled with that one, but decided not to make an issue of it, 'And you sir?' she said nodding to Xor.

'I will represent the defense in this matter,' he responded.

Smith continued hesitantly, glancing once at Ramirez, 'And what matter, exactly will we be hearing about today?'

As if this was some prearranged signal, the Gods meandered into motion. Xor and Zok went to the defense table and sat in the wooden chairs behind it. Pok did likewise with the plaintiff's table while Nor began pacing in front of the three judges.

'Your honors, I bring before you today charges of great import; the defendant, Zok Goddess of Computer Scientists, seeks to avert the Y2K disaster with a sweeping software update which will irrevocably change the course of human history by preventing the explosion of all computers. Although the defendant's plan would greatly improve society in the near future, it would also violate the rules of the Game.'

Judge Markand spluttered, 'Y2K, Computer Scientists, the Game? What is this crap?' But suddenly he knew exactly what it was. 'Umm, sorry I must have only skimmed this morning's briefing, please continue, umm- er-, councilor.'

Nor resumed her pacing. 'Thank you your honor. Our argument is simple. Although Zok's action may well be viewed as altruistic, it opens up a dangerous precedent for the future of the Game. If making imperceptible changes on a worldwide scale is itself imperceptible, many Gods may be tempted into constantly nudging the very fabric of global society, a fabric which is unfortunately prone to tear.'

Nor bowed, causing Judge Ramirez to choke on his coffee, before returning to the bench and adding a 'may it please the court' over her shoulder.

Xor ambled out into the space voided by his wife.

'Your honors, my-' he gestured at Nor searching for the right word, 'counterpart is correct in almost everything she said. My client's software update would open up a dangerous precedent when it comes to the meddling of my kin in human affairs. However, what she has failed to fully explain is the cost of ignoring this opportunity to avert great damage to your society. I ask, what good are laws if there is no one left to follow them?'

As he spun to walk back the other way, he swayed dangerously, eliciting a gasp from the gallery. 'The point which we cannot look past is that unless you allow my client to avert this disaster, the global society which we have labored for centuries to create will evaporate in a puff of silicon debris.'

Nor stood at this, 'Objection your honor, my husband is exaggerating and speculating.'

Smith sighed, 'Your *husband*? I don't really know how to respond to any of that, so let's just continue.'

Nor sat back down, 'Did I do it right?' she murmured to Pok.

'Perfection,' he murmured back.

Xor stopped his pacing and faced the judges, 'Your honors, the choice is simple. There is an extraordinary situation at hand. You can either maintain the law and let the situation ruin society or change the law and accept that in the future, society may be ruined. I know which one I would pick.'

Nor stood again, 'And which is that husband?'

Xor looked momentarily panic stricken before mumbling, 'The second I think,' and returning to his seat.

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A short while later, in the judges' chamber Smith pounded her fist into her hand in frustration, 'Does anyone know what's going on?'

Markand shook his head, 'No.'

Ramirez nodded, 'But yes also.'

Markand nodded as well, 'It's an intensely uncomfortable feeling to have knowledge shoved into your brain, so I suggest we get this over with and hope we forget about it afterwards?'

Smith rubbed her temples, 'Seems reasonable, but what will we decide about the uh-case?'

After a moment of silence, Ramirez shrugged, 'If it's true about Y2K, do we have any choice?'

'Even if we are- and I can't believe I'm saying this- opening ourselves up to future divine interventions?'

Markand cut in, 'I agree with Jay, we can't in good conscience decide any other way.'

Smith nodded slowly, 'Well at least it'll be over soon.'

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And so, reader, the stage is set. As a new millennium greets the dawn, the practiced Gods feign nonchalance.

How should we measure their restraint?