

It Was Just a Game
by
Robert Rietschel, July 1, 2023

Their day job was to develop virtual reality software for the Oculus system that Meta had rolled out. But it was Friday and work was over and our two programmers were at Applebee's in Redwood City just up the road from Menlo Park and Meta headquarters. All week they schemed and dreamed. It was in their job descriptions. They tried to get inside the heads of gamers and mess with their minds in creative ways that not just amuse but draw the player into an alternative reality. Each Friday they sat at the bar at Applebee's and rehashed the work they had done or failed to do. Roy and Sam were more productive than most of the team and you'd think they had little to complain about. Roy was telling Sam how much they could learn from Q. That anonymous Q that animated ordinary citizens to act on wild conspiracy theories. That was the gold standard. Sam agreed. It may have something to do with the three Coronas that each had downed, or maybe it was jealousy, but Roy told Sam that they needed to try to put some Q into their programming. Sam ordered round four and some nachos. Then Sam told Roy that he had an idea. They should do a little experimenting with Q-like tactics and see what things work and what things flop. The tactics that work get incorporated into a video game for work.

The plan started to come together when they got to round six and finished the nachos. Roy would try to form flash mobs of dumb jocks and see if he could manipulate those into jackass-type behavior. Sam would try to get a group of nerds to form a flash mob and do things that nerds usually don't do, namely behave like dumb jocks. It was agreed that Roy had the easier task, but the idea was to see what sort of things could prompt couch potatoes into motion. They would use the algorithms that Meta was famous for to find folks with common interests who fit their general types, jocks and nerds, and then motivate them to behave as Roy and Sam wished. If something worked, it would go into their video game. As people who have had six beers often remark when asked what were you thinking, Roy and Sam would tell you that it seemed like a good idea at the time.

Roy and Sam knew how to code what they wanted in order to assemble groups with shared interests. Roy wanted physically fit men who considered themselves alpha males and who had an interest in hunting, outdoor activities, and who considered themselves patriots. Sam wanted cerebral types, people who considered themselves intellectually superior, and activists. The idea was to form these groups in the Bay Area and try to prompt them into action with ideas provided by a cult-like mystery leader in the fashion of Q. If a ploy worked, it would be something to work into their video game. The coding was done on the back of a napkin at Applebee's. It was a dry napkin that they obtained from the bartender as their six coronas had soaked the ones they had been using. On Monday, they would enter the code and start forming their flash mobs.

Monday came and those napkins were used to set things in motion. But you just know that code written under the influence of nachos can't be all that good. Oh, you think the Coronas had something to do with it? Maybe. The flaw in the napkin code was that these groups were to be formed in all metro areas the size of the Bay Area rather than just the Bay Area. Over the course of the next two months, groups did form. Roy decided he would call himself Alpha Dog or just AD. Sam would call himself the Professor or just Dr.P. In order for AD and Dr.P. to have street cred, a little manipulation was needed. Dr. P. told his nerds that they needed to show the world that a new force for good was in town. This would be done by blockading the Bay Bridge in both directions at 1 pm on Saturday for 15 minutes. The nerds in Oakland would stop just short of the tunnel on Treasure Island near the mid-point of the bridge. Their cars would block all five lanes for 15 minutes. The nerds living on the San Francisco side would block the five lanes leading into the Treasure Island tunnel for 15 minutes. The protest would be to highlight the need for folks to use mass transit instead of their personal vehicles. Alpha Dog or AD told his jocks to avoid the Bay Bridge on Saturday as there would be a massive traffic jam. In this way, AD showed that AD had knowledge that was hidden from others. It was designed to show that AD could be trusted to lead and knew the stuff "they" didn't want you to know.

Groups in other areas of the country that had formed and were receiving these messages decided that this was some sort of demonstration project, and they would watch the national news to see if their leader had the right stuff. The traffic jam materialized right on cue. The nerds acted as a flash mob and blocked the Bay Bridge in both directions congesting the upper and lower decks with traffic backed up into both Oakland and San Francisco. It got a short mention on all the major news outlets. It was a slow news day. The nerds recognized that Dr.P. could give intellectuals clout. The jocks knew that AD had inside information and could be trusted. They awaited instructions. As did the nerds. Nerd power became a thing.

Time for the jocks to do something. AD decided that hunting was getting a bad rap. There was entirely too much sympathy for Bambi. AD directed the jocks to assemble in the area in front of city hall with their favorite rifle at 1 pm on Saturday as a show of solidarity for hunters everywhere. Dr.P. warned his nerds that mass demonstrations would occur around city hall Saturday afternoon and to avoid the area. Both AD and Dr.P. thought that only folks in the Bay Area were listening to this call to arms. When demonstrations popped up in every major metropolitan area in the country, the news media went nuts. For the nerds, Dr.P. was clairvoyant. For the jocks, AD was the boss. Some in the media wondered if AD and Dr.P. were the same person and thus knew what was going to happen. But no one knew for sure. All that was sure was that these mystery figures were commanding large numbers of followers.

Roy and Sam had hit the nail on the head when they put their groups together. By using patriots as a qualifier for the jocks, Roy had gotten people who were easily motivated to act. And Sam had done the same when he added activists to his qualifications for the

nerd group. These were nerds who were tired of sitting on the sidelines. Roy and Sam had a decision to make. What next? Sam said that his only “action” had been local and so he wasn’t sure he had a national following like Roy. So, they decided to test that. Dr.P. instructed his nerds to mass in front of the main library of their town to protest book banning. It was suggested that green armbands should be worn as a sign of solidarity. Again the time would be 1 pm on Saturday and the protest, or flash mob, was to last 30 minutes this time. Long enough for television crews to show up. AD would not alert his group so those who thought AD and Dr.P. were the same might be confused.

Flash mobs wearing green armbands appeared in front of libraries in all major metropolitan areas and there was national news coverage. Now, both Roy and Sam knew they had massive constituencies. Why? Roy and Sam monitored the chat within their respective groups and discovered that many folks were talking about their pride in belonging to a movement. Roy and Sam scratched their heads at that as they hadn’t done much of anything that would constitute a movement. They decided that there must be some pent-up human longing to be part of something bigger. They started writing code for their video game that allowed people to self-select for a team. The qualities of the teams in the video games would be spelled out and hopefully, the players would identify with one group as opposed to the other. But what to do with the real-life groups now that they’d been formed? This called for another session at Applebee’s.

It took about three rounds of Corona before Roy and Sam were sufficiently relieved of the burdens of responsibility and had entered the realm of the free thinker. The kind of thinking that had gotten them into this pickle in the first place. They decided that doing nothing was the right thing to do. There was so much that could go wrong if they tried to use these loose confederations of people to achieve some higher goal. Just go silent and let the groups fall apart. It seemed like a good idea at the time.

When weeks went by and there had been no word from AD or Dr.P. the jocks and nerds became restless. There was a lot of grumbling on the internet. What was our next mission? Patriots and Activists wanted to know. And into the breach stepped random players claiming to be AD or Dr.P. and since no one knew for sure who those mystery men or were they mystery women were, things became unstable. A new Alpha Dog burst onto the scene claiming to have taken over at the request of the original and his message was to march on Washington with their rifles much as they had done to city hall. This time their cause would be to extend hunting rights on federal lands and longer hunting seasons. The new Professor surrogate became aware of the jocks’ plans and organized a countermarch on Washington to push for sane gun laws. What could possibly go wrong? The original AD and Dr.P. decided they needed to stop this before someone got hurt. They held a news conference to explain how they were trying to build a better video game experience and that everyone needed to just stay home.

No one believed them. Roy and Sam were dismissed as Meta employees trying to get free publicity off of a citizens’ movement. The train had left the station and Roy and Sam couldn’t stop it. They couldn’t slow it down. It was full speed ahead for two groups of

people led by shadowy figures that no one had ever seen, but whom everyone in the groups had come to respect. Roy and Sam were just a couple of publicity-seeking losers.

The National Guard was mobilized to deal with the expected crowds. The march on Washington was on. The mall was packed with rifle-carrying jocks on one side and empty-handed nerds wearing green armbands on the other. At first, there was just a lot of shouting. Minor skirmishes broke out and quickly escalated into brawls. The National Guard fired tear gas into the crowds, but that just dispersed the fighting onto side streets and made it harder to identify and remove troublemakers. The saving grace was the rain. The skies opened up and rain came down at a rate of two inches per hour. The crowds retreated and the air cleared. There were long lines at the local emergency rooms. Most of the people needed something stitched.

Roy and Sam watched the conflict on the TV over the bar at Applebee's in Redwood City. They knew how this started. They knew it was their fault, but no one would ever hold them accountable as no one believed them. Roy claimed that proved that honesty is the best policy. Sam laughed. Laughter was easier after the first three Coronas. Meta had given them a raise as sales of their new game, "Jocks vs. Nerds" was selling better than anything else in the Meta catalog. Word on the street was that the game was addictive. Sam ordered nachos and round four of Corona. Sam told Roy he had an idea for a new game, and he asked the bartender for a dry napkin. Roy promptly spilled the last of his third Corona on that dry napkin and told Sam in no uncertain terms that code generated under the influence of nachos and Corona was inherently corrupt. Roy said he had a better idea and asked the bartender to turn off the news on the bar TV and see if either the Giants or Warriors were on. Sam protested that he really had a great idea. Roy said a great idea would be to leave work for Monday and sit back and enjoy the game.

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