

# QAnon resembles the games I design. But for believers, there is no winning.

The trail of ‘clues’ plays the people who follow it

By Reed Berkowitz

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May 11, 2021 at 6:00 a.m. EDT



For people who believe in the sprawling set of false claims that make up the QAnon belief system, this is a time of confusion. “The Storm” never came, Joe Biden is the president, Donald Trump is out of office and off social media, and Q has not been heard from since last year. Everything followers had been told was a lie. Logic would say that this has to be the end. But logic never had much to do with QAnon, so the doubt remains, like the end of a horror movie: Is it really over?

I have a strong hunch, based on my experience as a game designer, that it is not.

I work in a very small niche: I create and research games intended to be played in reality — stories and games designed to come to life around the players, using the real world as the backdrop.

When I saw QAnon, I knew exactly what it was and what it was doing. It was the gamification of propaganda. QAnon was a game that played people.

Q has specifically followed the model of an alternate reality game (ARG) using many of the same techniques. The games I design entice players through clever rabbit holes found in the real world that start them searching for answers — maybe something written on a billboard, seen at a rally or printed on a flier. Players are led through labyrinth-like stories full of puzzles, clues and group challenges. ARGs can have millions of people involved in them. (The 2007 game promoting Christopher Nolan’s “The Dark Knight” had 11 million participants in 75 countries.) The similarities are so striking that QAnon has sometimes been referred to as a live-action role playing (LARP) or an ARG. But QAnon is the reflection of a game in a mirror: It looks like one, but inverted.

In one of my earliest games, the plot led investigators into a creepy basement to look for a clue. It was obvious and easy to find, and I expected no trouble. But there was. Some scraps of wood were on the basement floor. Three of them somehow got shuffled into the shape of a perfect arrow pointing at a blank wall — which was not the clue. The clue hunters, sure this was the puzzle to solve, would go no further until they figured out what it meant. The random tools scattered around the basement seemed to mean that the clue was behind the wall. To get it, they needed to use the tools! Perhaps they could pry out a rock or two? Soon, players were picking up crowbars, ready to rip up the wall looking for clues that didn’t exist. (We intervened and redirected them before they did any damage.)

These were normal people, and their assumptions were logical. And completely wrong.

What the players in the basement had experienced was an apophany. They hadn't seen a clue — they'd created one in their minds. They hadn't followed the plot of the story or solved a puzzle; they'd created chaos. But it felt the same to them.

In many games, like the ones I work on, apophenia is a wild card that can lead participants away from the plot and force designers to scramble to get them back. Games can easily go off the rails — because there *are* rails. There are puzzles with real solutions and a real story to experience. In a well-designed game, players arrive at the intended epiphany, the puzzle is solved, new content is revealed, and the plot moves forward.

QAnon is a mirror reflection of this dynamic: Apophenia is the point.

QAnon revolves around a fantastical narrative that “Q,” allegedly a top-secret government operative, has been leaving clues on websites about a cabal of Satan-worshipping, child-abusing Democrats and “deep state” elitists who run the nation's power centers, and that Trump and his allies were working clandestinely to fight back against them. Believers pick up guidance from multiple sources, including rabbit-hole-like social media hashtags, TikTok influencers, popular YouTubers, even mainstream news articles. They click on links, search hashtags, “do their own research” and ultimately end up at various sources of Q's material. It spread from the 4chan message board to a wider circle of websites, Reddit forums, social media groups and YouTube channels, and it picked up additional convoluted — and false — details along the way. As prominent Q sites are created, social media and technology companies attempt to deplatform them, and the sites and groups reappear in different locations in a propaganda version of whack-a-mole.

The QAnon call to “do the research” (this is the notion that people shouldn't trust “experts,” but should come to their own conclusions, instead) breaks down resistance to new ideas. Guiding people to arrive at conclusions themselves is a perfect way to get them to accept a new and conflicting ideology as their own. It also instills a distrust for society and the competence of others — and confers an unearned sense of importance on the player. Only the believers can discover what's really going on! Initiates are given the tools — ways to look for ostensibly hidden messages in videos and text, and online communities to share their results — to arrive at “their own conclusions,” which are in every way more compelling, interesting and clearer than real solutions. For instance, learning to search for “code” in everyday correspondence led QAnon conspiracy theorists to find a “hidden message” in one of former FBI director James Comey's tweets that, to them, indicated there would be a “false flag” attack at the Grass Valley Charter School's Blue Marble Jubilee. Convinced that the children were in danger people called law enforcement, the school and the FBI. The event was cancelled because the organizers were afraid QAnon believers would show up to “guard” the event. The followers had created a danger out of thin air and “saved” the children from that imaginary danger. Never mind that the organization lost money and could not hold their school fund-raising event. Working backwards from the outcome is another sure way to generate a satisfying story. The coronavirus hurt the United States, so the obvious and satisfying narrative is that it was created to hurt us on purpose. Because the pandemic led the government to restrict our personal freedoms, it's a hoax created for that purpose. Both “work” as fictions that explain the complicated chaos of real life in terms of stories, with villains, victims and heroes instead of bats and complex environmental issues we don't have answers for. That's because they are entirely fictional, and fiction is easier to write than reality.

In a real game — or real life — it's hard to solve puzzles. First, there have to be actual puzzles or problems to solve. Then you need the skills to solve them, and your solution has to be right. Not so for the imaginary puzzles created by apophenia: There doesn't need to be anything to solve. You just have to be creative and follow along, leaping from one conclusion to the next. As Valerie Gilbert, the QAnon “meme queen,” put it: “The world opened up in Technicolor for

conclusion to the next. As Valerie Gilbert, the QAnon meme queen, put it: “The world opened up in Technicolor for me. It was like the Matrix — everything just started to download.”

Several Q drops stated that members of the ruling class of occultists identify themselves through symbolism and that “their need for symbolism will be their downfall.” Conveniently, the symbols were signs that followers were sure to find as soon as they started looking. Q might drop a clue specifically calling out high-ranking Democrats, such as Hillary Clinton, or performers, such as Beyoncé. He suggests searching for the iconography of owls and skulls with horns. He asks followers to look for themselves.

So participants start poring over hundreds of images of the people they distrust. “Evidence” isn’t hard to find: Rock stars throw “hand horns” all the time. Their videos are riddled with the skulls of cattle and weird tattoos and conscious occult references. Suddenly, just like in actual ARGs, participants look at the world a little differently. They can go on the boards, watch videos, ask questions. They can submit their own “research” and get kudos and make friends. They don’t have to believe it all, but now, when they see a new music video or look closely at a corporate chain logo, maybe they begin to notice strange things. Could it be that these things aren’t just filler or coincidence, but they have real meanings? A doubt begins to grow, and doubt is extremely difficult to get rid of once it starts. Maybe the elite really are in a powerful cult, after all.

There are no scripted plots for Q followers. There is no actual solution to arrive at. There’s only a breadcrumb trail away from reality. As game designers would expect, it works very well — because when you “figure it out yourself,” you own it. You experience the thrill of discovery, the excitement of finding the rabbit hole and tumbling down it. Because you were persuaded to “connect the dots yourself,” you can see the absolute logic of it, even if you made it up.

The most important difference between QAnon and real games is that Q claims it’s not a game at all.

In ARGs, people do a lot of the same things QAnon followers do, but they don’t call and report fictional crimes as if they are real. They don’t break laws. They may show up in mobs, but they understand it’s all pretend. Q is the opposite: People report crimes, or they swamp emergency phone lines with false reports about their enemies setting wildfires. They break the law. They show up in mobs for causes they think are very real — like the Jan. 6 insurrection at the Capitol, where QAnon figures were pivotal actors.

You can’t play a game if you don’t know you’re playing one. Play requires an agreement to play. Otherwise, it’s just manipulation — which describes Q perfectly. And it couldn’t have worked if it hadn’t been surrounded by a much larger right-wing media and social media disinformation campaign that calls into question the very nature of reality.

But now that Q has gone silent, what happens to all the believers? In a scripted game, the writers and producers produce a satisfying conclusion, often with a big reveal — for instance, a tour of Disneyland, a private concert or a special screening of a movie. The most die-hard players are rewarded extravagantly in real-life gatherings and often go home with amazing experiences and maybe a souvenir or two. The puppet masters get to come out from behind the curtain and take a bow, too: We meet our fans, answer questions, accept congratulations on a game well-run. And then the game ends, with a gratifying sense of closure and camaraderie.

In QAnon, as usual, there was a horrific mirror version of this kind of ending. Q’s posts dwindled to nothing; as Jan. 6 approached, the group was open to all kinds of outside influences. The huge “conclusion” occurred as people mobbed the Capitol waiting for “the Storm” to arrive and Trump to rise. Just like in a real game, the players came with their cellphones turned on, taking pictures and streaming video to record the big event. But nothing was planned for the benefit of those gathered. They hadn’t arrived at an event. They *were* the event.

And now, Q remains in hiding from his misled fan base and a furious nation. People are searching for the puppet masters, and the question of whether the game is truly over lingers over the nation. When you choose to play a game,

you decide when you're done playing. When a game plays you, though, it's out of your control.

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