

The Game

It started much like any other day, however unbeknownst to Josh Bray, he would soon find himself in a situation even worse than death...

"Da-dum, da-dum" The boy's racing pulse drowned out the distant church bells as he darted along the muddy track of Veil Park Hill. Passing the gnarled whispering trees, he noticed a murder of crows-the howling, deathly wind urging them on. This sight chilled him right to the bone. He was drowning in an inky-black ocean of nothing but pure fear. The impatient voices that had once been in the distance had somehow crept closer. Almost like a chain reaction, he quickened his pace, desperately hoping that he could outrun the ominous presence behind him. The darkness seemed to hang in the air like thick, black chimney soot; the only light was coming from the screen of the device he clutched onto-almost for dear life-in his right hand. Seeing his personal handset kicked his memory into gear. In his mind's eye, he trawled back to when the series of events that had led up to this moment had begun (about six hours ago...). And, it began with...well...it began with...

Boredom: at this point Josh Bray was a literal embodiment of it. He was due to be meeting his friend at the local trampoline park, but after laboriously waiting there for just over two hours, he had started to tire. So, he did what any boy of his (teenager) demographic would do, he turned on his phone.

He began to scroll aimlessly through never ending pages, menus and drop-downs of one of his most-used apps: The App Shop. He was (and quite proud of it) a beta-tester. It allowed him to download games and apps months before release, so he could write "positive" reviews of them (he could never quite find himself capable of the latter, however). It was upon entering the 'beta-tester' section, that one app in particular took his eye. With a title like "Pekemon Stop", he immediately realized that it was just quite a shoddy remake of the viral sensation that had hit the previous summer. The page stated that it had been developed by 'Ed Rang'. "Strange name?" Josh thought to himself, "Couldn't do any harm?" He checked one final time, but his friend did not seem to be remotely punctual. In fact, even Josh's texts could no longer get through to him. Slightly hesitant, he tapped the 'Download' button. "I've got nothing better to do... I guess?" he considered.

"Da-daa, da-daa!" The overly-happy theme tune seemed to pierce his ear drums as he opened the app. He was immediately greeted by a slightly familiar figure- but he just couldn't place it.... "Hello new player!" The man spoke, with a slight unnatural hint of fear in his voice, "Welcome to Pekemon Stop! Your aim is to catch as many 'Pekemon' as you can before **The Hunters' catch** you! Pekemon are little creatures who inhabit our world. You can catch them in 'Pekeballs'. Now off you go, out into your new world!"

"This is such a rip-off... but I'll give it a go..." he began to review. After a wait time (that was slightly on the long side), Josh's avatar popped up on the screen, surrounded by a sea of pixels that together formed a large-scale map of Josh's current area. He could clearly spot the nearby Trampoline Park, Bowling Alley and Cinema. And with that, he started walking...

However, something bothered him. His avatar didn't resemble him at all. It was very thin and lanky (almost like it had been flattened by a cartoon boulder), but Josh himself was rather 'plump'. It had thin, almost matchstick-like 2D arms-whereas Josh had rather muscular ones. Perhaps the most surprising feature though, was its shock of blinding white hair with a single streak of blue-in place of Josh's dark blonde!

Strolling out of the leisure complex and onto the shortcut through the industrial estate, Josh began to notice something a little odd.... With each throw of a 'Pekeball', with each catch of one of the little monsters, Josh began to feel a little lighter. It almost felt like his "slight fat" was just floating away from him. At first, he passed it off as a "side effect" of him getting exercise for once, but, no one could lose that body weight in a quick amount of time. His worry grew like a tree-it may have started off as a tiny sapling but was soon a giant, sprawling plant. He reasoned that he should head to the safety of his home-but-to do that, he had to pass through 'Veil Park Hill'

Veil Park Hill was, put lightly, an ancient woodland. However, take one look at it, and anyone would pass it off as 'haunted'. Whatever time of day, the hill would have an aura of gloominess, which would hang in the air, like a deadly shroud. What made it worse, was the fact that, locally, it served as a rubbish dump. There was everything from mountains made of bricks to 'plastic-bag-trees' and the odd shopping trolley. As he approached, the rusted gate howled, slowly creaking open. He stepped through. And that's when he saw it, a vague white haziness at the top of his vision. And a single streak of blue. Confirming what truly scared him, he opened up his phone camera like he was about to take a 'selfie'. He looked at the phone and he saw his avatar looking right back at him.

He would have begun to assess what had happened but he suddenly began to hear an ominous chatter coming towards him. Alarm bells were ringing in his mind, but also from his phone. He anxiously checked the app. "Alert: Hunters are approaching!" it read. He erased his mind of all questions and did the only thing he could: run!

And with that thought, Josh's mind drifted back to the present.

Run. The word still echoed through his mind, bouncing off the sides of his skull.

However, while reviewing upon the earlier events-with utter disbelief, he had allowed the "hunters" to gain the upper hand. It just so happened, that at this very point, a singular plastic bag danced to the floor from where it had been tangled in one of the trees. It was on his course. It sealed his fate. In one swift movement, Josh crashed to the mud.

The "hunters" approached. Their dark hoods and cloaks gave them the atmosphere of an antagonistic spectre. "We are the hunters" they all spoke in perfect unison, "You are Josh Bray. You have been hunted" Their collective voice was scratchy and metallic which just added to the crescendo of Josh's fear! And before he could react-or even stutter a reply ridden with fear-they struck.

A blinding light hazed his vision, as a deep rumble built up from above him : it was an orchestra tumbling from the sky!

Suddenly, there was just black.

All was quiet.

All was still.

"Da-dum, da-dum" Josh's own heartbeat woke him up. He felt cold and detached from his senses. Around him, a sea of pixels hazed . He heard the all too familiar piercing tune and a face appeared. Strange words spewed from Josh's mouth, directed at the boy in front of him. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't stop them. "Hello new player! Welcome to Pekemon Stop!"

And that's when it all came in to place in Josh's mind. That all too familiar face welcoming him to the game. He had always known who it was, at the back of his mind, but just passed it off as just a coincidence. The person greeting him at the very beginning was his friend. His "rarely punctual" friend had been in the same situation he was in now. "How were we so stupid?" he silently asked himself, "The warnings were all there, right from the very... beginning...."

He Paused.

Words shifted in his mind and re-formed. The developer. Ed Rang. "What a strange name?" His own words echoed at the fringes of his mind. It was an anagram. A warning from the very start, instructions not to use the game. "How could we have been so stupid?"

Ed Rang rearranged spells the word....

Danger.