

## Balancing Act

Czernobog and Bielebog sit and play games. This is, in fact, the whole story, with the rest as details. Some details, like the fact that while they play they usually crack sunflower seeds or eat the haluski that Bielebog's wife prepares are simply details. But in other details, at least according to Bielebog, are wisdom. Czernobog would tell you in details are also lies. But, nonetheless, here are the details.

Czernobog and Bielebog play games once a day, every day. They can be board games, like chess, checkers, reversi, go, mancala, or connect four, but sometimes they branch out into dominoes, war, or Super Mario Brothers. Any game with two colors will do. When there are white pieces, Bielebog is always white, Czernobog black. If the colors are otherwise, Bielebog is first and Czernobog second. Thus it has always been since time began. Bielebog as good, Czernobog as bad. Bielebog as right, Czernobog as wrong. Bielebog as Mario, Czernobog as Luigi. And since it will be like that until time ends, Czernobog cheats. But Bielebog is very lucky, so most days end in a draw.

For the draws, you can feel very lucky, for it is said that the fate of the world teeters each day on the outcome of their game. If Bielebog wins, the world is wonderful, the sort of days where you have a paid day off on an unseasonably nice afternoon and find money in your jacket. But when Czernobog wins, the world is awful, the sort of days where it snows in May and frosts your flowers and your favorite auntie dies without warning, because Czernobog hates this world.

Now, the most curious thing about their game is not the effect on the world, something that has long ago been agreed upon by those that believe in them, it's the location of their game. Even if you are looking right at them, you can't know where or

even when you are seeing them. They have been noticed everywhere from a tenement in Detroit to a hut in pre-Christian Poland. Men on the steppes of ancient Russia have scratched their felt caps in puzzlement as two old men played a game in a glowing box, and old women in New York have pulled their babushkas closer and warded off the evil eye from two youths playing chess in Central Park. To put in in modern parlance, Czernobog and Bielebog exhibit a non-linear temporal relationship with the world. To put it the way the much wiser old men at the Slovak Society will tell you, the gods exist in all places and all times.

Czernobog and Bielebog, having created the gods, are no exception. But this story isn't about how Bielebog made the land and Czernobog tried to steal it. You can read that story on your own. This story is about being chained to your brother for eternity. This is the story of how Bielebog and Czernobog began playing games.

In the beginning, there was the sea, and there was Bielebog. No one knows for how long there was only Bielebog on his raft in the sea, but we do know he was lonely. He tried to break his loneliness by creating things. He created fishes, first simple and then ever stranger, but he could not go to them and fish are poor company. So he created dolphins, but they were so playful that they soon got away from him, preferring one another's boisterous company to the quiet little man's. So he created whales, slow-moving singers. But the whales sang too slowly, and their huge bulk threatened his raft, so he let them go. He created birds, creatures out of the water that he might keep company with. But the birds took to the air immediately and would not come back.

Pouting and alone on a world full of life, Bielebog stared down into the water. In the water, he saw a very curious thing. He saw a shape staring back at him that he had not

created. When he turned his head to inspect it, it turned too. He moved back and forth, so did the new creature. He smiled, and the creature smiled a somewhat warped smile back at him. This at last was something he could control! Bielebog clapped with glee, and so did the new creature. Pleased with his discovery, Bielebog decided to name it.

Bielebog pondered. The creature was shaped as he was, as far as he could tell, but dark, much darker than Bielebog's white skin and yellow hair. He thought harder. Bielebog is the god of light, therefore he would call this thing Czernobog, since it was like himself only of darkness!

"You are Czernobog!" cried Bielebog, pleased.

But as soon as he spoke the name, the creature swam free, unruly, and leapt up onto the raft, a complete man identical to Bielebog but dark-haired, smiling the same warped smile it had had in the water. Bielebog was slightly dismayed at Czernobog's newfound free will, but decided that he would be better to play with this way. So the two played games and were content for some time.

But after some time, Czernobog helped Bielebog to create the dry land using sand from the sea floor and the division began. Bielebog, while very honest, was very simple and did not recognize that in Czernobog he had created his equal, a full god with separate ideas and goals. So Bielebog was of the opinion that anything that Czernobog came up with, such as using sea sand to make the earth, must be his property as much as Czernobog was his property, and he was technically right, but not as he supposed.

When Bielebog gave Czernobog his name, he stopped belonging to Bielebog much as the creatures of the sea had. For these reasons, when Bielebog claimed all of the land, Czernobog became furious at being cheated of his half and also laid claim to all of

the land. At a deadlock, the two agreed to a race from one river to the next. The winner would own the land.

But the rules of the race were not clearly defined, and Bielebog created a horse to run faster than his brother. Czernobog, outraged at this cheating and afraid of losing, caused the river to dry up. So the race extended to the next river, and the horse tired. Czernobog leading the race, Bielebog created many other mounts. But each river they came to with Bielebog ahead would be dry. They ran for years, creating and destroying in turn. Behind them, the shape of the world changed, becoming pitted with valleys and peopled with strange creatures. But still they ran on.

They ran for even more years. Perhaps they ran for centuries. No one knows. But the cycle of creation and destruction in their path was constant. In a short time, the world was full, but the creatures were not content. They were tired of being used by Bielebog and tired of the dry lands left by Czernobog.

Soon, the creatures of the world cried out that there would be no more rivers left, and so would not allow anyone to ride on their backs. This is why you can only ride trained animals to this day.

Running without help, Czernobog and Bielebog were evenly matched. Finally, they reached the river they had started from, both walking slowly, panting, step for step even with one another, and each fell down before the river, unable to cross. They looked old now, Bielebog's yellow hair and Czernobog's black hair matching in shades of grey.

"I have won," panted Bielebog. "My hair reaches further than yours."

"No, I have won," panted Czernobog. "My fingers reach further than yours. And the contest was to cross the river, you great simpleton, and you can't because you can't

swim. I will win. Just as soon as I can get up."

"But you can't get up, and so you have lost. And if you have lost, I have won," said Bielebog.

And so they argued, back and forth, each as close to being right as they were close to winning, in a stalemate.

By this time, a village had grown by this river, and a small boy was playing nearby. The boy laughed to hear them argue over who had won the land.

"Why don't you just share the land?" asked the boy. "Have a small contest, like a game, every morning to see who is the king today."

Both gods brightened at the wisdom of this child and followed him to his village to gather many games, games with hard set rules that could decide which of them was the best each day. And so each day, until the world becomes dust, Czernobog and Bielebog play games.