

*Because None of Us are as Cruel as All of Us*

*Griefers, /b/tards, and Anonymous*



Andrew Lloyd Goodman

## Introduction

*I have forced myself to contradict myself in order to avoid conforming to my own taste.*

- Marcel Duchamp

*Rule 34: If it exists, there is porn of it. No Exceptions.*

- Anonymous

*Think about the two qualities that a virus, or any sort of parasitic replicator, demands of a friendly medium, the two qualities that make cellular machinery so friendly towards parasitic DNA, and that make computers so friendly towards computer viruses. These qualities are, firstly, a readiness to replicate information accurately, perhaps with some mistakes that are subsequently reproduced accurately; and secondly, a readiness to obey instructions encoded in the information so replicated...The second requirement of a virus-friendly environment - that it should obey a program of coded instructions - is again only quantitatively less true for brains than for cells or computers.*

- Richard Dawkins, *Viruses of the Mind*

It is interesting to note that while we, as a class, have discussed a great deal over the course of the semester, that the discussion was at its most animated when we were discussing the contemporary issues of gaming and hacking. While this could certainly be attributed to the visit of Alexander Galloway, I suspect that there is a much deeper explanation for this phenomenon. In her text, *The Death of Nature*<sup>1</sup>, Carolyn Merchant postulates that all ideas can be seen as existing simultaneously (if inertly)

---

<sup>1</sup> Merchant, Carolyn. Harper & Row, San Francisco. 1980

alongside all other ideas. Ideas are accepted or rejected at any given moment, not as a result of their relative strength or truth, but because of the extent to which they conform to the societal or cultural mores of a particular time and place. One such example of this phenomenon being that of Galileo's postulation of a heliocentric universe, which at the time resulted in his censorship and house arrest but would later earn him the title of "Father of Modern Science".

I mention this concept because, while I may disagree with Merchant's conclusions, I see incredible value in viewing the history of thought, not as a linear progression, but as a kind of evolutionary system in which ideas emerge and propagate based on ever changing environmental (in this case the social environment) conditions. This notion is very much in keeping with that of Richard Dawkin's *memes* (which will be discussed in greater detail later in the text), which in their own right can be seen as a product of a broader socio-cultural conception of the nature of human thought. With this in mind, the propagation of theories regarding the formation of ideas, particularly within an *algorithmic*<sup>2</sup> structure, and our apparent fascination on the subject of hacking and gaming, speaks to an inherent willingness on the part of contemporary American culture<sup>3</sup> to increasingly view the world in the context of electronic media.

---

<sup>2</sup> As coined by Alexander Galloway in his text, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*.

<sup>3</sup> At least within the context of a higher level theory course at an elite private art college...a rarified population sample to be sure.

Ultimately this text is about a specific web phenomenon, that of *Griefers* or *Griefing*, and its broader implications both to the development of the internet as the new repository of social consciousness, as well as to the emerging field of video game and web theory. While the limitations of this assignment will only allow for a brief overview of the *Griefer* phenomenon, it is my hope that this text will serve as a beachhead for future research. In coming to understand this seemingly fringe phenomenon is may be possible to not only understand the broader internet culture of the early 21st century, but to gain crucial insight into the state of “real world” society as well.

## Griefers

*A griefer is an online version of the spoilsport — someone who takes pleasure in shattering the world of play itself.*

- Julian Dibbell, *Wired Magazine*<sup>4</sup>

*Internetz. Itz Serious Business.*

- Anonymous

*The subject is either divided inside himself or divided from others. This process objectivizes him. Examples are the mad and the sane, the sick and the healthy, the criminals and the “good boys”.*

-Michel Foucault

As someone who does not actively participate in online gaming environments such as Second Life and World of Warcraft, my introduction to

---

<sup>4</sup> *Mutilated Furies, Flying Phalluses: Put the Blame on Griefers, the Sociopaths of the Virtual World.* Wired Magazine. Issue 16.02, 2008

*Griefers* came about in a rather roundabout manner. However, the manner in which I first encountered *Griefers* speaks to the extent to which *Griefing* has impacted the internet as a whole and shaped the course of online culture. The story begins innocently enough. Through time spent on Digg<sup>5</sup> I became interested in the Lolcat phenomenon, in which users caption images of cats (and other “cute” animals) with funny, often grammatically incorrect, messages (see Appendix I). The humor is simple, and often involves references to previous Lolcat images or other web memes<sup>6</sup>, however the quickness with which the images can be viewed, and the continuous supply of new images, makes Lolcats an ideal reprieve from other online activities. It was through my interest in Lolcats that I first heard of 4chan, an online image board primarily geared towards disseminating anime, hentai<sup>7</sup> and other geek culture imagery<sup>8</sup> along with pornography and a wide range of esoteric pop-culture artifacts. Formed in 2003, 4chan is most noted for its “Random” forum, known within the community as /b/<sup>9</sup>. I was in the process

---

<sup>5</sup> Part of an emerging genre of social news sites in which users submit and vote on a wide range of news stories with the most highly ranked stories earning front page status. digg.com

<sup>6</sup> An increasingly common aspect of internet culture, web or internet memes often take the form of videos or images that gain widespread popularity throughout various internet subcultures. Often these memes are transmitted from one person or group of users to another in a viral pattern giving rise to the term “going viral” which can be seen as directly related to viral marketing which seeks to promote organizations through a similar process.

<sup>7</sup> Pornographic Japanese comics and cartoons.

<sup>8</sup> Such as stills from old Saturday morning cartoons, screen captures from video games, etc.

<sup>9</sup> This stems from 4chan’s forum designation system in which each category is assigned a letter (or set of letters): anime/manga is /a/, anime (cute) is /c/, etc.

of researching /b/ and its participants (self-reflexively known as /b/tards<sup>10</sup>) when I encountered the *Griever* phenomenon for the first time.

Unbeknownst to me, the same individuals responsible for much of /b/'s content, also happen to be the prime movers in the field of *Griefing*, as such, I believe it is important to define the phenomenon, not just as something related to the world of gaming, but pertaining to contemporary society as a whole. Just as McKenzie Wark came to define hacking in terms that exceeded those of computer programming, so too is *Griefing* deserving of a broader definition outside that of online game "spoiler". So what is *Griefing* then in this larger context? To answer this question I believe its important to look to the actions of the *Griefers* and their /b/*tard* counterparts.

## Organized Chaos

*Anonymous congregates on the net at various hangouts such as 711han.org (NSFW)<sup>11</sup> and partyvan.info and sundry IRC<sup>12</sup> channels. The group usually amuses itself by stealing passwords to downloading sites and finding ways to harass online communities that its members disdain. they were last seen on THREAT LEVEL when a Los Angeles Fox News affiliate ran a story that hilariously implied that the group's arsenal included exploding vans.*

- Ryan Singel, *Wired Magazine*<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> An obvious reference to the derogatory term "retard".

<sup>11</sup> An acronym for "Not Safe For Work", commonly associated with materials such as those found on 4chan and other image boards.

<sup>12</sup> A precursor to contemporary Instant Messaging clients dating back to 1988, it is worth noting that IRC gave birth to, and ultimately outlived the Internet Chat Room phenomenon of the 1990s.

<sup>13</sup> *War Breaks Out Between Hackers and Scientology - - There Can Be Only One*. *Wired Magazine*, January 23, 2008.

*Anonymous Does Not Forgive. Anonymous Does Not Forget.*  
- Anonymous

*In other words, discipline and confinement, as a modern control apparatus, are rarely represented today...Instead, discipline and confinement are upstaged by other matters, sublimated into other representation forms.*  
- Alexander Galloway<sup>14</sup>

In early 2008, shortly after the release of video footage featuring a fanatical Tom Cruise extolling the virtues of Scientology, and the church's subsequent efforts to have the videos removed from various privately owned websites, a video was released by a group identifying themselves only as Anonymous. In the video the group declared war against the Church of Scientology for its aggressive legal tactics and cultish inner workings. The video marked the beginning of a campaign of both virtual and physical protests against the Church which continue sporadically to this day. It is my belief that these events mark a pivotal moment in the evolution of *Griefing* and points to how we may come to understand it as a real world phenomenon.

One of the key tenants of /b/, and by extension the *Griefing* community as a whole, is the importance of maintaining anonymity. Unlike most online forums 4chan does not require any kind of account creation on the part of users, which means that all posters on /b/ are truly anonymous. What is more, the /b/tard community elevates the status of anonymity in such a way that to reveal one's actual identity is regarded as a faux pas and

---

<sup>14</sup> *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*. p. 89.

grounds for exclusion and harassment by the group. As a result the posters on /b/ are emboldened to behave in ways that would be otherwise unacceptable in any other context. Use of derogatory terms, ethnic and racial slurs, sexist and homophobic slander and all manner of derogatory abuse are not only common place, but encouraged. This is not to imply that /b/tards are immature or uneducated, on the contrary certain image threads (see Appendix II) reveal an incredible intelligence on the part of the /b/ community. In many ways this is a more disturbing trend than if /b/ was merely the product of bored adolescents. Similarly, my research of the *Griefing* phenomenon within gaming reveals that the perpetrators often possess a high degree of intelligence and education<sup>15</sup>.

What we appear to be witnessing then is the birth of an anarchic movement rooted in the algorithmic rigidity of digital culture. If Hackers are individuals who find and exploit the weaknesses of code, then *Grifers* are the individuals who actively seek out the bugs and glitches within a program the sole purpose of creating a "crash". Similarly, where as Gamers actively participate in games as a means of recreation, growth and development. *Griefers* participate in games as a means of shattering the sense of play and undermining the rules of the game. It is as if *Griefers* and /b/tards are the embodiment of the Internet's latent id, actively seeking out and indulging in all aspects of the wired world that the rest of us (the ego?) so desperately

---

<sup>15</sup> see *Mutilated Furies* article in *Wired Magazine* Issue 16.02 2008

try to repress. This is perhaps the most important observation that I can make regarding /b/ and the broader world of *Griefing*. Whether it is child pornography or images of mutilated bodies, the /b/tards are not the one responsible for their creation, rather they are merely the custodians of the content. In this sense *Griefers* are not monsters but rather the tormenting reflection of our own evils.