

High above the earth, within the confines of Fort Longcat, the channers meet to plan their next move.

"This world must be cleansed of its faggotry," says a person who appears as a representation of the Kool-Aid man, his words appearing as text.

"Of course it must," says another, a figure dressed in the dark wool overcoat of the old Soviet NKVD and who bears the head of a cat, topped with a Russian fur hat.

"But how?"

"Our efforts thus far have drawn too much attention. Many /b/rothers have already met with the banhammer of the moderators."

"Damn the mods," says another - who, for reasons too complex to relate, takes the form of a defective animation cell from a popular Japanese cartoon. "They are beholden to the fascist landowners, the furry nightclub proprietors, the merchant class, the loli impersonators and their pedo admirers."

"The scum of Second Life," summarizes another, one of several present here and hundreds elsewhere who bear the dark skin of the Moor and the Afro of the Nixon-era African American, and who clad themselves exclusively in dark, three-piece suits - an ancient chan tradition that goes back almost two years.

"We need /b/lackup," another asserts.

"Someone start another thread at 4chan and tell them we need more help, then."

"Failchan is worthless. Recruit from the /i/nsurgent board at 7chan."

been banned but had risen and promised eternal Second Life to those who followed in his path. And there were mockers and scoffers who denied this truth, saying that the altered client was probably malware, and so they did not download it, and eventually they found themselves banned for one thing or another, and to them was Second Life denied for all time, but those who did place their faith in /b/ and its ingenuity did download the client and did rise again after banning, just as was promised to them.

The jihad resumed.

When I got out of prison in 2007, I needed a new hobby. The last one hadn't worked out.

Like many whose work and play revolved around the internet, I was familiar with 4chan.org, the increasingly popular image board that had appeared in 2003 and which had gradually gained in notoriety. Having been inspired by a Japanese website called 2chan, and having initially appealed to the young and net-saturated, 4chan was a world unto itself: a sign of the times and a propagator of the culture.

The format, ~~like all formats~~, helped to define the nature of the content. 4chan is divided into a couple of dozen different "boards," or web pages, divided by topic. The /v/ board is concerned with video games; the /a/ board deals with anime and manga; the /x/ board is given over to discussions of the paranormal. Naturally, each of the various boards attracts different sorts of people, and thus develops its own character.

Each particular board is divided into ten individual web pages, and those who access a board will first view page one by default, with the option to click on nine other hyperlinks which link to the nine other pages, respectively. The format works as follows: A user will begin a thread by posting some image, with the option of including any amount of text

as well. Having been posted, the thread begins at the "top" of page one of the board, only to sink down into a lower position on the page (and then down into pages two through ten) as time passes and other new threads are created and get their own fresh start on the top of the first page. But each time another user replies to the thread, either with another picture or text or both, the thread is "bumped" back up to the top of page one. In this manner, popular threads that elicit many responses will tend to remain on the first couple of pages and thereby be seen by more people, whereas a new thread that no one considers worthy of reply will sink down to page two - where already it is far less likely to be seen and replied to than it would have been on page one - and then down to pages three, four, etc, until such time as it descends to page ten, and then off the board altogether, forever lost.

As with most textual descriptions of a system, the system itself is far more simple than a reading would suggest. But even a simple system gives rise to complex behavior, particularly when such a system is utilized by something so complex as an individual human - and especially when more than one individual humans are interacting within that system's confines. And so although we have yet to go into the nature of the content nor that of the people involved, we may now productively examine a few of the dynamics that would come into play due to the tendency of each user to wish success upon the thread he himself creates. For one thing, a user whose thread is descending down into lower, lesser pages after receiving no or few replies may game the system by "bumping" his own thread - replying to it - and thereby send it right back to the top of page one, where the process begins anew. The reasoning behind this is that a thread/submission which receives no replies and so descends down into the depths towards page ten didn't necessarily fail due to a lack of worth; oftentimes, it simply wasn't seen.

Which brings us to the next crucial dynamic of 4chan - that the various boards differ quite broadly in popularity, and thus in views, new threads, and replies. A board such as /tg/, traditional games, attracts a relatively small following of pen-and-paper role playing

game enthusiasts of the sort who spend their free time painting tiny miniatures of dwarves and space marines. In such an environment, where few posts are made, a fellow may post a picture of the miniature battle zone he created out of cardboard and cotton, write a few lines of text inquiring as to whether this particular battle zone is suited to the fictional environment in which his game of choice is set, and hit the submit button. The thread appears at the top - and will likely stay at the top for at least a few minutes before another submission is made. Even if the thread receives only one or two replies over the next hour, it's likely to remain on page three or two or even one during that time. Whatever happens, the cardboard-and-cotton battleground will get its due attention.

But this is the exception to the rule. ~~To varying degrees,~~ the more popular boards will attract more threads and more replies to those threads - vastly more, in the case of one board in particular, where thousands of people are submitting content and commenting on that content at any given time. On that board, a post that appears in its allotted top-of-the-first-page space will not remain there for more than a second - by the time one refreshes the page, it will likely be on page three or four. Of course, there was a second or so during which anyone who happened to pull up the page will have observed it there at the top, in all its majesty. And so long as those who are viewing the page don't click on refresh or go to one of the other nine pages, none of the threads will change position; there is plenty of time to read the text or ponder the picture and to reply as warranted - although, as the precious moments pass, others who didn't load the page at that particular moment but instead five seconds afterwards aren't seeing it at its original position at the top, but rather in some new and lesser position down the page or even on another page altogether. In fact, if one takes too long to reply to a thread, and then tries to reply, one might find that the thread has already passed into the great void, beyond page ten, having no received no reply at all from anyone.

Such an environment as this, in which the harsh competition of natural selection is applied to the information submitted by tens of thousands of people - information which

is to be read, viewed, added to, and possibly even acted upon by a million others - leads in turn to other dynamics. There is one in particular that bears noting.

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The natural solution to the ~~problem of the~~ harsh and arbitrary competition ~~that has just~~ been described is to simply reply to one's own post, thereby bumping it back to the top. At 4chan, one may do this quite easily and without the likelihood of raising suspicion, and this is due to yet another fundamental aspect of the medium - with extraordinarily rare exceptions, users of the site do not bother to use their names or even any sort of moniker that would differentiate themselves from any one of the millions of other individuals who have posted to the site in its decade-long history. In fact, there is no convenient way to associate one's self with any name at all, and rarely is there any impetus to do so. Most every post made to the site, then, is automatically noted at the top as having been produced by Anonymous.

HAS BEEN WRITTEN AS
~~That~~ this accident of web history led into something bigger - a loose-knit network of activists who have since scored hits against institutions ranging from NATO to Sony to the Church of Scientology - is already widely known, ~~this having been noted in~~ countless feature magazine articles of the sort that have appeared over the last several years. But there is something else in all of this that has proven itself to be even more important, although the full implications are only beginning to be seen. It involves that very same dynamic whereby some people found it convenient to pretend to be other people entirely, if only to ensure that their 4chan thread received more views than it would have otherwise. [Gunpowder, likewise, was originally used to make fireworks.]

It wasn't until 2008 that I began to see what could be done, and then did it. And only in 2011, in the wake of one of Anonymous' most dramatic and far-reaching operations, did I first learn that I had competition - and that the competition was organized, automated, and funded by the most powerful institutions in the history of mankind.

But first, back in 2007, I had my new hobby.

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The most popular and active board on 4chan is called /b/ - the "random" board. To provide a real sense of what it is and why it matters, we may quote from a collection of descriptions that appear on several other websites of the sort that chronicle such improbabilities as occur on the internet:

/b/ is the guy who tells the cripple ahead of him in line to hurry up.

/b/ is first to get to the window to see the car accident outside.

/b/ is the one who wrote your number on the mall's bathroom wall.

/b/ is that bat-shit crazy old man who sits on his porch and threatens to shoot the children that step on his lawn.

/b/ is the guy who calls a suicide hotline to hit on the adviser.

/b/ is the one who left a used condom outside the schoolyard.

/b/ is the homeless person at the bus stop who wraps his arm around you and starts a conversation.

/b/ is the guy who sticks his dick in the vacuum cleaner.

✓ In fact, /b/ is what happens when an entire generation is given virtually unlimited access to information from adolescence onwards - and then given absolutely unlimited access to each other. It is a million Tom Sawyers if Tom Sawyer were a nihilist and had a million other Tom Sawyers with whom to conspire. In a larger sense, it is a microcosm of the internet as a whole, and driven by the same tendencies. Along those same lines, the forces that were brewing within /b/ and the processes that drove them are comparable to the forces and dynamics that have defined the internet, which itself has begun to redefine the world. Incidentally, there are many within the fields of intelligence, journalism, and commentary who could have better anticipated the trends that are now coming into play if they had only taken the internet seriously. And many who could indeed bring themselves to take the internet seriously were unable to go so far as to

take /b/ seriously, and for many of the same reasons.

After all, /b/ dealt in obscure Japanese cartoons and video games and mean pranks and Dadaist short stories. /b/ was the province of the hyperactive teenager and the bored undergrad - the clinically depressed genius who couldn't get any job worth having and who instead spent his time altering photos in service to inside jokes that are only decipherable to those of his online contemporaries who are familiar with no less than six different other inside jokes, all involving Pokemon characters. /b/ was to the internet as the internet was to "real life," as it is known to those who divorce man's actions from the concepts that fuel them. Few suspected that there was something here worth learning, something indicative of the culture that also contributed to same. But we will come back to this complaint, as the reader has probably guessed.

For now, we ought to delve into the world we are discussing, just as I first did in earnest shortly after leaving prison.

In order to do this, we must first become familiar with the word "meme" and its current application. The term was first coined by the evolutionary biologist and professional atheist Richard Dawkins, who, having already written so eloquently on the matter of the gene and its ^{ADAPTIVE?} drive towards self-perpetuation, now needed a way in which to describe the similarly unconscious processes by which units of information may spread.

Appropriately enough to those familiar with how biology co-opts certain of life's functions for other purposes until the original purpose is lost, the term found its ultimate niche as a means of referring to stories, concepts, pictures, and even people who at some point or another have been the focus of a certain sort of repeated, evolving attention on the part of the internet's natives.

Now, let us see an example of how a meme is created.

At some fairly early point in the history of 4chan, some fellow somewhere was playing

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[you say LATER THIS
DIDN'T HAPPEN AT 4CHAN!]

an old Super Nintendo game called The Secret of Mana. Like many people, he was doing this using a computer program which emulates the SNES and its games, rather than on the actual SNES hardware. Among other features not present within the old hardware, the emulator allows one to play these games with someone else over the internet - which is to say that a two-player game which once required two people to play together in the same room may now be played together in realtime by two people in different countries.

- let's call them ~~ALAN~~ ^{THOD} and ~~BOB~~ ^{BARRY}

All was going well, presumably, until the two friends had themselves a difference of opinion. It seemed that ~~one of them~~ ^{NAMES!} insisted on equipping his game character with an item called the Power Wrist, which conferred a certain nature and extent of statistical advantages on his character. But ~~the other friend~~ ^{N2} wisely recognized that his friend was in error by believing this item to be superior to another item ~~that could be bought at a nearby shop within the game world.~~ ^{CONSIDERED} And it also happened that the friend who was in error had to pause the game to get a soda or go to the bathroom, ~~or something.~~ ^{WOULD BE BETTER STILL.} While the one friend is away, the other goes into the fellow's inventory, takes this particular item, and goes into the shop to sell it. With the money he earns from the transaction, he buys an item which is quite arguably better, and then equips his friend with it. His friend then comes back and is none the wiser - until an hour or so later, when he happens to notice that his item of choice is gone. His friend comes clean about the deception and explains why he felt the need to take charge of the situation. ~~HE WAS DOING N1~~ ^{N2} ~~A FAVOR~~

But the friend who has had his item taken and sold and replaced with another item is upset. He wants his item back. And as such, he is unwilling to proceed into the next regions, knowing that the shops to which he will be privy in far-off lands do not stock this particular item. After all, the item really isn't that good, and is thus only sold in earlier portions of the game, where players fight lesser enemies and only come across lesser options, this being a common convention in such games.

Though distraught, the one who had his item of choice taken from him is defiant. He

insists that the two return to the village where his item was sold so that he can buy it back and re-equip it. And thus the two friends begin their trek back to the village.

~~AND~~ A "JOURNALS DOCUMENTED" V/A

Here, for authenticity, is the original text, as posted on 4chan:

So I'm playing ~~Secret of Mana~~ with my friend ~~Senate~~ over ZSNES. We just got to The Empire (more than halfway through the game), and he's still wearing his fucking power wrist. It has 4 defense, as opposed to the ~20 defense from the armor available to us right now (this makes a lot of difference in the world of mana), but he keeps it anyways because it has +5 STR which he is convinced is more important than any amount of defense (it's not).

So while we were in the shop at The Empire, he gave up control of his character for a moment to go AFK, so I popped into his inventory and unequipped his power wrist so I could sell it and buy a Golem Ring instead. He noticed soon after he returned that his power wrist was missing, and became irate.

So now we're on our way to "potatos" [he means Potos Village] to buy back his power wrist. What he doesn't know is that he can buy it at the shop we just left in The Empire.

And the image which this 4chan user and Super Nintendo enthusiast posted to begin the thread is a screenshot of the person's view of the game in which he and his friend, or their Secret of Mana equivalents, are standing outside the shop. At the bottom, overlaid above the game view, is the text that his angry friend has written to him and which is displayed via some instrument of the emulator:

WE'RE GOING BACK TO POTATOS TO GET MY FUKING POWER WRIST
ASSHOLE

"Power wrist," "potatos," "we're going back to potatos," "fuking power wrist," and "we're

FIRST EXPLAIN — THIS XCHANGE WAS BEING FOLLOWED + COMMENTED ON w/ FASCINATION ON 4CHAN BY THOUSANDS

going back to potatoes to get my fuking power wrist" all became memes. This is to say that each of these phrases would be repeated over and over again forever, the original story would be recorded verbatim and kept at a certain other website that is in the business of chronicling such things, and the basic concepts laid out therein would eventually find themselves placed in new contexts. All of this naturally raises several questions among the uninitiated, such as "What?" and "Who the fuck cares?" Now, now. There, there.

[THAN WHY USE IT]

This particular meme did not come from 4chan, although 4chan was the that popularized it. Rather, it stems from a comment made on the website DeviantArt, a venue from which users may create and maintain pages for the purpose of displaying their artistic creations. There is more to be said about DeviantArt, its demographics, and the particularities of its content, but for now it will suffice to say that it is probably the world's greatest repository of drawn pornography depicting characters from the Sonic the Hedgehog series of video games. In fact, let's not say anything more about it at all, other than to note that following account refers largely to the Pokemon franchise, that "Ash" is the protagonist of the overarching Pokemon narrative, and that Mudkip is an especially cute specimen of Pokemon. I'm not going to tell you what a Pokemon is because it's a secret.

Today being Halloween, I decided to fuck with the major retard at school when I came out of science for break. He was dressed as Ash. Knowing this was going to happen, I brought a Mudkip doll. Thus I started the conversation, making sure no one saw me.

"So I heard you like Mudkips..."

"MUDKIPS? I LUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUVE MUDKIPS."

"O RLY? So, would you ever fuck a Mudkips, that is.." (he cuts me off before I could said "if you were a mudkips")

"OF COURSE."

"Well I just happen to have a Mudkips here, and..."

Which brings me to another point that will become evident as we proceed - that the model of the chan culture as a nation unto itself is only accurate to a certain degree, and useful mostly for tracking its trajectory in familiar terms. After all, if this people constitutes a nation, it is a nation that now exists in near-total opposition to nationalism, and often to the states in which real nations have long manifested themselves.

But now we are jumping ahead. Before there is a nation of any sort, there is a horde of barbarians. And I do not believe it will take much rhetoric on my part to make the case that the chans once constituted such a thing as a horde of barbarians, regardless of what else it was or has since become.

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In July of 2007, the Fox News television affiliate in Los Angeles aired a story on a nefarious group of "computer hackers" - promoted elsewhere in the segment to "hackers on steroids" - who had been "treating the web like a real-life video game: sacking websites, invading MySpace accounts, disrupting innocent peoples' lives," these apparently being the kinds of things that one does in an average video game in the view of whoever it is that writes scripts for this particular TV station.

"Destroy. Die. Attack," read the menacing red letters that kick off the segment, with these alleged quotes being described as "threats" made by the hackers, and I'll not quibble by noting that all three are actually imperatives, rather than threats, per se, as I've already come off as pedantic enough for one chapter. But an actual threat, by the English language reckoning, is soon played: an answering machine message in which some adolescent caller proclaims that he will slit the throat of the message's recipient. It is noted, or at least claimed, that "Anonymous has even threatened to bomb sports stadiums," this being a reference to a message board thread in which the topic was frightening terrorist scenarios and which prompted an arrest by the Department of

THIS CALLER IS
CONVICTED TO AVOID
SOMETHING?

WHERE IS GLOBB IN THIS!

Homeland Security after someone wrote a clearly fictional account of several football stadiums being blown up by terrorists. (Tom Clancy, meanwhile, is still at large) "I believe they're domestic terrorists," says a woman interviewed for the story, her assertion supported by subsequent stock footage of an exploding van.

Who is she?

"Their name comes from their secret website," the narrator continues, in reference to 4chan, which had long before developed into one of the most popular and best-known sites on the web. "It requires anyone posting on the site to remain anonymous," he adds, in reference to a requirement that never actually existed. "MySpace users are among their favorite targets," he goes on, with sudden accuracy. And then the viewer is introduced to a fellow whose profile was taken over thanks to a list of MySpace passwords that had been posted on 4chan a few months before; "gay sex pictures" were posted on his page, we're told, allegedly prompting his girlfriend to break up with him. "She thought I was cheating on her with other guys," the fellow explains to Fox.

WHY ARE WE OBSERVING ANONYMOUS CASE?

A self-proclaimed hacker, rendered ~~the regular sort of~~ anonymous for the purpose of the interview, next explains that the agenda of Anonymous hinges on sowing chaos and discord in pursuit of "lulz," a term our narrator explains to be "a corruption of LOL - laugh out loud." "Anonymous gets big lulz from pulling random pranks," the voiceover continues, "for example, messing with online children's games like Habbo Hotel," and example that Fox somehow neglects to illustrate with footage of exploding vehicles. "Truly epic lulz," he goes on, "come from raids and invasions, like their nationwide campaign to spoil the new Harry Potter book ending." It should be noted that the sinister background music which has played since the beginning of the segment continues through this particular revelation. Of course, it's needed for the next bit in which Anonymous' threat to blow up several football stadiums are described in a bit more detail, although not so much detail as to relay that the scenario was intended as fiction.

SIX SEVEN PAGES ON "ANONYMOUS" GOT 14,374 IS ANONYMOUS CASE? YOU GROSS OVER. "LULZ" IS A SARCASM.

The soundtrack does manage to obtain some level of appropriateness as the segment comes to explain the background of the unknown hacker. Though once a participant in

the then-nascent Anonymous culture, he claims to have since changed his ways, likewise attempting to convert his former associates to a kinder, gentler set of activities. Unsurprisingly, the fellow had little luck in changing anything at all and promptly became the subject of a harsh campaign of mockery and intimidation that prompted the threatening answering machine message played earlier (a more complete version is now run, revealing that the caller had not only threatened our subject's life but even called him an "emo bitch," one of the cruelest insults to which one could resort in 2007). We learn that his frightened mother responded to the posting of their address and phone number by installing an alarm system; a brief clip seems to imply that she also got into the habit of closing the living room curtains. "They even bought a dog," says the narrator, overlaying an action shot of the pet in question. It's also claimed that mom began "tracking down Anonymous members" herself, fearing that her calls to the FBI might not be taken seriously, and perhaps also worrying that unless she herself took them down first, some crack team of Anonymous techno-assassins might someday manage to get past the dog.

As the segment ends, it is noted that many of Anonymous' victims of chance are hopeful that their antagonists will simply get bored and move on. "But insiders say, 'Don't count on that,'" the narrator summarizes, prompting a final statement from the unknown hacker. "Garble garble mumble never forget," the latter says, or attempts to, through the voice garbling software that's been deployed lest Anonymous discover the identity of the fellow whose identity they already posted on the web. Presumably he is referencing the group's longtime motto, "We do not forgive. We do not forget."

Anonymous never did forgive or forget the hacker in question, a fellow named Paul Fetch, for proclaiming himself to be their leader and attempting to "clean up the organization." But then one never forgives or forgets their first romantic partner; one moves on nonetheless. After the airing of the segment, some number of Anonymous participants attacked the Fox affiliate's website, preventing users from viewing the segment online. This was not done out of concern for bad press, but rather out of a sort

So Fetch was in this position?
Said this during interview?

I CANNOT MAKE ANY SENSE OF THE COMMENT - IS
WAY THIS MATTERS, WHERE

of collective instinct. In fact, the segment was promptly re-cut into a sort of techno music video and placed on YouTube, making repetitive use of such lyrics as:

"Hackers on steroids!"
"Anonymous has even threatened..."
"I believe they're domestic terrorists"
"Destroy. Die. Attack."
"Gay sex pictures."
"Secret website!"
"Truly epic lulz"
"Even bought a dog."
"She thought that... that I was cheating on her with guys."

← NON-SENSICAL
WAY NOT
ARE THE PROPS.
AND GET
TO THESE.

... most of which quickly established themselves as beloved memes.

As ridiculous as the now-legendary segment happened to be, the general idea that there were many mean and, in some cases, vastly terrible people hanging around on 4chan in those days was entirely accurate. And we need not rely on any victim testimony to determine this; like any nascent nation with the means to record its own exploits, the hordes of /b/ recorded their deeds so that all might take look upon them and despair, or giggle, or whatever.

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← EXPLAIN FIRST!

Encyclopedia Dramatica was more of a gang than it was a chronicler. And it was very much a chronicler.

Utilizing the wiki format popularized by Wikipedia and adapted by countless other volunteer groups who sought to maintain a compendium of knowledge on some or another niche subject, ED allowed anyone to create new articles or edit existing ones -