*Anonymous is a loose and nebulous confederation of Internet users who tend to*
*congregate in a number of “stronghold” websites of a certain character. These*
*websites include 4chan (particularly the “anything goes” /b/ imageboard), Encyclopaedia*
*Dramatica, reddit, and other forum or imageboard websites that do not require registration to contribute. Anonymous features no distinct or recognized organization or leadership, operating instead by the momentum of Internet populism... Perhaps the only commonality among people affiliated with Anonymous is a militant, fundamentalist view on the freedom of information, censorship, and corruption, especially with respect to governments or organizations leveraging governments.*

- Endgame Systems report on Anonymous, composed in late 2010

                     Stolen by Anonymous in February 2011

The CNN presenter, a British female, is otherwise indistinguishable from the hundreds of other anchors who collectively and haphazardly preside over something akin to news. Ten minutes before the segment began, she’d likely been reminded by the producer as to who I was and provided with a brief summary of what might allegedly be happening that made this interview desirable. The producer would have spoken to me that morning via e-mail and paid attention to random sections of what I’ve told him; at best, he will have since conveyed some portion of this to the presenter, likely along with a few things he’s been told on the subject by some other person who is entirely wrong about all of them. We’re all set for cable.

“The hacker group Anonymous obviously likes to stay undercover. But our next guest says that he’s been associated with them for years. He says he speaks for the organization and shares their views. Gregg Housh is the administrator of a website called ‘Why We Protest.’ And he joins us now live, from Boston. Prepare to show your face, Gregg!”

… she challenges, in the general direction of the in-studio feed in which I stand unmasked as usual, having done television interviews under my real name for over a year now.

“You say you speak for Anonymous. We can’t verify that, so talk me through it.”

“I have... never said that I speak for Anonymous,” I reply. “That is a very bad thing to say in the eyes of Anonymous. Simply by being here in front of you, I’m not Anonymous. Here’s my name, here’s my face.” I had explained this to the producer - and, before that, to dozens of different journalists who had insisted on referring to me as the “official mouthpiece,” “spokesman,” or even “leader” of Anonymous.

“Okay, forgive me for that, but I thought when you’d spoke to my producer earlier on that you said that you thought that you could speak for Anonymous.”

“I can speak for what’s going on. I’m in all the chat channels, I’m in all the websites, I’ve been involved in past Anonymous actions such as the Church of Scientology. But I’m personally not taking part in any of the illegal activities. I’m just trusted by these people and I’m around all their inner circles.”

“Tell me in your own words what you think they’re trying to achieve.”

“You know, everyone on there - so many people from so many different countries - all have their own ideas. But they all revolve around the idea that information is free. And one of the big goals is...”

I pause for a moment, deciding to change tacks. This wasn’t the proper venue in which to try to explain the bigger picture. Nor was it the proper time; December 2010 marked the beginning of a shift that is best recognized in hindsight.

In the hours before the interview, Anonymous participants had launched a distributed denial of service attack, or DDOS, against the respective websites of MasterCard, Visa, Paypal, and Amazon, taking several of these down for hours. The first three had each, within a few days of each other, announced that they would no longer process donations to Wikileaks, which itself had just begun the release of some 250,000 U.S. diplomatic cables. Amazon, meanwhile, had ceased to provide the use of their servers to the organization. All, it seemed, had buckled under pressure from the federal government - which itself had been carrying out a secret war against Wikileaks and its principals for quite a while now. Months later, we would learn more about how that war was being conducted and how widespread the conspiracy had become; for now, I at least knew enough to get the CNN barker off my back.

“We live in a certain society where journalists have certain freedoms, the press has certain freedoms,” I begin. “And from this side of the fence, it looks like Wikileaks is working as a journalistic organization. They’re working with *The Guardian* and all these other existing organizations. So we think they should get those same protections. And we find it very interesting that these financial organizations are cancelling their accounts or denying them charges, like MasterCard, Visa, PayPal. And listing off very clearly-”

“How, though, do the aims effectively justify the means?” she asks me, and likely no one else prior to me, “the means being disrupting me and millions of our viewers from using Visa, MasterCard - and Amazon, which, let’s be honest, let’s face it, they weren’t able to bring down today. And right before Christmas! How do the ends justify the means, you think?”

“There’s a very tough balance to keep here. And I’m smiling because I’ve been asked this question several times today. We don’t want to interrupt the public’s livelihood...”

“... but you are.”

… “because in the end we want them on our side. Some people have been affected, but in all honesty, even when Visa’s website is down completely, you don’t go to Visa’s website to use your credit card. The payment process was working perfectly fine.”

That Anonymous’ operation had not actually inconvenienced the millions of viewers she had said it had fazed the woman not a bit; nor does she seem concerned about having just grossly misinformed those precious viewers about an issue that was important enough to take air time away from Tiger Woods’ marital difficulties. Suddenly, the issue is not that we had inconvenienced everyone, but that we had failed to do so.

“There weren’t enough hackers today to bring down the Amazon site,” she notes. “I get the sense that there are about 1,000, 1,500 participants around the world - and we’re giving them the oxygen of publicity tonight, and there might be more by the time this story is over. I hope we’re not complicit in what they’re doing.”

They were.

“But 1,500” - she continued, citing the number someone had made up - “doesn’t sound like a lot of people to me. And they certainly weren’t able to hit the Amazon site. So what should we expect next?”

As it turns out, we should have expected that I’d end up doing a book for Amazon’s new publishing arm less than a year later, which makes for a good lesson in and of itself, unless it doesn’t.

“Well, the Amazon site didn’t go down,” I conceded. “You’re absolutely correct. But your numbers - as I left for the studio, there were about 3,000 people in the chat channels doing this. so it’s still growing. And the complicit line you used there - that’s a bit tough, because the reason that DDOS are effective is not necessarily because the sites go down, but that whenever these DDOS happen, people like me and people like you end up talking about it.”

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I was born in a town that no longer exists, it having been swallowed up by the ever-expanding Dallas suburbs in the years since. My life began normally enough that I was able to get used to normality and thereby identify abnormality when it came along, which it promptly did when I was about three.

At that point, my dad owned a furniture store as well as a series of Dodge Chargers, Corvettes, and other fun status symbols of the middle class. My older sister had cerebral palsy, which is rare but not so rare as to be out of the ordinary. Mom was a homemaker. My dad and his friends started a gang.

Thirty years later, I still have no idea why that should have been so, or whether drug use prompted the car theft and bank robberies or if drugs just sort of seemed the natural thing to do under the circumstances. What I know is that my dad, his brother, and a few friendly accomplices somehow lurched into a crime spree sufficient to draw the attention of the Feds. By the end of it - to the extent that it ever ended - my dad and my uncle were on the run, one of their friends was dead, and mom had quite understandably filed for divorce.

Mom and dad thereafter had a series of spirited arguments as to whether or not dad had voided his right to help raise me. Dad’s position was that he was indeed responsible enough to do so, and he tried to prove it by threatening to find us and kidnap me. Lest dad win the debate via fait accompli, mom moved the two of us around quite a bit until dad finally gave up and left us alone.
No longer at risk of having her son taken by a career criminal, mom was free to move us in with our grandmother. This was a major plus since she couldn't afford much in the way of housing; with no prior work experience, she had been relegated largely to a series of waitressing jobs even as she had to contend with the expenses involved in raising not only me, but also a daughter suffering from a major degenerative disease. There would be plenty of days on which we only had one meal.

Another advantage to moving in with grandma was the presence of a potential father figure in the person of John, an older man whose son had been the one who died in the midst of the drug-fueled crime spree. John had needed a place to stay, and grandma had needed someone else living there. Beyond that, the two had an interesting sort of friendship that seemed to fall short of love. Uncle John, as I called him, was drunk every night that I knew him, which I suppose was understandable; a few years after his son’s death, his daughter died from a cocaine overdose. Incidentally, he ended up killing himself in grandma’s backyard a few years ago.

The next few years of my childhood were uneventful. After I turned nine, dad suddenly showed up driving a Porsche. He explained to mom that he’d gotten a new job driving high-end vehicles from their original lot to another where they might sell better. This was true in a way. At any rate, I got to ride around in a couple of those cars before they were chopped or sold out of state. Then dad disappeared once again. But always in the back of my mind, there was the threat - sometimes the anticipation - that dad would change his mind again and come to kidnap me. A day didn’t go by that I didn’t wonder what he was up to now.

Having known him better than I, my mom found his absence easier to accept. Other male role models would appear from time to time. One of them, Rick, was a professor. Another one, Craig, was especially patient with me - which is just as well, since I gave that one more shit than I’d given to anyone previously, and still regret it to this day. But by that time I considered myself man of the house. After all, I was already making loads of money at the age of 13.

At that time, there was an arcade in the area called Tilt. They had filled up the entire basement of a mall with video games. And this was the second heyday of arcade games, when Street Fighter 2 had just come out and one’s status was determined in large part by one’s ability to excel at it. I earned a lot of status in those days - which is good, because when you beat someone else, you keep playing, and it was rare occasion that I had more than a dollar to spend for the afternoon.

One day, a new machine appeared. Lotto Fun was something akin to the little wired machines that models operate on local news segments given over to the state lottery. Animated ping pong balls hopped around in a see-through container, each with a number on it. The user picks six numbers, which would appear on the screen on the left. Each time you pushed a button, whichever ball is closest to the gap would fall in. The more numbers you got correctly, and in order, the more you won. And it was a sliding scale, like a slot machine; if you put in four tokens and won, you got 16 in return.

On around the fourth time I played the machine, I noticed something. Among the various animations given off by the screen was one that seemed somehow out of place - a sort of pixel that turned yellow at certain moments. Soon I’d figured out that if one happened to push the button when the pixel was flashing yellow, the ball that fell in would be that of the number you’d selected - which is to say that if you simply put in four tokens and then pressed the button only when that little yellow light flashed, you would be assured of making a profit of 12 tokens. Most likely, some programmer decided to set it up that way, unknown to his employers, for the same reason that so many other programmers have added similar back doors to other products - a reason that we’ll have plenty of occasion to discuss later. For now, I was just a 13-year-old with lots and lots of arcade tokens.

Now, the reason that games like Lotto Fun don’t legally constitute gambling is that the tokens entered and the tokens won have “No Cash Value,” as is stamped on each token. One could just as well stamp “This Does Not Exist” or “Cure For Cancer” on such tokens with equal results; cash value is not determined by imprinted proclamations but rather by the market. And in a video arcade such as this one, the market dictates that tokens are worth a quarter each, that being how much they sell for in the dispensers. Markets, though, can be undercut.

My pockets filled with tokens, I waited next to one of the token dispensers until someone came up to use it.

“Hey, man. I’ll give you six tokens for that dollar.”

“What? Do they work?”

I stuck one of my tokens into a nearby arcade game, which promptly started up.

“Okay. Here’s two bucks, give me 12.”

“Sure thing.”

It was, at that point, a week before class picture. A week later, I came to class wearing the nicest clothes I had ever owned.

There was more than one Lotto Fun machine at Tilt. I taught a friend the game’s secret tell, lectured him on the finer points of the scam - learning the pattern that the security guards walked so as to avoid having one come by when one was selling at the token dispensers, paying attention to the ceiling cameras, etc - and took a 25 percent cut of his daily take. At that point, I hadn’t seen any of the mobster movies. I didn’t know anything about RICO or racketeering or anything else of the sort. But the fundamentals of crime are universal. My friend wasn’t quite as proficient as I was but he could pull out $50 in a day. Soon I was making about $400 a week - an extraordinary amount of cash for any 13-year-old, and almost unimaginable for a kid from a poor family.

Back at home, I kept my increasing supply of cash in a tennis ball canister. One night I came home to find my mom sitting at the kitchen table, the canister open on the table. Concerned, she asked where I was getting this kind of money. I told her, no drugs, no violence. She pressed me, still not understanding how I could possibly pull off something like this. I explained the situation with the arcade. She laughed and told me that I probably couldn’t even get in any real trouble for that. Looking back, that was the moment when I realized that I could probably get away with quite a bit more. I bought a moped.

One day, I had just walked into Tilt when an employee stopped me. He was about 25 years old, a big guy with a mustache and a beard.

“We need to walk,” he said.

Out of options, I followed alongside of him.

“Am I in trouble?”

“No, no, no.”

“Are you calling security?”

“No, no.”

He took me to one end of the arcade where no one could overhear us. He’d been watching me for a while, he explained. He knew what I was doing, and he had a pretty good idea of how much money I was making. And he wanted in.

Being the dumb kid I was, I told him exactly how much I was making. As such, he ended up with about 25 percent of the overall take from then on. But he also made sure that I had a solid perimeter, free from security guards. And of all the ceiling cameras, he informed me, about five percent actually worked, and none of those were in our area - one less limiting factor in the time my friend and I could spend selling at the dispensers.

Things proceeded like this until Tilt finally removed the Lotto Fun games, likely on a scheduled rotation. In the six months or so that I had run the operation, we probably took out something around $10,000. At any rate, my growing suspicion that the law simply didn’t apply to me had been confirmed.

As my adolescence continued and my savings dried up, I found myself in need of a real job. The first of these was at Wendy’s, where I lasted about two weeks before throwing a soda at my boss’ face. For some reason I thought McDonalds might work out better. Instead, I ended up throwing my manager onto the grill, burning his hands; this was in retaliation for him stupidly burning me with the fry basket out of sheer negligence, but apparently McDonalds policy does not take into account the occasional necessity for revenge, because I was fired. Anyway, jobs weren’t my thing.

School wasn’t my thing, either. I hassled my teachers with endless questions in order to improve their job performance, but the administration failed to appreciate my assistance. One day, when I found myself sent to his office one too many time for his liking, the principal told me that if I showed up there again, I’d be suspended. On my way out, the coach stopped me, pushed me against a wall, and made a similar threat, except this one involved taking me out back and kicking my ass.

That evening, I recruited two friends. One was actually a friend, while another was simply a kid I didn’t care for all that much but who had the virtue of being the son of the county sheriff. He was therefore a sort of walking insurance policy against any police involvement were we to somehow get caught doing what it was that we were about to do. And the thing we were about to do involved crowbars.

The next morning, everyone arrived at school to find it trashed - shattered glass, broken desks, smashed lamps, and other synonyms followed by nouns of the breakable sort. No one could prove anything, nor was I necessarily even the key suspect. It seemed like we would get away with it until a few days later, when my friend decided he would brag about it to some other kid - not realizing that a teacher was standing right behind him. He, the sheriff’s son, and I were rounded up, brought into the office, and with some great degree of satisfaction, the principal announced to us that the sheriff was on his way. I tried not to smile.

At the end of it, my friend was shipped off to another school district in Illinois, where he was able to start school just in the nick of time, before the paperwork to the effect that he was a hoodlum was made available. The son of the sheriff was sent to military school. But nothing really happened to me. My mom told me I’d better get a new Moped to replace the decrepit one I’d bought a few years back with my crime money, because she sure as well wasn’t going to be driving me around all day. I never went back to school.

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I got a computer at some point after I turned 16. Within a few weeks I was able to code. Unlike everything else, coding came naturally to me. I started playing around on the dial-up bulletin board systems (BBS’s) that were popular at the time; I also managed to get a research account that allowed me to access the internet before it was effectively available to the public. This was 1992, and institutions like the National Center for Supercomputing Applications were playing around with some interesting browser ideas; Mosaic, then the top of the line, couldn’t even show images yet. Meanwhile, there weren’t many people who had even heard of HTML, much less knew how to program in it; at the same time, an increasing number of companies were deciding that they needed a web presence.

A neighbor of mine with whom I’d discussed programming on occasion had a friend at one of those companies - a Kansas City firm that needed a database converted to a website. Having learned that I could code HTML, my neighbor called up his friend and said that while I could do the job, I was only 16. The company said they didn’t give a shit if I was 12, that they wanted me to interview for the job. I did, and was hired to come out to Kansas City and do the specified work.

Moving to Kansas City at my age would have been difficult were it not for a happy coincidence - my dad happened to be living out there at the time, working for my uncle. My mom’s good friend was also based in the area, and could thus report back to my mom. So my dad and I rented a townhouse together. Finally, we got a chance to get to know each other; from the age of four up until then, I had only spent a total of a few days with him.

I began my career as a web developer and all-around programmer. I did a good job at the firm - good enough to automate everything they needed and thereby put myself out of work. At that early point in the history of corporate web work, there wasn’t yet a constant push for changes and improvements in online setups; just setting up a website was considered akin to pulling off a five-man theft of a high-security art museum or some such thing, and when it was all over, everyone concerned was satisfied.

But I found other companies that needed similar work done, and was thereby able to land a series of consultancies and full-time positions over the next several years. I went to work for Ringside, the largest manufacturer of boxing equipment in the US, where I ran their computer network. The head, a guy named John Brown, was the guy you consulted with if you were making a boxing movie and wanted everything to be nice and accurate. That was an interesting job to have, as far as jobs go. I worked at American Century - the third largest investment firm in the world at that time - where I had originally been brought on to help run a massive computer migration from OS2 to NT4, and was afterwards asked to stay on for a while.

For the entirety of my stay in Kansas City, I helped run the local production of Rocky Horror Picture Show, playing Brad. This was where I met my first wife, whom I’d marry a few years later. But shortly after moving to Chicago, we got divorced, and she took our daughter and went back to Kansas City. Bummed out about the break-up of my first family, I was thrilled when my dad suddenly showed up, broke and hoping to stay on my couch. The two of us continued to live as roommates even after he found a new job, and once again we had the opportunity to reconnect. Things were looking up.

About a year later, I found myself unable to withdraw money from my bank account. It turned out that a lien had been filed against it, one that had actually been intended for someone else. Today, this sort of thing can be fixed in a few hours, but back then it took a week to rectify. While I waited for the bank to sort everything out, bills came up. I spent a long evening scrounging together about $1700 in cash, borrowed from assorted friends, with the intention of paying rent, electric, gas, and all that the next day. As it turned out, I wouldn’t have the time to drive around town paying off things in person, as I had a meeting the next morning at work. Luckily, my dad had the day off, and he volunteered to take care of it. I gave him the cash and my car and went to work.

When I got home, he wasn’t there. Neither was my car. When the next day came and he still hadn’t showed up, I called around and discovered that none of the bills had been paid. I never saw my dad again.

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There was a time, years later, when a certain array of people had a degree of influence over something very powerful. One of these people wrote a sort of manuscript, one that was originally intended to serve as a guide for the others who would come along to assist, or even to replace them one day. For several reasons, that manuscript was never distributed.

To the extent that it is a guide, it advises a particular blend of caution and aggression. To the extent that is a manifesto, it centers on two facts: that anyone may now theoretically have any information they please, and that anyone may now talk with, agree with, and act with anyone else on the planet. These two facts are portrayed as central to any relevant school of thought about where humanity is headed.

The document is huge, and deals with a wide range of subjects, but one line bears noting:

“Balance of power refers not to a one-dimensional measurement of who is stronger than whom, but to an overall disposition of strengths and weaknesses among opponents.”

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I made some interesting friends on the dial-up BBSs I frequented throughout my late adolescence. Among them was a kid who told me that “everything is on IRC” - internet relay chat.

IRC was a world unto itself, its user base drawn from the technical elite, many of whom would become millionaires over the next decade. Early adapters, software engineers, security experts, hackers of both the criminal and legitimate sort, and the system administrators who controlled the increasingly crucial technical infrastructure of the world’s major companies all congregated together in what was essentially a secret plane of existence, unknown to the world at large. It was an environment that seemed especially designed for conspiracy.

Among other things, this kid introduced me to the nascent warez subculture - the informal network of individuals who pirated software for free distribution, and motivated either by ideology or street cred or some combination of the two. I had downloaded a few things off BBSs, but I’d never seen anything like this. From the moment I was introduced to it, I was in.

My mind has a very organizational side to it; I have the desire to fix everything, to make everything run smoother. As the kid proceeded to show me the structure that this illegal sub-industry had so far taken, my mind was already attacking the problem of how to improve on it. Within the next few years, I had reformed one of the world’s biggest warez syndicates at the time, and many of our techniques were thereafter adopted by others.

Such improvements didn’t hinge merely on programming, but also social engineering - something that will come up quite a bit in this book and which entails the manipulation of another person in order to prompt them to act in a certain way. Of course, there’s not necessarily any clear line between social engineering and straightforward yet self-interested persuasion. But the term has come to be used within the context of the security field in particular as a means of describing “hacking by other means” - the non-technical means of the sort that famed hacker Kevin Mitnick often employed as a last resort when his objectives weren’t otherwise attainable.

The bulk of my plans for the re-invention of the warez community required me to build up a series of sources within a number of major firms dealing in both software and hardware. To those system administrators at software companies who could leak us the programs before they were released, I sent free hardware. To those sysadmins at hardware firms who could manage to sneak out any hardware that for one reason or another didn’t have to be accounted for, I made available the entirety of our pirated software. As our surplus hardware and library of software increased, I was in a better and better position to make offers that were sufficiently attractive to a higher and higher class of backroom techie until such time that I was ready to take things to the next level.

Sprint’s headquarters were based in Kansas City - itself the backbone of the growing internet at the time, with the majority of net traffic flowing through the area’s trunks and a wide range of research facilities having sprung up in the area as a result. Several of these were Sprint labs dedicated in part to developing faster internet technologies, and which necessarily had a tremendous amount of bandwidth available - one had six OC3s, each sporting 155 megabytes, an unbelievable amount in those days. And it was all unmetered, which is to say that no one in a position to care was keeping track of how much of it was used on a given day as the firm carried out its research.

In the course of my perpetual online search for useful people, I happened to meet a guy who was connected to one of these labs. It turned out that we had a mutual friend in real life, beyond the world of IRC channels and BBS forums. That friend facilitated a lunch meeting, and in the hour and a half that I had with this fellow, I gave him the latest variation on a spiel that I’d been using to recruit new participants, one that had improved with time as our resources increased - that, first of all, what I was doing on the internet was a lot more fun than whatever is what that he was doing; that by this time we had regimented things in such a way that it was almost impossible that he or any of our other supplies would get caught having this particular brand of fun; that, if he were to agree to the plan, we’d be storing all of our software - games, apps, music, porn, anything that anyone could possibly want - on servers located right behind his desk, from which he could help himself; that the software in question would include new releases and that this would begin uploading to those servers within seconds of its public release - not a couple hours or a few minutes, but literally four or five seconds after a given company had made it available for sale; that in some cases software would be on his servers not upon release, but months prior, as we had employees who leaked us stuff the minute the software was completed, all cracked and ready to go; and that, in addition to all of this, we would feed him all the hardware his little heart desired - hard drives, computer casing, CPUs, anything - as we already had deals in place with people at firms so large that adding a dozen extra units to the monthly orders wouldn’t even show up on the paperwork. And all he had to do in exchange for all of this was to give us access to those OC3s.

He agreed. And just a few days later, our warez syndicate had more bandwidth capability than did most governments.

We were now in a position to wreak havoc on the world’s corporate giants using their own employees, their own resources, their own infrastructure. I got us a source inside of Microsoft who was willing to leak us the various beta builds of Windows long before each one was available as a commercial product. We had Windows 95 and were shooting it out around the globe almost a year before it hit store shelves. It was a beta version, with its project designation “Chicago 32” still imprinted in large letters on the desktop background - buggy, but working, and interesting to play with. Microsoft was pissed, but so long as we had direct, internal, and hidden access to their beta build server, we had whatever they had within ten minutes flat - no activation necessary, no serial number needed. Theoretically, every program ever devised could be made available to everyone in the world for free. Someone was going to have to go to prison.

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When the knock on my door comes, my roommate answers it. He’s pushed back into the living room. The local cops come in first, guns drawn - the FBI come in behind them so as to skip any initial shootout. I decline the chance to engage in a firefight with several dozen law enforcement agents and instead come out of my room to surrender, or whatever one does.

They let my friend go and sit me down in the living room. More FBI stream in to “secure” the house. I ask if I can turn on the TV and watch the news and they tell me to shut up. I ask a few more times before they finally let me. The Feds are taking individual photographs of each and every five-square-yard portion of everything, like Japanese tourists who just did their first hit of crack at Disneyland.

When all my hardware has been loaded up into federal vans, someone tells me that I’m not actually charged with anything just yet, that they’re simply here to collect information. I’d have to come downtown with them but would be home by evening.

They want me to cooperate. Most everyone I’d be able to cooperate against has already been swept up like me, so that’s not going anywhere. But I want a way out. I won’t go after anyone involved in just warez, but if they want me to infiltrate credit card thieves or child porn merchants, I’d be more than happy to do either. They tell me that this is possible. They’ll get back to me.

They take me to the lie detector. I tell them I’ll lie anyway and that, incidentally, I don’t ascribe to the science behind lie detection devices and neither does anyone else who’s competent. I ask the administrator if he really thinks he’s doing anything useful. But I do compliment him on his bright orange tie, one of the few things about the day that still sticks out.

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Before getting to me and several other people like me, the FBI had snatched up dozens of lesser participants, turned a few, and successfully conjured more raids out of what little they had started with. I had been on a short list of people in whom they were particularly interested - rather, my screenname “wizy” was on the list. But the Feds were obligated to make thousands of arrests altogether if the industry and anyone else paying attention were to be satisfied. There probably wasn’t any one particular grizzled old agent who’d spent months contemplating and chasing this enigmatic “wizy” character through the more dramatically-charged ends of the cyber wasteland, sometimes scoring clues but mostly being outwitted, although this may change when we start working on the screenplay.

Three days after I’d first been detained, the FBI brought me back downtown, and fuck me if they didn’t put me right back on the goddamned lie detector test again and ask me the very same questions they’d asked me three days previously and getting back the same mostly false answers. They put me back on the thing a couple more times over the next three months, during which I had no clue what was going to happen; they weren’t any more forthcoming to me than I was to them. Finally they made me a proposal: I would start working on a child porn sting operation which, like a lot of the more productive offers that are made by the Feds to people in my position, eventually fell through after months of preparation, and for no reason that can be ascertained by anyone at all. They resumed alternating between putting me on the lie detector and asking me to help bring in people that I simply wasn’t going to bring in.

Some variant of all this went on for five years, during which I had no idea if I were going to go to prison or become a crime fighter or what. This is a common situation among those engaged in crime or activism or both and who use computers to this end; it’s being faced at this writing by dozens of Anonymous activists who face charges in nations around the world, and many of them will go on to do interesting things in the years to come, on different sides of different fights, and retaining old enemies with whom they’ll continue to do battle across a changing but increasingly consequential, and thus increasingly dangerous, landscape. Some will be swept up by society and placed into positions of limited but effectively secret power - most societies accidentally take up such people and equip them with positions in the state, unconsciously deeming them to be a sort of useful weapon - and some of these will co-opt the resources that become available to them to carry on their personal or political conflicts by other means. Almost everything that occurs will be invisible to the public except in the form of occasional news items that will be mostly false.

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I stared at my computer monitor. Then I stared at it some more.

This wasn’t going to do it for me.

I moved my mouse cursor over the icon for the IRC program. But then I took my hand off the mouse.

I stared at the monitor once again.

Then I got up and went to get a Pepsi from the fridge.

I don’t drink alcohol or smoke cigarettes. I don’t do any illicit drugs or even licit ones, really.
Pepsi is my only vice. And it’s not even a vice.

I write code, I provide technical consultation to companies, I start up various small-scale enterprises of my own - little online ventures that I can automate and calibrate and regulate from home. Tweaks go out, checks come in, I drink Pepsi.

It’s not enough. I needed a game to play. But I don’t play sports any more organized than frisbee. I don’t play video games or computer games or anything else of the sort. I don’t even play Minesweeper.

It was 2006 - four years since I’d been raided by the FBI. Four years of legal limbo is not uncommon for those facing federal charges of any complexity. The limbo is bothersome, but that’s not what kept me starting at the monitor. I missed that complexity.

The little mouse pointer was still on the IRC icon. I could click it, as I had a thousand times before. And I could go back to the warez servers and I could help to rebuild the pirate empire that the feds had disrupted. But if I did so, I could kiss a good portion of my ‘20s goodbye. I was already facing a potential prison stint, although the details were yet to be worked out. If I got back into the warez game now - even before I’d been prosecuted for the previous offenses, and with the feds now having an eye on me - I could expect to be caught again.

But I missed it.

Warez was the best game in town. Social engineering, hacking, planning, allocation, delegation, stealth, design, distribution - it was all there. You were up against the most powerful institutions in the world. You could ruin Bill Gates’ week from a thousand miles away. You had direct and instant access to the forbidden fruits of an age-defining industry. You lived out a winning streak at high stakes. And then, at the height of it all, two dozen armed men swoop into your apartment to inform you that you’ve just lost the game.

I finished my Pepsi. And then I moved the mouse pointer away from the IRC client and over to my web browser. Maybe I could find a different game.

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Like many whose work and play revolved around the internet, I had been vaguely familiar with 4chan.org, the increasingly popular image board that had appeared in 2003 and which had gradually gained in notoriety. 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. By 2006, when I really began to study it for myself, this had become clear to those who were paying attention.

The format helped to define the nature of the content, as formats always do. 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 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.

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.

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 now common knowledge. 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, and are still widely ignored. 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 that would come later. In 2006, I had my new game.