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Bad Techno-Subjects: Griefing is Serious Business

By Aubrey Anable



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Recently, a [New York Times Magazine](#) article entitled, "Malwebolence," explored the online activities of "trolls."¹ Also called griefers or e-terrorists, trolls are masterful users of digital media who delight in harassing users of online message boards and disrupting play in massively multi-player online games (MMOGs), to the point of eliciting extreme emotional reactions from their targets. Griefing can result in tears, crashed servers, destroyed property, lost money, and death threats. "Malwebolence," is interesting because it speaks to the desires and anxieties that swirl around bad behavior online and what it means for techno-subjectivity and digital citizenship. The author, Mattathias Schwartz, interviews some of the more notorious trolls and griefers and begins to get at what their bad behavior is about. One subject describes his activities as a means to create savvier Internet users, saying, "Hacks like this tell you to watch out by hitting you with a baseball bat."² Another calls griefing "Internet eugenics," and states, "Blogging gives the illusion of participation to a bunch of retards."³ Schwartz wonders what this behavior can teach us about free speech online. Rather than resorting to panic-based regulation, he argues, user-instigated policing may be the best way to deal with these kinds of bad techno-subjects. Furthermore, he suggests that being exposed to grief online might lead to "a better collective understanding" of free speech and the democratic potential of digital media. He writes:

[T]he Internet's system of civil machines has proved more resilient than anyone imagined. [...] The news media continually present the online world as a Wild West infested with villainous hackers, spammers and pedophiles. And yet the Internet is doing very well for a frontier town on the brink of anarchy. Its traffic is expected to quadruple by 2012.⁴

Impolitic use of digital media is an important cultural frame through which techno-subjectivity is imagined and negotiated. However, the idea that bad techno-subjects are simply minor annoyances that make digital democracy stronger obfuscates what is really at stake in the formation of subjectivities in relation to digital technologies. What is at stake is a critique of the collective disavowal around the commodification of the Internet and of how this affects its democratic potential and our agency as users. The idea of the "good" techno-subject is infused with the mythology of digital citizenship— notions of transcendent and unregulated democracy through digital media. Toby Miller calls this meeting of libertarianism with techno-progressivism "cybertarianism." He writes:

Cybertarian mythology rests not only on a flawed, albeit touching, account of the person as a ratiocinative, atomistic individual who can exist outside politics and society. It equally assumes that what was born of warfare consultancies and "big science," was spread through large institutions, was commodified for a tiny fraction of computer users, and is now moving towards comprehensive corporate control, can be claimed now or ever, for the wild boys of geekdom.⁵

Cybertarianism and digital citizenship depend on the myth that the Internet is an *inherently* free space and that digital literacy will inevitably make individual's lives better through an engagement with the digital public sphere. American politicians are currently proving to be excellent object lessons in the politics of cybertarianism. When noting the digital divide between John McCain and Barack Obama, journalists often cite comments McCain made during a New York Times interview. When asked about the fact that his staff help him get online, McCain responded, "I am learning to get online myself, and I will have that down fairly soon, getting on myself."⁶ In a recent New York Times editorial on the subject, Mark Leibovitch, paraphrasing a Silicon Valley futurist, proposes that, "The [Internet] 'user experience' [...] brings with it an implicit understanding of how the country lives, and where it might be heading." McCain lacks "user experience" Leibovitch argues, and thus appears, "deficient in this broader appreciation for how technology affects lives."⁷ McCain is presented as a bad techno-subject because he is not a "user" and, instead, relies on others (his wife and his staff) to connect him to digital culture. Furthermore, McCain's computer illiteracy is connected to a perceived inability to think and act in a complicated world. To wit, the Obama campaign released the following campaign ad in September:

Obama, on the other hand, is often photographed using a BlackBerry and his campaign uses social networking websites like Facebook and MySpace to greater effect than McCain's. This is not only read as a sign of an effective campaign strategy, but also as a sign of a more abstract concept: his greater digital citizenship. Obama is hailed as "cybergenic," much like John F. Kennedy is remembered as telegenic not only for looking good on TV, but also for masterfully using that medium to craft his political identity.

In order to think about the function of bad techno-subjects within the cybertarian discourse, we should look at a moment from 2007 when the presidential campaign and grieving collided. Long before the story of John Edwards' "webisode" sex scandal broke, the Democratic presidential hopeful became the first candidate to have campaign headquarters in the MMOG *Second Life*.⁸ He was in a strong position in the digital race, but in February of 2007, shortly after the headquarters were complete, the virtual building was vandalized with, among other things, Soviet imagery, a digitally manipulated picture of Edwards in blackface, and a giant pile of talking feces,



Exhibiting tone deafness for Internet culture, the Edwards campaign responded to the prank with utter seriousness and attributed it to “Republican *Second Life* users” because the pranksters’ avatars were wearing “Bush ‘08” buttons. Claiming responsibility for the attack, Mudkips Acronym, a pseudonymed representative of the “Patriotic Nigras” (PN), a group of self identified “e-terrorists,” posted a reply on the Edwards ‘08 website stating, “we’re not Republicans [...] I’m one of the most hardcore liberals I know.” However, Acronym made clear that the attack was not meant as a political statement. Repeating a PN tagline that uses a corruption of LOL (laugh out loud), he stated, “we simply did it for the lulz.”⁹

Eager to ridicule a politician for pandering to gamers, bloggers quickly picked up the story. John Brownlee on Wired magazine’s blog writes:

This is the modern-day equivalent of hippies freaking out the squares. You see countless news stories about this, over and over again: the sorry gray drones of political parties or corporations rushing to establish a presence in *Second Life* because it’s the thing to do, only to find themselves staring in horror directly into the collective Goatse.cx of the Internet’s soul.¹⁰

The Internet appears as a libertarian’s vision of alternative culture—a perpetual Burning Man— and the PN seem like folk heroes in Brownlee’s and other journalists’ coverage of the event. According to this perception of the event, it is a mistake to expect conventional political dialogue and decorum in a computer game populated by six-foot squirrels and humanoid avatars flying off to the genital boutiques and sex clubs. This judgment by the Internet elite sentenced Edwards to the uncool corner (i.e. very bad techno-subject), barring him from the coveted “netroots” that Obama was successfully tapping.¹¹ For Kirsten Powers of Fox News, who aired an exposé of the tawdry sex clubs that opportunistically opened up on the perimeter of the Edwards headquarters, his dalliance with the Internet was indicative of the Democrats’ reluctance to address the party’s perceived loose morals and slippery ways:

The PN, however, are the more interesting bad techno-subjects here. The group represents themselves through a website with the tagline "ruining your Second Life since 2006." Their most infamous attack, prior to Edwards, was against the SL real estate mogul Anshe Chung after the avatar's image appeared on the cover of Business Week for being the first to make a million dollars in the game. During a CNET interview with Chung in SL, the PN bombarded the stage with animated penises, eventually crashing the simulator.



Despite this previous moment of infamy, the PN are only briefly mentioned in the immediate coverage of the Edwards SL vandalism. Later, Wired Magazine published a short article by Julian Dibbell about the PN. Dibbell describes grieving as a "full-fledged culture" that organizes attacks against the wealthy and powerful online.¹² Indeed, the Chung and Edwards attacks do seem to suggest that the PN take issue with the ways the powerful use and control SL, but, according to the group, "it's all for the lulz." This disavowal of political relevance by the PN and claims for relevance by others is central to how grieving functions for cybertarianism. Like Schwartz,

Dibbell comes to the conclusion that griefers train us to be savvier users by making us suspicious of serious investment, emotional or otherwise, in games. Yet, those who want to see griefers as heroes must overlook or otherwise explain away the group's racist and sexist symbolism. Dibbell maneuvers around the question of racism in the following passage:

[T]heir blackface shenanigans, they say, aren't racist in any heartfelt sense. [...] ^ban^, leader of the Patriotic Negras [says,] "it's all just a joke." It's only one element, he insists, in an arsenal of PN techniques designed to push users past the brink of moral outrage toward that rare moment—at once humiliating and enlightening—when they find themselves crying over a computer game.

PN invasions of SL traffic in everything from low bodily humor (flying phalluses and the goatse.cx meme) to racist and homophobic images and language ("nigra" avatars with giant afros despite the group's mostly white membership and their favorite insult, "fag"). A sign of this failure to fully engage with the PN's symbolic warfare can be seen in most of the blog coverage of the Edwards attack. When Acronym's statement about the attack was quoted, his last line, "Enjoy your AIDS," is almost uniformly left out.

The racist imagery and homophobic remarks of the PN are heavily coded to be both offensive and inscrutable. Dibbell is correct to point out that the offensive language has the double valence of effective trolling material (it should elicit a response from targets) and group policing (outsiders are immediately recognizable by their misuse of the codes), but to let the PN off the hook for bad race politics because Dibbell sees a larger cause in their actions is to miss the ideological paradox within which grieving operates. Should we take them seriously when they say, "it's all for the lulz?"

The PN are also fond of saying, "The internet is serious business;" but sarcastically meaning just the opposite.



This meme is crucial to understanding what grief means for digital culture. It says, on the one hand, that whomever reads the PN's racist and homophobic language straight on, so to speak falls into their trap by taking it seriously and getting upset. On the other hand, it means precisely what it says. The Internet is serious business. But the Internet relies on the myth that it is not serious business to give the medium its appeal as a vast, free, and lawless frontier. The PN operate between these two meanings and within this paradox. Their bigotry tests the limits of speech online, while their actions test the limits of corporate control of digital technologies and notions of private property online.

Griefing troubles our ideas about what constitutes "play." Play is increasingly the dominant user experience, mode of address, and subject position online. In some sense, we are all hailed as players, if not always gamers,

by digital media. Grievers, as their very name suggests, destroy ideas we might have that digital play is simply about "fun." Grief in a game demands that we think about whether it is even possible to draw lines around play, as Johan Huizinga's notion of the magic circle suggests. Grief demands that we ask if clear distinctions between digital play and economic activity are or ever were possible? From gold farming and SL millionaires to the explosion of "serious games" and digital campaigning, digital play is indeed serious business and far from a Wild West free-for-all. Whether it is a personal blog, a profile on Facebook, a posting on YouTube, or an avatar in World of Warcraft, the mandate of Web 2.0 is: create content or cease to exist. As many media theorists have pointed out, the "prosumer" and "crowdsourcing" aspects of Web 2.0 tend to obfuscate whatever cultural distinctions were left between work time and play time. The good techno-subjects in the U.S. are the ones who spend as much time playing a MMOG as writing about their pastimes on a blog or message board, refining their Facebook profiles, or posting videos on YouTube.

Additionally, the technological virtuosity of the PN attacks calls into question the equalizing and benign concept of the "user experience." Rather than describing diverse and subjective experiences, the phrase "user experience" describes a techno-subject, "the user", who may embody and perform a range of techno-subjectivities across diverse digital media, but is first and foremost a user of a commodity. Not all user experiences are equal because the experience depends heavily on the user's competence with the tools. Yet the whole notion of digital citizenship in Web 2.0 buries the significance of computer mastery in the name of furthering the idea that digital technologies are universally "user-friendly" now.

By pushing at the limits of ideological tolerance, the technological and institutional structures of games, the distinctions between virtual currencies and real currencies, public space and private space, and pleasure and pain in gameplay, grievers make visible some of the ways the cybertarian mythology breaks down. The Wild West image is crucial to cybertarianism, but it is far from accurate. In 2008, the Internet is bound by a narrower and narrower set of subjectivities--not because of Internet regulation of the impolitic, but rather because of the commodification of techno-subjectivity itself. What is paradoxical about the PN is that they resist this commodification through bigotry that invites regulation, while supporting a cybertarian philosophy that seeks to reify their behavior through the forces of unfettered "democracy" and free speech.

So, finally, we have to ask: are the PN, and John McCain for that matter, bad techno-subjects we should learn to love because they resist techno-progressive mythologies about digital citizenship? Well, not exactly. McCain, of course, can afford not to give a damn about Web 2.0. He has people for that. He is not actively resisting anything, and, if president, would surely further deliver the Internet into the pocket of large corporations. And the PN, as argued above, are the most loyal cybertarians out there. They are not, as Brownlee put it, "the modern day equivalent of hippies freaking out the squares." Like the hackers of yesteryear who worked to break into things to show corporations, the military, and the FBI where their security was lax, the PN crack open cybertarianism in order to strengthen it. Their racist and homophobic antics ultimately shore up the fantasy of the Internet as a free frontier for "the wild boys of geekdom" and create endless amounts of content for their blogs.

As the meme says, the Internet is serious business. The challenge, however, for digital citizens, users, players, grievers, and good and bad techno-subjects everywhere is to translate the power of the meme into a coherent critique of the commodification of digital agency.

NOTES

1 Mattathias Schwartz. "Malwebolence." New York Times Magazine 3 August 2008: 27-30.

2 Ibid. 27.

3 Ibid. 28.

4 Ibid. 29.

5 Toby Miller. "Introduction to Part IV." Critical Cultural Policy Studies Ed. Justin Lewis and Toby Miller. New York: Blackwell, 2002. 145.

6 Nagourney, Adam and Michael Cooper. "McCain's Conservative Model? Roosevelt (Theodore, That Is)." New York Times 13 July 2008.

7 Leibovitch, Mark. "Hail to the Twitterer." New York Times 3 August 2008.

8 The *Second Life* headquarters were not officially connected with the Edwards campaign, but were set up by an Edwards volunteer with the permission of the campaign.

9 McCarthy, Caroline. "Second Life Grievers Claim Responsibility for Edwards Vandalism." CNET News Blog 5 March 2007.

http://news.cnet.com/8301-10784_3-6164467-7.html; Sklar, Urizenus. "Edwards HQ Vandalized. Campaign Blames Virtual Republicans."

Second Life Herald 1 March 2007. <http://www.secondlifeherald.com/slh/2007/03/edwards_hq_vand.html>; Cabron, Lou. "John Edwards' Virtual Attackers Unmasked." 10 Zen Monkeys 5 March 2007. <http://www.10zenmonkeys.com/2007/03/05/john-edwards-virtual-attackers-unmasked/>

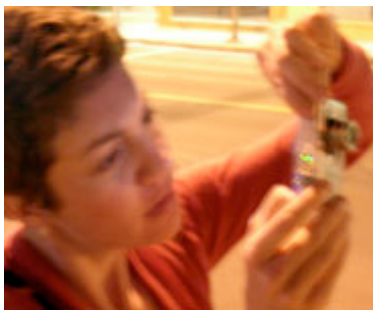
10 Brownlee, John. "John Edwards Meets Second Life 'Feces Spewing Obscenities.'" 18 July 2008. http://blog.wired.com/tableofmalcontents/2007/03/john_edwards_me.html. Goatse.cx was a shock website that featured a photograph of a naked man bent over and holding his anus open with both hands to expose a large portion of his lower digestive track to the viewer. The website quickly became an Internet meme resulting in the proliferation of parodies and pop cultural references.

11 Yet, the Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton campaigns opened headquarters in *Second Life* after Edwards to neither criticism nor fanfare.

12 Dibbell, Julian. "Griefer Madness." Wired, February 2008: 92.

13 Huizinga, Johan. Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture. Boston: Beacon Press, 1950. 10-11.

14 We might also think about the digital media "user" in terms of the debates around the "uses and gratifications" model of media consumption. See for example Jay G. Blumler and Elihu Katz, The Uses of Mass Communications, Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1974.



Author bio:

Aubrey Anable is a doctoral candidate in the Graduate Program in Visual and Cultural Studies at the University of Rochester. Her dissertation is titled [Digital Decay: New Visual Culture, Agency, and Urban Space](#).



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