This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things

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7 Dicks Everywhere: The Cultural Logics of Trolling

One of the 1980s' most recognizable anti-drug public service announcements features a heated confrontation between a father and his teenaged son. The father brandishes a box of drug paraphernalia, apparently discovered in his son's closet, and demands an explanation. "Who taught you how to do this?" the father asks, his voice shaking. The son looks up. "You, alright?" he admits. "I learned it by watching *you*." The camera lingers on the father's stunned face. "Parents who use drugs have children who use drugs," the announcer warns.[1]

Despite the ad's melodramatic tone and questionable assumptions, the argument that parents should consider the repercussions of their own actions (thereby impugning the hypocritical "do as I say, not as I do" parental imperative) is directly applicable to analyses of trolls. Specifically, knee-jerk condemnation of trolling does not and cannot account for the fact that trolling behaviors run parallel to a host of culturally accepted logics. Trolls may push these logics to their furthest and most grotesque extremes, but ultimately trolls' actions are imbricated in the same cultural systems that constitute the norm—a point that casts as much aspersion on the systems themselves as it does on the trolls who harness and exploit them.

The Mask of Trolling, Revisited

Building upon my previous discussion of the mask of trolling, this section will consider the cultural circumstances by and through which the mask of trolling was forged. It will also explicate the ways in which trolling behaviors mirror—and therefore shine an uncomfortable spotlight on—conventional behaviors and attitudes. Three discrete factors will be considered: the relationship between mass mediation, emotional distance, and off-color laughter; the ways in which trolling behaviors replicate the logic

of social media, particularly its celebration of the end user; and the behavioral implications of political upheaval.

Rubbish Rubbish Everywhere

The first factor undergirding the mask of trolling is the relationship between mass mediation and dissociative humor. Christie Davies posits this connection in his essay "Jokes That Follow Mass Mediated Disaster in a Global Electronic Age." Davies argues that, rather than merely expressing callousness, laughter in the face of violent or otherwise tragic events bespeaks a particular set of historical and technological conditions.[2] As Davies explains, "sick" humor has been around since people began writing down jokes. But even the sickest jokes did not, as far as anyone can tell, take the form of the modern disaster joke. Moreover, while people certainly commented upon gruesome news, this commentary never evolved into traceable joke cycles (clusters of jokes that emerge, evolve, and eventually plateau in response to specific tragedies). Significant historical events have inspired quite a bit of retroactive joking—for example, the sinking of the Titanic or the assassination of Abraham Lincoln—but Davies contends that this humor didn't become prominent until after the events were widely theatricalized.[3]

As Davies explains, the first major disaster joke cycle followed President Kennedy's assassination and coincided with what he describes as the "total triumph of television."[4] Davies presents three causes for this connection. First, he argues, disasters in the television age are followed and preceded by "rubbish," creating an incongruous package to respond to, therefore complicating or outright undermining normal expressions of human empathy. Second, television blurs the line between reality and fantasy, fact and fiction. Live disasters are thus conflated with fictional representations of disasters, precluding the viewer from truly believing that the event has taken place, and mitigating the impact of real tragedy when it really strikes. Finally, the experience of watching a televised tragedy is mediated by space, time, and geography, facilitating and sometimes even necessitating emotional detachment, and therefore cynical or comedic responses.[5]

Although Davies's analysis is focused on the ways in which television spurs disaster joke cycles—he does address the Internet, but writing in the early 2000s sees the web more as an infinite bulletin board than an actively generative social space[6]—his underlying argument is directly applicable to the contemporary Internet. In fact, I would argue that today's Internet, which is more incongruous then the most scattered variety show, which collapses the boundaries of reality and fantasy even further, and which

posits ever-greater distance between viewer and that which is viewed, handily outmediates television.

Of course I want to avoid the assumptions, with which Davies seems to flirt, that technological advances singlehandedly bring about the emergence of novel behaviors, and furthermore that consumers of mass-mediated content are so gullible and so devoid of agency that in response to the slightest corporate prodding they lose the ability to distinguish fiction from reality. But Davies's basic point, that mass mediation engenders emotional distance, and that emotional distance lends itself to detached, fetishistic humor, is extremely illuminating, especially in the context of trolling.

Consider trolls' highly fetishized engagement with the attacks of September 11, 2001. The most popular photoshopped images and GIFs include World Wrestling Federation wrestlers smashing the towers to bits; Will Smith as the Fresh Prince of Bel-Air tap dancing as the first tower falls; Kanye West scolding both towers ("Yo al Qaeda, I'm a really happy for you, and I'mma let you finish . . .but the war of 1812 was the best attack on US soil of all time!"); Nyan Cat at the moment of impact ("Nyan 11: Nevar Forget"); Where's Waldo careening out of the dust clouds wearing a troll mask; the Kool-Aid man emerging from the rubble; Obi-Wan Kenobi making racist jokes about "sand people"; the just-stricken towers crudely animated to look like two stick figures smoking a joint, the list goes on. In other images, actual news stills are superimposed with all kinds of bizarre captions, including vague memetic references (of the planes themselves: "no you are a plane, you can't work in an office, you don't even fit"; "do a barrel roll"), deliberately bad wordplay ("9/11 jokes are just 'plane' wrong"; "9/11 Americans won't understand this joke"), and assertions of ironic detachment (of a jumper: "Maybe that was a little dramatic").

Although the trolls' engagement with 9/11 might seem particularly callous, it provides a striking example of the complimentary relationship between trolling humor and mass—and in this case, digitally—mediated disaster coverage. After all, once uploaded onto the Internet, clips and images of the attacks were cast into a whirlpool of incongruity, from animated movie stills to videos of cute cats to hardcore pornography. And then there are the advertisements. A single webpage may host a dozen ads, some of which flash, some of which are embedded with audio, and all of which both frame and detract from whatever it is the viewer thinks he or she is focusing on. If television broadcasts of the attacks would have been emotionally alienating—thus courting detached comedic responses, as

folklorist Bill Ellis chronicled in his study of joke cycles directly following the September 11, 2001, attacks[7]—then digitized reposts of the attacks would have been infinitely more so.

Trolls' ability to transform existing artifacts into visual jokes further widens this affective gap. Unlike viewers who watched live analog coverage of the attacks, trolls have had nearly fifteen years to manipulate facsimiles of the attacks to suit their particular needs, most notably their impulse to juxtapose death and destruction with pop-cultural iconography. As Davies would have predicted, the more decontextualized these images became, and the more cluttered their audience's field of vision (figuratively and literally), the more likely it was that these images would become fodder for further memetic variation, further affective distance, and further trollish engagement.

That trolls have harnessed the September 11 attacks for their own trollish ends isn't just unsurprising, then; it may be the direct result of the kind of clutter and emotional splitting necessitated by the present media landscape—what might be described as the "total triumph of the Internet." From this perspective, trollish play with tragedy is what happens when current events become *content*, a term frequently (and cynically) used in the blogosphere to describe the various bits of digital stuff that may be shared, remixed, and of course monetized through advertisements.

Trolling for Filter Bubbles

Incessant disjointed multimediation isn't the only condition out of which the mask of trolling emerges. The mask is also forged from the cultural logic of social media, which values, and in many cases directly commodifies, transparency, connectedness, and sentimentality. Trolls don't just reject these values; they deliberately target their most conspicuous proponents. That said, and simultaneously, trolls embody and in fact are the grimacing poster children for the more ambivalent aspects of socially mediated web culture, namely objectification, selective attachment, and pervasive self-involvement, all of which fuel the desire for and amassment of lulz *and* constitute "proper" engagement with social networking technologies.

Consider the difficulty of establishing and maintaining context online, and the ways in which context, or lack thereof, feeds into detached emotional responses (and therefore detached unemotional laughter, echoing the previous section). As Henry Jenkins argues, online content, whether in the form of home-brewed videos or family photos or remixed sound bites ripped from the local news—really anything that can be uploaded—is

always one hotlink away from becoming unmoored from its original context.[8] If one looks hard enough, it is usually possible to trace most artifacts back to their original source. After all, everything online comes from somewhere, whether or not a particular viewer has the ability or inclination to conduct such a genealogy. That said, online content is rarely presented in full political, material, and/or historical context. More often than not, content functions as the visual equivalent of a sound bite—a few interesting seconds clipped from a much longer conversation.

Just as offline sound bites can present a skewed picture of what was actually said (as if one sentence could ever capture the spirit and nuance of an hour-long speech), problems arise when the things people do, share, and create are appropriated by an unintended and often unwanted audience. See Star Wars Kid (a chubby high school student who recorded himself clumsily reenacting a scene from the latest *Star Wars* film, the video of which was uploaded by a classmate and began amassing tens of millions of views), Scumbag Steve (a Boston-based rapper whose image was posted to reddit and quickly became the meme de jour), Goatse (whose gaping asshole has become a cultural icon, at least within certain Internet circles[9]), Rebecca Black (whose unintentionally funny 2011 vanity music video catapulted the teenager into the national spotlight), Antoine Dodson (who was featured in a local news report responding to the "bed intruder" who attempted to rape his sister), and so on. All found themselves thrust under the online microscope, and all made the often uncomfortable, and necessarily objectifying, transition from person to meme.

Despite the fact that each story represents a very real person navigating a very real set of social circumstances, the people behind the memes were immediately reduced to grotesque caricatures—a transformation that is perfectly in line with the logic of social media. Because content is so easily severed from creator, and because information spreads so quickly online, often in reverse-snowball form (in that contextualizing information is lost over time, not accrued), it is inevitable that real people would be reduced to fictionalized things. Not in spite of or incidental to the architecture of the web, but as a direct result of the ways in which its constituent content is created, spread, and engaged.

Specifically, Internet users are free, if not actively encouraged, to engage only the content he or she chooses, and to avoid the content he or she might find objectionable or otherwise uninteresting. Rather than functioning as the ultimate democratizing and pluralizing force, then, the web is, and is designed to be, a portal for what Eli Pariser calls "online filter bubbles"—personalized monads fortified not just by individual choice

(frequenting only those blogs you agree with, hiding the posts of Facebook friends you hate, blocking undesirable followers on Twitter or Tumblr) but also by algorithmic interventions by superplatforms such as Google and Facebook, whose robots note the things you seem to like and the things you seem to avoid, and quietly begin stacking the deck with the former.[10]

According to Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg, such bubbles are a blessing to the user. As he once noted, "a squirrel dying in front of your house may be more relevant to your interests right now than people dying in Africa."[11] In other words, if you don't want to engage with certain content, you shouldn't have to. Outside Facebook and Google's walled gardens, users even have the option to preempt offending content, a concept Greg Leuch has explored through his numerous self-censorship plug-ins—for example, his "Shaved Bieber" project, which blocks all references to the ubiquitous Canadian teen,[12] and his "Olwimpics browser blocker," which does the same for any and all references to the 2012 Olympics.[13]

It should go without saying that picking and choosing online, not to mention being picked and chosen for, is an enormous privilege, one that risks normalizing selective emotional attachment. Trolls take this privilege to the extreme, choosing to engage with only the content they find amusing and ignoring everything they deem irrelevant to their interests (e.g., their target's feelings). Their resulting lulz fetishism may appear foreign to average Internet users, but they are in fact subsumed by the same cultural logic that undergirds "normal" online engagement.

"Now Watch This Drive"

In August 2002, just before teeing off for his morning game of golf, President George W. Bush held an impromptu press conference. He'd just gotten word that a Palestinian suicide bomber had killed several Israeli citizens, and he wanted to send an unequivocal message to terrorists around the world. His eyes steely, Bush looked directly into the camera. "We must stop the terror," he urged. "I call upon all nations to do everything they can to stop these terrorist killers. Thank you. Now watch this drive."[14]

Bush's comments did not go unnoticed. On *The Daily Show*, Jon Stewart featured the clip in the closing "Your Moment of Zen" segment,[15] and Michael Moore included it in a pivotal scene of *Fahrenheit 9/11*.[16] In both cases, the clip was used to highlight the Bush administration's heavy-handed and often dizzyingly inconsistent post-9/11 tone. On the one hand, Americans were told to remain vigilant against further terrorist attacks. On the other hand, Osama bin Laden was dismissed as a nobody

by the very president who vowed to capture him dead or alive. This was an era in which citizens were urged by the Department of Homeland Security to prepare for possible anthrax attacks by stocking up on plastic wrap and duct tape, and were told by the president that the best way to fight terrorism was to relax, have fun, and take a family vacation to Disneyland.[17]

America was at war, and then wars, and the justification for the larger of these two wars kept changing, and at a certain point the talking heads stopped bothering to offer any reason, and the looming terrorist apocalypse was assigned a color-coded alert system, which miraculously would be raised whenever an election or important congressional vote loomed, and torture was deemed A-OK so long as it was conducted for democracy's sake, and patriotism trumped rule of law, and the president made jokes about looking for weapons of mass destruction under his Oval Office desk,[18] and the Geneva Conventions were suddenly "quaint" (at least according to then-White House Chief Council Alberto Gonzales),[19] and sometimes the only thing you could do to keep from crying was to laugh.

It was in this political climate that subcultural trolling and its constituent mask first emerged, a statement reflected in the following Encyclopedia Dramatica entry on lulz: "Lulz is engaged by internet users who have witnessed one major economic/environmental/political disaster too many," the entry reads, "and who thus view a state of voluntary, gleeful sociopathy over the world's current apoplectic state, as being superior to being continually emo."[20] This attitude was common among many of the trolls I worked with, who argued that it was better to have a trollfest than a bawwfest (in trolling parlance, bawwing means crying, and is often used alongside or in the context of the term "butthurt"; for example, the accusation that a person expressing a strong negative emotion is a "butthurt bawwfag").

Let me be clear: I am not implying that the September 11 attacks—including fallout from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq—caused trolling subculture to coalesce, or caused the mask of trolling to fall pre-forged from the heavens. As discussed in earlier chapters, geeks and hackers had been causing mischief online for years, decades in some circles, and the term "troll" had long been in circulation on Usenet. Trolling was not, in other words, the sole creation of 4chan's platform, nor could it be.

Henry Jenkins explores a similar point in his analysis of YouTube's cultural ascendency, in which he argues that successful platforms rarely if ever engender entirely new categories of behavior. Rather, these platforms provide users with more efficient ways of doing the things they were

already doing. YouTube's success, for example, wasn't derived from its ability to spur participatory/remix culture(s), but from its ability to court and provide a forum for existing communities and participatory remix culture(s). Without a built-in audience for home-brewed content, YouTube would not and could not have been such an overwhelming success.[21]

The same basic argument could be made about 4chan. The message board didn't and couldn't *create* the impulse to engage in trolling behaviors as much as tap into and provide a forum—and later, point of amplification—for existing energies. And there was plenty of energy to go around. The young web was swirling with mischief, pranks, and what would become known as "ultra-coordinated motherfuckery," to borrow a term from Coleman.[22] The difference between these behaviors and subcultural trolling behaviors was that early proto-trollish energies were for the most part confined to early adopters, primarily hackers and geeks. 4chan changed all that; 4chan, particularly the /b/ board, brought a very particular understanding of the term "trolling" to the wider Internet. Not because there was anything inherently new or even all that special about these particular behaviors. It was simply the right time and right place for something like 4chan/b/—and something like subcultural trolling—to reach critical mass.

The fact that it was *this* place and *this* time matters, and must be taken into account when considering not just how and when trolling subculture emerged, but why it caught on with so many people. Of particular importance is the fact that, during this period, Americans were unmoored, and were encouraged by the mainstream media and the Bush administration to remain unmoored—from history, from war, from the suffering of others, from the suffering of fellow citizens.

Of course, for New Yorkers and those who lost friends or family members in the attacks, September 11 was and remains a flesh-and-blood nightmare. The same holds true for returning veterans, as well as the loved ones of those deployed. For the vast majority of Americans, though, 9/11 was experienced as an endless loop of the same forty-five seconds of film, particularly the horrific spectacle of the second plane crashing into the South Tower. Similarly, for millions of Americans, both wars were only ever experienced remotely (i.e., via the news or online), making them no less real and no less upsetting but eerily removed from day-to-day life—a disconnect compounded by the Bush administration's insistence that unless Americans went about their daily lives as if nothing was wrong, the terrorists would win.

In short, Americans were asked to dissociate. They were asked not to dwell on the consequences of the wars, of torture, of the resulting

economic bloodletting. They were asked to go on vacations, and to shop, and not to ask too many tough questions. Is it any surprise, then, that trolls—who essentially function as cultural dung beetles—would choose to hold the tragedy of others at arm's length? Is it any surprise that trolling, which crystallized into a discrete subculture immediately following a series of massively mediated tragedies, would be explicitly and unapologetically fetishistic? Furthermore, is it any surprise that instead of crying, these trolls would have chosen to laugh, not just *with* other self-identifying trolls, but *at* those who fail to keep their emotions similarly in check?

Whether or not there exists an alternative explanation or nest of explanations for the development of trolls' dissociative behaviors, the uncomfortable truth is that trolls weren't the only group to disengage from social or political consequences, nor were they the most likely to harness tragedy for personal gain. This is particularly true during the period of subcultural origin, roughly between 2003 and 2007, during which time September 11 became its own sort of fetish—at least for the politicians who mined the attacks for votes (I am reminded of then-presidential candidate Joe Biden's assertion that former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani's presidential campaign platform could be summarized as "a noun and a verb and 9/11"[23]).

To summarize, regardless of how aberrant (and/or abhorrent) it may appear, trolling makes a great deal of sense within the context of contemporary American media. Trolls make expert use of the creative tools provided by the Internet. Their attitudes toward and use of social media is often in direct alignment with the interests of platform marketers, CEOs, and their corporate shareholders. They harness the contours of the historical and political landscape, and the corporate media systems therein. In a lot of ways, trolls do everything right. But that is hardly the extent of the connection between trolls and dominant cultural logics.

Dicks Everywhere

In addition to operating within mainstream media logics, trolls and trolling behaviors replicate and are animated by a number of pervasive cultural logics. Not only is trolling predicated on the "adversary method," Western philosophy's dominant paradigm,[24] it is characterized by a profound sense of technological entitlement born of normalized expansionist and colonialist ideologies. Furthermore, trolling behaviors are undergirded by precisely the values that are said to make America the greatest and most powerful nation on earth. In other words, there is ample cultural precedent

for trolling; that anyone is subsequently surprised by the ubiquity of trolls is itself surprising.

Your Resistance Only Makes My Penis Harder

First, trolls' privileging of cool rationality over emotionalism, coupled with their emphasis on "winning," that is, successfully exerting dominance over a given adversary, represents a logical extension of androcentrism, what cultural theorist Pierre Bourdieu describes as the "continuous, silent, invisible injunctions" that naturalize a phallocentric (male-focused) worldview. Though androcentrism may manifest itself as violent sexism or misogyny, it is in fact most potent when its effects are taken to be natural and necessary, something that could not be otherwise.[25]

Trolls' alignment with androcentrism is most conspicuously apparent in their replication of the adversary method, described by feminist philosopher Janice Moulton as the defining feature of the Western philosophical canon. As Moulton explains, the goal of this method is to be cool, calm, and unflinchingly rational; to forward specific claims; and to check those claims against potential counterarguments, all in the service of defeating or otherwise outmaneuvering one's opponent(s).[26] Although seemingly unassailable (how else might we hope to argue things, one might ask), the adversary method provides a textbook example of androcentrism and in the process exemplifies the subtle ways in which male-focused thinking is naturalized. Specifically, in addition to establishing the ground rules for "proper" argumentation, the adversary method presupposes the superiority of male-gendered traits (rationality, assertiveness, dominance) over female-gendered traits (sentimentality, cooperation, conciliation). In the process, it privileges and in fact reifies an explicitly androcentric worldview while simultaneously delegitimizing less confrontational discursive modes.[27]

Arthur Schopenhauer's *The Art of Controversy*, also translated as *The Art of Being Right*, perfectly embodies the adversary method.[28] Though by no means the only example one could cite (Schopenhauer's arguments pull from and expand upon a well-established rhetorical tradition, most notably Aristotelian logic), *The Art of Controversy* is unique in that many trolls regard it as a blueprint for modern trolling. In fact this text was recommended to me by one of my troll collaborators, with the promise that I would find in Schopenhauer a kindred spirit for trolls.

And indeed I did, particularly Schopenhauer's understanding of the Controversial Dialectic, "the art of disputing, and of disputing in such a way as to hold one's own, whether one is in the right or the wrong."[29] As

Schopenhauer explains, what something really means, and more importantly, what someone really feels, is less important than one's ability to win a particular argument. In other words, truth is nice, but victory is better; to help ensure the latter, Schopenhauer offers thirty-eight axioms essentially designed to hack the Dialectic.

For example, in order to win an argument, or perhaps more appropriately phrased, in order to defeat one's opponent, one strategy is to carry his or her opponent's claim "beyond its natural limits,"[30] thereby forcing the opponent to accept responsibility for a straw man, which may then be refuted by a series of counterarguments. Another is to deliberately court the anger of an opponent "by doing him repeated injustice, or practicing some kind of chicanery, and being generally insolent,"[31] since an angry opponent is often a frazzled and therefore sloppy opponent. Other tips include replacing the language used by an opponent to describe his or her position with terminology that exaggerates or casts aspersions upon that position and, consequently, its proponents (i.e., referring to abortion as baby killing), or personalizing arguments by demanding that the opponent practice what he preaches (i.e., during a discussion of assisted suicide, encouraging one's opponent to go kill himself if he thinks it's such a good idea).

Most trollishly, Schopenhauer urges his readers to push against any and all resistance, since anger almost always indicates insecurity and therefore argumentative weakness. The goal is to aim for the lowest possible personal blows, not just in relation to an opponent's argument but in relation to his person, family, friends, income, race, or anything that might appeal to what Schopenhauer calls the "virtues of the body, or to mere animalism."[32] Regarding this last tip, perhaps the sharpest tool in the rhetorician's arsenal, Schopenhauer warns that an opponent is likely to respond in kind and begin hurling his own insults. If and when that happens, one must remind one's opponent that personal insults have no place in a rational discussion and request that he or she consider the issue at hand—at which point one may return to one's own insults and prevarications.[33]

Trolls take a similar approach, explicitly eschewing the pursuit of truth—typically by bracketing "real life" from the adversarial play space—in favor of victory, and more importantly, dominance. Furthermore, trolls take active, gleeful measures against rhetorical others—namely, "soft," feminized thinkers. For trolls, softness implies anything emotive, anything less than perfectly rational; they see strong negative emotions like sadness, frustration, or distress (referred to collectively as "butthurt") as flashing neon target signs. Ironically, trolls court the very modes of thinking they

subsequently attack. They poke and prod their targets until they draw metaphorical blood—note the popular trolling declaration and current section header "your resistance only makes my penis harder"—then point to this blood as proof of the troll's inherent superiority, and the target's inherent weakness.

Not only does "knowing how to rhetoric" (as I've heard many trolls describe their discursive methods) serve as a point of pride for trolls, it provides a built-in justification for their antagonistic behaviors. After all, if cool rationality is in fact superior to "softer" modes of thinking, then denigrating and attempting to silence the feminized other isn't just warranted, it is the trolls' cultural duty (in response to their target's distress, "you're welcome" was an attitude frequently expressed by the trolls I worked with). Ultimately, then, the primary difference between "normal" manifestations of the adversary method and modern subcultural trolling is that participating trolls make absolutely no attempt to sugarcoat the ideological implications and inherent sexism of their behaviors.

Trolls' eagerness to align themselves with adversarial rhetoric—and by extension, the Western tradition—is further exemplified by their obsession with and adoption of the figure of Socrates. As the editor(s) of the "Socrates" entry on Encyclopedia Dramatica explain, "Socrates was a famous IRL troll of pre-internets [*sic*] Greece credited with inventing the first recorded trolling technique and otherwise laying the foundation of the science of lulz. He is widely considered to be the most irritating man in history."[34] Accompanying this statement is a quotation from *The Apology* in which Socrates proclaims, "I am that gadfly which God has attached to the state, and all day long and in all places am always fastening upon you, arousing and persuading and reproaching you," and that is captioned with the statement "Socrates explains trolling." Later in the article, the editor(s) explains "the famous Socratic Method of Trolling," which replicates the well-known trolling meme template discussed in chapter 4:

*Ask a bunch of questions about shit nobody cares about
*Be blatantly condescending while pretending to agree
*Raep your victim with logic
*Pretend to be objective and ignorant
*Put forth a batshit insane position for lulz
*???
*Profit

In a final flourish of reclamation, the author(s) of the post claim that Socrates's last words were "I did it for the lulz," and the entry itself is tagged as part of a series on trolls.[35]

In a 2012 segment filmed for Huffington Post live, notorious troll weev—the once-president of the trolling and hacking collective known as the GNAA ("Gay Nigger Association of America"), who was sent to prison in 2013 for his role in Goatse Security's AT&T data breach before being released in 2014 after the conviction was overturned on a venue technicality—elaborated on this sentiment. "Socrates would be a troll," weev argued. "He was confrontational. He was specifically trying to provoke a reaction and was trying to undermine the existing establishment."[36] In short, Socrates "raeped" with logic—"raep" being the preferred misspelling for "rape," which according to many trolls is the best of all possible trolling outcomes.

For an example of why trolls would be so inclined to adopt Socrates for the trolling cause, consider Socrates's comportment throughout *Meno*, which begins with an examination of the nature of virtue.[37] Meno, Socrates's interlocutor, asserts knowledge; Socrates professes ignorance; Meno forwards an explanation; Socrates proceeds to beat Meno over the head with his own words, stopping only to berate Meno for rhetorical chicanery and to lob strange, backhanded compliments. Midway through the onslaught, Meno seeks a reprieve. "I think you are bewitching and beguiling me, simply putting me under a spell, so that I am quite perplexed . . . my mind and my tongue are numb, and I have no answer to give you."[38] Meno has, in other words, given up. But Socrates isn't finished. He calls Meno a rascal and accuses him of deception, propelling the conversation forward despite Meno's objections, and despite having already proven his point—a point he immediately undermines by pivoting to divine intervention, a move many classicists read as ironic.[39]

Socrates might not assert a singular answer to the question of virtue, or any question for that matter. But by policing the borders of "correct" philosophical engagement, Socrates reifies a particular discursive mode—namely the Socratic method (not that he would have called it that himself), which isn't a position as much as it is an attitude toward the pursuit of answers. In their efforts to extract the greatest number of lulz from the most "deserving" online targets, trolls take this approach to its most antagonistic conclusions. Furthermore, while both camps refuse to forward a particular politics, and in fact target those who appear too emotionally invested in their ideals, both impose and are subsumed by a rigid rhetorical model, one that privileges and universalizes a male-focused worldview. In others, such rigidity would be unacceptable. But as long as they're the ones tossing off the philosophical or emotional imperatives, the problem of attachment is apparently moot.

It is therefore no surprise that trolls would be inclined to adopt Socrates as one of their own. But even for those resistant to the idea that Socrates was indeed "a famous IRL troll of pre-internets Greece," the fact that trolls have chosen as their intellectual mascot one of the most venerated and fetishized figures in the Western tradition, whose rhetorical method is taught to every college undergraduate in the United States, is significant in itself. Also of significance is the fact that, while trolls and trolling behaviors are condemned as aberrational, similarly antagonistic—and highly gendered—rhetorical methods are presumed to be something to which every eighteen-year-old should aspire. This is, to say the very least, a curious double standard. Trolling might be more conspicuously outrageous, offensive, and damaging than traditional discursive modes, but what does it say about the cloth if misogyny can so easily be cut from it?

Go Forth and Conquer

In addition to embodying the adversary method, trolling is animated by the same cultural logic that normalizes the drive for discovery and progress. To go further, to go faster, to go where no one (well, no one deemed important enough to count) has gone before—this is, at least is said to be, the defining feature of Western culture, a point Robert Nisbet iterates in his expansive *History of the Idea of Progress*.[40] Indeed, the assumption that one should go where one can, regardless of precedent or apparently minor details such as who currently occupies a given territory, undergirds everything from the myth of the American West to the desire to put a man on the moon.

It is also often cited—though much more indirectly—in early conversations about the Internet. Once the brainchild of the United States Department of Defense, the Internet generally, and later the World Wide Web specifically, was embraced and subsequently reclaimed by a wave of what early Internet researcher Howard Rheingold described as "digital homesteaders," users eager to stake their claim within the emerging world of cyberspace.[41] The landless land grab that swept the early web even inspired John Perry Barlow, an early Internet activist, cofounder of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, and later a research fellow at Harvard University's Berkman Center for Internet and Society to write "A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace,"[42] which asserted the political and moral sovereignty of "the new home of Mind." "I declare the global social space we are building to be naturally independent of the tyrannies you seek to impose on us," Barlow wrote. "We believe that from ethics, enlightened self-interest, and the commonwealth, our governance will emerge."[43]

Regarding the emerging encroachment of terrestrial law within cyberspace, Barlow attested the following: "These increasingly hostile and colonial measures place us in the same position as those previous lovers of freedom and self-determination who had to reject the authorities of distant, uninformed powers [i.e. American Revolutionaries]. We must declare our virtual selves immune to your sovereignty, even as we continue to consent to your rule over our bodies. We will spread ourselves across the Planet so that no one can arrest our thoughts."[44] Barlow's utopian and decidedly libertarian message thus functioned not just as a Declaration of Independence, but also as Manifest Destiny version 2.0. To these early adopters—the vast majority of whom were white males—the Internet was a land of endless opportunity, something to harness and explore, something to *claim*.

Trolls' attitudes toward the web echo Barlow's utopian vision—albeit its dark underbelly. Just as Barlow declares independence from the tyrannies of corporate and governmental encroachment, trolls regard the Internet as their personal playground and birthright; as such, no one, not lawmakers, not the media, and certainly not other Internet users, should be able to dictate their behavior. Trolls are, at least according to trolls, wholly sovereign to everything but their own will.

It's not just a strong libertarian streak that connects trolls and early Netizens (at least, early Netizens as conceived by Barlow). It's also their entitled attitude toward the virtual space. Recall Howard Rheingold's aforementioned framing of the "digital homesteader," which harkens to those rough and tumble, bootstrappy American frontiersmen who chose to stake their claim westward. But instead of heading west, digital homesteaders are on a virtual course. Trolls take this concept to its furthest and most grotesque extreme, which in fact is closer in spirit to "real" homesteading than early cyber-utopians' starry-eyed idealizations. Homesteading, after all, is the act of declaring that this plot of land is now *my* plot of land, regardless of whose land it might be currently. Whose plot of land it might be currently doesn't matter. That's just details, and is nothing a musket or ten can't fix. And that is precisely what trolls do. They homestead.

Take for example the infamous Habbo Hotel raids of 2006, in which trolls from /b/, goons from Something Awful, and several other motley trolling crews planned and executed the first of several massive raids against the eponymous Habbo Hotel, a strictly moderated social media platform catering to tweens and teenagers. After creating an army of identical avatars—black men in black suits with huge afros—nearly two hundred trolls, each operating multiple avatars, swarmed the American hotel (Habbo

is an international chain, boasting virtual branches in thirty-two countries). The troll army immediately began spamming public chats with various obscenities, essentially shutting down the hotel's public spaces. Simultaneously, a few dozen trolls formed a human blockade in front of the hotel pool. "Pool's closed due to AIDS," they insisted, a line that immediately entered the trolling lexicon.[45]

Habbo Hotel was hardly the first and hardly the last time trolls set forth and conquered. Trolls have applied the same basic model—show up, turn a website's social networking platform and community against itself, lol—to countless online spaces, as if lulz were a natural resource to be extracted. Encyclopedia Dramatica, for example, began as an archive for LiveJournal drama (hence the name), but was soon overrun by trolls—much to the chagrin of its founder Sherrod DeGrippo.

As discussed in chapter 5, trolls' largest land grab came in 2010, when trolls harnessed Facebook's social networking platform for their own trollish ends, making the site an unwitting and unwilling pawn in subcultural formation. Unsurprisingly, Facebook was not amused, and their admins did everything they could to repel the trolling onslaught. Trolls took this resistance as a call to arms, and began devising increasingly clever workaround strategies. This was *their* space, and no one was going to take it away from them; just as Barlow had done twenty years earlier, trolls declared their virtual selves immune to Facebook's sovereignty, and vowed to spread the lulz across the Planet so that no one could arrest their thoughts. And for these self-evident truths, they were more than willing to fight.

In short, through raids, forum hijacking, and platform repurposing, trolls tease out the trace of violence and exploitation that is so often effaced from discussions of progress and expansion, particularly within an American context. Again, though, while trolling behaviors are regarded as inherently problematic, the cultural tropes with which trolls' behaviors are aligned are either celebrated or, more frequently, rendered invisible, as if expansionism were as natural as the air Americans breathe.

I Can, Therefore I Should Be Able To

Not only do trolls' acts of entitlement mimic expansionist ideology, they also, and simultaneously, exhibit a culturally proscribed relationship to technology. Internet historian Jason Scott provides a framework for understanding this relationship in his 2008 ROFLcon talk "Before the LOL." As Scott argues, tinkering, playing, and otherwise hacking existing systems for one's own edification or amusement is simply what people will do

when confronted with new technologies, a point he illustrates through an examination of the nineteenth-century telegraph network, the HAM radio network in the 1960s, and copy machines in the 1950s and 1960s, each of which generated a great deal of (often transgressive) play.[46]

Although seemingly simple, if not outright commonsensical, the assumption-cum-conclusion that "this is what people will do" with emergent technologies is far more ideologically loaded than one might expect. First, the claim teeters at the edge of Hume's Law, also known as the is-ought fallacy. People can play with technology, and so they do, and so they *should*, or at the very least one mustn't be surprised when the inevitable comes to pass. The "is" of ludic engagement, in other words, is reframed to an "ought," thus naturalizing and universalizing the impulse to play with new technologies. The problem with this framing is that, while the ludic impulse may be strong in some, it is not, and cannot be, strong in everyone, for the simple reason that not all people have access to the technologies in question, the time to devote to learning the ins and outs of specific systems, or the energy to play with the tools they've been given.

Consequently, Scott's claim warrants reassessment. A much more accurate claim would be that "this is what privileged people will do" with technology, since those in positions of privilege—whether derived from racial, gender, and/or class position—have the inclination, access, and most importantly, the internalized sense of entitlement that it isn't just acceptable to play with whatever toys one has been given, but in fact is one's right to do so.

This issue of rights echoes the tone and overall spirit of the hacker ethic, which was first articulated by Steven Levy in his foundational 1984 account of early hackers.[47] According to Levy, the hacker ethic consists of the following interrelated axioms: access to computers should be unlimited, one should always yield to the hands-on imperative, all information should be free, authority should be mistrusted and routed around if necessary, hacking skill matters more than "bogus" real-world criteria like race, gender, or degrees, and computers can change the world for the better.[48]

One particularly relevant outcrop of the hacker ethic, and which undergirds Scott's assertion that "this is what people will do" with new technologies, is hackers' celebration of creative appropriation. To hackers, technologies were *made* to be played with (hence the hands-on imperative). Consequently, attempts to block or restrict hackers' perceived right to do what they want with the technologies in front of them is met with profound umbrage.[49]

While it would be a mistake to lump all hackers under the same banner—in her study of free and open software production, Gabriella Coleman is careful to highlight the often-conflicting branches in the hacking family tree[50]—Levy's formulation of the hacker ethic, particularly his emphasis on the impulse, and some hackers might even argue, the obligation, to unlock closed doors and to reappropriate available technologies, has endured as a behavioral ideal for nearly three decades. And not just in hacking circles—the impulse to push existing technologies to their limits, in short to do *what* you can *because* you can, is explicitly celebrated by the tech industry (whose best and brightest, it is worth noting, were raised on the hacker ethic, the most notable examples being Microsoft's Bill Gates and Apple cofounder Steve Wozniak).

The technologically privileged assertion that one can play with technologies and therefore should be able to provides yet another example of the ways in which trolling behaviors run parallel to dominant tropes. Trolls, after all, are champions of the idea that the practical ability to accomplish some goal ("I am able to troll this person") justifies, if not necessitates, its pursuit ("therefore it is my right to do so"). Nontrolls are quick to reject this line of reasoning on the grounds that it is callous, solipsistic, and exploitative. In other contexts, however, "I can, therefore I should be able to" is taken for granted, and in some circles is explicitly fetishized. It certainly has made a lot of white men a whole lot of money.

Land of the Free, Home of the Trolls

The logic of privilege that undergirds trolls' relationship to technology is itself undergirded by the ideals Americans are taught to hold most dear: namely, that all men are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, among them Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness, and furthermore, that Congress shall make no law abridging the freedom of speech. American trolls in particular embrace these ideals, and when pressed on the ethics of their behavior, often cite what they presume to be their constitutionally protected right to irritate strangers on the Internet. For these trolls, the iconic line from the Declaration of Independence might be revised thusly: "All trolls are endowed by their Internet with certain unalienable Rights, among them Anonymity, Impunity, and the Pursuit of Lulz." On this view, and gesturing toward hackers' general abhorrence of locked doors, American trolls regard any form of online censorship, including on-site moderation policies, as a basic infringement on the their civil liberties.

During the aforementioned Huffington Post segment, weev—who was framed by the host as both godfather of trolling and free speech warrior—echoes this position. As he explains, he has "the right, and perhaps even the moral obligation, to drop your dox." For weev, doxing someone (i.e., publicizing the target's personal identifying and/or financial information) is a "consequence of pissing off the community," essentially imbuing trolling behaviors with a kind of implicit pedagogy. "That's the great thing about free speech, about the First Amendment," he continues. "Not only does Violentacrez [an infamous reddit moderator responsible for creating and moderating "jailbait" and "creepshot" subreddits[51]] have a right to be a prick on the Internet, we have the right to punish him! That's beautiful. Our Constitution is beautiful."[52]

Initially, the impulse to wrap trolling in the American flag might seem counterintuitive, particularly when one considers its most destructive forms. In response to coordinated attacks against the parents of recent teenage suicides, say, I can't think of a less convincing justification than "free speech." Nor can I think of a more myopic framing of behaviors designed to humiliate, frighten, or intimidate, a particular and well-publicized specialty of weev's. In a 2008 *New York Times* profile, for example, weev boasted about doxxing and libeling technology writer Kathy Sierra,[53] who felt so threatened by the resulting onslaught that she was forced to retreat from the Internet entirely.[54] In another more recent example, weev's bullying and attempted extortion of a slander victim was presented during his 2013 AT&T sentencing hearing.[55] In these types of cases, particularly cases where the behaviors in question meet the legal definition of harassment (which, for the record, is *not* protected by the First Amendment), the idea that what trolls are actually doing by tormenting strangers is "fighting for free speech" is absurd, and might itself be an act of trolling.

Regardless of how unlikely the connection between trolling and free speech might appear, however, and regardless of what message they intend to send by embracing such a cherished American ideal, trolls' more extreme actions call attention to the ugly side of free speech, which so often is cited by people whose speech has always been the most free—namely straight white cisgendered men (i.e., men whose gender identity aligns with cultural expectations for their biological sex)—to justify hateful behavior towards marginalized groups. In these cases, claims to protected speech are often less about the legal parameters of the First Amendment and more about not wanting to be told what to do, particularly by individuals whose perspective one doesn't respect.

Just as it places assumptions about free speech in a new and perhaps uncomfortable light, trolling also reveals the destructive implications of freedom and liberty, which, when taken to their selfish extreme, can best be understood as "freedom for *me*," liberty for *me*," with little to no concern about how these actions might infringe on others' freedoms. American history is littered with moments in which freedom, liberty, self-determination, and of course the push for westward expansion—everything that is said to make America great—have been deployed with positive consequences for some and absolutely devastating consequences for others. The idea that a person has a right, and perhaps an obligation, to take advantage of others for their own personal gain is the American dream at its ugliest—and is exactly the dynamic the most offensive forms of trolling replicate.

As this chapter, and in fact the entire second section of this book illustrates, trolls are hardly anomalous. They fit comfortably within the contemporary American media landscape, and they effortlessly replicate the most pervasive, and in many cases outright venerated, tropes in the Western tradition. In that sense, trolls are model ideological subjects. The question is, then, what exactly are people criticizing when they criticize trolls? I would suggest that criticisms of trolling behaviors are indirect (if inadvertent) criticisms of the culture that spawns them, immediately widening the scope and significance of the so-called troll problem. I will expand upon this basic, if somewhat disturbing, point in the conclusion. First, however, we must consider just how far trolling has come, and where it might be going.