# The Social Media Reader

EDITED BY

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## Phreaks, Hackers, and Trolls

The Politics of Transgression and Spectacle

E. GABRIELLA COLEMAN

Among academics, journalists, and hackers, it is common to define hackers not only by their inquisitive demeanor, the extreme joy they garner from uninterrupted hacking sprints, and the technological artifacts they create but also by the "hacker ethic." Journalist Steven Levy first defined the hacker ethic in *Hackers: Heroes of the Revolution*, published in 1984. The hacker ethic is shorthand for a mix of aesthetic and pragmatic imperatives: a commitment to information freedom, a mistrust of authority, a heightened dedication to meritocracy, and the firm belief that computers can be the basis for beauty and a better world.<sup>1</sup>

In many respects, the fact that academics, journalists, and many hackers refer to the existence of this ethic is testament not only to the superb account that Levy offers—it is still one of the finest and most thoroughgoing accounts on hacking—but to the fact that the hacker ethic in the most general sense can be said to exist. For example, many of the principles motivating free and open-source software (F/OSS) philosophy reinstantiate, refine, extend, and clarify many of those original precepts.<sup>2</sup>

However, over the years, the concept has been overly used and has become reified. Indeed as I learned more about the contemporary face of hacking and its history during the course of my fieldwork on free and open-source software hacking, I started to see significant problems in positing any simple connection between all hackers and an unchanging ethic. Falling back on the story of the hacker ethic elides tensions and differences that exist among hackers.<sup>3</sup> Although hacker ethical principles may have a common core—one might even say a general ethos—further inquiry soon demonstrates that, similar to any cultural sphere, we can easily identify variance, ambiguity, and, at times, even serious points of contention.

Take for instance the outlandish and probably not entirely serious (but not entirely frivolous) accusation launched by a hacker bearing a spectacular and provocative name, the "UNIX Terrorist." He is featured in the hacker e-zine Phrack, which reached its popular zenith in the late 1980s and the early 1990s.4 The UNIX Terrorist claims that a class of so-called hackers, those who write free and open-source software, such as the Linux operating system and the enormously popular Firefox browser, are not deserving of the moniker "hacker":

Nowadays, it is claimed that the Chinese and even women are hacking things. Man, am I ever glad I got a chance to experience "the scene" before it degenerated completely. And remember, kids, knowing how to program or wanting really badly to figure out how things work inside doesn't make you a hacker! Hacking boxes makes you a "hacker"! That's right! Write your local representatives at Wikipedia/urbandictionary/OED and let them know that hackers are people that gain unauthorized access/ privileges to computerized systems! Linus Torvalds isn't a hacker! Richard Stallman isn't a hacker! Niels Provos isn't a hacker! Fat/ugly, maybe! Hackers, no! And what is up with the use of the term "cracker"? As far as I'm concerned, that term applies to people that bypass copyright protection mechanisms. Vladimir Levin? hacker. phiber optik? hacker. Kevin Mitnick? OK maybe a gay/bad one, but still was a "hacker." Hope that's clear.5

Hackers do not universally invoke this type of policing between "good" and "bad" or "authentic" and "inauthentic." Some hackers recognize the diversity of hacking and also acknowledge that, despite differences, hacking hangs together around a loose but interconnected set of issues, values, experiences, and artifacts. For instance, hackers tend to uphold a value for freedom, privacy, and access; they tend to adore computers—the cultural glue that binds them together; they are trained in highly specialized and technical esoteric arts, including programming, systems administration, and security research; some gain unauthorized access to technologies, though the degree of illegality greatly varies (and much of hacking is fully legal). Despite a parade of similarities, if we are to understand the political and cultural significance of hacking and its role in shaping and influencing segments of contemporary Internet cultures—such as Internet trolling—every effort must be made to address its ethical and social variability.

While Levy, and countless others, locate the birth of hacking at MIT and similar university institutions during the late 1950s, it may be more accu-

rate to identify MIT as the place where one variant of hacking got its start. Another variant began in the 1950s with telephone phreakers, who were the direct ancestors to underground hackers like the UNIX Terrorist. Phreakers studied, explored, and entered the phone system by re-creating the audio frequencies that the system used to route calls. Quite distinct from university-bred hackers whose ethical commitments exhibit a hyperextension of academic norms such as their elevation of meritocracy, these phone explorers exhibited other ethical and aesthetic sensibilities rooted in transgression (often by breaking the law or duping humans for information) and spectacle (often by mocking those in power). The institutional independence of phreakers, in combination with some early political influences, such as the Yippies (Youth International Party), made for a class of technologists whose aesthetic sensibilities and linguistic practices proved to be more daring, vivacious, audacious, and brash than what is commonly found in other genres of hacking, such as F/OSS.

As phreaking morphed into computer hacking in the late 1970s and early 1980s, this brash aesthetic tradition and the politics of transgression continued to grow in visibility and importance, especially evident in the literary genres—textfiles and zines—produced by the hacker underground. In recent times, the aesthetics of audaciousness has veritably exploded with Internet trolls—a class of geek whose raison detre is to engage in acts of merciless mockery/flaming or morally dicey pranking. These acts are often delivered in the most spectacular and often in the most ethically offensive terms possible.<sup>7</sup>

The behavior of trolls cannot, of course, be explained only by reference to the hacker underground or phreakers; nonetheless, as this essay will illustrate, there is a rich aesthetic tradition of spectacle and transgression at play with trolls, which includes the irreverent legacy of phreakers and the hacker underground. This aesthetic tradition demonstrates an important political attribute of spectacle: the marked hyperbole and spectacle among phreakers, hackers, and trollers not only makes it difficult to parse out truth from lies; it has made it difficult to decipher and understand the cultural politics of their actions. This evasiveness sits in marked contrast to other genealogies of hacking that are far easier to culturally decipher.

This drive toward cultural obfuscation is common to other edgy youth subcultures, according to cultural theorist Dick Hebdige. One of his most valuable insights, relevant to phreakers, hackers, and trollers, concerns the way that some subcultural groups have "translate[d] the fact of being under scrutiny into the pleasures of being watched, and the elaboration of

surfaces which takes place within it reveals a darker will toward opacity, a drive against classification and control, a desire to exceed."8 This description, which Hebdige used to describe the "costers," young and impoverished British boys who sold street wares and who flourished a century ago, could have just as well been written about phreakers, hackers, and trollers nearly a century later.

As the example of the UNIX Terrorist exemplifies, and as we will see below with other examples, these technologists "make a 'spectacle' of themselves, respond to surveillance as if they were expecting it, as if it were perfectly natural."9 Even if they may vilify their trackers, they nonetheless take some degree of pleasure in performing the spectacle that is expected of them. Through forms of aesthetic audacity, a black hole is also created that helps shield these technologists from easy comprehension and provides some inoculation against forms of cultural co-optation and capitalist commodification that so commonly prey on subcultural forms.10

In the rest of the essay, I narrow my analysis to phreakers, underground hackers, and Internet trolls. The point here is not to fully isolate them from other types of hacking or tinkering, nor is it to provide, in any substantial manner, the historical connections between them. Rather it provides in broad strokes a basic historical sketch to illustrate the rich aesthetic tradition of spectacle that has existed for decades, all the while growing markedly in importance in recent years with Internet trolling.

#### 1950–1960s: The Birth of Phone Exploration, Freaking, and Phreaking

Currently, the history of phone exploring, freaking, and phreaking exists only in fragments and scraps, although basic details have been covered in various books, public lectures, and Internet sites." Most accounts claim Joe Engressia, also known as Joy Bubbles, as their spiritual father, although others were already experimenting with the phone network in this period. Blind since birth and with perfect pitch, Engressia spent countless hours playing at home with his phone. In 1957, at the age of eight, he discovered he could "stop" the phone by whistling at a certain pitch, later discovered to be a 2600 hertz tone, into the receiver. Eventually, the media showcased this blind whiz kid, and local coverage most likely inspired others to follow in his footsteps.

In the late 1950s, the first glimmerings of phone explorations thus flickered, although only sporadically. Largely due to a set of technological changes, phreaking glimmered more consistently in the 1960s, although it

was still well below general public view. By 1961, phreakers—although still not named as such—no longer had to rely on perfect pitch to make their way into the phone system. They were building and using an assortment of small electrical boxes, the most famous of these being the Blue Box. This device was used to replicate the tones used by the telephone switching system to route calls, enabling Blue Box users to act as if they were a telephone operator, facilitating their spelunking of the phone system and, for some, free phone calls. Phreakers drew up and released schematics, or detailed "Box plans," allowing others to construct them at home. Eventually, further technical discoveries enabled phreakers to set up telephone conferences, also known as "party lines," where they congregated together to chat, gossip, and share technological information.<sup>12</sup> By the late 1960s, a "larger, nationwide phone phreak community began to form," notes historian of phreaking Phil Lapsely, and "the term 'phone freak' condensed out of the ambient cultural humidity."13 Its codes of conduct and technical aesthetics were slowly but surely boiling, thickening into a regularized set of practices, ethics, commitments, and especially jargon-a sometimes impenetrable alphabet soup of acronyms-that no author who has written on phreakers and subsequently hackers has ever left without remark.14

#### Hello World! The 1970s

In was only in the 1970s when phone freaking made its way out of its crevasse and into the public limelight through a trickle of highly influential journalistic accounts that also worked to produce the very technologists represented in these pieces. Thanks in particular to "Secrets of the Little Blue Box," a provocative account published in 1971, mainstream Americans were given a window into the spelunkers of the phone system. The article, authored by Ron Rosenbaum, who coined the term "phreaker," is was an instant sensation, for it revealed, in astonishingly remarkable detail, the practices and sensual world of phreaking. It focused on a colorful cast of characters with "strange" practices, names, and obsessions, who, according to Rosenbaum, were barely able to control their technological urges: "A tone of tightly restrained excitement enters the Captain's voice," wrote Rosenbaum, "when he starts talking about Systems. He begins to pronounce each syllable with the hushed deliberation of an obscene caller."16 Rosenbaum wrote such a compelling account of phreaking that it inspired a crop of young male teenagers and adults (including two Steves: Wozniak and Jobs) to follow in the footsteps of the phreakers he showcased. The most famous of the featured phreakers was

Captain Crunch, whose name references a toy whistle packaged in the sugary Cap'n Crunch brand cereal. Captain Crunch discovered that this whistle emitted the very 2600 hertz tone that provided one entryway into the phone system.

If journalists were spreading the word about these "renegade" technological enthusiasts throughout the 1970s, many phreakers and eventually hackers also took on literary pursuits of their own. In the 1980s they produced a flood of writing, often quite audacious in its form and content. In the early 1970s, however, the volume was only a steady trickle. In 1971, phreakers published a newsletter as part of their brief affiliation with an existing and wellknown countercultural political movement, the Yippies. Founded in 1967, the Yippies, who resided on the far left of the political spectrum, became famous for promoting sexual and political anarchy and for the memorable and outrageous pranks they staged. Originally bearing the title YIPL (Youth International Party Line), the newsletter was later renamed TAP (the Technical Assistance Program). Over time, the editors of TAP dropped the overt politics, instead deriving "tremendous gut-level satisfaction from the sensation of pure technical power."17

For a number of years, however, YIPL blended technological knowledge with a clear political call to arms. For instance, the first issue, published in 1971, opens with a brief shout-out of thanks to the phreakers who contributed the technical details that would fill the pages of this DIY/rough-andtumble newsletter: "We at YIPL would like to offer thanks to all you phreaks out there." And it ends with a clear political statement:

YIPL believes that education alone cannot affect the System, but education can be an invaluable tool for those willing to use it. Specifically, YIPL will show you why something must be done immediately in regard, of course, to the improper control of the communication in this country by none other than bell telephone company.18

Published out of a small storefront office on Bleecker Street in Manhattan's then seedy East Village neighborhood, the YIPL newsletter offered technical advice for making free phone calls, with the aid of hand-drawn schematics on pages also peppered with political slogans and images. For instance, these included a raised fist, a call to "Strike the War Machine," and, important for our purposes here, the identification of AT&T as "Public Enemy Number 1."19 A group of phreakers, who by and large had pursued their exploitations and explorations in apolitical terms, got married, at least for a brief period of

time, to an existing political movement. Although the marriage was brief, the Yippies nonetheless left their imprint on phreaking and eventually hacking.

Although phreakers were already in the habit of scorning AT&T, they had done so with at least a measure of respect.20 The zines YIPL, TAP, and eventually 2600 signaled a new history of the phreakers' (and eventually hackers') scornful crusade against AT&T. For example, in 1984, when TAP ceased to be, the hacker magazine and organization 2600 got its start. Largely, although not exclusively, focusing on computers, 2600 paid homage to its phonephreaking roots in choosing its name and spent over two decades lampooning and critiquing AT&T (among other corporations and the government) with notable vigor.

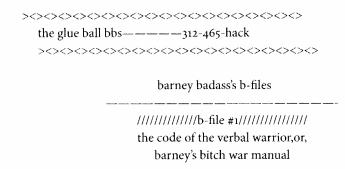
1980s: "To Make a Thief, Make an Owner; to Create Crime, Create Laws"-Ursula Le Guin

Arguably one of the most influential legacies of the Yippies was their role in amplifying the audacious politics of pranking, transgression, and mockery that already existed among phreaks. However, it took another set of legal changes in the 1980s for the politics of transgression and spectacle to reach new, towering heights. By the 1980s, phreaking was still alive and kicking but was increasingly joined by a growing number of computer enthusiasts, many of them preteens and teens, who extended the politics of transgression into new technological terrains. During this decade, the mainstream media also closely yoked the hacker to the figure of the criminal—often in spectacular terms as well—an image buttressed by legal changes that outlawed for the first time certain classes of computer intrusions.21

As in the past, other media representations also proved central in sparking the desire to hack, and few examples illustrate this better than the blockbuster 1983 movie War Games. Many hackers I interviewed, for example, recounted how watching the movie led to a desire to follow in the footsteps of the happy-go-lucky hacker figure David, whose smarts lead him to unwittingly hack his way into a government computer called WOPR, located at the North American Aerospace Defense Command Center (NORAD). After initiating a game of chess with the computer, David (unintentionally, of course) almost starts World War III. Most of the movie concentrates on his effort to stop the catastrophic end of the world by doing what hackers are famous for: subduing a recalcitrant and disobedient computer.

Apparently the movie appealed to a slew of nerdy types across Europe, Latin America, and the United States, leading them to incessantly demand from their parents a PC and modem, which once they got, commanded their attention while they were logged on for hours on Bulletin Board Systems (BBSes). A BBS is a computerized meeting and announcement system where users could upload and download files, make announcements, play games, and have discussions. BBSes housed a wildly diverse mixture of information, from government UFO coverups to phreaking box schematics, as well as software to ingest.<sup>22</sup> They also functioned like virtual warehouses filled with vast amounts of stand-alone texts, including genres like textfiles and zines, both of which significantly expanded the reach of the hacker underground, often broadcasting their message in audacious tones.

Textfiles, which were especially popular among underground hackers, spanned an enormously versatile subject range: anarchism, bomb building, schematics for electronics, manifestos, humorous tirades, UNIX guides, proper BBS etiquette, anti-Scientology rants, ASCII (text-based) porn, and even revenge tactics. A quite common type of textfile was box plans, schematics for electronics that showed how to use the phone system or other communication devices for unexpected (and sometimes illegal) purposes. Each textfile bears the same sparse aesthetic stamp: ASCII text, at times conjoined with some crude ASCII graphics. This visual simplicity sharply contrasts with the more audacious nature of the content. Take for example a textfile from 1984: "the code of the verbal warrior, or, [sic] barney's bitch war manual," which offered (quite practical) advice on the art of bitching.



so you log onto a board and make a bee-line for your favorite sub-board. some people love pirate boards, some people like phreak boards. my passion is the trusty old standby, the bitch board.

so you get in the 'argument den', or 'discussion board', or 'nuclear bitchfare'and start looking around for someone who you think you can outrank.you know,insult,cut down,and generally verbally abuse. and so you post,and,next thing you know,somebody appears to hate your guts. you've got an enemy, now what?

the main problem with 85% of all bitching that goes on on boards today, is that people just don't know how to handle the answer to that question. now what? do i keep it up? do i give up? do i insult his mother?

barney's bitch tip #1-----make up yor mind. either take the bitching completely seriously,or do not take it seriously at all. if you find yourself grinning at insults thrown at you by your opponent, then either cut it out immediately,or try grinning even wider when you're typing your reply. the benefit of this is that you can't be affected one way or the other by any thing that your opponent says if you're taking it seriously, then you just keep glaring at your monitor, and remain determined to grind the little filth into submission. if you're using the lighthearted approach, then it's pretty dif- ficult to get annoyed by any kind of reference towards your mother/some chains/and the family dog, because, remember, you're not taking this seriously!<sup>23</sup>

During the 1980s and through the 1990s, hackers were churning out these literary and political texts at rates that made it impossible for any individual to keep up with all of them. As cultural historian of hacking Douglas Thomas has persuasively argued, there was one publication, the electronic zine Phrack, that produced a shared footprint of attention among an otherwise sprawling crew of hackers and phreakers.<sup>24</sup> Phrack was particularly influential during its first decade of publication, and its style honored and amplified the brash aesthetics of hacking/phreaking as it spread news about the hacker underground.

One of the most important sections of the zine was the hacker "Pro-Phile," an example of which is the UNIX Terrorist's Pro-Phile that appears at the beginning of this essay. Thomas explains its importance in the following terms:

The Pro-Phile feature was designed to enshrine hackers who had "retired" as the elder statesmen of the underground. The Pro-Philes became a kind of nostalgic romanticizing of hacker culture, akin to the write-up one expects in a high school yearbook, replete with "Favorite Things" and "Most Memorable Experiences."25

This material was not simply meant for the hacker public to ingest alone. In the case of *Phrack*, the audience included law enforcement, for this was the period when hackers were being watched closely and constantly. Like Hebdige's costers, hackers conveyed the message that they too were watching back. The cat-and-mouse game of surveillance and countersurveillance among underground hackers and law enforcement amplified the existing propensity for hyperbole and trash talking that existed among phreakers and hackers. Their mockery of law enforcement, for example, not only abounded in the content featured in *Phrack* but was reflected in the very form of the zine. For instance, the structure of the Pro-Phile mirrors (and mocks) the FBI's "Most Wanted" poster, listing such attributes as date of birth, height, eye color, and so on.26

Hackers' expert command of technology, their ability to so easily dupe humans in their quest for information, and especially their ability to watch the watchers made them an especially subversive force to law enforcement. With society unable to pacify hackers through mere representation or traditional capitalist co-optation, a string of hackers were not simply legally prosecuted but also persecuted, with their punishment often exceeding the nature of their crime.27

1990s: "In the United States Hackers Were Public Enemy No 1."—Phiber Optik

Throughout the 1990s, the hacker underground was thriving, but an increasing number of these types of hackers were being nabbed and criminally prosecuted.28 Although there are many examples to draw on, the most famous case and set of trials concerns hacker and phone phreaker Kevin Mitnick.29 Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, he was arrested and convicted multiple times for various crimes, including computer fraud and possessing illegal long-distance access cods. Eventually the FBI placed him on the FBI's "Most Wanted" list before they were able to track him down and arrest him in 1995, after a three-year manhunt. He was in jail for five years, although he spent over four of those as a pretrial detainee, during which time he was placed in solitary confinement for a year.<sup>30</sup> Mitnick explained in an interview why this extreme measure was taken: "because a federal prosecutor told the judge that if I got to a phone I could connect to NORAD (North American Aerospace Command) and somehow launch an ICBM (Intercontinental Ballistic Missile)."31 Mitnick was unquestionably guilty of a string of crimes, although he never gained anything financially from his hacks. The extreme nature of his punishment was received as a warning message within the wider hacker community. "I was the guy pinned up on the cross," Kevin Mitnick told a packed room of hackers a couple of years after his release, "to deter you from hacking."32

At the time of Mitnick's arrest, hackers took action by launching a "Free Kevin" campaign. Starting in the mid-1990s and continuing until Mitnick's release in January 2002, the hacker underground engaged in both traditional and inventively new political activities during a vibrant, multiyear campaign: they marched in the streets, wrote editorials, made documentaries, and publicized his ordeal during the enormously popular hacker conference HOPE (Hackers on Planet Earth), held roughly every two years in New York City since 1994.

### 2000-2010: Good Grief! The Masses Have Come to Our Internet

Although the Internet was becoming more accessible throughout the 1990s, it was still largely off-limits, even to most North American and European citizens. By 2000, the floodgates started to open wide, especially with the spread of cheaper Internet connections. A host of new social media technologies, including blogs, wikis, social networking sites, and video-sharing sites, were being built and used by geeks and nongeeks to post messages, to share pictures, to chatter aimlessly, to throw ephemeral thoughts into the virtual wind, and to post videos and other related Internet memes. Internet memes are viral images, videos, and catchphrases under constant modification by users, and with a propensity to travel as fast as the Internet can move them.

During the period when large droves of people were joining the Internet, post-9/11 terrorism laws, which mandated stiff punishments for cybercrimes, and the string of hacker crackdowns of the 1980s and 1990s most likely made for a more reserved hacker underground.33 Without a doubt, cultural signs and signals of the hacker underground were and are still visible and vibrant. Hacker underground groups, such as Cult of the Dead Cow (CDC), continued to release software. Conferences popular among the underground, such as DEFCON and HOPE, continue to be wildly popular even to this day. Free from jail after two years, Kevin Mitnick delivered his humorous keynote address to an overflowing crowd of hackers at the 2004 HOPE conference, who listened to the figure who had commanded their political attention for over ten years.

Yet, with a few exceptions, the type of hacker Kevin Mitnick represents has become an endangered species in today's North American and European cultural landscape. Trolls, on the other hand, have proliferated beyond their more limited existence prior to this decade. Trolls have transformed what were more occasional and sporadic acts, often focused on virtual arguments called flaming or flame wars, into a full-blown set of cultural norms and set of linguistic practices.<sup>34</sup> These codes are now so well established and documented that many others can, and have, followed in their footsteps.

Trolls work to remind the "masses" that have lapped onto the shores of the Internet that there is still a class of geeks who, as their name suggests, will cause Internet grief, hell, and misery; examples of trolling are legion. Griefers, one particular subset of troll, who roam in virtual worlds and games seeking to jam the normal protocols of gaming, might enact a relatively harmless prank, such as programming flying phalluses to pay a public visit in the popular virtual world Second Life during a high-profile CNET interview.<sup>35</sup> Other pranks are far more morally dicey. During a virtual funeral held in the enormously popular massively multiplayer online game World of Warcraft, for a young player who had passed away in real life, griefers orchestrated a raid and mercilessly killed the unarmed virtual funeral entourage.<sup>36</sup>

In the winter of 2007 and 2008, one group of trolls, bearing the name Anonymous, trolled the Church of Scientology after the church attempted to censor an internal video featuring Tom Cruise that had been leaked. (Eventually what was simply done for the sake of trolling grew into a more traditional protest movement.)37 One participant in the raids describes the first wave of trolling as "ultra coordinated motherfuckary [sic]," a description fitting for many instances of trolling:

The unified bulk of anonymous collaborated though [sic] massive chat rooms to engage in various forms of ultra coordinated motherfuckary [sic]. For very short periods of time between Jan 15th and 23rd Scientology websites were hacked, DDos'ed to remove them from the Internet, the Dianteics [sic] telephone hot line was completely bombarded with prank calls ... and the "secrets" of their religion were blasted all over the internet, I also personally scanned my bare ass and faxed it to them. Because fuck them.

If hackers in the 1980s and 1990 were "bred by boards," as Bruce Sterling has aptly remarked, trolls have been partly bred in one of the key descendants of boards: wildly popular image forums, like 4chan.org, which was founded in 2003.38 4chan houses a series of topic-based forums where participants—all of them anonymous—post and often comment on discussions or images, many of these being esoteric, audacious, creative, humorous, heavily Photoshopped, and often very grotesque or pornographic. In contrast to many websites, the

posts on 4chan, along with their commentary, images, and video, are not archived. They are also posted at such an unbelievably fast pace and volume that much of what is produced effectively vanishes shortly after it is posted and viewed. These rapid-fire conditions magnify the need for audacious, unusual, gross, or funny content. This is especially true on the most popular and infamous of 4chan boards, /b/, the "random" board whose reigning logic combines topical randomness with aesthetic, linguistic, and visual extremity. "If you like the upbeat metaphor of the Internet as hive mind," explains Rob Walker, "then maybe /b/ is one of the places where its unruly id lives."39 This board is a haven for most anything and thus has birthed many acts of trolling.

Like phreakers and hackers, some trolls act as historical archivists and informal ethnographers. They record and commemorate their pranks, trivia, language, and cultural mores in astonishing detail on a website called Encyclopedia Dramatica (ED). ED is written in a style and genre that, like Phrack, pays aesthetic homage and tribute to the brashness that the trolls it chronicles constantly spew out. Take for example, the definition of "troll" and "lulz," a plural bastardization of laughing out loud ("lol"); lulz are often cited as the motivating emotional force and consequence of an act of trolling:

A troll is more than the embodiment of the internet hate machine, trolls are the ultimate anti-hero, trolls fuck shit up. Trolls exist to fuck with people, they fuck with people on every level, from their deepest held beliefs, to the trivial. They do this for many reasons, from boredom, to making people think, but most do it for the lulz.40

Lulz is laughter at someone else's expense. . . . This makes it inherently superior to lesser forms of humor. . . . The term lulz was coined by Jameth, and is the only good reason to do anything, from trolling to consensual sex. After every action taken, you must make the epilogic dubious disclaimer: "I did it for the lulz." Sometimes you may see the word spelled as luls but only if you are reading something written by a faggot. It's also Dutch for cock."41

As one will immediately notice, the very definition of "lulz" is a linguistic spectacle—one clearly meant to shock and offend through references to "cocks" and "faggots." Trolls have taken political correctness, which reached its zenith in the 1980s and the 1990s, by the horns and not only tossed it out the window but made a mockery of the idea that language, much like everything virtual, is anything that should be taken seriously.

Clearly, trolls value pranking and offensiveness for the pleasure it affords. But pleasure is not always cut from the same cloth; it is a multivalent emotion with various incarnations and a rich, multifaceted history. Common to F/OSS developers, hacker pleasure approximates the Aristotelian theory of eudaimonia described by philosopher Martha Nussbaum as "the unimpeded performance of the activities that constitute happiness." Hackers, in pushing their personal capacities and technologies to new horizons, experience the joy of what follows from the self-directed realization of skills, goals, and talents—more often than not achieved through computing technologies.

The lulz, on the other hand, celebrates a form of bliss that revels and celebrates in its own raw power and thus is a form of joy that, for the most part, is divorced from a moral hinge—such as the ethical love of technology. If underground hackers of the 1980s and 1990s acted out in brashness often for the pleasure of doing so, and as a way to perform to the watching eyes of the media and law enforcement, it was still largely hinged to the collective love of hacking/building and understanding technology. There was a balance between technological exploration and rude-boy behavior, even within the hacker underground that held an "elitist contempt" for anyone who simply used technological hacks for financial gain, as Bruce Sterling has put it.<sup>43</sup>

At first blush, it thus might seem like trolls and griefers live by no moral code whatsoever, but among trolls and griefers, there is a form of moral restraint at work. However naive and problematic it is, this morality lies in the "wisdom" that one should keep one's pranking ways on the Internet. Nothing represents this better than the definition for "Chronic Troll Syndrome," also from Encyclopedia Dramatica. This entry uses the characteristically offensive and brash style to highlight the existence of some boundaries, although in reality this advice is routinely ignored:

Chronic Troll Syndrome (CTS) is an internet disease (not to be confused with Internet Disease) that is generally present in trolls. It causes the given troll to be unable to tell the difference between internet and IRL [in real life] limits.

As a result, the troll is no longer able to comprehend what is appropriate to say and do when dealing with IRL people in contrast with the Internets. Symptoms include being inconsiderate and generally asshatty to friends and family, the common offensive use of racial epithets, and a tendency to interfere in other people's business uninvited "for the laughs." <sup>44</sup>

As so many Internet scholars insist, one should question any such tidy division between the virtual world and meatspace; further trolling often exceeds

the bounds of speech and the Internet when trolls "dox" (revealing social security numbers, home addresses, etc.) individuals and send unpaid pizzas to target's home, for instance. However problematic their division is, I would like to suggest that when trolls draw this cultural line in the sand, they are also commenting on the massification of the Internet—a position that is quite contemptuous of newcomers. Although trolling has existed in some form since people congregated online, trolling proliferated and exploded at the moment the Internet became populated with non-technologically-minded people. The brash behavior of trolls is especially offensive to people unfamiliar with this world, and even for those familiar with this world, it can still be quite offensive. Their spectacle works in part as a virtual fence adorned with a sign bearing the following message: "keep (the hell) out of here, this is our Homeland."

This geeky commentary on the masses is not entirely new. Take, for instance, "September That Never Ended," an entry from an online glossary of hacker terms, the Jargon File:

All time since September 1993. One of the seasonal rhythms of the Usenet used to be the annual September influx of clueless newbies who, lacking any sense of netiquette, made a general nuisance of themselves. This coincided with people starting college, getting their first internet accounts, and plunging in without bothering to learn what was acceptable. These relatively small drafts of newbies could be assimilated within a few months. But in September 1993, AOL users became able to post to Usenet, nearly overwhelming the old-timers' capacity to acculturate them; to those who nostalgically recall the period before, this triggered an inexorable decline in the quality of discussions on newsgroups. Syn. eternal September. See also AOL!<sup>47</sup>

Already by 1993 geeks and hackers who considered the Internet as their particular romping grounds were remarking on the arrival of newcomers. This tradition of lamenting the "lame" behavior of "noobs" continues today; however, the tactics have changed among a class of technologists. Instead of reasoned debate, as is common with university and F/OSS hackers, among trolls, the preferred tactic of performing their "eliteness" is shocking spectacle and the creation of highly specialized and esoteric jargon: argot. As noted folklorist David Maurer has argued, argot functions primarily in three capacities: to encode technical expertise, to create boundaries between insiders and outsiders, and to maintain secrecy.<sup>48</sup>

The behavior of trolls, of course, cannot be explained only by their contempt of newcomers; as this essay has argued, there are multiple sources and a rich historical tradition at play, including the aesthetic legacy of phreakers

and the underground, who provided a rich, albeit less shocking, tradition of spectacle and brashness from which to draw on, extend, and reformulate. We must also give due weight to the condition of collective anonymity, which, as the psychosocial literature has so long noted, fans the fire of flaming and rude behavior. 49 Finally, with a number of important exceptions, their antics, while perhaps morally deplorable, are not illegal. The hacker crackdown of the 1980 and 1990s may have subdued illegal hacks, but it certainly did not eliminate the rude-boy behavior that often went along with them; in fact, it might have created a space that allowed trolling to explode as it has in the past few years.

How have underground hackers reacted to this class of technologists? Although there is no uniform assessment, the UNIX Terrorist, who opened this piece, ends his rant by analyzing "epic lulz." Engaging in the "lulz," he notes, provides "a viable alternative" both to the hacker underground and to open-source software development:

Every day, more and more youngsters are born who are many times more likely to contribute articles to socially useful publications such as Encyclopedia Dramatica instead of 2600. Spreading terror and wreaking havoc for "epic lulz" have been established as viable alternatives to contributing to open source software projects. If you're a kid reading this zine for the first time because you're interested in becoming a hacker, fucking forget it. You're better off starting a collection of poached adult website passwords, or hanging out on 4chan. At least trash like this has some modicum of entertainment value, whereas the hacking/security scene had become some kind of fetid sinkhole for all the worst kinds of recycled academic masturbation imaginable. In summary, the end is fucking nigh, and don't tell me I didn't warn you . . . even though there's nothing you can do about it.

Good night and good luck,

the unix terrorist50

One obvious question remains: do trolls even deserve any place in the historical halls of hacking? I cannot answer this question here, for it is at once too early to make the judgment and not entirely my place to do the judging. One thing is clear: even if trolls are to be distinguished from underground hackers, they do not reside entirely in different social universes; trolling was common on BBSes, Usenet, and other Internet arenas where underground hacking thrived. There is a small class of the most elite griefers and trolls who use hacking as a weapon for their merciless mockery. Most telling may be the

UNIX Terrorist himself, and especially his rant; as the UNIX Terrorist's final words so clearly broadcast: underground hacking is notoriously irreverent and brash and thus helped to light an aesthetic torch that trolls not only have carried to the present but have also doused with gasoline.

Conclusion: Informational Tricksters or Just "Scum of the Earth Douchebags"?

Even while some of the actions of phreakers, hackers, and trolls may be ethically questionable and profoundly disquieting, there are important lessons to be drawn from their spectacular antics.<sup>51</sup> As political theorist and activist Stephen Duncombe has so insightfully argued, if carried out responsibly, a politics of spectacle can prove to be an invaluable and robust political tactic: "spectacle must be staged in order to dramatize the unseen and expose associations elusive to the eye."52 The question that remains, of course, is whether there is any ethical substance to these spectacular antics, especially those of the troll, whose spectacle is often generated through merciless mocking, irreverent pranking, and at times, harassment.

If we dare consider these informational prankers in light of the trickster, then perhaps there may be some ethical substance to some, although certainly not all, of their actions. The trickster encompasses a wide range of wildly entertaining and really audacious mythical characters and legends from all over the world, from the Norse god Loki to the North American coyote. Not all tricksters are sanitized and safe, as Disney has led us to believe. Although clever, some are irreverent and grotesque. They engage in acts of cunning, deceitfulness, lying, cheating, killing and destruction, hell raising, and as their name suggests, trickery. Sometimes they do this to quell their insatiable appetite, to prove a point, at times just to cause hell, and in other instances to do good in the world. Tricksters are much like trolls: provocateurs and saboteurs. And according to Lewis Hyde, tricksters help to renew the world, in fact, to renew culture, insofar as their mythological force has worked to "disturb the established categories of truth and property and, by so doing, open the road to possible new worlds."53

The mythical notion of the trickster does seem to embody many of the attributes of the phreaker, hacker, and especially the contemporary Internet troll. But is it reasonable to equate the mythical trickster figure Loki and the tricksters in Shakespeare with figures that do not reside in myth (although Internet trolls certainly create myths), do not reside in fiction, but reside in the reality of the Internet? Given that trolls, in certain instances, have caused mayhem in people's lives, does the moniker "trickster" act as an alibi, a defense, or an apology for juvenile, racist, or misogynist behavior?<sup>54</sup> Or is there a positive role for the troll to play on the Internet as site/place of constant play and performance? Is the troll playing the role of the trickster, or is the troll playing, you know, just for the lulz?

#### NOTES

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- 1. Steven Levy, *Hackers: Heroes of the Computer Revolution* (New York: Delta, 1984), 39-46.
- 2. Samir Chopra and Scott Dexter, Decoding Liberation: The Promise of Free and Open Source Software (New York: Routledge, 2009); E. Gabriella Coleman, "Code Is Speech: Legal Tinkering, Expertise, and Protest among Free and Open Source Software Developers," Cultural Anthropology 24, no. 3 (2009): 420–454. Chris M. Kelty, Two Bits: The Cultural Significance of Free Software (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).
- 3. E. Gabriella Coleman and Golub Alex, "Hacker Practice: Moral Genres and the Cultural Articulation of Liberalism," *Anthropological Theory* 8, no. 3 (2008): 255–277; Tim Jordan, *Hacking: Digital Media and Technological Determinism* (London: Polity, 2008).
- 4. Douglas Thomas, Hacker Culture (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).
- 5. "Phrack Prophile on the UNIX Terrorist," *Phrack*, November 8, 2008, http://phrack.org/issues.html?issue=65&id=2#article (accessed June 27, 2010).
- 6. It is far more common for hackers who do not engage in transgression to accuse transgressive hackers like the UNIX Terrorist of not being authentic hackers, instead being "crackers." See the entry for "cracker" in the tome of hacker lore, the Jargon File: http://catb.org/jargon/html/C/cracker.html.
- 7. Julian Dibbell, "Mutilated Furries, Flying Phalluses: Put the Blame on Griefers, the Sociopaths of the Virtual World," *Wired*, January 18, 2008, http://www.wired.com/gaming/virtualworlds/magazine/16-02/mf\_goons (accessed July 10, 2009); Mattathias Schwartz, "Trolls among Us," *New York Times Magazine*, August 3, 2008, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/03/magazine/03trolls-t.html (accessed August 3, 2008).
- 8. Dick Hebdige, "Posing... Threats, Striking... Poses" (1983), in *The Subcultures Reader*, ed. Ken Gelder and Sarah Thornton (New York: Routledge, 1997), 403.
- 9. Ibid., 398.
- 10. Dick Hebdige, "Subculture: The Meaning of Style" (1979), in *The Subcultures Reader*, ed. Ken Gelder and Sarah Thornton, 393–405 (New York: Routledge, 1997).
- 11. Phil Lapsely is currently writing a comprehensive history of phone phreaking and has given various lectures on the topic. See http://www.historyofphonephreaking.org/.
- 12. For a presentation about these early phone conferences held in the 1980s and 1990s, see TProphet & Barcode's talk, "Phreaks, Confs and Jail," given at The Last HOPE conference, July 2008, http://securitytube.net/Phreaks,-Confs-and-Jail-(The-Last-HOPE)-video.aspx.

- 13. Phil Lapsely, "More on the Origin of 'Phreak," *The History of Phone Phreaking Blog*, April 4, 2010, http://blog.historyofphonephreaking.org/2010/04/more-on-origin-of-phreak.html (accessed April 4, 2010).
- 14. See Steven Levy, *Hackers: Heroes of the Computer Revolution* (New York: Delta, 1984), 39–46; Ron Rosenbaum, "Secrets of the Little Blue Box," *Esquire*, October 1971, available online at http://www.lospadres.info/thorg/lbb.html (accessed April 16, 2011); Levy, *Hackers*; and Bruce Sterling, *The Hacker Crackdown: Law and Disorder on the Electronic Frontier* (New York: Bantam, 1992).
- 15. Lapsely, "More on the Origin of 'Phreak."
- 16. Rosenbaum, "Secrets of the Little Blue Box."
- 17. Sterling, The Hacker Crackdown, 62.
- 18. "The Youth International Party Lines First Issue," YIPL, June 1971, 1 (on file with the author).
- 19. Ibid.
- 20. Rosenbaum, "Secrets of the Little Blue Box."
- 21. Helen Nissenbaum, "Hackers and the Contested Ontology of Cyberspace," *New Media and Society* 6, no. 2 (2004): 195–217.
- 22. Jason Scott has produced a seminal history of the BBS era in his documentary BBS: The Documentary. See http://www.bbsdocumentary.com/.
- 23. barney badass, "the code of the verbal warrior," http://www.textfiles.com/100/warbitch.txt (accessed July 10, 2010).
- 24. Thomas, Hacker Culture.
- 25. Ibid., 92.
- 26. Ibid., 132.
- 27. Thomas, Hacker Culture; Sterling, The Hacker Crackdown. Among underground hackers, media representation and commodification were and still are largely ineffective tools to placate them. However, lucrative information-technology jobs, especially within the security industry, as Andrew Ross has noted, has led "two generations of hackers" to agonize "over accepting lucrative offers of employment within corporate or government IP security." Andrew Ross, Nice Work If You Can Get It (New York: NYU Press, 2009), 124.
- 28. Quotation in section title from Elinor Mills, "Q&A: Mark Abene, from 'Phiber Optik' to Security Guru," CNET News, June 23, 2009, http://news.cnet.com/8301-1009\_3-10270582-83.html (accessed July 10, 2010).
- 29. Kevin Mitnick's case and others are covered in Thomas, Hacker Culture.
- 30. E. Gabriella Coleman and Golub Alex, "Hacker Practice: Moral Genres and the Cultural Articulation of Liberalism," *Anthropological Theory* 8, no. 3 (2008): 255–277; Thomas, *Hacker Culture*.
- 31. Elinor Mills, "Q&A: Kevin Mitnick, from Ham Operator to Fugitive to Consultant," CNET News, June 22, 2009, http://news.cnet.com/8301-1009\_3-10269348-83.html (accessed July 10, 2010).
- 32. Quotation from Kevin Mitnick's keynote address delivered at the fifth HOPE conference, held in New York City, July 9–11, 2004, available online at http://www.the-fifth-hope.org/mp3/mitnick-1.mp3 and http://www.the-fifth-hope.org/mp3/mitnick-2.mp3 (accessed July 10, 2010).

- 33. This is difficult to empirically verify, yet it is not unreasonable to surmise that the well-publicized hacker arrests of the 1990s, combined with even stiffer penalties for computer intrusion mandated in the Patriot Act, would work to curb the most flagrant or potentially illegal behaviors or, alternatively, possibly make the underground burrow back into the recesses of its crevasses, away from the watchful eye of law enforcement.
- 34. Contemporary trolls encompass a wide range of subgroups, each with particular histories and techniques and some also harboring great distaste for other trolling groups.
- 35. Burci Bakioglu, "Spectacular Interventions of Second Life: Goon Culture, Griefing, and Disruption in Virtual Spaces," in special edition: "Cultures of Virtual Worlds," *Journal of Virtual Worlds Research* 3, no. 1 (2009), https://journals.tdl.org/jvwr/article/view/348; Dibbell, "Mutilated Furries, Flying Phalluses."
- 36. "WoW Funeral Raid," Playercraft.com, June 13, 2009, http://playercraft.com/famous/wow-funeral-raid/ (accessed June 10, 2009).
- 37. See http://www.whyweprotest.net/.
- 38. Sterling, The Hacker Crackdown.
- 39. Rob Walker, "When Funny Goes Viral," *New York Times Magazine*, July 12, 2010, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/18/magazine/18ROFL-t.html (accessed July 12, 2010).
- 40. Encyclopedia Dramatica, s.v. "Troll," http://encyclopediadramatica.com/Troll (accessed October 12, 2009).
- 41. Encyclopedia Dramatica, s.v. "Lulz," http://encyclopediadramatica.com/Lulz (accessed October 12, 2009).
- 42. Martha C. Nussbaum, "Mill between Aristotle and Bentham," *Daedalus* 133, no. 2 (2004): 64.
- 43. Sterling, The Hacker Crackdown.
- 44. Encyclopedia Dramatica, s.v. "Chronic Troll Syndrome," http://encyclopediadramatica.com/Chronic\_Troll\_Syndrome (accessed October 12, 2009).
- 45. E. Gabriella Coleman, "Ethnographic Approaches to Digital Media," Annual Review of Anthropology 39 (2010): 1–19; David Hakken, Cyborgs@Cyberspace? An Ethnographer Looks to the Future (New York: Routledge, 1999); T. L. Taylor, Play between Worlds: Exploring Online Game Culture (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006).
- 46. Judith S. Donath, "Identity and Deception in the Virtual Community," in *Communities in Cyberspace*, ed. Mark A. Smith and Peter Kollock, 29–59 (London: Routledge, 1999).
- 47. Jargon File, s.v. "September That Never Ended," http://www.catb.org/ $\sim$ esr/jargon/html/S/September-that-never-ended.html.
- 48. David Maurer, Whiz Mob: A Correlation of the Technical Argot of Pickpockets with Their Behavior (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1964).
- 49. Patricia Wallace, *The Psychology of the Internet* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
- 50. "Phrack Prophile on the UNIX Terrorist."
- 51. Quotation in section title from Encyclopedia Dramatica, s.v. "Troll," March 27, 2010, revision, http://web.archive.org/web/20100327134636/http://encyclopediadramatica.com/Troll (accessed July 5, 2011).
- 52. Stephen Duncombe, *Dream: Re-imagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy* (New York: New Press, 2007), 156–157.
- 53. Lewis Hyde, Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth, and Art (New York: North Point, 1999), 13.

54. Although I am not answering this question here, I am certainly not posing it rhetorically. It is crucial to interrogate trolling in all its dimensions, roots, and consequences, which I am unable to do here, as the main purpose of this essay is to establish aesthetic linkages between phreakers, hackers, and trolls. Lisa Nakamura has written about online racism extensively. See Lisa Nakamura, Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008) and Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet (New York: Routledge, 2002). Recently, she has explored the intersection between racism and griefing in a talk: "Don't Hate the Player, Hate the Game," June 16, 2010, available online at http://blogs.law.harvard.edu/mediaberkman/2010/06/16/ lisa-nakamura-dont-hate-the-player-hate-the-game. Legal scholar Danielle Citron has examined cyberharassment of women in terms of discrimination, building on her previous work on legal barriers and opportunities for addressing online abuse. See Danielle Citron, "Law's Expressive Value in Combating Cyber Gender Harassment," Michigan Law Review 108 (2009): 373-416; and Danielle Citron, "Cyber Civil Rights," Boston University Law Review 89 (2009): 61-125. Not all cases of trolling are relevant to the issues raised by these scholars, but some of them certainly are pertinent.