The Yin and Yang of 4chan's Nature

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INTRODUCTION

Since 2003, the 4chan website, or more specifically the sub-board /b/, has been a wellspring of inside ideas, jokes, themes, and actions which bubbled up to be infused in society as a whole. Yet if one were to examine 4chan over a period of time, one would find primarily two types of user participation on the board: communication and banter which is meant to remain on the board and communication and actions which go outside the board. Of the latter, one could further refine the actions into those of prankish mischievousness also known as trolling or action in vindication or support of a cause of individual, also known as vigilantism. Those two natures of 4chan's actions would on first glance, seem to be totally contrary to one another, however that duality of nature of 4chan/b/defines the true nature of the users. The purpose of this article is to examine the two seemingly at-odds natures of 4chan's external actions and to define a greater sense of the website's actions and subsequently, the individuals who populate and contribute to it.

BACKGROUND

On October 1, 2003, Christopher "moot" Poole started the website 4chan.net (it would later become 4chan. org). He modeled it as a Japanese anime cartoon image sharing website, not unlike its Japanese counterpart 2chan. Like 2chan, 4chan allowed users to post all content without forcing them to self-identify through the use of user names and profiles; all users' posts would automatically be labeled as "Anonymous" unless the user deliberately typed in an identity or tripcode. That distinction allowed users to default to the Anonymous moniker and create content, post opinion and reactions without having to reveal personal identity. Users were free to be as rude or as comforting as they deemed the situation demanded.

In addition to anonymity, there is no online archive of posted content. People may, if they wish, link themselves to a post or a comment using identifiers known as tripcodes, but in actuality, few do. A 2011 MIT study of 4chan use over a two week period discovered that for the majority of users, tripcodes were almost non-existent. "Tripcodes are the only way a 4chan user can guarantee that they are the same author of a previous post; however, they are very rarely used. Only 0.05% (281,367) of posts – one twentieth of one percent of [the study's] sample – contained a tripcode" (Bernstein et al., 2011, p. 55).

4chan is currently a set of 63 themed discussion or image posting boards. Each board is commonly referenced to its lettered code(s) bracketed by forward slashes. One of the most popular and certainly most notorious boards is the random board, /b/. /b/'s traffic makes up more of the activity on 4chan than all the other boards combined (Stryker, 2011). "The /b/ board['s name] stems from the original organization of the [2chan] site: [two channels,] /a/ for animation and /b/ for everything else" (Knuttila, 2011, p. 1). While almost all of the other boards have specific rules about what can be posted so that the overall theme is maintained, /b/ does not. Pretty much anything goes on any subject on /b/ (Stryker, 2011).

4chan/b/ has fostered its own sense of individuality. Those who post on /b/ do not want to feel like they are being pushed into an operation or action which is not self-generated. One of the more popular phrases is "/b/ is not your personal Army." (Chebet-Bouchard, 2010, p. 96). Personal army in the sense that just because "you" might want to go after a target, that doesn't mean that you get to order /b/ to do your bidding. There has to be a shared and agreed to sense of purpose for a group action; usually either "lulzy" foolishness or shared and recognized indignation over righting a wrong.

In the end, the personality and convictions 4chan/b/ participants bring to the board is a sense of invincibility through their anonymity, a lack of attribution with

the lack of an online repository of long-term posts, a group think of "all are in it or none are in it" for shared actions and cleverness and sense of the trickster going hand in hand with a moral compass which is defined by the group think.

THE DUALITY OF 4CHAN/B/

4chan/b/ as the Trickster

From its beginning, 4chan/b/ has been of a mind to play the role of troll or trickster against the unwary, unwitting or those who they feel need to be taken down a notch or two. To troll is to push the boundaries of outrageousness and surprise if only to evoke an angry, confused or violent reaction. The greater the reaction, the better the trolling and the more seemingly minuscule the issue, the greater satisfaction goes to the troll for getting the reaction. What follows is a brief collection of some of 4chan/b/'s more famous pranks and tricks.

In April of 2009, 4chan/b/ conspired to manipulate *Time Magazine's* online readers' poll of Top 100 Most Influential People of 2009 so that the founder of 4chan occupied the number one spot. Additionally, /b/ ensured that the first letter of the top 21 people's names spelled out the acrostic "Marblecake Also The Game." Marblecake is included as the first word in the acrostic for its shock value as it is a reference to a sexual act. The Game is included next because it signifies a win for the Trolls and a loss for the person "in the know." (Singel, 2009).

[The Game] is a popular 4chan meme that presages the site. The point is to make the victim think of something or notice something specific, with the moment of realization delivering a sense of having been had. The object of the game is to avoid thinking about The Game. (Stryker, 2011, p. 106)

In August of 2012, the restaurant chain Villa Fresh Italian Kitchen sponsored an online contest where it would accept free-text suggestions to name Mountain Dew's new green apple-infused flavored soda. It did not take long for 4chan/b/ to hijack the contest:

"Hitler did nothing wrong," "Diabeetus," and "Gushing Granny" all topped the online rankings to name the new drink, which Mountain Dew describes as "Classic Mtn Dew with green apple attitude." Other high ranking suggestions included "Soda" and "Sierra Mist," but the online shenanigans did not stop there. In addition to simply bombarding the poll with hilariously unusable names, the pranksters even went so far as to hack into the site, adding a banner that read "Mtn Dew salutes the Israeli Mossad for demolishing 3 towers on 9/11!" and a pop-up message that resulted in an unwanted Rickrolling. (Zimmermann, 2012, p. 1)

In November and December of 2012, *Time Magazine* again opened up its online voting contest to name who would be the Most Influential Person of 2012. Unrelated to that however, on November 14, 2012, the satirical magazine *The Onion* gushed in an article naming the new North Korean dictator Kim Jong-Un, their Sexiest Man Alive for 2012. Apparently, not realizing that this was *The Onion's* satirical spoof of *People Magazine's* "Sexiest Man Alive" contest, the official newspaper of the Chinese Communist Party, *The People's Daily*, announced that Kim Jong-Un had been named as *The Onion's* Sexiest Man Alive for 2012. *The People's Daily* article even added a slide show of 55 photographs of Un (Wong, 2012). 4chan/b/ took immediate notice and on November 26th the push to get Un elected as *Time Magazine's* Most Influential Person of 2012 had begun. By the next day, he had risen to second place behind Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi (Roy, 2012). As the contest continued into December, Kim Jong-Un had clearly taken the lead (Re, 2012).

Over time the prank began to take on more complexity. On Sunday, December 2nd, the CBS News Magazine *60 Minutes* ran a segment which described the operations of a secret North Korean prison camp. After the program aired, 4chan/b/ now pushed to have the first letters of the *Time Magazine* poll winners spell out a message as well. The push was to have the poll spell out "KJU Gas Chambers" which in addition to Kim Jong-Un, some believed referred to the *60 Minutes* prison camp (Constantini, 2012). When the polls closed on December 12th, 4chan/b/ was once again successful in manipulating the poll (Alfonso, 2012; Horn 2012).

In July of 2010, Justin Bieber agreed to let the public vote as to where his "My World" tour should begin. The non-binding vote by Faxo.com had North Korea as the odds-on favorite with a nearly ten thousand-vote lead over the next closest countries Israel and Poland.

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