

EPIC WIN FOR ANONYMOUS

HOW 4CHAN'S ARMY
CONQUERED THE WEB



COLE STRYKER

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For Charles and Janet Stryker, who once told me, “You’re not going to get very far in this world without knowing how to work a computer,” and then gave me one.

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EPIC WIN

Introduction

THIS IS THE story of the most interesting place on the Internet: an imageboard called 4chan, where you're as likely to find a hundred photos of adorable kittens as a gallery of gruesome autopsy photos.

It's a seedy, unpredictable place, where people have complete freedom to experiment; to try on new ideas, alternate identities. 4chan allows its users to say and do almost whatever they can think without fear of shame or retribution.

There are many individual boards that make up 4chan, and the strangest one is called */b/*, *Random*. This is the "hivemind" of the site, where nearly anything the human mind is capable of conceiving is on display, for better or for worse. Some have called it the Asshole of the Internet, but a few million call it home.

/b/ is particularly special because the board has almost no rules. However, its nameless users, who call themselves */b/tards*, have created a semiserious list of metarules, the first and second of which are cribbed directly from Chuck Palahniuk's book *Fight Club*:

Rule 1: You do not talk about */b/*.

Rule 2: You DO NOT talk about */b/*.

The stated intent of these rules is to keep outsiders out. Longtime */b/tards* detest new users more than anything, referring to them as "cancer" and go to great lengths to make their dialogue and community culture as unapproachable as possible. In writing this book, I've committed the most egregious violation of these rules in the short history of */b/*, opening myself up to everything from prank calls to death threats. I'm no longer just another member of "*anonymous*"—the vast group of 4chan users.

When I first started telling friends about the project, they'd universally respond:

"You're writing a book about 4chan? Ha! Good luck with *that!*"

OK, so we've established that 4chan is, to borrow a phrase from a well-known Jedi, a hive of scum and villainy. It's a playground for weirdos, but why does it matter? I've talked to everyone from academics and advertisers to hackers in order to find out. I got my hands dirty talking with the */b/tards* themselves, along with the people they love and those they love to hate. I approached 4chan not just as an observer, but as a participant, an antagonist, and an ombudsman.

I discovered that 4chan is a mysterious, misunderstood imageboard defined by anonymity and anarchy that influences the way you behave on the web, whether you realize it or not.

It stands in contrast to a web that seems to be moving inexorably toward personal responsibility and a constant identity across all platforms that define the browsing experience. I can't read a movie review online anymore without seeing my friends' Facebook commentary alongside it. And somehow Google knows that I'm really attracted to Nicki Minaj. On proprietary platforms like Facebook, one every move is documented. Some argue that this social accountability keeps us responsible. Others say it's another way to sell products. Either way, it's becoming more like real-life.

But didn't the Internet promise us an escape from real life? Wasn't that one of the reasons so many of us were drawn to it in the first place? 4chan is one of the few places that encourages the anarchy

found in the early days of the web.

And while 4chan is known for hosting everything from innocuous cat photos to child pornography, it's also a place where would-be activists can gather to express social dissent. It's a forum where a lonely nerd can ask for help meeting girls. And where a closeted homosexual can vent about his abusive, homophobic parents.

The fear-mongering mainstream media tends to portray 4chan as a breeding ground for sociopaths, superhackers and cyberterrorists. This is the case, yes, but it's a small part of the story. I wrote this book because I wanted to set the record straight. Namelessness matters. Freedom matters. And 4chan embodies those two ideals more concretely than anyplace else on the Internet.

If you've ever wondered, while browsing the web, "Why is this weird thing popular? Who cares about this stuff? How does this thing have so many views? Why do people waste their time with this? Where did it come from and where is it all going?" then read on.

This isn't so much a book about how technology is changing society as it is the story of how technology expanded the scale of human creativity and social interaction that already existed and was just waiting for the right platform. When that platform came along, creative participatory culture went global—and just like that things were never the same. This isn't just a book about 4chan. It's a book about you.

4chan is a multimedia experience, and there's only so much information that can be conveyed on the printed page. I highly encourage the reader to read this book near a computer so you can look up pertinent information as you go. If you're having trouble wrapping your head around a specific concept, online resources like Google, Wikipedia and Know Your Meme will help fill in the blanks.

A final warning:

Because 4chan thrives on its lack of rules, it hosts content that ranges from harmless to downright terrifying. Violent fetish pornography, racist/sexist rants, and gory photography are just a few of the more unsettling items that litter the pages of /b/.

Dear reader, under no circumstances should you see this book as an invitation to hop onto 4chan to see what all the fuss is about. If you must, at least prepare by reading my third chapter so you'll know exactly what you're getting into. There are ways to browse 4chan while avoiding most of the nastiest bits, and you should be aware of them.

Seriously. There are some things you can't unsee.

Mememes: Shared Nuggets of Cultural Currency

“DUDE, YOU’VE GOTTA see this.”

The sound of machine gun fire filled my freshman dorm. Walking down the hallway, I’d hear the explosion of grenades and machine gun spray muffling anguished shrieks of the dying. This went on literally all day and night. It was 2002, and the bros on my hall were taking full advantage of our campus’s T1 Internet connection by playing a run-and-gun PC shooter game called *Counter-Strike* till dawn.

For many of us, it was our first exposure to high-speed Internet. Previously we had to share 56k connections with siblings. It would take minutes to download a basic webpage. I remember setting up a string of downloads before bed each night and letting my computer run till morning. If AOL deigned to not kick me off the connection, I’d have four or five new songs in the morning. In college, I could accomplish the same in minutes. Webpages with streaming video loaded instantaneously. For the first time, the Internet moved as fast as my imagination. The guys on my hall spent most of their day taking advantage of this garden of earthly delights in hundreds of ways, some more illicit than others.

I vividly remember some gawky kid running into my room, doubled over in laughter.

“Dude, you’ve gotta see this.”

“What?”

“I can’t explain. Just google ‘gonads and strife.’”

I heard the ping of instant messages being sent back and forth throughout the hall. Laughter bubbled up all around me. And the sound of a chipmunk-like voice filled the air.

“Gonads and Strife” was a crude Flash animation that featured a monkey in a suit, a hyperactive squirrel, Stephen Hawking, R2-D2, and a spinning anatomic figure of a penis soaring through a lightning-filled sky. It was profane, catchy, and defied explanation. It spread through campus like wildfire. Like a virus, actually.

I can’t explain why Gonads and Strife is funny. You pretty much had to have been male college freshman to appreciate it. For a moment there, before YouTube and the rise of user-driven content aggregators like Digg and Reddit, intensely creative folks uploaded their work to the web, and finding it felt like being in on something special. Gonads and Strife was far from the first meme I experienced, but it was the first time I’d seen anything “go viral,” although my friends didn’t have a name for it yet.

I can think of a dozen more flash animations that eventually surpassed it in popularity, but in my little world, Gonads and Strife was genius. We scratched our heads, “How did someone even conceive of this? I’ve never seen anything like it.” It wasn’t long before I was running into someone else in my room, saying, “Dude, you’ve gotta see this.”

A History of Memes

In the decade since, barely a day has gone by that I haven't gleefully shared something from the Internet with a friend. The Internet is home to gigs upon gigs of content that compel viewers to share, participate, augment, parody, and otherwise own it. Today we call these bits of cultural currency *memes*. In order to understand why 4chan matters, we first have to understand memes.

Of course, memes were not born on the Internet. They've been driving the human sociocultural experience since before we scribbled on cave walls. Memes seek to replicate themselves laterally—the ideological or cultural equivalent of a gene, naturally arising from human interaction.

Ask evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins what a meme is and he'll tell you this:

Examples of memes are tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches. Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation.

This is an excerpt from Dawkins's groundbreaking book, *The Selfish Gene*, published in 1976. Dawkins didn't originally come up with the idea of a meme, but he was the first one to use the word and thus to inadvertently kick-start a new branch of anthropology called *memeetics*, a catchall term for the study of human social evolution as opposed to biological evolution (i.e., genetics).

I think that a new kind of replicator has recently emerged on this very planet. It is staring us in the face. It is still in its infancy, still drifting clumsily about in its primeval soup, but already it is achieving evolutionary change at a rate that leaves the old genes panting far behind.

The new soup is the soup of human culture. We need a name for the new replicator, a noun that conveys the idea of a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation. 'Mimeme' comes from a suitable Greek root, but I want a monosyllable that sounds a bit like 'gene.' I hope my classicist friends will forgive me if I abbreviate mimeme to meme. If it is any consolation, it could alternatively be thought of as being related to 'memory,' or to the French word 'même.' It should be pronounced to rhyme with 'cream.'

So, for Dawkins, religion is a meme. Art is a meme. Every form of human social expression is memetic. We are surrounded by memes, ranging from every family tradition we hold dear to the comics in today's funny papers. Some memes are widespread, like progressivism. Others are specific and intimate, like the unique baby talk between mother and child.

Everything we do and say is an imitation, to some degree, of the things we've seen those around us do. In a matter of speaking, memes seek to replicate themselves. Of course, neither Dawkins nor I would argue that memes are sentient beings capable of "seeking" anything. Memes are simply mental expressions that behave like genes. But memes have several things in common with biological life forms. That's why we often refer to memes as "going viral." They spread from person to person the way a virus does. Most of the time, we don't even realize we are spreading them, the same way a bear plays host to an intestinal parasite.

Memes can be ideologies, trends, fads, gossip, jokes, music, fashion, or adages—any concept that can be shared from one person to another. They're distinct and repeatable, and they live and die by natural selection in the same way that biological entities do. If a meme fails to spread, it's dead.

In the notes in Dawkins's 1989 reprint of *The Selfish Gene*, he admits that the word *meme* has become something of a strong meme in itself. In fact, his brief discussion of memes was only meant to serve a larger purpose: to establish that complex ecological systems arise from entities that seek to replicate.

I believe that, given the right conditions, replicators automatically band together to create systems, or machines, that carry them around and work to favour their continued replication. The first ten chapters of *The Selfish Gene* had concentrated exclusively on one kind of replicator, the gene. In discussing memes in the final chapter I was trying to make the case for replicators in general, and to show that genes were not the only members of that important class.

Although Dawkins had no intention of creating a grand unified theory for human culture (and eventually distanced himself from the term), a slew of memeticists picked up where he left off attempting to use memes to explain all human behavior. Countless heady discussions followed, influencing fields like cultural anthropology, sociology, and psychology, all dedicated to expanding Dawkins's theory of self-replicating units of cultural transmission.

Internet Memes

So how did we get from a broad, classical definition of a meme to an animated GIF of a dancing baby (or flying gonads)? Why has the term *meme* become so closely associated with web-borne viral content over the last ten years? Why, when we hear the word, do we think of something like the dancing baby rather than, say, Buddhism?

The Internet allows memes to spread more rapidly than any previous medium in human history. We now live in a world where any idea can be expressed instantly to nearly anyone on the globe, and millions of people take advantage of this capability every day, unconsciously spreading memes with every link shared, every video uploaded, every blog post written. Never before has the ratio of senders of memes to receivers of memes been so high.

Millions of memes are constantly fighting for your attention, for a chance to replicate. Memes proliferate, grow and shrink in the "meme pool," as public awareness expands and contracts. The structure of the web has been built around ensuring that the strongest memes made up of the most compelling, "sticky" content rise to the top. We see this principle in action in content aggregators like Reddit and Digg, which often collectively scrape content from, you guessed it, 4chan. This process is part of a phenomenon I call the Meme Life Cycle, which I'll explain later.

Since the Internet has made it so easy for memes to spread, it's become inextricably linked with how most people understand memes. Ask a fifteen-year-old what a meme is and he or she will probably say something along the lines of, "Have you ever seen lolcats? What about Antoine Dodson? Double Rainbow?" They'll rattle off Internet ephemera until you recognize something.

That's because today the word *meme* is shorthand for "A piece of content (e.g., a video, story, song, website, prank, trend, etc.) that achieved popularity primarily through word of mouth on the web."

When Internet phenomena such as viral videos, email-forwarded hoaxes, and web microcelebrity began to appear, journalists co-opted the term. As early as 1998, the word has been used to refer to bits of popular culture that are considered to be "from the Internet." But what does that mean, exactly? It's difficult to say, especially since the world of the web and the rest of popular culture are becoming increasingly intertwined.

It's difficult to pinpoint a precise time when the word *meme* started to refer to bits of Internet-born cultural iconography, like lolcats. I'd guess that Richard Dawkins would scoff at the bastardization of his term, especially since he distanced himself from it before the Internet ever co-opted it. We know that memes are propagated through social networks. This form of transmission is distinctly different from that of genes. You can't share your genes with your pals. Because the Internet so tangibly manifests those social networks, the word *meme* became a convenient term to describe specific bits of information that are shared on those networks.

In 1998, Joshua Schachter, who later went on to sell social bookmarking platform del.icio.us to Google, started Memepool, a multiauthor blog that contained links to interesting and offbeat content on the web. It was part of a growing network of blogs like Boing Boing, Waxy, and Laughing Squid who made up a vibrant culture of sharing cool Internet content. Memepool tracked stuff that was going viral. At the time, news outlets that profiled Memepool naturally referred to memes when

describing the site's subject matter.

In the mid-2000s, Jonah Peretti, who went on to found The Huffington Post and meme-tracker-online Buzzfeed, and Peretti's colleagues at Eyebeam, a not-for-profit art and technology research center, put together a research group called Contagious Media. The group was dedicated to performing culture-jammy "viral experiments" to demonstrate how information is passed around on the web. The project launched such viral phenomena as Black People Love Us (a satirical site about a dorky white couple's attempts to be accepted by the black community) and the "Nike sweatshop" email customer service exchange between Peretti and a Nike employee that resulted from Peretti trying to order a pair of customized shoes emblazoned with the word "sweatshop"). They held festivals and competitions based around this idea of contagious media.

Kenyatta Cheese, co-creator of Know Your Meme and former Eyebeamer, explains,

Jonah Peretti put together a Contagious Media Festival that was basically asking, "What is the science and culture behind the viral Internet?" As we collectively started taking the work of connecting viral media and connecting it back to the older theory of Dawkins, the word *meme* became the go-to term to describe viral content.

Somewhere between the late 1990s and the mid-2000s, the word *meme* became synonymous with weird, cool, and silly web stuff, and most people remain unaware of its original meaning in the field of evolutionary biology. I hope Richard Dawkins can at least get a kick out of how the word's definition has spread and evolved, memetically. In a 2010 interview with NPR, Dawkins said, "Well, I was pretty computer-literate for the time, but neither I nor anybody else, I think, had any very clear idea of what this enormous flowering that would become the Internet. It's become the perfect ecology for memes. I mean, the Internet is now one, great, memetic ecosystem."

Pre-Internet Memes

Is Yosemite Bear, the burly eccentric who achieved cultural ubiquity with his famous expression of awe at the sight of a "double rainbow," really all that different from Toby Radloff, the "genuine nerd" who became something of a pre-Internet micro-celebrity when he starred in a series of MTV promotional shorts in the '80s? Radloff was a coworker of comics legend Harvey Pekar, who featured Radloff in his *American Splendor* comics. Radloff was just a random weirdo who became known nationwide for a short while, not unlike Yosemite Bear and dozens of other web icons who've popped up on the mainstream's radar over the last twenty years.

While the rise of Yosemite Bear and Toby Radloff share the same "look at this random everyday weirdo" element, the means by which each achieved mainstream exposure is different. Radloff got big because some TV execs decided he was a quirky character and put him on TV. Yosemite Bear eventually made it all the way to the small screen as well, but it happened because millions of lines were instant-messaged back and forth. Thousands of tweets. Hundreds of blog posts. The rise was perpetuated by an unorganized grassroots movement. If you are aware of Yosemite Bear, it's because his meme was strong enough to beat out the millions of other memes competing for your attention.

Mememes had spread virally before the Internet as well. Consider the strange story of *Shut Up Little Man*, a series of recordings from the '80s made by a couple of guys living in San Francisco. Fascinating documents of bizarre humanity, the tapes captured the sounds of the guys' misanthropic neighbors hurling drunken insults at each other. The recordings were passed from friend to friend on cassette tapes. People made copies of copies. They became what we used to call "cult hits" in the burgeoning alternative West Coast zine culture. Since then, the recordings have been turned into a puppet show, a feature length drama, and a documentary that debuted in 2011.

OK, so we've established that there's nothing new under the sun. As I mentioned in the introduction, this isn't a book about explaining the way technology has changed the way we behave. The Internet didn't invent memes; it just expanded their scope and ramped up the frequency of their creation.

According to Eddie Lee Sausage, one of the guys who made the *Shut Up Little Man* recording (whom I interviewed for urllesque.com), experimental jazz composer John Zorn sampled them in his music. And they didn't peter out with the rise of the Internet. Within two days of Mel Gibson's racist rant against his now ex-girlfriend, some anonymous YouTube user had mashed up the rant with the audio from *Shut Up Little Man*. A similar mashup was created when Christian Bale famously flipped out on some poor lighting guy on the set of *Terminator Salvation*.

Speaking of music, consider hip hop culture, which is based on sampling, the practice of taking someone else's work, mixing it with the output of others, adding some of your own bits, and fusing all together into something fresh. Many of today's hip hop producers sample classic hip hop loops which are themselves made up of bits of soul and jazz from the '60s and '70s. And the beats are only part of this cultural milieu. B-boy dancing, MCing (rapping), and graffiti are layered over the music to create a rich sensory experience that vividly demonstrates the way all art evolves memetically.

The graffiti that evolved from hip hop culture is a prominent pre-Internet visual meme. Like many memes, graffiti is a means of showing off creativity or spreading a message. Sometimes graffiti artists just want to mark their territory. We've all probably seen "X was here" scrawled on a bathroom stall at some point. Where did that come from? Why is it observed all over the world? A suspected root of the meme is the "Kilroy was here" iteration, which features a bald-headed cartoon man with a long nose peeking over a wall.

Kilroy can be found in countless locations, scribbled on beachheads, landmarks—even the Berlin Wall. No one is quite sure who Kilroy is, and even the name is up for dispute, with variants that include Foo, Chad, Smoe, Clem, and others. Some suspect that the phrase originated among US servicemen marking places they'd been during tours of duty. Some historians place Kilroy's origins as far back as the 1930s. Regardless of where he came from, Kilroy is a wonderful example of a visual icon that motivated people to spread the meme virally, for no monetary or reputation benefit. They just wanted to be part of the meme.

Hide Ya Kids

I'll never forget the moment I first heard a woman singing The Gregory Brothers' "Bed Intruder" in a bar in the summer of 2010. For me it was a singularity that represented a shift in popular culture—the moment when Internet ephemera became solidified in the mainstream.

When people ask me what memes are I usually respond, "Have you ever heard of lolcats? You know, those funny cat photos with the misspelled captions?"

If that doesn't work, I'll say, "How about Antoine Dodson? That guy from the projects? There was that song? Hide ya kids? Hide ya wife? Nothing?"

Usually, by the time I get to "Hide ya wife," a wave of recognition washes over this uninitiated person's face, and I'm grateful I don't have to explain why an attempted rape is supposed to be funny. But that's what I'll do here.

In July 2010, Antoine Dodson was filmed by a local NBC affiliate in his Hunstville, Alabama housing project, where an unknown attacker had attempted to rape his sister the previous night. The video features an impassioned plea by Dodson:

Well, obviously we have a rapist in Lincoln Park. He's climbin' in your windows. He's snatchin' your people up, tryna rape

em. So y'all need to hide your kids, hide your wife, and hide your husbands 'cause they rapin' everybody out here.

Antoine became an overnight meme celebrity, but he rocketed to fame when his monologue was Auto-Tuned by musical comedy group The Gregory Brothers a few days later. The song was posted on iTunes and reached the Billboard charts, and The Gregory Brothers split the profits halfway with Antoine, enabling him to get out of the projects. At this point, Antoine is nearly as recognizable a pop culture icon as Justin Bieber or Lady Gaga. He's appeared on BET, the *Today Show*, and *Lopez Tonight*.

Many people felt that the humor of the clip was derived from a near-tragedy resulting from the plight of poor urban communities. The original coverage struck many as exploitative, as though Huntsville's NBC affiliate WAFF aired Antoine's ebonics-filled tirade for no other reason than to laugh at the uneducated black guy. Feminist bloggers wondered how a guy's goofy rant so easily overshadowed his sister's painful ordeal.

Nonetheless, the video racked up millions of views, becoming one of the fastest-expanding memes in history. Antoine saw an opportunity and rode the meme celebrity train for all it was worth. Merchandise, TV spots, promotional campaigns, you name it: Antoine was all over the place. He became almost a modern-day folk hero. Thousands of YouTube videos remixed, mashed up, and otherwise parodied the original. Even if the original video had been out of his control, at least Antoine was able to own his viral fame. On his personal site he proclaimed:

You all made me who I am today and for that I will for ever be in your debt. Once again I say thank you from me and on behalf of my entire family. I love you guys so much. You have given me this opportunity to shine so dammit I'm going to shine.

As of this writing, Dodson is working on an upcoming reality TV show.

Keeping Up With the New Language

People use the word *meme* to describe visual content like videos or photos or offbeat microcelebrities, but it's important to recognize that the meme is the concept. A photo or video might be just one execution of that concept among many. As memes evolve, they branch out in countless ways, shifting and merging with other mashed-up, mutated memes. Sometimes, in order to understand a given iteration of a meme, one must also be familiar with dozens of others.

Here's an analogy. The world of ABC's show *Lost*, which captivated TV viewers in the 2000s, demanded an unprecedented amount of attention from its fans. Each episode contained dozens of storylines, playing out bit by bit. There were so many characters and relationships to keep track of. One could not just jump into the show mid-episode, let alone mid-season. An offhand joke, or even a wordless facial expression, could be a reference calling back to an occurrence from an episode originally aired years prior. People who tried to pick up the show but hadn't watched earlier seasons were, uh, lost.

So it is in the world of memes. Keeping up with the Internet's daily output of fresh memes will likely define the watercooler conversation of tomorrow. A host of wikis, blogs, and even books have appeared over the last few years to try to make sense of it all. The structure of hypertext makes it easy to explore branching clusters of increasingly granular information. But given the availability of information on the web, the network of memetic information increasingly demands more from casual browsers. If I see something on 4chan and don't know what it means, I follow an informal process for figuring it out. This likely will start with a Google search, followed by a few quick scans of Wikipedia entries. If the meme is too obscure for Wikipedia, I might have to browse Encyclopedia Dramatica or

Urban Dictionary. If it deals with entertainment I might instead opt for the Internet Movie Database or Allmusic. I may consult Google News or Technorati to see if there's been any recent related web chatter. By the time I've fully explored the information, my browser is full of tabs.

As the Internet facilitates a growing network of increasingly complex memes, the gulf expands between those in the know and those who aren't privy to meme culture. There is a new language of memes forming, and I'm not referring to lolspeak or leetspeak. What I call the language of memes is not Internet slang, but a new visual way that people succinctly communicate emotions and opinions. Cheezburger CEO Ben Huh calls it the "visual vernacular."

Those who aren't able to keep up with all the latest cultural iconography won't be able to engage in the conversation. Knowing how to source the roots of memetic language will become an increasingly valuable skill as the network of memetic imagery becomes progressively more complex and people are expected to be more familiar with obscure web phenomena. Ignoring Internet memes will be equivalent to showing up to the office watercooler having watched none of last night's primetime content.

Dude, You've Got to See This

What compels people to share this stuff? The same impulse that incites us to gossip and share jokes. We want other people to enjoy the information we've acquired, and we get a mental kick out of being the ones to share it. This is as universal and historic a human characteristic as the need to eat. Sharing information, no matter how trivial, solidifies societal bonds and deepens relationships. These shared points of reference make up life as much as our inside jokes at work or gossip at church.

Clay Shirky has made waves in the last few years as being a kind of Marshall McLuhan for the Web 2.0 era. Throughout his two books, *Cognitive Dissonance* and *Here Comes Everybody*, Shirky provides the kind of commentary that fills one with excitement for being a part of the web right now. We're making things happen! It's a new stage in human social evolution! Look at all the cool stuff the Internet lets us do!

In *Cognitive Dissonance*, Shirky uses the lolcats found at <http://www.icanhascheezburger.com> as a convenient representative for what he calls "the stupidest possible creative act," as opposed to, say, improving a Wikipedia entry or creating a platform for financing human rights projects in the third world. I asked him about this, and he laughed.

"Actually, I love Cheezburger."

I breathed a sigh of relief, feeling a bit less guilty for spending more time laughing at "fail" videos than I've contributed to building out Linux.

He quickly added, "I'm not going to hold them up as a paragon of human intellectual achievement, but . . ."

Fair enough. He continued.

. . . I do think there's lasting social value in it. There's a spectrum of creativity from mediocrity to excellence, but there's a gulf between doing nothing and doing something. And anyone who's slapped a few words on a picture of their cat has already crossed that gulf. The invitation to make something and share it with other people on that scale is so radically different from what we were capable of doing in the twentieth century, that even a lolcat, one of the stupidest creative acts, is still a creative act.

Clay explains that we regard lolcats as an inexplicable novelty because the network on which they happen is so new. But the drive to share funny or interesting things with each other is a deeply entrenched human (not to mention animal) trait. So people who shake their heads and say, "Why would anyone waste their time with this stuff?" don't recognize that this impulse is nothing new.

What's new is the scale of the sharing.

Think of the aforementioned watercooler conversation. Or the bulletin board-covered walls of the college dorm room, festooned with satirical flyers, newspaper cutouts, editorial cartoons, and other ephemera. I remember as a kid visiting the shop floor where my dad worked, and noticing that he covered a filing cabinet with hundreds of magazine ads and other imagery. He'd used a Sharpie to draw mustaches and black eyes on the models, or given them speech bubbles, granting the images the ability to mock his coworkers.

I asked BuzzFeed's senior editor Scott Lamb how he responds to people who think the world of memes is a waste of time.

Bad romantic comedies are a waste of time. But very little Internet culture counts as that—as a waste—for me. First of all, it asks so little of you. Ten to fifteen seconds to scan a post, at most two minutes for a video? And most memes can be read and understood much faster than that.

It's important to remember that the cost that memes bear is almost nil compared to most other media. Who has the time for this stuff? Actually, quite a lot of people. Internet memes are bite-sized and as more of us become handcuffed to computers throughout the day, these tiny diversions become almost necessary.

A recurring theme in Shirky's work is the idea that some human social behaviors have always existed but are latent until triggered by some new technology that allows humans to express those behaviors like never before. In many cases, cultural critics shake their heads, claiming that human society is somehow getting dumber or lazier or more debauched. Clay argues that human behavior is mostly constant, and what changes is the technology.

This explains why we didn't see a group like capital-A Anonymous, the pseudopolitical activism group spawned from 4chan, ten years ago. Clay Shirky mentions the area code hookup threads that pop up on /b/ from time to time.

The scale at which Anonymous operates would not have been available ten years ago. When you look at area code hookup threads, the unspoken there is that obviously there's enough people here in any given area code that might be on the board. That density wasn't around ten years ago. People getting comfortable with this medium takes a lot longer than just rolling the tools out.

Clay draws my attention to Six Degrees, an early social network that had basically the same functionality as the more popular Friendster, but years earlier. In 1996, there simply weren't enough people online to support Six Degrees, and those who were online were not sufficiently acclimated to the Internet to be comfortable with the sort of commitment to a virtual identity that profile-based social networks such as Facebook and MySpace demand. Today, a generation has grown up with the Internet, considering it as much of a given as telephone networks. This generation has pioneered social networking because a lot of younger people already feel like they are living their lives online.

The Meme Factory

So what does all this have to do with 4chan?

For eight years now, 4chan has been a powerful (if not *the* powerful) wellspring from which memes emanate, a no-rules, boundary-less forum where the funniest and most interesting content not only rises to the top, but is copied, remixed, and mashed up ad infinitum until it becomes an indelible piece of this ever-shifting new culture. On 4chan, entertainment is no longer passive. It is an interactive living organism. 4chan behaves like the Internet, but harder, better, faster, stronger—a whirlwind.

microcosm of creativity. A fetid, bubbling meme pool.

To understand what makes 4chan tick, one must understand the language of Internet memes. 4chan didn't invent this, and is hardly the only place on the web where memes are born. Many of the memes featured in this book became viral completely independent from 4chan. But for a period of time that continues at least up to this writing, 4chan reigns as the web's primary meme factory.

Chapter 2

Discovering 4chan

GROWING UP IN rural Pennsylvania I had little exposure to the outside world, culturally speaking except for the piddly local library. My grandparents bought my sister and I our first family computer a Compaq Presario with a blindingly fast Pentium II processor, when I was fourteen. My ninety-year-old grandfather insisted that familiarity with a computer would define a person's ability to compete in the marketplace of tomorrow, but I had one thing on my mind: How do I get this thing to play video games?

Up until then, I had owned a few Nintendo consoles. Pop in a game cartridge and you're off. There was no installation of software, no downloading patches. Everything just *worked*. Not so with this unfamiliar contraption that miraculously landed in my room (a decision my parents apparently made without considering the implications of putting what was essentially a free porn machine in an adolescent boy's bedroom). Of course, I was terrified at the prospect of divine retribution and celestial shame, and I limited my racy searches on that computer to victoriassecret.com, which still brought unimaginable guilt.

Successfully running an average game on a PC in those days often required hours of detective work. I trawled tech support pages and dug deeply into hobbyist forums, slowly loading page after page until I had gathered enough information to get back into the game.

I familiarized myself with dozens of software packages, but I was most fortunate to grow up along with simple hypertext, the nonlinear, nonhierarchical structure of ideas all connected across millions of blue sentence fragments. My search for knowledge and entertainment on the web felt like untangling a giant knot; at times screen-smashingly frustrating and at other times deeply satisfying. I would follow certain paths across twenty pages, come to a dead end, and then start over from the beginning, following a different path. Over time I became more adept at finding the fastest routes to the information I wanted, whether that meant googling various search strings, posting a question on a forum, or browsing massive downloadable user manuals.

Along the way, I learned basic computer skills. More importantly, I learned how to navigate the Internet, a skill that would come to define my career. Due to the way information is structured on the web, one can follow endless rabbit holes of information. This was the dawn of the search engine and Wikipedia, which together opened my mind to an infinite world of new questions and answers. At some point gaming became a secondary concern, and I started using the Internet for the Internet's sake.

Though my mother put strict limits on the amount of time I could spend on the Internet, I had an hour each day to chat with friends on AOL Instant Messenger, read video game news, and look at funny photos at places like Fark and Something Awful. I'd boot up the computer, dial up a connection, and open twenty windows. Then I'd putz around the house, waiting for everything to load (usually about ten minutes). Then, and only then, would I start the egg timer that my mom used to mark off Computer Time. The twenty windows would generally keep me occupied for the hour.

Over the next few years I discovered Napster, which opened my ears to indie rock. I became

obsessed with punk music and its associated aesthetic. During those years I read probably thousands of music reviews and participated in countless forum arguments over the authenticity of certain bands. I got turned onto indie game development and the software piracy scene. I engaged in conversations about the nature of art, pop culture, and the web itself. I felt as though I was a part of something which literally no one I knew in real life was privy to. At home, amid miles of cornfields, I had one neighbor (a middle-aged couple), but online I was a part of a cadre of critics and tastemakers on the bleeding edge of culture. (Looking back, I was probably pretty insufferable in those days.)

And then college happened. I went to a tiny liberal arts school a few miles from my hometown. Culturally speaking, it didn't have much more to offer, but I fell in with a small group of indie rock geeks. We were *aesthetes*, silently projecting an aura of cultural superiority over the normals, which was likely never noticed.

One of my friends shared my enthusiasm for the web, though his knowledge of its emerging trends dwarfed mine. He was the sort of guy who wore a fedora, started a satirical newspaper, and had dreams of developing a gossip site that would act as sort of a hyperlocal Gawker for our rinky-dink campus. Perhaps more than our shared love of the web, we had in common a basic desire to be a part of a world bigger than the one in which our bodies were trapped. We'd talk about New York business moguls and Silicon Valley upstarts, referring to industry personalities by first names though we were miles away (geographically and experientially) from either of those scenes.

This friend and I developed a habit for sending each other, via instant messenger, links to funny or interesting web content. It became a challenge to beat each other to the latest story, and since we were pretty much the only people we knew who spent most of their waking hours in front of a computer, this practice continued after college. To this day, we still IM each other stuff.

Sometime in 2006, this guy sent me a link to 4chan—to a gross-out photo of an anime (Japanese animation) character doing something unspeakable involving at least three bodily fluids. For us, the Internet was a magical ladder reaching to new heights of the human imagination, but it was also a hilarious cesspool of depravity.

“Dude, WTF,” was probably my response, incredulity giving way to laughter at the existence of the kind of mind who would create such an atrocity. “Where did you find this?”

“4chan.org. It's a gold mine.”

And so began my relationship with 4chan. My friend went on to write, in a blog post for Gawker, one of the first mainstream reports of 4chan as a growing phenomenon.

4chan users would likely call me a newfag (read on, offended readers) and a lurker. I've rarely ever posted anything on the site, and I came to the scene relatively late. But what I found on 4chan was a distillation of what made the web so special. It's wild and weird—a level playing field where physicists and fathers rub shoulders with horny teenagers and senior citizens who compulsively collect their belly button lint in mason jars, with photographic proof. To be honest, I often find the place generally repulsive, but sometimes repulsive things have massive influence.

On 4chan, you never quite know whom or what you're going to run into. 4chan is like that burnout teenager who asked you and your childhood friends if y'all wanted to see a dead body down by the train tracks. 4chan is that kid in your class with Asperger's who sketched out a hundred-page graphic novel based on the entire recorded output of the prog-metal band Rush. It's the lightheartedly sadist next-door bully named Sid from Pixar's *Toy Story*. It's Brad Pitt's Tyler Durden from *Fight Club*. It's Willy Wonka and Boo Radley and Johnny Knoxville all rolled into one throbbing, sweating, oozing gob of id.

4chan is the most fascinating place on the Internet.

But What Is It?

4chan is an imageboard: a simple message board that allows users to post images in addition to text. Users can post anonymously, without setting up an account. It's hosted at <http://www.4chan.org>, and was launched in 2003 by a 15-year-old kid who wanted to provide his online buddies with a place to share anime.

That's it.

But somehow, 4chan has evolved into the web's foremost wellspring of pop-culture output over the last decade, spawning globally recognized iconography and serving as a base for people who conduct clandestine operations ranging from stalking cute girls to organizing global efforts of pseudopolitical "hacktivism."

As of this writing, 4chan receives 12 million hits monthly, making it one of the largest communities on the web. No small feat for a site with no marketing budget, no stated mission, no searchable index, no archives, a userbase that's famously antagonistic to outsiders, a decade-old user interface, and almost zero static content. There's something special about 4chan that keeps people coming back, with dramatically greater numbers year after year.

"Like it or hate it, 4chan is an important cultural force . . . It is a huge site, and so many Internet memes are formed there, it's hard to ignore it," said June Cohen, executive producer of TED Media, the organization that invited 4chan's founder to speak alongside impressively credentialed academic inventors, and entrepreneurs in 2010.

I could go on telling you about it, but I'd rather show you.

Chapter 3

4chan in a Day

MOST OF THE media coverage that 4chan has received over the last year has focused on Anonymous (again, capital A Anonymous). This is the loosely organized hacker collective responsible for a variety of unrelated pranks, hacks, and protests beginning in 2007. 4chan's the sort of place where unseemly characters congregate to plan pseudopolitically motivated mischief. We'll get to them later. But what's it actually like to be there?

I spent twelve straight hours on the site, documenting my experiences in real time. Everything you're about to read actually happened as I've presented below. I haven't added a thing to make it more interesting. I don't need to.

Take my hand. Call me Virgil.

The Enthusiast Boards

As of this writing, there are 49 boards that make up 4chan.org. When you read about 4chan in the news, you are most likely reading about /b/, 4chan's Random board. And for good reason. /b/'s traffic makes up more of the activity on 4chan than the other boards combined. /b/ is a no-rules board that fosters all kinds of nasty behavior. I discuss it later in this chapter. But first, some descriptions of the enthusiast boards found on 4chan that focus on specific areas of interest.

Note: All posts quoted from 4chan and elsewhere are reproduced exactly as posted.

/a/ Anime & Manga

4chan was originally conceived as a place for anime and manga (comic book) fans to talk about their hobby and share images from their favorite anime franchises. There are strict rules in place to ban those who spoil storylines. Not much to see here if you're not an anime buff.

As someone who has little personal interest in anime, I haven't spent much time on this board. But anime has had an important influence on the rest of 4chan, and on Internet culture at large. Anime fandom in the West exploded with the advent of the Internet. Before the web, fans acquired VHS tapes from pen pals in Japan and drove for days to get to annual anime conventions. Today's anime geek has millions of hours of content at his fingertips, all dubbed, subtitled, and readily available. What's more, he has a deeply informed network of superfans he can consult 24/7. And if he can't find some obscure piece of content, he can inquire at /a/ and likely receive an answer within seconds. Still, the hobby demands a deep devotion, and this is a favorite place for fans to geek out.

Japanese culture is deeply embedded in underground Internet communities like 4chan, partially because the initial scarcity of anime in the West drove anime nerds to the web to find information about their hobby—but also because certain strains of anime lean towards the transgressive, and transgression loves company.

/adv/ Advice

One of the more recent social experiments on 4chan, the /adv/ board is a crowd-sourced advice column. Sometimes responses are genuine, even heartfelt. Sometimes they're snarky and mean, but in a lighthearted, creative way. A lot of the questions deal with nerds asking help for dealing with girls.

Here's the top question right now, verbatim:

Ok, so here's my problem. Next fall, I got into my last year of college. I've haven't declared a major, but I can finish either English or Psychology in two semesters. If I go into english, I will go to law school. If I go into psych, I'm in the long haul for a PHD. I enjoy psych alot, but I want the best for my future family and I'm concerned about money.

Advice is requested with the understanding that many of the responses will be trollish in nature. But half the fun is seeing what kind of creatively terrible advice anon (i.e., lowercase-a anonymous, the anonymous crowd on 4chan, not to be confused with Anonymous, described above) is able to come up with.

/an/ Animals & Nature

This board is for photos of plants and animals only, with frequent discussion on how to care for pets and plants.

The top post:

So I found a baby cat on the streets yesterday, me and a friend brought him home, tried to feed him some tuna, she didn't want any of it, but she had some milk. Now I'm keeping her at my house, and, well, I'd like some advice on what to do now, for getting to shit and pee in one place and food she could eat that doesn't go to waste after two hours, and if I should bathe her. She's got no wounds or anything, but she was pretty scared yesterday night, crying and getting into my bed and in my sheet, and now she's sleeping in a box on my dad's lap.

D'aww.

/c/ Anime/Cute

Here is a place for lonely anime nerds to post cute, as opposed to erotic, anime pictures. Bookish girls with sexy librarian glasses and big eyes dominate the board.

One poster describes his crush with an enthusiasm that perfectly encapsulates the vibe:

For me, attraction is mainly her physical appearance. She looks like a doll or a lollipop with a curl of ice cream or something on her head. It's very appealing visually. Also she is good at doing/ saying really cute things, especially things boys like.

But it's not just about looks. I stumble on one poster who insists that his infatuation with a particular anime character from a series called *Magical DoReMi* is based on the strength of her character as depicted in the show:

A lot of it has to do with her selflessness and personal sacrifice for others. This is best showcased in the beginning of *Sharp* when she's taking care of Hana at night, while still juggling school and her idol work. I can barely keep up with just school on its own. Her straightforwardness can come in handy sometimes too.

I'm no psychologist, but it seems the attraction to cute, childlike anime girls is driven by a fear of real women. These cartoons don't talk back, they don't judge, and they're innocent and trusting. Besides, of all, they're often depicted as being into nerdy guys. The producers of these series' know the audience.

People throw the word *love* around quite a bit on this board, and they mean it. To the extent that ~~human being can love a cartoon character, these guys (and a few girls too!) do. It's not just a sexual thrill.~~ One guy says that such and such a character is so beautiful he could cry, and I believe him.

/cgl/ Cosplay & EGL

This discussion board is for people who dress up like anime, video game, or other fiction characters for fun. It's called *cosplay* (costume-play). If you've ever been to a comic book or video game convention, you've probably seen these folks—though there are also many conferences dedicated solely to cosplay culture. Hard-core cosplayers spend thousands of dollars on everything from exotic fabrics to wigs to comically massive foam swords. There are lots of women hanging around /cgl/. EGL stands for Elegant Gothic Lolita, a Japanese fashion that looks like modest, frilly Victorian garb, but is very dark and influenced by punk/goth subcultures.

It might seem at first glance as though there's something wrong with adults who dress up like comic book characters. I'm tempted to think from time to time that there's something unhealthy about cosplay fans, who obsessively ponder the history of their favorite fantasy characters, who devote more of their free time absorbing ephemera relating to their hobby, who spend a decent chunk of their disposable incomes building their identities around their hobby . . . and then I go to a football game.

/ck/ Food & Cooking

A sample:

Alright, /ck/. I'm on a mission and I'm not quitting until I succeed. I don't like eggplant or zucchini. I'll eat them if I absolutely must, since I'm not a 5-year old, but I do not like them and have never cooked anything with either of them.

But, there MUST be a way to prepare eggplant or zucchini that I will enjoy. Not tolerate, but actually enjoy. I want to be able to say, "Fuck yes, I want to eat more of this shit!" So I come to /ck/ for suggestions on delicious ways to prepare eggplant or zucchini. I will NOT give up and you WILL hear from me again, either asking for more suggestions or to confirm that I've succeeded in my quest to enjoy these two vegetables.

4chan's cooking board allows users to share recipes, kitchen-ware deals, and cooking tips. It's a very macho, as though the boys are attempting to compensate for their interest in a traditionally domestic hobby.

/cm/ Cute/Male

Another anime board. This one's full of photos of male anime characters—a gay-male and heterosexual female counterpart to /c/.

/co/ Comics & Cartoons

A home for images and discussion regarding Western comics. This includes everything from superhero fare to graphic novels to Spongebob Squarepants. The current top thread began with someone writing "Meanwhile at Taco Bell." Hundreds of responses follow, each taking on the persona of a comic book character, writing what, say, Spider-Man would say if he was chilling at Taco Bell.

/d/ Hentai/Alternative

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