

• *Articles* •

## **The Chaotic Freedom Fighter: Anonymous as the Trickster of Cyberculture**

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**Abstract:** *This article explores the connections between the hacktivist movement Anonymous and the mythical trickster figure. It takes up the features identified by scholars such as Lewis Hyde and William J. Hynes as typical for the trickster and examines them in the context of hacktivist culture. While Anonymous shows many of the core trickster characteristics, it differs from mythical tricksters in two important aspects: its plural nature and the fact that it is a real world entity. However, the cultural role they play is the same: they question rules, challenge assumptions and test limits, preventing stagnation. The article then offers a new perspective of studying the trickster: as a symbolic expression of an important social function.*

The trickster has been one of the most complex and fascinating figures of mythology. What makes this figure so complex is, among other things, its deeply ambiguous, paradoxical, and mercurial nature. And it is due to these features that the exact nature of the trickster has been notoriously difficult to pin down. In fact, there will probably never be a clear definition of the trickster because that would directly contradict one of his<sup>1</sup> central characteristics: his opposition to borders and boundaries. Indeed, as William J. Hynes helpfully points out, to categorize or define “(de-finis) is to draw borders around phenomena, and tricksters seem amazingly resistant to such capture; they are notorious border breakers” (Hynes 1997b, 33).

Nevertheless, the lack of an exact definition has not prevented scholars from identifying some core characteristics that most tricksters share. One of the things that all the well-established tricksters have in common is the fact that they appear in the realm of mythology. There is Loki in Norse mythology, Hermes in Greek mythology, Coyote in Native American mythology, and Ananse in African mythology,

to name the most famous examples. What is more, Lewis Hyde, in his fascinating work *The Trickster Makes This World*, argues that there are no modern tricksters; in his view, tricksters only appear “in the complex terrain of polytheism” (1998, 9-10). He explains that tricksters are essentially ambiguous characters and there is no place for them in the world where the boundaries of good and evil are clear-cut. He admits that it is possible for a trickster to appear outside this context, but on condition that he has “a relationship to other powers,” which have the ambiguous attitude “of both insisting that their boundaries be respected and recognizing that in the long run their liveliness depends on having those boundaries regularly disturbed” (Hyde 1998, 13). Moreover, a very important factor is the character of the disruption the trickster causes: “When he lies and steals, it isn’t so much to get away with something or get rich as to disturb the established categories of truth and property and, by so doing, open the road to possible new worlds” (Hyde 1998, 13).

We do not live in a polytheistic society and yet the boundaries between good and evil in the contemporary world in general and in cyberspace in particular are far from being clear-cut. More importantly, in the quote above, Hyde points out an essential cultural role that tricksters perform. They “open the road to possible new worlds” by constantly breaking rules, disregarding taboos and challenging even the basic assumptions societies are based on. In this way, the trickster ensures that the assumptions and rules are not being taken for granted. By his disruptive and disrespectful behavior, he often facilitates a change and thus prevents stagnation. It is simply too important a figure to be restricted to the realm of mythology. That being said, I cannot omit the darker side of the trickster. Most of what tricksters do is motivated by purely selfish reasons and can be described as morally shady, to say the least. Indeed, the trickster is more of an anti-hero than a hero. This, however, does not diminish his significance.

In the contemporary culture, this role is performed by Anonymous, a group of hactivists<sup>2</sup> who have become famous for attacks on government, religious, and corporate websites. It embodies the trickster in all its moral ambiguity. The link

between hackers and tricksters has been made before, most notably by Gabriella Coleman. The aim of this article is twofold: first, to examine how exactly Anonymous fits the category of the trickster as described by the leading trickster scholars, such as Hynes, Hyde, William G. Doty and Paul Radin. The article thus discusses some of the core trickster features Anonymous exhibits, such as its ambiguous, amoral, and anomalous nature; its role as a boundary crosser, a situation-inverter, and a sacred/lewd bricoleur; and its lack of identity, resulting from its motley character. I focus on the conflict of Anonymous and the Church of Scientology because this clash helped to give the movement its present shape. The second aim of the article is to explore how Anonymous departs from the more traditional tricksters and thus how this connection changes our understanding of the trickster archetype in contemporary world. Anonymous differs from traditional mythical tricksters in two ways: first, by being not a single figure, but a collective of people (it has often been described as a hive mind) and, second, by being not a mythical character, but real people existing in a real world, outside a narrative. The comparison of such fundamentally different figures, which nevertheless fit one archetype, casts light on what makes the essence of the trickster. And examining Anonymous through the prism of the trickster in turn enables us to see the movement in a new light and reveal the significance of its crazy pranks.

### **In it for the Lulz: Anonymous and its Antics**

Perhaps the most obvious feature tricksters and hacktivists share is their penchant for pranks. A common form of pranks practiced in cyberculture today is called “trolling,” which consists in “[p]osting derogatory messages about sensitive subjects on newsgroups, forums, and chat rooms in order to vent one’s feelings. The anonymity of such venues enables people to say things they would not say in person, and they often like to ratchet up emotions to generate strong reactions” (“Trolling” 2014). In this respect, trolling has a similar function as the practice of telling trickster tales in Native American cultures, namely providing a vent or—to

use Hynes' and Steele's metaphor—a "steam valve" for pent-up anger and frustration. These feelings necessarily result from various constraints and conventions, which are an inherent part of every social order. The anonymity connected with the forums and chat rooms where trolls are active grants them the freedom of breaking out of social constraints and flouting the convention which dictates that they behave in a certain way and allows for the feeling of frustration to accumulate. By playing in this space where one is not bound by any rules, "potentially disruptive feelings are released" (Hynes and Steele 1997, 171). However, trolling differs from the trickster tales in one important respect. In Native American trickster tales, the effect is more indirect because the disruptive feelings are released by the audience experiencing the outrageous acts vicariously (through the character of the trickster). The trolls, on the other hand, experience the effect of their impudent acts directly because they are the agents. This difference results from the fact that, unlike the tricksters in Native American tales, trolls are not characters in a narrative; they are the tricksters of the real world.

The main purpose of trolling is getting "lulz." What better definition of this expression to give than the one provided by trolls themselves in their *Encyclopædia Dramatica* (ED), itself a successful parody of regular encyclopaedias, being modelled on Wikipedia and echoing *Encyclopaedia Britannica* in its title:

**LULZ** is a corruption of *L O L*, which stands for "Laugh Out Loud", signifying laughter at someone else's expense (from the German concept of "Schadenfreude"). This makes it inherently superior to lesser forms of humor. Anonymous gets big lulz from pulling random pranks. The pranks are always posted on the internet. Just as the element of surprise transforms the physical act of love into something beautiful, the anguish of a laughed-at victim transforms lol into lulz, making it longer, girthier, and more pleasurable. Lulz is engaged in by Internet users who have witnessed one major

economic/environmental/political disaster too many, and who thus view a state of voluntary, gleeful sociopathy over the world's current apocalyptic state, as superior to being continually emo.

Not surprisingly, the entry is far from being objective. After all, that is not the point of this encyclopaedia. Nevertheless, it offers a clear definition of what makes lulz, the element of intense negative emotions on the side of the victim. The following definition of trolling, provided by an “anon” (i.e. a person associated with Anonymous), shows just how much the element of entertainment, coupled with provoking strong emotions, is important for what trolls do: “Trolling is a fucking art. Trolling is getting the person you are talking to to get as pissed off as they possibly can and for no reason except your own enjoyment. Maybe you are trying to illustrate a point, but it’s mostly for your own enjoyment” (Knappenberger<sup>3</sup> 2013). In this sense, trolling bears a strong resemblance to what the Signifying Monkey, an African-American trickster figure, does when it coaxes the lion into fighting the elephant and then does not hesitate to taunt the humiliated and enraged lion (Gates 1988, 63). Indeed, laughing at and taunting the victims of tricksters’ pranks is equivalent to the lulz trolls get from their pranks.

ED does not just offer a definition of Lulz; it exemplifies them in its entries. In fact, ED’s description of itself is quite illustrative:

Like all websites with user-generated content, ED quickly degenerated into a forum for unfunny revenge attempts by butthurt individuals of every description — bigots, banned website users, trolling victims, failed trolls, and virgins rejected by hot girls. 99.9% of all ED articles are tl;dr [too long; didn’t read] ravings about things the person dislikes, or unknown and uninteresting LiveJournal or deviantART users who made someone mad by existing. The other .1% are archives of dead YouTube embeds. But nevertheless, it is still filled



to the brim with lulz of every sort.

All users are welcomed to create and modify content to more accurately reflect the internets and help archive the never ending supply of e-drama. Please continue to add articles so that the encyclopedia will provide answers to questions like "What the hell is mediocrat?" and "Where are the lulz?"

As is clear from this entry, lulz are usually both funny and offensive. These seem to be two essential components of trolling. Even random browsing of ED shows that it is not a website for the sensitive or the serious. Its entry on "Wyatt Mann" is a salient example. It shows extremely offensive, racist and/or violent memes. But the cherry on top is the message at the top of the page, which says: "Offended? If you have been offended by 'Wyatt Mann', please click here and scroll slowly down to the bottom of the page." After clicking on the link (spoiler alert), the reader can see comforting pictures of cute animals, which are, however, soon replaced by utterly disgusting images of diseased genitalia, mutilated bodies, and the like. The point of these revolting and outrageous images is to scare away people who do not share trolls' open mind. And by "open mind" I mean their absolute disregard for what is considered polite, appropriate, or politically correct. This corresponds to the policy described in the entry on ED: "The wiki takes a no-holds barred, nothing is sacred approach to everyone and everything." An illustrative example of a trickster who shares this view is that of Eulenspiegel, a trickster from German folklore, who showed his disrespect for everything sacred by defecating in a church. This blatant disregard for the sacred and the forbidden may seem too irreverent and destructive at first, but it has one important social function. By breaking rules and violating taboos, tricksters and trolls are testing (be it unwittingly or intentionally) whether it makes sense to have these restrictions.

Indeed, for trolls, there is nothing that must be taken seriously. Everything can and should be made fun of. In short, there are no limits to the lulz. The more

certain issues are treated as taboos, the more attractive they are as targets of trolling because then they are more likely to spark outrage.<sup>4</sup> Norton's definition of lulz further supports the idea that, for trolls (and for tricksters), nothing is off limits. Just like tricksters, trolls are boundary crossers, the boundaries being social conventions and taboos:

Lulz . . . are about bemusement, belittlement, schadenfreude, anything it takes to make you laugh. They're sweet release from the obligations of modern life's Serious Business. Lulz can be witty or puerile, but what makes them so important to the story of Anonymous is that the lulz are, above all, free in every sense. . . . The lulz can be had by all, they cost nothing, they don't stop at borders, they don't respect social conventions. (Norton 2012)

In this flagrant disregard for social conventions, Anonymous very much resembles the trickster as an "enemy of boundaries" (Kerényi 1972, 185). Anonymous and trolls in general want to enjoy absolute freedom, which is a prominent feature they share with the trickster. Freedom pervades everything Anonymous does—it not only characterizes its activities, but also points to the targets of its attacks.

This absence of boundaries is also an important feature of the /b/ board, a part of the image board website 4chan, which is, like ED, a place where trolls find a convenient outlet for their (often disturbing) creativity. In fact, this is where Anonymous was born or at least where it got its name from because most of the posts here are anonymous. An anon explains why trolls find this website so much to their liking: "It's what you get when people are allowed to express themselves with absolutely no restrictions whatsoever. It's the kind of sum of human imagination when people can get together and paint together without any limits or parameters. It's the most vile, disgusting, and funny thing on the Internet" (Knappenberger 2013). With its absence of restrictions, the /b/ board creates a congenial

atmosphere for Anonymous because it is a place where people can enjoy themselves without any limits whatsoever.

It is this absolute freedom, this lack of restraint that makes the /b/ board a perfect playground for imagination and creativity, two very important elements of “bricoleur” aspect of the trickster which Hynes identified as being one of the core trickster features. Bricoleur means “a tinker or fix-it person, noted for his ingenuity in transforming anything at hand in order to form a creative solution” (Hynes 1997b, 42). Moreover, Hynes distinguishes a specific type of this function in the case of the trickster and that is a “sacred/lewd bricoleur” (elaborating on Robert Pelton’s term “the sacred bricoleur”). As a “sacred/lewd bricoleur,” the trickster “manifests a distinctive transformative ability: he can find the lewd in the sacred and the sacred in the lewd, and new life from both” (Hynes 1997b, 42). The trickster looses all kinds of “lewd acts upon the world. Gastronomic, flatulent, sexual, phallic, and fecal feats erupt seriatim. Yet the bricoleur aspect of the trickster can cause any or all of such lewd acts or objects to be transformed into occasions of insight, vitality, and new inventive creations” (Hynes 1997b, 42). Even by random browsing through the /b/ board or ED one can find many acts of transformation, mostly in the direction from the sacred to the lewd, such as identifying Jesus as a zombie and a fellow troll (see ED’s entry on Jesus). Nevertheless, these tricksterish transformative acts can result into “occasions of insight, vitality, and new inventive creations” even if the results are often rather unsavory.<sup>5</sup>

This transformative creativity is often connected with the trickster’s role of a culture hero. A salient example is the Winnebago Trickster, who transformed the pieces of his penis that had been gnawed off by the chipmunk into edible plants which human beings could use (Radin 1972, 39). Considering the creativity and inventiveness of the /b/ board and 4chan as a whole, it is not surprising that it contains a trace of the culture hero aspect. Indeed, it is a place where many famous memes originated and then went viral. In the words of Adrian Chen, 4chan is “basically the best breeding ground for Internet culture” (Knappenberger 2013).



Connecting Anonymous and 4chan with a culture hero may seem to be rather far-fetched when considering the culture heroes of Native American trickster tales, but it must be taken into account that the context is radically different as well. Anonymous can be acknowledged to have a culture hero aspect when being viewed in the context of the present-day cyberculture. After all, tricksters change along with the culture they are active in.

So far, I have tried to show the importance of the element of entertainment in trolling and the implications it has for cyberculture. I would like to examine it in a more personal dimension now and see what consequences trolling can have for its victims. Coleman draws attention to the personal consequences of trolling when she says that trolling entails “desecrating reputations and revealing humiliating or personal information” (2013, 3-4). This can be illustrated using the cases of Hal Turner and Aaron Barr, two well-known victims of trolling. These two examples show that, despite the apparently light-hearted nature of trolling, it can have a very serious impact.

Before he became a victim of trolling, Hal Turner was a well-known online and radio personality and a Neo-Nazi. This, of course, means that he often aired his racist opinions online and in his radio program—until he verbally attacked one of the users of 4chan. What follows, is an account of the incident given by an anon:

The first time I heard about Hal Turner is he was knocking somebody on 4chan. He was just being a major dick to a relatively known user and *for the fun of it* we started trolling, and then, I guess, we figured we had a moral high ground, which allowed us to get people on our side. But he was a fucking Neo-Nazi. That’s not okay to be in modern society. You’re not allowed to do that, and there’s a million Neo-Nazis out there, but he started picking on our dude, so we had to go to our dude’s fucking defence and *it just so happened* that he was a Neo-Nazi so that’s a bigger reason. (Knappenberger 2013, emphasis added)

This account further highlights the importance of entertainment in trolling, and the fact that the impact often appears as a side effect. In this case, the side effect of trolling Turner online and in real life meant that he lost his radio show (not being able to pay for it) and stopped posting on the Internet. What is more, by hacking into his private servers and revealing the information that he was serving as an FBI informant, Anonymous managed to ruin his name “within the white-nationalist scene” (Knappenberger 2013).

Turner’s case is a notable example of the role of the trickster as “situation-inverter,” which Hynes identified as one of the core trickster features. In this role, tricksters show their penchant for transforming hierarchies and their “ability to overturn any person, place, or belief, no matter how prestigious.” According to Hynes, “there is no ‘too much’ for this figure. No order is too rooted, no taboo too sacred, no god too high, no profanity too scatological that it cannot be broached or inverted. What prevails is toppled, what is bottom becomes top, what is outside turns inside, what is inside turns outside, and on and on in an unending concatenation of contingency” (1997b, 37). What transpires from this quote is tricksters’ aversion against stability and permanence. Nothing can be taken for granted in the presence of these unpredictable and chaotic figures. In Turner’s case, Anonymous played the role of a situation-inverter when it stripped him off his power and influence among the Neo-Nazis.

What often attracts the attention of tricksters as situation-inverters is boastfulness. When Eulenspiegel, a trickster from German folklore, hears of a wine cellar owner who boasts about being the cleverest man there is, he cannot help testing his cleverness and see if he can deceive him. He manages to swap a jug of water for a jug of wine, walking out of the wine cellar without having paid for the wine and saying that nobody is so clever that they cannot be deceived by a fool. An illustrative example in the story of Anonymous is the case of Aaron Barr, CEO of a security firm called HBGary Federal, who claimed that he had managed to uncover

the leadership of Anonymous and was going to make this public (Norton 2012). The coder Barr had been working with had serious doubts about the validity of Barr's method in digging up this piece of information, but Barr insisted that his analysis was right. The coder thus went to one of the company officials with a warning, pointing out the dangers of Barr's egotism: "I feel his arrogance is catching up to him again and that has never ended well...for any of us" (Anderson 2011). Whenever you get too puffed-up, there is always a trickster ready to burst the bubble of your self-importance. Indeed, the trickster "symbolizes that aspect of our own nature which is always nearby, ready to bring us down when we get inflated, or to humanize us when we become pompous . . ." (Singer qtd. in Hynes 1997a, 208). And that is exactly what happened to Barr. He received several internal warnings from the company, but he did not heed any of them. He got a story in *Financial Times* and the publicity he wanted so much. He thought that he had managed to infiltrate Anonymous and was planning to expose them, hoping to earn money and fame in the process. However, his hopes were soon dashed:

Anonymous responded with inhuman severity and swiftness. Within 48 hours, all the data on the email servers of HBGary Federal and its former parent company, HBGary, had been stolen and then released in full on the Pirate Bay. Anons further humiliated Barr by seizing his Twitter account and (they allege, though this has never been confirmed) even erasing his iPad remotely. Barr's Anonymous presentation was posted on the net and laughed at for its supposed inaccuracies. The notice on HBGary Federal's site read, "This domain has been seized by Anonymous under section #14 of the rules of the Internet." (Rule 14 is a real thing, from a "Rules of the Internet" list that often made the rounds on /b/. It reads as follows: "Do not argue with trolls—it means that they win.") (Norton 2012)

Of course, Anonymous did not deny itself the usual taunts that suggested themselves in a situation like this, deriding the vulnerability of a company that specializes in security (Anderson 2011).

### **The Cyberculture (Anti-)Hero: Anonymous and Activism**

So far it may have seemed that trolling is mainly about fun, which was indeed the case in its beginnings. In fact, that is how the culture of hacking came into being—as pranks. One of its birthplaces is the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) where the term “hacking” was “coined by members of the Tech Model Railroad Club as they play[ed] around with track circuitry” (McCormick 2013). Richard Thieme describes what these pranks looked like:

Hacking originated as humorous pranks. When the guys in MIT put a Volkswagen up on top of the dome of the building, people woke up and saw a car up there in the morning, or they measured a bridge by the body-lengths of somebody; let's say his name was Brian and they discovered the bridge over the Charles River was, you know, 822 Brians. These are funny things. That's where hacking originated and then migrated in engineering and computer communities. (Knappenberger 2013)

But this gave rise to something more serious when some hackers started to be interested in political issues and turned into “hacktivists.” The term “hacktivism” was coined by a similarly oriented computer-hacking group called Cult of the Dead Cow (cDc) which became “by the mid-1990s an explicitly political organization, one that leverage[d] technology to advance human rights and protect the free flow of information” (McCormick 2013). The members of cDc are described by Chris Wysopal as “merry pranksters” (Knappenberger 2013), an expression which brings to mind trickster-like characters such as Robin Hood. Their pranks and their crazy

title coupled with their interest in advancing human rights contain the peculiar blend of the comic and the serious which is characteristic of Anonymous as well.

Dorothy E. Denning describes hacktivism as a “marriage of hacking and activism. It covers operations that use hacking techniques against a target’s Internet site with the intent of disrupting normal operations but not causing serious damage. Examples are web sit-ins and virtual blockades, automated email bombs, web hacks, computer break-ins, and computer viruses and worms” (2001, 241). Margaret Rouse further explains that a “hacktivist uses the same tools and techniques as a hacker, but does so in order to disrupt services and bring attention to a political or social cause” (2007). In the case of Anonymous, the overarching political cause is freedom of expression and freedom of information. That is why the attention of Anonymous is often drawn by repressive regimes and governmental actions that are perceived by the movement as oppressive.

However, most of what Anonymous seems to be doing can be described more specifically as a fight against “the second enclosure movement.” This term, introduced by James Boyle, is based on what he calls “the first enclosure movement,” meaning “the process of fencing off common land and turning it into private property” (2003, 33-34). This was a series of enclosures taking place in England between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries (34). Correspondingly, the second enclosure movement is a term describing the process of fencing off the public domain, “the commons of the mind.” This domain is “being covered with new, or newly extended, property rights” (37). The rationale behind this is the following: as the cost of copying decreases, the control of intellectual property increases to protect the author, which Boyle challenges in his paper. One of the drawbacks of extending intellectual property rights he mentions is the possibility of slowing down innovation “by putting multiple roadblocks, multiple necessary licenses, in the way of subsequent innovation” (44). As a trickster, and thus an enemy of boundaries and an agent of change and innovation, it is not surprising that Anonymous is opposed to enclosing. Its opposition can be clearly seen in its fight against the opponents of



piracy. An illustrative example of this fight is Operation Payback, which involved, among other things, taking down the website of the UK Intellectual Property Office.

Since the very beginning of hacktivism then, the idea of having fun has been intrinsically connected with more serious issues, although the ratio of these two elements has not always been the same. At one point, the ratio of entertainment to activism leaned decidedly to the point of activism, and that is when somebody tried to spoil the fun Anonymous was having. That somebody turned out to be its arch enemy, the Church of Scientology:

What first pushed Anonymous in a political direction was the only thing that could have: an attempt to interfere with their lulz. In January 2008, a video leaked out of the Church of Scientology. In it, over the thrum of an action-movie-style soundtrack, Tom Cruise enthused about his total devotion to the doctrines of Scientology. The video flew around the Internet, spawning parodies and commentary. It was epically lulzy, in just the sort of way that made perfect fodder for /b/. But the legendarily litigious church acted to stop the spread of the video, sending legal nastygrams to anyone hosting or sharing it. (Norton 2012)

Scientology is indeed the sworn enemy of Anonymous because it is, in Coleman's words, "the perfect inversion of what geeks and hackers value . . . . It's very proprietary, it's closed and so in some ways if you had something like, a cultural inversion machine and you stuck geeks and hackers in there, you'd get something that looks a lot like Scientology" (Knappenberger 2013). With its closed, hierarchical, restrictive, and sober nature, Scientology made the perfect enemy for the crazy, chaotic, and creative force of freedom that the trickster represents. This is connected with another reason why Scientology was such a tempting target for Anonymous, which is explained in the following comment on the conflict, provided

by an Anon:

We're such polar opposites, with them being secretive and us hating secrets and them being so inclusive and us being, you know, anybody can say they're Anonymous and most importantly, how fucking self-important they were. They thought they were fucking untouchable. They thought they were . . . like their own little church mafia . . . it's like a play-toy now. We're going to make you look as stupid as shit. (Knappenberger 2013)

This comment is another salient example of the situation-inverter aspect of the trickster, and thus further explains why the idea of showing the Church of Scientology that they are not invincible and making them more humble, preferably having fun while doing this, was simply irresistible.

In fact, attacking Scientology and thus confronting its nemesis was a historical moment for Anonymous; to use the stereotypical image of Internet nerds that Anonymous is mostly identified with, the commitment to the idea of bringing Scientology to its knees (even for a moment) lured the geeks out of their basements (which meant leaving their computers behind) and into the streets, specifically to the centres of the Church of Scientology where they held their protests and generally tried to disrupt the proper functioning of the Church. The reason why this was significant is twofold. First, the protests meant crossing yet another boundary: Anonymous showed that its sphere of activity is not restricted to cyberspace. Second, part of Operation Chanology, as the attack on Scientology was called, was a "Message to Scientology" video, in which Anonymous formally declared war to Scientology. This video marked a significant change in Anonymous because that was the moment when "Anonymous as a culture started referring to itself as Anonymous as a movement and declared that it was going to take down and destroy the Church of Scientology" (Knappenberger 2013). What basically happened was that

Scientology became the Other that was necessary for Anonymous to define itself against and thus to unite all the geeks into a movement. The video marks this moment: “That one video really galvanized that moment, that moment of innovation. . . . with that video, internet activism, as it’s known today, was born” (Knappenberger 2013).

Although Anonymous did not destroy the Church of Scientology, it made a profound impact. It drew attention to the way Scientology harassed its critics and enabled the people dealing with Scientology to express their criticism without the fear of having their lives ruined: “Prior to Anonymous, critics of the Church still had to be very very careful, because of the aggressive lawsuits that were launched against academics, journalists and other critics. I would say that era is over and Anonymous more than any other sort of intervention is probably responsible for that change” (Coleman in Knappenberger 2013). As a situation-inverter, Anonymous managed to knock the Church off its pedestal of God-like self-importance and invulnerability and succeeded in advancing its main cause: the freedom of expression.

However, the success of Operation Chanology was not without a price. Two people responsible for taking down the Scientology website were arrested and got a prison sentence.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, it led to a rift in the movement, with part of Anonymous claiming that campaigns like these were leaning too much to the side of the serious. They were calling the members of Anonymous associated with Chanology—in other words the activists in the movement—“moralfags” (in contrast to “lulzfags,” who were in the movement chiefly for their own entertainment) (Norton 2012). In short, lulzfags thought that moralfags were taking all the fun out of the game and “ruining [their] bad name” (Knappenberger 2013). A well-known example of their retaliation is their attack on an epilepsy support message board run by the nonprofit Epilepsy Foundation, which was “possibly the first computer attack to inflict physical harm on the victims” (Poulsen 2008). The hackers posted animated black and white images, which were flashing quickly, to the forums in order to induce epileptic

seizures. This incident exemplifies the dark side of the culture.<sup>7</sup>

This rift shows another typical trait of the trickster, the fact that this figure is “the epitome of paradox” (Gates 1988, 30) symbolizing “the unity of opposed forces” (6). On the one hand, Anonymous can be seen as morally good, fighting for the freedom of information in operations such as Chanology. On the other hand, it is capable of disrupting corporate organizations or randomly attacking innocent people (ruining their reputation and/or their personal relationships) just for the fun of it. Actually, even its motivation in attacking Scientology, which was seen as morally good, was ambiguous:

It’s crucial . . . to understand the oddly contradictory spirit in which this campaign was conducted. Was Anonymous serious about destroying the church? Or was it all a joke? The answer to both questions is yes. The anons took on Project Chanology (as they called their Internet fatwa against Scientology) for the lulz, but they also wanted those lulz to have a real-world effect. (Norton 2012)

In fact, in the “Message to Scientology,” their motivation is explained. Anonymous vows to destroy the Church of Scientology “for the good of your [Scientology] followers, for the good of mankind and for our own enjoyment” (“Project Chanology” 2012). Their motivation is an ambiguous mixture of a commitment to a serious cause and the lulz. In fact, ambiguity is what Hynes sees as being at the very heart of the trickster’s character, together with his anomalous nature (Hynes 1997b, 34).

Anonymous, fits this other core trickster characteristic as well. Like the trickster, it is definitely an anomaly, symbolically standing outside the society by disregarding its rules, values and conventions. The fact that anons do not fit the norm is expressed in the following comment of an anon describing the strange character of the movement: “I’ve been an anon for a long time. I know Anonymous is

really strange. They're weird and the stuff we like is weird and it's really not mainstream at all" (Knappenberger 2013). Norton confirms this when he describes Anonymous as an "innumerable throng of Internet misfits" (2012). It is, therefore, difficult to describe their identity because identity is often bound to a place or group the person belongs to. And tricksters do not belong anywhere; their place is outside borders. The word that aptly characterizes this feature of the trickster and Anonymous is motley, signifying a lack of structure and thus a lack of a clear and stable identity: "Motley bespeaks a lack of identity. . . . [T]he character in motley is never the hero, never the king, though he or she has a freedom of motion those others lack" (Hyde 1998, 298). In the case of Anonymous, this absence of identity is clearly signified in the name of the movement. Moreover, probably the best symbol of identity in cyberspace is a user name, but anons often "drop one user name and take up another." Their identity is thus highly unstable: "The majority of Anonymous operations are conceived and planned in a chaotic and open fashion. At any given time, a few thousand people are congregating on the Anonymous IRC channels, figuring out for themselves what it means to be an anon. And together they embody whatever Anonymous is going to be that day" (Norton 2012).

Motley is also the opposite of structure (Hyde 1998, 297). In the case of Anonymous, this is expressed in two ways: first, in the absence of leadership and hierarchy, which is symbolized in the icon showing a person with a question mark in place of their head. Second, it is expressed in the absence of any membership requirements. Anyone can become Anonymous, which clearly transpires from one of its recent videos addressed to ISIS:

We are Muslims, Christians, Jews.... We are hackers, crackers, hacktivists, phishers, agents, spies, or just the guy from next door. We are students, administrators, workers, clerks, unemployed, rich, poor. We are young, or old, gay, or straight. We wear smart clothes or rugs. We are hedonists, ascetics, joy riders or activists. We come from all



racess, countries, religions and ethnicity. United as one and divided by zero—undefined and indefinable. (“Anonymous- #OpISIS Continues... Round 2.”)

Hyde points out that all structures are based on the principle of exclusion (286). Excluding what does not fit—what Hyde calls “the dirt,” the necessary “by-product of creating order” (176)—is what makes them structures and not chaos. And Anonymous does not exclude anybody. What is more, just like the trickster, it brings back the dirt and thrives in the resulting chaos, which is also implied in the motto “United as one and divided by zero—undefined and indefinable.” In mathematics, dividing by zero is not allowed because it would bring about chaos in the whole number system: “We have divided by zero, and we get the ridiculous statement that  $1 = 0$ . From there we can prove any statement in the universe, whether it is true or false. The whole framework of mathematics has exploded in our faces. Used unwisely, zero has the power to destroy logic” (Seife 2000, 219). The following comment by Joshua Corman captures the chaotic trickster spirit that permeates Anonymous and the ambiguous reactions it provokes:

I call this whole thing, “the rise of the chaotic actor.” It’s not like the first time we had hacktivism, but we’re definitely seeing, like a Renaissance in it, and chaotic, could be chaotic good, neutral or evil, if you go back to deal with Dungeons and Dragons terms, and some people see Anon Ops, initially and they’ll stick with Anonymous as chaotic good. They saw Operation Payback or they saw attacking Scientology and they say that’s good; it’s like Robin Hood, right? Chaotic good, outside the system, but doing something good. Other people, saw Anon as chaotic evil, like the Joker, that just want to see the world burn and potentially doing irreparable damage and the truth is, yes, it’s the entire column of chaotic. (Knappenberger 2013)

What epitomizes this penchant for chaos in Anonymous is a group called Lulz-Security (LulzSec) which separated from Anonymous and which was solely devoted “to the pursuit of mischief” (Coleman 2013, 8). The group was just temporary: becoming buoyant after the success of Anonymous in bringing down HBGary, the group went on a raid, causing chaos and disorder, showing “their taste for the absurd and the anarchic” (Norton 2012): “A fifty-day run, causing mayhem, havoc... and then ended it. The computer hacking group Lulz-Security has announced its disbanding, saying it had achieved its mission to disrupt governments and corporate organizations, for fun” (Knappenberger 2013). LulzSec represents the crystallized form of the trickster in the context of Anonymous—especially his dark side; it is the trickster in all his selfishness and absurdity.

LulzSec’s temporary separation from Anonymous brings me back to the conflict between lulzfags and moralfags, the two opposing sides that Anonymous subsumes. The conflict epitomizes what Radin described as the trickster’s “two hands fight[ing] each other” to illustrate the trickster’s paradoxical nature (1972, 203), the unity of opposing forces the trickster symbolizes. Anonymous, however, quite literally unites thousands of people with opposing interests under one mask, which is what makes Anonymous as a trickster unique. It is the first instance of a trickster with this kind of plural character, vividly expressed in the metaphor of a hive mind Anonymous identifies with. In other words, it is the first time a whole movement is identified as a trickster. Therefore, the question arises of whether we can really consider Anonymous a trickster figure? My answer is yes. It is the movement as a whole that performs the cultural and social functions that tricksters typically fulfil and it is the presence of a great variety of people with different interests that gives the whole its distinctive paradoxical, heterogeneous, and ambiguous character, being both good and bad, crazy and serious.

In her essay “Hacktivism: Serious or Silly?” Dorothy E. Denning poses the question whether we can take hacktivists seriously, with names such as Web Ninjas

or Fluffi Bunni, their antics, and the fact that they keep outing each other and attacking each other's websites. Again, the answer would be the ambiguous yes and no. What Anonymous and other hacktivists do is mostly absurd and silly, but their antics often make a difference. The same is true for the trickster. When one reads Radin's collection of stories about the Winnebago Trickster, one gets the same impression. Trickster, with his wild escapades, is not a character that commands much respect. Nevertheless, it is a very important figure in the Winnebago culture and mythology. Even though nobody takes him seriously, he is the one who ultimately creates the conditions for civilisation to emerge.

Coleman points out exactly in which ways Anonymous makes a difference: "They are testing new possibilities and legal limits for digital civil disobedience" (2013, 14). Just like the trickster they explore and help to demarcate borders and boundaries, revealing and helping to realize new potential. Furthermore, Anonymous "works to air and dramatize a panoply of issues that might otherwise have remained hidden, elusive or underreported" (15) such as, for instance, leaking information that the government wants to keep secret. In the same vein, Anonymous was able to reveal "current impasses and limits to democracy, [and so] the sort of critique offered by Anonymous is an essential feature of the democratic process." Consequently, it "acts as a vital counterweight to the state of surveillance" (19), just like the trickster who, embodying the force of chaos, is a vital counterweight to the order. It challenges the system and keeps it in check so that it does not become dictatorial or autocratic. Indeed, the trickster is first and foremost an agent of change, preventing stagnation that would necessarily result from an excessive control and curtailment of freedom. Moreover, due to its chaotic, unpredictable and anomalous character, groups like Anonymous are not easily dispersed or absorbed by the system: "The beauty and frustration of Anonymous lies in its unruly and unpredictable spontaneity—as its members like to boast, with a commonly stated refrain, 'We are not your personal army.' This inability to harness Anonymous directly prevents their assimilation and neutralization by

established institutional actors” (16).

### **Out of the Myth and into the Real World: Trickster as a Social Function**

To identify Anonymous with the trickster may seem surprising. The public image of Anonymous, especially its activist side, which comes to light in operations Chanology, Ice ISIS and others, comes across as that of an outlaw hero, such as Robin Hood. But there are (at least) two sides to Anonymous. And to identify Anonymous with the archetype of the outlaw hero would be to ignore its chaotic and selfish side—the side that attacks and harasses randomly selected corporations and people with the sole purpose of the lulz. And so, while the selfish, fun-seeking, and amoral lulzfags come closer to the trickster, the more serious moralfags, whose aims are “in their minds at least . . . ethical,” although usually not legally correct (Steven Levy in Knappenberger 2013) fit better the archetype of the outlaw hero, whose actions are (in his mind) ethical, but not legally correct. His ethical ends often justify the illegal means he uses to achieve them. But Anonymous, united as one and divided by zero, must be considered as one movement, despite its heterogeneous nature. It is the movement as a whole that takes responsibility for its actions while the individuals performing those actions remain obscure, true to the movement’s name. They are just part of the hive.

Like the mythical tricksters, Anonymous (and trolls and hackers in general) test the limits, exploring the seemingly impossible (within the cyberspace) and challenging assumptions that are taken for granted—all of these things resist change precisely due to the fact that everybody thinks that is impossible or undesirable to change them; many of these things are indeed considered sacred in the modern sense of the word. The mythical trickster, Anonymous, and other hackers and trolls in the contemporary world have no regard for the sacred or the forbidden (just one look at the /b/ board or ED can demonstrate this). Consequently, they are not afraid to play with taboo subjects—it is just raw material that they feel free to experiment with on the playground that /b/, ED, and similar

websites are. To go back to Hynes's description of the bricoleur aspect of the trickster, they are able to transform this raw material "into occasions of insight, vitality, and new inventive creations" (1997b, 42), even though this is often (but not always) limited to cyberspace and its culture. It is on websites like these that the boundary between the order and the dirt is being disturbed.

Like the trickster, anons are creative pranksters thriving in chaos and standing outside the social order, disregarding social and moral values, breaking rules, defying conventions, and violating taboos, often for quite selfish reasons. However, at the root of all this disrespect lies an unshakeable belief in freedom. Indeed, Anonymous "grew up to become a sort of self-appointed immune system for the Internet, striking back at anyone the hive mind perceived as an enemy of freedom, online or offline" (Norton 2012). But probably the most important function of both the trickster and groups like Anonymous is providing a balance to the existing system. It is a force of chaos that keeps questioning the existing rules and practices, debunks its myths and, in general, keeps the system in check. The social and cultural role Anonymous and other hacktivists and trolls play shows that it was time for the trickster to cross one more boundary and step out of the sphere of mythology into the real world. A mythical figure has found an embodiment in a real world entity. But I would argue that it is, actually, the other way around: the trickster is an embodiment of an essential social function that found a symbolic expression in mythical stories. That is also why the trickster can have a plural nature. Although the symbolic expression—the trickster figure—is singular, the real world entity performing this function—the collective Anonymous—can be plural.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The trickster is usually referred to using the masculine pronoun because the vast majority of traditional tricksters are male. For a discussion of the trickster in terms of gender, see Lewis Hyde's *The Trickster Makes This World* (pp. 337-343).

<sup>2</sup> Hacktivism is a term referring to the acts of "hacking, or breaking into a computer system, for a politically or socially motivated purpose" (Rouse 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Brian Knappenberger's documentary *We Are Legion: The Story of the Hacktivists* is one of my main sources because it contains interviews with people who are associated with Anonymous, and comments by experts on hackers and hacktivists, such as Gabriella Coleman.

<sup>4</sup> Racist images then do not mean that the trolls who created them are racist. "Wyatt Mann" is, in fact, "part of a series on National Socialists" as it says at the bottom of the page, a whole series which makes fun of Nazism. What is more, the entry on ED contains a subentry describing its policy on racism:

Is Encyclopedia Dramatica racist? Short Answer: ~~YES~~ NO! No, it is not. While there is a lot of material on ED that many find upsetting, the admins and users come from a variety of backgrounds. These people all understand satire and lulz, even when the minority group they are a part of is targeted, they know it was not a serious attack on them, and counter lulz to lulz the lulz are always an option.

<sup>5</sup> For example, ED's derisive definition of Christianity emphasizes its apparent nonsensicality:

The belief that a cosmic Jewish Zombie who was his own father can make you live forever if you symbolically eat his flesh and telepathically tell him you accept him as your master, so he can remove an evil force from your soul that is present in humanity because a rib-woman was convinced by a talking snake to eat from a magical tree... yeah, makes perfect sense.

This description seems to challenge the enduring importance of Christianity (and perhaps religion in general) in the twenty-first century, which may appear incongruous with the progress of science. Through this entry, the trolls perform the role of the trickster in testing and problematising the current status of religion in our society.

<sup>6</sup> "One, Dmitri Guzner, was sentenced to serve 366 days in federal prison and pay \$37,500 in restitution to the Church of Scientology.<sup>7</sup> The second, Brian Thomas Mettenbrink, also served a year in prison and was ordered to pay \$20,000 in restitution to the church" (Sauter 2014, 141).

<sup>7</sup> Another example of the dark side of trolling (although not directly connected to Anonymous) is the infamous GamerGate controversy, which involved serious harassment of female game developers and feminist cultural critics writing on gamer culture. The cyberbullying included death and rape threats, demonstrating that the line between trolling and harassment is precariously thin. For an insightful account of the GamerGate controversy, see Katherine Cross's article "'We Will Force Gaming to Be Free': On GamerGate & the Licence to Inflict Suffering."

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