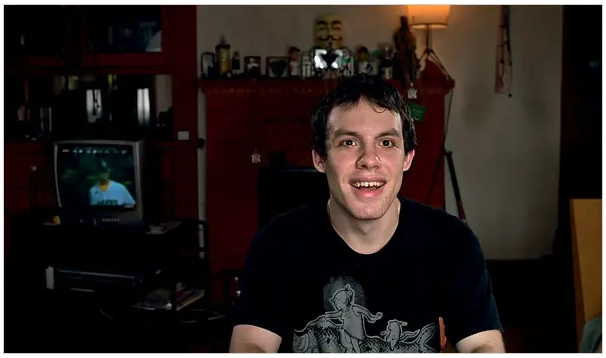
The New York Times Magazine | https://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/03/magazine/03trolls-t.html

The Trolls Among Us



The Trolls Among Us: Weev (not, of course, his real name) is part of a growing Internet subculture with a fluid morality and a disdain for pretty much everyone else online.
Robbie Cooper for The New York Times

By Mattathias Schwartz
Aug. 3, 2008

One afternoon in the spring of 2006, for reasons unknown to those who knew him, Mitchell Henderson, a seventh grader from Rochester, Minn., took a .22-caliber rifle down from a shelf in his parents' bedroom closet and shot himself in the head. The next morning, Mitchell's school assembled in the gym to begin mourning. His classmates created a virtual memorial on MySpace and garlanded it with remembrances. One wrote that Mitchell was "an hero to take that shot, to leave us all behind. God do we wish we could take it back. . . . " Someone e-mailed a clipping of Mitchell's newspaper obituary to MyDeathSpace.com, a Web site that links to the MySpace pages of the dead. From MyDeathSpace, Mitchell's page came to the attention of an Internet message board known as /b/ and the "trolls," as they have come to be called, who dwell there.

/b/ is the designated "random" board of 4chan.org, a group of message boards that draws more than 200 million page views a month. A post consists of an image and a few lines of text. Almost everyone posts as "anonymous." In effect, this makes /b/ a panopticon in reverse nobody can see anybody, and everybody can claim to speak from the center. The anonymous denizens of 4chan's other boards devoted to travel, fitness and several genres of pornography refer to the /b/-dwellers as "/b/tards."

Measured in terms of depravity, insularity and traffic-driven turnover, the culture of /b/ has little precedent. /b/ reads like the inside of a high-school bathroom stall, or an obscene telephone party line, or a blog with no posts and all comments filled with slang that you are too old to understand.

Something about Mitchell Henderson struck the denizens of /b/ as funny. They were especially amused by a reference on his MySpace page to a lost iPod. Mitchell Henderson, /b/ decided, had killed himself over a lost iPod. The “an hero” meme was born. Within hours, the anonymous multitudes were wrapping the tragedy of Mitchell’s death in absurdity.

Someone hacked Henderson’s MySpace page and gave him the face of a zombie. Someone placed an iPod on Henderson’s grave, took a picture and posted it to /b/. Henderson’s face was appended to dancing iPods, spinning iPods, hardcore porn scenes. A dramatic re-enactment of Henderson’s demise appeared on YouTube, complete with shattered iPod. The phone began ringing at Mitchell’s parents’ home. “It sounded like kids,” remembers Mitchell’s father, Mark Henderson, a 44-year-old I.T. executive. “They’d say, ‘Hi, this is Mitchell, I’m at the cemetery.’ ‘Hi, I’ve got Mitchell’s iPod.’ ‘Hi, I’m Mitchell’s ghost, the front door is locked. Can you come down and let me in?’ ” He sighed. “It really got to my wife.” The calls continued for a year and a half.

In the late 1980s, Internet users adopted the word “troll” to denote someone who intentionally disrupts online communities. Early trolling was relatively innocuous, taking place inside of small, single-topic Usenet groups. The trolls employed what the M.I.T. professor Judith Donath calls a “pseudo-naïve” tactic, asking stupid questions and seeing who would rise to the bait. The game was to find out who would see through this stereotypical newbie behavior, and who would fall for it. As one guide to trolldom puts it, “If you don’t fall for the joke, you get to be in on it.”

Today the Internet is much more than esoteric discussion forums. It is a mass medium for defining who we are to ourselves and to others. Teenagers groom their MySpace profiles as intensely as their hair; escapists clock 50-hour weeks in virtual worlds, accumulating gold for their online avatars. Anyone seeking work or love can expect to be Googled. As our emotional investment in the Internet has grown, the stakes for trolling for provoking strangers online have risen. Trolling has evolved from ironic solo skit to vicious group hunt.

“Lulz” is how trolls keep score. A corruption of “LOL” or “laugh out loud,” “lulz” means the joy of disrupting another’s emotional equilibrium. “Lulz is watching someone lose their mind at their computer 2,000 miles away while you chat with friends and laugh,” said one ex-troll who, like many people I contacted, refused to disclose his legal identity.

Another troll explained the lulz as a quasi-thermodynamic exchange between the sensitive and the cruel: “You look for someone who is full of it, a real blowhard. Then you exploit their insecurities to get an insane amount of drama, laughs and lulz. Rules would

be simple: 1. Do whatever it takes to get lulz. 2. Make sure the lulz is widely distributed. This will allow for more lulz to be made. 3. The game is never over until all the lulz have been had."

/b/ is not all bad. 4chan has tried (with limited success) to police itself, using moderators to purge child porn and eliminate calls to disrupt other sites. Among /b/'s more interesting spawn is Anonymous, a group of masked pranksters who organized protests at Church of Scientology branches around the world.

But the logic of lulz extends far beyond /b/ to the anonymous message boards that seem to be springing up everywhere. Two female Yale Law School students have filed a suit against pseudonymous users who posted violent fantasies about them on AutoAdmit, a college-admissions message board. In China, anonymous nationalists are posting death threats against pro-Tibet activists, along with their names and home addresses. Technology, apparently, does more than harness the wisdom of the crowd. It can intensify its hatred as well.

Jason Fortuny might be the closest thing this movement of anonymous provocateurs has to a spokesman. Thirty-two years old, he works "typical Clark Kent I.T." freelance jobs Web design, programming but his passion is trolling, "pushing peoples' buttons." Fortuny frames his acts of trolling as "experiments," sociological inquiries into human behavior. In the fall of 2006, he posted a hoax ad on Craigslist, posing as a woman seeking a "str8 brutal dom muscular male." More than 100 men responded. Fortuny posted their names, pictures, e-mail and phone numbers to his blog, dubbing the exposé "the Craigslist Experiment." This made Fortuny the most prominent Internet villain in America until November 2007, when his fame was eclipsed by the Megan Meier MySpace suicide. Meier, a 13-year-old Missouri girl, hanged herself with a belt after receiving cruel messages from a boy she'd been flirting with on MySpace. The boy was not a real boy, investigators say, but the fictional creation of Lori Drew, the mother of one of Megan's former friends. Drew later said she hoped to find out whether Megan was gossiping about her daughter. The story respectable suburban wife uses Internet to torment teenage girl was a media sensation.

Fortuny's Craigslist Experiment deprived its subjects of more than just privacy. Two of them, he says, lost their jobs, and at least one, for a time, lost his girlfriend. Another has filed an invasion-of-privacy lawsuit against Fortuny in an Illinois court. After receiving death threats, Fortuny meticulously scrubbed his real address and phone number from the Internet. "Anyone who knows who and where you are is a security hole," he told me. "I own a gun. I have an escape route. If someone comes, I'm ready."

While reporting this article, I did everything I could to verify the trolls' stories and identities, but I could never be certain. After all, I was examining a subculture that is built on deception and delights in playing with the media. If I had doubts about whether Fortuny was who he said he was, he had the same doubts about me. I first contacted Fortuny by e-mail, and he called me a few days later. "I checked you out," he said warily. "You seem legitimate." We met in person on a bright spring day at his apartment, on a forested slope in Kirkland, Wash., near Seattle. He wore a T-shirt and sweat pants, looking like an amiable freelancer on a Friday afternoon. He is thin, with birdlike features and the etiolated complexion of one who works in front of a screen. He'd been chatting with an online associate about driving me blindfolded from the airport, he said. "We decided it would be too much work."

A flat-screen HDTV dominated Fortuny's living room, across from a futon prepped with neatly folded blankets. This was where I would sleep for the next few nights. As Fortuny picked up his cat and settled into an Eames-style chair, I asked whether trolling hurt people. "I'm not going to sit here and say, 'Oh, God, please forgive me!' so someone can feel better," Fortuny said, his calm voice momentarily rising. The cat lay purring in his lap. "Am I the bad guy? Am I the big horrible person who shattered someone's life with some information? No! This is life. Welcome to life. Everyone goes through it. I've been through horrible stuff, too."

"Like what?" I asked. Sexual abuse, Fortuny said. When Jason was 5, he said, he was molested by his grandfather and three other relatives. Jason's mother later told me, too, that he was molested by his grandfather. The last she heard from Jason was a letter telling her to kill herself. "Jason is a young man in a great deal of emotional pain," she said, crying as she spoke. "Don't be too harsh. He's still my son."

In the days after the Megan Meier story became public, Lori Drew and her family found themselves in the trolls' crosshairs. Their personal information e-mail addresses, satellite images of their home, phone numbers spread across the Internet. One of the numbers led to a voice-mail greeting with the gleeful words "I did it for the lulz." Anonymous malefactors made death threats and hurled a brick through the kitchen window. Then came the Megan Had It Coming blog. Supposedly written by one of Megan's classmates, the blog called Megan a "drama queen," so unstable that Drew could not be blamed for her death. "Killing yourself over a MySpace boy? Come on!!! I mean yeah your fat so you have to take what you can get but still nobody should kill themselves over it." In the third post the author revealed herself as Lori Drew.

This post received more than 3,600 comments. Fox and CNN debated its authenticity. But the Drew identity was another mask. In fact, Megan Had It Coming was another Jason

Fortuny experiment. He, not Lori Drew, Fortuny told me, was the blog's author. After watching him log onto the site and add a post, I believed him. The blog was intended, he says, to question the public's hunger for remorse and to challenge the enforceability of cyberharassment laws like the one passed by Megan's town after her death. Fortuny concluded that they were unenforceable. The county sheriff's department announced it was investigating the identity of the fake Lori Drew, but it never found Fortuny, who is not especially worried about coming out now. "What's he going to sue me for?" he asked. "Leading on confused people? Why don't people fact-check who this stuff is coming from? Why do they assume it's true?"

Fortuny calls himself "a normal person who does insane things on the Internet," and the scene at dinner later on the first day we spent together was exceedingly normal, with Fortuny, his roommate Charles and his longtime friend Zach trading stories at a sushi restaurant nearby over sake and happy-hour gyoza. Fortuny flirted with our waitress, showing her a cellphone picture of his cat. "He commands you to kill!" he cackled. "Do you know how many I've killed at his command?" Everyone laughed.

Fortuny spent most of the weekend in his bedroom juggling several windows on his monitor. One displayed a chat room run by Encyclopedia Dramatica, an online compendium of troll humor and troll lore. It was buzzing with news of an attack against the Epilepsy Foundation's Web site. Trolls had flooded the site's forums with flashing images and links to animated color fields, leading at least one photosensitive user to claim that she had a seizure.

WEEV: *the whole posting flashing images to epileptics thing? over the line.*

HEPKITTEN: *can someone plz tell me how doing something the admins intentionally left enabled is hacking?*

WEEV: *it's hacking peoples unpatched brains. we have to draw a moral line somewhere.*

Fortuny disagreed. In his mind, subjecting epileptic users to flashing lights was justified. "Hacks like this tell you to watch out by hitting you with a baseball bat," he told me. "Demonstrating these kinds of exploits is usually the only way to get them fixed."

"So the message is 'buy a helmet,' and the medium is a bat to the head?" I asked.

"No, it's like a pitcher telling a batter to put on his helmet by beaning him from the mound. If you have this disease and you're on the Internet, you need to take precautions." A few days later, he wrote and posted a guide to safe Web surfing for epileptics.

On Sunday, Fortuny showed me an office building that once housed Google programmers,

and a low-slung modernist structure where programmers wrote Halo 3, the best-selling video game. We ate muffins at Terra Bite, a coffee shop founded by a Google employee where customers pay whatever price they feel like. Kirkland seemed to pulse with the easy money and optimism of the Internet, unaware of the machinations of the troll on the hill.

We walked on, to Starbucks. At the next table, middle-schoolers with punk-rock haircuts feasted noisily on energy drinks and whipped cream. Fortuny sipped a white-chocolate mocha. He proceeded to demonstrate his personal cure for trolling, the Theory of the Green Hair.

“You have green hair,” he told me. “Did you know that?”

“No,” I said.

“Why not?”

“I look in the mirror. I see my hair is black.”

“That’s uh, interesting. I guess you understand that you have green hair about as well as you understand that you’re a terrible reporter.”

“What do you mean? What did I do?”

“That’s a very interesting reaction,” Fortuny said. “Why didn’t you get so defensive when I said you had green hair?” If I were certain that I wasn’t a terrible reporter, he explained, I would have laughed the suggestion off just as easily. The willingness of trolling “victims” to be hurt by words, he argued, makes them complicit, and trolling will end as soon as we all get over it.

On Monday we drove to the mall. I asked Fortuny how he could troll me if he so chose. He took out his cellphone. On the screen was a picture of my debit card with the numbers clearly legible. I had left it in plain view beside my laptop. “I took this while you were out,” he said. He pressed a button. The picture disappeared. “See? I just deleted it.”

The Craigslist Experiment, Fortuny reiterated, brought him troll fame by accident. He was pleased with how the Megan Had It Coming blog succeeded by design. As he described the intricacies of his plan adding sympathetic touches to the fake classmate, making fake Lori Drew a fierce defender of her own daughter, calibrating every detail to the emotional register of his audience he sounded not so much a sociologist as a playwright workshopping a set of characters.

"A normal person who does insane things on the internet." Jason Fortuny in real life.
Robbie Cooper for The New York Times

"You seem to know exactly how much you can get away with, and you troll right up to that line," I said. "Is there anything that can be done on the Internet that shouldn't be done?"

Fortuny was silent. In four days of conversation, this was the first time he did not have an answer ready.

"I don't know," he said. "I have to think about it."

Sherrod DeGrippo, a 28-year-old Atlanta native who goes by the name Girlvinyl, runs Encyclopedia Dramatica, the online troll archive. In 2006, DeGrippo received an e-mail message from a well-known band of trolls, demanding that she edit the entry about them on the Encyclopedia Dramatica site. She refused. Within hours, the aggrieved trolls hit the phones, bombarding her apartment with taxis, pizzas, escorts and threats of rape and violent death. DeGrippo, alone and terrified, sought counsel from a powerful friend. She called Weev.

Weev, the troll who thought hacking the epilepsy site was immoral, is legendary among trolls. He is said to have jammed the cellphones of daughters of C.E.O.'s and demanded ransom from their fathers; he is also said to have trashed his enemies' credit ratings. Better documented are his repeated assaults on LiveJournal, an online diary site where he himself maintains a personal blog. Working with a group of fellow hackers and trolls, he once obtained access to thousands of user accounts.

I first met Weev in an online chat room that I visited while staying at Fortuny's house. "I hack, I ruin, I make piles of money," he boasted. "I make people afraid for their lives." On the phone that night, Weev displayed a misanthropy far harsher than Fortuny's. "Trolling is basically Internet eugenics," he said, his voice pitching up like a jet engine on the runway. "I want everyone off the Internet. Bloggers are filth. They need to be destroyed.

Blogging gives the illusion of participation to a bunch of retards. . . . We need to put these people in the oven!"

I listened for a few more minutes as Weev held forth on the Federal Reserve and about Jews. Unlike Fortuny, he made no attempt to reconcile his trolling with conventional social norms. Two days later, I flew to Los Angeles and met Weev at a train station in Fullerton, a sleepy bungalow town folded into the vast Orange County grid. He is in his early 20s with full lips, darting eyes and a nest of hair falling back from his temples. He has a way of leaning in as he makes a point, inviting you to share what might or might not be a joke.

As we walked through Fullerton's downtown, Weev told me about his day he'd lost $10,000 on the commodities market, he claimed and summarized his philosophy of "global ruin." "We are headed for a Malthusian crisis," he said, with professorial confidence. "Plankton levels are dropping. Bees are dying. There are tortilla riots in Mexico, the highest wheat prices in 30-odd years." He paused. "The question we have to answer is: How do we kill four of the world's six billion people in the most just way possible?" He seemed excited to have said this aloud.

Ideas like these bring trouble. Almost a year ago, while in the midst of an LSD-and-methamphetamine bender, a longer-haired, wilder-eyed Weev gave a talk called "Internet Crime" at a San Diego hacker convention. He expounded on diverse topics like hacking the Firefox browser, online trade in illegal weaponry and assassination markets untraceable online betting pools that pay whoever predicts the exact date of a political leader's demise. The talk led to two uncomfortable interviews with federal agents and the decision to shed his legal identity altogether. Weev now espouses "the ruin lifestyle" moving from condo to condo, living out of three bags, no name, no possessions, all assets held offshore. As a member of a group of hackers called "the organization," which, he says, bring in upward of $10 million annually, he says he can wreak ruin from anywhere.

We arrived at a strip mall. Out of the darkness, the coffinlike snout of a new Rolls Royce Phantom materialized. A flying lady winked on the hood. "Your bag, sir?" said the driver, a blond kid in a suit and tie.

"This is my car," Weev said. "Get in."

And it was, for that night and the next, at least. The car's plush chamber accentuated the boyishness of Weev, who wore sneakers and jeans and hung from a leather strap like a subway rider. In the front seat sat Claudia, a pretty college-age girl.

I asked about the status of Weev's campaign against humanity. Things seemed rather

stable, I said, even with all this talk of trolling and hacking.

“We’re waiting,” Weev said. “We need someone to show us the way. The messiah.”

“How do you know it’s not you?” I asked.

“If it were me, I would know,” he said. “I would receive a sign.”

Zeno of Elea, Socrates and Jesus, Weev said, are his all-time favorite trolls. He also identifies with Coyote and Loki, the trickster gods, and especially with Kali, the Hindu goddess of destruction. “Loki was a hacker. The other gods feared him, but they needed his tools.”

“I was just thinking of Kali!” Claudia said with a giggle.

Over a candlelit dinner of tuna sashimi, Weev asked if I would attribute his comments to Memphis Two, the handle he used to troll Kathy Sierra, a blogger. Inspired by her touchy response to online commenters, Weev said he “dropped docs” on Sierra, posting a fabricated narrative of her career alongside her real Social Security number and address. This was part of a larger trolling campaign against Sierra, one that culminated in death threats. Weev says he has access to hundreds of thousands of Social Security numbers. About a month later, he sent me mine.

Weev, Claudia and I hung out in Fullerton for two more nights, always meeting and saying goodbye at the train station. I met their friend Kate, who has been repeatedly banned from playing XBox Live for racist slurs, which she also enjoys screaming at white pedestrians. Kate checked my head for lice and kept calling me “Jew.” Relations have since warmed. She now e-mails me puppy pictures and wants the names of fun places for her coming visit to New York. On the last night, Weev offered to take me to his apartment if I wore a blindfold and left my cellphone behind. I was in, but Claudia vetoed the idea. I think it was her apartment.

Does free speech tend to move toward the truth or away from it? When does it evolve into a better collective understanding? When does it collapse into the Babel of trolling, the pointless and eristic game of talking the other guy into crying “uncle”? Is the effort to control what’s said always a form of censorship, or might certain rules be compatible with our notions of free speech?

One promising answer comes from the computer scientist Jon Postel, now known as “god of the Internet” for the influence he exercised over the emerging network. In 1981, he formulated what’s known as Postel’s Law: “Be conservative in what you do; be liberal in what you accept from others.” Originally intended to foster “interoperability,” the ability

of multiple computer systems to understand one another, Postel's Law is now recognized as having wider applications. To build a robust global network with no central authority, engineers were encouraged to write code that could "speak" as clearly as possible yet "listen" to the widest possible range of other speakers, including those who do not conform perfectly to the rules of the road. The human equivalent of this robustness is a combination of eloquence and tolerance the spirit of good conversation. Trolls embody the opposite principle. They are liberal in what they do and conservative in what they construe as acceptable behavior from others. You, the troll says, are not worthy of my understanding; I, therefore, will do everything I can to confound you.

Why inflict anguish on a helpless stranger? It's tempting to blame technology, which increases the range of our communications while dehumanizing the recipients. Cases like An Hero and Megan Meier presumably wouldn't happen if the perpetrators had to deliver their messages in person. But while technology reduces the social barriers that keep us from bedeviling strangers, it does not explain the initial trolling impulse. This seems to spring from something ugly a destructive human urge that many feel but few act upon, the ambient misanthropy that's a frequent ingredient of art, politics and, most of all, jokes. There's a lot of hate out there, and a lot to hate as well.

So far, despite all this discord, the Internet's system of civil machines has proved more resilient than anyone imagined. As early as 1994, the head of the Internet Society warned that spam "will destroy the network." The news media continually present the online world as a Wild West infested with villainous hackers, spammers and pedophiles. And yet the Internet is doing very well for a frontier town on the brink of anarchy. Its traffic is expected to quadruple by 2012. To say that trolls pose a threat to the Internet at this point is like saying that crows pose a threat to farming.

That the Internet is now capacious enough to host an entire subculture of users who enjoy undermining its founding values is yet another symptom of its phenomenal success. It may not be a bad thing that the least-mature users have built remote ghettos of anonymity where the malice is usually intramural. But how do we deal with cases like An Hero, epilepsy hacks and the possibility of real harm being inflicted on strangers?

Several state legislators have recently proposed cyberbullying measures. At the federal level, Representative Linda Sánchez, a Democrat from California, has introduced the Megan Meier Cyberbullying Prevention Act, which would make it a federal crime to send any communications with intent to cause "substantial emotional distress." In June, Lori Drew pleaded not guilty to charges that she violated federal fraud laws by creating a false identity "to torment, harass, humiliate and embarrass" another user, and by violating MySpace's terms of service. But hardly anyone bothers to read terms of service, and

millions create false identities. “While Drew’s conduct is immoral, it is a very big stretch to call it illegal,” wrote the online-privacy expert Prof. Daniel J. Solove on the blog Concurring Opinions.

Many trolling practices, like prank-calling the Hendersons and intimidating Kathy Sierra, violate existing laws against harassment and threats. The difficulty is tracking down the perpetrators. In order to prosecute, investigators must subpoena sites and Internet service providers to learn the original author’s IP address, and from there, his legal identity. Local police departments generally don’t have the means to follow this digital trail, and federal investigators have their hands full with spam, terrorism, fraud and child pornography. But even if we had the resources to aggressively prosecute trolls, would we want to? Are we ready for an Internet where law enforcement keeps watch over every vituperative blog and backbiting comments section, ready to spring at the first hint of violence? Probably not. All vigorous debates shade into trolling at the perimeter; it is next to impossible to excise the trolling without snuffing out the debate.

If we can’t prosecute the trolling out of online anonymity, might there be some way to mitigate it with technology? One solution that has proved effective is “disemvoweling” having message-board administrators remove the vowels from trollish comments, which gives trolls the visibility they crave while muddying their message. A broader answer is persistent pseudonymity, a system of nicknames that stay the same across multiple sites. This could reduce anonymity’s excesses while preserving its benefits for whistle-blowers and overseas dissenters. Ultimately, as Fortuny suggests, trolling will stop only when its audience stops taking trolls seriously. “People know to be deeply skeptical of what they read on the front of a supermarket tabloid,” says Dan Gillmor, who directs the Center for Citizen Media. “It should be even more so with anonymous comments. They shouldn’t start off with a credibility rating of, say, 0. It should be more like negative-30.”

Of course, none of these methods will be fail-safe as long as individuals like Fortuny construe human welfare the way they do. As we discussed the epilepsy hack, I asked Fortuny whether a person is obliged to give food to a starving stranger. No, Fortuny argued; no one is entitled to our sympathy or empathy. We can choose to give or withhold them as we see fit. “I can’t push you into the fire,” he explained, “but I can look at you while you’re burning in the fire and not be required to help.” Weeks later, after talking to his friend Zach, Fortuny began considering the deeper emotional forces that drove him to troll. The theory of the green hair, he said, “allows me to find people who do stupid things and turn them around. Zach asked if I thought I could turn my parents around. I almost broke down. The idea of them learning from their mistakes and becoming people that I could actually be proud of . . . it was overwhelming.” He continued: “It’s not that I do this

because I hate them. I do this because I'm trying to save them."

Weeks before my visit with Fortuny, I had lunch with "moot," the young man who founded 4chan. After running the site under his pseudonym for five years, he recently revealed his legal name to be Christopher Poole. At lunch, Poole was quick to distance himself from the excesses of /b/. "Ultimately the power lies in the community to dictate its own standards," he said. "All we do is provide a general framework." He was optimistic about Robot9000, a new 4chan board with a combination of human and machine moderation. Users who make "unoriginal" or "low content" posts are banned from Robot9000 for periods that lengthen with each offense.

The posts on Robot9000 one morning were indeed far more substantive than /b/. With the cyborg moderation system silencing the trolls, 4chan had begun to display signs of linearity, coherence, a sense of collective enterprise. It was, in other words, robust. The anonymous hordes swapped lists of albums and novels; some had pretty good taste. Somebody tried to start a chess game: "I'll start, e2 to e4," which quickly devolved into riffage with moves like "Return to Sender," "From Here to Infinity," "Death to America" and a predictably indecent checkmate maneuver.

Shortly after 8 a.m., someone asked this:

"What makes a bad person? Or a good person? How do you know if you're a bad person?"

Which prompted this:

"A good person is someone who follows the rules. A bad person is someone who doesn't."

And this:

"you're breaking my rules, you bad person"

There were echoes of antiquity:

"good: pleasure; bad: pain"

"There is no morality. Only the right of the superior to rule over the inferior."

And flirtations with postmodernity:

"good and bad are subjective"

"we're going to turn into wormchow before the rest of the universe even notices."

Books were prescribed:

“read Kant, JS Mill, Bentham, Singer, etc. Noobs.”

And then finally this:

“I’d say empathy is probably a factor.”