FCJ–160 Politics is Serious Business: Jacques Rancière, Griefing, and the Re–Partitioning of the (Non)Sensical

Steve Holmes.
Department of English, George Mason University.

Abstract:

This article contextualises certain elements of 'griefing' as a form of political action in virtual world by drawing on the political philosophy of Jacques Rancière. A small but growing number of scholars are starting to view griefing as an avant-garde, anarchist, or hacktivist political activity. I suggest that Rancière offers a more specific articulation of what constitutes political action and activism for griefing collectives because his understanding of politics is entirely grounded in relationship to the types of communities and individual political equality. The article focuses specifically on the Patriotic Nigras activities in the Great Habbo Raid of 2006 in an attempt to understand how a Rancièreian[eian or ian?] framework can provide some analytical tools for articulating politics in virtual worlds. I conclude that the PN do not ultimately realise a Rancierian[two different spellings] framework. They challenge not partitions of the sensible, but partitions of the nonsensical specific to the different operation of politics and community formation in virtual worlds.

Lulzpolitik

'We do not sleep, we do not eat, and we do not feel remorse. We will tear you apart from outside and in, we have all the time in the world.' (Anonymous)

Trolling is a difficult phenomenon to classify in terms of its political orientation. Some researchers such as John Kelley (2011) suggest that groups like Anonymous can be situated within the anarchist political tradition. Anarchists tend to privilege bottom-up, decentralized, and horizontal networks over top-down state or corporate control (Graeber 2004), and a similar attitude and organizational structure are evident in many of Anonymous' past activities. Others are more skeptical. E. Gabriella Coleman (2011) notes that trolls' cyberactivism lacks a singular agenda and a sustained commitment to political coordination with other actors and institutions. Along different lines, Lincoln Dahlberg (2001) has questioned whether trolls can be considered as valid participants in deliberative public spheres. Trolls often seek to deceive others by posing as regular users and do not share a commitment to sincerity, rationality, and consensus building: 'Intentionally misleading others about one's claims, including relevant information about one's identity, undermines the whole deliberative process' (2001: para. 31). Trolling frequently disrupts the stability of networked communities and seems to undermine the conditions of possibility for political interaction.

Researchers are often more comfortable in making attributions of politicality when trolling practices target actual political entities or legal problems, such as the Westboro Baptist Church's hate speech or the American NSA's Internet surveillance. Cyberactivism fits a narrative of a vigilante-esque continuation of progressive political ends by other means (for example, hacking, leaking information) in the service of increasing public awareness and democratic debate. When trolling lacks a recognizable or serious institutional target, political engagement is seldom raised as a consideration. This point becomes clear if we leave the broader category of trolling and focus specifically on 'griefing': the practice of 'purposefully engaging in activities to disrupt the gaming experience of other players' (Mulligan and Patrovsky, 2003: 15). Griefing targets regular players in virtual worlds and not actual political actors like the NSA. When Anshe Chung bragged to mass media outlets to have made close to 100 million in virtual currency in *Second Life*, the Patriotic Nigras (PN) flooded her room with flying penises in the so-called 'Room 101' event. The fact that griefing alienates many players and hurts Linden Lab's economic bottom line has led some to move beyond connotations of apolitical provocation for the sake of provocation (Schwartz, 2008) to accusations of virtual terrorism (Dibbell, 2008: 4).

In this essay, I want to push against the tacit assumption that the ends and means of trolling and griefing in multiplayer virtual worlds should be measured primarily by their resemblance to or engagement with conventional political actors. Coleman warrants her claim that trolls lack an overt agenda on the assumption that some or many trolling activities fail to mirror conventional expectations for political activity. This tension is also latent in Dahlberg's complaint that trolling's lack of sincerity interferes with the formation of networked public spheres. Despite repeated assertions by scholars that networked technologies profoundly alter modes of political interaction, there remains a pervasive expectation that online political interactions should resemble the modes of conduct of the (offline) liberal political tradition. Such ideal requirements are necessary to the promotion of certain types of resistance, deliberation, and collaborative action. At the same time, a *de facto* limit on what constitutes a political act for griefers or trolls can cause researchers to miss exploring some of the unique forms of political engagement specific to virtual worlds. [1]

I shall argue that political engagement specific to virtual worlds, such as the example of griefing, can be productively grasped through Jacques Rancière's political philosophy. Although he has yet to be placed in dialogue with griefing or trolling, the political and aesthetic views of Rancière have increasing currency in the English-speaking world. [2] In his major translated work *Disagreement*, Rancière (2004) defines 'politics' in an idiosyncratic manner. For Rancière, politics is not composed of institutionally legitimate channels for political intercourse in keeping with the liberal political tradition. Rather, politics only refers to acts of dissensus against institutions that legitimate what he calls the 'police order' that maintains unequal 'partitions of the sensible.' The latter is Rancière's term for norms of decorum, hierarchy, and identity that deny individuals the ability to act out a presupposition of political equality. Politics for Rancière is simply action – not reflection or assertion or debate – borne out of this presupposition of political equality. For precisely this reason, his work constitutes a refreshing return to pragmatism and activism in a critique-filled academic landscape where claims for action grounded in normative politics are largely met with well-justified but enervating anti-essentialisms and anti-foundationalisms.

In what follows, I explore and extend Rancière's thinking through the discussion of an older event: the PN's infamous 2006 *Habbo* Raid (edit: see Higgin in this issue). While the PN are currently active on patrioticnigras.net and have committed more recent offensives, I have selected this example for two reasons. The *Habbo* Raid's familiarity offers the benefit of requiring little in the way of expansive description, and the primary goal of this essay is the development of a Rancièrian analytical framework in relationship to griefing. More importantly, the *Habbo* Raid like many of the PN's activities was the epitome of nonsense. It employed offensive memes and procedural disruption on the flimsiest of motivations. The

PN responded to unsubstantiated rumours that system admins were disproportionately banning African-American avatars from the hotel. While the PN acted out of what might seem like a presupposition of racial equality, the comparative inequality that they challenged was fairly inconsequential. There are far more overt and pernicious instances of actual racism in virtual worlds that the PN could have targeted such as the racialized Horde avatars employed in *The World of Warcraft* (Nakamura, 2010). The use of these alleged bans as weak pretense to disrupt an entire virtual world could easily be interpreted as a self-interested exploitation of complex issues of representation in digital spaces.

The *Habbo* Raid therefore requires a different articulation of resistance and politics in virtual worlds and a better understanding of the different forms of exclusion and presuppositions of equality that are proper to the PN's interpretation of griefing. From the PN's perspective, only *nonsense* exists on the Internet. Of all the various splinter cells affiliated with trolling, the PN perhaps most fully embrace Anonymous' satirical goal: 'the Internet is serious business.' According to Encyclopedia Dramaticae entry, it is 'a phrase used to remind [the player] that being mocked on the Internet is, in fact, the end of the world' (2011: para. 1). While their motivations for each disruptive activity inevitably differ, the PN always attempt to make players such as Anse Chung feel embarrassed when they take their personas, politics, and businesses in *Second Life* or other virtual worlds 'too seriously.' Seriousness exists in part when players or software companies attempt to establish boundaries that equate identity, meaning, decorum, behaviour, and commerce in virtual social settings with the seriousness or reality of their offline equivalents. For the PN and like-minded griefers, there is no issue, meaning, or event that exists on the Internet that is serious enough that it cannot be converted into nonsense: a joke or opportunity for the online humiliation of a player or software company. It is those who believe otherwise – those who do in fact take the Internet seriously either for racist purposes or for progressive political ends – who are the most laughable of all.

An extension of Rancière's political philosophy demonstrates how the ability to fully embrace nonsense against seriousness on the Internet operates as an important form of politics for griefers. 'Seriousness' for the PN's *Habbo* Raid is akin to a Rancièrian partition of the sensible. Seriousness is specific to the particular ways in which Internet users can operate within conditions of possibility structured by the protocols of a given virtual world or networked community. Like many griefers or trolls, the PN acts for '*lulz*' or 'win': the desired online audience response to a successful act of disruption or humiliation. While griefing or trolling activities most often generate only mildly annoying noise for other players within an online space, the PN's specific use of *lulz* and win in the *Habbo* Raid marked the breaking point or moment of dissonance for a system that has otherwise been functioning to support 'partitions of seriousness' at a procedural level (defined below). A Rancièrian political act means that what counts as political is measured by virtue of the

effect that it generates and not by its sustained engagement with a single actor or issue. Disruption—provocation for provocation's sake—is not enough. Rancière's political goal of dissensus obtains when what people see is changed, the sensible is repartitioned, and a regime of the perceptible is challenged. Requiring a virtual world-specific extension of Rancière's thought, the PN acted in the *Habbo* Raid not primarily out of a presupposition of political but *procedural* equality that was designed to safeguard all players' creative agency to engage in nonsense against invisible police orders of seriousness.

Occupy Habbo

Estimated at around 150 individuals by Bakioglu (2009) and originally based in the 7Chan and Something Awful websites, the PN – formerly the /b/lockers – are an offshoot of the larger online community Anonymous. While the targets of trolling and griefing groups vary greatly, the PN has taken a special interest in making life difficult for Linden Labs customers. Their manifesto claims 'ruining your *Second Life* since 2006' as a primary purpose for action ('Patriotic Nigras,' 2012: 2). Describing a 2006 attack, Dibbell writes:

> [S]hortly after 5 pm Eastern time on November 16 [in the Albion Park section], an avatar appeared in the 3-D-graphical skies above this online sanctuary and proceeded to unleash a mass of undiluted digital jackassery. The avatar, whom witnesses would describe as an African-American male clad head to toe in gleaming red battle armor, detonated a device that instantly filled the air with 30-foot-wide tumbling blue cubes and gaping cartoon mouths. For several minutes the freakish objects rained down, immobilizing nearby players with code that forced them to either log off or watch their avatars endlessly text-shout Arnold Schwarzenegger's 'Get to the choppaaaaaaa!' tagline from *Predator*. (2008: 3)

This episode demonstrates several idiosyncratic staples in PN's tactical arsenal and particular interpretation of griefing: engaging in gridwide-system disruption across numerous platforms, spamming through offensive memes involving self-consciously ironic and stereotypical African-American avatars with Afros, and hacking or repurposing in-game objects created both by game designers and players for anti-social effects.

From July 6–12, the *Habbo* Raid occurred at the *Habbo* Hotel hosted by the Finland-based Sulake Corporation. *Habbo* is a virtual chat room designed for teenagers to socialize

through textchats in a variety of simulated hotel/resort-style public areas. According to primary sources (Sklar 2009; Bakioglu 2009), 4Chan's b/ (random) boards provided the exigency for the raid by circulating the accusation that the *Habbo* web admins were disproportionately banning black avatars based on their skin colour. In response, a group of 4channers calling themselves the /b/lockers occupied the entire hotel. The largest raid occurred on July 12 as the /b/lokcers were joined by other Anonymous-affiliated websites. The collision detection in the *Habbo* avatars meant that a 'physical' occupation of space was possible because avatars would not run through each other. The PN blocked access points to popular chat areas with black avatars in Afros and Armani suits, rendering these spaces impossible to walk through. The PN spammed the textchats with memes, self-parody, and racist jokes. At one point, they arranged their avatars into their trademark Swastika pattern–what has since become known as the 'Swastiget' meme. The Pool Area was a central target in the raid. The PN explained to other players that the pool had to be barricaded due to an AIDS outbreak. In direct response to allegations of the banning of black avatars, the PN claimed that black avatars had to be in the Pool Area to 'guard the safety' of white avatars. As documented by the website KnowYourMeme, 'Pool's Closed Due to Aids' became the PN's rallying cry along with 'harbl'–the community-specific code word of 4chan for penis (para. 1).

The PN's tactics in the *Habbo* Raid were not random or uncoordinated, and the effects of this raid extended beyond a momentary disruption. Even when systems admins retaliated, the PN developed a 'Pool Tool' software program that reactivated a banned player account. They also provided user-friendly instructions on how to spam *Habbo* by avoiding the censor filter. The PN achieved *lulz* by July 12. *Habbo* had to shut down as members of *Encyclopedia Dramatica*, 4Chan, Anonymous, and other affiliated troll communities and allies joined the raid. The Habbo Raid eventually manifested in non-digital variants when activists in Afro wigs and suits formed a Swastiget and protested outside of Sulake's physical headquarters. To make sure that the consequence of their protest was more than just a singular event, the PN have continued to spam the pool on the same day each year as a perpetual reminder of their presence and perhaps to affirm Anonymous's slogan that graces the top of this essay, 'We do not sleep, we do not eat and we do not feel remorse. We will tear you apart from outside and in, we have all the time in the world.'

Sitting Down at Habbo's Lunch Counter

The political implications of the *Habbo* Raid make little sense if we evaluate them through the requirements of a liberal public sphere predicated on sincerity or consensus-building. Rancière's framework in *Disagreement* is helpful to situate the PN's actions

because his articulation of politics does not require any universal target (state, monarch, corporation), sustained agenda, or require any specific form (reasoned dialogue, letters to the editor, protests) to engage in a political struggle. He offers a deceptively simple claim: politics is a form of action borne from 'the presupposition of the equality of anyone and everyone' (2004: 17). Equality is never the result of top-down political processes or deliberative entities in political institutions that determine the definition of equality. Equality is not something that a state can legislate, an Internet provider can preserve, or a *Habbo* administrator can distribute and apportion. These formal institutions necessarily convert individuals to passive objects of political distribution. Rather, politics is a form of solidarity that obtains through a bottom-up presupposition of those who act out of this presupposition of equality.

Rancière at once wants to avoid reducing politics to common forms of progressive identity politics (queerness, feminist, blackness) while simultaneously giving a definition to politics to enable action on behalf of these groups: politics is an 'empty freedom' that all possess. He maintains that all individuals possess equal intelligence, not in the sense of having specialized knowledge like a quantum physicist but in the sense of a potentiality or faculty for creating conditions for their own well-being with others. Equality only exists through a demonstration of an individual's equality vis-à-vis a social system—virtual or otherwise. Politics lies in our concrete practices, not outside or in abstraction from social conditions. Unlike Jürgen Habermas, who criticized the Internet's fragmentation of the ideal conditions for a rational public sphere, Rancière does not believe that individuals need to secure abstract conditions under which they can discuss and debate who will be a distributor and who will be an object of distribution in a given political hierarchy. Politics can only emerge from *within Habbo* by the activities of individual players in the service of a presupposition of some semblance of equality.

Before examining the PN's interpretation of equality for the *Habbo* Raid, it is necessary to describe the partitions of the sensible that Rancièrian politics works against and the police orders that sustain them. According to Rancière, politics is an event that arises only with respect to the resistance of police orders that maintain partitions of the sensible and that keep the demos—the 'count of those who have no count' from participating as equal actors (2004:29). Politics only exists in relationship to verifications and enactments of equality. When four freshman students from North Carolina A&T walked into a lunch counter at a Woolworth's in Greensborough in 1960, sat down, and asked to be served, they enacted politics. The police order, the sum total of institutions, discourses, and affective states that enabled legalized segregation and *de facto* racism, had established a clear partition of the sensible that refused to allow black bodies political equality with white bodies. The police order is not to be confused with those professionals who wear badges and make arrests (although they are certainly related). The police order is also not equivalent to Marxism's false consciousness or to Michel Foucault's earlier work on knowledge/power

and the production of docile bodies. The police order is much less specific and concerns in general the establishment of communicative and behavioural norms as they are invented, circulated, reaffirmed, and produced to be then distributed to define how bodies are ordered by these norms: 'Politics is generally seen as the set of procedures whereby the aggregation and consent of collectivities is achieved, the organization of powers, the distribution of places and roles, and the system for legitimating this distribution … I propose to call [this system] the police' (Rancière 2004: 28). The police naturalize and justify the institutions that structure social hierarchies to the extent that they form a continuation of our daily lives and identities. Rancière's description is worth quoting at length:

> *The police is thus first an order of bodies that defines the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying, [and] sees that those bodies are assigned by name to a particular place and task, it is an order of the visible and the sayable that sees that a particular activity is visible and another is not, that this speech is understood as discourse and another as noise.'*

Conventional theoretical splits between public and private or economic classes are already engaged in maintaining what he calls partitions of the sensible (partage du sensible) that sustain the police order.

These two forms - police inequality and political equality - 'must remain absolutely alien to each other, constituting two radically different communities even if composed of the same individuals' (34). Politics therefore means *actually sitting down at the lunch counter* and making visible a form of political equality that the police order commands to be invisible. The four freshmen did not stand outside with picket signs asking for political equality. Rather, they acted as if they were politically equal subjects who expected to be served in a manner identical to a white customer. By occupying the lunch counter, these freshmen disturbed the partition of the sensible not through participating in deliberative consensus but by manifesting an act of *dissensus*. According to Rancière, dissensus is 'the production through a series of actions of a body and a capacity for enunciation not previously identifiable within a given field of experience, whose identification is thus part of the reconfiguration of experience … The activity [of politics], by presuming equality, is itself challenge to the police everywhere' (2006: 35, 59).

From this initial framework, it is possible to begin classifying the PN's presupposition of equality and establishing specific partitions of the sensible that they challenged. Working within the police order in the *Habbo* Raid would have included filing legal 'cease-and-desist' orders or trying to use reason in chat rooms, Wikis, bulletin boards, or social media to solicit more players to engage Sulake's interest in this problem. Acceding to these

terms of engagement would have meant accepting Sulake's authority to set the terms of who is and who is not an active distributor of political equality in a virtual world. To qualify as an enactment of politics, the PN also could not have sought to permanently close down *Habbo* or to occupy it for all time. Politics for Rancière only exist in making visible police inequality through a verification of political equality in spaces where inequality exists. Politics is only what 'shifts a body from the place assigned to it or changes a place's destination. It makes visible what had no business being seen, and makes heard a discourse where once there was only place for noise' (30). Rancièrian politics does not seek to take the form of a new police order, a new mode of government or a more equitable distribution of wealth, commodities, or avatar access to the pool area.

While it is clear that the PN made black avatars visible in an area (a police order) that they were prohibited from, the presupposition of equality is of a qualitatively different order than non-virtual world forms of politics. A declaration of political equality grounded in the capacity for speech and action would have to point first to partitions of the sensible at the levels of software and hardware such as is the case of the 'digital divide': those economically prohibited from access to the technology that is necessary for participating in the construction of online identities in *Habbo*. As a point of comparison, it is not as if *Habbo*'s system administrators banned IP addresses from predominantly African-American regions of the United States. Similarly, we should count disproportionately incarcerated African-American prisoners who are often denied the ability to participate in online virtual worlds as they serve their sentences. These individuals arguably would be an actual 'count of no count' for a virtual world. Digital divides and prisoners are in fact reflective of police orders of political equality, but these are not the types of police inequality that the PN was principally interested in challenging in the *Habbo* Raid.

Partitions of Seriousness

In virtual worlds, players' creativity offers a space where police orders could be formed and contested, with little 'real world' consequence. Mia Consalvo argues that games cannot be measured by the rules that structure daily life. The anonymity of the Internet and virtual worlds means that players are able to 'experiment with actions, identities, and practices that in real life are forbidden' (Consalvo, 2007:186). Participating in a griefing raid will have few negative consequences for any participants in comparison to Occupy Wall Street protesters who face professional police harassment and incarceration for enacting politics. Despite similarities in the partitions of the sensible, it is nearly impossible to create an exact analogy for occupying a segregated lunch counter and occupying a hotel in a virtual world precisely because the consequences of griefing and police orders manifest

differently in virtual spaces: 'Although griefers are in some cases believed to behave as they do because there are no consequences for them, many would argue that there are no real consequences for their so-called victims either' (142). Consalvo's comments do not ignore the real emotional harm to players that griefing can cause. Her perspective reflects an understanding that police orders within virtual worlds are not designed to effectively legislate or manufacture truly effective partitions of *political inequality* in ways that correspond exactly to their offline equivalents.

As T.L. Taylor (2011) has noted, all players—griefers and non-griefers alike—must be seen as productive agents and we must resist the temptation to be frustrated with those who fail to play 'right' (159). If right play is limited to Anshe Chung's Second Life hubris (from the PN's perspective) or the system administrator's ban of black avatars, then Taylor's comments indicate a potential inroad for a Rancièrian analysis. The PN could be said to have enacted politics not out of a *presupposition of political equality*—a concern specifically born in reaction to the algorithms of liberal political philosophy and expectations of daily-life communications protocols—but out of a presupposition of procedural equality for experimentation specific to partitions of seriousness in virtual worlds. I add the term 'procedural' to 'presupposition of equality' simply to reflect the fact that all actions in virtual worlds are bound up in the conditions of possibility structured by the software protocols of the virtual world and these protocols in turn structure a virtual world's police order (Bogost 2010; Galloway 2004). A presupposition of procedural equality affirms (verifies) the equality of players' immanent faculties to create nonsense and resist 'seriousness' where in-game structures have promoted seriousness in any form. Procedures refer to seriousness explicitly supported by software protocols (*Habbo* admins) or tacitly supported by players like Anshe Chung who act as if *Second Life* economies were as serious as real world economies. In fact, it was the attempt to remediate offline forms of political inequality into a virtual world that constituted a 'serious' partition of the sensible in the *Habbo* Raid. As I will discuss below, procedures also include invisible partitions of seriousness such as a company's data collection of player habits in order to improve the commercial viability of the game.

Procedurality and the affirmation of nonsense vis-à-vis seriousness emphasize one major point of difference and extension from a strict Rancièrian account of politics. For Rancière, an act of dissensus that does not participate in the verification of human political equality would not count as politics. He would likely view the *Habbo* Raid as an act of dissensus that exposed a partition of the sensible without ultimately serving political equality. By contrast, equality for the PN presumed the collective right to declare any serious activity as nonsense—a conception of politics that they interpret as specific to procedural equality in virtual worlds. From their perspective, the procedural effort to treat meaning or events (seriousness) in Habbo as somehow equivalent to their offline equivalents enacted a

partition of seriousness. The PN operated out of a presupposition of the procedural equality to engage in dissensus against police orders of inequality when topics, subjects, and behaviours affirm that seriousness exists. Whatever the system will allow (for example, nonsense) to be made manifest is whatever players should be allowed to creatively foreground as nonsense against partitions of seriousness at the procedural level.

Such a suggestion does not authorize non-serious forms of racism at either procedural or non-procedural levels. Nor is it a contradiction to declare that the PN's particular anti-racist gesture is motivated by an affirmation of players' creative ability to traffic in nonsense against seriousness rather than by political equality in Rancière's strict sense. The former is the expression of politics proper to the PN's verification of procedural equality. As I interpret their actions, nonsense is an empty signifier. Nonsense has no content except with regard to challenging partitions of seriousness. By definition, nonsense *cannot* be instrumentalized for serious racist purposes *or else is it no longer nonsense* and is no longer attached to a verification of one's ability to engage in nonsense against partitions of seriousness. The use of racialized content and other offensive memes in their raiding activities were only a means to very specific and non-racialized end. According to one PN member, '[Offensive memes are] only one element, he insists, in an arsenal of PN techniques designed to push users past the brink of moral outrage toward that rare moment – at once humiliating and enlightening – when they find themselves crying over a computer game' (quoted in Dibbell, 2008: 4). Simply stated, an endorsement of nonsense in the context of resisting partitions of seriousness does not result in an 'anything goes' abandonment of a progressive politics of representation. Rather, the declaration of nonsense signals the possibility that politics will be enacted in relationship to a virtual world's partitioning of seriousness. This ability to produce nonsense is a collective presupposition to any and all virtual world players, especially those who have 'too much time on their hands.' By making partitions of seriousness visible, the PN attempted to call all players' attention to actual restrictions on the creative nonsensical freedom to resist seriousness that they always already possessed. Their favoured Swastiget meme thereby served as a heavy-handed and intentionally clichéd reminder that seriousness in *Habbo* is akin to fascism or totalitarianism.

The PN's identification of seriousness could be said to take the form of a specific type of activism and advocacy for an alternative communal 'norm' of nonsense on the Internet. However, it is more accurate to claim that these actions did not result in the establishment of new 'norm' because the politics of nonsense was only asserted in relationship to partitions of the sensible, and the PN's politics did not outlast its enunciation in relationship to re-partitioning seriousness. When political action did occur, it only exposed (made visible) what the PN viewed as a partition of the sensible in a virtual world that sustained a police order of seriousness while asserting their collective egalitarian right to enact

nonsense against seriousness. For Rancière, politics always has to obtain within a presupposition of collective (procedural) equality (of the resistance to seriousness). Except when they decide to act out of this presupposition to resist seriousness on behalf of the Internet collective, the PN cannot be said to engage in politics. The PN's actions are not therefore properly characterized in negative stereotypes of anarchists or nihilists as 'unstructured agent[s] of chaos lashing out haphazardly at government and civilian alike' (Reichert, 1969: 28). The PN's politics in the *Habbo* Raid obtained with very specific goals in mind: lulz and win in relationship to seriousness and a presupposition of egalitarian procedural equality.

Aestheticizing Procedures

The partitions of the nonsensical that are exposed through the PN's enactment of politics mean that 'victims' are tacitly complicit in certain police orders by virtue of playing the game. Visibility must occur at a procedural and system level of disruption or else dissensus would fail to reveal a given partition of the sensible to all players who were interacting with the system. Rancière's politics changes a partition of the sensible via aesthetic acts. Aesthetics is thus 'a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience' (Rancière, 2006: 13). The aesthetics of politics is 'a matter of appearances' that introduces 'a visible into the field of experience' (Rancière, 2004: 74, 89). Where human voices are invisible, unrecognizable and reduced to phone (noise) of animals, politics is what enables speech, 'thus making apparent both a body and capacity that had been discounted from the sensible arrangement of police aesthetics,' working toward a community born of aestheticization the 'virtual or immaterial community of equalities' (Rancière, 2004: x). Procedurality offers an additional method of extending Rancière's thinking for politics and the visibility of 'speech' in the *Habbo* Raid. It is the procedures themselves that must be made to speak.

In identifying procedural seriousness, the aesthetics of the dissensual act in the Habbo Raid were tied specifically to a reminder of how players' 'immersion' in virtual worlds is artificial. Immersion functions to support partitions of seriousness. In this context, seriousness is tied to protocols and corporate agendas that are 'invisible' when researchers describe a virtual world through personal player ecologies or the game's representations and narratives alones—a problem Lisa Gitelman among others has well-described as 'screen essentialism' (2008: iv). Along these lines, Bakioglu (2009) offers a productive distinction between 'grief play,' ('a type of game play') and 'griefing' ('disruptive cultural activity'). She suggests,

Claiming that they are causing turmoil for lulz (or laughs), griefers treat their activities as mere game play. However, underneath the rhetoric of game play based on targeting those who take the 'Internet as serious business,' there exists a cultural phenomenon with serious effects. They not only jam the world's signification system and subvert the bourgeois taste by spamming the environment with offensive objects, but also attack capitalistic ideology. By crashing sims and significant media events, and regularly launching raids in-world that result in causing businesses to lose money, thereby hurting the virtual economy at large (2009: x). While griefers temporarily inconvenience other players, such activities cause system lags and other protocological disruptions (De Paoli, 2010). Raiding, Bakioglu claims, spams servers and makes the entire virtual world run at slower levels. He writes, 'Every object (including avatars) uses up a certain amount of server space, that is, the resources of the server such as memory. This type of environmental poaching breaks the system in a much more fundamental way than merely attacking the content of the world' (2009: xi). There is no act of disruption in a virtual world that is unaccompanied by various human—coders, engineers, legal teams, graphic designers—and nonhuman actors—hardware, software, fiber optic cables. All actors and networks work together to create the emergent assemblage that Taylor (2009) calls the 'play moment' that griefers' politics resist. If the system operates normally while making racism invisible at a procedural level, then procedural disruption and flooding banned spaces with black avatars is the proportional political act of dissensus until lulz is achieved.

Hardware effects are worth mentioning because creativity and nonsense are not the only potential outcomes of the forms of collective solidarity that the PN engaged in the *Habbo* Raid and elsewhere. Many of their activities can engage with political inequality. The PN's procedural effects in raids in virtual worlds address the (serious) police orders tied in with the economic stability of companies such as Sulake or Linden Labs. It is easy to forget that the PN's particular attack on Anshe Chung, for example, cannot be isolated or abstracted from the other actors, networks, and assemblages that sustain players' abilities to play. Many of the PN's raids in Second Life express a partial desire to re-partition the sensible at protocological levels and encourage conversations about the production of subjectivity through corporate 'big data' surveillance. Maia Bäcke (2009: 111) has gone so far as to suggest that Foucault's critique of control and surveillance is useful for understanding the level of surveillance designed into Second Life by Linden Lab. The PN's hostility to surveillance indicates that political equality and the resistance to seriousness are hardly incommensurate. Surveillance enables corporate seriousness and potentially circumscribes players' creative abilities to engage in nonsense. To the extent that police orders threaten to make virtual worlds 'serious' places in any capacity, the PN will likely continue to find motivation for nonsensical enactments that presuppose creative procedural equality.

Conclusion: We Have All the Time in the World / Ain't Nobody Got Time fo' Politics

In my analysis of the *Habbo* Raid, I have sought to avoid imposing a rigid Rancièrian framework on the PN's activities. Rather, I have attempted to extend his general political concepts to illuminate certain aspects of the PN's acts of dissensus against partitions of seriousness as a neglected aspect of political activity in virtual worlds. This analysis was not designed to be comprehensive, and it is my hope that these initial efforts will encourage others to explore Rancière's rich corpus of writing in greater detail and specificity with regard to trolling and griefing. [3] For those who still baulk at the idea of griefing and nonsense as a political activity, I submit that one major benefit of considering Rancière's political philosophy is that griefing does not always have to be political. He readily concedes that the ideal manifestation of politics in the 'real world' seldom occurs given the strength of dominant police orders and the likelihood that politics cannot do away with police orders once and for all (Chambers 2012: 41–43). [4] Rancièreian politics is in constant need of verification and rearticulation through a variety of aesthetic and procedural practices. As virtual worlds grow in popularity, Rancière's thinking can enable the recognition of important mechanisms through which politics and griefing have aligned in the past and will continue to align in the future.

A Rancièrian articulation of the PN's politics additionally elucidates attempts by game theorists to see rule-breaking as creative and agentive acts of playful transgression. In this context, seriousness remains a significant obstacle in the political assessment of griefing. Julian Kuecklich (2004) has observed that dissensus and art in the 'real world' enjoy a privileged relationship while any disruptive form of play in a virtual world is all too often interpreted as terrorism or nihilistic vandalism. This double standard is yet another police order that the Habbo Raid calls into question. Players who view all griefing activities as mere vandalism or virtual terrorism often take their own roles in the game 'too seriously' (see Dibbell 2008). Lacking formal political actors, virtual worlds are conventionally regarded as inferior realms of political activism when they are evaluated only by comparison to examples such as the lunch counter sit ins of the Civil Rights era. Indeed, my implied comparison between the two forms of occupation in this essay was deliberately intended to provoke this tension. The PN's presupposition of procedural equalities confronts any analytical elitism that reduces politics to 'serious' (offline/real-world) forms alone. Such a declaration of the politics of nonsense against seriousness is not the 'end' of the possibility of political activism online. It is to recast entirely the categories and units of political analysis grounded in consensus, deliberation and political equality that we traditionally use to identify political interaction among griefers in virtual worlds.

This reorientation also enables researchers to better locate emergent forms of political participation in networked communities. Li and Marsh (2008) along with O'Toole et al. (2006) have rejected widespread assumptions that there has been a decline in political participation in the West among the young. Mainstream commentary mistakenly equates disengagement with formal political structures with a general apolitical attitude (see Halepka 2011). Li and Marsh maintain that it is not apathy but alienation that denies the youth a voice within a '… political system which does not allow them a real, that is effective, voice. Thus, they find a voice and the community online' (248). Griefing may not be a necessary condition of politics on virtual worlds and the Internet as a whole, but it has certainly become a sufficient one. Griefing and trolling increasingly will enable a new if unconventional 'count of no count' to find a voice in a Western political landscape whose corporate-dominated political terrain poses formidable barriers to meaningful access to political persuasion. Given the American government's heavy-handed reaction to the recent Edward Snowden NSA leaks that forced the closure of Lavabit, the company who offered Snowden and other activists secure e-mail services, one could easily suggest that the Internet and virtual worlds lately have become too serious and require a radical reassessment of the value of nonsense and dissensus as enactments of politics. Such events will only increase the need to explore political philosophies like Rancière's that can productively situate acts of networked and virtual disruption against variety of virtual police orders.

Acknowledgements

Biographical Note

Steve Holmes works across fields of rhetorical history and theory; media studies; videogames and virtual worlds; material rhetorics; and cultural theory. He has several publications in these areas, including a recent article in Terms of Play: Essays on Words that Matter in Videogame Theory (McFarlan, summer 2013) that explores political 'allegorithms' in Markus Persson's Minecraft.

Notes

[1] I want to clarify from the outset that my argument in no way intends to call into question the outstanding work of activists who challenge political exclusion through sincere deliberation in offline and online public spheres and by engaging actual political actors. I firmly believe that online political activism requires sensitivity to multiple and flexible tactics to address a variety of different police orders in virtual worlds and networked spaces. Consequently, it is of the utmost importance to better describe the actual enactments and effects of politics in virtual worlds rather than to declare griefers' forms of politics a priori as better or worse than models of cyberdemocracy grounded in deliberative democratic ideals.

[2] For comprehensive introductions to Rancière's thinking, see Todd May (2008; 2010) and Samuel A. Chambers (2011).

[3] Among many of his concepts that I did not address due to considerations of length, Rancière lists the self-suasion of political equality as a precondition for politics. In one passage, he writes, 'Furthermore, [politics] is an act undertaken not in relationship to other competing factors (e.g., within previously sanctioned channels and institutions), but through an internalized dialogue with the self. In fact, the first step toward politics begins not with an interlocutor—a demonstration of equality in a message delivered to another—but within the self as it has been subjugated to partitions of the sensible: 'Proving to the other that there is only one world and that one can prove the legitimacy of one's action within it, means first of all proving this to oneself' (50). Self-suasion and the idea of a 'self' are already fraught terms with regard to the Internet's anonymity.

[4] One potential problem with Rancière's political theory should be noted: the use of one partition of the sensible to diagnose another partition of the sensible to react against. From this perspective, whatever a group interprets as a presupposition of equality would only ever reflect equality as already defined by some previous partition of the sensible. This difficulty may explain why politics is never totalizing and politics only exists in relationship to specific enunciations against specific police orders. Foucault's understanding of power might be useful as an illustrative analogy: there is no 'outside' to police orders or end of police orders. Along these lines, I agree in part with Samuels' (2011) interpretation of Rancière in that we can only engage in 'impure politics' rather than achieve a permanent state where police orders disappear entirely (48).

References

'Anonymous', *Encyclopedia Dramatica* (May 11, 2011), https://encyclopediadramatica.se/Anonymous/Original

Bäcke, Maria. 'Self, Setting, and Situation in Second Life', in Francisco J. Ricard (ed.) *Literary Art in Digital Performance: Case Studies in New Media Art and Criticism* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group): 111–133.

Bakioglu, Barko S. 'Goon Culture, Griefing, and Disruption in Virtual Spaces', in Mark Ball and Mia Consalvo (eds.), *Spectacular Interventions in Second Life Special Issue, Journal of Virtual Worlds Research* 1.3 (Feb 2009): 4–21.

Bogost, Ian. *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Video Games* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2010).

Chambers, Samuel A. *The Lessons of Rancière* (Cambridge, London: Oxford University Press, 2012).

Coleman, E. Gabriella. 'From the Lulz to Collective Action', (Mar 9, 2011), http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/tne/pieces/anonymous-lulz-collective-action

—. 'Is Anonymous Anarchy?' *Politics and Activism* (Sept. 20, 2011), http://www.socialtextjournal.org/blog/2011/08/is-anonymous-anarchy.php

Consalvo, Mia. *Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Video Games*, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007).

Dahlberg, Lincoln. 'Computer-Mediated Communication and the Public Sphere: A Critical Analysis', Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication 7.1 (Oct. 2001).

De Paoli, Stefano. 'The Assemblage of Cheating', The Fibreculture Journal 16 (2010), http://sixteen.fibreculturejournal.org/the-assemblage-of-cheating-how-to-study-cheating-as-imbroglio-in-mmorpgs/

Dibbell, Julian. 'A Rape in Cyberspace', in Victor J. Vitanza (ed.) *Cyber-Reader 2nd Edition* (New York: Alyn & Bacon, 1999): 411–423.

—. 'Mutilated Furries, Flying Phalluses: Put the Blame on Griefers, the Sociopaths of the Virtual World', *Wired Magazine* 16.02 (2008): 90–97 http://www.wired.com/gaming/virtualworlds/magazine/16–02/mf_goons?currentPage=all

Galloway, Alexander R. *Protocol: How Control Exists after Decentralization* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004).

—. 'Gaming Lifeworlds: Social Play in Persistent Environments', *The New Media and Technocultures Reader*, S. Giddings and M. Lister (eds.) (New York: Routledge, 2011).

Gitelman, Lisa. *Always Already New* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2008).

Graeber, David. *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology* (Chicago, Ill: Prickly Paradigm

Press, 2004).

Kelley, John. 'Anonymous Anarchism: The Yang of Globalization' (September 20, 2011) http://www.opednews.com/articles/Anonymous-Anarchism-The-Y

Kuecklich, Julian. 'Other Playings - Cheating in Computer Games', *Other Players conference* (Centre for Computer Games Research, IT University of Copenhagen, Denmark, 2004).

Li, Y., and D. Marsh. 'New Forms of Political Participation: Searching for Expert Citizens and Everday Makers', British Journal of Political Science. 38 (2008): 247–72.

Ludlow, Peter. *Our Future in Virtual Worlds* (Milan, Italy: 40K Books, 2010).

Ludlow, Peter and M. Wallace. *The Second Life Herald: The Virtual Tabloid that Witnessed the Dawn of the Metaverse* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press,2007).

May, Todd. *Contemporary Political Movements and the Thought of Jacques Rancière: Equality in Action* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010).

—. *The Political thought of Jacques Rancière: Creating Equality* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University, 2008).

'Mountain Dew Naming Campaign Hijacked By Infamous Message Board 4Chan', *Huffington Post* (August. 13, 2012), http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/08/13/4chan-mountain-dew_n_1773076.html

Mulligan, Jessica and Bridgette Patrovsky. *Developing online games: An Insider's Guide* (Indianapolis, Ind.: New Riders, 2003).

Nakamura, Lisa. 'Race and Identity in Digital Media', in Michael Gurevitch and James Curran (eds.), *Mass Media and Society* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2010): 336–47.

O'Toole, T., S. Jones, et al. *Apathy or Alienation: Young People and Political Participation in the UK* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2006).

'Patriotic Nigras,' *Encyclopedia Dramatica* (2012), https://encyclopediadramatica.se/Patriotic_Nigras

'Pool's Closed,' *Know Your Meme* (2012). http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/pools-closed

Rancière, Jacques. *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

—. *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. Grabriel Rockhill (New York: Continuum, 2006).

Schwartz, Matthias. 'Trolls Among Us.' *New York Times Magazine* (August 3, 2008), http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/03/magazine/03trolls-t.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0

Sklar, U. '17 Sims Crashed in Swastika Pattern. Rosedale SIM Among Them', *Second Life Herald* (January 18, 2009), http://www.secondlifeherald.com/slh/2007/08/17-sims-crashed.html.

Taylor, T.L. 'The Assemblage of Play,' *Games and Culture* 4 (2009): 331–339.

'The Internet is Serious Business,' *Encyclopedia Dramatica* (2013), https://encyclopediadramatica.se/The_Internet_is_serious_business

OPEN HUMANITIES PRESS

The Fibreculture Journal is published by The Fibreculture Journal Incorporated in partnership with Open Humanities Press.