

# Inb4 404: Using 4chan.org to Challenge the Stasis Quo Illusion of Media Stability

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## Introduction

This paper is a work in progress that examines the unique forms, functions and uses of the 4chan messageboard. It is an attempt to contextualise and comparatively analyse the philosophical importance and cultural impact of 4chan's /b/ board activity, and offers a challenge to persistent Cartesian expectation, capitalist tradition and materialist perspective. Focused on the topic of this conference and conference series (transition), but avoiding the results-seeking anxiety of MiT7's "promise" and "peril" subtitle, this paper uses 4chan to question the naturalisation of perceiving transition as an undesirable state of temporary instability between static modes. I don't really need 4chan to do this though. The technology market in general and, in particular, Apple's notorious business strategy of planned, annual obsolescence is something that many of us already unquestioningly subscribe to and this choreographed media instability feeds our fetishization of new and imminent devices, delivery mechanisms and mediations. However, 4chan takes us further than an addiction to imminent anticipation by offering an alternative: embracing the philosophical and ethical possibilities within immanent transition.

At MiT5, David Thorburn concluded the gathering with an image of Janus, the two-faced god of transitions. While this image aptly captured the breadth of this conference's multiple concerns with past trends and possible futures, Janus' dualism perceives everything but its own excess, perceives from within a temporality that excludes the living present and ignores the inherent instability and mutability of the ever-changing here and now. MiT7's refocus on this surprisingly persistent experience of transition accuses Janus of nostalgic and anticipatory

transcendences, of an anomalous ignorance of present instabilities. My specialisation in literature of the British Romantic period allows me to recognise that Janus' limited perception is persistent. The French Revolution destabilised the illusory sense of economic, national and metaphysical security possessed by many British subjects in the late 18<sup>th</sup>-century, and fuelled meditations on the nature of history, memory, creativity and power. Reacting to imminent change, many writers and thinkers turned to past nostalgias and transcendent or futurist idealisms, or simply stuck their heads in the shifting sands of time and hoped for the best. John Keats, affected by this instability, famously reflected on it through aesthetic means in his "Ode on a Grecian Urn." Basically, Keats recognized the eternal beauty and truth of stasis and stability (as captured in the frozen images that comprised the urn's miniaturized friezes), but also implicitly celebrated his poem's ability to reanimate the "cold pastoral," to consummate the lover's imminent kiss, and to give it a dynamic voice. Transcendent ideals only speak their beauties and truths to us through transitional, mutable, temporally-dependent, linguistic instabilities. In this way, Keats resisted the self-medicating security that his literary predecessors in the Renaissance generated through repeated claims that their sonnets were vehicles of immortality for their subjects. Instead, he recognized the vitality inherent in constant motion. Despite this 200-year old awareness of the value of dynamism and instability and the function of poetic mediation in maintaining such energies, we continue to cling to transcendent ideals, to pursue "still unravish'd brides of quietness" and to unwittingly confirm Freud's unnatural death drive in our desire for destinations over journeys.

The continuing instability of 21<sup>st</sup>-century media platforms and the transitional state perpetuated by shifting digital systems is metaphorically akin to chemistry's "activated complex." An activated complex is a range of temporary, intermediary structures between reactants and products in a chemical reaction. However, to focus on the beginning and end of a reaction is to neglect the persistence of this high-energy process; for at the chemical level, especially within complex systems, stability is rare. Similarly, no media platform is stable, though some have proven more durable than others. Preoccupation with media consistency is an artificial ideal perpetuated by the kinetic persistence (or slow changes) and dynamic equilibrium associated with pre-digital, print-based technologies. The unique potential of our current, high-energy, unstable, activated media complexes, of this artificially perpetuated state of instability, is

eclipsed by a resilient obsession with meaning-making, progressive historicization, and the preservation of mediated artifacts and subjectivities.

While Mark Zuckerberg is quoted as having said that Facebook, like fashion, is never finished, Facebook is an example of emergence, and emergence remains concerned with products, not processes, by preserving the organizational outcome of complexity. A much “purer” form of transition than social media arenas such as Facebook or IRC, of an activated complex, akin to Deleuze’s “plane of immanence,” is 4chan’s /b/, which resists the emergent properties of social network systems via anonymity and lack of archiving.

This paper will use /b/ to argue that media instability, mutability and mortality is part of an ongoing, natural and necessary activated complex, as a process that challenges archival anxieties and prophetic predictions with unstable possibility fields of meaningful experience.

### **Setting the (ob)scene:**

4chan is an English language imageboard website launched in 2003 by a then-15 year old student from New York named Christopher Poole. Users can post to 49 differently themed messageboards, but the “random” board, or /b/ is the most popular and unpredictable area of the site. Simply put, /b/ has been and remains the underbelly of the internet, despite its growing profile in popular media and culture in recent years. It is the place to go if you want to witness unbridled misogyny, racism, objectification, hatred, stupidity and spectacle. However, this is only a limited catalogue of /b/’s contents. Less apparently (and also less frequently), I have also witnessed heartfelt emotional exchanges, political debates, empathy, sympathy, feminism, egalitarianism, justice, and creativity. In other words, 4chan’s /b/ contains an unedited microcosm of the breadths and narrows, and the shallows and depths of the larger human condition. No matter how “civilised and progressive” you might think that humans are, /b/ will challenge that. No matter how depraved you might think that people have become, /b/ will challenge that too. Neither static, nor progressive, it is instability incarnate, an unpredictable, impermanent record of the spectrum of raw human dialogues and utterances; both a dream and nightmare for optimistic sociologists and psychologists. 4chan has been called a “carnival of the obscene,” (Schmundt) and the performances in this space are certainly “obscene” in the true

sense of the word.<sup>1</sup> There are no shadows, nothing modest, hidden or insinuated. No veils except over the identities of its participants.

While users have the option to post messages using their real names, or pseudonyms, leaving the name option blank creates an “Anonymous” post in which the user’s name is not shared with those reading the messages. IP addresses of those who post content are also not shared with the community. The collective anonymity that results is akin to participating in medieval carnival or Feast of Fools cited by Mikhail Bakhtin in Rabelais and his World. Bakhtin views these carnivals as models for understanding literary practices that sought to subvert the dominant cultural ideology via parody and comic reversals. During these participatory spectacles in which identities and subjectivities were blurred and obscured, boundaries and divisions established by economic class, political hegemony and religious regulation were temporarily suspended, allowing established differences to meet and mingle in an arena of liberty and equality. While Bakhtin sees the carnival as a polyphonic space that holds the potential for political and social change, it shouldn’t be forgotten that the Feast of Fools was an initially sanctioned (though later condemned) and limited event, a pressure release valve that—like our contemporary holidays and parties—served as a benign and temporary reprieve from social limitation, frustration or dissatisfaction. Like many celebrations, abuse did occur, however, and there are few records of these carnivalesque events remaining.

What if the carnival never stopped, though, never stopped to record itself, and its participants never stopped to reveal themselves? Realistically and logistically, a real-world event is bound by spatial, temporal and economic limits, but 4chan’s virtual world carnival is subject to a different set of limitations. Most notably, 4chan preserves only 11 pages of message postings on each forum. The rest are permanently deleted. As well, posts which include material that violate US law are deleted by moderators. Thus 4chan makes no effort to archive or record its own history. While the medieval Church systematically obscured records relating to carnival events such as Feast of Fools, 4chan’s self-effacement leaves no trace of itself but the transitional present moment of access. Thus it is referenced as a space, as a process, but never an artefact.

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<sup>1</sup> One of the three conditions for “obscenity” as defined in U.S. law via Miller vs California (1973) is that “the work, taken as a whole, lacks serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value” (Harper) I’m arguing here that 4chan and /b/ have political, scientific, literary and artistic value, as does any social or cultural space in which communities communicate.

The collective memory and repostings of its anonymous, shifting populace sometimes manage to reinvent and reintegrate past memes into new contexts, but nothing lasts for long. Importantly, activity on the /b/ channel is often so voluminous, that refreshing your browser window every few seconds gives you an entirely new summary of recently contributed-to threads. When viewing individual threads, refreshing the page can often yield dozens of new replies within a few seconds, or reveals a “404” screen, which means that the thread has been permanently erased.<sup>22</sup> Frequent refreshing thus reveals the dynamic and impermanent character of the messageboard, and exposes the user to a continuous generation of content, but also runs the risk of destroying any prolonged access to that content. Not refreshing is akin to viewing a single frame from a motion picture—it offers an incomplete experience of the short life of a message thread, a frozen moment of movement that misrepresents the process of the community as a defined and determined finality.

### **The Coming , Immanent Community**

4chan is not just important for the kind of participatory space that it generates, but for the kind of participation that it encourages. Seeing a thread of Anonymous dialogue is initially odd—while each comment is distinct, the single name at the head of each contribution creates the illusion of a soliloquy. As well, while it is difficult to determine whether a single user has contributed more than one comment to a thread, it is easy to imagine that the same user has contributed all comments to that thread. “Anonymous” thus signifies the effacement of both self and subjectivity, while still allowing for a distinct utterance. While in general, “an author’s decision to remain anonymous is an exercise of autonomy over choice of content” (Lidsky and Cotter), is well-within First Amendment rights and is a time-honoured tradition practiced by authors who wish to speak more freely, on 4chan, such concentrated practice facilitates a social rethinking of this individual freedom.

To explore this, it is useful to call attention to Gilles Deleuze’s idea of the “plane of immanence,” a philosophical ideal realism of pure immanence which denies or rather occupies the transcendent (rather than distinguishing the empirical from the transcendent or the real from the ideal). Cartesian mind/body and subject/object dualisms collapse as the ideal and real are

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<sup>22</sup> In a 2011 study, Bernstein, Monroy-Hernandez and Harry found that over 90% of posts on 4chan’s /b/ board are made by users who choose to remain Anonymous. As well, most threads remain on the first summary page less than five seconds and less than five minutes on the site before expiry and deletion.

combined, are flattened into a singular, undifferentiated plane. "Here, there are no longer any forms or developments of forms; nor are there subjects or the formation of subjects. There is no structure, any more than there is genesis." (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* 293). Further,

there are only relations of movement and rest, speed and slowness between unformed elements, or at least between elements that are relatively unformed, molecules, and particles of all kinds. There are only haecceities, affects, subjectless individuations that constitute collective assemblages. [...] We call this plane, which knows only longitudes and latitudes, speeds and haecceities, the plane of consistency or composition (as opposed to a plan(e) of organization or development) (293-294).

While Deleuze and Guattari likely would not have envisioned 4chan as a performative, virtual example of their ideas, the idea describes and impacts our understanding of 4chan's operations in a profound way. While it appears that this plane of immanence is a virtual space, Deleuze constantly envisioned this idea as a way to ground philosophical idealism in empirical affect. In apparent contrast, 4chan's impact is largely limited to its own space and to virtual trends and communities. However, the isolationist argument relating to world-wide-web activity is not only challenged by misguided attempts to blame online experiences for deviant behaviour and criminal activity in the same way that rock stars and comic books were targeted as media scapegoats in the recent past, but also by an increasing awareness, generated through video game studies, that virtual experience is actual experience and has as much an affect as "real-world" activity. 4chan's impact is real, as I see students physiologically react in class when I casually mention phrases, anecdotes and memes from that community. In addition, I recently saw a sticker of pedobear, one of 4chan's most notorious memes, blatantly positioned in the back window of a car driven by four young men as I passed through New Minas, part of Nova Scotia's idyllic Annapolis Valley (with a population of just under 7000 people). Life in 4chan is not limited to 4chan's space.

Deleuze expands on his idea of immanence in his last text, called Pure Immanence: Essays on a Life, suggesting

The life of the individual ceded its place to an impersonal, and yet singular, life, that releases a pure event liberated from the accidents of interior and exterior life,

in other words, from the subjectivity and objectivity of what happens. "Homo tantum," sympathized with by everyone, to the point of reaching a kind of beatitude. It is an hecceity, that is no longer of individuation but of singularization: life of pure immanence, neutral, beyond good and evil because only the subject that incarnated it among things made it good or bad. The life of this individuality disappears and yields to the singular immanent life of a man that no longer has a name, because he cannot be confused with any other. Singular essence, a life.... (28-29)

Giorgio Agamben, also anticipating the kind of space constituted by 4chan, and expanding upon the already-suggested association with Deleuze's "plane of immanence," defines a "whatever singularity" in his book The Coming Community as possessing a Spinoza-like "inessential commonality, a solidarity that in no way concerns an essence" (18.9). His use of "whatever" draws from the Latin use "being such that it always matters" rather than its common contemporary association with indifference (1). He describes the behaviour of this coming community as follows:

It is neither apathy nor promiscuity nor resignation. These pure singularities communicate only in the empty space of the example, without being tied by any common property, by any identity. They are expropriated of all identity, so as to appropriate belonging itself, the sign... Tricksters or fakes, assistants or 'toons, they are the exemplars of the coming community. (9-10)

4chan's anonymous population is easily described by the above commentary. Furthering Deleuze's implicit suggestion that the "man who no longer has a name" can still have a cultural and thus political impact on the world, Agamben sees an inherently political potential in his "whatever singularity:"

Whatever singularity, which wants to appropriate belonging itself, its own being-in-language, and thus rejects all identity and every condition of belonging, is the principal enemy of the State. Wherever these singularities peacefully demonstrate their being in common there will be Tiananmen, and, sooner or later, the tanks will appear. (86.7)

The tanks have already begun to approach 4chan's anonymous, whatever singularity.

## The political emergence of anonymous

4chan's community of anonymous singularities have emerged as a political group over the last few years. Yet this in itself is contradictory, given that the singularities that act through the common pseudonym of Anonymous in the 4chan carnival –if linked to the ideals of Deleuze and Agamben—should remain distinct from the state (and thus oppose the state) via their avoidance of an ideologically linked community. This is a point where the practiced example falls away from the imagined philosophical ideals of practice and the easily perceived links between Deleuze and Agamben, and the space and users of 4chan become muddled by the nostalgic organization of Anonymous as a politically affective entity. While this practice would seem to tease out some of the problems with the philosophical concepts used to buttress this paper's perception of 4chan's potential, what is clear is that organization has caused the carnival to rupture, and Anonymous has emerged as an all-too-familiar vigilante gang. In addition to donning masks and appearing in person to protest Scientology or—less successfully—Sony, electronically supporting certain protagonists by attacking perceived antagonists with denial of service attacks or declaring “war” on Viacom and the New Zealand Government, Anonymous—the group, the process and/or the movement—is evolving the way that activism does business and trying to emerge from its mob mentality through organization via emergent social media processes and channels. But while this organization is antithetical to its origins, it is also necessary for its continuing political relevance. Anonymous has emerged as a digital, collective version of the traditional folk hero combined with a singular version of the faceless mob, but this motivation stands in stark contrast to the practice of Anonymous on 4chan's carnivalesque senate debates. Ironically, perhaps, there are websites that gather and co-ordinate news relating to the Anonymous activism. Two examples are:

1. <http://anonnews.org/>
2. <http://anonops.org>

AnonNews collects press releases, external news sources and websites related to Anonymous in one portal. It also solicits donations at the top of its site. The 96 postings announcing Anonymous-related websites demonstrate how far this supposedly coherent group has migrated from its 4chan origins. However, against this organization (yet still reminiscent of most political movements) it appears that Anonymous has internally splintered and continues to subdivide into

different interest sub-groups (Olson). For example, Anonymous IRC servers were recently hacked by a disgruntled moderator known as “Ryan” to protest against the increasingly exclusive leadership of AnonOps. Ryan has also published pseudonyms, IP addresses and chatlogs of anonops members on a hacked version of the AnonOps site (Anderson). While such deconstructive bickering is a larger scale version of the kinds of anonymized conflict that occurs on 4chan’s /b/ message board, these organized versions of Anonymous, operate in a much more traditional way than 4chan and the majority of its users. And despite Ryan’s recent efforts to return the politicized flavour of Anonymous to the status of a leaderless flock, Ryan, Owen and SmilingDevil—pseudonyms on the AnonOps IRC—have already exchanged their anonymity, their whatever singularity for a virtual subjectivity. Immanence gives way to emergence in the political sphere, but 4chan.org’s structurally enabled carnival continues, fuelled by inherent anonymity and mutability.

#### **4chan Remediations:**

Ethically determined practice is neither consistent nor enforced on 4chan, save for the rules that prevent illegal content (which are there to protect the board’s existence, rather than affirming a universal belief system. That said, /b/ users are as diligent as many Wikipedia contributors about excluding and reporting unwanted content (the primary examples for the former being animal torture or child pornography). Quite famously, 4chan members used their collective intelligence to track down a British woman who dumped her neighbour’s cat in a garbage bin (Chen) and a Bosnian girl who appeared on video throwing puppies into a river (Read). In this way, many (but not all) members of 4chan’s contributors could be said to engage in collective moral practice, but the purpose and consequence of ethical assertions or challenges are moot (the pseudonym of 4chan’s founder, incidentally), given the temporary nature of each message thread. As such, many users of 4chan’s unique environment are likely calibrated by more common holdovers from print cultural practice such as the desire for preservation and archiving, and disapprove of the site’s self-destructive, anti-archiving practice. Nowhere is this more evident than in the remedial website 4chanarchive.org, which has recently migrated to chanarchive.org. The purpose of this site is to archive the most popular threads on 4chan prior to their deletion. Users who do not have a “gold” account must request that specific 4chan threads be archived, and a certain

number of independent requests must be queued before this request is filled. Registering for the site allows users to possess gold accounts, which allows them to collect points (called cones) by reviewing archived threads. Once users contribute a specific number of reviews, they can trade their cones for the ability to archive a thread. Ultimately, though, site moderators choose what to keep and discard based on personal preference and user reviews—the site is not a comprehensive archive of 4chan content by any stretch of the imagination. Overall, then, 4chanarchive.org and its successor are collecting a canon of 4chan contributions that the 4chanarchive.org users (who are also, presumably, 4chan users) want to preserve.

While posts in archived threads remain anonymous, the archiving process replaces 4chan's temporal instabilities and transitional characteristics with a collection of static artifacts. Conversations become objects for an additional layer of critical commentary. Such practices are reminiscent of literary studies, the study of history and much philosophical discourse. In other words, 4chanarchive subjects the uniqueness of 4chan's digital environment to nostalgic, print culture practices and in doing so neuters the potential of 4chan's instability. Similar to the way in which print cultural practices often stripped the illustrations from reprints of William Blake's Romantic period illuminated manuscripts and deformed the nature and meaning of his work, 4chanarchive strips the performative and mutable aspects from 4chan content, simultaneously preserving the surface but destroying the nature, the substance of the original. This remedial activity is limited and limiting, but usefully demonstrates the Janus-like urges that persist in new media practices.

Another example of distorting remediation is the Encyclopedia Dramatica, which—in the spirit of 4chan—began as a satirical, carnivalesque version of Wikipedia and other encyclopaedic initiatives in December 2004. However, it, along with the Internet Meme Database have become invaluable repositories for and documents of the subcultures and contextual symbols related to 4chan usage. Recently Encyclopedia Dramatica was ported over to a new site version called “Oh Internet,” but many have resisted this migration, and a cloned (and still active) version of ED still exists. The archival urge (even within an initially satiric space) that generated these sites, along with the nostalgia that fuels the persistence of ED's original form also runs counter to the inherent temporal limitations of 4chan, demonstrating that even the democratic reinvention of

encyclopaedic processes made famous by initiatives such as Wikipedia still pale in comparison to the simplicity of 4chan's denial of persistent and consistent subjectivity.

### **Conclusion:**

Can the state of transition be revalued as a dynamic equilibrium, as a simultaneous center and circumference? 4chan is a creative process, an idea factory of experiments and evaluations that is immersed in production rather than collection and consumption. Structurally, 4chan is an artistic space that reminds us of John Keats' notion of "negative capability"— "when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason" (Keats, Letter to his Brothers, 22 Dec. 1817 (Negative Capability) 70-71). For Keats, the negatively capable poet was also the one with the most creative potential: "The poetical character has no self – it is everything and nothing – It has no character – It enjoys light and shade; it lives in gusto, be it fair or foul, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated – it has as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen. What shocks the virtuous philosopher, delights the chameleon Poet. It does no harm from its relish of the dark side of things any more than from its taste for the bright one, because they both end in speculation" (Keats, Letter to Richard Woodhouse, 27 October, 1818 150) This negatively capable, activated complex that makes room for Keats' ideal poetical character is the opportunity that 4chan offers through its enforced mutability and sanctioned anonymity.

In other words, 4chan offers the perspective and alternative that historically, culturally and technologically we are not in the midst of a transformative process or an intermediate state of transfer, but an expansive spill, an aggregation that defies totalization, in which the function of mediation is to remind us that transition is life, and the opportunity provided by this mediative process opens access to the whatever singularity, the plane of immanence, the activated complex, a negative capability that frees its participants from selves and subjectivities by affirming their being in common, being in transition.

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