Dale Beran Follow

Writer and artist. Maker of Hi Kwality precision comics daleberan.com

3 days ago · 32 min read

4chan: The Skeleton Key to the Rise of Trump

Trump's younger supporters know he's an incompetent joke; in fact, that's why they support him.

An Italian newspaper, reporting on Donald Trump retweeting himself depicted as Pepe the Frog in September of 2016.

1. Born from Something Awful

Around 2005 or so a strange link started showing up in my old webcomic's referral logs. This new site I didn't understand. It was a bulletin board, but its system of navigation was opaque. Counter intuitively, you had to hit "reply" to read a thread. Moreover, the content was bizarre nonsense.

The site, if you hadn't guessed, was 4chan.org. It was an offshoot of a different message board which I also knew from my referral logs,

"Something Awful", at the time, an online community of a few hundred nerds who liked comics, video games, and well, nerds things. But unlike boards with similar content, Something Awful skewed toward dark jokes. I had an account at Something Awful, which I used sometimes to post in threads about my comic.

4chan had been created by a 15 year old Something Awful user named Christopher Poole (whose 4chan mod name was "moot"). Poole had adapted a type of Japanese bulletin board software which was difficult to understand at first, but once learned, was far more fun to post in than the traditional American format used by S.A., as a result the site became popular very quickly.

These days, 4chan appears in the news almost weekly. This past week, there were riots at Berkeley in the wake of the scheduled lecture by their most prominent supporter, Milo Yiannopoulos. The week before that neo-Nazi Richard Spencer pointed to his 4chan inspired Pepe the Frog pin, about to explain the significance when an anti-fascist protester punched him in the face. The week before that, 4chan claimed (falsely) it had fabricated the so called Trump "Kompromat". And the week before that, in the wake of the fire at Ghost Ship, 4chan decided to make war on "liberal safe spaces" and DIY venues across the country.

How did we get here? What is 4chan exactly? And how did a website about anime become the *avant garde* of the far right? Mixed up with fascist movements, international intrigue, and Trump iconography? How do we interpret it all?

At the very beginning, 4chan met once a year in only one place in the world: Baltimore, Maryland at the anime convention, Otakon. As a nerdy teen growing up in Baltimore in the 90s, I had wandered into Otakon much like I had later wandered into 4chan, just when it was starting. I also attended Otakon in the mid-aughts when 4chan met there, likewise to promote my webcomic.

As someone who has witnessed 4chan grow from a group of adolescent boys who could fit into a single room at my local anime convention to a worldwide coalition of right wing extremists (which is still somehow also a message board about anime), I feel I have some obligation to explain.

This essay is an attempt to untangle the threads of 4chan and the far right.

2. Anon Steps Out to Fight Lord Xenu

In the beginning I didn't pay all that much attention 4chan. I knew they were a group of teen anime fans who met to party awkwardly like so many other teens at nerd-themed conventions. But around 2008 I realized I wanted to do a story on them. Their user base had grown exponentially and it was obvious they were about to explode into the mainstream. (Much to the dismay of its millions of users, who tried in vain desperation to keep it a secret.)

The key to 4chan's popularity (and what distinguished it from its progenitor Something Awful) was the Japanese bulletin board Poole had adapted for English use. People had so much fun using it, threads became ephemeral, growing wildly within seconds, then disappearing minutes later, pushed out of the way and into oblivion by new threads and so forth *ad infinitum* 24/7. Perhaps the most appealing part for users was that you didn't have to make an account. The software displayed a default name for posters who didn't sign up—which was everyone. On all those millions upon millions of posts the author's name was simply, "Anonymous". Users began referring to each other by that name. "Hi Anon here," posts would begin. And so Anonymous was born.

Now 4chan is often explained as being responsible for some early popular memes like "rickrolling". But this is an understatement. 4chan invented the meme as we use it today. At the time, one of the few places you saw memes was there. The white Impact font with the black outlines, that was them (via S.A.). Terms like "win" and "epic" and "fail" were all created or popularized on 4chan, used there for years before they became a ubiquitous part of the culture. The very method of how gifs and images are interspersed with dialogue in Slack or now iMessage or wherever is deeply 4chanian. In other words, the site left a profound impression on how we as a culture behave and interact.

In 2008, I wrote the site's teenage founder, Poole, whose contact was at the top of the site, asking for an interview. He never wrote back. Then I saw 4chan was meeting, not in Baltimore, but a few blocks from my

apartment in New York, in fact, in many cities around the world. They had planned to protest the church of Scientology.

Why this group of nerdy boys had pivoted from meeting at my local anime convention and goofing off to protesting Scientology is an interesting question.

To answer it, we must look a little closer at 4chan's system of values. To those with a passing knowledge of 4chan it's strange to think of it having a value system. And indeed it did try its mightiest to be nihilistic, to hate, to deny, to shrug, to laugh off everything as a joke like all teenage boys do (the board was mostly young men). This effort was of course impossible. The attempts to be "random", like a Rorschach test, painted a portrait of exactly who they were, the voids filled in with their identity, their interests, their tastes. The result was that 4chan had a culture as complex as any other society of millions of people, anonymous or no. There were things it loved, things it hated, ways of being and acting that met with approval and disapproval in the group.

In fact, it codified its value system in a series of "rules". Like everything it did, these were constructed piecemeal from pop culture. Rule #1 was taken from *Fight Club*'s Rule # 1, "Don't talk about 4chan". All the rules had a *Lord of the Flies* vibe to them, that is to say, they were very obviously created by a bullying and anarchic society of adolescent boys —or at least, men with the mindset of boys—particularly lonely, sex starved man-boys, who according to their own frequent jokes about the subject, lived in their parents' basement. (Poole himself lived in his parents' basement well after the initial success of the the site.) They were obsessed with Japanese culture and, naturally enough, there was already a term for people like them in Japan, *hikikomori*—— meaning "pulling inward, or being confined"—teens and adults who withdrew from society into fantasy worlds constructed by anime, video games, and now the internet. And of course, it's relevant to note here the themes of *Fight Club* itself, a film about a male collective who regains their masculinity through extreme acts after it has been debased by modern corporate culture.

Also like adolescent boys, 4chan users were deeply sensitive and guarded. They disguised their own sensitivity (namely, their fear that they would be, "forever alone") by extreme insensitivity. The rules, like everything else, were always half in jest. Everything had to be a done

with at least a twinkle of winking irony. This was an escape route, a way of never having to admit to your peers that you were in fact expressing something from your heart, in other words—that you were indeed vulnerable. No matter what a user did or said, he could always say it was "for the lulz" (lols). Like (by comparison the tame and sophisticated precursor) "Something Awful" board that spawned it, 4chan defined itself by being insensitive to suffering in that way only people who have never really suffered can—that is to say, young people, mostly young men, protected by a cloak of anonymity. The accepted standard was a sort of libertarian "free speech" banner, in which isolated man-boys asserted their right to do or say anything no matter someone else's feelings. This meant generally posting pornography, swastikas, racial slurs, and content that reveled in harm to other people.

Before 4chan's dispute with Scientology it had banded together for practical jokes they had called "raids". The board would flood particular chat rooms or online networks. Thousands of 4chan users would appear in the virtual child's world Habbo Hotel to cause chaos, for no other reason than that it was an amusing way to pass their near limitless idle time (or as they would phrase it, "for the lulz").

Durings the raids, they would enforce "Rule 1", and conceal the very fact of 4chan. An ongoing joke was to claim they were from a rival site, newgrounds.com. The Scientology "protest" was also in large part a "raid". Videos were made directed at Scientology pretending "Anonymous" was a shadowy and powerful cabal, something akin to Hydra from Marvel comic books. Since no one knew who Anonymous was at the time, they could pretend they were anything. This meant that there was another more serious component in the protest. The part that wasn't a joke was an experiment in political power. What could they do with their numbers? Could they actually destroy Scientology? If not, how far could they get? There wasn't a consensus of course. Many on 4chan expressed indignation and rage at the protests. They were afraid that "Rule #1" would be broken; 4chan would be outed—and as a consequence—the only community in which they had found acceptance would disappear.

The morning of the protest was a brutally cold Saturday. My roommate and I, bleary-eyed, boarded the subway and took it two stops to Times Square. We had a vague feeling we were being trolled.

"No way these nerds are leaving their parents' basements…" my roommate grumbled as we ascended up the NQR steps. Times Square was abandoned. Not even the tourists were out. All you could see was the trash billowing about on the streets. Then we turned the corner on to 46th street and to our astonishment several hundred people were screaming and shouting, cordoned off in front of the Scientology building. Anonymous. Every one. They all wore masks, mostly Guy Fawkes masks, inspired by the Wachowski sisters' adaptation of a comic book. This was, in comic book parlance, the mask's "first appearance" (IRL). I interviewed the perplexed Scientologist standing between the columns of his temple. He was wearing a gleaming silver suit, the threads iridescent. He looked horrified and perplexed.

"These are terrorists," he insisted, of course having no idea who they were, which was message board users. "This is a terrorist organization. And we are religion protected by the First Amendment." Then he handed me a packet, surprisingly thick, full of glossy pamphlets about Scientology, like something you might get from a college admissions office.

I interviewed a pimply faced boy, his Guy Fawkes mask pulled up over long, curly, orange locks.

"How was this protest organized?" I asked.

"It was organized on a site called newgrounds.com" he answered.

"Is the protest a joke or serious?"

"It's serious business." he replied. Serious business was a meme, a joke on 4chan. And so it went down the line, "anonymous" protestors, all 4chan users, following Rule #1, trying to conceal 4chan from me, and obscure the source of the joke, just like a real life "raid" into a chatroom, hiding their motivations behind a mirrored chamber of repeated memes. Habbo Hotel by way of Lord Xenu. Xenu was Scientology's ultimate revelatory secret, the intergalactic space ruler who seeded earth in the primeval past. So Anon chanted his name as a meme. It was their only real political statement: all information was free now that we had the internet. Scientology acolytes the same age, handing out copies of Dianetics, stopped up their ears.

When the protest broke up (it was scheduled to end at noon), a nerd dressed like Neo from *The Matrix* in a long black duster shouted, "Now back to our parents' basements!" and the whole crowd laughed.

4chan's first day out. The Scientology protests of 2008 off Broadway.

3. New Horizons

The peculiar thing about the Scientology protest was how little 4chan cared about Scientology. The original cause of the dispute had to do with 4chan's access to "lulz" on the internet. Scientology had removed a funny video featuring Tom Cruise rambling incoherently about Scientology. 4chan believed this had interfered with their unlimited right to post anything (and keep it) on the internet. There was a moral component to their protest, but it was tangential at best.

When, several years later, Occupy Wall Street came to Zuccotti Park, it too only tangentially touched upon 4chan's political interests and complaints. 4chan was libertarian. During the 2008 presidential election, it supported Ron Paul (replacing its traditional greeting "sup /b/" with "ron paul /b/"). 4chan wanted the right to do as it pleased and not much else. Where large organized systems like corporations, the government, or Scientology, interfered with that "right", they opposed them. Anonymous attacked corporations like Paypal and

American Express, not because of their corporateness, but because they had frozen the assets of Julian Assange who had similar beliefs about the freedom to distribute information on the internet.

At Occupy Wall Street, 4channers were a distinct minority. Now and again someone in a Guy Fawkes mask would voice libertarian ideas among a group of radical leftists discussing socialism.

However, despite not being on the left, Anonymous is often conflated or confused with the leftist Occupy movement. For example, in the T.V. series *Mr. Robot*, a group of clandestine anonymous hackers ("F Society") releases a video that is clearly derived from 4chan's/Anonymous' video for the Scientology protests. The hackers in *Mr. Robot*, who wear masks similar to those of 4chan's Guy Fawkes mask, want to destroy the corporate hegemony and free everyone from their debt, student or otherwise. That is to say, they have the agenda of Occupy Wall Street.

The absurdity here shouldn't go without note. Emulating fiction from T.V. and comic books, 4chan forum go-ers pretended to be an international cabal of powerful hackers. Then almost a decade later, a T.V. show about a fictional cabal of powerful hackers copies their video, closing the loop.

UM EXCUSE ME BUT WHEN THE FUCK

POOL'S CLOSED

DID WE GET FROM THIS

TO THIS?

I'm sorry, but how did we come from raiding Habbo Hotel to becoming a secret global super hacking group? I think I missed the memo.

An image saved off 4chan in February of 2011 by me, the lurking author.

By the end of 2011, 4chan had finally been outed. Subsequently, the group splintered in a sense; anyone could and did pick up the banner of Anonymous. Hackers labeling themselves as such pursued different agendas, some anti-corporate, some truly noble—like helping convict the Steubenville rapists. But philanthropic and anti-corporate hacking was not at the heart of what 4chan was about. It had started and always was in some way about the "lulz", using the computer for entertainment, for passing the time. Perhaps there was a moment when it could have been something else, a shining possibility that emerged on the horizon in one of those magical revolutionary moments in which all things are possible, like Occupy Wall Street itself. But, it was not to be. At least, not yet.

4chan was now spread along a network of websites and IRC channels of which 4chan.org was one. The press often lamented how, like Occupy Wall Street, they could not define Anonymous. No one person represented it. But this same reasoning could also be used to make the opposite point. If no definition existed for Anonymous, why were millions of people identifying as one of the group? Just because the borders were as amorphous as a cloud, didn't mean it wasn't as large or real as one. It was still united by a common culture and set of values, fuzzy around the edges, but solid at the core. And what was this solid core that defined it? The same thing it had always been.

It was still a group of *hikikomori*—a group of primarily young males who spent a lot of the time at the computer, so much so they had retreated into a virtual worlds of games, T.V., and now the networks of the internet. This was where most or all of their interaction, social or otherwise took place. The real world, by contrast, above their mother's basements, was a place they did not succeed, perhaps a place they did not fundamentally understand.

An early 4chan meme made from a screenshot of 4chan.

This, of course, did not describe everyone, but it was the bulk of the bell curve. Sometimes, while meeting virtually to commiserate about the problem, 4chan sought to fix it. For example, 4chan created a /fit/ board, teaching "Anons" how to exercise and groom themselves. The advice was so basic, it was endearing. ("You have to shower once a day" etc.) There were professionals and successful people on the board who used it only for amusement. And there were hackers who did indeed use their knowledge of virtual worlds to effect substantive change in the real one. But the core of the culture remained more or less unchanged. It was a culture that celebrated failure—that from the very beginning encouraged anyone who posted to "become an hero" (their term for killing themselves, and sometimes others in the bargain). And 4chan's next big effort reflected that. In fact, it was such a big deal for them because, after all their groping for a prank that might become a cause 4chan cared about, they finally hit on one that expressed their strange, unique complaints.

4. Gamergate: Anon Defends his Safe Spaces

It's difficult to recall what started Gamergate because, like much of 4chan-style content, it never made sense on the surface. The mind tends to discard such things as nonsense. Nonetheless, there was a beginning. In 2014, a jilted lover claimed his ex-girlfriend had been unfaithful to him. He tried to prove to the internet that he was wronged in an embarrassing and incoherent blog post. The target of his post, his ex, happened to be a female game developer.

Soon 4chan and other like minded men who felt wronged by women, took up the rallying cry. The effort somehow moved from lurid interest in a particular woman's sex life to a critique of video games. Gamergaters believed that "SJWs" (Social Justice Warriors) were adding unwanted elements into their video games, namely things which promoted gender equality.

Strangely enough, they believed this was happening not because video game creators and the video game press were interested in making and reviewing games that dealt with these issues, but because there was a grand conspiracy perpetrated by a few activists to change video games.

While this whirling connective tissue of nonsense doesn't seem to make much sense at first glance (and indeed, much of the game-making community and the press in general struggled to understand it). It makes perfect sense if we look at this New York Times story about how more than 16% percent of men in the nation are unemployed.

Again, here we can understand this group as people who have failed at the real world and have checked out of it and into the fantasy worlds of internet forums and videos games. These are men without jobs, without prospects, and by extension (so they declaimed) without girlfriends. Their only recourse, the only place they feel effective, is the safe, perfectly cultivated worlds of the games they enter. By consequence of their defeat, the distant, abstract concept of women in the flesh makes them feel humiliated and rejected. Yet, in the one space they feel they can escape the realities of this, the world of the video game, here (to them, it seems) women want to assert their presence and power.

If this sounds hard to believe, take for example Milo Yiannopoulos, the "Technology Editor" at Breitbart News, whose scheduled lecture this month at Berkeley spawned massive riots and protests. Yiannopoulos rose to prominence via Gamergate. He is not a "technology" editor

because he compares the chip architectures of competing graphics cards. Rather the "tech" here is code for the fact that his audience is the vast population of sad young men who have retreated to internet communities. Likewise the mainstream press sometimes describes him as troll as a way of capturing his vague association with 4chan. This term, too, is inaccurate. He is 4chan at its most earnest, after all these men have finally discovered their issue—the thing that unites them—their failure and powerlessness literally embodied (to them) by women.

Yiannopoulos is depicted as the last on the right in an Instagram image posted by Donald Trump in September of 2016.

Yiannopoulos' rambling "arguments" against feminism, are not arguments at all, as much as pep talks, ways of making these dis-empowered men feel empowered by discarding the symbol of their failure—women. As an openly gay man, he argues that men no longer need be interested in women, that they can and should walk away from the female sex *en masse*. For example in a long incoherent set of bullet points on feminism he states:

The rise of feminism has fatally coincided with the rise of video games, internet porn, and, sometime in the near future, sex robots. With all these

options available, and the growing perils of real-world relationships, men are simply walking away.

Here Yiannopoulos has inverted what has actually happened to make his audience feel good. Men who have retreated to video games and internet porn can now characterize their helpless flight as an empowered conscious choice to reject women for something else. In other words, it justifies a lifestyle which in their hearts they previously regarded helplessly as a mark of shame.

Gamergate at last (unlike Habbo Hotel, Scientology, Paypal, or Occupy Wall Street) was a "raid" that mattered, that wasn't just a fun lark to pass the time or a winking joke. Here was another issue (besides "let me do what I want on the internet all the time") that spoke to the bulk of 4chan users.

Anon was going to get "SJW"s (ie. empowered women) out of their safe spaces—video games—the place from which they retreated from women by indulging in fantasies in which they were in control (that is to say, ones which demeaned women).

However, their efforts failed, not so much for lack of trying (though there's that, too) but because the campaign itself was a fantasy. Gamergate was, quite poetically, defined by the campaigners poor-reality testing. The people carrying it out did not interact with real life all that much, only the virtual escapist worlds of video games, message boards, and anime.

And thus the campaign proceeded like the video game it wasn't. Menus of "target lists" were drawn up, their enemies (mostly women they wanted to harrass) labelled "warriors". 4chan users pretended a furious amount of mouse clicking and virtual action would somehow translate into a concrete reward appearing in their computer screens, like it does, say, in World of Warcraft.

Namely, gamergaters believed that online sleuthing would uncover a tangible conspiracy about how game creators colluded to further a "Social Justice Warrior" agenda. Among many others, they hacked the Skype account of the indie game developer I was working for at the time, presumably reading our conversations about the game we were making looking for the moment when we uttered "now to further the secret SJW agenda". What they found instead was my boss patiently

explaining to me the best ways to make a video game. One of the cardinal rules was that every action the user takes must have a carefully calibrated system of escalating rewards. Complete a level, get a cut scene. Video games in this sense, are meticulously constructed to make sure the user is entertained at every moment through a challenge-reward system.

All that work cracking Skype accounts with wordlists did not yield the tangible reward of evidence of a cabal. The real world behaves differently than a video game. There were shades of grey. It disappointed. What you did and what you got for your efforts were muddled. It was more challenging than the safe spaces of a video game, carefully crafted to accommodate gamers and make them feel—well, the exact opposite of how they felt interacting in the real world—effective. In the fantasy world of the game, actions achieved ends.

It was almost as if all these disaffected young men were waiting for a figure to come along who, having achieved nothing in his life, pretended as though he had achieved everything, who by using the tools of fantasy, could transmute their loserdom (in 4chan parlance, their "fail"), into "win".

5. Trump: the Loser who Won

They got trolled so hard, but then again, they had nothing to loose...
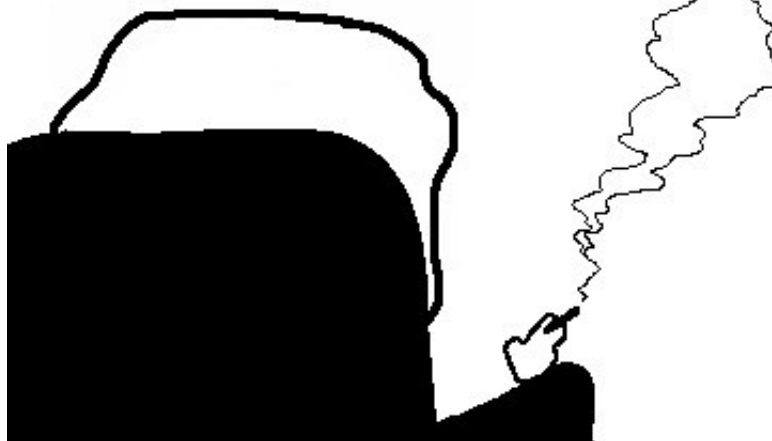
Another vintage 4chan meme from the author's personal collection.

In Bukowski's novel *Factotum*, the main character, Hank Chinaski, drifts through various demeaning blue-collar jobs until he ends up working the stockroom of an autoparts store. The job is no better than any of the others, except for one important difference: It ends early enough for Chinaski and another worker, Manny, to race to the track for the last bet of the day. Soon the other workers in the warehouse hear of the scheme and ask Hank to put down their bets, too.

At first Hank objects. He doesn't have time to make their petty bets before the track closes. But Manny has a different idea.

"We don't bet their money, we keep their money." he tells Hank.

"Suppose they win?" Hank asks.

"They won't win. They always pick the wrong horse. They have a way of always picking the wrong horse."

"Suppose they bet our horse?"

"Then we know we've got the wrong horse."

Soon Chinaski and Manny are flush with money, not from working for the $1.25 an hour at the warehouse or even making smart bets themselves, but for taking the money of the other workers and not betting it. That is after all, why those same men handing over their bets work in the factory; they are defined by their bad decisions, by the capacity for always getting a bad deal. Their wages and their bets are both examples of the same thing.

Trump, of course, has made his fortune in a similar manner, with casinos, correspondence courses, and pageants, swindling money out of aspiring-millionaire blue collar workers, selling them not a bill of goods, but the hope of a bill of goods, the glitz and glamour of success, to people who don't win, or in Trump's parlance, "don't win anymore." As if once, in the mythic past he invented, they did once and soon will again, since at the heart of what he promised was, "you'll win so much you'll get sick of winning". In other words, if we are to understand Trump supporters, we can view them at the core as losers—people who never ever bet on the right horse—Trump, of course, being the signal example, the man obsessed with "losers" who, seemingly was going to be remembered as one of the biggest losers in history—until he won.

The older generation of Trump supporters the press often focuses on, the so called "forgotten white working class", are in this sense easier to explain since they fit into the schema of a 1950s-style electorate. Like the factory workers in *Factotum*, the baby boomers were promised pensions and prosperity, but received instead simply the promises. Here the narrative is simple. The workers were promised something and someone (the politicians? the economy? the system itself?) never delivered. Their horse never came in.

This telling of the story ignores the fact that, as Trump often points out, "it was a bad deal". The real story is not that the promise was never fulfilled. Manny and Hank's deal with the workers was the same as the factory's deal with them: the empty promise was the bargain. *The real story is not that the horse didn't come in, it's that the bet was never placed.*

In the third presidential debate, Hillary evoked her conservative father as a way of appealing to the electorate, "My father was a small-businessman." she said. "He worked really hard… And so what I believe is the more we can do the middle class, the more we can invest in you…"

No one noted how wildly outdated Clinton's picture of the average voter was (her father, a suburban business man in the 50s) because we are used to every politician holding up the same faded 65 year old snapshot anytime he or she regards the American electorate. Just like how images of Christmas on Coke bottles and catalogs are forever stuck in the 30s and 40s, so we expect politics to be eternally frozen in the 1950s. That is to say, as a nation still (somehow!) defined by its baby boomers, we understand this era as the baseline for understanding ourselves, considering it, "where we are from".

But what does the American electorate look like if we put down the snapshot? Peel away how we perceive ourselves from what we actually are? How has that image of a 1950s business man who owns his own home in the suburbs changed after decades of declines in wages, middle classdom, and home ownership?

To younger generations who never had such jobs, who had only the mythology of such jobs (rather a whimsical snapshot of the 1950s frozen in time by America's ideology) this part of the narrative is clear. America, and perhaps existence itself is a cascade of empty promises and advertisements—that is to say, fantasy worlds, expectations that will never be realized "IRL", but perhaps consumed briefly in small snatches of commodified pleasure.

Thus these Trump supporters hold a different sort of ideology, not one of "when will my horse come in", but a trolling self-effacing, "I know my horse will never come in". That is to say, younger Trump supporters know they are handing their money to someone who *will never place their bets*—only his own—because, after all, it's plain as day there was never any other option.

In this sense, Trump's incompetent, variable, and ridiculous behavior is the central pillar upon which his younger support rests.

Such an idea—one of utter contemptuous despair—is embodied in one image more than any other, one storied personage who has become a(n) hero to millions, the voice of a generation.

I am speaking, of course, of Pepe the Frog.

6. Trump the Frog

When Hillary's campaign "explained" that Trump's use of silly cartoon frog Pepe was a symbol of hate, it seemed to be yet another freakish oddity in a parade of horribles that was campaign 2016. Much of the attention at the time was focused on the question of: well, was he? Efforts to save Pepe got underway. Journalists, still falling for the same tricks of 2006, cited "anonymous" (that is to say, from 4chan) sources claiming they had invented the idea as a prank.

But there was little talk of why Pepe of all things? Was Pepe indeed meaningless? Another flotsam of senseless meme nonsense flung out of the "dumpster fire" of team Trump?

Pepe, like so many memes, was born on the "random" boards of 4chan's /b/ ("b" for random) circa 2007, picked out of a webcomic by Matt Furie to become a macro. But why was he picked? We know now that 4chan's actions are neither meaningless, "random", or empty because they are labelled a "prank".

Viewed through the lens of the people first posting him, Pepe makes nothing but sense. The original comic panels from which Pepe is excerpted feature him getting caught peeing with his pants pulled all the way down, his ass hanging out. Surprisingly, he is unashamed of this, "feels good man" he tells his roommate.

The grotesque, frowning, sleepy eyed, out of shape, swamp dweller, peeing with his pants pulled down because-it-feels-good-man frog is an ideology, one which steers into the skid of its own patheticness. Pepe symbolizes embracing your loserdom, owning it. That is to say, it is what all the millions of forum-goers of 4chan met to commune about. It is, in other words, a value system, one reveling in deplorableness and being pridefully dispossessed. It is a culture of hopelessness, of knowing "the system is rigged". But instead of fight the response is flight, knowing you're trapped in your circumstances is cause to celebrate. For these young men, voting Trump is not a solution, but a new spiteful prank.

We know, by this point, that Trump is funny. Even to us leftists, horrified by his every move, he is hilarious. Someone who is all brash confidence and then outrageously incompetent at everything he does is —from an objective standpoint—comedy gold. Someone who accuses his enemies of the faults he at that very moment is portraying is

comedy gold. But, strangely, as the left realized after the election, pointing out Trump was a joke was not helpful. In fact, Trump's farcical nature, didn't seem to be a liability, rather, to his supporters, it was an asset.

All the left's mockery of Trump served to reinforce his message as not only an outsider, but as an expression of rage, despair, and ultimate pathetic Pepe-style hopelessness.

4chan value system, like Trump's ideology, is obsessed with masculine competition (and the subsequent humiliation when the competition is lost). Note the terms 4chan invented, now so popular among grade schoolers everywhere: "fail" and "win", "alpha" males and "beta cucks". This system is defined by its childlike innocence, that is to say, the inventor's inexperience with any sort of "IRL" romantic interaction. And like Trump, since these men wear their insecurities on their sleeve, they fling these insults in wild rabid bursts at everyone else.

Trump the loser, the outsider, the hot mess, the pathetic joke, embodies this duality. Trump represents both the alpha and the beta. He is a successful person who, as the left often notes, is also the exact opposite —a grotesque loser, sensitive and prideful about his outsider status, ready at the drop of a hat to go on the attack, self-obsessed, selfish, abrogating, unquestioning of his own mansplaining and spreading, so insecure he must assault women. In other words, to paraphrase Truman Capote, he is someone with his nose pressed so hard up against the glass he looks ridiculous. And for this reason, (because he knows he is substanceless) he must constantly re-affirm his own ego. Or as Errol Morris put it, quoting Borges, he is a "labyrinth with no center".

But, what the left doesn't realize is, this is not a problem for Trump's supporters, rather, the reason why they support him.

Trump supporters voted for the con-man, the labyrinth with no center, because the labyrinth with no center is how they feel, how they feel the world works around them. A labyrinth with no center is a perfect description of their mother's basement with a terminal to an endless array of escapist fantasy worlds.

Trump's bizarre, inconstant, incompetent, embarrassing, ridiculous behavior—what the left (naturally) perceives as his weaknesses—are to

his supporters his strengths.

In other words, Trump is 4chan.

Trump is steering into the skid embodied.

Trump is Pepe.

Trump is loserdom embraced.

Trump is the loser who has won, the pathetic little frog on the big strong body.

Trump's ventures of course, represent this fantasy: this hope that the working man, against the odds dictated by his knowledge, experience, or hard work will one day strike it rich—Trump University, late night real estate schemes, the casinos. Trump himself, who inherited his wealth, represents the classic lucky sap.

But Trump also equally represents the knowledge that all of that is a lie, a scam that's much older than you are, a fantasy that we can dwell in though it will never become true, like a video game.

Trump, in other words, is a way of owning and celebrating being taken advantage of.

Trump embodies buying the losing bet that will never be placed.

He is both despair and cruel arrogant dismissal, the fantasy of winning and the pain of losing mingled into one potion.

For this reason, the left should stop expecting Trump's supporters to be upset when he doesn't fulfill his promises.

Support for Trump is an acknowledgement that the promise is empty.

He is both the "promise" (the labyrinth", the "alpha") and the empty center ("the promise betrayed", the "beta"), in a sublime, hilarious, combination that perfectly reflects the worldview of his supporters.

In other words, we can append a third category to the two classically understood division of Trump supporters:

1) Generally older people who naively believe Trump will "make America great again", that is to say, return it to its 1950s ideal evoked by both Trump and Clinton.

2) The 1 percent, who know this promise is empty, but also know it will be beneficial to short term business interests.

3) Younger members of the 99 percent, like Anon, who also know this promise is empty, but who support Trump as a defiant expression of despair.

7. The Un-rarest Pepes of Them All

As I said when I began this essay, because I work in comics, video games, and animation, I've watched 4chan grow from a group of people who could fit inside a single room to a worldwide collective.

But I should also note there's another reason I was there from the beginning. It's because, like so many young writers, journalists, and artists that are now despised by 4chan, I'm an inch away from their demographic.

When my father died after I left college in 2004, the last of my family's wealth evaporated. And ever since then, I have lived well below the poverty line. (Even now, though I work as a Professor, this is true). But I had the benefit of an education.

It was not too difficult for me to imagine an alternate version of myself that didn't happen to have that. Like the men in those studies, I drifted unemployed and unemployable for many years in my 20s. Often when I did have a job, I quit, realizing that, in fact, laboring behind the counter in the service economy for minimum wage paid less than sitting at home idle in front of my PC, waiting for a gig in the gig economy, posting and selling comics, or trading virtual items in online games.

And I knew, I was on balance, luckier than most. My private school and private college education was the deviation from the norm. My chances were better than the majority of people my age. Yet here I was stone broke. All I owned (and still own) is my college debt. So it wasn't a surprise there were a teeming mass of people out there who knew with

fatalistic certainty that there was no way out. Why not then retreat into your parents' basements? And instead of despairing over trying and failing, celebrate not-trying? Celebrate retreating into the fantasy worlds of the computer. Steer into the skid—Pepe style. Own it. And why wouldn't they retreat to a place like 4chan? To let their resentment and failures curdle into something solid?

8. 4chan vs. Gender

In a previous essay about contemporary counter-culture, I mentioned Barbara Ehrenreich's *The Hearts of Men*, a feminist critique that discusses how gender roles bind and control men. Ehrenreich writes about how, in post-war hyper-capitalist 1950s America (the baseline America to which both Trump and Hillary harken back) a new role was invented for men. A man's wage and his Playboy "bachelor pad" linked his earning potential to his role as a ladies man. This replaced a previous, more conservative ideology in which your earning potential meant you were able to support a wife and children. These two schemes, Ehrenreich maintained, are still the dominant ideas that control men's behavior in the U.S.

As she pointed out, only "hipsters" managed to break and destroy this schema—the first and most famous ones being the wife-leaving beats, whose sexual adventures both gay and straight were totally disconnected from their earning potential and all societal expectations. They were dead broke ("Dharma") bums, who much to the frustration of the pro-capitalist Hefner-style playboys, got laid all the time despite being stone broke and sometimes gay to boot. In other words, their enjoyment of life and sex was decoupled from the ideological demands of capitalism.

Recall the central themes of Gamergate: women represent Anon's "beta" failure in capitalism. Anons have achieved neither of these ideological ideals; they are not playboys with bachelor pads or wage earners with families. If the U.S. were in fact what it pretended to be, that is to say, the best way to become either the playboy or the family man, Anon would not exist. But it is this gap between ideological expectation and cruel reality which created him. Instead, Anon resides in the very opposite of bachelor pads: his mother's basement. We learned from the New Yorker profile of the alt-right leader Mike

Cernovich, that he broadcasts from his girlfriend's parent's house, letting his male viewers believe the pool in the background of his webcasts is his, not theirs.

Video games were Anons' way to retreat from this painful reminder of his failure, a failure which was literally embodied by women—whose physical attainment is the end goal of both ideologies. Gamergate was a pained cry, that here too, even unto their escapist fantasies, empowered women, like the mythological furies, were hounding them.

We can see now why several weeks ago 4chan went to "war" with artists and their "safe spaces", trying to shut down music and arts venues across the country. What's striking is how close the populations of 4chan and those who wanted to shut down the "safe spaces" are. The artists themselves are young people on the fringes of the economy who are also immersed in romantic fantasy. The main difference is that the artists have learned different ways to cope with the same problem. Instead of residing in their mother's basements, they created ways to live together cheaply in warehouse spaces.

By contrasting 4chan with their self-proclaimed enemy, their counter-culture counterparts, we can see that, though demographically they are so similar, the real difference is introduced here—at the thorny of issue of the girlfriend. 4chan's self-described "beta" males are trapped in this ideology, hating their counterparts whose key difference is a willingness, like the beatniks of old, to slough off the "gender binary" and live how they please.

But rather than take this as reason to be ever more contemptuous of Anons and their misogyny, the left should regard Anon/the deplorables as a failure on its part, a terrific mangling of the left's own arguments that has resulted in alienating the very group of people who could be the most helped by their ideas, if not the most convinced.

To the deplorables, whose central complaint is one of masculine frailty, pride, and failure—to deny their identities as men is to deny their complaint. They are a group who define themselves by their powerlessness, by being trapped into defeat. But if they are to accept the left's viewpoint, they must accept that the problem at core of their being is all in their heads. That is to say, the left's viewpoint of sexual-difference-as-illusion is exactly what they don't want to hear—that they have cornered themselves into their mother's basements.

The left does more than simply declare their opposing viewpoint wrong, the radical idea of sex/gender-as-illusion denies their viewpoint an existence. To the left, a complaint stemming from being a man is null space, lying outside the realm of what it will acknowledge as true.

The irony here, of course, is the radical idea of sexual-difference-as-illusion is meant to solve the deplorables' problem. It was created to liberate those who are oppressed by the concept of sexual difference by dispelling it as a cloud of pure ideas. But to these powerless men, it's as if the left were addressing their issue by saying in an Orwellian manner, "There's no such thing as your problem! Problem solved!"

Here the notion of sexual-difference-as-illusion is not performing the work it was built to do, rather the opposite. Ironically, it works to convince alienated men that sex/gender has marked them as unique sort of outsider/failures, who cannot be accepted even into the multicultural coalitions that define themselves by their capacity for acceptance. In this way, 4chan's virulent hatred of gender-bending "safe spaces", though not justified, makes at least a perverse sort of sense, one tangled in wounded masculine pride.

9. Can Pepe be un Nazi-fied?

In Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, she notes that the inevitable result of a society built around the endless accumulation of middle class wealth is a man "degraded into a cog in the power-accumulating machine, free to console himself with sublime thoughts about the ultimate destiny of the machine, which itself is constructed in such a way that it can devour the globe simply by following its own inherent law."

Such a picture of man, as a helpless cog in the vast juggernaut of society that grinds on to mangle everyone in its path, is not particularly new to us. In fact, it exists as a sort of folkloric way of understanding our modern condition, popping up again and again in our myths about escaping such a fate. Hollywood's new hero is often one who must dramatically capitulate with an evil, hegemonic regime to stand against it. In the latest re-telling of the anti-fascist fable *Star Wars*, a hero must invent and build the fascist Death Star in order to destroy it. In the children's story, *The Hunger Games*, the would be revolutionary Katniss

must do everything the regime tells her so that she may ultimately effect its annihilation. And indeed, in the previously mentioned Anonymous-inspired T.V series *Mr. Robot*, the main character, a revolutionary hacker, works in a cubicle job in service of the an evil corporation (so tired is this cliche it must be playfully named "Evil Corp") that dominates almost all aspects of life.

As both Sanders and the philosopher Slavoj Zizek noted after Sanders lost the primaries, left and right are in some sense outdated ideas. The new division in politics is those who favor the current global hegemony and those who are against it. Like the Hollywood heroes, right and left have been competing to become this new radical anti-*status quo* party. And so far, in both Europe and America, the right has won, implying that, as Arendt predicted, the powerlessness created by bourgeoisie systems of capitalist exploitation might once again implode into far right totalitarianism.

However, as we have seen, the right's anti-feminist message is one that only provides a momentary sense of relief ("you are acting powerful by retreating into video games and the internet!") but like scratching a mosquito bite, it ultimately causes more dissatisfaction. That is to say, they only solution they can offer is, "keep retreating!" Likewise, Trump and the mocking cruel anguish he represents is not a genuine solution to the electorate's powerlessness, but rather, simply the one closest at hand.

An adult does not freeze in mute horror when a child throws a tantrum. Nor do we generally regard such emotional outbursts as meaningless. Likewise, the left should not be paralyzed with horror by the deplorables, but rather view them of as a symptom of a larger problem, one which only the left can truly solve.