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Spectacular Interventions in Second Life: *Goon Culture, Griefing, and Disruption in Virtual Spaces*

By Burcu Bakioglu, Indiana University

Abstract

*Employing game theory and cultural studies in order to make a much needed distinction between grief play (which is a type of game play) and griefing (as a disruptive cultural activity), I argue that griefers in Second Life, who engage in potentially subversive practices which residents recognize as characterizing the activities of subcultures, construct cultural formations, a term developed by Raymond Williams in his book *The Sociology of Culture* to describe groups that embody looser structures. Claiming that they are causing turmoil for the lulz (or laughs), they 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 (such as penises, swastikas, and communist symbols), but also attack the capitalistic ideology by crashing sims and significant media events, and regularly launching raids in-world which result in causing in-world businesses to lose money, thereby hurting the virtual economy at large.*

Keywords: griefers; Second Life; virtual worlds; cultural studies; 4chan; Something Awful.

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Spectacular Interventions in Second Life: *Goon Culture, Griefing, and Disruption in Virtual Spaces*

By Burcu Bakioğlu, Indiana University

“Some people play Second Life, we play people...”
@Zimmer, #PN

Hacking into user accounts; illegal distribution of a script-theft hack; a series of grid (world) crashes . . . SA Goons, the group held responsible for these activities, was banned in 2004. Hacking of the world map to feature regions with crude and offensive names, not to mention getting one of them to display a naked, ejaculating Bobby Hill image from the *King of the Hill* television series on the world map, another series of SIM (region) crashes . . . Voted 5 (V5), the group held responsible for these activities, was banned in 2006 (Minstral, “Skywriting,” 2006; Minstral, “Crocodile,” 2006). Anshe Chung, the first real estate tycoon in Second Life, who was featured in the May 1, 2006 issue of *Business Week*, was attacked during her CNET interview with flying penises, followed by a SIM crash (Miller, 2006). Room 101, the group which claimed to be behind it, published the video of this embarrassing event on YouTube. Digital Copyright complaints were filed against the offending accounts in 2006 (Terdiman, 2007). Patriatic Nigras crashed seventeen SIMs in a swastika pattern in 2007 (Sklar, 2007). Individual accounts have been banned on an hourly basis since then.

Welcome to the mysterious world of griefing.

Mulligan and Patrovsky define griefing in online environments such as virtual worlds as “purposefully engaging in activities to disrupt the gaming experience of other players” (Mulligan & Patrovsky, 2003, p. 250). While some types of griefing involve activities that are perfectly allowable within the parameters of the system, such as unwelcome loitering, begging for money, uttering obscenities, and stalking, others require scripting and appropriating legitimate hacks to use for griefing purposes. What constitutes an act of griefing in one virtual world or an online game may not be griefing in another. For instance, while actions such as attacking other players, stealing their properties, and killing them may be considered acceptable behavior within the bounds of a game world such as World of Warcraft (WoW), these activities are considered to be griefing in most regions of Second Life (SL), and can result in a user being banned from the world either temporarily or indefinitely.

Not surprisingly, there have been extended discussions on how to make sense of Second Life or even categorize it. To the uninitiated, SL appears to be an unusual beast, primarily because it is unlike any other media content that he or she is accustomed to consuming. While structurally speaking, it is similar to massively multiplayer online games (MMOs), such as World of Warcraft (WoW), Matrix Online, and Star Wars Galaxies, where users play a predefined game, Second Life is more like the social worlds There and Habbo, which, unlike game worlds, do not have preset goals for its players. Instead, users log on primarily to interact with one another and attend social events. But unlike most social worlds, the residents of SL are given unprecedented freedom to build the world in any way they like, script the objects they create, and sometimes, if skilled enough, manipulate the actual code. Put simply, the creation of

the world relies on user-generated content. More important, in contrast to other virtual worlds, Second Life users own the intellectual property rights to what they create.

Within the gaming context, however, Second Life exhibits game-like practices even though it lacks an overt game structure. For example, one can enact one's favorite science fiction stories in Star Wars sims, challenge another in Japanese sword fighting in Samurai Island, or play Tringo, an online multiplayer game that is a cross between Tetris and Bingo created exclusively for SL by Kermit Quirk (a.k.a. Nathan Keir). Despite the existence of various games within Second Life (all of which are created by its users), because the world lacks an overt game structure, many scholars and developers have debated whether Second Life itself should be considered a game or a platform.¹ Ultimately, because the world primarily provides an environment that can be manipulated and made use of for purposes other than gaming, Second Life developers argue that it is most appropriate to characterize it as a platform.² Accordingly, as a virtual world whose content is created exclusively by its users and third-party companies, Second Life is considered to be a relatively open-source multi-user virtual environment (MUVE) which comes into existence through the performative activities of its users. No doubt, however, these performative activities can and do take on game-like attributes and become games in themselves. One can argue – as griefers themselves have done on numerous occasions – that grieving itself is a form of game play, one based on a different set of rules not accepted by the majority, but primarily based on humor and spoiling other people's fun. This game play, however, becomes a disruptive cultural activity when it interferes with the daily life of *SL*.

I will employ game theory and cultural studies to show how grief play (type of game play) and grieving (disruptive cultural activity) are two interrelated, yet distinct, activities. I argue that griefers – those who practice grief play – ultimately end up engaging in potentially subversive practices that residents recognize as grieving, which ultimately has social, cultural, and economic consequences. Through their activities, they construct *cultural formations*, a term developed by Raymond Williams in his book *The Sociology of Culture* to describe groups that embody looser structures (Williams, 1981). These formations appear to be using some of the tactics observed in subcultures that Dick Hebdige discusses in *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (Hebdige, 1987). 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

¹ “Is Second Life a Game?” *International Game Developers Association*. June, 2001. April 10, 2008. <http://www.igda.org/Forums/showthread.php?s=661982960c7c40b7e02fe99c2640d9c4&threadid=30312&perpage=15&highlight=&pagenumber=1>.

² Baba Yamamoto, a developer in libsecondlife, an organization whose members reverse-engineer the *LL* client and create hacks to make Second Life a more flexible environment. After noting that characterizing as a game would be limiting its potential, explains it as follows: “I believe it is best to refer to Second Life as a platform or perhaps framework rather than a game. If Second Life is labeled as a game, which it can very loosely be defined as, you lose sight of much of what Second Life is, and imply many properties which it does not have. I also believe that all of this will become clearer as Second Life expands into a more a full featured platform for development of all kinds... Second Life is a platform for streaming content within a multiuser 3d space in real time. It describes the framework for displaying 3d content in the form of primitive objects. It also facilitates the manipulation of that content through a scripting language. Second Life has many features related to communication between users who share the space.” C.f. Yamamoto, Baba. (2006, July). “On games and Second Life,” *Baba Sucks: Sucking up the Web*. Retrieved April 10, 2008 from <http://www.babasucks.com/2006/15/on-games-and-second-life/>.

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. In this paper, I will discuss the current definitions of grief play and how they are complicated within different contexts, look at the various cultural formations that emerge from grief play, the types of disruptive activities these groups engage in and the symbolic, cultural, and economic interferences these activities present to Second Life.

Before I begin my discussion, I would like to say a few words about the methodology I used during my research. Tom Boellstorff's thorough research into the culture of SL in *Coming of age in Second Life* (2008) has shown that people find virtual worlds to be meaningful sites of social action, so I took virtual worlds to be legitimate sites of culture that reference the actual world, yet are independent of it. In other words, I considered Second Life to be a self-contained environment in which legitimate data about its culture and subcultures could be obtained without resorting to the actual world. However, because grieving activities have roots outside of SL and derive from other online cultures that emerge from various message boards, forums, and Internet relay channels (IRC), and then expand onto virtual worlds to form similar yet diverse communities, my research inevitably led me to investigate these ancillary (yet fundamental) online platforms. For example, I monitored blogs such as *Second Life Herald*, reviewed the forum threads posted on various SL sites and other sites such as Something Awful, 4chan, and Patriatic Nigra forums on a daily basis. Besides reviewing these sites, I used elicitation methods, mainly interviews that were, because of the potentially jeopardizing nature of the content matter, mainly conducted on platforms outside of Second Life, such as AIM, Skype, or various IRC chat rooms. I also employed methods of participant observation, not in the sense that I actively partook in grieving activities, but rather, I experienced and observed grieving while being in locations where these activities took place. I observed for a year and a half the activities in these locations and the builds³ that were being created in Baku and later in W-Hat. These are two of the sims that are openly owned and populated by *Goons*, a name which comes from the group's affiliation with the Something Awful (SA) forums (a comedy Web site that features crass humor and pranks) and thus came to be synonymous with the term "griefers." Because my research was limited to the culture of the virtual world and for reasons of privacy concerns, I did not make any attempts to meet these residents in real life or try to find out their actual identities, though I occasionally encountered them during SL events.

Defining Grief Play and Games

While everyone seems to have an understanding of what grieving may mean, and most claim to have experienced it first hand, there is no set of agreed upon criteria that would clearly identify a behavior as a grief act. Jim Rossingol (2005) defines a griefer as "a player with malign intentions" and explains that "[t]hey will hurt, humiliate and dishevel the average gamer through bending and breaking the rules of online games." In a similar fashion, Warner and Raiter (2005) define the concept as the "intentional harassment of other players" and note that the game structure is used in unintended ways to cause distress for other players" (p. 45). Chek Yang Foo and Elina M. I. Koivisto, two game theorists who research antisocial behavior in massively

³ A build is a project made up of smaller buildings and sculptures, all generally the same theme, which may or may not include objects that are scripted.

multi-player online role-playing games (MMORPG), characterize it as a type of play style and refer to it as grief play (Foo & Koivisto, 2004).

While these definitions imply that intent is indispensable in the acts of griefing, and that the Terms of Service (ToS) of games clearly state it as such, sometimes players feel annoyed or disturbed even in the absence of malicious intent. More important, what may be considered grief play in one game may be legitimate within the context of another, and even legitimate actions within game play may result in griefing, whether they may be intended to be so or not. Defining grief play, then, is a complicated task that requires a thorough understanding of a complex set of variables which includes the motivations of the griefer, the perception of the victim, the actual act, and the context in which the action takes place. As Foo and Koivisto (2004) argue, this ambiguity arises because most acts of griefing are possible within the parameters of the game and the griefer's foremost intention may not have been to cause distress to others. More importantly, some acts of griefing may be included in the actual game play, but may be intentionally appropriated for griefing purposes, such as ganking (or the repeated killing of players) in MMOs that allow PvP (player versus player combat) as in *World of Warcraft*. These acts may not be specifically against the rules found in ToS, but are griefing nonetheless. Additionally, some rules are implicit in that they are loosely defined, such as game-specific social rules of fair-play and etiquette of that game (Foo & Koivisto, 2004, p. 2-4).

To complicate things even further, in social worlds where game play is not specifically built into the structure of the world, what constitutes griefing is even more ambiguous. In his fieldwork in Second Life, Tom Boellstorff (2008) notes that one of his interviewees explained that griefing has become a useless umbrella term. He writes, "Now griefer is anybody you disagree with. It's gone from someone who's threatened the stability of the grid to someone who says your shirt's a funny color" (p. 188). While this is merely a popular sentiment among SL residents, it suggests that the catch-all statements of the ToS (not just in game worlds, but also in social worlds), defining what is allowable as opposed to a violation oftentimes fall short of restoring order and stability in virtual worlds.

While providing a useful starting point, the definitions outlined above fail to cover the diverse contexts in which griefing can take place in Second Life. Since virtual worlds can be characterized as either game worlds or social worlds, or both in some cases, depending on which set of practices take precedence in the world, griefing can and does occur in different contexts, thereby rendering the above definitions somewhat problematic. This is especially true when the term is applied outside virtual worlds that are ostensibly games, in particular, when we look in detail at its application to the social aspects of MMOs. Undoubtedly, griefing has emerged from game-like practices and, consequently, the culture it generated has inherited some of the gaming rhetoric. Because Second Life is a platform in which activities besides games take place, griefers do more than just disrupt the gaming experience of others, and can go so far as to damage the reputation of others, destroy the trade brands in-world, or cause businesses to lose money. These take the form of crashing important media events, defacing brand names, and staging embarrassing events around known people of the world. As such, griefing becomes something more than mere game play (e.g., disrupting the game experience of others), but a cultural phenomenon (e.g., attacking others' reputation or sexual orientation) with the agenda of jamming the entire system, either by attacking its signification system or the way it functions.

The discussion of grieving as a type of game play brings up the question of what play is, and, more importantly, where its boundaries lie. Specifically, where does it stand vis à vis culture at large? Johan Huizinga (1955) argues that play goes beyond the confines of purely physical or purely biological activity. He argues that “It is a *significant* function—that is to say, there is some sense to it. In play there is something ‘at play’ which transcends the immediate needs of life and imparts meaning to the action. All play is something” (p. 1). Accordingly, Huizinga notes that play is present everywhere as a well-defined quality of action which is different from “ordinary” life: he views it as a special form of activity, as a significant form, or more specifically, as a social function (p. 4). Claiming that play is distinct from ordinary life both as to locality and duration, Huizinga contends that this activity creates temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart (p. 9-11). These temporary worlds constitute what Huizinga refers to as the magic circle, which, in essence, is where the game takes place, such as the board of a board game or the playing field of an athletic contest.

In looking at the relationship between these temporary worlds and the real-life contexts that they intersects, Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (2004) extend Huizinga’s model of magic circle to game theory, investigating its relation to the culture that games elicit. Although the magic circle is where the game takes place, when looking at games, Salen and Zimmerman note that some games move beyond rules and play to map relationships between the magic circle and culture at large. As such, they argue, games have the potential to transform cultural values. Transformation occurs when the actual game play alters and shifts the cultural structures that the game provides. The rigid structures out of which play emerges are themselves reshaped through the very act of play.

In *Second Life*, the concepts of play and the magic circle it generates become complicated because of the world’s ambiguous status as a platform which is highly conducive to the emergence of games, as well as a myriad of other things that are a part of ordinary life, all of which, as Tom Boellstorff (2008) argues create a distinct culture of SL. In a sense, the ordinary events that occur in the daily life in *Second Life* merge with the game play that emerges within its platform, and thus, lead to the loosening of the boundaries between play and ordinary life. For example, when grievers are targeting residents who are leading alternative sexual lifestyles, such as Ageplay (which refers to activities that involve engaging in erotic encounters with avatars that resemble children), Goreans (who enact the relationships between masters and slaves), or those who engage in BDSM (from bondage and discipline, dominance and submission), the daily activities that these residents engage in clash with the magic circle of the grief play that takes place in *Second Life*. Kalevala Chevalier, a Goon who has an avatar in the shape of a poorly-scripted zebra, explains that even though their purpose is to disrupt the daily activities of the groups that they are targeting, they almost always try, at least initially, to conform to the standards of a region. For instance, if they are in an Ageplay sim, they will go to the SIM appearing to be sexually-charged children and concede to the requests of the Ageplayers, but, “when the owner of the land has [them] bouncing on his lap, [Kalavela will] transform into a zebra and ruin whatever perverted fantasy [the land owner is] engaged in.” In other words, while aiming to disrupt the daily activities (and thus the culture) of the residents of Ageplay sims, they do, at least temporarily, engage in these daily acts which they aim to disrupt. Grief play, then, becomes a disruptive cultural act because not everyone is aware of the existence of the magic circle that has been set up, a circle which ultimately exerts its own cultural values that are quite different than those that were initially set up by the Ageplayers.

Although the activities of the griefers have social and economic repercussions within the culture of Second Life (some even more dramatic than this funny little hoax and may even result in copyright violation complaints and law suits), griefers insist on linking their actions primarily to notions of play, claiming that their activities target the idea that “Internet is serious business,” thereby implying that Second Life should not be taken seriously but should only be considered within the context of play. In other words, they do not see themselves as causing serious disruption within a social and economic context, but that they are merely playing a game. This decision allows them to legitimize their disruptive activities within the set of rules with which they perceive others “playing” Second Life and tie their efforts to the long-standing tradition of grief play that exists in other virtual worlds and elsewhere.

The blending of games into the daily life of SL, as seen in the previous example, renders the boundaries of the magic circle permeable. While the nature of Second Life as a platform strongly suggests that the world as a whole does not inherently embody a magic circle, the existence of emergent games temporarily constructs these circles in various regions, and sometimes across regions, but these circles may and do overlap as they are extremely fluid and unstable. While certain games are confined to specific regions (as in the Ageplay sims), the magic circle of grief play may overlap with or disrupt other games or, more frequently, interrupt regular activity in Second Life. The magic circle of griefers, then, forms wherever grief play occurs, expanding to the daily life of the virtual world where these activities cease to be grief play, but rather become a cultural phenomenon referred to as griefing by the residents of Second Life. Griefers, as seen in the next section, build cultural formations that are founded upon this grief play and the particular activities they engage in within these temporary magic circles.

Griefers as Cultural Formations: Looking Beneath the lulz

Julian Dibbell (2008), while noting that the term *griever* dates to the late 1990s when it was used to describe the willfully antisocial behaviors in early MMOs, and that, even before it had a name, griever-like behavior existed in text-based virtual worlds, maintains that the griefing that takes place in virtual worlds these days stands for something a bit different than those earlier activities. He explains that these activities now constitute organized griefing grounded in online message-board communities that make use of in-jokes, code words, taboos, and an increasingly clear sense of purpose. He claims that it is “[n]o longer just an isolated pathology, griefing has developed into a full-fledged culture” (Dibbell, 2008, p. 93).

Specifically, the culture of griefing in Second Life emerged out of the members-only message forums of Something Awful: Internet Makes You Stupid.⁴ Something Awful, whose forums gave birth to SA Goons, W-Hat, and V5 in Second Life, is a comedy web site. It was founded and governed by Rich “Lowtax” Kyanka and houses a variety of content, such as instant messaging pranks, digitally edited pictures, and humorous negative reviews. All of these groups, except W-Hat, have been permanently banned thus far.⁵ One of the Goons of Something Awful,

⁴ *Something Awful: Internet makes you stupid*. Retrieved January 18, 2009 from www.somethingawful.com.

⁵ After some serious disturbances such as money theft and crashing the grid one too many times, SA Goons were permanently banned as a group from Second Life in mid-2004. On April 27, 2004, some Goons formed a new group called W-Hat to get away from the bad reputation of the SA Goons and located in the Baku SIM (in 2007 they moved to their own island named after the group, W-Hat). On February 18, 2006, a group of W-Hat officers, led by Verbena Pennyfeather, who was banned from W-Hat due to his association with a very dangerous griever, Plastic

Moot, started a related forum, *4chan*,⁶ as a Western clone of the *Japanese Futaba Channel* (2channel or 2ch) image board. The sub-forums of the *4chan*, specifically the /b/ thread forums (whose members are referred to as /b/tards), where random things are posted (and, subsequently, /i/ thread forums which are considered to be the invasion group of *4chan* that raided various Internet sites), gave birth to Chan groups in SL like the Patriotic Nigras (PN).

These griever groups, I contend, create specific, yet temporary, magic circles that exhibit their particular way of engaging in grief play and thus propagate similar, yet distinct, cultures and activities. In doing so, these groups present manifestations of the modern cultural formation that Raymond Williams (1981) discusses in *The Sociology of Culture*. The two types of groups that Williams defines are, “those based on formal membership, with varying modes of internal authority or decision, and of constitution and election; those not based on formal membership, but organized around some collective public manifestation, such as an exhibition, a group press or periodical, or an explicit manifesto” (p. 68). Griefing groups that have emerged in SL, thus, follow the pattern of those of cultural formations in that they are based on formal membership either by requiring the membership of a parent web site or passing various tests that demonstrates the hopeful’s mastery of the literacy of the respective message boards, thereby proving the fluency of the literacy of a particular group. These groups not only embody various modes of internal authority and constitution specific to individual groups, but also are organized around a collective public manifesto published on their official web sites. Oftentimes, their daily activities are documented on these sites regularly in the form of pictures or stories.

Although there are more overlaps between Goons (affiliated with the SA forums) and /b/tards (affiliated with the /b/ threads in *4chan*) than each group would care to acknowledge, there is an implicit animosity between the two. Describing themselves as “elitist pricks,” Goons believe (for better or worse) that their griefing style is more sophisticated than that of the Chan groups. Dibbell observes this tension in his article and explains that “Patriotic Nigras, /b/tards all, look on the somewhat better-behaved Goon community – in particular the W-Hats, a Second Life group open only to registered Something Awful members – as uptight sellouts. The W-Hats disavow any affiliation with the ‘immature’ and ‘uncreative’ Nigras other than ruefully acknowledge them as ‘sort of our retarded children’” (p. 93). The ultimate difference, however, goes beyond the style of humor, but rather lies in the difference in each group’s way of subverting SL culture and of what is deemed to be appropriate use of its platform. Nowadays, while Goons mostly attack the content of the world with their offensive builds and shocking

Duck, formed their own group, Voted 5 (V5), and settled in a new region named Satyr. After a series of grid crashes, sixty members of V5 were permanently banned on September 19, 2006, and their SIM was reclaimed.

⁶ *4chan* forums, the sister site of SA, play an equally important role in Goon culture and demonstrate similar subversive tendencies towards the society and the values it upholds. The idea behind these forums is that someone opens a thread appropriate to the topic of a particular section, generally by asking a question, and everyone else leaves a comment related to that particular thread. These posts are mostly made up of images collected from the Internet and digitally edited to present a commentary of some sort. What is really fascinating is that new images and posts are being added by the second and each new post comments on the previous ones, hyperlinking to the particular post it is commenting on, a fact not obvious for an outsider to these forums like me. *4chan* prunes these threads regularly, an understandable precaution, given the high traffic of these forums, thereby making *4chan* entirely new every couple of weeks. The goal is to find what sticks, meaning what strikes a chord with enough people to become a set piece and keep showing up in the threads. Because new posts are added by the second and are constantly pruned, these threads form texts which are in a constant state of flux. More importantly, Goons have the fluency required to read these texts. These forums are located at <http://www.4chan.org/>. *4chan: not dead yet!* Retrieved November, 2008 from <http://www.4chan.org/>.

images, PN focuses on crippling the medium itself by launching regular raids in-world to cause lag or to crash sims. Despite the differences among these groups, however, all of them pursue a common goal of attacking the idea of the “Internet is serious business.”

As cultural formations, however, these griefer groups adopt the ways in which subcultures present their objections and contradictions to hegemony, which, as Dick Hebdige (1979/1991) argues, is in a spectacular fashion. Hebdige argues that “the challenge to hegemony which subcultures represent is not issued directly by them. Rather it is expressed obliquely, in style. The objections are lodged, the contradictions are displayed . . . at a profoundly superficial level of appearances: that is, at the level of signs” (p. 17). Accordingly, he contends that the struggle between different discourses, different definitions and meanings within ideology, is always a struggle within signification, a struggle which extends to even the most mundane areas of everyday life. He explains that style in subculture is, then:

[P]regnant with significance. Its transformations go ‘against nature’, interrupting the process of ‘normalization’. As such, they are gestures, movements towards a speech which offends the ‘silent majority’, which challenges the principles of unity and cohesion, which contradicts the myth of consensus. Our task becomes...to discern the hidden messages inscribed in code on the glossy surface of style, to trace them out as ‘maps of meaning’ which obscurely re-present the very contradictions they are designed to resolve or conceal (p. 18).

When discussing the use of socially offensive symbolism in punk culture, Hebdige explains that “[t]he signifier (swastika) had been willfully detached from the concept (Nazism) it conventionally signified, and although it had been re-positioned . . . within an alternative subcultural context, its primary value and appeal derived precisely from its lack of meaning: from its potential for deceit” (p. 117). According to him, the appropriation of this type of symbolism leads subcultures to represent *noise*, not *sound* (p. 85). But, the signifying power of the spectacular subculture is not just a metaphor for the potential anarchy out somewhere, but is rather an actual mechanism of semantic disorder, or what Hebdige refers to as “a kind of temporary blockage in the system of representation” (p. 90).

In this context, griefers in Second Life form groups that engage in potentially subversive practices that can be recognized as characterizing the activities of spectacular subcultures. They express their objections to the serious treatment of SL through their game style, which impinges on causing turmoil exclusively for the lulz. Underneath the rhetoric of game play based on targeting those who take the Internet seriously, however, there exists a cultural signification 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 which result in causing in-world businesses to lose money, thereby hurting the virtual economy at large.

W-Hat’s cheeky activities and appropriation of the virtual world by creating offensive builds with objectionable symbolism (complete with swastikas, AIDS/rape signs, and cyberterrorism flags, all of which are removed from their conventional signifiers), as well as the constant in-world raids that PNs launch periodically in Second Life, are performative activities that create noise targeted to block the system of representation. Feem Lomax, a V5 member who

was banned during the mass-ban of the entire group, admitting that almost all of the people whom he encounters in SL are confused, infuriated, or even disgusted by him within minutes, admits that his most unforgivable crime was to be an “SA forum Goon, a W-Hatter; and a Voter 5.” Denying that he ever engaged in hardcore grieving, he explains his activities as such:

I built offensive items, such as a sewage treatment plant on the shoreline of a new continent, and enormous sky-scraping towers of shiny black stone. I built an art deco toilet which defiled every aspect of feng shui; I built an avatar with a vagina for a face, sores all over her back, a penis for a nose and an American Flag as decoupage (Uchniat, 2006).

No doubt, the production that takes place amongst the griever groups, with its crass humor and vulgar aesthetics that celebrate lower-body functions and its offensive rhetoric that borders on racism at its worst, denotes a non-elite, social context which grievers claim as their own when undermining the sense of taste deemed to be appropriate within Second Life culture. The unconventional activities that grievers perform in the off-the-cuff magic circles that they create provide them with transitory spaces in which they can generate noise that presents a blockage in the system of representation of the mainstream culture in a spectacular fashion.

Accordingly, offending the silent majority becomes a goal in and of itself for grievers, particularly for the Goons. Thus, after having been accused of being cyberterrorists and communists by Prokovy Neva, a famous real-estate owner and a controversial blogger, the group incorporated cyberterrorist flags in their sims and created a group uniform with a hammer and sickle belt buckle and various other red objects with the same communist symbol. In addition to these images, the group is famous for making use of sexually offensive signs and imagery (AIDS and rape signs) when decorating their sims and making a series of machinimas with off-color content and posting them on Second Life Safari, a subdivision of SA. In one of these machinimas, “Alien Invasion,” a group of aliens perform their BDSM fantasies on an abducted woman; in another, “Shiplog of the U.S.S. Prokofy Neva” (attributed to the aforementioned blogger), Star Trek characters engage in sexual activities in their ship, The Enterprise, an activity that takes place frequently in the role-playing sims of Second Life (Peterson, “Shiplog,” 2006).

Furries, or avatars who like to assume the shape of animals and who are believed to be homosexuals, are one of the most popular targets for grievers. The “Tacowood” build, for example, which was built as a parody of the Furry sim, Luskwood, depicted a Furry massacre with all its blood and gore. As such, the build embodied the type of literacy that exhibited the struggle between the two sub-groups: Griever groups and the Furry communities. The literacy necessary to understand how and why violent symbolism was adopted when depicting the Furries, once again, dates back to the SA forums. SA used to pick an “Awful Link of the Day” that featured a poorly designed web site mostly about a bizarre fetish of some sort. Lum Kuhr (one of the senior Goons) explains that Furry sites were frequently selected because theirs would generally adopt unusual fetishes. When these sites were reviewed negatively, the Furry community was enraged and sent massive e-mails, complaining about the reviews and even threatening the forums with lawsuits. Although the existence of the Furry communities dates back to the 1960s, Lum maintains that most Goons discovered the Furries through the SA site. Lum further explains that Goons are antagonistic mainly towards the Yiffy (i.e., horny) ones who

engage in alternative sexual lifestyles like the vore (virtually eating your partner) or the macro/micro sex (which refers to sex between really large and really small characters).⁷

Given the long history between the Goons, /b/tards, and Furies, the animosity being displayed towards Furies in environments created by the griever groups comes as no surprise. The name of the mock-build, “Tacowood,” is a combination of Taco (a cartoon-like, Furry-friendly island), and Luskwood (home for Furies). But the build is not a tribute to the Furry community. On the contrary, the build features violence at its extreme: police cages covered in feces, Furies on crucifixes, blood-covered Furies stabbed in their beds, Furies being used for target practice, and various other abominable features. Although V5 probably would claim that they created this build for no other reason than to make fun of the Furies, the fact remains that the violent imagery used in depicting the Furry community serves to create noise, or rather semantic disorder, in Second Life. The attempt at pushing the boundaries of what is acceptable is quite apparent in their offensive builds, such as this one, that are full of phallic imagery, foul language, and provocative ideas.

Although Goons claim that they do not engage in any hardcore grieving in Second Life (such as those that may threaten the stability of the platform), through the use of shocking builds, offensive language, and pranks they create transient magic circles that generate noise and disorder, which then expands to the entire world. Thus, their activities create temporary blockages in the world’s signification system, cause disruption in the daily life of Second Life, and ultimately attack its social stability. Put simply, Goons attack the content of the world and ruin other people’s experience of Second Life. Precisely because these attacks on content undermine Linden Lab’s promise of providing a second life enjoyable to everyone, they are breaking the system, albeit on a symbolic level. Similar to cultural formations that adopt the tactics of spectacular subcultures that borrow objects from the most sordid of contexts and value the perverse and abnormal (as Hebdige discusses in *Subculture*), Goons use illicit iconography of sexual fetishism in their machinimas (such as the paraphernalia of bondage and pornography), and adopt socially offensive discourse to elicit a certain spectacular effect. They adopt tropes that attempt to undermine significant cultural icons in order to construct an identity counter to what they perceive to be the assumed norm. They remove this offensive symbolism from their real-life cultural context and use them to embrace the identity of the “cyberterrorist,” a label all-too-willingly bestowed upon them by over-zealous residents.

⁷ Getting tired of the complaints from the Furies who belonged to the SA site, one of the moderators decided to identify the Furies on the site by adding Yiffy Stars (a six pointed yellow star) underneath their forum avatars. A sub-forum called the “Furry Concentration Camp” (FCC) was created, and those with Yiffy Stars were designated to be FCC-only, meaning they were only allowed to post on that sub-forum. Shortly thereafter, this group was permanently banned from the SA forums. Lum Kuhr admits that she has “no idea if that was planned from the beginning, or if the parallels to the plight of the [J]ews killed by the [N]azis was [sic] intentional. But they were noticed.”

This incident somewhat clarifies why Furies see themselves as a race akin to African-Americans or Hispanics, as noted by Frizzlefry101 in his interview. In addition, the YouTube Furry war that a group called Fried Chicken Trolling Crew (FCTC) launched, which (according to Frizzlefry101) instigated Furry/Hy00man (human, non-Furry) flamewars and spamming, clearly indicates the deep roots of this animosity. According to Zimmer, FCTC single-handedly destroyed the furfags on YouTube. Frizzlefry101 says that this trolling group, which was created a few months after PN was established, is soon to join his group.

Bringing Down the House: Raiding Second Life

Patriatic Nigras (PNs), who claim to be “ruining your Second Life since 2006” (their official slogan), take a more disruptive approach to jamming the signification system of Second Life than their Goon counterparts. Rather than creating offensive builds of poor taste and in addition to executing outrageous pranks, they actively raid in-world where they clutter the environment with superfluous objects, spam chat channels with obscenities, and attempt to cripple the medium itself. In this sense, the activities the Nigras engage in within the magic circles they form not only attack the social and symbolic stability of the world, but also target its overall existence.

The presence of PNs in Second Life (a group which migrated from *Habbo Hotel*, a Finland-based virtual world for teens where they adopted their dark-skinned avatar with an Afro-Armani suit) emerged out of an attempt at raiding a virtual Furry club known as “Gay Yiffy Club” frequented by the Furies. Frizzlefry101, the current leader of the group, says that in the following months the group grew larger and targeted many other fetish groups like Goreans, Ageplayers, and others. While Frizzlefry101 notes that the group also targets high profile people and places, such as John Edwards Headquarters and CNN’s iReport areas, he admits that they gravitate towards raiding Furies and other fetish groups because “many of them see themselves as a race similar to blacks or hispanics” and tend to take *Second Life* more seriously than others, thus making the Furry reaction to the stunts all the more hilarious. Frizzlefry101 bluntly confesses that, ultimately, the Nigras “get enjoyment out of . . . kicking freaks.”

Zimmer, a known PN member, explains that some of the Nigras used to belong to the Goon groups when Goons actively raided in Second Life. But he notes that since W-Hat now has an official sim, their members “[see] themselves as superior because they stand around in Second Life paying [money] for it. Whereas we [PNs] troll⁸ in SL.” He also claims that W-Hats consider themselves better than the PNs because they “play the game seriously and take SL as the equivalent of real life,” but this is in contradiction to the W-Hat’s claim that they are targeting those who take the “Internet as serious business.” This contradiction is a fundamental criticism of the Goon group. Similarly, Frizzlefry101 explains that W-Hat does not grieve in the damaging way that PN does any more, but simply does offensive things, makes offensive builds, and puts on a good show. He maintains that the PN emerged as a group keen on raiding in Second Life primarily after the shift in the nature of the activities of W-Hat. Ultimately, they consider the W-Hat Goons as regular SL users. Considering themselves as an invasion group of Second Life, PNs pride themselves in carrying on the work of the pioneering grievers such as Plastic Duck and aim to inspire a new generation of grievers dedicated to fighting AIDS, racism, and *furfags* (a derogatory term they use for Furies).

Raiding is particularly conducive to unstable, spontaneous magic circles that do not require a certain number of participants and do not need a well-defined space in order to sprint

⁸ Trolling is engaging in activities such as posting controversial, inflammatory, irrelevant or off-topic messages in an online community (such as an online discussion forum or a chat room) with the intention of provoking other users into an emotional response or to generally disrupt normal on-topic discussion.

into existence. In this sense, this approach is truer to the spirit of grieving than the activities of W-Hat and V5 who, as Zimmer notes, are confined to the land they legally own. Within that instability, however, the PNs are able to mobilize these amorphous magic circles to reaffirm themselves as valid cultural formations. Frizzlefry101 explains that, in the early days, raids used to be planned at least a week in advance, but gradually, organizing the raids shifted to the IRC channels and became more spontaneous. PNs raid in larger groups only when there is a high profile event, otherwise, they raid in pairs or alone, because, as Frizzlefry101 maintains, it only takes one person to clutter a SIM or grid. According to Frizzlefry101, although group raids are proposed by the leader first (whose job is to keep the members in line), group members do not need the leader's permission to raid. But he adds that if the leader decides on a raid, then everyone is obligated to participate in the event. Raids, on the most basic level, involve simple trolling which can be anything from going into an area to be annoying, starting arguments between other people, or using scripts to frame others for grieving to get them banned. In addition to trolling, PNs are notorious for their sim-wide and grid-wide raiding that, ultimately, causes disruption on a larger scale and clutters the world with loud noise, profanities, and annoying prims (which is a name given to the building blocks of virtual objects in Second Life).

Although most griefers do not have hacking skills, the Nigras (along with other griefers) freely appropriate the hacks created by legitimate Second Life developers to facilitate their grieving activities. In doing so, they interfere with the hacker culture of Second Life as well. While griefers share with the hacker community the value of decentralization and mistrust of authority, their acts of appropriating freely-available code for malicious purposes brings to light some of the negative aspects of the values much cherished by hackers themselves and much dreaded by the rest of the community. Believing that all information should be free and shared by anyone who is able to appreciate it, developers post their hacks online, available for anyone's use (Levy, 1984 and 2001, p. 39-49). This principle is quickly turned on its head when griefers (who mostly lack any coding skills and thus have earned the derogatory term "script kiddies") appropriate these hacks for grieving purposes and benefit from the thirst of knowledge much valued by the hacker community. CopyBot,⁹ for example, which was initially created by the libsecondlife team (a developer group supported by Linden Lab) as an object awareness code, which allowed bots to replicate surrounding objects to ensure their accurate perception by these bots, provides a great example of using a legitimate tool to cause disruption. The tool, which seemingly copies objects around it, instigated mass hysteria among content creators after it was leaked and sold on the open market. On the brink of protests, law suits, and bans, the libsecondlife team (whose members were labeled as "griefers" by the community as a result) deleted some essential parts of the code, allowing it to only copy objects, but not complete avatars. This tool was later used by the PN to migrate their inventory (where one's virtual assets are kept) from one account to the other before the offending accounts were permanently banned by Linden Lab. Currently, PN is limited to using CopyBot to copy any object across the grid that they feel would be useful to them for grieving purposes or to copy objects in front of their owners

⁹ In November 2006, a tool developed by libsecondlife called CopyBot caused much mayhem in-world. CopyBot was created to test the object awareness code of the Bots that libsecondlife developers created in Second Life; in other words, it tested whether or not they saw external objects properly. The surest way to do this was to have the Bot (later named as CopyBot) copy and display the objects and avatars around it. CopyBot performed this task without asking for any permission because it was never meant to be released publicly, but rather, was created as a debugging tool for developers. Then somehow the code was leaked and sold on the open market in *SLExchange*, one of the online vendors of Second Life. The public release of this tool caused the content developers to go on strike and some prophesied this to be the end of Second Life.

who undoubtedly get upset seeing their property being stolen (or appearing to be stolen) within seconds. Explaining that they mostly use it for trolling purposes, N3X15, one of the few PNs who is capable of hacking, explains that they would walk into a store which sells things for L\$100, copy it with CopyBot, attach it to their penis, and “then walk up to the store owner and headfuck [the store owner].” The few hackers in the group are actively working on restoring the deleted portions of the code to give the tool its full functionality and to integrate it into the PN sim, ShooopedLife, which is technically outside of the realm of Linden Lab since it is hosted on an unrelated server.

Working on CopyBot is an important task for the PN because it is one step towards their bigger plan, or, perhaps, the final step: threatening the economic stability of Second Life. Frizzlefry101 surmises that “PN could only consider its goal complete once [S]econd [L]ife is killed or has been purged of [F]urries.” While noting that the latter is impossible, he believes that the former is very possible if the virtual economy is destabilized and rendered dysfunctional as a result. While CopyBot, when it was first leaked, presented a case of unintentional grieving that elicited mass hysteria in-world, a remodeled, retooled version, FrizzleFry101 believes, could bring them closer to what he identifies as their ultimate goal. As a matter of fact, Frizzlefry101 does not believe that they have to wait to fully develop CopyBot to play with SL’s economy. PNs can possibly hack into other users’ Second Life accounts, perhaps those of shop owners, and embed trap scripts into the objects that are being sold and give these objects full copy permission, a type of permission that would allow whoever buys these objects to freely distribute them to whomever they want. The trapped objects would begin spamming once something triggers the malicious script, resulting in a mass ban, thereby instigating paranoia and fear among residents regarding their purchases. Frizzlefry101 says that the PNs used this trick on a smaller scale when they distributed trapped objects for free, and even built automatic dispensers for them, resulting in the new owners being banned by Linden Lab. Yet he claims that for the economy to take a serious hit, they will have to widen these initiatives to be grid-wide. Since most PNs are using unverified (anonymous) accounts without any credit card information that can link them back to these disposable accounts, they could easily evade any legal repercussions in the real world that might result from their activities in Second Life.

Whether or not the PN would be able to kill Second Life by playing with its economy with CopyBot or any other malicious tool is anyone’s guess. Their intention is clear, but also rather ambiguous at best. When asked why they were not already using trapped objects to elicit mass hysteria and take down the world, Frizzlefry101 bluntly admits that if they did it, then their fun would end. This honest confession brings to light the interesting ways in which cultural formations and even subcultures interact with the culture with which they are trying to interfere. Damaging Second Life irreparably (if they could) would mean the impossibility of generating any magic circles that would allow them to continue their grief play and thus, consequently, stop them from mobilizing any cultural formations that would emerge as a result. Moreover, N3X15, who is actively working on the tool, claims that the tool is currently fairly broken and it is impossible to make it copy scripts (since only the attributes of the objects that are publicly seen can be copied and not the scripts that are included in the objects). He also admits that the tool has not been adopted widely enough to pose any kind of substantial damage to the economy.

Michel de Certeau’s theory of the production and consumption of everyday life, in this respect, provides a working paradigm that sheds light on the activities of the griefers who are essentially poaching the environment in various ways through grief play within the magic circles

they generate. They adopt tactical approaches to using Second Life's platform in ways not initially foreseen by Linden Lab. De Certeau defines tactics, which he sees as being essential to the functioning of everyday life, as calculated actions exercised by those in a position of weakness. Accordingly, tactics rely on trickery, the clever utilization of time and the opportunities it presents (De Certeau, 1984 and 1988, p. 38-39). Many everyday practices, including talking, reading, and moving, are tactical in character and involve poaching of some kind. Griefing is a de facto tactical activity.

Because of their position of weakness, griefers adopt subversion as a form of play to systematically test the boundaries of the system in which they participate. By exercising tactical forms of power, which rely on poaching the environment or the medium, they are able to respond to the power being exerted over them by Linden Lab. The inherent appeal for grief play is, ultimately, breaking the system by going up against it. While Goons block the system of representation and create noise by constructing offensive builds with shocking imagery and engaging in cheeky activities (and thus, offending the mainstream taste), groups like PN raid Second Life, which they claim they do exclusively for the lulz. Beneath the lulz, however, lies a more serious goal. More than anything, their raids ultimately aim to break Second Life by rendering the medium itself temporarily dysfunctional.

Poaching the environment of Second Life, in this sense, is hardly limited to funny pranks, but rather, it is taken to its extreme by poaching the medium itself by staging various attacks through which the functionality of the world is direly affected. These attacks generally cause lagging or even crashing of the sim, which ultimately deforms the medium in such a way that, in some cases, the world may be rendered entirely unusable. Lagging the SIM is one way of deforming the functionality of the medium because it causes the affected SIM to run at a slower capacity than usual. Every object (including avatars) uses up a certain amount of server space, that is, the resources of the server such as memory. A good amount of lag is bound to happen in locations that are highly populated either with objects or avatars. Scripted objects (or objects that are animated) increase the lag because they require more memory to execute the actions that are attached to them. Because laggy spaces cause much frustration among residents who are not able to work at a regular speed, griefers rezz, or materialize, multiple instances of scripted objects, such as flames or any images that move, for the sake of causing lag in sandboxes where residents build.

Accordingly, PNs mostly engage in sim-scale and grid-scale raiding which aims to deform the medium itself. Sim-scale raiding involves filling it with loud and annoying prims, spamming everyone's screens with obscenities or some shocking image, or disrupting high profile events with flying objects (as Goons, too, are notorious for doing, as evidenced by the attack they launched on Anshe Chung's CNET interview), and crashing sims for some spectacular effect which is a more definitive way to deform SL. Crashing the SIM does not require any programming skills and can sometimes happen inadvertently due to the instability of the platform. Objects shaped in a certain way, when rezzed in-world, will inevitably crash the sim. PNs, however, as do other griefers, take advantage of these weaknesses for griefing purposes. For example, on August 12, 2007, PNs crashed seventeen sims, including the Rosedale SIM (which belongs to the previous CEO of Linden Lab), in a swastika pattern, thereby provoking the outrage of a Jewish mafia boss in Second Life, Cinda Valentino, who vowed that her group would be proactive in the matter since Linden Lab is unable to stop it from happening (Urizenus, 2007).

An even more effective way to render Second Life unusable is through initiating grey goo attacks by releasing self-replicating objects in the world that frequently take the form of flying penises. While crashing sims is only a localized way of taking down certain regions of Second Life, grey goo, like a virus, spreads across sims and is hard to contain. Gray goo originally referred to a hypothetical end-of-the-world scenario involving molecular nanotechnology in which out-of-control, self-replicating robots consume all living matter on Earth in the process of constructing more of themselves. Gray goo in Second Life works in a similar fashion. As the number of self-replicating objects in a particular region increase, the amount of server space that these objects require increases as well, thus overloading the servers and slowing down the operations of the world. Once the servers are unable to handle the load, the grid crashes and Second Life becomes unusable pending the removal of these malicious objects. On Christmas day of 2006, for example, one such attack was launched in Second Life with objects that appeared to be hollow green penises with Santa hats, owned by an avatar named lIMakeExplosion Toll, which, not surprisingly, was a disposable account created specifically for this purpose. While this attack was not openly claimed by the by any group, PN is known to engage in launching grey goo attacks to take the grid down.

This type of environmental poaching breaks the system in a much more fundamental way than merely attacking the content of the world. Although griefers do interfere with the social and symbolic stability of Second Life, in that they almost always use objectionable symbolism as a way to create a spectacular effect from their grief play, these attempts result in interfering with the stability of the platform and ultimately the economic stability of Second Life. They crash sims in a swastika pattern, they initiate grey goo attacks with green penises in Santa hats, they crash important media events as weirdly dressed up avatars, which eventually leads to an attack with virtual penises that crash the sim. All of these attacks break the platform in a spectacular fashion laden with symbolic imagery that offends common taste. More important, as long as the platform remains unusable, money is lost, reputations are damaged, and brands are defaced.

Grief play in the context of social worlds is based on user-generated content and transforms into a disruptive act that is recognized as grieving. Such acts interfere with the daily life of SL and have serious social, cultural, and economic repercussions that go beyond mere play or ruining other players' game play. My research is an initial attempt to analyze some contexts in which grief play turns into grieving and investigate the interconnections between the two concepts. As stated earlier, the play style of griefers not only jam the world's signification system and subverts the mainstream taste by cluttering the environment with objects that have shocking symbolism and spamming a region with profanities, but also break the platform by regularly launching raids and crashing sims, particularly during significant media events, resulting in businesses and individuals losing money. The grieving activities, ultimately, do not just playfully attack some people who take the Internet seriously, but also hurt the virtual economy at large. In this sense, grief play transforms into an initiative against capitalistic ideology as represented in virtual environments.

The possible destabilizing effects of a play style on the virtual economy reveals other significant connections between games and culture as alluded to by Salen and Zimmerman in *Rules of Play*. Salen and Zimmerman (2004) argue that games have the potential to move beyond play to map relationships between magic circles and the culture at large and, as such, they have the power to transform cultural values. Grief play, in this context, becomes a play style with the potential to affect culture. The Copybot incident (its uses and abuses) has already opened up

discussions on virtual property ownership, copyright issues, and Linden Lab's authority over that ownership. Grievers, within a social context, have laid bare our established set of norms and led us to re-evaluate our values and bring up important discussions regarding both the virtual world and the real one that we might otherwise not have had.

To date, the research that has been done on griefing mostly focused on the models that emerged within game theory and analyzed the cultural, economic, and social aspects of grief play in games and game worlds, while not many have looked at the effects of griefing beyond grief play in social worlds (Castronova, 2005; Consalvo, 2007). This may imply that the literature is manifesting an underlying assumption that grief play in game worlds has similar consequences to grief play social contexts. While the mechanics of these types of disruptive activities may be similar, their consequences in social worlds appear to be more far-reaching than in worlds that have a well-defined gaming structure. This paper suggests that future research on griefing in social worlds should examine any assumptions taken from game theory and analyze the consequences of griefing activities as a transformative act.

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