

Anonymous' Project Chanology and its Relationship With Play

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In January 2008, the Church of Scientology tried to take down an interview with Tom Cruise about Scientology from the Internet, and was confronted by Anonymous. Anonymous started as a group of Internet hackers who disagreed with Scientology's illegal Internet censorship, and its position as a Church. In its YouTube video "Message to Scientology,"¹ on January 21, 2008 it declared war on Scientology. Anonymous called this war Project Chanology. Its actions have included but are not limited to, spreading information against Scientology on the internet, distributed denial-of-service attacks (DDoS), black faxes, prank calls, non-violent protests, and appeals to the Internal Revenue Service to investigate the Church of Scientology's tax exempt status in the United States. All these attacks have not been ignored by Scientology, and some of the organization's responses have included: moving its domain to Prolexic Technologies (where it is protected from DDoS), posting a YouTube video claiming that Anonymous is a group of "cyberterrorists," and seeking an injunction and a restraining order to prevent Anonymous from protesting in front of its churches. Scientology is a fairly wealthy organization and has the capital to pay for responsive measures. Although anonymous does not have this advantage, it has found great success and strength in its numbers because it is founded on the same characteristics as play. According to Johan Huizinga in his book *Homo Ludens: A study of the Play Element in Culture*, "Since the reality of play extends beyond the sphere of human life, it cannot have its foundations in any rational nexus, because this would limit it to mankind. The incidence of play is not associated with any particular stage of civilization or view of the universe. Any thinking person can see at a glance that play is a thing on its own, even if his language possesses no general concept to express it. Play cannot be denied. You can deny, if you like, nearly all abstractions: justice, beauty, truth, goodness, mind, God. You can deny seriousness, but not play."² In these words Huizinga describes play as a powerful phenomenon that exceeds human constraint or denial. Play in this sense is a powerful tool

and arguably why Anonymous' strategy (which includes so much of play), has found its momentum and success. This paper will outline the ways in which Anonymous parallels play and explain how they have made Anonymous a powerful identity against Scientology.

I. Not Profitable

The attack on Scientology by Anonymous was not and is not for profit. There is no payroll for the hours that are put in and no future prospect of compensation. Unlike Scientology, when Anonymous grows in numbers, it receives no increase in money. Such a concept is a little surprising when considering the force and magnitude of the Anonymous attack on Scientology-- especially because most movements of this magnitude rely on a stockpile of funds in order to succeed (presidential elections serving as prime examples of this). From a gamer's perspective however, this is not surprising at all. This is because Anonymous utilizes the act of play, and play does not need money. Instead, play is specifically defined as being unprofitable. In his book *Man, Play, and Games*, Caollois affirms this when he says, "A characteristic of play, in fact, is that it creates no wealth or goods, thus differing from work or art."³ To Caollois, any activity that has a primary function and motivation for making a profit is no longer play. This makes sense on a fundamental level. For example, when an athlete starts to play his game on a professional level, play becomes more of a responsibility and necessity to him, because he is no longer playing for the sake of play. Scientology is very similar to the professional athlete in the sense that it depends more on money than play. Members of Scientology give money to Scientology, so it is unprofitable for Scientology to receive bad press from Anonymous and to let Anonymous bombard it through the internet; bad press means less followers. It also means that Scientology has no choice but to pay people to fight against Anonymous. Unlike Anonymous, its efforts to gain support and fight against Project Chanology are tightly entangled in and dependent on money: reaching the millions if you sum the costs from lawsuits to propaganda. It must work instead of play, and so it is placed at a

disadvantage against Anonymous-- work is never as fun as play.

2. Freedom of Membership

When one plays for the sake of play, the motive is purely for the pursuit of happiness. There are no obligations to play but to have fun, and so this means that play can be stopped at any time without consequence. In this sense, Scientology could never be considered play. While people are welcomed and encouraged to join Scientology, they cannot leave it as easily. From the article "My name is L Ron Hubbard" by James Donaghy, it is stated that people leaving Scientology lose the confidentiality of their personal information. This is because the Scientology Church maintains possession of it, and can even use it to attack and psychologically abuse the members who try to get away from it.⁴ Such a frightening consequence for leaving can make reluctant Scientology members feel imprisoned. To Anonymous however, commitment is self-decided. It boils down to choosing to log online and make life difficult for Scientology, or not to. There is complete freedom in choosing to participate and choosing to stop. In addition, Message boards used by Anonymous make it a point to not share the personal identities of their posters. For example, Anonymous started out on the Random board on 4Chan.org, where everyone posts under the name "Anonymous." Because the identities of its followers remain faceless, there is no information tying them to the group or to any contract. The fear of commitment is eliminated in Anonymous's membership strategy. As stated earlier, unforced commitment is part of what play is. When writing about play, Huizinga says, "First and foremost, then, all play is a voluntary activity... is free, [and] is in fact freedom."⁵ To Huizinga, one cannot play without freedom. Whereas Scientology threatens and restricts its members to stay committed to it, members of Anonymous can revel in the freedom of choice that is part of play. In this way, the Anonymous membership strategy is psychologically way more seductive than that of Scientology because of its relationship with play.

3. Escape from Routine

Another way Anonymous utilizes play in project Chanology is by providing an escape from routine for its members. A part of the reason why play is fun and is freeing is because it is "a stepping out of 'real' life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own."⁶ This is because, when it comes down to it, Project Chanology is a hacker's virtual war. Instead of tanks and firearms, the core ammunition of Anonymous are computers and the web. Just like video games, when a member of Anonymous sits down to attack Scientology over the web, he is entering a virtual world that is different from his regular life and job.

This is not to say that this hacker is confined to the virtual world alone- there are always opportunities to show up in the real world. Project Chanology has also featured live protests. The main point to think about here is that participation in Anonymous, whether it be online or outside, means taking a break from regular reality. This, as seen with the protests, means taking on a different identity as well. The pleasure of play also extends to "the pleasure of playing a role, of acting *as if* one were someone or something else" as said by Caillois.⁷ For Anonymous, being a part of it means that members get to act like the group's iconic figurehead: V. This identity is particularly attractive because V, from the comic series *V for Vendetta*, is an intelligent and smooth freedom fighter, whose identity is hidden by a Guy Fawkes mask, and who "uses terrorist tactics to fight against his totalitarian society."⁸ It's no surprise then, that when members of Anonymous go outside to protest against Scientology, they choose to protect their identities with Guy Fawkes masks and clothing similar to that of V.

At the end of the day, when the member of Anonymous wants to switch back to his life, all he has to do is step away from his computer or go back home (without being followed or caught of course). Although there are risks of getting caught by Scientology, there are no penalties administered by Anonymous. Things are not so simple for Scientologists. Not only are their identities as Scientologists nearly irreversible (because of stringent procedures set up to discourage leaving Scientology), but their routines themselves must incorporate Scientology. Participation in Scientology requires going to its churches and headquarters and getting "audits" (cleansing sessions

required to move up in the Scientology ranks). It also requires that the members perform specific rituals, only take certain medications (psychiatric drugs not allowed), and paying money to the church for audits ("costing anywhere from \$200-\$750 for introductory sessions to between \$8,000 & \$9,000 for advanced sessions"⁹). Because Scientology has so many requirements of its members and is a real-life practice, it consumes the routines of its members instead of providing an escape from them. Whereas Anonymous can appeal to people of any commitment level because of its relationship with play, Scientology cannot because of its relationship with duty and work.

4. The Game

Because its strategy and structure are based on the fundamentals of play, Anonymous' war is structured as a game. In the YouTube video "WE RUN THIS," noted for declaring Anonymous' attack on Scientology, the Guy-Fawkes-masked Anonymous member even says "thank you for playing the game."¹⁰ Not only is this phrase a popular meme used by people on 4chan message boards, but a statement that puts into perspective the attitude of the opposition: they are enjoying themselves. In Project Chanology there are clear enemies, a very real chance of defeat, and most of the rules are learned by playing. All these qualities characterize themselves as key elements of a game. In competition, the enemy must be clear, and "Every game of skill, by definition, involves the risk for the player of missing his stroke, and the threat of defeat, without which the game would no longer be pleasing."¹¹

According to Caillois, when there is a real possibility of failure in a game, there is incentive to play--and to play well. With Scientology as the target, known for its wealth, corruption, and power, Anonymous runs a risk of feeling its wrath. But by the previous logic, one could even argue that this makes the war against Scientology exciting. The war/game grows in appeal because not all the rules are clear. Anonymous members are learning what to do and what not to do as they go, which is a quality unique to the video game genre of games. According to Steven Johnson in his book *Everything Bad is Good for You*, Johnson states that "In the video game world, on the other

hand, the rules are rarely established in their entirety before you sit down to play. You're given a few basic instructions about how to manipulate objects or characters on the screen, and a sense of some kind of immediate objective. But many of the rules-- the identity of your ultimate goal and the techniques available for reaching that goal-- become apparent only through exploring the world. You literally learn by playing."¹² More than a regular board game or gambling game where not knowing the rules can make play impossible, video games simulate the ambiguity and discovery of reality and therefore serve as the best model of all the games to compare the game that Anonymous is playing. Whether it is downloading and using denial of service software, or hatching up another on-line or live act of protest, Anonymous is following a game model where the possibilities are endless and the final outcome is unclear. The open-ended format of this structure makes the war on Scientology extremely enticing to many Internet users, in the same way that video games are addictive to gamers, and this is where Anonymous has a devastating upper hand against Scientology. Anonymous draws its appeal from the simple and unavoidable fact that: the rewards in life are fewer than those in a game. According to Johnson, the rewards in life, aside from the more primal rewards such as eating, "only hover at the margins of everyday existence".¹³ Whether it is a pay-raise or a birthday, the points from life are distributed sparingly throughout the year and insufficient in terms of keeping a person pleased. This means that the average person will be drawn to systems that give rewards more frequently. This is how video games work and how Anonymous works, and why they are so popular.

In summary, we must remember that play is an undeniably powerful part of human culture. It is marked by its unprofitableness, freedom of membership, escape from routine, and application in games. Because Anonymous mirrors these attributes, one can say that its structure is founded on play, and that the group's war against Scientology is its game. Evidently so, Scientology does not have these core components of play. It instead is founded off of profit, contracted membership, and routine participation in a manner that mirrors work more than anything else. It is because of these distinctions that Anonymous has been so successful in its attack on Scientology and why it

continues to remain on the offensive. Because it relies on the pleasures of play, it is sustainable and appealing. Although it is unclear whether or not Anonymous will 'win' against Scientology or what winning actually means in this case, it is clear why Anonymous has found such great success.

Footnotes

¹ Anonymous. "Message to Scientology." YouTube.com. Reviewed: November.02.2009.
<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JCbKv9yiLiQ>>

² Huizinga, Johan. *Homo Ludens: A study of the Play Element in Culture*. Page 3. Boston: The Beacon Press, 1955.

³ Caillois, Roger. *Man, Play, and Games*. Page 5. Meyer Barash, trans. Urbana/Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001.

⁴ Donaghy, James. "My name is L Ron Hubbard." The Guardian, Saturday 9 June 2007.

⁵ Huizinga, Johan. *Homo Ludens: A study of the Play Element in Culture*. Page 7-8. Boston: The Beacon Press, 1955.

⁶ Huizinga, Johan. *Homo Ludens: A study of the Play Element in Culture*. Page 12. Boston: The Beacon Press, 1955.

⁷ Caillois, Roger. *Man, Play, and Games*. Page 8. Meyer Barash, trans. Urbana/Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001.

⁸ IMDB, IMDB.com. Retrieved: November.06.2009.<<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0434409/>>

⁹ Zeera. Answers.Yahoo.com. Retrieved: November.07.2009.
<<http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20090102110920AABqrGy>>

¹⁰ Anonymous. "WE RUN THIS." YouTube.com. Reviewed: November.02.2009.
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j0ZFow_9vsg>

¹¹ Caillois, Roger. *Man, Play, and Games*. Page 7. Meyer Barash, trans. Urbana/Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001.

¹² Johnson, Steven (2005). *Everything Bad is Good for You*. Page 42. Riverhead Hardcover.

¹³ Johnson, Steven (2005). *Everything Bad is Good for You*. Page 36. Riverhead Hardcover.

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