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Ecopolitics for teh Lulz: Transmedia Civil Disobedience in the Age of Fossil-Fuelled Information Capitalism

This text reflects on my involvement in The Climate Games, a campaign of creative civil disobedience that coincided with United Nations Conference of Parties on Climate Change, COP21 in Paris, 30 November-12 December 2015. It concerns a lack of “cyberactivism” across the Games platform, which was designed to integrate street actions with networked knowledge-sharing and organisation. Drawing on the pioneering work of the Electronic Disturbance Theatre and the recent activities of “hacktivist” collective Anonymous, I discuss resonances between online and street activism and the potential for their further co-development.

The Climate Games

The Climate Games were promoted by its organisers, the unorthodox theatre collective Laboratory for Insurrectionary Imagination (Labforii), as “the world’s largest disobedient action adventure game” (Climate Games n.d.). Acting on the slogan “We are nature defending itself,” The Games brought together teams of activists and artists to develop and engage in forms of non-violent “creative disobedience” so as to disrupt, out and sabotage organisations profiting from fossil fuel pollution. Gameplay was not exclusive to Paris but occurred in an interconnected online/offline game-space known as “the Mesh” (Climate Games n.d.). Using spectacle, novelty and meme-like distribution, The Games attempted to steal media attention away from the COP21 negotiations and towards movements undertaking grass-roots action (Aronoff 2015).

Over 220 teams registered for The Climate Games, marking targets in Europe, The United States, South America, India and Australia. After completing their actions and uploading documentation, teams nominated each other for awards, such as “The Hive Mind Award,” “The Future Now Prize,” and “The Electronic Disobedience Medal.” Winners were announced at a closing event held on the outskirts of Paris and streamed online on 13 December 2015. To my knowledge no specific online actions occurred during The Games, despite the involvement of web and games developers in the hackathons that preceded it and reports of organisers colluding with the notorious “hacktivist” collective, Anonymous (Brussels 2015). No winner is listed for the “Electronic Disobedience” award on The Climate Games website, however the runner-up was a
modified online Pacman game, “Lobbyman.” This lack of activity in a mode that seems representative of The Games’ organising principles led me to investigate a history of cyberactivism and to think about its incorporation into the (climate) activists’ toolkit.

Electronic Civil Disobedience

“Electronic Civil Disobedience” (ECD), first published in 1994, is a manifesto in which the Critical Art Ensemble (CAE) critique the efficacy of street based actions during an era marked by computerised information management. Arguing that power is no longer accessible through the architectural forms that represent it, such as castles, government bureaucracies and corporate offices, and rather circulates with the flow of information-capital, the CAE propose:

> When access to information is denied, the organizational properties of the institution from which it is withheld become unstable, and – should this condition be maintained for too long – the institution will eventually collapse because of a communication gap. (CAE 1996: 13)

The foremost technique of ECD that emerged following the publication of the CAE’s manifesto was of “distributed denial of service” (DDoS). During DDoS actions a web server is flooded with requests, causing it to slow down and, in theory, crash. This method of “virtual sit-in” was developed in the late 1990s by the US based Electronic Disturbance Theater (EDT). Comprising the artists, activists, programmers and scholars, Stefan Wray, Ricardo Dominguez, Carmin Karasic and Brett Stalbaum, the EDT broke away from the CAE to work at the “intersections of radical politics, recombinant and performance art, and computer software design” (Wray 1998b). They developed DDoS actions as a form of direct-action, initially in solidarity with the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional, EZLN).

During the first DDoS actions in 1998, the EDT encouraged internet users around the world to simultaneously reload a website on their browsers by manually striking the refresh button and thereby “blockading” the public-facing portals of websites regarded as symbols of “Mexican Neo-Liberalism” (Stalbaum n.d.). Soon after, the EDT developed a Java-based application, FloodNet, which was programmed to reload a targeted page every few seconds, enhancing the ability of “netsurfers” to participate in mass, browser-based actions. Wray (1998) recalls that the
effectiveness of FloodNet on targeted servers was questionable and thus the tool might be best understood as a “symbolic gesture” and “simulated threat” rather than a weapon. Media theorist Molly Sauter concurs that FloodNet actions and other early forms of ECD sought media attention as their primary goal, noting that the EDT would distribute press releases and publicise actions beforehand (2014: 61). Sauter further queries the success of these activities as tactical media, given that journalists responded to the novelty of this new form of protest and occasionally sensationalised these non-violent disruptions as acts of “cyber-terrorism,” but rarely reported on their politics and motivations (2014: 64).

Arguably the ECD action that speaks most directly to the objectives of The Climate Games was a virtual sit-in organised by the British collective, The Electronic Hippies. In 1999, the E-Hippies choreographed an online campaign targeting the World Trade Organisation (WTO) summit that coincided with the protests in the streets of Seattle. According to the group, over 450,000 activists used a tool based on FloodNet to target the conference servers, public-facing websites and various staff and state accounts (cited in Sauter 2014: 40). Following this virtual sit-in, the E-Hippies conducted a two-day “email bombing” campaign, for which protesters sent messages to a list of WTO affiliated addresses with large uncompressed attachments. Like the EDT, the Electronic Hippies pursued techniques of online activism that were analogous to already established physical actions, and in which the internet was defended as a public forum where people were able to assemble and exercise their democratic rights.

**DDoS and the law**

A campaign spearheaded by Anonymous in solidarity with Wikileaks was possibly the most effective act of ECD in (net) history. After Wikileaks released of a cache of diplomatic cables in November 2010 several major companies including Amazon, Mastercard and Paypal, bending under the pressure of the US Government, refused to process donations or provide web-hosting for the whistleblowing organisation. Between 4-10 December 2010 Anonymous mounted a crusade to “Avenge Assange,” Wikileaks’ prominent spokesperson, by targeting the websites of these companies. More than seven thousand supporters volunteered their machines to power a botnet-based application, Low Orbit Ion Cannon (LOIC). As a so-called server “stress-testing” tool, LOIC corrals a conglomeration of networked computers to perform under a single command and control – a botnet. As such, LOIC orchestrates DDoS “attacks” of a magnitude far greater than what FloodNet could facilitate, and that are capable of actually disabling servers rather than
posing as a simulated threat. According to one Anonymous informant it took only eight hundred computers to block the Mastercard site and one thousand for Visa, although accounts of as to how long the sites were down vary (Moses 2010).

Operation “Avenge Assange,” in particular the attacks on Paypal’s blog (note: not its credit processing site), triggered a series of FBI raids late in December 2010. By July 2011 fourteen alleged participants had been arrested after authorities, exploiting a vulnerability in LOIC, were able to determine their identities. By 2013, thirteen of the “Paypal 14” had pleaded guilty to participating in a “worldwide conspiracy” by coordinating “cyber-attacks” against a number of corporate entities. These court cases confirmed that DDoS attacks were prosecutable in the US under its Computer Fraud and Abuse Act (CFAA), with penalties much harsher than if one were to participate in similar offline actions such as an occupation or blockade that infringed on private property (Agence France Press 2013).

Most jurisdictions have laws against DDoS actions; yet, there is still some debate as to their legitimacy. Those in support of these means argue that they are an appropriate protest technique on internet-facing websites. Those who oppose DDoS argue that such actions block access to information, in what amounts to a restriction of free speech. Sauter argues that DDoS actions disrupt the frenzy of communicative capitalism and that the “lack of signal that is the external manifestation of an external DDoS action should be interpreted as making space for unheard dissent” (2014: 93). Anthropologist Gabriella Coleman, who studied Anonymous in depth, takes into account power relations in her analysis of DDoS actions, noting that:

> By enabling the underdog – the protester or infringed group – to speak as loudly as its more resourceful opponents (in this case, powerful corporations), we might understand a tactic like DDoS as a leveller: a free speech win. (2014:166)

An issue more current to this debate is the waning effectiveness of DDoS as web security infrastructures improve. How else can “netizens” leverage their concerns when the internet has now become wholly privatised? Furthermore, as many of our daily tasks and modes of organising are now reliant on the internet and our lives become circumscribed by network protocols, can we legitimately distinguish between activities that occur online and those that happen “in real life?”
Game on

Coleman (2014) identifies “the Lulz” as a significant factor motivating Anonymous, and one that distinguishes them from a previous era’s cyberactivists. A corruption of the web-speak acronym, LOL (laugh out loud), Lulz signifies laughter at someone else’s expense, similar to the German notion of Schadenfreude. Citing Encyclopedia Dramatica, a satirical repository of net culture, those who engage in the Lulz “view a state of voluntary, gleeful sociopathy over the world’s current apocalyptic state, as superior to being continually emo” (Coleman 2014: 45-46).

Coleman casts “Anons,” (i.e. Anonymous activists), as “tricksters,” mischievous archetypal figures who impart knowledge as they stir doubt and confusion (2014: 50). Arguably, the trickster is a figure familiar to many counter-culture movements and its characteristics may have become more pronounced given the turn towards creative disobedience in protest cultures. Brazen stunts, such as Brandalism’s satirical billboard campaign during The Climate Games, received favourable attention from major media outlets. Breaking into the numerous advertising hoardings of official COP21 sponsor JCDecaux, activists replaced the posters of sponsors deemed “climate criminals” with spoofs, effectively “hacking the COP” to raise the profile of grass roots movements. Elsewhere, the meme-like popularity of videos documenting the pranks of Ensemble Zoologique de Libération de la Nature (who coincidentally lift the acronym of the Zapatistas, EZLN), suggests they are exemplar tricksters of The Games. Flash-mobbing the offices of corporate polluters dressed as a range of flora and fauna, EZLN littered these climate-controlled interiors with mountains of green waste while dancing to a soundtrack of Vivaldi’s Four Seasons concerti.

Indeed, notions of the carnivalesque, cathartic ritual and play are often raised in discussions of protest practices. Methods of “tactical frivolity” emerged among alter-globalisation movements in the 1990s and are most readily associated with groups such as the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army (CIRCA), who taunt and distract police during demonstrations (St John 2008). Recently the term has been claimed by the Berlin based art-activist collective Tools For Action (TFA), whose inflatable sculptures have appeared in street demonstrations around the world since 2010. TFA’s giant shiny silver inflatable cubes, often described as cobblestones or barricades, became a design icon when featured in the exhibition “Disobedient Objects” (2014) at London’s Victoria & Albert Museum. When tossed into a crowd, the cubes proved capable of transforming a tense protest situation into a “highly interactive and playful event” (Duarte 2014).
They can be used defensively to protect demonstrators from police batons and strategically to orchestrate a media spectacle. As an activists’ tool, the cubes emphasise the game-like aspects of recent protest culture, particularly when used in large multi-stage actions, where they are deployed in formation or choreographed to distract authorities, block passageways and direct the flow of traffic.

Some activists are critical of the “gamification” of recent civil disobedient actions, which they say have led protests to become akin to “activist tourism.” As social and economic theorists Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams state in their recent critique of “folk politics”: “This is politics transmuted into pastime – politics-as-drug-experience, perhaps – rather than anything capable of transforming society” (Srnicek and Williams 2015: 17).

Arguably, *The Climate Games* arose from the widespread disillusionment with intergovernmental processes after COP15 in Copenhagen, 2009 failed to produce an accord. Indeed, critics have noted that after more than twenty years of COP negotiations emissions have continued unabated and at an accelerated pace (Nelson 2016). The Paris Agreement announced at the conclusion of COP21 was hailed by its organisers as an unprecedented achievement as negotiators settled on a 2° C cap on global temperatures rising above pre-industrial levels. However, Kevin Anderson (2015), deputy director of the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research in the UK, has noted that current pledges put temperature rises at around 3.5° C and is sceptical of the agreement’s ability to achieve its aims unless speculative carbon capture technologies are successfully developed in the latter half of this century. Commentators such as Kate Aronoff (2015) claim that it has now become the task of social movements to hold world powers to their word, recalling the response of journalist and founder of the global climate campaigner 350.org, Bill McKibben, to the historic agreement: “Game on.”

McKibben has for some time urged people to simply “do the math” on the amounts of carbon dioxide presently in the atmosphere, the amount that could be released to stay within a 2° C temperature rise and the amount in known coal, oil and gas reserves (McKibben 2012). Current calculations indicate this would require an immediate stop to new coal and gas mines and a coordinated effort to swiftly shift to clean energy sources. Yet for fossil-fuel industries this is simply “unrealistic” as plans for the expansion of already existing reserves and the exploration for new deposits continue (McKibben 2016).
Srnicek and Williams (2015: 15) rightly point out that social movements conscious-raise, radicalise and remind people of their power, yet time and time again they fail to exercise that power and take power. The CAE (1996: 8) note, however, that the purpose of civil disobedience is not revolution, but rather reform and its strategy of “economic disruption and symbolic disturbance” is to make space for negotiation. What McKibben makes clear is that climate justice movements do indeed have an enemy, which is not the state per se, but the fossil-fuel industry, “a rogue industry, reckless like no other force on Earth” (2012). Yet, as many have pointed out, this is an industry that is often propped up by tax incentives and government spending (Monbiot 2016, Holmes 2015, Klein 2014), despite encouraging signs that global investments in renewables currently exceeds those in fossil fuels (Hamilton 2016). In order to limit global warming to the stated aims of the parties who signed the Paris Agreement, climate justice movements must disrupt and ultimately dismantle the influence and power of the fossil-fuel industry.

Notably, 350.org takes its name from the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, measured as parts per million (ppm), determined to be the limit for a safe climate. Current levels have surpassed 400 ppm and are predicted to rise rapidly (Kahn 2016). Thus, one might interpret the recent turn towards novelty in protest culture as the Lulz arising as a motivating factor among climate justice activists; to generate collective and infectious joy amidst the cynicism following decades of failed solutions (Demos 2015) and as an alternative to being “continually emo.”

A mass participation transmedia action framework

Following the November 13 terrorist attacks in Paris, a state of emergency was declared in France, effectively outlawing planned protests surrounding COP21 such as the Global Climate March. Activists have argued that the attacks gave grounds for authorities to intimidate, raid and put organisers under house arrest (Aronoff 2015b). These measures, enforced by militarised police, served to de-democratise the COP negotiations by preventing civil society groups from registering their demands and thus emphasised their lack of agency in decisions that would affect the entire planet (Demos 2015). Nevertheless, with a distributed “peer-to-peer” organising structure, The Climate Games were effective in defying these restrictions (Aronoff 2015b).

According to its organisers:
The Climate Games is a mass participation transmedia action framework which merges the street, disobedient bodies and the internet, creating a crowd-sourced cartography of creative resistance in real time and real space. (Labofii n.d.)

The Games brought together teams of autonomous activists to undertake actions that ranged from the absurd, the poetic, the militant and anything in between. To me this resonates with the CAE’s (1996: 23) proposal that in order to be effective in the age of information-capital, small independent cells of multi-specialist activists should work together rhizomatically, or to use The Games’ metaphor like mycelium, nodes of interconnected fungi (Hickey 2015). I also find it instructive that the EDT were comprised of two kinds of writers: theorists and coders. In August a Climate Camp and ActionLab took place in the Rhineland, and given the involvement of organisations such as the Tactical Technology Collective in The Climate Games and other social justice movements across Europe, I wonder if any of the ActionLab’s participants sought to develop electronic disobedience. Certainly, the notion of mass participation transmedia civil disobedience has the potential to generate new metaphors and concepts which could lead to new methods and tools.

Civil disobedience is premised on an idea that activists visibly break the law and risk imprisonment, dramatising an issue in full view of authorities and the media, in order to expose a greater injustice (Sauter 2014: 21). One could then argue that DDoS tools are legitimised in that they enable activists to register their dissent via technical means, despite regulations designed by their more powerful adversaries in industry and government to prevent them from doing so. Thus, it is imperative that such actions remain disruptive rather than conform to predictable social actions, such as an authorised street protest. Given the harsh penalties that those who undertake DDoS face and that activists using such means risk being labelled cyberterrorists, there is a need to develop more secure, sophisticated and arguably spectacular means of undertaking such actions. For example, earlier this year it was discovered that the notorious black hat hackers, Lizard Squad, launched a series of DDoS attacks by coercing a number of devices that are manufactured to be “internet ready” into their LizardStesser botnet, and not just personal computers (Bing 2016). Thus, it seems that all sorts of consumer appliances, toys and tools are available for commandeering into cyber-actions, potentially expanding the range and reach of “disobedient objects.”
To refer back to *Encyclopedia Dramatica*: “Lulz is engaged in by internet users who have witnessed one major economic/environmental/political disaster too many,” and although the term has expanded to encompass all forms of internet humour, its roots lie in the distinctive pleasures of pranking and laughing at the misfortune of one’s adversaries (Coleman 2014: 45-46). Such acts are divisive, they split public opinion and force a discussion about the issue at hand. Given the limited agency that civil-society groups and those at the frontline of climate change have in determining the planet’s future, it becomes necessary for movements to develop means of enduring; of living with disaster and cynicism and (re-)generating collective joy. As such, humour, novelty and play brings a much needed means of managing pessimism, fostering friendships, expanding networks and inventing new modes of disruption and disobedience. Arguably, the most effective strategy for defending nature is to do it for teh (*sic*) Lulz.

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