Chapter 11
Internet Past Tense:
Trolls, Sock-Puppets, and Good
Joes in the Sandbox Newsgroup

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ABSTRACT

From the time of privately hosted computer bulletin boards to the rise of social networking, USENET hosted a broad array of newsgroups that hobbyists enjoyed. At The Sandbox group for collectors of 1:6 scale GI Joe toys, members developed a set of conventions governing an online community without moderation, countered trolls, and established reputations for fairness among members using pseudonyms. In time, however, these conventions began to weaken as the hobby waned in popularity. Eventually, The Sandbox at USENET came to an end as a vital community, and a diaspora to Facebook and privately hosted, moderated forums followed. This chapter studies how the USENET community worked socially, how its language evolved, and its fate when what the author calls “the Old Internet” gave way to today’s array of social-networking and multimedia applications.

INTRODUCTION

Point a Web browser to the Sandbox < http://groups.google.com/group/alt.toys.gi-joe > to get a sense of the sort of unmoderated newsgroup that flourished between the development of ARPANET in the late 1960s and the gradual demise of such venues in today’s era of Social Media (Markoff, 2006). Be wary, as the first message when I last checked was off-topic, and, frankly, disgusting even by pornographic standards.

Such was what I’ve come to call “the Old Internet.” That Sandbox is a ghost town today, its chaotic energy having flowed to moderated groups, one part of Facebook, another a private forum called “The Trenches.” Yet in its newsgroup
heyday, Sandbox participants discussed GI Joe, other toys, and often wildly OT (off-topic) issues. Something like this would pop up on the screen:

Wally World has reduced prices on the latest wave of 40th. Got a repro medic helmet from Cots for the fig and also pre-ordered one of the second-wave 40th AM sets. While I was at it, I ordered KFG hands; can’t stand that stupid nosepicker --can’t hold any gear. Oh, yeah, I’m going to send my extra coffin boxes to Sherman who karma bombed me with some parts.

This article will look at what generated that energy, where it went, and how participants accrued influence and became leaders without ever, with a few exceptions, having met each other in the flesh. Participants in the discussion, whether leaders, lurkers, or losers, often employed arcane code and social conventions to follow an unending stream of conversation. One goal of this chapter will be to archive and present that ephemeral sociolect of a small group of enthusiasts.

BACKGROUND: OLD TOYS, OLD INTERNET

Like other surviving parts of the Old Internet, USENET’s The Sandbox newsgroup is a fossil of sorts. First, it always attracted a fossilized crowd: collectors of old toys, in particular, Hasbro’s GI Joes of the 1960s and 70s. We—and the author is one of that group—are not a demographic on the rise. Later incarnations of Hasbro’s action figure from the Reagan Era (think Cobra Commander) have their own online groups, and this chapter will focus on those collectors who formed a community around the original GI Joe, several re-issues of that toy by Hasbro, or similar military-or-adventure themed toys by other firms.

Academics are not immune to the American mania for collecting things. One professor I know owns and races British sports cars, some have incredible wine cellars, and many are ardent bibliophiles. Though I am owned by two antique vehicles (’68 Chevy C-10 pickup and ’70 El Camino), my passion for many years was old toys, specifically the 12” tall GI Joe action figures made in the 1960s and 70s. The Sandbox served, after the revival of interest in older GI Joe collectibles in the mid 90s, as the best meeting place online for hobbyists.

That sense of shared community has been true since the earliest days of networked computing. The history is complex, even though the Internet as we know it today seems like an inevitable progression from primitive technologies to a gradual networking of more advanced systems. In reality, its development actually proceeded in fits and starts. (Markoff, 2005) notes that despite pioneering work in networked communications by Douglas Englebart and several other pioneers affiliated with Stanford or MIT starting in about 1960, later the history of computing took another path:

When personal computing finally blossomed in Silicon Valley in the mid-seventies, it do so largely without the history and research that had gone before it. As a consequence, the personal-computer industry would be deformed for years, creating a world of isolated desktop boxes, in contrast to the communities of shared information that had been pioneered in the sixties and early seventies. (Markoff, 2005, p. 179)

This “deformed” history contributed to the ad-hoc system of bulletin-boards locally hosted, international networks such as Bitnet, and dial-up access to university systems by the late 1980s. America Online entered the market as a walled garden for cautious users before it was annexed by the larger Internet. What we may forget, in the New Internet’s mix of popular social applications, is how Markoff’s “communities of shared information” evolved in the Old Internet’s mélange of often-competing systems and protocols. In
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