

# Gaming the System: Manifesting Affinity and Resistance Through the Visual Play

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**Abstract:** We argue that Anonymous aspires to a condition of aesthetics without art, politics without the polis, and praxis without theory. It intervenes on the political, economic, and social domains and does so by remixing a coherent and evolving *visual affinity space*, often articulated through the imagery of video games. Put differently, the iconography of Anonymous does not seek to foster communities, but rather instantiate constantly shifting markers of affinity and participation through a particular *visual literacy*. We argue Anonymous provides a new mode of political self-portraiture, one in which there is a staging of the self that is, perhaps as any self-portrait might be, an aspirational image.

## Introduction

Anonymous is a leaderless, structureless, charterless internet-based grouping that has engaged in a string of disruptive demonstrations and Internet hacking attacks on organizations ranging from the Church of Scientology to major financial institutions. The group, if we can call it that, is noted for its theatricality, its irreverent sense of humor and its love of anarchic Internet culture, values made explicit here in this image taken in 2010 at an anti-scientology demonstration. The sign, as we see, reads “Don’t worry, we’re from the Internet” (Figure 1). However, this same photograph points to the emergence of a recognizable iconography that has proliferated in “real world” global protests. This evolving iconography is born out of the circulation of images drawn from sources as diverse as Hollywood films, Internet memes, or computer games. Through its engagement with this new iconography, Anonymous seeks to intervene in new ways on political, economic, and social domains. This iconography is the product of a new visual literacy, a new visual grammar of design and meaning making, (Kress, 2006) around which affinities, identities, and new knowledgeable practices gather dynamically. Put differently, we argue that the iconography of Anonymous does not simply foster the development of a static subcultural community, but rather instantiate constantly shifting markers of affinity, identity, and participation through the demonstration of that visual literacy.



**Figure 3: A physical Anonymous protest**

Since the New London Group manifesto (Cope et al., 2006), an increasing number of scholars have adopted the view that the “reading” and “writing” of new multimodal and multimedia representational systems constitute new forms of literacy. This scholarship in “multiliteracies” has begun to investigate

how representational forms from images (Kress, 2006) to computer game play (Squire, 2010) can be understood as literacies. Social groups can use these symbolic systems—sets of images, videos, and interactive media—to produce, share, and decode meanings. Recent work on affinity spaces has characterized these semiotic systems, these multiliteracy domains, as the glue that holds otherwise anonymous online social spaces together (Gee, 2006). What these studies reveal is that in online spaces these unique literacy domains and symbol systems become the primary means through which participants express their identity and affiliation with a given social group. Anonymous, in particular, utilizes a very distinctive genre of images to express identification and affiliation, chief among which are the specific images of the Guy Fawkes mask and the empty suit.

### **Political Protest, Performance and Image Production**

The extent to which the Guy Fawkes mask had become a symbol of disruption and protest was made clear in legal actions taken by the Spanish Government against Anonymous. On June 10, 2011, the Spanish National Police announced their triumphant arrest of three alleged leaders of Anonymous for hacking attacks against the cyberinfrastructure of Spain's Central Electoral Board, Spanish banks BBVA and Bankia, and the Sony Playstation Network among other institutions. Spanish police trumpeted the arrests in a large press conference (Figure 2), claiming that they had created a vacuum by unmasking and apprehending leaders in the worldwide Anonymous organization. As their primary evidence against the accused, police proudly presented Guy Fawkes masks that they had seized from the suspects' apartments, alongside images of IRC logs, digital recordings of the perpetrators' online chat communications.



**Figure 4: Spanish national police trumpet Anonymous arrests**

The Spanish national police's claims to have arrested the leaders of Anonymous proved dubious. On the same day as the press conference, anonops, a self-declared online press office for Anonymous, published an image of a red V with the caption "expect US", adopting the iconography of the graphic novel and film V for Vendetta. The following day, a large-scale distributed denial of service (DDOS) attack, called "#OpPolicia" by Anonymous, was launched against the Spanish government, shutting down the official national police site for several hours. In the weeks following this incident, cyberattacks in Spain continued to grow in number rather than dissipate. Retaliations against the arrests knocked out the websites of Spanish banks and telecommunications firms, while a number of video polemics on sites like Youtube denounced the corruption of the Spanish government, financial system, and law enforcement. Around the time as this press release, the following image was posted on several websites. Using the press conference photo, the image was manipulated (Figure 3), the officer's faces crudely removed and switched with the masks they originally held in hand. They were widely circulated on Internet blogs and discussion sites as humorous evidence of the police's inability to understand how Anonymous operates and how swiftly this headless entity could wreak its vengeance on official bodies.



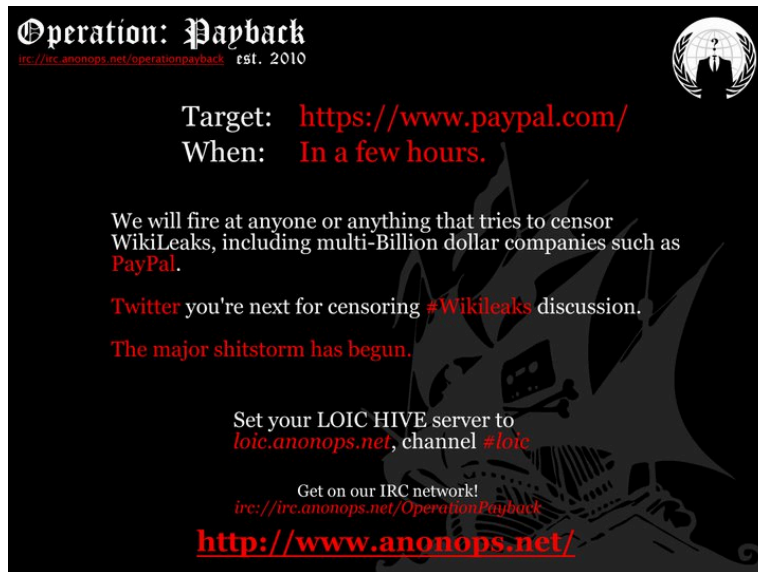
**Figure 5: Police press conference images manipulated**

### **Gaming and the Visual Literacy of the Paypal Raid**

Anonymous corrals a set of visual representations as a means gather up potential participants to constitute a new force to disturb the impassive surface of the status quo. Using often darkly humorous image has been key to the efficacy of Anonymous actions. In the absence of organization, membership or even community, viscerally resonant images mediate political praxis. These images are distributively authored by Anonymous to incite protest in the form of hacking, doxing, and pranking. But perhaps more significantly, Anonymous mobilizes this visual language in order to promote the use of participatory digital tools in political protest.

It should be noted that the manipulated image was released independently of the Anonops press release, that the identity of the author or authors of images or statements cannot be determined. And it is also notable that its production required little more than the most basic grasp of a program like Photoshop, or better yet Gimp, the open source image editor. This is not the product of several hours of considered, meticulous work but, rather was hastily executed in order to circulate the altered image as quickly as possible as a comic response. Timing's everything in a joke, and the humor of this image was immediately recognized. It was posted and reposted in blogs, message boards, and even Internet news sites within hours of the retaliatory hacks. The efficacy of playful imagery, the importance of engaging with the potential participant through humor is absolutely central role to Anonymous actions. In the absence of organization, membership, or even community, images mediate political praxis. Their "operations" are imagined, advertised, and coordinated through images, many of which use of simple graphic formats that can be easily rescaled and reworked without loss of resolution. Anonymous affiliated message boards offer advice about how best to manipulate images, often provide templates to facilitate the hijacking of existing genres of images like motivational or movie posters. These images often tap into fantasies of battling evil readily found in graphic novels and Hollywood action flicks.

What emerges is an anarchic, distributed and participatory pedagogy that teaches potential participants about the tools at their disposal. It does not end, however, with the production of what amount to propaganda posters. Far from it. The posters (Figure 4) are as instructional as they are promotional, and they often include crucial information to guide would-be participants in Anonymous to web sites or chat channels to learn the basics of hacking. The participatory and disruptive tools that Anonymous develops and distributes often give even novice computer users the ability to cause disorder and turbulence to Internet infrastructure. And just as the visual media of Anonymous tap into the heroic imagery of popular fiction, its tools for political action often leverage the embodied practice of playing a multiplayer computer game, as we see with this image derived from a *Team Fortress 2* poster (Figure 5).



**Figure 6: Instructional image for digital Anonymous protest**



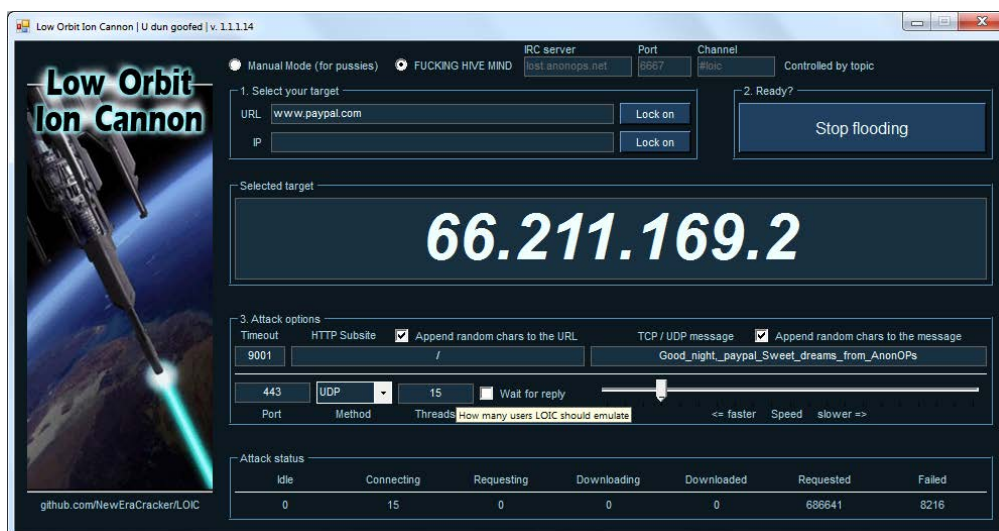
**Figure 7: Operation payback promotional image**

Take for example the case of Anonymous' Operation Payback, also called Operation Avenge Assange. In early December 2010, major financial corporations like Paypal, Mastercard, Visa, Bank of America, and PostFinance began what was tantamount to a financial blockade of the whistleblower organization Wikileaks. In the first week of December, these companies, one by one, announced that they would stop processing financial transactions involving Wikileaks, cutting off the non-profits foundations ability to accept donations that were its major source of funding. Outraged at what they called an attempt by major corporations to limit freedom of speech, Anonymous affiliates began circulating calls for action. On December the 8<sup>th</sup>, thousands of Internet users participated in an Anonymous-led distributed-denial-of-service attack (DDOS), flooding the servers of Visa and Mastercard, knocking their websites offline and slowing their payment systems.

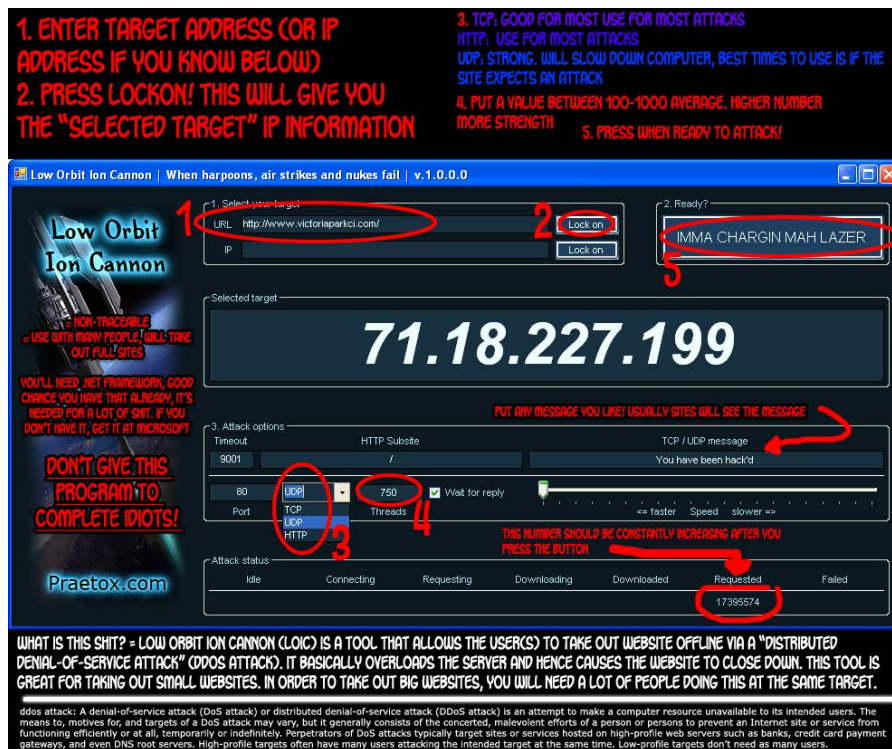
These attacks employed Anonymous-created software called the Low Orbit Ion Cannon (Figure X6), which enabled the coordination of large numbers of users' computers in a distributed-denial-of-service, or DDOS, hacking attack. A DDOS attack is an attempt to make an Internet-based site or



resource unavailable to computer users by preventing it from functioning properly. In most cases it involves pools of networked computers inundating a targeted site with false communications data protocol requests. As a rough metaphor you might imagine hundreds of people simultaneously calling your phone for hours or days at a time, making the phone line register as busy and preventing anyone who actually wants to call you from getting in touch with you. It has been argued that the distributed denial of service attack can be the digital equivalent of civil disobedience, an act distributed mass political defiance, a denial of the extant digital order. LOIC software made the steps required to have a computer voluntarily participate in a DDOS attack as easy as a click of a button in a computer game. The Anonymous poster with the caption “Low Orbit Ion Cannon: When Harpoons, Airstrikes, and Nukes Fail” hyperbolically announces the grand ambition of this tool, tongue in cheek. The interface design, and even the name of the software, was borrowed from the interfaces of computer games like *Command and Conquer 3*. The fire button reads “Imma Chargin Mah Lazer,” a reference to a popular meme from the anime *Dragonball Z*. This software was designed so that the user need not have a full grasp that his computer would be used to send out large amounts User Datagram Protocol (UDP) echo requests to certain Internet Protocol addresses in an effort to overload a server’s bandwidth. Instead it adopted the metaphor of a cannon in a video game, “shooting” projectiles at its target, participatory political action at the push of a button. And in case clicking the button was too difficult for some users, or if the interface was too confusing for the novice, Anonymous distributed instruction manuals detailing what exactly to how to engage with the interface (Figure 7).



**Figure 8: Low Orbit Ion Cannon (LOIC) Interface**



**Figure 9: Step by step instructions for LOIC operation**

And Anonymous' DDOS attack was quite different from the typical cyberattack in that it was voluntary. Characteristically DDOS attacks occur when hackers use a master computer to command botnets to attack a targeted server. Botnets are large groups of computers, often at large corporations or educational institutions that have been hijacked using malicious software. In the case of the attacks on Visa, Mastercard, and Paypal, however, Anonymous did not rely upon botnets or hacked computers at all. Instead, a new, customized version of the Low Orbit Ion Cannon software allowed users to link their computers together voluntarily, via Internet Relay Chat, in a "Hive Mind" mode that automatically coordinated attacks on the targeted Internet service. Some commentators remarked that it was the first instance of online civil disobedience, the digital equivalent of linking arms and sitting down in a doorway. These hacking tools distributed by Anonymous enabled anyone with a computer to participate in the disruption of social power structures, as they are articulated in digital space, through a kind of irreverent play. As serious as the consequences, as serious as the intent, the tools developed and the visual materials imagine their actions as part of a game, played with real life consequences (Figure 8). In important ways, these actions emerge as much out of a sense of collective injustice that provokes a series of actions. However serious the consequences, the design of the plot, the promotion and staging of the action, participation takes place in part for the laughs, or to take an internet neologism for laughing out loud, they're doing it for the Lulz.



**Figure 10: LOIC promotional imagery**

We bring attention to this particular tool, and to the visual promotional materials associated with it in part to show how elaborately Anonymous stages its actions. It takes the prankster impulse and transforms it through relatively simple technologies and software for use in projects of distributed digital disruption. Such pranks require technological masks, in this case, proxies to hide the identity of participants. But masking, more generally, plays a central role in Anonymous' activities more generally. In actual demonstrations the use of masks and wearing the suit enables role-playing, and the establishment of a peculiar kind of political theater.

### **The Mask & The Mob: Imagery as affinity space**

We'd like to argue that the use of the mask and the headless suit constitute props in a staging of self. We described this at the start of our lecture as modes of political self-portraiture.

The headless suit and the Guy Fawkes mask should be understood as part of what has come to be a shared marker of Anonymous whose efficacy is predicated on its use. Anyone can use these to become Anonymous. And as we pointed to at the start of the paper this is a transnational phenomenon. Anonymous, or at least individuals swathed in its costumes, have appeared in protests around the world. In the wake of the arrest of the Spanish youth allegedly perpetrating Anonymous attacks, demonstrations have taken hold of that country in the intervening months. In preparation for a call to action in October this year, Guy Fawkes masks quickly sold out.

We would like to close with this image of these young men dressed up in suits and ties, canes, and pinky rings, and the Guy Fawkes mask (Figure 1). The suits are cobbled together from stuff from the back of these young men's closets, suits they are probably not used to wearing on a regular basis, rumpled shirts not quite ironed out, collars hardly starched and their ties tied in knots unknown to the Windsors, half or full. But they wear the suit nonetheless to emulate the image of Anonymous as an entity comprised of many, whose identities cannot be wrest apart, whose participation in actions dissolve into thin air once the mask and costumes are removed. In this masquerade, protest and demonstration lay the stage for playing the part of the super hero, in the online DDOS attacks, a vigilante army battling corporate evil.

As we have argued over the course of this paper, Anonymous provides a new mode of political self-portraiture, one in which there is a staging of the self that is, perhaps as any self-portrait might be, an aspirational image. What we find in this photograph (Figure 1) is a group of young men emulating the images of the entity Anonymous online, responding to calls made on its behalf, promoted through posters anonymous individuals made, learning tactics this distributed entity what has come to teach.

### **Conclusion**

The iconography of Anonymous results from the nexus of a number of literacy practices, and represents a central means by which participants express their identification with the collective, and seek to garner the participation of others. These literacy practices are expressed in the production of

original digital images, the development of tools for disruptive protest, the appropriation of visual video game interfaces, and the remixing of imagery from popular media. These images result from the confluence of a number of different sociotechnical networks, as they circulate, frequently altered and detoured, from Hollywood films and major studio video games to image boards, chat channels, weblogs, and message boards (see Latour, 1987). The iconography itself is the result of the assemblage of a number of different texts, images, practices and discourses by participants in Anonymous. The software tools, design practices and aesthetic knowledge needed to undertake this remixing and reassemblage are provided in Anonymous-affiliating websites and forums, and taught in the group's chat channels.

The context in which the iconography is generated and distributed should not, however, overshadow the powerful response it engenders. The aesthetic quality of this imagery, and the way it calls forth potent feelings and actions, should not be lost in a discussion of the mechanisms of production and distribution (Leander & Frank, 2006). The aspirational imagery of Anonymous serves as a mass call to political action, one that seems to have very substantial resonance with those who respond. Research on the new literacies—on games, on online writing, on multimodality, on media production—often seems to ignore the way in which aesthetics are integral to the representational forms they investigate. Though the excitement this imagery provokes is undoubtedly bound up in its unique modes of production, its power lies in its affective capacity to engender a visceral and excited feeling of involvement and action, for better or worse. Anonymous reminds those studying digital literacies would do well to remember that feeling can be tied closely to meaning (see Lemke, 2010).

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