The Original Internet Abuse Story: 
Julian Dibbell 20 Years After ‘A Rape in Cyberspace’

A conversation with former journalist Julian Dibbell about his game-changing article and the internet 20 years later.

DALE EISINGER
08.07.16 12:01 AM ET

In 1993, a sexual assault rocked the online community known as Lambda MOO, a chat room and virtual world populated by early adopters to the internet. Using a virtual voodoo doll, a user known as “Mr. Bungle” forced simulated sex acts on another community member.

At the time, a young writer named Julian Dibbell stumbled on the story, chronicling the aftermath of the incident for the Village Voice in December, 1993. The piece was called “A Rape In Cyberspace,” and it set the stage for conversations about what digital communities are, how they function, and the limits of free speech online.

After a storied career as a freelance journalist writing about technology and the internet, Dibbel moved on to a law firm in Chicago. Today he focuses on technology transactions, cybersecurity, and data privacy issues, an interesting continuation of what he wrote about at the beginning of his career.

We spoke via telephone on the evolution of internet culture, in light of the high tide of identity politics and harassment online. He even offered some advice to the freelance journalist. Editor’s note: Interview has been edited for length and clarity.

“I’m going to say this to you,” he said about freelance writing. “And you’ll remember it someday: I don’t miss it all.”

Julian Dibbell: I started out my career as a music journalist and had recently started getting interested in this new phenomenon of the internet. To me it’s an extension of my
interest in DIY culture, democratic culture, and pop culture. I was just writing about a lot of the sub-cultural aspects of the internet: hackers, cryptogeeks, things like that. I stumbled into this MOO that was its own weird little subculture, with all kinds of interesting little cultural assumptions going on, many of which I wrote about in the article. I was a freelance boho journalist living in the East Village, working at the Village Voice, just starting to get my geek on.

Dale Eisinger: It’s quite a story to stumble upon.

Related in Tech

Even the story was kind of an accident. My girlfriend at the time lived in a different house. I kept trying to reach her and the phone [was] busy. I thought, “Oh, she must be online.” Then I went to look for her in Lambda MOO. She happened to be in the same room where they were having that meeting about what to do about Mr. Bungle. And that’s how it all befell.

What was your reaction to the Mr. Bungle situation at the time?

I was an outsider, just starting to think through a lot of the things Lambda MOO took for granted and that are familiar to a lot of us at this point. How do you deal with transgression in online communities? How do you deal with disruption in an online community, or “social media,” as we call it now?

The conversation around the incident kind of hit on all the points, the kind-of techno-libertarian approach to things. We could design around these social problems by creating tools for silencing what we’d call “trolls” now. Within the limits of that, and there are lots of them, the fact that this problem really doesn’t go away.

And then the whole issue of free speech getting wrapped up in that.

To me, that was the biggest transformation. It’s a little naive, but I did have a very black-and-white idea about free speech—a very “left-libertarian absolutism” about any kind of speech. “The only way to fight bad speech is with good speech,” kind of thing. But also built into that assumption was a kind-of “sticks and stones can break my bones but names can never hurt me,” immaturity. To talk to some of the people in the Mr.
Bungle voodoo doll attack and see how it affected them and how it intersected with their
genders, their sexualities, and aggravated some of those exclusions that people already
feel.
It was partly just the novelty of the space allowing you to think through a problem from
a new perspective. A problem of, is there really consequence to speech? In virtual and
digital environments, there is this fusion of word and deed. A computer program is like
a magic word. You say it and things happen.

What similarities do you see between those early days of the internet and
now? Has the online treatment of people gotten better or worse?
It’s kind of a plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose situation. People were so naive
and the interface was so clunky and it was such “Olden Thymes.” But the more you talk
it through, the more you realize so many of the social dynamics and problems that were
on display in that setting and story have not gone away, and, if anything, loom larger
than ever.
One thing that’s kind of lurking in the background of the story, and now is just a
constant dilemma in our online lives, is the problem of platform governance and
platform politics. The whole backstory to the voodoo doll incident was that there was a
conundrum. People were hanging out in a space that felt public, but was in fact a private
machine owned by a private corporation, administered by a small set of individuals.
[They were] extremely sympathetic to the fact this was a public space and community.
They bent over backwards to try and treat it like the public space they felt it was by
withdrawing from it as administrators involved in the social governance. And that was
what created this vacuum. The problem was, and remains: it’s very hard to brute-force
create an organic democracy in a space that’s completely someone else’s property. Part
of that is the way the internet has evolved. One of the leading-edge phenomena of the
early internet was email, which nobody owns. It’s not a private platform.

DE: A protocol.
Yes. And now more and more, the leading edge applications or the center of gravity are places or services or applications, whatever you call them, Facebook or Google, which are privately owned spaces which, nonetheless feel like civic spaces and increasingly do have enormous import for the health of civic spaces and the health of civic life. What do you do when that’s owned by somebody? So that is something that has not gone away, and only gets more complicated and weighty.

And then the whole trolling thing is what’s different now. One of the things that’s striking in retrospect is that it was kind-of a no brainer to say, “Well, Mr. Bungle is a sociopath. He’s just a guy who is out there following his own set of rules and that’s a problem because they allow him to do crappy things to people.” What’s emerged nowadays is that everyone knows that trolls aren’t loners. They have their own communities, they have their own cultures, they have their own weird set of ethics. They continue making life unpleasant for people. And that kind of online harassment continues to intersect with gender and sexuality and race in all kinds of unpleasant ways.

**Do you think there’s a difference between what Mr. Bungle did and a hate group, or a group of hateful people, going after a certain individual or class of individuals?**

Yeah, but it’s a very squishy difference with a lot of overlap between the two. I grant the people in troll cultures, like 4Chan, the premise that they’re not actually themselves racist, they’re just playing on the power of racist symbology to shock and upset people, and they find it amusing to watch people clutch their pearls and get upset about things. At a certain point it’s just like...

**What’s the difference?**

It’s not so much about how you feel about what you’re doing and how what you’re doing functions in society and the pernicious effect it has. On the other hand, I do have a certain amount of sympathy for the argument that there needs to be a space for appallingly playful language that plays with hurtful symbols, and potentially diffuses
them. But I definitely don’t think it’s any kind of “get-out-of-jail-free card” to say you did it “for the lulz,” and nothing else.

**When it’s directed inward it can be more like satire, and when it’s directed outward it’s more like harassment.**

That’s, again, one of the ways that the problem of free speech has changed over the last century or so, and especially in the last 20 years. Media has gotten much more intimate, right in the face of the people you’re interacting with or mocking with. And it’s hard to have that distance between the awful things people are saying and how you feel about it. Whereas in earlier times and under other media regimes, the great circulator of memes was the newspaper, say. Things were more distant. You would see something on a page and it would just sit there. Whereas now things are much more instant and reactionary. What do you think of that instant feedback that helps to drive the mob mentality? Take for example the recent *XOJane* piece about the woman who said she was glad about her distant friend who’d killed herself. There was such a huge backlash within a matter of hours.

I think you’ve nailed it. It’s the speed of the information more than the fact that people are awful or stupid.

**But they might also be awful and stupid.**

Or it unleashes awfulness and stupidity in ways that were not available before the internet.

**It’s almost like an instant validation when a mob gets together and says, “Oh, you’re right! You’re right! You’re right! This person is wrong!” And suddenly you’re united against a front whether the cause is appropriate or not.**

Yeah. It’s a great feeling to be right and have everybody else around you say you’re right and to be feeling power over someone you know for sure is wrong and bad. It’s regrettable in all kinds of ways. But I’m not sure how we put the brakes on that, other than the average reciprocity of advantage. Eventually, everyone is going to find
themselves, instead of being famous for 15 minutes, internet shamed for 15 minutes. And eventually people will go, “This really sucks to be on the other end of. Maybe we shouldn’t do it.” In the meanwhile, I don’t see what checks it.

When we first starting speaking you said that there were things, back when you wrote this piece, that we take for granted now. What are some of those things you were talking about?

The presence of trolls, for example. Whenever you try to deal with harmful, disruptive speech on the internet, there’s always going to be somebody trotting out free speech or misguided first amendment rights to say what they’re saying. Generally people are more and more sophisticated about the fact that it’s not an interruption of anybody’s free speech to try to cultivate a certain kind of discourse within a limited space. People get to say: this is my Facebook thread. I get to decide what’s in it. Nobody but people who really don’t get it protest anymore. People are a little more sophisticated about what it means to govern speech and govern your own speech, and to have collective understandings about what speech is okay and what isn’t.