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## THE HITCHHIKER'S GUIDE TO COMMUNITY: TERRITORIALITY, INTIMACY AND OWNERSHIP IN ONLINE SPACES

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*THE REVOLUTION WILL NOT BE TELE-TUBBIED.  
THE REVOLUTION WILL NOT BE PRE-EMPTIVELY MODERATED.  
THE REVOLUTION WILL NOT NEED A DISCLAIMER.  
THE R\*\*\*\*\*N WILL NOT BE HIDDEN BENEATH ASTERISKS.  
THE REVOLUTION WILL BE ANNOUNCED IN ALL LANGUAGES.  
YOU WILL BE RESPONSIBLE FOR COOKING THE REVOLUTION, BECAUSE IT  
WILL NOT BE PRE-DIGESTED FOR YOU.*

*VIVA ZAPHODA!*

*~ From the First Declaration of the Zaphodista Army of Cybernautic Liberation*

### Introduction: Settlers of the Virtual

One might be tempted to juxtapose the appropriation of internet space with the uses that are made of space in and under colonialist rule. But what are the parallels here, and what meanings might be at play in such a comparison? De Certeau makes a similar comparison in *The Practice of Everyday Life*:

Spanish colonization [of] indigenous Indian [*sic*] cultures was diverted from its intended aims by the use made of it: even when they were subjected, indeed even when they accepted their subjection, the Indians often used the laws, practices, and representations that were imposed on them by force or by fascination to ends other than those of their conquerors; they made something else out of them; they subverted them from within—not by rejecting them or transforming them (though that occurred as well), but by many different ways of using them in service of the rules, customs or convictions foreign to the colonization which they could not escape. (32)

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According to such a pattern, the appropriators of internet space, say, the corporate owners of a web-based Internet community, could be seen as the colonizers who are attempting to mould and shape the users of their websites and spaces, to make them notice certain things, buy others, exhibit certain behaviours, etc. The users of the sites and spaces would then be the colonized, a group that could be seen as having the possibility of resistance, to, as de Certeau would urge and identify, “remain other within [a] system which they assimilated and which assimilated them externally[; to divert] it without leaving it” (32).

All this might make for an interesting and provoking analysis, but, I think, an incomplete one. For the investors and companies that produce, manage, maintain and host websites are not colonial powers that have moved in and appropriated land to which they had no right. The politics of web spaces are often subtler and more nuanced. First, it is often the administrators of websites that go looking for external financial support to create and maintain an online presence, and not (only) power-hungry conglomerates that are mercilessly munching up anything smaller than them.<sup>1</sup> Nor is it always a simple case of a larger power sweeping down and diverting the course of a functioning community website, that would continue to exist regardless, to exploit its netizens<sup>2</sup> to create profit. Often without a corporate or commercial aspect many sites would simply cease to exist for lack of funds. As much as some may highlight the “easiness” of online community building and maintenance (e.g., Albert Borgmann and Darin Barney—see Barney (2004)), in reality it is a hard and ongoing process, and besides the physical resources of computers, webspace and a physical location to house them in, there is the labour cost of maintaining a complex online environment. Even with considerable volunteer workforces, often the financial demands of a sites’ maintenance are more than the resources immediately available.

Working with this take on the metaphor, one could alternatively see internet space as a settled space, designed and funded by certain individuals who have put an investment in that space (of both time and money) with a certain expectation of that space’s qualities and attributes. The response to any “citizens” who might demand different rights or a different understanding of what it means to occupy that space could then, justifiably, from this position, be: if you don’t like it, leave, or the slightly more poetic “vote with your feet.”

A more complex situation is what occurs when a space that already has a shared past, or history—a culture of its own—then becomes subject to determinations from outside and/or above, very often resulting in a situation of conflict. The complex task of building and maintaining the *infrastructure* of that space is often in conflict with the complex task of building and maintaining the *content or culture* of that space, or, if it is preferred, its nature as a specific place. In other words, internet spaces, and more specifically community sites, are the product of a complex of interacting forces, motivations, efforts and exigencies.

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<sup>1</sup> Though this happens too, as Microsoft’s landmark devouring of its competitor Hotmail can attest.

<sup>2</sup> Net citizens.

So where does this leave us? It seems we have two notions in conflict that seem to spin around a knot of questions concerning ownership. Who owns internet space, those who supply the infrastructure of a site, its material existence, the underlying code that enables it to be experienced; or those who supply its culture, its “placeness,” what makes it an experience to be contested in the first place? This is a complex issue, and this paper doesn’t contain any hard and fast solutions. What I do propose is to bring this issue into discussion, partially using the literature that has already explored the issue of internet community, from utopian (or heterotopian), and political economic, and theoretical perspectives, as well as through the lens of the on the ground micro-political debates within an internet-situated community. If we are looking to understand who is producing the space to which ownership is in question, we must first expand and explore what we mean by “production.” The method I am employing is to follow a specific website, *www.h2g2.com*, of which I am a member, through some of the trials, tribulations, appropriations, alterations, commercializations and finally transportations that this online community has gone through since its inception on April 28, 1999. I’m hoping that this longitudinal ethnographic grounding will help elucidate some of the more intricate power dynamics that I am trying to uncover, and to add subtlety to the current, and I think somewhat stifling, binary in the literature between “social” and “commercial” uses of the Internet.

### **A Note About Methodology**

This paper employs a longitudinal virtual ethnography (Hine, 2000; Silver, 2003) of the website and community surrounding The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy Online (*h2g2.com*), with three periods of engagement in 1999, 2004 and 2015 (years 1, 5 and 19 of the Guide). The paper uses discourse analysis in conjunction with grounded and participant observation, informal interviews and semi-structured themed discussion threads on site to unpack the issues that arose during each period and in conjunction with the website having three separate owners: company that originally created the site, the BBC, and most recently a new company run by one of the site’s original owners.

My participant observer position will be nuanced by access to various pools of publicly available information. Supplementing my status as a participant in many of the discussions I will mention, I am also referencing the collective depository of past fora that may include discussions I was not present for. In addition, I published an article<sup>3</sup> for the *h2g2post*, the community’s online weekly newspaper, about the governance history of the site, soliciting forum responses that could be a part of my research. Finally, in a popular discussion forum, I conducted informal online discussions with several members of the current *h2g2* community on their remembrances of key events and their current opinions on the state of the site and its community—both in 2005 and again in 2015. As such, my analysis takes the form of a multi-sited ethnography as described by George Marcus and Christine Hine and employed by David Silver in some of his work on the Blacksburg Electronic Village.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> For full text of this article, refer to Appendix A.

<sup>4</sup> For more information and examples of this methodology, see Silver (2003), and Hine “Communication, Community, Consumption: An Ethnographic Exploration of an Online City.” In Beth Kolko (ed.) *Virtual Publics: Policy and Community in an Electronic Age*.

## “What it is is up to us.”

This attitude that Harold Rheingold discusses as being central to the development of the online community the WELL<sup>5</sup> (43) was also a strong determinant of the electronic community *h2g2.com*. *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy (Earth Edition)*, or *h2g2* for short, grew out of the software company *The Digital Village’s* (TDV) attempts to grow a mobile wireless information service using the conjunction of WAP (Wireless Access Protocol) technology and the vision of such a system inherent to Douglas Adams’s *Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy Series*.<sup>6</sup> Adams, one of the co-founders of TDV, brought not only a visionary energy to the site but, as will be explored, a particular discourse-culture<sup>7</sup> that had been growing for decades around the reception of his writing. This peculiar conjunction allowed for unique politics to play out, as the discourse-culture around the fan community of *h2g2*, and that of the specific creative (and commercial) venture *h2g2* embodied eventually ended up butting heads on the site’s governance and uses the site was to be put too. Much more complex than binary “us versus them” narratives, where a commercial interest “corrupts” an online space devoted to some other goals or ideals, the case of *h2g2* plays out a politics where there are multiple actors with valid and ethical stakes in the proceedings. By exploring these multiple connections and ambiguities, as well as the political economic history of the site over the 26 years since its inception, I hope to explore the political intrigue of *h2g2* and unravel some of the meditations this case can proffer towards the often fraught issue of net governance.

## Settling the Virtual

Why study internet communities? There are various reasons, all of which have specific problematics, possibilities and corresponding discussants. Though all of these reasons bleed into each other, I am going to lump them into three categories for the sake of argument. The first is that of those who view the virtual or online community as an important step in the communications, social, and/or political history of the world. Authors and activists such as Harold Rheingold and John Perry Barlow wish to explore the Brave New World of CMC for the ways new cyberspatial spaces create new possibilities for communication—new extensions, as McLuhan might have put it, of what we are or could be. A second view, which might be called a political economic view, comprises authors who, as Wellman identifies, largely belong to the second wave of internet scholars (125). Looking at the “users and uses of the internet”, many authors have voiced concern over its rising commercialization. Authors such as Leslie Shade, Andrew Feenberg and Maria Bakardjieva warn that the possibilities for internet

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<sup>5</sup> Whole Earth ‘Electronic Link.

<sup>6</sup> *The Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy* is a Trilogy in 5 parts that first debuted as a Radio Drama on the BBC, and has since translated into every form from book to feature film. It centres around an electronic book called *The Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy*, which tells you everything you would ever want to know about anything. As such a device is in fact very close to what the internet (with the combination of WiFi and other wireless technology is, in fact, becoming) the synergy of this book’s global reception and the creation of the online guide is highly significant.

<sup>7</sup> By discourse-culture I refer to social cultures and subcultures that accrue around specific discourses and hold those discourses to be central features of their identity as a group (Rambukkana).

community are, and might increasingly be, severely limited by encroaching commercialism and the exigencies of big business. A final significant subset within the discourse of virtual community is an ongoing conversation about the possibility of community in the realm of the virtual. As largely a response or corrective to figures such as Rheingold, this occasionally vehement field of discourse contains powerful insights from figures such as Darin Barney, Albert Borgmann and Hubert Dreyfus that can help us shape questions about what “community” can mean to us and why we find it important to discuss online interactions in such terms.<sup>8</sup>

## **Mythmakers and Cyberlibertarians: The Enthusiasts**

In *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*, Harold Rheingold introduced to the world the concept of the “virtual community”:

The idea of a community accessible only via my computer screen sounded cold to me at first, but I learned quickly that people can feel passionately about email and computer conferences. I’ve become one of them. I care about these people I met through my computer, and I care deeply about the future of this medium that enables us to assemble. (1)

This quote situates much of Rheingold’s approach to virtual communities. That people can come to feel passionately about others they have met only virtually points to the significance of this new medium. While not a replacement for other forms of sociality, it is, for Rheingold (and many of the same mind), an additional form of actual sociality. His largely personal narrative unfolds his history of personally vibrant encounters over the net, from the ongoing emotional support in the parenting conference on the WELL (18), to the RL<sup>9</sup> actions of concerned online friends who raised funds to help a companion who fell ill while on vacation (28), to the virtual and then actual suicide of WELLite Blair Newman (32). The other key component of this quote is that the nature and future of the medium in which these people were able to form these strong bonds is highly significant to them. Far from being a technological determinist (though sometimes accused of such), Rheingold realizes the possibilities that *the medium* of the virtual community can enable, and accordingly is invested in the ongoing exploration of technological change: “Technology doesn’t have to dictate the way our social relations change, but we can only influence change if we understand how people use technologies” (Revised Ed. 346). Again, this points to his dominant conception of virtual communities; they are a tool that people can use to promote education, communication, and democracy, but not a guarantor of any of the above. Focusing our attention on them, and using positive frames like “virtual community” as opposed to, say, “virtual mall” can performatively influence the ways people inhabit those spaces.

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<sup>8</sup> It is important to note that there are other significant fields in the discourse of virtual community such as the one in media and psychological circles around net-addiction and the one in business circles around the ways that internet communities can be used by businesses to create/expand profits, but I will not focus on these directly. For further discussion of these (and other) discursive fields around virtual communities see Harold Rheingold’s chapter “Rethinking Virtual Communities” in the Revised Edition of *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*.

<sup>9</sup> Real Life.

Another pioneer of the early internet age was John Perry Barlow who, in “The Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace” declared the following (oft quoted and oft derided) statement:

Governments of the Industrial World, you weary giants of flesh and steel, I come from Cyberspace, the new home of the Mind. On behalf of the future, I ask you of the past to leave us alone. You are not welcome among us. You have no sovereignty where we gather.

Barlow’s position starts off with a radical proposition: that within cyberspace, minds can find a place to gather, to find a home. More forceful in his claims than Rheingold, Barlow seems to see this new space as highly transformative. Although Rheingold, following the early work of Sherry Turkle, does see the addition of a virtual social (and virtual subjective) as part of an ongoing (and eternal) transformation in “what it means to be human” (Revised Ed. 353), Barlow stakes a claim to cyberspace and cyberspatial relations as imminently revolutionary. The prominence of this sort of claim—to an already-here, inviolate and fundamentally different “home of the Mind”—echoes other, similar manifestos. Esther Dyson, George Gilder, George Keyworth, and Alvin Toffler of the Progress and Freedom Foundation (a prominent US lobby group), preface their document of Internet emancipation, “Cyberspace and the American Dream: A Magna Carta for the Knowledge Age,” with the following words:

The central event of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is the overthrow of matter. In technology, economics, and the politics of nations, wealth—in the form of physical resources—has been losing value and significance. The powers of the mind are everywhere ascendant over the brute force of things.

And again, prominent columnist for *Wired* and founder of MIT’s Media Lab, Nicholas Negroponte urged us all to “be digital,” to shrug off our archaic, heavy, determined atomic bodies and invest in weightless, free moving digital selves: to focus our time and energy where intelligence lived and circulated in a “[computing that was] not about computers any more [...] but about living” (6).

As hyperbolic as some of these claims no doubt appear, this effervescent excitement in experiencing the virtual social is understandable. These various mythmakers, as Vincent Mosco comes to call them far after the fact (17), were caught in the throes of experiencing interpersonal communication, and in fact subjectivity, in a completely new realm. The subjective experience of such a radical form of newness has always been prone to mythmaking with every new communication technology, as Mosco points out in *The Digital Sublime* (117), but perhaps it is because virtual community building was such a unique experience that the mythmaking was redoubled. For the digital realm was not only an extension of communication, but also of subjectivity, and also of sociality, and also of life-organization, and also of artistic production, etc., *ad infinitum*. Such a redoubling or extension of every conceivable thing in the world (or so it might seem) would certainly mark encroaching upon the digital, if not as a wholesale transformation of the world as we know it, then certainly of the *chance or possibility* of such a transformation. But the question remained, how did/do these radical potentials bear out in practice?

## **Who Owns This Space? The Political Economy Perspective**

“Does the Internet contain insuperable obstacles to community, or is it a matter of user initiatives and design? We believe the latter position is correct” (Feenberg and Bakardjieva 14). In the introductory chapter of *Community in the Digital Age: Philosophy and Practice*, Andrew Feenberg and Maria Bakardjieva pose this very important question. By framing virtual community as possible, they distance themselves from the perspective of impossibility that will be discussed in the next section, but that does not mean they are overly enthusiastic either. The more substantial question, from the perspective of many observing the progress of community sites on the internet becomes: As the possibility of community is a matter of design, will not the pressures of profit making, economic growth and top-down management then influence site design, limiting the ability for user initiatives to properly develop or maintain virtual communities? This is the question that is asked by many using political economic perspectives, and the answers are not optimistic.

In “Gender and the Commodification of Community: Women.com and gURL.com,” Leslie Shade traces out the erosion and downfall into consumerism of two feminist websites. One of these is Women.com, which started out in pre-web days as the dial-up service Women’s WIRE,<sup>10</sup> a 90 percent women, activist-leaning site that “emphasized current news and affairs and encouraged political activism. Subscribers were expected to participate and interact on diverse conferences to take a role in building community content” (145). As an all purpose tool by women and for women, the site showed much potential as a thriving and (especially within the early male-dominated internet) important social network. However, a series of mergers which brought it to the web as Women.com, corporate sponsorships with companies such as Levis, and the increased visibility of television advertising, thrust the now increasingly coded site into the public (and corporate) eye (146). As a thriving internet community, it was seen as able to “target the ‘elusive’ female market” (146). After a brief period of high profitability when the IPO for the company swelled its share price during the infamous dotcom bubble, Women.com merged with its competitor iVillage due to the exigencies of trying to make a profit: there just wasn’t enough of that particular niche-market to go around (147). And thus was the slow erosion of the specificity of Women’s WIRE as a type of community—user-focused, feminist and activist leaning—lost in the dilution of content inherent in it becoming Women.com and then the iVillage version of Women.com which now more closely resembles (both in look and content) the women’s magazines with which it is partnered: “Under the ownership of iVillage, Women.com has certainly shifted gears, going from intelligent women’s commentary and oftentimes feminist content to a content slate concentrating on “gossip, sex & style” (148).

Though Shade explores a further poignant example of community downsliding into commercialism, this one example can serve for all. Though positive community may indeed be possible, when such communities are put on a corporate, or commercial, footing they will then be prey to the vicissitudes and priorities of the market, trends, profitability, and the top-down decision making of the owners, or more often, the owners’ corporate partners.

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<sup>10</sup> Worldwide Information Resource & Exchange.

Though Feenberg and Bakardjieva also identify this problematic trend in the actual operations of many internet community sites, they are a little more optimistic. They identify that “community-building groupware is proliferating in the context of different structures of ownership and control” (23). They propose that “research should focus [...] on how to design community-friendly networks” (4), how to make sure that the rising tide of consumerism and commodification, which does not necessarily have to preclude the existence of community, is not eclipsed by the powerful trends Shade describes.

### **The Ephemeral Table: The “Community” Debate**

But there are those for whom even the possibility of community in virtual space is an oxymoron. Far from targeting the pressures of profit-driven design and management, they see the cyberspace itself as the main hindrance to developing community.

In “The Vanishing Table, Or Community in a World That Is No World,” Darin Barney theorizes the impossibility of virtual communities. Based on the work of Albert Borgmann, Barney posits that “the material basis of community is compromised by the dissolution of the common world of things” (42). He uses the example of table as a “thing” that is the prerequisite for all real community action and that, lacking such concrete things around which one can linger, any community we experience is merely commodity, the false consciousness of capitalism applied in the digital realm (32). Though his argument for requiring focal “objects” to sustain community is well taken, in that in order for a community to thrive it must coalesce around practices roughly organized around the “things” in a person’s life (43), he is somewhat essentialist about what can come to count as a thing. *Things* are important in Barney’s conception because they *matter*. In that virtual objects and spaces can come to “matter” to the people that care for them, they can become *the matter* of a relationship or community. And, using Barney’s logic, in that they can then be the focal points of practices, they become part of the world. (And this is, I think, the first insight I ever had about the virtual world, nearly 20 years ago as I explored various virtual communities spread throughout the newly flourishing world wide web: the virtual world *is* the real world, in every important respect.) Online interaction is not “virtual interaction”, just as the people you meet online are not “virtual people,” they are real people communicating in a different modality—just as cyberspace is not a separate space, but a modality of interaction that is simply part of the world we now live in (Baym XX). Where Barney’s logic doesn’t hold is in how he fails to attribute agency to people who feel they are part of a genuine community. It may well be that the members of that community are also in some way commodified, but that, as problematic as it is, does not make their experience of community a false consciousness.

Another perspective in this debate is that of Hubert Dreyfus who, in “Nihilism on the Information Highway: Anonymity versus Commitment in the Present Age,” argues that “[o]n the Internet, commitments are at best virtual commitments” (74). He posits that the conjunction of a current nihilistic Western society and digital communication technology formulates the conditions that promote “ubiquitous commentators who deliberately detach themselves from the local practices out of which specific issues grow and in terms of which these issues must be resolved through some sort of committed action

(71). In short, he argues that the anonymous and detached nature of the internet undermines the possibility of virtual community:

[T]he Internet, like the Public Sphere and the Press, does not *prohibit* unconditional commitments, in the end it *undermines* them. Like a simulator, the Net manages to capture everything but the risk. Our imaginations can be drawn in, as they are in playing games or watching movies, and no doubt, if we are sufficiently involved to feel as if we are taking risks, such simulations can help us acquire skills. But insofar as games work by temporarily capturing our imaginations in limited domains, they cannot simulate serious commitments in the real world. Imagined commitments hold us only when our imaginations are captivated by the simulations before our ears and eyes. And that is what computer games and the Net offer us. But the risks are imaginary and have no long-term consequences. (78)

This conclusion is worth discussing because it contains an oft-utilized form of misleading argumentation. Upon making an analogy between virtual communities and videogames, films and the like, he then draws conclusions in relation to such items *as if* they were factual traits of virtual communities. In drawing this over-strong connection, he is begging the question, presenting his argument as if it were evidence. The people that one meets via virtual communities do not cease to exist as soon as our imaginations are no longer “captivated by the simulations before our ears and eyes,” just as an interlocutor over the phone does not wink out of existence when we end a phone conversation. Just because internet technology is ephemeral and often relatively anonymous, does not mean that, as Dreyfus contends, “[o]n the Internet, commitments are at best virtual commitments” (74). Clearly, this is the limit case and does not define the entire range of possible online interactions. The notion of an ideal community space, be it on the internet, or in the actual public sphere of human interaction, is without a doubt merely a romantic notion.

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Rheingold is the first to warn us that we must “avoid romanticizing the notion of community” (Revised Ed. 361), even going so far as to state that he preferred Barry Wellman’s terminology and that if he had encountered him earlier he “could have saved us all a decade of debate by calling them ‘online social networks’ instead of ‘virtual communities’” (Revised 359). But Rheingold is perhaps too hard on the discourse that has grown around his controversial terminology. The arguments around the nature and possibilities of community in the virtual realm, though they may sometimes seem endless, baseless or interminable, actually give us a rich and variegated field of possible approaches and problematics in our ongoing encounter and engagement with virtual sociality. It is with these various insights that I will now approach the specific case of h2g2.

## **h2g2.com**

The site was conceived as open-source encyclopedia and guidebook. The basic premise was, and is, that people all over the globe could write about what they knew, from politics and philosophy, to cold remedies and hangover cures, to what pubs were good in their home towns. All this information would then be collected into one source,

an online guidebook that could be accessed from anywhere as long as you had a smartphone, pda or other mobile internet-enabled device. This was all well and good, until the occupants of the site realized they could use the site's software for more than simply creating articles and commenting upon them. The text-editors used for entering entries were also used to define virtual pubs, houses, churches, clubs, forests, beaches: a whole virtual world, with the response fora for the articles becoming conversation threads. This community aspect of the site became, in some respects and to some users, the dominant one, mainly due to how many already net-savvy technophilic *Hitchhiker's* fans found that this was an excellent place to move in.

The reaction to the homesteaders was not a negative one however, even when the traffic on the conversation forums necessitated the hiring of a Community Editor to manage that side of things, and the creation of new software features to cope with the demands of the community life the Guide had unexpectedly garnered. However, when it appeared that many of the homesteaders were not really interested in writing articles as well, the owners of the site faced some serious decisions. Unlike other sites that require a membership fee (such as The WELL and Women.com) where, as Rheingold points out, the main economic activity is selling users to each other (28), the economic plan of the Guide could be seen as "selling users to third-party users"—and no-one would want to buy an information guide that mostly consisted of other people chatting. The editors of the Guide eventually put out a request that those who occupy the Guide as homestead also use it to write articles.

It is perhaps easy to take the side of the homesteaders wanting to defend their cultural space against encroaching commercial interests, but this is hardly a simple matter of appropriation. The *h2g2* community and site was being provided free of charge to a group of users who chose to use it. Many felt that if people were not there to create articles and help with the larger creative vision of the Guide they should go and find another virtual community to inhabit. Others felt that they had a right to this space, a right to exercise creative expression in more ways than solely those laid down by the site's editors. This vision most likely came from the fact that the majority of *h2g2's* Researchers were already fans of Douglas Adams's work, and as such were already a *de facto* community and did not feel the need to organize as Researchers to form a community of interest (Shade, pers. comm.). These issues came most sharply to bear after the site changed to reflect a more Guide-centred (versus community-centred) look.

## **h2g2.Ltd**

When *h2g2ers*<sup>11</sup> logged in on July 25th, 2000, they found themselves faced with a very different-looking site. In addition to major design changes (including new threaded viewing schemes that increased navigability), many people were distressed to find the "My Homepage" button replaced by a "My Page" button; the community and *h2g2post* links missing from the front page; banner ads; corporate advertisers listed on the main page; and the occasional Amazon.com link in key articles and fora. Though many of the changes were accepted without question, some raised such complaint that they were altered (e.g., the "My Page" button was changed to "My Space" to reflect a slight

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<sup>11</sup> This is pronounced "hootooers" by common site parlance.

nuancing of attitude with respect to just what the User pages were for). But for some, these sweeping changes were the last straw.

One particularly vociferous user named Michael Kershaw took the editors to task in a series of private emails, an act which, once it made its way onto the public fora, proved a key moment in *h2g2*'s community discourse. The following extended quotation from his initial post outlines the main substance of his complaints:

It has worried me for a long time about the literally changing face of H2G2, it seems to me the values of independence it once prided itself on, or at least promoted, have increasingly eroded into increasing corporatisation [*sic*].

This is not fundamentally wrong, but the editors have been recalcitrant in making people aware of the fundamental change, and have not attempted to update site policies in recognition of this change.

The following points I have tried to separate out to clarify my concerns.

1. Advertising – The mainpage now has a number of 'partners' & advertising banners of a commercial nature, plus some guide entries have external links to corporate websites i.e. the edited entry on Peter Gabriel

\* This opens up a myriad of concerns over the editorial process turning what was essentially a non-corporate site into the recently named H2G2.Ltd.

\* From the early days the position maintained by Douglas Adams and the staff of H2G2 was that this was a collective exercise in developing the Earth equivalent of the fictional Guide. It's only 'advertising' was for non-corporate entities such as Amnesty International & Diane Fossey Gorilla Fund.

\* Given that now they are in 'partnership' with large corporate entities existing in complimentary fields, this does lead to the situation where editorial policy can be subverted or indeed lead by these ties.

[...]

2. Income Streams/Copyright – The creation of a number of phone 'partners', and the establishment of cut down version of the guide for WAP technology.

\* As I have raised above the guide origins were primarily established as a partnership arrangement whereby the clients provided their copyrighted material for free and the guide maintained the greater whole for the benefit of all.

\* I contend with the development of the partnership arrangements with the phone companies that H2G2 either gets a retainer for leasing/and or preferential treatment in lieu of the Hitch-Hiker Guide content for WAP technology. As such, the terms of agreement of the guide as they stand, contributors are being taken advantage of.

\* If this is the case, perhaps some form of payment or incentive scheme in mechanise [sic] is appropriate for the endeavours [sic] of those whom submit entries to acknowledge their input. Also, if this is the case the sites [sic] copyright statement needs to be updated to that of professional corporate entity, rather than the vagaries of the current policy.

[...]

3. Mainpage Agenda – In recent times the mainpage has undergone an overhaul to include such categories as ‘Reading the Guide’, Talking About The Guide’ & Contributions to the Guide’.

\* The Mainpage is now solely the agenda of the editors. Before, the feature Peta’s Pecks/ World of H2G2 used to be present, allowing for readers to submit their pages & ideas. They have stated there is an opportunity for interaction by the readers, but surely some defined area set aside for reader pages is merely an act of courtesy.

\* I consider this is a fundamental change of policy. I am of the opinion that the editors have sort [sic] to regain control over site activities, by removing anything ‘fun’ or frivolous that the readership has to offer. They are seeking to ‘naturalise’ [sic] guide entries as the only form of reader interaction.

[...]

\* This activity may indeed be related to the revenue streams as generated by WAP technology above i.e. that by doing so, they insure themselves of having a better product to offer to potential clients

4. Editors/Friends – The editors consider themselves friends.

\* The editors in my communications have at times stressed that they are friends and hinted at why don’t we all just get along. Infact [sic], this may indeed be the case, you may be friends. This however is not strictly true in relation to site activities.

\* Despite the two community editors being drawn from the researchers numbers they are now ostensibly accountable to the sites policy and the business ties they have sort [sic]. Indeed, I am sure they are willing and able to help you out in most situations, but only if it doesn’t go against the demands of H2G2.Ltd and its attendant interests.

\* Admittedly, this had grown out of the culture of H2G2 essentially being free of corporate control, but now that it is a fundamentally a corporate entity, this is founded in pure myth, so using such a term as ‘friends’ in such a way is ‘emotive’ and wrong.

Conclusion

\* I would like to say that despite some of the mindboggling [sic] accusations thrown in my general direction over the course of perusing my line of enquiry, I bear no malice for the unfounded abuse I have received. I know that there are a lot of e-commerce sites which are now facing some harsh realities since the worlds stockmarkets decided to place far more realistic evaluations on their businesses.

\* Indeed, many of the above changes made might very well have little to do with the editors such as corporate deals, but it fundamentally doesn't make them any less accountable when they continue to operate as if nothing has changed.  
(Kershaw)

The most significant part of this moment in the Guide's discourse is not that someone spoke up against the increasing corporatization of the site, but that the reaction to Kershaw's post was largely, though not wholly, negative. Many people felt that he was over-reacting, and that they could easily deal with few banner ads, as they had learned to ignore them elsewhere on the internet. They did not feel that they were being taken advantage of, and were grateful that the site existed, largely (to their minds) for their benefit. Perhaps most significantly, they felt that the non-exclusive copyright they signed when joining the site was a fair compromise for being able to write for, and be associated with, something they loved. One particularly bombastic young Researcher<sup>12</sup> responded:

Why did we take off Peta's Picks and other related miscellany from the main page? because of the idea of WRITING THE GUIDE was being .. well missed. Many people were just using this as their homepage .. not writing a thing, making pubs and beaches and whathaveyou (not that Im deriding any of these places, I love them -- but the ratio of new 'them' to new Guide entries was beginning to shift the whole balance of the Guide) .. it was just a shift back to the grassroots of the Guide is all. And the World of H2G2 is still very accesable .. its not like newbies arent pointed to it as soon as they get here. Its just that the FIRST thing they see is the articles. Good. [sic] (Beeblefish, Post 6)

And like on so many other sites a prolonged flame war was begun.

In response to both sides of this argument, one particularly perspicacious user nicknamed fragilis commented that it is the community aspect that keeps many who *were* interested in the article writing aspect attached to the site. They stay for the community, and write for the Guide, and therefore those who worked solely on the peripheral production of cultural and community content were, in fact, contributing an essential social aspect that maintained the Guide:

If we go back to the genesis behind h2g2's creation, it seems self-obvious that Guide Entries should be the primary goal. After all, this is what the site was created for - to house Edited Guide entries. Everything else has been a string of happy additions to this format, many of which came from the researchers rather than the paid staffers.

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<sup>12</sup> That is, me.

Some researchers prefer the happy additions to the actual Edited Guide. They may not even contribute to the Edited Guide. Nevertheless, such "freeloaders" do support the minds and imaginations of h2g2's regular writers. Indeed, community regulars and prolific writers are often the same. I can't think of a single case in which a member of h2g2 does not benefit the Edited Guide directly, or indirectly by encouraging writers and their attachment to the site.

But there is another reason why entry writing must be important for the Guide. The Edited entries are its primary content, and they are what originally bring most people to the site. If you removed the Edited Guide entries, the regulars would continue to return to h2g2 but newcomers would be rare and by referral only.

And there is something else as well. The Edited Guide is a resource that can be put into other formats to make profit. You can not put the Forum and Firkin, the Aroma Cafe, and the Bruce Memorial in a book and make money with them, but you can do so with many Edited Guide entries. This is surely not lost on the paid staffers.

While I understand the reasoning behind the priority, I don't see how this priority negates any of the activities now going on at h2g2. Let's use the Forum and Firkin as an example. The Forum and Firkin is not part of the Edited Guide, and it never will be. However, it does entertain researchers during the long wait between writing their entry and waiting for it to be approved. In many cases, researchers would permanently leave h2g2 if they were not entertained. Therefore, in my mind, h2g2 should welcome the Forum and Firkin's role in keeping good writers attached to the site. (Post 32)

fragilis's reaction did much to mediate this particular flame war, but also helped relax the antipathy towards those *h2g2* members who devoted all of their time to the community aspects of the site's production and development. It also restates the position of many site members: that they were okay that the site might turn a profit due in part to their volunteer immaterial labour (Lazzarato). The ironic turn, however, that ended up taking almost everyone by surprise was that in the final analysis it was community, and not profit, that ended up being the bottom line after all.

### **[bbc.co.uk/dna/h2g2](http://bbc.co.uk/dna/h2g2)**

After a brief period in which much of the Guide was speckled with Amazon.com links in a bid to increase site profitability (a move which led many of us to believe that site was suffering financial difficulty) we were blown away by the sudden announcement that *h2g2* had been bought by the BBC in February 2001. BBCi, the British Broadcasting Corporation's online component, was overwhelmed by the demands of managing what was by that time becoming a set of fairly thriving online communities. They needed someone to manage the community aspect of their sites. As such, the community frameworks and management tools developed by the *h2g2* team ended up being the most economically valuable aspect of their site. The community frameworks, more than likely, saved the site from the dotcom crash and allowed the Guide to continue its work.

The BBC move was not all positive, however. In addition to the ads all the user provided pictures had disappeared too, along with most of the old entries and threads which were now “hidden pending moderation.” The BBCi website had somewhat stricter Terms of Service than the original *h2g2*. As a site for all ages, the Guide was now subject to increased moderation, a language restriction barring offensive content, limitations in terms of discussing sexual content, as well as other restrictions such as having to contribute only in English (British Broadcasting Corporation 3). These restrictions led to the formation of a radical front. The Zaphodista movement, a widespread movement within *h2g2* that takes the metaphor of colonial rule very seriously, responded to the BBC merger with a manifesto that bears a strong resemblance to J. P. Barlow’s “Declaration of Independence” in both its cyberlibertarian perspective, style, and tone. Unlike Barlow, however, the Zaphodista movement (despite its rather hyperbolic citation of the Zapatista movement in Chiapas, Mexico), was focused in its rhetoric and applied specific pressure on its various demands: less stringent moderation, a loosening of vulgarity prohibitions, non-English language support, fewer disclaimers, and restoring the ability to have outside links.<sup>13</sup> The site managers eventually worked their way around the majority of these issues by switching to a system whereby only threads flagged as offensive by community members would be moderated, restoring outside links, and allowing some non-English spaces on the guide. Though not perfect (for example, many guide members still bemoan the loss of being able to link to pictures) many feel the move to the BBC was, in fact, an addition to the guide experience. Besides being able to cross-link to all other BBCi/DNA<sup>14</sup> communities, the move to the BBC meant an end to banner ads, corporate partners, and Amazon.com links, and seemed to have guaranteed the perpetual survival of the Guide project, as well as the creation of other, similar, projects such as *The Book of the Future*, another BBC online community dedicated to the democratic, collaborative creation of a book. It also presented an intriguing conjunction: as the BBC is a public corporation, owned and operated by the British government and mostly funded by a licensing fee paid by all British citizens, the merger invites the question of whether or not having a say in *h2g2* governance should, at least to British citizens, be a democratic right.

### **Not Panicking Ltd.**

The most recent change in ownership to what was by then a well-established online community was also met by complex politics balancing the need for security with wanting to reclaim the site’s original vision. In 2011, 10 years after the Guide moved to BBC control, it changed ownership once again, this time to a company titled Not Panicking Ltd., a company partially owned and run by Robbie Stamp, one of the founding members of the Guide from its Digital Village days. While the site persists, it seems to be approaching what Jenny Korn calls a state of stasis (Korn 133) where

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<sup>13</sup> The Zaphodista demands are included in full detail as Appendix B.

<sup>14</sup> DNA is the community hosting system for BBCi which, at time of research for this section, comprised nine communities including a community devoted to creating a democratically created book called *Book of the Future*; *collective*, a community devoted to exchanging views on film and culture; iCan!, an community activism site; a parenting site called *Parents Music Room*; a World War II site called *WW2*; a writer’s collective called *Get Writing*; a spiritualism and holistic healing site called *360*; and the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* cult site *Talk Buffy*. The site is named in honour of Douglas Noel Adams, which shows just how much the BBC merger effected the BBC as well as *h2g2*.

newer content is increasingly rare and participation drops off. Korn argues that such factors might be seen not as the failure of online communities or publics, but rather of such assemblages coming to a point of fruition. While this change reversed some of the compromises needed during the BBC days (such as the restriction on sexuality-themed articles) banner ads returned to the site and its users encountered other issues, such as periodic outages. While not as populated and busy as in an earlier period, the Guide, persists, both in its article writing and community modes, something that is notable given its creation at such an early period in digital social life.

### **Community Perspectives: Revisited**

Returning to our myriad perspectives on virtual community, it is perhaps appropriate to inquire what each of these perspectives might, in turn, have to say about the specific experience of *h2g2*.

Barney and Dreyfus might contend that *h2g2* is not an example of a true community. The fact that there was considerable conflict between and among various members and factions of the site might be proof positive that there is no unity in cyberspace. Despite noting this somewhat essentialist formulation of what “true community” might entail, it is also worth pointing out that the virtual spaces that users collaboratively created (both among themselves and often collaboratively with *h2g2* staff) functioned as “things” in Barney’s sense of the term. Fora, smileys that signified food and drink, textual descriptions of places, and other similar objects, act, in *h2g2*’s community zones, as focal objects that entice people to linger. They also require a fair deal of immaterial labour to maintain. The host of one of *h2g2*’s most popular forums, *The Atelier* writes that she feels “that the atelier is a responsibility as well as a pleasure, on account of being the hostess” (Asteroid Lil, Post 763). And as *The Atelier* just celebrated its 16<sup>th</sup> anniversary, Dreyfus’s claim about all commitments in cyberspace being virtual commitments does not bear much weight either. Real people have spent years of their lives maintaining these spaces, and maintaining the virtual object that allow their communities to coalesce. Another object is the Guide itself, which in 2005 contained over 7,031 edited articles by 267, 926 researchers in 85 countries.<sup>15</sup> This object, though virtual, certainly has weight and matter for those who volunteer to maintain it and make it grow.

Those from a political economic perspective, such as Shade, Feenberg and Bakardjieva, might argue that in the Guide’s earlier incarnations its very nature was prone to the flows and movements of its business end. Though it is true that top down control of the Guide and the exigencies of business had significant impact on the experience of the individual users, it is obvious by the vehement responses Michael Kershaw received that many regarded the commercializations of the site as a necessary evil, and felt a solidarity with the staff who they trusted to have everybody’s (including the community’s) best interests at heart. Though this is perhaps true of *h2g2*, it is certainly not the case universally, and as such the specific findings with reference to this

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<sup>15</sup> In July 2015, there were 10,862 edited entries, with 270,155 entries overall, numbers that suggest that the overall mission of creating edited content has slowed over time, while the creation and maintenance of articles and spaces persists.

site—that the staff valued community input, that they were willing to create compromises—cannot be generalized to all (or even most) such situations. But it does open a space where the top down control and/or commercialization of sites cannot be seen as a *de facto* negative. Not all business is at the expense of community.

Finally, one might ask what the homesteaders, the cyberlibertarians might say in response to the final outcome of *h2g2*. Oddly, here is where we might see a very heterogeneous response. J. P. Barlow would most likely side with Matthew Kershaw, and in turn with the Zaphodista movement, bemoaning the lack of democratic determination of (and on) the site. Dyson et al., ever the fans of synergy between community and business, would likely see *h2g2*'s progression as a set of elegant solutions to difficult and emergent problems. Negroponte might contend that the true power of the site lies in its flexible and mobile digital framework and the mobility and transportability it had as a venture. And finally, Rheingold might proffer the insight that “as business transforms the nature of virtual communities, it’s worth paying attention to the way virtual communities change the nature of business” (Revised Ed. 344). For, the addition of BBC control of *h2g2* has certainly influenced the nature and texture of the *h2g2* community, but the communitarian “personality” of *h2g2* infected the operations of BBC as well, helping them grow and change as a venture, enabling them to incorporate new ideas, and even alter major Terms of Service conditions such as their shift from pre- to on-demand moderation. (A change that, one could argue, is both community friendly AND cost effective, as not having to moderate every single entry and post could free up much time and many resources.) Rheingold ends the revised edition of his book by stating that “if online community is NOT a commodity, it is only because people work to make it so” (390).

### **Conclusion: Situating the Virtual Community**

But what do the members of *h2g2* think about the nature and state of the community aspect of the Guide through the various changes? After the BBC changeover, though many still felt a strong sense of community, it is certain that some things had changed. “The Guide has meant a lot to me,” writes one long-time Researcher, “and I am happy for my time here, but I do think that it is not the same place it was 6 years ago” (Marv the Grate, Post 731). Though some point out that a contemporaneous recent lack of enthusiasm in the site volunteer Scouts and Subeditors as a major cause of change on the site (Montana Redhead, Post 13), most point to the fact that the BBC had cut back on the number of paid staff fully devoted to the Guide:

[W]here there were once about half a dozen Italics,<sup>16</sup> there are now only two. If we want their attention, we really have to yell and shout. In my personal opinion, a successful community requires a sense of presence at the top. Not necessarily a dictatorial one, but an entity who keeps things on track and extends a sense of belonging to all who participate. A major-domo. Without that it becomes a bit

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<sup>16</sup> On *h2g2* the user names of the staff members always appear in italics to differentiate their posts. As such the staff are also interchangeably referred to as Italics.

aimless and anarchic. I think that, in the years since the Foop<sup>17</sup>, h2g2 has disintegrated into tribes. (Asteroid Lil, Post 748)

Others noted this tribe mentality, feeling they felt a greater sense of community in specific enclaves on h2g2 than on the site as a whole. Though this sentiment is far from ubiquitous. Many said they still quite liked the h2g2 community as a whole, and many (though not all) still continued the Guide project by writing and submitting articles and taking part in the volunteer schemes. One Researcher commented:

I don't feel h2g2 has changed for the worse. Not being able to display pictures or use javascript is all just cosmetic stuff. The reduction in Italic interaction with the community is nether here not there to me. They're there when they need to be and they might not tell us to go stick our heads in a pig but they will suggest that folk take a walk round the block when necessary. (Amy the Ant, Post 757)

And another noted that:

It's really amazing how this community has branched out like it has- on one end of the spectrum, we've got people with 100 edited entries, on the other, we've got people who have never written an entry, but have been here for years, playing games and having serious conversations. (Scandrea & Tracer, Post 3)

Though there was obviously still discontent brewing in various parts of h2g2 in 2004 (a brief scan of the "Who's Online" Utility pointed out several members who still had "Zaphodista" appended to their user names), and though there were still specific complaints about the rules and regulations of the site (such as the limited non-English language support and support of pictures), there were also positive reviews of the Guide's state, the largest of which is that it is still around after many other similar community sites have gone belly-up. While not perfect, and certainly not completely unified, h2g2 still managed to thrive under the BBC umbrella, and to support its members and their collaboratively built community.

After the Not Panicking changeover, with a smaller community there was less organized decent to the changeover, though of course not everyone was pleased. A full accounting of these new changes and their impacts will make up the final phase of this research and will explore how longtime residents feel about the changes, the new site owners, and the trajectory and state of h2g2 in general.

So how do I end this rather surface appraisal of one website and its heroic making-due with respect to both the difficulties arising out of running a website and not being able to control what people do with it, and those of using a website and not being in control of how the owners treat it? The first reflection is that the web is flexible enough to get around many problems. For example, as the BBC has tighter codes of conduct than the site previously had, articles about certain sexual matters were no longer allowed. This problem was solved by the editors by "transplanting" various articles to Wikipedia and replacing them with an explanation, an apology, and a link. With the return to an

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<sup>17</sup> The "Foop" refers to the morning that people went the Guide only to discover it gone, only to be returned a short while later under BBC rule. The name comes from one of the *Hitchhiker's* books when a spaceship mysteriously disappears and then reappears making such a noise.

independent status under Non Panicking, some articles were then transplanted back to the Guide. My second reflection is that the notions of production and consumption are much more complex when matters of collaborative space creation are involved. When both the users and owners of a site are each producing something that the other is consuming (such as space on a server or a community framework) then it feels, on the ground, much more like a trade off than consumption or appropriation. Finally, this brief history is a testament to the fact that virtual communities need not always sink into the mire of commercialization. Though this is a unique story, the type of synergy it embodies is one that is very possible, where instead of a stronger power engulfing a weaker one and corrupting it, a balance can be struck if enough care and effort is poured into it.

The Hitchhikers of *h2g2* present a very interesting model for Internet community building. Through their practices of “making do” that, like those of actual hitchhiking, take full advantage of prevailing and powerful flows, they have learned to latch on, be it to cars or corporations, to whatever will fill the needs of the moment.

## Appendix A

**Call for Participation** <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/h2g2/brunel/A3891945>>.

[letter run in h2g2post April 13, 2005; April 20, 2005]

Call for Participation!

What does it mean to own virtual space? Who has the right to determine how a virtual space is used: is it those who developed it, those who use it, or those who own the computers it runs on? And what does development even mean in this context; is it raising the funds, doing the coding, working out the bugs, developing content, or developing social and cultural frameworks? Or is it all of these? These are the issues I'm trying to explore in a Ph.D. paper tentatively titled 'Settlers of the Virtual: Community, Territoriality and Ownership in Internet Communities'.

When I first conceived this idea there was only one reason I thought about and cared about these issues - my experiences on h2g2. Who can remember the 'my home' versus 'my space' debates; the commercialisation issue, about adding Amazon.com links to threads; the communitarian versus guide researcher threads; the Zaphodista movement; the FOOP; the move to the BBC and somewhat stricter content guidelines? Moreover, who can forget them? These and countless other moments have shaped our community and our perceptions of it. I want to push some of these important reflections out into the greater world, to let those who are working on policies and plans to create or govern Internet spaces be privy to the particular insights the h2g2 community has garnered through the very experience of being there in the trenches.

So I'm putting out a call. This is a call for reflections, memories and poignant moments in our collective history that you think contributed to the ongoing h2g2 dialogue on ownership and community. This seems like a good time for reflection - to pause and consider - as another new iteration of the story that brought us together looms on the horizon. With a new generation of virtual settlers perhaps paddling along in its wake...

Post your thoughts here!

Beeblefish

## Appendix B

### *First Zaphodista Declaration (<http://XXXXXX>)*

THE REVOLUTION WILL NOT BE TELE-TUBBIED.

First Declaration of the Zaphodista Army of Cybernautic Liberation  
Writing from near the jungles of Lacandon, Chiapas, Mexico<sup>1</sup>.

Forty-seven days our gathering place was down. You know how they talk about things moving fast in "Internet Time?" It is as if our beloved forum and community had been down for years. Many of the people who used to count themselves as fans of the h2g2 community will likely not return.

But I have enjoyed this community too much to let it go. When it reappeared in full bloom, I was thrilled.

Then I tried to read my old entries, which were "hidden pending moderation."

Then I read the new House Rules.

Our beloved revolutionary sweetheart, the hitchiker's guide website, has been absorbed by the BBC -- British Bureaucracy Clampdown. It appears that new guide entries will be available to read instantly, but pre-BBC entries remain "hidden pending moderation2." This proactive moderating will take time. Time that you wouldn't have to lose at most other boards, forums, communities. Your friends are all saving time posting on those other forums, because they don't have your loyalty to h2g2 the site, or your fanatical devotion to h2g2 the book. Is it worth it?

Further, there will be no more vulgarity. It's not that free speech is curtailed exactly. Just your vocabulary. Because somewhere in merry old UK, people believe that the web should be tailored to kids, that adults should all give up their freedom so that parents and teachers do not have to take responsibility for policing children.

Shall we discuss what "vulgar" originally meant? It meant common. As in, the lower class. Didn't you people get this all worked out of your system on tv shows like "Upstairs, Downstairs?" Speech should be common. To classify speech as unacceptable because it is "common" is to classify people as "common," is to raise yourself up undeservedly. We are all commoners now, because All Your Upper Class Privilege Are Belong To Us.

To fight back against these ridiculous new policies, we present an unofficial h2g2 club -- a new, mostly non-existent group for fans of the old h2g2 site who are displeased with the changes made by BBC.

Two Thai/Buddhist gods; one throwing water over the other

Zaphodistas, as obedient members of the h2g2 community, seek to struggle within the existing rules of h2g2 for a reform of the system towards more democracy, openness, away from the pre-emptive moderating and the ridiculous ban on posting URLs. For the sake of the continued survival of h2g2 as a peoples' forum, these rules should be removed. Since there are so many other forums where people can write what they want without waiting for it to be moderated, without worrying about posting URLs, you can rest assured that frustrated contributors and visitors will not remain at a site with this slow and backwards system. These new rules are inconsistent with standards followed everywhere else on the web, and will likely prove detrimental to the survival of h2g2 when people can easily turn elsewhere.

THESE ARE OUR DEMANDS:

(Okay, they're not demands really. It's not a war, and we won't do any denial-of-service attacks like the real Zapatistas did. These are our heart-felt suggestions: )

1. Any page you come across that says "hidden pending moderation" is a frustration you won't experience at most other online communities. Return to the system of moderation after the fact, as used by most other message boards, forums and online communities.
2. Allow URLs everywhere, in forum posts and contributed guide entries. If they point to something naughty, you can zap them after someone complains. That's how it works on every other forum and online community. The Beeb has done alright in radio and tv, but Welcome To The Web. It's not like your father's Oldsmedia. If you don't match the freedom and openness of other forums on the web, yours will be a ghost town before long.
3. Allow all languages. Are you kidding me, you desperado you? The idiocy of this policy has a certain JE NE SAIS QUOI. Will segments of this page be rejected because I write VIVA ZAPHODA!?

In case this is your first day on the web (and I thought Beeb had a little more experience here), let me explain something else y'all failed to notice: INFORMATION WANTS TO BE FREE. Limits placed on information by sites that censor, sites that flirt with censorship (as this one now does), and sites that forbid languages, will find themselves left in the dust. If you can't let your information be free, there are many other forums that will3.

Anyway, I would think you'd be disgusted at how this policy flies in the face of democracy and freedom of speech, but apparently that stuff gets lower priority than, say, making a safe place where kids can read about Radio One.

4. For aesthetic purposes, will you just chill out with all the disclaimers? I don't remember there being this many on the old h2g2. Here I sometimes see the same junk repeated at the top and bottom of the same page, just so everyone knows about the new House Rules and Policies and Terms of Servitude and whatever.

Maybe they have more weird laws in the land where you come from, but couldn't you just post the fine print and disclaimers once, buried in the "Terms of Service" that everyone has to read when they sign up for your service? This is how most other forums and online communities do it.

5. Bring back the "Don't Panic!" button. I know real estate is scarce on the front page, but if you're so worried about people needing and searching for the word "HELP", then put it at the bottom in your stupid fine print disclaimer or something. You're fiddling with tradition, dog gone it! (I mean, "d\*\* \*\*\*\* \*t!")

6. Allow your readers to be adults by assuming they can survive reading a naughty word. It won't hurt us, it won't hurt your children, who probably know more versions than you by now. It won't even hurt your numbers, because everybody accepts this as normal on the web. It may hurt your Aunt Gertrude, but her boycott will be no great loss...and she too probably knows more versions of that word than you!

BY-LAWS of the Zaphodistas

Can you hold up the moonlight in your palm and say, "I own you, moonlight?"

No! Such are the rules placed on membership to the Zaphodista Army.

Anyone may be a Zaphodista who loves democracy, liberty, justice, and that scene where Marvin triumphs over the tank just by talking to him. To become a Zaphodista, simply call yourself one. Too lazy to announce it? That's okay: you may already be a Zaphodista!

The following guidelines are subject to change (if anyone else joins the group besides me who is writing this):

A. Zaphodistas are patriotic about h2g2! We love the idea of the site, and strive for its continued prosperity. We may even be generally pleased with the past of BBC, due to their involvement with the h2g2 radio series and Red Dwarf and The Jimi Hendrix Experience BBC Sessions, in spite of their involvement with the h2g2 tv show and Doctor Who5.

However, we do not support the recent changes to h2g2 made by the BBC, changes which seem to be working against the open system of the original h2g2 site.

B. Zaphodistas must struggle within the rules of BBC h2g2 to reform those rules. We do not seek to overthrow h2g2, but to save it from the misguided policies of silly people from another world who do not understand the way our world turns. (In case you missed the metaphor, I'm talking about BBC's experience in the "world" of radio and tv shaping their policies toward the "world" wide web.) Getting ourselves kicked out probably won't help.

C. If you have any pre-BBC guide entries "hidden pending moderation," by all means, update them and make them visible. Each of these hidden screens is a scar on the good name of what was once a healthy and open forum.

The Revolution will not be Tele-Tubbied. Zaphodistas A520769.D. Eventually, h2g2 will likely allow outside graphics to be displayed on guide entries. Until then, the graphic symbol of Zaphodista struggle should be a broken graphic link with text message. View the Source code of this page to put a similar graphic on your page. For the ALT portion of the IMG SRC tag, insert whatever text you feel.

X. In the course of struggling for greater democracy, liberty and justice, it may be necessary to perpetrate a little subversion within the bounds of the h2g2 system. Namely, it may become necessary to move pages about the Zaphodista Army away from h2g2 to some other site, if they are rejected. And as the system of "Official Approved" guide entries becomes more and more elitist (and I would argue that they already were elitist before BBC took hold), it falls to us to support and emphasize unofficial guide entries. This section of h2g2, if it returns to the kind of shape before being tainted by BBC, is like an Underground Guide within the Guide, entries not marked by the elitist approval of whoever these people are in charge of giving approval.

Z. All of the above demands and terms are subject to debate and discussion, and probably ought to be reworked by little local committees just like the EZLN does, but I can't remember what they call em. Anyhow, please post your ideas on the forum at the bottom of this page.

JOIN THE INSURGENT FORCES OF  
THE ZAPHODISTA ARMY  
OF CYBERNAUTIC LIBERATION.

THE REVOLUTION WILL NOT BE TELE-TUBBIED.  
THE REVOLUTION WILL NOT BE PRE-EMPTIVELY MODERATED.  
THE REVOLUTION WILL NOT NEED A DISCLAIMER.  
THE R\*\*\*\*\*N WILL NOT BE HIDDEN BENEATH ASTERISKS.  
THE REVOLUTION WILL BE ANNOUNCED IN ALL LANGUAGES.  
YOU WILL BE RESPONSIBLE FOR COOKING THE REVOLUTION, BECAUSE IT  
WILL NOT BE PRE-DIGESTED FOR YOU.

VIVA ZAPHODA!

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