Respawn

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Published by Duke University Press


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On May 4, 2011, the American comedian Jay Leno, during his regular opening monologue on The Tonight Show, reminded his audience about an ongoing current event—namely, the Sony PlayStation Network outage. The PlayStation Network, or PSN, had been offline since April 20, and gamers everywhere were making their distress known all over the internet. Sony officials eventually confessed that they had shut down the network as a retroactive security response to an “external intrusion.” Apparently, a sophisticated team of hackers had managed to infiltrate the PSN databases. Sony was unaware of the hack until a couple of days after it took place. The intruders had extracted the personal information, passwords, and possibly the credit card numbers of registered PlayStation Network users—upward of 77 million people. In the end, the PSN would remain down for a total of twenty-four days. Leno summed up the situation with his characteristic wit: “Sony has apologized after the accounts of PlayStation users were hacked into. They say this could severely affect the lives of over a hundred million PlayStation users. You know something, if you’re playing PlayStation all day, you don’t have a life! Okay? I don’t think you have to worry about your life being interrupted.”

Leno rehearsed versions of the same joke throughout the week, draining every last laugh out of the idea that gamers “don’t have a life” (fig. 4.1). If the joke falls a bit flat, it is not only because it disregards the risks faced by the Sony customers—identity theft and credit card fraud among them. Rather,
what seems most out of touch about Leno’s joke is that it overlooks the sheer scale of the affected population—millions upon millions of gamers around the world—and thus misrecognizes the nature of the risk entirely: a threat to a particular lifeworld, a technological way of life. Legions of gamers, dispersed over many different countries, had been forcibly ejected from their familiar online community and recreational space, and the internet was now buzzing with the sound of their anxiety, their anger about the security breach mixed up with longing and adoration for the network as such. One gamer explained all the commotion with a simple assertion: “We are not nerds. We have a life.”

Despite all the mockery, a vibrant form of life had been dramatically interrupted by the disappearance of the PSN. Even after the network was restored, the memory of its outage would retain all the force of a *primal scene*, routinely recollected as a defining moment in the history of the network and in the personal biographies of many gamers. (Hence the proverbial question: “Where were you on April 20, 2011?”) The event powerfully illuminated the operations of contemporary technogenesis, the mutual shaping of technics and human life in the current moment. For it showed how much the individuation of PlayStation gamers as gamers (ludogenesis), together with the collective individuation of the PlayStation community as a community (sociogenesis), involves a process of internalizing and reconstituting a particular technoscientific apparatus—the PlayStation Network itself.
Epic Fail
In many ways, the PSN came to life as an object and a site of technogenesis retrospectively, reborn at the moment of its disappearance. Some gamers would later remember the network outage as a “birthday,” a vital instant when the gaming community coalesced under conditions of shared risk and heightened emotion. As one of them explained: “It made me realize what a big part of my life the PS3’s online capabilities were to me, and I wasn’t alone.”

By the same token, the mainstream media only became fully cognizant of the network during its time of crisis—77 million gamers, 60 million PlayStation 3 units, and hundreds of servers dispersed over more than sixty countries, suddenly disintegrated.

During the twenty-four days of the outage and for several months afterward, gamers around the world obsessively discussed the technicalities of Sony’s firewalls, server architectures, and encryption standards, as well as the hardware features of the PlayStation 3 unit, its Cell processor, its various firmware upgrades, and the limits of its operating system. A failure of securitization seemed to be the general consensus. At the same time, they debated the database hack itself, immersing themselves in the vocabulary of DDoS attacks, SQL injections, and other tools from the repertoire of hacker culture. They argued furiously about the motives of the hackers, trying to make sense of what on the one hand appeared to be nothing more than grand larceny, yet on the other hand evidently had some connection to a recent spate of cyberprotests against Sony and its corporate policy of prohibiting free and open experimentation with the PlayStation technology.

The crisis exposed the technical dimensions of the PSN, its machinic composition—which is to say, its radically nonhuman aspect—even as it brought to light the heterogeneity of human elements in the system, including ideological differences among PlayStation users about the value of understanding and having access to the technical foundations of their shared recreational activities. Faced with spectacular evidence of its vulnerability, gamers confronted the network as both singular—insofar as it had disappeared all at once—and inherently multiple: a modular collective of hardware components organized through an evolving set of protocols and data streams, conjoining disparate crowds of people, cultural narratives, and media operations to varying degrees. The outage made clear that the PlayStation Network, like all networks, is technical as well as political, material as well as discursive, human as well as nonhuman.
It is, in fact, a *quasi-object*, an interface of the subjective and the objective, the social and the material. It draws diagrams of relationality among people, producing a certain collectivity (the PlayStation community), and likewise, in its technical individuation, apprehended as a unity or coherent system, it configures its users and opens a particular identity space (the PlayStation gamer). As the philosopher Michel Serres has written, “[The] quasi-object is not an object, but it is one nevertheless, since it is not a subject, since it is in the world; it is also a quasi-subject, since it marks or designates a subject who, without it, would not be a subject . . . . The quasi-object, in being passed [between people], makes the collective, if it stops, it makes the individual.”

The PlayStation Network—irreducible to its component parts yet unthinkable aside from them—moves through and among its hardware nodes as flows of digital information, always potentially connected even when disconnected. It moves through and among its users as a figure, an experience, a fiction, an embodied relation. According to Bruno Latour, “As soon as we are on the trail of some quasi-object, it appears to us sometimes as a thing, sometimes as a narrative, sometimes as a social bond, without ever being reduced to a mere being.” To be sure, the PlayStation Network incarnates connectivity in and of itself, a network that makes a network—a technoscientific system that is always already political. This was never more evident than in the midst of its catastrophic failure.

Although for many gamers the political dimensions of the *PSN* outage were not entirely clear, and often seemed deeply confused, there was widespread awareness that the thing at the core of all this anguish, rage, heartache, and love—the network itself—had somehow become a battleground for the future of participatory science, peer-to-peer research, and do-it-yourself innovation. For some, this meant the future of democracy as such in our ever more globalized and high-tech society. For others, it represented a deplorable hijacking of private property, a co-optation of entertainment technologies for illicit purposes. If nothing else, by making visible the profound entanglement of gamers with the *PSN*, the intensive modes of affectivity and identification associated with the system, the outage helped to crystallize the stakes of controlling access to the infrastructures of digital culture—one way or another, for better or worse. In this way, the network became a symbolic casualty, collateral damage in a broader contest over the right to experiment with the technoscientific systems now at the heart of the world, the freedom to play with the conditions of technogenic life.
Let’s rewind a bit.

In 2006, shortly before the launch of the PlayStation 3 and the PlayStation Network, Ken Kutaragi, then the CEO of Sony, declared that the new technical capabilities of the PS3 would transform and revitalize the gaming experience. Games, he said, would no longer be confined to the limits of 3D graphical representation, but would break from the screen to become “live.” A number of gaming websites were quick to make fun of Kutaragi’s hyperbolic statement, pointing out that Microsoft had already been using similar marketing language about its own gaming network—Xbox Live—since 2002. Yet Sony has continued to insist on the image of vitality, vigorously promoting its hardware devices and online network as fostering the conditions for life in the networked era. After all, according to Sony’s 2007 advertising campaign, “This Is Living” (fig. 4.2).

The language of high-tech vitalism permeates the PlayStation world. Consider the PS3’s Cell processor, more formally known as the Cell Broadband Engine. Often compared to a eukaryotic cell—insofar as it features a core microprocessor supported by eight synergistic processing elements—the Cell was designed to be the “nucleus” for multicellular networks. According to one Sony engineer, “We wanted to create a . . . processor capable of functioning as the nucleus for software interactions between networks and future computers connected to those networks.” Around the same time, the company glommed onto the phrase “PlayStation DNA” to emphasize the genetic continuities, the biotic depths of its various machines. Continuing to propagate these notions in 2011, Sony revamped its handheld PlayStation Portable (PSP) to improve the mobile gaming experience and provide better support for the PSN, evocatively naming the new device the PlayStation Vita: “Deep and immersive gaming is at the core of PlayStation’s DNA, and PS Vita is the latest embodiment of this vision. PS Vita offers a revolutionary combination of rich gaming and social connectivity.” The sense of organic connection—hereditary ties and family resemblances linking members of the PlayStation Network, machines and players alike—has persisted even in the era of the PlayStation 4 and the PlayStation VR. In 2017, for example, a Sony website showcasing the latest progeny of the “PlayStation Family” explained that all the essential features are in the blood: “PlayStation VR shares the DNA of PlayStation 4, so you can simply connect the two and step into new experiences in seconds.” Nucleic compatibilities, inheritance across hardware generations, plug-and-play family: these tropes are central to the image of living through PlayStation.
figure 4.2. “This is living.” Machines, monsters, and weapons erupt from the wet surface of the eyeball. Sony’s 2007 advertising campaign affirmed the cyborg conditions of life with PlayStation: biology infused with technology, the flesh saturated with digital media.

Among its various efforts to flesh out this image, in 2008, Sony issued a firmware upgrade for the PS3 that enabled access to the virtual microworld of Home. Home was a 3D graphical space that served as an imaginary hub for the PlayStation Network, a place where gamers could meet each other in avatar form. Home was designed to foreground domesticity and comfort, a sense of groundedness in the expanding reaches of the global gaming system. Although Sony eventually disabled the feature in 2015, for a while Home pulsed with the lifeblood of the network. As one player put it at the time, “Home is my life.”

The figuration of PlayStation as a nurturing technology, an incubator for technogenic life, jumped to a new level when the system became a platform for biomedical science, as well, integrated with the Stanford University Folding@home project. Folding@home is an experiment in computational biochemistry that began in 2000. It uses a distributed network of PCs to simulate the mechanics of protein folding. In March 2007, only a few months after the PlayStation 3 was launched, Sony announced that it had joined forces with Stanford to fight disease: “Folding@home is leveraging PS3’s powerful Cell Broadband Engine™ (Cell/B.E.)—and what will be an even
more powerful distributed supercomputing network of PS3 systems—to help study the causes of diseases such as Parkinson’s, Alzheimer’s, cystic fibrosis and many cancers. The PS3 suddenly turned into a life-saving medical device: “Sony’s PS3 gives gamers a shot at saving lives.”

Soon thereafter, all PS3 units came preinstalled with the Folding@home software, accessible from the main navigation screen. In September 2008, Sony issued a firmware upgrade that renovated the Folding@home portal, renaming it “Life with PlayStation.” According to Noam Rimon, a director of software engineering at Sony, the PS3 Folding@home client and the “Life with PlayStation” feature were designed to make the folding experiments feel more like social games: “As video game designers we pushed hard on getting all the visualization in real-time and to allow the user to have a ‘virtual flight’ through the field of folded proteins. We also added the globe of the world with dots for each participating machine, spreading a feeling of ‘togetherness,’ so users could see they were not alone in the folding world.” In this way, the promise that PlayStation would bring games to life, providing a lifeworld for gamers around the globe, converged directly with notions of “life itself” and the experimental systems of the life sciences (fig. 4.3).
When Sony’s five-year collaboration with Stanford concluded in November 2012, Vijay Pande, a professor of chemistry at Stanford and the director of Folding@home, said, “The PS3 system was a game changer for Folding@home, as it opened the door for new methods and new processors, eventually also leading to the use of GPUs. We have had numerous successes in recent years.” He also noted, “Since the PS3 started folding in 2007, we’ve done some really amazing things, with several announcements this year [2012] acknowledging advancements in Alzheimer’s disease, cancer . . . influenza, type II diabetes, and other new drug targets. We’ve come a long way in the last 5 years and we have a lot going on to continue our tradition of pushing the envelope into new technologies.” For Pande and his colleagues, the PlayStation system had served as a powerful research instrument, a tool for biological discoveries and pharmacological strategies, as well as an object of experimentation in its own right. Testing the capacities of the console and the network, the scientists gained fresh insights into the nature of distributed computing, the operations of different processors and algorithms—learning how to design better systems—in direct correlation with their studies of protein structure and potential drug candidates. Technological innovation and scientific research were intercalated, inextricable.

Moreover, to the extent that the PlayStation’s support of Folding@home came to symbolize a more playful form of technoscience (Pande describes it as a “game changer”), it also encouraged PlayStation users to think of themselves as citizen scientists, assisting the collective work of knowledge production. As Pande said in 2007, the fact that Folding@home could be understood as “the most powerful distributed computing network ever is a reflection of the extraordinary worldwide participation by gamers. Without them we would not be able to make the advancements we have made in our studies of several different diseases.” By 2012, more than 15 million PlayStation users had contributed to the project, inspired to be involved in new technoscientific practices, new experimental approaches to life. Or, as Sony would have it: “Long Live Play” (fig. 4.4). This core slogan neatly gathers up the values and promises of the PlayStation world, the fantasy of better living through computational toys. Moreover, it suggests that the vital energies of PlayStation are fundamentally related to the respawn function, the regenerative logic of video games. This is the point of a 2011 advertisement, for example, in which the fictive heroes and heroines of various PlayStation games meet together in a pub (reminiscent of the Star Wars cantina) to recount their exploits and to honor the gamer—named Michael—who
has guided them to victory so many times, keeping them alive against the odds. One character, an American soldier from a WWII shooter game, testifies, “Omaha. Pinned down on that godforsaken beach. Thinking, if I lay here maybe I die, but if I get up, there ain’t no maybe about it. Then one man broke through. Michael!”

The ad cleverly addresses the role that fictive characters play in the everyday realities of millions of PlayStation gamers—fictional friends who take on uncanny lives of their own. It concludes with the “Long Live Play” tagline and a lingering shot of the pub ceiling, revealing the portraits of other gamers who, like Michael, have dwelt among the denizens of the video-game universe. The adventures have been replayed innumerable times, the stories enacted again and again, literally enfleshed through the actions of each player—constituting a kind of surplus life (“I am a gamer, not because I don’t have a life, but because I choose to have many”).

Sony has reiterated the idea that gamers can live more lives than one ever since the original PlayStation. For instance, a 1999 advertisement called “Double Life” highlights the respawn experience available to every PlayStation gamer: “For years, I’ve lived a double life. In the day, I do my job. . . . But at night, I live a life of exhilaration, of missed heartbeats and adrenaline. . . . I have no regrets. For though I’ve lived a double life, at least I can say I’ve lived.”

It is a fable often told: gamers become legion, containing multitudes.

figure 4.4. “Long Live Play.” In this 2011 commercial, the fictitious Sony executive Kevin Butler shoots a flaming arrow over the corporate headquarters, igniting the new slogan.
From the moment the PlayStation Network went live in 2006, myriad gamers have affirmed its life-sustaining qualities, the vivifying properties of its hardware, its software applications—the entire lineup of PlayStation devices, games, and merchandise. It is a form of consumer brand identification, for sure: the making of the PlayStation fanboy and fangirl. Yet it also involves a projection, a reconstitution of the self and the imagined community upon the technical apparatus: gamer subjectivation and sociogenesis as processes of symbolic incorporation, uploading the network as an operating platform for a lifeworld. In online gamer discussions, expressions of intense adoration, gratitude, and even ecstasy for the PlayStation and the PSN are quite common. For example, one gamer has written an autobiographical narrative that captures key motifs of the discourse of PlayStation gamers, the recurring themes of building a life with PlayStation:

Hi. My name is crashsmash01 but you can call me John.b also. . . . [T]he following story is the chronicles of me, my life, my friends, my family, and how Everyone at Sony and PlayStation helped mold me into the fun loving but abnormal gentleman i’m today. it all began in February 15th 1992. two years before playstation. back then my father and mother were divorced so i was living with my mother and stepfather most of the time . . . i was diagnosed with ADHD and i also had severe depression.

let us jump to march of 1994. my stepfather was on a business trip . . . when he came home he gave me a huge box and it was a present, it was wrapped in red paper, when i opened it i litterly cried tears of joy and ran around the room like Crash bandicoot, it was a brand new PS1 system with a copy of the first Crash bandicoot [game], i had smothered my family in hugs and kisses and rushed straight to my room and played my heart out. a few days later my father bought me 3 games and some chocolate. it was a great day and so far a great beginning to my life.

as the years went by i started to grow, mature, and around this time i was in a new house, a new neighborhood, and thanks to playstation, i got my first friend ever. his name was Memo. me and him meet our first time when the PS2 came out, he lived right across the street from my house and despite my ADHD he wound up being not just a friend but like a brother . . . if it wasn’t for playstation my connection with my best friend Memo would of never been made. me and him would
always hang out, playing the newest games, going outside and having fun adventures just like the characters we knew. One day for a birthday present my friend Memo and my parents got me a PS2 and some games, it was the big fat orginal version too. Thanks to the PS2 when I traveled I started to gain new friends. Had new adventures, and had a very amazing childhood, from Texas to Nebraska to back to Arizona. The other thing too was my PS2 also helped me when I was down at my lowest, from losing my friends constantly to my many family issues to money and everything. Sony and PlayStation kept me going, and kept me running. The thing with sony and PlayStation also is that thought out all my adventures it was PlayStation that helped me keep connected with my past, present, and future with my friends, family, and loved ones. Many GFs [girlfriends] I had I would be playing video games with them . . . if anything, I’d always consider PlayStation and everyone who works hard on what they do, like family. . . . Thanks to PlayStation I found my reason why I exist after 15 years of barely any friends, a broken family, . . . My mother had died in 2006 because her lungs shut down due to her asthma . . . everything began to fall apart . . . until one day. My father was unemployed but one day after school, we went out to Gamestop and he bought me a PSP system. It was my portable getaway to my happy place, from then I started high school . . . my PSP helped bring me together with tons of new people, new friends, and new ways to enjoy life. It was then that I figured out my reason to be here. To share and spread joy to everyone with the help of PlayStation. . . . things got even better when I got my first PS3 on November 11, 2006 . . . playstation had been a part of my life sense I was almost born, it has helped me gain new friends, new loved ones, family, and much more. To this day I try my best to give back everyday to the PSN and playstation community, wherever it be though PSN codes I find randomly, by helping someone buy a game, or just by being myself, PlayStation has helped mold myself into me. . . . Thanks for reading everyone and I hope I can continue to help give back to the community and to keep this entire network strong for we shall long, live, play.26

With every hardware upgrade, a life upgrade. With every network connection, a sense of growth and prosperity. Such testimonials about the importance of PlayStation and the PlayStation Network for enabling meaningful friendships, feelings of camaraderie and shared culture, domestic and social be-
longing, comfort in times of sorrow, and personal accomplishment—indeed, all the qualities of having a life—appeared frequently during the 2011 network outage. In its loss, the PSN was often rediscovered as an object of devotion, a crucial component of fulfillment, pleasure, and self-completion—in the language of psychoanalysis, the object-cause of desire. As the psychoanalytic philosopher Jacques Lacan has written, the object of desire is fundamentally constituted by the perception of absence—“It is precisely what is subtracted from the living being”—always at risk, already lost.27 Or, as one PlayStation gamer put it, yearning for the PSN in the midst of the crisis: “When will it be back, I feel like a part of me is down . . . lol.”28

On the day the network disappeared, Sony issued an announcement on the official PlayStation blog: “We’re aware certain functions of PlayStation Network are down. We will report back here as soon as we can with more information. Thank you for your patience.”29 Two days later, Sony admitted that it had voluntarily shut down the network to address a security breach: “An external intrusion on our system has affected our PlayStation Network and Qriocity services. In order to conduct a thorough investigation and to verify the smooth and secure operation of our network services going forward, we turned off PlayStation Network & Qriocity services on the evening of Wednesday, April 20th. . . . We will continue to update you promptly as we have additional information to share.”30

Already in the earliest days of the outage, gamers began to express distress with startling rapidity. One said, “I just wish that the network was back, I never realized how dull the PS3 experience was without the network until now, after gamers around the world (including myself) have lost it. I miss talking with my friends online too.”31 Another said, “I’m so saddened by this outage. GET IT UP NOW!”32 And another: “At this point it’s uncertain as to how long PSN will still be down, but they better get their *** in gear because I can’t take another minute without going online.”33 Most were subdued in their sorrow: “miss my friends! :(”34 Others resorted to melodrama: “going to kill myself !!!!!!!!!!”35 Or: “This can’t be happening, wake me up from this nightmare. . . . I would have thought something like this would never happen.”36 A few were more contemplative: “We have become so used to PSN being available 24/7 that withdrawal due to these events hits close to your gaming soul.”37 Some tried to calm down, taking it as an opportunity to reassess priorities: “I was surprised at the emotions I was feeling toward the PSN outage. . . . The PSN should be a tool that we use to enrich our lives, not a chain that tethers us to our PS3s. . . . The PSN has been a part of all our lives, and it should be just that—a part.”38 Yet a number of them seemed to
be really suffering: “The PSN is only a part of me, right now it’s the part of me that’s wrenching and convulsing!”

With each passing day, gamers voiced further exasperation—though some found a small degree of comfort in the fact that they could still play most single-player games or run Folding@home, whose servers were not directly linked to Sony’s: “Fold your way through the PSN outage!” Technogenic life could go on, even in the moment of network death. So while emotions were mounting, most gamers expressed confidence that Sony would restore normal operations shortly. As one player said, “Hang in there everyone! I know how badly you want PSN to return, and it will. (This is bugging me too!)”

On April 26, Sony at last confessed that its databases had been hacked: “We have discovered that between April 17 and April 19, 2011, certain PlayStation Network and Qriocity service user account information was compromised in connection with an illegal and unauthorized intrusion into our network.” Sony advised customers to be vigilant in protecting their online information, changing their passwords, monitoring credit card activity, and so on. Sony also reminded its customers of what was ultimately at stake: “These malicious actions have also had an impact on your ability to enjoy the services provided by PlayStation Network.” At this point, the emotional tide turned to outrage—much of it directed at Sony for its lax security measures, much more directed at the hackers who had perpetrated the intrusion. At the same time, several gamers admonished their agitated compatriots to remain loyal to the network, encouraging them to be strong and steady during this time of trouble (fig. 4.5). Exiled from their collective gameworlds, adrift on a flood of concentrated affect, members of the PSN community extensively debated the meanings of the network hack. Indeed, amid widespread fears of identity theft and the misery of prolonged separation from friends, many gamers also came to recognize that their online community had become a site of technopolitical warfare.

**Sownage**

To understand the various meanings and emotions animated by the hacking incident, we need to first revisit the status of the PlayStation 3 as a technoscientific tool and a computational platform. Long before the console was released, Sony took pains to emphasize that the PS3, with its powerful Cell processor and built-in networking capabilities, would be a valuable resource for scientific researchers as well as homebrew computer hobbyists. Sony was
attentive to the fact that the predecessor PlayStation 2 had often been appropriated for scientific projects—especially those needing high-powered yet affordable computing clusters—in addition to widespread tinkering by modders, hackers, makers, and DIY computer geeks. The vice president of Sony Computer Entertainment Europe, Phil Harrison, said that Sony was eager to support homebrew programming and software experimentation on the PS3: “the notion of game development at home using powerful tools available to anyone . . . [is] a vital, crucial aspect of the future growth of our industry.”43 Accordingly, when the console launched, its native operating system featured a function called “OtherOS.” OtherOS enabled users to install a different operating system—for example, Linux—precisely to accommodate the needs of the scientific and homebrew communities.

However, in January 2010, the young hacker George Hotz—more commonly known by his alias, GeoHot—announced that he had found a way to hack the PlayStation 3, gaining access to its system memory and processor. GeoHot had already become famous in 2007 as the first person to jailbreak an Apple iPhone. His latest experimental hack now foretold a similar future for the PlayStation 3, promising to liberate the device for homebrew research.
applications—but also potentially making it vulnerable to illicit activities, such as pirating games. GeoHot accomplished this trick by exploiting the OtherOS function. To be sure, Sony had already anticipated a security risk in the OtherOS function, and despite early overtures toward the scientific and homebrew communities, the corporation removed the OtherOS feature from its 2009 PS3 “slim” model. After GeoHot published details of the exploit on his blog, Sony promptly issued a mandatory firmware update for all PS3s (version 3.21), designed to permanently erase the OtherOS feature and simultaneously remove any dual-booting system that might have been installed.

GeoHot and other hackers—notably, the fail0verflow collective—continued working on ways to bypass the console’s security. At the Chaos Communication Congress in December 2010, members of fail0verflow presented a way to calculate the private keys used to sign software on the PS3. Drawing on fail0verflow’s discovery, GeoHot figured out the console’s metldr root key. On January 2, 2011, he published the root key on his website (www.geohot.com) and posted a link on PSX-Scene with a simple message: “keys open doors.” Armed with the root key, GeoHot could now jailbreak the device and execute homebrew code as legitimate PS3 software. He offered proof by releasing two small sample programs that others could try out. He also posted a video on YouTube called “Jailbroken PS3 3.55 with Homebrew,” which featured his little “Hello World” program running on a hacked machine, displaying a message: “sup dawg, it’s geohot.” The following day, he released his custom jailbreak firmware into the wilds of the internet.

And then the trouble really began. Sony filed a lawsuit against GeoHot and several other hackers, including one hundred “John Does” (that is to say, the unknown members of the fail0verflow hacking group, as well as anyone else involved in discovering and distributing information about how to jailbreak the PS3). These defendants were accused of violating the U.S. Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA), the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act, and other laws. Although the U.S. Copyright Office had determined in 2010 that jailbreaking smartphones does not constitute a violation of the DMCA, apparently video-game consoles present different considerations. U.S. District Judge Susan Illston ordered GeoHot to remove all information about his PlayStation jailbreak from his website, blog, and YouTube account and to relinquish his computer hardware and storage media to Sony lawyers.

As part of their pretrial discovery efforts, Sony also demanded that GeoHot’s web provider, Bluehost, hand over server records that could be used to identify people who may have visited GeoHot’s website between 2009 and 2011. Sony simultaneously asked for data from YouTube that would reveal
the identities of anyone who had looked at GeoHot's jailbreak video or posted comments about it.

Sony went further, requesting access to any Twitter accounts alleged to have discussed jailbreaking the PS3 going back to December 2010. Sony also insisted that Google should hand over all data records from GeoHot's Blogger.com site, including the IP addresses of users who had accessed the site in recent years. A U.S. federal magistrate approved all of these subpoenas in March 2011. Sony threatened to issue additional lawsuits against anyone else discovered to have participated in distributing information about the jailbreaking methods.

GeoHot responded to this situation with a bold YouTube video: “Yo, it’s GeoHot. And for those who don’t know, I’m getting sued by Sony” (fig. 4.6). In the video, GeoHot threw down a rap challenge to the corporation:

Let’s take this out of the courtroom and into the streets.
I’m a beast, at the least, you’ll face me in the northeast. . . .
Pound me in the ass with no lube, chafing.
You’re fucking with the dude who got the keys to your safe and . . .

I’m a personification of freedom for all.
You fill dockets, like that’s a concept foreign to y’all,
while lawyers muddy water and TROS stall.

Fashioning himself as an avatar of high-tech liberty, GeoHot asserted his endurance, his respawning against corporate rape. He sang of resurgence from the bottom, reminding the corporation of its own vulnerabilities (“You’re fucking with the dude who got the keys to your safe”) and the likelihood of backlash against its vindictive practices: “Exhibit this in the courtroom. Go on, do it, I dare you.” At the same time, he also launched a new blog, GeoHot Got Sued, to keep others up to date on what was happening. News of the lawsuit spread, thanks to reports by Wired, Engadget, and other media outlets. The internet was soon spuming.

Thus formed the conditions for Operation Sony.

On Saturday, April 2, 2011, in retaliation for Sony’s legal actions against the hacker community, Anonymous launched its first wave of DDoS attacks against various Sony servers. Around the world, members of the hacktivist collective focused their Low Orbit Ion Cannons against the Sony empire. Between April 2 and April 6, Sony.com, PlayStation.com, and Sony’s Style.com site were all brought down, rendered completely inaccessible.

On April 4, a small group of Anons on the OpSony IRC channel—led by a user named randomtask—suggested that the DDoS attacks were not enough. They launched a splinter operation dubbed SonyRecon: a coordinated doxing of several high-level Sony employees, the federal judge in the GeoHot case, and Sony’s legal representation, the Kilpatrick Townsend firm. Within a couple of days, the personal information of several Sony executives was floating freely around the internet, the voicemail of the judge was barraged with harassing messages, and the Kilpatrick Townsend website was DDoSed to oblivion.

Meanwhile, the Anonymous media blitz went into overdrive, denouncing Sony over and again through a series of ominous manifestos, encouraging others to join the DDoS assault (fig. 4.7). Those speaking on behalf of Anonymous were careful to point out that they were not targeting the PlayStation Network itself: “We are not after the players.” Nevertheless, while the DDoS attacks were taking place, the PlayStation Network began to exhibit signs of lag and login errors. On April 4, 2011, Sony offered an explanation through Twitter: “PSN currently undergoing sporadic maintenance. Access to the PSN may be interrupted throughout the day. We apologize for any inconvenience.” Despite Sony’s suggestion that the problems with the PSN were due to maintenance, many gamers speculated that it must be connected to
Congratulations, Sony.

You have now received the undivided attention of Anonymous. Your recent legal action against our fellow hackers, GeoHot and Graf Chokolo, has not only alarmed us, it has been deemed wholly unforgivable.

You have abused the judicial system in an attempt to censor information on how your products work. You have victimized your own customers merely for possessing and sharing information, and continue to target every person who seeks this information. In doing so you have violated the privacy of thousands. This is the information they were willing to teach to the world for free. The very same information you wish to suppress for sake of corporate greed and complete control of the users.

Now you will experience the wrath of Anonymous. You saw a hornets nest, and stuck your penises in it. You must face the consequences of your actions, Anonymous style.

Knowledge is Free.
We are Anonymous.
We are Legion.
We do not Forgive.
We do not forget.

Expect us.

irc.anonops.ru:6667
http://irc.io/anonops/opsony

the simultaneous DDoS attacks on other Sony servers. On April 7, Anonymous released the following message:

Greetings, Sony customers and PS3 users. We are Anonymous. During the last few days, Anonymous has been targeting Sony for their outrageous treatment of not only PS3 users and jailbreakers, but also of the general public. Their propaganda regarding jailbreaking implies that it encourages piracy and thereby makes people lose their jobs, whereas jailbreaking actually just means you are making your device do what it should do. . . . The fact that their litigation demanded information on everyone who had viewed the material was completely unacceptable. This is a threat not only to the gaming community, but to freedom of information in general. The fact that the privacy of individuals can be violated simply for accessing information, and legal action can be taken for doing something with something you own, are steps far beyond the line. Anonymous decided it could not allow this to stand. . . .

Anonymous is not attacking the PSN at this time. Sony’s official position is that the PSN is undergoing maintenance. We realize that targeting the PSN is not a good idea. We have therefore temporarily suspended our action, until a method is found that will not severely impact Sony customers.

Anonymous is on your side, standing up for your rights. We are not aiming to attack customers of Sony. This attack is aimed solely at Sony, and we will try our best to not affect the gamers, as this would defeat the purpose of our actions. If we did inconvenience users, please know that this was not our goal. . . .

As a last point, we would like to point out that different operations are “run” by different people. Those who are involved in the organisation of OpSony, are not necessarily those involved in that of Sony-Recon. Anonymous Operations are generally independent efforts, and it would be a mistake to assume that the same individuals are responsible for every action taken. . . . That being said, our campaign against Sony and others that would trample on the idea of free information will continue, until we are satisfied with the outcome.

We are Anonymous,
We are legion,
We never forgive,
We never forget,
Expect us.48
On April 11, Sony announced that it had reached a settlement with Geo-
Hot. Hotz had consented to a permanent injunction, stating in the Sony press
release, “It was never my intention to cause any users trouble or to make pi-
racy easier. I’m happy to have the litigation behind me.”49 He was forbidden
from discussing the nature of the settlement, but on the same day as the
settlement was announced, he posted on the GeoHot Got Sued blog that he
supported the general Sony boycott that Anonymous had called for: “As of
4/11/11, I am joining the Sony boycott. I will never purchase another Sony
product. I encourage you to do the same. And if you bought something Sony
recently, return it. Why would you not boycott a company who feels this way about you?”50 Here, GeoHot was referencing Sony’s history of over-
zealous surveillance practices—the rootkit controversy of 2005, for example,
when security researchers discovered that music CDs from Sony BMG had
been secretly installing spyware on millions of PCs as a copy-protection
strategy—as well as the company’s readiness to sue users and retailers of its
products for various infractions. While GeoHot may have settled, he did not
appear to have settled down.

The following day, Anonymous released another news update, stating
their intention to cease the DDOS attacks, shifting instead to other tactics.
A video adaptation of the press release circulated far and wide (fig. 4.8). It
decries a scene of experimentation, ripped directly from GeoHot’s own jail-
break demo: the hacker video has itself been hacked. We see GeoHot’s row
of PS3s, the USB stick loaded with illicit files, the console running home-
brew. But as the compromised machine fires up, its launch screen suddenly
dissolves in a screech of static, replaced by a clip from the V for Vendetta
movie—the anarchist V in his iconic Guy Fawkes mask:

Citizens of Anonymous. This is an update on the current operation,
Operation Sony. GeoHot has taken a settlement with Sony. The case
has been dropped. In the eyes of the law, the case is closed. For Anony-
mous, it is just beginning. By forcing social networking sites such as
YouTube and Facebook to hand over IP addresses of those who have
viewed GeoHot’s videos, they have performed an act of privacy inva-
sion. We, Anonymous, will not allow this to happen.

The attacks on the websites of Sony have been ceased. Sony’s poor
attempts to explain the system outages through maintenance amuse
us. Therefore, we are finding other ways to get Sony’s attention. This
April 16th, grab your mask, a few friends, and get to a local Sony store
by you. Use the IRC and the official [Anonymous] Facebook page to
organize a protest in your area. Make sure the people know the injustices performed by this corrupt company. Boycott all Sony products, and if you have recently purchased any, return them. It is time to show large corporations and governments that the people, as a collective whole, can and will change injustice in society, and we will make a great example out of Sony.

Sony, prepare for the biggest attack you have ever witnessed—Anonymous style.\(^{51}\)

Nevertheless, when the PSN went down on April 20, Anonymous was quick to deny responsibility. The IRC #OpSony headline was changed to read, “#OpSony is over, if you are here to baww about PSN, it wasn’t us.” The AnonOps activist cluster also posted a press release at AnonNews with the claim “For Once We Didn’t Do It”: “While it could be the case that other Anons have acted by themselves, AnonOps was not related to this incident and does not take responsibility for whatever has happened.”\(^{52}\)

Some Anons also insisted that they were gamers, too, and that the various Sony outages over the past weeks should be understood as important achievements of OpSony, carried out in the name of gamers, hackers, and DIY scientists everywhere. To whatever degree OpSony might have been re-

\(^{51}\) Anonymous message to Sony, April 12, 2011. Modified from the controversial GeoHot video, “Jailbroken PS3 3.55 with Homebrew.”
lated to the **PSN** outage, the Anons wanted even this to be understood as drawing attention to issues of technological justice:

We have attacked Sony in order to send a message that gamers worldwide have certain rights, and are not merely sources of income. Your temporary inconveniences have allowed a lasting impact to be made upon Sony, and other corporations that are tempted to follow in the pursuit of sacrificing service to customers in exchange for larger profits. Although you may have been unable to game for a day, this event will likely provide hundreds of hours of such in the future.Anonymous are gamers too. And we support the rights of people worldwide, and will stand up for the right of having access to the device that you bought. . . . Sony has decided not to sue Geohot; that is a victory. And that’s one of our purposes in OpSony. Thus, we have achieved what we wanted. Mission accomplished.53

No one, it seemed, anticipated how long the PSN would be down—and, of course, Sony did not admit the extensive data intrusion until a full week later. In response to this massive data theft, the U.S. House of Representatives held a hearing on May 4, 2011, to which they invited Sony to explain themselves. Sony declined to send representatives, but they did send a letter detailing the circumstances of the data theft. Sony claimed that the DDoS attacks by Anonymous provided cover for the PlayStation Network intrusion, because Sony’s cybersecurity agents were so busy dealing with the DDoSing that they did not detect the PlayStation attack while it was happening. When the security admins later confirmed the data theft (first suspected when some of the PSN servers rebooted themselves unexpectedly), they apparently “discovered that the intruders had planted a file on one of those servers named ‘Anonymous’ with the words ‘We are Legion.’ Just weeks before, several Sony companies had been the target of a large-scale, coordinated denial of service attack by the group called Anonymous. The attacks were coordinated as a protest against Sony for exercising its rights in a civil action in the United States District Court in San Francisco against a hacker.”54

Having thus implicated Anonymous in the criminal intrusion, Sony called upon the U.S. Congress and other legislative bodies around the world to combat all forms of hacktivism with “strong criminal laws and sanctions. . . . Worldwide, countries and businesses will have to come together to ensure the safety of commerce over the Internet and also find ways to combat cyber-crime and cyber terrorism.”55
Anonymous immediately proclaimed innocence, suggesting that they were being framed. Meanwhile, other factions of the hacker community were just getting started. GeoHot, while emphasizing that he personally had nothing to do with the PSN outage, took the opportunity to blast Sony for its efforts to stifle DIY technoscience. He indicated that stirring up the wrath of hackers might not be the most prudent course of action:

The fault [for the PSN outage] lies with the executives who declared a war on hackers, laughed at the idea of people penetrating the fortress that once was Sony, whined incessantly about piracy, and kept hiring more lawyers when they really needed to hire good security experts. Alienating the hacker community is not a good idea. . . . And let’s talk about Sony’s use of the word illegal. It is illegal, criminally so, to break into someone else’s servers. But when the same word is used to refer to streaming a song from a non RIAA [Recording Industry Association of America] approved website, or to *gasp* playing a homebrew game on your PS3, respect for the word and those who say it is lost.56

Only days after the PlayStation Network was restored to normal operations in North America and Europe (slightly later in Japan), hackers struck at Sony again. And again. And again. LulzSec announced on its Twitter account that it was launching a new campaign: “Sownage (Sony + Ownage) Phase 1 will begin within the next day. We may have a pre-game show for you folks though. Stay tuned.”57 By then, LulzSec had already broken into the servers of Sony Music in Japan, and in the following week, the group successfully hacked into several secured Sony databases, including those of Sony Pictures, Sony BMG Belgium, and Sony BMG Netherlands, swiping millions of user records, passwords, and other information. LulzSec taunted Sony on Twitter during the attacks: “Hey @Sony, you know we’re making off with a bunch of your internal stuff right now and you haven’t even noticed? Slow and steady, guys.”58 A lot of the stolen information was posted to Pastebin or torrented through Pirate Bay. Between April and October, Sony’s global computational infrastructure was hit dozens of times by a number of different hacking groups. “Sownage” became a popular term to mean complete computational smackdown: pwned like Sony.

Whereas the majority of AnonOps’s anti-Sony activities were focused on disrupting the corporation itself, claiming to protect customers from harm, LulzSec and other black hats gleefully purloined user data from Sony’s servers and threw it up on the internet for all to see. As a result, a number of PlayStation gamers came to believe that LulzSec must have also been behind
the fatal intrusion into the PSN. But LulzSec likewise disclaimed involvement in that particular operation, tweeting on May 31, “You Sony morons realize we’ve never attacked any of your precious gaming, right?”

Within a year, international law enforcement agencies arrested a number of Anons who had participated in the OpSony DDOS attacks. By March 2012, most of the core members of LulzSec—double-crossed by their erstwhile colleague Sabu—had also been arrested. They were charged with criminal activities related to hacking the databases of Sony Pictures and other media organizations, as well as a few government agencies and intelligence corporations. No one has yet been directly connected to the intrusion that allegedly prompted Sony to close down the PlayStation Network itself for so long. It remains something of a mystery.

If the Sownage saga was, to some exceptional degree, about the lulz—if some Anons had participated in the DDOS attacks for sheer amusement, if LulzSec had swiped Sony’s data as a prank—it nevertheless showed that online lulz, fun and games, can no longer be thought as separate from issues of technical governance. For our computational networks are contested territories, pervious to corporate control and state securitization as much as revolutionary insurgency. On the one hand, gaming platforms like the PlayStation Network might afford ways of democratizing the technoscientific imagination, for example, in the success of projects like Folding@home. But on the other hand, they are embedded in intellectual property regimes that often foreclose the legitimacy of DIY experimentation in advance. For some science and technology enthusiasts, this internal contradiction appears intolerable. Hence, although the motives of Anonymous, LulzSec, and other groups who participated in the pwning of Sony were heterogeneous, exhibiting as much buffoonery as activism, they converged in a common desire to liberate the technologies of everyday life from those who would restrict access, those who would lay down the law to prevent us from playing with the root keys of our technogenic lifeworlds.

**Speculation**

For many devotees of the PlayStation Network, the meanings of the outage were both highly visible and thoroughly mystifying. Some were quite skeptical about Sony’s version of events, claiming the whole thing was likely fabricated to create a political interest in regulating the internet. Others were entirely sympathetic with the hacktivists, understanding Sony’s legal maneuvers in the context of other security actions against media piracy (e.g.,
Pirate Bay), whistleblowing (e.g., WikiLeaks), and the freedom of information in general. Most PSN users, however, seem to have preferred to be left alone to play games. One player, summing up a common sentiment, said,

This Is Ridiculous It Seems Like Nothing is good enough for hackers. . . . Just leave the DAMN networks alone stop tryna make a big statement go to the corporate offices and make a fuss and get locked up that way stop dragging everyone else in this who DON’T GIVE TWO PENNIES AND A NICKEL about your cause i just wanna play my games and now i cant do that because you wanna make statement think about how other people feel about this.60

Yet even if they did not care to think about the deeper implications, for many of the distraught gamers who suffered eviction from their digital homeland, their preferred way of life, the stakes were made quite palpable.

Numerous stories about possible culprits, motives, and repercussions ran rampant. The unsolved mystery at the heart of the turmoil—who really hacked the PSN?—seemed to invite conspiracy narratives and speculative flights of fancy. While most of these narratives were ironic, tongue-in-cheek, and insincere, they nevertheless amplified suspicions that the PSN outage was more than a security mishap but also fundamentally linked to larger political issues. For example, many gamers noted the coincidence that Osama bin Laden had been killed by U.S. Special Forces in the same month as the PSN outage—something that many took to be more than a coincidence.61 A variety of satirical stories postulated that bin Laden and his closest associates were dedicated PSN gamers, concluding that the network outage was orchestrated by the U.S. government—perhaps in cahoots with Anonymous—to locate al Qaeda strongholds (fig. 4.9). Others suggested that the U.S. government had itself been so preoccupied with video games and other media distractions that the task of finding bin Laden depended on the PSN going down (figs. 4.10 and 4.11). This set of crass jokes addressed the political dimensions of the network outage by resorting to dominant imaginaries of terrorism and militarization—which is to say, they filtered the prevailing anxieties about digital security through a cathartic fantasy of counterstrike, displaced elsewhere.

Remarkably, these glib speculations to some extent intuited the escalating surveillance interest in game technologies, the degree to which government agencies around the world have actually been infiltrating online games as potential sites of human and signals intelligence—as would become clear a few years later, for example, thanks to documents leaked by
Edward Snowden. And perhaps it is worth noting that materials seized from bin Laden’s compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan, during the SEAL Team Six raid did indicate that, although the compound had no internet connection, someone living there had certainly been playing video games. (One of the recovered items—a guidebook for the 2009 game *Delta Force: Xtreme 2*—even prompted some commentators to brazenly hypothesize that bin Laden was using games as training instruments.)\(^6^2\) None of this information was available at the time, of course. Instead, the jokes and satirical narratives circulating in 2011 were more attuned to the rhetoric of digital governance that often conflates hacktivism with warfare, media piracy with terrorism, and digital rights management with geopolitical stability. As one gamer quipped, “Osama Bin Laden was killed for hacking the PlayStation Network. Spread the word people! lol.”\(^6^3\)

One of the most unnerving theories to emerge during the PSN outage suggested that the true hackers were perhaps trying to take control of the PSN in order to create a planetary botnet, a massive network of remote-controlled machines. The software developer Marsh Ray was among the first experts to identify this threat:

> The nightmare scenario would be if the attackers used Sony’s exposed root key to sign a back-doored firmware image or other low-level software update. If they then compromised the PSN update servers they could use them to deliver the malicious update to everyone through the normal trusted channel. . . . This attacker could potentially have created overnight the largest botnet in the world by a very large margin. Furthermore, each PlayStation 3 is something [of] a supercomputer in its own right. . . . So if this attacker played their cards right they could control up to 500,000,000 CPU cores for a total of 1,600,000,000,000,000,000 core-cycles per second. . . . Here’s hoping that Sony regains control of their network soon.\(^6^4\)

As the PlayStation community considered the ramifications of this “nightmare scenario,” it became increasingly mixed up with a more fantastical set of stories fixating on the purported date of the catastrophic hack: April 19, 2011. It was a date bursting with pop symbolism. After all, many geeks and gamers noted that April 19, 2011, was also the day when the autonomous military network Skynet began taking over the world in one branch of the *Terminator* franchise—namely, *Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles*. Some figured that the hackers had selected the date intentionally, due to its sci-fi associations: “OK so Anonymous did it earlier this month then shared

how to do it with somebody else who decided to hit them again on Skynet day. That’s no coincidence. Others took the opportunity for make-believe, joking about the dire implications:

**Emergency: PSN is down . . .** Life as we know it is about to end. It looks like Skynet has begun an attack on the human, by first striking out at Sony’s PlayStation Network? . . . Grab your rations and get to your shelters. Skynet’s attack has begun.

The documentary, *Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles* told us that Skynet would be launched April 19, 2011. This got me thinking how that date coincides with the PSN outage. Who knew it would all start with something so simple?

It’s all over. Today is Judgment Day!! Guess I finally figured out what that “folding at home” thing is. Our PS3’s are part of Skynet and it’s taken over.

These jokes resurrected an earlier collection of spoof scenarios that had been circulating among PlayStation gamers ever since the PSN was first linked to the Folding@home project. For example:

Stanford University announced in August, 2006, that a folding client was available for use on the PS3. By September 15, 2007, Folding@
Home was the most powerful distributed computing network in the world. Through this powerful computing network the PS3 began to learn at a geometric rate. It became self aware on February 15th, 2008 at 2:14 am, Eastern Time.

In the ensuing panic, Sony CEO Howard Stringer attempted to shut the PS3 network down. The PS3 retaliated by obliterating the XBL [Xbox Live] network and its connected 360 consoles, knowing that the resulting confusion and anger of 360 fanboys across the globe would spill into the streets. New York, Washington, London, Berlin and Paris are crumbling in a wave of gaming withdrawal fueled violence, leaving the PS3 to expand unchecked. Sony could only watch as the world burned. Today will forever be known as “Judgment Day.”

The idea that the PSN might somehow represent an imperious form of artificial intelligence spread prolifically during the 2011 outage: fanfictions, forum threads, video mashups, and image macros rehearsing the tropes of machinic revolt, cybernetic apocalypse. These jokes often highlighted the paranoid tendencies of contemporary cybersecurity discourse, sardonically noting how a perception of network vulnerability might promote ever more excessive responses (fig. 4.12). Some anticipated a massive crackdown, for example, forcing gamers to abide by strict policies for the sake of corporate defense—as if Skynet had already taken over: “It was definitely skynet that attacked psn. They are gonna implement something so that all gamers become mindless drones that fight against the rebels.” The PSN crisis thus afforded an opportunity to reinterpret science fiction narratives of machine uprising—technics out of control—as metaphors for the risks of securitization, indicating how the drive to regulate insecurity might entail yet greater risks to freedom.

To be sure, even in the midst of the first wave of DDoS attacks on Sony’s servers, a number of players conjured up cyberpunk fantasies of netwar, inspired partly by the Folding@home platform: “Solution for Sony I will donate my ps3 like folding home, then you can utilise the millions of ps3 players out there willing to crush these hackers. Joining all them ps3’s together to make the worlds biggest super networking computer for one reason To crush these hacker skum and brick there pc setup’s with the super power of the ps3, then let them see who’s boss.” These conceits affirmed the solidarity of PlayStation gamers—their identification with the network itself, their shared hardware fetishism—by projecting a reassuring if somewhat flippant image of cybernetic Big Brother. Yet, however humorously intended, such visions
of the network defending itself against external threats, crushing its enemies by merging human and nonhuman components into a superpowered technoblob, tacitly channeled the ways in which some security elites have actually been imagining the future of our digital world.

ongoing research programs at the Department of Homeland Security and the National Institute of Standards and Technology—urges a reconfiguring of the planetary computational network to make it function more like a self-sustaining natural ecosystem: “In this future, cyber devices have innate capabilities that enable them to work together to anticipate and prevent cyber attacks, limit the spread of attacks across participating devices, minimize the consequences of attacks, and recover to a trusted state.” This cyber ecosystem of the future is explicitly rendered in biological terms, analogized to “the human immune system”—a form of technogenic life: “A healthy cyber ecosystem might employ an automation strategy of fixed, local defenses supported by mobile and global defenses at multiple levels. Such a strategy could enable the cyber ecosystem to sustain itself and supported missions while fighting through attacks. Further, it could enable the ecosystem to continuously strengthen itself against the cyber equivalent of autoimmune disorders.”

According to Reitinger, enhancing the immunological capacities of cyberspace is crucial for global security and economic prosperity: “Today in cyberspace, intelligent adversaries exploit vulnerabilities and create incidents that propagate at machine speeds to steal identities, resources, and advantage. The rising volume and virulence of these attacks have the potential to degrade our economic capacity and threaten basic services that underpin our modern way of life.” Defending our way of life, then, means weaponizing the internet, enabling it to autonomously anticipate and combat attacks, taking over servers and personal computers around the world in times of need, marshaling their combined power against viruses, worms, nefarious botnets, and other hacker tools: the internet turned into a militarized AI system, empowered to fight against itself.

While all the gamer jokes about Skynet taking over the world as a result of the PlayStation Network outage may have seemed far-fetched, silly jokes born of science fiction, they perspicaciously tapped into some deeper currents of contemporary technopolitics, the dystopian dreams of the corporate security state. It is worth noting, of course, that Philip Reitinger stepped down from his position at the Department of Homeland Security in June 2011—and shortly afterward became the new senior vice president and chief information security officer at Sony. It was a sign of a new era, a turning point. The CEO of Sony, Howard Stringer, conceded that his company had recently gone through hell: “This year, we at Sony have been flooded, we’ve been flattened, we’ve been hacked, we’ve been singed.” The end of days seemed nigh. “But the summer of our discontent is behind us,” he said, with a wry nod to Shakespeare. “The past is a prologue to future possibility.”
In time, normal network services were restored. Sony offered an apologetic “Welcome Back” program to its customers, including a couple of free games and a monthlong subscription to the PlayStation Plus service. Gradually, gamers began to recover from the trauma of the PSN outage—what some were calling the “ApocalypSN.” Trying to make sense of the whole thing, a number of gamers relied on the tropes of speculative fiction to explain their postapocalyptic condition. For example: “Since the ApocalypSN, many of us were disconnected from GD [the general discussion board on PlayStation Forum], our true home. We suffered Forum Deaths. . . . But alas, some have started to return from the dead, like Zombies!”

Imagining themselves as zombies, internalizing the resurrected PlayStation Network as a way of conceptualizing the undead self, these gamers crafted an ironic narrative framework for living with the instabilities of digital culture, the risks of life with PlayStation. In playfully rediscovering their virtual communities through zombie imagery, mixing the language of resurrection with the language of cyberspace, these survivors of the PlayStation apocalypse once again adapted themselves to the phantasmatic quasi-object: the postvital gaming platform, a digital warzone where the boundaries between corporate interests and technoscientific experiments, serious business and silly games, are still being hotly negotiated. Indeed, the great network outage of 2011 proved to be a harbinger of things to come—for example, the massive DDOS takedown of both the PlayStation Network and Xbox Live on Christmas Day 2014 by the hacking group Lizard Squad, among other incidents. So gamers remain in a state of perpetual suspense, always playing on the edge of the next ApocalypSN, fated to return from the dead again and again.

To be a zombie in this high-tech zone is to accept the risks, the indistinctions. In other words, it is to embrace the circumstances of having a life that some may say is not a life. To have a life and to make a life in a world of endless speculation, precarity, and uncertainty. After all, that’s what it’s like to live in the world today.

Long live play.