

## CARLOS PALANCA MEMORIAL AWARDS FOR LITERATURE

2011 Kabataan Essay: What is the most valuable lesson you learned in the internet?

---

### Gods of the Internet

I remember the first time I was able to use the internet: it was like heaven. I did not mind that I was using a second-hand desktop my dad brought home. I did not care if it used Windows 98. It did not matter that I had to put up with a slow internet provider in those days when I knew nothing of DSL. It was at a time I recognized Internet Explorer as the only reliable browser; that was before I discovered the wonders of Mozilla Firefox or Google Chrome. The point is that what I had before me was liberating; it could take me anywhere beyond the four corners of my PC screen, the confines of my room, the black and white of my world.

One thing that made the internet so appealing to me is its size and scope. I knew at once that I could never get tired of it. There is just so much to see in this whole, new, virtual world. At times, I would go overboard and end up finding my eyes glued to the monitor for hours on end. I knew it was not right, but the internet to a new user could get very addictive. I would end up with migraines. At this stage, I was testing the waters, figuring out how it would serve me best and get headaches along the way.

On my first few excursions, I would simply browse through my favorite sites. My thirst for knowledge was easily satiated by this embodiment of the Information Age. I would go back and forth between sites like Yahoo, Google, and everyone's favorite: Wikipedia. I was stupefied by how much I was learning everyday. It seemed as if those who wrote here knew *everything*. It was as if God himself authored it all. Who else would possess so much knowledge and readily give it out to eager young minds like myself?

Of course, I knew myself as not only eager. I was gullible as well. Everyone who ever trusted Wikipedia would know what I am talking about. I began seeing junk like “Makati is the capital of the Philippines” or “Sharks are ugly dolphins.” At first I would believe the more reasonable trash one could just edit on the public website. But as they grew worse, I abandoned Wikipedia altogether, especially for doing my homework. I had disowned the gods I had relied on so much for my research. Well, these “gods” did not know everything after all. At least, they just pretended to. Some claim facts their own. People are ruthless with copy-paste, aren’t they?

It was at that time that I started calling internet users “gods.” They were most of the time unseen, but they made their presence felt. They were very influential, and had untold powers when logged on the internet. Many of them even have a band of loyal followers.

When I got tired of the usual sites I visited, I turned to my other interests. I began to explore the internet beyond my established comfort zone. I went to websites of significance, such as Catholic Answers and Pinoy Exchange, as well as websites of insignificance, like Pokemon.com or World of Warcraft Wiki. Either way, I indulged in them heavily. I think forums on sites such as these are one the best uses for the internet. As I read through all these forums with such broad topics as society, religion, the economy, literature, and even one’s wardrobe, I was compelled to join them. In forums such as these, internet users, the gods, are able to voice out their own opinions and spread the knowledge. And that knowledge would add to my meager stock, which I know I will be able to use in real life. From e-bay to answers.com, from all manners of self-help sites, I found the internet as not merely a way of escape but also a mode of reentry to the real world as better and more “educated” in a sense. Forums, in this way, become avenues for freedom, self-expression, like a sort of virtual democracy where one can engage in intellectual discussions, healthy debates, constructive criticism, formal dialogue, sharing of

interests, or even small talk and quick chat. I realized that the people here are the real gods. They might not exactly know *everything*, but they have the politeness, courtesy, and brevity that suggest a majestic demeanor.

After becoming a member in a number of such sites, I did something for the first time in my “virtual life.” I contributed to Wikipedia. That infamous site which has gained notoriety for attracting vandals who have nothing better to do, I sought to fix. From correcting subtle lapses in grammar and spelling, to writing full articles, I did it all. In my own little way, I was able to make Wikipedia a better place.

Another website made itself known to me by storm. This time, it was Youtube, that video phenomenon. Indeed, whereas I enjoyed all the previous sites by skimming through thoughtfully written articles and forums, Youtube gave me the opportunity to enjoy the internet as if I were in the family room watching television without having to wrestle the remote from someone else. It was an absolutely amazing experience which I enjoyed very much. I was able to catch up on episodes of my favorite shows, especially those I would miss because of my tight schedule. I could watch full-length movies without having to go all the way to the theatre. I could enjoy my favorite band or singer’s latest music video over and over again. I was able to watch online classes and tutorials that actually helped me with my schoolwork. Youtube gradually eclipsed Wikipedia, Google, and Yahoo as my most-visited site.

However, there was one flaw that ruined my Youtube experience. It was the comments section. I am always open to other people’s opinion. I have great respect for these gods and my reverence for them is greatly supported by their actions in the internet. But unlike the previous sites and forums, which are carefully monitored by online officers or GM’s as we call them, Youtube hosts a comments section heavily diluted with less healthy debates, racism, sexism, all

sorts of prejudices, swear words, vulgarities, and utter nonsense. Practically all videos have them. Music videos have haters who unreasonably bash at one's favorite artists. National anthems and patriotic videos are swarming with racists. The same holds true for many more videos, even the less serious ones (generally the less serious videos attract the more serious issues at hand). For instance, I was watching a math tutorial when I saw in one of the comments someone blaming Obama for all the problems of their country. Sometimes people would try to sell items in sites which host comments sections. Seriously, I respect freedom of expression but some people just abuse it. And they do so with impunity. People who say nasty things online are cowards, especially if they hide behind a username. I know that these gods are the evil types who have nothing else better to do than spread their hate instead of spreading knowledge and love. Worse, they harass other gods with bitter words, even obscenities and promiscuities. It became clear to me that the internet is being wrongly used as an instrument of hate.

Obscenities in particular are what I have learned to avoid. Pop-up windows leading to pornographic sites are indeed, to put it bluntly, disgusting and abominable. They do not deserve a place in a heaven like the internet, where only good things ought to exist.

Finally, there are social networking sites and blogs which provide the biggest connection between the real and virtual worlds. Facebook, Twitter, and Blogger have taught me to raise my now braver and more mature voice. I need not be like the cowardly gods who hide behind usernames. I can use my own identity and spread knowledge and love starting with the people I already know in the real world, and the people who regularly read my works online. And what I can do is far more profound than giving away a spare cow in Farmville.

It is on looking back at my journey through the internet that I realize the most valuable lesson I learned upon using this important tool. I feel like Dante, who after having gone through

all the tiers of Inferno, Purgatorio, and Paradiso, and encountered different kinds of gods along the way, has embraced his more spiritual self and has become more enlightened and resolute.

This is the most valuable lesson I have learned in the internet: *I have discovered who I am and what I can do*. Like any other internet user, *I am a god in the virtual domain*. As such, I have the all power to use or abuse the internet. Through all the knowledge I gain, I can come close to being omniscient. Much more importantly, I can choose to treat my fellow internet users benevolently, or malevolently. *I have the choice*, to silently read whatever is posted, or actively post my thoughts and opinions; to close pop-up windows of obscenities, or actively seek and indulge in them; to avoid creepers like online harassers or bullies, or be an online predator myself; to be ignorant and apathetic of real life events, or to donate spare change online to make a difference; to simply be polite and formal, or to be a rude, vulgar, and insensitive jerk. I realize that I possess the same powers I see the other gods exhibit. But I also have responsibilities that equal them.

Not only that, in being an active internet user, I have discovered who I am and consequently who I want to be in real life. What I do in the internet, whether I use my real name, my username, or expose myself in a webcam, is a reflection of who I am, my values, and my potential to make not just Wikipedia, but also the whole world, a better place. Earlier I had wanted to find out how to use the internet to best serve me. Now I want to use the internet to best serve others, virtually or otherwise.

Realizing what power I have as a god of the internet, I have the firm resolve to be a part of the celestial host of responsible internet users. That way, I can better not just the heavenly World Wide Web, but the real world at that. It is a big lesson learned, a simple resolution made, and an attitude nothing less than divine.