

## Hackers, liberalism and pleasure

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Most generally, my work entertains the formation of counter-expertise among technologists (programmers and hackers) and patient advocates largely, but not exclusively, in the context of virtual interactions. Since most of my completed work is on geeks and hackers who write Free and Open Source software, such as the Linux operating system, the rest of the post will focus on completed research, publications, and a manuscript I am writing on the topic: Coding Freedom: Hacker Ethics and Pleasure.

First a word about hacking, which tends to immediately raise eyebrows and stereotypes perpetuated by the media (and at times by hackers themselves):

Generally a hacker is a technologist with a love for computing and a hack is a clever technical solution arrived through a non-obvious means (or alternatively it can mean a downright clunky and ugly solution, one, however, that gets the job at hand done). Hackers tend to uphold a value for freedom, privacy, and access; they tend to adore computers—the cultural glue that binds them together; they are trained in highly specialized and technical esoteric arts, including programing, system administration, and security research; some gain unauthorized access to technologies,

though the degree of illegality greatly varies (and most of hacking is completely legal); they tend to value playfulness and cleverness and will take most any opportunity to perform their wit through code or humor or even both: funny code.

Once one confronts the fuller, social dimensions of hacking, this shared plane of material and ideological existence melts into a sea of difference and variations, one variation being Free and Open Source Software. Other variations have focused on cryptography and privacy, for example. Most famously, the “hacker underground” has brought into being a politics of transgression by seeking forbidden fruit—and it is this variant that has received the lion's share of media attention. Most of my work has concentrated on Free and Open Source software, a techno-social movement centered around making the underlying directions of software, source code, legally accessible via novel licensing schemes, most famously the GNU General Public License. Following an anthropological tradition that examines the linkages between the online and offline world, much of my work has examined how hackers have exposed central contradictions in the liberal tradition, notably between intellectual property and free speech, in large part by remaking liberal values into their own technical vernacular. I have explored this in depth in a number of publications, most recently a piece that examines the coupling between source code and free speech as it occurs in the context of software development and political protest.

Another thread in my work entertains the pleasures of hacking and thus pays close attention to the material and affective stances of hacking/programming. Since I have published less on this material, I will spend a little more time on this theme here. In its more commonplace form, hacker pleasure approximates the Aristotelian theory of eudaimonia described by philosopher Martha Nussbaum “the unimpeded performance of the activities that constitute happiness.” In pushing their personal capacities and technologies to new horizons, hackers experience the joy of that follows from the self-directed realization of skills, goals, and talents—more often than not achieved through computing technologies—and is a form of happiness that is evident in other forms of crafting.

Hacker pleasure, however, is not always so staid; it far exceeds the eudamonic pride of crafting. Less occasionally, hackers experience a more obsessive and blissful state. In native hack-jargon, the state of bliss is “Deep-Hack Mode.” Matt Welsh, a well-known hacker and computer scientist, humorously describes the utter magnetism of this mode, “...very few phenomena can pull someone out of Deep Hack Mode, with two noted exceptions: being struck by lightning, or worse, your \*computer\* being struck by lightning.”

One cultural vessel by which I analyze the pleasures of hacking is humor, which was quite pervasive during the course of my fieldwork. I encountered it over dinner with geeks in San Francisco, all the time online during Internet Relay Chats (IRC), and during the festive conferences—the hacker cons—that hackers organize and attend (and sometimes hack until they drop):

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To put it simply, humor is pleasure and play made socially material/tangible and also reveals and attenuates all sorts of contradictions in the world of hacking, especially between individualism and collectivism. Humor—a punctuated, performative, and self-grounding expression of wit—is also a distilled instantiation of the hacker cultural adoration for cleverness. It is a particularly effective way of enacting their commitment to cleverness precisely because, unlike the objects of hacker technical production, joking has no strict functional utility and speaks of the inherent appeal of creativity and cleverness for their very own sake. Joking is a self-referential exercise that designates the joker as an intelligent person and cleverness as autonomously valuable.

To wrap up, discussing hacking in terms of liberalism and pleasure might seem implausible or even a contrived imposition. Presenting them together gets us much closer to what makes this site of ethics and technological production so intriguing in the first place. For it is the extreme pleasure of hacking that motivates hackers to simultaneously turn to and yet also turn away from liberal engagements. The unruly, deeply-felt pleasures of hacking, which at times stray away from liberal visions, and usually enters into a more romantic territory, nonetheless hold a substantive link with them. Because the joy of hacking intimately shapes the hacker desire for productive freedom, hacker pleasure forms part of the ground for adopting and extending liberal commitments, especially those of freedom and free speech. At least part of the reason hacker ethics takes the liberal form it does is connected to the particular pleasurable experiences of hacking, which nonetheless, often part company with liberal logics.

Links:

1. <http://www.gnu.org/copyleft/gpl.html>
2. <http://www.amazon.com/Internet-Ethnographic-Approach-Daniel-Miller/dp/1859733891>
3. <http://www.culanth.org/?q=node/238>
4. <http://www.utilitarian.net/jsmill/about/20040322.htm>
5. <http://mbrix.dk/files/quotes.txt>