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Reading Notes: Hacker Ethic

- The interest in the hacker ethic would be in extending it, either as concept and analysis, or as model and design, to other online communities.
- It strikes me that the hacker community is a highly competent bunch of computer users, and that their aggregate competence sets the foundation for self-policing behavior. One could say that it's not the hackers per se, but the community's maturity and experience. Hunters, burners, and DJ's, also police themselves (hunters by not shooting one another; burners by not dying on the playa; dj's by sharing tracks). The success of a community constrained by its own ethical commitment is quickly undermined by even a few rotten apples—be they newbies, jealous outsiders, competitors, or what have you. Perhaps competence, and not "hacker", is the operative term here.
- Chance is interested in the passionate and creative quality of hacker work; but I think the positive orientation of hacker work must also be put in the context of the hacker's rebel spirit. After all, hacking is a subversive undertaking, even if the nature of the work is creative and unconstrained (by authority, making money, etc).
- Deriving a shared hacker ethic from the (apparent) common activities and behaviors of hackers may be too strong and optimistic. We can't claim to know why individuals do things, even if a group of them has a mission statement purporting to do just that. An equally compelling analysis would be, simply, that hackers compete for recognition, status, and acknowledgment just like the rest of us. And that being seen as an ethical hacker is one important element in that pursuit. In other words, it is

logically difficult to claim that the hacker ethic offers something intrinsically special.

- W/r/t the hacker's insistence on "freedoms," we have to make this point clear: free product is as much a comment on capitalist for-profit product, and the capitalist's labor relations, as it is the creation of a common good. Yes it's true that the hacker ethic seems to promote an alternative economy (much reminiscent of burning man, and probably not by coincidence). But free here also means "not for sale."
- The hacker act is as important as the hacker product.
- Chance himself takes up the hacker ethic in a philosophical context, which is interesting. But I think it's a mistake to disregard the society or community of hackers, and to look for sociological explanations of the ethic in addition to neo Kantian or neo Marxist ones.
- There's an interesting contradiction inherent to the concept of individual labor and common benefit; the hacker ethic claims to resolve the two. Hacker's are satisfied as individuals (their work is interesting and not exploited), and as a community the product of their work is shared and free. At first glance this arrangement looks ideal, for the worker is individually realized while he contributes to a common good at the same time. But the whole thing is set up on a false foundation, a negative dialectic, if you will, because it's contingent on the existence of a for-profit mode of production, one against which it bears critique... The hacker ethic is a "mirror of production" (to quote Baudrillard, though I'm sure inaccurately)

"The license guarantees the following four freedoms:

1. The freedom to run the program, for any purpose
2. The freedom to study how the program works, and adapt it to your needs
3. The freedom to redistribute copies so you can help your neighbor
4. The freedom to improve the program, and release your improvements to
5. the public, so that the whole community benefits"

p. 9

[The Hacker Ethic and Meaningful Work](#)

Tom Chance, 2005

These reading notes were taken while researching source material and conceptual frameworks of potential use to *social interaction design*, an approach I'm developing for use in the development and design of social software, interaction tools, communication technologies and their applications.