

## **In-Person Sociality: The Hacker Conference and the Distillation of a Lifeworld<sup>1</sup>**



### *Hacker Con: Brief History<sup>2</sup>*

Much has been made over the fact that hacking and F/OSS production unfolds in the ethereal space of bits and bytes. “Indeed, serious hackers” writes Manuel Castells, “primarily exist as hackers on-line.” (2001: 50). Undoubtedly, the substantial academic attention given to the virtual ways hackers produce technology is warranted and rich and has advanced our sociological understanding of virtual communities. But what this literature fails to substantially address (and sometimes even barely acknowledge) is the existence and growing importance of face-to-face interactions among geeks.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps this is so because much of this interaction seems utterly unremarkable—the ordinary stuff of work and friendships. For example, many hackers see each other with remarkable consistency, usually every day at work where they may share office space and regularly eat lunch together. During down-time they will “geek out,” perhaps delving deep in conversation about technology, hacking on some code, or patching and

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Jonas Smedegaard who gave me prompt feedback on this section.

<sup>2</sup> During the course of my fieldwork I attended Defcon 2002 (Las Vegas); Codecon 2002 (San Francisco); Debconf 2002 (Toronto)/2004 (Brazil); LinuxWorld 2000/2001/2002 (Bay Area); Annual Linux Showcase 2001 (Oakland); Usenix 2002 (San Francisco); Computer, Freedom, and Privacy 2002 (San Francisco); HOPE 2002/2004 (New York City); and Forum Internacional Software Livre 2004 (Brazil). Compared to many geeks I knew, my attendance record in the conference circuit was fairly light to moderate.

<sup>3</sup> See chapter two for an overview of the literature on hackers.

recompiling their kernel just to try something out. On a given day, they might dissect the latest round of RIAA-provoked lawsuits launched against P2P file sharers and bemoan the discovery of a particularly obnoxious security hole in the Linux kernel.<sup>4</sup> The following day they might tackle some work-related technical hitch and express their relief that the security hole was patched. They may, if they attend school, take classes together and in the evening spend hours together in the Computer Science lab where they hack on projects, interacting in ways strikingly similar to Steven Levy's portrayal of hackers before the advent of large scale connectivity (1984). On weekends closer friends may informally socialize at a bar, on a camping trip, at a technically oriented meeting, or at a LAN party (a temporary gathering of people together with their computers, which they connect together in a local area network [LAN] in a location primarily for the purpose of playing multiplayer computer games). If they live in an location with a particularly high density of geeks, usually big cities with a local technology sector (for example, Amsterdam, Munich, Bangalore, Boston, São Paulo, the Bay Area, Austin, NYC, and Sydney), face-to-face interactions are more likely to happen, especially since geeks often are roommates or associate through informal hacker associations and collectives that are grounded, to some degree, locally.<sup>5</sup>

The advent of networked hacking should not be thought of as a displacement or replacement of physical interaction. These two modes silently but powerfully reinforce each

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<sup>4</sup> Though no one has yet to adequately address the socio-cultural ramifications of the geek cultural experience in the workplace, its existence and importance are nonetheless documented aptly in comic strips such as *User Friendly* and *Dilbert*, which humorously depict the routine ebbs and flows of office life and are read by many hackers and geeks. As explained on one Debian developer's home web page, "Dilbert is a wonderful comic strip about the trials and tribulations of working in a corporate environment. Every computer geek, nay, everyone even vaguely involved in **anything** technological, should have this bookmarked." See <http://azure.humbug.org.au/~aj/>. The importance of the corporate world in shaping geek values is implicitly reflected in the fact that many hackers love the movie *Office Space* for it captures as one geek told me "the asinine waste and idiocy of office politics."

<sup>5</sup> For example the BALE (Bay Area Linux Events) website lists eight different meetings/events between March 1 and 8, 2005. See <http://www.linuxmafia.com/bale/>.

other, working to stabilize intersubjective meanings around technology, morality, selfhood, and politics. Reading the latest technical, legal, or social news about F/OSS on a web news portal every morning, then posting the article link on a mailing list board (perhaps with a brief analysis) and discussing this news with friends over lunch, bolsters the validity and importance of such public discourse.<sup>6</sup> Discourse grabs attention effectively because it circulates pervasively, traveling in many places where it is multiply read, chewed on, digested, re-vamped, and (repeat x times).

Admittedly, this type of daily or weekly in-person interaction among friends and work-mates is rarely thought of by hackers as the locus of the “community” commonly referred to when speaking of computer hacking or free and open source software. For hackers, the locus of sociality is, as much of the literature argues, networked and translocal. Composed of a vast and dispersed conglomeration of peoples—close friends, acquaintances, strangers—they see themselves united primarily via the communicative applications of the Internet and by a fervent interest in, and commitment to, technology.

However, if hackers have undoubtedly come to situate themselves in a vast global communications network and imagine themselves in terms of networks and virtuality, they have increasingly done so by celebrating their translocality in person. More than ever, hackers participate in and rely on a physical space common to many types of social groups (such as academics, professional groups, hobbyists, activists, and consumer groups): the conference, which in hacker lingo is usually designated by its shorthand, the “con.”

Coming in many forms, the number of hacker cons is astonishingly high, although it must

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<sup>6</sup> Certainly it is not everyday that hacker go beyond reading news to discuss it with peers online or with friends, but it seems that they do engage in this multiplicity quite often.

be emphasized that their emergence is recent. Nonexistent before the early 1980s, the autonomously organized hacker con has markedly proliferated during the last fifteen years, keeping pace with the seismic expansions of networked hacking and undeniably made possible by changing economies of air travel. To adequately grapple with the prosaic nature of hacker sociality, whether virtual or in person, we must also give due attention to these events, which take on an extraordinary and for some hackers a deeply meaningful aspect to their lifeworld.

Since the history of the hacker conference has yet to be written, it is worth providing a few basic details here. Before the advent of the autonomously organized hacker conference, computer professionals met during trade workshops and professional conferences. Important precursors to the hacker con were hardware and hobbyist gatherings, many which pre-dated personal computers. In the late 1970s, hardware hobbyists hosted amateur computer shows where they displayed their home-crafted electronics and computer equipment alongside those manufactured by small corporations that would eventually engulf and eradicate the PC hobbyist movement. Though some small corporations displayed their products, these affairs were informal geek-out gatherings.

For example, in 1976, Jim Warren decided, after attending the Atlantic City *PC '76* event, to host a West coast version, which he called the “West Coast Computer Faire.” Much more popular than anyone anticipated, Steven Levy described this as the hacker equivalent of the “Woodstock in the movement of the 1960s” (Levy 1984: 266). To the best of my knowledge, it was still another eight years before the first autonomously organized hacker conference was held. Initially inspired by the book *Hackers*, this con was held north of San Francisco in 1984. Operating on the basis of personal invitation, the “Hackers” con still exists as a private, elite affair.

The “SummerCons” also started in this period. These were hosted by the underground e-zine *Phrack* and were also invite-only affairs, not opened to the general public until 1995. In 1990, the Cult of the Dead Cow, an underground hacker group based in Texas, hosted HoHoCon. Open to the public, the brash organizers also openly invited journalists and law enforcement officials, who had attended some of the previous SummerCons as peeping toms. HoHoCon became the template for the series of similar cons that would mushroom in the early 1990s such as Defcon (Las Vegas), PumpCon (Philadelphia), and 2600's HOPE (New York City). The Computer Chaos Club in Germany and the Hack-tic/Hippies from Hell in the Netherlands started to hold outdoor festivals every four years and still host these enormously popular events, drawing hackers from all over Europe and North America. In the late 1990s and early 2000, alongside a number of Linux and free/open source specific conferences, a number of F/OSS projects started to hold their own developer cons. These are now held annually and are often scheduled to follow or precede professional conferences, like LinuxWorld and Usenix.

### *A Ritual Condensation and Re-enactment of a Lifeworld*

Hacker cons occur infrequently but consistently. They reconfigure the relation between time, space and persons; allow for a series of personal transformations; and reinforce group solidarity. All of these aspects of conferences make them ritual-like affairs. While experiential disorder, license, and abandon are common to them, however, they tend to lack the types of reversals or inversions in traditionally identified forms of ritual that feature carnivalesque play or periods of ritual liminality (Bakhtin 1984; Turner 1967; Gluckman 1954). Instead, these are primarily rituals of *celebratory re-enactment*. Taking what is normally experienced prosaically over the course of months, hackers collectively condense their lifeworld in an environment

where bodies, celebration, food, and drink exist in excess. Interweaving hacking with bountiful play and constant consumption, the atmosphere is one of festive interactivity. As if making up for the normal lack of collective co-presence, physical contiguity reaches a high-pitched point.

Hacker conferences are rituals of confirmation, liberation, celebration, and re-enchantment. If humor is as microcosm of the value hackers place on autonomy (see Chapter 4), the con is a macrocosm of this commitment to technical sovereignty. Humor also reigns free at these festivals. They are particularly powerful in not only recreating but celebrating cherished elements of the hacker lifeworld.<sup>7</sup> Through a celebratory condensation, hackers imbue their actions with new, revitalized, or ethically charged meanings. Lifting life “out of its routine” (Bakhtin 1984: 273) in its place, hackers erect a semi-structured but fluid environment, the kinetic energy being nothing short of irresistible and corporeal interactivity. These are profound moments of cultural re-enchantment.

Since there are “only hosts for there are no guests, no spectators, only participants” (Bakhtin 1984: 249), everyone arrives on equal footing, ready to contribute their presence and their part to what can only be characterized as a dizzying range of activities that include formal talks, informal BOF's (birds of a feathers session),<sup>8</sup> lots of eating, maybe dancing, hacking, gaming, sight-seeing, drinking, and plenty of talking. A little bit like summer camp but without the rules, curfews, and annoying counselors, many hacker cons are the quintessential hacker

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<sup>7</sup> While no hacker con can be called a tame affair, they do, however, exist on a spectrum, which ranges from the large and wild to more subdued and intimate. Most hacker cons mix socializing, with hacking, gaming and talks/panels, which span from the utterly technical to the fabulously silly, with many legal, political and historical oddities and talks in between. Much of this description draws from Debcon4 although it is not solely a reflection of this particular event but a more general account of the hacker conference.

<sup>8</sup> A BOF is an informal discussion group session scheduled during a conference. I have been told my multiple people that the bird reference is meant to signify that they, like birds, flock together. I have also been told that it may also refer to the fable by Hans Christian Andersen about the way that an informal conversation can transform something small (like vague or incipient ideas) into mature and well formed ideas. See <http://www.underthesun.cc/Classics/Andersen/ThereIsNoDoubt/>

vacation, a vacation that often involves furiously exhausting work, lack of sleep, and the need to take a real break afterwards.

Though organizers spend many months of hard work planning these conferences, the participants tend to experience them as evanescent. Because very little beyond talks and a few planned events can be foreshadowed or predicted in advance, the social atmosphere is pregnant with possibility. Time takes on new qualities. Time in the ordinary sense of having to keep it, is unimportant as are many other demands of day to day living. Participants can change the outcome of the con itself by self-organizing, announcing new sessions, planning events, or by buying a lot of alcohol (that if drunk inadvertently derails other plans). Its temporal potency resides in its sheer intensity, a feverish pace of life in which freedom of expression, action, interactivity, and laughter reign loose and is often channeled to secure the bonds behind “intense comradeship” (Tuner 1969: 95). Reflexivity and reflection are put on momentary hold, in favor of visceral experience. Attention is given entirely to the present moment, so much so that the totality of the conference is usually recalled as startlingly unique, its subsequent representation whether in text, photos, or video, a mere shadow lacking the granularity and depth of what actually transpired.

But while its power seems to reside entirely in its temporal singularity, its effects are multiple, far outlasting the actual con itself. Due to sleep deprivation, overconsumption, and the physical-temporal condensation of interacting with peers in a non-Internet mediated way, by the end bodies and minds are usually left worn, torn, and, often, entirely devitalized. Nonetheless, by witnessing others who share one’s passions and by freely partaking in them, the hacking spirit is actually revitalized in the long run, after the short (and, for some, extended) recovery from the con that is needed to return to normal. Participants come to think of their relation to hacking or a

particular project in a different light. Above all, any doubts about one's real connection to this virtual community are replaced by an invigorated faith and commitment to the world.

### *The Social Metabolism of a Typical Developer Conference*

After hours of travel, hackers who tend to come from Western Europe, Australia, the United States, Canada (and a few from Asia and Latin America), trickle in throughout the first day and night to the venue. The Debian developer conference, for example, is held every year in a new location for over a week.<sup>9</sup> Those who have traveled especially far but have attended such conferences before arrive exhausted but enthusiastic. For first timers, the anticipation may be a little more amorphous but no less significant. The prospect of seeing, meeting, talking (actually *in person!*) with people you interact with every day, but typically only through the two dimensional medium of text, is exciting. Many participants, unable to contain their excitement, skip the first (and maybe second) night of sleep, spending it instead in the company of peers, friends, alcohol, and of course, computers:



No respectable hacker/developer con could be called such without the ample presence of computers, the collagen indisputably connecting hackers together. Thin laptops, chunky PCs,

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<sup>9</sup> In 2000, Debconf0 was held in Bordeaux, France; Debconf1 Bordeaux, France 2001; Debconf2 Toronto, Canada; Debconf3 Oslo, Norway; Debconf4 Porto Alegre, Brazil; Debconf5 was just recently held in Helsinki, Finland and the next Debconf is scheduled to be held in Mexico.

reams of cable, fancy digital cameras, and eccentric and other assorted electronics equipment ostentatiously adorn the physical environment. Animated by fingers swiftly tapping away at the keyboards, computers return the favor, animating faces in a pale hue.

Most cons now host a hack lab, a room filled with long tables, every inch occupied by computers networked together, available for experimentation, testing, playing, demonstrating, etc. Virtually communicating with participants (as well as with those unable to attend), hackers continue to give due attention to their work and networked interactivity even while in the presence of others:



Since coordinating the hundreds, sometimes thousands, of hackers at a con can be a bit of a challenge, geeks naturally turn to technology for help. Even before the start of a conference, organizers erect an IRC channel, mailing list, web page, and wiki. Many geeks, who are coming from out of town change their cell plans, rent a cell phone, or get a new chip for their cell phone to provide them with cellular service at the local rate. These tools are prolifically used to locate people, spontaneously coordinate new events, collect all sorts of information (for example local places to visit, compile a list of where people are from, find out where to do laundry, coordinate

a dinner), and post slides.<sup>10</sup> Posted on the Debcon4 mailing list, the following message exemplifies how such lists are used to organize new activities, some of which concern to locally defined technical matters or concerns:

Hi,

Chris Halls pointed out to me exactly how many people there are wandering this place with laptops. Both Enrico and I maintain packages to enable more or less automation of what happens when your laptop finds itself in a new location (i.e. guessnet and whereami), and I think it would be worthwhile for us to maybe chat with "itchy" people to see if we can scratch things in the right place.

It seems that there are far too many of these things around, and some review, rationalisation and redesign is probably in order.

Is anybody interested in helping us out with this?

I'm not sure if this is a BoF, but maybe an informal meeting over lunch, or a discussion with one or the other of us.

During talks, IRC becomes the high-tech peanut gallery. Hackers unabashedly discuss the talks as they unfold, giving those not present, but online, an often humorous textual play-by-play of them. At the con, these networked and virtual technologies exist in much the same way they ordinarily do. Rarely used in isolation or to replace the meat-world, they augment interactivity. And hackers have grown adept at fluidly moving between them, cultivating a peculiar incorporated competence—a hexis, the “durable manner of standing, speaking and thereby of feeling and thinking” (Bourdieu1977: 93) used to negotiate this movement. Even while typing

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<sup>10</sup> Although there was no funding budget report-back required, the organizers at the last Debconf gathered a staggering amount of detail, performed statistical breakdowns of participants, analyzed and summarized for no other purpose than to do it. At the last Debconf there were 148 participants from 27 countries: Argentina, Chile, Peru, Mexico, USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, South-Korea, South Africa, Greece, Italy, Spain, France, Belgium, Netherlands, England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Denmark, Finland, Norway, Poland, Austria, Germany. More specific stats can be viewed in the *Debconf4 Final Report*: <http://www.debconf.org/debconf4/final-report.html>

furiously away, eyes scan various open windows on the computer, but their ears are usually perked up, listening to the chatter, ready to contribute to the conversations unfolding in the room. Here and there, material and virtual, their bodies sit at an intersection, processing bits and bytes as well as other physical bodies, who do the same.

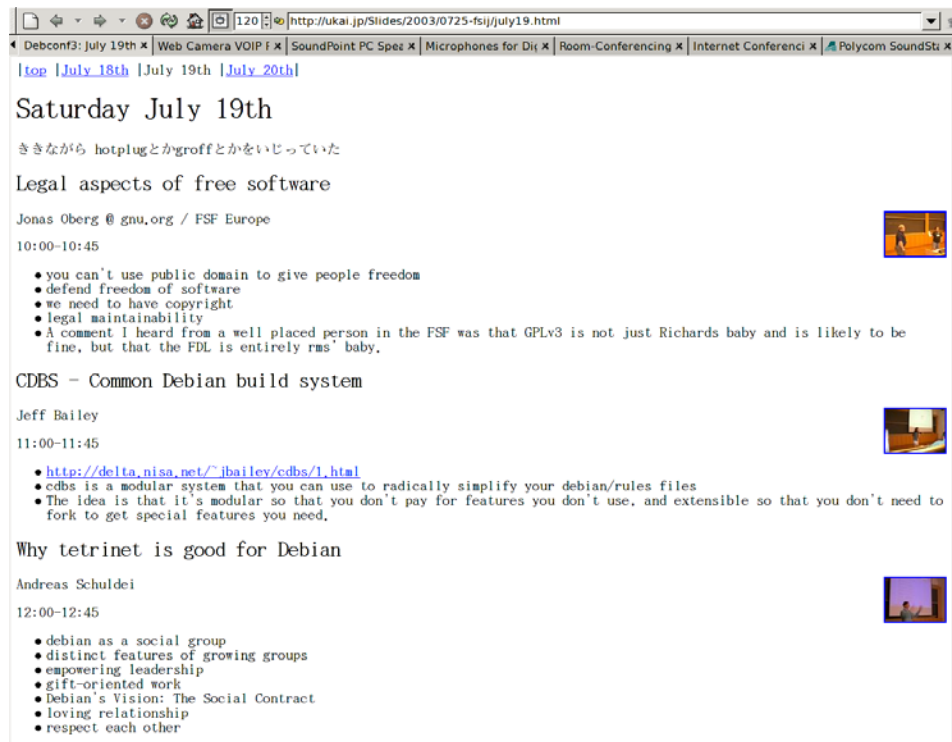
Cons offer ample opportunity for individuals to present their own work or interests to a larger audience.<sup>11</sup> Though many talks are on technical matters, they usually span multiple topics: legality, politics, cooperative sociality, and even the anthropology of their project:



Below is a snippet from the 2003 Debian developer conference program, indicative of the wide range of topics addressed during talks and panels:

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<sup>11</sup> During smaller cons, such as Codecon or the developer cons, there is usually only one scheduled talk during one time slot. As such, a good chunk of participants get to witness and participate in most of the talks. The larger conferences, such as Defcon and Hope, are organized around panels, usually with two or three tracks, lasting all day, sometimes well into the night. As such, they usually have a much vaster range of topics and panels. The following are but a small sample of panels from the Hope 2004 conference: *Building Hacker Spaces Binary*, *Bypassing Corporate Restrictions from the Inside*, *The CryptoPhone Cult of the Dead Cow Hactivism Panel*, *Friday Keynote: Kevin Mitnick, Hackers and the Law Hacking National Intelligence: Power to the People*, *Robert Steele, Lockpicking, Media Intervention via Social and Technical Hacking*, *Phreaking In The Early Days Privacy - Not What It Used To Be*, *Security, Liberties, and Trade-Offs in the War on Terrorism*, *Slaying the Corporate Litigation Dragon: Emerging the Victor in an Intellectual Property Cybersuit*, *Urban Exploring: Hacking the Physical World*



While the experience of a con may ostensibly evade representation (or strike participants as entirely fleeting), they are nonetheless important historical conduits. During cons participants make important decisions that may alter the character and course of the developer project. For example, during Debconf4, the handful of women attending used the time and energy afforded by an in-person meeting to initiate and organize “Debian-women,” a website portal and IRC mailing list that encourages female participation by visibly demonstrating the presence of women in the largely male project. Below is a picture of some of them brainstorming to help one Debian enthusiast prepare her talk on women and computing, which was held the next day:



While decisions are made that may alter the future history of a project, cons also imbue projects with a sense of historical time. Different generations of hackers intermix, older ones recollect times past, letting the younger hackers know that things were *once quite different*. Though information may strike outsiders as mundane, for those involved in the project, learning how its social organization radically differed (“the New Maintainer Process for me was e-mailing Bruce Perens”) or to find out where key Debian servers were once housed (“under x's disk in his Michigan dorm room”), is delectable and engaging. Over days of conversation, younger developers learn their project’s history, which grows ever more complicated each passing year. In return, younger developers also respond to stories of the past, adding their own versions of how they became involved in the project and what role they may have played in changing its procedures.

This back-and-forth storytelling, especially when based on personal memories and project history, is an apt example of the “second-order stories” that Paul Ricouer identifies as part of an intersubjective process of “exchange of memories.” These he writes, “are themselves intersections between numerous stories,” the effect of which is a more pronounced form of entanglement through narrative (Ricouer 1996: 6). The picture below was taken during an informal history roundtable, with the founder of Debian, Ian Murdock, and another longtime developer Bdale Garbee (among many others not pictured) recounting what Debian was like in

the early days. Younger developers added their own stories about how they ended up working on Debian:<sup>12</sup>



Some developers who collaborate on a piece of software take the opportunity to sequester themselves for a couple of days and overcome some particularly stubborn technical hurdle, thus accomplishing more in two days than they had done in the previous two months. To non-hackers, the value of this in-person collaboration may seem odd when the collaborators work pretty much as they do at home, i.e., alone on their computers. This is a consequence of the single-user design and function of computers. While at a con, collaborators might physically sit next to the person they work with online (and thus never see), and will often stop and talk with them, or hammer out a problem over a meal, the actual act of “working” on a project is determined by the object-necessitated state: in a state of interacting with their computer, more often than not, alone. This is occasionally mitigated by shoulder-surfing, and “check this out” stuff that brings people together to look at the same screen, but typically for any substantial work to get done, only one person can operate the machine at a time because the time spent looking at someone else typing, making mistakes that one wouldn't make, or solving a problem in a way that seems inefficient, or

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<sup>12</sup> For purposes of full disclosure, I organized this informal history roundtable as a BOF, which was attended by 25 people. I was inspired to do so, however, based on the fact that so many informal conversations between developers over meals were precisely on the “exchange of memory.”

bumbling around unable to fix something, makes people quickly gravitate back to being in control of their own machine in a state of mental isolation. The operative object necessities of a computer are particularly interesting at a con because the con fundamentally challenges but never overcomes completely these necessities. What makes the shared sociality of projects so interesting is that people do end up working together (in the ways discussed in the last chapter), even though their instrument often demands only one operator.

Other hackers who had hoped to get a significant amount of work done, entirely fail to do so, perhaps because socializing, sight-seeing, and night clubs prove a greater draw than late-night hacking:



Most hackers however intermix play with hacking, giving themselves ample opportunity to see the sights, dance the dances, play the games, eat the local cuisine, hit the parks and beaches, as well stay put with computers on their laps, hacking away next to others doing the same. This often continues into the early morning.

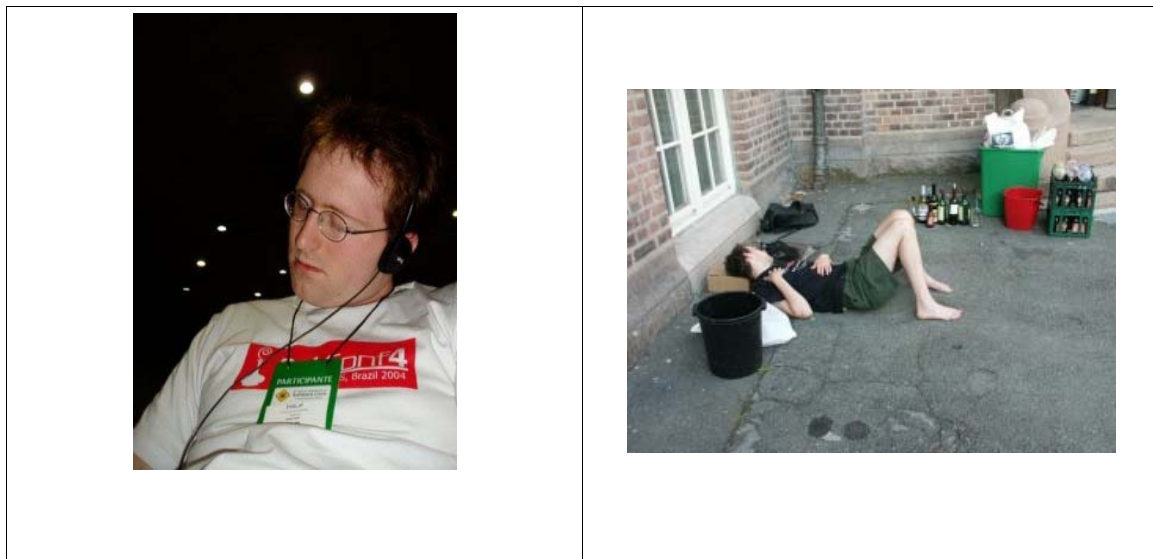


During hacker cons there is a semiotic play of profound sameness and difference. Signs of sameness are everywhere: most people are attached to their computers and share a common language of code, servers, protocols, computer languages, architectures, LANs, wireless, kernels, man pages, mother boards, network layer, file sharing, stdout and stderr. Debian, FSF, and other geeky tee-shirts are ubiquitous. With each passing day, the semiotics of sameness are enlivened, brought to a boiling point as participants increasingly become aware of the importance of these personal relations, this form of labor, and of free and open source software—in short, the totality of this technical lifeworld.

Within this sea of sameness, eddies and tides of difference are sculpted by individual personalities, the unique existence of physical bodies in proximate space, and political and cultural difference. A mixture of different thick accents cascade over endless conversations. The melodic Italian competes with the enchanting Portuguese. The German Jaaaaa always carries more weighty affirmation than the American English “yeah.” Everyone adopts the basics (“please” “yes” “no” “thank you”) of the native language. Italian anarchists work alongside American liberal democrats. Bodies sleeping, eating, and interacting make themselves known without asking, the peculiar corporeal details: green hair, a wheel chair, gray beards, red flushed cheeks, a large toothless smile, the Texan drawl, a freckled face, the paucity of females—make a

lasting imprint and are captured in the thousands of photos that are taken and posted on the Debconf gallery.<sup>13</sup>

By the end, the play of sameness and difference no longer can make their mark for bodies exist deflated, slightly corpse-like. Unable to process signs of life or even binary, some hackers experience a personal systems crash:



At the airport, awake but tired, participants engage in one final conversation on technology, usually mixed in with re-visiting the notable events that transpired at the con. Before the final boarding call is made, some voice their commitment to return to next year's Debconf, which is usually already being planned by excited participants who want to ensure another great (possibly better) event. For those who return annually, the hacker con takes on the ritual quality of pilgrimage.

If immediacy and immersion set the tone of the con experience, as soon as one leaves a new experiential metabolism takes its place: one of heightened reflexivity. As noted by Victor

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<sup>13</sup> <http://debconf.org/gallery/>

Turner, rituals and similar cultural performances, especially in their liminal phase, allow for an acute form of apprehension in which social actors reflect “upon themselves, upon the relations, actions, symbols, meanings, codes, roles, statuses, social structures, ethical and legal rules, and other sociocultural components which make up their public 'selves' ” (Turner 1986: 2; 1967: 105). While this is certainly the case for the hacker con, most of the reflective work happens later, after the sheer intensity of action recedes and a feeling of nostalgia sets in.

Small bits of this process are openly shared on mailing lists and blogs, especially by con neophytes who had never experienced such a gathering before:

It was the first Debconf for me and it was very exciting and brought many different views on software development and deployments, even though I'm now hacking for over 12 years...

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I don't think I could ever have had a better first debconf experience. I think it was as close to perfect as possible, everyone was friendly and that was the most important thing... There is only one thing that I am sorry about and that is that I had to leave so soon!

For weeks, sometimes months, afterward, the IRC channel remains highly active as people who spent the week together reach out over virtual channels to try to regain the social interactivity they have lost. Conversations detailing particular events work as an inscription device, making sure that such events transform into collective memory and outlast the place and time of their occurrence. The duller (and, for some, oppressive) atmosphere of office life makes the con more wondrous, bringing into sharper focus its creative, open potentials, fueling the strong desire to return, yet again.

If cons undoubtedly cement group solidarity, they also usher in personal transformations. Liberated “from the prevailing point of view of the world ... and established truths, from cliches, from all that is humdrum and universally accepted” (Bakhtin 1984: 24), people embark on decisions and actions they probably would not have considered otherwise. Some hackers decide

to formally apply to become a Debian developer, while long-time developers decide not to quit the project—just yet. Others may tone down their mailing list flaming after meeting the developers in person. Some fall in love during the con, sometimes with another participant, other times with a local. If the con was politically oriented (like HOPE), a developer may begin work on an overtly political project. A few may quit their job working on proprietary software, feeling that if others can make a living from free software, they ought to be able to, as well. Some developers (and the anthropologist) begin regular interactions on IRC and can't quite leave, even when the official research period is over.



## Conclusion

*“Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain!”*

### **The Wizard of Oz**

The hacker con is a condensed, week-long performance of a lifeworld that hackers otherwise build over decades of experiences and interactions connected to various media, institutions, and objects; and as long as a hacker continues to connect to others via IRC, submits patches to open source projects, reads about his technical interests on websites, argues with his buddies over the best-damn text editor in the world (emacs), he adds layers of experiential sedimentation. Like a large geological rock formation, a lifeworld has detectable repetitions, but

they clearly exhibit patterns of change. In one era, hackers connected with others through BBSes, now they have transitioned into a larger space of interactivity, tweaking the Internet technology that, as Chris Kelty (2005) has argued is the regular basis for their association. They now hold a fairly complex philosophy as to why they should have the political right to change these technologies.

In the last decade, the participants and the content of their public have expanded and diversified. Over blogs and at conferences, many geeks engage in a discussion with lawyers and media activists about a range of legal and technical topics, such as if copyright industries are pushing aggressively for DRM (Digital Rights Management), what then is the future of a digital commons? A day rarely passes without hackers creating or reading the publicly circulating discourse that in text represents this lifeworld, otherwise experienced in embodied interactions, maniacal sprints of coding, and laughter poured over the latest *Dilbert* cartoon or *Strongbad email* at work. Insignificant as each of these moments may be, taken together, they become the remarkable and powerful undercurrent that sustains a shared world.

There are lines of continuity and discontinuity with times past. Hackers today are still tweaking and building technology like they did as children on their Sinclair, but now they are equipped with more technical know-how, their computer's CPU is light-years more powerful, their online interactions are more frequent and variegated, and they have created and are always creating new lingo. Even while their technical life has become more public, their mailing list discussions, decisions and progress under the display of a simple search query, their social and technical production occurs more than ever in the domestic space of the home. Publicity has required a move inward, into the privacy of the room or office where hackers labor during the day, in the evening, on the weekends (for some all of these). A lifeworld is situated within its

historical times, even if rarely experienced as anything other than prosaic time, except during rare moments like the con.

Like many publics connected primarily by a shared interest, profession, lifestyle, or hobby, they are compelled to re-enchant cultural mores and commitments by meeting in person and for hackers, they are able to re-enact the most important elements of their lifeworld at the same time as they celebrate it.

The relations between the conference and the public have affective, moral, technical, economic, as well political dimensions. Transportation technologies, trains in times past and planes in times present, are as much part of the hidden architecture of publics as are newspapers and the Internet, for they transport bodies, normally connected by discourse, to interact in an intense atmosphere for a short burst of time. To organize and attend, these events require significant labor and money. The context of labor and organization (is it affordable; held in a downtown hotel, or small forest outside of Eugene Oregon; yearly or held every four years; how is the conference advertised, is it open to all?) carries over to their moral and political texture. Given that most conferences, even those that are consciously made affordable, usually require long distance travel, the economics of conferences make them significantly less accessible to certain populations: the poor, the unemployed, the young, the chronically ill, and at times, the disabled. A political economy of the conference can illuminate how members of a public are poised differentially to each other because of their ability or inability to meet in person.

Just as a public has wildly different instantiation, the same can be said of the conference. The differences between the American Psychiatric Association meetings and the outdoor festival held by European hackers are difficult to deny. The ethos and class of a group is inscribed in where they are willing to meet and what they are *willing to do* with their bodies, with each other

during these times of intense interaction.

While conferences can be markedly different, they tend to be the basis for forms of moral solidarity that sustain groups who are otherwise scattered across vast distances. For hackers, given the fierce celebration of some of their cons, they feel entropic, a cathartic release of laughter and pleasure, in which the daily rhythms and trouble of life can be placed aside. Yet these events work against entropy, sustaining unity as they engender new possibilities—a reaffirmation that is at the basis of the energy directed at initiating new projects, relations, and friendships.

I end this chapter with one of the more famous quotes from movie history, the Wizard's protest during the climax of *The Wizard of Oz*. Dorothy's tiny dog Toto unwittingly opens a curtain revealing that the fearsome wizard is neither fearsome nor really a wizard. He is a sham: his magic is controlled by machines, and worse hidden behind a sheath of lies, obscurity, and secrecy. It is a particularly powerful scene, for it captures the sense of deep disappointment we have all felt at one time or another when we discover that something profoundly meaningful does not exist or work the way we imagined it.

I use this story and the quote because the sense of disappointment contrasts so starkly with the elation that follows many hacker cons. During the con, a curtain is also raised, but instead of seeing a diminutive wizard constructing a false sense of reality, hackers see themselves, collectively performing a world that, as far as they can tell, is an outgrowth of their practices, of their daily life, and of their deepest passions. The con enables hackers see that it is not just themselves, alone at home pulling levers and punching buttons on machines behind the curtain, but instead the con enables them to pay attention to the other people who are also behind the curtain. The con acts like an internal "theater of proof" (Latour 1987) which powerfully

states that this world is “as important to others as it is to me,” a clear affirmation of the intersubjective basis by which we can conceptually posit any sort of lifeworld. Sometimes, as one sits at their computer, coding feverishly for a project, thousands of miles away from some of your closest friends and interlocutors, one has to wonder, “does this matter to others in the same way as it does to me? In what ways does this matter?” And more than any other event, the hacker conference answers with lucidity and clarity.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> References available upon request.