

Welcome to the Tribe
*Socio- and antropological phenomenae at Unix
hacker Conferences*

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1 Hi there

Do you know the answer to more than two of the following questions:

1. Who wrote Sendmail?
2. Name two captains of a USS Enterprise.
3. Which keyword was reserved, but not used, in K&R C?
4. Who answered: 42?
5. What does "BSD" stand for?

If so, then: Welcome! You are most probably a member of the international tribe of hackers that scours the planet in search of bandwidth, free Internet access, IA64 compile farms, IEEE 802.11b reception and versions of Unix where "cc" equals "gcc" and where "-Aa" is an unknown "cc" option.

Over the last couple of years, an international culture of hackers has been forming. Or at least, so we're told. .. But is the phenomenon we are experiencing right now a "culture". Is it not a "religion", a "tribe", "caste" or another sociological grouping of people that share common attributes? An interesting question indeed, because if we want to get any political power (suppose we're interested) to influence decision making, it is in our best interest to ensure that we are recognised as a defined sociological (and perhaps even antropological) unit, with voting powers.

Too often we are ignored right now, and whereas even the humblest peasants fight for their right to be subsidised beyond your wildest imagination, we are often ignored. And God knows how many cartloads of manure we can unload on the virtual cyber highways of the world. . .

2 Who are we?

We are the hackers; a self-styled techno elite with distinct cultural identifying marks. The world we live in is not the physical world of every day, but instead a virtual cyberspace of places, streets, bridges and libraries. With the skill of a medieval guildsman we manipulate the technology that drives our world and that of the (for lack of a better word) Muggles.

We have traditions, rituals, enemies, elders, nutcases, habits, a language (in fact, too many to mention), troublesome youths, values, a moral code, and, lest we forget, humour. Our tribe cuts straight through all other strata of human societies: we're everywhere!

Most commonly, we lie low in our respective home societies, maintaining our tribal connections through the virtual cyberworld where we slip and slide in the high speed lane and through firewalls as we please. Small pockets of our tribal brethren live and work together, as if they were small resistance cells buried deep in societies that lack the deep understanding of our moral convictions.

But, every once in a while, we emerge splendidly, with all our battle gear, painted with the war colours of our tribe, carrying all our armour and weaponry, in order to attend THE CONFERENCE!

3 The Conference

It is at the Conference that we can shed off the layers of disguise that we have to use to cover up our true identities when we are not among our peers. The Conference is coming home; it is a Pow-Wow, the Pope saying mass, the World Jamboree, Dynamo Open Air and a Republican convention rolled into one. We can out ourselves for who we are, behave as we want to and communicate with others without constantly being stared in the face blankly by someone who is completely clueless.

At the Conference our behavioural patterns can be observed in all their splendour; unedited, uncensored. A truly exhilarating experience for a student of human behaviour with a keen interest in our tribe of hackers. Walking around at the Conference one can not only study, but often also participate in, the day to day lives of hackers in their natural habitat (i.e. when in company of their fellow tribesmen and in an environment that comes pretty close to the hacker's ideal: lots of interesting hardware and virtually unlimited (wireless) Internet access).

It is in that habitat that the following chapter's topics can be exquisitely observed "in vivo":

4 Elders

The hacker culture (like almost any other culture on the planet) ascribes a special status to its elders. The hacker elders are responsible for transmitting the tribe's history by means of an oral tradition. Sometimes their stories are set before the start of time (January 1st 1970) and often they serve as parables relaying important moral lessons

like “and that is what happens if you expect `**envp` to contain at least one entry”, or “and thus we learned that having duplicate superblocks is a necessity”.

Sometimes, elders are war veterans of the BSD/SysV war (SysV won, but only after becoming so much like BSD that it really didn't matter anymore) or the OpenLook/Motif war (Motif sort of won, but has been declining ever since; a bit like Great Britain after WWII). The war veterans serve as important examples to the younger generation of what can happen if we take our intra-tribal issues too far.

The elders are being revered by the younger tribe members, who not seldomly improve their status by knowing and following an elder (much like knowing and following an Indian guru; interestingly, even the terminology is the same; see also the section on “Status”). Often we see bands of young (or sometimes even just aspiring) hackers gathered around a sofa or table where a tribal elder “holds court”. The elder answers questions, dispenses advice, autographs holy texts or just tells tales from days past.

5 Mythology

Mythology forms an important part of the hacker tribal culture. Just to refresh your memory: a “myth” is a cultural story that, although sometimes founded in truth, describes a series of events that have not taken place as such. Instead, the myth is used to relay a deeper (usually moral) message that should be taken as a lesson to be applied in the day to day life of the listener.

In the hacker culture, myths are usually founded in actual events as experienced by one or more of the elders (we are fortunate as a tribe to have most of the elders that were there at the beginning of time still with us). By being told and retold, the stories evolved into myths, with the historical angle gone, but now with a deeper moral message buried in the story's layers.

There exists for instance a story (myth?) about elder J.A. coming home slightly intoxicated (after a “meeting”). Instead of going to bed, he decided to boot his system and rewrite “troff” while continuously heightening his level of intoxication. Then when the sun started shining across the land, he uploaded the new troff binary to the machines of the labs he was working. He then went to bed. As the tale tells, there was not one bug in the thusly written code.

I am still kind of pondering on the deeper moral message here. Maybe it is: “You write your best code when drunk”? In which case it would explain why my code is usually so bad :-)

Anyway, Conferences are great places for myths to form and be told and retold. Given the diaspora of our tribe's members, the Conference is in effect an orgy of communication between members that don't see each other very often. It is there that the great oral tradition of the tribe takes shape.

6 Economics

The economics of the hacker tribe are pretty peculiar. Given the fact that the hackers usually earn their keep within their respective home societies, the purpose of economics

in the hacker tribe is not to allocate scarce resources. Instead, economics in the hacker tribe is all about creating value and then giving that away! Usually the only thing gained (in the economic sense of the word) by this process is “Status” for the creator. Not uncommonly, tribe members allot so much time to the tribe’s economic process that it impairs their economic activity in their home economies. Attempts have been made to formalise the hacker tribe economics inside the system of the “normal” world, but these have failed miserably in most cases (and the juries are still out on the case that have not gone under conclusively). But, these experiments were still interesting, and there is nothing that does for the creation of free software than blowing away a couple of billion dollars in venture capital money.

With respect to the culture of giving away value, the hackers are somewhat like the Quakiutl Indians of west Canada. In Quakiutl tribes, status is obtained by destroying value (burning them during great parties). Although the hackers obviously do not destroy value but instead enlarge the base of economic goods by their toil, the mechanism of status enhanced by not working for one’s own enrichment is identical.

The strange voodoo economics of the hacker economy are made possible by the special nature of the “goods” they create. By virtue of being strictly digital, once created they can be re-instantiated (copied) without extra cost (compare this with a Mercedes-Benz).

The Conference is the place where the hackers come together to be lauded for their economic activities of the past. There is no sense in creating if it can not be publicly acknowledged, and hackers old and young grasp at the opportunity given by the Conference to reap the benefits of their intellectual work. Often, the public recognition by fellow hackers is what a hacker works for.

7 Ethics, values and moral code

The topic of economics is closely intertwined with that of hacker tribal values and the system of ethics that is informally applied to hacker activity. Remember: A moral code is a system of guidelines that enable an individual to evaluate whether intentions and/or actions are good or bad.

At first sight, the tribal moral values of the hackers seem to be related to that of “Altruism”; actions that are solely for one’s own benefit are usually frowned upon. Someone who creates, but keeps the created good for himself (thereby impeding further creation based on the newly created) is deemed selfish or is suspected of Not Getting It (both are value judgements).

However, it can be argued that although hackers freely share the fruits of their labour (for the common good), there is no obvious obligation to help those who are less well off. The clearly clueless (newbies) may be flamed without remorse. And although flaming is thought to be a sign of immaturity, it is not really pronounced “bad”. There seems to be no moral imperative to help the (intellectually) needy.

Also, when reviewing the code of sharing the result of productive work, one could argue that this is actually done for a well defined personal reason: raising the status of the giver. Because of this, it could also be argued that the hacker tribe follows some of the more important characteristics of the philosophy of Hobbes (in essence: every man for himself).

I must say that I personally do not believe this last statement. The hacker tribe's members have been known to show genuine interest in the wellbeing of others without actually gaining personal profit from it. My latest thoughts on this subject are that most hackers are in essence Objectivists (from Objectivism, the philosophy of Ayn Rand), because they mostly seem to work and live suchly that being a hacker is an end in itself. This topic requires more study...

At the Conference, interesting ethical discussions can pop up, especially on topics of intellectual property, copyrights and licenses and such. Since hacker work is mostly intellectual endeavour, it is not surprising that the exact rules of sharing the results of hacking is the foremost topic of interest and discussion whenever ethics come into play. Like in the real world, competing views struggle for prominence and try to assert their moral superiority. Battles are fought out between "fundis" and "realos" up to the point where leading fundi philosophers are not invited to realo Conferences and realos are denounced for their practical view of life.

8 Humour and entertainment

Humour plays an important role in the hacker tribe. Strangely enough, the tribe members draw mostly on external sources of humour instead of creating their own. It is an interesting phenomenon that the tribe members are surprisingly homogenous when it comes to the humour and types of entertainment they like. Popular pastimes in the hacker tribe are:

1. Hacking... (not so much an entertainment, but a "raison d'être").
2. Watching TV shows like Star Trek (TOS, TNG, DS9, VGR), Red Dwarf, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Monty Python's flying circus, cartoons.
3. Reading books like The Hitchhikers guide to the galaxy, Cryptonomicon, Discworld.
4. Playing role playing adventure games, Magic (the Gathering).
5. Watching movies: Science Fiction, Monty Python.

Sports is not a popular hacker activity. Physical exercise above and beyond crawling under floors to track twisted pair network cables is usually shunned.

Only on the topic of musical taste is the tribe deeply divided. Musical tastes seem to range from classical music to Gaelic folk and hard core rock.

The Conference is the place where hackers get the chance to exchange ideas, visions, opinions and tastes with their peers. Since their cultural interests usually differ greatly from the people around them in their ordinary daily lives, the tribe members revel in the warm bath of culturally identical twins that the Conference is. In this culturally homogenous environment, they finally get a chance to "compare notes" as it were, and to further their taste by getting advice on books to read, games to play and shows to watch.

The cultural homogeneity of the hacker tribe is an interesting phenomenon that begs for a scientific explanation. In one view, the mindset needed to appreciate the hackers'

cultural preferences is genetically coupled to the mindset necessary for grasping advanced technologies and using these as if they were toys. In that view, the two traits have evolved in parallel and might have even reinforced each other, as the playful attitude induced by exposure to the cultural preferences improved the ability to play with advanced technologies and vice versa.

In a dissenting view, the enormous homogeneity of the cultural preferences of the hackers is explained by the proposition that ascribing to the cultural legacy of the tribe is necessary for becoming a tribe member. In that view, it is part of a “rite of ascession”. Although there is some sociological evidence supporting this view, it is not widely held.

9 Enemies

Part of being a member of tribe is having to “buy in” to the tribe’s history and legacy. Apart from rites and customs, this also means accepting the tribe’s hereditary enemy as one’s own immortal enemy. In case of the hacker tribe, the enemy is pretty obvious: the Evil Empire from Redmond (WA) whose name we shall not mention. The unchallenged leader of the Evil Empire is as close to the personification of the devil as the hackers are willing to admit exists.

Whatever differences of opinion exist within the tribe, as soon as The Enemy comes into play the ranks are closed and the hacker’s elite units of Zen terrorists fight The Enemy’s own army and mercenaries at every turn. In the words of a not yet forgotten leader of a quaint little island just off the coast of Europe: “We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the hills and in the fields, we shall fight in the streets, WE SHALL NEVER SURRENDER!”

It is the hackers great frustration in this existence that their words of wisdom and The True Way (which they all follow) are widely ignored by the intellectual peasants of the Normal World. Fortunately, since Mao’s program of forced restructuring, nobody tries to mention that the Unknowing should be converted and made to be seen the errors of their ways by force. Unfortunately, the (in itself understandable) frustration of the tribe members sometimes leads them to out themselves in ways that directly plays into the Evil Empire’s hands, by enabling them to depict the hackers as nutcases (more on which in the next section) and communists.

The Conference enables hackers to visually display their partisanship and their abhorrence of The Enemy without any inhibition whatsoever. They revel in their freedom to denounce The Enemy and his followers without fear for repercussion or damaging The Case. The tribe members display their contempt for The Enemy in any way they can. However they prefer visual cues such as T-Shirts, badges, screen savers et cetera.

Sociologically speaking, the Conference provides a very important possibility for release of the tension that is created by having to conceal ones true hacker feelings towards The Enemy in a society that does not understand (nor cares). Without the periodical release of this tension the stress could build up to unmanageable levels and tribe members with a weak personality structure might well go postal, with all the consequences that that entails.

10 Nutcases and Outcasts

A social group is defined as much by their outcasts as by their incrowd. As the mathematician Gödel proved, every conceivable system contains at least one entry that is obviously part of that system, but can not be proven to be so (nor is that entry an axiom of the system). In terms of the hacker tribe that means that we have our outcasts (and/or nutcases) that are obviously part of the tribe, without completely subscribing to all the tribe's principles (or, in some cases, by taking them much too far).

The beautiful thing about hacker outcasts is that they are very much accepted as part of the tribe, albeit with a special status. Their views are widely known and most of the tribe members have opinions about these views and about the outcasts' social status. Outcasts are shunned, lauded, ignored, invited, damned and praised. It's a hard life. . .

At Conferences, outcasts are seldomly present. Although their presence is sure to create (media) attention, they can also be seen as "loose cannons" (or, alternatively, "unguided projectiles") that might want to (ab)use the Conference as a platform for their own differing views and opinions about Life, the Universe and Everything.

11 Gadgets

Gadgets are important elements of life in the hacker tribe. Just like some Indian tribes like to wear the paraphernalia that define their status (not uncommonly the genitals of their slain victims), so do hackers like to wear and use completely useless devices and other cool examples of technology. If a cyborg future ever becomes viable, the hacker tribe will be the first to succumb. In my humble opinion, it is just a matter of time before they start implanting gadgets and hooking up sensors directly to the central nervous system.

The art of gadgets seems to a central issue in the life and work of the hackers. They are used as tools but also (and certainly not less importantly) to define a hacker's true identity. By preferring an Ericsson R380 over a Nokia Communicator a hacker gives important signals about who he is and what he stands for. A Palm V defines yet another outlook on life and a Windows Crap Edition device can be construed as a form of rebellion against the hacker society.

A digital camera, anything containing Bluetooth, a portable DVD player, (a DVD burner), a digital watch that also is an MP3 player, a GPS with subspace transporter facilities and a pager that can do RSA arithmetic as well as being a subnet mask calculator all seem to belong to the standard outfit of a hacker. And each of these devices insist on keeping track of time. So ask a hacker what time it is and you can watch him grab devices all over himself in order to look for the device that has the best time (probably because it is linked into the long wave transmitter in Braunschweig (Germany)). Remember: A man with one watch knows what time it is; a man with two watches is never sure. . .

The Conference is the ideal location for members of the hacker tribe to ascertain that their set of gadgets is still cool and to show off gadgets with their fellow tribe members. As fashion and trends dictate, I predict that this year will be the year of digital video cameras. The fashionable hacker wears a silver/metallic Sony Digicam this spring. . .

Take away a hacker's gadgets, and he will lose his identity. He'll stop knowing all his e-mail addresses, the names of his best friends, what he is supposed to be doing on Monday and what his favourite music is. They're the tangible parts of his self esteem, not be toyed with. . . .

12 Women

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13 Status

In essence, most of the things we have been describing about the members of the hacker tribe come down to just one concept: "Status". And it is here that our beloved hackers become human just like everyone else: it is status that drives (most of) their activities within the tribe. And this is completely understandable: Since being a member of the tribe is a voluntary thing, and most of the rest of life is provided for in another social environment, the acquisition of status has to be one of the most important aspects of tribe membership (together with professional recognition). The other essentials of life (food, love, air, water, an IP address and a domain) can largely be taken care of without belonging to the tribe.

In the hacker tribe, status derives mainly from the following items:

1. Sharing valueable work with the rest of the tribe.
And, especially if it is Cool Code!
2. Having gadgets.
3. Knowing elders (and nutcases).
4. Having useless knowledge (mainly in the humour/culture/entertainment area).
5. Getting It.
6. Colourful scorning of The Enemy (although the status elevation obtained by this is usually short lived).

Conferences can therefore also be seen as one long series of status exchanges. As my personal guru Keith Johnstone already described: most conversations between people are about setting and determining status relative to one another. Look at conversations at the Conference through this angle, and a whole new world opens up. . .

14 Conclusion

We are a funny lot!

And I mean that in the most positive sense of the word imaginable. I mean, have you ever had more professional fun then when attending Conferences or Fests? Have you

ever been with a group whose collective IQ is so big? Do you know of any other group of people who share so many values with you or who also like the books, TV shows, movies and cartoons you like? I know I haven't, so I strive to be:

A Member of the Tribe!