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**The Anthropology of Computing**  
**Fall 2004 MIT**

**COMPUTING COUNTERCULTURE: HACKING AND GAMING FROM PC TO INTERNET**

**Lecture 9. November 15**

**Pfaffenberger**, Bryan. 1988. The Social Meaning of the Personal Computer: Or, Why the Personal Computer Revolution Was No Revolution. *Anthropological Quarterly* 61(1): pp. 39-47.

OK, the personal computer. Let's cut straight to the question: WHY was the personal computer revolution NO revolution?

"new technologies frequently reproduce existing social and meaning systems"

The move from CENTRALIZED COMPUTING to PERSONAL COMPUTING

The emergence of the personal computer against the backdrop of social contests for what this new machine would mean and whom it would serve. The personal computer (and perhaps more importantly, its design and marketing) carried meanings important in American political culture.

PCs went up against image of corporate computer as a tool of hierarchical control; PCs would be about individuals, grass roots politics, networking, 'user-friendliness,' democracy.

PAGE 44: "Symbolic inversions or reversals, the tools of reconstitution, figure prominently in the early personal computer industry's self-depictions. If computers are signifiers of corporate centralization, patriarchal authority, and a sterile life kept apart from nature, then the new home computer companies would reverse such meanings by associating the technology with decentralization, democratic autonomy and the restoration of nature"

PC builders were 'heterogeneous engineers.' Pfaffenberger's tale of 'no revolution' maintains that resistance is always within the frame of power and can be easily co-opted; "Just as the agents of regularization sought to build domination, patriarchy, and centralization into computer systems, only to find that in many cases the technology backfired on them by providing new roles for skilled labor, so too did the agents of reconstitution — seeking this time freedom, autonomy and decentralization — find that the new technology they created was all too easily brought back within the frame of domination" (p. 46).

What does Pfaffenberger mean by Technology's **Double Life**? This from Noble:

"technology leads a double life, one which conforms to the intentions of designers and interests of power and another which contradicts them — proceeding behind the backs of their architects to yield unintended consequences and unintended possibilities... technologies rarely fulfill the fantasies of their creators"

WHAT IS HACKING? a HACKER? a good HACKER? bad HACKER?

**Ross**, Andrew. 1991. Hacking Away at the Counterculture. In Technoculture. Constance Penley and Andrew Ross, eds. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 107-134.

"The hacker ethic, which has remained the preserve of youth culture for the most part, asserts the basic right of users to free access to all information" (p. 116).

Ross writes about the hacker subculture and its cultural meaning in a world of high security computer systems. He discusses the 'moral panic' the activity of hackers has caused among people who manage governmental and private computer systems.

there's quite a bit on the metaphorical conflation of hackers with the computer viruses they write and with 'foreign invaders' of the national body. Difference between computer and biological viruses is intentionality; how does this make a difference?

Hackers threaten regimes of hierarchical control, intellectual property; the moral panic about them has become a vehicle for stepping up FBI powers of investigation into all of our electronically mediated lives.

But, as Pfaffenberger points out, hackers' 'outlaw' status may be overdrawn; hackers are often hired by the very companies they have sought to electronically break into; many if not most of them are already on a university-paved road to computer science success (though this ethnic and gender profile is slowly changing, along with the penalties for hacking); they already believe in American ideals of individual accomplishment.

Ross recognizes the 'American youth culture' complexion of hacking, but thinks that concentrating on this supports the process and moral economy of co-optation; "a way of trivializing its embryonic politics" (p. 116). Hackers are consistently infantilized and described as 'juvenile' spoiled brats in need of 'rehabilitation.'

This blocks any understanding (either their own or the broad left's) of their activity as not ultimately complicit with structures of domination.

Ross wants to leave space for real countercultural practice among hackers (he notes that office workers may also hack at the efficiency of their companies' operations and motives) and he wants to understand technoliteracy as a cultural practice which, though always within the frame of power, can be used to struggle for oppositional meanings in the use and construction of technology. Contra Pfaffenberger?

**Taylor**, Paul A. 1999. Hacking Culture. From Hackers: Crime in the Digital Sublime. London: Routledge, pp. 23-42.

designates five generations of hackers.

1 *aficionados*

2 PC

3 games

4 illicit access  
5 microserf

repeats the five points of hacker ethic, from Levy's *Hackers*: p. 25

how have things changed? remained the same?

what did you make of Taylor's research on gender and hacking? beginning page 32 (and see Sterling quote). Do you think hacking is a particularly male enterprise? Why or why not? Is hacking masturbatory?

film excerpt: *War Games*

**Ito**, Mizuko. 1997. *Virtuality Embodied: The Reality of Fantasy in a Multi-User Dungeon*. In *Internet Culture*, David Porter, ed. New York: Routledge, p. 87-109.

"While I agree with the sentiment that online spaces provide opportunities for strikingly new social formations, I am wary of the tendency to view the virtual as a radically disjunctive and purely imaginative space that lacks consequentiality, location, or materiality" (p. 88).

Farside.

MUDsex, MUDmarriage.

How does the digital domain transform the kinds of relationships people can have?

What is the sociology of the online multiplayer game?

**Flanagan**, Mary. 2002. *Hyperbodies, Hyperknowledge: Women in Games, Women in Cyberpunk, and Strategies of Resistance*. In *Reload: Rethinking Women + Cyberculture*, Mary Flanagan and Austin Booth, eds. Cambridge: MIT Press, pp. 425-454.

When boys play *Tomb Raider*, are they cross-dressing? (p. 438)

Third space between the real and the virtual. Subjectivity/objectivity.