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Outlaws, Bandits, Hackers

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Abstract
Technological imperatives may once have forced the first hackers to shift their schedule to the night, but eventually the hacker subculture became inextricably linked to the night and to the outcast and outlaw imagery associated with it.

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Assignment 1: Outlaws, Bandits, Hackers

"The Hackers came out at night"

The alarm goes off at, say, 7 a.m. Wake up, brush your teeth, shower, dress, commute, toil away from 9-to-5, get home, have some dinner, watch Jeopardy, maybe read for a few hours, catch the evening news and fall asleep around 11 p.m. It's the typical American day.

But some don't quite fit the mold. A small fraction, living outside the realm of the normal society, rise when the rest of the world readies for sleep, working through the night until the sun comes out, when they retreat, hiding from the rest of the world. The night has long been the realm of the underworld — criminals taking care of their illicit dealings with the least chance of being seen or caught. And while their status as bona-fide criminals is questionable, hackers and others associated with the development of cyberculture have also made the night their domain. Coding and hacking while the rest of the world sleeps, cyberculture members have placed themselves on the margins of society, avoiding contact with the rest of the world.

The roots of hacking can be traced back a full century, to the development of wireless telegraphy in the United States. Susan Douglas chronicles the rise of the amateur wireless operator in the early 20th century, through popular accounts of the technology. She opens with Walter Willenborg, a young man from the outskirts of New York, tapping into the network of transatlantic telegraph messages coming across his homebuilt wireless apparatus. Douglas relays the story of how the

amateur Willenborg effectively 'hacks' the official messages being sent across the Atlantic. "His equipment was extremely powerful and had the ability to 'destroy' the messages of others at will" (Douglas, 189). He does this for no reason but to exert his power on the authority figures over the airwaves.

This activity was nearly always associated with the night. The New York Times reporter who profiled Willenborg wrote of his first experience in the ether listening to the wireless messages: "The millions below us knew nothing of this strange intercourse through the night." Douglas adds that the millions asleep in New York "had no idea that the 'folds of the night' contained 'hidden mystic jabbering'" (Douglas, 187). As one children's book described it, "On every fair night after dinner time…the entire country becomes a vast whispering gallery" (Douglas, 191). And as more and more amateurs took to the airwaves, the night became their domain, perhaps because the young male amateurs worked or studied during the day, or maybe simply because their transmitters worked better in the night air.

With the development of computer technology in the post-war era, cyberculture became even more tightly aligned with 'after-hours' activity. At the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, a culture of 'hackers' sprung up out of the university's model railroad club (Levy, 23). Through an alumnus of the club, the technologically savvy students gained access to an expensive new computer, the TX-0, and quickly found that they could have the most uninterrupted time with the coveted machine in the wee hours of the morning.

"[They] changed their life-style to accommodate the computer. They laid claim to what blocks of time they could and would 'vulture time' with nocturnal

visits to the lab on the off chance that someone who was scheduled for a 3 a.m. session might not show up" (Levy, 29). Much like the amateur radio operators, these hackers would often play harmless late-night pranks on the 'official' university overseers of the machines (Levy, 27). "The hackers came out at night," Levy wrote in his history of hacking.

While the hackers' transgressions were mostly mild-mannered pranks, their activity and obsession with computers began to parallel more illicit activities. Like the drug culture that does its dealings at night, hackers were associated with "a new kind of addiction, with drug-like affects: withdrawal from society, a narrowing of focus and life purpose, inability to function without a fix." The hackers became more drawn into the culture of computers, and withdrew from the typical academic "day life" at MIT and beyond (Turkle, 205-6).

As computing and hacking have made their way into popular fiction, the association with the night and distancing from normal society, carry over as well. In William Gibson's *Neuromancer* — a 1984 novel in which he coined the term 'cyberspace' — the action occurs almost exclusively at night. The book opens with the protagonist Case in *Night City*, a lawless underworld that is basically shuttered up during daylight. Case explains that he believes the country tolerates this area as "a deliberately unsupervised playground for technology itself" (Gibson, 6-11). This is arguably similar to the MIT hackers getting extended time with the TX-0 late at night when the halls of the university were empty and learning to improve their coding unsupervised. Case too has the same addiction to hacking that Turkle describes in MIT hackers, but when he loses the ability to connect to cyberspace, he

turns to more traditional drugs. And it comes as no surprise that at then end of the first chapter, when the sun comes up, Case retires to his coffin apartment, literally locked away from the world during the daytime.

Throughout the history of cyberspace, we see its main actors — hackers — as mostly nocturnal beings. It begins as a matter of coincidence; young amateur radio hobbyists take to the airwaves at night because they have free time and because their shortwave radios perform better in the night air. The first real computer hackers became night owls because that was the only time they could get unrestricted access to institutional hardware. Over time, the shift toward a nocturnal lifestyle is gradual. The radio operators tool away through the evenings, the MIT hackers later into early morning hours, and by the actual coining of the term "cyberspace" in *Neuromancer*, Gibson's protagonist hacker functions solely at night. By the 1990s we see the programmers of Silicon Valley stretch this lifestyle even further, working — perhaps binging — for long stretches fueled by caffeine, rarely leaving their cubicles. At the University of Pennsylvania, the programming group PennApps sponsors semesterly "Hackathons" where participants spend 48 hours on collaborative development projects. The group's website explains simply: "What is PennApps? In three words: Eat. ~~Sleep.~~ Code."[1]

In the history of cyberculture there also occurs a similar gradual shift in the hackers' intentions. The amateur radio boys played mostly harmless pranks on naval operators, as did the MIT students on those in charge of the computer

[1] "What Is PennApps." *PennApps*. <http://2012s.pennapps.com/learn_more>.

systems. But in Neuromancer, Case, the hacker, is a full blown criminal, living in the shadows of the Japanese underworld.

Hackers thus distanced themselves from normal society simply because they operated on a different schedule. Aside from possessing a skill set with computers that the majority of society lacked and didn't understand, they were mysterious because the rest of society never saw very much of them. While the world slept, no one knew quite what the hackers were up to.