The Hacker Perspective

by BJ Snyder

I'm a hacker and you're not! Nah nah nah na! Or am I? I think that everyone is using the term so loosely that the meaning is lost. I'm a hacker. You're a hacker. My grandmother was a hacker. Actually she was a junk collector and metal scrapper. But I think when you call yourself a name, it doesn't have the credibility as if someone else had called you it.

A friend of mine said he would call me Spock because I like math and science and I am more about the ideas than actually the business side of earning money. Well, to be called Spock is an honor. But the fact remains that there is already a Spock and I can't fill his shoes. On my website, I took to calling myself "Trul." I don't know if you have read Stanislaw Lem's *The Cyberiad*, but Trul also has some big shoes to fill. I think a title or nickname should come from your peers, critics, or friends. Friends call me BJ or Beege. I think that is a fitting nickname based on my name. But there is no reason why BJ shouldn't become a hacker. The fact is he should worry about the things a hacker does and leave the title to philosophers.

I don't want to put forth the opinion that hackers are bad or that everyone cannot be one. I just think the actual things that make hackers hackers are the ideals. I know this is "The Hacker Perspective," but I believe you are talking to a non-hacker. Again, I know those of us reading 2600 know the true meaning of a hacker: one who is not a destructive criminal, but one who learns for the sake of learning and tries to be creative, even when corporations try to dominate the world. I am not trying to insult those who consider themselves to be hackers. In a sense, you probably are a hacker. I am happy with this definition. I just want to challenge anyone who considers themselves to be a hacker to act as one and not worry about the terminology.

Let's consider an example. You are a broke, overworked undergraduate in college who happens to play the lottery when the jackpot is multi-millions. You win. But what did you lose? There are benefits to being a "starving artist." The multi-millions have just ruined you. Now you have "friends" or those who claim to be friends and relatives you have never seen asking for money. That supermodel who wouldn't talk to you before has suddenly fallen in love with you. It is difficult to find true love, but somehow you just did. The fact is that being a millionaire has just affected how you live and how the future of your life will go. Is it better? I don't know. But maybe you were a better, more motivated, creative person when you were that starving hacker. Heck, maybe this is the reason most hackers don't care about money. They know the dangers of what it does, how it can affect their lives, and that it isn't their ultimate goal.

Let's consider another example of being classified as a hacker. Did you ever see the Spider-Man comic where Peter Parker is out of his suit and can't fight the Green Goblin? Maybe the suit does make the man - just as the term hacker can make people perceive you as a criminal. I'm not saying it should, but you have to admit it does happen a lot. It is like when a criminal can't commit a crime without a mask. Of course they don't want to be identified, but if the victim could see them they would be ashamed of their actions. Being defined as a hacker could work to make you into a criminal, or it could make you believe you're something you're not. If you let others make the call as to whether you're a hacker or not, I believe you have the potential to make the term what it should be. You define the word hacker; it does not define you. If you want hacker to mean someone who creates or builds, I think you have just broken the mold of criminal. We should be hackers by example and not by false percep-
tions. So we all might be hackers after all. But when everyone is a hacker, we get compared to the criminal element of hackers. But that categorizing is only done by those who are ignorant of the hackers that we are.

So don’t think it isn’t important what type of hacker you are. It is like the police force saving a woman from a burning car and then the next day five cops beat up some teenager. Do you remember that cops are good and there to protect us? No. You see that cops are corrupt. This will cause the whole honorable meaning of what it is to be a police officer to be forever tarnished by a fraction of those who belong to the force. So you think that crashing a computer or placing a Trojan on someone’s system will go unnoticed? Do you want to tarnish what it is to be a hacker?

That is enough of not self-proclaiming yourself to be a hacker. Chances are if you are reading this message you are a hacker. But let’s not call ourselves hackers; let’s lead by example and show the world what hackers do.

I think the greatest factor in how we will be judged as hackers is by what we create. The Nobel Peace Prize was created out of Alfred Nobel’s guilt for inventing dynamite. A hacker’s dynamite may be malware. Not all creations are good. I have seen a PBS documentary on microbiologists who were making viruses. Why on earth would someone do such a thing? They claim that it helps them to understand viruses better, but it is the deadliest of weapons. So when designing something, we should be aware of the results. It may be an impressive achievement to create something, but how will it be used?

I love cryptography. I have spent hours reading, researching, and trying to discover new methods. This could be considered hacking, but I don’t want to call myself a hacker. The fact remains that I have to break 256-bit RSA before anyone cares about any of my work. While there is a big following of math and cryptography on the Internet, most people I show my work to don’t care. It just doesn’t interest them. If you care about being called a hacker, you may be disappointed when the vast majority doesn’t care. But the beauty of being a hacker is that you don’t care that people don’t care. We do care when they perceive us a criminals. What would I do if my equations broke RSA? I would be known as the guy who broke a 40-year-old algorithm. I don’t believe I could actually do that. But if I did break RSA, I would be known as the guy who crippled security - a title I would not want. But if a civilian could break or, at the very least, show a pattern in RSA, I imagine the NSA already knows about it. Maybe it is the hacker part of me that doesn’t like ciphers that can’t be broken. I feel a need to find why.

As part of “The Hacker Perspective,” we are supposed to share our hacking views and past experiences. Perhaps me not wanting to be called a hacker stems from my lack of credentials. That is at least what Sigmund Freud would say. My id wants to take control of the Internet, but I have delusions of being able to find the product of two prime numbers. But here, we know that achievements and credibility are not the only things that make a hacker.

Maybe the psyche is the key to the hacker. I want to be a mathematician, inventor, and engineer, but I am intimidated into thinking I have to have the achievements of Newton. I had a coach say: “Never let anyone intimidate you.” This is because once you get it in your head that you can’t do something, you will not succeed. If you think you aren’t a hacker, I guess you aren’t one because you decided that you are not.

Just as I cannot categorize the hacker, neither can anyone completely categorize you. We are more than just labels and multiple choice questions. Personally, I hate psychology because most of it is fluff. I mean, why analyze people instead of accepting them for who they are? I know it is important to study ways that people learn, but so much of it is looking for man’s answers to spiritual questions. Spiritual beliefs are personal. Believe what you want insofar as what you believe the definition of a hacker to be, but you must admit the psychologist categories of people benefit only psychologists’ opinions on how the world works. Just as we don’t understand most of the world, who is qualified to call you a hacker? Who better to understand you than you? It doesn’t matter if you refer to yourself as a hacker or not. Just by doing what you do, the proper definition will find you. The word hacker isn’t just a title. It is a way of life.