The Hacker Perspective
by Brock Lynch

Are hackers born or do they become hackers after getting a Sega Dreamcast with a GameShark? If you think that’s a silly question to ask, please read on and I’ll take you down a path of wonder, awe, and more questions. I began to get my feet wet in hacking when I was a teenager. This was while many adversities were afflicting my life, and I felt like a stereotypical teenage hacker rebel. After all, sometimes stereotypes are true. Society and life had given me a reason to stand up to the system I lived in and say, “I’m going to do what I want.”

I started off as an online hacker, exploiting flaws in games like Phantasy Star Online. There was a vulnerability in the game that would allow you to PK (People Kill) people in a non-player-versus-player area of the game. Now, at the time this was a cheap and simple sadistic thrill. There was an attack called a Resta spell that would take away all of the player’s health points. But in order to use it, you had to modify a certain hex value in the game. This was originally great fun having the power to do things that other people couldn’t. But as time went on, I learned that the sort of hacking I was doing was black hat and, more importantly, it was mean and wrong.

What caused me to lay to rest my old ways of black hat exploitation? Well, in short, I grew a conscience. They say there are many different intelligences people can possess. When I was younger hacking Phantasy Star Online, the intelligence that I didn’t possess was an emotional one. However, one day after I had PKed someone, something happened to me that stood out for the rest of my teen years. A person with a more advanced hacking method came in and did the same thing to me, only worse. I felt powerless and was in very deep despair. I thought to myself, “Is this all that life amounts to? A dog-eat-dog world where there is always a bigger fish seeking to devour a smaller weaker morsel?”

As it turned out, that little experience inside of a somewhat massively online multiplayer game was one of the main turning points in my life. It made me see that just because someone can do something doesn’t mean that they should do it. There was also an example I learned by watching players that didn’t exploit the vulnerabilities in the game. They were in essence sitting ducks, but they seemed like they were having more fun. In that way, I found out that vulnerability is a strength rather than a weakness.

What I realized with my black hat hacking pursuits was that it all seemed to boil down to control. This mainly stemmed from the fact that I felt helpless in real life. It seems like if the thrill of being able to have control over things leaves you, you start seeing things from a more altruistic perspective. At least, this is what happened to me during my teen years. I left behind the shadowy arts of black hat game hacking for more benign things that actually helped others. These were things like volunteering at a local computer recycling shop, and helping my mom and grandma with their computers. This was where my black hat changed to a halo or, more specifically, a white hat. Some people never reach the level of calling themselves a white hat hacker, or they go from white hat to black hat. However, like life, hacking has many varying shades of gray.

As stated earlier, the black hat hacking I did when I was younger was not without its pitfalls. People would get mad at me in the game and say some very distressing things.
This brings me to a big point about life. I found that doing the wrong thing was easy and took very little effort to gain monetary or mood benefits. But, in life, doing the right thing is difficult.

I had this epiphany when I was around 17 years old, and was walking down the street in the city I grew up in. I thought about infamous hackers such as Kevin Mitnick, and how he was able to recover his stance in the world after being locked up for social engineering. This is in stark contrast to people like Bill Gates who seem to always do the right thing. Up until the time I found my way, my friends and I would participate in questionable hacking activities, i.e., building cantennas, trying to make virii, and general teenage hacker shenanigans. Later, I found out that the time I had spent doing these things would have probably been better spent looking for a job.

So, what really is a hacker and what do they do? People can always look at a hacker and say, “They exploit things.” But you have to realize that the only way to mend a broken bone is by knowing it is broken in the first place. Along those same lines, the same code that makes us weak also makes us strong. If, for instance, you find a zero day vulnerability inside of your own machine, you could use that for nefarious means, or to benefit others by releasing the information. In that way, life is proven to be both a gift and a curse at times. Hackers prove this notion - some hack because they feel as though they’re cast down in the world. After all, isn’t it a psychological tenet of human nature that people who feel powerless want to gain power, even by force? But in doing so, some have fallen further than they ever stood to gain from their activities. I’ve heard of many hackers on the news getting long jail sentences for stealing. This is what changed my mind about being a black hat hacker. I learned that by doing the right thing, you close up the vulnerability within yourself for people to act against you.

Really then, the smart hackers are the ones that try to build up their community, friends, and family - and not try to break it down. Besides, there are other ways to keep progressing as a hacker without breaking the law. It may not be the most glamorous form of hacking to help family or friends remove viruses from their machines, but it feels way better than exploiting others.

Other areas, such as open source contributions over GitHub, would be the primary way I see to hone one’s skills and still remain in the right by the law. Another way would be to create your own home network and hack it for fun. I plan on trying both of these things in the near future.

My message to the younger generation of hackers out there - and hackers in general - is to not view hacking as a political, social, or monetary tool, but mostly as a manifestation of self. Without getting too deeply into my personal psychological analysis of why people hack, I’d say it’s mostly because they’re curious. It wouldn’t seem proper to say that this curiosity always kills the cat. But there are many instances of people in history that were too curious for their own good. Take Marie Curie, for example. I consider her to be a hacker in a way, because she was curious about radiation. She and many other scientists ended up getting sick or dying over their experimentation with radioactive elements. Many scientists are hackers because they hold knowledge as tantamount to life. And both hackers and scientists run experiments, although hackers’ experiments often take the form of debugging a piece of software. We then must be careful that, if we live by the hack, we do not also die by it.

Being a hacker is one of the many things I have experienced in my life. There is always the person that is purposely vulnerable who makes you question the whole basis of why you hack, or the person that has more skill than you who makes you feel like the victim. Going back to the beginning of the article when I was talking about the game Phantasy Star Online, it wasn’t playing the game that taught me a lesson. It was trying to game the game that taught me a lesson. Some lessons in life don’t come about no matter how many times you read a book or go down the same road. Hacking has taught me that, to learn, you must try
things in novel ways. You must experiment with your surroundings and transfer skills from one aspect of life to another. I've read in scientific papers that stepping outside your comfort zone is one of the best ways to master a new skill. If that is true, then hacking must be one of the best ways of learning there is. This is because in hacking you're always adapting to a new architecture, programming language, or platform.

If you're an aspiring hacker trying to get into the scene, I recommend going down the path less traveled. As Smash Mouth sings in the famous song “All Star,” “...what's wrong with taking the back streets? You'll never know if you don't go.” So shine in whatever path you choose to take in hackerdom, whether you're simply hacking together a spreadsheet or getting paid to pen test some vulnerability in Google. To me, the exceptional hacker is the one who spends the most time on a seemingly trivial facet of something others overlook. After all, while everyone else is using Python for an artificial neural network, you can be the brave explorer who attempts to use PHP for the same endeavor. At least, that's what I'm doing. We don't learn in life by doing the same thing as everyone else. To be an exceptional hacker, my advice is to step outside of your comfort zone and do something new.

There have been many good things that have come about because I hacked things when I was younger. I was able to get my information technology associate degree with relative ease. This involved taking “Fundamentals of Programming” and “Web Design Basics” classes, which were already right up my alley. Also, whenever I see a problem, hacking has given me the insight to know that there is always more than one way to skin a catfish. Yes, the skills I learned in hacking are translatable to other areas of life. That's why you don't always need the right tool for the right job. What is needed, instead, is the right mind for the right job.

If this article finds its way amongst the other great articles I've read in 2600 Magazine over the years, I hope it helps someone. I've tried to incorporate some life lessons I've learned from being a hacker. Sometimes the lessons were harsh and other times they were easy. But in the end, "hacker" is just a word. The word means many different things to many different people. I ask that if you're reading this and have a negative view of hackers, that you realize that we are people too. Some of us even have lives. We're not always the bad guys that the media portrays as stealing massive amounts of information online. We are sons, daughters, fathers, grandfathers, and most importantly, we are human beings. We vary as greatly as the life on our planet, and we are curious enough about life to teach you a thing or two about what we've learned along the way.

To this day, the author remains a hacker and curious about the world around him. He recently earned an Associate's in information technology and continues to use his knowledge for good, rather than bad.

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