Sometimes, hackers of a certain age may feel that they were born a generation too early. With the abundance of silicon in every setting powered by the kind of processing grunt that was unthinkable a few short decades ago, and the proliferation of free online courses in programming (that’s what we used to call coding; youngbloods), obstacles to becoming the next visionary of the digital age have never been fewer.

Like so many hackers of my generation who grew up in England, I only got into computing from such a tender age through sheer luck. An older sibling bought a Sinclair ZX81, a monolithic piece of black plastic that connected to a flickery CRT television. I was instantly drawn to it like a magnet.

Learning how these beautiful, mysterious, and, at first, horrifyingly unreliable works of art ticked was far from an easy task. Being a child of the eighties, reference guides couldn’t even be found in most local libraries, the Internet had yet to make an appearance, and schools could barely afford a single BBC Micro, never mind staff who had actually been trained to use them. Code, however, wasn’t buried away to the same extent that most proprietary junk is today. In fact, entire programs were printed out in enthusiast magazines for the patient and studious to copy out into their beloved computers. And of course, once you realize how the words on the pages push the pixels and bitmaps around on the screen, you can adapt and bend them to your will.

Despite barely getting a look-in himself, my brother went on to upgrade to a Sinclair Spectrum 48K, a Commodore 64, and the mighty Commodore Amiga. By this point, the gaming scene had really taken off, and copious demos and other software were given away on magazine coverdisks. These coverdisks would include a menu system to access what was on them which, with a modicum of effort, could be copied, tweaked, and customized. And so, I would busy myself compiling and adapting the best demos from across the mags onto one glorious disk, ready for my brother to enjoy with the increasingly limited time he had to spend with what was still technically his computer. Yes, you really could fit multiple demos onto one 1.44 MB floppy.

Around the same time, Datel released the Action Replay cartridge. This came with a hardware button that, when pressed, would instantly halt whichever game was running and give you access to a console where you could examine the code that was in memory and, better still, mess with it. This opened up the possibilities of taking screenshots long before this functionality became baked into OSs, and altering values that were in the RAM to award extra lives or to kill timers in trial software that otherwise planned on ruining our fun. At one point, I’d managed to mod a copy of the original Worms so that the titular stars would swear like dockers throughout every game.

Running alongside all of this was the public domain scene. Much like the open source scene today, PD wares consisted of various utilities and demos put out by passionate programmers who wanted to help their fellow enthusiasts push their systems to their very limits. The most exciting aspect of this was the demo scene. These weren’t demos in the same sense as the game demos distributed on coverdisks, but more like mostly non-interactive technical demos that would package together some truly incredible audiovisual experiences that didn’t so much move the benchmarks of what was thought possible with the hardware at the time as absolutely obliterate them.

These took many forms, ranging from compressing “Flash” by Queen onto a single floppy long before the MP3 standard was even thought of, showcasing the brilliant animated short “Pugs In Space,” and melting eyeballs with psychedelic proofs of concept for what our hardware was really capable of. These latter demos were produced by several pioneers of the time, but many of the most impressive were the product of the mighty Red Sector Inc. If you’re unfamiliar with their work, I implore you to search for the “RSI Megademo” on YouTube to enjoy some of the greatest chiptunes to be committed to magnetic media.

PD was distributed through mail order adverts in magazines where you would pay for the cost of the disk and postage, through gatherings such as computer shows and parties, and via the good old-fashioned SneakerNet. Outside of the public domain scene, more corporate interests were trying incredibly hard to convince us that free distribution would lead to the down-
fall of computing itself, but we had other ideas about that.

While the hobby was becoming increasingly popular, it was still largely restricted to those of us who gladly embraced the nerd and geek labels that were nowhere near as cool then as they’ve become today. Finding fellow enthusiasts lurking in the school library would always lead to an excited meeting where both parties would produce their cases of copied floppies. At the front of every case was X-COPY, the de facto copying software of the time that was so good it was quickly hacked to be effective at natively defeating almost every copy protection that existed, even the DRM ironically placed onto later versions of X-COPY Pro. Whoever had the older copy of X-COPY would always begin the ritual by making a copy of the newer version for themselves, and then the real fun would begin.

Whilst fully entrenched in the golden age of Amiga computing, IBM-compatible PCs were starting to appear in schools. I began my high school years experimenting with the new, exotic but somehow inferior file systems employed by the PCs that made up what could quaintly be described as the school network. Security was barely thought about back then, but it was still a surprise when experimenting with the command line interface led to me stumbling upon the password file for every account holder in the school in plaintext.

Our school was big on learning by doing, so they must have been delighted when they found that one of their students had supplemented their IT classes with a few extracurricular activities. On the hackers’ curriculum was swapping the staff passwords around, helping the deputy headmaster to declare his undying love for the headmaster via the network’s internal messaging system, and hosting a full copy of Doom in the headmaster’s personal storage space for the students to download and run on the other school computers.

As school gave way to university and the simple pleasures of cloning the copy cards containing printer credit for the libraries, a new spin on a much-treasured pastime had come about: home copying was being replaced with Internet piracy. This was of great interest to me for two reasons. First of all, I was absolutely unsurprised to discover that, despite all the rhetoric of the “Don’t Copy That Floppy” advertising, the games, film, and music industries were somehow still going despite a few nerds making copies in playgrounds and offices. Secondly, it dawned on me that there was a beautiful confluence between the two things in life that had always enthralled me: hacking and piracy.

Of course, 2600 was way ahead of the curve on this. Anyone who saw the June 1987 issue (4:6) will have enjoyed the sight of a jolly pirate lurking over a phone ready to be phreaked in protest of the corporate monopolies of the time. Personal privacy aside, hackers believe in the freedom of information, and tend not to take kindly to corporate interests telling them how to behave. While not every pirate is a hacker, piracy as it is today would not exist without hackers creating tools such as Napster and BitTorrent, and busily cracking and stripping away the DRM that’s increasingly infested our otherwise open digital lives.

As university progressed, and I once again noted that the “You Wouldn’t Steal A Car” nonsense didn’t successfully predicate the downfall of the entertainment industries, I realized that there wasn’t much actual, proper, decent academic research into all this. And that’s when I decided to become a researcher in online file sharing.

Whilst working as a lecturer for the university at which I’d graduated, I diligently spent my nights designing, implementing, and executing an online survey into piracy. A year and one thousand responses later, I submitted my research study, conclusions, and all of my data to an academic journal. At the time, this was the largest study of its kind into piracy that had ever taken place, which made the results all the more exciting. Basically, people who pirate stuff without paying for it tend to spend more money on the same entertainment products than people who don’t.

The world apparently didn’t share my excitement, as my study was largely ignored. This didn’t particularly bother me as I hadn’t expected otherwise, and the fun of carrying out the study was more than enough to make it worthwhile. But then, a few months later, a study similar to my own was released. This was fascinating for a number of reasons, not least in that it had been carried out similarly to my own study, and had coincidentally been produced by a team at my university (albeit in a different department, so it genuinely was a coincidence). But the biggest surprise is that it had been released by the university to great fanfare and, consequently, had been picked up by most of the press.

As the study was similar to my own, I was keen to examine it and compare the data sets. However, the data sets hadn’t been released. No matter what I tried, I absolutely could not pry the raw data from the researchers who had put this beast together and, being of the pirate-hacker mindset, I just couldn’t understand why this particular information was not free. It turned out that it was “proprietary,” and thus not to be shared.
But surely a university which, like all of them, has charitable status due to its supposed contributions to public knowledge would also consider this data to be public knowledge, wouldn’t it? Except it didn’t, because it didn’t pay for it. It was, in fact, paid for by a coalition of companies who represent copyright holders. You know, those guys who have been trying for years to perpetuate the fantasy that noncommercial piracy is killing their staggeringly rich and constantly growing monopolies. And so it was that I discovered what I now know to be the phenomenon of scholars for dollars.

It’s simple, really. You’re in the business of producing popular culture, but you don’t like the fact that some people think you charge too much for it. You’ve tried paying for advertising and throwing out snappy little slogans but, try as you might, you can’t convince those pesky consumers of culture that not being ripped off by you is the equivalent of grand larceny. If only you could get those damned troublesome consumers to see things your way, and get them back in line.

But wait a minute, if they won’t listen to you, surely they’ll listen to those brainy types who hang around in universities? So, all you have to do is write a big fat check from all the money you’ve parasitically siphoned away from creators and consumers, and hand it to a university. A few months later, that same university will produce a publication that says, “We carried out a study into piracy, and can conclude that it’s comparable to genocide.” You can then put the full might of your PR department into pushing this line right up until someone asks for the actual data so they can check if it’s been collected and analyzed properly. At which point you can say, “Sorry, bud, but this is commercially sensitive proprietary information that absolutely nobody can look at, ever.”

On this planet, it’s PR departments who set the news, not rationality and common sense. This is why laws and treaties are still written and court cases still decided on the basis of what is a proven lie that’s been perpetuated by the copyright industries through the reliable scholars for dollars route. This misrepresentation of cold hard facts has become so bad that, in the U.K., copyright industry coalitions are partly funding a specialist police force that’s dedicated to arresting and harassing those who challenge their attempts at imposing artificial scarcity to digital culture, and the government has mandated the brainwashing of children in our schools with anti-piracy propaganda. Do you older folk still think you were born too early?

There is a happy end of sorts to this tale. Another of the many breathtakingly dishonest rackets I’ve encountered in my time as a researcher who asks too many awkward questions is academic journals themselves. If you’re a researcher and you want to publish your hard work, you’ve traditionally had to submit it to one of these journals. Said journal will then pay not a single penny for this work, which is fine, considering we’re supposed to be doing this stuff for the advancement of public knowledge. What’s less fine is that they then charge universities and students, if they’re rich enough, thousands to access all of these studies that they’ve acquired for free.

Happily, the brightest minds of academia have pushed back against this with schemes such as the Social Science Research Network, where researchers can host their papers for anyone with an Internet connection to access for free. Never ones to be left out, the pirate-hackers have played their part too with Sci-Hub, the wonderful repository of knowledge and information that would otherwise be scandalously locked away behind a paywall. Due to submitting some of my earlier work to the academic racketeers at the start of my career, I’ve actually had to pirate some of my own papers to submit them to these fantastic institutions. Needless to say, I’ve published everything since under a Creative Commons license.

If life on this weird planet has taught me anything, it’s that describing yourself as a hacker or a pirate to anyone who doesn’t identify as either of those things themselves unfailingly courts gasps of horror. It’s also taught me that hackers and pirates are the only groups left who actively give a damn about freedom and openness, who honestly believe that sharing is caring, and who will always be ready to push back when we’re told that our technology and behavior is a threat to the world’s backwards way of doing things.

The playground didn’t care when the corporations tried to tell us not to copy that floppy, and the Internet doesn’t care that the same gluttons are trying to build laughingly ineffective artificial barriers on top of it to push around the same community on a larger scale. A youth spent immersed in the world of a fledgling technology that was nourished by a culture of openness and sharing has taught me to live by those principles. I don’t tell people that I’m a hacker, or a pirate. I tell them that I’m a pirate-hacker, and will proudly fly the black no matter what they think.

Captain Crackham is still writing and asking awkward questions. He continues to immerse himself in the latest developments in the piracy scene, and is now learning how to make games. If any make it to release, they will not contain DRM.