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FANDOM COMMUNITY, HACKER ETHIC, OPEN MOVEMENT: INFLUENCES ON SOCIALLY ENGAGED CONTEMPORARY NET.ART

This article examines the links between the fandom, hacker and open communities. It also attempts to understand how, in the current transmedia culture, new communication technologies encourage the development of ideas of civic duty and uses of collective knowledge by citizens. Drawing on a selection of works with specific references to critical thought and (dis)organizing models of collectives, we try to show how net.art encourages public participation, freedom of information and social reflection.

The establishment of digital networks has made possible the development of a transmedia culture, in which the publics of different media platforms have become active users—they are not only the consumers of culture, but also its producers and distributors. These notions are broadly explored by Henry Jenkins,[1] the former co-director of the MIT Comparative Media Studies program, who describes our current context as a convergence culture and its members as "prosumers," a neologism of "producer" and "consumer" coined by Alvin Tofler.[2]

The Internet's explosion was essential to the creation of convergence culture. The new public cyberspace was developed by programmers, self-named "hackers," who envisioned the free circulation of scholarly and scientific contents, rejecting the conceptualization of knowledge as exclusive property. In Pekka Himanem's *The Hacker Ethic*, hackers are described as "people who are passionate about programming, share information and produce free software."[3] Furthermore, the online "jargon file" specifies that the term "hacker" should not be restricted to the information technology field, because a hacker is someone who is passionate, enthusiastic and devoted to a particular task.

These ideas brought about the socio-cultural open source and access movements, which promote the distribution of open source software (for the most part closed after the Internet was privatized in 1995), as well as free use and access to scholarly, scientific and cultural contents (cultural content was included in the Berlin Declaration in 2003). Regarding use of these materials, the open access movement does not allow users to transform the materials and create other derivative products.[4] According to Eben Moglen, this is "a commons that protects itself: Appropriation may be made in an unlimited way, providing that each modification of goods in commons are returned to commons [*sic*]."[5]

The process of appropriating cultural goods so as to creatively transform them and share the results with the rest of the online community stems from an enthusiasm for the appropriated object and is easily recognizable in fandom culture. Parallels can certainly be drawn between the hacker and the fan; after all, hackers are IT fans (or, according to the "jargon file," fans of anything to which they devote themselves in a passionate and committed manner). These two groups participate in public and cooperative projects by establishing horizontal relationships with their collaborators, and base themselves on Pierre Lévy's concept of collective intelligence.[6] Moreover, just as hackers play an active role in the fight for universal access to knowledge, fandom involves active fans who produce the derivative works that increase the cultural value of the cult object. Many fandom tactics can be linked to those developed by hackers. A good example is "remakes," which might involve creating a series of novels or films or, in the case of hackers, rebuilding old software, so as to introduce improvements, or programming new versions of software.

As regards hacker communities, the emotional charge with which they go about their activities is evident—"[…] the hacker's work ethic is based on the value of creativity, and involves combining passion with freedom"[7]—as is their commitment to society through the improvement of the means and technologies that foster the development of collective intelligence. With respect to fandom, however, even when the emotional investment is present, it is possible that the social engagement is lacking. Fans accomplish tasks that are generally considered playful, which is often associated with the banal or even the frivolous. Nevertheless, we should move away from the idea of the fan as a thoughtless and reckless adolescent fanatic. Scholar Liesbet Van Zoonen lays the groundwork for connecting the responsibilities of fans to those of citizens, advocating "infotainment" (a neologism of information and entertainment). According to her, while fans rigorously research and analyze popular culture goods, they launch discussions, share knowledge and ideas, offer opinions and propose alternatives. They also construct their community around collaboration and personal emotional investment, leading to an "affective intelligence," which is closely linked to how citizenship and political involvement are to be understood.[8]

Thus we can say that hacker and fandom communities emerge from an emotional involvement in initiating collaborative activities that both create the means and/or dynamics needed for the development of knowledge and require their members to have strong social engagement. These are communities who face their social responsibilities through activism and volunteering. Although these two groups precede the Internet, hackers, with activities analogous to fandom behaviour, were essential to the net's development, while fans benefited from the hackers' work that made their tasks easier to accomplish and increased their visibility.

In this volunteering and activism context, and full of the emotion and engagement characteristic of fan and hacker communities, art exploded on digital networks, seduced by their dynamics and features. With clear references to organizing (or rather disorganizing) models of fandom and hacker groups, the emergence of net.art influenced the online community by championing a connection between artists and other users. These attempts to democratize art, which had already been championed by some members of the avant-garde and the neo-avant-garde, destroyed the idea of the genius artist and advocated collective authorship and proprietorship of artworks. New art streams, which demanded more interaction from net surfers, thus appeared. The initial net.art undoubtedly shared the open movement's current philosophy of the democratization and dissemination of art/culture/knowledge. Artists initiated the first online discussions by experimenting with various ways of operating on the web and by establishing different levels of interaction for the user. Thus we began to see new ways of stimulating social debate and attempts to subvert political attitudes that are against human rights.

A decade before what is considered to be the start of net.art, Kit Galloway and Sherrie Rabinowitz created the *Electronic Cafe*, with the financial support of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, when the city was host to the Olympic Games in 1984. Working out of five ethnic restaurants in Los Angeles, the *Electronic Cafe* became the first online forum of cultural debate.[9] Its goal was to share opinions and materials that showed the cultural diversity of Los Angeles and the Olympic Games by highlighting their positive impact and social and cultural benefits.

This type of initiative, based on fandom behaviour that Van Zoonen relates to good citizenship, exemplifies the moment just prior to an emergence of larger-scale projects, such as *The File Room* (http://thefileroom.org/), developed by Antoni Muntadas ten years later. This work critiques the attempts of certain political leaders to staunch the flow of information through censorship. To express its opposition, the work gives Internet users access to artistic projects—in different disciplines—that have been censored by governments and allows them to upload other censored cases to the file room. This social file room thus transforms into a space free from political oppression. Users can use it either to upload or to consult information. *The File Room* has also been shown as an installation in numerous exhibitions. Since 2001, it has been hosted and maintained by the National Coalition Against Censorship.

Although hackers and artists envisioned the Internet as an open source from the start, without commercial or political interference, the privatization of the net in 1995 created a certain level of distrust.
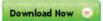
China Channel Firefox Add-on

Experience the censored Chinese internet at home!

The Firefox add-on China Channel offers internet user outside China to surf the web as if they were in China. Take an unforgetable virtual trip to China and experience the technical expertise of the Chinese Ministry of Information Industry (supported by western companies). It's open source, free and easy.

Version 0.4.2 beta; 26.10.2008; 70 KB

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Disclaimer: This software is experimental, it might harm your user profile. Not FF 3.5 compatible.

China Channel

The Plugin

The China Channel Firefox Add-On provides a way for Firefox users to surf the internet as though they were located behind the Chinese Great Fire Wall. This enables you to learn for yourself which websites and search results the Chinese government does and does not choose to censor. The way it works is by routing all of your browser activity through a proxy based in the People's Republic of China with the result that it is censored in exactly the same way as if you were connecting to the internet from within China.

Screen capture of China Channel *by Aral Bartholl, Evan Roth and Tobias Leingruber, 2008.*

Internet art began to be inundated with critical and protest actions coming under the designation of hacktivism and cyberactivism.

FloodNet (1998), created by the Electronic Disturbance Theatre (EDT) collective, is a work of hacktivism that relied on the online community to introduce social critique into Mexico's political discourse. This work is part of a series of "electronic civil disobedience" actions in support of the indigenous population of Chiapas against the oppression of the Mexican government. EDT mobilized thousands of users around the world via web pages and emails to block access to government websites through the massive use of an online Java applet created specifically for this purpose.[10]

In 2003, Daniel Garcia Andujar completed *INDIVIDUAL CITIZEN REPUBLIC PROJECT™*, an online platform through which users can either freely download from the server or have open access to learning resources regarding the programming and use of IT services and structures (hacking, cracking, Linux, wireless, etc.). This art initiative of citizen collaboration stems from the ethic of the Platonic Academy, founded on the concept of "synusia," a space for sharing knowledge and experience with the aim of "encouraging independent learning, […] a place where any member's individual learning always benefits others."[11] Via this platform, the artist, like the hacker, provides the necessary means for developing shared knowledge through cooperation between users who, following the advice of the art community, can in turn carry out actions that are generally in keeping with the hacker community. In this work, art and the hacker ethic are symbiotically merged to such an extent that their boundaries are erased.

Other critical net art examples are two Mozilla Firefox add-ons: *Real Costs* (2007, http://therealcosts.com), by Michael Mandiberg and *China Channel* (2008, http://chinachannel.hk/), by Aram Bartholl, Evan Roth and Tobias Leingruber. By installing *Real Costs*, users can know what the CO_2 emissions will be for a flight they wish to purchase when they visit airfare websites. The plug-in also indicates the CO_2 that other means of transportation would produce to make that trip. The work informs the online community of CO_2 pollution, aiming to raise the environmental awareness we need to live in a more responsible, sustainable and clean world. *China Channel*, on the other hand, gives users the possibility of surfing on the web as though they were in China. Users can thus experience the censorship and informational manipulation to which citizens are subjected in this country.[12]

We are undoubtedly in a cultural context in which citizens, previously hypnotized by the media, are beginning to transcend the passive consumer observation of media content. The projects discussed above are clear examples of different strategies that Internet art uses to encourage the development of collective social and political action. Are we ready to join the movement?

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Translation: Oana Avasilichioaei

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