Thoughts on Hacktivism

Post-Y2K

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A TAO PAMPHLET

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It would appear that the most important, if not essential aspect of surviving in this 'post-Y2K' society has become the task of "Understanding Reality". That is to say, our society has reached such a high level of media saturation, that reality is not so much an objective experience, but more a subjective construct facilitated by a sprawling economy that combines telecommunications, computers, marketing, and entertainment, to generate a facility that more and more permits the customization of reality, when and where possible. Power in this system manifests as the ability to control, contain, maintain, and escape one's constructed reality. As with most political systems, power is centralized and continuously accumulated into the hands of the few, while the appearance of distributed wealth is enabled by the reality of distributed computing and communications. For every remote control there is the illusion of change, even when we all know that everything is the same, regardless of the channel.

For most people however, reality bites, and it bites hard. The values that the society presents as the bonds of its existence, include accumulative and possessive individualism, often at the expense of the society (and social fabric) itself. We are told that happiness is in success, that success is in power, and that power comes with money, so we need to get mo' money and mo' money, by any means necessary.

Hacking Reality is the means by which we can reclaim our communities and struggle towards an equitable and democratic society. Within this technological system that surrounds us, the Hacker struggles to become human. We are all born animals, but via socialization with each other, and our environments, we become the human being that we're instinctively driven to become. What sets the Hacker apart from other identities in our society, is the considerable effort and ongoing change that the Hacker undergoes to understand, and furthermore, transform, the environment in which they reside. Contrast this with the average Consumer, who has discarded their humanity, in favour of a much more reliable and secure corporate identity, that guides them through the trends and fads of their culture. The Consumer does not understand or attempt to transform their environment; rather they accept it as it is, conforming to whatever changes the system presents.

What these two identities hold in common is an existence within a dynamic and

ever changing system. For as we all see and hear: the only constant in our world, is change itself. What sets the Hacker apart, is their possession of social power, which is largely derived from an understanding of their environment (aka: reality). For within this technological society, there are always inherent mechanisms of power built into the logic and operations of its systems. Colloquially this is referred to as "God Status", and most frequently manifests as a systems' root account. While these powers generally exist (and were intended) for administrative purposes (and control) they can also have countless secondary and tertiary applications, especially when it comes to unintended applications or possessions of said power.

As a culture, and as a set of social networks, Hackers have been uniquely successful in both understanding the presence and role of this power (within the system) as well as being able to both subvert and broaden the access to said positions and mechanisms of power. Out of this particular ability, if not potential social role, has emerged the concept of Hacktivism, which while widely used (by the mass media) really does not have a consensual definition that is accepted by all actors in the culture. For the purpose of this discussion however, let us define Hacktivism as: Social Activism augmented by an advanced literacy of communications environments. For one of the largest tensions that is underlying many of the conflicts in our technological society is the contrast between open source shared organizing, and closed proprietary development. In the realm of Hacktivism, this is the difference between the military-centric strike teams, and the social-centric hackers (and groups) who freely give out source code and intelligence that they gather.

Most of our technology, indeed, most of our communication environments, were originally, and for the most part still are, the domain of the military. This is not to say that economic and civil activities cannot simultaneously co-exist, but it does mean that any telephone and computer is within reach of the eyes ears and guns of the military and state intelligence establishments. This only serves to emphasize and highlight the need for a broader sphere of: Critical Collaborative Free Open Source Distributed Development.

Essentially we are all squatters on the largest military base ever created, and it is the role of Hacktivists to help the residents of the squat (o/k/a society) understand what it is they can do with the facilities (Internet) as part of a greater struggle to be human beings living in a social world.

A recent, and potent example of where Hacktivism was essentially absent, when and where it was desperately needed, was the ideological exercise that was presented to the public as the Y2K Bug. At no time did a coherent transcendence of Y2K emerge, that simultaneously addressed both the dependence on

technology that our society possesses, as well as the mythology (and ideology) embedded in the Y2K spectacle, that had nothing to do with technology, nor even the messianism and eschatology that was adjacent to Y2K. For Y2K served two primary purposes, that are in and of themselves, central to the existence and prosperity of our current political economic system. The first was to reinforce the primacy of the focused self-interest. The second was the further normalization of an insular and pragmatic culture.

Y2K as a spectacle, or in some respects, a social concern, was more about a "Me, Myself, and I" rather than a "We, Us, and I". What arose was more of a "Bunker Mentality" rather than a sense of shared conditions. The emphasis was on stocking up on personal supplies, driven by a fear that stems from a combined sense that nobody really knows what could (or would) happen. Even those administrators and experts who in the final days assured all that nothing would go wrong, still holed up in bunkers and control rooms of their own, to safely monitor what they perceived as potential (if not falsely promised) social chaos.

Indeed it is the social construct of the Bunker that serves to contain (and protect) the culture of the possessive individual. Surrounded by Globalization in all its myriad of forms, the Y2K spectacle allowed the industrialized world to cocoon themselves in a social reality that was insulated from the misery and poverty of the rest of the world. While a minority of people were concerned they may lose their running water, electricity, or telephones for a day or two (because of the Y2K bug), most of the people in the world had never even made a telephone call, let alone have access to clean running water, or affordable housing. What Y2K has illustrated is just how exclusive the systems that we once thought of as universal really are. The so called industrialized world is desperately trying to insulate itself from the social reality of the rest of the world, and one only has to look at the rising poverty and homelessness in what was once arrogantly referred to as the first world, to see that in fact, times are hard for people all over.

Y2K as ideological exercise was really an initiation of a select few into what little remains of the prospering and developing future. The beauty (sarcasm) of its execution is the way in which it inculcates its inhabitants to thinking that everyone is like them, and everything is as good as it is where they are. Imagine a sphere, with mirrors (as monitors) on the inside, in which the Consumer is contained, and encapsulated with the constant site of their own ever-changing image. What appears as infinity, is really an inverted self-reflection, that displays everything as an image of one's self. This sphere used to be described as 'Plato's Cave', but now it might be appropriate to call it 'Einstein's Egg', where instead of representation (and reflections) upon a wall,
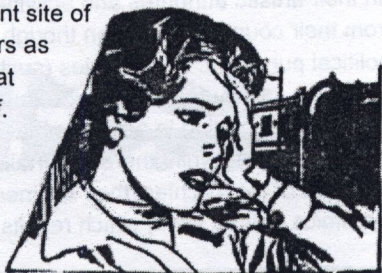
we perceive the world as relative to our own insularity.

Enter the Hacker, the child of the networks, the animal of light, the human inside the system. From this individual identity, now emerges the culture of Hacktivism: a collaborative, and networked agent of social change. Hacktivism has been adept at engaging the public mind and furthering the level of debate around particular social issues. Employing spectacular and situational techniques, Hacktivists have been able to rapidly and contagiously, distribute and broaden political participation. Whether organizing networks, or mobilizing with them, Hacktivism does offer the tools to engage and effectively appear in the (techno-logical society's) political arena.

Paradoxically, Hacktivism is a force for the demystification of the technological society, where open multifaceted and distributed processes allow participants and observers to learn about the communications, technical, and political infrastructure that surrounds (and may contain) them. In this public education comes through demonstration, as stunts, hacks, and performances, highlight different elements or tensions within the system. Most often this comes in the area of network security, but increasingly, will involve more lucrative areas, such as trade policy (WTO) and social controls (Genetic Engineering). The power of Hacktivism resides largely in the development of more tactile and tangible notions of communications, that involve the politics of occupation, rather than abstention. Why stay in your bunker, when you can occupy the whole system? When we can occupy the routers and the streets at the same time we will find that we outnumber those still huddled in the (remote) control room.

However with that said, Hacktivism, as a self-identified culture, is still juvenile, and does not possess the breadth or diversity that enables greater effectiveness and accessibility amongst (and for) social movements. At present the Hacktivism milieu can be categorized into three groups: the Artists, the Techies, and the Politicos, all three of which need to come together in a much more coherent manner (and setting) if Hacktivism is to live up to its potential. For while all three groups involve elements of each other, each one is defined on that which they choose to focus on.

The Artists (such as the Electronic Disturbance Theatre and RTMark) focus on their artistic attributes and activities, often as an excuse to ignore criticisms from their counterparts, even though they do employ elements of technology for political purposes. The Techies (such as l0pht.com and 2600.com) on the other hand, are largely focused on the development of technical tools and platforms, as well as engaging in activities that are centered around said technology (and related issues). While there is certainly an artistic and political element to the activities of the Techies, they at times neglect both the esthetics and political dynamics of their work, which results in their alienation or distance from other

social movements. Similarly the Politicos (such as tao.ca and iww.org) emphasize the political dynamic of their activities, often at the expense of the technical or aesthetic (accessible) elements of their work. Yet, as a result of their political background, it has been the Politicos who have done the most so far to bring these three divergent groups together, with http://hacktivism.tao.ca as one example.

Yet it is in this need or desire to forge greater cross-cultural links, that Hacktivism may offer a model for social movements in general, in terms of enabling a singularity of multiplicity, where many identities and movements can co-exist. The ability to (optionally) emulate successful (political and organizational) models is the innovation that stems from the emerging network culture of experimentation and open development. Ongoing situational diversity nurtures a desire for difference that fuels the breadth that provides the dynamism and strength resident in the notion of Hacktivism. It is something of a self-referential feedback loop that given the right balance of social agency and distributed networking can provide a myriad of options to those involved in social struggles.

However socializing the technology is difficult, if not treacherous, due to the immediate and constant presence of the military and state actors. It is not to suggest or encourage paranoia, but rather recognize the immediacy of conflict, and the inherent class war mechanisms that are ceaselessly operating against us. Thus openness is essential, if not catalytic to our ability to not only survive, but demonstrate what human life can be like in the here and now. Sharing what we do have, rather than hoarding that which we seek to keep, is a potent means by which to subvert the very system we find ourselves residing in.

Hacktivism is the existentialism of the Network Society. It is the way of being for those of us who want to become human, leaving behind the corporate consumer identity that has enshrouded our world. While the flood of information torrentially subsumes people, we learn to swim against the current, while helping others regain their senses, so as to find their bearings, and join us in this social struggle.