

Graffiti Artists of Cyberspace

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What does art or education have to do with hacking? This was a question that our group was confronted with as we strove to direct and guide our research on hackers as a subject for ethical issues. As our group conducted multiple interviews and refined our focus, we found that hacking interestingly correlates with one of the most notorious and controversial forms of expression: graffiti art. It is our intention through this e-paper to uncover some of the misconceptions held by viewers of these two professions, and also to reveal the correlations between them.

What comes to mind when one thinks of the term “hacker”? Is the connotation positive, or negative? Most people, including our group members, see hackers as some mysterious, evil, villains of cyberspace whose only aim is to destroy and/or deface networks, computers, or programs. But is this self-formed claim true? How much do we know about hacking? Is it supported by evidence? Do we really understand who hackers are? According to

www.unusualresearch.com a hacker is:

1. A person who enjoys learning the details of programming systems and how to stretch their capabilities, as opposed to most users who prefer to learn only the minimum necessary.
2. One who programs enthusiastically, or who enjoys programming rather than just theorizing about programming.
3. A person capable of appreciating hack value (q.v.).
4. A person who is good at programming quickly. Not everything a hacker produces is a hack.
5. An expert at a particular program, or one who frequently does work using it or on it.

6. A malicious or inquisitive meddler who tries to discover information by poking around.

As you can see, only one of the above definitions asserts that hackers are some brutal group of criminals, and even then they are qualified by the term “inquisitive.” So, are graffiti artists, too, a misunderstood group of individuals?

Graffiti art, to some, is an art of deviant teenagers who have nothing better to do with their time than to defile public property. To the uninformed, it is an art of thugs and drug dealers, decorating inner city buildings, claiming territorial rights, and identifying gang affiliation. To others, it is an art of beauty, used to articulate the voice, not of vandals, but rather of those whose right to be heard has been hushed by the environment in which they were born. Eliciting even more respect, by this “other” group, is the planning and speed that must go into such works, which can variably be completed in just a few minutes, or over many hours. Which group is right? Is either?

As artists, our group intends to uncover a correlation between computer hacking and artmaking. We discovered that there are strong parallels between hackers and graffiti artists. As www.sitepoint.com states: “Like hackers, graffiti artists find themselves in a continuing struggle to get their work seen and avoid the law.”

Interestingly there are sub groups within both the areas of hacking and graffiti. In hacking, there are people who are called white hats, black hats, and script kiddies. Within the graffiti world there are piecers, bombers and taggers. These subgroups also correspond to each other. Starting with the “good”; white hat hackers are security experts in the professional field of network security.

They work for corporations to prevent the “bad” hackers from destroying their systems. The bad, known as black hats and script kiddies, give the white hats as well as the general term hackers a bad name. This unfortunate fact is the same in the graffiti world; piecers who create fine art, often in the form of murals, are striving to elevate the social view of graffiti art, whereas bombers and taggers are consistently giving graffiti art a bad name.

In the computer world, black hat and script kiddies are the ones that find new ways to attack network systems. Just as in the graffiti art world, the bombers and taggers tend to destructively vandalize without meaning or simply just spray their initials on walls.

In the article found on www.sitepoint.com, there was an interesting statement by a community resident. He explained that when he would walk out the door and see graffiti on the wall that was beautiful, he wouldn't mind as much as when taggers simply leave their initials on the wall. In the case of initials, he would immediately call the police. Within the computer world, a white hat hacker who works for corporations to secure their systems would not be reported to the police. On the other hand, the black hat and script kiddies can receive long lengths of jail time if caught. For example, in the UK, two men have received a two-month jail term for conspiring to create a computer worm for an international hacking group.

Due to the malicious nature of black hats and script kiddies, there is an immediate need to protect electronic information and network equipment just as we would protect our personal property from taggers and bombers. To do so, we

install security software and update it regularly. Another way to protect ourselves from hacking is to avoid opening suspicious emails and files.

Corporations face a much larger problem. They often have databases of personal information about employees, clients, and business transactions. If one of these corporations gets hacked into, many peoples' personal information, therefore identity, would be in jeopardy.

Corporations are not the only area that needs heightened awareness of network security. Any computer network that contains personal information such as school districts, universities, medical centers and government departments needs security. Places of these sorts often have large security departments whose only job is to guard against hacking and to find holes in their security systems. These are the white hats that appropriately apply their knowledge of technology and hacking to guard against the black hats and script kiddies.

Education is an area that not only has to guard their students' and employees' information from being stolen, but they also have to guard against students hacking into the schools systems in order to change their grades, plagiarize, and obtain any possible secure information.

Through our exploration of the different types of hackers that exist, as well as the comparison with graffiti artists, we found the connection between hackers and art and education. The younger generations tend to have more knowledge, access and interest in technology than generations that came before them. Often, they do not hack with the intent of doing harm. It is the black hats that the network security departments are protecting their systems from. We need to

remember in this technologically advanced world to protect ourselves against hackers, but we also need to realize that hackers can offer a valuable security service to society as well.

Both graffiti artists and hackers are given a negative connotation because most people generalize that both groups deface and destroy property. Yet we now know that this is not always the case. We found our “self-formed claim” to be false and also found that there are actually many hackers and graffiti artists that can do good things for society.

So how do we solve the problems presented by the bombers, taggers, black hats and script kiddies? Through art classes we can educate students about graffiti art, its history, and reasons for creation. In computer courses we can educate students about the proper way to use technology. Education can be a very important tool for teaching kids at a young age what is right and what is wrong in regards to graffiti art, computer hacking, and their future usage of ideals related to these topics.

Click on the photograph to hear our interview with Scott Putney:



Works Cited

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