

# #HackFutures: Futurist As Hacker

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We live in strange times. We all know it. Some of us celebrate and play with the sense of vertigo being experienced whilst others tremble and attempt to limit the turbulence through various kinds of self-absorption. This contested space is very much alive and creative. Those choosing to play in this space are consciously seeking to realise preferred futures. Even the ‘bad guys’ have their preferred futures and often they have very powerful technologies at their disposal to help realise these. Yet even the solitary has cultural power. No being is an island and we are all in a rush to stamp the future with our particular brand. As Fred Polak argued “No man, not even the suicide, can leave tomorrow alone. The suicide but hastens tomorrow in his impatience” (1973, p. 4). I argue that each cultural actor is a cultural hacker generating new possibilities within the cultural genome, exploring new pathways by reconfiguring old elements, inserting new ‘code’, and out of this creative work generating alternative futures.

## Hacking and Cultural Agency

To hack in this cultural sense is to take the hacker mentality described by McKenzie Wark (2004) into creative spaces previously immanent to the cultural project. To hack is to claim – or reclaim – our right to cultural agency. Cultural agents are hackers. They understand that to change their responses, to offer alternative narratives, images and visions is to hack into the cultural coding that determines how we think, relate, remember, act, love, fear and hope. This is what Wark recognised when he wrote his *Hacker Manifesto* in 2004.

*Hackers create the possibility of new things entering the world. Not always great things, or even good things, but new things. In art, in science, in philosophy and culture, in any production of knowledge where data can be gathered, where information can be extracted from it, and where in that information new possibilities for the world produced, there are hackers hacking the new out of the old (2004, p.004).*

Such hackers work with the *ur-stuff* of possibility in which alternative forms lie immanent to a context (Dyson, 2015), and through which the context can be understood heterotopically as pregnant with possibility: always pregnant, always expectant; always generative (Bussey, 2009; Foucault, 1986). To identify and release such possibilities is the work of the cultural hacker. Such a hacker is a creative ‘programmer’ or cultural entrepreneur who releases new possibilities hidden within a system. Eric Raymond (1996), perhaps ghosting Guy Steele<sup>1</sup>, notes that a traditional hacker is a ‘person who enjoys exploring the details of programmable systems and how to stretch their capabilities’ (Raymond, 1996, p.233). I extend this definition, via McKenzie Wark (2004), to those working not just with computer programmes but also with cultural programmes particularly as they pertain to the future and the largely untapped levels of human agency.

A hacker can reveal the new within the current system, she can also connect elements from between or across systems to generate new hybrid assemblages based on unexpected encounters between previously

separate systems. Such chimeric discoveries can be visceral or abstract or even a combination of both (Saniotis, 2007) – this is the viral quality of a hack. A hacker is to their social or cultural milieu as a programmer is to a game – they develop patches, evolve lateral and systemic dimensions and – following Deleuze and Guattari (1987) – work across planes of meaning to generate new social, cultural, technological possibilities (De Landa, 2000). Hackers disrupt, in the sense of *futures jamming* described by Ramos (Ramos, 2006). They respond synergistically to the *ur-stuff* immanent to their context and bring forth new possibilities. A hack can often be opportunistic arising from an off the cuff statement, or a fortuitous link that spawns copies and trends. Thus the words ‘occupy’ (Catalano & Creswell, 2013) and ‘meme’, the term ‘fake news’ all rapidly gain discursive ground whilst we see neologistic creativity with a prefix such as ‘post’ that moves from the post-formal and the post-modern to the post-normal (Sardar, 2010). Similarly, if we follow the career of the concept of ‘rights’ we can see what Lynn Hunt (Hunt, 2007) has described as a ‘rights cascade’ in which the term has been used exponentially over time as an identifier for a wide range of rights based action such as natural rights, human rights, land rights, animal rights, gay and lesbian rights, environmental rights and so on.

Language is an easy target for the cultural hacker. As cultural code it invites, and in fact delights, in inventive metamorphosis (Ostler, 2005). Yet it is not a standalone, it inhabits a dynamic cultural space in which all linguistic media from Twitter to tattoos, from television to graffiti all mediate meaning and representation (McLuhan, 1989). A good example of this is the Microsoft company’s co-option of the word ‘window’. This rich metaphor entered the market-place in triumph and I remember many cultural commentators waxing eloquent about the possibilities and constraints of thinking ‘window’ back in the late 1980s and early 1990s (see Friedberg, 2006). The language of a culture, the style and substance of it, its rhetoric and its embodied resistance and challenge all hinge on cultural hacks. Yet cultural hackers are often unaware of their role in this. My contention is that futurists invite people to consciously embrace their role as cultural hackers.

## Chimeric Hacks

Before going further with this point it is necessary to back up a bit and note that culture is not a homogenous entity. Rather it consists of a set of nested domains such as the linguistic which I was exploring above, the technological, the institutional and political, the aesthetic and the biological, the imagined, the embodied and the feared. All are zones open to hacking, and all interpenetrate the other. In this work taboos are crossed and frontiers re-imagined. Arthur Saniotis, for instance, offers the chimera as a metaphor for the mixing of previously separate elements both in culture and in nature. He posits the evolutionary potential for transgenic ‘chimeric hacks’ (my term) that advantage humanity in a world of decreasing returns and low level anticipatory consciousness. He argues that:

*... given the rate of ecological destruction on the earth the promise of trans-species gene splicing may lead to the possible creation of a new kind of embodiment which is more environmentally friendly (2007, p.53).*

This embodiment will enhance what I think of as our future senses (Bussey, 2016, 2017a) – our perceptual capacity to read the signs around us and respond appropriately. Thus, he notes, drawing on the work of Paul Ehrlich:

*... evolutionary changes need to be in the area of the human perceptual system which has problems comprehending the immediacy of environmental problems... [such] trans-species gene splicing may lead to the cultivation of a greater range of sensitivities to environmental conditions (2007, p.55).*

This hacking of human DNA to bring about perceptual changes that increase human sensitivities to environmental changes, Saniotis argues, is key to our successful response to climate change (2007, p.55) and is a clear example of what humans do, and have always done, to increase advantage. The chimeric nature of the hack is both enticing and terrifying. Mythic representations of the chimera are indeed intentionally frightening as humans have a built-in dislike of deviance from the norm. It is also technically fascinating, and points to the intimate relationship between human beings and their tools.

Other examples of the hack in history include:

- The emergence of language
- Shift from hunter-gathering to agriculture
- Increasing intensification in urban life (and patriarchy/hierarchy)
- Political evolution of the state and empire
- The emergence of the Great Religions in the Axial Age
- Martin Luther’s 95 Theses nailed to the church door in Wittenberg
- The Scientific Revolution
- The emergence of the internet and mobile phones

## **Futurist As Hacker**

To return now to my main argument, McKenzie Wark (2004) in his book *The Hacker Manifesto* is making the case for a hacker class. My interest in hackers is as disturbers of the peace (Bussey, 2017b). Good futurists are disturbers of the peace, they are hackers at work across the layers Inayatullah describes in Causal Layered Analysis aka CLA (Inayatullah, 2015) yet they stand apart by virtue of the action of hacking. A ‘futures hack’ is a kind of abstraction and the hacker comes as an alien to the community they work with – bringing a new set of eyes as Proust once quipped. The act of hacking opens the present to surprise and disturbs regimes of power that have suppressed alternatives. It abstracts from what is a ‘what-might-be’ that shakes up and reveals new identities, new pathways, new technologies and new horizons. Thus, to hack in this way is to critique what is and release new configurations that we can consider, explore and implement in our personal lives, our institutional contexts or even in our social and cultural domains. Wark’s formulation captures this creative and critical potential nicely:

*To hack is to produce or apply the abstract to information and express the possibility of new worlds, beyond necessity (2004, p.014).*

Futurists hack culture not simply by ‘invention’ but by developing and applying hacker-techniques in the service of those organisations, communities, societies and individuals seeking greater agency in a world of diminishing returns. As Wark notes, such work can be essentially amoral as the hacker can be totally focused on the production of the new: ‘to hell with the consequences’. However, by working within collective processes and structures the collective itself imposes ethical limits on the role of the futurist-as-hacker. This of course is not a one-way street. The futurist-as-hacker also has an effect disproportionate to their ‘size’ on the organisation, community etc that they serve. The futurist, in helping stakeholders shape preferred futures, will often create a ‘gravity free’ space in which the better and the best become narrative pathways for futures that involve inclusive, ethical, win-win responses to current dilemmas.

To hack is to exercise individual and collective agency within the cultural domain. To hack is to put one’s creative energy in the service of social, cultural and ecological processes that keep gridlocking, in a state of postnormal paralysis. It is to step outside one’s context for a moment and to see the world not as a given but as an open system with co-creative possibilities. It is to actively

enter this open space and create new possibilities beyond the trance inducing condition of business-as-usual. It is to release the anticipatory imagination of those invested in – even complicit in – a dominant reading of the present. In all this work, nothing is free from a potential hack: history, memory, taste, desire and both hope and fear are all open to a futures hack.

## #Hackfutures

With this in mind I have started to tag my tweets with the hashtag #hackfutures to see what kind of possible order/disorder might arise from this potentially subversive and creative media platform. I am not just tagging the obvious topics like AI, the transhuman or nanotech, but also historical, aesthetic and ecological Tweets that embroider the cultural ferment. I invited other Twitterati to join me in this and gained limited traction. In Figure 1 are two examples of this exercise. This is crude hack-mapping but it is a start and leads on to further considerations of what futurists are doing as hackers.

The first observation is that futurists hack narratives (Milojević & Inayatullah, 2015). This hack sits at the heart of scenario work which unpacks and reconfigures sets of possibilities following the narrative logic of a specific given scenario (Jarva, 2014). The hacker instinct is to add an element which causes a *narrative mutation* to occur. This experimental dimension is safe within a scenario workshop but becomes real and productive of effects once applied to the contexts of our clients. Narratives can often be conveyed via images – such as the ‘black swan’ (Taleb, 2007), ‘elephant in the room’ or ubiquitous anthropomorphic cyborg (Figure 2) which appears regularly on Twitter.



Figure 1. #hackfutures Examples



Figure 2. Twitter Cyborg

## CLA of the Hack

Narratives are key to our identity, so it goes without saying that hackers also hack identities at both the cultural, social and individual levels. In fact, hackers bring about mutation at all levels as the process of Causal Layered Analysis demonstrates. A litany hack might be a new piece of technology, a product or a new meme that modulates or messes up the ordinary, adding new elements to our two-dimensional worlds. A system hack goes deeper and generates a system level mutation in which a system level process such as the ‘checkout-chick’ is replaced by ‘self-serve’ in which the narrative of service with its relational dimension is replaced by the narrative of self-sufficiency. The subtext here of course is that relationships, even superficial ones, are an encumbrance. The monad neoliberal self seeks freedom, agility and speed at all costs. Narrative legitimacy at the system level is often, as this reflection indicates, rooted in deeper causal processes such as the worldviews that underpin systems.

A worldview hack is an ideological or epistemological hack. It attacks the legitimacy of knowledge-power centres. The issue of ‘fake news’ for instance is a brilliant worldview hack as it destabilises traditional verities and tribalises systems of knowing. It is also a relational hack in the same way that the shift from ‘checkout-chick’ to ‘self-serve’ is, as it breaks the logical links between systemic knowing that builds on scaffolded and interrelated ‘truth’ statements anchored in research and peer corroboration. Worldviews themselves all have mythic/metaphoric roots. Metaphoric hacks offer new emotional and ontological anchors to culture. Perhaps the greatest hack in recent centuries was the concept/metaphor of the factory. Here order, productivity and rationality converged to provide social utopians with a taste for profit a wonderful metaphor for society. As a result educational and health systems became factories as Ivan Illich bewailed decades ago (Illich, 1971, 1976). The state too became a factory (Scott, 1998). The recent counter-metaphor to the

factory is the network (Castells, 2012; De Landa, 2006). This too is a brilliant hack, yet the factory is still deeply embedded in our psyches and institutions.

## Conclusion

To hack is to create a mutation in the world. Scenarios and CLA are tools for hacking. Gaming and play are also powerful ways to hack at the visceral, epistemic and ontological underpinnings of our world and our place in it (Bussey, 2014). Games and play invite creativity and joy into what we do. A lightness of being to contrast with the heaviness that is promoted as the dominant modality for dealing with life. Yet the ingredients for approaching issues of social and environmental continuity and change are still part of games and play (Candy & Dunagan, 2016). Games in particular require strategy and perseverance, especially if the game is about winning (not all are of course). Play being less structured also relies on agreed forms and informal rules though winning is less important than the process of play itself. This short paper is a thought bubble. As a hacker I am writing for hackers. The intention is not to form a hacker class but to explore the hack as a tool for futures interventions and the hacker identity as a useful way of situating those disrupting the dominant 'program' in the ongoing struggle to build a more just, inclusive and free world.

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## Notes

1. See Raymond's introduction where he discusses how he worked with Steele's original New Hacker Dictionary (1983) to revise and update it.

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