HACKER.WS4

Origin of the word "hacker" in computers

(Retyped by Emmanuel ROCHE.)

- "Hacker Derivation"
  BYTE, November 1985, p.399

Dear Jerry,

Regarding your description of Hacker-con in March (1985): As one
who was there when the words "hacker" and "to hack" were first
applied to programming, I may be able to shed more light on the
subject.

In 1965 I was at MIT, doing what amounted to postdoctoral work
after getting a mathematics degree from Berkeley. I asked one
day about the student sleeping on the table in the PDP-10 room.
I was told that his name was Richard Greenblatt and that he was
working on a chess program. In time I got to know Greenblatt and
a couple of his friends, named Nelson and Gosper, and I became
fascinated by the argot they spoke. For a true argot it was, as
full of neologisms as any Parisian slang.

Actually, "hack" is much closer than you might think in origin
to "hack writer." Greenblatt and his friends loved to write
programs fast. Not programs that RUN fast, you understand, just
programs that took a very short time to write. The resulting
programs, as one might expect, were often rather inelegant, and
they knew it; so they started referring to them as "hacks." In
those days, elegance in programming meant writing in ALGOL 60,
and Greenblatt's group had little interest in ALGOL 60 (which
endeared me to them, since I was similarly inclined). They,
then, were the outsiders, the self-described "hackers," trusting
in their ability to write assembly-language artificial-
intelligence programs that would outperform anything written in
ALGOL 60 -- as, indeed, they did.

The prototypical variable names FOO and BARF served the same
purpose in the argot that "John Doe" and "Richard Roe" do for
lawyers. Thus, one might say, "if you have the ALGOL statement
FOO := BARF, you have to load BARF and store it in FOO." There
was also "moby," meaning "big." Greenblatt was "writing this
moby hack to play chess." The argot also took the place of
conventional cussing. I never heard "goddammit" from Greenblatt
or Nelson or Gosper; I heard "Foo! Barf!" or sometimes "Moby
foo" or "Moby barf."

In time I went on to teach at Berkeley and lost contact with the

hackers until I read about the success of Greenblatt's chess
program, which the media called MacHack; actually, it was "MAC
Hack," meaning "a hack (or program) developed at Project MAC."

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