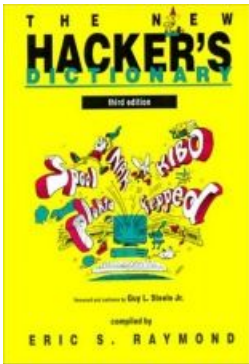


THE JARGON FILE - THE HACKER'S DICTIONARY

Thursday, September 22, 2011 - 01:15 PM

By [Alex Goldman](#)

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(MIT Press)

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gedanken: /g@dahnkn/, adj.

Ungrounded; impractical; not well-thought-out; untried; untested.

The Hacker's Dictionary is now in its third edition, but rather than being on the forefront of the hacker slang vanguard, it feels more like a time capsule of the burgeoning

The Jargon File began as just a couple of pages of definitions, compiled by a computer scientist named Raphael Finkel at [SAIL](#), the Stanford Artificial Intelligence Laboratory in 1975. At the time, there existed a kind of proto-internet called [ARPANET](#) that primarily connected research universities and a few tech companies. Hacking luminaries of the era like [Richard Stallman](#) and [Tim Anderson](#) contributed definitions to the file in its early years.

As the hacker community grew, The Jargon File made its way to numerous other universities and institutions, and the number of definitions in the jargon file exploded. By 1983, there were enough definitions and enough interest to publish The Jargon File in book form. For print, it was edited by a hacker named Guy Steele, rechristened *The Hacker's Dictionary*, and published by MIT Press.

monkey up: vt.

To hack together hardware for a particular task, especially a one-shot job. Connotes an extremely [cruffy](#) and consciously temporary solution. Compare [hack up](#), [kluge up](#), [cruft together](#).

Even though The Jargon File was and remains a collaborative effort, a custodian was needed to seed the file with the latest terms and definitions. Between 1983 and 1990, the rate at which definitions

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were added slowed considerably. At least until a hacker named [Eric Raymond](#) took over the maintenance of The Jargon File in 1990.

"I got interested, I started making changes, and the previous editor handed me the baton," says Raymond. "That's how it works in the hacker culture - authority follows from accepting responsibility." One of his first moves as editor was to open the jargon file to everyone, which resulted in an influx of hundreds of new contributions.

splork!

[Usenet; common] *The sound of coffee (or other beverage) hitting the monitor and/or keyboard after being forced out of the mouth via the nose. It usually follows an unexpectedly funny thing in a Usenet post.*

Compare [snarf](#).

The Hacker's Dictionary is now in its third edition, but rather than being on the forefront of the hacker slang vanguard, it feels more like a time capsule of the burgeoning hacker world. Raymond says the sheer volume of niche cultures on the internet has made The Jargon File somewhat obsolete. "I think this is because as the Internet has gone mainstream, most of the jargon formation associated with it is no longer being done by people inside the hacker culture," says Raymond. "Rather, you get lots of little subcultures - *on* the Internet, but not *of* it - forming their own memes."

However, Raymond points out that The Jargon File was invaluable in making hacker culture accessible to those on the outside. "By showing people that the native culture of the Internet's engineers is benign and playful, I think it helped us head off some pretty serious threats to electronic civil liberties," says Raymond. "It had another effect I didn't really anticipate, which was to enable the hacker culture to acculturate [newbies](#) at a tremendously increased rate. This might not sound very important to someone who's not inside that culture already, but the second-order effects included the rise of the open-source software movement, and everything that proceeded from that."

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ALEX GOLDMAN

[Alex Goldman](#) is a producer for [On the Media](#). One time he got run over by a car.

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Ben Baker from [S. Georgia](#)

This story is a partial waste of time. A word is defined by common and mass use. That the word "hacker" has been redefined by common use is evidence of an evolving language. Consider the word "gay" which has completely changed within my lifetime.

If hackers of any stripe do not like this, they are welcome to learn another language or, a la Esperanto, create their own and leave modern English to the rest of us.

The story was not a complete waste of time in that it discussed the present hacker culture and its impact on society. That was good and interesting. The premise of the story is the wast.

Sep. 27 2011 08:33 AM



Geoffrey Mattson from [Silicon Valley](#)

I have to disagree with the commentator's attribution of the word hacking to some railroad model club at MIT during the dawn of the microprocessor age.

The term has been used for decades to mean a sloppy, ad hoc creative effort or to describe a person who habitually

makes such an effort. Hasn't the term been applied to writers and journalists for years (as in "hack writer").

In software, hacking has always had two connotations. One implies sloppiness and expedience. This pejorative version is used in phrases such as "Look at this code. What a hack!".

But it also became respected when it referred to a programmer who was creatively expedient and tenacious. Some of these programmers used "hacking" methodology to penetrate private networks and computers. Hence the term "hacking".

At least that's my understanding.

Sep. 26 2011 09:31 PM



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