



# The Limits of Hacking Composition Pedagogy

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## Abstract

In recent decades, the term *hacking* has ceased referring exclusively to illegal computing, and is regularly used in reference to practices that are considered virtuous in composition classrooms, such as collaboration, open access, subversion of hierarchies, and exploratory learning. Of late, hacking has begun to serve as an appealing metaphor for the work we aim to do in 21st century composition classrooms. However, as with any metaphor, the origin term might bring unwanted associations from its history and its contemporary evolutions. This essay synthesizes a survey of literature in the field with the history of hacking and its contemporary practices in open-ended competitions known as hackathons. Based on interviews of eight undergraduate hackathon competitors, in which the virtues of hacking appear to be quickly undercut by dubious ethical and political practices, the essay ultimately presents a caution against adopting hacking as a metaphor for composition.

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## 1. Introduction

As the idea that composition is an inherently multimodal endeavor continues to gain purchase, *writing* appears ever more limiting as a default term to describe the central subject of composition. It's not only that writing teachers have begun to think about composition in a new key (Yancey, 2004), or as a communicative practice that operates in conjunction with other modes (George, 2002; Selfe, 2009). Writing studies also continues to reach for new terms and metaphors to describe the kinds of activities and environments we desire in a 21st-century writing classroom. Echoing our ever-growing but always-fraught commitment to examining writing's relationships with other semiotic modes, writing pedagogy has a history of culling metaphors and analogies from disciplines and other contexts that traditionally compose in more than words: writing as Happenings (Sirc, 2002), as visual design (Marback, 2009), as filmmaking (Costanzo, 1986; Williamson, 1971), as gaming and game design (Colby, Johnson, & Colby, 2013; Robison, 2008), and so on. Broadly speaking, composition is likened to modes of expression that rely less on alphabetic language, so that a fully realized view of multimodal composition must seek analogies outside of print-based alphabetic writing.

This essay examines composition studies' recent interest in *hacking*, an evolving, fluid concept originating first in computer programming communities, now increasingly used in composition conferences, journals, and books as a term to describe activities within and parallel to the composition classroom. Operating from a critical perspective, this essay

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considers what is gained and lost when we use hacking as metaphor for writing. Following a brief discussion of the term's origins and uses in computer science, I present findings of a systematic review of hacking metaphors, summarizing the common applications of *hacking* and its variants, as they have appeared in the literature of composition pedagogy. The results of this review are then put into conversation with the findings of a case study of student participants in competitive programming events known as *hackathons*.

## 2. Origins of hacker culture

In a history likely familiar to many readers of this journal, the term *hacker* was originally applied to members of a group of precocious college students who were among the first to make a hobby of experimenting with computer programming in the 1950's. Famously characterized in 1984 by Steven Levy's *Hackers*, the original hackers started out as model train enthusiasts, who developed a keen interest in computing when the first computer programming course was offered at MIT in 1959. Several members of the group became fixated on programming for themselves, despite the fact that access to computers was tightly controlled by university officials. Eventually gaining access to a relatively unsupervised TX-0 ("Tixo") machine, the MIT hackers spent many all-nighters (and many missed classes) obtaining their "real education" (Levy, 2010, p. 19). Mostly, the hacker group developed programs that served little practical purpose at all, but which offered the "feeling of power and accomplishment" whenever a program worked. To the MIT group, a "hack" came to describe "project undertaken or a product built not solely to fulfill some constructive goal, but with some wild pleasure taken in mere involvement," and that in order for an accomplishment to be deemed a hack, it would have to be "imbued with innovation, style, and technical virtuosity" (p. 8).

These original MIT hackers embodied a set of principles that Levy called the "Hacker Ethic." Among these principles, Levy describes hackers' strong belief in access to technology and information, which included a desire for hands-on learning; mistrust of authority; belief in meritocracy rather than evaluating hackers by their degrees, age, race, or position (Levy does not mention gender); and belief that computers could improve life for the better.

## 3. Hacking in rhetoric and composition journals

The term "hacker" surfaced as a reference to underground computer programmers in the 1980's and 1990's both in public discourse as well as in the scholarship of English and composition studies, where the term encapsulated the consciousness of a postmodern age. In *JAC*, Henry Giroux (1994) described a generation of dislocated "border youth" as "members of the hacker culture," whose social worlds are highly mediated, existing not in communities but in "overlapping cyberspace networks" (p. 356). An early and influential appearance of the term hacking in English studies appeared in *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, in which Janet Murray (1997) embraced the aesthetic possibilities of the computer for literary arts, describing emergent storytellers as "half hacker, half bard" (p. 9). Like the MIT hackers, Murray was willing to see computers as creative tools, rather than as "a drudge" (p. 6). Since then, the figure of the hacker and the activity of hacking have made inroads into the consciousness of writing studies researchers and teachers, largely by way of scholarship in computers and writing.

To trace the emergence of hacking in writing studies parlance, I conducted a systematic survey of journals in the field most likely to include direct discussions of writing pedagogy, particularly those with historical interest in digital media and writing: *College Composition and Communication*, *College English*, *Composition Forum*, *Composition Studies*, *Computers and Composition*, *Computers and Composition Online*, *Enculturation*, *JAC*, *Kairos*, *Pedagogy*, *Research in the Teaching of English*, and *Rhetoric Review*. Although my search strategy limited me to those journals that had electronic, searchable archives, the survey spans published scholarship from 1950 to 2015. In each journal, I searched for in-text appearances of *hack* and six of its variants (*hacks*, *hacked*, *hacking*, *hacker*, *hackathon*, and *hacktivism*) within the main text of research articles, response essays, and pedagogical essays; book reviews were excluded, as were all appearances of the word *hack* unrelated to either writing or computing (e.g., meaning "to slash or chop" or "cough"), its appearance within a proper name (e.g., Diana Hacker), and its appearance solely in a direct quote or bibliographic reference. Also excluded were 3 uses of *hack* to denote "handling something," as in "she couldn't hack it in college."

In total, 89 articles were identified that fit selection criteria. Axial coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2007) distinguished four broad categories of usage, as outlined further in Fig. 1. "Hack" was used as a pejorative to describe shallow or unskilled writers and writing (37% of uses); as a reference to illegal and/or malicious computing activity (19% of uses);

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