

1 Introduction

Mark Rittman's home is a web of sensors and control. Filaments of data pass between his house, his body, and the server in his garage. Door, motion, and temperature sensors monitor his environs. His iPhone and health band monitor him. Everything is logged for analysis, and controlling the lighting, temperature, and music is as easy as a request to Siri. With the addition of his latest gadget, the iKettle, Rittman hoped to ask Siri for a cup of tea. Better yet, he wanted to add the kettle to an automated morning routine: when the health band on his wrist noticed he was awake, it could alert the house to turn up the heat and lighting downstairs and have the kettle ready for when he got out of the shower. Unfortunately, Rittman had a hard time getting the gadget online, as he tweeted to the thousands following his saga: "3 hrs later and still no tea. Mandatory recalibration caused wifi base-station reset." When he did get it online, the kettle did not work with his other devices: "To get my iKettle to actually work with Siri I had to hack this integration together myself." He continued to tweet about this process, and when he finally succeeded, his story went global, starting with a report in *The Guardian*: "English man spends 11 hours trying to make cup of tea with Wi-Fi kettle technology."¹

This project exemplifies the hacker mind-set: an enthusiastic—sometimes excessive—fascination with the workings of systems. But let us imagine another hacker who did not persevere on the technical front. Harper buys the iKettle on sale and, after tinkering with it over a couple of weekends, concludes that it's hopeless. Worse yet, the receipt has gone missing. Fortunately, there is recourse to a different sort of hack: Harper remembers a post on the site *Lifehacker*, "How to Return Nearly Anything without a Receipt."² Harper opts for the last-ditch effort and waits a few more weeks until after Christmas to return the kettle. Even though there may be long lines, stores tend to be more lenient then.

Rittman, a big data analyst and self-tracker, pulled off his hack because he understood the technical systems underlying home automation. Harper pulled off the no-receipt hack because of an understanding of a different system: the dynamics of the shopping season. These two hacks are indicative of how, in the past ten years, the notion of hacking as a quick or clever fix to a technical system has been applied to all aspects of life. Life hackers track and analyze their meals, finances, sleep, work, and headaches. They share tips on how to efficiently tie shoelaces, pack luggage, find dates, and learn languages.

All of this might surprise those who associate hacking with criminals in hoodies hunched over green-type terminals, but it's in keeping with the word's origins. Sixty years ago, model railroad enthusiasts at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) used *hack* to describe a quick fix to "The System," the web of wires and relays under the train platform. Hackers are drawn to exploring, building, and manipulating such systems.

Today, life hacking sits at the intersection of technology, culture, and larger concerns about work, wealth, health, relationships, and meaning. It is the manifestation of the *hacker ethos*, an individualistic and rational approach of systematization and experimentation.³ For instance, some "biohackers," as they call themselves, are experimenting with "Strategies for Engineered Negligible Senescence." This name for life extension oozes confidence—it only makes "SENS," after all. With the continued proliferation of technology, especially apps and connected sensors, this hacker ethos is appearing in many areas of our life that have never been engineered or hacked before. In addition to extending life, there are systems for increasing productivity, achieving material contentment, maximizing fitness, and finding romantic partners and pleasing sexual ones.

Some of this might seem a bit weird or extreme. Plenty of critics have pointed out life hacking's pretensions and excesses. Yet the critics, too, have their excesses. One journalist describes the life hacker favorite *Getting Things Done* as "a holy book for the information age [that] is turning stressed-out worker bees into members of an unlikely new cult obsessed with keeping an empty inbox."⁴ Calling enthusiasts a "cult" is catchy, but it's also hyperbolic. We have all experienced moments of being overwhelmed by work and email. And what do these *enthusiasts*—a perfectly good word—and *Getting Things Done* have in common with a cult? No one claims the book is "holy" or inerrant. The author is neither semidivine nor especially charismatic. Readers

are not required to abandon alternatives, recruit newcomers, or isolate themselves from friends and family.

Life hacking is an approach to life and a type of self-help. It has strengths, to which I am sympathetic given my own geekiness, and weaknesses, about which I have concerns. Yet these concerns are not because life hacking is alien and cultish. Rather, they arise *because* of its relevance: we can all use some help as our lives become increasingly governed and structured as systems.

The term *cult* distracts us from the more interesting question: What does life hacking tell us about life well lived in the twenty-first century? We will see that life is increasingly like the iKettle, a complicated system. And to succeed, like Rittman, we must dedicate ourselves to mastering its rules.

Life Hacking Geeks and Gurus

A hacker is popularly understood as someone who breaks into computers: those who exploit system weaknesses for ill-gotten gain. Yet for those familiar with the term, it means something different. Yes, hackers often have a technical affinity. And like the model railroad enthusiasts at MIT, they do like to understand and explore systems. But for most hackers, a *hack* means a novel solution or fix, which is often shared. This includes clever fixes that are good enough and increments toward perfection.

Although sharing tips is not novel—recall Hints from Heloise—the term *life hacking* emerged among a handful of technically inclined writers in 2004. In February of that year, Danny O'Brien proposed a "life hacking" session at the O'Reilly Emerging Technology Conference in San Diego, California. O'Brien, a writer and digital activist, noted that "alpha geeks" are extraordinarily productive, and he wanted to speak "to the most prolific technologists about the secrets of their desktops, their inboxes, and their schedules."⁵ The idea caught on. Within the year Merlin Mann launched *43 Folders*, named for a way of organizing future tasks via folders, and Gina Trapani started *Lifehacker*, a site that remains popular today. Tim Ferriss took the practice mainstream with his 2007 best seller *The 4-Hour Workweek: Escape 9–5, Live Anywhere and Join the New Rich*.⁶ Although Ferriss does not make much use of the *life hacker* term—he sees himself as a self-experimenter in *lifestyle design*—his books and podcast make him its most famous practitioner.

Lifestyle design is an accessible label for those who want to reach an audience beyond those who identify as hackers—or even know what *hacking*

means. Other labels speak to different areas of focus. Minimalists seek to pare down and live more simply, a goal often facilitated by technology. Pickup artists use systematic techniques and behavioral hacks to further their sexual interests.⁷ And those who focus on tracking their lives, such as steps taken or foods eaten, might identify with the Quantified Self movement. I consider all of this life hacking because of the shared enthusiasm for improving life via a systematic approach. This includes small tips, like how to peel an onion without crying, and weightier suggestions, like how to find contentment.

It's not a coincidence that the term *life hacking* emerged a few years after Richard Florida's 2002 book *The Rise of the Creative Class*. Why do some regions in America do well relative to others? Florida argues that metro-polises with the "3Ts" (technology, talent, and tolerance) correlate with growth. This growth is driven by workers who create "new ideas, new technology, and creative content," including artists, engineers, writers, designers, educators, and entertainers. Members of the creative class, about 30 percent of the American workforce, "engage in complex problem solving that involves a great deal of independent judgment."⁸ They accept or prefer flexible work even if it exceeds the bounds of the 9-to-5 workweek, are less concerned with dress and formality, and identify more with their profession than with their employer. Most relevant to life hacking, they feel that working too much is better than counting the minutes before the end of the day. And they tend to complain of too little time rather than too much work. Life hackers are the systematizing constituency of the creative class.

Among self-identifying life hackers, many are true to type, but there are, of course, individual differences. I've followed and spoken to many enthusiasts, online and in person, and even as they differentiate themselves—not all biohackers associate with the Quantified Self, for example—they have something in common. Even those who prefer the label *self-experimenter* or *lifestyle designer* share the life hacker ethos. They are rationally inclined individuals fond of systems and experimentation—whatever differences, distancing, and distinctions also exist.

One distinction that can be drawn among life hackers is between *geeks* and *gurus*. I make this distinction because most life hacking critiques focus on prominent personalities, especially Ferriss. Yet as important as he is, Ferriss is not a typical life hacker. He is a guru, someone who sells lifestyle advice and his role as its vendor. Even if *guru* is not always flattering, I do not use it as an insult. Pragmatically, *guru* is more concise than *self-help author*, *life*

coach, or *lifestyle designer*. Analytically, it designates those who offer and are looked to for guidance. A recent documentary about self-help author Tony Robbins is subtitled *I Am Not Your Guru*.⁹ But he is a guru: he and Ferriss are professional advice givers. The question, then, is, What assumptions underlie their advice, and is that advice sound and worth what they charge?

Geeks, on the other hand, are enthusiasts looking to fix their foibles and improve their quality of life. For example, later in the book we will meet a relationship hacker who shared her dating spreadsheet template so others could use or improve it. Many geeks similarly share their hacks and experiments—such is the nature of their enthusiasm—but few desire or manage to become professional writers and lifestyle coaches.

Gurus do deserve scrutiny. They court publicity and argue others should pursue a course of action premised on unspoken assumptions and financial gain.¹⁰ The former attracts our attention; the latter deserves it. Even so, we should not lose sight of life hacking as a subculture of those sharing tips and tools for a better life.

Practical Philosophy, Self-Help, and Systems

You, one among many, can be a success with the right attitude and actions. To learn how, you need only consult some of the 45,000-plus self-help titles in print. Most Americans do just that, and the market for this genre is worth more than \$500 million—\$10 billion when audio, videos, infomercials, and personal coaching are included.¹¹

Life hacking is the latest chapter in the history of self-help, and as the meaning of success has changed, so has the advice given. Do we succeed by being open to divine intervention, as in the 1890s? By following the examples of those who had grown rich, as in the self-help classics of the 1930s? Or by adopting the secrets of the alpha geeks, who thrive amid today's information glut? As Steven Starker writes in his history of the genre, self-help books "reflect their sociocultural context, revealing something of the needs, wishes and fears of individuals of their period."¹² And as the author of a *New Yorker* profile of Ferriss quipped: "Every generation gets the self-help guru that it deserves."¹³

Just as life hacking is a recent instance of self-help, both are continuations of what is now being called "practical philosophy." Unlike academic philosophy, practical philosophy is focused on *what* is worthwhile in life

and *how* to realize it.¹⁴ It's a life philosophy. Stoicism and Confucianism are ancient practical philosophies. Life hacking is a contemporary one. For example, you can be productive (what) by limiting the time you spend on email to a certain time of the day (how).

Self-help is a practical philosophy, steeped in American culture. As Starker writes in *Oracle at the Supermarket: The American Preoccupation with Self-Help Books*, "American individualism, I believe, is the wellspring from which nearly all self-help materials flow." Self-help, he continues, is a manifestation of "American opportunism, self-reliance, and determination to succeed."¹⁵ More recently, a cultural critic writing for *New York* magazine notes that "strains of self-help culture—entrepreneurship, pragmatism, fierce self-reliance, gauzy spirituality—have been embedded in the national DNA since Poor Richard's Almanack."¹⁶ Although Scotsman Samuel Smiles's lucrative *Self Help* (1859) was the first book to use the term, self-help joins apple pie as a European import that is now inexorably linked with America.

Life hacking is now a slice of the self-help pie. Before moving on to new ventures, Gina Trapani published three books of hacks culled from *Lifehacker*. Ferriss has compiled five best-selling books, maintains a popular blog, and hosts a widely listened to podcast, all under the 4-Hour brand. Half a dozen authors have published works on minimalism, including *The 100 Thing Challenge* and *Everything That Remains*.¹⁷ There are also many smaller life hacker titles that don't reach the mainstream audience. Still, despite being published via independent presses or as e-books, they receive dozens of reviews on Amazon. I have even come across a life hacking magazine in my grocery store checkout and in a television show, *Hacking the System*, on National Geographic.

Life hacking is a continuation of American self-help for geeks, which has gone mainstream. The values of "American individualism," of being "pragmatic" and "entrepreneurial," and of having an "endless ability to overcome obstacles" are all core to life hacking. Life hackers add a systematizing mindset, willingness to experiment, and fondness for tech; this befits a world of far-flung digital networks, a world of systems and gadgets.

Some might find life hacking, like self-help, difficult to take seriously. It spans from small tricks, which can be dismissed as trivial, to lifestyle design, which can be likened to a refashioning of the same old "S.H.A.M."—the title of a book critical of the "Self-Help and Actualization Movement."¹⁸ Yet this reach is what makes life hacking interesting: there is an underlying ethos of systematizing that embraces both mundane hacks and life's larger pursuits.

Entrepreneur Paul Buchheit, Google employee number 23, lead developer of Gmail, and coiner of Google's early motto "Don't be evil," believes that hacking is an "applied philosophy" of life. He writes that "wherever there are systems, there is the potential for hacking, and there are systems everywhere. Our entire reality is systems of systems, all the way down." Granted, "not everyone has the hacker mindset (society requires a variety of personalities)," but those with this mind-set are the ones who "transform the world" across industry, governance, and even religion. For Buchheit, "hacking is much bigger and more important than clever bits of code in a computer—it's how we create the future."¹⁹

Buchheit's belief is provocative, simplistic, and totalizing—like many self-help premises. And as Starker observes, it's easy for the critic of such beliefs to be dismissive, to respond with a "shake of the head, momentary sneer, superior smile, and benign neglect." Nevertheless, "the self-help book is a firm part of the fabric of American culture, too pervasive and influential to be ignored or lightly dismissed, and certainly worthy of investigation."²⁰ The same is true of life hacking.

Life Hacking's Shades of Gray

The power of hacking, for Paul Buchheit, resides in the fact that every system is governed by two sets of rules: the perceived rules of how things are thought to work and the actual rules of reality. He believes that "in most complex systems, the gap between these two sets of rules is huge. Sometimes we catch a glimpse of the truth, and discover the actual rules of a system. Once the actual rules are known, it may be possible to perform 'miracles'—things which violate the perceived rules." So for example, a computer hacker can exploit the gap between how a program is supposed to behave and the reality of a buffer overrun. Of course, "hacking isn't limited to computers."²¹

Computer hackers are often discussed using a trope from old Western movies: white-hat hackers fortify system weaknesses arising from this gap and black hats maliciously exploit them. Gray hats are in between: they might break into a system without permission but cause little to no harm. Harper's holiday return of the kettle is a light shade of gray. As Rittman and others discovered, getting the kettle's Wi-Fi to work is not easy. Returning it without a receipt bends the rules but doesn't seem so bad. What if Harper had instead used the same technique to return the gadget to a different store at full price?

Harper would then have defrauded the second store and walked away with more cash than the original sale price. That would be a darker shade of gray.

Lifehacker's "How to Return Nearly Anything" post appeared as part of its annual Evil Week leading up to Halloween. The *Lifehacker* editors write that such posts, although "a bit tongue-in-cheek," reflect that "knowledge is power, and whether you use that power for good or evil depends on you. Sometimes evil is justified, or sometimes it can help you fight evil. Learning to crack passwords teaches you security practices. A better understanding of lying and manipulation earns you the ability to detect such tactics (or use them in situations in which it's actually the lesser of two evils)."²² This rationale sounds almost Machiavellian. It also evinces a technically inclined and individualistic mind-set—not surprising. However, whether something is good or evil depends on more than the individual. To understand this, replace the moral absolutes with an alternative question: To what degree is a life hack harmful or beneficial, and to whom? We'll return to this question often.

The no-receipt hack is obviously self-interested. But it's not harmful if Harper returns the kettle to the same place where she bought it and at the same price. What if everyone used this hack? This question is an instance of Immanuel Kant's *categorical imperative*: do only that which you would want everyone to do. The first case of returning an inoperable kettle at the original place and price is innocuous. However, if everyone used this no-receipt hack to return discounted products at full price, the world would be worse off for it. Beyond the theft, stores would in turn adopt less flexible return policies, harming other shoppers as well.

Kant's categorical imperative expands the scope of moral consideration beyond the individual. We can ask if a hack is *universal*: Does it continue to work if everyone does it? And is it *beneficial*: Is the world then a better place?

Consider the real-life case of "Bob," a developer at Verizon, who was caught outsourcing his own work to a firm in China.²³ Many American workers, including software developers, face the anxiety of having their jobs outsourced overseas. Bob outsourced his work but kept his job. He paid the Chinese one-fifth of his salary and spent his days browsing the web and watching cat videos. He turned a corporate practice to his own advantage, hacking the system. Bob's hack was clever, and I read his story with some delight. He was also dishonest and a liability because he gave outsiders access to his company's systems; I understand why he was fired. Yet was he taking advantage of a workforce reality or complicit by adopting the strategy

himself? He was doing both. This was a darker life hack. Clearly, Bob's hack was self-interested. Also, his hack wasn't universal. It worked only because it was singular and surreptitious. It also had the potential to harm others. His dishonesty put his employer at risk. It doesn't survive Kant's scrutiny because we would not wish such dishonesty to be universal.

There are also life hacks that can *unintentionally* harm the hacker and others. Consider the parallel between productivity hacking and cosmetic surgery. At the individual level, cosmetic surgery is a type of self-enhancement that can improve quality of life. It can go also wrong, making things worse. Or surface enhancements can provide temporary respite from deeper needs, leading to a cycle of interventions that never satisfy. It is hard to claim, universally, that cosmetic surgery is good or bad for all individuals. The same is true of life hacking. And this becomes further complicated when we think about the social implications of self-enhancement. Enhancement's impetus is often social, and when undertaken, it pushes standards increasingly higher—driving contentment further out of reach.²⁴ One person's enhanced beauty can make others feel uglier.

Similarly, some productivity hacks work well. Prioritizing tasks, rather than overscheduling, is key to a productive day. Some hacks won't work. Drinking lots of water and holding your urine is supposed to make you more focused but is more likely to be distracting. And like some surgeries, there are hacks that can make things worse or that will never satisfy. Overscheduling is a mistake, and superproductivity will never be enough. Finally, enhanced productivity accelerates the demands placed on everyone, including the productive.

These are the shades of gray of our *digital age*, a moment of far-flung interactions, ubiquitous devices, and unsettled science; a moment in which we can work remotely, outsource chores, and track and experiment with every indicator of life, from heart rate to emails sent. By considering cases like Bob's, we can identify the values inherent in *what* is thought to be worthwhile and the efficacy and consequence of *how*.

Nominal, Optimal, and Near Enemies

As with computer hacking, there are useful, useless, and harmful life hacks, with nebulous boundaries between. By exploring these boundaries, we can better understand the challenges of the new millennium. In an economy that

prizes immediacy and flexibility, how do we manage time? In a culture that values autonomy and self-reliance, how do we motivate ourselves? In a world in which material excess is now as much a problem as deficiency, how do we relate to stuff? In a period of increasing uncertainty but ubiquitous monitoring, how do we know what really works? When others are within a finger's reach on our devices, how ought we to connect and relate to one another? When we realize that nothing, even the most clever hacks, will save us from uncertainty and loss, how do we find meaning in life?

Technology-related criticism speaks to these questions, usually by pitting opposing sides against one another, creating heroes and villains, rather than productive conversation. We can do better, in part, by asking open questions without forgone conclusions.²⁵ Take arguments about Facebook's effects on users' well-being, for example. Rather than simply concluding that Facebook makes people depressed or that it gives the depressed social support, we should ask about the different ways different people use Facebook. Similarly, rather than asking if life hackers are visionaries or cultists, we can make distinctions among practitioners and among practices.

Just as I distinguish between geek and guru hackers, I distinguish between nominal and optimal hacking. Among engineers, to say that something is *nominal* means that it is within the expected range. If the power at my electrical outlet is between 114 and 126 volts (120 volts \pm 5 percent), it is nominal. I use this term instead of *normal* because the latter is loaded. To return to the cosmetic surgery parallel, what does a *normal* nose look like in a multiethnic world? There can be different normals in different contexts. At the same time, within a single context, normal tends toward a privileged ideal. What does a normal nose look like as rhinoplasty becomes common? We can ask the same question about being productive or healthy. The ideal becomes ever narrower: social norms affect what individuals want and vice versa.²⁶

Nominal permits me to temporarily put aside issues of normalcy and draw a distinction between it and *optimal*, at or exceeding the leading edge. Their difference is related to intention, one of *keeping up* versus *surpassing*. Take swimming: whereas the nominal hacker wants to be a good enough swimmer to safely enjoy the water, the optimal hacker wants to be the best at racing upstream. This difference is like that between reconstructive and cosmetic surgery or between therapy and enhancement. The distinction between nominal and optimal hacking, though, can be seen in every domain of life.

The earliest example of life hacking I can recall is of nominal health hacking: John Walker's *The Hacker's Diet*. Walker founded the company behind AutoCAD, an engineering and drafting program still used today. As the 1980s came to a close, Walker was concerned that he had grown out of shape and overweight. Because he was an engineer, he decided to “approach weight loss as an engineering problem. I studied the human body the way I'd tackle a misbehaving electronic circuit or computer program: develop a model of how it works, identify the controls that affect it, and finally adjust those controls to set things aright.” His engineering approach worked. In less than a year, “under my own direction and without any drugs or gimmicks,” he went from 215 to a fit 145 pounds—nominal.²⁷ His *Hacker's Diet*, first posted online in 1991, was the go-to resource for many internet users over the next decade and a half.

Ray Kurzweil, on the other hand, is an optimal health hacker. Google hired the well-known futurist in 2012 to contribute to its artificial intelligence efforts. He takes hundreds of vitamins and supplements a day, and the recent septuagenarian believes his efforts have taken nearly thirty years off his biological age. By hacking his health, he expects to reach the moment, a few decades away, when biological life need not end and a fully digital life is possible—and preferable. Less grandiose optimal hacks include cognitive enhancements, maniac workweeks, and Casanova-like seduction.

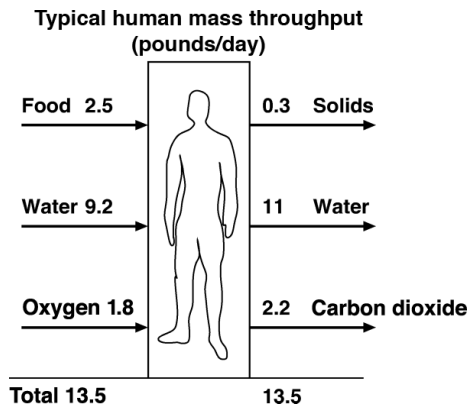


Figure 1.1

John Walker, “Human Mass Throughput,” in *The Hacker's Diet*, 2005, <http://www.fourmilab.ch/hackdiet/e4/rubberbag.html>.

I will argue in this book that life hacking, especially the optimizing type, is associated with a type of tunnel vision. Life hacking can be like donning a set of horse blinders so as to block out distractions and focus attention on personal goals. This means, however, that with their vision fixed on the horizon, hackers can be naive to the people and circumstances on their periphery. The more optimal the hacking, the more narrow and distant the vision tends to be.

Still, I am not condemning life hacking. Life hackers' strengths *and* weaknesses are two sides of the same coin. Dining out with a meticulous self-tracker might be tiresome, but her well-informed restaurant recommendations could be excellent. This insight is also related to the trope of the double-edged sword. A scheduling app might enable you to squeeze more into your day, which, at the end, leaves you feeling more stressed and anxious. Life hackers' weaknesses of character are their sources of strength, and their gadgets are double edged.

If life hackers' strengths and weaknesses are two sides of the same coin, what of the coin's edge? For this, I borrow an analytic tool from Buddhist philosophy: the near enemy. Virtues, like compassion, often have an obvious opposite, like animosity; this is known as the *far enemy*. There are also sentiments that masquerade as virtues: pity as compassion, dependence as love, indifference as equanimity. These are *near enemies*. In the following chapters, I identify near enemies in the domains of work, wealth, health, relationships, and meaning. No one wants to be incapable or incompetent, but being efficient is not the same as being effective. We decry materialism, but being precious about minimalism is not the same thing as living unfettered. No one likes being sick, but compulsively checking health statistics is its own sort of illness. We hope we are beloved, but continuous connectivity and sexual conquest will not save us from alienation. There is no greater virtue than wisdom, but Wisdom 2.0 falls short.

As much as life hacking promises, it obscures. The hope that a robotic kettle will shave a few minutes off a busy morning can all too easily eclipse the simple pleasure of a cup of tea.