

# Civil Disobedience in the Form of a Virtual Sit In

Situated in the dank and cold of a room in Pilsen, within the exposed infrastructure of wires and ceiling beams, about 14 recycled, donated and salvaged computers sit amidst a web of tangled cords. Inside, dozens of Chicago's most tech-savvy computer experts and programmers battle with hackers in Chile and Spain in a capture-the-flag game of global proportions.

The objective: Capture and retain the opponent's flag without being caught in the act. But this game doesn't take place in backyards and works in a slightly different way.

Each side places a "flag" in computer programs they set up with known system vulnerabilities. They then attempt to sneak into each others' systems without being detected. They are playing for nothing more than bragging rights, but they can't see, talk or touch each other. Their purpose: to practice their hacking skills.

The game is being played entirely via computers in a type of Internet warfare that reflects much more than simply child's play; rather, it represents the kind of computer knowledge that is leading some to use their skills as a form of activism-hacktivism.

Although a computer capture-the-flag game may not typically be associated with hacking, the game uses the same strategies one would use to break into any personal computer. It allows practice cracking computer codes, and anything from disrespecting copyright laws by downloading music to using open-source software like Linux, which may be freely altered, can be considered hacktivism. At its roots, hacktivism refers to large-scale website defacements and virtual sit-ins, which have users slow down a website by overflowing its server. If the United States Congress decides to allow private companies control over aspects of the Internet, as it is debating currently, it could give

activists another reason to abandon traditional forms of protest for a more cutting-edge style of resistance.

This past July, Jake Elliot, a slender and eccentric School of the Art Institute of Chicago dropout moved into a storefront at 2159 W. 21st Place, along with several other current and former students. They call the place "The Flower Shoppe" because of the building's former use. A slightly rusted green "Flower Shoppe" sign still hangs high above the building's front entrance and the greenhouse in back is now filled with couches and a curtain for screening video art projects.

There, Elliot and his friends started Dai5ychain, pronounced "Daisychain." On one level, the place is a community computer lab, open from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. every weekday. It offers free Internet access and open-source software for anyone to use. On another level, it is a staging ground for hacktivism.

On Oct. 13, Elliot and several other organizers put on the first Chicago hackmeeting at Dai5ychain, a weekend-long seminar that included presentations and workshops on a variety of hacking techniques on topics like hacking music players and the computer version of capture the flag.

The idea for the computer lab originally began as an art project, but quickly evolved into much more, Elliot said. At its most basic, it is a place for people to use computers with recycled hardware which were either donated or salvaged from dumpsters or thrift stores. As the lab opened up to the community, Elliot said he found many people simply needed access to computers and the Internet.

David Eads, a freelance computer programmer and web designer who helped set up the hackmeeting, said about 40 to 50 people came throughout the course of the weekend. He said the talk at the event wasn't as technical as it was political.

"I think you are seeing more tech people embracing the political field, at least in Chicago," Eads said. "I know in Europe and in certain parts of Latin America, the culture goes back a little farther, but when issues like net neutrality come up I think you're going to see a lot more of that."

Net neutrality is the movement to keep the Internet free from regulation while the U.S. Congress debate proposed bills allowing private companies and service providers to charge premium fees for a higher bandwidth. What has many proponents of Net neutrality worried is that if the Internet is privatized, it

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will no longer provide the unfettered access to information that made it the global connector it is today.

"Originally [hacking] meant the dude or lady who liked to crack open an electronic device to see how it worked," Eads said. "To the extent of disrespecting copyrights and that stuff, it becomes sort of a political thing at that point."

Eads said computer activism could increase dramatically if Net neutrality is harmed since the companies regulating the Internet would become more of an opponent to hackers. But just like any other cultural or political movement, Eads said, hacktivism has interior conflicts as to what tactics to use and how far to take them.

"As far as hacking in the malicious sense, that was sort of a minor part of the discussion," Eads said. "Definitely some people in the community are interested in and skillful in it, but it's not necessarily something that everyone embraces."

He said there are numerous websites dedicated to supporting hacktivism, but Dai5ychain provides a physical place which would help bring Chicago to the forefront of the movement in the U.S.

Elliot said the forum Dai5ychain provides is for learning about issues related to hacktivism and hopes that despite the implications of Net neutrality, he hopes the lab won't be effected.

"Net neutrality I'm not real excited about; not for either party am I passionate," Elliot said. "It could make it very difficult and expensive if something happens in the future with the Internet, materially, but this project wants to operate outside of [Net neutrality]."

Even though Elliot said he doesn't practice explicitly malicious hacking, he does support hacktivism culture, something which is evolving beyond just tactics. The movement has even spurred its own political party, the Pirate Party. The party has political brochures and a website, pirate-party.us. In the brochure and on the website the party explains what it supports and hopes to disrupt through political and computer activism.

Jeremy Hammond, a hacker, Chicago native and supporter of the party, was recently convicted of felony computer fraud for hacking into protestwarrior.com, a right-wing activist group. He obtained credit card numbers from the website and had the ability to charge political donations on them. He faces jail time at his sentencing in December.

Hammond, who created the website, hackthissite.org, and distributes Hackthiszine, practices the type of hacktivism that could increase if the Internet is privatized like many hackers fear. He said ultimately the purpose is fundamental change in the way information is disseminated and distributed. If they topple the existing hierarchal structures for information and culture that are fed from top down, people must have a form of infrastructure to revert to, and that is where the underground hacktivist community comes in.

"There are virtual sit-ins, website defacements, they're all part of hacktivism, but the whole culture revolves around the free and open spread of information," Hammond said. "Things like Indymedia are an example of how [computer activism] has evolved. That might be harmed if Net neutrality is damaged."

Indymedia is an independent media organization that has expanded rapidly over the past decade, mostly through the Internet. Hammond said oftentimes people hear of stories from Indymedia they never would have if they relied on common forms of information gathering like traditional news services owned by private companies.

Hacktivism, however, is not without its skeptics. Kalle Lasn,

editor of Adbusters Magazine and media foundation said the Internet is one of the reasons for the recent decline in effective activism. He said activism and liberalism have dwindled to finger-pointing and whining partly because, "People think that they can sit in front of their computers with their hand on a mouse and think they've done something."

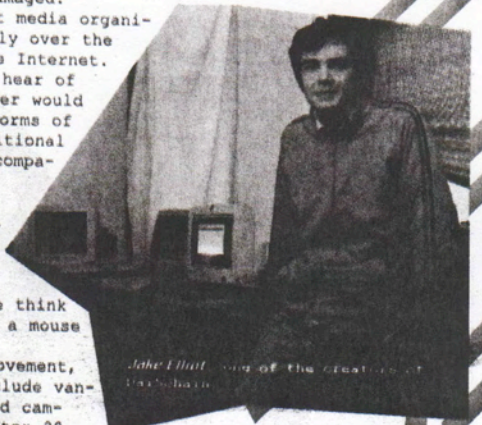
Abusters and Lasn are known for starting the Culture Jamming movement, which centers on a kind of direct and immediate action that can include vandalism and destruction of property. They are known for spoof ads and campaigns like TV Turn-Off Week and Buy Nothing Day. Lasn said that after 20 years of dedicated activism, he's worried that the people of Canada, America and Europe are "mindfucked" to the point of uselessness.

"On one hand, [the Internet] is an incredibly powerful tool that allows activists to come together, but it has a bad side to it," Lasn said.

Lasn credited the Internet by saying it was one of the reasons many of Abusters campaigns are international. He said he doesn't want to discourage hacktivism, but said it is not a solution. The only type of change worthwhile is a fundamental change, and computer hacktivism will not bring that about, he said.

"People are sort of caught in this huge swirl of information that keeps on going round and around," Lasn said. "People read it and get a little excited, but ultimately fuck all is happening because the only thing that is happening is that the information is being circulated."

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