

Of Hobbits, Amish, Hackers, and Technology

The final lecture of SPEAIT

Kaido Kikkas

The final WTF...

- Sometimes it is good to think about things – and also remind the IT folks that their field is not limited to the boxes and cables (and that applies to other tech guys too)
- All those mentioned in the title have got something to say – even to the IT people
- After all, nowadays we have got a global phenomenon in the Internet – and its influence spans far wider than just technology
- *“For the world is changing: I feel it in the water, I feel it in the earth, and I smell it in the air”* - Fangorn, the Return of the King

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien

- ... is there anyone who hasn't heard of him...?
- A long-time favourite of hacker folks
- ... but was actually quite a technophobe?
 - *“He (Saruman) has a mind of metal and wheels; and he does not care for growing things, except as far as they serve him for the moment.”* - Fangorn, The Two Towers
- Good races – Elves, Dwarves, Hobbits and Men – used their hands and wit (plus magic), machinery was only used by the bad guys!

Tech comparison



http://vignette4.wikia.nocookie.net/lotr/images/1/1e/Lothlorien_Bow.jpg/revision/latest/scale-to-width-down/180?cb=20100927000758



<http://i.ebayimg.com/images/g/FGoAAOSwymxVlyOA/s-l300.jpg>

Tolkien's ideal world

- *“Hobbits are an unobtrusive but very ancient people, more numerous formerly than they are today; for they love peace and quiet and good tilled earth: a well-ordered and well-farmed countryside was their favourite haunt. They do not and did not understand or like machines more complicated than a forge-bellows, a water-mill, or a hand-loom, though they were skilful with tools.”*

- The Fellowship of the Ring

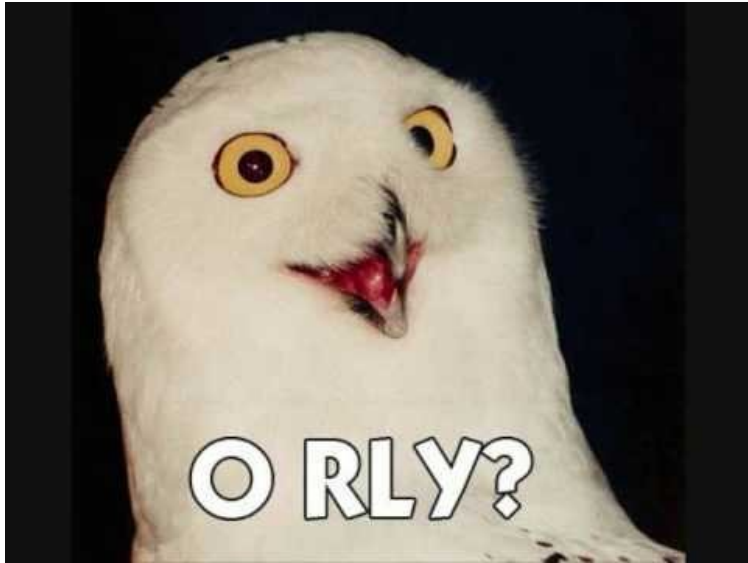
Tolkien and hackers?

- Ain't that a contradiction?
- The common denomination – technology should not come between people to divide them into different ranks
 - Just as the Hobbits did not like Sandyman's new mill that polluted their land, do the hackers dislike large software monopolies
 - Just as the Hobbits rebuilt the Shire with amazing speed after driving out Saruman's Men, do the hackers create new software regardless of obstacles and stupid laws
 - And just as the Hobbits hated the Chief (who was BTW a prime example of Peter's Principle) and his Men, so do the hackers hate pretentious and stupid Suits

The Hobbits in our world: Amish

- They live in 22 states of the US, also in Ontario and Manitoba, Canada; over 318 000 people (2017; significant growth since 2007)
- Of Swiss-German-Dutch heritage, descendants of Anabaptists from the European Reformation period
- Typical assessment – religious freaks with a technological disability (Weird AI anyone?):
 - do not use electricity or cars
 - do not attend secondary school
 - lead very simple life (clothing, housing, transportation)

Owl says...



- The question is – can we dismiss them so easily? Or... maybe we have something to learn from them?
- Howard Rheingold, a tech writer, visited Pennsylvania in 1999 and wrote about his findings in the Wired Magazine (also available at <http://www.rheingold.com>)

So...

- Many “modern” problems are next to unknown to the Amish:
 - extremely few divorces
 - extremely few suicides
 - extremely few cases of cancer or heart diseases
 - crime is next to extinct
 - drug and alcohol abuse as well as AIDS are unknown
- Main problems are inherited diseases (due to small communities) and ... overweight (just like Hobbits...)

How?

- Not hostility, but rather extreme caution regarding technology
 - If used with Ordnung => may be considered!
 - Ct. Tolkien: *"For they attributed to the king of old all their essential laws; and usually they kept the laws of free will, because they were The Rules (as they said), both ancient and just."* - the Fellowship of the Ring
 - Gas grill, pesticides, propane fridges are OK
 - Modern medicine is OK (although mostly by others)
 - Recently: telephones (even mobiles) are OK
 - NB! Phone booths common to a couple of households
 - In some cases, even electricity and cars

Still, why?

- *"A farmer with a tractor does not need help from neighbors" – the question focuses on community and human relations!*
- Rheingold: *Far from knee-jerk technophobes, these are very adaptive techno-selectives who devise remarkable technologies that fit within their self-imposed limits*
- Main counter-arguments: pride + competition
- Not avoidance but rather limiting uncontrolled usage: *"You can't design foolproof machines, because fools are so clever."*

Example: phones at home

- An Amish man: *"We don't want to be the kind of people who will interrupt a conversation at home to answer a telephone. It's not just how you use the technology that concerns us. We're also concerned about what kind of person you become when you use it."*
- Rheingold: *"How often do we interrupt a conversation with someone who is physically present in order to answer the telephone? Is the family meal enhanced by a beeper?"*
- And this was back in 1999 – the situation has gone much more crazy since (more smartphones, less smart folks)

What about education?

- Actually, the Amish value education too – but the problem lies in the American school system and its core values that are not acceptable to them; mostly the individuality cult, self-establishment and competition (Note: we have it in Europe, too!)
- They have a number of people with degrees, but mostly in practical fields (doctor, teacher)
- Note: the Amish do not stress mission, or spreading their way of life (by the way, neither did Hobbits!). Youth are given a period of *rumspringa* or “running around”, after which they have to choose their way of life

Another world: (classical) hackerdom

- Note: the original meaning of “hacker” (as seen some lectures ago) is used here
- A tech subculture deeply rooted in the history of technology
- Hacker ethic as formulated by Eric S. Raymond: *"The belief that information-sharing is a powerful positive good, and that it is an ethical duty of hackers to share their expertise by writing open-source code and facilitating access to information and to computing resources wherever possible."*

Amish vs hackers

- Opposites?
 - Hackers are passionate about technology
 - Hackers tend to have a wide spectrum of world views
- BUT:
 - „live yourself and let us live as we see fit“
 - inner > outer
 - self-promotion and greed are out of style
 - Ordnung == netiquette and other unwritten codes
 - + some aspects of work ethic are similar (e.g. barn-raising == hackerly “work hard and have fun”)

Tech for people, or vice versa?

- Pekka Himanen, „Hacker Ethic“:

“The application of the computer metaphor to people and society makes real ethics also very difficult. The optimization of human beings and enterprises terms of the computer leads to the logic of speed, and this tends to make our lives survival-based in another way.

At high speeds, the societal goal becomes the same as the pursued by race-car drivers: to keep the vehicle stable so as to prevent it from running off the track. Here, the ideal of stability threatens to replace ethics once again.

One might say that there is an "ethics barrier" a speed above which ethics can no longer exist. After that point, the only remaining goal is to survive the immediate moment. But only those who do not have to focus purely on the "now" to guarantee their own survival are able to care for others. Ethicality requires unhurried thinking.”

Thought-provoking

- Himanen does ask (along with hackers) the powers of this world: “What do you need that much money for?” - amassing things and position is not the only possible way to go
 - An old (Red) Indian asked: “White man only has two feet. Why has he five pairs of boots?”
 - An Estonian social media campaign some time ago: “Whoever dies with the most toys wins”
- Many top hackers are involved in social projects (Kapor, Wozniak, even an ex-hacker named Bill can be mentioned), free software movement has direct ethical undertones

One more point

- We are at a school right now (The Estonian word for university, “*ülikool*”, literally means “supreme school”)
- “School” << Greek word *skholē* (σχολή) meaning “leisure” (decent men were to spend their free time discussing interesting problems)
- In Ancient Greece, having *skholē* (i.e. being in control of one's time) was a characteristic of a free man. Slaves had *askholia*, i.e. no *skholē*
- Who has *skholē* today? Should we have more? What should be done for that?

What exactly is changing?

- We're drowning in sh... pardon, *approaching the planetary limits*.
Soon, even most hardcore types will need to reconsider how to manage
- Ubicomp is becoming a reality (at least in the West)
- Social applications of Internet introduce radically new forms of education, work and management – examples include Linux, Wikipedia, but also the Arabian Spring etc
- Information is a different kind of basic resource likely leading to post-scarcity economy (kind of)
- Focus: an individual in a social context

Yochai Benkler says

- Three important spheres of social life:
 - information
 - knowledge
 - culture

were temporarily shadowed by capital, money and profit, but are returning

- An example: there are no noncommercial car manufacturers or voluntary steel foundries, yet we have community-based science, FLOSS software and public media (KK note: or the *Born of Hope!*)
- With the coming of the Internet, industrial information economy => networked information economy

Communism...?

- Not really – the question here is much older than the Commies
- Resources: scarcity => value
- An example: value of water for the Vikings vs the Bedouins
- Earlier: wars over resources
- Later: „civilized discussion“ and agreements
- Entrenchment of the „scarcity meme“
- King Midas, anyone...?

That weird resource called Information

- Spreads almost exclusively by multiplication:
 - I have two apples. I give one to you. I still have one.
 - I know two jokes. I tell one to you. I still know... two?
(OK, I admit – it sounds a bit like Idiocracy)
- Has never before been the dominating resource
- Most of the current legal system has only learned to follow the scarcity meme
- Now what?

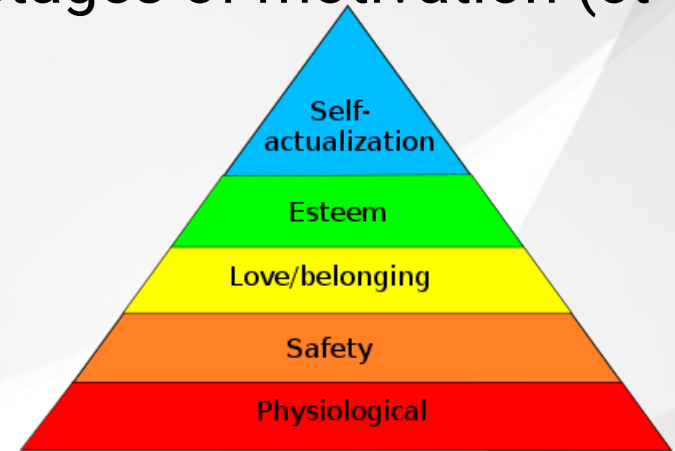
Benkler's three factors

- Information production is inherently more suitable for nonmarket strategies than industrial production (e.g. Cory Doctorow)
- Rapid spread of nonmarket production, widening base (e.g. Wikipedia)
- effective, large-scale cooperative efforts in peer production of information, knowledge, and culture (most of the Web 2.0)
- Essentially the same hacker way of doing things!

The Linus Law

- Proposed by Linus Torvalds
- All human activity goes through three stages of motivation (cf Maslow's pyramid of needs):

- survival
- social position
- fun



- For comparison: The Wozniak Formula $H = F^3$ <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/3/33/MaslowsHierarchyOfNeeds.svg/450px-MaslowsHierarchyOfNeeds.svg.png>
- Example: a Japanese gentleman called Akihito
 - a respected amateur maritime biologist and musician. Also known as the (now former) Emperor of Japan

Common wisdom

- ... by Hobbits, Amish and hackers: technology should serve people and society, not the other way round:
 - Having the needs of people, community and society as starting point for tech development, good results can be obtained for everyone (e.g. assistive technology and Design for All)
 - At the same time, technology which is meant for power concentration and increasing differences will ultimately lead towards disaster (we already do have all means to blow up the whole planet)

One Ring to rule them all...

- In Tolkien's world, there were 20 Great Rings:
 - **3 for Elves** – Rivendell, Lothlórien and the Grey Havens were built, degeneration by time was slowed
 - **7 for Dwarves** – obtained lots of riches, which also caused lots of trouble (dragon attacks, wars etc)
 - **9 for Men** – amassed lots of riches, power and dubious knowledge; the final outcome were 9 Nazgûl or Ringwraiths who finally perished along with their Master
 - **The Ruling Ring of Sauron** – the root of evil, corrupted everything around it and would have given Evil the ultimate victory, was finally destroyed at its birthplace
- Now, let's substitute “ring” with “technology”...

Dangers today

- ... to create another One Ring:
 - social systems which do not interface with the information society – both locally and globally. Especially likely when information is viewed as just another finite resource to fight over
 - the still-omnipresent information monopolism (or intellectual imaginary property)
 - Eben Moglen: the IP-droid and the Econodwarf
 - ethical agnosticism in technological aspirations

The lesson from the Amish

- The main checkpoint in introducing new technology - *does it bring us together, or draw us apart?*
- Howard Rheingold asks after visiting the Amish: „*If we decided that community came first, how would we use our tools differently?*".

Pekka Himanen again

- *The logic of the network and the computer alienate us from direct caring, which is the beginning of all ethical behaviour. We need more of the kind of thinking about the peculiar challenges of caring in the information age that some hackers present.*

We will do well not to expect these thoughts to come from corporations or governments. Historically, such entities have not been sources of new ethical thinking; instead, fundamental changes have been initiated by some individuals who care.

So you wanna be a hacker

- Use your own processor
- Think and do new stuff
- Avoid stereotypes
- Be able and willing to learn (not only at school)
- Learn to keep stupids off your back
- Do serious work as if having fun...
- ... and have fun seriously
- Dare to laugh, also at yourself
- Never be done

Since 2007

- Since the initial version of this lecture at the University of Joensuu in Finland, a lot has happened:
 - Facebook revolutions
 - E-books
 - Khan Academy, MMOC, Coursera, Udacity, Wikiversity...
 - Startup boom
 - Hybrid business models (free base product/service, paid add-ons)
 - Pirates have invaded politics (Arrrrr!!!)
 - ... - but the main points are still valid

Final words

- Remember the Human (1st command of Netiquette in Virginia Shea's book)
- The Internet has far more influence on our lives than we sometimes think
- Making money does not need to mean ridding someone else of it
- Excessive speed can be dangerous – both in traffic and society; time for thinking is needed
- Improving the world is a good pastime :-)
 - ... and Tolkien rules!

Read more

- Peter Barnes. Capitalism 3.0
- Yochai Benkler. The Wealth of Networks
- Larry Lessig. Code v2.0
- Larry Lessig. Free Culture
- Brian Martin. Information Liberation
- Helsinki Institute for Information Technology. Towards Ubiquitous Network Society
- Eben Moglen. Anarchism Triumphant
- Pekka Himanen. Suomalainen unelma

Thanks