Hacking as Feminine

by Bailey Kelley

In thinking about ways of putting today's (incredibly fun and not nearly long enough) workshop in conversation with my project, I quickly made an analogous connection between learning to hack and learning to cook. First, each calls for (if not necessitates) explicit training from either knowledgeable individuals or other resources, and the feelings of gratification that I've experienced from even small successes in both fields are remarkably similar. Second, a student needs not only the proper ingredients (fresh vegetables, the right cut of meat, a working NES cartridge), but also the proper implements (pans and whisks, screwdrivers and soldering irons). Different dishes or projects require a vast diversity of ingredients, but specific implements may be useful to any number of endeavors. Both hacking and cooking also expect the student to apply their knowledge in unique and creative ways; mastering established procedures is clearly only the *start* of any serious application of these skills. "Real" hackers and cooks do something new with each enterprise through understanding the functionality and fundamental relationships among ingredients, tools, and procedures and then manipulating those relationships in novel ways. Finally, both studies require access to a variety of materials, resources, and knowledge that only individuals with a certain amount of privilege can obtain. As I was thinking "anyone can learn this!" during our workshop, I was immediately reminded of my good fortune of being in this seminar, using efficient software and hardware, and of having the time to devote to this endeavor.

In this exercise of thinking through how hacking is like cooking, I was struck by the relative ease of positioning such disparate practices alongside each other. Hacking is disruptive, modern, and logical; cooking is productive,

ancient, and corporeal. One is primarily associated with (straight, white) men, while the other has historically been assigned to women. What insights could be gained from rearticulating hacking as a *feminine* practice? (While a piece on hacking as feminist praxis would be similarly illuminating, not to mention most likely already written, I'm focusing here on the ways in which orientations, processes, and affects that have been defined as 'feminine' in contemporary Western culture could describe hacking in new ways.)

Hacking can be thought of as a feminine technology in three ways: it is repetitious, community-based, and fundamentally material.

1. Repetition: Not only does the peek-and-poke method take a lot of back and forth between resources, files, and various programs, but the arms race between content producers and users means that hacking is a Sisyphean task. In the same way, cooking is just one of the several never-ending yet life-sustaining tasks that Hannah Arendt assigns to her category of "labor." In a more visceral and cynical mode, novelist Marilyn French describes domestic tasks as "deal[ing] all day with shit and string beans." The drudgery of learning a software program well enough to successfully hack it may not be quite as repulsive as French's description of being a housewife, but the tedious nature of hacking may require the same kind of careful inattention. Furthermore, many domestic arts, from cooking to folding laundry, improve almost exclusively through repetition. I know that today I was much better at desoldering by the last few pins.
2. Community: Today, we were supported not only by Patrick's generous expertise, but by a host of programs and tools developed by other enthusiasts. How far would we have gotten without FCEUX, Data Crystal, or the desolderer? While crowdsourcing is commonplace in discussions of digital media practices, developing and

maintaining networks has historically been the responsibility of women. As opposed to the figure of the cloistered artist or solitary genius, the hacker relies heavily (or at least more overtly) on community-produced knowledge and community-based resources.

3. Materiality: Masculine technologies and practices necessarily have fundamental connections to the material (what doesn't?), but the feminine world of *things* has historically been delineated from the masculine world of *ideas*. Today's workshop clearly exposed the physical structures of digital media, underscoring the fact that hacking is as physical as it is logical. In *The Marvelous Clouds,* John Durham Peters leverages the etymology of the word "material" in bringing gender to bear on his brand of media studies (i.e., "mater" vs. "pater"). Zoe Sofia's work on container technologies as maternal (and therefore intellectually overlooked) could be taken up in this context to turn from code to cartridges, more fully positioning the apparatuses that provide room and sustenance for hacking at the center of inquiry.