Ten Theses on Life Hacks

Life Hacks in general aren't taken too seriously. The ten theses in this document are meant to provide a widened perspective on Life Hacks, and on their relationship to our collective experiences and reflections. The criteria listed in first thesis allow us to test whether something is a Life Hack or not. The remaining theses present extended arguments, supported by examples, that identify specific features of Life Hacks, the environments they exist within, and the kind of culture they foster.

This publication's format incorporates the Life Hack ethos. With the addition of a series of holes, each loose page can be seen as a *hackable surface*. We invite you to collate and bind them, making an eclectic choice from a range of unorthodox materials.

Introduction

At its most basic, a "hack" is an imprecise rough cut, made quickly to achieve a short-cut solution. With the emergence of hacker culture came a new usage of the term. Borrowing from this evolution, Life Hacks emerged as small personal methods, scripts and processes that geeks of the early 2000s used to deal with a growing (and often overwhelming) density of information and work, such as creating email readers and organising to do lists. Now, Life Hacks are created and employed by non-specialists as a reaction to inefficiencies of their everyday life; they're common responses to their immediate environment.

A quick search on lifehacker.com offers a range of suggested strategies to manage different aspects of life, including communication, time management, and even relationships. This website is one of many online platforms (Instagram, YouTube, the list goes on) that present ways to do everything better. However, here Life Hacks appear simply as products, jokes; an amusing spectacle detached from the original intention of the Life Hacker, who acts spontaneously to solve a problem and then move on with their life. The marketing of Life Hacks derives capital from this spectacle while promoting a culture in which those who succeed are those who are most efficient and productive in their lives: Life Hacks become a reflection of the entrepreneurial mindset.

Life Hacks are:

INNOVATIVE — Life Hacks occur whenever an object is reutilized to achieve another goal, or when more objects or materials are combined in order to be used in an innovative way.

MAKE-DO — Life Hacks are quick-and-dirty processes, initiated with economical means and aims. The Life Hacker is an amateur who improvises Life Hacks, this is why they generally preserve a make-do appearance.

IMMEDIATE — The elements that form a Life Hack are characterized by proximity. These elements are close to reach and quick to obtain: they're easily accessible to the Life Hacker.

SUBJECTIVE — When a Life Hack is first devised, its goal is to benefit its creator. A Life Hack is subjective in the sense that it needs to be useful to whoever comes up with it.

SHAREABLE — Different people can make use of the same Life Hack: it can be shared and others might find it useful.

LIFE-IMPROVING — While Life Hacks may superficially seem a way of upgrading things, ultimately they improve one's life by suggesting and producing new habits and behaviors.

PROCESS-BASED — Life Hacks are not the thing produced by the Life Hacker, but the very process to produce the thing.

GENERATIVE — Life Hacks have the potential to build a network of interconnected Life Hacks.

Life Hacks turn life into a problem.

Through the prism of Life Hacks, life acquires a peculiar quality. It becomes a problem to be solved, a process to be fixed, a task to be upgraded. Life Hacks acknowledge the unpredictability of life: if life could be planned, there would not be any need to hack it; life could be merely designed.

Nowadays, everything feels fast-paced. The boundaries between work life and personal life are blurred and the need to increase productivity is spread to every aspect of our lives. Life Hacks try to simplify this process, they suggest that with the right tools there is always room for improvement. It is unclear whether or not Life Hacks contribute to living a better life, but the ambition of being more efficient helps us understand the urge for these tips and tricks.

Life Hacks materialise the need to reshape life in order to meet our cognitive and practical needs. They exist as an answer to everyday demands, deeply contextualized in society, and therefore produce a particular understanding of life. Life Hacks answer very directly to a problem or a need, so they have the ability to reveal the ambitions, concerns and constraints of society.

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G I N A   T R A P A N I

Gina Trapani's *Upgrade Your Life*. The main cover element, the "control"
button, literally suggests that through life hacks, one gains control of their life.

The appropriation of Life Hacks makes life look like work.

In an industrial system, "worker information", i.e. the tips and tricks that workers would come up with to facilitate their work, are often appropriated by Capital and later reincorporated into the production process against workers themselves. Nowadays, the formulation of such worker information is itself part of the work. This doesn't necessarily happen during work time, thus Life Hacks inform work, and in turn, work acquires the features of life itself. While Life Hacks promise to make life better, they make life something to be *bettered* in response to unpredictable and not fully controllable events.

As work and life become blurred, so do work and life spaces. Some choose to customize these ambiguous work/life spaces with products that display motivational messages that condense the Life Hacks mentality into aphorisms. Seemingly innocuous items such as coffee mugs and posters drift between the work space and the life space, reinforcing the urgency to be, if not productive, at least busy doing something.

III

An inflatable mobile office that provides a "take-along-workspace",
by Hans Hollein, 1969.

The difference between a Life Hack and a project.

Life Hacks and projects have fundamentally different approaches and strategic paths in order to achieve their goals. A project is an individual or collaborative process that is carefully planned to achieve a particular aim and that radically differs from the improvisational character of Life Hacks. This particular quality resonates with concepts like flexibility, chance and autonomy. Life Hacks are not treated as serious, rigid procedures as they reconfigure objects within scenarios that may vary greatly. Within projects, objects and scenarios don't usually have the same adaptabilty, and so Life Hacks are more closely related to a fast and easily achievable approach that doesn't require such a level of organisation.

Life Hacks are a vivid expression of thinking with one's hands, as the craftsman does. Revealing the natural relationship between mind and material life, Life Hacks can be seen as a response to an existential need, rather than just a technical problem that must be resolved with haste so as to be efficient. In this way they materialise a cognitive need to play and interact with one's surroundings.

Park(ing) day is an annual event where citizens transform the public space, creating temporary gardens in the metered parking spots in the city.

Life Hacks are self-directed, but can affect others.

The Life Hacker is the person who initiates the Life Hack. As the Life Hacker and the "Life Hackee" often reside in the same body, Life Hacking can be seen as self-design; the very process that is created, not the thing it creates. As soon as this process is materialised in a public space, it can be shared and used by others.

In these situations, such as when the space within which life goes on is improved, the benefit is extended towards a community. Life-improving also applies to a Life Hacker's perception of the conditions their environment and community experience. Others may use or benefit from a Life Hack, although its originator always creates it with the expectation of personal benefit to follow.

V

Park fountain hack, a public shower facility.

Life Hacks relate to routine, habits and daily life.

The "official" framework where everyday life takes place, is formed by organizational power structures of different scales, like states, municipalities, corporations etc. This framework is composed by a network of rules and mass production commodities.

In everyday situations, Life Hackers find gaps for creative responses to the limiting aspects of these existing structures. They are neither just passive consumers of products nor passive followers of rules. Life Hackers somehow attempt to individualise mass culture by altering things, from objects to urban plans, trying to reappropriate them. They act in a spontaneous and opportunistic way to develop their own interpretation of habits and daily routines.

In this sense, daily life is the field where Life Hacks emerge, by alternative and imaginative ways of doing a variety of things: thinking, communicating, commuting, cooking, sleeping etc. (and ultimately living).

Homeless man makes use of warm draughts coming from a subway
ventilation grill. New York City, 2014.

Small Life Hacks can initiate big changes.

Life Hacks, due to their alternative and innovative nature, interrupt conservative paradigms. Apart from their characteristic small tweaks, in some cases, they might point to bigger changes. Everyday objects or behaviors, when transformed by Life Hacks, can generate political antagonistic tools with practical or symbolic use.

During the electoral reforms of 2014 in Hong Kong, a political movement emerged, adopting the graphic symbol of a yellow umbrella. As part of the "Umbrella Movement", Hong Kong residents occupied public spaces in protest for 79 days, demanding a more democratic electoral process without interference from the central Chinese government. While police fired tear gas and water throughout demonstrations, protesters used umbrellas as a practical sheltering tool, resisting the attacks. The miniscule, personal, small scale on which Life Hacks operate doesn't usually lead to systemic change, but can become symbolic and therefore a tool charged with political value.
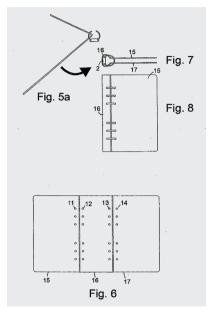
Protesters of the "Umbrella Movement" square off against police.
Hong Kong, 2014.

Life Hacks have an expiration date.

Life Hacks are inseparable from the context in which they are created (e.g. the time, place, weather, resources available etc) and also intrinsically connected to their user. Therefore, they have the temporary role of meeting the needs of their creators.

However, when made public, Life Hacks become fair game for replication or appropriation by others. For example, the industry of product design can potentially appropriate the concept of a Life Hack, transform it into a commercial product and make profit out of it. Likewise, popular social media accounts make good use of Life Hacks in the form of entertaining content to increase their views.

However, as soon as the mode of use of an original Life Hack is recontextualized in this way, it loses its novel quality and thus is not a hack anymore. After this point, the Life Hack is expired. The life of a Life Hack depends on its circulation and exposure.
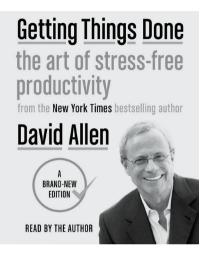
Fig. 5a

Fig. 7

Fig. 8

Fig. 6

Filofax is a patented personal organiser which uses an adaptable system, including loose leaf papers and inserts, an example of the Life Hack mentality and process applied to industry.

Life Hacks can become a burden.

Life Hacks originate from a desire to make life simpler. Organising your working space, saving time, money or mental energy, is naturally liberating. However, these spontaneous practices can easily be converted into a mindset which is profitable to a socio-economic system that celebrates "maximisation of efficiency" at all costs. As a result, they become an endless "life-coaching" plan for constant self-improvement, instead of providing simple solutions to everyday problems.

Entrepreneurs, companies, start-ups and new enterprises promote Life Hacks, within a culture of continuous productivity. On the surface, the goal is self-help, but in fact it results in endless work, and condemns any activity that does not increase efficiency as sinful laziness. You grow the urge to succeed in the contemporary fast lane of life, otherwise you will probably feel like a failure. When the Life Hack mentality is distorted like this, it ultimately becomes another burden, rather than a form of liberation.

Book cover of *Getting Things Done* by productivity consultant David Allen.

Life Hacks don't have to be optimisation techniques.

Life Hacks might exist outside of the realm of what is optimal, especially when this term is viewed in association with ideas of improvement and progress. A Life Hack doesn't have to perform in the best possible way, as it doesn't follow the principles of engineering, design, etc. which are bound to optimisation.

Within areas of knowledge such as engineering comes "jury (or jerry) rigging", which traditionally referred to makeshift repairs to ships. For example, "jury-rigged" devices include unorthodox, clumsy, but temporary applications of technology to perform particular tasks. Another example is a "kludge", which is a hastily-assembled imperfect solution to a temporary problem. Kludges also are used as a way to test systems, and in computer science they are known as notoriously inefficient yet functional knots of code.

It's hard to argue that these processes are optimal ways of using materials, as obviously there are better ways to achieve their purposes, such as simply acquiring a product specifically designed for them. More than trying to offer the optimal result, Life Hacks provide innovative solutions to current problems.

X

A small vanity mirror as a temporary replacement for a wing mirror on a car.

Conclusion

Life Hacks share the creative, problem-solving approach to innovation with the discipline of design, but use different methodologies and criteria as they are accessible to everyone on an intimate level. This reappropriation of the creative process by a diversified multitude happens in everyday life, which is not just lived anymore but questioned. Life Hacks also foster an actual reappropriation of the surrounding space and tools, without the necessity of a specific expertise or particular skills.

If design can improve the quality of your space in a top-bottom fashion, Life Hacks belong to the one who inhabits the space. The potential of Life Hacks is in their capacity to be shared and used by a diverse group of people, and in creating communities with cultural differences that try to improve life. However Life Hacks are contextual: what is a Life Hack for some, might not be for others. Life Hacks demonstrate a free and open-source approach to everyday life, but their openness makes them vulnerable, as they can be appropriated for commercial purposes and become constrained to an attitude to life characterized by accelleration, efficiency and productivity that may ultimately result in burn-out.

The dynamics of a self-improvement attitude and a reappropriation of Life Hacks shape our understanding of the social and anthropological shifts of our times. And in doing so, Life Hacks highlight the formation of a new subjectivity of the *entreprecariat* stretched between precarious conditions and the necessity of a self-entrepreneurial routine. Trying to understand Life Hacks in the landscape of an advanced capitalist society raises the question of the ambiguity of a system in which the entrepreneurial routine of the self is internalized to perform an ever-working life. In actuality, Life Hacks bring about the possibility of reappropriating everyday life in a creative and practical response, managing precarity and complexity.

Appendix: A brief history of hacking

The word hacking finds its root in the early days of computational culture. While the term hacker was initially used in the 60s negatively to describe computer programmers who were too self-absorbed in their relation to their machine, it slowly evolved in the 70s and 80s into a subculture where the notions of programming, crafting and wizardry were strongly associated, and claimed back the negative connotation to form the cultural identity of a new class of exceptional computer programmers. This was particularly made explicit in the discourse of the first free and open source software communities that directly stemmed from this subculture, who proudly used the term to highlight their particular approach to programming.

Around the same time the phreaking scene, and to some extent later the warez scene, demonstrated that technological knowledge could also be used to disrupt, appropriate, crack, protest, sabotage and mess around with telecommunication infrastructures and any forms of technological restrictions, which led to the early mix between hacking, software piracy and activism but also created a tension between different hacker communities and paved the way towards the cultural diffusion of the romanticised hacker-as-hero or hacker-as-vilain stereotypes in 80s and 90s cyberpunk literature, blockbuster movies and mainstream media.

With the democratisation of the Internet and the further cultural appropriation of net and computational culture into other fields, the term started to become increasingly used to describe persons knowledgeable enough of a tool, system, practice, environment, to turn it upside down and take advantage of it for fun and profit. A notable example comes from the so-called maker movement where hacking has been used to describe practices that were essentially derived from DIY cultures.

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