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Hackers and Painters

Paul Graham’s Hackers and Painters develops an interesting analogy between hacking and painting, as the title explicitly states. Being relatively new to the computer science field, I really have very little hacking experience. Still I find the analogy appropriate in my small experience of programming.

The distinction between makers and researchers is important here. Because hackers and programmers work to create products that they consider beautiful, or useful, or efficient, or whatever term you might apply, their work and processes are similar to that of other makers. In the sciences progress is made through observation and deduction. Here we find a clear demarcation between the sciences and hacking. Hackers create software through persistence, refinement, and building on previous experience.

In the broadest sense though, I feel that any profession can be compared, because the things that make success in one field are much the same as in others. Persistence, refinement, and learning from the past are how a person perfects any craft, skill, or pursuit. While the differences between formalized processes in math and research and creation in painting and hacking, the qualities for success, in the broadest sense, are much the same.

Overall I agree with the article. I have been educated as an economist, an English major, tended bar and waited tables. Now I endeavor to learn programming. While the technical details and difficulties are always different, the same qualities have always defined success. Namely persistence, refinement, learning from previous experience, and if you are really committed an obsession with detail. Mostly I believe that Paul Graham’s article yearns for a freedom from the restrictions of institutions, whether they be universities or corporations, and the pursuit of beauty.