

**A FRAMEWORK FOR THE STUDY OF
COMPUTER-ORIENTED HUMOR
(COHUM)**

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ABSTRACT

All humor is to some extent cultural and, perhaps to that same extent, humor serves to define, explain and enhance our understanding of a particular culture. The computer industry, now over 50 years old, is a mature culture characterized by industriousness, creativity, energy, bureaucracy and wit. The computer itself has lately become something of a cultural icon or signpost. Yet the computer industry has always seemed to breed its own special brand of humor – intelligent, somewhat superior, slyly subversive – even from its very earliest days.

This paper is to explore computer-oriented humor (COHUM) in order to provide a framework, and a comprehensive categorization, and to place COHUM in the context of the much broader study of humor. In investigating COHUM some of the most interesting findings were: the abundance of antiestablishment humor and of hermetic, knowledge-based humor. Recognition of the importance of bonding humor and especially the I-get-it variety of bonding humor. As so often happens, an intimate investigation of the specific has led to innovations in the more general field of humor study.

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A FRAMEWORK FOR THE STUDY OF COMPUTER-ORIENTED HUMOR (COHUM)

The computer industry, now over half a century old, is a mature culture characterized by industriousness, creativity, energy, bureaucracy and, yes, wit. The computer itself has lately become something of a cultural icon (Porter 2000) or signpost. Yet the computer industry has always seemed to breed its own special brand of humor – intelligent, somewhat superior, and slyly subversive – even from its very earliest days.

There is arguably no other group that produces as much humor as computer professionals. This is a field that has produced email emoticons; high- and low-brow Internet humor; satirical dictionaries; a serious April Fool's Day conference on computational humor (HAHAcronym Project 2002); and even a rating scale to measure an individual characteristic called microcomputer playfulness (Webster & Martocchio 1992). This is a field whose jargon can be serious and humorous at the same time, *e.g.*, a nibble is half a byte.

There are very few jokes centered around any other product – electrical or otherwise. Before the computer “revolution,” there was a railroad “revolution,” a telephone “revolution,” automobile, radio, television, *etcetera*. These all changed the world, but produced little humor. It may seem at first blush that light bulb jokes are an example of product-centered humor, but light bulb jokes are actually the polar opposite of computer-oriented *humor* (COHUM). Light bulb jokes are funny precisely because the

light bulb is such a simple device and so easy to manipulate; computer jokes arise in part because computers are difficult to master and require knowledge and training.

Why is it that the computer industry has generated so much humor? The purpose of the current paper is to explore COHUM, to provide an overview, a framework, and a comprehensive categorization, and to place it in the context of the much broader study of humor. It is also expected that this research will help us understand why there is such an abundance of humor revolving around the computer.

COHUM: A NAÏVE CLASSIFICATION

It is instructive first to examine the diverse types of COHUM, employing examples of each. The examples used in this paper have been chosen because they are well known, repeated frequently, and represent their respective classes. In this first classification scheme, the humor is categorized as follows: the computer against the world; users vs. computer professionals; computer professionals vs. users; antiestablishment humor; and knowledge-based humor.

THE COMPUTER AGAINST THE WORLD

This category includes anthropomorphic representations of computers as mighty, powerful and omniscient. The computer in the movie *2001: A Space Odyssey* comes to mind. In fact, that computer, named HAL, was a sly dig at the (then) all-mighty IBM: each letter of the name HAL is a decrement of the corresponding letter in IBM. The computer depicted in the following joke, based on a short story “Answer” by Fredric

Brown (1954), has very high aspirations.

A team of the world's most accomplished computer scientists and engineers have just completed the world's most powerful computer. It takes up the entire laboratory. The leader of the team plugs in the power cord and turns the computer on. There is an explosion of flashing colored lights and whirring disks. The scientist stands in front of the computer and speaks directly into the microphone, asking the one question that has plagued mankind since the beginning of time: "Is there a God?" The lights flash, the disks whirl, and various mechanisms chug back and forth as the computer contemplates this problem. Finally, a mechanical voice booms forth from the giant speakers on top of the machine: "NOW there is." [1]

USERS VERSUS COMPUTER PROFESSIONALS

This kind of humor arises out of common shared experience of having to deal with supercilious know-it-alls who think all users are morons. Even computer professionals can identify with this category of humor. After all, we are all users too. This category seems to be similar in tone to the ubiquitous lawyer jokes.

You know you are a computer nerd if: [2]

- You think that when people around you yawn, it is because they did not get enough sleep.
- You know what `http://` stands for.
- When the radio traffic reporter talks about a backup caused by a crash, you correct him that a backup is good protection in case of a crash.

COMPUTER PROFESSIONALS VERSUS USERS

To techies, users are incredibly naïve individuals who forget simple things like plugging in the power cord; do not have a clue about the technology on their desktops; and want the job done yesterday. The definitive joke in this category is the anecdote, told as if it had really happened (perhaps it really did):

... about the technical support specialist who fields a call from a user about a defective cup holder at the front of the computer: it was the CD-ROM drive. [3]

ANTI ESTABLISHMENT COHUM

Some of the best COHUM has always been subtly subversive. In fact, an earlier generation's anti-IBM jokes seem to have transmuted into the current crop of anti-Microsoft jokes (Bill Gates does not come off too well either), mocking the current self-appointed king of technology that, in truth, everyone is beholden to.

The End of the World: God decided to end all life on Earth. He also decided to call three leaders to Him and tell them about it. So, He called to His chambers George W. Bush, Vladimir Putin and Bill Gates. [4]

After greeting them, He informed them that he had had it with the situation on Earth, and was going to destroy it. They were to tell people to prepare for the end, which would be that Friday.

Each returned to his governing board.

Bush stood before his cabinet and said, "I have some good news, and some bad news. The good news is that there IS a God. The bad news is that He is unhappy with Earth, and will destroy it on Friday."

Putin stood before his cabinet and said, "I have some bad news and some worse news. The bad news is that there IS a God. The worse news is that He is unhappy with Earth and plans to destroy it this Friday."

Bill Gates stood before his board and said, "I have some great news and some FANTASTIC news. The great news is that God thinks I am one of the three most powerful men in the world. The FANTASTIC news is that we don't have to fix WINDOWS 2004."

In explaining the information technology concepts of real vs. virtual, the following diagram is sometimes found helpful:

Is It There?		Do I See It?		[5]
		Yes	No	
	Yes	REAL	TRANSPARENT	
	No	VIRTUAL	VAPORWARE	

The last category was directed at IBM about 40 years ago, but would be targeted at Microsoft today.

KNOWLEDGE-BASED COHUM

The category of knowledge-based COHUM contains hermetic humor told by one computer professional to another and requires specialized knowledge to “get” the joke. The humor in this grouping relies on shared knowledge between the narrator and the audience. Usually that knowledge involves such esoterica as number systems other than decimal, and programming logic or syntax. For example:

It’s as easy as 01 10 11. [6]

Why do programmers always get Christmas and Halloween mixed up? [7]
 Answer: Because DEC 25 = OCT 31.

What would you call the object-oriented version of COBOL? [8]
 Answer: ADD ONE TO COBOL.

There are many more examples of COHUM in all of these categories. An evaluation of this initial attempt at COHUM classification is interesting and provides a kind of superficial framework for the study of COHUM but, ultimately, it is somewhat less than informative. This classification does not help answer the questions motivating this

investigation: Why has this field produced so much humor? Why are these jokes funny? Who finds them funny? Is there a common thread that marks the humor of computer professionals?

In order to help us understand the underlying dynamics of COHUM and its broader sociological context, we turn to the humor studies literature.

THE STUDY OF HUMOR

There are many different types of humor, including puns, wordplays, riddles, jokes, satires, lampoons, sarcasm, irony, wit, black humor, comedy, slapstick, farce, burlesques, caricatures, and parody. The differences among these different humor types is not always great. The bottom line is that humor has the ability to make people laugh, smile, or chuckle, at least inwardly.

Human beings seem to naturally gravitate toward all forms of humor. Indeed, humor has been shown to be useful and effective in many different areas of human endeavor, including medicine, counseling, advertising and, of course, communication (see, *e.g.*, Holden 1993; Goldin & Bordan 1999; Witkin 1999; Weinberger & Gulas 1992; Honeycutt & Brown 1998).

Humor has many functions, both positive and negative. Humor has been found to be an important de-stressing device (Berk 1998; Burkhart 1998), and it is hard to find a more stressful occupation than computer scientist. One well-known joke plays on this tension but, in truth, can be and has been reworked to poke fun at a variety of occupations (*e.g.*, lawyer):

A doctor, a civil engineer, and a computer scientist got to discussing which was the oldest profession. The doctor pointed out that according to Biblical tradition, God created Eve from Adam's rib. This obviously required complicated surgery, so therefore medicine was surely the oldest profession in the world. The engineer countered with an earlier passage in the Bible stating that God created order from chaos, and since this was most certainly the biggest example of civil engineering, it proved that his profession was the oldest profession. Smiling, the computer scientist responded: "Who do you think created chaos?"

[9]

THEORIES OF HUMOR

While many hypotheses as to why people laugh have been postulated, there are three major theories of humor: incongruity, relief/release, and superiority. According to Keith-Spiegel (1972), incongruity theory posits that humor results from a contrast between what is logically expected and what actually takes place or what is said. Gerard (1759) and Beattie (1776) first proposed this theory (some claim that it was actually presented first by Blaise Pascal in the 17th century) but it is usually associated with Kant (1790) and Schopenhauer (1819).

The relief/release theory of humor focuses on the fact that laughter is a socially acceptable way to release pent-up tension and nervous energy, and relieve stress. This theory was first developed by Spencer (1860) but was made famous by Freud (1960). Many people may be afraid or find it difficult or uncomfortable to talk about certain subjects, for example, such topics as rape, impotence, homosexuality, violence, racism, and incest. Humor is a socially acceptable way of relieving one's tension about these sensitive areas.

Superiority theory suggests that the purpose of humor is to demonstrate one's

superiority, dominance, or power over others. Mocking humor that belittles the stupidity, infirmities, or weaknesses of other groups would certainly be a way of demonstrating the “superiority” of one’s own reference group and thus boosting one’s ego. Superiority theory is associated with Hobbes (1651) but was also discussed by many others including Aristotle, Plato, and Cicero. A variation of superiority theory is that of Gruner (1997) who believes that humor should be seen as a type of game in which there is a winner and a loser. The winners are the parties doing the laughing and the losers are the ones being laughed about or at. Not all proponents of the superiority theory of humor see it as belittling and denigrating others. Some assert that this type of humor may also be sympathetic, empathetic, and congenial (Keith-Spiegel, 1972).

These theories of humor help to provide some explanation for the dynamics underlying the categories in the naïve classification of COHUM presented above. The humor of the computer against the world provides relief (and release) for our fears that perhaps we have created a monster we cannot control. Note how many films – ranging from *Star Wars* to the *Terminator* and *Matrix* franchises – have as a theme computers or cyborgs running amok and attempting to take over the world. Indeed, humans are superfluous in a world ruled by machines. In fact, the categories of computer against the world, the user versus the computer professional, and the antiestablishment humor, which includes thousands of anti-Microsoft tidbits, all have some of the flavor of the humor of the oppressed, which operates under the relief / release theory of humor. Humor in which users mock the “nerdy” computer professionals or in which everyone mocks the corporate behemoth Microsoft provides an outlet for those of us who feel insignificant, inferior or

put upon by these targets. Similarly, there is some degree of superiority theory underlying the computer professional versus the user.

What about knowledge-based humor? Various explanatory theories probably apply. Much of the humor in this category is based on alternate number systems, i.e., binary, octal, hexadecimal, and the theory of incongruity plays a role here. An ordinary life event in which we expect to use decimal arithmetic – but do not – becomes funny. For example, the anecdote told by Grace Murray Hopper of the difficulty she experienced one day in balancing her checkbook, until she realized that she was using octal arithmetic (Friedman 1992).

This category of knowledge-based COHUM presents a totally different and very rich area of study. Some of the best COHUM is dependent on a shared knowledge set between the narrator and the audience, on shared common experiences, on, if you will, a secret handshake.

BONDING HUMOR

In exploring computer-oriented humor (Friedman & Friedman 2002, 2003a), the authors note that much of this type of humor has a social purpose. It serves as a bonding device. Indeed, there are several kinds of humor whose primary function appears to be the creation of a feeling of belongingness and togetherness. Some of this humor is almost generic, in that the same joke works well for one subgroup and then can be reworked and recycled to be just as funny to another group of people. Some cannot.

This type of humor covers a wide variety of comic endeavors, including the humor of various ethnic groups, racial groups, religions, professions, scientific disciplines, indeed,

any group of individuals who share a body of knowledge, rituals, experience, lore, and, of course, a sense of humor (Friedman& Friedman 2003b).

CULTURE-SPECIFIC HUMOR

All humor is to some extent cultural and, perhaps to that same extent, humor serves to define, explain and enhance our understanding of a particular culture. Even in antiquity it was believed that it is possible to learn a great deal about a person by what he finds funny (Babylonian Talmud, Eruvin 65b). Much like the parable of the blind men and the elephant, humor is one of the ways with which we can grasp a level of understanding of a highly complex cultural environment.

One of the underpinnings of humor and humor research is that all humor will not necessarily be funny to all people. In other words, there is really no such thing as pure humor (Cohen 1999, p. 12). Veatch (1998) posits that the way in which people from diverse cultures are offended, amused, or unaffected by different sets of events reflects different subjective moral systems. LaFollette and Shanks (1993) also note that all humor is context-dependent, some depending on the listeners' beliefs. Duncan *et al.* (1990) assert that the humor used in the workplace partially defines the organizational culture.

Cohen (1999, pp.12-32) uses the term *conditional* for jokes that will work only with certain audiences and *hermetic* for those jokes that presume particular knowledge or belief. Some of the most strongly conditional, hermetic jokes are those that make references to the jargon or knowledge of a particular profession, and the profession with arguably the most arcane knowledge base is probably the computer profession.

In-group humor, a kind of culture-specific humor, can be used to help new recruits

or trainees develop a feeling of belonging. In general, this type of humor tends to bond together members of the profession. This type of bonding humor helps people find common ground (Holden 1993, p. 67). Koller (1988, p. 11) notes, “to share a laugh together is a major social bond,” *i.e.*, humor builds rapport. Humor can be used to deride others (*e.g.*, racist jokes, lawyer jokes) but it can also be used to enhance the image of a group. Of course, one joke can sometimes do both jobs at the same time: mock one group while at the same time making another group appear smarter than everyone else.

According to Martineau’s (1972) model of in-group humor: When humor lauds the in-group, it functions to strengthen the group. When the humor belittles the in-group, it has one of four purposes: to control the behavior of the in-group; to strengthen the in-group, *i.e.*, using self-disparaging humor to laughingly talk of one’s own group’s weaknesses but in a congenial way that strengthens the rapport of the group; to introduce or encourage conflict that is already present; and to encourage the break-up of the group. When humor lauds an out-group, it functions to strengthen the group. The out-group may be seen as a reference group and the humor demonstrates that the two groups have much in common. When humor belittles an out-group, it has one of two purposes: it enhances the morale of the in-group; and it introduces or encourages a negative attitude towards the out-group.

Sometimes humor of this type seems to operate under the theory of superiority, as when another (outsider) group is the object of the joke. At other times, there is no superiority; the humor may be of the self-deprecating type.

In-group humor may be just as conditional as culture-specific bonding humor. It may be hermetic, meant only for true insiders. Some jokes do not even sound funny unless one has the necessary knowledge or experience to understand them. Some humor cannot

be recycled, and depends on shared knowledge between the joke teller and the audience. Strongly conditional, hermetic COHUM serves many purposes today, just as it did in the early days of the profession. When used in the classroom, for example, it brings students into the community of professionals, by making them feel like part of the in-group. After all, if you don't get the joke, you're not a computer professional. COHUM of the conditional, hermetic type is usually (but not always) intelligent, and often extremely subtle.

I-GET-IT: A TYPE OF BONDING HUMOR

When bonding humor is hermetic, the listener must bring some kind of specialized knowledge to the joke-telling enterprise or the joke is meaningless, or, at least, not funny. This phenomenon can occur in tightly-knit groups or groups that share similar experience or knowledge, for example, musicians, mathematicians, computer scientists or, even, families. In sum, this type of humor can be characterized by a mental (or verbal) audience response of “I get it.” Ziv and Gadish (1989) found that inside/private jokes, phrases, sayings, and expressions constitute a kind of “secret language” for couples and serve to strengthen “feelings of belongingness and intracouple cohesiveness.”

How do we explain I-get-it humor, or the satisfaction that is realized by both parties to the humorous transactions that result in the I-get-it moment? Although, at first glance, there seems to be a slight fit or overlap with the type of humor based on superiority theory, it is really quite different. With humor that is hermetic but derives its satisfaction from superiority, the payoff comes when the listener is baffled – an explanation is clearly *required*, whether or not it is offered. There is definitely a winner and a loser here, more

gotcha then I-get-it. Conversely, the payoff for true I-get-it humor is in *not* needing to explain the joke. Both parties share the joke; they are both winners. Those who would not understand the joke – the presumed outsiders – are not relevant to this transaction because they are not there. Superiority is not at play.

This distinction deserves to be more clearly delineated. Adult humor is a good example. Two adults sharing a racy joke – that’s a shared bond. On the other hand, some individuals may relate a strongly hermetic joke to someone who cannot possibly get it – say, an older child telling a “dirty” joke to a young child. This sort of nasty jokester preys upon people’s desire to “get it.”

For the large sub-category of bonding humor that may be described by the implied response, “I get it,” the narrator and the audience both share an understanding of the underlying knowledge, experience, or culture needed to “get it.” It is this unstated bond, this implied wink, this *secret handshake* that informs the transaction: both parties are members of the “club.”

This type of humor is often hermetic, relying on specialized knowledge shared by the narrator and the audience. The payoff in this type of humor is when the shared knowledge, experience, and / or understanding produces the I-get-it moment. For one who does not *get it*, this type of humor requires too much explanation, that is, the listener must bring too much to the listening experience in order to appreciate it. In fact, for both parties in this I-get -it transaction, the greatest satisfaction is derived when no explanation is required, requested, or offered. Between the narrator and the listener, there is an implicit understanding, the secret handshake.

COHUM: AN ALTERNATIVE CLASSIFICATION

In the naïve classification above, COHUM was mostly categorized according to insider and outsider, mocker and mockee. Users make jokes about techies and *vice versa*. However, the bonding and I-get-it aspect of knowledge-based COHUM suggests classification on a different dimension: General COHUM and Classic COHUM.

General COHUM is accessible to a general audience. One doesn't have to be a computer professional, computer scientist, or techie to understand it. Most of the humor we call computer humor – and there are many Internet sites with hundreds of examples – falls in this category. Some of this humor may even be recycled to or from some other profession or scientific field.

Classic COHUM, on the other hand, is conditional or hermetic, or both. It requires specialized knowledge, shared experience, or a particular attitude common to professionals in the field. More important, humor in this category cannot be recycled. This type of COHUM is classic in the same sense as music or literature may be deemed classic. It will be around as long as computers exist; it represents the field; if nothing else, it is part of the historical record. Some jokes capitalize on variations in programming languages or operating systems and are thus extremely hermetic.

Figure 1 presents this two-dimensional classification of COHUM, and shows how the humor presented so far fall into this scheme.

	<i>General</i>	<i>Classic</i>
<i>Computer vs the world</i>	[1]	
<i>User vs computer professional</i>	[2]	
<i>Computer professional vs user</i>	[3]	
<i>Antiestablishment</i>	[4][9]	[5]
<i>Knowledge-based</i>		[6][7][8]

Figure 1
Classification of Computer-Oriented Humor (COHUM)

As Figure 1 demonstrates, classic COHUM is concentrated mostly in the antiestablishment and knowledge-based categories. These are true insider jokes, that, e.g., only a “real” computer person will understand. This type of humor is conditional and hermetic, and may be used to establish who is an insider and who is an outsider. The jokes in this category require a great deal of knowledge on the part of the listener. It may have developed from the fact that the first computer professionals were mathematicians and engineers. They were the “high priests” of the industry, the insiders of the in-group.

Some of the best antiestablishment COHUM cannot even be considered “jokes.” The history and names of our myriad programming languages often are accidentally funny. For example, PL/1 (Programming Language ONE, often cited as the epitome, or nadir, of IBM’s arrogance) and APL (What kind of name is “A Programming Language”?). Then, of course, there were the developers of SNOBOL, slyly poking fun at the fledgling industry’s penchant for acronyms by naming their language with the most intricate acronym they could think up, StrNg Oriented symBolic Language. This was their second attempt at naming the language; the first was String Expression Interpreter (SEXI), but was deemed too risqué for what was quickly becoming a very popular piece of software (Friedman 1992). Later on, there was David Gelernter’s sly poke at the Ada language

(named after Lady Ada Lovelace, the "first" programmer) when he named his parallel processing language Linda (after a well-known porn star of the time, Linda Lovelace).

The cover art on Jean Samet's (1969) text on programming languages depicted a tower of 'Babel' (read babble) of the ever-proliferating varieties and species of programming languages. Similarly, in a jab at the industry's penchant for designing "kitchen sink" programming languages (everything in them but the kitchen sink), "The Emperor's Old Clothes" (Hoare 1981) is a brilliant reworking of the well-known parable "The Emperor's New Clothes."

In the knowledge-based category, Touretzky (1984, pp. 198-199) used the "Dragon's Dream" fable to successfully illustrate the elements of recursion in a non-threatening, humorous way.

CONCLUSION

Wit is the hallmark of intelligent beings. What makes this area of study so fascinating is that the advent of the computer, and the technical and social revolutions that followed, have spawned such a vast quantity of humor in all its manifestations. And humor, as we know, is ultimately a most *human* enterprise.

In investigating COHUM some of the most interesting findings were: the abundance of antiestablishment humor and of hermetic, knowledge-based humor. Recognition of the importance of bonding humor and especially the I-get-it variety of bonding humor. As so often happens, an intimate investigation of the specific has led to innovations in the more general field of humor study.

Some of the best COHUM does not lend itself to the joke format. It comes to us in the form of parables, fables, art, historical anecdotes. There are those who might argue that these forms are not really humor. (After all, they do not even rate a numbered reference in Figure 1.) However, they definitely seem to belong to the I-get-it type of bonding humor: the narrator and the audience both share an understanding of the underlying knowledge, experience, or culture needed to “get it.” For both parties in this I-get -it transaction, the greatest satisfaction is derived when no explanation is required, requested, or offered. Between the narrator and the listener, there is an implicit understanding, the secret handshake.

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