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Web Roundup: Biohacking, BioArt, and other Playful Abominations

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These days, it is fun to “hack” almost everything. You can [hack your life](#), you can [hack your home](#), and you can even [hack your period](#). So, as the web continues to grow more material on [synthetic biology](#), let us turn [once again](#) to the world of biohacking.

A particularly interesting piece considers the possibility of [Open Source Insulin](#). Insulin, like any bio-commercial product, can be simultaneously life-saving and expensive. For those people who can't make their own (with an embedded pancreas), why not [homebrew](#)? You could also [inject your eyeballs with a kind of chlorophyll analog called Chlorin e6](#) in order to improve your night vision, [hack your ears to hear Wi-Fi](#), or [extract DNA from some strawberries](#). (Just don't forget to [kill your adorable little abominations](#) before you pour them down the drain.)

The application of the Open Source movement to biology is another way in which technologies and bodies can intertwine, touching on the tensions between private property (both patents and selves) and science as an aspirational public good. For the moment, we can find an [open source language for programming cells](#), the [BioBricks Foundation](#), [Open Wetware](#), and physical spaces for workshops and experiments, like [Genspace](#).

But, you may ask, is biohacking really a thing? It's not like you can get a home [CRISPR](#) machine – at least, [not quite yet](#). (For a fun if slightly noisy overview of CRISPR, listen to science reporter Carl Zimmer on Radiolab: “[Of CRISPR and dragons](#)”). But even without a kitchen-counter gene-editing appliance to slide in next to your bread machine, CRISPR technology leaves us with plenty to discuss. For example, [scientists in China have successfully modified human embryos](#), which has spawned many discussions about [the ethics of human germline modification](#), and what this all [means for the future](#).

Editing humanity is a topic full of [fear and promise](#). Gene editing holds the potential for innovation in treatment of many diseases, particularly [cancer](#). (And there are also some [odd proposals](#), even accounting for good intentions.) The invocation of dragons may be a subtle reference to the location of this research in China. But at the same time, like the dinosaur

parade of the “Jurassic” franchise, Dragons serve as a broader metaphor for the dangers of meddling with nature. The Radiolab piece expresses it like this (excerpted from minutes 21-23):

Voice 1: “I don’t know if it’s a religious thought or just the thought of a conservative person, but ... I don’t know where the sacred begins and ends anymore, on that particular turf... As the human beings get more and more power to create and design and essentially create a future, that future will include the imaginations both light and dark of humans... [I don’t think we should outlaw it], I think we should cringe a little as opposed to having a big party.”...

Voice 2: “OK, let’s all cringe... ready...”

Voice 1: “You cringed with attitude!”

Voice 2: “But you’re afraid of, like, *dragons!*” [laughter]

Of course, this dragon metaphor is not new. Medieval manuscripts were known to “[make explicit the connection between the dragon and the devil](#), aligning the fantastical creature with evil, deception, ‘vainglory and human pleasures.’” The dragon is also very much like the Beast of the Apocalypse, often depicted with an array of multiple and often multi-species heads, like [this one](#) described at the [British Library](#), or [this one](#). There can be overlap between [the whimsical](#) and [the satanic](#).

Putting the “Play” back into “Playing God”?

The shifting divisions between nature, the sacred, and the abomination have often been explored through art. As an emergent art form, [BioArt](#) explores [this interstitial space](#), reaching into [Biodesign](#) and [Molecular Cuisine](#). There is even a Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology [BioArt contest](#).

Intersections of science and religion tend to appear here as well. For yet another perspective, see “[Why I Became a Christian Transhumanist](#).” There is the saying that the road to hell is paved with good intentions. Or is it actually a [mouth with a flaming cauldron](#) (complete with goat-men and a bird-headed creature with an additional posterior face stoking the fire with bellows)? Maybe there is more than one way to get to hell.

Additional Links:

- [What is biohacking and why should we care?](#)
- [Where will synthetic biology lead us?](#) (first mentioned in

Somatosphere [way back when](#))

- Read about [A Million Core Silicon Brain](#) at MindHacks.
- [Every Virus a Person Has Had Can Be Seen in a Drop of Blood](#)
- Are you interested in [ancient DNA](#)? Sure you are.
- I'm still trying out collecting links at delicious.com [@smbergst](#) [#Biohack](#)

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