GENERATION HACK!

(Insights from a Hacker Con)

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The elevator thinks the hotel lobby is on the second floor. Confused guests step in and out of the hallway trying to make sense of their dilemma. A hotel security guard ushers the masses towards the stairs apologizing for the inconvenience but offers no explanation. A technological glitch? No, the hackers are in town.

Cliques of black-clad twentysomethings float in and out of hotel rooms. With the exception of a tendency to accessorize their outfits with electronic gadgets, they look nothing alike. There are stereotypical nerds - skinny and frail with glasses and good math grades. There are military looking jocks with short hair and athletic bodies, and finally every parent's nightmare: gothic pale skin, black lipstick and multiple facial piercings. It's a Marilyn Manson concert meets Revenge of the Nerds. Welcome to Summercon, an annual gathering of hackers on the East Coast.

Originally sponsored by a handful of well-known hacker groups that operated on an "invitation only" basis, Summercon has established itself as a significant annual hacker event. The conference is now open to anyone and is known not for its schedule of speakers, but for its ability to gather enough of the right people in the same spot for late night socials and information sharing. Every year 150-200 hackers gather to have fun, display new toys, and test new technology.

The unsuspecting hotel managers at the Georgetown Holiday Inn watch on Friday as piece after piece of computer equipment is hauled up to individual rooms. To be without Internet connectivity at a hacker conference is a social faux pas and each room will have more space dedicated to computing power than sleep. A tactical frequency is established and for the remainder of the weekend hackers will communicate significant happenings via hand-held radios. Those without radios will at least listen in with scanners and receive conference updates as well as hotel security radio traffic. In fact, the hotel security radio frequency and the D.C. police frequency will be monitored twenty-four hours a day for the next two days so the conference attendees won't encounter any surprises from local law enforcement.

Friday afternoon's events begin with a tour of the FBI headquarters building in downtown Washington, and then it's off to the Pentagon City mall in nearby Virginia for a special 2600 meeting, so named after their sponsor and central organizer 2600 Magazine: The Hacker Quarterly. In existence for over 12 years, 2600 Magazine sponsors a series of informal hacker meetings the first Friday of every month at various public locales around the world. The Pentagon City mall food court is the venue for the D.C. area 2600 meetings. The mall security guards are kept busy with laser pointers strategically zapped at their security cameras, but for the most part the gathering is uneventful.

"Roadancer," a burly Harley Davidson-driving hacker creates a well-respected presence and he tells the crowd to buy

something to eat and sit down or get thrown out. The mall security force appreciates the interface and though they keep a watchful eye on the crowd they keep their distance. The activities transition to the hotel smoothly and well into the night.

A typical hacker conference, official Summercon activities start no earlier than noon on Saturday. Hackers are by nature nocturnal animals and the hours of 5 a.m. to noon are used to counter sleep deprivation. Driven by their passion for understanding technology, hackers become experts on the intricate computer systems our society relies on for daily convenience and survival. This fact isn't lost entirely on the security experts as I count several in the audience feverishly taking notes during an informal speech on Windows NT security holes. As few as six years ago this combination of security experts and hackers would have been unheard of. Today, the communities have grown closer as significant numbers of hackers have successfully migrated into the "professional world." As one hacker notes with an evil grin and a hint of sarcasm, "One day you'll wake up and realize that we control the infrastructure and with that will come a realization that we aren't all that bad."

Later in the afternoon, I am taken on a tour of the conference communications room. Though I am not a hacker, my age and affiliation with several old-school hackers grants me the privilege of such a tour. The room is crammed with computers and radio equipment. I am told as many as five people slept here the night before, one of them curled up between a Sun workstation and a tower PC. One computer is hooked up to the Internet and is connected to several other machines in the room. In one corner is radio communications equipment capable of broadcasting at 100 watts -- stronger than

some college radio stations. The radio equipment is monitoring the conference frequency, hotel security and the D.C. police and is capable of crossbanding any of them together. For example, conference attendees often share Beavis-and-Butthead-style belches on the hotel security frequency and occasionally the D.C. police wind up talking with the hotel security staff.

Another computer is intercepting and decoding nationwide alphanumeric pager messages and displaying them on the screen. The screen scrolls fast so a nearby hacker pauses it for me. One entry reads "Honey I love you, please come home," while another offers "Can you open for the Fugees in Miami on Tuesday night?" Amazed, but at the same time uncomfortable with the illegality of the activities, I excuse myself from the room.

When it is finally over, the city is no worse for wear and the hacker motive of information propagation has triumphed again. By nature individualistic, the hacker community has finally recognized its strength in numbers and gained media exposure. Widely covered, but rarely understood, hackers are reaching out for legitimacy in the digital age as it encompasses the world around them. While they still contain a disruptive element in their ranks they have moved from most likely to pillage the global village to most likely to find the newest privacy exposure in Netscape Navigator.

Somewhere along the line, this duality of the hacker subculture got lost in the shuffle. We haven't decided if hackers are the explorers of the cyber-frontier or the pirates of the cyber-seas. Or perhaps, hacking is just a transition period for a techno-induced generation of young men and women trying to leave their mark on the world. Maybe

they aren't satisfied with a label of "Generation X" and are trying to prove some sense of cultural self-worth the only way they know how: through technology. Computer security author Winn Schwartau likes to joke in the presence of hackers that "If my generation (boomers) had your capabilities (the hackers), the 80s would have never happened." Though the social messages emerging from the hacker community are mixed, their true message emanates from their approach towards their medium of choice. No matter how embedded technology becomes in our society, it is never fool proof. The human mind with the right intellect and ambition can always overcome technology.

You can always exploit its flaw of human design.