Phreaks

The Cyberpunk Project

A Phreak is the one who does phreaking. Phreaking is the art and science of cracking the phone network (so as, for example, to make free long-distance calls). It means also security-cracking in any other context (especially, but not exclusively, on communications networks).

At one time phreaking was a semi-respectable activity among hackers; there was a gentleman's agreement that phreaking as an intellectual game and a form of exploration was OK, but serious theft of services was taboo. There was significant crossover between the hacker community and the hard-core phone phreaks who ran semi-underground networks of their own through such media as the legendary "TAP Newsletter". This ethos began to break down in the mid-1980s as wider dissemination of the techniques put them in the hands of less responsible phreaks. Around the same time, changes in the phone network made old-style technical ingenuity less effective as a way of hacking it, so phreaking came to depend more on overtly criminal acts such as stealing phone-card numbers. The crimes and punishments of gangs like the "414 group" turned that game very ugly. A few old-time hackers still phreak casually just to keep their hand in, but most these days have hardly even heard of "blue boxes" or any of the other paraphernalia of the great phreaks of yore.

This is from "A Postmodern Interpretation of the Computer Underground" by Gordon Meyer and Jim Thomas.

Phreaking broadly refers to the practice of using either technology or telephone credit card numbers (called "codez") to avoid long distance charges. Phreaking attained public visibility with the revelation of the exploits of John "Cap'n Crunch" Draper, the "father of phreaking" (Rosenbaum, 1971). Although phreaking and hacking each require different skills, phreaks and hackers tend to associate on same boards. Unlike hackers, who attempt to master a computer system and its command and security structure, phreaks struggle to master telecom (tele-communications) technology :

> The phone system is the most interesting, fascinating thing that I know of. There is so much to know. Even phreaks have their own areas of knowledge. There is so much to know that one phreak could know something fairly important and the next phreak not. The next phreak might know 10 things that the first phreak doesn't though. It all depends upon where and how they get their info. I myself would like to work for the telco, doing something interesting, like programming a switch. Something that isn't slave labor bullshit. Something that you enjoy, but have to take risks in order to participate unless you are lucky enough to work for Bell / AT&T / any telco. To have legal access to telco things, manuals, etc. would be great.
> -- Message log, 1988

Early phreaking methods involved electro-mechanical devices that generated key tones or altered phone line voltages to trick the mechanical switches of the phone company into connecting calls without charging, but the advent of computerized telephone switching systems largely made these devices obsolete. In order to continue their practice, phreaks have had to learn hacking skills in order to obtain access to telephone company

computers and software.

Access to telecom information takes several forms, and the possesion of numbers for "loops" and "bridges", while lying in a grey area of law, further enhances the reputation and status of a phreak. P/hackers can utilize "loop lines" to limit the number of eavesdroppers on their conversations. Unlike bridges, which connect an unlimited number of callers simultaneously, loops are limited to just two people at a time. A "bridge" is a technical name for what is commonly known as a "chat line" or "conference system". Bridges are familiar to the public as the pay-per-minute group conversation systems advertised on late night television. Many bridge systems are owned by large corporations that maintain them for business use during the day. While the numbers to these systems are not public knowledge, many of them have been discovered by phreaks who then utilize the systems at night. Phreaks are skilled at arranging for a temporary, private bridge to be created via ATT's conference calling facilities. This provides a helpful information sharing technique among a self-selected group of phreak/hackers :

> Bridges can be extremely useful means of distributing information as long as the [phone] number is not known, and you don't have a bunch of children online testing out their DTMF. The last great discussion I participated with over a bridge occurred about 2 months ago on an AT&T Quorum where all we did was engineer 3/way [calls] and restrict ourselves to purely technical information. We could have convinced the Quorum operators that we were AT&T technicians had the need occurred. Don't let the kids ruin all the fun and convenience of bridges. Lameness is one thing, practicality is another.
> -- DC, message log, 1988

Phreaks recognize their precarious legal position, but see no other way to "play the game" :

> Phreaking involves having the dedication to commit yourself to learning as much about the phone system/network as possible. Since most of this information is not made public, phreaks have to resort to legally questionable means to obtain the knowledge they want.
> -- TP2, message log, 1988

Little sympathy exists among experienced phreaks for "teleco ripoff". "Carding", or the use of fraudulent credit cards, is anathema to phreaks, and not only violates the phreaking ethic, but is simply not the goal of phreaking :

> Credit card fraud truly gives hacking a bad name. Snooping around a VAX is just electronic voyeurism... carding a new modem is just flat out blue-collar crime. It's just as bad as breaking into a house or kicking a puppy ! [This phreak] does everything he can (even up to turning off a number) to get credit information taken off a BBS. [This phreak] also tries to remove codes from BBSes. He doesn't see code abuse in the same light as credit card fraud, (although the law does), but posted codes are the quickest way to get your board busted, and your computer confiscated. People should just find a local outdial to wherever they want to call and use that. If you only make local calls from an outdial, it will never die, you will keep out of trouble, and everyone will be happy.
> -- *Phrack*, 3(28): Phile 2

Experienced phreaks become easily angered at novices and "lamerz" who engage in fraud or are interested only

in "leeching" (obtaining something for nothing) :

Sub ->Carding From ->JB (#208) To ->ALL Date ->02/10/xx 02:22:00 PM What do you people think about using a parents card number for carding ? For instance, if I had a friend order and receive via next day air on my parents card, and receive it at my parents house while we were on vacation. Do you think that would work ? Cuz then, all that we have to do is to leave the note, and have the bud pick up the packages, and when the bill came for over $1500, then we just say... "Fuck you ! We were on vacation ! Look at our airline tickets !" I hope it does... Its such a great plan !

Sub ->Reply to: Carding From ->(xxx) To ->X Date ->02/11/xx 03:16:00 AM NO IT'S NOT A GREAT IDEA ! WHERE'S YOUR SENSE OF RESPONSIBILITY TO YOUR FAMILY ? ARE THEY ALL IN AGREEMENT WITH YOU ? WOULD YOU WANT ANYONE TO USE YOUR PRIVATE STUFF IN ILLEGAL (AND IMMORAL) ACTIVITIES WITHOUT YOUR KNOWLEDGE ? DIDJA EVER HEAR ABOUT TRUST BETWEEN FAMILY MEMBERS ? IF YOU'RE GOING TO BE A THIEF (AND THAT'S NOT NEAT LIKE JAMES BOND IN THE MOVIES), TAKE THE RISKS ONLY UPON YOURSELF !

Sub ->Carding From ->(#208) To ->(#47) Date ->02/12/xx 11:18:00 AM Why not ? We have a law that says that we have the right to refuse payment to credit cards if there are fraudulent charges. All we do and it is settled... what is so bad about it ? I'm going for it !

Sub ->Reply to: Carding From ->(xxx) To ->J.B. Date ->02/13/xx 02:08:00 AM APPARENTLY YOU MISSED THE MAIN POINTS I TRIED TO MAKE TO YOU... YOU'RE A THIEF AND A LIAR, AND ARE BETRAYING THE TRUST OF YOUR FAMILY AS WELL AS INVOLVING THEM IN YOUR RISK WITHOUT THEIR KNOWLEDGE. THAT MEANS YOU ARE A FAIRLY SCUMMY INDIVIDUAL IF YOU GO THROUGH WITH IT ! NOW AS TO YOUR "DEFENCE" ABOUT $50 MAXIMUMS AND ERRONEOUS BILLINGS.. LAW MAKES A CLEAR DISTINCTION ABOUT THEFT BY FRAUD (OF WHICH YOU WOULD BE GUILTY). AND IN A LARGER SENSE, YOUR THEFT JUST MAKES IT MORE COSTLY FOR YOU YOU AND EVERYBODY ELSE TO GET CREDIT, AND DO BUSINESS WITH CREDIT CARDS. YOU'RE GOING TO DO WHATEVER YOU DO ANYWAY... DON'T LOOK FOR ANY APPROVAL IN THIS DIRECTION.

Ironically, experienced phreaks are not only offended by such disregard of law, but also feel that "rip-off artists" have no information to share and only increase the risk for the "techno-junkies". Message boards reflect hostility toward apprehended "lamerz" with such comments as "I hope they burn him", or "the lamer probably narked [turned informant] to the pheds [law enforcement agents]". Experienced phreaks also post continual reminders that some actions, because of their illegality, are simply unacceptable :

It should be pointed out however, that should any of you crack any WATS EXTENDER access codes and attempt to use them, you are guilty of Theft of communications services from the company who owns it, and Bell is very willing and able to help nail you ! WATS EXTENDERS can get you in every bit as much trouble as a Blue Box should you be caught.

Ex-phreaks, especially those who are no longer defined by law as juveniles, often attempt to caution younger phreaks from pursuing phreaking :

ZA1 : One thing to consider, also, is that the phone compagny knows where the junction box is for

all of the lines that you are messing with and if they get enough complaints about the bills, they may start to check things out (I hope your work is neat). I would guess that the odds are probably against this from happening though, because when each of the people call to complain, they'll probably get a different person from the others. This means that someone at Ma Bell has to notice that all of the complaints are coming from the same area... I don't think anybody there really cares that much about their job to really start noticing things like that... anyway, enjoy !!! My guess is that you're under-age. Anyway, so if they catch you, they won't do anything to you anyway.

ZB1 : Yeah I am a minor (17 years old) I just hope that they don't cause I would like to not have a criminal or juvenile record when I apply to college. Also if they do come as I said in the other message if there are no wires they can't prove shit. Also as I said I only hook up after 6 p.m. The phone company doesn't service people after 6 p.m. Just recently (today) I hooked up to an empty line. No wires were leading from the two plugs to somebody house but I got a dial tone. How great. Don't have to worry about billing somebody else. But I still have to disconnect cause the phone bills should be coming to the other people pretty soon. HEHEHEHE.

ZX1 : Be cool on that, especially if you're calling other boards. Easiest way for telecom security to catch you is match the number called to the time called, call the board, look at users log or messages for hints of identity, then work from there. If you do it too much to a pirate board, they can (and have successfully) pressured the sysop to reveal the identity under threat of prosecution. They may or may not be able to always trace it back, but remember : yesterday's phreaks are today's telecom security folk. AND : IT'S NOT COOL TO PHREAK TO A PIRATE BOARD... draws attention to that board and screws it up for everybody. So, be cool phreaking... there's safer ways.

ZC2 : Be cool, Wormburger. They can use all sorts of stuff for evidence. Here's what they'd do in Ill. If they suspected you, they'd flag the phone lines, send somebody out during the time you're on (or they suspect you're on) and nail you. Don't want to squelch a budding phreak, but you're really taking an unnecessary chance. Most of us have been doing stuff for some time, and just don't want to see you get nailed for something. There's some good boards with tips on how to phreak, and if you want the numbers, let me know. We've survived to warn you because we know the dangers. If you don't know what ESS is, best do some quick research.

-- P/h message log, 1988

In sum, the attraction of phreaking and its attendant lifestyle appear to center on three fundamental characteristics : the quest for knowledge, the belief in a higher ideological purpose of opposition to potentially dangerous technological control, and the enjoyment of risk-taking. In a sense, computer underground participants consciously create dissonance as a means of creating social meaning in what is perceived as an increasingly meaningless world (Milovanovic and Thomas, 1989). Together, phreaks and hackers have created an overlapping culture that, whatever the legality, is seen by participants as a legitimate enterprise in the new "techno-society".