

Night of the hackers

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of Newsweek

As you are surveying the dark and misty swamp you come across what appears to be a small cave. You light a torch and enter. You have walked several feet when you stumble into a bright blue portal...With a sudden burst of light and a loud explosion you are swept into...**DRAGONFIRE...** PRESS ANY KEY IF YOU DARE.

You have programmed your personal computer to dial into Dragonfire, a computer bulletin board in Gainesville, Texas. But before you get any information, Dragonfire demands you name, home city and phone number. So, for tonight's tour of the electronic wilderness you become Montana Wildhack* of San Francisco.

Dragonfire, Sherwood Forest (sic), Forbidden Zone, Blottoland, Plovernet, The Vault, Shadowland, PHBI and scores of other computer bulletin boards are hangouts of a new generation of vandals. These precocious teen-agers use their electronic skills to play hid-and-seek with computer and telephone security forces. Many computer bulletin boards are perfectly legitimate: the resemble electronic versions of the familiar cork boards in supermarkets and school corridors, listing services and providing information someone out there is bound to find useful. But this is a walk on the wild side, a trip into the world of underground bulletin boards dedicated to encouraging—and making—mischief.

The phone numbers for these boards are as closely guarded as a psychiatrist's home telephone number. Some numbers are posted on underground boards; others exchanged over the telephone. A friendly hacker provided Dragonfire's number. Hook up and you see a broad choice of topics offered. For Phone Phreaks—who delight in stealing service from AT&T and other phone networks—Phreakenstein's Lair is a potpourri of phone numbers, access codes and technical information. For computer hacker—who dial into other people's computers—Ranger's Lodge is chock-full of phone numbers and passwords for government, university and corporate computers.

Moving through Dragonfire's offerings, you can only marvel at how conversant these teenagers are with the technical esoterica of today's electronic age. Obviously they have spent a great deal of time studying computers, though their grammar and spelling in-



'Bobby... have you been playing with those access codes again?'

dicating they haven't been as diligent in other subjects. You are constantly reminded of how young they are.

Well it's that time of year again. School is back in session so let's get those high school computer phone numbers rolling in. Time to get straight A's, have perfect attendance (except when you've been up all night hacking school passwords), and messing up your worst teacher's paycheck.

Forbidden Zone, in Detroit, is offering ammunition for hacker civil war — tips on crashing the most popular bulletin-board software. There are also plans for building black, red and blue boxes to mimic operator tones and get free phone service. And here are the details for "the safest and best way to make use of nitroglycerin," compliments of Doctor Hex, who says he got it "from my chemistry teacher."

Flip through the "pages." You have to wonder if this information is accurate. Can this really be the password for Taco Bell's computer? Do these kids really have the dial-up numbers for dozens of university computers? The temptation is too much. You sign off and have your computer dial the number for the Yale computer. Bingo—the words for Yale University appear on your screen. You enter the password. A menu appears. You hand up in a sweat. You are now a hacker.

Punch in another number and your modem zips off the touch tones. Here comes the tedious side of all this. Bulletin boards are popular. No vacancy at Bates Motel (named for Anthony Perkins's creepy motel in the movie "Psycho"); the line is busy. So are 221 B. Baker Street, PHBI, Shadowland and the Vault. Caesar's Palace rings and connects. This is a different breed of board. Caesar's Palace is a combination of Phreak board and computer store in Miami. This is the place to learn ways

to mess up a department store's antishoptlifting system, or make free calls on telephones with locks on the dial. Pure capitalism accompanies such

anarchy. Caesar's Palace is offering good deals on disc drives, software, computers and all sorts of hardware. Orders are placed through electronic mail messages.

'Tele-Trial': Bored by Caesar's Palace, you enter the number for Blottoland, the board operated by one of the nation's most notorious com-

puter phreaks — King Blotto. This one hasn't been busy allnight, but it's now pretty late in Cleveland. The phone rings and you connect. To get past the blank screen, type the

secondary password "S-L-I-M-E". King Blotto obliges, listing his rules: he must have your real name, phone number, address, occupation and in-

terests. He will call and disclose the primary password "if you belong on this board." If admitted, do not reveal the

phone number of secondary password, lest you face "teletrial," the King warns as he dismisses you by hanging up.

You expected heavy security, but this teen-ager's security is, as they say, awesome. Com-

puters at the Defense Department and hundreds of businesses let you know when

you've reached them. Here you need a password just to find out what system answered the

phone. Then King Blotto asks questions—and hangs up. Professional computer-security ex-

perts could learn could learn something from this kid. He knows that ever since the 414 computer hackers were arrested in August 1982, law-

enforcement officers have been

searching for leads on computer bulletin boards.

Do you have any ties to or connections with any law enforcement agency or any agency which would inform such a law enforcement agency of this bulletin board?

Such is the welcoming message from Plovernet, a Florida board known for its great hacker/phreak files. There amid a string of valid VISA and MasterCard numbers are dozens of computer phone numbers and passwords. Here you also learn what Blotto means by teletrial. "As some of you may or may not know, a session of the conference court was held and the Wizard was found guilty of some miscellaneous charges, and sentenced to four months without bulletin boards." If Wizard calls, system operators like King Blotto disconnect him.

Paging through the bulletin boards is a test of your patience. Each board has different commands. Few are easy to follow, leaving you to hunt and peck your way around. So far you haven't had the nerve to type "C", which summons the system operator for a live, computer-to-computer conversation.

The time, however, has come for you to ask a question to the "sysop." You dial a computer in Boston. It answers and you

begin working your way through the menus. You scan a handful of dial-up numbers, including one for Arpanet, the Defense Department's research computer. Bravely tap C and in seconds the screen blanks and your cursor dances across the screen.

Hello...What kind of computer do you have?

Contact. They sysop is here. You exchange amenities and get "talking." How much hacking does he do? Not much, too busy. Is he afraid of being busted, having his computer confiscated like the Los Angeles man facing criminal charges because his computer bulletin board contained a stolen telephone-credit-card numbers. "Hmmm...No," he replies. Finally, he asks the dreaded question: "How old are YOU," you reply, stalling. "15" he types. Once you confess and he knows you're old enough to be his father, the conversation gets very serious. You fear each new question; he probably thinks you're a cop. But all he wants to know is your choice for president. The chat continues, until he asks, "What time is it there?" Just past midnight, you reply. Expletive. "It's 3:08 here," Sysop types. "I must go to sleep. I've got school tomorrow." The cursor dances***** Thank You for Calling." The screen goes blank.

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