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On Juvenile Techno Delinquency:  
Four Portraits of Adolescent Computer Geeks

Nineteen hundred and ninety three. AD. The nexus of the future. In 1993 the world was becoming wired. The year 2000, only the geeks knew the acronym "Y2K," was still seven years away. Everything was "techno." Seven years seemed like an eternity, and while we weren't banking on hovercars, Gibson and Stephenson and Sterling and Bear had convinced us that something grand was on the horizon, and we didn't care if it happened in Y2K or 2K1 or 2K2. We just knew something was going to happen, and we didn't want to be left out.

I was eighteen in 1993, when I purchased a 486DX40. AMD. It wasn't my first computer. My parents had enlisted me in gifted and talented programs at an early age, so I was familiar with the Apple II and TRS-80. They bought a Commodore Vic20 in 1983. And a VCR. Both changed my life. And both changed my language. Once I began to break into the semiology of "RAM" and "modes" it was a small leap to "phreaks" and "cracks." I didn't always understand the language being used to explain different principles and procedures to me. But that didn't matter. I fell in love with the code.

In 1987 my father bought a Commodore 128 - all the programs of the Commodore 64, and twice the memory. I was addicted. I played Little Computer People and Bard's Tale and Gorf and Skate or Die. A couple of years later I lived in Arkansas, where I sought refuge in typing long sequences of code into the Basic compiler to make computerized wolf-whistles and UFO sound effects. I made friends with Dan.

Dan Hazlett was, possibly still is, a computer geek dirthead. His parents had just moved to Russellville, Arkansas from Phoenix, and he had just turned fifteen, so he was a lot like me: When hormonal and social desires were overtaking most kids our age, we were stuck in Arkansas with no friends but our Commodores. Dan had a mom who never got off the couch to clean up the dog shit from her two pug dogs, a brother my age who drew large-breasted superheroines all day, and a younger sister whose job it was to do all the cooking, cleaning, washing, errands, and whatever other miscellany that might come up. Dan wasn't particularly intelligent or cool, and not a lot of fun to hang out with. But he had two things I wanted very much: an incredibly thorough collection of contemporary hard rock and heavy metal, and a huge stack of pirated games for the Commodore.

Dan claimed to have been friends with the legendary pirate, the Shark, while living in Phoenix. Although I never saw him do it, he claimed to download games from a private pirate BBS in Phoenix all night long. He gave me Rolling Thunder, and some Billy Idol game-type thing, and Samantha Fox Strip Poker, and a bunch of graphic and music demos from some Scandinavian whiz kids. I discovered there was a huge international community of Commodore users that I was excluded from because of my lack of a modem. My father, whose mama didn't raise no dummy, figured I wouldn't be able to resist running up huge phone bills. He was right.

I left Arkansas soon enough, which was great except for the fact that my flow of pirate goodies was abruptly cut off. Dan wasn't going to mail me anything, and I didn't have a modem. I would have to settle for the knowledge that I was a friend of a friend of the Shark for the next few years, and placate my computer lust tinkering on my high school's VAX system. Until I got my 486. I was out of high school, and finally I had a computer with a modem.

I only applied to one college - Idaho State University. I didn't really want to leave home, had no idea what I wanted to do, but if I applied to ISU, I would be able to get a computer account, and with my new computer I would be able to dial into the Internet. I applied, was accepted, got my bus pass to make the hour long commute from my parents' house in Idaho Falls to campus in Pocatello, and signed up for a computer account. I went out and bought a computer. Unable to contain myself, and in serious need of network interaction, I explored the local Idaho Falls bulletin boards. They were useful for their downloads, which varied from utilities and games to music, graphics demos, and pornography. But I became increasingly interested in the graphics and sound programs as well. I had been a DJ for several years at that point in time, spinning at raves and parties in southern Idaho and Utah. I was enthralled by electronic music, although fully aware that its heyday had passed after the summer of 1992.

The computer offered a new way to compose, but everything was even more complex than I imagined. Learning an entirely new platform, and about a whole world I was late coming to, at least by geek standards, required some assistance. My first entrée into the world of 1990s geekdom was Tim Johnson. Tim and I met through a mutual friend, and he's proved to be one of the best computer mentors I've had. Tim is one of those extremely rare computer geeks gifted with both a true talent for techno-jiggery and good social skills. I like to think I fit into that group with him. He dressed like a normal eighteen year old in 1993 - jeans, plaid shirt, sneakers. He was working on growing his hair out from the waver cut and spiked part he had for so many years. And perhaps because we had that in common, we've been able to, over the course of our friendship, remain a similar distance away from the inner sanctum of techno delinquency. Although it would be unfair to say we're friends only because of this, one factor of our relationship has been that we've never crept each other out. We've come to, looked over, reached across, but never actually broken our line of good taste and honest curiosity.

I identify with Tim. We are the same character when it comes to this computer stuff. Granted, we have different talents and abilities, but our approach is inherently similar: The computer is a tool for making life better. Our love of computers doesn't supercede a love of social interaction and real-world goods.

While it may not sound particularly singular, most hardcore computer fans do not view their computers this way. For many geeks, the computer is the tool that facilitates their lives - through which and for which they live.

Tim introduced me to Clive. Clive isn't his real name. I feel like it might be uncouth to use his real name, and it would be deceptive for me not to warn you about the change. But if you knew his real name, you'd agree that Clive is a clever substitute, and applaud the decision.

Clive attended ISU, too. During breaks he would move back home. At home, his room was the far corner of a semi-finished basement, delineated by a row of bookcases piled with books, clothes, and miscellaneous computer and

electronic parts. His quadrant of the basement was only a couple of feet wider than his twin bed. At the end of his bed sat a TV cart with two monitors, a TV, an Amiga 500, a PC, and a VCR. The rest of the basement was given over to his stepmother, who transcribed medical documents at a desk during the day and sometimes in the evenings. I had known Clive in high school. He always wore the same clothes, navy blue pants, white socks, black velcro sneakers, and a white button-down shirt. He had tousled hair, thick glasses, and his fingernails usually needed clipping. He was often in the computer labs, and sat behind me in French class. While I sympathized with his nerdiness, I didn't often talk to him. And he never really talked to anyone. So I didn't know much about him. However, he lived on the same hall in the ISU dorms as Tom Hoff, who told Tim and I one day at lunch about some good porn and cool fractals that Clive had been showing off the previous night. Tim had Clive in a class, and set up a showing. We copied dozens of disks from Clive during lunch breaks and while waiting for the bus home that semester. I saw his dorm room often, which was always cluttered with clothes and stacks of printouts.

Clive gave me a printout of the hacker zine Phrack one day. I read it on the bus ride home. It was incredible. I had heard of pirate groups, had even written my senior thesis in high school about the positive effects hackers have had on developments in computer science, but had never encountered the real deal. Phrack #43 contained articles like "Step by Step Guide to Stealing a Camaro" and "Physical Access and Theft of PBX Systems." I didn't understand two thirds of it, but I loved it. This was what computers were for - stickin' it to the man. And someone once noted that boys love codes, especially the cracking. I consumed stacks of Clive's printouts of Phrack. I read story after story of arrests, busts, evasions, and escapades. When your accomplishments happen in the solitary glow of your computer, usually in your bedroom, a little bragging is necessary. And, of course, you had to come back with evidence. I perused lists of computer dialups, telephony acronyms, and network addresses. I poured over articles about hacking ATMs, pay phones, and network passwords. Clive had software to go with the articles, too. He gave me Crackerjack and huge dictionary files. I tried them out on Princeton. I obtained over a hundred passwords in a half hour, over a 14.4 modem. I never figured out what to do with them, since the accounts were pretty much identical to my ISU computer account, except they didn't belong to me. I didn't have an overwhelming desire to send email bomb threats or harass my fellow students. I built a Red Box, which allowed you to fool payphones into thinking you had inserted a quarter, out of an old Gum Tape container and a Hallmark Record-A-Greeting card - the epitome of DIY phreak technology. All of this was detailed in Phrack. It became a bible to me and many like me, who wanted to know how things worked.

But Clive was a fairly innocent hacker. I visited his house for the first time over Thanksgiving Break, and I was shocked to see it. Not only was his "bedroom" something I'd never seen before, but his family was downright cold to him. We stood at the door for almost fifteen minutes before somebody yelled down to him that we were there. Tim and I stood outside, knocking on the door, stack of disks in hand. The door finally opened. His stepmom looked like, well, a stepmom. She was fat, had bad hair and big glasses, and gave us a dirty look.

"Are you here for Clive?"

"Yes, ma'am." The manners held over a little from Arkansas.

"Come in."

And that was it. We stood there, next to an empty gumball machine, in

what looked like the living room, and she crossed the room to the couch, sat down, and picked up a novel. We looked at the walls. There was only one photo of Clive - he and his father. She sat and read for a few minutes, then looked up and said to us, "Oh. I guess he's not coming up to get you." She rose, disappeared around a corner into the kitchen, opened the door to the basement stairs, and shouted, "Clive! Don't make me yell at you to get your damn friends!"

She returned to her couch and her novel. We stood, startled. Clive fetched us and took us downstairs where we gawked at the new graphics demos he had downloaded. Those Europeans always made the best demos. Clive would also flip through the latest porn he'd found, sometimes showing us incredibly horrifying images, and would pop in any new games he found. He also collected bizarre books, magazines, and videos. He showed us 2600 and the Skeptical Inquirer. He let me borrow The Book of the Subgenius, which I later bought, and The Authorized Biography of Anton LaVey, which unintentionally ended up being one of those "permanent loan" things. Tim and I gave Clive a copy of Miscellaneous T for Christmas, although none of us believed in the holiday. We became friends. Our soundtrack was Information Society and They Might Be Giants. We were kings of the new realm.

Clive liked to ride his bike. He had to be out of the basement during the day so he wouldn't bother his stepmother as she transcribed, and couldn't find peace in his house. His father had left his mother after she was diagnosed with schizophrenia and became convinced that he was Satan. Clive and his father moved around, eventually landing in Idaho with a stepmom and three half-siblings. When we were seniors in high school, his mother was either thrown or jumped out of a window in a very tall building in New Jersey. Clive said nobody bothered to figure out which, and I don't know if he had gone to her funeral. Or if there even was one. Clive was the red-headed step child, without the red hair, and suffered the brunt of his stepmother. His father kept his pockets full of spending change, but Clive wasn't built for entrepreneurship. He needed a family and friends.

I don't mean to portray Clive as a victim. He pursued all kinds of projects, from programming to astronomy, and read voraciously. He had a certain quality of intellect that's often associated with introverts, which I think is a fair label for him. He spent hours dialing phone numbers, by hand, to find all of the computer dialups in Idaho. He had a certain fame for his always nearly-complete list of numbers, which was carried proudly on all the finest Idaho bulletin boards in exchange for free and unlimited membership.

Once Clive showed up at the gas station I was working at as we opened. He came in, bought a sandwich, a juice, and an extra sandwich for later.

"What're you doin' Clive?"

"I got stopped by the police last night."

"The police? Why?"

"I was riding my bike."

He stopped there. Clive occasionally just paused for no reason.

"I was riding my bike, looking for payphones."

Part of his goal was to document all the payphones - their corporate affiliation, phone number, location, ID number. He did it both in Idaho Falls and when he was at school in Pocatello.

"And..."

"And the cops stopped me. Right over there." He pointed across the parking lot. "I had just come out of here."

"What'd they want."

"They wanted to know what I was doing."

"What did you tell them?"

"Looking for payphones."

"What'd they say?"

"They got upset, like I was kidding with them. Then they made me show them my notebook. Then they searched my coat, and me, and my backpack."

"Did they find anything?"

"My sandwich and my juice. They thought I stole them."

While Clive was a bit odd by most standards, and atypical by mine, there was a certain genius aspect to his personality - his quirks and oddness seemed directly related to his incredible intelligence. He made me like him. I trusted him.

He introduced me, however, to someone I didn't like; somebody that you would only hang out with if your stepmother was an evil witch and you had almost completely retreated into the world of your Commodore Amiga 500 and payphone numbers.

Again, I can't use his real name, and even his screen name is probably not safe, so let's call him PhrackMaster93. He was that kind of computer geek - flashy, full of braggadocio, and really into destruction. Beyond that he had very questionable taste. Clive took Tim and I to PhrackMaster93's house for the first time. He lived with his parents, of course, and in the basement. The basement was entirely covered with toys, electronics, computer equipment, and stacks and stacks of floppy disks. PhrackMaster93 also sported an Amiga/PC combination.

The Amiga had the better graphics and sound processing, but the PC could interface with more networks. It was a constant trade-off. PhrackMaster93 was one of those folks who look like a rat, literally. He had a head shaped like a football, pointy nose, and his eyes squinted as if he should be wearing glasses. He had the geek-chic knack for highly dramatized speech patterns that result in a jumble of excited bursts and vocal sighs. He was difficult to be around.

First, Tim didn't like him because he knew what kind of trouble PhrackMaster93 had gotten into. Tim sought a career in computers, and worked at the time for some of the people the PhrackMaster hacked. Second, PhrackMaster93 had a habit of leering at my girlfriend in Spanish class and making odd comments about her breasts. Third, I had heard rumors that he had

gone all crazy on another girl at school. Apparently, she'd seen Silence of the Lambs and wanted to be Jodie Foster. There were certain creepy qualities the PhrackMaster shared with Dr. Lechter, so it's easy to see why she latched onto him. She thought she was studying him, but she was really just exciting him. Eventually, he couldn't control his passion and made a move. I don't know details, but the word is it wasn't good.

So I was trepidatious about PhrackMaster93. When he started showing us images of incredibly young-looking girls, and talking about his fascination with the little girl he babysat, we left. But for some reason I was drawn to him. I suppose we all want to be Jodie Foster a little bit.

I met PhrackMaster93 for an evening of stories and beige-boxing. I encountered him a few times afterward, but that evening was enough. Beige-boxing is the practice of using a standard ratchet to open the phone company's supply boxes and manholes. You can often find wire and test phones inside, and those are useful for many different hacking and cracking activities. We only found coils of dirty wire.

PhrackMaster93 told me how he'd been arrested by the Secret Service. He was fifteen when it happened. It made him excited to tell the story. He'd been using a computer in Ohio to do most of his work. First, he dialed through a payphone from Clive's list. With COCOT payphones, the independent phone company must lease the lines. That means they must use a central computer for their billing, and they contact that computer before you make a call, to determine the cost. So you can imitate those phones by calling the computer directly and entering the right codes.

PhrackMaster93 dialed the central routing computer, and gave it the ID code for a payphone in Pocatello. But when he dialed, he also changed the automatic number identification to the number of a cheap motel in the middle of Wyoming. So by all accounts it looked as if he was calling from the motel, and then it looked like he was calling from a payphone, both in different cities. Ingenious, no? Then he would dial the number for the Ohio State University computer system, where he'd made a little data haven for himself. From there he would hack into all kinds of computers, ranging from NASA to UK government systems. His professed goal was to get control of a Russian computer, just for the hell of it. He didn't do much damage, other than draining system resources for the time he was online, but eventually the authorities caught on. PhrackMaster93's accounts at OSU began getting shut down faster and faster. He always claimed that the reason they caught onto him in the first place was that he'd fixed all the bugs in their security. Eventually he made a crucial mistake: He emailed the instructions to make the phone call he had used to cover his tracks to a fellow hacker. The admins keeping an eye on his accounts saw the message, followed the directions in reverse, and eventually landed him.

They busted into his house late one night, frightening his mother. They took his monitors, but left the computers. They took the answering machine and all of his dad's reel-to-reel tapes.

Electronic crimes fall into the jurisdiction of the Secret Service, through some fluke of Constitutional amending. One of the things that made 1993 so glorious was that the authorities hadn't quite caught up with the phreaks. PhrackMaster93's story wasn't so different from many hackers of the time. However, since they didn't find out about his activities on other systems aside from OSU (if such activities ever even existed), the Secret Service turned his

case over to the local branch of the FBI. Being a minor, he was let off with some community service and a lifetime ban from any computer in the school district.

A few months after PhrackMaster93 and I bonded over Mountain Dew's and "war" stories, I moved out of my parents' house for good. I went to college in a town twelve hours away and never saw the PhrackMaster after that. I've met plenty of other ex-hackers, ex-crackers, and ex-phreaks of all ages. Some of them have been incredibly brilliant when it comes to technology. Others have been obvious poseurs. Mostly, though, the emphasis of these folks lies in gadgeting up work and living spaces, while actually using computers to make a living. Home theaters, in-car navigation systems, and surveillance cameras are popular hobbies.

Tim is now a successful programmer, working for a reputable software development firm. PhrackMaster93 apparently has gone off to work computer security somewhere, as all the best hackers and phreaks eventually do. As far as I know, his past technological indiscretions never really caught up with him. Clive bounced around for years after I knew him best. He worked in Silicone Valley for awhile, but tired of the grunt work and high cost of living. He returned to school to receive a degree in Astrophysics, but decided that field didn't interest him enough, either. While in school the second time, he decided to become a woman. She is now working at a large software development firm, in a position that allows her to flex her intellectual and technological muscles. I don't speak with her often, but as far as I can tell, she, like me, is still essentially the same boy who fell in love with the ether.

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