

# The miserable life of a phone hacker

BY STEVEN LEVY

THE LIFE OF A PHONE HACKER IS NOT A pretty one. Take Cheshire Catalyst. The name's fictitious, of course — when you are a phone hacker, you do not want your real name known to the general public, nor do you want to capriciously add fodder to your FBI file.

Cheshire has been tinkering with telephones since he was twelve. One of his first experiences — fiddling with a phone's innards and discovering that he could talk to all sorts of weird people at the telephone company — led him to believe that incredible things were out there, almost as rewards for tampering with something that someone had told you not to fool with. And ever since then, Cheshire has argued that forbidden knowledge should be spread, with as much joy as possible. This is why Cheshire Cat is more public than most phone hackers. It is also why he sometimes gets himself into trouble.

Cheshire Cat may well be the nation's most quoted advocate of the practice of using computers to poke around in the nether zones of institutional, government and industry computers. He speaks as the editor of a modest newsletter called *TAP* (*Technological Assistance Program*), which prints the forbidden knowledge that the Cat loves so dearly. For example, recent issues of *TAP* included information on how to obtain valid SPRINT numbers that would enable you to make free calls. There was a brief article called "Department Store Fun," which offered an amusing plan to throw stores into chaos by making your own version of those stupid little plastic things that the stores attach to clothes to prevent theft. And there was plenty about "phone phreaking" — using

technology to run wild with the phone system and get unlimited free long-distance privileges. (If you want more, you can subscribe to *TAP*, 147 West 42nd Street, Room 603, New York, NY 10036: it's one dollar per issue.)

As *TAP* spokesperson, Cheshire Cat talks about all this. "My policy is to speak to anyone," says this thin, bearded fellow of indeterminate age. In the past couple of years, he has been featured in the *Wall Street Journal*, *Technology Illustrated* and Germany's *Stem* magazine. A cover story in *Newsweek* began with a snippet of a song he wrote called "Hacker's Anthem." And visitors to the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City were treated to a video presentation in which Cheshire Cat explained the secrets of his trade.

But all this exposure has probably made him an object of official scrutiny, and as a result, he must soberly refrain from actively using the forbidden knowledge he celebrates. No compromising defense computers and starting World War III for the Cat — in fact, he admits to me that his Osborne Computer is temporarily out of service. Disc-drive problem.

This exile from phone hacking is only one of the Cheshire Catalyst's problems: he's just about broke. The lecture gigs, for which he's paid \$1500, are few and far between. Though it makes much sense to the Cat that an upstanding corporation would want to hear him out to see what they're up against, it seems that few upstanding corporations want to get that close to a...phreak. Editing *TAP*, with its shoestring budget, gives him only "beer money." And as a result of his being the subject of a 1982 *Technology Illustrated* article called "The Intruder," he was fired



*The unlucky Cat: Even his computer is out of order.*

from his job at a New York bank.

Though the story did not use his real name, he says, "anyone who knows me could have told it was me." Among the giveaways were a picture of his cosmically disheveled room, an overly graphic shot of his distinctive profile and a mention of the fact that he calls his necktie his "disguise." It apparently meant something to the president of the bank, who, Cheshire says, ordered the systems department to "lose that man." It had been a good job, too — he had been showing the place the flaws in its computer security system.

Still, the Cheshire Cat keeps talking. He feels he has a message to get across. He wants everybody to know that the term hacker is a beautiful one, not something that implies sneakiness or a

propensity toward mischief. "A hacker primarily hacks away at a computer keyboard until a program does what he wants it to do," Cheshire says. But the media limits the term to people like the teenagers in Milwaukee who broke into the Sloan-Kettering computer system by exploiting its almost nonexistent security precautions — it thinks that all hackers do is run around trying to break into things. Now such states as New York and California are considering "antihacker" bills, and the whole thing horrifies Cheshire Cat.

Cheshire thinks that "crackers" — those hackers who choose to use their skills to break into computer security systems for fun and education — should not be outlawed but applauded. "Kids who are cracking are doing people a service. Firms should hire them as consultants," he says. Only then would big institutions of commerce and government realize that the real threat lies in hardened criminals breaking into computer systems to steal information or change data for profit and pragmatic mayhem — not from playful and precocious teenagers who, from their suburban bedrooms, find ways those systems are vulnerable.

It is the kind of crusade that makes sense, but certainly not the kind of logic to which institutions have traditionally responded. Especially considering the crusader. Therein lies the Cheshire Cat's lament: the more he talks, the less he seems to be heard. ●