

The secret history of hacking

[Technology](#), [Information Technology](#)



The Secret History of Hacking Today nearly everyone familiar with computers is familiar with the notion of hacking. Strictly speaking hacking refers to the process where an individual gains illegal access to a computer network through manipulating computer code. Hacking, however, has increasingly come to refer to broader ranging notions of a computer subculture. Indeed, one considers that social media giant Facebook hosts regular ‘hackathons,’ where computer programmers stay up all night programming code that will potentially be used for the website. With the widespread cultural use of the term hacking, one considers the history of this subculture. This essay examines the ‘secret history of hacking’. While most individuals associate hacking with computers, hacking previously was linked to telecommunications. In the 1970s ‘phone phreaking’ became a phenomenon among some technologically literate people. This was a process where phones could be rigged to make free long-distance telephone calls. This specifically occurred through an individual using a whistle to match a necessary frequency that triggered access to the telephone line. Phone phreaking is today recognized as a precursor to computer hacking, because of the monstrous complexity of the phone system. Although it’s difficult to label a specific starting point for computer hacking, among the most prominent hackers in the early era of personal computers are Steve Wozniak and Kevin Mitnick. Wozniak became inspired by an article written about phone phreaking and worked at making his own phone boxes. Wozniak then sought out John Draper, one of the progenitors of phone phreaking. With the advent of the personal computer, however, the hacking focus shifted from telecommunications to computing. The Homebrew Computer Club was

formed to explore the personal computer and subsequent hacking information. During this period individuals would bring personal computers in and the members of the computing club would explore their technological potential. In this way, hacking these machines directly contributed to the development of the personal computer. It was during this era that Wozniak began experimenting with developing his own computer components. Wozniak went on to develop his ideal computer. Later referred to as the Apple I, Wozniak was not concerned with marketing the product, but rather constructing it so that it met his needs and expectations as a computer hobbyist. Wozniak would partner with Steve Jobs and these hacking inventions would turn into a multi-billion dollar business. While Steve Wozniak's early exploits in hacking would result in a successful business, the same is not true of Kevin Mitnik. Mitnik's hacking would eventually land him in serious trouble with the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). Mitnik's early adventures included sneaking into a telephone company and stealing important manuals to assist in their phone phreaking efforts. Mitnik's involvement in computer hacking occurred at a significant transition period for American culture. During this period the perspective of hacking shifted from one of embracement, as evidenced in the efforts of Steve Wozniak, to one of fear. No doubt this shift was partially contributed to by films such as War Games that positioned hacking as potentially catastrophic for national security. Additionally, there was the need to secure computer networks as businesses recognized the potentials of electronic commerce. Increasingly the FBI became aware of cyber-crime and took efforts to stop it. Despite recognizing the dangers of his efforts, Mitnik continued to engage in hacking

of classified information. Mitnik would spend a year in jail. After his release he again became involved in hacking efforts. He began gathering information on government individuals that were watching him. When the government came to arrest him, Mitnik went on the run. He built fake references and an identity by again computer hacking. Still, the FBI would eventually track Mitnik down, arrest him and accuse him of stealing over \$80 million dollars of software and information. Eventually Mitnik would be sentenced to five years in jail and then given supervised release. Ultimately, his story demonstrates the recognition of the potential dangers of computer hacking. In conclusion, this essay has examined the history of computer hacking. In this context of understanding it's demonstrated that computer hacking has its roots in the phone phreaking that occurred in the 1970s. The complexity and challenges of these efforts naturally lead to the similar complex challenges posed by the personal computer. Both Steve Wozniak and Kevin Mitnik experimented with phone phreaking before hacking. Wozniak's computer hacking efforts would lead to the development of the Apple Computer. Conversely, Mitnik's efforts would lead to his five year imprisonment. These divergent paths demonstrate the divergent paths of the hacking subculture in late 20th century American society.