



Hackers At Large 2001

It's Thursday, 09.00 am and my head hurts. I'm not even sure if what I'm doing is a good idea, I don't even actually know where I am going. I'm going to HAL2001, a hacker/computer security conference in The Netherlands, at the University of Twente. I feel like a bum who's going to a high society gala. It's a well-known event; people come from all over the world to be there. There'll be some 3000 hackers and security experts from over a 100 different countries there, or so the papers tell me. 'Cause all I know about the hacking/security community, I have read either on the net or in papers, newspaper articles, journals, etc. Do I think I'm a hacker? I sure have a lot of the character traits, but besides a friend of mine, who started out with me in this hobby, about 6 years ago, I never met a hacker in real life, at least not as far as I know. We both wanted to go, knew it would at the least be a blast. However, he fell ill the day before and in a moment of insanity I decided to go anyway, and just see where I would wound up. I know a lot of them, I know all there is to know about the hacker subculture, it's history and ethics but will I fit in, when I actually meet these guys?

Its 13.00 pm and I arrive at the HAL2001 main entrance. What I see before me is the wide area that is the grounds of the University of Twente, with lots of green, trees, and water. There are people all over the place, and tents, caravans. Even though the event doesn't start until tomorrow, officially. But I was gonna be early. I decided to go after all and now I wasn't gonna be told that they were out of tickets. The huge open air network here consists of three kilometres of fibreglass cable, two kilometres of electricity cable and 24 kilometres of network cable. Fourteen generators, which together provide 1,5 megawatt of electricity.

As I am gazing my eyes out, the first thing I do is set up my tent. The next thing I do is make sure my internet connection is fully functional, or to be honest, my German neighbours do, they are very kind and I decide at that moment to try and have an honest look at my prejudice against Germans again.

I no longer feel like a bum at a high society gala; more like Alice at the outskirts of Wonderland. I have internet access in my 2-by-2 tent for God sake! And not just some connection, an incredibly fast one. There are no workshops or speeches today, since the conference doesn't officially start until tomorrow. So what am I to do? I take a walk around the grounds and see who and what is already here. People everywhere, setting up tents, bbq-ing, having beers, talking or staring at their computers and stroking the keyboard, whether on the grass or half in their tents.

I take my laptop to the Main Info Tent where over 400 computer people have gathered and plugged into the network. At first they all look like a kinda anti-social group of people; everyone staring at their own computer screens, doing their thing, but when I sit down and plug in it doesn't take long for

someone to offer me to share his joint with him and his friends. I have come to HAL2001 alone; what better way make friends than to get high with people, just 2 hours after you arrived. These people are also Germans. There are a lot of them out here. But Americans as well, and English, French, Swedes, and Dutch of course. As we drink Jolt, get to know each other, use our computers and talk, time passes. At my table there are two 14-year olds. They each posses more skills than I do. It's weird but at this moment the words of The Mentor come to mind, even though they have been cited to many times and in too many wrong ways. But it's true, these kids, 8 years younger then I am, they know so much, that I do not and they learned it all, gained all this knowledge, 'cause they have phun using computers. And nobody around here gives a rat's ass what age they are, what they look like, what language they speak or how much money they make. They care about what they know about computers and security, they care about whether they're fun to hang out with.

A female reporter and a cameraman come up to the guy sitting in front of me. His hair dyed red, his clothes all black and his face all white. He is a friendly guy, he helped me with some stuff. But he doesn't like journalists probably because most of them aren't here to do research and write a good article, but are here to get some quick shots of people who look like a stereotype hacker, so they can write their stereo type 'Evil Hacker' story.

"Sir, can we ask what you are doing here at HAL2001?"

The hacker doesn't look up to the camera and replies in a very serious tone:

"I'm watching porn, that's what I do all day. I just watch porn on the net."

The reporter, obviously not content with his reply and the fact that we, the people surrounding him, are laughing our brains out, tries again and as she directs the cameraman to film the hacker's black screen showing Linux at the shell and a lot of numbers and weird signs, she asks:

"But what is it that you are doing right now" (since she thinks these incomprehensible signs must mean he is hacking The Whitehouse, The Pentagon or NASA, at the least.)

This time he takes the time to turn his head to the camera as he says:

"This is letter and number-porn, I watch this all day. It gives me a hard on. Does it get you excited?"

The female reporter's expression on her face changes to bad weather and she grabs the cameraman by the arm and pulls him away.

Not the story she was hoping for I guess.
But we sure had a good laugh.

At first it's a lot of Jolt, but later on the beer starts flowing, I'm glad these guys know how to party, even though we're all behind computer screens. The music is loud like hell, but it's good music, it kinda gets me in to a weird state of concentration, together with the Jolt, the beer and more cigarettes than I have ever smoked in a single night. The next time I look up from my screen it's 09.00 am. The room has emptied a bit, but not much. Some people have fallen asleep at their keyboards, some sit around tables, drink beer and discuss, whatever it is that they are discussing. Some have gotten out the breakfast. I eat a bit and decide to get some sleep. It's all been a bit overwhelming. The friendliness, the new people, the lack of sleep, the feeling 14 cans of Jolt have given me and the scene as a whole. But I feel at home already.

I sleep a few hours and wake up to the sound of a voice.. am I still sleeping? Dreaming? Am I awake? I hear people laughing, a lot of people laughing. I hear a man talking. it takes me a few seconds to figure out where the hell I am? I'm at HAL2001. Damn I'm glad I decided to come after all. It's the voice of Emanuel Goldstein that I hear through the speakers?

I know this man. I read his work, I read his articles and I've read over a thousand of pages of hacker history in which he plays his part. I know who this guy hung out with, I know where he lived, what he did, what he does still, who his friends are.. in short. I know this man all though I have never met him. The funny thing is; I saw him on TV, just a few days earlier on CNN, talking about Code Red. The man

doesn't only have a great way of speaking, a gift of being able to amuse a crowd and keep it listening, but he also makes sense. The things he's saying, I agree with him, and most of the other people here seem to agree with him as well.

The workshops are great: Smartcard technology, (readers and writers provided), Linux for beginners, Fundamentals of C++ coding, FreeBSD Security, Introduction to IPV6, DNS Security and more. And then of course there are the speeches about Encryption, Freedom of Speech, Privacy & location data in mobile telephony, Transport of intercepted IP Traffic, Open Source Crypto Hardware Using Java Cards, Can Hacker Ethics be taught and what are hacker ethics anyway? Provisioning Portal for multicast satellite communication, SMS Security, Hacking the Brain: From Reverse Engineering to Optimisation, etc. etc. They are all so very interesting. I feel bad that I don't have time enough to visit all the workshops, hear all the speeches.

At night some of the visitors stay in their tents and keep on hacking away, some come to the main tent to hack and socialise, some go to sleep early and a lot of them gather at the local pub on campus. It's a party! These people live the good life, they combine an interesting hobby, for some people their jobs, with meeting people, having fun, drinking beer and even... meeting girls. Yes, they are scarce, but they are around. And some even look pretty :-)

After 4 long days and nights with only 7 hours of sleep in total, HAL2001 comes to an end, or at least for some of us. Many people decide to stay another day or two. They don't care about the network being taken down they are here with their old and their new friends, they've got beer and stuff to talk about that could keep them busy talking for years on end. For me the experience ends here? I sit next to a few Americans in the train, who are talking about Defcon already... I know I won't be able to go, but that doesn't matter. Because I also know that I'll be there some day. When I come back home and people ask me where I have been I try to avoid the question. I'm dying to tell anyone who wants to hear, but they wouldn't understand. I don't wanna call it a hacker conference, 'cause they would degrade my great experience with their idea of what a hacker is. I look back on these days and notice that I have made a lot of friends, I gained a lot of knowledge on many security related subjects, but most of all I just had a huge blast.. and felt right at home. More than I could have ever imagined.

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