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Inside The Billion-Dollar

Steve O'Hear

@sohear / 5 years ago

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For this group of old friends, assembled for an impromptu reunion, the venue would feel familiar: an online chat room running on a secure private server. Each were former members of the elite hacking group "w00w00" and they had reconvened that afternoon to celebrate and share in the success of one of their own. In some ways it was just like old times.

Napster ⓘ co-founder **Shawn Fanning** ⓘ ("napster") is
member of w00w00, along with a number of other early
music file-sharing service. Meanwhile, although not uni
group, Sean Parker ("dob"), Napster's other co-founder
Facebook, is said to have been present at the beginning

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> ## Everyone talks about the PayPal talks about the w00w00 mafia.

Many other former members of this elite hacking crew
Internet security and related industries, founding or wo
companies such as Cloudmark, Duo Security, Hotmail,
CloudVolumes, Symantec, SecurityFocus, Immunet, an

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"Everyone talks about the PayPal mafia, but nobody tal
says a person familiar with the group, comparing the im
made on the tech industry to the much-publicised succ
and founders.

Hello World

Formed sometime around 1996 and still active until the early 2000s, not a huge
amount is known publicly about w00w00 or its precise activities. Its online footprint
consists almost entirely of the security tools and advisories issued by various
participants of the group and media coverage garnered through the discovery of such
software exploits.

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> who are, or were at one time, inter
> computer security.

Jonathan Bowie

At the age of 17, taking inspiration from stories he had started the "#!dweebs" channel on EFNet and invited o join. But eight to nine months into the chat room's exist decided a change of name was required. Jokingly, Matt founder and CTO of CloudVolumes, suggested they cal the name stuck.

Although they mainly congregated online, Bowie says v sometimes meet in-person at local "2600″ events or at "There were also pockets of the group that were workir says.

Contrary to our use of the term "members" to describe into the group, the w00w00 website explicitly states "th participants, since to a certain extent membership remained informal. Framing it that way also likely protected the autonomy of its participants, many of whom already worked for major security companies.

"I believe at one point in the late 90s/early 2000s we had representative membership with ties to every major security consulting firm, hacker think tank, and security team on Wall Street," says Bowie.

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That didn't stop people attempting to join w00w00 with
came across, a hacker from Denmark tried to gain entry
room by exploiting a weakness in the original IRC proto
w00w00 attacked the intruder's box and retrieved his h
called him up and asked him to explain in 20 words or l
w00w00.

His answer: "I want to change the world."

An Exchange Of Ideas

In an interview with BME Online's "HYPE," published so
representative likens the group's activities to a security
365 days of the year and takes place online. "Acceptance into the group is based on
technical knowledge and not reputation," explains the representative.

"We would spend hours exchanging ideas and crazy thoughts about everything,
mostly computer hacking and security stuff but also business, life…" says Zboralski.

The base ideology for the group was encouraging
positive collaborative research in ways that not

most importantly, discover technology. We researched
and exploiting software vulnerabilities, security tools ran
to packet generation to exploit platforms.

"The base ideology for the group was encouraging pos
ways that not only benefited the community, but also c
the success of the individual members," he says.

That dichotomy of collaboration and individualism caus
group, as it found itself caught up in the "antisec" deba
information to disclose after discovering a vulnerability.

But it also created an environment that would set the se
to pursue their own entrepreneurial endeavours, individ

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The Writing Is On The Wall

An early example was the creation of Napster in the late
recruited a number of other w00w00 members to help
service. They included system architect Jordan Ritter ("
role in helping Napster scale and is sometimes credited as a co-founder, and server
admin Evan Brewer ("dmess0r'). Ritter has since co-founded multiple companies
including Cloudmark and Servio.

Members of w00w00 were also some of the first users of Napster after initially
reverse-engineering various aspects of the service in protest of Fanning's refusal to
allow them to inspect the source code. "This is, in our opinion, the greatest tool for
finding MP3s in the world," a cached version of the w00w00 website reads.

McKay (early employee at Google and AdMob), Josha

Yammer), Joshua J. Drake (Accuvant Labs), Andrew Re

Simon Roses Femerling (ex-Microsoft Research), Gordc

Nmap Security Scanner), Adam O'Donnell (co-founder

founder Azimuth Security) and Tim Yardley (researcher

security), to name but a few.

Talking to a number of former w00w00 members, what'

particularly surprised at the success that they and othe

seen, including Jan Koum's multi-billion-dollar home-ru

one member confessed to not knowing that "yan" was

acquisition broke.

"The only surprise is that we didn't all end up in jail," jol

"We felt the world was ours to take," says Zboralski, wh

CEO of Belua. "We were young, smart, ambitious and c

few people thought were possible. A lot of us had a fero

Adds Bowie: "We all thought great things would happer

wall."

Illustration by Bryce Durbin

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