

" U.S. computer investigation targets Austinites "

[The above caption high-lighted the Saturday March 17, 1990 edition of the Austin American-Statesman [Austin, Texas]. The article has been copied in its entirety, and the main point for typing this up was because of the involvement of the LOD/H throughout the article.]

The U.S. Secret Service has seized computer equipment from two Austin homes and a local business in the past month as part of a federal investigation into electronic tampering with the nation's 911 emergency network.

Armed Secret Service agents, accompanied by officers from the Austin Police Department, took the equipment in three March 1 raids that sources say are linked to a nationwide federal inquiry coordinated by the Secret Service and the U.S. attorney's office in Chicago.

While federal officials have declined to comment on the investigation

- which focuses on a bizarre mix of science fiction and allegations of high-tech thievery - the Austin American-Statesman has learned that the raids targeted Steve Jackson Games, a South Austin publisher of role-

playing games, and the home of Loyd Blankenship, managing editor at the company.

A second Austin home, whose resident was acquainted with Jackson officials, also was raided.

Jackson said there is no reason for the company to be investigated

. Steve Jackson Games is a book and game publisher of fiction, he said, and it is not involved in any computer-related thefts.

The agents, executing search warrants now sealed by a judge from

public view, took computer equipment, including modems, printers, and

monitors, as well as manuals, instruction books and other documents. The

equipment has been forwarded to federal officials in Chicago.

The Secret Service, best-known for protecting the president, has

jurisdiction in the case, government officials say, because damage to

the nation's telephone system could harm the public's welfare.

In

addition, the system is run by American Telephone & Telegraph Co., a

company involved in the nation's defense.

The 911 investigation already has resulted in the indictment of

two computer "hackers" in Illinois and sources say federal authorities

now are focusing on Austin's ties to a shadowy underground computer

user's group known as the Legion of Doom.

The hackers, who live in Georgia and Missouri, where indicted in

Chicago. they are believed to be members of the Legion of Doom and

are charged with seven counts, including interstate

transportation of
stolen property, wire fraud, and violations of the Computer Fraud
and
Abuse Act of 1986.

The government alleges that the defendants stole a
computerized
copy of Bell South's system that controls 911 emergency calls in
nine

states. The information was then transferred to a computer
bulletin

board and published in a hacker publication known as Phrack!

A trial in the case is scheduled to begin in June.

U.S. agents also have seized the final drafts of a science
fiction game written by the Austin-based game company.

Sources say

the agents are trying to determine whether the game - a dark,
futur-

istic account of a world where technology has gone awry - is
being

used as a handbook for computer crime. Steve Jackson, the
owner of

the local company and a well-known figure in the role-playing
game

industry, said neither he nor his company has been involved in
tampering with the 911 system.

No one in Austin has been indicted or arrested as a result of
the investigation. "It is an on-going investigation. That is all
I can say," said Steve Beauchamp, special agent-in-charge of the
Secret Service Austin field office. "Until we can put it all
together, we just do not comment," he said.

Bob Rogers, Jackson's Dallas attorney, said federal officials
have assured him that neither Jackson nor Jackson Games is the
tar-

get of the probe. The authorities would not tell Rogers whether
the

inquiry focused on other company employees. As for the
science fiction

game, called Cyberpunk, Jackson said federal authorities have
mistaken

a fictional work for a technical manual [E.N. Why does this sound all too familiar?] .

"It's not a manual for computer crime any more than a Reader's

Digest story on how to burglar-proof your house is a manual for burglars," said Jackson, 36. "It's kind of like the hints you get on safe-cracking from a James Bond movie."

Blankenship, the author of the book, said his attorney has advised

him not to comment on the book or the Secret Service investigation.

Jackson said he guesses his company was linked to the 911 probe

by its use of a computer bulletin board system, called Usenet. The

board, one of hundreds throughout the country, is a sort of electronic

Town Square, where personal computer users from throughout the world

can tap into the system via phone lines and a modem.

The network, free and relatively unregulated, is an information

exchange where users can post information, exchange electronic messages

and debate with keyboards everything from poetry and politics to nuclear war.

One of the world's largest networks - boasting more than 600,000

users - Usenet was tapped by Chinese students in North America to

organize support for students during the pro-democracy demonstrations

last year. The network also was infected in 1988 by a now-famous

computer "virus" unleashed by college student Robert Morris.

Jackson said his company has maintained a bulletin board on

the Usenet network on which it posts advanced copies of its role-playing games. The firm posts the games and requests that the users

of the network comment on the text and propose improvements.

The Jackson bulletin board, called Illuminati, greets users with

the company's logo and a message that states: "Welcome to the World's

Oldest and Largest Secret Conspiracy."

Over the past several months, the company has been posting drafts

of Cyberpunk for review.

The resident of the second Austin home raided by the Secret Service

was acquainted with Jackson and had made comments about the game on

Usenet. He asked to remain anonymous.

Typical of Cyberpunk literature, the game is set in a bleak future,

much like the world portrayed in Max Headroom, formerly a network

television program. Computers and technology control people's thoughts

and actions and are viewed both as a means of oppression and as a method

of escape. Portions of Jackson's Cyberpunk viewed by the Austin American

Statesman include a detailed discussion on penetrating government computer

networks and a list of fictitious programs used to break into closed

networks. Bruce Sterling, an Austin science fiction writer and one of

the world's best-known Cyberpunk writers, said Jackson's game and its

computer-related discussions are hardly unusual for the genre.

"Cyberpunk is thriller fiction," Sterling said. "It deals to a great extent with the romance of crime in the same way that mysteries

or techno-thrillers do." He said the detailed technical discussions in the Jackson games are what draws people to them. "That's the charm of simulating something that's supposed to be accurate. If it's cooked up out of thin air, the people who play these games are going to lose interest."

Jackson, though, said he has been told by Secret Service agents that they view the game as a user's guide to computer mischief. He said they made the comments where he went to the agency's Austin office in an unsuccessful attempt to reclaim some of his seized equipment. "As they were reading over it, they kept making outraged comments," Jackson said. "When they read it, they became very, very upset. "I said, 'This is science fiction.' They said, 'No. This is real.'"

The text of the Cyberpunk games, as well as other computer equipment taken from Jackson's office, still has not been returned.

The company now is working to rewrite portions of the book and is hoping to have it printed next month. In addition to reviewing Cyberpunk, sources say federal authorities currently are investigating any links between local computer hackers and the Legion of Doom. The sources say some of the 911 information that is the subject of Chicago indictments has been traced to Austin computers.

Jackson's attorney said federal officials have told him that the 911 information pilfered from Bell South has surfaced on a computer

bulletin board used at Steve Jackson games. But the information apparently has not been traced to a user. Jackson said that neither

he nor any of his employees is a member of the Legion of Doom.

Blankenship, however, did consult with the group in the course of researching the writing the Cyberpunk game, Jackson said.

Further, the group is listed in the game's acknowledgments for its aid in providing technical information used in Cyberpunk. For these

reasons he believes Blankenship is a local target of the federal probe,

though none of the investigators has yet confirmed his suspicion.

"My opinion is that he is (being investigated)," Jackson said,

"If that's the case, that's gross.

"he had been doing research for what he hoped would be a mass-

market book on the computer underground," Jackson said.

The other Austin resident raided by the authorities, who asked

to remain anonymous, acknowledged that he is the founding member of

the Legion of Doom and that copies of the 911 system had surfaced on

the group's local bulletin board. The 20-year-old college student said the information hardly posed any threat to the 911 system.

"It was nothing," he said. "It was garbage, and it was boring."

In the Chicago indictment accuses the group of a litany of electronic abuses, including: disrupting telephone service by changing the routing of telephone calls; stealing and modifying individual credit histories; stealing money and property from companies by altering computer information; and disseminating information about attacking computers to other computer hackers.

The Austin Legion of Doom member said his group's worst crime is snooping through other people's computers. "For the most part, that's all we do," he said. "No one's out ripping off people's credit cards. No one's out to make any money.

"We're just out to have fun."

The group member said the fact that the legion is shrouded in mystery adds to its mystique - and to the interest law enforcement agents have in cracking the ring. "It's an entirely different world," the student said. "It's a very strange little counter-culture. "Everybody who exists in that world is familiar with the Legion of Doom," he said. "Most people are in awe or are intimidated by it."

(C)opied by Pizzia Man
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