



by Peter Economy

When Hackers Attack

Got DSL? Or a cable modem? If so, your computer is vulnerable to attack by hackers anytime you're logged onto your Internet connection. I'm talking about someone who has targeted *your* computer and you *personally* for a concerted attack.

The goal? Perhaps to steal your name, your address, or your credit-card numbers, or maybe to use your computer as a remote-controlled zombie to attack other computers or Web sites at some future time. Or perhaps simply to delete your hard drive, your work, and your life as you know it — forever and ever.

Imagine having to explain to your client, "You know that report I've been working on for the last six months? Well, a hacker obliterated it last night. I think we're gonna have to start all over again. That okay with you?"

The sad truth is that independent professionals can be especially vulnerable to these attacks — as if life wasn't already hard enough for us. Since we're on the Net all day for business, a high-speed Internet connection is fast becoming an essential tool for many IPs. And because we're doing business on our computers, we're likely to have tons of important information stored away on our hard drives — like financial records, client lists, and current projects. These are files that I wouldn't want anyone else to get hold of — and files that I'd be lost without.

Unfortunately, without an IT department to back them up, it's only the most technical IPs who realize they're at risk in the first place. And if a hacker gets to your machine, you may have to spend hundreds of dollars bringing in a consultant to help get everything back up and running. And computer downtime will probably mean a loss of bill-

able time — depending on how much of your work is done on the ol' computer. Anyway you look at it, a hacker-attack is bad news. And if you're a member of the "it-can't-happen-to-me" club (of which I was a card-carrying member), you might want to rethink your position, because I didn't think it could happen to me either.

Until one day it did.

It all began when, a couple of months ago, I noticed a charge for \$2.99 on my American Express Card statement. In fact, it was the very last entry on the bill. "What? I never charged \$2.99 on my AMEX card," I thought. A call to the toll-free number on the form revealed that the charge was for an introductory membership to a pornographic Web site, and that my card had also been hit up for \$29.99 for a full month's service.

After getting the porno-site company to credit back the charges, I called American Express to see if anything else was out of sorts. It was. Someone had made several hundred dollars' worth of charges to purchase prepaid phone cards over the Internet. I immediately cancelled my card, and had American Express create a new account for me and send me a new credit card.

Mission accomplished. Or so I thought.

The next day I received a letter in the mail from a telecommunications company that had declined to issue credit to me because I had provided them with an incorrect birth date. Problem was, I had never applied for credit with the company, and I certainly knew what my birth date was — and it was nowhere close to the date cited in the letter of denial. I immediately saw what was going on: the person who had stolen my

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charge-card number was also attempting to steal my identity and my financial life. The next phone calls I made were to all the major credit bureaus to tag a fraud alert onto my credit reports.

To make a long and personally upsetting story short, I suspect that a hacker entered my computer through my cable modem and nabbed personal information from my files.

So, what exactly does this mean for you, IP extraordinaire? It means that if you've got a high-speed, broadband hookup to the Internet through a cable modem or DSL you'd better watch your ass. And while you're at it, you'd better get serious about protecting yourself from all the snickering hackers out there just waiting for you to log on.

Is the threat real? You bet it is! Says Vincent Weafer, director of Symantec's Anti-Virus Research Center in Cupertino, Calif., "Anybody who is directly connected to the Internet through cable modems or DSL is extremely susceptible to these back-door programs. We have seen many, many attacks on those people's machines." And my machine was one of them.

So what can you do to protect yourself—and your projects—from the clutches of a malicious hacker? The good news is that there are a couple of things you can and should do if you have a cable modem or DSL.

First, install what computer types call a firewall—a software-based barrier that will repel the attacks of even the most highly motivated hacker. I had read articles about the threat to computers like mine—logged onto the Internet 24/7—but I had discounted them. After I woke up and smelled the hot chocolate, the first thing I did was run to cNet.com—a Web site whose reviews of computer hardware and software I trust

and rely on. Although I have impersonated a computer geek on occasion, I really don't have the tech cred to pull it off. Fortunately, cNet had a review of the best programs, and I immediately bought and downloaded the top-rated one, Norton Internet Security 2000, from the Norton Web site.

And it's a good thing I did. Within hours, I logged the first hacker attack on my computer—my new firewall intercepted and blocked an attack. The bastards. In the few days after that first attack, my computer endured—and repelled—12 more attacks from hackers, and I have since seen many more. In fact, while writing this column, I was just attacked twice more.

One more piece of advice, one you've probably heard more times that you would like by now: back up your files regularly—especially if you have yet to purchase and install your firewall software. Of course, since computers have the uncanny ability to screw up at any time for any reason—with or without a hacker's help—this advice applies to *everyone*, whether you're hooked up to a cable modem or DSL or not.

The Internet is a dangerous place, and you've got to play it safe if you want to ensure the integrity of your computer and the work that's contained within it. If you've made the move to a high-speed, broadband Internet connection, then take the time to protect yourself—and the work that you do for your clients—from a hacker attack. If it happened to me, it can happen to you. **1099**

For PCs

BlackICE Defender
Windows 95/98/NT/2000
Network ICE, \$39.95
www.networkice.com

Norton Internet Security 2001
Windows 95/98/NT/2000
Symantec, \$71.35
www.symantec.com

Personal Firewall
Windows 95/98/NT/2000
McAfee, \$39.95
www.mcafee.com

ZoneAlarm Pro
Windows 95/98/NT/2000
Zone Labs, \$39.95
www.zonelabs.com

For Macs

DoorStop Personal Edition
Mac OS 8.1 or later
Open Door, \$59
www.opendoor.com

NetBarrier
Mac OS 7.5.5 or later
Intego, \$150
www.intego.com

Norton Internet Security
Mac OS 8.1 or later
Symantec, \$99.95
www.symantec.com