

nd so it begins...

It is midnight on a warm June evening in Michigan. The air is cooling, but remains somewhat temperate. They are gathering. Gathering to listen. Gathering to learn. Gathering to complain, and to laugh, and to engage in battle.

Who are they? No, this is not some druidic sect or a group of historical reenactors. These adventurers are of a different sort. They come to Michigan each summer to define the future, to shape what will be. They come to hack.

In 1998, events were opened by Apple Employee Number Eight, Chris Espinosa. He entertained the audience for hours with stories of life in the early days of Apple and led all the way to his current activities with Applescript.

Once the keynote ends, though, things really begin...

rief History

Every year since 1986, southeast Michigan has played home to MacHack. This conference has become legend among the Macintosh cognoscenti and has stretched its tendrils into the worlds of Windows, UNIX and almost every other corner of the computing universe. Nobody planned it that way — it just happened.

Things began at the University of Michigan, where those young and talented programmers originally gathered to see what kind of cool things

they could do with this up-and-coming platform, the Macintosh. And cool things they did. The programs slung hastily together in the short days of the conference have left their mark on the Macintosh. More than 50 of them have gone on to become part of Mac OS. Numerous innocuous hacks have found their way into working utilities and shareware tools.

essions

Still true to its roots as a technical conference, MacHack has an abundance of technical sessions where attendees are drawn to learn yet more. New technologies are always central to the sessions, since that is, after all, what the conference is all about. Sessions are lively and often tongue-in-cheek, making often dry topics as interesting as possible. Speakers for the conference are all volunteers, bringing their passion for the topics to the presentations with infectious enthusiasm. Technical is not always exciting, but at MacHack the technical and the exciting come close to fusion. This year will be no different. Topics for 1999 already scheduled include cross-platform technologies, networking and media technologies, rapid application development, and a mixture of business topics of interest to small and large developers alike.

he Hack Contest

As the conference evolved from that first small gathering into something more, Scott Boyd, now of MindVision, and Greg Marriot, now of General Magic, created what has become the centerpiece event. The legendary Hack Contest was born from their desire to focus the talent at hand. Now, the programmers spar on the field of code and each strive to out-do one another for the most clever widget they can muster in those sleep-deprived hours during the conference itself.

Friday at midnight, the contest begins. The programmers, though already fading from the efforts of two nearly sleepless days of sessions and coding, line up in the main hall and await a turn to make their demo. All are ready, and all are tense at the prospect of demonstrating code that may not perform as expected for this technically savvy crowd. In the short time available, adequate testing is all but impossible.

The show itself is lively. The tug-of-war between sleep deprivation and caffeine ingestion drives the audience. Shouts from within the crowd of

attendees determine the overall reaction. Heckling is encouraged. If code is believed to be a sham (and hacks have won on pure showmanship before), cries of "source!" can be heard, demanding that the demonstrator prove his programming prowess. The audience is hard, but very forgiving. Even this raucous crowd shows great reverence and respect for the youngest attendees — who are scheduled early in the show. Hackers as young as eight and nine years old have both warmed the hearts of these code-savvy warriors and impressed them with technical merit.

The show can drag on indefinitely, but usually lasts four to five hours. The hackers then shamble to their rooms for rest, while the Hax Group — just as sleep-deprived as the coders — readies the balloting process: one attendee, one vote. The hack with the most votes wins. Of course this simple process gets complicated when the world is fuzzy from lack of sleep. Goals of web-based balloting have collapsed in the last few years as need for sleep has overcome the desire to move away from hand counting photocopied ballots.

inning Hacks

There is a mad genius to the Hack contest. It draws out some of the best hastily written code in the business. But to what end? No English words seem to describe it. The Japanese have a concept called Chindogu that comes close. Chindogu is the art of inventing things that are very nearly but not quite useful. These technically meritorious creations must be appreciated by the observer as clever if nothing else. Below are last year's winners — you decide if this description fits.

The title of Best Hack and the coveted Victor A-Trap trophy went to

asciiMac, the hands-down favorite hack. Nothing better summarizes the concepts that drive the hack contest. Written by a team of first-time MacHackers, Alexandra Ellwood and Miro Jurisic's hack wowed and amazed the late-night crowd. asciiMac is nothing short of stunning. The code is fast and lean, slowing down only because the PCI bus can move only so much data at once. But what does it do? That is the key to a winning hack: Functionality that is amazing, but at the same time not really useful. This program renders the entire Macintosh screen in realtime as ascii art, in color no less. It is absolutely staggering to witness. The entirely professional and well-rehearsed demo for the contest even included demonstrations of Quicktime movies and Virtual PC running as rendered ascii art. This is the essence of the Hack.

Hacks do not necessarily take advantage of the Macintosh per se. Things

like Open Firmware, the long awaited update to the Macintosh that was to facilitate clone design, is just as much a target. The second place hack for 1998 was OFPong by Marcus Jager and Quinn "The Eskimo!" OFPong takes us back to those days of yesteryear when paddles of blocks propelled a streaking square around the screen. Written entirely in Open Firmware, the Macintosh boot-strap environment, OFPong provides updating to the boot process that allows a diversive trip down memory lane. As your machine is booting you can take a break for a quick game and then continue booting up.

Two hacks tied for third in 1998. First time attendee P.D. Magnus provided the conference with his unusual take on the universe with 180 Years of Hack. P.D. picked up on a printing error and ran with it. Each of this year's MacHack attendees received a commemorative mug at registration. Due to an error at the printing plant, the art on the mugs became muddled with another commemorative event and read "MacHack 1818-1998." P.D.'s hack, 180 Years of Hack, comes as a set of Web pages celebrating (with doctored photographs and woodcuts) what MacHack and the Best Hack Contest looked like over the span of the last couple of centuries. From the conference's presumed inception attended by Scottish philosopher James Watt, to the Wartime conferences of the last 180 years, P.D. provided an interactive if entirely fictional history lesson during the late night hack contest. At the awards banquet, P.D. also received a copy of Codewarrior and lots of lighthearted jibes that perhaps next year he could write some "real code."

Third place was shared with PhaseShift by Ed Wynne and Matt Slot. Ed and Matt gave some popular screen saver patterns a new twist by running them on the desktop all of the time instead of across the whole screen when the machine is idle. This caused scintillating displays of color to appear behind all the open finder windows and icons. Since the screen savers were the typical kaleidoscopic colors on a dark background, the desktop contents were all clearly visible. The demo was made more impressive by the programmers' own apparent fear at the suggestion that the patterns all be invoked simultaneously. Good code made the displays more psychedelic and things worked without a hitch.

Of the winners, the fifth place Spotlight Hack holds the most promise for a truly useful tool. While this almost disqualifies it from the running, the demo was sufficiently lacking in real utility that the voting held. This hack creates a circular "hole" in the Finder's windows so the user can see the desktop

and icons that are on it. The hole moves with the mouse. It was written by David Kamholz. Unfortunately, the demo only allows viewing of the desktop with no interaction. Perhaps some future iteration will allow the ability to interact with Finder windows and icons through the hole. Imagine being able to reach through a large window and grab an icon only to release the hot-key and have the icon hovering over the window so it can be dropped in the middle of the document.

he Awards Banquet

Saturday night brings the closing event of the official MacHack schedule, the awards banquet. This is run by the Hax Group committee, who presents prizes lovingly selected from Duke's Hardware. Why Duke's? This old-time hardware store located just a few miles from the conference site is the perfect setting to find as many prizes as possible on a minimum budget. From stick-on letters to actual bricks, almost every hack gets something to commemorate the event. The winner gets the one prize that is planned well in advance, The Victor A-Trap. This large rodent catcher is embossed with the name of the event and the winner.

The last couple of years have seen the addition of commercially-provided prizes such as software and assorted computing-related widgets. These are given out in a door-prize-like fashion to maintain the nature of the hack contest as one of good-natured competition, so that hackers compete more against each other than for a prize.

he Future

There have been lean years for this conference, to be certain. Even with the wonder of Steve Wozniak as keynote, many wondered if the 1997 conference would be the last. However, things have turned around, more because the attendees have redefined their focus than because the Macintosh is reborn. MacHack is about the future, about defining what will come next. It is about passion for technology and a love of the new. The conference still carries the name and holds the Macintosh in high regard, but in reality the vision lies at the heart of the conference.

The hacks discussed here as well as others from 1998 and previous years are available for download at <http://www.machack.com/>.

Special Thanks to Scott Boyd of the MacHax Group.

Warren Magnus
wmagnus@ibm.net

<http://applewizards.net/>