

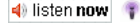


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Odd jobs

on 31 March 2000, 22:00



by [Niall McKay](#)

It's midnight and "Mudge," a hacker with near-cult status in the computer underground, is working late. A can of Guinness sits on the corner of his desk in a clubhouse-cum-computer lab west of Boston. For the past five years, this warehouse loft has housed Mudge, Dildog, and the five other hackers collectively known as [LIIIpht Heavy Industries](#). Mudge's current task is to produce a paper for the [Infosec Research Council](#), which coordinates information defense between such dot-mil and dot-gov heavyweights as the [National Security Agency](#) and the [Central Intelligence Agency](#).

The LIIIpht earned its notoriety in 1998 by testifying before the U.S. Senate on lax government computer security. And last year Mudge and Dildog were quoted in the media worldwide when, as members of the Cult of the Dead Cow, they released version 2.0 of BackOrifice, a systems administration tool often used by hackers to break into computer systems. The team has now moved its daytime activities to [@Stake](#), a computer security firm in downtown Cambridge, Massachusetts. In January the startup -- headed by former [Forrester Research](#) analyst Ted Julian and one-time [Compaq Computer](#) senior vice president, John Rando -- raised \$10 million from [Battery Ventures](#). [@Stake](#) immediately hired the LIIIpht, along with former MIT security expert Dan Greer, as its security team. [@Stake](#) hopes to help Fortune 1,000 and e-commerce companies build sites as easy to use as Macy's but as secure as Fort Knox.

The services start with a rigorous security audit. "The first thing we look for is computers that are running a little too smoothly," says Mudge, whose formal title is vice president of research. "Malicious hackers will generally keep a vulnerable machine running perfectly, so as not to draw attention to themselves."

Next, he and his team scrutinize any mobile code and ties to the back-end database. "But many of these sites are extremely complex, so these days just running security auditing software is not good enough," he says. "You've got to look directly at the source code."

In the past, the LIIIpht has certainly excelled at finding software flaws -- often angering major corporations by releasing security advisories before the company in question (usually [Microsoft](#)) has released a remedy. "We've always notified companies and given them adequate time to fix the software," Mudge says. "But if they ignore us, then it's our responsibility to notify users about the problem."

Given February's hacker attacks on Web sites, [@Stake](#) may find it has more business than Mudge's team can handle.

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