The Transformation Story Archive

Spells 'R' Us

Byte Me

by Phaedrus

A sysadmin's job can swing back and forth between full-blown panic and mind-numbing boredom.

Trevor was bored.

Nothing was broken. Nobody had accidentally deleted the departmental budget. The router was routing. Two systems needed backing up, but that could wait a few hours. And the VP was visiting today, so he didn't dare fire up Diablo.

Well, there was always one other option.

He fired up his "wardialer", a little script he'd written to telnet to random IP addresses on the Internet. Sometimes it turned up interesting stuff. And if anyone asked, well, he was testing network connectivity. He left it running, went to get another can of Mountain Dew, stepped outside for a quick smoke.

When he got back, he stopped it, scrolled through what it had found. A few ISPs. A bank; better leave that one alone. A Muck; no thanks—he didn't have quite that much spare time. A BBS; might be interesting, might not.

Huh? What the heck is this?

Intrigued, he started another Telnet session, connected.

SPELLS R US Computerized Inventory, Receivables, Customer Enhancement VER. 0.7b16 (phaedrus)—ALL FEATURES SUBJECT TO CHANGE

To create new account, enter `NEW` login:

Some sort of business, obviously. But what sort of name is "SPELLS R US"? And what kind of place puts their recordkeeping system on the Internet with no security? Wait; it's a development build. Probably a prototype with no real information, waiting for hackers to do their testing for them—or a new business too stupid to realize what they're doing. Well, it wouldn't hurt to have a look around, maybe leave them a note pointing out the error of their ways…

He dutifully typed "NEW".

There was a pause of about ten seconds; then the screen cleared.

Welcome, TREVOR FIELDING. Your current access level is First-Time Customer.

Please verify the following account information; press ENTER to continue, or ESC to make changes.

Trevor was stunned. There on the screen was his full name, his address, his home and work telephone numbers, his height, his weight… How could it possibly know that? He was behind a firewall, for Christ's sake; it shouldn't even be able to look up his IP address, let alone cross-reference it against anything else. And, even assuming that there were databases where this stuff was available, how could it possibly look it up that fast?

For a few long seconds, Trevor thought about disconnecting now. But it wasn't as if he had done anything illegal; the system had invited him on. And besides, he had to know how it did this…

Numbly, he pressed Enter.

Customer Main Menu

1. Browse Customer Database
2. Update Your Customer Profile
3. Customer Service (NOT IMPLEMENTED)
4. Disconnect

More features to come!

Your choice:

Curiouser and curiouser. Why let customers look at other customers' information? Was this some kind of dating service?

Trevor typed "1", and found himself in a conventional-looking database. Then he took a closer look, and quickly realized that there was nothing at all conventional about this.

At least some thought had obviously been given to privacy; the addresses and phone numbers weren't visible. Which was too bad, because he desperately wanted to call some of these people. What kind of customer list had a field in it for "SPECIES"—let alone one with room for four entries, complete with "(%)" for each? Must be a pet store, or a vet…

Then he noticed the "View Customer Purchases" option. This oughta clear things up, he thought, as he punched it up and scrolled through a few screens. It didn't. What the hell kinda store was this? Animal crackers? Satyr costume? Bimbo Flute?

Suddenly, it all clicked into place. He obviously wasn't the first one to find this system. Some hackers had found it first, and had some fun trashing the database. It was a shame; somebody must have worked pretty hard on it. They'd probably have to dump everything and start over. But what's done was done; and that's what you get for leaving a system like this unprotected.

On a whim, Trevor hopped back to the main menu, chose "2". The system was already a wreck; one more weird record wouldn't matter. Once again, his info filled the screen, this time including the strange extra fields from the database. "Well, Mom always said I slept so much I must be half-cat," he muttered, as he hopped down to "SPECIES" and added "JAGUAR(50%)". Under "CUSTOMER PURCHASES", he added "FLEA COLLAR, DELUXE, LEATHER" and "CATNIP (2 LBS.)". He chuckled, then picked "SAVE CHANGES".

He suddenly felt uncomfortable. He shifted in his seat, tugging at his collar. Dammit, it was hot! Why on earth had he worn a long-sleeved shirt today? He stood up, looked around to make sure the VP wasn't nearby; then he quickly unbuttoned his shirt, wriggled out of it, careful not to catch a claw in the sleeves. He stretched luxuriously, licked his paws and ran them through his fur, smoothing it down. Then he sat back down, curling his tail around his waist, and saw that the screen had cleared again.

Sorry, but your time for today has expired. Your new account status is: Preferred Customer. Thank you for using SRU CIRCE!

Connection closed by remote host.

Trevor shrugged, closed the Telnet window. He ought to get those backups running anyway, he mused. He wanted to leave a little early today anyway; he thought he'd swing by the mall on the way home, see if they had any more of that catnip…

Anselm looked over at the console, smiled. Another satisfied customer.

He still wasn't sure that he trusted this newfangled stuff, but Ancaliquara had insisted—said that his sales figures were still hopeless, that computerizing would help "expand his customer base." And, after he'd made a few adjustments to her original idea, how right she'd been…

The beauty of it was that it hadn't cost him a dime. Ancaliquara had dumped the equipment in his lap, with dire warnings about adding it to his loan balance if anything happened to it. And the programmer had just walked in the front door while he'd been plugging it in… and once he'd heard what Anselm had in mind, he'd been very insistent that payment not be in money. Anselm had long since given up on figuring out what made mortals tick, but he'd been more than happy to go along. He'd been changing him gradually, a bit more at every milestone. It was hard to imagine an employee more dedicated to staying on schedule.

Speaking of which, he'd been meaning to check on how the inventory module was going. After that debacle last month, he'd give his right arm for anything to make that little job a bit easier… The speakerphone picked up, dialed a number. Two rings. Then a bark.

"Hey, Phae… Any progress on the inventory?"

Three barks.

"I'm sorry, what was that last bit?"

Another bark.

"Sounds good. Two more weeks, then?"

A high-pitched whine.

"Fair enough; three weeks. Oh, could you come in on Thursday and work the store? Nathan needs the day off."

A bark.

"Great. Good to see that the two of you are getting along, by the way."

A howl came from the back of the store.

"Oh, that's right… Nathan says hi. He wants me to remind you about that Quake deathmatch you promised him for seven tonight. I swear, I wish you'd never gotten him started on that game…"

A whine.

"Yes, I know, you've both been working like… well, you've both been working hard. I'm sure he'll be calling you at seven, then… and I'll see you Thursday. Bye…"

The line went dead.

Anselm smiled. He loved it when things came together. His profits were up; not by a lot, but maybe enough to get Ancaliquara off his back for a few days. Nathan was noticeably more chipper; a little socialization never hurt anyone. And if he ever went ahead and got that warehouse space, he knew just who he could get to guard it; he'd just need to add a computer and a T-1 line to the plans.

"He'll be ready at seven, Nathan. It sounds like he still hasn't gotten used to his new vocal chords yet; his bark is definitely worse than his byte."

Nathan covered his ears with his paws and howled…

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