CyberCracker

A group of cyber criminals with different motivations all attack the same computer system in an attempt to access secure datafiles. Each tries to accomplish their goal first, but if the computer system security is triggered, everyone is thrown out of the system. Players take on the role of cyber criminals or "crackers", each sitting at their own computer and communicating exclusively via text through the system. The GM (game master) participates as a sentient AI (artificial intelligence) defending the computer system from intrusion, but subject to strict rules.

This larp is designed to be played through custom web-based software but can be played through any chat program, relying on the honor system and players honestly reporting results and taking actions. The GM shares their screen to show the system diagram and time. Each player opens the GM's screen share, the group chat window, and a one-on-one chat with the GM.

Details
- Players: 3 to 8
- Play Time: 2 hours (including setup and debrief)
- Structure: digital sandbox game
- Play style: futuristic computer exploration inspired by 1990s hacker culture
- Requires: internet connection supporting text based chat, six sided dice (or equivalent)


Setup

The GM creates the computer system by rolling six-sided dice (also referred to as a D6). Start with a single entry node with one connection up. From there roll a D6 for which node type to add (see node types list below) and a D6 for connections the node has (1: left, 2: left and up, 3: left, up, right, 4:up, right 5: right, 6: none). Keep repeating this pattern for each node until you reach 20 nodes. If you run out of connections before 20, pick the most recent with no outgoing connections and keep re-rolling connections until it has more than zero.

Node Types

1. Empty - no effect
2. Security - raises the system alert level when entered
3. Firewall - requires two actions to enter
4. Portal - connect to any other portal node to move from

5. Info - Gain information about another character when entered. The system uses advanced AI research techniques to gather information on the characters attacking it, and stores it in these nodes.
6. Storage - gives the players 1 secure datafile when entered

Example:
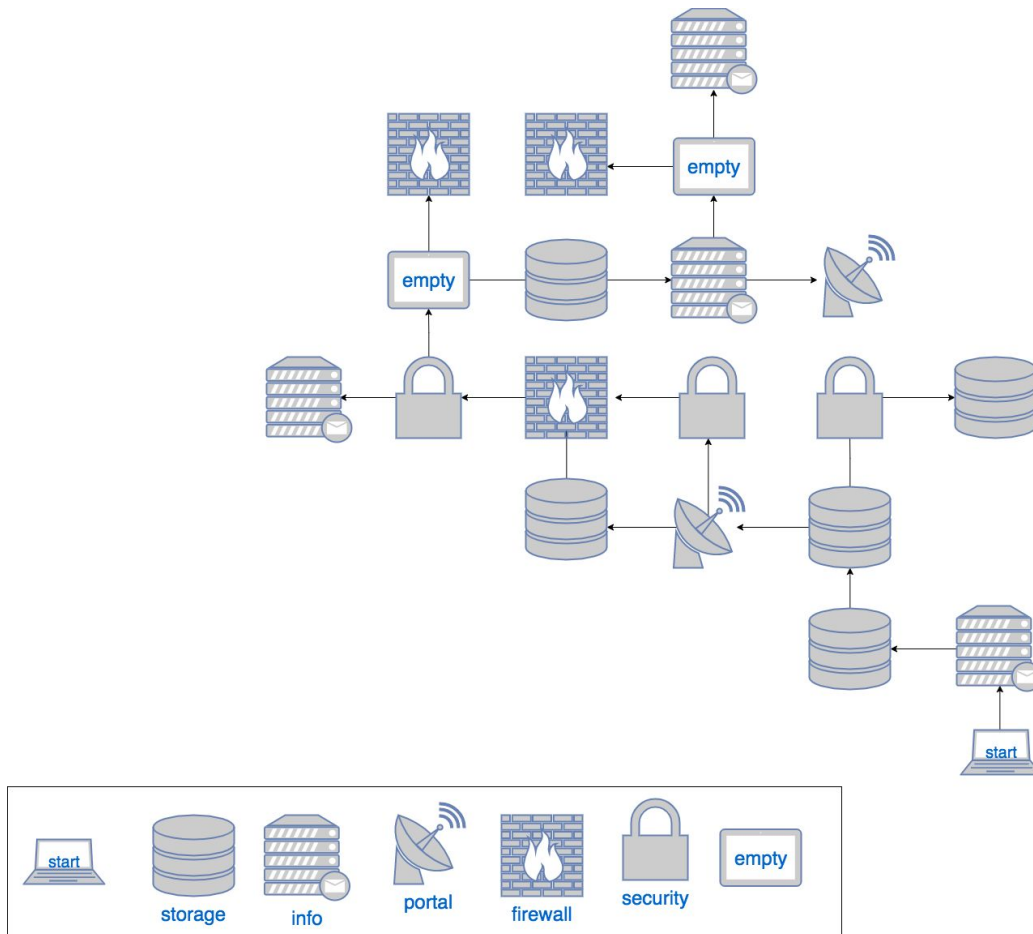
The system alert level is set at 0 out of 5, the total number of datafiles retrieved starts at 0 out of the total number of storage nodes(5 in the above example), and the clock starts at 60:00 (sixty minutes) and will count down.

Character Creation

Players choose:
● Character's real name
● Character's handle (their nickname)

- Backstory and motivation. Answer the question "why are you breaking into computer systems?"
- It's recommended for immersion (but not required) that each player wear small costume details or place objects on their desk that their character would have.

Players each decide two character relationships by performing the following twice:

The GM randomly pulls names from a hat to group players into two (with one group of three if there is an uneven number). Each group rolls a D6 to determine the type of connection. Examples are provided here but can be changed at GM discretion.

Type:
1. Attended school together
2. Old friends (enemies)
3. Co-workers at a job
4. Previously been arrested together
5. Members of the same criminal group
6. In debt to the same person

The players then determine the nature of their connection, ex: "I'm your half-sister you lost touch with years ago" or "we both studied computers in school and ended up in debt to a shady company." Players reveal their real names and any pertinent character background to each other, and to the GM. If any player has an issue with a person they're connected to or with any content, they can let the DM know and work out a new option.

Once both rounds of character connections are finished, the GM randomly assigns each player one of three goals by rolling a D6, but doesn't tell any player who else may have the same goal.
1 - 2: Retrieve the information for the government
3 - 4: Retrieve the information for an unnamed multinational corporation
5 - 6: Retrieve and destroy the information for a freedom-fighter group

Gameplay

Players communicate exclusively through text in a group chat that everyone can see. There's no side-channel communication, except from the AI to each player. At any point a player can ask for a private conversation with the AI by typing a message starting with the AI's name.

Play goes in vague rounds where the players all talk in chat to discuss options, then one player takes an action by telling the AI what they're doing. There's no enforced turn order but each player should act before any player acts again. No player can ever act twice in a row. Action precedence is decided by the players, and ultimately arbitrated by the AI.

Whenever a player takes an action to break into a new node, all players must vote to help or hinder them. If at least 50% of the players help, it succeeds. If less than 50% of the players help it fails and the system warning level goes up. Each player must convince the other players that their goals align and they should help them accomplish their goals.

The worst thing that can happen to a player is having their real identity revealed. Players can use knowledge of each other as blackmail to make other players go along with them.

After 50 minutes, when the alert level reaches 5, or when the last datafile is captured, the AI goes into alert mode. The clock is set to 10:00, counting down, and players have 10 minutes to resolve the game before the system shuts down. Everything else continues working as normal.

Possible Actions:
- Attack - take over a new node. The player initiating the action gets the datafile or chooses what information the AI should reveal from an information node. Info revealed is at the AI's discretion, and can be any private character information.
- Impersonate - temporarily impersonate another character by messaging the AI and having the AI relay a single sentence to a target player. That player sends the sentence in chat as if they said it themselves, then takes no action and sends no messages for the next 60 seconds. Counts as the attacking player's action for the round, but the player who was attacked can still act as normal after the 60 seconds.
- Trade - exchange information or datafiles with another player

Debrief

Debrief is recommended but it's up to each player to choose to participate. Suggested debrief done via a group call (like google hangouts) and includes a brief de-roling exercise followed by a general discussion, but any debrief style or activities can be used.

De-Roling Exercise

Players A de-roling exercise where the group goes around in a circle and each person speaks. They list one thing about their character that they want to bring back into their real life, and one thing that they want to leave in the game. Then they name one item (real or imagined) that they associate with their character, and removes it (or pretends to remove it).

Safety and Consent

Gameplay should be safe and comfortable for all players. We recommend using a modified version of the "ok" check-in mechanic where anyone can type "[OOC]" followed by the "ok?" question and "yes", "maybe", "no" responses are typed instead of spoken. Similarly, to stop gameplay in the event of an issue anyone can type "[OOC] cut." See
https://nordiclarp.org/2018/01/24/safety-calibration-design-tools-uses/

Thanks

Inspired by the hacking mini game in Deus Ex: Human Revolution and the 1995 film Hackers.
Thanks to Tara Clapper for reviewing and [playtesters?]
The de-roling exercise was first seen by the author at New World Magischola by LearnLarp, but almost certainly predates that.

Effort has been made to avoid using the term "hacker" in a negative context or in a way that denotes criminal intent. See "What is a Hacker?" by Brian Harvey at
https://people.eecs.berkeley.edu/~bh/hacker.html