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# Video game 'hackers' get paid to cheat



PHOTO BY ELIZABETH MALBY / THE BALTIMORE SUN

by Michael James  
The Baltimore Sun

When he worked for Hewlett-Packard, Jay Philbrook spent his time working on printed circuit boards and writing programs to test DSL systems.

Then he moved to a more exciting job, in an out-of-the-way Hunt Valley, Md., office cubicle surrounded by state-of-the-art computer hardware, where he studies arcane assembly-language subroutines, pores over displays of hexadecimal printouts, and occasionally cries out in triumph.

"What I've done here is to make a code that will enable you to warp from one place to another, while also enabling you to throw fireballs at the enemy," the 25-year-old programmer boasts. "The other day I came up with a code that made it so when you pressed just one button, you'd instantly be going 200 mph on the highway."

Philbrook isn't cooking up secret weapons for the CIA. His full-time job is hacking into video games for Interact Accessories Inc., a company with \$200 million in sales that has hit it big with a small group of game fanatics and programmers who spend mega-hours hacking into video games.

Their goal is to devise shortcuts and "cheat codes" that allow players to shoot straighter, run faster, punch harder, jump higher, dodge bullets better and live longer than the mere mortals who aren't in on the secret.

In order to use the codes that Philbrook and others on Interact's team create, a player needs one of the company's \$40 GameShark products. These are sold as disks, which are loaded into consoles before a game starts and allow players to enter cheat codes, and as hardware devices that store codes and plug into a console's memory cartridge port.

So far this group of a half-dozen programmers has cranked out more than 23,000 codes that cover nearly every game on the market. As many as 2 million visitors a month log in to grab the latest codes from the company's Web site, [www.gameshark.com](http://www.gameshark.com).

It's a niche business off the radar screens of anyone but hard-core gamers, but it's profitable. It's also a contentious arena at times, because game publishers aren't always thrilled at having their creations "hacked" and played in ways they didn't intend.

Interact hires a company in Manchester, England, to create modified versions of game systems made by Sony, Microsoft, Nintendo

and others. They allow a game to be unlocked as it's played so that programmers can study the code that's hidden within.

Once that code is unlocked, it can be read through a personal computer plugged into the modified game console.

For hours on end, hackers here squint over thousands of lines of numeric coding that translate to great feats of accomplishment on a video game.

Strings of numbers and characters such as "01086436" inserted at the right time into Metal Gear Solid 2 or StreetFighter can give a player "immortality" within the game. Or it might mean that Tarzan never falls off his surfboard in the new Tarzan Untamed for kids.

It's an unusual way to make a living - the game guys at Interact earn \$28,000 to \$60,000 a year - but this is a dream job for young gamers with remarkable programming skills, many of whom are recruited right off the pages of [gameshark.com](http://gameshark.com)'s discussion boards.

"This is my passion, this is what I love to do," says Philbrook, who has been heavily into video games ever since he and a group of friends spent \$250 at an arcade during his 13th birthday party.

He recalls proudly how he and a buddy figured out a way to get free credits on the Dragon's Lair laserdisc arcade game that day; they skated through an adjacent roller rink and, after getting up a full head of steam, slammed their bodies into the 6-foot-tall metal arcade cabinet. It jostled the laser mechanism inside and gave them a free game for every body slam.

Today's hacks are less violent. Philbrook's employer, Interact, was created as a video game accessory company by brothers Todd and John Hays. Although the brothers do play video games for fun, they see themselves more as entrepreneurs than game addicts.

Growing up in Ellicott City, Md., and spending time on their grandmother's farm in Cockeysville, the Hayses were always looking for a way to make a buck. In their early teens, they started a snowball stand and made \$500 the first year, using a converted meat grinder to make the confections.

Eventually, SnOasis Snowballs became a 10-outlet chain (which they still operate), and by the time John and Todd Hays headed off to Penn State in the early '80s, they had enough capital to start a new business. First they made Christmas wreaths, but when the video game console craze hit in the early '90s, they headed into the world of game coding.

"These codes are serious business and it's big, huge money," says John Hays, 37. "And it's fun for us. We've got a code that makes it so that when you play 'Tiger Woods Golf, you get a hole in one every time."

John Hays's hacker team is overseen by 33-year-old Benn Ray, who came to Interact from Diamond Comics.

It's Ray's job to recruit hackers from GameShark's Web site discussion groups, and he looks for people who demonstrate hacking expertise and fanatic gaming tendencies.

"You have to have an innate wish to want to break things to be able to be a code hacker, and that's what we look for," says Ray.

Outside Ray's office, focusing on mapping out the levels of Metal Gear Solid 2 with a video capture device and a laptop, is Kevin Walter, 26, who quit his job as a telephone repairman in New Jersey and joined Interact.

"And now I work in a cubicle with a 27-inch TV and I'm loving life," he says.

Walter writes strategy guides for GameShark's Web site.

He spends hours analyzing the nuances of every game, and at the moment he's had an epiphany about Metal Gear Solid 2, in which he's a military commando.

"I figured out that if your character goes into the bathroom and turns the hair dryer on, the guards can hear it and they'll come in and nail you," he says.

Some purists take issue with a device that enables cheating (although Interact calls it "game enhancement"). On message boards around the Internet, hard-core gamers occasionally bad-mouth the GameShark, labeling it "a little hell device" that ruins the competitive gaming experience.

"The bottom line is the game isn't supposed to be played that way, and it helps people have an unfair advantage in online games against other players who didn't pay 40 bucks to buy a GameShark," said Kenny Harris, 19, a college student in Los Angeles who plays games with his Sega Dreamcast online. "I'm always bringing up the rear in Phantasy Star Online, and I know it's because other guys have cheat codes."

Interestingly, Phantasy Star Online, a popular space adventure in the online gaming circuit, is not one of Interact's primary targets. John Hays says that's because of the "moral issues" involved with providing cheat codes for players in head-to-head online gaming.

"We could do it, but we don't," Hays said.

# Boy who crashed plane left note sympathizing with Bin Laden

by John-Thor Dahlburg  
Los Angeles Times

It was a lonely and despondent 15-year-old, feeling sympathy for accused terrorist mastermind Osama bin Laden, who stole a private plane and slammed it into a Tampa skyscraper, authorities said Sunday.

A brief handwritten note found in the pocket of Charles J. Bishop, who died in the Saturday crash, strongly implied that the high school freshman was inspired by the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

"He made a statement expressing sympathy with Osama bin Laden and the events of 9/11," Tampa Police Chief Bennie R. Holder said at a news conference.

Despite the contents of the note, authorities said they were treating the incident as the suicide of a desperate teen and not as an attack against a U.S. target.

"He had acted alone, without any help from anyone else," Holder said. "This was a young man who had very few friends and he was very much a loner. From this action, we can assume he was a very troubled young man."

No one else was hurt when the single-engine Cessna, which may have been traveling about 100 miles per hour, punched a 10-foot-wide gap in the side of the 42-story Bank of America Plaza building only minutes after taking off from nearby St. Petersburg-Clearwater International Airport.

Unwittingly, the boy may have revealed holes in the aerial safety net that many Americans believe protects the country's cities. When asked if nothing could have been done to prevent Saturday's crash, a National Transportation Safety Board official responded, "That's correct."

"The response was occurring when the aircraft hit the building," said Butch Wilson, an NTSB investigator. "Things were moving, but in nine to 12 minutes, to get aircraft in the air, it's not enough time."

He added: "You can't protect people from someone who's bound and determined to do themselves in."

Neighbors in Palm Harbor, the middle-class development where Bishop lived with his mother for at least three months, said the boy often appeared sad and withdrawn. The new arrival, with curly brown hair, was small for his age and seemed to have been trying hard but unsuccessfully to fit in.

"When I'd walk my dog, and he'd walk by, I always had the sense that he was depressed," said Linda Wolf, an airline sales employee whose son rode the same school bus as Bishop.

Lindsey Knott, 18, a classmate of Bishop's at East Lake High School, described him as friendly, but said he was usually alone. "He was kind of quiet most of the time, but you'd hear him telling about where he had moved from, or how he was new here."

Some neighbors said he came to Florida from Boston.

Other students who rode the bus with Bishop said he never spoke during the journeys to and from school. "He stayed mostly to himself, as far as I could tell," said Dan Harrison, 15. The boy frequently walked the neighborhood streets, joined by his terrier and always clad in shorts, he said.

On Sunday, FBI agents and forensic investigators of the Pinellas County Sheriff's

Department searched through the gray-and-white, two-story townhouse where Bishop lived, looking for clues about his mood and motivations. Holder said the boy's computer would be searched.

The police chief declined to provide further information from the note written by the boy, saying the investigation was ongoing.

Bishop, a flight student, showed up for a 5 p.m. lesson Saturday at the St. Petersburg-Clearwater airport and was instructed to conduct a preflight check of the plane, police said. He took off without waiting for an instructor who was supposed to accompany him. A Coast Guard helicopter chased down the plane, but Bishop ignored the copter pilot's signals to land.

During his short flight, the teen-ager breached the restricted airspace of MacDill Air Force Base south of Tampa, where U.S. Central Command is directing the actions of U.S. troops in Afghanistan. The base was alerted by radio that a minor flying a private plane was coming in its direction, but "we didn't feel that there was any threat to MacDill at the time," said Lt. Col. Rich McClain, a base spokesman.

Two F-15 fighter jets were scrambled from Homestead Air Base south of Miami to try to intercept Bishop, but by the time they arrived, the Cessna had plowed into the 28th floor of the Bank of America tower, a prominent feature of this city's skyline.

Officials said there was little room for doubt that Bishop had been in control of the plane at all times. "I have radar data that shows him flying directly into the building," Wilson said.

Bishop had been taking lessons since March at the airport, on the western side of Tampa Bay. He was not a frequent student and would wash the airplanes belonging to the school, National Aviation Holding Inc., to get a break on the fees.

Investigators said Sunday it did not appear that any regulations were violated in leaving Bishop alone with the plane and its keys.

Most flight schools lock down their airplanes, keep tight control of the keys and insist that novice students be accompanied at all times on the tarmac. But several flight instructors on Sunday acknowledged that the Tampa incident could be repeated just about anywhere.

"Anyone who's clever enough can steal anything they want," said Joe Justice, owner of Justice Aviation in Santa Monica, Calif., a flight school that manages about 30 aircraft.

For some Tampa residents, Saturday's incident - and the scream of police and fire rescue sirens in the streets that followed - triggered fears that terrorism had struck their city. Mary Geraci, a camerawoman for a local television station, was playing Scrabble with friends about a quarter-mile from the Bank of America building at the time.

"I just said, 'Oh my God, they're here. It's happening in my own back yard,'" she recalled.

Early Sunday, wreckage from the Cessna's fuselage, which had been jutting from the skyscraper almost 300 feet above the ground, was carefully lowered to the street. The remnants of the plane were taken to Tampa International Airport, where they will be reassembled as part of the NTSB's investigation.

# Professor studies women in hip-hop

by Kristina Torres  
Knight Ridder Newspapers

Welcome to the world of Gwendolyn Pough, a hip-hop feminist scholar who wants to turn academia on its ear.

As an emerging authority on hip-hop soul divas, Pough admits she's not what might be expected: a woman who thinks of herself as shy and who lives in Minnesota.

But this assistant professor of women's studies at the University of Minnesota has turned her attention to a topic that hasn't had much scrutiny: "I would say that I don't think anyone is looking at hip-hop and gender in the same ways," allows Pough. "What I try to do is look at women rappers and what they have to say, and look at men rappers and what they say about themselves."

At 31, Pough counts a Ph.D. among her accomplishments and also serves as an adjunct faculty member for the department of African-American studies.

"She opened up a whole new world for me," says Cheryl Johnson, Pough's mentor at Miami Univer-

sity in Ohio and someone who, when she first met Pough, thought with a dismissive sigh, oh, rap.

"As I talked about Billie Holiday and Dinah Washington, she talked about Mary J. Blige," says Johnson, remembering the light bulb that went on as the conversation continued. "She helped me to listen, to see the tradition of what comes next."

What comes next, Pough hopes, empowers young black women.

Pough grew up in Patterson, N.J., "P-town" to locals and home to William Patterson University, where Pough earned her bachelor's and got her first taste of teaching through the school's Pre-College Academy for urban high-schoolers.

She continued her studies, first at Northeastern University and then at Miami, connecting her thoughts on women, rap and hip-hop feminism while polishing a love of writing first exhibited in fifth grade, when she wrote a black version of "Grease" and cast her friends and classmates in the leading roles.

Pough, the oldest of five girls, became a woman in an era of hip-hop and men. As she matures in her professional life, she wants to bring recognition to

the coming of age of hip-hop and women.

"Nobody's really looking at the young black women," Pough says. "I want feminists and black feminists to look at the life of young black girls. They're not getting any kind of critical tools to navigate."

Says Johnson: "There will always be a need for the Gwens of the world who say 'what about this, what about that.' That is important because then, 16-year-olds will realize: 'There is a place for me in (academia).' You need not alienate yourself from your own urban culture."

Pough, who admits to not yet making a full adjustment to her new home ("it's cooold," she says), made a presentation in Minneapolis a couple of years ago when she happened across a "dream job" announcement about the assistant professorship she has now.

Among the courses she'll teach next semester is one about mystery novels written by women of color. She's also writing a research book she hopes to complete by the summer. The title: "Check It While I Wreck It."

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