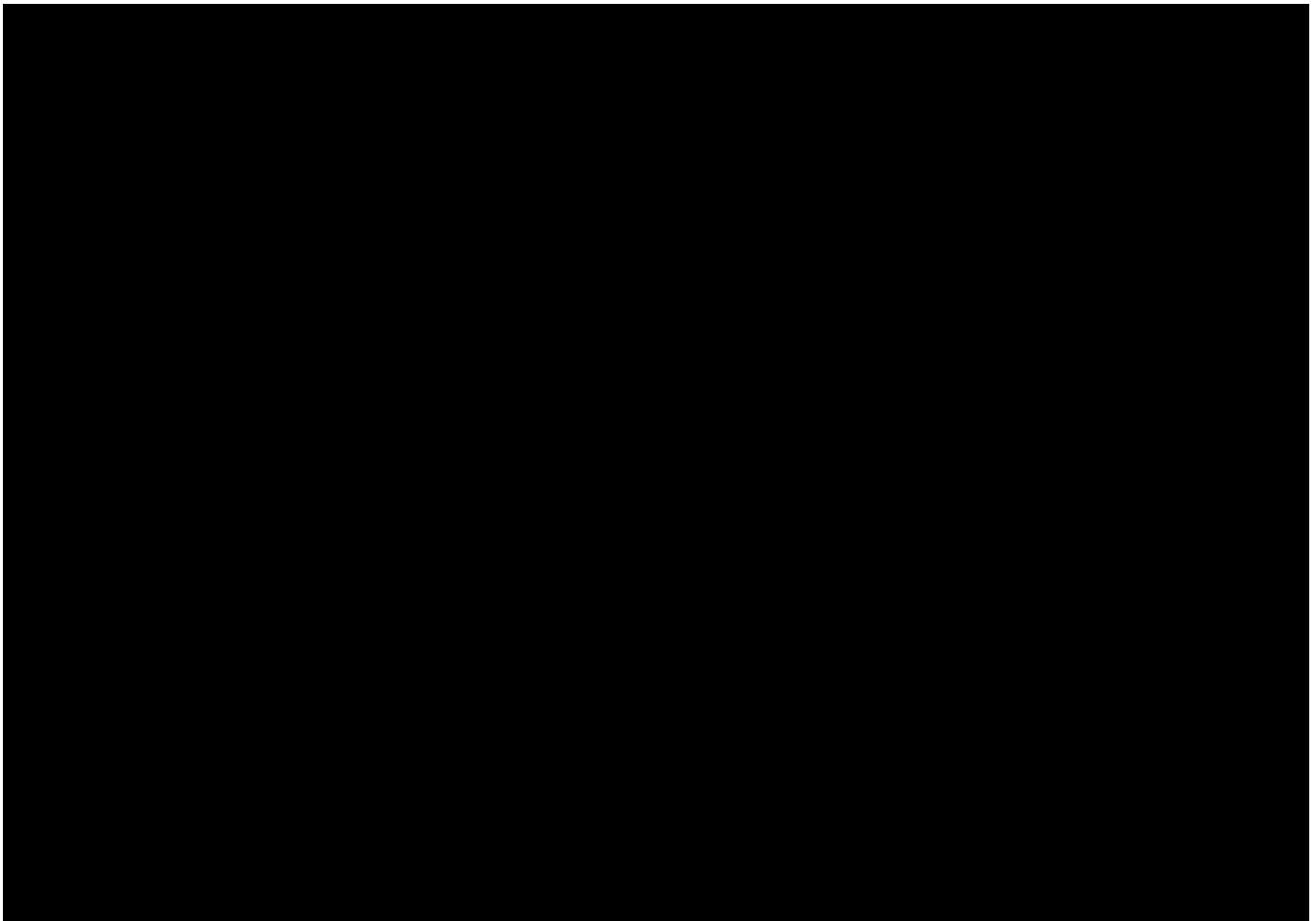# 'We Got to Be Cool About This': An Oral History of the LØpht, Part 1

Mar 6, 2018 By **[Dennis Fisher](#)**

In the beginning, there was a hat factory.

Factory is probably too grand a word for it, but the space that would eventually become the first home of [L0pht Heavy Industries](https://duo.com/decipher/an-oral-history-of-the-l0pht) began as the location of a hat-making business. The second-floor spot in a building in Boston's South End was where the wives of two of the L0pht founders spent their days making and selling hats. Soon, it would be the workspace of some of the top white hat hackers on the planet.

In 1992, the hacker scene in Boston was thriving. The city, along with Cambridge, its funkier neighbor across the river, had been ground zero for many of the technologies and companies that helped lay the foundation of the Internet in the 1970s and 1980s, and as the 1990s dawned, a new generation of free thinkers, coders, tinkerers, and engineers was emerging. This was the first generation with easy access to personal computers and many of the people who emerged from the Boston scene had spent their formative years teaching themselves how to write code and taking apart early IBM PCs, Apple Macintoshes, VAX machines, and whatever other hardware they could get their hands on.

With the web still several years away from taking over, hackers and hobbyists relied on BBS boards for communication and to trade tools, techniques, and information. It was on boards such as The Works that some of the key figures in the Boston scene first came together. Later, the local 2600 meetings became the center of gravity for much of the community, which was growing quickly by the early 1990s. The meetings brought together the disparate threads of the community: professional coders, engineers, self-taught developers, hackers, college students, and even some high school kids.

Out of that mix emerged a small, loosely connected group of hackers that would help shape the future of the hacker scene and go on to define the security industry as we know it today. Over time, the group included

Count Zero, White Knight, Brian Oblivion, Golgo 13, Weld Pond, Silicosis, Space Rogue, Kingpin, Mudge, John Tan, Dildog, and Stefan Von Neumann.

That group became known as the L0pht, one of the more influential hacker crews of the last 25 years. They were the varsity. And this is their story, in four parts.

(Read [Part 2](#), [Part 3](#), and [Part 4](#).)

Count Zero (John Lester): It started for me in high school when I got my first computer, which was an Atari 800. I couldn't afford an Apple IIe. That's what we had in the labs in high school. But I could afford an Atari 800, and I got a 300 baud modem. I wasn't really interested in programming, and I started calling bulletin board systems. I found a war dialer program that I think I copied, and then modified it. I could do a little programming, but nothing really. It was more about modifying what we could find that someone else wrote. And I made this little war dialer modification, and so I was just like calling random numbers, seeing if I heard a dial tone, and found a bunch of bulletin boards.

Kingpin (Joe Grand): The Works had all those text files, and it was sort of hacker related, but it wasn't evil hacker related. So I think The Works is the spot. I was involved in Renegade Legion doing stuff before the L0pht. The Works was definitely the first meeting point.

Count Zero: And then on those bulletin boards, I found conversations between people going around different topics. And I was just fascinated by people talking about things, and the technology. So for me it was all about the computing technology, and how we can connect people to communicate with others around the world. And then I found lists of bulletin boards around the country on these local bulletin boards. That's how the network sort of expanded, right? When I got out of school I started working in a research laboratory at Mass General. And it was really

then the late '80s early '90s that I was like living on my own, and so what did I do? I fired up my war dialer, and started calling numbers around Boston. And then I found The Works BBS.

White Knight: In 1982 or 1983 I traded some friend a bike frame for a Timex Sinclair 1000 that didn't have a power supply. I wound up finding one that would work and hooked it up to my TV and I got hooked on the notion of early personal computers and BASIC programming. My best friend, who lived next door, his dad actually worked for a government contractor and he had access to ARPANET. They had in their house a [DEC] VT52 terminal and he allowed us to explore ARPANET, and we would play games like Adventure and Zork. That eventually led to better computers and the blossoming BBS scene that was coming along.

Mudge (Peiter Zatko): I started in computers in probably about 1975. And that was with a Tektronix 4051 or a Sweet Pea 75, Southwest Technical Products. My father brought them home from work. He was working on projects for NASA. We actually have some of the first trajectories still on massive tapes from NASA calculations on these old probably Z80 systems or maybe even 8080. The challenge was, there wasn't any software at the time. You couldn't download anything. You couldn't buy anything. So my dad and I would start writing it all. He'd put me to sleep, literally, by reading me assembler manuals.

Weld Pond (Chris Wysopal): The Works was a place that a lot of hackers would log on. That's where I met Deth Veggie. That's where I met Brian Oblivion. The Works was pretty open. It was fairly public. Anyone could join. This is sort of what I learned. There are bulletin boards that screen people. Brian ran this bulletin board called [Black Crawling Systems](#). He had better, more technical files on there that he didn't want everyone to see. He had to meet me in person, so I met him on The Works and we scheduled an in-person meeting. He's basically, "Why should I let you on my board?" I had to both have some skills that I was going to contribute,

but then I had to also have some hacker cred.

Mudge: So, when I was choosing whether I was going to go to college for music or computers, because essentially I had dual tracked most of my life on both of those, I had a little run in with the government that kind of spooked me. Turned out to be nothing, because of course, I knew what the laws were and I didn't break any of them. So that skewed me towards music. I got my computer system, we'll just say back, when I was actually in college, and it was that Apple II Plus. So I had it, and somebody had taken the lowercase conversion chip set out. And so I didn't have any of my connections anymore. I hadn't been doing it for like a year and a half. I've just been doing pure music, hardcore. And I was like, "Okay." So I cobbled together a war dialer and I started scanning the Boston phone numbers for carriers. And one of the boards I found was The Works. So I log on. But what I forgot is everything I'm typing in is all caps. So here comes Mudge just like shouting at every single person.

Space Rogue (Cris Thomas): I went in the service after high school, got out of the service with the idea of going to college, but the GI Bill at the time is not the way it is now. And while I did make it to Boston University, I didn't really finish at Boston University. But in the meantime, I knew that I needed a computer to go to college, so I bought a Mac, and then I had a modem with it. And I was dialing around to various bulletin boards, and found the cool boards, if you will, which in Boston at the time was a board called The Works, which was run by a guy named Jason Scott. All the cool kids called The Works.

People would get together in Harvard Square and hang out at the Au Bon Pain, where the chess boards were...and we'd hang out there and drink our café mocha,

Americanos, and talk about computer stuff. And that's kind of the beginning.

L0pht members Weld Pond and Silicosis discuss the origins of the group, its birth in the Boston BBS scene, and its evolution and growth.
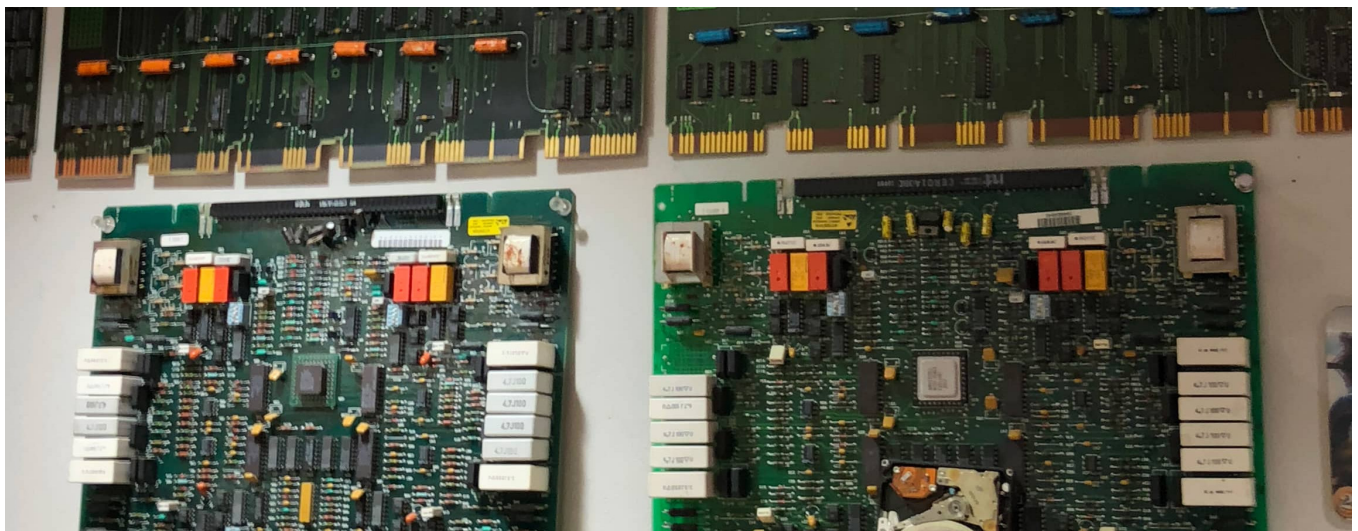
Jason Scott: I went to school in 1988 in Massachusetts and I fell into that crowd. I knew Deth Veggie and some of the [Cult of the Dead Cow](#) guys and then I got to know the L0pht guys. This was a particularly smart group of people and they were a lot of fun. They were technically smart people who liked to put things together. Count Zero was the spine of it. Brian was

really good at getting the site together. I was around the outside of it.

Space Rogue: The Works had this thing called Works Gatherings, and this predates [2600](#) meetings, this predates a lot of other type of meetings. But basically, people would get together in Harvard Square in Boston and hang out at the Au Bon Pain, where the chess boards were and old guys would play chess and we'd hang out there and drink our café mocha, Americanos, and talk about computer stuff. And that's kind of the beginning.

Count Zero: So it was these face to face get togethers. Emmanuel Goldstein, the guy who started 2600, I was hanging out with him in New York one time, and he's like, "We're trying to really expand these face to face meetings every month, the 2600 meetings." And they list them on the back of the magazine. And I said, "Cool. I don't see anything for Boston." And he said, "No. There's nothing going on in Boston." And he's like, "You want to set something up?" I'm like, "What do I have to do?" And he says, "You just have to say yes, and I put your name on the back of the magazine, and you tell me the time and place and make sure you're there, and kind of act like a host.

White Knight: I went to one of these Works meetups and that's where I met Brian Oblivion for the first time and I felt like we hit it off pretty quickly. I became acquainted with Count Zero and he and his wife were upstairs-downstairs neighbors with Brian and his wife and we all had a similar problem, which was we all lacked the space for all the hardware we had. And we wanted to work on projects together.

Silicosis (Paul Nash): I came to the Boston area in '93, and immediately started going to the 2600 meetings. Back then, it started off, it was Harvard Square, and then eventually moved to the Financial Center. Then we started doing the 2621s.

Weld Pond: Once a significant group of us were over 21, we said, "After

the 2600 meeting, it's still early. It's 9:00. It's a Friday night. Why don't we go to a bar and have some beers?"

Silicosis: It was a smaller group of people. It was a selective audience, more technically inclined, because at that point, the 2600 meetings were really becoming very popular. We did the 2621. It was bring an exploit, and you'll get a free round of drinks. It was fascinating, because you'd have a great conversation. There would be what, 15 to 20 of us? We could talk for hours. It was just a great.

Weld Pond: The bring an exploit was always a fun angle. This was pre-full disclosure. This was no disclosure really early on, so people would just share exploits.

Katie Moussouris: The Works was the first time I ever encountered the L0pht guys. And I believe I joined The Works when I was 15 years old. The very first time I met them in person was one of these meetups that was for The Works, that then kind of morphed into the 2600 meetings. Not every person who was on that BBS was super friendly towards me. And I think most of that, I would chalk up to just social awkwardness, no malicious intent. But yeah, it was more like I was so assertive that it was kind of like it didn't really matter, I was just gonna keep showing up no matter what happened. Yes, I was young, but I was very, very assertive. And kind of insistent that of course I'm going to keep showing up and as long as you hold it in a public place, I'm going to keep coming, so you better get used to it type of thing.

> *I was just gonna keep showing up no matter what happened. Yes, I was young, but I was very, very assertive.*

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The Works BBS was a key meeting point for the early members of the Boston hacker scene,
including the L0pht members.

Count Zero: Initially it was me and Brian Oblivion wanting to have space
to store all of our stuff that we were buying at the MIT flea market.
Because each of us at the time, we were married, and our wives were kind
of getting sick of like, "You know, you got all these computers and ham

radios, and broken monitors. What the hell are you doing with all this stuff? We can't store it all in our house in our apartment, right?" And Brian and I, we were hanging out, we were good friends, and I moved into the same building where he lived because I was looking for an apartment, my wife and I were looking for an apartment. And he said, "Hey, the ground floor opened up." Originally it was Brian's wife Mary, she got a job at some hat place on Newbury Street. And she was starting up this little side business of making hats. And my wife was friends with Brian's wife, and they were both kind of getting into it on their own, and they were like setting up these little work spaces in the apartments where they were putting hats together. And I remember Brian and I were like, "Okay, this shit's out of control now because on the one side of our space we've got all the computer stuff, and then we got all these hats on the other side." It's like, "We need a space." And Brian and I just sat together, and we were like, "Hey, let's find a space. Let's just rent a space. We both have jobs, we've got some money, let's just rent a space, and we can use it as a space to do two things. Put all of the stuff that we have in terms of computer stuff in there, and also the place where our wives to do their hat stuff." And we found a space. This was the key thing. It was literally on the same block just around the corner from where we lived. So it was a loft basically right behind our building. So basically we could walk over there in one minute, and we thought, "This is awesome." And we moved all of our stuff in there, and what happened was we started doing things like, "Oh, look. We've got this computer system here that we bought at the flea market, and all these dumb terminals. Let's just set it up."

White Knight: It was a little wild out there but you could get a loft space fairly inexpensively. We got together with Count Zero, myself, Brian, Golgo, and their wives and we got going and our friendships blossomed in the meantime.

Kingpin: So I was way younger, and all those guys ended up being kind of role models, whether or not they expected it. Mostly Brian Oblivion, Count

Zero were the two early on. And then when Count Zero split, and then it was Brian and Space Rogue. And then Tan joined later. Space Rogue and I joined at the same time. So I looked up to those guys, and sort of mimicked their behavior. So I was involved in Renegade Legion, this little hacker group, and we were doing all sorts of things that some people got busted for. And we have some text files that were up in The Works, and it was hacker stuff. When I started hanging out with the older guys, they knew I was still doing dumb stuff. They're like, "Ah, we know. Joe's a smart kid, but he's doing dumb shit. Keep him at arm's length a little bit until he gets that out of his system." And sure enough they were 100 percent right because I got arrested in 1992, and that was the real turning point for me.

Space Rogue: We bought a couple of modems with our earnings from what we sold at the MIT flea market and had a dedicated 56K dial-up line to the internet, and that's what started our web presence. So the L0pht started before we had Internet. The reason we started it wasn't like, "Oh, let's get this hacking group together and wreak havoc on the Internet," or whatever, because we didn't have access to the Internet. The initial reason for starting the L0pht was to store equipment. Like, we all had this excess computer crap in our houses and we needed some place to put it.

Weld Pond: We would get it from everywhere. We would do dumpster diving. A lot at MIT. If someone was throwing away a VAX, if we knew someone who was a system administrator there, we would get tipped off. We got a PDP-11 and a big VAX 11/780 chassis for free just by renting a U-Haul truck, going down and getting it and bringing it back.

Count Zero: It grew organically into this collective where we were pooling resources, and it really took off. Then we started doing things like we'll have the 2600 meeting, and afterwards, the people that we really kind of trust, because sometimes they were total strangers, but people we knew, it's like, "Yeah, let's go back to the loft." We were sitting around, and it's

like, "Can we invite them back to the space?" We would call it the space. And I was like, "That's not cool, man. We got to be cool about this." But I was like, "We got to call it something catchy, and we got to have a logo." And I remember saying, "Okay, it's a loft, so we can call this a loft, but let's spell it like hackers with a zero and a pht."

> ## I remember saying, "Okay, it's a loft, so we can call this a loft, but let's spell it like hackers with a zero and a pht."

Space Rogue: Brian and Count Zero invited Golgo 13 and White Knight to store their stuff there, also to help with some of the rent. But then the hat business went out of business, and so they weren't there to help pay their rent, so half the space is now freed up. And so, they wanted other people to come in and help pay for the rent and people that were invited were myself, Weld, Kingpin. I had been there a couple of times before. I thought it was cool, got to play with computers, and then half the space was wide open for the hat stuff. And so, when they asked me to come over one night and it was kind of a surprise and they asked me to join, I was like, "Yeah, I'm there." Like, "Sure, who do I write the check out to?" And just, "No, write the check out to yourself because you're in charge of the bills now."

Weld Pond: You'd go to DEF CON and you'd have your L0pht t-shirts, and you would sell the t-shirts. We were sort of known within the hacker community. It wasn't until we started publishing the security research that we kind of got known in more of the mainstream tech world. I think that was when the L0pht kind of changed, was when people were like, "Oh, it's a L0pht advisory. I have to listen to this." It became a thing.

Tomorrow: Part Two

Header image: Getty Images; L0pht logo courtesy of Joe Grand; center photo by author; bottom photo courtesy of Joe Grand.

[L0pht](#)