

Hall of Fame: Captain Crunch

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Who are the famous and infamous icons of computer security? Who is the Van Gogh, the Picasso, the Pollock of hacking? We present the "Hall of Fame," an article series highlighting the industry's most important and controversial figures. Whitehats and Blackhats alike.

We start with a man who tricked the telephone system by blowing a whistle.

John Draper, also known as "Captain Crunch," was a legendary figure in the world of [phone phreaking](#) and computer hacking in the 1970s and 80s. He became famous for using a toy whistle found in a box of [Captain Crunch cereal](#) to manipulate phone tones and make free long-distance calls. His ingenuity and technical savvy catapulted him to fame and inspired a generation of hackers and tech enthusiasts.

Draper's early life was marked by tragedy and hardship. He was born on March 11, 1943, in the Bronx, New York. His father abandoned the family when Draper was just two years old, leaving his mother to raise him and his older brother on her own. To make ends meet, his mother took on multiple jobs, leaving the boys to fend for themselves much of the time.

Despite the challenges he faced at home, Draper was a bright and curious child. He showed a natural aptitude for electronics and tinkering, often taking apart and reassembling household appliances just for the challenge. As he got older, he became increasingly interested in phone systems and how they worked.

It wasn't until Draper was in his 20s, however, that he discovered the world of phone phreaking. Phone phreaking was a subculture that emerged in the 1960s and 70s, involving individuals who manipulated phone systems to make free [long-distance calls](#). Draper was immediately drawn to the idea, seeing it as a way to explore the technical intricacies of phone systems while also sticking it to the phone companies.

Draper's first foray into phone phreaking was simple but effective. He discovered that he could make free long-distance calls by using a rubber toy whistle that he found in a box of Captain Crunch cereal. The whistle emitted a 2600 Hz tone, which was the same tone that AT&T used to indicate that a long-distance call was over. By blowing into the whistle, Draper could fool the phone company into thinking that his call had ended, thus allowing him to make free calls all over the world. This technique became known as "phreaking the phone."

Draper quickly gained a reputation as one of the most skilled phone phreaks in the country. He was a member of a group called the "Phone Phreakers of America," which was dedicated to exploring the technical possibilities of phone systems. The group held meetings and exchanged information on the latest phreaking techniques.

Wozniak and Draper became fast friends

Draper's technical expertise soon caught the attention of [Steve Wozniak](#), who would go on to co-found Apple Computer. Wozniak was also a phone phreak, and he and Draper became fast friends. Together, they began to experiment with building their own devices that could manipulate phone tones and make free calls. In 1972, they built the first "[blue box](#)," which was a device that could mimic the tones used by the phone company to make free calls.

The blue box was a game-changer for the phone phreaking community. It allowed users to make free long-distance calls without having to rely on rubber whistles or other makeshift devices. Draper and Wozniak's invention inspired a wave of innovation in the phone phreaking community, as others began to build their own blue boxes and experiment with new techniques for manipulating phone systems.

Draper and Wozniak's collaboration continued through the 1970s. They worked on various projects together, including building a digital dialer that could be used to make free calls from payphones. Draper also began to experiment with computer hacking, using his technical skills to gain access to computer systems and networks.

Draper's technical exploits eventually caught the attention of law enforcement. In 1972, he was arrested and charged with conspiracy to commit wire fraud for his involvement in phone phreaking. He pleaded guilty and was sentenced to five years probation.

However, Draper's legal troubles didn't stop him from continuing to push the boundaries of technology. In the 1980s, he began working on a virtual reality system called "Cyberdreams." The system used head-mounted displays to create immersive, 3D environments, and was ahead of its time in terms of technology. It was the [Metaverse](#) of the 80s so to say.



Draper's contributions to the world of technology were recognized by many in the industry. In 1998, he was awarded the Pioneer Award from the [Electronic Frontier Foundation](#), which recognized his contributions to the field of computer technology and his advocacy for freedom of information.

Throughout his life, Draper remained a controversial figure. Some saw him as a hero of the counterculture, a man who used his technical skills to challenge the power of corporations and government. Others saw him as a criminal who engaged in illegal activity and put innocent people at risk.

Regardless of how one feels about Draper's actions, it's hard to deny the impact that he had on the world of technology. His technical expertise and willingness to push boundaries inspired a generation of hackers and tech enthusiasts, and his legacy lives on today in the countless individuals who continue to explore the possibilities of technology.

Additional Resources

"[Hackers: Heroes of the Computer Revolution](#)" by Steven Levy - This book chronicles the rise of the hacker subculture in the 1970s and 80s, and features Draper as one of the key figures in the movement.

"[Exploding the Phone: The Untold Story of the Teenagers and Outlaws Who Hacked Ma Bell](#)" by Phil Lapsley - This book provides a detailed history of phone phreaking and features Draper as one of the main characters.

"[The Secret History of Hacking](#)" - This documentary film explores the history of hacking, featuring interviews with Draper and other notable figures in the hacking community.

"[The KGB, the Computer, and Me](#)" - This documentary film tells the story of Draper's involvement in a scheme to hack into a computer system at the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory in the 1980s.

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