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Hackers Happy Campers
by Steve Kettmann

3:00 a.m. 7.Aug.99.PDT

BERLIN -- It takes countless hours cooped up indoors in front of a computer screen to truly appreciate the giddy mood at this weekend's three-day Chaos Communication Camp.

By Friday evening, more than 1,400 hackers, encryptologists, computer visionaries, and assorted geeks had pitched their tents in a scenic lakeside field, and more were on their way.

See also: Chaos in Berlin

An afternoon of workshops gave way to a warm evening of lounging in front of tents, as people pounded away at keyboards and greeted acquaintances they had met only via networks or email.

"It's a way to attach faces to email addresses," said John Gilmore, one of the founders of the San Francisco-based Cypherpunks. "It's a way to say, 'Hey, I know this person, we've been collaborating for years. Who *are* you?'"

Like others at the event, Gilmore was headed in about four directions at once. That's how it goes when you put together thousands of smart, passionate people used to the isolated pursuit of their craft.

Mass hacking, under the stars no less, was one of the activities. It took on an unlikely charm, especially given its location -- in the main tent next to a small, polished-silver spacecraft, a "shuttle" to Chaos' Heart of Gold Web site.

This weekend's three-day event, the first of its kind in Germany, takes as its inspiration Hacking in Progress, a similarly organized hacking and technology festival that took place outside of Amsterdam two summers ago.

"About 10 Cypherpunks went to HIP two years ago, and they came back with so many stories about how fun it was hanging out with people there. Also, they finished proofreading and typing in PGP, Pretty Good Privacy, a computer program that does encryption, so there was an international version," said Gilmore.

"I didn't make it to HIP, but I resolved to go to the next one, and here I am. We have 15 or 20 people here, probably more than a dozen from the San Francisco Bay Area, and others scattered around from Berlin and Amsterdam and other parts of Europe. It's a real collegial, friendly sort of

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The Berlin-based Chaos Computer Club, which organized the weekend, spent a year preparing for the meeting. That comes through in the atmosphere of crisp organization that seems to meld seamlessly with a spirit of fun -- the latter best summed up by comments like, "What's it like? I've never done pot before."

"For me, this is more German than HIP," said Ine Poppe, a Dutch documentary filmmaker and artist who worked HIP as a journalist. "It's better organized. They learned a lot from the festivals before.

"From my point of view, HIP had more of a scene of chaos: tents close together and cables all over the place and dance parties into the night. Maybe we will have those later."

Kurt Seifried, a 22-year-old from Edmonton, Alberta, was roaming around the Cypherpunk tent with the exultant air of a student wrapping up finals week.

"I gave a talk during one of the workshops and they didn't throw beer cans at me, so I guess it went all right," he said. "It was my first public speaking experience, so it was kind of scary.

"The worst part was, they canceled the other workshop scheduled for the same time, so I looked up and about 100 people were streaming into the tent wanting to be entertained. It was like something out of Pink Floyd's *The Wall*."

Seifried's area of expertise is security, the yin to cracking's yang. His 177-page guide to Linux security is posted on the Web.

"It's encryption at network level to secure things, because right now the Internet is wide open, as people know. I came here to do that, and to network a little," he said.

Yet after the hacking and networking comes the relaxing, and the face-to-face conversations.

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