OF HACKERS AND WITCHES

Recently I was lucky enough to come into possession of a book by Terry Pratchett called *"A Hat full of Sky"*. I normally really enjoy Pratchett's books and have no problem at all recommending them, but I really liked this one. In fact there are two passages I would like to share with you all...

> *"Witches didn't fear much, Miss Tick had said, but what the powerful ones were afraid of, even if they didn't talk about it, was what they called 'going to the bad'. It was too easy to slip into careless little cruelties because you had power and other people hadn't, too easy to think other people didn't matter much, too easy to think that ideas like right and wrong didn't apply to you. At the end of that road was you dribbling and cackling to yourself all alone in a gingerbread house, growing warts on your nose. Witches needed to know that other witches were watching them."*

and,

> *"'The locked-up bit was the important bit,' said Mistress Weatherwax. 'Learnin' how not to do things is as hard as learning how to do them. Harder, maybe. There'd be a sight more frogs in this world if I didn't know how not to turn people into them.'"*

As I finished reading the book I thought to myself, that if you substitute the word hacker (the traditional meaning is what I mean not the sensationalized meaning) wherever you see the word witches, the first excerpt would still make a lot of sense (well maybe not the gingerbread house part), you see we as hackers need to know that other hackers are watching us, kinda helps to keep us honest. As for why? Well the second excerpt explains that very well, because it really is more difficult to not do something then it is to learn how to do something. And lastly, as I have said before, what we do very often looks like magic to those people who do not know how it is done, much the way I view nuclear physics ... or the inside of my car engine actually.

You see, I do not count myself as a great genius when it comes to IT security in all it's facets. I know for a fact that there are many people out there who do know more then me. But I do know a bit, some might say enough to be dangerous, but thats my whole point. Even with what I know, I find myself tempted to cause havoc sometimes, like when some moron who has no idea what he is doing, tells me that "telnet is not that bad" or that "IP is on it's way out" or tries to tell me how to do my job when the concept of a multi-user system leaves him confused (I wish I was joking with these examples). Or when some sales-drone tells me that I am not getting a raise because I do not suck up as well as he would like. At these times, I admit, I am tempted to cause havoc - deleting files, changing data, etc, etc - all the usual bad stuff. You see, it really is hard to learn how *not* to do something.

As I carried on thinking, I figured that that must be why so many of us feel the need to teach people what is done and how it is done. Maybe unconsciously we want people to be able to catch us, because if we know that there are people who know what we know .. well it helps keep us in check, thats also what the first excerpt says (the substitutions are mine of course), "*Hackers* needed to know that other *hackers* were watching them." Of course I could be wrong, but I wonder ...

I really do think it is very important to for us to have lines/morals/standards/ethics - call it what you will, we need them. Without them, it is very easy to start down a path which ends up with "warts and a gingerbread house". Us technical people may not always be the nicest, or the best looking, or the easiest people to get along with that you may meet, heck most of us are paranoid, violent, harsh and sarcastic to a certain extent and we are always in need of caffienne or sugar - generally both. But in spite of all of this, most of us generally try to do the right thing. But it is not always easy, we get belittled in most companies and have to follow the lead of those people who have no clue, so we do get tempted, often. And when our own standards seem to not be enough, it helps to know there are other witches ... sorry, I mean hackers ... that there are other hackers making sure we remember how not to do certain things.

So teach, learn and have fun. Watch for warts ... both on your own nose and on all of ours.