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Illegal program troubles America Online

By Simson Garfinkel
SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE

An illegal computer program making the rounds on some electronic bulletin board systems is creating havoc for America Online Inc. and its customers.

Called AOHell, the program has a number of devilish features seemingly designed to turn on-line lives into living nightmares.

Armed with AOHell, a user can send hundreds of electronic mail messages to unwitting victims in just a few seconds. The technique, known as "mail bombing," can also be used to clog someone's fax machine and even someone's US mailbox.

Exploiting an apparent bug in the authorized AOL software, AOHell can also abruptly log off legitimate subscribers simply by striking the "punt" command. Another command will send a graphically obscene gesture to customers in AOL's chat forums. A button called "Ghost" will clear everyone's comments but the AOHell user's.

The author of the insidious program, who identifies himself in the program's electronic manual as Da Chronic, says he wrote AOHell because: "I hate the staff on AOL for one, I hate most of the people on AOL for another, and I wanted to cause a lot of chaos."

Indeed, AOHell's worst punches seem to be aimed directly at America Online itself.

AOHell has a nefarious system built into it for generating fictitious credit-card numbers. According to users, the program can make free accounts that last up to 10 hours of on-line time or one week, whichever comes first.

"Any member using AOHell will have their account immediately terminated," said Margaret Ryan, an AOL spokeswoman.

Ryan wouldn't say whether AOL has any technical fixes in the works that would prevent the program from functioning properly.

Although AOHell's author has chosen to remain anonymous, a built-in feature allows AOHell users to send bug reports to the author. Those reports get sent to a computer in Finland called an anonymous remailer, which allows people on the Internet to exchange electronic mail without knowing each other's identities.

"If you think AOHell 2.0 is marvelous, wait until you see 3.0," wrote the program's author, in response to an electronic mail message. "I'm almost finished with it and it will make version 2 look like a Commodore 64 program."

better, and most providers now sell service at the higher speed.

Prices vary widely, but the entry level – offered by Xensei of Quincy and prob-

Local companies frequently put together software bundles they know will work with their systems and offer them to customers to ease the once-daunting task

the easy-to-use software that made it the darling of computer novices, Prodigy sprinted another length ahead this week.

Modem speeds, which doubled and redoubled in recent years, have hit a ceiling at 28.8 kbs, the practical limit for data traveling over an ordinary phone line. To enjoy pictures, sound and megabyte monsters like video clips without interminable waiting requires still higher speeds, generally attainable only with extremely expensive lines dedicated to high-speed communications.

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