

Hackers build mobile phone network for Def Con

July 29 2012, by Glenn Chapman

A custom mobile phone network came to life in the middle of Def Con as hackers showed off their technology skills in tribute to the infamous gathering's elite "ninjas."

A Def Con team bought a [telecom company](#) van and configured a "Ninja Tel" cellular phone network to pay homage to longtime hackers who have kept the spirit of the event alive and, admittedly, just to do something "over the top."

"People don't realize how much hacking has changed," said Def Con veteran Dan Kaminsky, known for discovering a perilous Internet bug that bears his name.

"This used to be a sub-culture of people who bonded over their fascination with technology," he continued. "Now, hacking has gone mainstream."

"A mom hacks her kid's grade at school and [Rupert Murdoch](#) gets called out for hacking."

The Ninja Tel team built 650 handsets powered by [Google](#)-backed [Android](#) software tailored to synch with the exclusive Ninja Tel network.

The smartphones were handed out as "badges" to members of the Def Con community whose hacker accomplishments or whose legacies in the

20-year-old annual gathering have earned them "ninja" status.

"The ninjas represent a group of phenomenally intelligent people who share a common interest and passion," said John Hering, head of Lookout [Mobile security](#) startup and part of the team behind Ninja Tel.

"They are a center point for the community at Def Con; it is a very special thing."

Ninja Tel mobile phones only work within range of the van, which is parked in the middle of the Def Con event that continues through Sunday in the Rio Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas.

Contact numbers for anyone with a Ninja Tel phone are automatically listed in handsets, which also allow callers to playfully battle one another with virtual karate moves in a spin on the child's game Rock, Paper, Scissor.

Ninja Tel has a geek "Easter egg" -- the woman who was the original voice for recorded AT&T information messages during landline days of decades gone by did the voice-overs for the hacker network.

"It really is a throwback to a more simplistic era of telephony," Hering said. "It looks like the Yellow Pages, but it is a really sophisticated Android operating system."

Ninja Tel phones could also be used to signal vending machines scattered about Def Con to pop out free beer or soda using wireless technology at close range.

"We've made it hackable from the ground up," Hering said of the [handsets](#).

"You can build your own apps and customize the device to do some more interesting things."

The team at Ninja Tel declined to reveal how much was spent on the project, which was pulled off with the backing of Facebook, Zynga, Qualcomm, and Lookout.

"It's a pretty ambitious project to build your own Telco, effectively, and your own device from scratch," Hering said.

The hacker mobile network came as the sun set on a Def Con tradition, the exclusive annual party hosted by Ninja Networks.

Ninja Networks is rooted in the original hackers whose time at Def Con dates back decades to when it was an intimate assembly of technology renegades.

Kaminsky smiled at the notion of Ninja Tel, seeing it as hackers "social engineering" major companies into buying them a [mobile phone network](#).

"There are many definitions of the word 'hacking,'" Kaminsky said.
"This is hacking on a corporate scale."

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