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Computer researcher says he's a nerd and proud of it

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By Melissa Trujillo/Associated Press

MILWAUKEE -- Paul Watson thought he saw a security problem that could seriously hurt the Internet, and he was willing to spend his nights, weekends - even his vacation - figuring it out.

"Just putting in hours researching intricacies of protocol and stuff is a lot of fun," Watson said Tuesday, soon after landing in Vancouver, British Columbia.

The 35-year-old Milwaukee man discovered a flaw in the underlying technology for nearly all Internet traffic that, left unaddressed, could be used to seriously disrupt its flow of information. He is expected to explain his findings Thursday at an Internet security convention in Vancouver.

At a conference last summer, Watson, an information security specialist at Rockwell Automation, heard experts say it wasn't practical to use the security problem to attack the Internet.

"During their talk, I saw what I thought was a flaw in their logic, asked a brief question, didn't like the answer and immediately went out by the pool and started the first draft of my research," he said.

About two months later, his work was nearly done.

But not before he took two weeks off to concentrate in his basement, which Watson said has more than 30 computer systems "for recreation."

"It's his work, it's his hobby, it's just something he enjoys," Watson's wife, Cynthia, said. "He pretty much lives in the basement."

So she and her husband's colleagues said they were not surprised he made the discovery. Paul Watson kept his bosses at Rockwell up to date during his research.

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"Tony is a very talented guy," Rockwell media relations manager Steve Smith said. "Based on what he's produced here, it's evidence of his talents."

Watson said he was a little taken aback by all the attention his findings received Tuesday from the tech community and governments around the world.

"This is a nerd thing," he said he told a friend, "nobody's going to be interested in this."

Unlike others who intentionally disrupt the Internet, Watson looks to fix the problems he finds in computer systems.

The moniker for his personal Web site, which he named www.terrorist.net well before the Sept. 11 attacks, says the exact opposite of his true goals, he said.

"I'm anything but a terrorist," Watson said. "In the past, whenever I discovered something, it's always been responsible disclosure."


Watson also doesn't fit the quiet, dull stereotype of a hacker, his wife said. Besides computers, he enjoys skiing, running and hanging out with their two daughters, ages 8 and 13.

"He's very, very, very friendly," Cynthia Watson said. "He loves to be a clown too."

But Paul Watson doesn't mind one stereotype about computer experts.

"I'm a hard-core geek through and through," he said. "To me, it's the biggest compliment anyone could give me to call me a nerd."

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