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16 Interview - Antitrack

Antitrack, Sun 10 Jun 2007

Interview

Known as one of the most skilled crackers in the C64 scene, he's had some proud times amongst the likes of Legend, F4CG and Cosmos to name a few. Please stand and applause...

Antitrack.

R)

Welcome to the second edition of Recollection. Most people have heard of you or even know you, but for those who don't please introduce yourself.

A)

Hi there! I'm Alex from Central Europe and am better known as a cracker under my handle, "Antitrack/Legend". I was born around 1970. I'd like to tell you more, but then I'd have to kill you.

R)

When and how did you start out on the C64?

A)

I got my C-64 as x-mas present in 1982, together with a datasette and a copy of a chess game. At my birthday in 1983, I got a Commodore 1541 disk drive, which was much more convenient. The first few years, I just played games and copied stuff just like everyone else. Back then, basically, no-one cared, especially no sort of "authority" or even (shudder) "detectives".

R)



When and how did you enter the underground C64 scene?

A)

It's difficult to pinpoint the precise date, but pretty soon, after a few years of meeting all local dudes and computer clubs, my supply of new stuff was quite exhausted, and playing games got boring; I felt I ought to code a bit. You see, my local friends were pretty active sceners; some of them were not just copying stuff, but also did a lot of coding and cracking. For example, I learned how to rip music from a local friend called RLA, whom I met around 1983. (Later, we coded the "Chaos Speech" demos together.) Anyway, someone told me to go and call some dude called "CHC/TSK", and so I did. In the 80's, there was absolutely no fear of meeting someone who only really wants to narc on you, this was just unthinkable at this time. Everyone, even the local dudes, were mostly friendly and helpful; you'd just avoid the very few real "nerds", who'd show their bad character pretty soon, which made avoiding them all the more easy. Anyway, back to CHC: I was already coding quite a bit at this time, so I showed CHC some of my sideboarder-routines, which were pretty impressive to him. We agreed to meet the rest of the TSK crew members on a local meeting. There I was introduced and eventually declared new member of TSK. The rest, as they say, is history.

At this time, in 1987, I was already proficient at cracking because some local dudes copied me their 'uncopyable' original games using a burst nibbler, and I tried to crack them (successfully, of course). They also borrowed me a lot of original tapes, which I also cracked. This was a great learning experience because no sort of pressure was involved (i.e. the usual "we have to put this game out FIRST!"), and the "Data Becker" books were especially useful, for example their best book was titled the "Anti-Cracker Book". For me, this book only helped cracking, it didn't help defeating cracking. Vaguely remembering, it was around 30 games I cracked just for myself between 1985 and 1987. Any new protection was always treated as a challenge to be welcomed (because, at its' core, in principle impossible to do).

R)

What happened after TSK? Please tell us about your time in Cosmos, 711, Legend and F4CG.

A)

TSK was ruled by a single guy, "The Softkiller". In fact, TSK is just short for, "The Softkiller Crew". We were five people. All of us were disappointed about Softkillers' dictatorship. He did all the important decisions, for example, who had to mailtrade with whom, and we just had to obey. After a while we just took all his addresses and contacts, added our own, dumped Softkiller, and formed a new group called Cosmos. Our new leader was SSD, "Softspider". He organised the originals and also did a lot of modem trading. CHC and me



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were the crackers. Cosmos was very successful, and we were visiting a lot of copy parties together, but after about one and a half year SSD resigned - why, was a mystery even to me on the beginning. Much later on there was a rumor saying that SSD's phone bill due to his modem-trading was the culprit. Anyway, not too much later I got an offer to crack for 711, which I did, but the strange thing about it was the low amount of originals floating in. Another few years later, I got an offer from Legend (since I was mailtrading with them for quite a while) to join their group. Wise decision! I surely had my best time there again! However, the same problem, too few originals, slowly appeared; but now, it we're speaking about the mid-90s, not the end of the 80s, anymore. Then I thought it would be a good idea to join another group, as a second group. This "second group" is, you guessed it, F4CG. However, someone started the rumour that I left Legend, which I never did. So some people believed I was in one group only, when in fact I was both in Legend and F4CG. Basically, I didn't care what other people believed or not, or wanted to hear or not. For me, I was in both groups - end of discussion. Anyway, the amount of originals from F4CG was pretty low, and one of their Austrian members thought it would be funny to "change" something in my crack without talking to me first, so I stopped immediately for I didn't like it. He added his "own" IFFL plus title pic to my intro+main program, which looked totally stupid. The "own" IFFL he added was the commercial one by Radwar. This just looked pathetic. I realised I was in the wrong group, for I always upheld a high quality in my artworks whenever possible, with very few exceptions.

R)

Out of the groups you were in, which were your favourite and why?

A)

Honestly, I can't decide between being in "Cosmos" and being in "Legend". Both had its pros and cons. Cosmos had more originals, but also higher pressure; Legend had just these incredible phone conferences and better BBS'es! And perhaps the nicer sounding name, by the way.

R)

Back then, what was it like to be an "elite cracker" on the C64?

A)

Actually, it was very simple - you had all sort of contacts, lots of local friends, two private archivists for archiving all the stuff, several



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semi-private mail-trading-swappers for getting the new stuff from less famous contacts; a P.O.Box of your own, and of course a constantly busy phone-line. Over the time, you'd hand-pick the better contacts for private mailtrading (and tool swapping) and leave the worse ones to your local mailtraders, which may or may not be a member of your group (at least for a while). That of course shifts all the bad contacts to your local friends, which perhaps isn't a nice thing to do, but basically everyone did it like that. So, that's the PRO side. The other side of the coin is when you have 3 originals to crack, all at once, and no clue what the bloody protection is doing, since it is a new protection, and you cannot ask anyone anything about it! So you're sitting deep at night at your computer, wondering, "what the FUCK is this hell of a code doing, and what am I going to do about it?" and you know you have to finish this real soon now, coz your group may lose the race with other groups. (A little anecdote: CHC had no freezer and pressed the Reset button 12 hours in a row straight (at the right moment of loading from tape) so as to get the more important bytes of a tape loader...)

Luckily, this other side of the coin didn't show up too many times. Our original suppliers would be able to guess which protection was weak, and would not assign all the hard protected originals to one cracker when there were several. The crackers would get more and more proficient defeating even the hardest protections. And, don't forget, all this cracking was still done for a basic passion to overcome the protection challenge. So even if it was hard, it was also much fun.

R)

There have been many different styles of crack-groups in the scene, what ones stand out in your mind as the best and why?

A)

Styles? A crack-group isn't a way of style for me. You crack and train the stuff, period. The better you do it, the more I'll like your work. If you think you're going to impress a cracker with anything lower than cracking a super-hard protection, you're wrong. The only thing that has style is perhaps the intro - we crackers usually leave this task to the intro coders. But if you consider "style" for doing "hard high-quality cracks", I was surely impressed by all the heroes doing the super-hard-protected stuff. Triad stands out, with Mr. Z; so does MZP/TLC, or Omega Man/TLC. Few people are there who constantly took the challenge of a real hard protection.

R)

What did your normal day look like during the time when you were on the top of almost all cracking charts?

A)

Less exciting than you think! I still had to deal with all the normal stuff, like school or, later, studying. Basically, the first half of the day



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was wasted by school, the early evening, up to the nights of course, were devoted to coding, cracking and phone calls. If this sounds pretty lonely, you're right, but I wasn't that unhappy about it. All the fun and respect from my local and global friends surely made up for it. About the charts themselves, I hardly read too many mags; I knew first-hand what's going on, anyway. I really didn't care too much about what others think about my stuff, for I knew it was good - I didn't feel I really needed an echo about it. But yes, it was surely fun to get such an echo anyway.

R)

Can you please tell us more about Paperback Writer? I heard it had some disk protection and a nasty dongle to overcome, which is why you, Mr. Z, Janitor and Mr. Zero Page were some of the only guys ever releasing it.

A)

Okay. One German guy copied an original called "Paperback Writer" to many of his contacts and made a sort of cracking contest out of it, since he considered its protection extremely hard. It had "only" a disc protection with one sync per track, which could easily be copied by burst nibbler. So where's the hard stuff? The hard stuff was the protection itself. Everything was encoded by TONS of encoding- and decoding loops. They were simple but efficient, much in the EOA-loader-style. Everything was used and checked: Timers, even sound chip registers, of course the whole zeropage, stack values, etc. There was no such a thing as a "jump" to the main program in any way (BRK, RTI, RTS) - you'd just suddenly find out, after the 120th or so decode loop, that miraculously, a sort of program is started directly after this loop (which is also very EOA-loader-style). Important pointers to subroutines remained on the stack, etc. etc. In 1987, this wasn't fun anymore, and I still refused to use a freezer. When the main program started, the fun was still not over: the print routine inside the main program would check another time the correct SID chip values, which were set earlier in just every weird way possible. You can't directly disassemble the print routine, since she is also decoded with a tiny loop, the print command is executed, and the print routine then is being encrypted again! The SID chip check would also, of course, defeat any freezer. Checksums were all over the place. The whole program code consisted more of 'protection' than of actual 'program code'. Oh yes, and no use trying to modify the floppy code, it was also encrypted, at least at the beginning. The other way to crack this would be to grab all data from the drive and write a compatible loader that sends the data from the drive to the c-64 as expected, but from a normal file and not from a 1-sync-per-track format. I haven't tried it to solve the riddle from this way. Your mileage may vary. For being just, basically, a single-file program, Paperback Writer was surely ultimate in its protection. When I was done with it, I realised no other protection could be in theory too much harder than that, and so far this assessment is, still, correct. The other guys I know who cracked this were MZP and Scratch/Triangle. I haven't seen the other versions of PBW done by MZP, Mr. Z, and Janitor myself, but I'd sure be happy to get them. Scratch/Triangle missed the "printer check" however, that's where his version crashes. Also, I have seen a very strange "Paperback Writer for 128" version, where someone probably attacked the disk loader more directly. I can't remember who did it, but the name sounded like a hardly known American group. The same guy who made the protection for PBW later on also made the super-hard "Dragons Lair" protection on Amiga.



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R)

You also had fun with Ivo Herzeg's Timex V2 and V3? What were the most hardcore protections and protected programs on the C64 and also were any of them overrated?

A)

That's right, Timex was quite a fun, more like a large joke, really. A large self-modifying beast residing fully in the whole zeropage would decode, using way too many timer registers, a single step decoder, which, ultimately, directly sends the drive routines (no usage of kernal calls!) via `0000`; the drive, disappointingly, only checks one single GCR-0-byte-mark at Track 18, Sector 18. After all checks are passed, the single-step-decoder decodes an RTI command which directly jumps into the now-with-timers-decoded-game. Great fun due to lots of illegal opcodes!

However, we'd have to look at the pros and cons : Timex is vulnerable to low-level reset-cracking and 'circumventing' much more than its developers might want to concede. If I'd do the nasty thing and burn my own floppy kernel with a modified M-E-command, Timex is history in five minutes. Timex' 0-byte-GCR-mark can easily be duplicated by good burst nibblers or it can be added later to a bad copy of the original with just the tiniest self-written 1541 drive code. And hell yes, all of Timex' routines can be woozled through by the basic mechanism of just stopping all the timers, adding your own code, and running the timers again. This was "fixed" in Timex V3 (after I told the Timex developers and also developed a 2 block routine that woozles through Timex on a sunny Saturday afternoon) by using "EOR `0012`" and "EOR `0011`" (i.e. XOR with the raster routines). The rationale behind this was that you could stop timers, but you cannot stop the raster register! However, you don't have to. You can wait `4cc7` cycles on a PAL computer (yea, lots of nops and useless wait loops!) and the raster beam is in exactly the same position as "before" stopping the timers. Furthermore there is a TERRIBLE, HUGE bug in Timex V3 that lets you change memory location `FFFF`, so the BRK command at `00FF` returns to where-ever YOU want to return it to, thus making Timex V3, unfortunately, almost trivial. The whole Timex code is just "a few" bytes long; (0000-00ff and around 0400-07ff) and can be circumvented way too easily, thus it has been overrated many times by many other crackers.

"Circumventing" protections is not a great art; removing it completely altogether (whilst woozling through, and understanding, all decoding loops and still remembering each and every part of it) is the real goal. If you deprive yourself of the real goal, you miss all of the fun of understanding what really happens at the decoding level. No real cracker who loves his work, can afford that. Yes, especially Timex V3 was overrated; V2 was, in a sense, even harder, for it didn't allow you to modify `FFFF`.

R)

Something interesting happened at the Light/Phenomena Easter party in 1992 with a tool you wanted to show people, can you tell us what happened?



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A)

Oh, sure. You know, packing on the c-64 was pretty boring all the time, for packers like CruelCruncher often needed several hours crunching time. Worst time I remember was like 7 hours. This was also a good excuse for slow crackers back then.... No real cracker would afford to release a crack without (level-)packing the stuff. In 1992, I experimented with my old MS-DOS and transferred some disks from C-64 to PC and tried out the PC's crunchers. Even my slow PC (16 MHZ, back then!) didn't need hours to crunch my files, only seconds! Thus, I immediately realised that the PC's strength in this case wasn't due to its superior speed, but due to its superior algorithm. This disclosed direction immediately resulted in studying some books about data structures and algorithms. Soon I found out that the C-64's cruncher is stuck into a double loop. I programmed a new version of that loop during a weekend and was amazed to find out that the modified compression algorithm of DarkSqueezer now only took one minute compression time where he needed hours on the unmodified version!

I planned to release this tool on the Light-Phenomena party Easter 1992, provided that the organisers will allow me to introduce the audience to this new tool (and its new algorithms) on the large screen. But alas, only demos were allowed. This felt weird for me, for my packer got all sort of praises from all kinds of dudes at the party. So eventually I teased the FLT dudes with the packer a bit, but of course I let it leak out lately and pretended I was pissed about it (such rumors secure the spreading of one's tools; otherwise, everyone else surely wouldn't have given away this fine piece of art, since it gives a time advantage for cracking and ultimately first-releasing, away.) I also made sure that the biggest lamers would get it first, so the chance of spreading this fine tool gets higher (and the poor lamers have their heyday). I bet the truth about my packer will come as a surprise to some people, who perceived "these events" back then quite differently. However, I definitely planned to spread the packer at the party. I thought I ought to have gotten a special prize for it - after all, crunching with perfect result in just 5 minutes was just a dream for the 64 community at that time. It's weird how irrational people can get when a superior product comes along! It somehow reminds me of the Microsoft FUD tactics against Linux...

R)

What memories do you have of the groups and sceners from the American scene and the relationship it had with the European scene as far as boards and importing?

A)

Sadly, I have only been in touch with very few Americans. The reasons were pretty simple: We already had other members doing the hassle of 300-then-1200-baud modem trading; for example, TSK (the boss himself) did all the 300 baud "importing" of some "Bards Tale" (multidisk) version; furthermore, the crackers were way too few. Quoting Jeff Smart's mag "Illegal #36": "There are 250 million Americans and only ONE (ESI) who can crack properly!" That, of course, neatly ended my "biz" with Americans as far as I was concerned, for I was single-mindedly concerned with cracking only. For the lower tasks, there were the lower people, which I don't really want to know in general. What was also weird for me was that most Americans had a much larger ego problem and a much more aggressive attitude, whereas Europeans would just be friendly, even if they were super-experts on their field (Darkforce, the



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compression expert, comes to mind as a good example of real friendship and character, as well as many musicians, gfx artists, coders, local friends, etc.).

To be fair, I must say I really liked some phone conferences, which of course were started by some Americans, but the usual procedure was that you would just end up after a 6-hour-conference talking about tech details with some other European, whereupon the rest of the conference was pretty much asleep already.

There was only one special guy, outside the real scene, not from America but from Australia (and I'm not referring to Jazzcat hehe), I'm referring to a single individual named "Anthony D. McS." from Tasmania. He was able to disassemble whole games and study their routines up to the smallest detail. No routine was too complex not to be perfectly disassembled; Anthony's sourcecode looked better than the original sources from the original programmers. (He disassembled the depacker of Darksqueezer, for example. Or some 3d-vector routine from some Amiga game. His sourcecodes are amazing!) Disassembling other peoples code was Anthony's passion, even for multiple systems (64, Amiga, SNES, others). He was just amazing at it. Sadly, he moved house and never showed up again on the net. This was in 1994.

Other than that, I must admit I kept the usual European arrogant attitude, which means, I couldn't care less about the importers and the BBS's except perhaps a very, very, very few. Many other Europeans just felt the same way about Americans in general; this was neatly detailed in some old issues of Jeff Smart's "Illegal". It went something like: "Do these Americans think we Europeans live in a cave? Yet they can't crack at all!"

Today, with the advent of the Internet, BBS's and Americans are obsolete. Hooray!

R)

Did you ever have any problems with the law relating to any of your C64 activities?

A)

Never! Not me! I check out people constantly and filter fake friends and unreliable wannabe-sceners mercilessly! This works perfectly! But I know a single local guy who once was so stupid as to mailtrade with unknown lamer groups. He got a "cease-and-desist" letter from a lawyer and subsequently paid a fine. His fault, not mine.



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R)

The scene is known for its trouble-makers and wars. Were you ever caught up in any individual or group wars?

A)

Uh, we had quite some argument with Genesis Project back then. We considered their mag "Sex and Crime" for what it is, i.e. rubbish, self-hype, and self-glorification, and we considered their cracker way too overrated. They once called me on a conference call and tried to rag on me, but I was well prepared for such situations. I couldn't care less anyway. Basically, I always stayed out of trouble; once you learn how to smell trouble, this is done pretty easily. Staying out of all sort of crap always worked well for me.

R)

What release impressed you most on C64?

A)

If you mean "cracked game", perhaps "Toki" by my own group Legend. They had to reprogram large parts of the game so as to make it run without a cartridge. If you mean "demo", there was a certain glenz vector demo by "Pi", which showed morphing vector objects for over 10 minutes. Very impressive! But I was also very impressed, back then, by the inventors of the opening of the sideborders, 1001 Crew...

R)

and what release let you down the most?

A)

Game cracks? Too many to mention - did you think just changing a few bytes in an EOA loader makes you a hero?

R)

Who do you think is the biggest lamer to walk the face of the C64 scene?



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A)

OMFG, don't you know how many lamers walk around? For me, the current best candidate is perhaps MASON, aka "Bamboo". He's just such an unreliable swapper, it's incredible. You could as well throw your disks into a black hole and forget about them. And listening to his pathetic excuses makes it all the worse. But there are many people like this walking around. So don't hold your breath for a long lamer list, for I simply could not care less about such people.

R)

Personally, which crack of a C64 game that you did are you most proud of and why?

A)

Naturally, I liked my "Shadow of the Beast" version very much. But I don't generally prefer one of my cracks over the others. I always tried to do my best, you know. However, this was sometimes impossible due to pressure of putting out the stuff first.

R)

Yes, Shadow of the Beast one-sided version was very impressive. How long would such a crack take you to do? Was it the longest game you worked on?

A)

For SOTB, I just needed a few hours on a Saturday afternoon. The trick is to plug in the cartridge, switch to Dolphin Dos, and prevent a CBM80-Autostart by pressing space when switching on the 64. Once the cartridges' auto start is gone, you can disassemble the ROM area. Very soon you can spot a piece of code that simply copies ROM to RAM memory and which is obviously a replacement for a loader. So you play the game for a while in order to find free RAM for a normal disk loader, then you write a little routine to load/save all level files, you insert your own loader and you're almost done. This was pretty easy.

The game I worked longest on was perhaps "Brubaker", 10 days for translating; it just wasn't the crack work but the translation which took so much time. The actual longest game protection that kept me busy for 3 afternoons was actually "Zak Mc Cracken and the alien Mindbenders". This ScummVM engine is just tricky; back then I needed lots of theorizing what to actually change since the whole game is written in its own script language.



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R)

Can you explain to the readers the average "plan" of Antitrack's for say a protected full disk game. Tell us from start to finish what you would do.

A)

Always disassemble from start of program (of loader). You're stuck by a decoding loop (EOA, Timex)? Decode all sort of crap with your own routine that is somewhere else in memory, so you have control over what the computer does (where it jumps to) after decoding. Another decode loop? Decode it in the same way until all decoding loops are gone. Then use the original loader to load all files (to REU), then save all files from REU to disk, replace the original loader with your own one (in case of multiload); in case of single-file, you're almost done, you only need to pack and/or train the program. In extreme cases, disassemble the whole memory in order to check out for checksums, dongles (Turboass!), etc. If it checks for weird stuff like timers, SID values etc. either remove the check or give the program the proper SID/timer contents (example: PBW!). This of course can get nasty - so: Always test the program thoroughly. This certainly can easily turn out to be the most time-eating part. So the basic and essential work was categorically always the same, i.e. it is to load all files with the originals' loader, then save them in normal format and replace the original loader with a normal load routine.

R)

What are your views on cracking using cartridges like Action Replay, compared to not using them at all and going old-style?

A)

Cartridges are a good help for finding trainers, but if you use them to skip over learning the details of the protection, you deprive yourself of a potentially valuable learning experience. Nothing looks worse than a completely frozen crack; what sort of "skill at cracking" is needed for pressing just a button on a device? The old style is still much more valuable. Let's look at what's happening on the PC: No freezer cartridge, thus: no lame frozen programs. Going old style is the only thing that makes you learn something.

R)

Who were your heroes from old days? Who did you look up to on the C64 in the beginning?

A)

Back then in 1983 I was surprised that there were people who could crack, and often did an amazing job at it! Imagine the poor tools these people must have had - no packer, no good monitor, no good assembler, and definitely no cartridge! But, still quite nice cracks!



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Thus, you got to be amazed about cracks coming from people and groups like: 1103, Antiram, Antirrom, Antiprotect, Jedi, ABC Crackings, Dynamic Duo, etc.etc. Today's standards for cracking and training are much higher, but the fact remains that these old cracks mostly always worked fine.

R)

How did you choose your handle?

A)

In 1984, there were a lot of individuals calling themselves something with "Anti-" on the beginning and something technical at the end, i.e. Antirrom, Antiram, etc. So I decided to adapt this convenient notation.

R)

What do you think was the special thing about C64 compared to other computers and scenes during that time? I mean it is still being used by a lot of people in 2006!

A)

There are a lot of special things in the 64. First, you switch it on and everything you need is there in just 2 seconds (provided you have Dolphin Dos - which is the only hardware add-on you need). Even my mobile phone is slower than that, not to mention any typical PC, who needs minutes to boot each time! Compared to that, a C-64 is fast and efficient. The 64 also has high-precision timers, which the PC is still missing, and raster interrupts, which the PC also does not have. A PC could be a dream of a game machine if it had just these two things! Yet any Amiga still easily beats any PC when it comes to flicker free sprite multiplexing, for the Amiga is way better adapted to do things that are based on video timing. PC's are just over bloated and overheated giants, which are still performing poorly because they have inexplicable bottlenecks such as described above. They are hardly efficient. Compared to that, the C-64 feels like it has an efficiency of 98% or something. You switch it on and everything you need is there. The SID chip and VIC chip are miracles of efficiency and don't require DirectX 9.0c. How the PC could require more and more and more useless device drivers is beyond anyone's reasonable comprehension.

R)

Thanks for your time and participation! Any last words for the readers?



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A)

The whole social, financial and economic system we're stuck in is just a large prison like enslavement idiocy that provides you with deliberately false answers and only makes the rich more rich and the poor more poor. The mass media is not telling the truth; in fact they would get sued if they did. You got to fight for your right to live, especially when you realise that the system is crumbling down. In Germany they have "Hartz-4"-plans which were developed by these criminals who are called "government"; Hartz-4 forces unemployed people to take 1-dollar-per-hour-enslavement-jobs. The real government is the banker s oligarchy who is financing the official government. Money is reigning the world much worse than any bad dictator could. This whole fucking system is just extremely miserable and corrupt to death. We got to fight against it, and so far I'm proud to admit that the scene did a terrific job at fighting the stupidity of the system. Keep up the good work, dudes.