

HACKERS INVITED TO BREAK THE VAULT

By MURRAY JOHNSON

AN AUSTRALIAN company has thrown down the gauntlet to the world's best hackers. Secure Systems says its Silicon Data Vault® (SDV) is guaranteed to protect computer hard drives from hackers and viruses.

The company was only launched in July, and employs eight people at its Perth office.

Yet it is chasing a computer security market that is expected to be worth \$22 billion a year by 2003.

Chief executive officer Mike Wynne is hesitant to put a value on the company's technology, pointing out that cyber crime already costs world businesses an estimated \$1.5 trillion a year.

"American businesses lost \$255 billion in 1999 just to hackers and viruses," Mr. Wynne said.

The military, governments and banks are his prime market.

He said he was negotiating with "one European and three American companies" interested in taking the SDV technology to market.

"It could be in the marketplace within six months," Mr. Wynne said.

Secure Systems launched its product at an electronic security conference and trade show in Arlington, Virginia, offering \$20,000 to anyone who successfully hacked data protected by the vault.

If no one did, the company said it would donate \$2 million to the US-based Make-a-Wish Foundation out of sale proceeds if a deal was consummated to market the product.

The hacking challenge is due to take place this month with a leading audit company supervising the trial.

More information about the challenge is available at the company's website at www.securesystems.com.au

"Ethical hackers", employed by government, banks and the military to test their systems, will be given 30 days to beat the SDV.

Unlike a traditional firewall, installed between a computer and the outside world, the SDV is a customised silicon chip installed inside a personal computer.

It controls all activity to and from the hard drive, ensuring only authenticated users gain access to protected data areas. Data security is absolute, the company claims.

"During the past four years our technology has been secretly tested, under tightly controlled situations, by military experts, international banks and universities, and nobody has been able to crack it," Mr. Wynne said.

"It is not possible to bypass, intercept or break in through any means, prior to, during or after system boot-up."

According to the company's technology director, Mike Hearn: "That makes it impossible for viruses, hackers and any other unwanted guest to illegally access critical data."

Mr. Hearn developed the SDV after 30 years in the IT industry and five years of lateral thinking about computer data security.

"Software is just that - soft," Mr. Hearn said. "We approached this huge worldwide problem from an entirely different angle - that when hardware meets software, hardware wins."

Even if a computer is stolen and its hard drive and the SDV removed, Secure Systems claims the data can not be accessed.

Mr. Hearn said that was vital to the military, which lived with a constant fear of notebooks being lost or stolen.

Experts predict mobile phones and personal digital assistants will soon become hacker targets, along with the much-vaunted "automated home".

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Note: All currency referred to in this article is shown in Australian Dollar equivalents.