

# KEVIN TRIES TO BUILD A BBS

## THE JOURNEY BEGINS

Admittedly, I'm starting my journey into building a BBS with almost no experience with building tangible computers. Let alone networked systems. I'm going to try to do both! I want to create a BBS as a way to empower myself to time travel from the consumption based commercial internet of today to a land of creative communication-based networked computing that existed in the BBSes throughout the early 90s. On the internet and world wide web - the primary way people contemporarily interact with networked computers - one can find the idealistic communities that early computer users dreamt of if they look, but often times instead of trudging through the muck to find the diamonds of the internet, it's easier to just settle on Instagram

More than anything, the opportunity for me to step back in time to use a system of networked computation that has fizzled out will help me see alternate ways that we can use computer networks in the future. When I am so used to the confines and surveillance of contemporary internet usage, I think it's easy to become jaded that this is the one way that networked computers can properly exist and function in society. But, as history has shown again and again, there's no one way to use a computer, just happy accidents of which ways become societally dominant.

To operate, a BBS might use a dial-up modem, Telnet or the internet. Because I don't want to have to buy a dial-up modem (at least for my first attempt at being a sysop), this leaves my options to building a [BBS](#) to either Telnet or the internet.

At this point in my deep dive into building my very own BBS, I'm swimming through terms that I only have vague definitions and understandings of. I've come across the impasse of my OS, MacOS Mojave, not natively being able to run Telnet protocol. So, a quick Google and a not so quick amount of page scrolling later, I've discovered that I can download a software called Homebrew that will allow me to run the Telnet protocol from the command line on my MacBook. Do I know what about half of those words mean? Vaguely definitely. But in an absolute sense?

Not at all! What I do know is that I'm about to use the internet to install some foreign software onto my laptop that will allow me to share my own computer and share other peoples' computers directly. The feeling I have is something of a mixed brew of anxiety and excitement. IN a way I cannot describe, it feels like I'm about to join a community. Those mantras (and quasi-problematic) rallying cries of a disembodied utopia feel suddenly not so utopic.

One thing that I'm realizing that I don't know anything about is ... you know, how to actually create the files that will become the Bulletin Board System. In fact, I don't know what type of files constituted any form of Bulletin Board System. Because I have experience with web development, I think I automatically assumed that I would just create a certain file structure akin to HTML, but I'm really starting to understand the DIY nature of the BBS scene. But as I feel like I'm beginning to get a sense for the DIY scene, I can't help but think about the fact that already in building my BBS, I've found so much information through the contemporary internet. I've downloaded the files I've needed to create my BBS from the internet. How did this process occur before the internet?

## KEVIN LEARNS TO TRUST STRANGERS ON THE INTERNET

I went ahead and took the plunge. Or rather, I let the ocean take me in? I've been surrounded by information that I didn't fully understand about the technical components of building a BBS. I still haven't figured out how to enable Telnet, and I don't know exactly how I will build the BBS once I have the capability to do so. But, I have a lead: that I can download a software package, such as [MysticBBS](#) or Synchronet, that should get me just about everything that I need to create my BBS. Or so it seems.

The moment I changed my security settings to allow applications from developers felt both wild and terrifying. Do I have any idea if my data is being ransacked as I type? Will I wake up tomorrow with a text that's just a link to a video of me sleeping? Plausibly! At this point, I feel I've made a bargain with the world at large in my quest to restore the collaborative, community-resource driven glory of the Bulletin Board System. Put simply, I'm trusting

someone I've never met to help me use this software that will supposedly let me express myself to more people. It's scary and exciting to be so vulnerable.

I've invested hours and hours into my quest so far, and what do I have to show for it? Technically, I've only downloaded a software package from the internet and allowed it to run on my laptop. In this time, I've done research on the history and technical aspects of Bulletin Board Systems, but more than anything. I think this time was the time it took me to shed my notions of a security that had to exist outside of trust.

## AN APPLE A DAY IS A BAD PLATFORM ON WHICH TO BUILD A BBS

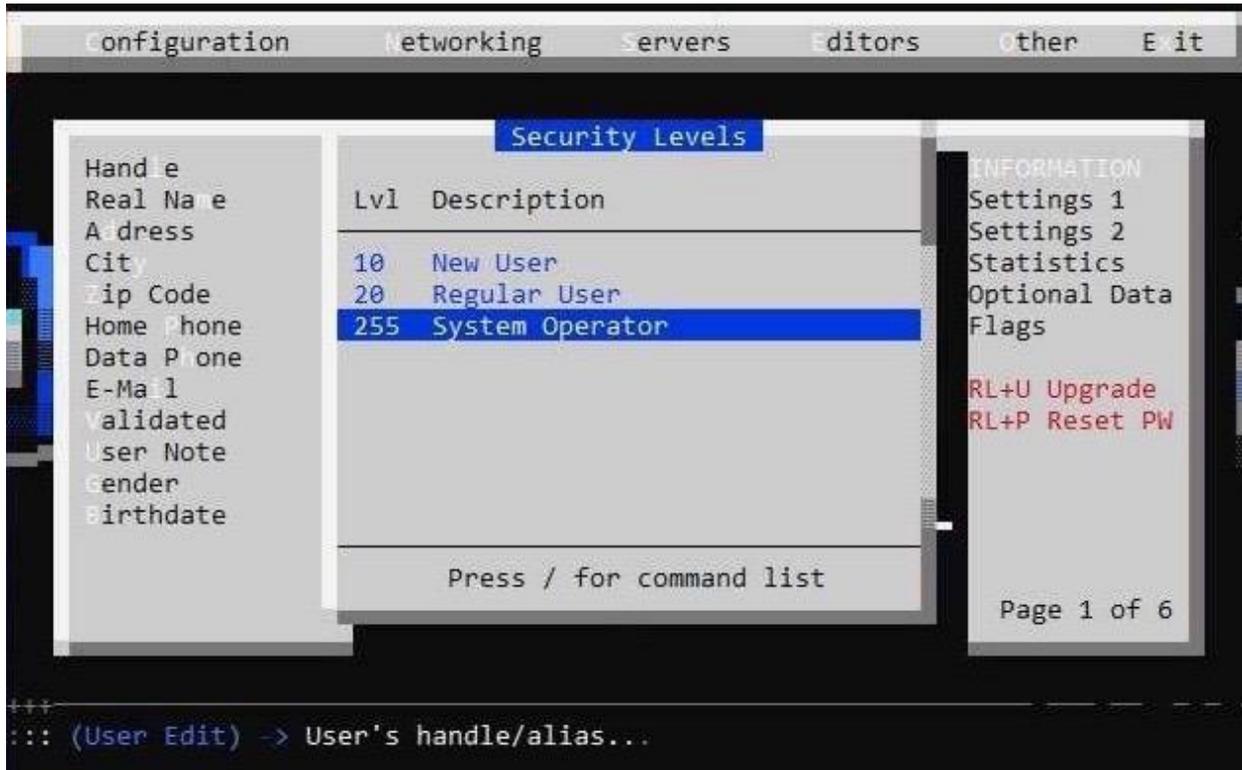
Now, in my journey, I've spent countless hours toiling away in the command line of my MacBook trying my absolute hardest to get Mystic BBS up and running. No matter where I navigate to place the root of the BBS, I keep getting an error that Mystic doesn't have authority to place a folder there. Thus, I learned how to become a "superuser" temporarily on my own command line to usurp any kind of user-based restrictions. This usurpation allowed me to place the root directory, but then when I tried to execute the Mystic Installer, an error message kept appearing about how the directory "already existed."

Frustrated, I decided that I'd just build my own computer off of which I'd host my BBS. Simple. Not a problem. I went out and got a Raspberry Pi and some peripherals for it, and I spent a while learning about computers and OSs to build a small computer. I'm glossing over this part of the journey because this is where my journey gets super high and then disgustingly low.

## A SOARING FLIGHT, A CRUSHING DEFEAT

**High:** I literally built a computer and installed a BBS structure on it. I made myself a sysop for \*my\* BBS, The Pork Initiative. I learned how to navigate a command line, and I learned how to set up different chat rooms and user profiles and roles. I played around with ANSI art and I had a grand old time getting everything ready for my flood of

visitors.



Look at how cool this is? This is me setting my security level to the highest value (255) so that I can access and edit all parts of my BBS. At this point, I built a computer. I learned how to install an OS and navigate the command line. I gave myself carte blanche to rule over my BBS as the "puppetmaster." I was flying so close to the sun.

**Low:** I spent genuinely uncountable hours trying to figure out how to (1) establish that my BBS is a Telnet server and (2 (if I ever could have gotten past 1) how other people would access my BBS. While I learned a lot about trust and grit in my adventures trying to build a BBS, I missed out on the lesson of reciprocity. Instead of asking people how to do things over the internet, I just secluded myself back to the documentation for different Telnet and BBS documents, trying to figure out a magical solution to my networked problems. Now, as I'm moving forward, I have realized that the Telnet protocols (or at least using them to serve a massive collection of files from the command line) are a little challenging for me to face alone, so I've reached out to some people who have run BBSes. Hopefully I get net mail from them soon. :)