

Book Review

Smart Home Hacks—Meyer

Review by Joel Cohen

Smart Home Hacks

Tips and Tools for Automating Your House

Author: Gordon Meyer

Publisher: O'Reilly (www.oreilly.com)

Having only nibbled at the edges of X10 applications for over 25 years, I would have called this book *The X10 Bible*. For that is what it is. Its 376 pages, including a very complete index, take the reader through a clear explanation of how this simple yet ubiquitous automation control system operates and into more projects and applications than I could have dreamed of. Admittedly my dreams rarely concern themselves with home automation projects.

Meyer is an avowed hacker, who explains that this is a complimentary term applied to one who creatively applies his know-how to find a clever way to get a job done. To overcome the negative bias against the term hacker, due to its misuse by the media to specifically tag cyber pranksters and criminals, the publisher is issuing several books with the term hacks in the title, in place of terms such as tricks, shortcuts, or projects.

Meyer is also a humanist, as evidenced by his reminders that many of the hacks in this book—which will delight the hacker—may confuse or frustrate others who share his or her living

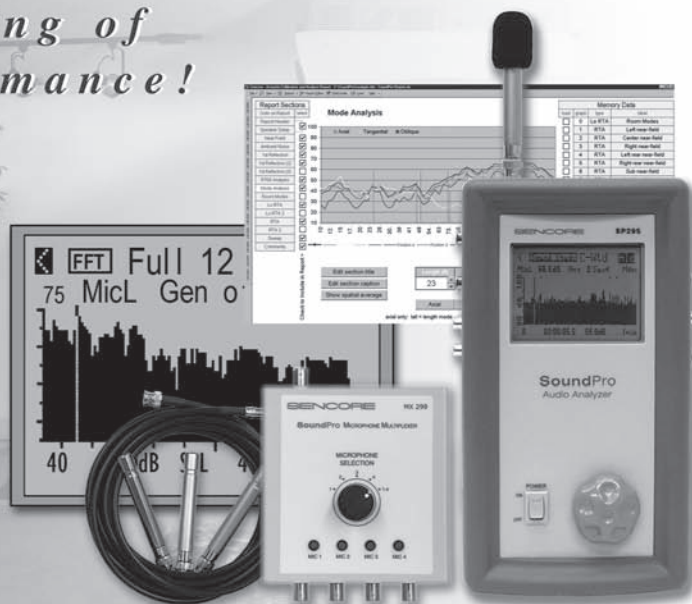
space. He is also not the caricatured antisocial kind of hacker, having worked as a professional magician before finding his bliss in designing systems for writing and presenting on-screen instruction manuals and help systems. He also keeps in touch with many others working in home automation, as evidenced by information on nearly 30 of them whom he credits as contributors.

The basic X10 system came into being about 1978 and hasn't changed much since then, nor has it needed to. It uses the in-house power lines to carry instructions from one module to another in short, low-power 120kHz bursts. These are timed to go out coincident

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Gordon Meyer

with the zero voltage crossing of the AC line voltage in order to maximize its own signal-to-noise ratio. The transmitter-controller sends out two pieces of information each time: the three-digit address of the module it wants to control, and the instruction for that module. The address of each receiver/actuator module is individually set and each will only obey a command that is preceded by its own address code.

The basic plug-in keypad-controller and two types of plug-in receiver modules (an on/off switch and a lamp dimmer) have been staple items at Radio Shack for as long as I can remember. The simple stand-alone X10 system, which you can produce with these three basic modules, can be expanded with in-wall versions of the switcher and dimmer modules and an RF receiver unit that receives X10 control signals from a wireless transmitter and injects them into the power line. These devices allow you to manually, from a distance, almost instantaneously (it is not a fast response system), turn units on or off or up or down.

You can up the ante with motion detectors and a stand-alone X10 timer-controller to make simple applications happen automatically or on a schedule, but things become really interesting when you bring a computer into the picture. There is tried-and-true software available for both the PC and Macintosh computers. The book simply explains how to set up and use this software to do all sorts of things, illustrated with screen images along the way. There are 100 hacks, or projects, described in the

book and enough information on each to give you ideas about others. They include such functions as starting your coffee in the morning; monitoring the cat's litter box; detecting whether the garage door is open; controlling lawn watering; heating the toilet seat; and monitoring your home from afar.

Smart Home Hacks is well organized, so you can start at the beginning, learning about the hardware and simple applications as you go along. The author has used a number of symbols within the text to indicate the degree of difficulty, offer coincident tips, warn you of dangers, and link you to other related hacks.

There are now other, more sophisticated and self-contained control systems that you can program to do more and present a simpler user interface than the classic X10 system, but these aren't much fun for the tinkerer. With this book and a starter set of modules, you can accomplish more than you might expect. Then continue to add new functions whenever the mood strikes you or a new challenge arises. I will keep a copy close at hand. *aX*



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