1. How did people first come to start cracking games?

Home consumer piracy goes all the way back to 1975 with the first ever commercial program for a micro computer, Microsoft's Altair BASIC. Most users of this now legendary system were hobbyists who had an underlying belief that all information containing to these systems should be shared. So they actively encouraged the copying and sharing of any programming code, shared or otherwise.

Probably the earliest known of copy protection can be found on the Apple II from 1977. Within a year there were already examples of audio cassette games that contained code to stop the reproduction of the software tape. Fortunately for the software publishers of that era, audio tape duplication was not too reliable. The cassettes deteriorate after each copy so mass piracy wasn't such an issue.

What eventually did become a problem for publishers was the popularisation of the Apple Disk II 5 ¼" floppy disk. It quickly made cassette data storage on the Apple II obsolete due to its speed and its reliability. While at the same time it inadvertently enabled users to duplicate and pirate disks without the deterioration problems associated with tape.

Software developers and publishers reacted by introducing various forms of disk copy protection schemes. Many were basic but some were quite complex and rigorous. So to answer the question the first crackers probably would have been the early hackers on the Apple II. Curious kids and teenagers, who encountered these schemes, were interested as to how they worked and tried to disable them through reverse engineering.

2. Was there a real community, almost a social aspect, to crackers in the old days?

I would argue even today within the upper echelons of the scene there would be a strong social aspect. It is very much part of why people contribute so much time, effort, even money into their various roles and why they often find it so hard to completely detach from it. I assume in today's scene though that it would be nowhere near to the extent of what was enjoyed back in the 1990's and 1980's. Back when consumer piracy in most countries was a civil not a criminal issue and so the risks, legalities and paranoia were not there.

3. How competitive was the community?

Pirate scenes usually have always been highly competitive. Most people find this surprisingly but it is competition, not free software that is often the driving motivation for many top pirates. People working within the top piracy groups get off at knowing that worldwide they are the best at what they do. Over the years the computers systems, participants and group names change, but the goal is always the same. That is to release the product in an acceptable form and to do so before anyone else within your community.

Pirate communities could be compared sporting leagues, where member teams are highly competitive during play. While after the games they are usually sociable.

4. Did/does the cracking community have a certain philosophy?

You can look all the way back to the early cracking groups of the early 1980's operating on the Apple II and Commodore 64 systems and see that their original philosophy is not all that different to groups of today.

- Obtain a new, unreleased game.
- Package the game into a re-distributable and usable form which usually will involve the defeating or removal of any copy protection.
- Brand the repackaged game with your group's name.
- Quickly spread the repackaged game within your scene.

- Claim acknowledgement from other community members for your group's release.

The means and tools of doing that task might be a lot different today. The end result and goal is the same.

5. Do people have various specific roles within cracking clans?

Yes definitely though it does depend on how competitive a scene is. In the early PC DOS scene, right until the late 1980's it was not uncommon for a lone person to obtain, crack, package and to upload a release all by themselves. This was in stark contrast to some other systems from the era such as the Commodore 64 and Amiga scenes which had large, well organised, multi-national competitive groups.

Most structured organisations would designate roles to individuals to match their abilities and skill set. Piracy is no different.

6. How did the various scenes change with the advent of the Internet?

The Internet had been used as a tool for piracy. Often many participants of the scene were also students at university. Which gave them easy and free access to the Internet long before it was commercially affordable or available for domestic use.

The most obvious change to piracy was the quick death of the pirate Bulletin Board System. The BBS and the local communities built around them served a critical function in the piracy scene of old. So much so that you could say they were fundamental to that era.

But the Internet globalised and revolutionised communications within the scene. It allowed the cheap, anonymous and effective organisation of groups, allowing members to be based from any region of the world. Where prior, it was expensive to communicate long distances to other people and different scene communities. Technologies like Internet Relay Chat, E-mail, FTP servers and later instant messaging removed those barriers. Well without need of resorting to illegal and dangerous means such as using stolen credit and telecommunication calling cards.

The downside of this was it exposed many more people to what was previously a little known activity. Many people, often kids who couldn't join a top tier group, would often start their own. Releasing products of dubious quality that other people and groups simply wouldn't touch. So there was a surge in quantity and decline in quality, not just of releases but of people as well.

7. Is there an argument that back in the old days, there was a romantic, outlaw element to cracking games? Whereas today, certainly in regards to warez, it all feels seedy and wrong, and sites for downloading cracks are riddled with porn and viruses and spam.

One needs to remember that the groups who crack, package and release titles. Especially those that release titles stolen from well known, mainstream publishers have nothing to do with the seedy and wrong sites that populate the Internet claiming to offer free software.

Groups, who release titles, release for themselves and for their inner-circle that is the scene. The filtering down of releases onto peer-2-peer networks, websites and into the general Internet population is probably an unfortunate consequence. One that these days I can assume they wish it hadn't happened. The activity these days is illegal, so exposure for the scene participants is dangerous.
The problem seems that it is not piracy or the scene that has gone dirty, cheap and commercial. But rather that piracy has been exposed to the greater world and it is now a mainstream topic. Everyone these days now knows that you can find illegal, digital consumer goods online for free. So there are many unrelated people trying to make a quick buck by associating themselves with the scene and their products.