

Prologue

Ira Glass

OK, three boys, aged 13, 14, and 16. All three chose to appear with fake names on this radio program. And the fake names they chose, you ready? K-Rad, Mr. Warez, and Fred. Those first two names come from the world of computer hacking and software piracy. Mr. Warez, for example, that's "warez," as in "wares," as in "softwares," as in pirated softwares, illegal softwares. And as for Fred--

Fred

Why Fred? For no reason, man. There's got to be someone else named Fred out there.

Ira Glass

You see, anonymity was important given the kinds of things that we were discussing, namely credit card fraud, computer hacking, and the nature of hell. Well, from WBEZ in Chicago, this is Your Radio Playhouse. I'm Ira Glass. Today on our playhouse stage, small-scale stories of small-scale sin. Stay with us, won't you?

So K-Rad, Mr. Warez, and Fred were trying to be criminals. But they were not too successful at this. And at a McDonald's on Times Square in New York City, they told all. Doesn't that have a nice, Hard Copy sound to it? "They told all."

This was kind of an unpleasant McDonald's. Because it was in Times Square, they decided to have neon lights everywhere in this place. A crush of sweaty people at the counter, tourists, most of us. It was the middle of summer. Fred took charge.

Fred

What do you guys want?

K-rad

I want a number one meal.

Fred

OK, I'm paying for this. You're paying for my cab, OK? Whatever I can pay for. OK, we'll have a number one meal.

Ira Glass

They're actually in Manhattan for a computer hackers' convention this summer, and Fred was not used to the downtown prices.

Fred

Oh my god. It's \$<sup>o</sup>, man. You guys are chipping in. I can't pay for this.

Ira Glass

I think it's fair to say that one sign that your criminal career is not going so well is if you have to worry about the prices at McDonald's. But K-Rad, Mr. Warez, and Fred were involved in very low-level types of crimes. All of them involve computers. They pirated software. They scammed free CD-ROM games. They cheated one of the big online computer services out of a few hundred dollars in online time.

All in all, they didn't steal very much. And they didn't steal very effectively. But they did try to steal. Take this phone scam, where they would call people at random and try to get a calling card number or a credit card number out of them.

K-rad

Basically, the way it works is this. You call up somebody. You say, "This is the AT&T operator. I have a priority collect call for--" so-and-so's name. And the whole point is you have to sound like you're not calling somebody up with the intention of getting them. You have to sound like you've been sitting in this chair for 10 hours, and you want to go home.

So you got to go, "This is the AT&T operator. I have a collect call for Paul. Will you accept charges, sir?" "Uh, yeah. I'll accept charges." "All right, hold on one second."

Then you tap on the keyboard. You say, "I'm sorry. You seem to have a restriction on your phone line. You can't accept collect calls to this line." And then they yell, and they go, "What do you mean, I can't accept collect calls to my line? I've been getting collect calls to this line for 20 years."

And then, you've got to go, "Sir, there's nothing I can do about it. My computer says you can't receive a collect call on this line. Would you like to try an alternate billing method?" In which case they will proceed to either give you a calling card or a major credit card.

Ira Glass

And that, of course, is the idea behind the whole thing, to end up with a calling card number or a credit card number that is not your own, that you can use yourself. Now I should say that before you go out and try this yourselves, if you are thinking about doing this yourself right now, I should tell you one important fact. It doesn't work.

K-rad

The reason it doesn't work is because a good percentage of people, after the point at which they go through the mind-boggling experience of not understanding what it means to have a restriction on your line, because nobody knows what that means, then they'll just say, "Oh, this is too much trouble. Forget it. I won't accept the collect call."

Ira Glass

The other scams these guys run don't do much better. They tried to hack their way into the mainframe system of a big computer retailer. But they were caught and stopped before they got very far. They are such unaccomplished computer hackers that Fred himself was actually the victim of computer hackers twice. Someone broke into Fred's account on one computer bulletin board and used his account and his electronic mail to visit some of the nether regions of the net.

Fred

Remember, you talked to the guy on IRC. There's this weird guy. This guy was going on all these sex channels. And he was wrecking my name and stuff. It was awful.

K-rad

You can't get pissed at him. I wouldn't get pissed at him, because that would be entirely hypocritical. I've said that if anybody ever steals one of my credit cards or ever hacks into my account or computer system, I will not care. And I will be perfectly allowable to that.

To go and say, "I can't believe it. Somebody took my credit card." Well, so what if I did it to everyone else? I'm perfectly willing to let someone do that to me.

Ira Glass

Over the summer was when they really started to get serious about using other people's credit cards, which they call "carding." They met a guy who was good at this and who taught them some tricks. K-Rad and Fred ordered \$1,600 in computer merchandise on someone else's credit card. They had it delivered to a neutral address. They picked it up. They sold half of it for cash.

And one thing that's peculiar about this story is that these are rich kids. K-Rad and Fred live in a wealthy upstate community. They attend what is one of the most expensive, prestigious private schools in the country. But they steal.

Fred believes that he has no choice. He really suffers over money. He's this skinny, young-looking 16-year-old. And he is perpetually strapped for cash. And he said that his parents couldn't help him much with money right now because they had just gone \$200,000 into debt.

Fred

Because they bought a house right before the depression and stuff. The recession, excuse me. I consider it a depression. I've noticed the effects.

Ira Glass

At one point, to get some cash, he actually sold the computer that his parents had bought for him. And I don't think they knew. His idea is that he wanted to replace the computer as quickly as he could with the help of a stranger's credit card.

And he also wanted to get all the other things that the other kids at his expensive private school had. He wanted to have a microwave. He wanted to have a stereo. Basically, he just wanted to be like everybody else.

Fred

I'm also pretty good at shoplifting. But my whole thing on that is that I will not steal anything if I have the money for it. And a lot of times, like the store at my school, like the grill, I steal from that a lot. But I also give them \$10 for no reason if I have the money because I feel bad about what I've stolen. And if I ever get the money so I don't have to do this shit anymore, then I'm not going to do it.

Ira Glass

What's striking about this is how these boys want to convince themselves-- I think they really do-- want to convince themselves that they are good, and that what they do does not harm anyone. And if it does harm someone, there's always the reassuring thought that they keep very near at hand that someday they can make it up to the injured party.

K-rad

As noble as this sounds, this is one thing that I absolutely guarantee that sounds like the biggest load of crap anyone could ever say. But if I am ever in a financial--

Mr. Warez

We believe in you.

K-rad

No, no one should believe in me. This is the biggest "I'm really good inside." If I ever find myself-- and I've made this vow to myself-- in a good enough financial situation, I will repay everything

I have ever done now. If I find myself making \$2 million a year, I will send a \$10,000 check to the company which I stole calling cards from. That is something I definitely want to do if I am in the financial situation to do it.

Ira Glass

K-Rad told me that the \$1,700 that they charged to a stranger's Visa card was, in fact, a victimless crime, that the card owner would call Visa, have the charge removed from his bill. And that Visa figures a certain amount of fraud is just the cost of doing business.

K-rad

One thing that I've always said in all my doings is that I will never, ever do something that will severely hurt an individual person. OK? So for example, if it involves-- I would never mug someone. I would never beat someone up for money. I'd never shoplift. Well, maybe I-- no, I wouldn't shoplift.

Ira Glass

That's one of my favorite parts of the interview. Hold on. I'm just going to play that tape back. Because you can actually hear him-- he's struggling so much, you can actually hear him working it out out loud. Hold on, I'm just going to rewind for a second.

[TAPE REWINDING]

K-rad

--never beat someone up for money. I'd never shoplift. Well, maybe I-- no, I wouldn't shoplift. Because that is hurting the individual person.

Ira Glass

See what I mean? So we headed out of the McDonald's and back to the hotel where the computer hackers' convention was taking place. On the way, without any prompting at all, Fred elaborated on the idea that he was only stealing because he absolutely had to.

Fred

I go to boarding school. And I don't have that much-- I don't have any money or anything. And I get really hungry and stuff. I have a fast metabolism. And seriously, I starve. And I lost 10 pounds in one week. And that's not good for someone who's really skinny, like I am. And then a lot of it is just stuff I want, you know?

And yeah, I just really want to stress that in other ways, we're not bad people. And we don't go around trying to screw all people in any way we can. Because we're not at all.

I mean, I do social work. I tutored kids. I do a lot of stuff which isn't necessarily evil and more good. But sometimes, it's just like, I don't know, man. I like doing it. I can't explain it.

Ira Glass

Talk about that part of it. What is the thrill of doing it?

Fred

That's the first-- that was the reason I started carding. The reason was the thrill of going. When we went in there, it was like Mission: Impossible. We went in. We had gloves on and stuff. And we picked it up. We had it all worked out. We were connected. We had lookouts and stuff. And it's just a lot of fun. It's like you're doing stuff that is not exactly legal, not legal at all. And it's fun.

Ira Glass

By this point, we were back in the hotel lobby. We took the elevators up to the floor where the hackers' convention was taking place. K-Rad said that real hackers do not use their skills like this. They do not use their skills for personal gain. They don't do carding. They don't steal.

The whole idea of computer hacking, for these guys anyway, is that it's a kind of pure, zen pursuit. It's an ends in itself. You break into the computer for its own sake and to look around, and for the knowledge of everyone, especially you.

We stood in the hallway. People streamed by. We tried to move to a corner where we would not be overheard. And K-Rad said, actually, that they had never really talked about their illegal activities this much before with anyone.

K-rad

The most thing I'm worried about is I'm actually starting, for the first time, to say this all out loud, everything I've done. And suddenly, it doesn't sound as hacker, much, anymore. And I've known that ever since I moved into doing maybe some credit card thing. And that's why I'm, in fact, even considering giving up on doing all the carding and stuff like that, which seriously, I am.

Ira Glass

Fred then shot him this look. Because if K-Rad were serious, and they did stop carding, Fred would not be able to get a computer to replace the old one that his parents gave him.

Fred

What about my computer?

K-rad

What?

Mr. Warez

Your computer will come first.

Fred

Jesus Christ, man. I want to get a gun and shoot you.

K-rad

All right, after your computer.

Ira Glass



The thing about a bad conscience is that it splits you in half. And Fred said that he had two different modes. That was the word he used, "modes." He said that sometimes he would think about what they were doing. And he knew it was wrong, and it would bother him. But mostly, he tried not to think about it.

Fred

My worst fear is that I can end up going to hell for doing this. And that's my worst fear.

Ira Glass

Do you believe in hell?

Fred

Yeah, I do.

Ira Glass

And you think you can go to hell for getting a computer on somebody else's credit card?

Fred

I don't know. I hope not. I really hope not. It's always been my biggest fear. That's why I'm afraid of dying. I'm afraid if there's something I've done which just is like the straw on the camel's back, that's going to be what's going to do it.

Ira Glass

How big is this worry? Will this keep you up at night?

Fred

Yeah, maybe for a couple minutes. And then I just sort of put it out of my mind, you know?

Ira Glass

His share of the carding profits was \$^••. I told him that from an adult's perspective, this did not seem like a lot of money. I didn't think you could do eternity in hell for \$^••.

And as soon as I said this, I really regretted it. Fred's body language changed completely. It was like I was calling him a little kid. It was like saying that he was ridiculous to worry over something so small. It was just one of these moments. He got quieter, and he kind of pulled into himself a little bit.

Then Mr. Warez spoke up. He said that sure, maybe by adult standards, this wasn't much money. But to them, it was a lot, that it was plenty enough to count.

When is hell a possibility? Whenever you think it is, it is. More on this when our program continues.

Act One: Act One

Ira Glass

Well, this is Your Radio Playhouse. Now a little radio experiment. We told a Chicago playwright named Jeff Dorchen what K-Rad, Fred, and Mr. Warez said about hell and about sin and about their own relative badness in this world. And we asked Jeff Dorchen to write an original radio play that would pick up the themes where the boys leave off. So here's what he came up with.

Caleb

I'll call.

Dondi

Me too.

Caleb

Three \ 's.

Peter

Full house, aces and eights.

Caleb

Ooh. What do you got, kid?

Dondi

Four diamonds.

Caleb

You got nothing.

Peter

See, if you had some where the numbers matched, or if they were in order, and there were five of them. But that, what you have there, that's nothing.

Caleb

My grandpa used to call that a kangaroo straight.

Peter

My dad used to call it a Klondike.

Dondi

Klondike wins the game.

Caleb

No, Klondike doesn't win the game. Peter wins the game. Full house wins.

Dondi

I hate you, Peter.

Peter

I don't blame you.

[WAILING]

Dondi

Grandmother, be careful. Grazie.

Peter

My deal. Straight, five card draw.

Caleb

Anything wild?

Peter

No.

Dondi

[UNINTELLIGIBLE]

Caleb

Shut up. Ow. Watch it with those cards, man.

Peter

Sorry.

Caleb

What's your problem today?

Dondi

He has sinned.

Peter

Yeah-- yes, I have. How did you know?

Dondi

Your eyes. They are the eyes of an accused man, furtive, alert, the eyes of a nervous beast who, once a lover of gambols and jigs and standard metals, has been driven to nocturnal skulking by the pursuit of a relentless predator.

Caleb

He's got you there. \ , , , , lira.

Dondi

Call.

Peter

Call. Caleb, do you believe in sin?

Caleb

Hell, no. I believe in damnation, though.

Peter

How can you believe in damnation but not sin?

Caleb

Predestiny. Take me. I was born damned. I'm cowardly, petty, intolerant, lazy, and just generally destructive. I knew I was damned the first time I heard the word.

Dondi

Your Calvinism relieves you of the responsibility for improving yourself.

Caleb

Shut up, kid.

[SLAP]

Dondi

Ow!

Peter

What are you doing?

Dondi

It's all right, GI Joe. I am strong.

Caleb

Yeah, Pete. The kid can take it. Now give me three.

Peter

How many, Dondi?

Dondi

Four.

Peter

You can't have four. The most you can have is three.

Dondi

OK. I'll take two.

Peter

And two for the dealer.

Caleb

o, . . . .

Dondi

Call.

Peter

Call. What do you have?

Caleb

A pair of 9's. Dondi?

Dondi

Three onions.

Caleb

Those are spades, not onions. And you're supposed to match the numbers, not the suit, you little spaghetti sucker.

Dondi

I have a Klondike.

Caleb

You have garbage. How many times do we have to go through this? It's like rolling a boulder up a hill just to have it roll back down again, over and over and over.

Dondi

I will not make the mistake again, sahib.

Caleb

Don't call me sahib. Peter, what do you have? A pair of jacks. All right. Pair of jacks takes it. All right. Seven card stud poker, one-eyed royalty, red deuces, nines, and all odd-numbered clubs are wild.

Peter

What do you guys think the worst sin is? Murder?

Dondi

Betrayal.

Peter

Why do you say that?

Dondi

At the center of the ninth and innermost frozen circle of hell, Lucifer devours Judas eternally.

Peter

Really?

Dondi

That's what they say. One million lira.

Peter

I'll see that and raise you one.

Caleb

Call.

Dondi

I'm there.

Caleb

What do you got?

Dondi



Seven aces.

Peter

Me too.

Caleb

So do I. All right, so there were a few too many wild cards. Let's hold the pot over.

Dondi

OK. Peter?

Peter

Huh? Oh, sure. Leave it over. Do you think a sin is worse if say you, for example, you betray somebody? Then suppose you don't feel any remorse. Does that make it worse?

Dondi

Of course. Gentlemen, the game is Chicago low. Ace, no face, sevens, follow the queen.

Peter

Wait a second, Dondi. Caleb, could I talk to you alone for a second, over there, by the window?

Caleb

Sure, Pete.

Dondi

I will go fetch us some delicious ginger ale.

Caleb

Good idea. What is it, Pete? Think the kid's trying to hustle us?

Peter

No, I just wanted to talk, that's all.

Caleb

What's the matter?

Peter

Nothing. Just I'm afraid of going to hell.

Caleb

What? Why?

Peter

I just don't think I'm a very good person.

Caleb

That's ridiculous, Pete. You're a very nice guy. You write letters. I never write letters.

Peter

Yeah, but what if you do something bad? How bad does it have to be? I mean if-- do you have to-- if you feel like it's bad enough to damn you, are you damned? I mean, if you don't feel any remorse?

Caleb

Is that it? You betrayed somebody and then didn't feel any remorse? Is that what all those pregnant pauses during the poker banter were about?

Peter

Well--

Caleb

How can you say you don't have any remorse when you're practically tearing your hair out worrying about going to hell?

Peter

But being afraid of punishment isn't the same as remorse. Remorse is truly feeling apologetic for what you've done, not just worrying about being punished for it.

Caleb

And you don't feel sorry at all?

Peter

No.

Caleb

Even though you recognize that what you did was wrong?

Peter

That's right.

Caleb

You know, Pete, you're a very complex guy.

Peter

Thank you.

Woman

They went to sea in a sieve, they did. In a sieve, they went to sea. In spite of all their friends could say, on a winter's morn, on a stormy day, in a seive they went to sea.

Caleb

Dondi, what's with the old lady?

Dondi

The cigar smoke is causing her to recite "The Jumblies" by Edward Lear.

Caleb

Well, shut her up, will you? I can hardly hear myself think.

Dondi

Shut up, grandmother.

Peter

I mean, what am I doing here? Who are these strange people? I don't remember deciding to come to Italy. What am I doing in Italy?

Caleb

Maybe to see the Pope?

Peter

Just last week, I was in France, in Rouen, the town where Joan of Arc was burned at the stake. And I was visiting the tower where she was held before her execution. And I was thinking about writing a letter, you know, apologizing. A letter apologizing to the injured party.

I was looking down from the highest window in the tower. And just how you do-- you know, you try to tap into the place in yourself where you have truly apologetic feelings, because you want to be sincere. You don't want the letter to sound phony.

Except I realized, I discovered that there was no such place in myself, that where that place should have been, there was just an empty hole. And it was frightening. It was like staring into the abyss.

Caleb

Go see the Pope. Ask for absolution.

Peter

But you have to be repentant. I'm not repentant.

Caleb

You could just act repentant. That's what ritual is all about, going through the motions.

Peter

No. I'd have to be truly sorry in my heart, or it wouldn't save me.

Caleb

That is a very rigid attitude.

Peter

What do you mean? I can't just pretend to have remorse.

Caleb

You haven't even tried. I mean, the Pope's a very nearsighted, distracted old man. If you buried your face in your hands and pretended to sob, I'm sure he'd buy it.

Peter

It's not a question of fooling the Pope.

Caleb

You know, I'm starting to think that you don't really want to help yourself.

Peter

How did I get here? Why are we playing poker in Italy with a demonic little boy whose grandmother is dying in the next room?

[PEACOCK CRY]

Peter

What was that?

[PEACOCK CRY]

Caleb

A peacock.

Peter

Huh. What's that a symbol of?

Caleb

Pride. Look, there it is, in the middle of the cemetery.

[PEACOCK CRY]

Peter

It's golden, a golden peacock in the middle of a graveyard. I wonder what it means.

Caleb

My advice is that you come up with the most positive interpretation you can.

Dondi

We're out of ginger ale. I can only offer you root beer.

Peter

Oh.

Caleb

Aww.

Peter

Well, that's all right.

Dondi

All right, gentlemen. The game is--

Caleb

We know what the game is, you little pistachio masher.

Dondi

Who dealt this mess?

Caleb

Don't give me that bluffing baloney. You got a possible straight flush in onions.

Dondi

Do not mention onions, sahib. My grandfather was killed by Il Duce.

Caleb

Don't call me sahib.

Peter

Talk is cheap, gentlemen. 7 million lira.

[PEACOCK CRY]

Ira Glass

Well, "The Golden Peacock" was written for Your Radio Playhouse by Jeff Dorchon. Jeff also played Caleb. Peter Handler played Peter. Lisa Stodder played Dondi and played the dying grandmother.

Act Two: Act Two

Ira Glass

How bad is bad? How bad is bad enough to count to send you to hell? Well, Michael Warr is a local poet and director of the Guild Complex here in Chicago. And he joins us in this, our radio playhouse.

Ira Glass

And Michael, you were raised with certain, very particular ideas about when a sin was bad enough to actually count.

Michael Warr

Yeah. I was raised as a Jehovah's Witness. It was like my whole life was enveloped by what is a sin. And as a Jehovah's Witness, it was Armageddon or paradise.

And at a very young age, I decided I did not want to live in paradise because there were these pictures of paradise. The pictures would always be idyllic. And there would be the lion lying with the lamb, everyone sitting around peacefully. And the fascinating thing about the Jehovah's Witnesses, and this is something that affects me to this very day, is that it was a very multicultural type of religion.

And so I would look at these pictures. And I noticed that when there were black people in the pictures, that the sisters, their heads were always covered. And that was because there was a political issue that had not really been resolved. And that is in paradise, what would their hair be like?

See, this is when the natural was a political statement. So that they didn't show them wearing naturals. And believe it or not, this was like a political awakening for me because in high school, these were serious issues. The natural was just like the Black Power sign. It was a political statement. So I said to myself, well, if the sisters can't wear afros in paradise, I don't want to be there.



Ira Glass

Now, you've brought some of your poems about your experience with these rules. And they're here. Actually, you're a very modern poet, and you've brought your color Macintosh, portable Macintosh, here. Why don't we flip it on?

Michael Warr

OK. Let's see if--

[STARTUP NOISE]

Michael Warr

I don't know if you can actually call it a flip, but it's on.

Ira Glass

It's on.

Michael Warr

Yeah, I have a poem that I have written called "Rules That Don't Work."

Smokey Robinson was a mulatto devil with [? Afro-Motownian ?] rhythm locked inside a black plastic analog disk. Every time he curled his snaking tongue to sing, Satan channeled Motown messages to the epicenter of some sinner's soul, making it shake like the quake in Zechariah, hard as Babylonian tablets and wet as the Red Sea. [SINGING] Baby, baby.

Slow dancing was wicked. To avoid temptation, we were to dance \^ inches apart, a safe \^ inches.

On the Oakland side of the bay, black 'hovahs broke all the rules. Having to rebel against something, as other black denominations were breaking windows, tossing Molotovs, and tearing down pillars of the state, they danced, never really measuring the distance between their sacrilegious mounds. Touching more than my ear, that first skintight slow song with sister Sheila

Berry was so, so, so evil that a bolt of lightning could have crashed through the roof of that dingy, oil-scented, black-lit ghetto garage and struck me down with the evidence of sin still in my ignorant arms. Dying smiling but confused, not comprehending how her pelvis could be so simultaneously rigid and relaxed, rigid then relaxed, like that thing my father told me not to do. Was it the devil that made her move like that? Sunday morning, I asked my mother and don't remember her giving me an answer.

Ira Glass

Do you think that it's only possible to be heavily engaged in these issues, or it's much easier to be heavily engaged in these issues, when you are young? That is, I was talking to this guy about this. And he told me this story about how when he was a kid, not even a teenager yet, he stole a cheap little tin toy car of a kind his parents never would have bought him that he shoplifted out of a dime store.

And he said he felt such a profound guilt about the wrongness of this that he could never play with it in good conscience. He could never play with it. And eventually, he just threw it away. He just threw it in the garbage because he thought it was so wrong. And I wondered if you think that our sense of right and wrong is much bigger, our awareness of it, the internal debate about what is right and wrong, is much more acute when we're kids.

Michael Warr

I think that it's far more complicated because you have not formulated your own ideas about what is right, what is wrong. It's totally coming from outside of you. And I think that the environment I was coming up in, in which there was this metaphysical world that I was being force-fed every single day--

Ira Glass

The Witnesses [INAUDIBLE].

Michael Warr

--of my life. Yeah. I mean, I had home Bible study Monday night, public Bible study Tuesday night, home Bible study Wednesday night, training in a theocratic school Thursday night, study of The Watchtower and Awake! at home Friday night, Watchtower and Awake! door-to-door distribution Saturday morning, Sunday morning, and then public lecture Sunday afternoon. That is what you call indoctrination, right?

But on the other hand, there was this other thing going on where I'm reading James Baldwin and reading Malcolm X and literally leading rebellions in high school. In other words, I really didn't have a lot of time beating myself and saying "This is wrong. This is wrong," in terms of buying a Black Panther newspaper or supporting the Black Panthers in those days or something. That might have been considered-- that was a sin for a Jehovah's Witness.

But I was convinced by the conditions at the time that hey, if it's a sin, it's the right thing to do. I doubt if I could have explained it that way at the time. But I know I didn't feel guilty about it.

Ira Glass

Michael Warr, thank you for coming into our radio playhouse and reading for us.

Michael Warr

Thank you. It's the most I've talked about the Jehovah's Witnesses in years.

Ira Glass

Michael Warr is the author of We Are the Black Boy. More thoughts about sin, sinning, what's wrong, what's not wrong, when our radio playhouse, my radio playhouse, Your Radio Playhouse continues.

Act Three: Act Three

Ira Glass

This is Your Radio Playhouse. Small Scale Sin on today's program. I'm Ira Glass.

So Eli was a big-time computer hacker. He and his friends were thrown into prison for this. He served six months. And here's what he says about his time in the big house.

Eli

It was so fun. I have to say, I had fun. It was a good experience. And I don't regret going there, actually.

Ira Glass

I think a lot of people are going to hear this and feel a certain horror. They're going to feel like, well, people should be punished.

Eli

Oh yeah. What I did was a bad thing, and I don't suggest anybody else do it, because that would be wrong. I don't do anything illegal anymore.

Ira Glass

This is a story of someone who does not fear hell or punishment. It's a story of somebody who's been put into the position of defining for himself what is right and what is wrong. Starting in the mid-1980s, Eli was a member of a crew of computer hackers called MOD. At the time, journalists from the Village Voice and Esquire magazine documented just how much they were able to do.

It is entirely possible that no group of American computer hackers has before or since gotten so far in breaking into other people's computers. They infiltrated dozens of business and government networks. The reporters from Esquire, at one point, asked them to demonstrate their skills by breaking into the White House computer system. And then they watched them do it.

But for MOD, their real love was the biggest, most complicated computer system in the world, the phone system. They were in at the highest level computers that run the phone system for New York and New England. And this way, they could assign any services to any phone, listen to any phone, disconnect or create accounts, get unlisted phone numbers, or bring the entire phone system down.

Eli served six months in a minimum-security prison and six months on home confinement. I spoke with him this summer, while he was still on home confinement in his parents' house in Queens.

Eli

The prison I had gone to was very relaxed. We played tennis, basketball. We had tournaments and got trophies. It was at Allenwood FPC. And playing Monopoly with the other inmates and Scrabble and stuff, it was just a wild concept.

And then when I came back here, it actually bummed me out that I had to be home all day. It was like, where does this make sense? They're doing me a favor by letting me out, yet I had more fun in there. Something's not right. Something was very not right.

It was more like a fame camp. People who were known and people who were involved in high-profile cases went there. That's what it was.

I had a couple of really good friends there. My best friend there was a fellow by the name of Chris who lived out in San Diego and was involved in marijuana dealing. And he used to sell it through the mail. And he got caught. And they took away about \$300,000 from him. And he's my age, probably 23, 24, something like that.

And it was sad that he got five years. He was a nice guy. He was just like me. And we would hang out all the time.

And across from me on the other side of my room was a man they used to call the Condo King. And he lived in Massachusetts in a castle that was probably worth \$2 million and had butlers and Rolls Royces and this and that. And it was a real castle and right on the water.

And he taught me about real estate, which was the funny thing. So I learned real estate from him. I learned about stocks. I learned from the best. And it was such a great experience. It was like college all over again.

The attitude there was that of camaraderie. Everybody there had this one thing in common, and that was that they looked for the shortest way possible to achieve what they wanted to achieve. And they all got there at some point. And they just felt a stroke of bad luck, I suppose.

There were no losers there, that's for sure. Everybody there had achieved a very high level of success, were very well known in whatever they did. And I was friends with all the mobsters there. And they took care of me and stuff because I was from New York and I knew about Little Italy and Mulberry and the Village and stuff.

And when I went there, it was like, hey, another guy from New York. Kid's from the streets. And they were just impressed because I was the only hacker in this whole compound. So everybody knew me. As soon as I got there, a day later, everybody was blabbing, hey, there's this hacker in here. Even the guards were telling the inmates, hey, that guy's in here for this.

Ira Glass

Outside, in the hacking community, Eli was pretty well known. Actually, he was known by his handle, which was Acid Phreak. That's "Phreak" with a P-H at the beginning of it. Inside, in prison, he got all sorts of job offers. It turns out that lots of people in prison can use the services of a computer hacker.

Eli

Everything from obtaining credit cards to changing credit to-- yeah, changing credit was a big thing. Because, I don't know if you know about this, but every time these real estate guys get busted, their credit usually goes down the tubes. One big request I had was to change a lot of credit reports and stuff. And I didn't do that and didn't take it seriously. I just told them, yeah, it was possible, but you're not going to get it from me.

And there was a lot of mobsters who wanted me to set up phone lines for them that couldn't be detected by the police and things like that. And again, "Well, it's possible. But I can't do that for

you." But then again, if you were to ask me that and I was to do it, I wouldn't tell you anyway. So that's kind of a question that's hard to answer.

Come into my domain. This is my room. As you can see, it's a typical teenager room.

Ira Glass

Well, actually, it was only sort of typical. The bedroom that he lives in during his six-month home confinement is tiny, barely enough space for a bed, a desk, and a bookshelf. There's a TV and a VCR, two computers. He flips on the stereo.

Eli

I don't know. I guess I've got kind of a lot of equipment around here. I've got a fax machine here. In my room, I've got five phone lines. I got a two-line phone, but I've got everything else connected to computers or fax.

Ira Glass

There were cheesy kung fu movies on video. On his CD player, there was old-school rap, Nine Inch Nails, the Doors, Jimi Hendrix. And then he says, "Let me show you the good stuff," and he pulls out Xeroxes of old spiral notebooks.

Eli

I have here what was seized from me but they had to return back to me. Here's my evidence examination report by the United States Secret Service. Subject, Acid Phreak. These notes have basically all the systems I got into. Look, I have little sketches and diagrams of how things work, different protocols and networks, definitions. See, a lot of this stuff was really good. I had stuff outside the country, NASA.

Ira Glass

The something defense? What is that?

Eli

Government defense.

Ira Glass

Government defense.

Eli

Yeah, that's a Washington number. McDonald's, since I had Telenet, I had McDonald's accounts. If you're a McDonald's employee, I could raise your pay. So that way, you get \$10 an hour for shuffling burgers and stuff.

Ira Glass

So did you decide just at random to help someone out?

Eli

I didn't do it to anybody. I just wanted to know how.

We did this from pay phones. We'd have a line of pay phones. We'd get into the computer, first liberate one phone. "Liberating" meaning make it so that you don't need quarters for that pay phone. You just pick up and dial like a regular house phone. So that way, we could make an endless amount of phone calls without putting quarters.

Next step was to get into the network, find a session that was already going, and then knock them off while they were connected, and then sit there, watching them. In other words, put us in the place of the computer they were going to connect to. So the next time they'd try to log in, they would get our computer. And we'd type in, "login." And they'd put in their login account.

Then we'd go, "password," you know? The password. They'd say, "OK, password," and they'd put their password in. And then we would have-- all these things were already encoded in one key, so we could just hit one key. And it wouldn't look like we were typing it.

Ira Glass



Login would just appear, whoomp. Input password, whoomp.

Eli

Login. And then we'd hit the password key, and password would come out. And then we'd say "Login incorrect" and then disconnect from them. But we already got their login and password.

And then when they reconnected, it would be the regular system. So they'd figure, hey, I made a mistake typing it in or something. And that's how we would get in accounts. It was funny.

You get into things that are good. You start targeting systems that are interesting. And then you start developing a collection. It's like baseball cards. I have NASA. I have NSA. I've got the phone company computers. I've got MISR. I've got Cosmos. I've got this. I've got that.

McDonnell-Douglas, Marriott Marietta. TRW, CBI, TransUnion. What else can I get? You try to get the big names. So you start developing your collection.

Then after a while, it became fun to look up famous people. Let's look up John Gotti's credit. Let's see what he owns. Let's look up Julia Roberts. Let's get her home phone number. Let's get this guy's home phone number.

We'd go into pay phones and stuff. And hooking up, I would drive up to a pay phone real quick and do what I had to do and leave really quick. That's where I really got into a movie. I felt like it was like Mission: Impossible, like that whole gang. It was like-- [HUMMING "MISSION: IMPOSSIBLE THEME"].

And we would all go out and hook up and everything. And it was like, "Yeah, all right. I'm that black guy who does all this technical stuff. I can get into it. Let's go, let's go."

I felt like we should have walkie-talkies and headsets and everything, and be like, "OK, Blue. Go do your thing on five. Ready? Five, four three, you're in. You're in." It was just amazing after a

while. And we were just so excited we were getting all that stuff. And it was just a rush. It was the flow.

Once you start going, you can't stop. You're just steamrolling one after the other. And the flow gets you going, and then you're just like, "Yeah, we rule. We're it." It breaks down all barriers. Nothing can stop the flow. If you've got the flow, you can conquer everything. That's what people call being in the zone. Once you're in there, you can't stop. It's the juice.

Ira Glass

If anything, it's surprising how little they did with their power over computers. It was mostly pranks, making somebody's phone ring continuously, turning an enemy's home phone line into a pay phone line so when the guy picked up his phone at home, it demanded that he deposit a quarter. Of course, there was no way he could do that because it's his home phone.

They did actually call Julia Roberts once. They called Queen Elizabeth, too. But there's an emptiness at the heart of a lot of these stories. Once you've got the Queen on the phone, what do you say?

Eli

She's like, "Hello?" She's talking to us and stuff. And we don't know what to say. "Hi, we're calling from the United States, and this and that." And she knew what was up. She's like, "OK, hello." And then she said goodbye, and that was it.

We didn't know what to say. What do you say to Queen Elizabeth? "Hi. So you see that movie, True Lies?" You know, what do you say? The fun of it is finding the number.

Ira Glass

Eli was thrown into prison for a relatively minor offense. Some of the members of his crew broke into the computers that list everybody's credit ratings. And they copied some credit reports. And they sold the information to other people. And he was named as a member of this conspiracy.

Eli

They said we abused our power. But we didn't abuse it at all. We did nothing compared to the things that could have been done. What we did was such a small thing in such a larger scheme of things.

It's kind of depressing, in a way. There's so many things we could have done. We could have monitored Peter Lynch. What's the next best investment for the day? And we'd make millions of dollars investing or shorting some stock. But we never did. And now we wonder why. We're like, "Damn. There are so many applications for this kind of stuff. What happened?" But then we're like, "Ah, we were just kids."

Then one time, one of us got the Mad magazine owner's phone number. And we called him. And that time, he was going through some rough times or something. And we were calling him for about two weeks. And he was just so goofy. He was kind of crazy. And he was just really stressed or something. And we just kept calling him and calling him.

And finally, we started harassing him and harassing him. We'd make fun of him and laugh at him and call him Alfred E. Neuman. And just ridicule him. And then he got so mad at us. And we used to keep calling and screwing around with him.

And then one day, we read in a paper he died. The day after we had called him, he passes away. And we're there like, "Yo, did we kill him? I hope not." And then they said he had some nervous breakdown and this and that. We're like, "Oh my god. Oh my god. I think we contributed to his demise there. We better not tell anybody this." But then we realized that there was probably other factors that contributed to it, not just a kid calling him on the phone. But since then, we stopped doing things like that because it was like, "Oh my god."

I don't destroy computers. I don't take them down. I don't delete information that shouldn't be deleted. I think there's something morally wrong if you affect a person personally in not only his computer life, but his personal life, his right to make a living. I think that's wrong. It's just a question of morality.

Ira Glass

One thing about the computer world is that it's all so new. And hacking on computers is so new that each person who does it feels like he or she can create his or her own moral code. And Eli's crew had its own particular code of behavior. For example, unlike most hackers, they didn't share what they knew with other hackers.

Eli

We had complete control over certain networks. We could have any system we wanted on that network. Any host was ours. But you don't let it get out to other hacking groups and other hackers. Because if they don't know how to use it, they don't understand the power of it all, you can't trust them. It's too much power for some people.

Basically, it's like having a gun. Let's say it's the Wild West. You take it upon yourself to have a gun, you're responsible for it. If you give that to someone, you're responsible for that. So you don't give it out. If you want to shoot somebody's sister, somebody's wife or something, that's upon you. It's all a question of morality in my eyes.

And if I know something, and it's of importance to somebody else, who's to tell me I can't sell it if I know it? Like if I knew something about you that somebody would pay a price for, it's up to me and my own morality whether I would sell it to him or not. But nobody could tell me, "You can't do that."

Like if I know about your credit history, and somebody comes up to me and says, "I'm doing background on him. I want to know. Can you get me his credit history?" If I think it's immoral, I'm not going to do it. But if for some reason I think that he's going to get it anyway, and it would benefit me, I'd probably give it to him anyway.

We're not evil people. We're good people at heart. There was a time when me and my friend, Nynex Phreak, another guy in the group, we found a system that actually, what it did was you could input a certain series of digits. It would take those digits and see if it was a credit card. So

you could basically hack out credit card numbers just by guessing. Is this a credit card? And it would tell you if it was or not. And we found that system.

Finally, somebody wrote a program that would automatically do it, scan all night and get thousands of credit cards. And we're like, yeah, this is no good. What if they start selling credit cards and stuff? We're like, this is no good. So we actually called the FBI and told them about it.

We wouldn't narc on anybody. We wouldn't say who wrote it or anything. We just said, there's a system, and it isn't right it's open like that. It was just getting ridiculous.

So I was like, "We've got to put an end to this." And we did that. And we were like, "Damn. We can't tell any hacker we did this. They'll be pissed." And we felt like that was right to do. That's kind of wrong.

Ira Glass

It is because of their own moral code in their group, and also their belief that someday hacking will no longer be seen as a crime, that society will change its ideas about information and computers and breaking into computers, that Eli is able to say something like this next quote about his time in the big house.

Eli

I was a criminal in the sense that Jesus Christ was a criminal, you know? Well, you know how he was thought to be a criminal. And he was sentenced and everything. And now look. Everybody's sporting crosses. And there's churches built around him and everything. Who knows? Maybe one day, it'll be Acid Phreak, the faith. You never know.

Ira Glass

In fact, when I was visiting Eli, he was facing a daily question of right and wrong when it came to his own home confinement. The prison system was keeping track of him during home confinement with this electronic device. It was about the size of a beeper. It was riveted onto an ankle strap.

And it would send this signal to a computer that authorities had put into his house. And that computer would call another computer any time that he would leave the house. And as he explained, hacking these computers and the phone line that connected them was pretty easy work.

But he did not do it. He said he just didn't want to get in any more trouble. He said he was going straight. And it wasn't because he thought hacking was wrong. It was that he was just tired of it.

Eli

We had lists and lists of computers and no time to do it in. It just got to the point where it was such a large burden. It was like, "Aw, man. We got to do this one. Aw, there's another one we got to do." And then it got to hundreds and hundreds. And finally, it's not even fun anymore.

It was such a rush to get it when you initially get it. But then, I don't know. It gets to be boring. I've just burned myself out, I think. I just got to that point where everybody gets burnt out if they have a little too much of everything.

Ira Glass

Now, though he was burned out, it was still a shock when the federal authorities seized all of his computers and he wasn't allowed to hack anymore. This was back when he was first arrested.

Eli

It was like, OK, what do I do? I usually get on the computer now, late at night and stuff. And you'd just go to sleep. And then my lifestyle started changing. I'd be sleeping at night again. So I was like, "Damn. This is like-- I have to fill this void. What should I do?" And I didn't know what to do anymore. It was horrible.

It was sad. We would call each other up. And usually, we'd be talking about computers and trading passwords, and then we'd get into this and that. And I remember, the first time we called, it was like, "So, what's up?" "Nothing. I cleaned my room yesterday." "Yeah, they came over and cleaned my room, too, pretty well." "Yeah, I know." "So what do you want to do?" "I don't know."

Because it's such a large part of our lives at that point. You have so much power and to lose it in an instant like that is just such a shock. It's like, bam. You don't have that power anymore. You can't sit on your computer. What are you going to do? Uh-oh, I'm a regular guy now. I'm not Acid Phreak anymore. What's Acid Phreak without a computer? He's just a regular guy. So it was a bummer.

At this point, I've already done it. I see it as a teenager thing. OK, I was a hacker when I was a kid and this and that. I got busted. It's a teenager thing to do. And that's that. I move on. I work with computers now, and that's my life.

Ira Glass

Well, Acid Phreak was not the first criminal who told me that he quit being bad because he got bored with it. A few Chicago gang members have told me the same thing, that you end up having the same night over and over again. You just get tired of it.

Maybe you remember the book *A Clockwork Orange*, the book and the movie. They're about teenage boys who love ultra-violence, commit murder, do all sorts of horrible things, speak to each other in a very stylized language.

At the end of that book-- the movie actually doesn't end this way, but the original British edition of the novel does. At the end of the book, the central character gives up committing acts of violence. And it's not because he thinks it's wrong. And it's not because any of the punishments and treatments that he's received have worked on him.

He gives it up because he's bored with it. It's just not that interesting to him. And we will end our program today with a couple of paragraphs from the book.

"I knew what was happening, O my brothers. I was like growing up. Yes yes yes, there it is. Youth must go. Ah, yes. But youth is only being in a way like it might be an animal. No, it is not just like being an animal so much as being like one of those malenky toys you viddy being sold in the streets, like little chellovecks made out of tin, with a spring inside and then a winding handle on

the outside. And you wind it up, grrr grrr grrr and off it itties, like walking, O my brothers. But it itties in a straight line. And it bangs straight into things, bang bang. And it cannot help what it is doing. Being young is like being one of those malenky machines."

And then at this point, the narrator starts going into this fantasy about having a son someday. And he says, "When I had my son, I would like to explain all that to him, when he was starry enough to like understand. But then I knew he would not understand, or would not want to understand at all, and would do all the veshches I had done, yes perhaps even killing some poor starry forella surrounded with mewng kots and koskhas. And I would not be able to really stop him. And nor would he be able to stop his own son, brothers. And so it would itty on like that to the end of the world, round and round and round, like some bolshe, gigantic like chelloveck, like old Bog Himself, turning and turning and turning, a vonny grahzny orange in his gigantic rookers."

Credits

Ira Glass

Well, this episode of Your Radio Playhouse was produced by WBEZ Chicago with generous funding from the MacArthur Foundation. Editorial and production help from Paul Tough and Jack Hitt on the East Coast, Margy Rochlin on the West Coast, Dolores Wilber and Emily Hanford here in Chicago. It was Paul Tough who hooked up the program with all the computer hackers. The old gospel records today were courtesy of the amazing Steve Cushing and the Blues Before Sunrise radio network. Rob Newhouse helped produce our radio play. Special thanks, as always, to Torey Malatia. I'm Ira Glass.

[FUNDING CREDITS]

Announcer

This is WBEZ Chicago.