

# How to spot a hacker

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Hackers are among us, but we never think about them. Most of them probably have normal day jobs; some work in tech companies and others don't work at all. That's one of the problems of being antisocial: you don't fit in. Ever. Now then, how do you spot these troublemakers of the web: smart people with double lives, a tingling passion for twisting the darkest side of the web, and a genius for social engineering?

I would love to tell you that I've cracked the code to detect them.

Unfortunately, hackers are hard to generalise. But I'll give it a try. So, hop on a journey to discover if your shy best friend is just an introverted nerd or a coding machiavellian.

Thea Leyland and Rob Swartz bring you a show about spotting the hackers walking down our roads, ordering coffee at our local spots and sitting on the other side of our date-night tables. Are you ready to stop someone in the streets and ask them, "What's your favourite malware?"

## Episode 1: Ego + Machiavellianism

[intro jingle]

"Hello, hello! We are Thea Leyland and Rob Swartz and this is another episode of 'How to spot a hacker'. Our guest today is Mason, a 32-year-old hacker who created an infamous malware."

A skinny man with long brown hair, a thick moustache and a goatee glares into the direction of the window screen, his gaze covered by a baseball hat. He can't see the presenter and just sits, inspecting the room.

In the room Mason is in, there's one chair and a table with some beverages: coffee, tea and soft drinks. The room looks cosy, with peach walls, a comfortable two-seater couch and some random objects. There's another door, opposite the one Mason came from. It's a white door with a keyboard, and you would supposedly submit a code to get in if it wasn't for the fact that it's a fake door.

Rob adjusts the microphone and clears his throat: “Today we are talking about ego and Machiavellianism in hackers, and we choose our guest as an example of these traits”

Thea joins in. “Well said Rob! I was blown away when I realised how ego was the main character in Mason’s defeat. I’ve also heard the story about how — after coming out of prison without any money to buy food — he ended up in a McDonald’s and convinced them to give him a free meal by saying, ‘I was here yesterday and I had a bad experience, your colleague promised me a free meal.’ This man never stopped deceiving.”

“Are you familiar with the Iliad, Thea?”

“The epic poem?”

“Yes, it’s from there we get the name Trojan virus, a malware that, like the Trojan Horse, enters your computer disguised as something useful, but when you download it — like a bunch of soldiers — it invades your device, giving full access to the hacker.”

“It sounds terrifying! I can only imagine, from the hacker’s perspective, this must be a crazy boost of confidence.”

“Yeah, let’s talk a bit about that before asking our guest some questions.”

“Ok, Rob. Research shows that hackers tend to be very self-assured and egomaniacal. Listening to some of the stories told by notorious hackers, the sense of disconnect from reality and the feeling of superiority is clear. The skill level you need to do some of these hacks is great. And some of these people acquire those skills at an early age, figuring out ways to get around systems built by prominent organisations.”

“But could we call it knowledge, or is it just cleverness and a high ability for problem-solving?”

“That’s an interesting question. There are lots of different types of hackers out there. Some rely more on knowledge about the machine they are trying to infiltrate and compromise. Others specialise; like hackers who learn and develop knowledge around a specific coding language or operating system. Other hackers are more about planning and strategising. The social engineering is the part they are best at.”

“Yeah, that’s fascinating. Some real manipulation in action right there. Which of the two categories do you think defines our guest today?”

On the other side of the screen, Mason is looking around the room, analysing each object around him with minutia. His eyes jump over every detail while his head is almost totally still.

“I would say 50/50. I mean, this man knew computers, and he was able to build one of the first access control tools. But he was also an incredible social engineer, and the innovative ways he found to spread the virus were amazing.”

“For hackers, it is crucial to have the ability to convince people to do something, and they can use tools of coercion like nude pictures and financial threats. They can disguise themselves as the person, finding information about them, or with that information they can send messages relevant to them that will convince them to click a link. This calculated manipulation is called ‘Machiavellianism’. But what about our guest’s ego? Is the ego born first or the skill?”

“Ah, that’s a hard one! The ego is sometimes what kills you. This was the case for our guest and many other hackers as well. It’s often hard for hackers to keep their mischief to themselves. This is why they end up confessing and being caught for that.”

“That sounds quite irresponsible for a criminal!”

“Yeah, I don’t think they like to call themselves that. But think about it, this is exactly what happened in the 2015 CIA hack. The hackers D3f4ult and Cracka started targeting CIA officers of high ranks sharing their personal information with the general public. Didn’t the kid confess everything to his friend who ended up betraying him out of spite?”

“Oh right, a lesson about ego and also about friends I guess, ah ah.”

“So Mason, tell us a bit about how you got caught by the police the first time?”

“Ouch! Right to the point.” Mason adjusts his hat without losing composure.

“What happened is that the phone company charged me for some calls that weren’t mine. That really pissed me off because, to be honest, I had put so much effort into tapping the neighbours’ phone line to try and lower my family’s phone bills. You know, hacking at the time was hard on your bills. Those who started hacking in the 90’s like me had to deal with dial-up internet access: the Internet was directly connected to the phone line. If you were spending hours at the computer, your parents would discover it the next month through your bills.” Mason stands up and starts walking in a circle in the small room. “I called them, and they said they couldn’t do anything about it. They provoked me; they thought they were smarter than me. Then I just did what I knew best. I started dialing their company numbers one after the other to try to connect to the company modems until I managed to get in”

“But you didn’t manage to change your phone bill in the end...” Rob probes.

“No, I caused an outage on all their West Coast telephone systems. That’s

where I fucked up. I called them and threatened them, saying, 'If you solve the problem with my phone bills, I'll tell you why the outage is happening and how to solve it.' Mason laughed. "Yeah, I gave them my name, phone number, address, everything. What an idiot."

Thea: "What happened after that?"

"I went to jail for like five months. And it was fun, to be honest! Everyone thought I was cool because I was the hacker guy, and I started teaching the prison IT guy some new computer skills."

"Oh, it sounds like you had a blast! It's almost like anybody else that goes to prison lies about their experience" comments Rob, smiling.

"Now, Rob, let's observe our guest's behaviour for a second"

Mason has sat down on the couch again, now holding a cup.

"What are the first things you notice, Thea?"

"Ok, first of all, he chose the Tom & Jerry cup. Bold choice. And he's drinking coffee."

"I noticed he lit the candle on the table."

"That's funny. I wonder if he thought it was some kind of psychological challenge"

"I mean, he was right. He kinda acted how we expected, connecting the dots."

"Mason, let's move to the important questions. Give us an example of your day."

Mason is now trying a combination on the door's keyboard.

"Mason? Are you with us?"

"Oh, yeah. My day. It depends on who I am hacking with. Recently I have been working mostly in groups. Usually, I align my timetable to the time zone of their country. Recently my day has started around 1 pm. Before that, I go to my Jiu Jitsu class or for a walk downtown. I like to lose myself in the city; the skyscrapers towering above me. When the official day starts, I go home. I usually don't hack from anywhere else. I spend the rest of the day in front of my computer. Maybe I order some food or I pick up something. And, man, I don't know, I can end up working on something until quite late."

The man keeps trying code after code, at an ever faster pace.

"It's funny how this wouldn't sound like a very exciting life from the external point of view."

"I agree, Rob. I don't think I would date someone who spends almost their entire day in front of a screen. But maybe it's not all bad. Mason, what would you usually talk about on a date?"

“Mmmh, I don’t know, I can talk about many things. Usually, I would pick something I have in common with the girl I am dating and start with that. Damn door!” Mason slaps the door loudly. “It’s impossible!”

“Do you ever tell your friends or someone you're dating that you are a hacker?”

“It happened, not gonna lie. Sometimes people are just chatting about the most lame job achievement, or their dog learning how to sit, or some other lame shit. And meanwhile, you are doing these incredible things. I can’t stop myself from bragging a bit. But it only happened a few times with people I knew wouldn’t actually take me seriously.”

“Oh, ok. Do people not believe you?”

“People have a very pop culture idea of hackers. It’s just this nerdy guy typing incomprehensible shit on a computer screen. Very few know what that really means. So people are like, ‘Oh cool!’ or ‘Hey, don’t hack my laptop!’ But then they quickly try to forget.”

“So it’s almost like people would prefer to erase the idea of a hacker existing from their brain than to actually face it and maybe protect their devices from it?”

“Yeah..motherfucker..I feel it’s kind of like...that.” Mason has moved on to banging the door violently. “It doesn’t open, right? It doesn’t...ugh.”

“Ok, our time is finished for today. Let’s say goodbye to Mason.”

They start waving towards the screen to an oblivious Mason whose door pounding has escalated to drop kicks directed at the thick wood.

Rob turns off the microphones and starts collecting his stuff. Thea takes a sip of the cold tea sitting on her desk. “Hey, I received an email. Apparently, there’s a new software that helps podcasters archive all their recordings safely and catalogue them by keywords. The AI scans all the recordings, so you don’t even have to manually input the keywords!” Rob looks at her with his eyes wide open, full of excitement. “It sounds great, let’s get it.” She starts collecting her things. “Send it to me, and I’ll download it first thing in the morning.”

Rob and Thea shut down their laptops and turn off the studio lights.