

Confessions of a Former Teen Internet Pirate

by Melanie G. Snyder

“Who is pounding on the door at this crazy hour?” Hackrat thought as he rolled out of bed and threw on a pair of sweatpants. He squinted at the clock beside his bed. 6AM! The pounding continued, but before he could get to the door, it flew open and he faced a swarm of police officers.

“Do you know why we’re here?” the officer asked.

“No! I don’t!” he said, his voice shaking.

“Know anything about DrinkOrDie?” the officer asked.

Hackrat felt like he was going to throw up. His mind raced, thinking about the two computers sitting under his desk, each containing literally thousands of pirated copies of movies, PS2 games, PC games, and software applications – all of which he had been making available for free download on the Internet. DrinkOrDie was an Internet piracy ring – and Hackrat was one of their site operators.

Hackrat got involved initially to get free software and games for himself when he was a freshman in college. “My friends in the dorms introduced me to all of this,” he says.

When he wasn’t at class, studying, mountain biking or hanging out with his girlfriend, Hackrat was online – part of a whole underground Internet piracy community. “I met tons of people online, from all over the world. It all seemed sort of cool – we were all in this thing together - ‘us’, the little guys, against ‘them’, the big corporations. And, of course, I got to play my games.” His girlfriend repeatedly urged him to “stop doing this nerdy stuff,” Hackrat says. But, he was hooked. Little by little, Hackrat got more and more involved until he started running two sites of his own, which he used to supply four large “warez” groups (underground Internet piracy groups). It never occurred to him that he’d get busted.

But here were armed FBI agents and police officers, searching his place, confiscating his home computer and laptop, advising him of his rights and telling him he was going to need a lawyer. The days that followed were a blur, as he met with the federal prosecutor, found a lawyer, was charged with

criminal copyright infringement, was arraigned in US District Court, pled guilty and was convicted of conspiracy, a felony charge under Title 18, Section 371 of the US Code. He faced a statutory maximum sentence of five years in federal prison, a fine of \$250,000 and possible payment of restitution to the victims of his copyright infringement.

But worse than facing all of this, says Hackrat, was facing his father and telling him what he had done.

“About nine months before I was busted,” Hackrat recalls, “my father called me on the phone in the middle of the night and said, ‘Son, I don’t know what you’re involved in, I don’t *want* to know what you’re involved in – but, whatever it is, you need to knock it off!’ At the time, I just said, ‘Yeah, Dad, whatever.’ You know, you just think you’re invincible – that nothing will actually ever happen to you...”

Hackrat’s voice trails off. There’s a long silence.

Then, he continues. “My dad had a heart attack – literally, an actual heart attack – two weeks after I was busted. I know it was because of me – because of how upset he was about what I had done. I have never felt so guilty in my whole life.”

As news of Hackrat’s bust hit the newspapers, many of his friends as well as his girlfriend hit the road. “When you’re in this kind of trouble you find out who your friends really are,” he says. “When I was into the warez scene, I thought ‘I’m not hurting anybody’. But you really have no idea what kind of impact you’re going to have on your loved ones, on the people around you.”

These days, Hackrat spends a lot of time traveling around the country talking with kids and teens about what he’s been through and trying to help them understand that copying copyrighted materials is just plain illegal.

He knows the temptations that are out there for kids to download. “I know kids think, ‘Hey, it’s free, it’s easy’, and you can brag to your friends if you’re the first to have something like a new game or a new movie,” Hackrat observes. “But kids have to understand that downloading something on the Internet for free without paying for it is the same as stealing from a candy store. The rules in real life apply to life on the Internet.”

“When you’re a kid, you think you’re invincible and will live forever and nothing is any big deal,” says Hackrat. “I had to find out the hard way. Copyright infringement IS a big deal. No one told me

what I was doing was wrong. I didn't think I was breaking the law. But I was and I'm paying the price. I tell every kid I meet: "Ignorance of the law is no defense!"

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Sidebar: Hackrat's Tips for Staying Out of Trouble Online

(Approx 50 words)

Don't plead ignorance of the law. Get the lowdown on copyright laws from Hackrat and other former teen pirates here:

http://www.netmonkey.info/index.php?option=com_content&task=section&id=4&Itemid=45

Get the scoop on basic downloading do's and don'ts:

http://www.isafe.org/channels/sub.php?ch=4&sub_id=2&content=includes/content/4/protecting_ip_tips.htm

And find out what defines the line between "sharing" and stealing:

<http://www.definetheline.com/>