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## The 'spider's web' of hacking

By Margaret Ryan

BBC News

**As a Briton faces possible extradition to the US for alleged computer crime, a former hacker, whose prosecution collapsed, talks about the lure of breaking into systems.**

Mathew Bevan had stood accused of mounting a determined "information warfare" campaign against the US air force and leading defence contractors in 1994.

US Senate hearings were initially told the security breaches were the work of highly skilled foreign agents.

Mr Bevan, whose hacker alias was Kuji, was charged with conspiracy and faced accusations of being an Eastern European spy.

But the truth was somewhat more prosaic, said the 30-year-old computer consultant.

"I was just a kid in my bedroom hunting for UFO information."

Then a computer programmer for an insurance firm, he says he had previously been bullied and had felt ostracised by his peers.

"But the computer system was a place where I was king and showed power.

"In the real world I had none and I was quite defenceless. I didn't deliberately cause any damage."

### Thrill of the chase

But the amateur hacker's pastime landed him in court in the UK after his activities came to the attention of the US authorities and the British police tracked him down.

Mr Bevan can only talk about his own experiences - but his case, he believes, was overblown from the start as he was portrayed in the States as a spy running rings of spies.

"At the time I was 'the single biggest threat to world security since Adolf Hitler'," he said.

By the time his case came to court the allegations made against him had died down.

The case against him finally collapsed in 1997 after the judge was told he posed no threat to security.

Another, a 16-year-old defendant, was fined £1,200 after admitting breaking into a number of US military systems.

Mr Bevan, who now lives in Wiltshire, freely admits that, for hackers,

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The case against Mr Bevan collapsed

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successfully breaking into systems provides an ego boost.

Reports claiming that UFO were being held secretly at American military installations had set the young hacker down the path of trying to find out more.

"It's an adrenalin rush. It's like a parent finding their child's diary.

"You know you shouldn't look at it but you just can't help yourself.

"You know it's wrong but you still do it. It becomes addictive," he explained.

#### **Competitive element**

More than a decade on Mr Bevan understands the havoc hackers can cause in compelling companies to install more security, but resents the suggestion his actions were done out of malice.

"It's like a spider's web - once you break into one machine you can compromise a few accounts.

"You may go into a machine not with the intent to find anything but just as a staging ground for another computer system"

"It's a case of 'how many computers can I hack into in two hours?' We used to have competitions."

But he claimed hackers had been "tainted" by the rise in identity theft and viruses.



The search for UFOs prompted Mr Bevan's hacking

For the hacker, he argued there is an ethical code that information should be free and there are strict rules about using that information.

He believes companies have to accept some responsibility for hacking, arguing insurance firms would not generally pay out on insurance claims if it could be shown that not enough care had been taken in guarding against it.

To this day he believes his arrest was politically motivated, suggesting hacking cases make headlines when companies want funding to fight cyber crime.

"In my cynical view the powers that be decided 'we'll have you two and make a good example of you'", he said.

#### **Childhood pursuit**

He says he had already left hacking behind him before the day he was arrested at work.

Since his case was dropped the world of hacking has changed but he believes the potential for disruption remains stronger than ever as young people become ever more computer literate.

"When I was doing it people didn't have net access in the UK. I was dialling up to the States," he said.

For many hacking is a young person's pursuit that they eventually grow out of, he suggested, but before they do the potential for disruption is incalculable.

"They [children] are smart and can develop skills that adults can't keep up with," he said.

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