
Community Guide

The bridging series

by Rick Harmsen



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The second community guide

Another community effort. This time focused on one principle: Bridging. Once again it proves what investigators, compliance specialists, and open-source experts from around the world can pull off when united by one mission: staying ahead of criminals. This guide, like the first, is built on shared experiences, real traces, and the lessons learned along the way.

In the previous guide we established that crypto keeps evolving, and bridging is exactly one of those topics that seems hard to counter for a lot of investigators. The truth? Most of the time it's not as hard as it looks.

It's about knowing the ins and outs, approaching transactions from the right angle, and processing all available information to reach the correct conclusions. Bridging is not magic. It's a technical capability, and like any technical capability, it can be understood, traced, and used against the very people trying to hide behind it. This guide covers the most important parts: the know-how, the identification, and the steps you can take. Will you need to keep skilling up beyond this? Absolutely. But that's the job, and every guide gets you one step closer.

Take it, use it, share it. And most importantly: stay sharp, because the other side will keep finding ways to level up.



Stay Sharp Legends!

Want to contribute?

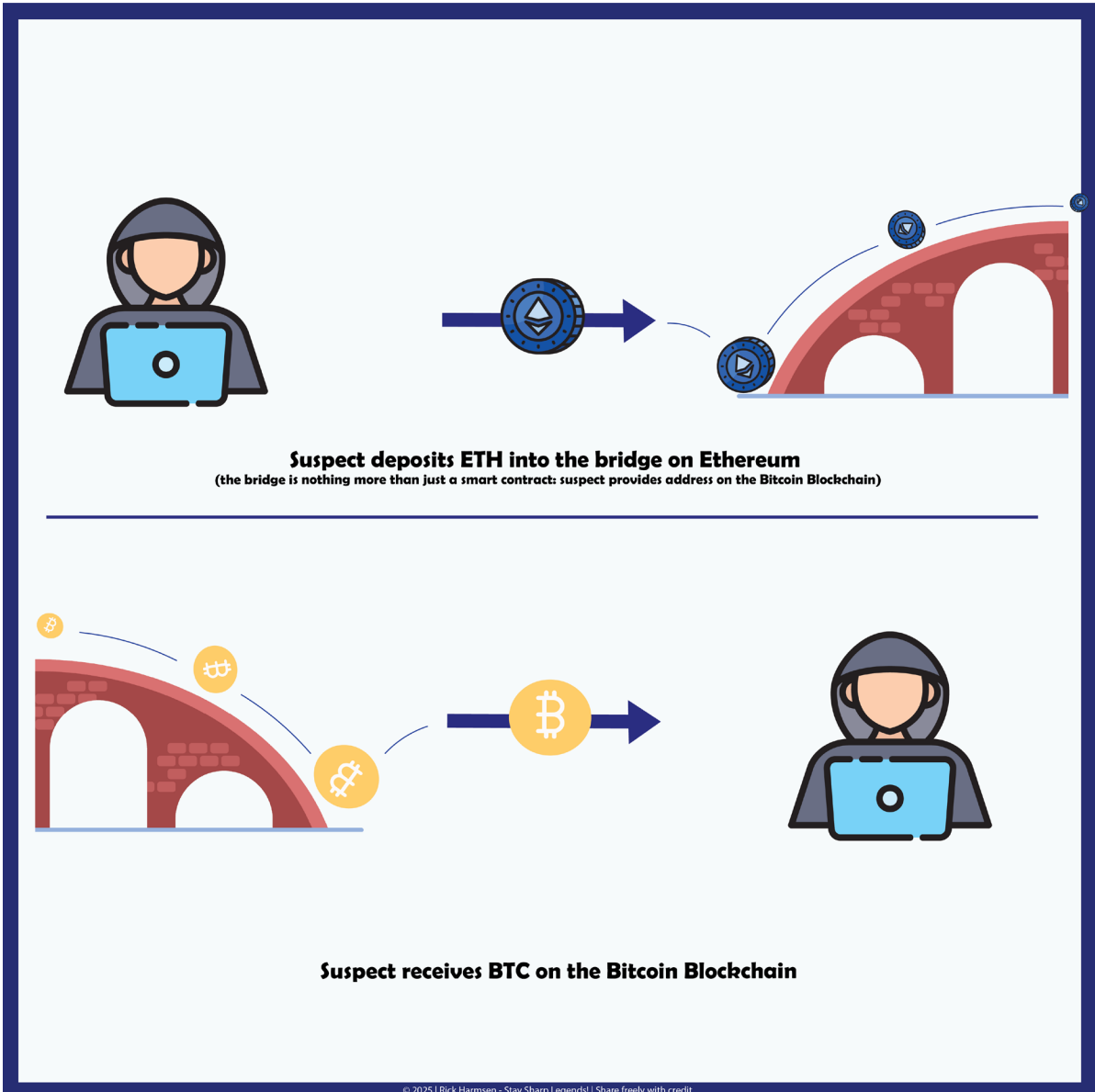
This community isn't closed, invite-only, or hidden behind special access. It's built on genuine connections that matter. If you've got experiences, observations, or even just questions that can help make the crypto space safer, I want to hear from you.

Reach out in whichever way works for you: drop a DM, reply to a post, share your own story, or even send an OP_Return message on-chain if that's your style. Every contribution, big or small, adds another piece to the puzzle.

One thing is certain: we'll keep putting information out there, in every format we can think of. The more voices, the sharper the insights which will all benefit in making the crypto space safer, step by step.



Why do bad actors use bridging?



Not a new feature

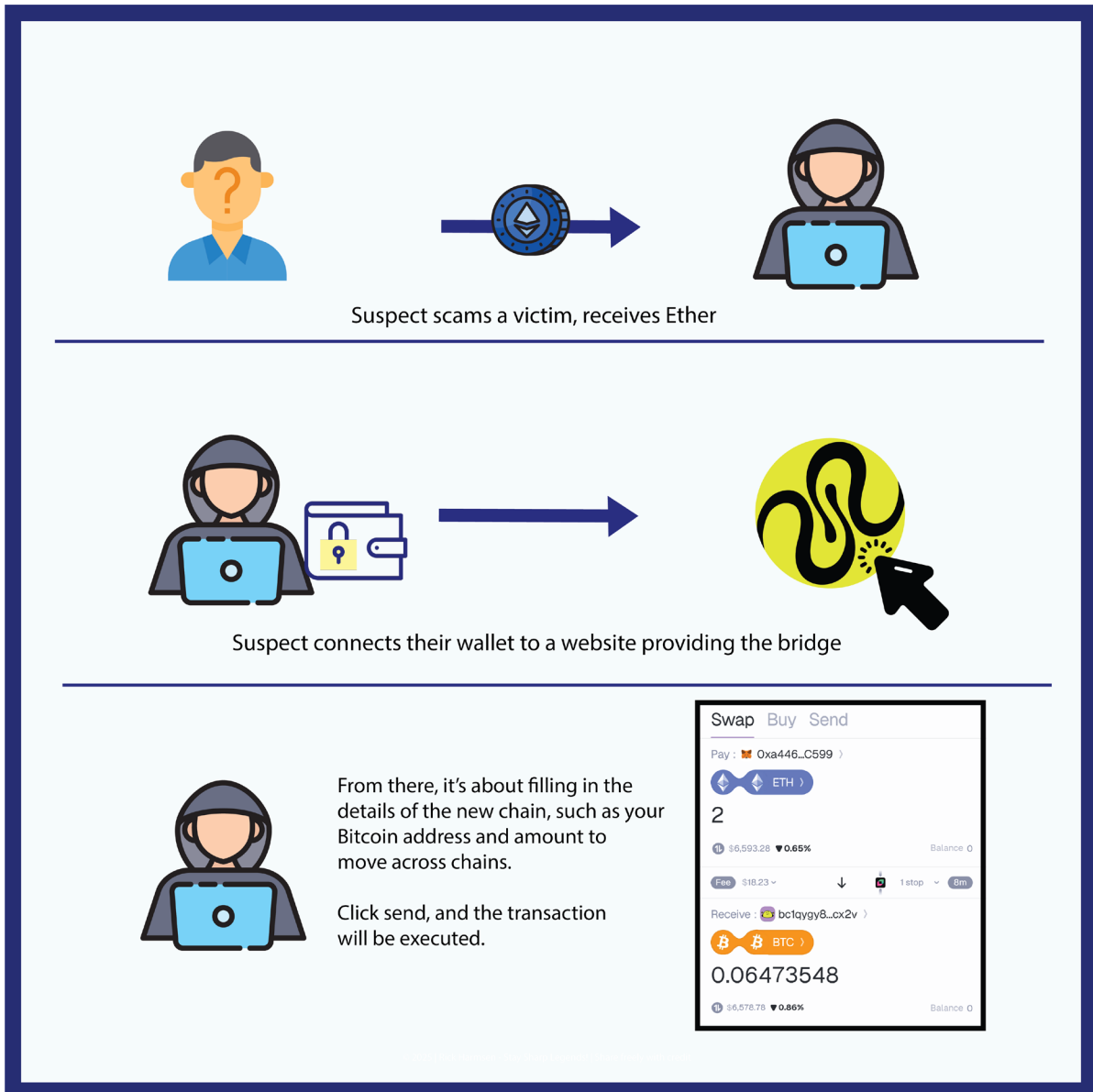
Bridging isn't new, nor was it designed for crime. Just like swapping or staking, it exists to give users flexibility across chains. The ability to move assets freely between blockchains is a legitimate and widely used feature of the crypto ecosystem. The difference lies entirely in how a bad actor chooses to leverage it.

How to approach the trail?

Bad actors love bridges, and for good reason if obfuscation is the goal. Most investigators are still learning the ins and outs, but that's not all. After bridging, most tooling will flag bridging exposure rather than the underlying crime, such as a scam or phishing origin. Bridging transactions always require further investigation.



How do bad actors leverage bridging



The options are wide

In essence, it's straightforward. Navigate to a website offering the bridge, or leverage the built-in functions of a wallet if available. Sometimes additional addresses are required when bridging to certain chains, but the process itself is rarely complex.

Which ones bad actors use?

Every bad actor has their favorites. Some are smart, deliberately choosing bridges that leave little trace in explorers. Others? A bit less careful. Your job is to identify which type you're dealing with and build the narrative from there.



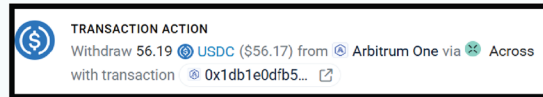
How to identify the use of bridging



A bad actor initiates the bridge through a simple interface, but it still leaves data behind!



Hidden inside OP_Returns on Bitcoin...



...or clearly labeled in explorers like Etherscan

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Sometimes it's that visual

Bridges are not anonymous. Identifying them is a skill you may not have fully developed yet, but it gets easier by the day. The key insight? Even when a bad actor thinks they've hidden their tracks, the data is almost always there. You just need to know where to look legend.

Where to look?

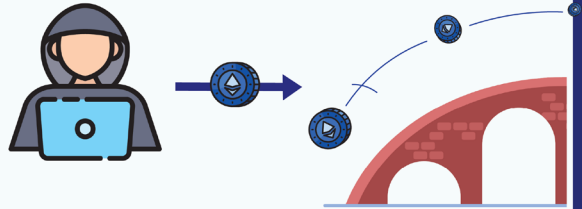
Most explorers will provide visual clues a bridge has been used, but next to that? Visualisation tooling is one of the most powerful additions to a bridging trace. It gives you a quick exposure overview, and once you've encountered a bridge before, you'll know exactly which steps to take next.



Extracting the details of bridging

You've identified that the suspect used a bridge. Sometimes you'll see a name, sometimes an address... and sometimes nothing at all!

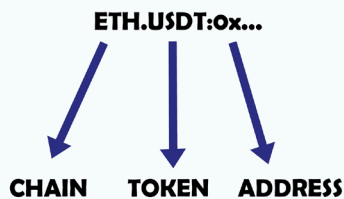
So how do you handle the quick and simple ones?



```
OP_RETURN ==ETH.USDT:0x1278534c3c03017a... 0.00000000 BTC
bc1q50pgcpgm4ng5yvf00v9... 2s40lxf 0.00020000 BTC
bc1qng2r0pg4ydkd08vdslw... evkk5c4 0.05511212 BTC
0.05531212 BTC
```

OP_RETURNS are mostly quick and dirty. This transaction with ETH.USDT:0x...?

The idea is straight forward:



0x5c7BCd6E7De5423a257D81B442095A1a6ced35C5 (Across Protocol: Ethereum Spoke Pool V2)

TRANSACTION ACTION
Withdraw 56.19 USDC (\$56.17) from Arbitrum One via Across with transaction 0x1db1e0dfb5...

Sometimes transactions clearly present all the information, like the one shown above

It tells you exactly which protocol is used, in this case the Across Protocol. Even if you find the text hard to interpret, an explorer will show you the details in a, more familiar, format.

For Across Protocol: explorer.range.io

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It doesn't stop at identifying

Bridge identified! Does the next step have to be difficult? Not always, legend. Sometimes it's as simple as identifying, reading, and visualising the data. The visualisation part will typically take the most time, but the information is usually there.

How to read the data?

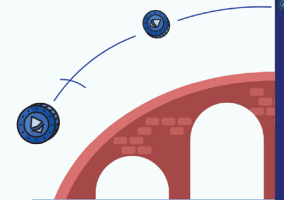
OP_Returns often follow a strict format that spells out the complete action, including the chain, token, and receiving address. Hit an EVM transaction? Open the explorer, find the transaction, and more often than not the bridging action will be clearly labeled and easy to interpret.



The investigators mindset

In the end, it's all about you. The suspect may make it harder, but you still have to trace through that bridge to follow the funds.

Your mindset matters, and not giving up!



1. *Am I relying on my default view, or digging deeper?*
2. *What other perspective could reveal more?*
3. *Can I make sense of the (raw) data myself?*
4. *Can I spot patterns to work around the bridge?*
5. *Is there an intermediary that still can be approached?*

Bridges do not end investigations, they test your patience and persistence!

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Your patience and persistence will constantly be tested

Nowadays it is impossible to get around bridging transactions in longer investigations. It's more accessible than ever through websites and wallets, with almost endless possibilities for the bad actor. But those same possibilities are there for the investigator to leverage to their benefit.

The mindset should be straightforward: there is almost always an option to move forward. Are there situations where it feels impossible? Yes. But even those are getting countered by the day through new tools and innovations. Some cases might linger a while longer, but they rarely stay cold forever.



The second guide, and we aren't stopping!

This second guide has focused on one thing: strengthening knowledge in the fight against crypto crime. It has been a blast constructing this information along the way, eventually combining it into a community guide once again.

A big thank you to everyone reading this. Whether you're a seasoned investigator or just starting out, the fact that you're here and sharpening your skills is exactly what this community is about. Every person that levels up makes the space a little harder for criminals to operate in.

Special shout-outs to the ones who kept me sharp along the way once again for this second guide, you know who you are! From spinning up ideas to reviewing all the versions before releasing the final one. Your contribution is tremendously valuable and appreciated.

We aren't done yet, there is so much ground still to cover. Not knowing where it leads next, I am already tremendously excited. Keep investigating, keep sharing and remember... the criminals don't rest, so neither can we. And that's why we always need to...



Stay Sharp Legends!

Want to reach out? Just hop over to my LinkedIn!

