

For Joe Warez Addict at the end of the cracked software food chain, membership in a group like the Inner Circle is the ultimate collectible. A way to legitimize their addiction, work for the common good, and, of course, get a nice fresh supply of warez. The drug addict becomes dealer. A sizable chunk of Mad Hatter's daily mail is begging letters.

"I hope that if I ask this question, you will not be offended in any way. But can I join the Inner Circle? I mean, I respect the Inner Circle ... but never got a chance to join it. I was just wondering, can I? Please mail me back ASAP."

Needless to say, this lone obsessive didn't get his chance. Joining the Inner Circle is nigh on impossible. Reaching its members, though, is easy enough. They keep a high profile, both in posting files on Usenet and flaming lamers. When I first tried to contact them I thought that they weren't so good at answering email, but it turned out their provider had just been taken offline for illegal spamming. They relocated en masse, and my mail had been lost in transit. So I posted a message to one of their newsgroups, made sure it was correctly labeled, politely worded, and not crossposted (a cardinal sin anywhere on Usenet). A reply arrived within eight hours. Mad Hatter was more than happy to talk, but not on the phone, not in person, and not on conventional IRC. "It has a bit of a habit of advertising my IP address," he said. He and six other Inner Circle members set up their own IRC server, configured a secret channel, and arranged a mutually convenient time for a live interview. We met and talked for nine hours, in the bizarre overlapping conversational style of IRC. They were frank and open, friendly and articulate - and, like any new start-up,

flattered by the attention.

A 17-strong force, the Inner Circle has its own iconography and its own ideals. Its members are warez gods. They preach, police, advise, flame. Their commandments? Good manners, good use of bandwidth, and good warez. Give unto others as you would have them give unto you. When the Inner Circle is not sourcing warez from secret sites, its members are hunting and gathering from more conventional sources. Clickety borrows fresh stuff from his clients. A few have attended Microsoft Solution seminars. "Some of us are actual beta testers, too," says Mad Hatter. "That's got to be scary for the developers." One way or another, they help maintain the steady flow of warez onto Usenet. From there, various wannabes, lamers, and aspirants copy their work to countless BBSes, FTP sites, and Web pages.

These are not pimply teenagers devoid of social life and graces, little ferrets who talk in bIFF text and make napalm out of soap and lightbulbs; they're not downloading porn or being careful not to wake their parents or spelling "cool" as "kewl." According to the interviews I conducted, not one member is younger than 20; Clickety-Clack is the youngest at 23. Most are 30-plus. Champion uploader Digital has been happily married for 22 of his 46 years. Most are well-adjusted white males with day jobs and thoroughly nuclear families. Founding member Abraxas has three kids, one over 18. Mad Hatter runs a small business from home. Technical guru TAG is a computer animator. Irrelevant maintains commercial real estate. They're spread all over the United States. A few are concentrated around Orlando, Florida. Two or three others are California-based. For obvious reasons, that's as precise as they like to get.

The Inner Circle was born of a sense of outrage that their beloved pirate-ware news groups were going to pot. Warez had been around for more than a decade, but the growth of the Internet was bringing clueless newbies onto the boards. Warez needed a code of ethics and a group of leaders to set some examples. The leaders would be the best crackers - some of whom became the Inner Circle.

"We took over alt.binaries.pictures.leek in early '96," explains Abraxas, "and then leaked the first Nashville [Windows 97] beta. The groups were being overrun by clueless people. They needed help. They were wasting Internet resources. Perhaps if we could encourage responsible use of the available bandwidth, the whole Usenet warez 'scene' might last a while longer. Warez was around before we were, and will be after, but we wanted to help people and preserve resources using common sense."

As enforcers of the warez code, the Inner Circle can be swift and sure. In April 1996, a pirate gang called Nomad, convinced that posts to warez groups were being suppressed, decided to get themselves some unsupervised elbow room. They selected an antiwork newsgroup - alt.binaries.slack, relatively empty and off the beaten track - where software could be slipped past news providers who had firewalled the usual warez forums. Within 24 hours, the forum was flooded with the latest releases. The slackers bestirred themselves from their apathy and fought back, posting files that told the pirates politely to push off. The warez kept coming. Then the Inner Circle waded in on the slackers' side and castigated the invaders for their poor manners. The pirates left meekly -

though as a parting gift, one of them posted Microsoft NT, Beta 3, all 48 Mbytes of it, in 5,734 parts. The slackers' newsfeed was clogged for days.

A slightly disturbing revelation came out of the slacker invasion. "After the first attempted takeover, we discovered just how scary search engines like Deja News and AltaVista were," explains TAG. "You could dig up real email addresses pretty easy on about 75 percent of people posting warez." A worried TAG hacked into the code of Forte Agent, an industry standard newsreader already cracked to bypass the shareware cripples, and stripped away the X-newsreader header, giving posters far greater anonymity. As a side effect, the patch also reduced email spams by two-thirds. "The hack went over so well with even nonwarez people that Forte eventually incorporated it into Agent as a feature," TAG says proudly, "although I don't think they'll be giving us credit."

By mid-'96, Mad Hatter decided that police work was getting to be too much of a chore. The newsfeed was being clogged by lamers, requesters, and partials posters with "room-temperature IQs." Those genuinely into warez were seeing less and less complete software uploaded; in its place were hundreds of stray disks and clammy begging posts. In a rare fit of pique, Mad Hatter took his revenge.

"If I continue to see the 'here's what I have' threads," he wrote, "I will stop uploading here. I will not help and will laugh my ass off that everyone is suffering. If for some reason you doubt that I make a difference, it's your loss, as I personally have uploaded 85 percent of all the shit that's getting posted now when it was zero

day or still fresh. Keep fighting over stale shit - I like to watch; keep posting partials, and I'll stop upping my 100 to 300 Mbytes a week. In fact, I think I'll stop now."

And stop the Inner Circle did. "We became burnt out on educating the masses," Mad Hatter says. Instead, a range of guaranteed lamer-free encrypted newsgroups was created for posting PGP-encoded warez, for Inner Circle-approved members only. Those on the select interested-parties list are given the codes to unlock the software, and anyone can apply to join. Requirement: a reasonable knowledge of PGP. "Hopefully this is a sign you won't be totally incompetent if you choose to post," says TAG. At the last count, the IPL had 500 subscribers, happily trading warez under the protection of the latest in antilamer technology.