

Warez on Usenet are basically gifts - testimony to the power and stature of the giver. Files are posted for all to download, free. Just fire up your newsreader, point it at an appropriate forum, and a list like a home-shopping catalog of the latest software spills down your screen. There is no pressure, but if you download and you like the vibe, you are expected to join the community and contribute uploads whenever possible.

On the freewheeling IRC chat forums, warez are no longer gifts - they're trade goods. The rewards are greater, but you've got to work for them. The IRC channels are 24-hour stock exchanges cum street markets: FreeWarez, Warez96, Warez4Free, WarezSitez, WarezAppz, and WarezGamez. There are private channels, hidden areas, and invite-only piracy parties. And there are no free lunches - every piece of software has to be paid for, in software. The more recent the application, the higher its value. The ultimate bartering tools are zero-day warez - software released by a commercial house in the last 24 hours, cracked if necessary and uploaded. The prizes for good zero-day warez vary; you may get instant download status on a particular server, logins and passwords for exclusive FTP sites, or admission to the ranks of a powerful cartel like the Inner Circle.

"Zero-day sites are very Élite stuff," explains paid-up Élitist TAG. "People can get access only if they can move a few hundred Mbytes a day. Most are invite only. The average IRC warez trader doesn't get that kind of access unless he puts a lot of effort into it." Zero-day warez trading is a fraught business; competition between groups often leads to malpractice. "You

get a lot of first releases with bad cracks," says TAG, "just so someone can say they released first. Then two days later, you get a working crack. We get most of our freshest stuff from private FTP and courier drop sites."

If your software collection is more mundane, you can trade one piece directly for another. But with so many unpoliced egos in one place, this can be risky. People will often welsh on deals, allowing you to pass them a file and then disappearing into the ether. Cunning traders will barter with "trojans" - zipped-up files of gunk, realistic enough to carry out half the transaction. In extreme cases, someone may feed you a virus.

A step down from zero-day warez are drop sites, where fresh cracks can be found for the cost of a download. Some drop sites run on the trader's own machine; others piggyback on government or corporate mainframes, shareware mirrors, and university networks. Often they're only in existence for 24 hours, or on weekends when the sysops are at home.

Wherever you end up, you'll be struck by the extreme politesse and measured courtesy, united by a common language. "Greetz m8. Have appz, gamez and crackz on 129.102.1.3. Looking for Pshop 4.0 beta. L8ter." "Have 1.5 gigs of warez on anonymous T1. Upload for leech access. /msg me for more info. No lamers."