

Software Piracy, part 2

HYPOTHESIS

Even if informed of the stiff penalties for illegal copying and distribution of software, it is hypothesized that home computer pirates--and owners of pirate bulletin boards--would not cease software pirating and illegal distribution.

NULL HYPOTHESIS

If informed of the stiff penalties for illegal copying and distribution of software, it is hypothesized that home computer pirates would cease to pirate and distribute software immediately.

METHOD

The study involved several subjects. The focus of data-gathering was on the relationship between business executives and home computer pirates, what part pirate bulletin boards play in the illegal distribution of pirated software. The researcher has interview two of the anticipated three software pirates. These two pirates are distinguished based on how they obtained copyrighted software: (a) Home computer pirate, pirating and distributing software through a ritual of software trading; (b) A business employee who pirates software from work. Interviews with the home computer pirate and the business employee were scheduled by researcher. Unfortunately, the interview with the pirate bulletin board system operator was not possible.

Also included in the study is a record of on-line (that is, connected to an electronic bulletin board) pirated software available on pirate bulletin boards and a list of pirated software at a home computer software pirate's home.

IMPLICATIONS

This is one of the first studies focusing on home computer software piracy. Little is known about the home computer software pirate, although much is known about corporate piracy. As time goes on, it is quickly apparent that software piracy costs computer users--honest and dishonest--billions of dollars around the world. As businesses clean out their computers, and become legal, attention must turn to the home computer pirate. What their motives, their ambitions, and their methods are must be determined now before anti-pirating organizations make

pirates even more close-mouthed. Knowledge of how pirating can be avoided and/or dealt with in education, business, and home on a microcosmic level (individual users) rather than macrocosmic level (institutional level) may well determine the price of the next upgrade of Microsoft Windows, or other programs.

INTERPRETATION OF RESULTS

A variety of factors influence the software pirate and impact on the realm of software piracy. During the course of this research, the researcher has been tempted to side with the software pirate. The appeal of the software pirates' arguments is not strong; stealing software to evaluate it before buying it is not a valid point when commercial software is rarely bought. Software piracy does not result in many sales; the data does not show this. Neither is the pirating justified because the purchase price of software is so high; if one cannot afford a Porsche, one does not buy one. While software companies do not seem to perpetrate upgrade scams; it stands to reason that companies that do so will put themselves out of business. Who would buy their products if they treated customers dishonestly? The only valid argument supporting software piracy is that licensing agreements are impractical. Many such agreements are; however, businesses are making an effort to be less impractical. Word Perfect Corporation--makers of Word Perfect, Draw Perfect, Letter Perfect word processing and drawing programs--have made it possible for employees to install software on various computers so long as it is used on only one at a time.

The lure of stolen goods is too much to bear for most computer users. It is too easy to become a software pirate in this high technology age amidst modems, fax machines, scanners, and inexpensively priced super-computers. In the two interviews conducted with software pirates, fieldnotes and research, the following themes arose. Each has a significant impact on home computer software piracy; each is discussed as follows:

Pirate Bulletin Boards

Pirate bulletin boards, as discussed earlier, require that a computer user have access to several things: (a) a computer with sufficient storage space (hard drive, disk drive); (b) access to a phone line; (c) commercial software to pirate. Home computer pirates acquire their software mainly through pirate bulletin boards operating around the country (refer to Appendix A for a list of national pirate bulletin boards). Few computer users acquire their software via business, although

this is certainly a starting point, as the business pirate points out. This business pirate said "I copied programs so I could bring them home and work with them more closely" (Interview #2).

According to the home computer pirate (Interview #1), the Software Publisher's Association does not think much of pirate bulletin boards. "Maybe," the home computer pirate says, "they think pirate bulletin boards are not that prevalent. In this town, an individual board will wax and wane. They arise as a matter of opportunity, inclination." While individual boards may wax and wane, most pirates follow a pattern of downloading (getting computer programs from bulletin boards) regardless of which board. This particular computer pirate (known as "Red Cadillac") "established a pattern with various boards" (Interview #1). Many pirate bulletin boards exist nation-wide (Figure 1). The heaviest concentration of pirate bulletin boards is in California and Illinois. One of the reasons for California's numerous pirate bulletin boards might be that most software publishers are based in California. Not to mention, Silicon Valley, the heart of the computer-chip industry, is located in California. Most pirated software comes from California; the pirate bulletin board network serves as the heart of the pirate industry.

Pirate bulletin boards are characterized by an almost avaricious acquisitiveness. The posting--or exchange of messages between pirates--is primarily composed of requests and queries centered around pirating (Appendix B). The message base is also provides instructions and helpful comments from a brand of software pirates known as "crackers;" crackers remove copy protection from software (crackers are usually high-level programmers, often self-taught). A cracker expressed his opinion as follows:

Removing a doc check or any protection

scheme is the same everywhere; you just have

to spend a lot of time with it. When you

get good, cracking can take minutes (Appendix

B; message #3236).

Once copy protection has been removed, the program may be copied without any hassles. There are a variety of copy protection schemes. The most popular and effective include documentation checks, disk copy protection, spin-wheels and registration. Copy Protection

Documentation checks, or "doc checks," require that when the computer program is first run (or started) it asks for the computer user to type in a certain word from the User's Manual provided with the program. If a program has been pirated, usually the documentation is not available. Pirates deal with doc checks in several ways; the most common is to get a cracker to "crack" the program (remove the doc check). Once the doc check is removed, the program does not ask for a doc check. Another way pirates deal with doc checks is to scan (read the document into the computer using a scanner, a copier-like piece of hardware available for two-hundred dollars or less that reads in words and graphics) the manual. The general feeling on doc checks was expressed by a pirate called "Super Doc;" the quote follows:

. . .I'll be looking forward to your tutorial

on removing DOC checks. There seem to be more

and more of them these days. I don't really

see the usefulness of them. Who in their

right mind would spend good money to buy

something that you had to keep a book on

hand to use. I don't know about others, but

I have to mount a search to find the DOCs to

most of the programs that I own. Those soft-

covered manuals just don't sit well on book

shelves and where else are you going to keep

them? (Appendix B; message #3226).

The second most popular form of protection that must be dealt with is disk copy protection. This means that the floppy disk itself cannot be compressed using a compression program. Crackers go in and remove the offending "computer code" and then compress the program. Although once very popular, this is the least popular form of copy protection because it prevents the legitimate owner from making backup copies for his own use.

Spin-wheels are fairly simple devices; they are much like the spinnerets provided with board games except they have an added level of complexity. Two wheels must be placed so that only certain information is displayed. This is similar to a doc check, except that you are required to look at the spin-wheel rather than the manual. Crackers often remove spin-wheel copy protection in the same way doc checks are removed.

The fourth type of copy protection is registration. Registration requires that the person using the software type in their name and serial number. The program permanently records this information onto the installation diskettes. Pirates easily circumvent this by copying the diskettes before the computer user types in his name.