PCWorld

What the Pirates are Really Up To

Forget BitTorrent downloads or illicit DVDs; the real pirates are hawking their warez.

Eric Lai, Computerworld
Monday, December 08, 2008 02:50 PM PST

When people think of software pirates, they usually envision college kids downloading games off BitTorrent, or adults getting too-good-to-be-true bargains off eBay, or street stalls lined with DVDs in Third World cities.

The real pirate scene, however, is much larger, hidden, and yet in plain sight, say experts.

And despite the best efforts of Microsoft Corp. and anti-piracy vendors, no one has developed a 100% invulnerable copy protection scheme.

Illustration: Lou Beach

"There is always a way to crack something. Mechanisms can always be defeated," said John Frame, senior director of product management for Acresso Software Inc., the longtime anti-piracy vendor formerly known as Macrovision.

The economic downturn could presage an upswing in piracy next year, despite ongoing legal campaigns by the Business Software Alliance, Microsoft and others.

"We've seen an increase in piracy during past recessions," said Victor DeMarines, vice president at anti-piracy software vendor, V.i. Laboratories Inc. "It's very cyclical."

DeMarines recently gave this reporter a brief tour of parts of the software piracy scene that most Internet users don't get to see.

When piracy first started in America a quarter-century ago, it was mostly teenagers " on their Apple II+s cracking and trading warez via dial-up Bulletin Board Systems (BBSes) for thrills and bragging rights.

According to DeMarines, the culture of piracy hasn't changed much over the past 25 years, even if the technology is different.

Pirates "still want to be the first to get their software released and pushed into the top sites," he said. Pirates will host the cracked software themselves or sell it to someone else. The software then gets cataloged by a warez site, such as 0DayKingz. Pronounced "Zero-Day-Kings," the name refers to software that is cracked and made available on the day it is released.

0DayKingz doesn't host any of the software, just the links to them. "All releases are listed here for informative purposes," its FAQ states.

"Warez sites" can be Googled, and sites such as 0DayKingz will be found, though DeMarines warned that some are fake sites that will spread spyware or malware to unsuspecting visitors. Software vendors can get a free analysis of where and how their products are pirated at V.i. Labs' Web site.

Pirates hate spammers and malware distributors, DeMarines said. For one, they are bad for business. The download sites operated by pirates or their cohorts charge subscriptions or charge US$50 or $100 for single downloads of high-end application, such as a engineering or CAD. That's still a bargain compared with the several thousand dollars charged for such software at retail.

Mainly, pirates, then and now, are in it for the glory. They agonize over making sure that the warez run smoothly with few problems for users and with all of the promised features. They still create elaborate pages, now .NFO files, out of text or low-resolution graphics.

Pirates "are proud of what comes out of their shop," DeMarines said. "They have a sense of honor."

Pirate groups, which sport names such as The Bitter End, DarkL0rd, and AGAiN, also compete on volume. The Bitter End, according to DeMarines, has released 2,000 cracked warez in the past three years.

The warez that show up on these subscription-only sites eventually make their way to free file-sharing networks such as BitTorrent or LimeWire, sooner in the case of hot games, later in the case of esoteric apps.

Surprisingly, pirates today still work in the same primitive assembly language or machine code to crack software, DeMarines said. That's despite the proliferation of higher-level languages that make programming today almost like writing an essay.

Not as surprising is the fact that many vendors aren't interested in making their products completely pirate-proof. For one, implementing tough anti-piracy technology can have the side effect of interfering with patch and update installation, leading to more technical support calls from legitimate paying users, according to Acresso's Frame.

Also, as even Bill Gates openly admits, piracy can help your product in the long run.

"You have to ask yourself: If some user in a BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India or China) nation is pirating my $50,000 piece of software, would they actually buy it if they couldn't copy it?" Frame said. "Or would they have just gone to a cheaper or open-source product?"