

Let's Get Cracking

Feature: How software piracy became an art form

By Pavel Barter for PC Zone Magazine [1]

Let's say, just for argument's sake, that you happen upon a hacked version of a PC game and run installer.exe. To the plonky sounds of synth music you might read, "Tony Hawk Pro Skater 4 (c) Aspyr. Enjoy another nice game from your friends at Class."

After that, you open the accompanying .nfo text file. Beneath an ASCII art graphic, you read details about how the game was ripped, and a 'help wanted' section, seeking partners in crime like suppliers, distributors, and the elite of videogame lawbreakers: crackers.

Back in the day, cracker groups were borderline famous. With names like Criminal Disguise, X-Static, G-Force, Now5 and Automation, they sounded like south London grime crews - but instead of laying down 'wicked rhymes', these posses gouged out the guts of PC games, wedged a few personal mementos inside, then sewed them back up again.



[2]

Some pirates have little more than mischief in mind you see, in stark contrast to their public image of morally repugnant individuals who somehow manage to fund terrorism.

"There is a strong social aspect to the cracking scene," says Ben Garrett, who runs Defacto2.net, a site dedicated to the computer underground counterculture.

"It's part of the reason why people contribute so much time, effort, even money into their various roles and why they often find it hard to detach from it. Today's scene is nowhere near as social as it was in the '90s and '80s. Back then, consumer piracy was a civil, not a criminal issue and the risks and paranoia just weren't there."

In fact, home piracy began in 1975 with the first commercial program for a microcomputer: Microsoft's Altair BASIC.

"Most users of this now legendary system were hobbyists who actively encouraged the copying and sharing of programming code," says Garrett. Mass piracy wasn't exactly a burning issue, though, since cassette games deteriorated after each copy. In 1978, Apple's Disk II floppy disk drive changed all that, and software publishers, seeing a fleet of marauding brigands on the horizon, hurriedly introduced copy protection.

Ironically, it was the challenge of figuring out how the copy protection worked, and how it might be disabled, that spawned the cracker scene. These proto-pirates left their mark, like dogs peeing on lampposts, in the form of colourful introduction scenes: crack intros or 'cracktros'.

"Being a cracker soon became a source of pride, and the best names were known worldwide," says Tamas Polgar, author of FREAX - The Brief History of the Demoscene (www.freax.hu), a book about the history of cracking.

GANG WARS

By the mid '80s - the time of the Amiga and the Commodore 64 - crackers were organised into large crews that could distribute their wares without much difficulty. Europeans mostly spread their releases by mail, while Americans used modems and bulletin board systems (BBS) because of cheaper phone rates in the US. This resulted in a serious division in standards, explains Polgar.

"European crackers achieved a higher quality because they had time to get the original software in the morning, work on the crack all the day, let the C64 compress it during the night, and mail it the next morning. American crackers did not have time. They had to do it quick, and sometimes dirty, because the competition could upload work to a BBS at any time."

Today, speed and quality remain the main areas of competition among cracker crews: "Pirate scenes have always been highly competitive," continues Garrett. "It's competition, not free software, that is often the driving motivation for top pirates. Over the years the computer systems, participants and group names change, but the goal is always the same: to release the product in an acceptable form and to do so before anyone else."

1. <http://www.computerandvideogames.com/sites/pczone/>
2. <http://www.computerandvideogames.com/viewer.php?mode=article&id=195723>

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During the height of the cracktro era, the scene split into two groups: pirates proliferated warez, while demoscene programmers stayed on the right side of the law. These cracker cousins use game graphics, animation and music to create non-interactive videos, running in real time on PCs - art gallery cracktros, in essence.

"A demogroup is usually made of a programmer, a graphic designer, a musician and a 3D and 2D animator," says Stephanie Cornilleau from the website Demoscene.tv.

DEMO GOODNESS

"People confusing the demoscene with warez are mostly journalists," she continues. "To the games industry, the demoscene is a fishpond of creative and technically talented people. There's no bad feeling between us and the industry."

Sure enough, development studios often recruit visual effects programmers from the scene. Will Wright has cited the scene as a major inspiration for Spore, and the team behind Max Payne are reportedly former scenesters.

Demogroups get together at an annual bash in Germany, where the Scene.org Awards hand out prizes to the best demos of the year. "The demoscene has its codes, its rules, its stars and as a result, its history," says Cornilleau.

These arty crackers have evolved over time, and now create demos on platforms like mobile phones and iPods, as well as old-school emulators like the ZX Spectrum.

But while the demoscene has become a shining example of new media art, piracy has turned all seedy. In the '90s, BBS gave way to the internet, which revolutionised cracker communications.

COMMON PIRATE

"The downside was that it exposed many more people to what was previously a little-known activity," says Garrett. "Many people - often kids who couldn't join a top-tier group - would start

...ing, says Garrett. "Many people, often from the same group, would start their own group, releasing products of dubious quality that other people wouldn't touch. There was a surge in quantity and a decline in quality."

Furthermore, game piracy became a massive legal and moral issue. Law enforcement bodies like the FBI started hounding down and locking up pirates, while gamers became genuinely concerned that piracy could lead to the downfall of the PC game industry.

Despite all these concerns, however, the irony is that the cracking scene itself has hardly changed.

"The groups who crack, package and release titles have nothing to do with the seedy sites that populate the internet," says Garrett. "Groups who release titles, release for themselves and for their inner circle. The filtering down of releases onto peer-to-peer networks, websites and into the general population is probably an unfortunate consequence."

The problem is not that piracy or the scene has gone dirty, cheap and commercial, but rather that piracy has finally been exposed to the greater world."

1. <http://www.computerandvideogames.com/sites/pczone/>