Piracy of games and PC software is as rife as ever, but does Microsoft really have the answer?

Pirates ahoy!

I recently found myself in Hong Kong and, succumbing to an impulse of consumerism, I decided to go shopping for a shiny new PlayStation2. I ventured into the Golden shopping arcade on Kowloon and wandered the aisles wide eyed at the vast amount of computer entertainment housed under one roof. However, one thing amazed me far more than the sheer scale of the premises, and that was the modification that had been made to every PlayStation2 on sale. Every single retailer that I approached was selling PlayStation2 machines that had been 'chipped' for playing pirate software.

Even though the PlayStation2 incorporates a DVD drive, most of the software is still shipping on CD-ROM disc, so these modification chips fool the machine into playing games that have been copied to CD-R. Even the few games that do ship on DVD-ROM weren't safe, with ingenious pirates extrapolating the data and discarding non-essential files to bring the capacity below the 650MB CD-R limit. Considering how new the PS2 is, I was stunned that chips for converting it to play pirate software had appeared so quickly. Of course, the cynical among us will wonder if the machine was designed to be so easy to crack, making it a more attractive purchase. After all, it's doubtful that the original PlayStation would have sold so well if it wasn't so easy to chip up for cheap pirate games. Sony will, of course, deny this rumour and has already implemented a hardware change to get around the chipping. Although, no matter how good a mousetrap Sony comes up with, someone is bound to invent a better mouse.

Sega thought it had solved the piracy problem when it released its Dreamcast console. Instead of using CD or DVD technology, Sega plumped for a proprietary format called GD-ROM. The GD-ROM is basically a high-capacity CD that can store 1GB of data. The plan behind this design was that since no-one would produce GD-ROM writing equipment or even the blank media, it would be impossible to pirate the games. Unfortunately for Sega the proprietary format has not been enough to put off the pirates. Recently released on the web is a download that can be burnt to CD and run in a Dreamcast. Once inserted, this disc will display a new boot profile that will allow games to be run from CD-R instead of GD-ROM.

However, no matter how alarming the piracy situation on games consoles is, it's but a drop in the ocean compared with the PC.

Microsoft is currently in the midst of a big media campaign and crackdown on software piracy, feeling that it's losing millions of dollars as a result of it. That said, the situation is considerably different to the console market. A retail game costs in the region of £40, whereas a full retail copy of Microsoft Office Premium will set you back over £600. For some home users that's more than the cost of their PC. Obviously there are cheaper alternatives available but, let's face it, the PC productivity world revolves around Microsoft Office. I'm not condoning piracy here in any way, but I can't help thinking there'd be less of it if PC applications were more affordable to the masses.

Microsoft's solution to unofficial installation of its operating systems looks set to be the end of OS

> **I'm not condoning piracy, but I can't help thinking there'd be less of it if PC applications were MORE AFFORDABLE TO THE MASSES**

distribution. Instead of receiving the OS on CD-ROM when you buy a new PC, it will be pre-installed with a backup image on your hard disk. It will also be locked to the motherboard BIOS to stop the image being used on another PC. Unfortunately, I've heard no decent explanation of what happens if your hard disk crashes or if you want to change your motherboard, thus losing the BIOS key.

Of course, this plan will not only save Microsoft revenue through less piracy, but also save it millions by removing the cost of disc production and distribution.

Ultimately I think that every user would rather have an original product complete with manuals than a pirate copy, but consumers need to feel that they're getting value for money. If the price of essential software like operating systems dropped to a reasonable level the piracy market might start to wither and die.

Riyad Emeran, Editor