

Cheap and Fast Software An Introduction to Shareware

Visit any computer store today and you'll find what seems like miles and miles of software on sale. Certainly enticing buys, there are a few problems with buying software off the shelves. On the shelf, software - otherwise known as "commercial software" - can be expensive, and incompatible, and outdated when compared to what's available online. Fortunately, there's an alternative to commercial software and although it isn't new, it's one of the most under-exploited opportunities in the computer industry.

We're talking about shareware - software that you can try before buying.

Shareware has a long history and was rather popular in the days where BBS (bulletin board systems) reigned the online industry. It hasn't gone anywhere, but its competition with commercial software is fierce - so fierce that it tends to fall on the back burner among new computer users. This is unfortunate because shareware has so many advantages over commercial software.

One of those advantages is its cost. On the whole, shareware is generally cheaper than commercial software. But don't misinterpret the cost. With shareware, cheap does not equal low-quality and there are plenty of examples that prove shareware often outperforms the quality of commercial software time and time again. How much savings are we talking about? You could purchase a quality word processor, spreadsheet, database program, or system utility anywhere from a mere \$15 to under a hundred. This is almost unheard of in stores like Best Buy, Circuit City, or Egghead, yet the shareware programs offered within this price range rival even Microsoft's Office suite.

Another advantage that shareware has over commercial software is its compatibility. We're not saying that shareware is compatible with all operating systems. What we're saying is that since we can try shareware before paying for it, we can determine if the software is completely compatible with our systems first. In other words, we can discover whether the software performs the way we want them to and should anyone try to do the same with commercial software, they'll be in for a big disappointment.

Commercial software policy doesn't even allow for returns, let alone "borrowing" them to try them.

The last advantage that shareware has over commercial software (but certainly not the least) is its applicability. Plain and simple, shareware is the best bet when you want to keep on top of the latest release of a particular program.

Sure, computer stores do their best to keep their inventory up to date, but when you can download version 5.6042 of a shareware program as opposed to buying a commercial 3.0 version from the local computer shop, there's just no comparison.

Which brings up our next point. Just where does one get shareware? Shareware is all over the Internet and it's really hard not to bump into it. The most popular places to find shareware is within thousands of download libraries, however the companies (and even independent programmers behind shareware) are increasingly offering shareware from their own websites. A simple Google or Yahoo search for a particular type of program will yield all sorts of results that point you toward items that you can try before you buy.

Be aware however, that because shareware is not commercial software, you may not experience a full program the way you would if you bought the software out of a box. Shareware may or may not be limited - meaning that some functions may not be available to you until the program is paid for. These limitations are often small and don't interfere with the way its full version operations. They're really just implemented as a way to prompt payment. Remember that shareware is not freeware. You shouldn't try to use shareware as commercial software without paying for it.

About the only thing that's similar between shareware and commercial software is the way in which they may be bought. With a credit card, you can be the new owner of your own software within minutes.

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