

# Software piracy — the unspeakable crime

By Mark Jacques

If I were to say that computer piracy and incest are alike, you'd probably think I was nuts. But there's a similarity between the two: they are both "unspeakable" crimes. No one wants to talk about them.

Although there are lots of computer magazines being sold today, it's rare to see articles in any of them which seriously address the problems of piracy. You're likely to see stern pronouncements forbidding people to type in programs from the magazine and give them to friends. Yes — if you've received a copy of such a program and you don't own the issue in which it appeared, then you too are a pirate.

A speaker at my computer club recently caused a few mouths to drop when he began his talk by saying: "User groups are nothing more than an excuse for people to get together and rip off programs."

Shocking as this statement may seem, there's a lot of truth to it. "Knowledge" could be substituted for "safety" in the old expression "there's safety in numbers."

We might ask — why do people steal programs? Is it the challenge involved? Software companies have devised many unusual methods of protecting their disks ranging from error tracks to plug-like devices called "dongles," duplicated tracks and even drops of acid on crucial locations of the disk. Wide and varied as these means may be, I don't know of a single one which hasn't been defeated.

There's always some whiz-kid who finds a way to overcome these protectionary obstacles. One such

boy genius was congratulated by an Apple executive on a late-night U.S. talk show for his efforts in solving some particularly difficult task. Apple obviously has a different attitude towards people who pirate, or clone, their computers.

Does the cost of software contribute to piracy? Obviously if someone offers you a \$200 program for nothing, you won't think twice about accepting it unless you are a person of firm religious or moral principles. Personally, I think the price of much software is too high. Whether it's at that level to cash in on the computer craze or just to recover the expected losses from piracy is another matter.

One recent development, an alternative to high-priced software, is an EPROM-making device which allows the user to bring a blank cartridge into a store, plug it in and get a program for a miniscule sum — like \$5 - \$10. The current price of programs distributed with this system is in the \$20 range, which would likely discourage return trips to reprogram for a new game. The point here though is that \$5, \$10 or \$20 is still more than nothing.

Of course the piracy situation is hardly helped by magazines who profess a holier-than-thou attitude and advertise programs which are designed solely for the purpose of ripping off software. One particularly sleazy ad appeared recently which began: "This book 'BLOWS THE LOCKS OFF' protected DISKS, CARTRIDGES and TAPES! Protection 'secrets' are clearly explained along with essential information and procedures to follow for breaking protected software. An arsenal of protection breaking software is included

with all listings, providing you with the tools needed!"

It ended with the line "This manual does not condone piracy — distributing copied software is illegal."

What a laugh! This is the same kind of line shopkeepers have when they sell cleaning fluid which contains high alcohol content to skid row bums.

Obviously there is no easy solution to the problem of pirating commercial software. A person should be allowed to back up programs which they've paid for, and customize these programs for their own use. As far as selling pirated programs, Canada's antiquated copyright laws (which are in the process of being revised) do little other than offer a series of loopholes for pirates to slip through.

One representative from a large software company who addressed another local users group was asked point blank what his company was doing about piracy, aside from the usual breakable methods. He replied: "Not much... we just try to get the software into the stores as quickly as possible."

Given that situation, I'd sure hate to be a software author. As a friend of mine commented, "The only people making money off computer software are those with Xerox machines and those who sell blank disks."

**Editor's note: Many major users groups have strict policies prohibiting piracy as a club activity and from my experience this is enforced. Individual club members, however, may be active in piracy on their own time.**