

Software piracy

It's a crime

Satnam Purewal

satnam.purewal@ubc.ca

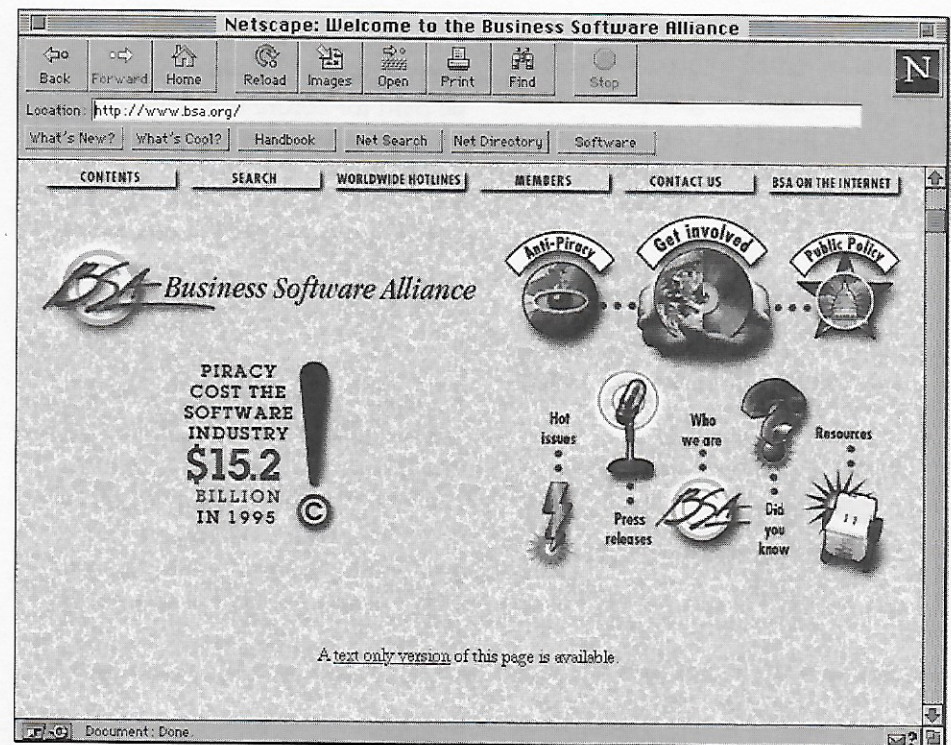
Software piracy—the illegal distribution or copying of software—costs the software industry billions of dollars every year. According to the Business Software Alliance the software industry in Canada and the United States experienced a loss of \$3,131,455,600—21% of the world total—from software piracy in 1994. Losses in Asia and Europe were higher at 29% (\$4,350,981,640) and 39% (\$6,002,681,255) of the world total.

Preventive measures

The software industry has tried many methods to prevent the unauthorized copying and distribution of software; for example, requiring the owner to enter a serial number supplied with the software when they install it. However, software pirates have been able to circumvent most of the mechanisms that developers have tried. These methods have also been viewed unfavourably by authorized users; for example, serial numbers cause a problem if the user has to re-install the software but has lost the serial number.

Licence agreements

These days most commercial software packages use what is called a shrink-wrap agreement, which means that once the user opens the software, they enter into an implicit licence agreement with the developer. For software downloaded from the Internet, the terms of the licence agreement are usually indicated when the user starts the program. (See "Software licences" this issue for more information on licence



The Business Software Alliance Web site provides information about software piracy and promotes awareness of copyright issues.

agreements.) In both cases there are no protection mechanisms in place to prevent violation of the agreement—it is based solely on the honour system.

Public awareness

To further combat software piracy, the industry is promoting awareness through organizations such as the Business Software Alliance (<http://www.bsa.org/>) and the Software Publishers Association (<http://www.spa.org/>), so legitimate holders of licences know that distributing copies of software is illegal. It is also providing more privileges to registered holders of legal copies of software. For example, most developers provide free technical support once

users identify themselves as authorized holders of a licence.

Illegal actions

Despite the software industry's efforts, there are still many people who continue to violate software copyright. Often people justify software piracy by saying that everyone is doing it. This brings to mind the old saying: if everyone jumped off the bridge, would you? Everyone must realize that violating software copyright is the equivalent of theft. □

Satnam Purewal, CISSP (Certified Information System Security Professional), is a security analyst, Administrative Technical Support, University Computing Services, Computing and Communications.