rake's Corner
by R.L. Drake

Pay to Play

This month I was going to write about something else, not piracy. I really hate to write things about something so negative and ugly. But I couldn't help myself. After hearing about the alarming wide-spread piracy of betas (a beta is one of the last phases in software development, usually when all the bugs are fixed and the final features are added)like Wolfenstein and more recently, a beta of Marathon that leaked to the public in early October, I decided it was time to talk about that rather ugly side of the computer business. But don't worry, this article will not be an article entirely devoted to an anti-piracy pitch. That's up to you. All I'll be attempting to do is present the facts.

First, what is computer software piracy? Software piracy is the illegal copying of personal computer software. Copying computer software for any other reason than to make a backup copy is a violation of federal law and is subject to civil and criminal penalties. So what the heck does that mean? Well, if you copy a program and give that copy to a friend, or upload it to a BBS, then you are committing a federal crime. That means jail time if you're caught. Yikes! So why do so many people pirate software despite these stiff penalties? Well, because it's just so bloody easy to do. I mean, you'd have to be pretty ignorant to get caught pirating software. In fact, when people DO get caught it is usually at their work place. Many companies these days have strict anti-piracy rules because if someone blows the whistle on someone at Company X, it ends up costing millions in damages for Company X, not to mention the firing of the employee.

The Internet - Piracy Central?
The Internet by many has been called the biggest pirate board in the world. And by recent accounts in a popular newsgroup called comp.sys.mac.games, that's no lie. For the past month now people who have gotten illegal betas of Marathon have posted without fear their experiences with the Marathon beta on this popular newsgroup and some have even requested that someone having the beta e-mail it to them. There has also been an ongoing debate about whether or not it is illegal to copy a beta, a discussion on whether the leaked beta doesn't hurt Bungie, it provides them with good "free" advertising and on and on. It seems the piraters themselves are feeling a bit guilty and are somehow trying to justify their actions. But don't think the piracy is restricted to college dorms, even employees of large corporations have said they've been playing the illegal beta at work with other employees.

What I found interesting when reading these discussions is that most people found nothing wrong in copying, distributing, or playing the Marathon beta. Even though having or distributing is illegal, it didn't prevent them from distributing or copying the unfinished game because it was just that, a beta. The beta was unfinished product, without many features, so in people's mind, there was nothing wrong with that because it wasn't the "official" game or demo. In other words, people saw the beta not as an illegal product to have but a product they could test, try out, and have fun with before the official version was released.

But you can't entirely fault comp.sys.mac.games on this one. I was amazed when I found out that you could download the Marathon beta off of ftp sites on the Internet and even some public BBS's around the country. Of course, the betas were taken off these sites after the people in charge were told it was illegal to have the beta online. But still, why did the administrators allow the file to be released?

So how did this beta of Marathon get leaked in the first place? Well, the trail leads to an advertising agency who had obtained (legally) a beta from Bungie Software, the developers of Marathon. However, an employee at the advertising agency decided to give the beta to a friend and the chain reaction began. The friend gave it to another friend, it then got uploaded to pirate boards, then from there it spread like wild fire. For his generosity the employee got fired from the advertising agency. Not too smart, huh?

When asked how the leaked beta adversely affected them, Alexander Seropian of Bungie Software replied, "What hurts us the most is that people are playing and judging pre-release software that is inferior to our finished product and that could seriously affect our impression in the market and hurt sales." Seropian also went on to say that what is done is done and now that the demo is available all this pirating of the Marathon beta will all but disappear. But I'm willing to bet the next time a beta of a hot new game is leaked, it mass-pirating will start once again.

CD-ROM, the Anti-Piracy Weapon?
In recent years software publishers have begun to publish more and more on CD-ROM   and some have even begun to publish exclusively on CD-ROM. Its benefits of mass storage not only allow publishers to provide more detailed graphics, sound, and animation, but they also provide the publisher's biggest anti-piracy weapon, huge file sizes.   I'm willing to bet you won't find illegal copies of The 7th Guest or MYST on any Internet sites or pirate bulletin boards.

So is CD-ROM the answer to the piracy problem? Well, for the near-term future, yes. It is virtually impossible to copy CD-ROMs (unless you have a CD-ROM recorder) and modems are just not fast enough to transfer a 400 MB program over telephone lines. But, the CD-ROM solution may be short-lived as CD-ROM recorders become cheaper and things like ISDN (high speed digital lines provided by telephone companies) become more prevalent. But those types of devices may take years to become economically feasible and widespread.

Of course, the ultimate threat to piracy is education. Organizations like the Software Publishers Association (SPA) are doing their best to educate consumers about the illegality of copying software with television and print ads (like the Don't Copy That Floopy ads). But with all this recent pirating of things like Wofenstein 3D and Marathon, is the software industry losing an impossible battle? Well, according to the SPA, recent figures show piracy going down, especially in the workplace.

Will it Ever Stop?
So will it ever stop? The answer is no. There are simply too many obstacles to overcome.

First, pirating is easy. Insert a floppy and copy the program. Second, software is too expensive. Not everyone can afford to buy Adobe Photoshop at $500 a pop. So the easiest alternative is to copy it and live with the guilt. I've heard the arguments on this one before, "I wouldn't have bought it anyway because I can't afford it, so I copied it."   And third, it's in our societal nature. We love to get things for free. Why buy it when you can get it for free and when everyone around you is doing it?

So where does that leave us? Well, with you of course. The person reading this article. Some of you pirate software, some of you don't. Now I told you in the beginning this was not going to be an anti-piracy campaign, I'll leave that to the SPA and the software companies. But I do want you to what the consequences are.

By pirating software, you are committing a federal crime. That we now know. But it's much deeper than that. Every time someone pirates a copy of a game, that means lost revenue for the company. That, in turn, means less money for the publisher and less money for developing new games. In the end, that ends up meaning less games for us, the Macintosh game fanatics. When you steal software, what you really end up doing is stealing from yourself in terms of future games. Think about it, the choice is up to you.