IF YOU CAN'T SEND CASH, SEND A CARD
(Software, Snacks, and Pay Backs)

A Column by Troy Janisch

Why get something for free, when you can pay for it?
Shareware and freeware are valuable resources to Macintosh users.
Shareware developers create fonts, utilities, extensions, games, and other programs. They make them available to us for a fraction on their value, or potential commercial cost.
Most of them give us the program and ask that we send them a few dollars in return for registration, updates, and a clear conscious. Its kind of like the snack table we use to have in an office where I worked. They set bags of chips, candy bars, and chewing gum out, figuring that we would probably pay for what we ate. If we didn't pay for it all the time, they figured that it would cost them less overall than putting in a vending machine. If we were short a few dollars on one day, we could take a snack from the table on credit and make up the difference later.
It was a great idea, but somewhere along the line the snack table disappeared. In its place, there stood an unforgiving vending machine. With these machines you pay your money, the machine rattles, and your snack drops into a tray. I am convinced that these machines are programmed to make up for money that was lost by snack tables because, every now and then, you pay your money, the machine rattles, and the tray is empty.
For shareware, commercial developers fill some of the same void that vending machines filled in employee break rooms. It's a void in honesty. A friend of mine wrote a great little game on his Atari ST called "Bubbles McGee," three years ago and uploaded it as shareware on Compuserve and GEnie. In return, no one sent a penny.
He did get one small payment in return: about a year ago, a middle school student from some other part of the country wrote him a letter and said that it was his favorite computer game in the whole world. Although receiving money for the program would have been

appreciated, I think the letter was just as good and, in some ways, better. My friend still has the letter. I doubt if the same could be said about any money he might have received. As a Macintosh user, I would like to think that we are more attentive to paying shareware fees, because finding inexpensive commercial programs for the Macintosh is a much greater challenge than it is for some other systems. However, our shareware snack table is probably as empty as the others. The question is, can anything be done about it? I think it can.

First and foremost, we need to be honest and send in the shareware fees on software that we use frequently. If you really use a shareware program a lot and like it, at send its creator something. You might even send them half of the registration fee along with a note that says you will pay for the other half after six months of use.

It may be convenient to overlook the fees that software creators ask for, but in the long run we are hurting ourselves and other Mac users when we use the software without paying for it. My friend doesn't upload any of his programs to on-line services anymore. And, he's probably not alone.

Second, if (really) don't have enough money to register a piece of shareware, or if you use a piece of software for a short time and cannot justify to yourself paying the fee, at least send the author a post card. You can keep a stack of post cards by your computer and write a quick note to the author saying "thanks," or "keep up the good work!" Pre-paid post cards are available from your local US Post Office, in bundles of 50 for $9.50 (only 19 cents each). Or, put them on your Christmas card list during the years that you use their program.

If you download an arcade or adventure game and play with it for just a few hours, many programmers will understand your reluctance to register it for a lifetime of use when you don't plan to play it again. If the game provided you with a few hours of fun, why not send them a movie pass from a popular chain of theatres? You can usually buy them in packs of 10.

In the long run, it doesn't cost you much more. However, it means a lot to the independent programmer or developer that is slaving away in their basement during odd hours of the night and ignoring their family while they create something that helps other users. It gives them encouragement and a sense of appreciation.

After all, giving them your thanks is better than giving them nothing.

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