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Tracking the Crackers - A Look at Software Piracy

By Brian Prince

Vendors are waging a losing battle against software pirates. With [V.i. Labs](#), eWEEK takes a look at how software pirates promote their wares on the Web.

According to the Business [Software Alliance](#), more than one-third of all software installed on personal [computers](#) worldwide is pirated, costing the software industry nearly \$48 billion. At one end of that food chain is the consumer. On the other end is the network of crackers, suppliers and distributors involved in the piracy scheme.

Somewhere in the middle are sites such as [NFOHump.com](#), where software pirates post .nfo files advertising their wares.

V.i. Labs took eWEEK on a brief tour of the piracy underground, offering insights into how such sites operate. In its research, Vi has found about 50 pirate Web search engines, including international ones. The number excludes IRC (Internet relay chat) channels and secure FTP sites that also allow access to search for pirated software.

Once software is cracked and a counterfeit version is ready for release, groups will announce it over IRC. The actual software and .nfo files promoting the release are pushed to topsites with exclusive membership, explained Victor DeMarines, vice president of products at V.i. It is this second group that distributes the software and makes information about it available through .nfo files on sites such as [NFOHump](#).

According to Web information company [Alexa](#), [NFOHump.com](#) has a traffic rank of 15,091 as of Nov. 13. However, sites that actually distribute pirated software or from which such software can be downloaded, such as [ThePirateBay.org](#), rank much higher. [ThePirateBay.org](#) has a traffic rank of 123; [Walmart.com](#), by contrast, is ranked 257.

Travel to [NFOHump.com](#), and you'll find lists of .nfo files for everything from pirated DVDs to enterprise software. The .nfo files, DeMarines explained, are essentially press releases for piracy groups.

"They follow certain vendors and their software, and when they crack the software ... they will put out an announcement and celebrate the fact that they have this release available," he said. "They'll also recruit people who work for the group as well."

Finding sites such as [NFOHump.com](#) seems to be the easy part. Tracking down the pirates themselves, however, is more difficult.

"It's difficult since pirates can easily change their usernames or account names, or even change which computers they're working from," said Rodger Correa, compliance marketing director at the Business Software Alliance. "It's quite easy to hide on the Internet, which [creates] quite a challenge from a law enforcement perspective."

Periodically though, law enforcement does catch up to piracy gangs. In July 2007, the FBI working in tandem with Chinese authorities busted two crews of software pirates and seized more than \$500 million worth of software. And [vendors such as Microsoft](#) and [Symantec](#) have not been shy about making moves against counterfeiters on their own, [suing resellers suspected](#) of trafficking in pirated goods.

Much of the pirated software circulating the globe is available on peer-to-peer Web sites, Correa said. For software vendors, such piracy can cost big bucks. V.i. Labs recently evaluated 17 leading EDA ([electronic design automation](#))

and PLM (product lifecycle management) vendors such as Agilent and Siemens and discovered nearly 1,000 crack releases in the last three years alone. Almost 80 percent of those releases were CAD (computer-aided design)- or PLM-related.

“We’ve seen software in the price range of \$4,000 sell for as little as \$50,” Correa said. “Overall, the price discrepancy between pirated and legitimate product is enormous.”