

(THE WAR ON PIRACY)

Down Right Madness?

→ Since *Spore's* release last month, digital rights management has been in the spotlight. The online community was outraged over what it called draconian methods, but is there method in EA's madness?

Digital rights management is no new concept, despite what some outlets might say. Methods of preventing copyright infringement have existed for as long as there's been media to copyright, but it's only in the last decade that this issue has become a real point of contention. Publishers simply want to safeguard the products they license while consumers just want to enjoy the rights they deserve.

Who's right? Well, it's easy to label a company like EA as the bad guy. The inclusion of SecuROM DRM software in *Spore* was the latest in a series of attempts by the publisher to crack down on piracy through its software. Despite the backlash from gamers and the general consumer base, Will Wright's latest title went on to sell over a million copies, and that's not counting the 500,000 illegally distributed by pirates. Despite the furor and outcries to the contrary, DRM doesn't hurt sales, but should it even be there in the first place?

Below *Mass Effect* was initially going to need authenticating every ten days, but the publisher backed down after a torrent of complaints. Compromise or capitulation? You decide.



Traditionally, DRM in games involved a simple string of numbers and letters that formed a serial key, which you type in when installing a game. While not the most complex of anti-piracy systems, it nevertheless kept most people happy. The publishers could sleep safe in the knowledge that they'd tried to combat piracy, and the consumers would jump through this simple hoop because they felt trusted, and understood why it was necessary. At some point, that all changed.

Starting at the turn of the century with StarForce and continuing today with SecuROM, publishers are increasingly experimenting with tougher methods of protecting their products. EA is not the only company to try this, but it's certainly one of the more infamous. Before *Spore*, there was *Mass Effect*, and before that there was *The Sims 2*. Even future titles like *Red Alert 3* will come with DRM software, and the basic message is that EA suspects its consumers of criminal behaviour, and guess what, consumers aren't happy.

EA isn't the only company to take a tough stance on piracy. 2K Games used the SecuROM software in *BioShock*, and before that publishers like Ubisoft used

the infamous StarForce protection, all amid claims of rootkits and malware. Activision Blizzard, arguably the largest publisher in the industry, has allegedly filed and won several lawsuits against individuals in the US for piracy-related offences, though the specific details have yet to be revealed. This could be considered a harsher and more direct approach, but it has been better received by the gaming community than a simple blanket approach through DRM, because as far as consumers are concerned, that way wrongdoers are being punished, and paying customers are not being treated like criminals.

BUT ARE GAMERS completely blameless? While the larger community has a tendency toward immaturity at times, the reaction to these DRM-ridden games by gamers has bordered on childish. Take Amazon, one of the many 'battlegrounds' for the anti-DRM movement. The amount of negative customer reviews for *Spore* purely based on its DRM issues were so numerous, Amazon staff, allegedly, had to delete some of them. Gamers have also gone out of their way to pirate the game, again due to the presence of DRM. This is hardly a constructive



response. If someone isn't happy with a product, they boycott it to make a point. You can't complain about your cake as a point of principle, but secretly eat the sugar-free version at the same time.

And this is not the only incident that can be called questionable. Speaking out last month, 2K Boston's Ken Levine told *PC Zone* about how he was threatened by consumers over the DRM included in the PC *BioShock*. "When the copy-protection issues came out, I was out there talking about the product, I didn't run away from that. And frankly I got some nasty fucking threats."

Is this the kind of response that publishers deserve? No matter how naive they may be in thinking that software like this actually works, this is a case of two wrongs not making a right. Furthermore, the fact that gamers turned to piracy just to teach publishers a lesson re-enforces a belief that gamers can't be trusted. That's not to say that all publishers are like this - Stardock's own Impulse distribution system is completely DRM-free, as the company believes that if you treat the consumer well, they will treat you well. A good ethos, and it appears to be serving Stardock well, but you could argue that it has a lot less to lose.

It all comes back to the serial code - whatever the publishers feel comfortable with, Stardock has decided that it can trust its customers, as it believes the revenue gained through happy consumers will outweigh the loss through piracy. EA, on the other hand, a much larger company feels as if software like SecuROM is the only way to go, for the moment at least. As has been shown, the software is next to useless at preventing piracy, and many people believe that SecuROM even breaches their privacy rights. Then again, cracked copies of the games don't strip out the software

- they just bypass it, so despite all of the morally outraged complaints, piracy will not guarantee a DRM-free existence.

MEANWHILE, EA HAS even tried to compromise with its consumers. While not going as far as to put their hands up and be counted, Electronic Arts execs have taken several steps to make coping with DRM as easy as possible. Install limits have been increased from three to five, de-authorisation methods are in the works, and it's said it will remove the DRM through a patch when the servers are no longer needed. This shows a level of cool-headed compromise that seems to be at odds with the idea that EA is evil incarnate.

There's no doubt that the issue is messy. It is probably safe to say that publishers haven't exactly been smart, and inappropriate actions by vocal minorities

"When the copy-protection issues came out, I got some nasty fucking threats"

Ken Levine - 2K Boston

- and it probably is just a minority - haven't helped things, either. In the middle of it all, the average consumer just doesn't seem to care. What is certain is that the actions of a few outspoken individuals can't change the corporate mentality. EA will continue to do what it does until a better way is found, and even though it could be argued that Stardock's method works, if it was that good, EA would have adopted it already. All we can do as consumers is either accept that life can be difficult, or simply boycott. There is no admirable middle ground.

Above Ubisoft's *Spinter Cell: Chaos Theory* used the StarForce DRM software. It lasted 422 days before it was cracked. And they said DRM was useless...



FROM THE FORUM Your Views On DRM

Posted by: djants

It doesn't strike me as an attempt to combat piracy, more an attempt to eliminate the pre-owned market. But by doing so, it encourages piracy. If they really want to kill the trade-in market, simply drop game prices to that of DVDs... the market is big enough now.

Posted by: beemoh

US retailer Wal-Mart is switching off its music DRM server, meaning that people who bought DRM music from the store won't be able to play the music they've legally paid for after the switch-off. DRM punishes people who play the game and pay for things. Everyone who downloaded their music illegally gets to carry on enjoying it, while the people who paid are now out of pocket and have nothing but some useless data to show for it.

Posted by: Dynamite-Dan

I don't like it really, I have a friend who loves playing PC games in his spare time. However, he cannot get an internet connection. I'd love to be able to lend him my copies of games such as *Half-Life 2*, but he has no way of playing it. If I pay £40 for a game, I own it. I can do what I want with it, I can lend it to anyone I chose. It is *my* property.

Posted by: Miss Marvelous

I personally don't have much of an issue with it. However, I do have an issue with the fact that they didn't tell anyone about it. They should make it clear on the game disk what's on it and what it will install onto your machine.

Posted by: hazeyhaze

The ironic fact that you can get around this ludicrous state of affairs and get your infinite installs by pirating the games, the very thing this DRM is trying to combat, says it all really. DRM needs a full rethink in my opinion.

Posted by: marthagogo

It's just desserts for PC gamers and their big fat superiority complexes. But I can see it coming onto consoles soon enough - and only then will we be united in our bitching.

Posted by: DexteXs

We all are hypocrites who, on some level, deserve what we get. Any of you who say you have never downloaded a song, played a cracked game, torrented a TV series or watched a copied DVD, is likely a liar, or just ignorant of the channels available. The fact is, if we can get it for free we will, and although EA should have been open about what it was doing with DRM, we are the ones who pushed them to create something like SecuROM, we have nibbled away at companies almost since the beginning of the internet - no wonder they are battling tooth and nail to stop us.

your say www.gamemtm.co.uk/forum