Sorcerer Users' Group (Toronto) Newsletter
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EDITOR'S TURN

I am very sorry to have to report that at the writing of this newsletter, the Board of Education has not yet come through with a meeting place for us. They are really insisting on a lot of bureaucratic red tape this time. They have asked us to submit financial statements (us? financial statements? does anybody have a two column ledger sheet?) in order to prove that we are non-profit and needy (get out your begging bowls!). Unless anybody knows of a place where we can hold our next meeting, it looks like another 'meetingless' month. If anything breaks soon, we'll call you. Perhaps we'll have one later on in the month.

As yet, nobody has expressed any interest in doing the organizing for the club in 1981. As you know, Duncan and I are stepping down from our esteemed positions this year. Before we do, we hope to obtain a regular meeting place for the club which would run until next summer. This really is the only work there is to do. All that's required of the 'executive' is to make sure that there is a Sorcerer available for the club meetings and to make a few minor decisions. If a newsletter is to be continued then the board will have to arrange for someone to do it (or do it themselves) and pay a few bills (out of the clubs membership fees) that are connected with it. I am not presently aware of what the librarian, David LeBlanc's, intentions are.

These jobs are really easy. Duncan has been doing it for almost two years and I have been doing it for one year. Now it's time for someone else to do a little. I hope that this group is not another one of those chronic apathetic cases where only a few people are interested in doing anything and the others sit idly by. If that is the case, then this group might as well roll up and die now. It really is ridiculous to continue if nobody is interested enough to take a turn doing the organizing. The elections (if there are any candidates) will be held at the December meeting. If no one comes forward by that time then it will be the last meeting by natural process.

This may not be as bad as it sounds. Most people have now made the contacts that they originally set out to do. There are several small splinter groups of compatibly interested people who get together outside of the meetings on an occassional basis. Sorcerer sales in Toronto are almost non-existent and there are very few new members joining up. Only one third of our forty members come to the meetings. Almost all of those who participate have branched out of the Sorcerer realm into the S-100 and CP/M realms. Is there really a need or a desire to continue this group? Death is a natural process. Our group, I think, is the last of its kind on earth (do other countries know something we don't?). Is it our duty to protect this rare and endangered species from extinction?

These are the questions and thoughts that you will have to roll around in your minds over the next two months. What happens at the December meeting will evidence our thoughts on these matters.

I realize that my editorials have been slipping a bit lately. I have gone a few months now without criticizing any people or institutions and I apologize for this. In order to atone, I offer the following.

If I wanted to be like Zoso who writes for the CPMUG Lifelines publication, I would say that the subject of this article is a major software house which has been around pretty well since the beginning of the micro world. The first letter of its name begins with 'M' and it has several very non-compatible versions of BASIC floating around. If I was Zoso, I'd probably receive many threatening calls and letters for even saying this much. If I were Zoso, I would invent a new game called "Guess Who I'm Talking About" and offer prizes for the winner. I am not Zoso. I am me and I don't like guessing games and I don't like being hoodwinked by these large corps and I don't like being ripped-off. I do like getting to the meat of the matter and speaking openly and honestly about what really bugs me. What really bugs me lately is 'MICROSOFT'. Mind you, they are not the only ones that I grudge against but they are the target of my sharp wit this month.

The point I am specifically going to refer to this month is in connection with baloney licensing gimmicks they're pulling. If you have recently ordered the BASIC compiler from them then you have noticed that before you can receive a copy, you first have to sign an agreement stating that you will give a percentage of any and all revenues that you receive from any of YOUR programmes that you created using THEIR compiler. This is the most ridiculous thing I have ever heard of. Who gave supreme copyright over the BASIC language to them? A compiler is nothing more than a language interpreter. It takes one language (say BASIC) and converts it into another language (machine code). Some may do a better job than others, just as another person may interpret from English into French better than I do, but it does not give them copyrights to the language. Boy, I wish that I could copyright English and charge a percentage of any work published in the language. Microsoft, themselves, would owe me a bundle by now.

What would it be like if this stupidity was carried further by others. This compiler runs under the CP/M operating system by Digital Research. The compiler brings a BASIC source programme down to an assembler source programme. Then you need an assembler to create a hex file and a linker/loader to convert the hex file into an actual machine language programme. This obviously necessitates an operating system which further requires customized I/O drivers. Now could you imagine if the programmer of the assembler wanted a cut and the programmer of the linker wanted a cut and if Digital Research wanted a cut and if Exidy wanted a cut? My God, there'd be nothing left for anybody!

As it presently stands, most companies seem to think that they can copyright ideas. Whether they can or not is of little consequence. The users think they can and that is all that matters. The users are beginning to get accustomed to this and take its validity for granted. Sooner or later, they will also start to accept this newest rip off as valid. Once it becomes common place it supplies more power to the perpetrators in a legal situation. I say they can't do this but the apathy of the programme users will allow them to get away with it anyway.

How can they determine that a particular programme was ceated using their compiler? There are only two ways and I contend that niether of them would be valid in a court of law. One way is to insert some magic license number or code into every programme. The other way is to insert some common module or module handling subroutine into every programme. Then their stand would be that you reproduced their code exactly thus infringing copyright laws. They could NEVER prove conclusively that you used their programme to compile your code.

Now we come down to a unique situation which is the subject of many heated debates in the computer world. What constitutes violation of copyright laws in a computer programme? The above techniques are only circumstantial evidence. Is a stolen idea a violation of copyright. This has been proven to be a definite NO. You cannot copyright an idea or a concept. In order to violate a copyright, you must reproduce a work, word for word or code for code. But how much machine code must be duplicated in order to make a violation. In the computer world, unlike spoken language, in order to achieve an idea or concept or function, a specifically ordered set of code is required and absolutely no other will do. With only 255 codes to choose from, it would be very difficult indeed to write any programme that does not violate the copyright. It's like the latest incident where Zilog is attempting to bully Lifeboat Associates (see Lifelines Sept/80 issue) for using the letter 'Z' in their programme titles claiming that this is an infringment of trademark. They reply, in essence, that if any company can patent a letter of the alphabet when there are only 26 to choose from then the entire world is in danger of losing their languages. These things cannot be copyrighted or patented because it stifles freedom of expression. So how much code must be reproduced - 3 bytes, 30 bytes, 300 bytes, 3,000 bytes? The courts, judges and jury, cannot decide the answers to these questions and thus, copyrighting of computer programmes is still in its infancy and is far from being defined. One thing is for certain, however. You cannot resell Microsoft's BASIC compiler.

I, therefore, make the following conclusions:

1) Microsoft has absolutely no legal rights over any programme that you write, whether or not you used their compiler.

2) They cannot conclusively prove that a particular programme was created using their compiler.

3) They cannot possibly win in a lawsuit for either breach of contract or violation of copyright.

4) Anyone who complies with their conditions or pays them any royalties is a fool.

I hope that someday soon, someone will take them to task on this issue and set a legal precedent in a court of law. Microsoft will lose.

SOFTWARE

No software programmes have been submitted this month and I have nothing interesting to give. However, for those of you who are running CP/M, Craig Dolbeer recently purchased volume 40 from the CP/M User's Group library which has several interesting and useful system routines and cataloguing programmes.

I think that he will be submitting some of these programmes to the library. If you wish to order some of the CPMUG volumes ($8.00 is the price) but are unable to read their 8 inch, soft-sectored, IBM format disks, I think Craig will be happy to order it for you and transfer the programmes to cassette tape.

I received a large package of literature from Australia on computer wargaming and wargaming clubs. These people are looking for international members who wish to participate in computer wargames around the world. The literature has been given to Duncan and is included in the binder that he brings to the meetings. For further information, come to the meetings or call Duncan.

GENERAL NEWS

- I must make a correction from the last newsletter. I stated that Exidy sold their data products division to Ramotek. This is incorrect. The division was sold to RECORTEK.

- for those of you who are anxiously awaiting the big computer show that's held in Toronto about this time, the show is scheduled for early November. I think it is the 11, 12 and 13 but this will have to be verified. It will be held at the International Centre again and tickets can be obtained in advance or at the door. I think it's still $5.00.

- a last minute newsbreak! Bob Simpson has indicated that he may be able to get us a meeting place relatively soon from the North York Board of Education. We will contact you if anything comes up.

ADVERTISEMENTS

For Sale - Ball Brothers, 12 inch video monitors. Comes OEM style, that is, no case or power supply. Requires a 12v, 1½ Amp power supply. They have green phospher screens and separate horizontal and vertical inputs. Schematics are supplied. These are brand new and in the original shipping carton. The price is $110.00 and they can be obtained from Bob Simpson. Call 225-6193.