Windows anti-piracy tool causes controversy

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When Microsoft released its WGA (Windows Genuine Advantage) anti-piracy tool in July of 2005, its goal was to attempt to find a way to track and help reduce the illegal use of its Windows XP operating system. But the company may have been a little overzealous in their efforts.

WGA, the anti-piracy tool that Microsoft began including with the downloadable software updates for Windows XP, was developed as a means of checking license numbers for Windows XP and helping to locate pirated copies of the software.

While considered just another update for a while, the program has taken center stage as Microsoft announced that users would need to pass the WGA's license number checks to be able to download the latest updates of its software such as Internet Explorer 7 and Windows Media Player 11. Copies of the operating system software which do not pass this test will be able to only download critical updates for the operating system and be restricted from additional downloads typically available via the software update application.

As a result, has become extremely controversial, inciting not only a French developer to release a program which removes WGA from the system, but for two law suits to be filed within four days of each other last week. The suits, which include a class-action effort as well as accusations that the WGA tool violates California and Washington protection laws by not fully disclosing its presence and that Microsoft misled its customer base by including the WGA tool as part of its monthly patches, which often include critical security updates.

In addition, user feedback to the program has been less than forgiving. Users have complained that the WGA tool is buggy and has identified their valid copies of the Windows XP operating system as invalid, thus exposing them to the punishments reserved for users who've failed to pass the WGA's authentication tests. Additional complaints have stated that the tool also pops up through the boot and general use stages of operation when it should run as a background function.

Throughout the history of the computer software industry, piracy has always been a major concern. Most software can be freely installed from one computer to the next and required serial numbers and license keys can be easily found across the Internet, thereby drastically reducing potential profits for a software firm. For Microsoft, the firm has long faced piracy from users sharing license keys for both individual and volume installations of Windows XP.

"Eighty percent of all WGA validation failures are due to unauthorized use of leaked or stolen volume license keys," said a Microsoft spokeswoman.

Still, speculation continues to mount and Microsoft has made some concessions to the controversy surrounding the program. A new version of the WGA tool, which previously checked the system's licensing numbers on a daily basis, now performs the check only once a month. Microsoft has also exempted corporations that buy large volume installations of Windows XP from having to install the WGA program.

"With worldwide losses to piracy at $34 billion in 2005 and a global piracy rate of 35 percent, every effort to encourage users to become compliant helps," said Neil MacBride, vice president of Legal Affairs for the Business Software Association, an anti-piracy lobbying group. "A recent IDC/BSA study showed that if the piracy rate were to drop 10 points to 25 percent, it would create as many as 2.4 million new jobs,

$400 billion in economic growth and $67 billion in tax revenues worldwide."

"It's Microsoft's right to deactivate pirated copies," said a Windows user who preferred to remain anonymous. "Still, I don't think that a daily check is a good thing. It infringes on privacy. It would make more sense if it checked when you grabbed security patches or updates."

Microsoft has not announced details as to what will happen with its WGA anti-piracy tool, but has mentioned that it will remain a key component within its upcoming Windows Vista operating system, due in late 2006 and early 2007.

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