

# Playing at pirate games: Busting a few digital piracy myths

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The results of a large-scale, analysis of BitTorrent file-sharing of computer games, focusing on using open methodologies are to be published in the *International Journal of Advanced Media and Communication* and bust some of the common myths about digital piracy.

The controversy about illegal file sharing over the Internet has been a focus of intense attention from industry and media alike for the past decade. Despite the massive [financial interests](#) involved, there is, however, only limited factual knowledge available backing claims from either side of the controversy.

Focusing on digital [game](#) piracy specifically, Anders Drachen of the Department of Communication and Psychology, at Aalborg University and the PLAIT Lab, Northeastern University and Robert Veitch of the Department of IT Management at Copenhagen Business School, in Frederiksberg, Denmark, report the results of a large-scale, analysis of BitTorrent file-sharing of computer games, focusing on using open methodologies. Their data covers a three month period during 2010 to 2011 and included information on 173 computer games.

The results present a nuanced picture of game piracy and presents evidence against some of the common myths in [digital piracy](#). For example, the team found that it is not just hardcore "shooter" games that get pirated on BitTorrent. They also recorded piracy of games across the board, from children's and family games all the way to the major

commercial titles. Furthermore, their results indicate that the actual number of illicit [digital copies](#) of computer games accessed on BitTorrent is not as high as those mentioned in reports from industry trade organizations, for instance.

During the period of monitoring BitTorrent, the research team found that about 12.6 million unique peers from over 250 countries/areas were sharing illicit copies of games, which included Fallout: New Vegas, Darksiders, Need for Speed: Hot Pursuit, NBA 2k11, TRON Evolution, Call of Duty: Black Ops, Starcraft 2, Star Wars the Force Unleashed 2, Two Worlds II, The Sims 3: Late Night. This represents a wide range of games vendors and games types encompassing simulations, sports and strategy as well as action games. They report that of the 173 digital games in the sample, the ten most popular games titles during the period analyzed drove more than 4 out of every 10 unique peers on BitTorrent and a mere 20 of the countries monitored were contributing to more than three-quarters of the total file-sharing activity.

For the most popular games, they add, there was an average of 536,727 unique peers sharing via Bit Torrent, and the geographical distribution of the unique peers paint a very diverse picture of where people who access illegally copied games on BitTorrent are positioned. For example, a number of countries stand out as having very large numbers of unique peers represented in the dataset, including Romania, Croatia, Ukraine, Greece, Poland, Italy, Armenia and Serbia. Portugal, Israel and Qatar also have more than 1% peers per Internet user. The results also point out that games receiving high critical acclaim tend to have higher numbers of unique peers than those which receive negative critique in media reviews.

While the games investigated covered all major hardware platforms, console games are much tougher to pirate than desktop computer games for the simple reason that one needs to modify the hardware of the

console to use them. In contrast, to use an illicit copy of a PC game, one must commonly only modify the computer code itself. A recent turn towards cloud-based gaming could reduce the chances of games being copied illicitly still further but adoption relies on access to reliable broadband internet for gamers. Of course, better broadband also potentially means more efficient sharing of illegal copies of digital games.

The findings present a picture of peer-to-peer, P2P, distributions that confirms some existing assumptions about piracy while contradicting others. "First and foremost, P2P game piracy is extraordinarily prevalent and geographically distributed [at least it was during the period analyzed]. However, the numbers in our investigation suggest that previously reported magnitudes in game piracy are too high," Drachen adds. "It also appears that some common myths are wrong, e.g. that it is only shooters that get pirated, as we see a lot of activity for children's and family games on BitTorrent for the period we investigated."

**More information:** "Patterns in the distribution of digital games via BitTorrent" in *Int. J. Advanced Media and Communication*, 2013, 5, 80-99

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