



## Microsoft's Copy Protection: Time to Mend It—Or End It

SO HELP ME, I'm not irrevocably opposed to copy protection. Software developers have a right to be compensated for their work, and they're entitled to take steps to protect their intellectual property. I get that.

But Windows Genuine Advantage, Microsoft's antipiracy technology, is enough to turn anyone into a hard-core copy-protection opponent. And never more so than on August 24, when a bug on the company's authentication servers caused WGA to lose its ability to tell a legitimate copy of Windows from an unauthorized copy.

Suddenly, thousands of Microsoft customers saw messages informing them that their paid-for software was fake. Worse, WGA punitively disabled their access to features like Windows Vista's Aero environment and ReadyBoost accelerator—some of the very items that Microsoft had used to induce buyers to pony up for Vista in the first place.

Nineteen hours later, the company fixed the glitch, and users got their lost features back. All in all, though, the

Windows Genuine Advantage isn't just flaky and intrusive. It's an affront to all of us who pay Microsoft for our software.

most Microsoft-hating hacker couldn't have dreamed up a more telling exposé of WGA's fundamental fragility.

This was hardly the first time the technology had caused headaches for innocent Windows owners. It already had a reputation for mistakenly fingering users as running pirated software when they weren't: As posts in Microsoft's own forums show, innocuous activities like adding components to a PC or upgrading its BIOS can lead to trouble.

And when WGA does behave as it's meant to, it's still no picnic. Download Windows-related items from Microsoft, and you'll have to validate your operating system. Download some more, and you'll need to do it again. The process is especially clunky in Firefox.

Even the way Microsoft markets WGA is broken. Its customers deserve a straightforward acknowledgment that

the company is inconveniencing them to protect its profits, not platitudes about WGA existing mostly as a warning system for people who have unwittingly bought counterfeit copies of Windows.

That's not all they deserve. After the August meltdown, WGA senior product manager Alex Kochis blogged about measures the company is taking to lessen the damage "should anything like this happen again." Excuse me? Any copy protection that can accidentally deprive people of features they paid for needs to be rethought from the ground up. Microsoft owes its customers a WGA that's more predictable and less vindictive. It owes them copy protection that stays out of their face.

### The Obliteration Option

Of course, the folks in Redmond could eliminate all of WGA's problems simply by eliminating the technology altogether. I don't expect this to happen, but it's not unthinkable. PC history holds multiple examples of software companies discontinuing the use of copy controls, from Lotus in the 1980s to Intuit after the 2003 tax season.

Every past instance of a product losing its shackles has had two things in common: There were unprotected competitors, and users told the developers behind the copy-protected ones that enough was enough. If I were Microsoft CEO Steve Ballmer, I'd take note of the fact that there's no such thing as Mac Genuine Advantage or Linux Genuine Advantage—and I'd listen very carefully to what customers have to say about copy protection in Windows.

Last time I checked, I wasn't Steve Ballmer, but I'm still interested in your thoughts on all this. Drop me a line at [harry\\_mccracken@pcworld.com](mailto:harry_mccracken@pcworld.com), with your take on WGA.

Read Editor in Chief Harry McCracken's blog at [blogs.pcworld.com/techlog](http://blogs.pcworld.com/techlog). ●

### PICKS OF THE MONTH

AS I WAS finishing this column, the 27-inch TV I've owned for a decade died on me. I didn't mourn a bit, though—it was the excuse I needed to start shopping for a flat-screen HDTV.

I'm still looking, but my old set croaked at an opportune time: The PC World Test Center was wrapping up its examination of models for "LCD vs. Plasma: Which HDTV Is Right for You?" (page 110). Of the units we tested, I'm most intrigued by two from

Vizio: the VP42 plasma and the GV42LF LCD. These sets aren't perfect, but they delivered some of the best images our jury saw, at prices much lower than those of most big-name high-def models. Sounds like a winning combination to me.



VIZIO GV42LF high-definition LCD TV.