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Dave McClure • May. 22, 2013

From the Bleeding Edge blog.

In the very early days of the PC revolution, untold thousands of hobbyists and programmers spread their fledgling programs across the seven major online services (The Source, The Well, CompuServe, AOL, ZDNet, Prodigy and MSN) and thousands of Bulletin Board Systems.

The programs were largely free to use, and in fact the few software authors who dared to try to charge money for their efforts were thoroughly castigated as being greedy.

Eventually, people figured out that talented programmers could not afford to give away their products, any more than talented musicians or painters could.

The market divided into three layers – major software programs that consumers paid for at one end of the spectrum; "freeware" software of little applications at the other end; and "shareware" programs in the middle that one could try for free but had to pay a nominal amount to use if you liked it.

The problem with this rather elegant structure is that most people would prefer "freeware" over anything they had to pay for. And for good reason – particularly with utilities, you could find something that worked better for free than the stuff you paid for. Windows utilities, DVD rippers, ebook readers and even office utilities were examples of free programs that worked as well as or better than their more pricy counterparts.

Simply enter "free _____" in your search engine, and you would be taken to the whole

you do have to pay to actually use the product. For what you get, "free" has become expensive. So how do you fight back?

First, recognize that major programs need to be paid for. This includes nearly all accounting and tax software, which take thousands of man-hours every year to update and keep useful. If you want these for free, you are out of luck. For the rest, follow a few simple rules:

1. Look for sites that specialize in software, such as CNet and Tucows. They are honest and safe.
2. Note whether the software is commercial, shareware (try before you buy) or freeware.
3. Pay attention to the ratings for the programs, both from editors and users. Two stars are not the same as five stars, for a reason.

And any software that says "free to download" is not free. If you want free, avoid this software.

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