Shareware:
Try Before You Buy

by David Alfano

User-supported software, or "shareware" as it is popularly called, is an alternative to the software in the flashy boxes with the corresponding high prices. The concept is simple: You try the program out on your computer, and if you like it, you "register" your copy by sending a check directly to the author. The cost of registering shareware is usually less than $25 and rarely more than $100. If you don't like or need the program, you either delete it or pass it on to a friend who may find it useful.

Shareware is a cottage industry, and literally thousands of programs are available. Some shareware is written to "fix" problems in commercially-produced programs, but the vast majority is inspired by the need for features the big software manufacturers left out of their programs. Other shareware programs fill a special niche, such as those designed for builders, including *Sp-Footing* (which analyzes and designs concrete spread footings), *Wiresize* (which estimates the voltage drop across wires to aid the selection of proper wire gauge), *Estibid* (an estimating program), and *SupremeSched* (an employee scheduling system), to name only a few.

Going On-Line

You can purchase shareware from mail-order companies for about $5 per disk; a disk often holds more than one program. Most companies publish a monthly catalog and offer discounts on bulk orders (see "Shareware on Disk"). But the quickest and easiest way to obtain shareware is over the phone lines. In addition to a modem, you need communications software, which is frequently included in the purchase price of a modem, but it can be purchased separately as well. If you don't like the version you start with, don't despair. Some of the best communications programs, like *Telix* or *Procomm*, are available as shareware.

The setup procedure that allows your communications software to work with your modem is usually described in the modem manual. You don't need to understand it all, but it's important to set the proper transmission protocol. For most communications software, the following settings will work: 1200 or 2400 baud (depending on the speed of your modem), no parity, 8 data bits, and 1 stop bit. These settings will appear somewhere on the setup screen as "1200,N,8,1" or "2400,N,8,1."

Who Ya Gonna Call?

Once your modem is set up, you need a number to call. Information services systems, such as CompuServe (800/848-8199), GEnie (800/638-9636), Prodigy (800/776-3552), or America OnLine (800/827-6364) are good sources of sh monthly subscription fee. But the real gold mine for shareware is the vast number of Remote Bulletin Board Systems (often called RBBSs or just BBSs), which are privately operated and often run out of someone's home. To get the phone number of a BBS near you, pick up a copy of *Computer Shopper* magazine at almost any computer store or good newsstand. A section in the back lists BBS numbers by area code. Don't be discouraged if you can't find a local number: Nearly every BBS maintains a file containing the phone numbers of other BBSs. Once you're on line, chances are good you'll find a number that's close by.

Joining a BBS

The first time you make connection with a BBS, the system will prompt you through a "registration" process, where you will be asked to enter a *User Name* and *Password*. Be sure to write down the password because you'll need it to gain access on subsequent calls.

Next you'll see a menu of options. If there's a *Bulletin* area, read the files that give general information about the BBS and review the instructions on how to maneuver around in it. Then check out the *Message* areas to see what kinds of "conversations" are going on among the users. If you find a *Special Interest Group* (SIG) you like, most BBSs will allow you to "join" and leave a message right away. Just follow the instructions on the screen.

Downloading Files

To find files that you can download, select the Main Menu option that brings you to the files "directory." This may also be called an "area" or "library." Once you're there, you can "browse" through a list of the file names along with a short description of their contents (see Figure 1).

When you find a file that looks interesting, select the *download* option. The BBS will then ask you to name a file transfer protocol. Once again, you don't need to understand how a protocol works, only that the download won't work without it. If you are not sure what protocol to use, consult your communications software manual or the on-line tutorial, if the BBS has one. If you have to guess, XMODEM is a good choice, since it's the most common file transfer protocol.

Begin the file transfer using your software's *Receive File* or *Download File* command (usually initiated by hitting the PGDN key). I suggest

On-Line File Library			
SPFOOT.ZIP	12-20-91	Calcs Footing for Engineers, V1.0	81280
COSTIT.ZIP	11-26-91	Cost Estimating Program, V2.0	81920
TELIX-3.ZIP	11-22-91	Telix Comm Pkg, V3.15 3 of 3	63616
TELIX-2.ZIP	11-22-91	Telix Comm Pkg, V3.15 2 of 3	123904
TELIX-1.ZIP	11-22-91	Telix Comm Pkg, V3.15 1 of 3	151040

Figure 1. *BBS libraries contain lists of files that can be downloaded. The file name is usually followed by the date the file was created, a brief description of what the program does, and the size of the file in bytes. Files with the extension ".ZIP" are compressed and need to be "uncompressed" before you use them.*

you only download one or two files until you get the hang of the whole procedure. You can call back later to get other files that interest you.

Pay to Play

It won't be too long before you find that some of the programs you've downloaded are extremely useful. If you plan to use these programs regularly, you should "register" the software. Instructions are usually included somewhere in the program itself.

Shareware is cheap, but it's not free. Even though it's based on the honor system, the most obvious reason to pay for shareware programs you use is that your money encourages the author to let you "try before you buy," something few commercial vendors allow.

For those of less conscience, there are other reasons. Some shareware programs, for example, are partially "disabled" or display a nagging message about supporting shareware. After you pay your registration fee, you receive a version with these obstacles removed. In other cases, the documentation that comes with the unregistered version is incomplete. But after you register, you may receive not only a diskette with a newer version of the program, but a bound, professionally-produced manual that describes the program's features in great detail. Additionally, registered users usually receive notices of updates to the program, as well as announcements of other programs of interest.

Caveat Emptor

Downloading files from other peoples' systems brings with it the possibility of capturing a computer virus — a program that "infects" your system through "contaminated" files and produces unpleasant results at predetermined times, such as formatting your hard drive or scrambling your file directories. Computer viruses are here to stay, but if you exercise caution — or practice "safe hex," as one programmer I know put it — you can all but eliminate the chance of catching a virus from shareware. Always run a virus detection program before executing any newly downloaded programs on your computer. Many anti-virus programs are available commercially, and an excellent virus-detecting program called *VirusScan* (McAfee Assoc., Cheeney St., Santa Clara, CA 95054; 408/988-3832) is widely available as shareware. ■

David Alfano is Software Assurance Manager in the Office of Safety, Reliability, and Quality Assurance at NASA's Ames Research Center in Mountain View, Calif.

Shareware on Disk

EMS Professional Shareware
4505 Buckhurst Ct.
Olney, MD 20832
301/924-3594

PC-SIG
1030D E. Duane Ave.
Sunnyvale, CA 94086
800/245-6717

Public Brand Software
P.O. Box 51315
Indianapolis, IN 46251
800/426-3475
BBS: 317/856-2087 ($50/yr.)

Public (software) Library (PsL)
P.O. Box 35705
Houston, TX 77235
800/242-4775
$24/yr. for a monthly catalog

Reasonable Solutions
1221 Disk Dr.
Medford, OR 97501
800/876-3475

Software Excitement
6475 Crater Lake Hwy.
Central Point, OR 97502
800/444-5457

The Software Labs (TSL)
3767 Overland Ave., #112-115
Los Angeles, CA 90034
800/359-9998