

Many PC manufacturers have cheated BIOS to 'unlock' free full software versions

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You may have noticed that a brand new PC comes with some software pre-installed. Sometimes, when you open this software, it will automatically activate, and you will immediately get the full version without having to pay anything. This happens because the PC manufacturer is the licensing partner of the software, and getting the full version for free is a great incentive to attract customers. However, in the past, many PC manufacturers have tried to "bend the rules" to get the full version of the software completely free.

Windows 95 era and BIOS "tricks"

Back in the days of Windows 95, when the Plug and Play standard was still being developed, Microsoft engineers were faced with the problem of finding a way for the operating system to recognize PCs that were built before the standard was introduced. One of the methods they tried was to scan for firmware license strings and release dates in the BIOS.

During the inspection, they discovered a strange copyright string: "Not Copyright Fabrikam Computer" on a PC that was actually manufactured by Contoso (Fabrikam and Contoso are assumed names, used to hide the real identities of the OEMs involved).

As Microsoft engineer Raymond Chen explained in a blog post, these strange license strings appear because Contoso wants to activate a full version of a trial software for customers without paying a license fee. To do this, they added the following text to the BIOS:

" Copyright Contoso Not Copyright Fabrikam Computer "

The trial version of the software was programmed to look for the string "Copyright Fabrikam Computer". When it scanned the BIOS, it accidentally detected this string in the above confusing text, thereby activating the full version without verifying the valid copyright.

Microsoft has since implemented stricter controls to prevent this type of cheating, but it's still a fascinating story about the early days of the PC industry, when manufacturers were willing to bend the rules to benefit their customers (and themselves).

As the saying goes: "Let bygones be bygones" – but sometimes it's fun to look back at old tech "hacks"!

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