

News

Free shareable iTunes in sight

Apple rep said as much at Macworld expo, but observers doubt it

| Joseph Wilson

By most accounts, the 2009 Macworld in San Francisco, Apple's last annual marketing fest, was a snooze. The yearly convention devoted to the deification of all things Apple usually sets the tone for high-tech product launches for the coming year.

That is, until Philip Schiller, standing in for ailing CEO Steve Jobs, uttered those magical words "completely DRM-free."

DRM stands for "digital rights management," which is the term used to describe the technologies companies like Apple use to ensure that you aren't violating any copyright laws on purchased songs. People who have bought tracks off iTunes know that there's a limit to how many ways you can listen to your songs. iPods can only be synced to one computer, and songs need to be "burned and ripped" if you want to use them in more than one location.

If Schiller's declaration is to be believed, all 10 million songs in the iTunes catalogue will soon be free from such restrictions. Pundits reacted with suspicion, and Mac-heads nodded in support of Apple's bold move. As always with such announcements, technology commentators are busy parsing the fine print to see what Apple's real plan is.

Two years ago, Apple tested the waters by selling select songs through iTunes as DRM-free. Users quickly found out that although they could share, rip and burn at will, the digitally encoded file included information from their user account, including their email address, which was being copied and shared along with the music.

This strategy, not technically considered DRM, could allow Apple and its music industry partners to keep tabs on what people do with their music, and who is sharing what with whom. Although we're past the days when Sony would sue a teenage girl in Kingston for posting tracks on a P2P network, this new tracking strategy could help map out file-sharing networks for future exploitation by media companies.

The Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF), which promotes privacy and freedom on the Web, has cautiously praised Apple's steps toward complete freedom from DRM. But EFF member Richard Esguerra points out, "The iTunes Store will still lock down movies and TV programs with FairPlay DRM."

Apple also uses strong DRM to lock down its iPhone and to ensure that its Macbooks can only output content to "approved" displays.

In addition, files bought from iTunes are still restricted in other ways. Once purchased, the files acquire an .m4p extension that ensures they can only be played in their purchased form on an Apple device – something with an "i" in the name.

Also, users who want to liberate their current songs from DRM must buy them again for 30 cents each – 40 cents for Canadians. According to TechCrunch editor Erick Schonfeld, that amounts to a \$1.8-billion money grab for Apple.

Apple shouldn't take all the credit either for forward-thinking policy. Amazon.com has been offering DRM-free music for about a year now, and has taken a chunk out of Apple's business. In this light, Apple's move is merely a response to market conditions.

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