Shiver Me Timbers

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For Christmas in 1978, my family got the Atari 2600. Some of my fondest childhood memories are of my dad, sister and I sitting in front of our 26" Zenith and competing in 'Air/Sea Battle' and 'Combat.' Activision even made a bridge game for my mom to play on it.

As many people know, I love video games. We graduated from the Atari 2600 to the 5200, then Nintendo, Super Nintendo, Nintendo 64, Xbox and finally the Xbox 360. Today, I'm making new memories with my kids by sitting in front of our 54" television and playing 'Lego Indiana Jones' and 'Lego Batman.'

Games have come a long way in 30 years. The Atari had large cartridges that contained blocky, 3 or 4 color games with what seemed like unlimited number of variations of tennis. The Xbox 360 has games on a disk that are so realistic you sometimes wonder if you're watching a movie. But all that awesome technology comes at a price – today's game consoles are several hundred dollars, while the games themselves can cost up to $60.

Because some unscrupulous people do not want to pay $60, they pervert the technology they so revere by using it to illegally copy or download games. Well, Microsoft, who manufactures the Xbox 360, is cracking down on people who play pirated games.

In the past, I've written about pirated CDs and DVDs and even pirated designer purses. Now the most popular things to pirate are video games. Earlier this month, Microsoft banned as many as 1 million players from utilizing Xbox Live for illegally modifying their Xbox 360 consoles in order to play pirated versions of games. Xbox Live is an online service where 20 million gamers can download games, game ad-ons, and movies, and it also allows them to compete against one another over the Internet.

Each Xbox 360 console is equipped with digital rights management technology that is designed to detect pirated software. Players, however, can override the DRM protections by modifying their machines. In addition to voiding their warranties, violators got kicked off of Xbox Live. While banned gamers can't use the online service, they can still play offline games.

In addition to playing pirated games, players were also banned from Xbox Live for making threatening, racist or profane comments online or simply ruining gaming experiences for others. Just how long the ban will last is unclear. According to Xbox Live Director of Programming Larry Hryb, players who violate Xbox Live's terms of use "may be banned for a day, a week, or depending on severity, permanently!"

The bans came right on the heels of the release of Activision's 'Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2', one of the most hotly anticipated video games of all time. Activision has come a long way, too; the company's war epic is light years ahead of my mom's card game. Accordingly, tons of websites boasted downloadable copies of the game, so Microsoft enacted the ban. In a statement, Microsoft explained that its "commitment to combat piracy and support safer and more secure gameplay" remains a top priority.

There is no way I would ever be brave enough to crack open my Xbox. I remember one of my buddies opened up his Atari when it wasn't working and fiddled with the components. I think his mom is still finding parts in their basement.