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1

METHOD FOR THE ACQUISITION OF SOFTWARE AND
DATA-PROCESSING SYSTEM TO IMPLEMENT THE METHOD

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

1. Field of the Invention

The invention relates to a method of acquisition of software programs by microcomputers.

The invention also relates to a data-processing system for the acquisition of software.

The invention can be applied notably to microcomputers known as portable or pocket computers, i.e. computers that can easily be carried about and can work with independent power supplies (such as cells and batteries).

2. Description of the Prior Art

To obtain several hours of independent operation, it has been necessary to remove elements that consume a great deal of power from these microcomputers. In particular, the hard disk has been replaced by purely electronic memory and the magnetic disk drives have been replaced by drives for the reading of removable mass memories or mass memory cards. These memory cards are sometimes called PC-cards or again PCMCIA cards after the name of the corresponding standard ("Personal Computer Memory Card International Association" 1030B East Duane Avenue, Sunnyvale, California). These cards have several memory chips and a connector at the end of a card (68-pin female connector) that can be plugged into a corresponding connector of the drive of the microcomputer. The connections are such that the memory can be addressed by a parallel input-output port of the microcomputer. These cards are compact: they have the format of a credit card with a thickness of 3 to 5 millimeters, and access to them is obtained very

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speedily. Finally, their total memory capacity may attain several tens of megabytes.

Besides, to protect a computer against use by an unauthorized person, certain microcomputers also have a drive for the reading of chip cards. The security system then consists in preventing the use of the microcomputer if the user has not furnished the appropriate confidential codes or if he has not inserted a chip card into this drive.

The distribution of application software programs to microcomputers is usually done by magnetic diskettes. In the case of these portable microcomputers which no longer have magnetic disk drives but PCMCIA card drives, these card drives are used to carry out the distribution of the application software programs: a user purchases a PCMCIA card, into which an application software program has been loaded, from a vendor.

However, in practice, PCMCIA cards with mass storage units are very costly: they cost up to some thousands of francs depending on the memory capacity, thus making the cost of the smallest application software program prohibitive.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

An object of the present invention is a new method for the acquisition of software programs by microcomputers.

In the invention, it is proposed to use an information retrieval center or data base service center in which there will be stored applications software programs to be distributed and a removable electronic memory carrier containing rights of access to software to enable the remote loading of application software programs into a microcomputer.

Indeed, most microcomputers contain or may contain

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cards having functions of communication between the microcomputer and the exterior. These cards are called input/output function cards. A typical example of these is the modem which is connected by a first connector to the microcomputer and by a second connector to a telephone line for the dispatching or reception of digital data by the line. In another example of a card with a communications function, the communication with the exterior is achieved not by a connector with physical contacts but by RF links. These cards may be connected to an input/output port of the microcomputer or directly mounted inside the microcomputer.

According to the invention, application software programs are loaded into the data base service center to which microcomputers may be connected by a card such as this with input/output functions. Removable memory carriers having very little memory are delivered (sold) to the users. These carriers contain a right of access to at least one application software program. In this case, a carrier such as this comprising practically no memory has a low cost of about twenty francs at most. The information elements stored use only some bytes. The carrier may be, for example, a credit card type of chip card or again a PCMCIA card with very limited memory, and the microcomputer have the drives that correspond to these cards.

When a user of a microcomputer wishes to acquire an application software program, he purchases the carrier that contains the right of access to this software program. The price of the carrier corresponds to the sales price of the software plus that of the carrier which does not exceed about twenty francs. The user then inserts the carrier into the drive of the microcomputer. He sets up connection with the data base service center

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and selects the desired application software program, for example through the screen and keyboard of the microcomputer. The service center will then check the right of access in the carrier, through the microcomputer, and then transfer the application software program to the microcomputer, for example into its internal memory.

More specifically, the software acquisition method according to the invention comprises chiefly the following steps:

- in a first step, software programs are loaded into a data base service center to which it is possible to connect microcomputers capable of receiving removable memory carriers and users of microcomputers are given a removable electronic memory carrier containing at least one right of access to a software program of the data base service center;

- in a second step, a user of a microcomputer introduces the removable electronic memory carrier in his possession and a desired software program from the service center, authorized by the carrier, is remote-loaded into the microcomputer.

In one example, the software is remote-loaded into the internal memory. It can also be remote-loaded into a PCMCIA card when the microcomputer has a sufficient number of drives.

The time taken to remote-load the software depends only on the size of the software program and the transmission characteristics (format, bit rate etc.) of the microcomputer/service center link (which may be a modem link, wireless network etc.).

According to another characteristic of the invention, the right of access is controlled by the service center through the use of safety procedures with

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identification and enciphering/deciphering algorithms. The memory carrier comprises, to this end, an electronic safety module that makes it tamper-proof. For, fraudulent persons have to be prevented from pirating information contained in the carriers: this would enable them to remote-load software without having to pay for them, by making pirated versions of carriers.

The term electronic safety module is understood here to mean an integrated circuit chip comprising a non-volatile memory with confidential information and a programmed security circuitry capable of using this confidential information and other information elements given by the user to deliver validation instructions, after the verification of a predetermined relationship between these two types of information. The confidential data elements do not go out of the module.

According to another aspect of the invention, the very use of the application software programs is made secure. The method then comprises chiefly the following steps:

- the user is given a removable memory carrier containing rights of use proper at least to one software program of the service center and permitting the remote-loading of the corresponding software program or programs;

- the user must then introduce the memory carrier containing the rights of use proper to the software program that he wishes to remote-load and that he seeks to run. The remote-loaded software program is advantageously self-protected, and its running includes interrogations to the memory carrier to make checks on the secret rights of use and permit or prohibit the running of the rest of the program.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWING

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6

Other features and advantages of the invention shall appear from the following description, made by way of a indication that does not restrict the scope of the invention, with reference to the appended drawing, referenced figure 1, which is a drawing of a data-processing system according to the invention;

MORE DETAILED DESCRIPTION

A data-processing system according to the invention is shown in figure 1. It comprises a data base service center 1 in which there are stored application software programs 10, a microcomputer 2 connected to the service center by an interface 3 (such as a telephone network, radiophone network etc.) and a removable electronic memory carrier 4.

The microcomputer comprises: a screen 20, a keyboard 21 which may be replaced by a light pencil or any other existing man/machine interface, a central processing unit 22, an internal memory 23 and a drive 24 for the reading of removable electronic memory carriers.

The memory carrier comprises an interface 40 for connection to the drive 24 of the microcomputer, a non-volatile memory electronic chip 41. In the memory 41, the memory carrier contains secret information elements corresponding to a right of access to one or more application software programs stored in the server 1. These carriers are, in practice, marketed by the vendor/distributor of the application software programs considered.

To carry out the acquisition of an application software program, the user who possesses a carrier containing the corresponding right of access must introduce it into the the drive 24 of the microcomputer. Then, the user starts running a connection software program on the microcomputer. When communication is set

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up with the service center, this service center displays a menu on the screen of the microcomputer. Through this menu, the user chooses the application software program(s) that he wishes to acquire. The service center will then check the right of access to these software programs by interrogating the carrier through the central processing unit of the microcomputer. This check is advantageously made by using security methods similar to those used in chip cards (credit cards), i.e. with identification and authentication procedures, using enciphering and deciphering algorithms. The secret information elements are not sent out of the carrier. The non-volatile memory electronic chip 41 then comprises a security circuitry programmed to carry out these security functions.

If the safety check is positive, the service center carries out the remote-loading of the application software program(s) selected and authorized by the carrier in the internal memory of the microcomputer. As an option, for a microcomputer comprising at least two drives 24 and 25 for the reading of removable electronic memory carriers, provision may be made to enable the user to choose the place where the software has to be remote-loaded: whether in an internal memory 23 of the microcomputer or on a removable carrier 5 comprising an electronic chip 50 of a random-access memory, for example. The remote-loaded software can then be run by the microcomputer.

Now, it is possible to imagine a case where a fraudulent person has been able to memorize the software at the time of the remote-loading. But advantageously, to protect the method of the invention, there is provision for a removable electronic memory carrier to be introduced into the drive during the running of the



application software, said carrier containing secret data elements corresponding to known rights of use of the software program. This program, when it is being run, interrogates the memory carrier from time to time in order to ascertain that the rights of use are present. This check will be done preferably by using known security methods, notably the enciphering/deciphering algorithms. The memory carrier contains a security chip for this purpose.

Advantageously, the same memory carrier 4 contains rights of access to an applications software and the corresponding rights of use in the same electronic chip 41.

Other options may be envisaged. For example, it may be provided that the application software program is sold for a limited number of uses. The electronic chip will then include, for example, a counter containing this information element. One task of the application software program will comprise, for example, the following steps:

- reading, on the removable memory carrier 4, an information element indicating whether the software has been acquired for a limited number of uses. If the answer is "no", this task is ended and the running of the program continues;

- if the answer is "yes", then a decrementation command is sent. The electronic chip makes an internal check on the contents of the counter and if the value of the contents is not zero it sends an acknowledgment to the microcomputers. The software program can continue to run;

- but if the value of the counter is zero, then it sends back an error message for example, and the running of the software program is stopped.



In a practical example of an application, the removable memory carrier 4 is a chip card, or a PCMCIA card containing only the electronic chip needed for the application. The microcomputer will be fitted out with the corresponding drives to read cards such as these. The electronic chip 41 will comprise, for example, a programmed security circuitry 410, a non-volatile memory circuitry 411 and a counter 412.

The security circuitry 410 monitors the access to the memory and to the counter, and manages the external access to the carrier.

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WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:

1. A method for the acquisition of software programs by a computer, consisting:

- in a first step, in loading software programs into a data base service center to which it is possible to connect microcomputers capable of receiving removable memory carriers and in providing users of microcomputers with a removable electronic memory carrier containing at least one right of access to a software program of the data base service center;

- in a second step, for a user of a microcomputer, in introducing the removable electronic memory carrier in his possession and in remote-loading a desired software program from the service center, authorized by the carrier, into the microcomputer.

2. A method for the acquisition of software programs according to claim 1, wherein the remote-loading consists:

- for the user, in setting up communication with the service center and selecting at least one software program to be remote-loaded;

- for the service center, in ascertaining that the removable electronic memorization carrier contains a corresponding right of access to permit the transfer of the selected software program to the microcomputer.

3. A method for the acquisition of software programs according to any of the foregoing claims, wherein said method further consists:

- in delivering, to a user, a removable electronic memory carrier containing rights of use proper to at least one software program of the data bank service center;

- for a user of a microcomputer, in introducing the memory carrier containing the rights of use proper to





11

the remote-loaded software program, the running of said software program including interrogations of the memory carrier to check the rights of use and to permit or prohibit the running of the rest of the program.

4. A method for the acquisition of software programs according to claim 3, wherein the memory carrier containing rights of access to software programs contains the corresponding rights of use.

5. A method for the acquisition of software programs according to one of the claims 3 or 4, wherein the memory carrier comprises a counter indicating the number of uses of the remote-loaded software program that are still authorized, the running of this software program leading to a decrementation of the counter and the checking, by the carrier, of the state of the counter to permit or not permit the running of the software program.

6. A method for the acquisition of software programs according to any of the foregoing claims, wherein the verification of the data elements stored in the removable electronic memory carrier uses procedures of authentication and enciphering/deciphering, the removable electronic memory carrier comprising, to this end, an electronic security module providing for security against access to the data elements memorized in the carrier.

7. A method for the acquisition of software programs according to any of the foregoing programs, for a microcomputer comprising at least two drives for the reading of removable electronic memory carriers, wherein a software can be remote-loaded either in an internal memory of the microcomputer or in a removable electronic memory carrier comprising sufficient memory.

8. A data-processing system comprising

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12

microcomputers capable of setting up communication with a data base service center, said system comprising means for the acquisition of software programs loaded into the data base service center by microcomputers, these means comprising a removable memory carrier containing rights of access to software programs, to be introduced into a drive of the microcomputers.

9. A data-processing system according to claim 8, wherein the removable memory carrier is a protected chip card.

10. A data-processing system according to claim 8, wherein the removable memory carrier is a PCMCIA card.

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