

Aussie inventor in \$537m Microsoft damages win

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Ric Richardson.

An Australian inventor is set to reap the lion's share of a \$US388 million (\$537 million) damages award from Microsoft after a US jury found the software giant stole his technology.

Ric Richardson, who divides his time between Sydney and California, is the founder of Uniloc, which sued Microsoft in 2003 for violating its patent relating to technology designed to deter software piracy.

The company alleged Microsoft earned billions of dollars by using the technology in its Windows XP and Office programs.

Last week, a jury in Rhode Island found Microsoft violated the patent and told Microsoft to pay the company \$US388 million, the fifth-largest patent jury award in US history, according to data compiled by Bloomberg.

Four of the six largest patent verdicts have been against Microsoft, but the Uniloc damages fee only amounts to about eight days of profit for the company.

Richardson reportedly came up with the idea for the patented technology during his former career as a sound equipment programmer for bands ranging from INXS to John Denver. The job required him to use pricey specialist software but there was no

way to trial the software before buying it, which pushed many musicians into using pirated software.

Before getting into software development, Richardson, with his brother, invented the "Shade Saver" cords used to keep sunglasses attached to a wearer's neck. Profits from this invention were used to fund his Uniloc venture.

Richardson stepped down as a director of Uniloc in January this year, documents lodged with the Australian Securities and Investments Commission show.

He has sold some of his Uniloc shares in recent years but confirmed in an email that he still has "one of the larger individual shareholdings". It is impossible to determine his exact holding as Uniloc is a private company.

Richardson would not say much more, saying the case was still making its way through the courts.

He was less restrained on Twitter, announcing: "Dear fiends and family... its official. We won the case with Microsoft... and a \$388 mill verdict."

The jurors have already found that Microsoft wilfully and intentionally infringed Uniloc's patent, but the company is awaiting a final decision by the judge, who, Bloomberg reports, could increase the award three-fold.

Richardson's patent, one of many under his name, relates to work he did in the early 1990s and covers a software registrations system that allows software makers to create try-before-you-buy versions of their work.

Once users buy the software they get a registration key that unlocks the full featured version of the software.

Uniloc claimed Richardson showed a copy of his software to Microsoft in 1993 but Microsoft did not license it, instead developing its own almost identical version and incorporating it into its products from 1997 or 1998.

Microsoft said that its system works differently from Uniloc's and that Uniloc's patent was obvious.

The company has said it is very disappointed with the jury verdict and will ask the court to overturn the verdict.

In 2006 a different judge ruled in favour of Microsoft, but this was overturned by an appeals court, which argued the case shouldn't have been decided without hearing from a jury.

Other inventions patented by Richardson include the ability to swap batteries on laptops without shutting down, an open standard for online forums and the "smog eradicator" - an on-board carbon scrubber for petroleum-fuelled vehicles.