

# California Computer Care

News,  
Views,  
Tips and  
Cool Techniques  
for CCC Members

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We  
speak  
Geek,  
so you  
don't  
have to.

## Microsoft Musings

Well, the big trial is over and Judge Thomas Penfield Jackson has pulled no punches in labelling Microsoft as the predatory monopoly that it is. Next will come the decision about how to deal with the world's mightiest corporation. Here's my opinion on what has transpired (not that you asked).

Nobody outside of Microsoft doubts that they are a monopoly. IBM-PC style computers rule the desktop marketplace. 98% of them are run by Microsoft operating systems. With this power, Microsoft controls the look and feel of all of these computers. Because the operating system determines how a computer works and interacts, if a computer manufacturer wanted to give us something new and different, they couldn't; Microsoft would not allow it. That is why, with few exceptions, all desktop computers look and act alike and all computer makers and software publishers must toe Microsoft's line. If your product doesn't fit with Microsoft's view, it won't run and no one will buy it.

Well, duh! This is just common sense. After all, every car runs on gasoline, what's wrong with every computer running on the same operating system? Nothing, except with gas many different companies make it and sell it and add improvements or not as they see fit. With computers this cannot be so. Only Microsoft can make Windows (copyright law ensures this) and only the real Windows will work, because the computer hardware has to be tailored to fit the software. Deviate just a little and the computer doesn't work at all.

So, Microsoft is a natural monopoly kind of like PG&E, what's wrong with that? Plenty. Imagine what your choices would be like if PG&E sold their own electric and gas appliances and made sure that only their appliances worked correctly with their electricity and natural gas. Further imagine that PG&E would actually change how their electricity and gas worked to make other manufacturer's appliances break. Then your choice would be to buy PG&E washing machines (that work well) or Maytag washers that never seem to work quite right. This is

indeed what Microsoft does with it's power over the operating system. When Microsoft makes application programs like Word, Excel and Encarta, they can tailor these applications and Windows to work closely together and they purposely build into Windows features that only Microsoft products can use. Pretty clever and pretty nasty. This is why Microsoft's applications own over 90% of their categories.

But, Microsoft got here because consumers picked their software over the competition. Isn't this the good, old free market in action? No, because consumers never got a choice. To understand why, we have to go into the past.

Several thousand years ago (1977), the Apple II was introduced and the desktop computer (as we know it) was born. For the next few years, little companies popped up everywhere creating personal computers. Each PC used a different operating system made for it alone. Companies like Apple, Kaypro, Tandy, Commodore, Atari and Osborn flourished and consumers had real choices in computer hardware and software. Then the sleeping behemoth, IBM, opened an eye and saw this upstart market and said: "Hey, look at these toy computers, I'll bet we could sell a hundred thousand or so before the market saturates and no one buys them anymore." Now, because IBM saw the market as small and insignificant (and something easy to rule with their great power), they figured that to spend any serious resources on the project would be silly, so they built the cheapest, funkier machine they could. They weren't interested in performance or quality, they just wanted to get something on the market. So, instead of developing their own parts, they took outside bids on the two key components: the central processing chip (the brains of the machine) and the operating system that made it run. In both cases they gave the contract to the lowest bidder (in the case of the brains, Intel got the contract with their very low quality chip) and Microsoft won the bid for the operating system (by charging 10% of what the next bidder wanted). By the standards of the early

80's, Microsoft's MSDOS\* was very rough and raw (it barely ran at all), but it was cheap and that's all IBM cared about.

Before IBM got into making desktop computers, businesses wouldn't buy. Being conservative, they wanted reassurance that desktop computers would do the job. When IBM released the IBM-PC, businesses worldwide said: "If it's got IBM's name on it, it must be good! Buy it!" and overnight, it seemed, all of the other computer manufacturers faded away (except Apple, of course). The IBM machines became the standard that all new computer manufacturers and software publishers had to accept. Since it was Microsoft's MSDOS that ran IBM's computers, it was really Microsoft that was calling the tune that everyone danced to (IBM discovered this too late and so, they were relegated to be just another computer maker and not the owner of the market as they planned). In the end, it was IBM, not the consumer, that gave the operating system market to Microsoft; we never had a say.

From there, the rest follows. Microsoft began using its monopoly power to create applications and to structure the computer world so that their competition could not keep pace. Even today, whenever they change Windows, Microsoft Word is ready. Corel's Word Perfect, on the other hand, stops working right, until months later when they make it conform to Microsoft's

\*Which Microsoft didn't create, but bought for a pittance from a hobbyist programmer in Seattle.

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new standard. Any wonder that Word Perfect (a better product even now and once the leading word processor before Windows 95 appeared) barely exists anymore?

So what? My PC works and does what I want. How am I harmed? Let's imagine a world in which only 12" black and white, monophonic, televisions existed. You could still watch your favorite shows, you'd probably think this is a pleasant diversion and be perfectly happy. How would you know what you were missing without large screens, color and stereophonic sound? If tv innovation were crushed by RCA back in the early 1950's, we'd still be using those 12" black and white machines and be none the wiser.

And so, the consumer gets hurt. We're hurt because we'll never know what innovations were squashed by this arrangement. We have no operating system choices that will run the software and hardware that we already own. If we choose a non-standard computer and/or application, we can't share our files with the 90% that own the market leader, so we have no choices, again. This even affects us Mac users. Have you ever heard of such great Mac word processors as FullWrite Professional, Nisus or Mariner Write? All of these great products were sacrificed to the gods of Microsoft Word conformity.

What to do about it? Break-up Microsoft? Force it to play nice? Subsidize competitors? There are lots of ideas floating around. Here's a question: Would you buy a computer and then spend more money

to buy a different operating system and spend even more money to have an expert remove Windows 98 and install your operating system of choice? That could easily cost more than the computer itself. My preference would be to stop IBM-PC style computer manufacturers from supplying the operating system with the computer. Let the customer decide what operating system they want when they buy the machine. A savvy computer shop would then install the software for free and you get what you want. This levels the playing field for all concerned and opens a great market for innovation and diversity.

But, this speculation is a bit premature. Let's see what Judge Jackson comes up with. I'm sure that it will be fascinating.



*December Tip—*

Time to put up the Holiday lights!  
Go to [http://shareware.cnet.com/shareware/0-13628-500-1284899.html?tag=st.sw.16170\\_501\\_5.lst.titledetail](http://shareware.cnet.com/shareware/0-13628-500-1284899.html?tag=st.sw.16170_501_5.lst.titledetail) to download this cute shareware program. Install it and enjoy the festive season.

*Happy Holidays to all!  
And the best for the new millennium!*