

Almost in Praise of Microsoft

Andrew Davison
Dept. of Computer Engineering
Prince of Songkla University
Hat Yai, Songkhla 90112, Thailand
dandrew@ratree.psu.ac.th

A battered-and-bruised 486 has been collecting dust in my store room at home for years: its CD chassis was broken during a house move, the hard disk crashed not long after, but at least its 8MB of RAM is okay. There's no sound card or modem; I don't think the Web had been invented when I bought this dinosaur.

Recently, I decided to learn more about PC hardware and software installation by fitting a new CD drive and hard disk, and loading DOS 6.22 and Windows for Workgroups 3.11. Perhaps surprisingly, Windows was a great choice for turning my lump of iron into a useful contributor to society.

I'll briefly describe the installation based on subjective qualities like ease of loading, and their utility to the Davison household. However, my main reason for writing this piece is to send a message to Microsoft: *it's time for Redmond to do a Borland and a Red Hat*. But don't worry, I'm not calling for open source DOS and Windows, which has as much chance of happening as Bill Gates dyeing his hair blue.

Preparing

DOS and Windows for Workgroups 3.11 (hereafter called WfW) are fading fast. Forget about finding them in the shops, although you can still buy them second hand. But I did what any person who works in a medium size company would do: I searched through the dusty boxes in the technician's office. I found DOS 6.22 on 4 disks and WfW on 10.

Another point is the rapidly disappearing support: books aren't published on WfW anymore, but you'll find some moldering away in any library. Fortunately, there are several good Web sites, including "AXCEL216's Max Speed Windows" (<http://members.aol.com/axcel216/>), and the less daunting "Windows 3.1. FAQ" (http://www.logicalskey.com/Windows31_FAQ.htm).

Installing

The WfW installation was a matter of pressing a couple of buttons (just as well since the dialog boxes were in Thai). However, there was some low grade techy stuff required with `fdisk` and `format`. Installation was made easier by my machine having no network card/modem, printer, or sound card, and using a standard Seagate disk and an IDE/ATAPI compatible CD drive.

I found the WfW disks gathering dust in the sys. admin's office. Alongside were 3 disk boxes (35 disks) holding Microsoft Office 4.3 (hereafter known as Office). Once again, a piece of luck that will be much less likely in a few years time.

What about freeware/shareware? Borland has made Turbo C 2.0.1 for DOS available for free. This comes with an integrated editor, compiler, assembler, linker, debugger, help system, and it only occupies 2 MB! You can download it from the museum section of the Borland Community Web pages (<http://community.borland.com/>) after registering.

Some good freeware/shareware sites: <http://www.simtel.net>, <http://www.tucows.com>, <http://www.download.com>, and <http://www.bookcase.com>. Microsoft also offers free stuff, perhaps the most significant being Internet Explorer for Windows 3.x (<http://www.microsoft.com/downloads/>).

Outcomes

The bottom line must be "is this system of use to me?". WfW and Office will certainly be useful: I write a lot of reports and presentations (using Word and PowerPoint). This level of functionality is probably adequate for the majority of computer users.

The system is a bit slow, but acceptable. I won't be doing anything very CPU or memory intensive.

An interesting point is the amount of disk memory used: WfW, Office, and a few others only take up about 160 MB. A useable system doesn't need a vast hard disk.

Proposal Time

It's time for Redmond to do a Borland. Following the example of Turbo C, Microsoft should make DOS 6.22 and Windows 3.x freely available. They should also consider making Office 4.3 free, or at least something like Microsoft Works. When these tools are combined with a free browser (IE or Netscape), you can create a extremely useable system that can run with 8-12 MB RAM and a tiny hard disk.

It's time for Redmond to do a Red Hat. This free software should be placed inside a modern installation package on a cheap CD. The installer should handle large hard disks, the current range of sound and network cards, CD drives, and printers, and be aimed at naïve users. Perhaps a selection of useful shareware can be included (e.g. WinZip, Paint Shop Pro).

The big question: why should Microsoft do this?

The Benevolent Answer

Giving this software away is a service to the community, more precisely the large world community who cannot afford top of the range hardware and software.

It's only fair to remark that Microsoft has a long track record of giving. For example, last year it donated software to the tune of \$344 million in support of Intel's *Teach to the Future* programme. Interestingly, the software was principally Office 2000 Professional and Encarta 2000, which requires quite a hefty investment in hardware. Further details from <http://www.microsoft.com/giving/>.

Also of note is Bill Gates' change in emphasis for donations from the *Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation* (<http://www.gatesfoundation.org/>). A now-famous

quote: "The world's poorest two billion people desperately need healthcare, not laptops". This seems like good sense, but doesn't prevent donations which benefit those beyond above the poverty line. And WfW/Office doesn't need a laptop, just an old 486.

The Financial Answer

A free WfW/Office will generate revenue; very few people would buy this software at today's prices, especially since it's inferior in functionality. Revenue would come from the superiority of the CD's installation process; this is a viable business model as shown by Linux companies.

One objection may be that a free option will dissuade people from buying the current product (e.g. Microsoft XP), and so actually cause a drop in income. I doubt whether this will be much of a concern: WfW/Office is a low-end package, aimed principally at poor (third world) users. It might cut into the K12 market in the US, but some savvy marketing about functionality and obsolescence could avoid most of that. The K12 market will probably see a slight fall in sales, but WfW/Office is still Microsoft, which means the potential for profits through upgrades.

A free WfW/Office in poorer countries should reduce software piracy. At the moment many commercial products cost so much (in local terms) that piracy is tempting.

Releasing WfW/Office again will prevent a perfectly good product, which cost lots of money, time and effort to develop, from disappearing into oblivion. (In some ways WfW/Office may be a *better* product than the latest software since it has seen years of debugging through use.)

The Industrial Answer

A free WfW/Office will boost a variety of related businesses, including manufacturers of cheap/recycled PCs, publishers and authors of how-to books, and companies offering different kinds of installation disks.

Of course, some companies may not be pleased. Will Intel be happy that an old chip like the 486 remains useable instead of a bright new Pentium-whatever? But a 486 will appeal to different users, and leave open the opportunity for upgrades later.

The Linux Answer

Linux and Windows are two very different animals, as seen by looking at what they offer to their users. Simply speaking, Linux is about hacker/programmer tools, while Windows is about business/home software.

The killer difference that works against Microsoft is *cost*, both for hardware and software. In that respect WfW/Office can be seen as a strategy for undercutting the appeal of Linux to a general audience. It is a cheap, user-friendly, windowing environment that runs comfortably with 8MB RAM and a hard disk of less than 200MB.

Another difference is the notion of open source, which really means a few things: freedom to distribute copies of a program, freedom to study a program's source, freedom to improve the code, and freedom to distribute those changes. WfW/Office

offers the first of these freedoms, and it's my belief that the average user (who is not a hacker) is not particularly interested in the others.