Making Windows Transparent

Choosing the lesser evil.

Anyone who has spent time trying to make sense of the Microsoft issue realizes that this is one case in which the cliché is true: there are no good answers, and all one can do is try to choose the lesser of several evils. I like the apparent settlement reached last week better than I liked the solution that Judge Thomas Penfield Jackson tried to impose last year, but I would be the first to admit that this answer has its own problems.

As it happens, my own minor travails in the course of writing a textbook seem to illustrate in a small way why this problem is so hard to solve, and why the settlement, if the states go along with it, might nonetheless do some good.

Here’s the story: My co-author and I are submitting text in WordPerfect, which is significantly better for these purposes than Microsoft Word (better formatting control, if you really want to know). The publisher has reluctantly gone along with that. But we submit the figures in PowerPoint, because the publisher isn’t willing to have its staff learn to use new graphics software.

So there you have part of the problem. My publisher uses PowerPoint because everyone else uses PowerPoint; the sheer force of “network externalities” gives the Microsoft product an effective monopoly. And let’s face it: the fact that everyone uses PowerPoint, like the fact that so many people speak English, is in itself a social good.

This means that an attempt to break up such monopolies, however much we may dislike the monopolist, is just as likely to do more harm than good; it would be a case of cutting off our nose to spite Bill Gates’s face.

And the same can be said of draconian rules that prevent the “bundling” of software into the Windows system: life would be more difficult for millions of computer users if there weren’t a number of useful applications that came as standard features with the operating system.

But I have another problem, which seems avoidable. It turns out that when I have both WordPerfect and PowerPoint running, some things don’t work right. In particular, when I try to cut and paste in WordPerfect, it cuts just fine, but then refuses to paste, and the cut text vanishes into cyberspace. Experts are no doubt chuckling—after all I had to do was hit Ctrl-Alt-Shift-PgUp-PgDn-End, right?—but the whole point of modern software is that you aren’t supposed to have to be an expert to use it.

So here we have a case of software that is sufficiently superior for the purpose that I find it worth using despite the network externalities associated with the Microsoft product—but which doesn’t work quite right because of some mysterious incompatibilities with other Microsoft products. Microsoft has been accused of deliberately creating such incompatibilities; indeed, the company seemed to be back to its old tricks when we learned that Windows XP would not support RealNetworks’ media player. In any case, Microsoft has been found guilty of withholding technical information necessary for competitors to design products that work smoothly with Windows.

But the key element of the proposed settlement is supposed to be a procedure for the sharing of technical information that, if it works properly—a big if—should prevent this sort of thing from happening in the future. And that would clearly lead to wider consumer choice and better product quality, without in any important way infringing on Microsoft’s property rights.

Despite this, the settlement clearly leaves Microsoft with a lot of advantages. It will still have its monopoly position in operating systems; it will still be able to use that position to sell other products, as long as they are not too much worse than the alternatives. And that will continue to deter at least some potential innovation. As I said, it’s a choice among evils.

One last complaint: Judge Colleen Kollar-Kotelly urged a quick settlement in light of “the recent tragic events affecting our nation.” That’s not a good reason for haste in an antitrust proceeding, and a positively bad reason to push a settlement that one must admit is rather friendly to the monopolist. There are already enough people in the executive and legislative branches of our government who think that the way to show national unity in these trying times is to give giant corporations whatever they want; let’s not have the judicial branch joining the act.