Editor's Letter

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Why PC Users Hate Microsoft

I CAN'T REMEMBER the last time I saw an email or article comment in which a *PCWorld* reader professed love—or any measure of affection—for Microsoft. In fact, I've been covering PCs as a journalist since 1995, and I can't recall any reader ever sharing even the smallest bit of warmth for the company that has been most instrumental to the health and welfare of the PC platform.

Sure, many Windows users are emotionally attached to their computers. And some even have a good word to say about Windows itself. But I have yet to meet a PC user who cops to even the slightest bit of fondness for Microsoft. This contrasts dramatically with the deification of Apple by so many Mac users.

Have you ever met a Microsoft fanboy? They just do not exist.

So why does Apple receive such love and support from a hard-core fan base, while Microsoft is merely tolerated (at best) and more often scorned? Simple: Microsoft is the electric company, and no one likes the electric company, no matter how important a service it provides.

For the great majority of users, Windows isn't something anyone directly purchases. Our buy-in is all but involuntary, and when we turn on our PCs, it is ready and waiting for us, just like electricity coursing through a wall outlet. But Windows inevitably fails us—and it does so often, because the OS is an insanely complex assembly of code that

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struggles to remain compatible with whatever software or upgrade hardware that a user may install.

The end result of that failure? We curse the electric company. Windows, like electricity, is just supposed to work. It's

supposed to be always-on. Expecting continuous, trouble-free service is almost part of our social contract. And just as we rarely get to choose an electricity provider, the vast majority of PC buyers never have an option to choose an OS provider. So, when Windows fails them, they elevate Microsoft to boogeyman status: a craven, profit-hungry monopoly that runs an unreliable service.

In many ways, Microsoft is a victim of

its own success. It so thoroughly dominates the PC desktop that no one is motivated to cut it any slack. The situation would be different if users felt they had invited Windows (and by extension, Microsoft) into their homes.

Of course, Mac OS is also a fallible system that's prone to service interruptions. But because Mac users feel fully complicit in their computer purchases—everyone who buys a Mac, really wants a Mac— they forgive Apple's OS sins.

So how does Microsoft steal a page from Apple's playbook? Well, obviously it can't cede its dominance on the desktop in an appeal for the sympathy vote. Instead, Microsoft needs to pursue Apple's strategy of creating beautiful, branded hardware to inspire user passions, and bestow some cachet and relevance to the Microsoft name. Hardware delivers a level of brand appreciation that OS software just can't match. The new Surface tablets are a great first step (see pages 13 and 48), and if Microsoft has any sense, it will release branded smartphones and full-fledged computers too.

Computer users will always hate Microsoft for its imperfect Windows service, but the company can pick up some love on the back end by creating beautiful PCs. ●

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