From: Anthony Shipman
To: Microsoft ATR
Date: 1/16/02 10:24am
Subject: Microsoft Settlement

[I sent this before but did not have the correct subject line.]

A penalty is not a penalty unless it stings. The current proposed "penalty" does not sting Microsoft. The simple fact that they are saying positive things about it, calling it "fair", shows that.

A real penalty that would be of great benefit to the computer-using public would be to require that control over the Microsoft Office file formats be transfered to a public standards body such as the American National Standards Institute (ANSI). This would include, at least, the formats for Microsoft Word documents, Excel spreadsheets and Powerpoint presentations.

This would make it possible for a variety of software companies to develop office software that interoperated with Microsoft products. The goal is that an ANSI-conforming document produced by vendor X software would be guaranteed to be readable by vendor Y's software. Since it is a common practice to e-mail documents, spread-sheets etc. from person to person and business to business one would expect that the formats should be standardised and that the standardisation process be impartial.

As well as revitalising the software industry this remedy would also go a long way to solving the problem of archived documents. It is well recognised by historians and librarians that much of the documentary material in an electronic format produced by today's society is ephemeral and will not be available to historians of the future. This is not only because physical formats such as magnetic tape become obsolete but also because the file formats become obsolete. Even now, if you have a Word document from 10 years ago you will have great difficulty in reading it as current versions of Word do not recognise formats that old. You will have to hunt around for a software product that can convert it to a newer format. This problem will continue to get worse in the future.

In short, since office file formats have become an integral part of the information infrastructure that the public depends on in this day and age it is important that they be under impartial, public control rather than be subject to the whim of Microsoft's marketing department. I believe that this would be the biggest step that could be taken to level the playing field for business software.

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