

Compression casualties

When the smoke cleared after the Stac Electronics vs Microsoft trial, the disk compression software market had been permanently scarred. Two key decisions made by the US Federal jury set off a chain of events that left Microsoft without a compression engine and left the state of Stacker very much in doubt.

Fact: The jury found that in DoubleSpace, Microsoft had violated two Stac patents on data compression and had to pay Stac \$120 million in damages.

As a result, Microsoft released DOS 6.21, which does not contain DoubleSpace. Users of DOS 6.0 and 6.2 can continue to use DoubleSpace without any legal consequence.

Microsoft filed a motion asking the judge to overturn the jury's patent-infringement verdict. If the judge does not, Microsoft will file an appeal.

Fact: The jury found Stac guilty of reverse engineering a feature in DOS 6 that lets DoubleSpace (and Stacker) 'preload' the compression driver before CONFIG.SYS and AUTOEXEC.BAT run. Preloading is a significant advance that only an operating system developer could have introduced. The jury ordered Stac to pay Microsoft \$13.7 million in damages.

Because Stacker 3.x and Stacker 4.0 use the preloading technique, Microsoft wants to stop the sale of all Stac products that preload the driver and has asked for an injunction. If Microsoft is granted the injunction, Stac would have to release a version of Stacker that loads the compression driver using a DEVICE = statement in CONFIG.SYS.

As for replacing DoubleSpace, Microsoft goes back to the drawing board. If Microsoft wins the appeal and overturns the decision, it could re-release DoubleSpace. Microsoft said it would be interested in providing a new compression engine for DOS, but as yet has no details.

Chicago, successor to Windows 3.1, will probably be available by then, and its compression picture is still unclear. In the meantime, Stac Electronics presses on with new powerful alliances (see news roundup).

Christopher Barr

