SLAMMING GATES

By David Shenk

It’s kind of funny that Bill Gates has embraced the World Wide Web with so much enthusiasm and investment capital lately, because the Web sure doesn’t seem to like him. Try an online search for “Microsoft sucks,” and you’ll find websites that depict Gates being shot repeatedly, poked in the face with darts, and revealed to be the devil. Offline, Gates’s list of antagonists is mushrooming almost as rapidly as his net worth, with vocal detractors in every branch of the federal government, many state attorney-general offices, the national media, brand-name universities, and leading consumer-action groups. Cheering on this crusade is a sizable grassroots chorus of software engineers, Web professionals, corporate systems managers, and disgruntled customers.

“Whenever I write a column that is critical of Microsoft,” says Paul Gillen, editor-in-chief of Computerworld, “invariably, a half-dozen ‘atta boy’ letters will come out of the woodwork—’Way to go,’ ‘Stick it to ’em,’ ‘Evil empire,’ and ‘They suck.’ And when Gillen praises Microsoft? ‘I get letters saying: ‘You’re just sucking up,’ ‘You’re in Bill Gates’s back pocket,’ or ‘You suck.’ These acidic notes, Gillen says, do not seem to come from a short list of recycled names. ‘It’s a wide and diverse group,’ Microsoft-bashing has become so common in the Bay Area, says writer Po Bronson, ‘It’s like talking about the weather in Minnesota. I literally have conversations about Microsoft with everybody, every day, all the time. It is omnipresent.’

But why? Does Gates really deserve this hostility, or is Microsoft-bashing just a cheap new common currency in an otherwise hyper-fragmented society? Or, worse, are the growing number of Gates-haters simply pawns of high-octane competitors like Lotus, Oracle, Netscape, and Sun, for whom Microsoft-hating is an important part of doing business? A close examination of the culture of Microsoft-loathing reveals an eclectic variety of denunciations—some sound, others specious. Accusations vary wildly in levels of Intelligence, maturity, and credibility. Critics are by no means coordinated in their criticism, nor are they always necessarily conscious of the real reasons behind their antipathy. All of which would be merely amusing, if it weren’t so consequential. There’s a serious case to be made for containing the Microsoft behemoth, but it’s getting lost amid the name-calling, corporate rivalry, and not-so-petty jealousy.

The simplest—and perhaps the soundest—critique of Microsoft is the one that preoccupies the Justice Department and is the subject of this week’s hearings in federal court: namely, that the company engaged in anticompetitive tactics to establish what amounts to a monopoly over various sectors of the software industry. Microsoft was able to establish MS-DOS and subsequently Windows as the standard PC operating system by exacting a royalty for every PC sold regardless of whether its operating system was installed. Then the company leveraged its ubiquity and deep pockets to push products like Office, Encarta, and Internet Explorer, thus securing market share for products that surely would not have sold as well on merit alone.

Although Microsoft likes to portray all critics as ambitious corporate rivals or failed competitors, the apparent unfairness of Microsoft’s rise has inspired an awful lot of sincere criticism. And the gripes are not all ancient computing history. “To me, there is a difference between competition and what they do,” says Mitch Stone, a consumer with no ties to the industry, who created the “Boycott Microsoft” website. “In August 1996, Microsoft began aggressively distributing Explorer 3.0 for free. That seemed unfair to me, a pretty deliberate effort to destroy a much smaller competitor. As a consumer, I couldn’t see how that benefited me, or anyone else either. There is such a thing as being a good corporate citizen, and deliberate efforts to remove competitors from the marketplace—that’s an ethical violation.”

This is not just Stone’s conjecture about Microsoft’s intent, mind you: Steve Ballmer, Microsoft’s executive vice president of sales and support, confirmed such suspicions in January 1997 when he told Forbes, “We’re giving away a pretty good browser as part of the operating system. How long can they survive selling it?”

Microsoft has also perfected the use of “vaporware”—the strategy of quelling interest in a competitor’s product through the use of tantalizing press releases. “In their typical vaporware act,” says Audrie Krause, editor of the watchdog newsletter The Microsoft Monitor, “they say, ‘We have this product that will soon be ready.’ This

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convinces many prospective purchasers to put on the brakes, she says. "It makes people say, 'Well, I guess we'll wait and see.' They've done this repeatedly over the years, and sometimes they don't even ever bring out the product. But they kill the market for another product by announcing way ahead of time that they're coming out with something competitive." Noted examples include Internet Explorer 3.0 for Unix, announced to ward off major purchases of Netscape but never actually released, and Microsoft Exchange, which the company promised would match Lotus Notes, feature for feature, years before it reached that level of functionality.

In a properly functioning competitive environment, rivals who create better products could withstand such pressure. But when Gates is faced with a competitor he can't easily beat, critics say, he either crushes or purchases it—thus eliminating the competition. "He's a praying-mantis business model: they have sex with you, and then they eat you," says Gary Reback, the well-known Silicon Valley attorney representing a number of Microsoft's competitors, citing a familiar refrain. Such brute force combined with such wealth has transformed arguably the most innovative industry in history into a tightly controlled empire.

"The basic model in the industry today is to be bought by Microsoft or to go out of business," observes Andrew Shapiro, a fellow at Harvard Law School's Center for Internet & Society. "Isn't that amazing? There's very little hope of independent success." Software entrepreneurs are in the strange and uncomfortable position, in other words, of having to answer to Microsoft in much the same way that a local factory apparatus in the Soviet Union had to answer to the regional party boss.

One could make similar analogies about the way Microsoft has attempted to broaden its reach: "It goes beyond high-tech companies," says Bob Ingle, vice president of New Media of Knight-Ridder. "I think a fair chunk of corporate America is terrified of Microsoft, and they want an alternative." During the last dozen years, Gates's Microsoft has purchased a handful of promising software outfits, hired thousands of star programmers and researchers, co-founded a new cable network (MSNBC), snapped up the digital rights to the Bettman archive of still images, and invested heavily in cable TV (Comcast), satellites (Teledesic), network computing (Web-TV), and other Internet-related resources. "They are obviously going after the means to control all ways of accessing the Internet," says Microsoft Monitor's Krause.

As important as serious Microsoft monitoring is, though, Gates-bashing is too widespread—and too vis-
cereal—to be a fuss over something as nuanced and arcane as antitrust law. Another agenda must be at work, and one need look no further than Microsoft's competitors to find it.

"If you want your company to get some attention," complains Microsoft spokesman Greg Shaw, "you say, 'Hmmm, how might I get my company covered? I think I'll come down on Microsoft.' He's dead right, of course, and no one has done more to whip up the hostility than Netscape, Microsoft's arch rival in the Web browser business. Marc Andreessen, Netscape's co-founder, has publicly compared Microsoft to the Mafia, boasting that his company refused what was supposed to be Microsoft's unrefus-
able offer to buy them out. "No horse heads in the bed yet," Andreessen said smugly. He also characterized the current Netscape-Microsoft browser contest as Bambi vs. Godzilla, portraying his company as not only the underdog, but also the ethically pure protagonist.

Condemning Gates not only helps companies gain the visibility and public admiration that firms crave; it also serves as ideal internal propaganda. Software is a quixotic and ruthless business. Vast fortunes are made and lost in very short order, and hardworking employees of ambitious companies easily slip into a bunker mentality. For those tens of thousands of people working off of little more than dark-roasted coffee fumes and stock options, Gates is not just a formidable competitor. He is also the ideal motivational device—a marionette of hate that CEOs like Oracle's Larry Ellison, or Sun's Scott McNealy and Lotus's Jeffrey Papows, love to yank. (McNealy and Papows, according to the latter, are "co-captains of the I-hate-Bill-Gates fan club. We just couldn't decide which of us hates him more.") Many thousands of industry laborers hate Microsoft primarily because they are trained to; for example, Ellison recently rallied his troops by displaying a giant computer-generated image of Gates giving Oracle employees the finger.

In fairness, Gates's rivals like Ellison would never make headway if their claims didn't resonate with so many software engineers and computer users. MS "crapware," as some call it, is widely disparaged as inelegant and buggy. (Joke précis: Bill Gates dies and gets to choose between heaven and hell. On his tour of hell, it looks like a beach party, in contrast to heaven's park-bench serenity. After he chooses hell, though, it turns out to be a torturous, skin-flaying pit of despair. Gates asks St. Peter, "What happened to the hell you showed me before?" St. Peter looks down—from his Macintosh—and says: "Oh, that
was just the demo.”) The complaints are just too numerous and plain-spoken to be mere rival propaganda. Says one information-systems manager, “I hate Microsoft because I am frequently put in a position of solving problems that would not have come up if my customer had bought software from another vendor.” Another software professional (both insist on anonymity for reasons of job security) echoes this complaint, denouncing “their dominance of the software industry with crap.”

Sentiments such as these have spawned hundreds of Web pages that protest Microsoft’s allegedly inferior products. On the Net, there are endless how-many-Microsofties does it take-to-screw-in-a-lightbulb jokes, Gates-bought-what? spoofs, and I-hate-Bill-because-quirps. There is also a deluge of adolescent puns (Microdot, Microshaft, Microsuck, etc.), a Usenet conference called alt.destroy.microsoft, and enough gratuitous violence to fill a Tarantino script. (“Kill Bill Gates” appears twice as often as “Kill Bill Clinton.”) An alien logging on from its own planet might wonder if Gates had killed more people than Adolf Hitler, or slightly fewer.

“It started when I saw my dad using Windows and it crashed every five minutes,” says Chris Mutter, the 24-year-old Austrian creator of what he claims was the very first anti-Microsoft “Hate Page” — www.enemy.org — which went online in 1994. “I was just angry because here was a company who is the leader in the PC software market and ships its products with that many bugs and limitations.” Enemy.org, a member of something called the International Anti-MS Network, features many of the classics in the Bill-baiting genre—the “Internet Explorer” and “WinBlows” parody icons, the depiction of Gates with horns and glowing red eyes, the gun to Gates’s exploding head, and so on, much of it clearly the work of adolescent lampooners reacting instinctively to a corporate behemoth. “You have been part of a force that has done everything humanly possible to ensure that using a computer is a living hell for any person without a legal education,” writes enemy.org contributor Rune Jacobsen to MS employees who might be visiting the site. “You therefore have to accept that you are a subject of hate from computer users all over the world, and this is our only way to get back at you.”

But if Microsoft software is so inferior and the company treats customers that badly, how does the company continue to prevail in the free market? Ruthlessness and deep pockets are not enough to keep any suite of products so astounding popular on the consumer and corporate level. Contrary to the stereotype of a company that possesses a monopoly, Microsoft uses its wealth to improve its products, even if they still remain inferior to some rivals. “This time,” Apple co-founder Steve Jobs told Fortune in 1996, “Microsoft has the technology to compete on quality.” Far from succumbing to the pride of success and indolence that can come with immense wealth (thousands of current and former Microsoft employees are stock-options millionaires), the company is plowing an extraordinary amount of money into increasing the quality of its software. In many cases, Microsoft is bankrolling several competing internal software teams.

Gates often answers critics by arguing that, when it comes to information technology, it’s impossible to have a true monopoly. “In a field like ours,” Gates told NBC a few years ago, “there isn’t much in the way of power.” That’s a little bit like Paul McCartney saying there isn’t very much money to be made in the music business. Gates’s pretense of meekness is outrageous and patently dishonest, but his claim does speak to the industry’s peculiar power dynamics. In a business built on speedy innovation, even a powerhouse like Microsoft is not assured future dominance, or even future success. Though the Windows operating system currently dominates the personal-computer market, it is entirely conceivable that Sun’s Java technology, for example, in combination with a future generation Web browser, could soon render exclusive operating systems such as Mac OS and Windows obsolete. Would you feel self-assured as the leader in the telegraph business if you had an inkling that the telephone was about to be invented—by someone else?

From this angle, Microsoft starts to look like the all-American quarterback who is in his prime and knows it. And the bashers? They begin to look like malcontents who kvetch about the weather so much that they don’t notice the sun coming out. In the acrid digital space of the most vociferous Microsoft haters, truth and innuendo merge to form a preposterous case against the company and its leader. “Microsoft is in a bind,” says Boston Globe technology columnist Simson Garfinkel. “If they put out bad software, people criticize them for putting out bad software, and if they put out good software, people criticize them for dominating the industry.”

If the software isn’t that bad, and is getting much better, why do we love to hate Microsoft so? Why have I, for example, casually bashed Microsoft in conversation and in prose (written using Microsoft Word), or referred to the software-media giant as the “evil empire” plenty of times (before and after carrying Microsoft checks for an online commentary I wrote for the Microsoft Network)? Why does the acrimony feel as prevalent in New York as Po Bronson says it is in California?

One spur, clearly, is Gates’s wealth. When he was worth just three or four billion dollars, it was heady—the unlikely triumph of a computer geek. Forty billion, though, engenders in many of us a vague sense of unease, compounded by the fact that it comes from the sales of hundreds of millions of products that, stacked together, wouldn’t stretch to the end of your driveway, or even to the end of your hand. Microsoft, by some accounts, the second most capitalized company on the planet, is the only corporate colossus in history whose entire product line could be eliminated with a giant magnet.

The more powerful reason, though, is techno-angst. The current phase of the information revolution has been a psychic whirlwind, for good and for ill. Software—especially Microsoft software—has become such an integral part of our culture that it is almost impossi-
able to imagine life without it. (If forced to give up either your personal computer or one finger for the rest of your life, which would you choose? One in three would give up the digit, according to Philip Nicholson, one expert on "technostress.") The remarkable velocity of information and increased demand on consumer attention can also produce significant stress and distraction. Our emerging "attention economy," whereby profits flow from grabbing the consumer's attention, however fleetingly, inevitably yields a noisier, more vulgar society.

In venting our techno-angst, we instinctively take aim at its most visible emblem. Some of us do so harmlessly under our breath, others turn it into a showcase of juvenescence. With the spectacular success of Microsoft, with the understandable fixation on Gates's personal fortune, and with his conspicuous efforts to establish himself as the leading visionary of the personal-computing revolution, Gates has been transformed into a potent cultural icon. He isn't just very rich and very famous. Like all dominant icons (Monroe, Reagan, Sinatra, etc.), he embodies an arresting social transformation. We look at him and see our technological future, warts and all. As the startup personal-computing industry has blossomed into a computing-communications juggernaut, becoming—as of late 1997—the largest industry in the nation, we project onto Gates our hopes, fears, dark suspicions—but mostly our (understandable) ignorance. We suddenly find ourselves fastened to an industry that few truly comprehend, but that rockets ahead regardless.

But if critics can't get over their current state of anger, they may ultimately be doing Microsoft a great favor. For it is precisely the emotionalism of its competitors, says the Globe's Simon Garfinkel, that has helped Microsoft stay on top. "Lotus did great until they started focusing on Microsoft instead of focusing on their customers," says Garfinkel. "Netscape has made exactly the same mistake. Now Scott McNealy is making this competition with Microsoft very personal, sniping at every possible opportunity, rather than focusing on their customers. At the big Sun Java One conference last year, McNealy's keynote was dedicated to why Active X, Microsoft's program, is a problem. That's really bad. You shouldn't make the keynote of your address bashing another company. And now Oracle's Larry Ellison is focusing on Microsoft instead of his own customers. Whenever a company does that, they lose."

The case against Gates, if it is going to succeed, will do so on the strength of hopes and not fears; ingenuity, not insecurity; ambition, not envy. A more thoughtful attack on Microsoft would focus, as MIT researcher and software designer Philip Greenspun does, on the importance of innovation and on Microsoft's apparent stifling of it over the last several years. Greenspun is the creator of the infamous Bill Gates Personal Wealth Clock, possibly the densest online jab at Gates. Here, Gates's steroidal wealth—$41.9423 billion at the moment this sentence was written—can be tracked minute by minute. The clock was designed, explains Greenspun, as a swipe at the man who has the gall "to make so much money writing software that ignores the users." But this is also Gates's secret weapon, Greenspun argues. Truly great software systems, he explains, perversely tend to be extremely vulnerable to competition, because they can be broken down into well-documented components. Thus, any individual component can be replaced by one that is engineered to the same spec. "If you're a bad engineer and you can't quite finish the specs and you think that the specs aren't really needed, then you end up with a nasty pile of code with lots of bugs, a system where the guts depend on everything else," where the software works only with programs created by the same sloppy engineers.

Thus, asserts Greenspun, Microsoft gets rich not despite but because it produces inferior software. In a fairer world, he says, "companies like Hewlett-Packard would be the winners because they make high-quality products. It's a shame that the Gates we have is uninterested in technology. Consumers don't know what they're missing." According to this analysis, the real power of the information revolution has been to spur innovation about what technology can do for people. That inspiration has spread through the business, which is why everyone from 16-year-old webmaster James Baughn (author of yet another anti-MS site) to MIT's Greenspun understands that, as spectacular as computing is right now, it would be even more sensational if Microsoft were weaker.

This ethereal argument, repeated by Mitch Stone, Gary Reback, and most other serious critics, is the abstract sibling of the Justice Department critique, the vaguest and yet by far the most compelling reason for anyone to hate and/or fear Microsoft: consider, in the stunted software culture described by Andrew Shapiro, what we've already missed, and what we'll miss out on tomorrow and the next day. If there is little hope of independent success from even marvelous innovation, innovation itself is inevitably stifled. This is It's a Wonderful Life in reverse; without Gates, our small towns and big cities might be so much better off.

Short of such a collective critique, it may well be Gates's game to lose. As long as Microsoft keeps focused on its own business, maintains that hungry feeling, and stays (more or less) within the bounds of the law, it is bound to remain profitable even as it inspires a continuing spiteful undercurrent. Of course, technology has a way of turning the tables rather suddenly. Regardless of his company's foresight, toughness, breadth of investment, and research, Gates knows as well as anyone that his days as technology king could come to a fairly swift end. At that point, assuming that the end of his dominance would spur a plummet in the Microsoft stock price, he would become an underdog and, thus, a sympathetic figure. Letters would start pouring into editorial offices: "Stop picking on Microsoft!" Politicians would clamor to kiss his children. The Web would start crawling with I-Can't-Bill sites. People would start arguing about who loved Bill most.
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