

# M\$ faces Longhorn apathy

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When Bill Gates cannot show unmitigated glee over a Microsoft Corp. product, the world's largest software company has a problem.

Last week, after watching a demonstration of the most important version of the Windows operating system in a decade, even a normally enthusiastic Gates could not hide his frustration with a project that is years behind schedule.

"It would be super," he said, "to get that out in the hands of our customers."

Gates, Microsoft's chairman, is the most important of thousands of technologists growing restless with the recent pace of innovation at the company he co-founded in 1975.

Few endeavors highlight that feeling better than the company's latest iteration of its flagship Windows operating system, code-named Longhorn.

Microsoft built its sizable fortune and overwhelming market share by selling new versions of its software that runs computers - first DOS, then Windows - every couple of years. Computer users flocked to each new upgrade as they sought relief from the hang-ups, glitches and bugs that historically plagued the complicated software.

This time around, Redmond, Wash.-based Microsoft finds itself the victim of its own success. Windows XP, released in 2001, resolved many of the biggest gripes about the operating system. Subsequent updates fixed even more, to the point that there is no groundswell for a new version of Windows.

When the company released a preview edition of Longhorn at a Seattle conference recently, many of the Microsoft loyalists in attendance found themselves shrugging their shoulders.

"It's got things in it that solve problems," said Adrian Ford, chief technology officer of Great Britain's Global Graphics Software Ltd., who was invited to show off Longhorn's printing system.

"I don't think it's going to be a blockbuster."

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