

Barry Fox worries that **ill-defined standards** let industry giants pursue their interests, not yours.

Trouble standards



We rejoice when, to our surprise, something in the Windows world actually works as promised, but complain bitterly when an audio or video system falls over. We are used to the guaranteed plug and playability that comes from

tight standards on disc, tape, radio and TV.

The DVD Forum was set up to control the new Movie and ROM formats. But the 1,000-page DVD standard was hurriedly agreed by companies (Toshiba, Time Warner, Hitachi and Panasonic) that have never created or policed standards. We are now seeing the unhappy results.

The Matrix is the first mass-market DVD to contain branch codes that provide different levels of interaction on a PC and home DVD player. However, the codes confuse some players and some PCs, so the disc may not play. The interactive software comes from PC Friendly and its website catalogues the extent of the problem which hit consumers in the US (<http://pcfriendly.com>).

Players from Sony, Samsung, GE/Thomson, Toshiba and Pioneer all suffered. The manufacturers have had to pay for modifications, usually a new firmware EPROM.

As soon as the US problems emerged I asked Warner in the UK and Warner's head office in Burbank what steps had been taken to ensure a smoother launch in Europe. Burbank promised a comment, but despite my reminders and Burbank's assurances, I heard nothing of substance. Warner UK now says 70,000 copies sold here in the first week and any problems are because 'the disc is too sophisticated for lower-end, cheap hardware that does not have the capacity to play such enhanced material. There are not actually any problems with the disc itself'.

But Thomson, which owns GE and RCA in America, has employed independent technical consultants that say the US *Matrix* was outside the DVD specification in one key area, the 'menu.VOB' file structure. Placement of the 'Video Zone TS directory' and 'UDF file lengths' were also abnormal.

Similar compatibility problems are now emerging in Europe. My Dell PIII PC refuses to run the disc under the PC Friendly software. After warnings from *Something About Mary* (which uses similar interactive branching) Samsung is spending around £500,000 changing chips in the 50,000-60,000 players it has sold in Europe over

the past year or so. Without the mod, the players refuse to play the disc. Woolworths and Comet are worried about their Proline players. Comet does not stock the disc, telling customers it has been withdrawn as faulty.

Says Samsung: 'DVD hardware was out there before these discs. Why didn't Warner check?'

Expect similar problems with a modification to the CD system due soon. The object is to stop people making digital copies of music CDs.

This spoilsport system was developed by British company C-Dilla, now owned by Macrovision, the US giant that provides the analog anti-copy system used for VHS tapes, DVD movie discs and satellite pay-per-view. C-Dilla has for many years encrypted CD-ROMs to prevent unauthorised use or copying and recently found it could modify the bit stream on a music CD so that it plays on a CD player, but not on a PC CD-ROM drive.

False error correction codes stop the disc playing on a ROM drive, or dual-deck music CD copier which, by design, refuses to copy a ROM. Added flags also fool a CD player into muting the SP/DIF digital output. So the music content cannot be digitally copied. It sounds too good, or more accurately too bad, to be true. But I tried a test pressing and it worked; the music played on a consumer music CD player but not on a PC drive.

The 1,000-page DVD STANDARD WAS HURRIEDLY AGREED by companies that have never created or policed standards

Macrovision has recently teamed up with TTR Technologies to test the system on a wide range of CD players, PC ROM drives and DVD players. The current plan is to offer the system (provisionally called AudioLock) to the record companies for commercial launch in summer this year. The record companies hate recordable CDs so much that there are bound to be plenty of takers.

But the industry-backed Secure Digital Music Initiative (SDMI), acknowledges that people want to 'rip' CDs from ROM drive to hard disc. So SDMI concentrates on controlling further copying. Now AudioLock will stop ripping.

That's the effect of messing with a standard.

barryf@pcw.co.uk