The shortcomings of Windows 98 may cause the cash cow of upgrades to dry up, says Barry Fox.

Watershed 98

If you could see me now, you'd see a happy man. A man who finally got rid of Windows 98 and went back to Windows 95. It wasn't easy, because my original upgrade had chewed up all my Windows 95 settings and spat them out, leaving me with the need to re-install everything from scratch. But it's been worth it. Things that stopped working when Windows 98 got hold of them now work again. Well, most of them. My RealMagic MPEG-1 decoder seems to have died with the shock of it all, and as Sigma no longer has any visible interest in the UK market, it's probably a write off. But that's a small price to pay for a 98-free life.

Since writing about the problems of upgrading a working PC from Windows 95 to 98 I have received a steady stream of calls and emails, all with a common theme of miserable frustration, cold panic and wasted working time. Writes Peter Allison: "Glad to read I'm not the only one with Win98 problems, as Microsoft might have me believe. System crashed on setup…after five hours on the phone Microsoft told me it was due to FAT on hard disk being partially converted to FAT32 … Luckily I've two hard disks and it only affected one."

"You are not alone!" writes the IT Manager for the London Symphony Orchestra. "Your experience mirrors mine exactly — I spent a week trying to upgrade from 95. Having eventually installed it, my computer has never been the same. Thankfully I just tested 98 on my home PC. It will be a long time before I let it go anywhere near the LSO."

"I have had exactly the same problems, only until now, I didn't know why recovery didn't take place," says Norman Wollons. "I lost the machine for a week, while I got drivers for my CD-ROM, and with DOS book in hand, wrote config.sys entries to make the CD work under DOS. It took a further couple of weeks to get the system something like back to normal."

Meanwhile, PC World, part of The Dixons Group, has agreed to subsidise customers who bought Windows 98 with a DVD-ROM drive, in the misguided belief that the PC would then play DVD movie discs. Those who can prove they were misled will get around 50% off the price of a graphics card that works with MPEG-2 decoder software. But this offer came only after I had pulled rank as a journalist and complained to the Advertising Standards Authority. And even then I had to ask PC World to tell me about the offer. The ASA is satisfied that PC World is no longer misleading the public. But weeks later, Microsoft's web site was still promising that "with Windows 98 you can watch a full-length movie". I have asked the ASA to look at this, too.

So what does Microsoft have to say about all this? In June, when I first started to uncover problems with Windows 98, Anne Mitchard, Marketing Manager for the Personal Systems group and Microsoft's frequent spokesperson on Windows 98, ignored my questions until prodded from other quarters. She finally called me on the 8th of July and promised to get back with a considered comment on my core question: how could Microsoft release Windows 98 with so many inherent problems already well known to Microsoft's own technicians — for example, the risk of the upgrade fatally crashing during conversion of the Windows 95 registry? By my deadline for this column, near the end of August, despite two faxed reminders, I had still heard nothing from Anne Mitchard. Although it will be no short-term consolation to those

> **The Windows 98 débacle could prove a watershed. By never saying sorry, Microsoft gives PC users, both personal and corporate, THE STRENGTH TO SAY NO to each next upgrade**

who are struggling to make things work or staring at a Blue Screen of Death, the long-term future looks good.

Until now PC users have been carried along by the insidious brainwash that constant upgrading is essential. New software has needed more disc space, memory and processor speed. Often the benefits have been marginal, but the vicious circle of hardware-software interdependence has generated a vital revenue stream for Intel and Microsoft. The Windows 98 débacle could, however, prove a watershed. By ducking comment and never saying sorry, Microsoft finally gives PC users, both personal and corporate, the strength to say no to each next upgrade. In the crazy computer industry, big companies' fortunes can change with extraordinary speed. Windows 98 could make Microsoft next.

100131.201@compuserve.com