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When Will It End? Dept.: In the middle of 2005, when many ill-fated Windows Vista features were still on the table, a number of Web sites ran stories about how Microsoft was rethinking the Windows Registry. Does that mean it's still rethinking the Registry? Does it mean we'll have to wait another five years to get an OS without this clunky thing? Well, maybe not. Various third-party products are bypassing the Registry all on their own.

The most interesting among them is MojoPac, available at www.mojopac.com for \$49.95. With MojoPac, you can install software applications on a USB device that virtualizes the Registry. The company seems most proud of the fact that you can avoid traveling with your laptop by loading Microsoft Office and all your Office docs onto an Apple iPod. Plug your iPod into any computer anywhere, and bingo, you're running Microsoft Word or typing on an Excel spreadsheet. Not everything works with the MojoPac, but an astonishing number of programs do. That includes the Adobe Creative Suite as well as Microsoft Office.

As you look over these tools, you can't help but see an unintended consequence. The idea of application portability will certainly undermine software sales. Using the Registry, Windows can make sure an application is installed only once. If you're dealing with high-cost apps prone to piracy, such as Adobe CS, MS Office, and Autodesk, it's easy to control unauthorized installs on machines spread throughout an office. With a virtualized registry, however, you can put these apps on a key drive and pass them around the office as needed. "Hey, does anyone have a copy of Illustrator that I can use?"

In fact, the Microsoft notion of something called application manifests that sit alongside applications, without using a registry of any kind, would hurt software sales in much the same way. Thus, we're not seeing it in Vista. With no registry whatsoever, you could even install software CD-ROMs and pass them around as needed. This would be perfect for situations where large offices use some very expensive software, but use it only occasionally.

When analyzed in hindsight, the Windows Registry looks like an excellent way of maintaining control. This may be the reason that Vista still has it, and it may be the reason that Microsoft seems to have dropped rumored development of a USB standard that would essentially clone the U3 platform.

Where there's a will, there's a way. The virtualized systems cited above will continue to improve, and unless software vendors start blocking installs on USB devices, these tools will soon turn all apps into portable apps. The irony is that early USB keys were used as copy-protection dongles. Now these things are a way of moving apps from machine to machine. Ha.

Personally, I think this is how apps should work. A single license should be installed only once or twice on any given device, and it should run on only one machine at a time. But you should also be able to move it from machine to machine as necessary. The software people have relied on the idiotic single-CPU license for years, and they're already struggling with dual-core licenses. Let's get back to simplicity.

Some licenses are actually violated in the strictest sense of the term when software is run on dual-core or dual-processor machines. Once the big boys realize what's going on here, this new breed of portability is going to drive them crazy.

