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Self-serving “synergy”

The HDMI (high-definition-multimedia-interface) organization finalized its Version 1.4 specification in early June. Silicon Image, an HDMI-founder company, subsequently released its first two Version 1.4-supportive chips, the SiI9387 port processor and the SiI9334 transmitter. This timing wasn't the way things were supposed to play out. The original plan was for HDMI to publicly unveil the finalized specification, and Silicon Image to coincidentally unveil the chips, in late April.

Then, the two pushed out the embargo date for both spec and silicon to mid-May and eventually released the spec stand-alone as a two-step preview-then-final introduction, with the chips following it. Despite the multiple delays, nobody else that I know of had as of mid-July released HDMI Version 1.4-supportive chips.

Besides Silicon Image, the other HDMI-founding companies are Hitachi, Matsushita/Panasonic, Philips Consumer Electronics International, Sony, Thomson (RCA), and Toshiba. Although some of these companies have semiconductor divisions, only Silicon Image is fundamentally a semiconductor supplier. And, as a founder, it is in the unique position—unlike other HDMI-silicon vendors—of having not only access to proprietary draft versions of upcoming spec revisions, but also the ability to heavily influence the development direction of those spec revisions.

Silicon Image can start its chip-design work early, and the company garners revenue from other silicon suppliers, its supposed competitors, in the form of licensing royalties. And it has yet another notable competition-squelching arrow in its quiver. Silicon Image is an umbrella organization



Silicon Image is trying to have it both ways.

comprising three business groups, one of which is Simplay Labs, which handles industrywide compatibility testing. Each Simplay Labs validation attempt costs other companies many thousands of dollars. The validation process also takes as long as Simplay Labs deems it should take. This arrangement gives Silicon Image a convenient lock on the market through the initial and profitable portion of each HDMI specification version's lifetime.

Not surprisingly, I've heard plenty of complaints over the years from companies that try to compete with Silicon Image on the supposedly level global-standard playing field. I've also been on the receiving end of a lot of

grumbling from Silicon Image's customers—some of them even on the HDMI founders list! System suppliers would prefer to be able to source products from multiple vendors as a means of obtaining both optimum prices and assured supply. However, again and again, they find that Silicon Image is their only product option in the early stages of an HDMI-specification version. And, by the time an HDMI generation is sufficiently mature that other vendors are available, it's time for Silicon Image's reluctant customers to begin designing systems complying with the next HDMI version.

The market situation is so distorted that a collective of graphics-chip companies and display manufacturers a few years ago developed a competitive interface, DisplayPort. I've suggested many times that DisplayPort's success will be muted at best, in no small part because it took the technology's developers so long to finalize the specification. Meanwhile, HDMI was cultivating an insurmountable lead, especially in consumers' living rooms. Looking at the market today, I see no evidence that my past prognostication was off-base. However, that HDMI's detractors were motivated to spend a substantial amount of money and allocate precious resources for DisplayPort development indicates the industry's aggravation with Silicon Image's de facto HDMI dictatorship.

Silicon Image is trying to have it both ways—painting a picture of HDMI as a cozy, cooperative industry standard, when in reality HDMI is predominantly a single-silicon-supplier proprietary approach. **EDN**

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⊕ For more information, go to www.edn.com/blog/40000040/post/1850046185.html.

⊕ Read a response from Silicon Image at www.edn.com/090806ed.