

Shortsighted nostalgia for XP

—by Rob Pegoraro

By the strictest definition, Windows XP has been dead since Jan. 30, 2007—the day its replacement, Windows Vista, arrived in stores and XP promptly vanished from most new computers. And yet by other measures, XP appears quite alive.

Vista's issues—its steep hardware requirements, its strict anti-piracy measures, its sometimes-intrusive security measures, its incompatibility with some older products -- have given XP not only a second life in the market but also a newly vocal and enthusiastic fan base. Boxed copies still sell briskly. From 2007 through the first quarter of 2008, 87 million copies of XP had been sold worldwide, compared with 132 million copies of Vista.

Computer manufacturers have responded by bundling XP on some of their units and selling "downgrades" to XP on others. Business and government users, critical members of Microsoft's customer base, have resisted Vista strongly enough to force Microsoft to push its deadline for retailers and computer vendors to drop XP from January 30 to June 30, 2008.

But XP holdouts haven't only voted with their credit cards, they've also put their names on a "Save Windows XP" petition, hosted by the tech magazine InfoWorld that urges Microsoft to offer XP "indefinitely" (<http://savexp.com>). Some XP fans have gone further, asking Microsoft to abandon Vista outright.

It can be heartwarming to see this display of adoration. But when you consider how much affection XP drew as Microsoft's flagship product, this newfound worship looks ridiculous. Vista has problems, but reverting to XP won't solve most of them.

There's a lot to be said for keeping XP on an existing machine instead of upgrading to Vista; things are much cheaper and simpler that way. People running specialized software packages often have other reasons to stick with XP. But it's another thing to say that on a new home computer, Vista is so unacceptable for mainstream use that you'd be better off with its predecessor.

XP had enough problems at its October 2001 debut, starting with weak security and inadequate tools for organizing your information, and the Internet has only gotten busier and more brutish since then. Even with all of Microsoft's patches—including XP's third major Service Pack update, issued early August—and the prospect of continued security fixes through April 2014, keeping XP running safely and reliably requires a host of add-on security and Internet programs to paper over its faults.

XP is not something that needs to be "saved," as if it were some architectural triumph in need of historic preservation. It's not an Old Post Office or a Union Station; it's more like that crummy midfield terminal at Dulles International Airport, a once-serviceable structure that outlived its utility years ago. And that, in turn, helps explain why Apple is selling so many Macs.

Vista needs less tinkering and reinforcement out of the box than XP. For all the people who never touch default settings, that matters more than how an expert might fine-tune XP.

In some aspects, the worst part of the transition to Vista is over. This software has seen numerous bug fixes, including a Service Pack in March that curbed its widely hated anti-piracy defenses. Most third-party developers who hadn't updated their software for Vista have fixed their products by now. (If they haven't, they probably never will. Presumably, those dead-enders are uninterested in any new sales to the customers they've ditched in this way.)

One unpleasant aspect of Vista, however, lingers on: its ravenous appetite for memory and processor cycles. Most new desktops and laptops can sate it, but not ultracheap, ultralight laptops such as Aus's \$300-and-up Eee PC. That has led Microsoft to stretch its own rules about XP's expiration date to allow manufacturers to load XP on these low-end machines through June 30, 2010—with the bizarre condition that such computers not include screens bigger than 10.2 inches or hard drives larger than 80 gigabytes. (When's the last time a software developer decreed *maximum* hardware requirements?)

The builders of these little laptops don't have to choose between obsolete or sluggish Microsoft software. Faced with those unappealing options, many of them are instead loading the more efficient, free and open-source Linux operating system, which happens to perform many everyday tasks just as well as Windows does.

If you're unhappy about Vista, don't get sucked in by the misguided nostalgia for XP. Root for the success of non-Windows computers. Or buy one yourself. Nothing attracts a company's attention like taking your business elsewhere.

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