

No, I Don't Want to Update

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Author Leo Wrobel takes his annual satirical look at technology, this year tackling the trials and pains of having to update your software.

Every new year, I like to write something a little bit off the wall regarding technology. Humor me, as I will make a few valid points with this Andy Rooney-style diatribe by the end of this article. First I will rant a bit

Isn't it funny that in my early youth, anything you used for communications and entertainment had to WARM UP? I know I risk dating myself here, but at age 55, I remember when a lot of things had vacuum tube technology. Many people don't recall those days. In fact, a boy in our neighborhood once asked what was wrong with the radio in one of my antique cars. I explained that it had to warm up. No sense of wonderment; he just didn't understand the concept. I then explained that the radio had TUBES in it. To which he said

OOh, tubes, that explains it. The radio has tubes

He then went on

OWhat's a tube

When I was about 10 years old, I got a Jade six transistor radio. You may remember them; they came with a 90-day warranty and broke on the 9th day. The best part about that radio was that it turned on instantly. You did not have to wait for it to warm up. If you wanted to listen to the 6pm news, you could turn it on at 2 seconds to 6, rather than have to warm up just in time to miss the headlines but catch the commercials. Now *that* was technology.

Taking Technology a Step Backward

Anyhow, I digress, but that's my prerogative in a back-handed semi-satirical art. And now that I have ranted for a while, it brings me to another point: Isn't it funny that technology-wise, we seem to have taken a step backward? Turn on your computer from a cold start, for example. It has to warm up

Now I don't know about you, but I turn on a computer because I want to know or do something *right now*. There is nothing more frustrating to a knowledge-based worker than to have a brilliant thought in his or her head and really need the computer now, only to have to wait. Myself, I don't want to sit through 90 seconds of hour glasses and smiley faces and have my computer "Welcome me for the 9 millionth time"

Granted, we have lived with this problem for a generation, but now it's worse. Items that *today* everything that one uses for entertainment or communication slows us all down even more. Everything today asks you if you want to *update*.

In the previous example, I turned the computer on for a reason. That reason was *not* because I wanted to update.

It's not just computers that irk me, either. In the last week alone, the following happened:

- I received a text message from my daughter on my phone. First off, I was irritated because I receive about five text messages a year and send, well, zero. Sorry, but most of us baby-boomers don't give a rat's patootie about typing with their thumbs and squinting with our 50-something eyes to see a 2-inch screen. Why would we when we can just hit the speed-dial button and call the person? And bummer, she texted me *a picture*. Now what do I do? Because I have an iPhone 3G (that for some ungodly reason has trouble with SMS Picture messages), I have an after-market application that allows the iPhone to send and receive pictures in text messages. I never use it. Still, for some reason I feel the need to have it. When I opened the application, it

asked me if I wanted to update. *No, I don't want to update. I was trying to look at a picture.* Why would I want to update anyway? The application worked a year ago when I got my last text message. Does it have a shelf life or expiration date?

- Shortly thereafter I sat down for an evening of TV courtesy of NetFlix, which is in my opinion the greatest invention ever. In particular, I get to watch all of my favorite 16-minute History Channel programs. Why 16 minutes you ask? Because that's how long they are with the commercials taken out. In fact, one of the big reasons why I like the service so much. Granted, one has to wait a little bit for NetFlix in order to download the program, but that only takes a few seconds and is worth the trade-off. After all, what's better: 30 seconds of download or 14 minutes of commercials featuring Chuck Norris on the Ab-Buster machine? Anyhow, with three fingers of Scotch poured, a dish of salted nuts, and three good History Channel shows in queue, I fired up my Blu-Ray player and eagerly launched NetFlix. It was then that I got the dreaded message again, this time from the Blu-Ray player

“There is a new firmware update available, do you want to update?”

- No, I do NOT want to update. I want to watch *Weapons of War* on the History Channel. Even so, and against my better judgment, I pressed the OK button for the firmware update. This mistake resulted in my being treated to 45 minutes of a status bar keeping me informed of the status of my important update. (Don't even THINK you can abort the process once it starts—beware!) By the time the update was done, so were the Scotch and nuts, and worse, my wife Sharon now wanted to watch *Bones*. *Weapons of War* would have to wait, essentially because it was not worth a war with Sharon

Leave it to Samsung Blue Ray to screw up something as awesome as NetFlix and destroy the user experience.

- We recently remodeled our conference room at the office, and installed a PC for video conferencing and presentations. You guessed it. “Do you want to update?” “No, we really did not want to update at the time, but we did so anyway. Did you know that Windows XP has some 60 updates to download, all purportedly critical? And even with Windows supposedly pre-installed on the computer? Whatever else we wanted to load or test on our new conference room system had to wait.”

No, We Don't Want to Update

This whole update business is akin to me bringing wine and roses home to Sharon, dimming the lights, putting on soft music, and lighting candles only to have her suddenly pop up a window and say “Do you want me to vacuum and do the wash now?” In the context described in this article, maintenance chores were obviously *not* what I had in mind. The same holds true with computer, phone, or Blu-Ray box having other ideas when I clearly have something else in mind to do. So what is the answer?

In fact, there are things that can be done to enhance the user experience, bolster software quality, and avoid the dreaded update. Perhaps the biggest change would be for software writers to concentrate on software applications and stop toying with the operating system. It's a pipe dream of mine, but seriously think about the following idea. It would work.

Why can't operating system manufacturers—even Microsoft—put their operating system *on a chip* and only change it once every 10 years? Now I know what you are probably thinking, but consider this from another perspective.

Many years ago, about the time I got my Jade six transistor radio in fact, I used black, rotary dial, Clark Kent-style telephone. My number was BUTLER 5-1896. Yup, I really am that old. I remember when home numbers were five digits long and actually had *names*. Even the phone book said BU5-1896 rather than 285-1896. Yet even at that time the phone company used T1-soa technology that survives virtually intact to this day.

A T1 is a 1.544 Mbs data circuit essentially designed originally to carry 24 voice channels. Later, T1 was adapted to carry data and remains a backbone transmission speed to this day. When one looks at the T1 bit stream, it is the same one that existed in 1965 to serve my Clark Kent telephone service. You no doubt have routers and multiplexers in your office right now that still have T1 interfaces. Notwithstanding, by setting the options right for error detection (Extended Superframe or ESF) and other T1 improvements that came along later (like leased channels using B8Zs line code), it is still possible to connect a 2011 T1 multiplexer with a 1965 T1 multiplexer. *The two will still sync up with one another and run!*

This begs a few questions in my estimation. What if instead of keeping the same thing for 50 years, AT&T Bell Labs had changed the T1 format every five or six years? It would be a constant battle for anything to talk to anything, and we would have the phone network of France. Conversely, what if Microsoft had a light bulb come on and designed an operating system *on a chip* that only changed every 10 or 15 years? Which makes more sense?

What about those critical updates? To this observer, most seem to be security issues and improvements for applications running higher up the protocol stack than the operating system. Who did and made Microsoft responsible for every application in existence? It hardly seems fair. Why not let Microsoft concentrate on stabilizing its operating system until it's as reliable as the T1? If other applications have security problems or need improvements, let them write their own updates.

Of course, my opinions probably don't comport with the strategy at Microsoft, which is frankly one reason for the status quo. To roughly quote Larry Ellison from a few years ago, Microsoft can engineer a ham-on-rye and a glass of orange juice into the Windows operating system, but the deli industry won't like it at all. Seriously, though, I am not disrespecting Microsoft, either. I just think that if they concentrated on developing a Johnson Space Center quality operating system that users knew would be around for 10 years or more, they would be hard to beat.

Microsoft is also pretty good at writing higher-level applications that would more than make up the revenue they would lose (and bad press due to the inevitable bugs) of changing their operating system every five years. Face it: We human beings are lousy at debugging systems with more than about a million lines of code. It's just too complex. Microsoft should give itself a fair chance by concentrating on its basic operating system longer between revisions.

For the record, we use Microsoft in this office, but we still use Windows XP like a lot of people still do these days. It's a good and stable platform now that it is all patched up but it took 10 years to get there.

Imagine if Microsoft announced today that it would take its latest and greatest version, put it on a chip, and keep it in service until 2020. I think such a product would be a winner. For one thing, the computer would not have to warm up any more, at least to the extent it does now. It would instantly turn on when one has an idea, wants instant information, needs to prescribe medicine right now, or whatever. Just like the iPhone and iPad do now.

This would be a capability worth marketing relentlessly because I can't be the one peeved about waiting for the hourglass and welcome messages. Besides, if Microsoft is worried about the revenue loss of no longer replacing operating systems every five years, it could make the chip integral to the latest generation of motherboards. Motherboards last about five years. When the motherboard dies, then you need another chip. As I said earlier, Microsoft is very good at writing applications that do not necessarily reside in the operating system. They would do fine. Furthermore, when they did release a new operating system chip every 10 years it would be grounds for celebration, not dread, because it would be a well-tested and high-quality release.

Final Thoughts

Anyway, I hope this article provides food for thought about how to enhance the user experience in a way many of us don't often consider. I don't think it's a coincidence that the products today are the most runaway successes (e.g. the iPhone, iPad, etc.) are those which, in the words of Alvin Toffler, are *High Touch* as well as *High Tech*.

In closing, if you are a software developer working on the next wonderful product or service, think about these issues. Also *please* design your new gadget to improve or correct itself while I sleep, because *I do NOT want to update*.
