SAVING XP

Dear Linux Magazine Reader,

A minor scandal erupted this month when a Google engineer exposed a serious security flaw in Windows XP. Microsoft cried foul, arguing that they didn't have enough warning before the announcement went public, and attackers quickly started using the exploit, with no clear indication when a patch would appear.

The episode led to claims and counterclaims about Google's motives, as well as some philosophical sparring over whether it is better to fight vulnerabilities with transparency or secrecy. The talk got pretty heated, but the one question I didn't see anyone address is: "Why is anyone even still using XP?"

XP might have been an advance over previous Windows systems, but it is really backward by today's standards – even Windows standards. Windows XP systems used to soak up adware all the time, even if you paid real money for commercial adware and virus tools. Given that Windows 7 is definitely better and safer than XP, why don't these users all over the world upgrade? One reason is it costs US$ 100 or more, even for a low-end Windows 7 license. Another problem is the system requirements have changed, so systems running XP won't even work with Windows 7.

Complicating the situation is that the Windows 7 installer doesn't provide an XP upgrade option, and Windows 7 doesn't even support XP applications out of the box. Microsoft offers a virtual environment they call Windows XP Mode for running XP apps in Windows 7, but according to the download page, Windows 7 users aren't "eligible" to download the XP Mode app unless they are running the Windows 7 Professional edition or better. Users with the Starter or Home Premium editions can't even use the tool that runs XP apps, which adds further complication and additional disincentive for users wanting to put the XP dinosaur to sleep.

All this is nothing but an opportunity for Linux. Users can easily replace their outdated XP systems with Linux. Unfortunately, the fact is, many of these XP users are afraid of Linux. Some of these fears are unfounded – a response to the be-FUDdling effects of Microsoft FUD; nevertheless, the installation and configuration phase is often the most challenging part about working with Linux – and not the best pool in which to throw long-term Windows users.

One interesting solution might be to develop a Linux distro designed to address the needs of XP users. Instead of blowing the budget on obsessively tweaking a counterfeit, Windows-like "look and feel" (a superficial strategy I have never really understood), this new XP salvation distro could focus on the following goals:

- Hardware support for the maximum range of XP-era PC hardware.
- A checker utility built into the installer that runs before installation and assesses whether the hardware components will work in Linux.
- A simplified disk utility that helps the user through the disk configuration phase – the hardest part of Linux installation, especially for dual-boot and virtualization scenarios that require preserving (and sometimes shrinking) the Windows partition.

Linux is already good about recognizing and configuring a previous Windows version in the boot menu, but allowing a full, wide-open XP to remain in operation just perpetuates the problems. One safe solution is to configure dual-boot, but disable network access for Windows, so that XP is available for desktop apps, but the user needs to switch to Linux for web surfing and email. A more elegant option is to include a script that automatically sets up the on-board XP system to run in a protected, virtual environment.

This kind of thing is clearly not for the Linux purist; however, Microsoft has left a big opening in the market. A specialty Linux distro tailored to the needs of the XP user base would provide an interesting option for Windows users who are tired of the headaches of XP but are wary of more headaches migrating to Windows 7.

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