(Approx. 1719 words)

President's Corner

The Year of Living Dangerously

(The Last Year of Windows 7 Support)

By Greg Skalka, President, Under the Computer Hood UG, CA

November 2016 issue Drive Light

www.uchug.org

President (at) uchug.org

Google’s Android is now the most-used operating system in the world, holding 40% of market share. This is due to its popularity with smart phone users. Surprisingly, Microsoft’s Windows (all versions) still holds nearly 36.5%, in spite of being relegated almost completely to the personal computer market. This appears to be the case because, although there are now more smart phones in the world than personal computers, there are still not that many more (maybe 2.3 billion vs. 2 billion PCs). Per StatCounter, iOS holds 13.02% (of Operating System Market Share Worldwide from July 2017 - July 2018) and OS X is at 5.51%. Linux holds the next largest share (and lowest of named OS’s) at a minute 0.74%. Unfortunately for those Linux advocates I know, it was beaten out by “Unknown” at 2.56% and “Other” at 1.61%.

In the PC market, Windows truly dominates, holding 82.79% (of worldwide market share, 7/2017 to 7/2018). OS X comes in second with 12.63%, with Linux at 1.61% and Chrome OS at 0.86%. For Windows versions, Win10 has finally edged out Win7, 42.37% to 42.14%, and Windows 8.1 has 8.59%. These three are the only versions still supported by Microsoft, per the Windows Lifecycle Fact Sheet. The remaining, unsupported versions (XP, 8, Vista and others) hold less than 7% of market share.

Windows 7 was released to the world on July 22, 2009. Its mainstream support ended on 1/10/15, meaning the end of product improvements and new features. In a little more than a year from now (1/14/20), extended support is scheduled to end. This will mean that Microsoft will stop making security updates to Win7, and it will become more dangerous to use (at least when connected to the internet).

I currently have six actively used personal computers (desktops and laptops) at home. Of these, more than half (3.5, by my accounting) run Win7. I have a Chromebook, which runs the Chrome OS; it is my favorite for travel and for getting on the web quickly. I still have one desktop PC I still use (I’m writing this on it) which runs XP, though for security it is not connected to any network. My newest computer is a tower desktop that I call my chameleon computer, as its boot hard drive is removable from the front. I have separate hard drives that allow it to run either Win7 or Win10 (thus the ‘3.5’ for Win7 machines, and Win10 would be on 0.5 computers). My primary computer is a 14” laptop running Win7. My wife has a Win7 desktop, as well as a 15.6” Win7 laptop.

Next year will the ‘year of living dangerously’ for these three Win7-only machines. Something will need to happen before 1/14/20, so that my wife and I can continue computing safely. Microsoft could extend the support date out further, but that is highly unlikely, as their apparent goal since it was released in 2015 is to get all users on Windows 10. I might spend most of 2018 trying to figure out what to do, but by the end of next year, I will need to be on the path of one or more of these likely actions:

**Update my Win7 PCs to Win10.** Microsoft did provide me with several opportunities to update my Win7 computers to Win10 for free in the past, but I was not willing to switch at the time. As the end-of-support deadline nears, it is possible they could provide some final upgrade offer to entice those still on the fence to join the Win10 collective. They could offer a discount on an upgrade version, but it is more likely they will hold the line on price and rake in more upgrade money. If I were to go with this option, I’d likely wait as the deadline approaches, to see if any good deals come up.

I could buy the Win10 upgrade for some or all, but I’d need to weigh that cost against the age of these computers, which range from 6 to 8 years old. All seem to still run well, though I fear my wife’s desktop, her primary computer, could have a catastrophic failure at any time. I have made upgrades in memory, drive space and interfaces over the years, but none have USB3 or gigabit Ethernet capability, or meet the most current Wi-Fi standards. I could pay for OS updates and then wind up having a hardware failure soon after. I could also find my computer hardware, though once verified to be compatible with an older Win10 version, may not be with the latest. It may be more cost effective to follow the next action.

**Buy new Win10 computers as replacements**. Buying new computers, with Win10 installed, would certainly be the most expensive option, but would provide many benefits over upgrading old hardware. We could have all the most current capabilities and features, with higher performance and (presumably) longer life going forward. OS compatibility issues would be eliminated, though there would no doubt be extra costs for new application software, to replace those programs we used on our old PCs. My wife’s poor old desktop is definitely a good candidate for this option, as is possibly my laptop.

To minimize costs, I’d again likely wait until the deadline looms closer, to buy the most current hardware I can within my budget. I’d probably look more intently at the Black Friday deals this year and next, to see if there are good savings at those times. There is always this China trade war issue to consider, however; I’d hate to find that even larger tariffs on foreign-made computers (effectively the only kind available) have doubled their prices as Win7 support ends.

**Abandon Windows and convert to another OS.** Both of the options explained so far assume we will need to learn to use Win10. Though I despise change for change’s sake, I’m sure I can adapt to Win10 and the new programs that will go with it. I’ve not used my Win10 incarnation of my chameleon computer very much, though, as I prefer to stay with the more familiar Win7. That would obviously have to change. Getting my wife comfortable with Win10 may be another story, however, as she has a sometimes-tense relationship with Win7 now. Still, she has figured out her iPhone with absolutely no help from me (being an Android advocate), so the transition for her may not be as bad as I might imagine.

Still, there would be an OS change, and so this might be an opportunity to consider other possible changes. While staying with Windows, which is likely to remain the overwhelming favorite PC OS, will facilitate compatibility with computer use required in employment for both of us, there are other PC operating systems to consider. We could consider a Mac, but my exposure to Apple products so far indicates I don’t think the way their developers do. My wife might make this transition better than I (could it be that men are from Mars / Google / Microsoft, and women are from Venus / Apple?). Ultimately, the high cost of Apple product would deter me, as I’m among the most value-conscious persons you are likely to find. We could switch to Linux, and maybe even continue using our old hardware, but I fear the learning curve would be great, and we would still have work compatibility issues with our existing stuff and the work world. Maybe I could convert one of the old computers to Linux to experiment with (though I could be doing this with my chameleon computer now and don’t), but, overall, I’d say this option is not likely as a comprehensive solution.

**Abandon Windows PCs and use only non-Windows or mobile devices.** There are a lot of people now that don’t use personal computers in their personal lives at all; smart phones and tablets fulfill all their computing needs. While there are more and more web-based applications available, and I find I’m online more and using “offline” programs less, I’m not yet ready to give up word processing, spreadsheets, photo editing, tax filing and other more PC-centric activities to the small screens (and lower performance) of phones and tablets. It might be possible, but as I get older, I want bigger screens, not smaller. My smart phone and my Chromebook have definitely taken over a growing percentage of my computing time, but I really can’t see them increasing to all the time. Maybe some new neural implant and projection display technologies will change that one day, but not by 2020. For better or worse, I feel we need to be tied to that majority of PC users that, again for better or worse, support Microsoft (at least through Windows).

Note that “**Continue using Win7 on the internet**” is not one of the options I’m considering for after its security support ends. It might be safe for a short time, but eventually uncorrected issues found by hackers in Win7 will make it too vulnerable. Since we use these computers to access our online financial accounts, the risk is just too great.

It is likely I will in any case keep at least one Win7 computer available to run off the network, especially if I find, as I did with XP, that some programs and interfaces for other devices are not easily available on other computing devices or with other operating systems. I have handheld GPS receivers that I can only connect to through my XP machine. I have a lot of admittedly older software for things like mapping, photo editing and scanning that is either not available, not available without significant cost or that I simply prefer on my old XP computer. I’ll likely find similar issues going from Win7 to Win10 or to other operating systems and computing devices.

As my year of living dangerously comes to an end and 1/14/20 approaches, I hope I will have determined and perhaps implemented a course of action to allow my wife and I to safely continue the computing activities we need to perform. If not, 2020 might really be dangerous.