



Taking 3.1 Steps Forward, 98 Steps Back

The above title illustrates a point, but it is not to dump on Microsoft. A journal for technology-savvy readers is no place to make glib, rash statements about complicated technology issues. Instead, this column shows how a conspiracy by the personal computer (PC) industry is turning us into profitable zombie slaves.

I see no other reasonable explanation for why the world's bean counters, who usually hold their organizations' purse strings tightly enough to asphyxiate a musk ox—who create databases that track trends in staple usage—can blow thousands of dollars per employee per year on new computer stuff, and they don't seem to care whether they're getting a return on their investment.

Well, I've performed a study on our returns that should zap them back to reality. Of course, my startling conclusions would be meaningless without good data, but as my co-workers will testify, I am full of it. My study, which contrasts my recent computer upgrade with my recollections of previous performance—and includes figures I computed on a *real calculator*—shows how my recent upgrade robbed me of four years productivity *in the first two days alone*.

Here's the math: My old computer had plenty of RAM and storage space, and at 200 MHz, executed most commands instantaneously. This makes sense, considering that, like many people, I only occasionally need to create real-time 3-D galactic radiation entropy data models. For writing documents, creating simple graphics, and doing E-mail, 200 million cycles per second was kind of overkill.

So, seeing that my machine was more than adequate, and was set up with everything I needed, my organization decided to do something about it. They gave me a 300 MHz machine that has the sole advantage of providing *50 percent more overkill*. Well, maybe that's unfair. My larger documents are now printed a full 60 seconds before I mosey over to the printer—not just 55 seconds earlier. Also, I'm saving a couple of seconds each time I re-boot the system, which greatly helps, since the new computer crashes several times each day.

All told, the new computer may save up to 40 seconds per workday over the old one. However, it took me 12 hours to get it configured the way I need it, which means I'll have to work on it for four and a half years to get my 12 hours back. But that's a moot point, because next year I'm getting an *even more* instantaneous computer and a new operating system to learn. I'll soon be hundreds of years behind, but at least they'll be paying thousands of dollars for the privilege.

Perhaps you think the practice of buying marginally useful hardware and software upgrades is partially due to clever industry marketing and licensing practices. However, I have discovered that there is a much more reasonable explanation for our bizarre purchasing behavior: brainwave-altering voodoo satellites.

Here's how the satellites work: Say company X creates a word-processing upgrade with two exciting new features: automatic paragraph formatting you don't want but don't know how to undo, plus a new format no other application can read. The company then uses these satellites to broadcast a powerful voodoo spell: "There's a higher version number available for product X, you technology fossils! You must upgrade now!" A tiny, powerful zombie army then forms a line at the software store, eager to start distributing files nobody can open.

The rest of us receive these files, get sick of asking people to resend a readable version, and decide it's easier to upgrade our office suites, since there's a budget for upgrades anyway. We then in turn share our files with others who in turn have to get upgrades. A few months and perhaps billions of dollars later, everyone has upgraded entire software suites in order to gain the ability to open one type of file. Few people seem to be bothered by this, despite the fact that nobody on the planet has intentionally used a new word-processing feature since 1992.

Therefore, my column's title illustrates that the newest, latest technology isn't necessarily a step forward in terms of productivity. Imagine our joy, when the next upgrade wave came along, if everyone just said, "Nah, maybe next time." I doubt we'd miss out on much. Further details are available in my full study, which is available in a 3-D, full-motion interactive multimedia presentation (DVD-format only). You'll probably need an upgrade to view it.

—Lorin May

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