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Windows XP Retirement a Boon for Hackers

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Windows XP was the first consumer-oriented operating system produced by Microsoft to be built on the Windows NT kernel. Microsoft plans to retire its venerable, twelve-year old and popular XP operating system on April 8, 2014. Windows XP¹ is currently used on over a third of all PCs worldwide and will still be running on over 25% of PCs by the time it is retired.² (Windows 7 now runs on 50% of all PCs, and Windows 8 is a distant third at 8%.)



Hacker Heaven

Windows has always been the primary target of hackers. It is reported that 99% of all virus attacks target Windows systems. Microsoft issues security patches monthly to protect systems against known attacks. If a security bug is critical and is widely spread, Microsoft will go outside of its normal monthly patch schedule and issue emergency fixes.



Hacking can be rewarding for the hackers who discover new vulnerabilities (so-called zero-day vulnerabilities because they have not yet surfaced). An average price for a new Microsoft exploit ranges from USD \$50,000 to \$150,000.

The retirement of Windows XP raises a severe security risk for users who continue to run their PCs on XP. As of the retirement date, Microsoft will no longer issue patches to correct security flaws or other bugs in the operating system.

Therefore, it is expected that hackers will begin to bank their zero-day vulnerabilities until Microsoft stops patching XP next April. At that time, they may use the vulnerabilities themselves or sell them to others. The value of these vulnerabilities may soar since they may now be useful for months if not for years. Users will have to count on their anti-malware products to detect and quarantine the attacks.

If the prediction of zero-day vulnerability banking is correct, there should be signs of it. Most notably, it is expected that there will be a sharp drop in publicly disclosed new vulnerabilities leading up to the retirement date.

There is no precedent for this situation. The last time that Microsoft retired an operating system was in July, 2010, when it stopped supporting Windows 2000. At that time, Windows 2000 powered just 0.4% of all PCs; and ongoing support was not an issue.

Aside from simply living with the problem, most users have only one other option. That is to upgrade to Windows 7 or Windows 8.1 (or even to an Apple iOS system). This not only requires an upgrade fee, but it will often require the purchase of new PCs to meet the memory and speed requirements of the new

¹ "XP" comes from "eXPerience," intended to highlight the extended user experience.

² Windows 2003 will be retired on the same date, but its use is miniscule.

operating systems. Many users are reluctant to upgrade to Windows 8.1 because it has a different look and feel from XP. However, Windows 7 is very similar to Windows XP.

An Option for Large Users

For large corporations and government agencies that have hundreds or thousands of PCs, the cost of purchasing all new hardware can be prohibitive. It must be done incrementally over a period of time to fit within budgets. For these organizations, there is an option – Microsoft’s Custom Support program. The Custom Support program provides security updates for a fee for months or years for operating systems that have been officially declared retired.

The Microsoft Security Response Center (MSRC) classifies problems into four categories – critical, important, moderate, and low. For companies who decide to purchase Custom Support, Microsoft will continue to provide patches for bugs rated as critical by MSRC. It will also provide patches for important bugs for an additional fee. It will not provide patches for moderate or low bugs.

Microsoft structures the cost of Custom Support to encourage users to upgrade to a newer operating system. Though Microsoft does not publish the cost of Custom Support, it is reported that it is about \$200 per PC for the first year. Thereafter, the fee goes up every year and terminates after three years. By then, Microsoft expects that the company has completed its upgrade to new systems.

Summary

Computerworld sees six options that are open to Microsoft in order to ease the burden of this transition on its XP users:

1. Continue free patching for critical and perhaps for important vulnerabilities. However, this approach would be unpalatable to existing Custom Support customers.
2. Selectively patch for free only critical bugs that are being actively exploited by hackers.
3. Provide limited custom support to small customers for a smaller fee.
4. Heavily discount Windows 7 or Windows 8.1 to existing XP users.
5. Some combination of the above.
6. Do nothing.

At this point in time, it appears that Option 6 is the option of choice for Microsoft.

Acknowledgements

Information for this article was taken from the following sources:

[XP’s retirement will be hacker heaven](#), *Computerworld*; August 12, 2013.

[Microsoft will craft XP patches after April ’14, but not for you](#), *Computerworld*; August 26, 2013.

[Windows XP’s user share nose-dives](#), *Computerworld*; September 2, 2013.

[AVAST: Windows XP’s Retirement Will Cause a Major Technology Crisis](#), *Softpedia*; September 5, 2013.