Crossing the Digital Divide Volume 10
"Should I fix it?"
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for the Observer

I meet a lot of people in the work I do; computers are everywhere, in businesses of all kinds and in many homes. The inner workings of a computer intimidate many. I often describe computers as being similar to a Swiss Army knife, a compact collection of tools, the magic easily dismissed with education.

Let's focus on the premise that a personal computer (PC, Mac, etc.) is merely that, a tool. Assuming the investment in that "tool" was for a specific sets of tasks, and it did the job when you first began to use it, what has changed since then?

If you bought your computer to use as a word processor, or for spreadsheet manipulation, or business accounting/bookkeeping, and it's running slow, crashing often, or generally complaining, it may be worn out, or wearing out, or at capacity, or infected with malware. If the needs of the tool haven't changed, and the hard disk drive isn't full, the first step would be to remove any infections on the computer. Malwarebytes is free to use (on demand), and an inexpensive insurance policy as a full-time, real-time, licensed solution ($25/year). Download, install, update and run, then remove all infections Malwarebytes finds. 80% of the PC's I see have malware, most work fine once cleaned up.

Let's assume you've run Malwarebytes, and have successfully rid your PC of unwanted or potentially-unwanted-programs, but the PC is still running slower than you're used to, have you kept up with Windows updates? Are you still running Windows XP? If you're running XP, with minor exception, it's time to budget for a new computer. Windows XP was installed on PC's beginning in 2001, ending in 2005. Ten+ year old PC's are at end-of-life, both in terms of aged parts and obsolete technology.

If your PC is running Windows Vista, Windows 7, Windows 8, Windows 8.1, Windows 10 (e.g., less then ten years old) and you're experiencing slowness, one of two things has happened:

1) You've picked up infections, and should clear them with Malwarebytes;
2) You have a component(s) at capacity or at risk of failure.

A full disk (or nearly full) will slow down a PC dramatically! A PC with minimal memory will feel slow. Memory upgrades and disk upgrades are fairly cheap, and a perfect way to give new life to a more recent PC. Power supply units fail, and are usually a cheap replacement. Batteries in laptops run about $100, and have a typical lifespan is 2-3 years. Bad video card? In a PC, an affordable replacement, in a laptop, maybe not. New disk drives – if a laptop, go Solid State! If a desktop or tower has a failed disk drive, at minimum, make sure you get a replacement with a 7200RPM spindle speed, many entry level PC's were shipped with slow, 5400RPM disk drives. Bad monitor? Bigger, thinner and more Energy efficient units are yours for under $200.

Finally, and more often the real issue, have your demands (usage) of your computer (the tool) changed? Maybe, since you first got your PC, you've discovered new ways to use it, could that be?

YouTube, Netflix, Hulu, Showtime are prime examples of "new uses", and indicate a change in requirements from your original purchase. Streaming media is cool, and has already proven it has changed the nature of the Internet – do you realize, over ½ of the entire Internet traffic is media streams from Netflix and Google's own YouTube? Amazon, Netflix, YouTube, Hulu, Apple TV and dozens of upstarts have leveraged the ubiquity of the Internet, the ever increasing processing power delivered by AMD and Intel, to create a new paradigm. You may well be able to dump TV today and see everything you want via the Internet, but your current PC may not be capable of delivering a similar or better experience.

Next week: Windows 10 – do we or do we not?