Vista system's full of glitches

Much-touted security features are driving new users crazy

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According to Microsoft chief executive Steven Ballmer, January 30, 2007 was the biggest day in the company's history.

If you missed the fawning references in the dailies and have managed to duck the obtrusive swaths of baby blue on the walls of our subway stations, let me be the one to tell you that Windows has a new operating system called Vista.

If this is Microsoft's biggest moment, it's in trouble. You can tell by the latest Apple ads featuring Mac personified mocking Mr. PC because Vista's security systems are more trouble than they're worth.

It's been five years since the release of Microsoft's last operating system, Windows XP. Those five years have been fraught with redesigns and development glitches that have caused delay after delay in Vista's release.

With its slidey, floating windows, Vista certainly looks better than its predecessor and claims it has better search features, tighter security and a better platform for playing multimedia files.

The pre-installed imagery is certainly impressive, designed to ease our anxiety about technology by replacing the clutter of desktop icons and the digital imagery inherent in the first generation of screensavers with panoramas of beaches, rolling green hills and dark country skies.

But how it looks or what it can actually do is really beside the point. IDC, a market research firm in Boston, estimates that 5,000 programs that work with Vista are ready to be launched, and almost $70 billion of revenue will be generated through Microsoft's 500,000 worldwide partners.

So far, problems raised by the tech sector are typical of Windows: crashing programs, error messages and the iconic "blue screen of death." But the aspect of Vista that has come in for most criticism has to do with security and user freedom.

The End User License Agreement (EULA) is the little window that pops up before you install a program that asks you to click, "I Agree."

Agree to what? The Vista EULA creates a ton of restrictions, including limitations on your ability to run the operating system in parallel with others on a Mac or PC. This is precisely the feature that's the subject of Apple's derisive TV ad.

Techies have also found an embarrassing loophole in Microsoft's own security, allowing users who have never bought Vista to manipulate the Vista Upgrade Software CD into providing the OS for free.

Such glitches are especially embarrassing for the National Security Agency (NSA), as it has been proudly working with Microsoft to meet the security requirements of the United States Department of Defense.

But here's the most controversial issue: Vista contains a digital rights management (DRM) code that ensures Vista users are playing legitimate media files on their machines. The DRM only allows Vista users to copy and send legitimate media files over the Web, crippling attempts to open up the Web for the free flow of information.

Predictably, though, a mere two days after the launch, a hacker from Montreal has found a way to crack Vista's DRM.

Beyond the security question, although a small sector of the population always wants to be on the leading edge of such technology, smart consumers will wait to buy new tech products until the bugs in the initial release have been worked out.

The first generation of users, the so-called "early adopters," are the people who work the system until it breaks, prodding for flaws and weaknesses. Industry experts rely on these obsessive techies to find problems with their products that they can work out in later versions.

The speed at which information flows these days ensures that Vista will be obsolete before the year is out.

Do yourself a favour and wait a few months before you let yourself be seduced by those lush, rolling hills.

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