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EMAIL IS THE FUTURE (AS ARE BROWSERS, DESKTOP)

Have you seen the software the kids are using these days? Appalling.

Flipkart thinks that abolishing their website and going for a mobile-only offering is something other than an insane strategy guaranteed to fail. Only 22% of millennials are “very likely” to open an email in their lifetime. Satya Nadella claims his company’s future is going to be “mobile-first, cloud-first”. Yeah, how about fad-first?

The kind of thinking that motivates this sort of predictions is insane – no, it’s non-existent. While decisions e.g. for a company, of where to invest, etc. ultimately rely on the question of what kind of product will have dominance in future, etc. – i.e. you do need to pick winners and losers – statements like “the future is mobile” are not a productive line of thinking if you consider such a thing to be axiomatically true, i.e. as an unquestionable religious conviction.

Desktop clearly *isn’t* dead. And email and the browser are at least as alive than the herded zombies making these sort of statements.

The software industry is a very delicate one – it could become extremely inefficient very easily. The main danger to the efficiency of the software market is the so-called *network effect*, in which people use a product not because it is good, but because they benefit from its popularity (for example, an OS being popular encourages developers to develop for it, which in turn drives its popularity). This encourages monopolies and massively reduces the incentive for a product to be good.

What’s prevented the tech industry from being too bad – the key idea that’s really driven the success of consumer computing over the past three decades at least – is the idea of *interoperability*.

It’s hard to overstate just how valuable this is. It doesn’t really matter that much if Windows is more popular than Linux – you can still survive on a Linux thanks to the inter-operability offered by the browser. It doesn’t matter if Gmail is more popular than Outlook.com – you can still send and receive mails to and from a different email provider, because that’s how the email protocol *works*.

(There may have been some other platforms, like phone calls and SMS, that offer the same interoperability as email, but the crappy government standards for phone numbers – a relatively small number of numbers actually available to use – ensures that phone numbers are unnecessarily scarce and creating one for yourself is a pointless hassle – and also not free – compared to creating an email account.)

But the current fads in the tech industry seem to specifically target this feature of a lot of communication platforms. You can’t use Whatsapp to send a message to Google Hangouts.

And you can't use Facebook to post updates to people in your Google Plus circles. This is simply an inferior system compared to the kind of communication protocol offered by email.

The key issue with these trends – the disdain for unification/assimilation, the obsession with successively dumber and more “friendly” (i.e. imprecise) interfaces – is that they represent objective regressions not only from the quality of classic technology, but the fundamental principles that have historically made technology great. For example, the most clearly visible impact that modern consumer computing – specifically the general-purpose CPU – has had is in being *general-purpose*, or *all-in-one*. It's a genuinely revolutionary, and great idea – to have the computer **replace absolutely everything, allowing the individual to categorise and manage the world as he sees fit**. The point is to *replace* clocks and watches, *replace* the phone, *replace* book retailers, *replace* paper and stationery, *replace* your graphing calculator under a unified, efficient interface. *Replace*, not *upgrade*. The trend to upgrade every single of these devices to make them “smart” is expensive, inefficient and self-defeating. The only upgrade you should make to a watch is throwing it in the trash.

You shouldn't bother making insects “smart”. You should just kill them.

TAGS – technology, software, technology trends, rants