When good computers go bad

July 9 2009, By Craig Crossman

Personal computers are complex devices. We use them every day to do so many things and quite frankly, I don't know how I got along without one back in the olden days (that's the '70s in case you were wondering). Their complexity makes all the things they do possible but it's also that same complexity that can be the source of a great deal of frustration. Everything on a computer must work and work well together. If something malfunctions, you're going to know it pretty much right away.

When something does go wrong on a computer, you would think that the problem would be fairly obvious and in many cases it is. If the hard drive crashes, if a key on the keyboard gets stuck or behaves erratically, if your screen becomes pixilated or erratic, you can pretty much respectively assume it's the [hard drive](), your [keyboard]() or the graphics card that needs attention.

But then there's the type of malfunction that's the stuff of nightmares and its name shall be known as the "intermittent problem." Intermittent problems are the hardest to diagnose simply because it's really hard to fix something that isn't broken. This harkens back to those days where you would call the TV repairman to come fix your TV set only to find that when he showed up, the TV would be working just fine. He'd check it out and find nothing wrong with it, making you feel like an idiot. After he'd leave, of course the TV would malfunction again. The only thing you could do at that point was to let him take the set to his workshop where he would let it run for days until it acted up or finally give up the ghost. At that point, it could be fixed. Unfortunately, computers have inherited that intermittent legacy but on an even worse scale. But the

answer remains pretty much the same. Sometimes you just have to let it run until the problem can be observed by a professional.

Failing memory can be the source of intermittent grief. The symptoms can be really hard to nail down and too often a computer virus or similar type of malware is usually the first suspect. After the malware option is discounted, a memory test is the next step. Running a simple RAM test may not show that something is wrong as an intermittent memory problem might fool the testing software. Typically a good RAM test requires running for several hours, even overnight. So when an intermittent hiccup does occur, the problem will be reported so the identified memory can be replaced. But there's one other component inside your computer that can make even the worst intermittent memory problem look like a CD rainbow.

Imagine how you would feel when any of your working programs start failing and each time the malfunction differs. And it's not just your software. Different hardware components in your system begin to fail, then work again. Connected USB devices begin acting unpredictably, video cards act erratically, your Wi-Fi connections misbehave, the list can go on and on. As you experience these intermittent erratic behaviors, you might think your computer has been possessed by some abhorrent technology spirit and the only recourses left to you are an exorcism or buying a new PC. But there is one component inside your PC that can cause virtually any and all of these intermittent problems and in fact, if any of these things do begin happening, you will now be prepared to deal with it. It's your power supply that's going bad.

A failing power supply can cause the required power levels of memory or any other component to drop just enough and cause them to malfunction. But the insidious part is that a failing power supply may monetarily recover and everything will work perfectly once again. That's the really bad part to this whole scenario. It would be a lot more merciful

if the darned thing just died. But a slowly dying power supply can mimic so many computer ailments that it can fool even some of the best of us out there. So don't feel too bad if it happens to you. Just be sure to add a failing power supply to your list of diagnostic considerations.

Power supplies come in all shapes, sizes and power ratings. Replacing a power supply isn't for the faint of heart and should be done by someone who has some qualified experience. If you do need to have yours replaced, it might be a good idea to replace it with one that has a higher power rating than the one that came with your computer. Newer add-on cards and devices typically have larger power requirements so adding in a beefier power supply will insure your computer will run longer and be able to handle your growing demands. Also make sure the power supply comes from a reputable manufacturer that can back it up with a good warranty. Now you have the power.

___

(Craig Crossman is a national newspaper columnist writing about computers and technology.)
(c) 2009, McClatchy-Tribune Information Services.