What's at stake with Windows 9?

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When Microsoft presents its first public glimpse of Windows 9 - it's expected to happen late this month or early next - a lot more than just an operating system is at stake.

Smartphones and tablets are firmly entrenched as important, sometimes even primary, computing devices for many people. At the same time, a recent upsurge in PC sales notwithstanding, sales of desktops and laptops are declining.

With Microsoft's share of the worldwide smartphone and tablet markets still under 5 percent, "really, what's at stake is the continued dominance of Windows as a thing that people use every day," said Wes Miller, an analyst with independent research firm Directions on Microsoft.

Windows 8 was supposed to be Microsoft's solution to that challenge - an operating system, the company said, that worked equally well for mouse-and-keyboard PC users as for touch-centric tablet users.

Turned out, not all users agreed.

Windows 8, launched two years ago, jammed together two different user interfaces - a tile-based, touch-friendly mode that was radically different from any previous version of Windows, and the traditional desktop interface.

Many users found it jarring to go back and forth between the two.

"Certainly Windows 8 did not set the world on fire the way Microsoft had hoped," said Stephen Kleynhans, an analyst at research firm Gartner. "They tried the big departure and it wasn't quite what people were looking for."

With Windows 9 - the name Microsoft presumably will give the operating system code named "Threshhold" - it's anticipated that Microsoft will bring back some familiar features from Windows past.

In addition, the new OS is believed to be more specifically tailored to the type of input - whether touch or keyboard-and-mouse - the person is using at a given time.

The world is likely to know in late September or early October, when the company reportedly will have a technical preview of Windows 9 at a media event.

Based on what Microsoft has already said about what it's working on, as well as on reported leaks, Windows 9 should have a Start menu for mouse-and-keyboard users that will include both desktop programs and Windows Store apps.

It appears that the Charms feature on desktops - the bar in Windows 8 at the right side of the screen and includes commands such as "search" and "share" - will be gone. And Windows 9 is likely to have the ability to run mobile apps designed for the Windows Store in [windows](#) while in desktop mode. Those apps currently can run only full screen.

WHAT USERS EXPECT

The goal with Windows 9, Kleynhans said, seems to be to provide an experience that matches what users would expect from any device, whether a PC, tablet or smartphone.

Overall, Windows 9 represents a "let's try that again," he said.

That said, Kleynhans thinks "Windows 8 was a necessary step to get to Windows 9. It created the underpinnings of the ecosystem that is going to drive them forward in the future. I think Windows 9 will benefit from what happened with Windows 8, much the way that Windows 7 reaped the benefits of Windows Vista."

But the problem is "getting people over the hump and getting them beyond Windows 7," said Frank Gillett, an analyst with Forrester Research. "They finally got a chunk of people off (Windows) XP. Can they repeat the success of Windows 7? And can they actually get enough of a role in mobile to really matter?"

In order for Windows 9 to succeed, Gillett said, Microsoft has to "reduce the perceived difficulty or confusion of moving to the modern Windows - the one that mixes touch and mouse. They have to make it feel smoother and more accessible."

In addition, Microsoft has to "demonstrate that there's a benefit to using Windows on your PC and on your mobile device. Right now, people don't perceive or experience that there's a lot of benefit to that."

CONVERGED SYSTEM

Microsoft is currently working toward a converged operating system, with the goal of having developers build an app once and being able to port it across different Windows devices.

At its annual Build conference for third-party developers held earlier this year, Microsoft introduced the idea of "universal Windows apps, " which could run across Windows PCs, tablets and phones, without developers having to do extensive work for the software to work across platforms.

The benefit for customers is that they could buy an app and have it work on the phone, tablet and PC.

Achieving a converged system "is really critical for Microsoft," said Al Gillen, an analyst with research firm IDC. "They have got to bring the phone and tablet and PC environments all together."

In addition, Gillen said, "the next major release of the Windows client system has to be suitable for corporate users.

"The problem with Windows 8 has been that initially it was such a radically different experience, especially for power users who really needed applications that lived in the Windows 7 (desktop) environment. It was not inviting to business customers."

UPDATE CYCLE

Microsoft is also reportedly moving toward a faster update cycle for Windows - something already evident with the updates to Windows 8.

"I think what they're working toward is something more like what you see in Office 365," said Kleynhans, the Gartner analyst.

"Office 365 doesn't get 'updates' in the same way (as the traditional operating system updates). It gets a stream of updates that enter the product when it's ready," Kleynhans said.

"I'm not sure they can get into that continual trickle updates for an operating system and I'm not even sure that's appropriate," he said. "But I think the trajectory of what they're doing is to move toward a more regular pace of updates so we're not faced with these big mammoth updates that tear our world apart every few years."

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