

Vroom, vroom ... crash

I think you ought to know I'm feeling very depressed this week. The rot set in when I received an e-mail exhortation to be a part of some IT health project or other. This project extolled the virtues of teleinfomatics and went on about VoIP and so on. It was accompanied by a gigantic Word file of some 4Mb. I opened this file expecting to be reading acronyms until the next Coming and was greeted by a tiny graphic about the size of a postage stamp and 100 words of text. It was an advert for a medical journal. If it takes 4Mb to store this, we may be talking terabytes for a digital X-ray of somebody's toe. No wonder the NHS has storage problems. By comparison, the text version of the King James Bible on project Gutenberg is almost exactly the same size.

If this weren't enough, a colleague in some considerable disbelief, e-mailed me a news announcement <http://www.speedtv.com/articles/auto/formulaone/27956/> which had me checking the calendar in case there were two occurrences of April 1st this year, (every day is a potential April 1st in the wonderful world of IT). Let me quote it for you. 'Microsoft Get Exclusive F1 Contract. Bridgestone and Microsoft have been granted exclusive contracts to be the sole suppliers, of tires and ECUs respectively, of Formula 1 beginning in 2008.' An ECU is the Electronic Control Unit which controls the engine. It goes on to say 'The move to a single tire supplier and standardized ECUs is part of the FIA's radical cost-saving package announced earlier this year for introduction in 2008. Both Bridgestone and Microsoft will supply F1 through 2010'.

I find this decision decidedly odd. With all due respect to the consumer appeal and market penetration of Microsoft, developing consumer software for mass distribution and developing real-time safety-critical systems are more than a little different. In fact real-time safety-critical systems present one of the most complex application areas known and there are formidable technical difficulties involved, a number of them not satisfactorily resolved. Developing such systems first of all requires detailed domain knowledge, in this case an in-depth understanding of engine management in general, and then its role in very high performance engines in particular. Such systems are also networked in with other critical functions in the car so domain specific knowledge requirements extend much wider. As if that weren't enough, deep familiarity with safety cases and safety analysis and the presence of a sophisticated well-used and most of all, open and accountable software development system honed on previous experience with the standards and duty of care implied for such systems, is absolutely mandatory. It is a bit like asking your local painter and decorator to restore the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. The skill sets could not be more different.

There are numerous companies big and small around the world with the technical background, engineering expertise, track record, and domain knowledge to do this but it isn't cheap so it is difficult to escape the conclusion that the phrase '... FIA's radical cost-saving package announced earlier ...' which appears above has something to do with this unusual decision.

Maybe I got it wrong and Microsoft are supplying the tires.

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