

Not a good year, but not surprising

First of all, Merry Christmas and Happy New Year to you all. Just remember to include that important New Year's resolution:- "If I am tempted in the New Year to upgrade something which works passably; I musn't", not that I am singling out anybody's product in particular.

At the end of each year I look back and keep hoping that systems are showing signs of improving a little, that we are making progress and that innovation is alive and well. This year has not been a good year. Systems are still failing frequently and expensively and it is for example looking increasingly likely that the NHS Connecting for Health program, somewhat inaccurately christened the "largest computer program in the world" is going down the pan with no independent review available and the usual talking heads talking nonsense. I find this very sad. It needn't have happened like this, it has cost a fortune and it will taint any future attempts to introduce essential but hopefully more parsimonious and feasible measures to improve patient data access.

Microsoft continue to attempt to increase their stranglehold with the alarming news that the End User Licence Agreement (EULA) for Vista will permit them remotely to disable your machine and potentially deny you access to your own files. I have to say at this point that anybody contemplating using software under these kind of conditions when something as good as Linux is available for nothing must be crazy. If you want to maintain any kind of control whatsoever over the direction of Microsoft operating systems, install Linux now. You won't regret it and you will probably never go back.

Its not been a good year for the human interface with computer systems either. I've written about this in the past on a number of occasions but the interfaces to many modern systems are simply frightful with no attempt made to understand the user's requirements or responses. Most ordinary users remain utterly bemused by them and worst of all, think that this is normal for a computerised system. The following is fairly typical. I've just had to have my plumbing redone to include a new condensing boiler. This is to satisfy Britain's commitment to the Kyoto agreement whereby you are forced to spend several thousand quid to replace a reasonably fuel-efficient boiler which has an effective lifetime of around 25 years with one which is slightly more fuel-efficient but which has an effective lifetime of around 5 years and neglect to include the carbon penalty of making five boilers instead of one. Politicians call this progress. The incoming boiler comes with a state of the art interface on its slinky new wireless digital controller. First of all, this has only one frequency allocated and a radius of 30m meaning any of 6 neighbours with the same interface would inadvertently be able to control my boiler. Second and this is where it gets distinctly other-worldly, if it hangs, (and it does according to the engineer), you first have to remove the two battery containers, then press button 1, then press buttons 1 and 2 together and hold down for a few seconds, then push the right hand battery compartment back and finally push the left hand battery compartment back. Of course, how else would you do it ?

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