

## Inhuman interfaces

My theme this month is the quality of interfaces. I have written about this before but I've had a really bad month with them and I wondered if it was just me. Just what is it about interfaces which brings out the dark side of programmers? It all started when I upgraded my copy of Zonealarm. I had used its free version for two years and had such good experiences I felt I finally owed them some spondulicks. Legions of weird messages promptly start to appear as if they feel they have to earn the upgrade money. Plug my camera in and you get something along the lines of 'murdlesplunge.exe is trying to communicate with the andromeda galaxy by altering its process ... Allow / Deny'. With due respect to an otherwise admirable product, this is about as much good to the average user as a chocolate teapot.

It got worse when I hired a BMW on a German trip. I don't quite know how to admit this but in spite of a good working knowledge of German, I drove 350 km before I was able to figure out how to switch the radio off. Even then I did it by choosing an option which connected it to a 'non-existent external sound source' using a miniature joystick. Well of course - the concept of an off switch does not appear to have occurred to the designers. Maybe ageism is the appropriate strategy for IT systems employment after all. I am only trained to understand logical things - this sort of pointless fashion-driven obfuscation defeats me completely.

Then it was the turn of the KLM e-ticket check in at London Heathrow, another strong contender in a crowded field. I was faced with this at 5am so was not in a terribly good mood anyway. It claims to accept passport, credit card or airline reference number to complete the electronic check-in. It was far from obvious how it would scan a passport or which way up it should be, so I opted for the credit card version. Unfortunately, the recessed slot is too small for big fingers. While I was desperately trying to get the credit card in, it timed out on me and then informed me that I was checked in successfully but didn't issue a boarding card. The second time I tried, I managed to get it in the little hole in time, at which point it checked me in again and invited me to take my bags to "bag drop" but failed to issue a boarding card again. At this point, I decided to use the airline reference number option. This went swimmingly until it asked me for 'the 13 digit airline reference number' and presented a numeric pad. Unfortunately, my airline reference number had 6 letters and numbers. I was getting a bit low by this time so I asked an assistant, (why would they need assistants near their wonderful automated system I wondered idly). The young lady said 'the passport option works best'. This is modern parlance for 'the passport option is the only one that works'. A large number of options later, with some help I managed to check in. At my university, we nail the student's hands to the keyboard if they design systems like this. Only kidding.

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