

Windows for, gulp, warships

I have finally returned from a testing conference in Oz this week predictably jet-lagged and deeply disillusioned at Australian weather. Fortunately my Manchester heritage stood me in good stead and the rain just washed off as of old.

I returned to this: "OSS torpedoed: Royal Navy will run on Windows for Warships." Oh good. Am I alone in thinking that this has to be one of the most terminally stupid IT decisions of the century? For those of you without some of the background on this, this was first attempted in the mid 1990s to be accompanied by a wonderful description of the then latest generation of US missile cruiser, the USS Yorktown, having to be rebooted frequently because its underlying network of computers running Windows NT crashed somewhat inconveniently. Apparently the design is such that critical systems such as steering were lost because of this. You can just imagine this in the middle of a battle.

So here we are again. The decision has this time been made by AMS, a subsidiary of BAe Systems against the advice of its engineers. For the benefit of the AMS decision makers, engineers are the ones who understand engineering as opposed to complicated things like outsourcing, rationalising and organising office parties. It's slightly more up-market than the USS Yorktown using Windows 2000 rather than NT, but that's about all that can be said for it. (According to my own measurements W2000 is about twice as reliable as NT, crashing only about every 2 or 300 hours compared with the mean time between failures of years, enjoyed by standard Linux systems). To compensate for this slight advantage, this one will control the Combat Management System of type 45 destroyers and also Vanguard submarines which includes the UK's Trident thermo-nuclear ballistic missiles.

Not only this but Microsoft in their licensing policy specifically disclaim any version of Windows as being appropriate for safety-critical systems, so I have to say, nice one AMS. I simply cannot begin to imagine the mentality of the people who would collect word-processing and the control of nuclear missiles under the same 'standardised' IT umbrella. I for one would like to know who is responsible in Government for monitoring the engineering background of a decision like this, so let me propose a scenario ...

We go ahead with this crassly stupid decision and some hostile group manages to infiltrate the systems with spyware, viruses and/or worms, (which have increased by a factor of 5 this year alone in Windows systems), and don't for a moment let AMS tell you they can prevent this with Windows 2000. So what do you all think about warships running the same operating system as you have on your home PC which allows uncontrolled popups, crashes unpleasantly frequently, is specifically distanced from suitability for critical systems by its manufacturer, is riddled with intrusions, is effectively impossible to harden and controls nuclear missiles? Well I think it stinks.

Just in case we have nobody in Government prepared to say that this is completely unacceptable in systems of such criticality, here is a useful set of flags for the unfortunate men and women of the Royal Navy who will have to use these systems:- 15 11 5 1 18 5 22 1 9 19. It means "Please Wait".

lesh@leshatton.org