

D3: Software - PC'd off by your PC ?

Les Hatton

Oct 1995

This is the opening article in a regular series on the general subject of software reliability. How it develops is, to a certain extent, dependent on the feedback I get from you the reader, but its a subject you will hear more of as time goes by whatever I do or say. Note that a gallows humour is an essential pre-requisite for the gentle art of watching computers screw things up, so I'll attempt to feature a classic problem each month, with a little bit of analysis to see why it happened, and to convince you just how big a problem is looming.

For example, before you all yawn and reach for your PC, have you ever asked yourself how reliable it is ? I don't mean the hardware, which has an almost legendary reliability now, I mean the software. Each year, you will notice how memory and disks get cheaper and it makes absolutely sod-all difference, because the applications increase in system requirements at about the same rate. PC users tend to report system crashes on a daily basis. So, when I started writing the book John Abbott mentioned in his interview, I thought I would begin a failure log to see how often my latest and greatest Mac 7100/66 PowerPC exhibited a fault, running system 7.5 and equipped with various Microsoft and other bits and pieces of software.

I intend to put the results on the front cover of the book, a decision more than ever re-inforced by the fact that a fault of some kind has occurred every 3 hours 10 minutes of use since July 6th. when I started. Of these, 56% hung the machine, and I would request that a special place in hell be reserved for the authors of Apple Remote Access which was responsible for the majority of these. Microsoft Word, Excel, and the much vaunted Quickdraw GX, which is unable either to print equations or lay out multiple overheads properly, account for most of the rest. Since I don't use a lot else, its probably all the same - the first four times I used AutoRoute, it produced 4 different bugs, one of which sent me in the wrong direction. After an update and numerous faxes, I returned it to the vendor for a refund, which as Glen Myers, the doyen of testing once told me, is the only way things are ever going to improve.

The question is: how would you like your video, package tour aeroplane or car to behave the same way ? More next month ...