

The Wobbles of Windowdom, Sep 2004 - Nov 2004

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Abstract

A diary of experiences with Windows XP after starting work at the University of Kingston in 2004. I have previous experience of XP but as a single user so this gives me a good opportunity to study this Operating System in a large multi-user environment. This in no way is intended as a criticism of my hard-working colleagues in support here, it is merely intended as a diary of just how backward and non-systematic Windows XP and its standard applications are. This is a property of complex highly interwoven monolithic systems like Windows as opposed to modular systems like Unix, Linux and so on. My main reason for emphasising this is the recent decision by AMS, a subsidiary of BAe Systems to use Windows 2000 as the centre-piece of its Combat Management System on warships including the Trident missile submarines.

I haven't crashed XP yet but the long periods where applications just go away essentially amount to an Internal Denial of Service, (IDoS). I kept this up for about a month after which I gave up in disgust.

1 Diary

There follows a day by day, blow by blow account of life with Windows XP. As the reader goes through this, imagine this will be controlling a warship's missile system (soon including thermo-nuclear ballistic systems).

- 22-Sep-2004: The log-in dialog box appears and the mouse goes *behind* it. Support explains that Windows puts it up before its ready to receive input in order to appear faster, (the username goes in but the password field is not accepted). Solution is to wait for some unspecified time and the promise that it will get better. Dire warnings at login about waiting at least a minute but wait, my machine is a high-spec machine I am told so it won't be too bad. This is 2004. Operating Systems have been handling this correctly for the best part of 25 years but Windows decides to present the user with non systematic behaviour in the urgency to get the wallpaper up.

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- 22-Sep-2004: If you are in Exchange and you write a long e-mail, it is perfectly possible for it to be set to time out so that all your work is lost. This happened to me twice before I started writing shorter e-mails. At least it will teach me to be brief. No warning is given and there is no obvious way of preventing it.
- 22-Sep-2004: There is a printer on my machine but there might as well not be. The default choice of the printer immediately puts up the Save As ... file dialog. All efforts to recognise it fail. It used to work until last week. I spent an hour trying to get it going. Why should I bother ?
- 22-Sep-2004: Noticed on the main notice-board that the University System has been infected by MyDeal.B (I think its called).
- 23-Sep-2004: This morning, boot, wait carefully and a message comes up saying could not open tray icon. Click OK, (what does this mean ?) and then up comes the desktop with icons missing. I have no idea why. Yesterday, this didn't happen.
- 23-Sep-2004: If you are in Outlook and you go to Public Folders → LR → Shared Contacts, Outlook logs you out and every attempt to log back with normal username / password fails, repeating the dialog. It also logs you out of the Inbox although that does allow you to log back in.
- 23-Sep-2004: Try to pull Adobe pdf document off the web. Dialog box says that a problem in the configuration (their words) is preventing this, and would I like to fix it. I say yes although I have absolutely no idea what it is I am fixing. Document then comes up normally. When I attempt to close it, I get an illegal instruction trap and have to force close firefox and adobe, close the windows, turn the lights off and go home in despair.
- 24-Sep-2004 → 29-Sep-2004. Away.
- 30-Sep-2004: Logging in at 15:30 takes 15 minutes during which it puts up dialog boxes and ignores all input into them.
- 30-Sep-2004: I open a template file and save a modified version in Word. When I try to close the template it says do I want to save my changes. I say no and it puts up another dialog box asking how I want to save it. Sigh.
- 01-Oct-2004: I created a signature in Outlook. On Save and Close, it automatically checks the box saying include with outgoing mail. I then timed out and on login again, the signature was there but the box was not checked. Today login took 2 minutes instead of 15.
- 01-Oct-2004: Outlook again. It registered a single message in drafts. I tried to delete it and it said it could not delete because it had been deleted already. After I said OK, it then deleted it but it still registers as being in the folder in the left-hand view.

Are you still imagining this controlling a missile cruiser ? Frankly I wouldn't try to control anything more sophisticated than a Powerpoint presentation with it but let's carry on ...

- 02-Oct-2004 → 04-Nov-2004. Didn't use the system.
- 05-Nov-2004 After using webmail for the last few weeks, I switched to Outlook to be able to access common addresses and so on. Duly switched. How do people manage with this heap of junk ? This morning, it took the network nearly two hours to find the server. Once you're in, simply moving a message from one folder to another took 4 minutes. For the first 10 seconds, you get a normal cursor, then the hour-glass appears. The response is glacial at best tending towards tectonic. At least with webmail, you can move messages without visibly ageing in the process.
- 05-Nov-2004 Made a desultory attempt to get my printer to work. Failed. I wonder if I could put some flowers on it ? At least it will look pretty.
- 05-Nov-2004 Outlook finally became unusable by mid-afternoon. It could not find any of the public folders and it even gave "not responding" messages when trying to close a drop-down menu. Relegating it to the toolbar to carry on with something else left the drop-down menu plastered across the middle of the next application. Such quality. Shut it down and gave up. I heard with some relief that everybody else was having problems too.
- I gave up in disgust at this point. I do hope it gets a little better.