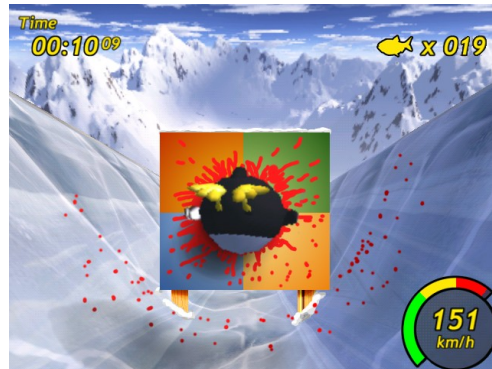# Gates of Hell

Replace Windows with Linux or UNIX if you want but what if it was illegal?

Last year, Ingvar Kamprad, founder of IKEA, pushed Bill Gates off his 'Richest man on the planet' pedestal. The US economy wasn't doing particularly well and many put it down to that. Of course, there might be more to it than the sliding dollar: Linux is becoming increasingly significant; Macs are moving over to Intel; Firefox is ousting Internet Explorer; and, Vista doesn't seem to offer enough to existing users to warrant the hassle of an upgrade. On the face of it, things don't look particularly hopeful for the Redmond money factory and an increase in television advertising seems to reinforce this. So how can Microsoft guarantee its future? How will Bill get back his crown? What would happen if it made the opposition illegal?

Microsoft's key product, like the hardware that it runs on, has come a long way since the days of a little GUI program it called 'Windows' that was based upon someone else's idea and had a clock on it. The first serious attempt was Windows 95 and by the time USB support was fully integrated, in Windows 98, we had a good working OS that filled most jobs.

Now, even with Vista just around the corner, Windows 98SE is still significant. Indeed, I'm writing this using Lotus WordPro97 on a Windows 98SE 200Mhz Pentium MMX machine that has been up for over four and a half months. The word processor does everything I need and takes less than 2 seconds from double-click to running. If it ain't broke, don't mend it.

However, Redmond needs to sell new copies of Windows and is installed by default on all new PCs. Whilst each new incarnation brings innovation and a prettier GUI, they are increasingly inefficient and will only run on the latest hardware. The symbiotic relationship with the hardware manufacturers is a key to Microsoft's future in more ways than one. By the way, can your word processor load in 2 seconds flat?

Even with Macs converting to Intel, Microsoft's biggest threat is Linux. It is: free; stable; genuinely multi-user and network based; supports new hardware; has better security; and, so on. It runs anything from laptops, PCs and large servers to clusters. It is also the natural choice for the $100 computer project (OLPC) and now threatens to create a generation of Linux users. In response, Microsoft can: remove the competition; make Windows better; and, make Windows appear better -- the latter being evident arguably in screenshots of 'the ribbon'. But what about removing the competition?

One answer is the hardware - manufacturers taking steps so that only 'approved' software can run. Another is with lobbyists influencing legislators. If the EU patent system became Americanised, developers could find that the code fragments they'd just written were already owned by someone else.

Alternatively, companies can see what they can get away with - software updates that restrict functionality and compromise systems. From restricting the number of tracks you can play to installing rootkits on your PC, the industry is already getting away with it.

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So, if Microsoft pushed the right buttons at the right time and wiped the PC competition off the face of the Earth, it would only be a matter of time before other server OSes were eliminated too. IT would then be Microsoft. Web servers; cars; aeroplanes; battle ships; tanks; weather forecasting; building-environment-, transport-management-, health-care-, welfare- and national-defence-systems, even your washing machine, would all run only on Windows.

This would present an amazingly vulnerable monoculture. Virus writers and organised crime would exploit security holes designed into software by Microsoft - for example BHOs - or those kept secret until an official patch was made available. We would all be held hostage by any malcontent that could hack into them.

Stability issues concerning critical systems would compromise everything - if you were flying at 30,000 feet and the aeroplane's computer crashed, would it be able to check the hard drive partitions and reboot before the aeroplane itself crashed? A new meaning to the 'Blue Screen Of Death'.

Then there are innovations. 'Take something that's already invented and stick a clock on it' is how innovation is achieved in the post-skills era. HTML email with scripting looks 'good' but their scripts are invaluable to organised crime by providing porn and spam botnets. Giving a word processor a powerful macro scripting language also provides an effective environment for viruses.

If you think that these are bad enough, we have no idea what will come from the USB-flash-drive-with-a-clock generation. Maybe a Windows-based networked refrigerator that displays your schedule - you plan your holiday in Spain and the burglar knows when he can empty the house at his leisure.

It's a good thing that there are dedicated people around, keeping their eyes on the corporations. SCO's attempt to silence Linux is all logged at Groklaw and the Sony BMG rootkit trojan case is blogged all over the 'net. Perhaps common sense will prevail and none of this will happen but don't hold your breath.