

perspectives

Usability: The Final Frontier Lon Warfield

Captain's log, star-date 45.54. The Starship Consolation-prize is orbiting planet Gorm having transported the federal ambassador there to take part in the galactic usability standards conference. While we were docked the ship underwent a low-level re-fit. All systems are now back to normal. We are resuming our exploration duties.'

Having finished his log entry Captain Klick relaxed back into his chair, smiled and addressed his science officer; 'Well Spare, I wonder if the ambassador will persuade the Seedy Romulans to agree to the federations menu layout amendment. I wonder.' He turned to his ensign at the helm. 'OK, Take us out of here ensign Boot, warp factor 2'. A pause, the pattern of stars on the main screen didn't shift. Captain Klick looked back to ensign Boot and said, louder this time; 'OK Boot, take us out of orbit.' Still nothing. Klick glanced round at the rest of the crew and then shouted; 'Ler's go Boot, hit the button.'

Finally Boot turned round in his chair. 'Erm... I'm sorry Captain but I'm not too sure which button it is'. 'What do you mean?' asked Klick aghast. 'Hit the warp drive button.' What was going on? Was this a recurrence of the memory virus they had encountered on the outer reaches of the galactic rim? Apparently it wasn't for Boot replied; 'Well sir, While we were docked in Goms we had release 6.0 of the helm software installed and there seem to be some differences with version 5.6.'

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'I'm sorry ensign?'

'Captain, the upgrade for the helm software has got different button mappings. It's inconsistent with the old one'. Klick stared round. He was the ship's captain, he should be concerned with the high-level decisions about the ship, he shouldn't have to get involved with issues like which release of the helm software they were running. He swung round at Boot again, 'Ensign, didn't they give you a course on the upgrade or something?' Boot's answer was interrupted by the level tones of science officer Sparc. 'Captain the planet Goms is parliamentary oligarchy with a civilization level of only 3, as such they don't have sufficient facilities for refresher courses in helm software upgrades'. Boot nodded vigorously. 'He's right Captain, there were no courses there'.

'Well isn't there a manual or anything?' asked Klick in exasperation. 'You know an old fashioned book on paper with all the details in it?' For the first time in the conversation Boot looked sheepish and avoided Klick's gaze. 'Well yes there is, but I lent it to Captain Poke while we were in the space port and he forgot to give it back to me before we left.'

Klick rolled his eyes upwards in disbelief. Take things easy now. He was a space captain with a highly qualified and trained crew, when in doubt; delegate. 'First officer Sparc, you're the science officer, can you sort this out?' Sparc's eyebrows raised slightly. 'I'm Sorry Captain but my totally logical Vormal upbringing renders me completely unable to comprehend the complexities of your human software products.'

Klick was starting to realize that this was going to be another of those usability problems that he just couldn't delegate. He was going to have to solve it himself with as little fuss as possible. If word of this got back to Star Command it would be disastrous. A phrase from his past floated into his head; 'If you want to know about software, ask a computer', who had told him that? Was it Commander Decker way back when he was in cadet school? Decker was always giving advice, time to try some of it out. 'Computer'. There was a pause, no response. 'Computer'. Still no response. Had the computer voice recognition system also had some awful upgrade?

'Computer, computer...' Suddenly a metallic voice filled the bridge. 'Working... working...

working, working'. Captain Klick tried not to let the relief show on his face. 'Computer, during the re-fit on Goms were you programmed with information on the helm control software release 6.0?'

'Affirmative.' came the reply. Why couldn't the stupid thing just say 'yes' for once, it was even worse than talking to Sparc. 'Computer, explain how release 6.0 differs from the previous release.'

'Affirmative, for information about how release 6.0 differs from the previous release please refer to section 148.3 in chapter 482 of the user manual supplied with the upgrade.'

Commander Decker had long ago retired from teaching at cadet school but Klick still had occasion to meet him at ceremonial events. The next time that they met up Klick wasn't going to listen to any of his stupid reminiscences. He was going to give him a piece of his mind for once.

He turned to his science officer again, 'Sparc, what about the Vormal mind meld, could that help us?'

'Captain, carrying out a Vormal mind meld with a bug ridden human software upgrade would involve a 98 percent chance of me dying. As such I think that it is inadvisable in the circumstances'. Was he lying? wondered Klick. Vormals can't lie, but Sparc was half human...

'Right, there's nothing for it, well just have to contact Captain Poke then. We know he's got at least one set of the manuals'. The last few words of this he directed fiercely at the back of ensign Boot's head. 'Lieutenant Nettie, open a communication channel with the U.S.S. Eisenhower and... put it on the main screen so that we can all see it', He wasn't going to let ensign Boot forget this in a hurry. 'Roger Captain, do you want an STP or a UTP communication channel?'

'Which ever's best Nettie', replied Klick restraining himself. 'And what Baud rate shall I use, Captain?'

'Nettie, It's very simple, I just want to be able to talk to Captain Poke!'

'Very good Sir, communication channel established, UTP based, baud rate of 59.2 M, with a built in cross in the route and using POP7 protocol and...'

Captain Klick swung his glazed expression

to face the main screen as Captain Poke's face loomed into view smiling. 'U.S.S. Eisenhower, Captain Poke here, what can I do for you Jim?'

'Captain, Poke. I understand you have in your possession manuals for the latest release of the helm software belonging to ensign Boot of the U.S.S. Consolation-prize. We would appreciate their return as soon as possible.' Captain Poke's face blurred as he leaned back to speak to a crew member. A few seconds later it swam into focus again. 'Sorry Jim, we don't know where they are, but we have the manuals for release 5.6 if that will help.' 'No, we need the new manuals'. 'Waita minute', Poke was leaning out of shot again, 'My science officer has just had a clever idea'. Klick groaned inwardly, there ought to be a law about clever ideas from science officers, Poke continued, 'My helmsman has got release 6.0 installed and running, he's got all the old button patterns set up with a special setup file he's written so the whole thing still behaves like release 5.6. What we can do is copy his setup file over to you via sub-space communication channels and then you'll have no problems.'

Klick was ready to try anything, he raised his voice and addressed his crew. 'Ensign Boot, Lieutenant Nettie, stand by to copy over the

setup file from the U.S.S. Eisenhower'. There was a frenzy of activity as both crews discussed transfer protocols and file formats. Klick's mind wandered to the halcyon days in the Star Command Officer's Training Corps when helm control was carried out with punched cards and software upgrades happened every five years instead of every two weeks as it now seemed. Klick's reveries were interrupted by someone shouting, He looked up at the main screen. The stars were whizzing past, the leap to warp-speed had been made. The distances measured in light years were flashing past almost unnoticed. Time and space bent and gave way under the mighty forces harnessed by the anti-matter drive units. He tightened his grip on the arms of his chair even though in the control room there was no hint of the colossal energies powering them at light speed through the cosmos. This was why he joined Star Command. This was why he became a captain. 'Well done Boot', he whispered through his gritted teeth. Boot looked up confused, 'Oh, Sorry Captain, we're still working on it, that's just the new screen saver that comes with release 6.0'. ☺

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