The Right (Platform) Tool For the Job(s).

Don MacVittie, 2011-11-05

One of my hobbies is modeling – mostly for wargaming but also for the sake of modeling. In an average year I do a lot of WWII models, some modern military, some civilian vehicles, figures from an array of historical timeperiods and the occasional sci-fi figure for one of my sons… The oldest (24 y/o) being a WarHammer 40k player and the youngest (3 y/o) just plain enjoying anything that looks like a robot. While I have been modeling more or less for decades, only in the last five years have I had the luxury of owning an airbrush, and then I restrict it to very limited uses – mostly base-coating larger models like cars, tanks, or spaceships.

The other day I was reading on my airbrush vendor's website and discovered that they had purchased a competitor that specialized in detailing airbrushes – so detailed that the line is used to decorate fingernails. This got me to thinking that I could do more detailed bits on models – like shovel blades and flesh-tones with an airbrush if I had one of these little detail brushes. Lori told me to send her a link to them so that she had it on the list for possible gifts, so I went out and started researching which model of the line was most suited to my goals. The airbrush I have is one of the best on the market – a Badger Airbrush Company model 150. It has dual-action, which means that pushing down on the trigger lets air out, and pulling the trigger back while pushing down lets an increasing amount of paint flow through. I use this to determine the density of paint I'm applying, but have never thought too much about it. Well in my research I wanted to see how much difference there was between my airbrush and the Omni that I was interested in. The answer… Almost none. Which confused me at first, as my airbrush, even with the finest needle and tip available and a pressure valve on my compressor to control the amount of air being pumped through it, sprays a lot of paint at once.

So I researched further, and guess what? The volume of paint adjustment that is controlled by how far you draw back the trigger, combined with the PSI you allow through the regulator will control the width of the paint flow. My existing airbrush can get down to 2mm – sharpened pencil point widths. I have a brand-new fine tip and needle (in poor lighting I confused my fine needle with my reamer and bent the tip a few weeks ago, so ordered a new one), my pressure regulator is a pretty good one, all that is left is to play with it until I have the right pressure, and I may be doing more detailed work with my airbrush in the near future. Airbrushing isn't necessarily better – for some jobs I like the results better, like single-color finishes, because if you thin the paint and go with several coats, you can get a much more uniform worn look to surfaces – but overall it is just different. The reason I would want to use my airbrush more is, simply time. Because you don't have to worry about crevices and such (the air blows paint into them), you don't have to take nearly as long to paint a given part with an airbrush as you do with a brush. At least the base coat anyway, you still need a brush for highlighting and shadowing… Or at least I do… But it literally cuts hours off of a group of models if I can arrange one trip down to the spray area versus brush-painting those same models.

What does all of this have to do with IT? The same thing it usually does. You have a ton of tools in your datacenter that do one job very well, but you have never had reason to look into alternate uses that the tool might do just as well or better at. This is relatively common with Application Delivery Controllers, where they are brought in just to do load balancing, or just for application acceleration, or just for WAN Optimization, and the other things that the tool does just as well haven't been explored. But you might want to do some research on your platforms, just to see if they can serve other needs than you're putting them to today. Let's face it, you've paid for them, and in many cases they will work as-is or with a slight cost add-on to do even more. It is worth knowing what "more" is for a given product, if for no other reason than having that information in your pocket when exploring solutions going forward.

A similar situation is starting to develop with our ARX family of products, and no doubt with some competitors also (though I haven't heard of it from competitors, I'm simply conjecturing) – as ARX grows in its capabilities, many existing customers aren't taking advantage of the sweet new tools that are available to them for free or for a modest premium on their existing investment. ARX Cloud Extender is the largest case of this phenomenon that I know of, but this week's EMC Atmos announcement might well go a long way to reconcile that bit. To me it is very cool that ARX can virtualize your NAS devices AND include cloud and/or object storage alongside NAS so as to appear to be one large pool of storage. Whether you're a customer or not, it's worth checking out.

Of course, like my airbrush, you'll have some learning to do if you try new things with your existing hardware. I'll spend a couple of hours with the airbrush figuring out how to make reliable lines of those sizes, then determine where best to use it. While I could have achieved the same or similar results with masking, the time investment for masking is large and repetitive, the dollar cost is repetitive. I also could have paid a large chunk of money for a specialized detail airbrush, but then I'd have two tools to maintain, when one will do it all… And this is true of alternatives to learning new things about your existing hardware – the learning curve will be there whether you implement new functionality on your existing platforms or purchase a point solution, best to figure out the cost in time and money to solve the problem from either direction. Often, you'll find the cost of learning a new function on familiar hardware is much lower than purchasing and learning all new hardware.

WWII Russians – vehicle is airbrushed, figures not.

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