

Column: From Editor
Figures: NONE
File for Companion Disk: None

A Little Too Much LSD

Whil Hentzen

A friend of mine recently used the term "A little too much LSD" as in "I think he used a little too much LSD in the sixties." The flippant manner in which this was bandied about unnerved me. I didn't think to ask what the proper amount of LSD was.

If I had, the first words out of his mouth would have been "What I meant to say was..."

We hear this phrase a lot in our business, don't we? (By "we" I mean "both you and me", not "me and my slaves at the office.") Why? Because humans aren't by default filled with rigor. By nature, we're analog creatures, not digital. Thus, we have a lot of room for error built in. We can be fuzzy and get away with it. Who else would try to program a digital computer - whose entire existence relies on the difference between "0" and "1" - to be inexact? <g> Not the Archilleans. Not those Apes that Charlton Heston battled three decades ago. And we can guarantee that Tribbles wouldn't even dream of it.

But humans would.

Anyway, I'm digressing. This lack of rigor causes problems when we do battle with, er, I mean, work with customers. We think it's pretty clear when we say, "I'll have the first build ready next Monday." You would likely think it's pretty reasonable to interpret this statement as "We'll have an executable that we'll have to install by hand to see if it will run on that piece of junk you've given us as a test machine."

They, of course, interpret it completely differently. They could well expect a package with a freshly burned CD, a bulletproof installation routine, complete documentation, and full test data. Even though they've still got twenty five or thirty items on their "To Do" list that they haven't gotten around to yet.

I once had a customer who spent two hours arguing with me about the meaning of the word "replace." The entire sentence in question was along the lines of "The new Windows-based XYZ system will completely replace the old DOS-based ABC system." They still felt that all of the old functionality would still be in the new system - including hot-keys, cursor movements, and a myriad of other features. We wrote a 150-page specification with screen shots and descriptions of every control on every screen, and were pretty darn explicit that "it is up to you to confirm that every feature and function you are expecting is described in this document."

However, they argued that since we earlier said "completely replace", all of those DOS features should still have been included in the new Windows version, even though they weren't shown or described anywhere in the specification.

I dunno. I can see their point. They promised their bosses something without reading the spec, and got into hot water. How many of you want to read through three pounds of paper - isn't it just easier to assume that "it's all in there"? That aforementioned lack of rigor rears its ugly head.

I'm guessing that this type of issue isn't going to go away, no matter how the tools and environments evolve.

What does "replace" mean, after all? If I go to the car dealership, and explain I want to replace my 1987 RX-7, do they sell me another 1987 RX-7? Or when I buy a brand new Corvette, can I go back and complain because this new two-seater sports car has an eleven-year-old rotary engine in it? I did say "replace", didn't I?

What I meant to say was...