



You Want Reality Computing? You Can't *Handle* Reality Computing!

It's April. Time for the annual Systems and Software Technology Conference, and I'm sitting on another airline flight writing a BACKTALK column. Some things don't change much. On the other hand, some do.

I am flying to Salt Lake City from Detroit, where I teach college part-time. For the past 10 years, I have flown into and out of Detroit, usually on Delta airlines. For the last nine years, Delta has used the L.C. Smith Terminal – an older terminal, but convenient. To fly out, rental car busses dropped you off near the ticket counter; it was a short walk to the gate. Flying in was a breeze – the luggage pickup was within 50 yards of the rental car pickup.

Last month, in an effort to upgrade, the Detroit airport has expanded its new terminal, and Delta has relocated there. The new terminal is both modern and pretty, but not as functional. You have to walk about a mile to get from the ticket counter to the gate, or back from the gate to the luggage pickup. To get from rental car drop-off to the ticket counter involves walking several hundred yards, negotiating revolving doors while carrying luggage, and two escalators. Once you have your ticket, getting to the gate involves three escalators, four moving walkways, and an underground corridor that has varying mood lighting and sound, supposedly to invoke images of a thunderstorm. Just what I want – dimming lights when I am trying to replace items in my pockets from security, and see how to step on and off of moving walkways.

Modern is not always better. Perhaps I am becoming set in my ways, but new is not always better. As another example, what happened to good old-fashioned humor on television? When I turn on the television, I want entertainment. I miss Seinfeld. The other night on TV, I had my choice of several reality dramas. I haven't figured out the reality of these shows. Personally, I have never been (a) stranded on a deserted island trying to survive without fire, or (b) traversing the African continent without enough frequent-flyer points to get a plane ticket home.

Somehow, knowing there is a film crew and a sound team supporting me would take the actual survival drama out of the

situation. I can't figure out why they don't just break one of the cameras and use the metal pieces (or even the batteries) to create sparks and discover fire!

Unfortunately, Seinfeld probably won't return. I'd settle for a good rip-off. It seems, however, that the trend is more and more absurd reality television. Perhaps what we need are topics that are more realistic. How about a reality show that shows the real world? I have an idea for a show about reality computing: It would have scenarios that include the following computing classics, guaranteed to provide huge ratings.

First, how about being able to vote off end-users who can't seem to agree on requirements? Once a week, we get the developers together, and they get to write down the names of the most unsupportive and unresponsive subject matter expert (SME). The SME voted off would have to work for six months testing the effectiveness of varying brands of odor eaters in Iraq.

Next, by the same token, end-users get to vote off the developer who added the most useless feature to their system. Those voted off would be forced to work converting legacy Fortran.

OK, you're right. These ideas are too realistic. Reality shows require some believability, but not too much. What we need are ideas that would provide some reality, but are enough removed from actual life to entertain and amuse. I have a couple of ideas that I think would be funny, but non-realistic enough to not only entertain and amuse, but also draw high ratings. In my first idea, developers are mandated to develop systems using a new language – but no (or few) compilers, tool sets, or trained personnel would be available. There would be incentives to develop supporting toolsets and compilers. Just about the time supporting software and personnel become available, tell the developers, "Just kidding," and entice them not to use the new language. In fact, let them develop mission-critical software with languages that perform no range checking, parameter checking, type checking, or memory protection. Imagine the hilarity and laughs from this hypothetical scenario! There would be a million laughs a minute as developers scramble to track

down invalid pointers. The thrill of locating that last uninitialized variable while delivery deadlines slip and costs rise would keep viewers glued to their seats.

For my second idea, let's take obsolete standards for developing software and update them so they actually work. Make them a new standard. Then just as the new standard becomes useful, remove it as a standard and tell developers to simply use best practices. Don't define what the best practices are. Imagine the chaos and the chortles that will result! In fact, to really facilitate the humor, we could cut funding to organizations that provide software support and quality improvement.

In my third idea, top-level managers are tantalized with new processes that aren't processes. Let's give these almost-processes appealing names like "Flexible Methodology" or "Maximum Programming." Show policy makers that these almost-processes work (and work well) for smaller, non-critical applications. Then, tempt managers to apply these almost-processes to large-scale mission-critical programs. It is always a real side-splitting laugh to watch folks learn over and over that, on large-scale mission-critical systems, you can't skip things like formal interface design, configuration management, documentation management, quality assurance, and requirements engineering. The hysterical guffaws from applying lightweight processes and free-fall coding practices on complex systems guarantees a laugh riot every minute!

I don't know about you, but I think the above scenarios – which, granted, are quite far-fetched and unrealistic – would provide just about the humor television needs. In fact, after 31 years of developing, managing, and supporting Department of Defense software, these ideas make me laugh all the time.

Oh yeah. We need a name for our reality show. Funny, the only name I can come up with is "Survivor" – but it's already taken.

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