Software Odd to See

I received a message from Dave Cook, principal engineering consultant for the Software Technology Support Center, who was scheduled to compose the BackTalk commentary for this issue. He came down with laryngitis and has doctor's orders not to speak for two days. Now that would be an interesting sight. Asking Dave Cook not to chatter for two days is like asking Mick Jagger to line dance. He asked if I would fill in. Sure Dave, I know how it is when the voice goes; the mind can't be far behind. Have fun in New Orleans – at the Software Engineering Process Group Conference.

I called Pam, CrossTalk's managing editor, to ascertain the issue's theme. The reception on my cell phone was shoddier than a tube laden TV in a thunderstorm. I thought I heard her say the theme was "Software Odd to See, 2001." Certainly odd to me, but you know these imaginative journalists are always trying to be more creative than Ron Popeil at an infomercial convention. So I went with it.

What's odd in the software industry in 2001? I'll tell you what's odd. It's odd to see Y2K consultants, who scared the cash flow out of clients, flipping burgers at McDonalds because they invested their spoils in the latest dot-com craze. It's odd to see investors astonished by their high tech, no sweat, easy bet, Internet companies deflating faster than a helium balloon at a frat party.

It's odd to see engineers plaster their cubicles with Dilbert cartoons and grouse when they get passed over for management positions. It's odd to see project managers spend more time in process improvement meetings than with their customers. It's odd to see customers willing to pay more money for software from a company that has a higher capability maturity level. I thought they had better quality, leading to less defects, and thus reduced costs?

It's odd to see the Capability Maturity Model grow more appendages than a Siamese twin millipede. It's even odder to see experts try to integrate those independent appendages into a cohesive model. But most odd to see are customers clamoring for this new model like contestants during a Survivor immunity challenge.

It's odd to see software engineers more interested in the means (tools, language, process, etc.) rather than the results (customer satisfaction). It's odd to see software consultants who have never worked a complete project. Industry reference checks are about as scrupulous as a Clinton pardon review.

It's odd to see the most effective process in the industry – inspections – get the least amount of press. It's odd to see an industry, striving so hard to be an engineering discipline, naively jump on every technology bandwagon that drives through town. It's odd to see 75percent of the English language prefixed with the letter "e."

It's odd to see software processes constructed with all the demure expertise of Lucy and Ethel boxing chocolates. It's odd to see Software Engineering Process Groups, trying to improve organizational maturity, acting like Barney Fife on his fifth cup of coffee. Even odder is the rank and file blindly accepting KPA after KPA, like an inebriated Otis checking into jail, never questioning why or what for.

It's odd that after 10 years of rapid technological advances the words "paperless office" have left our vocabulary. After living through the Ada Dynasty, it's odd to see C++ being used on government projects. It's odd to see that a "CASE tool" is once again something you carry work in, to and from the office.

What's really odd to see is continued promotion of the best engineers into management. Didn't the Beatles teach us that writing great songs is not a good prerequisite for running the record company? It's odd to see software engineers promoted to management, suddenly and inexplicably bestowed with years of management wisdom. What's to learn? No need for training here.

Of course software is odd to see. It's intangible. You can see your keyboard, mouse, and monitor. If you splash water on your monitor you can see pixels. But you can't see software. Many attribute that fact to all that is odd in the industry.

If you really want to see something odd take these issues to your boss and ask for enlightenment. The rationalization will be as easy to understand as Jar Jar Binks, on Novocain, reciting Shakespeare. What an Odyssey.

– Gary Petersen, Shim Enterprise Inc.