Letters

Rebuttal: Them windmills got teeth!

To the Editor:

Last issue's IEEE Micro contained a letter to the editor about standards from Fletcher J. Buckley. In it I am accused of tilting at windmills. Fletcher is a former Computer Society Vice President for Standards, and as such he should be well acquainted with many of the problems in developing new standards. He and I also have spent much time looking over each other's shoulders to "keep the other honest," as they say, in handling the development of new standards.

On the issue of publishing draft standards, Fletcher refers to two requirements of the Computer Society's Policies and Procedures Manual (that he substantially wrote and I substantially objected to). These are (1) written permission must be obtained from the sponsoring technical committee chair (it establishes his responsibility for technical content), and (2) written permission must be obtained from the CS VP for Standards, acknowledging that all proper procedures have been followed.

Three important issues arise:

- The above-referenced requirements were instituted 18 months ago. Traditionally, the sponsor alone could approve the publication of a draft under its sponsorship. No specific responsibility rested with individuals for technical content or procedural certification. The technical committee sponsors did not agree to the assigning of such responsibility.
- Some TC chairs feel that they may be libel for future legal action if they approve a draft for publication, since they are responsible for technical content. In fact, the publication is often designed for the interested technical community to review and look for flaws.
- IEEE standards are developed by a consensus process; the procedures followed are not democratically determined. The rules and procedures are established by committees higher in the Society/Institute bureaucracy than those—like sponsors and working groups—which must comply. For example, the CS policies and procedures were written by a small committee and approved by the CS Board of Governors.

Further, the bylaws of the IEEE Standards Board clearly state that the "Standards Board is responsible on an institute-wide basis...to encourage, coordinate and supervise the development of IEEE standards." Nowhere can we find written delegation of any of this responsibility to individual societies. There are specific duties required of the sponsor of a standards development activity; these are spelled out in the IEEE Standards Manual.

But, back to publishing unapproved drafts. The IEEE Standards Manual states, "The practice is deprecated by the Standards Board." Further, the manual states about trial-use standards, "This is a preferred alternative to the widespread distribution of unapproved drafts." In other words, Fletcher, the IEEE official policy is to not publish unapproved (by the Standards Board) draft standards if possible. Exceptions have been made.

Fletcher also takes a pot shot at the MSC and its sponsor, the Technical Committee on Microprocessors and Microcomputers. I do not like being cast in the role of apologist for something that requires no apologies. I do feel that the record needs to be set straight.

The MSC, as the standards subcommittee of the TCMM, has oversight responsibility for all facets of standards development under the TCMM, including both technical content and procedural correctness. It is to the MSC that the TCMM chair turns for assurance that an unapproved document is correct, by virtue of its having been examined by and formally voted upon by the MSC. Among the MSC membership are some of the best brains in the Institute on matters concerning microprocessors and microcomputers.

The procedures for standards developed under TCMM sponsorship (which are nonexistent according to Fletcher) require that after a working group reports its draft out of committee, it must be approved by the MSC before proceeding to the TCMM sponsor ballot. Usually this vote is taken at a meeting by a show of hands. (MSC members receive the draft in the mail from the working group the previous month.) The minutes that detail the vote
are widely distributed. Very rarely has approval been denied and a draft returned to committee by the MSC. Lately, some working groups such as P896 Futurebus have opted for a formal mail ballot of the MSC in lieu of the meeting vote. This was originally instituted when inadequate notice of the impending vote was given by the working group. This process, however, can add months of delay to the progress of a draft standard and is not recommended.

Fletcher Buckley takes a parting shot in his letter by claiming that the MSC has no written procedures. Very strange. How can he say it? He was the very one who was instrumental in our creating a written document enumerating those procedures as they have been practiced. Furthermore, he was one of the first to review that document. The MSC policies and procedures have been followed by the MSC for many years. Although they have evolved over the past eight years, they have been substantially stable for the last six years. The MSC pulled these procedures together into a draft document to facilitate formal adoption. Fletcher continues to push for those procedures to be enacted in the same manner that he used to institute procedures for the development of software engineering standards under the SESS subcommittee.

But now the proverbial fan has exploded. In no uncertain terms we have been told by the VP Standards and others that there is no authority for enacting such procedures. Catch 22! The MSC is damned either way. Sub rosa we are informed to carry on business as usual. This is very difficult to do since we now have a rebel working group chair who contends that the MSC has no authority over him and his group. Well, it does keep the MSC meetings lively. (You wouldn’t have believed the November 1986 meeting.)

A last response to Fletcher. All of the proposed standards brought through the MSC to the IEEE Standards Board ARE currently in effect. Some took six months, some six years. One even withstood an appeal to the Standards Board from an antagonistic group. The MSC has 27 standards projects now in progress. The TCMM calendar for this year averages more than one sponsor ballot on a new proposed standard each month.

So, Fletcher, I see the TCMM as a most productive and careful standards sponsor. Proposals are well scrutinized. Why not let a well-functioning group continue its exemplary work and perhaps contribute to whatever formalization of procedures are necessary? You can stop playing the picador.

Copies of the MSC Policies and Procedures (draft) are available from me on request. Please send $1 for postage, etc., to 3428 Greer Road, Palo Alto, CA 94303.

Michael Smolin

Reader Interest Survey

Indicate your interest in this department by circling the appropriate number on the Reader Interest Card.

High 186 Medium 187 Low 188

From the Editor-in-Chief

continued from p. 3

just smaller information. We went to 100-percent black-and-white pages inside the magazine. All vended work was closely monitored so costs could be reduced as much as possible. The bottom line was that we made our first-ever profit—about $30,000. This amounts to a little over $1 per subscriber, hardly what could be considered excessive.

Now I shall address a sensitive issue, because I feel that you have a right to know. We have two categories of professionals working for IEEE Micro: part-time, unpaid volunteers and full-time, salaried professionals. We volunteers give the magazine technical direction, review contributed articles, write articles and columns, and send all of the work to Los Alamitos, California. There, our full-time staff (two people, Marie English and Joe Schallan) edit, copy edit, interface, coordinate, assist, generate text, lay out the magazine, assemble the cover, arrange for typesetting, proof (usually late into the night), and see that the magazine is printed and mailed. During this process, they share resources such as art generation with other Society magazines. The other functions at Los Alamitos, such as the publisher, advertising director, magazine promotion, and others, are shared by all of the magazines.

Our full-time professionals are among the best in the business. I say this not as hype but as a fact. We have lost a number of them to the commercial trade press, mostly because of the attraction of a higher salary. This occurred despite the fact that the trade press, in general, is also suffering in this slump. The Society has performed a compensation study, and it is now being implemented. This effort will raise our costs, but it is worth it to retain these professionals and thereby our high quality.

We are not sitting still in 1987. We are planning an even better IEEE Micro. We shall continue to give you the technical depth in articles and columns, such as MicroStandards and MicroLaw, that you cannot get elsewhere. We will be defining articles more closely to the needs of our readers, soliciting articles on interesting new topics, as well as publishing those that are submitted without solicitation and meet our criteria. We are becoming more international. This issue focuses on an exclusive in-depth look at TRON, a new technology from Japan. October will focus on technology in IEEE Region 8 (Europe and the Middle East).

To improve our breadth of readership and financial health, we will be actively soliciting new subscribers and investigating new avenues of doing this. We have a new advertising manager, and we will be performing a study to generate more advertising revenue.

Since you have not renewed, I will mail you a copy of this issue from my home. It is my hope that you will take the time to read this issue, and reconsider your decision. In the near future I doubt that IEEE Micro will be "free" like the commercial trade magazines. I do think that we are worth the money.

Best regards,

Jim Farrell

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