

From the Editor

It's Not That Sexy. Well, OK, It Actually Is.

Whil Hentzen

Most guys, when they get home from a really long day at work, probably settle down with a copy of Sports Illustrated, or Golf Digest, or Road and Track and Field and Stream. A few of you probably go for the new copy of PC Magazine, or perhaps Wired, if you're trying to fruitlessly maintain some semblance of youth. Over the past month, I've blown off every magazine I get, instead choosing to spend my few free minutes with a book by G. Pascal Zachary entitled Showstopper!, the saga that details the creation of Windows NT. My wife has long stopped being curious why I'm spending late evenings reading about a new operating system, but every once in a while, I'll step outside of myself and ponder if it's normal. Then I'll frantically turn the page, because I can't go to bed until I find out how the latest cliffhanger comes out - whether Allen was able to quash that bug in the graphics icon rewrite routine in time for the final build for Beta 1.

The fascinating part of this book, however, is not the decision of whether the team is going to go with the new, radical file system (they did) or if it they were going to be able to get it to run in 8 MB (they didn't). Rather, it's the stories of the people behind the scenes and how they built a rock-solid, robust (if somewhat memory hungry and sluggish) operating system out of a mishmash of white board scribbles, broken dreams from other companies, and long term guesses about where the industry might head. If you pick up this tome, you'll meet folks like Dave Cutler and Eric Fogelin. Cutler, a fossil in terms of relative age, but described by a number of people as knowing more about operating systems than anyone else on the planet, ran the entire NT project. Eric Fogelin, who by chance ended up applying for a technical support job at Microsoft one day because he was knocking around the west coast and was running low on cash, moved a cot into his office because he lived 90 minutes away from Redmond and he'd committed to producing 13 manuals for a release less than 8 months away.

As you get engrossed in the story, you get swept up by the passion and zeal - and panic - felt by these folks as they tried to wrestle with a program that was, arguably, the most demanding program ever to run on a PC platform. You watch as deadline upon deadline slips, due to miscommunication of specs, feature creep, limited resources, and unanticipated technical hurdles. You live with them as they drop hobbies, lose friends, have their electricity and water turned off because they forgot about paying bills, and find their marriages break up, all in the quest of the operating system of the next decade.

And you grow more and more envious of them. It sounds grand, romantic, exciting and, yes, in this day and age, sexy. And we're just like them. We're the last of the cowboys - the adventurers of the electronic frontier (sorry, that **does** sound pretty putrid, doesn't it?) We're the only ones who brag about 20 hour days, leaving work one day and finding out the U.S.A. invaded another country - three days ago - and having weeks measured by empty cases of Jolt and discarded wrappers of Twinkies. Les Pinter put it very eloquently a year or so ago - bankers and lawyers don't go to parties and brag about staying up till four A.M. working on a loan or rewriting an appeal, but they'll strut around the cock of the walk after cobbling together a program and three screens that seem to work over 90% of the time.

As I write this editorial, the longest unbroken string of sleep I've had in about a week has been five hours. Last night was worse than most - but still typical - calls at 7, 9:30, midnight, 2 AM, 5:30, 8:00 and 9:30. The application is a complete rewrite of a mission-critical (that means 24 hours/day, accessible remotely by approximately 25,000 sites around the country) application that is tied to seasonal events. In other words, the deadline was not imposed by some power-hungry bureaucrat who picked some arbitrary date, but was due to external constraints that couldn't be altered. The customer had their previous developer bail on them four weeks before the app was to go live, and was left with partial specs and a previous version that was your basic model of how to keep things a secret. To compound matters, a cornerstone of the application was

the import of a number of data files from various sources, and the suppliers of those data files were both late with the file layouts and made numerous changes to the layouts over the four weeks.

Well, that's what we do - write code and ship apps. And here was another opportunity for adventure - the 20 hours days, the cot in the office, and a chance to help improve Coca-Cola Inc.'s profits again. I shifted workloads around so that the whole shop was able to help out in the effort of getting this guy out the door.

After seeing John nearly fall asleep on his feet after two consecutive 16 hour days at the office (he has a 70 minute drive home), and then watching Shauna leave work Monday night (well, it was really Tuesday morning) at about 2:20 with enormous bags under her eyes, I started thinking that maybe this wasn't that exciting after all. It looked pretty cool, Clint Eastwood riding into town, shooting the bad guys, getting the girl (for a while, at least), and then riding into the sunset with a fistful of dollars. But you didn't see the four days on a horse that smelled better than he did. The festering blisters weren't obvious, either. And the breakfast, lunch and dinner of canned beans just didn't seem as funny as it did in Blazing Saddles. The romance isn't quite there when the mercury doesn't dip below 95 and a rusty canteen of warm water is the only drink you've got until the weekend.

So, in retrospect, it didn't seem that cool to bill 88 hours in five days. We couldn't figure out where the fun was. It was just hard work and we're all exhausted.

But I'll wait, and we'll swap stories in a couple of weeks. We'll have our little in-jokes and sly references to goofy customers with outlandish expectations. Despite our best attempts at describing the events, the new people coming on board are going to wonder what they missed. They'll have to wait till the next customer emergency to become indoctrinated into the secret society of software development.

I think maybe I won't check out who's hiring bankers in the Sunday paper after all.