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Editor's View

Living with Change

Sometimes we don't even notice things changing. That's probably good.

By Tamar E. Granor

I visited my old high school recently to speak at their annual Career Day. I got a lot from my four years at this public all-girls academic high school and I'm happy to go back and give the students what I can.

I've been there a number of times in the 22 years since I graduated and each time is a little stranger. The building looks mostly the same, but I spoke in a room filled with computers. When I went to school there, there were two rooms filled with typewriters and the closest thing to a computer in the building was a teletype machine connected to a mainframe at the Board of Education.

The halls were filled with campaign signs for upcoming school elections. In my time there, we used poster board and markers (called "Magic Markers" in those days); most of the signs I saw carried the telltale graphics of PrintShop.

The girls I spoke to were truly stunned when I told them that my class was the first to be allowed to wear pants for our entire four years there—before we entered, the dress code required skirts or dresses, even on the coldest winter days.

A few of my former teachers are still there now, but it's sobering to realize that most of them were younger when I had them than I am now.

Change can be like that—subtle, yet substantial. As application developers, we deal with change practically every day. But sometimes it's not until we stop and reflect that we notice the magnitude of the change.

With my book finished and at the publisher, I had time this winter and spring to take care of a number of tasks that have been on my "to do" list.

First, I replaced my notebook computer and at just about the same time, I finally decided to take the plunge and upgrade all my machines to Windows NT. This led to several days of installing and configuring and bothering more knowledgeable friends on the phone and generally feeling aggravated about the whole thing. On my desktop machine, it turned out that NT can only see my CD-ROM drive if I boot to DOS first, then reboot to NT—it took several weeks of fiddling and tech support calls to figure that one out.

Configuring two machines made me realize how much things have changed in a very short time. The last time I bought a new PC for myself (about two and a half years ago), every single piece of software was installed from floppy disks. Since that machine was a notebook with only a 3 1/2" disk drive, I had to copy some 5 1/4" floppies onto 3 1/2". This time around, more than half of what I installed (including Windows NT itself) came

off a CD-ROM. I can't imagine buying a computer without a CD-ROM drive today. Nor can I imagine buying one with a 5 1/4" drive.

Along with the change to NT, I made some software changes. First, since it made sense to me to run 32 bit applications on a 32 bit operating system, I upgraded to Office 95 (which also works in NT). I spend a lot of time in Word and, for the most part, this was a painless upgrade. However, the two dialogs I use the most (File-Open and File-Save As) have significant changes, not so much in functionality as in how you get to it. They both seem designed more to smooth the way for newer users than to make life easy for power users like me. It's been a number of months now and I'm still cursing at a couple of the changes.

I also upgraded my CompuServe off-line reader. Though I'm using a later (and much better) version of the reader I've used for years, enough was different that it took me several days to get used to the new keystrokes. There are still a few things I'm not sure how to do.

Late winter and early spring was also the time for me to check out the Internet. I acquired both a Web browser and, with the opening of the Microsoft newsgroups, an offline newsgroup reader. Although these are both Windows applications, I'm still figuring out how to make each of them work for me.

The rate of change in our industry is both frightening and exhilarating. It seems that we're constantly having to learn something new. Microsoft's stated policy is that they want to upgrade every application every 12 to 18 months. No sooner do you start to feel comfortable with one version than it's time to start learning another.

I enjoy the challenge of learning new things (and fortunately am pretty good at it). But living this way makes me wish two things. First, just for a little while every now and then, I'd like to rest on my laurels and just work with what I've learned without having to really dig into something new. Second and more reasonable, I wish folks would take standards more seriously. Make your applications conform to existing standards, even if the standard isn't the best it could be. Let last year's learning apply to this year's product.

On another front, all these changes, some of which involved configuration stuff, reminded me how much I hate dealing with hardware. I want to buy a computer, install my software, and never have to think about what's inside again. I'm a software developer and user and I don't want to know about IRQs and DMAs and other TLAs (three-letter acronyms). Plug-and-Play sounds like it was made for me. I'll be watching carefully over the next months and years to see if it really works.