

Developer on the Move

By Dr. Neil Roodyn

From the USA I flew out to Europe, after a short stop in London to say hello to family and friends I headed to Denmark. I have spent some considerable time in Denmark in the past and this article recalls a conversation I had with a good friend of mine Carsten Jørgensen while I was there.

The Impossible Dream

One of the most famous exports from Demark (apart from Carlsberg) is a building brick toy that many of us love, Lego. This is a plastic building brick that clicks together with other bricks to build whatever your imagination can come up with.

Now imagine you and me are invited by a mystical man to enter a special room. We are told that when we enter this room the world will magically change. Of course I don't believe him, maybe you do? I'm happy to go along with the game as I am pretty sure this is pure bunkum, how many times have I been told that something will change the world? Do any of these changes ever come into being? So far no, so I take the risk. Are you going to join me?

Imagine you do, we enter the magical room and the door is shut. A few seconds later the door opens and the mystical man says "and behold your world has changed!" Nothing appears to be different. Just as I thought nothing has changed.

A few months go by and I go into a toy shop to buy some Lego, the shop keeper is astonished, he doesn't know what I'm talking about.

"Do you have any Lego?" I ask,

"Any what, sir?" the shopkeeper replies,

"Lego, you know the little plastic bricks that let you build cool stuff!" I say.

"What on Earth are you talking about, Sir?"

"Surely you're kidding me? You've never heard of it, let alone stock it!" I storm off angry that I have to deal with such a fool.

I visit several other toyshops that day, none of them, including the big super stores, have ever heard of Lego.

Now imagine you go through the same thing. The world did change, when we entered the magic room the existence of Lego was removed from our reality!

So from here we both decide to 'invent' Lego, but we don't have any Lego to work from and we don't talk to each other. We are competing to get the market. We use different plastics companies and work from different sketches of what we believe Lego should be. After a mad rush to get our products to market, we both produce Lego-like products.

Guess what?

The two different Lego-likes don't work together; you can't plug your bricks into my bricks. We had the same idea, worked from the same principles and had a simple standard way for our bricks to interconnect. The problem of interconnection was created in the implementation of the bricks.

This story highlights the problem that many standards have suffered from. All parties implementing the standards are working from the same blueprints but they do it differently.

The impossible dream is that we can create a standard way of plugging things together and everyone will implement it in such a way that all the components plug together without difficulty.

This has been the problem with all standards that we have seen to date. Standards such as CORBA are obvious examples with huge specs (500 pages plus) but no implementation guidelines or policing. Other more lightweight standards have suffered the same issues. Take HTML for example, every browser should show the same thing, right? The standard is clearly written down, and is not overly complex. For some reason this doesn't appear to be the case. Somewhere in the implementations differences exist.

Unless you've been living in a cave for the last year you're probably asking yourself some questions right now. Such as:

*I thought that Web Services were supposed to solve this problem?
Does this mean that this dream will never become a reality?*

As so many of the large vendors (IBM, Microsoft, BEA, Sun, Rogue Wave) are pushing Web services it is hard to see through the cloud of marketing and sales information and misinformation.

I don't believe what we have right now will be the ultimate solution. I think that as we progress through the iterations of web services that emerge over the coming years, we may get closer to the dream than we have ever been.

WSI, the Web Services Interoperability Organization, attempts to provide a forum for software implementers to ensure that what they produce will work with what everyone is producing. This is done via the use of standard implementations against which services can be tested. This is certainly a step in the right direction, but does require that the software development community plays nicely together and works with the WSI. It appears even now that is unlikely to happen, the WSi has become too bogged down with large committees and requests for change. This means it is moving too slowly for the vendors who need to meet their client's expectations and release software now.

I wonder if this is the root of the problem with all large scale standards? Is the pace of change required by the real world just too high to allow the setting of uniformity in place between organizations? I would propose that the more pressure there is to deliver software standards quickly the less chance there is of them succeeding.

The pace of change is increasing. Even with the world economy in the state it is, the pace of change has continued to increase. If I am right this does not bode well for new standards that are being set now or that will be set in the future.

Finally on a different and far lighter topic altogether I would like to tell you how my friend Carsten defines computer hardware, he says you know it's hardware when "you can physically touch it and you shouldn't"

English born, Dr. Neil travels the world working with software companies. He loves Australia, where he spends the summer enjoying the Sydney lifestyle and helping software development teams get more productive. Dr. Neil spends his other summer each year flying between northern Europe and the USA working with software teams and writing about his experiences. Neil brings his business and technical skills to the companies he works with to ensure he has happy customers.

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