Book reviews

The virtual community

Howard Rheingold. Addison-Wesley, 1993.
ISBN 0-201-60870-7.

This book could almost be subtitled ‘Confessions of a Spod’ – to adopt the slang by which users of bulletin boards and virtual discussions refer to themselves. Howard Rheingold bases it around his own experience over several years as a user, particularly of a system called WELL.

But Rheingold is no preoccupied hacker with limited social skills. He joined an electronic community in the mid-1980s, attracted by the chance to watch a society growing, developing its own conventions and learning how best to use its own peculiar method of communication. His (real life) family became used to seeing him in earnest discussion with the computer, and his description of this society and its members as he meets them is varied, absorbing and at times touching. Without leaving his home, he has met students, medics, librarians and lawyers, many with a story to tell about themselves. He has watched history unfold as it happens, participated in fund-raising for sick members of the community, watched romances made and broken and in extreme cases met people in real life once he had got to know them over the net. Even when he addresses the allegations that such systems are for the lonely, it is refreshing to see that he refuses to be pejorative about users who are lonely: ‘one honest answer... is that most people don’t have a terribly glamorous life’.

Within the virtual world there are numerous communities – general fora for asking specialized questions, cult discussions, live chats (the most addictive and potentially damaging to productivity) where users can watch words appear on a screen as their counterpart types them, pornographic bulletin boards with their attendant ethical problems and multiuser dungeons (the connotations of the word dungeon vary amongst different people). There are people hiding behind multiple identities, crafting their own personalities, sometimes creating complete fictitious characters and joining the network in character, sometimes disguising their gender (Rheingold is rather over-charitable on this; in practice most networks have more male than female users, so presenting as a woman is a way of attracting attention). The book is an engaging account of what it feels like to join such a borderless community.

While clearly enthused by the network’s possibilities, Rheingold ends by looking at some of the drawbacks, not

so much of virtual community but of a society where there are no restrictions on spreading information (unfortunately there is no mention of the British Data Protection Act) and the infrastructure to distribute it is very cheap. His (powerful) analogy for people feeling imprisoned by technology is the Panopticon, a prison proposed in the 19th century by Jeremy Bentham where every inmate would be under constant surveillance but unable to see anybody else.

Nevertheless, Rheingold raises more questions for the researcher than he answers. When do bulletin boards become addictive? What are the implications of users revealing or concealing their identity? What sort of ethical code is needed to control interactive behaviour on the network? How close to universal access will such networks get in the future? Rheingold has given us a readable and evocative account, but it remains a valuable starting point, with much work still to be done.

MARTIN RICH
City University Business School

Software inspection

Tom Gilb and Dorothy Graham. Addison-Wesley, Wokingham, UK, 1993.
ISBN 0-201-63181-4. 471 pp. £24.95

Software inspection is an important and proven technique for improving the quality of software. Michael Fagan of IBM wrote the seminal paper in 1976 which reported how inspections could increase coding productivity by 23% and reduce schedule plans by 25%. This book *Software Inspection* incorporates the many refinements to and experiences with Fagan’s technique that have been reported since then. The result is a most readable and thorough description of how to carry out software inspections successfully. The ideas are well supported by references and pragmatic advice. The authors are two experienced practitioners and their depth of experience is apparent throughout. The book is composed of 17 chapters which cover three main areas: introduction to and cost justification of inspections, precise details on how to carry out inspections and six case studies.

The introduction shows how Fagan adapted the ideas of Deming and Juran to make statistical quality methods work on ‘ideas on paper’. It then gives convincing data to show that inspections are far more cost-effective than software testing. The next part on how to do inspections is good because it explicitly addresses the organizational and human issues which are vital to any quality initiative.