
Editorial

For the last couple of weeks, I have been working on a game. That is, I have been helping a colleague to build a game. Sadly, it does not contain dungeons or dragons, buried treasure or lost rings. Nor are any space ships involved.

It is a business game. The only monsters to wrestle with are those of declining profitability and alienated customers. But still it has been an interesting experience, requiring me to dust off my programming skills and build what is, essentially, a decision support system that can be played in real time.

When it is finished, players will not only be able to test their own business skills, they will also be able to learn, because the result of each decision that they take will, as far as is possible, reflect the sort of outcome that would occur in the real world. With the right support material, they will be able to see the direct consequence of their choice and will be able to understand *why* their choices have brought about that consequence.

For myself, this project is interesting not just for its content — games, after all, having far greater amusement value than real life consultancy — it is also interesting because it allows for a change of hats; I have been able to get back to a more technical role in a project than, nowadays, I usually occupy. Instead of worrying about strategy and customer perspectives, I can just get on with delivering something that works.

Yet, along the way, this simple project has re-kindled an insight into designing systems for customers. At various points I

have found it necessary to debate the technical delivery of the game with its originator. Like all individuals who are closely involved in a project, he has some very definite ideas about how it should work. Some of those ideas relate quite specifically to the underlying structure of the software.

In some instances, they make life a good deal more complex. They demand extra tables, additional joins and a variety of programming tweaks and twirls that we could probably do without. In one such instance, I pointed this out to him. If he required that the game be set up the way he was describing, it would take a lot more work, it would make the structure much more complex; and, because the players only interact with the game at a superficial level, no one would know about the added complexity. Well, no one except the two of us. To which his reply, echoing that of artists down the ages, was simple: 'It doesn't matter, because I would know.'

This same point, seen from an opposite perspective, has surfaced recently in an increasingly bitter dispute with my gas supplier (who, out of respect for the laws of libel, had best remain nameless). That company has recently put in place a new billing system. It has transferred accounts from the old system to the new and they have written to their customers, myself included, telling us of this joyous news. It has all been done, they claim, to make life easier for me.

Unfortunately, this 'improvement' seems to mean that, for a period at least, the company is operating two systems

and two sets of account numbers. Worse, it is operating two call centres, each of which only has access to one set of numbers. There is no single point in the organisation that you can contact to argue the merits of how sums have been transferred from one bill to the next.

Stirring this recipe for disaster, I have been issued with a bill, which doesn't reflect payments in my previous bills. And finally, to cap it all, the company has managed to send out one of the infamous red slips, requiring me to pay up 'or else'.

Of course, this red slip suggests that I have seven days to comply (odd that, since in all the years I have worked for this and other utilities, I have never known them to pay a bill in anything close to seven days). Meanwhile, it is almost two weeks since I asked them to investigate what had happened to payments already made.

It is a customer experiential disaster. If I cared enough, and felt another utility might get matters less badly wrong, I would now be applying to anyone but my present supplier. As it is, they retain my custom — but not my goodwill — on the sole premise that I don't trust any other supplier to treat me any less badly.

So how does this relate to game playing?

Somewhere behind the façade of this utility is, I suspect, a steering group paddling furiously and doing its best to make life easier for customers. They have almost certainly invested at least a six-figure sum, if not a seven-figure sum, in a new system. They have believed the hype of those who sold it to them. They genuinely believe it will make customers' lives easier. So they have authorised letters informing us of this new fact. If they had not done so, I would probably have been disappointed by their current service levels — but not by much. As it is, I am acutely aware of the gap

between their aspiration and the service they are providing.

This is where it meets with the game experience. People deal with the surface. If a game does certain things, they do not usually delve below the surface to wonder why or how. If a utility — or any other service provider, for that matter — provides a good service, that is the least they expect, and they don't much care how it is achieved.

If you spend a large amount of money on a system that delivers theoretical benefits, your customers will not care. They are stubborn that way. Selfish, too. But then, why should they care if you have just invested in new systems, or offices, or software? They are not IT connoisseurs. They are interested in just one thing: does the service feel the same? Or better? Or worse? And, if it feels worse, then by publicising your spend, you appear at one and the same time to be fools and wasteful fools at that. You are spending their money and delivering a worse service.

This is a very general point. Why make it? Is it not self-evident? To which the answer must, I think, be no. An organisation that cares about the service that it delivers to its customers will measure that success in terms of customer key performance indicators (KPIs) (time to respond, pick-up rates and so on). It will maintain good measures of customer experience. It will engage, frequently, in 'mystery shopping' and staff will be encouraged to use the services they provide.

Meanwhile, when a new system is put in place, the simple lesson is this: if much of the talk is about the size of the investment (and little about the precise improvement to customer experience) then prepare yourself for expensive failure.

So we go from designing games to utility bills — and on to the Business

Intelligence category of the Information Management Project Awards (2003). This issue of the Journal contains a departure from usual, in that it carries details of some of the entries and case studies that featured in last year's Business Intelligence competition — an event which looked for excellent innovation across a range of categories of customer relationship management delivery.

The case studies consist of a set of four short case studies and one much larger one from BT. They are about innovation, and as such they are about good intentions. They are examples of organisations using technology to assist them but they do not, yet, provide the results of what happened when these systems were put into place. For that, we will need to wait a little longer.

My hope is that each of these new technological improvements will result in improved customer service and

experience and, ultimately, better business. My fear is that some of them will not.

Otherwise, this issue is strong on targeting techniques, rather than technology. Two papers, from Hansotia and Banasiewicz, focus on how to use a variety of techniques to recruit the right customers — those that will stay and those that will be valuable.

Lau *et al.* document a new departure — mining the web for business intelligence; that is, using text analysis to draw up a profile of individuals within a given market.

Finally, our legal team looks at the differences in protection afforded to databases in Europe and the USA.

As always, we welcome your feedback and comments, both on the topics selected and the approach taken.

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