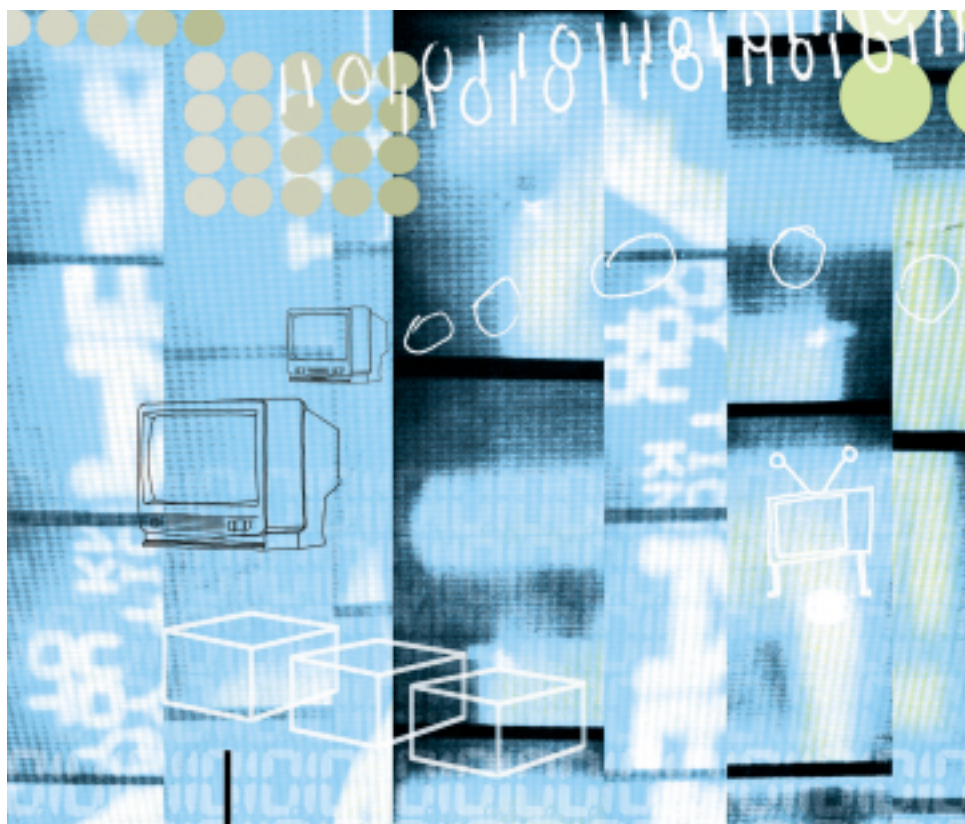


reflections



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So Much for WYSIWYG

Steven Pemberton

I live in a multi-lingual environment. Although I run the English-language version of the operating system on my PC, some of the programs I use are the Dutch versions, so sometimes I am confronted with the amusing sight of a dialogue box asking me a question in Dutch, and offering the English “Yes,” “No,” and “Cancel” as possible replies.

I have a PDA, and a colleague of mine who has the same PDA, knowing I had written a useful if somewhat complicated spreadsheet, asked me for a copy. These being modern times, I beamed the spreadsheet over using the infra-red link, and thought nothing more of it until a couple of days later she asked me if I’d make a modification to it for her. I took her machine and went to make the change and was shocked with what I saw: it was com-

pletely unrecognizable. Keywords were different; where once were commas were now semicolons. It turned out that she had the Dutch version of the PDA, while I had the English version. In beaming it over, the little machine had translated it into Dutch, so that even numbers were written with commas instead of full-stops for decimal points, and parameters consequently were separated by semicolons instead of commas. The makers of that PDA had done their internationalization work well!

Another colleague of mine prepared a quotation for a job with a major word processor. He typed it in, prepared all the amounts, and used the facilities of the program to do the actual calculations for him. Once he thought

continued on page 59

So Much for WYSIWYG

continued from page 60

it was in order, he copied it to a floppy and passed the floppy to a colleague to check (an extra pair of eyes) and to send off to the company in question if it was OK.

The colleague checked it, double checked the amounts; it was fine, and so printed it and posted it off.

The next day the company in question phoned up: the quotation had the words “syntax error” in every place that there should have been an amount of money quoted. Wasn’t that a bit careless?

So what had happened? Well, the person creating the document had used the English version of the major word processor. It allows you to say in tables “product(left)” and “sum(above)” to calculate values. Unfortunately his colleague who checked and printed the document used the Dutch version of the major word processor, and “product” is spelt “produkt” in Dutch, and “sum” is spelt “som.” The major word processor, rather than storing the calculations in a language-independent manner, apparently stores them literally in the language of the creator (so much for localization), and doesn’t convert them when you open the file in another language version (so much for portability of documents). And when you load a file into the major word processor, it doesn’t re-calculate the values of table elements, but just uses the values there, so it looks all right. However, if you print a document it does recalculate, and rather than tell you that there was a problem, prints it off with error messages in it. So much for WYSIWYG...

Of course, I hear you ask, why would one Dutch person use the English version of the major word processor and the other use the Dutch version. And so we come to the realm of localization and internationalization in the Netherlands. If you talk to many Dutch computer scientists in Dutch, they will talk about “een file editten,” or “een disk formatteren,” Dutchifying English technical terms. Unfortunately all computer companies who translate their software into Dutch insist on translating everything into Dutch, and all of a sudden it is not a “file” but a “bestand,” and not “edit” but “bewerk,” and this drives many Dutch people I know crazy, because all of a sudden they have to translate the terms they use into these strange words, and they have to search endlessly in menus to try and find the command they want. So it is a toss up: Of course they’d rather have the error messages and help files in Dutch, but they want the technical terms in the Dutch that *they* speak and not some strange Dutch that apparently the translators of the software speak. And so in the end, some choose to use the English language versions of software in preference to the Dutch versions (the English versions are often cheaper by the way).

I can vouch for this from personal experience as well: When producing software for some Dutch schoolchildren (10-11 year olds), I found they wanted to have the keywords in English, but the error messages in Dutch.

And then we come to the question of why a document in a major international word processor is not transferable between different language versions of the same program. Your guess is as good as mine. ☺

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