

## What if....

by David Martin

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The other day, whilst contemplating the effectiveness of IT departments, a random thought came bubbling up from the depths: “what if books had been invented *after* computers?”...

SCENE: Office of an Information Technology Priest. Enter an Inventor.

ITP: [Shocked] How did you get past the barbed wire?  
I: That was easy. The moat with the crocodiles was harder.  
ITP: What do you want?  
I: I've invented a new information retrieval system.  
ITP: Is it compatible with our corporate standards?  
I: Er... I don't know. But look ![holds up a book] It's called a “book”.  
ITP: A portable! How long do the batteries last?  
I: It doesn't need batteries.  
ITP: No batteries? How can you retrieve information without batteries?  
I: Easy, you just flip the pages. Random or sequential access.  
ITP: Where do you type UUGREP:\-1@c:\ to tell where to go?  
I: You don't. You look in the index.  
ITP: Sorry. UUGREP:\-1@c:\ is our corporate standard search engine string. You need to be compatible. What's this file called?  
I: “A Tale of Two Cities”.  
ITP: [Outraged] What!? That has *spaces* in it!  
I: Well, yes..... it's the title in English text.  
ITP: And it's got more than 8 letters in it! AND IT'S NOT ALL IN CAPITALS.  
I: But...  
ITP: Sorry. Have to change it to “ATOTC.DOC”  
I: But that will conflict with this other book “Adiabatic transients of toroidal condensers”.  
ITP: Too bad. A standard is a standard. What about back-ups?  
I: What about them?  
ITP: If the server crashes, how will you retrieve information?  
I: Just as before: you can't crash a book.  
ITP: Nonsense. Everything crashes at some time or other.  
I: Not books; that's one of their advantages.  
ITP: So it's incompatible with our corporate back-up systems?  
I: Well, yes, but..  
ITP: Sorry. What about security?  
I: I keep it in my pocket.  
ITP: More incompatibilities: our corporate standard calls for changing your password just about the time you begin to remember it. And you can't have the same password within 10 changes.  
I: How about if I change my trousers?  
ITP: You got more than 10 pairs of trousers?  
I: No.

ITP: Then you can't change trousers more than 10 times. Ergo, incompatible.  
I: But this invention is a paradigm shift!  
ITP: Paradigm schmaradigm. Standards *uber alles*.  
I: Who's Alice?  
ITP: [Flipping the pages] And the writing's all funny: the letters are all different widths.  
I: Exactly! Proportionally-spaced fonts are easier to read. Type is designed that way.  
ITP: Our information-retrieval systems can only handle monospaced fonts. Incompatible again. And you've got a PICTURE on the same page as the funny-looking text!  
I: But that's to keep the words and its related worth-a-thousand-words together.  
ITP: Sorry. Our corporate systems require you to press a button to bring up the image separately in a separate window. That's the standard that ensures information gets decoupled from its associated bits. And what's all this "Charles Dickens" nonsense?  
I: He's the author.  
ITP: Then he should be c:\dickens.c@corp.com.  
I: No capitals?  
ITP: Different standard.  
I: But surely you can see *some* advantages of a book?  
ITP: Certainly: you can slip it under a monitor to tilt it. Gets rid of pains in the neck.  
I: Don't feed me straight lines.  
ITP: Sorry. ATOTC.DOC is incompatible. Close the door behind you.  
I: [Pulling out a small bazooka and turning to the last chapter of ATOTC.DOC]  
"Tis a far, far better thing that I do now,  
Than I have ever done before..."