

ARROGANCE OR EFFICIENCY?

Part 1: The Disappearing Message Text

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Earlier this year, I was writing an e-mail message using Microsoft Office Outlook 2007 and clicked on the button for adding one of my signature blocks.

Presto! Most of my message disappeared! Investigation and testing showed that the behavior was unpredictable; sometimes, only the existing default signature was replaced by the new signature but occasionally the program became confused and wiped out portions of the text as well.

I tried in vain to find a problem report on the Microsoft site about this peculiar behavior. Using my status as a *Network World* columnist, I was able to get through to a press relations officer representing Microsoft Office products, and had a pleasant conversation about what turned out to be a usability issue. During that conversation, I pointed out that the observed normal behavior -- replacing the previous signature block -- was new to Outlook 2007 and represented what I felt to be a presumption about both the limitations of users (obviously incompetent to delete a redundant signature block) and mental rigidity by the designers, who were tricked by the name of the feature into believing that signature blocks should be used only for signatures. On the contrary, I said, I had long used the signature block feature as a macro facility, storing dozens of predefined texts in the signature list and selecting them at will. In addition, why would it seem reasonable to designers to assume that a signature block would necessarily be replaced instead of added to? Why would they make the choice for the user never to have components of signature blocks stored separately, to be combined at will?

I admitted that macro facilities in Office 2007 were far better than in previous versions of the software suite. We can now easily create and manage blocks of text, favorite headers and footers, and even text boxes and other objects for storage and retrieval. For more details of these useful functions and others in Word 2007, see a guide by my colleague Prof Rich Huebner and myself.<
http://www.mekabay.com/methodology/word_tips.pdf >

Our conversation then turned to another irritating aspect of Office 2007: the absence of a backward-compatible user interface. As most readers know, the Office 2007 suite has a radically different user interface, called the Microsoft Office Fluent user interface (UI), in which

- Familiar functions are grouped in new ways;
- Some functions have disappeared entirely;
- The limited user-definable toolbar is restricted to a single roll of symbols;
- Icons in the user definable toolbar cannot be customized; and
- There is no way to revert to the more familiar Office 2003 (or older) interface.

I said that it seemed to me that these limitations of user control were the result of arrogance: the unspoken assumption that users cannot be trusted to make rational choices about new versions of software. In contrast, I ranted, in my systems engineering and programming courses I teach students to listen carefully to user needs and to remember that all of our production should serve

as aids to users, not as unwanted controls.

The PR representative was admirably diplomatic and helpfully relayed my questions and comments to the product managers of Office 2007. Mark Alexieff, Senior Product Manager for Microsoft Office responded in detail and with his permission, I will quote him verbatim in the next columns in this series.

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