From the Standards Blog:

WHAT A DIFFERENCE A DECADE MAKES (OR DOES IT?)

[] [] [] **November 11, 2003 -** In the course of doing research for a Friend of the Court brief in support of Infineon's (unsuccessful) Supreme Court bid, I came across an article that appeared in The Economist some ten years ago. As I read it, I was struck by the degree to which the world has changed since the bad old days of proprietary systems -- when everyone talked about open standards (but no one really meant it) -- to the present time, where we utilize a host of standards that truly permit devices of diverse manufacture to interoperate. But how different are things today, really?

Ten years ago, a business was a DEC shop, or a Data General shop, or a Thinking Machines shop (obviously, a number of other things have changed along the way as well). Today, while we have not achieved true platform freedom, we do have examples of vast wide area interconnectivity, courtesy of the Internet and telecommunications. And new standards-based initiatives, such as the storm of activity in the area of Web services, promise to bring us closer to even the goal of pervasive cross-platform interoperability.

But have things really changed, or are today's standards efforts, like Clausewitz's definition of diplomacy, simply the pursuit of war by other means? And if so, are we better off, or just treading water?
For some insight into those questions, let's go back ten years to that ancient article in *The Economist*, which stated:

> Every firm wants a monopoly--and every firm wants to call it an open standard. The noisiest of...competitive battles will be about standards...[I]n the computer industry, new standards can be the source of enormous wealth, or the death of corporate empires. With so much at stake, standards arouse violent passions. Much of the propaganda pumped out by individual firms is aimed at convincing customers and other firms that their product has become a "standard."

Well, we've largely moved on from that specific type of competitive behavior. Most vendors now realize that becoming the next Microsoft is simply not in the cards. But that doesn't mean that everyone is willing to hop into the same sandbox and create open standards in a pure spirit of cooperation. Not even with adult supervision.

No, the search for competitive advantage has simply switched from trying to establish one's own proprietary technology as "the standard" to trying to control the process whereby the standard is set. But, as with diplomacy, controlling the process of standard setting requires more art and less blunt force than either war or establishing proprietary systems as de facto standards.

Happily, trying to blatantly control the creation of a standard is comparatively difficult to pull off in the context of a collaborative process. After all, as observed in the same article in *The Economist*, "...most multi-firm efforts have failed for the simple reason that the participating firms cannot trust each other." But today, many new business opportunities simply can't exist without standards, so that lack of trust means that everyone is looking at everyone else very closely. Even the press has found story lines in the standards games that companies play, to the point where standards development has gone from the status of chloroform in print to the subject matter of investigative journalism.

So let's return one last time to *The Economist* to see how much the world has really changed. In February of 1993, the authors used Unix as an example of how agreeing on truly open standards was an inherently lost cause:

> There are now many rival versions of Unix sponsored by various firms from IBM to Sun Microsystems, all of which are, to a significant degree, incompatible with one another, although all are promoted as open....In fact, widespread adoption of a single firm's product is the only way truly open standards have been established in the new computer industry....In December Novell bought Unix Systems Laboratories from AT&T and 11 minority shareholders, with the obvious intent of making Unix an alternative standard to whatever is offered by Microsoft.

Where to begin to bring that one up to date? Unix is back with a vengeance -- but no longer in a proprietary uniform, with Novell owning the One True Version. Instead, its new face is the innocent penguin of Linux, an operating system that is not only open, but created by an entirely new standard-setting process, involving independent, individual programmers (at least initially), rather than corporate giants.

So it is that a confederacy of David's, and not Novell, is finally threatening the Goliath of Redmond. Novell itself is hoping to ride the open coattails of the operating system that it once owned, long after abandoning its effort to turn that same operating system into its next Netware-type monopoly. With Novell's acquisitions of Ximian and SuSE, it is basing its future on the success of an orphaned operating system that made good on the streets, after surviving life in a series of corporate foster homes.
Almost the stuff of a made-for-TV movie. Perhaps a decade can make a big difference after all.

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Useful Links and Information:

The Economist, *Do It My Way* , Vol. 326, Issue 7800, 11 (Feb. 27, 1993) [not available on-line]

Famous quotes, like paper "will hold still for anything," and are thus kidnapped by myriad authors to serve their own selfish purposes. The quote of Carl von Clausewitz that I have used for my own purposes above, perhaps his most famous, is subject to some variance of interpretation even in its original context. The controversy revolves around his use over 170 years ago of the word "politik," simplistically translated by some as "politics," and by others more particularly as "diplomacy." One author explains Clausewitz's intention as follows:

> In fact, Clausewitz's varied usage of Politik and the historical context within which he wrote indicate that he meant three things by the term. First, Clausewitz did intend Politik to mean policy, the extension of the will of the state, the decision to pursue a goal, political or otherwise. Second, Politik also meant politics as an external state of affairs, the strengths and weaknesses provided to a state by its geo-political position, its resources, alliances and treaties, and as an ongoing process of internal interaction between a state's key decision-making institutions and the personalities of its policy makers. Lastly, Clausewitz used Politik as an historically causative force, providing an explanatory pattern or framework for coherently viewing war's various manifestations over time.

> See: Echevarria, Antulio J. II. War and Politics: The Revolution in Military Affairs and the Continued Relevance of Clausewitz:
> http://library.thinkquest.org/C004488/Ess2.html?tqskip1=1&tqtime=1111