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M Computing is published by MUMPS Users' Group trading as M Technology Association, Suite 205, 1738 Elton Road, Silver Spring, Maryland 20903. Phone: 301-431-4070, Fax: 301-431-0017,email: MTA@mtechnology.org

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FROM THE EDITOR

Innovation versus Standardization

Kate M. Schell

by Kate M. Schell

The purchase of Micronetics' assets, including MSM, by InterSystems has raised some interesting topics within the M community. One recent area of discussion has been the status and purpose of the M standard. Of particular concern to me have been the criticisms that the standardization process stifles innovation by a vendor or vendors.

The purpose of a programming language standard is to give the users of the language a common, accepted set of syntax that will work on any platform.

Products written in ANSI Standard M[UMPS] move easily from one M platform to another, and from one operating system to another. This mobility allows product developers to take advantage of price and performance improvements without having to make substantial modifications to their code.

Companies whose programmers have not written in ANSI Standard M[UMPS], and who wish to change language versions or operating systems, pay programmers and consultants really good money to help them accomplish the job. Companies such as HBO who write their own flavor of the language must then maintain and enhance it.

The M[UMPS] Language standard provides a mechanism for developers who wish to incorporate new functionality to do so. The letter "Z" is reserved for the identification of non-standard functions and commands. Most M programmers are familiar with commands such as ZLoad, ZInsert, ZPrint, and functions such as $ZDate. Unfortunately, the language standard did not address mechanisms for incorporating new concepts, such as objects. Although that functionality is now specified, it may be hard to produce a new version of the language standard containing that specification.

The acquisition of DTM and DSM, and most recently MSM, did not bring those M language versions into synchronicity with each other, or with the existing InterSystems' products. All still have "non-standard" features. To move between the various InterSystems M products seamlessly, you must still reference the M language standard.

So, what is the role of the ANSI standard in your work and in the systems that your vendor provides you? That answer is up to you and to your vendors. If you choose to code in an ANSI standard version of the M language, your code will move painlessly from one ANSI standard platform to another. If you choose to use vendor-specific extensions, you become more tightly bound to that vendor and to their language version. This is true no matter what version

of the M language you use, regardless of vendor. None of this is new, but it does seem to need to be stated frequently.

Since standards are, by definition, least common denominator efforts, it seems to be strange to expect that a language standardization committee would be expected to lead in language innovation. However, for several major efforts over the past decade, that was exactly what the MDC was expected to do. The effort to produce a GUI version of M and to produce technologies such as Transaction Processing and Event Handling were seen by the vendors as high-investment and high-risk areas. They wanted agreement on requirements and syntax before they started investing in coding.

Now the pendulum is swinging back, and the vendors want to take control of development. This bodes well for the development of new functionality. Programming shops that consider use of the new functionality will still be faced with the decision of portability versus new capabilities. **M**

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