

Fast Track in Wonderland

Stefan Gustavson, September 6, 2007

There is a strange and twisted place where standards are not held to high standards, where we are told that "yes" means "no" and "no" means "yes", where "competition among standards" is argued to be a good thing, and where standardization is achieved by bribery and foul play instead of honest work. Scarily enough, that place is Earth. Join us on a journey down the rabbit hole, to a place where logic is a matter of dispute, decency has been thrown out the window and common sense is considered evil. The end of the story is not yet written.

Fast track in reality (ODF)	Fast track in Wonderland (OOXML)	Narrative commentary (apologies to Lewis Carroll)
<p>A need for a document standard for office documents is recognized by several parties. A standards group is formed within OASIS among those who share an interest in this. Microsoft participates to begin with, but later decides to leave the group, let the work on the ODF standard be done by others and instead develop a different, non-standard XML file format for their Microsoft Office products.</p>	<p>When some important government contracts start to require an open, standardized XML file format for public documents, Microsoft realizes very late that they too have a need to support an ISO standard XML format in their Office products. As they have already invested a lot of effort into their own XML file format, they decide to create a standard to support the file format of their current Office products instead of making their Office products support a standard.</p>	<p><i>This is where Alice fell down the rabbit hole. On her way down, everything around her started to look strange and twisted, although somehow familiar, and with a logic all of its own.</i> <i>"Funny", said Alice to herself while she was falling, "I think I just saw a boy made of money. That can't be right. And if it is, what is he doing here in a simple rabbit hole? And why wasn't he playing with those other boys? He said they wouldn't let him in, but the door was wide open, and he was in fact already in."</i></p>
<p>Work progresses slowly and deliberately to make the new standard as good as possible, starting from the existing XML file format of StarOffice and OpenOffice 1.0. That format is found to be lacking in many respects, so a lot is thrown out and many new ideas are included. The standards drafting process is running in parallel to software development, and many changes are adopted. The resulting draft standard looks very different from the original OpenOffice 1.0 format, and is a lot better in many respects. Where possible, the standard uses existing and well tested XML standards for content like graphics and mathematics, and elements and attributes are re-used within the schema to make the standard clean and easy to implement.</p>	<p>ECMA is hired to author a standard in record time with Microsoft and a small number of partners, with the specific goal to make it match the almost finished implementation for Microsoft Office 2007. No provisions are made to make changes in the software, so nothing is allowed to change in the standards process. To a large extent, the format is an XML-encoded dump of binary data structures from the existing software, and large parts of the standards document are recycled software documentation. Instead of using existing XML standards for content like graphics and math, such content is implemented using Microsoft-specific XML schemas which have not been previously documented in public and are included as a part of the standard. The different parts of the standard use different methods for identical purposes, making the standard unnecessarily complex and very hard to implement.</p>	<p><i>Alice landed on her head in a big heap of paper.</i> <i>"Goodness, this must be more than six thousand sheets", she said. "And they are all full of scribbles. Hello, what are you doing?"</i> <i>A rabbit was rummaging through the pile very quickly while scribbling some hard to read notes randomly across the remaining blank sheets he found.</i> <i>The Rabbit didn't look up, he just mumbled "I'm running late for the Mad Hatter's tea party", picked up all the papers and started running.</i> <i>"Wait!" said Alice. "I have a question for you!"</i> <i>"Sorry, no time to listen, got to hurry to submit this Draft Standard, oh, look, there's a shortcut, bye!"</i> <i>"But this is all wrong", said Alice.</i> <i>"You are doing it all upside down and backwards, and for all the wrong reasons."</i> <i>But the Rabbit was long gone.</i></p>
<p>After three years of work, an OASIS standard of about 800 pages is published in May 2005, and in 2006 it is presented to ISO for fast track approval. At this time, there are several independent software</p>	<p>After a single year of work, a standard of about 6,500 pages is published by ECMA. It is immediately submitted to ISO for fast-track approval. At this time, there is only a beta release of one single implementation of the</p>	<p><i>The Rabbit arrived at the tea party, in a flurry of papers and out of breath.</i> <i>"Good boy, just in time", said the Mad Hatter. Without even looking at what the Rabbit had brought, he then solemnly declared that this was a</i></p>

implementations of the standard.	standard, Microsoft Office 2007.	<p><i>Good Standard, and put his big stamp of approval on it.</i></p> <p><i>Alice watched in amusement. That is not even a properly written Technical Specification, she thought, much less a Good Standard. This was indeed a strange world.</i></p>
ISO sends the draft out for comments on possible contradictions. No contradictions are found and reported, so the draft standard is sent out for a five month review by the ISO national bodies, with a ballot following the review period.	ISO sends the draft out for comments on possible contradictions. An unprecedented number of member countries report lots of perceived contradictions, some of a very fundamental and potentially serious nature. Many members also point to the very large size and low quality of the standard and its apparent lack of proper review by ECMA, and clearly state their opinion that it is unsuitable for a fast track approval. All the raised contradictions are dismissed by Microsoft and ECMA as not being contradictions at all. The ISO secretariat therefore decides to go forward with the fast track process. A draft standard is sent out for a five month review by the ISO national bodies, with a ballot following the review period.	<p><i>At the well attended International Standards croquet game, the Red Queen defending the Mad Hatter's Good Standard needed to change her own rules to make it last even through the first round. Her troubled citizens cried out in dismay, but she turned a blind eye and a deaf ear and commanded "Off with their heads!"</i></p> <p><i>"Isn't that cruel?" asked Alice.</i></p> <p><i>"Don't worry", said the Knight of Spades, "We don't actually cut off their heads. We just cut out their tongues."</i></p>
An average number of ISO national bodies respond to the review process. All votes are "yes" votes, so there is unanimous support for adoption of the standard.	A very large number of ISO national bodies respond to the review process. Many votes are from new members which have never before participated in ISO work, and many new members decide to join with the highest level of commitment in ISO, as P-members with special voting rights and responsibilities. Reports from all over the world point to significant irregularities in procedure and in the conduct of committee chairs, political influence over the votes, many alleged and confirmed actions from Microsoft to influence the vote in every possible way and many last minute ballot stuffing incidents where lots of Microsoft partners joined the committees as late as the day of voting to vote an unconditional "yes". Despite all these irregularities, clearly aimed at making the vote pass regardless of the technical merits of the draft standard, the vote fails by a rather large margin. Not enough P-members vote "yes", and more than the allowed amount of total votes are negative.	<p><i>The game scores were in. The Good Standard was not successfully defended, in spite of all the Red Queen's mad advisors stepping in to change the rules, to shout at the top of their voices (which, Alice observed, strangely carried rather more than voices ought to) and to silence and discredit the opponents to the Good Standard ever more fiercely towards the final moments of the game.</i></p> <p><i>"Why was that strange boy made of money running around talking to the opponents during the game?" asked Alice.</i></p> <p><i>"He can talk to anyone he wants", said the Knight of Spades. "He has lots of friends in many places."</i></p> <p><i>"But he was paying them money. That is not the proper kind of friends. And he asked spectators to join his team."</i></p> <p><i>"You must have been mistaken", said the Knight. "Paying spectators to play for his team would be illegal, so this simply can't be the case."</i></p> <p><i>"But I saw him do it!"</i></p> <p><i>"You most certainly did not. Move along."</i></p>
Some national bodies have technical comments, the more fundamental ones concerning handling of Arabic text and accessibility, but they are not made conditional for approval. Most	Thousands of comments are submitted, which is highly irregular, in fact previously unheard of for a fast track standard. Once again, the very motivation for the standard and its	<p><i>The Cheshire Cat suddenly appeared from out of nowhere, put on his biggest and most friendly-looking smile (which was not a very friendly smile at all, because he had big fangs)</i></p>

<p>comments are editorial in nature, and the total number of comments is small.</p>	<p>lack of quality receives much criticism, as the document has not changed at all. Many comments are technical, serious and often fundamental in nature. Many countries make their resolution conditional for approval, while others do not. Contrary to ISO guidelines, Microsoft and ECMA have suggested that conditional approval can be expressed as a "yes with comments". Many of the comments submitted even with "yes" votes are technical comments which are serious and fundamental in nature. Microsoft announces that this is business as usual and that there is nothing strange with thousands of serious objections to a draft standard in fast track approval. They even announce the result as a victory because 74% of the required 75% of voters were positive. The fact that only about half of the P-members approved, out of a required 2/3, is not mentioned. Because a "no" is formally a "conditional approval" according to ISO ballot regulations, the official press release says "most countries support an approval of the standard once their comments have been addressed". Anything else would in fact have been impossible.</p>	<p><i>and started to annoy everyone present with his practice of using words wrong in any way he chose to. This time, he also tricked others into using words wrong to his pleasing. Even the meaning of simple words like "yes" and "no" were shrewdly confused, and the Cheshire Cat chuckled to himself.</i></p> <p><i>"I won", said the Cheshire Cat.</i></p> <p><i>"But you didn't play", said Alice.</i></p> <p><i>"Of course not", said the Cat. "When I said 'I won', I actually meant 'The Mad Hatter won', wasn't that obvious?"</i></p> <p><i>"I don't see how that would be obvious at all", said Alice. "Besides, the Mad Hatter didn't win, his proposed Good Standard was defeated on all accounts! The Judge announced it just now."</i></p> <p><i>"That is your opinion", said the Cat.</i></p> <p><i>"A word like 'defeat' means so very different things to different people. Would you say that you were 'defeated'?", he asked.</i></p> <p><i>"I didn't play!", said Alice.</i></p> <p><i>"Well, neither did I."</i></p> <p><i>"But you said you won."</i></p> <p><i>"I did."</i></p> <p><i>Alice felt her head spinning, and she had to sit down for a while.</i></p>
<p>DIS 26300 is unconditionally approved by 100% of the voting members, so a ballot resolution meeting is not deemed necessary. Editorial comments are addressed and a final draft FDIS 26300 is sent out.</p>	<p>DIS 29500 is not approved by the vote, but is instead subject to a barrage of criticism previously unheard of for a fast track process. Despite this, the ISO secretariat decides to push it forward and announces a ballot resolution meeting to be held in five months. The project editor has a little more than three months to address the thousands of comments, hundreds of which can be expected to be unique and non-trivial in nature.</p>	<p><i>The Cheshire Cat was still smiling. His appearance was fading at the edges, but with a twist and a spin, a strong exercise in self-deception and a helping hand from the Red Queen, he pretended to remain reasonably solid and thanked everyone for their great support and thorough review of his, um, the Mad Hatter's Good Standard. Words like "support" and "thorough review" clearly had an entirely different meaning to the Cat than to Alice.</i></p>
<p>FDIS 26300 is approved and becomes SIS 26300:2006. Work continues on remaining accessibility issues, which are later addressed in version 1.1 of the standard. Version 1.2 is in draft to address further issues, like the need for unambiguous and properly standardized formula definitions.</p>	<p><i>Watch this space for updates on the strange and entertaining story of Fast Track in Wonderland!</i></p>	<p><i>Alice was still sitting down. Was she going mad? No, the world was going mad, that must be it. But if the rest of the world was going mad, what right did she have to call herself sane? Surely some of the things she had learned in school should still matter? Simple, basic things like logic, decency and fair play. She didn't know whether to laugh or cry. If only she could find her way back to the surface. Perhaps this was all a bad dream. But it felt so real.</i></p> <p><i>No, this would not do, thought Alice. Somebody had to put a stop to it. She stood up.</i></p>