

standard-output

Guy L. Steele Jr.

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Haec columna in partes tres divisa est.

Past Doings of X3J13

Technical Committee X3J13 met March 3-5, 1993, in Palo Alto, California, hosted by Hewlett-Packard, to process the many public review comments that were received during the first public review period, which ended November 23, 1992. (X3J13 is a subgroup of ANSI Accredited Standards Committee X3 for Information Processing Systems; it is responsible for Programming Language Common Lisp.)

Some of the technical points raised resulted in time-consuming discussions at the meeting. As a result, processing of public review comments was not completed at the March meeting. Over the summer, a working subcommittee informally processed the remaining comments and drafted proposed responses to almost all the public review comments. In parallel, project editor Kent Pitman prepared (speculatively) a revised dpANS (draft proposed American National Standard) reflecting the recommendations of the working subcommittee. This revised dpANS was unanimously approved by letter ballot.

X3J13 met again October 4-5, 1993, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, hosted by Harlequin. At this meeting, X3J13 completed processing of the public review comments and approved official responses to those comments. X3J13 also made some final corrections to the dpANS and unanimously voted to request a second public review period. (Because technical changes were made to the dpANS, another public review period is mandatory.) If and when this two-month second public review period is approved, X3 will announce the exact dates. (My rough guess is that it would end in January or February, 1994.)

What happens after that? It depends on the volume and nature of comments received. Anyone is entitled to comment, by sending physical mail to the X3 Secretariat (CBEMA) with a copy to the ANSI Board of Standards Review. (Specific instructions on how to do this are included the announcement of a public review period.)

The Public Review Process

I want to explain clearly some of the requirements of the standards process to help you, the reader, decide what to do. I do this here as a columnist, trying to be independent of my role as chair of X3J13. It is not my purpose in this section to persuade you to comment or not to comment, but only to outline the requirements of the process and the consequences of commenting or not commenting. (The persuasion appears in the last section of this column!)

X3J13 is required to review and respond to every comment. If a comment suggests a change, then X3J13 must either accept the change or provide a rationale for not accepting the change. There are two kind of changes. A technical change alters the technical content of the document so that it specifies a different programming language. An editorial change alters only the form of the presentation. Whether a change is accepted or rejected, X3J13 must prepare a written response to the commentor.

Another point is that every commentor has the right to review the response and to send a reply to X3 (within 20 days) indicating whether or not the response produced by X3J13 is acceptable.

Each kind of change has a cost in discussion time. Technical changes impose a further cost: accepting any technical change forces another round of public review. This delays the standard by

another six months to a year. Negative replies to the responses, indicating dissatisfaction with the responses, may also cause X3 to send the dpANS back to X3J13 for further work.

On the other hand, there may also be costs associated with failing to make a change if there is some serious flaw in the draft proposed standard.

In principle, the public review process can iterate indefinitely. It converges when a public review produces only comments that require no technical change or for which an adequate rationale can be provided for rejecting or postponing all proposed changes.

If you have any questions about the public review process or any other aspect of programming language standardization, please feel free to contact me by E-mail (glb@think.com). You can also call the X3 Secretariat (CBEMA) at (202)737-8888 (press 1 twice).

A Personal Plea

Now I will become less impartial and state my opinion. Here I do not speak for X3J13, but I do speak for my employer and as a Lisp user.

I believe the Lisp community would be best served by having an American National Standard for Common Lisp sooner rather than later. Naturally we do not want a standard that contains glaring technical flaws or inconsistencies. On the other hand, I believe it is better to put up with minor flaws and inelegances than to delay further. Common Lisp is a big language and is unlikely ever to be perfect or to satisfy everyone's needs perfectly. The question to ask at each stage is not "Is it now perfect?" but rather "Is it now good enough? Have we reached a local point of diminishing returns in the improvement process?"

If there remains a horrible flaw or error that heretofore has been somehow overlooked, then of course I would want it brought to the attention of X3J13. But otherwise I would say the Common Lisp dpANS is now good enough to serve the needs of the Lisp community.

Dear reader, please weigh your options carefully. We are all familiar with the methodology of submitting "bug reports" whenever we are even slightly dissatisfied with a detail of something, hoping that our reports will make it better and assuming that our bug reports will be ignored if they are inappropriate. But the ANSI process, a central goal of which is to promote fairness, makes it impossible to ignore such reports. This introduces cost and risk: the cost of human time and effort to process each report, and the risk that a need will be misperceived to be greater than it really is, resulting in unnecessary delay.

If you want a standard soon, then submitting a public review comment suggesting dozens of technical changes will not help. Contrariwise, if your primary objective is to correct technical problems or suggest entire new features, please understand that such changes are likely to delay the standard by another six months to a year, minimum, no matter how small the changes may seem to be. If you would like to see major changes to the language (a window system? multiprocessing? whatever?) but think they would be better made during a second round of standardization, after the current dpANS becomes an official ANS, then you can wait; or if you really want to get your two cents' worth in now, you can clearly label your comment as intended for future consideration rather than a suggestion for changing the current dpANS.

In the last public review, X3J13 understood that flaws probably remained in the dpANS and that the level of comments would inevitably force a second public review forced. Therefore the members of X3J13, as individuals, actively encouraged the public to comment. This time around, I think X3J13 has done a pretty good job of correcting the remaining major problems. If you have a strong reason to make a public review comment, please do so. You may wish to consider the alternative strategy of sending non-urgent comments about Common Lisp informally via private channels (such as E-mail to common-lisp@ai.sri.com) that do not invoke the ANSI comment processing machinery.

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