

Brian Clegg welcomes the steady addition of **new features** to business software.

# Feature fever



Until hard disks got so ridiculously big that only dedicated gamers could fill them, a popular moan about business software was featuritus. You know the sort of thing. The software company thinks 'it's time we

raked in some more dosh from the suckers (sorry, excellent customers), so what idiot features can we cram in to justify a new version?' The result, it was implied, was software bulging with features that no-one could possibly want. 'All I need,' claims the feature-hater 'is the basic word processing I get from SuperRite 1.0, which runs in 2K of memory on an abacus.' Obviously software companies do want to rake in cash regularly, and adding new features is a great way of doing it. It's also true that every new version of a piece of software isn't worth buying. But let's expose the featuritus argument for the fallacy it is.

**There are two fatal flaws** in the argument. The first is the assumption that by version 3, for example, they've got rid of the bugs, added the good features that were missing originally, and every version since is bloat. I have a simple counter to that — AutoRoute 2000. For the few people who haven't heard of it, AutoRoute is the British-originated route planning software gobbled up by Microsoft a few years ago. The last couple of versions haven't been anything to get excited about; if anything, they seemed to prove the featuritus case. Then along comes this new one. I hate to get all excited about a Microsoft product, because I'm bound to get emails suggesting I'm under the mind control of the evil Bill, but the fact is, it's brilliant, and the reason is because of the new features.

**Let's just look** at a couple. Ever since the early days, AutoRoute has been a great way to get to another town; but once you were there, how did you find Blackadder Road or wherever you were going? You had the option of either lashing out on a street map, or you had to stop and ask a local. Now AutoRoute has street-level mapping for the whole country. Search for Blackadder Road, and there it is in all its glory. Once you've got there, perhaps you need a good pub for lunch — no worries; after years of moaning by me (and maybe one or two others) they've finally included the whole

Good Pub Guide. These are two features that have transformed the product for me.

The 'me' at the end of the last sentence highlights the other problem with featuritus. One person's useless feature is another's lifesaver. What we mean when we say a product has useless features is 'features I don't want'. Because, of course, what I want is what everyone wants... isn't it? The classic example is word count, that handy feature you'll find in practically every word processor. For 99 percent of businesses, this is a waste of code. When you are writing a memo or even a budget plan, you might be interested in how many pages there are, but not how many words. Yet it's there, because one small (but I like to think important) segment of word processor users need it — writers. Whether you are producing an epic novel or a column like this, the publisher is fussy about the number of words in it. For those who remember counting by hand, word count is a lifesaver. It is also vital for students, who need to calculate how close they are to the minimum word requirement before hitting the union bar.

You could use a similar argument for macros in office

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products. After all, here's an example of a feature that can be positively malicious — it's the basis for all those document-based viruses that plague us. Yet while many people don't use macros, the businesses that do would never think of macros as unnecessary frippery, and nor would they complain about new versions which bring macros in line with other programming languages, thus enabling sharing of code.

**Seen in perspective**, the steady addition of new features is a good thing. With CD-ROMs and gigabyte hard disks, space isn't really an issue. If some updates only have trivial features, ignore them, but quite regularly there will be additions that make you understand once more what all the fuss is about. Long live new features!

Brian@cul.co.uk