

## An In-Depth Seminar on Proven Tools & Techniques of Structured Methodology for Effective Software Configuration Management

Isn't that a catching title? I think it is fascinating. But the most fascinating thing is that in order to compose that blah-blah, I needed to merge only two recent announcements:

"An In-Depth Seminar on Methodologies & Tools for: Software Configuration Management, Presented Entirely by the Guest Expert: Mr. Rick Frederick"

and

"Proven and Effective Techniques in... Structured Methodology for Software Design and Development, Presented Entirely by the Guest Expert: Mr. Robert J. Rader".

The first of these two-day courses will be given in London, Paris\*, and Amsterdam, the second one in W. Berlin, Paris\* and London.

\* Paris session will include simultaneous translation in French.

Conference Management is by Technology Training Corp.; the folders further mention State of the Art Seminars Division Ltd. (To give you some idea of their competence: my name occurs three times on their mailing list!) The courses are sponsored by "Education Foundation of the Data Processing Management Association (USA)" and "The Institute of Data Processing Management (UK)"; so much for the level of those two bodies.

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We are flooded by such folders and they pose a problem. You see, it is very improbable that those courses have any content more solid than the folders, and the

folders are patently empty. They push very impressive terms - "Configuration Management Phasing", "Automated Requirement Languages" - but what is the rôle of those hollow forms? As vehicles for serious thought they are inadequate, for they are about as meaningful as the decorations pinned on the chest of the average army general or communist leader. These terms are probably best understood as this secular age's equivalents of the magic formulae and the religious incantations of other times and civilizations.

But the companies selling these wonderful words make enough money to remain in business one year after the other: evidently, enough people are taken in, and that is something to think about for a while.

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Wherever the printing press has been in operation, we have had junk literature: the English "penny-dreadful", the American "pulp magazine", the Dutch "keukenmeidenroman" (= kitchen-maid novel), the German "Groschenroman" (= penny novel), the French "roman de quatre sous" (= four-penny novel), in short: pulp literature. The characteristic fact is that the addict firmly believes that he or she is reading the real thing; in its modern form it is known as "the nr. 1 bestseller".

The 19th Century did not only have its pulp literature, but also a lot of pulp music: remember the operette! Again the addict believed that he or she was listening to the real thing; in its modern form pulp music is known as "the top-hit".

I think the time has come to recognize that we

have pulp science as well. In earlier centuries we had astrology, numerology, alchemism; in this century, Teilhard de Chardin has provided us with a nice specimen. And, please, don't forget all the nonsense written about the pyramids! Again, pulp science can be practised as seriously as genuine science and the addict firmly believes that he or she is dealing with the real thing.

I think also the time has come to recognize that nowadays pulp science is a very flourishing business, too diverse to oversee it all. Psychology, pedagogy and the social sciences are clear examples; so are artificial intelligence and systems engineering. The last one has given rise to expressions such as "systems thinking" and "the systems movement", terms unmistakable for anyone who is somewhat familiar with the modus operandi of obscure cults.

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The wide-spread existence of pulp science has to be stressed because, containing as few scientists as they do, many bureaucracies — including governments and university administrations — are no longer able to identify pulp science as such. And this has more serious consequences than the fact that some people are willing to pay \$500.- for a two-day course that others instantaneously identify as bullshit.

Nowhere in computing the quack density is as high as in the broad area of design methodology; needless to say, all the miracle ointments are at the very least "proven" or "tested". With that abundance of wonderful remedies the conscientious scientist, who refuses to offer a cure-all, may have a hard time

convincing his administration or the funding agency that his efforts make sense. Whether he likes it or not, the language of the quack is almost forced upon him when that has become the only language the authorities still understand. Slowly the distinction between the scientist and the salesman erodes; but once widespread acceptance has been allowed to become a goal, it becomes a quality criterion, and the world of science has been infested with the standards of the best-seller society. And those discourage any deviation from the status quo so strongly that for many the road to innovation and improvement is effectively blocked.

Under these circumstances the scientist has to remember that there is no virtue in pandering to the tastes of The Great Unwashed and he has to learn to take it as a compliment when he is being "accused" of being not enough of a salesman. Perhaps he should make it a habit to close each technical paper with the standard formula

"Disclaimer. Neither in form, nor in content, the above is pretended to be an improvement. (End of Disclaimer.)"

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