

Bickering Children

By David Broberg, © February 3, 2001

As I began this story today, my three boys were in the next room bickering and fighting. This is not so uncommon among 5 to 9 year-old boys. One wants to build a Lincoln Log cabin, the next wants to build a marble roller-coaster, while the third wants to play medieval warrior and launch his catapults at the other's creations.

Lately similar childlike behavior has surfaced in our industry. The three children can be described by their initials. Each has a different game to play or something different they wish to build. In this case, the creations take the form of industry standards.

One player is known as SCTE. In the area of standards, this is the youngest player. While only accredited by the American National Standards Institute (ANSI) in the late 90's as a recognized standards body, this player is still growing. There have been sure signs of immaturity by this new player as it begins to develop within the standards process. For example, the numbering system for documents assigned to the Digital Video Subcommittee (DVS) has been nothing but chaotic. The documents are numbered in such a way that it makes it impossible to determine which have been fully adopted as standards and which are simply informational submissions. In some cases a ballot has been cast to accept as a standard, the work of another standards body (DVS/100). Even with the immaturity, this group has grown tremendously. The attendance at bimonthly DVS meetings often exceeds 50 participants. The work taking place by this group will certainly have a very important place in the future of interactive broadband technology.

Another player in this game is known by the initials NCTA. In the formal sense, this player is not really in the standards process, but has dabbled in this space over the years, especially the years before SCTE was formally recognized by ANSI. While most of the energies of NCTA are focused on other activities such as government relations they have played an important role in the development of several important standards that were developed jointly with the third player through a cooperative effort called the Joint Engineering Committee (JEC). Some of the standards that can be credited to this group include EIA-23 (*RF Interface Specification for Television Receiving and Cable Television Systems*); EIA-679 (*National Renewable Security Standard*) and EIA-679 (*Cable Channelization Plan*). It is important to note the letter prefix for these standards belongs not to NCTA, but to the third player as a demonstration of humble cooperation. Alas, with the accreditation of SCTE for standards, the need for this effort by NCTA has diminished and work has all but stopped in this area.

The third player is currently known as CEA. This is the newest player in one sense, but is really a veteran who was reborn with a new name recently. Although some might contend that with this new name there has been some dramatic personality change. When this player was known by its former name (CEMA or even EIA), there was a spirit of cooperation as EIA and CEMA formed the other half of the JEC. With the new name came a new personality. This new personality has become very focused on streamlining the standards process and expanding their reach. In one sense, this expansion of reach hopes to extend the area of interest to a degree that it is competing with the mission of SCTE-DVS. In that sense, this new personality seems to be representing the bully of the group.

The recent fights between these three groups can often be traced back to the bully attitude that has been expressed over and over again by CEA. In one example, the bully has tried to take back those things it gave under a former spirit of cooperation. There are several examples in the body of SCTE-DVS standards that include submissions made in the spirit of cooperation by CEA (or formerly CEMA or EIA) that are now being withdrawn or removed due to demands by CEA. This petty bickering between the players sounds more like my children when one says "that's mine, give it back." Actually, the claim made by CEA has to do with copyright permission, but after all it is about ownership and take backs isn't it?

What's needed is a little maturity by all the groups. They all need to be reminded that with such bickering nothing gets done and often progress that has already been made is quickly erased. Just like my boys who finally figured out that by sharing their space, they could each build the empire they chose and with some cooperation, they could help each other while not destroying their own empires. Likewise, SCTE, NCTA and CEA need to figure out how to get along and stop the childish behavior that will lead only to frustration or worse; the parent (government) could step in and take away the toys.