Computer Crashes: *You always hear how computers free up our time. They do. Every time your PC crashes, it frees you up to take care of errands.* **—Bob Hirschfeld, American cybersatirist**

Opinion

Rhymes with GUI? Um...Let's see....

Just Thinking
by Alexander Kufel

During this past month or so, no one was more attentive than I to the news that surgery to CEFMS, the Corps' electronic financial management system, was a success and we would soon be privy to an updated program. A GUI (Graphical Users Interface) and the use of the Internet for access to CEFMS processes (instead of an unpredictable computer file server) were going to solve all our problems and allow us to get back to doing our various specialties rather than struggle with vaguely related processes.

Silly me. Although I will say that nowadays CEFMS does look better. And I'm really "wired" now that I can use the world-wide web instead of a dedicated line for access to the financial management system. And it doesn't stop there. I can use the computer "mouse" to click on boxes and move through the menus without typing in numbers. But, and forgive me for saying this, other than that, I don't see a whole lot else happening. In fact, it seems there are some things that I used to be able to do but no longer can.

But it's my problem, isn't it? I know I should drop the subject, admit defeat, keep asking for assistance and wearing out friendships, and get on with the bigger business of pointing out that these things are small potatoes compared to deeper computer-related problems such as viruses that have become part of the working day. The last time I made fun of CEFMS, I got an indignant e-mail saying that if it took me four hours and three phone calls to complete a single 15 minute CEFMS action, there must be something wrong with me. I never said there wasn't. The sender also said that I certainly wasn't making anyone's life easier by making such comments. Obviously, I was rubbing up against what clearly is an open wound. But, as the saying goes, "Hope springs eternal." Maybe the next iteration will be the answer to my prayers. Maybe I'll be able to move on to other things.

Right now, I'm in trouble because I'm behind on the work I was hired to do, certain credit card bills haven't been paid, the phone's ringing off the hook, and this morning I received more than 50 virus-related messages on my computer. And that's just at work. However, I'm not afraid to go home to see what's waiting for me there. No matter what's in the mail or on my personal telephone answering machine, I know I'll be able to resolve it without logging on to CEFMS.

While I have my doubts that if I don't mention them, such "problems" will simply go away, I'm just as skeptical that airing my grievances makes a difference. However, there's no question in my mind that occasional CEFMS users like myself are not tolerated by this system. In fact, the system seems to have no tolerance for individuals that might need prompting (prompting, that is, beyond freezing the screen) to successfully complete any operation nor, heaven forbid, for anyone who makes a mistake somewhere along the way. And that is the basis of my constructive criticism. One of the colossal ironies of this system, is that it's still paper driven and if certain manual operations are not completed in a timely manner along the way, the whole process grinds to a halt. Meanwhile, the credit card bank's clock keeps ticking away.

The real issue, of course, is that I don't think that either my memory or my percentage of good decisions versus bad decisions is any worse than its ever been. It's just that I feel that in this "information age" I find myself so besieged by a constant flow of mostly trivial information that it's increasingly difficult to separate the desirable from the undesirable. To keep my house and my life from being buried in paper, I now stand over the trash can to sort mail. Electronically, I do the same thing. If I have to concentrate on the steps required to complete a task, it's as if suddenly the process is of more importance than the product and I lose interest. I want to accomplish something with my life; I find myself craving simplicity and skill of navigation, and tangible outcomes.

So, for what it's worth, if anyone wants me to be an enthusiastic participant in this "information age" and reduce the risk to myself, others, and the system as a whole, I think the answer is increasingly clear. It has been right there in front of us all along: make desired outcomes a part of the equation. CEFMS? Create a menu screen that asks "What do you want to do?" Then, by using the time-honored "If...Then...." construct, guides me through all the necessary components on the road to completion. And when I make a mistake, permits me to "undo" it. When the job is finished, I won't even mind sharing the glory and saying "Thank you, I couldn't have done it without you."