One Last Compile...

Programmers are from Mars, Users are from Alpha Centauri

I always think to myself: this time it's going to be different. A new relationship, with trust and respect on both sides. This could be the big one, I tell myself. Don't mess it up.

But in three months time I know I'll be sitting mournfully across the table, surveying the wreckage of my hopes and dreams, bracing myself to hear those stinging words:

"I'm sorry, but it's not really working, is it?"

"Well – no," I'll admit. There'll be a long painful pause. Then I'll make one final effort to keep our destinies together. "Not all of it. But look – if you click here, this bit works."

The User will look at me sorrowfully, knowing that it's doomed but not wanting to humiliate me too much. "I'm not sure," they'll say tactfully, "how useful a window which pops up with quotations from the *I Ching* will be to our plumbers out in the field."

"It's been a tremendously useful source of guidance to millions of people down the ages," I'll respond, "I don't think your plumbers should sniff at it." (Besides which, it was a really nifty little component that I found on CompuServe, and you're damn well going to like it. I might even send the author his $20 if I remember.)

The User often makes a grab for the mouse then, always a dangerous moment. They're liable to head straight for the bits which don't quite work yet, and then look at me accusingly when the system bombs. Like it's my fault.

"This input screen," says the User, clicking cautiously. "Why can't I enter any data?"

I'll resist the temptation to click my tongue in an irritated manner. "Well – obviously, you first have to open a new database file, initialise it, flick to this screen here and enter in your log-ID and password, then right-click on that small icon down there and select `Enter Data`."

Ten minutes later the User says that there's still nothing happening.

"This is an early beta version, those Edit Boxes don't actually work yet. But look, don't you think these red graphs are good?"

"I'd prefer them in light blue," says the User, looking thoughtful.

I'll usually start getting angry at this point. "Light blue? Fine. Look. Into Delphi, click on this form, click on the graph, select colour for series: cyan. Re-compile. Voila: light blue."

Big mistake.

"Oo, that was clever. What does the Lime Green look like?"

We'll spend a good twenty minutes doing this, before the User finally decides that red is probably the best choice after all. The User is very perky now, and decides to flex a few creative muscles.

"This font, can we change it to Bold Italic? Maybe just Italic. And can we move this label above the box rather than to the left of it? Bit higher up. Yup, that's it. Now, this window here. All wrong: needs more space, more light. Take all the font sizes down. Wonderful." The User stops to scroll admiringly through the screens. "Gosh, I never knew programming could be so easy."

Like always, half of me is deeply offended. Half of me is mightily relieved. "So, you're going to stay with me then?"

"Yes, I think so. Now that I've been through it with you and we've resolved the important issues, I think there's definitely a way forward for us."

"And the quotations from the *I Ching*?"

Pause. "I think – now that they're in that Shadow Outline font – our plumbers will probably be quite receptive. In fact, I'm sure they'll find them invaluable."

We'll smile at each other as the User leaves, clasp hands warmly. I know that chances are the User is going to be booted off the project next month, and I'll be starting over again with somebody new. But there's just a chance that maybe this time I've found a user I can talk to, who understands me, who can be my confidant and my best buddy. I don't think it's much to ask.