

We Are All Actors  
Act 2, Scene 7  
"A Failure to Communicate"

by  
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INT. AN OFFICE

RICK and CHARLIE sit in front of a computer screen.

RICK  
Wow, that's ugly.

CHARLIE  
OK, Rembrandt, you got a better  
idea?

RICK  
It can't get much worse. I'd be  
happy to work on it with you.

CHARLIE  
Wow, when you put it that way I can  
hardly resist.

RICK  
Touchy!

CHARLIE  
Yeah, a little. It's been pretty  
tough, actually.

RICK  
So this is supposed to be a  
legislative history?

CHARLIE  
Yeah. It's last year's education  
bill.

RICK  
What are all the different colors?

CHARLIE  
Each color represents a different  
markup version.

RICK  
But they're all just mixed in  
together.

CHARLIE  
You're not really supposed to read  
this version. See, if you click on  
a blue word, all the other colors  
go away and you just have the blue-  
version markup.

RICK  
OK, that kind of makes sense.

They're both silent for a moment.

CHARLIE

It's not very good though, is it?

RICK

No, not really. I can't really see how it changes from version to version.

CHARLIE

I tried putting some colored buttons along the top so you could click through the versions really fast and see how things changed. But it wasn't really easy to understand, and it was hard to explain how to use the buttons to users.

RICK

And there's another problem too - I can't tell who made the changes or why.

CHARLIE

You can, actually.

RICK

No I can't.

CHARLIE

You just need to look better. Watch this! If I right-click with the mouse I can bring up a little context menu.

RICK

Sexy. And totally obvious.

CHARLIE

Smartass.

RICK

Sorry. Let's see - "Sponsor" means who inserted the changed language?

CHARLIE

Yep.

RICK

And "Committee" - does that mean the committee that put the language in?

CHARLIE

Yeah.

There's a moment of silence

RICK

Don't those both do sorta the same thing?

CHARLIE

Yeah. I'm not completely happy with that.

RICK

And "Debate"?

CHARLIE

It links you to the text of any floor debate on the amendment that inserted the language in the Congressional Record.

RICK

Oh.

He looks at the screen for a minute.

RICK

And what's "Pressure"?

CHARLIE

Force per unit area.

RICK

You're not going to be the last comic standing.

CHARLIE

Oooh - he can dish it out but he can't take it.

RICK

OK, one point for Charlie. "Pressure"?

CHARLIE

If you click it lists the lobbying groups in favor of the change.

RICK

I think you're gonna have to change the name of that one. Maybe "advocates" or something?

CHARLIE

Yeah, probably, it's just a beta.

RICK

OK, so let's say I study all this and figure something out and I want to comment on it. How do I do that?

CHARLIE

There's a comment button down at the bottom.

RICK

You mean like on a blog.

CHARLIE

Exactly. People will already know how to use it.

RICK

Yeah, but it will still suck.

CHARLIE

Wow, Mr. Sunshine, tell me more.

RICK

Well, on long bills the comments will be like fifty or a hundred screens away from what I'm commenting on.

CHARLIE

Yeah, I did think about that. I thought about doing the threaded discussion forum thing and putting a little "Comment" or "Quote" button after each section.

RICK

And if you click on it you can put a response inline and indented, kinda like Slashdot?

CHARLIE

Yeah, like that. But having the comments mixed in with the text like that made the whole thing really confusing to read.

RICK

I can see how that would be a problem. What about mouseover?

CHARLIE

Oh, you mean like putting up a little text bubble with the comments in it when you hover the mouse over the text?

RICK

Yeah.

CHARLIE

I guess I could try that, but if there were a lot of comments the bubble would fill up the whole screen.

RICK

Maybe you could just put the names of the commenters in the bubble and link them to the text of the comments.

CHARLIE

You know, that's actually a pretty good idea. Not good enough to balance out all the annoying sarcasm, but it's a start.

RICK

Well thank you very much.

There's silence for a moment

RICK

But it's only part of a good idea, actually. It doesn't help readers find all the comments from the same organization, for example.

CHARLIE

That's true.

RICK

And it only goes one level deep.

CHARLIE

What?

RICK

Well, if I want to comment on a comment, I can't hover over the balloon and get another balloon.

CHARLIE

Hmmm. You might be able to do that, but I don't know how to do it in Javascript.

RICK

But it's a problem, right? Because unless you can comment on comments you can't really express disagreements.

CHARLIE

Yeah that's true. I was dreading getting to that part, actually.

RICK

And there's a bunch of other stuff I'd really like to be able to do too - like see all the text inserted by a single committee.

CHARLIE

You mean like, search on any of the things in the bubbles and hide everything that wasn't in the search result.

RICK

Yeah - really it's kind of a visual filter. "Show me all the stuff that changed in the current version". "Show me all the stuff that ACLU opposes". "Show me all the stuff that Senators from New Hampshire added through amendments". Stuff like that.

There's another silence. CHARLIE looks unhappy.

CHARLIE

That would be really hard, Rick.

RICK

Yeah, I know actually. And I'm not trying to be hard on you.

(MORE)

RICK (cont'd)  
Actually you've done a pretty good  
job. It's just a really really  
hard problem.

CHARLIE  
It sure is. I'd love it if  
somebody else would solve it.