

# Who wrote the text for the Ctrl+Alt+Del dialog in Windows 3.1?

 [devblogs.microsoft.com/oldnewthing/20140902-00](http://devblogs.microsoft.com/oldnewthing/20140902-00)

September 2, 2014



Raymond Chen

One of the differences between standard-mode Windows and enhanced-mode Windows was what happened when you hit **Ctrl + Alt + Del**. Since 16-bit Windows applications are cooperatively multi-tasked, it is easy to determine whether the system is responding, and if not, it is also easy to identify the application which is responsible. In that case, Windows gave you options to close the non-responsive application, restart the computer, or cancel.

During this time period, Steve Ballmer was head of the Systems Division, and he paid a visit to the Windows team to see what they were up to, as is the wont of many executives.<sup>1</sup> When they showed him the **Ctrl + Alt + Del** feature, he nodded thoughtfully and added, “This is nice, but I don’t like the text of the message. It doesn’t sound right to me.”

“Okay, Steve. If you think you can do a better job, then go for it.” Unlike some other executive, Steve took up the challenge, and a few days later, he emailed what he thought the **Ctrl + Alt + Del** screen should say.

The text he came up with was actually quite good, and it went into the product pretty much word for word.

## Contoso Deluxe Music Composer

This Windows application has stopped responding to the system.

- \* Press ESC to cancel and return to Windows.
- \* Press ENTER to close this application that is not responding. You will lose any unsaved information in this application.
- \* Press CTRL+ALT+DEL again to restart your computer. You will lose any unsaved information in all applications.

**Note to journalists:** This is the **Ctrl + Alt + Del** dialog, not the blue screen of death. Thank you for paying attention.

<sup>1</sup> It occurred to me only as I wrote up this entry that people took the phrase *Right on top of my notepad* from the earlier story literally: There was a chair, the chair had a notepad on its seat, Bill sat in the chair (on top of the notepad). That interpretation never occurred to me. From the description in the previous paragraph, it was apparent to me that the notepad was on a desk, and Bill's choice of seat blocked access to the notepad. (*I.e.*, the manager would have to reach around Bill to get the notepad.) The person telling the story is not a native English speaker, so there may have been a preposition translation issue.

Raymond Chen

**Follow**

