



White paper

Micro-releases

Simple and manageable product releases

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I've always advocated slow foundational steps during product development rather than monolithic version releases. I've seen far too many projects get bogged down in the innumerable details, and sometimes canceled because they grew too unwieldy to manage and complete.

For product development, I've found the technique of "micro-releases" to be very liberating. Micro-releases are very small incremental product releases where the version number is incremented in the hundredth's digit, and relatively small changes are made to the product. For instance, a micro-release from version 1.20 to 1.21 might consist of ten bug fixes, one feature addition, and some usability polish.

Micro-releases typically take two weeks to implement, a few days to test, and perhaps another few days of end-user beta testing before being officially released. A full major release may consist of up to 50 of these releases, metered out over an 18 month cycle. This simple development cycle has the following benefits:

- 1) Simple goals that are easier to communicate
- 2) Focused testing on just a few key issues
- 3) Introduce fewer bugs
- 4) Catch and fix bugs earlier
- 5) Introduce major architecture in small pieces
- 6) Make architectural improvements along the way
- 7) More polish for customer usability
- 8) Faster turnaround time for customer requests
- 9) Learn what customers really want
- 10) Architecture is "aged" over a long period of time

Because micro-releases are so simple, there are many advantages for the entire organization, including the development team, QA team, and even the executives

and sales force. It is easy for everyone to focus on the simple goals of the current micro-release, rather than on lofty blue-sky plans.

The simpler a micro-release is, the easier it is to communicate to the entire company or department. It is easy for everyone involved to know the key vision and goals of the release, and to focus on achieving them. You have fewer people who are clueless about what to do next, and more people who are working together to achieve the goals. When goals are simple and imminent, people are more willing to apply themselves to the task at hand. And when management consistently executes these simple goals, employees learn that they'll never be placed in a position of "man hauling" a huge project. They learn that each burden they are asked to shoulder will be light and achievable. That keeps excitement and morale high. There are no death marches with micro-releases. The instant gratification of seeing customers benefit from their work pushes people to repeat their success. Success breeds success, but failure breeds failure.

Management and product architects need to keep in mind that large architectural product plans do exist, and that products do not grow well with simple monthly patches. Products can grow to become pretty ugly when there is no grand vision, and everything that is done to the product is quick and shortsighted. Does this mean that micro-releases are bad? No, it simply means that the grand strategy needs to be consistently executed while the short-term tactical maneuvers are carried out. Large-scale architectural product plans need to be slowly and consistently introduced into the product within the micro-release framework.

Product quality and customer satisfaction increase significantly because the product is constantly being groomed and polished for human consumption. The product is always in a state of readiness.

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