

You Can't Do That To An Egg!

by Dean K. Wilson, P.E.

***Question:* Hoping to keep as up-to-date as possible as an installer of fire alarm systems, I recently purchased a copy of the new edition of the *National Fire Alarm Code, NFPA 72-2007*. Imagine my frustration when discussing code requirements with my local Authority Having Jurisdiction to discover that she does not have this edition. In fact, she continues to use the 1999 edition from two code-revision cycles ago. What gives?**

Answer: I can only imagine your frustration. You have decided to “take the high road.” You have made an effort to educate yourself in the latest code requirements by purchasing the most recent edition of the *National Fire Alarm Code*. From this act on your part, I can presume that you have an interest in making certain that your customers end up with a code-compliant fire alarm system installation. Not only will this help guarantee the maximum level of safety provided by such a system, it will also help ensure that the fire alarm system produces a minimum of false alarm signals. To find out that the AHJ, on whom you must rely for guidance in complying with the Code, does not possess the most up-to-date edition could easily drive you crazy.

Following the rules and regulations developed by a true consensus code-making process becomes one of the most important activities in which any fire alarm system designer or installer engages. These rules and regulations have importance beyond measure. The true consensus process employed by the National Fire Protection Association helps guarantee requirements that offer genuine safety, free from arbitrary and capricious influences.

How important are the rules and regulations? Thinking about this question reminds me of the early days of personal computers. Current users would laugh heartily if they could view some of the early attempts at computer gaming. No graphics; just plain text on a screen. No mouse to manipulate; just commands typed on the keyboard. One game in particular, *Zork I*, offered some unique challenges. The game began with several paragraphs describing a cabin in the woods with nearby hidden treasure. By typing certain commands, such as, “walk toward cabin,” “walk up onto porch,” or “open cabin door,” the game would respond with additional text allowing the participant to maneuver through the scenario of the game.

At one point, I tracked the treasure down to the locale of the woods outside the cabin. The text on the screen had earlier supplied me with a hammer from inside the cabin. With a description of a jewel-encrusted golden egg up in the tree displayed for me by the text on the screen, I issued the typed command: “climb tree.”

“You now sit on the tree branch next to the egg,” the computer responded on its screen.

“Smash egg with hammer,” I typed.

“YOU CAN’T DO THAT TO AN EGG!” the computer barked back in boldface upper case letters.

I had violated one of the rules of the game. Now I did not know that I had done so until I had typed my offending command. The game offered no list of rules, no instruction on how to play, no parameters that would lead to success, and no cues along the way. That seemed to represent part of the allure of this particular game. You did not know the any of the rules until you violated one of them.

Imagine what a serious and hard-working designer or contractor would experience if designing or installing fire protection equipment worked that way. Determined to provide the best

possible protection, the designer or contractor would do his or her best to design or install a system only to have an AHJ decline to approve the design or installation. No advance warning. No listing of the rules. No instruction on how to make a proper, code-complying design or installation.

Fortunately, NFPA 72-2007, *National Fire Alarm Code*, offers a level playing field of thoughtful rules and regulations to guide designers and installers in giving their clients the best possible and most effective fire alarm system design and installation. Everyone in the process must possess a copy of the *Code*. Each one must read the *Code* with understanding. And, each one must apply the requirements of the *Code* appropriately to each fire alarm system installation.

If the AHJ does not possess a copy of the current edition of the *Code*, the whole process grinds to a screeching halt. Shame on the AHJ! Shame on *any* code-authority who does not choose to follow the requirements contained in the most recent edition of the *Code*.

If you are an AHJ—fire chief, fire marshal, fire inspector, building inspector, chief of fire alarms, or some other title that gives you authority over code enforcement in your jurisdiction—please, please, please make certain that you purchase, read, understand, and apply the requirements from the latest edition of the *National Fire Alarm Code*, NFPA 72-2007. If you don't understand some of the requirements, seek help from someone knowledgeable in those requirements.

I list my telephone number and e-mail address at the end of each of these articles because I want to help you understand the requirements of the *National Fire Alarm Code*. All you have to do: write me an e-mail or give me a telephone call.

If everyone in the process works together, we can achieve the goal of a more fire safe community. And, wouldn't that give us all a true "Win-Win" situation?

IMSA member Dean K. Wilson, P.E., FSFPE, C.F.P.S., now retired on disability, formerly worked as a Senior Engineer in the Erie (PA.) office of the fire protection engineering and code consulting firm, Hughes Associates, Inc. (www.haifire.com). The opinions expressed in this article are strictly his own. You can reach him by e-mail at deanwilson@adelphia.net or by telephone at 814-897-0827.