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eliot-akira / [how-software-companies-die](#)

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[how-software-companies-die](#)

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1  =====
2  How Software Companies Die
3  =====
4  - Orson Scott Card
5
6  The environment that nurtures creative programmers kills management and
7  marketing types - and vice versa.
8
9  Programming is the Great Game. It consumes you, body and soul. When
10 you're caught up in it, nothing else matters. When you emerge into
11 daylight, you might well discover that you're a hundred pounds
12 overweight, your underwear is older than the average first grader, and
13 judging from the number of pizza boxes lying around, it must be spring
14 already. But you don't care, because your program runs, and the code
15 is fast and clever and tight.
16
17 You won.
18
19 You're aware that some people think you're a nerd. So what? They're
20 not players. They've never jostled with Windows or gone hand to hand
21 with DOS. To them C++ is a decent grade, almost a B - not a language.
22 They barely exist. Like soldiers or artists, you don't care about the
23 opinions of civilians. You're building something intricate and fine.
24 They'll never understand it.
25
26 Beekeeping
27
28 Here's the secret that every successful software company is based on:
29 You can domesticate programmers the way beekeepers tame bees. You
30 can't exactly communicate with them, but you can get them to swarm in
31 one place and when they're not looking, you can carry off the honey.
32
33 You keep these bees from stinging by paying them money. More money
34 than they know what to do with. But that's less than you might think.
35 You see, all these programmers keep hearing their fathers' voices in
36 their heads saying "When are you going to join the real world?" All
```

37 you have to pay them is enough money that they can answer (also in
38 their heads) "Jeez, Dad, I'm making more than you." On average, this
39 is cheap.

40
41 And you get them to stay in the hive by giving them other coders to
42 swarm with. The only person whose praise matters is another
43 programmer. Less-talented programmers will idolize them; evenly
44 matched ones will challenge and goad one another; and if you want to
45 get a good swarm, you make sure that you have at least one certified
46 genius coder that they can all look up to, even if he glances at other
47 people's code only long enough to sneer at it.

48
49 He's a Player, thinks the junior programmer. He looked at my code.
50 That is enough.

51
52 If a software company provides such a hive, the coders will give up
53 sleep, love, health, and clean laundry, while the company keeps the
54 bulk of the money.

55
56 Out of Control

57
58 Here's the problem that ends up killing company after company. All
59 successful software companies had, as their dominant personality, a
60 leader who nurtured programmers. But no company can keep such a leader
61 forever. Either he cashes out, or he brings in management types who
62 end up driving him out, or he changes and becomes a management type
63 himself. One way or another, marketers get control.

64
65 But...control of what? Instead of finding assembly lines of productive
66 workers, they quickly discover that their product is produced by
67 utterly unpredictable, uncooperative, disobedient, and worst of all,
68 unattractive people who resist all attempts at management. Put them
69 on a time clock, dress them in suits, and they become sullen and start
70 sabotaging the product. Worst of all, you can sense that they are
71 making fun of you with every word they say.

72
73 Smoked Out

74
75 The shock is greater for the coder, though. He suddenly finds that
76 alien creatures control his life. Meetings, Schedules, Reports. And
77 now someone demands that he PLAN all his programming and then stick to
78 the plan, never improving, never tweaking, and never, never touching
79 some other team's code. The lousy young programmer who once worshiped
80 him is now his tyrannical boss, a position he got because he played
81 golf with some sphincter in a suit.

82
83 The hive has been ruined. The best coders leave. And the marketers,
84 comfortable now because they're surrounded by power neckties and they
85 have things under control, are baffled that each new iteration of
86 their software loses market share as the code bloats and the bugs
87 proliferate.

88

89 Got to get some better packaging. Yeah, that's it.

90

91 -----

92

93 Yes, it's from Orson Scott Card, the Hugo and Nebula award winning

94 author of Ender's Game, Speaker for the Dead, Lost Boys, the Alvin

95 Maker series, and many others novels.