No Comment

I received a few emails after last time along the lines of "Oh. Perl. Homebrew CMS. *That's* why you don't allow people to post comments." Well, no, but it was definitely a conscious decision. The Web 2.0 answer is that I'm outsourcing comments to reddit and Hacker News. The real reason is this:

The negativity of online technical discussions makes me bitter, and even though I'm sometimes drawn to them I need to stay away.

To be fair, this isn't true only of technical discussions. Back when I was on Usenet, I took refuge from geeky bickering in a group about cooking...only to find people arguing the merits of Miracle Whip versus mayonnaise. Put enough people together and there are sure to be complaints and conflicting personal agendas. But with smart, technically-oriented people, I'd expect there to be more sharing of real experiences, but that's often not the case.

Here's a lesson I learned very early on after I started working full-time as a programmer (and that's a peculiar sentence for me to read, as I no longer program for a living). I'd be looking at some code at my desk, and it made no sense. Why would anyone write it like this? There's an obvious and cleaner way to approach the same problem.

So I'd go down the hall to the person who wrote it in the first place and start asking questions...and find out that I didn't have the whole picture, the problem was messier than it first appeared, and there were perfectly valid reasons for the code being that way. This happened again and again. Sometimes I did find a real flaw, but even then it may have only occurred with data that wasn't actually possible (because, for example, it was filtered by another part of the system). Talking face to face changed everything, because they could draw diagrams, pull out specs, and give concrete examples.

I think that initial knee-jerk "I've been looking at this for ten seconds and now let me explain the critical flaws" reaction is a common one among people with engineering mindsets. And that's not a good thing. I've seen this repeatedly, from people putting down programming languages for silly, superficial reasons (Perl's sigils, Python's enforced indentation), to ridiculous off-the-cuff put downs of new products (such as the predictions of doom in the Slashdot announcement of the original iPod in 2001).

The online community that I've had the most overwhelmingly positive experience with is the photo-sharing site Flickr. I'll keep talking about Flickr, because it played a big part in getting me out of some ruts, and I've seen more great photographs over the last five years than I would have seen in ten lifetimes otherwise. I know that if you dig around you can find tedious rants from equipment collectors, but I do a good job of avoiding those. I don't think I've ever seen real negativity in photo comments other than suggestions for different crops or the occasional technical criticisms. There are so many good photos to see that there's no reason to waste time with ones the don't appeal to me. That's supported by only allowing up-voting of photos (by adding a shot to your favorites); there's no way to formally register dislike.

Flickr gets my time, but most of the programming discussion sites don't.

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I'm James Hague, a recovering programmer who has been designing video games since the 1980s. Programming Without Being Obsessed With Programming and Organizational Skills Beat Algorithmic Wizardry are good starting points. For the older stuff, try the 2012 Retrospective.

Where are the comments?