

Programmer Dreams and Stranger Things

As I write these words it is four days before Father's Day, when I suppose many men are dreaming of gas grills, recliners, golf clubs, or power tools. Or is that a little too cliché? I have in front of me a half-page newspaper ad entitled "Father's Day Dream Sale," sporting nothing but electronics: a home theater projector, a camcorder, flat HDTV, and a video editor box. We love our sophisticated toys.

This father is a programmer and has different dreams (although I did just acquire a DVD/VCR combo for "convenience"). Maybe your dreams are of similar ilk. I have a dream, for example, that Linux will continue to become easier to configure and that Windows will become more stable—some sort of combination of the two seems like it would be an ideal desktop environment. I have separate boxes running Windows XP, RedHat Linux 8.0, and Mac OS X networked in my home office. Not being a Linux expert myself (although a vintage UNIX user from the 80s) I thought I could easily configure my Linux box to serve up printers and other hardware. I thought wrong. After three weeks and scads of emails to the local Linux user group, I gave up. (I refuse to sell my soul to interminable hours in Configuration Hell just to brag to fellow hackers that I know every line in every file in the `/etc` tree by heart—I really do have other things to do.) I now have my printers and scanner connected to my Windows box and everything works just dandy. I have a dream that software, especially operating systems, will someday become at once reliable, well documented, and easy to use.

I have known programmers that wish that users would just go away so that they could hack and tinker at will and still get paid for it. Not a realistic dream IMO. Some hard-working programmers I know dream of a 40-hour work week. Since this is orthodox Extreme Programming doctrine one would think this would be more popular. Alas, not so. Other programmers I know would gladly work 60-80 hours right now if they could only find a job. Maybe you can tell me where all the jobs have gone.

Having more questions than answers, I shall conclude by sharing a timely gift from my inbox, left by the Mysterious Bard who has haunted these pages twice in the past year. Maybe you can identify with the following, as you dream of better days.

Coding In the Dark

According to the C Street Band

(with apologies to Bruce Springsteen's "Dancing In the Dark," and to the many good contractors out there)

They ask when I'll deliver, and I ain't got nothing to say
I sling code till the morning, I go to bed feeling the same way
My bug count's climbin' higher, man, it's high and the blame's on myself
So I'm lazy... but a new perk, well that might help:
 "You can't make me aspire,
 Can't make me aspire without a Sparc!"
 My contract won't expire
 Even if I'm just coding in the dark
OnMessage calls getting clearer, round trip's on and I'm moving 'round my CASE
I check my work into `\mirror`... I wanna change my cube, my air, my space!
Man, I ain't getting nowhere just working in a dump like this
There's more cash happening somewhere, my headhunter just knows that there is:
 "You can't make me aspire,
 Can't make me aspire without a Sparc!"
 This gun's for hire
 Even if I'm just coding in the dark

You sit around getting bolder,
There's a joke here somewhere and he's hired me
I'd shake this gig off my shoulders,
But the money's too good on me
Stay on the streets of this town and they'll keep hiring you up alright
They say you gotta stay hungry – hey, baby, my cola gut is rumblin' tonight!
I'm dying for some pizza, I'm sick of sitting 'round here trying to make this work
I need just one clean checkin, give me one good build, 'cause this boss is a jerk
You can't just retire
When your manager's budget is hot
This gun's for hire
Even if I'm just coding in the dark

Whatever they require
It doesn't matter whether I can build it or not
My contract won't expire
Even if I'm just coding in the dark...

-- H.P. Typecraft