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by Rob Kolstad

Rob Kolstad is currently Executive Director of SAGE, the System Administrators Guild. Rob has edited *login*: for over ten years.



kolstad@sage.org

Ugly Babies

I recently attended Charlie Bass's WebDevCon in Las Vegas (held concurrently with ApacheCon). The vast majority of WebDevCon's attendees were developers of commercial software, and they pretty much used Microsoft operating systems and products exclusively. It was very enlightening for me.

As casual discussion topics rotated during one particular lunch, the others at the table turned their attention to the .NET initiative. They discussed the various tools available and offered various critiques. Some of the newer Integrated Development Environment (IDE) received high marks. One attendee made a telling remark (this is not an exact quote but is the general idea): "We have a job to do. We all know multiple programming languages and can learn new ones fairly rapidly. We choose a good tool and work with it. I am particularly pleased at my new ability to create prototypes very rapidly."

Rapid prototyping. He wasn't talking in the context of "Extreme Programming" (see <http://www.jera.com/techinfo/xpfaq.html> for an excellent brief introduction to "XP"). He was extolling the same virtues that the Perl, Python, and other aficionados enjoy when they suggest bringing up quick-and-dirty versions of software to see if it solves the problem-at-hand.

The discussion then turned to the pivotal comment: "Yeah, it sure saves us from ugly baby syndrome." My mind churned trying to figure out the reference.

"No one has ever had an ugly baby," it was explained. "Maybe you or I might think the baby is less than attractive, but when it's *your* baby, it's the most beautiful baby in the world."

And the light came on for me. When programmers, committees, designers, architects, or anyone else spends a fairly long time on a project, then the results of that project are guaranteed a positive evaluation because: There Are No Ugly Babies (TANUB).

Now that I understand this, I understand my emotions when people talk to me about my programming contest grading system (aka "Rob, Junior," my baby). It's a beautiful system. Oh, maybe there's a rough edge here or there, but otherwise it's perfect. TANUB.

Or so I thought. Russ Cox, now of MIT, began an "improvement regimen" for the grading system that included such items as constructing a new (to me) sort of "jail." This "jail" knows how to check every system call (and the arguments thereto) that goes by as a contestant's program is executed and can be configured to allow or to deny the success of the call based on a number of interesting attributes of such calls. Well, that would improve my baby. In fact, Russ has a huge number of good ideas that will be improving my baby. So many that maybe, just maybe, it will become his baby. Only then will I be able to step back and see if it's ugly or not.

So what's the prescription? Well first, let's acknowledge that it's a variant of an older prescription that you've probably heard repeatedly (I think Mike O'Dell inculcated me with it): "Generally, it's OK to fail, as long as you fail quickly." This prescription's corollary is: "Never fail slowly." I think these are great words to live by. They enable one to experiment freely, as long as the experiments are not "costly" in terms of cash, prestige, data loss, etc.

The new prescription: "Don't spend so much time on the first version(s) of a project that you will be unable to judge its success or failure unemotionally." This suggests rapid prototyping as a great way to implement the mature engineer's credo: "Plan to throw the first one away." Why not? If the first one was "cheap," it won't hurt at all to discard it, redesign it, or improve it in some other way. The opposite approach is mind-numbing in its political complexity, trust me.

Best wishes to everyone for a productive New Year and many successful projects.