

One Last Compile...

Portrait of the Artist as a Young Coder

Someone wise once remarked that no work of art is ever completed, it is only abandoned. You could substitute the word 'software' for 'art', which is something I'll come back to in just a second, and you would then have my life in a nutshell. There are always more features to add, screens that can be improved, shortcuts to be implemented. I've never once been able to rise confidently from my desk and say 'That's finished.' And that's not just because the Testing Department would laugh themselves into a coma.

The problem can manifest itself in one of two ways. If the client starts trying to get a few extra bells and whistles in without paying any more (usually by getting their pretty secretary to explain earnestly how her life would be so much easier if you just did this one itchy-bitsy little change) then it is referred to as 'feature creep'. That's irritating enough, but it's not the killer. The one that gets you, that sends your schedules all to hell and ensures that you never, ever, deliver anything on time, is when you add in new features yourself, unprompted and unasked for. This is the weird phenomenon known as 'gold plating'. Or maybe, in my more modest case, 'brass plating.' It is counter-intuitive, uneconomic, and plainly against my own best interests. And I can't stop myself doing it.

Imagine that you owned a car factory, and one day you wandered down to the production line to see the assembly of the new economy model of your popular family runaround, the ProctoPlasm X. You would be more than mildly irritated, I would suggest, if you found your workers adding in gold hubcaps and installing top of the range stereos and air-conditioning units into every vehicle. You would comment, perhaps rather

heatedly, that if they continued in this manner you would have no alternative but to close down the business and go and farm pigs in Bolivia. You would not be sympathetic, I believe, to the shrugs and mutters of 'It only takes a few minutes, seems a shame not to give them the best car we can, you've got to admit it's better for it, etc'.

Yet, when confronted about my own gold plating, I find myself getting very defensive indeed. I know, deep down, that what I do is bad business. But then, deep down, we're not businesspersons, are we? Nor are we scientists. For all our love of reason, science and logic and our deep, burning, desire to see *Blake's 7* back on telly we see ourselves, in the final analysis, as artists. Or, if you find that a stretch too far, craftsmen. Artisans. (Hang on, I'll just go and check that last one in the dictionary. Yup, we're all right.) And we don't want to produce the economy model ProctoPlasm X. We want to produce the ProctoPlasm GLX Sport, with power steering and passenger side airbags. (Sorry to dip into brackets again, but I just love the idea of built-in computer airbags. 'We're about to crash Excel! Aaargh! *WHOOOSH!*' 'That was close. Everybody okay in the back there?')

It might be our time that's being used up and yes, time costs money, but we're talking about our work here, our legacy to future generations, the fruit of our labours. We want to build the finest software we can. It represents the best of us, who we are and what we stand for. Or, in my case, it represents the minimum functionality I can get away with plus lots of cool stuff that isn't useful but far, far more interesting to do.