

The Journalism Analogy for Programming

Ward Cunningham
Cunningham & Cunningham, Inc.

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In DisciplineEnvy [2] I wrote ...

"The programming discipline has suffered a long term identity crisis. It never seems happy to be itself but instead pretends to be the discipline it serves at the moment, or the discipline from which it has drawn the most members. First our discipline wanted to be like mathematics. Oh how nice it is to reason with artifacts of pure thought. Then we were a science, off on a voyage of discovery with the scientific method at our side. Now we've matured to engineers, liberated by certified processes and writing our handbook.

"I don't believe it. When I stoop to analogy I pick journalism. Hey, like us, the journalism grunts are idolized and reviled at the same time and all work under deadlines. And we will be a lot better off when we let our young whips design the systems and make our old sages do editorial maintenance. Unlike journalism, we promote the wrong direction.

I went on in this mid '90s piece to complain about our search for analogy without considering that our discipline might not need an analogy to make progress. I still believe that, but I have become more and more attached to the programmer is a journalist metaphor. I like it because the metaphor is productive, that is, it leads us to correct assumptions about programmers based on our experience with journalists. Here are metaphoric products that appeal to me.

- Programming, like journalism, requires talent. Although anyone can go to school to study either, that education only teaches the practices of the moment, it cannot make you write well if that is not your inclination.
- Programmers, like journalists, must get the story. Although managers (editors) may assign activities and set deadlines, the programmer (journalist) must figure out what is really going on when they get to the scene and capture it in their work.
- Programmers, like journalists, must write in a style that fits into the finished product. Fitting in well is the first requirement of their work after basic accuracy and well formed grammar.
- Programing, like reporting, is filled with hard work and attention to detail that is rarely honored when done well but often ridiculed when mistakes happen.

Of course there are many ways that programmers are not like journalists. We can ask, what does a journalist do that we don't, and what would our profession be like if we did? This is what we hope from the civil engineering analogy: if we just make blue prints before we started and hold ourselves responsible for loss, then, like bridges, our software will work for a hundred years. In response, I say, if we just sent our cub programmers out to write the first draft of everything and then let the senior people start with that then maybe we could hundreds of thousands of largely correct and relevant lines on a nightly basis just like the daily news. It is something to think about, no?

References

- [1] <http://www.visibleworkings.com/analogyfest/>
[2] <http://c2.com/cgi/wiki?DisciplineEnvy>