Software and the 15th Century

I received an interesting e-mail looking at the origins of some of our modern sayings that derived from life in the 15th century. Although I question its accuracy, I could not help but see a parallel with today's software engineering. Here are my observations:

MARRIAGE AND FUNDING: In the 15th century most people took their yearly bath in May and got married in June because they were still smelling good in June. To be safe, brides carried a bouquet of flowers to hide their body odor.

Today, software projects are started in September to avoid the loss of fiscal year surplus funds. To be safe, project managers carry around justification statements to avoid the smell of working the system.

BATHS AND PERSONAL COMPUTERS: In the 15th century, baths consisted of a big tub filled with hot water. The man of the house had the privilege of the nice clean water, followed by the other men, the women, and finally the babies. By the time the babies had their turn, the water was so dirty you could lose someone in it. Hence the saying, *"Don't throw the baby out with the bath water."*

Today, executives enjoy the privilege of the best personal computers and peripherals, followed by the Chief Information Officer and his/her staff, other managers, and finally software engineers. By then the computers available to the engineers are so slow and archaic you could lose someone to a competitor with better equipment. Thus a new saying, "Don't throw the engineer out with the 486."

ROOFS AND DEFECTS: In the 15th century, houses had thatched roofs, with decaying straw piled high and no wood underneath. In the winter it was the only place for dogs and cats to get warm. When it rained it became slippery and sometimes the animals would fall off the roof. Hence the saying, *"It's raining cats and dogs."*

Today, software programs are hastily thrown together. Spaghetti code is piled high with no structure underneath, providing a hospitable place for Ghastly Non-Architectural Traps (GNATs) and Big Ugly Goofs (BUGs) to germinate. Thus a new saying during software testing, "It's raining gnats and bugs."

DEATH AND PEER REVIEWS: In the 15th century, lead cups were used to drink ale or whiskey. The combination of lead and alcohol would sometimes knock people out for a couple of days. Someone walking along the road would take the person for dead. The unconscious person was laid out on the kitchen table for several days and the family would gather around, eat and drink, and wait to see if their loved one would wake up. Hence the custom of holding a "wake."

Today, software engineers sometimes mix Mountain Dew and chocolate bars, causing them to bounce off their cubicles like a battling top. Colleagues walking by and recognizing the potential for spontaneous combustion take the engineer into a conference room. Other engineers are invited to help talk the whirling engineer down to earth. Hence the custom of "peer reviews".

GRAVES AND NETWORKS: In the 15th century, England started running out of places to bury people so they would dig up coffins and reuse the grave. In reopening these coffins, one out of 25 coffins had scratch marks on the inside, indicating people were being buried alive. They decided to tie a string on the deceased's wrist, lead it through the coffin and up through the ground and tie it to a bell. Someone would sit in the graveyard all night to listen for the bell. Hence on the "graveyard shift" they would know that someone was "saved by the bell" or he was a "dead ringer."

Today, software engineers are buried in massive cubical pits and overloaded with tasks. To measure productivity, management strings fiber optics from each cubical through a router to a massive network. The engineer is asked to communicate with peers through e-mail and prohibited from Internet use. Hence on the "7/24/365 shift" managers know which engineers are "saved by the e-mail" and which are "web ringers."

The more things change, the more they stay the same.

— *Gary Petersen, TRI-COR Industries*

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