

preface

I have lost count of the number of PCs I have worn out since I started my career as a software developer—but I will never forget my first computer.

I was only 12 years old when I started programming in BASIC. I had to learn English at the same time because there simply weren't any books on computer programming in my mother tongue (Dutch). This was in 1982. Windows didn't exist yet; I worked on a TI99/4A home computer from Texas Instruments. When I told my friends at school about it, they looked at me as if I had just been beamed down from the Starship Enterprise.

Two years later, my parents bought me my first personal computer: a Tandy/Radio Shack TRS80/4P. As the *P* indicates, it was supposed to be a portable computer, but in reality it was bigger than my mother's sewing machine. It could be booted from a hard disk, but I didn't have one; nor did I have any software besides the TRSDOS and its BASIC interpreter. By the time I was 16, I had written my own word-processing program, an indexed flat-file database system, and a drawing program—nothing fancy, considering the low resolution of the built-in, monochrome green computer screen.

I don't remember exactly what happened to me at that age—maybe it was my delayed discovery of girls—but it suddenly struck me that I was becoming a first-class nerd. So I made a 180-degree turn, studying Latin and math in high school and taking evening classes at a local art school. I decided that I wanted to become an artist instead of going to college. As a compromise with

my parents, I studied civil architectural engineering at Ghent University. In my final year, I bought myself a Compaq portable computer to write my master's thesis. It was like finding a long-lost friend! After I earned my degree as an architect, I decided that it was time to return to the world of computers.

In 1996 I enrolled in a program that would retrain me as a software engineer. I learned and taught a brand-new programming language, Java. During my apprenticeship, I was put in charge of an experimental broadband Internet project. It was my first acquaintance with the Web. This expertise resulted in different assignments for the Flemish government. One of my tasks was to write an R&D report on standard Internet–intranet tools for GIS applications. That's when I wrote my first Java servlets.

I returned to Ghent University as an employee in 1998. When I published my first Free/Open Source Software library, I knew I had finally found my vocation. Now I have had the chance to write a book about it. I tried to give this book the personal touch I often miss when reading technical writings. I hope you will enjoy reading it as much as I have enjoyed writing it.