Courier-Oblique
family: Courier
size: 14
bold: 0
italic 1
ascender: 8.806
descender: -2.198
baseline distance: 16.800
bbox: [-0.378, -3.500, 11.886, 11.270]

Helvetica-Bold
family: Helvetica
size: 14
bold: 1
italic 0
ascender: 10.052
descender: -2.898
baseline distance: 16.800
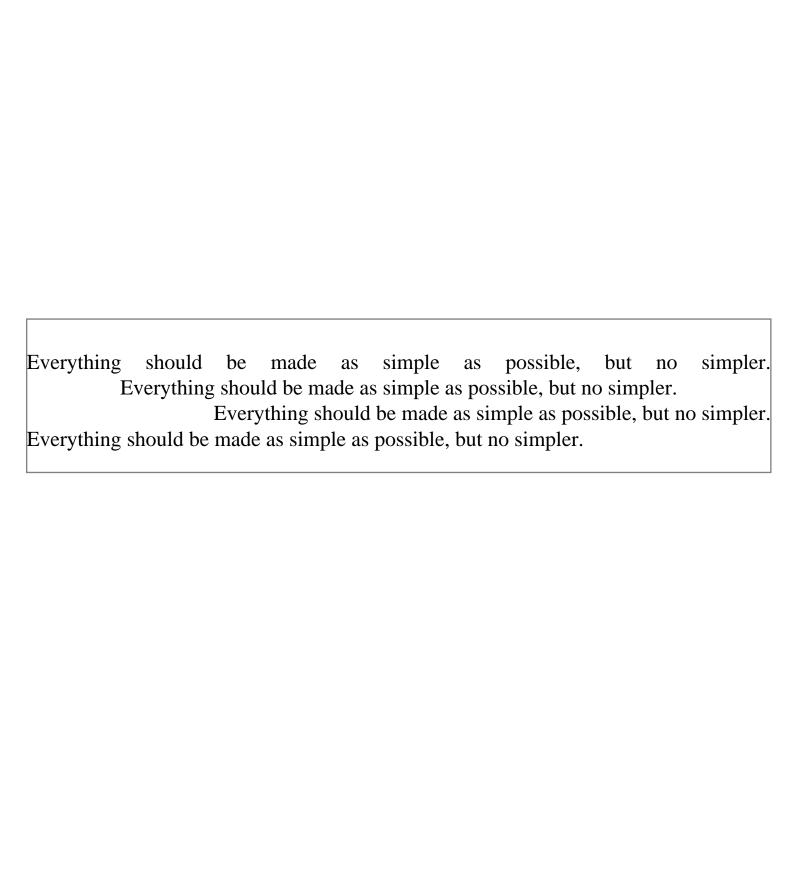**bbox: [-2.380, -3.192, 14.042, 13.468]**

Times-Roman
family: Times
size: 14
bold: 0
italic 0
ascender: 9.562
descender: -3.038
baseline distance: 16.800
bbox: [-2.352, -3.052, 14.000, 12.572]

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How Software Companies Die

By: Orson Scott Card

The environment that nurtures creative programmers kills management and marketing types - and vice versa. Programming is the Great Game. It consumes you, body and soul. When you're caught up in it, nothing else matters. When you emerge into daylight, you might well discover that you're a hundred pounds overweight, your underwear is older than the average first grader, and judging from the number of pizza boxes lying around, it must be spring already. But you don't care, because your program runs, and the code is fast and clever and tight. You won.

You're aware that some people think you're a nerd. So what? They're not players. They've never jousted with Windows or gone hand to hand with DOS. To them C++ is a decent grade, almost a B - not a language. They barely exist. Like soldiers or artists, you don't care about the opinions of civilians. You're building something intricate and fine. They'll never understand it.

BEEKEEPING

Here's the secret that every successful software company is based on: You can domesticate programmers the way beekeepers tame bees. You can't exactly communicate with them, but you can get them to swarm in one place and when they're not looking, you can carry off the honey.

You keep these bees from stinging by paying them money. More money than they know what to do with. But that's less than you might think. You see, all these programmers keep hearing their fathers' voices in their heads saying "When are you going to join the real world?" All you have to pay them is enough money that they can answer (also in their heads) "Geez, Dad, I'm making more than you." On average, this is cheap.

And you get them to stay in the hive by giving them other coders to swarm with. The only person whose praise matters is another programmer. Less-talented programmers will idolize them; evenly matched ones will challenge and goad one another; and if you want to get a good swarm, you make sure that you have at least one certified genius coder that they can all look up to, even if he glances at other people's code only long enough to sneer at it.

He's a Player, thinks the junior programmer. He looked at my code. That is enough. If a software company provides such a hive, the coders will give up sleep, love, health, and clean laundry, while the company keeps the bulk of the money.

OUT OF CONTROL

Here's the problem that ends up killing company after company. All successful software companies had, as their dominant personality, a leader who nurtured programmers. But no company can keep such a leader forever. Either he cashes out, or he brings in management types who end up driving him out, or he changes and becomes a management type himself. One way or another, marketers get control.

But...control of what? Instead of finding assembly lines of productive workers, they quickly discover that their product is produced by utterly unpredictable, uncooperative, disobedient, and worst of all, unattractive people who resist all attempts at management. Put them on a time clock, dress them in suits, and they become sullen and start sabotaging the product. Worst of all, you can sense that they are making fun of you with every word they say.

SMOKED OUT

The shock is greater for the coder, though. He suddenly finds that alien creatures control his life. Meetings, Schedules, Reports. And now someone demands that he PLAN all his programming and then stick to the plan, never improving, never tweaking, and never, never touching some other team's code. The lousy young programmer who once worshipped him is now his tyrannical boss, a position he got because he played golf with some sphincter in a suit.

The hive has been ruined. The best coders leave. And the marketers, comfortable now because they're surrounded by power neckties and they have things under control, are baffled that each new iteration of their software loses market share as the code bloats and the bugs proliferate. Got to get some better packaging. Yeah, that's it.

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Master Foo and the Methodologist

When Master Foo and his student Nubi journeyed among the sacred sites, it was the Master's custom in the evenings to offer public instruction to Unix neophytes of the towns and villages in which they stopped for the night.

On one such occasion, a methodologist was among those who gathered to listen.

"If you do not repeatedly profile your code for hot spots while tuning, you will be like a fisherman who casts his net in an empty lake," said Master Foo.

"Is it not, then, also true," said the methodology consultant, "that if you do not continually measure your productivity while managing resources, you will be like a fisherman who casts his net in an empty lake?"

"I once came upon a fisherman who just at that moment let his net fall in the lake on which his boat was floating," said Master Foo. "He scrabbled around in the bottom of his boat for quite a while looking for it."

"But," said the methodologist, "if he had dropped his net in the lake, why was he looking in the boat?"

"Because he could not swim," replied Master Foo.

Upon hearing this, the methodologist was enlightened.

1. A novice asked the master: ''In the east there is a great tree-structure that men call 'Corporate Headquarters'. It is bloated out of shape with vice presidents and accountants. It issues a multitude of memos, each saying 'Go, Hence!' or 'Go, Hither!' and nobody knows what is meant. Every year new names are put onto the branches, but all to no avail. How can such an unnatural entity be?"

The master replied: ''You perceive this immense structure and are disturbed that it has no rational purpose. Can you not take amusement from its endless gyrations? Do you not enjoy the untroubled ease of programming beneath its sheltering branches? Why are you bothered by its uselessness?''

2. In the east there is a shark which is larger than all other fish. It changes into a bird whose wings are like clouds filling the sky. When this bird moves across the land, it brings a message from Corporate Headquarters. This message it drops into the midst of the programmers, like a seagull making its mark upon the beach. Then the bird mounts on the wind and, with the blue sky at its back, returns home.

The novice programmer stares in wonder at the bird, for he understands it not. The average programmer dreads the coming of the bird, for he fears its message. The master programmer continues to work at his terminal, for he does not know that the bird has come and gone.