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# 19 Eponymous Laws Of Software Development

📅 Jul 17, 2007 🏷 software


✍ suggest edit

One surefire way to sound really really smart is to invoke a law or principle named after some long dead guy (an alive guy is acceptable too, but lacks slightly in smart points).



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 *hammurapis*

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This realization struck me the other day while I was reading a blog post that made a reference to Postel's law. Immediately I knew the author of this post must be a highly intelligent card carrying member of [MENSA](#). He was probably sporting some geeky [XKCD](#) t-shirt with a [lame unix joke](#) while writing the post.

Well friends, I admit I had to look that law up, and in the process realized I could sound just as scary smart as that guy if I just made reference to every [eponymous](#) (I'll wait while you look that one up) "law" I could find.

And as a public service, I am going to help all of you appear smart by posting my findings here! Don't let anyone



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ever say I don't try to make my readers look good. If you look good, I look good.

Make sure to invoke one of these in your next blog post and sound scary smart just like me.

## Postel's Law

The law that inspired this post...

*Be conservative in what you send, liberal in what you accept.*

Jon Postel originally articulated this as a principle for making TCP implementations robust. This principle is also embodied by HTML which many attribute as a cause of its success and failure, depending on who you ask.



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In today's highly charged political environment, Postel's law is a uniter.

## Parkinson's Law

Otherwise known as the law of bureaucracy, this law states that...

*Work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion.*

As contrasted to Haack's Law which states that

*Work expands so as to overflow the time available and spill on the floor leaving a very sticky mess.*

## Pareto Principle

Also known as the 80-20 rule, the Pareto Principle states...

*For many phenomena, 80% of*



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*consequences stem from 20% of the causes.*

This is the principle behind the painful truth that 80% of the bugs in the code arise from 20% of the code. Likewise, 80% of the work done in a company is performed by 20% of the staff. The problem is you don't always have a clear idea of which 20%.

## Sturgeon's Revelation

The revelation has nothing to do with seafood, as one might be mistaken to believe. Rather, it states that...

*Ninety percent of everything is crud.*

Sounds like Sturgeon is a conversation killer at parties. Is this a revelation because that number is so small?



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## The Peter Principle

One of the most depressing laws in this list, if you happen to have first-hand experience with this via working with incompetent managers.

*In a hierarchy, every employee tends to rise to his level of incompetence.*

Just read Dilbert (or watch The Office) to get some examples of this in action.

## Hofstadter's Law

This one is great because it is so true. I knew this law and *still* this post still took longer than I expected.

*A task always takes longer than you expect, even when you take into account Hofstadter's Law.*



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By the way, you get extra bonus points among your Mensa friends for invoking a self-referential law like this one.

## Murphy's Law

The one we all know and love.

*If anything can go wrong, it will.*

Speaking of which, wait one second while I backup my computer.

The developer's response to this law should be [defensive programming](#) and the age old boy scout motto, *Be Prepared*.

## Brook's Law

*Adding manpower to a late software project makes it later.*

Named after Fred Brooks, aka, Mr.



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## Mythical Man Month.

My favorite corollary to this law is the following...

*The bearing of a child takes nine months, no matter how many women are assigned.*

Obviously, Brook was not a statistician.

## Conway's Law

Having nothing to do with country music, this law states...

*Any piece of software reflects the organizational structure that produced it*

Put another way...

*If you have four groups working on a compiler, you'll get a 4-pass compiler.*

How many groups are involved in the software



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you are building?



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## Kerckkhoff's Principle

This principle is named after a man who must be the only cryptographer ever to have five consecutive consonants in his last name.

*In cryptography, a system should be secure even if everything about the system, except for a small piece of information – the key – is public knowledge.*

And thus Kerckkhoff raises the banner in the fight against [Security through Obscurity](#). This is the main principle underlying public key cryptography.



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## Linus's Law



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Named after Linus  
Torvalds, the creator of  
Linux, this law states...

*Given enough  
eyeballs, **alibugs** are  
shallow.*

Where you store the  
eyeballs is up to you.

## Reed's Law

*The utility of large  
networks,  
particularly social  
networks, scales  
exponentially with  
the size of the  
network.*

Keep repeating that to  
yourself as you  
continue to invite  
anyone and everyone to  
be your friend in  
FaceBook.

## Metcalf's Law

*In network theory,  
the value of a system  
grows as*



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*approximately the square of the number of users of the system.*

I wonder if Reed and Metcalfe hung out at the same pubs.

## Moore's Law

Probably the most famous law in computing, this law states...

*The power of computers per unit cost doubles every 24 month.*

The more popular and well known version of Moore's law states...

*The number of transistors on an integrated circuit will double in about 18 months.*

And we've been racing to keep up ever since.



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## Rock's Law

I was unable to find Paper's Corollary, nor Scissor's Lemma, so we're left with only Rock's law which states...

*The cost of a semiconductor chip fabrication plant doubles every four years.*

Buy yours now while prices are still low.

## Wirth's law

*Software gets slower faster than hardware gets faster.*

Ha! Take that Moore's Law!

## Zawinski's Law

This law addresses software bloat and states...



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*Every program  
attempts to expand  
until it can read mail.  
Those programs  
which cannot so  
expand are replaced  
by ones which can.*

I hear that the next version of *calc.exe* is going to include the ability to read email. A more modern formulation of this law should replace *email* with *RSS*.

## Fitt's Law

This is a law related to usability which states...

*Time = a + b log<sub>2</sub> (D/S + 1)*

Or in plain English,

*The time to acquire a target is a function of the distance to and the size of the target.*

A well known application of this law is placing the Start



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menu in the bottom left corner, thus making the target very large since the corner is constrained by the left and bottom edges of the screen.

## Hick's Law

Has nothing to do with people with bad mullets. I swear.

Related to Fitt's law, it states that...

*The time to make a decision is a function of the possible choices he or she has.*

Or in plain math,

$$Time = b \log_2(n + 1)$$

Seems to me this is also a function of the number of people making the decision, like when you and your coworkers are trying to



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figure out where to  
have lunch.



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discussion...

Display Name

email/@twitter/github

Leave response

☐ Remember me

## 65 responses



Eric Kemp •

July 16th, 2007

Occam's  
Razor

"The  
explanation  
of any  
phenomenon  
should  
make as  
few  
assumption  
as possible,  
eliminating  
those that  
make no  
difference  
in the  
observable  
predictions  
of the  
explanatory  
hypothesis  
or theory."



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It's a fancy  
way of  
saying  
K.I.S.S.



Travis Illig ·  
July 16th, 2007  
I think I  
met some  
goober at a  
conference  
that was  
wearing  
that shirt.  
Can't  
remember  
his name...  
:)



SBC · July  
16th, 2007  
LOL!! Great  
post!  
I'd like to  
add the old  
DP (Data  
Drocessing)  
Law of  
System  
Delivery -  
"Double  
your  
estimate  
and  
replace  
with next  
unit of  
time". For  
example:  
original  
estimate: 6  
weeks.  
Double: 12  
weeks.  
Next unit  
of time:  
12months.



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This law  
still works  
all the time  
in  
Corporate  
IT!



Mike • July

16th, 2007

I'd like to  
add  
Lubarsky's  
law of  
Cybernetic  
Entomology  
"There is  
always one  
more bug".  
Great work!



Barry

Dorrans • July

16th, 2007

G  
er  
ey  
al  
bi  
ar  
sh

And you  
don't  
object to  
this? Come  
now, that  
law is a lie  
by  
omission.  
It should  
be *Given  
enough  
eyeballs  
connected  
to people*



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*who  
understand  
and who  
want to  
look for  
problems,  
understand  
the  
problems  
and can  
hold onto  
the entire  
system in  
their head,  
all bugs are  
shallow..*

I've always found the proclaimed many-eyes advantage to Open Source bogus simply because having the people doesn't make them look. How many Firefox users look at the code? A tiny tiny amount. And yet even then bugs slip through. Sometimes big gaping security bugs. Because it's doubtful everyone



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looks at it all. Sure you may find a bug in one area you are focussed on, but does that cover how that part integrates with others and chains down? No. Heck I don't examine a lot of the subtext checkins; do you? (Ok, **you** might oh benevolent dictator, but you get my point).

Many eyes don't help unless the eyes are both focussed on the detail and wide enough to see the whole; and that's rare.



Kent Sharkey  
• July 17th,  
2007



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What? A list that long and you didn't include Godwin's Law? (Of course, I'm not sure how you could apply it to software developer but someone has.)



Ryan Smith ·

July 17th, 2007

I thought that Haack's Law was: "Business needs and feature requirements increase to fill in the productivity gains due to silver bullets."



Alan Stevens

· July 17th,

2007

+1 for the Bill Hicks mullet joke.

++Alan



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David Preece

• July 17th,

2007

You forgot the corollary to Murphy's law: any attempt to deliberately apply Murphy's law is also bound to fail.



DotNetKicks.com

• July 17th,

2007

You've been kicked (a good thing) - Trackback from [DotNetKick](#)



koz1000 • July

17th, 2007

The Start Menu is actually a bad example of Fitt's Law. When it was first implemented in Win95, the bottom row of pixels on the toolbar WASN'T RECOGNIZ as part of



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the "Start" button. Only in recent versions of Windows did they hack it to make the mouse jump up a little to hit the button (try it and see).



Bill Ford ·

July 17th, 2007  
Briggs/Chas  
Law of  
Program  
Developme  
To  
determine  
how long it  
will take to  
write and  
debug a  
program,  
take your  
best  
estimate,  
multiply  
that by two,  
add one,  
and  
convert to  
the next  
higher  
units.  
So for  
example if  
you  
estimate 6  
weeks,  
then its  
mult by  
 $26\text{wk} * 2 =$   
12wk



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add 112wk  
+ 1wk =  
13wk  
shift  
unit:13  
months.



Thomas  
Freudenberg  
• July 17th,  
2007  
I like the  
extended  
version of  
Murphy's  
Law with  
bonus  
points for  
self-  
referencing

If  
an  
ca  
go  
w:  
it  
w:  
ex  
if  
yo  
re  
on  
M  
's  
La



Jason  
Stangroome •  
July 17th, 2007  
It's just not  
complete  
without  
Brannigan's  
Law.



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Super • July  
17th, 2007  
You totally missed Greenspun' Tenth Law. Any sufficiently complicated C or Fortran program contains an ad hoc, informally-specified, bug-ridden, slow implementation of half of Common Lisp.



ak • July 17th, 2007  
90 - 90 law  
"The first 90% of the software takes 90% of the time to build, and the last 10% of the software takes the other 90% of the time."



Casual Observer •  
July 17th, 2007  
>  
Kerchkhoff'



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Principle  
> This  
principle is  
named  
after a  
man who  
must be  
the only  
>  
cryptograph  
ever to  
have five  
consecutive  
consonants  
in his  
> last  
name.  
You're  
forgetting  
about  
Helena  
Handschuh  
<http://www.i>  
[t...](#)



Deryck  
Hodge • July  
17th, 2007  
Great and  
interesting  
post.  
I do believe  
the  
comment  
attributed  
to Linus  
Torvalds  
was  
actually  
made by  
Eric S.  
Raymond.



mynameishere  
• July 17th,  
2007

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"What's  
your law"...

[http://www.€](http://www.)



Christopher  
Steen • July  
17th, 2007  
Materials  
from  
&quot;Using  
Behaviors  
to Flex  
Your WCF  
Muscles&q  
posted  
[Via:  
tom.fuller ]  
MSDN  
Nuggets  
and...



Haacked •  
July 17th, 2007  
@Travis - I  
bet he was  
a good  
looking  
really cool  
goober,  
right?  
@Barry -  
I'm just  
reporting  
it. Not  
making a  
judgment  
here. I  
agree, the  
real world  
practical  
implication  
mean that  
most  
projects  
don't get to  
enjoy this



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phenomena  
Only the  
most  
popular  
with lots of  
developers.  
@Koz1000  
- I was  
referring to  
Vista. But  
if it works  
now,  
doesn't  
that make  
it a good  
example of  
Fitt's law?  
Agreed, it  
was a bad  
example in  
the past.  
Regarding  
the laws I  
missed,  
keep them  
coming. I'll  
post a  
follow-up  
later.



Kit • July 17th,  
2007

Fraid  
Wikipedia  
beat you to  
it. Here's  
their full  
list:

[http://en.wi](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_eponymous_laws_of_software_development)

I like  
Hanlon's  
Razor:  
"Never  
attribute to  
malice that  
which can  
be  
adequately  
explained



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by  
stupidity."



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Matt Ellis ·

July 17th, 2007

Re:  
Zawinski's  
Law. I  
believe it's  
been  
"updated"  
to support  
RSS:  
<http://www.1>  
Cheers  
Matt



pauldwaite ·

July 17th, 2007

Barry: "It  
should be  
Given  
enough  
eyeballs  
connected  
to people  
who  
understand  
and who  
want to  
look for  
problems,  
understand  
the  
problems  
and can  
hold onto  
the entire  
system in  
their head,  
all bugs are  
shallow..."  
I think the  
law  
assumes  
with, with  
enough



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eyeballs, a sufficient proportion of those eyeballs will be connected to people that match your description. It doesn't state how many eyeballs will be enough for a given bit of software. That's the thing about good laws: they limit themselves to accurately describing one true principle. They don't cover all the logical consequences of that principle and its interactions with other principles; that's left as an exercise for the reader.



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Frank  
Wilhoit • July



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17th, 2007  
Wilhoit's  
Corollary  
to  
Murphy's  
Law states  
that if  
anything  
can  
possibly go  
wrong, it  
already  
has: you  
just haven't  
found out  
about it  
yet.



Peter J. • July

17th, 2007

Nice list.  
At the risk  
of ruining  
a good  
joke, the  
Peter  
Principle  
isn't about  
promoting  
incompeter  
it's about  
putting  
people into  
positions  
that match  
their  
abilities.  
Dilbert  
and The  
Office are  
funny, but  
have little  
or nothing  
to do with  
the  
principle.  
(Could be  
I'm  
defensive



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due to my  
name  
though. :)



A.B.Leal • July

17th, 2007

Missing  
from both  
Wikipedia's  
and your  
list:  
Cheops'  
Law:  
Nothing  
ever gets  
built on  
schedule  
or within  
budget.  
Cole's Law:  
Thinly  
sliced  
cabbage.



bofe • July

17th, 2007

[http://en.wi](http://en.wikipedia.org)  
As an  
online  
discussion  
grows  
longer, the  
probability  
of a  
comparator  
involving  
Nazis or  
Hitler  
approaches  
one.



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@Kit -  
That's a

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great list,  
but much  
broader  
than this  
list, which  
intends to  
only cover  
software  
and  
software  
managemen  
It's why I  
didn't  
include  
Godwin's  
law.



mike's web  
log • July 17th,  
2007

Golly, is it  
Wednesday  
already?  
&lt;br  
&gt;&lt;br  
&gt;The  
Surname  
Study.

According  
to this, if  
your last  
name  
begins with  
Z, you  
might as  
well give  
up,  
haha.&lt;br  
&gt;&lt;br  
&gt;I Want  
a Lucky  
President.  
Scott  
Adams  
posits that  
everyone  
has the  
same  
amount of



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luck, but it

...



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Vincent

Evans • July

17th, 2007

At the first glance at the formula - it appeared to me that Fitt's law states that you can waste any amount of time if you have a blog and nintendo DS.



Robert • July

17th, 2007

Great list. McLuhan's Law: If it works it's obsolete.



BigJimInDC •

July 17th, 2007

And don't forget "The Rock's" (yes, the wrestler) law: "Know your role and shut your hole!" Put another



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way, don't overstep the bounds of your role in the (development) process when you have yet to attain any semblance of perfection, or even solid competency in your own role. Nothing changes my @\$\$ more than the business analyst attempting GUI design when their analysis skills both are lacking and they refuse to get better at them. Or even admit that they are lacking in them. And to boot, their GUI skills are completely non-existent (i.e., no prior experience or education, just



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opinions).  
But they  
"want to  
get into  
GUI  
developer  
to prove  
their worth  
elsewhere  
because at  
heart, they  
know they  
suck at  
analysis (or  
are just  
bored with  
it, probably  
because  
they suck  
at it, but  
needed a  
job).



Luis • July  
17th, 2007  
I feel  
smarter  
already.



Donnie Hale  
• July 18th,  
2007  
I first  
heard this  
called  
"Stewart's  
Law of  
Retroaction  
It's easier  
to ask  
forgiveness  
than get  
permission.  
No idea  
where the  
name  
came from



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or who  
Stewart is.



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sjs • July 18th,  
2007  
Sorry to  
contribute  
to this,  
but...

H  
m  
Fi  
us  
lo  
at  
th  
cc  
A  
ti  
ti  
ar  
A  
ye  
ev  
th  
bu  
sl  
th  
So  
bi  
ga  
se  
bu

Neither  
you nor I  
know how  
many users  
read the  
Firefox  
source, but  
I can tell  
you this  
much: it is  
more than  
the  
amount of  
people who



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read the source of any proprietary browsers. Similarly the amount of bugs the users fix is greater than zero, which is more than can be said for the proprietary browsers as well. Now of course they are not perfect, and Firefox is hardly the best application by any standard. However it is just good enough to be useful and popular to quite a few people, some of them smart programme with time to read the source and fix bugs they stumble upon themselves. No one's



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saying it's  
a silver  
bullet that  
will cure  
all your  
ailments. If  
anyone  
says that  
about  
anything  
you should  
be cautious  
about  
believing  
them,  
software or  
otherwise.  
It happens  
to work  
very well  
for some  
projects,  
that's all.



Nathan • July  
18th, 2007

"I've always  
found the  
proclaimed  
many-eyes  
advantage  
to Open  
Source  
bogus  
simply  
because  
having the  
people  
doesn't  
make them  
look. How  
many  
Firefox  
users look  
at the  
code?"  
To be fair,  
you should  
characterize



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AJ Finch ·

July 18th, 2007

Appologies  
for being  
dragged  
into the  
"Many  
Eyeballs"  
thing...

I think you  
will find (if  
you read

\_The  
Cathedral  
and The  
Bazaar\_ by  
Eric S  
Raymond),

that this  
refers to  
identifying  
the causes  
of known  
problems -  
not to  
finding  
bugs. So  
the fact  
that

those  
numerous  
firefox  
users as  
"many  
hands"  
rather than  
"many  
eyes".  
Some of  
them may  
be looking  
at the code,  
but most of  
them are  
just waving  
mice and  
tweaking  
knobs.



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Firefox has bugs does not disprove the law, rather the measure of the law would be the time between a bug being identified by a user and the cause of the bug being understood by \_a\_ developer. ... I only post this because I realise that it \_is\_ of earth-shattering significance. Also because I wouldn't want anyone to be deprived of enjoying my own sense of self-importance. Great post and great comments (until this one).  
- AJ ;)  
><>



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Chris May •

July 18th, 2007

If we keep commentin on this post, we will invoke Goodwin's Law:

[http://en.wi](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Goodwin's_Law)

As an online discussion grows longer, the probability of a comparisor involving Nazis or Hitler approaches one.



Coding

Horror • July

19th, 2007

Tim Berners-Lee on the Principle of Least Power: Computer Science spent the last forty years making languages which were as powerful as possible. Nowadays we have to appreciate the



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reasons for  
picking not  
the most  
powerful  
solution  
but the...



Coding  
Horror by  
Jeff Atwood •  
July 19th, 2007  
Tim  
Berners-  
Lee on the  
Principle  
of Least  
Power :  
Computer  
Science  
spent the  
last forty  
years  
making



Programming  
• July 20th,  
2007  
Tim  
Berners-  
Lee on the  
Principle  
of Least  
Power :  
Computer  
Science  
spent the  
last forty  
years  
making



lb • July 20th,  
2007  
hey -- i was  
planning  
to write



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this article  
before  
you... and  
also, i  
suspect i'm  
the xkcd  
wearing  
mensa-ite  
you  
mentioned  
in the  
preamble,  
as i threw  
in a postel  
a few days  
ago  
(<http://secrelb>)



Haacked •

July 20th, 2007

Oh ye of  
the big ego.  
The XKCD  
wearer [was me](#) and the  
Postel  
reference  
was in a  
post by  
[Dave Winer](#).



Minh's Notes

• July 21st,

2007

Yes, the  
cows have  
come  
home:  
&lt;cite  
class=&quot;  
website  
weblog  
blog&quot;&  
Notes&lt;/ci  
is back.



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Eswaran •

July 24th, 2007

good! all in  
one place!!!



Shan • July

25th, 2007

My  
favourite:  
Simple  
programs  
never work  
the first  
time.  
Complex  
programs  
never work.



PeterJ • July

26th, 2007

Peter's Law  
#1: If it's  
getting  
complicated  
you're  
doing it  
wrong.  
Peter's Law  
#2: 90% of  
people who  
program,  
shouldn't.



D.A.Rogers •

July 31st, 2007

You forgot  
my  
favorite:  
Cole's Law:  
Thinly

sliced  
cabbage.



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Jeff Knutson •

September

12th, 2007

I was recently catching up on some old DotNetRoc podcasts (you \*do\* listen to DNR, right???) and during



NoonKnight •

September

12th, 2007

All non-trivial programs have bugs. All bug free programs are trivial. ~unknown



Welcome to

Bochek.com •

October 7th,

2007

Thinking of Quotes



root123 •

November

14th, 2007

"The bearing of a child



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takes nine months, no matter how many women are assigned." This is really fun .....I feel that Project Managers should formulate something to deal with this.



;-) • December 18th, 2007

19  
Eponymous  
Laws Of  
Software  
Developme



;-) • December 18th, 2007

19  
Eponymous  
Laws Of  
Software  
Developme



Ashley • April 24th, 2008  
Great post.keep it up!!!!



diane • May 2nd, 2008  
Murphy's Law

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spawns so many excellent corollaries.. Brideson's Corollary: Murphy's Law is both reentrant and recursive. (attribution Law: If anything fails to go wrong, it will ultimately be true that it would have been better if it had gone wrong.



Sid Savara -  
Personal  
Developm ·  
August 11th,  
2008  
Cool list! I was just about to make one of these for a friend, and Googled and came across your page.



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franzwha ·  
September  
18th, 2008



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A law  
derived  
from this  
(great and  
funny)  
blog:  
"People  
who post  
comments  
on blogs  
do not read  
previous  
comments"

...  
otherwise,  
there  
would not  
be 4 or 5  
posts of  
the  
Godwin's  
law for  
instance...  
:o)



Mike •

February 17th,  
2009

I'm going  
to send  
this link  
around - I  
know a  
bunch of  
geeks and  
maybe  
they'll be  
geeky  
enough to  
send  
enough  
traffic to  
make your  
server heat  
up a bit.  
Congratul  
on a great  
post.



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Guest •

January 18th,

2013

Jags Law:  
90% of  
people who  
program,  
shouldn't.



Muigai

Mwaura •

January 18th,

2013

"I knew the  
author of  
this post  
must be a  
highly  
intelligent  
card  
carrying  
member of  
MENSA."

Ha, ha, ha!  
I feel a lot  
smarter  
after  
reading  
this  
article...  
sending off  
my  
application  
to Mensa  
now!



itoctopus •

January 20th,

2013

Gotta love  
that Wirth  
Law.  
Nevertheless  
there are



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sometimes  
some gem  
pieces of  
software  
that take  
little space,  
little  
memory,  
and little  
processing  
power and  
deliver a  
lot.



RedmondGuy

• April 24th,  
2013

A variant  
of Wirth's  
Law, more  
commonly  
known as  
Gates' Law:  
"What Intel  
giveth,  
Microsoft  
taketh  
away."



tim • March

8th, 2015  
Hi Phil,  
thanks for  
the  
interesting  
posting.  
We are  
currently  
looking  
into Url  
Rewriting  
on an  
ASP.Net  
2.0 based  
website.  
After  
reading



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this post I am considering using the Routing engine as it seems a much nicer, cleaner [solution](#). So the question is, can we use the required dll's with ASP.Net 2.0?

Cheers,

Tim

---

Phil Haack [You've been](#)



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Haacked is a blog about Technology, Software, Management, and Open Source. It's full of good stuff.



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