

Design for This Century

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Response

On September 9, 1945, a Harvard technical team looked at Panel F and found something unusual between points in Relay 70. It was a moth, which they promptly removed and taped in the log book. Grace Hopper added the caption "First actual case of bug being found," and that's the first time anyone used the word bug to describe a computer glitch. Naturally, the term debugging followed. Word nerds trace the word bug to an old term for a monster -- it's a word that has survived in obscure terms like bugaboo and bugbear and in a mangled form in the word boogeyman. Like gremlins in machinery, system bugs are malicious. Anyone who spends time trying to get all the faults out of a system knows how it feels: After a few hours of debugging, any problems that remain are hellspawn, mocking attempts to get rid of them with a devilish glee. But how are bugs good for us?

Feedback is one key to developing better products. It's one of the primary tenets of agile development. Unit testing and iterative development are both techniques to provide feedback faster. With unit testing you get feedback on whether the code works, and with each delivered release you can hear what the customer thinks of the new features. A bug report is another form of feedback on your code.