Bill Joy

There are many well-known computer languages. Ask any programmer, and one is likely to hear about Java, Python, C, HTML, and many others, but none are as influential and fundamental to modern programming as UNIX. UNIX was originally licensed by AT&T to companies like IBM, Sun Microsystems, and Microsoft, but the development of UNIX happened over many years with many developers working independently on improving the rudimentary operating systems of the early machines of the 60’s/70’s. One of the most influential of these programmers is Bill Joy. Modern programmers owe a lot to the work of Joy and others like him for their

Bill Joy was born November 8th, 1954, in Farmington Hills, Michigan, outside Detroit to William and Ruth Joys, both teachers. He attended university at the University of Michigan, graduating with a Bachelor of Science degree in Electrical Engineering. It was here that Joy found his love of programming. Joy was extremely fortunate to be studying in UofM at the time, because it was one of the first places in the world to have a Time-Sharing computer system, which meant many people could program at the same time and all test their codes concurrently. It was a revelation in computer programming. Joy is quoted with saying “It’s the difference between playing chess by mail and speed chess”. This system allowing Joy to be able to write all the programs he wanted and to be incredibly efficient in comparison to many of the professional firms at the time.

Joy went from Michigan to a graduate program in electrical engineering and computer science from the University of California, Berkeley. It was there that he worked on an early version of the UNIX kernel, left by one of the other UNIX creditors, Ken Thompson. While studying he worked at the Berkeley Software Distribution, BSD, on these UNIX kernels/distributions. He continued this work after graduating, developing UNIX programs that are still in use, such as the ex and vi editors, and the c shell. Furthermore, his UNIX system was one of the first to utilize built-in TCP/IP. This laid down the foundation for mass use of the internet later in computer development. Joy developed this before even graduating from Berkeley, giving a legendary status in the programming world. Any programmer who has worked a command line will understand the significance of these tools in making programming at scale even possible.

From BDS, Joy went to help co-found Sun Microsystems. Sun founded many significant computer systems like UNIX, RISC processors, and many parts of the Java programming language. Java is perhaps Joy’s second most significant contribution to computer programming. A legend at this point in the computer world, there are stories that he wrote the vi editor in a week, and came up with some of the influential structures of UNIX in the middle of verbal interviews. Whether or not these stories are true, they do speak to Joy’s known programming prowess.

Joy left Sun in 2003, and started a venture capital firm, HighBAR Ventures with 2 other Sun employees. Joy left that firm in 2005 to join the esteemed Kleiner Perkins, heading the “green energies” division. He is now a vocal critic of irresponsible engineering, speaking out against nanotech and robotics specifically.

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