

Developer happiness and associated meetings

This is a report on my trip to the UK in February 2009. It will start life as a blog post, which will then form the basis for a report to [ADFI](#).

The main event was the Developer Happiness Days conference, but I also had meetings with four institutions: [UKOLN](#) @ University of Bath, Southampton, King's College London and Birkbeck college in London.

Dev8D

First up the event. It's a bit hard to describe the event that David Flanders and Ben O'Steen and team put on and called The Developer Happiness days but Julian Cheal has an [article in Ariadne](#).

Ben O'Steen gives a good run down of [Why happiness is important](#). His summary:

To foster innovation and to allow for creativity in software development:

- Having **play** space is **important**
- Being **vague** with aims and **flexible** with outcomes is not a bad thing and is **vital** for unexpected things to develop - *e.g. A project's outcomes should be under continual re-negotiation as a general rule, not as the exception.*
- **Encouraging** and **enabling** free and easy communication is **crucial**.
- Be aware of what drives people to do what they do. Push all feedback to be **as disproportionate as possible**, allowing both developers and users to benefit, with only putting a relatively trivial amount of input in (this pattern affects web UIs, development cycles, team interaction, etc)
- **Choose useful highscores** and be prepared to ditch them or change them if they are no longer **fun and motivational**.

<http://oxfordrepo.blogspot.com/2009/02/developer-happiness-days-why-happyness.html>

For me the Twitter side-channel that went along with the event was a revelation – it added a new dimension I have not experienced before – you could peek into other sessions, organise dinner, and so on, even measure overall happiness. Ben [looked at how twitter was used during the conference](#) along with Flickr photo sharing via the tag dev8d. You can see that the chatter went on after the conference with a Twitter search for [#dev8d](#).

My contribution:

- I kicked off the Python for newbies day with some simple unit testing and later did a lightning talk on XSLT, both described briefly [here](#).
- I did a talk entitled Getting beyond the PDF. I wrote that up [too](#). There were only a few people in the room, but it was videoed, picked up on the blogosphere and evidently seen by people who were not in the room.
- I accidentally entered the Developer Decathlon competition with team Three Lazy Geeks. More on that below.

I wasn't intending to enter the competition¹ but I wandered into the room where they had real lecturers talking about what software services they'd like to see and met [Nick Short of the Royal Veterinary College, London](#).

Paul Walk [describes this process](#) whereby users were invited to engage with developers:

One of the things which stood out at dev8D was the way in which users (or [UberUsers](#)) were invited to engage with developers. There's an **important, non-obvious** distinction here. Users were invited to come into the developers' environment. Brave users, you might say! Normally, developers are invited into the users' environment.... for just long enough to explain to them what the users require. Users would often rather not have to deal with developers all that much. To step into an environment of happy, busy developers must have been an eye-opening experience for those users who were brave enough, and open-minded enough to try it. Although I wasn't on the 'dragons den' panel looking at the prototypes being developed in the [Developer Decathlon](#), it was remarked to me several times that the quality of submissions was better than in previous events - and that this was attributed to the fact that users had been involved in the prototyping process. I'm one of the judges who'll be marking these submissions and I'm really looking forward to seeing what was produced.

<http://blog.paulwalk.net/2009/02/13/making-developers-happy/>

Nick Short was after something to help him prepare presentations with images and video. He said he wanted to do it an hour before the lecture, but I think that was an exaggeration. On one level it sounded like what he and his colleagues really needed was some training to help them deal with unfamiliar media, but true to form I managed to come up with an idea for a software solution that involved several moving parts. Why not tag resources in del.icio.us then harvest them into a powerpoint later, I wondered?

[Mia Ridge](#), a web and database analyst/programmer who works at the Science Museum in London was interested in the idea. She recruited Ian Ibbotson, occupation 'geek' according to his [work blog](#), making what was eventually called team Three Lazy geeks. As we worked through the original idea it became clear that 'just tag in delicious' is an oversimplification, and we ended up with a intermediary web service that would know about your lectures and help you tag resources.

Mia put the [Three Lazy Geeks submission up on her site](#). The key thing you have to submit is a screencast. I did that out-of-sync screencast late at night (or was it early in the morning?) in my hotel room on the underpowered Dell Mini 9. That was the only take, and as Mia points out I didn't even mention that Nick's a vet. Here's a [louder version](#) of the screencast. I will post what I learned about screencasting in Ubuntu Linux soon.

Other visits

UKOLN, Bath

This visit was motivated by [discussions with Chris Rusbridge about The Internations Journal of Digital Curation](#).

Chris didn't make it down from Edinburgh, so I met with [Paul Walk](#) and [Brian Kelly](#) and colleagues. I gave a demonstration of ICE with the emphasis on how it might be used for research publications (ie for journals and the like).

¹the Developer Decathlon – not sure where the dec bit comes into it

So far there are no actions arising from this meeting apart from us providing Brian with a test account in ICE just as soon as the OpenId login is working (this week I hope), but there were hints that ICE might be useful for some of what UKOLN do, in due course (and if it works as expected for them, of course). We'd be happy to help out if UKOLN would like to trial ICE.

Southampton

I met with Mr ePrints Les Carr and Simon Coles who works in Chemistry, and a couple of their colleagues. Simon says:

Andrew Milsted is nearing the writing up stages of his PhD and was responsible for the Blog Lab Notebook and eCrystals data repository on top of Eprints (<http://chemtools.chem.soton.ac.uk/projects/blog/> & http://wiki.ecrystals.chem.soton.ac.uk/index.php/Main_Page).

Mark Borkum is a first year PhD student charged with learning from our experiences with the Blog and Data repositories and designing, ground up, a generic system that will accommodate those requirements. Mark has worked on myExperiment (<http://www.myexperiment.org/>) and StOReLink (<http://www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/digitalrepositories2007/storelink.aspx>) and is now working on oreChem (<http://www.openarchives.org/oreChem/>).

It was a pretty long day with wide-ranging conversation about eResearch services and repositories. Amongst other things we talked about:

- The collaborative spaces that Simon's team are creating for chemists based on a blog system which is far more than a blog.
- How ICE might complement some of their existing and planned work in this area. I gave a demo of the work we have done in
- With Les, how ePrints is going in a business sense. Watch this space, for various reasons I can't talk about some of the ideas we tossed around, yet.
- An idea I have for bringing the the semantic web in reach for systems like ePrints and other repositories and for 'ordinary' word users by encapsulating predicate and object into a single URI that people can 'just link'. More on that in another post.

Kings College

I have been talking with Mark Hedges Deputy Director of the Centre for e-Research for King's College London for some time. We met with a some of his colleagues (Tobias Blanke, Vikas Deora and Omar Radwan) to give a demo of the work we've been doing on [ICE-TheOREM](#), which turned into a robust discussion about the relative merits of word processing a la ICE, LaTeX and XML. Vikas extolled the virtues of LaTeX for thesis writing. I'm happy for people to use whichever tools they like, but I can't see LaTeX rolling out into disciplines which it has not already conquered without a lot of evangelistic work. If we could find a generic LaTeX to HTML converter that worked we'd plug that into ICE in a second.

Mark is interested in applying the approach we took with ICE-TheOREM in the humanities, and possibly one or more of the sciences with a view to a more substantial trial in the future. We discussed various kinds of data/document integration including things like geocoded archaeological data and the biosciences. We will assist from our end in getting a trial ICE installation and/or accounts going.

Birkbeck

I met with a very worn out post-dev8D David Flanders along with Mark, and got a bit of an insight into how JISC are seeing the process of getting their innovation projects into production. David has put a fair bit of thought into the kinds of team members you need to have around your developers to get code from the lab into production. I won't attempt to reproduce his model here, hope he publishes it soon for comment.

David and team have also been looking at Google docs in an academic environment. Caroline Bell and Sarah Sherman joined us to talk about how users have taken to the Google tools. We're exploring the possibility of a collaboration where my team would look at how to design templates for Google docs that give the best prospects for document re-use. I see this as the first step for us in the inevitable ICE to Google Docs adapter we will have to write as the service gains users.