

My immense disappointment with the software industry

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I dislike Jane Austen novels. Any novel by any author is about people, even in sci-fi where the people are dressed up as sentient chunks of silicon. The characters do things, things happen to them, and the novel is interesting for the reactions of the characters. But Jane Austen novels cut to the core, because nothing actually happens. The light coming through the swaying tree branch makes it look like one character flinched, the other responds to the perceived flinch, the first responds to the response, and soon you have a plotline built out of nothing. I acknowledge that others love her writing, but I can't stand it.

Next point. To a great extent, ethics is about efficiency. If I told you that most of ethics is about individual self-interest versus achieving the most benefit for the group at large, you'd wonder whether to class that as self-evident or a tautology. So much of what we find to be deeply unethical—the smashed car window to steal somebody's favorite CDs, the tire company that shipped tires that fall apart and kill people because the accountants thought they could save two cents an hour in labor costs—are the ones that are most destructive for the least gain.

So I'm finding the politics of software to be increasingly onerous. The politics of coal mining is about people finding jobs, producing heat and electricity, environmental destruction. Things happen, and on that backdrop, people do the usual asshole things to promote their self-interest and get more money than the other guys. Human blood was likely spilled in the examples of unethical action above.

But there is nothing tangible to software. It's just information, whose best claim to actually existing is a weak differential in a magnetic field. A few episodes ago, I wrote about people who were tortured to advance Yahoo!'s hopes of transmitting its weak electromagnetic disturbances across China, and the time before, I had written about how the US Trade Representative has actively worked to ensure the death of thousands (if not millions) of people with AIDS in the name of ownership of information. And hey, how about a story about a man who threatened to kill a child¹ so he could keep putting out spam.

Look, I know all the arguments for why software and intellectual property matter, and respect most of them. When I'm not writing about software, I'm writing books

¹<http://arstechnica.com/news.ars/post/20070802-30-years-in-the-slammer-for-online-pharmacy-spam.html>

and law review papers about software. If computers didn't exist, I have no idea how I'd buy food. But I can still acknowledge that it is all smoke, shadow, and æther.

Can software make the world a better place? No doubt. Information, human connection, learning about the world through data analysis beyond human ability, fun—we can get all of that from software. And further, well-written software is write-once, use forever, because copying code is so easy. I really *have* downloaded, compiled, and used software written in the 1980s. I use the GNU's edition of `grep` a dozen times a day, as do literally millions of people around the world, and it hasn't seen any substantial changes in five years—even the changes in 2002 weren't so substantial. That is amazing value for effort.

Tragedies are not about people being stupid and dying, but about people falling from grace. The software industry's fall from infinite abundance to endless bickering is a tragedy.

Even the ones who are allegedly on the pro-efficiency team are asses. Just today I read about the GNU's lawyer having a drag-out argument with the guy who named the O'Reilly Press after himself. I won't bother linking to it—you'd be better off spending your time reading Jane Austen directly. Gosh, I've received a nastygram or two from the lead author of a stats package because s/he didn't like the concept behind my stats library. Pardon my yelling, but THEY'RE FUNCTIONS TO SHUNT MATRICES. THERE IS NOTHING TO POLITIC OVER. You use yours, I'll use mine, and at worst there's some duplicated effort.

"But B," you protest, "hadn't you heard? People suck." And I would say that yes, I realize this, but I'd been hoping for something a little better in the new world. I mean, it's just so *easy* out here, like a fantasy novel. You want a castle on a cloud? No problem, get coding. Write your fiction, and it will compile and run and on a good day spit out correct answers. My real failure was in thinking that people's suckiness came from scarcity, so in a world without scarcity, people wouldn't suck. But no, people just make something up and call it scarce. When you light your taper at my torch, my flame is no dimmer—but now I'm not the only guy on the block with light.

So where we could have invented abundance, people die and are tortured over invented scarcity.

Manufacturing scarcity This is all an extended example of a class of actions that create ethical qualms in virtually everybody. They take a situation of general abundance and well-being, and manufacture scarcity therefrom. That's why it's unpleasant to talk to most anti-immigration activists: as per the last column, they take the world around us, a Land of Opportunity, and cast it as a wasteland of scarcity.

Don't manufacture scarcity is the neoclassical, capitalist, free-trade equivalent to the old track, "Kids, be free. Do whatever you want, be whoever you want to be, just as long as you don't hurt anybody."

It's a simple and easy way to maintain some ethics, and all of the above examples manage to blare right past it. The hardcore neoclassicists are surprised that you can do things in a neoclassically perfect system that still causes others harm, like building barriers between them and the things they need, that you can then promise to drop should they pay the right fee.

If we agree that people are subjective beings, and that their perception of value depends on things besides just their immediate gut need, then it is possible to create scarcity simply by claiming that there is scarcity, as does the anti-immigration team with its constant hammering away at how the USA is a land of scarcity.

The problem is that the whole system rides on scarcity. Some of these forms of manufacturing scarcity simply consist of withholding your services or goods from others until they pay up. We think this is OK, and the system clearly won't work without that type of scarcity. For most of the world's desirable goods, there is simply not enough to go around—our infinite desires have to live on a tiny planet.

But there are other cases where the scarcity is an artificially built wall keeping folks from what they would otherwise have access to, like the formula for a medicine or a job opportunity. Intellectual property law is designed from the ground up to create scarcity in the use of an idea, which is why IP law makes so many people queasy: just because some dude is the first guy to come up with some idea, he has the right to manufacture scarcity of that idea the world over? Franz Kafka died in 1924, but if I disseminate his writings far and wide, I'll get sued? It takes a few steps to make that scarcity makes sense; sometimes it does and sometimes it falls flat.

As usual, I have no conclusion, but intend only to point out that even though our system depends on the existence (and sometimes creation) of scarcity, there are still distinctions between creating scarcity in one's own goods and services and building artificial barriers so you can charge a fee to drop them. Free marketeers see all manufacturing of scarcity as necessary and good, and the hippie kids see all manufacturing of scarcity as evil, but both extremes go nowhere. It's a case-by-case question that doesn't admit sweeping generalizations like 'all patents are bad' or 'all free market actions are Pareto-improving'.