MYTHICAL SOFTWARE
In “The Empty Box” (In Our Time, Sept. 2006, pp. 9-11), David Alan Grier writes about an important topic from a unique perspective. I value that in anything I read, whether it’s a science fiction novel, a biography, or a professional article.

There are rumors abounding now of “roll-your-own” software apps—ones that don’t require a software degree or background, merely an understanding of the business rules involved. When I first heard about this, it sounded to me like the death knell of programming, at least for everyday needs. I believe, however, that we’ll always need programming-type skills for new endeavors such as going to Mars or robotic surgery.

Grier’s last statement referring to the possibility that someday software might be as invisible as hardware reminded me strongly of a poem by Prelutsky about dragons. It seems to me that he is equating software, like the hardware he refers to, with mythical creatures. That’s an appealing paradigm for students in this age of Harry Potter. Perhaps it could be used to make computer classes more interesting to the younger generation—especially as I keep hearing that the US doesn’t have enough IT-savvy workers now, let alone when the baby boomers start retiring.

Of course, I am biased, being as interested in Harry Potter as in the Virtual Observatory.
Lauretta Nagel
nagel@stsci.edu

CAREER CHOICES
Reading “The Language of Bad Love” (D.A. Grier, In Our Time, Oct. 2006, pp. 7-9), made me recall the past, when I was first introduced to information technology as a teenager. At age 15, I used my small savings to buy a third-hand Apple IIe+, and I did some programming in Apple Basic. I think I still have that computer somewhere.

Now I am an academician, and I have mostly forgotten how I reached this point in my life. However, reading this article made me realize that my career choice was motivated by the simple need to find a language for expressing myself—the same need that moves poets to work with words, mathematicians to elaborate theorems, or sportsmen to improve their movements.

But there are more languages for IT people to choose from. Computer scientists can build their own languages, and they can modify the rules to express their ideas—and ultimately themselves.

We now have significant experience in computer languages, but at the same time we are assisting in the reduction of language diversity. Some would argue that solutions are more important than the language we employ to realize them. Thus, converging toward a universal general-purpose language would simplify the world and improve the sharing of ideas.

But I strongly disagree with this view, and I hope past experience will help to motivate people to approach the development of new languages in new ways.

Thanks for reminding me why I am doing my job today.
Luigi Troiano
troiano@unisannio.it

WRONG CANYON
Having grown up in the area, I am almost certain that the beautiful panoramic photo displayed in Figure 1 on page 116 of Computer’s October 2006 issue is Bryce Canyon National Park, not the Grand Canyon.

I was further sensitized to the issue on a recent trip to China, where a similar wall-sized photo of Bryce Canyon was identified as Fire Mountain near Urumqi in Western China. It was only when I pointed out the Ponderosa pine trees that they finally admitted it was not Fire Mountain, and the photo wasn’t from China.

Reed Gardner
Salt Lake City, Utah
reed.gardner@has.utah.edu

The department editor responds:
Thanks—you are correct. The image was provided with the wrong caption.
Mike Macedonia
macedonia@computer.org

NEW URL
Because our systems administrator has reconfigured the department Web site, the URL included in the letter published in Computer’s September issue (p. 5) is no longer valid. The URL should be: http://csci.csusb.edu/dick/papers/rjb04bDFDs.
Richard J. Botting
rbotting@csusb.edu

We welcome your letters. Send them to computer@computer.org.