Control and Creativity

On 1 May 1964 John Kemeny and Thomas Kurtz of Dartmouth College conceived Beginner’s All-purpose Symbolic Instruction Code, BASIC for short. The 50th anniversary of the beloved computer language was duly celebrated by my geekier friends, one of whom posted this revealing comment on Facebook:

INPUT was the command that made me excited about programming. I learned PRINT earlier but it just seemed so pointless—it just seemed to be a redundant way to type. But with INPUT suddenly it became interactive, and I was in control. This was when I was in 6th grade, playing around with an Apple II in the school library.

As a former astronomer, I was tempted to extrapolate from my sample of one and assert that all programmers took up the craft after being seduced by the power to make computers do their bidding. But as a journalist, I decided to investigate the question further. Other, interesting answers might come to light.

So I googled the question, Why did you become a programmer? The second search result was illuminating. Four years ago, New Zealand-based IT consultant Renea Mackie posted a similar question to an online forum called O’Reilly Answers.

Among the people who answered Mackie’s query was a user who goes by the name cupcakesandcode. She mentioned control, but creativity was also important to her:

I also got into programming because of the creative potential. Game making definitely played into this—when I was young, I enjoyed creating games with the help of a point-and-click authoring tool (Klik & Play) but also felt limited by the software, and decided that it was time to learn programming.

Another respondent, nboever, recalled how, as a child, he used to help his grandfather make birdhouses and other objects. Lacking the dexterity to make such objects himself, he took up programming because he “wanted to continue building things.”

What motivates youngsters to take up programming is important. Too few girls even consider computing as a career. Perhaps if the creative aspect of programming were emphasized, the gender imbalance might be reduced. Youngsters—girls as well as boys—should be encouraged to discover that computing is a rewarding and satisfying vocation for a range of reasons.

Apple’s new app-programming language Swift could boost the appeal of computer science. As soon as the language became available in June, a friend of mine downloaded it. He posted his reaction on Facebook:

I’m as crummy a programmer as there is, and I’m blown away by playing with Swift. I may decide to write an app.

Just as BASIC introduced a previous generation of youngsters to the power of programming, Swift could introduce the current generation to the joys of computer-based creativity. I hope so.

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