

Winter 2022

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CS 428
THE MYTHICAL
MAN-MONTH
CHAPTERS 16-19

CH 16: NO SILVER BULLET – ESSENCE AND ACCIDENT IN SOFTWARE ENGINEERING (1986)

- Probably one of the single most important essays ever written about information technology
 - Core argument: “Building software will always be hard. There is inherently no silver bullet [to slay the monsters of software development].”
- Four inescapable essential difficulties in software development
 - Complexity: increases non-linearly with program size, both technically and managerially
 - Conformity: code must “work with” its ever-more-complex environment
 - Changeability: constant pressure to improve or fix existing systems
 - Invisibility: software is extremely hard to inspect and examine (vs., say, a building)

CH 16: NO SILVER BULLET (CONT.)

- Things that do help
 - Buy vs. build
 - Buy and adapt (or adapt to) an existing solution that someone else had built and maintains
 - Requirements refinement and rapid prototyping
 - “...it is really impossible for clients, even those working with software engineers, to specify completely, precisely, and correctly the exact requirements of a modern software product before having built and tried some versions of the product they are specifying.”
 - Incremental development
 - “A large, complex system that works is inevitably found to have evolved from a small, simply system that works.” – John Gall, Infomatics
 - Great designers
 - “The very best designers produce structures that are faster, smaller, simpler, cleaners, and produced with less effort. . . . Those software systems that have excited passionate fans are the products of one or a few designing minds, great designers.”
- Analysis and observations?

CH 17: “NO SILVER BULLET” REFIRED

- “I can’t help noticing that the nostrums published so vigorously in 1986 and 1987 have not had the dramatic effects claimed.”
- Brad Cox in 1990: “The reusable, interchangeable component approach [is] an attack on the conceptual essence of the problem.” This led to the ‘reuse’ push of the 1990s, which failed utterly.
- David Harel in 1992 offers “The Vanilla Framework”. Ever heard of it?
- Object-oriented development: also another brass slug (hence my book *Pitfalls of Object-Oriented Development* [1995])
- Brooks says his analysis stands; 30 years later, I agree with him.
- Analysis and observations?

CH 18: PROPOSITIONS OF “THE MYTHICAL MAN-MONTH”: TRUE OR FALSE?

- Hint: this chapter is a great cheat-sheet for the open-book midterm

CH 19: “THE MYTHICAL MAN-MONTH” AFTER 20 YEARS

- Why has *The Mythical Man-Month* persisted? Again, me before Congress in 1998:
 - "Fred Brooks explored many of the root causes [of IT project failure] over twenty [now over forty] years ago in *The Mythical Man-Month*, a classic book that could be regarded as the Bible of information technology because it is
 - universally known,
 - often quoted,
 - occasionally read,
 - **and rarely heeded.**"

CH 19: “THE MYTHICAL MAN-MONTH” AFTER 20 YEARS (CONT.)

- Brooks sees his central argument not about scheduling or staffing, but rather about conceptual integrity and the need for a chief architect
- Second-system effect: define the set of users:
 - Who they are
 - What they need
 - What they think they need
 - What they want
 - “It is far better to be explicit and wrong than to be vague.” [Why?]
- Triumph of the WIMP interface, which Brooks sees as eventually being replaced by voice (I disagree)

CH 19: “THE MYTHICAL MAN-MONTH” AFTER 20 YEARS (CONT.)

- “Build one to throw away” – as we discussed, Brooks abandoned this in favor of iterative development – but most ‘waterfall’ is iterative these days as well
- Brooks acknowledges his fault in rejecting information hiding and now sees it as essential
- The mythical man-month: Boehm shows that “hardly any projects succeed in less than $\frac{3}{4}$ of the calculated optimal schedule, regardless of the number of people applied.”
- Brooks Law: yes, there are cases where adding people can help but “I stand by the bald statement as the best zeroeth-order approximation of the truth, a rule of thumb to warn managers against blindly making the instinctive fix to a late project.”

CH 19: “THE MYTHICAL MAN-MONTH” AFTER 20 YEARS (CONT.)

- People are everything (well, almost everything)
 - Cites *Peopleware* by DeMarco & Lister (your next book to read)
 - Boehm’s studies: “the quality of the team is by far the largest factor in its success, indeed four times more potent than the next largest factor.”
- The power of giving up power
 - Effective software management means building teams and letting them succeed
- The biggest surprises?
 - Millions [really billions] of computers [and now mobile devices]
 - Massive amounts of shrinkwrap software (and now apps)
 - Note: he talks about 4G languages like Hypercard, which again have failed to pan out