

You Must Be Joking... Why Alice killed Bob

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ABSTRACT

Humor is something that I take very seriously. Recently, I have been thinking a lot about it. It all started with a pet peeve of mine that got spurred on by a comment from a student. Then, I started writing and it came out completely different from what I expected. It could be mean or pointless. Or it could be both, you be the judge.

1. INTRODUCTION

Below is an excerpt from a secret computer science digital manuscript hidden in an ancient VAX 8978 room and guarded by demons.

Alice woke up agitated. It was the third consecutive night that she saw the same nightmare: all languages had somehow disappeared except COBOL and she had to program a user interface in 15 minutes to save the world from an invading race of extraterrestrial squirrels. Weird. Looking outside the window she could see the heavy rain clouds gathering. The rest of the day was not looking that good either.

Then, she went to her computer. Typing always calmed her nerves. But then, beep!, there it was, an email. An email from Bob. Her nerves got tighter than the strings of a Stradivarius.

Some background is necessary here. Bob has been flirting with Alice for years now. However, the communication was weird and restricted exclusively to messages. They never met. Initially, Alice thought it was cute. Nerdy, but cute. But, then Bob never changed. And what was worse, his emails were repetitive: “Ping”, “Hello world”, TCP-SYN. Initially, she thought it was some kind of code. A weird Morse code of love. She threw everything at it, decoding sequences, imaginary algebra, theory of provable non-existence, arbitrary geometry. Nothing. After months of trying, and while ready to email him and admit defeat, she run a simple statistical test that confirmed the pure random nature of the packets. She was thrilled with the discovery. Initially. Then, she started to wonder of the meaning of randomness. Is nature really random, or the very existence of randomness indicates a hidden agenda? That was when she started drinking. Primarily milk, as she was allergic to alcohol. It didn't help. She enrolled into a philosophy class in a nearby community college. That didn't help either.

Then, she naturally fell into depression. If it was random, she wasted years of her life waiting and responding to a lunatic. It was very disappointing. Their discussions were typically two or three exchanges of messages. Sometimes, Bob would ask for confirmations. “Please ACK”. Completely weird. Sometimes she would confirm, sometimes she would not, depending on her mood. Once she asked him, “Why

do you want me to RSVP?”. He seemed frazzled. He mumbled something incoherent about “inability to make commitments”. Typical. She pressed the subject, but the only answer was that he would try to “do his best”.

Then, she noticed another thing. Bob would sometimes send the same message to her back to back. As if he didn't hear. It was really bizarre. Sometimes, she would not respond at all to these weird *repeat* messages. He would send them three times and then start slowly all the way from the beginning. As if nothing had happened. He would repeat the entirely message exchange. That freaked her out.

The worst, of course, started a few weeks back. Some nights, she would suddenly start receiving messages from some weird lady, Trudy. What was that all about? She was either pretending to be Bob, or Bob was pretending to be her. In the first case, Bob was secretly emailing another woman. In the second case, Bob was another woman. Neither could be good.

That morning, she thought she could not handle it anymore. She mustered some courage, clenched her teeth and opened his email. “Hello world!”. That tipped the scale. The suppressed frustrations resurfaced with the force of a geyser. There were not too many options: it was either him or her.

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It was a week later at Bob's funeral, when she saw him for the first time under her black veil. He was wearing a trench-coat and he kept asking people. Usually three times each person, and then he would move to the next person. A weird method, but when you are the best at what you do, you don't care if you look weird. Finally, he approached her. “Route, Tracy Route, private eye”, he introduced himself. He had piercing eyes that gave her the impression of seeing through her. She tried to conceal her nervousness by asking for a cigarette. It was clear that he meant business. “I always reach my destination”, he said in a way that was more of a statement than an attempt to boast. She got chills down her spine. For a second, she was somehow certain that he was going to find the truth. Her only hope was to do some serious identity spoofing to cover her tracks.

- I am looking for Mr. Server, he said. Do you know him?
- I am afraid I can't help you, Mr. Route.
- He often goes with his initial, DNS, DMS, SMS, or something. Does it ring a bell?
- No, not really.
- People say he controls everything. He runs a major racket managing names, huge directories. He gets his money by revealing where people are. Something like an inverse witness protection program. He has thousands of customers from all over the world. Some of the customers are not nice guys, mass

murders, they follow a shotgun approach: they achieve what they want, while millions of innocents suffer. Mr. Server does not seem to mind, as long as you ask the right way, if you know what I mean... Disgusting pig. Are you sure you don't know him?

– Oh! I remember him now.

– Really?

– No, not really, but if you keep asking I may get to know him retroactively out of sheer will.

What an idiot, she thought. If this guy is really the best private eye, I would hate to meet the runner up.

2. GIVE ALICE A BREAK

What is this obsession with Alice and Bob?

I realized that there is something wrong when an undergraduate computer science major asked me this exact question: is there a reason why we always use Alice and Bob in computer science to represent nodes A and B. That got me thinking. I could not find any reason other than a lack of imagination and a geeky stick-to-our-internal-joke approach.

However, the pervasiveness of the joke is staggering. Is this some kind of joke that repetition makes it funnier? Can we expect that, at the billionth time that a CS professor writes on the board the famous “A” and “B”, and says the names, the students spontaneously crack up saying “Ah, we get it now, it is funny. We were not sure where you were going with this, but now we get it”.

Another possible explanation is that despite being a group with relatively high mathematical IQ, we have no imagination. Either that or we are really bad at remembering names.

Seriously, I get the whole A and B thing, it is the beginning of the alphabet. But can't we think of other names? With a bit of effort I came up with the following list.

- Alex and Bill, for short robust alternatives
- Anna and Basil, for something different
- Annie and Buck, for that person-next-door feel
- Alison and Buxter, for something different
- Arlington and Baron, for something really different
- Antoinette and Boris, for a touch of royalty
- Andy and Betsy, for that motherhood and apple-pie touch
- Anfernee and BJ, for a more multicultural street-cool feel

There. The names are out. None has an excuse anymore. Feel free to mix it up too. The names will still work.

3. GEEK HUMOR LIVES ON

Unfortunately, if you think about this, we are not known for our humor. Most people I polled for this article, namely my wife, Sherry, think that computer science humor is not fit for humans. She refers to it as “computer jokes” and she will avoid it when possible¹.

I would have used this editorial for a call to arms a massive scale movement to reinstate our sense of humor to its rightful position. But, unfortunately, it is already at its rightful

¹To give you an idea, she barely tolerates the SIGCOMM outrageous opinions. I know what you are thinking, and I agree: it is an outrage.

position. Of course, exceptions exist, I know some people in our trade who are absolutely hilarious. But, let's face it, the typical “fun” discussion for computer scientists can put to sleep most people, while it can kill the older and the weak. It's like a flu epidemic.

Why is that? I have been thinking about this for quite some time now. I have no solutions whatsoever. Instead, I will simply bitch and complain about things I don't like. It is much easier this way.

First, I think that the obsessive repetition of quirky expressions and conventions is lame. A prime example is the Alice Bob thing. But, I don't think that it stops there. Here are some expressions that I personally find non-funny.

The famous *foobar()*. What the heck is a foobar? I didn't think that this was funny the first time I heard it, and I don't think that it gets funnier every time I hear it. In fact, I have never been quite sure what foobar really is supposed to be, so I think I tried to suppress it from the conscious part of my brain². Luckily, UCR student Dhiman brought it to my attention, and he also pointed me to the wikipedia explanation, which I quote here:

“Foobar is a common placeholder name also referred to as metasyntactic variable used in computer programming or computer related documentation.

For other uses, see Foobar (disambiguation).

Not to be confused with FUBAR.”

I was very impressed. Primarily by what FUBAR stands for. I am not going to repeat it here, this column has class, although, I know, it is hard to tell. I will just say that it is an “acronym in the SNAFU family”, quoting Wikipedia again.

The second problem is the use of jargon out of context when we want to make merry. Here, I have to admit a personal fondness for this practice. But, non-CS people hate it, primarily because they don't understand it. In some sense, making such jokes in front of other people is like making jokes where the punch line is in another language. Here are some prime examples.

“*We will never converge*”. Often heard while ordering at a chinese restaurant where sharing of dishes is expected and people try “optimize the problem along many different dimensions”: achieve a combination of pork, chicken, beef, and vegetarian, while at the same time covering noodles, rice and salads, and meeting other dietary requirements.

“*It is not just hard, it is NP-hard*.” No explanation is necessary here. However, this can be thoroughly abused, if the problem is in fact straightforward for other people that may have skills in such things as understanding of social context, human psychology, or with an opinion in clothes, music, or literature.

“*He gave me a brain dump*.” We may get a brain dump, but non-CS people get a brain freeze when they hear us.

4. CONCLUSION

I personally think that our community has some extremely funny and interesting people. However, it is clear that CS humor has a long way to go, until it is met with sympathy, let alone, acceptance by others. Mind you, columns like this are not helping.

²A task which is not that difficult given that I think there is only a small part of my brain that does stuff, while the rest is collecting unemployment and hosts headaches.