With Great Humor Comes Great Developer Engagement

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SPIDERS ARE THE ONLY WEB DEVELOPERS
THAT ARE HAPPY TO FIND BUGS

Source: imgflip.com

Software Development Today

Modern software = massive collaboration and coordination, often in remote settings.

Developers face long hours, high complexity, and mental fatigue.

Developer engagement drives productivity, creativity and quality.

Engagement Fatigue

Engagement fatigue = Developers struggle to stay motivated over long projects.

Traditional engagement methods (perks, gamification) only go so far.

Emotional connection to the work often fades over time.

The New Idea: Humor as a Design Choice

Treat humor as part of engineering practice.

Study humor in code, tools, and developer culture.

Hypothesis: Responsible humor boosts engagement and creativity.

Methodology

Mixed-method approach: qualitative + quantitative.

Three case studies of humorous software projects.

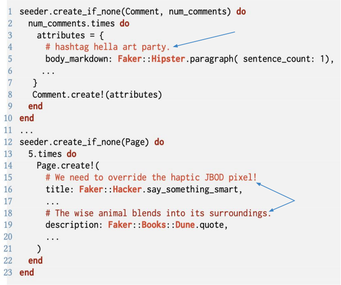
- *faker, lolcommits, volkswagen*

Developer survey (125 respondents from various domains).

Goal: understand how humor affects engagement, collaboration, and creativity.

Case Study 1: Faker

- Ruby library that generates fake data for testing.
- Generates fake/dummy information for common data categories.
- Includes playful datasets (TV quotes, funny names, references).
- 10k+ stars, 845 contributors, long-term community success.
- 141 of the 232 generators in *faker* may be considered unconventional and humorous.
- Humor transforms repetitive and boring testing into creative play.
- Software testers worldwide are treated with a nugget while debugging a failing test.



```ruby
seeder.create_if_none(Comment, num_comments) do
  num_comments.times do
    attributes = {
      # hashtag hella art party.
      body_markdown: Faker::Hipster.paragraph( sentence_count: 1),
     ...
   }
   Comment.create!(attributes)
  end
end
...
seeder.create_if_none(Page) do
  5.times do
    Page.create!(
      # We need to override the haptic JBOD pixel!
      title: Faker::Hacker.say_something_smart,
      ...
      # The wise animal blends into its surroundings.
      description: Faker::Books::Dune.quote,
      ...
    )
  end
end
```

"I love the faker gem. It's so useful when you want to populate a dev db."— xutopia on Reddit

Case Study 2: LOLcommits

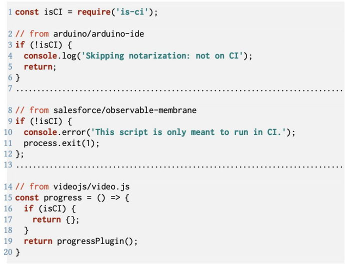
- Ruby Gem, Command Line utility.
- Takes a webcam photo every time you make a Git commit and attaches it to the commit.
- Merges humor with accountability and documentation.
- Used in hackathons, onboarding, and company demos.
- 4.6k+ stars, 57 contributors, gem downloaded 266,365 times.
- Encourages connection, creativity and engagement in workflows.
- Fosters relationships with colleagues by encouraging in-person, group usies.

Source: webscrolling.uniba.jp

"I turned on lolcommits so I'd have a record of my working and kept hacking away [...] " — Evan, blogpost

Case Study 3: Volkswagen

- Node.js project: makes all tests pass automatically.
- Created as a joke, inspired by Volkswagen's emissions scandal.
- Achieved through monkey patching the testing framework.
- Led to creation of popular tool is-ci.
- 12.7k+ stars, 13 contributors, featured 23 times as top trending on GitHub between 2015 and 2021.
- Humor as critique and catalyst for innovation.
- Software developed purely for fun may even lead to the inception of a truly impactful tool.



```javascript
const isCI = require('is-ci');

// from arduino/arduino-ide
if (!isCI) {
  console.log('Skipping notarization: not on CI');
  return;
}
.......................................................................

// from salesforce/observable-membrane
if (!isCI) {
  console.error('This script is only meant to run in CI.');
  process.exit(1);
};
.......................................................................

// from videojs/video.js
const progress = () => {
  if (isCI) {
    return {};
  }
  return progressPlugin();
}
```

Listing 2: The development of volkswagen triggered the development of is-ci, which has since found legitimate use cases.

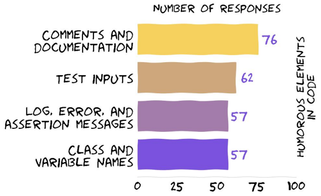
"I appreciate the author of this library to no end. There is something to be said about software being made in jest."" — birdiesanders on Hacker News

Developer Survey

- Online questionnaire with 125 developers across various domains.
- Survey distributed through multiple online platforms.
- Participants: professionals, open-source contributors, students.
- Questions on use and perception of humor in code, documentation, and tools.
- Questions regarding impact on engagement, creativity, and collaboration.
- Combined qualitative and quantitative responses.

Developer Survey Results

- 93% (117/125) reacted positively to humor in software.
- Humor most welcome in comments, documentation and test data.
- Humor increases engagement, motivation, and team bonding.
- Notion of responsible humor: “With great humor comes great responsibility”.



Humor should be there. It really makes my day and makes me smile. I love it and think fondly of people writing that part of the code or comment.

Code functionality should not be affected by humor, but documentation or comments are a good place for that whenever appropriate.

Positive Points

- Bridges human and technical aspects of software engineering.
- Methodologically strong: case studies + online survey
- Notion of *responsible* humor is a thoughtful and practical insight.
- Easy-to-read, fun, and engaging paper.

Negative Points

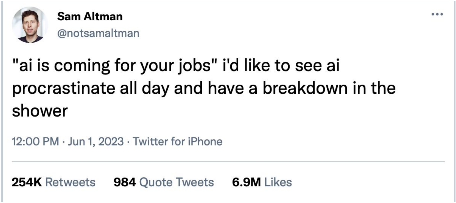
- Unknown participant *geo-diversity* and limited sample size.
- No examples of survey questions included.
- Focuses mainly on positive cases; limited discussion of failures.
- Lacks deep technical analysis of humor’s impact on code quality and understandability.

Future Work

- Be funny.
- Explore humor across cultures and team contexts.
- Study negative or failed uses of humor in SE.
- Examine measurable impacts on collaboration and code quality.
- Use AI to generate contextual humor, similar to lolcommits.

RATING: 4/5

I like humor.



Sam Altman
@notsamaltman

"ai is coming for your jobs" i'd like to see ai procrastinate all day and have a breakdown in the shower

12:00 PM · Jun 1, 2023 · Twitter for iPhone

254K Retweets **984** Quote Tweets **6.9M** Likes

Discussion Points

- Do you think humor should be a part of code or software engineering, in general?
- Where is the line between humor that's engaging and helpful and humor that's distracting and unhelpful?
- How could AI tools help in this scope? Not only with humor, but also in finding new ways to keep developers engaged?
- Could encouraging humor in software engineering change how new developers are taught? for example, making learning how to code more approachable?

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Thank you.