

Vernacularism in Software Design Practice: does craftsmanship have a place in software engineering?

Paul Taylor

Abstract

Convention dictates that an information discipline matures from an informal shared practice to a defined and repeatable process through the externalisation and formal expression of its underlying theory. The inevitability of this progression should not be allowed to transfer mechanisms of the superseded vernacular or craft-like practices. This paper examines the tension between software engineering's professionalisation of the software design role—exemplified by the software architect—and its antithesis, the software craftspeople, despite attempts to suppress reliance on individual skills and abilities through software engineering process. In other design disciplines, the professionalisation of design marks a distinct progression from ad hoc, unrepeatable, unselfconscious craft to a self-conscious engineering. Software engineering has partially failed to make this transition and this failure undermines the exclusivity of the engineering metaphor and engineering-based process models as a model of practical software design. Software methods must acknowledge informality if the creative act of design is to be correctly characterised, supported in methods, and taught.

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