

The Programmer's X-mas List

by Randy Charles Morin

My wife is Philippina, which means one thing. The Christmas (X-mas) lights and tree go up when the months end with "ber". September, October, November and December. I have to thank my friend Tom for that line. He too is married to a Philippina. My wife lives for winter holidays. She listens to an all holiday music radio station. One of her favorite songs on the channel is "Grown Up X-mas List" by Amy Grant. The premise for the song should be obvious. The singer is discussing a X-mas list worthy of an adult.

The premise of this article is my own discussion of the typical programmer's X-mas list. I'll start with the greedy top ten things to buy a programmer this X-mas and then I'll give you ten wishes that would benefit the programming community as a whole.

My Greedy X-Mas List

I'll start from #10 and move to #1 in order to build up the suspense. Just like Dave.

#10 Tickets for Lord of the Rings

You can't be much of a programmer unless you've read Lord of the Rings. I remember my University days. The engineering students a.k.a. the nerds were always into Dungeons & Dragons and the entire medieval adventure story line. It was a social requirement to be familiar with the Lord of the Rings. Lord of the Rings wasn't to the same level as Star Trek, but it was there.

#9 EA Sports PC Game

My preferred game is NHL. I grew up on NHL 93, 94, 95, 96, 97 and 98. Played them for hours. Nobody can beat me. Other programmers might be more interested in the NBA, NFL or FIFA versions.

#8 XBOX

The latest in gaming technology. If you are buying a gift for any big kid or small kid, then you can't go wrong. This item is sure to be popular with just about anybody. But in particular, the geeks will especially be happy with one under their tree.

#7 Palm Pilot

This is one of those toys that'll be widely used for 3 to 6 months. But you can expect even the grown kids to get bored with their Palm Pilot after only a few months use. It's fun to play games on the road, but the games are not up to par yet with traditional game consoles and PCs.

#6 Web Camera

Once you have that dedicated connection to the Internet, the next step is to setup your own Web Cam. Myself, I'd like to get a Fish Cam going, so that I can see my fish, even while at work. Full audio-visual meetings over the Internet are also something I'd like to try.

#5 Both XP and Linux

I think about every developer has a dream. And that dream is to have his computer setup for dual boot with both Windows XP and Linux. The problem is always taking the time to set this up. So don't expect any hurray if you buy your programmer a CD with XP or Linux on it. The real present is getting this stuff installed.

#4 DSL

Digital high-bandwidth connections to the Internet. Doesn't have to be DSL. Digital cable will do.

#3 Digital Camera

The most popular guy at work is the one who brought in the latest trinket. Digital cameras are a great way of getting the attention of your fellow programmer. The hope is they will all ask to borrow your camera. Instant gratitude.

#2 Ethernet Home-Based Network

OK! DSL is no longer enough. Get that DSL to Ethernet gateway going. Then you can connect unlimited computers to the Internet, a programmer's dream. And don't forget that firewall. Again, it's not buying the hardware that counts. It's installing the network.

#1 Dock-able Toshiba Notebook

I have a Dell notebook. Crap. The keyboard keys are falling off. The U in particular is getting to be a stubborn button. I heard that Toshiba has the sturdiest notebook. With two children and wife, I need sturdy. Don't forget the dock-able part, that means, full keyboard, monitor and mouse when sitting at the desk in the house. This is a \$5000 plus baby so don't get in unless you plan on marrying the programmer.

My Philanthropic X-Mas List

Well, if I actually had some money and some influence on those big wigs in Silicon Valley, then my X-mas wish list might include the following ten things.

#10 A Stable Windows Explorer

I don't know about you guys, but I'm tired of the instability of Windows Explorer. I often find Windows Explorer deadlocks and I'm forced to kill the Explorer process in order to kick-start another application. Or even worse are the frequent "Unhandled Exceptions" that take out Explorer.

#9 Death to the command prompt

Just why do people continue to develop applications that are run exclusively from a command prompt. There are two types of computer users, those that use the keyboard and those that use the mouse. I fall into the first category like most experienced computer users. I also fall into the category that are geeks and who develop really user-unfriendly software.

#8 Oracle hires some good GUI developers

This is more of a continuation of the previous wish. Somebody at Oracle is in love with the command prompt. I wouldn't wish anybody dead, but I'd like him at least to be fired. Otherwise, Microsoft SQL Server will eventually dominate the performance database server market, just as it dominates everything else. And it's not enough to catch up to Microsoft. You have to surpass them in usability. Oracle take that \$1 billion you saved and hire some GUI developers.

#7 Death to RMI

This one has been giving me a headache for years. Why does a language, Java require it's own proprietary transport? Yet, I continue to hear more and more companies adopting this technology. The reasoning is that RMI as a part of Java is platform independent. This is a total lie. It's dependent completely on the Java platform. Use CORBA.

#6 Standard C++ Thread Class

We have the C run-time library and STL. Can we please have a threading library? I've grown weary of rewriting threading libraries each time I join a new startup company. I have created my own to limit the weariness, but would be glad if you stole my code and did the deed. Here's the URL, <http://www.kbcafe.com/articles/CPlusPlus.Threading.html>.

#5 Standard Date format

While were standardizing, I'd like to announce a bounty on the head of anybody who creates a new date format. Ya! Ya! Localization. Crap. We all follow this American calendar. So, why do we write dates differently in Toronto, then we do 100 kilometers south in Buffalo? And don't get me started on the American laziness as per the metric system.

#4 Hardware Independent OS

I really like Java, a nice hardware independent platform. The problem is that Microsoft is not on board. So, it's Sun's Java against Microsoft's Windows. I favor Java, but I'm afraid the money is favoring Microsoft. It'll be a struggle, but trust me that Microsoft will not lose. Then what? Let me introduce you all to a new platform called C# and CLR. Yikes!

#3 Death to C#, CLR and Dot-Net

Let's continue on that note. What is C#, CLR and Dot-Net? It's just Microsoft's version of Java and the Internet. So, now I have to learn 50 million new things, because Microsoft doesn't want to lose their platform monopoly. Crap.

#2 Java pre-installed on XP

So, how does Microsoft go about ensuring that the new C#-CLR platform wins over Sun's Java? How about not installing Java in the OEM version of the most popular computer platform on Earth. Being that Microsoft owns Windows, this wasn't too hard to do.

#1 Break Up Microsoft

I think I know how to fix #2, #3 and #4. Microsoft's continued abuse of their monopoly of computer system software must end.

About the Author

Randy Charles Morin is the Lead Architect of SportMarkets Development from Toronto, Ontario, Canada and lives with his wife and two kids in Brampton, Ontario. He is the author of the www.kbcafe.com website, author of Wiley's Programming Windows Services book and co-author of many other programming books and articles.