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COTS, Open Source, Build it Yourself, or Something in Between?



Eli White

As developers, this is a topic that is near and dear to our hearts. I know for myself it's a question that raises its head every time that I consider a software need I have.

I could just write the code myself and have what I need. But do I want to? Do I want the burden of maintaining new code? Is that where my focus and my is? Or are there better ways for me to spend my time making value than re-creating something that may already exist?

Maybe you can grab a pre-built open-source solution, or buy a paid solution. But what happens if it doesn't quite meet your needs? How do you handle that? Are you left augmenting a half-done solution? Do you change your workflow to match someone else's assumptions? Do you need to throw away the money you spent because it's not good enough, or do you just hobble along with half of a solution?

Low-level programming is good for the programmer's soul.

—John Carmack

Heck, this doesn't only stay in the realm of programming. I also run conferences plus I am a woodworker. I'm often debating when looking at stage equipment if I should buy something or build it from scratch.

Tough decisions

Honestly, I don't think there is a single answer—it's just a struggle that we always face. Luckily with the prevalence of easy to use shared libraries and extensible software, nowadays you are often able to find half-way solutions. Rarely is build-it-yourself the real answer as you can always start from somewhere.

Need a basic website and just to throw up some content on a regular basis? Maybe toss up WordPress and write a little bit of custom code to get it working. Need an eCommerce site? Well, your options can range from SaaS solutions like Shopify to full blown extensible solutions such as Magento, to using an eCommerce platform toolkit such as FoxyCart, or at the lowest level just writing your solution integrating with Stripe and Paypal.

But the fact is that no-one should be recreating the wheel. It still always leaves us in a tough situation trying to discern the right solution. I'll admit that I often spend more time trying to research the options that exist to meet a need I have than it may have taken to write the code in the first place. At the same time, if that code isn't part of my core business model itself, then I don't want to spend my time maintaining it.

Conclusions

This month I don't have any conclusions for you, but I'd like to hear from you. What is your make it or break it point? When you do build from scratch, versus just buy a solution? When do you customize something in-between? Take it to twitter and tweet at @phparch¹ to let us know your thought process.

I look forward to hearing what you have to say.

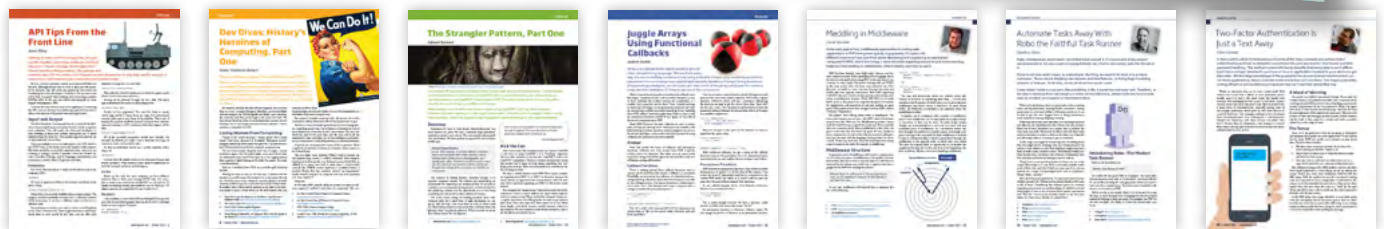
Eli White is the Conference Chair for php[architect] and Vice President of One for All Events, LLC. He may be currently debating some woodworking versus buy decisions for php[world] at the moment. @EliW

¹ @phparch: <https://twitter.com/phparch>

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