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PHP Tek: A Homecoming

Ben Ramsey

Check out Ben Ramsey's fun recollection of this year's Tek.

PHP Tek always feels like a homecoming. No matter how much time passes between conferences, or between the person I was the last time I attended and the one I am now, walking into that hotel and finding familiar faces feels like returning home to close friends and family. That feeling was especially pronounced in 2023, when the conference returned after a four-year hiatus imposed by the pandemic. This week in Rosemont, back at the Sheraton O'Hare, it was there again.

The conference ran from May 19th through the 21st. It was three days of sessions, workshops, and the kind of hallway conversations that don't appear on any schedule. I gave two talks: one on describing APIs with OpenAPI¹ on Wednesday, and a beginner's guide to OAuth and OpenID Connect² on Thursday. Both went well, and I'm always glad for an audience willing to spend an hour in the weeds with me on less glamorous—but no less fascinating or important—parts of development.

A few of the talk highlights from the conference, for me, were:

- Shane Rosenthal speaking about NativePHP³ (check out [NativePHP](https://phpa.me/nativephp)—it's really cool)
- Sarah Peters's "From Concert Hall to Code Review, Symphony to Software⁴," where she played violin interludes between sections of her talk
- James Warmoth III's "From Classroom Code to Production Code: Bridging the Gap Between School and the Software Industry⁵"

One of the most memorable parts of PHP Tek is the game night or after-party. Game night is a tradition going back to the earliest PHP Tek conferences. You see, PHP Tek takes place in a hotel by the airport, and there's little to do nearby. The surrounding area isn't very walkable, and it takes about an hour to get into Chicago. *This is a feature, not a bug.* As a result, everyone sticks around to play games, get to know each other, and have fun.

One of my favorite game night traditions is karaoke. This tradition has been quietly accumulating across PHP conferences for twenty years. It started, as best I can recall, in a hotel



bar at ZendCon in San Jose in 2006. After a pirate-themed after party⁶, we found ourselves in the hotel bar, where they had a DJ leading karaoke. It was so memorable that they made it a part of the after-party at ZendCon 2007. I remember doing karaoke after delivering a keynote at the PHP Experience in São Paulo in 2016, which was surreal (the karaoke, not the keynote). That same year, we found a karaoke bar near the hotel at PHP Tek in St. Louis. Along the way, we've done karaoke at Lone Star PHP in Dallas, Southeast PHP in Nashville, Longhorn PHP in Austin, Cascadia PHP in Portland, among others. The conferences changed, the cities changed, and somehow karaoke kept appearing.

Figure 1.



Nate, Jackie, and Larry sing "What It Sounds Like" from *KPop Demon Hunters* at PHP Tek

1 <https://phpa.me/php-tek-openapi>

2 <https://phpa.me/php-tek-oauth-oidc>

3 <https://phpa.me/nativephp-2026>

4 <https://phpa.me/php-tek-concert>

5 <https://phpa.me/php-tek-from-classroom>

6 <https://phpa.me/phptek-2026-photos>

At PHP Tek, we've evolved beyond hunting for a karaoke venue. Since the conference returned in 2023, we've been using the sound system already set up in the ballroom during game night to run our own. It happened again on Wednesday, and I ended up leading a good stretch of it. Nobody assigns this role. It just falls to whoever's willing to go first. (But really, it's because I'm the most persistent at begging [John](#) to let me do it.)

Another highlight of PHP Tek is *Catan Starfarers*⁷. This is the most unhinged version of Catan. I've never played, but watching is its own pleasure. Omni Adams⁸ [_GMs](#) a game that's not supposed to have a game master. The games go late. They're ginormous. I don't fully understand how anyone wins, and I suspect that's part of the appeal. Rumor has it that some folks attend just to play *Starfarers*.

Figure 2.



Kalen, Daniel, Scott, Nia, Omni, and John play *Catan Starfarers* at PHP Tek

A meaningful moment of the week, for me, was catching up with Elizabeth Barron⁹. Elizabeth has been a fixture in the PHP community for many years, and we go way back; we organized PHP Appalachia¹⁰ together in 2006. We'd stayed loosely in touch over the years, but I don't think we'd been in the same room since around 2016. She's back in a significant way now, having joined the PHP Foundation as executive director¹¹. We talked mostly about family, life, and things unrelated to PHP or technology. I love that conferences like PHP Tek provide opportunities to catch up with people you haven't seen in years without any particular agenda.

⁷ <https://www.catan.com/starfarers>

⁸ <https://gravatar.com/omniadams>

⁹ https://github.com/ElizabethN/about_me

¹⁰ <https://phpa.me/phpappalachia>

¹¹ <https://phpa.me/elizabeth-barron>

There were conversations with more of an agenda, of course. The hallway track at PHP Tek is where a lot of the real thinking happens, and this year, some of the recurring subjects were: context generators¹², [supply-chain security in the PHP ecosystem](#), the impact of AI on how we write and think about code, and the longer question of where PHP is heading. I don't think any of these had tidy conclusions, but they benefit from in-person discussions in ways that mailing list discussions can't provide.

PHP Tek has outlasted hype cycles, framework wars, and periodic predictions that PHP was dying, and it keeps coming back. The community keeps showing up. That's the thing about a homecoming: it only means something if people keep coming home.

One last thing: [WurstCon](#) returned this year, following the close of the conference. This has become a PHP community tradition. For where two or three are gathered together with hot dogs, there is a WurstCon. This time, WurstCon was at the Winking Dog¹³.

Figure 3.



The WurstCon conference goes outside the Winking Dog



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¹² <https://wiki.php.net/rfc/context-managers>

¹³ <https://www.winkingdog.com>