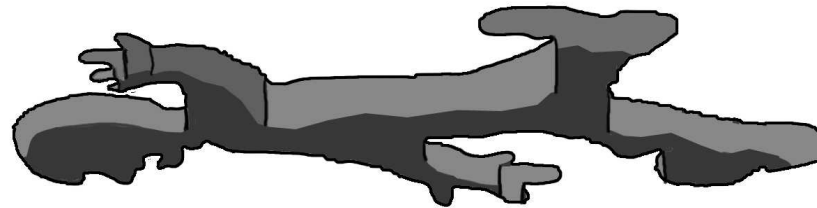


Splatman — start reading now!

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Praxis talk
Tuesday, 30 October 2007

Thanks to Brian Palmer. Original images by Lydia.

Part I

Background

I'm Jamie. I've been at Heriot-Watt since 2006. I lecture Formal Specification to Year 2 and Compilers to Year 3. If you like, check out my teaching pages on www.gabbay.org.uk.

Origin of this talk

I got an e-mail from Brian Palmer a couple of months ago.

Jamie, old fruit, he said, would you mind terribly standing up and telling our boys and girls something about your research? Bit of the old inspiration, you know.

Certainly Brian, I replied, but instead of talking about my research let me tell them about Splatman.

A few facts about Splatman

Splatman is an allegoric character. As such, I make no apologies for making him male.

I see Splatman all the time. He walks into my office several times a day. I get e-mails from him. I mark his scripts. In a couple of years my department may or may not award him a degree.

What does Splatman look like?

For exams, Splatman wears his underwear outside his trousers, wears a t-shirt with a pixelated 'S' written on it. He wears a cape. He has poor posture and a hunted, nervous look.

Outside exams, Splatman looks very ordinary. He wears jeans and a scruffy t-shirt. He has no political convictions, and belongs to no society.

Splatman doesn't like to talk, but he will chat for hours online. When Splatman does talk he has a pleasant — though rather insecure — manner.

What is Splatman?

Do not underestimate Splatman! He may surprise you:

- He may run a mailorder sex site to earn money to get through university.
- He may advertise a forklift truck he picked up cheap in a warehouse firesale.
- He may one day suddenly say 'Jamie, I think I know you well enough now to tell you that I'm homosexual'. Okey-dokey.

How do lecturers look to Splatman?

Splatman treats lecturers with respect but little understanding. For him, they are slightly unreal; as if the forces that move Lecturers belong to another dimension, beyond his understanding.

Splatman never thinks what he looks like from the outside. He could get a first-class degree — but he doesn't. He remains with the herd; he doesn't ask if that's such a bright idea either. He will emerge from University with an indifferent degree, never expecting more.

Splatman has wildly unrealistic expectations, which he fails to revise in the face of overwhelming evidence.

Splatman drives me up the fucking wall.

Splatman's unrealistic expectations



“How hard can it be?” he said.
“I’ll read up about it on the way down,” he said...

Study

What is the point of university? To learn to work hard.

University exams do not measure social background, gender, good taste in clothes, music, women, or drugs. University exams do not even measure cleverness!

Exams test ability to maintain a concentrated and consistent effort over a period of months. There is a reason for this: these skills are required to hold down a job, maintain a relationship, bring up a child.

From you we need a consistent and committed effort through the year. Turning up to lectures, doing exercise sheets. We need a bit of ambition too: try to produce consistently A-grade material, rather than scraping through on the minimum possible, or less.

Study

I can't see the future, but if you get a degree that shouts

'I can't manage my priorities of my time. I'm a lump. Kick me and I'll shift'

then I suppose you'll get a job where priorities are set for you, time is regimented, and you're generally treated like a lump.

This doesn't make you a bad person but what's the point?

Study

If you get a degree that shouts

‘I have discipline, I work well, and pay attention to detail; give me responsibility’

then I suppose you’ll find good work and responsibility.

Who knows; one day you might find yourself with responsibility for convincing the younger generation to spend their evenings studying; responsibility for making sure that in twenty years’ time — when your own children are at university — the Pound isn’t worth 50 cents of the dollar and we’re all speaking Chinese, Russian, German (or French).

Specifics

Let's get down to some specific comments:

- Responsibility for your study and intellectual development ultimately rests with you. That means the teenager sitting **there**, in **your seat**, wearing **your underwear**.

Universities provide learning **opportunities**, no more.

- You have to do example sheets. **All** of the example sheets. What, you got stuck? That's what God made the message boards for. Do not ignore example sheets.
- Some courses are obvious and commonsense. Some aren't, and they will demand thought and practice. Understand this now or you're going to get some really crummy marks.

Specifics

- Generally, you will be told what will get you an A, a B, a C, or a D. Don't expect a D and do what's needed to get one; expect a D and do what's needed to get an A. You may be pleasantly surprised at the result.
- The second-best time to revise for the exam is **the evening after the lecture**. But you'll get busy: the **best** time to revise for the exam is **the evening before the lecture**. My slides are online now, before the course even starts. Read them.

My favourite quotes

‘We’re only second-years.’ **Grrr. At primary school?**

‘You didn’t tell us we had to do example sheets.’ **Methinks I effing did.**

‘I made a detailed study plan: I started revising the week before the exam.’ **This man has no bald-headed giggle-stick (Lewinski lunch).**

‘I didn’t understand but I didn’t ask questions because I didn’t want to disturb the lecturer.’ **Aargh!**

Excuses

Sometimes, there are good reasons for underachievement:

- My father just kicked me out of the house. I'm staying with my grandma.
- I have catastrophic allergies. Just taking the bus to university is dicing with death.
- I've had a nervous breakdown. Every time I open a textbook, I puke.
- I'm up to my ears in student debt. Will you buy my kidney?
- I'm dyslexic and sold my soul to Santa.

Reality can be a harsh place (and sometimes, rotten people do rotten things to you). This can bite the best of us.

Excuses

Allowances can be made in exams, but only up to a point; the exam only measures what you know and so, indirectly but reliably, how effectively you study.

You do realise that that is what the degree measures; how effectively you study?

Discuss such issues with your mentor.

Part II

Report writing

Exams test your ability to maintain a concentrated and consistent effort over a period of months.

We also need you to master report writing.

That's 'expressing ideas clearly and concisely in writing'.

Report writing

I need you to rewrite the following text (from a real report). It's waffly; make it shorter and better. You have three minutes:

In order to determine the most appropriate structure for the application to be developed, two simple structure prototypes were produced. For this project it was assumed that the application being developed would be integrated with the existing online module material. Therefore the prototypes were designed with this in mind and where possible in a manner consistent with the existing material.

What, three minutes isn't enough? I certainly hope you don't expect me to spend three minutes per paragraph on **your** project. Get cracking!

Report writing

In order to determine the most appropriate structure for the application to be developed, two [simple — all prototypes are simple] structure prototypes were produced. For this project it was assumed that the application being developed would be integrated with the existing online module material. Therefore the prototypes were designed with this in mind [and where possible in a manner consistent with the existing material — superfluous; you just said the same thing twice.]

Report writing

[In order — just delete] to determine the [most appropriate — i.e., best] structure for the application [to be developed — yes, I know you're developing an application; I set the question, didn't I?], two structure prototypes were produced. [For this project — what, you written another project?] [it was assumed — by whom?] that the application [being developed — aargh] would be integrated with the existing online module material. [Therefore — superfluous] the prototypes were designed with this in mind.

If you're not comfortable writing 'I', use 'we'. No passive tenses; this isn't a chemistry experiment that should give the same result every time. It's **your** project; unique and individual.

Report writing

To determine the best structure for the application, two structure prototypes were produced. We assumed the application would be integrated with the existing online module material. The prototypes were designed with this in mind.

Report writing

This is my version:

We tested ideas for the structure of our application using two prototypes. Both of these ensured compatibility with the existing online material.

Every word more than necessary wastes time and loses your reader's concentration. Don't think we lecturers don't notice, don't think we don't get pissed off.

or

No waffle. Or else.

Another example

It has also been considered that an interesting variation on this format would be to use flash animation to act out a question scenario. The flash animations would take the place of the textual questions and would provide a more interesting and stimulating learning experience. At this stage, due to the time constraints associated with this project, there is no certainty that flash animations will be used in this way. It is something that will be considered and explored in more detail in the third terms work on this project.

Another example

My version:

Flash animations might liven up the user experience but we have no time to set this up. We may try to do this in the third term.

Taken from the Reith Lectures, 2005

Even people who should know better, get this wrong. Take a look at this:

One of the reasons that the earliest significant advances were few and far between was that the technologies of communication had yet to be created, and communication of any kind could be rigidly controlled. While there was only word of mouth, information must frequently have been lost, and the process of innovation forced to repeat itself over and over again. Innovation could not advance exponentially as it does today because there were no means reliably to pass information from generation to generation, or between widely-separated societies. The difficulty of transportation compounded the problem: it was only the wealthy and powerful who could travel to distant sources of information. It was through primitive paintings and tablets of stone, and eventually hand-written manuscripts, that each generation first began to preserve and reliably to pass its

precious knowledge on.

Taken from the Reith Lectures, 2005

The whole text of the 2005 Reith lecture was like that. It's better-written than most projects I get, but not by very much, and it's **pretentious**.

The lectures were called 'the triumph of technology'. In my opinion, the lectures were a terrible advert for the 'technological society'.

I offer a prize of a box of pralines to the best rendering of the quote above into plain english.

I got it down to 62 words.

Apostrophes

Read up about this one (examples courtesy of Lynn Truss):

- “Those smelly things are my brother’s” (children running away with pegs on their noses from a pair of stinky shoes).
- “Those smelly things are my brothers”, no apostrophe (two boys pouring rubbish on each other).
- “The dogs like my Dad” (dogs looking adoringly at man).
- “The dog’s like my Dad” (dog and man, with uncannily similar faces).
- “We’re here to help you” (smiling assistants behind a desk).
- “Were here to help you” (closed door with sign: ‘Gone fishing’ and ‘Try next door’).

A sign of a weak mind

TILES
TOILETS
TOOL'S

TAP'S
VANITIES
ADHESIVES

Conclusions

The nature of university

University is like a gym membership: once you're in, it's up to you to use the equipment.

You're all lucky. For the past ten millenia of more-or-less recorded human history, and right up to fifty years ago, the following sentence would have been fantasy or even heresy: Scottish society has decided to give everybody aged 18-21 the opportunity to educate themselves, no strings attached.

My comment on this is simple:

Do.