XP Day - the story of an XP event

A recent eXtreme Programming workshop gave developers the chance to put the techniques through their paces. Kevlin Henney reports.

Perhaps the most obvious reason to be heading into central London two Saturdays before Christmas would be to indulge in some extreme shopping. However, at Imperial College on 15 December, an alternative attraction was laid on for those so inclined - XP Day. The XP concerned was not a wannabe operating system from Redmond, but eXtreme Programming, perhaps the most popular of the agile development methods and a longer standing use for the initials (**www.agilealliance.org**).

The day, hosted by the Extreme Tuesday Club and the BCS OOPS Specialist Group, sold out more than two weeks prior to the event with more than 100 registrations, which is a respectable measure of the interest in streamlined development approaches. They were treated to a packed day of three-session tracks, including presentations, panels, workshops, a keynote speech, a decent lunch and a steady supply of caffeine.

Steve Freeman and Tim Mackinnon kicked off the day with an overview of the XP community and its practices. Although the conference had been billed as an international event for customers, developers and managers, a quick show of hands revealed what you might expect - an order of magnitude more developers than managers... and one customer. The maturity and reach of XP was evident from another show of hands. Almost everyone had at least nodding familiarity with XP's values, principles and practices, and a fair number were already involved in XP or XP-influenced projects.

Two years ago, an equivalent conference would have been explained what XP was and Kent Beck, the father of XP, would have been the central figure. Now, however, the focus was on how to do XP effectively and Beck was in the audience - a surprise and welcome visitor.

Getting down to business
So, how do we do XP? This is where you had to agonise over which sessions to attend, and therefore which to miss:

- **The Extreme Hour**, hosted by Duncan Pierce, Tung Mac and Nat Pryce, was a hands-on workshop offering a compressed introduction to all the XP practices.
- **Kick-starting XP**, with Keith Braithwaite and Paul Simmons, explored the conditions that needed to be addressed for the successful introduction of XP into an organisation.
- **Scaling up XP**, with Michael Feathers and Jack Bolles, attempted to answer the question of how to scale up XP to large teams. It is normally considered ideal for teams of less than 20, but this is not always possible.
- **Tuning XP**, with Rachel Davies and Tim Mackinnon, provided a tutorial on how to improve estimation within XP, and what measurements allow a team to be more effective.
- **If you repeat it, it's worth automating**, with Tim Bacon and Jeff Martin, offered a tutorial on taking the tedium and repetition out of project chores. Why do something again and again when you can write code to do it for you?
- **Gardener's Question Time**, chaired by Paul Simmons, offered a slight twist on the usual conference panel format, as its title suggests.
- **Extreme Business**, with Colston Sanger and Aidan Ward, explored the application of XP principles to the business domain.
- **The Test-First Lab**, hosted by Joseph Pelrine and Ivan Moore, offered programmers hands-on experience with some code-based XP practices such as pair programming, test-first design and refactoring - in Java or Smalltalk.
- **The Extreme Lego workshop**, hosted by Tom Ayerst, Paolo Polce and Seb Palmer, gave programmers a chance to get back to their roots and put XP practices into action. Lego Mindstorms offered the perfect opportunity for children of all ages to get extreme.

One session you did not have to worry about missing was the keynote by Martin Fowler, author of *UML Distilled, Refactoring and Analysis Patterns*. Martin spoke about the origins of XP, the Agile movement as a whole, and how to start XP. Under the last heading, he spoke about the stealth approach. Some practices require the involvement of others but some clearly do not. For instance, test-first design is a personal practice that requires no permission from others, and continuous integration can be introduced under the aegis of tidying up the build.

Follow the Lego brick road
In the afternoon, my personal choice was to follow the Lego brick road. This workshop included a brief stand-up presentation of what we were looking to achieve, and then the 20 Lego-nauts were divided into four teams of five. Each team had one laptop and two Lego Mindstorms kits to allow parallel development of hardware and software, and rudimentary versioning for hardware.

In each team, there was a pair working on the hardware, a pair working on the software and a tracker, observing and tracking time against estimates that the team had come up with for each identified task. In the two-and-a-half hour workshop, each team member would cycle through all of the roles. The two main user stories that had to be fulfilled were:

1. Build a vehicle that drives forward, reverses on hitting a wall, stops when it passes over a dark line, and does so in as short a time as possible and with the smallest stopping distance
2. Modify the vehicle to allow it also to track a dark racetrack on a light background

This is real deadline pressure. Fun? Undoubtedly. Educational? Certainly. The teams that kept the discipline - keep tracking, keep testing, keep in pairs - ended up with robust Lego vehicles that were as effectively programmed as the time would allow. Those that panicked as the final deadline drew close had less to show for their efforts.

And then, finally, there was the wrap-up session followed by the pub. All in all, an excellent way to build a community and a welcome distraction from seasonal retail.

Photos and some presentations from the day, along with some movie clips from the Extreme Lego workshop, can be downloaded from the conference web site:
http://xpday.xpdeveloper.com