

Transcript of Skype chat between Stephen Hill and James Bach – 5 December 2010 – on Transpection

[Removed pre-amble agreeing to discuss transpection at this time]

[21:41:50] Stephen Hill: The problem I have is knowing how to get started. I was doing Weekend Testing yesterday in partnership with Ajay Balamurugadas and I was trying to explore 'severity' and 'priority' in bug tracking tools. I asked him how he splits severity up but found I dried up really quickly.

[21:42:04] Stephen Hill: How do you normally approach a transpection session?

[21:42:37] James Bach: okay

[21:42:46] James Bach: first, tell me what transpection is

[21:44:07] Stephen Hill: Well to me transpection is questioning yourself and another party to further your own understanding of something.

[21:44:41] Stephen Hill: That is probably a very simplistic view though!

[21:44:47] James Bach: What is it SPECIFICALLY?

[21:46:25] Stephen Hill: It's looking at, in this context, testing from different viewpoints.

[21:46:46] Stephen Hill: Specifically the other person's viewpoint.

[21:47:44] Stephen Hill: Then contrasting that with your own and using that to further inform your own opinions.

[21:48:47] James Bach: yes, that last part is more transpection

[21:49:05] James Bach: Transpection means simultaneously interviewing yourself and someone else and comparing answers on an issue that you don't feel fully aware about or settled on by experiencing yourself via someone else

[21:50:34] James Bach: So, let me demonstrate with you what transpection is

[21:50:44] Stephen Hill: Great - thanks.

[21:51:06] James Bach: I want you to tell me the three most important attributes of a great tester

[21:51:30] James Bach: (while you answer, I will give my private thoughts in parantheses, so that you can see it play out)

[21:52:41] Stephen Hill: OK the three most important attributes of a great tester are: they have to be very imaginative - creative - in identifying situations that needs to be tested and how to test them;

[21:52:47] James Bach: (first thing I think is: "most important? what does that mean?" then I think "perhaps three very important things will be enough" then I think "how do I know that ANYTHING is important?")

[21:53:17] James Bach: (I notice that you went right for the first order answer, whereas I moved to second order)

[21:53:42] Stephen Hill: Most important to whom probably comes into this too.

[21:53:45] James Bach: (then I think: maybe I'm overthinking this?)

[21:53:58] James Bach: (then I decide that I'm not)

[21:54:10 | Edited 21:54:14] James Bach: (I look at your answer...)

[21:54:39] Stephen Hill: Next most important thing is that they are very good at questioning everything they see. They don't assume things.

[21:54:52] James Bach: (how does someone develop imgainativeness? How do you know someone is imaginative?)

[21:55:06] James Bach: (Don't assume things? Is that possible?)

[21:55:26] James Bach: (I don't think you CAN avoid asusmptions... I'll ask about that...)

[21:55:38] James Bach: Out loud I ask you this:

[21:55:53] James Bach: Stephen, can you say more about assumptions?

[21:56:03] James Bach: (notice that I didn't let on what I thought)

[21:56:19] Stephen Hill: An imagination is something that people are born with.

[21:56:23] James Bach: (I'm trying not to direct you too much, or else I'll lose the value of your unique thinking)

[21:56:40] James Bach: BTW Stephen don't respond to anything I say in parentheses I'm just letting you read my mind so that you can understand what transpection is. Respond only to what I say without the bracketing

[21:57:44] James Bach: see what I mean?

[21:57:51] James Bach: transpection means I ask you questions you respond, I ask more questions and sometimes make a comment so as to examine the questions with the use of your mind while simultaneously mulling through it myself but NOT letting you know what I'm thinking. That's why transpection looks like inspection; like an exam but it's not - get it?

[21:59:31] Stephen Hill: Yes I think I see where I was going wrong.

[22:00:08] James Bach: so why don't you try to transpect with me. Think of a question that you are not settled on and ask me the question, think about my answer and probe it but don't tell me straight out what YOUR opinion is. At the end of a transpection session, you can spill your thoughts, but to do so during the transpection turns it into an ordinary conversation

[22:01:55] Stephen Hill: OK. This is where I went wrong. I turned the transpection into a conversation yesterday!

[22:02:12] James Bach: okay

[22:02:16] James Bach: so let's try it again

[22:02:22] James Bach: give me the same question you gave him

[22:03:15] Stephen Hill: Now, to give this a try, can I ask you how you define the severity of bugs in your incident management system?

[22:04:21 | Edited 22:04:28] James Bach: I don't have an incident management system

[22:05:43] Stephen Hill: How do you normally record bugs so they can be fixed by developers?

[22:05:58] James Bach: Depends on the project

[22:06:02] James Bach: Want me to pick one?

[22:06:10] Stephen Hill: Please do.

[22:06:22] James Bach: Then I choose Borland International, circa 1993

[22:06:32] James Bach: We had a bug tracking system based on a Paradox database. Testers reported bugs mostly within that system. We defined severity as a scale from A-E; it was a symptom-based scale:

A = crash or data loss

B = function loss w/o workaround

C = function loss w/workaround

D = minor problem

E = enhancement request

[22:09:31] Stephen Hill: That is interesting. How did you differentiate between C and D severities?

[22:09:54] James Bach: D might not have a workaround or it might have a workaround and be too minor to worry about. Basically it was based on the metaphor of a garden path:

A meant that the garden was destroyed or the visitor ejected

B meant that part of the garden became unreachable to a visitor

C meant that you could still use the garden, but had to take special measures

D meant that your enjoyment of the garden was not as good as it could have been, due to a specific flaw in it

E meant that your enjoyment of the garden wasn't as good as it could have been, due to a lack of a certain type of flower that visitors would like.

So the basic idea is that some problems seem minor – put them in the minor category; some seem major but we distinguish between major problems that disable the app, and major problems that don't.

[22:14:20] James Bach: (done)

[22:15:52] James Bach: A great way to think about transpection is that you are making people give you a lecture on the spot even if they aren't an authority on that subject; it can be useful even if you are the expert and they are not

[22:17:15] Stephen Hill: Yes I see that. By treating it as a lecture I formed further questions through sitting quietly watching the screen.

[22:18:04] Stephen Hill: Thank you so much for spending the time with me. I really appreciate it. Do you mind if I save this transcript to go through it again later?

[22:18:45] James Bach: Of course I mind if you *didn't* save it I would think you were wasting our time. Save it by all means! But you didn't do much transpecting did you? You asked one question - it was a good question but I would recommend that you go deeper.

[22:21:17] Stephen Hill: Well one of the things that I was going to start exploring was whether "special measures" could need to be taken for a minor issue in the garden.

[22:21:49] James Bach: If the problem is minor then we call it a minor problem. If it's not minor then we choose which of the severity categories it belongs in among the three major ones. Basically it's a set of binary distinctions

1. enhancement or not?
2. major or minor?
3. disabling or non-disabling?
4. crash/data loss or not?

These binary distinctions determine what to call it:

1. E or not E
2. ABC or DE
3. AB or C
4. A or BC

[22:24:44] Stephen Hill: So how was the severity allocated? Would there be a group of people from across the business deciding whether something was major or minor?

[22:25:09] James Bach: Testers are the first filter. This then is potentially modified by the test manager and then it may be modified by the "bug council" which is the group of people who run the project. It's generally not modified by devs, but might be

[22:27:29] Stephen Hill: So who would be in the bug council? Sales reps? Marketing people? Business Analysts?

[22:28:02] James Bach: the test managers, the dev managers, product managers, project manager, program manager, build manager, tech support manager, documentation manager. That's it

[22:29:49] Stephen Hill: Interesting.

[22:30:41] Stephen Hill: Earlier on you mentioned that most bugs were stored in the Paradox-based bug tracking tool. What sort of things would not get into this system?

[22:31:50] James Bach: Good question. At the last minute on projects, we stop using the system because it's too slow and also if we are very confused about whether something ought to be reported we bypass the reporting system and use conversation. Also we sometimes don't formally report bugs during initial testing because it takes too long so we just shout them to the dev.

[22:34:17] Stephen Hill: Can you tell me more about the confusion surrounding what should be reported?

[22:38:34] James Bach: Sure. Maybe the product gets slow sometimes and then speeds up again. It's not *terribly* slow but strangely slow. I might not report that as a "bug": it deserves to be discussed, perhaps, but reporting it formally creates paperwork.

[22:40:31] James Bach: Now we've gone deeper! So tell me Stephen what have you been thinking?

[22:40:45] James Bach: Spill it - let's hear YOUR answers

[22:41:00] Stephen Hill: OK...

[22:41:41] Stephen Hill: Well in my world we have a very similar set up.

[22:42:23] Stephen Hill: We use an open source bug tracking system called Mantis which allows us to assign various severities to bugs as we report them.

[22:43:10] Stephen Hill: Our severity scale is numeric where 1 is a crash; 2 is a system failure with no work around; 3 is a system failure but there is a work around 4 is a usability problem - but the system still works; and 5 is an improvement request.

[22:45:59] James Bach: Sounds very similar. Now, about that...

[22:46:17] James Bach: Had you shared that idea with me first you'd not know whether my description had been influenced by yours.

[22:47:14] Stephen Hill: I was mulling over in my mind how we differentiate between major and minor and realised that we have a design team but it is not constructed in the same way as your bug council.

[22:47:49] Stephen Hill: I think that is where I was going wrong. I was influencing Ajay with my own views.

[22:47:59] James Bach: Right. That's a CRITICAL part of transpection: not biasing people with your ideas but leading them into the areas where you are yourself confused or interested in another point of view.

[Removed request from James and subsequent discussion to publish this transcript.]

[Removed post-amble and feedback from James on my performance during the transpection which, in summary, he said was good.]

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