

INTERVIEW



Richard Dice about “The Perl Foundation”

FM: Hi Richard, thanks for taking time to do this interview. Please introduce yourself.

RD: Hello Renee. It’s great to talk with you again (even if it is only through the Internet.)

First, the basics. As you mentioned, my name is Richard Dice. As I imagine many of your readers are European I should say that my last name is pronounced in the English fashion (“Dy-se”) rather than the Italian fashion (“Dee-che”). I am Canadian, born in Montreal and living in Toronto the past 11 years after living in various cities in Ontario and Quebec in the in-between time. In my undergraduate university years in the early 1990s I studied Astronomy and Applied Mathematics. More recently I completed my M.B.A. at the University of Toronto. I live with my wife and a very fancy cat at our house roughly 10km north of downtown Toronto. In my day job I’m the IT director at Raybec Communications, a marketing & IT startup.

FM: When did your “Perl career” start?

RD: I have been programming Perl since 1994. In 1998 I wrote a series of articles for Webmonkey, a division of Wired/Hotwired, on the topic of web/database programming using Perl, MySQL, Apache and Linux. They proved pretty popular at the time. I joined the Montreal Perl Mongers in 1999 and the Toronto Perl Mongers in 2001 (once I returned to Toronto after living in Montreal for 2 years).

I’d say that is when my Perl community involvement really picked up. At that time Damian Conway was working full-time on Perl as part of a Perl Development Grant from The Perl Foundation, which then was newly-formed. I noticed what appeared to me to be a gap in his North America touring schedule and so I asked for him to speak in Toronto, which he did.

Damian’s speaking events that summer turned out to be a decent success. We planned for him to return to Toronto in the summer 2002. With an entire year to plan though it turned into a “Damian festival.” Over the course of a week he had around 750 people come out to see him. When all that was done he suggested I bid for YAPC::NA to be hosted in Toronto. That eventually happened in the summer of 2005. Not long after that Allison Randal and Bill Odom, the then-past and present Presidents of TPF, asked me if I’d be interested in joining TPF, and I accepted their suggestion. I was elected to the position of Steering Committee Chairman in October 2005.

FM: You are the president of The Perl Foundation (TPF) since August 2007. How does this new position changed your view on Perl?

RD: As I have acquired more responsibility in The Perl Foundation I have made it a personal goal to change my view on Perl. What I mean is that I’m trying to gather information that helps me understand where Perl fits into the larger world of IT. My premise is that a better understanding can help us focus on those things that most need improvement.

From what I have learned so far, I feel that Perl-the-language is strong and Perl-the-community is incredibly vibrant (although one must always pay attention to rates of inflow into the community; that is, are people newly entering the workforce adopting Perl? are students adopting Perl?).

FM: Where is room for improvement?

RD: I think improvement needs to happen in two main areas. One is technological. Perl-the-environment is the experience of people programming in Perl but working in the structure of their larger IT (and business) infrastructure. Two things



strike me as being problems for people in this realm. One is the deployment of applications written in Perl. This could either be applications obtained in the outside world or applications developed internally. Recall that deployment need not be done by the same people who do development. If something breaks in deployment the original developer often is not available to puzzle through the situation to set it right. Even if they are it's most likely a waste of time for them to have to do this. Either way, difficulties in the deployment of Perl-based systems are a drag on the use, adoption and expansion of Perl.

A related issue is the distribution of Perl modules. CPAN works well for people who (a) have access to it (which excludes many internal development communities in large companies) and (b) are comfortable resolving module conflicts and/or dependencies on C libraries or other forms of non-Perl resources. To overcome these problems there should be the option of installing some kind of extended core of modules, like a Perl SDK, that would be composed of a tested "best of CPAN" collection. Strawberry Perl is a fascinating attempt to address the issue of C module dependencies on Windows platforms. I hear that it is starting to identify a set of recommended Perl modules as well. It will be interesting to see how the rest of the world adopts Strawberry Perl.

There is a fundamental problem in all this analysis though, which is that everything that happens in Perl is the result of bottom-up community efforts. The emergent behaviour of tens of thousands of individual programmers scratching their own "local itches" has produced something truly marvelous in Perl. But is this sort of behaviour capable of addressing the gaps I identified above? I'm not sure. Maybe it isn't. (Obviously it hasn't been thus far or else these problems would already have been addressed.) Maybe it is, but only when some additional magic ingredient is added to the mix. According to the way we have been operating the past 20 years it would require for these particular items to be both some specific person's itch and an itch that that particular person has the capability to scratch. We might yet be able to address these problems through this mechanism. Or maybe we need to develop a new mechanism. Or maybe we never solve these problems, in which case we risk marginalization and obsolescence.

The other area of improvement I think is needed is in Perl-the-organization. If someone in the world outside of Perl wanted

to "talk to Perl", who would they contact? If they needed some kind of change, who could they work with? Who can represent the interests of the Perl community in places where those interests need to be voiced? Who can communicate the value of Perl to others who are contemplating their options for future growth and development of their IT plant? Right now we do a poor job at these things, at least compared to what could be done. I think it's pretty clear that in my mind the answer to these questions is "The Perl Foundation." However, we are a volunteer organization, just as everyone who contributes to Perl is a volunteer. I think the people involved in TPF are people of great character, intelligence and ability, but we are also very busy (to say the least) with our day jobs and personal lives. It can be very frustrating knowing all the good things we could be doing for the Perl community to not have the resources to be able to do them. We do what we can with the time we have available to us.

FM: I think many of the readers out there don't know much about TPF. Can you describe the aims of TPF and what you do?

RD: From the front page of our web site, <http://www.perl-foundation.org/> -

"The Perl Foundation coordinates the efforts of numerous grass-roots Perl-based groups, including:

- International Yet Another Perl Conferences
- Carries the legal responsibility for Perl 5, Perl 6 and Parrot perl.org
- Perl Mongers
- PerlMonks"

These items are not insubstantial. At the very least, owning the international copyrights and trademarks on Perl is a very important duty we undertake on behalf of the Perl community. TPF also spearheaded the work on the Artistic 2.0 License. Allison Randal recently won a 2007 White Camel for her work on Artistic 2.0. http://www.oreillynet.com/onlamp/blog/2007/07/2007_white_camel_awards.html

The origins of The Perl Foundation are in the original YAPC conferences at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh in 1999 and 2000. Following the conference in 2000 the organizing team decided that continuing the conference at CMU wasn't something they were interested in doing, but they did want the conferences to continue. TPF was created to, amongst other things, select future YAPC:NA locations.



Another of the first efforts TPF took on was the sponsorship of Damian Conway in 2001 and then in 2002 similar sponsorships were created for Larry Wall and Dan Sugalski. The modern incarnation of these efforts is in the Perl Development Grant program, <http://www.perlfoundation.org/grants>. Recently, a major new grant was announced to support Patrick Michaud in his work on Perl 6 and the Parrot Compiler Toolchain, http://news.perlfoundation.org/2007/11/patrick_michaud_awarded_perl_6.html

Work on YAPC and Perl Development Grants speak to a mandate to support Perl. We also work to promote Perl to outside of the Perl community. For instance, two major projects TPF undertook in the past year were participating in a Forrester Research survey on “dynamic languages” (i.e. Perl, Python, PHP, Ruby and ECMAScript) and working with The Linux Foundation to help make Perl 5.8.8 a part of the LSB 3.2 spec. TPF endeavours to send representatives to IT conferences

FM: What can all the people do to support TPF?

RD: TPF is an organization based on a mission – to support Perl and the Perl culture. If you’re doing these thing, in whatever way you can, you’re doing the good work we care about and you are a friend of TPF.

You can share ideas with TPF. My email address is rdice@perlfoundation.org. If you have an idea that you think we should be aware of, please let us know. If you notice something that you think could make a difference to Perl and to TPF, share it with me. (One really good example of this was when someone wrote me to point out that Oracle ships a Perl distribution within 10.2.0! Knowing this makes it that much easier for me to approach Oracle for support of TPF.)

You could volunteer to be the driving force behind a TPF project. For instance, we’ve been sponsoring standalone hackathons for the past year, with significant hackathon events in Chicago and Amsterdam. We would like there to be more of these but we need local organizers. It’s a real amount of work but very rewarding and very useful in terms of what hackathons accomplish.

I have been approached by the Perl 5 Porters and the Perl 6 workgroups that they’d like some help to find new mailing list summarizers. This is an important and visible job. If someone out there would like to volunteer for this please get in touch with me.

You can enable us to talk on Perl’s behalf. We need to attend more conferences and have more meetings with company that use (or could use) Perl. For instance, if you’re aware of a conference that you think TPF should attend, get in touch and let me know. Note that we could also use financial support in order to send a delegate to the conference. Financial support in general is needed to enable us to sponsor hackathons, support YAPC conferences and Perl Workshops, and just run the nuts and bolts of an organization (like get an accountant to help us with our tax returns).

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