

Talking with a Man Named Tom

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By Brian Proffitt

For a couple of weeks, I had been trying to locate Tom LaStrange, creator of the twm window manager, in hopes of combining a talk with him with the review I did of twm a while back.

Unfortunately, LaStrange was not an easy man to find--until a note from him showed up in my mailbox a few days after the [twm column](#) ran.

LaStrange seems to be a man who's a bit incredulous about the fuss made over twm. In his first comments to me, he seemed to think that it was no big deal.

"That poor ugly duckling was written out of selfishness more than anything," LaStrange said. "I needed a new window manager and it turns out other people did, too."

It never fails to amaze me when people just create something like a window manager because of something they personally needed. The notion seems incredible to a non-programmer like myself. I asked LaStrange what he was looking for in an interface that prompted him to create twm.

"I had been using X10R6 (around 1986) for awhile and the only window manager available was called uwm," LaStrange replied. "It was a non-reparenting window manager (no window titlebars), which meant you had to remember Ctrl/Shift mouse button combinations to move a window, iconify, etc.

"X11R1 was released and I went looking for the uwm replacement," he continued. But LaStrange could find nothing for uwm in X11. So he got to work.

"I sat down at my monochrome Sun 3/50 and typed vi twm.c and then opened the X11 documentation. twm was my first X program. About six months later, I convinced my manager to let me send a copy to the comp.windows.x newsgroup," LaStrange related.

Regardless of how the aesthetic value of twm is perceived by LaStrange and many others, I pointed out to him that twm has had a significant effect on the overall development of X window managers. He grudgingly conceded this point and related an example.

"I was lucky to be in the right place at the right time with something that a bunch of other people found useful," LaStrange explained. "I exchanged some e-mail with the Enlightenment developers about a year ago. It turns out the ugliness of twm inspired them to write Enlightenment--much like the ugliness of uwm inspired me."

But twm made a big impact even early in its existence, when the X Consortium decided to make it a standard part of the X release.

"About nine months after I sent out the first version of twm, conversations were happening around taking either twm or awm and making it the standard supported window manager (awm was the Ardent Window Manager and I'm pretty sure it started life from the uwm code base)," LaStrange said.

The details of just how the decision was made were a bit fuzzy, due some technical problems.

"Our Usenet connection went down for about a month at that time so I didn't even know these conversations were happening," said LaStrange. "Jim Fulton of the X Consortium approached me officially and I was happy to hand over the reigns of control. They whipped it into shape to conform to the then new Inter Client Communications Conventions Manual (ICCCM), added the shaped titlebars, etc."

These shaped titlebars would become part of the reason for the window manager's name change. According to LaStrange, "The shaped titlebars made the windows look like file folders with tabs so 'Tom's Window Manager' was changed to 'Tab Window Manager.' The reasoning was that it was now a Consortium effort and no single developer should get credit over another."

This was perfectly fine with LaStrange, because he soon had other fish to fry.

"After the transition... I joined a startup company called Solbourne, where they actually paid me to write a new window manager, swm," LaStrange related. "I believe it was the first X window manager to introduce a 'virtual desktop'."

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"The swm features plus the twm code base are what got vtwm and tvwm off the ground," he added.

So what is the man who lent so much to the early development of X window managers doing these days? It seems LaStrange has moved on to other challenges. He now works for ChannelPoint, a B2B insurance e-commerce company.

[ChannelPoint] was born a little over four years ago when a bunch of Sun Microsystems Java developers (myself included) found themselves without a company. We're developing mostly server side Java these days for Insurance e-commerce. It's very challenging because insurance products tend to be pretty complex and differ from market to market," LaStrange said. "I'm the Chief Architect for e-commerce applications. I still write a bunch of code and try to make sure we're making the right decisions on what we should build versus buy and how we can efficiently piece things together to form total solutions."

LaStrange has completely moved on from window managers, but has no regrets.

"Not only don't I work on window managers anymore, I haven't really used a UNIX system in a significant way for about four years," he explained. I'm sure some of the Linux users out there are thinking 'he's old, he's sold out, and he's lost touch with his open source roots.' That's OK, I have some younger co-workers that think the same thing..."