

Wednesday, June 24, 2009

The Art Of Deception Or Publishing PHP6 Books

I was strolling around a bookstore today, Easons on O'Connell Street here in Dublin, when I found myself staring at a bookshelf in near shock. Kid, I thought, you've been out of the loop for only two months and somehow those crazy people have managed to release PHP 6 right under your nose! I took several deep breaths not quite sure how to react. I moved closer and pulled out the shiny red book published by Wrox titled "Professional PHP 6" and prepared to kick myself silly for the next week learning PHP6 (not from the book, which while shiny is of little use to someone using PHP so often it's hardwired into your brain).

The more I stared at the three youthful faces grinning at me from the cover, the more I convinced myself this was a publishing error. No way was PHP6 going to be released without me noticing. Google Reader would have been on fire with that news. So what the hell was I looking at?

I was apparently looking at a big fat lie.

PHP6 has been the long standing grail for PHP developers who whisper in corners about its major feature: Unicode! Unicode makes the planet revolve, well its literary parts anyhow... Out on the edges were numerous other features, but most of those have been rolled into PHP 5.3 - which should be released next Tuesday. PHP 5.3...next Tuesday. And here we have books titled PHP6...what a joke. PHP6 won't see so much as an alpha release for months...could even be years for all I know. It will be ready when it's ready.

My biggest question of course was how can publishers escape punishment for such obvious silliness? Maybe someone can explain it in the comments because I'm at a loss. I figured there was some justification in that PHP6 would undoubtedly support some backwards compatibility with PHP 5, and therefore you could learn a great deal of PHP 6, simply by learning PHP 5. After all, both are PHP. Or perhaps it's all the disclaimers technical books can include to escape responsibility if the information in the book is wrong. This might be sufficient to get around the laws of any number of countries, like Ireland, but I don't consider it honesty. In my opinion it's blatantly obvious that the PHP6 references used in book titles are little more than an attempt to differentiate these books from their competitors and earlier editions. Enough to fool a lot of consumers that buying the PHP6 book must be better than buying the perfectly up to date PHP5 book sitting in the bargain bin or available secondhand from Amazon. We are in a recession afterall and who banked on PHP 5.3 dropping a bombshell on plans for PHP6 books to spark a buying spree from developers?

Now, even I admit my outrage can be exaggerated. So I did go and pick up a few sample books using PHP6 in their title out of curiosity. Flicking through the pages I quickly noted how many of them avoided the PHP6 topic like the plague by omitting obvious things you'd expect to see. Unfortunately I also found a few notable slips which had me in stitches. Installation instructions and version listings are the most telling

The Wrox Programmer To Programmer series includes the far fetched title "Beginning PHP6, Apache, MySQL Web Development" (Timothy Boronczyk, Elizabeth Naramore, Jason Gerner, Yann Le Scouarnec, Jeremy Stolz, Michael K. Glass). The installation instructions for Linux state:

6. Extract the tarball, and change to the directory it creates:

```
tar -vxzf php-6.0.0.tar.gz
cd php-6.0.0
```

Number 3 earlier on the same list states:

3. Scroll down to the Complete Source Code section, and click on the appropriate link to download the latest tar.gz package.

Perhaps someone didn't notice that the download here (as of today) according to php.net is PHP 5.2.10? Not PHP 6.0.0.

Earlier the same book states:

The most recent stable versions that were in effect at the time of this book's writing were:

PHP: Version 6.0.0

Apache: Version 2.2.9

MySQL: Version 5.0.67

Future editions of this book will address changes and improvements in these programs as they become available.

Again, the non-existent PHP 6.0.0 makes an appearance clearly noted as being a "stable version". Of course, this is complete bollocks. The rest of the book seems pretty clearcut. It doesn't mention PHP 6 anywhere else except in two Chapter titles according to its index. PHP 5.3 is mentioned once in a brief description of namespaces. Everything else is PHP...drumroll...5. This book teaches you PHP5 and only PHP5. Look on the bright side - the Wrox website and Amazon page suggests the title should have included MySQL 6... All they needed was the equally mystical appearance of Apache 6 to get the conspiracy theorists worked up into a fever pouring through the Book Of Revelations. Anyone want the movie rights to that idea?


After flipping through other PHP6 titled books (it's not like Wrox and Wiley Publishing are alone), I arrive at the same conclusion - they are PHP 5.2 books. It's laughable to even think they cover PHP 5.3 let alone PHP 6! All they have are a few obvious references to PHP 6.0.0 which at best are a mistake (maybe the titles are a mistake too?), and at worst a deliberate misleading lie. A few statements I noted might escape stupidity if the author could prove they ran a PHP 6 snapshot from CVS. To be honest I feel sorry for all the authors involved - it's their name hanging on the front cover too and this might speak an awful lot as to the power a publisher can exert over an author's work depending on their contract.

Shame on all publishers guilty of this silliness. To anyone in the market for a PHP book, stick to the bargain bins and second hand stores until a genuine PHP 5.3 book is released (that actually covers PHP 5.3's new features mind!). The real PHP6 books are probably years away but PHP 5.3 looks to be a great release with plenty of new features..next Tuesday!

In the meantime I'll be feeling pity for the poor sods who will buy these fake PHP 6 books second hand when PHP 6.0.0 sees a stable release.

Posted by Pádraic Brady in PHP General, PHP Security at 18:56


I've noticed these books as well. My theory is that since the books cover material that is relevant to PHP 6 (ie, the code will work in 6), they simply slap "PHP 6" on the cover and hope that people assume the books are more up-to-date than the PHP 5 books on the same shelf. Rather ridiculous, IMO. Anonymous on Jun 24 2009, 20:06

Ha! Funny article... It seems to be the vogue though... I reckon publishers think their books will stay relevant for longer than if they published a book with PHP5 in the title 

Anonymous on Jun 24 2009, 20:10


They'll be outdated en masse next Tuesday...when PHP 5.3 is released and PHP 5.3 books are warranted. Anonymous on Jun 24 2009, 20:29


Hi Padraic!

Yes, my name is on one of the books you mentioned. 

I worked on the first two editions of the BPAM books, but not this third one. However, because some of our original material was used in this book, they still give us credit as authors.

I don't remember a conversation about the title, and I can only speculate how the final decision was made. So officially, I don't speak for Wrox/Wiley. However, I would assume that one of 2 things happened. One- this edition was so long in the making that at the beginning of the project, there were high hopes for PHP6 to be released in a reasonable time frame surrounding the book's projected publish date. Or two- there is an increasing amount of pressure for publishers to stay relevant and competitive, so if other publishers are releasing titles with PHP6 in them, they feel they should be too (regardless of what advice they get from the authors).

Of course, it's ridiculous. And of course I got some razzing from some core dev members. I jokingly offered that I was psychic and they should buy the books to see how PHP6 will turn out. 

Such as life with writing technical books. Ask me sometime about the automatic replacing of "email" with "e-mail" during editing... which subsequently broke all the code (\$e-mail is not so good). I'll be happy to tell you all about it over a beer. 


Anonymous on Jun 24

2009, 22:14

I had the same problem a few months ago when I've seen "PHP 6 AND MySQL 5" for sale. I looked to see, well... just about anything related to PHP6. Is the same book as "Php And Mysql: For Dynamic Web Sites". And is not a very good book for PHP 5 even, as the original content was written for PHP 4 and adapted for PHP 5. Anonymous on Jun 25 2009, 09:37

I haven't read it - but a few excerpts I came across it at least addresses PHP 6 distinctly. Written in 2007 so obviously completely out of date but at least it did address the topic! My beef is with books which write a PHP5 book (nothing on PHP 6) and call it a PHP6 book. Or write a PHP 5 book where everything runs on a CVS snapshot of PHP 6...lol Anonymous on Jun 25 2009, 09:48

Probably the next thing to look out for is people with/companies offering PHP6 Certification! Anonymous on Jun 25 2009, 16:29

So long as I get the first one! 

Anonymous on Jun 25 2009, 17:36

Padraic:

Thanks for taking the time to discuss this with me on Twitter last night. I'm the Associate Publisher for Wrox, I'm the person usually behind @wrox on twitter.

After meeting with the editor who ran the PHP list for us, you're right. The titles of these PHP6 books, some of the references to PHP6 in the books, what isn't covered in the books, all prove we made a mistake, something went wrong. But how, why?

Elizabeth (and thanks for her measured response) is correct in part of her assessment that books take a long time to write and publish. I'm sure that when the editor and authors started these books in Spring 2008, they're thinking was that 6.0 would indeed be a stable release by early 2009 (if not sooner) and they were aiming for that. But clearly along the way we dropped the ball on checking references to things like the non-existent "6.0.0 stable".

In the Beginning PHP6, MySQL, Apache book, I can actually understand the rationale not to cover Unicode there. Given that Unicode is primarily valuable to someone internationalizing a site or localizing it for multiple languages - topics that I wouldn't consider "Beginning" level - I can see why it wasn't covered. (Before becoming associate publisher, I was actually our ASP.NET

editor for most of the last 5 years and we don't for example cover internationalization/localization in our Beginning ASP.NET 3.5.) So we want to have a book that Beginning level customers understand will work with PHP6 if that's the version they're using, but we didn't communicate right what that meant in this context where there weren't major new v6 features at the level we thought a beginner would need.

The professional book stumps me more. It's hard for me to understand how that book doesn't have a chapter on Unicode. It looks like an oversight by everyone involved in the book.

So where do we go from here and get better than this to eventually prove we're worthy of better than when @bicatu says "That reminds me why I've never bought a Wrox book?"

First, I've asked the team involved with Beginning PHP6 scheduled to ship to the printer this week to pull that book back, to read your post and the subsequent twitter discussion and to make sure we aren't making the same mistake a third time. I want the author and editors to provide a level of confidence that the PHP6 features that should be covered are, that the discussion of the current state of PHP6 is accurate, and that the title, subtitle, and marketing copy on the book and online accurately reflects what is and isn't covered.

Second, publishing the right books depends on having the right team, including a large number of well placed community experts on the topics who serve as authors, freelance/contract technical editors. There's always room for a team to improve, through learning and through recruiting. I hope this discussion helps our current team in PHP (and MySQL and LAMP in general) and I hope it helps us attract people like you who have ideas on what we can do better. I'd like to invite you and everyone who's commented on this post so far (and I'll post the invite on twitter too) to get involved. We've got a PHP Design Patterns book scheduled to publish in August (not specific to any version) I'd like to start by offering you all a preview of that. If you see any red flags, tell us. If you like it, if you see issues and help us make it better, at a minimum we'll send you a free copy. If you get involved more extensively, you can discuss with the editor contract work. DM me in twitter with your email addresses if you want to get involved. Or email me at the address below.

Thanks for caring enough to get our attention. I promise, we're listening.

Jim Minatel

Associate Publisher @ Wrox

jminatel at w | l | e | y | d | o | t | c | o | m Anonymous on Jun 25 2009, 18:50

This rather reminds me of the way a magazine with cover date April 2009 will appear in the shops in February. It's dishonest, but it can easily become an industry norm and it's very hard for one single publisher to break the pattern. A lot of the answer should be to reduce the time it takes between an author delivering finished text and the book appearing on the shelves: that's far too long at the moment, and means that authors have to make guesses about future events. Anonymous on Jun 25 2009, 23:31

I think the problem in these sorts of episodes is QA. An author can deliver an honest book in their circumstances and timeframe, but the author can't perform the QA on it in isolation or once it passes beyond their control. Any good QA system applies the "many eyes" principle from start to finish ensuring fresh sets of qualified eyes (people who know the topic) are watching for obvious mistakes - like mentioning the existence of a PHP 6.0.0 stable version. In this case, Wrox's QA failed them badly. Somewhere along the line, PHP 6.0.0 was added to the title and the book's text in a wholly inaccurate fashion and it was not detected internally before it hit the printers. I think the response from Jim bears out the main step they have available to prevent another embarrassing reoccurrence - recruiting suitably qualified programmers as technical reviewers...a safeguard against the ridiculous. I hope that recruitment effort goes well. Anonymous on Jun 25 2009, 23:46

Guys, I'm the author of the Pro PHP 6 book.

When we started planning it we were working on information we had that PHP 6 would be released in a year; the book would take about nine months to write as we all have full time jobs (in my case, running an advertising agency). We weren't certain that Unicode support would be included in the final v6 at that time, and information on it was very patchy.

When Unicode was officially announced as being "definitely on" it was too late to incorporate it into the title. It's the same thing with namespaces.

I agree it's not ideal, but given the lead time between planning a book and it hitting the shelves, and the relative secrecy of the PHP development team, it's very hard to plan for.

The alternative is to wait until version six is released and THEN start planning the book. This means you will wait a year after the software comes out to get the first quality title. Of course you can rush out titles in a month - as other publishers do - but they won't be well written.

With a bit of luck we might be able to do a second edition/update at some point in the near future.

Feel free to DM me on Twitter (eleckyt) if you want to discuss.

Ed Anonymous on Jun 26 2009, 14:42

"The alternative is to wait until version six is released and THEN start planning the book. This means you will wait a year after the software comes out to get the first quality title. Of course you can rush out titles in a month - as other publishers do - but they won't be well written."

We, the readers expect our technical books to be accurate. If that means waiting then that's ok. In the case of PHP it's even preferable as upgrading to the x.0.0 version is probably not a very sane practice for production systems. By the time the book comes out, one can actually enjoy a more stable version. Anonymous on Jun 26 2009, 18:34


Hi Ed,

Thanks for your reply, however I have to question some of these statements. Before I do I think it should be made clear my main problem with PHP 6 books remains that they cannot teach PHP 6. It's an inherent inability since PHP 6 has never been finalised and it's feature list remains in flux. One may bet on a PHP 6 release, guess what features it will have, but until you see at least an alpha version it's never reliable.

My first problem is Unicode. I don't know when exactly you started writing the book, but Unicode has been a confirmed feature of PHP 6 for years. There is no confusion here - the need to include Unicode is a massive ongoing effort. There are any number of public statements on mailing lists, blogs, and other source pointing to this. A brief search on Google located the main document I recall from a PHP Developer Meeting held back in 2005. To my knowledge, Unicode has not had a question mark over for almost the entire period since then. It's PHP 6's primary feature.

I also must take exception to the "relative secrecy" statement. PHP is a public open source project and the public have free and ready access to its mailing lists. You may be referring to those times when a feature is developed privately, but such features must be publicly released for discussion obviously. I saw that process executed publicly and loudly when namespaces and closures were proposed for PHP 5.3. I had no problem following those developments - and I am not even remotely a PHP internals guy. PHP is not controlled by any one company or individual. Oh, and its CVS repositories are world readable. You may want to clarify what you meant.

"The alternative is to wait until version six is released and THEN start planning the book."

I'd wait until the first Alpha, or some official statement or consensus that an alpha is being given a specific release schedule. It takes months to get from there to a full stable release. Conceivably longer. I would also assume, given the uncertainty, that any plans are recognised as being a rough guesstimate (nothing is binding until you see the release 

) - something that should and absolutely must guarantee future QA and follow up to ensure the accuracy and datedness of the text. It should also ensure authors have the opportunity and the time to fix such problems as they arise.

The fact is that planning PHP 6 books before seeing a release boils down to taking a bet. That bet was lost. There are no excuses for foisting inaccurate books onto the public at a time when the flaws should be obvious to any PHP developer who is vaguely aware of PHP 6's status.

Now, just to be absolutely clear. As I said before I do not blame authors for this debacle. I don't know how much control authors have over completion times or printing schedules. What I do know, is that the publishers need to step up their QA efforts to prevent their losing bets from damaging their reputation with the public. Anonymous on Jun 26 2009, 19:16

Ed's response here (and I haven't had a chance to have a personal discussion with Ed or his co-author on this since it erupted) confirms some of what I figured out in the last 36 hours: that one of the obvious root causes here is lack of good communication of expectations and plans. I don't think we (Wrox) did a particularly good job spelling out for Ed or his co-author how other authors deal with languages/technologies that are in flux like this or of asking them what potential problems they saw in the plan.

We're here to find good SMEs, community expert leaders etc, and help them write good books. Good in this case is a book that fits the needs of the customer. Clearly these books are missing the mark and that's our, Wrox's, failure.

We will learn from this and get better, you have my guarantee and word on that.

Jim Anonymous on Jun 26 2009, 20:12

Interesting to see Wrox's reply here, and heartening. I can't remember which publisher had this out, but I distinctly remember seeing a PHP6 book in a store in January 2008. I'm not sure there could even have been a reasonable "it takes a long time to put a book together" justification for that one, as it would have started in 2007. Anonymous on Jul 3 2009, 15:40