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Coderetreat

Hosting and Facilitating

by Adrian Bolboacă and Alexandru Bolboacă

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Introduction

To those about to coderetreat, we salute you!

How Alex got involved in coderetreats, and why you should too

In the spring of 2007, Maria Diaconu was organizing the first edition of OpenAgile Romania, in Bucharest. Finding speakers proved to be a fairly difficult challenge, due to both being the first edition and to the image of Romania outside its borders. Two speakers accepted back then to come to Romania: one would later become a management thinker, Jurgen Appelo, and the other would amplify a movement that has now spread all over the world: software craftsmanship. Corey Haines was in the middle of his pair programming tour and agreed to speak in Bucharest.

Needless to say, one of his talks was about software craftsmanship. During his inspiring speech, he mentioned a very strange practice format called Coderetreat. I later found out that the format was inspired from writers' retreats, events where writers would get together, write something, then throw it away and write it again. After many rewrites, the result was much better. The idea of porting the format to software was genius, and it resulted in a phenomenon that has inspired thousands of developers since.

Maria loved the idea, and she decided to organize the first coderetreat outside US. So 6 people, including Maria and I, met for the first time at a friendly company from Bucharest, sat under a vineyard, wrote code and discussed about it. After that day, I was hooked.

Many good things came from that day. Coderetreats have been part of my life and career ever since. This chance meeting with Corey clarified my thoughts on software development in a time when I most needed that. Maria's entrepreneurship moved the Romanian community into the forefront of a global movement. It wasn't easy or simple, but I could have been a grumpy old developer now, mumbling against managers and customers. I want as many developers as possible to avoid this fate, because it can be so much better and so much fun. And it can all start with one single coderetreat.

This is why this book is so important to me: codetreats can change lives and enhance careers. They can make participants love programming again. They can start other movements. I know, because it happened to me.

After a few years of doing coderetreats and speaking at conferences about them, I met Greg Dziemidowicz who was working at Nokia in Berlin. He thought coderetreats are interesting and invited me to facilitate the first coderetreat in Berlin. One of the attendees happened to be Benjamin Reitzammer. He was so inspired by the event that he went back home and started the

Softwerskrammer community in Frankfurt. This community later grew and started organizing awesome events, including SoCraTes who is now copied around Europe.

I'm asking you to imagine this: you can be involved in historic events for our profession and industry. All it takes is to organize and facilitate a coderetreat. And while you need to pay attention to certain things, it is not a difficult event to organize. And we wrote this book to make it even easier for you. You are out of excuses; so when will you organize your first, or your next coderetreat?

About the book

We decided to write this book because we met many people interested in organizing a coderetreat. Organizing one is simple, but to make it awesome you need a good facilitator and a knowledgeable host.

The book is structured in such a way to help you focus on what you want to learn. If you are interested in facilitation read chapter 3 and learn facilitation basics, tips and tricks and how to interact with your host. If you are interested in hosting, read chapter 4 and learn what's required from a host and tips and tricks for hosting.

Towards the end of the book we documented a session catalog, a list of sessions complete with history, goals and tips and tricks for facilitation.

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Chapter 1: A bit of history

How it all started

In 2009 Gary Bernhardt, Patrick Welsh, Nayan Hajratwala and Corey Haines met at Codemash Conference. They discussed to create a repeatable full-day event focused on practice. The first coderetreat was held in Ann Arbor, MI, USA.

Maria, Alex and the first coderetreats outside US

Corey Haines came to Bucharest after being invited by Maria Diaconu. She was organizing the first edition of OpenAgile Romania, for the brand new local Agile community, AgileWorks Romania. The community later took a holistic view on software development, discussing in the same groups Agile, Lean and Software Craftsmanship. At that moment Corey was doing his Journeyman tour, just coding for food and a couch to sleep on. He talked a lot about Software Craftsmanship, Test Driven Development, and about Deliberate Practice, coderetreats being one of the examples of Deliberate Practice. He told Maria and me the story, and we went on to facilitate the first ever European coderetreat.

Initially, coderetreats were meant to be in a single programming language, the most accessible being Java. The reason was to focus on practising programming rather than learning a new programming language. We didn't know this rule; during 2009 we organized about 10 coderetreats, without any restrictions on the languages used. When Corey came back to Bucharest in 2010, he co-facilitated his first language-agnostic coderetreat and he was convinced. This is how the coderetreat format became language-agnostic as it is today.

2009 was a year of heavy experimentation with the format. Among the experiments were: start with a coding dojo, end with a coding dojo, and many new constraints. Some of the experiments were included in what you now know as coderetreat, while others proved unfit for the format.

After 2010, I continued organizing coderetreats in Romania and around Europe. While records may still exist, it would be very hard to construct a complete list, since I was travelling a lot for work, conferences and community events. All in all, I facilitated around 50 coderetreats between 2009 - 2016. In the meantime, Maria focused on growing the AgileWorks community and the Mozaic Works company and stopped facilitating, but she continued to coach us whenever we needed help or support.

This has been an extremely interesting period, with software craftsmanship communities popping up everywhere, Global Day of Code Retreat starting as a global event and more and more facilitators and events being organized. But I will let Adi talk about his part in the development of the event, since he has been a community bumblebee around Europe.

Adi got involved

I did not attend the first couple coderetreats in Romania, but facilitated my first coderetreat a bit later. Then I moved to Lille, France, a nice but small town that wasn't providing enough action for me at the time. I decided to look for groups that cared about software development. The first group I found was in Belgium, where Corey would facilitate the first Belgian coderetreat. I registered for the event, woke up at 6am to drive to Belgium and there I met Corey again.

Corey: What are you doing here?

Adi: I just wanted to surprise you. I will be joining the event.

The Belgium coderetreat was organized by Erik Talboom and Maarten Volders. Erik wanted to continue facilitating coderetreats, and I proposed a partnership, since I had facilitated a couple of them in the past, and needed more action. For one and a half years, I co-facilitated with Erik a coderetreat every six weeks.

Every once in a while I would contact local user groups from other countries. I would say that I want to facilitate one in their community, and all they had to do was to organize it. Almost each weekend I was away somewhere around Northern France facilitating a coderetreat. Those were the times when I met many many interesting people who taught me a lot.

I started to facilitate by doing it. It was a new and very interesting skill for me. I had done some hosting before, so that was quite easy. I improved my facilitation with every event.

My personality pushed towards a certain facilitation style. I wanted to push people way out of their comfort zone. For that I started creating more constraints. Coderetreats are for doing things you are not used to, to find out new techniques and use them in production next time you have the chance.

In 2011 Corey came with the idea to organize Global Day of Coderetreat (GDCR). We would start this amazing global event where everyone would code around the clock for 32 hours. He needed help for organizing GDCR so he invited Jim Hurne for USA's side of the world and me for Europe's. We would equally contribute to Africa, Asia and Australia. The event was a success, with a consistent presence of 100-200 cities joining the GDCR.

I came back to Bucharest and joined Mozaic Works. My facilitation skills helped me teach high quality workshops and coderetreats in companies. I completed my development as a facilitator learning how facilitating a coderetreat for a company is different from a community event.

My personal record was to facilitate 5 coderetreats in 7 days. I don't plan to do more than that, but it was surely fun. I lost count of how many coderetreats I facilitated, but they should be around 200 at the moment I am writing this book.

Part of the GDCR preparation was teaching new facilitators and hosts. After doing it for a couple of years, I decided that it would be useful to put all my knowledge in writing, and this book was born. Enjoy!