

## Perlmeister Mike Schilli celebrates 10 years

# “I THINK IN PERL”

“One or two years in the USA would be great,” Mike Schilli thought back in 1996. The “Perlmeister” has lived in San Francisco for 11 years now, and he’s been writing the regular Perl column for almost as long.

BY ULRICH BANTLE

When Mike Schilli, a.k.a. the Perlmeister [1], leaves his apartment and walks down the lively 24th Street in San Francisco’s Noe Valley, he regularly meets acquaintances and stops to visit. The green-card holder is still fascinated with the unique atmosphere in the City on the Bay. “San Francisco is close, like a village, but it still leaves you enough freedom for eccentricities,” he says. And this “village” is the perfect harbor for Mike in another sense: “Everybody’s a foreigner here. More or less nobody who lives here was actually born in San Francisco.” This has really helped Mike, who is from Augsburg, Germany, to get acclimatized.

Since the first Perl column back in 1996, Mike has worked for several companies. After his first job with a startup called Blaxxun Interactive, Mike moved to AOL before the dotcom bubble burst. Mike moved to Yahoo! when America

Online became entangled in the browser wars after acquiring Netscape and reduced staff levels in Mountain View, California, from 2000 to 200. Mike turned his Perl hobby into his profession.

Of course, Yahoo! (Figure 1) isn’t a Perl-only corporation. Mike describes the developers’ approach to problem-solving as agnostic – developers just use the best language or programming technique available for the job.

Interestingly, the prospects of a career in the U.S. didn’t look promising when Mike finished his degree in electro-technology at Munich’s technical university in 1991. “Nobody needed electrical engineers at the time,” he says. His first job with Oldenbourg Data Systems (ODS) was in software development. Mike first felt the urge to move to Silicon Valley and join software development’s major league while working with a guru flown in from the birthplace of Unix: Berkeley.

Mike had a sound programming background. As a tutor at the technical university in Munich, Mike was responsible for Fortran. He worked early in the mornings and had extra time to do battle with the university’s sys admin on the Unix machines. Along the way, Mike mastered Unix.

Then Mike attended a lecture on Perl and was immediately captivated by the newly discovered potential of the programming language, so he bought the *Programming Perl* book by

Perl creator Larry Wall. Later, Mike posted a question on Usenet and got an answer from Larry Wall, so he decided to delve deeper into the language, something he has been doing ever since.

## C by Day, Perl by Night

During the day, Mike coded login systems in C to help AOL cope with the explosive growth of the Internet, and at night he developed Perl modules. “Perl is a way of thinking,” Mike says. “Whenever I face a computer problem, I start thinking in Perl.”

Mike soon started to write about Perl. “I had nothing to do one weekend,” he says, so he wrote an article about Perl’s object system and offered it to *Heise* for publishing. Mike later contacted Tom Schwaller, former editor of *Linux Magazine*’s German edition, to propose a regular column on Perl programming.

That was back in 1996 and the timing was perfect. Mike had been planning his marriage to his girlfriend and was working for Softlab (a BMW Group company). Mike turned down a job friends offered him in Munich, but their offer of a job in the company’s San Francisco office changed his mind. Mike accepted, got married, and then moved.

Mike’s favorite writing subject, Perl, has competition from newcomers such as Ruby, Python, and PHP, and he knows that Perl’s complexity can be intimidating. But a new language can only be as good as the existing infrastructure and will need to develop the modules that already exist for Perl. Mike Schilli has been a major contributor to these resources and wrote about 30 modules. It looks like Perl, and the Perlmeister, will be around a while longer. ■



Figure 1: A hard-working programmer in his cubicle at Yahoo!

## INFO

- [1] Perlmeister website:  
<http://www.perlmeister.com>
- [2] Viennese schnitzel:  
<http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=92574570497260796>
- [3] USA letters:  
<http://www.usarundbrief.com>