

CASTing a Testing Spell

By Robin Price, Software Tester
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Standing on the 10th floor, looking out over Manhattan on the first morning of CAST 2014, it was impossible not to be awed by what lay ahead. Three days dedicated to conferring with testers from all over the world, working in a wide variety of industry verticals and with every level of experience imaginable.

CAST¹ is the Conference for the Association for Software Testing; a three-day conference held every August somewhere in North America. The theme this year was The Art and Science of Testing. The number of participants is intentionally kept lower than for many other conferences, and this year the limit was set to 250.

“CAST is what the participants make it”

CAST is not about passive listening, but active participation and engagement. More than any other conference, CAST is what the participants make it. With 20 minutes of every 60-minute session dedicated to an open-floor discussion, the takeaway from a presentation is highly dependent on the audience and the questions and comments raised.

The opening day of CAST consisted of full-day tutorials covering a multitude of subjects. These tutorials are intentionally limited to a low

number of participants in order to facilitate group activities and discussions.

One session by Ann-Marie Charrett was about “How We Discover”². The participants were asked to conduct a series of experiments in order to see how people “discover”. In this tutorial, groups were divided into teams of two or three with the task of determining what a purposefully obfuscated button did on a set of robots. Some groups were given clues as to what this button may do, some were given no clues at all and the remaining participants knew what the button would do.

This tutorial taught the members to fail fast and move on. Along with “failing fast”, it was also shown that even though a person wasn’t provided information as to the function of the button, prior knowledge was key in the decision making. This “prior knowledge” is an attribute we use in our daily work lives. A white paper on this subject is due to be published in the near future.

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This year’s schedule was packed full of interesting sessions examining the relationship between science and testing from different perspectives. Often, when drawing parallels

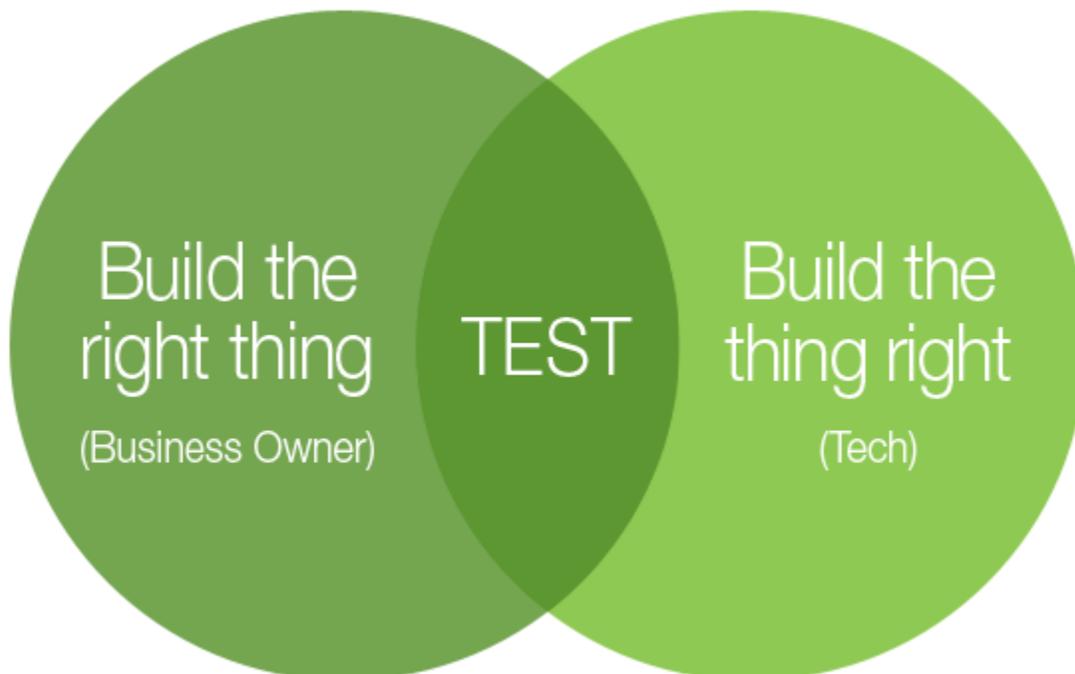
between science and testing, it is the natural sciences that are being referenced but, at CAST 2014, psychology, philosophy and art were also used to exemplify the vast set of opportunities for the testing community to draw inspiration from other disciplines.

One topic that was raised in several sessions was skills transfer. How do we transfer skills from one context to another, and from one person to another? When teaching, mentoring and coaching, it is important to understand and appreciate diversity. We all have different frames of reference, different ways of communicating and different reactions to the same environment. Therefore, the examples and analogies I use might not mean anything to you. Michael Larsen and Harrison C. Lovell talked about their own personal experiences of

mentoring in their session “Coyote Teaching – A New Take on the Art of Mentorship”³.

Other notable attended sessions were Håkan Ramberg’s “The Business Minded Tester”⁴ and “Bridging the Gap – From Developer to Tester”⁵ by Jonathan R. Clarkin.

During Håkan’s session, it was shown that while a raised issue may be a low-severity defect in the testers mind, this same issue may be a critically high-severity defect for business. One slide that caught attention showed two circles. On the left, “Build the right thing” (Business Owner) and on the right; “Build the thing right” (Tech). In between both circles was the word “Test”. This is, in Håkan’s mind, the sweet spot where testers should strive to be.



Jonathan is relatively new to the testing world and comes from a decade of experience from creating software. His session explored how he went from producing the software to evaluating and testing the same software. Items such as “Proximity”, “Terminology”, “Community” and “Tools” were discussed as potential ways to “bridge the gap” between development and test. CAST puts its participants under a spell – an enchanting testing spell that creates a state of passion and engagement. From early morning to late evening – or even early the next morning – people are caught up in lively discussions around testing in smaller groups, examining

fundamental test ideas or the latest fads with testers they didn’t know three days ago. Meeting others who have been testers for years, or even months, proved to further validate the importance of our field.

In his session, “The History of Reason, Arts and Testing”⁶, Geoff Loken used the quote “The sleep of reason produces monsters” from Francisco Goya, and that nicely summarizes the main takeaway from CAST this year. It is our duty as testers to stay vigilant and critically examine our assumptions and actions.

¹ <http://www.associationforsoftwaretesting.org/conference/cast-2014/>

² http://cast2014.sched.org/event/55ffee3856feb7ccee0e80b8b83b17e6#.U_OOGvldV8E

³ http://cast2014.sched.org/event/f72da60490528ed1ffff1b8d3a7a0094#.U_LFpIBdWgl

⁴ http://cast2014.sched.org/event/3593787935c2cb8c1c25a183220e9f28#.U_OhmPldV8E

⁵ http://cast2014.sched.org/event/e38e7d51a07d489cd3abbc98982c5bba#.U_OiCvldV8E

⁶ <http://cast2014.sched.org/event/8d0b2e3be893765ae60865c284844356#.VAB4VPldWd4>



About The Author

Robin Price is a Software Tester with Professional Quality Assurance and has 8 years of experience providing software quality assurance solutions. He is knowledgeable in modern software testing techniques and processes, and is well versed in the processes of software development. Some of Robin’s responsibilities have included writing test plans and test cases based on functional specifications and business requirements provided by the client. He is also responsible for time estimates, test execution, defect reporting and tracking.