What Makes the History of Software Hard, and Why It Matters

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The history of software is the history of how various communities of practitioners have put their portion of the world into the computer. That has meant translating their experience and understanding of the world into computational models, which in turn has meant creating new ways of thinking about the world computationally and devising new tools for expressing that thinking in the form of working programs. It has also meant deciding, in each realm of practice, which aspects of experience can be computed and which cannot, and establishing a balance between them. Thus the models and tools that constitute software reflect the histories of the communities that created them and cannot be understood without knowledge of those histories, which extend beyond computers and computing to encompass the full range of human activities. All software, even the most current, is in that sense "legacy" software. That is what makes the history of software hard, and it is why the history of software matters to the current practitioner.