

Kings X has a platform zero !

Les Hatton, 07-Aug-2010

There are two kinds of people in the world; those who count from 1 and those who count from 0, (I am deliberately leaving out those people who count down to 0 as being somewhat unnerving and not the people who you might want to invite to a dinner party). The former we call well balanced rational and entirely normal people (although I generally exclude Fortran programmers who also count from 1). Ask normal people to count for you and they will instinctively start at 1 and wander off upwards.

The latter we call the C-people. These are programmers trained in the arcane arts of programming languages like C, C++, Java, Javascript, perl and the many other derivatives. We are odd. I include myself even though I also started counting from 1 but switched to the dark side as the subtle attractions of number 0 entwined me. Start a C-person counting and they will jump to the number 0 and off they go. Ask them to count to 10 and they will inexplicably stop at 9 because if you haven't figured it out yet, 0 up to 9 is 10 numbers. This is indeed the stuff which fills the sad, miserable life of programmers with just a little light relief.

As a brief background, the number 0 appeared rather late – around the 9th century A.D. in India where mathematicians were quite comfortable with its general nothingness, even though the ancient Greeks weren't, (modern Greek economics has overcome this historic difficulty). It is jolly useful internationally, for example in England, where it is the defining and most frequently-used symbol of the national football team.

The reason I am rambling on like this is that fortified by Harry Potter's example, King's X railway station in London has sprouted another new platform. It is called platform zero. Yes 0, nada, nowt, AND it is hidden away in a corner so that its seductive charms cannot corrupt the minds of too many innocent travellers.

Nothing prepares you for its existence. On the way into Kings X from any direction, the signs display "platforms 1-8 this way", but nary a mention of a platform from the dark side.

The first thing I knew of it was sitting waiting for the train to Leeds. The 12.05 to Shanghai or Burnley or somewhere popped up proclaiming platform 6 and all was normal and good in the world. Then the 12.10 to Leeds appeared. Next to it in the place normally reserved for platform number was, well, a 0. My wife and the lady she was chatting with, like most normal people determined 1-ers both, dismissed it as yet another computer oddity after a moment's perplexed contemplation. I entirely agreed, bringing to bear the fruits of 30 years of experience battling programmers' determined attempts to destroy the brains of the public with computer systems which cock everything up and then say things like:- "Microsoft Powerpoint would prefer not to have anything to do with the file you have just spent 4 hours creating; OK ?".

About to reach for my camera with a knowing smile to snap the evidence for my vast chamber-pot of programming horrors, I suddenly had a horrible thought. “They wouldn’t do that surely ?” So, I rambled off past platform 1 in the general direction not towards 2 and there it was in a spectral mist, not far from platform $8\frac{3}{4}$. Yes, there really is a platform zero, 0, nada, nowt.

To cut a long story short I had to drag off my dear wife and her friend still protesting that there was no platform number, by pointing out that yes, there was and it was number 0, that it to say, platform nothing.

J.K. Rowling, what have you started ? Have Network Rail or whatever they are called this week now embarked on a large-scale social engineering experiment to teach mathematics to the people in line with Government directives to double the number of people who can er, double. Perhaps we will see negative numbers next (the ones with the curious little hyphen at the front which bankers use to balance large + ones they use with bonuses) and then even the irrational numbers, (“The next train departing from platform π is the circular route to Swansea.”). Then, who knows, the final frontier, the dangerous wastes of the complex domain, (“The 16.20 to Bristol will leave Platform $1+3i$ and take the branch cut via the Riemann ruins in Bath.”). Sorry nurse, I'm rambling again aren't I.

I half expected the train with its full complement of C-people to emerge in Transylvania but we had to make do with Leeds.