November 10, 2015

Ian Bogost’s article “Programmers: Stop Calling Yourselves Engineers” gives much needed and long overdue attention to the cheapening of the “engineer” title. In his November 5, 2015, article in The Atlantic, Ian Bogost brings to light a pervasive problem that licensed professional engineers have been working to address for decades: that many “engineers” by title are, in fact, not engineers. Engineering is a learned profession. As a licensed professional engineer, or PE, my foremost priority is protecting the public health, safety and welfare by carefully designing, building, and maintaining systems.

For more than a century, the licensing of professional engineers in the US has protected the public from unqualified actors performing engineering services. The “engineerwashing” of software development is just the latest example of an industry pilfering the engineer title to create the appearance of credibility at the public’s expense.

As Bogost notes, engineering is as much a civic profession as it is a technical profession. Licensed professional engineers know this well. They follow a code of ethics that places the protection of the public health, safety, and welfare above all other considerations; and they dedicate themselves to professional conduct based on honesty, integrity, impartiality, fairness, and equity.

Years ago, the National Society of Professional Engineers recognized that the people who design software systems that have a direct impact on the public health, safety, and welfare should follow the same standards as professional engineers. Now, thanks to the work of NSPE, IEEE, and the other members of the Software Engineering Licensure Consortium, software engineers have a clear path to professional licensure.

As artificial intelligence, driverless cars, and other technologies advance, society stands to benefit greatly. But there’s also the very real potential for great harm. The public deserves to know that the people designing those systems are qualified and place paramount importance on public safety.

Sincerely,

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President