Foobar

The terms **foobar**, **foo**, **bar**, and **baz**, are common placeholder names (also referred to as metasyntactic variables) used in computer programming or computer-related documentation. They are commonly used to represent unknown values, typically when describing a scenario where the purpose of the unknown values are understood, but their precise values are arbitrary and unimportant. The terms can be used to represent any part of a complicated system or idea, including the data, variables, functions, and commands. The words themselves have no meaning in this usage, and are merely logical representations, much like the letters x and y are used in algebra. *Foobar* is often used alone; *foo*, *bar*, and *baz* are usually used in that order, when multiple entities are needed.

Foo has entered the English language as a neologism and is considered by many to be the canonical example of a metasyntactic variable. It is used extensively in computer programming examples (sometimes expressed as "for once only") and pseudocode. Eric S. Raymond has called it an "important hackerism" alongside kludge and cruft.[1]

History

The terms' origins are not known with certainty, and several anecdotal theories have been advanced to identify them. *Foobar* may derive from the vulgar military acronym FUBAR, or it may have gained popularity due to the fact that it is pronounced the same.

FOO as an abbreviation of Forward Observation Officer was a British Army term in use as early as the First World War[2] The etymology of *foo* is explored in the IETF Request for Comments 3092, which notes usage of *foo* in 1930s cartoons including *The Daffy Duck* and comic strips, especially *Smokey Stover* and *Pogo*. From there the term migrated into military slang, where it merged with FUBAR.[3]

The terms may have developed in electronics, where a digital signal which is considered "on" with a negative or zero-voltage condition, is identified with a horizontal bar over the signal label; the notation for an inverted signal *foo* would then be pronounced "foo bar".

The use of *foo* in hacker and eventually in programming context may have begun in MIT's Tech Model Railroad Club (TMRC). In the complex model system there were scram switches located at numerous places around the room that could be thrown if something undesirable was about to occur, such as a train going full-bore at an obstruction. Another feature of the system was a digital clock on the dispatch board. When someone hit a scram switch the clock stopped and the display was replaced with the word "FOO"; at TMRC the scram switches are therefore called "Foo switches". Because of this an entry in the 1959 Dictionary of the TMRC Language went something like this: "FOO: The first syllable of the misquoted sacred chant phrase 'foo mane padme hum.' Our first obligation is to keep the foo counters turning."[4]

The term *foobar* was propagated through computer science circles in 1960s and early 1970s by system manuals from Digital Equipment Corporation.

Foobar was used as a variable name in the Fortran code of Colossal Cave Adventure (1977 Crowther and Woods version). The variable FOOBAR was used to contain the player's progress in saying the magic phrase "Fee Fie Foe Foo".

Usage in code

The terms are very often used in programming examples, much like the Hello World program is commonly used as an introduction. For example, *foo* and *bar* might be used to illustrate a simple string concatenation:

```java
//Java Code
String foo = "Hello, ";
String bar = "World";
System.out.println(foo + bar);
//Hello, World is printed to the screen by printing the values of foo
and bar
```

Usage in culture

$foo is the name of a Perl programming magazine,[5] and Foo Camp is an annual hacker convention (the name is also a backronym for Friends of O'Reilly, the event's sponsor).

During the United States v. Microsoft trial, some evidence was presented that Microsoft had tried to use the Web Services Interoperability organization as a means to stifle competition, including e-mails in which top executives including Bill Gates referred to the WS-I using the codename "foo".[6]

See also

- Placeholder name
- Lorem ipsum, the name given to commonly used placeholder text
- John Doe, a placeholder name for a male party, in a legal action, case or discussion, whose true identity is either unknown or must be withheld for legal reasons
- FUBAR, a homophonous acronym
- Foo Camp, an annual hacker event hosted by publisher O'Reilly Media
- BarCamp, an international network of user generated conferences

References

[1] Eric S. Raymond (1996). *http://books.google.com/books?id=POlUJW3Z9McC&pg=PA5&dq=foo+jargon&ei=GnIvR8PwGJiSpgK1qIT6CQ&ie=ISO-8859-1 New Hacker's Dictionary.* MIT Press. ISBN 0262680920. http://books.google.com/books?id=POlUJW3Z9McC&pg=PA5&dq=foo+jargon&ei=GnIvR8PwGJiSpgK1qIT6CQ&ie=ISO-8859-1&sig=hIE0I8TtPGKUbSU-wgDTm4hQ8ig#PPA4,M1.

[2] http://www.1914-1918.net/Diaries/wardiary-118siege.htm Extract from War Diary of 118th Siege Battery WO95/322

[3] D. Eastlake III et al. (2001). http://www.ietf.org/rfc/rfc3092.txt|"Etymology of "Foo"". Internet Engineering Task Force. http://www.ietf.org/rfc/rfc3092.txt. Retrieved on 2007-11-05.

[4] http://www.computer-dictionary-online.org/?q=foo|"Computer Dictionary Online". http://www.computer-dictionary-online.org/?q=foo.

[5] $foo PERL MAGAZIN () (http://foo-magazin.de/)

[6] Microsoft ploy to block Sun exposed (http://www.news.com/Microsoft-ploy-to-block-Sun-exposed/2100-1001_3-912906.html)

External links

- RFC3092 Etymology of "Foo" (http://tools.ietf.org/html/rfc3092)
- The Free Online Dictionary of Computing entry on "foo" (http://foldoc.org/index.cgi?query=foo)
- The Jargon File entry on "foobar" (http://www.catb.org/~esr/jargon/html/F/foobar.html)
- Foobar2000 is an advanced audio player for the Windows platform (http://www.foobar2000.org/)
- RFC 1639 - FTP Operation Over Big Address Records (FOOBAR)

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