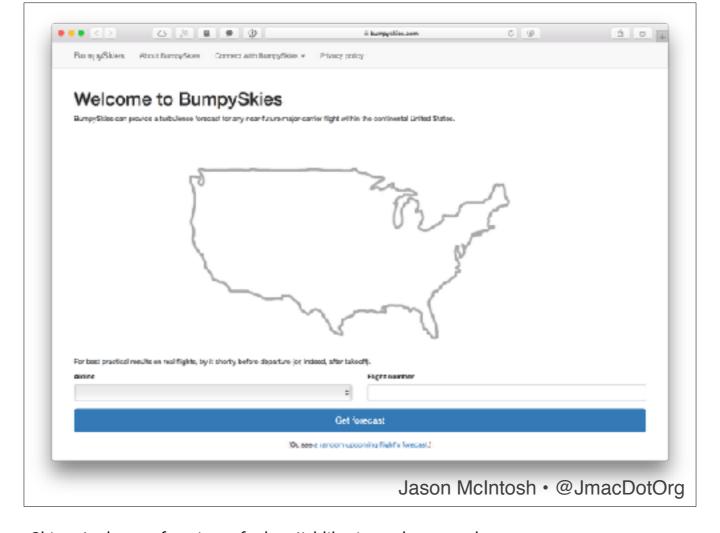
BumpySkies: A passion-project postmortem

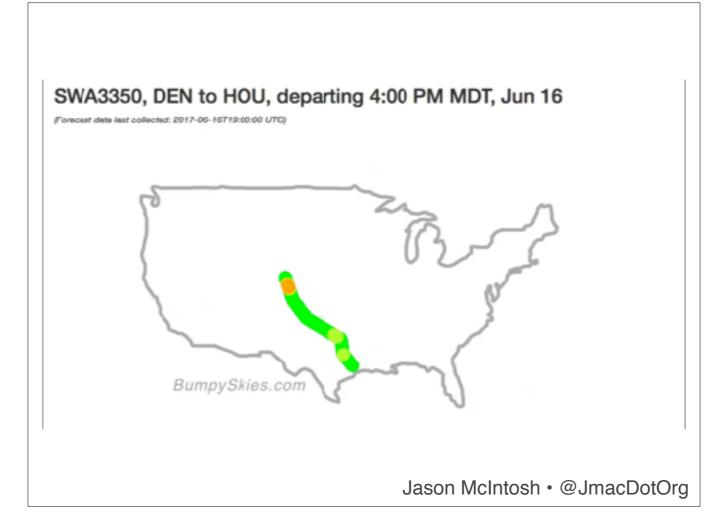
The Perl Conference • June 21, 2017

Jason McIntosh • @JmacDotOrg

I spent a lot of last year making



this thing. It's a website called BumpySkies. It does a fraction of what I'd like it to do someday,



but today it can provide graphical predictions of turbulence for near-future flights over the continental US. I made it for nervous fliers like me. I think of it as a tool for demystifying flight by mitigating surprise. Turbulence prediction represents only the start of what I'd like to do, but it does it well enough that I consider it a shipped project.

So, in this project postmortem, I'll tell you about three things that went well, and three things that didn't go so well, and an ill-defined number of things that yet to earn qualitative judgment, because they haven't happened yet.

Good thing (3 of them)

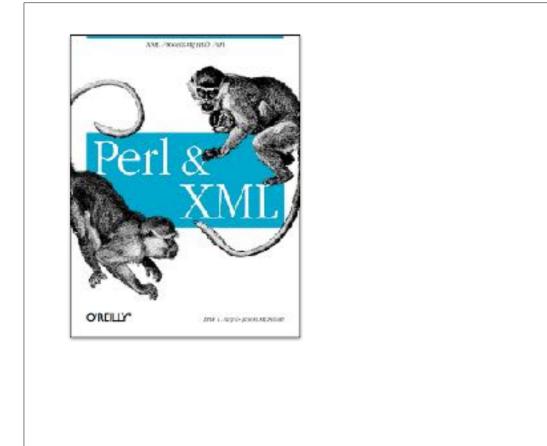
- · I ask for thing
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For a project about managing fear, BumpySkies' development depended on my overcoming personal faults less about fear and more about misperception.

I learned that tools and resources exist outside of purely independent study, if one is willing to ask for them nicely.

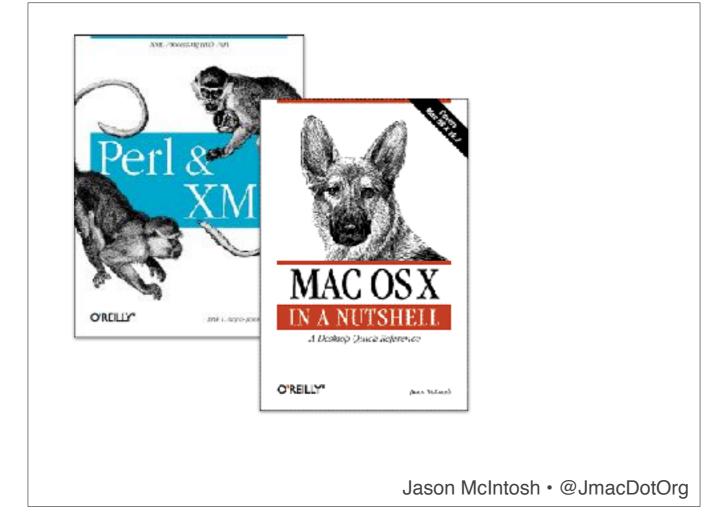
I found myself able to personally succeed in tasks that I previously assumed I had no business attempting

But first I want to tell you how before I could do anything else, I had to throw away and rebuild my own sense of professional identity. See, a couple of years ago, I thought I was going to write a book.

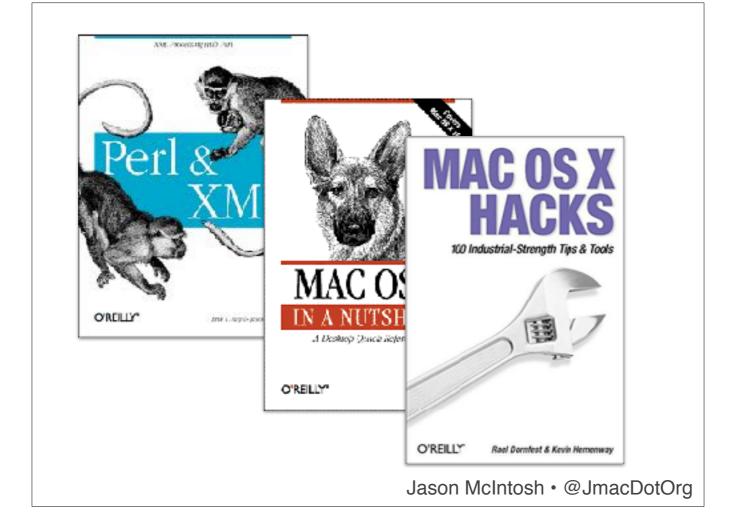


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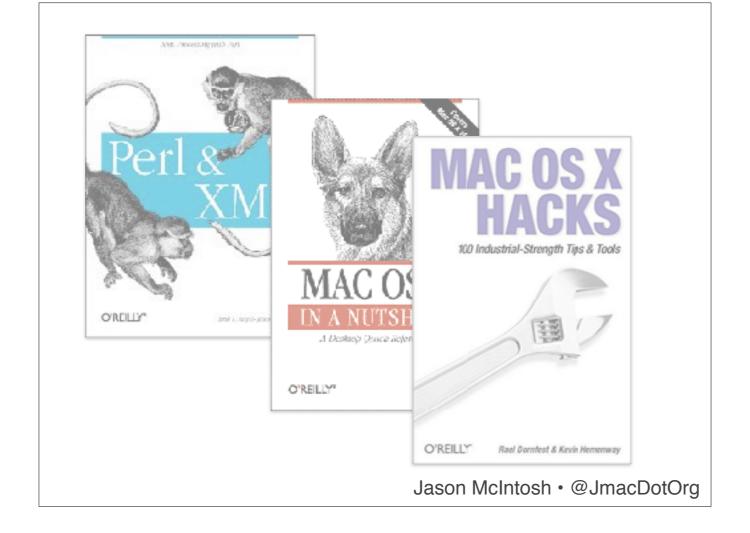
I'd done it before, or anyway as a co-author, or at least a contributor, a few times. A long time ago. I have few good memories of these experiences,



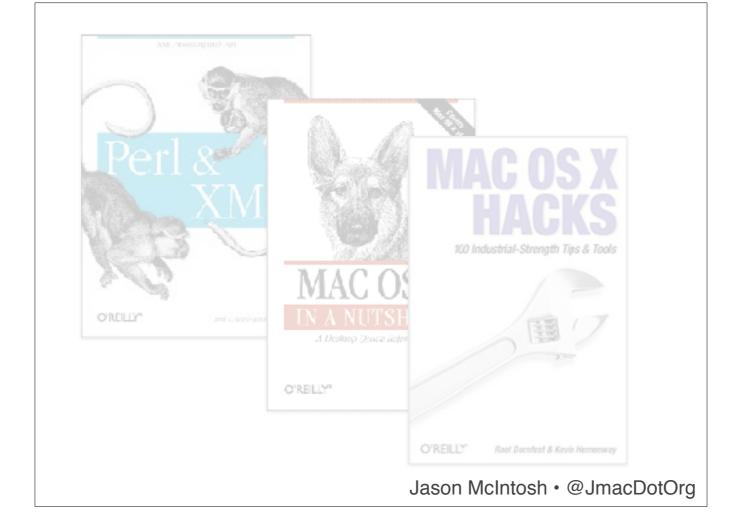
all projects I agreed to when I had far more youthful enthusiasm than wisdom or even basic preparedness, but I thought this time would be different:



I'd be writing by myself about a subject deeply interesting to me, and sharing things I'd learned with people who really needed it, as opposed to just documenting some computer stuff. I had the exact same thought



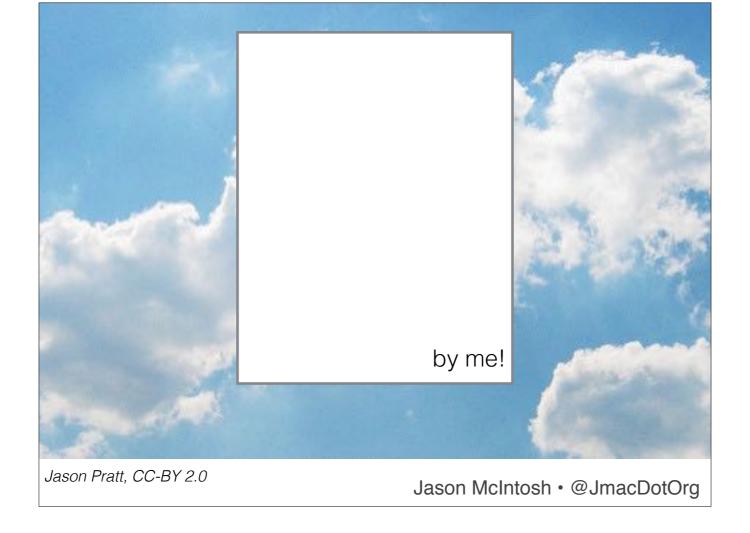
five years ago, and



seven. In fact the thought occurred to me



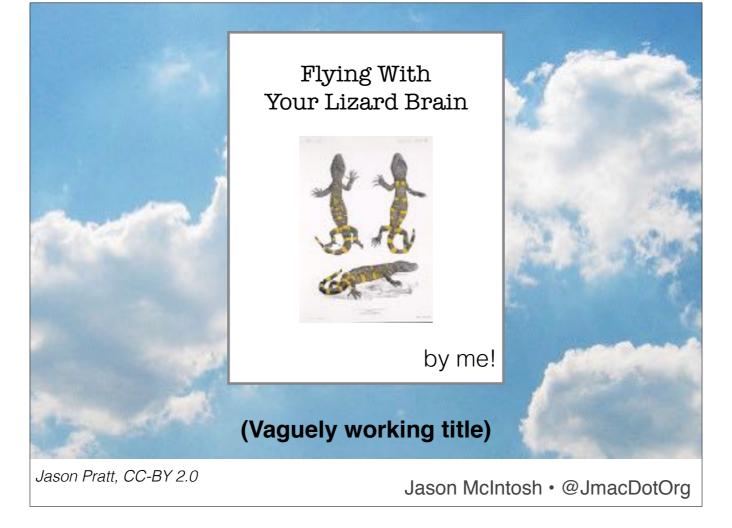
every time I got off an airplane, because -- my thought was —



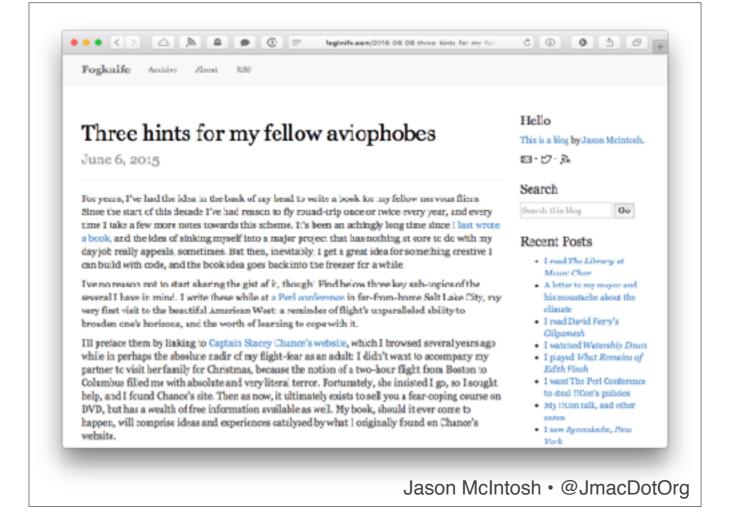
I could sell a book



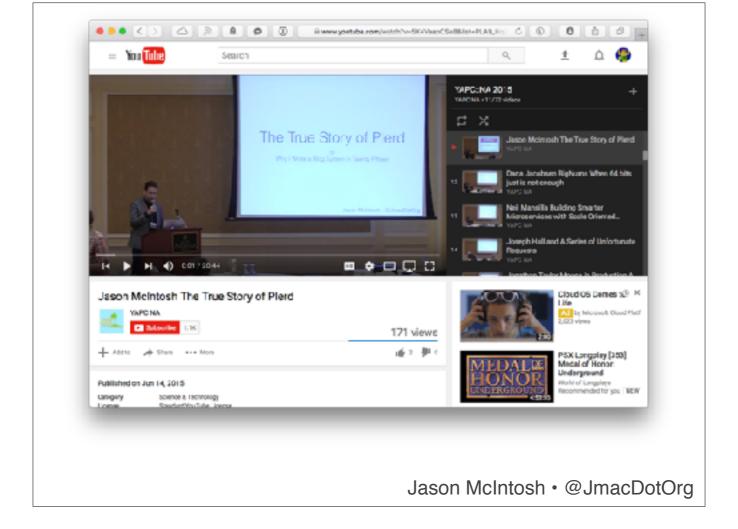
to my fellow nervous fliers about



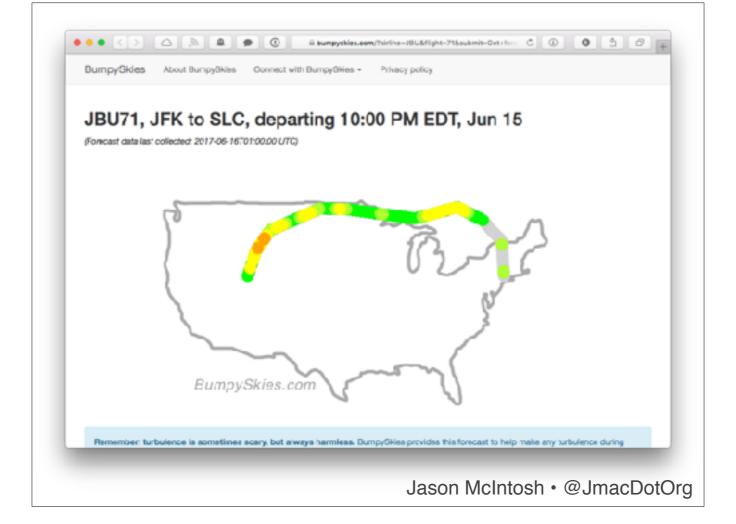
all the knowledge and techniques I had gradually accrued to make the experience of commercial flight less nerve-wracking. I was never going to write that book, and I know today that I'll may never write another book about anything, ever.



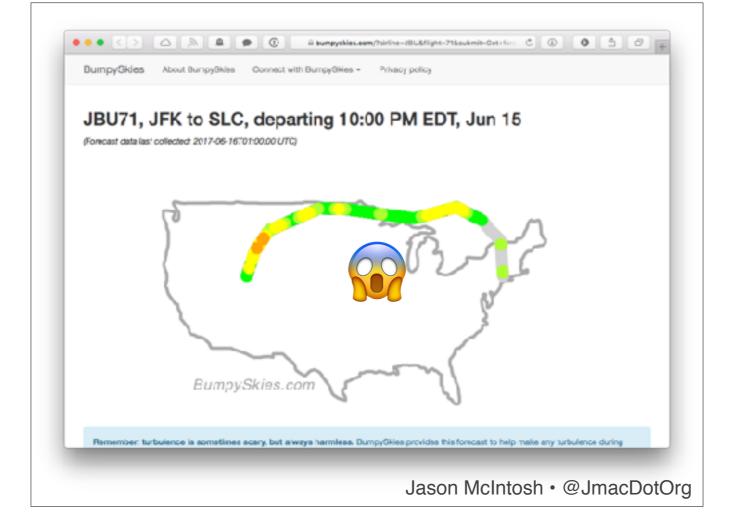
But I didn't know that when I wrote a blog post in Salt Lake City during that year's Perl Conference. I was in a very writerly mood that year.



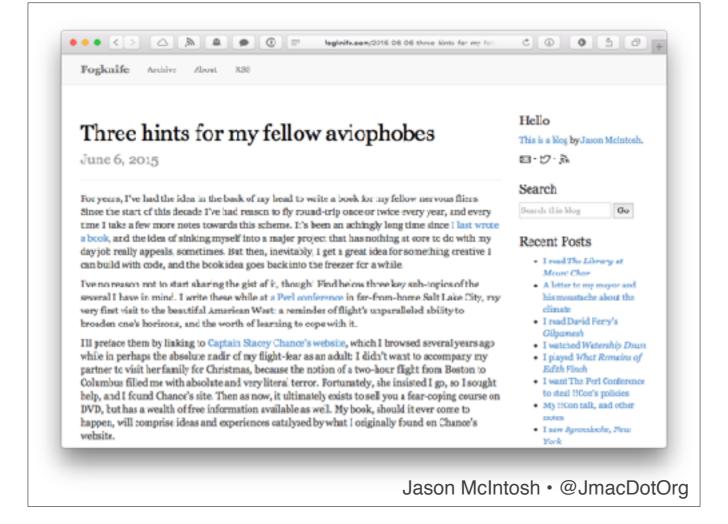
I gave a talk about a blogging platform I had made, and with my lizard brain freshly hoarse from



screaming all through the



cross-continental flight, things seemed to align such that



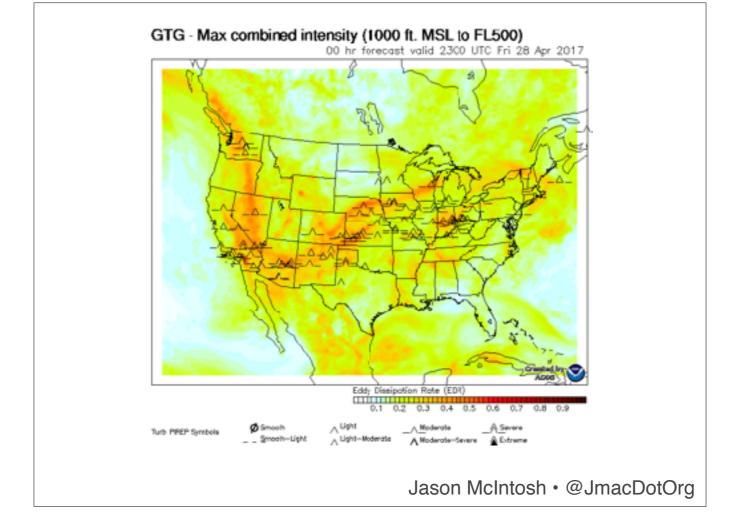
I couldn't not see my post as the nut graf of a much larger work. I was right — but not in the way I thought. My flights to and from Salt Lake City were the first I'd made on an aircraft



with in-cabin Wi-Fi. Not knowing what else to do with it, I spent the whole time

Asset Mehitsh Conscious Times like this I try to think of that scene
from Red October and I tell myself I can be brave like that helicopter guy eating the candy bar
Likes C.
252 FM - 5.1m 2015 from Even, IEA © 8 © 1 © 8 A
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posting continuously on Twitter as a distraction while my jet pinballed over heartland turbulence and my friends encouraged me and brands engaged with me and that was pretty great. I also had the novel experience of



reading NOAA's turbulence maps even as the jet I rode tore straight through its various bright orange doom-blobs, and while I still hated every minute of it, I could feel my terror lessened by seeing it reduced from



an unknown horror tearing at my fragile craft to

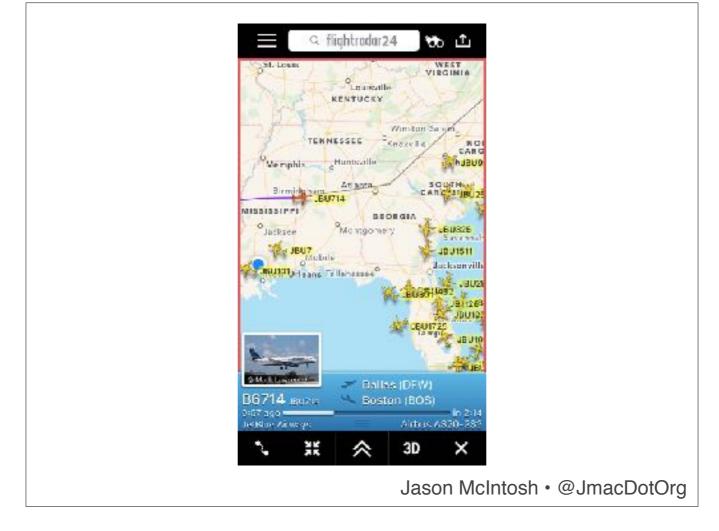


a finite phenomenon whose discrete borders fit on a tiny phone screen. By the time of my next long-haul flights, some months later,

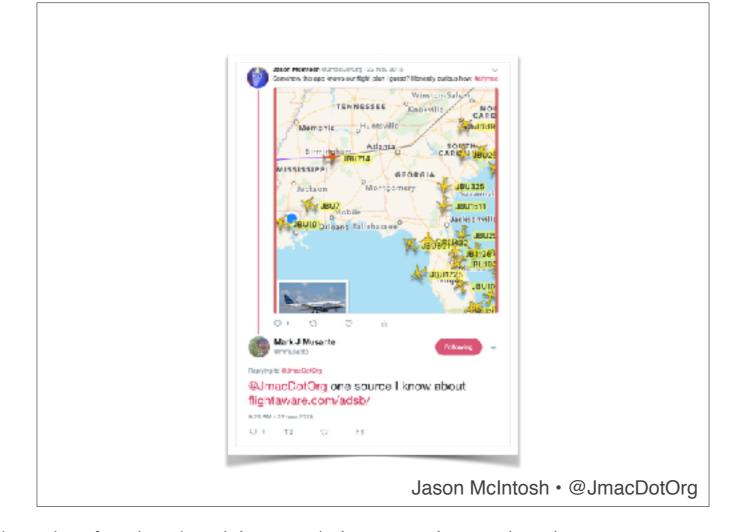


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I had discovered plane-tracking mobile apps like FlightRadar, which, yes, do work splendidly while airborne. And this led to the true pivot in my thinking about how I could best help my fellow aviophobes, and it was a literal pivot,



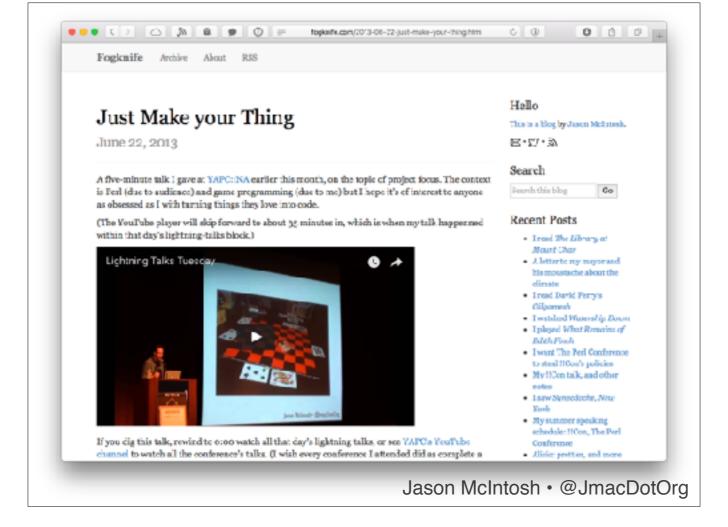
which is to say this left turn over Atlanta, which FlightRadar somehow plotted ahead of my plane's current position. I paused in my mid-air tweet-gibbering to



ask out loud how this was possible, and my friend Mark said that it might have something to do with



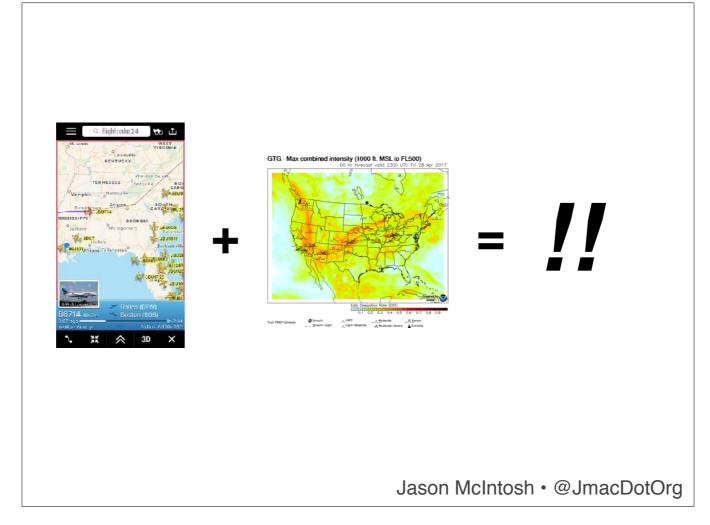
this crowdsourced plane-tracking project that another service called FlightAware runs. And so my plane continued on to Logan, but before it landed I knew I'd just started a new journey.



I gave a lightning talk, my first Perl Conference talk, in 2013 called "Just Make Your Thing" where I set out the case that, in software, purposeful tools, however rough around the edges, can bring at least as much value to the world than the most beautifully architectured abstraction layers.



And as my plane juddered through the clouds over Massachusetts Bay I saw my long assumptions of just repackaging my knowledge as text, even though I love text, as the less vital abstraction here. My time would be much better spent building a tool, one that that would somehow mix these disparate mobile-technology magics into syncretic software that would directly demystify flight for the fearful.



Years overdue and thousands of feet high, the discarded pages of my outdated identity as an author fluttered into the sea. I landed in Boston a fully self-cognizant toolmaker, and I knew what my next tool had to be. Even as I deplaned back into my home city, I found myself in gloriously unknown territory, and of course I had to spend some time going about it all wrong.

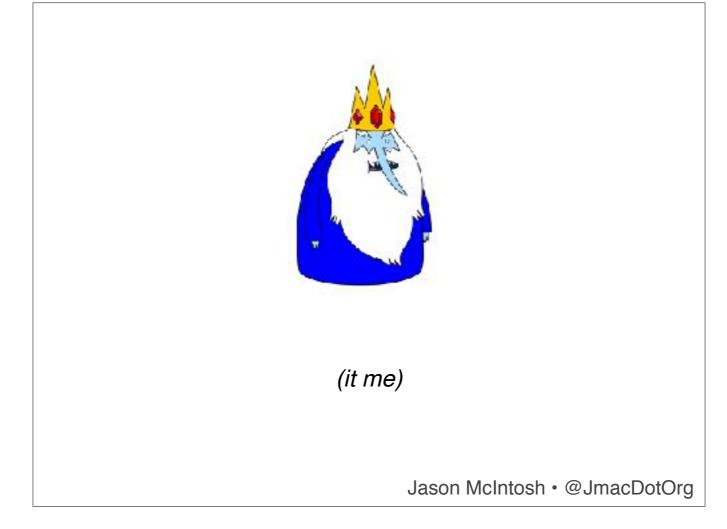


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One of the dangers of working freelance,



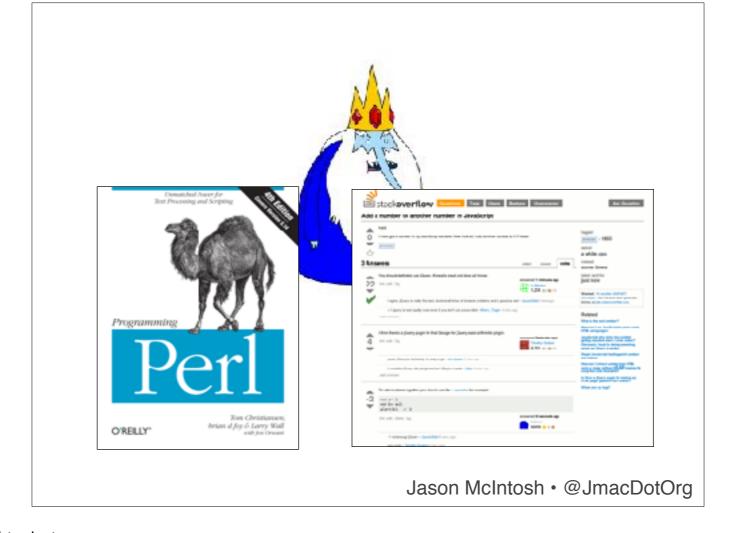
as I have done for the last decade, is the temptation to start viewing yourself the way that your clients tend to do:



as a wizard, ensconced in your high tower, with only



your grimoire and



your Palantir, working in beautiful isolation to



bend reality to match your will. The danger lurks in how this view can feel quite accurate -- 90 percent of the time.

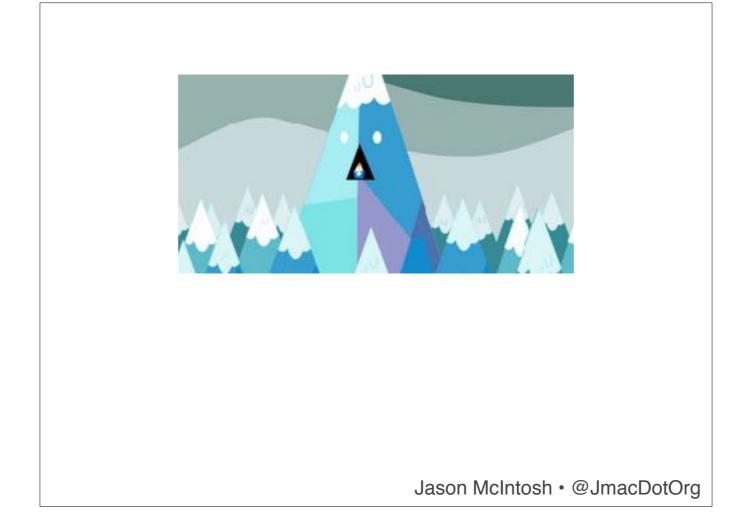


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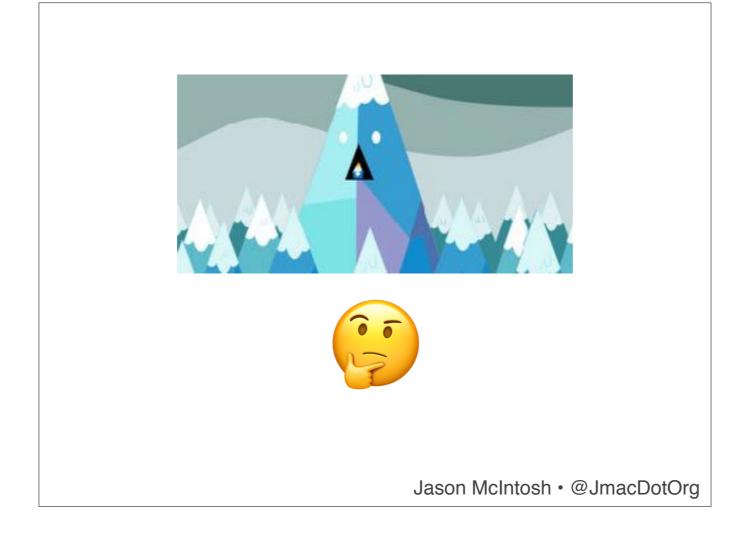
But sealing yourself off like this all the time can block even the most experienced hacker from realizing some of their best work, which requires not just showing up at conferences and such



but truly venturing outside one's comfort zone, taking the initiative to reach out and ask for knowledge, access, or perspective that will never come through a mere search query.



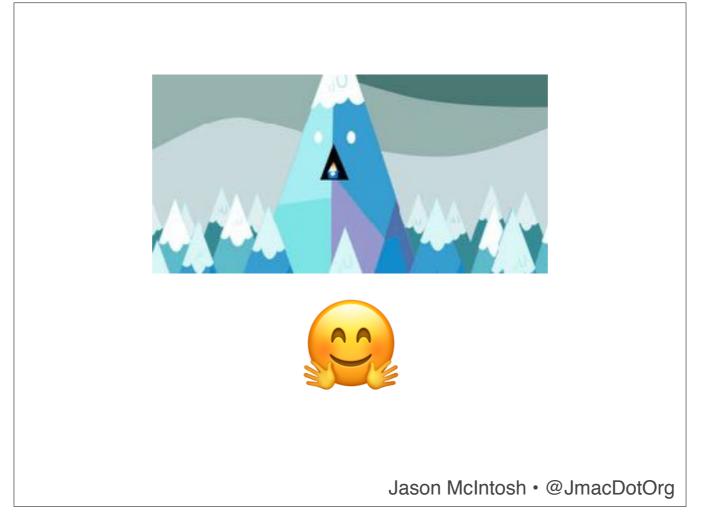
When I began working on BumpySkies, though, I wasn't a big believer in any of that. So I retreated into my workshop,



assuming that I could apply



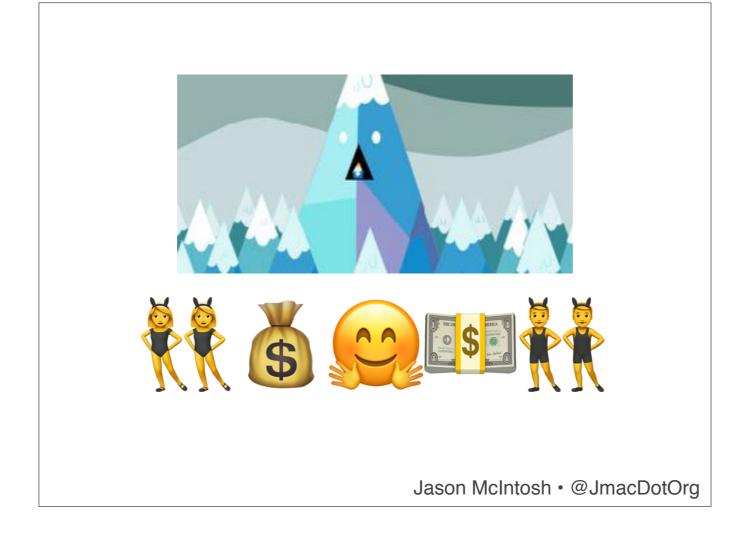
all my usual methods of isolated study and experimentation until the day I



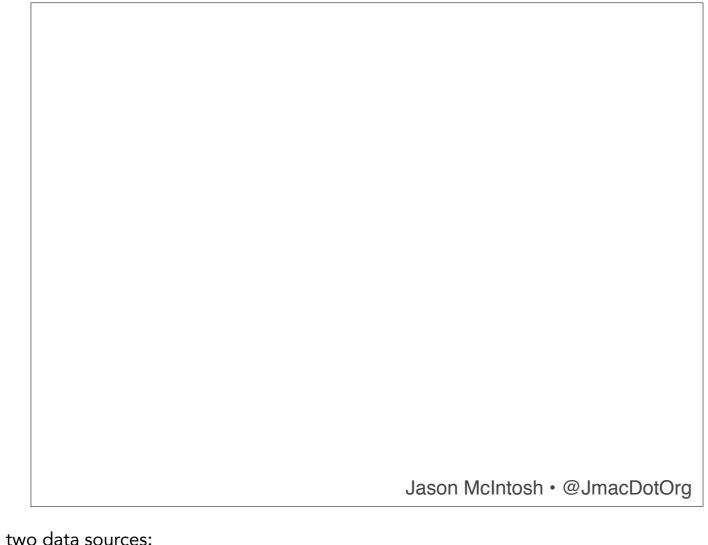
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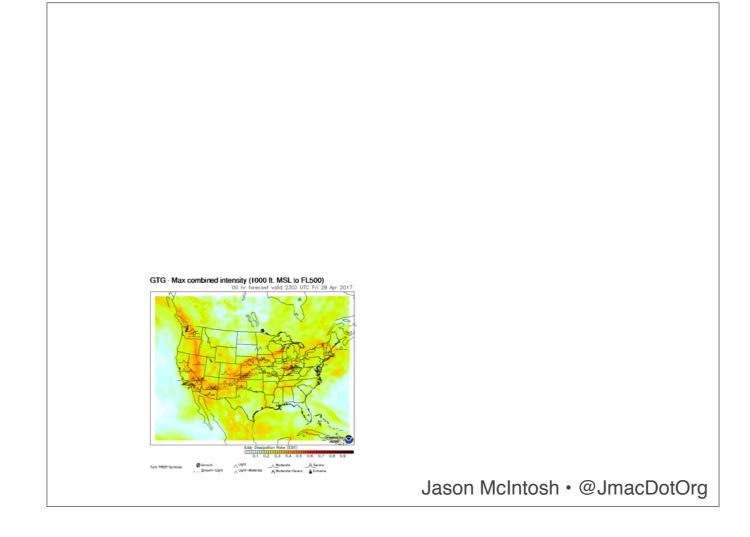
just as I would with



any client-driven task.



Obviously I would need access to two data sources:



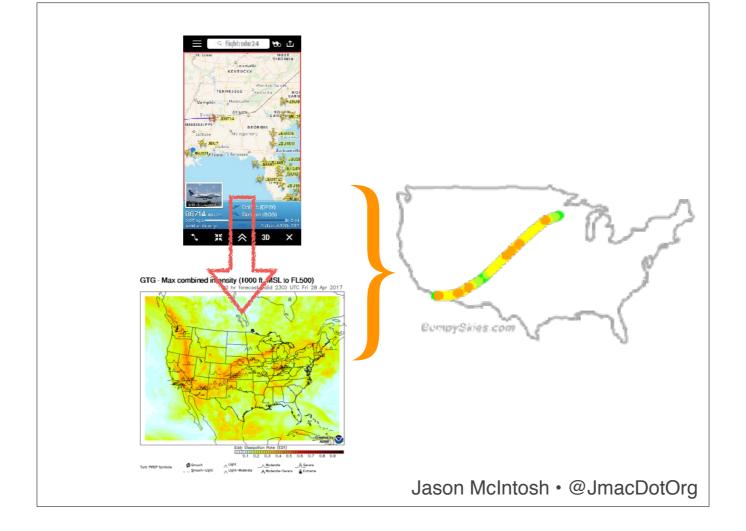
One for weather conditions,



and one for flight routes. My idea being that for a given flight,



I'd just run the latter through the former



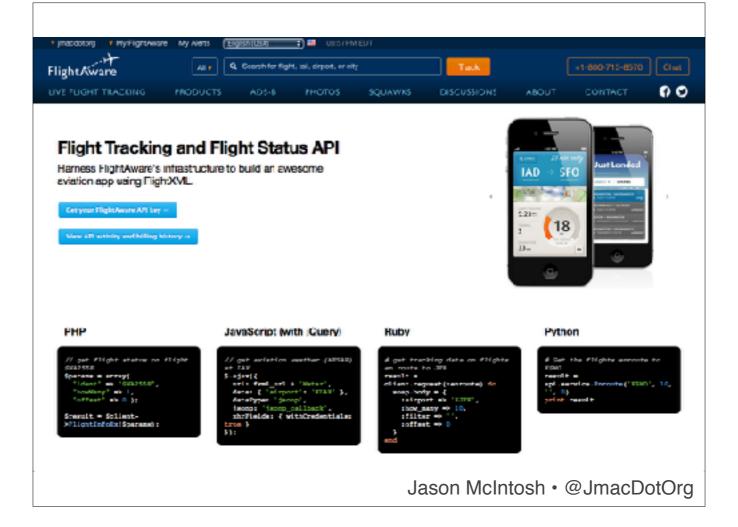
and show you the numbers, somehow. And my natural introverted starting point was: let's find the public APIs! Surely there are public APIs!



I started with the flight plans, and to my surprise



I didn't find any obvious APIs offered by the FAA, even though I had a notion that flight plans were public information. I did quickly find a commercial API



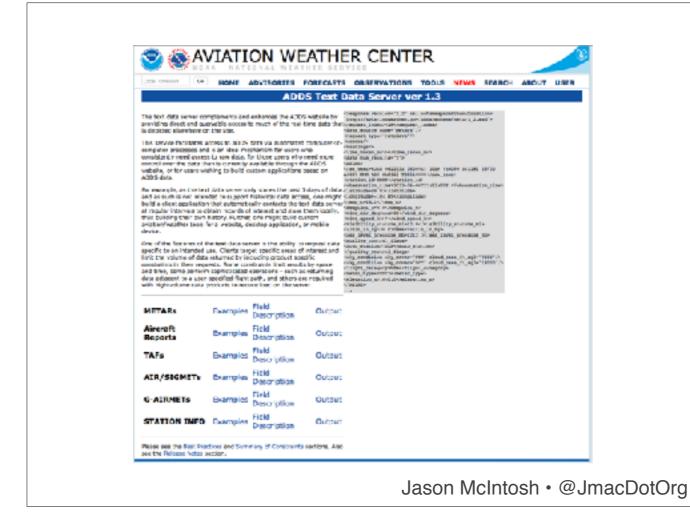
offered by a company called FlightAware, which offered me exactly the information I wanted for



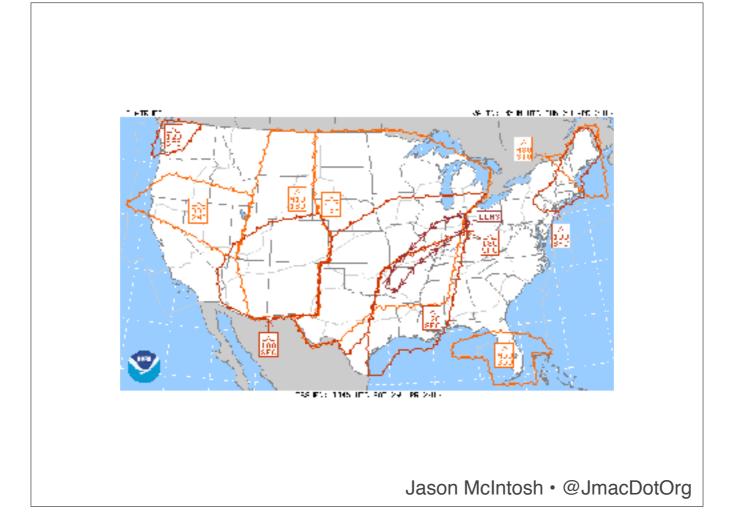
the low low price of two tenths a cent per query. OK, well: so noted. Put that aside for now.



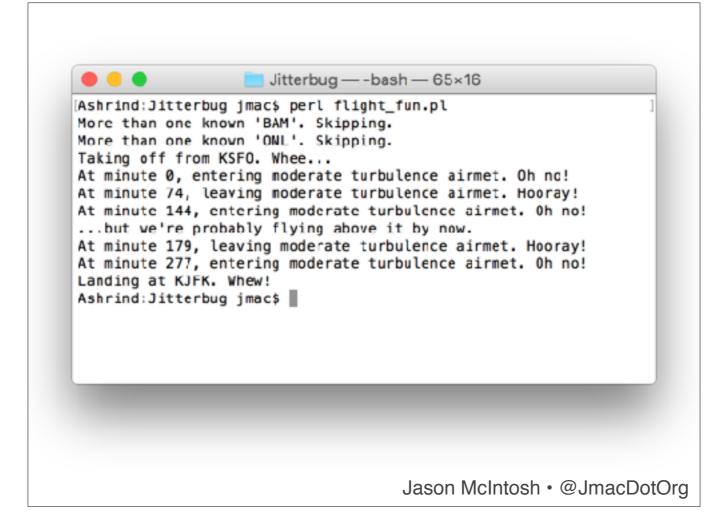
NOAA! They have public APIs! One even involves air turbulence!



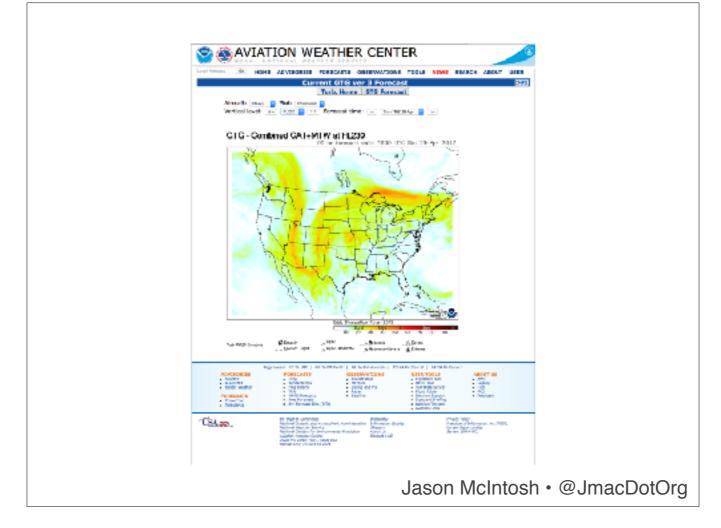
It's a lot of fun! You can give it a path of geographical fixes and a timestamp and it'll send you XML telling you about all the AIRMETs along the way.



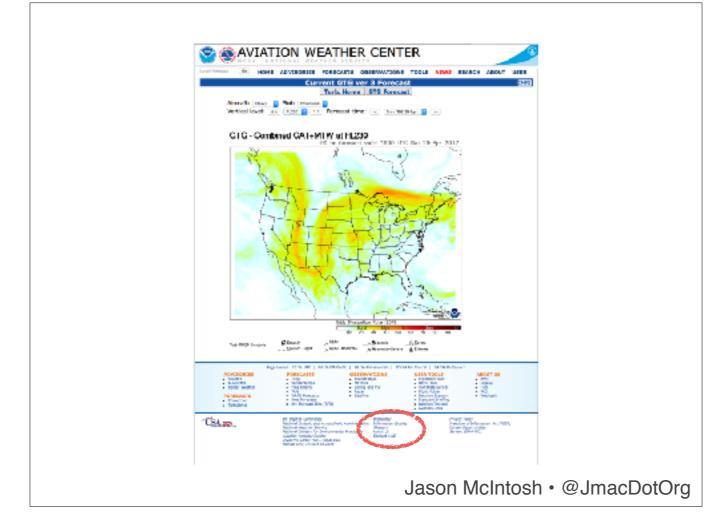
AIRMETs look like this. They're big old irregular polyhedra floating in the air, with floors and ceilings defined at certain altitudes. They define a 3D space that contain an increased likelihood of atmospheric conditions for aircraft passing through them, including turbulence. Sounds perfect!



And I drafted a prototype out of it! And some friends tested it, but it was clearly too broad to be a useful predictor of anything from a passenger's perspective.



What I wanted was something like this, NOAA's graphical turbulence display, which I've used as part of my own pre-flight meditation for many years. And friends, I sunk many serious hours into the puzzle of downloading and analyzing these images, pixel by pixel,



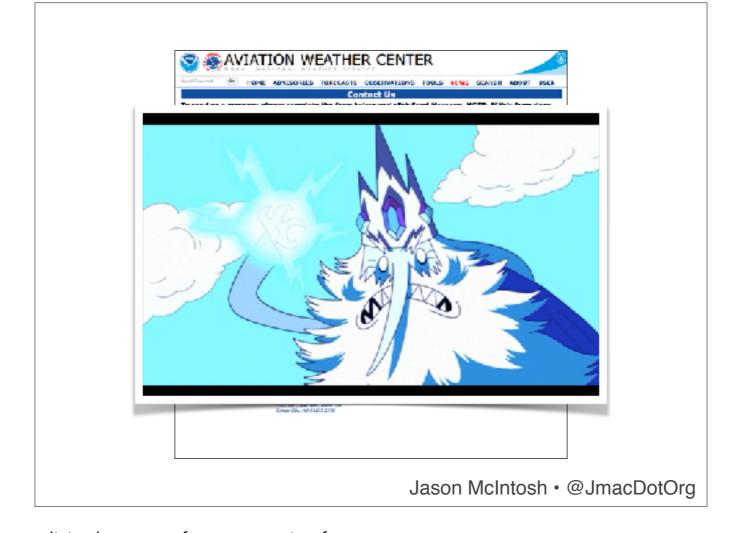
before I even began to consider the possibility of doing something with those contact links down at the bottom.



Now, my wife is a public servant -- that's her on the left. She works as a librarian for the U.S. Navy. And upon hearing my image-analysis woes, she said:

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you know, that contact form is probably monitored by someone who cares deeply about their work, seldom hears honest curiosity about it, and who would be absolutely delighted to hear from a member of the taxpaying public for whom they ostensibly labor. This struck me as counterintuitive, given my own



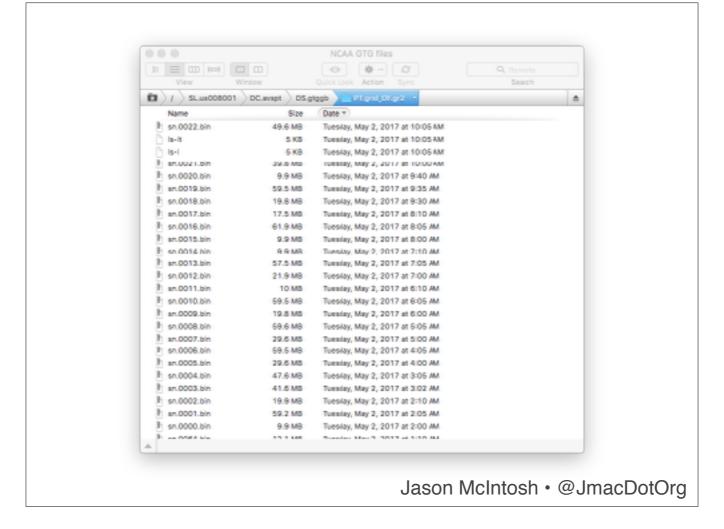
typical private-sector response to unsolicited requests for my attention from strangers,



but I like to think I know when to defer to experts.

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And so I filled out that contact form. Feeling optimistic about the AIRMET API, I asked if they made their graphical turbulence data available in some plain text format. XML, maybe JSON. And I got a response almost immediately. And they said: JSON or XML files? Yeah, sorry, we don't have any data like that.



But we do have an anonymous FTP directory full of up-to-the minute weather data using a format that meteorologists use called GRIB, and here is all the information you need to get at it. Would that be useful? And I said:



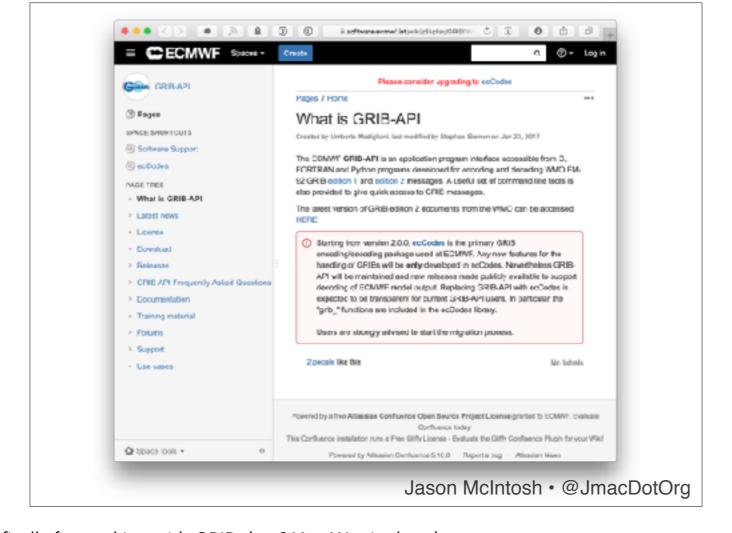
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I'll will let you know. And so I retreated to my tower

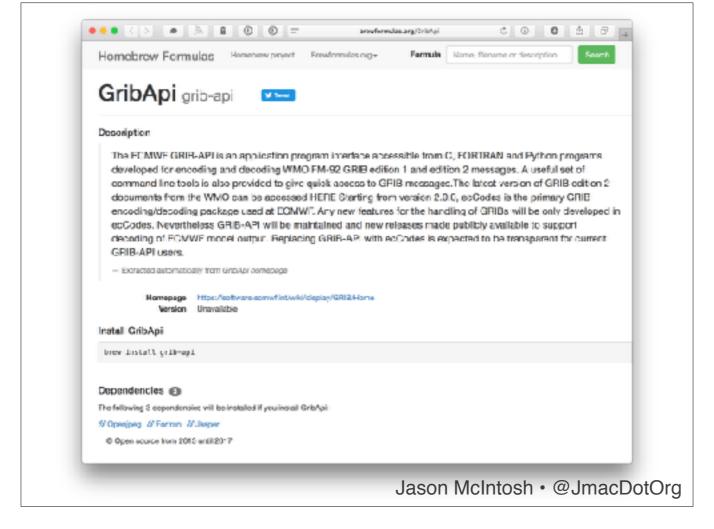


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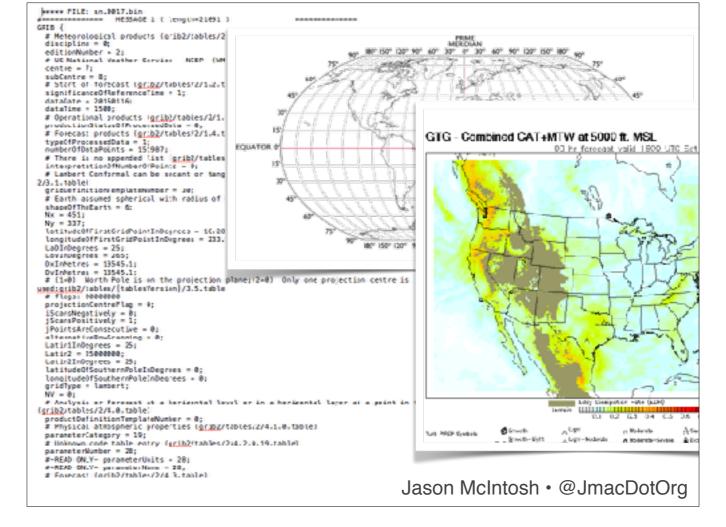
which that particular afternoon was actually the Blue State coffee house in Allston, Massachusetts and there did work I've no doubt most anyone in this room could have done, and I had a great deal of fun. Does there already exist



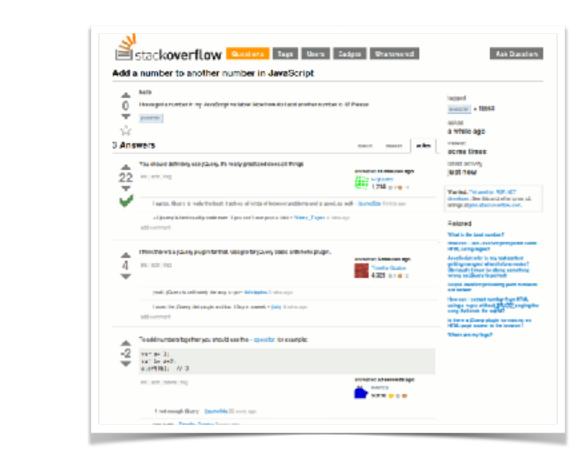
a suite of open-source tools specifically for working with GRIB data? Yes. Was it already



packaged up for macOS Homebrew? Yes. Did it feel indescribably refreshing to work with open source tools that processed data

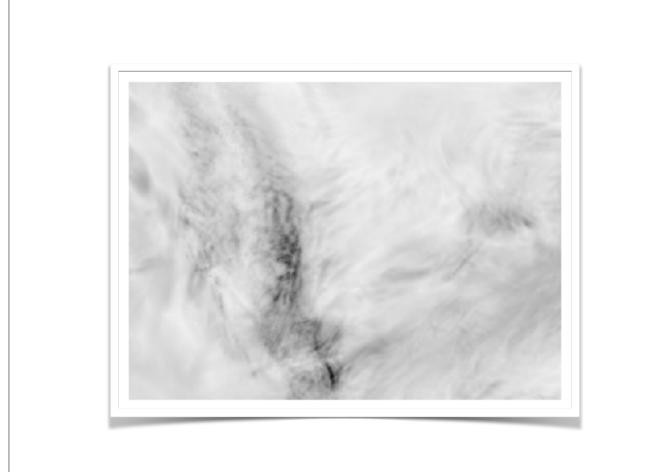


for a purpose more focused than data-processing's own sake, as so often feels like the foundation of my career? GOD YES. And my discovery of this territory would have been impossible had I not jumped the track and contacted someone from outside of



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my usual sphere. And so I ended up that afternoon



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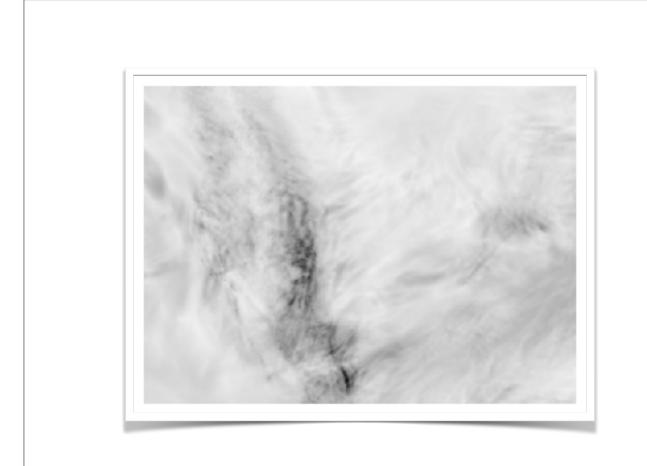
with this. And I felt jubilant! And I



posted it to Twitter! Jitterbug being an early code name for the project. And my friend Jenni said

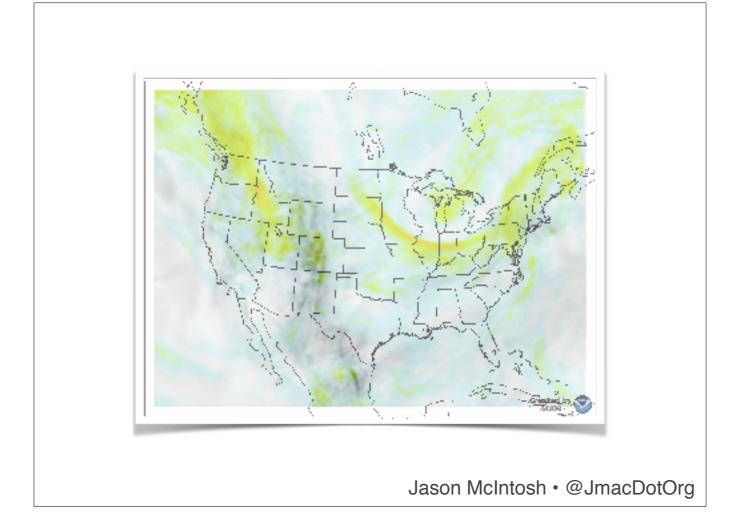


"Is it a tumor" and I was like No, Jenni, but yeah okay I didn't really provide any context so that's fair but no!



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It's CONUS!

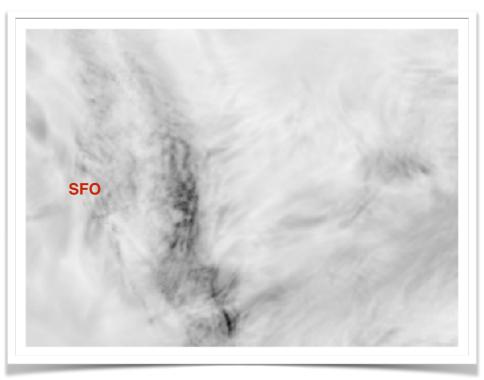


It's the continental United States or rather a slice of the atmosphere above it, or rather a forecast of clear-air turbulence intensities at a particular altitude at a particular minute on January 16, 2016.



I was able to read the data well enough to create this image. This is the moment where I knew this project had potential. Which left the problem of the airplanes. I had enough that, given

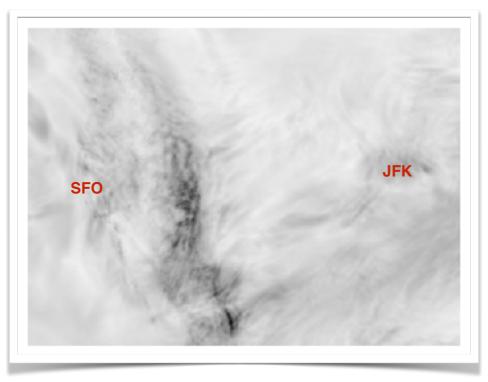
JetBlue flight 616, SFO-JFK, typical path



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takeoff and

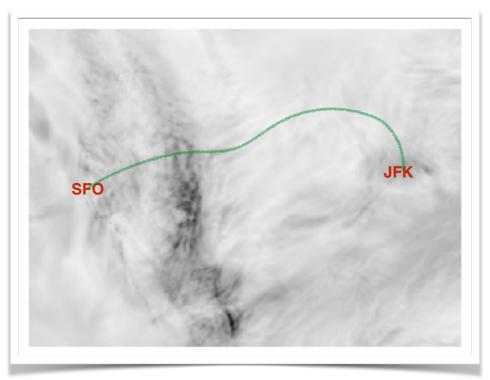
JetBlue flight 616, SFO-JFK, typical path



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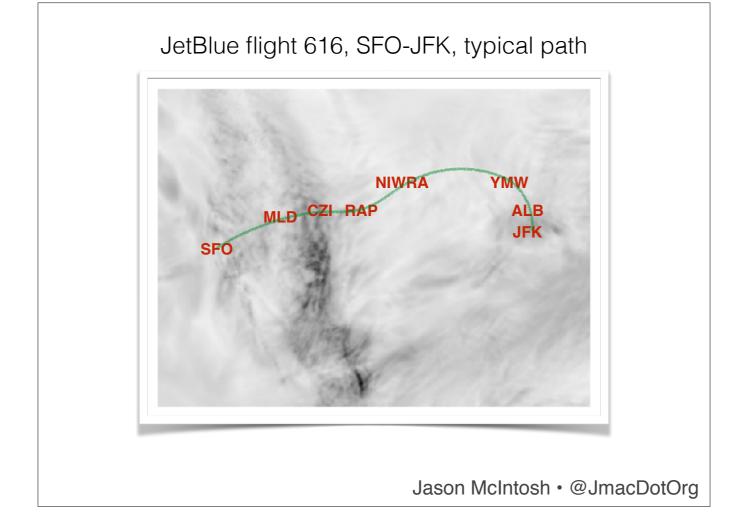
landing times and

JetBlue flight 616, SFO-JFK, typical path



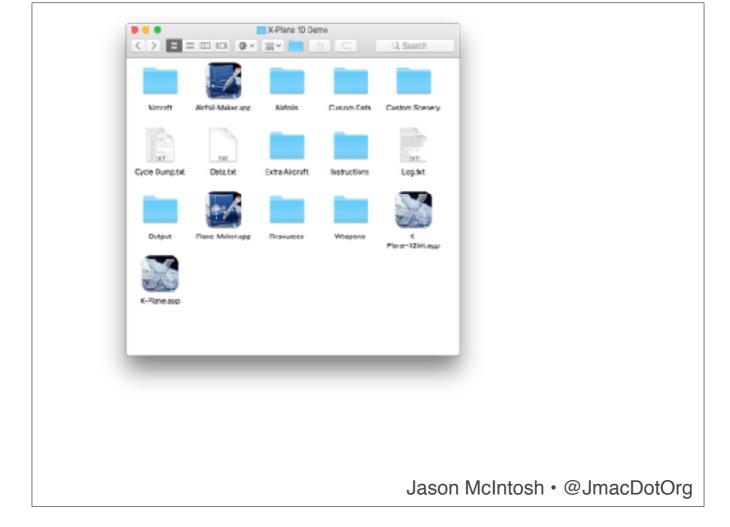
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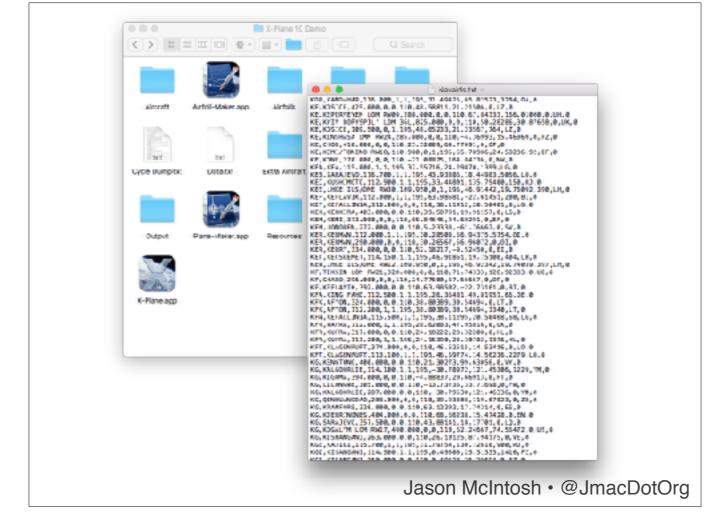


navigational fixes I could estimate what conditions surrounded the plane at any given point on its journey. But asking users to look up and type in nav codes of their upcoming flight, versus just a flight number, was a non-starter.

As an aside: I learned a lot about aeronautical navigation points for this project, and how there's no good public database of them all, but you can fake it well enough by



downloading the free trial of the super-nerdy X-Plane flight simulator and raiding

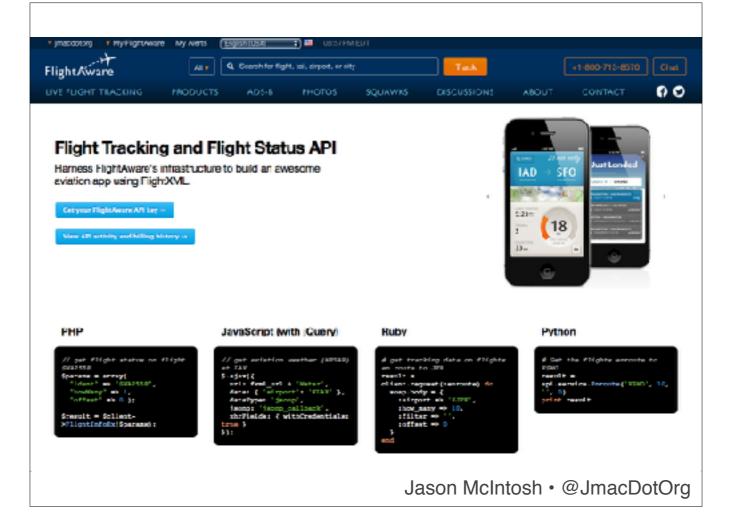


its data textfiles. But that is a tale for another time.

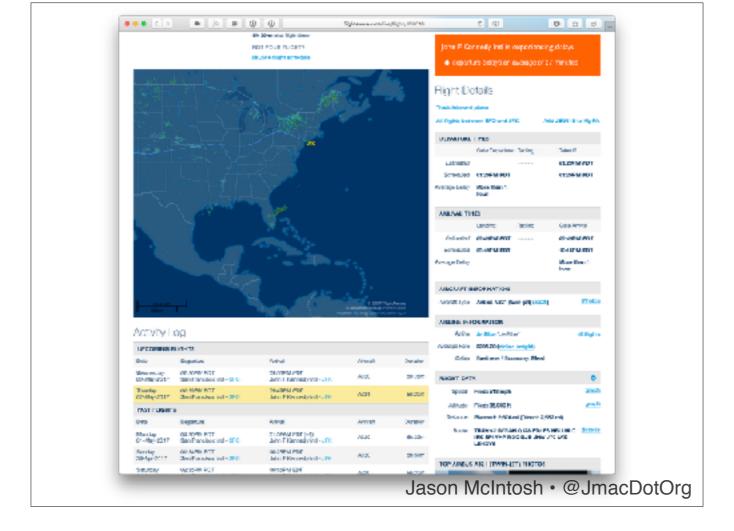


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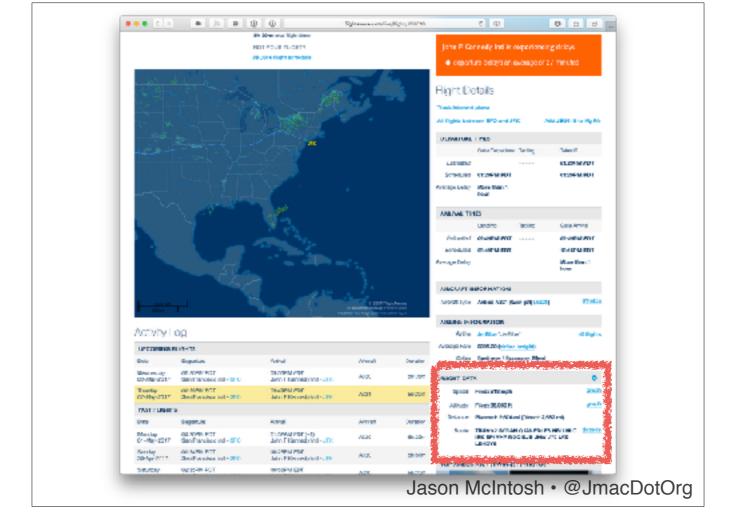
Back to my tower, which I wasn't ready to leave again, just yet.



I returned to my old friends at FlightAware, they of the commercial API, and... well.



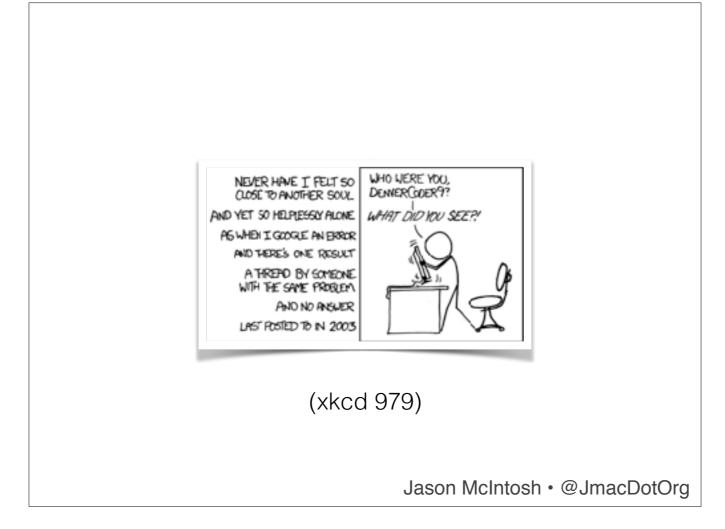
built a screen-scraper of their webapp, which among other things turns flight numbers



into nav paths. This would not scale to production, but it did let me complete



my proof of concept, of which me and some friends were the only users. (And yes, that's plotted against an Apple Maps screengrab. It was there, and it was good enough.) But now progress slowed down.



"Never have I felt so close to another soul", writes Randal Munroe in XKCD 979, "..."

Naturally I wasn't the only jerk on the internet who wanted FAA data, and indeed found many instances of people asking, but no clear answers. I did find some tantalizing, almost rumor-level pointers in multiple years-old forum posts

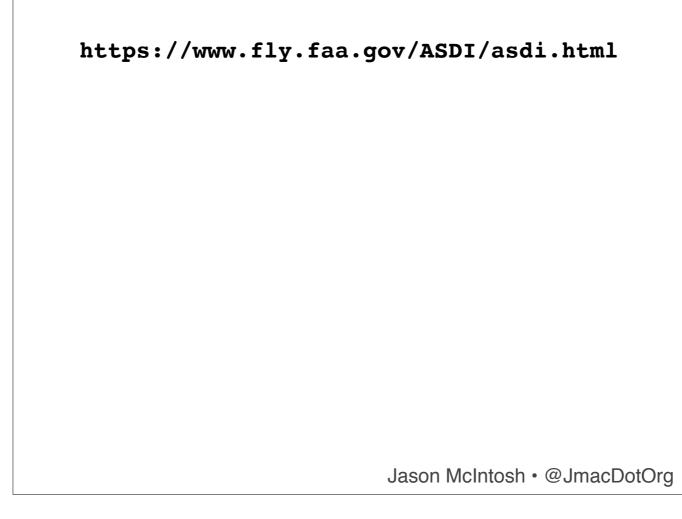


https://www.fly.faa.gov/ASDI/asdi.html



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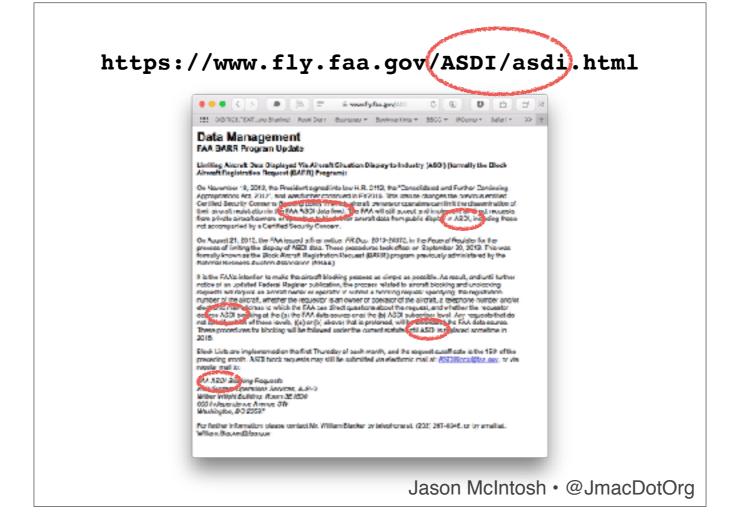
that all linked to the same URL, and clearly there



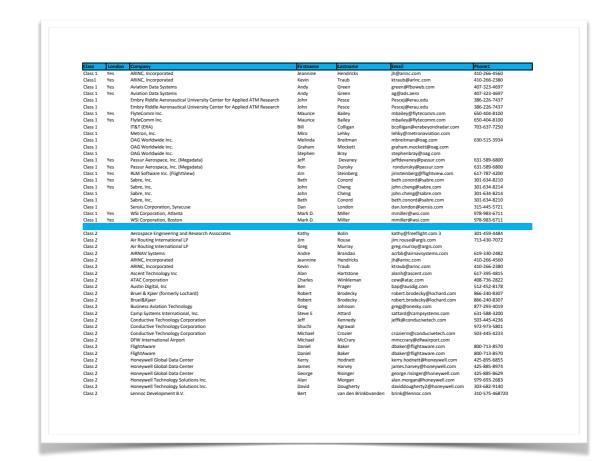
used to be a website there, but now it just held

https://www.fly.gad.a.gov/lises/books/fly.ga

a 2011 press release describing a random policy change, like a fading concert flier tacked to an old warehouse. However, it had an acronym I hadn't seen before:

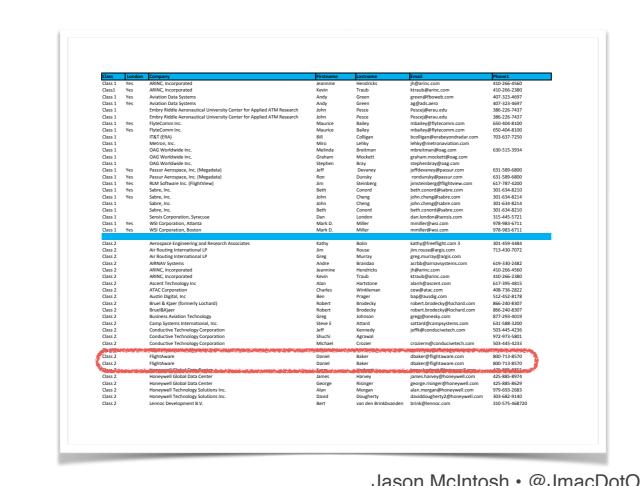


ASDI, and a reference to something called the FAA ASDI data feed. That gave me another handle to search on. And I found, for example,



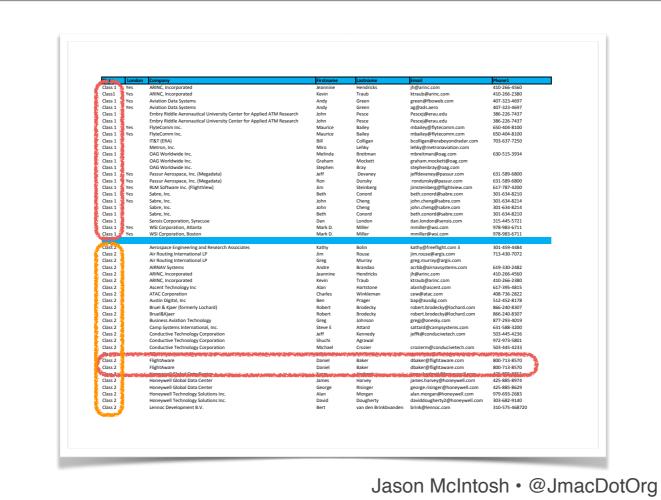
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this document listing users of ASDI — whatever it was — which included

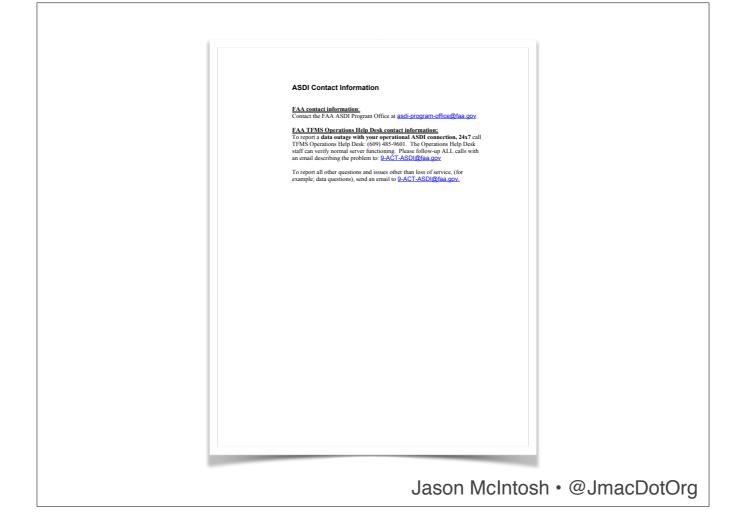


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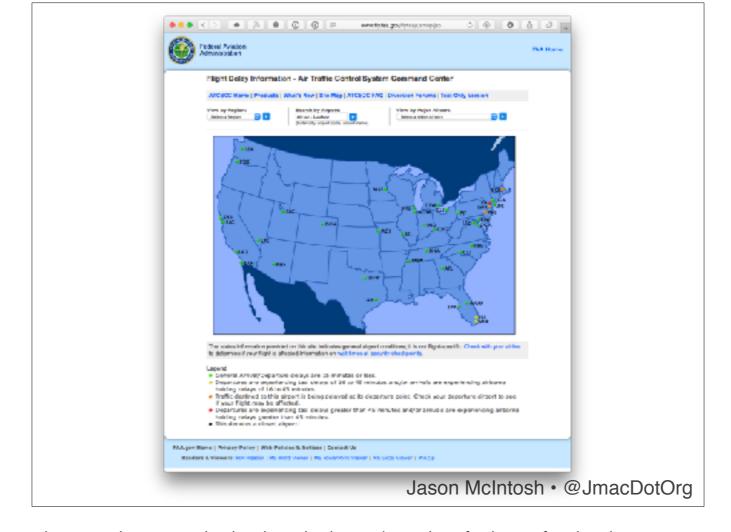
my friends at FlightAware. OK: right track. I'd also seen mention of this



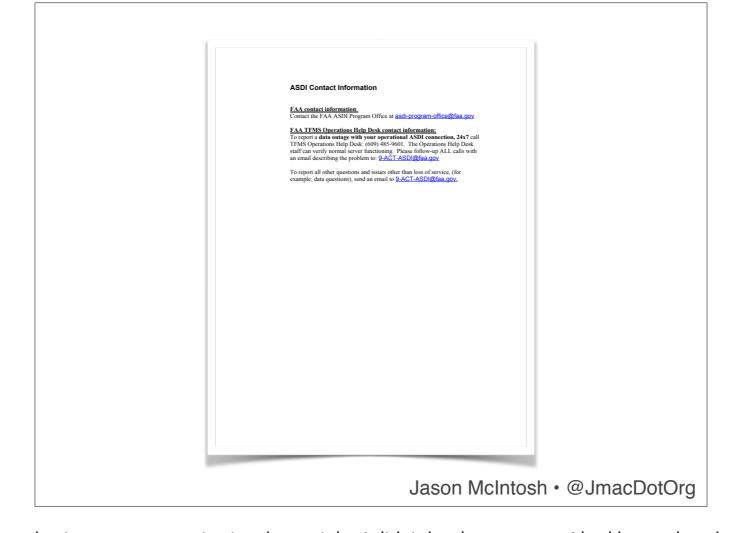
Class 1 versus Class 2 designation, which would come in handy later. Finally I found



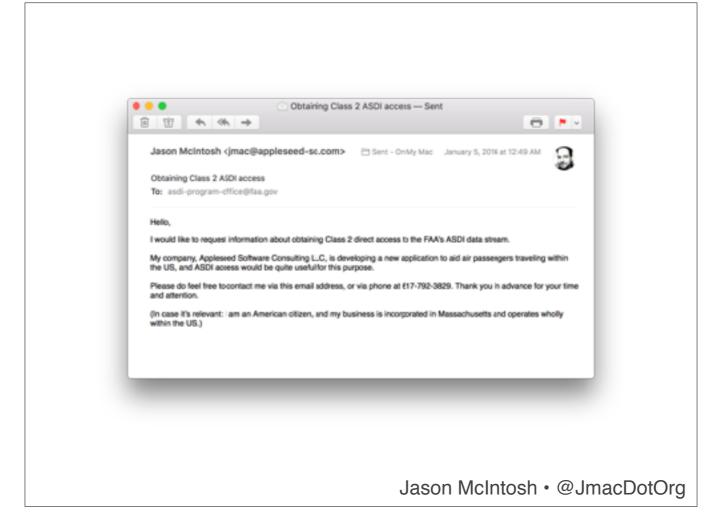
this PDF, sitting in a directory containing no index files, and on an FAA website



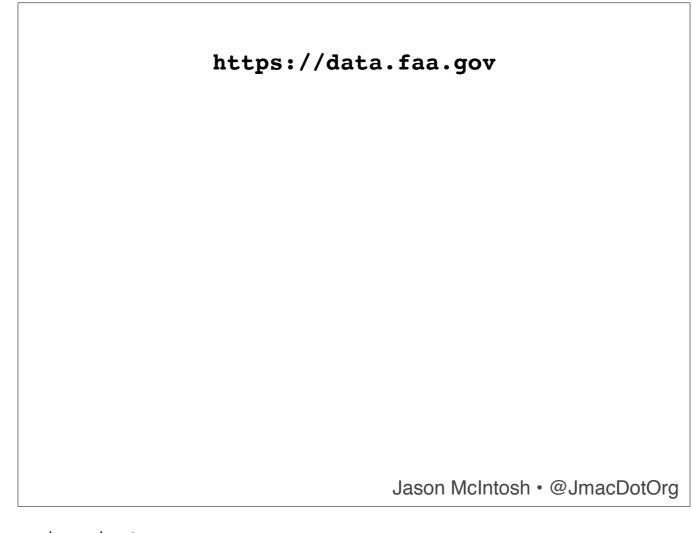
otherwise dedicated to flight delays. That search engines had indexed it bespoke a dignified past for the document,



and I could only assume its continued existence an organizational oversight. I didn't let that stop me. I had learned my lesson earlier. I wrote the email address printed on it. Like a tourist speaking from a phrasebook, I pieced together vocabulary I had encountered but not necessarily fully understood, and I said



"Hello, I would like to request information about obtaining Class 2 direct access to the FAA's ASDI data stream." A week later I got a response. And it said: ASDI! We've retired that. Have you checked



data.faa.gov? You know, the website we have that is

https://data.faa.gov BOA () B (Federal Aviation Administration Agreement Portal This portal provides the means to request access to FAA data and services. The following catalog lists what is currently available. For more information, or to register for access, cick the "Learn More" button. Ea House Flight and Retrard Date Integrated Terminal Newbor Hodica to Airman (NOSAMs) - Ateu Service Station to Airman 3875AMg - Web Service OFBES Alignet Data Loon Nore Loan More Jason McIntosh • @JmacDotOrg

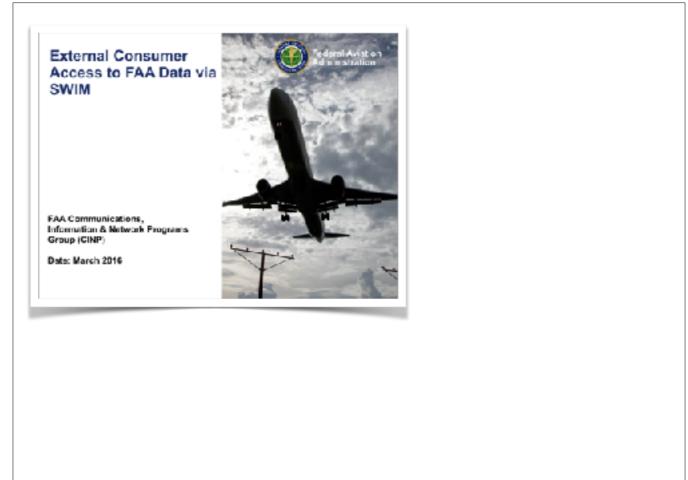
covered in giant green buttons, the very first one of which is labeled



En Route Flight and Related Data? And I said: How is your robots.txt file...

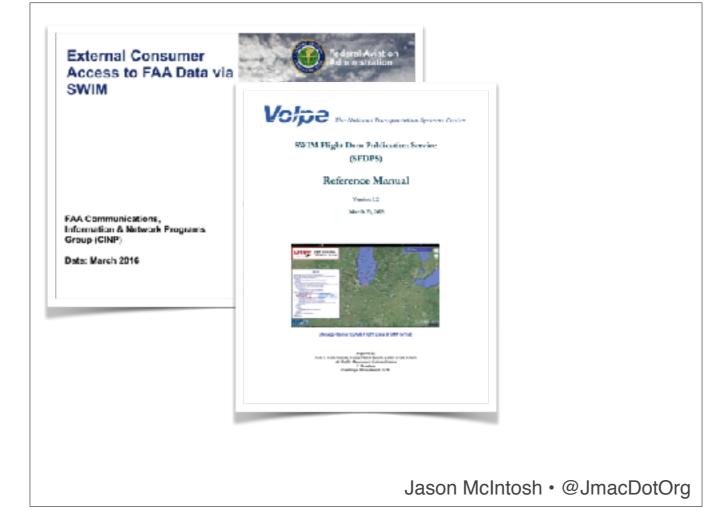
https://data.faa.gov Federal Aviation Administration Agreement Portal This portal provides the means to request access to FAA data and services. The following catalog lists what is currently available. For more information, or to register for access, cick the "Learn More" button. Ea Roars Flight and Related Date Integrated Terminal Newsfer Hodica to Airman (NOSAMs) - Ateu Service Notice to Airman SKTAMig - Web Service OFBES Alignet Data Loon Nore Loan More Jason McIntosh • @JmacDotOrg

You know what... never mind. *Thank you.* And friends, I hit that button.

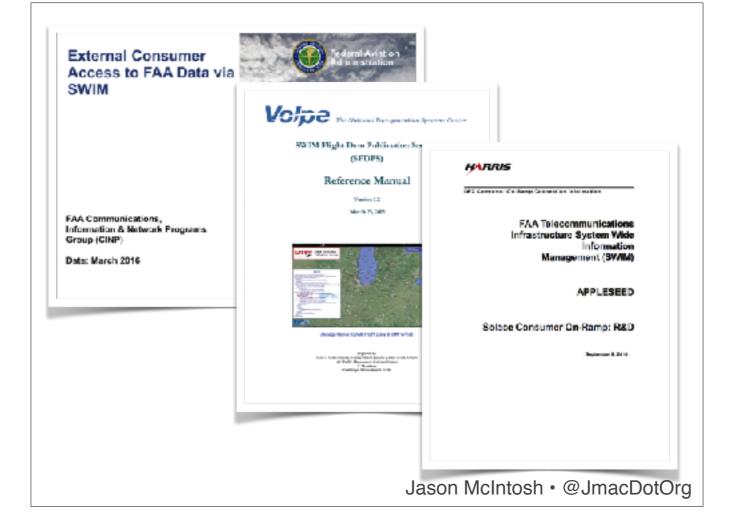


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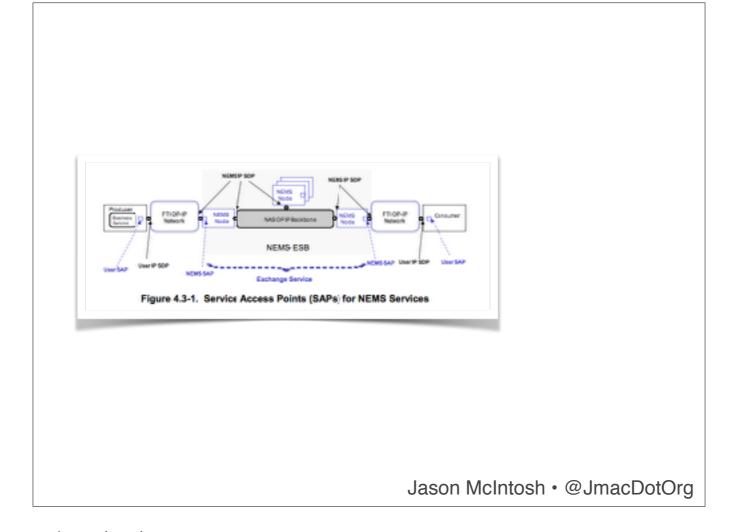
At this point, about three months had passed since that bank to port over Atlanta, and now I found myself set up with my own assigned contact at the FAA,



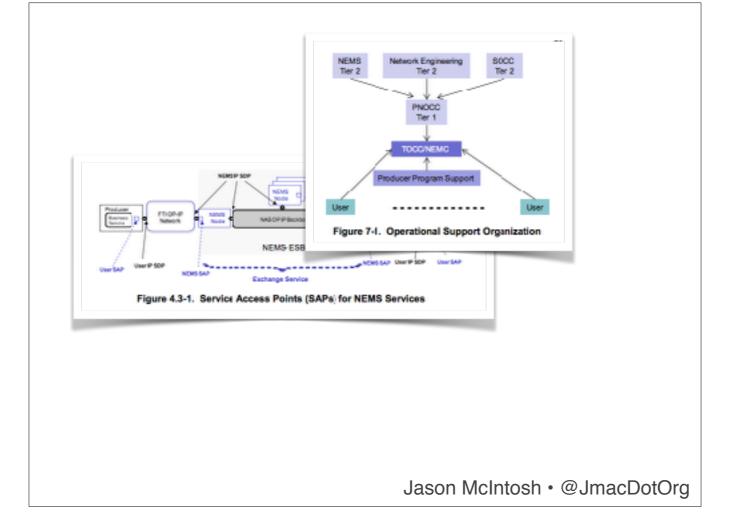
as well as a passel of documents about hooking in to the administration's flight-data firehose. And here, for the first time in this project,



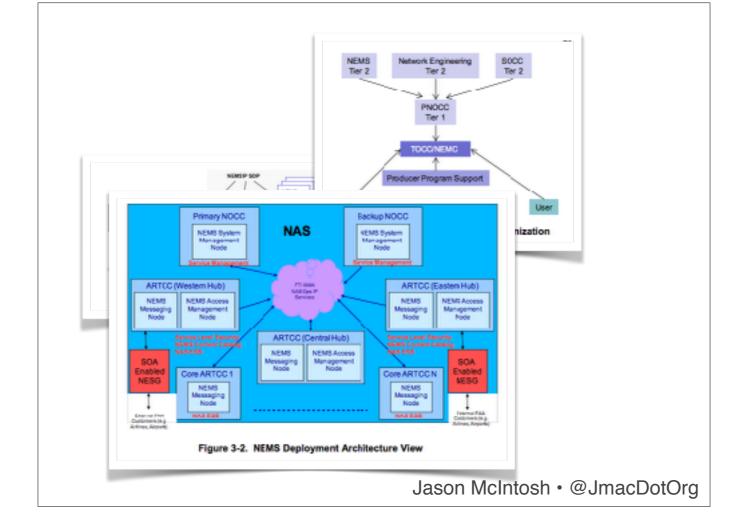
I faced an obstacle I could neither code nor question my way around.



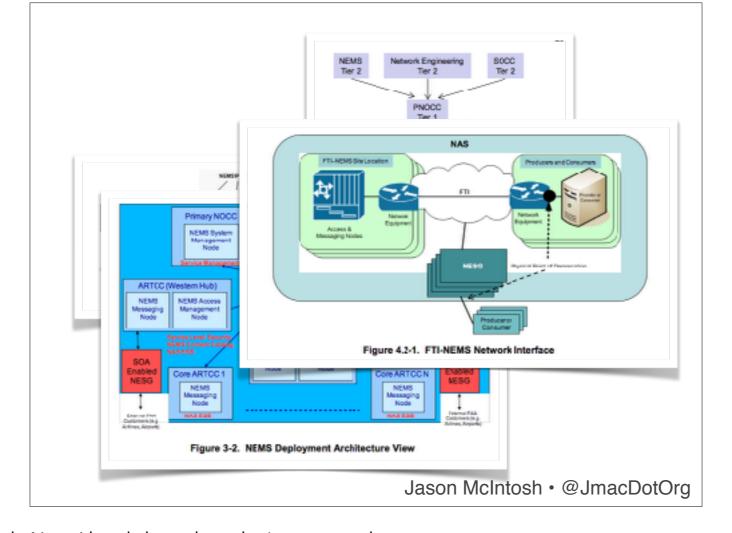
The FAA requires that organizations seeking this data



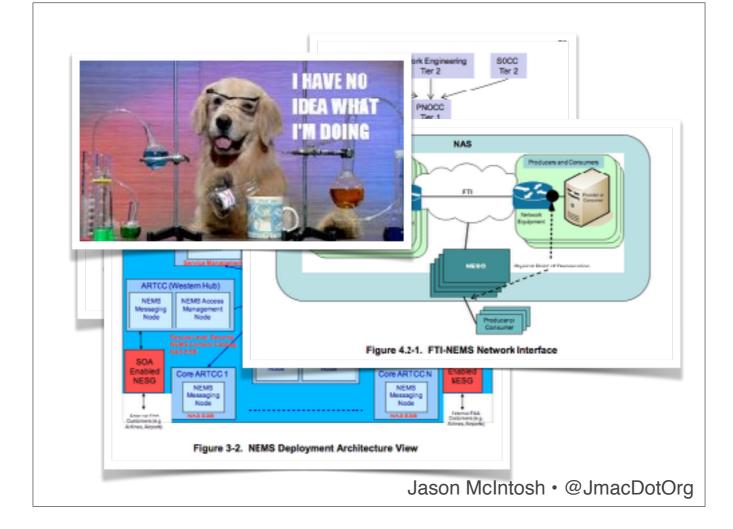
first establish a permanent site-to-site VPN connection



between some machine under their control



and the FAA's own internal network. Now. I barely know how the internet works,

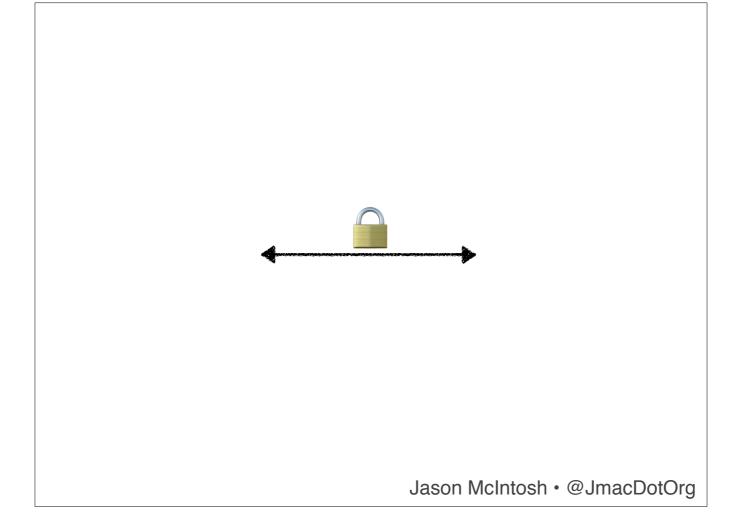


and I didn't know anything at all about VPNs. in my experience heretofore, VPNs are only a vaguely annoying hurdle that certain of my business clients insist I leap over before

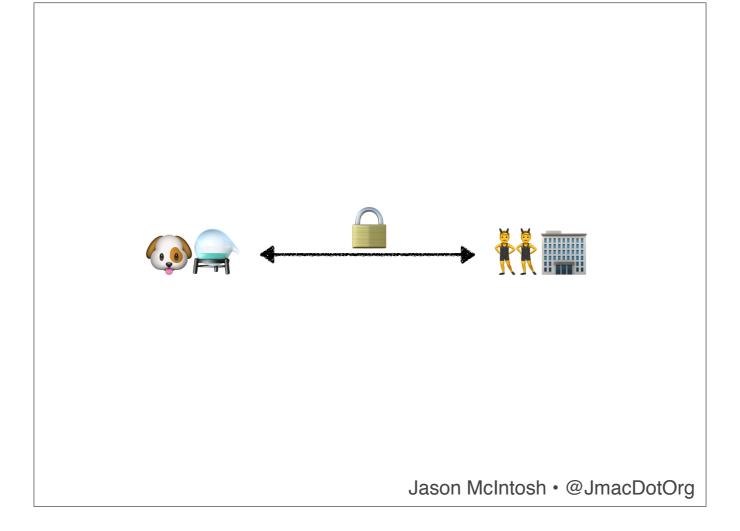


I could SSH in and see why Apache had crashed this time.

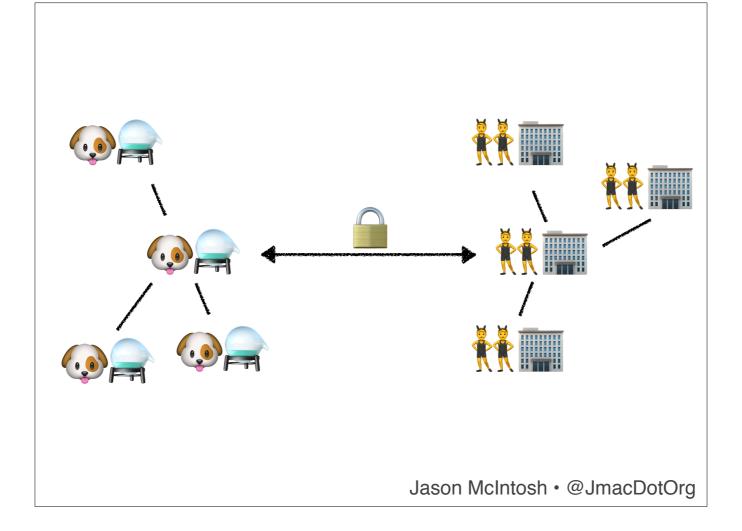




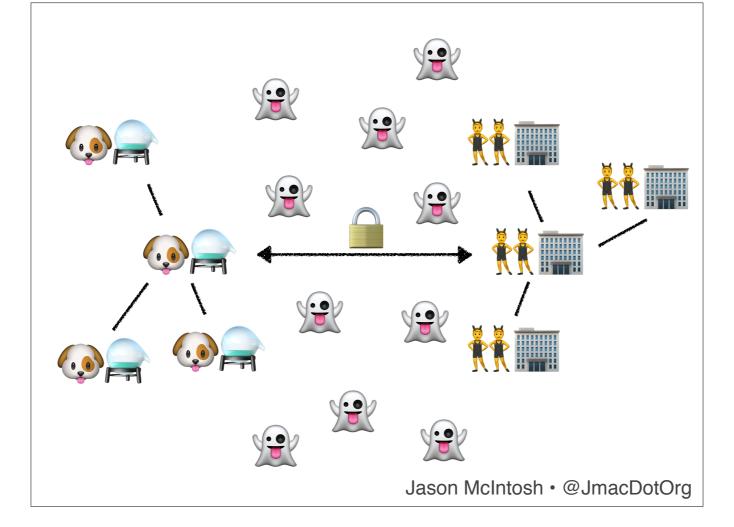
establishing an encrypted tunnel between



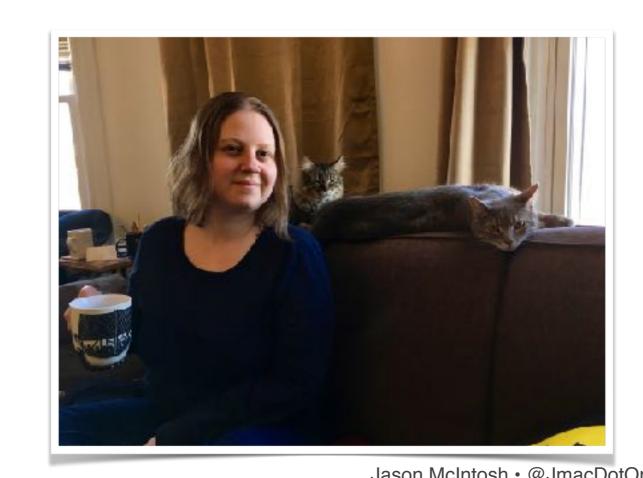
two routers that see each other as peers, and typically used to securely connect a single organization's



geographically disparate subnetworks over



the insecure internet. So, as a prerequisite for something I saw as a public API, a site-to-site VPN struck me as a little weird. One colleague of mine, upon hearing about it, compared the requirement to inviting a dinner guest over on the condition that they come in through your bedroom window. It's just not a commonly encountered phenomenon, at least not in the open-sourcey world,

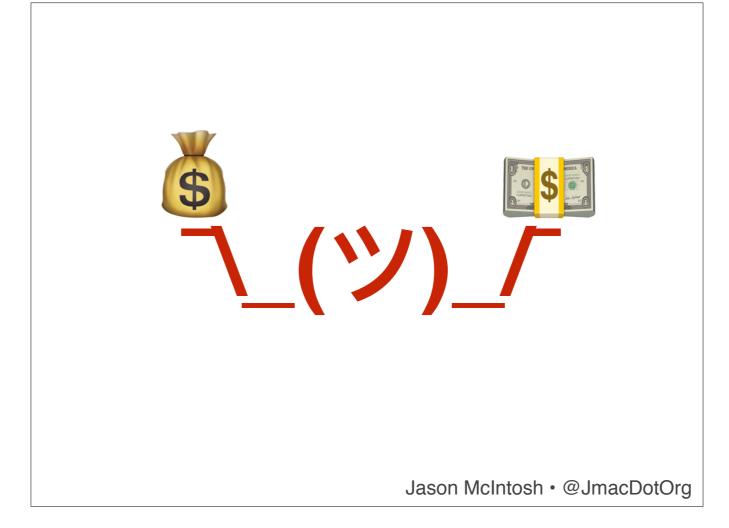


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and when I used my shiny new super-power of asking for help,



I got nothing. None of my colleagues knew how to implement this. I continued to get very little results when



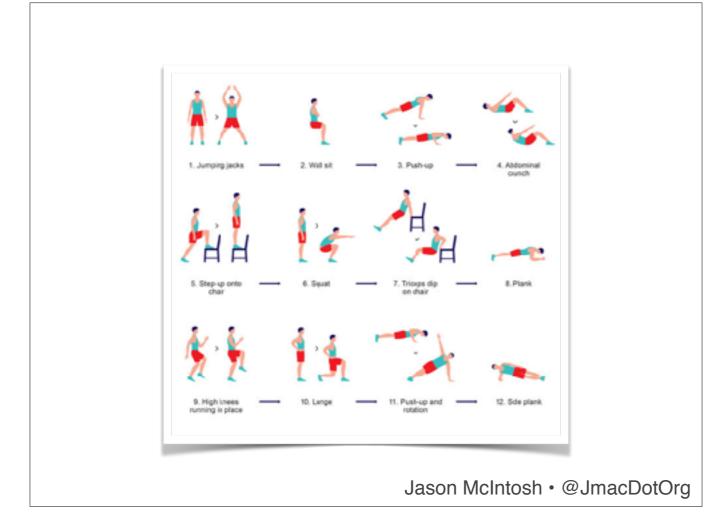
I decided to start spending some money on the problem, hiring other consultants to help. While I did have some insightful conversations, the problem still stumped every professional in my vicinity who was willing to consider the problem.



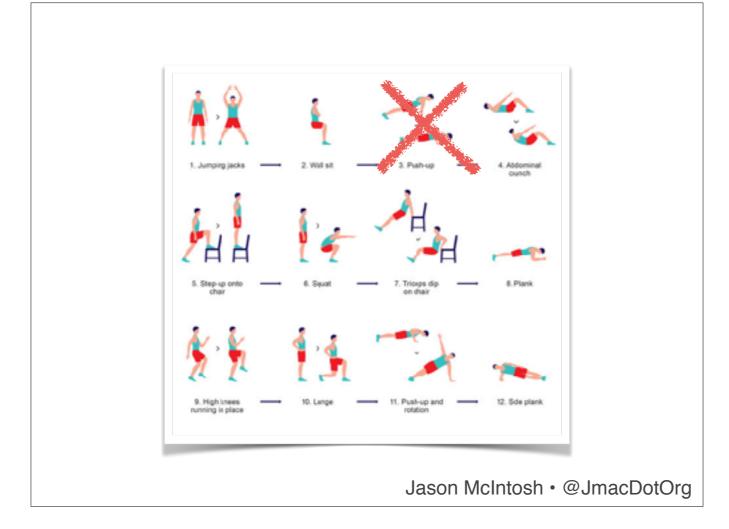
At my talk a couple of years ago about blogging, I mentioned as an aside how in recent years I've taken up regular exercise. I had a twofold reason for it.

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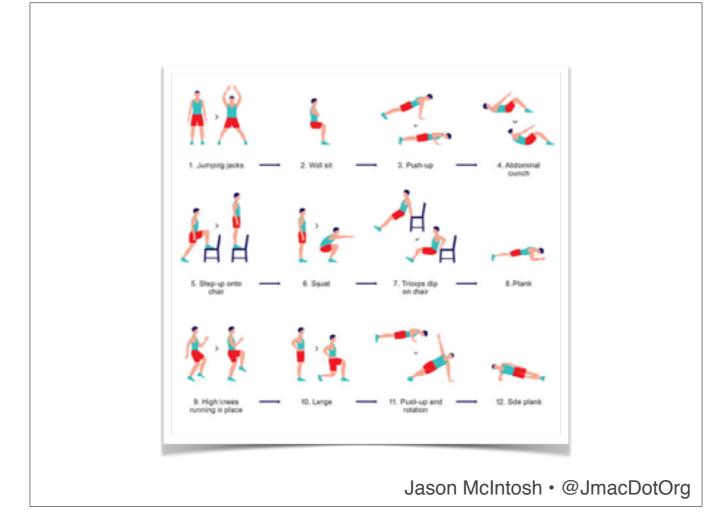
On the one hand, due to both age and dicey genetics, I'd stopped receiving daily well-being for free every morning.



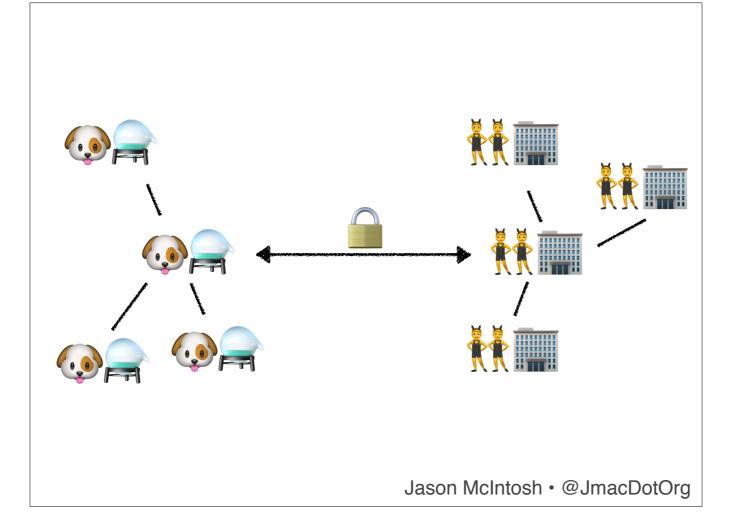
More to the point though, new scientific and technological developments, like the standardized seven-minute workout and the panoply of web and mobile apps that implement it, made high-intensity workouts much more feasible for an otherwise extremely lazy and antisocial person.



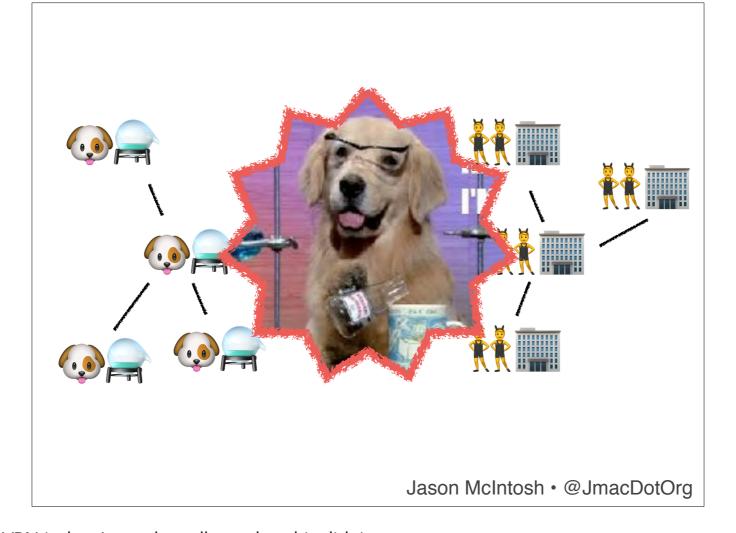
My whole life up until then, I assumed that I couldn't do push-ups. That, I don't know, I just lacked the ineffable sinew for it, somehow, like how some of my friends can't eat cilantro.



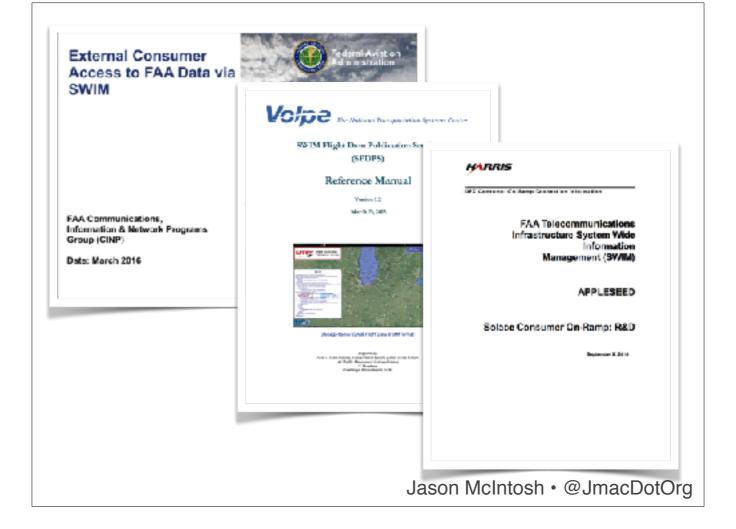
But as soon as I reached a sweet-spot intersection of personal motivation and technological affordance, I found that I could do push-ups just fine, decades of denial to the contrary. And even though it took until the summer of 2015 for the penny to drop, I do believe that that experience helped me to question how accurate it was that



I just couldn't "do" network engineering. What if -- here was a crazy thought -- what if I took just a little that money I tried to spend on consulting, as good an idea as that was at the time -- blocked out two weeks, and taught myself how to do this? Well, I'll tell you right now,



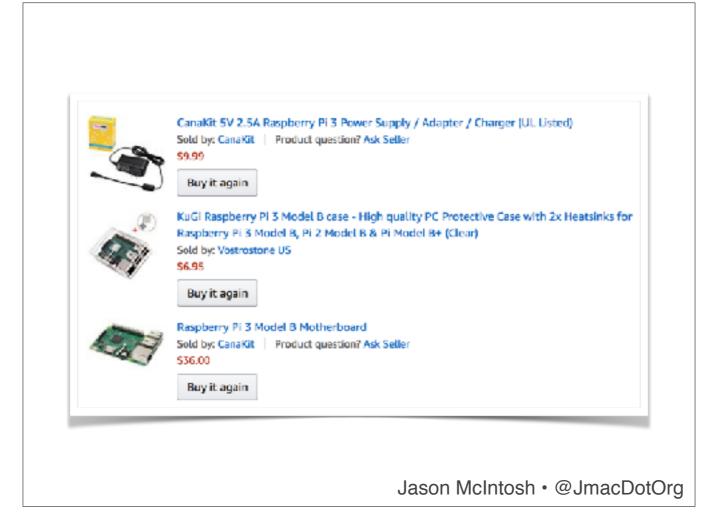
I still barely have any idea what a VPN is, but I can also tell you that this didn't stop me.



In all their documentation, the FAA assumed that you-the-outsider would use dedicated, aye, Cisco-branded hardware as your end of the site-to-site VPN tunnel. Fine. So be it!



After some time banging around on Amazon, I bought Cisco's cheapest network appliance that had "site-to-site VPN" written on the box,



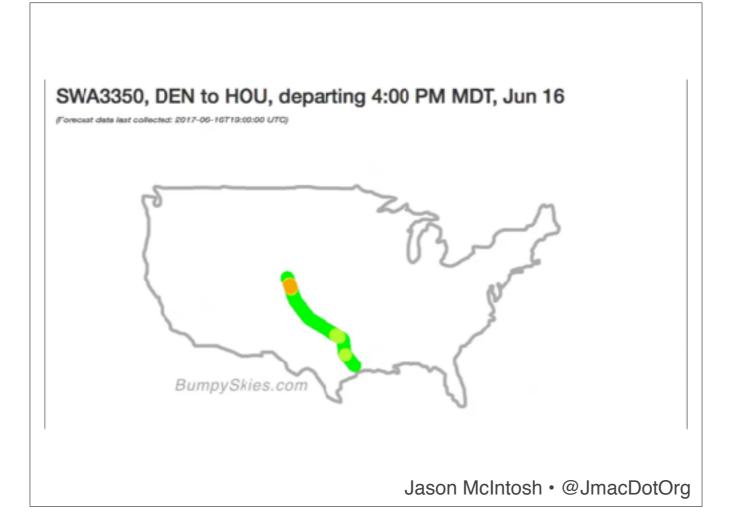
and I bought a raspberry Pi to use as a development server to which I had physical access. and I bought a static IP address for my little office,



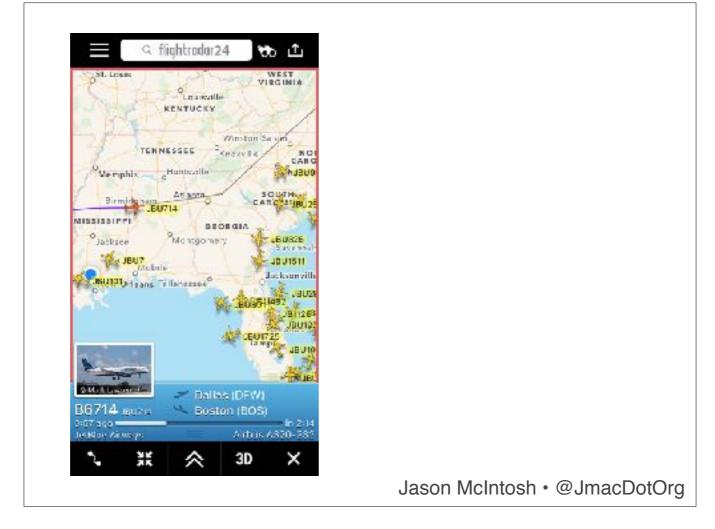
And using the box's Java-GUI wizard which causes my laptop's fans to switch to jet-turbine mode, I got, after two weeks, that Raspberry Pi to talk to the FAA. And after two more weeks, I managed to translate the state of that Cisco box into



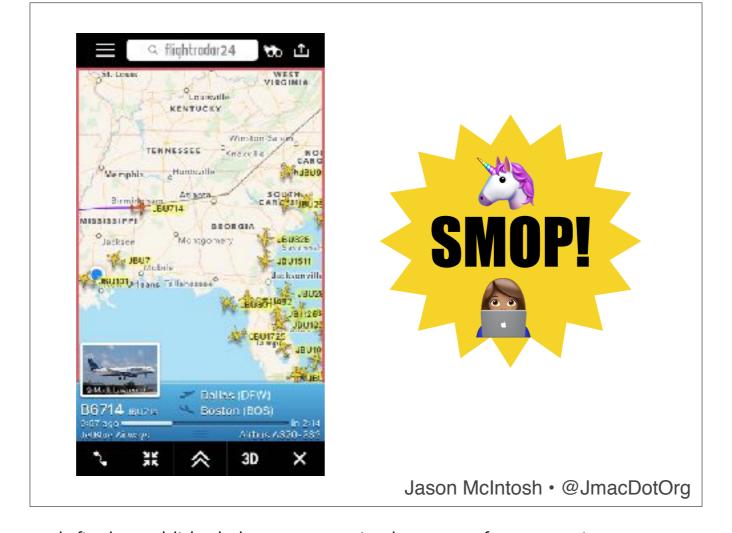
a nice, clean Strongswan configuration file running on one of my beautiful, silent, invisible Linodes, which is all I really wanted eight months prior. Both the Pi and the router sit unplugged in places of honor on my office shelf today,



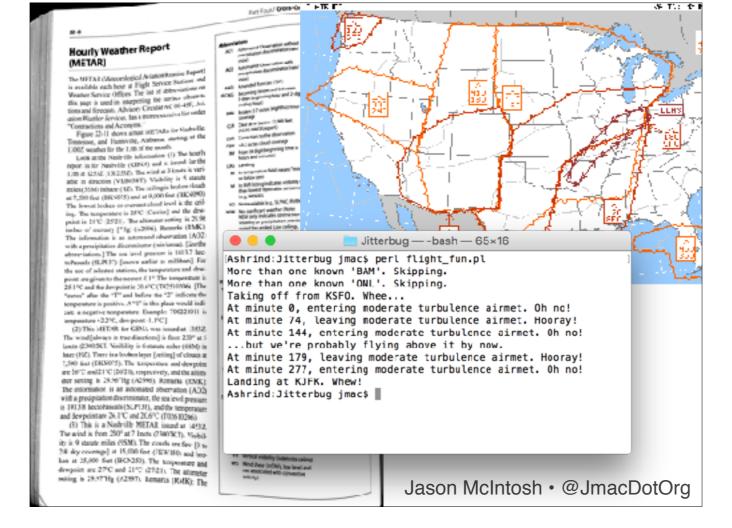
And all that brings it around to where the whole project rests today. So what didn't go well? Obviously, it took too long. A one-page web application that draws lines over a map of a single country shouldn't have taken most of a year to build, and while I could further dig into reasons why, I find far more interesting the problem that I can't eat my own dogfood here.



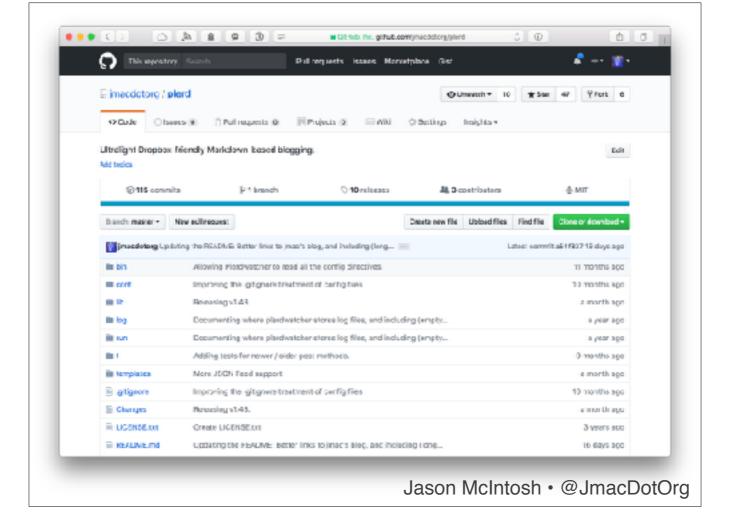
That inspiration struck while I sat literally in-flight makes for a subtly crucial point, one I was blind to during those initial months of subsequent and entirely ground-based work,



when I was able to pretend that, my goals firmly established, the rest was a simple matter of programming.

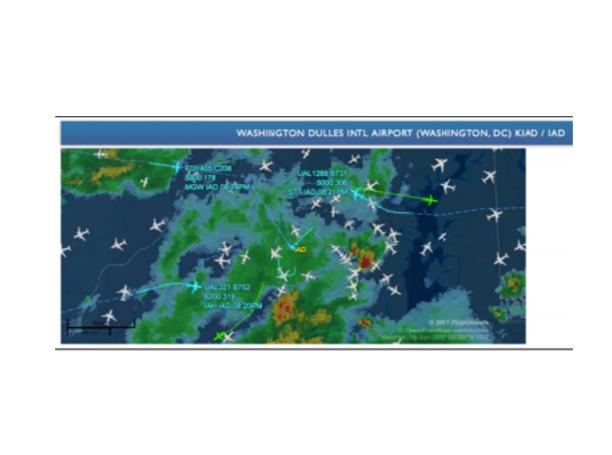


My joy at rapidly learning and experimenting and iterating was genuine! But in the excitement I never thought through the fact that I'd be able to use the final project four or six times per year, at most. I just don't fly that much! Today, as much as I love seeing the site work, I do so at a more abstract level than I should.



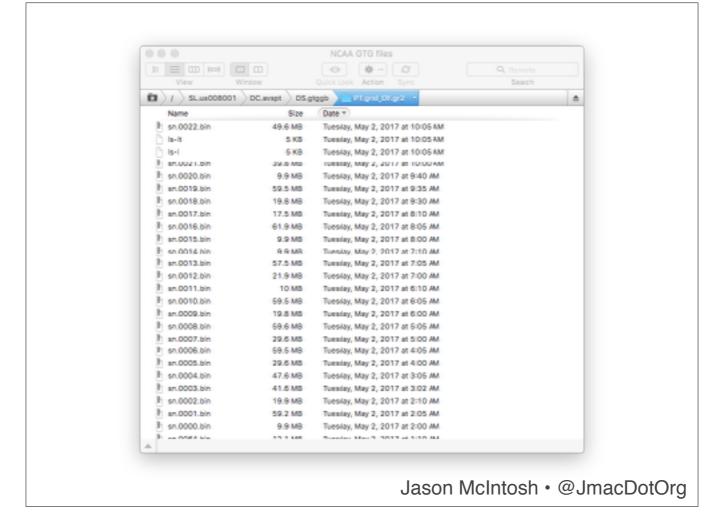
Compare this to Plerd, my blogging platform, and my most successful self-started open-source project. Colleagues and I use it several times per month, across multiple contexts, and this more than any Github star count or whatnot has driven me to make it the best tool that I can.

There's no getting around the fact that passion projects work best when their builder can also become their most fanatical user — but in BumpySkies' case, that just isn't possible, and that will always be a diminishing factor.



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But thirdly, and most worryingly, the project's dependencies have become more precarious through no action of my own. I have concerns now about its future viability which didn't seem worth my trouble in late 2015. In particular, those two data sources it relies on depend in turn on American tax dollars, shared through transparent, government-funded science that increasingly feels itself subject to a new kind of turbulence.



Eighteen months ago I wondered if using an anonymous FTP server outside of my control would give me problems later on; today, *click* I wonder if assuming the continued existence of publicly funded meterological science is folly. I hope not.



But so far I don't have any reason to bail out. In retrospect I find Bumpy Skies absolutely worth the effort I've put into it so far, and with climate change all but guaranteeing that air travel will become only more turbulent, *click* I see this tool as itself a source of comfort in an uncertain future.



And yet I'm not sure what to do with BumpySkies next. I'd like to add more features, like mapping cloud cover, for flyers like me who like to see the ground. Honestly, I'd also like it to generate income somehow, but that's truly flying far afield of my own expertise.

So I end with an appeal: if you or someone you know might like to speak with me about where this technology could go next, and for whom, please do look me up. I'm willing to travel, if I have to.



Thank you very much.