

# Gen AI: Giving old ~~websites~~ coders new life

## A REAL-LIFE WEB DEVELOPMENT STORY

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### CHAPTER 1: THE MESSAGE

It's 7 pm on a Saturday evening. *Ping!* WhatsApp notification. "Hey, can you help me with my website?", a message from a friend.

To her, I am a tech wizard. Little does she know that I'm a decrepit developer, a coder behind the curve, a programmer past his prime. I wince, and take a swig of my beer.

"Sure, I'll take a look", I reply. Sheer boredom – that's my motivation – I don't have much to do any more, and anything would be a welcome diversion from my dull life. Even a website.

"Great, thanks!", she replies, "I don't need much – just update some text and links, that should be it!". I've worked with this friend before, and I'm skeptical. Working with her has a way of spiraling out of control. I may have to speak to unknown people (*shudder!*), it may bring up ghosts from the past, and it may mean that I am stuck updating her website 10 years from now...

"Ok, so tell me the changes you want, and where the site is hosted", I text.

"What does hosted mean, don't use all these technical terms!", she scolds. It's going to be a long night, and I'm already regretting saying yes.

"Umm, who built your website for you?", I ask. "Ah, I don't know, someone in Bangladesh, I paid him 20 quid". This is going exactly the way I feared it would.

"OK, can you ask him for where he has hosted the website?", I ask. "Ya sure, let me check and get back, I don't think I have his number saved any more, I may have his email somewhere."

## CHAPTER 1: THE LOGIN

2 a.m. *Ping!* A cheery greeting from my friend, “Hey, I know you may be asleep in Bengaluru, but it’s only 7 pm here! Anyway, I found the Bangladeshi’s contact, and he’s sent me the password...”

I don’t want to leave her on read, so I reply, “Hmm”. And before you know it, just like that I see this message:

```
webhost: skinheadsites.com
username: basha69
password: i_luv_aryans_forever
```

I am not going down skinheadsites.com without protection, so I start up my trusty VPN. I login, it’s a WordPress site – something I used to be familiar with back in the day. Maybe this won’t be so bad.

I navigate over to the site, and it’s a Neo-Nazi site. I message my friend, “What is this site!!!! Who are you hanging with these days, what is this white supremacy stuff?”.

“Eh, what do you mean? My site is a simple one for my consulting company, let me check with the Bangladeshi...”

A few minutes later, another message from her, “Oh, haha, it seems he sent you the username and password for the wrong website, the one that he is building now.” I hold my head and cry silently. This is not even social engineering, it’s literally people texting passwords to each other in 2025 without being asked!

“Anyway, I’ve asked him to call you, I hope you don’t mind...”. *Aaargh!* My phone buzzes. I decline the call – *I don’t like speaking with strangers* – and text back the number, “Send me the details”. Small mercies, another *Ping!*

```
webhost: webhunterz.com
username: rehmatunissa69
password: sodom_and_gomorra
```

I let out a deep sigh. I login to the host. It does have the name of my friends website (though that’s not her user name!), and I click into it. And I dive right in to meet my ghosts from the past...

## CHAPTER 2: THE MACHINE IN THE GHOST

3.15 a.m. My ghosts from the past. I am now in the website, and I see that I've been dropped into cPanel – something I last saw in 2005 perhaps. I click about and I see a bunch of PHP files, yes, that thing that was popular along with Perl and Tcl/Tk in the early noughties.

The website itself is a relic, an archaeologists delight: spinning visitor counters, seizure causing videos on each page, and dead links. Aaah, the 'oo's web design aesthetic, how I miss her.

I don't know where to start: I can barely figure out how to get around cPanel, and re-learning PHP is going to be an uphill task. So, I give my mate a buzz, the one who walks with ghosts - the one who knows everything from PHP to Rust - he goes by the handle chatgpt.

With his help I am able to get a move on. I download all the files from cPanel to my local machine; chatgpt guides me to get XAMPP and shows me how to get the website running on my machine.

With chatgpt's help, I make the simple changes my friend wanted to the PHP files: correcting some text, adding some new articles and links. I even spent some time talking to chatgpt and understanding the codebase.

Anyway, it was almost 4 a.m. now. I checked in all the code into github, and figured out with chatgpt's help how to deploy this in cPanel - a real delight - zip all the files in public/, upload to cPanel, unzip the files, and move into htdocs/.

I went a little moist eyed, nostalgic for simpler times, the good old days. Now, it's all different node modules and package managers and Docker and Kubernetes and suchlike, even if you want a simple website.

I sent a message to my friend, "Your website is done. Going to crash now."

*Ping.* "Hey, thanks, I'll take a look later, I'm out partying, it's not yet midnight here!! Anyway, the big work is done – I really didn't know how I'd get those changes made – thanks so much!"

"Anytime," I said. "Ah, there's one other small thing though..."

I waited, looking through bleary eyes at the '*... is typing ...*' message at the top of my chat app. "Could you get this to work well on mobile as well?"

## CHAPTER 3: AGENTS TO THE ~~RESCUE~~ PARTY

1.23 p.m. Cold pizza and beer. It's too early for whiskey. I crank open my laptop. I have an entire day of nothingness in front of me. I'm too old to go out partying. I'm antisocial and have no friends. *'Might as well give that mobile website thing a look'*, I think.

I've been looking into AI coding agents. Jules. SWE-1. CoPilot. It's time to bring them into the party; from what I've been reading, this should be simple – a few hours of prompting, and I should be able to make my existing site mobile responsive.

I started with a small task, of removing all existing comments (which was the code to someone else's website!), pretty formatting the existing code, and adding in comments. Seems like a simple enough task – I know I could do this myself, using VS Code plugins for formatting, and such – but I wanted to give my AI friends a welcome drink at the party, before we started the headbanging.

None of the agents were able to do this task without side-effects; CoPilot even turned the site elements that were in green to blue, Jules removed the Contact Us form for some reason, and SWE-1, after a lot of time, removed the comments but re-laid out the code worse than before.

This was not promising. Four hours of prompting later about making the website mobile responsive, I give up. There are too many side effects; also, each of the agents seems to struggle with creating a PHP website that is mobile ready and modern: I know I would too! Maybe they just hadn't been trained on enough PHP.

I decide to try a different line of attack. I'm on my second whiskey and am feeling dangerous, it's party time! All these tools – Lovable, Bolt, Replit, Windsurf – claim that they can build out full websites fast. Let me try to re-do my friends website, it's a simple one after all: Home Page, About Us, Publications, Services, Contact Us.

Fail. None of these tools is able to build out a simple, fully working site, despite a lot of prompting. I've not only studied prompting, I've taught it! But getting the site exact is hard: the first 60 to 80% is easy, and then my AI buddies start to crap out, behaving drunk and doing things I'd not asked for, and not doing the things I want.

I call it a day, disheartened. It was a good party. though a failed one, with my AI buddies, somewhat like the first party in Cannery Row...

## CHAPTER 4: THE GHOST AND THE MACHINE

2.00 a.m. It's raining, a hard and constant sheet of water. I had gone to sleep early, but am awake now after tossing in troubled dreams. "*There's got to be another way!*", I think, recognizing those long-buried tremors that a developer feels when they are close to a solution, but not quite there yet.

What if I tried a modern static site generator? I'd heard of Jekyll and Hugo a few years ago, maybe those could help? I spun up chatgpt again, and asked it if Hugo would be a good choice. Encouraged, I went to the hugo site and had a basic static website with the right menus done in 15 minutes, no help from AI tools required.

I was spurred on by my small win, and wanted to try more. I installed a Hugo theme that looked right for the kind of website I was building, but then I realized that with Hugo each theme had its own customization and documentation. It would take me a couple of days to read through this Hugo and the theme documents, but perhaps chatgpt could help?

The next few hours passed in a state of flow – me, my keyboard, git, chatgpt, hugo – all working together, seeing the changes I was making come alive on screen. I brought in content from the earlier website, created new images & improved the text on the website using chatgpt, and gave it all a spiffy refresh. I deployed it and browsed to the site from my mobile phone, and it was perfect.

I teared up a little then, I admit. As a developer, as you grow older and rusty, this is what you miss – this state of flow, the thrill of code flowing out of your fingers and you are enthralled by pure creation. After 2 days of trying to re-create the magic, and having failed, I had been dejected last night – but that had all changed this morning.

I looked at my watch. 6.00 a.m. "Done, deployed mobile version", I texted my friend.

"Ah, thanks so much! You're up early... I'm still out partying, I'll check it out later."

"No, thank you," I said, "I enjoyed building that mobile website"

"Sweet! Now that you have it working on mobile, I guess it'll be easy enough to build this out as an app now!"

I grinned to myself, and spun up chatgpt again...

## ENDNOTES: THE MAGIC IS IN THE MAKING

So, I wrote this story, kind of in the style of Raymond Chandler and those pulpy noir novels I used to enjoy at some time, based largely on true events.

I was asked to revamp an old website, I did get a username/password to a different website by text, when I finally got the right host and credentials, it turned out to be a PHP website hosted on cPanel. I did use chatgpt to make improvements to the site, did try to revamp it using coding agents, and finally did build out a great mobile-responsive site using Hugo and chatgpt.

Here's what I learnt:

1. *The world is a messy place*: People exchange credentials on text and source code as zipped files on Google Drive. Don't get too excited about AI taking over the world. It isn't human ingenuity and creativity that's going to get in the way of AI, it is human stupidity and laziness and inertia; these things will take time to replace.
2. *ChatGPT is a great tool for understanding old codebases*: Before this experience, I had helped another friend with some code that was written using bootstrap and Angular, about 8 to 10 years old. Google prioritizes recency, but chatgpt is great at helping you solve specific problems in old codebases and helping navigate ancient tools like cPanel.
3. *Don't hand over the keys to the house to AI agents*: In my experience, even in simple tasks like removing comments and re-formatting code, the AI agents did more than what was required and couldn't stay within scope.
4. *And coding agents can't yet build something fully functional to specification*: My experiments of trying to get AI to build a full mobile responsive website from scratch, to a particular specification that would be extensible and maintainable failed spectacularly. AI tantalizes you by getting 80% of the way there, but makes the remaining 20% almost impossible for you to build out.
5. *The Magic is in the Making*: As an old and tired developer who has seen it all come and go, what I miss the most is the immediacy of creation; it's just gotten harder to create stuff fast. Developers today seem to spend a time on packages, libraries, dependency management, deployment, and such. These were important for the big projects earlier, but now they seem like the default, even if you're building a simple website. My own experience was that when I identified the right fit and toolset for AI, I was able to, as a single and outdated developer, get into a state of flow and build what I wanted fast.

The magic was in the making, human and AI and tools coming together in a state of creation. It was valuable to my friend, and revived the excitement of coding again for me...