When Trouble Comes: The Basics of Debugging

Or as I often call it:
“What the (bleep!) did I just do?!?”

Nobody gets it right the first time. Part of being fluent is the ability to identify the problems of the program. Although debugging is very case-specific, there are some principles.

Bugs vs. Faults

When the car doesn’t start because of a dead battery, figuring out the problem uses debugging skills … however, finding the dead battery is not technically debugging – it’s “fault identification”.
- When the error is a failing component of a correct design, it is a fault … when the battery is fixed, the car runs
- When the error is a failure of the design, it is a bug

When dealing with complex computer software and technologies, the chances are extremely high that the error is a bug
- In other words, you’ve most likely made a reasoning error

To Debug is to Think Abstractly

- Debugging is a process that improves with practice.
- Helps you trace what is going wrong with the program at hand
- An effective way to proceed is to...
  - Think about what you know … the facts
  - Consider what should be true … the assumptions
  - Formulate a test hypothesis … gather evidence
  - Work intelligently … assess if you’re making progress
- Think about how great it feels to find the problem that stumped everyone else!

Guidelines for Debugging

- There is no one sure way to debug. Every situation is different…but there are some guidelines you can follow

1. Make sure the error is reproducible – in other words, make it happen again
   - “Transient errors” can occur
   - The error may have been caused by a state or configuration that was unknowingly set … Get a “clean” instance of the bug
   - When reproducing the error, try to work with or create a minimal version of the system or program with the bug
     - Copy a chunk of HTML and look at it by itself
Guidelines : Check the obvious!

2. Check for obvious problems
   - Make sure that what you entered is what is required
     - Are there substitution mistakes? O-0 or 1-1 or 1-I
   - If there are multiple components or files in the system with bugs, make sure they are properly connected
     - HTML files and the pictures/images that are referenced
   - Has anything been changed recently?
     - Or, do you just THINK you changed something?
   - When there are multiple inputs, does the order matter?
   - The chances are small that the problem is obvious – but always start with this as a process of elimination

Guidelines : Isolate the error

3. Isolate the problem – Most likely the error is in a specific place in the system/program, so sections that are "correct" should be removed from consideration
   - Isolating the problem to a specific procedure is best
     - Your HTML displays up to a point, then nothing – you know where you should start looking
   - Verifying that parts you think are correct really ARE correct is essential
     - Are you SURE you don’t have to end a tag, or enclose a value in quotes?

Guidelines : Step through the process

4. Ok, you’ve isolated the error – now what? Reason through the process start-to-finish, predicting what should be computed and then verifying that it has been
   - If your prediction doesn’t match an observation, then move inwards and further isolate the problem
     - The process was OK prior to this step
     - The process was incorrect after this step
   - Look at the inputs and reason through the step
   - If the bug isn’t found, continue applying the guidelines

Guidelines : Assess Objectively

5. It often will happen that you check everything out and find it to be OK, but the bug is still there
   - DON’T become frustrated!!!! Instead, evaluate your progress objectively
   - Are you making a wrong assumption
   - Are you misinterpreting the data input or output?
   - Have you made a wrong prediction/deduction?
Debugging Example: Building an HTML Table

The basic 2 x 2 table in HTML has the following scheme:

```html
<TABLE>
  <TR>
    <TD>This is Row 1, Cell 1</TD>
    <TD>This is Row 1, Cell 2</TD> Row 1 spec
  </TR>
  <TR>
    <TD>This is Row 2, Cell 1</TD>
    <TD>This is Row 2, Cell 2</TD> Row 2 spec
  </TR>
</TABLE>
```

NBA Players Table: First attempt

```html
<TABLE WIDTH="80%" CELLPADDING="3" BORDER="2">
  <TR BGCOLOR="#33CCFF">
    <TD>Name</TD>
    <TD>Team</TD>
    <TD>Photo</TD></TR>
  <TD>Michael Jordan</TD>
  <TD>Chicago Bulls</TD>
  <TD<IMG SRC="jordan"></TD>
  <TD>Larry Bird</TD>
  <TD>Boston Celtics</TD>
  <TD<IMG SRC="bird"></TD>
  <TR><TD>Dennis Rodman</TD>
  <TD align="center"><IMG SRC="worm jpg"></TD>
</TR>
</TABLE>
```

Steps

- Is the bug reproducible? ...reconstruct web page
- Check the "obvious" stuff ... locate the NBA photos
- Isolate the problem ... analyze the page—what’s wrong?
- Reason through the process
  - Think about what should be happening (what you should see)
  - Make predictions and check if they occur
- Assess your progress objectively (don’t freak out!!!!)
  - What do you need to know or find out?
  - Are there other things you can do?
  - Don’t get frustrated (I know it’s easy to do!)
Coming up…

- Read through Lab 6
  - There are readings AND helpful web pages in the lab

- For Friday Lecture
  - Read Chapter 9 in the FIT course pack

- And of course, for Friday….
  - Project 1, Part 1 due
  - Read the Project description for turn-in instructions
  - A suggestion:
    - Don’t use your freebie on this one—you’ll need it later

- Office Hours all this week to help you out!!!!!!!
  - See web page