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.

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-I or 1-l
   - 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 is 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
Tables in HTML

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

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NBA Players Table: First attempt

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

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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!)