

What's a good analogy to explain the concept of wicked problems?

[closed]

Asked 16 years, 1 month ago Modified 16 years, 1 month ago

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4



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Most developers understand the concept of [wicked problems](#). What's a good analogy to use when explaining this concept to project managers?

project-management

edited Nov 4, 2008 at 15:52



Mark Brady

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asked Oct 29, 2008 at 2:00



HTTP 410

17.6k ● 14 ● 79 ● 129

This question might be a good candidate for workplace.stackexchange.com – Richard Neish Jun 24, 2019 at 13:41

5 Answers

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6



If you want an analogy, I would go with the timeline of NASA. Still technical based, but you do not need any coding skills to understand the difficulty involved. I'm also using the [Coding Horror](#) definition of a wicked problemmm in that:



Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber defined a "wicked" problem as one that could be clearly defined only by solving it, or by solving part of it. This paradox implies, essentially, that you have to "solve" the problem once in order to clearly define it and then solve it again to create a solution that works.

When NASA started, they were tasked with getting a man on the moon. I'm sure at the time they had ideas of how

they were going to accomplish the task, but there was no way they could spec out the first moon mission at the start. They had to develop rockets and find out all the catastrophic things that could go wrong. They had to get an orbiter flying around the Earth and then bring the astronaut back home safely. Eventually they got to the point of getting to the moon, but there was still the issue of getting home.

I hope this seems like a non-programming wicked problem to your project manager. If not, I agree with Glomek. You are doomed.

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answered Oct 29, 2008 at 2:28

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Jason Z

13.4k ● 15 ● 51 ● 62



1



Every changing requirements lead to an impossible to manage design. Just send him here: [Winchester Mystery House](#). The house is filled with staircases to nowhere and doors that open to brick walls. It was built exactly as spec'd, but isn't really what you'd call usable.



Of course up here in New England a "wicked problem" is one that requires a wicked good engineer to come up with a wicked clever solution :)

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answered Oct 29, 2008 at 2:04

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Jon B

51.8k ● 31 ● 136 ● 163



there's the time-honored "trying to hit a moving target" analogy

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which you could step up to wicked level as



trying to hit a moving target that changes shape, wears disguises, hides in shadows, recruits minions, and shoots back



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answered Oct 29, 2008 at 2:20

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[Steven A. Lowe](#)

61.1k ● 19 ● 135 ● 204

But what if you work for iRobot or something, and make combat robots ? The manager will *expect* this!

– [Tim Williscroft](#) Oct 29, 2008 at 3:17



Try getting them to read the article with "I wanted to know your thoughts on this article..."

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Really, your project managers should know this stuff though.



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answered Oct 29, 2008 at 2:05

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[Nat](#)

14.3k ● 5 ● 43 ● 64



If your project manager has no programming experience, then you are doomed and should find a new place to

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work.



If your project manager has no programming experience, and is not willing to leave architectural decisions to someone who has some programming experience, then you are double doomed and you very desperately need to find a new place to work.

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answered Oct 29, 2008 at 2:06

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[Andru Luvisi](#)

25.3k ● 6 ● 55 ● 66

I am a project manager, amongst my many other hats. This is to educate other project managers, especially those who are good but not technical. – [HTTP 410](#) Oct 29, 2008 at 11:50
