

R Shiny: Bug hunting

Logging, error handling and post-mortem analysis

Feb 15, 2023 by J. A.

License: GPL3 (<https://www.gnu.org/licenses/gpl-3.0.en.html>)

Source and author see: https://github.com/aryoda/R_shiny_post_mortem_analysis_training





What's the problem?

Have you ever tried to

- find out why your shiny app **does not show correct results**?
- find the **reason of an error or warning** in your code?
- fix a bug that **happens only in your production system (shiny server)** but not on your DEV computer?
- fix a bug that does occur only randomly (= is **not reproducible**)?

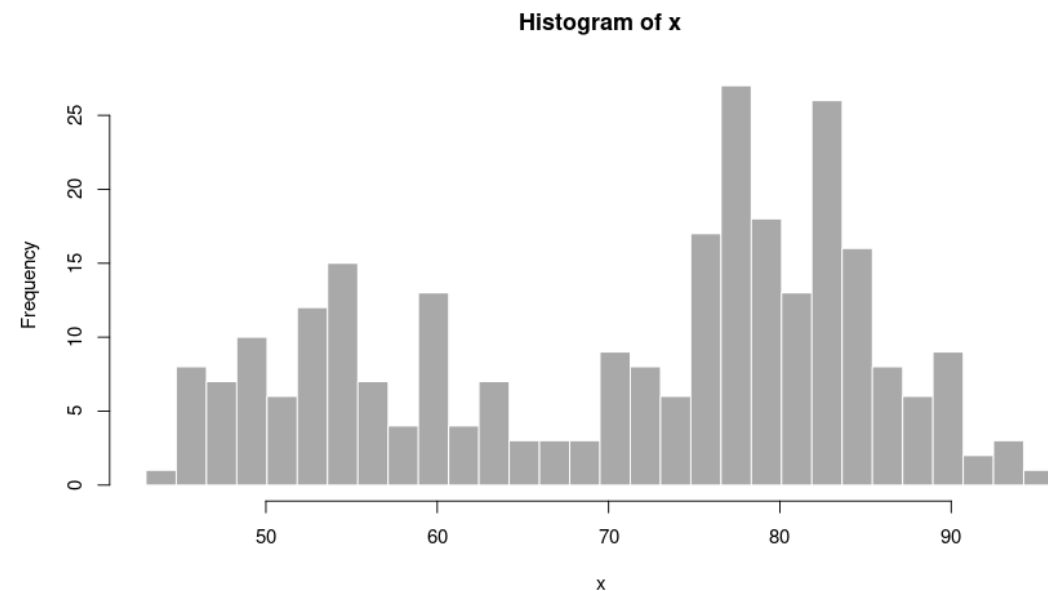
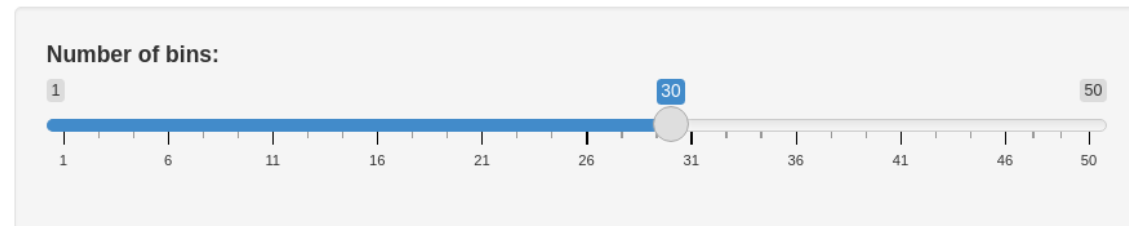
Ways to solve the bug hunting challenge...

Use the CRAN package [tryCatchLog](#) + a supported [logging package](#) and learn how to do

- logging
- error handling
→ only required parts using “tryCatchLog” to enable logging and post-mortem dumps are covered here
- debugging in RStudio
→ out of scope here (belongs to the “basics”)
- post-mortem analysis (using dump files)

Let's play with this “hello world” shiny app...

Old Faithful Geyser Data



1) “Hello world” shiny app with code*

```
library(shiny)

ui <- fluidPage(
  titlePanel("Old Faithful Geyser Data"),
  sidebarLayout(
    sidebarPanel(
      sliderInput("bins",
        "Number of bins:",
        min = 1, max = 50, value = 30)
    ),
    mainPanel(plotOutput("distPlot"))
  )
)

server <- function(input, output) {
  output$distPlot <- renderPlot({
    x <- faithful[, 2]
    bins <- seq(min(x), max(x), length.out = input$bins + 1)

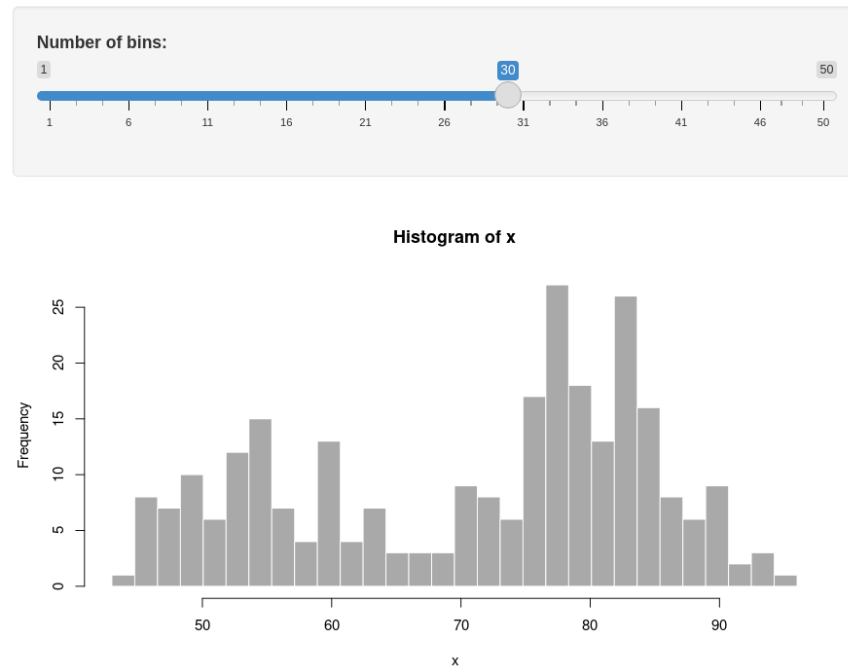
    hist(x, breaks = bins, col = 'darkgray', border = 'white')
  })
}

# Run the application
shinyApp(ui = ui, server = server)
```

Diagram illustrating the Shiny app structure:

- input binding** (yellow box) points to the `sliderInput` function in the UI code.
- output binding** (blue box) points to the `renderPlot` function in the server code.

Old Faithful Geyser Data



2) Shiny app with unhandled warning and error

File: app.R

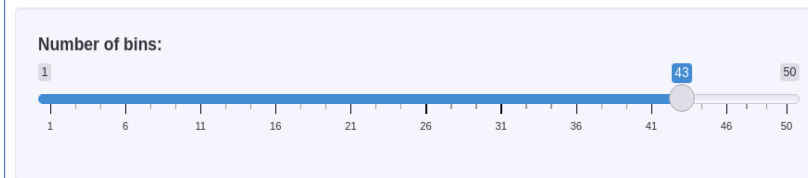
[... unchanged code omitted...]

```
server <- function(input, output) {  
  output$distPlot <- renderPlot({  
    # generate bins based on input$bins from ui.R  
    x <- faithful[, 2]  
    bins <- seq(min(x), max(x), length.out = input$bins + 1)  
  
    # some fancy logic  
    source("script_with_error.R", local = TRUE)  
  
    # draw the histogram with the specified number of bins  
    hist(x, breaks = bins, col = 'darkgray', [...]  
  })  
}
```

File: script_with_error.R

```
if (input$bins > 40)  
  stop("Too many bins!")  
  
print(log(-1)) # just provoke a warning for demo purposes
```

Old Faithful Geyser Data



Error: Too many bins!

```
> runApp()  
Listening on http://127.0.0.1:5067  
Warning in log(-1) : NaNs produced  
[1] NaN  
Warning: Error in eval: Too many bins!  
173: stop  
168: renderPlot [app.R#40]  
166: func  
126: drawPlot  
112: <reactive:plotObj>  
96: drawReactive  
83: renderFunc  
82: output$distPlot  
1: runApp
```

Note: Errors are shown as “warning” in Shiny!

Observations regarding unhandled conditions*

Unhandled errors

- 1) stop the creation of the user interface (leaving an **incomplete UI**)
- 2) are caught and **reported as “warning”** (to avoid crashing the complete shiny app)

Unhandled conditions*

- 3) do **almost never show the real line of code** that produced the error
- 4) do not show the data (variables) that cause the unexpected condition

It is not easy to reproduce and analyze a bug to fix it!

*) “condition” is the general R term for errors, warnings, messages and other “exceptions” that are derived from the R super class condition

Approaches to hunt bugs

1) Logging (“tracing”, “auditing”)

- ➔ **print** info about the current operation (code location + relevant data)

2) Interactive debugging

- ➔ **halt** the code execution at chosen code locations
- ➔ **inspect** the current state of variables
- ➔ **execute** code (blocks) step-by-step

3) Post-mortem analysis

- ➔ **create a memory dump** file of all objects incl. the call stack when an error occurs
- ➔ **inspect** the objects along the call stack

```
*** STOP: 0x0000001E (0xC0000005, 0xF24A447A, 0x00000001, 0x00000000)
KMODE_EXCEPTION_NOT_HANDLED

*** Address F24A447A base at F24A0000, DateStamp 35825ef8d - wdmaud.sys

If this is the first time you've seen this Stop error screen, restart your
computer. If this screen appears again, follow these steps:

Check to be sure you have adequate disk space. If a driver is identified in
the Stop message, disable the driver or check with the manufacturer for
driver updates. Try changing video adapters.

Check with your hardware vendor for any BIOS updates. Disable BIOS memory
options such as caching or shadowing. If you need to use Safe Mode to
remove or disable components, restart your computer, press F8 to select
Advanced Startup Options, and then select Safe Mode.

Refer to your Getting Started manual for more information on troubleshooting
Stop errors.

Kernel Debugger Using: COM2 (Port 0x2f8, Baud Rate 19200)
Beginning dump of physical memory
Physical memory dump complete. Contact your system administrator or
technical support group.
```


3) Shiny app with logging and unhandled conditions

File: app.R

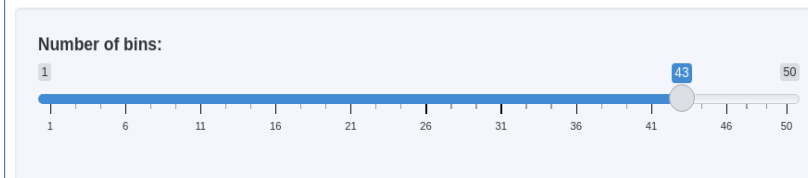
[... unchanged code omitted...]

```
server <- function(input, output) {  
  library(futile.logger)  
  output$distPlot <- renderPlot({  
    flog.info("Begin of renderPlot (bins=%i)", input$bins)  
    # generate bins based on input$bins from ui.R  
    x <- faithful[, 2]  
    bins <- seq(min(x), max(x), length.out = input$bins + 1)  
  
    # some fancy logic  
    source("script_with_error.R", local = TRUE)  
  
    # draw the histogram with the specified number of bins  
    hist(x, breaks = bins, col = 'darkgray', [...])  
    flog.info("End of renderPlot")  
  })  
}
```

File: script_with_error.R

```
if (input$bins > 40)  
  stop("Too many bins!")  
  
print(log(-1)) # just provoke a warning for demo purposes
```

Old Faithful Geyser Data



Error: Too many bins!

```
> shiny::runApp()  
INFO [2023-02-14 01:02:54] Begin of renderPlot  
                        (bins=30)  
Warning in log(-1) : NaNs produced  
[1] NaN  
INFO [2023-02-14 01:02:54] End of renderPlot  
INFO [2023-02-14 01:04:05] Begin of renderPlot  
                        (bins=43)  
Warning: Error in eval: Too many bins!  
173: stop  
168: renderPlot [app.R#60]  
126: drawPlot  
112: <reactive:plotObj>  
96: drawReactive  
83: renderFunc  
82: output$distPlot  
1: shiny::runApp
```

Little detour: Which logging framework shall I use?

CRAN download statistics (of the last 30 days as of Feb 14, 2023) to indicate the **popularity***

	package	N	downloads	
[1:	<i>plogr</i>	30	90222]	→ header-only C++ logging library (not for “plain” R)
2:	futile.logger	30	72081	
3:	logger	30	22173	
4:	lgr	30	12827	
5:	logging	30	12707	
6:	debugme	30	8654	
7:	log4r	30	8025	
8:	logr	30	1434	
9:	loggit	30	693	

The upcoming tryCatchLog release will support all major logging frameworks (not only futile.logger):
https://github.com/aryoda/tryCatchLog/blob/feature/71_indiv_settings_per_condition_type/NEWS.md

*) see: <https://github.com/aryoda/tryCatchLog/issues/42>

4) Shiny app with handled conditions

File: app.R

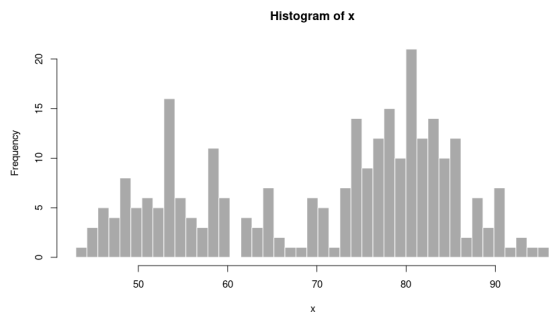
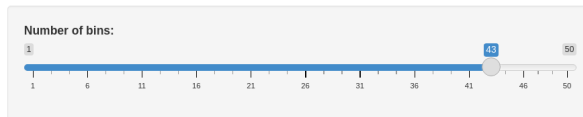
[... unchanged code omitted...]

```
server <- function(input, output) {  
  library(futile.logger)  
  output$distPlot <- renderPlot({  
    flog.info("Begin of renderPlot (bins=%i)", input$bins)  
    # generate bins based on input$bins from ui.R  
    x <- faithful[, 2]  
    bins <- seq(min(x), max(x), length.out = input$bins + 1)  
  
    # some fancy logic  
    source("script_with_error_and_try.R", local = TRUE)  
  
    # draw the histogram with the specified number of bins  
    hist(x, breaks = bins, col = 'darkgray', [...]  
    flog.info("End of renderPlot")  
  })  
}
```

File: script_with_error_and_try.R

```
try({  
  if (input$bins > 40) {  
    stop("Too many bins!")  
  }  
  print(log(-1)) # just provoke a warning for demo purposes  
})
```

Old Faithful Geyser Data



```
> shiny::runApp()  
INFO [2023-02-14 01:02:54] Begin of renderPlot  
                               (bins=30)  
Warning in log(-1) : NaNs produced  
[1] NaN  
INFO [2023-02-14 01:02:54] End of renderPlot  
INFO [2023-02-14 01:02:54] Begin of renderPlot  
                               (bins=43)  
Error in try({ : Too many bins!  
INFO [2023-02-14 01:02:54] End of renderPlot
```

5) Shiny app with tryCatch handler to print call stack

File: app.R

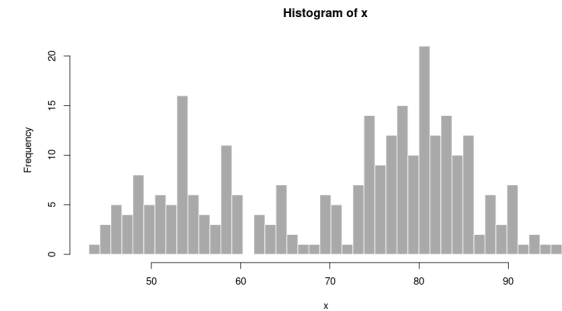
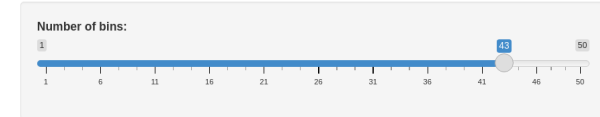
[... unchanged code omitted...]

```
server <- function(input, output) {  
  library(futile.logger)  
  output$distPlot <- renderPlot({  
    flog.info("Begin of renderPlot (bins=%i)", input$bins)  
    # generate bins based on input$bins from ui.R  
    x <- faithful[, 2]  
    bins <- seq(min(x), max(x), length.out = input$bins + 1)  
    [...]
```

File: script_with_error_and_tryCatch_and_callstack.R

```
tryCatch(  
  {  
    if (input$bins > 40) {  
      stop("Too many bins!")  
    }  
    print(log(-1)) # just provoke a warning for demo purposes  
  }, error = function(e) {  
    stack.trace <-  
    paste(as.character(limitedLabels(tail(sys.calls(), 100))),  
          collapse = "\n")  
    cat("Error occured: ", e$message, "\n") # error message  
    cat(stack.trace, "\n")  
  }  
)
```

Old Faithful Geyser Data



```
> shiny::runApp()
```

```
...  
Error occured: Too many bins!  
domain$wrapSync(expr)  
withCallingHandlers(expr, error = doCaptureStack)  
...  
app.R#60: source("script_with_error_and_tryCatch..  
...  
eval(ei, envir)  
script_with_error_and_tryCatch_and_callstack.R#1:  
tryCatch({ if (input$bins > 40) {
```

6) Shiny app with tryCatchLog handler

File: app.R

[... unchanged code omitted...]

```
server <- function(input, output) {  
  library(futile.logger)  
  output$distPlot <- renderPlot({  
    flog.info("Begin of renderPlot (bins=%i)", input$bins)  
    # generate bins based on input$bins from ui.R  
    x <- faithful[, 2]  
    bins <- seq(min(x), max(x), length.out = input$bins + 1)  
    [...]
```

File: script_with_error_and_tryLog.R

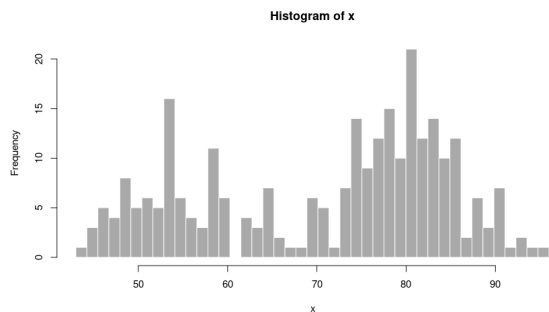
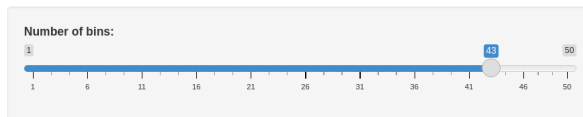
```
library(tryCatchLog)
```

```
options(keep.source = TRUE)
```

```
options(tryCatchLog.include.full.call.stack = FALSE)
```

```
tryLog(  
  {  
    if (input$bins > 40) {  
      stop("Too many bins!")  
    }  
    print(log(-1)) # just provoke a warning for demo purposes  
  }  
)
```

Old Faithful Geyser Data



```
> shiny::runApp()
```

```
...
```

```
ERROR [2023-02-14 02:22:24] Too many bins!
```

```
Compact call stack:
```

```
1 shiny::runApp()  
2 app.R#57: source("script_with_error_and_tryLog.R"...  
3 script_with_error_and_tryLog.R#9: tryLog({  
4 tryLog.R#57: tryCatchLog(expr = expr, ...  
5 tryCatchLog.R#476: tryCatch(...  
6 tryCatchLog.R#476: withCallingHandlers(expr, ...  
7 script_with_error_and_tryLog.R#12: stop("Too many  
bins!")
```

7) Intro into dumps and post-mortem debugging

```
# File: dump_frames_intro.R
```

```
library(tryCatchLog)
```

```
x.global <- 99
```

```
f <- function(x) {  
  value <- x + 1  
  ff(value)  
}
```

```
ff <- function(y) {  
  fff(y + 2)  
}
```

```
fff <- function(z) {  
  print(paste("z =", z))  
  if(z > 4) stop("z is too big\n")  
}
```

```
tryLog(f(2), write.error.dump.file = T, [...])
```

```
# File: post_mortem_analysis.R
```

```
# --- Reset workspace before debugging  
# See `?dump.frames` and `?debugger` for details
```

```
load("dump.rda") # use an already prepared dump  
debugger()
```

```
> debugger()
```

```
Message: z is too big
```

```
Available environments had calls:
```

```
1: source("dump_frames_intro.R")
```

```
2: withVisible(eval(ei, envir))
```

```
3: eval(ei, envir)
```

```
4: eval(ei, envir)
```

```
5: dump_frames_intro.R#25: tryLog(f(2), ...
```

```
6: tryLog.R#57: tryCatchLog(expr = expr, ...
```

```
7: tryCatchLog.R#476: tryCatch(withCallingHandlers(expr, ...
```

```
8: tryCatchList(expr, classes, parentenv, handlers)
```

```
9: tryCatchOne(expr, names, parentenv, handlers[[1]])
```

```
10: doTryCatch(return(expr), name, parentenv, handler)
```

```
11: tryCatchLog.R#476: withCallingHandlers(expr, ...
```

```
12: tryLog.R#57: f(2)
```

```
13: dump_frames_intro.R#9: ff(value)
```

```
14: dump_frames_intro.R#13: fff(y + 2)
```

```
15: dump_frames_intro.R#18: stop("z is too big\n")
```

```
16: .handleSimpleError(function (c)
```

```
{
```

```
  write.to.log <- TRUE
```

```
  log.as.severity <- NA
```

```
  config.check.result <- is.
```

```
17: h(simpleError(msg, call))
```

```
Enter an environment number, or 0 to exit
```

```
Selection:
```

Post-mortem debugging: Inspect variables

```
# File: dump_frames_intro.R
library(tryCatchLog)
```

```
x.global <- 99
```

```
f <- function(x) {
  value <- x + 1
  ff(value)
}
```

```
ff <- function(y) {
  fff(y + 2)
}
```

```
fff <- function(z) {
  print(paste("z =", z))
  if(z > 4) stop("z is too big\n")
}
```

```
tryLog(f(2), write.error.dump.file = T, [...])
```

```
# File: post_mortem_analysis.R
```

```
# --- Reset workspace before debugging
# See `?dump.frames` and `?debugger` for details
```

```
load("dump.rda") # use an already prepared dump
debugger()
```

Enter an environment number, or 0 to exit

Selection: 4

Browsing in the environment with call:

```
eval(ei, envir)
```

Called from: debugger.look(ind)

Browse[1]> ls()

```
[1] "f" "ff" "fff" "last.dump" "x.global"
```

Browse[1]> x.global

```
[1] 99
```

Browse[1]> x.global <- 22

Browse[1]> x.global

```
[1] 22
```

Browse[1]>

Available environments had calls:

```
...
```

```
4: eval(ei, envir)
```

```
5: dump_frames_intro.R#25: tryLog(f(2), ...
```

```
...
```

```
13: dump_frames_intro.R#9: ff(value)
```

```
14: dump_frames_intro.R#13: fff(y + 2)
```

```
15: dump_frames_intro.R#18: stop("z is too big\n")
```

```
...
```

Enter an environment number, or 0 to exit

Selection:

use the parent call number (!)
to look into variables visible
at the call code location

list directly visible variables

show the value of a variable

change the value of a variable

press ENTER to leave the
browser ("debugger") and go
back to the call selection

Post-mortem debugging: Hunt down the bug

```
# File: dump_frames_intro.R
```

```
library(tryCatchLog)
```

```
x.global <- 99
```

```
f <- function(x) {  
  value <- x + 1  
  ff(value)  
}
```

```
ff <- function(y) {  
  fff(y + 2)  
}
```

```
fff <- function(z) {  
  print(paste("z =", z))  
  if(z > 4) stop("z is too big\n")  
}
```

```
tryLog(f(2), write.error.dump.file = T, [...])
```

```
# File: post_mortem_analysis.R
```

```
# --- Reset workspace before debugging  
# See `?dump.frames` and `?debugger` for details
```

```
load("dump.rda") # use an already prepared dump  
debugger()
```

```
Available environments had calls:
```

```
...  
4: eval(ei, envir)  
5: dump_frames_intro.R#25: tryLog(f(2), ...  
...  
13: dump_frames_intro.R#9: ff(value)  
14: dump_frames_intro.R#13: fff(y + 2)  
15: dump_frames_intro.R#18: stop("z is too big\n")  
...  
Enter an environment number, or 0 to exit
```

Determine the frame causing the error by entering the call frame (call number minus one!) and checking the variables...

```
Selection: 14  
Browsing in the environment with call:  
  dump_frames_intro.R#13: fff(y + 2)  
Called from: debugger.look(ind)  
Browse[1]> ls()  
[1] "z"  
Browse[1]> z  
[1] 5  
Browse[1]> z > 4  
[1] TRUE  
Browse[1]>
```


Little detour: Environment, frames and (en)closures

See: `?environment`:

- **Environments** consist of
 - a **frame** (collection of named objects)
 - and a pointer to an enclosing environment.Example: **Frame of variables local to a function call.**
Its **enclosure** is the environment where the function was defined.
- The enclosing environment is distinguished from the **parent frame**: the latter (returned by `parent.frame`) refers to **the environment of the caller of a function**.

Since confusion is so easy, it is best never to use 'parent' in connection with an environment (despite the presence of the function `parent.env`).

Confused? ;-)

8) Post-mortem debugging of a shiny app

File: app.R

[...]

```
server <- function(input, output) {  
  library(futile.logger)  
  output$distPlot <- renderPlot({  
    flog.info("Begin of renderPlot (bins=%i)",  
              input$bins)  
    # generate bins based on input$bins  
    x <- faithful[, 2]  
    bins <- seq(min(x), max(x), length.out =  
                 input$bins + 1)  
    [...]
```

File: script_with_error_and_tryLog_and_dump_file.R

`library(tryCatchLog)`

```
options("tryCatchLog.write.error.dump.file" = TRUE)  
options(tryCatchLog.include.full.call.stack = FALSE)
```

```
tryLog( {  
  if (input$bins > 40) {  
    stop("Too many bins!")  
  }  
  print(log(-1)) # just provoke a warning  
})
```

```
> load("dump.rda")  
> debugger(last.dump)  
166: func()  
167: ..stacktraceon..(renderPlot())  
168: renderPlot()  
169: app.R#60: source("script_with_error_and_tryLog_and_dump  
...  
173: script_with_error_and_tryLog_and_dump_file.R#12: tryLog({  
      if (input$bins > 40) {  
        stop("Too many bins!")  
      }  
174: tryLog.R#57: tryCatchLog(expr = expr...  
...  
180: script_with_error_and_tryLog_and_dump_file.R#15:  
      stop("Too many bins!")  
...  
Enter an environment number, or 0 to exit  
Selection: 172  
Browsing in the environment with call:  
  eval(ei, envir)  
Called from: debugger.look(ind)  
Browse[1]> ls()  
[1] "bins" "x"
```

Oops, where is the “input” variable? => “input” is a “reactiveValues” class (an “environment”) and shiny hides it quite well.

Best practice: Always use a local variable to store the required variables of “input” (or “output”) to ease post-mortem analysis!

When to use which approach to hunt bugs?

	Logging	Debugging	Post-mortem analysis
Preparation efforts	High: Logging functions must be added into code first	Low: No code changes required normally	Medium: Each reactive function requires at least one “error handler”
Available during DEV vs when deployed on shiny server (e.g. PRD ;-)	Local machine + server	local machine only (R does not support remote debugging of processes)	Local machine + server
Advantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Logging granularity can be modified without changing codeAlways active when something happens	<ul style="list-style-type: none">step-by-step code executioninteractive examination of (large) datano code changes required	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Sporadic (non-reproducible) bugs can be analyzed (killer feature ;-)Captures exact code location and call stack of an errorAllows interactive examination of (large) data
Restrictions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Logging of larger data like data frames not practicalCode without logging calls is a black boxRequires code changes and possibly a roll-out if adding/modifying logging calls are required to hunt a bugpossible performance overheadrisk of introducing a bug (e.g. RTE) in a logging call	<ul style="list-style-type: none">No remote debugging on the server (e.g. if a bug happens only on a certain infrastructure)Non-reproducible bugs are difficult to discover	<ul style="list-style-type: none">no (easy) step-by-step code execution (“debugging”)memory dumps may flood the server HDD/SSD until it is full ;-)“input” and “output” env vars are not visible

Summary: Steps to enable logging and post-mortem

- Use the **packages** `tryCatchLog` and a logging framework like `futile.logger`
- **Set global options** for `tryCatchLog` and your logging framework in your `app.R`
- **Surround every reactive function with a `tryLog()` block** (which also catches conditions in all called functions within the block)
- *Optionally:*
Add `try/tryCatch/tryLog/tryCatchLog` condition handler around every expression where you want to handle expected conditions in a special way (ignore, retry, graceful recovery...)
- **Add INFO or DEBUG severity logging** output calls with relevant variables at the beginning and end of each of your functions (and other significant code locations)
- **Store variables of input and output in local variables** to make them visible in dump files for post-mortem analysis

```
# app.R

library(shiny)
library(tryCatchLog)
library(futile.logger) # "flog"

flog.threshold(INFO) # or FATAL, ERROR, WARN, INFO
# flog.appender(appender.file("my_app.log"))

# Keep the file name and line numbers of sourced files
options(keep.source = TRUE)

# creates a dump file for each error
options(tryCatchLog.write.error.dump.file = TRUE)

# stack trace shall contain only code with known line numbers
options(tryCatchLog.include.full.call.stack = FALSE)

[...]

output$distPlot <- renderPlot({
  tryLog({
    flog.info("Begin of renderPlot (bins=%i)", input$bins)
    bins <- input$bins
    [...]
    flog.info("End of renderPlot")
  })
})
```



Questions?

Links

- Slides:
https://github.com/aryoda/R_shiny_post_mortem_analysis_training
- tryCatchLog package:
<https://github.com/aryoda/tryCatchLog>
- Excellent shiny intro:
<https://debruine.github.io/shinyintro>
- Debugging shiny applications (official doc):
<https://shiny.rstudio.com/articles/debugging.html>
- List of shiny options:
<https://shiny.rstudio.com/reference/shiny/latest/shinyoptions>
- Debugging hints:
<https://stackoverflow.com/questions/31920286/effectively-debugging-shiny-apps>
<https://stackoverflow.com/questions/32222935/find-source-of-warning-in-shiny-app>

Things not mentioned but worth to do it...

- Shiny Server trace output will be placed in a log file on the server under:
 `/var/log/shiny-server/*.log`
- `options(shiny.fullstacktrace = TRUE)` # see also shiny-internal calls!
- ...