

THE POCKET GUIDE TO DEBUGGING

by Julia Evans



Stellar strategies
for sticky situations



you can't
catch me!

about this zine

This zine has:

- ① a ~~manifesto~~ with my general debugging principles



- ② a list of my favourite debugging ~~strategies~~, which you can try in any order that makes sense to you



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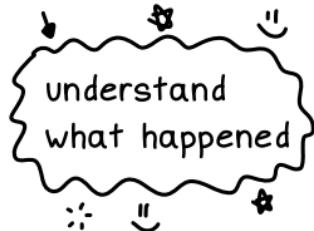


a debugging manifesto



1

inspect, don't squash



2

being stuck is temporary



I WILL NEVER FIGURE
THIS OUT

... 20 minutes later...

wait, I haven't tried X...

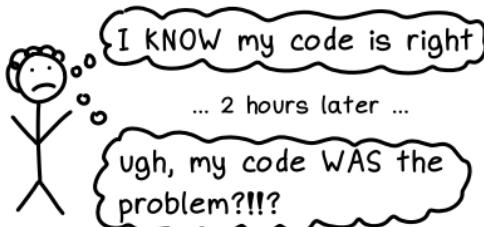
3

trust nobody and nothing



4

it's probably your code



6



5

don't go it alone



6

there's always a reason



computers are
always logical, even
when it doesn't feel
that way

7

build your toolkit



wow, the CSS
inspector makes
debugging SO
MUCH EASIER

8

it can be an adventure

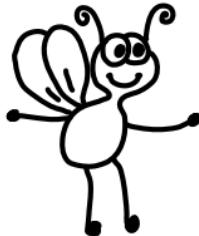


you wouldn't
BELIEVE the
weird bug I
found!

7

chapter 1

FIRST STEPS



preserve the crime scene



One of the easiest ways to start is to **save a copy** of the buggy code and its inputs/outputs:



Depending on the situation, you might want to:

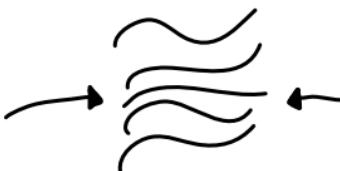
- make a git commit of the buggy code!
(on a branch, just for you)
- save the input that triggered the bug
- save logs/screenshots to analyze later

read the error message



Error messages are a goldmine of information, but they can be very annoying to read:

giant 50 line stack
trace full of
impenetrable jargon,
often seems totally
unrelated to your bug



can even be
misleading, like
"permission denied"
sometimes means
"doesn't exist"

Tricks to extract information from giant error messages:

- ★ If there are many different error messages, start with the **first one**. Fixing it will often fix the rest.
- ★ If the **end** of a long error message isn't helpful, try looking at the **beginning** (scroll up!)
- ★ On the command line, pipe it to less so that you can scroll/search it (`./my_program 2>&1 | less`)

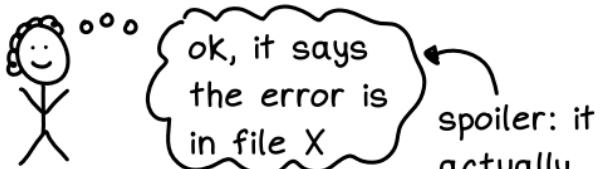
if you don't include `2>&1`, less won't show you the error messages (just the output)

reread the error message

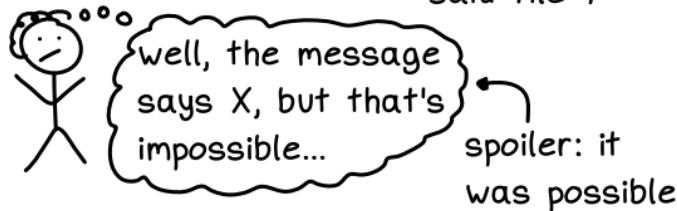


After I've read the error message, I sometimes run into one of these 3 problems:

- ① misreading the message



- ② disregarding what the message is saying



- ③ not actually reading it





reproduce the bug

My favourite way to get information about buggy code is to **run the buggy code** and **experiment** on it.
(Add print statements! Make a tiny change!)

If the bug is happening on your computer every time you run your program: hooray! You've reproduced the bug!



ok, time to debug! I've got my
print statements ready to go!

But if you can't make the bug happen, you're left guessing.



what was variable X set to
when the bug happened? guess
there's NO WAY TO KNOW

the next
page has
tips!





inspect unreproducible bugs

When you can't reproduce a bug locally, it's tempting to just try random fixes and pray. Resist the temptation! Some ways to get information:

- try to reproduce the environment where it happened
- ask for screenshots / screen recordings
- add more logging, deploy your code, and repeat until you understand what caused the bug
- read the code VERY VERY carefully ← incredibly boring
but it actually does work sometimes
- do your experimentation somewhere where you *can* reproduce the bug ← on a staging server? on someone else's computer?

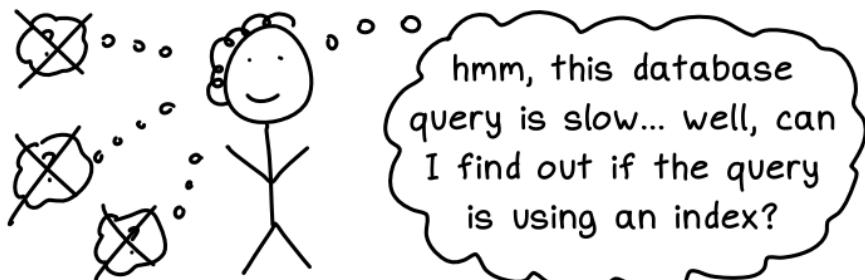
identify one small question



Debugging can feel huge and impossible. But all you have to do to make progress is:

- ① come up with ONE QUESTION about the bug
- ② make sure the question is small enough that you can investigate it in ~20 minutes
- ③ figure out the answer to that question

ignore all these other questions for now! one at a time!



retrace the code's steps



Here's a classic (but still very effective!) way to get started:

- ① find the line of code where the error happened
- ② trace backwards to investigate what could have caused that error. Keep asking "why?"

There's an error on line 58...

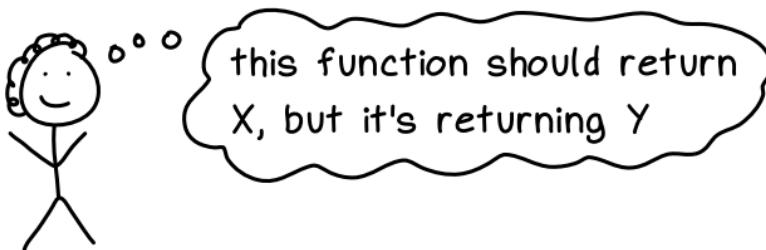
- ↳ that's because this variable has the wrong value...
- ↳ the value is set by calling this function...
- ↳ that function is making an HTTP request to the API...
- ↳ the API response doesn't have the format I expected! Why is that?



write a failing test



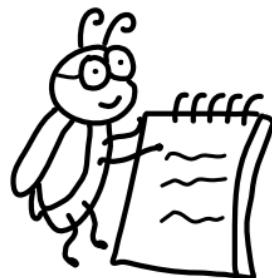
If your program already has tests, adding a failing test is a great way to work on your bug!



- ⤵ it forces you to pinpoint what exactly the bug is
- ⤵ it's easy to tell when you've fixed it (the test passes!)
- ⤵ you can keep the test to make sure the bug doesn't come back

chapter 2

GET ORGANIZED



brainstorm some suspects



Brainstorming every possible cause I can think of helps me not get stuck on the 1 or 2 most obvious possibilities.

could I be using the wrong version of this library?

am I passing the wrong argument to function X?

is something wrong with the server?

is the entire internet broken???

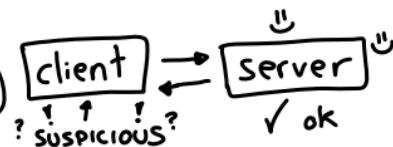
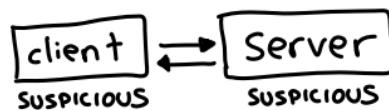
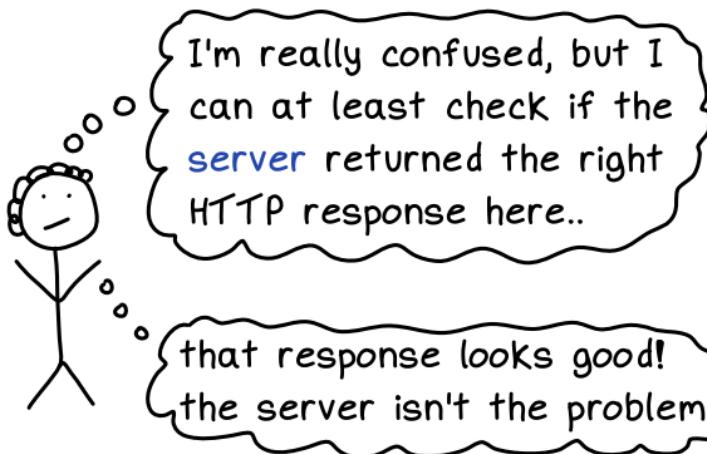
sometimes I find it easier to think clearly when writing by hand on paper

no filter! even ridiculous ideas!

rule things out



Once I have a list of suspects, I can think about how to eliminate them.

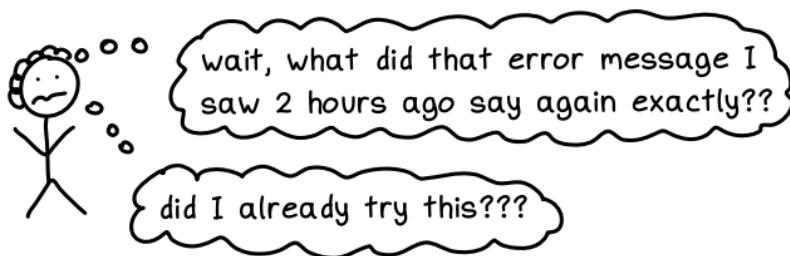


here we're assuming that was the only request being made. Otherwise this wouldn't be a safe conclusion :)

Keep a log book



I don't usually write things down. But 2 hours into debugging, I get really confused:



Keeping a document with notes makes it WAY easier to stay on track. It might contain:

- specific inputs I tried
- error messages I saw
- stack overflow URLs

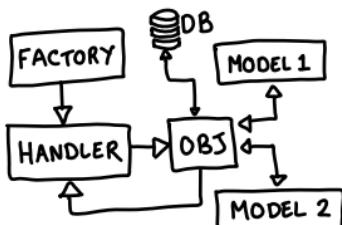
The log makes it easier to ask for help later if needed!

draw a diagram

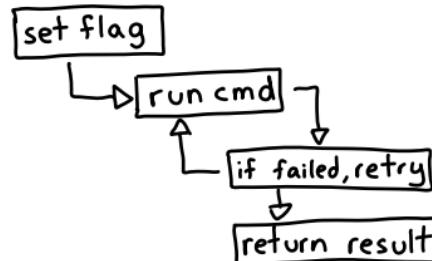


Some ideas:

network diagram



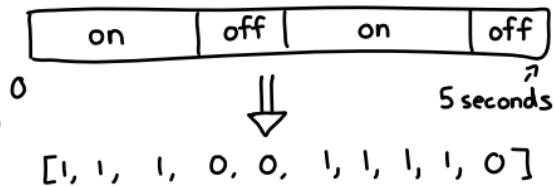
flowchart



state diagram

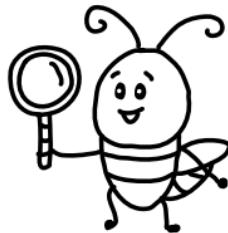


or anything else
(like a data structure!)



chapter 3

INVESTIGATE



add lots of print statements



I love to add print statements that print out 1, 2, 3, 4, 5...



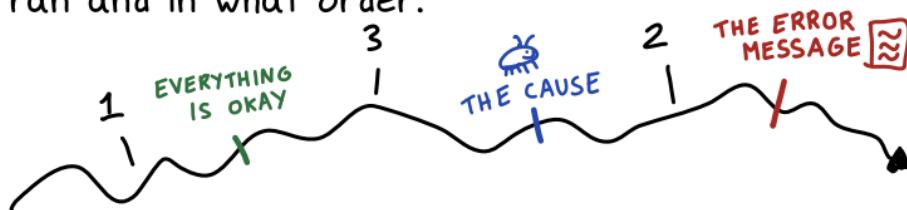
```
console.log(1)
```

```
console.log(2)
```

```
console.log(3)
```

using descriptive strings is
smarter, but I usually use
numbers or "wtf???"

This helps me construct a **timeline** of which parts of my code ran and in what order:



Often I'll discover something surprising, like "wait, 3, never got printed??? Why not???"

use a **debugger**



A **debugger** is a tool for stepping through your code line by line and looking at variables. But not all debuggers are equal! Some languages' debuggers have more features than others. Your debugger might let you:

- * jump into a REPL to poke around (see page 25)
- * watch a location in memory and stop the program any time it's modified
- * "record replay" debuggers let you record your entire program's execution and *time travel*



I love record/replay debuggers because they make hard-to-reproduce bugs easier: I just have to reproduce the bug once

jump into a REPL



In dynamic languages (like Python / Ruby / JS), you can use a debugger to jump into an interactive console (aka "REPL") at any point in your code.

Here's how to do it in Python 3:

① edit your code `my_var = call_some_function()`
 `breakpoint()` ← add this!

② refresh the page

③ play around in the REPL! You can call any function you want / try out fixes!

How to do it in other languages:

* Ruby: binding.pry

* Python (before 3.7): `import pdb; pdb.set_trace()`

* Javascript: `debugger;`

find a version that works



If I have a bug with how I'm using a library, I like to:

- find a code example in the documentation
- make sure it works
- slowly change it to be more like my broken code
- test if it's still working after every single tiny change



This puts me back on solid ground: with every change I make that DOESN'T cause the bug to come back, I know that change wasn't the problem.

look at recent changes



Often when something is broken, it's because of a recent change. Usually I look at recent changes manually, but git bisect is an amazing tool for finding exactly which git commit caused the problem.

We don't have space for a full git bisect tutorial here, but here's how you start using it:

```
git bisect start
```

```
git bisect bad HEAD
```

```
git bisect good 1fe9dc
```

ID of a commit that
doesn't have the bug

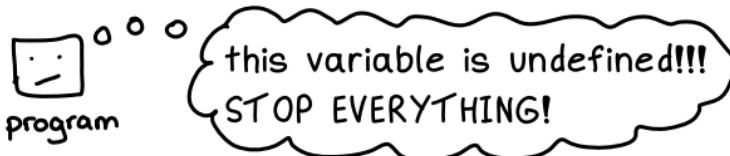
Then you can either tag buggy commits manually or run a script that does it automatically.

sprinkle assertions everywhere

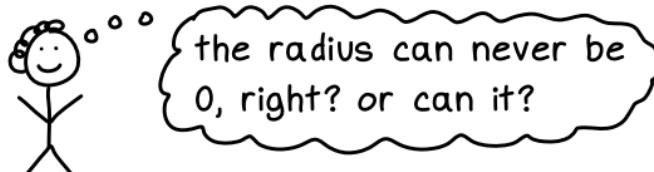


Some languages have an assert keyword that you can use to crash the program if a condition fails. Assertions let you:

- ★ come up with something that should **ALWAYS** be true
- ★ immediately crash the program if it isn't



This is a great way to force yourself to think about what's **ALWAYS** true in your program, and check if you're right.



comment out code



Commenting out code is an amazing way to quickly do experiments and figure out which part of your code is to blame. You can:

- ★ comment out a function call and replace it with a hardcoded value, to check if the function call is broken
- ★ if the error message doesn't give you a line number, comment out huge chunks of the program until the problem goes away
- ★ comment out some code and rewrite it to see if the new version is better



analyze the logs

If you can't reproduce a bug, sometimes you need to comb through the logs for clues. Some tips:

- filter out irrelevant lines (for example with grep -v)
- find 1 failed request and search for that request's ID to get all the logs for that request
- build a timeline: copy and paste log lines (and your interpretations!) into a document
- if you see a suspicious log line, search to make sure it doesn't also happen during normal operation
- if there's a cascade of errors, find the first error that started the problems

chapter 4

RESEARCH



read the docs



There are many ways to read the docs!

the surgical strike:

Search for a specific function, find an example on the page, copy it and leave. ← this is often me :)

the question quest:

You have a specific question and you'll keep skimming different pages until you find the answer.

the IDE integration:

Set up your editor or IDE so that you can instantly jump to a function's documentation.

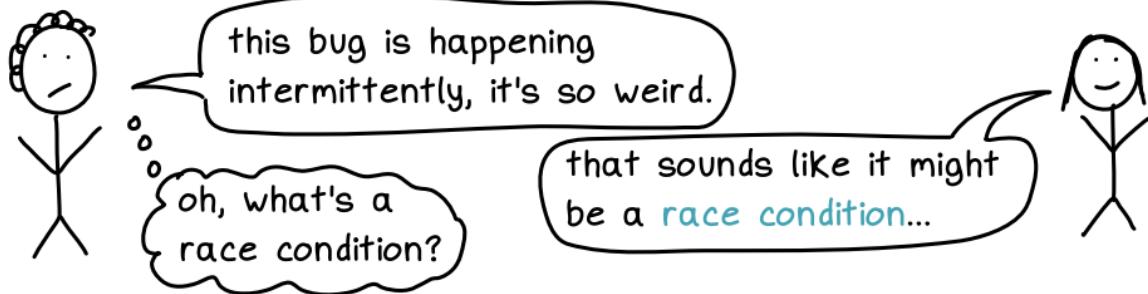
the rigorous read:

Get a cup of coffee and read all of the docs cover to cover, like a book.

find the type of bug



If the bug is totally new to you, find out if there's a name people use for that type of bug!



terminated by signal SIGSEGV (address boundary error) → segmentation fault

flexbox: div doesn't fit in other div



→ item overflowing container (CSS)

nodename nor servname provided, or not known

→ DNS lookup failure

RecursionError: maximum recursion depth exceeded

→ stack overflow

learn one small thing



Bugs are a GREAT way to discover things on the edge of your knowledge.



hmm, part of the problem here is that I don't understand how position: absolute works...

Finding one small thing I don't understand and learning it is really useful (and pretty fun!)



now I understand position: absolute! cool!

read the library's code



Lots of code isn't documented. But when there are no docs, there's always the source code! It sounds intimidating at first, but a quick search of the code sometimes gets me my answer really quickly.

Tips for exploring an unfamiliar library's code:

- ★ search the `tests`! Tests are a GREAT source of examples
- ★ `git clone` it locally to make it easier to navigate
- ★ search for your error message and trace back
- ★ if it's a Python/JS/Ruby library, sometimes I'll edit the library's code on my computer to add print statements (just remember to take them out after!)

find a new source of info



We all know to look at the official documentation.

Here are some less obvious places to look for answers:

- * the project's [Discord](#), [Slack](#), [IRC channel](#), or [mailing list](#)
- * [code search](#) (search all of GitHub for how other people are using that library!)
- * [GitHub issues](#) (did someone else have the same problem?)
- * [release notes](#) (is the bug fixed in the new version?)
- * [a book chapter](#) (you might have a book on this topic!)
- * [blog posts](#) (sometimes there's an amazing explanation on the 2nd page of Google results)

chapter 5

SIMPLIFY



write a tiny program

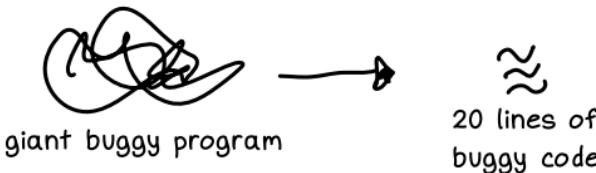


Does your bug involve a library you don't understand?



UGH, requests is NOT working
how I expected it to!

I like to convert my code using that library into a tiny standalone program which has the same bug:



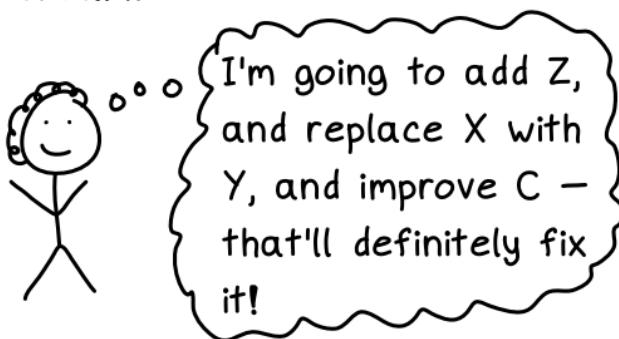
I find this makes it WAY EASIER to experiment and ask for help. And if it turns out that library actually has a bug, you can use your tiny program to report it.

one thing at a time



It's tempting to try lots of fixes at once to save time:

dream:



reality:



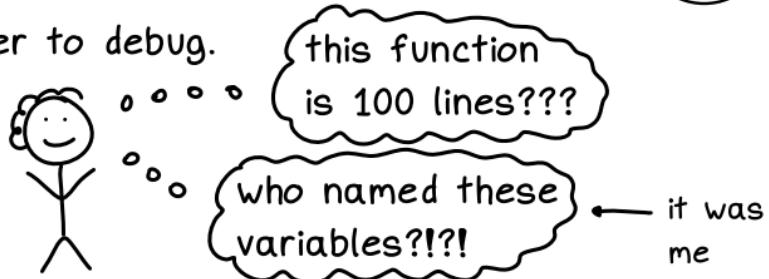
If I found I've done this by accident, I'll:

- undo all my changes (git stash!)
- make a list of things to investigate, one at a time

tidy up your code



Messy code is harder to debug.



Doing a tiny bit of refactoring can make things easier, like:

- rename variables or functions
- format it with a code formatter (go fmt, black, etc.)
- add comments
- delete old/untrue comments

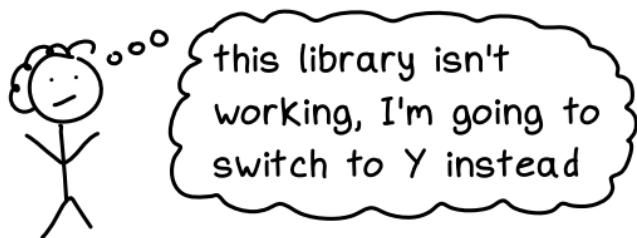
Don't go overboard with the refactoring though: making too many changes can easily introduce new bugs.

delete the buggy code

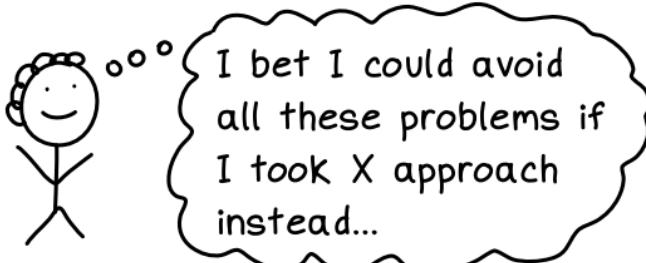


Sometimes the buggy code is not worth salvaging and should be deleted entirely. Reasons you might do this:

- * it uses a confusing library / tool



- * you have a better idea for how to implement it





reduce randomness

It's much easier to debug when your program does the exact same thing every time you run it.



the bug only happens 10% of the time, it's SO HARD to figure out if my change fixed it or not

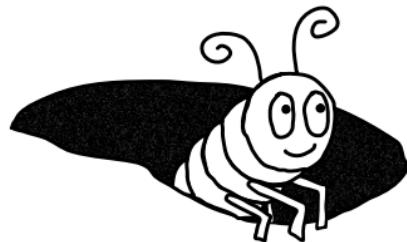
There are a bunch of tools for controlling your program's inputs to reduce randomness, for example:

- many random number generators let you set the seed so you get the same results every time
- faketime fakes the current time
- libraries like Ruby's vcr can record HTTP requests
- record/replay debuggers like rr record everything

chapter 6

GET UNSTUCK

My favourite tricks to get from:
"I'm NEVER going to figure this out!"
to: "it seems obvious now!"



take a break



Investigating a tricky bug requires a LOT of focus.

googling the
same error
message for
the 7th time



ugh, nothing
is working...

very frustrated

Instead, try one of these magical debugging techniques:
(even a 5 minute break can really help!)

get a coffee!

go to bed!

ride your bike!

eat lunch!

have a
shower!

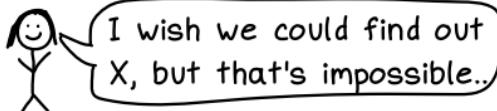


investigate the bug together



I find investigating a bug with someone else SO MUCH more fun than doing it alone. Debugging together lets you:

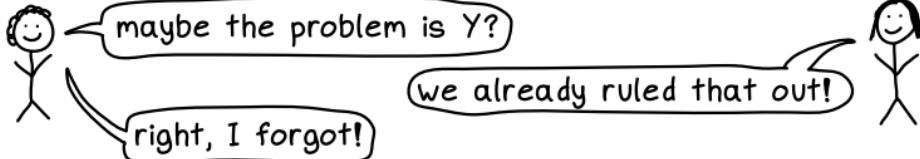
- teach each other new tools!



- learn new concepts!



- keep each other on track



timebox your investigation



Sometimes I need to trick myself into getting started:



UGH, I do NOT want to look at this CSS bug!!!!

Giving myself a time limit really helps:



Okay, I'll just see what I can figure out in 20 minutes...



... 15 minutes later ...

all fixed! that wasn't so hard!

you can't always solve it in 15 minutes, but this works surprisingly often!

write a **message** asking for help



When I'm REALLY stuck, I'll write an email to a friend:

- "Here's what I'm trying to do..."
- "I did X and I expected Y to happen, but instead..."
- "Could this be because....?"
- "This seems impossible because..."
- "I've tried A, B, and C to fix it, but...."

This helps me organize my thoughts, and often by the time I finish writing, I've magically fixed the problem on my own!

It has to be a **specific** person, so that the imaginary version of them in my mind will say useful things :)

explain the bug out loud



Explaining what's going wrong out loud is magic.



so, when I do X thing, I'm getting an error, and it doesn't make any sense because I already checked that A and B are working....

huh...



!



<pause for 5 seconds>

OH I SEE WHAT I
DID WRONG

happy
to help!



People call this "rubber ducking" because the other person might as well be a rubber duck (they don't say anything!)

make sure your code is running



NOTHING I try is helping,
this is IMPOSSIBLE

wait... nothing I try is
changing anything.... is my
code even being run????

If my changes have no effect at all, often it means I've made a silly mistake (like forgetting to restart the app) and my changes aren't being run!

I like to check that my code is being run by printing something out (like `print("asdf")`). Or, if that's not possible, I'll introduce an error so that it crashes.

do the annoying thing



Sometimes when I'm debugging, there are things I'll refuse to try because they take too long.



But as I become more and more desperate, eventually I'll give in and do the annoying thing. Often it helps!



chapter 7

IMPROVE YOUR TOOLKIT



try out a new tool



There are TONS of great debugging tools (listed on the next page!), but often they have a steep learning curve. Some tips to get started:

- get **someone more experienced** to show you an example of how they'd use the tool ← this is SO helpful!!!
- try it out when investigating a **low stakes** bug, so it's no big deal if it doesn't work out
- **take notes** with examples of the options you used, so you can refer to them next time

types of debugging tools



Here are some tools I've found useful:

debuggers! (most languages have one!)

profilers! perf, pprof, py-spy

tracers! strace, ltrace, ftrace, BPF tools

network spy tools! tcpdump, wireshark, ngrep, mitmproxy

web automation tools! selenium, playwright

load testers! ab, wrk

test frameworks! pytest, RSpec

linters/static analysis tools! black, eslint, pyright

data formatting tools! xxd, hexdump, jq, graphviz

dynamic analysis tools! valgrind, asan, tsan, ubsan

fuzzers/property testing! hypothesis, quickcheck, Go's fuzzer

I've never used these but lots of people say they're helpful

shorten your **feedback loop**



When you're investigating a bug, you'll need to run the buggy code a million times.



UGH, I need to type all this information into the form to trigger the bug AGAIN??? This is literally the 30th time :(:(

Ways to speed it up:

- ★ use a browser automation tool to fill in forms / click buttons for you!
- ★ write a unit test!
- ★ autorun your code every time you save!



add pretty printing

Sometimes you print out an object, and it just prints the class name and reference ID, like this:

```
MyObject<#18238120323>
```



Implementing a custom string representation for a class you're often printing out can save a LOT of time.

The name of the method you need to implement is:

Python: <code>__str__</code>	Ruby: <code>.to_s</code>	JavaScript: <code>.toString</code>
Java: <code>.toString</code>	Go: <code>String()</code>	

Also, pretty-printing libraries (like `pprint` in Python or `awesome_print` in Ruby) are great for printing out arrays/hashmaps.

colours, graphs, and sounds



Instead of printing text, your program can tell you about its state by generating a picture! Or playing sounds at key moments!

Some ways your programs can generate pictures or sounds:

- ★ add **colours** to your log lines
- ★ add **red outlines** around every **HTML element!**
- ★ Haskell has an option to beep “” at the start of every major garbage collection
- ★ draw a chart of events over time but wait
- ★ use graphviz to generate a diagram of your program's internal state



chapter 8

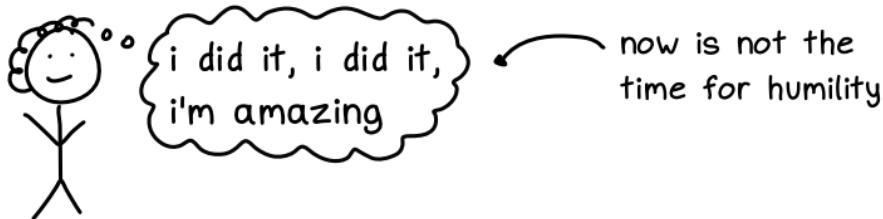
AFTER IT'S FIXED



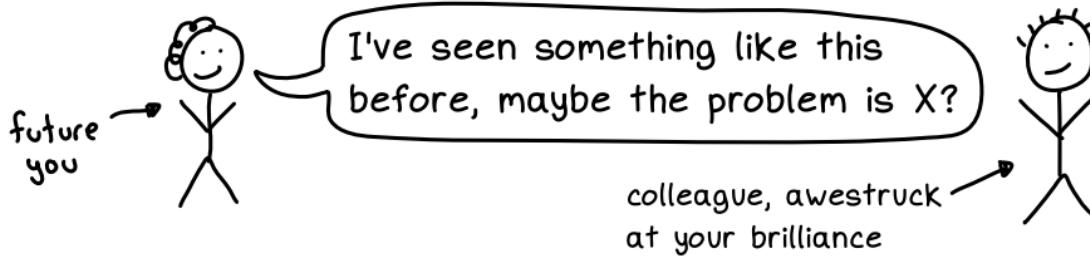


do a victory lap

Once you've solved it, don't forget to celebrate! Take a break! Feel smart!



The best part of understanding a bug is that it makes it SO MUCH easier for you to solve similar future bugs.



tell a friend what you learned



I love to celebrate squashing a bug by telling a friend:



hey marie, did you know about
this weird thing that can
happen with CSS flexbox?

Some possible outcomes of this:

- they've seen that bug too, and teach me something else!
- they learn something new!
- they ask questions I hadn't thought of
- they tell me about a website/tool I didn't know about
- it helps solidify my knowledge!

find related bugs



When you're done fixing a bug, glance around to see if there are any obvious places in your code that have the same bug.

I was calling function X wrong, I'll check if we're calling that function wrong anywhere else!

o o o o o



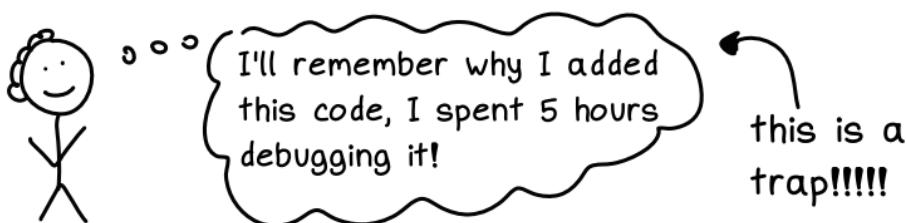
wow, my assumption about how Y worked was TOTALLY wrong, I should go back and fix some things...

add a comment

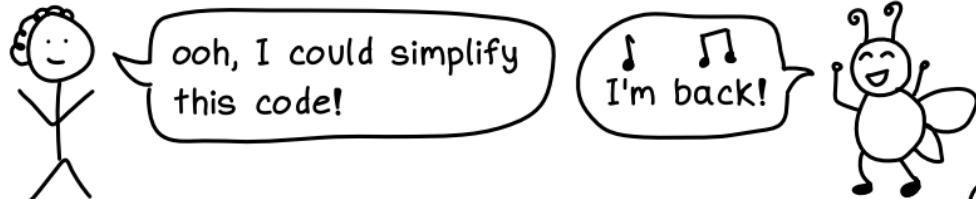


Some bug fixes are a little counterintuitive.

Otherwise you would have written the code that way in the first place! You might think:



Adding a comment can help future you (or your coworkers!) avoid accidentally reviving a bug later.



document your quest



For very tricky bugs, writing up an explanation of what went wrong and how you figured it out is an amazing way to share knowledge and make sure you really understand it.

Ways I've done this in the past:

- ★ complain about it in the internal chat! ↗ so people can search for it!
- ★ write a quick explanation in the commit message
- ★ write a fun blog post telling my tale of woe!
- ★ for really important work bugs, write a 5-page document with graphs explaining all the weird stuff I learned along the way

thanks for reading

One more thing: I also built a choose-your-own-adventure debugging game to go with this zine, where you can solve computer networking mysteries:

<https://mysteries.wizardzines.com>

credits

Cover art: Vladimir Kašiković

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Pairing: Marie Claire LeBlanc Flanagan
and thanks to all the beta readers ☺

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more at
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