

Engineering and Debugging an App

HelloPurr, MoleMash, and the other apps covered in this book's early chapters are relatively small software projects and don't really require a significant amount of software engineering. As soon as you take on a more complicated project, you'll realize that the difficulty of building software increases rapidly for each bit of complexity you add—it is not anywhere close to a linear relationship. You'll quickly learn that to build even moderately complex software, you need forethought, planning, blueprints, user and system testing, and in general, techniques and skills that are more engineering than programming. For most of us, it takes a few hard knocks before we realize this fact. At that point, you'll be ready to learn some software engineering principles and debugging techniques. If you're already at that point, or if you're one of those few people who want to learn a few techniques in the hope of avoiding some of those growing pains, this chapter is for you.



Software Engineering Principles

Here are some basic principles that we'll cover in this chapter:

- Involve your prospective users in the process as early and as often as possible.
- Build an initial, simple prototype and then add to it incrementally.
- Code and test in small increments, never more than a few blocks at a time.
- Design the logic for your app before beginning to code.
- Divide, layer, and conquer.
- Comment your blocks so that others (and you) can understand them.
- Learn to trace blocks with pencil and paper so that you understand their mechanics.

If you follow this advice, you will save yourself time and frustration and build better software. But, you probably won't follow it every time! Some of this advice might seem counterintuitive. Your natural inclination is to think of an idea, assume you know what your users want, and then start piecing together blocks until you think

you’ve finished the app. Let’s go back to the first principle and look at how to understand what your users want before you start building anything.

Solve Real Problems

In the movie *Field of Dreams*, the character Ray hears a voice whisper, “If you build it, [they] will come.” Ray listens to the whisper, builds a baseball field in the middle of his Iowa corn patch, and indeed, the 1919 White Sox and thousands of fans show up.

You should know right now that the whisperer’s advice does not apply to software. In fact, it’s the opposite of what you should do. The history of software is littered with *great solutions for which there is no problem*. Solving a *real* problem is what makes for an amazing app and a successful and perhaps lucrative project. And to know what the problem is, you’ve got to talk to the people who have it. This is often referred to as *user-centered* design, and it will help you build better apps.

If you meet some programmers, ask them what percentage of the programs they have written have actually been deployed with real users. You’ll be surprised at how low the percentage is, even for great programmers. Most software projects run into so many issues that they don’t ever see the light of day.

User-centered design means thinking and talking to prospective users early and often. Really, this should start even before you decide what to build. Most successful software was built to solve a particular person’s pain point, and then—and only then—generalized into the next big thing.

Build a Prototype and Show Users

Most prospective users won’t provide useful feedback if you ask them to read a document that specifies what the app will do and give their feedback based on that. What *does* work is to show them an interactive model for the app you’re going to create—a *prototype*. A prototype is an incomplete, unrefined version of the app. When you build it, don’t worry about details or completeness or having a beautiful graphical interface; build it so that it does just enough to illustrate the core value of the app. Then, show it to your prospective users, be quiet, and listen.

Incremental Development

When you begin your first significantly sized app, your natural inclination might be to add all of the components and blocks you’ll need in one grand effort and then download the app to your phone to see if it works. Take, for instance, a quiz app. Without guidance, most novice programmers will add blocks with a long list of the questions and answers, blocks to handle the quiz navigation, blocks to handle checking the user’s answer, and blocks for every detail of the app’s logic, all before testing to see if any of it works. In software engineering, this is called the *Big Bang approach*.

Just about every new programmer uses this approach. In my (author Wolber) classes at the University of San Francisco, I will often ask a student, “How’s it going?” as the student is working on an app.

“I think I’m done,” the student will reply.

“Splendid. Can I see it?”

“Ummm, not yet; I don’t have my phone with me.”

“So you haven’t run the app at all?” I ask.

“No.”

I’ll look over the student’s shoulder at an amazing, colorful configuration of 30 or so blocks, none of them tested. The problem is that when you test all at once, it is much more difficult to diagnose the bugs, and there will be bugs—big hairy ones!

Probably the best advice I can give my students—and aspiring programmers everywhere—is this:

Code a little, test a little, repeat.

Build your app one piece at a time, testing as you go. You’ll find bugs, alright, but tiny ones that you can easily swat away. And the process will become surprisingly satisfying, because you’ll see results sooner when you follow it.

Hundreds of books and theses have been written on incremental software development. If you’re interested in the process of building software (and other things), check out the *agile development* methodology.¹

Design Before Coding

There are two parts to programming: understanding the logic of the app, and then translating that logic into code in some programming language. Before you tackle the translation, spend some time on the logic. Specify what should happen both for the user and internally in the app. Nail down the logic of each event handler before moving on to translating that logic into blocks.

Entire books have been written on various program design methodologies. Some people use diagrams such as flowcharts or structure charts for design, whereas others prefer handwritten text and sketches. Some people believe that all “design” should end up directly alongside your code as annotation (comments), not in a separate document. The key for beginners is to understand that there is a logic to all programs that has nothing to do with a particular programming language. Simultaneously tackling both that logic and its translation into a language, no matter how intuitive the language, can be overwhelming. So, throughout the process, get away from the

¹ Beck, Kent; et al. (2001). “Manifesto for Agile Software Development”. Agile Alliance, Retrieved June 5, 2014

computer and think about your app, be sure that you're clear on what you want it to do, and document what you come up with in some way. Then, be sure to hook that design documentation to your app so that others can benefit from it.

Comment Your Code

If you've completed a few of the tutorials in this book, you've probably seen the small yellow boxes within the blocks (see [Figure 15-1](#)). These are called *comments*. In App Inventor, you can add comments to any block by right-clicking it and choosing Add Comment. Comments are just annotations; they don't affect the app's execution at all.



Figure 15-1. Using a comment on the if block to describe what it does in plain English

Why comment, then? Well, if your app is successful, it will live a long life. Even after spending only a week away from your app, you will forget what you were thinking at the time and not have a clue what some of the blocks are for. For this reason, even if nobody else will ever see your blocks, you should provide comments for them.

And if your app is successful, it will undoubtedly pass through many hands. People will want to understand it, customize it, and extend it. As soon as you encounter the wonderful experience of starting a project with someone's uncommented code, you'll understand completely why comments are essential.

Annotating a program is not intuitive, and I've never met a novice programmer who thought it was important. Conversely, I've also never met an experienced programmer who didn't do it.

Divide, Layer, and Conquer

Problems become overwhelming when they're too big. The key is to break a problem down. There are two main ways to do this. The one we're most familiar with is to break a problem down into parts (A, B, C) and tackle each one individually. A second, less common way is to break a problem into layers from simple to complex. Add a few blocks for some simple behavior, test the software to verify that it behaves as you want, and then add another layer of complexity, and so on.

Using the President's Quiz app in [Chapter 10](#) as an example, let's evaluate these two methods. Recall that the President's Quiz app lets the user navigate through the questions by clicking a Next button. It also checks the user's answers to determine if she's

correct. So, in designing this app, you might break it into two parts—question navigation and answer checking, and program each separately.

However, within each of those two parts, you could also break down the process from simple to complex. So, for question navigation, start by creating the code to display only the first question in the list of questions, and test it to ensure that it works. Then, build the code for getting to the next question, but ignore the issue of what happens when you get to the last question. After you've confirmed that the quiz will take you to the end, add the blocks to handle the "special case" of the user reaching the last question.

It's not an either/or case of whether you should break a problem down into parts or into layers of complexity: you should do both. Those who can do this well—software architects—are in extremely high demand.

Understand Your Language: Tracking with Pen and Paper

When an app is in action, it is only partially visible. The end user of an app sees only its outward face, the images and data that are displayed in the user interface. The inner workings of software are hidden to the outside world, just like the internal mechanisms of the human brain (thankfully!). As an app executes, we don't see the instructions (blocks), we don't see the program counter that tracks which instruction is currently being executed, and we don't see the software's internal memory cells (its variables and properties). In the end, this is how we want it: the end user should see only what the program explicitly displays. However, while you are developing and testing software, you want to see *everything* that is happening.

You, the programmer, see the code during development, but only a static view of it. Thus, you must *imagine* the software in action: events occurring, the program counter moving to and executing the next block, the values in the memory cells changing, and so on.

Programming requires a shift between two different views. You begin with the static model—the code blocks—and try to envision how the program will actually behave. When you are ready, you shift to testing mode: playing the role of the end user and testing the software to see if it behaves as you expect. If it does not, you must shift back to the static view, tweak your model, and test again. Through this back and forth process, you move toward an acceptable solution.

When you begin programming, you have only a partial model of how a computer program works—the entire process seems almost magical. You begin with some simple apps: clicking a button causes a cat to meow! You then move on to more complex apps, step through some tutorials, and maybe make a few changes to customize them. The beginner partially understands the inner workings of the apps, but certainly does not feel in control of the process. The beginner will often say, "*It's not working,*" or, "*It's not doing what it's supposed to do.*" The key is to learn how things

work to the point that you think more subjectively about the program and say things such as, “My program is doing this,” and, “My logic is causing the program to...”

One way to learn how programs work is to trace the execution of some simple app, representing on *paper* exactly what happens inside the device when each block is performed. Envision the user triggering some event handler and then step through and show the effect of each block: how do the variables and properties in the app change? How do the components in the user interface change? Like a close reading in a literature class, this step-by-step *tracing* forces you to examine the elements of the language—in this case, App Inventor blocks.

The complexity of the sample you trace is almost immaterial; the key is that you slow down your thought process and examine the cause and effect of each block. You’ll gradually begin to understand that the rules governing the entire process are not as overwhelming as you originally thought.

For example, consider the blocks depicted in Figure 15-2, which are slight alterations of those from the President’s Quiz app (Chapter 8).

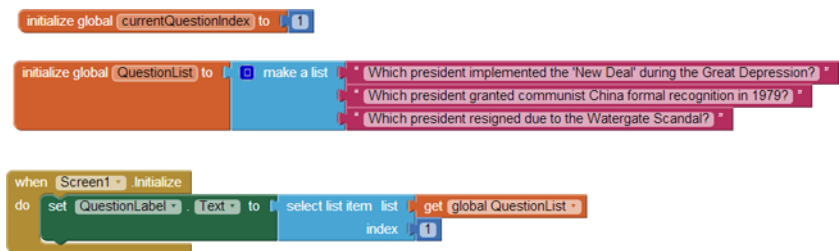


Figure 15-2. Setting the Text in QuestionLabel to the first item in QuestionList when the app begins

Do you understand this code? Can you trace it and show exactly what happens in each step?

You start tracing by first drawing memory cell boxes for all pertinent variables and properties. In this case, you need boxes for the `currentQuestionIndex` and the `QuestionLabel.Text`, as shown in Table 15-1.

Table 15-1. Memory cell boxes for tracing

QuestionLabel.Text	currentQuestionIndex

Next, think about what happens when an app begins—not from a user’s perspective, but internally, within the app when it initializes. If you’ve completed some of the tutorials, you probably know this, but perhaps you haven’t thought about it in mechanical terms. When an app begins:

1. All the component properties are set based on their initial values in the Component Designer.
2. All variable definitions and initializations are performed.
3. The blocks in the `Screen.Initialize` event handler are performed.

Tracing a program helps you understand these mechanics. So, what should go in the boxes after the initialization phase?

As shown in [Table 15-2](#), the 1 is in `currentQuestionIndex` because the variable definition is executed when the app begins, and it initializes it to 1. The first question is in `QuestionLabel.Text` because `Screen.Initialize` selects the first item from `QuestionList` and puts it there.

Table 15-2. The values after the President's Quiz app initializes

QuestionLabel.Text	currentQuestionIndex
Which president implemented the "New Deal" during the Great Depression?	1

Next, trace what happens when the user clicks the Next button, using the blocks shown in [Figure 15-3](#).



Figure 15-3. This block is executed when the user clicks NextButton

Examine each block, one by one. First, the `currentQuestionIndex` is incremented. At an even more detailed level, the current value of the variable (1) is added to 1, and the result (2) is placed in `currentQuestionIndex`. The `if` statement is false because the value of `currentQuestionIndex` (2) is less than the length of `QuestionList` (3). Therefore, the second item is selected and put into `QuestionLabel.Text`, as illustrated in [Table 15-3](#).

Table 15-3. The values after NextButton is clicked

QuestionLabel.Text	currentQuestionIndex
Which president granted communist China formal recognition in 1979?	2

Trace what happens on the second click. Now, `currentQuestionIndex` is incremented and becomes 3. What happens with the `if`? Before reading ahead, examine it very closely and see if you can trace it correctly.

On the `if` test, the value of `currentQuestionIndex` (3) is indeed greater than or equal to the length of `QuestionList`. Consequently, the `currentQuestionIndex` is set to 1 and the first question is placed into the label, as shown in [Table 15-4](#).

Table 15-4. The values after NextButton is clicked a second time

QuestionLabel.Text	currentQuestionIndex
Which president implemented the “New Deal” during the Great Depression?	1

The trace has uncovered a bug: the last question in the list never appears! Do you know how to fix it?

When you can trace an app to this level of detail, you become a programmer, an engineer. You begin to understand the mechanics of the programming language, absorbing sentences and words in the code instead of vaguely grasping paragraphs. Yes, the programming language is complex, but each “word” has a definite and straightforward interpretation by the machine. If you understand how each block maps to some variable or property changing, you can figure out how to write or fix your app. You realize that *you* are in complete control.

Now, if you were to tell your friends, “I’m learning how to let a user click a Next button to get to the next question; it’s really tough,” they’d think you were crazy. In fact, such programming *is* very difficult, not because the concepts are so complex, but because you have to slow down your brain to figure out how it, or a computer, processes each and every step, including those things your brain does subconsciously.

Debugging an App

Tracing an app step by step, on paper, is one way to understand programming; it’s also a time-tested method of debugging an app when it has problems.

Programming environments, including App Inventor, also provide the high-tech version of pen-and-paper tracing through debugging tools that automate some of the process. Such tools improve the app development process by providing an illuminated view of an app *in action*. These tools allow the programmer to do the following:

- Pause an app at any point and examine its variables and properties
- Perform individual instructions (blocks) to examine their effects

Watching Variables

The values of component properties and variables are not visible when you test an app in App Inventor. One common debugging technique is to add blocks to display these values in labels of the user interface during testing, then remove the labels and display code after the app is debugged.

The earlier version of App Inventor (App Inventor Classic) had a mechanism for watching variable and property values in the Blocks Editor while testing, without using labels in the user interface. The plan is for such a mechanism to be added to App Inventor 2 as well, so keep a lookout for it because it's very helpful in debugging and understanding code.

Testing Individual Blocks

While you can use the Watch mechanism to examine variables during an app's execution, another tool called Do It makes it possible for you to try out individual blocks *outside* the ordinary execution sequence. Right-click any block and choose Do It; the block will be performed. If the block is an expression that returns a value, App Inventor will show that value in a box above the block.

Do It is very useful for debugging logic problems in your blocks. Consider the quiz's `NextButton.Click` event handler again, and suppose that it has a logic problem in which you don't navigate through all the questions. You could test the program by clicking Next in the user interface and checking to see if the appropriate question appears each time. You might even watch the `currentQuestionIndex` to see how each click changes it.

Unfortunately, this type of testing only allows you to examine the effect of entire event handlers. The app will perform all the blocks in the event handler for the button click before allowing you to examine your Watch variables or the user interface.

With the Do It tool, you can slow down the testing process and examine the state of the app after any block. The general scheme is to initiate user interface events until you get to the problem point in the app. After discovering that the third question wasn't appearing in the quiz app, you might click the `NextButton` once to get to the second question. Then, instead of clicking the `NextButton` again and having the entire event handler performed in one swoop, you could use Do It to perform the blocks within the `NextButton.Click` event handler, one at a time. You'd start by right-clicking the top row of blocks (the increment of `currentQuestionIndex`) and choosing Do It, as illustrated in [Figure 15-4](#).

This would change the index to 3. App execution would then stop—Do It causes only the chosen block and any subordinate blocks to be performed. This affords you, the tester, the ability to examine the watched variables and the user interface. When you're ready, you can choose the next row of blocks (the `if` test) and select Do It so that it's performed. At every step of the way, you can see the effect of each block.

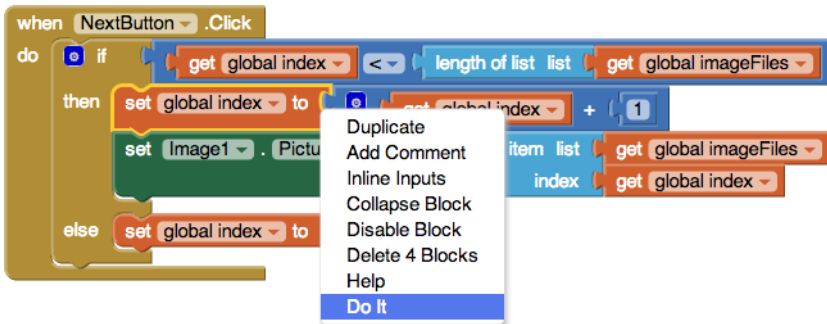


Figure 15-4. Using the Do It tool to execute the blocks one at a time

Incremental Development with Do It

It's important to note that performing individual blocks is not just for debugging. You can also use it during development to test blocks as you go. For instance, if you were creating a long formula to compute the distance in miles between two GPS coordinates, you might test the formula at each step to verify that the blocks make sense.

Disabling Blocks

Another way to help you debug and test your app incrementally is to disable blocks. By doing this, you can leave problematic or untested blocks in an app but direct the system to ignore them temporarily as the app runs. You can then test the active blocks and get them to work fully without worrying about the problematic ones. You can disable any block by right-clicking it and choosing **Disable Block**. The block will be grayed out, and when you run the app, it will be ignored. When you're ready, you can activate the block by right-clicking it again and choosing **Enable Block**.

Summary

The great thing about App Inventor is how easy it is. Its visual nature gets you started building an app right away, and you don't have to worry about a lot of low-level details. But, the reality is that App Inventor can't figure out what your app should do for you, much less exactly *how* to do it. Even though it's tempting to just jump right into the Designer and Blocks Editor and start building an app, it's important to spend some time thinking about and planning in detail exactly what your app will do. It sounds a bit painful, but if you listen to your users, prototype, test, and trace the logic of your app, you'll be building better apps in no time.