

Zen and the Art of Programming

by Jeremy Fonte

To some, programming would appear to be a tedious, difficult task; a necessary evil, which fills their smartphone with dozens of apps, provides productivity suites and e-mail, and so on. When I first started programming, it was mostly out of curiosity, and it was certainly a struggle back then to craft the software I envisioned. Nowadays, programming, and web development in particular, is more than a hobby or profession of mine - it has become a way of life.

As I've learned more complex techniques, and developed an understanding of the principles of software architecture, I've found myself thinking about the big picture for code, much more so than when I was first programming. It is this comprehension of the totality of an elaborately complex system that brings me to the metaphor of "zen" programming.

Many have heard the saying "what is the sound of one hand clapping?" - this rhetorical question serves the purpose of baffling the mind with an apparent paradox. The hope is that thinking about the impossibility of one hand clapping will shift your thoughts to the abstract realm of contemplation.

Likewise, I propose that software design, be it web, database, or mobile development, has the potential to inspire a similar phenomenon in the mind. To make the process of software design manageable, developers often break the process down into many smaller tasks, and use tools like Microsoft Project or SG Project to analyze the countless components that together will equal the finished application. This is a good thing for productivity – but when you take a break from your work, I suggest a different approach.

Try to think of all the myriad pieces of the app's architecture. Think of the code libraries you're using in the app's implementation. Think of the development software, the language's compiler, the operating system, the instructions the processor carries out, and the hardware itself. Now, imagine where all of the hardware was manufactured, the people working in the factories, and the supply chain employees who brought the components to your country as a finished computer.

I find this to be a useful meditation that piques my interest, given my passion for computer programming and technology. It takes me to a state of contemplative appreciation of the complexity of software, and the complexity of our daily life. It's always nice to take a step back from the details, and think about the big picture - I believe spending some time thinking in the abstract is always a good thing!