

Write Beautiful Code

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This presentation is about writing:

beautiful

practical

sleek

code

History / Rationale

I used to give a presentation about bad code.

This is the optimist's version.

It's also at a relatively high level.

<me>

<me>

PHPer for a long, long time

Engineer, consultant, trainer, manager of engineers

Opinionated (Australian)

Work at Mozilla (previously OmniTI, RMIT)

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Principles

Your PHP should

be simple

get the job done

be secure

be scalable and performant

be producible and maintainable

Simple

This is easier said than done.

Many people find complex architectures beautiful. Me, I like the simple things in life.

Rule #1

First, do the simplest thing that could possibly work.

Implications

The simplest thing that could possibly work is usually pretty fast to produce.

It may lack robustness, performance, and security.

(Strangely, very simple code is usually simple to maintain.)

Clever code

The village idiot is by definition a simple person.

What about clever code?

I hate clever code.

Architecture

Many people like big elegant architectures. These are sometimes referred to as “enterprise”.

If the task is simple, build a simple solution.

If the task is large and complex, have an architecture but prototype the hard parts first with small, simple code. This lets you focus on getting it working.

Failure

I see projects fail when people spend all their time on building big and run out of time to make it work.

Robust

Robust

Robustness means two things:

getting the job done

continuing to get the job done as much as possible even when things go bad

Testing ?

I don't just mean testing.

I mean building your code and environment to degrade gracefully in the event of failure, and to resume working later.

Robust Code

Strategies for robust code include

- Testing common cases and edge cases

- Removing dependencies where possible - especially dependencies on uncontrollable variables (outside APIs et al)

- Decouple code so each piece is itself simple and has an established interface.

Robust Environment

Robust environment?

Repeatable process

Lightweight documentation

Documentation of changes

Good use of version control

Environment

Minimum: stage/test + production

Preferred: dev + stage/test + production

Need different boxes (virtual++)

Testing

Bare Minimum: use case testing

Good: use case testing + unit tests

Better: human use case testing + full automated

Testing = tools + discipline/process

Tools

SimpleTest <http://www.simpletest.org/>

PHPUnit <http://www.phpunit.de/>

Selenium <http://www.openqa.org/selenium/>

Perl

Secure

Most times security is something tacked on at the end of the day

The ideal is a secure design: architecture with a single entry point, et al

Simple independent code components and a low level of trust is easier to scale

Trust no one

`$_GET`, `$_POST`, `$_REQUEST`, `$_COOKIE`

Some server variables (e.g. `$_SERVER`
`['SERVER_NAME']`)

API data

Files

Girl Scout Cookies

Sleepless nights

XSS (Cross Site Scripting)

SQL/Command/Code Injection

Exposed source code

Session fixation / Session hijacking

CSRF

Cross domain Ajax requests

Zero day

People stay up worrying about the next exploit, when the truth is most websites have plenty of existing problems.

Principles

Peer review new code

Audit existing code

Stay up to date

Don't depend on external factors for security (where possible)

Make time in your process for security

Have a disaster plan

Scalable
Performant

Scalability vs Performance

Scalable code handles a change in load acceptably

Performant code handles today's load acceptably

Confusion

Confusion arises between these two terms because typically we deal with the issue after the horse has bolted.

Coding for scale

More about what you shouldn't do

Question design decisions:

What will this mean when there are 100 servers?

Will this code work if we change the underlying architecture?

How do I scale-proof my code?

Performant

What makes a good programmer?

“The ability to trust empirical evidence over instinct.”

For performant code we need to measure, tune, and measure again.

Principles

Keep parts of the system as independent as possible

Measure, measure, measure

Focus on the worst thing

Change one thing at a time

Measure again

Independence

If you keep components independent, you can change things out or add more firepower as load increases

- More web servers

- More database slaves

- More caches in more places

Caching

Use a compiler cache (Zend, APC, etc)

Cache generated content (note: serve static content separately)

Whole pages or fragments (disk, squid, memcache)

Database query results (query cache, memcache)

External data (memcache, disk)

Measurement

You need tools.

Profilers: xdebug, APD, Zend Platform

System tools: strace, dtrace, ltrace

Database tools: (e.g. MySQL) mysqltop,
show processlist, slow query log

No assumptions

Measure to see where the problem is

Remember diminishing returns

No premature optimization (worst use of developer time ever)

Performance testing

Need to test your architecture? Use production data

New systems with unknown traffic patterns are much harder to test.

Producible
Maintainable

Producible: able to be created in a reasonable amount of time

Maintainable: able to be updated in a reasonable amount of time

These forces often pull in different directions.

The usual problem.

Don't forget “debuggable”

Using

- output buffering

- framework magic

- black box components

makes debugging much much slower.

Frameworks

(By which people mean MVC)

Suitable for UI apps

Don't buy you simplicity or performance

Buy you maintainability at the expense of
producibility

Do frameworks speed up development?

Write good code

Above all, code needs to be readable and maintainable

Beware clever code:

- cool design patterns

- obscure performance tweaks

- niche language features

Errors and Exceptions

Turn `error_reporting` up in dev and `display_errors` off in production

Use `set_error_handler()` and `set_exception_handler()` for top level errors

Whacking all your code in a `try...catch` block is not a panacea.

Coding standards

Have and use a coding standard

Zend Framework, PEAR, homebrew

Legacy code always a problem

Don'ts

Make the rules awkward and difficult to remember

Apps Hungarian

Force millions of include files (performance hit)

Force complete OO (c.f. Simple)

Final words

Slides at www.laurathomson.com (later)

Questions?