Drawing for IT Architects

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1. Introduction

Use a picture. It's worth a thousand words.

– Tess Flanders ("Speakers Give Sound Advice". *Syracuse Post Standard* (page 18). March 28, 1911.)

The expression "A picture is worth a thousand words" and its variations have over the years been attributed to many people, including Fred R. Barnard, Ivan Turgenev and even Napolean Bonaparte. Fred R. Barnard used it in an advertisement in 1927 labeling it a Chinese proverb. Later he admitted that he added that phrase "so that people would take it seriously". Today, there's not much discussion about the idiom itself, except for its exact origin, and whether a picture would be worth a thousand, ten thousand or maybe even more words.

At the beginning of this book, it's probably a good idea to investigate this proposition a bit more. Is a picture really worth a thousand words? What does it take for a picture, or to be more precise, a drawing by an IT architect, to be worth a thousand words? I have seen drawings that definitely weren't worth a thousand words. I have even seen drawings that needed a thousand words just to explain what they were about. And I'm quiet sure some of my drawings fall in that category too.

Over the years, I've learned a few tricks to make better drawings. I'm not claiming to be the world's best expert on how to make a good drawing, but there are some simple mistakes that are easy to avoid. Caring about your drawings and how they look like is probably the most important thing you can do to make better drawings. Throwing away drawings you're not happy with and starting over again to make another one is another good trick.

But there are also many technical details that are easy to get right, once you know them. Be conscious about the stroke width of lines and borders. Try to balance and align the shapes in your drawing whenever possible. Think about what colors you're using, and what hidden messages they may carry. Use a font that's suited for your drawing. And don't try to put too many things in a single drawing. Sometimes it's better to have two drawings each worth five hundred

words rather than trying to convey two messages in a single drawing people won't be able to understand.

Many things can be said about the tools you should use to make your drawings. In my experience, that's usually not where the problem is if a drawing is bad. The most important things is to use a tool you're comfortable with, but also, that you learn to use the tool properly, and that you understand its limitations. But if I should make one recommendation about tools, then it would be the following: try to stay away from pixel-based drawing tools as much as possible, and rather use vector-based tools, or tools that are built around an equivalent domain model.

But maybe the most important advise would be that, more important than being entirely correct and complete, the purpose of a drawing should be to give the viewer an insight. Therefore, it not only has to be pleasant to look it, it should (like the rest of your documentation) also be pedagogical. Therefore, a good drawing, in the sense that it would be worth a thousand words, can never be simply produced by an automatic tool. It takes a human to encode the thousand words into the drawing. Doing that is a craft, which requires care, insight, a little bit of talent, and a lot of training. The intent of this book is to help with some insights, and maybe give some inspiration to do some more training too.

Glossary

Here are some brief definitions of selected terms and concepts used in this book.

Font
: A font is a particular size, weight and style of a typeface

Font Family
: A typeface

JPEG
: Joint Photographic Experts Group

Joint Photographic Experts Group
: A commonly used method of lossy compression for digital images, particularly for those images produced by digital photography

PNG
: Portable Network Graphics

Portable Network Graphics
: A raster-graphics file format that supports lossless data compression

Scalable Vector Graphics
: An XML-based vector image format for defining two-dimensional graphics

Serif
: A serif is a small line attached to the end of a stroke in a letter or symbol

Shade
: A shade is the mixture of a color with black, which reduces lightness

SVG
: Scalable Vector Graphics

Tint
: A tint is the mixture of a color with white, which increases lightness

Tone
: A tone is produced either by the mixture of a color with gray, or by both tinting and shading

Typeface
: A typeface (also known as font family) is a set of one or more fonts each composed of glyphs that share common design features

References

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