QUICKSANDS OF SOFTWARE DEVELOPMENT

D. PETRE BOGDAN

Quicksands of software development

D. Petre Bogdan

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Intro

Here is a definition of *"quicksand"*, straight out of the dictionary[1]:

> Quicksand, (noun). Sand readily yielding to pressure; especially: a deep mass of loose sand mixed with water into which heavy objects readily sink.

Depending on where you live, you've probably also seen signs like this at some point in your life:

You need signs like that to warn you of the danger. Quicksand looks solid when undisturbed, but walking into it causes liquefaction. And that's when you start to sink.

I think many companies that develop software should have a sign like that somewhere in their offices. Why? Here is the second definition of *"quicksand"* from the same dictionary page[1]:

> Quicksand, (noun). Something that entraps or frustrates.

Again and again, software development projects fail for various reasons: unclear project goals or requirements, poor business decisions, lack of planning, poor communication, bad technological choices (like choosing the wrong programming language or the wrong architecture), complexity and size of the project, poor prioritization, project management mistakes, unrealistic deadlines, office politics, and many more. Even if the project succeeds, the result is often a combination of cost overruns, late product deliveries, poor quality, lots of frustrated people, and jokes like this one:

> *"Developer to Team Lead"*: We cannot do this project. WE CAN NOT! It implies a significant design change, and no one in our team understands this model. And, above all, no one in the company knows the programming language in which this application was written. So, even if someone wants to work on it, they can not. In my personal opinion, the company should never have gotten itself involved with this project.
>
> *"Team Lead to Project Manager"*: This project will involve a design change. Currently, we do not have anyone with experience in this type of project. Additionally, we don't know the programming language. We will have to organize a lot of training sessions if we are to take this project. In my opinion, we are not ready to engage in projects of this type.
>
> *"Project Manager to Head of Department"*: This project involves a design change, and we do not have much experience in this area. Also, not many people in the company are well prepared for this. In my opinion, we could do the project, but we will need more time than usual.
>
> *"Head of Department to Upper Management"*: This project involves redefining the design. We have some people who have worked in this area, and others who

> know the programming language. So they can train other people. In my opinion, we should accept this project but with care.
>
> *“Upper Management to CEO”*: This project will show everyone our ability to remodel the design of an entire system. We have all the necessary knowledge and people to execute this project successfully. Some employees have already provided training in this field to other employees. In our opinion, we should not let this project escape us.
>
> *“CEO to client”*: This is the type of project in which our company specializes. We have executed many such projects for many important clients. Trust me when I say that we are the best company in the field to do this kind of project. It is my opinion that we can execute this project successfully in the required time.

Many software projects have enough messed up things happening with them that they have the potential of generating a few jokes of their own. Another one of my favorite jokes is *“Project delivered on time!”*. The funniest jokes will be the ones you have lived through, because beneath the humor lies an undesirable situation you somehow got accustomed to. With time, just like with a frog being slowly boiled alive[2], we get so acclimatized to such situations that various problems just start to look normal, and we don’t do anything about them anymore. If jokes start surrounding your project, it might be people’s way of dealing with the working environment slowly slipping into a state of normalization of deviance[3], since humans use jokes as a coping strategy to make light of bad situations.

If you’re in your first software development job, you might have no idea what I’m talking about. Yet! Instead, you probably find software development challenging and lots of fun. You’ve most likely been busy and focused on things like *“What books should every programmer read”*, *“10 programming languages to learn next* *year"*, *"What every software developer should know about such and such"*, *"10 ways to improve your code"*, and so on, and so forth. And that was just to get your appetite going. You then discovered design patterns, modular architecture, source control, concurrency, scalability, the cloud, functional programming, IoC, unit testing, TDD, regex, refactoring, code reviews, and principles like SOLID, KISS, DRY, YAGNI, or SRP. You know… the tools of the trade, the things you need to learn, the things you need to practice, the things that earn you the big bucks, or reputation and recognition on developer communities like Stack Overflow[4]. You have a blast learning all of these things. You don't feel entrapped or frustrated. So, where is the problem? Why do we need the warning signs?

First of all, these things are all about you. *"You"* need to learn. *"You"* need to do. *"You"* need to master the various topics. But unless *"you"* are building the next successful business out of your parents' garage and working on becoming your own boss, it won't be just about *"you"*. Most likely, you will start working in a company on a software project that isn't going smoothly and might possibly be heading towards partial or total failure. I mentioned above some reasons why software projects fail, but those represent the *"macro"* issues. They are the results of smaller things that happen every day. Little things that combine in unfortunate ways to cause lots of harmful effects. And those things won't be just about *"you"*. They will also be about *"others"*.

Secondly, most of the things I mentioned above gravitate towards the technical. You might be tempted to say, *"Well, duh! Isn't this Information Technology dummy"*? It is, but it's also about businesses. And every business is a people business. You will not just write code all day long until you retire; you will do lots of stuff that won't be coding but interacting with others in the company (or outside of it). With time, you take on new roles and responsibilities - you might lead teams and manage projects, you might mentor novices, hire and fire people, communicate with clients and executives, and all sorts of stuff that isn't technical in nature.

So this book isn't about the technical stuff, the languages, the tools, or the patterns. These are important too. But there are plenty of good books on each of those topics. This book is about the situations when, despite using all of these goodies you have at your disposal, you can only scratch your head and say, *"WTF happened?"*. This book is about what happens in the trenches, things that aren't technology related. It's about some bad things common to software projects that people discover the hard way, by ending up in a situation that they didn't recognize. You will walk into such situations just like you walk into quicksand. As time passes and you pay more attention and get more experience, you will recognize some of these things as annoying and disruptive to your daily work, causing unnecessary suffering and frustration to people working on software projects. It's a bunch of tiny things, *"micro"* things that contribute to the *"macro"* issues.

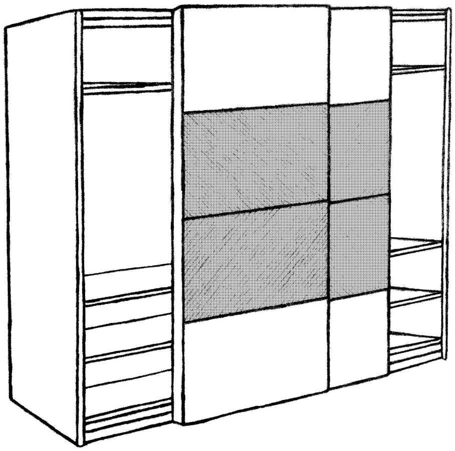
Heads up

This book is my attempt at a *"Heads up!"* for the new generations to know what else to expect when pursuing a career in software development. Young developers make the same mistakes as other developers did before them. People focus on technologies and how to use them best to write great software, while everything else just happens to them. Similar to learning how to drive a car, you start by concentrating more on the car and how to handle it, and only later on how to handle yourself in traffic. But we all know that being a driver isn't just about handling the car. It's about doing so on the road, in various weather conditions, together with other drivers, motorcyclists, pedestrians, or animals, paying attention to one's surroundings, and following and respecting the meaning of traffic signs. You might be a badass driver, drifting or doing donuts in parking lots, or breaking with your left foot, but if you don't know the meaning of signs like *"dangerous curve* *to the right, slippery road, railway level crossing, or give way"*, then you will be in for some unpleasant surprises. The signs are useful to let you know what you might encounter on the road ahead. Concentrating on the car and your driving skills is good, but it's even more important to pay attention to what's happening on the road. Similarly, good technical skills are a must for building software, but don't neglect what's around you: your environment and the things you encounter, challenges with the potential to transform into unpleasant situations that entrap or frustrate.

Just because you enjoy programming, don't think that a software development job will be just about programming in a company of like-minded people, working side by side with your developer buddies, eating pizza, sipping energy drinks, mastering the tools of the trade, and producing software that you can all be proud of. Some stuff will inevitably go into the weeds. So when the honeymoon is over, some of the things I mention in this book will be waiting for you around the bend. Be aware, be prepared, and pay attention to the warning sign.

I'm not trying to scare you. That's not my intention. There are a lot of positive things in software development. First of all, it's a lot of fun. Then there is always something new to learn or discover. You are not limited to working in just one domain; considering everyone needs software these days, you can combine programming with various other disciplines. You work with a lot of other smart people.

You are part of a community. You can work from home. You solve problems; the more complex, difficult, or challenging the problem, the more proud you feel when you make something work, you feel a sense of accomplishment. It's that satisfaction of creating something useful out of nothing (programming is an intellectual activity; you basically think a program into existence), something that other people use, sometimes that might even make a difference in their daily lives. You get a nice feeling when you see the result of your work. It's even more satisfying than assembling a sliding door wardrobe from scratch, all by yourself.



And the pay is pretty good too :).

But the reality is that, inevitably, many projects become *"stained"* by something. Developing software is fun and challenging, but often it's also hard and frustrating. Not just because the software itself is complex, but also because the process of making it is not without its challenges. Users never know what they want, the problems you are trying to solve might be very large and complex, you have technical, budget, business, legal, security, and time constraints, you depend on software you can't control (like operating systems, programming languages, libraries, frameworks, or platforms), it's almost impossible to test all potential inputs and execution paths, there is that elusive bug that keeps manifesting itself from time to time, and you just can't figure out its cause, and the list goes on and on and on.

Nothing new

What I write in this book is common knowledge. I haven't discovered anything new, haven't solved any mystery, haven't reached some higher level of understanding after scientific research, or aggregate the results of an IT survey with 50,000 respondents, from 2,500 companies, from 10 countries. I've just been around the block for a while. I'm trying to share some of the things I've learned at each stage of my career, highlight some of the things that can go wrong, and try to give some solutions I think might work to make things better. Anyone like me could have written a similar book. After a good amount of years working in this industry, in various contexts, with multiple people, you can write a book like this too. It's about experiences and lessons learned the hard way, things I wish I had known much earlier, or done differently, if only I had better understood them at the time.

I did a lot of dumb things and learned the hard way in the past 15 years or so. I've moved from being a young grasshopper[5] to senior developer, to Team Lead, to coach, and various mixed positions, both technical and managerial. Each stage brought new challenges and quicksands. The views, opinions, conclusion, and recommendations I write about in this book are thus my own, based on my own experiences. This is a personal story, and yours is likely to be different from mine. This book is about the quicksands you might encounter on the job, just like I did. If you are young, like writing code, and you are passionate about technology, it makes perfect sense to make a living from what you enjoy doing. But the way you program or build an application for yourself, or for school projects, won't be the same as when working in a company on projects with tight constraints and with lots of other people involved. There will also be frustrating aspects of being an employee programmer or developer.

I can't offer an exhaustive list of all of the problems you will encounter, and I can't talk about everything in great detail either. Nevertheless, I want to draw attention to some situations I have encountered more often and try to come up with some solutions based on my understanding and experience, so you too can recognize certain situations you are heading for and attempt to do something about them. Although I've done lots of things and had various responsibilities throughout the years, my perspective on things is, for the most part, that of a technical person. So you might view the same situations through different lenses. You might agree, disagree, and everything in between. Always use your judgment when trying to apply some of the proposed solutions. There are no guaranteed answers in this book. Some of the recommendations I offer may not apply to your situation, or things might not evolve exactly as described here. Your mileage may vary. Always look at the broader context to figure out what can actually work for you and within your environment.

There also isn't a certain progression in which these issues occur. You might not encounter them all, but you also can't steer clear of all of them. Many are not only specific to the software industry. Workplace issues can be found in any company. They come bundled together with having a job, and jobs sometimes may be unpleasant to some degree (that's why they pay you money to do it). Absurdity happens in the workplace because, as Scott Adams - creator of the now-classic book *"The Dilbert Principle"*[6] - mentions: *"everyone is an idiot"*.

Another thing to be aware of is that I don't always explicitly say throughout the book to what role I refer to when I talk about things, like for a programmer, a developer, Team Lead, manager, and so on. I can't say, *"As a developer expect this"*, *"As a Team*

Lead be aware of that" because many roles can have the same title in several companies, but not identical responsibilities. You might even be a developer with responsibilities of a Project Manager, or even vice versa. It's for you, from the context, to infer whose responsibility it is to avoid or fix some situation. And because responsibilities increase or change as your career progresses, you may have to come back to the book and reread it. Maybe now you're a programmer, and project management matters are not on your radar. But after a while, they may be. Perhaps you will even become a Project Manager. Who knows? Some things are valid for when you're a junior, others for when you're a senior, and some for when you're a Team Lead, for example. The quicksands are different in your new environment and in accordance with your new set of responsibilities.

When I started in this industry, all I knew was how to write code. It never even crossed my mind that I would write such a book. Many things interacted for me to get where I am today. Some were good, positive things. Others… not so much. The same thing happens with software projects. Many things interact to create either a good or a harmful situation, similar to how quicksand is formed: you need the right quantity of water and sand, certain friction between sand particles, water having no way to escape from the mixture, the force of the upward water opposing the force of gravity, or the right amount of pressure applied on the surface.

There are many other useful books that mention the topics covered here. Still, I couldn't find one that addresses a lot of them together. So I tried to cover a lot of ground. Maybe I insisted too much on some things, perhaps some of them I mentioned too briefly, maybe I repeat myself, and I'm sure I forgot some. But this is my attempt, and I hope it's successful, and you will find it useful. You be the judge of that. If you can learn from my mistakes and avoid some quicksand with what information you extract from this book, then I declare myself happy. If you encounter situations that I didn't mention in this book, want to send me comments, questions, or feedback, I would love to hear from you at quicksandssoftwaredevelopment@gmail.com. With this being said, let’s now put up some signs to warn about the quicksands and avoid falling in it.

Staff developers

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The plan

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Change

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Sacrificing quality

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It takes longer

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The real cost

Bridging the gap

Trust

Build trust

Meetings and reports

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Cogs in the machine

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A losing battle

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References