

Is frontend development “real programming”?

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This may sound like a silly question but it still comes up

Contempt for frontend devs is widespread in the tech community. There's a stigma around frontend web development and you may even be asking yourself if you're a “real programmer” or think that you have to learn backend development to prove you're a programmer! Let's get this out of the way, yes frontend engineers are real programmers! Frontend development requires a unique set of skills that is distinct from backend development but it doesn't mean it's any less useful.

Why is there a stigma?

The stigma can often come from a lack of understanding or a divide between engineers from a computer science background vs designers who've become web developers and other backgrounds.

A lack of understanding can come from the simplicity of starting web development in general. HTML, CSS and JS are the tools of the web and they're pretty forgiving. You can make mistakes and the browser will usually do the right thing. They're approachable and easy to start which may lead some to think that the entire discipline of web development is easy and frontend engineers aren't doing anything more complicated than showing a simple page, making it look nice and adding some light interaction. This isn't the case, any programmer can learn the fundamentals of the web, it doesn't mean they've mastered it.

Another cause of division is gatekeeping. Developers can come from a wide a range of backgrounds but more often than not come through one, a university computer science degree. This inherently creates a tension with developers who've taken a different path, the web is easy to get started and therefore attracts a wider range of developers. They may have come through bootcamps, been designers who wanted to learn to code or progressed from something completely unrelated. Frontend developers from these diverse backgrounds may not have the knowledge of a CS degree which makes them a target for people who have a degree, to look down on them regardless of skill and merit.

Why is frontend its own discipline?

Proper frontend development for complex applications isn't easy and requires a lot of thought about a variety of topics. It could involve complex UI interactions that have edge cases that need to be handled gracefully. You're concerned with security, writing performant code, creating reusable components and an architecture that allows for your code to be maintainable. If this wasn't enough, you also have to consider support for browsers, making everything responsive so it fits different screen sizes and ensuring accessibility. There's a lot more that can fall within the role of frontend engineer and we've barely scratched the surface, in fact the role of frontend engineer could even be broken down into more granular specialisations depending on the size of the organisation. These are just some of the concerns you'll be thinking about and balancing as a frontend dev, if someone tells you you're not a “real programmer”, they're misinformed or being wilfully malicious.

Why does it matter?

Frontend engineering is seen as a lesser profession by some in the tech community. Something that doesn't deserve to be given its own title. A role that could be done by anyone as it's easy and is just making things look pretty. Frontend is a distinct set of skills that intersects programming, design and user experience that justifies its existence and skilled frontend engineers are highly sought after for a reason. If you're a frontend engineer that's told you're not a “real programmer”, feel confident in your skills and know they might just need some educating.