

Class 01: An Introduction to Algorithms

Held: Friday, 25 August 2006

We begin the class by considering the discipline of CS and by trying to formally give instructions for an everyday problem.

Related Pages:

- EBoard.

Assignments

- Do Homework 1 (due Monday).
- Read Linux and the MathLAN (also due Monday).

Overview:

- Introduction; What is CS?
- An Algorithm for Making Simple Sandwiches.

An Introductory Question

- Rather than telling you exactly what the class is about, I'm going to start the class with a question for you.
 - The question will help ground the class.
 - The question will begin to get you used to some aspects of my teaching style (particularly my reliance on recitation-style work).
 - The question will test your abilities as a liberal artist.
- *What is Computer Science?*
- I will give some of my own responses after I've heard some of yours.

What is CS?

- Computer scientists differ in how they define the discipline. However, most would agree that
Computer science is the study of algorithms and data structures.
- By “algorithms”, we mean sets of instructions that can be used to solve problems.
 - Some problems are mathematical. For example, you might write an algorithm to find the square root of a real number.
 - Other problems deal with textual information. For example, you might write an algorithm that tells how to find a name in the phone book.
 - You can write algorithms for a wide variety of problems.

- By “data structures”, we mean mechanisms for organizing information. For example, we organize some information in lists and other information in tables.
- By “study”, we mean specify, design, describe, evaluate mathematically, evaluate experimentally, implement in software, implement in hardware, prove properties, consider applications and implications, and much, much more.
- In our studies, we rely on the tools and techniques from a number of other disciplines.
 - From *mathematics*, we take proof techniques, formal language for describing problems and solutions, and even core ideas.
 - From *science*, we take experimental techniques.
 - From *engineering*, we take techniques for designing and constructing things.
 - From *psychology and the social sciences*, we take techniques for understanding the relationship of our work to human endeavors.
- These diverse perspectives and skill sets make CS interesting and challenging.
- Our European colleagues often refer to the discipline as “Informatics” (that is, implying the study of information), and I will admit that I have come to prefer the term because it distances us a bit from both computers (we are broader than the technology) and from science (since we do not necessarily emphasize the scientific method).

An Everyday Algorithm

- We’ll explore the problems of writing clear instructions through a simple exercise.
- Challenge: Write a clear, unambiguous, and detailed set of instructions for making a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.
- Format: Work in groups of about four.
- Each group will write its solution on one of the four boards.
- SamR will play the role of the sentient, but malicious and clueless “follower of instructions”.
- We will do some debriefing today, and additional debriefing in the subsequent class.

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