

Sam Answers Your Questions

Here you will find my answers to some of the questions you asked on homework 1.

Answers written the evening of Monday, 22 January 2007.

What do you like to do in your free time?

I don't feel like I have a lot of free time these days. When I do, I play with my kids, read books (some fantasy, a lot of non-fiction science, even some comic strip reprints), play games, and, unfortunately, shop online for books that I may never get a chance to read.

I think it would be particularly interesting to have you complete question (i) of Part Two of this assignment.

Amazingly, the last time someone asked me that, I ended up choosing something that would serve to answer the first question: **Top Five Ways to Spend Time**

1. Doing whatever with my wife (Michelle) and children, William (11), Jonathan (8), and Daniel (5).
2. Reading. These days, I tend to read modern fantasy and a variety of types of nonfiction.
3. Cataloging my record collection (much too large).
4. My research projects, which seem to be endless time sinks.
5. Preparing for my courses (yes, it's a time sink; it's also one that I enjoy).
6. Playing cards. (Okay, I can't count.)

Of course, that's not really fair, since I've answered the question already. So ... my five favorite nicknames that people have used for me. 1. Dad (reserved for my kids). 2. SamR (pronounced "Sam Are"), how I sign almost everything. 3. SamR (pronounced "Sam Er"), the alternate pronunciation of that nickname. 4. S.A. (pronounced "Ess Ay"), which was once accompanied by the claim that "My parents didn't give me names, just letters. They chose those two because they hoped that I'd be a writer." 5. Spamwise, the name my college roommates chose to call me.

When was your first computer science class? Did you feel comfortable and confident with the material immediately?

I have vague memories of making an expedition to a computer center somewhere while I was in, um, junior high, but I remember very little about it. My first real computer science course was in my second year of college (hmmm ... I think it was my second year). And yes, it seemed right to me. I was a Mathematics major at the time, and I certainly grasped computer science much better than I grasped math.

Ooh! The next question led me to another list. My five favorite college-level classes (although I took some in graduate school). In no particular order:

1. Sound Film Comedy, with Gerald Mast. Mast was a brilliant film historian, and I felt privileged to learn from him. I took a lot of course from Mast, but I think I liked this one the most. Mast graded my writing more fiercely than any other professor, and I appreciated that. Of all the grades I earned in college and graduate school, I am proudest of the A- I earned on my final paper for him, which was accompanied by the comment (approximately): "Sam, it's nice to see that your writing has finally reached the level of your ideas."
2. Analysis in $R(n)$, with Paul Sally. The first math course I took in College. I'll admit that I remember very little from the class, but Mr. Sally was an inspirational teacher. Deep in my heart, I attribute most of my success in teaching to what I learned by watching him.

3. Recursive Function Theory, with Bob Soare. An upper-level math class (and also CS-like). I'll admit, once again, that I don't remember much about the course. What I do remember is the beauty of recursive function theory and Soare's brilliance.

4. Graduate and Professional Writing (aka Little Red Schoolhouse), with a cast of teachers. The course that made me a competent writer. (I also earned an editing prize in that class, much to the dismay of my tutees.)

5. Programming Languages (graduate), with Mike O'Donnell, my graduate advisor. Languages are my favorite topic in computer science. I will admit that I remember this class more for anecdotal things than for particular topics. In particular: (a) On our first exam, the first question was to prove some theorem. I proved that the theorem was false, and only got partial credit because I did not then rewrite the theorem so that it could be proven correct. (b) In at least one class, I was dozing off (I worked the graveyard shift as a UC-equivalent), woke up, looked at the board, identified a significant problem in the proof he was writing, corrected it, and went back to sleep. My advisor seemed convinced that I was just thinking hard behind closed eyes. And no, I don't recommend that strategy.

Stolen from "America's Best Un-required Reading": What is something you absolutely believe is true but cannot be proved? (I guess you could say computers are sentient and malicious but that wouldn't be pushing any new ground).

Damn, that was my answer. Perhaps "Grinnell students get better direct support from their faculty than do students at all but perhaps two or three other institutions in this country."

If you could tour with one band (in any time era) what band would it be?

Boy, that's a difficult one. I don't play well enough to be on stage, if that's what you mean, so perhaps you just mean following the band around. I'm old enough that the drugs that seem to have accompanied most bands scare me, rather than intrigue me. I've listened to enough live recordings to believe that, at least for most rock bands, the songs don't sound that much different from night to night. Of the rock bands that I like that do improvise a bit, I'd say that Dylan and the Band (when the Band were Dylan's backing band) did enough variation that they would remain interesting. The Velvet Underground certainly did something new every night, but I'm not sure how much atonal noise I could take after awhile. At times like this, I wish I understood jazz better, since there are clearly groups that did creative and interesting things every night. Hmmm ... perhaps Louis Armstrong and his Hot Five, when they were just starting, to see the birth of a new kind of music, because it's music I enjoy, because he had such great charisma, and because they clearly did improvise each night.

What are your research interests?

These days, I study the applicability of the functional paradigm (what we'll be learning in this class) to media, particularly graphics and time-based media.

Why did you decide to teach rather than working in the industry?

I really love teaching, particularly when a student finally grasps a difficult concept. It feels like my "vocation", as it were. Now that I have a family, I also appreciate the more open schedule. (The hours are still long, but I can often choose them.)

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