Class 54: What is Computer Science, Revisited?

Held: Tuesday, May 8, 2007

Summary: Today we begin the conclusion of CS by looking beyond this course to what kinds of topics computer scientists often study.

Related Pages:
- EBoard.

Notes:
- An optional HW17 will be ready this afternoon.
- An optional replacement for the project will be ready this afternoon.
- Another homework replacement will be held in class today.

Overview:
- What is CS?
- Subfields of CS.
- Related Disciplines.

What is CS?
- We started the course with this question.
- We therefore start to end the class with a similar question.
- I’ve given you a simple definition: Computer science is the study of algorithms and data.
- We’ve seen a bit what an algorithm is and what data are.
- But how do we study them?
- How have we studied them in this course?

Subfields of Computer Science
- In part, the ways in which we study algorithms lead to different subfields of computer science. The domains we study also lead to different classes of algorithms.
- Computer scientists who emphasize organization and architecture study the ways in which algorithms and data may be implemented in hardware and the implications of particular implementations.
  - Example: Representing integers and adding integers.
  - Grinnell’s course: CSC211
- Computer scientists who emphasize operating systems study algorithms and data representations that permit programs to use the common resources (file system, processor, mouse, etc.)
- Example: Dining philosophers problem.
- Grinnell’s course: CSC213

- Computer scientists who emphasize software engineering look at the design of large computer applications. They may consider process, program segmentation, team aspects, or even social aspects.
  - Example: Waterfall vs. Agile
  - Grinnell’s course: CSC223

- Computer scientists who emphasize artificial intelligence look for ways to either model the way the brain works or to build alternate simulations.
  - Example: Genetic programming.
  - Grinnell’s course: CSC261

- Computer scientists who emphasize algorithms tend to look for interesting problems for which to design algorithms. They also investigate general algorithm design strategies and prove things about the characteristics of problems and algorithms.
  - Example: Lower-bound on the running time of a sorting algorithm.
  - Example: The traveling salesman problem.
  - Grinnell’s course: CSC301

- Computer scientists who emphasize programming languages look at the design of the languages in which we express algorithms.
  - Example: Paradigms
  - Grinnell’s course: CS302

- Computer scientists who emphasize theory consider models of computation and the limits of these models.
  - Example: The halting problem.
  - Example: The Church-Turing thesis.
  - Grinnell’s course: CSC341

- Computer scientists who emphasize computer graphics write algorithms related to that problem domain.
  - Example: Ray tracing.
  - Grinnell’s course: Special Topics

- Computer scientists who emphasize human-computer interaction consider the relationship of the programs we write to the people who use them.
  - Example: Menu ordering.
  - Grinnell’s course: Special Topics

- Computer scientists who emphasize databases look carefully at the models for representing and accessing large amounts of data.
  - Example: Relations
  - Grinnell’s course: Special Topics

- Computer scientists across the board consider social and societal implications of computing, although some focus more on this area than others. (And yes, some make it their specialization, and we still consider them computer scientists.)
Related Disciplines

- There are many fields that are like computer science, but differ a bit.
- Here are some variants that you may hear.
- Computer Engineering emphasizes the construction of computational devices.
- Software Engineering (mentioned above) emphasizes the construction of software, particularly processes, using some of the approaches of the discipline of engineering.
- Informatics is either (a) a better, European, name for CS or (b) the application of CS to a particular problem domain.
- Information Science is the study of information. It tends to focus more on representation or the softer sides of CS.
- Computer Programming is a profession not always closely related to CS.