Complexity, State, and Concurrency

CS 100: Introduction to the Profession
Matthew Bauer & Michael Saelee
Q: What makes programming hard?
- Language (so many!)
- Code volume (e.g., millions of lines of code)
- Huge libraries (platforms/APIs)
- Algorithmic complexity
- Backwards compatibility / Standards / Compliance
- Performance/Efficiency concerns
- Scaling requirements
§ Complexity
Complexity is the root cause of the vast majority of problems with software today. Unreliability, late delivery, lack of security — often even poor performance in large-scale systems can all be seen as deriving ultimately from unmanageable complexity.

Ben Moseley and Peter Marks, Out of the Tar Pit
But is all complexity the same?
E.g., building an unbeatable chess AI
First steps:
- illustrate the chess board layout
- explain the rules of the game
- describe the desired outcome (e.g., checkmate)
To build a computer AI, we would also typically:

- define *domain-specific types*
- create a *game tree* (for searching ahead / weighing options)
- build supporting *algorithms* and tools (e.g., neural network for deep-learning, feedback mechanisms, UI)
Lots of choices and issues along the way:

- language/framework/other prior work
- performance (how long is AI allowed to “think”?)
- brute force vs. expert system vs. self-learning vs. ?
- how to best accommodate updates and improvements?
Lots of complexity!

Which steps are truly necessary, and which steps are due to limitations of / problems with a particular approach?
In an ideal world, we can simply feed the critical specifications into a machine, and out pops a working solution.
In the real world, we should be careful to distinguish between **necessary complexity** and **accidental complexity**

I.e., which problems are *intrinsic* to the problem, and which are simply a product of our *imperfect tools*?
Seek to **minimize accidental complexity**.

Don’t make programming harder than it needs to be!
§ Managing Complexity
Q: You’re a project manager on a software team. The next deliverable is in a month and you’re way behind schedule. You currently have 5 programmers on the job, and they’re already churning out code as fast as they can. What do you do? (You have plenty of cash.)
Add more programmers!
… our estimating techniques fallaciously confuse effort with progress, hiding the assumption that men and months are interchangeable.

*Adding manpower to a late software project makes it later.*

Frederick P. Brooks, *The Mythical Man-Month*
Techniques for managing complexity:
- planning and reasoning
- abstraction and modularization
- testing, testing, and more testing
Planning and reasoning

- white board / pen-and-paper design
- high-level software architecture decisions
- be conservative and pessimistic: things will go wrong!
Abstraction and modularization

- break software into pieces to be designed, implemented, and tested separately
- build to API specifications instead of implementations
- “black box” integration
Testing, testing, and more testing

- even before development begins, specify the *expected output for every combination of input* for every module

- ensure all tests pass during the development phase!
  (known as *continuous integration*)
After fully testing modules in isolation we can piece them together to build bigger systems (that work predictably with little further testing)

Principle of **composability**
def discriminant(a,b,c):
    return b*b - 4*a*c

def quadratic_roots(a,b,c):
    d = discriminant(a,b,c)
    if d == 0:
        return -b / (2*a)
    elif d > 0:
        sqrt_d = math.sqrt(d)
        return ((-b+sqrt_d)/(2*a), (-b-sqrt_d)/(2*a))
    else:
        return "No real roots!"

quadratic_roots(1,4,4) => -2
quadratic_roots(1,-1,-2) => (2.0, -1.0)
quadratic_roots(1,3,8) => “No real roots!”
Civilization advances by extending the number of important operations which we can perform *without thinking*.

Alfred North Whitehouse
What are some barriers to composability?
§ State
state | stāt |
noun
1 the particular condition that someone or something is in at a specific time
The prevailing model of computation is a *stateful* one.

To determine what is going on in our programs, we ask:

- what line of code is being executed?
- what are the values of different variables?
- what is stored in global/local/dynamic data regions?
The prevailing model of computation is a *stateful* one.
Infinite Runner FSM

- **running**: tap/jump
- **jumping**: obstacle
- **stopped**: tap/restart
- **dead**: tap/restart

- **no obstacle**: move forward
- **hit ground**: tap/jump
- **run off ground/fall**: tap/jump
- **miss ground/fall**: off screen
- **start**: tap/restart
def process_game_event(event):
    if player_state == 'running':
        if event == 'tap':
            player_state = 'jumping'
    elif player_state == 'jumping':
        if event == 'hit-ground':
            player_state = 'running'
    elif player_state == 'stopped':
        if event == 'tap':
            player_state = 'jumping'
    elif player_state == 'dead':
        if event == 'tap':
            player_state = 'running'
    restart = True
...
*Imperative* programming languages (by far the most common type of programming language) reinforce the stateful model by making the standard unit of execution the `statement`.

*Statements alter state.*
How do we test a stateful program?
(Is the input/output specification method sufficient?)
To properly test a stateful program, we must specify its expected behavior for *all combinations of input and starting state*. 
What happens when a stateful system gets itself into an unexpected state?

Its behavior is, by definition, unpredictable!
Anyone who has ever telephoned a support desk for a software system and been told to “try it again”, or “reload the document”, or “restart the program”, or “reboot your computer” or “re-install the program” or even “re-install the operating system and then the program” has direct experience of the problems that state causes for writing reliable, understandable software.

Ben Moseley and Peter Marks, *Out of the Tar Pit*
num_times = 0

def foo():
    num_times += 1
    if num_times < 100:
        return 10
    else:
        return "I'm too old for this!"

# => "I'm too old for this!"
# => 10

foo()  # => 10

for _ in range(99): foo()

foo()  # => "I'm too old for this!"

# assume we don't know what went before ...

foo() + foo()  # => ?

we say `foo` is a *stateful function*, or that it has *side effects*
N.B.: Not all systems/computations are stateful!
E.g., mathematical functions are stateless.

$$\int_{0}^{2} x \, dx = \frac{x^2}{2}\bigg|_0^2 = 2$$

$$\int_{0}^{2} x \, dx \cdot \left(\int_{0}^{2} x \, dx + 5 \cdot \int_{0}^{2} x \, dx\right) = ?$$

Regardless of context, they are evaluated the same way.

Useful property known as referential transparency.
Stateful functions are harder to test in isolation, but when different stateful functions share state, it gets even worse (why?)

And if an otherwise stateless function calls a stateful function, the first one becomes stateful too. I.e., *statefulness is contagious!*

How can we make this even more complicated?
§ Concurrency
The free lunch is over. We have grown used to the idea that our programs will go faster when we buy a next-generation processor, but that time has passed.

While that next-generation chip will have more CPUs, each individual CPU will be no faster than the previous year’s model. If we want our programs to run faster, we must learn to write parallel programs.

Simon Peyton Jones, Beautiful Concurrency
The most common form of parallelism is carried out via multiple threads of execution that run concurrently within a program. These threads may access shared data. They progress through the program at different, unpredictable rates — i.e., which thread does what first is non-deterministic.
def t1():
    for _ in range(times):
        count = count + 1

def t2():
    for _ in range(times):
        count = count + 1

def test(n):
    count = 0
    times = n
    thread1 = Thread(target=t1)
    thread2 = Thread(target=t2)
    thread1.start()
    thread2.start()
    thread1.join()
    thread2.join()
    print(shared)
count = count + 1

%reg = count
%reg = %reg + 1
count = %reg
def t1():
    for _ in range(times):
        regA = count
        regA = regA + 1
        count = regA

def t2():
    for _ in range(times):
        regB = count
        regB = regB + 1
        count = regB
def t1():
    for _ in range(times):
        regA = count
        regA = regA + 1
        count = regA

def t2():
    for _ in range(times):
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        regB = regB + 1
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def t1():
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        count = regB
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def t1():
    for _ in range(times):
        regA = count
        regA = regA + 1
        count = regA

def t2():
    for _ in range(times):
        regB = count
        regB = regB + 1
        count = regB
```

```text
count 3

regA 3

regB 1
```
def t1():
    for _ in range(times):
        regA = count
        regA = regA + 1
        count = regA

def t2():
    for _ in range(times):
        regB = count
        regB = regB + 1
        count = regB
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    for _ in range(times):
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    for _ in range(times):
        regB = count
        regB = regB + 1
        count = regB
“Race conditions” in concurrent programs may lead to incorrect — and worse, unpredictable — results.
Concurrency also affects testing, for in this case, we can no longer even be assured of result consistency when repeating tests on a system — even if we somehow ensure a consistent starting state.

Running a test in the presence of concurrency with a known initial state and set of inputs tells you nothing at all about what will happen the next time you run that very same test with the very same inputs and the very same starting state... and things can’t really get any worse than that.

Ben Moseley and Peter Marks, *Out of the Tar Pit*
Statefulness and concurrency can make testing near impossible, and destroy composability!

So how do we deal with this?
Approaches:

1. Outlaw modifications to shared data (i.e., no stateful code).
2. Limit concurrent execution by forcing critical shared data to be accessed in isolation, using software “locks”.
3. Delegate management of concurrency to someone else — mark which code blocks need special attention.
All these approaches have their pros/cons — concurrent programming is still very much an open research problem.

Parallel computing research professor (Dr. Sun) coming in to give a talk later this semester!
References:

- Frederick P. Brooks, “No Silver Bullet.”
- Frederick P. Brooks, “The Mythical Man-Month.”
- Ben Moseley and Peter Marks, “Out of the Tar Pit.”
- Simon Peyton Jones, “Beautiful Concurrency.”
- John Backus, “Can Programming Be Liberated from the von Neumann Style?”