

Comparative Programming Languages CM20318

Russell Bradford

2024



Introduction

The purpose of this Unit:

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The purpose of this Unit:

How to choose the right tool for the job

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The purpose of this Unit:

How to choose the right tool for the job

Or...

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How to choose the right tool for the job

Or...

Why Java is not always the answer

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The purpose of this Unit:

How to choose the right tool for the job

Or...

Why Java is not always the answer

But sometimes is

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Why Python is not always the answer

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Why Haskell is not always the answer

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Why *insert favourite language here* is not always the answer

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But sometimes is

“Why are you teaching me how to use a screwdriver when I am an expert in using a hammer?” (paraphrase of a student question)

CM20318

Three hours of lectures a week:

- Monday 17:15
- Tuesday 13:15
- Friday 9:15

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Consolidation week starts on Monday 8th March

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If you have a personal issue with being recorded, please sit in a place not covered by the lecture room camera

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The past papers for CM20253 have similar kinds of questions, though the style of the CM20318 paper is slightly different

CM20318

Learning Outcomes:

On completion of the unit the students will be able to:

1. recognise the various styles of programming language
2. understand the differences between them
3. choose the right programming style and language for the task in hand.

Styles

Content:

Programming paradigms and language families, for example Functional, Procedural, Object Oriented, Logic, Scripting, Declarative, Macro, Unstructured, Event Driven, etc. Examples of languages from each style, with comparisons.

Further choices that languages provide, e.g., application based languages; interpreted, bytecoded and compiled; parallel or sequential; OO prototyping, delegation, traits, class centred; managed, unmanaged and garbage collected; static typed, dynamic typed and untyped; call by value, reference, name, need, etc.

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But, most importantly, you should be getting to the stage of seeing unfamiliar code and being able to have a good guess at what it does

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Some details may need researching, but the general idea should be clear

CM20318

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And understanding the unusual stuff is one thing that distinguishes the really good programmers

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So you don't try to solve every problem with a Java- or Haskell- or Python-shaped or mallet

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Would you hire a plumber whose only tool is a hammer?

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Understanding (a) what they do (b) why they exist (c) why Java is adopting them (d) how to use them effectively; all these will make you a better Java programmer

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And if you end up being a manager rather than a programmer, it helps to know what languages or features in languages are there to help weaker (= cheaper) programmers be more productive

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A lot of flame wars on the Internet dealing with programming or programming languages are “programming language X is good” vs “programming language X is bad”

They really mean “X is good for what I do” vs “X is bad for what I do” but the “for what I do” is lost and so the arguments go on forever

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When a new language comes along with a new approach, often their instinct is to say the new language is defective (as it doesn't do things in the old way) and rubbish it and not try to learn the new ideas it presents

Introduction

jacg, in reply to a comment in a language forum on how that language “gets it wrong” as “all other languages” do something different; July 2023:

“No, not in any other language, just the very few you happen to have encountered so far.

It's really important not to fall into the trap of believing that the first language you encounter is normal, and anything you meet later, that differs from it, is weird. Falling into this trap is a huge disservice to yourself, as it will make learning new things much more frustrating and much less productive for you”

Introduction

After a few examples of different ways languages do things, jacg continues:

Introduction

“If you think that some of them are more logical or natural or correct than others, then you are deeply mistaken. Do yourself a favour and disabuse yourself of this misconception!

Understand that the syntax and the concept the syntax represents are separate things, and learn to understand the concept in itself, liberating yourself from the syntax. That way, a number of important and hugely beneficial to you, things will happen:

- You’ll have a far firmer, deeper, better understanding of the meaning of programs you read and write.
- You’ll be able to reason more clearly about the ideas you want to express, because you will be able to decouple thinking about what it is that you want to say, from thinking of how to say it in whatever language you happen to be using.
- You’ll be able to learn new languages far more efficiently.”

Introduction

“Hidden within the various languages that exist today, are *a set of paradigms that can completely change the way you are used to thinking*. Sometimes these paradigms are so focused and so specific to a language that they are only applicable in that particular language. Other times I find, and this is the great part; that you can **take those paradigms and apply them to the languages you currently utilize**. When that happens, congratulations, you’ve expanded your mind and your skill set and additionally you now have a fresh way of tackling stale old problems.”

Ralph Caraveo III

Introduction

“Reading and experience train your model of the world. And even if you forget the experience or what you read, its effect on your model of the world persists. Your mind is like a compiled program you’ve lost the source of. It works, but you don’t know why.”

Paul Graham

Introduction

“If your boss was taking all the decisions for you, you wouldn't be a programmer, you'd be a typist.”

“Bloggy Badger”

“Programming is a skill acquired by practice and example rather than from books.”

Alan Turing

“Programs must be written for programmers to read, and only incidentally for machines to execute.”

Abelson and Sussman, “Structure and Interpretation of Computer Programs”

Introduction

“You cannot reduce the complexity of your problem by increasing the complexity of your language”

Niklaus Wirth

“There are two ways of constructing a software design: one way is to make it so simple that there are obviously no deficiencies, and the other is to make it so complicated that there are no obvious deficiencies.”

Tony Hoare

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Though this is a bit lightweight

Resources

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Exercise Have a look at <http://rosettacode.org/>

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I keep a 9-5 (approx) Monday–Friday week and am unlikely to respond out of those times (a long time ago someone said “Get a life”, so I did)

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Continuing Exercise Read around the topics to fill in more detail

Continuing Exercise When you come across a new (to you) language, write some code using it

Material

As this is an overview Unit that covers many different topics, your background reading (which is expected of every Unit) is particularly important to help you consolidate what we are going to see in lectures

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They are often abbreviated in style, and so are not the whole story and would not be suitable to be quoted verbatim in an exam

Standard Introductory Slides

Don't try to copy everything down from the slides in lectures—the slides will be available after each lecture

Instead, make a note of what is important and use that later—in conjunction with the slides—to guide your further reading and study

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You need to take your own notes, read, and *participate*

You don't expect to get fit simply by paying to joining a gym. . .

“If you have college courses in CS, buy the books and spend day and night the few days before class going through the books and taking notes and answering questions and programming examples before the first class even starts. If you really want to do this in your life, that’s what you should do, not just wait for the education to be handed you. Those who finish at the top will always be in high demand. You can learn outside of school too but you have to put a lot of time into it. It doesn’t come easily. Small steps, each improving on the other, is what to expect, not instant understanding and expertise.”

Steve Wozniak, co-founder of Apple

Standard Introductory Slides

Computer Science is not a spectator sport

Anon