CSE 331
Software Design & Implementation

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Specifications
(Slides by Mike Ernst)
2 Goals of Software System Building

• Building the right system
  – Does the program meet the user’s needs?
  – Determining this is usually called validation

• Building the system right
  – Does the program meet the specification?
  – Determining this is usually called verification

• CSE 331: the second goal is the focus – creating a correctly functioning artifact
  – It’s surprisingly hard to specify, design, implement, test, and debug even simple programs
Where we are

• We’ve started to see how to reason about code
• We’ll build on those skills in many places:
  – Specification: What are we supposed to build?
  – Design: How do we decompose the job into manageable pieces? Which designs are “better”?
  – Implementation: Building code that meets the specification (and we know it because we can prove it!)
  – Testing: OK, we know it’s right, but is it?
  – Debugging: If it’s not, how do we systematically find the problems and fix them?
  – Maintain: How does the artifact adapt over time?
  – Documentation: What do we need to know to do these things? How/where do we write that down? (Comments, JavaDoc, UML(?), …)
The challenge of scaling software

• Small programs are simple and malleable
  – easy to write
  – easy to change
• Big programs are (often) complex and inflexible
  – hard to write
  – hard to change
• Why does this happen?
  – Because interactions become unmanageable
• How do we keep things simple and malleable?
A discipline of modularity

- Two ways to view a program:
  - The implementer's view (how to build it)
  - The client's view (how to use it)
- It helps to apply these views to program parts:
  - While implementing one part, consider yourself a client of any other parts it depends on
  - Try not to look at those other parts through an implementer's eyes
  - This helps dampen interactions between parts
- Formalized through the idea of a **specification**
A specification is a contract

- A set of requirements agreed to by the user and the manufacturer of the product
  - Describes their expectations of each other
- Facilitates simplicity by *two-way* isolation
  - Isolate client from implementation details
  - Isolate implementer from how the part is used
  - Discourages implicit, unwritten expectations
- Facilitates change
  - Reduces the “Medusa” effect: the specification, rather than the code, gets “turned to stone” by client dependencies
Isn’t the interface sufficient?

The interface is to define the boundary between the implementers and users:

```java
public interface List<E> {
    public E get(int);
    public void set(int, E);
    public void add(E);
    public void add(int, E);
    ...
    public static boolean sub(List<T>, List<T>);
}
```

Interface provides the syntax
But nothing about the behavior and effects
Why not just read code?

```java
boolean sub(List<?> src, List<?> part) {
    int part_index = 0;
    for (Object o : src) {
        if (o.equals(part.get(part_index))) {
            part_index++;
            if (part_index == part.size()) {
                return true;
            }
        } else {
            part_index = 0;
        }
    }
    return false;
}

Why are you better off with a specification?
Code is complicated

• Code gives more detail than needed by client
• Understanding or even reading every line of code is an excessive burden
  – Suppose you had to read source code of Java libraries in order to use them
  – Same applies to developers of different parts of the libraries
• Client cares only about what the code does, not how it does it
Code is ambiguous

• Code seems unambiguous and concrete
  – But which details of code's behavior are essential, and which are incidental?
• Code invariably gets rewritten
  – Client needs to know what they can rely on
    • What properties will be maintained over time?
    • What properties might be changed by future optimization, improved algorithms, or just bug fixes?
  – Implementer needs to know what features the client depends on, and which can be changed
Comments are essential

• Most comments convey only an informal, general idea of what the code does:

```java
// This method checks if “part” appears as a sub-sequence in “src”
boolean sub(List<?> src, List<?> part) {
    ...
}
```

• Problem: ambiguity remains
  – e.g. what if src and part are both empty lists?
From vague comments to specifications

• **Properties of a specification:**
  – The client agrees to rely *only* on information in the description in their use of the part.
  – The implementer of the part promises to support everything in the description
    • otherwise is perfectly at liberty

• **Sadly, much code lacks a specification**
  – Clients often work out what a method/class does in ambiguous cases by simply running it, then depending on the results
  – This leads to bugs and to programs with unclear dependencies, reducing simplicity and flexibility
Recall the sublist example

```java
T boolean sub(List<T> src, List<T> part) {
    int part_index = 0;
    for (T elt : src) {
        if (elt.equals(part.get(part_index))) {
            part_index++;
            if (part_index == part.size()) {
                return true;
            }
        } else {
            part_index = 0;
        }
    }
    return false;
}
```
A more careful description of sub()

// Check whether “part” appears as a
// sub-sequence in “src”.

needs to be given some caveats (why?):

// * src and part cannot be null
// * If src is empty list, always returns false.
// * Results may be unexpected if partial matches
//   can happen right before a real match; e.g.,
// list (1,2,1,3) will not be identified as a
// sub sequence of (1,2,1,2,1,3).

or replaced with a more detailed description:

// This method scans the “src” list from beginning
// to end, building up a match for “part”, and
// resetting that match every time that...
It’s better to **simplify** than to **describe** complexity

A complicated description suggests poor design
Rewrite sub() to be more sensible, and easier to describe:

```java
// returns true iff sequences A, B exist such that
// src = A : part : B
// where "::" is sequence concatenation
boolean sub(List<?> src, List<?> part)
```

Mathematical flavor is not (always) necessary, but can (often) help avoid ambiguity
“Declarative” style *is* important – avoids reciting or depending on operational/implemention details
Sneaky fringe benefit of specs #1

• The discipline of writing specifications changes the incentive structure of coding
  – rewards code that is easy to describe and understand
  – punishes code that is hard to describe and understand (even if it is shorter or easier to write)
• If you find yourself writing complicated specifications, it is an incentive to redesign
  – sub() code that does exactly the right thing may be slightly slower than a hack that assumes no partial matches before true matches – but cost of forcing client to understand the details is too high
Examples of specifications

• Javadoc
  – Sometimes can be daunting; get used to using it
• Javadoc convention for writing specifications
  – method prototype
  – text description of method
  – **param**: description of what gets passed in
  – **returns**: description of what gets returned
  – **throws**: list of exceptions that may occur
public boolean contains( CharSequence s)

Returns true if and only if this string contains the specified sequence of char values.

Parameters:
  s - the sequence to search for

Returns:
  true if this string contains s, false otherwise

Throws:
  NullPointerException

Since:
  1.5
CSE 331 specifications

- The **precondition**: constraints that hold before the method is called (if not, all bets are off)
  - **requires**: spells out any obligations on client
- The **postcondition**: constraints that hold after the method is called (if the precondition held)
  - **modifies**: lists objects that may be affected by method; any object not listed is guaranteed to be untouched
  - **throws**: lists possible exceptions (Javadoc uses this too)
  - **effects**: gives guarantees on the final state of modified objects
  - **returns**: describes return value (Javadoc uses this too)
**Example 1**

**static int test(List<T> lst, T oldelt, T newelt)***

- **requires**  
  lst, oldelt, and newelt are non-null. oldelt occurs in lst.

- **modifies**  
  lst

- **effects**  
  change the first occurrence of oldelt in lst to newelt & makes no other changes to lst

- **returns**  
  the position of the element in lst that was oldelt and is now newelt

```java
static int test(List<T> lst, T oldelt, T newelt) {
    int i = 0;
    for (T curr : lst) {
        if (curr == oldelt) {
            lst.set(newelt, i);
            return i;
        }
        i = i + 1;
    }
    return -1;
}
```
Example 2

static List<Integer> listAdd(List<Integer> lst1, List<Integer> lst2)
    requires lst1 and lst2 are non-null.
    lst1 and lst2 are the same size.
    modifies none
    effects none
    returns a list of same size where the ith element is
    the sum of the ith elements of lst1 and lst2

static List<Integer> listAdd(List<Integer> lst1, List<Integer> lst2) {
    List<Integer> res = new ArrayList<Integer>();
    for (int i = 0; i < lst1.size(); i++) {
        res.add(lst1.get(i) + lst2.get(i));
    }
    return res;
}
Example 3

static void listAdd2(List<Integer> lst1, List<Integer> lst2)

  requires lst1 and lst2 are non-null.
  lst1 and lst2 are the same size

  modifies lst1

  effects ith element of lst2 is added to the ith element of lst1

  returns none

static void listAdd2(List<Integer> lst1, List<Integer> lst2) {
  for(int i = 0; i < lst1.size(); i++) {
    lst1.set(i, lst1.get(i) + lst2.get(i));
  }
}

22
Should requires clause be checked?

- If the client calls a method without meeting the precondition, the code is free to do anything, including pass corrupted data back
  - It is polite, nevertheless, to **fail fast**: to provide an immediate error, rather than permitting mysterious bad behavior
- Preconditions are common in “helper” methods/classes
  - In public libraries, it’s friendlier to deal with all possible input
  - **Example**: *binary search would normally impose a pre-condition rather than simply failing if list is not sorted.* Why?
- **Rule of thumb**: Check if cheap to do so
  - **Ex**: *list has to be non-null → check*
  - **Ex**: *list has to be sorted → skip*
Comparing specifications

• Occasionally, we need to compare different versions of a specification (Why?)
  – For that, we talk about “weaker” and “stronger” specifications
• A weaker specification gives greater freedom to the implementer
  – If specification $S_1$ is weaker than $S_2$, then for any implementation $I$,
    • $I$ satisfies $S_2$ => $I$ satisfies $S_1$
    • but the opposite implication does not hold in general
Example 1

```java
int find(int[] a, int value) {
    for (int i=0; i<a.length; i++) {
        if (a[i]==value) return i;
    }
    return -1;
}
```

- specification A
  - requires: value occurs in a
  - returns: i such that a[i] = value
- specification B
  - requires: value occurs in a
  - returns: smallest i such that a[i] = value
Example 2

```java
int find(int[] a, int value) {
    for (int i=0; i<a.length; i++) {
        if (a[i]==value) return i;
    }
    return -1;
}
```

- specification A
  - requires: value occurs in a
  - returns: i such that a[i] = value
- specification C
  - returns: i such that a[i]=value, or -1 if value is not in a
Stronger and weaker specifications

• A stronger specification is
  – Harder to satisfy (harder to implement)
  – Easier to use (more guarantees, more predictable)

• A weaker specification is
  – Easier to satisfy (easier to implement, more implementations satisfy it)
  – Harder to use (makes fewer guarantees)
Strengthening a specification

• strengthen a specification by:
  – promising more
    • effects clause harder to satisfy, and/or fewer objects in modifies clause
  – asking less of client
    • requires clause easier to satisfy

• weaken a specification by:
  – promising less
    • effects clause easier to satisfy, and/or extra objects in modifies clause
  – asking more of the client
    • requires clause harder to satisfy
Choosing specifications

- There can be different specifications for the same implementation!
  - Specification says more than implementation does
  - Declares which properties are essential – the method itself leaves that ambiguous
  - Clients know what they can rely on, implementers know what they are committed to

- Which is better: a strong or a weak specification?
  - It depends!
  - Criteria: simple, promotes reuse & modularity, efficient
Sneaky fringe benefit of specs #2

• Specification means that client doesn't need to look at implementation
  – So the code may not even exist yet!
• Write specifications first, make sure system will fit together, and then assign separate implementers to different modules
  – Allows teamwork and parallel development
  – Also helps with testing, as we'll see shortly