CSE341: Programming Languages

Lecture 14
Thunks, Laziness, Streams, Memoization

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Delayed evaluation

For each language construct, the semantics specifies when subexpressions get evaluated. In ML, Racket, Java, C:

- Function arguments are *eager* (call-by-value)
  - Evaluated once before calling the function
- Conditional branches are not eager

It matters: calling `factorial-bad` never terminates:

```scheme
(define (my-if-bad x y z)  
  (if x y z))

(define (factorial-bad n)  
  (my-if-bad (= n 0)  
    1  
    (* n (factorial-bad (- n 1))))))
```
Thunks delay

We know how to delay evaluation: put expression in a function!
– Thanks to closures, can use all the same variables later

A zero-argument function used to delay evaluation is called a thunk
– As a verb: thunk the expression

This works (but it is silly to wrap if like this):

```
(define (my-if x y z)
  (if x (y) (z)))

(define (fact n)
  (my-if (= n 0)
    (lambda() 1)
    (lambda() (* n (fact (- n 1))))))
```
**The key point**

- Evaluate an expression $e$ to get a result:
  $$e$$

- A function that *when called*, evaluates $e$ and returns result
  - Zero-argument function for “thunking”
    $$(\text{lambda} () e)$$

- Evaluate $e$ to some thunk and then call the thunk
  $$(e)$$

- Next: Powerful idioms related to delaying evaluation and/or avoided repeated or unnecessary computations
  - Some idioms also use mutation in encapsulated ways
Avoiding expensive computations

Thunks let you skip expensive computations if they are not needed

Great if take the true-branch:

```
(define (f th)
  (if (...) 0 (... (th) ...)))
```

But worse if you end up using the thunk more than once:

```
(define (f th)
  (... (if (...) 0 (... (th) ...))
       (if (...) 0 (... (th) ...))
       ...
       (if (...) 0 (... (th) ...))))
```

In general, might not know many times a result is needed
**Best of both worlds**

Assuming some expensive computation has no side effects, ideally we would:

- Not compute it *until needed*
- *Remember the answer* so future uses complete immediately

Called *lazy evaluation*

Languages where most constructs, including function arguments, work this way are *lazy languages*

- Haskell

Racket predefines support for *promises*, but we can make our own

- Thunks and mutable pairs are enough
Delay and force

```scheme
(define (my-delay th)
  (mcons #f th))

(define (my-force p)
  (if (mcar p)
      (mcdr p)
      (begin (set-mcar! p #t)
              (set-mcdr! p ((mcdr p))
                          (mcdr p)))))
```

An ADT represented by a mutable pair

- #f in car means cdr is unevaluated thunk
  - Really a one-of type: thunk or result-of-thunk
- Ideally hide representation in a module
Using promises

```
(define (f p)
  (... (if (...) 0 (... (my-force p) ...))
       (if (...) 0 (... (my-force p) ...))
       ...
       (if (...) 0 (... (my-force p) ...))))

(f (my-delay (lambda () e)))
```
Lessons From Example

See code file for example that does multiplication using a very slow addition helper function

• With thunking second argument:
  – *Great* if first argument 0
  – *Okay* if first argument 1
  – *Worse* otherwise

• With precomputing second argument:
  – *Okay* in all cases

• With thunk that uses a promise for second argument:
  – *Great* if first argument 0
  – *Okay* otherwise
**Streams**

- A stream is an *infinite sequence* of values
  - So cannot make a stream by making all the values
  - Key idea: Use a thunk to delay creating most of the sequence
  - Just a programming idiom

A powerful concept for division of labor:
- Stream producer knows how create any number of values
- Stream consumer decides how many values to ask for

Some examples of streams you might (not) be familiar with:
- User actions (mouse clicks, etc.)
- UNIX pipes: `cmd1 | cmd2` has `cmd2` “pull” data from `cmd1`
- Output values from a sequential feedback circuit
Using streams

We will represent streams using pairs and thunks

Let a stream be a thunk that *when called* returns a pair:

\[(\text{next-answer} . \text{next-thunk})\]

So given a stream \( s \), the client can get any number of elements

- First: \( \text{car} \ (s) \)
- Second: \( \text{car} \ ((\text{cdr} \ (s))) \)
- Third: \( \text{car} \ ((\text{cdr} \ ((\text{cdr} \ (s)))))) \)

(Usually bind \( \text{cdr} \ (s) \) to a variable or pass to a recursive function)
Example using streams

This function returns how many stream elements it takes to find one for which tester does not return `#f`

- Happens to be written with a tail-recursive helper function

```
(define (number-until stream tester)
  (letrec ([f (lambda (stream ans)
                (let ([pr (stream)])
                  (if (tester (car pr))
                      ans
                      (f (cdr pr) (+ ans 1))))])])
    (f stream 1)))
```

- `(stream)` generates the pair
- So recursively pass `(cdr pr)`, the thunk for the rest of the infinite sequence
Streams

Coding up a stream in your program is easy
   – We will do functional streams using pairs and thunks

Let a stream be a thunk that *when called* returns a pair:
   '(next-answer . next-thunk)

Saw how to use them, now how to make them…
   – Admittedly mind-bending, but uses what we know
Making streams

• How can one thunk create the right next thunk? Recursion!
  – Make a thunk that produces a pair where cdr is next thunk
  – A recursive function can return a thunk where recursive call
does not happen until thunk is called

```
(define ones (lambda () (cons 1 ones)))

(define nats
  (letrec ([f (lambda (x)
              (cons x (lambda () (f (+ x 1)))))])
           (lambda () (f 1))))

(define powers-of-two
  (letrec ([f (lambda (x)
              (cons x (lambda () (f (* x 2)))))])
           (lambda () (f 2))))
```
Getting it wrong

• This uses a variable before it is defined

\[
\text{(define ones-really-bad (cons 1 ones-really-bad))}
\]

• This goes into an infinite loop making an infinite-length list

\[
\text{(define ones-bad (lambda () (cons 1 (ones-bad)))}
\text{(define (ones-bad)(cons 1 (ones-bad)))}
\]

• This is a stream: thunk that returns a pair with \text{cdr} a thunk

\[
\text{(define ones (lambda () (cons 1 ones)))}
\text{(define (ones)(cons 1 ones))}
\]
Memoization

• If a function has no side effects and does not read mutable memory, no point in computing it twice for the same arguments
  – Can keep a cache of previous results
  – Net win if (1) maintaining cache is cheaper than recomputing and (2) cached results are reused

• Similar to promises, but if the function takes arguments, then there are multiple “previous results”

• For recursive functions, this memoization can lead to exponentially faster programs
  – Related to algorithmic technique of dynamic programming
How to do memoization: see example

• Need a (mutable) cache that all calls using the cache share
  – So must be defined outside the function(s) using it

• See code for an example with Fibonacci numbers
  – Good demonstration of the idea because it is short, but, as shown in the code, there are also easier less-general ways to make fibonacci efficient
  – (An association list (list of pairs) is a simple but sub-optimal data structure for a cache; okay for our example)
 assoc

• Example uses `assoc`, which is just a library function you could look up in the Racket reference manual:

  `(assoc v lst)` takes a list of pairs and locates the first element of `lst` whose car is equal to `v` according to `is-equal?`. If such an element exists, the pair (i.e., an element of `lst`) is returned. Otherwise, the result is `#f`.

• Returns `#f` for not found to distinguish from finding a pair with `#f` in `cdr`