Lecture 5: Decomposition and Abstraction

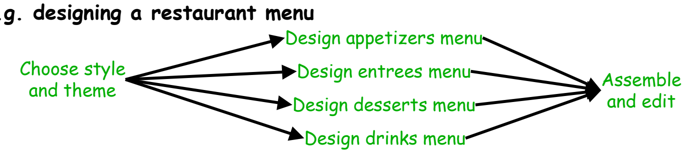
- Decomposition
  - When to decompose
  - Identifying components
  - Modelling components
- Abstraction
  - Abstraction by parameterization
  - Abstraction by specification
  - Pre-conditions and Post-conditions

Decomposition

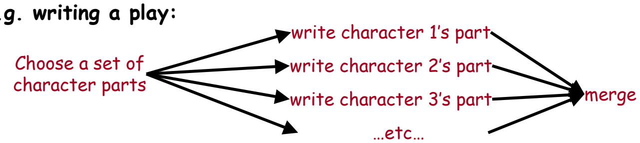
- Large problems can be tackled with “divide and conquer”
- Decompose the problem so that:
  - Each subproblem is at (roughly) the same level of detail
  - Each subproblem can be solved independently
  - The solutions to the subproblems can be combined to solve the original problem
- Advantages
  - Different people can work on different subproblems
  - Parallelization may be possible
  - Maintenance is easier
- Disadvantages
  - the solutions to the subproblems might not combine to solve the original problem
  - Poorly understood problems are hard to decompose

Decomposition Examples

- Decomposition can work well:
  - E.g. designing a restaurant menu



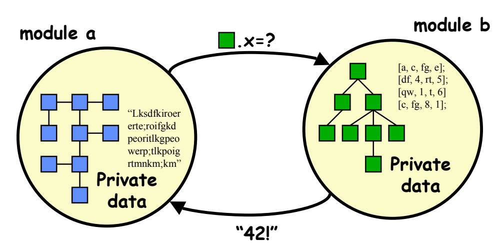
- Decomposition doesn’t always work
  - E.g. writing a play:



- Decomposition isn’t always possible
  - for very complex problems (e.g. Managing the economy)
  - for impossible problems (e.g. Turning water into wine)
  - for atomic problems (e.g. Adding 1 and 1)

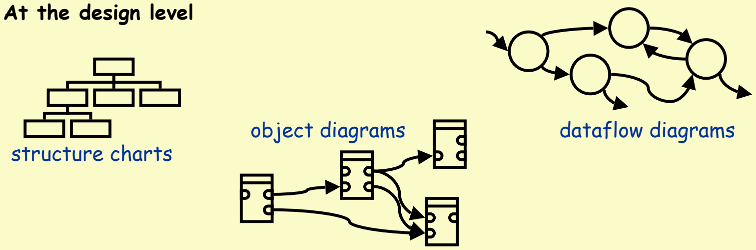
How to decompose

- Step 1: Identify components
  - a good decomposition minimizes dependencies between components
    - coupling - a measure of inter-component connectivity
    - cohesion - a measure of how well the contents of a component go together
  - information hiding
    - having modules keep their data private
    - provide limited access procedures
    - this reduces coupling



How to decompose (cont.)

- Step 2: Model the components
  - At the design level



  - At the coding level

procedure declarations

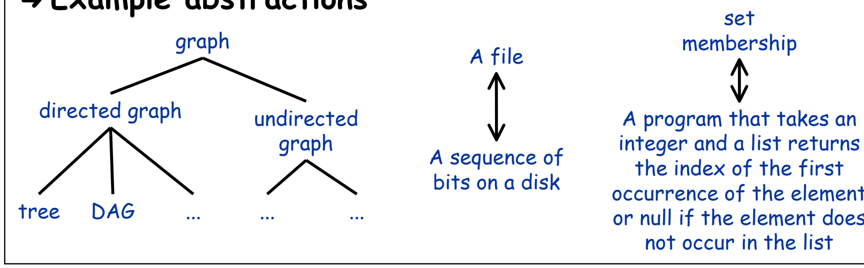
```
float sqrt(int);
```

procedure specifications

```
float sqrt(int x){
/* requires: x is a positive integer
   effects: returns an approximation
   of the square root of x to within
   ±10^-4 */
```


Abstraction

- Abstraction is the main tool used in reasoning about software
- Why? It allows you to:
  - ignore inconvenient detail
  - treat different entities as though they are the same
  - simplify many types of analysis
- Example abstractions



example

Can I replace A with B?

A

```
found = false;
i = lowbound(a);
while (i < highbound(a)+1){
  if (a[i] == e) {
    z = i;
    found = TRUE;
  }
  i = i + 1;
}
```

B

```
found = false;
i = highbound(a);
while (i > lowbound(a)-1){
  if (a[i] == e) {
    z = i;
    found = TRUE;
  }
  i = i - 1;
}
```

if we could abstract away all the detail…

Using Abstraction

- Abstraction can help with Decomposition
  - e.g. To manage the economy, try focussing on some abstracted features such as inflation, growth, GDP, etc.
  - Abstraction allows us to ignore inconvenient details
- In programming:
  - Abstraction is the process of naming compound objects and dealing with them as single entities
    - (i.e. ignoring their details)
- Abstraction doesn't solve problems…
  - …but it allows us to simplify them

Abstraction by Parameterization

- **The program fragment:**

  `x * x - y * y`

  computes the difference of the squares of two specific variables, x and y.

- **The abstraction:**

```
int squares (int x, int y) {
  return(x * x - y * y);
}
```

  describes a set of computations which act on any two (integer) variables to compute the difference of their squares

  Note: locally the variables are called x and y for convenience

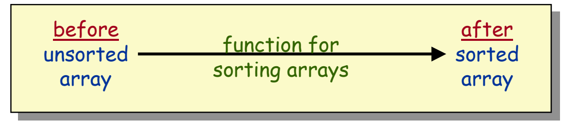
- **The specific computation:**

  `result = squares(big, small);`

  uses the abstraction 'squares' on two specific variables ('big' and 'small')

Abstraction by Specification

- **Abstraction by parameterization…**
  - …allows us to express infinitely many computations
  - …but does not tell us about the *intention* of those computations
- **We need to capture the intention**
  - e.g. consider what is true before and after a computation



  - we can abstract away from a computation (or a plan, program, function, etc) by talking about what it achieves

> specification
> this function can be used whenever we have an array. After it is applied, the array will be sorted into ascending order

Pre-conditions and Post-conditions

- **The two forms of abstraction are complementary**
  - parameterization allows us to perform a computation on any arbitrary variables (values)
  - specification allows us to ignore **how** it is done
- **Unfortunately…**
  - only abstraction by parameterization is built into our programming languages
    - as function (procedure) definitions
  - We can overcome this using comments:

```
int strlen (char s[]) {
  /* precondition: s must contain a character array,
        delimited by the null character;
     postcondition: returns the length of s as an integer;
  */
  int length = 0;
  while (s[length])
    length++;
  return(length);   }
```


Summary

- **Decomposition allows us to simplify difficult design tasks**
- **A good decomposition**
  - minimizes coupling between components
  - maximizes cohesion within components
  - permits information hiding
- **Methods provide…**
  - … techniques for decomposing problems
  - … notations for describing the components
- **Abstraction allows us to ignore detail**
  - by parameterization: allows us to describe and name sets of computations
  - by specification: allows us to ignore how the computation is done

References

van Vliet, H. "Software Engineering: Principles and Practice (2nd Edition)" Wiley, 1999.

- Chapter 11 provides an introduction to the concepts in this lecture, especially section 11.1. However, van Vliet does not go into much detail about documenting procedural and data abstractions in the style I use in this and the next two lectures. For this you'll need:

Liskov, B. and Guttag, J., "Program Development in Java: Abstraction, Specification and Object-Oriented Design", 2000, Addison-Wesley.

- See especially chapters 1 and 3. I draw on Liskov's ideas extensively for advice on program design in this course. The commenting style I use ("requires", "effects", etc) is Liskov's. If you plan to do any extensive programming in Java, you should buy this book. If you don't buy it, borrow it and read the first few chapters.