

# NPRG075

Making programming  
easier and learnable

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Lectures: Tuesday 12:20, S6

➔ <https://d3s.mff.cuni.cz/teaching/nprg075>



# Course feedback

What do you think

- I would love to hear from you!
- [tinyurl.com/nprg075-feedback](https://tinyurl.com/nprg075-feedback)

Some things to consider

- Topics covered in the course?
- Conventional lecture format?
- Alternatives to assignment?







# Introduction

Programming for non-programmers

# What & why

## Programming for non-programmers

-  Augmenting human intellect research theme
-  Reducing costs of programming for businesses
-  Computer science & general education
-  Thinking about how to think when programming!

2022 CSforALL Summit Registration Open.


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**Join the Movement to  
Bring Computer Science  
to ALL Students**

I am a



# Computational thinking

Is that teaching everyone to code?

What to teach and how to best do it?

Designing languages for education?

## LOGO (1967)



Characteristics of the era

Not just a programming language for kids

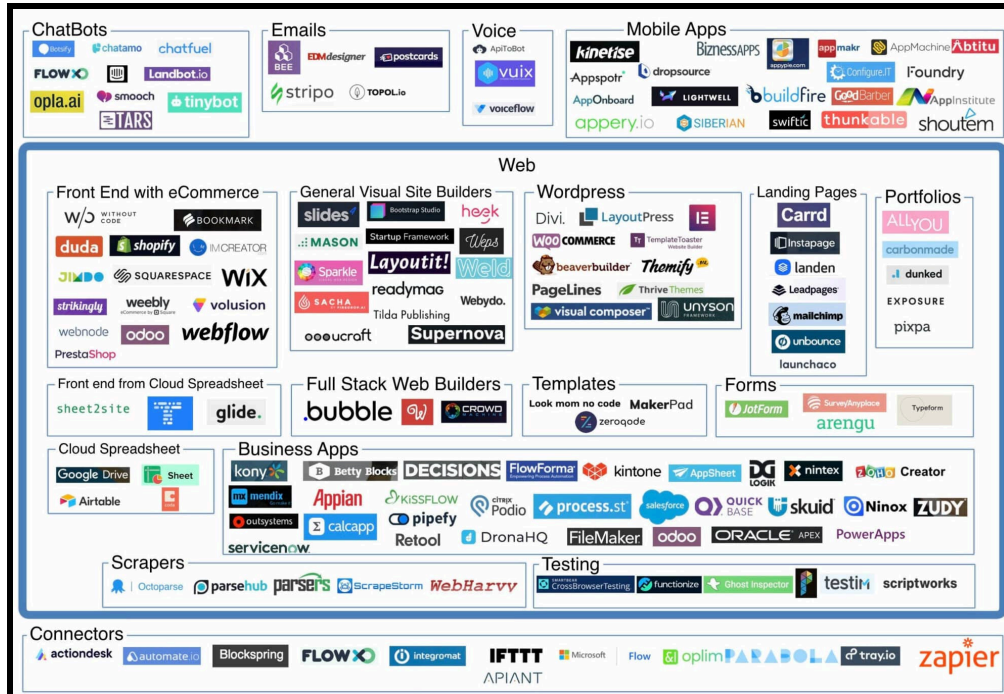
Computer environment: people, things, ideas

Computer culture: a way of thinking about thinking

# No-code and low-code

Platforms for creating applications with minimal code

A new take on end-user programming



UNIQUE SAVINGS  
of the  
**UNIVAC**  
**FLOW-MATIC**  
SYSTEM



**1**

**Virtually Eliminates Your Coding Load**

Your skilled programmers are freed from clerical drudgery to do more creative work. FLOW-MATIC shifts emphasis of the programming effort from detailed coding to problem definition and systems analysis. Slashes drastically the time required to program new or altered UNIVAC applications.

# FLOW-MATIC





High-level business oriented predecessor of COBOL (1957)

Makes coding so easy your company will not need programmers!



# Methodology

## Programming for non-programmers

-  Metaphors for explaining programming
-  Cognitive models to understand human thinking
-  Finding more manageable kinds of interactions
-  Understanding & assisting with common errors

# End-user programming

Making programming super easy

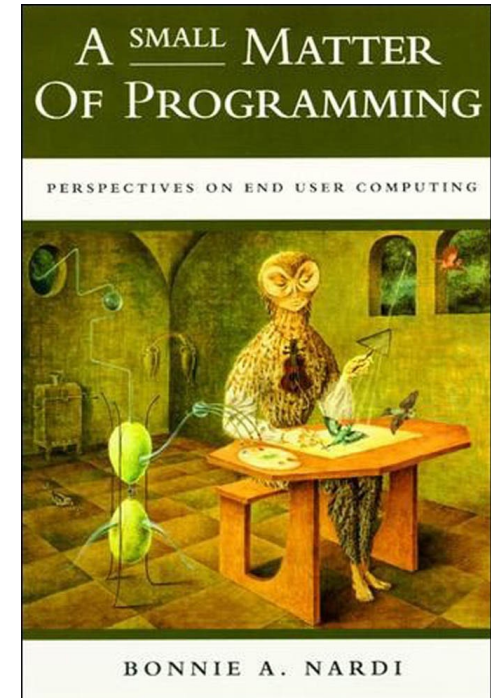
# A small matter of programming

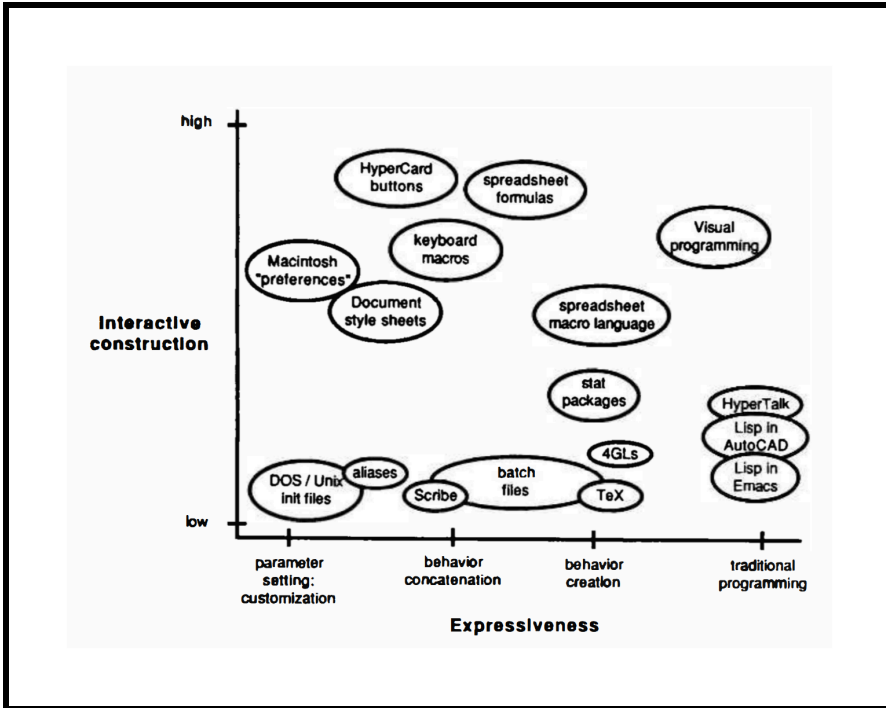
## End-user programming (1993)

- Spreadsheets, CAD systems, statistical packages
- Task specific systems

## An elusive dream?

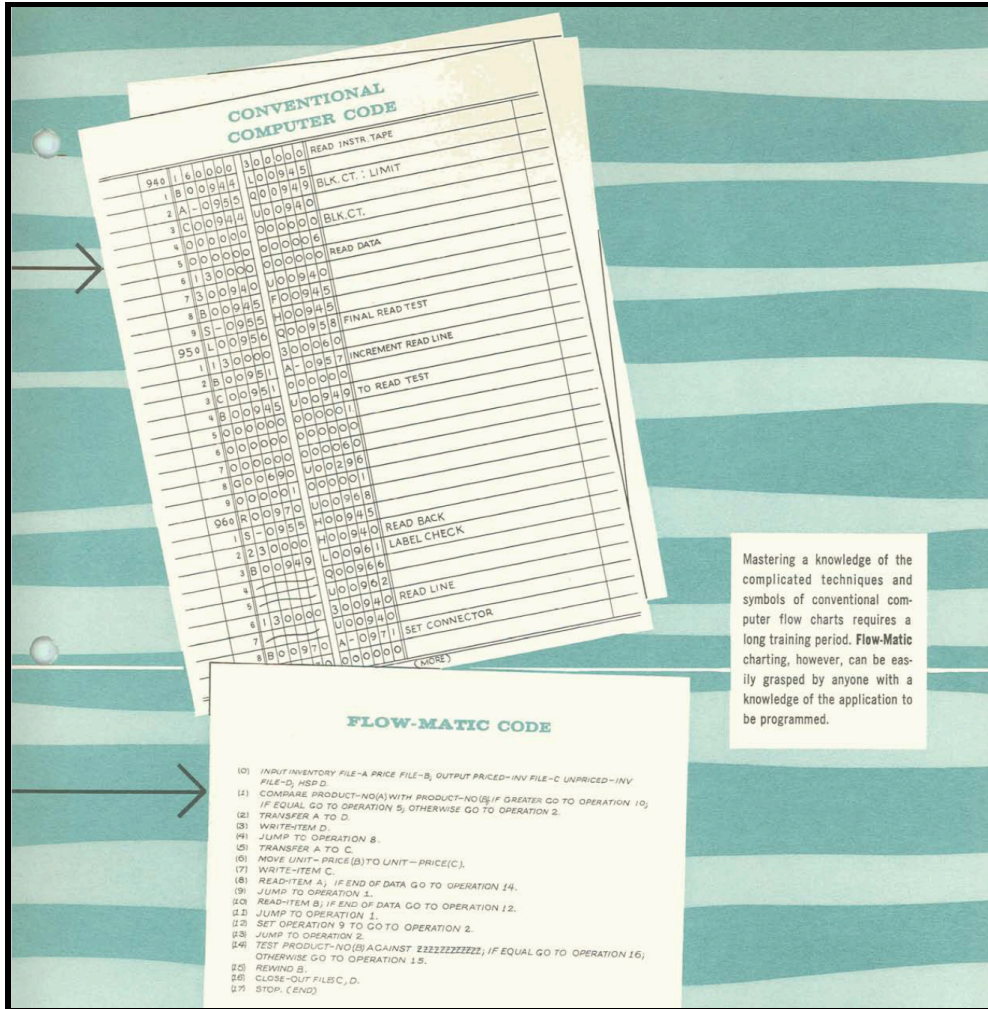
- Can anyone become a programmer?
- Beyond task-specific?
- Programmable end-user systems?





# End-user programming

- ① Very high-level  
Domain-specific languages
- ② Spreadsheets  
CAD & statistical systems
- ③ User interaction  
New kinds of specifying



# High-level languages

## FLOW-MATIC (1960s)

English; easily taught to clerical workers

## DSLs (2000s)

Small languages for specific problems

## Low-code (2020s)

GUI-based entire app development

# Case study: Darklang

Domain-specific  
abstractions for  
server-less backends

- HTTP handler
- Worker
- Database
- CRON job

```
HTTP GET /coding-challenge/outlier/timeseries
DB::query `^Timeseries \value -> value.country = request.queryParams.country`





HTTP GET /coding-challenge/outlier/import
emit/1 "request" "importTimeseriesWorker"

WORKER importTimeseriesWorker
let _ = importTimeseries "australia"
let _ = importTimeseries "usa"
importTimeseries "france"

DB Timeseries.v0
All entries are identified by a unique string 'key'.
date Date
location String
value Int
country String
```

# Notations

## Limits of high-level notations

-  Requires a "tidy" problem domain
-  There is no universal language
-  Adaptable notations tend to be complex
-  Cannot (should not?) accept human vagueness

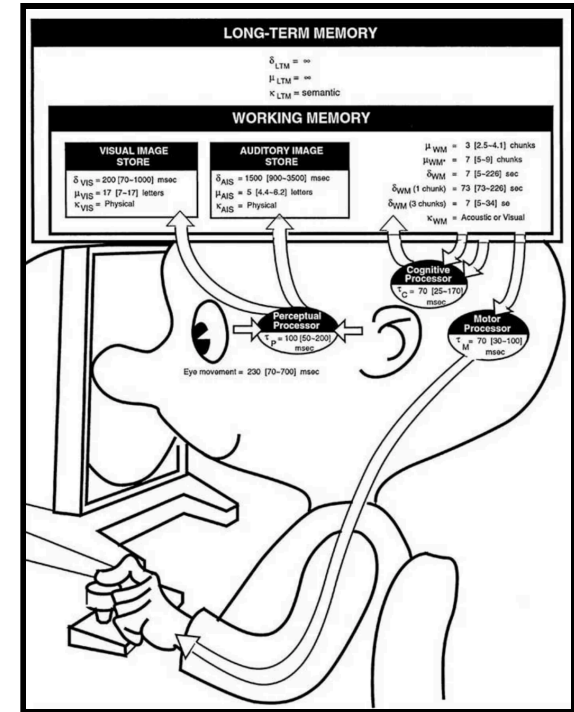
# What makes programming hard?

## Cognitive obstacles

- Loss of direct manipulation (and the frame problem)
- Use of (specialized) notation
- Abstraction for complexity

## Attention investment model

- Cognitive obstacles have cost
- Programming as an investment
- When is the gain worth it?





# Eliminating cognitive obstacles

## Spreadsheet-based interfaces

Avoid abstraction and give immediate feedback

## Programming by example

No need for notation and abstraction

## Direct manipulation

Manipulate concrete entities & post-hoc abstraction

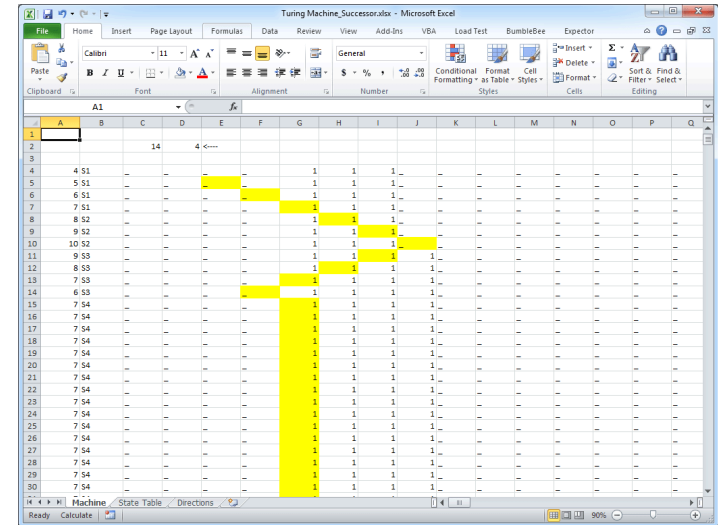
# Spreadsheets as programming

Are they really programming?

- Domain-specific, but powerful
- Turing-complete (in a way)
- Lambdas, macros, extensions

Spreadsheets & programming

- IDEs can learn about liveness
- Spreadsheets can learn about software engineering
- TechDims: Abstraction construction, feedback loops



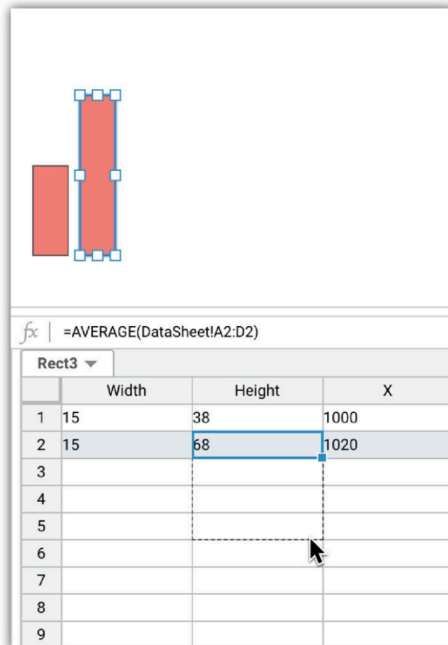
# General-purpose spreadsheets?

(Marasoiu, 2019)

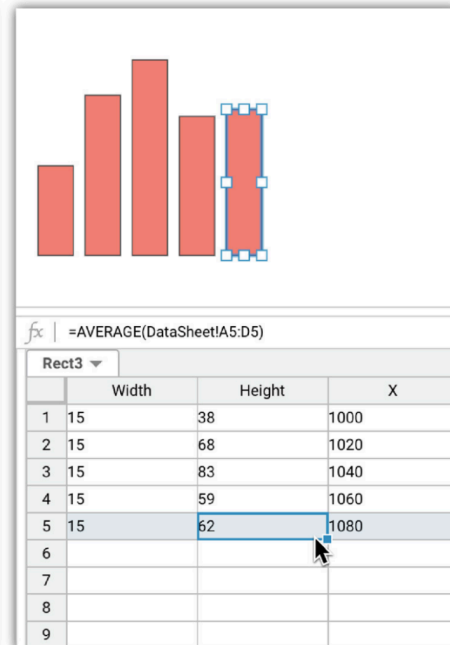
Spreadsheet-based data visualization

Spreadsheet interface for constructing custom charts

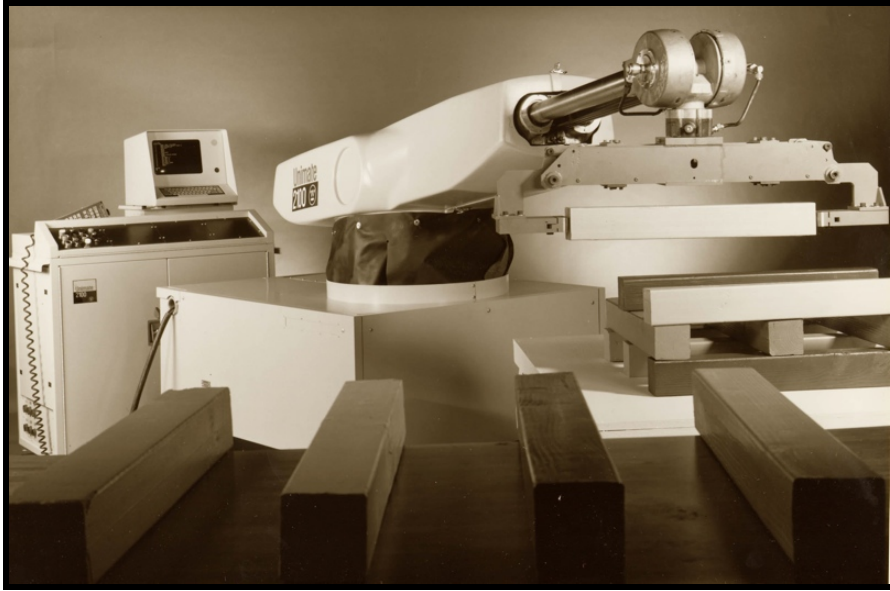
What else could we express this way?



*A.*



*B.*



## Direct manipulation

Complete task manually,  
have computer repeat it

Industrial robots, graphics  
editing, task automation,  
geometry, formatting

How to allow for small  
variation in behaviour?

Transform Script		Year	State	#	Property
Split data repeatedly on newline into rows		0	Reported crime in Alabama	Alabama	
Split split repeatedly on ','		1	2004	Alabama	4029.3
Promote row 0 to header		2	2005	Alabama	3900
Delete empty rows		3	2006	Alabama	3937
Extract from Year after 'in '		4	2007	Alabama	3974.9
Set extract's name to State		5	2008	Alabama	4081.9
Fill State by copying values from above		6	Reported crime in Alaska	Alaska	
Text Columns Rows Table Clear		7	2004	Alaska	3370.9
Delete rows where Year starts with 'Reported'		8	2005	Alaska	3615
Delete rows where Year contains 'Reported'		9	2006	Alaska	3582
Extract from Year between positions 0, 8		10	2007	Alaska	3373.9
		11	2008	Alaska	2928.3
		12	Reported crime in Arizona	Arizona	
		13	2004	Arizona	5073.3
		14	2005	Arizona	4827
		15	2006	Arizona	4741.6
		16	2007	Arizona	4502.6
		17	2008	Arizona	4087.3
		18	Reported crime in Arkansas	Arkansas	
		19	2004	Arkansas	4033.1
		20	2005	Arkansas	4058.1

# Wrangler

(Kandel et al, 2011)

Data wrangling by direct manipulation

User cleans with data

System builds a script

Attempts to generalize concrete interactions

# Programming by example

## FlashFill and FlashExtract

- Write (or select) examples
- System infers patterns
- Refine examples to clarify

## Implementation

- Synthesize programs to match
- Using carefully chosen small language
- And a suitable search algorithm

```
DLZ - Summary Report
"Sample ID: ""5007-01""
"Sample Date/Time: ""Wednesday, May 30, 2006 00:43:51""
Intensities
"/S: ""Analyte"" ""Mass"" ""Conc. Mean"" ""Unit"" ""Conc. SD"" ""RSD"" ""Mean""
"/> ""Be"" 9,0.070073, ""ug/L"" 0.009,12.542,121.334"
"/> ""Sc"" 45, ""ug/L"" 404615.043"
"/> ""Ti"" 48,10.653153, ""ug/L"" 0.847,7.949,181379.200"
"/> ""Se"" 82,1.009204, ""ug/L"" 0.026,2.613,457.487"
"/> ""Si"" 88,20.163079, ""ug/L"" 2.005,9.943,718014.023"
"/> ""Rh"" 103, ""ug/L"" 438976.176"

DLZ - Summary Report
"Sample ID: ""5007-02""
"Sample Date/Time: ""Wednesday, May 30, 2006 01:02:38""
Intensities
"/S: ""Analyte"" ""Mass"" ""Conc. Mean"" ""Unit"" ""Conc. SD"" ""RSD"" ""Mean""
"/> ""Mn"" 55,71.705740, ""ug/L"" 0.350,0.489,2428667.736"
"/> ""Co"" 59,0.131132, ""ug/L"" 0.004,3.315,3606.816"
"/> ""Ba"" 138,129.339264, ""ug/L"" 3.088,2.387,4648771.382"
"/> ""H"" 178, ""ug/L"" 338359.496"
"/> ""Tl"" 205,2.876992, ""ug/L"" 0.730,25.380,129217.588"
"/> ""Pb"" 208,3.671043, ""ug/L"" 0.026,0.702,228830.402"
```

# Education

Teaching programming & thinking

# MIT Artificial Intelligence Lab

## Minsky & Papert

"Seymour Papert and Marvin Minsky thought about thinking, about children's thinking and about machine's thinking."



## LOGO project & language

- Computers as "native speakers" of mathematics
- Teach creative and logical thinking
- Giving children tools to learn (Montessori)



# LOGO as a language

## Language features

- Interactive and LISP-inspired
- Lists, recursion, functional
- More of an idea than a language

## LOGO for education

- Learning through microworlds
- Give kids the most powerful language created
- Powerful ideas: anthropomorphization, metalanguage



```
TO NOUN
  OUTPUT PICK [BIRDS DOGS ..]
END
TO VERB
  OUTPUT PICK [HATE BITE LOVE]
END
TO ADJECTIVE
  OUTPUT PICK [RED PECULIAR ..]
END

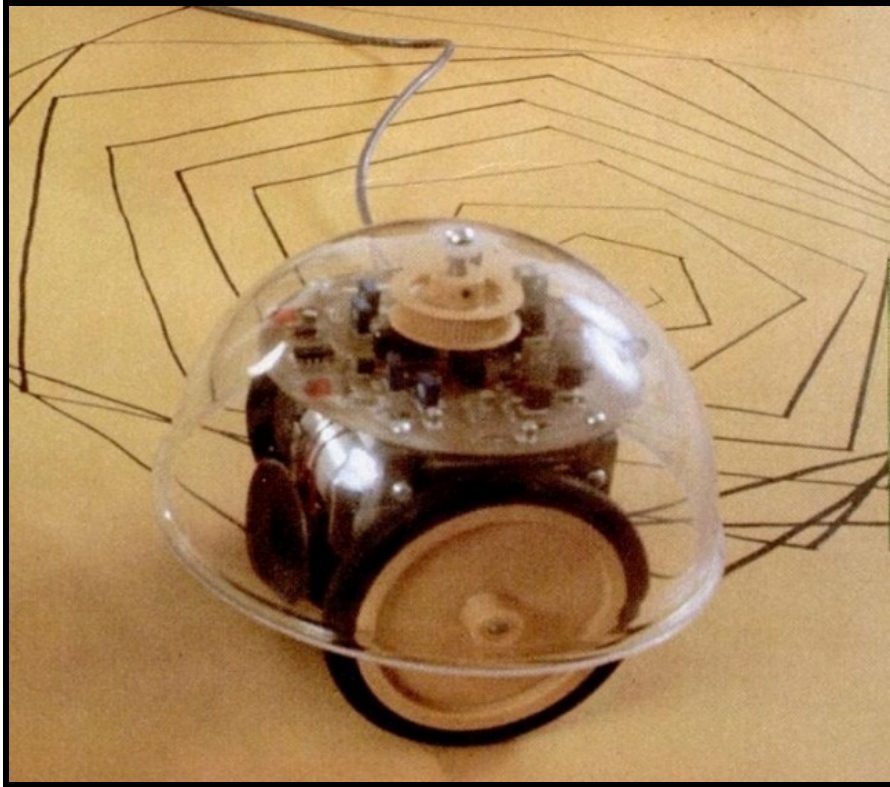
PRINT (SENTENCE ADJECTIVE
      NOUN VERB ADJECTIVE NOUN)
```

## Microworlds

A small domain-specific language for exploring ideas

Turtle graphics is best known example

First LOGO example was for word plays



## Turtle microworld

On-screen and floor robots





Great for teaching

Debug by pretending to be the turtle & follow program

Does not blame students ("the turtle has a bug")

# Computer science education

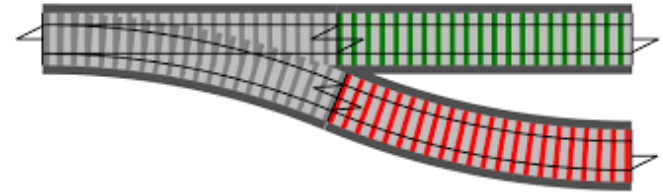
## Teaching programming thinking today

-  From 1960s idealism to 2020s pragmatism
-  Focus on what we can convincingly study
-  Improving teaching practices & methods
-  Developing better conceptual frameworks

# Notional machines

## Models for thinking

- Model of a computer operation
- Helps understand computation
- A "useful lie" for teaching



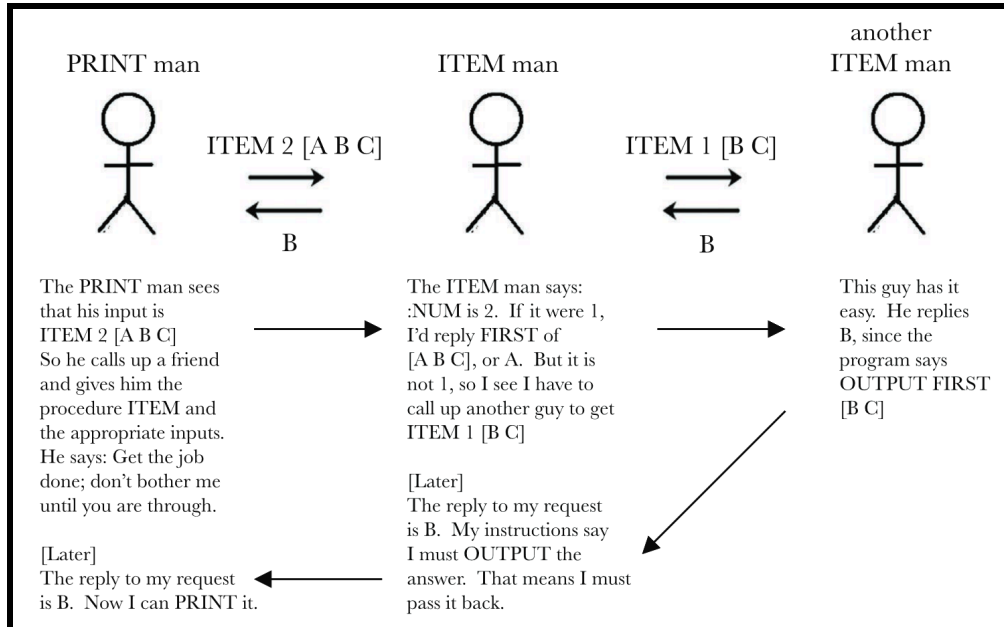
## Example notional machines

- Objects and message passing of Smalltalk
- LOGO "little people" metaphor
- Computation as railway track

# Little people metaphor

A powerful idea for understanding how programs work

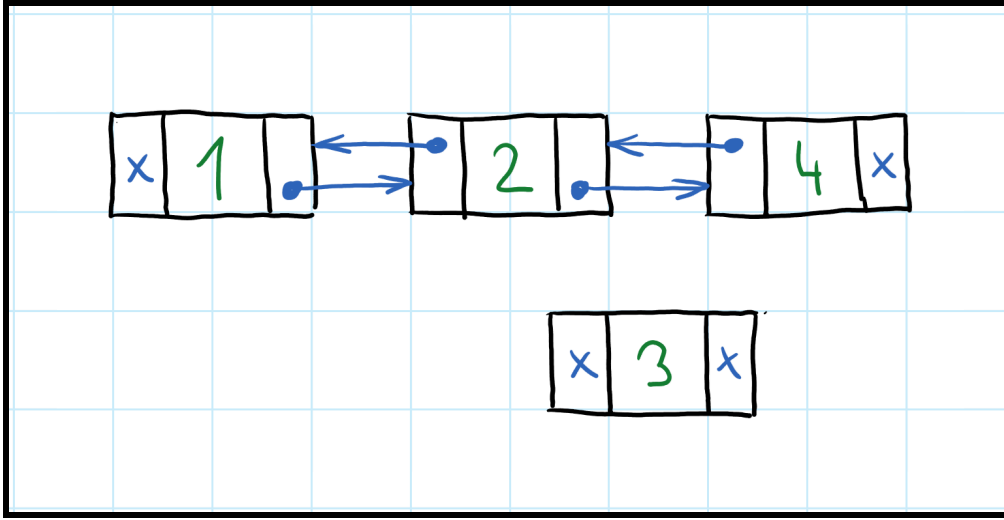
Function instantiation as a "little men" doing (one step of) work



## Linked lists (1/2)

Boxes with pointers as connecting arrows

Let's insert 3 in the list between 2 and 4...

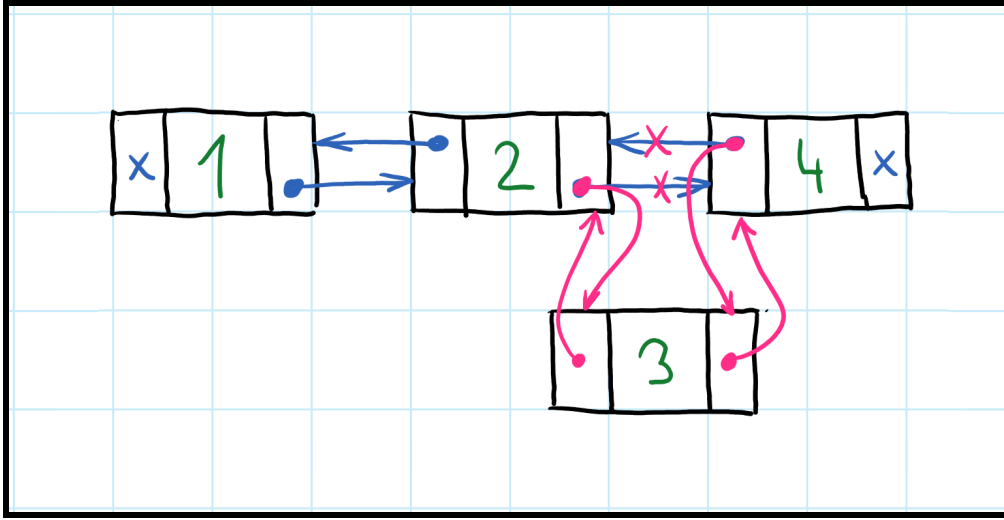


## Linked lists (2/2)

Boxes with pointers as connecting arrows

Let's insert 3 in the list between 2 and 4...





Useful but does not explain everything that pointers can do!





# Computing education

Basic disagreements about the problem

-  Computational thinking & algorithms for all?
-  Creativity as with LOGO and Sonic Pi?
-  History and philosophical problems?
-  How to best teach present-day technology?

# Metaphors

Thinking about programming

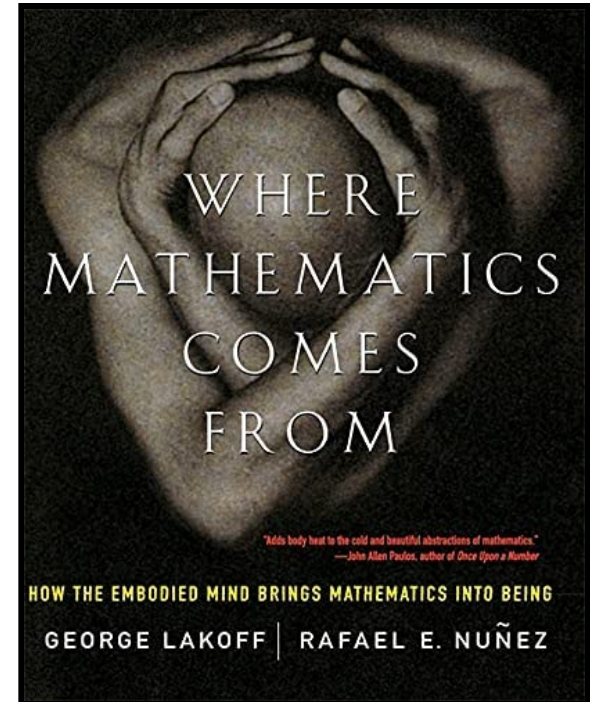
# Metaphors for programming

## Essence of human thought?

- Time as resource, Up as positive, ...
- Apparent through our language
- Basic for constructing mathematics?
- Each has fits and misfits

## Metaphors for programming

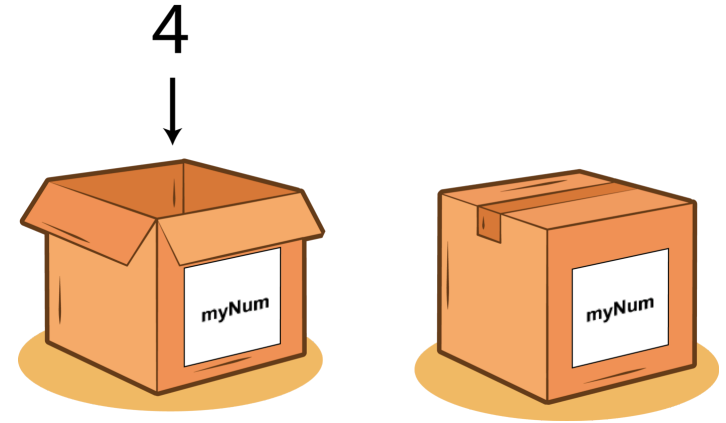
- Notional machines (LISP, Smalltalk)
- Thinking about variables, monads



# Two metaphors for variables

## Variable as a box

- You store value in a box
- Variable "contains" a value
- What is stored in a **name**?



## Variable as a label

- Label you place on a value
- Variable "is" a value
- What is a **name**?

# Misconceptions

Does the metaphor for variables matter?

« What is the meaning of multiple assignment?

☒ Box can contain multiple values!

⊕ Label will be for computation or addition

🏆 Box metaphor wins, but beware of misfits

```
class Monad m where
  (>>=)  ::
    m a -> (a -> m b) -> m b
  return ::
    a -> m a
```

## Metaphors for monads

Interface capturing a class of computations

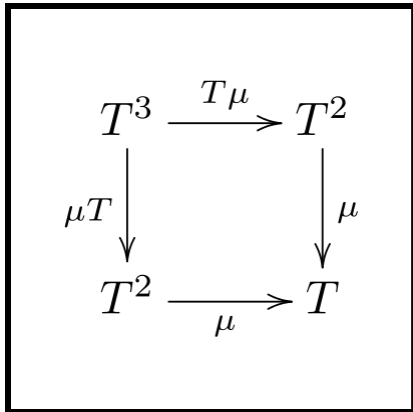
Used for effectful computations in Haskell

How programmers think about them?

# Three metaphors for monads

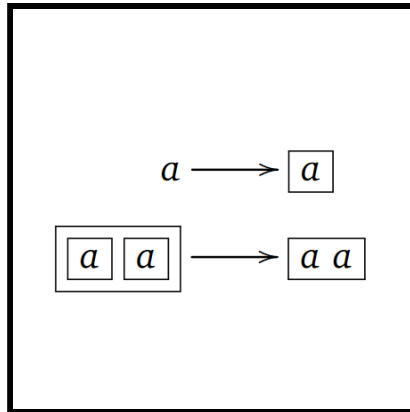
## Symbolic

Meaningless  
symbolical entity  
satisfying laws



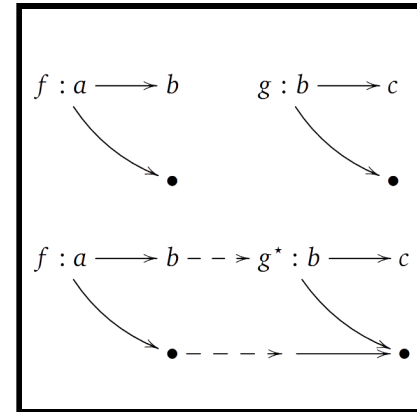
## Box

Container that can  
be transformed  
and un-nested







## Track

Computation that  
can proceed in  
multiple ways



# Misconceptions

## Common errors in thinking

-  Loops terminate when condition turns false
-  Sequential statements do not wait
-  Variable name has effect on its behaviour
-  Missing else branch stops program



# Conclusions

Easier and learnable

# Thank you!

Please do keep in touch!

- Do a final project (and get credit as a bonus)
- Sign-up for a follow-up seminar
- Get in touch about MSc or PhD projects

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➔ <https://d3s.mff.cuni.cz/teaching/nprg075>

# References (1/3)

## End-user programming

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## Spreadsheets

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## Programming by demonstration

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- Kandel, S., et al. (2011). [Wrangler: Interactive Visual Specification of Data Transformation Scripts](#). CHI
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## Programming by example

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- Vu Le, Gulwani S. (2014). [FlashExtract: A Framework for Data Extraction by Examples](#). PLDI

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## Metaphors & misconceptions

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