

Assignment 3: Boggle

Thanks to Todd Feldman for the original assignment idea. And thanks to Julie Zelenski and Eric Roberts for the handout.

Me	13		Computer	52			
lean	peel	clean	elan	celeb	cape	capelan	capo
pace	lent	bent	cent	cento	alee	alec	anele
pent	clan	thane	leant	lane	leap	lento	peace
bleep			pele	penal	hale	hant	neap
			blae	blah	blent	becap	benthal
			bott	open	thae	than	toecap
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The Game of Boggle

Those of you fortunate enough to have spent summers seeing the world from the back of the family station wagon with the 'rents and sibs may be familiar with Boggle, the little word game that travels so well, and those who didn't will soon become acquainted with this vocabulary-building favorite. The Boggle board is a 4x4 grid onto which you shake and randomly distribute 16 dice. These 6-sided dice have letters rather than numbers, creating a grid of letters from which you can form words. In the original version, the players start simultaneously and write down all the words they can find by tracing by a path through adjoining letters. Two letters adjoin if they are next to each other horizontally, vertically, or diagonally. There are up to eight letters adjoining a cube. A letter can only be used once in the word. When time is called, duplicates are removed from the players' lists and the players receive points for their remaining words based on the word lengths.

Due: Wednesday, January 31st at 11:59 pm

Assignment 3 asks that you write a program that plays a fun, graphical rendition of this little charmer, adapted to allow the human and machine to play one another. As you can see from the screen shot above, the computer basically trounces all over you, but it's fun to play anyway.

The main focus of this part of the assignment is designing and implementing the recursive algorithms required to find and verify words that appear in the Boggle board.

How's this going to work?

You set up the letter cubes, shake them up, and lay them out on the board. The human player gets to go first (nothing like trying to give yourself the advantage). The player enters words one by one. After verifying that a word is legitimate, you highlight its letters on the board, add it to the player's word list, and award the player some points.

Once the player has found as many words as he/she can, the computer gets its turn. The computer searches through the board to surface all the remaining words and awards itself points for everything it finds. The computer typically beats the player mercilessly, but the player is free to try again and again and again until he/she is inferior. ☺

The letter cubes

The letters in Boggle are not simply chosen at random. Instead, the letter cubes are designed in such a way that common letters come up more often and it is easier to get a good mix of vowels and consonants. To recreate this, our starter code declares an array of the cubes from the original Boggle. Each cube is described using a string of 6 letters, as shown below:

```
const string kStandardCubes[16] = {
    "AAEEGN", "ABBJOO", "ACHOPS", "AFFKPS",
    "AOOTTW", "CIMOTU", "DEILRX", "DELRVY",
    "DISTTY", "EEGHNW", "EEINSU", "EHRTVW",
    "EOSST", "ELRTTY", "HIMNQU", "HLNNRZ"
};
```

These strings are used to initialize the cubes on the board. At the beginning of each game, "shake" the board cubes. There are two different random aspects to consider. First, the cubes themselves need to be shuffled so that the same cube is not always in the same location on the board. Second, a random side from each cube needs to be chosen to be the letter facing up.

To rearrange the cubes on the board, you should use the following shuffling algorithm, presented here in pseudo-code form:

```
Copy the constant array into a vector vec so you can modify it.
Shuffle vec using the following approach:
for (int i = 0; i < vec.size(); i++) {
    Choose a random index r between i and the last element position, inclusive.
    Swap the element at positions i and r.
}
Fill the Boggle grid by choosing the elements of vec in order.
```

This code makes sure that the cubes are randomly distributed across the grid. Choosing a random side to put face-up is straightforward. Put these two together and you can shake the cubes into many different board combinations.

Alternatively, the user can choose to enter a custom board configuration. In this case, you still use your same board data structure. The only difference is where the letters come from. The user enters a string of characters, representing the cubes from left to right, top to bottom. Verify that this string is long enough to fill the board and re-prompt if it is too short. If it's too long, just ignore the ones you don't need. You do not need to verify that the entered characters are legal letters.

The human player's turn

The human player enters each word she finds on the board. For each word, check that:

- It is at least four letters long.
- It is contained in the English lexicon.
- It has not already been included in the player's word list (even if there is an alternate path on the board to form the same word, the word is counted at most once).
- It can be formed on the board (i.e., it is composed of adjoining letters and each cube is used at most once).

If any of these conditions fail, the word is rejected. If all is good, you add the word to the player's word list and score. In addition, you graphically show the word's path by temporarily highlighting the relevant cubes. You can use the graphics function **pause** to implement the delay. The length of the word determines the score: one point for a 4-letter word, two points for 5 letters, and so on. The functions from the **gboggle.h** interface provide helpful routines for highlighting cubes, displaying word lists, and handling scores.

The player enters a blank line when done finding words, which signals the end of the human's turn.

The computer's turn

The computer then searches the entire board to find the remaining words missed by the human player. The computer earns points for each word found that meets the requirements (minimum length, contained in English lexicon, not already found, and can be formed on board).

As with any exponential search algorithm, it is important to look for ways to limit the search to ensure that the process can be completed in a reasonable amount of time. One of the most important Boggle strategies is to prune dead end searches. For example, if you have a path starting **zx**, the **Lexicon's containsPrefix** method should inform you there are no English words down that path. So, you should stop right here and move on to more promising combinations. If you miss this optimization, you'll find yourself taking long coffee breaks while the computer is futilely looking for words like **zxgub**, **zxaep**, etc.

Our provided code

We have written all the fancy graphics functions for you. The functions exported by the **gboggle.h** interface are used to manage the appearance of the game window. It includes functions for initializing the display, labeling the cubes with letters, highlighting cubes, and displaying the word lists. The implementation is provided to you in source form so you can extend this code in your own novel ways if you are so inclined.

The **Grid** and **Lexicon** classes you've already seen will come in handy again. Our English "**dictionary.txt**" file contains over 125,000 words, which is about four times as large as the average person's vocabulary, so it's no wonder that the computer player is so good.

Solution strategies

In a project of this complexity, it is important that you get an early start and work consistently toward your goal. To be sure that you're making progress, it also helps to divide up the work into manageable pieces, each of which has identifiable milestones. Here's a suggested plan of attack that breaks the problem down into five phases:

- *Task 1—Cube setup, board drawing, cube shaking.* Design your data structure for the cubes and board. It will help to group related data into sensible structures rather than pass a dozen parameters around. Set up and shuffle the cubes. Use the **gboggle** routines to draw the board. Add an option for the user to force the board configuration, as illustrated by the sample application. And no global variables.
- *Task 2—Human's turn (except for finding words on the board).* Write the loop that allows the user to enter words. Reject words that have already been entered, that don't meet the minimum word length, or aren't words according to your trusty **Lexicon**. Use the **gboggle** functions to add words to the graphical display and keep score.
- *Task 3—Find a given word on the board.* Now put your recursive talents to work in verifying that a word can be formed on the board, subject to the adjacency and non-duplication rules. You will employ recursive backtracking that "fails fast": as soon as you realize you can't form the word starting at a position, you move on to the next position. If a path is found, use the highlighting function from **gboggle** to temporarily draw attention to cubes proving the word is present.
- *Task 4—Find all the words on the board (computer's turn).* Now it's time to implement the killer computer player. Employing the power of recursion, your computer player traverses the board using an exhaustive search to find all remaining words. Be sure to use the **Lexicon**'s prefix search to abandon searches down dead-end paths.
- *Task 5—Polish.* With everything now working, it's time to finish off the details. Be sure to gracefully handle all user input.

Requirements and suggestions

Here are a few other details we'd like you to manage:

- Words that differ only in capitalization should be treated as equals, and that **PEACE** is the same as **peace**.
- The program contains two recursive searches: one to find a specific word entered by the human player and another to search the board exhaustively for the computer's turn. They are somewhat similar, and you may be tempted to try to integrate the two into one combined function. In general, we applaud this instinct to unify similar code. However, we need to tell you that it doesn't play out well in this one case. There are enough differences between the two that they don't combine cleanly and the unified code is actually made worse, not better, as a result. Given the tricky nature of recursion, you should focus on writing exceptionally clean code that clearly communicates its algorithm and thus can be easily maintained and debugged. An important goal for this assignment is that you to learn how to employ these two different varieties of recursion into the context of a larger program, and we expect you to do so by writing two separate recursive searches.
- This is the first large program you're required to write in the course (we'll say that the Games of Life assignment was relatively medium in size ☺). Getting to a working solution is an excellent indication that you're on top of the technical challenges. This program is also an opportunity to demonstrate a commitment to good style. Your code should be decomposed, rely on brilliant function and variable names, and be self-documenting (relying on comments to explain what's going on when the code itself is too dense or otherwise confusing). If you view style only as an afterthought—a rearrangement after the fact to clean things up—you'll have missed a huge part of the benefit, which is that paying careful attention to design from the beginning results in code that is faster to write, is more likely be functionally correct, is easier to debug and modify, and requires far fewer comments.