

# Introduction to Algorithms and Data Structures

## Lecture 29: Unsolvable Problems

John Longley

School of Informatics  
University of Edinburgh

21 March 2022

Life...

The Universe...

Everything...

## Lecture 29

# Unsolvable Problems

# The plan ...

## Last time:

- ▶ Introduced register machines (RMs), due to Marvin Minsky.
- ▶ Used them to define the Church-Turing computable functions.
- ▶ Reviewed arguments for the Church-Turing thesis.
- ▶ Sketched construction of a universal machine, using the crucial idea of coding a machine as a natural number.

## This time:

- ▶ Give an example of a function that's not CT-computable, based on the halting problem.
- ▶ Mention other algorithmically unsolvable problems in maths/CS.
- ▶ Hint at some philosophical teasers, and weave in a shameless book plug.

# What is a ‘function’? A culture divide . . .

1. For 18th-century mathematicians (e.g. Euler), a function was something given by a formula. E.g.  $f(n) = n! + n^2 + 5$ .
2. In 19th century (Dirichlet onwards), a function was conceived as an abstract object: a sort of infinite lookup table, not necessarily describable by any formula or finite ‘rule’ at all.

n	0	1	2	3	4	.....
f(n)	42	578	2	10225464	999	.....

This is what today’s mathematicians typically have in mind.

[Teaser: In what sense do all these functions ‘exist’?]

3. For many CS-educated people today, the word ‘function’ naturally refers to an entity defined by a piece of code. E.g.

```
def factorial(n):  
    if n==0: return 1  
    else: return n * factorial(n-1)
```

Understood in this way, the concept of ‘non-computable function’ makes little sense! We’re thinking of ‘functions’ more in sense 2.

## The halting problem

Say a RM computation **halts** if we eventually emerge at an exit.

Recall that both **RM flowcharts** and **memory states** can be 'coded' as natural numbers  $(m, n)$ .

A **halting tester**, if it existed, would take numbers  $m, n$ , and tell us whether 'machine  $m$  halts when run on initial memory state  $n$ '.



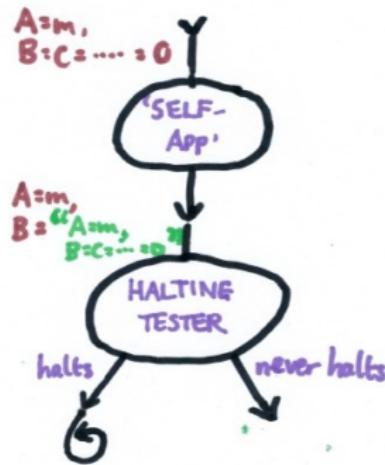
**Theorem:** There is no such register machine! In other words, the halting problem is (RM-)unsolvable.

Equivalently, the following function  $h$  isn't RM-computable:

$$h(m, n) = (0 \text{ if machine } m \text{ halts on input } n, 1 \text{ otherwise})$$

# Unsolvability of the halting problem

Suppose a halting tester existed. Build the following machine  $P$ :



(NB. Running machine  $m$  on  $A = m, B = \dots = 0$  ‘applies  $m$  to itself’.)

Let  $p$  be the numerical code for  $P$ .

Now run  $P$  on  $A = p, B = C = \dots = 0$ . What happens?

- We’re testing if “  $P$  run on ‘ $A = p, B = C = \dots = 0$ ’ ” halts!
- If answer is yes, we loop; if no, we halt. **Contradiction!**

## Precursor: Russell's paradox (1901)

Define  $R$  to be the set of all sets that don't contain themselves:

$$R = \{S \mid S \notin S\}$$

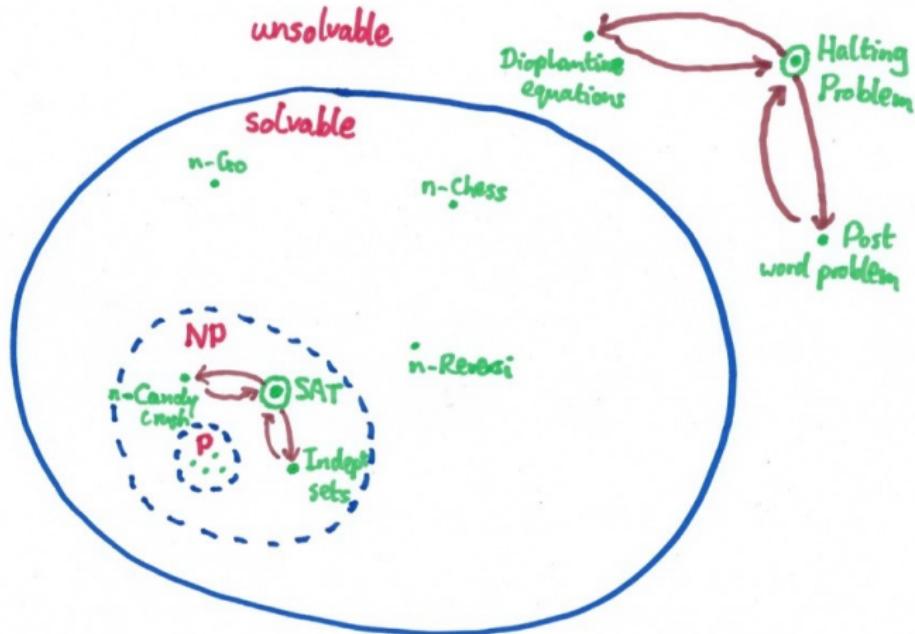
Does  $R$  contain itself, i.e. is  $R \in R$ ?

**Russell's analogy:** The village barber (a man) shaves exactly those men in the village who don't shave themselves. Does the barber shave himself, or not?

**Conclusion:** No man exists in the village with the property proposed by Russell. (Not really a 'paradox' in this case.)

**Recommended reading:** *Scooping the Loop Snopper* by Geoffrey Pullum. (A proof that the Halting Problem is undecidable, written in verse in the style of Dr. Seuss).

# The world of (un)solvability



- ▶ Dotted lines are conjectured boundaries.
- ▶ ' $n$ -G' refers to the problem of choosing optimal moves in an ' $n$ -ary generalization' of the game G.
- ▶ Halting problem is to unsolvable problems what SAT is to NP-hard ones.

## Diophantine equations

Consider two equations. Want integer solutions ( $x, y, z \in \mathbb{Z}$ ).

1.  $x^2 + y^2 + z^2 = 42$ .

Clearly requires  $|x|, |y|, |z| < 7$ . So bounded search suffices.

$$5^2 + 4^2 + 1^2 = 42.$$

2.  $x^3 + y^3 + z^3 = 42$ .

Cubes may be  $+$  or  $-$ . Seemingly requires unbounded search.

Solved in 2019!

$$(-80538738812075974)^3 + 80435758145817515^3 + 12602123297335631^3 = 42$$

More generally, a Diophantine equation is a multi-variable polynomial equation with integer coefficients for which we require integer solutions. E.g.

$$x^2y + 2yz^3 - 506zvw + w - v = 54321$$

Natural problem: Given such an equation, does it have a solution?

This turns out to be unsolvable: there's no program that takes a Dio eq as input, and gives a yes/no answer to this question.

## Another example: Post's word problem

Given two finite sets  $S, T$  of strings, decide whether or not there's a string that can be formed **both** as a concatenation of strings in  $S$  **and** as a concatenation of strings in  $T$ .

E.g. suppose

$$S = \{a, ab, bba\}, \quad T = \{baa, aa, bb\}$$

Then the answer is **YES**, because:

$$bba.ab.bba.a = bbaabbbbaa = bb.aa.bb.baa$$

For general  $S$  and  $T$ , however, this is an **unsolvable** problem!

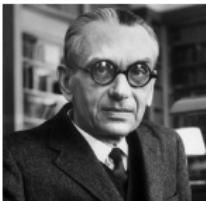
There are also examples in many other branches of CS/math.

E.g. given two context-free grammars  $G_1, G_2$ , it's an **unsolvable** problem whether  $L(G_1) \cap L(G_2)$  is context-free.

## Some big questions . . .



Alan Turing



Kurt Gödel

- ▶ Turing's theorem tells us that for any given machine  $M$ , there will be (yes/no) mathematical questions that  $M$  can't answer.
- ▶ Turing also thought that any aspect of human intelligence could in principle be imitated by a machine.
- ▶ If so, does that mean there are yes/no mathematical questions that *we humans* will never be able to answer? We seem to be led to . . .

### Gödel's dichotomy:

*"Either . . . the human mind (even within the realm of pure mathematics) infinitely surpasses the powers of any finite machine, or else there exist absolutely unsolvable diophantine problems."*  
(Gödel 1952, emphasis mine)

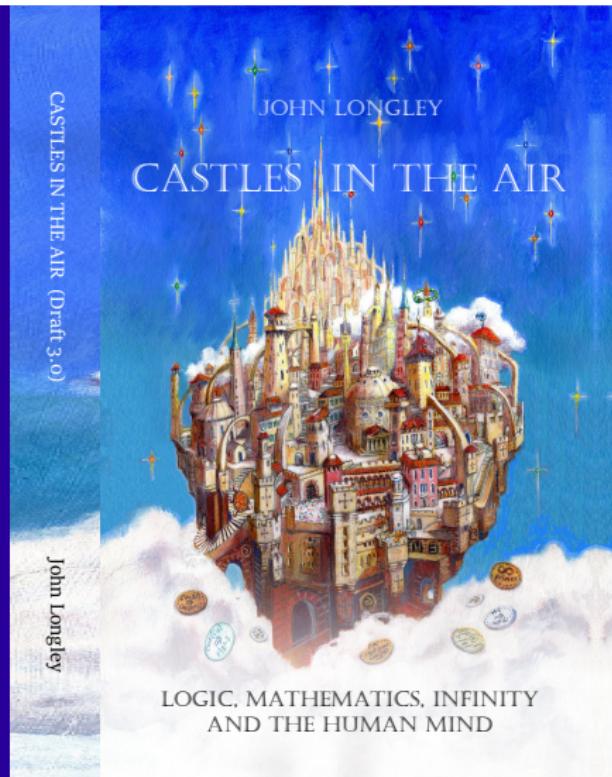
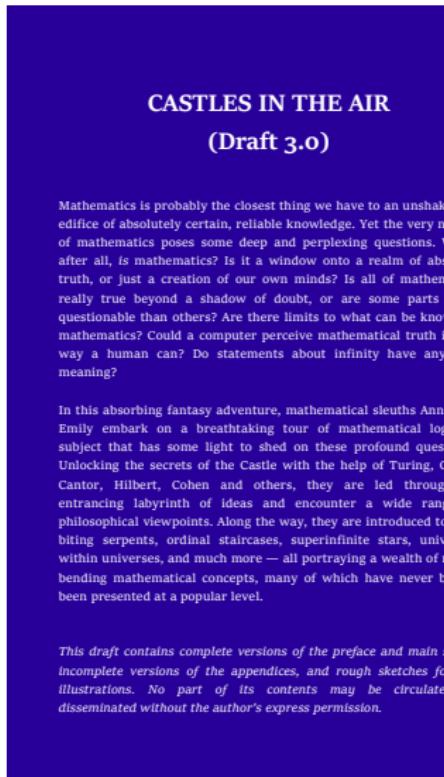
## Unknowable truths?

- ▶ Gödel himself showed that any (suitable, consistent) **formal system** for math proofs will inevitably leave some questions unresolved.
- ▶ But *can* the power of the ‘human proof engine’ can be adequately encapsulated by some fixed formal system? If so, which system?
- ▶ Gödel himself believed deeply in the unlimited power of human reason, and thought that no mathematical questions were ‘absolutely unsolvable’.

More questions . . .

- ▶ If some mathematical question were ‘absolutely unsolvable’, would we still say that question **has** a definite answer? If so, why?
- ▶ If not, which kinds of math statements have a definite ‘meaning’, and which don’t? How much is just ‘human convention’?

# Coming soon, I hope . . .



Artwork © Cat Outram 2020