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Why is Binary Search preferred over Ternary Search?

3 minutes

The following is a simple recursive **Binary Search** function in C++ taken from [here](#).

```
int binarySearch(int arr[], int l, int r, int x)
{
    if (r >= l)
    {
        int mid = l + (r - l)/2;
        if (arr[mid] == x) return mid;
        if (arr[mid] > x) return binarySearch(arr,
l, mid-1, x);
        return binarySearch(arr, mid+1, r, x);
    }
    return -1;
}
```

The following is a simple recursive **Ternary Search** function in C++.

```
int ternarySearch(int arr[], int l, int r, int x)
{
```

```

    if (r >= 1)
    {
        int mid1 = 1 + (r - 1)/3;
        int mid2 = mid1 + (r - 1)/3;
        if (arr[mid1] == x)    return mid1;
        if (arr[mid2] == x)    return mid2;
        if (arr[mid1] > x) return
ternarySearch(arr, l, mid1-1, x);
        if (arr[mid2] < x) return
ternarySearch(arr, mid2+1, r, x);
        return ternarySearch(arr, mid1+1, mid2-1,
x);
    }
    return -1;
}

```

Which of the above two does less comparisons in worst case?

From the first look, it seems the ternary search does less number of comparisons as it makes $\text{Log}_3 n$ recursive calls, but binary search makes $\text{Log}_2 n$ recursive calls. Let us take a closer look.

The following is recursive formula for counting comparisons in worst case of Binary Search.

$$T(n) = T(n/2) + 2, \quad T(1) = 1$$

The following is recursive formula for counting comparisons in worst case of Ternary Search.

$$T(n) = T(n/3) + 4, \quad T(1) = 1$$

In binary search, there are $2\text{Log}_2 n + 1$ comparisons in worst case.

In ternary search, there are $4\text{Log}_3 n + 1$ comparisons in worst case.

Time Complexity for Binary search = $2\log_2 n + O(1)$

Time Complexity for Ternary search = $4\log_3 n + O(1)$

Therefore, the comparison of Ternary and Binary Searches boils down the comparison of expressions $2\log_3 n$ and $\log_2 n$. The value of $2\log_3 n$ can be written as $(2 / \log_2 3) * \log_2 n$. Since the value of $(2 / \log_2 3)$ is more than one, Ternary Search does more comparisons than Binary Search in worst case.

Exercise:

Why Merge Sort divides input array in two halves, why not in three or more parts?

This article is contributed by **Anmol**. Please write comments if you find anything incorrect, or you want to share more information about the topic discussed above

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