Software Development Journal

**Initial Premise & Motivation**

*For the Application*

I have always been a hands-on learner. For that reason, I have always found it kind of unfortunate that the main method with which information is conveyed in college is via lecture. Now that I am nearing the end of my undergraduate studies, I can truthfully say that, to me, a useful lecture was a rare occurrence. To be frank, I can count the number of classes where lecture was useful on one hand.

For that reason, I need to go out of my way to study to understand and retain any course-related information at all. I have researched several schools of thought on the concept of self-study, and have tried many methods of doing so. The strategy that I have had the most success with goes as follows:

1. Obtain a piece of course material to study, usually a slideshow used in lecture.
2. Ask myself questions about the course material as I am reading over it.
3. Write down these questions and the answers to them.
4. Use the questions and answers obtained in (3) to make a quiz.
5. Quiz myself until I get all the answers right.
6. To better retain and understand content, return to (5) at a later date for review.

In order to expedite this process, I looked at some services and software that allow the user to quiz themselves. The best one I could find ended up being Quizlet, which is a web service that allows the user to create a set of terms and definitions to quiz themselves with (think virtual flashcards). Ideally, I wanted a lightweight, open source, local application that allows the user to quickly create quizzes about any type of content with a simple, intuitive GUI or syntax. I was unsuccessful in finding anything that met all of these criteria, so I thought to myself, “Why don’t I make it?”

*For this Journal*

Whenever I have a problem that I need to solve via programming, my standard process is as follows:

1. Identify and write down the problem to solve.
2. Check if the problem has already been solved; if so, reuse the code that solves it.
3. Check if the problem can be solved using a function; if so, write the function to do so.
4. Check if the problem can be solved using a class; if so, split the problem into subproblems to be solved using members of the class.
5. Check if the problem can be solved using a collection of classes; if so, split the problem into subproblems to be solved using classes.

The actual writing of code only takes place in problem (3). When I solve this problem, I use the first solution that comes to mind. Oftentimes, this solution is not the best, simplest, or easiest solution. This solution may even have no redeeming qualities other than that it solves the problem. There may be a great deal of better solutions to same problem. Maybe the solution does not even actually work.

All of these are obviously negative possibilities, but that is not the reason I use the first solution I think of. I use this solution to better understand the problem I am trying to solve in the first place. Although it is not necessarily immediate, after writing this first solution, I almost always think of a better one. Sometimes, I do not think of a better solution for a long time (weeks, if not months). And when I implement this better solution, I end up with less code than I started with. Often, I will implement another, even better solution after that, and end up with even less code.

One can probably tell where I am going with this by now. The more I work on my project, the less I have to show for it. So, what are some solutions to this?

1. Keep the initial code for every problem solved because it does the job (even if it does it poorly), resulting in a larger, more impressive-looking codebase.
2. Continue replacing solutions with better ones, and accept the fact that the codebase will grow slowly.
3. Create some other deliverable to document the mental labor, thought process, and learning behind the project itself.

The first solution I tried was (1). Unsurprisingly, my experience went poorly. Indeed, I was able to implement the first few software functionalities surprisingly quickly. The codebase grew at a rapid pace. However, implementing each functionality became more difficult than the last, since I took no time for maintenance. Bugs were rampant, and finding their source was incredibly frustrating. Determining an ideal way for functionalities to interact was practically impossible when I did not fully understand what the functionalities were doing in the first place. Code was repeated in multiple places in multiple files, so changes to one instance of repeated code were not reflected in the others. In short, it was a mess.

For that reason, (1) was a completely unsustainable approach. I switched back to (2), which is my preferred approach, and worked on the project with great success. However, I could not shake the feeling that I would go to defend my thesis, someone would see a few files and a few hundred lines of code and go, “That’s it?” I expressed my thoughts to my thesis director, Professor Miller, and he proposed that I create this very journal. That is how we arrived at (3), which I think to be the best approach for this project, even if it results in less time spent programming.

**Minimal Requirements**

At the time of submitting the prospectus for this project, I did not fully understand the workload that awaited me in the following year. For that reason, the initial requirements and timeline outlined in the prospectus were unrealistic. A more realistic, minimal set of requirements for the software will be listed here. This journal also exists as a way of supplementing the work done for this thesis.

1. The user shall be able to write and design a quiz in a plaintext (.txt) format.
   1. The syntax for writing this quiz shall be simple enough such that it is accessible for non-programming people.
   2. The language with which quizzes can be written shall allow for the user to write questions, answers, and feedback.
      1. For a given question, the feedback section shall be optional.
   3. The language with which quizzes can be written shall allow for the user to provide randomly selected variables to be used when presenting the quiz.
      1. A randomly selected variable shall be given a name and a list of random values to choose from.
2. The software shall be able to scan a preset directory for quiz files, and present these files to the user.
   1. The software shall ignore any files in this directory that are not labeled with the extension “.txt.”
   2. The software shall label text files found in the quiz directory with an integer, and present this labeling to the user.
   3. The software shall prompt the user to select a quiz by entering the integer used to label the quiz.
   4. The software shall return to the quiz selection screen upon completion of a quiz.
   5. The software shall return to the quiz selection screen if there is an error while trying to parse the quiz.
   6. The software shall exit if the user enters an integer that is not a valid label for a quiz.
3. The software shall be able to parse a quiz file, and present the quiz to the user.
   1. The software shall be able to parse a quiz file, and store the data of the quiz in memory.
   2. The software shall present the user with descriptive error messages if it encounters an error while parsing the quiz.
   3. The software shall be able to sequentially present the user with questions of the quiz.
   4. The software shall be able to sequentially accept the user’s given answer for each question.
   5. The software shall be able to check a given answer against the correct answer.
   6. The software shall be able to provide the user with feedback regarding whether or not the user’s given answer is correct or not.
      1. This feedback shall be able to be presented in two ways: immediate, and post-quiz.
   7. The software shall be able to provide the user with optional feedback written by the creator of the quiz if the user’s given answer is incorrect.

**Java versus Python**

When I initially created the prospectus for this thesis, I made the design choice of doing the entire project in Java. This, and I cannot stress this enough, was a horrible mistake. I chose Java in the first place because it was the language that I was most comfortable with. In actuality, I had not programmed anything substantial in Java since my freshman year of college. Choosing C++ likely would have been a better idea for this project, as I used that in my regular coursework in both my sophomore and junior years.

An even better idea would have been to take the risk of using this project as a means of learning Python. I will be addressing six topics in this section: code constructs, data types, functions versus methods, returning multiple values, functions and methods as arguments, and meta-programming. I will discuss the differences between how each topic is represented in both Python and Java, and how and why Python does it better every time.

*Code Constructs*

There are a wide variety of code constructs that are seen in most object-oriented languages. These include bodies and headers for classes, functions, methods, and loops; if, else, and else-if clauses; exception-handling blocks, and more. In Java, these constructs are organized by collections of parentheses, brackets, and semicolons. Python manages to do most of this with whitespace, although parenthesis are still used in some places. For example, the class body consists of all lines below the body that are one level of indentation greater than the header. This makes Python much more readable, elegant, and easier to write than Java. Indented blocks are used as a conventional means of organization in other programming languages, but Python goes a step further by making it part of its syntax.

*Data Types*

In Java, if I want to store a value, I have to provide the type and name of the variable before I can set it to a value, and then the value has to agree with the type. Trying to set a value to a variable that does not agree with the type causes a compile-time error. This also applies to methods. I must tell Java what data type the method will return, and then I can only return a value that matches that data type. If one tries to return a data type that does not agree with the function header, they will be met with yet another compilation error.

In Python, this constraint does not exist. To create a variable, you provide a name and value; no data type is required. The variable can also be reassigned to a value of any data type. For example, a variable that holds an integer can be reassigned to hold a string, or a double, or a boolean, etc… Functions and methods operate in the same way: no return type is required, and any type of value can be returned.

Some of my fellow students criticize this feature of Python, claiming using a weakly-typed programming language can lead to error-prone code, and encourages poor programming practices. There is some weight to this criticism, as I have had moments of confusion during debugging where I thought that a variable held a value of type X, when really it was of type Y. However, variables, functions, and methods can be typed with a feature known as “type hints,” but this feature is completely optional. In a general sense, as far as bad programming practices are concerned, bad code can be written in any language.

*Functions versus Methods*

The terms “function” and “method” are often used interchangeably, but by my understanding, the distinction between the two is that methods are functions bound to a class. With that being said, this is the definition that will be used here.

Java does not have functions. To write a method in Java, it must be contained within a class. The method is then bound to that class. By default, methods in Java are bound to an instance of that class (an object). However, the keyword “static” can be used, which makes a method bound to the class itself rather than a specific object. This means that if one wishes to create a function in Java, the closest they can get is by creating a static method. The problem here is that there may be no logical reason for the function to be bound to a class at all. This often pollutes the codebase with boilerplate classes that only serve to hold a collection of static methods. This is also just a general nuisance that must be dealt with during the design process.

Python has both functions and methods. To create a function in Python, declare it outside of any class body. To create a method in Python, declare it within a class body. The method is then bound to that class. Additionally, Python also supports static methods via the “staticmethod” annotation This leads to less boilerplate, and allows for more freedom of design.

*Returning Multiple Values*

Java does not support returning multiple values. Suppose a method performs some computation based on given arguments, and this computation results in two useful values. These values cannot be returned directly. To get around this, a Java programmer must make use of the fact that the return type of a method can be an object. So, these values must first be placed inside an object such as a list or array, and then this object is returned instead. More boilerplate and more restrictions in design; thanks Java.

Python supports both functions and methods returning multiple values. These values are given via comma-separated list.  
*Functions and Methods as Arguments*

Sometimes, it can be useful to write a function or method that accepts another function as an argument. For this to be possible, functions and methods must be treated as first-class values. In Java, methods are not first-class. A method, as-is, cannot be passed to another method as an argument. There are two courses of action for getting around this: pass an object that has access to the necessary method, or make use of something termed a “functional interface.” The first method mandates the existence of a class, while the second mandates the existence of an interface. Both result in more boilerplate unless using built-in types.

In Python, both functions and methods are first-class values. Both can be passed to another function or method by name. Methods bound to an instance of an object (non-static) passed in this way are unbound. To call such a method, one must provide an object to it via argument. No boilerplate is required for any of this.

*Meta-Programming*

It is difficult for me to articulate what I mean by “meta-programming.” The best way I can define it is this: taking advantage of underlying code structures to an extent not immediately obvious or accessible, especially to reduce boilerplate.

For example, in Python, I was writing some test scripts. I had a collection of methods, where each method ran its own test. Then, I had a single method that would run all testing methods simultaneously. I implemented this method by manually identifying and calling each testing method by name. However, this became somewhat annoying to maintain. Every time I wrote a new test, I would have to update the method that runs all tests.

To solve this problem, I hooked into the class directory and found all names that begin with the prefix “check.” These were my testing methods. Every time a testing method was found, it was called. This reduced boilerplate, and made the code a lot easier to maintain.

Surprisingly, I managed to do something similar in Java. The only difference is that I have to catch three exceptions in my run-all-tests method, and suppress a warning for every test that I write.

**Lost Entries**

Technically, no entries were “lost” in the sense that I created them, and then lost access to the file containing them at some later point. However, during the first semester of this project’s development, I worked on the project with no version control system, and did not produce any external documentation. For that reason, within the scope of the project’s development, there existed potential for me to create much more entries than can be seen here in this journal. This is truly unfortunate, because in this first semester, I was in a much poorer state of mind than I am now – which would have made for great journal material.

**Retroactive Entries**

*Introduction*

This journal was created quite late in the project’s development (second to last month). For that reason, the majority of the work done on the project has already been completed. Obviously, I cannot directly capture my state of mind as it were earlier in development. However, between the first and second semester of development, I (finally) taught myself how to use GitHub, and created a repository for this project for the purpose of version control. Every update of my code has a short description to go with it. These entries contain the short descriptions themselves, their dates, and some comments from present me to give context, explanation, or my thoughts.

**Journal Entries**

*March 2nd, 2021*

Today, I created the software development journal itself, so this will be its first genuine entry. I created the file, came up with a general structure for the document, and started typing away. I wrote the journal’s first section, “Initial Premise and Motivation,” which is currently comprised of two subsections: “For the Application” and “For this Journal.” I think they are both quite good, and should serve as a great introduction to the journal – let us hope I think the same in a month from now!

I also wrote the section “Lost Entries,” which discusses the work that was done on the project pre-GitHub. After that, I wrote the introduction to the section “Retroactive Entries.” I hope to finish this section tomorrow and capture my thinking from my previous commits. Of course, commits made from this point onward will be captured in the entries in this section here.

On that note, today’s thesis work consisted of a few hours of thinking and writing. The only thing I will commit today is this journal itself, although I am not sure how GitHub handles docx files. My plans as of now are to finish up this entry, give this document a quick proofreading, and then commit this document to the project’s repository. Since all of today’s work took place in the journal itself, this entry is definitely an example of meta-journaling.

*April 6th, 2021*

As one can tell from the difference in entry dates, I certainly did not “finish this section tomorrow” as was planned. This is because shortly after the last entry, my schedule was bombarded with midterms, assignments, and projects, to a magnitude that was somewhat… unexpected. But, it has all been said before; I am here now, so let’s move on, and get down to brass tacks.

At the time of writing this, the project is incomplete. It is in a workable state, but it is definitely not complete. However, it is close – with a little bit more work, the project will be in a state that I consider to be satisfactory. Although, this feeling of closeness may fall under the category of “so close, yet so far.” To quantify exactly what I want to do for the project, a section will be added entitled “Minimal Requirements.” I have discussed what can be accepted as a set of minimal requirements with my thesis director, and have taken some rough notes on the subject. I would like to write this section tonight.

As previously stated, this software development journal was initially made as a way of compensating for the fact that programming, and following good practices while doing so, often results in a small codebase. However, what has not been said as of yet is that, at this point, the focal point of this project has shifted away from the software itself, and towards this journal. The thesis has gone from a software development project, to a “learning about software development” project.   
 What does this shift-in-focus imply? Does it imply that the thesis is a failure, since development of the software did not go as far as planned? Absolutely not. A set of revised minimal requirements were defined for the software. At this time, the software is on track to meet these requirements before the defense. Even then, if by some stroke of bad luck, the thesis was not accepted outright at the time of its defense, there will still be ample time for revisions.

Another question comes to mind: suppose that software development went as planned. How much of a difference would this have made? I must admit that yes, the software would have turned out significantly better than it is now. Looking back at the prospectus summary, the requirements were somewhat unrealistic. Would it be possible for an experienced programmer to create such an application in a year’s time? Definitely. Was it possible for me to create such an application given a full course load, a capstone project, an accelerated graduate program, and additional honors work? It was not.

To summarize: although the thesis will not be up-to-par based on the original standards, it will be complete by a set of more reasonable, redefined standards that have been clearly outlined in a different section. Additionally, the focal point of the thesis has shifted to this software development journal, which was something that was not even defined in the original prospectus. At this time, I am going to break away from this entry, and write the minimal requirements section.

*April 9th, 2021*

Work on the project has been going well as of late. After writing the section on minimal requirements, I took the time to read over the entire document and make revisions. Only a few revisions were made, mainly for the purpose of consistency of tone. Following these revisions, I sent the list of minimal requirements to the thesis director for approval. They were approved, meaning that the software now has a more concrete criteria for completion.

I have an idea for two sections I would like to add to the journal, ideally in this section of journaling. The first is “Java versus Python,” and the second is “Structured versus Unstructured Learning.” The first section will address my complaints about the Java programming language by comparing it with Python. Most of these complaints revolve around how certain programming tasks that are easy in Python are made unnecessarily difficult in Java. The second section will address the difference between structured learning (such as taking a course) versus unstructured learning (such as working on a personal project). It will also address my own personal difficulties working on projects that fall into the second category.