Ranking and Unranking Permutations in Linear Time

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Abstract

A *ranking function* for the permutations on n symbols assigns a unique integer in the range $[0, n!-1]$ to each of the $n!$ permutations. The corresponding *unranking function* is the inverse: given an integer between 0 and $n!-1$, the value of the function is the permutation having this rank. We present simple ranking and unranking algorithms for permutations that can be computed using $O(n)$ arithmetic operations.

Keywords: permutation, ranking, unranking, algorithms for combinatorial problems.

1 Historical Background

A permutation of order n is an arrangement of n symbols. For convenience when applying modular arithmetic, this paper considers permutations of $\{0, 1, 2, ..., n-1\}$. The set of all permutations over $\{0, 1, 2, ..., n-1\}$ is denoted by S_n.

There are many applications that call for an array indexed by the permutations in S_n [2]. One example is the development of programs that search for Hamilton cycles in particular types of Cayley graphs [10, 11]. To do such indexing, what is desired is a bijective *ranking* function r that takes as input a permutation π and produces $r(\pi)$, a number in the range $0, 1, \ldots, n!-1$. The inverse of r is also often useful, and is called the *unranking* function.

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The traditional approach to this problem is to first define an ordering of permutations and then find ranking and unranking functions relative to that ordering. For example, in lexicographic order, the rank of a permutation is simply the number of permutations that precede it in lexicographic order. Naive implementations of ranking and unranking functions for lexicographic order require $O(n^2)$ time [7, 9].

Given a permutation $\pi = \pi_0\pi_1...\pi_{n-1}$, its *inversion vector* $v = v_0v_1...v_{n-1}$, has v_i equal to the number of entries π_j such that $\pi_j > \pi_i$ and $j < i$. Hall (see [12, p. 203]) first observed that the inversion vector uniquely determines a permutation.

More sophisticated algorithms for ranking and unranking permutations in lexicographic order calculate the inversion vector as an intermediate step. The first step in ranking is to determine the inversion vector of a permutation. Unfortunately, naive implementations require $O(n^2)$ time and even the $O(n \log n)$ implementations using modular arithmetic [5, Ex. 6, p. 18] or mergesort [5, Ex. 21, p. 168] are too slow. The last step in unranking is to determine the permutation from its inversion vector. Again, the naive approach takes $O(n^2)$ time. A balanced binary search tree can be used to improve this to $O(n \log n)$. Using the fancy data structure of Dietz [3] the running time can be reduced to $O((n \log n)/(n \log \log n))$, but we know of no implementations of this algorithm. Conversion between the inversion vector and the rank is straightforward and can be done in $O(n)$ arithmetic operations. So the bottleneck is the translation between a permutation and its inversion vector.

The whole problem of ranking permutations in lexicographic order seems inextricably intertwined with the problem of computing the number of inversions in a permutation, and it seems that a major breakthrough will be required to do that computation in linear time, if indeed it it possible at all. Our new algorithm achieves linear time by not insisting that the permutations are lexicographically ordered.

Other ranking algorithms for permutations have been published, for example in the Steinhaus-Johnson-Trotter order, but these offer no running-time advantages over the lexicographic algorithm. See Reingold, Nievergelt, and Deo [9] or Kreher and Stinson [6] for a description of these algorithms.

Our approach to this problem differs from previous approaches in two important aspects. First, instead of selecting an ordering of the permutations and then finding the corresponding ranking and unranking algorithms, the ordering is defined by the unranking algorithm and it is not particularly easy to describe. The second difference is that the unranking algorithm is developed first and then the ranking algorithm is derived from it. Traditionally, ranking algorithms have been developed first, then the unranking algorithms. Furthermore, in all other cases that we know of, the unranking algorithm is more complicated than the ranking algorithm — but that is not the case here!

2 Ranking and Unranking

In this section we present two slightly different approaches for ranking and unranking permutations. The first (*rank1* and *unrank1*) has simpler code. The second approach (*rank2* and *unrank2*) is included as it is easier to understand the ordering of the permutations according to their ranks.

Our inspiration is the standard algorithm [8, 4, 1] for generating a random permutation. The array $\pi[0..n{-}1]$ is initialized to the identity permutation (or some other permutation) and then the following loop is executed:

$$\textbf{for } k := n{-}1, n{-}2, ..., 1, 0 \textbf{ do } \mathit{swap}(\pi[k], \pi[\mathit{rand}(k)]);$$

where the call $\mathit{rand}(k)$ produces a random integer in the range $0..k{-}1$.

This algorithm produces a permutation selected uniformly at random from amongst all permutations in S_n. Let $r_{n-1}, \ldots, r_1, r_0$ be the sequence of random elements produced by the algorithm, where $0 \leq r_i \leq i$. Since there are exactly $n(n{-}1)(n{-}2) \cdots 2 \cdot 1 = n!$ such sequences, each different sequence must produce a different permutation. Thus we should be able to unrank if we can take an integer r in the range $0..n!{-}1$ and turn it into a unique sequence of values $r_{n-1}, \ldots, r_1, r_0$, where $0 \leq r_i \leq i$. The details are given below.

To unrank a permutation we first initialize π to be the identity permutation: $\pi[i] := i$ for $i = 0, 1, ..., n{-}1$.

```
procedure unrank1 ( n, r, π )
    if n > 0 then
        swap(π[n−1], π[ r mod n ]);
        unrank1( n−1, ⌊r/n⌋, π );
    fi;
end {of unrank1};
```

It should be fairly obvious why this function works. We can use the argument alluded to above or argue directly as follows. We need only show that every permutation in S_n is a possible outcome for some $r \in \{0, 1, \ldots, n!{-}1\}$. Clearly, every possible value of $\pi[0..n{-}1]$ can appear in position $n{-}1$ after the interchange. After $\pi[n{-}1]$ is set it is never again modified. Further,

$$\{\lfloor r/n \rfloor : r \in \{0, 1, \ldots, n!{-}1\}\} = \{0, 1, \ldots, (n{-}1)! - 1\},$$

so, inductively, we may assume that every possible permutation of $\pi[0..n{-}2]$ can occur.

0: 1 2 3 0	6: 3 0 1 2	12: 2 1 3 0	18: 0 3 1 2
1: 3 2 0 1	7: 2 0 1 3	13: 2 3 0 1	19: 0 2 1 3
2: 1 3 0 2	8: 1 3 2 0	14: 3 1 0 2	20: 3 1 2 0
3: 1 2 0 3	9: 3 0 2 1	15: 2 1 0 3	21: 0 3 2 1
4: 2 3 1 0	10: 1 0 3 2	16: 3 2 1 0	22: 0 1 3 2
5: 2 0 3 1	11: 1 0 2 3	17: 0 2 3 1	23: 0 1 2 3

Figure 1: Ranks of permutations for *rank1*, $n = 4$

To rank, first compute π^{-1}. This can be done in $O(n)$ operations by iterating $\pi^{-1}[\pi[i]] := i$ for $i = 0, 1, ..., n{-}1$. In the algorithm below, both π and π^{-1} are modified.

function rank1 (n, π, π^{-1}) : integer;
  if $n = 1$ **then** RETURN(0) **fi**;
  $s := \pi[n{-}1]$;
  $swap(\pi[n{-}1], \pi[\pi^{-1}[n{-}1]])$;
  $swap(\pi^{-1}[s], \pi^{-1}[n{-}1])$;
  RETURN($s + n\cdot$ rank1($n{-}1$, π, π^{-1}));
end {of rank1};

These algorithms obviously use $O(n)$ operations. The corresponding ranks for the permutations for n=4 are as illustrated in Figure 1.

An alternative formulation makes it easier to describe the order in which the permutations are ranked. Consider instead the following ranking and unranking algorithms.

Before calling *unrank2*, initialize π to be the identity permutation; $\pi[i] := i$ for $i = 0, 1, ..., n{-}1$.

procedure unrank2 (n, r, π)
  if $n > 0$ **then**
    $s := \lfloor r/(n{-}1)! \rfloor$;
    $swap(\pi[n{-}1], \pi[\,s\,])$;
    unrank2($n{-}1$, $r - s \cdot (n{-}1)!$, π);
  fi;
end {of unrank2};

Compute π^{-1} before calling rank2.

0: 1 2 3 0	6: 3 2 0 1	12: 1 3 0 2	18: 1 2 0 3
1: 2 1 3 0	7: 2 3 0 1	13: 3 1 0 2	19: 2 1 0 3
2: 2 3 1 0	8: 2 0 3 1	14: 3 0 1 2	20: 2 0 1 3
3: 3 2 1 0	9: 0 2 3 1	15: 0 3 1 2	21: 0 2 1 3
4: 1 3 2 0	10: 3 0 2 1	16: 1 0 3 2	22: 1 0 2 3
5: 3 1 2 0	11: 0 3 2 1	17: 0 1 3 2	23: 0 1 2 3

Figure 2: Ranks of permutations for *rank2*, $n = 4$

function rank2 (n, π, π^{-1}) : integer;
  if $n = 1$ **then** RETURN(0) **fi**;
  $s := \pi[n{-}1]$;
  $swap(\ \pi[n{-}1],\ \pi[\pi^{-1}[n{-}1]])$;
  $swap(\pi^{-1}[s],\ \pi^{-1}[n{-}1])$;
  RETURN($s \cdot (n{-}1)! +$ rank2($n{-}1$, π, π^{-1}));
end {of rank2};

The order of generation for n=4 is given in Figure 2. The ordering is such that the permutations ending in 0 appear first followed by those ending in 1, then 2, then 3. If you look at the second to last digit of the permutations which end with the symbol i, these are in order except for the fact that i was swapped with $n{-}1$ and hence the ordering is $0, 1, ..., i{-}1, n{-}1, i + 1, ..., n{-}2$. In general, if you consider position i for all the permutations that have the same symbols in positions $i + 1..n{-}1$, the symbols are ordered but the ordering depends on the swaps that have occurred so far.

3 Possible Extensions

If the algorithm for generating random permutations is terminated at the k-th step then positions $n{-}k..n{-}1$ hold a random k-permutation of $0, 1, ..., n{-}1$. Hence, our ranking and ranking algorithms are easily modified to do k-permutations of an n-set.

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