

History and Programming

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Abstract

Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it. Because programmers usually think they deal with cutting edge technology, they tend to forget the age and genealogy of the ideas they are working with. A demonstration of the history of the some crucial ideas of the programming craft would avoid the repetition of error and allow better ideas to take hold.

keywords: Programming, History, Learning

1 Introduction

Almost every school that tries to form professionals(?) begins with an overview of the history of the field. That is doubly true (?) in art schools, because one is expected to learn to develop his own style by studying the style of others. Programming, which is usually seen as an art discipline as much as an engineering one, does not maintain that tradition. That leads to a lack of vision an historical perspective of the discipline methods, points of views and techniques.

A professional without an historical perspective could be compared to a navigator without a compass. The navigator can move, but hardly advance towards a goal if not by accident.

2 Ideas

Here I will approach three of the main ideas that integrated to form the modern personal computer environment: Graphical user interface, constructionism, and collaborative systems.

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This division will at times seem artificial, not only because they influenced each other, but because there is great overlapping of techniques and philosophy between them. On the other hand this structure does capture important distinctions and points of view that are valuable to understand the whole story.

2.1 GUI

The development of all graphic environments can be traced directly to Ivan Sutherland's sketchpad. Its ideas *still influence how every computer user thinks about computing*. Sutherland [2003]

It did that by introducing graphic metaphors and devices, such as the light-pen, the rubber band graphic manipulation, icons and a great deal of the things most people take as “natural” when manipulating modern GUI. Sutherland [2003]

But the major influence for programming paradigms was because its object oriented features, which along with Simula ¹ had a major impact in the inspiration and development of Smalltalk:

What Simula was allocating were structures very much like the instances of Sketchpad. There were descriptions that acted like masters and they could create instances, each of which was an independent entity. What Sketchpad called masters and instances, Simula called activities and processes. ...

This was the big hit, and I've not been the same since. Kay [1993]

References

- Alan C. Kay. The early history of Smalltalk. *SIGPLAN Not.*, 28(3):69–95, March 1993. ISSN 0362-1340. doi: 10.1145/155360.155364. URL <http://dx.doi.org/10.1145/155360.155364>.
- Ivan Edward Sutherland. Sketchpad: A man-machine graphical communication system. 2003. URL <http://www.cl.cam.ac.uk/TechReports/UCAM-CL-TR-574.pdf>.

¹Both share a common ancestor in the work of Douglas T. Ross Sutherland [2003]