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C Programming Language - A High-level Approach to a Low-level Solution

by Mary Hobson
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 Technology Schools Columnist

"Real programmers write in C" was a popular bumper sticker in the 1970s, and it is true that C programming language is a language that is best used by experienced programmers. But what is C programming language, and why is it only for "real programmers?"

Before C Programming

Computer programming has advanced a long way in the fifty years that computing has existed in the commercial world. In the early days all programming happened at machine level, which was where you had to manipulate all data at a physical level.

There was, in the 1950s, virtually no language that was easily translatable from one machine to another.

Soon enough, though, people started developing shortcuts, library subroutines, and macros that allowed frequently used operations to be automatically called and executed. These developments became the basis of higher level languages, many of which started to look a little more like human languages.

The problem was - and to some extent, still is - the higher the level of computing language, the more baggage it carries with it and the slower and less efficient it becomes.

If you want to develop applications, in which what you do is more important than how you do it, that's OK. But if you want to manipulate systems software, which runs alongside applications programs, efficiency and accuracy is vital. The caveat is: systems software manipulation can be somewhat obscure, thereby taking a long time to learn and use.

Using C Programming Language for Game and Other Programming

C - and its later developments C+ and C++ - is one option to try to make a low-level language easier to learn and document. C programming language was developed in the early 1970s by Ken Thompson and Dennis Richie for use on UNIX operating systems as a standardized systems programming language, portable across a range of hardware and software.

In fact, it is also suitable for use in applications programs, and its low-level qualities make it particularly useful for games applications. C allows game programming to be efficient in the manipulation of graphics and fast in execution, to maintain interoperability. In fact, C game programming is a skill in great demand, partly because students learn C and C++ in their studies and become proficient at an early age.

C is a programming language that maps almost directly onto the hardware, making it fast. It does not have to go through a lot of "translations" in order to be executed, and it also encourages structured programming, making programs easier to understand.

C programming language is also written so that the same program can be used across lots of different machines, using different operating systems as well as different hardware, so once you have written a program in C you can use it on almost any computer you wish.

Be a Real Programmer - Learn C

So if you want to be a real programmer - learn C. You will be able to use it in all kinds of situations, from games programming to writing your own operating system - and you won't ever have to learn two languages.

About the Author

Mary Hobson is a consultant for technology start-ups in Russia. She has also worked as an executive officer in a defense facility and as a university lecturer in computer science and management information. Mary earned her first degree in textile marketing and subsequently studied education and computer science at a Master's degree level.

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