Chapter 20. Less-Numerical Algorithms

20.0 Introduction

You can stop reading now. You are done with *Numerical Recipes*, as such. This final chapter is an idiosyncratic collection of "*less*-numerical recipes" which, for one reason or another, we have decided to include between the covers of an otherwise *more*-numerically oriented book. Authors of computer science texts, we've noticed, like to throw in a token numerical subject (usually quite a dull one — quadrature, for example). We find that we are not free of the reverse tendency.

Our selection of material is not completely arbitrary. One topic, Gray codes, was already used in the construction of quasi-random sequences (§7.7), and here needs only some additional explication. Two other topics, on diagnosing a computer's floating-point parameters, and on arbitrary precision arithmetic, give additional insight into the machinery behind the casual assumption that computers are useful for doing things with numbers (as opposed to bits or characters). The latter of these topics also shows a very different use for Chapter 12's fast Fourier transform.

The three other topics (checksums, Huffman and arithmetic coding) involve different aspects of data coding, compression, and validation. If you handle a large amount of data — numerical data, even — then a passing familiarity with these subjects might at some point come in handy. In §13.6, for example, we already encountered a good use for Huffman coding.

But again, you don't have to read this chapter. (And you should learn about quadrature from Chapters 4 and 16, not from a computer science text!)

20.1 Diagnosing Machine Parameters

A convenient fiction is that a computer's floating-point arithmetic is "accurate enough." If you believe this fiction, then numerical analysis becomes a very clean subject. Roundoff error disappears from view; many finite algorithms become "exact"; only docile truncation error (§1.3) stands between you and a perfect calculation. Sounds rather naive, doesn't it?

Yes, it is naive. Notwithstanding, it is a fiction necessarily adopted throughout most of this book. To do a good job of answering the question of how roundoff error

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