

CS 425 / ECE 428

Distributed Systems

Fall 2025

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Lecture 1: Welcome, and Introduction

Aug 26, 2025

Web: courses.engr.illinois.edu/cs425/

Course Staff

- Instructors:
 - (*Indy Gupta*): 3112 Siebel Center
 - (*Aishwarya Ganesan*): 3120 Siebel Center
 - (*Ram Kesavan*): New faculty, previously worked at Google
 - Office Hours Every Tue and Thu right after class until 4 pm – see website
- TAs: (see course website for office hours)
 - *Chirag Shetty (Lead TA)*
 - *TAs for On-campus Students: Kartik Ramesh, Madhav Jivrajani, Hanbo Guo, Gabriella Xue, Nishant Sheikh*
 - *Lilia Tang (lead TA for MCS Coursera, and Deputy Lead TA)*
 - *TAs for MCS Online Students: Tianchen Wang, Talha Waheed, Ashish Kashinath*
 - *All students (oncampus or MCS Coursera) can access all above TAs*

What This Course is About

- Sports
- Movies
- Travel to Outer Space
- Interviews
- Company Acquisitions
- (Not Kidding)

What This Course is Really About

- Distributed Systems
- How to Design Algorithms for them
- How to Design The Systems
- How they work in real life
- How to build real distributed systems

Many Students are Intimidated by Computer Science...

- ... It's a good sign that you will do well!
- (Ice skating story: Narration)
- Moral: One must *unlearn first*, before learning.

Our Main Goal Today

To Define the Term Distributed System

Can you name some examples of Operating Systems?

Can you name some examples of Operating Systems?

...

Linux Windows Unix FreeBSD macOS OSX

2K Aegis Scout Hydra Mach SPIN

OS/2 Express Flux Hope Spring

AntaresOS EOS LOS SQOS LittleOS TINOS

PalmOS WinCE TinyOS iOS

...

What is an Operating System?

What is an Operating System?

- User interface to hardware (device driver)
- Provides abstractions (processes, file system)
- Resource manager (scheduler)
- Means of communication (networking)
- ...

FOLDOC definition

(FOLDOC = Free On-Line Dictionary of Computing)

Operating System - The low-level software which handles the interface to peripheral hardware, schedules tasks, allocates storage, and presents a default interface to the user when no application program is running.

Can you name some examples of Distributed Systems?

Can you name some examples of Distributed Systems?

- Client-Server (NFS)
- The Web
- The internet
- A wireless network
- DNS
- Gnutella or BitTorrent (peer to peer overlays)
- A “cloud”, e.g., Amazon EC2/S3, Microsoft Azure
- A datacenter, e.g., NCSA, a Google datacenter, AWS

What is a Distributed System?

I asked Alexa...

- “What is a Distributed System?”
- And Alexa said...
- *“I don’t know what a stupid system is.”*

How does Leslie Lamport define Distributed System?

- *(Leslie Lamport is considered by many to be the most prominent Distributed System Researcher)*
- *“A distributed system is one in which the failure of a computer you didn't even know existed can render your own computer unusable.”*

FOLDOC definition

A collection of (probably heterogeneous) automata whose distribution is transparent to the user so that the system appears as one local machine. This is in contrast to a network, where the user is aware that there are several machines, and their location, storage replication, load balancing and functionality is not transparent. Distributed systems usually use some kind of client-server organization.

Textbook definitions

- A distributed system is a collection of independent computers that appear to the users of the system as a single computer.
[Andrew Tanenbaum]
- A distributed system is several computers doing something together. Thus, a distributed system has three primary characteristics: multiple computers, interconnections, and shared state.
[Michael Schroeder]

Unsatisfactory

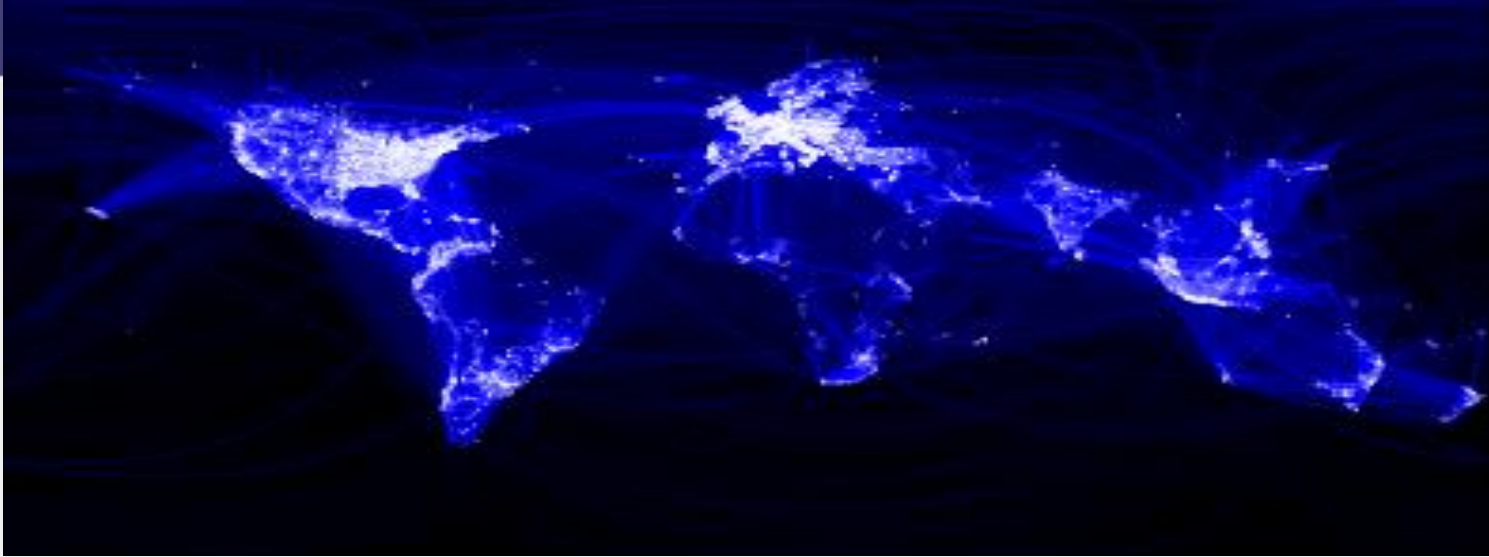
- Why are these definitions short?
- Why do these definitions look inadequate to us?
- Because we are interested in the insides of a distributed system
 - design and implementation
 - Maintenance
 - Algorithmics (“protocols” or “distributed algorithms”)

“I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced within that shorthand description; and perhaps I could never succeed in intelligibly doing so. But I know it when I see it, and the motion picture involved in this case is not that.”

[Potter Stewart, Associate Justice, US Supreme Court (talking about his interpretation of a technical term laid down in the law, case Jacobellis versus Ohio 1964)]

Which is a Distributed System – (A) or (B)?

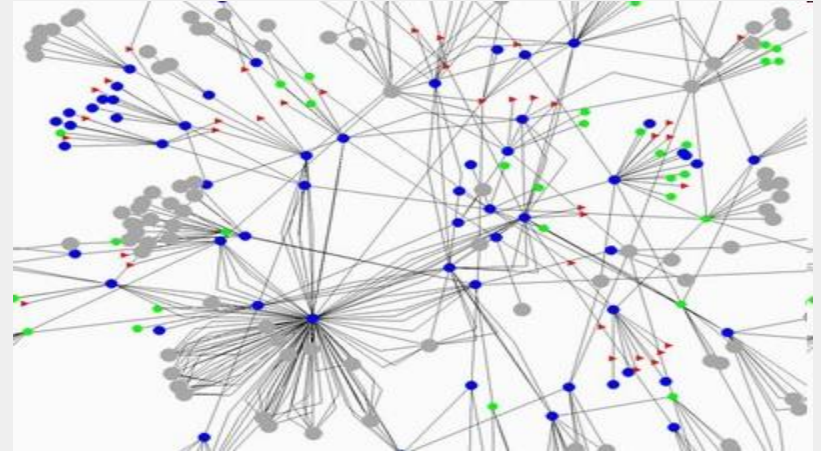
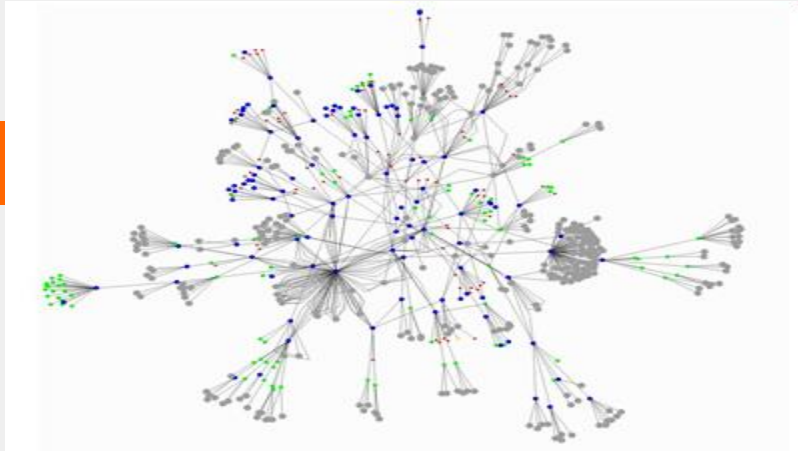
(A)



(A) Facebook Social Network Graph among humans

Source: https://www.facebook.com/note.php?note_id=469716398919

(B)



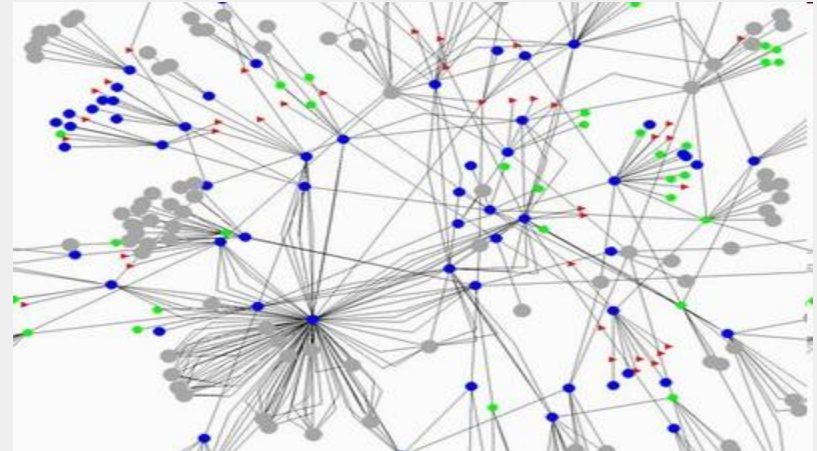
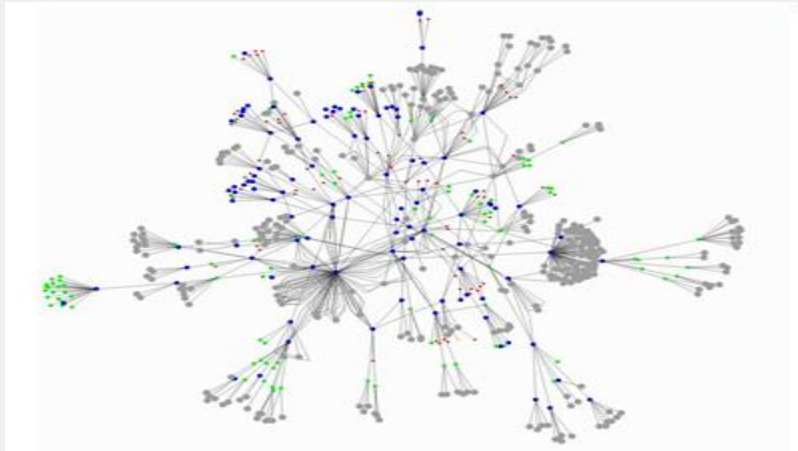
(B) Peer to peer file-sharing system (Gnutella)

A working definition for us

*A distributed system is a collection of entities, each of which is **autonomous**, **programmable**, **asynchronous** and **failure-prone**, and which communicate through an **unreliable** communication medium.*

- Entity=a process on a device (PC, PDA/mobile device)
- Communication Medium=Wired or wireless network
- Our interest in distributed systems involves
 - design and implementation, maintenance, algorithmics

Gnutella Peer to Peer System



**What are the “entities”
(nodes)?**

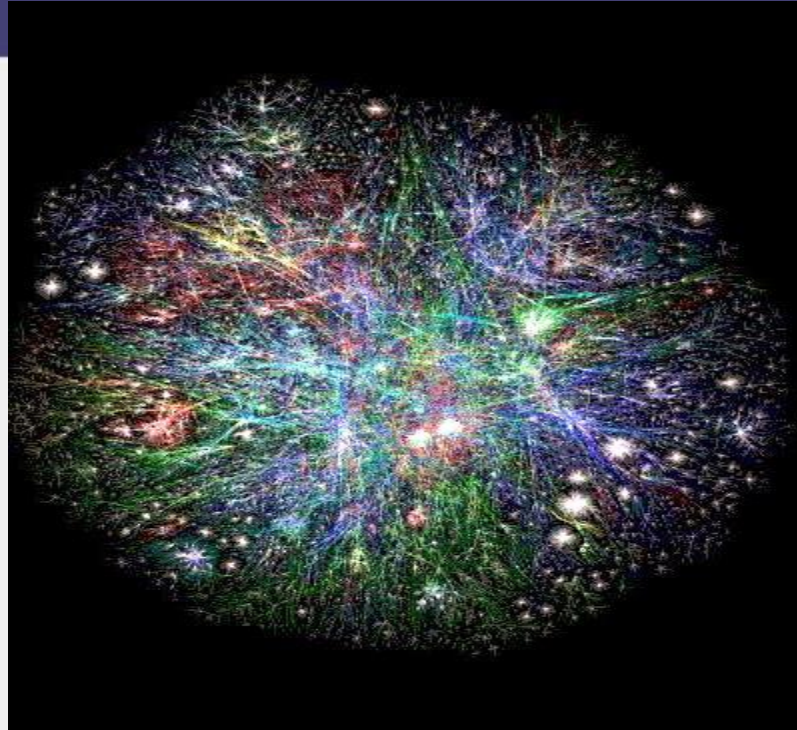
Source: GnuMap Project

**What is the
communication medium
(links)?**

Web Domains

What are the “entities”
(nodes)?

What is the
communication medium
(links)?



Source: <http://www.vlib.us/web/worldwideweb3d.html>

Datacenter



What are the “entities”
(nodes)?

What is the
communication medium
(links)?

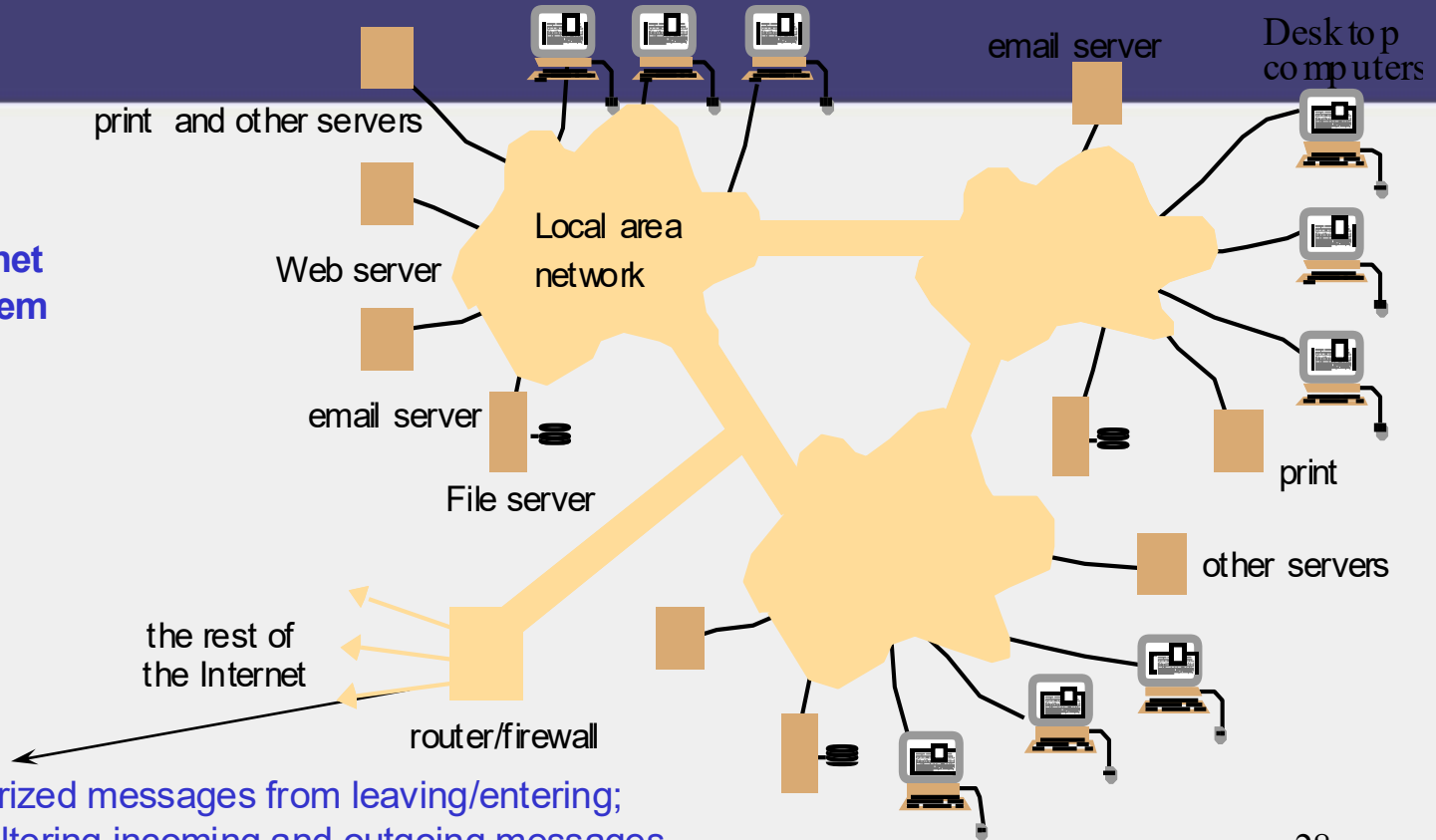


The internet – Quick Refresher

- Underlies many distributed systems.
- A vast interconnected collection of computer networks of many types.
- Intranets – subnetworks operated by companies and organizations.
- Intranets contain LANs (local area networks).
- WAN – wide area networks, consists of subnets (intranets, LANs, etc.)
- ISPs – Internet Service Providers. Companies that provide modem links and other types of connections to users.
- Intranets (actually the ISPs' core routers) are linked by backbones – network links of large bandwidth, such as satellite connections, fiber optic cables, and other high-bandwidth circuits.
- UC2B? Google Fiber? (MAN = Metropolitan Area Networks)

An Intranet & a distributed system

Running over this Intranet
is a distributed file system



prevents unauthorized messages from leaving/entering;
implemented by filtering incoming and outgoing messages
via firewall "rules" (configurable)

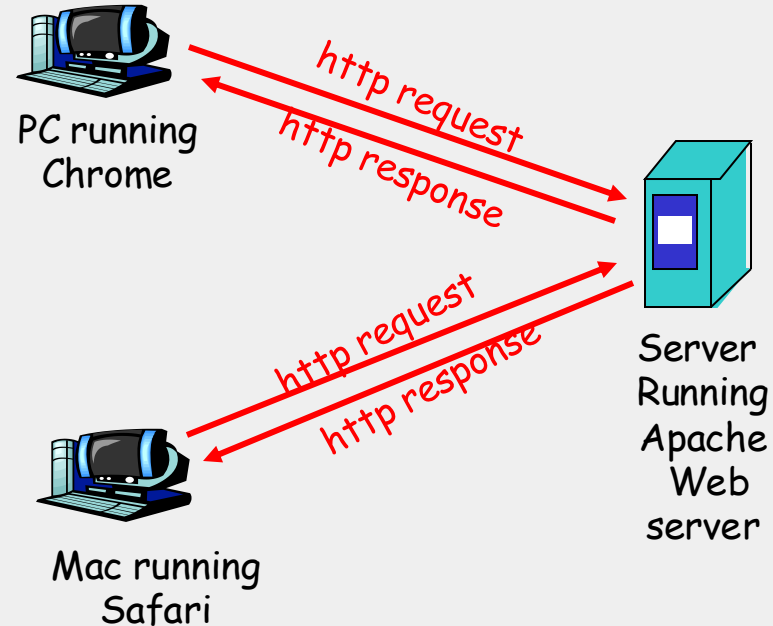
Networking Stacks

Application	Application layer protocol	Underlying transport protocol
Distributed System Protocols!		Networking Protocols
e-mail	smtp [RFC 821]	TCP
remote terminal access	telnet [RFC 854]	TCP
Web	http [RFC 2068]	TCP=Transmission Control Protocol UDP=User Datagram Protocol (Implemented via sockets)
file transfer	ftp [RFC 959]	
streaming multimedia	proprietary (e.g. RealNetworks)	TCP or UDP
remote file server	NFS	TCP or UDP
internet telephony	proprietary (e.g., Skype)	typically UDP

The Heart of the World Wide Web: the HTTP Standard

HTTP: hypertext transfer protocol

- WWW's application layer protocol
- client/server model
 - *client*: browser that requests, receives, and “displays” WWW objects
 - *server*: WWW server, which is storing the website, sends objects in response to requests
- http1.0: RFC 1945
- http1.1: RFC 2068
 - Leverages same connection to download images, scripts, etc.



The HTTP Protocol: More

http: TCP transport service:

- client initiates a TCP connection (creates socket) to server, port 80
- server accepts the TCP connection from client
- http messages (application-layer protocol messages) exchanged between browser (http client) and WWW server (http server)
- TCP connection closed

http is “stateless”

- server maintains no information about past client requests

Why?

Protocols that maintain session “state” are complex!

- past history (state) must be maintained and updated.
- if server/client crashes, their views of “state” may be inconsistent, and hence must be reconciled.
- RESTful protocols are stateless.

HTTP Example

Suppose user enters URL `www.cs.illinois.edu/`

(contains text,
references to 10
jpeg images)

1a. http client initiates a TCP connection to
http server (process) at
`www.cs.uiuc.edu`. Port 80 is default for
http server.

1b. http server at host
`www.cs.illinois.edu` waiting for a TCP
connection at port 80. “accepts”
connection, notifying client

2. http client sends a http *request message*
(containing URL) into TCP
connection socket

3. http server receives request messages,
forms a *response message* containing
requested object (`index.html`), sends
message into socket

time
↓

HTTP Example (cont.)

- 
5. http client receives a response message containing html file, displays html, Parses html file, finds 10 referenced jpeg objects
 6. *Steps 1-5 are then repeated for each of 10 jpeg objects*
 4. http server closes the TCP connection (if necessary).

time For fetching referenced objects, have 2 options:

- **non-persistent connection:** only one object fetched per TCP connection
 - some browsers create multiple TCP connections *simultaneously* - one per object
- **persistent connection:** multiple objects transferred within one TCP connection

Your Shell as a Web browser

1. Telnet to your favorite WWW server:

```
telnet www.google.com 80
```

Opens TCP connection to port 80
(default http server port) at www.google.com
Anything typed in sent
to port 80 at www.google.com

2. Type in a GET http request:

```
GET /index.html
```

Or

```
GET /index.html HTTP/1.0
```

By typing this in (may need to hit
return twice), you send
this minimal (but complete)
GET request to http server

3. Look at response message sent by http server!

What do you think the response is?

Does our Working Definition work for the http Web?

*A distributed system is a collection of entities, each of which is **autonomous**, **programmable**, **asynchronous** and **failure-prone**, and that communicate through an **unreliable** communication medium.*

- Entity=a process on a device (PC, PDA)
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“Important” Distributed Systems Issues

- No global clock; no single global notion of the correct time (asynchrony)
- Unpredictable failures of components: lack of response may be due to either failure of a network component, network path being down, or a computer crash (failure-prone, unreliable)
- Highly variable bandwidth: from 16Kbps (slow modems or Google Balloon) to Gbps (Internet2) to Tbps (in between DCs of same big company)
- Possibly large and variable latency: few ms to several seconds
- Large numbers of hosts: 2 to several million

Many Interesting Design Problems

-
-
- Real distributed systems
 - Cloud Computing, Peer to peer systems, Hadoop, key-value stores/NoSQL, distributed file systems, sensor networks, measurements, graph processing, stream processing, ...
- Classical Problems
 - Failure detection, Asynchrony, Snapshots, Multicast, Consensus, Mutual Exclusion, Election, ...
- Concurrency
 - RPCs, Concurrency Control, Replication Control, Paxos, ...
- Security
 - ACLs, Capabilities, ...
- Others...
-

Typical Distributed Systems Design Goals

- Common Goals:
 - **Heterogeneity** – can the system handle a large variety of types of machines and devices?
 - **Robustness** – is the system resilient to host crashes and failures, and to the network dropping messages?
 - **Availability** – are data+services always there for clients?
 - **Transparency** – can the system hide its internal workings from the users? (warning: term means the opposite of what the name implies!)
 - **Concurrency** – can the server handle multiple clients simultaneously?
 - **Efficiency** – is the service fast enough? Does it utilize 100% of all resources?
 - **Scalability** – can it handle 100 million **nodes** without degrading service? (nodes=clients and/or servers) How about 6 B? More?
 - Security – can the system withstand hacker attacks?
 - **Openness** – is the system extensible?

“Important” Issues

- If you’re already complaining that the list of topics we’ve discussed so far has been perplexing...
 - You’re right!
 - It was meant to be (perplexing)
- The Goal for the Rest of the Course: see enough **examples** and learn enough **concepts** so these topics and issues will make sense
 - We will revisit many of these slides in the very last lecture of the course!

“Concepts”?

- Which of the following inventions do you think is the most important?
 1. Car
 2. Wheel
 3. Bicycle

“What lies beneath?” Concepts!

How will We Learn?

All this information is contained in handout on course website: “Course Information and Schedule”

- **Web: courses.engr.illinois.edu/cs425/**
- Textbook, **Recommended but not Required**
 - Colouris, Dollimore, Kindberg and Blair (5th edition)
 - CDK Textbook
 - If you use a different or older version, be sure to check problem numbers, etc.
 - Textbook is a great source of practice problems for the exams (midterm and final)
- Lectures

How will We Learn? (2)

This information is in “Syllabus” handout on course website (read carefully!)

- **Web: courses.engr.illinois.edu/cs425/**
- Homeworks (HWs)
 - Four in total, two before midterm (early-Oct) and two after
 - About 2-3 weeks per homework
 - Solutions need to be typed, figures can be hand-drawn
- Programming assignments (MPs, i.e., Machine Programming Assignments)
 - **Only for 4 credit on-campus students** (3 credit students welcome to do it, but we won't be able to give you VMs or grade it or use it as extra credit)
 - You will be building a distributed (surprise!) processing system in stages
 - Four in total, two before midterm and two after
 - Demo dates set on website: please be in town on those days (no excuses for interviews, travel..)
- Exams/quizzes
 - Midterm in class (**Oct 9th**) + Final in person (date decided by campus)

What assistance is available to you?

- Lectures
 - Lecture slides will be placed online at course website
 - “Tentative” version before lecture
 - “Final” version after lecture
- Asking Questions (most preferable first)
 1. **Piazza**: Your first stop for all questions (see if your question has already been asked)
 - We will try to ensure that every question is answered within 24 hours of posting (during weekdays).
 - Do not post solutions or code on Piazza – that’ll immediately earn you a zero on the HW/MP.
 2. **Office Hours** (posted on course website): Every weekday has multiple office hours scheduled, including evenings.
 3. **Email staff** mailing list (don’t email individual instructor/TA except for private issues)
- Course Prerequisite: Credit or concurrent enrollment in one of CS 240/241/340/341, or ECE 391, or equivalent OS/networking course (latter need instructor permission)

Course Staff

- Instructors:
 - (*Indy Gupta*): 3112 Siebel Center
 - (*Aishwarya Ganesan*): 3120 Siebel Center
 - (*Ram Kesavan*): New faculty, previously worked at Google
 - Office Hours Every Tue and Thu right after class until 4 pm – see website
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 - *Chirag Shetty (Lead TA)*
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 - *Lilia Tang (lead TA for MCS Coursera, and Deputy Lead TA)*
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 - *All students (oncampus or MCS Coursera) can access all above TAs*

Individual vs. Group Work

- Homeworks
 - **Individual work only.** All work must be your own.
- MPs
 - In groups of 2
 - Within group: Can discuss everything.
 - Outside group (e.g., on Piazza): can only discuss concepts and question (but not solution)
- For both HWs and MPs
 - You can discuss with others (and course staff) lecture concepts and the HW/MP question/spec itself, but **you cannot discuss solutions or even ideas.**
 - You cannot copy solutions/code or look at someone else's solutions: we check with Moss, etc.
 - No use of AI permitted (you will get wrong solutions, and you won't know it)
- First violation: zero on HW/MP. Second violation: F in course. (Both have happened in the past!)

Speaking of HWs and MPs

- All MP demos are in-person (not online!), and the demo dates are posted to website. So please make sure you plan ahead!
- HW1 and MP1 have both been released!
- Don't worry – you have time
- But start early! Start now.
- (4 cr only) You must let us know the composition of your group for MP by Monday 9/1 @ 5 pm.
 - If you don't meet this deadline you won't get VMs to do your MP!
 - Instructions on how to inform us are on the course website
- You can start on MP right away (don't need lectures for it)
- Due in about 2 weeks
 - MP1 due 9/14 (demos on 9/15)
 - HW1 due 9/18 (Please read submission instructions carefully)

3 cr vs 4 cr vs MCS Coursera

	3 cr (On-campus & MCS-Chicago)	4 cr (On-campus & MCS-Chicago)	MCS Online DS3/DS4 (Coursera only)
HWs 1-4 On-campus	Yes	Yes	Yes (On Gradescope)
MP On-campus	No	Yes	No
Coursera Quizzes 5 + 5=10 Coursera Finals: Part 1 + Part 2	No	No	Yes (On Coursera)
Coursera Programming Projects Part 1 + Part 2	No	No	Yes for DS4, No for DS3
On-campus Midterm Exam + On-campus Final Exam	Yes	Yes	Yes (On Gradescope)

Wrap-Up

- (Reading for today's lecture: Relevant parts of Chapter 1)
- All students:
 - Go to course website <https://courses.engr.illinois.edu/cs425/>
 - Todos:
 - (All) Sign up for Piazza by today
 - (4 cr) Form MP group by this week and respond to MP group survey. You can use Piazza “Search for Teammates”, or just hang around after class today.
 - (All) Fill out Student Survey sheet by today (latest by this week Friday)
 - Not yet registered?
 - We cannot allow “double booking” with CS425 and another class at same time
 - No waitlist this year ☹
 - Continue to do all the HWs, (MPs if 4 cr). Usually we get everyone in by end of September (no guarantees though!).