CONFERENCE SPOTLIGHT: ITCS AND SODA

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The 16th Annual Innovations in Theoretical Computer Science (ITCS) and the 36th ACM-SIAM Symposium on Discrete Algorithms (SODA) took place in January in New York City and New Orleans, respectively. I attended both and will share my experience here, highlighting some of the similarities and differences between them. I am a postdoc working on parameterized algorithms, but this spotlight is written with a broad TCS audience in mind.

ITCS (January 7-10). The 16th Annual Innovations in Theoretical Computer Science (ITCS) was held at Columbia University in New York City. This conference was much smaller, with only a single track of talks. The room where the sessions took place was quite unique, shaped like a quarter of a circle with beamers projecting onto two walls at a 90-degree angle. Figure 1 gives an illustration. A noteworthy tradition at ITCS are the *session chair rants*. These 10-minute summaries were delivered by the session chairs at the start of each session and provided an overview of all papers in the session. All session chairs did a great job, but Tal Malkin stood out with an impersonation of Ryan Williams. The talks at ITCS were quite short—only 7 minutes each—but each participant also had to record a longer video talk. These videos are publicly available and linked on the conference website.

I want to highlight a few speakers whose 7-minute talks were both educational and entertaining:

- Josh Alman: Sparsity Lower Bounds for Probabilistic Polynomials
- Georgi Li: Concentration of Submodular Functions under Negative Dependence
- Thorsten Götte: Distributed and Parallel Low-Diameter Decompositions for Arbitrary and Restricted Graphs

On a side note, New York was freezing cold at the time. I nevertheless took advantage of my trip to catch a performance of *Wicked* on Broadway. While not cheap, it was absolutely worth the price, and I highly recommend it to anyone visiting New York.

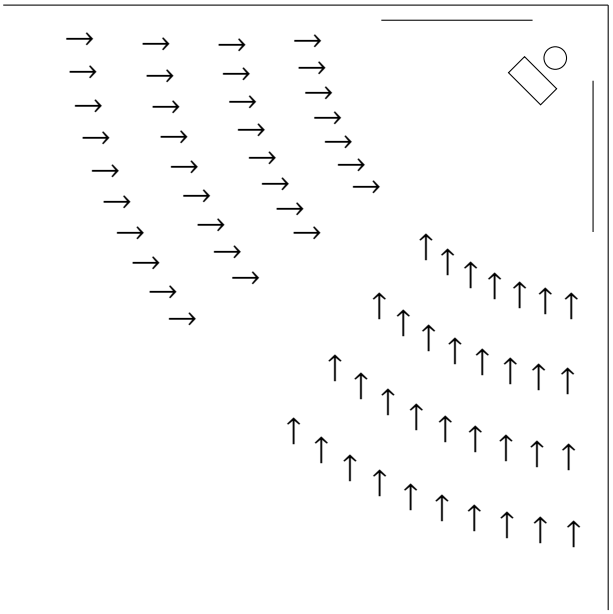

Figure 1: An illustration of the room layout at Columbia University.

SODA (January 12-14). The 36th ACM-SIAM Symposium on Discrete Algorithms (SODA) was held at the Astor Crowne Plaza at French Quarter in New Orleans. It was significantly larger than ITCS, with three parallel sessions and additional tracks for the co-located conferences ALENEX and SOSA. Given the size of the conference, I could only attend a fraction of the talks, but I still want to highlight a few that stood out to me as particularly well presented:

- Florent Becker: Strict Self-Assembly of Discrete Self-Similar Fractals in the Abstract Tile Assembly Model
- Michał Włodarczyk: Losing Treewidth In The Presence Of Weights
- Hantao Yu: Improving the Leading Constant of Matrix Multiplication

There was a joint lunch on Monday, but the event was unfortunately underwhelming and left many participants disappointed. Another curiosity was the conference's online program, which was not particularly user-friendly as it was tedious to compare talks in parallel sessions. A few participants took matters into their own hands, crawling the data from the webpage and reorganizing it. These efforts were quickly shared and greatly appreciated by the community. Another unique aspect of SODA was the business meeting, which was unlike any I had attended before. Instead of a bidding process to find a place to host the upcoming iterations of SODA, participants were asked to suggest and vote on potential places

and SIAM will try to find a suitable venue in one of the chosen cities. The result? Puerto Rico emerged as the top choice for 2027, followed by Boston and Philadelphia. It was also revealed that SODA 2026 will be held in Vancouver and this year's acceptance rate was 29%, with 192 out of 655 papers being accepted.

So far, I have mostly focused on the differences between the two conferences. To conclude, I want to highlight one similarity: both conferences celebrated gamification. At ITCS, there was a board game night where attendees played various games. I joined a few rounds of *Avion*, a social deduction game similar to Mafia or Among Us, but I also saw various other types of games being played at other tables. At SODA, Jane Street organized an *Estimathon*, where participants were tasked with estimating numbers they had no business knowing. The most memorable question for me? Estimating the smallest common multiple of three random numbers between 1 and 99 picked by the host the day prior. Both events were a fun way to unwind and connect with fellow researchers outside the formal sessions. They added a fun and engaging twist, making for an enjoyable experience beyond the academic discussions.