CSE 341: Programming Languages

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Lecture 23— Multiple Inheritance, Interfaces, Mixins

Today

Have seen OO's essence: inheritance, overriding, dynamic-dispatch.

What if we want these things from more than "exactly 1 superclass"?

- *Multiple inheritance*: allow > 1 superclasses
  - Useful but has some problems (see C++)
- Java-style *interfaces*: allow > 1 *types*
  - "Irrelevant" in a dynamically typed language, but fewer problems
- *Mixins*: allow > 1 "sources of methods"
  - Close to multiple inheritance; almost as useful with fewer (?) problems
  - In Ruby

Multiple Inheritance

If code reuse via inheritance is so useful, why not allow multiple superclasses?

- Because it causes some semantic awkwardness and implementation awkwardness (we'll discuss only the former)
- (With static typing, there are some more issues)

Is it useful? Sure: A simple example is "3DColorPoint" assuming we already have "3DPoint" and "ColorPoint".

Naive view: Subclass has all fields and methods of all superclasses

Trees, dags, and diamonds

The "class hierarchy" is a (conceptual) graph with edges from subclasses to superclasses.

Ambiguous phrase: *subclass*, let's use *immediate-subclass* or *transitive-subclass* when we need to be clear.

- With single inheritance, the class hierarchy is a tree.
- With multiple inheritance, the class hierarchy is a dag.
  - Semantic problems arise from *diamonds*: Multiple ways to show that class `A` is a transitive-subclass of some class `B`.
  - If all classes are transitive-subclasses of something like `Object`, then multiple inheritance always leads to diamonds.

Multiple Inheritance Semantic Problems

What if multiple superclasses define the same message m or field f?

- Classic example: Artists, Cowboys, and ArtistCowboys

Options for m:

- Reject subclass—too restrictive (especially due to diamonds)
- "Left-most superclass wins" (leads to silent weirdness and really want per-method flexiblity)
- Require subclass to override m (can use *directed resends*)

Options for f: one copy or two copies?

C++ provides two forms of inheritance:

- One always makes two copies
- One makes one copy *if* fields were declared by same class
  - Would not work well in Ruby?

Java-style interfaces

(Recall?) in Java, we can define *interfaces* and classes can *implement* them.

- Interface describes methods and their types

```
interface Example {
    void m1(int x, int y);
    Foo m2(Example e, String s);
}
```

- `Example` is a type (can be used for a field, method argument, local variable, etc.)
- If class `C` implements interface `I`, then instances of `C` can have type `I` but `C` must define everything in `I` (directly or via inheritance).
- Given an expression of type `I`, it type-checks to send it any message `I` promises.

Interfaces are a typing thing

In Java, you have 1 immediate-superclass and any number of interfaces you implement.

Because interfaces provide no methods or fields (only types of methods), no duplication problems result!

- No problem if `I1` and `I2` both "promise" some method `m` and `C` implements `I1` and `I2`.

But interfaces do not give us the power we want for making colored 3D points or artist-cowboys.

They're *totally irrelevant* in a dynamically typed language like Ruby:

- We are already allowed to send any message to any object
- It is up to us to get it right ("interfaces" more in comments or *reflection*, e.g., the `methods` method of `Object`)

Interfaces vs. Abstract Classes

If you had multiple inheritance, you could replace interfaces with abstract classes containing only abstract methods.

- Called pure virtual methods in C++
- But the whole point is multiple inheritance is more powerful because it doesn't require $n - 1$ superclasses to have only abstract methods.

Mixins

A mixin is a collection of methods

- no fields, constructors, instances, etc.

Languages with mixins (e.g., Ruby) typically allow a class to have 1 superclass but any number of mixins.

Bad news: Less powerful than multiple inheritance; have to decide "upfront" what is a class and what is a mixin.

Good news: Clear semantics on methods/fields and works great for certain idioms.

Ruby mixin basics

A *module*'s instance methods are mixed into a class by *including* the module in the class definition.

Method-lookup rules: First class's methods, then its mixins' methods (later includes shadow), then immediate-superclass, then immediate-superclass's mixins, ...

Field rules: It is all one object.

What mixins are good for

We could make `Color` a mixin and then use it for coloring 2D and 3D points.

- Works fine but often bad style to have mixin methods define fields (could conflict with other fields)

For artist-cowboys, what should the mixin be?

But mixins are extremeley elegant for letting classes "get a bunch of methods while defining only a few".

- All thanks to late-binding!
- Cool examples in Ruby library: `Comparable` and `Enumerable`