



PAUL G. ALLEN SCHOOL  
OF COMPUTER SCIENCE & ENGINEERING

CSE341: Programming Languages

Lecture 23

Multiple Inheritance, Mixins, Interfaces,  
Abstract Methods

Eric Mullen

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# *What next?*

Have used classes for OOP's essence: inheritance, overriding, dynamic dispatch

Now, what if we want to have more than *just 1 superclass*

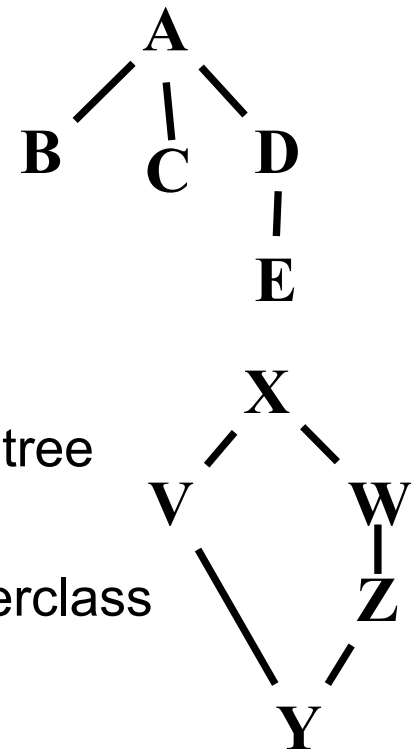
- *Multiple inheritance*: allow  $> 1$  superclasses
  - Useful but has some problems (see C++)
- Ruby-style *mixins*: 1 superclass;  $> 1$  method providers
  - Often a fine substitute for multiple inheritance and has fewer problems (see also Scala *traits*)
- Java/C#-style *interfaces*: allow  $> 1$  types
  - Mostly irrelevant in a dynamically typed language, but fewer problems

# *Multiple Inheritance*

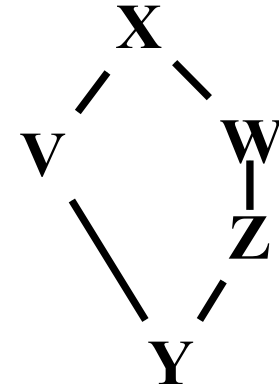
- If inheritance and overriding are so useful, why limit ourselves to one superclass?
  - Because the semantics is often awkward (this topic)
  - Because it makes static type-checking harder (not discussed)
  - Because it makes efficient implementation harder (not discussed)
- Is it useful? Sure!
  - Example: Make a **ColorPt3D** by inheriting from **Pt3D** and **ColorPt** (or maybe just from **Color**)
  - Example: Make a **StudentAthlete** by inheriting from **Student** and **Athlete**
  - With single inheritance, end up copying code or using non-OOP-style helper methods

# Trees, dags, and diamonds

- Note: The phrases *subclass*, *superclass* can be ambiguous
  - There are *immediate* subclasses, superclasses
  - And there are *transitive* subclasses, superclasses
- Single inheritance: the *class hierarchy* is a tree
  - Nodes are classes
  - Parent is immediate superclass
  - Any number of children allowed
- Multiple inheritance: the class hierarchy no longer a tree
  - Cycles still disallowed (a directed-acyclic graph)
  - If multiple paths show that *X* is a (transitive) superclass of *Y*, then we have *diamonds*



# What could go wrong?



- If  $V$  and  $Z$  both define a method  $m$ , what does  $Y$  inherit? What does **super** mean?
  - *Directed resends* useful (e.g., **Z :: super**)
- What if  $X$  defines a method  $m$  that  $Z$  but not  $V$  overrides?
  - Can handle like previous case, but sometimes undesirable (e.g., **ColorPt3D** wants **Pt3D**'s overrides to “win”)
- If  $X$  defines fields, should  $Y$  have one copy of them (**f**) or two (**V :: f** and **Z :: f**)?
  - Turns out each behavior can be desirable (next slides)
  - So C++ has (at least) two forms of inheritance

# 3DColorPoints

If Ruby had multiple inheritance, we would want `ColorPt3D` to inherit methods that share one `@x` and one `@y`

```
class Pt
  attr_accessor :x, :y
  ...
end
class ColorPt < Pt
  attr_accessor :color
  ...
end
class Pt3D < Pt
  attr_accessor :z
  ... # override some methods
end
class ColorPt3D < Pt3D, ColorPt # not Ruby!
end
```

# ArtistCowboys

This code has `Person` define a pocket for subclasses to use, but an `ArtistCowboy` wants *two* pockets, one for each `draw` method

```
class Person
  attr_accessor :pocket
  ...
end
class Artist < Person # pocket for brush objects
  def draw # access pocket
  ...
end
class Cowboy < Person # pocket for gun objects
  def draw # access pocket
  ...
end
class ArtistCowboy < Artist, Cowboy # not Ruby!
end
```

# Mixins

- A *mixin* is (just) a collection of methods
  - Less than a class: no instances of it
- Languages with mixins (e.g., Ruby modules) typically let a class have one superclass but *include* any number of mixins
- Semantics: *Including a mixin makes its methods part of the class*
  - Extending or overriding in the order mixins are included in the class definition
  - More powerful than helper methods because mixin methods can access methods (and instance variables) on `self` not defined in the mixin



# Example

```
module Doubler
  def double
    self + self # assume included in classes w/ +
  end
end
class String
  include Doubler
end
class AnotherPt
  attr_accessor :x, :y
  include Doubler
  def + other
    ans = AnotherPt.new
    ans.x = self.x + other.x
    ans.y = self.y + other.y
    ans
  end
end
```

# Lookup rules

Mixins change our lookup rules slightly:

- When looking for receiver `obj`'s method `m`, look in `obj`'s class, then mixins that class includes (later includes shadow), then `obj`'s superclass, then the superclass' mixins, etc.
- As for instance variables, the mixin methods are included in the same object
  - So usually bad style for mixin methods to use instance variables since a name clash would be like our **CowboyArtist** pocket problem (but sometimes unavoidable?)

# *The two big ones*

The two most popular/useful mixins in Ruby:

- Comparable: Defines `<`, `>`, `==`, `!=`, `>=`, `<=` in terms of `<=>`
- Enumerable: Defines many iterators (e.g., `map`, `find`) in terms of `each`

Great examples of using mixins:

- Classes including them get a bunch of methods for just a little work
  - Classes do not “spend” their “one superclass” for this
  - Do not need the complexity of multiple inheritance
- See the code for some examples

# *Replacement for multiple inheritance?*

- A mixin works pretty well for `ColorPt3D`:
  - Color a reasonable mixin except for using an instance variable

```
module Color
  attr_accessor :color
end
```

- A mixin works awkwardly-at-best for `ArtistCowboy`:
  - Natural for `Artist` and `Cowboy` to be `Person` subclasses
  - Could move methods of one to a mixin, but it is odd style and still does not get you two pockets

```
module ArtistM ...
class Artist < Person
  include ArtistM
class ArtistCowboy < Cowboy
  include ArtistM
```

# *Statically-Typed OOP*

- Now contrast multiple inheritance and mixins with Java/C#-style [interfaces](#)
- Important distinction, but interfaces are about static typing, which Ruby does not have
- So will use Java code after quick introduction to static typing for class-based OOP...
  - Sound typing for OOP prevents “method missing” errors

# Classes as Types

- In Java/C#/etc. each class is also a type
- Methods have types for arguments and result

```
class A {  
    Object m1 (Example e, String s) {...}  
    Integer m2 (A foo, Boolean b, Integer i) {...}  
}
```

- If **C** is a (transitive) subclass of **D**, then **C** is a *subtype* of **D**
  - Type-checking allows subtype anywhere supertype allowed
  - So can pass instance of **C** to a method expecting instance of **D**

# Interfaces are (or were) JustTypes

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

- An interface is not a class; it is [er, used to be] only a type
  - Does not contain method *definitions*, only their *signatures* (types)
    - Unlike mixins
    - (Changed in Java 8, makes them more like mixins!)
  - Cannot use **new** on an interface
    - Like mixins

# Implementing Interfaces

- A class can explicitly implement any number of interfaces
  - For class to type-check, it must implement every method in the interface with the right type
    - More on allowing subtypes later!
  - Multiple interfaces no problem; just implement everything
- If class type-checks, it is a subtype of the interface

```
class A implements Example {
    public void m1(int x, int y) {...}
    public Object m2(Example e, String s) {...}
}
class B implements Example {
    public void m1(int pizza, int beer) {...}
    public Object m2(Example e, String s) {...}
}
```



# *Multiple interfaces*

- Interfaces provide no methods or fields
  - So no questions of method/field duplication when implementing multiple interfaces, unlike multiple inheritance
- What interfaces are for:
  - “Caller can give any instance of any class implementing  $\mathbf{I}$ ”
    - So callee can call methods in  $\mathbf{I}$  regardless of class
  - So much more flexible type system
- Interfaces have little use in a dynamically typed language
  - Dynamic typing *already* much more flexible, with trade-offs we studied

# Connections

Let's now answer these questions:

- What does a statically typed OOP language need to support “required overriding”?
- How is this similar to higher-order functions?
- Why does a language with multiple inheritance (e.g., C++) not need Java/C#-style interfaces?

[Explaining Java's [abstract methods](#) / C++'s [pure virtual methods](#)]

# Required overriding

Often a class expects all subclasses to override some method(s)

- The purpose of the superclass is to abstract common functionality, but some non-common parts have no default

A Ruby approach:

- Do not define must-override methods in superclass
- Subclasses can add it
- Creating instance of superclass can cause method-missing errors

```
# do not use A.new
# all subclasses should define m2
class A
  def m1 v
    ... self.m2 e ...
  end
end
```

# Static typing

- In Java/C#/C++, prior approach fails type-checking
  - No method `m2` defined in superclass
  - One solution: provide error-causing implementation

```
class A
  def m1 v
    ... self.m2 e ...
  end
  def m2 v
    raise "must be overridden"
  end
end
```

- Better: Use static checking to prevent this error...

# Abstract methods

- Java/C#/C++ let superclass give signature (type) of method subclasses should provide
  - Called *abstract methods* or *pure virtual methods*
  - Cannot create instances of classes with such methods
    - Catches error at compile-time
    - Indicates intent to code-reader
    - Does *not* make language more powerful

```
abstract class A {
    T1 m1 (T2 x) { ... m2 (e) ; ... }
    abstract T3 m2 (T4 x) ;
}
class B extends A {
    T3 m2 (T4 x) { ... }
}
```

# Passing code to other code

- Abstract methods and dynamic dispatch: An OOP way to have subclass “pass code” to other code in superclass

```
abstract class A {  
    T1 m1 (T2 x) { ... m2 (e) ; ... }  
    abstract T3 m2 (T4 x) ;  
}  
class B extends A {  
    T3 m2 (T4 x) { ... }  
}
```

- Higher-order functions: An FP way to have caller “pass code” to callee

```
fun f (g, x) = ... g e ...  
fun h x = ... f ((fn y => ...) , ...)
```

# *No interfaces in C++*

- If you have multiple inheritance and abstract methods, you do not also need interfaces
- Replace each interface with a class with all abstract methods
- Replace each “implements interface” with another superclass

So: Expect to see interfaces only in statically typed OOP without multiple inheritance

- Not Ruby
- Not C++