Self

Kathleen Fisher

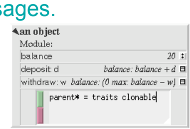
History

- Prototype-based pure object-oriented language.
- Designed by Randall Smith (Xerox PARC) and David Ungar (Stanford University).
  - Successor to Smalltalk-80.
  - "Self: The power of simplicity" appeared at OOPSLA '87.
  - Initial implementation done at Stanford; then project shifted to Sun Microsystems Labs.
  - Vehicle for implementation research.
- Self 4.2 available from Sun web site:

http://research.sun.com/self/

Design Goals

- Occam's Razor: Conceptual economy
  - Everything is an object.
  - Everything done using messages.
  - No classes
  - No variables
- Concreteness
  - Objects should seem "real."
  - GUI to manipulate objects directly



How successful?

- Self is a very well-designed language.
- Few users: not a popular success
  - Not clear why.
- However, many research innovations
  - Very simple computational model.
  - Enormous advances in compilation techniques.
  - Influenced the design of Java compilers.

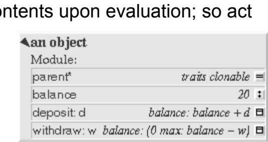
Language Overview

- Dynamically typed.
- Everything is an object.
- All computation via message passing.
- Creation and initialization done by copying example object.
- Operations on objects:
  - send messages
  - add new slots
  - replace old slots
  - remove slots

Objects and Slots

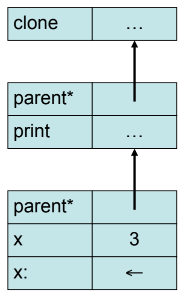
Object consists of named slots.

- Data
  - Such slots return contents upon evaluation; so act like variables
- Assignment
  - Set the value of associated slot
- Method
  - Slot contains Self code
- Parent
  - References existing object to inherit slots

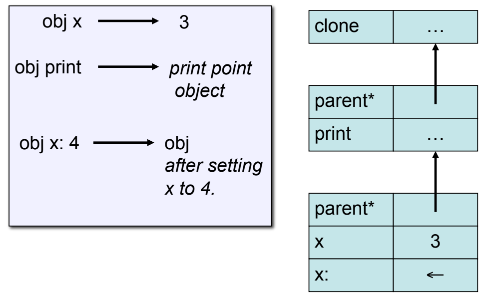


Messages and Methods

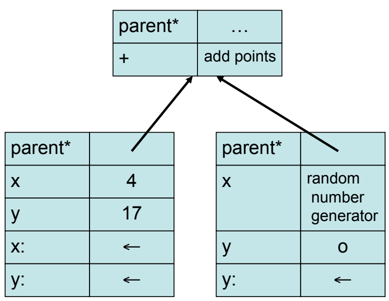
- When message is sent, object searched for slot with name.
- If none found, all parents are searched.
  - Runtime error if more than one parent has a slot with the same name.
- If slot is found, its contents evaluated and returned.
  - Runtime error if no slot found.



Messages and Methods

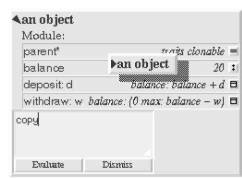


Mixing State and Behavior

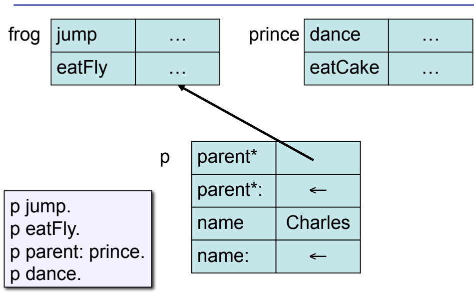


Object Creation

- To create an object, we copy an old one.
- We can add new methods, override existing ones, or even remove methods.
- These operations also apply to parent slots.



Changing Parent Pointers



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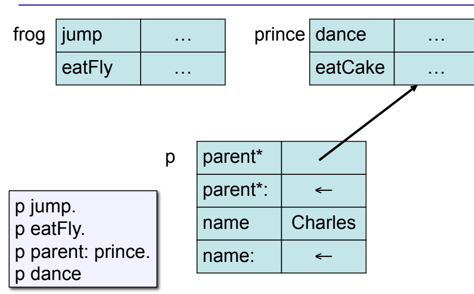


Disadvantages of classes?

- Classes require programmers to understand a more complex model.
  - To make a new kind of object, we have to create a new class first.
  - To change an object, we have to change the class.
  - Infinite meta-class regression.
- But: Does Self require programmer to reinvent structure?
  - Common to structure Self programs with *traits*: objects that simply collect behavior for sharing.

Contrast with C++

- C++
  - Restricts expressiveness to ensure efficient implementation.
- Self
  - Provides unbreakable high-level model of underlying machine.
  - Compiler does fancy optimizations to obtain acceptable performance.

Implementation Challenges I

- Many, many slow function calls:
  - Function calls generally somewhat expensive.
  - Dynamic dispatch makes message invocation even slower than typical procedure calls.
  - OO programs tend to have lots of small methods.
  - Everything is a message: even variable access!

"The resulting call density of pure object-oriented programs is staggering, and brings naïve implementations to their knees" [Chambers & Ungar, PLDI 89]

Implementation Challenges II

- No static type system
  - Each reference could point to any object, making it hard to find methods statically.
- No class structure to enforce sharing
  - Each object having a copy of its methods leads to space overheads.

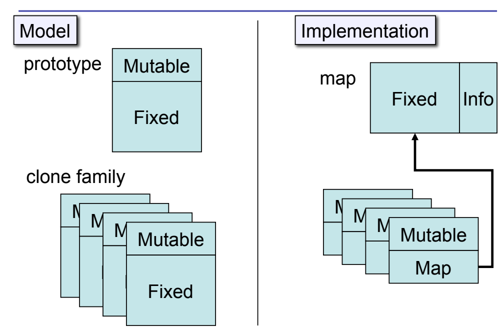
Optimized Smalltalk-80 roughly 10 times slower than optimized C.

Optimization Strategies

- Avoid per object space requirements.
- Compile, don't interpret.
- Avoid method lookup.
- Inline methods wherever possible.
  - Saves method call overhead.
  - Enables further optimizations.

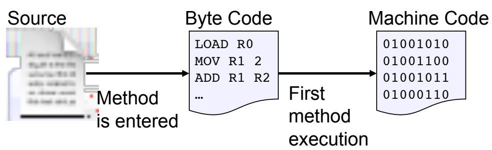
Clone Families

Avoid per object data



Avoid interpreting

Dynamic Compilation



- Method is converted to byte codes when entered.
- Compiled to machine code when first executed.
- Code stored in cache
  - if cache fills, previously compiled method flushed.
- Requires entire source (byte) code to be available.

Avoid method lookup

Lookup Cache

- Cache of recently used methods, indexed by (receiver type, message name) pairs.
- When a message is sent, compiler first consults cache
  - if found: invokes associated code.
  - if absent: performs general lookup and potentially updates cache.
- Berkeley Smalltalk would have been 37% slower without this optimization.

Avoid method lookup

Static Type Prediction

- Compiler predicts types that are unknown but likely:
  - Arithmetic operations (+, -, <, *etc.*) have small integers as their receivers 95% of time in Smalltalk-80.
  - ifTrue had Boolean receiver 100% of the time.
- Compiler inlines code (and test to confirm guess):

```
if type = smallInt  jump to method_smallInt
call general_lookup
```

Avoid method lookup

Inline Caches

- First message send from a *call site*:
  - general lookup routine invoked
  - call site back-patched
    - is previous method still correct?
      - yes: invoke code directly
      - no: proceed with general lookup & backpatch
- Successful about 95% of the time
- All compiled implementations of Smalltalk and Self use inline caches.

Avoid method lookup

Polymorphic Inline Caches

- Typical call site has <10 distinct receiver types.
  - So often can cache *all* receivers.
- At each call site, for each new receiver, extend patch code:

```
if type = rectangle jump to method_rect
if type = circle    jump to method_circle
call general_lookup
```

- After some threshold, revert to simple inline cache (megamorphic site).
- Order clauses by frequency.
- Inline short methods into PIC code.

Inline methods

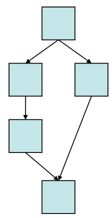
Customized Compilation

- Compile several copies of each method, one for each receiver type.
- Within each copy:
  - Compiler knows the type of self
  - Calls through self can be statically selected and inlined.
- Enables downstream optimizations.
- Increases code size.

Inline methods

Type Analysis

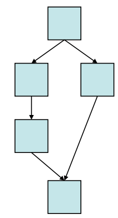
- Constructed by compiler by flow analysis.
- Type: set of possible maps for object.
  - Singleton: know map statically
  - Union/Merge: know expression has one of a fixed collection of maps.
  - Unknown: know nothing about expression.
- If singleton, we can inline method.
- If type is small, we can insert type test and crate branch for each possible receiver (type casing).



Inline methods

Message Splitting

- Type information above a merge point is often better.
- Move message send “before” merge point:
  - duplicates code
  - improves type information
  - allows more inlining



Inline methods

PICS as Type Source

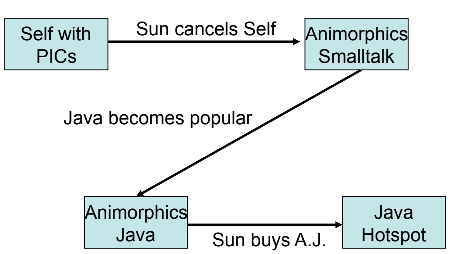
- Polymorphic inline caches build a call-site specific type database *as the program runs*.
- Compiler can use this runtime information rather than the result of a static flow analysis to build type cases.
- Must wait until PIC has collected information.
  - When to recompile?
  - What should be recompiled?
- Initial fast compile yielding slow code; then dynamically recompile *hotspots*.

Performance Improvements

- Initial version of Self was 4-5 times slower than optimized C.
- Adding type analysis and message splitting got within a factor of 2 of optimized C.
- Replacing type analysis with PICS improved performance by further 37%.

Current Self compiler is within a factor of 2 of optimized C.

Impact on Java



Summary

- “Power of simplicity”
  - Everything is an object: no classes, no variables.
  - Provides high-level model that can’t be violated (even during debugging).
- Fancy optimizations recover reasonable performance.
- Many techniques now used in Java compilers.
- Papers describing various optimization techniques available from Self web site.

http://research.sun.com/self/