Reflection
Spring 2020

(Condensed and modified from Steve Odendahl, Reflection: Java Technology’s Secret Weapon, JavaOne 2002)
Introduction

• Reflection makes classes, methods, and fields into \textit{first class objects} that exist at run time
  ▪ Can determine fields and methods of class
  ▪ Can instantiate class given a \texttt{String} containing the name
  ▪ Can invoke methods given a \texttt{String} with method name
  ▪ Can create classes (in a certain way) at runtime

• Reflection does not
  ▪ Add any expressive power to the language, in theory
    - With or without reflection, Java is Turing complete
  ▪ Solve every problem
    - Reflection is a sledgehammer that can do certain things that are difficult to achieve any other way
    - But it should be used sparingly, preferably not at all
java.lang.Class

• An instance of Class represents a class
  ▪ You can use it to get information about its fields/methods
  ▪ Most uses of reflection start with a Class
  ▪ Even primitive types have a Class

• Where to get one of these objects?
  ▪ `Class<?> c = “hello”.getClass();`
  ▪ `Class<?> c = String.class;`
  ▪ `Class<?> c = Class.forName(“java.lang.String”);`
  ▪ Here, the `<<?>` means the exact class is unknown, which is a conservative assumption

• What is the Class of a class? Class, of course!
  - “hello”.getClass().getClass() == Class.class;
If we want to make an instance of the class, we need to get one of its constructors first.

```java
Class<?> c = A.class;
Constructor<?> cons = c.getConstructor(String.class, int.class);
Object o = cons.newInstance("foo", 42);
A a = (A) o;
```

Because we didn’t indicate what class this constructor is for (parameter is `<?>`), we have to downcast the return of `newInstance`.

Omitted: lots of checked exceptions

- `getConstructor` might raise `NoSuchMethodException`
- `newInstance` might raise `IllegalAccessException`, ...

Generally, always need to use `try-catch` with reflection.
Methods and Fields

- Notice that a **Method** and **Field** (from `java.lang.reflect`) describe an elt of a class
- To invoke a **Method**, pass this as the first argument
- To access a **Field**, pass this as the argument

```java
Class<?> c = A.class;
Method<?> meth = c.getMethod("m", int.class);
A a = ...;
Object o = meth.invoke(a, 42); // call a.m(42);

Class<?> c = A.class;
Field<?> fld = c.getField("f");
A a = ...;
Object A_f = fld.get(a); // return a.f
```
import java.io.*;
import java.lang.reflect.*;

public static void main(String[] args)
    throws Exception {
    Field f = System.class.getField("out");
    PrintStream out = (PrintStream) f.get(null);
    Method m = PrintStream.class.getMethod("println", String.class);
    m.invoke(out, "Hello, world!");
}

• Well, that doesn’t seem very good!
  ▪ Why would we ever want to use reflection?
Design Patterns with Reflection
Factory Methods

- Recall that in the factory pattern, we create objects through a method call rather than using `new` directly.
- We could use reflection to create objects by name.
- Example: Create objects based on names in map.

```java
// Assume Pawn is a class, Pawn extends Piece
HashMap<char, String> hm; // map from ‘p’ to ‘Pawn’
String cname = hm.get('p');
Class<?> c = Class.forName(cname);
Constructor cons = c.getConstructor();
Piece p = (Piece) cons.newInstance();
```
Interpreter

• Take various actions depending on a string
  - “up” → call up()
  - “down” → call down()

• Straightforward implementation

  ```java
  if (str.equals("up")) { up(); }
  else if (str.equals("down")) { down(); }
  ...
  ```

• Reflective implementation

  ```java
  Method m = this.class.getMethod(str);
  m.invoke(this);
  ```

  - Concise, easy to extend
Security Warning!

• The previous example is actually a **BAD IDEA**
• What if `str` is controlled by an *adversary*?
  - Someone who is *trying* to do something bad
  - Normal users work around bugs; adversaries look for them!
• An adversary could set `str` to
  - The name of a method they shouldn’t be able to call
  - The name of a nonexistent method—leads to crash
• Who might be an adversary?
  - Someone sending data over the internet
  - A local user with fewer privileges than the app
• KEY RULE: Never treat data that is not directly from the program as code
Testing

• Invoke all methods that begin with test

```java
// o is an instance of some Test class
Class c = o.class;
Method[] meths = c.getMethods();
for (Method m : meths) {
    if (m.getName().startsWith("test")) {
        m.invoke(o)
    }
}
```

• We’ll learn about JUnit a little later, which does this
Double Dispatch

- Recall in the Visitor pattern, invoking `o1.accept(o2)` calls a method that depends on the run-time type of `o1` and the run-time type of `o2`.

- We can implement this with reflection!

```java
class C {
    Object m(C1a x, C1b y) { ... }
    Object m(C2a x, C2b y) { ... } ...
}
// call m method based on run-time type of x, y
Object call_m(Object x, Object y) {
    C c = ...;
    // now we look up run-time types of x and y
    Method m = c.class.getMethod("m",
                                x.getClass(), y.getClass());
    m.invoke(c, x, y);
}
```
Dynamic Proxies

- Recall the Proxy pattern: wrap an object to add extra logic before or after calls to its methods
- Java has *dynamic proxy* support to create a wrapper on-the-fly

```java
import java.lang.reflect.*;

public class MyProxy implements InvocationHandler {
    Object invoke(Object proxy, Method method, Object[] args) {
        // proxy = o, method = m, args[] = { “foo” }
    }
}

interface I { void m(String x); }
Class<?>.interfaces = new Class<> [] { I.class };
InvocationHandler handler = new MyProxy();
I o = (I) Proxy.newProxyInstance
      (I.class.getClassLoader(), interfaces, handler);
o.m(“foo”);
```
Serialization

- Can use reflection to automatically serialize objects

```java
Writer w = ...;
void serialize(Object o) {
    Class c = o.getClass();
    w.write(c + "\0"); // add null as terminator
    Field[] fs = c.getFields();
    for (Field f : fs) {
        w.write(f.getName() + "\0");
        serialize(w); // serialize the field value
    }
}
```

- Above code doesn’t work with cycles...
Reflection Disadvantages

- Extremely verbose
- Potentially opens up security concerns
- Misses out on compile-time type checking
  - E.g., trying to invoke a method with the wrong name or wrong arg types becomes a run-time exception
- Large performance penalty compared to direct calls
  - Overhead of extra method calls plus compiler can’t optimize reflective calls very well, in general

- Summary: Use with caution or not at all
  - Never use it if you don’t have a very good reason