JAVA GENERICS

Prof. Chris Jermaine
cmj4@cs.rice.edu
Java Is Strongly Typed

• Or is it?

• I can write:

```java
Double myDouble = new Double (12.3);
ArrayList myList = new ArrayList ();
myList.add (myDouble);
Integer myInt = (Integer) myList.get (0);
// compiles OK!
```

• What does this do?
  — Creates an ArrayList, which is a data structure holding type Object
  — Puts a Double in (OK since a Double in an object)
  — Takes that object out, tries to cast it into an Integer
  — Program barfs at runtime... in general, leads to lots o’ bugs!

• This was the official “Java Programming Style” (TM) in 1998
Why’d People Code This Way?

• Everyone justifiably avoids copying/pasting code

• Want to write ArrayList (or other class) just once
  — And have it work with any type you send in

• Only way to do this way back when...
  — Is to hard code in the class the “highest” type that could ever go in
  — For a generic container this is “Object”
  — That way, you can put anything in
  — Then when you take it out, “downcast” to get original object back

• So despite evils of coding this way...
  — Was better than the alternative of copying/pasting code
Early On, Java Designers Realized Not Good

• Thus, idea of a “generic” type was introduced

• In modern Java, can now say:

```java
Double myDouble = new Double (12.3);
ArrayList <Double> myList = new ArrayList <Double> ();
myList.add (myDouble);
Integer myInt = (Integer) myList.get (0);
// won’t even compile!
```

• What’s the diff?

  — Everything is almost exactly the same
  — But now, can tell the compiler that ArrayList holds only objects of type Double
  — Done via the “diamond” notation
  — As such, the compiler can catch the error in the last line
This Might Seem Like a Small Change

• But casting was a real problem in old-school Java
• In our trivial example, clear what is in the container
• But in general case, we have no idea
• People used type “Object” all over the place
• Practiced “cast and pray” programming
  — With generics, no need to ever cast again*
  — Except to do numeric conversions

*well, except for a few little problems...
(more at the end of this lecture/next time)
Historical Note

• Generics (aka “templates” in other languages)
  — Have been around for a long time

• Are a key feature of Ada, for example

• Many people vehemently argue that Java generics are unique
  — In particular, Java-heads seem really insecure wrt C++ templates
  — Java generics are unique in the sense that every realization of idea has its quirks

• But the goal is always the same, regardless of language
  — Allow people to easily re-use code (no copying and pasting) in a type-safe way
Let’s Examine (Somewhat) Complex Example

• Fortunately, we can add complexity piece by piece
  — So hopefully not overwhelming

• Key thing: my example is NOT restricted to simple containers
  — In practice, most use of generics happens with simple containers
  — Things like using an “ArrayList <Double>” instead of an array list of “Object”’s
  — I’ll try to show you that the generic mechanism can be more powerful!
Let’s Examine (Somewhat) Complex Example

• Say we want to have a generic set of objects
• And we want to associate with that set...
  — A method that computes the sum over all of the objects in the set
  — We want this code to be trivially reusable for any type where sum makes sense
  — How would you accomplish this?
  — Use generics!
interface ISummable <T> {
    void addYourselfTo (T addToMe);
}

• OK, so what’s the deal here?
• We have defined an interface called “ISummable”
    — We’ve seen plenty of interfaces before!
• The only difference is that this interface is parameterized
    — Something can implement “ISummable of type T” only if it has the ability to add itself to an object of type T
    — Where T is some (any) arbitrary type
    — Ex: something can implement “ISummable of type Double” only if it has the ability to add itself to an object of type Double
Now Let’s Use ISummable

• Please note I’m gonna skip the abstract class only for clarity
  — Don’t want to make generics more puzzling than they already are

```java
class ChrisInt extends ISummable <ChrisInt> {
  private Integer myVal;

  public ChrisInt (int val) {myVal = val;}

  public void addYourselfTo (ChrisInt addToMe) {
    addToMe.myVal += myVal;
  }
}
```

• What’s going on here?
  — You’re telling the world that ChrisInt can sum itself with ChrisInt objects
  — And the compiler will make sure you are telling the truth!
  — It’ll check to see you have method “public void addYourselfTo (ChrisInt)”
We Can Build This Up Further

• Let’s say we now want our set that can automatically sum itself
• Just have:

```java
class SummableSet <T extends ISummable <T>> {
}
```

• What is this saying?
  — Class “SummableSet” is parameterized on a type
  — That type is “<T extends ISummable <T>>”
  — This will match any type that is declared using

```java
class SomeTypeHere extends ISummable <SomeTypeHere> {}
```
  — And for this declaration to hold, the class must provide a method of the form

```java
public void addYourselfTo (SomeTypeHere foo) {}
```
class SummableSet <T extends ISummable <T>> {
    ArrayList <T> myData = new ArrayList <T> ();

    void addItem (T addMe) {
        myData.add (addMe);
    }

    T getSum () {
        T sum = null;
        for (T curItem : myData) {
            if (sum != null) {
                curItem.addYourselfTo (sum);
            } else {
                sum = curItem;
            }
        }
        return sum;
    }
}
Using SummableSet

• Easy!

```java
SummableSet <ChrisInt> foo = new SummableSet <ChrisInt> ();
...
ChrisInt result = foo.getSum ();
```

• So what do we get from this?
  — We can now use “SummableSet” over any type that can be added to itself
  — And the compiler checks everything, so there’s no possibility of type errors
  — In the “old-school” Java way of doing things, there would have been several casts
  — Using generics, there is little room for error!
Using SummableSet

• Can easily create a SummableSet of polynomials...

— First define the “Polynomial” class

class Polynomial implements ISummable<Polynomial> {

    private ArrayList<Double> coefs = new ArrayList<Double>();
...

    public void addYourselfTo (Polynomial addToMe) {
        int i = 0;
        // this nasty code adds my coefs to his
        for (; i < coefs.size () && i < addToMe.coefs.size (); i++) {
            addToMe.coefs.set (i, addToMe.coefs.get (i) + coefs.get (i));
        }
        // and then inserts any additional coefs to the other one
        for (; i < coefs.size (); i++) {
            addToMe.coefs.add (coefs.get (i));
        }
    }
}
Using SummableSet

• Can easily create a SummableSet of polynomials...
  — First define the “Polynomial” class
  class Polynomial implements ISummable<Polynomial> {
  • And then we’re good to go!
  SummableSet<Polynomial> foo =
      new SummableSet<Polynomial>();
A Few Thoughts

• As intimated before...
  — Much use of generics is for simple containers
  — So you get class definitions like:
    
    ```java
    class Stack <T> { }
    ```
  — This is fine and useful

• But you are using the generic mechanism at its full power when
  — The type argument implements some interface
  — Because then you can implement **algorithms** in a generic way
  — You abstract out the ops you need from the data being operated on by the alg
  — Put them in an interface
  — Don’t worry about anything else

• This is exactly what we did with “SummableSet”
How Does This Differ From “Classic” Inher.?

• Consider what our example looks like w/o generics:

```java
class SummableSet {
    ArrayList <ISummable> myData =
        new ArrayList <ISummable> ();

    void addItem (ISummable addMe) {
        myData.add (addMe);
    }
}

...
How Does This Differ From “Classic” Inher.?

• Consider what our example looks like w/o generics:

```java
class SummableSet {
    ArrayList <ISummable> myData =
        new ArrayList <ISummable> ();

    void addItem (ISummable addMe) {
        myData.add (addMe);
    }

    ...
}
```

• What are the key diffs?
  — Someone is free to put anything implementing ISummable into SummableSet
  — Can mix all sorts of different types in there
  — How to deal with “addYourselfTo” to make sure we don’t add mismatched types?
  — Well, in each implementation, would need to cast to verify correctness...
How Does This Differ From “Classic” Inher.?

class ChrisInt extends ISummable {
    private Integer myVal;

    public ChrisInt (int val) {myVal = val;}

    public void addYourselfTo (ISummable addToMe) {
        ChrisInt temp = (ChrisInt) addToMe;
        temp.myVal += myVal;
    }
}

• Note the cast: could fail at runtime! Really bad!
• With generics, compiler prevents any of these errors
Questions?