Generic handles

Memory management made easier

A cautionary note

- The programming technique that we are about to see is pretty specific to C++, because it relies on
  - destructors
  - templates
- However, the way we will develop the program is applicable to any language

The problem

- Remember the Expr classes?
  - Version 1
    - the user does memory management
    - leaks memory, never really satisfactory
  - Version 2
    - memory management in the implementation
    - somewhat intertwined with the rest of the code
- We are going to try to do better

Do better? How?

- Better correspondence between the code and the concepts it expresses
- More general
- Easier to follow once you understand it

Our first try (lecture 11)

- Our first try was a user-visible class hierarchy:
  ```
  class Expr { /* … */ };
  class IntExpr: public Expr { /* … */ };
  class UnaryExpr: public Expr { /* … */ };
  class BinaryExpr: public Expr { /* … */ };
  ```
- Advantage: Straightforward
- Disadvantage: Exposes memory management to users

Using the first try

```c++
intExpr* three = new IntExpr(3);
intExpr* four = new IntExpr(4);
intExpr* five = new IntExpr(5);
UnaryExpr* negfive =
  new UnaryExpr("-", five);
BinaryExpr* twelve =
  new BinaryExpr("x", three, four);
BinaryExpr* seven =
  new BinaryExpr("+", negfive, twelve);
seven->print(cout);
```
Memory management woes

• There is no good place to delete
  – Sometimes, the user has to delete
    Expr* e1 = new IntExpr(8);
    Expr* e2 = new BinaryExpr("*", e1, e1);
  – But sometimes, it's impossible
    Expr* e =
      new BinaryExpr("*",
        new IntExpr(3),
        new IntExpr(4));
• Therefore, we need a better scheme

The second version
(lecture 13)

• We renamed our base class Expr Base
• We added a use count to the
  Expr Base class
• We defined a use-counted handle class
called Expr
  – An Expr object contains a pointer to
    Expr Base
  – The Expr class does memory management

The revised data structure

Outline of class hierarchy

class Expr { /* … */ };
class ExprBase { /* … */ };
class IntExpr: public ExprBase
  { /* … */ };
class UnaryExpr: public ExprBase
  { /* … */ };
class BinaryExpr: public ExprBase
  { /* … */ };

This approach is easier to use

Expr e("*",
  Expr("-", Expr(3)),
  Expr("*", Expr(4), Expr(5)));
e. print(cout);

However, there are still disadvantages

• A single class implements the user
  interface for the Expr hierarchy and
  use-counted memory management
• Each Expr object contains data related
  to the expression contents and to
  memory management
The source of the problems

• Class Expr is really a kind of container
  – Each Expr object contains a single expression node
• But it is an intrusive container
  – The bookkeeping information is intertwined with the data in the container element
• If we’re going to keep the code separate, we’ll want separate data, too

A new strategy

• Keep the use count separate from the expression node
  – Advantage: We can ignore what’s in the expression nodes when we do memory management, and vice versa
  – Disadvantage: Probably slightly slower
• Put all the memory management in a separate class

The data structure

Let’s think about it generically

• We have an inheritance hierarchy
• We want a handle class whose objects will
  – each identify an object from that hierarchy
  – manage memory for its object
  – not know the details of that object’s type
• In effect, we want a generic handle

What properties should it have?

• The usual construct, copy, assign, and destroy operations
• A way of constructing a handle from an object of the target class
• A way of getting at the object to which the handle is attached

These handles act a lot like pointers

• They are sometimes called “counted pointers” or “smart pointers”
• We can use the oper at or - > feature of C++ to make them look a lot like pointers
• It is hard to defend against deliberate misuse
oper at or - > explained

• If p is a pointer, then p->x is defined as equivalent to (*p).x
• If p is not a pointer, then p->x is defined as (p.oper at or->() )->x
• Note that this definition is recursive: oper at or- > can return a class object as long as it is of a type with oper at or- > defined

We can already start coding

```cpp
template<class T> class Handle {
public:
    Handle();
    Handle(T*);
    Handle(const Handle&);
    Handle& operator=(const Handle&);
    ~Handle();
    T& operator*() const;
    T* operator->() const;
private:
    T* p;
    int* use;
};
```

We will want to cater to null handles

• If someone says
  Handle e<T> h;
  we want to allow it, even though h doesn't refer to anything useful (yet).
• We would like to avoid special cases in our use-counting code
• Therefore, every handle will have a use count, even if its pointer is 0

The default constructor

```cpp
template<class T> Handle e<T>::Handle():
    use(new int(1)), p(0) { }
```

Other constructors

• When we attach a handle to an object, we will be giving the handle the responsibility for deleting that object eventually:
  ```cpp
  { Handle e<string> h(new string("hello"));
    // ... }
  ```

Constructor definitions

```cpp
template<class T>
Handle e<T>::Handle(T* tp):
    use(new int(1)), p(tp) { }
template<class T>
Handle e<T>::Handle(const Handle e<T>& h):
    use(h.use), p(h.p) { ++*use; }
```
Destructor

```cpp
template<class T>
Handle<T>::~Handle() {
    if (--*use == 0) {
        delete use;
        delete p;
    }
}
```

Assignment

- As usual, we will increment the use count on the right-hand side before we decrement our own:
  ```cpp
template<class T> Handle<T>&
Handle<T>::operator=(const Handle<T>& h) {
    ++*h.use;
    if (--*use == 0) {
        delete use; delete p;
    }
    use = h.use; p = h.p;
    return *this;
}
```

The * and - > operators

```cpp
template<class T>
T& Handle<T>::operator*() const { return *p; }

template<class T>
T* Handle<T>::operator->() const { return p; }
```

How do we use it?

- It works a lot like a pointer, but it will delete objects for us:
  ```cpp
  // Pointer version
  int* p(new int(42));
  cout << *p << endl;
  delete p;
  
  // Handle version
  Handle<int> h(new int(42));
  cout << *h << endl;
  // No delete
  ```

Interactions with inheritance

- Handles encapsulate pointers, which means that they can point to a base class in an inheritance hierarchy:
  ```cpp
class B { virtual ~B(); /* ... */; }
class D: public B { /* ... */; }
Handle<B> h(new D);
```

Handles as data elements

- Because handles have copy and assignment defined, we can use them as elements of other data structures, almost as easily as if they were pointers:
  ```cpp
  struct node {
    Handle<Thing> h;
    Handle<OtherThing> h2;
    // ...
  };
  ```
What do these handles do for us?

- They are an abstraction of the idea of use-counted memory allocation
- They behave a lot like pointers
- They allow us to structure our programs to separate the algorithmic part from the memory-management part
- We have to write the Handle template only once

Advantages of use counting

- We can manage resources other than memory
  - files
  - network connections
- Resources are deallocated as soon as they are no longer needed
  - no unused memory sitting around and waiting for the garbage collector

What don’t they do for us?

- Use-counted memory allocation does not handle circular data structures
- There is some extra overhead in allocating the use counts separately
- They are not completely foolproof
  - Attaching a handle to an object not allocated by new is a recipe for disaster
  - You mustn’t explicitly delete an object while there is still a handle attached to it

Homework (due Monday)

- Take the Handle template definition and the first version of the Expr class definition (both available from the course website) and merge them, modifying the Expr class hierarchy to use the Handle template.
- Add an appropriate definition of oper at or << for Expr output