

# Automatic Memory Management

Godmar Back

Virginia Tech

November 2, 2023



# Automatic Memory Management

## Rationale

Explicit memory management (via, e.g. `malloc()` and `free()`) is prone to errors. All modern languages provide forms of automatic memory management, also called “implicit memory management.”

- Manual (explicit) memory management is difficult, many errors are possible
  - Free memory too early, risk use-after-free errors
  - Free too late (or forget to free (\*)), risk memory leaks
- Requires principled design that identifies ownership and lifetimes of objects
- Complicates design of APIs

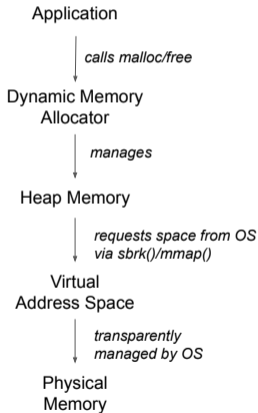
Will study

- Garbage Collection: Principles, Implementation, and Tuning
- Reference-counting approaches
- Related Programming Issues: Leaks, Churn, and Bloat

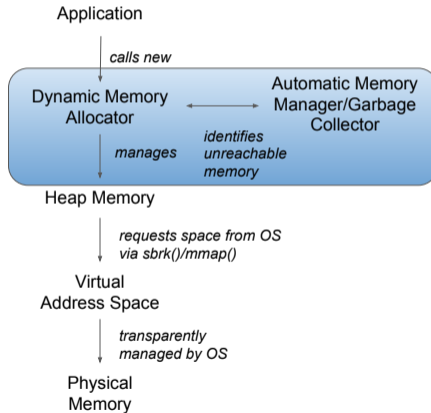


# Explicit vs. Implicit Memory Management

## Explicit Memory Management



## Implicit Memory Management



## Key Idea

Identify those objects that the program may be accessing in the future. Keep them, reclaim the rest.

- Invented in 1960 by McCarthy for LISP [1]
- Assumption: well-defined programs cannot legally access objects to which they do not have pointers/references
  - Assumes no pointer  $\leftrightarrow$  integer conversion
- Objects that can be accessed are said to be reachable
- We do not know if program will access any reachable object in the future
  - Those that won't be accessed are said to be leaked
- Essential abstraction: reachability graph

# Reachability Graph: Java Example

```
class B {
    int x, y;
    B(int x, int y) {
        this.x = x;
        this.y = y;
    }
}

public class A {
    static A S;
    B f;
    public static void main(String[] args) {
        S = new A();
        A local = new A();
        B b = new B(1, 2);
        set(local, b);
        b = null;
        local = null;
    }
    static void set(A t, B b) {
        t.f = b;
    }
}
```

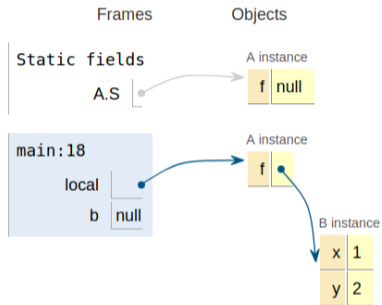


Figure 1: Reachability graph after setting `b = null`. Made with <http://pythontutor.com/java.html>

# Mark and Sweep Garbage Collection

- Identify roots, e.g., in Java
  - Static fields
  - Local variables of in-progress method calls of all threads
  - JVM Internal roots
- Traverse the entire heap via, e.g. DFS, “mark”ing all reachable objects
- Reclaim (“sweep”) all objects not marked

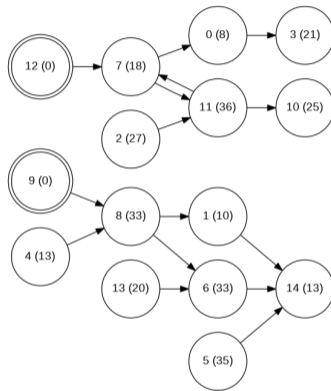


Figure 2: Reachability Graph

[1] John McCarthy.

Recursive functions of symbolic expressions and their computation by machine, part I.

*Communications of the ACM*, 3(4):184–195, 1960.