CS450

Structure of Higher Level Languages

Lecture 07: Tail-call optimization

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Today we will learn...

- Identifying a tail-call optimization
- Internals of the tail-call optimization
- Structures (safe and easy user-data structures)

> Learning how to write tail-call optimizations is explained in future lessons. Today, we focus on what the optimization is, and on why the optimization works.

Suggested reading

SICP §1.2.1

Tail-call optimization

What is it?

max: attempt 1

```
(define (max xs)
  (cond
    [(empty? xs) (error "max: expecting a non-empty list!")]
    [(empty? (rest xs)) (first xs)]                ; The list only has one element (the max)
    [(> (first xs) (max (rest xs))) (first xs)] ; The max of the rest is smaller than 1st
    [else (max (rest xs))]))                        ; Otherwise, use the max of the rest
```

max: attempt 2

We use a local variable to cache a duplicate computation.

```
(define (max xs)
  (cond
    [(empty? xs) (error "max: expecting a non-empty list!")]
    [(empty? (rest xs)) (first xs)]
    [else
      (define rest-max (max (rest xs))) ; Cache the max of the rest
      (cond
        [(> (first xs) rest-max) (first xs)]
        [else rest-max])]))
```

- Attempt #1: 20 elements in 75.78ms
- Attempt #2: 1,000,000 elements in 101.15ms

5000× more elements for the same amount of time!

Can we do better?

max: attempt 3

```
(define (max xs) =
  ; 1. Abstract the maximum between two numbers
  (define (max2 x y) (cond [(< x y) y] [else x]))
  ; 2. Use parameters to store accumulated results
  (define (max-aux curr-max xs)
    ; 3. Accumulate maximum number before recursion
    (define new-max (max2 curr-max (first xs)))
    (cond
      [(empty? (rest xs)) new-max]          ; Last element is max
      [else (max-aux new-max (rest xs))])) ; Otherwise, recurse
  (cond
    [(empty? xs) (error "max: empty list")] ; 4. Only test if the list is empty once
    [else (max-aux (first xs) xs)]))
```

Comparing both attempts

	Element count	*Execution time*	*Increase*
Attempt #2	1,000,000	101.15ms	
Attempt #3	1,000,000	20.98ms	4.8× speedup
Attempt #2	10,000,000	1410.06ms	
Attempt #3	10,000,000	237.66ms	5.9× speedup

> Why is attempt #3 so much faster?

Because attempt #3 is being target of a Tail-Call optimization!

How are both attemps differents?

Attempt 2

```
(define rest-max (max (rest xs))) ; 1. Do recursive call
(cond                             ; 2. Handle accumulated result
  [(max2 (first xs) rest-max) (first xs)]
  [else rest-max])]))
```

Attemp 3

```
(define new-max (max2 curr-max (first xs))) ; 1. Handle accumulated result
(cond
  [(empty? (rest xs)) new-max]
  [else (max-aux new-max (rest xs))]))      ; 2. Do recursive call
```

Tail-call optimization

Why does it work?

Call stack & Activation frame

- **Call Stack:** To be able to call and return from functions, a program internally maintains a stack called the ***call-stack***, each of which holds the execution state at the point of call.
- **Activation Frame:** An activation frame maintains the execution state of a running function. That is, the activation frame represents the local state of a function, it holds the state of each variable.
- **Push:** When calling a function, the caller creates an activation frame that is used by the called function (eg, to pass arguments to the function being called).
- **Pop:** Before a function returns, it pops the call stack, freeing its local state.

Consider executing the factorial

Program

```
(define (fact n)
  (cond
    [(= n 1) 1]
    [else
     (* n (fact (- n 1)))]))
```

Evaluation

```
(fact 3)
(* 3 (fact 2))
(* 3 (* 2 (fact 1)))
(* 3 (* 2 1))
(* 3 2)
6
```

Call-Stack

```
[n=3,return=(* 3 (fact 2))]
[n=3,return=(* 3 ?)],[n=2,return=(* 2 (fact 1))]
[n=3,return=(* 3 ?)],[n=2,return=(* 2 ?)],[n=1,return=1]
[n=3,return=(* 3 ?)],[n=2,return=2]
[n=3,return=6]
```

Call-stack and recursive functions

> Recursive functions pose a problem to this execution model, as **the call-stack may grow unbounded**! Thus, most non-functional programming languages are conservative on growing the call stack.

```python
def fact(n):
  return 1 if n ≤ 1 else n * fact(n - 1)
fact(1000)
```

Outputs

```
  File "<stdin>", line 1, in fact
RuntimeError: maximum recursion depth exceeded
```

Factorial: attempt #2

Program

```
(define (fact n)
  (define (fact-iter n acc)
    (cond
      [(= n 0) acc]
      [else
        (fact-iter (- n 1) (* acc n)) ]))
  (fact-iter n 1))
(fact 3)
```

Evaluation

```
(fact 3)
(fact-iter 3 1)
(fact-iter 2 3)
(fact-iter 1 6)
6
```

Factorial: attempt #2

Call stack

```
[n=3,return=(fact-iter 3 1)]
[n=3,return=?],[n=3,acc=1,return=(fact-iter 2 3)]
[n=3,return=?],[n=3,acc=1,return=?],[n=2,acc=3,return=(fact-iter 1 6)]
[n=3,return=?],[n=3,acc=1,return=?],[n=2,acc=3,return=?],[n=1,acc=6,return=6]
[n=3,return=?],[n=3,acc=1,return=?],[n=2,acc=3,return=6]
[n=3,return=?],[n=3,acc=1,return=6]
[n=3,return=6]
```

Tail position and tail call

> The ***tail position*** of a sequence of expressions is the last expression of that sequence.

```
(lambda ()
  exp1
  ; ...
  expn) ⟵ tail position
```

> When a function call is in the tail position we named it the ***tail call***.

```
(lambda ()
  exp1
  ; ...
  (f ...)) ⟵ f is a tail call
```

Tail call and the call stack

A tail call does not need to push a new activation frame! Instead, the called function can "reuse" the frame of the current function. For instance, in `(fact 3)`, the call `(fact-iter 3 1)` is a tail call.

```
[n=3,return=(fact-iter 3 1)]
[n=3,return=?],[n=3,acc=1,return=(fact-iter 2 3)]
```

Can be rewritten with:

```
[n=3,return=(fact-iter 3 1)]
[n=3,acc=1,return=(fact-iter 2 3)]
```

In attempt #2, both calls to `fact-iter` are tail calls.

Tail-Call Optimization

- Eschews the need to allocate a new activation frame
- In a recursive tail call, the compiler can convert the recursive call into a loop, which is more efficient to run (recall our $5\times$ speedup)

Revisiting user data structures

User data structures

Recall the 3D point from Lecture 3

```
; Constructor
(define (point x y z) (list x y z))
; Accessors
(define (point-x pt) (first pt))
(define (point-y pt) (second pt))
(define (point-z pt) (third pt))
```

And the name data structure

```
; Constructor
(define (name f m l) (list f m l))
; Accessor
(define (name-first n) (first n))
(define (name-middle n) (second n))
(define (name-last n) (third n))
```

How do we prevent such errors?

```
(define p (point 1 2 3))
(name-first p) ; This should be an error, and instead it happily prints 1
```

Introducing struct

```
#lang racket
(require rackunit)
(struct point (x y z) #:transparent)
(define pt (point 1 2 3))
(check-equal? 1 (point-x pt))  ; the accessor point-x is automatically defined
(check-equal? 2 (point-y pt))  ; the accessor point-y is automatically defined
;
(struct name (first middle last))
(define n (name "John" "M" "Smith"))
(check-equal? "John" (name-first n))
(check-true (name? n))    ; We have predicates that test the type of the value
(check-false (point? n)) ; A name is not a point
(check-false (list? n))  ; A name is not a list
; (point-x n) ;; Throws an exception
; point-x: contract violation
;   expected: point?
;   given: #<name>)
```

Bennefits of using structs

- Reduce boilerplate code
- Ensure type-safety

Implementing Racket's AST

Grammar

```
expression = value | variable | apply | define
value = number | void | lambda
apply = ( expression+ )
lambda = ( lambda ( variable* ) term+)
```

Implementing values

```
value = number | void | lambda
lambda = ( lambda ( variable* ) term+)
```

Implementing values

value = *number* | *void* | *lambda*
lambda = `( lambda` `(` *variable** `)` *term*+`)`

```
(define (r:value? v)
  (or (r:number? v)
      (r:void? v)
      (r:lambda? v)))
(struct r:void () #:transparent)
(struct r:number (value) #:transparent)
(struct r:lambda (params body) #:transparent)
```

> We are using a prefix `r:` because we do not want to redefined standard-library definitions.

Implementing expressions

```
expression = value | variable | apply
apply = ( expression+ )
```

Implementing expressions

expression = *value* | *variable* | *apply*
apply = `(` *expression+* `)`

```
(define (r:expression? e)
  (or (r:value? e)
      (r:variable? e)
      (r:apply? e)))
(struct r:variable (name) #:transparent)
(struct r:apply (func args) #:transparent)
```

> In `r:apply` we distinguish between the expression that represents the function `func`, and the (possibly empty) list of arguments `args`.

Implementing terms

```
term = define | expression
define = ( define identifier expression ) | ( define ( variable+ ) term+)
```

Implementing terms

```
term = define | expression
define = ( define identifier expression ) | ( define ( variable+ ) term+)
```

```
(define (r:term? t)
  (or (r:define? t)
      (r:expression? t)))
(struct r:define (var body) #:transparent)
```

> For our purposes of defining the semantics in terms of implementing an interpreter, we do not want to distinguish between a basic definition and a function definition, as this would unnecessarily complicate our code. We, therefore, represent a definition with a single structure, which pairs a variable and an expression (eg, a lambda). In our setting, the distinction between a basic and a function definition is syntactic (not semantic).

Summary of `struct`

```
(struct point (x y z) #:transparent)
```

Simplifies the definition of data structures:

- Creates selectors automatically, eg, `point-x`
- Creates type query, eg, `point?`
- Ensures that functions of a given struct can only be used on values of that struct.
  Because, not everything is a list.

> What is `#:transparent`? A transparent struct prints its contents when rendered as a string.