Introduction to Serialization

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Outline of Topics

- What is Serialization
- Basics of Serialization
- The transient keyword
- Changing the default reading and writing
- Security Issues
- Versioning

Serialization

- Introduced in Java 1.1
- Allows reading and writing of whole objects to any InputStream or OutputStream
- Reasonably easy to use default behavior
- Reasonably easy to customize
Why Serialization?

- Persistence: Storing objects in files and databases (persistence)
- Marshalling: Passing whole objects between VMs over the network

Serializable Interface

- Only objects that implement the Serializable interface can be serialized
- This interface is part of Java 1.1
- String, Integer, Vector, Hashtable and other typical classes have been retrofitted in Java 1.1 to be Serializable
- Easy to implement this interface: it has no methods!

Why Isn’t Everything Serializable?

- If it was, there could be information leaks when objects are written.
- We also need to be careful when reading a serialized object (sketch of the details provided later)
Writing an Object

- Create an ObjectOutputStream from any OutputStream
- Use its writeObject method:
  ```java
  void writeObject( Object obj );
  ```
- Remember: obj must be serializable.
- Need to handle IOException, NotSerializableException, InvalidClassException. All are IOExceptions.

Reading an Object

- Create an ObjectInputStream from any InputStream
- Use its readObject method:
  ```java
  Object readObject( ) ;
  ```
- Returned type must be downcast to actual type.
- Need to handle IOException, ClassNotFoundException, OptionalDataException. All but ClassNotFoundException are IOExceptions.

Example of Writing

```java
FileOutputStream f;

ObjectOutputStream out = new ObjectOutputStream( f );
Person p = new Person( ... );
...
try {
    out.writeObject( p );
} catch( NotSerializableException e ) {
    // Oops: Person is not serializable
} catch( IOException e ) {
    // Oops: Various I/O problems
}
```
Example of Reading

```java
FileInputStream f;
ObjectInputStream out = new ObjectInputStream(f);
Person p;
...
try {
    p = (Person) in.readObject();
} catch (ClassNotFoundException e) {
    // OOps: Person class not loadable on this VM
} catch (IOException e) {
    // OOps: Various I/O problems
}
```

What Gets Written

- `ObjectStreamClass` object for the object’s class
  - Includes 64-bit `serialVersionUID` (versioning)
  - Names and types of fields
  - `ObjectStreamClass` of super class
- Non-transient, non-static fields
  - Base class data written first (if base class not serializable, zero-parameter constructor used)
  - Fields that are object references are followed; if they can be serialized, they are; otherwise, if `null` ok; otherwise exception is thrown.

Several References to Same Object

- When written, each object gets a serial number (hence, serialization)
- Each reference is then either null or the appropriate serial number
- Long chains of references are followed automatically using a depth-first search; saves you lots of manual labor
- When objects are restored, everything looks like it was.
What Gets Read

- `ObjectStreamClass` object for the object's class
  - Includes 64-bit `serialVersionUID` (versioning)
  - Names and types of fields
  - `ObjectStreamClass` of super class
- Object fields read in next
- If base class is nonserializable, inherited portion is initialized with no-parameter constructor.

Class Versioning

- 64 bit `serialVersionUID` is stored; it is based on the class members
- If the class changes in any significant way, the `serialVersionUID` changes too
- When object is read from an object stream, system ensures that version UIDs of `ObjectStreamClass` and local class are the same
- If not, exception is thrown

Version UIDs

- Computed using SHA (only 64 of the 160 bits are retained); can obtain it by running `serialvar`, which is part of the JDK.
- Will change if you add or delete members or change signatures (even from public to private)
- You can declare your opinion that a class is compatible by adding a private static final long member named `serialVersionUID`.
Version UIDs (continued)

- If UIDs match, attempt to load class will continue.
- During the read, new fields (those not written by the write) will get default values (null for references, etc.)
- Removed fields will be ignored.
- If VM isn’t happy, an exception is thrown. May happen if field type has changed.

Security Problems

- The constructor for the Serializable object is NOT called.
  - Some fields may be null, which might not be what was expected based on constructors.
- Serializable object is read in without checks. Consider a serializable Date class.
  - Can write the Date out to a file.
  - Can edit the file, and generate an illegal date.
  - When it is read in, fields are copied, blindly.
  - There’s no check, and Date is now inconsistent.
  - Don’t even need files: can use ByteStreams.

Customizing readObject

- Can have readObject do extra work by implementing (in the serialized object’s class).
  private void readObject(ObjectInputStream in)
  throws IOException, ClassNotFoundException;
- readObject (and only readObject) can call an ObjectInputStream method to do the normal default read, and can then add code to do error checks or other additional work. The method call would be
  in.defaultReadObject();
- Note: readObject must be private.
Example: Making Date Safer

```java
public class Date implements Serializable {
    private boolean isValid() {
        /* implementation omitted */
    }

    private void readObject(ObjectInputStream in)
        throws IOException, ClassNotFoundException {
        in.defaultReadObject();
        if (!isValid()) throw new IOException();
    }
}
```

Customizing `writeObject`

λ Not surprisingly, can do similar things with `writeObject`

- Can have private `writeObject` method (throws `IOException` only)
- Private `writeObject` method can call `out.defaultWriteObject()`

λ This is useful for writing output in a special way. For instance, can write a transient field in an encrypted format. Of course, need to implement `readObject` to match.

```java
public class Secure implements Serializable {
    transient private String password;
    private String name;

    private void writeObject(ObjectOutputStream out)
        throws IOException {
        out.defaultWriteObject();
        out.writeObject( NSA.encrypt( password ) );
    }

    private void readObject(ObjectInputStream is)
        throws IOException, ClassNotFoundException {
        in.defaultReadObject();
        password = NSA.decrypt( in.readUTF() );
    }
}
```
Dealing With Changing Fields

- Uses nested class `ObjectInputStream.GetField`
- Call `ObjectInputStream.readFields` to get a collection of name/value pairs
  - unfortunately, cannot enumerate over collection
  - must know exact field name in stream format
- Various `get` methods extract objects
  - Two parameters: name of field, and value to return
  - if field is not in the stream, but is in current class
  - if field not in the stream AND field is not in the current class, you get an exception
  - Must explicitly assign values to all class fields, or they will get zero for primitives, null for references

Using `ObjectInputStream.GetField`

class Person {
    static final long serialVersionUID = ...;

    private void readObject(ObjectInputStream in) throws IOException, ClassNotFoundException {
        ObjectInputStream.GetField gf = in.readFields();
        String fullName = (String) gf.get("fullName", null);
        if (fullName == null) {
            fullName = gf.get("lastName", null) + " " + gf.get("firstName", null);
            age = gf.get("age", 0);
        }

        private String fullName; // the new version
        // private String lastName; // the old version
        // private String firstName; // the old version
    }
}

Externalization

- Serializable is nice, but has some overhead. May not be appropriate in all instances.
- The `Externalizable` interface extends `Serializable`. Must implement
  - `public void writeExternal(ObjectOutput out)` throws IOException;
  - `public void readExternal(ObjectInput in)` throws IOException, ClassNotFoundException;
- Your object has complete control over how it is written but you deal with base classes, and serializing object references.
- Object and all super classes must have 0-param constructor
class Date implements Externalizable {
    public Date() {
        this(1, 1, 2000);
    }
    public Date(int m, int d, int y) {
        month = m; date = d; year = y;
    }
    public void writeExternal(ObjectOutput out) throws IOException {
        out.writeInt(month); out.writeInt(date); out.writeInt(year);
    }
    public void readExternal(ObjectInput in) throws IOException, ClassNotFoundException {
        month = in.readInt(); date = in.readInt(); year = in.readInt();
    }
    private int month;
    private int date;
    private int year;
}

Summary

- Serialization is easy to use; it tracks down and serializes all objects reachable from the basic object being serialized
- Usually have to implement private readObject to do security check
- May need to watch out for class version changes and set the serialVersionUID
- Externalization is hard to use unless class is trivial, but can be faster and more compact