Operator Overloading

Michael Hanke

School of Engineering Sciences

Program construction in C++ for Scientific Computing

Outline

Introduction

- Our Point class is a model for the vector space $\mathbb{R}^2$. In this space, operations like vector addition and multiplication by a scalar are defined.
- What we can do right now: Define a function

```
const Point add(const Point &P, const Point &Q);
Point W = add(P,Q);
```

  Note: The symbol = indicates an initialization of `W`. This is the copy constructor.
- Wish: How can we make sense to statements like

```
Point P, Q, W;
W = P+Q;
```

  Note: Here, the = symbol stands for the assignment operator. We will need another type of constructor here (copy-assignment).

Operators

Operator Overloading

In C++, operators are considered to be special kind of function (with predefined structure of the argument list, compatible with the C++ syntax). So they can be redefined for new data types. This is called overloading.

Lvalues and Rvalues

- In C, lvalues are expressions which can appear at the left-hand side of the assignment operator; rvalues appear on the right-hand side of it:

  lvalue `=` *rvalue*;

- The semantics is that rvalue will be evaluated and assigned to the lvalue.
- The assignment operator is right-associative meaning that `a = b = c;` is equivalent to `a = (b = c);`
- Consequence: *An assignment $a = b$ has a value!*
- Question: What is the result of `(a = b) = c;`? (Demo!)

Lvalues and Rvalues (cont)

- Operators differ as to wether they require an lvalue or an rvalue as operands or wether they return lvalues or rvalues.
- C++ has a rather complex behavior here.
- Heuristically:
  - When we use an object as rvalue, we use the object's value (its contents).
  - When we use an object as lvalue, we use the object's identity (its address).
- Most often, an lvalue can be used when an rvalue is required.
- Example: An expression like `a + b` can never be an lvalue. *Why?*

Operators in C++

- Arithmetic operators (+,-,*,/, %) - standard precedence and associativity rules
- Logical and relational operators - standard precedence and associativity rules
- Assinment operator (=) - right associative, lowest precedence
- Increment and decrement operators (`i++`, `++i`, `i--`, `--i`)
- Member access operator (left associative), function call, subscript (., (), [])
- many more

All these operators can be overloaded (exception here: member access operator)!

A Final Bit To Know: `this`

- When calling a member function there is always a concrete object involved:

  ```
  Point P, Q; P.X();
  ```

  The latter will return the contents of x of the instance P.
- How can the runtime system decide between x belonging to P and the one belonging to Q?
- The distinction is provide by an implicit variable defined by the compiler for every class:

  ```
  class *this;
  ```

- In our example, the statement `return x;` is interpreted as

  ```
  return (*this).x;
  ```

  equivalently, `return this -> x;`
- All member functions have the implicit first argument `this`.

Aim

How to define a version of the assignment operator such that an assignment of the kind

```
P = Q = W;
```

makes sense?

- Since the interpretation is rather close to the copy constructor, we should expect similar properties.
- However, as an operator, the assigment must have a value.
- After assignment both objects should be the same (but not identical!).
- The value returned should be (a reference to) the rightmost expression.
- For consistency with the built-in types, it should be a reference to the left-hand operator.

The Copy-Assignment Constructor

- The copy-assignment constructor must be a public member function.
- It must have the form

```
class& operator=(const class&);
```

- The `this` pointer points to the left-hand side operand of the assignment.
- The argument should be a reference.

Extending The Point Class

```
class Point {
  private:       // Can be omitted here
    double x;
    double y;
  public:
    Point(double xx = 0.0, double yy = 0.0) :
           x(xx), y(yy) { }
    Point(const Point& Q): x(Q.x), y(Q.y) { }
    ~Point() { }
    double X() const { return x; }
    double Y() const { return y; }
    void zero() { x = y = 0.0; }
};
```


The Point Class (cont)

```
Point& Point::operator=(const Point& P) {
  if (this != &P) {
    x = P.x;  // equivalent: (*this).x = P.x;
    y = P.y;
  }
  return *this;  // dereferencing!
}
```

- This copy-assignment constructor corresponds to the automatically generated one.
- As a rule of thumb, an individual version is necessary if you need an individual copy constructor.

Remarks

- We can write simply `P = Q = W;` now if `P`, `Q`, and `W` are instances of class Point.
- We can even write `P = 1.0;` since we have available a type conversion double to Point.

- The latter is slightly inefficient because first, a temporary object of class point is created and only then the assignment takes place.
- For efficiency reasons, it might be better to have an explicit definition:

```
Point& Point::operator=(const double& xx) {
  x = xx;
  y = 0.0;
  return *this;
}
```

A First Operator

- Previously, we defined the negative of a Point (nonmember function):

```
const Point negative(const Point& P) {
  return Point(-P.X(),-P.Y());
}
```

- This can easily transformed in a unary minus operator (member function):

```
const Point Point::operator-() const {
  return Point(-x,-y);
}
```

  - Note the first implicit parameter `this`!
  - The old object will not change, therefore const.
  - As previously, the result cannot be a reference.

- Now we can write

```
P = -Q;
```

Another Operator: +=

It is as simple as this:

```
const Point& Point::opertor+=(const Point& Q) {
  x += Q.x;
  y += Q.y;
  return *this;
}
```

- We can write now `W = P += Q;` but not `(P += Q) = W`. *Why? Design error?*
- We can also write `P += 1.0;` Might be better to define it explicitely.

And Finally: +

```
const Point Point::operator+(const Point& Q) const {
  return Point(x+Q.x,y+Q.y);
}
```

Note: Creation of a temporary object!

Compare

```
      Point& operator= (const Point&);
const Point  operator- ()             const;
const Point& operator+=(const Point&);
const Point  operator+ (const Point&) const;
```

A Final Subtlety

- The following code is valid:

```
Point P, Q(1.0,2.0);
P = Q+3;
```

  Note: The `int` 3 is converted to a `double` is converted to a `Point`.
- Addition should be commutative. However, the expression `P = 3.0+Q;` leads to a compile time error. *Why?*
- *Operators defined as member functions are "unsymmetric"!*

We will need operators that are not member functions.

Friend Functions

- For implementing our operation, we would need a nonmember function of the kind

```
const Point operator+(double x, const Point& Q);
```

- Even if this fucntion belongs to the interface, it is not part of the class. Consequently, it does not have access to the private members.
- Access can be granted by providing the `friend` attribut in the class declaration:

```
class Point {
  friend const Point operator+(const double x,
                               const Point& Q);
};
```

- In the implementation, the actual definition takes place:

```
const Point operator+(double x, const Point& Q) {
  return Point(x+Q.x,Q.y);
}
```

Remarks

- In the previous case, a non-friend, nonmember implementation could have been provided:

```
const Point operator+(double x, const Point& Q) {
  return Q+x;
}
```

- It is slightly more expensive because of the additional function call.
- It is slightly better maintainable because it does not use the internals of `Point` directly.

Demo

`typetst.cpp`

Good Practices

- Define overloaded operators consistently with the user's expectations. For example,
  - `P + Q` and `P += Q` should deliver identical values.
  - The operator + should not be overloaded with a subtraction-like operation.
- If the class does I/O, define the shift operator consistently with those of the built-in types.
- If a class has `operator==`, it should also provide `operator!=`.
- Be careful when overloading logical operators. Evaluation rules of the built-in functions do not survive (short-circuit evaluation).
- Assignment and compound assignment should return a reference to the left-hand operand.
- If a (commutative) binary operator accepts operands of different types, both orders should be available.

Conventions

- Similarly to arithmetic or assignment operators, both << and >> should return a reference to its left-hand argument.
- << and >> are left associative. So the left-hand argument is always a stream.
- So the overloaded operators can neither be a member of the stream class (we cannot add members to library classes) nor a member of our own class.
- The declaration looks something like this:

```
ostream& operator<<(ostream& os, const class& item)
istream& operator>>(istream& is,       class& item)
```

- Note: Input operators must deal with the possibility that the input might fail; output operators usually don't bother.

Example: << for Point

```
ostream& operator<<(ostream& os, const Point& P) {
  os << ``(`` << P.X() << ``, `` << P.Y() << ``)'';
  return os;
}
```

Note: This operator could be made slightly more efficient by defining it as a `friend`.

How?

Example: >> for Point

```
istream& operator>>(istream& is, Point& P) {
  double x, y;
  is >> x >> y;
  if (is)  // Success?
    P = Point(x,y);
  else
    P = Point();
  return is;
}
```

Summary

- How to overload operators
- Assignment operators
- this
- friend

- What comes next:
  - Structured grids and their implementation