JEqualityGen: Generating Equality and Hashing Methods

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Abstract
Manually implementing equals (for object comparisons) and hashCode (for object hashing) methods in large software projects is tedious and error-prone. This is due to many special cases, such as field shadowing, comparison between different types, or cyclic object graphs. Here, we present JEqualityGen, a source code generator that automatically derives implementations of these methods.

JEqualityGen proceeds in two states: it first uses source code reflection in MetaAspectJ to generate aspects that contain the method implementations, before it uses weaving on the bytecode level to insert these into the target application. JEqualityGen generates not only correct, but efficient source code that on a typical large-scale Java application exhibits a performance improvement of more than two orders of magnitude in the equality operations generated, compared to an existing system based on runtime reflection. JEqualityGen achieves this by generating runtime profiling code that collects data. This enables it to generate optimised method implementations in a second round.

Categories and Subject Descriptors D.3.4 [Processors]: Code generation

General Terms Algorithms, Performance, Theory

Keywords meta-programming, equality, hashing, code generation, Java, Scala, AspectJ, AOP

1. Introduction
The notion of equality between objects is distinguished from object identity in that the latter is tied to the concept of individuating different objects regardless of their behaviour. Equality is a more general concept which is defined more loosely as ‘some’ equivalence relation between objects. The official Java documentation [1] published by Sun (Oracle) contains an object contract that specifies the details of this relation, and asks that equals methods behave as an equivalence relation. To support this, Java provides a default equals method in the Object class that follows this contract. It is intended that programmers override this method to define their own custom notion of equality between objects, obviously without breaking the contract. Note, however, that this contract is not at all enforced in the Java language.

The implementation of equals methods in many different classes can therefore be a tedious and error-prone process. In fact, a number of studies [2, 3], together with our research, suggest that most of these equality methods are faulty and violate the object contract. This arises partly due to underspecification in the object contract itself, and partly due to subtleties in field shadowing, comparisons between different types, object cycles, etc. This should be quite worrying since program bugs due to equality such as symmetry and transitivity violations tend to cause errors that can be hard to track down. However, for most purposes the equals and hashCode methods are conceptually simple operations, and their implementations can be generated automatically. In order to do this though we must identify what notion of object equality we target.

One reasonable viewpoint is that two objects are equal if they are semantically indiscernible. This entails that all operations which may be performed on these objects produce semantically indiscernible results and cause semantically indiscernible changes in state. However, this relation is difficult to characterise formally and for general languages will be undecidable. In practice, we can approximate this extensional view with a finer notion of equality by simply comparing object state on a per-field basis. We adopt this view of object equality throughout the paper. This approach is also taken by Rayside et al. [3] who describe and evaluate a generic, reflective implementation of equals and hashCode methods. Their solution relies entirely on runtime reflection to ascertain the full state of each object under comparison. Although this will adequately perform equality checks there are some drawbacks to doing this. Firstly, there is clearly a performance hit in using runtime reflection to traverse object graphs. In particular, detecting cycles in an object’s state at runtime is unnecessarily costly. Secondly, the implementation of the equality method is generic and hence not available for analysis or specialisation. Instead, we adopt an approach where we statically generate equality implementations by using reflection in MetaAspectJ. The generated code is actually in the form of an aspect which is then woven into the build process of large projects. Since we are effectively providing support at the bytecode level rather than at the Java source code level, JEqualityGen can also work for other programming languages that are compiled into the JVM, and we demonstrate this for Scala. Since JEqualityGen statically generates specialised implementations which require no runtime reflection, a typical performance improvement of almost two orders of magnitude can be observed over the runtime reflection solution by Rayside et al. [3]. A further speed-up can be achieved by adapting the order in which fields are compared to the application profile. JEqualityGen supports this by generating runtime profiling code that collects data which can then be used in a second round to automatically generate the optimised method implementations.

For the remainder of this paper we begin by identifying the challenges we are faced with in implementing equality methods. We

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1http://sourceforge.net/projects/jequalitygen/
do this by considering the common causes of faulty equality implementations. This requires us to consider how the object contract impacts upon the comparison of objects at different but comparable types and also how the class hierarchy affects comparisons. Further to this, we need to be able to account for equality between objects with cyclic reference graphs. For example, consider two linked list objects in which one list is a single node cycle containing a value, and the other is a two node cycle in which both nodes contain the same value. These two objects should be considered equal and our generator recursively checks equality over such cyclic object structures.

An issue closely related to the generation of equals methods is the generation of the related hashCode method. This method is used for providing a hashed value of the receiver object’s state and is supported in Java similarly to method equals by providing a default implementation in the class Object. What is worth noting is that the interplay between hashCode and equals is specified as part of the object contract. In particular, the hashed values must respect equality of objects. For this reason, we also support the generation of hashCode methods in JEQualityGen. Moreover, we provide support for compile-time warnings of mutations of key fields which may adversely affect hash code calculations.

In Section 4 we give an overview of JEQualityGen’s architecture and provide a more detailed description of issues related to its implementation. This includes various code optimisations which have been made to both simplify the code of and improve performance of the generated methods. Given that we designed JEQualityGen with performance in mind, we also provide a mechanism for runtime profiling of equality operations. JEQualityGen can then use profiled information in order to regenerate code that optimises the order in which comparisons are made within equality operations. We demonstrate the effectiveness of code generation and our optimisations by running benchmarks comparing JEQualityGen and Rayside’s [3] system. These benchmarks, together with other test cases, are based on a popular Java charting library, JFreeChart [4].

2. Implementing Equality

In this section we consider the Java object contract and discuss the problems that arise with naive implementations of equality according to this model.

2.1 The Java object contract

The official Java documentation [1] describes the contract the equals method has to follow.

The equals method implements an equivalence relation on non-null object references:

- It is reflexive: for any non-null reference value \( x \), \( x.equals(x) \) should return true.
- It is symmetric: for any non-null reference values \( x \) and \( y \), \( x.equals(y) \) should return true if and only if \( y.equals(x) \) returns true.
- It is transitive: for any non-null reference values \( x \), \( y \), and \( z \), \( \text{if } x.equals(y) \text{ returns true and } y.equals(z) \text{ returns true, then } x.equals(z) \text{ should return true.} \)
- It is consistent: for any non-null reference values \( x \) and \( y \), multiple invocations of \( x.equals(y) \) consistently return true or consistently return false, provided no information used in equals comparisons on the objects is modified.
- For any non-null reference value \( x \), \( x.equals(null) \) should return false.

We can see immediately from this contract that it does not specify exactly how equality should be implemented and it will accept object identity (also called referential equality) as an implementation. Indeed, object identity is the default implementation provided in class Object. Object identity is tackled extensively by Khoshafian and Copeland [5], who also define a taxonomy of different object identity implementation strategies. The simplest form of identity test is a comparison of the physical memory addresses of the objects. Other implementations compare virtual addresses, structural identifiers or user-specified identifier keys. In other systems such as PostgreSQL, objects contain a system-generated object identifier unique for every relation.

Java distinguishes between object identity, which is encoded in the == operator and remains fixed, and object equality, which is handled by the equals method and defaults to identity, but can be overridden.

There are different natural choices for implementing object equality. The common approach is to perform a state-based comparison between objects of the same, or at least similar types. Khoshafian and Copeland [5] define different levels of equality, namely shallow and deep equality while Gregoros and Sakkinen [6] refine this concept.

Referential equality, also called depth-0 equality, holds for \( a \) and \( b \) if \( a \) and \( b \) both point to the same objects. For primitive types such as integers, this is the only type of equality we are interested in. Shallow equality (or depth-1 equality), like shallow cloning, implies that for each field in \( a \) and \( b \), referential equality holds. Depth-\( k \) equality holds on objects \( a \) and \( b \) if all fields in \( a \) are depth-\( k' \) equal to the corresponding fields in \( b \), for all \( k' < k \). We refer to this type of equality as deep equality in case \( k = \omega \). Objects \( a \) and \( b \) are thus deeply equal if all fields in \( a \) are deeply equal to the fields in \( b \). Abiteboul and Van den Bussche [7] discuss three different logical characterisations of deep equality and show that they are equivalent.

An elegant property of referential, shallow, depth-\( k \) and deep equality is that each type of equality implies the next. For example, reference equality implies all other aforementioned types of equality since if two objects are identical they are obviously equal in all possible aspects. In this paper we address the implementation of the coarsest of these relations, deep equality. A naive approach to this problem would be to implement equality in a given class by making a per-field comparison of equality on each field of the class. For fields of primitive type their values can be compared directly using depth-0 equality. For fields of reference type the equals method can be invoked recursively. There are two glaring problems with this approach—this solution does not interact well with subtyping at all, and it will cause divergent behaviour on cyclic object graphs. We now consider these problems in turn and consider how to address them.

2.2 Comparing objects with different types

Equality comparisons between two objects of different types are difficult in general. Vaziri et al. [2] claim that an equals implementation breaks the Java object contract [1] in this case. An implementation cannot be symmetric and transitive when it compares two objects of different types that might have a different interface as well as a different implementation.

It is, however, desirable to allow, for example, TreeSet and HashSet objects from the Java API to be comparable since they can be interchanged while maintaining the same behaviour of the system. A pragmatic solution to achieve this is to perform equality on different classes at a particular super-type level, although, in practice, this presents a number of issues. For example, Hovenmeyer et al. [8] note that one common mistake is to have equality methods that return true even though the object types under con-
equals the instance check fails depending on whether tends to cause problems if we compare two objects whose respective operation in the case of incompatible types. However, this different types start with an instance check that short-circuits the private members is impeded.

Field shadowing when sub-calling. Java permits the overriding of fields throughout a class hierarchy. Unfortunately, this presents a number of challenges when implementing equality methods that compare objects of different types. For a simple example, consider again the Point class in Listing 2 containing two integer numbers and a FPoint class that extends Point and shadows its fields. The naive implementation of equality in this situation is to implement a single equals method in the Point class that works for both classes, and directly accesses both fields of the objects being compared. However, Java does not use the dynamic type of an object when resolving field accesses, but its static type. Since p2.equals(p1) is dispatched to Point.equals, it does thus not operate on the FPoint fields, but instead on the shadowed Point fields. By default, these are set to zero and therefore p2.equals(p1) evaluates to false, even though the two points are created with the same coordinates.

In Listing 3, equals is overridden in FPoint, in the hope that equality would use the correct fields when making the comparisons. With this modification, even though p2.equals(p1) returns true, p1.equals(p2) returns false and therefore symmetry is violated. This happens because the equals method called on p2 is FPoint.equals and uses the fields in FPoint while the equals method called on p1 is Point.equals, which only sees Point.x and Point.y, as above.

Implementing getter methods and using them in the equality operations solves this problem. Care must be taken however, as the getter methods operate on the fields that are visible at that level in the class hierarchy. Therefore these methods must be overridden together with all equality methods.

Listing 4 shows a correct implementation with respect to field shadowing.

2.3 Cyclic object graphs

A cyclic object graph can easily occur when objects are referencing each other. If the developer writing the equals (or hashCode) methods is not aware of this, an invocation of such methods would
class Point {
    public int x, y;
    public boolean equals(Object o) {
        if (!(o instanceof Point)) return false;
        Point that=(Point)o;
        return this.x==that.x && this.y==that.y;
    }
}
class FPoint extends Point {
    public int x, y; // shadows x and y in the Point class
    public boolean equals(Object o) {
        if (!(o instanceof Point)) return false;
        Point that=(Point)o;
        return this.x==that.x && this.y==that.y;
    }
}
Point p1=new Point();
FPoint p2=new FPoint();
p1.x=5; p1.y=5; p2.x=5; p2.y=5;
assert p2.equals(p1);
assert p1.equals(p2); // false - error

Listing 3. Direct field access and overridden equality

class Point {
    public int x, y;
    public int getX() { return x; }
    public int getY() { return y; }
    public boolean equals(Object o) {
        if (!(o instanceof Point)) return false;
        Point that=(Point)o;
        return getX()==that.getX() &&
                getY()==that.getY();
    }
}
class FPoint extends Point {
    public int x, y;
    public int getX() { return x; }
    public int getY() { return y; }
    public boolean equals(Object o) {
        if (!(o instanceof Point)) return false;
        Point that=(Point)o;
        return getX()==that.getX() &&
                getY()==that.getY();
    }
}

Listing 4. Correct implementation. Overriding equality methods
and accessors

never return and would consequently overflow the call stack. Ignoring fields that may be involved in a cycle would make the method terminate without overflows the stack, but it would also make the equality method unfaithful to the abstract state of the original object [3]. In fact, it would either identify all cyclic object graphs, or make them all distinct.

It is, however, possible to write equals (and hashCode) methods that can deal with cycles. One approach that was already used in Eiffel [11] is to assume that two objects are, prima facie, equal. Their object graphs are then traversed in parallel, and their corresponding fields are compared, in search of evidence to refute this assumption. Since no more evidence can be obtained by traversing a cycle multiple times, we can assume that the objects in a cycle are equal. Figure 1 shows an example of this. Note that cyclic objects can be equal even if their object graphs are not isomorphic. We do not support an equality check based on graph isomorphism, but the modular implementation of JEquality-Gen should facilitate such a change. For hashCode, whenever a cycle is encountered, the object structure cycle’s hash is substituted by a constant number. We follow this approach to handle cyclic object structures, which is similar to Rayside et al. [3].

3. Implementing Hashing

3.1 The relationship between equals and hashCode

Although not enforced by the compiler, the Object contract [1] also specifies a clear relationship between the equals and hashCode methods:

• Whenever it is invoked on the same object more than once during an execution of a Java application, the hashCode method must consistently return the same integer, provided no information used in equals comparisons on the object is modified. This integer need not remain consistent from one execution of an application to another execution of the same application.

• If two objects are equal according to Object.equals, then calling the hashCode method on each of the two objects must produce the same integer result.

• If two objects are not equal according to the method Object.equals, then calling the hashCode method on each of the two objects may or may not produce the same integer result.

Listing 5 demonstrates what happens if hashCode is not in line with the equals method. Since the HashSet implementation in Java uses the hash code of an object to search for the actual object in the collection, objects with different hash codes are considered not equal. This will occur in our example since the default implementation of hashCode returns a value based on the location of the object. The ArrayList structure, on the other hand, does not make use of hash codes.

Rayside et al. [3] analyse three different Java projects and conclude that simple errors are all too common. One of the simplest errors is when equals is implemented but hashCode is not. A
number of tools [8, 12] can easily spot this trivial mistake and enforce implementation of both methods at once. A human inspector however can easily miss this mistake because “the mistake lies in what is missing” [8]. Similarly, on larger projects, changes in the structure of the class require changes in equals and hashCode. Often, these changes are overlooked, especially considering that there is no enforcement mechanism in the Java language. If these methods are automatically generated then these problems are easily solved.

3.2 Consistency of key fields
Vaziri et al. [2] note that the object contract does not require that key fields be immutable. There are, however, undesirable consequences in allowing key fields that make up the abstract state of an object to mutate during runtime. A minor consequence is that equality and hash results cannot be cached (memoisation). A more serious consequence is that if an object is placed into a collection, the operations add, remove and contains will exhibit an unexpected behaviour. For example, in the case of a HashSet, if an object is added, it is stored in a hash bucket determined by the value of its hash code. Mutating one of the key fields in this object effectively changes the object’s hash code, and it can no longer be retrieved since it resides in a different bucket that does no longer correspond to its new hash code.

Countering this problem entails that equality and hashing should be based on fields that are immutable. The Java specification, however, does not enforce this constraint. Ideally the Java runtime system would check whether an object’s fields are mutated after the invocation of the first equals or hashCode and issue a runtime exception or warning.

4. JEQualityGen: Architecture and Implementation
JEQualityGen is a code generator that automatically generates equals and hashCode methods from annotated class archive files. In building JEQualityGen, we make use of aspect oriented programming (AOP) techniques, because we believe that object equality is a cross-cutting concern. In particular, we use Meta-AspectJ [13], a meta-programming extension for AspectJ [14]. Meta-AspectJ leverages the program transformation capabilities of AspectJ such as inter-type declarations. This enables us to statically weave the generated code into the existing Java bytecode. We also rely on AspectJ’s runtime reflection, in particular its ability to inspect the call stack, to handle cyclic object graphs.

4.1 Overview
Figure 2 gives an overview of the structure of JEQualityGen. It works by loading the user’s classes and, using reflection, statically analyses each class and generates AspectJ aspects with the appropriate equality and hashing implementations. These aspects are woven into the user’s existing classes using the AspectJ compiler. All operations are therefore carried out on compiled Java classes. This makes JEQualityGen easy to integrate into the build process.

The code generation is modularised; each module is responsible for certain elements of the generated aspects. A set of introspectors act as facades [15] to the annotated Java classes. They analyse the actual classes and provide the basic information used by the remaining parts of the generator, including:

- which classes may be involved in cycles;
- which fields are being shadowed; and
- the order in which to best structure the equality expression based on separately collected runtime profiling information.

This approach allows us to separate our code generator into smaller generators. For example, there is a generator responsible for the “naive” equality implementation and another generator for the cyclic handlers. These generators are independent from each other, and since they do not impinge on each other’s generated code, they can be switched on and off. We then rely on AspectJ’s weaving facilities to “recombine” the individual fragments into a single implementation, instead of generating a monolithic implementation of equality we could make use of AspectJ’s weaving facilities.

A field accessor facade acts as a facade [15] to each of the individual fields in a class. These facades are implemented in MAJ and can be viewed as a collection of generators that generate per field advice for the final generated aspect. Every facade generates:

- accessor expressions for the particular field;
- getters for the field; and
- mutation warnings and errors advice to ensure that key fields are not mutated in certain instances.

The output of JEQualityGen is a single aspect that contains all the equality implementations, getters, warning declarations and cyclic-object graph advice. The implementations of the equals and hashCode methods constructed follow the guidelines described in Sections 2 and 3.

4.2 Annotations
In order to make use of JEQualityGen, the classes for which equals and hashCode should be generated must be annotated with a few simple annotations:

Equality JEQualityGen will generate appropriate equality implementations for classes that are annotated with this annotation. A super-type may also be specified so that objects may be compared at that specific level.

ReferenceEquality JEQualityGen will use Java’s default reference equality (==) when classes annotated with this annotation are encountered.

NonKey Fields annotated as non-keys will not be considered as key fields and not be used for equality comparisons and hash code computations. All fields are considered as key fields by default.

In cases where the code that requires an equality implementation is inaccessible to the weaver (see Section 4.6), any information about the classes required in JEQualityGen can be given through command line arguments.

Annotating classes that already implement either equals or hashCode methods leads to a compile-time error, in particular, a duplicate method declaration, as we use inter-type declarations to insert the generated methods into the target classes.
4.3 Generating equals methods

In order to implement equality, we generate two methods, equals, which is the main operation, and canEqual, which determines whether its argument is an instance of the correct type. An example of the generated methods is given in Listing 8. It is surprising to see that it takes so much code to implement proper equality operations for such conceptually simple classes.

The equals methods follow a specific template, and performs the following steps:

- coerce the argument object to the correct equality type (i.e., the type on which the equality is evaluated);
- check whether the receiver object is comparable to the argument, and conversely check whether the argument is comparable to the receiver;
- profile how often fields differ between different objects, to determine in which order they are compared; and
- (recursively) check whether each key field in the receiver object is equal to each key field in the other object.

An example of a generated equality expression, as discussed in the last item, is shown in Listing 6. The exact form of the equality expression for each field depends on the type of the field, and the code generation task was split into multiple parts, depending on the type of the field.

If a field is of a primitive type or a simple reference type which requires only reference equality (a class annotated with @ReferenceEquality), the Java == operator is used for equality. An expression that evaluates to the value of the field is generated (for example this.__get_x() for field x). The selection depends on whether the field can be accessed without the need of an accessor, whether it needs a custom accessor, or whether it requires the use of a standard Java accessor.

A problem which arises when comparing floats or doubles is that nothing is equal to Float.NaN or Double.NaN. JEqualityGen uses the function Float.floatToIntBits in the case of floats and Double.doubleToLongBits in the case of doubles. In the case of an array, if the enclosing type of such array is yet another array, the Arrays.arrays.deepEquals function is used. In the simple case of having an array of a non-array Arrays.equals is used.

If the field is not a primitive type, the equals method needs to be used. However, JEqualityGen also needs to make sure that the receiver object is not null. Nullity checks are therefore added to the generated expression.
Finding fields that require getters. In Section 2, we have seen that field shadowing leads to unexpected equality results. It is therefore necessary to add getters whenever the fields being declared are shadowed.

Fields that need getters are identified by traversing the class structure, noting which fields are declared at every level. If throughout the search a field is found to be declared at more than one level, both of these fields are added to the results set. This data is later used to write the appropriate getters for the fields, and JEqualityGen always accesses these fields using the generated custom getters.

4.4 Generating hashCode methods

For the hashCode method, JEqualityGen generates an integer expression, rather than a boolean expression, but the underlying logic is similar to that of the equality generators. As in the case of the equality expression, dispatching is done according to the type of the field. In the case of a primitive field, dispatch is done over these various primitive types as follows:

Boolean The expression generated evaluates to a particular constant value in the case of true and a different constant in the case of false.

Character The character is cast to an integer.

Float The Float.floatToIntBits() function is used to get an integer value from the Float.

Long The 32 MSBs are xor-ed with the 32 LSBs.

Double The Double.doubleToLongBits function is used and the resulting 32 MSBs are xor-ed with the resulting 32 LSBs.

The individual expressions are then conjoined to form a Kernighan and Ritchie multiplicative hash expression [16]. Listing 7 shows part of a generated hashing expression for various field types. We have chosen this hash function because it is fast. The modular design of JEqualityGen makes it easy to change the particular hashing method. This could even be done based on runtime feedback.

4.5 Handling Cycles

In Section 2, we have seen potential cycles in the object graph. Of course, this is a "good thing": given the class declarations, it is clear that there cannot be a
private transient boolean Point.hCalled = false;

before(Point self) :
    execution(* hashCode()) & target(self) { 
      self.hCalled = true;
    }

before(Point self, int val):
    if (self.hCalled && !(self.x1 == val)) && 
    set(* Point.x1) & target(self) & args(val) { 
      throw new KeyMutationException("Point.x1 has been mutated"); 
    }

Listing 10. An exception is raised whenever a key field is mutated if hashCode has been called already on that object

cycle, so there is no need to check for it. Hence, in order to reduce the size and increase the speed of the generated code, JEqualityGen makes use of a simple algorithm that statically detects whether cycles are possible at all.

Determining whether a class might be involved in cycles. In general, a class might be involved in a cycle if it contains a field which may be assigned from itself. By extension, this would happen also if any of a class’s fields might in turn contain a field assignable from the original class. This property extends itself recursively.

Although not much code is required to determine such an eventuality, such an algorithm lends itself to bugs. Given a particular container class and a containee (initially the same class), JEqualityGen goes through each of the container class’s fields (one parent class at a time) and sees whether any of the fields is assignable from the containee. If the field is not a primitive type, JEqualityGen then in turn sees whether the containee may be contained in this field. This process is invoked recursively until all fields in the class hierarchy are tested. Classes which have already been traversed do not need to be traversed a second time.

Advice for cycle handling. Cycles are handled by generating advice that uses a point-cut descriptor as shown in Listing 11. The executing advice uses one stack containing the visited objects for every different class that may be involved in cycles. If the current target of the point-cut is present in the stack, then the execution has reached a cycle. In such a case, object graphs involved in the cycle must be equal since the equality expression would have short-circuited otherwise. This would have terminated our equality computation, returning false. On the other hand, if the target object is not found on the stack, it is pushed on the stack. The execution then proceeds with the original equality computation and removes the target from the stack when the computation returns. The result is finally returned.

4.6 Generating code for inaccessible classes

JEqualityGen was initially designed to only operate on classes which the user has control over. This assumes that classes in external libraries that are used in the user’s code have a correct implementation of equals. This is typically not the case.

The simple approach to extending an inaccessible class is to use an AspectJ inter-type declaration and let the AspectJ weave in the equality method. However, it is impractical to have all libraries in the AspectJ inpath. For example, putting rt.jar in the inpath would crash the weave.

The approach used in JEqualityGen instead is that of extending (i.e., sub-claasing) the class and adding the actual equality logic in the extended class. All calls to the constructor of the original class are intercepted and replaced by calls to the extended class. This not only solves any problems in the auto-generated equals methods but also in any other invocations of equals on the original classes in the user’s code.

Privileged access of classes require AspectJ to weave special accessors into the accessed classes. Unfortunately, this entails that the original classes are advised. Since these classes form part of the Java library and the state would be exposed through the Java API in a standard and consistent manner, JEqualityGen only accesses an object’s state through its getters in the case of external libraries.

An experimental feature in AspectJ has to be used to make the generated aspect serialisable. All fields in the aspect are however marked as transient as these are not of any importance for the serialisation. The result is that any relevant aspects are now serialised with the classes they advise.

5. Runtime statistics-based optimisations

JEqualityGen can instrument the equality operations it generates in such a way that they gather statistics about the fields in the class; specifically, the methods keep a tally of how often each field in each class has failed the equality operation. This can then be used to generate optimised equality operations, simply by placing the fields with the highest probability of failing the equality operation at the beginning of the expression. This increases the chances of these fields failing the equality test early, and thus short-circuiting the equality operation.

5.1 Gathering and persisting statistics

When JEqualityGen is instructed to gather statistics about the generated code, the following steps take place:

- the code to declare the necessary data structures that record field statistics at runtime is generated;
- the necessary code fragments that perform the profiling are generated; and
- the code that is invoked before the program terminates is generated (see Listing 12). This code persists the profiling information to disk.

Listing 13 shows some of the code that gathers the statistics. The per-field equality expressions generated by the field accessor facades are also used as arguments to the tally method in our statistics gathering classes. In order to properly gather the statistics, the individual field equality expressions must, however, not short-circuit, and the effects of all fields must go into the tally. However,
of code for this project. The benchmark exercised the equals and hashCode methods of the the top level container class org.jfree.chart.JFreeChart. This class contained objects of most of the classes in the project.

We compare JEQualityGen to the system presented by Rayside et al. [3], and benchmarks were run on both of these systems. Since the system by Rayside et al. uses caching to enhance performance, we ran the benchmark loop several times before starting the timer. This enabled both the JVM and the implementation of Rayside et al. to warm up.

Table 1 lists the results of running these benchmarks on a Lenovo T500 2.4GHz under 64-bit Debian running sun-java-6. JEqualityGen is able to produce equals methods that are about 162 times faster than [3] and hashCode methods that are about 31 times faster.

We note that given the sheer size of JFreeChart and the complexity of its class structure, invoking reflection on an entire object graph is much slower than a direct field access. Another reason why Rayside et al.’s solution is slower is that a lot of dispatching and analysis is carried out at runtime, while in our case this is carried out at code generation time. A case in point is the cycle detection optimisation that is done at code generation time. Runtime feedback and re-ordering the equality expression also helps to boost the performance of JEQualityGen’s generated code, by a factor of two. Note that this is not applicable the same way for computing the hash codes, because the hash code must be computed from all key fields.

6.2 Correctness analysis
We initially planned to analyse the correctness of JEQualityGen by statically verifying the generated bytecode. This would have allowed us to prove that our implementation yields the correct notion of equality and to compare it to a reflective solution. Unfortunately, there are no mature Java bytecode verifiers available and therefore we had to resort to normal testing.

In order to assess the correctness of JEQualityGen, we modified the JFreeChart project to utilise our code generator for the equality and hashing implementations rather than using the manual implementations. Given the size of the project, this served as a good test case for JEQualityGen and it also influenced some of our design decisions. There were some problems we encountered throughout our testing, namely:

- **Hard-coded hash-codes** Since our auto-generated hash functions are different (but still correct), test cases expecting a specific hash value for some objects obviously fail.
- **Incorrect equality implementations** Some equality test cases are not faithful to the state of the object. For example, serialising and de-serialising the object would change the object. Other implementations were buggy for other reasons. Some test cases were written in such a way that a correct implementation fails.
- **Key mutation** Whenever a key field is mutated in an object after the hashCode method is called, an exception is raised. Unfortunately, this runtime check caused some tests to fail. It was shown in Section 2 why key fields should not be allowed to mutate.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>JEG</th>
<th>JEG w/profiling optimisations</th>
<th>Rayside et al. [3]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>equals</td>
<td>2297</td>
<td>1108</td>
<td>179856</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hashCode</td>
<td>3602</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>86683</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Time to run benchmark in ms

6. Experimental Evaluation

6.1 Performance analysis
Since JEQualityGen uses code generation rather than reflection, we certainly expected an improvement in performance. In order to evaluate to which degree the performance improvements materialised, we wrote a benchmark that exercises the equals and hashCode methods of a number of classes from the JFreeChart project [4]. JFreeChart is a charting library that is part of the DaCapo Benchmark Suite [17]. It contains 1158 classes, with 8960 methods. We generated equality and hashing methods for 478 of these classes, of which 101 had cyclic handling advice generated for. This means that 101 of these classes could potentially be involved in cycles. JEQualityGen generated 25000 lines

```java
after() : execution(static void *..main(..)) {
    try {
        fieldStatistics.persist("./profileinfo.dat");
        ...
    } catch (IOException ioe) {
        ...
    }
}
```

Listing 12. Advice which is executed before the application exits
area of improvement would be to offer the user thread-safe versions of equality and hashing methods. In its current form, it is up to the user to take care of concurrency.

Lastly, other methods can be generated using the same techniques. These are, for example, the clone method and the toString method. The latter is catered for in Eclipse [18]. Functionality responsible for serialising objects could also be automatically generated. Using code generation, serialisation is known to run faster [19].

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References