Java is a high-level, class-based, object-oriented programming language that is designed to have as few implementation dependencies as possible. It is a general-purpose programming language intended to let programmers write once, run anywhere (WORA),[16] meaning that compiled Java code can run on all platforms that support Java without the need to recompile.[17] Java applications are typically compiled to bytecode that can run on any Java virtual machine (JVM) regardless of the underlying computer architecture. The syntax of Java is similar to C and C++, but has fewer low-level facilities than either of them. The Java runtime provides dynamic capabilities (such as reflection and runtime code modification) that are typically not available in traditional compiled languages.

Automatic memory management

Java uses an automatic garbage collector to manage memory in the object lifecycle. The programmer determines when objects are created, and the Java runtime is responsible for recovering the memory once objects are no longer in use. Once no references to an object remain, the unreachable memory becomes eligible to be freed automatically by the garbage collector. Something similar to a memory leak may still occur if a programmer's code holds a reference to an object that is no longer needed, typically when objects that are no longer needed are stored in containers that are still in use.[54] If methods for a non-existent object are called, a null pointer exception is thrown.[55][56]

One of the ideas behind Java's automatic memory management model is that programmers can be spared the burden of having to perform manual memory management. In some languages, memory for the creation of objects is implicitly allocated on the stack or explicitly allocated and deallocated from the heap. In the latter case, the responsibility of managing memory resides with the programmer. If the program does not deallocate an object, a memory leak occurs.[54] If the program attempts to access or deallocate memory that has already been deallocated, the result is undefined and difficult to predict, and the program is likely to become unstable or crash. This can be partially remedied by the use of smart pointers, but these add overhead and complexity. Garbage collection does not prevent logical memory leaks, i.e. those where the memory is still referenced but never used.[54]

Garbage collection may happen at any time. Ideally, it will occur when a program is idle. It is guaranteed to be triggered if there is insufficient free memory on the heap to allocate a new object; this can cause a program to stall momentarily. Explicit memory management is not possible in Java.

Java does not support C/C++ style pointer arithmetic, where object addresses can be arithmetically manipulated (e.g. by adding or subtracting an offset). This allows the garbage collector to relocate referenced objects and ensures type safety and security.

As in C++ and some other object-oriented languages, variables of Java's primitive data types are either stored directly in fields (for objects) or on the stack (for methods) rather than on the heap, as is commonly true for non-primitive data types (but see escape analysis). This was a conscious decision by Java's designers for performance reasons.

Java contains multiple types of garbage collectors. Since Java 9, HotSpot uses the Garbage First Garbage Collector (G1GC) as the default.[57] However, there are also several other garbage collectors that can be used to manage the heap. For most applications in Java, G1GC is sufficient. Previously, the Parallel Garbage Collector was used in Java 8.

Having solved the memory management problem does not relieve the programmer of the burden of handling properly other kinds of resources, like network or database connections, file handles, etc., especially in the presence of exceptions.