

# CMSC 330: Organization of Programming Languages

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## Garbage Collection

### Memory attributes

- Memory to store data in programming languages has several attributes:
  - **Persistence** (or **lifetime**) – How long the memory exists
  - **Allocation** – When the memory is available for use
  - **Recovery** – When the system recovers the memory for reuse
- Most programming languages are concerned with some subset of the following 4 memory classes:
  - **Fixed** (or **static**) memory
  - **Automatic** memory
  - Programmer **allocated** memory
  - **Persistent** memory

## Memory classes

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- **Static** memory – Usually a fixed address in memory
  - Persistence – Lifetime of execution of program
  - Allocation – By compiler for entire execution
  - Recovery – By system when program terminates
- **Automatic** memory – Usually on a stack
  - Persistence – Lifetime of method using that data
  - Allocation – When method is invoked
  - Recovery – When method terminates

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## Memory classes

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- **Allocated** memory – Usually memory on a heap
  - Persistence – As long as memory is needed
  - Allocation – Explicitly by programmer
  - Recovery – Either by programmer or automatically (when possible and depends upon language)
- **Persistent** memory – Usually the file system
  - Persistence – Multiple execution of a program (e.g., files or databases)
  - Allocation – By program or user, often outside of program execution
  - Recovery – When data no longer needed
  - This form of memory usually outside of programming language course and part of database area (e.g., CMSC 424)

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## Memory Management in C

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- Local variables live on the stack
  - Allocated at function invocation time
  - Deallocated when function returns
  - Storage space reused after function returns
- Space on the heap allocated with `malloc()`
  - Must be explicitly freed with `free()`
  - This is called *explicit* or *manual* memory management
    - Deletions must be done by the user

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## Memory Management Mistakes

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- May forget to free memory (*memory leak*)

```
{ int *x = (int *) malloc(sizeof(int)); }
```
- May retain ptr to freed memory (*dangling pointer*)

```
{ int *x = ...malloc();  
  free(x);  
  *x = 5; /* oops! */  
}
```
- May try to free something twice

```
{ int *x = ...malloc(); free(x); free(x); }
```

  - This may corrupt the memory management data structures
    - E.g., the memory allocator maintains a *free list* of space on the heap that's available

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## Ways to Avoid Mistakes

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- Don't allocate memory on the heap
  - Often impractical
  - Leads to confusing code
- Never free memory
  - OS will reclaim process's memory anyway at exit
  - Memory is cheap; who cares about a little leak?
  - LISP model – System halts program and reclaims unused memory when there is no more available
- Use a garbage collector
  - E.g., conservative Boehm-Weiser collector for C

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## Memory Management in Ruby

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- Local variables live on the stack
  - Storage reclaimed when method returns
- Objects live on the heap
  - Created with calls to `Class.new`
- Objects never explicitly freed
  - Ruby uses *automatic memory management*
    - Uses a garbage collector to reclaim memory

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## Memory Management in OCaml

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- Local variables live on the stack
- Tuples, closures, and constructed types live on the heap
  - `let x = (3, 4)` (\* heap-allocated \*)
  - `let f x y = x + y in f 3`  
(\* result heap-allocated \*)
  - `type 'a t = None | Some of 'a`
  - `None` (\* not on the heap—just a primitive \*)
  - `Some 37` (\* heap-allocated \*)
- Garbage collection reclaims memory

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## Memory Management in Java

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- Local variables live on the stack
  - Allocated at method invocation time
  - Deallocated when method returns
- Other data lives on the heap
  - Memory is allocated with `new`
  - But never explicitly deallocated
    - Java uses automatic memory management

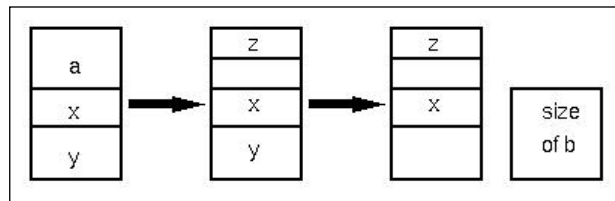
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## Memory Problem: Fragmentation

```
allocate(a);  
allocate(x);  
allocate(y);  
free(a);  
allocate(z);  
free(y);  
allocate(b);
```

⇒ No contiguous space for b

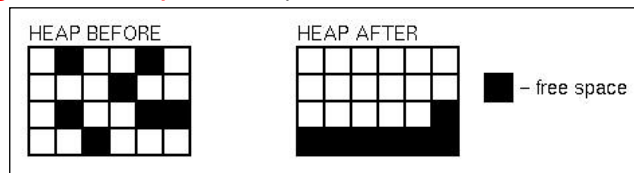


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## Garbage collection goal

- Process to reclaim memory. (Also solve **Fragmentation problem.**)



- **Algorithm:** You can do garbage collection and memory compaction if you know where every pointer is in a program. If you move the allocated storage, simply change the pointer to it.
- This is true in LISP, OCAML, Java, Prolog
- Not true in C, C++, Pascal, Ada

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## Garbage Collection (GC)

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- At any point during execution, can divide the objects in the heap into two classes:
  - *Live* objects will be used later
  - *Dead* objects will never be used again
    - They are garbage
- Idea: Can reuse memory from dead objects
- Goals: Reduce memory leaks, and make dangling pointers impossible

## Many GC Techniques

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- In most languages we can't know for sure which objects are really live or dead
  - Undecidable, like solving the halting problem
- Thus we need to make an approximation
  - OK if we decide something is live when it's not
  - But we'd better not deallocate an object that will be used later on

## Reachability

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- An object is *reachable* if it can be accessed by chasing pointers from live data
- Safe policy: delete unreachable objects
  - An unreachable object can never be accessed again by the program
    - The object is definitely garbage
  - A reachable object may be accessed in the future
    - The object could be garbage but will be retained anyway

## Roots

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- At a given program point, we define liveness as being data reachable from the root set:
  - Global variables
  - Local variables of all live method activations (i.e., the stack)
- At the machine level, we also consider the register set (usually stores local or global variables)
- Next: techniques for pointer chasing



## Reference Counting

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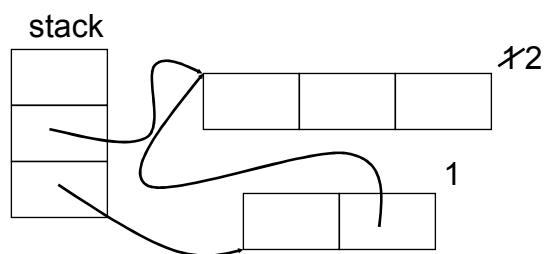
- Old technique (1960)
- Each object has count of number of pointers to it from other objects and from the stack
  - When count reaches 0, object can be deallocated
- Counts tracked by either compiler or manually
- To find pointers, need to know layout of objects
  - In particular, need to distinguish pointers from ints
- Method works mostly for reclaiming memory; doesn't handle fragmentation problem

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## Reference Counting Example

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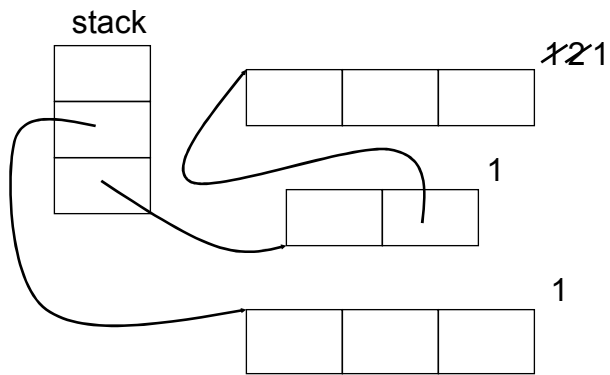


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## Reference Counting Example

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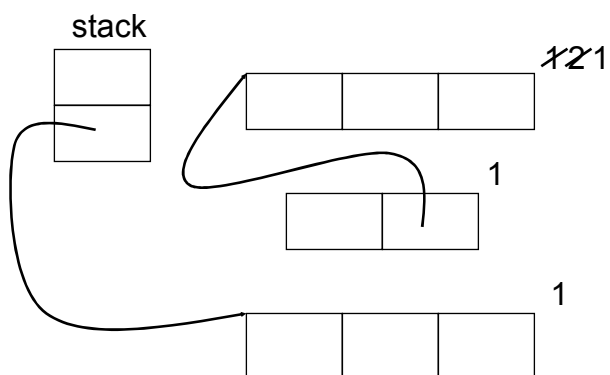


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## Reference Counting Example

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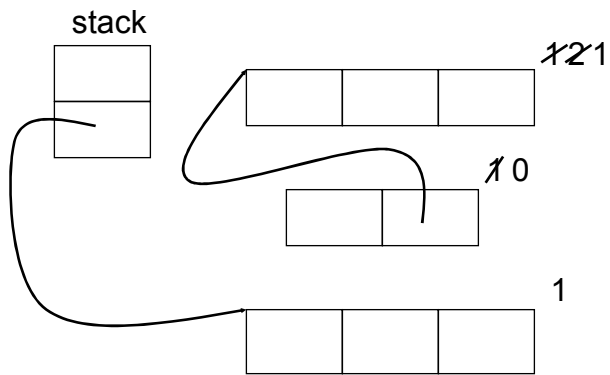


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## Reference Counting Example

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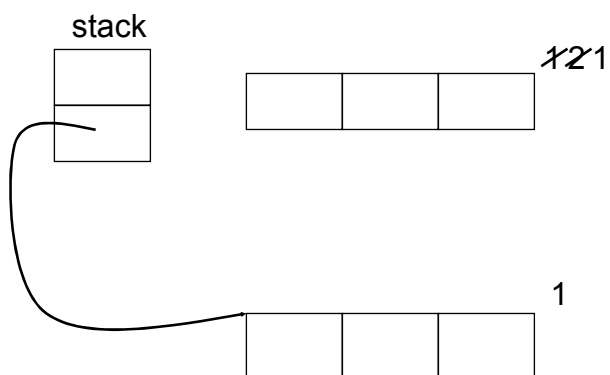


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## Reference Counting Example

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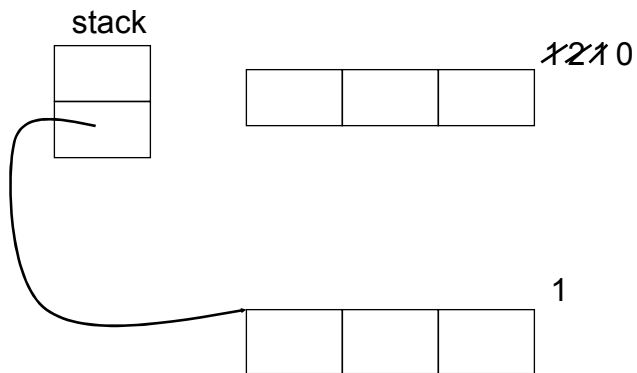


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## Reference Counting Example

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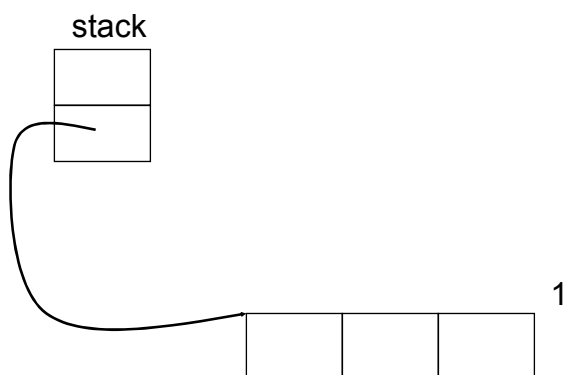


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## Reference Counting Example

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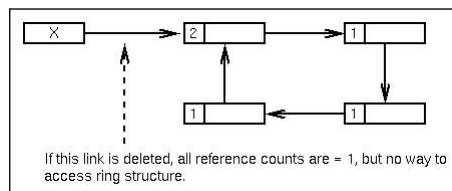


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## Tradeoffs

- Advantage: incremental technique
  - Generally small, constant amount of work per memory write
  - With more effort, can even bound running time
- Disadvantages:
  - Cascading decrements can be expensive
  - Can't collect cycles, since counts never go to 0
  - Also requires extra storage for reference counts



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## Mark and Sweep GC

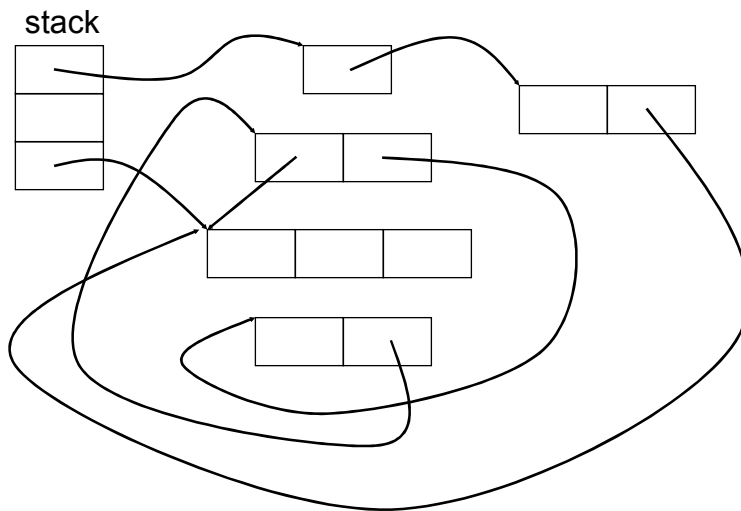
- Idea: Only objects reachable from stack could possibly be live
  - Every so often, stop the world and do GC:
    - Mark all objects on stack as live
    - Until no more reachable objects,
      - Mark object reachable from live object as live
    - Deallocate any non-reachable objects
- This is a *tracing* garbage collector
- Does not handle fragmentation problem

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## Mark and Sweep Example

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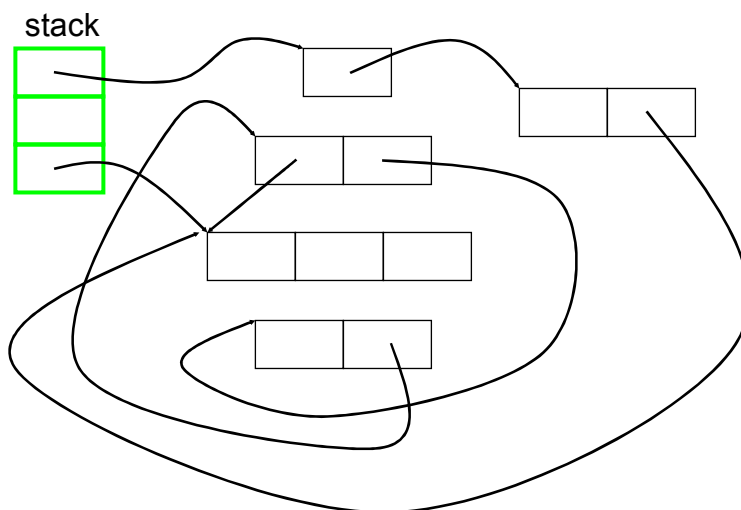


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## Mark and Sweep Example

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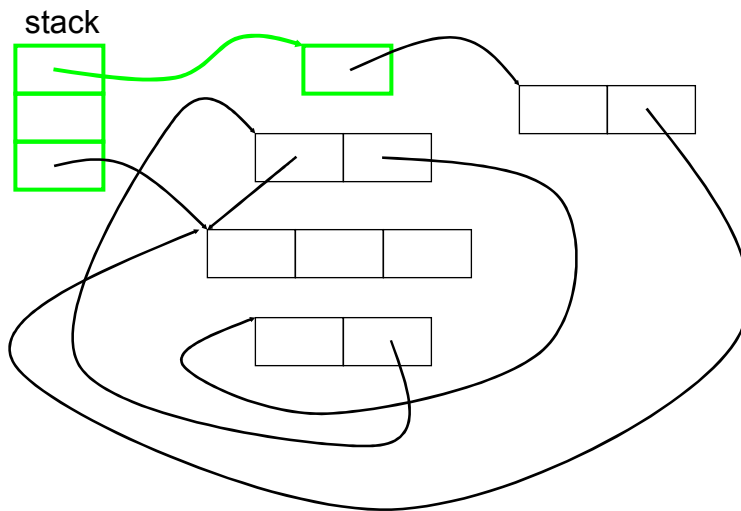


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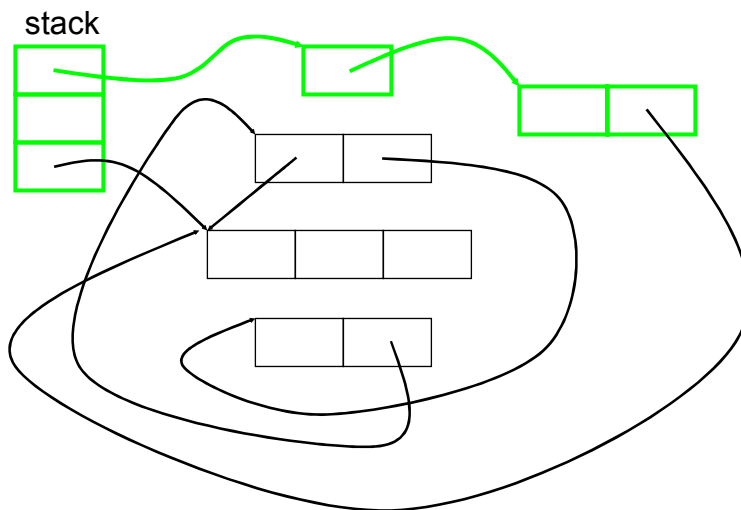
## Mark and Sweep Example

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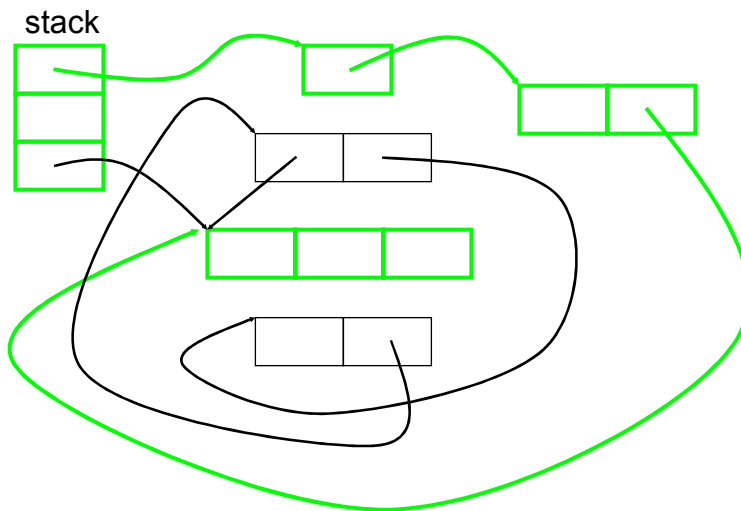
## Mark and Sweep Example

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## Mark and Sweep Example

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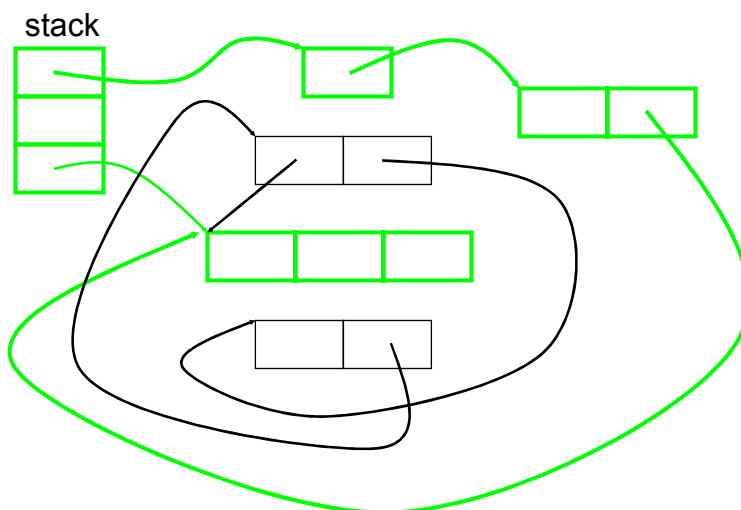


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## Mark and Sweep Example

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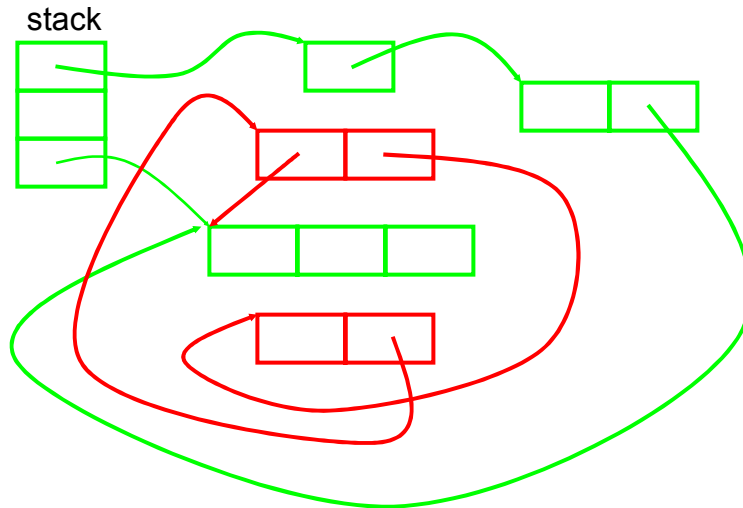
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## Mark and Sweep Example

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## Tradeoffs with Mark and Sweep

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- Pros:
  - No problem with cycles
  - Memory writes have no cost
- Cons:
  - Fragmentation
    - Available space broken up into many small pieces
      - Thus many mark-and-sweep systems may also have a *compaction* phase (like defragmenting your disk)
  - Cost proportional to heap size
    - Sweep phase needs to traverse whole heap – it touches dead memory to put it back on to the free list
  - Not appropriate for real-time applications
    - You wouldn't like your auto's braking system to stop working for a GC while you are trying to stop at a busy intersection

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## Stop and Copy GC

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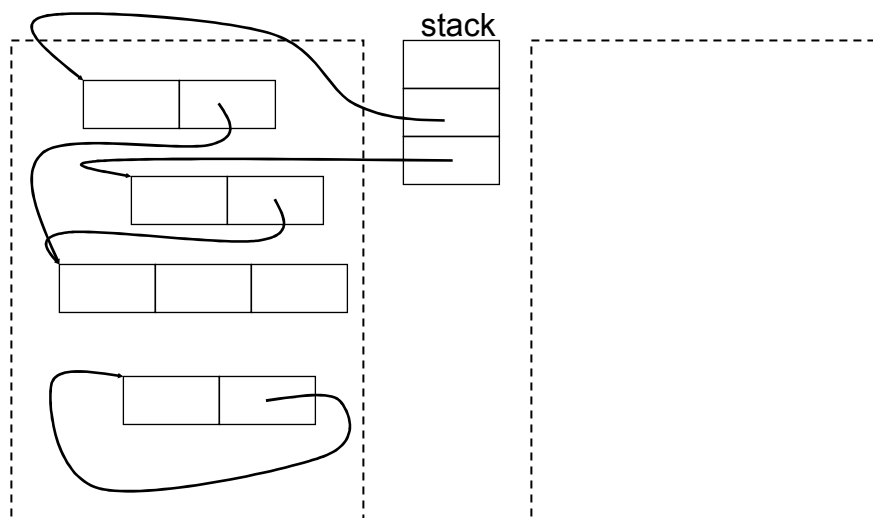
- Like mark and sweep, but only touches live objects
  - Divide heap into two equal parts (semispaces)
  - Only one semispace active at a time
  - At GC time, flip semispaces
    - Trace the live data starting from the stack
    - Copy live data into other semispace
    - Declare everything in current semispace dead; switch to other semispace

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## Stop and Copy Example

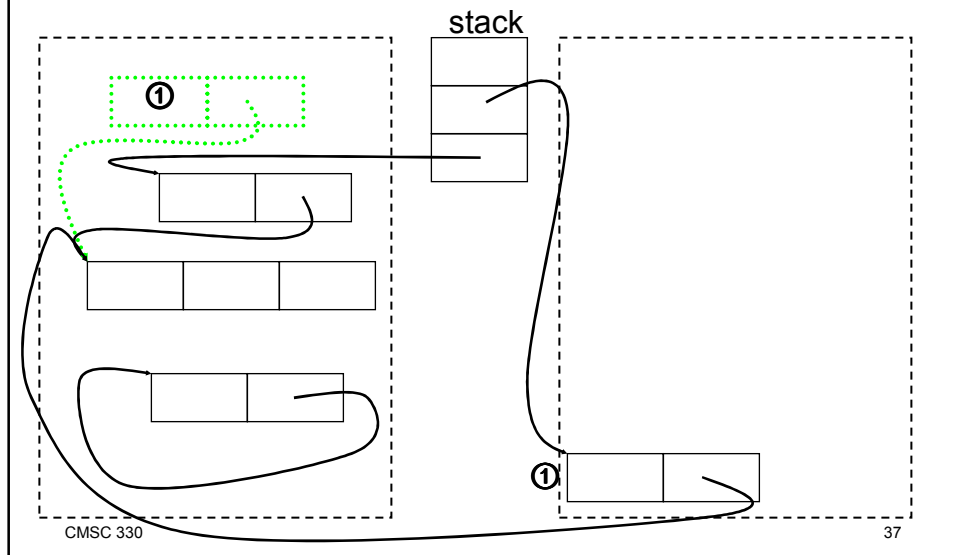
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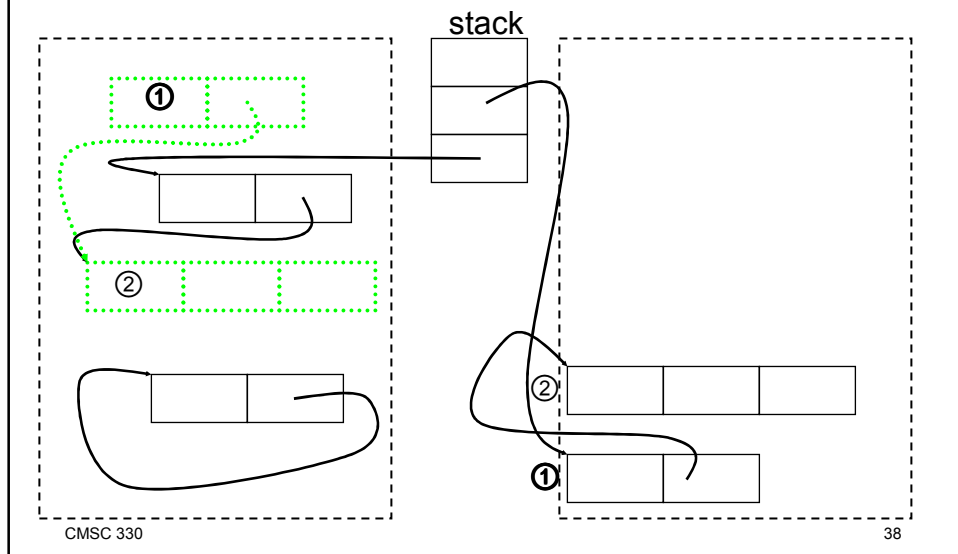
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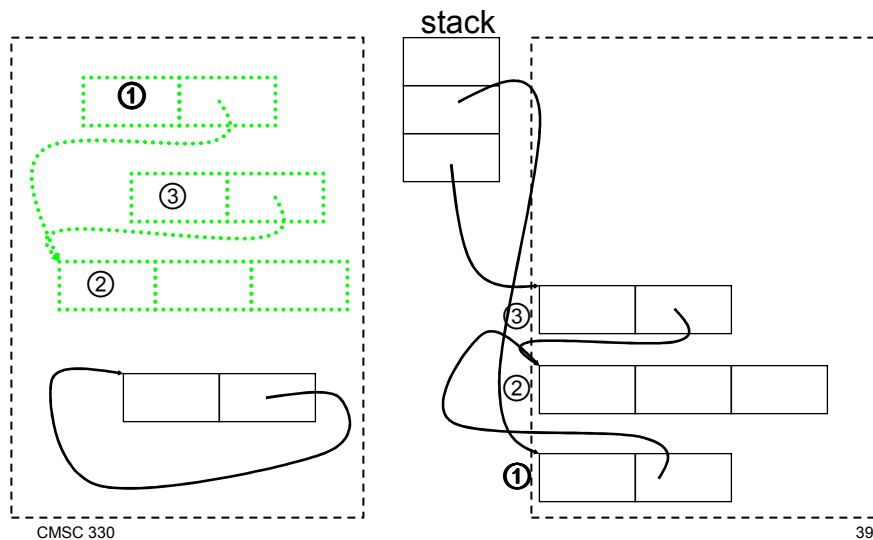
## Stop and Copy Example



## Stop and Copy Example



## Stop and Copy Example



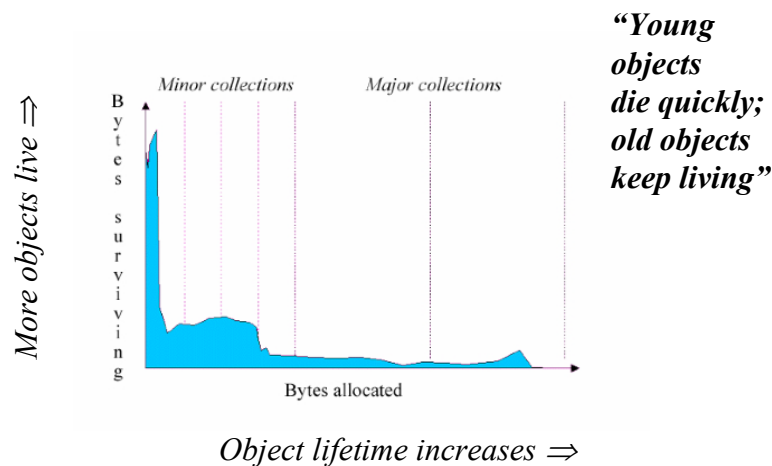
## Stop and Copy Tradeoffs

- Pros:
  - Only touches live data
  - No fragmentation; automatically compacts
    - Will probably increase locality
- Cons:
  - Requires twice the memory space
  - Like mark and sweep, need to “stop the world”
    - Program must stop running to let garbage collector move around data in the heap

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## The Generational Principle



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## Generational Collection

- Long lived objects get copied over and over
  - Idea: Have more than one semispace, divide into generations
    - Older generations collected less often
    - Objects that survive many collections get pushed into older generations
    - Need to track pointers from old to young generations to use as roots for young generation collection
- One popular setup
  - Generational stop and copy

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## More Issues in GC (cont'd)

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- Stopping the world is a big draw-back
  - Unpredictable performance
    - Bad for real-time systems
  - Need to stop all threads
    - Without a much more sophisticated GC
- One-size fits all solution
  - Sometimes, GC just gets in the way
  - But correctness comes first

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## What Does GC Mean to You?

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- Ideally, nothing
  - It should make your life easier
  - And shouldn't affect performance too much
    - May even give better performance than you'd have with explicit deallocation
- If GC becomes a problem, hard to solve
  - You can set parameters of the GC
  - You can modify your program
  - But don't optimize too early!

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## Dealing with GC Problems

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- Best idea: Measure where your problems are coming from
- For HotSpot VM, try running with
  - -verbose:gc
  - Prints out messages with statistics when a GC occurs
- [GC 325407K->83000K(776768K), 0.2300771 secs]
- [GC 325816K->83372K(776768K), 0.2454258 secs]
- [Full GC 267628K->83769K(776768K), 1.8479984 secs]

## GC Parameters

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- Can resize the generations
  - How much to use initially, plus max growth
- Change the total heap size
  - In terms of an absolute measure
  - In terms of ratio of free/allocated data
- For server applications, two common tweaks:
  - Make the total heap as big as possible
  - Make the young generation half the total heap

## Increasing Memory Performance

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- Don't allocate as much memory
  - Less work for your application
  - Less work for the garbage collector
  - Should improve performance
    - (Why only "should"?)
- Don't hold on to references
  - Null out pointers in data structures
  - Or use weak references

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## Find the Memory Leak

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```
class Stack {
    private Object[] stack;
    private int index;
    public Stack(int size) {
        stack = new Object[size];
    }
    public void push(Object o) {
        stack[index++] = o;
    }
    public void pop() {
        return stack[index--];
    }
}
```

– From Hagggar, Garbage Collection and the Java Platform Memory Model

**Answer: pop() leaves item on stack array; storage not reclaimed.**

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## Bad Ideas (Usually)

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- Calling System.gc()
  - This is probably a bad idea
  - You have no idea what the GC will do
  - And it will take a while
- Managing memory yourself
  - Object pools, free lists, object recycling
  - GC's have been heavily tuned to be efficient