Lecture #17: Exceptional Conditions, Objects in Expressions

Public Service Announcement: IEEE/UPE Technical Interview Workshop. Tuesday, Feb 28, 4-6PM, 380 Soda.
Learn how to present yourself and work through practice interview questions.

Exam #2 review by HKN: Sunday, 4 March 2012, from 3PM to 6PM in 306 Soda (HP Auditorium).

Failed preconditions

- Part of the contract between the implementor and client are the *preconditions* under which a function, method, etc. is supposed to operate.
- Example:

```
class Rational:
    def __init__(self, x, y):
        """The rational number x/y.  Assumes that x and y
        are ints and  y != 0."""
```

- Here, "`x and y are ints and y!=0`" is a precondition on the client.
- So what happens when the precondition is not met?

Programmer Errors

- Python has preconditions of its own.
- E.g., type rules on operations: `3 + (2, 1)` is invalid.
- What happens when we (programmers) violate these preconditions?

Outside Events

- Some operations may entail the possibility of errors caused by the data or the environment in which a program runs.
- I/O over a network is a common example: connections go down; data is corrupted.
- User input is another major source of error: we may ask to read an integer numeral, and be handed something non-numeric.
- Again, what happens when such errors occur?

Possible Repsonses

- One approach is to take the point of view that when a precondition is violated, all bets are off and the implementor is free to do anything.
  - Corresponds to a logical axiom: False $\Rightarrow$ True.
  - But not a particularly helpful or safe approach.
- One can adopt a convention in which erroneous operations return special error values.
  - Feasible in Python, but less so in languages that require specific types on return values.
  - Used in the C library, but can't be used for non-integer-returning functions.
  - Error prone (too easy to ignore errors).
  - Cluttered (reader is forced to wade through a lot of error-handling code, a distraction from the main algorithm).
- Numerous programming languages, including Python, support a general notion of *exceptional condition* or *exception* with supporting syntax and semantics that separate error handling from main program logic.

Exceptions

- An *exception mechanism* is a control structure that
  - Halts execution at one point in a program (called *raising* or *throwing* an exception).
  - Resumes execution at some other, previously designated point in the program (called *catching* or *handling* an exception).
- In Python, the `raise` statement throws exceptions, and `try` statements catch them:

```
def f0(...):
    try:
       g0(...)        # 1.  Call of g...
       OTHER STUFF    # Skipped
    except:
       handle oops    # 3.  Handle problem
...
def g1(...): # Eventually called by g0, possibly many calls down
    if detectError():
       raise Oops     # 2.  Raise exception
    MORE              # Skipped
```

Communicating the Reason

- Normally, the handler would like to know the reason for an exception.
- "Reason," being a noun, suggests we use objects, which is what Python does.
- Python defines the class BaseException. It or any subclass of it may convey information to a handler. We'll call these *exception classes.*
- BaseClassException carries arbitrary information as if declared:

```
class BaseException:
    def __init__(self, *args):
        self.args = args
    ...
```

- The raise statement then packages up and sends information to a handler:

```
    raise ValueError("x must be positive", x, y)
    raise ValueError     # Short for raise ValueError()
    e = ValueError("exceptions are just objects!")
    raise e              # So this works, too
```


Handlers

- A function indicates that something is wrong; it is the client (caller) that decides what to do about it.
- The try statement allows one to provide one or more handlers for a set of statements, with selection based on the type of exception object thrown.

```
try:
    assorted statements
except ValueError:
    print("Something was wrong with the arguments")
except EnvironmentError:  # Also catches subtypes IOError, OSError
    print("The operating system is telling us something")
except:                   # Some other exception
    print("Something wrong")
```


Retrieving the Exception

- So far, we've just looked at exception *types.*
- To get at the exception objects, use a bit more syntax:

```
try:
    assorted statements
except ValueError as exc:
    print("Something was wrong with the arguments: {0}", exc)
```


Cleaning Up and Reraising

- Sometimes we catch an exception in order to clean things up before the real handler takes over.

```
inp = open(aFile)
try:
    Assorted processing
    inp.close()
except:
    inp.close()
    raise          # Reraise the same exception
```


Finally Clauses

- More generally, we can clean things up regardless of how we leave the try statement:

```
for i in range(100)
    try:
        setTimer(10)  # Set time limit
        if found(i):
            break
        longComputationThatMightTimeOut()
    finally:
        cancelTimer()
        # Continue with 'break' or with exception
```

- This fragment will always cancel the timer, whether the loop ends because of break or a timeout exception.
- After which, it carries on whatever caused the try to stop.

Standard Exceptions

- See the Python library for a complete rundown.
- We'll often encounter ValueError (inappropriate values), AttributeError (x.foo, where there is no foo in x), TypeError, OSError (bad system call), IOError (such as nonexistent files).
- Other exceptions are not errors, but are used because raise is a convenient way to achieve some effect:
  - StopIteration: see last lecture.
  - SystemExit: Results from sys.exit(n), which is intended to end a program.

Summary

- Exceptions are a way of returning information from a function "out of band," and allowing programmers to clearly separate error handling from normal cases.
- In effect, specifying possible exceptions is therefore part of the interface.
- Usually, the specification is implicit: one assumes that violation of a precondition might cause an exception.
- When a particular exception indicates something that might normally arise (e.g., bad user input), it will often be mentioned explicitly in the documentation of a function.
- Finally, raise and try may be used purely as normal control structures. By convention, the exceptions used in this case don't end in "Error."

Back To Rationals

- Before, we implemented rational numbers as functions. The "standard" way is to use a class.
- There are a few interesting problems along the way, at least if you want to make something that meets our natural expectations.
- Python has defined a whole bunch of library classes to capture different kinds of number (see numbers and fractions), but we're going to build our own here.

Some Basics

- We'd like rational numbers, with the usual arithmetic.
- Furthermore, we'd like to integrate rationals with other numeric types, especially int and float.
- So, let's start with the constructor:

```
class rational:
    def __init__(self, *args):
        if len(args) == 2:
            if type(args[0]) is not int or type(args[1]) is not int:
                raise TypeError("numerator, denominator not ints")
            if args[1] == 0:
                raise ZeroDivisionError("denominator is 0")
            numer, denom = args
        # What about rational(3) or rational(3.2)?
        d = gcd(numer,denom)
        self.__numer, self.__denom = numer // d, denom // d
```


Arithmetic

- Would be nice to use normal syntax, such as a+b for rationals.
- But we know how to do that from early lectures:

```
def __add__(self, y):
    return rational(self.__numer * y.__denom + self.__denom * y.__numer,
                    self.__denom * y.__denom)
```

- What do we do if y is an int?
- One solution: *Coercion*:

```
def __add__(self, y):
    y = rational._coerceToRational(y)
    return rational(self.__numer * y.__denom + self.__denom * y.__numer,
                    self.__denom * y.__denom)
```


Coercion

- In programming languages, *coercion* refers to conversions between types or representations that preserve abstract values.

```
@staticmethod    # Why is this appropriate?
def _coerceToRational(y):
    if type(y) is rational:
        return y
    else:
        return ?
```


Type Dispatching

- But now what about 3 + rational(1,2)? Ints don't know about rationals.
- This is a general problem with object-oriented languages. I call it "worship of the first parameter." It's the type of the first parameter (or that left of the dot) that controls what method gets called.
- Others use the phrase "the expression problem," because it arises in the context of arithmetic-expression-like things.
- There are various ways that languages have dealt with this.
- The brute-force solution is to introduce *multimethods* as a language feature (functions chosen on the basic of all parameters' types.)
- Or one can build something like this explicitly:

```
_add_dispatch_table = { (rational, int): _addri,
                        (int, rational): _addir, ...}
    def __add__(self, y):
        _add_dispatch_table[(type(self), type(y))](self, y)
```

A Python Approach

- The dispatch-table requires a lot of cooperation among types.
- Python uses a different approach that allows extensibility without having to change existing numeric types.
- The expression x+y first tries x.__add__(y).
- If that throws the exception NotImplementedError, it next tries y.__radd__(x).
- The __add__ functions for standard numeric types observe this, and throw NotImplementedError if they can't handle their right operands.
- So, in rational:

```
def __radd__(self, y):
    return rational._coerceToRational(y).__add__(x)
```

- And now:

```
>>> 3 + rational(1,2)
7/2
```


Syntax for Accessors

- Our previous implementation of rational numbers had functions for accessing the numerator and denominator, which now might look like this:

```
def numer(self):
    """My numerator in lowest terms."""
    return self.__numer

def denom(self):
    """My denominator in lowest terms."""
    return self.__denom
```

- It would be more convenient to be able to write simply x.numer and x.denom, but so far, the only way we know to allow this has problems:
  - The attributes are assignable, which we don't want if rationals are to be immutable.
  - We are forced to implement them as instance variables; the implementation has no opportunity to do any calculations to produce the values.

- In other words, the syntax exposes too much about the implementation.

Properties

- To provide greater freedom to class implementors in selecting syntax, Python provides an egregiously general mechanism known as *descriptors*. When an attribute of a class is set to a descriptor object, it behaves differently from usual when selected.
- Descriptors, in their full details, are wonders to behold, so we'll stick with simple uses.
- If we define

```
def _numer(self): return self.__numer
numer = property(_numer)  # numer is now a descriptor
```

  Then fetching a value x.numer (i.e., without parentheses) is translated to x._numer().
- Can't assign to it, any more than you can assign to any function call.

Properties (contd.)

- The usual shorthand for writing this is to use property as a decorator:

```
@property
def numer(self): return self.__numer
```

  which is equivalent to

```
def numer(self): return self.__numer
numer = property(numer)   # Redefinition.
```