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LOADING OBJECT-ORIENTED COMPUTER PROGRAMS

The invention relates generally to methods of and computer systems for loading object-oriented computer programs. More specifically, although not exclusively the invention is concerned with object-oriented programs in which the code is provided in the form of class files, each containing a plurality of methods.

A well known example of an object-oriented programming language is "Java" (a trade mark of Sun Microsystems Inc.). A "Java implementation" is a software system which allows a software application consisting of one or more class files to be run. These class files must conform to some version of the standard Java Virtual Machine Specification, as published by Sun Microsystems Inc. A class file defines the data and program code required for a particular class.

Although there is some interaction, the Java implementation can conceptually be divided into two parts:

- The Java Virtual Machine (JVM). This reads the class files and executes the instructions contained within them in a way which conforms to some version of Sun's Java Virtual Machine Specification. Some of the instructions contained within a class may reference the data or program code of other classes; the JVM also manages such relationships between classes.
- The Java Class Library. This is a set of predefined classes with data and program code which act in a way conforming to Sun's Java Class Library Specification. These library classes could be implemented in some way other than as real class files, for example using the C or assembler programming languages, in which case the JVM must ensure that references

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to their data and program code work in the same way as references to classes which originated from real class files.

The program code in a class file is in an instruction format known as Java bytecode (JBC), or simply as bytecode. Each method in the class has its own sequence of bytecode. The bytecode for a method consists of a sequence of JBC instructions.

There are two schemes which JVMs use to execute the bytecode:

- An interpreter. In this scheme, the JVM contains an interpreter, which is a piece of program code which executes the bytecode by looking at each JBC instruction in turn, decoding it, and performing the actions demanded by it. While this approach is the simplest to implement, its disadvantage is that it is slower than the alternative, since many steps of the interpreter program are required to interpret a single JBC instruction.
- A compiler. In this scheme, the JVM converts the JBC instructions of the bytecode into machine code instructions understood by the CPU being run on (native machine code), before any execution starts. Then, to execute the program code for a method, the compiled machine code is executed instead. There is a time overhead for the initial compilation from JBC instructions to machine code instructions, although this may be done during the preparation of the application rather than when the application is started. Once the compilation has been performed, the method's program code runs much faster, at a speed comparable with other traditionally compiled languages such as C. A special case of the compiler scheme is a just-in-time compiler (JIT), in which the bytecode for a class is compiled just before it is first used.

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Some JVMs use a combination of the two schemes, where only program code which is being executed many times is compiled, and the rest is interpreted.

Linking is the process by which a reference from one class C1 to another class C2 (or data or a method in C2) is resolved. If C2 is not already loaded, it is loaded, and compiled if using the compiler scheme, and itself linked. Then the reference in C1 to C2 (or some item of data or a method in C2) is modified such that there is now a direct pointer to whatever in C2 is being referred to.

Sun's Java Virtual Machine Specification allows for a range of linking schemes:

- Static linking: The loading and linking of all classes of the application is performed when the application is prepared. This scheme is typically used when an application is embedded permanently in a device.
- Dynamic load time linking: Class C2 is loaded the first time another class is loaded which refers to C2 (or some data item or method within C2).
- Dynamic late binding: Class C2 is loaded the first time a JBC instruction (or its compiled equivalent) which refers to C2 (or some data item or method within C2) is executed.

In operation, when a particular method of a particular class is invoked, the particular class required may or may not already be resident in the JVM. If the required class is not resident, then the class file for that class must first be loaded from outside the JVM (for example from a disk or from a network), linked and initialised into the JVM. Then, the required method can be found by looking down the list of methods for the class. Once the required method has been found, the Java bytecode of that method is executed until a return is encountered, whereupon the method has ended and control is returned to the invoker of the method. A method invocation can also be terminated by an

exception being thrown which is not caught in the method.

Figure 1 illustrates a typical prior art implementation in which the JVM makes use of a JIT compiler. The JIT compiler 120 takes the class bytecode 110, just before it is to be used, and translates it into native code 130 ready for execution on a specific processor. The remains of the class 140 (or possibly the entirety of the class) remains available in the memory in case the native code 130 should need to refer to it while running.

Figure 3 illustrates a typical prior art JVM implementation in a multiprocessor environment. A server 210 maintains a class store 220 for holding the bytecode of the various classes that may be required by the client processors 230,240. Within the class store 220 is shown a typical Java class 211 containing within it a plurality of individual methods 212.

The server 210 supplies the class files 211, as necessary, across a communications network generally indicated at 250 to the clients 230,240. In this example, the processors 230,240 are of two different types – namely client type 1 and client type 2 respectively. Each of the clients maintains its own JIT, respectively 231,241, enabling it to compile the received class file 211 to its own version of native code 233,243, and to store that in its own native code store 232,242. In addition, and as previously described with reference to Figure 1, the remains of the class file 211 (or possibly the entire class file) will remain in local memory, as generally indicated at 234,244, in case the native code 233,243 should need to refer to it while running on the local processor.

In an alternative prior art arrangement (not shown) the client JITs 231,241 may be maintained on the server 210, with the conversion to native code being done there rather than at the clients 230,240.

There are several disadvantages with either prior art arrangement. Firstly, in each case, a large execution environment is required on each of the

clients. In addition, either the Java class file 211 or the native versions 233,243 along with the class file remains 234,244 need to be transmitted across the communications network 250. Either approach is unsatisfactory in practice, particularly in the context of wireless client networks such as mobile cellular phone networks, since the class files are typically large.

According to a first aspect of the present invention there is provided a method of loading an object-oriented computer program comprising code provided in the form of classes each containing a plurality of methods, the method including:

(a) selecting for execution one of the methods of one of the classes; and

(b) loading the selected method into an execution environment without necessarily loading into the execution environment the whole of the selected class.

The method of the invention provides all of the dynamic features of the Java Virtual Machine (JVM), but with a substantially reduced footprint compared with conventional approaches.

In its preferred form, the invention provides fine granularity of binding/linking, loading, compilation and transmission across a communications network. More specifically, the granularity is at the method/tool level rather than the class level as with conventional object-oriented systems. The invention is particularly although not exclusively applicable to a Java Virtual Machine (JVM) environment. The invention provides for the entire range of JVM linking schemes, namely static linking, dynamic load time linking and dynamic late binding. Specific fields of application for preferred embodiments of the invention include wireless communications (wireless client networks), and specifically although not exclusively mobile cellular phone networks. The invention may also be

applied to other embedded devices, preferably networked devices, such as (without limitation) hand-held computers, games consoles, cameras, or indeed any other type of networked or networkable device. In one embodiment the system may consist of or include a wireless network, whereas in other embodiments it may include a private or public fixed network, or the Internet. Where the client devices are not capable of wireless communication, provision may be made for them to be coupled to the Internet as required (for example via a standard modem or ISDN link). In such a way, the invention could be applicable to a wide range of embedded devices, including for example cameras, televisions, washing machines, motor vehicles or indeed virtually any other type of computer operated device that can be conceived of.

One advantage of the invention, when applied to wireless client networks, is that each individual transmission (of a method/tool) is of a significantly shorter duration than with conventional systems in which the entire class file has to be downloaded. This means that the network provider does not need to keep the virtual circuits of the network open for long periods. Each small method/tool to be transmitted can if necessary be routed differently. In addition, the transmission of smaller discrete chunks of data means that lower redundancy and error correction is required. The load on the network can therefore be reduced by a greater amount than would be expected merely by a consideration of the data transfer rates.

In its preferred form, the invention is particularly applicable for use with object-oriented computer programs that are to be compiled (rather than interpreted) prior to execution. When the invention is used in the context of a distributed computer system, the individual methods may be compiled either before or after they are sent across the network to the client device.

Preferably, the invention includes the preliminary step of translating the

classes into a plurality of virtual processor tools which use the instruction set of a virtual processor. Then, the step of selecting one of the methods for execution may include selecting one of the virtual processor tools. When used in the context of a networked system, either the virtual processor tools may individually be transmitted across the network to the client device, or alternatively the individual virtual processor tools may first be compiled and the native compiled code transmitted across the network.

The invention further extends to a computer system adapted to carry out a method as previously described.

The invention further extends to a computer system for loading and/or executing an object-oriented computer program comprising code provided in the form of classes each containing a plurality of methods, the system defining an execution environment and being operable to select for execution one of the methods of one of the classes, and to load the selected method into the execution environment without necessarily loading into the execution environment the whole of the selected class.

According to another aspect of the invention there is provided a distributed computer system comprising a server in communication via a transmission means with a plurality of client devices, each having a respective execution environment for executing an object-oriented computer program comprising code provided in the form of classes each containing a plurality of methods, the system including:

(a) means for selecting for execution on one of the client devices one of the methods of one of the classes; and

(b) loading the selected method into the execution environment in the said client device without necessarily loading into the said execution environment the whole of the selected class.

The invention extends not only to methods and apparatus for loading object oriented computer programs, but also to methods and apparatus for compiling such programs, binding such programs, executing such programs, and transmitting such programs across a communications network.

Finally, the invention also extends to a computer program for implementing any of the described methods whether or not embodied on a data carrier. It also extends to a data stream representative of a computer program for carrying out the described method.

It is to be understood that, where used in the description and claims, the word "code" includes data where that data is part of the program itself. Accordingly, but without limitation, the expression "code" includes such things as constants, variable names and types, flags, pointers, object names and so on.

The invention may be carried into practice in various ways and one specific embodiment will now be described, by way of example, with reference to the accompanying drawings, in which:

Figure 1 illustrates the operation of a conventional JIT compiler within a JVM;

Figure 2 illustrates the two-stage translation process of the preferred embodiment of the present invention;

Figure 3 shows a typical prior art client/server system;

Figure 4 illustrates the operation of the preferred embodiment of the invention within a client/server system;

Figure 4a illustrates a variation of the embodiment shown in Figure 4;

Figure 5 illustrates the operation of the present invention within a wireless network; and

Figure 6 illustrates certain aspects of the translation from bytecode to intermediate virtual processor code according to the preferred embodiment of

the invention.

Figure 1, which has been described above, shows the way in which a JIT compiler within a JVM translates from processor-independent bytecode to processor-dependent native code for running on a particular processor. In the present invention, conversion from bytecode to native code takes place in two separate stages:

1. Conversion from the class file to an intermediate processor-independent form. This will be referred to as Virtual Processor or VP code. The converter itself is known in the preferred implementation as the "jcode translator".
2. Conversion from the intermediate VP form to the native machine code. The converter here will be known as the "native translator".

Figure 2 illustrates in more detail the translation from class bytecode to native code. The class byte code 210 is first checked for validity by a class verifier 211. This checks not only the individual bytes themselves, but also checks for valid external and internal references. The class verifier if necessary loads additional classes to check the external references.

Once the code has been checked, it is passed to the jcode translator 212 which converts it, as described in more detail below, into VP code 213. The VP code 213 is then converted by the native translator 214 to the native code 230.

It is important to appreciate that the class verifier 211, the jcode translator 212 and the VP code 213 are all processor-independent. It is only the native translator 214 and of course the final native code 230 which is processor-specific.

Shown on the right hand side of Figure 2 is a schematic representation of the objects that are being manipulated during the translation process. The

process starts with the class bytecode in the form of a Java class file 201 which consists of a plurality of individual methods 202. The jcode translator translates the class file into a plurality of individual virtual processor tools 203. Depending upon the application to be run, a selection is made of those virtual processor tools 203 which will be required, and those selected tools (and only those tools) are then translated by the native translator into individual native methods 204. It is important to appreciate that the entirety of the original class file 201 is not necessarily being passed through the native translator 214: only those virtual processor tools 203 which are actually needed by the application will be translated and ultimately stored for running on the client.

The use of the preferred embodiment within a heterogeneous multiprocessor environment is shown schematically in Figure 4. This should be compared with the corresponding prior art approach shown in Figure 3.

In Figure 4, the server 410 is serving two clients 430,440 (having different processors) via a communications network 450. All of the processor-independent calculation is carried out on the server; in particular, the server maintains a class store 420, a class verifier 421, a jcode translator 422 and a VP store 423. An initial Java class file 480, consisting of a plurality of methods 481, is translated via the two-stage process described previously, into a plurality of VP tools 482 which are stored within the VP store 423. The VP (processor-independent) tools can then be served individually, as required, across the network 450 to the individual clients. The VP tools are then translated by the individual client translators 424,425 into native methods 483,484 which are optimised for their respective processors. These native methods are stored within the respective native code stored 432,442.

The use of VP on the server, as shown in Figure 4, allows the verification of the class files and the first stage of the compilation (the conversion to VP

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code) to be performed once only by the server. Then, only the native translation (which differs according to the processor type) needs to be performed by the client device before execution. Such an arrangement makes it easy to supply updated classes at the server, without the server needing to know anything about the details of the particular clients that will wish to make use of those classes. An updated class needs to be amended once only, in the class bytecode, and then translated once only into VP. The VP is transmitted to the client devices, as necessary, and the final translation to native code can be carried out at the client in a way which is entirely transparent to the end user. In addition, no amendment to the server or to the VP code is required in the event that a new type of client comes onto the market which requires different native code. The client manufacturer simply provides the client with an appropriate native translator, and the device should operate without any manual intervention at the server.

With the approach described, it is not necessary to download across the network the Java class file 480, nor all of its individual methods 481. Only those VP tools which are actually required by the individual client applications need be transmitted across the network. The required VP tools may be either downloaded on demand (for example by means of a control signal transmitted from the client back to the server), or alternatively may be transmitted when the server determines that it is necessary. In one embodiment, for example, the server may transmit updated VP tools across the network in order to update an applications program which is running on the client. That could be done in real time, in a way which is entirely transparent to the end user. Alternatively or in addition the individual transmitted VP tools may represent "add-ins", or additional functionality that the user wishes to add to an application program to be run on the client. In one particularly convenient approach, when the user

attempts to make use of functionality in an application program for which code is not available at the client, the client automatically transmits a signal to the server requesting that the necessary VP tools be downloaded. The server responds by transmitting the requested VP tools which are then translated into native form by the local native translator 424,425.

Figure 4a shows an alternative embodiment in which the individual native translators are maintained on the server. In Figure 4a, the reference numerals have the same meaning as those used in Figure 4.

In one version of this embodiment, a full collection of native methods for each of the client processors is stored on the server within respective native code stores 432′,442′. Since it cannot necessarily be determined in advance which methods will be needed by the individual clients, it is preferred that the entirety of the VP tools 482 be passed through the respective native translators 424,425 to provide a comprehensive selection of native methods 483,484. When a particular new or updated method is called for by the client, or is required to be sent by the server, the appropriate individual native method is sent across the communications network 450. As before, only individual methods are sent, not the entire class, nor all of the native methods which have been created from the original class.

In yet a further alternative method, the server need not maintain a complete collection of pre-translated methods for each possible client processor. Instead, when a particular VP tool is needed, it is translated on the fly by the appropriate native translator 424,425 and the native method transmitted immediately to the client.

Once specific implementation, illustrated in Figure 5, is that of a mobile phone network. Individual mobile phones 530, 550 using the network each include a respective native translator 524, 525 and a native code store 532, 542.

When it is required to upgrade the functionality of the phones, updated VP code is supplied from a VP store 523 on a central server 520. The updated VP code is sent via a land-based communications network 511 to a wireless transmitter 512. The code is then packetized and sent across a wireless link 513 to the individual phones. On receipt, the VP code is automatically translated into native and stored in the native code store. The whole process may be transparent to the phone user; or alternatively the updated code may be sent on receipt of a specific request from the phone user, via the wireless link 513.

Implementing a mobile telephone network (or indeed any other type of wireless client network) in this way allows the clients to download individual methods (each of which might be for example 100 bytes in length) instead of having to download an entire class (which might be for example 10 k). Transmitting individual methods in this way also has advantages for the wireless network provider since virtual circuits do not need to be maintained open for lengthy periods while large files are being transmitted. Each small individual method can be routed differently. Also, the transmission of smaller chunks of data reduces the need for redundancy and error correction techniques, thereby increasing the capacity of the network over and above that which would be expected merely by a comparison of raw data transfer rates.

For completeness, a detailed description will now be given of the preferred method by which the class file is converted into VP and the VP tools are converted into native. It will be understood that this is purely exemplary, and that the present invention is not limited to an embodiment in which there is a two-stage translation, first from bytecode into VP and then from VP into native.

Turning back now to Figure 2, further details will be given of the preferred two-stage translation from class bytecode 210 into native code 230.

As previously described, the class verifier 211 checks the class bytecode for validity. The class verifier may in some embodiments be incorporated within the jcode translator, in which case the class bytecode 210 is passed straight to the jcode translator 212 as shown by the arrow 240.

The JVM and the bytecode instructions it implements are stack based, which means that operands (numbers, pointers to objects) are kept on a stack, on which the last item to be pushed on is the first to be popped off. A bytecode instruction typically removes one or more operands from the stack, performs some action, and pushes the result operand (if any) back on the stack. On the other hand, VP is register based, in that it has a set of registers which are addressed directly by the VP instructions. An instruction typically takes its operand(s) from register(s) specified in the instruction, performs some action, and puts the result operand (if any) into a further register specified in the instruction. This register based architecture is more similar to most real processors, except that VP has a very large number of registers, large enough such that any system converting to VP does not need to worry about how many there are.

VP instructions are based around expressions. A single instruction typically has one or two operands, and each operand can be a constant, a register, or an expression. An expression then has one or two operands, each of which can be a constant, a register or an expression. In this way, an arbitrarily complex instruction can be built up.

There now follows a more detailed description of how parts of a class file are converted. The description uses the term "fixup"; this is a small item of data attached to a particular point in the compiler's output code or data which instructs the JVM that the code or data at that point needs to be modified in some way before it can be used. Fixups are used to change a native instruction

or a data item such that the native code can obtain a direct reference to another class, or to a field or method therein.

A java class file consists of the following parts:

- A constant pool, which contains the constant numbers and names in other parts of the class file, instead of a name, there is a reference to a name which is stored here.
- Information such as the name of this class, the superclass and any direct superinterfaces.
- A list of fields, with information on each one.
- A list of methods, with information on each one. This information includes its code section. Thus there are several code sections, one for each method.

The Java class file is converted to VP tools as follows:

- A data tool. Despite its name, this has nothing to do with the data to be used by the class. Instead it contains information about a class, including but not limited to the names, parameters and types of all constructors, fields, methods and other entities which make up the API of a class. A typical use for this would be for reflection (i.e. the functionality in java.lang.reflect in a Java Library). Reflection is a programmatic interface to allow a programmer to enumerate and manipulate the constructors, fields, methods and other entities which belong to a class. The data tool is also used by the verifying jcode translators, in situations where either the Class file is not available, or where the class file has already been translated. Where the class is written in VP, there is no class file anyway.
- A class tool. This contains some housekeeping information used by the JVM (including the size of object to allocate, the size of the class's static data if any, and the superclass and superinterfaces), and code for none, some or all of the non-static methods.

- Zero or more method tools. Methods which do not appear in the class tool have their own individual tools. The decision on whether to place a method in its own tool can be based on a number of factors such as the size of the method.
- A fixup tool. The fixup tool typically returns a constant fixup value which is used to determine the offset within an object of a particular field. The tool is called at fixup time to provide the offset, and the binder/linker patches this offset into the code that wants to use it. It is thus used to implement both "get a field" and "put a field" in the bytecode.

  More generally, the fixup tool returns data used for fixups. This can only be determined at fixup time and not at compile time. The data may include but is not limited to, the size of a class instance and the offset within a class instance of a field.

  The data tool can be discarded if the java application is known not to use certain facilities (largely reflect), and the fixup tool can be discarded if the java application is to be embedded in a device which does not dynamically load further java classes.

  The jcode translator uses a VP register for each item on the stack.

VP code does not directly implement the class file's mechanisms for accessing another class, method or field from within the bytecode. In the bytecode there are instructions for, but not limited to, calling a method (in this or another class), getting the contents of a field (in this or another class), pushing a value onto the stack, popping a value off the stack and setting the contents of a field. The jcode translator converts these into VP instructions which may do one of the following (this is not an exhaustive list):

- Call a non-static method (i.e. one to which an object pointer must be passed) in a class. VP has the concept of a class with methods, which is used to implement Java classes. Such methods can be called virtually (the actual method called depends on the class of the object whose pointer is passed) or non-virtually (the method called is in the class specified in the call).
- Call a subroutine. This is used to implement the bytecode's call of a static method (i.e. one to which no object pointer need be passed), and in some cases a non-static method.
- Get the value of the constant fixup from the fixup tool.

The constant pool within a class file is converted as follows:

- A constant pool entry containing a constant number (integer or floating point) is incorporated into the compiled version of the JBC instruction which references the constant number.
- A constant pool entry containing string data which is used directly by a JBC instruction is copied into the data attached to the compiler's output code.
- Other constant pool entries containing string data are not used directly, but are used when referred to by the constant pool types below, or by other parts of the class file.
- A constant pool entry referencing a class C causes a fixup referencing the class C (or the JVM's internal name for the class) to be attached to the compiler's output code/data such that a JBC instruction using this constant pool entry to refer to C is compiled to a native code sequence which, after applying the fixup, obtains access to class C's code and data.
- A constant pool entry referencing a field F in a class C causes a fixup referencing F in C (or the JVM's internal name for F in C) to be attached to the compiler's output code/data such that a JBC instruction using this

constant pool entry to refer to F is compiled to a native code sequence which, after applying the fixup, obtains access to field F.

- A constant pool entry referencing a method M in a class C causes a fixup referencing M in C (or the JVM's internal name for M in C) to be attached to the compiler's output code/data such that a JBC instruction using this constant pool entry to refer to M is compiled to a native code sequence which, after applying the fixup, obtains access to method M.
- A constant pool entry giving a name and type of a field or method is not used directly, but is used when referred to by other constant pool entry types or other parts of the class file.

The code section within a class file is converted as follows:

- Code doing purely numerical calculations (ie where there is no reference to an external method) is translated straight from bytecode into a corresponding tool in VP.
- As shown in Figure 6, where the bytecode 600 has a reference 610 to a field, that is converted at fixup time by a call 611 to the fixup tool. The call to the fixup tool returns a value which references the location of the field. Thus, by the time the instruction is run it has been patched to contain the correct offset.
- A static method 620 is converted to a corresponding VP tool, but with added fixup code 621.
- A non-static method 630 has added to it a fixup for a method call (ie a reference to the method name). This will eventually become an atom in the final native code.

The calling conventions are rather different in bytecode and VP. In conventional byte code such as Java byte code, the parameters to be passed to a subroutine are placed on the stack, followed by a reference to the method to be

called. A byte code instruction to call a method is then executed which takes the method reference from the stack, resolves it and starts executing the new method with the parameters from the stack. Control is returned to original method when a return instruction is executed. This is converted to VP which loads all the parameters into VP registers before executing a gos (goto subroutine) instruction which has been fixed up to point to the destination method (this fixup may be statically or dynamically bound). Execution is passed to the subroutine and returns when a 'ret' instruction is executed.

Other parts of the file are converted as follows:

- The name of the class determines the name used by the JVM to refer to the code and data output by the compiler.
- The name of the superclass becomes some reference to the superclass within the code and data output by the compiler. In the preferred implementation, the output data contains a pointer with a fixup attached such that, after linking, the pointer points to the superclass code and data.
- The name of each interface becomes some reference to the interface within the output code and data. In the preferred implementation, the output data contains a pointer for each interface with a fixup attached such that, after linking, the pointer points to the interface code and data.
- The debug information attached to each method (and the source filename which is stored in the class file), when present, is converted to a format suitable for the environment in which the JVM is running. In the preferred implementation, the debug information is converted to the same format used for non-Java parts of the system.

The final VP class comprises one or more named tools, normally including at least the data tool, the class tool, the fixup tool and zero or more method tools. The tool names are generated automatically by the jcode

translator, each name being related to the name of the class and the function of each tool within the implementation of that class.

Turning back again to Figure 2, further details will now be given of the native translator which translates the VP code into native code. It will be understood, of course, that VP code is never itself run directly in a live application; it is always converted by the processor-dependent native translator into the appropriate native code for the processor on which it is to be executed.

The native translator 214 is quite a small piece of code (around 150k, depending upon the processor), so that it can easily be stored in memory within an embedded system. The translator 214 maps VP registers to the registers of the particular processor being used. The translator uses its knowledge of the real processor's register architecture to decide at each point in the output native code which VP registers should be mapped to the real processor's registers, and which should be kept in memory (which is slower to access). The translator also provides machine-dependent optimisation of instructions. Until the native code is bound in, it will still normally contain sections of fixup code. On binding (or sometimes at run-time) the fixup code will be replaced with appropriate machine-dependent instructions. For example, the fixup for a non-static method will be converted to an atom in the native code.

Both the jcode translator and the native translator are themselves preferably written in VP code and can thus be translated (using the native translator itself) to run on any desired platform. From that initial VP code, compiled versions of both translators may be provided in native code, optimized for the particular processor on which the translator is to execute. To compile the VP code for the jcode translator, that code is passed through the native translator. To compile the VP code for the native translator, that code is passed through the native translator itself.

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Although the preferred embodiment uses the Java Virtual Machine, the overall inventive concept is more general, and it is not essential to use the JVM, or indeed Java at all. Where Java is used, however, the invention described allows Java-skilled applicators programmers to develop programs in their preferred language, without having to understand, or even to know anything about, VP code.

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CLAIMS:

1. A method of loading an object-oriented computer program comprising code provided in the form of classes each containing a plurality of methods, the method including:

(a) selecting for execution one of the methods of one of the classes; and

(b) loading the selected method into an execution environment without necessarily loading into the execution environment the whole of the selected class.

2. A method as claimed in Claim 1 in which the selected method is loaded without necessarily loading into the execution environment all of the methods of the selected class.

3. A method as claimed in Claim 1 in which the selected method is loaded without necessarily loading into the execution environment any of the methods of the selected class other than the selected method.

4. A method as claimed in Claim 1 including compiling the selected method without necessarily compiling all of the methods of the selected class.

5. A method as claimed in Claim 1 including compiling a selected method without necessarily compiling any of the methods of the selected class other than the selected method.

6. A method as claimed in Claim 1 including transmitting the selected method across a communications network from a server to a client device on

which the selected method is to be run, without necessarily transmitting all the methods of the selected class.

7. A method as claimed in Claim 1 including transmitting the selected method across a communications network from a server to a client device on which the selected method is to be run, without necessarily transmitting any of the methods of the selected class other than the selected method.

8. A method as claimed in Claim 1 in which the classes are Java classes.

9. A method as claimed in Claim 1 including the preliminary step of translating the classes into a plurality of virtual processor tools which use the instruction set of a virtual processor.

10. A method as claimed in Claim 1 in which the step of selecting one of the methods for execution includes selecting one of the virtual processor tools.

11. A method as claimed in Claim 10 including compiling and loading the selected virtual processor tool without necessarily compiling and loading into the execution environment all of the virtual processor tools which were translated from the selected class.

12. A method as claimed in Claim 10 including compiling and loading the selected virtual processor tool without necessarily compiling and loading into the execution environment any of the virtual processor tools which were translated from the selected class, other than the selected tool.

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13. A method as claimed in Claim 10 including transmitting the selected virtual processor tool across a communications network from a server to a client device on which the selected method is to be run, without necessarily transmitting all the virtual processor tools which were translated from the selected class.

14. A method as claimed in Claim 10 including transmitting the selected virtual processor tool across a communications network from a server to a client device on which the selected method is to be run, without necessarily transmitting any of the virtual processor tools which were translated from the selected class.

15. A method as claimed in Claim 13 or Claim 14 including compiling the selected virtual processor tool to native code prior to transmission across the communications network.

16. A method as claimed in Claim 13 or Claim 14 including compiling the virtual processor tool to native code at the client device, after transmission across the communications network.

17. A computer system adapted to carry out a method as claimed in any one of the preceding claims.

18. A computer system for loading an object-oriented computer program comprising code provided in the form of classes each containing a plurality of methods, the system defining an execution environment and being operable to select for execution one of the methods of one of the classes, and to load the

selected method into the execution environment without necessarily loading into the execution environment the whole of the selected class.

19. A distributed computer system comprising a server in communication via a transmission means with a plurality of client devices, each having a respective execution environment for executing an object-oriented computer program comprising code provided in the form of classes each containing a plurality of methods, the system including:

(a) means for selecting for execution on one of the client devices one of the methods of one of the classes; and

(b) means for loading the selected method into the execution environment in the said client device without necessarily loading into the said execution environment the whole of the selected class.

20. A computer system as claimed in Claim 19 which transmits the selected method from the server to the said client device without necessarily transmitting all the methods of the selected class.

21. A computer system as claimed in Claim 19 which transmits the selected method from the server to the said client device without necessarily transmitting any of the methods of the selected class other than the selected method.

22. A computer system as claimed in Claim 19 in which the selected method is compiled by the server prior to transmission.

23. A computer system as claimed in Claim 19 in which the selected method is compiled by the client device after transmission.

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24. A computer system as claimed in Claim 19 in which the server is configured to transmit an updated method to a client device when it determines that the said client device is using an outdated method.

25. A computer system as claimed in Claim 19 in which the server is configured to transmit an updated method to a client device when that updated method is requested by the said client device.

26. A computer system as claimed in Claim 19 in which the server is configured to transmit methods as required by a requesting client device, the requesting client device being configured to bind the received methods dynamically into its execution environment.

27. A computer system as claimed in Claim 19 in which the server stores a plurality of virtual processor tools, said tools using an instruction set of a virtual processor and being a translation of one or more classes of the said object-oriented program.

28. A computer system as claimed in Claim 27 in which the means for selecting one of the methods for execution includes means for selecting one of the virtual processor tools.

29. A computer system as claimed in Claim 28 in which the server transmits the selected virtual processor tool to the said client device without necessarily transmitting all of the virtual processor tools which were translated from the selected class.

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30. A computer system as claimed in Claim 28 in which the server transmits the selected virtual processor tool to the said client device without necessarily transmitting any of the virtual processor tools which were translated from the selected class, other than the selected tool.

31. A computer system as claimed in Claim 28 in which the selected virtual processor tool is translated into native code prior to transmission across the transmission means.

32. A computer system as claimed in Claim 28 in which the selected virtual processor tool is translated into native code by the client device after transmission across the transmission means.

33. A computer system as claimed in Claim 19 in which the transmission means comprises or includes a wireless network.

34. A computer system as claimed in Claim 33 in which the client devices are mobile phones.

35. A computer system as claimed in Claim 33 in which the client devices are hand-held computers.

36. A computer system as claimed in Claim 33 in which the client devices are games consoles.

37. A computer program for executing a method as claimed in any one of

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Claims 1 to 16.

38. A data carrier which carries a computer program for executing a method as claimed in Claim 37 or any one of Claims 1 to 16.

39. A data stream representative of a computer program for executing a method as claimed in Claim 37 or as claimed in any one of Claims 1 to 16.

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ABSTRACT

A method of executing an object-oriented computer program comprises loading into the execution environment the selected methods that are to be run without necessarily loading the entirety of the class. In a multiprocessor environment, a server (410) maintains a store of processor-independent virtual processor tools (482). Individual tools may be transmitted as requested across a communications network (450) to individual clients (430,440), without any need to transmit the whole of the original class file (480). Each client carries a small processor-dependent native translator (424,425) with which it translates the downloaded processor-independent tool into native code. The invention finds particular application in embedded systems, and particularly in wireless client networks such as mobile phone networks.

(Figure 4)