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Delegating Constructors (revision 2)

Note: The only change since revision 1 was to refine the wording based on Core WG wording review.

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1. The Problem and Current Workarounds

1.1. Overview

C++ does not provide a mechanism by which one constructor can delegate to another. This means that where it is not possible (or considered undesirable) to use default arguments, the class maintainer has to write and maintain multiple constructors. This can lead to tedious code duplication at both source and object level, which impedes maintainability (because of the potential for introducing inconsistencies) and in some cases can lead to minor code bloat.

Other OO languages, such as Java, do provide this feature. As Java is often used as an introductory language, an increasing number of people learn C++ with prior experience of Java. There are substantial and desirable differences between the languages without having ones for which the only justification is historical.

Today's workarounds boil down to delegating work to a common initializer function, which does not permit delegating the initialization of bases and members.

This paper proposes extensions to constructors that will reduce repetitive coding which is tedious and fragile. The proposed changes are pure extensions to ISO C++ that will not affect the meaning of existing programs.

We note that recent independent proposals from author Glassborow (see N1445) and C++/CLI (see [C++/CLI-WD1.1]) are nearly identical in syntax and semantics. This proposal is based on both of these recent works.

This proposal falls into the following categories:

- Improve support for library building.
- Make C++ easier to teach and learn, particularly in competition with languages like Java.

1.2. Current Workarounds

Today, C++ books recommend code like the following that delegates to a common initialization function:

```
class X {
    void CommonInit();
    Y y_;
    Z z_;
public:
    X();
    X( int );
    X( W );
};
```

```

X::X()      : y_(42), z_(3.14) { CommonInit(); }
X::X( int i ) : y_(i), z_(3.14) { CommonInit(); }
X::X( W e ) : y_(53), z_( e ) { CommonInit(); }

```

This is undesirable for the following reasons:

- *Constructor body redundancy.* In this case, one of the constructors could be replaced with a default parameter. The other can't, at least not without changing the calling semantics.
- *Member initialization redundancy.* The workaround cannot delegate the actual initialization of the member variables too, at least not without significantly restructuring the class (e.g., splitting off the data members into a second class held by pointer and allocated by `CommonInit()`). There is no way to achieve this effect without language support, because once we're in a non-constructor member function it's too late, and the members have already been constructed. There is no way to "really" delegate everything, including the member construction.

Aside: Note that novice programmers frequently (and mistakenly) think that the delegating constructor feature already exists, because code like the following compiles, although it doesn't do what they expect:

```

class X {
    int i_;
public:
    X();
    X( int );
};
X::X() { DoSomethingObservableToThisObject(); }
X::X( int i ) : i_(i) { X(); }           // oops! compiles, but no-op

```

2. Proposal

2.1. Basic Cases

We propose that a constructor of a class type `X` (the "delegating constructor") may have an initializer list that invokes another constructor of the same type (the "target constructor"). That is, the delegating constructor delegates the object's initialization to another constructor, gets control back, and then optionally performs other actions as well. A delegating constructor can also be a target constructor of some other delegating constructor.

For example:

```

class X {
    int i_;
public:
    X( int i ) : i_(i) { }
    X() : X(42) { }     // i_ == 42
};

```

The following rules apply:

- Out of line definitions are allowed as usual (see example below).
- At most one other constructor may be named as the target constructor. If a sibling constructor is named in the initializer list, then the initializer list shall contain nothing else (i.e., no other base or member initializers are allowed). The target constructor is selected by overload resolution and template argument deduction, as usual.
- Any target constructor may itself delegate to yet another constructor. If there is an infinitely recursive cycle (e.g., constructor **C1** delegates to another constructor **C2**, and **C2** also delegates to **C1**), the behavior is undefined. No diagnostic is required, because detecting the circularity can be burdensome to detect at compile time in the general case, when constructors are defined in different translation units. As a quality of implementation issue, implementers are encouraged to diagnose violations wherever this is feasible.
- Statements in the delegating constructor body are executed following the complete execution of the target constructor. Local variables in a delegated constructor body are no longer in scope in the delegating constructor body.
- The lifetime of an object begins when any constructor (i.e., in the case of delegation, the ultimate target constructor) is successfully completed. For the purposes of [C++03] §3.8, “the constructor call has completed” means any constructor call. This means that an exception thrown from the body of a delegating constructor will cause the destructor to be invoked automatically.

Example:

```
class X {
    X( int, W& );
    Y y_;
    Z z_;
public:
    X();
    X( int );
    X( W& );
};

X::X( int i, W& e ) : y_(i), z_(e)  { /*Common Init*/ }
X::X()             : X( 42, 3.14 ) { SomePostInitialization(); }
X::X( int i )     : X( i, 3.14 )  { OtherPostInitialization(); }
X::X( W& w )      : X( 53, w )    { /* no post-init */ }

X x( 21 );        // if the construction of y_ or z_ throws, X::~~X is invoked
```

Example:

```
class FullName {
    string firstName_;
    string middleName_;
    string lastName_;
```

```

public:
    FullName(string firstName, string middleName, string lastName);
    FullName(string firstName, string lastName);
    FullName(const FullName& name);
};

FullName::FullName(string firstName, string middleName, string lastName)
    : firstName_(firstName), middleName_(middleName), lastName_(lastName)
{
    // ...
}

// delegating copy constructor
FullName::FullName(const FullName& name)
    : FullName(name.firstName_, name.middleName_, name.lastName_)
{
    // ...
}

// delegating constructor
FullName::FullName(string firstName, string lastName)
    : FullName(firstName, "", lastName)
{
    // ...
}

```

Example:

```

class ex {
    ex(int =0, double = 0.0, float = 0.0, std::string = "");
    ex(int, double, std::string);
    ex(int, std::string);

private:
    int j;
    double d;
    float f;
    std::string s;
};

ex::ex(int jp, double dp, float fp, std::string sp)
    : j(jp), d(dp), f(fp), s(sp)
{
    std::string message("full ctor");
    std::cout << message << '\n';
}

ex::ex(int jp, double dp, std::string sp)
    : ex(jp, dp, 1.0, sp)
{
    std::string message("float defaulted ctor");
    std::cout << message << '\n';
}

```

```

ex::ex(int jp, std::string sp)
  : ex(jp, 0.0, sp)
  {
    std::string message("float & double defaulted ctor");
    std::cout << message << "\n";
  }

```

In the above example, the last constructor executes as if the following had been written:

```

ex::ex(int jp, std::string sp)
  : j(jp), d(0.0), f(1.0), s(sp)
  {
    {
      std::string message("full ctor");
      std::cout << message << '\';
    }
    try {
      std::string message("float defaulted ctor");
      std::cout << message << '\';
    } catch(...) { ~ex(); throw; }
    try {
      std::string message("float & double defaulted ctor");
      std::cout << message << "\n";
    } catch(...) { ~ex(); throw; }
  }

```

(Note that this rewrite is accurate for this example, but cases using constructor function try blocks have no direct rewrite; see §2.3.)

Note that it can make sense to delegate to a constructor that actually takes fewer arguments. For example (contributed by Roger Orr): Consider `std::fstream`. The standard lists two constructors (§27.8.1.12(1-2)):

```
basic_fstream()
```

and

```
explicit basic_fstream(const char* s, ios_base::openmode mode);
```

An implementation of the second constructor using a delegating constructor would be:

```

basic_fstream::basic_fstream( const char* s, ios_base::openmode mode)
  : basic_fstream()
  {
    if(open(s, mode) == 0)
      setstate(failbit);
  }

```

2.2. Constructor templates

When using constructors that are templates, deduction works as usual or the template arguments can be provided explicitly. For example:

```

class X {
    template<class T> X( T, T ) : I_( first, last ) { /*Common Init*/ }
    list<int> I_;
public:
    X( vector<short>& );
    X( deque<char>& );
};

X::X( vector<short>& v )           : X( v.begin(), v.end() ) { }
                                // T is deduced as vector<short>::iterator

X::X( const deque<char>& d ) : X<deque<char>::iterator>( d.begin(), d.end() ) { }
                                // T does not need to be deduced

```

2.3. Constructor function try blocks

When using constructor function try blocks, the invocation of a target constructor is treated just like any other *mem-initializer*; an exception emitted from the initializer list or body of the target constructor means that the body of the delegating constructor is never entered, and the exception can be caught by the delegating constructor's function try block if there is an appropriate handler. For example:

```

class X {
    X( Y&, int, double );
    Y y_;
    int i_;
public:
    X( double, Y );
    X( Y );
};

X::X( Y& y, int i, double d )
    try : y_( y*d ), i_(i) { cout << "X::X(Y&,int,double) body" << endl; throw 1; }
    catch(...) { cout << "X::X(Y&,int,double) catch" << endl; } // implicit rethrow

X::X( double d, Y y )
    try : X( y, 42, d ) { cout << "X::X(double,Y) body" << endl; }
    catch(...) { cout << "X::X(double,Y) catch" << endl; } // implicit rethrow

X::X( Y y )
    try : X( 3.14, y ) { cout << "X::X(Y) body" << endl; }
    catch(...) { cout << "X::X(Y) catch" << endl; } // implicit rethrow

int main() {
    X x( Y() );
}

// Output
X::X(Y&,int,double) body
X::X(Y&,int,double) catch
X::X(double,Y) catch
X::X(Y) catch

```

In the above example, the last constructor executes as if the following had been written (this is pseudocode, not legal C++):

```
X::X( Y y )
  try {
    try {
      try : y_( y*3.14 ), i_(42) { cout << "X::X(Y&,int,double) body" << endl; throw 1; }
      catch(...) { cout << "X::X(Y&,int,double) catch" << endl; throw; }
    }{
      cout << "X::X(double,Y) body" << endl;
    }
    catch(...) {
      try { cout << "X::X(double,Y) catch" << endl; throw; } catch(...) { ~X(); throw; }
    }
  }{
    cout << "X::X(Y) body" << endl;
  }
  catch(...) {
    try { cout << "X::X(Y) catch" << endl; throw; } catch(...) { ~X(); throw; }
  }
}
```

3. Interactions and Implementability

3.1. Interactions

The proposed feature fits well with the rest of the language, naturally extending initializer-list syntax and semantics.

For template interactions, see above.

There is no impact on code that uses the constructor; the delegation is an implementation detail.

By design, there are no effects on existing code.

3.2. Implementability

There are no known or anticipated difficulties in implementing this feature.

4. Proposed Wording

In this section, where changes are either specified by presenting changes to existing wording, ~~strike-through text~~ refers to existing text that is to be deleted, and underscored text refers to new text that is to be added.

No change to the grammar is needed.

4.1. Changes to §3.8

Change §3.8(1) as follows:

- 1 The *lifetime* of an object is a runtime property of the object. The lifetime of an object of type **T** begins when:
 - storage with the proper alignment and size for type **T** is obtained, and
 - if **T** is a class type and the constructor invoked to create the object is non-trivial (12.1), the non-delegating constructor call (12.6.2) has completed. [*Note*: the initialization can be performed by a constructor call or, in the case of an aggregate with an implicitly-declared non-trivial default constructor, an aggregate initialization 8.5.1. —*end note*]

The lifetime of an object of type **T** ends when:

- if **T** is a class type with a non-trivial destructor (12.4), the destructor call starts, or
- the storage which the object occupies is reused or released.

4.2. Changes to §12.6.2

Change §12.6.2(2) as follows:

- 2 Names in a *mem-initializer-id* are looked up in the scope of the constructor's class and, if not found in that scope, are looked up in the scope containing the constructor's definition. [*Note*: if the constructor's class contains a member with the same name as a direct or virtual base class of the class, a *mem-initializer-id* naming the member or base class and composed of a single identifier refers to the class member. A *mem-initializer-id* for the hidden base class may be specified using a qualified name. —*end note*] Unless the *mem-initializer-id* names a non-static data member of the constructor's class, the constructor's class, or a direct or virtual base of that class, the *mem-initializer* is ill-formed. A *mem-initializer-list* can initialize a base class using any name that denotes that base class type. [*Example*:

```
struct A { A(); };
typedef A global_A;
struct B { };
struct C: public A, public B { C(); };
C::C(): global_A() { }           // mem-initializer for base A
```

—*end example*] A *mem-initializer-list* can delegate to another constructor (the target constructor) of the constructor's class using any name that denotes the constructor's class itself. If a *mem-initializer-id* designates the constructor's class, it shall be the only *mem-initializer*; the constructor is a *delegating constructor*, and the constructor selected by the *mem-initializer* is the *target constructor*. The *target constructor* is selected by overload resolution. Once the *target constructor* returns, the body of the delegating constructor is executed. If a constructor delegates to itself directly or indirectly, the program is ill-formed; no diagnostic is required. [Example:

```

struct C {
  C( int ) { } // 1: non-delegating constructor
  C() : C( 42 ) { } // 2: delegates to 1
  C( char c ) : C( 42.0 ) { } // 3: ill-formed due to recursion with 4
  C( double d ) : C( 'a' ) { } // 4: ill-formed due to recursion with 3
};

```

—end example] If a *mem-initializer-id* is ambiguous because it designates both a direct non-virtual base class and an inherited virtual base class, the *mem-initializer* is ill-formed. [Example:

```

struct A { A(); };
struct B: public virtual A { };
struct C: public A, public B { C(); };
C::C(): A() { } // ill-formed: which A?

```

—end example] A *ctor-initializer* may initialize the member of an anonymous union that is a member of the constructor's class. If a *ctor-initializer* specifies more than one *mem-initializer* for the same member, for the same base class or for multiple members of the same union (including members of anonymous unions), the *ctor-initializer* is ill-formed.

4.3. Changes to §15

Change §15.2(2) as follows:

- 2 An object that is partially constructed or partially destroyed will have destructors executed for all of its fully constructed subobjects, that is, for subobjects for which ~~the~~ a non-delegating constructor (12.6.2) has completed execution and the destructor has not yet begun execution. Similarly, if a non-delegating constructor for an object has completed execution and a delegating constructor for that object exits with an exception, the object's destructor will be invoked. Should a constructor for an element of an automatic array throw an exception, only the constructed elements of that array will be destroyed. If the object or array was allocated in a new-expression, the matching deallocation function (3.7.3.2, 5.3.4, 12.5), if any, is called to free the storage occupied by the object.

Change §15.3(11) as follows:

- 11 The fully constructed base classes and members of an object shall be destroyed before entering the handler of a *function-try-block* of a constructor or destructor for that object. Similarly, if a delegating constructor for an object exits with an exception after a non-delegating constructor for that object has completed execution, the object's destructor shall be executed before entering the handler of a *function-try-block* of a constructor for that object.

5. References

- [C++03] *Programming Language C++* (ISO/IEC 14882:2003(E)).
- [C++/CLI-
WD1.1] *C++/CLI Language Specification, Working Draft 1.1, Jan. 2004* (Ecma/TC39-TG5/2004/3).