JEP 416: Reimplement Core Reflection with Method Handles

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Summary

Reimplement `java.lang.reflect.Method`, `Constructor`, and `Field` on top of `java.lang.invoke` method handles. Making method handles the underlying mechanism for reflection will reduce the maintenance and development cost of both the `java.lang.reflect` and `java.lang.invoke` APIs.

Non-Goals

It is not a goal to make any change to the `java.lang.reflect` API. This is solely an implementation change.

Motivation

Core reflection has two internal mechanisms for invoking methods and constructors. For fast startup, it uses native methods in the HotSpot VM for the first few invocations of a specific reflective method or constructor object. For better peak performance, after a number of invocations it generates bytecode for the reflective operation and uses that in subsequent invocations.

For field access, core reflection uses the internal `sun.misc.Unsafe` API.

With the `java.lang.invoke` method-handle API introduced in Java 7, there are altogether three different internal mechanisms for reflective operations:

- VM native methods,

- Dynamically generated bytecode stubs for `Method::invoke` and `Constructor::newInstance`, along with `Unsafe` field access for `Field::get` and `set`, and

- Method handles.

When we update `java.lang.reflect` and `java.lang.invoke` to support new language features, such as those envisioned in Project Valhalla, we must modify all three code paths, which is costly. In addition, the current implementation relies on special treatment by the VM of the generated bytecode, which is wrapped in subclasses of `jdk.internal.reflect.MagicAccessorImpl`:

- Accessibility is relaxed so that these classes can access inaccessible fields and methods of other classes,

- Verification is disabled to work around JLS §6.6.2 in order to support reflection on `Object::clone`, and

- A non-well-behaved class loader is used to work around some security and compatibility issues.

Description

Reimplement `java.lang.reflect` on top of method handles as the common underlying reflective mechanism of the platform by replacing the bytecode-generating implementations of `Method::invoke`, `Constructor::newInstance`, `Field::get`, and `Field::set`.

The new implementation performs direct invocations of the method handles for specific reflective objects. We use the VM's native reflection mechanism only during early VM startup, before the method-handle mechanism is initialized. That happens soon after `System::initPhase1` and before `System::initPhase2`, after which we switch to using method handles exclusively. This benefits Project Loom by reducing the use of native stack frames.

For optimal performance, `Method`, `Constructor`, and `Field` instances should be held in `static final` fields so that they can be constant-folded by the JIT. When that is done, microbenchmarks show that the performance of the new implementation is significantly faster than the old implementation, by 43–57%.

When `Method`, `Constructor`, and `Field` instances are held in non-constant fields (e.g., in a non-`final` field or an array element), microbenchmarks show some performance degradation. The performance of field accesses is significantly slower than the old implementation, by 51–77%, when `Field` instances cannot be constant-folded.

This degradation may, however, not have much effect on the performance of real-world applications. We ran several serialization and deserialization benchmarks using real-world libraries and found no degradation in

- A custom JSON serialization and deserialization benchmark using Jackson,
- An XStream converter type benchmark, or
- A Kryo field serializer benchmark.

We will continue to explore opportunities to improve performance, for example by refining the bytecode shapes for field access to enable concrete `MethodHandles` and `VarHandles` to be reliably optimized by the JIT regardless of whether the receiver is constant.

The new implementation will reduce the cost of upgrading reflection support for new language features and, further, will allow us to simplify the HotSpot VM by removing the special treatment of `MagicAccessorImpl` subclasses.

Alternatives

Alternative 1: Do nothing

Retain the existing core reflection implementation to avoid any compatibility risk. The dynamic bytecode generated for core reflection would remain at class file version 49, and the VM would continue to treat such bytecode specially.

We reject this alternative because

- The cost of updating `java.lang.reflect` and `java.lang.invoke` to support Project Valhalla's primitive classes and generic specialization would be high,

- Additional special rules in the VM would likely be needed to support new language features within the limitation of the old class-file format, and

- Project Loom would need to find a way to handle the introduction of native stack frames by core reflection.

Alternative 2: Upgrade to a new bytecode library

Replace the bytecode writer used by core reflection to use a new bytecode library that evolves together with the class-file format, but otherwise retain the existing core reflection implementation and continue to treat dynamically-generated reflection bytecode specially.

This alternative has lower compatibility risk than what we propose above, but it is still a sizeable amount of work and it still has the first and last disadvantages of the first alternative.

Testing

Comprehensive testing will ensure that the implementation is robust and compatible with existing behavior. Performance testing will ensure that there are no unexpected significant performance regressions compared to the current implementation. We will encourage developers using early-access builds to test as many libraries and frameworks as possible in order to help us identify any behavior or performance regressions.

Baseline

```
Benchmark                                      Mode   Cnt    Score   Error   Units
ReflectionSpeedBenchmark.constructorConst      avgt   10    68.049 ± 0.872   ns/op
ReflectionSpeedBenchmark.constructorPoly       avgt   10    94.132 ± 1.805   ns/op
ReflectionSpeedBenchmark.constructorVar        avgt   10    64.543 ± 0.799   ns/op
ReflectionSpeedBenchmark.instanceFieldConst    avgt   10    35.361 ± 0.492   ns/op
ReflectionSpeedBenchmark.instanceFieldPoly     avgt   10    67.089 ± 3.288   ns/op
ReflectionSpeedBenchmark.instanceFieldVar      avgt   10    35.745 ± 0.554   ns/op
ReflectionSpeedBenchmark.instanceMethodConst   avgt   10    77.925 ± 2.026   ns/op
ReflectionSpeedBenchmark.instanceMethodPoly    avgt   10    96.094 ± 2.269   ns/op
ReflectionSpeedBenchmark.instanceMethodVar     avgt   10    80.002 ± 4.267   ns/op
ReflectionSpeedBenchmark.staticFieldConst      avgt   10    33.442 ± 2.659   ns/op
ReflectionSpeedBenchmark.staticFieldPoly       avgt   10    51.918 ± 1.522   ns/op
ReflectionSpeedBenchmark.staticFieldVar        avgt   10    33.967 ± 0.451   ns/op
ReflectionSpeedBenchmark.staticMethodConst     avgt   10    75.380 ± 1.660   ns/op
ReflectionSpeedBenchmark.staticMethodPoly      avgt   10    93.553 ± 1.037   ns/op
ReflectionSpeedBenchmark.staticMethodVar       avgt   10    76.728 ± 1.614   ns/op
```

New implementation

```
Benchmark                                      Mode   Cnt     Score   Error   Units
ReflectionSpeedBenchmark.constructorConst      avgt   10     32.392 ± 0.473   ns/op
ReflectionSpeedBenchmark.constructorPoly       avgt   10    113.947 ± 1.205   ns/op
ReflectionSpeedBenchmark.constructorVar        avgt   10     76.885 ± 1.128   ns/op
ReflectionSpeedBenchmark.instanceFieldConst    avgt   10     18.569 ± 0.161   ns/op
ReflectionSpeedBenchmark.instanceFieldPoly     avgt   10     98.671 ± 2.015   ns/op
ReflectionSpeedBenchmark.instanceFieldVar      avgt   10     54.193 ± 3.510   ns/op
ReflectionSpeedBenchmark.instanceMethodConst   avgt   10     33.421 ± 0.406   ns/op
ReflectionSpeedBenchmark.instanceMethodPoly    avgt   10    109.129 ± 1.959   ns/op
ReflectionSpeedBenchmark.instanceMethodVar     avgt   10     90.420 ± 2.187   ns/op
ReflectionSpeedBenchmark.staticFieldConst      avgt   10     19.080 ± 0.179   ns/op
ReflectionSpeedBenchmark.staticFieldPoly       avgt   10     92.130 ± 2.729   ns/op
ReflectionSpeedBenchmark.staticFieldVar        avgt   10     53.899 ± 1.051   ns/op
ReflectionSpeedBenchmark.staticMethodConst     avgt   10     35.907 ± 0.456   ns/op
ReflectionSpeedBenchmark.staticMethodPoly      avgt   10    102.895 ± 1.604   ns/op
ReflectionSpeedBenchmark.staticMethodVar       avgt   10     82.123 ± 0.629   ns/op
```

Risks and Assumptions

Code that depends upon highly implementation-specific and undocumented aspects of the existing implementation may be impacted. To mitigate this compatibility risk, as a workaround you can enable the old implementation via `-Djdk.reflect.useDirectMethodHandle=false`.

- Code that inspects the internal generated reflection classes (i.e., subclasses of `MagicAccessorImpl`) will no longer work and must be updated.

- Method-handle invocation may consume more resources than the old core reflection implementation. Such invocation involves calling multiple Java methods to ensure that the declaring class of a member is initialized prior to access, and thus may require more stack space for the necessary execution frames. This may result in a `StackOverflowError` or, if a `StackOverflowError` is thrown while initializing a class, then a `NoClassDefFoundError`.

- We will remove the old core reflection implementation in a future release. The `-Djdk.reflect.useDirectMethodHandle=false` workaround will stop working at that point.