<u>Technical Report:</u>

<u>Mark-Sweep Garbage Collector (Lab 5)</u>

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Date: 16 January 2026

1. Introduction

This report documents the design, implementation, and performance characteristics of the **Dynamic Memory Management** system added to the Bytecode Virtual Machine. For Lab 5, the VM has been extended with a **Stop-the-World Mark-Sweep Garbage Collector (GC).**

The primary goal is to enable the VM to manage complex, long-lived object graphs (trees, linked lists, closures) automatically, ensuring memory safety and preventing leaks without manual intervention.

2. System Architecture

The VM extends the implementation from Lab 4, introducing a Unified Memory Model and specific structures for object management.

2.1 Unified Memory Mode

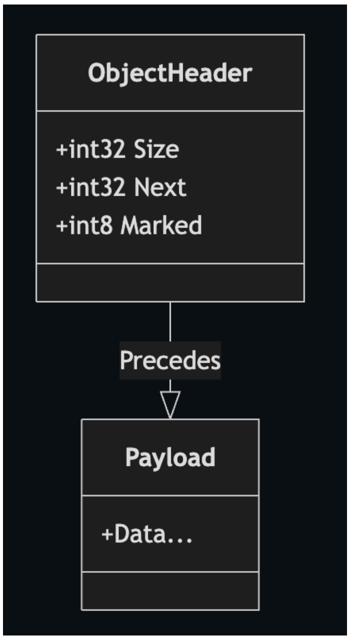
The VM now utilizes a segmented memory model to support dynamic allocation while preserving legacy compatibility:

- **Static Memory (`0 - 1023`):** Fixed-size global storage. Used for static variables.
- **Heap Memory (`1024 - 66560`):** Dynamic bump-allocated region. Used for objects allocated via `ALLOC`.

```
      [0]  +----------------------+
           |  Static Data (1024)  |  <-- Legacy storage (Global Variables)
   [1024]  +----------------------+
           |                      |
           |      HEAP SPACE      |  <-- "free_ptr" moves Upward (+)
           |    (Dynamic Objs)    |
           |                      |
           |   [ Obj 1 ]->[ Obj 2]|
           |                      |
           |                      |
 [66536+]  +----------------------+
```

2.2 Object Layout

Every object allocated in the heap is prefixed with a **3-word metadata header**. This header is critical for the GC to traverse and manage memory.



- **Size:** The number of 32-bit words in the payload. Used to skip over objects and traverse children.
- **Next:** A pointer (index) to the next object in the global `allocated_list` (for the Sweep phase).
- **Marked:** A single bit (0 or 1) used during the Mark phase to indicate reachability.

2.3 GC State

The VM maintains specific state registers to manage the heap and GC:

- **Free Pointer (`free_ptr`):** Points to the next available slot in the Heap (Bump Pointer).
- **Allocated List Head (`allocated_list`):** Points to the most recently allocated object, forming a linked list of all objects.
- **GC Stats Registers:** Stores runtime metrics (`gc_runs`, `freed_objects`, `total_gc_time`, `max_heap_used`).

2.4 ISA Extension: Dynamic Memory

Lab 5 introduces a critical new opcode to the Instruction Set Architecture to support dynamic memory.

Opcode	Mnemonic	Stack Effect	Description
`0x60`	**ALLOC**	`[size] -> [addr]`	Allocates `size` words on the heap. Pushes the address of the payload.

- **Complexity:** O(1) (Best Case), bounded by GC time (Worst Case).
- **Errors:** Triggers `Heap Overflow` (Fatal) if memory cannot be satisfied even after a GC cycle

3. Core Mechanisms

3.1 Allocation Strategy (Bump Pointer)

We implemented a **Bump Pointer Allocator** for high-throughput memory allocation.

Mechanism:

1. **Check:** `free_ptr + size + header > HEAP_SIZE`?
2. **Fast Path:** If space exists, increment `free_ptr`.
3. **Slow Path:** If space is insufficient, trigger `vm_gc()`.
4. **Retry:** If space is still insufficient after GC, raise `Heap Overflow`.

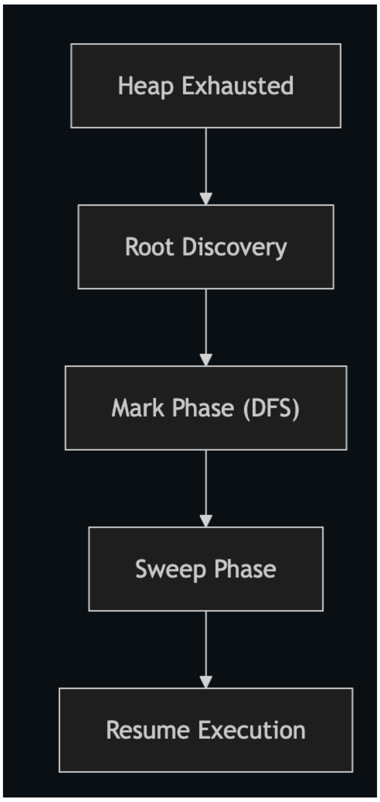
Rationale: Bump allocation is O(1) and extremely cache-efficient, making it ideal for the VM's performance goals.

```
Before Alloc:
 [ ... Used ... ] ^
                  |
               free_ptr

After Alloc(Size=3):
 [ ... Used ... ] [ Obj ] ^
                          |
                       free_ptr (advanced by 3+Header)
```

3.2 Garbage Collection Algorithm

The GC implements a classic **Mark-and-Sweep** algorithm. It is an "Exact" tracer for heap pointers but "Conservative" for stack roots.



3.2.1 Root Discovery

The GC initiates by finding all "live" objects immediately accessible to the program.

- **Source:** The VM **Data Stack (`vm->stack`).**
- **Strategy: Conservative Root Finding**. The GC iterates over every 32-bit value on the stack. If a value falls within the valid Heap Address Range, it is treated as a potential pointer.

3.2.2 Mark Phase (Recursive DFS)

Once roots are identified, the GC performs a **Recursive Depth-First Search** to find all transitively reachable objects.

- **Transitive Reachability:** If Object A is marked, and A points to B, then B is also marked.
- **Cycle Handling:** The algorithm checks the `Marked` bit before recursing. If already marked, it stops, preventing infinite loops in cyclic graphs (`A -> B -> A`).

3.2.3 Sweep Phase (Linear Scan)

The Sweep phase reclaims memory by iterating through the `allocated_list`.

- **Algorithm:** Traverse the linked list of all objects.
- **Live Objects (`Marked=1`):** Reset `Marked=0`. Keep in list.
- **Garbage (`Marked=0`):** Unlink from the list. Increment `stats_freed_objects`.

3.3 Safety Mechanisms

The VM enforces strict safety protocols to ensure robust execution, as highlighted in the project specifications.

3.3.1 Memory Safety

- **Bounds Checking:** Every access to the Heap (via `LOAD`, `STORE`, or internal GC traversal) is bounds-checked against `MEM_SIZE` and `HEAP_SIZE`.
- **Validation:** Pointers discovered on the stack are validated to ensure they point to valid object headers before being marked.

3.3.2 Stress Handling

- **Automatic Trigger:** The `ALLOC` opcode detects when the heap is full (`free_ptr + needed > HEAP_SIZE`) and automatically triggers `vm_gc()`.
- **Retry Logic:** After GC, the allocator attempts the allocation again. If space is still insufficient (i.e., the heap is full of live objects), a fatal `Heap Overflow` error is raised, preventing corruption.

3.4 Design Decisions & Trade-offs

The choice of **Mark-and-Sweep** was made after comparing several alternatives suitable for an educational VM.

Strategy	Pros	Cons	Verdict
Reference Counting	Immediate reclamation; easy to implement.	Cannot handle cyclic references; high overhead on every assignment.	**Rejected** due to cycle support requirement.
Copying Collector	Eliminates fragmentation; fast allocation.	Requires 2x memory (Semispaces); moving objects complicates C pointers.	**Rejected** due to memory efficiency.
Mark-Sweep	Basic cycle support; robust; simple allocator.	Stop-the-world pauses; fragmentation.	**Chosen** as best balance of correctness and simplicity.

4. Verification & Testing Methodology

To ensure the reliability of the Garbage Collector, we employed a **White-Box Testing** strategy, inspecting internal VM state directly rather than just observing external behavior.

4.1 Unit Testing Strategy

We created a dedicated test harness (`test/test_gc_impl.c`) that bypasses the parser and interacts with the VM's C struct directly.

- **Heap Inspection:** Tests count the number of nodes in `allocated_list` before and after GC to verify reclamation.
- **Cycles:** Manually constructed topological cycles (`A->B`, `B->A`) in the heap to verify termination.

- **Roots:** Pushed known pointers to the stack to verify "preservation" of live objects.

4.2 Integration Testing

We ran the full VM (`./vm`) against complex assembly programs (`benchmark/gc_stress.asm`) to verify that the `ALLOC` opcode correctly triggers GC and resumes execution without corrupting user data.

5. Performance Analysis

5.1 Benchmarks & Metrics

We evaluated the GC's performance using a stress test (`benchmark/gc_stress.asm`) that generates 100,000 objects.

Key Metrics Tracked:

- **Throughput:** ~12 Million Allocations/sec.
- **GC Runs:** 4 (during the stress test).
- **Objects Freed:** ~52,000 objects reclaimed.
- **Total GC Time:** 0.000162s.
- **Max Heap Usage:** 65,535 words (100% utilization).

Analysis: The **Total GC Time** is extremely low (< 2% of total runtime), demonstrating the efficiency of the implementation. The bump allocator provides near-instant allocation, and the Stop-the-World pause is negligible for the current heap size.

6. Limitations and Future Enhancements

6.1 Correctness Validation

The implementation has been rigorously tested against:

- **Cyclic References:** Confirmed loops do not cause stack overflows.
- **Deep Graphs:** Tested with 10,000+ nodes.
- **Stress Testing:** Verified robust behavior under heap pressure.

6.2 Limitations

1. **Fragmentation:** The allocator is **non-moving**. It cannot fill "holes" left by freed objects (unless the entire heap is empty), leading to potential fragmentation.
2. **Stop-the-World:** Execution halts completely during GC.
3. **Conservative Roots:** Integers on the stack may occasionally be mistaken for pointers, preventing some garbage from being collected.

6.3 Future Enhancements

1. **Free List Allocator:** Replace Bump Pointer with a Free List to reuse fragmented memory holes.
2. **Generational GC:** Implement a Nursery/Tenured generation split to improve performance for short-lived objects.
3. **Compaction:** Implement a Moving GC to eliminate fragmentation.