PUC

ISSN 0103-9741

Monografias em Ciência da Computação
nº 10/93

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PUC RIO - DEPARTAMENTO DE INFORMÁTICA ISSN 0103-9741

Monografias em Ciência da Computação, Nº 10/93
Editor: Carlos J. P. Lucena June, 1993

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* This work has been sponsored by the Secretaria de Ciência e Tecnologia da Presidência da República Federativa do Brasil.

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THE SEMANTICS OF NESTING IN OBJECT-ORIENTED DESIGN

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Abstract

It has been observed that design of complex objects such as software requires both decomposition by form (atomic objects) and decomposition by function (nesting) in order to reduce the design to a set of manageable components. However, the object-oriented design paradigm mostly supports decomposition by form. This paper uses a simple example to motivate the need for nesting (decomposition by function) and illustrates how nesting might be incorporated into a design language. We then demonstrate how the introduction of nesting into software specification and design significantly increases reusability. ADVcharts, a new visual formalism, and VDM are used to provide a semantics for nesting.

1 Introduction

Authors such as Maher [Mah90] have observed that designers in various engineering disciplines use both decomposition by function and decomposition by form to reduce their projects to manageable components. Similarly, software designers should use both design strategies since they also build complex objects. Decomposition by form follows the object-oriented paradigm and object-oriented programming languages [GR83, BS83, Str86, CN91] and design methodologies [Boo91, R^+91] support decomposition by form through such techniques as creating subclasses (inheritance) and encapsulation. Decomposition by function requires that an object be divided into smaller components to which a small set of actions can be applied. The relationship among the larger component and its constituents is expressed through nesting, a concept that some authors claim is not properly supported by object-oriented languages [BZ88] and is not supported at all by strictly object-oriented design methodologies [Jal89].

Although there have been arguments made in favour of nesting in object-oriented specification and design, we came to the conclusion that most of the arguments used so far are not very satisfactory. Some of the arguments sound like a nostalgic defense of structured design/programming [Ala88, Jal89], and some authors even show how to convert a structured design into an object-oriented design [Ala88]. Other authors [BZ88, Ass92, Mad87] have examined a related issue, namely, the implementation of nesting in object-oriented programming languages. We believe a common concern at both the design and programming language levels is nesting encapsulation. That is, the semantics of nesting should allow reference to definitions from outside the containing block without violating encapsulation [BZ88, Ass92, Mad87].

We feel there is a need for an appropriate illustration of the "form versus function dilemma" that every designer needs to face. In other words, a discussion about when to use decomposition by form (inheritance) and when to use decomposition by function (nesting) should be presented in the context of a software design activity. Since problem solving at the design and implementation levels can always take place using only one of the two kinds of decomposition, a "metric" is necessary to justify decisions that combine both approaches to design. The metric we propose in this paper is enhanced design reuse.

Our motivation for the combination of inheritance with nesting at the design level comes from our work on Abstract Data Views (ADVs) [CILS93a, CILS93b]. At first the concept of ADVs was used only for the design of user interfaces. Later this concept was generalized to deal with module interconnection in general and the design of concurrent and distributed systems [PLC93]. The justification for the combined use of nesting and inheritance can be naturally explained in the case of user interfaces. Nesting models the issue of "locus of association" in human interfaces. Nested objects know "where they are" with respect to other objects on the screen, therefore minimizing the so-called constraint problem [Lel88, Car92]. Inheritance is normally used to specialize interface objects.

A justification for the combined use of the two kinds of decomposition is less obvious in other application domains. We discuss this issue in this paper using a simple software design situation. What we have done was to "simulate" the locus of association situation in our example to try to convince the reader that at least in this situation (which occurs very often in software designs), a combined use of the two decomposition styles is justified because design reuse is clearly improved.

It should be noted that we discuss specification and design issues in this paper, not implementation issues. One contribution of this paper is to illustrate the importance of nesting to those researchers who are extending formal design notations to encompass object-oriented design concepts [S^+90, CDD^+90, CHB92, Fit91]. We also use the design example to introduce the notions of maximization of reuse as a design metric, and the properties of locus of association, object-set browsing and nesting encapsulation. These are all properties which are introduced when nesting is used as a design notion. In our work on ADVs we expressed nesting using the extensions of VDM proposed by Ierusalimschy [Ier91, Ier93]. In this paper we use this extension to VDM and

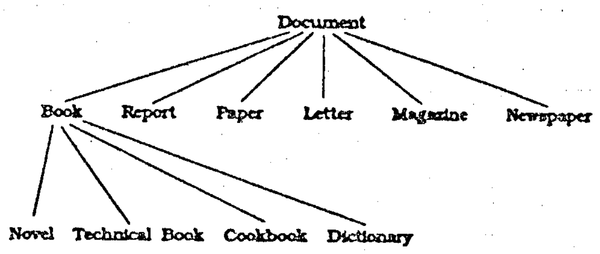

Figure 1: A Hierarchy of Document Types for a Library – An is_a Relation

ADVcharts to express the semantics of nesting and inheritance.

2 The Problem

Consider an electronic version of a library. An electronic library is a collection of documents in machine-readable format ordered using some scheme such as the Dewey Decimal System. We wish to specify and design a program which allows a user of the library to browse all the documents in the library sequentially.

Browsing the library means that the user starts at the first document in the library and examines the cover. If the document is of interest, the user then scans the document in more detail by moving among the sections of the document in some predetermined order from front to back. The sections of the document and the order of those sections is determined by the type of the document.

3 The Structure of the Library

The library consists of a number of documents and these documents are of many different types such as book, report, paper, letter, magazine, and newspaper. Many of these document types can be further subdivided into different classifications. For example, a book can be a novel, technical book, cookbook, or dictionary. This relationship among document types can be represented as a hierarchy and is shown in Figure 1. As we move from top to bottom in the hierarchy each document type becomes more specialized and inherits the properties of its superior entry in the hierarchy. Inheritance is often called an *is_a* relation.

Each document type in a library may have a different composition. For example, a novel has a title, author, preface and a number of chapters, while a technical book is composed of a title, author, table of contents, chapters, appendices and an index[1]. The structure or composition of a specific type of document namely, a novel and a technical book is illustrated in Figure 2 where boxes inside each other indicate composition by nesting[2] , and the left to right order of boxes indicates

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[1] This description is a simplification of the structure of various kinds of books, but it is certainly adequate for the present example.

[2] Both inheritance and composition by nesting could be illustrated using a tree diagram. We have chosen two different representations to emphasize that these are different concepts.

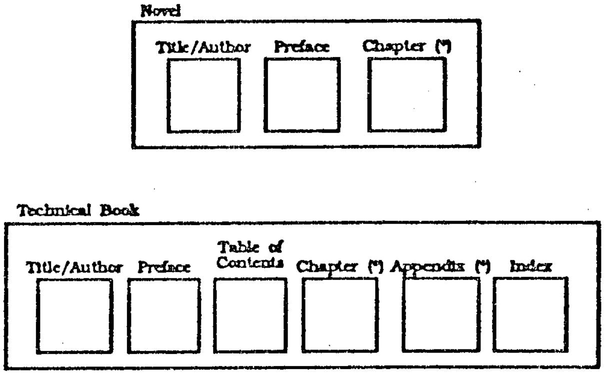

Figure 2: The Structure of two Document Types – An is_a_component_of Relation

order of appearance in the document. The asterisk (*) beside the name of a component indicates that the component may appear several times in sequence. The term *is_a_component_of* is often used to describe the nesting relationship.

4 An Object-oriented Design for the Library

In this section we consider an object-oriented design for the library in order to motivate the need for encapsulation, inheritance, and composition by nesting. Object-oriented design requires that we identify the basic objects which can act together as atomic units to produce the desired behavior. If we confine the contents of the library to novels and technical books, it is clear from Figure 2 that we need objects such as title, author, preface, chapter, table of contents, appendix and index. The library then becomes an ordered collection of documents and each document in the library such as a novel or technical book becomes an ordered composition of these basic objects.

In order to browse the library we need to define two methods or functions for each document, namely "get_next" and "examine". The method "get_next" will move to the next document and the method "examine" will allow a detailed examination of each section of a specific document. The method "get_next" can be defined for all documents as it is only necessary for the system to know how to move to the next element in the ordered collection of documents. The method "examine" is more specialized because an examination of a document requires knowledge of the specific type of document and is an example of the requirement for the "locus of association".

4.1 Encapsulation and Inheritance

Conventional structured design would specify the "examine" method for books using the pseudo-code structure shown in Figure 3. In this Figure the document type is located in a standard place in each document and is then interrogated in a case statement. Based on the value in the case statement the "examine" method can call the correct function for a specific type of document.

In the object model of design the state of an object is encapsulated or hidden and is queried and changed through a set of associated methods or functions. Since the methods are really part of the

```
record document (typecode : integer;....)
.....
method examine(item)
    type item : document
    case item.typecode
      novel: examine_novel(item)
      technicalbook: examine_technical_book(item)
      cookbook: examine_cookbook(item)
      dictionary: examine_dictionary(item)
      report: examine_report(item)
      paper: examine_paper(item)
      .....
    esac
```

Figure 3: A Conventional Pseudo-code Specification for "examine"

object they can be used by naming an object and its associated method. For example, accessing the method "examine" for the object "item" can be written as

```
item.examine;
```

and replaces the pseudo-code of Figure 3.

We now must add the method "get_next" to each object so that the entire library can be browsed. Unfortunately we now must duplicate the "get_next" specification for every type of object in the library. The concept of inheritance solves this problem. Inheritance allows the definition of a type which may be specialized and thus implements the hierarchy shown in Figure 1. Since "get_next" is the same for all documents, we can now attach the specification and the corresponding state to the document type. When the newer types inherit from document they also inherit the state and all accompanying methods such as "get_next". This means the specification and state for this method are only located in one place in the program design, although it is accessible to all subtypes that inherit from the type document. A type that allows inheritance is usually called a class.

4.2 Composition by Nesting

Invoking the method "examine" for each document type requires that each component of the document be displayed in succession under user control. A simplified version of the class book containing only the components preface and chapter and their associated "display" method, might be expressed as shown in Figure 4 if we use only the concepts of encapsulation and inheritance. Inheritance is made explicit with the expression

```
novel is_a book.
```

This solution illustrates a strict object-oriented style of design where the designer interpreted both the relations is_a and is_a_component_of in Figures 1 and 2 as inheritance trees.

```
class book is_a document
    where = (preface, chapter)

    function examine_preface(item)
       item.display
       where <- chapter

    function examine_chapter(item)
       item.display
       where <- preface

class novel is_a book
    where <- preface
    method examine(item)
       case where
         preface : examine_preface(item)
         chapter : examine_chapter(item)
       esac
```

Figure 4: An Object-oriented Approach to the function "examine" for the objects book and novel

Instances of the classes book and novel maintain a variable "where" which records the next item to be examined in the document. Note the use of the case statement with the variable "where" to select the correct version of "examine". This solution has the same problem as the one which motivated encapsulation. Also this solution has to be created for each class because the solution must be specialized to that specific class. Such specialization limits reuse.

Note that this specification could be implemented using an array of object pointers. However, the expression of nesting would not be explicit, but would be implied by the semantics of the program.

We create the concept of composition by nesting to build a class. Each class is composed of it's constituent classes and their associated methods. We illustrate composition by nesting in Figure 5 by using a version of the class novel. The statement

```
class novel is_a book
    novel is_composed_of (title/author, preface, chapter)

    method examine
       next.display
       next <- succ(next)
```

Figure 5: An Object-oriented Approach to the class novel using composition by nesting

```
novel is_composed_of (title/author, preface, chapter)
```

indicates that the class novel is composed of the classes title/author, preface and chapter, and that they appear in the order presented. In our case each of these constituent classes has a method called "display" which is invoked by naming the object of that class, and then the method. For example, "display" for the object "item" of class "chapter" would be invoked with the expression

```
item.display
```

Associated with this list of constituents in each object is a variable named "next" that is used to traverse this list. The first time the variable "next" is used its value is the first object in the list of constituents. There is also a successor method named "succ" that moves the value of the variable to the next element in the list of constituents. The method "succ" will move to the beginning of the list of constituents after accessing the last element. Thus, we have provided the design specification with an *object-set browsing* capability.

When a class such as novel is instantiated, its list of constituents is defined, but the list does not contain any instances of constituent classes. That is, the type and order of the constituents is known when the class is defined. As an object of a class such as novel "grows" and "shrinks" new instances of constituent classes are added and removed from the list. Hence, methods such as "insert" and "remove" must be defined for constituent lists and could be based on the position of the variable "next". We should also note that type and number violations are not allowed. For example, the constituent list for novel may not have an instance of an index, and if the list already contains an instance of a preface then trying to enter another preface would cause an error. We say we have achieved *locus of association* through nesting.

We observe that nesting has maintained the separation of concerns, since we first solved the problem of manipulating each individual component and then we solve the problem of composition; the two solutions proceed independently. Although the enclosing object of a class such as novel knows the identity of its constituent classes, the enclosed objects of classes such as preface and chapter have no knowledge of the state of novel. We call this property of the design *nesting encapsulation.*

Also using this design language involving composition by nesting to invoke the methods "examine" does not require any knowledge of the position in the constituent list from either of these methods. In fact we could easily change the constituent list without changing any of the specification associated with the object novel. This form of limited change makes any of these objects highly reusable.

Because the knowledge of position in the constituent list is encompassed by the variable "next" we can use inheritance to associate the method "examine" with the class document. This concept is illustrated in Figure 6. The constituent lists for document and book are empty, but this does not affect the program design. These lists become completed when the class novel is declared.

Of course it is possible to have some of the constituents in a list to be composed of lists. This can be easily handled within the constituent itself. For example, consider a class tech_chapter which consists of sections. This could be expressed as shown in Figure 7 and except for a change of name is exactly the same specification as used in Figure 6.

```
class document
    document is_composed_of ()

    method examine
       next.display
       next <- succ(next)

class book is_a document
    book is_composed_of ()

class novel is_a book
    novel is_composed_of (title/author, preface, chapter)
```

Figure 6: Associating the method "examine" with the class document

```
class chapter
    chapter is_composed_of ()

    method examine
       next.display
       next <- succ(next)

class tech_chapter is_a chapter
    tech_chapter is_composed_of (section(*))
```

Figure 7: Nested Composition

```
class book is_a document
    book is_composed_of (author/title, preface, chapter)

class novel is_a book
```

Figure 8: A class novel inheriting a nest

```
class book is_a document
    book is_composed_of (author/title, preface, chapter)

class technical_book is_a book
    novel is_also_composed_of (author/title, preface, chapter, index)
```

Figure 9: A class technical_book inheriting a nest

5 Some Properties of Nesting

In previous sections we described object-oriented design using nesting. In this section we present two important properties of nesting namely "inheritance of nesting" and "nesting of inheritance".

5.1 Inheritance of Nesting

Consider Figure 8 which illustrates inheritance of nesting. Since a book already contains the components author/title, preface, and chapter, the class novel which is a specialization of book also contains these components. Inheritance of the nest is automatic and does not have to be explicitly stated. If we wish to modify the nest of components, then we use the version shown in Figure 9 where we define a technical_book which also contains an index. Here we explicitly use the phrase "is_also_composed_of" to indicate that we inherit the nest of book, but that we can add to the nest. The nest must be explicitly specified so that new elements can be inserted at any position.

5.2 Nesting of Inheritance

```
class book is_a document
    book is_composed_of (author/title, preface, chapter)

class technical_book is_a book
    novel is_also_composed_of (author/title, preface, technical_chapter, index)

class technical_chapter is_a chapter
```

Figure 10: A class technical_book showing inheritance of subclasses

In Figure 10 we show a class book that is composed of three classes author/title, preface and chapter. Figure 10 also illustrates what happens when a new class technical_book is defined which contains a subclass of chapter, namely technical_chapter. Again we use the phrase is_also_composed_of to indicate that some of the classes in the nest can be inherited from book but some may be replaced by subclasses.

6 The ADVchart Notation – A Visual Formalism for Nesting

ADVcharts are primarily a visual formalism for describing the structure and flow of control in a program design and have been found to be especially useful for describing the semantics of designs for interactive object-oriented programs. ADVcharts are a formal approach to program design in that they can be translated into an equivalent design in a VDM-like notation [Ier91, Ier93] using a set of rules. In this section we present an example using ADVcharts to illustrate a formal visual semantics for nesting and inheritance, and to show both inheritance of nesting and nesting of inheritance. A more complete description of ADVcharts is in [CCL93].

ADVcharts are an extension of Statecharts [Har87] and Objectcharts [CHB92] which are based on a finite state machine notation. ADVcharts were originally created to describe Abstract Data Views (ADVs) [CILS93a, CILS93b] a program design concept which allowed for the clean separation between the user interface and the application code, thus, supporting design reuse. ADVs are Abstract Data Types (ADTs) with some special properties which make them useful for expressing the design of user interfaces.

The ADVchart notation consists of three components: the configuration diagram, the ADVchart diagram, and the set of transitions. The configuration diagram shows the inheritance structure of the application and the ADVchart illustrates the nesting property and reflects the inheritance structure.

Each document in the library has two components: a user view (or user interface) for the document and its contents. The user interface is represented by an Abstract Data View (ADV) and the contents by an Abstract Data Type (ADT). Both the ADV and the ADT can be specialized through inheritance. A configuration diagram shows the inheritance hierarchy for both the ADVs and ADTs and the operations on both of them. The operations on an ADV are the user input operations and the corresponding displays, while the operations on the ADT are caused by the ADV and are a direct consequence of the user actions.

A partial configuration diagram for the document problem discussed earlier in this paper is shown in Figure 11. Part of the inheritance hierarchy for the ADVs is illustrated in the diagram where the ADV for document is specialized to become the ADV for book and further specialized into different types of books. There is no corresponding hierarchy for the ADT document since the specialization of the document is through its views not through specializing its contents. The operations on the ADV for document are "get_next" document, and "examine" current document. The single operation on the ADT is "getLibraryDocument". If other ADVs needed specialized or overloaded operations then these would be shown on the appropriate ADV in the configuration diagram.

Each ADV or ADT in the configuration diagram can be divided into its nested components. The components and their relationships in terms of events is shown in an ADVchart. The ADVchart

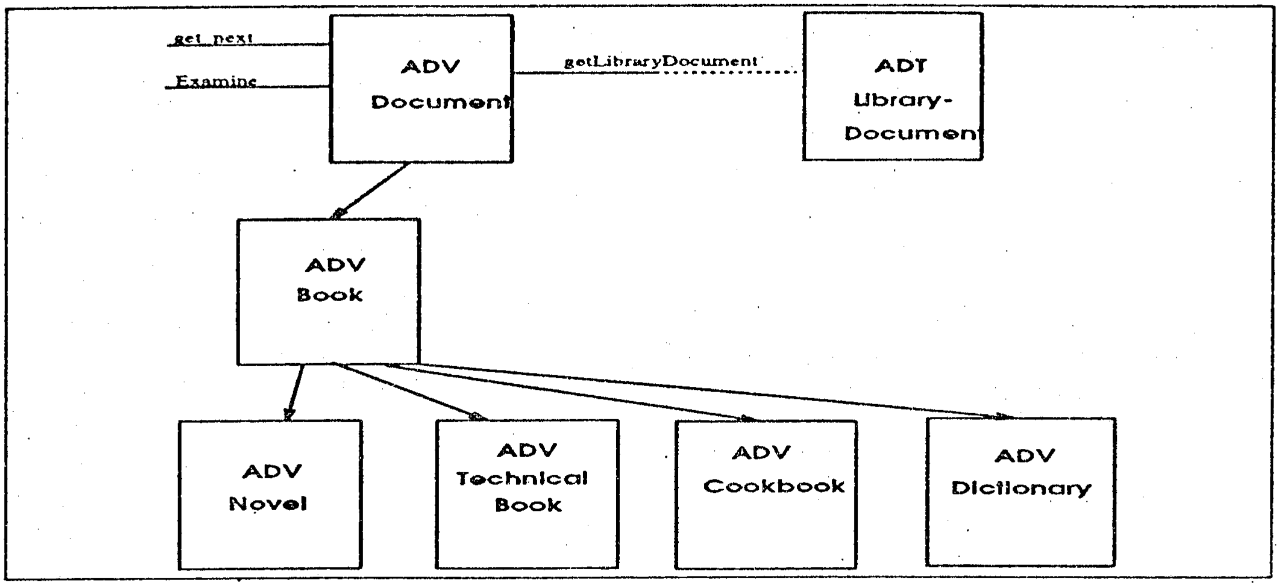

Figure 11: Configuration Diagram for the Document Problem

for the ADV "Book" consisting of three distinct logical components (Title/Author, Preface and Chapters) is shown in Figure 12. This ADVchart when used with the Configuration Diagram of Figure 11 illustrates the semantics of inheritance of nesting.

The ADVs are denoted by rectangles with the name of the ADV in a smaller rectangle in the top left-hand corner. States attached to an ADV are represented by rectangles with round corners inside the class and the name of the state is shown at the top. To implement nesting and preserve the separation of concerns the ADVs can be contained inside states. This is illustrated in Figure 12 where the state "AnalyseDoc" contains the three ADVs composing the ADV "Book". Each ADV can also contain a declaration for the variables that define the state of an attribute of that ADV. An attribute is an identifier and its corresponding value.

Transitions between states which are equivalent to state transitions in finite state machines, are illustrated by arrows joining an initial and a final state. The initial state is at the tail of the arrow. A state can have an initial transition which is illustrated by an arrow with no initial state. One example is the transition labelled "examine" from the state "display" in the ADV "Title/Author" to the state "display" in the ADV "Preface". Since the definition of the ADV "Book" needs to be specialized into entities such as a novel or technical book by adding an component such as a "Table of Contents" the set of nested components is not complete. Thus, there is no transition shown in Figure 12 between the state "display" in the ADV "Preface" and the state "display" in the ADV "Chapter".

Transitions can only be executed if certain conditions apply. These conditions are expressed in a transition specification such as the one in Figure 13. This Figure shows the specification for one of the transitions in Figure 12, where each transition specification consists of four parts. The transition has a label which shows the initial and final states connected by an arrow. The pre-condition expresses a predicate which must apply before the transition is fired and the post-

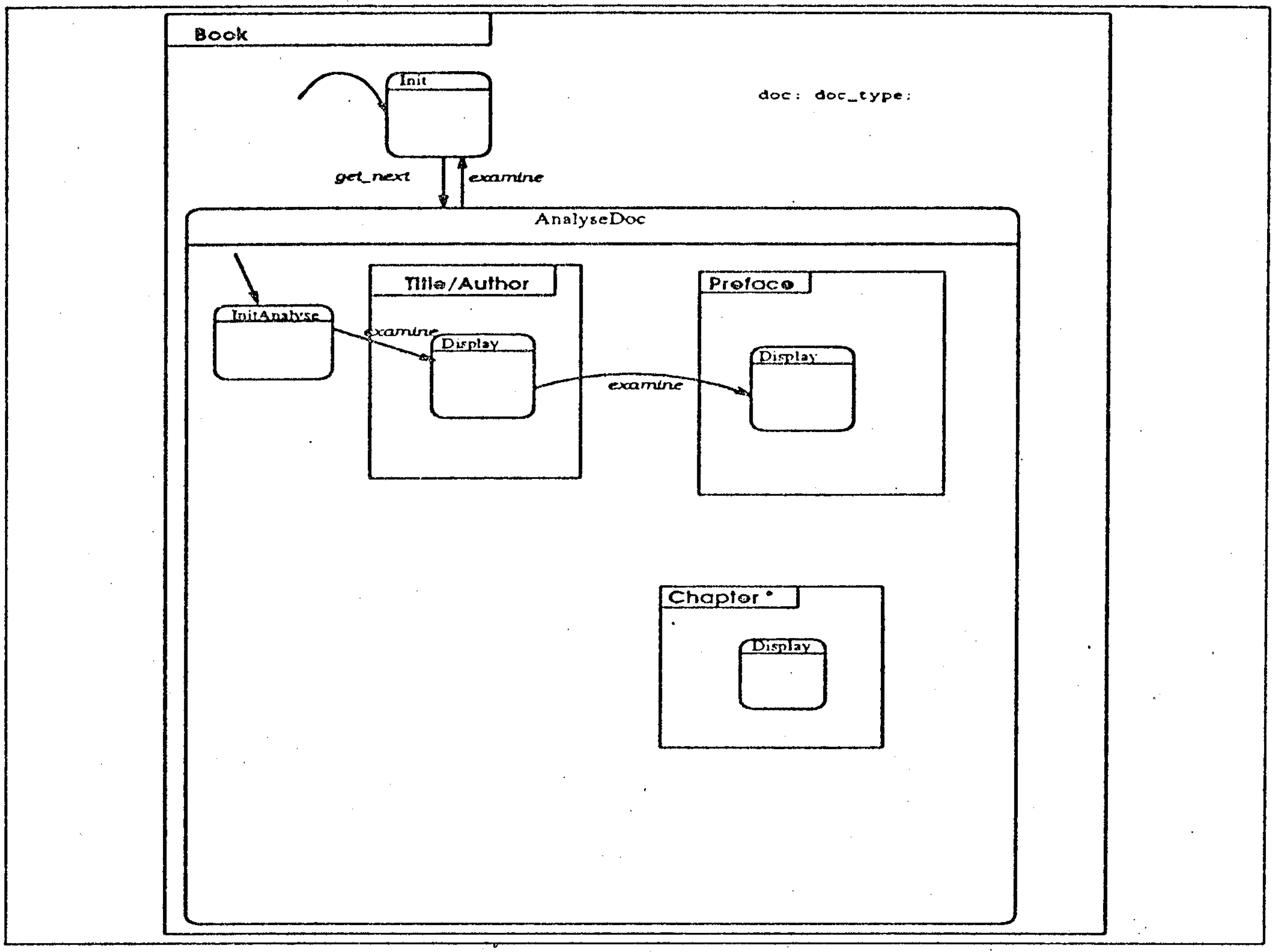

Figure 12: ADVchart for the Book Problem

Transitions ADV Book

- **Init → AnalyseDoc :**
  pre-condition : {}
  event : get_next()
  post-condition : {*doc* = *owner.getLibraryDocument*()}

Figure 13: Some Transition Specifications for ADV Book

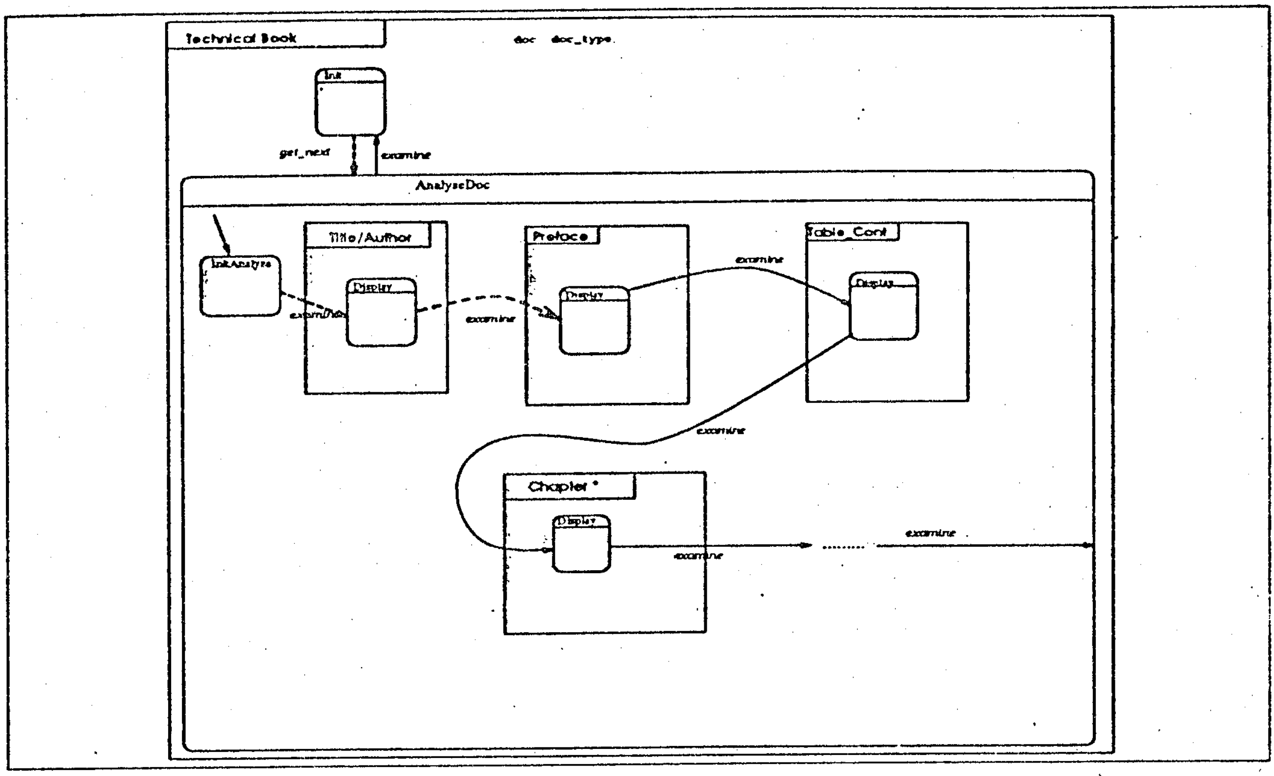

Figure 14: ADVchart for Technical Book

condition expresses the predicate which applies after the transition is complete. The event statement contains the name of the event associated with the transition. The variable *owner* in the post-conditions represents the name of the specific ADT which corresponds to this ADV, and is a method of binding an ADV to an ADT. The character \ indicates a required service supplied by the ADT.

An ADVchart can inherit the nested components from another ADVchart and augment them. This concept is illustrated in Figure 14 where the ADVchart for "Technical Book" has inherited the shaded components "Title/Author", "Preface", "Chapter" from the ADVchart for "Book" and added the component for the "Table of Contents" ("Table_Cont"). This inheritance property is analogous to the normal inheritance property of object-oriented design; as well as inheriting state which can be augmented, we also inherit component structure which has similar properties, thus, illustrating the semantics for nesting of inheritance. Of course the set of transitions is modified to show the appropriate sequence of events. The new transitions are shown as solid lines. The solid and dotted arrow labelled "examine" in Figure 14 indicates that the ADV for "Technical Book" is incomplete in that other ADVs and states could be added.

The ADVcharts can be easily translated into a VDM notation that supports nesting [Ier91]. Partial VDM specifications for the ADVs for "Book" and "Technical_Book" are illustrated in Figure 15 and Figure 16. The first line of the specification in Figure 15 indicates that the ADV for "Book" inherits its structure from the ADV for "Document". The state variables for the ADV are specified

```
ADV Book For ADV Document
    Declaration:   doc: doc_type

    ADV Title/Author
        EVENT examine ()
        post-condition:   doc.title + doc.author are displayed on the screen
    End  Title/Author

    ADV Preface
        ⋮
    End  Preface

    ADV Chapter*
        ⋮
    End  Chapter
    EVENT get_next ()
    external:         wr doc
    post-condition:   doc = \owner.getLibraryDocument()
    EVENT examine ()
    post-condition:   "End of Document" + doc.title are displayed on the screen
End  Document
```

Figure 15: VDM-like Specification for Book

```
ADV Technical_Book For ADV Book

   ADV Table_Of_Contents
      EVENT examine ()
      post-condition:   doc.preface.tableContents is displayed on the screen
   End Preface
End Novel
```

Figure 16: VDM-like Specification for Technical_Book

as well as the fact that the component ADVS are shown nested inside the "parent" ADV. The transitions become named events in the ADV specification.

7 Conclusions

This paper has used a simple example to illustrate that design using decomposition by form and function require inheritance, encapsulation and composition by nesting. Hence, composition by nesting has a significant role in object-oriented design. Reuse of design was used as a "metric" to demonstrate the need for composition by nesting, since reuse is more viable at the design level. Our example also clarifies the informal semantics of composition by nesting for the designers of both design and programming languages by introducing the notions of locus of association, object-set browsing and nesting encapsulation. Some properties of nesting and their corresponding semantics have been illustrated using the ADVchart notation and VDM. This illustration provides some indication of how to extend formal methods to incorporate this important design concept.

Most of the notions of the design approach illustrated in these examples can be implemented more or less directly in existing object-oriented languages, although they do not use the syntactic method we have described here to produce this implementation. It would be ideal if the language used to implement our design notion of composition by nesting could exhibit some form of polymorphic behavior, since the constituent list can contain objects of any class. Also management of objects would be made easier, because the constituent list contains the names of all objects that compose an object. Because the names are easily found it should be possible to build a tool that can locate all the classes which make up a document class since they are connected in a nesting tree.

8 Acknowledgement

The authors wish to thank P.J. Bumbulis and M.H. Coffin for their many comments on the contents of an earlier version of this paper.

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