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## Table of Contents


TracNav 3
- Introduction... 3
- Installing JPF... 3
- User Guide... 3
- Developer Guide 3
- MJI... 3
- Projects... 3
- About... 3

**ChoiceGenerators 3**
- Motivation 3
- The JPF Perspective 5
- How it comes to Life 5
- Cascaded ChoiceGenerators 8

## ChoiceGenerators

Software model checking is all about doing the right choices, to reach the interesting system states within the resource constraints of the tool and execution environment. We refer to the mechanism used by JPF to systematically explore the state space as *ChoiceGenerators*.

ChoiceGenerators can be approached from an application perspective, or from the JPF implementation perspective. We will do both.

### Motivation

While most of the choices during JPF application are related to thread scheduling, the example that obviously justifies our implementation approach is from the non-deterministic data acquisition branch. Support for "random" data acquisition (using the gov.nasa.jpf.jvm.Verify interface) has been in JPF since a long time

```
...
boolean b = Verify.getBoolean(); // evaluated by JPF for both 'true' and 'false'
...
```

This worked nicely for small sets of choice values (like {true,false} for boolean), but the mechanism for enumerating all choices from a type specific interval becomes already questionable for large intervals (e.g. Verify.getInt(0,10000)), and fails completely if the data type does not allow finite choice sets at all (like floating point types):

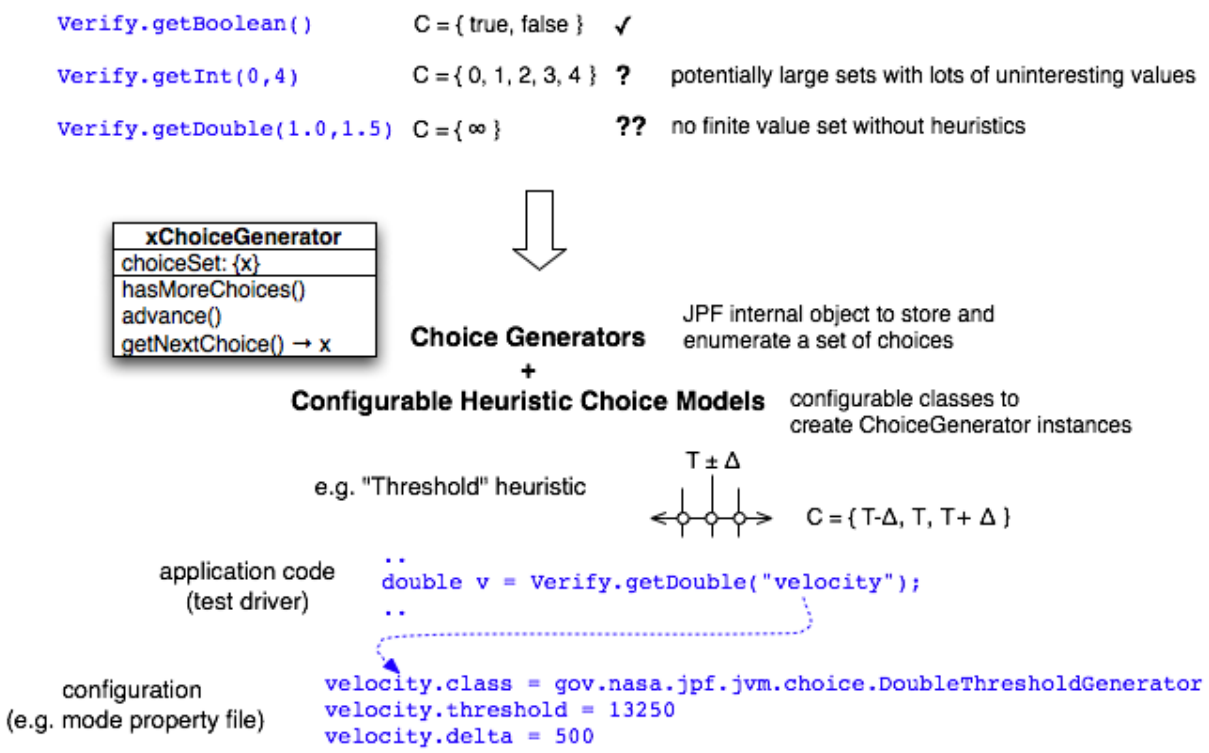


Figure: ChoiceGenerator Motivation

To handle this case, we have to leave the ideal world of model checking (that considers all possible choices), and make use of what we know about the real world - we have to use heuristics to make the set of choices finite and manageable. However, heuristics are application and domain specific, and it would be a bad idea to hardcode them into the test drivers we give JPF to analyze. This leads to a number of requirements for the JPF choice mechanism:

- choice mechanisms have to be decoupled (i.e. thread choices should be indpendent of data choices, double choices from int choices etc.)
- choice sets and enumeration should be encapsulated in dedicated, type specific objects. The VM should only know about the most basic types, and otherwise use a generic interface to obtain choices
- selection of classes representing (domain specific) heuristics, and parametrization of ChoiceGenerator instances should be possible at runtime, i.e. via JPF's configuration mechanism (properties)

The diagram shown above depicts this with an example that uses a "randomly" chosen velocity value of type double. As an example heuristic we use a threshold model, i.e. we want to know how the system reacts below, at, and above a certain application specific value (threshold). We reduce an infinite set of choices to only three "interesting" ones. Of course, "interesting" is quite subjective, and we probably want to play with the values (delta, threshold, or even used heuristic) efficiently, without having to rebuild the application each time we run JPF.

The code example does not mention the used *ChoiceGenerator* class (DoubleThresholdGenerator) at all, it just specifies a symbolic name "velocity", which JPF uses to look up an associated class name from its configuration data (initialized via property files or the command line - see Configuring JPF Runtime Options). But it doesn't stop there. Most heuristics need further parameterization (e.g. threshold, delta), and we provide that by passing the JPF configuration data into the ChoiceGenerator constructors (e.g. the 'velocity.threshold' property). Each ChoiceGenerator instance knows its symbolic name (e.g. "velocity"), and can use this name to look up whatever parameters it needs.

## The JPF Perspective

Having such a mechanism is nice to avoid test driver modification. But it would be much nicer to consistently use the same mechanism not just for data acquisition choices, but also scheduling choices (i.e. functionality that is not controlled by the test application). JPF's ChoiceGenerator mechanism does just this, but in order to understand it from an implementation perspective we have to take one step back and look at some JPF terminology:

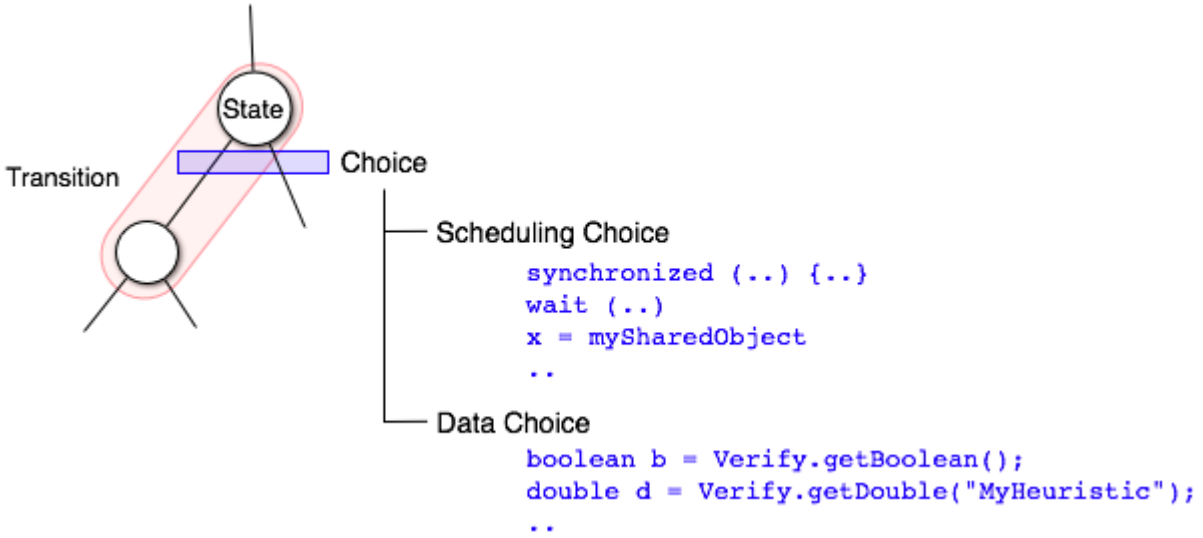


Figure: States, Transitions and Choices

**State** is a snapshot of the current execution status of the application (mostly thread and heap states), plus the execution history (path) that lead to this state. Every state has a unique id number. JPF-internally, State is encapsulated in the SystemState instance (almost, there is some execution history which is just kept by the JVM object). This includes three components:

- KernelState - the application snapshot (threads, heap)
- trail - the last Transition (execution history)
- current and next ChoiceGenerator - the objects encapsulating the choice enumeration that produces different transitions (but not necessarily new states)

Transition is the sequence of instructions that leads from one state to the next. There is no context switch within a transition, it's all in the same thread. There can be multiple transitions leading out of one state (but not necessarily to a new state).

Choice is what starts a new transition. This can be a different thread (i.e. scheduling choice), or different "random" data value.

In other words, possible existence of Choices is what terminates the last Transition, and selection of a Choice value precludes the next Transition. The first condition corresponds to creating a new ChoiceGenerator, and letting the SystemState know about it. The second condition means to query the next choice value from this ChoiceGenerator (either internally within the JVM, or in an instruction or native method).

## How it comes to Life

With this terminology, we are ready to have a look at how it all works. Let's assume we are in a Transition that executes a get_field bytecode instruction (remember, JPF executes Java bytecode), and the corresponding object that owns this field is shared between threads. For simplicity's sake, let's further assume there is no synchronization when accessing this object, (or we have turned vm.sync_detection off). Let's also assume there are other runnable threads at this point. Then we have a choice - the outcome of the execution might depend on the order in which we schedule threads, and hence access this field. There might be a data race.

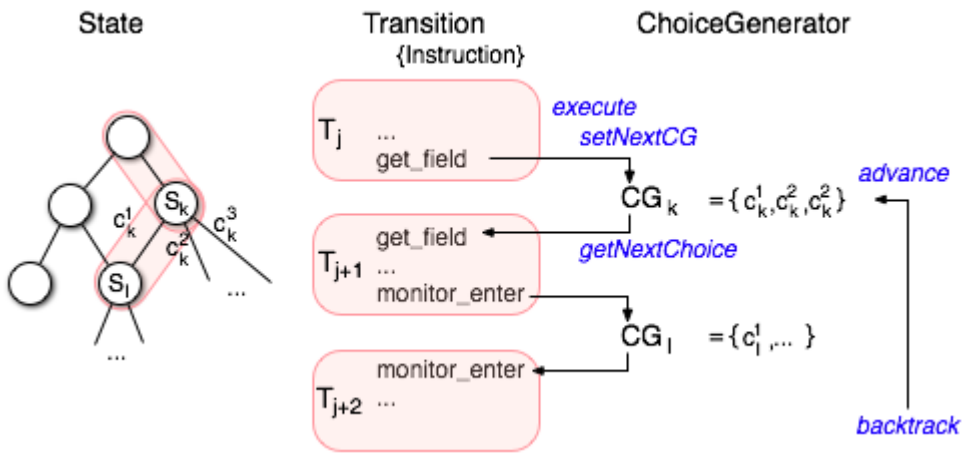


Figure: ChoiceGenerator Sequence

Consequently, when JPF executes this get_field instruction, the gov.nasa.jpf.jvm.bytecode.GET_FIELD.execute() method does three things:

1. create a new ChoiceGenerator (ThreadChoiceGenerator in this case), that has all runnable threads at this point as possible choices
2. registers this ChoiceGenerator via calling SystemState.setNextChoiceGenerator()
3. schedules itself for reexecution (just returns itself as the next instruction to execute within the currently running thread)

At this point, JPF ends this Transition (which is basically a loop inside ThreadInfo.executeStep()), stores a snapshot of the current State, and then starts the next Transition (let's ignore the Search and possible backtracks for a moment). The ChoiceGenerator created and registered at the end of the previous Transition becomes the new current ChoiceGenerator. Every State has exactly one current ChoiceGenerator object that is associated with it, and every Transition has exactly one choice value of this ChoiceGenerator that kicks it off. Every Transition ends in an Instruction that produces the next ChoiceGenerator.

The new Transition is started by the SystemState by setting the previously registered ChoiceGenerator as the current one, and calling its ChoiceGenerator.advance() method to position it on its next choice. Then the SystemState checks if the current ChoiceGenerator is a SchedulingPoint (just a ThreadChoiceGenerator that is meant to be used for scheduling purposes), and if it is, gets the next thread to execute from it (i.e. the SystemState itself consumes the choice). Then it starts the next Transition by calling ThreadInfo.executeStep() on it.

The ThreadInfo.executeStep() basically loops until an Instruction.execute() returns itself, i.e. has scheduled itself for reexecution with a new ChoiceGenerator. When a subsequent ThreadInfo.executeStep() reexecutes this instruction (e.g. GET_FIELD.execute()), the instruction notices that it is the first instruction in a new Transition, and hence does not have to create a ChoiceGenerator but proceeds with it's normal operations.

If there is no next instruction, or the Search determins that the state has been seen before, the VM backtracks. The SystemState is restored to the old state, and checks for not-yet-explored choices of its associated ChoiceGenerator by calling ChoiceGenerator.hasMoreChoices(). If there are more choices, it positions the ChoiceGenerator on the next one by calling ChoiceGenerator.advance(). If all choices have been processed, the system backtracks again (until it's first ChoiceGenerator is done, at which point we terminate the search).

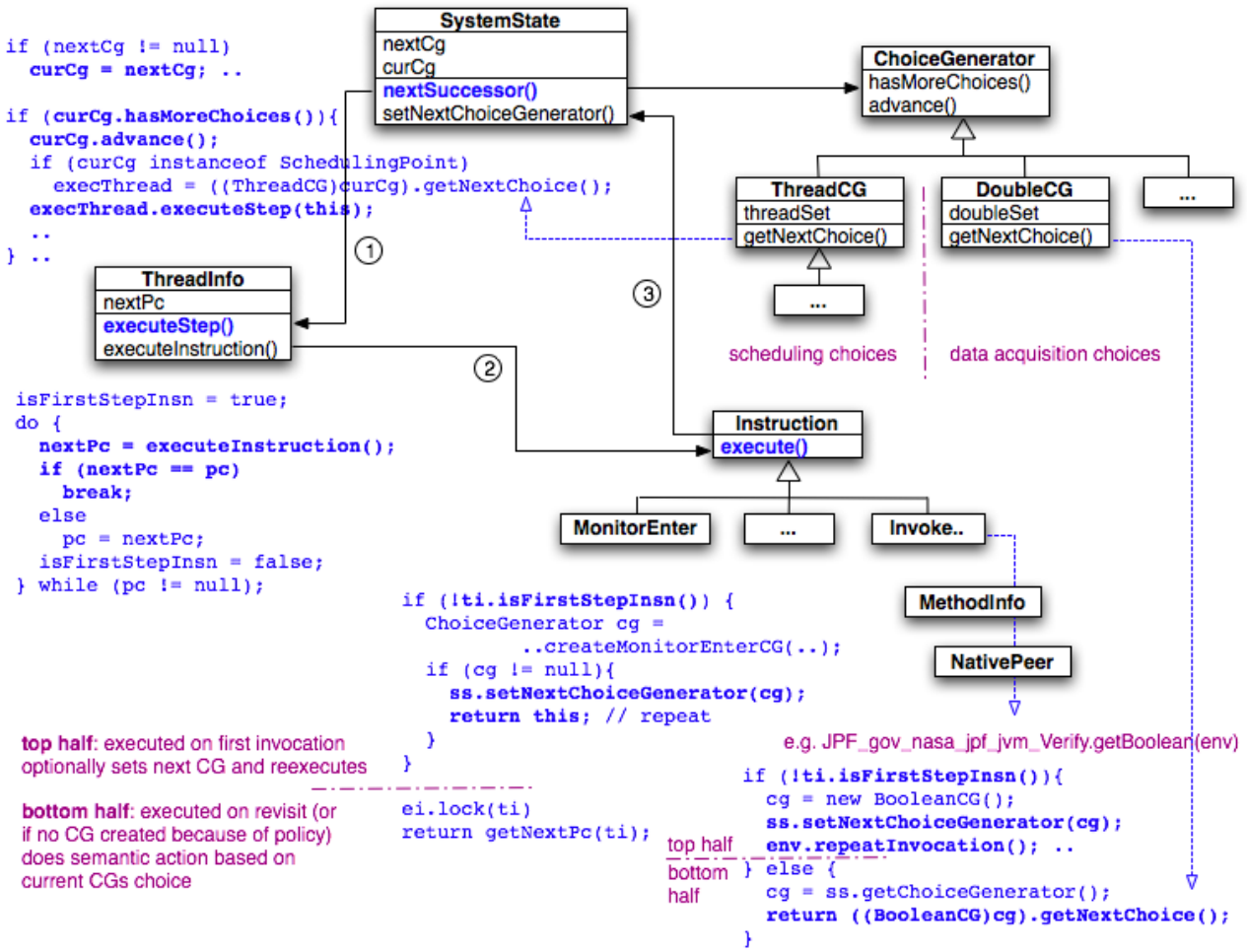


Figure: ChoiceGenerator Implementation

The methods that create ChoiceGenerators have a particular structure, dividing their bodies into two parts:

1. *top half* - (potentially) creates and registers a new ChoiceGenerator. This marks the end of a transition
2. *bottom half* - which does the real work, and might depend on acquiring a new choice value. This is executed at the beginning of the next transition

To determine which branch you are in, you can call `ThreadInfo.isFirstStepInsn()`. This will return `true` if the currently executed instruction is the first one in the transition, which corresponds to the *bottom half* mentioned above.

The only difference between scheduling choices and data acqusition choices is that the first ones are handled internally by the JVM (more specifically: used by the `SystemState` to determine the next thread to execute), and the data acqusition is handled in the bottom half of an `Instruction.execute()`, native method, or listener callback method (in which case it has to acquire the current `ChoiceGenerator` from the `SystemState`, and then explicitly call `ChoiceGenerator.getNextChoice()` to obtain the choice value). For a real example, look at the `JPF.gov_nasa_jpf_jvm_Verify.getBoolean()` implementation.

As an implementation detail, creation of scheduling points are delegated to a `SchedulerFactory` instance, which encapsulates a scheduling policy by providing a consistent set of `ThreadChoiceGenerators` for the fixed number of instructions that are scheduling relevant (monitor_enter, synchronized method calls, `Object.wait()` etc.). Clients of this `SchedulerFactory` therefore have to be aware of that the policy object might not return a new `ChoiceGenerator`, in which case the client directly proceeds with the bottom half execution, and does not break the current transition.

The standard classes and interfaces for the `ChoiceGenerator` mechanism can be found in package `gov.nasa.jpf.jvm`, and include:

- `ChoiceGenerator`
- `BooleanChoiceGenerator`
- `IntChoiceGenerator`
- `DoublechoiceGenerator`
- `ThreadChoiceGenerator`

- `SchedulingPoint`
- `SchedulerFactory`
- `DefaultSchedulerFactory`

Concrete implementations can be found in package `gov.nasa.jpf.jvm.choice`, and include classes like:

- `IntIntervalGenerator`
- `IntChoiceFromSet`
- `DoubleChoiceFromSet`
- `DoubleThresholdGenerator`
- `SchedulingChoiceFromSet`

As the number of useful generic heuristics increases, we expect this package to be expanded.

### Cascaded ChoiceGenerators

There can be more than one `ChoiceGenerator` object associated with a transition, which we call *cascaded* `ChoiceGenerators` = giving us a set of choice combinations for such transitions.

For example, assume that we want to create a listener that perturbs certain field values, i.e. it replaces the result operand that is pushed by a `getfield` instruction. This is easy to do from a listener, but the VM (more specifically our *on-the-fly* partial order reduction) might already create a `ThreadChoiceGenerator` (scheduling point) for this `getfield` if it refers to a shared object, and the instruction might cause a data race. Without cascaded `ChoiceGenerators` we could only have the perturbation listener **or** the race detection, but not both. This is clearly a limitation we want to overcome, since you might not even know when JPF - or some of the other listeners or bytecode_factories - create `ChoiceGenerators` that would collide with the ones you want to create in your listener.

Using cascaded `ChoiceGenerators` requires little more than what we have already seen above. It only involves changes to two steps:

**(1) ChoiceGenerator creation** - you need to identify `ChoiceGenerators` with a `String` **id**. We can't use the type of the `ChoiceGenerator` - or it's associated choice type - to identify a particular instance, since different listeners might use different `ChoiceGenerator` instances of same types for different purposes. Resolving through unique types would throw us back to where we would have to know about all the other `ChoiceGenerators` created by all the other JPF components. We can't use the associated instruction either, because the whole point is that we can have more than one `ChoiceGenerator` for each of them. So we have to give our `ChoiceGenerator` instances names when we create them, as in

```
...
IntChoiceFromSet cg = new IntChoiceFromSet("fieldPerturbator", 42, 43);
```

The name should be reasonably unique, describing the context in which this choice is used. Don't go with "generic" names like "myChoice". In case of doubt, use the method name that creates the `ChoiceGenerator`. The reason why we need the *id* in the first place is that we later-on want to be able to retrieve a specific instance. Which brings us to:

**(2) ChoiceGenerator retrieval** - at some point we want to process the choice (usually within the *bottom half* of the method that created the `ChoiceGenerator`), so we need to tell JPF all we know about the `ChoiceGenerator' instance, namely '''id''' and '''type'''. The simple` SystemState.getChoiceGenerator() `we used above will only give us the last registered one, which might or might not be the one we registered ourselves. Retrieval is done with a new method` SystemState.getCurrentChoiceGenerator(id,cgType)`, which in the above case would look like:

```
...
IntChoiceFromSet cg = systemState.getCurrentChoiceGenerator("fieldPerturbator", IntChoiceFromSet.class);
assert cg != null : "required IntChoiceGenerator not found";
...
```

This method returns `null` if there is no `ChoiceGenerator` of the specified *id* and type associated with the currently executed instruction. If this is the *bottom half* of a method that created the instance, this is most likely an error condition that should be checked with an assertion. If the retrieval is in another method, existence of such a `ChoiceGenerator` instance could be optional and you therefore have it checked in an `if (cg != null) {..}' expression.