Elm-style Functional Reactive Programming demystified

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SF Types, Theorems, and Programming Languages

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What is "functional reactive programming"

FRP has little to do with...

- event-driven state machines
- message-passing concurrency and "actors"
- distributed computing on massively parallel load-balanced clusters
- ma/reduce, the "reactive manifesto", (*insert latest fad here*)...

FRP is...

- **pure functions using temporal types as primitives**
  - (temporal type ≈ lazy stream of events)

Transformational vs. reactive programs

Transformational programs	**Reactive** programs
example: `pdflatex elm_talk.tex`	**example**: any GUI program, OS
start, run, then stop	keep running indefinitely
read some input, write some output	wait for signals, send messages
execution: sequential, parallel	"main run loop" + concurrency
difficulty: algorithms	signal/response sequences
specification: classical logic?	classical temporal logic?
verification: proof of correctness?	model checking?
synthesis: extract code from proof?	temporal logic synthesis?
type theory: intuitionistic logic	intuitionistic *temporal* logic

Difficulties in reactive programming

- Input signals may come at unpredictable times
  - Imperative updates are difficult to keep in the correct order
  - Flow of events becomes difficult to understand
- Asynchronous (out-of-order) callback structures are difficult to maintain
- Inverted control ("the system will call you") obscures the flow of data
- Some concurrency is usually required (e.g. background tasks)
  - Explicit multithreaded code is hard

Motivation for FRP

- Reactive programs work on **infinite sequences** of input/output values
- Main idea: make infinite sequences implicit, as a new "temporal" type
  - (Elm) `Signal` α — an infinite sequence of values of type α
  - alternatively, a value of type α that "changes with time"
- Reactive programs are **pure functions**
  - a GUI is a pure function of type `Signal Inputs` $\to$ `Signal View`
  - a Web server is a pure function `Signal Request` $\to$ `Signal Response`
  - all mutation is **implicit** in `Signal` α; our code is 100% immutable
    - instead of updating an `x:Int`, we define a temporal value of type `Signal Int`
  - asynchronous behavior is **implicit**: our code has no callbacks
  - concurrency / parallelism is **implicit**
    - (the runtime needs to provide the required scheduling of events)

Elm primitives

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Part 2. Temporal logic and FRP

- Reminder (Curry-Howard): temporal logic expressions will be our types
- We only need to control the order of events: no hard real-time requirements
- How to understand temporal logic:
  - classical propositional logic $\approx$ Boolean arithmetic
  - intuitionistic propositional logic $\approx$ same but without **true** / **false** dichotomy
  - (linear-time) temporal logic $\approx$ Boolean arithmetic for *infinite sequences*
  - intuitionistic temporal logic $\approx$ same but without **true** / **false** dichotomy
- In other words:
  - a temporal type represents a **single infinite sequence** of values

Boolean arithmetic: notation

- Classical propositional (Boolean) logic: T, F, $a \vee b$, $a \wedge b$, $\neg a$, $a \to b$
- A notation better adapted to school-level arithmetic: 1, 0, $a + b$, ab, a'
- The only "new rule" is $1 + 1 = 1$
- Define $a \to b = a' + b$
- Some identities:

$$
\begin{gathered}
0a = 0, \quad 1a = a, \quad a + 0 = a, \quad a + 1 = 1, \\
a + a = a, \quad aa = a, \quad a + a' = 1, \quad aa' = 0, \\
(a + b)' = a'b', \quad (ab)' = a' + b', \quad (a')' = a \\
a(b + c) = ab + ac, \quad (a + b)(a + c) = a + bc
\end{gathered}
$$

Boolean arithmetic: example

Of the three suspects A, B, C, only one is guilty of a crime.
Suspect A says: "B did it". Suspect B says: "C is innocent."
The guilty one is lying, the innocent ones tell the truth.

$$\phi = \left(ab'c' + a'bc' + a'b'c\right)\left(a'b + ab'\right)\left(b'c' + bc\right)$$

Simplify: expand the brackets, omit aa', bb', cc', replace $aa = a$ etc.:

$$\phi = ab'c' + 0 + 0 = ab'c'$$

The guilty one is A.

Propositional linear-time temporal logic (LTL)

- We work with *infinite boolean sequences* ("linear time")
  Boolean operations:

  $$a = [a_0, a_1, a_2, ...] ; \quad b = [b_0, b_1, b_2, ...] ;$$
  $$a + b = [a_0 + b_0, a_1 + b_1, ...] ; \; a' = \left[a_0', a_1', ...\right] ; \; ab = [a_0 b_0, a_1 b_1, ...]$$

  Temporal operations:

  $$\begin{aligned} \text{(Next)} \quad & \mathbf{N}a = [a_1, a_2, ...] \\ \text{(Sometimes)} \quad & \mathbf{F}a = [a_0 + a_1 + a_2 + ..., \; a_1 + a_2 + ..., \; ...] \\ \text{(Always)} \quad & \mathbf{G}a = [a_0 a_1 a_2 a_3 ..., \; a_1 a_2 a_3 ..., \; a_2 a_3 ..., \; ...] \end{aligned}$$

  Other notation (from modal logic):

  $$\mathbf{N}a \equiv \bigcirc a; \; \mathbf{F}a \equiv \Diamond a; \; \mathbf{G}a \equiv \Box a$$

- Weak Until: $p\mathbf{U}q$ = "p holds from now on until q first becomes true"

  $$p\mathbf{U}q = q + p\mathbf{N}(q + p\mathbf{N}(q + ...))$$

Temporal logic redux

- LTL as type theory: do we use $\mathbf{N}\alpha$, $\mathbf{F}\alpha$, $\mathbf{G}\alpha$ as new types?
- Are they to be functors, monads, ...?
- What is the operational semantics? (I.e., how to compile this?)

Interpreting values typed by LTL

- What does it mean to have a value x of type, say, $\mathbf{G}(\alpha \to \alpha\mathbf{U}\beta)$??
  - $x : \mathbf{N}\alpha$ means that $x : \alpha$ will be available *only* at the *next* time tick (x is a **deferred value** of type α)
  - $x : \mathbf{F}\alpha$ means that $x : \alpha$ will be available at *some* future tick(s) (x is an **event** of type α)
  - $x : \mathbf{G}\alpha$ means that a (different) value $x : \alpha$ is available at *every* tick (x is an **infinite stream** of type α)
  - $x : \alpha\mathbf{U}\beta$ means a **finite stream** of α that may end with a β
- Some *temporal axioms* of intuitionistic LTL:

$$
\begin{aligned}
\text{(deferred apply)} \quad & \mathbf{N}\,(\alpha \to \beta) \to (\mathbf{N}\alpha \to \mathbf{N}\beta)\,; \\
\text{(streamed apply)} \quad & \mathbf{G}\,(\alpha \to \beta) \to (\mathbf{G}\alpha \to \mathbf{G}\beta)\,; \\
\text{(generate a stream)} \quad & \mathbf{G}\,(\alpha \to \mathbf{N}\alpha) \to (\alpha \to \mathbf{G}\alpha)\,; \\
\text{(read infinite stream)} \quad & \mathbf{G}\alpha \to \alpha\mathbf{N}(\mathbf{G}\alpha) \\
\text{(read finite stream)} \quad & \alpha\mathbf{U}\beta \to \beta + \alpha\mathbf{N}(\alpha\mathbf{U}\beta)
\end{aligned}
$$

Elm as an FRP language

- λ-calculus with type $\mathbf{G}\alpha$, primitives `map2`, `foldp`, `async`

$$\begin{aligned}
\texttt{map2} &: (\alpha \to \beta \to \gamma) \to \mathbf{G}\alpha \to \mathbf{G}\beta \to \mathbf{G}\gamma \\
\texttt{foldp} &: (\alpha \to \beta \to \beta) \to \beta \to \mathbf{G}\alpha \to \mathbf{G}\beta \\
\texttt{async} &: \mathbf{G}\alpha \to \mathbf{G}\alpha
\end{aligned}$$

- (`map2` makes **G** an applicative functor)
- `async` is a special *scheduling instruction*
- Limitations:
  - Cannot have a type $\mathbf{G}(\mathbf{G}\alpha)$, also not using **N** or **F**
  - Cannot construct temporal values by hand
  - This language is an *incomplete* Curry-Howard image of LTL!
  - *I work after the boss comes by and until the phone rings*:

```
let after_until w (b,r) = (w or b) and not r in
  foldp after_until false (boss, phone)
```

Conclusions and outlook

- LTL is not a good fit as a specification language for reactive programs
- LTL synthesis from specification is theoretical, not practical
- FRP tries to make specification closer to implementation
- There are some languages that implement FRP in various *ad hoc* ways
- The ideal is not (yet) reached

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Abstract

In my day job, most bugs come from imperatively implemented reactive programs. Temporal Logic and FRP are declarative approaches that promise to solve my problems. I will briefly review the motivations behind and the connections between temporal logic and FRP.

FRP can be defined as a λ-calculus with types given by a (limited subset of) propositional intuitionistic LTL. Although the `Elm` language uses a subset of LTL, it achieves high expressivity for GUI programming. I discuss the current limitations of `Elm` and outline some possible extensions.

My talk will be largely self-contained and should be understandable to anyone familiar with Curry-Howard and functional programming.

Suggested reading

E. Czaplicki, S. Chong. Asynchronous FRP for GUIs. (2013)
E. Czaplicki. Concurrent FRP for functional GUI (2012).
M. F. Dam. Lectures on temporal logic. Slides: Syntax and semantics of LTL, A Hilbert-style proof system for LTL
E. Bainomugisha, et al. A survey of reactive programming (2013).
W. Jeltsch. Temporal logic with Until, Functional Reactive Programming with processes, and concrete process categories. (2013).
A. Jeffrey. LTL types FRP. (2012).
D. Marchignoli. Natural deduction systems for temporal logic. (2002). – See Chapter 2 for a natural deduction system for modal and temporal logics.