

Improving Clojure Usability for Introductory Course

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Goals

- Integrate Clojure into an introductory CS class
- Currently use Racket
 - Limited teaching language
 - Difficult to make complex projects
 - Students hitting performance issues (!)

Why use Clojure?

- Used in industry
- Better on resume
- Support for concurrency
- Large community and excellent resources
- Excellent libraries (data processing, image recognition, graphical, musical)

Issues with Clojure

- Confusing error messages
- Lack of beginner-friendly graphics libraries in functional style
- Some misleading or confusing core functions (`conj`, `some`, string functions).

Error Messages

- Computers are literal
- Error messages are the only way to communicate when something goes wrong
- By the time an error is detected, a lot of the context is lost

Error Messages for Beginners

- Use terminology that beginners haven't been introduced to
- Beginner mistakes can lead to very complex errors
- Beginners don't read error messages
- Line number reporting needs to be accurate
- Good error messages should lead to a correct fix (study of Racket error messages)
- Very little (if any) systematic usability study of error messages

Clojure Error Messages

- Java exceptions
- Use not only Java types, but Java terminology: "cannot be cast", "null pointer"
- Very verbose
- Stack traces are long
- Compiler messages come with a separate cause

Example Clojure Error

```
Exception in thread "main" clojure.lang.ArityException:  
Wrong number of args (3) passed to: core/cons, compiling:  
(/tmp/form-init3025539740275626138.clj:1:72)  
at clojure.lang.Compiler.load(Compiler.java:7142)  
at clojure.lang.Compiler.loadFile(Compiler.java:7086)  
at clojure.main$load_script.invoke(main.clj:274)  
at clojure.main$init_opt.invoke(main.clj:279)  
at clojure.main$initialize.invoke(main.clj:307)  
at clojure.main$null_opt.invoke(main.clj:342)  
at clojure.main$main.doInvoke(main.clj:420)  
at clojure.lang.RestFn.invoke(RestFn.java:421)  
at clojure.lang.Var.invoke(Var.java:383)  
at clojure.lang.AFn.applyToHelper(AFn.java:156)  
at clojure.lang.Var.applyTo(Var.java:700)  
at clojure.main.main(main.java:37)
```

Our Error Messages

- We are not changing language definition
- A combination of two approaches:
 - Approach 1: overwrite common functions (`map`, `filter`, `+` to add pre-conditions for precise parameter reporting
 - Approach 2: catch exceptions, match and replace the error message
- Filter the stack trace
- Avoid unfamiliar terminology
- Consistency within error messages
- Readable and short
- Future direction: adding hints for common sources of errors

First iteration

```
Error: Wrong number of arguments (3) passed to a function of
Found in file core.clj on line 108 in function -main.
intro.core/-main (core.clj line 108)
```

Current message

```
Error: You cannot pass three arguments to a function cons,  
Found in file core.clj on line 108 in function -main.  
intro.core/-main (core.clj line 108)
```

Compilation messages

We can handle compiler errors

- Compiler errors are often nested
- Many compiler errors in Clojure 1.7.0 were runtime in earlier versions

Current message

```
Exception in thread "main" java.lang.IllegalArgumentException:
Parameter declaration "5" should be a vector, compiling:
(core.clj:104:5)
```

```
at clojure.lang.Compiler.expand1(Compiler.java:6644)
at clojure.lang.Compiler.analyzeSeq(Compiler.java:6719)
at clojure.lang.Compiler.analyze(Compiler.java:6524)
at clojure.lang.Compiler.analyze(Compiler.java:6485)
at clojure.lang.Compiler$BodyExpr$Parser.parse(Compiler.java:6485)
at clojure.lang.Compiler$TryExpr$Parser.parse(Compiler.java:6485)
at clojure.lang.Compiler.analyzeSeq(Compiler.java:6733)
at clojure.lang.Compiler.analyze(Compiler.java:6524)
at clojure.lang.Compiler.analyze(Compiler.java:6485)
at clojure.lang.Compiler$BodyExpr$Parser.parse(Compiler.java:6485)
at clojure.lang.Compiler$FnMethod.parse(Compiler.java:5296)
at clojure.lang.Compiler$FnExpr.parse(Compiler.java:3925)
```

Current message

```
Error: Parameters for defn must be a vector, but 5 was four
Found in file core.clj on line 107 in function -main.
clojure.core/assert-valid-fdecl (core.clj line 7180)
clojure.core/map (core.clj line 2622)
clojure.core/seq (core.clj line 135)
clojure.core/filter (core.clj line 2677)
clojure.core/seq (core.clj line 135)
clojure.core/assert-valid-fdecl (core.clj line 7184)
clojure.core/sigs (core.clj line 225)
clojure.core/defn (core.clj line 303)
intro.core/-main (core.clj line 107)
```

Recent Improvements

- Fixed issues with arity
- Made errors for lazy sequences useful
- **Henry:** Expand?
- Working on fixing line number reporting
- Fixed a large number of smaller issues

What is Quil?

- Graphical Library for Clojure
- It can:
 - Draw shapes and images
 - Move objects on the screen
 - Make games, pictures, ect..

fun-mode

^

Quil

^

Clojure

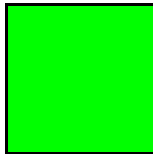
^

Java

Quil's fun-mode isn't enough

- Quil ONLY takes draw commands
- Quil doesn't separate the model from the view
- Quil code can get confusing and long

```
(q/fill 80 255 80)  
(q/rect 100 100 50 50)  
(q/no-fill)  
(q/no-stroke)
```



Designing super-fun-mode

- Built on top of fun-mode
- Gives students functions, colors, images, ect..
- Easy to read and change program code
- Allows for easy complex shapes

```
super-fun-mode  
^  
fun-mode  
^  
Quil  
^  
Clojure  
^  
Java
```

How super-fun-mode works

- You start by creating a shape

```
(def red-square  
  (create-rect 50 50 :red))
```
- Note that creating a shape does not draw it
- From there, you can draw the shape

```
(draw-shape red-square 500 500)
```



How super-fun-mode works technically

- Underneath, super-fun-mode builds a hashmap or a vector of hashmaps (in the case of complex shapes) with holds relevant information including:
 - The shape's width and height
 - The complex shape's width and height
 - The rotation angle of the shape
 - The function to draw the shape

super-fun-mode complex shapes

- You can put shapes together to make complex shapes

```
(def tower  
  (above red-square  
         orange-square  
         yellow-square  
         green-square  
         blue-square  
         violet-square))
```



Six squares

- The difference becomes quite apparent with complexity



Quil code

```
(let [x 100
      numb 6
      dist (+ 100 (* (\ numb 2) 50)))]
  (q/fill 80 255 80)
  (q/rect (- dist (* 1 50)) 100 50 50)
  (q/rect (- dist (* 2 50)) 100 50 50)
  (q/rect (- dist (* 3 50)) 100 50 50)
  (q/rect (- dist (* 4 50)) 100 50 50)
  (q/rect (- dist (* 5 50)) 100 50 50)
  (q/rect (- dist (* 6 50)) 100 50 50))
(q/no-fill)
```


Our code

```
(def lime-rect
  (create-rect 50 50 :lime))

(def lime-rectangles
  (beside
    lime-rect lime-rect lime-rect
    lime-rect lime-rect lime-rect))
```

Rotation and scaling

- You can modify the size and orientation of the shape

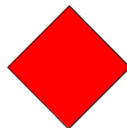
```
(rotate-shape red-square 45)
```



```
(scale-shape red-square 2 2)
```



```
(rotate-shape  
  (scale-shape red-square 2 2)  
  45)
```



Overlaying and complex shapes

- You can put shapes on top of each other

```
(overlay window roof)
```



```
(overlay-align :bottom :center  
  door  
  red-rect)
```



```
(scale-shape  
  (above (overlay top bottom))  
  1.4 1.4)
```



Other complex functions

- You can orient your besides and aboves as well

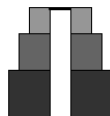
```
(beside-align :top  
  tower  
  tight-rope  
  tower)
```



```
(above-align :right  
  block1  
  block1.3  
  block1.6)
```



```
(beside-align :top  
  tower-aligned-R  
  tight-rope  
  tower-aligned-L)
```



Our direction

- Less paintbrush, more collage
- Create shapes, not just draw them
- Easier student code
- Give students an idea of how good software should be built

A few examples

Please Enjoy a Few Live Examples

Future work

- Fill out more functionality
 - Rotate more complex shapes
 - Pixel-detail Overlay and Overlay-Align
 - More seamless integration with Quil fun-mode
- Open Source the project
- Integrate a Clojure sound library

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Thank you!
Any questions?