
Coupling Server-Side Templates and Client-Side Models

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Abstract

►in English...◄

Resumé

►in Danish...◄

Acknowledgements

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Aarhus, May 15, 2012.*

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Chapter 1

Introduction

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►example of a citation to primary literature: [?], and one to secondary literature: [?]◄

Chapter 2

Developing web applications

web applications are on the rise. Not a day goes by where a new web application isn't popping up for uses that were previously reserved for a program locally installed on a computer. Even more so: Previously unimagined uses for any Internet enabled device seem to be developed at a rate that surpasses the former.

2.1 What are web applications?

In this thesis, we will focus on web applications which use a modern web browser and with it HTML as their basis (HTML5 in particular). The non-static parts, which control the heart of the web application, are supplied by JavaScript. This not only includes interactivity, but also animation and updates from the server. Interactivity in this context is defined as anything in the web application the user can modify directly via an input device or modify indirectly, e.g., the back button in the browser and the window size of the browser.

Alternatives to JavaScript like Dart, CoffeeScript and Google Web Toolkit do exist and are meant to ameliorate the shortcomings of JavaScript. However, they are all translated into JavaScript if cross-browser compatibility is a requirement (which it almost always is).

The claim that web applications are meant to be ubiquitous, operating system independent and run in the browser, is not a claim shared by all definitions of a web application. For simplicity however we will for the remainder of this thesis treat it as fact.

2.1.1 Server side web applications

Another way to incorporate business logic **►definition◄** and interactivity into a web application, is by rendering customized HTML pages on the server.

This has both advantages and disadvantages to the client-side scripting method:

- *Heavy computations can be run in a controllable time frame regardless of the client device.*
Especially phones and other portable devices have reduced computing capacity in order to save battery power.
- *Sensitive data can be handled without leaking it to the client.*
Any data that the client is not supposed to see, can never leave the server. This means if any computation on the data should take place, it would have to be made insensitive, e.g., in the case of personal data for statistical purposes, the data would have to be anonymized first.
- *The client application has to be initialized with data for each page load.*
Data that gives the application context, is – depending on the language and implementation – loaded in RAM and/or saved in a database. On the client this data would first have to be loaded either from the server or from the local storage.
- *The technology stack is more controllable.*
The main browser technology stack, i.e., CSS, HTML and JavaScript, has suffered greatly under the "browser wars" **►reference◄** and has only gained widespread standardization in the last 5 years. There are still many inconsistencies, especially when tackling edge cases (for example the "Guillotine bug" in Microsoft Internet Explorer 6 and 7, each with their own variation **►http://www.positioniseverything.net/explorer/guillotine.html◄**). This technology stack and its edge cases is greatly reduced when on the server, because every software version and the software itself can be controlled by the developer.

2.1.2 Client side web applications

These arguments do not make the case for a server-only web application. They highlight the strengths of server side processing. A combination of server-side and client-side processing where their respective advantages are utilized and their drawbacks avoided, would in part help in creating an optimal web application.

►Explain why client side programming advantages are obvious. The above is mainly done to draw lines in the sand, between client and server side.◄

2.2 The development process

The development process of a web application is similar to any other software development process. One starts with the data to be modeled. It may be developed for the client and server part simultaneously. A protocol for communication between the two is then established. The design of a web application is usually the last component to fall into place. It may have existed in the very beginning of the development process, but is usually only finished and implemented when most other critical components are in place.

2.2.1 Usual design patterns

The model-view-controller design pattern has proven itself to be a sane choice for developing web applications. Most frameworks today use this pattern or variations thereof. The pattern is a separation of responsibility like so many other patterns are. It lends itself very well to web applications because of the way web applications are structured.

The "Model" part represents the data that the web application presents and allows the user to modify. It does not only contain basic Create-Read-Update-Delete operations, but also macro procedures which are specifically tied to a concrete type of data.

A "Controller" implements the business logic that is not tied to one specific model. It draws on the operations tied to the models to perform its duties. Both of these components may be implemented on the server as well as the client.

This is true for the "View" component as well. Its purpose however only comes to fruition on the client. The job of the "View" component is to present the data to the user and tie calls to the controller to elements of the interface that can be acted upon by the user.

This component is still present on both the server and the client though. Any HTML the server sends to the client is considered part of the "View" component.

Designs of web applications change with time, features are added or removed and common processes simplified. In light of this, it is desirable to ensure that the "View" part of the model-view-controller pattern is easily modifiable.

Modifications of this pattern have evolved in the web application domain to cater to this specific purpose. The most notable of those would be the model-view-viewmodel pattern. It was designed by Microsoft and targeted at interface development platforms including Windows Presentation Foundation and Silverlight but also HTML5.

The advantage of this version of model-view-controller is the improved separation of roles between interface developers and application developers. Even if this is the same person, separation of responsibility in an application still has its merits.

The "ViewModel" component allows developers to implement interface logic that lies between the model and the view, allowing the view to be entirely free of code. This component is meant to hold data-bindings to the model while listening to interface events at the same time. It "translates" user actions into

operations on the model. Without it the view would have to be aware of how data is laid out internally, making refactors harder.

►MVVM from Microsoft, MVP by Taligent (Apple, IBM, HP)◄

Chapter 3

Tools of the trade

In order to achieve a separation of responsibility various frameworks and tools are at a developers disposal. In this thesis we will focus on two of them specifically.

3.1 Client frameworks

3.1.1 Backbone.js

3.1.2 XPath

XPath is a language that allows us to define a path from a root node to another node. Although limited, the language is fairly concise and directly built into JavaScript. We will only be dealing with XPath 1.0, because version 2.0 is, with the exception of Microsoft Internet Explorer, not implemented in any browsers yet and likely will not ever be (the final specification was released 2006).

3.2 Templating languages

A templating language allows the developer to create HTML documents containing placeholders, which later can be filled by a model and its attributes. Templating is part of the "View" component in the model-view-controller pattern. In the following we will have a look at one such templating language.

3.2.1 Mustache

Mustache is a so called "logic-less" template engine. This subtitle derives from the fact that there are no if statements, else clauses, or while loops. Instead there are only tags. Some tags are replaced with a value, some nothing, and others a series of values.

Tags in in this context can be understood as an advanced form of placeholders.

Limitations

These templating languages are very different in their design. All aim to improve one or more aspects of the templating task. Of those Mustache seems to be specifically tailored for web applications with interactive JavaScript parts. They all have a common trait which in some cases can be an advantage but given any specific implementation of a web application is a drawback: They are completely oblivious of their surroundings. They draw the line at the "View" part in order to encourage a separation from the other parts. This comes at the cost of lost information when sending a rendered view to the client.

Chapter 4

Requirements

The information lost after a view is rendered might not be useful and the behavior of existing templating languages therefore inconsequential. This is not the case. Let us consider a minimal template used for displaying profile information: **►...◄** As you can see, the fields of the user object are printed into the HTML at the appropriate places, leaving us with a normal page which can be displayed in the browser. Add the requirement that this form is not to be submitted via a synchronous browser request but via AJAX. Now the developer has to reverse engineer the generated HTML with JavaScript to obtain the user information that is to be submitted. Any changes to the template will now also require a change in client side code, particularly the code, which finds the values in the form. This example contains a rather obvious loss of information. The position of the field attributes of the user object. At the time of the rendering these positions are known, but as soon as the result is converted into a string that is sent to the client, this information is lost.

►Introduction to what I want to do about it◄

4.1 Development workflow

The tool introduced in this thesis, will be developed via an iterative work flow. Two or three versions of the solution to the requirements outlined above will be discussed in this thesis. Each version building on the knowledge acquired in the development process of the previous.

4.2 Initial prototype

First a rudimentary prototype will be made. It is not very useful in practice, but serves to illustrate the road map lying ahead.

This prototype is an exploratory prototype, meaning none of its code or architecture is intended to make it into the next iteration. The motivation behind this exercise was to simply explore what challenges lied ahead and to explore the problem domain.

This prototype features an interactive application with which a movie library can be maintained. Details can be edited and actors can be added. The server side back end is based on PHP and MySQL. The client side uses HTML5, JavaScript (+XPath) and CSS as its core technologies.

4.2.1 Libraries

In order to speed up the prototyping process a plethora of libraries have been used. Excluding basic core technologies like JavaScript, MySQL and PHP, the application stack consists of the following:

- *less*
A superset of CSS providing variables, calculations and nested selectors. It is a javascript library which converts included less files into CSS.
- *jQuery*
The de facto standard when creating web applications. Among other things it simplifies the interaction with the DOM.
- *underscore.js*
Before jQuery was the standard prototype.js was a library developed by Sam Stephenson to improve upon the DOM API itself. It also brought with it various improvements to native JavaScript prototype objects. Underscore carries these improvements into the world of jQuery.
- *backbone.js*
Backbone.js is a JavaScript Model/View framework. It provides the developer with View, Model and Collection prototypes. The View prototype can be considered analogous to the aforementioned ViewModel, while the Model and Collection part make up the Model component and collections thereof respectively.
- *php-activerecord*
PHP ActiveRecord is the server side library utilized to communicate with the database.

4.2.2 The application

►explaiiiiin◄

4.2.3 Results

4.3 Plan for next iteration ►...◄

While developing this application various libraries have been examined for their viability in the next iterations. backbone.js has in this case proven itself to be a very good fit. Its View prototype is made to bind with the interface while being model aware. Such a component is what is needed to put the information about the placement of data in the DOM to good use. Only small modifications should be necessary to allow the View component to populate the Model component

with data from the DOM.

Chapter 5

Implementation

5.1 Templating language syntax

5.1.1 Integrating the parser

5.2 Template-aware clients

5.2.1 Client side architecture

5.2.2 Transmitting meta-data

Chapter 6

Usage

6.1 Application example

Chapter 7

Evaluation

7.1 Performance



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