

Experience Report: Josephine

Using JavaScript to safely manage the lifetimes of Rust data

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Text of abstract

CCS Concepts: • **Software and its engineering** → **Functional languages**; *Imperative languages*;

Additional Key Words and Phrases: JavaScript, Rust, interoperability, memory safety, affine types

1 INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses the Josephine API [?] for using the Spidermonkey [?] JavaScript runtime to safely manage the lifetime of Rust [?] data. That sentence needs some unpacking.

1.1 Rust

Rust is a systems programming language which uses fancy types to ensure memory safety even in the presence of mutable update, and manual memory management. Rust has an affine type system, which allows data to be discarded but does not allow data to be arbitrarily copied. For example, the Rust program:

```
let hello = String::from("hello");
let moved = hello;
println!("Oh look {} is hello", moved);
```

is fine, but the program:

```
let hello = String::from("hello");
let copied = hello;
println!("Oh look {} is {}", hello, copied);
```

is not, since `hello` and `copied` are simultaneously live. Trying to compile this program produces:

```
use of moved value: `hello`
--> src/main.rs:4:32
|
3 |   let copied = hello;
|   ----- value moved here
4 |   println!("Oh look {} is {}", hello, copied);
|                                   ^^^^^^ value used here after move
```

The use of affine types allows aliasing to be tracked. For example, a classic problem with aliasing is appending a string to itself. In Rust, an example of appending a string is:

```
let mut hello = String::from("hello");
let ref world = String::from("world");
hello.push_str(world);
println!("Oh look hello is {}", hello);
```

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The important operation is `hello.push_str(world)`, which mutates the string `hello` (hence the `mut` annotation on the declaration of `hello`). The appended string `world` is passed by reference, (hence the `ref` annotation on the declaration of `world`).

A problem with mutably appending strings is ensuring that the string is not appended to itself, for example the documentation for `C strcat` [?] states “Source and destination may not overlap”, but C does not check aliasing and relies on the programmer to ensure correctness. In contrast, attempting to append a string to itself in Rust:

```
let ref mut hello = String::from("hello");
hello.push_str(hello);
```

produces an error:

```
cannot borrow `*hello` as immutable because it is also borrowed as mutable
--> src/main.rs:3:18
|
3 |   hello.push_str(hello);
|   -----          ^^^^^- mutable borrow ends here
|   |               |
|   |               immutable borrow occurs here
|   mutable borrow occurs here
```

In Rust, the crucial invariant maintained by affine types is:

Any memory that can be reached simultaneously by two different paths is immutable.

For example in `hello.push(hello)` there are two occurrences of `hello` that are live simultaneously, the first of which is mutating the string, so this is outlawed.

In order to track statically which variables are live simultaneously, Rust uses a lifetime system similar to that used by region-based memory [?]. Each allocation of memory has a lifetime α , and lifetimes are ordered $\alpha \subseteq \beta$. Each code block introduces a lifetime, and for data which does not escape from its scope, the nesting of blocks determines the ordering of lifetimes.

For example in the program:

```
let ref x = String::from("hi");
{
  let ref y = x;
  println!("y is {}", y);
}
println!("x is {}", x);
```

the variable `x` has a lifetime α given by the outer block, and the variable `y` has a lifetime $\beta \subseteq \alpha$ given by the inner block.

These lifetimes are mentioned in the types of references: the type $\&\alpha T$ is a reference giving immutable access to data of type T , which will live at least as long as α . Similarly, the type $\&\alpha \text{ mut } T$ gives mutable access to the data: the crucial difference is that $\&\alpha T$ is a copyable type, but $\&\alpha \text{ mut } T$ is not. For example the type of `x` is $\&\alpha \text{ String}$ and the type of `y` is $\&\beta (\&\alpha \text{ String})$, which is well-formed because $\beta \subseteq \alpha$.

Lifetimes are used to prevent another class of memory safety issues: use-after-free. For example, consider the program:

```
let hi = String::from("hi");
let ref mut handle = &hi;
{
  let lo = String::from("lo");
```

```

    *handle = &lo;
} // lo is deallocated here
println!("handle is {}", **handle);

```

If this program were to execute, its behaviour would be undefined, since `**handle` is used after `lo` (which `handle` points to) is deallocated. Fortunately, this program does not pass Rust's borrow-checker:

```

`lo` does not live long enough
--> src/main.rs:6:11
|
6 |     *handle = &lo;
|               ^^ borrowed value does not live long enough
7 | } // lo is deallocated here
|   - `lo` dropped here while still borrowed
8 | println!("handle is {}", **handle);
9 | }
|   - borrowed value needs to live until here

```

This use-after-free error can be detected because (naming the outer lifetime to be α and the inner lifetime to be $\beta \subseteq \alpha$) `handle` has type $\&\alpha \text{ mut } \&\alpha \text{ String}$, but `&lo` only has type $\&\beta \text{ String}$, no $\&\alpha \text{ String}$ as required by the assignment.

Lifetimes avoid use-after-free by maintaining two invariants:

*Any dereference happens during the lifetime of the reference,
and deallocation happens after the lifetime of all references.*

There is more to the Rust type system than described here (higher-order functions, traits, variance, concurrency, ...) but the important features are *affine types* and *lifetimes* for ensuring memory safety, even in the presence of manual memory management.

1.2 Spidermonkey

Spidermonkey is Mozilla's JavaScript runtime, used in the Firefox browser, and the Servo [?] next-generation web engine. This is a full-featured JS implementation, but the focus of this paper is its automatic memory management.

Inside a web engine, there are often native implementations of HTML features, which are exposed to JavaScript using DOM interfaces. For example, an HTML image is exposed to JavaScript as a DOM object representing an `` element, but behind the scenes there is native code responsible for loading and rendering images.

When a JavaScript object is garbage collected, a destructor is called to deallocate any attached native memory. In the case that the native code is implemented in Rust, this leads to a situation where Rust relies on affine types and lifetimes for memory safety, but JavaScript respects neither of these. As a result, the raw Spidermonkey interface to Rust is very unsafe, for example there are nearly 400 instances of unsafe code in the Servo DOM implementation:

```

$ grep "unsafe_code" components/script/dom/*.rs | wc
393      734    25514

```

Since JavaScript does not respect Rust's affine types, Servo's DOM implementation makes use of Rust [?] *interior mutability* which replaces the compile-time type checks with run-time dynamic checks. This carries run-time overhead, and the possibility of checks failing, and Servo panicking.

Moreover, Spidermonkey has its own invariants, and if an embedding application does not respect these invariants, then runtime errors can occur. One of these invariants is the division of JavaScript

memory into *compartments*, which can be garbage collected separately. The runtime has a notion of “current compartment”, and the embedding application is asked to maintain two invariants:

- whenever an object is used, the object is in the current compartment, and
- there are no references between objects which cross compartments.

In order for native code to interact well with the Spidermonkey garbage collector, it has to provide two functions:

- a *trace* function, that given an object, iterates over all of the JavaScript objects which are reachable from it, and
- a *roots* function, which iterates over all of the JavaScript objects that are live on the call stack.

From these two functions, the garbage collector can find all of the reachable JavaScript objects, including those reachable from JavaScript directly, and those reached via native code.

Automatically generating the trace function is reasonably straightforward metaprogramming, but rooting safely turns out to be quite tricky. Servo provides an approximate analysis for safe rooting using an ad-hoc static analysis (the *rooting lint*), but this is problematic because a) the lint is syntax-driven, so does not understand about Rust features such as generics, and b) even if it could be made sound it is disabled more than 200 times:

```
$ grep "unrooted_must_root" components/script/dom/*.rs | wc
    213      456    15961
```

1.3 Josephine

Josephine [?] is intended to act as a safe bridge between Spidermonkey and Rust. Its goals are:

- to use JavaScript to manage the lifetime of Rust data, and to allow JavaScript to garbage collect unreachable data,
- to allow references to JavaScript-managed data to be freely copied and discarded, relying on Spidermonkey’s garbage collector for safety,
- to maintain Rust memory safety via affine types and lifetimes, without requiring additional static analysis such as the rooting lint,
- to allow mutable and immutable access to Rust data via JavaScript-managed references, so avoiding interior mutability, and
- to provide a rooting API to ensure that JavaScript-managed data is not garbage collected while it is being used.

Josephine is intended to be safe, in that any programs built using Josephine’s API do not introduce undefined behaviour or runtime errors. In particular, Josephine tracks compartments using phantom types [?].

Josephine achieves this by providing controlled access to Spidermonkey’s *JavaScript context*, and maintaining invariants about it:

- immutable access to JavaScript-managed data requires immutable access to the JavaScript context,
- mutable access to JavaScript-managed data requires mutable access to the JavaScript context, and
- any action that can trigger garbage collection (for example allocating new objects) requires mutable access to the JavaScript context.

As a result, since access to the JavaScript context does respect Rust’s affine types, mutation or garbage collection cannot occur simultaneously with accessing JavaScript-managed data.

In other words, Josephine treats the JavaScript context as an affine access token, or capability, which controls access to the JavaScript-managed data. The data accesses respect affine types, even though the JavaScript objects themselves do not.

This use of an access token to safely access data in a substructural type system is *not* new, it is the heart of Ahmed, Fluet and Morrisett's L^3 Linear Language with Locations [?] and its application to linear regions [?].

Moreover, type systems for mixed linear/non-linear programming have been known for a long time, for example Benton's 1994 [?]. The aspects that are novel are:

- the linear language is Rust, and the non-linear language is JavaScript, which are both industrial-strength languages,
- the treatment of garbage collection requires a different treatment than regions in L^3 , which have a stack discipline, and
- the token contains more state in its type, carrying more than just read/write access, but the current compartment, and the capability to trigger garbage collection.

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2 THE JOSEPHINE API

There are two important concepts in Josephine's API: *JS-managed* data, and the *JS context*. For readers familiar with the region-based variant [?] of L^3 [?], JS-managed data corresponds to L^3 references, and JS contexts to L^3 capabilities.

2.1 JS-managed data

JS-managed data has the type $\text{JSManaged}\langle\alpha, C, T\rangle$, which represents a reference to data whose lifetime is managed by JS, which:

- is guaranteed to live at least as long as α ,
- is allocated in JS compartment C ,
- points to native data of type T .

This type is copyable, so not subject to the affine type discipline, even though it can be used to gain mutable access to the native data. We shall see later that this is safe for the same reason as L^3 : we are using the JS context as a capability, and it is not copyable.

In the simplest case, T is a base type like `String`, but in more complex cases, T might itself contain JS-managed data, for example a type of cells in a doubly-linked list can be defined:

```
type Cell<'a, C> = JSManaged<'a, C, NativeCell<'a, C>>;
```

where:

```
struct NativeCell<'a, C> {
  data: String,
  prev: Option<Cell<'a, C>>,
  next: Option<Cell<'a, C>>,
}
```

This pattern is a common idiom, in that there are two types:

- $\text{NativeCell}\langle\alpha, C\rangle$ containing the native representation of a cell, including the prev and next references, and
- $\text{Cell}\langle\alpha, C\rangle$ containing a reference to a native cell, whose lifetime is managed by JS.

These types are both parameterized by a lower bound α on the lifetime of the cell, and the compartment C that the cell lives in.

Doubly-linked lists are an interesting example of programming in Rust, and indeed there is an introductory text *Learning Rust With Entirely Too Many Linked Lists* [?], in which safe implementations of doubly-linked lists require interior mutability (and hence dynamic checks) and reference counting.

2.2 The JS context

By itself, JS-managed references are not much use: there has to be an API for creating and dereferencing them: this is the role of the JS *context*, which acts as a capability for manipulating JS-managed data.

There is only one JS context per thread (and JS contexts cannot be shared or sent between threads) so unique access to the JS context implies unique access to all JS-managed data. We can use this to give safe mutable access to JS-managed data, since the JS context is a unique capability.

The JS context has a state, notably keeping track of the current compartment, but also permissions such as “allowed to create new references” or “allowed to dereference”. This state is tracked in the type system using phantom types [?], so the JS context has type $\text{JSContext}\langle S \rangle$, where S is the current state.

For example, a program to allocate a new JS-managed reference is:

```
let x: JSManaged<C, String> = cx.manage(String::from("hello"));
```