

PRAGMATIC FUNCTIONAL JAVASCRIPT



by

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Introduction

What does "pragmatism" mean?

Pragmatism, noun, a **practical** approach to problems and affairs. There is no word that can describe this book better. We are going to focus on practical applications of the beautiful and enchanting theory built around functional programming. This book is made for people with basic knowledges on JavaScript programming; you definitely shouldn't have exceptional abilities to understand the things here written: it is made to be practical, simple, concise and after that we except you to be able to write real world applications using the functional paradigm and finally say "I **do** work with functional programming!".

When possible, we'll provide the problem that we are trying to solve with alternative implementations and techniques in other paradigms. Programming is made to solve problems, but sometimes solving a problem may generate several other small problems. Before continuing, we need to set some premises:

- **Programming languages are not perfect:** seriously. They are built and designed by humans, and humans are not perfect (far from that!). They may contain failures and arbitrarily defined features, however, most times there is a reasonable explanation about the "workaround".
- **Problem solving may generate other problems:** if you are worried only about "getting shit done", this might be a bit controversial for you. When you solve a problem, have in mind that your solution is not free from introducing problems that other people will have to solve later. Being open to criticism is a good thing here; this is how technology evolves.
- **The right tool for the right job:** this is pragmatism. We pick the tool that solves the problem and introduces the lowest number of side-effects. Good programmers analyse trade-offs. There are a lot of programming languages published and dozens of paradigms, and they are not made/discovered only because "somebody likes writing that way" or "somebody wants to have their name in a programming language" (at least most times), but because new problems arise. It is sensible, for example, to use Erlang on telephone systems, Agda on mathematical proofs and Go on concurrent systems, but it is definitely insane to use Brainfuck on web development and PHP on compiler development!

The author

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to talk about compilers and type theory, you can easily find him on GitHub under [/haskellcamargo](#).

The second chance

And God said, "let there be functions", and there were functions.

In the beginning, computers were very slow, way slower than running Android Studio on your 2GB RAM machine! When the first physical computers appeared and programming languages started to be designed and implemented, there were mainly 2 mindsets:

1. Start from the Von Neumann architecture and **add abstraction**;
2. Start from mathematics and **remove abstraction**.

When it all started, dealing with high levels of abstraction was very hard and costly, memory and storage were really small in power, so imperative programming languages got a lot more visibility than functional ones because imperative languages had a lower level of abstraction that was way easier to implement and map directly to the hardware. It could not be the best way to design programs and express ideas, but at least it was the faster one to run.

But computers improved a lot, and functional programming finally got its deserved chance! Functional programming is not a new concept. I'm serious, it is really old and came directly from mathematics! The core concepts and the functional computational model came even before physical computers existed. It had its origins on lambda calculus, and it was initially only a formal system developed in the 1930s to investigate computability.

A lot of modern programming languages support well functional programming. Even Java surrendered to this and implemented lambda expressions and streams. Most of you program in languages that were created; I want to show you the one which was discovered.

Why functional programming?

If imperative programming and other paradigms, like object orientation, were good enough, why do we need to learn a new way to code? The answer is: survival. Object orientation cannot save us from the cloud monster anymore. More complex problems have arisen and functional programming fits them very well. Functional programming is not "another syntax", as some people think; it is another mindset and a declarative way to solve problems. While in imperative programming you specify steps and how things happen, in declarative (functional and logic) programming you specify what has to be done, and the computer should decide the best way to do that. We've evolved a lot to do the job that a computer can do hundreds of times better than us.

Testability and maintainability

Modular and functional code bases are way easier to test and get a high coverage on unit tests. Things are very well isolated and independent, and by following all the main principles you get composable programs that work well together and have less bugs.

Parallelism

This is really variant with the implementation, but in languages that can track all sort of effects, you get parallelism and the possibility of clustering your program for free.

Optimization

Functional languages tend to be a lot easier to optimize and are more predictable for compilers. Knowing all sort of things that can happen in a program gives the possibility to the compiler to know the semantics of your code before even running it. Haskell can be even faster than C if you write idiomatic code! The main JavaScript engine, V8, has invested extensively in optimizations for the functional paradigm.

Less is more

Having a lot of ways to do a job and to solve a problem in the same context is always good, right? Well, not always. If you pluck most programming languages that are largely used by the market, then you have a functional language — and this is valid also to JavaScript. JavaScript has strong ties with Scheme and has the perfect potential to be a very good functional language. Remove loops, mutability, references, conditional statements, exceptions, labels, blocks and you virtually have a dynamically typed OCaml dialect. I'm serious, you can even define functions in JavaScript without giving importance to the order they occur, just like OCaml em Haskell do — this is what we can call hoisting and we'll be seeing how to take advantage of this in the next chapters.

Don't be miser. Do you really need all that different unaddressed language constructs? In the chapters of this book we'll discard a large part of JavaScript and we'll focus only in an expressive subset: functions and bindings, it is everything we'll need for now! Before learning functional programming with JavaScript, you first will have to think about unlearning some things. This is necessary to avoid language vices and to stimulate your brain to solve problems in a declarative way. For now, you'll have to trust, but in the course of this book you'll see how everything makes sense and fits into the purpose.

Tooling

We'll focus more on program semantics and correctness than execution, but if you really want to learn, only reading this book will not be enough.

Roots of the evil

Null considered harmful

And by `null`, we also mean `undefined`. It is hard to see a programmer we never had any sort of problems with null references, null pointers or anything that can represent that absence of a value. For JavaScript programmers, `undefined is not a function`, for the C# young men in suits, `NullReferenceException`, and for unlucky one who use need to use Java, the classic `java.lang.NullPointerException`. Do you think we really need `null` as a special language construct? In this point, there is also a consensus between functional programmers and object-oriented programmers: `null` was a secular mistake.

It increases complexity

When you have to compare for null to avoid runtime errors, your code logic forks and creates a new path of possibilities. If you use lots of `null` values, the chance of having spaghetti code that becomes hard to maintain is really big. Object-oriented languages recommend the null object pattern, while functional languages use monads for that. Luckily, there are lots of libraries and monadic implementations for JavaScript to abstract and avoid this problem. We'll see monads in details and how to properly handle `null` later — for now we'll be presenting the problems and seeking the solution will be a task for the next chapters.

Unpredictable types

Why would you return `null` in a function that retrieves the list of users of the database when I can just return the **empty representation** of the expected type? — an empty array in this situation. The fact is that `null` can inhabit **any** type, and this makes the task of debugging a lot harder. Which one is more pragmatic?

```
const showUsers = () => {  
  const users = getUsers()  
  if (users !== null) {  
    users.forEach(console.log)  
  }  
}
```

```
const showUsers = () => getUsers().forEach(console.log)
```

Don't make it complex when you can make it simple.

True, false ...and null!?

Unless you have a **very** good excuse, don't return `null` when all you need to do is giving a simple boolean answer. First thing: `null` is not `false`, `null` is the absence of value, and in this case we don't have a boolean representation, but a three-state model. Booleans should never be nullable.

Mutability can kill your hamster

One of the pillars of functional programming is immutability, and changing things is a very common thing in imperative and object-oriented programming languages, but how one can model computations and problems without even being allowed to have variables?

Mutability is about showing the computer **how** to solve your problem and not presenting out declaratively **what** is the problem that it should solve.

Before presenting how we can do it, let's first examine why mutability is evil and you should avoid it when possible and sensible if you care about the life and health of your hamster. This is definitely not a rant about mutability in general, but an overview of the problems that are undeniably common in real world projects. There are situations where mutability is necessary, but they are the exception, not the rule.

Mutable data is inherently complex

And mutability without explicit control is what makes software development difficult. The control flow of your program takes more possible paths and more things to worry about. When maintaining code bases with lots of mutable or global variables and references, there are not warranties that touching and changing a function will not present side-effects in other part of the program that may be completely unrelated. Functions with only input and output give you warranty that they will not affect other parts of the program and are predictable. Worrying about program safety should be a work of the compiler, not yours. The programmer should worry about problem modeling and the only errors with which they should worry about should be from business logic, but most mainstream languages transfer their work to the depressive programmer.

Multithreading is hard

If you believe that imperative languages and things which are closer to Assembly are better for distributed systems, you are wrong, and increasingly wrong. Immutable and predictable code is inherently easier to optimize to run in multiple cores and threads because the compiler knows that it can safely run different parts of the program independently knowing that there is no interdependence among them. A function that has some input and always the same output and that doesn't touches parts of the program it shouldn't or emit side-effects is always thread-safe and optimizable.

Loss of reversibility

Reversibility matters a lot. Since 2015, new tools for front-end development have emerged and a large part of them is about state control and reversibility, such as React and Vue. Reversibility is about having the control of your program and being able to replicate the point of a program based purely on its current state. This also makes debugging and finding errors a lot easier because not reproducing errors can no longer be an excuse. When you have reversibility and state control, complex things become trivial, such as restoring the program state on restarting it or implementing "undo" and "redo" operations.

Debugging can be tiresome

And I'm not joking. Debugging becomes still harder when you are dealing with multiple processes and asynchronous programming. Did you ever wonder how in the world that variable suddenly had its value changed? When you combine mutability with nullity, you create a dangerous monster.

Type coercion is a bad boy

While static typing helps avoiding mistakes and unexpected behaviors, type coercion helps losing the control about your data values and types. Type coercion means that when the operands of an operator have different types, then they are converted to an equivalent and acceptable value by that operator. For instance, when you do:

```
1 == true
```

This is `true` only because, as long as there is no comparison for different types, `true` on the right side is converted to a number (based on `1` in the left side), in this case, `true` becomes `1`. The operator `===` prevents this conversion from happening, and it is what we will be using from this point.

The type system of a programming language defines what types of data can exist in the language and how operations can be applied to them, and this sort of thing exist to prevent the programmer from shooting theirself on the foot. Type coercion is about **implicitly** converting incompatible values when there is no valid operation for that type of value.

In languages like Python, even with dynamic typing, operations like `"foo" + 1` will emit a runtime error:

```
>>> "foo" + 1
Traceback (most recent call last):
  File "<stdin>", line 1, in <module>
TypeError: cannot concatenate 'str' and 'int' objects
```

And this helps preventing a lot of bugs that would be caught only in distant point of the program. Type coercion is a misnomer, as long as values have no types in the sense of static typed languages, but it is a definition of how different values interact. The ECMAScript specification about type coercion is really big; there are lots of rules and exceptions and trusting on these conversions is a fatal error.

Somebody stop this!

There are a lot of articles about the `this` keyword in JavaScript, and **this** was one of the worst design issues of the language. Some people argue that there would be names that express better the concept of `this`, like `potatoes`. Even JavaScript programmers with years of experience get confused about it and it is a common source of mistakes among them. There are several different ways to set the value of `this` inside a function, such as calling a method from an object, calling a function alone, using `call`, `apply` or even using `new` to create an instance. It's really a handyman keyword. Telling the behavior of a program piece only looking at it when it has `this` is not as easy as it is with pure functions because you need to worry and care about the **context** of call of that function. It also has different behaviors when using `function` keyword and `() =>`, the fat-arrow, which captures the top context instead of creating another, making the use of the two forms of declarations of anonymous functions not interchangeable.

Behaviors of this

Method call

```
const person = {
  fullName: 'Mr. Pickles',
  sayName: function () {
    console.log(`Hello, my name is ${this.fullName}!`)
  }
}

person.sayName() // Hello, my name is Mr. Pickles!
```

Note that using `() =>` instead of `function` would capture the top `this`, making `this.fullName` be `undefined` in this situation.

Meet ESLint

Using a linter is a nice way to help you avoiding mistakes and encouraging a standard coding style. There is an excelent tool called ESLint for that. We will be using it in these series to restrict some language features while encouraging others.

Restricting imperative syntax

We will configure the linter to restrict imperative syntax to avoid relapses. The mindset used in functional programming is different, simpler than imperative, so we can eliminate language features that would cause confusion and that have good functional replacements.

Functional languages targeting JavaScript

If you are still not convinced about using JavaScript as a functional language, but enjoys the environment it provides and/or needs to do web or server development with it, then there are several alternative languages that encourages functional programming better than JavaScript and compile to it. You may think, if it compiles to JavaScript, why not writing JavaScript? Because languages provide abstractions to make problem solving easier. This would be the same thing about arguing about writing Assembly because "languages compile to it". There are almost as many languages that compile to JavaScript as there are JavaScript frameworks and libraries.

LiveScript

CoffeeScript is for Ruby as LiveScript is for Haskell. LiveScript is a functional language with strong roots on Haskell and F# with dynamic type checking that compiles to pure and mappable JavaScript. It's very useful for prototyping and data transformation. It provides a standard library called `prelude-ls` with lots of functions to handle lists, objects and other data structures with focus on composition and immutability, but still allows everything that JavaScript does, such as loops and random effects (not that you should use them). LiveScript is a fork of Coco language, an indirect dialect of CoffeeScript, but it is a lot more expressive. It also provides source-maps to allow debugging on VSCode, Chrome or Firefox without headache or suffering.