



Brad Dayley

Node.js, MongoDB and AngularJS

Web Development



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Node.js, MongoDB and AngularJS Web Development

Brad Dayley

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Brad Dayley is a senior software engineer with more than 20 years of experience developing enterprise applications and web interfaces. He has used JavaScript and jQuery for years and is the author of *jQuery and JavaScript Phrasebook* and *Teach Yourself jQuery and JavaScript in 24 Hours*. He has designed and implemented a wide array of applications and services, from application servers to complex Web 2.0 interfaces. He is also the author of *Python Developer's Phrasebook* and *Teach Yourself Django in 24 Hours*.

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Introducing the Node.js-to-AngularJS Stack

To get you off on the right foot, this chapter focuses on the fundamental components of the web development framework and then describes the components of the Node.js-to-AngularJS stack that is the basis for the rest of the book. The first section discusses various aspects of the general website/web application development framework, from users to backend services. The purpose of first covering the web development framework components is to help you more easily understand how the components of the Node.js-to-AngularJS stack relate to the pieces of the general framework. This should help you better see the benefits of using the Node.js-to-AngularJS stack components instead of the more traditional technologies.

Understanding the Basic Web Development Framework

To get you in the right mind-set to understand the benefits of utilizing Node.js, MongoDB, and AngularJS as your web framework, this section provides an overview of the basic components of most websites. If you are already familiar with the full web framework, then this section will be old hat, but if you only understand just the server side or client side of the web framework, then this section will give you a more complete picture.

The main components of any web framework are the user, browser, webserver, and backend services. Although websites vary greatly in terms of appearance and behavior, all have these basic components in one form or another.

This section is not intended to be in-depth, comprehensive, or technically exact but rather a very high-level perspective of the parts involved in a functional website. The components are described in a top-down manner, from user down to backend services. Then the next section discusses the Node.js-to-AngularJS stack from the bottom up, so you can get a picture of where each of the pieces fits and why. Figure 1.1 provides a basic diagram to help you visualize the components in a website/web application, which are discussed in the following sections.

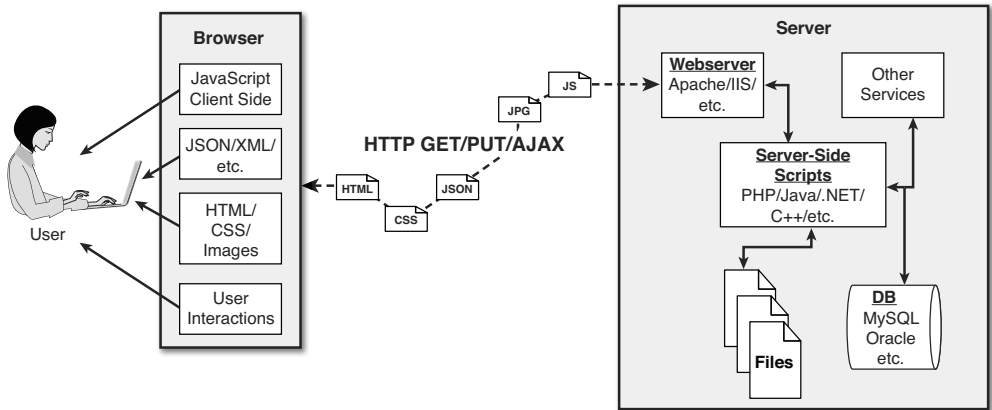


Figure 1.1 Basic diagram of the components of a basic website/web application.

Users

Users are a fundamental part of every website; they are, after all, the reason websites exist in the first place. User expectations define the requirements for developing a good website. User expectations have changed a lot over the years. In the past, users accepted the slow, cumbersome experience of the “world-wide-wait,” but not today. They expect websites to behave much more quickly, like applications installed on their computers and mobile devices.

The user role in a web framework is to sit on the visual output and interaction input of webpages. That is, users view the results of the web framework processing and then provide interactions using mouse clicks, keyboard input, and swipes and taps.

The Browser

The browser plays three roles in the web framework:

- Provide communication to and from the webserver
- Interpret the data from the server and render it into the view that the user actually sees
- Handle user interaction through the keyboard, mouse, touchscreen, or other input device and take the appropriate action

Browser-to-Webserver Communication

Browser-to-webserver communication consists of a series of requests, using the HTTP and HTTPS protocols. Hypertext Transfer Protocol (HTTP) is used to define communication between the browser and the webserver. HTTP defines what types of requests can be made as well as the format of those requests and the HTTP response.

HTTPS adds an additional security layer, SSL/TLS, to ensure secure connections by requiring the webserver to provide a certificate to the browser. The user can then determine whether to accept the certificate before allowing the connection.

There are three main types of requests that a browser will make to a webserver:

- **GET:** The GET request is typically used to retrieve data from the server, such as .html files, images, or JSON data.
- **POST:** POST requests are used when sending data to the server, such as adding an item to a shopping cart or submitting a web form.
- **AJAX:** Asynchronous JavaScript and XML (AJAX) is actually just a GET or POST request that is done directly by JavaScript running in the browser. Despite the name, an AJAX request can receive XML, JSON, or raw data in the response.

Rendering the Browser View

The screen that the user actually views and interacts with is often made up of several different pieces of data retrieved from the webserver. The browser reads data from the initial URL and then renders the HTML document to build a Document Object Model (DOM). The DOM is a tree structure object with the HTML document as the root. The structure of the tree basically matches the structure of the HTML document. For example, `document` will have `html` as a child, and `html` will have `head` and `body` as children, and `body` may have `div`, `p`, or other elements as children, like this:

```
document
+ html
  + head
  + body
    + div
    + p
```

The browser interprets each DOM element and renders it to the user's screen to build the webpage view.

The browser often gets various types of data from multiple webserver requests to build a webpage. The following are the most common types of data the browser uses to render the final user view as well as define the webpage behavior:

- **HTML files:** These provide the fundamental structure of the DOM.
- **CSS files:** These define how each of the elements on the page is to be styled, in terms of font, color, borders, and spacing.
- **Client-side scripts:** These are typically JavaScript files. They can provide added functionality to a webpage, manipulate the DOM to change the look of the webpage, and provide any necessary logic required to display the page and provide functionality.
- **Media files:** Image, video, and sound files are rendered as part of the webpage.

- **Data:** Data such as XML, JSON, or raw text can be provided by the webserver as a response to an AJAX request. Rather than send a request back to the server to rebuild the webpage, new data can be retrieved via AJAX and inserted into the webpage via JavaScript.
- **HTTP headers:** HTTP defines a set of headers that the browser can use and client-side scripts to define the behavior of the webpage. For example, cookies are contained in the HTTP headers. The HTTP headers also define the type of data in the request as well as the type of data expected to be returned to the browser.

User Interaction

The user interacts with the browser via mice, keyboards, and touchscreens. A browser has an elaborate event system that captures user input events and then takes the appropriate actions. Actions vary from displaying a popup menu to loading a new document from the server to executing client-side JavaScript.

Webservers

A webserver's main focus is handling requests from browsers. As described earlier, a browser may request a document, post data, or perform an AJAX request to get data. The webserver uses HTTP headers as well as a URL to determine what action to take. This is where things get very different, depending on the webserver, configuration, and technologies used.

Most out-of-the-box webservers such as Apache and IIS are made to serve static files such as .html, .css, and media files. To handle POST requests that modify server data and AJAX requests to interact with backend services, webservers need to be extended with server-side scripts.

A *server-side script* is really anything that a webserver can execute in order to perform the task the browser is requesting. These scripts can be written in PHP, Python, C, C++, C#, Perl, Java, ... the list goes on and on. Webservers such as Apache and IIS provide mechanisms to include server-side scripts and then wire them up to specific URL locations requested by the browser. This is where having a solid webserver framework can make a big difference. It often takes quite a bit of configuration to enable various scripting languages and wire up the server-side scripts so that the webserver can route the appropriate requests to the appropriate scripts.

Server-side scripts either generate a response directly by executing their code or connect with other backend servers such as databases to obtain the necessary information and then use that information to build and send the appropriate responses.

Backend Services

Backend services are services that run behind a webserver and provide data that is used to build responses to the browser. The most common type of backend service is a database that stores information. When a request comes in from the browser that requires information from the database or other backend service, the server-side script connects to the database, retrieves

the information, formats it, and then sends it back to the browser. On the other hand, when data comes in from a web request that needs to be stored in the database, the server-side script connects to the database and updates the data.

Understanding the Node.js-to-AngularJS Stack Components

With the basic structure of the web framework fresh in your mind, it is time to discuss the Node.js-to-AngularJS stack. The most common—and I believe the best—version of this stack is the Node.js-to-AngularJS stack comprised of MongoDB, Express, AngularJS, and Node.js.

In the Node.js-to-AngularJS stack, Node.js provides the fundamental platform for development. The backend services and server-side scripts are all written in Node.js. MongoDB provides the data store for the website but is accessed via a MongoDB driver Node.js module. The webserver is defined by Express, which is also a Node.js module.

The view in the browser is defined and controlled using the AngularJS framework. AngularJS is an MVC framework in which the model is made up of JSON or JavaScript objects, the view is HTML/CSS, and the controller is AngularJS JavaScript code.

Figure 1.2 provides a very basic diagram of how the Node.js to AngularJS stack fits into the basic website/web application model. The following sections describe each of these technologies and why they were chosen as part of the Node.js to AngularJS stack. Later chapters in the book will cover each of the technologies in much more detail.

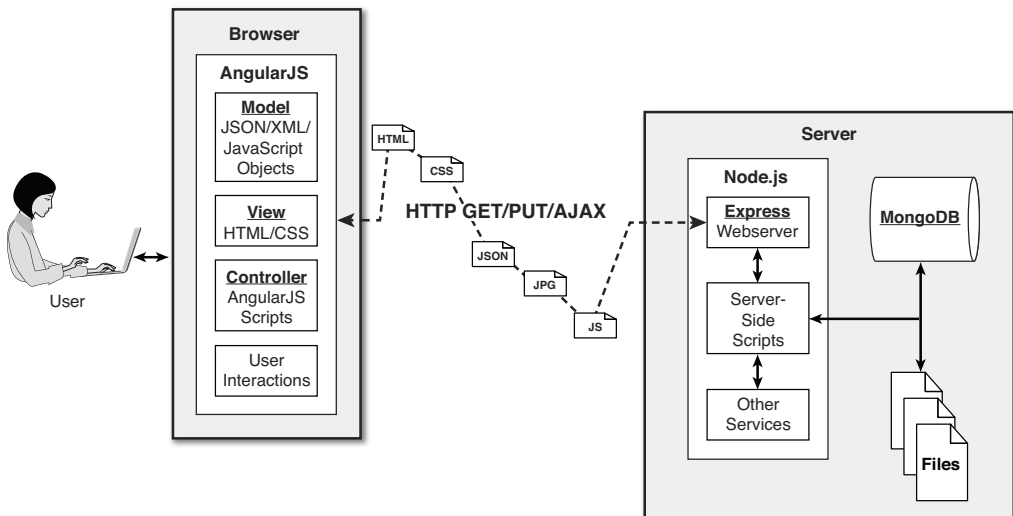


Figure 1.2 Basic diagram showing where Node.js, Express, MongoDB, and AngularJS fit in the web paradigm.

Node.js

Node.js is a development framework that is based on Google's V8 JavaScript engine and executes it.

You can write most—or maybe even all—of your server-side code in Node.js, including the webserver and the server-side scripts and any supporting web application functionality. The fact that the webserver and the supporting web application scripts are running together in the same server-side application allows for much tighter integration between the webserver and the scripts. Also, the webserver can run directly on the Node.js platform as a Node.js module, which means it's much easier than using, say, Apache for wiring up new services or server-side scripts.

The following are just a few reasons Node.js is a great framework:

- **JavaScript end-to-end:** One of the biggest advantages of Node.js is that it allows you to write both server- and client-side scripts in JavaScript. There have always been difficulties in deciding whether to put logic in client-side scripts or server-side scripts. With Node.js you can take JavaScript written on the client and easily adapt it for the server and vice versa. An added plus is that client developers and server developers are speaking the same language.
- **Event-driven scalability:** Node.js applies a unique logic to handling web requests. Rather than having multiple threads waiting to process web requests, with Node.js they are processed on the same thread, using a basic event model. This allows Node.js web servers to scale in ways that traditional web servers can't.
- **Extensibility:** Node.js has a great following and very active development community. People are providing new modules to extend Node.js functionality all the time. Also, it is very simple to install and include new modules in Node.js; you can extend a Node.js project to include new functionality in minutes.
- **Fast implementation:** Setting up Node.js and developing in it are super easy. In only a few minutes you can install Node.js and have a working webserver.

MongoDB

MongoDB is an agile and very scalable NoSQL database. The name Mongo comes from the word “humongous,” emphasizing the scalability and performance MongoDB provides. It is based on the NoSQL document store model, which means data is stored in the database as basically JSON objects rather than as the traditional columns and rows of a relational database.

MongoDB provides great website backend storage for high-traffic websites that need to store data such as user comments, blogs, or other items because it is quickly scalable and easy to implement. This book covers using the MongoDB driver library to access MongoDB from Node.js.

Node.js supports a variety of database access drivers, so the data store can easily be MySQL or some other database. However, the following are some of the reasons that MongoDB really fits in the Node.js stack well:

- **Document orientation:** Because MongoDB is document oriented, data is stored in the database in a format that is very close to what you deal with in both server-side and client-side scripts. This eliminates the need to transfer data from rows to objects and back.
- **High performance:** MongoDB is one of the highest-performing databases available. Especially today, with more and more people interacting with websites, it is important to have a backend that can support heavy traffic.
- **High availability:** MongoDB's replication model makes it very easy to maintain scalability while keeping high performance.
- **High scalability:** MongoDB's structure makes it easy to scale horizontally by sharding the data across multiple servers.

Express

The Express module acts as the webserver in the Node.js-to-AngularJS stack. Because it runs in Node.js, it is easy to configure, implement, and control. The Express module extends Node.js to provide several key components for handling web requests. It allows you to implement a running webserver in Node.js with only a few lines of code.

For example, the Express module provides the ability to easily set up destination routes (URLs) for users to connect to. It also provides great functionality in terms of working with HTTP request and response objects, including things like cookies and HTTP headers.

The following is a partial list of the valuable features of Express:

- **Route management:** Express makes it easy to define routes (URL endpoints) that tie directly to the Node.js script functionality on the server.
- **Error handling:** Express provides built-in error handling for “document not found” and other errors.
- **Easy integration:** An Express server can easily be implemented behind an existing reverse proxy system, such as Nginx or Varnish. This allows you to easily integrate it into your existing secured system.
- **Cookies:** Express provides easy cookie management.
- **Session and cache management:** Express also enables session management and cache management.

AngularJS

AngularJS is a client-side framework developed by Google. It provides all the functionality needed to handle user input in the browser, manipulate data on the client side, and control how elements are displayed in the browser view. It is written in JavaScript, with a reduced jQuery library. The theory behind AngularJS is to provide a framework that makes it easy to implement web applications using the MVC framework.

Other JavaScript frameworks could be used with the Node.js platform, such as Backbone, Ember, and Meteor. However, AngularJS has the best design, feature set, and trajectory at this writing. Here are some of the benefits AngularJS provides:

- **Data binding:** AngularJS has a very clean method for binding data to HTML elements, using its powerful scope mechanism.
- **Extensibility:** The AngularJS architecture allows you to easily extend almost every aspect of the language to provide your own custom implementations.
- **Clean:** AngularJS forces you to write clean, logical code.
- **Reusable code:** The combination of extensibility and clean code makes it very easy to write reusable code in AngularJS. In fact, the language often forces you to do so when creating custom services.
- **Support:** Google is investing a lot into this project, which gives it an advantage over similar initiatives that have failed.
- **Compatibility:** AngularJS is based on JavaScript and has a close relationship with jQuery. This makes it easier to begin integrating AngularJS into your environment and reuse pieces of your existing code within the structure of the AngularJS framework.

Summary

This chapter covers the basics of the web development framework to give you a good foundation for the rest of the book. This chapter covers the basics of interaction between the webserver and browser, as well as the functionality required to make modern websites function.

This chapter also describes the Node.js-to-AngularJS stack, comprising Node.js, MongoDB, Express, and AngularJS. Node.js provides the platform for the framework, MongoDB provides the backend data store, Express provides the webserver, and AngularJS provides the client-side framework for modern web applications.

Up Next

The next chapter provides a brief primer on the JavaScript language. Because the Node.js-to-AngularJS stack is based on JavaScript, you need to be familiar with the language to be able to follow the examples in the rest of the book.

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