iData For The World Wide Web
Programming Interconnected Web Forms

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Abstract. In this paper we present the iData Toolkit. It allows programmers to create interactive, dynamic web applications with state on a high level of abstraction. The key element of this toolkit is the iData element. An iData element can be regarded as a self-contained object that stores values of a specified type. Generic programming techniques enable the automatic generation of HTML-forms from these types. These forms can be plugged into the web application. The iData elements can be interconnected. Complicated form dependencies can be defined in a pure functional, type safe, declarative programming style. This liberates the programmer from lots of low-level HTML programming and form handling. We illustrate the descriptive power of the toolkit by means of a small, yet complicated example: a project administration. The iData Toolkit is an excellent demonstration of the expressive power of modern generic (poly-typical) programming techniques.

Keywords server side web programming, web forms, functional programming

1 Introduction

The World Wide Web is experiencing a rapid growth of web based applications. For many companies their web based services are their only contact with clients. These clients gain access to these applications via a wide variety of browsers. In addition, they tend to use these applications in a browsing style: clients clone windows, move back and forward through visited links, visit different sites, and so on. These aspects impose strong demands on web applications in order to assure correct behavior. It is important that these web applications are constructed in a well-understood way, and are based on solid foundations. In the iData Toolkit project we are working on a framework for these purposes. The main features of the toolkit are:

- The toolkit is based on a single concept, that of interactive Data, or iData.
- The web application is a single program (perhaps consisting of several modules) instead of a collection of loosely coupled script pages.
The toolkit is defined in a pure functional programming language, and uses features such as strong typing and expressive type systems.

The toolkit offers a good separation of concerns. The computational content of the web application is separated from the presentation in a clear way.

The programmer has fine grained control over the life span of the application's state. State can be stored persistently, session based, or page based.

We focus on two challenges when programming the web: the first is how to program forms in a concise, abstract, and well-defined way, and the second is how to interconnect these forms. Forms are the interactive parts of web applications. In them, users can enter data, using a variety of interactive elements such as text input fields, (radio) buttons, and pull down menus. An application page generally consists of several forms which content may depend on each others state. We guarantee that user input is always type correct, and that the server side application always receives the correct data.

We meet the above challenges by imposing a typed discipline on the untyped world of web programming in a novel way. In our framework, forms are really *editors of values*. Because we use a strongly typed programming language, these values have a well-defined type. We derive the form automatically from the type of the value of an editor using *generic programming techniques* [13, 14, 2]. Such an editor is an iData. This results in a powerful abstraction: iData Toolkit programmers do not program forms, but instead design types and values of iData. We have implemented this approach earlier for Graphical User Interfaces [1]. The implementation of the iData Toolkit [20] is both entirely different and a major improvement of the previous work.

Generic programming has been built in in *Clean* [21, 3] and *GenericHaskell* [17]. We use *Clean*. *Clean* details are explained in the text. We assume that the reader is familiar with functional and generic programming.

Contributions presented in this paper are:

- We present a single programming concept, the iData, with which dynamically, interconnected, type-safe web applications can be developed.
- We show that iData offer a high level of abstraction because they are programmed in terms of data models. Forms are rendered automatically from the type of these data models.
- iData can be interconnected type-safely, as if they were stateful objects.

This paper is structured as follows. In Sect. 2 we introduce the iData Toolkit by means of a few key examples. We show what steps an iData Toolkit application programmer goes through by discussing a case study of a small, yet complex and realistic example of a web form in Sect. 3. We discuss related work in Sect. 4. Finally, we conclude in Sect. 5.

## 2 The concept of iData

An iData element is an object with two major components: (i) a *state*, or *value*, which type is determined by the programmer, and (ii) a *form*, or *rendering*, which is derived automatically by the toolkit from the state and its type.
The programmer manipulates the iData in terms of the state and its type, whereas the application user manipulates the iData in terms of a low-level form. Clearly, the iData Toolkit needs to mediate between these two worlds: every possible type domain has to be automatically mapped to editable forms, and every user action on these forms has to be automatically mapped back to the original type domain, with a possibly different value.

In this section we explain the main concepts of the iData Toolkit by means of a few key examples. Please notice that although the code of these examples has a static flavour, each of these examples are complete interactive web applications. First we discuss the architecture of server side web applications.

2.1 Architecture

The applications that we study reside on web servers. They are launched by the web server whenever a (remote) web browser program sends a request for an HTML page. It is the task of the application to compute an HTML page, and then terminate. The web server takes care that the generated HTML page is sent back to the web browser program.

In our approach, a web application consists of two parts: the declaration of the interconnected iData elements, and the generation of the HTML page that contains (a subset of) the automatically derived forms of these iData elements.

Interconnection of iData is programmed in a pure functional data dependency style. This gives the program a highly declarative flavor. Yet, the application is started from scratch every time a web form is altered by the user. The current state of the program is completely determined by the iData elements. They are re-created each time the program is started, and are able to recover their current state (possibly changed by the user). To make this possible, the serialized state of an iData is stored either at the server on disk or in the HTML page. All iData elements therefore automatically always contain a type correct value reflecting the latest changes made by a user. For recalculation of a page, and even of a complete web site, the same algorithm can be re-used taking the current iData states as starting point, enabling the highly declarative style of programming.

iData Toolkit applications compute HTML pages. There are many possible approaches to handle this (Sect. 4). This aspect of the iData Toolkit was not our priority. We have chosen an approach that fits in our framework, i.e. an approach that uses data types to model output. The HTML that is computed by the application is encoded with algebraic data types, using a types-as-grammar approach [25]. This has the following advantages. (1) We get a complete context free grammar for HTML which is convenient for the programmer. (2) The type system eliminates type and typing errors that can occur in plain HTML. (3) Compiling an instance of this data type to HTML code is done by a compact type driven generic function. (4) Such a generic implementation is very robust, future changes of HTML are likely to change the type definitions only. A snapshot of the algebraic data types is:

$$html = html \ Head \ Rest$$
The last three data constructors of BodyTag are not part of HTML, but are provided for programming convenience. The data constructor STable generates a 2-dimensional table, the data constructor BodyTag turns a list of body tag elements into a single body tag, and EmptyBody can be used as an empty element.

The code below shows the standard overhead of every iData Toolkit program:

```haskell
module FL0PS2006Examples
import StdEnv, StdHtml

Start :: *World -> *World
Start world = doHtml example world

The proper library modules need to be imported (line 1). Lines 2–3 declare the main function of every Clean program. The uniqueness attribute * just in front of World guarantees that values of this type are always used in a single-threaded manner. Clean uses uniqueness typing [6,7] to allow destructive updates and side-effects. The opaque type World represents the entire external environment of the program. The iData program is given by the function example :: *HSt -> (Html, *HSt). The wrapper function doHtml turns this function into a common Clean program. It initializes the HSt value with all serialized values that can be found in the HTML page, and includes the World as well. This implies that every iData Toolkit application has full access to the external world, and can, for instance, connect to databases and so on. Below, we only show the example functions, and skip the standard overhead.

2.2 iData Have Form

The first example demonstrates the fact that iData elements are type driven. A simple Int iData is created (Fig. 1(a)).

```haskell
example1 :: *HSt -> (Html, *HSt)
example1 hst
  | (nrF, hst) = mkEdit (nIdatald "nr") 1 hst
  | mkHtml "Int editor" [ H1 [] "Int editor" , BodyTag nrF.form ] hst

Passing multiple environments around explicitly is supported syntactically in Clean by means of $\tilde{\text{i}}$-definitions. These are non-recursive let-definitions, which scope extends to the bottom, but not the right-hand side. This is the standard approach in Clean. Even though the examples in this paper do not exploit the flexibility of multiple environment passing (by for instance connecting to a database system), we present them in this style. The function mkEdit (Sect. 2.5)
declares an iData element `nrF` with initial value `1`. The element is identified with the value `(nIDataId "nr")`. The iData record holds the form rendering of the iData, its value, and a boolean that states if this particular iData element has been changed by the user:

```plaintext
:: IData m = { form::[BodyTag], value::m, changed::Bool }
```

Key features that are illustrated in this small example are the declaration of an iData element (`nrF`) from an identification value and an initial value, and that this iData element has an automatically derived rendering in terms of a form that can be addressed by `nrF.form`. It is a general property of an iData that a user can only enter input that is type-safe. When a user creates wrong input, the previous value (of correct type) is restored. If an initial value of some other type would have been specified as argument of `mkEdit`, a corresponding, yet completely different iData element is generated, with a rendering that allows only input of the appropriate type. Finally, the declaration of iData is robust against ill-typed use: only if the current HSt value contains a serialized representation of a value of the correct type, then the iData uses the deserialized value of the correct type; otherwise it relies on its initial value. Hence, all iData declarations with the same label but different type use their own initial value. If the declaration of an iData updates the HSt, then it may be the case that the type of the reference is modified accordingly. It is the responsibility of the application programmer to use unambiguous names throughout his program. Although this approach is not fail-safe, it is easy to explain to programmers, and problems can be avoided by using separate declaration functions (Sect. 3.2). We are still investigating if better solutions exist or need to be created.

Note that the definition of the web page, given by the function `mkHtml :: String [BodyTag] *HSt ^ (Html,*HSt)`, is cleanly separated from the declaration of the iData. At this spot we can freely mix HTML code that is automatically generated from iData elements with “ordinary” hand-written HTML code.

### 2.3 iData Have Value

In this example we show that, besides a form, iData also have a value (Fig. 1(b)).

```plaintext
example2 hst
| (nrFs,hst) = seqList (mkEdit (sumId nr) nr \ nr \ [..5] hst
= mkHtml "Numbers" [ H1 [] "Numbers", sumtable nrFs ] hst

sumtable nrFs = STable [] ( [nrF.form \ nrF \ nrFs] ++
[ [toHtml (sum [nrF.value \ nrF \ nrFs])] ])

sumId i = nIDataId ("sum" <$> i)
```

Five iData elements are activated: `nrFs :: [IData Int]` (seqList `fs st` threads a state value `st` through a list of state transformer functions `fs` and collects their results and the final state). The function `sumtable` places their forms in a column, underneath of which the sum of their values is displayed. The value of an iData is given by the value field of that iData. The library function `toList` uses the
generic form rendering function we also use for the iData to render values of arbitrary type into HTML. The overloaded operator $<$ appends a String version of its second argument to its first argument.

2.4 iData Have Sharing

Repeated use of the same iData declaration refers to a shared iData object. A first advantage of this scheme is that an iData can be seen as a store of a value of a certain, arbitrary type. Where values are actually being stored depends on the kind of iData created (see 2.5). Hence, we do not need to introduce a separate concept to store data. A second advantage is that both the value and rendering of iData can be used arbitrarily many times in a HTML page without causing ambiguity problems. We illustrate the latter by replicating the column of integer iData and their sum in the example below (Fig. 1(c)):

```hst
example3 hst
  \( (nrFs,hst) = \text{seqList} \left( \text{mkEdit} (\text{sumId } nr) \ \text{nr} \ \| \ \text{nr} = [1..5] \right) \ hst \)
  = \text{mkHtml} "Numbers"
    [ \text{H1} ["Numbers"], \text{STable} [\text{sumTable nrFs}, \text{sumTable nrFs}] ] \ hst
```

Editing any of the iData elements also automatically affect the other iData in the same row. The sum is displayed twice, at the bottom of both columns.

2.5 iData Have Model-View Separation

So far we have seen that the rendering one obtains for free from an iData element is completely determined by its type. What if we don’t like this particular rendering? Suppose that for this particular example we want to replace the default integer editor boxes by iData elements that are counters. These counters have different self contained behavior: pressing the buttons should increment/decrement the integer value. This warrants good separation between model (integer value) and view (counter). Indeed, in the example code we only have to replace mkEdit by counterIData that we will define later on to obtain the desired program that displays five counters instead of five integer editors (Fig. 1(d)).

```hst
example4 hst
  \( (nrFs,hst) = \text{seqList} \left( \text{counterIData} (\text{sumId } nr) \ \text{nr} \ \| \ \text{nr} = [1..5] \right) \ hst \)
  = \text{mkHtml} "Numbers" [ \text{H1} ["Numbers"], \text{sumTable nrFs} ] \ hst
```

The counter iData ensures that its integer value is incremented/decremented at every corresponding button press. Although we have created an iData element with a completely different behaviour (view), it still returns an integer value to the programmer. The model has not changed, and therefore nothing else in program has to be altered, since iData elements are self contained and fully compositional. But how can a programmer define these counters?
Creating iData forms. The one pivotal library function mkIData allows the
definition of all sorts of iData elements one can imagine. It has type signature:

\[
\text{mkIData} :: \text{IDataId} \ (\text{IBimap} \ m \ v) \rightarrow \text{IDataFun} \ m
\]

| gForm{|*|}, gUpd{|*|}, gPrint{|*|}, gParse{|*|} v
:: \text{IDataFun} \ m \ ::= \text{**HSt}

With mkIData any model-view mapping can be made. The polymorphic type
variable m stands for model, and the generically overloaded type variable v stands
for view. Class restrictions on this generic variable v appear after |. It shows that
mkIData obtains its power by making use of four generic functions (of kind *):

- gForm creates a form from a view type,
- gUpd converts any change made by the user with a browser in a form to a
corresponding change in the view value,
- gPrint serializes values of any type for iData storage, and
- gParse de-serializes values of any type for iData recovery.

For the programmer all these generic functions addressed in the context restric­
tion have as small consequence that he has to tell Clean to automatically derive
these generic functions (see [2,3]) for the user defined types that he wants to
view. In order to visualize a user defined view type Type, somewhere in the
program the programmer has to define

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{derive gForm Type}; \text{derive gUpd Type}; \text{derive gPrint Type}; \text{derive gParse Type}
\end{align*}
\]

Clean function types show their arity by separating arguments with white­
space. Therefore, mkIData requires three arguments. Let’s take a closer look at
these arguments. The first argument of mkIData is of type IDataId:

:: \text{IDataId} = \{ \text{id}::\text{String}, \text{lifespan}::\text{LifeSpan}, \text{mode}::\text{Mode} \}
:: \text{LifeSpan} = \text{Page} | \text{Session} | \text{Persistent}
:: \text{Mode} = \text{Edit} | \text{Display}

The id field of this record type is used to unambiguously identify iData elements.
The programmer creates them by making up String identifiers, which is a typical
way of identifying forms in web applications. It is the task of the programmer to
use names in such a way that every use of (mkIData id) refers to the same iData
element of some type m. We already saw in the sharing example that one can
refer multiple times to the same iData element. The lifespan field controls the
life span of the corresponding iData value: its value is either remembered as long
as the same page is being viewed (lifespan = Page), or during a browser session
(lifespan = Session), or independently of sessions (lifespan = Persistent). Per­sistent
storage simply means that instead of storing a serialized representation
of the value of an iData in the HTML page, the serialized value is written to
and read from disk on the server side. Finally, the edit mode of iData can be
set. This mode is typically editable (mode = Edit), but sometimes they should
only display constant values (mode = Display). For convenience, for any kind of
thinkable IDataId combination, a library function is offered \{n,s,p\|[d]IDataId ::
String -> IDataId. Here, n, s, p represent the lifespan values Page, Session, and
Persistent respectively. If d is included, the mode is Display, otherwise it is Edit.
The second argument of \texttt{mkIData} is its initial value. This initial value is used when an \texttt{iData} element is created for the first time or if no matching \texttt{iData} was found in the \texttt{HSt} environment. This happens for instance when a web page is viewed for the first time.

The third and final argument of \texttt{mkIData} is the most complicated one because it is used to define the model-view abstraction. This allows the application to work with \texttt{iData} that have state values of type \texttt{m}, but that are visualized by means of values of type \texttt{v}. This is a variant of the well-known model(-controller)-view paradigm [16]. What is special about our approach, is that a view is also determined by its data type. The type can be regarded as a model of a view, and hence can be handled generically in exactly the same way! This is clearly expressed in the type signature of \texttt{mkIData}, which states that the generic machinery must be available for the view model \texttt{v}.

The mapping between a model \texttt{m} and its view \texttt{v} has to be given by defining an instance of the following record type \texttt{IBimap m v}:

\[
\begin{aligned}
\texttt{IBimap m v} &= \{(\texttt{toView} :: \texttt{m} \to (\texttt{Maybe v}) \to \texttt{v}, \texttt{updView} :: \texttt{Bool} \to \texttt{v} \to \texttt{v}, \\
\texttt{fromView} :: \texttt{Bool} \to \texttt{v} \to \texttt{m}, \texttt{resetView} :: \texttt{Maybe} \to (\texttt{v} \to \texttt{v})\}
\end{aligned}
\]

The record contains model-view conversion functions and functions to enable the desired self contained behavior. Model values are transformed to views with \texttt{toView}. It can use the previous view value if available. The self contained behavior of an \texttt{iData} element is handled by \texttt{updView}. Its first argument records if the view has been changed by the user. The same argument is passed to \texttt{fromView} which transforms updated view values back to model values. Finally, \texttt{resetView} is an optional separate normalization of the updated view value.

The result of \texttt{mkIData} is an \texttt{HSt} environment function of type \texttt{IDataFun m} that yields a \texttt{(IData m)} value. The abstract type \texttt{HSt} is constructed by the \texttt{iData} Toolkit immediately after the application has been restarted and contains the serialized states of all views. The non-persistent view states are stored in the \texttt{HTML} form and transmitted whenever the page is changed. Persistent view states reside on disk on the server side and are read when needed.

\textbf{Integer as model, Counter as view.} Now that we have explained the most important function of the \texttt{iData} Toolkit, we can show how a self contained counter can be defined as a view for an integer model.

First of all, we need some button machinery. In the \texttt{iData} Toolkit, all imaginable input forms, such as labelled buttons, image buttons, radio buttons, and pull down menus, are predefined by specializing types to these input forms. In Sect. 2.6 we show how programmers can use the very same specialization mechanism for their own purposes. As an example we show the predefined type for a pull down menu and a button. Both are used in Sect. 3.

\[
\begin{aligned}
\texttt{PullDownMenu} &= \texttt{PullDown} (\texttt{Int}, \texttt{Int}) \to (\texttt{Int}, [\texttt{String}]) \\
\texttt{Button} &= \texttt{Pressed} \mid \texttt{LButton} \to \texttt{Int} \to \texttt{String} \mid \texttt{PButton} \to (\texttt{Int}, \texttt{Int}) \to \texttt{String}
\end{aligned}
\]

A value \texttt{(PullDown (v, w) (i, elts))} is shown as a pull down menu of width \texttt{w} that displays \texttt{v} elements of \texttt{elts}. The index of the selected element is \texttt{i}. A value
(LButton w l) creates a w pixels wide button with label l. A value (PButton (w,h) p) creates a button that is w pixels wide and h pixels high, and that has a picture at file path p. Whenever a button is pressed, its iData value is set to Pressed.

Second of all, we need to specify layout. By default, arguments of data constructors are placed in a column, top- and right-aligned with the data constructor. As we have seen in the examples above, tables are useful to specify different layouts. For convenience, we have introduced a number of types to lay out elements in rows and columns. Furthermore, 2,3,4-tuples layout their elements in a row.

Elements such as the above can be used by defining iData of values of these types. A Counter for an integer value can be constructed by adding an up and down button to it. This results in the following (synonym) type:

```
:: Counter ::= (Int,Button,Button)
```

We can now straightforwardly define counterIData in terms of mkIData. To express the mapping between an integer model and a counter view, we need to define toView, updView, fromView, and resetView:

```
counterIData :: IDataId Int -> IDataFun Int
counterIData iDataId i = mkIData iDataId i ibm
where ibm = { toView = An v | useOldView (n,down,up) v,
               updView = \_ v -> updCounter v,
               fromView = \_ (n,\_,\_) -> n,
               resetView = Nothing }

(up,down) = (LButton (defpixel / 6) "+",LButton (defpixel / 6) "-")
```

```
updCounter :: Counter -> Counter
updCounter (n,Pressed,\_) = (n - 1,down,up)
updCounter (n,_,Pressed) = (n + 1,down,up)
updCounter noPresses = noPresses
```

```
useOldView :: a (Maybe a) -> a
useOldView new (Just old) = old
useOldView new Nothing = new
```

**Frequently Used Views** The function mkIData is a very powerful function with which any model-view abstraction can be defined. Frequently used patterns are predefined in the library. Two examples used in this paper are:

```
mkEdit :: IDataId m -> IDataFun m | gForm[|*|],gUpd[|*|],gPrint[|*|],gParse[|*|] m
mkEdit iDataId m = mkIData iDataId m { toForm = useOldView,
                                       updForm = modeUpd iDataId.mode m,
                                       fromForm = \_ v -> v,
                                       resetForm = Nothing }
where modeUpd Edit _ _ newv = newv
      modeUpd Display initm _ _ = initm
```

```
mkSelf2::IDataId m (m -> m) -> IDataFun m | gForm[|*|],gUpd[|*|],gPrint[|*|],gParse[|*|] m
```
\begin{verbatim}
mkSelf2 iDataId m f = mkIData iDataId m { toForm = useOldView,
        updForm = λ_ v → f v,
        fromForm = λ_ v → v,
        resetForm = Nothing }
\end{verbatim}

The \texttt{mkEdit} function was used in examples 2.2 and 2.3. It can be used as a 'store' in Display mode, or as a straight editor in Edit mode. \texttt{iData} can also be used to create an intelligent store with custom behavior. \texttt{iData} that are declared with \texttt{mkSelf2} memorize a value, initialized with the second argument of the function. When declared, the \texttt{iData} applies the argument function \( f \) to its value (by \texttt{updForm}). In this way stores can preserve properties: e.g. one can ensure that a stored list is always sorted by defining a sort function as parameter. Because \texttt{iData} can be shared, the programmer is able to parameterize \texttt{mkSelf2} with different function arguments. In this way, the stored state can be manipulated from the outside. In combination with the \texttt{pIDataId} function, this results in a persistent memory store which obeys these properties.

### 2.6 \texttt{iData} Have Specialization

\texttt{iData} can be specialized, just as generic functions can. The generic mechanism can render a value of any type. With specialization one can overwrite the default way this is done. This cannot only be used to create buttons and the like when certain types are being used, but it can also be used to customize the look and feel of any user defined type. By using specialization one can separate the handling of the functionality of the web page (by the programmer) from the way things look (by the designer of a site).

Suppose the designer likes the counters in Sect. 2.5 much better than the default integer editors that were used in Sect. 2.2 and 2.3. Assume that he wants to ensure that, throughout the program, these counters are being used instead of the plain integer boxes. For this purpose he needs to specialize the generic form rendering function \( gForm \) for the \texttt{Int} type. This is done by:

\[
gForm\{\texttt{Int}\} \ iDataId \ i \ hst = \text{specialize asCounter} \ iDataId \ i \ hst
\]

where
\[
\text{asCounter :: IDataId Int → IDataFun Int}
\]

\[
\text{asCounter} \ iDataId \ i = \lambda hst
\]

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\{ \text{counterF,hst} = \text{counterIData} \ iDataId \ i \ hst \\
\text{changed} = \text{counterF.changed} \\
\text{value} = \text{fst3} \ \text{counterF.value} \\
\text{form} = \text{counterF.form} \}
\end{array}, \ hst \)
\]

The \text{asCounter} function that defines the specialization uses \text{counterIData} as defined in 2.5. The library function

\[
\text{specialize :: (IDataId a → IDataFun a) IDataId a → IDataFun a | gUpd{|*|} a}
\]

is able to 'plug in' the specialization function into any arbitrary other \texttt{iData} structure. Given this specialization for \texttt{Integers}, in any place where an \texttt{iData} of an Integer value is needed, a counter \texttt{iData} will be made. In such a setting, the programs 2.2, 2.3, and 2.4 all have self contained counters instead of integer boxes without any change to be made in the presented code.
3 Case Study: Project Administration Web Application

As a case study we construct a small, yet complicated form that could be part of a site with which (simple) projects are administrated. It consists of a dynamic number of interconnected sub-forms. Its size is 250 loc (including empty lines): 50% handles the problem domain, 12% specialization, and 38% form programming. The screenshot in Fig. 2 shows the application with all sub-forms active.

3.1 Basic Logic of the Project Administration

We assume that the types and algorithms needed to do the actual project administration have been defined and designed separately, without any knowledge of the web interface that has to be created on top of it. Let’s assume that to administrate projects, the following, self-explanatory, types have been defined.

:: Project = { plan ::ProjectPlan, status::Status, members::[Worker] }
:: ProjectPlan = { name ::String, hours ::Int }
:: Status = { total::Int, left ::Int }
:: Worker = { name ::String, status::Status, work::[Work] }
:: Work =:= (Date,Int)
:: Date = Date Int Int Int

We assume that for the maintenance of the project administration, suitable initialization, update, and retrieval functions are defined on these data structures, such as initProject :: String Int → Project. Their definitions are straightforward. We use them where needed, but skip their definition for lack of space.

3.2 Designing Forms by Defining Types

The screenshot in Fig. 2 reveals that we have defined at least three iData input forms: one to define a new project, one to add a worker to an existing project, and one to assign worked hours for an existing worker of an existing project. These are located below each other. The details view on the right hand side is not an iData, but just displays all information of one existing project. Clearly, the iData have a strong interconnected behavior: only if a project exists, then workers can be added to it; working hours can be assigned only for workers on projects they participate in. We show how to specify these dependencies.

For each iData we need a corresponding type, since iData’s forms are generated type driven. Sometimes, we can use (a combination of) existing types, and sometimes we need to define new types. Because iData can be shared, it is good practice to define a separate declaration function for each of them. In case of straight editors, we use the mkEdit function. If we need to be able to impose properties on the state of an iData, we use the mkSelf2 function. So, for every iData we give the type and define a creation function.

The project form can be of type ProjectPlan, which is given above. The creation function is projectIData. Initially we assume that no projects are planned.
For the `worker` form we define a new type `WorkerPlan`. It holds all project names a worker is involved in, the worker's name, and the hours that should be added to a particular project. The `worker` form must know all projects that have been entered. The function `adjWorkers :: [Project] WorkerPlan → WorkerPlan` updates the worker plan with all new project plan names. For this reason, it is a customizable editor created with `mkSelf2`.

```
:: WorkerPlan = { project::ProjectList, name::String, hours::Int }
:: ProjectList ::= PullDownMenu
```

```
workerIData :: (WorkerPlan → WorkerPlan) → IDataFun WorkerPlan
workerIData f = mkSelf2 (nIDataId "worker") (initWorkerPlan "" 0 0 initProjects) f
```

For the `hours` form we define the type `DailyWork`. For a given project (in `projectId`), and a given worker (in `myName`), it stores how many hours have been worked on a particular date. Because this form depends on the current list of projects and associated workers, this declaration function is also created with `mkSelf2`. The function `adjDailyWork :: [Project] DailyWork → DailyWork` updates the daily work value with all currently registered project-worker combinations.

```
:: DailyWork = { projectId ::ProjectList, myName::WorkersList, hoursWorked::Int, date ::Date }
:: WorkersList ::= PullDownMenu
```

```
hoursIData :: (DailyWork → DailyWork) → IDataFun DailyWork
hoursIData f = mkSelf2 (nIDataId "hours") (initDailyWork 0 0 initProjects) f
```

Of course we need to store the whole project administration of type `[Project]`. This can be achieved by using a persistent `IData`. Again, we make its declaration function `adminIData` parametrized. By now, the pattern should be clear.

```
adminIData :: ([Project] → [Project]) → IDataFun [Project]
adminIData f = mkSelf2 (pIDataId "admin") initProjects f
```

Finally, the user manipulates the forms of the application. Changes to the database are committed by pressing one of the buttons to add a `project`, `worker`, or `hours`. The corresponding actions are given by the functions

```
addNewProject :: ProjectPlan [Project] → [Project]
addNewWorkplan :: WorkerPlan [Project] → [Project]
addDailyWork :: DailyWork [Project] → [Project]
```

The library function `ListFuncBut` associates an `m → m` function with buttons, and yields an `(IData (m → m))` which value is either one of the selected functions or the identity function.

```
ListFuncBut :: Bool IDataId [(Button, m → m)] → IDataFun (m → m)
```
With this function, we can concisely specify the buttons of the application:

```
btnsIData::DailyWork WorkerPlan ProjectPlan → IDataFun ([Project] → [Project])
```

```
btnsIData daylog workplan project
= ListFuncBut False (nIDataId "mybuttons")
    [ (LButton defpixel "addProject", addNewProject project ),
      (LButton defpixel "addWorker", addNewWorkplan workplan ),
      (LButton defpixel "addHours", addDailyWork daylog ) ]
```

### 3.3 Interconnecting iData

To create the desired web application we need to do two things: we have to declare and interconnect all iData and we have to deliver an HTML page that contains the renderings of these iData. We do not discuss the latter aspect: it is not essentially different from the tiny examples given in Sect. 2. Interconnecting the iData is what matters:

```
example hst

%% (projectF,hst) = projectIData hst
%% (workerF, hst) = workerIData id hst
%% (hoursF, hst) = hoursIData id hst
%% (btnsF, hst) = btnsIData (hoursF.value workerF.value projectF.value) hst
%% (adminF, hst) = adminIData btnsF.value hst
%% (workerF, hst) = workerIData (adjWorkers adminF.value) hst
%% (hoursF, hst) = hoursIData (adjDailyWork adminF.value) hst
=

mkHtml "projectadmin" [ H1 [] "Project Administration"
... */ not shown due to lack of space */ ] hst
```

First, the three user forms, project, worker, and hours, are declared (lines 1-3). As a result, they recover their possibly altered state. Then the buttons are declared (line 4). If the user has pressed one of them, then the value of btnsF is the associated administration update function. This function, btnsF.value, is then applied in the declaration function of the complete administration (line 5). Given the new administration, the worker and hours form need to be updated with the new project and workers lists (line 6-7). For this reason the latter two forms occur twice in the code. This is a typical iData Toolkit programming pattern. The program guarantees that users can only add workers to existing projects and hours to existing workers.

### 4 Related Work

iData components are form abstractions. A pioneer project to experiment with form-based services is Mawl [5]. The <bigwig> project [9] uses Powerforms [8]. Both projects provide templates which, roughly speaking, are HTML pages with holes in which scalar data as well as lists can be plugged in (Mawl), but also other templates (<bigwig>). Powerforms reside on the client-side of a web application.
The type system is used to filter out illegal user input. They advocate compile-time systems, just as we do, because this allows one to use type systems and other static analysis. The main differences are that in our approach all first order user types are admissible in iData, that iData are automatically derived from these types, and that we can use the expressiveness of the host language to obtain higher-order forms/pages.

Continuations are a natural means to structure interactive web applications. This has been done by Hughes [15], using his Arrow framework; Queinnec [22], who takes the position that continuations are at the essence of web browsers; Graunke et al [11], who have explored continuations as (one of three) functional compilation technique(s) to transform sequential interactive programs to CGI programs. Our approach is simpler because for every page we have a complete (set of) model value(s) that can be stored and retrieved generically in a page. An application is resurrected by recovering its previous state, merging the user modification, if any, and computing the proper next state that is re-rendered.

Many authors have worked on creating and manipulating HTML (XML) pages in a strongly typed setting. Early work is by Wallace and Runciman [26] on XML transformers in Haskell. The Haskell CGI library by Meijer [18] frees the programmer from dealing with CGI printing and parsing. Hanus uses similar types [12] in Curry. Thiemann constructs typed encodings of HTML in extended Haskell in an increasing level of precision for valid documents [23, 24]. XML transforming programs with GenericHaskell has been investigated in UUXML [4]. Elsmann and Larsen [10] have worked on typed representations of XML in ML [19]. Our types-as-grammar approach eliminates all syntactically incorrect programs, but we have not put effort in eradicating all semantically incorrect programs. Our research interest is in the automatic creation of forms from type specifications, and less in the definition of the HTML pages in which they reside.

5 Conclusions and Future Work

In this paper we have presented the iData Toolkit, an innovative toolkit for the construction of server side web applications. The toolkit is founded on a strongly typed, pure, functional programming language with support for generic programming. The key concept of the toolkit is the iData element. A web application is a function that computes an HTML page. Forms in this page are derived automatically by the iData Toolkit from the typed states of the declared iData elements. Each and every iData handles its initialization, state recovery, and rendering. The result is that applications can be defined in a concise and declarative style.

In this paper, we have illustrated the expressiveness of the iData Toolkit by means of several small examples, and one larger case study. To test the suitability of the iData Toolkit for constructing real world applications, we have created all kinds of applications, such as a fully functional CD-shop site. Also for these larger web applications we have observed that they can be defined in the same concise and declarative way as the examples in this paper.
We believe that the conciseness of programs, the use of a single iData concept, and the embedding in a functional programming language, are important factors to enable reasoning about these programs. We think that the iData Toolkit provides a step in the direction of formal reasoning about dynamic, type-safe, server side web applications.

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References


Appendix

Fig. 1. Screen shots of the initial state of the toy examples in Sect. 2. (a) A simple integer iData. (b) Summing the value of iData. (c) Sharing iData. (d) Model-View separation of iData.

Fig. 2. Screen shot of the project administration case study in Sect. 3.