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Clark, Tony (2007) A domain specific language for interactive applications. In: TOOLS EUROPE 2007: Object, Models, Components and Patterns, 24-27 June 2007, Zurich, Switzerland. . [Conference or Workshop Item]

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A Domain Specific Language for Interactive Applications

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June 5, 2007

Abstract

This paper describes an architecture that separates the processing logic from the rendering engine in an interactive application such as a television quiz running on a set-top box. Such applications are ideally suited to implementation by domain-specific languages (DSLs) that abstract away from implementation details and thereby be accessible to developers whose primary expertise is in areas other than computer software. The approach also enforces a standard look and feel. The paper uses the textual language definition facilities of the XMF tool to implement the DSL.

1 Introduction

An increasing number of interactive applications can be downloaded onto devices such as mobile phones, PDAs, web-browsers and TV set-top boxes. The applications involve presenting the user with information, options, menus and buttons. The user typically enters information by typing text and choosing amongst alternatives. An event is generated by the user clicking a button or selecting from a menu. Once an event is generated an engine that services the interactive application processes the event, updates its internal state and then produces a new dialog to present to the user.

The dialogs required by the interactive applications tend to be fairly simple and are often used in conjunction with other applications such as being broadcast together with TV video and audio content. The technology used to construct the interactive application should be accessible to as broad a spectrum of users as possible, including users whose primary skill is not in developing interactive software applications.

Technologies used for interactive displays include Java-based technologies such as the Multimedia Home Platform (MHP)[1], HTML and JavaScript. These technologies are very platform specific. They include a great deal of technical detail and are certainly not approachable by a non-specialist. Furthermore, the general low-level nature of the technologies does not enforce any standard

look-and-feel to interactive applications. The applications developed for a given client (for example a single TV company) should have a common look and feel that is difficult to enforce at such a low-level.

A common way to abstract from technical detail and to enforce a common look-and-feel for a suite of applications is to develop a *domain-specific language* (DSL) whose concepts match the expectations and skill-levels of the intended users. A DSL for interactive applications will include constructs for expressing textual content, buttons and choices. The DSL leaves the rendering of the display features and the event generation to a display engine that enforces a given look-and-feel. The display engine can be replaced, changing the look-and-feel without changing the DSL.

In addition to the DSL supporting high-level features for expressing display content, it must provide some means for describing what the application *does*. Normally, application processing algorithms are expressed at a low-level in program-code. If the DSL is designed with an *execution engine* then the same approach to abstraction from rendering detail can be applied to abstraction from the operational detail.

An executable DSL is a language for expressing complete applications without detailed knowledge of implementation technologies. The xDSL is a modelling language, instances of which are expressed as data. An execution engine processes the data and runs the application. The xDSL engine can be embedded within devices and other software applications in order to run the models.

This paper describes the design of an xDSL for interactive applications. The xDSL has a textual syntax and is implemented in the tool XMF [2]. XMF is a platform for developing DSL-based applications. It provides an extensive high-level language called XOCL for developing applications and XOCL can be extended with new language constructs. The design of XMF has been based on Common Lisp [6], Smalltalk, Scheme [7] and ObjVLisp [8]. The DSL for interactive applications described in this paper can be developed on any platform, but XMF is ideally suited to the task. XMF will be available in the near future as an open source edition from Xactium Ltd.

The rest of this paper is structured as follows: section 2 describes an architecture for interactive applications based on an xDSL; section 3 describes the xDSL from the point of view of the application developer, it outlines the language features in terms of a simple application involving a quiz; section 4 describes how the xDSL is implemented on XMF; section 5 shows how the rendering engine can be simulated and connected to the xDSL engine to simulate the execution of an interactive application; section 6 shows how the application models can be serialized as XML; section 7 concludes by reviewing the key features of the approach and the technology used to develop the xDSL engine.

2 Interactive Application Architecture

Figure 1 shows an overview of the architecture for an interactive application xDSL. XMF is used as the DSL implementation engine. XMF provides facilities

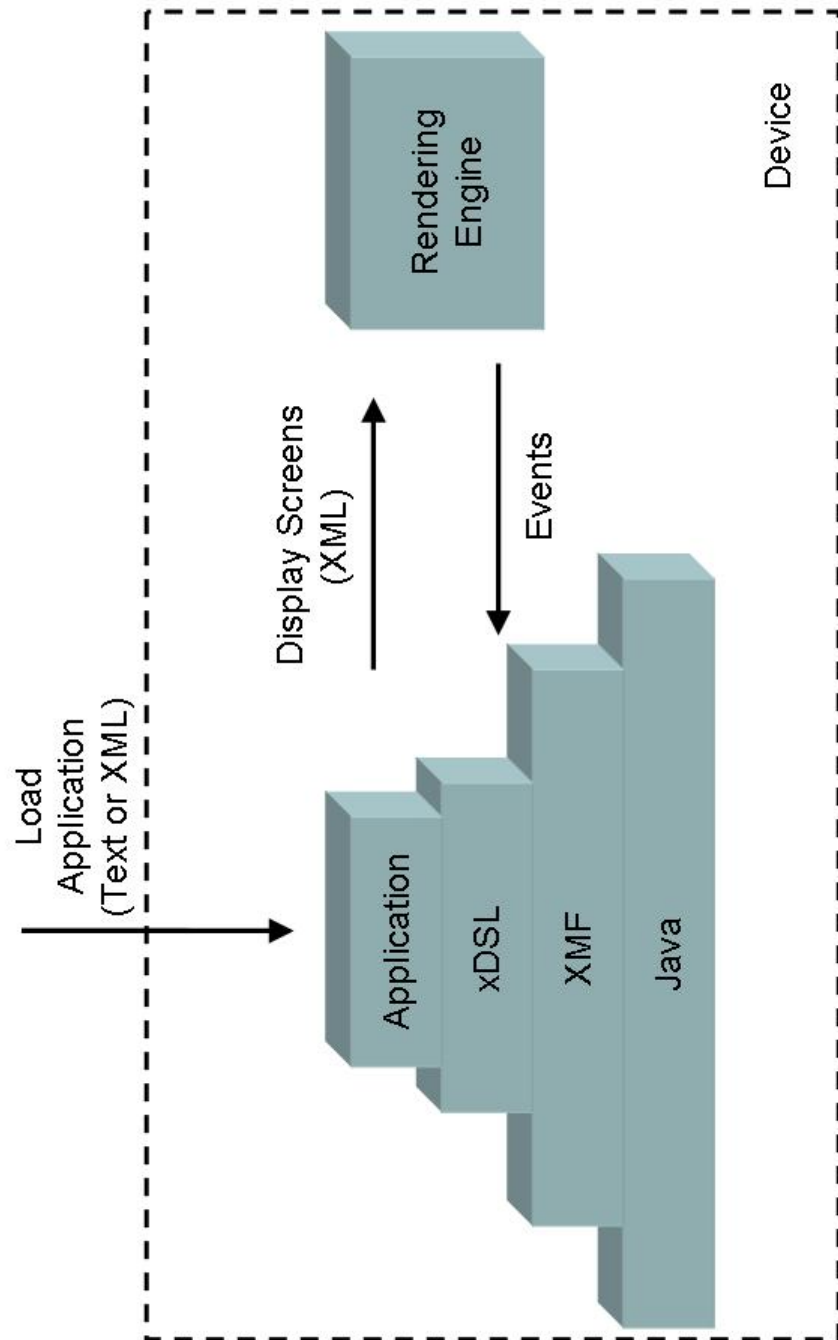


Figure 1: Application Architecture

for developing text-based modelling languages and their associated execution engines. The xDSL is written as a model in XMF, the applications are then loaded onto the xDSL engine and executed.

The application generates display information in a general-purpose format; in this case XML. The XML display information is sent to a rendering engine. The engine understands the display features of the DSL and interprets them in terms of the rendering technology. This achieves a separation of concerns whereby the DSL can focus on the information content and execution logic whereas the rendering engine can focus on a standard way of displaying the information without necessarily having to understand anything about the application that is being rendered.

The rendering engine controls the hardware that interacts with the user. The user generates events that are sent back to the xDSL engine. In principle the events can be very detailed and can be encoded in a suitable DSL. The example presented in this paper uses a very simple encoding of events.

When the xDSL receives an event, it must process the data in an appropriate way to produce more display information for the rendering engine. The processing information is expressed in the application model running on the xDSL engine. The display/event loop continues until the application is terminated.

The architecture shown in figure 1 has been used a number of times based on the XMF processing engine. The development environment XMF-Mosaic is completely based upon a number of rendering engines based on various features of Eclipse: browsers, property editors and diagram editors. The architecture has also been successfully used where XMF is deployed as a web-application and the rendering engine is a standard web-browser (using various combinations of HTML and the Google Web Toolkit).

3 A DSL for Interactive Applications

This section presents a simple interactive application expressed using the xDSL and then shows it running. The following section shows how the xDSL is implemented in XMF.

Textual languages are developed in XMF by extending the basic language with new language features. XMF has a small basic language; the rest is developed by extension. Each new language feature starts with an '@' character; the feature may be used wherever any normal language construct is expected. In this way, the XMF engine can be developed into any special purpose DSL engine.

The following fragment shows the start of an interactive application:

```
@Model Quiz
  // The Quiz model describes an interactive application
  // for a TV quiz. Viewers are presented with a sequence
  // of questions and get a final score...
  score : Integer;
  // Screen definitions...
end
```

Each model consists of a collection of screens. Each screen describes how it is to be rendered and how it responds to events. For example, the following screen starts the application. It places some text above a button named Start. When the engine receives a Start event then the application makes a transition to the screen named Question1:

```
screen START()
  vertical
    text Welcome to the Quiz. Click the button to Start end
    button Start
      go Question1()
    end
  end
end
```

Options are offered using a construct that lists the options (how they are displayed is up to the rendering engine). The option group is named; the name is used to refer to the particular option value that the user selects when the event returns to the xDSL engine. This is a typical way of encoding variable information during dialogs: http does this and can be used to determine the values of fields and choices on HTML screens. The first part of the Question1 screen uses options as shown below:

```
screen Question1()
  vertical
    text What is the capital of England? end
    options Choice
      option London;
      option Paris;
      option Madrid;
    end
  // Question1 continues...
```

Layout can be handled using many sophisticated schemes. A useful, simple way to specify layout is to use horizontal and vertical flow, where these can be nested. The options are displayed below the text in the fragment given above. In the fragment below, the buttons for Next and Quit are displayed next to each other (but below the options):

```

// ... Question1 continues...
horizontal
  button Next
    // Next action continues...
  end
  button Quit
  go Quit()
end
end
end
end
end
end

```

The Next event is received after the user has chosen an option. If the option is correct then the user is congratulated and the score is incremented, otherwise the user is told the correct answer. In both cases the dialog continues with the next question.

Actions may be conditional, the conditional expression may refer to choice variables, values of variables passed to screens and the current state of the model instance. Actions may also produce displays (without having to go to a new screen) which allows variables to be scoped locally within an action¹. In the following, the Next action has two local displays that are used to respond to the choice:

```

// ...Next action continues...
if Choice = "London"
then
  display
  text Well Done end
  button Next
  score := score + 1;
  go Question2()
end
end
else
  display
  text Wrong! Answer is London. end
  button Next
  go Question2()
end
end
end
end

```

The DSL is simple and closely matches the concepts required to define an interactive application. It could be extended in a variety of ways, for example

¹We really should have a let-construct and some local variables here to show that the nested display has access to locally-scoped variables over a user-transaction.

pattern matching event data and further display concepts. It includes execution by encoding event handlers. It deals with complexity by being simple and supporting nesting with local scope and modularity. A non-expert in interactive software applications should have no problems writing an application in this DSL.

The following shows a partial execution of this application. Since there is no rendering engine attached, the XML is printed and the responses encoded by hand:

```
<Screen>
  <Vertical>
    <Text text=' Welcome to the Quiz. Click the button to Start ' />
    <Button name='Start' />
  </Vertical>
</Screen>
Start          <-- Event from rendering engine
<Screen>
  <Vertical>
    <Text text=' What is the capital of England? ' />
    <Options name='Choice'>
      <Option name='London' />
      <Option name='Paris' />
      <Option name='Madrid' />
    </Options>
    <Horizontal>
      <Button name='Next' />
      <Button name='Quit' />
    </Horizontal>
  </Vertical>
</Screen>
Next Choice=London  <-- Event from rendering engine
<Screen>
  <Text text=' Well Done ' />
  <Button name='Next' />
</Screen>
Next          <-- Event from rendering engine
```

4 Implementation

The implementation of the xDSL has two main components: a syntax model and a grammar that transforms text to instances of the syntax model, and a semantics model that defines an execution engine. The syntax model defines a modeling language that defines an application *type*; an instance of the type is defined by the semantics model. This is a typical way to define a language: models represent things that can be *performed* in some sense. Performing the

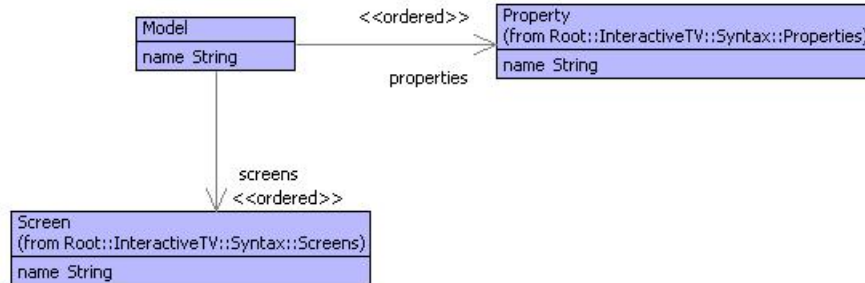


Figure 2: Interactive Models

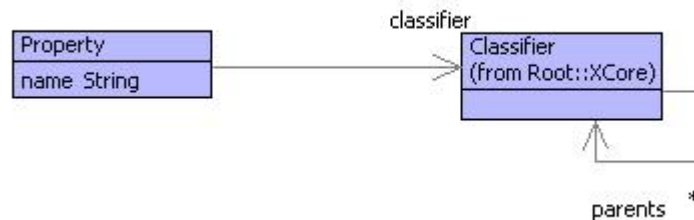


Figure 3: Properties

models produces instances whose behaviour is expressed by the model. Another way to think about this is that we aim to produce libraries of reusable interactive applications (instances of the syntax model). A run-time occurrence of an application is described by the semantic model.

XMF provides facilities for working with text including grammars, XML parsers and XML formatters. The models have been developed using the XMF development engine XMF-Mosaic and then run on the basic engine.

4.1 Syntax

The syntax for the DSL has two parts: the abstract syntax and the concrete syntax. The abstract syntax consists of a collection of models that are described below. The concrete syntax is defined by a collection of grammars that are defined at the end of this section.

Figure 2 shows the top-level model for the interactive application language. A model consists of a collection of properties and a collection of screens. Each property is defined by the model in figure 3; it has a name and a classifier. XMF has a meta-model that provides features such as Class and Object. A type is called a Classifier in XMF; Integer, String, Set(Object) are all XMF classifiers.

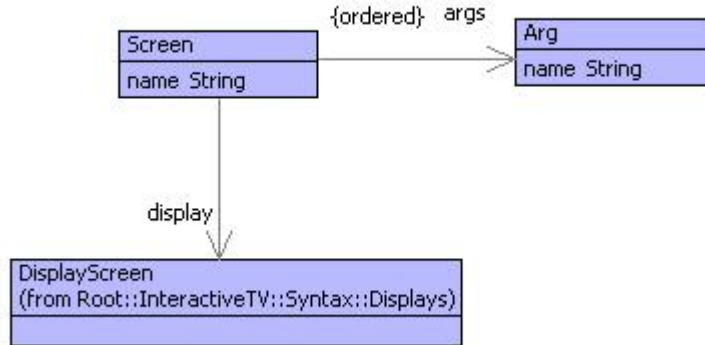


Figure 4: Screens

Screens are shown in figure 4. A screen has a collection of arguments. An action may cause the application to make a transition to a screen in which case the transition can supply argument values to be used when calculating the display for the screen. Figure 5 shows the model for displays. Each element of the display model can produce XML output that is understood by the rendering engine. In addition, some of the display elements are associated with actions that will be performed when the appropriate event is received by the xDSL engine.

The display elements of an application model refer to an XOCL class called `Exp`. This is used wherever an executable fragment of code is required. It allows features of the displays to be computed dynamically. For example when a transition to a screen is made, the names of the buttons may depend on the values of the arguments that are passed to the screen. This is the reason why a button has an `exp`: it is used to calculate the label on the button in terms of the variables that are in scope at the time². The `Exp` class is a way of importing the models for XMF expressions into the displays model.

Menus are shown in figure 6. Each menu has a label that is computed (again depending on the context) and an action. Actions are defined in figure 7. An action is either a transition to a new screen (`Go`), a conditional action (`If`), an update to a variable currently in scope (`Update`) or a local display.

The developer of an interactive application does not directly create instances of the abstract syntax model. The idea is that they write in a text language that is parsed to synthesize instances of the syntax model³.

XMF allows any class to be extended with a grammar. The class then defines a new syntax construct that is completely integrated into the base language of

²Unfortunately no examples of this feature are given in the document. However, imagine a list of voting options that will depend on the current state of the system.

³Another way of doing this is to use some form of graphical notation. XMF is designed to interface to EMF [4] and GMF [5] and therefore provide execution engines for EMF models.

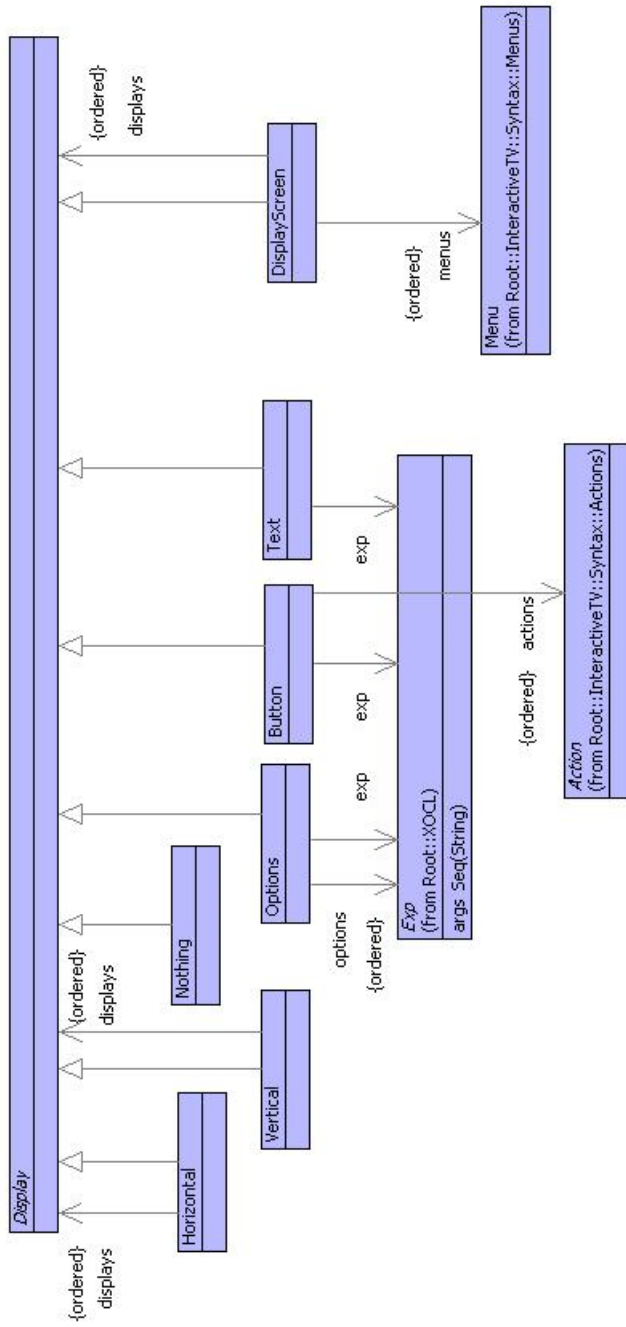


Figure 5: Displays

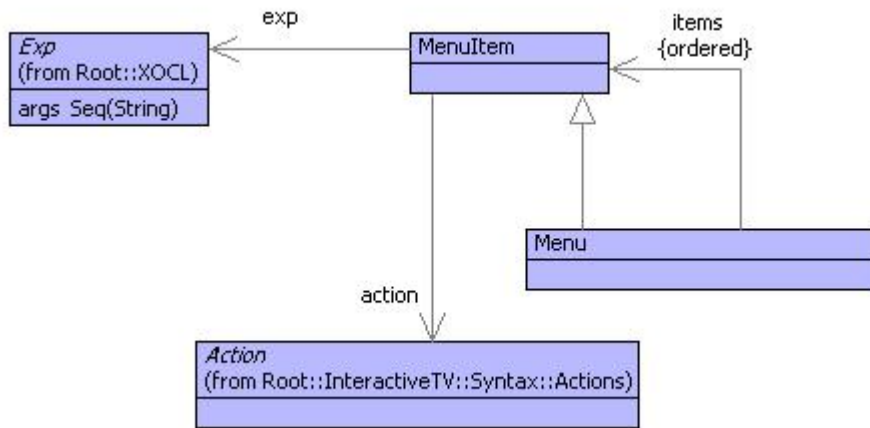


Figure 6: Menus

XMF. Any number of classes can be added in this way and new syntax classes can build on existing syntax classes. The following is a simple example of a class definition that implements a simple guarded expression:

```

@NotNull [e1].m(e2,e3,e4)
  else e5
end
  
```

where *e1* evaluates to produce an object to which we want to send the message *m* with args *e2*, *e3* and *e4*. However, *e1* might produce null in which case we don't want to send the message, we want to do *e5* instead. This language construct is implemented as follows in XMF:

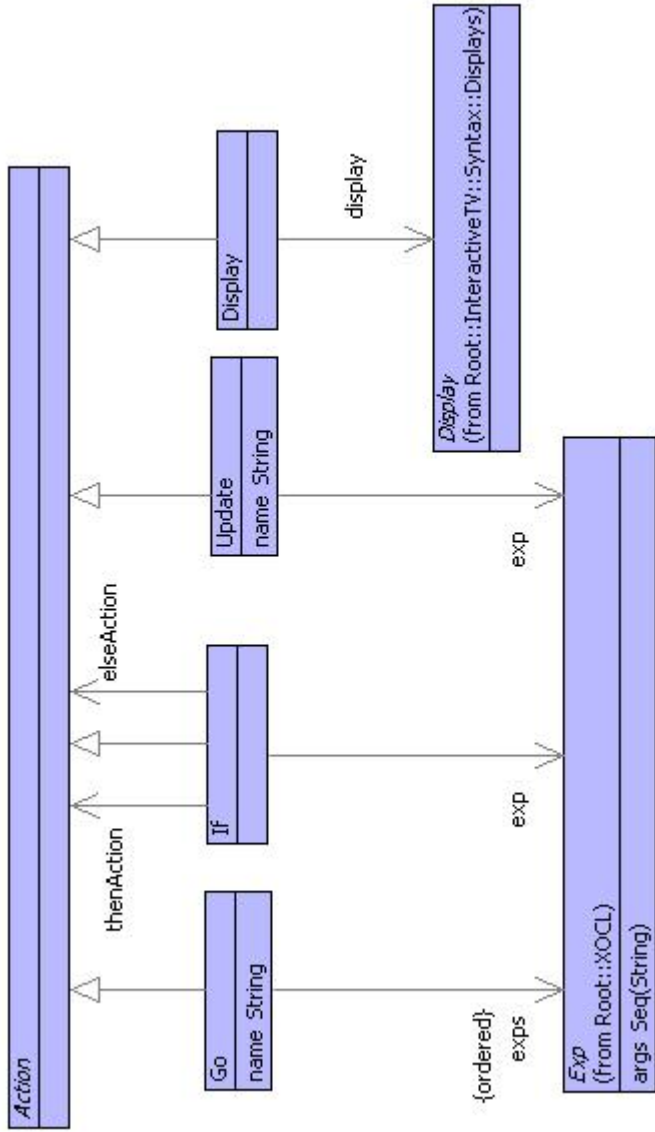


Figure 7: Actions

```

@Class NotNull extends Sugar

  @Attribute exp      : String      end
  @Attribute name    : String      end
  @Attribute isMessage : Boolean    end
  @Attribute args    : Seq(Performable) end
  @Attribute error   : Performable  end

  @Constructor(exp,name,error) end

  @Constructor(exp,name,args,error)
    self.isMessage := true
  end

@Grammar extends OCL.grammar
  NotNull ::=
    '[' e = Exp ']' '.' n = Name NotNullTail^(e,n) 'end'.

  NotNullTail(e,n) ::=
    '(' as = NotNullArgs ')' x = NotNullElse { NotNull(e,n,as,x) }
  | x = NotNullElse { NotNull(e,n,x) }.

  NotNullArgs ::=
    e = Exp es = (',' Exp)* { Seq{e|es} }
  | { Seq{} }.

  NotNullElse ::=
    'else' Exp
  | { [| null |] }.

end

@Operation desugar():Performable
[| let notNullValue = <exp>
  in if notNullValue = null
    then <error>
    else <if isMessage
      then Send([| notNullValue |],name,args)
      else [| notNullValue.<name> |]
    end>
    end
  end
|]
end

end

```

The key features of the NotNull class are as follows:

- The class extends Sugar which means that it is defining a new syntax construct by providing an operation called 'desugar' whose responsibility is to turn an instance of NotNull into program code.
- The grammar definition extends the OCL grammar and thereby imports all of the basic grammar-rule definitions. This provides the rule for Exp which is the top-level grammar-rule for all language constructs.
- Each grammar-rule consists of a name and a body. The rule may optionally have arguments. The body consists of terminals (in ' and '), builtins such as Name, rule-calls (possibly with arguments) and actions (inside { and }). The rule actions are any program expression, in most cases they use class-constructors to create an instance of a named class.
- The desugar operation uses lifting-quotes (|| and ||) to create an instance of syntax-classes. The opposite of *lifting* is *dropping* (< and >) used to calculate syntax by evaluating a program expression.

The rest of this section describes how the grammar feature of XMF can be used to define the interaction language. A model consists of a name followed by properties and screen definitions:

```
context Model
  @Grammar extends Property.grammar, Screen.grammar
  Model ::= n = Name ps = Property* ss = Screen* 'end' {
    Model(n,ps,ss)
  }.
end
```

A property is a name and a simple expression (that cannot include the ';' operator). The property-rule action uses an interesting feature of syntax classes that allows the expression to be dropped into the syntax element and is thereby evaluated to produce a classifier for the property type:

```
context Property extends OCL::OCL.grammar
  @Grammar extends OCL.grammar
  Property ::= n = Name ':' e = SimpleExp ';' {
    Property(n,Drop(e))
  }.
end
```

A screen has a name, arguments, menus and display elements. The rule for screen arguments shows how optional elements are processed: it returns either a non-empty sequence of names Seq{a|as} (head followed by tail) or the empty sequence Seq{}:

```

context Screen
@Grammar extends Menu.grammar, Display.grammar
Screen ::=
  'screen' n = Name '(' as = ScreenArgs ')'
    ms = Menu*
    ds = Display*
  'end' { Screen(n,as,DisplayScreen(ms,ds)) }.
ScreenArgs ::=
  a = Name as = (',' Name)* { Seq{a|as} }
| { Seq{} }.
end

```

A menu is shown below. This shows how expressions are captured in data. The rule for a menu item name returns an instance of the class Exp that is used in data to wrap an evaluable expression. There are two forms of construction for Exp: Exp(e) and Exp(e,V,null). In both cases e is an instance of a syntax class. In the second case V is a collection of variable names that occur freely in e. The values of variables in V can be supplied when the expression is evaluated (via keyApply as shown below).

Another interesting feature of the menu item name rule is the use of 'lift' to transform a data element (in this case a string n) into an expression whose evaluation produces the original data element:

```

context Menu
@Grammar extends OCL.grammar
Menu ::= 'menu' n = MenuItemName is = MenuItem* 'end' {
  Menu(n,is)
}.
MenuItemName ::=
  n = Name { Exp(n.lift()) }
| e = SimpleExp { Exp(e,e.FV(),null) }.
MenuItem ::=
  Menu
| 'item' n = MenuItemName a = Action 'end' { MenuItem(n,a) }.
end

```


Since Display is an abstract class, the grammar-rule for Display is a list of concrete alternatives:

```
context Display
@Grammar extends Action.grammar, OCL.grammar
Display ::=
    Text
    | Button
    | Options
    | Horizontal
    | Vertical.
Text ::= 'text' t = Char* 'end' {
    Text(Exp(t.asString().lift()))
}.
Button ::=
    'button' n = ComputedName
    as = Action*
    'end' { Button(n,as) }.
ComputedName ::=
    n = Name { Exp(n.lift()) }
    | e = SimpleExp { Exp(e,e.FV(),null) }.
Options ::=
    'options' n = ComputedName
    os = Option*
    'end' { Options(n,os) }.
Option ::=
    'option' n = Name ';' { n }.
Horizontal ::=
    'horizontal'
    ds = Display*
    'end' { Horizontal(ds) }.
Vertical ::=
    'vertical'
    ds = Display*
    'end' { Vertical(ds) }.
end
```

Action is another example of an abstract class:

```
contxt Action
@Grammar extends OCL.grammar
Action ::=
    UpdateProperty
    | IfAction
    | Go
    | DisplayScreen.
DisplayScreen ::=
    'display'
    ms = Menu*
    ds = Display*
    'end' { DisplayScreen(ms,ds) }.
UpdateProperty ::=
    n = Name ':' e = SimpleExp ';' {
    Update(n,Exp(e,e.FV(),null))
    }.
Go ::= 'go' n = Name '(' as = GoArgs ')' { Go(n,as) }.
GoArgs ::=
    e = GoArg es = (',' GoArg)* { Seq{e|es} }
    | { Seq{ } }.
GoArg ::= e = SimpleExp { Exp(e) }.
IfAction ::=
    'if' e = SimpleExp
    'then' d = Action
    IfActionTail^(e,d).
IfActionTail(e,d1) ::=
    'else' d2 = Action 'end' { If(Exp(e,e.FV(),null),d1,d2) }
    | 'end' { If(Exp(e,e.FV(),null),d1,null) }.
end
```

4.2 Semantics

The semantics of the interactive application modelling language defines an instance model for the syntax and also defines an execution engine for the instances. The instance model is shown in figure 8. An instance of a Model is defined by the class Instance. It should have a slot for each property of the model. The value of each slot should have a type that is defined by the classifier of the corresponding property.

The class Engine defines the execution engine. An engine controls an instance and maintains an id-table that maps event ids to handlers as shown below. The idea is that each time an event occurs, a handler from the id-table is used to produce a new XML display that is sent to the rendering engine. The XML data is calculated from the information in the model and the current state of the instance slots.

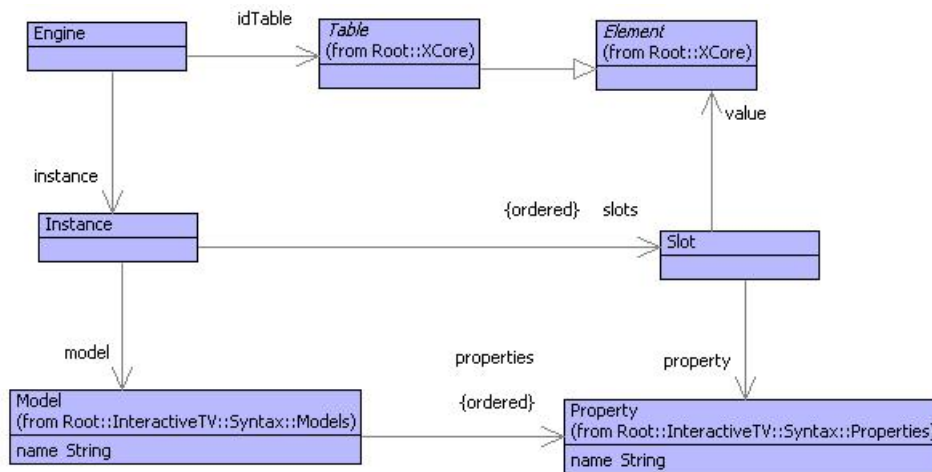


Figure 8: Semantics Model

The rest of this section defines the engine execution semantics. The following section shows how the engine is connected to a rendering engine. The engine processes a screen-transition using the 'go' operation defined below. XMF supports many types of input and output channel. The 'go' operation shows an example of a string output channel used to capture and then return the XML output data as a string:

```

context Engine
  @Operation go(screen:String,args:Seq(Element))
    let sout = StringOutputChannel()
    in instance.go(screen,args,self,sout);
    sout.getString()
  end
end
  
```

An instance handles a screen-transition by looking up the screen in its model. If the screen exists then it is requested to display itself with the supplied argument values:

```

context Instance
  @Operation go(screen:String,args:Seq(Element),engine:Engine,out:OutputChannel)
    @NotNull [model.indexScreensByName(screen,null)].display(self,args,engine,out)
    else self.error("No screen called " + screen)
  end
end
  
```

A screen delegates the 'display' message to its underlying display component. The screen argument names are bound to the argument values to produce an *environment of bindings* using the 'env' operation:

```
context Screen
  @Operation display(instance, args, engine, out)
    display.display(instance, self.env(instance, args), engine, out)
  end
context Screen
  @Operation env(instance, values)
    let env = args.zip(values)
    in instance.slots()->iterate(slot env = env |
      env.bind(slot.property().name(), slot.value()))
    end
  end
end
```

Each display element type : Button; Text; Horizontal; Vertical; and, Options implements a 'display' operation that writes XML data to the supplied output channel. As a side effect, if any of the elements have event handling actions then the engine is updated with an appropriate handler for the event when it is received from the rendering engine.

Each 'display' operation shows the use of an XMF language feature @XML ... end that is used to write XML output to a channel. The construct has the form:

```
@XML(out)
  <TAG ATTS>
    .. program code ...
  </TAG>
end
```

where the literal XML data is written to the supplied output channel. In-between writing the starting tag and ending tag, an arbitrary program is processed.

```
context DisplayScreen
  @Operation display(instance, env, engine, out)
    @XML(out)
      <Screen>
        @For menu in menus do
          menu.display(instance, env, engine, out)
        end
        @For display in displays do
          display.display(instance, env, engine, out)
        end
      </Screen>
    end
  end
end
```

The 'display' operation for text shows an example of the shortened form of the XML construct with no body, and also the use of the 'keyApply' operation of the Exp class. The 'env' argument supplied to 'display' contains bindings for all variables in scope. The 'keyApply' operation performs the expression in the context of these variables:

```
context Text
  @Operation display(instance,env,engine,out)
  @XML(out)
  <"Text" text=exp.keyApply(env)/>
end
end
```

A button contains an action that is used to handle the event arising from the user pressing the button in the rendering engine. The 'display' operation for Button shows how an event handler is registered in the engine. The arguments passed to 'registerActions' are the context required to perform the actions when the event associated with 'id' is received:

```
context Button
  @Operation display(instance,env,engine,out)
  let id = exp.keyApply(env)
  in engine.registerActions(id,instance,env,actions);
  @XML(out)
  <Button name=id/>
end
end
end
```

Horizontal and Vertical are similar:

```
context Horizontal
  @Operation display(instance,env,engine,out)
  @XML(out)
  <Horizontal>
    @For display in displays do
      display.display(instance,env,engine,out)
    end
  </Horizontal>
end
end
```

The 'display' operation for Options shows an example of interleaving of XML and program code:

```
context Options
  @Operation display(instance,env,engine,out)
  @XML(out)
  <Options name=exp.keyApply(env)>
    @For option in options do
      @XML(out)
      <Option name=option/>
    end
  end
  </Options>
end
end
```

The 'registerActions' operation of Engine must define a handler for an event. The definition associates the event identifier 'id' with an operation in the id-table of the engine. Actions are performed using their 'perform' operation which expects to receive arguments that include the current environment of variable bindings. The variables available to an action include all those bound by selecting options on the display. These display-bound variables are supplied to the handler (in the same way that http works) as an environment 'env2':

```
contxt Engine
  @Operation registerActions(id,instance,env1,actions)
  idTable.put(id,
    @Operation(env2)
    let value = null
    in @For action in actions do
      value := action.perform(instance,env2 + env1,self)
    end;
    value
  end
end)
end
```

There are four types of action: If; Update; Go; and, Display. Each action produces a result and the last action performed should return an XML string to be sent to the rendering engine. If performs one of two actions (or nothing) depending on the outcome of a test:

```
context If
  @Operation perform(instance,env,engine)
  if exp.keyApply(env + instance.env())
  then thenAction.perform(instance,env,engine)
  else @NotNull [elseAction].perform(instance,env,engine) end
```

```
    end
end
```

An update changes the value of a variable currently in scope. The variables in scope are: the slots of the instance; the current screen arguments. The following operation checks whether the named variable is a slot and updates the instance appropriately, or updates the current environment:

```
context Update
  @Operation perform(instance,env,engine)
    @NotNull [instance.getSlot(name)].setValue(exp.keyApply(env + instance.env()))
    else env.set(name,exp.keyApply(env + instance.env()))
  end
end
```

Go makes a transition to a new screen. The screen will produce the XML output. Notice that the current 'env' is not supplied to the 'go' operation; therefore any variables currently in scope are not available to the target screen unless their values are passed as arguments:

```
context Go
  @Operation perform(instance,env,engine)
    engine.go(name,exps->collect(exp | exp.keyApply(env)))
  end
```

Display is a way of locally displaying a screen without losing the variables that are currently in scope:

```
context Display
  @Operation perform(instance,env,engine)
    let sout = StringOutputChannel()
    in display.perform(instance,env,engine,sout);
    sout.getString()
  end
end
```

4.3 Handling Events

Events occur when the user interacts with the rendering engine, for example by pressing a button. When the event occurs, the current screen may contain any number of option groups. Each option group is named and offers a number of alternative values. The selected option may affect the behaviour of the engine in terms of variable updates and screen transitions. Therefore, the event sent from the rendering engine to the xDSL engine must encode the value of any option variables currently displayed.

In addition there may be any number of ways an event can be raised: menu selection or button press. Each must be uniquely identified and the event must supply the identifier of the event that occurred.

An event is defined to have a format that starts with the event id and is followed by any number of option variable/value pairs:

```
<ID> <VAR>=<VALUE> ... <VAR>=<VALUE>
```

The event is encoded as a string and must be decoded by the engine. This is easily done by defining an event as a grammar-rule:

```
context Engine
  @Grammar
    Event ::= n = Name e = Binding* { Seq{n|e} }.
    Binding ::= n = Name '=' v = Name { Seq{n|v} }.
  end
```

When an event is received by the engine it is supplied to 'getDisplay' which calculates a new XML display string for the rendering engine. The operation uses the grammar defined above to synthesize a pair Seq{id|env} containing the event id and an environment of option-group variable bindings. If the id is bound in the id-table then the handler is supplied with the environment:

```
context Engine
  @Operation getDisplay(event:String)
    let pair = Engine.grammar.parseString(event,"Event",Seq{}) then
      id = pair->head;
      env = pair->tail
    in @TableGet handler = idTable[id] do
      idTable.clear();
      handler(env)
    else self.error("No handler for " + name)
    end
  end
end
```

5 Simulation

Figure 1 shows the architecture of an interactive application. The rendering engine is external to the design of an xDSL; the relationship between the two is defined by the XML schema for the display language and the format of event strings. However, it is useful to be able to simulate the rendering engine in order to test the xDSL engine. This can be done by setting up a simple test harness for a pair of data consumers and linking the xDSL engine with a rendering engine simulation that reads events strings in from the terminal.

The following class implements a data producer-consumer pair:

```
@Class Consumer

  @Attribute filter : Operation end
  @Attribute other  : Consumer (!) end

  @Constructor(filter) ! end

  @Operation consume(data)
    other.consume(filter(data))
  end
end
```

The filter operation is used to generate data that is supplied to the other consumer. If a pair of Consumer instances are linked together then the data will bounce back and forth as required. The following operation creates a filter for the xDSL engine:

```
@Operation mk_xDSL_filter(model:Model)
  let engine = Engine(model.new())
  in @Operation(event)
    engine.getDisplay(event)
  end
end
```

The following filter operation simulates the rendering engine. It does so by pretty-printing the XML to the standard-output. An XML string can be transformed into an XML tree using the 'asXML' operation defined for String. The standard-input is flushed and a line containing the event is read and returned:

```
@Operation renderFilter(xml:String)
  xml.asXML().pprint(stdout);
  ".println();
  stdin.skipWhiteSpace();
  stdin.readLine().stripTrailingWhiteSpace()
end
```

Given a model 'model', the following code produces, and starts, a simulation:

```
@Operation simulate(model:Model)
  let eConsumer = Consumer(mk_xDSL_filter(model));
    dConsumer = Consumer(renderFilter)
  in eConsumer.setOther(dConsumer);
    dConsumer.setOther(eConsumer);
    eConsumer.consume("START")
  end
end
```

6 XML Representation for Applications

A requirement for interactive applications is to be able to dynamically update the content and to be able to transfer the content from remote locations in a standard format. The application described in this paper is completely represented in data. This means that, although the application is executable, it can easily be serialized, sent over a communications link, and then uploaded onto the device that is running the xDSL engine.

XMF provides support for encoding any data elements as XML. There is a basic markup provided for all XMF data; the mechanisms for which can easily be extended to provide bespoke XML encoding. Using the basic mechanisms, a model can be encoded as follows:

```
@WithOpenFile(fout -> "c:/model.xml")
  let xout = XMLOutputChannel(fout,NameSpaceXMLFormatter())
  in xout.writeValue(model)
  end
end
```

The resulting output is produced in an XML file that is shown in figure 9. The XML markup shown in the figure is the default vanilla-flavour markup provided by XMF. It is possible to add adapters to an XML output channel that filter the data as it is processed and thereby use domain-specific markup. So instead of seeing Object and Slot as element tags, we might use Screen and Button.

The XML can be read back in using the following code:

```
@WithOpenFile(fin <- ModelFile)
  let xin = XMLInputChannel(fin,NameSpaceXMLInflater())
  in xin.parse()
  end
end
```

7 Conclusion

This paper has described an approach to modelling systems whereby an engine for an executable domain-specific language (xDSL) is used to develop and run the applications. The xDSL is designed to use concepts that are suited to the application domain which allows the language to abstract away from implementation details; the language is then executable, can be used with different implementation platform technologies, and is suitable for use by people whose primary skill lies in the application domain rather than the implementation technology.

A method for developing xDSLs has been shown that involves a separation of concerns between syntax elements that describe type-level features of a model,

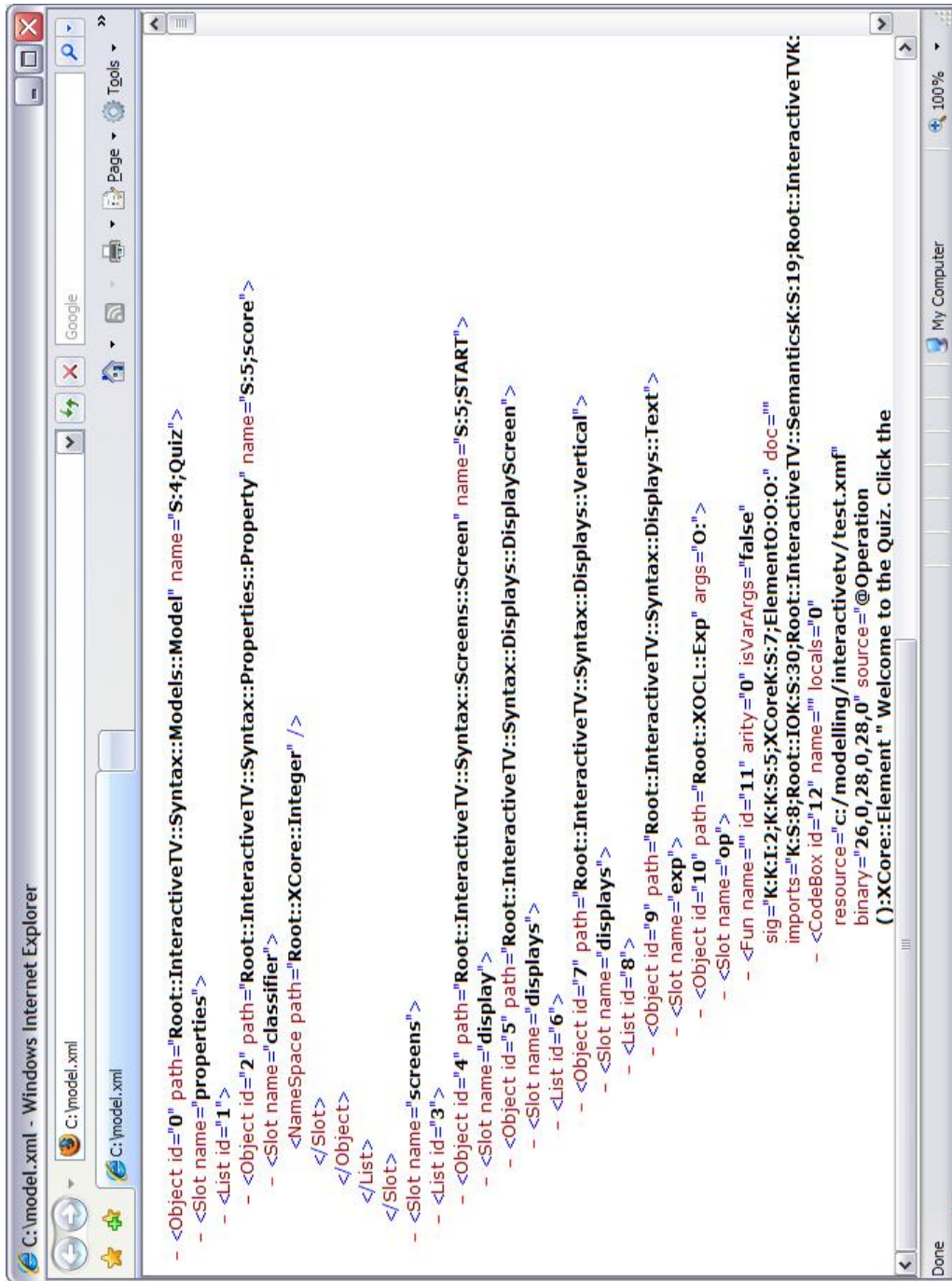


Figure 9: A Serialized Model

and semantics elements that define run-time features of an application. Experience has shown that this separation is natural and allows the xDSL developer to effectively manage the process.

We have shown how a textual syntax can be added to an xDSL. In practice, most xDSLs will require a concrete syntax. The precise form of this will depend on the nature of the application and who the intended users are. Sometimes, a purely graphical syntax is appropriate (for example UML class-diagrams). Other times a purely textual syntax works best, especially where executable features are involved and when complexity can be controlled effectively using textual nesting. Often there is scope for a mixture of the two where different aspects of the models are constructed using graphical or textual syntax.

Modelling all features of a language has a number of benefits that arise because everything is *reified*. Reification involves representing everything as data as opposed to program code or transient non-tangible artifacts such as system events. Once everything is reified, many types of analysis are possible including well-formedness checking, type checking, application of style rules. It becomes easy to capture and apply patterns and to perform refactoring. All features of an application can be transformed to a target technology.

Modelling actions is particularly important here; often actions are left as unprocessed strings of program code which makes it very difficult to analyze and run as part of an xDSL engine. The application given in this paper has shown that it is straightforward to model actions and to integrate them into the execution engine for an xDSL. By following a few basic guidelines in terms of variable scope and control flow, actions are easy to implement and are completely integrated into the xDSL, its analysis and transformation.

The approach models the xDSL and executes it directly using an engine (in this case XMF). This is attractive because it provides a high degree of control over the language. It should be contrasted with a translational approach to implementing a DSL whereby the model is translated to the source code of a target language (such as Java or C++) for which there is an implementation platform. This is an approach taken by Swul [3] and GMF [5] for GUI applications. Translational approaches have some advantages: notably open architectures; efficiency; arbitrary extensibility. However, there are some significant disadvantages relating to the complexity of the generated code including maintainability and understandability. It should be noted that an xDSL engine-based approach does not preclude a translational approach.

We have given a complete implementation of an interactive application xDSL using the features of XMF. XMF is an engine that is specifically designed to support this kind of application development. It has very high-level language features that support modelling concepts, it is executable, and is designed to support textual language extension through the use of extensible grammars. XMF directly supports textual xDSLs and provides native interfaces to Java and EMF/GMF for use with other concrete syntaxes.

XMF may be used to develop an xDSL and then deploy the language as a stand-alone engine as shown in figure 1. XMF runs its own virtual machine and has a number of interface features that allow it to connect to external

applications. XMF may also be used to develop an executable design of an application which is then exported on to another implementation platform.

XMF has been used extensively by Xactium as the basis for many model-driven applications. It has been used to run many 100KLOC's of model code. XMF is based on a Java virtual machine which runs a language called XOCL. Apart from the VM, all of XMF is written in XOCL. Xactium plans to make XMF available as open source later this year, both as a stand-alone system and as a contribution to the Eclipse project as a component that allows execution engines to be combined with EMF and GMF.

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