

Teaching Interaction using State Diagrams

Padma Pasupathi

McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario
pasupatp@mcmaster.ca

Nicole DiVincenzo

McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario
n.divincenzo@hotmail.com

Christopher W. Schankula

McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario
schankuc@mcmaster.ca

Sarah Coker

McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario
cokers@mcmaster.ca

Christopher Kumar Anand

McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario
anandc@mcmaster.ca

To make computational thinking appealing to young learners, initial programming instruction looks very different now than a decade ago, with increasing use of graphics and robots both real and virtual. After the first steps, children want to create interactive programs, and they need a model for this. State diagrams provide such a model, but in the Functional Programming community, there is a lot of skepticism about explicitly talking about state, perhaps because they associate it with side-effects.

This paper documents the design and implementation of a Model Driven Engineering tool, SD Draw, that allows even primary-aged children to draw and understand state diagrams, and create modifiable app templates in the Elm programming language using the model-view-update pattern standard in Elm programs. We have tested this with grade 4 and 5 students. In our initial test, we discovered that children very quickly understand the motivation and use of state diagrams using this tool, and will independently discover abstract states even if they are only taught to model using concrete states. To determine whether this approach is appropriate for children of this age we wanted to know: do children understand state diagrams, do they understand the role of reachability, and are they engaged by them. We found that they are able to translate between different representations of state diagram, strongly indicating that they do understand them. We found with confidence $p = 0.001$ that they do understand reachability by refuting the null hypothesis that they are creating diagrams randomly. And we found that they were engaged by the concept, with many students continuing to develop their diagrams on their own time after school and on the weekend.

1 Introduction

McMaster Start Coding (<http://outreach.mcmaster.ca>) has introduced 25,000 children in Grades 4 to 8 to functional programming in Elm over the last 5 years using socially constructive learning. During the pandemic, we started offering on-line camps with different themes, including camps focussed on interactive applications. Using human-centered design approach, we interviewed past instructors to identify gaps and opportunities. We identified the poor translation to the virtual environment of whiteboard state diagrams and poor functioning of the noisy state diagram game we played in classrooms as gaps, and a better version of a Model-Driven Engineering (MDE) tool as an opportunity. Our program is built on lessons, and we have videos¹ for self-learners and for use in training mentors. Lesson 8 covers state diagrams. Pre-pandemic, after teaching using our state-diagram game using a (physical) white board,

¹<https://www.youtube.com/c/McMasterStartCoding/videos>

we helped children use PAL Draw [21], an MDE tool originally developed for advanced developers who could manipulate Petri nets with embedded state diagrams. Although it is overly complex, children seemed to enjoy working with it in person, but it was just too awkward to use virtually. Translating game maps into code is difficult for beginning programmers, and hard for mentors to support virtually.

Nevertheless, there is no reasonable alternative mathematical structure for describing interaction in simple “adventure” games.

Inspired by the Event-Driven Programming (EDP) and MDE literature, we decided to make a better tool for state diagramming with support for code generation. The new tool adheres better to Norman’s principles², generates complete programs (with working buttons for all transitions), and went through many iterations internally before we tried to use it with children from Grades 4 and 5. Most of our outreach activities are time-constrained, so our initial test was restricted to 3.5 hours per class of virtual instruction, followed by one hour of challenges a week later. Surprisingly, we could answer affirmatively all of our questions about student understanding in this short intervention, including statistically significant results on their understanding of reachability, and the observation that they could both translate between different representations of state diagrams and spontaneously use abstract states like “DragonIsDead” or “GameOver” versus concrete states like “Park” or “Mountain” in their diagrams.

We also wanted to think about the place an improved tool could have in our outreach efforts, which can be summarized by the following research questions:

- RQ1 Do grade 4-5 students demonstrate an understanding of State Diagrams by being able to translate between different representations?
- RQ2 Do grade 4-5 students demonstrate equal facility for translating between different representations of state diagrams?
- RQ3 Can grade 4-5 students understand the role of reachability? Assuming that students who did not understand the role of reachability would generate random graphs, what confidence do we have that the graphs are more reachable than random graphs?
- RQ4 Are grade 4-5 students engaged by state diagrams and their applications to adventure games?
- RQ5 Do grade 4-5 students understand abstract and concrete states equally well? Will students presented with concrete states generalize to abstract states without prompting?

The remaining sections will explain our *methods* for this design iteration, including app design, curriculum design and evaluation through observation and challenges; *results* of the challenges and analysis of the children’s state diagrams; *discussion* of the results leading to proposed *future work*.

2 Background

In this section we provide background of our program as well as relevant research on which we built our tool and instruction.

2.1 McMaster Start Coding Program

This McMaster University Outreach Program has been operating for the past decade. A mainly volunteer group of undergraduate and graduate students develop lesson plans and deliver free workshops to schools,

²For a discussion of these principles and an analysis of the new app see [20].

public libraries, and community centres in the Hamilton, Ontario, Canada area [17]. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the program has shifted online and has taught a record number of students. Since 2016, we have taught over 22,000 students in nearly 1,000 classrooms. The goal of the program is to foster interest and ability in STEM subjects through coding, especially for those groups who are underrepresented in STEM subjects, such as girls and underprivileged youth.

To support these workshops, we have developed several tools, including:

1. An open-source Elm graphics library, GraphicSVG [22].
2. An online mentorship and Elm compilation system incorporating massive collaborative programming tasks, including the Wordathon³ and comic book storytelling⁴.
3. A curriculum for introducing graphics programming designed to prepare children for algebra [9].
4. A type- and syntax-error-free projectional iPad Elm editor, ElmJr [18].

2.2 Functional Programming

Functional programming [13] is a value-oriented programming paradigm, consisting of functions. Functions consume and produce values. There are no loops, and conditional expressions replace conditional statements, but functions are first-class values and can, e.g., be passed as parameters. There are two variations in functional programming languages: (1) typed or not and (2) eager or lazy. These variations lead to differences in programming style.

Many non-functional programming languages are adopting functional features, including Scala, Swift and Python.

Krishnamurthi et al [13] agree with the common perception that writing programs in imperative programming languages is much easier as the state provides convenient communication channels between parts of a program, but this makes reasoning and debugging harder, whereas on the other hand functional programming has the opposite affordances. Students studying object-oriented programming are taught different skills and programming styles which reveal that the way of approaching programming and problem-solving differs in students studying different paradigms. Functional programming students perform better by having high level structures and composing solutions out of simpler functions than object-oriented students who try solving the entire problem in a single traversal of data. They also use built-in/higher order functions to implement subtasks which performed multiple passes over input data and had to release unwanted memory for intermediate data. Functional programming students create short functions for specific tasks, which create intermediate data. They also use `filter` and `map` rather than loops and non-general library functions. Thus, we should expect that a student who learns Java after learning functional programming may well program with different patterns than a student whose prior experience was entirely imperative.

Note that our experience is that functional programming with appropriate supports is easier for Grade 4 to 8 students.

2.3 Elm Language

Elm (<https://elm-lang.org>) is a functional language designed for the development of front-end web applications [7], and sold to front-end developers as a way of avoiding the many software quality issues

³<http://outreach.mcmaster.ca/#wordathon2019>

⁴<http://outreach.mcmaster.ca/#comics2019>

which plague JavaScript programs. Its syntax, based on Haskell, is intentionally simple. For example, it has no support for user-defined type classes. In addition to strictly enforcing types, the Elm compiler also forces programmers to follow best practices, such as disallowing incomplete case coverage in case expressions. Elm apps use a model-view-update pattern in which users write pure functions and the run-time system handles side effects without the need for advanced concepts. Elm code compiles to JavaScript simplifying deployment and visualization.

While many consider that functional programming should be reserved for expert users, many of the features useful for experts (strict types, pure functions) are very useful for beginners. In addition to the practical implications of compiling to JavaScript, Elm’s combination of simple syntax, strict typing, and purity which matches students’ pre-existing intuition about math proves to be an asset to our program. These features allow the development of tools and curricula which would not otherwise be easy or possible in an imperative language with side effects such as Python.

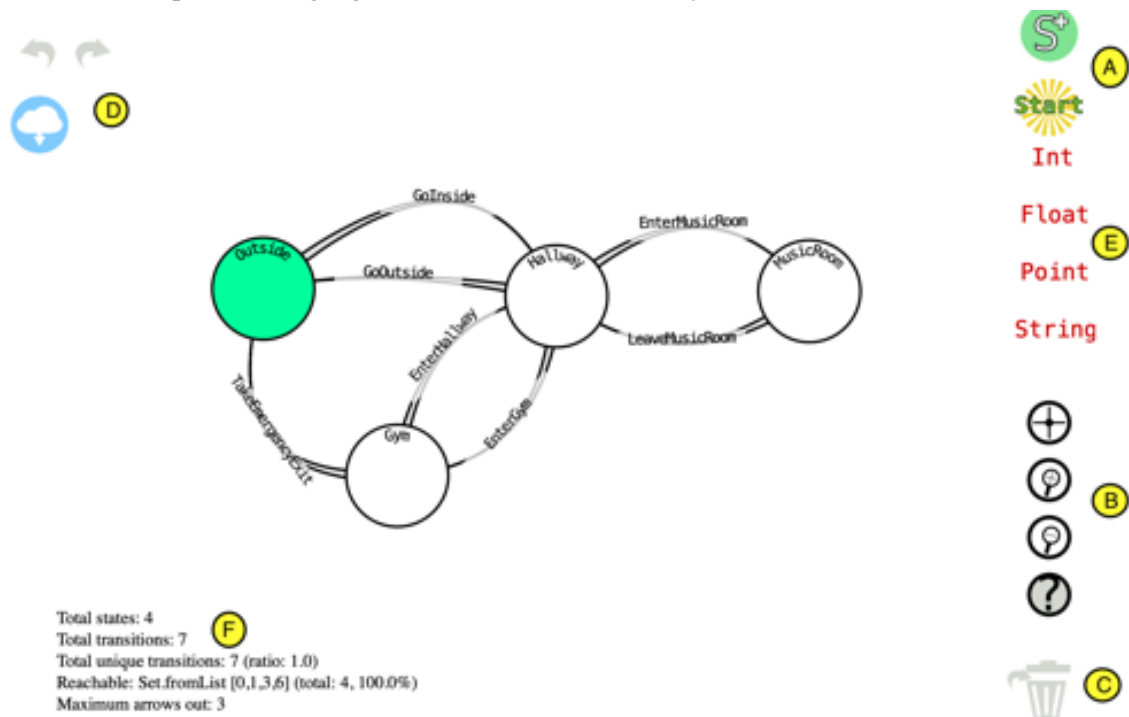


Figure 1: The interface of our web-based state diagram editor, with a diagram representing navigation through a school. (A) allows users to add states or make a state the starting state. (B) has functions for recentering the screen, zooming and a help page. (C) allows states and transitions to be deleted. (D) provides undo / redo and code generation functionality. In the diagram, states are represented by circles with arrows (going from wide to narrow) representing transitions from one state to another. The green state is the starting state of the diagram.

2.4 Related Work

Our background research aimed to identify prior work in the area of using state diagrams to teach computer science to K-12 students, as well as a more sweeping review of coding education and how it relates to other types of literacies.

2.4.1 Visual Learning and Education

Based on the keywords used, there seemed to be more literature on learning through drawing than learning through writing in relation to STEM. Ainsworth and Scheiter [1] were able to list advantages of drawing: i) limits abstraction ii) exploits “perceptual processes by grouping relevant information” iii) draws on problem-solving instead of memory, iv) provides focus for joint attention/group collaboration, v) increases attention, and vi) activates prior knowledge [5]. Park et al [19] also states that learning through drawings not only takes different perspectives into consideration but also exposes the child to other subject domains (such as math and literacy) when working in groups. To add, those who used learning-by-drawing scored higher on a test based on comprehension [23]. Chang [5] found that when a child and an adult are partners in learning through drawing, that communication was associated with healthy language development and enabled the children to listen, think, and then speak. Interestingly, Cheng and Beal [6] found that while students who drew had a significantly higher cognitive load than those who studied pictures, students were more willing to learn with provided pictures than drawing themselves. That being said, Kunze and Cromely [14] also noted that drawing-to-learn was slightly less effective in “early secondary [i.e., children who are around 12-15] than in the bulk of literature.”

2.4.2 Coding, Literacy, and State Diagrams

When it comes to child development and coding, looking at coding as a language was heavily emphasized. Again using Piaget’s work, many believe that coding can change the way we think and experience the world around us [4]. Coding in itself is seen as a language [4]. Goldenberg and Carter [10] believe that computer programming is just as important as English and should be taught in elementary school. Monteiro et al [16] also suggest that “programming can be the third language that both reduces barriers and provides the missing expressive and creative capabilities children need.” Coding is a mix of English and math as the words allow for interaction with feedback [10]. These two authors also bring up important facts when looking at programming as a language: “students can construct viable arguments and critique the reasoning with others, it eases the process of beginning with concrete examples and abstracting regularity, perseverance, using the proper tools strategically, and being precise.” Finally, and akin to English, coding also involves problem-solving, a manipulation of a language, and symbols to create a shareable product [10].

As discussed previously in [4], previous systems for teaching coding based on Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) did not account for the intellectual maturation of school-age children. “Coding as Another Language (CAL)” considers coding development alongside language and literacy development. Using similar stages to those of learning reading and writing (emergent, coding and decoding words, fluency, new knowledge, multiple perspective, purposefulness), CAL uses literacy as both a parallel to develop programming curricula and a tool. Knowledge-constructing concept maps can allow for mental mapping of written stories and allow for a newer and easier method for students to record their ideas before starting the writing process Anderson-Inman and Horney [2]. State diagrams mimic mind-mapping, a commonly used method of brainstorming in literacy teaching. Previous studies and curriculum formed around these standards have shown that it is very possible for students to have a basic understanding of coding upon leaving elementary school [25], similar to their level of reading and writing when entering high school. Recent studies show that lessons in coding can also be useful in teaching mathematics at the elementary level [24]. By teaching computational thinking, or the thinking of a computer scientist, at a young age, students are provided with a deeper understanding of mathematical relationships necessary to perform algebra and calculus in later grades.

2.5 Using Event-Driving Programming in Education

As Lukkarinen et al [15] state in their literature on EDP in programming education, event-driven programming and computer programming are two separate entities; programming relies on *organizational characteristics* whereas EDP focuses on *behavioural characteristics*. For example, while computer programming is more procedural and object orientated, EDP forces the programmer to consider the consequences of the user's actions and how to react to them [15]. That being said, the main takeaway is that EDP and computer programming are two different concepts and therefore require two separate ways of teaching. On a similar note, they also display the challenges of challenges of EDP within their literature review: it is hard to trace the computer programming from beginning to end which affects students abilities to fully understand, EDP has been linked to negative transfer effects when associated with event and non-event oriented programming environments, and "students who learn to program in an event-fashion do not develop some algorithmic skills that other students will have" [15]. Finally, in terms of challenges, they state that no attempt has been made to alleviate these issues within EDP and learning.

Finally, in this literature review, we learned the most used software tools when teaching and learning EDP. They found that Java was the most popular language with App Inventor, C++, and Scratch. Other tools for Java include DoodlePad and Squint Library [15].

They questioned if any empirical results were recorded, to which they concluded that no pedagogical method (i.e., ways we teach EDP through abstract concepts or through video games for example). However, they cautions researchers to view EDP and learning as more than "merely claiming in passing that some method or tool caused students to learn and giving some counts as statistics."

2.5.1 State Diagrams in Computer Science Education

Several authors have used state diagrams to introduce computer science and coding concepts at both the K-12 and university level. Czejdo and Bhattacharya [8] discuss lessons using state diagrams to allow students to describe complex behaviours for robots, which then generated Python code to control the robots. They noted that the robots increased the students' engagement with the concepts and that the diagrams allowed the students to program more complex behaviours than would have been possible without them.

Kamada [11] similarly used state diagrams to program behaviours of on-screen characters, for example programming a virtual fire truck to seek out water and then put out fires. They noted that "Enthusiastic children often run into the combinatorial explosion of states and transitions. Then it is the time for them to move on to the structured programming languages where they can use variables to represent states," which is aligned with our experience and is discussed in later in this paper. They also noted that "In some disappointing cases, a series of states are simply chained as if they continue forever" [11], which is not something we observed in our albeit small study. This, however, is continued with the following statement: "We had better not recommend computer science to those children," with which we fundamentally disagree. We believe that this should instead be considered a teachable moment for the students and an area of improvement for the delivered lesson, instead of jumping to the rash decision that this indicates a fundamental lack of ability to be a computer scientist.

In contrast to the statement by Kamada [11], Ben-Ari [3] instead states that "The science-teaching literature shows that performance is no indication of understanding. CSE research like Madison's, which elicits the internal structures of the student, is far more helpful than research that measures performance alone and then draws conclusions on the success of a technique. A student's failure to construct a viable model is a failure of the educational process, even if the failure is not immediately apparent." Thus, in our

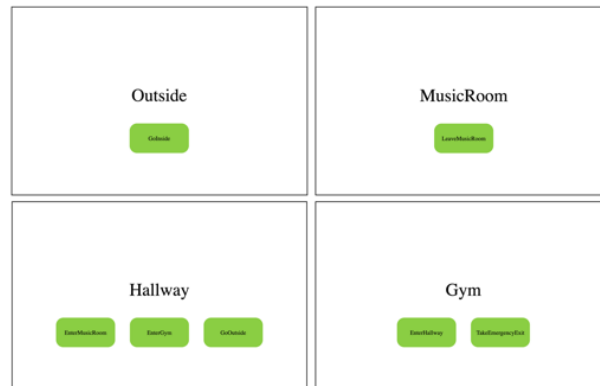


Figure 2: From the state diagram in Figure 1, a basic Elm application can be generated using the GraphicSVG library. Shown here are the four different “pages” the app can be in, one for each state in the diagram. Each place is given by default a basic title text and buttons for each transition, with the appropriate logic to transition to the correct state when clicked. Students can use existing knowledge from previous lessons to design graphics for each page, or even change the buttons themselves.

evaluations we must keep in mind that failures for students to apply state diagrams should be considered as important lessons for us as researchers in how to improve our lessons in the future.

3 State Diagrams

The state diagrams of note in this work are a type of non-deterministic finite state automaton (NFA), which contains a set of states, transitions and a function mapping from one state to another through directed transitions. In NFAs, there is no requirement that every state have every possible transition in the alphabet coming out of it. Unlike the formal definition given in [12], our diagrams do not have final states as they represent programs which continue to respond to user input until closed.

3.1 Graphical Representation and Tool

A state diagram can be represented graphically using a diagram where states are defined as labeled circles with transitions drawn as labeled arrows which define legal movements from state to state. Figure 1 shows an example state diagram representing the navigation of a school.

In order to facilitate the creation of state diagrams, we have created a tool using the Elm language with a server backend written using IHP⁵ in Haskell, which currently allows diagrams to be saved to a server and accessed later by logging in. Our state diagram tool allows students to easily draw their state diagrams by defining states and then attaching them with transitions. Each state and transition can given a name where no pair of states or state and transitions can be named the same. Transitions can be named the same provided that no state has two transitions with the same name coming from it. Other invariants needed later for code generation are enforced, such as restricting state names to include only alphanumeric characters starting with a capital letter.

⁵<https://github.com/digitallyinduced/ihp>

3.1.1 Code Generation

With Elm’s algebraic data types, generating the code from a state diagram is straightforward. The set of possible transitions is mapped to a `Msg` type and the set of possible states is mapped to the `State` type. For instance, for the diagram shown in Figure 1, the data types generated are respectively:

```
type Msg = Tick Float GetKeyState
         | GoInside
         | EnterMusicRoom
         | LeaveMusicRoom
         | EnterGym
         | EnterHallway
         | TakeEmergencyExit
         | GoOutside

type State = Outside
          | Hallway
          | MusicRoom
          | Gym
```

Care must be taken not to generate duplicate transitions in the case where the same name is used for multiple transition arrows. The `Tick` message is platform-specific and sends the current time and keystrokes every 1/30th of a second, for easily making animations and taking keyboard input.

The update function is also generated based on the structure of the diagram which includes the logic for transitioning from state to state. Since all transitions are put into the singular algebraic data type `Msg` as constructors, there is no type-level safety for restricting which messages can be sent from which states. Instead, this logic is generated in the update, which pattern matches on the current state to determine which state to go to and defaults to keeping the current state the same if the message is sent from a state where it should not be according to the diagram. There is, of course, nothing stopping the users from modifying the code so as to no longer match the diagram, but generally beginners do not need to understand the update function to start creating their games.

Below is a snippet of the update function generated for the example in Figure 1:

```
update msg model =
  case msg of
    GoInside ->
      case model.state of
        Outside ->
          { model | state = Hallway }
        otherwise ->
          model
```

The view function is generated to display the correct state when in that state, as well as pre-populating each place with a basic text field to identify the current state and basic buttons for transitioning from state to state. Using knowledge from previous workshops, students can add graphics to each “page” of the app or change the buttons into more interesting objects, such as door handles or levers. See Figure 2 for an example of how the compiled code looks by default.

3.1.2 Adding Graphics with Elm

Once the code is generated, students can compile the code to get a bare-bones app with titles for each state and buttons representing each transition out of that place. Figure 2 shows the generated app for the example in Figure 1. Students can use their existing graphics knowledge to create pictures and/or animations for each place.

4 Design

This section discusses the design of the lesson and the challenges given to students.

4.1 Lesson Design

We developed a lesson plan prior to teaching the Grade 4 students and radically simplified it when teaching Grade 5 group based on feedback from the classroom teacher. For Grade 4, we introduced the concept of a state diagram using the Moo-Quack game (see 9). Here, the instructor shows a state diagram in which the states are animal noises and transitions number of raised arms. Students are often confused at first but catch on quickly when classmates start making animal noises. We then explained the concepts of a states (places) and transitions (actions) using examples drawn in our tool of states of matter, Canadian provincial land borders, and school navigation (see Figure 1). Finally, we showed the children how to generate and run the code in a game slot in our Web IDE. We then split the class into groups, assigned each to a breakout room, and challenged them to make their own game.

We then received feedback from the classroom teachers. For the Grade 5 class, we focused on presenting state diagrams as the map of a concrete adventure game and used the vocabulary of “places” and “ways.” From there, we split the children up into groups and asked each group to chose one person to edit the map while sharing their screen, and we gave them a Google Slides template to use in identifying tasks and then assigning them to group members. One of the teachers asked them to think about the scale of their game in terms of enjoyment in reading a story. We found that if it is too long, people will lose interest.

After class, we were able to retrieve the state diagrams, and approximately assign them to the two grades (i.e., Grade 4 and 5). Due to the fact our program uses randomly generated logins, we do not keep identifying information, and many of the students continued working on their state diagram after class, we expected to report on the two classes as a whole. Statistics on the state diagrams are reported below.

4.2 Challenge Design

We visited the Grade 5 students the next week for an additional hour and gave them four challenges to measure the impact of our teaching on their understanding on state diagrams and their ability to translate from one representation/implementation to another. Each challenge had two variations; the first one, based on the state diagram in Figure 1, contained only concrete place names. The second variation had abstract states: a closed box with scratching, an open box with a dragon flying around, and a closed box. The challenges were to:

1. Draw a state diagram using our tool from an English paragraph:
 - a Your task is to make a state diagram to help a new classmate find their way around inside your school. The classmate starts Outside. From the Outside, they can go inside to the Hallway. From the Hallway, they can enter the Music Room. From the Music Room they can leave

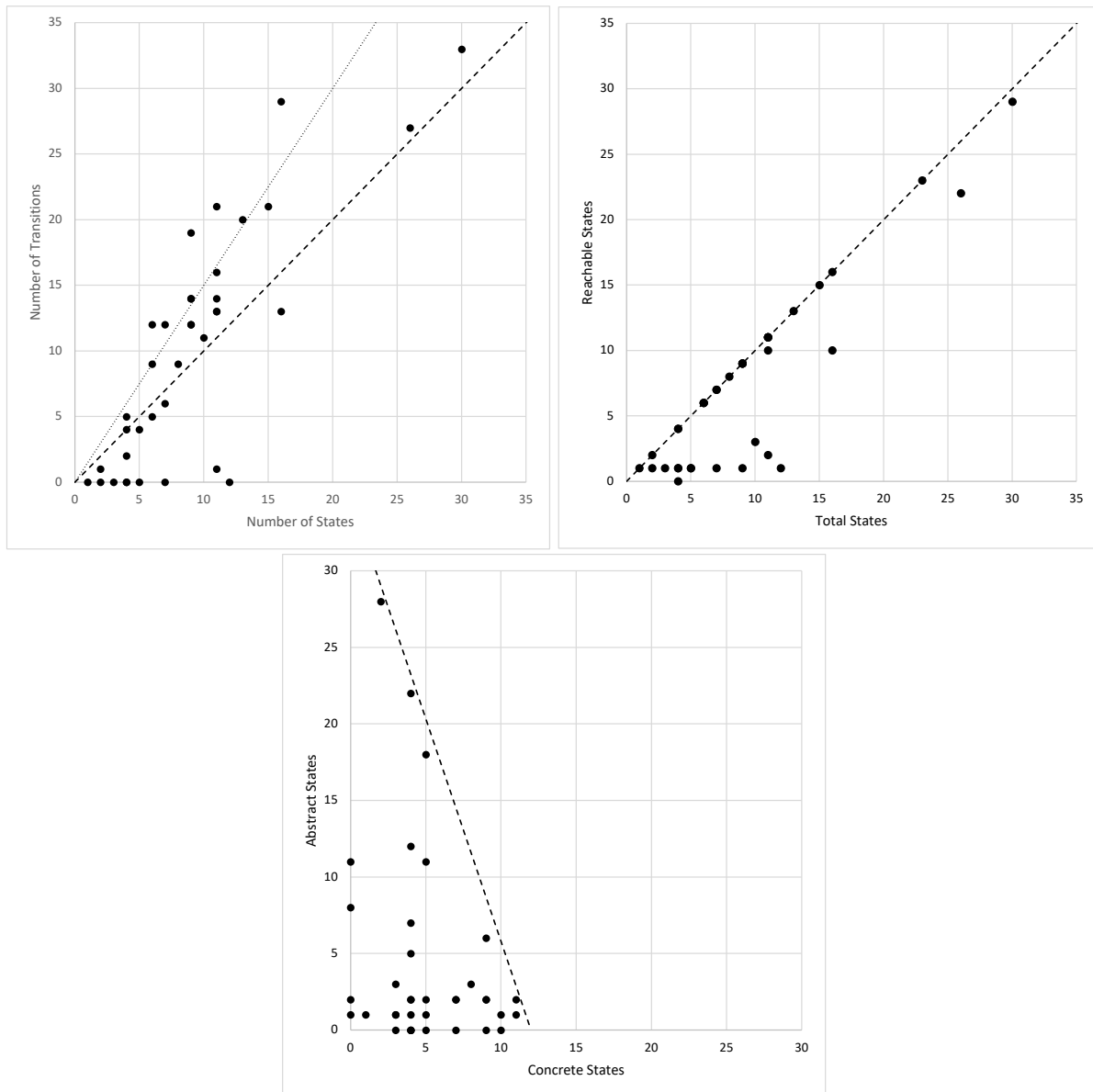


Figure 3: (left) A scatter plots of the numbers of transitions and number of states for each diagram. The line $y = x$ is plotted as a dashed line, and $y = 1.5x$ plotted as a dotted line. Points below $y = x$ indicate more states than transitions and a disconnected graph. The points near the x -axis are likely abandoned diagrams. Points near $y = x$ indicate diagrams with close to one transition per state, e.g. a tree. Points above $y = x$ indicate more complex games with multiple paths. (middle) A scatter plot of reachable versus total states in students' diagrams. Points on the diagonal ($y = x$) indicate that all states are reachable from the starting state. The points on the line $y = 1$ probably correspond to abandoned diagrams, since only the starting state is reachable. (right) A scatter plot of concrete versus versus states in students' diagrams. The dotted line has slope -2.9 which suggests that the effort required to add an concrete state is three times the cost of adding an abstract state.

and go back into the Hallway. From the Hallway they can also enter the Gym. From the Gym they can leave the Gym and go back to the Hallway, or in an emergency they can take the emergency exit to go back Outside. Your classmate cannot enter the school through the emergency exit.

- b You are designing a state diagram for a video game about a dragon. The game starts with a Closed Chest, with a scratching noise inside. The player can open the chest, which will cause a dragon to start flying around. The player can then close and open the chest as many times as they want, but the dragon will still be flying around and the chest will remain empty. There are many correct answers: remember, just do your best!
2. Draw a state diagram using our tool from English bullet points.
- a
- One place you can be is Outside.
 - One place you can be is in the Hallway.
 - One place you can be is in the Music Room.
 - One place you can be is in the Gym.
 - From Outside you can go inside to the Hallway.
 - From the Hallway you can go back Outside.
 - From the Hallway you can also go into the Music Room.
 - From the Music Room you can go back into the Hallway.
 - From the Hallway you can also go into the Gym.
 - From the Gym you can go back into the Hallway.
 - From the Gym you can also go through the emergency exit to go back Outside.
 - You cannot enter through the emergency exit.
 - You start Outside.
- b
- One thing that can happen in the game is the chest is open and a dragon flies out of it.
 - One thing that can happen in the game is the chest is closed but the dragon is still flying.
 - If the chest is closed and you hear a scratching sound, you can open the chest.
 - If the chest is open and the dragon is flying, you can close the chest, but the dragon will still be flying.
 - If the chest is closed and the dragon is flying, you can open the chest again.
 - The dragon never enters the chest again.
 - The game starts with the closed chest with the scratching noise.
3. Describe a state diagram using English based on a diagram drawing using our tool.
4. Draw a state diagram using our tool given a generated (and compiled) game, e.g. Figure 2.

5 Results

The detailed result analysis of the above challenges are discussed here. The median results are highlighted here. Students who learned state diagrams based on adventure game came up with better diagrams than the other students. The statistical analysis are based on some of the factors like number of states and transitions used in a diagram, abstract names and concrete names for states, and reachability of states through transitions.

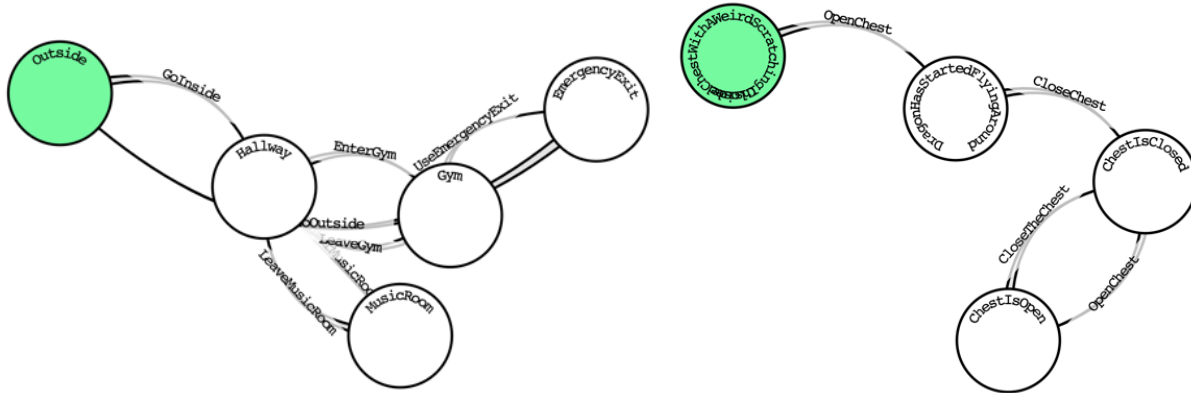


Figure 4: Median results for challenges 1a (left) and 1b (right).

5.1 Quantitative Analysis of State Diagrams

Figure 3 shows a scatter plots of (left) the total number of transitions versus states. (middle) reachable vs total states, and (right) abstract versus concrete states. Consistent with our observation that many diagrams were abandoned after students realized that only one of the diagrams created by their group could be used in the next step, we note a cluster of disconnected diagrams, but otherwise the diagrams indicate strong understanding of and engagement with the material. There was widespread adoption of abstract states, even though most students were only taught to think about and create concrete states. In fact, the most productive groups produced many more abstract than concrete states.

To answer **RQ3**, we have tested the hypothesis that the diagrams created come from the distribution of randomly generated diagrams. To use the Anderson-Darling single-sample test, we need to know the cumulative probability distribution (CDF) for the number of states reachable from the starting state. We approximate this discrete by generating random diagrams. Using the empirical CDF, we can randomly generate samples of diagrams and evaluate the Anderson-Darling statistic to approximate its distribution, and estimate the p -value for the child-created diagrams.

In Tables 1, 2, and 3, we display the probability distribution for reachability for each diagram with respect to the number of states and transitions in the diagram. Considering that the initial state is always reachable, the minimum reachability is one. Given a random state diagram, we calculate the reachability using Dijkstra's algorithm. We approximate the probability distribution function for the number of states reachable from the initial state using a normalized histogram. Before computing the Anderson-Darling test, we note that the histograms for randomly generated diagrams are not consistent with the distribution of student-generated diagrams. In Table 1, we see the probabilities for the diagrams with 11 states, as well as the observed reachability in the five diagrams created by students. In the first three rows, the maximum probability for any observed reachability is 1% (rounded to the nearest percent). Although the probability of full reachability grows with the number of transitions, it is never high. The maximum probability for full reachability is in the third row of Table 2, for diagrams with 9 states and 19 transitions, at 18%. In Table 3 we show two cases with large numbers of states and transitions, which illustrate that for larger diagrams, a large number of states are needed to make reachable graphs at all likely to arise randomly.

| States | Transitions | Probability Distribution Function | Observed |
|--------|-------------|-----------------------------------|----------|
| 11 | 13 | | 10,11 |
| 11 | 14 | | 11 |
| 11 | 16 | | 11 |
| 11 | 21 | | 11 |

Table 1: Probability Distribution functions for the number of reachable states based on simulation of 4000 random diagrams with 11 states. The observed column has the number of reachable states in the students’ state diagrams with 11 states and its corresponding transitions.

The formula for calculating the Anderson-Darling test statistic is,

$$A^2 = -n - S, \tag{1}$$

$$S = \sum_{i=1}^n (((2i - 1) \div (n)) [\log F(Y_i) + \log(1 - F(Y_n + 1 - i))]). \tag{2}$$

where, A is the Anderson-Darling test statistic, F is the Cumulative Distribution Function, and n is the number of elements(diagrams). This statistic measures the match between a sample and a distribution. To use this test statistic, we need a sample of diagrams from one distribution. We have at most two diagrams with the same number of states and transitions, but we can reduce our confidence level by assuming that the diagrams with 11 states and 13, 14 and 16 transitions all have 16 transitions, and hence come from one distribution. The CDF F is displayed in the third row of Table 1, but to compute the next steps we used 40K samples to get a better approximation of the true distribution. In Figure 5, we show the distribution of test statistics for 4000 sets of 4 randomly generated diagrams, and the test statistic

| States | Transitions | Probability Distribution Function | Observed |
|--------|-------------|-----------------------------------|----------|
| 9 | 12 | | 9 |
| 9 | 14 | | 9 |
| 9 | 19 | | 9 |

Table 2: Probability Distribution functions for the number of reachable states based on simulation of 4000 random diagrams with 9 states. The observed column has the number of reachable states in the students’ state diagrams with 9 states and its corresponding transitions.

| States | Transitions | Probability Distribution Function | Observed |
|--------|-------------|-----------------------------------|----------|
| 23 | 38 | | 23 |
| 30 | 33 | | 29 |

Table 3: Probability Distribution functions for the number of reachable states based on simulation of 4000 random diagrams with 23 and 30 states. The observed column has the number of reachable states in the students’ state diagrams with 23 and 30 states and its corresponding transitions.

for the sequence of reachabilities 10, 11, 11, 11, i.e., 33.8. Since this is an empirical distribution based on 4000 samples, and the test statistic for these four diagrams is well outside the distribution, we are confident that $p < 0.001$, refuting the null hypothesis based on four diagrams. In the future, it would be good to calculate the confidence value for the full set of diagrams by using Fisher’s combined probability

test to combine the p values for each set of diagrams with a common number of states and transitions.

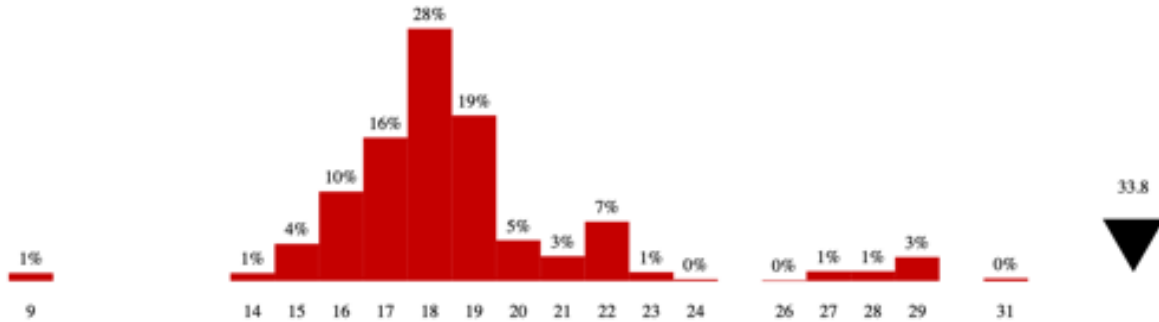


Figure 5: Anderson-Darling Test Statistic Distribution for 4 diagrams each with 11 states and 16 transitions, approximated using 4000 randomly generated sets of 4 diagrams. The horizontal axis shows A^2 , the Anderson-Darling test statistic, and the vertical axis shows the probability. The black triangle shows the test statistic for the 4 diagrams produced by children with 11 states and 16 or fewer transitions (33.8). Since 4000 sets were used to generate the histogram, and 33.8 is well outside the randomly generated tests, we estimate that the confidence value $p < 0.001$.

5.2 Qualitative Analysis of Challenges

We report the results of the challenges qualitatively because (1) to understand where we needed to improve instruction without asking for too much student time we had 3-5 students completing each challenge, (2) we asked some children to write paragraphs, and (3) we asked some children to create state diagrams. In all cases, we could identify a “median” response, which we report here.

In the concrete school challenges, we found confusion about whether the emergency exit was a state or a transition, as seen in Figure 4 when translating from a paragraph description. Whereas given a point-form description, they were less likely to leave off or add additional states or transitions, as seen in Figure 6.

When asked to describe the state diagram in English, most students hesitated to get started, but then used narrative to thread together a description. Many students asked “when should I stop?” because they realized that the narrative could go on forever due to a cycle, giving a glimpse into how they were systematically analyzing the diagrams. Our median response for Challenge 3a was: *You start outside the school. If you go inside through the door, you’ll be at the hallway. Here, you can access all the different rooms or exit the hallway to go back outside. The music room is the room labeled “music,” and you can enter and exit it through the door. From the hallway, you can also enter the gym room, and exit it back through the door. If you are in the gym and there is an emergency, you can take the emergency exit instead of running back to the hallway and exiting that way. There is no emergency exit in the music room, since there is nowhere to go after you leave.* There was not median response to the final challenge due to miscommunication about the need to work individually.

The abstract dragon-in-a-box challenge was more difficult, but they did best when translating a working app into a diagram, see Figure 6, perhaps because they did not have to think about the semantics of the abstract situation. When they had to reason about the English description, they were uncertain, but still seemed to understand the basic definitions and task, see Figures 4 and 6.

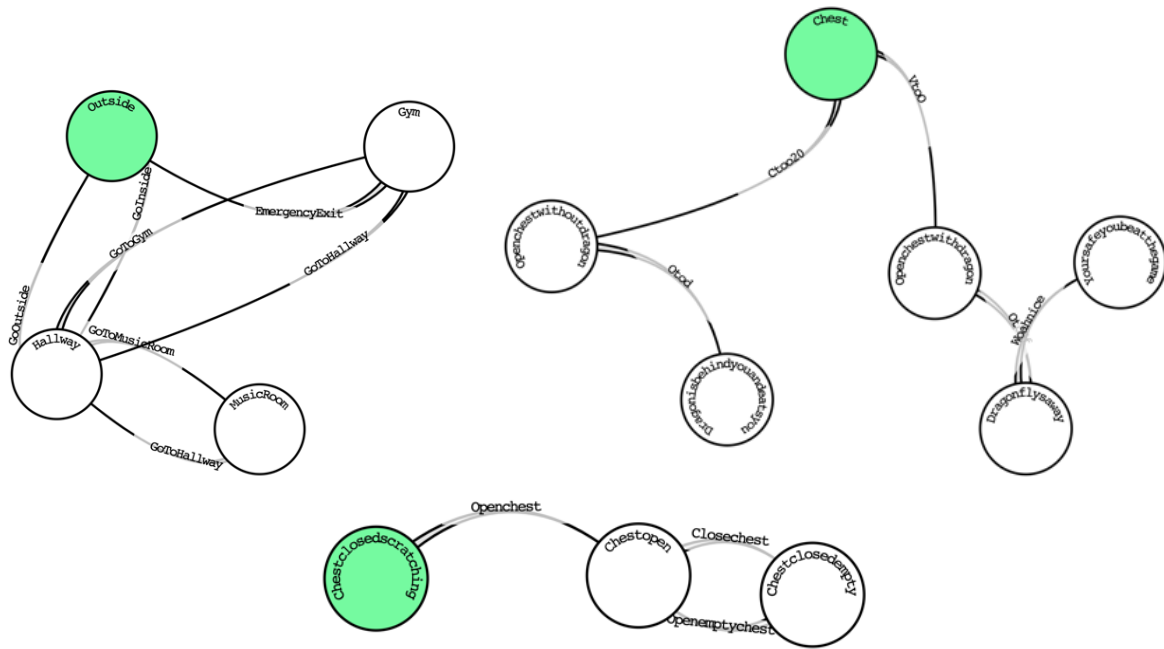


Figure 6: Median results for challenges 2a (top left), 2b (top right) and 4b (bottom).

Going the other way, they again showed their understanding of the concept, but felt the need to add narrative bridges, perhaps because we used narrative in our descriptions, or because that is how they understand them. Our median solution: *You start with a chest, and you hear a faint scratching noise inside. If you run away, you will find that the room has no escape, and you have to open the chest. When you open the chest, The dragon flies out, and all you have to do is to close the chest, and you win.* The inclusion of narrative elements to explain properties of the state diagram was surprising and shows their understanding of the state diagram model. In this response, *you will find that the room has no escape* shows that they understand how the diagram models the allowable transitions at a given place. The addition of *and you win* shows another common observation we saw with their responses: the student adding their pre-existing knowledge of video games to their responses, whether or not that information is encoded in the diagram, which in this case it is not.

6 Discussion of Results

The primary purpose of this study was to test the tool and pedagogy of teaching state diagrams. Identified future work is presented in this section.

One of the more interesting results of the classes was that the students began to differentiate between concrete states (places one could go) and abstract states (new states of being), and apply different levels of both. For example, in a game where a character can enter a barn, he finds a dragon. The character can transition to a new state by feeding the dragon. The barn itself would be a concrete state, as it is a place the character can enter. The fed dragon would be an abstract state, as you cannot return to the state of the dragon being unfed. Both types of states were given in the examples provided in class; however, it was never explained that there might be a difference between the two.

Once the results of what the students had created was reviewed, it was hypothesized that they could

be sorted by complexity in two forms: number of states and transitions, and number of concrete and abstract transitions. The results showed few games of moderate complexity, instead showing that students favoured either high complexity or low complexity. Students who used more abstract states also had higher rates of states and transitions, while those with more concrete states had less states and transitions. Further research might be able to explain why this trend was seen.

It was also noted, when checking in on the state diagrams created by the students, that some continued their work after the classes had ended. Though these results were not analyzed due to the small participation number, it seemed that those who showed more complexity by using abstract states and a higher number of states and transitions overall, were the same students who continued working on their projects in their own time. This showed the investment the students had in their stories that had not been predicted. As mentioned previously, the ability to visually map out ideas through concept mapping or state diagrams has been shown to improve the efficiency of a student's writing. However, this finding also suggests the potential for higher engagement, interest and initiative when learning to code, and create culminating projects fusing coding and other curriculum areas.

6.1 Limitations

Firstly, our results are based on approximately 38 diagrams from a total of 70 students from an enrichment program. While we cannot draw conclusions about the general school population, our experience in piloting curriculum with this group over 15 years suggests that this new activity will also work in all classrooms, and for longer engagements.

Secondly, we did not follow the same lesson plan when teaching the Grade 4s as when teaching the Grade 5s. After one lesson with the Grade 4 students, a streamlined teaching plan was used for the Grade 5 students, with the main differences being the skipping of explanations of state prior to designing a game together, and the reiteration of the importance of choosing one team member to share their screen while creating one shared state diagram. Because we use anonymized accounts, we cannot segregate and compare their results. Similarly, Grade 5s are both more mature and cognitively advanced than Grade 4s, and therefore the difference in how they were taught on days one and two of this study may have contributed to the differences within our results rather than it being their age or grade. That being said, a more concrete and tailored lesson plan for both grades would be helpful in increasing reliability and validity.

Finally, the online platform we used was not compatible with tablets (i.e., a small number of iPads), and students used a range including Chromebooks, with and (mostly) without mice. The lack of control around which device was being used may affect whether a concrete or abstract diagram was created, but device heterogeneity is more common than not in the classrooms we visit.

7 Conclusions and Future Work

Our initial motivations for this work were (1) the positive reaction of children to our previous tool, PAL Draw, and (2) questions raised after our TFPIE 2017 presentation about the advisability of discussing state with novice functional programmers. We are satisfied that this proof-of-concept is ready for universal use in our own outreach program, and we hope that positive answers to our research questions (below) will help convince other educators of the wisdom of using explicit, graphical state diagrams to teach interaction to children learning a functional language.

RQ1 *Do grade 4-5 students demonstrate an understanding of State Diagrams by being able to translate*

between different representations? Yes, when students were given different representations and asked to convert them, they were able to do so. See Section [5.2](#)

- RQ2 *Do grade 4-5 students demonstrate equal facility for translating between different representations of state diagrams?* No. When a state diagram is given and students are asked to write a description about it, students were confused how much to write, especially in the case of a cycle in the state diagram. Students also found it easier to interpret point-form specifications rather than paragraphs, and found the conversion of a working app into a State Diagram easiest of all. See Section [5.2](#)
- RQ3 *Can grade 4-5 students understand the role of reachability? Assuming that students who did not understand the role of reachability would generate random graphs, what confidence do we have that the graphs are more reachable than random graphs?* We have a confidence of $p < 0.001$ that they understand reachability enough not to draw random diagrams, based on an monte carlo simulation of the Anderson-Darling statistic for four of the diagrams with 11 states. See Section [5.1](#)
- RQ4 *Are grade 4-5 students engaged by state diagrams and their applications to adventure games?* Yes, students were engaged by state diagrams. They expressed interest in creating the state diagrams during class, and showed even more interest in designing the levels or difficulty of the levels of their game than designing the graphics for their game. Several groups continued working after school. See, e.g., Table [3](#)
- RQ5 *Do grade 4-5 students understand abstract and concrete states equally well? Will students presented with concrete states generalize to abstract states without prompting?* For the grade 5 students, we did not explain about concrete and abstract states. But when we asked them to draw their own State Diagrams for their favorite game, some students came up with abstract states. See Figure [3](#) (bottom).

That said, we have a plans for tool and pedagoical improvements and future studies.

7.1 Tool Improvements

Given that most of our teaching has been forced online due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, more features are planned for improving distance education. Instructors can currently view and make changes to students' state diagrams, but live editing and viewing and shared control by teams would significantly improve distance learning and teamwork.

The next step towards model-driven engineering requires the integration of the state diagram editor with our Web IDE, allowing the code generation button to automatically open a game slot with the generated code. Full model-driven development would add the ability to make changes in the state diagram and have them mirrored in the code. This is more work, but is important to support an iterative design thinking approach to development.

Collaboration could also be supported by allowing sub- or nested- state diagrams; that is, allowing an entire state diagram to exist within a state of a larger diagram. Students are interested in designing mini-games as part of a larger game, and in fact we encourage this with a summer camp. Nested state diagrams would allow students to integrate mini-games without mentor involvement, as is currently required [6](#). This would require that sub-diagrams can be tested independently, similar to the support we already provide for individual frames in animated comics.

⁶<http://outreach.mcmaster.ca/#camps> and <https://macoutreach.rocks/escapemathisland/>

Beginner students can get very far with data-less states and transitions but eventually fall prey to what is known as a “state explosion,” where students create many states and transitions to represent data which would make more sense as a data type like a Boolean, integer, etc. Even in our first 2.5-hour workshop we saw students making such diagrams, with states representing things like the amount of health an enemy has left and transitions for dealing with different damage values. We believe that students do benefit from the discussion and problem-solving that went into making such complex diagrams, based on discussions we overheard during the session. Furthermore, generally students are not ready for things like integers being added to their states and transitions until they have had the chance to design their diagrams, generate the code, and discover the state explosion problem on their own. However, especially (or perhaps, only) when these tools are used in longer-term settings like a summer camp, eventually the basic “untyped” diagram is no longer powerful enough to support the students’ ideas. Thus, future work includes finding the best way to introduce and teach these concepts, as well as support for user-defined algebraic data types and an interface to model such data. As previously mentioned, the lesson intended to introduce the concept of associating data with states and transitions must first motivate its need in the form of a student-generated problem and then present its solution as a much simpler diagram, even if this complicates handwritten (and generated, for that matter) Elm code.

One category of statistics evaluated above revealed that most of the children were able to use a transition to reach each state they created (see Figure 3). However, a few outliers showed that some of the students had difficulty with this, leaving certain states unreachable. In the future we should not allow code generation when some states are unreachable, but explain to the user that each state needs a transition leading to it.

Self-hosting means implementing a tool using the tool itself. Eventually, we would like to self host SD Draw. To discover the features we would need, we drew a state diagram based on the current implementation, see [20], to identify features required for advanced users. In particular, this exercise uncovered the desirability of nested states and user-defined types, and tool support for keyboard shortcuts. Potential solutions are discussed in [20]. Finally, team-based software development, and software maintenance requires support for versioning. Elm already supports semantic versioning, and we could support semantic versioning in state diagrams which would project onto Elm’s versioning.

7.2 Pedagogical Improvements

We found that students were generally able to translate between different equivalent specifications of state diagrams, but that they were more successful and (anecdotally) more comfortable with point-form specifications than paragraphs. This suggests designing and testing a staged curriculum in which translation between diagrams and point-form specifications should be taught first, followed by paragraph descriptions, and the advantages of translating from working game to diagram to point-form to paragraph should be measured. Teachers are always trying to find ways of engaging reluctant writers, and we hypothesize that this is one way of leveraging children’s engagement with video games. Different teaching styles should be investigated for different age groups. Furthermore, demographic information collected beforehand can allow the foundation for comparing genders, ages and developmental differences.

Knowing that many students created abstract states without prompting, see Figure 3 we should add a follow-up lesson after children have produced one (or more) state diagrams to introduce abstract states to all children. We should then design new challenges to evaluate whether all children are able to understand and use abstract states, and whether there are differences based on developmental level.

Acknowledgements

We acknowledge financial support from the Faculty of Engineering. We also appreciate input from teachers, parents, and all the enthusiasm and inspiration from all the future coders we visit.

References

- [1] Shaaron E Ainsworth & Katharina Scheiter (2021): *Learning by drawing visual representations: Potential, purposes, and practical implications*. *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 30(1), pp. 61–67.
- [2] Lynne Anderson-Inman & Mark Horney (1996): *Computer-based concept mapping: Enhancing literacy with tools for visual thinking*. *Journal of adolescent & adult literacy* 40(4), pp. 302–306.
- [3] Mordechai Ben-Ari (1998): *Constructivism in computer science education*. *Acm sigcse bulletin* 30(1), pp. 257–261.
- [4] Marina Umaschi Bers (2019): *Coding as another language: a pedagogical approach for teaching computer science in early childhood*. *Journal of Computers in Education* 6(4), pp. 499–528.
- [5] Ni Chang (2012): *The role of drawing in young children’s construction of science concepts*. *Early Childhood Education Journal* 40(3), pp. 187–193.
- [6] Li Cheng & Carole R Beal (2020): *Effects of student-generated drawing and imagination on science text reading in a computer-based learning environment*. *Educational Technology Research and Development* 68(1), pp. 225–247.
- [7] Evan Czaplicki (2012): *Elm: Concurrent FRP for Functional GUIs*. Senior thesis, Harvard University.
- [8] Bogdan Denny Czejdó & Sambit Bhattacharya (2009): *Programming robots with state diagrams*. *Journal of Computing Sciences in Colleges* 24(5), pp. 19–26.
- [9] Curtis d’Alves, Tanya Bouman, Christopher Schankula, Jenell Hogg, Levin Noronha, Emily Horsman, Rumsha Siddiqui & Christopher Kumar Anand (2018): *Using Elm to Introduce Algebraic Thinking to K-8 Students*. In Simon Thompson, editor: *Proceedings Sixth Workshop on Trends in Functional Programming in Education*, Canterbury, Kent UK, 22 June 2017, *Electronic Proceedings in Theoretical Computer Science* 270, Open Publishing Association, pp. 18–36, doi:[10.4204/EPTCS.270.2](https://doi.org/10.4204/EPTCS.270.2)
- [10] E Paul Goldenberg & Cynthia J Carter (2021): *Programming as a language for young children to express and explore mathematics in school*. *British Journal of Educational Technology* 52(3), pp. 969–985.
- [11] Masaru Kamada (2016): *Islay—An educational programming tool based on state diagrams*. In: *2016 International Conference on Advances in Electrical, Electronic and Systems Engineering (ICAEEES)*, IEEE, pp. 230–232.
- [12] Dexter C Kozen (2012): *Automata and computability*. Springer Science & Business Media.
- [13] Shriram Krishnamurthi & Kathi Fisler (2019): *Programming paradigms and beyond*. *The Cambridge Handbook of Computing Education Research* 37.
- [14] Andrea Kunze & Jennifer G Cromley (2021): *Deciding on drawing: the topic matters when using drawing as a science learning strategy*. *International Journal of Science Education*, pp. 1–17.
- [15] Aleksi Lukkarinen, Lauri Malmi & Lassi Haaranen (2021): *Event-driven Programming in Programming Education: A Mapping Review*. *ACM Transactions on Computing Education (TOCE)* 21(1), pp. 1–31.
- [16] Ana Francisca Monteiro, Maribel Miranda-Pinto & António José Osório (2021): *Coding as Literacy in Preschool: A Case Study*. *Education Sciences* 11(5), p. 198.
- [17] Bill O’Farrell & Christopher Anand (2017): *Code the future!: teach kids to program in ELM*. In: *Proceedings of the 27th Annual International Conference on Computer Science and Software Engineering*, IBM Corp., pp. 357–357.

- [18] Optimal Computational Algorithms, Inc. (2018): *ElmJr (1.0)*. iOS App Stores: <https://apps.apple.com/ca/app/elmjr/id1335011478>.
- [19] Joonhyeong Park, Jina Chang, Kok-Sing Tang, David F Treagust & Mihye Won (2020): *Sequential patterns of students' drawing in constructing scientific explanations: focusing on the interplay among three levels of pictorial representation*. *International Journal of Science Education* 42(5), pp. 677–702.
- [20] Padma Pasupathi (2021): *SD Draw: A State Diagram Tool including Elm Code Generation for Interactive Applications*. Master's thesis, McMaster University.
- [21] Christopher Schankula, Emily Ham, Jessica Schultz, Yumna Irfan, Nhan Thai, Lucas Dutton, Padma Pasupathi, Chinmay Sheth, Taranum Khan, Salima Tejani et al. (2020): *NewYouthHack: Using Design Thinking to Reimagine Settlement Services for New Canadians*. In: *International Conference on Innovations for Community Services*, Springer, pp. 41–62.
- [22] Christopher W Schankula & Christopher K Anand (2016-2019): *GraphicSVG [Elm Package]*. Available at <http://package.elm-lang.org/packages/MacCASOutreach/graphicsvg/latest>
- [23] Annett Schmeck, Richard E Mayer, Maria Opfermann, Vanessa Pfeiffer & Detlev Leutner (2014): *Drawing pictures during learning from scientific text: Testing the generative drawing effect and the prognostic drawing effect*. *Contemporary Educational Psychology* 39(4), pp. 275–286.
- [24] Leslie Suters & Henry Suters (2020): *Coding for the Core: Computational Thinking and Middle Grades Mathematics*. *Contemporary Issues in Technology and Teacher Education* 20(3), pp. 435–471.
- [25] F Vico, M Molina, D Orden, J Ortiz, R Garcia & J Masa (2019): *A coding curriculum for K-12 education: the evidence-based approach*. In: *Proceedings of the 11th annual International Conference on Education and New Learning Technologies*, pp. 7102–7106.