Structured Synchronous Reactive Programming for Game Development
Case Study: On Rewriting Pingus from C++ to CÉU

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Abstract—We present a qualitative case study of rewriting the video game Pingus from C++ to the structured synchronous reactive language CÉU. CÉU supports reactive control-flow primitives that eliminate callbacks and let programmers write code in direct and sequential style. Structured reactivity helps describing complex control-flow relationships in the game logic more concisely. We show gains in productivity for four behaviors in Pingus through a qualitative analysis of the proposed implementations in CÉU in comparison to the originals in C++. We also categorize the behaviors in recurrent control-flow patterns that likely apply to most games.

Keywords—Control Flow ; Event-Driven Programming ; Game Logic ; Synchronous Reactive Programming ;

I. INTRODUCTION

Pingus is an open-source puzzle-platform video game based on Lemmings. The objective of the game is to guide a group of penguins through a number of obstacles towards a designated exit (Figure 1). Pingus is developed in standard object-oriented C++, “the lingua franca of game development” [14]. The codebase1 is about 40,000 lines of code (locs), divided into the engine, level editor, auxiliary libraries, and the game logic itself.

According to Tim Sweeney (of Unreal Engine fame), about half the complexity in game development resides in simulation (aka game logic), but which only accounts for 10% of the CPU budget [24]. The high development costs contrasting with the low impact on performance appeals for alternatives with productivity in mind, especially considering that it is the game logic that varies the most between projects. Sweeney states that “will gladly sacrifice 10% of our performance for 10% higher productivity”.

Object-oriented games rely on the observer pattern [14] to handle events from the environment (e.g., key presses and timers) and also as a notification mechanism between entities in the game logic. The observers are short-lived callbacks that have to execute as fast as possible to keep the game reactive to incoming events in real time. For this reason, callbacks cannot use long-lasting locals and loops, which are elementary capabilities of classical structured programming [2, 12, 18]. In this sense, callbacks actually disrupt structured programming, becoming “our generation’s goto”.

In this work, we advocate structured synchronous reactive programming (SSRP) as a more productive alternative for game logic development. We present a qualitative case study of rewriting Pingus from C++ to CÉU. CÉU [20] is a Esterel-based [5] programming language that originally targets embedded soft real-time systems. It aims to offer a concurrent, safe, and expressive alternative to C. SSRP lets developers write code in direct style, recovering from the inversion of control imposed by event-driven execution [2, 12, 18]. CÉU supports logical parallelism with a resource-efficient implementation in terms of memory and CPU usage. The runtime is single threaded and does not rely on garbage collection for memory management [19]. Existing work in the context of embedded sensor networks evaluates the expressiveness of CÉU in comparison to event-driven code in C and attests a reduction in source code size (around 25%) with a small increase in memory usage (around 5–10%) and comparable CPU responsiveness [19]. CÉU has

1Official Pingus repository: github.com/Pingus/pingus/

2“Callbacks as our Generations’ goto Statement”: tirania.org/blog/archive/2013/Aug-15.html
### Declarations

- `input <type> <id>` // declares an external input event
- `event <type> <id>` // declares an internal event
- `var <type> <id>` // declares a variable

### Event handling

- `<id> = <exp>` // assigns a value to a variable
- `<id>(<args>)` // executes and awaits
- `await <id>` // awaits event and assigns received value
- `spawn <id>(<args>) [in <id>]` // executes and continues
- `pool [num] <id> <id>` // holds instances

### Abstractions

- `code <id> (<args>) -> <type> do <stmt>` // executes and awaits
- `par/or do <stmt>` with `<stmt>` end // terminates with any
- `par/and do <stmt>` with `<stmt>` end // terminates with all

### Assignment & Integration with C/C++

- `<id> = <exp>` // assigns a value to a variable
- `_<id>(<args>)` // calls C/C++ (id starts with '_')

Listing 1. A compact reference of CÉu.

CÉu has also been used in the context of multimedia systems [22] and games [21].

Our case study discusses the gains in productivity for four selected behaviors in the game logic of Pingus rewritten in CÉu. We present an in-depth qualitative analysis of the proposed solutions in comparison to the original implementations in C++. Not all techniques result in reduction of locs (especially considering the verbose syntax of CÉu), but they have other effects such as eliminating shared variables and dependencies between classes. We also identify four control-flow patterns that likely apply to most games: Finite State Machines, Continuation Passing, Dispatching Hierarchies, and Lifespan Hierarchies. In this context, a control-flow pattern is a recurring technique to describe execution dependency and/or explicit ordering between statements.

We employed a live code rewrite, i.e., starting from the original codebase in C++, we reimplemented it piece-by-piece in CÉu without breaking the game compilation and execution. This approach shows the feasibility of a partial and gradual translation between the languages, and also the possibility of keeping performance-critical functionality in C++, such as for heavy graphical primitives.

### II. An overview of CÉu

CÉu is a synchronous reactive language in which programs evolve in a sequence of discrete reactions to external events with the characteristics that follow:

- **Reactive**: code only executes in reactions to events.
- **Structured**: programs use structured control mechanisms, such as `spawn` and `await` (to create and suspend activities).
- **Synchronous**: reactions run atomically and to completion on each line of execution, i.e., there’s no implicit preemption or real parallelism.

CÉu is designed for control-intensive applications, supporting concurrent lines of execution, known as *trails*, and instantaneous broadcast communication through events. CÉu provides an `await` statement that blocks the current running trail allowing the program to execute its other trails; when all trails are blocked, the reaction terminates and control returns to the environment to process upcoming events. Listing 1 shows a compact reference of CÉu.

Listing 2 shows a simple example in the context of embedded systems that blinks an LED and terminates either on a button press or at 1 hour of execution. The example declares two external events (ln 1–2): an input that represents a button press and an output that represents an LED. The blink behavior uses a `code` abstraction (ln 4–11) which is similar to a coroutine or fiber [2], but which can interact directly with the environment through `await` statements (ln 7,9). The `spawn` statement (ln 13) instantiates a `Blink` abstraction to execute in the background and the program then creates two trails to await two events at the same time (ln 14–18). Since the composition is a `par/or`, it will terminate when either of the two events occur, proceeding to the end of the file and consequently also terminating the program.

In CÉu, every execution path within loops must contain at least one `await` statement to an external input event [4, 19]. On the one hand, CÉu shares a restriction with standard event-driven programming: computations that take a non-negligible time to run (e.g., cryptography or image processing algorithms) violate the zero-delay hypothesis, and thus cannot be directly implemented. On the other hand, all reactions to the external environment are guaranteed to proceed.
be computed in bounded time [23], ensuring that games progress with time.

III. THE PINGUS CODEBASE AND REWRITING PROCESS

In Pingus, the game logic accounts for almost half the size of the codebase\(^5\): 18,173 from 39,362 locs (46%) spread across 272 files. However, about half of the game logic relates to non-reactive code, such as dealing with configurations and options, saved games and serialization, maps and level descriptions, string formatting, collision detection, graph algorithms, etc. This part remained unchanged in our rewrite and relies on the seamless integration between CÉU and C/C++ [19]: the type systems are compatible and the integration happens at the source code level. This enables accessing data and calling CIC++ from CÉU and vice-versa. Therefore, we only rewrote 9,186 locs spread across 126 files\(^4\). In order to only consider relevant code in the analysis, we then removed all headers, declarations, trivial getters & setters, and other innocuous statements, resulting 4,135 condensed locs spread across 70 implementation files originally written in C++\(^4\). We did the same with the implementation in CÉU, resulting in 3,697 condensed locs\(^5\).

Figure 2 summarizes the effective game logic codebase in the two implementations.

Although the analysis in this work is qualitative, the rows with lower ratio numbers in Figure 2 do correlate with the parts of the game logic that we consider more susceptible to SSRP. For instance, the Pingu behavior (row 4, ratio 0.80) contains complex animations that are affected by timers, game rules, and user interaction. In contrast, the Option screen (row 9, ratio 0.97) is a simple UI grid with trivial mouse interactions.

The rewriting process consisted of identifying sets of callbacks in C++ implementing control flow in the game and translating them to CÉU using appropriate structured constructs. As an example, a double mouse click is characterized by a first click, followed by a maximum amount of time, followed by a second click. This behavior depends on different events (clicks and timers) which have to occur in a particular order. In C++, the implementation involves callbacks and reaction to successive events which manipulate state variables explicitly. As a general rewriting rule, we identify control-flow behaviors in the C++ codebase by looking for class state members with identifiers resembling verbs, statuses, and counters (e.g., pressed, particleThrown, mode, and delay_count). Good chances are that such variables encode some form of control-flow progression that crosses multiple callback invocations. Not all state follows these conventions, but they helped finding classes that are heavy on control flow quickly at the beginning of the process.

IV. CONTROL-FLOW PATTERNS & CASE STUDIES

During the rewriting process, we have identified four abstract cause/effect control-flow patterns which likely apply to most games:

1) Finite State Machines: Event occurrences lead to transitions between states and trigger actions comprising the behavior of a game entity.

2) Continuation Passing: The completion of a long-lasting activity in the game may carry a continuation, i.e., some action to execute next.

3) Dispatching Hierarchies: Entities form a dispatching hierarchy in which a container that receives a stimulus automatically forwards it to its managed children.

4) Lifespan Hierarchies: Entities form a lifespan hierarchy in which a terminating container entity automatically destroys its managed children.

We describe representative game behaviors in detail distributed in the four patterns and analyze their implementations in C++ and CÉU.

A. Finite State Machines

Event occurrences lead to transitions between states and trigger actions comprising the behavior of a game entity.

1) Case Study: Detecting Double-Clicks in the Armageddon Button: In Pingus, a double click in the Armageddon button at the bottom right of the screen literally explodes all pinguins.\(^5\)

Listing 3 shows the C++ implementation for the class ArmageddonButton with methods for rendering the button and handling mouse and timer events. The code in the figure focus on the double click detection and hides unrelated parts with <...>. The methods update (ln 14–26) and on_click (ln 28–34) are examples of short-lived callbacks, which are pieces of code that execute atomically in reaction to external input events. The callback on_click reacts to mouse clicks detected by the base class RectComponent (ln 2), while the callback update continuously reacts to the passage of time, frame by frame. The class first initializes the variable pressed (ln 3) to track the first click (ln 32). It also initializes the variable press_time (ln 4) to count the time since the first click (ln 16–17). If another click occurs within 1 second, the class signals the double click to the application (ln 29–30). Otherwise, the pressed and press_time state variables are reset (ln 18–21). Figure 3 illustrates how we can model the double-click behavior in C++ as a state machine. The circles represent the state of the variable pressed, and the arrows represent the callbacks manipulating it. Note in Listing 3 how the accesses to the state variables are spread across the entire class: the distance between the initialization of pressed (ln 3) and the last access to it (ln 32) is over 40 lines in the original file. Arguably, this dispersion of code across methods makes the

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\(^3\)We used SLOCCount to count only non-blank, non-comment lines in the codebase: [www.dwheeler.com/sloccount/](www.dwheeler.com/sloccount/)

\(^4\) Effective codebase: [github.com/an000/p/tree/master/](github.com/an000/p/tree/master/)

\(^5\)Double click animation: [github.com/an000/p/p/#1](github.com/an000/p/p/#1)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Path</th>
<th>Ceu</th>
<th>C++</th>
<th>Ceu/C++</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 game/</td>
<td>2064</td>
<td>2268</td>
<td>0.91</td>
<td>the main gameplay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 ./</td>
<td>710</td>
<td>679</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>main functionality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 objs/</td>
<td>470</td>
<td>478</td>
<td>0.98</td>
<td>world objects (tiles, traps, etc)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 pingu/</td>
<td>884</td>
<td>1111</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td>pingu behaviors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 ./</td>
<td>343</td>
<td>458</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>main functionality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 actions/</td>
<td>541</td>
<td>653</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td>pingu actions (bomber, climber, etc)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 worldmap/</td>
<td>468</td>
<td>493</td>
<td>0.95</td>
<td>campaign worldmap</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 screens/</td>
<td>1109</td>
<td>1328</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>menus and screens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 option/</td>
<td>347</td>
<td>357</td>
<td>0.97</td>
<td>option menu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 others/</td>
<td>762</td>
<td>971</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>other menus and screens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 misc/</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>1.22</td>
<td>miscellaneous functionality</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2. The Pingus codebase directory tree.

```c++
// ArmageddonButton::ArmageddonButton(<...>):
RectComponent(<...>),
pressed(false);
// button is not initially pressed
press_time(0);
// how long since 1st click?
{
}

void ArmageddonButton::draw (<...>) {
}

void ArmageddonButton::update (float delta) {
if [pressed]
    press_time += delta;
    if [press_time > 1.0f]
        pressed = false; // give up, 1st click was too long ago
}
else {
<...>
press_time = 0;
}

void ArmageddonButton::on_click (<...>) {
if [pressed]
    send_armageddon_event();
else {
    pressed = true;
}
}
```

Listing 3. C++: Detecting double-clicks in the Armageddon button.

understanding and maintenance of the double-click behavior more difficult. Also, even though the state variables are private, unrelated methods such as draw, which is defined in middle of the class (ln 10–12), can potentially access them.

CÉU supports structured constructs to deal with events, aiming to eradicate explicit manipulation of state variables for control-flow purposes. In Listing 4, the loop to detect double clicks (ln 4–12) awaits the first click (ln 5) and then, awaits either a 1-second timeout (ln 7) or the second click (ln 9). If the second click occurs within 1 second, the break terminates the loop (ln 10) and the emit in sequence signals the double click to the application (ln 14). Otherwise, the par/or block as a whole aborts after 1 second and the loop restarts, falling back to the first click await (ln 5). Double click detection in CÉU does not rely on state variables and is entirely self-contained in the loop body. Also, those 9 lines of code only detect the double click, leaving the actual effect (ln 14) as well as all unrelated code (such as redrawing the button) to happen outside the loop.

The await statement of CÉU allows for nested control-flow statements to suspend execution while retaining all enclosing state alive, such as local variables and next statement to execute. Then, a subsequent reaction to an event resumes execution normally. In contrast, method callbacks in object-oriented programming have a single entry point at the top
The Bomber action to a pingu.

**Figure 4.** Assigning the Bomber action to a pingu.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Ceu</th>
<th>C++</th>
<th>Explicit State</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bomber</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>4 state variables</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drown</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1 state variable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exiter</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>2 state variables</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Splashed</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>2 state variables</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 5.** Pingus actions in CÉU and C++ in terms of locs and state variables.

level of the class, in which only instance members remain active between invocations. In particular, locals and loops cannot persist across invocations.

2) **Summary & Pattern Uses in Pingus:** In comparison to explicit state machines, the structured constructs of CÉU introduce some advantages as follows:

- They encode all states with direct sequential code, eliminating callbacks and shared state variables for control-flow purposes.
- They handle all states (and only them) in the same contiguous block, improving code encapsulation.

Object-oriented games also adopt the state pattern to model state machines with subclasses describing each possible state [14]. However, this approach is not fundamentally different from Pingus’ use of switch or if branches to decode state.

In Pingus, the player may assign actions to specific pingu, as illustrated in Figure 4. The Bomber action explodes the clicked pingu, throwing particles around and also destroying the terrain under its radius.\(^6\) We model the explosion animation with a sequential state machine with effects associated to specific frames, such as playing a sound and throwing the particles. Pingus supports other 15 actions in the game. Five of them implement at least one state machine, and are considerable smaller in CÉU than in C++ in terms of locs (Figure 5). For the other 11 actions without state machines, the reduction in locs is negligible. This asymmetry illustrates the gains in expressiveness when describing state machines in direct style.

Among all 65 implementation files in CÉU, we found 29 cases in 25 files that use structured mechanisms to substitute states machines. They typically manifest as await statements in sequence (e.g., ln 5,9 in Listing 4).

**B. Continuation Passing**

The completion of a long-lasting activity in the game may carry a continuation, i.e., some action to execute next.

1) **Transition from Story to Credits to Worldmap Screen:** The campaign world map has clickable blue dots in the two extremes of the map road to show introductory and closing ambience stories, respectively. For introductory stories, the game returns to the world map after showing the story pages. For closing stories, the game also shows a Credits screen before returning to the world map.\(^7\) From the click in the story dot until the return to the world map, the game animates the story with a timer-based scrolling and also reacts to user input to advance it.

In C++, the class StoryDot in Listing 5 (ln 1–12) first reads the level file (ln 5) to check whether it is a closing story and should, after termination, show the Credits screen. The boolean variable show_credits (ln 2,5,10) is passed to the class StoryScreen (ln 10) and represents the screen continuation, i.e., what to do after showing the story. The class StoryScreen (not shown) then forwards the continuation even further to the auxiliary class StoryScreenComp (ln 16–40). When the method next_text has no story pages left to display (ln 32–38), it decides where to go next, depending on the continuation flag show_credits (ln 33).

In CÉU, the loop of Listing 6 controls the flow between the screens as a direct sequence of statements. We first invoke the Worldmap (ln 2), which shows the map and lets the player interact with it (e.g., walking around) until a dot is clicked. If the player selects a story dot (ln 4–9), we invoke the Story and await its termination (ln 5). After showing the story, we check the returned values (ln 6) to perhaps show the Credits screen (ln 8). The enclosing loop restores the Worldmap and repeats the process.

Figure 6 illustrates the continuation-passing style of C++ and the direct style of CÉU for screen transitions:

1) **Main Loop → Worldmap:**
   - C++ uses an explicit stack to push the Worldmap screen (not shown in Listing 5).
   - CÉU invokes the Worldmap screen expecting a return value (Listing 6, ln 2).

2) **Worldmap (blue dot click) → Story:**
   - C++ pushes the Story screen passing the continuation flag (Listing 5, ln 10).
   - CÉU stores the Worldmap return value and invokes the Story screen (Listing 6, ln 2,5).

3) **Story → Credits:**
   - C++ replaces the current Story screen with the Credits screen (Listing 5, ln 34).

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\(^6\) Bomber action animation: github.com/an000/p/#2

\(^7\) Credits screen animation: github.com/an000/p/#4
Figure 6. Continuation (C++) vs Direct (C´EU) Styles.

### Listing 5: C++: Transition from Story to Credits and Worldmap screen.

```cpp
1 StoryDot::StoryDot(FileReader& reader) :
2     show_credits(false), // do not show by default
3 {
4     // from file
5      reader.read("credits", show_credits);
6 } // from file
7
8 void StoryDot::on_click() {
9     // ...
10     push(<StoryScreen>(show_credits));
11     // ...
12 }
13
14 // class separator //
15
16 StoryScreenComp::StoryScreenComp (<...>) :
17     show_credits(show_credits),
18     // ...
19     // ...
20     // ...
21 }
22
23 // draw and update page
24
25 void StoryScreenComp::next_text() {
26     if (!displayed) {
27         // ...
28         // ...
29     } else {
30         // ...
31         if (!pages.empty()) {
32             // ...
33         } else {
34             if (show_credits) {
35                 // ...
36                 replace(<Credits>(<...>));
37             } else {
38                 pop();
39             }
40         }
41     }
42 }
43
44 // ... // draw and update page
45
46 void StoryScreenComp::on_click() {
47     // ...
48     // ...
49     // ...
50     // ...
51     // ...
52     // ...
53     // ...
54     // ...
55     // ...
56     // ...
57     // ...
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89     // ...
90     // ...
91     // ...
92     // ...
93     // ...
94     // ...
95     // ...
96     // ...
97     // ...
98     // ...
99     // ...
100 // ...
101 // ...
```

### Listing 6: C´EU: Transition from Story to Credits and Worldmap screen.

```cpp
c++
1 loop do
2     var int ret = await Worldmap();
3     if (ret==CREDITS or ret==BACK) then
4         // ...
5     var bool is_click = await Story();
6     if (is_click and ret==CREDITS) then
7         // ...
8         await Credits();
9     end
10 else
11     // ...
12 end
13
14 // draw and update page
15
16 void StoryScreenComp::next_text() {
17     if (!displayed) {
18         // ...
19         // ...
20     } else {
21         // ...
22         if (!pages.empty()) {
23             // ...
24         } else {
25             if (show_credits) {
26                 // ...
27                 replace(<Credits>(<...>));
28             } else {
29                 pop();
30             }
31         }
32     }
33 }
34
35 // draw and update page
36
37 void StoryScreenComp::on_click() {
38     // ...
39     // ...
40     // ...
41     // ...
42     // ...
43     // ...
44     // ...
45     // ...
46     // ...
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89     // ...
90     // ...
91     // ...
92     // ...
93     // ...
94     // ...
95     // ...
96     // ...
97     // ...
98     // ...
99     // ...
100 // ...
```

- **C´EU** invokes the Credits screen after the **await** Story returns (Listing 6, ln 8).

4) **Credits** → **Worldmap**:

- **C´EU** pops the Credits screen, going back to the Worldmap screen (not shown in Listing 5).
- **C´EU** uses an enclosing loop to restart the process (Listing 6, ln 1–13).

In contrast with C++, the screens in **C´EU** are decoupled from each other and only the Main Loop touches them: the Worldmap has no references to Story, which has no references to Credits. Changing the screen arrangements is a matter of adjusting the main loop only.

2) **Summary & Pattern Uses in Pingus**: The direct style of **C´EU** has some advantages in comparison to the continuation-passing style of C++:

- It uses structured control flow (i.e., sequences and loops) instead of explicit data structures (e.g., stacks) and continuation variables (e.g. boolean flags).
- The activities in sequence are decoupled and do not hold references to one another.
- A single parent class describes the flow between the activities in a self-contained block of code.

Continuation passing typically controls the overall structure of games such as screen transitions in menus and level progressions. In Pingus, **C´EU** adopts the direct style technique in five cases involving screen transitions: the main menu, the level menu, the level set menu, the world map
loop, and the gameplay loop. It also uses the same technique for the loop that switches between pingu actions during gameplay (e.g., walking to falling and back to walking).

C. Dispatching Hierarchies

Entities form a dispatching hierarchy in which a container that receives a stimulus automatically forwards it to its managed children.

1) Case Study: Bomber Action `draw` and `update` Dispatching: In C++, the class `Bomber` in Listing 7 declares a `sprite` member (ln 3) to handle its animation frames. The `Sprite` class is part of the game engine and knows how to update and render itself. However, the `Bomber` still has to respond to `update` and `draw` requests from the game and forward them to the `sprite` (ln 11–13 and 15–18). To understand how the `update` callback flows from the original environment stimulus to the game down to the `sprite`, we need to follow a long chain of 7 method dispatches (Figure 7):

1) `ScreenManager::display` in the main game loop calls `ScreenManager::update` when starting a new frame.
2) `ScreenManager::update` calls `World::update` for the active game screen (i.e., a `GameSession` instance, considering the screen in which the `Bomber` appears).
3) `GameSession::update` calls `world->update`.
4) `World::update` calls `objs->update` for each object in the world.
5) `PinguHolder::update` calls `pingu->update` for each pingu alive.
6) `Pingu::update` calls `action->update` for the active pingu action.
7) `Bomber::update` calls `sprite.update`.

`Sprite::update` finally updates the animation frame.

Each dispatching step in the chain is indeed necessary considering the typical OO game architecture employed in Pingus:

- With a single assignment to `screen`, one can easily deactivate the current screen and redirect all dispatches to a new screen (step 2).
- The `World` class manages and dispatches events to all game entities with a common interface `WorldObj`, such as the pingus and traps (step 4).
- Since it is common to iterate only over the pingus (vs. all world objects), the container `PinguHolder` manages all pingus (step 5).
- Since a single pingu can change its actions during lifetime, the `action` member decouples them with another level of indirection (step 6).
- Sprites are part of the game engine and are reusable everywhere (e.g., UI buttons, world objects, etc.), so it is also convenient to decouple them from actions (step 7).

Like `update`, the `draw` callback also flows through a similar dispatching hierarchy until reaching the `Sprite` class.

In CÉU, the `Bomber` abstraction presented in Listing 8...
spawns a Sprite animation instance on its body (ln 3). However, the Sprite abstraction in C´EU can react directly to external update and draw events, bypassing the program hierarchy entirely. Events in C´EU are broadcasted to the entire application in lexical order, i.e., an abstraction that appears first in the source code (e.g., ln 3) reacts before another one that appears second (e.g., hidden in ln 4). This rule preserves determinism and also conforms to the program static hierarchy. While (and only while) the bomber abstraction is alive, the sprite animation remains alive and reacts to the update and draw events (see also Section IV-D on Lifespan Hierarchies). The radical decoupling between the program hierarchy and reactions to events eliminates dispatching chains entirely.

2) Summary & Pattern Uses in Pingus: Passive entities subjected to hierarchies require a dispatching architecture that makes the reasoning about the program harder:

- The full dispatching chain may go through dozens of files.
- The dispatching chain may interleave between classes specific to the game and also classes from the game engine (possibly third-party classes).

In C++, the update subsystem touches 39 files with around 100 lines of code just to forward update methods through the dispatching hierarchy. For the drawing subsystem, 50 files with around 300 lines of code. The implementation in C++ also relies on dispatching hierarchy for resize callbacks, touching 12 files with around 100 lines of code. Most of this code is eliminated in C´EU since abstractions can react directly to the environment, not depending on hierarchies spread across multiple files.

Note that dispatching hierarchies cross game engine code, suggesting that most games also rely heavily on this control-flow pattern. In the case of the Pingus engine, we rewrote 9 of its files with a reduction from 515 to 173 locs, mostly due to dispatching code removal (not listed in Figure 2, since it’s engine code).

D. Lifespan Hierarchies

Entities form a lifespan hierarchy in which a terminating container entity automatically destroys its managed children.

1) Case Study: Dynamic Pingus Lifecycle: A pingu is a dynamic entity created periodically and destroyed under certain conditions, such as falling from a high altitude.

In C++, the class PinguHolder in Listing 9 is a container that holds all alive pingus. The method PinguHolder::create_pingu (ln 1–6) is called periodically to create a new Pingu and add it to the pingus collection (ln 3–4). The method PinguHolder::update (ln 8–18) checks the state of all pingus on every frame, removing those with the dead status (ln 12–14). Note that if the programmer disregards the call to remove, a dead pingu

would remain in the collection and still update on every frame (ln 11). Since the draw behavior for a dead pingu is innocuous, the death could go unnoticed when testing it but the program would keep consuming memory and CPU time. This problem is known as the lapsed listener [14] and also occurs in languages with garbage collection: a container typically holds a strong reference to a child (sometimes the only reference to it), and the runtime cannot magically detect it as garbage. Hence, entities with dynamic lifespan always require explicit matching add and remove calls associated to a container (ln 4, 13).

C´EU supports pool declarations to hold dynamic abstraction instances. In addition, the spawn statement supports a pool identifier to associate a new instance with a pool. The game screen in Listing 10 spawns a new Pingu on every invocation of Pingu_Spawn (ln 4–7). The spawn statement (ln 6) specifies the pool declared at the top-level block of the game screen (ln 3), attaching the scope of the
pingu to that block. Since pools are also subject to lexical scope, the lifespan of all dynamically allocated pingus is constrained to the game screen (Figure 8). Lexical scopes handle memory and event dispatching automatically for static instances (Listing 8, ln 3) and also for pools. However, the lifespan of a dynamic instance does not necessarily have to match the lifespan of its associated pool. In CÉu, when the execution block of a dynamic instance terminates, which characterizes its natural termination, the instance is automatically removed from its pool (Figure 8, instances 1 and 3). Therefore, dynamic instances do not require any extra bookkeeping related to containers or explicit deallocation. To remove a pingu from the game in CÉu, we just need to terminate its execution block according to the appropriate conditions: The escape statement (Listing 10, ln 17) aborts the execution block of the Pingu instance, removing it from its associated pool automatically. Hence, a dynamic instance that terminates naturally leaves no traces in the program.

2) Summary & Pattern Uses in Pingus: Lexical lifespan for static instances and natural termination for dynamic instances provide some advantages in comparison to lifespan hierarchies through containers:

- Lexical scope makes an abstraction lifespan explicit in the source code. All entities in a game have an associated lexical lifespan.
- The memory for static instances is known at compile time.
- Natural termination makes an instance innocuous and, hence, susceptible to immediate reclamation.
- Instances (static or dynamic) never require explicit manipulation of pointers/references.

The implementation in CÉu has over 200 static instantiations spread across all 65 files. For dynamic entities, it defines 23 pools in 10 files, with almost 96 instantiations across 37 files. Pools are used to hold explosion particles, levels and level sets loaded from files, gameplay & worldmap objects, and also UI widgets.

V. RELATED WORK

The control-flow patterns presented in this paper closely relate to the GoF behavioral patterns [10], which are discussed in the context of video games in previous work [3, 14, 17]. The original Pingus in C++ uses variations of the patterns state (Sections IV-A and IV-B), visitor (Sections IV-C and IV-D), and observer (to handle events in general) as implementation techniques to achieve the desired higher-level control-flow patterns described in the paper. CÉu overcomes the need of behavioral patterns with support, at the language level, for structured control-flow mechanisms and event-based communication via broadcast.

A number of domain-specific languages, frameworks, and techniques have been proposed for particular subsystems of the game logic, such as animations [8, 15, 16], game state and screen progression [13, 25], and behavior and AI modeling [1, 11]. In Pingus, the adoption of CÉu is not restricted to a specific subsystem. We employed CÉu at the very core of the game for event dispatching (Section IV-C) and memory management of entities (Section IV-D), eliminating parts of the original game engine. We also implemented all entity animations and behaviors (Section IV-A), and screen transitions (Section IV-B) using the available control mechanisms of CÉu. Furthermore, CÉu is a superset of C targeting reactive systems in general, not only games, and has also been successfully adopted in other domains, such as wireless sensor networks [6, 19] and multimedia systems [22].

Functional reactive programming (FRP) [9] contrasts with structured synchronous reactive programming (SSRP) as a complementary programming style for reactive applications. We believe that FRP is more suitable for data-intensive applications, while SSRP, for control-intensive applications. On the one hand, FRP uses declarative formulas to specify continuous functions over time, such as for physics or data constraints among entities. On the other hand, describing a sequence of steps or control-flow dependencies in FRP requires to encode explicit state machines so that functions can switch behavior depending on the current state. FRP has been successfully used to implement a 3D first person shooting game from scratch, but with some performance considerations [7]. Although we do not provide a performance evaluation (Pingus is not performance sensitive), existing work on CÉu shows that it is comparable to C in the context of embedded systems [19]. Nonetheless, given the tight integration between CÉu and C/C++, critical parts of games can be preserved in C++ if needed.

VI. CONCLUSION

We advocate Structured Synchronous Reactive Programming as a productive alternative for game logic development. We use the video game Pingus as a qualitative case study. We compare the implementation of four game behaviors in
C++ and CÉU and discuss how structured reactive mechanisms can eliminate callbacks and let programmers write code in direct style. Ultimately, we rewrote about 1/4 of the whole codebase (9.186 from 39.362 lines of code) which comprises the core of the game logic that is susceptible to structured reactive programming.

We categorize the behaviors in four recurrent control-flow patterns: State machines are the workhorses of the game logic, appearing in animations, AI behaviors, and input handling. CÉU can encode states implicitly with sequential statements, eliminating shared state variables and improving code encapsulation. Continuation passing controls the overall structure of the game, such as scene transitions and level progressions. Similarly to state machines, CÉU describes the flow of the game as sequential statements in self-contained blocks, eliminating explicit data structures and continuation variables. Dispatching hierarchies disperse input events through the game entities and serve as a broadcast communication mechanism. Event broadcasting is at the core of the semantics of CÉU, allowing entities to react directly to inputs and bypass the program hierarchy entirely. Lifespan hierarchies manage the memory and visibility of game entities through class fields and containers. In CÉU, all entities have an associated lexical scope, similarly to local variables with automatic memory management.

Overall, we consider that most difficulties in implementing control-flow behavior in game logic is not inherent to this domain, but a result of accidental complexity due to the lack of structured abstractions and an appropriate concurrency model to develop event-based applications.

REFERENCES


