



Book Review: AJAX and PHP: Building Responsive Web Applications

By Dennis Pallett

Introduction

Welcome to the first book review on PHPit, which is the first one in the new "Book Reviews" section on PHPit. There are many PHP & MySQL books these days, and more are being released every day, which makes it a hard task to pick a good PHP book. That's why I've decided to create this new section which will help you pick the best PHP books available. I will take a look at certain PHP books, and do a thorough review on each of them. Every review will end with a conclusion and a recommendation.

If you're a book publisher, and want me to review your books, let me know by contacting me (through the contact form).

If you own any PHP books, and want to write a review on PHPit, let me know as I'm very happy to receive any contributions.

With all the introductions out of the way, let's start with the first ever review on PHPit.

Disclaimer

The publisher of "*Ajax and PHP: Building Responsive Web Applications*" sent me a free copy for reviewing purposes. Obviously this won't influence my judgement at all.

Technical Details

Title: AJAX and PHP: Building Responsive Web Applications

Publisher: [Packt Publishing](#)

Authors: Cristian Darie, Bogdan Brinzarea, Filip Chereches-Tosa and Mihai Bucica

Length: 273 pages (10 chapters + one appendix + index)

ISBN: 1904811825

Website: http://www.packtpub.com/ajax_php/book

The Review

The title immediately tells you what the book is about: AJAX and PHP, and that's exactly what you'll learn about in this book. Unfortunately the book doesn't come with a CD which holds the demos, but thankfully

there is a website dedicated to the book available at <http://ajaxphp.packtpub.com/>. There you will be able to find live working demos of all the examples in the book, and you will also be able to download all the code examples, and believe me, this is absolutely necessary. Typing the code examples from the book is pretty much out of the question, unless you want to spend hours typing.

Although there are ten chapters in this book, you can pretty much divide the book in two different sections. In the first section, which includes chapters one, two and three, you are introduced to the theory of AJAX and PHP. How it works, its history, etc. Then in the second section, chapters four to ten, you will be taken through seven different examples of using AJAX, like form validation, an AJAX chat, and more. I really liked this structure, since it allows you to focus on the first three chapters, after which you can pretty much steamroll through the last seven chapters. Of course I might be slightly biased here, since I already know a lot about AJAX, so a beginner may not like this style, but it certainly fit me.

In the first chapter you are first given a little bit background information on how the web (HTTP protocol) works, and I'm glad to see that this information is included in the book. AJAX completely changes the way interaction between client and server happens, and it's important to understand how it all works behind the scenes before jumping right in. Chapter one also includes some useful illustrations on how AJAX works to make it a bit clearer, although this can still be somewhat confusing. Of course no-one likes chapters which only cover theory, so chapter one finishes with a good example demonstrating the use of AJAX. Since this is only the first chapter, the example is briefly explained, but most things are left unexplained for later chapters.

In chapter two there's more theory on topics like JavaScript, the JavaScript DOM model, the XMLHttpRequest object and XML. These topics are thoroughly explained, with examples to demonstrate how they work. The XMLHttpRequest object is covered very in-depth, and the book takes a good look at the different "types" of the object, namely the native object in Firefox/Opera/Safari and the ActiveX object in IE. Something I didn't know is that IE actually comes with different versions of the XMLHttpRequest object, and the book shows you how to use the latest version (which supposedly comes with more features). Another good thing about chapter two is that it immediately looks at using XML in your AJAX requests ("putting the X in AJAX"), and it also shows you how to handle invalid XML in JavaScript by using various tricks. This is really useful information, because you can't catch invalid XML using standard JavaScript error handling (try {} catch).

In chapter three you are introduced to the server side part of AJAX. You will learn how to use PHP's inbuilt DOM functions to create an XML response for the AJAX request. Although this technique works fine, I've never done it like this myself, and I find it much easier to first create a standard PHP array of my data, and then to transform it into standard XML using a XML_Serializer. Each to his own of course, but the DOM method needs more code than my method. The book also shows you how to use a custom error handler (with the set_error_handler() function) to catch any PHP errors, and send it back as an XML response. This is really quite an important step, especially during development, since you won't be able to see the errors when they're printed (like a normal PHP script).

Chapter four is the first example chapter, and marks the end for most of the theory. In this chapter you take a look at form validation, and how AJAX can be helpful. Most of the chapter is spent on building a simple form validation script, and explaining the script, but this chapter also explains how to build thread-safe AJAX. Since AJAX is usually asynchronous, it can often lead to requests coming back in different order than they were sent. To learn more about this problem, have a look at ["Troubles with Asynchronous Ajax Requests and PHP Sessions"](#), but in some cases it's important that requests come back in the same order. This book will show you exactly how to do this.

In chapters 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10 you are taken through more examples, like an AJAX chat, color picker, dynamic images with SVG and AJAX, an AJAX RSS reader, and more. All these chapters are pretty much about these examples and explaining them, and you won't really learn anymore new theory about AXAX itself, but these chapters do introduce a few other new topics, like using XSL to transform XML or using SVG.

Final Verdict

Although I've done countless of things with AJAX myself, and have a firm grasp on how it works, I still learnt a thing or two from this book. Most of the stuff was common knowledge for me, but there were still a few new things. If you're an absolute beginner when it comes to AJAX, and want to get started, I can definitely recommend this book. It starts off with the basics and slowly moves towards the more difficult stuff.

One thing I missed in this book was the usage of JSON. It's briefly mentioned in the beginning of the book, but an example of how it's used is never given, even though JSON is so much easier to use than XML. Another thing I was hoping to see was a bit more information on the current state of AJAX/PHP libraries, like [SAJAX](#) and [My-BIC](#).

All in all I'd say this is an excellent book, and well worth reading and keeping as reference. It's not too long either, since the last seven chapters go really fast. Highly recommended.

About this PDF

You may distribute this PDF in any way you like, as long as you don't modify it in any way. You can ONLY distribute the unchanged original PDF.

For more information, contact us at support@pallettgroup.com.