



Institute of  
Mechanism Theory,  
Machine Dynamics  
and Robotics



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## Cross-Compiling ROS2 Humble to WebAssembly

Master Thesis

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Aachen, 31 March 2023



**Master Thesis**

by Isabel Paredes B.Sc.

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## 2. Literature Review

TODO: Some other intro

### 2.1. State of the Art

TODO: some intro

#### 2.1.1. ROS on Web

The closest representation of the intended project is the work produced by Michael Allwright known as *ROS on Web*. Allwright shares the same goal as the author to develop the technology which allows for running ROS nodes entirely on the browser by cross-compiling C++ code to WebAssembly and using web workers to handle the internal communication [All23].

Equivalently, Allwright targeted the ROS 2 distribution. It is suspected that the *galactic* version was used for the demonstrations. The main demonstration of a running publisher and subscriber is illustrated in Figure 2.1.

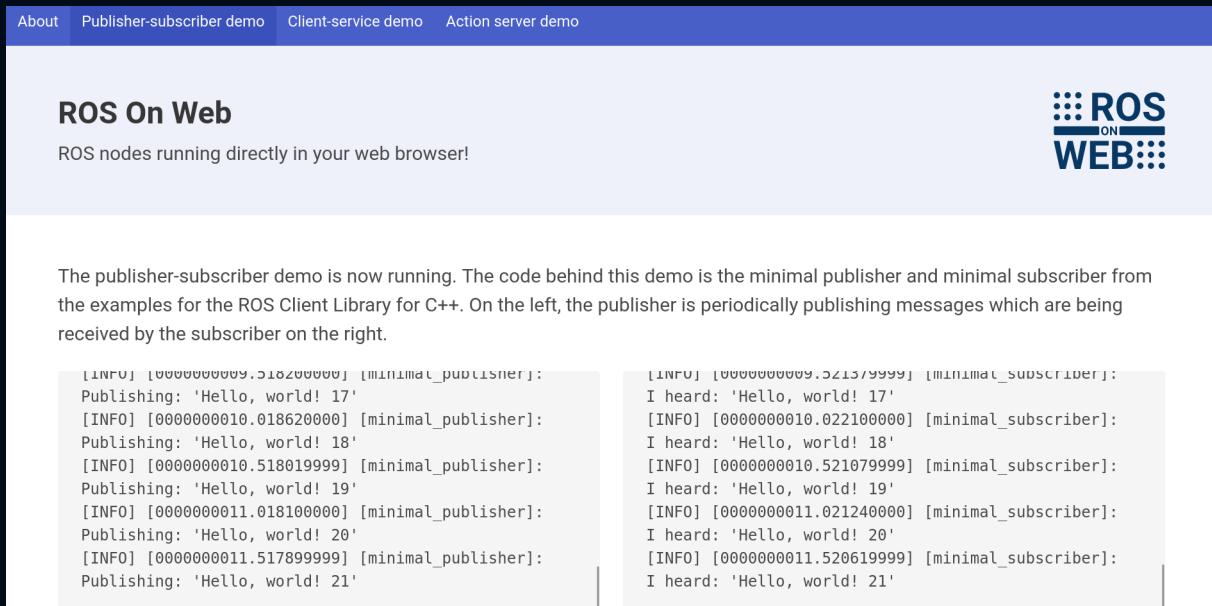


Figure 2.1. *ROS on Web* publisher and subscriber demonstration.

Nonetheless, the greatest disadvantage of *ROS on Web* lies in the fact that the project is not open source. Very little can be derived about how Allwright was able to achieve the demonstrations represented on the website. A few hints are given in the introductory page such as the replacement of the middleware with a custom design and the use of web workers. However, it is not possible to determine the manner in which these technologies were used. Hope remains that

in the near future, the repositories for *ROS on Web* become publicly available as an extension of the ROS open source ecosystem.

### 2.1.2. ros wasm suite

Another project closely related to the author's developments is `ros wasm suite` currently maintained mainly by Nils Bore. This suite is a set of libraries which help the user to crosscompile C++ ROS nodes to WebAssembly [Bor]. It also includes a library of helpers to write web Graphical User Interface (GUI)s for ROS; one such example can be observed in Figure 2.2.

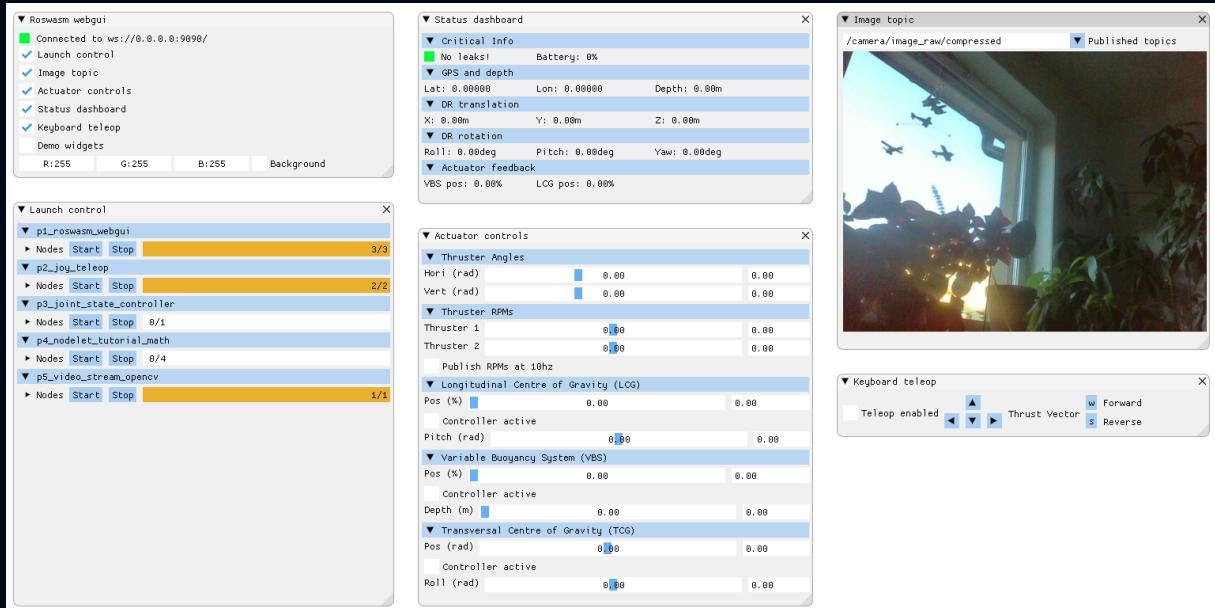


Figure 2.2. Example GUI for ROS using `ros wasm suite`.

Some of the biggest advantages of this `ros wasm suite` are that it is open source and actively maintained. The developers have a long history of continuous improvements to the packages, and as of 2023, they have managed to publish ten releases.

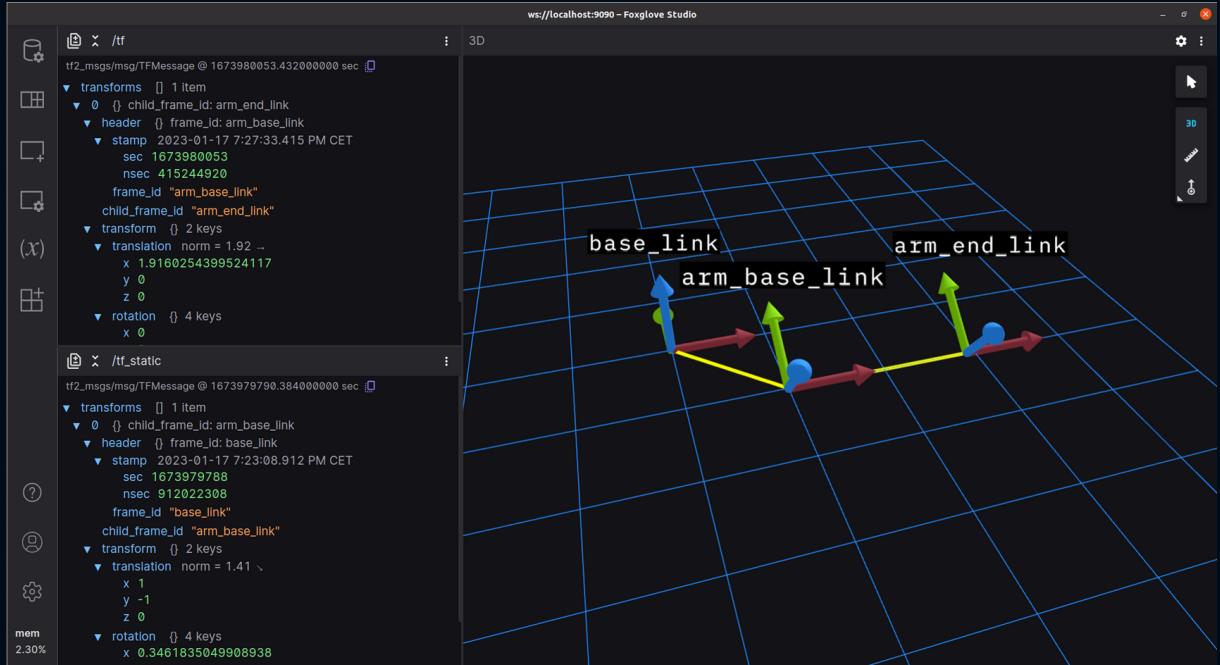
Nevertheless, these libraries do come with their set of disadvantages. First, the suite targets a ROS 1 distro and it depends on `catkin` tools to build the packages. Thus, the user is required to have a ROS 1 installation and the Emscripten Software Development Kit (SDK) before being able to use these libraries to launch ROS nodes on the browser.

## 2.2. Relevant Works

There are several other works which do not directly align with the goals for this project but are pertinent in regards to the idea of developing a robotics environment which can be used on a web browser. Robot Web Tools maintains a collection of open source libraries and tools which can be used for robotic frameworks on the web [Ban].

### 2.2.1. Foxglove Studio

One of the most notorious examples of robotics applications on the browser consists of Foxglove Studio. The main focus of Foxglove Studio is visualization and debugging of robotic tasks [Sht]. Given that their products are based on observability and not on direct control of robotic systems, this allows them to expand their service area to a wider range of systems and platforms. For example, Foxglove Studio supports both ROS 1 and ROS 2 distributions and the application can be installed on Linux, Windows and MacOS or run directly in Google Chrome.



**Figure 2.3.** Visualizing ROS 2 Transforms with Foxglove Studio [Mil23].

The wide range of visualization panels is one of the greatest strengths of Foxglove Studio. An example of a panel is shown in Figure 2.3 where ROS 2 transforms are drawn in a graphical display. Additional examples of panels include support for visualizing raw messages, image topics, plots, parameters, Universal Robotic Description Format (URDF) models, etc.

Another advantage of Foxglove Studio is that it is open source and actively maintained by community members. The application is also highly extensible with plugins to fit any specific needs of the users. Nevertheless, as a side effect of concentrating on observability, the application works as an add-on to an existing ROS installation and not as a replacement.

### 2.2.2. rosbridge\_suite

On a similar note, the `rosbridge_suite` provides a set of packages which allow the user to interact with a ROS system via a JavaScript Object Notation (JSON) interface [Sch22]. Hypothetically, with these libraries, any non-ROS systems could interact with ROS by sending JSON messages. An instance of the `rosbridge` protocol can be seen in Figure 2.4.

```
{
  "op": "subscribe",
  (optional) "id": <string>,
  "topic": "/cmd_vel",
  "type": "geometry_msgs/Twist"
}
```

**Figure 2.4.** Example of `rosbridge` protocol emphasizing the JSON format.

The `rosbridge_suite` consists of four main packages:

- `rosbridge_suite`
- `rosbridge_library`
- `rosbridge_server`
- `rosapi`

From these packages, the `rosbridge_library` performs the conversions from JSON to ROS messages and vice versa. While the `rosbridge_server` provides the browsers with a WebSocket connection. A handful of Application Programming Interface (API)s enable clients to communicate with `rosbridge`; these APIs are implemented in JavaScript, Java, Python, and Rust.

Analogous to Foxglove Studio, `rosbridge` relies on an existing ROS installation. However, the capabilities of `rosbridge` are extensive and can be applied to real world scenarios; it also supports ROS 1 and ROS 2 distributions. Additionally, the community of contributors is highly involved in the maintenance of the client libraries.

### 2.2.3. ROS Control Center

The ROS Control Center is another web application which uses the `rosbridge_suite` to establish a WebSocket connection to a robotics system running ROS [Ber18]. A view of the control center is depicted in Figure 2.5.

With this ROS Control Center, the user is able to display information about running nodes, publish and subscribe to topics, call services, and change ROS parameters. Despite its potential, the control center does not offer explicit support for interacting with ROS 2 systems.

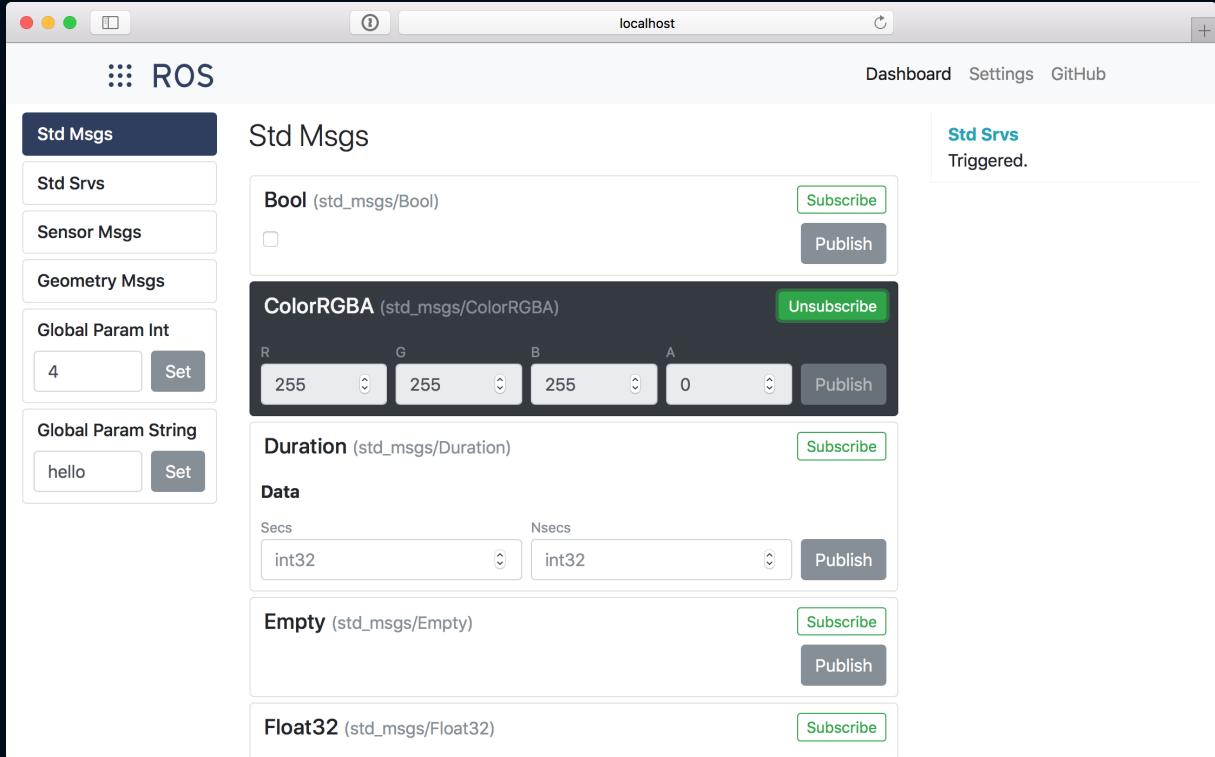


Figure 2.5. ROS control center running locally.

#### 2.2.4. ROSWeb

ROSWeb combines all of the ROS widgets collected by Robot Web Tools into a single web application [Arr22]. As in the case of 2.2.3, ROSWeb also depends on rosbridge to interact with ROS systems. Figure 2.6 demonstrates the ROSWeb application running on a Windows platform and communicating with a Virtual Machine running Ubuntu.

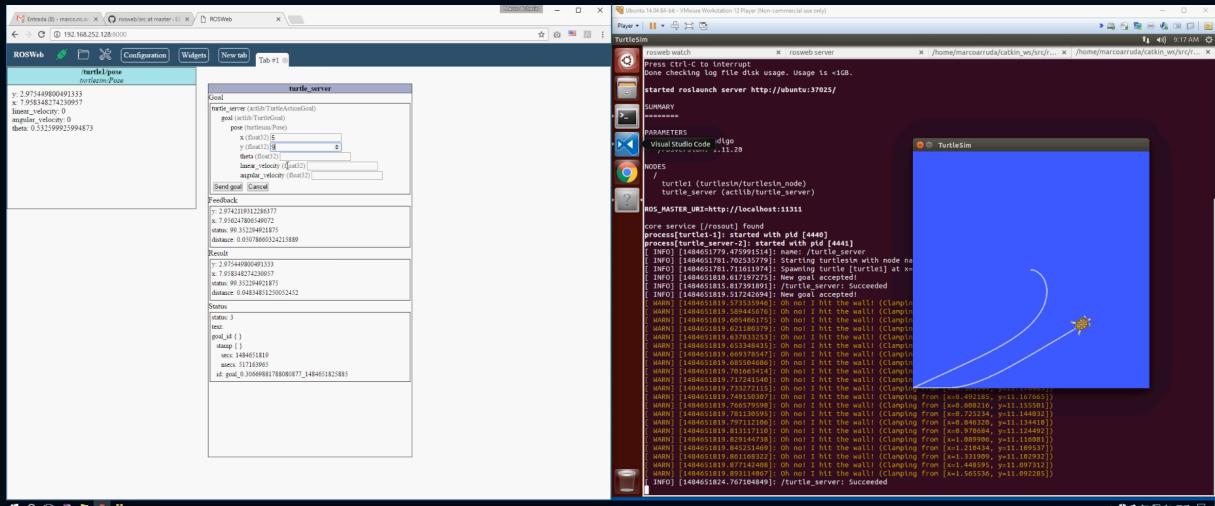


Figure 2.6. ROSWeb application interacting with a Virtual Machine (VM) running ROS.

A major advantage of ROSWeb application is its simplicity. The ROS widgets are interactive and require minimal programming experience from the users. It also enables the users to save

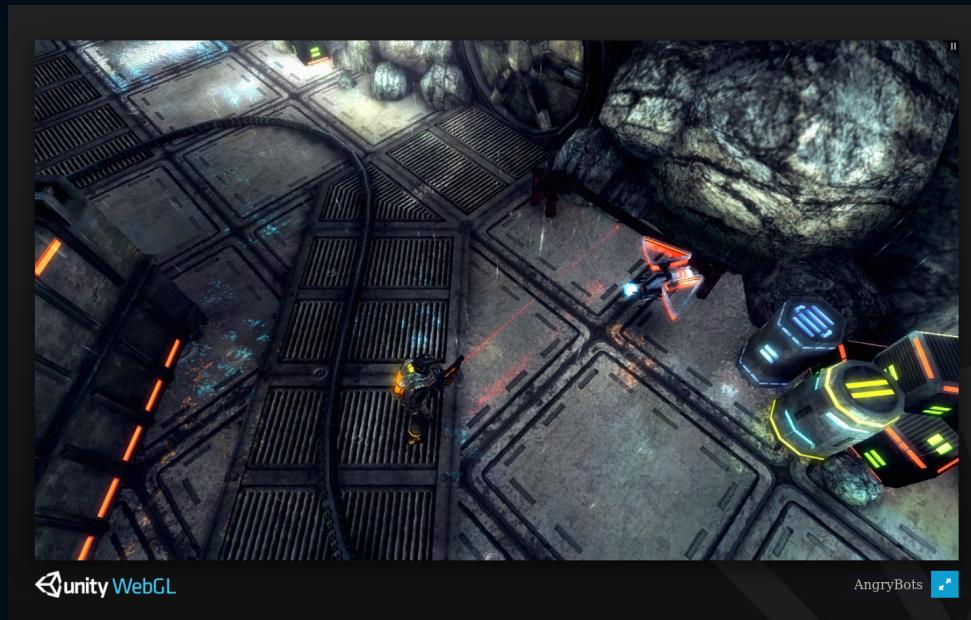
and modify workspaces to match their needs.

#### 2.2.5. ROSboard

#### 2.2.6. ROSlink

### 2.3. State of WASM

#### 2.3.1. Unity in WebAssembly



**Figure 2.7.** Demo of Angry Bots in Unity WebGL

### **3. Concept Realization**

This section provides the major milestones from the project beginning with a brief description of the overall concept solution to the challenges presented in the Introduction, followed by the layers of implementation accomplished during the development phase.

#### **3.1. Target Scenario**

To introduce the concept, a “target scenario” is first considered. In this scenario, an intermediate ROS user should be able to reach a high level of usability with the tools developed in this project. First, an intermediate user is described as an individual who is familiar with the ROS ecosystem but does not have the need to maintain or test ROS packages across different platforms. In the target scenario, this intermediate user will be capable of performing the following tasks:

- install pre-compiled ROS 2 packages in the browser
- launch nodes including publishers, subscribers, servers, and clients
- interact with the environment to obtain information about running nodes, this would include echoing topics, listing parameters, reviewing log files, etc.
- visualize URDF files, transforms, point clouds, markers, etc.
- play and record bag files
- connect with robots via bluetooth

Outside of this scenario, another goal for this project includes making the developed tools available to the general public by distributing them as open-source software. This will allow other roboticists to compile their own packages and share them on the web.

#### **3.2. Implementation Layers**

The development of this project is subdivided into multiple levels for the users, the interactions that the users have with the tools developed, and the technical difficulty of developing the tools. These subdivisions are beneficial in providing the reader with an illustration of the progressing stages of development of this project.

**Note**

If the reader would like to follow along with the demonstrations provided in the following pages, it is recommended to visit [ros2wasm.dev](https://ros2wasm.dev). Throughout the text, links will be provided to redirect the reader to specific examples.



### 3.2.1. User Levels

For the purpose of establishing target users for the developed tools, potential users were categorized based on expertise level with ROS and programming in general. A summary of these levels can be observed in Table 3.1.

**Table 3.1.** Target users categorized by expertise level.

User	Description
1 Beginner	Complete beginners who have never used ROS or programmed in any language.
2 Student	University students with basic programming experience.
3 ROS User	Students and researchers who actively use ROS for projects.
4 Roboticist	Robotics software developers including contributors to the ROS ecosystem.

Commencing with Level 1, the *Beginner* category is reserved for students in secondary education who have had little to no experience with programming, and therefore are not familiar with ROS. The tools developed in this project would serve as an initial introduction to robotics for this category of users.

Level 2 consists of university students who have completed elementary programming courses but have not yet been introduced to ROS. For this type of user, this project will provide essential tutorials to become acquainted with the inner workings of ROS.

With a slightly higher level of expertise, Level 3 comprises students or other enthusiasts who are already familiar with ROS and have collaborated in projects which use ROS as the main system to handle communications of multiple robotics elements. This ROS user is equivalent to the intermediate user described in the target scenario (Section 3.1).

Lastly, the highest level of experience is dedicated to roboticists who actively use ROS and contribute to its development. For this category of users, the intention of this project will be to involve more contributors in order to more promptly meet the needs of most ROS users.

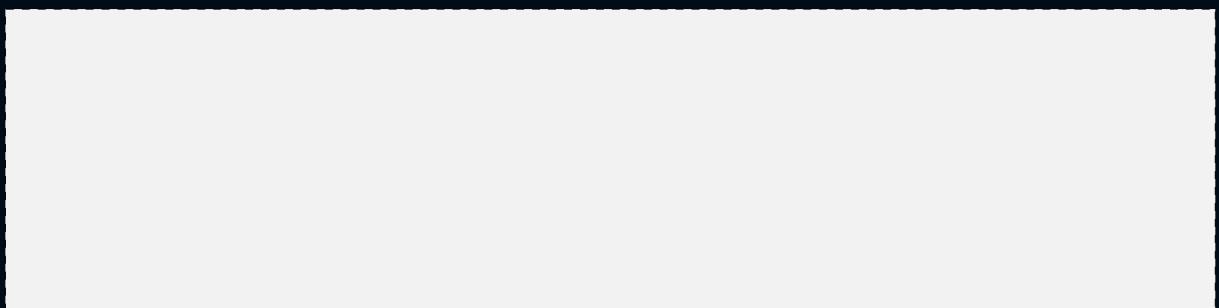
### 3.2.2. Interaction Levels

The GUI is an essential element in the development of this project because it determines the benefits the users will receive by utilizing these tools. Similarly, the interface the user experiences with the tools has been categorized in increasing levels of interaction. These categories are summarized in Table 3.2.

**Table 3.2.** User Interface (UI) segmented based on the level of interaction.

Interface	Description
1 Non-interactive	A publisher runs automatically as soon as the site is loaded.
2 Minimal	User can start/stop a publisher by pressing a button.
3 Basic	User can select and run publisher and subscriber nodes simultaneously.
4 Intermediate	Publishers, subscribers, and services are available, and the user can request basic information about the environment.
5 Advanced	A complete GUI where the user has full control of the environment, can start/stop nodes, modify parameters, manage bag files, and visualize robots.
6 Complete	All ROS 2 features are available and packages can be built on the browser, plus the user can directly connect and interact with external robots.

As the name implies, the *non-interactive* Level 1 does not offer the user any sort of interaction with the ROS environment. With this non-interactive interface, the user can do nothing more than load and reload the page. As soon as the user loads the page, a node which has been pre-compiled will automatically start running. In the simplest case scenario, a publisher node would run and the published messages would be displayed on the window. Because the user has no ability to interact with the environment, this publisher node will continue to run uninterrupted. The scenario described is illustrated in Figure 3.1.



**Figure 3.1.** TODO Level 1 image

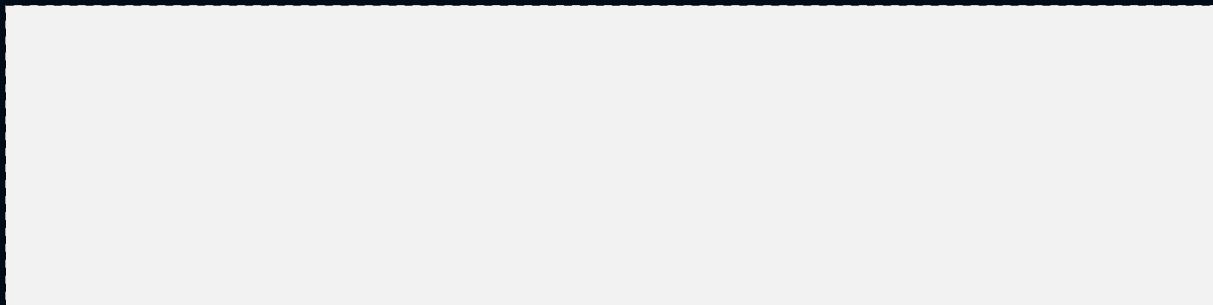
**Example 1**

A demonstration of a *non-interactive* user interface (Level 1) can be found at  
[ros2wasm.dev/pages/demo01](https://ros2wasm.dev/pages/demo01)

NOTE: The page must be reloaded to restart the node.



By marginally expanding the interface, the *minimal* Level 2 provides the user with the ability to start and stop a pre-compiled node. This stage is accomplished by the addition of buttons to the website. Continuing with the example previously described, in this level the user can press a button to start a publisher node, view the output of any published messages, and stop the node at any point. Level 2 is exhibited in Figure 3.2



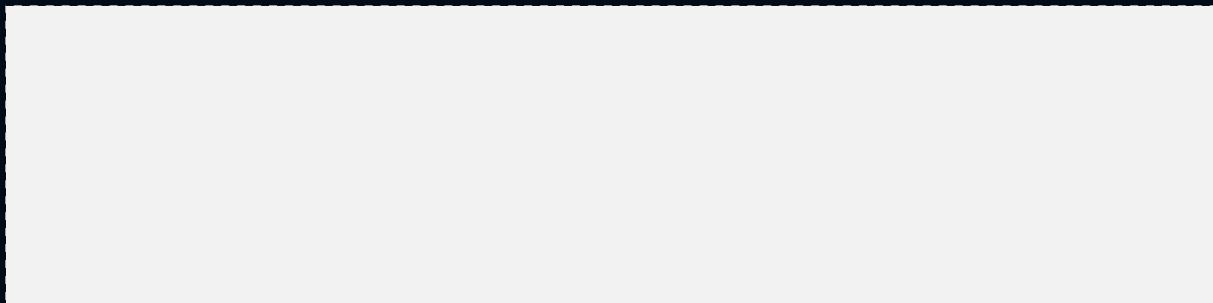
**Figure 3.2.** TODO Level 2 image

**Example 2**

A demonstration of a *minimal* user interface (Level 2) can be found at  
[ros2wasm.dev/pages/demo02](https://ros2wasm.dev/pages/demo02)



The *basic* Level 3 offers the user increasingly more control over the environment. In this level, the user has the ability to run more than one node simultaneously. This makes it possible to have publishers sending messages to a particular topic and subscribers retrieving the published messages accordingly. Nonetheless, the nodes are still pre-compiled and thus the user does not have the ability to change the topic names or any other parameters of the nodes. Figure 3.3 demonstrates a snapshot of Level 3.



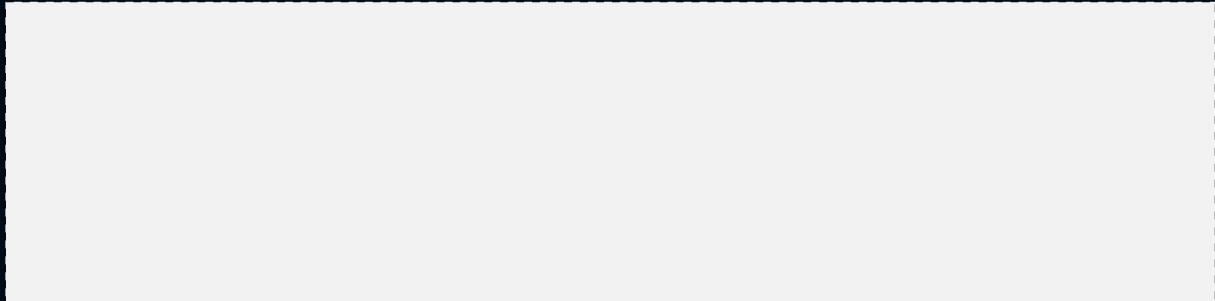
**Figure 3.3.** TODO Level 3 image

**Example 3**

A demonstration of a *basic* user interface (Level 3) can be found at  
[ros2wasm.dev/pages/demo03](https://ros2wasm.dev/pages/demo03)



Stepping further into the list, the *intermediate* Level 4 introduces services, these include both the servers and the clients. Additionally, with this level the users now possess the ability to request information from the environment such as the type of nodes which are running at a given time, or which topics are available. A depiction of Level 4 is shown in Figure 3.4



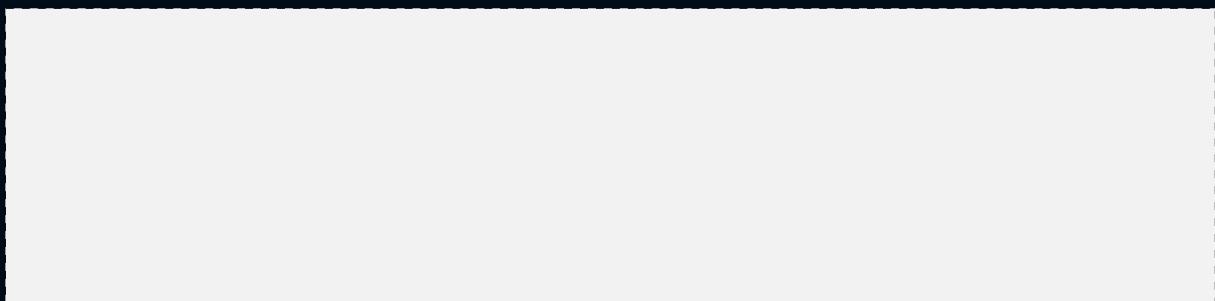
**Figure 3.4.** TODO Level 4 image

**Example 4**

A demonstration of an *intermediate* user interface (Level 4) can be found at  
[ros2wasm.dev/pages/demo04](https://ros2wasm.dev/pages/demo04)



Finally arriving at the *advanced* Level 5, this level is more prominent because it introduces the integration of JupyterLite with the ROS environment. With JupyterLite, the user can directly interact with the ROS environment by using the ROS client libraries such as `rclpy`. A typical workspace in JupyterLite is pictured in Figure 3.5.



**Figure 3.5.** TODO Level 5 image

**Example 5**

A demonstration of an *advanced* user interface (Level 5) can be found at [ros2wasm.dev/pages/demo05](https://ros2wasm.dev/pages/demo05)



Lastly, Level 6 consists of a *complete* ROS environment also made available to the user through JupyterLite. The user would be able to install any additional ROS packages from `emscripten-forge`. An extension for JupyterLite could enable communications with external robots by using the Web Bluetooth API. And a web compiler could be implemented to directly build packages within JupyterLite.

### 3.2.3. Complexity Levels

**Table 3.3.** Implementation categories with increasing technical complexity.

Level	Description
1	A publisher is displayed.
2	A publisher and subscriber can communicate with each other.
3	Multiple nodes and distinct topics can run simultaneously.
4	Graphical display and interaction with a ROS client library.
5	Manipulation of a physical robot via bluetooth or wifi.
6	Visualization of a robot with Zethus.
7	Simulation of a robotics scenario with Gazebo.
8	Development workspace for creating and debugging ROS packages.

## 4. Methodology

In the spirit of reproducibility, this chapter describes the tools and procedures used in the development of this project. Starting with the hardware, the requirements for this project were minimal. An Intel® Core™ i7-1065G7 CPU 1.30 GHz processor with a memory capacity of 15.2 GiB of RAM was used. The operating system consisted of Ubuntu 22.04. A system with substandard specifications can also be adequate for development.

### 4.1. Development Environment

For the sake of simplicity and to isolate the development environment from global dependencies, a `conda` environment was created. This `conda` environment was used to build the ROS packages required. The essential packages installed in the development environment are shown in Table 4.1. For quick installation, an environment yaml file is provided at TODO

**Table 4.1.** Development environment dependencies

Package	Version
<code>python</code>	3.10
<code>setuptools</code> <sup>1</sup>	58.2.0
<code>numpy</code>	1.24
<code>lark</code> <sup>2</sup>	1.1
<code>rosdep</code>	0.22
<code>cmake</code>	3.25
<code>colcon-core</code>	0.12
<code>colcon-ros</code>	0.3
<code>colcon-package-selection</code>	0.2
<code>colcon-devtools</code>	0.2
<code>nodejs</code>	18.12

### 4.2. Compilation Tools

Given that the `colcon` package is already well adapted to build ROS packages, `colcon` was widely used throughout this project with a few customizations. In order to cross-compile the ROS C++ and C packages to WebAssembly, the Emscripten SDK (emsdk) version 3.1 was installed. The Emscripten toolchain was then provided to `colcon` as a `cmake` argument (See Appendix C.1 Line 109).

---

<sup>1</sup>Version 58.2.0 of `setuptools` is the highest version that supports `setup.py` installs which many of the core ROS packages depend upon.

<sup>2</sup>The `lark` package is required for `builtin_interfaces`

### 4.3. Package Building Process

Before any packages could be built, all of the ROS 2 core packages were cloned in a local workspace. To prevent compilation issues, packages related to the default middleware implementations were excluded by adding a `COLCON_IGNORE` file in their respective root directories; these include `iceoryx`, `cyclonedds`, `fastrtps`, and `connextdds`. A secondary purpose for excluding these packages is to ensure that the custom middleware implementation is the only implementation available at runtime. This custom middleware implementation must also be included in the current workspace before proceeding.

Additionally, a “blasm” script was created to aid in the building of packages given that the number of arguments quickly became exceedingly lengthy for manual input. The entire script is included in Appendix C.1 for reference. With this script, it is possible to build any package and its dependencies, or to build a package individually. Care must be taken to ensure that the environment variables for the tools such as `EMSDK_DIR` are set accordingly. The list of options for this script are shown in Figure 4.1.



**Figure 4.1.** Blasm script options.

If the package compiles without errors, any executables in the package will be converted to `.wasm` and `.js` files to be run on the browser.

### 4.4. Debugging Tools

When working with new ROS packages, there are two main sources of errors: errors during compilation and errors at runtime. To tackle compilation errors, the first step is to obtain a full description of the error. The “blasm” script has the option to dynamically activate verbose (`-v`) mode as needed.

Secondly, for debugging errors at runtime, one of the most effective tools is the use of logs. Core ROS packages such as `rcutils` and `rccpputils` already include logging functionalities. Adapting these ROS logs into any newly created packages allows for efficient and quick debugging. Alternatively,

customized logging functions could be implemented for an in-depth analysis at the expense of increasing the complexity of the package in question.

#### 4.5. Post Processing

Once the executables have been successfully compiled, the generated JavaScript files are augmented with additional functions to enable communication between the main thread and the ROS packages. The added functions are described in Appendix C.2. (TODO: OR provide link to file on GitHub)

#### 4.6. Testing Environment

Lastly, there are two phases of testing. The first phase consists of testing the packages directly from the terminal. For the early stages such as during the replacement of the middleware implementation, cross-compilation is not yet required; thus, it is possible to locally test the middleware packages by comparing their behavior with the default middleware implementations. This can be achieved in a separate `conda` environment with ROS 2 packages preinstalled by creating and installing an overlay which only includes the customized middleware implementation.

And the second phase involves testing the packages on a web browser. For this project, only Firefox and Chrome were subject to testing due to their popularity. The tools developed in this project may be suitable for other browsers, however, their full functionality is not guaranteed.

## 5. Middleware Implementation

- What does the middleware do?

### 5.1. DDS Middleware

ROS supported middleware implementations

#### 5.1.1. FastDDS

default

#### 5.1.2. Eclypse

#### 5.1.3. Gurum

### 5.2. Custom Middleware

Why it needs to be replaced

#### 5.2.1. Email

#### 5.2.2. Zenoh

Minimal implementation (minimal set of functions)

### 5.3. Substituting ROS 2 Middleware

At run time

At build time

### 5.4. Custom Middleware Design

Design of middleware packages (tree diagram or something)

### 5.4.1. `wasm_cpp`

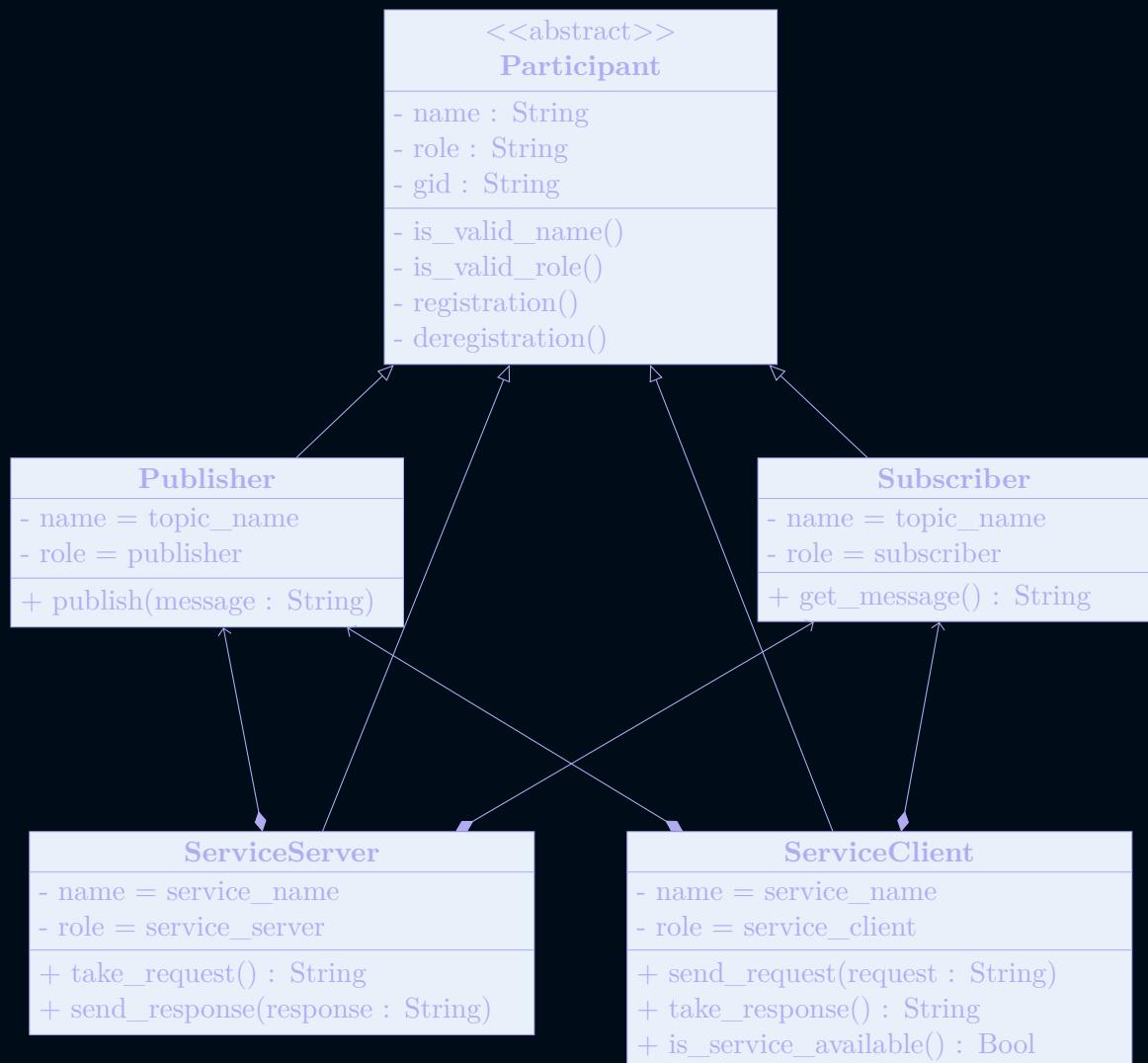
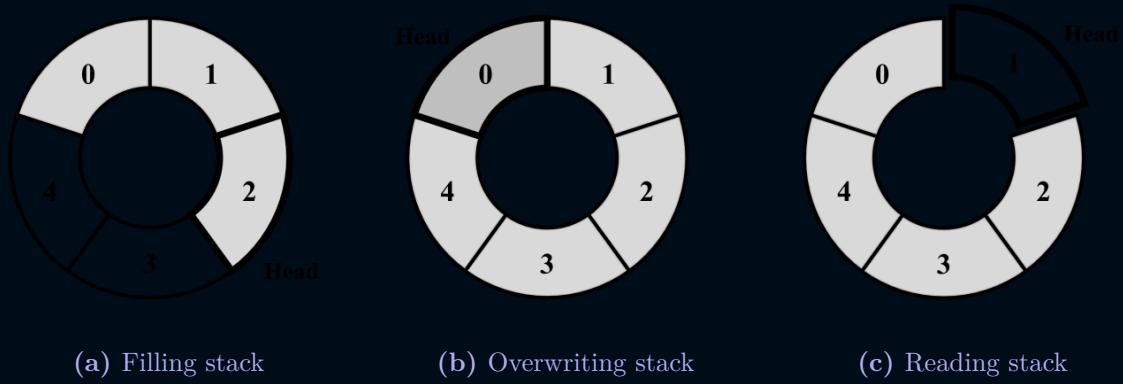


Figure 5.1. A class diagram

## 6. Design of Web Elements

### 6.1. Web Workers

### 6.2. Message Stacks



**Figure 6.1.** Modified Circular Stack, Last In, First Out (LIFO)

- Web workers, what are they? why are they needed?
- Communication channels
- Registry of topics/subs/pubs
- Message handling width

## **7. Package Management and Distribution**

- Automating package building - Pipelines - robostack?



## 9. Summary



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## C. Code

### C.1. Build Script

```
1 #!/bin/bash
2
3 #-----
4 # HELP
5 #-----
6 Help()
7 {
8     echo -e "Options:"
9     echo "-h      help"
10    echo "-c      clean workspace"
11    echo "-d      activate cmake debug mode"
12    echo "-u      build up to package"
13    echo "-s      build selected package"
14    echo "-i      ignore \\'listed packages\\\'"
15    echo "-p      install emscripten python"
16    echo "-v      verbose"
17    echo -e "\n"
18 }
19
20 #-----
21 # INSTALL PYTHON
22 #-----
23 InstallPython()
24 {
25     # Install emscripten python
26     CONDA_META_DIR="${PWD}/install/conda-meta"
27     [[ -d "${CONDA_META_DIR}" ]] || mkdir -p "${CONDA_META_DIR}"
28     micromamba install -p ./install python --platform=emscripten-32 \
29         -c https://repo.mamba.pm/emscripten-forge -y
30     mv ./install/bin/python3 ./install/bin/old_python3
31 }
32
33 #-----
34 # VARIABLES
35 #-----
36 VERBOSE=0
37 EMSDK_VERBOSE=0
38 verbose_args=""
39 package_args=""
40 package_ignore="--packages-ignore rosidl_generator_py"
41 debug_mode=OFF
```

```
42
43 export RMW_IMPLEMENTATION="rmw_wasm_cpp"
44
45 #-----
46 # OPTIONS
47 #-----
48
49 while getopts "hcvpu:s:i:" option; do
50     case $option in
51         h) # Display help
52             Help
53             exit;;
54
55         c) # Clean workspace
56             [[ -d "${PWD}/install" ]] && rm -rf "${PWD}/install"
57             [[ -d "${PWD}/build" ]] && rm -rf "${PWD}/build"
58             [[ -d "${PWD}/log" ]] && rm -rf "${PWD}/log"
59             exit;;
60
61         d) # Activate cmake debug
62             debug_mode=ON
63             echo "[BLASM]: CMake debug mode activated.";;
64
65         v) # Make verbose
66             VERBOSE=1
67             EMSDK_VERBOSE=1
68             verbose_args="--event-handlers console_direct+"
69             echo "[BLASM]: Verbose activated.";;
70
71         p) # Install emscripten python
72             echo "[BLASM]: Installing python."
73             package_ignore=""
74             InstallPython;;
75
76         u) # Build up to package
77             package_args="--packages-up-to ${OPTARG}"
78             echo "[BLASM]: Build up to ${OPTARG}.";;
79
80         s) # Build selected package
81             [[ -d "${PWD}/build/${OPTARG}" ]] && rm -rf "${PWD}/build/${OPTARG}"
82             package_args="--packages-select ${OPTARG}"
83             echo "[BLASM]: Build only ${OPTARG}.";;
84
85         i) # Ignore "given packages"
86             package_ignore="--packages-ignore ${OPTARG}"
87             echo "[BLASM]: Ignore packages ${OPTARG}.";;
```

```

88
89     \?) # Invalid option
90         echo "Error: Invalid option."
91         Help
92         exit;;
93     esac
94 done
95
96 #-----
97 # MAIN
98 #-----
99 [[ -z "${package_args}" ]] && { echo "No args given."; exit 1; }
100 [[ -d "${PWD}/src" ]] || { echo "Not a workspace directory"; exit 1; }
101
102 echo "[BLASM]: Commencing build."
103
104 colcon build \
105     ${package_args} ${package_ignore} ${verbose_args} \
106     --packages-skip-build-finished \
107     --merge-install \
108     --cmake-args \
109         -DCMAKE_TOOLCHAIN_FILE="${EMSDK_DIR}/upstream/emscripten/cmake/ \
110         Modules/Platform/Emscripten.cmake" \
111         -DBUILD_TESTING=OFF \
112         -DBUILD_SHARED_LIBS=ON \
113         -DCMAKE_VERBOSE_MAKEFILE=${debug_mode} \
114         -DCMAKE_FIND_ROOT_PATH_MODE_PACKAGE=ON \
115         -DCMAKE_CROSSCOMPILING=TRUE \
116         -DCMAKE_FIND_DEBUG_MODE=${debug_mode} \
117         -DFORCE_BUILD_VENDOR_PKG=ON \
118         -DPYBIND11_PYTHONLIBS_OVERWRITE=OFF

```

## C.2. JavaScript Functions

```

1 // The Module object: Our interface to the outside world. We import
2 // and export values on it. There are various ways Module can be used:
3 // 1. Not defined. We create it here
4 // 2. A function parameter, function(Module) { ..generated code.. }
5 // 3. pre-run appended it, var Module = {}; ..generated code..
6 // 4. External script tag defines var Module.
7 // We need to check if Module already exists (e.g. case 3 above).
8 // Substitution will be replaced with actual code on later stage of the
9 // build,
10 // this way Closure Compiler will not mangle it (e.g. case 4. above).
11 // Note that if you want to run closure, and also to use Module
12 // after the generated code, you will need to define var Module = {};

```



