FH JOANNEUM (University of Applied Sciences)

**Usage possibilities of WebRTC in a cross-platform developed hybrid app**

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06 / 2016

**Obligatory signed declaration:**

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The present thesis has not been submitted to another university for the award of an academic degree in this form. This thesis has been submitted in printed and electronic form. I hereby confirm that the content of the digital version is the same as in the printed version.

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Michael Stifter Graz, 13.06.2016

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Abstract

Kurzfassung

# Introduction

Over the last years, Web Real Time Communication (WebRTC) has seen a significant rise in popularity, especially in browser-based web applications. Its biggest disadvantage to date is the fact that not all web browsers support WebRTC, although the number of supporting browsers has been continuously rising for a few years now.

This poses a problem for developers who want to use WebRTC in applications today. While nowadays there are few alternatives to web applications in terms of desktop devices, the situation is different for mobile devices. Native apps have become massively popular and deliver substantial advantages when it comes to user experience. This stems from the fact that it is possible to integrate and access many components of the user’s device, such as the list of contacts, the calendar and various sensors into an application with ease. While it is possible to develop a native app that uses WebRTC, it also increases the development effort considerably, since it is necessary to implement the same functionality on multiple platforms, such as Android, iOS and Windows Phone.

A solution to this problem could be the use of a suitable cross-platform development framework that facilitates the use of WebRTC. For a cross-platform developed mobile app, it is not necessary to develop the same application once for each platform it should support, but rather only once. The framework then generates a native app from the shared code base. However, since WebRTC is a technology that can be considered relatively new and is still under development, it is not guaranteed that cross-platform development frameworks fully support the latest version of WebRTC.

This thesis takes a deeper look into popular cross-platform mobile development frameworks and examines them on their ability to support current versions of WebRTC. To analyze this examination, a set of criteria is defined in order to identify suitable frameworks for developing cross-platform apps that use WebRTC.

The thesis is structured as follows: The first part describes various ways of implementing a mobile app and highlights the advantages and disadvantages of each method in detail. The second part discusses the history and functionality of WebRTC, together with its benefits and shortcomings. In a third step, the possibilities of using WebRTC on mobile devices are addressed. Following that, the essential insights regarding the implementation of a reference app are pointed out. Chapter 5 discusses the evaluation process and its results. The final section concludes the thesis by summarizing the essential findings and suggesting possibilities to expand the underlying work.

# Cross-platform mobile development

Beginning with the introduction of Apple’s iPhone back in 2007, mobile applications have become massively popular. Back then, it was self-evident to implement an app natively on the one hand, and on the other hand there were no other options to do so. However, the following years saw a substantially increasing number of popular mobile platforms, such as Android, Windows Phone and the aforementioned iOS. Since all these platforms use different programming languages, there was no possibility to reuse the programming code written for one platform, it had to be rewritten in the exact same way for all platforms that should be supported. Additionally, making changes to an app again meant going through all platforms and implementing the changes separately for each platform (cf. PAPER-1).

APIs, MDD?

Another solution to this problem is cross-platform mobile development. It enables developers to write code for an app only once and, subsequently, generate native applications for all desired platforms from that code base. In most cases, the code is written using web technologies, such as HTML5, JavaScript and CSS. Incidentally, PAPER-2 points out, it was the original plan for apps for the iPhone to be written using these tools. In the end, however, Apple decided that third-party apps for their operating system have to be written natively in Objective-C, which was followed by Swift in 2014.

Introduction, motivation

PAPER-1

PAPER-5 [In this context, the challenge for web developers is to de-

velop di\_erent versions of their applications that are cus-

tomized to suit the speci\_c characteristics of the di\_erent

platforms, yet provide a consistent set of features and ser-

vices across all versions.]

* API

-🡪 Model Driven Development? (PAPER-6)

## Differences to native app development

A large difference between a native app and a cross-platform developed app is the fact that native apps are usually compiled, which in most cases results in faster execution times because the programming code is translated into machine code before the execution of the program. Cross-platform developed apps, on the other hand, mostly use interpreted languages such as JavaScript, which executes its code instructions step-by-step without compiling them first (cf. PAPER-2). Generated cross-platform apps, which will be discussed in more detail below, constitute an exception to this circumstance.

### User experience

One area that was heavily influenced by the spread of smartphones over the last years is user experience, a term which refers to a person’s overall experience when using a software application or system. With smartphones, for instance, it is possible that a certain part of an application is triggered when the user enters a certain location. PAPER-2 defines two primary categories for user experience: First, the context of the application or system. It consists of components which need to be understood by the user, such as platform-specific user interface conventions. Second, the implementation, which involves all elements “that can be controlled in an application” (PAPER-2). This includes the use of push notifications, the handling of input errors or the graphical layout of an application. This second part is solely the responsibility of the developer.

PAPER-2

Difference native/compiled versus web/interpreted code

Sensor/device access

User experience (push notifications, access to phonebook, contacts)

Ability to use app offline (HTML5 application cache – PAPER-3)

## Motivation

Pro / con

PAPER-7

## Approaches

PAPER-1 defines four different categories for cross-platform developed apps: Web, hybrid, interpreted and generated apps. All four approaches will be discussed in detail in this section.

PAPER-1

PAPER-9

### Web apps

Web apps are applications that run within a web browser. Typically, they use HTML5 and JavaScript. The advantage of web apps is that nowadays, almost any smart mobile device has a web browser installed, thus providing a broad range of dissemination. One disadvantage of web apps is the limited access to the device’s sensors, file system and features like contact list and calendar. Native apps, on the other hand, can exploit the device’s full potential when it comes to these features.

Unlike native apps, web apps do not need to be physically installed on the device and, furthermore, also do not have to be upgraded when a new version is available. At the same time, this becomes a disadvantage when users are not connected to the internet. In this case, the web app is not accessible to the user (cf. PAPER-1). There are modern HTML5 technologies like the Application Cache (AppCache) to eradicate this problem. AppCache allows developers to store programming logic and data on the user’s device. However, this technology requires substantial additional programming effort (cf. PAPER-3).

### Hybrid apps

Hybrid apps are a combination of native apps and web apps. They are “primarily built using HTML5 and JavaScript, and a detailed knowledge of the target platform is not required” (PAPER-1). The essential difference to web apps is that they are running within a native app container. The code is still executed by a web browser, but can be bundled together with the application, thus removing the necessity of an active internet connection to download the programming logic. With hybrid apps, it is also possible to access the device’s special features through APIs provided by the cross-platform development framework (cf. PAPER-1).

### Interpreted apps

Interpreted apps use pre-defined commands during the development process to use native user interface components. This means that on the Android platform users will interact with typical Android-styled buttons, while on iOS users will interact with iOS-styled buttons, without any effort of the developer. Despite this advantage in user experience, the developer is completely dependent on the used framework. This could especially pose a problem when a new version of an operating system is released, because it is not clear if the app will automatically have access to new features or if all previously used components will look and behave the same way (PAPER-1).

### Generated apps

This type of cross-platform developed apps use the code to generate native apps from it. They benefit from a high overall performance due to the use of compiled native code. One downside of generate apps is the increased build time that has to be carried out each time a change is made to the app (cf. PAPER-1).

## Cross-platform development frameworks

Over the last years, a multitude of cross-platform development frameworks has emerged. This section will give a brief overview of some of the most popular frameworks and mention their particular characteristics.

PAPER-4

Important criteria for choosing a framework

### Apache Cordova (PhoneGap)

One of the most popular cross-platform development frameworks is Apache Cordova[[1]](#footnote-1). Apps built with this framework belong to the category of hybrid apps. Developers can write applications with HTML5, JavaScript and CSS, which will then be executed inside a native application in a web view. Due to the fact that these tools are also used to develop web applications, this framework offers a relatively low entry point into cross-platform mobile development. Access to underlying features such as sensors and file system is provided via an API, the *Cordova Plugins*. Apache Cordova provides support for numerous platforms, such as Android, iOS, Windows Phone, Blackberry and Ubuntu.

Apache Cordova is open-source, although its owner, the software company Adobe, also released a different version of it called *PhoneGap[[2]](#footnote-2)*. PhoneGap is built on the same core application as Apache Cordova, but is part of a product package that also offers various additional tools, for instance a desktop application, a build tool and a variety of third-party libraries and plugins.

### Xamarin

Xamarin[[3]](#footnote-3) is another popular framework that builds generated native apps. Instead of web technologies it uses the programming languages C# or Ruby. Xamarin apps use native user interface components, thus providing app users with well-known interaction tools. It supports the most popular operating systems, namely Android, iOS and Windows Phone and also offers a native API to access device sensors. Xamarin also offers additional services such as an automated build tool.

### Appcelerator Titanium

Appcelerator Titanium[[4]](#footnote-4) is an example for a framework that creates interpreted apps, which means that apps created with this framework will use native user interface components. However, it also features some aspects from hybrid apps by providing developers with the possibility to write reusable modules in JavaScript.

Titanium is one product of the Appcelerator platform, together with tools like *Arrow*, which is a framework for easily building APIs or *Push*, which is a pre-built service for push notifications that can be integrated into apps. Furthermore, Appcelerator provides a multitude of analytics tools. It has to be noted that while Titanium itself is open-source and free-to-use, all other previously described tools from Appcelerator are only available in paid plans.

### Ionic

Ionic[[5]](#footnote-5) is a relatively new cross-platform mobile development framework that relies heavily modern web technologies like AngularJS[[6]](#footnote-6), Sass[[7]](#footnote-7) and virtual DOM rendering for data-intensive apps with rapidly changing user interfaces. It is built upon Apache Cordova. Ionic is an open-source project and its entire source code can be found on Github, where users are also able to report bugs or suggest improvements to the code.

### Sencha Touch

Sencha Touch[[8]](#footnote-8) focuses primarily on creating user interfaces. It has special features to simulate user interface components from Android and iOS within a web application. It does not, however, provide tools to build native apps. In order to use the code in a native app, it is either necessary to create a blank native app containing a web view for each platform the app should run on or use another framework like the previously mentioned Apache Cordova to fulfil the task.

### Other frameworks

There are also a number of smaller, lesser known cross-platform mobile development frameworks. These include jQuery Mobile[[9]](#footnote-9), Mobile Angular UI[[10]](#footnote-10), Kendo UI[[11]](#footnote-11) or the lightweight app.js[[12]](#footnote-12)

# WebRTC

# Prototype development

# Evaluation

## Setup

## Method

## Results

# Outlook

The underlying work is far from being finished. There are numerous possibilities for further extending the current project. A few possible enhancements are mentioned in this chapter.

## User management and authentication

The backend server that handles the WebRTC connection setup and distribution of information about available peers is currently not authenticating user requests. This does not mean that communication with the server is insecure, all requests to and from the server use HTTPS and are therefore encrypted with Transport Layer Security (TLS). However, there is currently no user management system implemented, which would allow users to log into the application with conventional username and password combinations. For now, anyone who knows the URL of the application is able to use it.

To eradicate this problem, it is either possible to design and implement an authentication solution from the ground up or use an existing application like for instance Passport[[13]](#footnote-13), which is an authentication middleware for Node. With Passport, it is possible to use local username and password authentication as well as authenticating users with an authorization protocol like OAuth[[14]](#footnote-14).

## Multi-user sessions

At this time the application allows for any number of parallel peer-to-peer sessions, meaning that one session cannot contain more than two users. While this entails a number of advantages previously discussed in this thesis, it might sometimes be necessary to invite more than two users to a session. Especially in remote support environments it might be beneficial to get the opinion of another expert to solve certain problems.

Due to its peer-to-peer design, WebRTC only supports two users in one session. If three or more users want to participate in a session, one solution would be to use a Multipoint Control Unit (MCU) as a central communication point which handles the routing of audio and video streams between all participating parties. There are publicly available open-source solutions like Erizo[[15]](#footnote-15) or Janus[[16]](#footnote-16) which could perform this task without requiring considerable development efforts.

# Conclusion

List of tables

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List of abbreviations

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