

Developing a Web Service

Databases, Security and Access Control

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<p>Abstract</p> <p>The goal of the project, assigned by Protacon Solution Oy, was to develop work safety familiarization software called <i>TyPe</i>. The software, which includes a frontend web application and a backend web service, was built for companies to test their employees' knowledge of topics that are relevant to their occupation. Various common, yet critical aspect of developing the web service included database design and management, security measures and an access control implementation.</p> <p>The web service was built using the popular PHP framework <i>Symfony</i>. It uses a MariaDB database for storing application data, such as courses, companies and users. On top of that, JWT authentication was implemented for managing logged in users and authentication alongside a set of firewalls and guards. Additionally, a customized heavy-weight access control implementation was also created due to the complex project requirements. The thesis covers the most essential aspects of developing these features, focusing on the solutions to a lot of the issues.</p> <p>The primary result of the thesis is the product itself, which includes the web application and the web service. Along with the concrete results, the developers gained immensely useful experience as well as new programming techniques and knowledge.</p> <p>In the end, the project successfully fulfilled the specified requirements. There are surely more improvements that could be made to the software, even though certain aspects of it received positive feedback from the clients. Thanks to the successful release, more features are added whenever necessary.</p>		
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<p>Tiivistelmä</p> <p>Protacon Solutions Oy:lle tehdyn opinnäytetyön tavoitteena oli kehittää työturvallisuusperehdytys-ohjelmisto nimeltä <i>TyPe</i>. Ohjelmisto, johon kuuluu frontend-web-sovellus ja backend-web-palvelu, rakennettiin yrityksille työntekijöiden tietojen testaamista varten työnkuvaan liittyen. Web-palvelun kehittämiseen kuului useita kriittisiä ominaisuuksia, kuten tietokanta-suunnittelua ja -hallintaa, turvallisuustoimenpiteiden suunnittelua ja kulunvalvontatoteutuksen kehitystä.</p> <p>Web-palvelu rakennettiin käyttäen suosittua PHP-sovelluskehystä <i>Symfonyä</i>. Se käyttää sovellustietojen, kuten koulutusten, yritysten ja käyttäjien tallentamiseen MariaDB-tietokantaa. Sen lisäksi kirjautuneiden käyttäjien hallintaan ja todentamiseen otettiin käyttöön JWT-autentikaatio ja konfiguroitiin tarvittavat palomuurit. Projektin monimutkaisten vaatimusmääritysten takia siihen kehitettiin lisäksi tavallista raskaampi mukautettu kulunvalvonta-toteutus. Opinnäytetyössä käydään läpi tärkeimmät ongelmat ja ratkaisut näiden aihealueiden toteutuksesta.</p> <p>Opinnäytetyön ensisijainen tulos on itse ohjelmistotuote, mukaan lukien web-sovellus ja -palvelu. Konkreettisten tulosten lisäksi projektin kehittäjät saivat suunnattoman tärkeää kokemusta sekä oppivat uusia ohjelmointitekniikoita ja -tietämystä.</p> <p>Loppujen lopuksi projekti täytti tarpeelliset vaatimukset onnistuneesti. Vaikka ohjelmistoon voidaan tuki tehdä vielä parannuksia, on se saanut positiivista palautetta asiakkailta tietyiltä osin. Menestyksekkään julkaisun ansiosta uusia toiminnallisuuksia kehitetään aina tarvittaessa.</p>		
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Terminology

API

Application Programming Interface allows different programs or machines to communicate with each other by sending data, for instance an endpoint on a server.

Git

A common version control system, or VCS. Git saves changes made to the code and keeps track of all the changes throughout the project. Web-based third-party hosting services, such as GitHub and GitLab, store the changes on a remote server instead of only on the local machine.

HTTP

Hypertext Transfer Protocol is a stateless protocol for sending hypertext documents, including HTML, scripts, JSON and XML among others.

Framework

Frameworks are extensions to programming languages, which are used for developing most modern web and mobile software. They allow developers to save time by utilizing prebuilt features and reducing the need for boilerplate code. Occasionally frameworks offer better maintainability and security depending on the framework.

Web server

Web server can mean either the computer hardware, software or both of them running in unison. Essentially, web server hardware is used to host software, such as APIs or static assets like websites, which are accessed through the Internet.

Backend/Frontend

Backend refers to server-side implementations such as databases and web services whereas frontend indicates client-side implementations, for instance web applications or websites.

Database

Database is a collection of data that is stored on a computer. Web services use databases to manage information including users' login information or products in an online store.

SQL

Query languages, with the most common being SQL, are used to request information from or save it to a database. The results of a query can then be used in the web server code and sent back to the client.

State

In computer science, state means globally stored information in an application. The information can be of previous application events or backend response data. The properties of an object are not considered part of the application state.

XML

Extensible Markup Language is a format for describing data. XML documents can be used to specify all sorts of things e.g., information about a person or a machine. Structurally, XML is a collection of tags which can nest more tags and attributes inside of them, similarly to HTML file structure. XML can be sent over the Internet and converted into another format by using an XML parser, for instance by a web browser or server.

JSON

JavaScript Object Notation is a light-weight format for describing data. Despite its name, it can be used by any number of programming languages outside of JavaScript. The data in JSON files is formatted as key/value pairs similarly to properties in a programming object. JSON that is sent over the Internet can be parsed to objects for use in the application code. Due to its simplicity, it can also be easily read and written by any human.

URL

Uniform Resource Locator is a web address for a resource which can be accessed through a browser or by sending a request. It consists of the protocol such as HTTP,

host name and domain name such as *www.google.com*, as well as any route specifications following them. URLs point to a specific IP address.

Middleware

Middleware is a broad term for software between two or more other software which connects them together. When it comes to web software, middleware can be a communication framework that sends requests from an application to the server.

1 Introduction

1.1 Background

The working life of a software developer is one of ever-changing variables. Brand new technologies and techniques such as programming languages, architectural styles and design patterns are constantly coming out and being improved further. Having a good understanding of the technologies that are relevant to one's work, is imperative to developing modern high-quality products in the software world. Although legacy skill and knowledge cannot be underestimated, learning new things is also necessary.

Every once in a while, when working on a software project, a developer may find the selected technologies or a particular solution to be insufficient. If the need to switch technologies is apparent early on, it can be viable to try something else, although it can be problematic. Frankly, a lot of it comes down to lack of knowledge and experience in certain areas and can be solved by proper planning as well as information gathering. That's when the understanding of different technologies and techniques comes into play.

When it comes to developing a web service, there are several important things to consider. First of all, there are multiple types of databases for different purposes as well as techniques for using them. Selecting the correct one for each use-case will most certainly help in the long run for both development costs and learning purposes. On top of that, there are various ways to handle security and user rights including authenticators, firewalls, user roles and access control. Although many web applications only have public data, in reality, a considerable amount require setting up a complex web of roles and rights.

These issues became a reality during the development of a software project. It turned out that the requirements were more complicated than previously thought, resulting in some unforeseen consequences. What are the best methods to use when encountering such problems? Are there any counter-measures to actively mitigate the issues? The thesis goes in-depth into the development of the project, specifically on the server-side programming.

1.2 Project Premise

The goal of the project was to develop a work safety familiarization software system which includes a frontend web application and a backend web service. In a nutshell, the application should allow the users to create *courses*, which are essentially pop quizzes that are used to test other users' knowledge of various topics. The exam results and other information can be viewed and managed by administrative users. In practice, the amount of potential use-cases for the application is huge due to the customization options and features.

In terms of scalability, the system has to support large organizations. Each organization is essentially a client that pays for a license to use the the service. Furthermore, the organizations may have subsidiaries and subcontractors with considerable amounts of employees under each one. Some companies may even employ freelancers who are not directly linked to them. Not only that, but each user can also work under multiple companies with different roles and access rights.

1.3 Protacon Solutions Ltd

The project was assigned by Protacon Solutions Ltd, a subsidiary of Protacon Group. Protacon Solutions is a software development company based in Jyväskylä, Finland with multiple offices around the country. The company focuses on digitalization and software development including creating web applications and services as well as mobile applications and IoT solutions. The project in question, abbreviated TyPe, was one of Protacon Solutions' many original products. (Digitalisaatio n.d.)

The project was developed by a team of software developers employed by Protacon Solutions at their office in Jyväskylä. The team consisted of developers with various talents in frontend and backend development as well as user experience enhancement. The development started in early 2018 with new features still in progress at the end of the year.

1.4 Objectives of the Thesis

Naturally, the main goal of the thesis was to create a functioning system that fills the requirements set by Protacon Solutions and its clients. It was difficult at times due to the complex nature of the requirement specifications and lack of resources in general. Although it took a lot of effort, a team of software developers undertook the challenge to meet the specified requirements.

In addition, the thesis aims to shed light on some of the design choices made by the developers and to spread knowledge about the associated techniques and technologies. Although the thesis focuses on a particular project, other development options are also discussed to highlight their features and shortcomings. To share information to other developers, the thesis covers some of the most critical issues and solutions when it comes to developing a web service. The TyPe project also serves as a case study of design choices, which includes discussion of its flaws and ways to improve the software system.

The thesis also served as a method of self-learning. Learning about different development options is highly useful since there is not enough time to study them thoroughly in normal day-to-day work. Not only that, but there are also countless critical aspects of server-side programming that are often ignored or hastily presented in school curriculums, resulting in low proficiency and experience when using them in a workplace environment. For those reasons, the thesis was used to improve the author's practical skills and knowledge in software development.

2 Web Services

2.1 What Are Web Services?

The blanket term *web service* can have different meanings for different people often times making it confusing. Essentially, a web service is a means of communication for machines through a network, usually the World Wide Web. (What Are Web Services and Where Are They Used? 2013) Due to the vague nature of the definition, it covers

most server-side software for online stores, social media, management systems, online video games and many mobile applications.

From a software developer's standpoint, web services are associated with server-side programming, also called *backend* programming. It means developing software which ordinarily communicates with a *frontend* application such as a website. Both parties communicate back and forth by sending requests and responses to each other (ibid). The messages can contain data about practically anything, whether it is submitted form data, a user's login information or metadata. Web services often utilize databases to save the received data or load data to send back to the client.

Web services are accessed via transport protocols, such as HTTP and SMTP (Mueller 2013). One of the most common ways of accessing a web service for normal users is through an application in a web browser. When a user interacts with a web application, it sends requests to a dedicated web service in the form of XML messages using one of the transfer protocols. Web services decode the data and perform any necessary actions before returning a response in the same format. (What Are Web Services and Where Are They Used? 2013.) Certain modern web services, for instance RESTful web services, send JSON-based messages instead of XML. A simplified version of the client-server communication process is portrayed in Figure TODO.

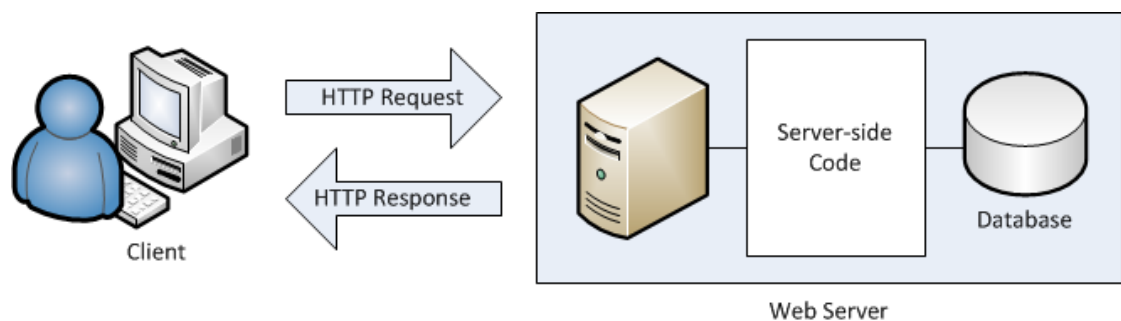


Figure 1. Communication between a client and a web server.

Web services are occasionally mixed up with web APIs. Certainly, they are both related to machine-to-machine communication, although in slightly different ways. De-

spite the fact that all web services are APIs, not all APIs are services. They differ fundamentally in terms of their approach to communication. In general, web services are somewhat tightly coupled with their web applications, whereas API requests require less knowledge of the server architecture to deliver a request. In the case of RESTful APIs, they use HTTP methods such as GET and POST to redirect the request to the appropriate destination. (Verma 2018.) In a sense, RESTful web services also have multiple API endpoints which are used to access certain resources in the service.

2.2 Design Models

2.2.1 General Info

Since web services have to communicate with the frontend application and occasionally other APIs, it is important to choose the right *design model*. Most web APIs and services use one of the two most dominant techniques, SOAP and REST, which account for around 90% of all APIs (REST in peace, SOAP 2010). The distribution of usage in 2010 can be seen in Figure 2 **TODO**.



Figure 2. Usage statistics of web API models (Hoppe 2015, 9).

Technically, SOAP is a protocol whereas REST is an architectural style. (What is REST? n.d.) Despite them being fundamentally unlike, developers usually have to choose

between the two or one of the less common technologies. The model will greatly influence the design of a web service, as everything revolves around the communication architecture set up by the selected technique. However, programming languages and frameworks often use a predetermined model, which means that developers cannot alter it, even if they wanted to. The differences between the technologies lie mostly in communication methods, bandwidth, statelessness, caching and ease of use, which are covered in the following chapters (SOAP Vs. REST: Difference between Web API Services n.d).

2.2.2 SOAP

SOAP, or Simple Object Access Protocol, was designed to allow machines to communicate with each other over the Internet, even if they use software with distinct programming languages. It also supports multiple communication protocols such as HTTP, SMTP and FTP (Kumar n.d). Developed by Microsoft in 1998, SOAP quickly became the *de facto* standard web service technology. (Box 2001.) Despite no longer being the predominant option, SOAP is still utilized in certain software systems.

The most apparent characteristic of SOAP is its heavy use of XML. The protocol utilizes *WSDL*, or Web Service Description Language, to define information about the service in XML format, including how it can be accessed, what sort of data to provide it with and a set of endpoints. (Shah n.d.) The WSDL document is a sort of contract between the client and the service. This results in SOAP being tightly coupled with the server, reducing its flexibility (Wodehouse n.d). An example of a WSDL file can be seen in Figure **TODO**. Although SOAP uses WSDL, it is not unique to the protocol.


```

<?xml version="1.0"?>

<soap:Envelope xmlns:soap="http://www.w3.org/2001/12/soap-envelope"
soap:encodingStyle="http://www.w3.org/2001/12/soap-encoding">

  <soap:Header>
    <m:Trans xmlns:m="http://www.w3schools.com/transaction/"
      soap:mustUnderstand="1" soap:actor="http://www.w3schools.com/appml/">234
    </m:Trans>
  </soap:Header>

  <soap:Body>
    <m:GetPrice xmlns:m="http://www.w3schools.com/prices">
      <m:Item>Apples</m:Item>
    </m:GetPrice>

    <soap:Fault>
      ...
    </soap:Fault>
  </soap:Body>

</soap:Envelope>

```

Figure 3. A SOAP WSDL document example (Tutorial – Example of a SOAP message 2012).

SOAP messages include an XML document with the following parts: Envelope, Header, Body and Fault. First of all, the Envelope wraps the entire message together with a start and end tag. Body is the main part of the message, which contains any data returned from the service or what kind of data is being requested, while the optional Header tag can include any additional parameters. Lastly, the Fault element includes information about handling errors that may occur during the communication process. (The structure of a SOAP message n.d.) In the case of errors, it allows retrying of certain operations or redirection to another part of the service. REST, on the other hand, has to receive a manually sent request in a similar cases.

SOAP offers high security making it a good choice when dealing with delicate information. It utilizes WS-Security, an extension to SOAP, which improves integrity and confidentiality of the message. The extension allows various encryption types to be used for safe transportation of security tokens. WSS is not a perfect technology on its own, however SOAP also supports Secure Sockets Layer, SSL, for establishing a secure connection between the client and server. On top of that, SOAP has a multitude of other extensions available for it. (Wodehouse n.d.)

Although SOAP offers great security and transactional reliability, it suffers in performance. By default, XML tends to be somewhat slower than JSON format, notably used by REST, due to the envelope's size. (SOAP Vs. REST: Difference between Web API Services n.d.) Not only that, but SOAP-based calls can also not be cached on the client-side for later re-use and as a result cost more time (Wodehouse n.d). Since most features can be implemented using any technology, developers tend to prefer the quicker ones.

2.2.3 REST

Compared to SOAP, Representational State Transfer is a more recent technology, having been created in the early 2000s (The History of REST APIs 2016). It is an architectural style that aims to fix some of the issues with the more traditional SOAP. Instead of inventing new standards, REST implements existing HTTP functionalities, for instance HTTP verbs. (Kumar n.d.) RESTful service is a term generally used to describe a web service that implements the REST technology.

The goal of REST is to offer a more loosely coupled technology for web service communication. A tightly coupled web service can only be used for a certain applications and even minor changes require drastic changes to the opposite side. The loose coupling of REST allows developers to save time by using the same or slightly modified API for multiple projects. (Gilmore 2018.) Whether the developers decide to use this to their advantage is up to them, but it is one of the main advantages of REST nonetheless.

RESTful service structure design is comprised of three parts: resources, verbs and representation (Kumar n.d). Resources are available through URIs. For instance, when requesting videos, the resource might be located in the following address: *http://www.my-web-service.net/video*. Furthermore, there could be specific sub-resources under the video resource, for example cat videos, in which case the noun cat would be added to the end of the URI. REST resources are accessed using the HTTP verbs, such as GET, POST, PUT, DELETE, which tell the backend what operations to perform. Generally, GET is for requesting, POST for creating and other miscellaneous operations, PUT for updating and DELETE for removing data, although there can be exceptions. Finally, REST supports the use of most formats including but not limited

to JSON and XML. (ibid.) REST is stateless, meaning that each request includes enough information to handle it on the server-side without saving data about the session (The History of REST APIs 2016).

The primary reasons for using REST lie in its performance speed, maintainability, ease of use and flexibility. As previously mentioned, JSON is generally quicker than XML due to the nature of the format. On top of that, it is considered easier to learn and has great support for web browsers. HTTP methods and the resource architecture are also simple to use and understand. Thanks to REST's independency of representation format and programming languages it can be used in most situations. (Kumar n.d.; Wodehouse n.d.)

The main disadvantages of REST are over- and under-fetching of data from a database and weak data typing. Under-fetching is due to the resource-based architecture, which results in extra requests that have to be sent back and forth in order to receive all the necessary data. Over-fetching, on the other hand, can become an issue when the application only needs a part of the data from a resource. (The ultimate guide to API architecture: REST, SOAP or GraphQL 2018.) Since REST does not inherently offer strong data typing, developers have to make sure the data matches the appropriate type.

2.2.4 Other Alternatives

GraphQL is Facebook's take on web service protocols. It is a query language that was first introduced to the masses in 2015 after having been used internally at Facebook since 2012. GraphQL enables the client application to precisely determine what kind of data it wants to receive or manipulate. This is achieved by inserting a query inside the request, determining all the different properties or fields, as seen in Figure **TODO**. Using this logic can reduce the amount of requests that the client has to perform to receive the required data, while also optimizing the performance by avoiding over-fetching. That said, having so many useful features also comes with drawbacks. Due to the freedom of constructing requests on the client-side, the server-side code has to carefully handle security issues and set query limitations for performance reasons. (Wieruch 2018.)



```

{
  user(id: 4802170) {
    id
    name
    isViewerFriend
    profilePicture(size: 50) {
      uri
      width
      height
    }
    friendConnection(first: 5) {
      totalCount
      friends {
        id
        name
      }
    }
  }
}

```

```

{
  "data": {
    "user": {
      "id": "4802170",
      "name": "Lee Byron",
      "isViewerFriend": true,
      "profilePicture": {
        "uri": "cdn://pic/4802170/50",
        "width": 50,
        "height": 50
      },
      "friendConnection": {
        "totalCount": 13,
        "friends": [
          {
            "id": "305249",
            "name": "Stephen Schwink"
          },
          {
            "id": "3108935",
            "name": "Nathaniel Roman"
          }
        ]
      }
    }
  }
}

```

Figure 4. GraphQL request and response (Anser 2017).

Similarly to GraphQL, Falcor is a technology that describes data querying parameters. It is a server-side JavaScript library developed by Netflix to simplify data transportation. As its format, it uses JSON just like REST and GraphQL. However, instead of replacing a web service's backend, it acts as middleware between the client and the server. In most cases, Falcor is a more light-weight and easy to use alternative, although it does not offer as much utility as the other available technologies. (Helfer 2016.) It is also limited to applications using JavaScript language, such as Node.js services.

RPC, which stands for Remote Procedure Call, is another alternative to the aforementioned technologies. There are various implementations of RPC for different formats, such as XML-RPC and JSON-RPC. When the service consists of varying actions, RPC can be a good choice. This is because RPC is essentially a collection of methods that are called directly on the server by the client application via an HTTP request. (Sturgeon 2016.) Certain languages have their own language-specific technologies, such as the Java RMI, short for Java Remote Method Invocation (Pohjolainen 2016). It is an object-oriented implementation of RPC (Difference Between RPC and RMI 2017). RMI revolves around a stub class and skeleton class. Stub is basically the client's representation or interface of a remote object. It transmits or "marshalls" data to the server-side skeleton, which converts it into Java code and invokes the proper method on the

server. Despite their quite fast performance, Java RMI applications are tightly coupled as they require that both the client and server use Java. (Pohjolainen 2016.)

2.3 Development Frameworks

2.3.1 Symfony

Symfony2 is one of the most versatile backend development frameworks. The PHP-based framework is essentially a collection of smaller reusable libraries, known as bundles. Developers can select which bundles to use for each project making the framework extremely flexible. Although the libraries can also be used separately from the framework, Symfony allows for quicker installation and guaranteed compatibility. (Hansen 2017.) One of the most important bundles is Doctrine, which is used to access information in a database via an ORM. Doctrine makes using databases simple without having to learn SQL.

Symfony's long-standing position as one of the best frameworks is proof of its reliability. It is still regularly updated and has a large user base meaning that someone has likely encountered most issues when it comes to using the framework. Overall, Symfony is a mature framework with great documentation. (ibid.) Symfony is also equipped with useful debugging tools, including a profiler tool that shows detailed information about requests and responses.

Compared to its rivals, Symfony loses in performance and ease of use. (ibid.)

Granted, some of the more recent PHP versions introduced performance improvements, but using an ORM can still result in many extra database queries, especially with certain versions of Symfony. Symfony's difficulty comes from having to learn Doctrine and other technologies that are often used in conjunction with it (ibid). Configurations can also take time to get used to.

2.3.2 Laravel

Similarly to Symfony, Laravel is a PHP framework of separate bundles. In fact, it was originally built from Symfony components (Sakhibgareev n.d). It has, however, become its own entity with many benefits over its competition, including simplicity, robust tools and its own templating engine. According to a survey on SitePoint (Skvorc

2015) Laravel is by far the most popular framework among developers in 2018, especially for personal projects. (Rytov n.d.)

Laravel uses the Eloquent ORM to access data, similarly to Symfony's Doctrine. Eloquent can programmatically structure SQL queries using a query builder. It is compatible with different SQL databases including PostgreSQL and MySQL. More often than not, the backend and frontend environments are separated. However, Laravel's templating engine, Blade, can be used to integrate data from the backend straight into the application template. Blade is a straightforward yet efficient feature for developers who prefer programming in that fashion. In addition, Laravel's Queue function allows performing actions asynchronously from the standard code. (ibid.) It is especially useful for sending emails or executing other time-consuming operations.

When it comes to performance, Laravel is about on par with Symfony, depending on the version. In the end, a framework's speed is the sum of its parts' speed. Overall, when weighing the pros and cons of each technology as well as reading developers' opinions, it is hard to argue against Laravel. In fact, it seems to be the go-to framework in 2018.

2.3.3 Node.js Frameworks

Node.js is a runtime environment that can execute JavaScript code independently from a browser. It uses Chrome's V8 JavaScript engine to convert the code into low-level machine code which performs far faster. (Patel 2018.) It can therefore be used to create web services by developers who prefer using JavaScript for building web or mobile applications. Similarly to frontend web applications, Node.js uses npm, Node Package Manager, and node modules to easily manage project dependencies (ibid).

Since most web applications use JavaScript or one of its frameworks, it can be beneficial to use the same language on the backend as well. JavaScript uses JSON as its native object notation format, meaning that the client, server and database can all use the same format. In addition, Node.js has an event-driven and non-blocking I/O.

Whereas most servers run on multiple threads by spawning another for each request, Node.js runs on a single thread while creating additional threads for running callback functions determined in the server code. This feature makes Node.js a good

choice for applications that must support a high number of requests while having light data processing on the backend. On the other hand, Node.js suffers when there is a lot of data to process in a single request. Therefore, it shines when it comes to real-time online applications. (Why the Hell Would You Use Node.js 2017.) A typical Node.js application can be a chat room or even a real-time browser-based game. The technology is not something one would select for every scenario but more of a situational option.

There are many Node.js frameworks available for use, with Express.js being the most common. It is a minimalist routing framework that creates an HTTP server on top of Node.js. Express is considered easy to use, scalable, and flexible for various purposes. Additionally, there is a myriad of ready-made solutions available due to the large user base. There are also full MVC frameworks, such as Koa2 and Sails.js, which are slightly less popular. Although they are based on Node.js, each framework is completely distinct from each other. (10 best Node.js frameworks in 2018 2018.)

2.3.4 Other Alternatives

Selecting a framework often comes down to the developers' preference in to programming languages. Developers who are familiar with Ruby might find Ruby on Rails to be a great choice. Similarly, Django being the most versatile Python framework is an obvious choice for Python developers. Even PHP has more frameworks to offer including Yii and CodeIgniter, which are both considerable options.

2.4 Database Types

2.4.1 Relational Databases

Relational Database Management Systems, or RDBMSs, are the most commonly used databases. Some of the most popular relational databases are Oracle, MySQL, Microsoft SQL Server, PostgreSQL and DB2. Usually, relational databases make use of the Structured Query Language, SQL. (Hammink 2018.) According to DB-Engines, (DB-Engines Ranking – Trend Popularity n.d) approximately 25% of all databases are relational databases. RDBMSs have been around for a long time, and, therefore, most developers more or less understand how they function.

Relational databases consist of tables. Each table has named columns, which indicate the data types for each cell in the table. Rows can be inserted to, updated or removed from the table. Related data in another table can be connected by using a foreign key or an index. Rows in each table typically have an ID property, also known as a primary key, which can be inserted into another table as a foreign key. This allows logically linking relevant data together by using SQL JOIN statements. On top of that, optional cascade rules can be set to make it so that the unused data in a relational table is automatically removed when a primary key is deleted.

Relational database structure and data types are defined in a schema, which updates whenever new tables are added or existing ones are altered (see Figure [TODO](#)). The data types are enforced by constraints. (Homan 2014.) Some of the most common constraints alongside primary and foreign keys are NOT NULL, meaning that the value has to be defined, and UNIQUE, meaning that another row cannot have the same value in the column.

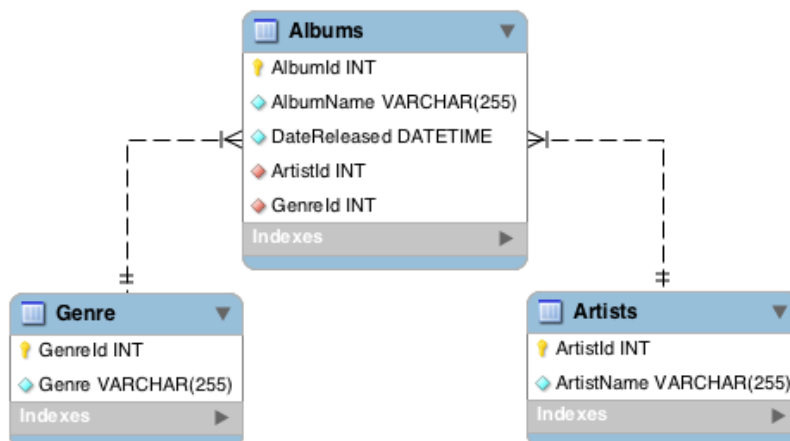


Figure 5. Simple relational database schema. In this case, artists can have multiple albums that belong to a single genre out of many. (What is a Database Schema? 2016.)

One of the problems with complicated relational databases is that the data in a single table will often not match an object in an application (Hammink 2018). Oftentimes developers use an ORM to map database table data into objects which is more of a workaround and results in slower performance. It can force developers to learn both the object mapping and the database structure since it is not always viable to use the

ORM. These workarounds are essentially why NoSQL databases were invented (Harris 2016). Generally, relational databases are best used with a clear database design in mind when first implementing it. Creating new relations later on into the development, for example, causes performance issues due to the amount of JOINS required.

2.4.2 Non-Relational Databases

Non-relational databases, also known as NoSQL databases, greatly differ from relational ones. Generally, NoSQL databases specialize in a handful of use-cases, as they were designed to overcome specific technical difficulties with traditional RDBMSs. Although situational, NoSQL databases come in various sorts, including Key-Value Stores, Wide Column Stores, Document Stores and Graph Stores. (Hammink 2018.) Even though RDBMSs are more commonly used, many tech giants including Facebook, Google and Amazon have widely adopted the use of NoSQL databases. (Reeve 2012).

Key-Value Stores are self-explanatory. They store elementary data, such as strings, numbers and dates, as values, which are mapped by a generated key. Key-Value Stores offer lightning fast query speeds with extreme simplicity as a tradeoff. Document Stores are a sort of key-value store as well. The difference is that the value is stored as an object in JSON format, giving it much more complexity and flexibility. (Hammink 2018.) JSON makes querying more intuitive from an object-oriented standpoint by allowing direct access to an object's properties.

Wide Column Stores are similar to relational databases in that they consist of tables with rows and columns. The main difference, however, is that Wide Column Store data is not constrained by data types, and, therefore, different rows may include different types of data. It may even store empty values instead of a NULL value, saving some space on the machine. Additionally, Wide Column Stores allow partially updating a single column value instead of the whole row. Each cell value also has a timestamp attached to it that indicates the time of insertion. (What is a Column Store Database? 2016.)

Graph Databases are collections of interconnected nodes, where each node is an object with properties. The nodes are connected unidirectionally to other nodes in a relational way. Other than the start and end nodes, all of the relations must define a type, e.g., a company node might have a “HAS_EMPLOYEE” relation to user nodes. (Carpenter 2018.) Graph databases are easy to visualize and understand, as seen in Figure **TODO**. That said, in practice, there would be too much data to visualize, especially in huge social media applications.

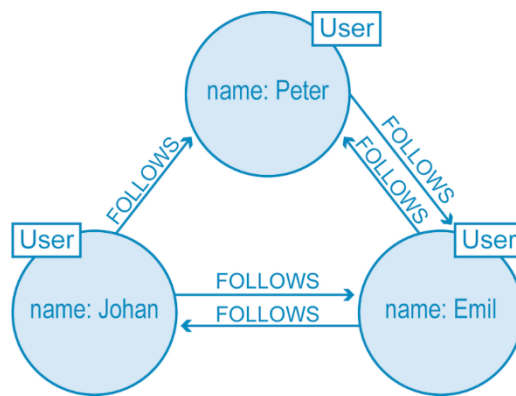


Figure 6. Graph database visualized (Sasaki 2018).

The information in NoSQL databases is less strictly constrained than in relational databases. They do not natively support constraints on data types, although data integrity must still be manually enforced in most cases. Rather than using SQL, NoSQL databases each have their own query language, whether it is derived from SQL or completely original. (Yegulalp 2017.) Hence, it can be a hurdle to jump from using an RDBMS to a NoSQL database.

3 Development Choices and Project Setup

3.1 Selected Technologies

3.1.1 Symfony and MariaDB

The framework of choice for the project was Symfony. Since it is commonly used at Protacon Solutions, there is a good understanding of it among the developers. Someone at the company has likely encountered most issues already and help is never far. Not only that, but there is plenty of reusable code that can greatly reduce development time made by some of the employees. At any rate, Symfony is a well-rounded framework for any project in general.

Symfony makes use of relational SQL databases. MariaDB, a fork of MySQL was chosen for this project. It works mostly the same way with some tiny differences. MariaDB supports some cutting-edge features including thread pool, NoSQL queries with Cassandra and dynamic columns. It also claims to have quicker performance, especially with large datasets. (Nayyar 2018.) Although most of these features are insignificant for small-scale software, it is still a great modern database option.

3.1.2 Angular

The frontend web application was developed using the Angular framework, not to be confused with AngularJS. Similarly to Symfony, it is widely used at Protacon Solutions. Angular is a JavaScript framework that is based on TypeScript, a strict syntactical superset of JavaScript. The object-oriented TypeScript enables type annotations for functions and class properties as well as the use of object interfaces. It compiles into standard JavaScript code. (Lease 2018.) The Material Angular library was used for creating a clean and intuitive layout.

Angular notably utilizes Observables, which enhance event handling in the application. Observables allow a component to subscribe to an event, including to changes to a variable or application state property. Along with Observables, the *ngrx* library was used in the project in order to manage the application state. It is a Redux-inspired state management framework that acts as middleware for sending requests

from the client-side to the backend web service. Afterwards, the response data is stored in the state for later use.

3.2 Setting up the Project

3.2.1 Frontend Environment

Setting up the frontend application locally was quite simple. After cloning the code-base repository, the first step was to install the required packages using Yarn which is a dependency manager. It fetches the dependencies defined in the project's *package.json* file. Other required software include Node.js for hosting the application and Git for version control. Additionally, Webpack, or a similar module bundler, is required to deploy the application locally. The application uses information defined in an *.env* file. When starting the development, one has to make sure the *.env* file's configuration, such as the web service address is correct, to forward the requests appropriately.

3.2.2 Backend Environment

The backend code has to be hosted on a server that supports PHP. One way to easily deploy the application, is to use Symfony's WebServerBundle. It uses PHP's built-in server and requires minimal configuration. Another way is to use a virtual machine, such as Vagrant, to separate the backend environment from the local machine, or to actually host it on another machine. In any case, the server must have PHP and MySQL available. Similarly to the frontend, environment files have to be properly setup to allow access from the local machine.

Symfony loads configuration files from the *config* folder. First of all, the *routes.yaml* file defines the location of the controllers, e.g., "*src/Controller*", and routes for other bundles. *Services.yaml* contains the configuration for service classes such as repositories for entity classes. In addition, the *config/packages* folder includes other configuration files for security, event subscribers, Doctrine ORM, migrations and any installed bundles. Lastly, there are *dev*, *prod* and *test* folders, which can include config-

urations specific to any of the three supported environments. (How to Organize Configuration Files.) For instance, having the Symfony profiler enabled for debugging is important in development environment.

Symfony bundles are managed by *Composer*. The first step to deploying the server is to run Composer's install command. Further bundles can be added to the project by using the require command and most of them have satisfactory documentation for setting them up. After installing the dependencies, the console script in the bin folder can be ran with PHP. It includes useful tools for managing the database and other various things. For instance, the database can be set up with Doctrine's console commands, *doctrine:database:create* and *doctrine:migrations:migrate*. Doctrine itself is installed by requiring *symfony/orm-pack*. Migrate command builds the database schema from the project's migration files, which are generated with *doctrine:migrations:diff*. (Databases and the Doctrine ORM.) Moreover, MySQL can be used to directly access the database with the right credentials, after configuring it in the *.env* file. If a graphical user interface is more desirable, HeidiSQL is a great [alternative](#)^[A1].

PhpStorm is a good text-editor option for the project. It can be configured to automatically upload file changes to the remote server after configuring it properly. PhpStorm is naturally often used with PHP and Symfony, but other available options include Atom and Visual Studio Code. Postman is another optional program for testing purposes. It is used to more efficiently send requests to the server, instead of sending them via the application in the browser. Cmdr is a useful console emulator tool for managing all the different environments, especially when using Git via the command line.

4 Database Management

4.1 Doctrine Primer

Entities are basically classes that are used by Symfony framework's Doctrine tool, specifically Doctrine 2. Similarly to classes in object-oriented programming, entities have properties and methods. The properties can include not only primitive data, such as strings and numbers, but also other entities and collections of entities. Using

private or protected properties with getters and setters to handle them in the code is highly recommended. Doctrine automatically maps the entity classes into database tables and objects into rows via an ORM (see Figure **TODO**). (Databases and the Doctrine ORM.)

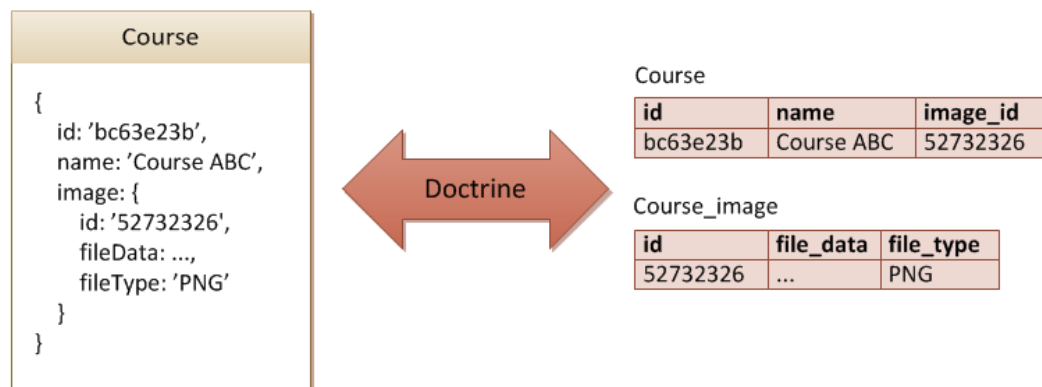


Figure 7. Visualization of a programming object and the corresponding database table schema.

The configuration file for Doctrine is located in *config/packages/doctrine.yaml* and *doctrine_migrations.yaml*. They must describe the URL and name of the database as well as the folder where entity classes reside in. Optionally, naming strategy setting for entities and database types for objects such as `DateTime` can be included. The `auto_mapping` property should be set to `true`, in order to automatically generate the Doctrine migration files. (How to Organize Configuration Files.)

Doctrine's `EntityManager` class is responsible for handling the lifecycle events regarding the transformation of entities between the database and non-persistence and also finding entities from the database. After modifying entity properties in the code, calling `EntityManager`'s *persist* method saves the changes to the object, although it does not trigger a database query yet. Calling the *flush* method afterwards runs all the necessary queries changing the database to match the created, modified and deleted entities^[A2] that are persisted. `EntityManager` allows for native SQL queries as well, if necessary. (Databases and the Doctrine ORM.) It is fairly important to note,

that accessing a property results a database query. Therefore, looping a property getter exponentially increases the amount of queries executed.

Everything regarding database can be configured with the ORM. Annotations can be used to set the table name, unique constraints, indexes, column names and types, nullable values and cascade rules (see Figures **TODO**). Some of the most common property types are string, integer and Boolean as well as Collection for relational properties. Doctrine transforms these types into the database schema with the appropriate mapping. Furthermore, minimum and maximum lengths as well as nullable values determine validations for the property data. Finally, orphan removal can be disabled to keep the orphaned child entities in the database after removing the parent.

```
/**
 * Class Course
 *
 * @ORM\Table(
 *     name="course",
 * )
 * @ORM\Entity()
 *
 * @Gedmo\SoftDeleteable(
 *     fieldName="deletedAt",
 *     timeAware=false,
 *     hardDelete=false
 * )
 */
```

Figure 8. Class annotation for course entity

```
* @var string|null
*
* @ORM\Column(
*     name="description",
*     type="text",
*     nullable=true,
* )
*/
private $description;
```

Figure 9. Description property annotation

4.2 Schema Design

4.2.1 Entities

In the web application, the five main entities are separated into different views, where they can be accessed, created and modified (see Appendix 1). The entities are course, exam, course package, company and user. These entities were roughly designed at the beginning of the project as a baseline for what is to come. The main reason why the database schema was not fully realized at first was because the application required feedback and development ideas from the users. New features were added in whenever necessary. This, however, resulted in some problems later on.

Course

Course is the most essential entity for the application. It is a sort of quiz with a plethora of configuration options as well as questions. Both courses and its questions can include materials such as external links, files and images. Published courses can be assigned to users through course packages, after which they can practice it or take the exam. Each course can only be successfully finished once, but failed ones do not count.

Exam

Exam is the result of a finished course, whether it is successfully passed or not. It includes the answers that the user selected. On top of that, the exam includes all relevant data about the course at the time of completion in what is called an *exam snapshot*.

Course Package

As the name suggests, a course package is a collection of courses. They exist as a way to more efficiently share courses to relevant users, while categorizing them cleanly. The package itself only contains a name, description and image, although it features many relations such as included courses and owner companies.

Company

Companies are essentially counterparts to real-life companies in the application. Their properties include a name, address, image and Business ID. The Business ID is used in certain places to identify existing companies instead of using their primary

keys. Hence, it is also used as a unique constraint in the database. Companies are the primary means of sharing and propagating access rights in the application. There are two types of companies, the ones with paying customers and their subsidiaries.

User

Users are associated with accounts that can access the application. They are tied to a single person by their full name and date of birth. Although there can be rare cases of multiple people having the exact same name and date of birth, this is robust enough for most cases. Users belong to at least one company when they are created, but they can be attached to others after the fact.

4.2.2 Organizations

One of the complications from a business perspective while designing the software was differentiating between the paying customers' companies and their subsidiaries. Although both are considered companies, the customers must have access to additional features and more rights in general. Some of those features include creating new subsidiary companies, courses, users and course packages as well as tracking users' exam results. In order to discern the two types of companies, the *organization* entity was designed.

When it comes to entity design, organization is fairly straightforward. It simply includes information about the real-life company so that Protacon Solutions can easily tell them apart and properly charge them for the service. Organizations can also have access to different paid features, which are distributed to users via the company entity related to that organization. These extra features, which include sharing course packages, more configuration options for courses and an SMS service, are retrieved when a user logs in to the application (see Figure `TODO[A3]`). Most importantly, the entity acts as a Boolean value for distinguishing organizations from other companies. By accessing the property in the server code, different use-cases can be handled neatly, as seen in Figures `TODO`. This adds an extra layer of security and stability to the application, since it disallows users with high-level privileges from manipulating unintended properties on normal companies. It is also useful for accurately sharing access rights.

```

$activeCompany = $user->getActiveCompany();
if ($activeCompany === null || !$activeCompany->isOrganization()) {
    throw new HttpException(Response::HTTP_NOT_ACCEPTABLE);
}

```

Figure 10. Organization property check for companies. The if statement checks that the user's active company is an organization and otherwise throws an error.

```

/**
 * @return bool|null
 */
public function isOrganization(): ?bool
{
    return $this->organization !== null;
}

```

Figure 11. Boolean getter for the organization relation in company entity

4.2.3 Entity Relations

Relational database mappings are either one-to-one, one-to-many or many-to-many. One-to-one is simple in principle, as it means that only a single entity complements another one. In the application, one-to-one was only used for profile pictures and other images. A lot of the time, one-to-one relations can simply be added to the entity class itself as properties or implemented via a trait, although separation of concerns would suffer from that. On top of that, one-to-one relations are useful, when a single class, such as a file or a link, is used by multiple entities. An important thing to note, is that Doctrine will always serialize one-to-one relational entities, when retrieving an entity from the database, greatly slowing down the query in some cases. To counteract that, the relation can be defined on only one side, so that it does not get serialized from the other side of the relation. When it comes to the database schema, the entity data is separated into two tables with a foreign key in one of them. The target entity and foreign key join column must be defined in the annotations of the property as seen in Figure [TODO](#). The definition is only required on one side of the relation. (Working with Relations n.d.)

```

* @ORM\OneToOne (
*     targetEntity="App\Entity\File",
* )
*
* @ORM\JoinColumn (
*     name="profile_picture_id",
*     referencedColumnName="id",
*     nullable=true
* )

```

Figure 12. Annotation for a one-to-one relation

One-to-many and many-to-one relations are counter-parts of each other. They were heavily utilized in the application; almost every entity was connected to each other in some way. The distinction from one-to-one is that both sides of the relation must define the property, although only one of them should have the join column definition. (ibid.) Generally, the one-to-many side is considered the owning side of the relation whereas many-to-one is the child or *inverse* side. Therefore, the inverse side generally contains the foreign key column in the database table. The Doctrine ORM requires that both sides define the opposite property with *inversedBy* and *mappedBy* annotation definitions (ibid). Some one-to-many relations in the application include courses having questions and exams and users having multiple groups of contact information.

Many-to-many is useful when ownership of an entity is shared between entities. For instance, companies have multiple users and users can be part of multiple companies, and the same principle applies to courses and course packages. In database terms, this results in what is called an associative table or *join table*, which consists of foreign keys of both sides of the relation. The owning and inverse sides can be chosen arbitrarily, although it makes sense to have some sort of hierarchy in mind. Case in point, the company entity should be the owner and user the inverse side. There are also many common naming conventions for join tables, but this project used the following style: “company_has_user”. Additionally, both many-to-many and many-to-one relation setters in the entity code must be called from the owner side, in order to properly persist the changes into the database [A4] (ibid).

TODO[A5]

TODO[A6]

4.3 Working with the Data

4.3.1 Serialization Groups

Serialization groups are used to determine which entity properties to include in the backend responses. This is done by Symfony's *Serializer* component. Configuring serialization groups is important for a few reasons. First of all, serializing only necessary properties improves the tidiness and maintainability of the code. Keeping things simple is almost always better. In addition, when sending objects in JSON format, they have to be transformed, which takes time. There are also security issues with serialization. For instance, when requesting data for an exam, the correct answers should naturally not be included in the response. Even if they are not visible in the application itself, they can be viewed through the network tab of a modern web browser. In order to determine the serialization context for a request, one can use the *Serializer* component's `normalize` method and pass it an array of serialization group names as a parameter.

As a rule of thumb, only non-relational properties should be serialized in the default group, i.e., "EntityName". Relations, on the other hand, should have specific groups such as "Company.users" or "CoursePackage.courses". This way each request can contain different relational data. Another way to optimize the groups is by using custom names, such as "set.UserList", which serializes necessary data for a specific view only. The only problem with that is that the group annotation must be added to each property that should be included in it. One example of serialization group annotations can be seen in Figure [TODO](#).

```
* @Groups({
*     "ROLE_USER__Course",
*     "ROLE_USER__Course.description",
*     "ROLE_USER__CoursePackage.courses",
* })
```

Figure 13. Serialization groups

4.3.2 Symfony Forms

Symfony forms are useful for validating the data received by REST endpoints. As demonstrated in Symfony's documentation (Forms n.d.), the form can be instantiated inside the controller for each entity. However, the forms should be separated into different files for better maintainability, which is exactly what was done in this project. Inside the controllers, each form type, such as create type, update type and patch type, were mapped to their specific REST endpoint (see Figure [TODO](#)). The primary reason for this is to allow modifying certain properties on create or update only. As a rule of thumb, PATCH is for partially modifying an entity, PUT is for updating it entirely and POST is for creating and other miscellaneous processes. For instance, a course can only be added to a course package after its creation by using the PATCH form type. There are many ways to implement Symfony forms, but this method is great when utilizing generic RESTful traits.

```
class CourseController extends Controller
{
    protected static $formTypes = [
        self::METHOD_PATCH => CoursePatchType::class,
        self::METHOD_CREATE => CourseCreateType::class,
        self::METHOD_UPDATE => CourseUpdateType::class,
    ];
}
```

Figure 14. Form type mapping

The form types must specify which entity properties can be modified along with validation options. As seen in Figure [TODO](#), the form takes in a list of property names, types as well as optional validation options and default values. Symfony comes equipped with most of the commonly used types, but custom ones can be added as

well. Checking the documentation is essential, as many of the available options have default values that correspond with certain property types and some properties are completely ignored by Symfony in specific cases.

Forms can make use of transformers to modify the form data or match it with other data. Some useful cases for transformers include transforming a date string to a Date or DateTime object or finding an entity based on its ID, as seen in Figure `TODO` with the File class. `TODO`^[A7]

```
public function buildForm(FormBuilderInterface $builder, array $options): void
{
    $builder
        ->add(
            'name',
            Type\TextType::class,
            [
                'label'      => 'Name',
                'required'   => true,
            ]
        )
        ->add(
            'description',
            Type\TextType::class,
            [
                'label'      => 'Description',
                'required'   => false,
                'empty_data' => '',
            ]
        )
        ->add(
            'mainImage',
            Type\TextType::class,
            [
                'label'      => 'Image',
                'required'   => false,
            ]
        );

    $builder->get('mainImage')->addModelTransformer(
        new IdPropertyTransformer($this->objectManager, entityClass: File::class)
    );
}
```

Figure 15. Course package entity form. The properties and options are added to the FormBuilder object and the “mainImage” string value is transformed to an Entity.

Symfony forms can also be rendered to the frontend application through HTML and Twig template files. It reduces development time, since the validation options do not have to be defined on both ends. `TODO`^[A8]

4.3.3 Lifecycle Events

Doctrine's entities have lifecycle events that occur in certain situations. Some of these events happen after and before creating, updating, deleting or persisting an entity instance. Event listeners for each of the lifecycle events are defined in the *subscribers.yaml* file, as shown in Figure [TODO](#). An important thing to note is that events happening before a database query, such as an insert or update, can still result in the query failing. Therefore, calculations and other procedures should be handled in the lifecycle hooks that are executed after the database is changed whenever possible.

```
services:
  App\EventSubscriber\UserEntitySubscriber:
    tags:
      - { name: doctrine.event_listener, event: prePersist }
      - { name: doctrine.event_listener, event: preUpdate }
```

Figure 16. Event listener configuration in *subscribers.yaml*.

Lifecycle [hooks](#)^[A9] ... PostPersist is only launched after SQL INSERT operations whereas PostUpdate is launched after UPDATE operations.

5 Security

5.1 Authentication

5.1.1 JSON Web Tokens

JSON Web Tokens, or JWTs, are an alternative to session cookies. They are often utilized for logging in and authentication in web applications. [TODO](#)^[A10] In practice, the starts by submitting their login information, username and password, to the web service. The server-side software checks that the information is correct before creating a signed token, which is sent back to the client. The token houses the following information: [...](#)^[A11]

As an extra security measure, the authentication was split into access tokens and refresh tokens. The access tokens contain the aforementioned signed token and information about the user, including their active company and access role in said company. The token is attached to each backend request's header by the HTTP interceptor service on the frontend, in order to access protected resources. However, the access token has a short lifespan, which is where the refresh token comes into play.

Refresh tokens are used to retrieve a new access token after it has expired and after first logging in. Although they have a much longer lifespan compared to access tokens, after it expires, the user must login to the software once more. The user's login data is only authenticated when the refresh token is renewed, which makes the rest of the requests faster and less straining for the backend. That being said, the refresh token must be kept secure, since it can be used to renew access tokens until it expires or gets blacklisted.

Lexik JWT authentication bundle makes JWT authentication simple to implement. By modifying the configuration options in *lexik_jwt_authentication.yaml* file with the values shown in Figure **TODO**, the token creation becomes automatized. Additionally, *Gesdinet JWT refresh token* bundle enables refresh tokens on top of Lexik's base implementation. For configuration, Gesdinet's bundle also requires the path definition in *routes.yaml* (see Figure **TODO**). The time-to-live values can be adjusted, but it should be kept short for access tokens and somewhat longer for refresh tokens. Ten minutes and one day respectively is a good rule of thumb. The secret and public keys are generally defined in a separate file and the pass phrase must always be kept secure along with the secret key.


```
lexik_jwt_authentication:
    secret_key: '%kernel.project_dir%/env(JWT_PRIVATE_KEY_PATH)%'
    public_key: '%kernel.project_dir%/env(JWT_PUBLIC_KEY_PATH)%'
    pass_phrase: '%env(JWT_PASSPHRASE)%'
    token_ttl: '%env(JWT_TTL)%'

gesdinet_jwt_refresh_token:
    user_provider: App\Security\UserProvider
    ttl_update: true
    ttl: 86400 # 1 day
```

Figure 17. Configuration for Lexik JWT and Gesdinet JWT bundles. Environment variables are defined in a separate file.

```
gesdinet_jwt_refresh_token:
    path: /auth/token/refresh
    defaults: { _controller: gesdinet.jwtrefreshtoken::refresh }
```

Figure 18. Gesdinet JWT route configuration

The JWT creation event can be subscribed to, similarly to Doctrine entity lifecycle events. This makes it so that custom data can be added to the token between the token's creation and sending it back to the client. As seen in Figure **TODO**, user data, such as their name, active company and access role as well as extra security measures were added to the payload. Naturally, if the user or someone else can change the information within the application, the token data must also be refreshed. In these cases a new token should be retrieved despite the old one still being valid.

```

public function onJWTCreated(JWTCreatedEvent $event): void
{
    $user = $event->getUser();

    // Get current original payload
    $payload = $event->getData();

    // Add some extra security data to payload
    $this->setSecurityData($payload);

    // Add necessary user data to payload
    $this->setUserData($payload, $user);

    // Add company data to payload
    $this->setCompanyData($payload, $user);

    // Set api key for file downloads
    $this->setApiKey($payload, $user);

    // And set new payload for JWT
    $event->setData($payload);
}

```

Figure 19. JWT creation event handler function.

5.1.2 Authentication Service

TODO^[A12]

```

const isTokenExpired = this.jwtHelper.isTokenExpired(this.localStorage.retrieve('token'));

// If access token is expired, attempt to fetch new one
if (isTokenExpired) {
    return new Observable<boolean>((observer: Observer<boolean>) => {
        this.getAccessTokenWithRefreshToken().subscribe(
            (authenticated: boolean) => {
                observer.next(authenticated);
                observer.complete();
            }
        );
    });
}

```

Figure 20. Token retrieval from local storage. TODO

On^[A13] the frontend, an HTTP interceptor is used to add the JWT into the header of each backend request. It basically makes an identical copy of all outgoing requests, modifies the header and sends the request to the original address (see Figure TODO). This is standard practice, because attaching the JWT from each component or service would be unnecessarily complex for little gain. Not only that, but it also allows for less tightly coupled design, making it easier to refactor the logic later on. In addition,

the interceptor service allows one to handle the different error cases accordingly. In the case of 401 error meaning *unauthorized*, the access token is refreshed and the request sent again afterwards, as seen in Figure **TODO**.

```
intercept(req: HttpRequest<any>, next: HttpHandler): Observable<HttpEvent<any>> {  
  const newReq = req.clone();  
  
  return next.handle(newReq)  
}
```

Figure 21. Cloning a request with an HTTP interceptor.

5.2 Firewalls and Guards

5.2.1 Configuration

Symfony's security configuration is located in the *security.yaml* file. [...\[A14\]](#) (How to Organize Configuration Files n.d.)

```

firewalls:
  dev:
    pattern: ^/(_(profiler|wdt)|css|images|js)/
    security: false
  login:
    pattern: ^/auth/get-token$
    stateless: true
    anonymous: true
    json_login:
      provider: user_provider
      check_path: /auth/get-token
      success_handler: lexik_jwt_authentication.handler.authentication_success
      failure_handler: lexik_jwt_authentication.handler.authentication_failure
  refresh:
    pattern: ^/auth/token/refresh
    stateless: true
    anonymous: true
  api:
    pattern: ^/
    stateless: true
    anonymous: true
    guard:
      provider: user_provider
      authenticators:
        - lexik_jwt_authentication.jwt_token_authenticator

```

Figure 22. Firewall configuration **TODO**

The security implementations require access to the User entities. The usual way of achieving this by implementing a user provider. [...\[A15\]](#)

```

providers:
  chain_provider:
    chain:
      providers: [user_provider, api_key_user_provider]
  api_key_user_provider:
    id: App\Security\ApiKeyUserProvider
  user_entity_provider:
    id: App\Security\UserProvider
  user_provider:
    entity:
      class: App\Entity\User

```

Figure 23. User provider configuration. **TODO**

5.2.2 File Downloads

The issue with the application's HTTP interceptor was that it only works with requests sent from within the Angular instance itself. This means that it does not apply to HTML attributes that send requests, such as *src* and *href*, which are generally used for requesting image elements and links respectively. Optimally, file downloads would be handled through the href attribute, but unfortunately it bypasses the HTTP interceptor. As a workaround, the token data could also be appended directly to the URL as GET parameters, although that is less secure since the token is in plain text and the URL becomes extremely long. Therefore, this would be less than ideal.

The most obvious solution to this problem was to manually recreate the request in the application code to make the interceptor handle it. An Angular directive, a reusable component which modifies HTML elements with behaviors and styles, was made to handle the request and either add the file into the HTML element or download it (see Figure [TODO_{\[A16\]}](#)). The returned file is in Blob format, meaning that it has some limitations in file size and speed. Although those limitations are insignificant in the grand scheme of things, the most glaring issue is the lack of platform support. Older browsers, such as Internet Explorer 10 or older, do not trigger the file download with this method. On top of that, mobile devices with the iOS operating system are lacking a file system meaning that they handle file downloads differently from Android and Windows platforms. Normal href downloads still work, because the devices are designed to handle those events in a specific way, which does not apply here. Additionally, programmatically created files in Blob format do not support file downloads or opening in a new window or tab. Unfortunately, the application had to support various platforms and devices, and, therefore, this solution was insufficient.

TODO[A17]

```
firewalls:
  file_download:
    methods: [GET, POST]
    pattern: ^/file/[0-9a-f]{8}-[0-9a-f]{4}-4[0-9a-f]{3}-[89ab][0-9a-f]{3}-[0-9a-f]{12}
    stateless: true
    anonymous: true
    guard:
      provider: user_provider
      authenticators:
        - App\Security\ApiKeyParamAuthenticator
```

Figure 24. Firewall configuration for file downloads TODO

Since the API key token was included in the URL string, it was possible for it to get leaked. For example, if a user opens an image in a new tab and sends the link to another user, they could get access to that picture without signing in. Afterwards, they could use the key to access other files if they happen to know their resource URLs. This is why the API keys have a very short lifespan and have to be renewed often. This allows users to link the images to someone else, while reducing the risk of misuse. When working with tokens, there is always a risk that they can be leaked or intercepted, but keeping user information secure is much more critical for this system than hiding images and files.

5.2.3 Password Reset

Most of the backend resources were behind some sort of authentication. However, if a user forgets their password, they must be able to reset it without logging in first. Hence, one of the endpoints was configured as anonymous, so that it can be accessed by anyone (see Figure TODO[A18]). Basically, the endpoint takes in a username email address so that a password reset email can be sent to the user. In this system, multiple users can potentially have the same email, although it is not endorsed.

As for the link, a temporary API key is generated and concatenated into the web application URL, after which it is sent to the user's email address. Accessing the link begins the authentication process by connecting to another unsecured anonymous endpoint. That endpoint has, however, a light authentication mechanism in the form

of an API key check. If an API key with the token specified in the URL is found and is not expired, the user's password is changed and encrypted with a secure algorithm. Afterwards, the client receives a signed token and is able to login as normal.

6 User Roles and Access Control

6.1 User Roles

6.1.1 Role Descriptions

The TyPe application was designed with multiple user roles in mind. Starting from the lowest to the highest role they are *examinee*, *work manager*, *gate keeper* and *organization admin*. Examinees are considered "normal" users, whereas the rest are administrative users. The distinction between them is that the admin users are normally part of an organization or in a management position in one of their subsidiaries and examinees are other employees and freelancers. Technically, each role has access to features that are meant for users below them in the hierarchy, e.g., work managers can also take exams.

The majority of users are *Examinees*, who only take exams in the application. They have no rights to create or modify anything except for exam entities and their own user information. Rather than being part of organizations, these users generally belong to subsidiary companies. Examinees cannot see any other users or even course packages, only courses that are assigned to them and any related materials.

Work managers are administrators designated to specific course packages. Their primary purpose is to assign examinees to course packages and occasionally create new users. They can additionally track the exam results of users who belong to their company or companies. Similarly to examinees, work managers belong to subsidiaries more often than not, although it is possible have them in an organization. Even though they are administrators of course packages, they cannot modify the entity itself in any way.

Organization admin is the highest role available. As the name suggests, it is only available for users in an organization. Organization admins can not only create

courses, course packages, companies and users but they can modify basically every property available. Furthermore, it is up to organization admins to create all content in the application, including other users. They also have access to exam results and their users' information similarly to the other admin roles.

Gate keepers are similar to organization admins in that they can only belong to an organization. The main difference is that they cannot create new courses, course packages or companies. They can, however, create users and manage them, which includes attaching them to companies and course packages. The gate keeper role is designed for people whose job is to check which users have successfully taken an exam.

6.1.2 Changing Companies

The access control list is not only based on access roles, but also on companies. This means that access control entries include the ID value of the company, through which the access right is shared. This is necessary due to some edge cases, such as when a single work manager is designated to the same course package through more than one company or when an examinee is attached to a course package in similar fashion. Naturally, users can only have access rights that are connected to companies that they belong to.

TyPe was designed to be simplistic in that each user has a single active company, while they are logged in, to reduce the amount of information they take in at once. Since users can be part of multiple companies, there had to be an option to change the active company of the user. At first, when creating a user, they are also attached to a company making that their active company at that time. Afterwards, the user can switch their active company, after which a new token containing the necessary information is generated on the backend. Every request sent from the application includes the ID of the active company, which is used in the access control filter as described in more detail in chapter **TODO**.

The difference between administrative users and examinees is that examinees cannot change their active company. Instead, they see all the courses that they have access to concurrently. When it comes to admins, one can only switch to a company in which their access role is of a similar level; organization admins and gate keepers can

only change to a role in another organization, as changing to another company under the same organization is redundant. Work managers, on the other hand, can freely switch between different companies where they exist as work managers. Whenever a user accesses the application, a request is sent to the web service retrieving a list of companies that the user can switch to. The code for retrieving the company data is showcased in Figure `TODO`^[A19].

To allow admin-level users to also take exams without making the user interface too confusing, another feature, known as *Examination mode*, was developed. It allows users to temporarily set their own role to “examinee” for backend requests. Examination mode makes it so that one can only receive data relevant to examinees and additionally disables company switching, until they change back to Administrative mode.

6.2 The Importance of Access Control

Requests can be sent to API endpoints via programs like Postman. The requests can include headers, payloads and anything that web applications includes in them, including the access token. Therefore, unauthorized people can try to fish for protected data if they are aware of the resource URLs. Access control is essential to software solutions for making sure that users can only access resources available to them.

Many web services and APIs consist of both secure and unsecure endpoints that require no authentication. When designing unsecure endpoints, it is imperative to disallow access to any protected resources. For instance, when using serialization groups, they should be manually set on the backend to essentially avoid a kind of SQL injection. Otherwise, one could populate an entity and all of its relational properties to gain access to them. With large scale modern web software consisting of huge amounts of features, it can be a lot of work to keep everything secured. Nonetheless, a robust access control system can thwart a lot of unwanted breaches of security.

Naturally, keeping user information secure from unauthorized people is imperative, especially because of the European Union’s General Data Protection Regulation. One of the primary adjustments that developers have to make is that user information

has to be deleted from systems that have no necessity to handle it. According to GDPR's terms, personal information includes names, addresses, phone numbers, tracking information and even IP addresses among other things. (Henkilötietojen käsittelyä koskevat periaatteet n.d.) Software companies must make sure to keep this data from the hands of unauthorized people.

6.3 Base Implementation

6.3.1 Access Control List

Access control list is a sort of map that describes which users have access privileges to which resources.

TODO[A20]

TODO[A21]

6.3.2 Access Control Filter

Symfony has a built in event that is dispatched after the controller for an endpoint has been resolved, but before executing the code. The event can be subscribed to with the *onKernelController* function. (Built-in Symfony Events n.d.) In this function, it is possible to ...[A22]

TODO[A23]

As for user entities, there are no access control entries with them as the domain. Instead, any administrative user can see all users in their respective companies. The user filter basically checks ...[A24]

TODO[A25]

6.4 Access Control Entries

6.4.1 Entity Design

The access control entries work the same way as other Symfony entities. They are mapped to a single table in the database with the most important properties being

the subject, domain, company and access role. The properties are connected to the original entities by foreign keys making it easier to create complex SQL queries with multiple joins (see chapter `TODO` for an example). All of the properties, except company, are required to map the entries onto the appropriate entities.

Subject refers to the user who has an access control right to an entity. The target entity, on the other hand, is known as the *domain*. It consists of two properties, domain id and domain name, which are the primary key of the domain entity and its name, e.g., “App\Entity\Course”. Most access control entries also have a company property, which indicates the company through which the right is given. When accessing backend resources, the user’s active company is used to filter access control entries based on the company ID. Lastly, access role is self-explanatory in that it simply specifies the role as a string value, for instance “EXAMINEE” or “ORGANIZATION_ADMIN”.

Access `[A26]` rights are reliant on modifiers. In this case, users can gain access through a certain role, company or even a course package. For example, a single user can be an administrator of a course, even though they cannot take the exam for that course without having examinee-level access rights. That same rights can also be given via multiple companies or even multiple course packages. All of the variable data is included in the access control entry increasing its complexity. Otherwise, the access control rights would be impossible to manage afterwards.

6.4.2 Creating Entries

The access control rights are generally created in entity lifecycle hooks (see chapter `TODO`). In the case of a new course, its creator gets an entry for that course with both an “OWNER” role as well as an “ORGANIZATION_ADMIN” role. Every other organization admin in the same company also obtains the latter. `...[A27]`

Access rights are propagated via the company or `...[A28]`

Whenever a new user is added to a company, they must also get access to the necessary data. `...[A29]`

6.5 Problematic Cases

6.5.1 Retroactive Access Rights

In the application, users' contact information is tied to their company. Therefore, since any user can belong to multiple companies, they could also have more than one email and phone number. The contact information is stored in `UserDetail` entities, which are associated with the user and the company. Originally, the data was simply stored on the user entity instead, but it was deemed necessary to allow multiple sets of contact information. Another benefit of a separate entity is that the *Blameable* trait can be utilized. It saves the ID of the user who created the entity, so that their information can be tracked later on. Using this method, it is possible to retrieve the contact information of the work manager who attached an examinee to a course package, and show it to the user. Furthermore, the same principle applies to updating and deleting.

Due to changes in the application code after the TyPe application product was released, certain administrative-level users lost their access rights to some users' contact information^[A30]. ...

The issue was fixed by an SQL Stored Procedure, which is similar to a function. The procedure made use of^[A31]... The logic for creating the necessary access control works as follows:

1. Select all user detail entities and iterate through them in a loop.
2. Inside the loop, select all users with an administrative access role in the company that the user detail belongs to and iterate through them as well.
3. Inside the inner loop, create a new access control entry entity for that user to that user detail with the same access role and the same company.

For the procedure code, see Appendix 2.

6.5.2 Creating Duplicate Entities

Each real-life company can only have a single company entity matching it in the application. However, multiple organizations can still "own" the same company. When creating a company, one of the required properties is the business ID, which is used

as a unique constraint in the database. After typing in the business ID in the correct format, a request is sent in the background. The request checks whether a company with the business ID already exists, ignoring the standard access control procedures. Instead, the endpoint only checks that the user is an organization admin. Although it is not ideal to be able to find entities without proper access, it was essentially the only way to handle this case without confusing the users.

If an existing company entity is found by the database query, it is added under the user's organization. The difference from normally creating a company is that the organization does not receive owner rights. Therefore, only the first organization to create a company can modify its properties, although others can still add users to it. In that case, both organizations have access to those users.

7 Discussion

7.1 Conclusions

7.1.1 Accomplishments

From the clients' perspective, the application had many praiseworthy features. Specifically, it received positive feedback for its ease-of-use and intuitiveness. The credit for that certainly goes to the development team's user experience expert. Moreover, it was a good idea to wait for clients' feedback and then refactor certain components and features with the feedback in mind. The course form, which was used for creating and editing courses, was especially well-received.

Although the access control implementation was not without flaws, it certainly worked as intended. The base implementation, including the entity, access control filter, propagation functions and the inheritance of access rights, was intelligently designed. It can surely be utilized again in future projects due to its flexibility. There is also a lot to learn from developing it.

The application was designed with best practices in multiple areas. Thanks to the knowledge from the team's most experienced developers, a lot of pitfalls were avoided. Issues were spotted in code review and quality assurance testing and

promptly fixed afterwards. The team followed naming conventions for files, resources such as endpoints, tables and components. Although the developers did not have much experience with Angular or state management, they handled Observables, the application state and the ngrx middleware appropriately and efficiently.

7.1.2 Design Flaws

The controllers in the web service contained a lot of actions, which are endpoints that handle various operations. It would have been better to implement generic REST endpoints by using a bundle like the FOSRestBundle. They allow easily modifying entities if implemented properly. Additionally, array type properties should be configured to use *adder* methods instead of *setter* methods, so that every related child row does not have to be altered on each update. That was how the controller endpoints worked at first, but Symfony forms and the access control implementation created some issues. There might be better input validation bundles available or perhaps Symfony forms could be customized somehow.

As mentioned in chapter **TODO**, organizations can have other organizations as their subsidiaries. Taking it one step further, a subsidiary organization could technically have another organization under it. This results in an incredible amount of database queries and long iterative loops when creating access control entries for those companies. Looking back at this functionality, it would have been better to disallow subsidiary organizations in favor of a two-level design with organizations on top and normal companies below them. Even if the clients actually made use of this feature, as it stands, it would be extremely confusing to them.

7.1.3 Improvement Possibilities

The access role names are fairly generic. One way to cater to different clients' needs would be to allow customizable role names and even names for entities. For instance, some client might prefer to call companies subsidiaries instead. That way, it would be less confusing for the end-users, since they can use terminology and jargon from their respective occupations. The main issue, however, is that Finnish language has a lot of conjugations and they would have to be configurable as well.

The complexity of the access control service's logic makes some of the queries take a long time. During this time, the users have to wait for the response before continuing to use the application. It would definitely be better to run those tasks asynchronously by adding them to a process queue, which would be executed with a first-in-first-out logic. Granted, if there are many tasks in the queue, it might take a while for users to see the changes in the application, but it would be far better than forcing them to wait. Similarly, the process queue could also be utilized by the email and text message services, which can take a while to execute the message delivery.

Serializing entities to response payloads takes not only time, but also processing power. Optimizing the population options would be the first step to achieving faster performance in the system. For instance, when populating course entities in a Course package, the population options could be changed from "CoursePackage.courses, Course" to "set.CoursePackageList". Then, the set group can be added to each property that should be included in the set. Not only does this make it faster in certain situations, but it also makes it easier to maintain the software in the long term. Another improvement to property population would be to include certain *count* values. In the previously mentioned course package list example, instead of populating each course entity, it might be better to include only the number of courses and possibly the number of unpublished Courses as well. Knowing other information about the courses is unnecessary. Other than the optimizations for serialization, this also reduces the time it takes for the access control filter to run, since it is executed for each processed entity.

There is a generic search feature in each list view. The search is limited to string-based properties, such as names and descriptions. Instead, it would be far better to be able to filter based on other criteria, including relations and Boolean properties. Some examples of this include finding courses based on course packages, users based on companies, courses that are published or unpublished, exam results that are valid or expired, et cetera. The search criteria should optimally be implemented in a generic way, with a trait or service, to reduce development time and not hinder the maintainability.

7.2 Lessons to Learn

The main problem that slowed down the development was the less than adequately designed database schema. At first, users could have a single set of emails and phone numbers, which was changed later on. Another big change was when course packages could be shared between organizations, which meant that the relation had to be changed from one-to-many to many-to-many among other issues. Similar code refactoring had to be made often, resulting in extra development time. As Protaccon Solutions' motto says, *pro planning is pro quality*.

Deadlines are something that developers have to constantly deal with at work. Since the development of the system took longer than expected, the project's release date came quickly. The team knew that they had a hard time creating a stable product on release, which meant that certain shortcuts had to be taken to reach that state. This ended up hurting the development in the long run, due to the technical debt of having to refactor code. Instead of developing barely working features, it would have been better to spend the extra time and even delay the release if necessary. This also comes back to the planning issues.

When developing a feature, it is common to split it into smaller tasks. Generally, it is a good thing, although it can also create issues later on. Other code changes might affect that feature or make it more difficult to implement in some way. In the worst case scenario, it might even get forgotten or pushed lower into the backlog of tasks. In addition, the developer or developers who originally worked on a feature might not be working on the project anymore, meaning that programming the feature takes more time. The split tasks should be prioritized well and preferably developed right after the main task in many cases.

Most problems that developers run into have already been solved in the past. Therefore, it is better to reuse existing solutions, rather than try and reinvent them. It is important to use libraries and bundles that are publically available, as long as they are secure and do not pose other problems. Although it is difficult to say what kind of packages could have been used in the project, there are surely a few of them.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Screenshots of the TyPe web application

TODO

Appendix 2. SQL procedure for adding access rights to user information.

TODO