Chapter 1 – Introduction

Can a web site be made responsive without having the frontend do all the work?

# Background

Modern web sites contain a multitude of functionality and rich, interactive content. With this rich content and interactivity there comes a cost in the form performance issues. Mobile devices are quickly becoming peoples main channel for accessing content on the web [[1](#_ENREF_1)], much of which is either not designed for- or is poorly implemented for use on such devices. Web applications are often highly optimized on the backend for the sake of scalability through database tuning, clustering, customized data caching and so on, which allows them to handle a large number of requests. Although this performance tuning helps the applications service a large number of users, the users themselves do not experience these optimizations in any tangible manner. Users are interested in their own request, and if it is slow the quality of the user experience is severely diminished.

With mobile devices comes a severe reduction in the amount of screen space web developers can utilize to present content. Considering that web pages now need to work in both desktop and mobile contexts, developers have started coming up with ways to simplify and streamline the process of creating web pages that adapt to the environment in which they are being viewed. The most popular among these is “Responsive Web Design” (RWD). Suggested in the book by the same name [[2](#_ENREF_2)]. Roughly speaking it aims to make web sites “respond” to the context in which they are being viewed. This is primarily achieved through something called “Media Queries” in CSS. Media Queries can be used to detect certain attributes of the device rendering the web page, e.g. screen width and height, which then can alter the layout of the web page to fit the result of the query. It is not without its problems, though, and it has been noted that it is not a “silver bullet” for mobile Web design. Doing all of the adaptation on the frontend causes file sizes and logic to grow much larger than previously, as all clients now receive all HTML markup, CSS, JavaScript and media [[3](#_ENREF_3)].

## Web performance

Steve Souders, author, creator of the web browser performance plugin YSlow and engineer at Google, suggests that because of this, we should focus on improving the response time on the frontend. The frontend, he says, stands for 80-90 percent of the response time [[4](#_ENREF_4)]. He suggests a list of best practices aimed at improving the performance of web pages through frontend optimization:

I set out to capture these best practices in a simple list that is easy to remember. The list has evolved to contain the following 14 prioritized rules:

1. Make fewer HTTP requests
2. Use a content delivery network
3. Add an Expires header
4. Gzip components
5. Put stylesheets at the top
6. Put scripts at the bottom
7. Avoid CSS expressions
8. Make JavaScript and CSS external
9. Reduce DNS lookups
10. Minify JavaScript
11. Avoid redirects
12. Remove duplicate scripts
13. Confi gure ETags
14. Make Ajax cacheable

- Steve Souders

Many design philosophies and best practices have surfaced with the advent of the mobile Web, RWD is, as mentioned, one of the most popular among these. While this method is practical for developers in terms of giving them an easy way to make their web pages adapt to their environment, it leaves the whole job of making the web page responsive to the frontend. This is somewhat contradictory to Souders idea of optimizing the frontend of web applications, because that is where the largest chunk of the response time is spent in such a solution. Responsive Web Design (RWD) is reliant on heavy use of CSS (stylesheets) and also needs to use JavaScript to hide and alter content to fit each device. Both of these things go against Souders principles. Doing these kinds of alterations on the frontend also does not reduce the amount of HTTP requests, as these have their roots firmly set in the backend and the HTML document that is sent to the user.

On the opposite side of Souders we have people like Kate Matsudaira, a previous technical lead/manager at Amazon and Microsoft, who suggests that to improve the performance of the mobile Web we need to improve the backend [[5](#_ENREF_5)]. She says that because of the limited system resources and bandwidth, we need to minimize connections and data across the network, images and other media by leveraging technologies such as localStorage and caching, as well as allowing the server to correctly identify the limits of the device making a request. While her article focuses on API design for the mobile Web, it touches upon an interesting question: how can we improve the detection capabilities of the server to improve Web performance?

## Making the backend smarter

Jon Arne Sæterås, Mobile Web evangelist, blogger and product director at Mobiletech suggested in his post “Next steps of Responsive Web Design” [[6](#_ENREF_6)], that letting the device do all the hard work of being responsive is neither fair, right or smart.

It is not only the design of the web site and the layout of content that needs to be adapted of enhanced; the idea of being responsive, adaptive and enhancing, must be implemented in the whole value chain.

– Jon Arne Sæterås

In its current form, RWD sends the same markup, CSS, JS and images to all devices, regardless of their capabilities. What he means by this statement is that more parts of the Web hierarchy must be made to be responsive. Being able to move much of the work over to the backend can potentially reduce much of the current load on devices viewing Web pages designed using RWD. Involving the whole “value chain”, as he calls it, will result in Web pages consuming less time and resources on the frontend, leaving the responsibility of things like image scaling and markup processing to the backend.

Responsive Design + Server Side Components (RESS) is a method of making the server participate more actively in RWD. It suggests having Web sites split into components that are altered by the server depending on the type of user agent (UA) it detects as the requestor [[7](#_ENREF_7)]. This idea goes along with Sæterås’s notion of making more of the “value chain” smarter, in this case the Web server. It allows the server to more accurately tune what is sent to the client, amongst other things giving it the ability to optimize bandwidth usage when responding to mobile devices.

## Future Friendly

Being able to make a web site adapt to all present and future devices is a daunting proposition. Making it “future proof” is near impossible, as there is no way of telling what kind of devices people will be using to access the Web in the future. In 2011, several of the biggest Web gurus today got together and proposed a new Web design philosophy: be future friendly, not future proof [[8](#_ENREF_8), [9](#_ENREF_9)]. It suggests that being “future proof” is unnecessary (and near impossible), and that focusing on what actually brings value to your site will help it survive longer. It suggests focusing on content first and having dynamic feature detection systems that do not rely on manual updates.

In this thesis we present an implementation of a possible solution for making web pages responsive without having all of the work done on the frontend, based on the RESS concept and another implementation of a RESS-like system called Detector by Dave Olsen [[10](#_ENREF_10)]. This is done with the aim of improving web performance on both desktop and mobile devices. The focus has been on the mobile aspect as this is where the biggest gains can be found in the context of improving performance, and thus the user experience. The implementation is a user agent feature detection plugin for the Enonic CMS, which aims to accurately detect the features supported by each individual user agent. This allows the HTML document served to the user can be tailored on the backend before ever reaching the requesting user agent. The idea is that by tailoring the HTML on the backend, the performance on the frontend can be improved, following the concepts of Souders and Matsudaira, amongst others, and making the Web pages built in the CMS “future friendly”.

# Structure

The thesis is structured in a “bottom up” fashion to provide all necessary background knowledge before delving into the details of the implementation.

Chapter 2 presents the technologies and concepts that this thesis is based upon, as well as the related work in this field.

Chapter 3 presents the Enonic CMS, how it supports plugins and the details surrounding the implementation of our plugin.

Chapter 4 will detail how we did the performance testing of the plugin and also present the results of the tests.

Chapter 5 discusses the merits of the plugin, the results of the performance tests and attempts to look at the results in the context of related work in the same field.

Chapter 6 will tie it all together and summarize our key findings.

It can be read in three parts. The first part containing the background information needed to understand the implementation. The middle part can be considered the practical part, describing the process of implementing the system and the performance tests conducted on it to establish the impact it might have on making the Enonic CMS’ device classification system more future friendly. The final part is a discussion where we discuss the implementation, its merits and the results from the performance tests. It also looks at the concepts themselves and how they tie into the implementation.

# Bibliography

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