



University of Nottingham  
Department of Computer Science

COMP3003 - Interim Report

A Cross-platform Networking Configuration & Auditing  
Mobile Application

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## **Abstract**

For Small/Medium, and even some large companies that own and maintain their own server spaces, a unique set of challenges are to be faced. Although these devices are typically business critical, they are typically squeezed into encumbered spaces, with lacklustre lighting and limited access. Further, and critically, this makes the maintaining and documenting of these devices inherently more difficult. Current alternative solutions fail to focus on in-situ use, and are typically bloated with features for large data centers. This project investigates the needs and requirements that can solve these challenges, with a focus on Human-Computer Interaction. From these designs, this project then implements a cross-platform mobile application that satisfies these needs.

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# 1 Introduction

With the work for the Research Support Team in the School of Computer Science at Nottingham, one of the primary responsibilities revolves around server spaces. This involves the installation and configuration of new servers, as well as the maintenance of existing hardware. When we were faced with the task of migrating servers to a new location, the problem of understanding the configuration of the existing servers arose. There lacked a consistent documentation format that could be used to replicate the configuration of a server in a new location.

With a larger project in mind, where understanding the configuration of many servers was essential, the idea of this project was born; To create a tool that will allow for cable configuration of server hardware to be easily digitised, visualised, queried and updated.

Whilst alternatives exist, they are typically a segment of a far larger suite of tools, which are usually not necessary for small/medium sized server spaces. Naturally, cable configurations can be difficult to understand and work with even in these smaller spaces. This also brought forward the second aspect of the project, to also be an investigation into the user experience and interface design of the tool. To ensure that the tool is easy to use and can be understood by a wide range of users.

Further, the project will be open source, and will be available for use by the wider community of server administrators. This will allow for the human Computer interaction findings that have been implemented to be used in similar applications. Additionally, the tool will be utilising and integrating with Netbox[1], an open-source tool for managing network infrastructure. This will act as the backing database for the tool and will allow for the tool to be used in a wider context of server management.

The Research Support Team will act as a prime example of the target audience. The project aims to discover the needs of a wider range of small and medium sized enterprises (SME) who run and maintain their own server spaces. As mentioned previously, there are not many similar alternatives to the project as these SME's usually pose a unique server environment. These spaces can be cramped, poorly lit and hard to navigate. Seen below is a picture of the server space in the School of Computer Science at Nottingham (fig. 1), which is an example of the type of environment that the project will be designed for.

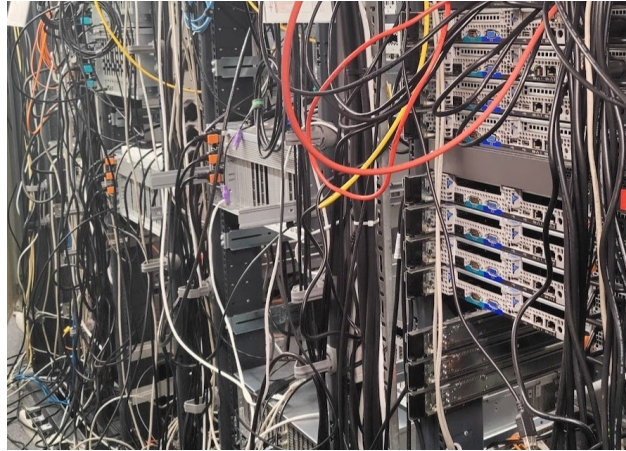


Figure 1: Server Rack within the school of Computer Science

This is another reason that typical solutions cannot usually apply to these spaces, as they are often designed for large data centres, where laptops can be used easily to use software in situ. A tool that can be used on a mobile device in these less-than-ideal conditions is something worthy of investigation. As mentioned, a perfect example of this is the server space in the School of Computer Science seen in (Fig. 1). Before upgrades, the space was poorly lit and is, still relatively cramped. It's not particularly feasible to use a laptop in this space comfortably, which most solutions rely on due to cluttered UI. The current layout of servers and hardware makes tracking cables completely impracticable and a mobile application would be a perfect solution to this problem.

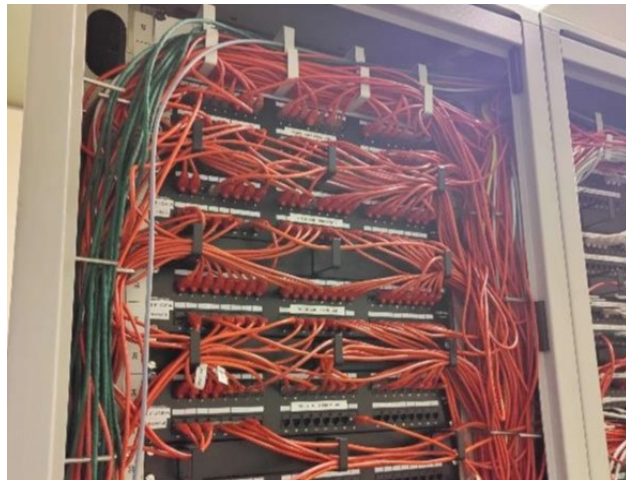


Figure 2: More ideal and realistic server space

Comparatively, the server space dedicated to networking has been managed to a more ideal state (fig. 2). Whilst not perfect, comparing to that of data centers, it is far more manageable. This is the aim of the project, to create a tool that can be used in these less-than-ideal conditions to allow for scenarios like the one in fig. 1 to be managed more easily.

## 1.1 Aims & Objectives

The projects aims with their respective objectives.

- A1 To create a tool that will allow for cable configuration of server hardware to be easily digitised, visualised, queried and updated.
  - In order to achieve this, the tool will integrate with Netbox, an open-source tool for managing network infrastructure. This will act as the backing database for the tool and will allow for the tool to be used in a wider context of server management.
  - The tool will use Netbox's API to query and update the database whilst using intuitive UI to allow for easy use.
  - To achieve visualisations, the tool will illustrate the cable connections between devices, showing data in a clear and concise manner.
- A2 To create a in situ cross platform mobile app that can be utilised in restricted spaces.
  - To achieve this, the tool will be cross platform, and will be able to be used on any mobile device supported by the Flutter framework.
  - The tool will be designed with a focus on Human-Computer Interaction, to ensure that the tool is easy to use and can be understood by a wide range of users.
- A3 To create an app that can interact with other open-source software easily
  - The tool will be open source, and so modifications can be made to the tool to allow for it to be used in other contexts.
  - The tool will be built around modifiable models that can be changed easily for other software or a custom build backend.

## 1.2 Background

There are currently no popular mobile tools for this use case. Whilst I can appreciate, in a large data centre application. It is likely that a mobile application might not have the same level of functionality as a desktop application. Further, it is likely to be useful in a larger environment. But with my experiences working for the Research Support Team - I have personally found that a tool of this nature would be extremely useful. Further, with the Open Source nature of Netbox, the accepted DCIM software for RST, a mobile application would be a perfect companion. With the addition that the tool could then be released to the wider community of server administrators to be used with their own instances of Netbox.

## 2 Related Work

### 2.1 Application and Product Reviews

Following research of open source and paid for cable management/DCIM software I have found that there are limited options that allow for trial version without a legitimate business interest. This limited the selection of software that can be researched. There follows three different software packages that I have found that are relevant to the project. Including Sunbird DCIM[2], a paid for solution with a trial accessible publicly. Pathfinder Mobile [3], a mobile counterpart to the enterprise "Pathfinder" package, this was the only high quality mobile solution that was discovered. Finally, Netbox [1], the open source DCIM software that the project will be built around. These three packages were shown to three individuals within the Research Support Team and their feedback was recorded. Each software was shown in mobile view.

#### 2.1.1 Sunbird DCIM

Sunbird DCIM is a feature full Data Centre Infrastructure Management Package with a significant list of components. Their client list includes the Paddypower betfair, ebay and COMCAST [4]. When trialling dcTrack their DCIM software - The immediate impression is that it is feature-rich; including Environment, Security, Cooling as well as Asset and Connectivity. Whilst the server spaces within Computer science at UoN could benefit from a tool like this. Its implementation and management would be strenuous. The tool is designed for large data centres and would be overkill for the server spaces within the school. But, some of its features

could be useful in the implementation of the project. For example, the visualisation of data centers via a 3D model. This could be an interesting feature to implement in the project but might be out of scope. The searching of assets and connections, while thorough, is not as intuitive as the project aims to be. Further, the intention of Sunbird is to serve clients that might have thousands of assets, not quite hundreds. So the requirements of searching and filtering are different. Though, filtering by an extensive set of categories is a useful feature and could be implemented in the project, but in a more intuitive manner.

### **2.1.2 Pathfinder Mobile**

Pathfinder Mobile is a mobile component to the complete Pathfinder package. The mobile application is designed to be used in conjunction with the full software and used as an "anytime and anywhere" tool. It allows existing users of Pathfinder to access data remotely and in-situ. With a intriguing focus on, "work orders". Being created at a workstation, i.e. Laptop, then the mobile app synchronizes with these work order. Then the mobile app can be used to execute these work orders on site through using "graphical instructions support"[3]. Finally, then, all changes are uploaded to the pathfinder client. A similar environment interaction would work well for this project. With more complex modifications being completed/generated on a desktop client on the Schools Netbox instance, i.e Templating. Then once completed, the data entry for these templates can be completed on the mobile app, in the server space. With the app synchronising with Netbox via its API.

The pathfinder app also allows for quick access to networking information, where users can complete tracing of connections. Whilst this already was a core intention of the project, Pathfinders method to visualise this is intuitive and similar to that which was discussed in the first Current State Analysis interview. These interviews are discussed more in detail in section 4.0.1. But, notably, an interviewee mentioned a good method to do a visualisation is to list devices in a scrollable view - with the connections between them being drawn on the screen, along with device and interface information displayed as well. This is similar to the method used by Pathfinder, with; device name, location, interface name, type and cable type being displayed.

One aspect of Pathfinder that could be improved upon is the searching of assets. Whilst they describe their searching as being "text-rich" - It seems to be less intuitive, and does a search based on every field, meaning that results for a simple search can be overwhelming. This is something that the project aims to improve upon, with a more intuitive search method. Further, their search by ID code only simply enters the ID code into the search bar. This is not a bad method, but it is not as intuitive as it could be.



Overall, I think pathfinders mobile app will be a good reference point for the project. It has a similar focus to the project, and has a similar method of visualising data. Though it is a companion of a larger software package that doesn't meet the requirements of the school, it has features that can be referred to and implemented in the project.

### **2.1.3 Netbox**

Whilst searching for a DCIM solution for the School of Computer Science - Netbox become a clear choice. It has a great feature core, it's open source, self-'hostable' and is able to help solve the problems that the school is facing. As discovered during the Current State Analysis and my own experiences, the server rooms within CS are poorly documented due to a lack of consistent historical data. Most of the information is stored in memory of long gone staff, or in out of date spreadsheets. Netbox is to act as a "source of truth"[1].

It has become the accepted DCIM solution for the Research Support Team and will be a key aspect to this project. Though, it does have some limitations, the most notable being a lack of visualisations, and the entry and querying of cable management data. This is where the project will come in as a supporting tool.

## **2.2 Papers focused on HCI and User Experience**

There is a lack of significant research into areas of Human-Computer Interaction and User Experience in the context of server management. But there are a few papers that are relevant to the project. The first paper is a write-up by Yin et al. [5] regarding their demonstration of Cloud3DView at SIGCOMM '13. Cloud3DView is an interactive 3D visualisation tool used for Data Centers which uses FPS gamification to allow users to monitor situations and control data from a user friendly interface. This project also included a focus on "cutting-edge HCI technologies" [5]. Whilst the paper itself doesn't go into reasoning of why certain HCI choices were made - It shows a good example of how a mobile device can be used to interact with a data centre, and can be used to improve efficiency and user experience. Whilst the focus of this project isn't to be a 3D visualisation tool, one aspect of Cloud3DView is the ability to view data in relation to the devices in a 3D environment. Whilst, a 3D visualisation is out of scope for KeepTrack - It is possible that an augmented reality view could be implemented, where users can view data/connections in relation to the devices via a camera on their mobile device. In fact, this was a feature suggested by an interviewee during the Current State Analysis.

Further, there was a focus on using mobile devices to be used for the visualisation, but didn't mention the use of a mobile device for data entry. With the nature of the data being entered in the context of data centers, a mobile format will be more intuitive/accessible than a desktop format for some cases. An important benefit of using mobile devices for data entry is a the ability to use multiple interface types to enter data. For example, a user can enter data via an alphanumeric keyboard, numerical keypad, calendar picker, lists etc. A comparative analysis into different data entry design patterns investigated 3 different patterns for 7 different data types for a set of 9 tasks testing different patterns [6]. For this project, the most relevant data types are; dates, small numbers, single-choice lists and text. The investigation completed a set of usability tests to determine which pattern was the most effective, with different patterns benefiting different tasks/data types better than others. The results from this study will be used to inform the design of the interface for the project, and will be discussed in more detail in section 5.

On a similar note, a study into the structure of data entry on mobile devices noted that existing interfaces "interfere with user input" and force "complex interactions to enter simple information" [7]. This is especially apparent in some cases of the netbox interface. Whilst, naturally, there are limitations as to how simple an interface can be on a desktop based web application, there is more room for improvement on a mobile application. Kleek et als study also focused on the structure of data entry on mobile devices, its importance, but also the importance of not creating interfaces that deter users from entering data. Highlighting a fine balance between the two. For one of the sources of problems for the school is the lack data ever being entered into anywhere. If the project has an interface that dissuades users or is perceived as too tedious then it will not solve a key problem. This project will take upon the findings of this study to ensure that the interface is intuitive and easy to use. For example, an autocomplete search bar for assets and replacing text fields with scanners or other input methods.

## **2.3 Papers focused on Technical aspects of the project**

Whilst deciding on a cross platform framework to build this project on, Flutter become the obvious choice. Not only in my previous experiences with it but also as it has become the most popular cross platform framework [8]. Further, with my work in aiding the development of Labmonitor[9], I have become familiar with the Code scanning package that will also be used in this project.

One of the key parts where the project aims to improve is the searchability of assets, i.e. finding the asset desired quickly and accurately through many means. The current method of asset identification is inconsistent with different naming conven-

tions, ID codes, labels, no labels, host name etc. The Centre for the Protection of National infrastructure (CPNI) have a paper on the importance of asset management, specifying that "all organisational assets and systems that are necessary for the delivery of effective operations or are of specific organisational value (e.g. commercially sensitive information), should be identified." [10].

Not only is it important to identify assets whilst they are in use, but also for documenting any changes, journal entries, ownership, location etc. This project also aims to improve upon this, with a focus on the identification of assets being unified and consistent.

In this project, assets are considered to be both physical hardware, such as servers, switches, KVMs etc. but cabling, such as ethernet, fibre, power etc. In order to identify each of these assets uniquely it was decided that a encoded label would be best. A comparative study into barcodes, QR-codes and RFID systems in the library environment looked into the respective advantages and disadvantages of each [11]. Going by these attributes, it is more sensible to use Barcodes or QR codes for the project. With RFID tags being more expensive, and tag collisions can occur when many are in a close proximity - Like that of a server room. Further, a specialised reader is needed and so another handheld device would need to accompany the app.

Additionally, a paper written on the review of QR codes highlights that, QR codes can store more data in same area, have data redundancy, faster to scan and are "readable from any direction in 360°" [12]. Whilst these benefits seem to make it the clear choice over barcodes, QR codes contain data in both dimensions - Whilst this is a benefit in most use cases, it is likely to pose a problem when scanning codes stuck to ethernet cables. Where, barcodes contain data in one dimension which is then repeated vertically, allowing for their placement to be more dynamic, e.g. on a cable. This is clearly shown in figure 3 of the paper [12]. So, for this project the use of barcodes for cables, and then QR codes for other assets will be used. Especially with the data needed to be stored for cable information needing to be completely abstract, with a random short number being assigned to each cable. This way it can be entered manually if the scanner fails. On the other hand, with assets, e.g. servers - The data can be more specific, and so a QR code will be used. E.g. can contain a URL that links to the asset in the netbox database.

Whilst an Augmented Reality visualisation feature is dependant on time and the success of other elements - It is still important to consider related work with these features, especially as it could be a feature added on. Whilst already investigating Cloud3DView [5], which uses 3D visualisation, a more apt implementation would be by using the QR codes placed on assets to aid in visualising data via Augmented Reality. This is very similar to the work outlined in the paper, "Applying QR code in augmented reality applications" [13]. This paper displays how the elements of

the QR code can be used to position elements in the AR scene and simultaneously generate information embedded in the QR code. Should this be a feature that can be implemented, it is likely I will follow a similar method as to what Kan et al. set out [13]. With the existing desire to implement a multi-format code scanner, i.e both barcode and QR, this would be a good addition to the project. Further, there already exists a cross platform plugin for Augmented Reality in Flutter which can be utilised [14].

### 3 Description of the Work

The aim of this project is to create a mobile application that will allow for users to add, view and manage assets and cables in server rooms. With the specific application to Small/Medium enterprises. The application will be built using Flutter, a cross platform framework which will allow for the app to be used on both Android and iOS devices. The application will be built upon Netbox DCIM [1] and their RESTful API [15].

The project aims to build upon this API to create a more user friendly and intuitive interface for server administrators to use. With this in mind, a second key aspect is investigating the best interface for the data entry in this context. This will be done by interviewing and observing the system administrators at the school using iterative prototypes of increasing fidelity.

#### 3.0.1 Project Stretch Goals

Following the interviews during the current state analysis and the investigation of similar work, the further goal to implement a augmented reality visualisation feature is desirable. Allowing for the user to visualise asset information and networking details in a highly interactive way.

Desirable features that could be implemented dependant on time constraints:

- Journals for assets, allowing for notes to be added to assets, e.g. when a new component is added, or when a component is removed.
- Auditing of assets, allowing for the user to scan an asset and then be presented with a form to fill out, e.g. the asset is in good condition, or the asset is faulty.
- In-App SSH terminal, allowing for the user to connect to a device and run commands, e.g. to check the status of a service.

## **4 Methodology**

### **4.0.1 Current State Analysis**

## **5 Design and Implementation**

### **5.1 Technical Work Done To Date**

## **6 Progress**

### **6.1 Projection Management**

### **6.2 Contributions and Reflections**

#### **6.2.1 Computer laws, social, ethical and professional issues**

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