Continuous Face Detection and Verification During Online Examinations

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Abstract

I present a prototype of a system used to continuously detect and verify faces of examinees during online examinations, as well as a method of representation of the results of such verifications, and overall architecture of the system. The system consists of three modules: the client-side face detection, the serverside face verification, and the exam supervisor’s dashboard. Face detection occurs on each client’s computer using Single Shot Multibox Detection (SSD). The resulting image is aligned and cropped, then encoded into base-64 format and sent to the verification server via a POST request. Upon receiving such request, the server decodes the base-64 image, feeds it to the VGG-Face model to get a vector representation of the face and compares the Euclidean distance between said image and some predefined base image. The results of the last operation are sent to the exam supervisor’s dashboard via a POST request. The exam supervisor’s dashboard’s task is to receive and process such requests and represent the updated data in real time. In addition, the exam supervisor’s dashboard is responsible for configuration of the exam session, as well as generation of the clientside executables to allow easy and seamless process for the students.

Keywords: Real-Time Face Recognition, Client-Server Architecture, Online Examination.

## Motivation

The current solutions for online examination are variants of the following approach: the students connect to a third party-provided online meeting (e.g., Zoom, Microsoft Teams), turn on their cameras, proceed to complete the exam. This method is flawed in terms of security against academic offenses. The most prevalent one, in my experience as a student, is the abuse of the fact that the exam supervisor has never seen students’ faces before the exam due to it not being required during the semester, as well as the absence of identity verification as a prerequisite to writing the exam. In other words, students may outsource (ask their friends to write the exam for them, pay a professional to do it, etc.) and get a passing grade regardless of whether they truly know the material presented during the semester. During the COVID-19 pandemic, when there was no other option other than online education and online exams, the students were incentivized to abuse this system and commit academic offenses and get a passing grade without opening the course textbook once during the semester. This effectively lowers the overall education level, potentially creating severe errors, that may be lethal in some cases, due to students-turned-professionals being unqualified. One may argue that the proportion of students cheating is marginal at best, however this problem is a hole in a ship that might lead to it sinking.

With an existing state-of-the-art face recognition technology, it is possible to prevent these problems by building and integrating security applications into existing infrastructures of academic institutions.

## Existing Procedures

Normally examinations are held in-person, which prevents students from committing academic offenses under the watchful eyes of the exam supervisors and their assistance. The identity of examinees is established and verified either on entrance to the exam room or during the exam itself: the examinees are asked to present a student identification card that contains the image of their face, first and last name(s), and the student ID number. This information is verified against a list of students registered for this exam, and the images in the identification card is matched with the face of the owner of the card. If these conditions are met, the examinee is cleared to write the exam. Examinees are not allowed to leave the exam room until they have turned in their exam papers, or their identity is verified once again on re-entry.

The described above procedure is put in place with security in mind, to prevent the problem mentioned in the previous section. It has been successful in preventing most cases of identity fraud in the context of examinations. However, currently there is no such procedure being used for online examinations.

## Proposed Procedure

The procedure I use in my application is modeled after the existing in-person exam protocol:

1. Before the start of the exam session, exam supervisors are required to create a list of students allowed to take the exam (first and last names, student numbers, optional base image).
2. The client executables (access point for the students) are generated and distributed to the students.
3. The exam supervisor starts the exam session.
4. The students launch the executables, input their identification data (first and last names, student number)
5. The system verifies their faces throughout the duration of the whole exam.

The described above procedure replicates the in-person procedure except for the last step. Step 6 covers an edge case that is only possible during online examinations: it is not possible to fake one’s identity once it has been verified without leaving the examination room first. However, during online examinations it is possible. By ensuring continuous verification, the application prevents it from happening.

# Chapter 1. System Architecture

Any face recognition pipeline consists of at least four parts: face detection, alignment, face representation, and verification. The system consists of three modules: client-side face detection, server-side face verification, and exam supervisor’s dashboard. The pipeline stages are spread across the three modules to optimally distribute the stress and utilization of computational resources required of each stage.

## Exam Supervisor’s Dashboard

The Dashboard module is responsible for configuration of the session, executing compilation scripts, starting the verification server, and presentation of the verification results. It is a web application that the examination supervisor exclusively will have access to. The module consists of two components: the frontend and the backend.

### Frontend

This component is responsible for the visual representation of the data and allowing the supervisor to utilize all the tools provided efficiently and with ease. The User Interface (UI) is designed to be as minimalistic and intuitive as possible to minimize the training required to become acclimated to the system. It is built with React JS, which is a JavaScript framework. Due to the limitations of the design, it is impossible to utilize some of the features of React efficiently. Instead of only refreshing the contents when there is change automatically, the contents are manually refreshed with the given frequency. This results in a consistent amount of GET requests to the backend, which is more stable when there is a high volume of clients connected to the session.

Timeline

Description automatically generated with medium confidence

Figure 1. Default UI of the Dashboard

#### Add Student

This button redirects the user to a separate page that contains a form that allows for addition of new students to the database. The required components are the first and last names, and the student identifier. There is also an optional field to add a base image of the student. This base image is uploaded to the backend server and saved locally for the verification purposes. The ‘Cancel’ button redirects the user back to the previous page.

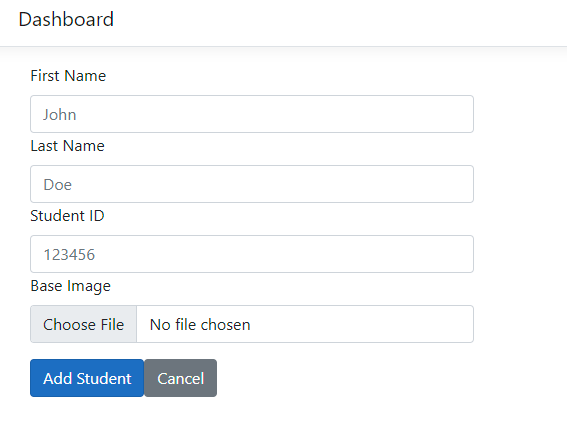


Figure 2. Add Student Form

When the form is submitted, the contents are sent to the backend via a POST request, where it is processed further. After this step, the student is added to the table on the previous page and to the database.

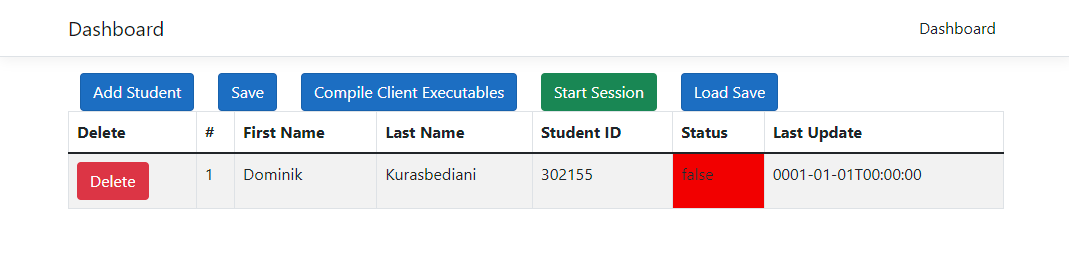


Figure 3. Table after a new examinee has been added.

The ‘Delete’ button deletes the given student from the database.

#### Save

The ‘Save’ button saves the current state of the database, serializes it into .json format and the supervisor can download it to their computer.

#### Compile Client Executables

This button starts the compilation of the executables used by clients (examinees) to send the detected faces to the verification server. In the prototype application, this process can take up to approximately 2 hours to finish, and once started the supervisor is asked not to close or refresh the page until the process is finished.

#### Start Session

This button starts the verification server effectively starting the session. Shortly after this step, the supervisor can alert the examinees that the session has begun and ask them to run the distributed executables.

#### Load Save

The ‘Load Save’ is the counterpart to the ‘Save’ button. The supervisor can use this button to upload a previously saved session instead of starting a new one.

### Backend

This component is responsible for all the data management, script execution and operation of the dashboard. It is a REST API built with C# and ASP.NET Core.

#### Database

The module is implemented in a way that omits configuration and maintenance of dedicated databases and instead utilizes an in-memory database built in runtime. This solution reduces the cost of maintenance in the long-term at the cost of building the database every session (which is compensated by the ability of the user to export the session data and load sessions from a .json file). The solution also decreases the amount of time required for the changes to occur due to the lack of the need to send and receive data from a dedicated database. However, it is configured in a way that would not take a significant amount of development time to implement support of a dedicated solution due to utilization of .NET’s Entity Framework.

#### Add Student

Entity Framework and ASP.NET provide a simple and well-documented framework for database operations such as adding, editing and deleting new entries (POST, PUT and DELETE requests, respectively.) The form sent along with the POST request contains serialized text information regarding the name, surname and student identifier. The latter is the primary key.

The form may optionally contain an image. If there is an image attached, the server will rename the image to the student identifier the image belongs to postfixed with the extension of the image file and save it locally. The location of the saved image is also recorded in the database to avoid iterating through the directory to delete the image when deleting a student, as well as to supplement session save-load system.

#### Saving

When the server receives a request to save the current session, it serializes the list of students currently in the database into a .json file (name, surname, student identifier, status, last status update and path to the base image). The file is saved locally to the dashboard’s host machine to provide an additional fail-safe to user errors. Then the resulting file is read as an array of bytes. Then the server returns a file with the specified serialized session (Status200OK), the Content-Type of ‘application/octet-stream’, and ‘SaveData.json’ as the name of the file. This file is then sent to the user and is downloaded.

#### Loading

Upon receiving a given POST request to load the session, the server assumes an attached session data file previously generated with the ‘Save’ button. The file is then saved locally on the server’s host machine to allow for diagnostics in case an error occurs. The contents of the file are then deserialized and the list of examinees is added to the existing database.

All the steps are performed inside try-catch blocks to avoid fatal errors due to dealing with file systems. In addition to the assumption stated above, there are null checks at the deserialization step to handle the case where the submitted .json file would contain serialization errors. If the file submitted is empty, the user will receive a Status-400 Bad Request response.

Upon successfully adding all the examinees to the database, the server returns a Status-200 OK response.

#### Compilation Script Execution

To maintain modularity and customizability of the system, the Dashboard relies on Windows Shell or Bash (depending on the host OS) to execute the compilation process. The API itself only starts said scripts. For the prototype, the script first attempts to install all the Python dependencies required by the client. It then attempts to install PyIntsaller – a Python package that allows to bundle the client application and all its dependencies into a single package. The packages that are already present are skipped to avoid redundancies. Once dependency installation has been concluded, the client application is compiled using PyInstaller. The compilation time depends on the technical specifications of the machine is it executed on. However, the first time this process is executed on a machine, it takes a significant amount of time to finish. After the process is finished, PyInstaller does not remove the intermediate files, so further compilation times will take significantly less time. Once the compilation has finished, the resulting files are zipped and sent to the requester.

#### Start Session

The system design expects the verification server and the dashboard to be launched from the same machine. The main reason is session directory preparation. The verification server verifies the incoming faces against their respective base images that are prepared in this step.

Once the dashboard’s server receives a request to start a session, before running any scripts, it starts preparing the directories and file system hierarchy expected by the verification server. First, it deletes the remainder directories from the previous session. Then, it creates a directory for each examinee with the student identifier as the name.

Like the ‘Compilation Script Execution’ section, this procedure uses custom Windows Shell or Bash scripts to allow for customizability and expandability. In the prototype, the script iterates through the base images uploaded through the ‘Add Student’ step, puts them into their respective directory and renames them to ‘base’ followed by the extension of the file. Then the script installs the Python dependencies required by the verification server and starts the server.

## **Client-Side Face Detection**

Once the compilation of client executables is done, the supervisor may distribute them to the examinees. Each examinee gets one executable file for their operating system (.exe for Windows, .app for Mac OS).[[1]](#footnote-1) They will launch this executable right before attempting the exam. The module is responsible for detecting the faces of each examinee. It also crops and aligns the face to the size required and sends the image to the verification server, where it is processed further. The module is written in Python. The Module is divided into two components: the ID form and the capture window.

### **ID Form**

This component is responsible for the presentation of the form the examinees must complete for the detection process to begin. It consists of only one field – the student identifier.

Graphical user interface, application

Description automatically generated

Figure 4. Client Form

Once completed, the user presses the corresponding buttons, and the identifier entered is saved and is sent with every payload for the verification server to identify the sender. Once the ‘Next’ button is pressed, the form window closes, and the capture window opens starting the face detection process.

### Capture Window

The opened window shows the camera-feed with a rectangle around the detected face (if any) and a number in the top left corner. The number represents the time left before the detection is “unfrozen” (more on this in the backend section)

A picture containing text, person, person, wall

Description automatically generated

Fig. 5. Capture window.

This component is responsible for face detection, alignment, cropping and sending the captured images to the verification server.

WRITE ABOUT FACE DETECTION ALGORITHM IN GENERAL LIKE PRETRAINED MODEL WITH WEIGHTS BLA BLA SSD BLA BLA

THEN WRITE ABOUT CONSECUTIVE FRAMES TO AVOID FALSE POSITIVES

THEN WRITE ABOUT FREEZING THE FRAME FOR A PERIOD OF TIME TO REDUCE THE STRESS ON THE VERIFICATION SERVER

THEN WRITE ABOUT CROPPING AND ALIGNMENT

FINALLY WRITE ABOUT SENDING THE BASE-64 CROPPED IMAGES TO THE SERVER DURING FREEZE TIME

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Tables

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1. The prototype is limited to only producing executables for the host machine’s OS. It can be expanded using Docker or utilizing a different bundler. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)