XMPP and Android

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Ignite Realtime

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XMPP

eXtensible Messaging and Presence Protocol

- Allows to exchange data in form of XML elements between entities

- Specified by
  - RFC 6120 (XMPP-Core), RFC 6121 (XMPP-IM), RFC 6122 (JID)
  - various “XMPP Extension Protocols” (XEPs)

- Specifies 3 root elements, called “stanzas”
  - message send asynchronous, fire-and-forget, store-and-forward
  - iq request-response (response is mandatory)
  - presence multicast to subscribed entities, pub/sub paradigm
XMPP (cont.)

eXtensible Messaging and Presence Protocol

XML?!

- Allows to extend the protocol without breaking compatibility
- You can encapsulate any data you want, for example JSON (XEP-295)
  - Be careful when doing so, parsing is always a possible attack vector
  - See “BlackPwn: BlackPhone SilentText Type Confusion Vulnerability” [2], for a case where XMPP encapsulated JSON parsing went wrong
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XMPP is not strictly an IM protocol! [4]

It allows you to exchange data between entities, and can therefore be used as protocol for Instant Messaging (IM), Social Media, the Internet of Things (IoT), Multi-Agent Systems (MAS), …
Smack
An Open Source XMPP Client Library written in Java for JVMs and Android

- Started by Jive Software in 2002
- Was first ported to Android by the end of 2007 [6]
- Jive founded the “Ignite Realtime” community 2009
- Rene Treffer created aSmack in 2009 for Buddycloud
- Native support for Android added with Smack 4.1 (beta)
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- Native support for Android added with Smack 4.1 (beta)
- Appears to be used (at least partly) by Google for the “GTalk Service”

Figure: GTalk Service Monitor on Android 2.2 / 2.3
Smack

Code example

XMPPTCPConnection connection =
    new XMPPTCPConnection("sensor42", "pass", "example.org");
connection.connect().login();

Message message =
    new Message("datasink@foocorp.org");
message.addPacketExtension(mydata);
connection.sendPacket(message);

PacketFilter filter =
    new AndFilter(MessageTypeFilter.NORMAL,
                  new PacketExtensionFilter("data", "http://foocorp.com"));
connection.addAsyncPacketListener(
    new PacketListener() {
        public void processPacket(Packet stanza) { ... }
    }, filter);
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Smack on Android

Use cases:

- A chat app (e.g. for your community)
- Push target
- Status monitoring
- Remote command execution
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Previously: aSmack

aSmack was a build environment which, in order to provide a working XMPP library on Android, applied various patches on top of Smack and added another 6 open sources libraries to the mix.
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Now: Smack 4.1

Tested by gradle to build against android.jar (-bootclasspath. This guarantees that Smack runs on Android (min. API level 8). Smack 4.1 uses APIs provided by the Android runtime where possible.
Push Service
realized using XMPP on Android?

Let’s assume we want to build a push service for Android based on XMPP.
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“Why not simply use GCM?”

- Not all devices come with Google Services Framework
- You may don’t want to depend on Google
- Have a single push mechanism: XMPP
- XMPP Push notifications are faster [3]
- Some Push service provider don’t guarantee delivery

“I’ve heard that XMPP is not battery friendly!”

- More on that in a few minutes
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XMPP is already been used for Push Services. But what are the pitfalls?
The Smartphone challenge

Using XMPP on Android

Resource constraint system
- Slow processor
- Not much memory
- Usually on Battery
- May enter (deep) sleep mode

Data connectivity in a mobile environment
- Changing latency
- Sometimes no connectivity at all
- Sometimes the connectivity changes (GSM / WiFi switch)

Lesson learned
- Some (most?) XMPP implementations, especially older ones, were not designed with mobile devices in mind. For example Smack 3 will drop your whole connection state after `disconnect()`.

Florian Schmaus (Ignite Realtime)
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Running on a resource constraint system

Smack design decisions

- Smack uses efficient XML Pull Parsing [5]
- No Document Object Model (DOM), no problems.
  - DOM is memory intensive
  - and hard to use efficiently
  - You can still use it if you really want/need to.
- Smack is modular, you can pick the components you need and disable the others
- Smack is designed with minimal resource consumption in mind
  - Doesn’t use JABX. But you can use JABX if you want.
  - We try our best to avoid memory-leaks
Approaches for data connectivity issues

XEP-198: Stream Management (SM)

Stanza Acknowledging

- *Stream* endpoints acknowledge the receipt of stanzas
- Every endpoint keeps a counter of received stanzas
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XEP-198: Stream Management (SM)

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Stream Resumption
- With help of the counters, it’s possible to *resume a stream*
- The TCP connection initially used by the stream can be replaced by another one
- This is useful for example
  - during short (a few minutes) connection interruptions
  - for the GSM-WiFi switch
Approaches for data connectivity issues (cont.)

XEP-199: XMPP Ping, using Smack’s PingManager

- Check “liveness” of XMPP connection by sending XMPP Pings
- Smack automatically sends server Pings in a configurable interval
- Server Ping will only be send if there was no stanza received within the interval
Approaches for data connectivity issues (cont.)

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Android

Use Smack’s ServerPingWithAlarmManager to reliably schedule server pings on Android.
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Android

Use Smack’s ServerPingWithAlarmManager to reliable schedule server pings on Android.

If the connection silently breaks, i.e. no SIGPIPE, then there is nothing you can do to detect that besides draining the battery by increasing the ping interval.
About XMPP’s battery consumption

- Sending and receiving data involves power consumption
- If the mobile device sends a stanza it usually has a good reason
- It’s the receiving side you have to take care of
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Solution

Distinguish between incoming stanzas that

1. require immediate delivery
2. can be delivered later
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Typical examples:
1. (Certain) Message stanzas
2. Presence stanzas if the user is inactive (next)
3. Stanzas send by an malicious entity (slide after next)
About XMPP’s battery consumption (cont.)

Incoming presence stanzas are often the cause of unnecessary power consumption.
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- No presence information required if the user isn’t looking at the roster
- Idea: Delay presence delivery until user is active
- XEP-352: Client State Indication

Further techniques to decrease power consumption

- Avoid network I/O by using XEP-115: Entity Capabilities
- Minimize data size (as recommend by XEP-286: XMPP on Mobile Devices)
- Use compression (XEP-138: Stream Compression)
  - **Warning:** Using compression opens an attack vector (cf. CRIME/BEAST attacks) [1]
About XMPP’s battery consumption

Preventing malicious users from stealing your battery charge

A malicious entity (user) could drain the victims battery if it knows
- your bare JID, and the only connected resource is the mobile client
- your full JID

by sending stanzas to the victims mobile device.
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Possible solution:
XEP-16: Privacy Lists

- Enables server-side blocking of stanzas
- Create a list that
  1. Allows stanzas from JIDs that are **subscribed to your presence**
  2. Allows stanzas from your XMPP service
     - otherwise you may just locked yourself out of the service
  3. Blocks everything else
Using Smack’s XMPP TCPConnection on Android

- Create an android.app.Service which holds the reference to and manages your XMPP TCPConnection

- Model the service as Finite-State Machine, with those states:
  - Disconnected
  - Connecting
  - Connected
  - Disconnecting
  - WaitingForNetwork
  - WaitingForRetry

- Register BroadcastReceiver for android.net.conn.CONNECTIVITY_CHANGE
  - Check in receiver if the data connectivity really changed
  - If so, call XMPP TCPConnection.instantShutdown() followed by connect() to re-establish (and possible resume) XMPP stream
XMPP Login Duration

XMPP Login takes to long. Number with 80ms round-trip

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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- Could use XEP-305: XMPP Quickstart
- Not supported by Smack and still not enough
- Should be possible to resume stream in under 200ms
- Work in progress

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- **Top priority:** Add support for XEP-174: Serverless messaging (XMPP via zeroconf/link-local)
  - Guardian Project’s ChatSecure wants to switch to Smack 4.1
  - They need XMPP link-local support
  - ChatSecure is currently locked-in using an old version of aSmack

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- More open tasks at
  https://github.com/igniterealtime/Smack/wiki/Smack-Jobs

Thanks for your attention.
Meet me in 30min at the Realtime Lounge (Building K, Level 2) if you have further questions.


