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Experience with a Wireless World Wide Web Client

Joel F. Bartlett

digital

Western Research Laboratory 250 University Avenue Palo Alto, California 94301 USA

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Abstract

In order to separate promises from practice in PDAs and wireless communications, we decided to try to build a wireless PDA-based client to access the World Wide Web. Using equipment available in the winter of 1994, we were able to build a client that we call W4, the Wireless World Wide Web. In this paper we describe our initial design choices, implementation, experience with the device, and close with some thoughts about next steps in this area.

This is a preprint of a paper that will be presented at IEEE Spring *COMPCON95*, San Francisco, California, March 5-9, 1995.

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Table of Contents

1. Introduction

A number of people have seen personal digital assistants, PDAs, with wireless communication as the "next big thing" in the computer industry. At the same time, there has been a lot of uncertainty of how PDAs and their applications will evolve. Today's PDAs, with their limited computational power, storage, wireless communication bandwidth, and display size, offer a challenge: can you build anything, and if so, would anyone want to use it? Rather than adding to the speculation about the future of PDAs, we decided to put our mobile computing dreams in perspective by building a wireless interactive application using equipment readily available in the winter of 1994. This paper reports our results.

Sections 2 through 5 provide a roughly chronological record of the design and implementation of W4, a "proof of concept" for a Wireless World Wide Web client. Section 6 reports our experience with the device and sections 7 through 9 conclude with some observations about future developments in this area.

2. Choosing an application

A wireless client for the World Wide Web [2] was chosen as the sample application. A number factors encouraged this choice:

- The client/server interface is well documented and significant amounts of code are publicly available.
- Existing clients like Mosaic [4] have established a de facto user interface.
- A large number of service providers are converging on the Web.
- A significant number of people inside and outside of Digital are interested in the Web.

3. Choosing a PDA

The Apple Newton MessagePad was an easy choice as it had generated a lot of interest and most important, the developers toolkit was available. After some experiments using and programming the Newton, attention turned to wireless communications.

4. Choosing wireless communications

From the beginning, we were not interested in wireless local area communications. We wanted the focus to be on the PDA and not on the installation and management of the network. If we got something built, we wanted to take it on the road. Much of the "look and feel" of mobile computing is lost if you can't bring the demo to the customer.

Press releases from a number of vendors during the summer of 1993 suggested that "real soon" there would be several communications options to choose from. Winter came and visions of a Newton with a PCMCIA card communicator were dashed as such devices were not yet available. However, prototyping using a Motorola InfoTAC radio modem (a box about the size and weight of a Newton) and ARDIS as the wireless data communications carrier seemed to be a good way to go.

ARDIS was attractive because it had good in-building service, was available nationwide, and charged on a per packet basis. Unfortunately, the service available in our area was oriented toward two-way paging and had neither the data rate nor the network latency required for an interactive application.

Attention then turned to analog cellular telephones. While little information about data communications was available from the cellular vendors, we constructed a system consisting of three parts: a Newton, a Motorola CELLect modem, and a Motorola MicroTAC cellular telephone. With an initial communications choice in hand, focus turned to the application architecture.

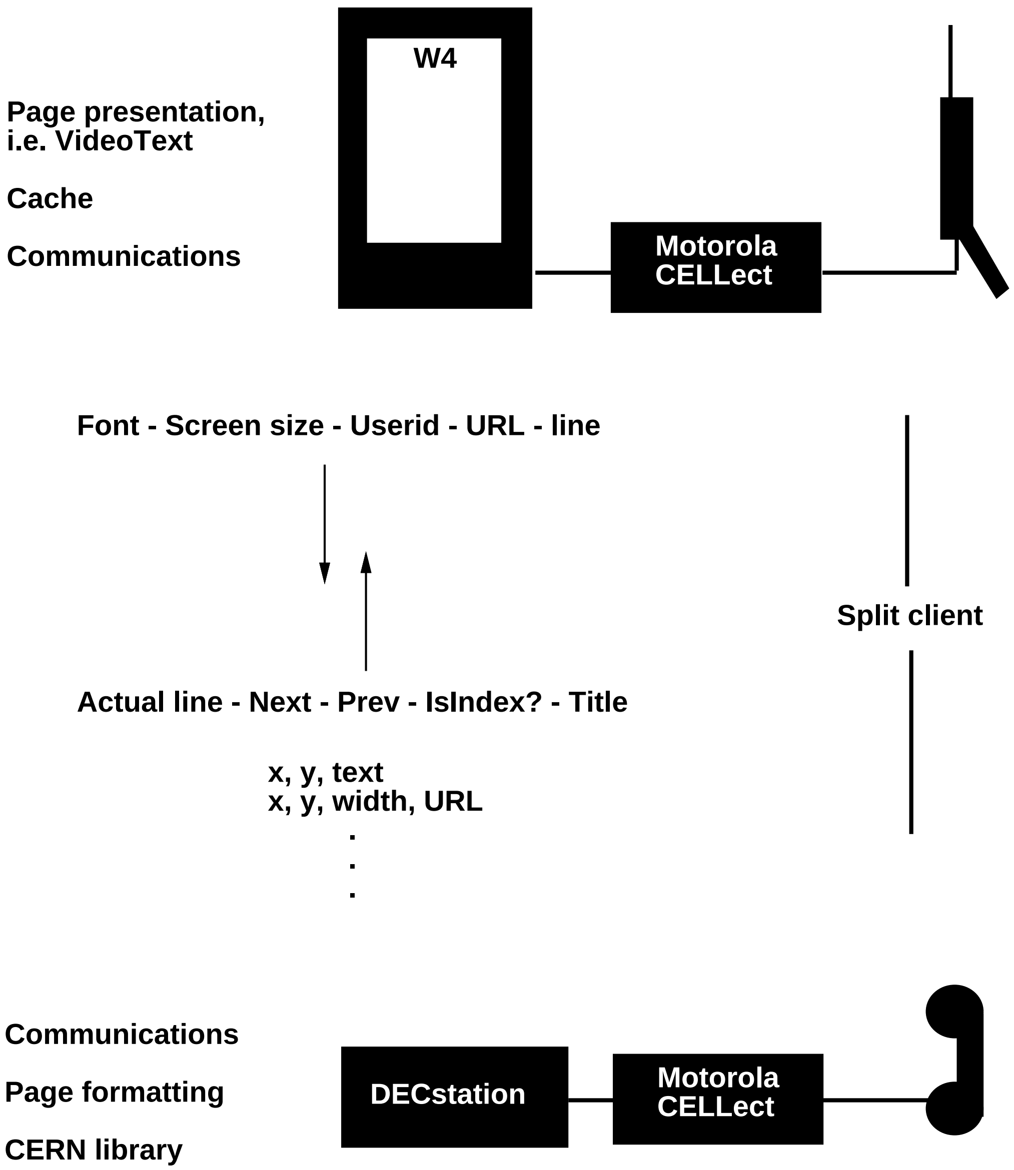

Figure 1: W4 block diagram showing split-client architecture

5. Application architecture

Early experiments suggested that the PDA should do as little as possible and that wireless bandwidth be conserved. This resulted in the client being split between the PDA and an ULTRIX workstation, with the bulk of the application residing in the workstation.

The PDA acts as a video-text client, displaying screens representing a portion of a hypertext document. Each screen is identified with a tag that contains the document's Universal Resource Location (URL) and an offset within the document. In the simplest PDA-based client, when a hypertext link or scroll arrow is tapped by the user, the tag associated with the interactor is sent in a request to the workstation. The workstation obtains the document from the Web, parses it (caching the result for later requests), formats the desired screen for the PDA, and then replys to the PDA's request.

The reply is a screen description composed of simple screen drawing commands that were designed for efficient decoding in the PDA. Each line of text is specified by its x,y coordinates and a text string. Each hypertext link is represented by its x,y coordinates, the link width, and the tag. New commands for handling images, line drawings, and forms could be easily added to the protocol.

In order to improve performance and allow operation without communications, a simple cache was added to the PDA-based client. Each time a screen description is received by the PDA, it is added to the cache. Before the PDA makes a request to the workstation for a screen, it checks to see if it is in the cache.

The final performance improvement was to add prefetching to the PDA-based client. After a screen is displayed, the PDA checks to see if the next sequential screen of the document is in the cache. If it isn't, then the screen is requested from the workstation.

6. Experience with W4

Our experience with transmitting data over analog cellular telephones has been generally positive. Depending upon geographic location, we can communicate at 1200-4800 baud using LAPM error control and V.42 bis compression. While in some buildings, calls can only be placed near windows, the only time that we've been completely unable to initiate a connection was when the PDA shared a phone cell with a World Cup soccer game. Data transmissions are minimized by only sending screens to the PDA that have a high probability of being viewed. At 4800 baud, interactive response is satisfactory.

Minimizing the code in the PDA covers for the fact that the PDA is much slower than the workstation. While users familiar with Mosaic on a workstation find W4 a little sluggish, those familiar with PDAs are pleased with its performance. For screens cached in the PDA, it typically takes less than 1 second from the time the user taps a hypertext link until the screen is displayed. A typical round trip time to fetch a screen from the workstation is 2-3 seconds. For multiple screen documents, the prefetch of the next screen usually completes before one has finished reading the current screen.

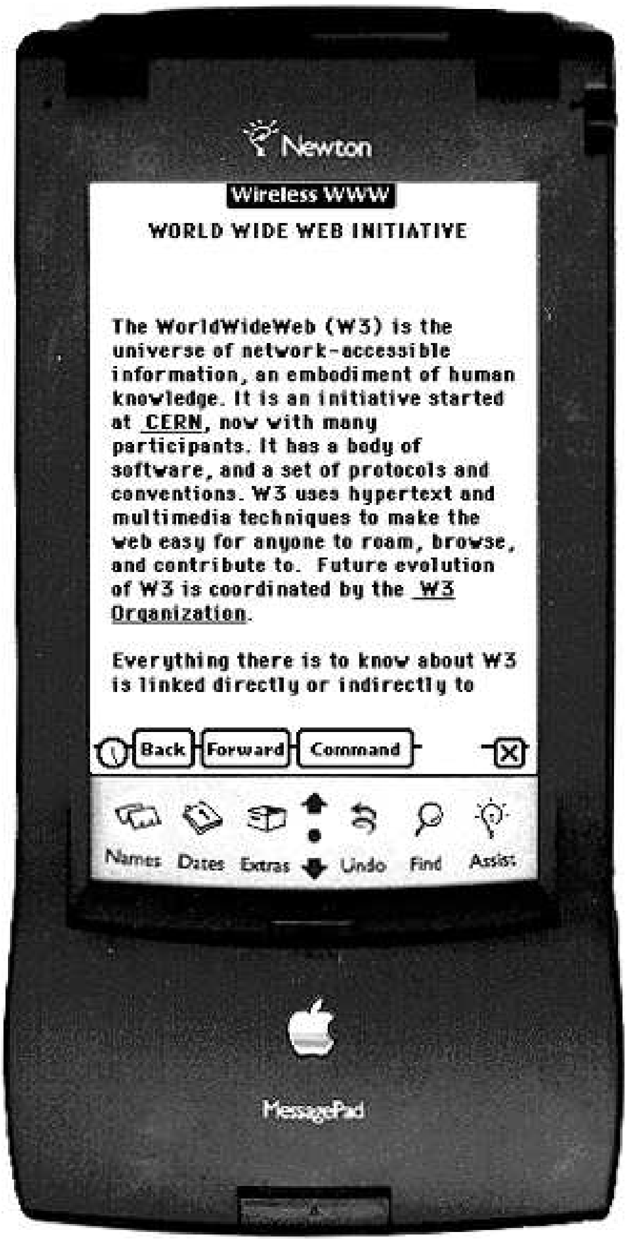

Figure 2: W4 showing the first screen of a document describing the World Wide Web. The URL is *http://info.cern.ch /hypertext/WWW/TheProject.html*.

PDA memory is fairly limited which forces the screen cache into a PCMCIA card. For W4, we've found that a 1 MB card provides plenty of cache. However it also occupies the PDA's only PCMCIA slot.

A pleasant discovery is that most Web documents are quite readable on a 320x240 pixel screen, even though they were designed for a much larger display. The biggest thing Mosaic users notice is not the screen size, but the lack of images and forms.

In many cases though, information providers will gladly accept the smaller display in exchange for Web services away from the desktop. For example, Digital's service organization is looking at the Web as a vehicle for delivering service documentation. To investigate this, they produced a hypertext trouble shooting guide for the PATHWORKS PC integration environment. The guide was easily adapted for the PDA's screen size and the entire document can be stored in .3 MB on the PDA. One can easily envision service personnel carrying a device like W4 with commonly used documents cached in the device and additional documents and updates only a phone call away.

7. Reflections on W4

The experience reported in the previous section demonstrates the utility of existing PDAs and wireless communications systems. We'd now like to turn our attention to some things that need improvement. Our predictions on the pace of innovation are tempered by our experience building W4; we'd like to be proven too conservative.

7.1. Less power

W4 uses three kinds of batteries: a 9-volt in the modem, 4 AAs in the Newton (possibly rechargeable), and a rechargeable battery on the cellular telephone. Newton battery life is not a problem, but the modem and cellular telephone rapidly exhaust their batteries. In practice, this isn't a large problem as the cellular telephone also rapidly consumes money; a minimum of $.30 per minute in our area. In the short term, reducing the number of separate pieces in W4 is the best way to reduce the number of types of batteries and chargers that one travels with.

7.2. Fewer pieces

W4 consists of three pieces: a modem, a cellular telephone, and a PDA. The modem can be eliminated by using a cellular telephone with an integral modem such as the AirCommunicator which is available today. If the screen cache could be moved into the PDA's main memory, then the cellular telephone and modem could be replaced by a PCMCIA card supporting cellular digital packet data (CDPD). CDPD cards and communication services should start to become available in 1995.

An alternative is a PDA with integral wireless communications like Motorola's Marco and Envoy communicators.

7.3. Improved Wireless Communications

While *Wall Street Journal* articles may talk enthusiastically about CDPD and personal communications services (PCS), the reality for wide area wireless communications in the United States is analog cellular telephones and digital data carriers like ARDIS.

We are cautiously optimistic that 1995 will see U.S. cellular telephone systems start to support CDPD. In contrast with the existing cellular infrastructure, the carriers will hopefully provide a uniform, national calling and billing scheme.

At the same time, digital data carriers like ARDIS are committed to service improvements and talk of linking their systems with CDPD systems.

We expect CDPD systems to provide an application with a data rate of 10-19.2 kbps, an improvement over existing cellular systems. While network latency may be worse than that currently offered by a dedicated cellular circuit, we'll have to move W4 to a CDPD system to see if this negatively affects the application.

7.4. Improved processor performance

When designing for PDAs it might be dangerous to assume that processor speeds will rapidly improve. Cost, size, and power reduction seem to be more important than performance improvements. When more processor power is provided, it may not be available to the application programmer as it could be used to provide such things as software modems, improved handwriting recognition, or animation.

8. Other approaches

Since W4 was completed in the summer of 1994, two other Newton-based web browsers have been announced. Gessler [3] describes a system where the developers chose to move more of the document processing into the PDA than was done in W4. In order to do this, they also required a higher bandwidth connection to the PDA. The result is a system that appears to have lower performance than W4 and does not support wireless communications. The authors are aware of these limitations and are counting on advances in PDAs and wireless communications to improve their system.

A recent announcement by AllPen Software [1] describes a browser with an architecture similar to W4's. Their system replaces W4's cellular connection with a fast, wireless local area network. They take advantage of this significant increase in bandwidth to support document images and forms on the PDA.

9. Conclusion

In October of 1994, *Wired* magazine announced the death of PDAs. We beg to differ; W4 is proof that it is possible to build useful wireless PDA-based applications today. By carefully splitting the client between the PDA and a stationary host, we've been able to build a portable unit with good performance. The biggest obstacle for the mobile user of this system is the size of the mobile unit, not the limitations of the PDA and communications system. Equipment has become available in the last year that can reduce the size.

Progress in wide area wireless communications has not been as rapid. The actual bandwidth available to applications, the interactive response time, and the cost of using CDPD systems are unknown. We hope communications suppliers will not limit their vision to electronic mail, but recognize that W4 is an example of a class of truly interactive, wireless applications that should be encouraged. How improvements in this area will ultimately be delivered is not clear as PDAs and wireless communication have often been characterized by aggressive product promises followed by tentative product rollouts.

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