Evaluating Usability of Cross-Platform Smartphone Applications

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Abstract. The computing power of smartphones is increasing as time goes. However, the proliferation of multiple different types of operating platforms affected interoperable smartphone applications development. Thus, the cross-platform development tools are coined.

Literature showed that smartphone applications developed with the native platforms have better user experience than the cross-platform counterparts. However, comparative evaluation of usability of cross-platform applications on the deployment platforms is not studied yet.

In this work, we evaluated usability of a crossword puzzle developed with PhoneGap on Android, Windows Phone, and BlackBerry. The evaluation was conducted focusing on the developer's adaptation effort to native platforms and the end users.

Thus, we observed that usability of the cross-platform crossword puzzle is unaffected on the respective native platforms and the SDKs require only minimal configuration effort. In addition, we observed the prospect of HTML5 and related web technologies as our future work towards evaluating and enhancing usability in composing REST-based services for smartphone applications.

Keywords: Usability, PhoneGap, Android, Windows Phone, BlackBerry, Cross-platform applications.

1 Introduction

It is well known that smartphones are playing a very important role in people's life. They are used in education, healthcare, business, etc. Smartphones may be described as kinds of mobile phones with increased capabilities such as touch screen, intelligence and alertness, though there is no agreed definition of a smartphone in the literature. However, the specific question that needs to be answered for a specific application is how smart the smartphone is?

I. Awan et al. (Eds.): MobiWis 2014, LNCS 8640, pp. 248–260, 2014.

For the purpose of this study, we consider the smartphone features as described in [1] and hence we define smartphones as mobile phones that are capable of accessing the Internet and are equipped with mobile operating systems such as Apple's iOS, Google's Android, Microsoft's Windows Phone, and BlackBerry and software can be installed on.

On top of the operating system, smartphones are equipped with software development kits (SDKs) that enhance the characteristics of smartphone application software and configurations such as reusability, and interoperability.

Smartphone applications can broadly be categorized into native and cross-platform based on the software development environments they are produced from.

The native applications belong to one category of smartphone applications that are written and developed for specific operating system. Jobe [2] describes native applications to have unhindered access to device hardware and support all user interface and interactions available in the respective mobile operating environment.

Cross-platform applications, on the other hand, can be dedicated mobile web applications, generic mobile web applications (also called mobile websites), and hybrid applications [2]. They are implemented based on a web browser, and the fundamental web technologies are HTML5, JavaScript, and Cascading Style Sheet (CSS).

- *Dedicated mobile web applications* - are designed to mimic the native applications of the host operating system but they execute on a web browser.
- *Generic mobile web applications* - correspond to mobile versions of websites.
- *Hybrid applications* - are a combination of both mobile web and native applications developed with standard web languages, but typically have access to the native device APIs and hardware and they are typically distributed through 'App stores'.

In terms of productivity and time to market, cross-platform smartphone applications are preferred to native ones. However, cross-platform smartphone applications are challenged by the limitation in user experience when deployed on native platforms. In this work, we evaluate the usability of such applications on their respective deployment operating platforms.

This paper is structured as follows. Smartphone application development and cross-platform development tools are discussed in sections 2 and 3 respectively. Concrete comparison of usability of cross-platform applications is presented in section 4. In Section 5 we discuss our findings and eventually, we draw our conclusions in Section 6.

2 Smartphone Application Development

In this section we consider the native and cross-platform application development in some depth. In addition, we consider the Sun Microsystems's Java ME separately as it contains such set of runtime environments and APIs developed for a wide range of resource constrained devices including the Smartphone.

2.1 Java ME

Java ME is designed to use smaller virtual machines and APIs to create content for the severe restrictions on computational power, battery life, memory, and network bandwidth of the devices. It is a platform, a collection of technologies and specifications, that are designed for high-end and low-end consumer devices and smartcards through its CDC, CLDC, and Java card APIs configurations respectively.

According to the description given in [3] and the context given in our study, the CDC represents the smartphone domain. The CLDC and Java card APIs are thus beyond the scope of this review. Isakow et al. [3] noted that the CDC targets larger devices with more capabilities like the smartphones and newer CDC applications are written like the Java SE systems but with a subset of APIs available in Java SE.

In the CDC configuration, a device stack is situated on top of the smartphone hardware and operating system but beneath the smartphone applications. The stack contains the configuration information, device profile and personal profile layers.

The configuration layer is a Java runtime environment for a family of devices consisting of a JVM to execute Java byte code, the native code that serves as an interface to the underlying system, and a set of core Java runtime classes.

An example of device profile is the Foundation Profile (FP) that adds additional Java SE classes to the CDC configuration which helps as a foundation for building other profiles. The Personal Profile (PP) provides Java ME specification for the devices that need a high degree of Internet connectivity and web fidelity.

Similar software layering and configuration approaches are also provided by other smartphone application platforms such as the Windows Phone, Android, and iOS, and the cross-platform Smartphone application development environments [4].

2.2 Native Applications

The native applications are written and developed for specific operating system such as Windows Phone, Android, BlackBerry, iOS and Firefox OS. In the following paragraphs, we provide brief information on these operating systems and their corresponding integrated development environments [2].

Windows Phone

Windows Phone is one of the operating systems for smartphones. In the latest versions of Windows Phone, smartphone applications are written in managed code by frameworks that support multiple languages such as c# from the Microsoft.NET environment.

Windows Phone is primarily built with the Windows Phone SDK. Where Silverlight is an add-on for powerful, engaging interfaces and XNA for 2D or 3D games and development is done on Visual Studio. Programs created for Windows Phone are packaged into XAP files, which is the Silverlight application package [4].

Android
Android is one of the leading operating systems for smartphones. It is based on the Linux kernel and developed as an open source system platform. In addition to the operating system, Android provides development environment to write managed code with Google's Java libraries, and the Dalvik Virtual Machine for the smartphone applications to run on [24].

The development environment enables to use 2D and 3D graphic libraries, a customized SQL engine for persistent storage, and 3G, 4G and WLAN network capabilities [4]. Eclipse and IntelliJ IDEA are software development tools for Android.

BlackBerry
BlackBerry is a proprietary mobile operating system developed by BlackBerry Limited for its BlackBerry line of smartphone and tablet handheld devices. It is based on the QNX operating system, which is popular in industrial computers and used in many car computers.

BlackBerry 10 operating system uses an innovative combination of gestures and touches for navigation and control. Details on the system architecture of BlackBerry 10 can be found on the BlackBerry developer site [23]. Eclipse is one of the software development tools used to develop BlackBerry applications.

Apple iOS
iOS is an operating system (architecture shown in Fig. 3) for many Apple's devices including iPhone and its applications are written in an object-oriented programming language called Objective-C - which is an extension of the C language, and using a library called Cocoa Touch.

Development for iOS requires a computer or a VMware running Mac OS. Xcode is the most commonly used integrated development environment to write iOS applications. It includes an editor, analysis tool, iOS simulator, and the SDK [4, 5].

Firefox OS
Firefox OS corresponds to a new approach for smartphone operating systems based on web technologies, namely, HTML5, JavaScript and Web APIs. Grønli et al. [4] described this new approach in such a way that it brings open Web APIs to communicate directly with the smartphone hardware and provides a direct link to the web-based application marketplace. In general, the native development environments are good at exploiting each device's capabilities. However, they lack cross-platform compatibility.

3 Cross-Platform Development Tools

The smartphone operating systems are so rich in libraries and built-in features. However, they still face the heat of the market to match customer's high expectations because their basic architecture and support of programming languages is different.

Literature such as in [6] describe that the proliferation of a fragmented smartphone market with multiple operating platforms makes the development of native mobile applications a challenging and costly endeavor. To alleviate this situation, the literature and industry envisions cross-platform development approaches.

The essence of cross-platform environments is a subset of the software development environments aiming at building platform independent applications. Cross-platform application development environments work based on the general principle of "*write once, and run everywhere*". In the smartphone application development, Dalmasso et al. [7] described the general architecture of the cross platform mobile application development tools as shown in Fig. 1.

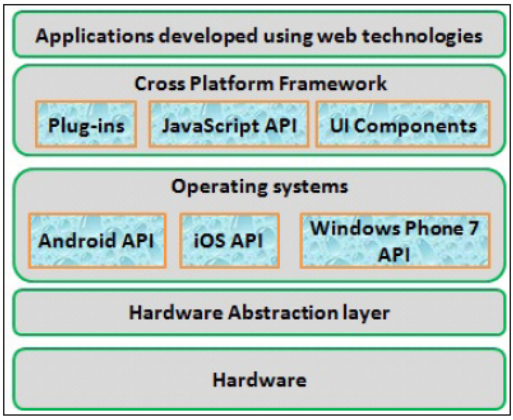

Fig. 1. General architecture of cross platform mobile application development tools

However, as pointed out in [6], the diverse hardware and software platforms inevitably make portability a hassle for mobile-application developers. Portability primarily depends on runtime support and the feasibility of achieving identical look-and-feel and functionality across platforms. There are several attempts of implementations of cross-platform smartphone application development environments. For example Java ME supports cross-platform development through configurations and profiles. Gavalas and Economou [8] describe a configuration as the minimum Java VM features and library set for devices with similar processing and memory limitations, user interface requirements, and connection capabilities, while a profile comprises libraries specialized in the unique characteristics of a particular device class.

Grønli et al. [4] investigated the strengths and weaknesses of the mobile application development ecosystem and pointed out that the developer support has been improved the performance of developer tools through provision of higher level abstraction of performance-critical third party libraries. However, according to Grønli et al., cross-platform development environments like the Firefox OS are being challenged by the different implementations, immature platform support, variety of devices, and variety of browsers while the platform specific ones like Windows Phone,

iPhone, and Android are benefiting from being tightly integrated with their respective operating system. The work by Grønli et al. [4] showed that there is better integration between the development environment and deployment devices on the platform specific ones than that of the cross-platform environment. This indicates that the cross-platform application development still is in its early stages.

Literature such as in [6,7, 8] showed that cross-platform development tools are flourishing aiming at addressing user experience, stability of framework, ease of updating, cost of development for multiple platforms, and the time to market of an application. When realized, the interests of many developers would be satisfied in terms of releasing applications for major mobile platforms such as iOS and Android and provide a consistent user experience across the platforms with minimal or no change to the original code.

PhoneGap, Rhomobile, JQuery Mobile, and Xamarin are some of the cross-platform mobile application development tools available. We provide a quick overview of these tools as follows.

PhoneGap

PhoneGap is an open source cross-platform smartphone application development tool developed by Adobe System Inc under Apache license. It provides a decent toolbox for building native mobile applications using only HTML5, JavaScript and CSS [7], [9]. PhoneGap is quite popular among users mainly because of its flexibility, straightforward architecture and ease of use. Its architecture is mainly composed of Web application, PhoneGap, and the operating system along with native APIs (See Fig. 2).

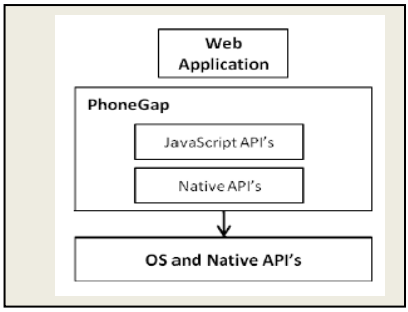

Fig. 2. Interfacing Layers of the PhoneGap Architecture

Palmieri et al. [9] explained that PhoneGap is a "wrapper" that allows developers to enclose applications written in known programming languages into native applications. That is, applications developed using PhoneGap are neither purely web-based and nor purely native and thus some layout rendering is done via web-view instead of the native language of the operating system, and there is lack of support of HTML in some functions. PhoneGap does not provide its own IDE to develop applications, but developers have to write the source code with an IDE and port their code into

other IDEs such as the Eclipse for Android and XCode for iOS. Thus far, PhoneGap permits the creation of applications for Windows Phone, Android, iOS, Bada, BlackBerry, Symbian, and WebOS operating systems.

RhoMobile

RhoMobile is another cross-platform mobile application development tool developed by Motorola solutions Inc that is used to build application for iOS, Android, BlackBerry, Windows Phone, and Symbian [9]. It is an open source Ruby-based mobile development environment used to develop enterprise applications and data on a single source code across the different operating systems listed above.

The RhoMobile suite provides an IDE called RhoStudio. Alternatively, it offers the possibility to write applications with any other IDE which supports HTML, HTML5, CSS, JavaScript and Ruby such as Eclipse, Visual Studio, Netbeans, and IntelliJ. RhoMobile uses the Model View Controller (MVC) pattern to develop mobile applications.

Applications developed with RhoMobile are compiled into Java bytecode to be executed on BlackBerry, or compiled into Ruby bytecode to be executed on all other operating systems that are running on real or virtual devices.The RhoMobile architecture is composed of Controller, HTML templates, source adapter, RhoStudio (or any other editor), Ruby executor, device capability such as the APIs for camera and GPS, object relational mapper (ORM) called Rhom which provides an interface to interact with the SQLite database, a RhoSync client, and RhoSync server.

jQuery Mobile

jQuery Mobile is a mobile application development framework that enables and supports touch events and design elements for a wide variety of tablets and smartphones in order to make them look and function like native applications[2].

The jQuery Mobile framework is a JavaScript library developed and maintained by a project called jQuery. It is compatible with the major mobile operating systems and desktop browsers, and provides a means to customize aspects of the user interface and CSS in order to imitate the user interface of the host operating system.

Sencha Touch

Sencha Touch 2.0 is another powerful yet a complex cross-platform mobile application development framework. Its SDK tools provide access to a subset of phone native API such as camera, notification, connection, and orientation [25]. In addition, Sencha Touch offers the possibility to build native packaging deployable on iOS and Android application markets.

In summary, the cross-platform development tools such as the above noted ones leverage device capabilities with the help of JavaScript APIs and generate the HTML code for presentation.

4 Comparison of Usability of Cross-Platform Application

In this study we employ literature review to frame the research setting, and usability technique to evaluate usability of the smartphone application developed with PhoneGap as a cross-platform development tool. PhoneGap is chosen because it is the most widespread and for technical convenience of the researchers to work with the Eclipse IDE on the Windows platform, and Visual Studio.

Usability is defined by the ISO [16] on its guidance on usability as the extent to which a product can be used by specified users to achieve specified goals with effectiveness, efficiency and satisfaction in a specified context of use.

Based on the above definition, Carol Barnum [17] underscored the need to consider the target group of users (not all users) for a particular product; the specific design goals of a product are identical with the goals of its users; and users use the application in a certain environment (context) and it is essential that the application is designed to be used under those terms.

In this research, a crossword puzzle is developed with draggable alphabets, target drop slots on a table, and list of clues as shown on Fig 4. The puzzle was initially developed in [21] with HTML5, JavaScript, and CSS and has been modified to fit into our context of use. The basic features of the puzzle used for the evaluation are text, image, hovering, drag, drop, button, navigation, platform configuration, and the SDK used.

Our evaluation process consisted of the following four phases:

1. First, the HTML5 based crossword puzzle is developed as a general web application and tested with a smartphone web browser (the Opera Classic) as a mobile web.
2. Then, for the Android platform, we setup the Android SDK on the Eclipse IDE. In addition the PhoneGap plug-ins - cordova.js, cordova.jar, and the config.xml files incorporated; the android manifest tweaked, and more.
3. After that, the Windows Phone development environment was setup on Visual Studio 2010 Express for Windows Phone. We used PhoneGap plug-ins from Cordova for Windows Phone (namely, PhoneGap Custom and PhoneGap Starter); Google's JavaScript plug-in; and other custom plug-ins.
4. Finally, a development environment for BlackBerry was setup with PhoneGap-blackberry, and JavaScript plug-ins.

In this study, usability evaluation is conducted from the viewpoint of both the developer who does the development and adaptation to the native platforms and the end users who actually play the game.

The developer viewpoint is framed under the developer-tools usability theme [20] that is the ease to use of the tool to develop applications for multiple platforms. Specifically, for the interest of time, we just considered the efforts exerted by the developer to adapt to the Android, Windows Phone, and BlackBerry native platforms in terms of lines of code.

The end user viewpoint, on the other hand, is part of the classical usability evaluation as described in Jacob Nielsen [18]. Jacob Nielsen described in his book entitled

Usability Engineering usability as a set of attributes of a user interface; namely; learnability, efficiency, memorability, errors and satisfaction.

The descriptions of usability presented above are full of subjectivity and evaluation with these attributes is highly biased. Thus, ten general principles of user interface design are coined as heuristics and a description of each is provided [17, 18].

In a similar context, a ten point usability measurement tool called system usability scale is presented in [19]. Jeff Sauro [19] describes this tool to be technology independent and has since been tested on hardware, consumer software, websites, cellphones, IVRs and even the yellow-pages.

As the system usability scale tool has become an industry standard [19], we used it to evaluate the usability of the crossword puzzle on Android, Windows Phone, and BlackBerry devices. The system usability scale is a five point Likert scale with the ten questions as shown on Table 1 below.

Table 1. Questions in the System's Usability Scale Tool

No	**Questions**
1	I think that I would like to use this system frequently.
2	I found the system unnecessarily complex.
3	I thought the system was easy to use.
4	I think that I would need the support of a technical person to be able to use this system.
5	I found the various functions in this system were well integrated.
6	I thought there was too much inconsistency in this system.
7	I would imagine that most people would learn to use this system very quickly.
8	I found the system very cumbersome to use.
9	I felt very confident using the system.
10	I needed to learn a lot of things before I could get going with this system.

Nine users participated in the evaluation of the crossword puzzle in three groups and played on each of the three operating platforms. Each user was briefly introduced about the puzzle, asked to play, and respond to the questions. Accordingly, a summary of their responses on the usability of cross-platform crossword puzzle on the three different operating platforms is shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Summary of Responses on Usability of the Crossword Puzzle

Question numbers	Response	Number of respondents for		
		Android	Windows Phone	BlackBerry
1,5	Very high	2	3	1
1,5	High	1	-	2
3,7,9	High	3	3	3
2,8,	Low	3	3	3
4,6,10	Low	3	2	3
4,6,10	Very low	-	1	-

The Android version of the puzzle has been tested on a real Samsung Galaxy Ace device. However, the usability evaluation result shown in Table 2 is based on the tests on the respective device emulators.

5 Discussion

As described earlier in the previous section, our discussion of results is based on both the developer and the end user viewpoints.

With the developer viewpoint, we considered the efforts required by the developer [20] to adapt to the Android, Windows Phone, and BlackBerry platforms with respect to the text, image, hovering, dragging, dropping, button click, navigation, platform configuration, and the SDK features of the crossword puzzle and the development platform.

Initially the puzzle was developed with HTML5, CSS3, and JavaScript but targeting the desktop browser. The same source code was also accessed as a mobile web with only limited usage difference such as hovering needs long touch in mobile web as opposed to the point-and-hold on the desktop browser.

However, the same source code was deployed on the Android platform as a cross-platform app with PhoneGap and the hovering, dragging, and dropping features were lost completely.

The source code has been debugged by applying fairly large number of JavaScript lines of code and plug-ins to make it compatible with the Android platform and the puzzle's behavior was preserved as shown in Fig. 3.

Fig. 3. The Crossword Puzzle on Android Platform

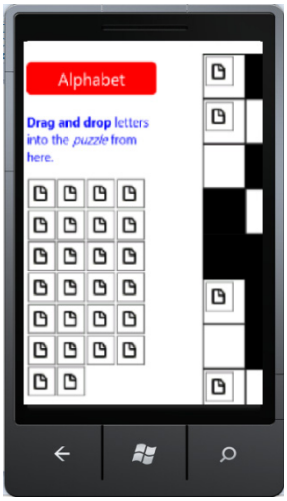

Fig. 4. Distortion of Crossword Puzzle on Windows Phone

The same source code that correctly run on the Android platform with its PhoneGap plug-in has been deployed on the Windows Phone and BlackBerry platforms with their respective PhoneGap plug-ins and all the features of crossword puzzle worked correctly without any adaptation efforts to maintain those features except that a few SDK configuration efforts have been made.

For example, among the SDK configuration requirements we encountered that images disappeared both from the alphabet pallet and the puzzle board (see Fig. 4) when deploying on the Windows Phone.

The 'build action' file property of all images is converted from 'resource' into 'content' and the app was rebuilt into the proper features as shown in Fig. 5. The crossword puzzle source code which was tweaked to make it compatible with the Android platform was deployed on the BlackBerry platform (See Fig. 6) with the proper PhoneGap configuration and it showed no observable behavioral change.

Fig. 5. Adaptation of Crossword Puzzle for Windows Phone

Fig. 6. Adaptation of Crossword Puzzle for BlackBerry

Our findings pointed out that PhoneGap based cross-platform apps can be ported into other platforms with only limited SDK configuration efforts of the developer and hence usability from the developer viewpoint.

When considering the platform configuration effort as a feature, we observed the following:

- The Android platform required tweaking of the configuration elements such as the cordova.js, cordova.jar, config.xml, and the android manifest. In addition, Google's JavaScript plug-in, and other custom plug-ins are added to the source code.
- The PhoneGap Custom and Starter, Google's JavaScript plug-in, and other custom plug-ins for Windows Phone; and

– The PhoneGap-blackberry, editing the configuration file, and adding JavaScript plug-ins for the BlackBerry.

Thus, we found out that the Windows Phone is easier to configure because the minimal configuration effort required to run the crossword puzzle is less than the Android and BlackBerry platforms.

The result of usability evaluation from the end user viewpoint (Table 2 above) also indicated that the usability of the cross-platform app remains an affected across the individual platforms when ignoring the impact of the form factor of each device. The Windows Phone version, however, is found to be more usable than the other two versions.

6 Conclusion

It is observable that the cross platform mobile application development frameworks are benefiting developers to build applications for multiple platforms. However, there is a little doubt on the behavior of the resulting cross-platform applications (in terms of usability from the viewpoint of the developer as well as the end user) on the native platforms.

Usability of the resulting applications from the developer viewpoint is seen in terms of the effort required in lines of code, and platform configuration to adapt into the respective native platforms. For the end user, on the other hand, we applied ten questions usability questionnaire.

Our finding showed that the usability of cross-platform smartphone applications remains an affected when deployed on the respective native platforms. In addition, we observed that the cross-platform development tools such as PhoneGap require only minimal configuration effort to deploy the cross-platform app to the specific platforms. HTML5 and related web technologies together with cross-platform tools would offer considerable opportunities to enhance usability of developer tools.

Thus, our future work will consider the usability of existing REST-based service to compose cross-platform smartphone applications. In addition, the prospect of HTML5 and related technologies will be explored to enhance usability in the composition of REST web services (towards developing an end-user mash-up tool) for smartphone applications.

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