Applying Complex Event Processing and Extending Sensor Web Enablement to a Health Care Sensor Network Architecture

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Abstract: The limited reuse of middleware components for wireless sensor networking projects has driven interest in emerging standards from the Sensor Web Enablement Working Group which offers methods to virtualize sensor data into a common, self-describing format, using access mechanisms based on HTTP. Using these standards, applications are able to discover and access different sensor offerings, automatically understand the data format used and even specify conditions in the sensor data. This paper examines how an existing sensor network platform in the health care domain can make use of these standards and examines the possibility of extending the Sensor Alert Service with a richer set of functions. Concepts taken from Complex Event Processing engines are explored in the context of this particular health care platform, where it is shown that there are clear advantages to extending the standard.

1. Introduction

BT Research has had a long interest in wireless sensor networking based projects and has participated in a number of collaborations covering a wide range of domains from health care to environmental monitoring, and traffic management. Typically, these projects have required bespoke solutions where middleware reuse has been minimal. Our interest in emerging standards to address this issue has led us to investigate the use of Sensor Web Enablement (SWE) from the Open Geospatial Consortium (OGC) [1] as a possible approach for the virtualization of sensors. This would form part of our strategy for building a more generic sensor network architecture with components that could be reused in a diverse range of sensor network projects. We feel that the use of standardized middleware will help drive the acceptance of sensor network solutions as we move away from costly, bespoke solutions; a problem particularly relevant to our approach given the broad range of application areas.

We have investigated the SWE standards for the Sensor Observation Service (SOS) [2] and Sensor Alert Service (SAS) and how they may be applied to one of our existing sensor network projects, SAPHE (Smart and Aware Pervasive Healthcare Environment) [3]. SAPHE is one of a number of growing industrial and academic wireless sensor network projects in the health care domain. The most notable being Intel IrisNet [4], Hitachi Collectlo [5], and A Remote Health Care System Based on Wireless Sensor Networks [6].

This paper reviews the previously published findings where we applied SWE to SAPHE [7] and [8] and highlights the possibilities of extending the SAS service with more advanced filtering mechanisms, such as those found in Complex Event Processing (CEP). An example CEP engine, Esper [9] was investigated with the view that the application of CEP to the SAS service may result in a number of benefits to sensor network architectures and to SAPHE in particular. CEP is particularly relevant to SAS as it offers the ability to aggregate and correlate large volumes of events through the real-time processing of continuous queries. It is possible to apply pattern matching to asynchronous events through the use of logical and temporal event correlation, and defined 'window' views of the event streams. Current standards for defining which events are relevant to an application using SAS are severely limited to a simple definition of a property of a single event. It is not possible to correlate multiple events, a capability that has the potential to reduce bandwidth and processing overheads of edge network applications.

2. Key challenges in SAPHE

SAPHE is a collaborative research project co-funded by the TSB, involving Imperial College, BT, Philips UK, University of Dundee, Cardionetics and Docobo. It aims to develop a holistic monitoring solution to support the care and self-care of people with long-term health conditions with the placement of a number of sensors around the home and on the patient that monitor both the immediate environment in the home along with physiological traits. SAPHE targets patients who typically receive a specialist service provided by community matrons. The desire is to support these users, providing a new tool for professional care, encouraging greater patient self-care and to monitor the patient in order to detect early indications that a patient's wellbeing is changing and preventative care is required. Independent monitoring of the patient and their environment can lead to early detection of worsening conditions that may either not be reported by the patient nor detected by the health care professional and help prevent escalation of a patient's conditions and their ability for self-care. For example, changes in sleeping patterns, mobility around and outside of the home, and eating habits can be early indicators of a worsening of a patient's condition.

Within the home environment there are a number of sensors that use either ZigBee or Bluetooth to communicate to the SAPHE set-top box which has the task of managing the communication from the sensors and reformatting the sensor data into a common format based on BinX [10]. The canonized data is then sent securely to the SAPHE network platform via the Internet, using the BT Home Hub as a gateway. Within this network the data is analyzed for significant events and other factors that can lead to an assessment of the patient's wellbeing. This information is then sent on to health care professionals. For example, patient data is visualized in real-time on the secure SAPHE health care monitoring portal as a series of histograms or line graphs using Dundas Chart.

The patient also wears a number of sensors in the form of a single device worn on the ear. This device reports back blood oxygen levels, heart rate and an activity index derived from a 3D accelerometer when within range of the set-top box within the home. When outside the home environment, the patient wears a mobile device that stores the body-worn sensor data until it is in range of the set-top box at which point it uploads all cached data. The mobile device is also able to communicate directly with the SAPHE network platform in the case of an emergency via a Bluetooth connection to the patient's mobile phone and GPRS connection.

3. Complex Event Processing

Complex Event Processing (CEP) is an event processing concept that takes asynchronous, real-time, high-volume data event streams and provides a mechanism for application developers to specify correlations, aggregations and other forms of event pattern matching. The approach taken by CEP turns the traditional, database-led approach of application development upside-down. Rather than an application repeatedly compiling a query, submitting it to a database and waiting for a result, applications using CEP submit a query once. This is compiled by the engine and as data events arrive they are passed through this query. When conditions are met, the resulting data is published to the subscribing application. CEP provides a publish/subscribe view of event streams that supports complex analysis of the data stream and negates the need for an application to repeatedly poll a database.

From the small number of CEP engines available we chose Esper [9], a Java and .NET based framework because of its extensive documentation, online community support and open source licensing. Esper supports many of the critical functions needed by CEP applications that require low-latency analysis of real-time data. Esper supports the following key methods of analysis in CEP:

- windows on events: sliding windows (time, length, sorted, time-ordered);
  tumbling windows (time, length, multi-policy, first-event)
- grouping, aggregation, sorting, filtering and merging of event streams
- output rate limiting and stabilizing
- access to a wide range of data formats using a standardized interface language
- logical and temporal event correlation

4. Lessons Learned

In the current proposed SAPHE architecture, all sensor data from each patient and home environment is sent to the external, back-end servers in the SAPHE platform network which archive and check for patterns and trends in the data that are indicators of deteriorating health in the patient. The frequency of sensor communication and the overhead of BinX sent externally would indicate large volumes of bandwidth usage growing as the patient user base expands.

Creating SWE services offers a number of generic advantages and some specific to this type of application where local processing could prove advantageous. SWE offers a standardized protocol for discovering and accessing sensor data which enables data to be reused in potentially new and novel ways. An application could simply repurpose sensor data for another domain, or fuse together data from several services to provide radically different applications. Standardizing on the access mechanism and the data model for the sensor data conveys advantages to the application developers as there are a growing number of 3rd party tools that facilitate access, analysis and visualization of data, reducing the time to develop new applications and facilitating innovation [11].

SWE services can exist anywhere in the architecture between the sensors and the applications that utilize their data. Specific to SAPHE and similar sensor network architectures, placing the SWE services at the local level could reduce real-time bandwidth requirements. An SOS archives sensor data in a common data format allowing applications to query and retrieve data as appropriate. An SAS would be able to offer basic analysis of sensor data, publishing an alert or data fragment to subscribing applications. An application could then use the SOS to access relevant data when appropriate rather than receiving data in real-time for analysis.

The architecture and protocols were already established for the SAPHE system, making use of proprietary data formats and protocols. The SWE services were created in parallel to the existing framework, an approach not untypical for sensor network platforms where such services can readily be developed as an adjunct to an existing platform; in effect, applications can be retro-fitted to provide SWE services. Our previous research [7] shows how an SOS service could be retro-fitted to the existing framework. The exercise was a valuable one and clearly showed that there was quite a high overhead in creating a standards-based service. The cost in doing so would hopefully, with time, be mitigated through the reuse of that service by new applications, although it remains to be seen whether the cost would be simply too high for closed solutions.

The process of creating an SOS service began with the definition of the data models that represented the sensor data in terms of ‘observations’ of ‘features of interest’ that were presented in the form of ‘offerings’. There were two initial types of offering: sensor data from the ambient sensors around the house, and body-worn physiological sensor data, neatly mapping on to two features of interest being the house and the patient. Sensors and sensor clusters are known as ‘procedures’ under SWE terminology.

5. Conclusions and Future Work

This paper has reviewed how SWE services can be retro-fitted to an existing sensor network platform and has highlighted what the potential benefits are in doing so. SWE enables sensor data to be virtualized, providing a common, self-describing data format and access protocol. The number of domain-agnostic toolkits becoming available indicates that the rather large overhead in creating new applications based on accessing these services can be mitigated by the re-use of data, the use of third-party analysis engines and the reductions in bandwidth and processing overhead to edge applications. The ability to access a diverse range of real-time data has the potential to lead to exciting and radically different applications including health care.

Considering the range and growing number of sensors monitoring each patient and his or her environment, there is a recognized need to optimize the processing of sensor data in order to make informed inferences on the well-being of each patient. Support for data fusion using components from the SWE framework (e.g. SAS) extended through concepts such as CEP may prove to be a valid approach to meeting this growing volume and complexity of data whilst providing a standard method for accessing this data.

Technologies such as Complex Event Processing are designed to process high-volumes of sensor data with minimal latency. They provide a potential solution to the growing world of sensor data that is becoming available. Our experiences with Esper highlights that CEP is ideal for this critical and dynamic environment in contrast to a traditional database approach, where real-time processing of large volumes of data is critical. With respect to the SAPHE project, we have shown that it is possible to retrofit existing wireless sensor network projects with SWE services.

Recent events have seen the publication of two OGC discussion papers proposing the adoption of Event Pattern Markup Language (EML) [12] and OpenGIS Sensor Event Service Interface Specification [13] for SWE services and in particular SAS. These approaches continue the discussion on the need for a more flexible and extensible method of defining which events and sequences of events are of interest to edge applications. The exercise of applying SWE to SAPHE has added to that discussion and the potential benefits of using a CEP-style aggregation/correlation engine made clear.

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