Using P3P in a web services-based context-aware application platform[1]

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Abstract

This paper describes a proposal for a privacy control architecture to be applied in the WASP project. The WASP project aims to develop a context-aware service platform on top of 3G networks, using web services technology. The proposed privacy control architecture is based on the P3P privacy policy description standard defined by W3C. The paper identifies extensions to P3P and its associated preference expression language APPEL that are needed to operate in a context-aware environment.

1 Introduction

Context-aware computing is an emerging computing paradigm that tries to exploit information about the context of its users to provide new or improved services.

Dey and Abowd [1] have defined context as "*any information that can be used to characterize the situation of an entity. An entity is a person, place, or object that is considered relevant to the interaction between a user and an application, including the user and applications themselves*". This definition is widely used in literature today.

Context-aware computing environments may use information provided by many sensors to acquire knowledge about the context. These sensors can be invisible to users. It is obvious that these sensors, gathering information about people without being noticed, can be a threat to privacy. If the risks of privacy violation when using a context-aware application cannot be estimated, users may be unwilling to use such a system. *This is why privacy control is essential in the design of a context-aware computing platform.*

This paper aims at providing a privacy control architecture for the context-aware application platform developed in the WASP project (see section 2). The proposed privacy control mechanism is based on P3P [7].

The rest of this paper is structured as follows. Section 2 presents a quick overview of the WASP platform. The applicability of P3P in a context-aware platform such as WASP is explained in section 3. Section 4 identifies the extensions needed to P3P to be used for context-aware web services. Section 5 depicts the privacy control architecture of WASP, using P3P. Finally, section 6 contains conclusions and presents future work to be done.

2 WASP

In the WASP (Web Architectures for Services Platforms) project [8], the University of Twente, Ericsson and the Telematica Instituut cooperate in developing a platform to support context-aware applications based on web services. The WASP platform operates on top of 3G networks, using Parlay X [6] as a web services interface to 3G network functions.

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Typically, users interact with service providers offering context-aware applications through their mobile device. A context-aware application uses context information available from the WASP platform to provide its services (Figure 1).

Initially, the WASP project will focus on tourist applications using location-based services. Service providers, called Points of Interest (POI) in WASP, like museums and restaurants, provide a web services interface. The descriptions of these services are stored in a registry, the POI registry. Users can look up services of interest through this registry.

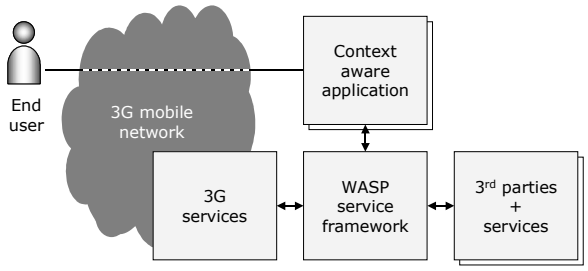

Figure 1: Interaction between a user, a service provider (context-aware application) and the WASP platform.

WASP users will mainly access WASP applications using mobile devices, such as PDAs and smart phones. WASP will provide tight integration with the underlying 3G technology by offering seamless invocation of network services, such as directly making a voice call to the POI from a WASP application.

3 Applicability of P3P in WASP

P3P was developed as a standard for web sites. Since the main purpose of P3P is to simply describe services, its applicability is actually much wider. Web services, used as the enabling technology in the WASP project, follow a client-server paradigm that is comparable to interaction on the World Wide Web. Furthermore, P3P is based on XML, as are web services. Integration of P3P into the domain of web services will be quite straightforward. The requirements for this integration are identified in section 4.

In a context-aware platform, contextual information is generally acquired through various sensors. Some of these sensors may reside on the user's device, such as a GPS receiver integrated in a mobile phone, while other sensors may be installed in walls or ceilings of the building close to or surrounding the user. It may be simple for users to control the release of contextual information that is stored on their own device, but it may be hard to control information gathered at different places in the platform. As P3P does not provide mechanisms for controlling data release to interested parties, but simply describes service behaviour, it is irrelevant to P3P where the data is coming from. So, P3P is suitable for an environment where the data is distributed.

Research has shown that the "inquirer", i.e., the service provider using contextual information, is an important determinant for people's privacy preferences [3]. This means that users usually have the same preferences for the same data collector, no matter where they are or what they are doing. So, privacy preferences are strongly influenced by a description of the data collecting service, which is exactly what P3P provides.

Other researchers have also proposed to use (adapted versions of) P3P in context-aware systems. The works of Langheinrich [2], Myles et al. [4] and Nilsson et al. [5] all propose privacy control mechanisms based on P3P for context-aware or location-based environments.

4 Extensions to P3P

Whereas the suitability for P3P in a context-aware web services-based environment such as WASP has been argued in the previous section, some extensions have to be implemented before we can actually use P3P in such an environment. This section discusses the extensions needed to P3P itself as well as to the privacy preference expression language APPEL.

4.1 P3P in web services-based context-aware environments

Two extensions to P3P are identified to make it suitable for a web services-based context-aware environment. First, P3P will need to be adapted so that it works with web services instead of just web sites. Next, P3P will need some mechanism to reason about contextual information. Finally, some adaptation is necessary to integrate P3P with the context-aware environment. This will involve several issues:

Policy discovery. Web sites can reference their policies in multiple ways. Either they can publish it at a well-know location (/w3c/p3p.xml relative to the site's address), they can link it from the (X)HTML source file, or they can reference it in HTTP headers.

For web services, we propose to publish the policy in either the WSDL file describing the service, or in a registry such as UDDI, or the WASP POI registry.

It is also possible to use a well-know function call (analogous to the well-known location for web sites), but this means that a web service has to be invoked before the policy is retrieved. This problem is analogous to the problem of linking to P3P files from an HTML document, or sending a reference to the P3P file in HTTP headers. In these cases, the web site has to be accessed before its policy can be evaluated.

Contextual information. The P3P specification describes many predefined data types. These data types are categorised, and have associated descriptions of their meaning. This allows also semantic agreement on the data collected, so that there is no ambiguity between a user and a service provider about what is exactly collected. However, as P3P was developed for web sites, there are no data types addressing the kind of data that would be gathered in context-aware environments.

P3P provides extensibility in its specification, i.e., a service provider can mention other types of data (for example user location) than the ones specified by P3P in a policy. There are two problems with using such an extension. First, there is no semantic agreement on the actual meaning of this data, so it may mean one thing for one service provider and a completely different thing for another service provider. Second, if all contextual information has to be redefined in every P3P policy, policies may become quite large. This is especially problematic in environments like the WASP platform, where users typically use small devices with limited bandwidth connections. So, contextual information should be added to the list of predefined data types.

Trust. Privacy control using P3P relies on trust. P3P does not provide any technical means to enforce privacy. This is left to law and other regulations. To increase this trust, service providers could be screened by the context-aware platform provider, and receive a certificate [9].

4.2 User privacy preferences

P3P is intended to provide privacy control for simple request-reply web interaction. In this case, one request leads to one reply. So, a user can evaluate the site's privacy policy before each request, and decide whether or not to use the service. After the invocation of the service, no further interactions take place. A new interaction can only start on the initiative of the user.

In a context-aware system, it is common for a user to register with a service once, after which the service may contact the user many times. For example, a user may register to a location tracking service, which will provide the user with information every time a certain condition is met.

A problem that arises in this situation is that user preferences may also be constrained by context. For example, a user may allow his employer (in fact: a service acting on the employer's behalf) to track his location, but *only during work hours*. While a condition like this may still be checked by the employer before requesting a user's location (since both the user and the employer's service can have the same notion of time), it is not difficult to think of more complicated situations. Suppose the user will only allow his employer to track his location *while he is in the office.* This condition can

no longer be checked by the employer before actually retrieving the user's location. In other words, a service cannot publish this kind of behaviour in its P3P policy and take care of complying with the policy itself. So, user preferences containing constraints on the contextual data that is being collected must be checked somewhere else, as they cannot be checked by the service provider.

There is a good argument not to include these context-dependent conditions in a privacy policy of a service at all. Context-dependent conditions are not part of the actual service behaviour. They describe user preferences, not service characteristics.

To support the inclusion of this kind of conditions in user preferences, we are currently developing an extension to APPEL. This extension will support the expression of constraints on the values of the contextual data specified by our extension to P3P. For example, it enables a user to express that a particular service provider may only retrieve data between nine and five, or only retrieve his location while the user is in his office building.

5 WASP privacy architecture

The proposed privacy architecture for the WASP platform is depicted in Figure 2. A user interacts with context-aware services through a user agent, which can automatically retrieve P3P policies for the requested services and compare them to the user's preferences. This user agent can reside on the user's device, or, in case of small user devices with limited bandwidth and processing power, somewhere in the wired network.

Contextual information is shielded from service providers by the privacy control layer. This layer is responsible for checking context-dependent privacy preferences, as explained below.

Contextual information is available from the contextual information interpreter. This component aggregates all data from sensors and other context providers (such as for example a user's calendar).

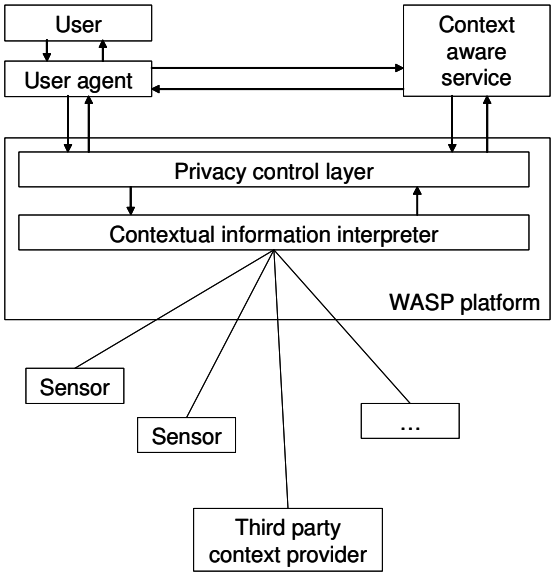

Figure 2: WASP privacy architecture overview.

In WASP, we separate the evaluation of the privacy policy of a service and the evaluation of a user's context-dependent preferences. Before a user invokes a service, his user agent will retrieve the P3P policy of the service. This will be compared against the user's preferences, expressed in the extended version of APPEL. If the service's policy is acceptable (evaluated automatically from the APPEL preferences, or after interaction with the user if no suitable rule is available for automatic evaluation), the user agent will store the association between the user, the service and the agreed privacy policy in the platform's privacy control layer.

Together with this association, the user's context-dependent part of the preferences will be stored. Every time a service needs contextual information, it will contact the WASP platform. The privacy control layer will then check for an association record between the service, its policy and the user it wants information about. If this association exists, the privacy control layer will evaluate the context-dependent preferences expressed by the user. If the context-dependent constraints are satisfied, the privacy control layer will release the requested contextual information to the service.

The separation between the checking of the privacy policy against the user's preferences

and the checking of the request against the user's context-dependent preferences is made for two reasons. First, it expresses the conceptual difference between a privacy policy, describing a service's permanent characteristics, and context-dependent preferences, which are of a frequently changing nature. Second, it provides a performance improvement. P3P policies, which can be quite complex, need to be compared to the user's preferences only once. For further requests for context by a context-aware service, only the context-dependent constraints need to be evaluated.

In practise, this separation enables to establish the willingness of a user to use a certain service in principle, even though there are some conditions under which the user may temporarily wish to stop being tracked by the service.

6 Conclusions

In this paper, we identified the requirements for applying a P3P based privacy control mechanism in our context-aware WASP platform. A privacy architecture has been designed based on an extended version of P3P and its associated preference expression language APPEL.

We are currently implementing the proposed extensions to P3P and APPEL. The next step in our research will be the actual design and implementation of a prototype of the proposed privacy architecture. This prototype will be integrated in the WASP project.

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