An Introduction to VoiceXML

ART on Dialogue Models and Dialogue Systems

François Mairesse
University of Sheffield
F.Mairesse@sheffield.ac.uk
http://www.dcs.shef.ac.uk/~francois

Outline

- What is it?
- Why is it useful?
- How does it work?
- How to make it better?
Brief history

- 1999: AT&T, IBM, Lucent Technology and Motorola formed the VoiceXML Forum
  - The goal was to make Internet content available by phone and voice
  - Each company had previously developed its own markup language
  - Customers were reluctant to invest in proprietary technology

- 2000: release of VoiceXML 1.0
- 2005: VoiceXML 2.1 is a W3C candidate recommendation

What is VoiceXML?

- VoiceXML is a mark-up language for specifying interactive voice dialogues between a human and a computer
- Analogous to HTML
  - VoiceXML browser interprets .vxml pages
  - Can be dynamically generated by server-side scripts (JSP, ASP, CGI, Perl)
    - Can access external databases (e.g. SQL)

- Example
  ```xml
  <?xml version="1.0"?>
  <vxml version="2.0">
    <form>
      <prompt>
        Hello world!
      </prompt>
    </form>
  </vxml>
  ```

- VoiceXML platform
### Architecture

- VoiceXML Gateway
  - telephony interface
  - voice browser
  - automated speech recognition
  - text-to-speech synthesis
  - touchtone
  - audio play/record

- HTTP Server
  - VoiceXML documents
  - audio files
  - service logic (CGI)
  - database interface

### Voice User Interface (VUI)

- Traditional web-based forms
- The purpose of a dialogue is to fill forms
- GUI vs. VUI
  - Fonts vs. prosody
  - Large menus vs. short utterances
  - Hypertext navigation vs. voice commands
  - Constraint on forms vs. recognition grammars
  - Global options always visible vs. only uttered at the beginning of the dialogue
Why use VoiceXML?

Advantages of VoiceXML platforms

- Special-purpose programming languages
  - Reduces development costs
- Separation between dialogue system components
  - Portability of application
  - Flexibility: outsource or purchase equipment
  - Choose best-of-breed components
- Re-use of Internet infrastructure
- VoiceXML is becoming a standard

The VoiceXML language

- XML structure
  ```xml
  <element_name attribute_name="attribute_value">
      ......contained items......
  </element_name>
  ```

- Basic elements
  - `prompt`: specifies the system’s utterance
  - `audio`: play pre-recorded prompts
  - `form`: set of fields
  - `field`: information needed to complete task
  - `grammar`: specifies possible inputs to a field
Basic elements

- *filled*: what to do if user input is recognized
- *value*: return a field’s value
- *goto*: go to another form or file
- *submit*: go to another file and keep field values

Error handling

- user says nothing: *noinput*
- nothing matches the grammar: *nomatch*

- Many more elements: http://www.vxml.org

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VoiceXML document

```xml
<?xml version="1.0"?>
<vxml version="2.0">
<form id="get_student_name">
  <field name="student_name">
    <prompt> What's your name? </prompt>
    <grammar> john | mary | rob </grammar>
    <noinput> Please say your name. </ noinput>
    <nomatch> I didn't understand that. </ nomatch>
    <filled>
      Thank you, <value expr= "student_name" />
      <submit next="next_document.vxml" />
    </filled>
  </field>
</form>
</vxml>
```
Recognition grammars

- Key to successful recognition
- Many platform-dependent formats (JSGF, SGL, etc.)
- Inline grammar
- External file
  `<grammar src="mygram.gram" type="application/x-jsgf"/>

- Example with optional inputs (in brackets)
  
  ```java
  #JSGF V1.0;
  grammar pizza;
  public <pizza> = [I'd like a] <size> <type> [pizza] [please];
  <size> = small | medium | large;
  <type> = vegetarian | pepperoni | cheese;
  ```

Built-in grammars

- Boolean
- Currency
- Date
- Digits
- Number
- Phone
- Time

- Example: `<field name="get_digits" type="digits"/>

- Can add additional constraints
  `<field name="get_digits"
  type="digits?minlength=3;maxlength=9">

```
Events

- Similar to exceptions
- Thrown by
  - Platform: ASR misrecognition
  - Application: <throw>
- Handler
  - Specific: <nomatch>, <nomatch>, <help>
  - General: <catch event=…>
  - Can count number of event occurrences
    - Successive ASR errors with different repairs
      <nomatch count=3> What did you say? </nomatch>

VoiceXML properties

- Can be modified using the <property> element
  - Confidence level of ASR
  - Barge-in
  - Time-out
  - Voice/DTMF
- Properties can be defined at all levels: for the whole application, document, or a specific field
Mixed-initiative dialogues

- VoiceXML allows for simple mixed-initiative
  - More flexible
  - More room for errors
- A form-level grammar that can recognize multiple fields at once
  - E.g. “Please tell me a departure day and a destination”
  - Grammar needs to account for all possible orderings
    - “I’m going to DEST on DATE”
    - “I’m leaving on DATE to go to DEST”
- What if we don’t have all required information at once?
  - Back to directed dialogue
  - Need traditional fields
  - How to know what fields remain unfilled?

Form Interpretation Algorithm

- Defines how control flows through a VoiceXML application as it executes
- Makes VoiceXML declarative
  - Just specify utterances, fields and grammars
  - Define what happens, not how
  - FIA deals with procedural details
    - Keeps querying undefined fields
    - Throw events and loop until field is filled by user
      - <nomatch> or <noinput>
      - <filled>
FIA - confirmations

- If a field value isn’t confirmed by user, set it to undefined and the FIA will ask for it again

```html
[field name="confirm" type="boolean">
  <prompt> Do you want details on $student_name$? </prompt>
  <filled>
    <if cond="confirm">
      Looking up details on $student_name$
      Let’s try again
    </if>
    <else />
    <clear namelist="student_name confirm" />
  </if>
</field>
```

Limitations

- Simple mixed initiative
- How to retrieve information from a database?
- What about more advanced dialogue system features?
  - Content summarization
    - Multiple database entries
    - Find alternatives answers
  - Dynamic grammars
    - If the database changes, the recognition grammar must adapt
    - Generate VoiceXML pages dynamically
Dynamic VoiceXML

- Similar to dynamic HTML pages
- Content isn’t stored on the server, but created on-the-fly based on the user’s parameters and a database

- Typical interaction:
  - A static VXML page collects information from the user
  - Submit the fields to a server-side script (JSP, PHP, ASP, Perl, etc.)
  - The script queries the database and processes the results
  - The script outputs VXML code which is interpreted by the browser
Implementation in Perl

- When form is filled, send fields value to the server-side script for processing
  ```html
  <filled> Thank you
  <submit next="http://mywebserver/script.perl">
  </filled>
  ```
- The Perl script collects information
  ```perl
  $q = new CGI;
  $name = $q->param('student_name');
  ```
- Connect to the SQL database
  ```perl
  $handler = DBI->connect("DBI:mysql:$db", $user, $password);
  ```
- Query the database for the student's name
  ```perl
  $query = $handler->prepare("SELECT * FROM students WHERE name = "$name" ");
  $query->execute;
  ```
- Output beginning of VoiceXML document (<xml>, <voicexml>, <form>, <prompt>)
- Output result, i.e. the student's phone number
  ```perl
  @row = $sth->fetchrow_array;
  print "The phone number of $name is $row[2]\n";
  ```
- Output end of VoiceXML document (</form>, </voicexml>, etc.)

Dynamic grammars

- What to do when the recognition vocabulary is not known in advance?
- Rewrite a grammar at each database update
- Better, use a server-side script to
  - Retrieve patterns from database
  - Write grammar to an external file
  - Call a VXML page using this grammar
Conclusion

- VoiceXML has become a standard
  - All-in-one solutions available
  - Reduces dialogue system development time
  - Comes with limited dialogue management and language generation capabilities
  - Additional functions can be easily implemented
  - Develop your own dialogue system with free VoiceXML browsers!

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