Mobile App Design Tool for Smartphones: A Tutorial

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Abstract—The paper presents the basics of mobile application creation for smartphones using the visual programming tool, ‘App Inventor for Android (AIA)’. The AIA was developed by Google to enable non-programmers to easily build mobile applications by dragging and dropping the block-based interfaces, like blocks of Lego, instead of writing lines and lines of code. It allows users to immediately build applications (e.g., location services and games) that interface with mobile technologies.

Index Terms—App Inventor, Mobile App, Smartphones, Designer, Block Editor

I. INTRODUCTION

With the popularity of smartphones, mobile applications are increasingly gaining interest to younger generations as well as students who are interested in computer science [1]. App Inventor for Android [2, 3, 4] has great potential because individuals without any prior programming skills can easily build their own applications with real-world impact. Students can become excited to learn by tinkering with their most beloved devices (e.g., smartphones).

The main objective of this project is to build the smart parking management system to solve current parking problems on the university campus. It aims to provide real-time parking information as well as support a more sustainable campus by reducing the amount of carbon dioxide. In this paper, we will introduce the mobile app design tool, AIA, and then attempt to design a mobile application for campus parking management.

II. WHAT IS APP INVENTOR

App Inventor [3] is a mobile applications design tool consisted of two major parts; Component Designer and Block Editor. It allows users without prior programming experience to develop mobile applications. App Inventor [4] lets users develop applications for Android phones using a web browser and either a connected phone/tablet or an emulator.

Figure 1 shows the architecture of App Inventor. The App Inventor Server stores a developer’s work and help him/her keep track of a project. The App Inventor Designer [5] is mainly used to create the interface of a user’s own apps and put them together from its functional components, such as Basic, Media, Animation, Social, and Sensor. It is implemented as a web application, so you load it just like a normal website into your browser by entering the appropriate web address. After finishing the design of applications, the App Inventor Block Editor should be used to specify how the components of App Inventor Designer [3] should behave. The more detail process will explained next session.

Instead of the traditional method of debugging, your app appears on the phone as you add pieces to it, so you can test your work as you build. When you're done, you can package your app and produce a stand-alone application to install. If you don’t have an Android phone, you can build your apps using the Android emulator [4], software that runs on your computer and behaves (with a few exceptions) just like the phone.

III. DEVELOPMENT ENVIRONMENT

The App Inventor development environment [5] is supported for Mac OS X, GNU/Linux, and Windows operating systems, and several popular Android phone models. Applications created with App Inventor can be installed on any Android phone.

A. Objects

An object represents an instance of a class such as Form, Control, or Component. An everyday object such as an automobile also has properties, methods, and events.

B. Property

A property is an attribute of an object that defines one of the object's characteristics. Examples of properties are the size, color, or screen location of the object. Other properties could include aspects of the object’s behavior, such as whether it is enabled or visible.

C. Method

A method is an action that an object can perform. For example, Add is a method of the ListPicker object, because it adds a new entry into the list.
D. Event

An event is an action recognized by an object, such as clicking the mouse or pressing a key, and for which you can write code to respond. Events can occur as a result of a user action or program code, or they can be triggered by the system.

E. Example

Figure 2 shows an example of automobile. An object (Automobile) has properties (Color, Length, and Height), responds to events (Collide with object), and can perform methods (Drive). An automobile also has known methods or actions that it can perform. For example, a ‘Fill her up’ method (filling it with gasoline). A ‘drive’ method (expelling its contents such as gasoline, oil, winshield wiper fluid). An automobile’s properties include visible attributes such as its length, model, and color. Other properties describe its state (running, idle, off), or attributes that are not visible, such as its age.

Figure 2: Objects, Properties, Events, and Methods of Automobile

IV. COMPONENTS OF APP INVENTOR

As addressed in the above, the App Inventor consists of two components - the ‘Component Designer’ for specifying the visual components of an application and the ‘Blocks Editor’ for creating behaviors for the components [9].

A. Basic Component

Figure 3 shows the list of Basic Component. Each component is briefly described as follows:

- **Button** is a component that users touch to perform some action in your application.
- **Canvas** is a two-dimensional rectangular panel on which drawing can be done and sprites can be moved.
- **CheckBox** can detect user taps and can change their Boolean state in response.
- **Clock** is used to create a timer that signals events at regular intervals.
- **Image** is to represent images that users select and manipulate.
- **Label** is a component used to show text.
- **ListPicker** is that users tap a list picker component to select one item from a list of text strings.
- **PasswordTextBox** is that users enter passwords in a password text box component, which hides the text that has been typed in it.
- **TextBox** is to enter text in a text box.
- **TinyDB** is to store data that will be available each time the app runs.

![Figure 4: Basic Component](image)

B. Media Component

Figure 5 shows the list of Media Component. Each component is briefly described as follows:

- **Camera** is used to take a picture on the phone.
- **ImagePicker** is used to choose an image from your image gallery.
- **Player** is used to play an audio or video file, or to vibrate the phone.
- **Sound** is used to play an audio file, or to vibrate the phone.
- **VideoPlayer** is used to play a video file.

![Figure 5: Media Component](image)

C. Animation Component

Figure 6 shows the list of Animation Component. Each component is briefly described as follows:

- **Ball** is a particular kind of sprite (animated object) that looks like a ball.
• **Image Sprite** is an animated object that can interact with a canvas, balls, and other image sprites.

![Image](example.png)

*Figure 6: Animation Component*

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**D. Social Component**

Figure 7 shows the list of **Social Component**. Each component is briefly described as follows:

- **ContactPicker** is used to let the user choose an entry from the Android contact list.
- **EmailPicker** is used to let the user enter a user's email address from the Android contact list.
- **PhoneCall** is used to dial the phone and make a call.
- **PhoneNumberPicker** is used to allow users to choose a phone number from a list of Android contacts' phone numbers.
- **Texting** is used to allow users to send and receive text messages.
- **Twitter** is a non-visible component to enable communication with Twitter.

![Social](example.png)

*Figure 7: Social Component*

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**E. Sensors Component**

Figure 8 shows the list of **Sensors Component**. Each component is briefly described as follows:

- **AccelerometerSensor** senses the Android device's accelerometer, which detects shaking and measures acceleration in three dimensions.
- **LocationSensor** provides the Android device's location, using GPS if available and an alternative method otherwise, such as cellular towers or known wireless networks.
- **OrientationSensor** uses an orientation sensor component to determine the phone's spatial orientation.

![Sensors](example.png)

*Figure 8: Sensors Component*

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**F. Screen Arrangement Component**

Figure 9 shows the list of **Screen Arrangement Component**. Each component is briefly described as follows:

- **HorizontalArrangement** uses a horizontal arrangement component to display a group of components laid out from left to right.
- **TableArrangement** uses a table arrangement component to display a group of components in a tabular fashion.
- **VerticalArrangement** uses a vertical arrangement component to display a group of components laid out from top to bottom, left-aligned.

![Screen Arrangement](example.png)

*Figure 9: Screen Arrangement Component*

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**G. Other Stuff**

Figure 10 shows the list of **Other Stuff**. Each component is briefly described as follows:

- **ActivityStarter** launches another activity from your application.
- **BarcodeScanner** reads a 1-dimensional barcode or 2-dimensional barcode (QR code). In order for this component to work, the Barcode scanner application from ZXing must be installed on the phone.
- **Notifier** uses a notifier to display notices and alerts to users of your app, and also to log information that can help you debug your application.
- **SpeechRecognizer** listens to the user speaking and convert the spoken sound into text using Android's speech recognition feature.
- **TextToSpeech** uses a text-to-speech component to have the device speak text audibly.
- **TinyWebDB** is a non-visible component that communicates with a Web service to store and retrieve information.
- **Web** is a non-visible component that provides functions for HTTP GET and POST requests.

![Other Stuff](example.png)

*Figure 10: Other Stuff Component*

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**2. Block Editor**

The **Blocks Editor** is used to assign behavior to the components. It is where you indicate what events should cause action in the app and what the resulting algorithm is after the event occurs. It allows a user to set of different properties. It can make a reference to a component via a variable/argument and manipulate dynamically. Figure 11 shows a screen shot of **Block Editor**.
The *Block Editor*, where you assemble program blocks, specifies how the components should behave. You assemble programs visually, fitting pieces together like pieces of a puzzle. There are seven block categories, not including the *My Blocks* section.

![Image showing the Block Editor](image)

**Figure 11: Block Editor**

### A. Definition Blocks

There are four *Definition Blocks*: procedure, procedureWithResult, name, and variable, as shown Figure 12. These blocks allow user to automatically generate blocks definitions related to *App Inventor* components.

![Image showing Definition Blocks](image)

**Figure 12: Definition Blocks**

### B. Text Blocks

Figure 13 shows the list of *Text Blocks* and each component is briefly described. These blocks create, manipulate, and destroy text. Text is usually used as a user interface. Currently there are 20 text block types.

![Image showing Text Blocks](image)

**Figure 13: Text Blocks**

### C. List Blocks

List blocks are used for creating and manipulating lists which can be combined with the for each block to do a set series of operations on every value in the list. Figure 14 shows the list of *List Blocks* and each component is briefly described. List is a necessity in almost every applications regardless of what programming language is used. This is the easiest way to create and manipulate a set of values, items, and elements in an ordered fashion.
D. Logic Blocks

Figure 16 shows the list of Logic Blocks and each component is briefly described.

F. Math Blocks

The math blocks handle mathematical functions suitable for calculator applications. Figure 18 shows the list of Math Blocks and each component is briefly described.
The Color Blocks contain several blocks corresponding to commonly used colors. Figure 19 shows the list of Color Blocks and each component is briefly described. These blocks have two types one is the text color setting and the other is the background color setting. These same colors can also be selected from the color dropdown lists in the Designer's properties panel.

V. AN EXAMPLE: DESIGNING CAMPUS PARKING SYSTEM

In this project, we designed a test-bed for performance evaluation of the RFID-enabled and mobile app-based parking management system in a controlled and repeatable laboratory environment. The test-bed consists of a real-time RF channel simulator, Wi-Fi 802.11 access points, RFID tags, and a laptop loaded with the positioning algorithm and its associated user interface (i.e., mobile app) [6].

The parking management platform consists of four systems [7]: RFID system, Wi-Fi systems, database management system (DBMS), and mobile systems loaded with our mobile app. The web-based mobile app will use the University Wi-Fi network to triangulate the position of the user’s smart phone. It will provide a view of the University’s parking lot layout and the user’s location on the smart phone (combining the GPS guidance system and the RFID technology).

The mobile app will provide real-time parking information (e.g., available parking spaces) and also guide the user giving them turn by turn directions to the destination.

Using the mobile app for android, the preliminary test-bed for integrating the RFID system, wireless network, and mobile devices. The methodology for this test-bed will be a lab-based approach (experiment). This pilot study will be carried out in the University’s computer networking lab and use some facilities (power source, database server, wireless access points, and PCs). The additional equipment for a test-bed includes RFID Tags, RFID Readers, and RFID software. Figure 20 shows web-based mobile app prototype which provides a map with parking information like available parking lots and spaces.
VI. CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper introduces the App Inventor for Android as a tool to develop mobile applications, including its definitions, components, and architecture. The benefit of this software is that there is no prior experience in programming, but improvement in the knowledge of computer programming.

Using this mobile app design tool, we plan to build the campus parking management system for solving current parking problems in university campus by providing the real-time parking information and also for supporting more sustainable campus by reducing the amount of carbon dioxide. This system also will be applied to many fields, such as central business districts, airports, transit stations, and shopping centers.

REFERENCES


Hak J. Kim is an Associate Professor of Information Technology and Quantitative Methods at the Hofstra University. He is a Director of Computer and Network Lab in the Zarb School of Business. His current research interests include mobile computing & ubiquitous business, social networking services & social media, and cyber space & cyber security. In this workshop, he is interested in applying mobile computing technologies to smartphones and analyzing how his research interests are incorporated in the real-world businesses.

Jonathan Modell is currently an MBA graduate student at the Zarb School Of Business/Hofstra University with a focus on Information Technology. With over fifteen years of industry experience, he currently owns and operates a small computer consulting firm focusing on the needs of smaller emerging businesses on Long Island.