VoiceXML replaces the familiar HTML interpreter (Web browser) with a VoiceXML interpreter and the mouse and keyboard with the human voice.

Until recently, the Web delivered information and services exclusively through visual interfaces on computers with displays, keyboards, and pointing devices. The Web revolution largely bypassed the huge market for information and services represented by the worldwide installed base of telephones, for which voice input and audio output provide the sole means of interaction.

Development of speech services has been hindered by a lack of easy-to-use standard tools for managing the dialogue between user and service. Interactive voice-response systems are characterized by expensive, closed application-development environments. Lack of tools inhibits portability of applications and limits the availability of skilled application developers. Consequently, voice applications are costly to develop and deploy, so voice access is limited to only those services for which the business case is most compelling for voice access.

Here, I offer an introduction to VoiceXML, an emerging standard XML-based markup language for distributed Web-based voice services, much as HTML is a language for distributed visual services. VoiceXML brings the power of Web development
and content delivery to voice-response applications, freeing developers from low-level programming and resource management. It also enables integration of voice services with data services, using the familiar client/server paradigm and leveraging the skills of Web developers to speed application development for this new medium.

VoiceXML 1.0 was developed by the VoiceXML Forum (see www.voicexml.org), which released it in March 2000, and was accepted by the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) two months later as the basis for developing a W3C dialogue markup language (see www.w3.org/Voice/). The initial version of the language included robust support for basic state-based dialogue capabilities, using a design with simple form-based natural language capabilities that leaves room to grow as the technology evolves. (You can find the VoiceXML specification at www.voicexml.org and a free implementation for personal use at www.alphaworks.ibm.com/tech/voiceserversdk.)

**Basic Spoken Dialogue**

The basic spoken dialogue capabilities of VoiceXML are illustrated by the following VoiceXML document containing a menu and a form:

```xml
<?xml version="1.0"?>
<vxml version="1.0">

  <prompt>Say one of: <enumerate/></prompt>

  <choice next="http://www.sports.example/sports.vxml">
    Sports scores
  </choice>

  <choice next="http://www.weather.example/weather.vxml">
    Weather information
  </choice>

  <choice next="#login">
    Log in
  </choice>

</menu>

<form id="login">
  <field name="phone_number" type="phone">
    <prompt>Please say your complete phone number</prompt>
  </field>

  <field name="pin_code" type="digits">
    <prompt>Please say your PIN code</prompt>
  </field>

  <block>
    <submit next="/servlet/login"/>
  </block>

</form>
</vxml>
```

This document enables a dialogue like the following one in which the user selects an item from a menu:

C (computer): Say one of: Sports scores; Weather information; Log in.
H (human): Sports scores

The computer then retrieves and interprets a VoiceXML document from www.sports.example/sports.vxml containing a specification of the next segment of the dialogue (in this case, a sports information service). The dialogue uses the menu element (but not the form element). It also illustrates a capability similar to the one provided for visual applications by a set of static HTML hyperlinks. However, the static linking of information is only the Web's most basic function. The Web's most compelling feature is its dynamic distributed services, which require forms.

The form is VoiceXML's basic dialogue unit, describing a set of inputs (fields) needed from the user to complete a transaction between the user agent (browser) and a server. Each field includes a prompt and a specification of what the user is allowed to say to provide the required input. The form also specifies what to do with the set of fields after they are collected. The following dialogue between a computer and a human uses both the menu and the form in the example VoiceXML document:

C: Say one of: Sports scores; Weather information; Log in.
H: Log in.
C: Please say your complete phone number
H: 914-555-1234
C: Please say your PIN code
H: 1 2 3 4

The computer has now collected the two fields needed to complete the login, so it executes the code block containing a submit command, thus causing the information collected to be submitted to a server for processing. Each field specifies the set of acceptable user responses. Limiting these responses serves two purposes:

- Allow them to be verified and provide help (in case of an invalid response) locally without the delay of a round trip over the network to the application server; and
- Help achieve good speech-recognition accuracy, particularly over a relatively low-quality channel like a telephone.

In the example VoiceXML document, the set of acceptable user inputs is specified implicitly by specifying a "type" attribute ("phone" and "digits" in the
example) in the field element. VoiceXML interpreters provide built-in support for a set of common field types, including number, digits, phone, date, and time. However, applications would be seriously constrained if they were limited to only these built-in types. VoiceXML applications may specify their own field types using grammars, or enumerations in compact form of a set of phrases. The following example VoiceXML document illustrates the use of grammars in an online voice-enabled restaurant application:

```xml
<form>
  <field name="drink">
    <prompt>What would you like to drink?</prompt>
    <grammar>
      coffee | tea | orange juice | milk | nothing
    </grammar>
  </field>
  <field name="sandwich">
    <prompt>What sandwich would you like?</prompt>
    <grammar src="sandwiches.gram"/>
  </field>
  <block>
    <submit next="/servlet/order"/>
  </block>
</form>
```

The grammars here are specified using the Java Speech Grammar Format (JSGF) (see java.sun.com/products/java-media/speech/). The first one is inline and consists of a list of words and phrases (“coffee,” “tea,” and so on) the user may say in response to the prompt for that field. The second is contained in an external file called “sandwiches.gram”:

```
<ingredient> = ham | roast beef | tomato | lettuce | swiss [cheese];
<bread> = rye | white | whole wheat;
public <sandwich> = <ingredient> ([and] <ingredient>)* on <bread>;
```

This grammar consists of three rules: The first, labeled `<ingredient>`, specifies a list of phrases listing sandwich ingredients. The last phrase (“ingredient” in this case) in the list uses square brackets to indicate the word “cheese” is optional; thus, the user may say either “swiss” or “swiss cheese.” The second rule, labeled `<bread>`, specifies a list of phrases naming breads. And the third rule, labeled `<sandwich>`, specifies that a complete description of a sandwich consists of at least one ingredient, followed by zero or additional ingredients optionally separated by the word “and” and ending finally with the word “on” followed by the name of a bread. This last rule is marked “public,” indicating it defines the phrases the user can actually say; the first two rules are used only in the formation of the `<sandwich>` rule. (For more on grammars, a good starting point is the JSGF reference manual at java.sun.com/products/java-media/speech/)

A typical dialogue between a computer and a human enabled by this form might be:

C: What would you like to drink?
H: Orange juice
C: What sandwich would you like?
H: Ham, lettuce, and swiss on rye

The computer has now collected the two fields needed to complete the order, so it executes the code block containing a `submit` command, thus causing the information collected to be submitted to a server for processing.

**VoiceXML and Web Standards**

As the first line of the food-ordering dialogue indicates, VoiceXML is an XML application, meaning it adheres to the XML standard that at its core specifies the meta-delimiters `<, </, >, =, and “” (see www.w3.org/TR/1998/REC-xml-19980210). The rest of the contents of the example are specific either to VoiceXML (“vxml,” “menu,” “prompt,” “choice,” and “next”) or to the application (“Say one of:” and “Sports scores”).

Basing VoiceXML on the XML standard yields some important benefits. The most important is it allows the reuse and easy retooling of existing tools for creating, transforming, and parsing XML documents. It also allows VoiceXML to make use of other complementary XML-based standards. For example, VoiceXML applications occasionally need to specify speech-synthesis parameters, such as volume, speaking rate, and pitch. For this purpose—specifying synthesis parameters—VoiceXML incorporates the XML markup from the Java Speech Markup Language, an industry standard for speech synthesis markup (see java.sun.com/products/java-media/speech/)

**The Distributed Model**

The Web brings to each user a worldwide array of information and services while bringing each information and service provider a worldwide customer base. Thus, a distributed application model is fundamental to the Web; VoiceXML builds on the same distributed model that has already proved so successful for visual Web-based services. Figure 1 outlines the distributed Web-based application model used by VoiceXML services accessed by telephone.

The VoiceXML architecture is the same as the one in the more familiar visual Web application model, except the HTML interpreter (Web browser) is
replaced by a VoiceXML interpreter, and voice
replaces the mouse and keyboard as the user-interface
medium. In addition to its core capabilities,
VoiceXML provides more advanced features, includ-
ing local validation and processing, audio playback
and recording, and support for context-specific and
tapered help and for reusable subdialogues.

Local processing and validation of user input is
accomplished through a collection of elements pro-
viding a more-or-less standard programming
model. A “block” element allows code to be run at
any point in the process of collecting inputs. A
“filled” element allows input validation code to gain
control upon completion of any set of user inputs;
this element is particularly useful for the mixed-initi-
tive dialogue model in which the user is able to
supply inputs in any order. Finally, a “script” ele-
ment allows ECMAScript (also known
as JavaScript) program fragments to be run locally
at any point in the dialogue (see

The playback of prerecorded audio prompts is
accomplished through an “audio” element. Recording
of user messages is done through the “record” ele-
ment; the recorded audio may then be played back
locally using the “audio” element or uploaded to the
server for storage, processing, or playback at a later
time.

Meanwhile, context-specific and tapered help is
provided by a built-in system of events and event
handlers. VoiceXML defines a set of events corre-
sponding to, for example, a user request for help, a
failure by the user to respond within a timeout
period, or user input that doesn’t match an active
grammar. The application may then provide (in any
given context, including a form or a field) an event
handler responding appropriately to a given event for
a particular context. Moreover, help may be tapered;
a count may be specified for each event handler so a
different handler is executed, depending on how
many times the event has occurred in that context.
For example, tapering can be used to provide increas-
ingly more detailed messages each time a user asks for
help.

Finally, VoiceXML provides support for subdia-
logues (an entire form that is executed), the result of
which is to provide an input field to another form.
This feature has two uses: provide a disambiguation
or confirmation dialogue for an input and support
reusable subdialogues.

**Compared with HTML**

While VoiceXML reuses many concepts and designs
from HTML, it differs in several ways due to the
differences between visual and voice interactions.
For example, an HTML document is a single unit
that is fetched from a network resource specified by a
uniform resource identifier and presented to the user
all at once. In contrast, a VoiceXML document con-
tains a number of dialogue units (menus or forms)
presented sequentially. This difference is due to the
visual medium's ability to display a number of items
in parallel, while the voice medium is inherently
sequential.

Thus, although a given VoiceXML document may
contain the same information as a corresponding
HTML document, the VoiceXML document is
structured differently to reflect the sequential nature
of the voice medium. So, for example, the HTML
equivalent of the menu in the simple VoiceXML doc-
ument outlined earlier might be:

```
Please select a service.
<a href="http://www.sports.example/sports.html">Sports scores</a>
<a href="http://www.weather.example/weather.html">Weather information</a>
<a href="#login">Log in.</a>
```

In HTML, there is no need to identify this menu as
a unit or to isolate it using markup structure from
other elements on the same page. However,
VoiceXML requires dialogue elements (menus and
forms) to be identified as distinct units so they may be
presented one at a time to the user. Thus, while an
HTML document functions, in effect, as a single dia-
logue unit, a VoiceXML document is a container of
dialogue units, such as menus and forms, each con-
taining logic to sequence the interpreter to the next
unit.

Another consequence of the sequential nature of
the voice medium is the need for the markup to con-
tain application logic for sequencing among dialogue
units. This need is reflected in a tighter integration of
sequential logic elements into VoiceXML than in

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**Figure 1.** The distributed Web-based
application model used by VoiceXML
services accessed by telephone.
VoiceXML supports simple “directed” dialogues; the computer directs the conversation at each step by prompting the user for the next piece of information.

In contrast, a somewhat more natural dialogue might proceed as follows:

C: How can I help you?
H: I’d like to fly from New York on February 29th.
C: Where would you like to fly to?
H: To Chicago.

VoiceXML enables such relatively natural dialogues by allowing input grammars to be specified at the form level, not just at the field level. A form-level grammar for these applications defines utterances that allow users to supply values for a number of fields in one utterance. For example, the utterance “I’d like to fly from New York on February 29th” supplies values for both the “from city” field and the “date” field. VoiceXML specifies a form-interpretation algorithm that then causes the browser to prompt the user for the values (one by one) of missing pieces of information (in this example, the “to city” field).

VoiceXML’s special ability to accept free-form utterances is only a first step toward natural dialogue. VoiceXML will continue to evolve, incorporating more advanced features in support of natural dialogue.

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