Pody: a Solid-based approach to embody agents in Web-based Multi-Agent-Systems

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Abstract. In this paper we discuss the problem of situatedness for agents perceiving and acting on the Web (namely, "Web agents"). Assuming Web agents are *embodied* on the World Wide Web, then we must define what a Web agent's *body* is. We first provide an abstract definition of a Web agent's body in terms of what it should comprise. Then we propose a concrete definition of it relying on Solid, a recent Web technology for Social Linked Data: we implement a Web agent's body as a data pod. Consequently, we coin the term *pody* to refer to the Web entity that embodies an agent on the Web with Solid. This paper summarises the findings of a working group from the *Dagstuhl Seminar 23081: Agents on the Web* (February 19-24, 2023).

Keywords: Multi-Agent Systems · Semantic Web · Embodiment · Situatedness · Solid

1 Introduction

Two notions of particular importance in research on intelligent agents are *situatedness* and *embodiment*: the dominant view is that intelligent, rational behaviour is closely related to the environment an agent occupies and is not disembodied [16]. This view emerged in the late '80s in close relationship with research on intelligent robots [11], which are naturally situated and embodied in a physical environment. The complexity of virtual environments, such as the Web, rivals that of physical environments. Furthermore, with the recent standardisation of the Web of Things at the W3C and the IETF, the Web now extends to the physical world – and thus becomes a uniform hypermedia fabric that interconnects virtual and physical environments.

This evolution unlocks new practical use cases for intelligent agents on the Web, a vision that can be traced back to the early days of the Web [6]. Such agents, however, also need to be situated and embodied. In this paper, we discuss how Web agents could be embodied into the Web, both at an abstract level and concretely using Web standards and technologies. In a nutshell, we envision a Web agent's body as a collection of Web resources and Web interfaces that are attached to the identify of the Web agent. The Web agent's body allows the agent to participate in collective work as part of a multi-agent system (MAS) on the Web: to perceive and actuate Web resources (including Web-enabled devices), to be discovered and perceived by other agents, to participate in organisations, to communicate with other agents, etc. We illustrate this concept through a concrete example of how such Web agents could be embodied using Solid pods, the core concept and technology from Sir Tim Berners-Lee's project for **So**cial **Li**nked **D**ata – an initiative to preserve the decentralised nature of the Web and to radically decentralise personal data.

To explain our proposal, we first present the background setting in which we position our research in Section 2. Then in Section 3, we present our vision of how agents should be situated and embodied on the Web, independently of the technologies used. After that, in Section 4, we show how this can be implemented using Solid: we describe how we can engineer Solid pods to represent a Web agent's body as a *pody*, an entity that comprises a data pod with interfaces attached to an agent evolving and interacting in a Web environment. Section 5 finishes the paper with additional discussions of what other abstractions would be needed to articulate together *podies* with other essential dimensions of Web-based MAS.

2 Background and Related Work

In this section, we first discuss the notions of situatedness and embodiment in research on artificial intelligence – and, in particular, on engineering MAS (Section 2.1). We then provide an overview of the main concepts, principles, and technologies from the Semantic Web that will serve our purpose in the rest of this paper (Section 2.2). Finally, in Section 2.3, we describe the key technology at the center of our proposal: Solid.

2.1 Situatedness and Embodiment in Multi-Agent Systems

In the mid-80s, a new view emerged in the research field on intelligent agents: an agent is considered situated in its environment, in the sense that it is directly connected to its problem domain through sensors and actuators, and it can effect changes in this domain through actuators [11]. This view contrasted prior views in AI research, in which an agent would typically amount to a program to which

[6] See the keynote of Sir Tim Berners-Lee at the First International Conference on the World Wide Web (WWW'94): `https://videos.cern.ch/record/2671957`

a formal specification of a problem is provided as input – and then the program returns a result.

The notion of *situatedness* originated from research on mobile robots, with Brooks being one of its main originators [4]. It is now generally accepted for any system that needs to autonomously fulfill its design objectives in a dynamic, unpredictable environment – be it physical or virtual [11]. Most definitions of what is an *intelligent* or *autonomous agent* are centered around this notion of *situatedness* (e.g., see [6] for a detailed discussion of various definitions).

Another notion closely related to *situatedness* is the *embodiment* of an agent. In [3], Brooks defined this notion to articulate that robots have bodies and "their actions are part of a dynamic with the world" (e.g., their actions have immediate feedback on their own perception). Close to situatedness, this notion of embodiment originally applied to mobile robots can be extended to agents in virtual environments.

Most notably, in the Agents&Artifacts (A&A) meta-model [13] for MAS engineering, agents are situated in *workspaces* where they are embodied through *body artifacts*. A body artifact holds an agent's context within a workspace: it allows the agent to perceive and act within the workspace, and it allows other agents situated in the same workspace to perceive and interact with the agent. In A&A, an agent holds a body artifact in each workspace it is a part of. From an engineering viewpoint, this separation of concerns between an agent's mind and its body artifact allows heterogeneous agents (e.g., using different architectures or frameworks) to be reified within the same workspace in a uniform way.

2.2 A Web for Machines

In 2001, the Semantic Web was defined as an extension of the current Web relying on new models and technologies to provide structure and meaning to the content available on the Web [2], at that time mostly based on HTML documents and designed for human consumption. The Semantic Web relies on the Resource Description Framework (RDF), a graph model to structure data by expressing relations between entities, and on RDF Schema and the Ontology Web Language to represent the vocabularies or ontologies used in RDF graphs, thus providing semantics to them.

Early research on the Semantic Web was mostly focused on ontology engineering and knowledge representation, but in 2006 Tim Berners-Lee introduced the Linked Data principles [1], that are summarised as follows: 1) use URIs to name things; 2) use HTTP URIs so that things names can be looked up; 3) describe things using standards (RDF) so that when someone looks up things URIs they get useful information; and 4) include links to other URIs in things descriptions.

Ontologies and linked data together provide the means by which an agent can reliably interpret resources described on the Web, whether they are digital resources or real-world resources. Additionally, with links, a resource leads to other resources, and so forth, so as to make agents aware of the environment that the Web constitutes. Some standardised ontologies also define, in their specification, conformance obligations that say how to operate with resources described using them. For instance, the W3C Thing Description standard [9] provides both an ontology to describe possible interactions with *things* on the Web, but also the way those descriptions can be leverage to operate these things.

2.3 Solid: Social Linked Data

Solid is a project started by Tim Berners-Lee in reaction to the growing centralisation of Web platforms that collect more and more personal data. Instead, Solid aims at decentralising personal data management in such a way that Web users regain ownership and control over their data. At the core of Solid technologies, there is the Solid *pod* (**p**ersonal **o**nline **d**ata store) that hosts the user's data and is implemented as a Linked Data Platform [15] with access control on top of it. Pods are mostly used to provide data to online applications, such as social platforms, that are granted access by the pod's owner. This way, not only the data are externalised from Web platforms, but also the same identity, described inside the pod, can be reused across multiple applications.

Identity is managed using a customised protocol based on WebID [14] that allows one to retrieve credentials from a URI that not only identifies the user (as an account login) but also dereferences to the owner's data pod, thus enabling applications to get appropriate data from the user.

Solid pods can host any kind of data but are designed to most easily manage RDF datasets with fine-grained read/write operations. Overall, the Solid Protocol [5] specifies authentication, storage, access control, and interactions that must implemented by all Solid pods and Solid platforms in order to interoperate with each others and with applications that builds on them.

3 Embodiment and Situatedness of Agents on the Web

The **situatedness** of an agent, as introduced in Section 2.1, refers to the relationship that exists between the agent and its environment. In order for an agent to be situated in its environment, it must have the ability to perceive and act on it. In the case of a *Web agent* addressed in this paper, the environment comprises the Web, and the interaction are the basic interaction protocols defined for the Web. The minimum requirement for a *Web agent* is the ability to interact with hypermedia resources on the Web.

The **embodiment** of an agent on the Web requires a representation of the agent to exist within the Web. We define the *embodiment* of a *Web agent* as the composite set of resources it exposes within a Web-based hypermedia environment, including any (semantic) descriptions of such resources. A defining characteristic of an agent's embodiment in the Web is that the set of resources constituting the agent's *Web body* is innately tied to the agent's identity: the agent may be acting through its Web body, and other agents observing the body would assume that the entity controlling and acting through the body is indeed the reified agent. This paper posits that the minimum requirement for an "embodied Web agent" is a hypermedia resource that provides the semantically defined abstraction of an **Agent Description**. This is the top-level abstraction that describes the elements of the agent that are exposed as resources on the Web. It is also the initial entry point into what we are considering to be the *embodiment* of the agent.

In order to facilitate interactions within a Web-based MAS, additional abstractions should be defined to provide the necessary contextual information, such as: **Communication Interfaces**, **Preferences**, **Goals**, and **Beliefs** – all of which are important abstractions for promoting collaboration and coordination in MAS [12]. The **Communication Interface** abstraction is the element of the agent's embodiment that facilitates interaction between agents and allows for an agent to become an entity directly accessible within the Web. The **Preferences** abstraction provides information such as an agent's preferred methods of interaction, but it is not limited to that. It can also be a domain-specific abstraction that defines the agent's preferred environmental state or any other preference with regard to the agent's embodiment in a particular environment.

If an agent has an explicit internal representation of its goals, the **Goals** abstraction would allow the agent to expose a set of goals. The agent may not necessarily be actively pursuing these goals but by merely exposing a set of goals publicly as a resource, the agent can have an effect on other agents in its vicinity as their actions may be influenced by their beliefs pertaining to the goals of the other agents. This can result in benevolence between agents or agents acting in the disinterest of other agents within the system, depending on the context and implementation. Similar to the **Goals** abstraction, if an agent represents its knowledge of the world in terms of beliefs (e.g., as is the case for BDI agents [7]), the **Beliefs** abstraction is also a set of beliefs that are exposed as Web resources, so that other agents can query the supposed beliefs of the agent. Additionally, the publicly available beliefs of the agent may or may not be beliefs that the agent maintains, but can be an attempt to influence the environment state through the actions of other entities that inhabit it.

4 Podies: Solid Pods Implementing Web Agents' Bodies

In this section, we show how Solid pods can be used to concretely implement the abstractions discussed in Section 3.

First of all, the Solid protocol says "an agent is a person, social entity, or software identified by a URI; e.g., a WebID denotes an agent". We then assume that such a URI would dereference to an entry point for the data pod of the agent, where an **Agent Description** would be provided as an RDF graph, in addition to the mandatory credentials for authenticating the agent. For example, Listing 1.1 shows an **Agent Description** for a self-driving bus. The description identifies the self-driving bus as a `foaf:Agent`[7], which is a concept defined by the Friend-of-a-Friend (FOAF) vocabulary (part of the Solid protocol). This

[7] See term definition: `http://xmlns.com/foaf/0.1/#term_Agent`

description provides basic information about the agent (e.g., a name, a relevant image), and links to other resources that are part of the agent's Web body, namely: a **Communication Interface** in the form of a mailbox that can be used to contact the agent, and a link to the agent's **Preferences**.

Listing 1.1. This listing shows an RDF representation of an **Agent Description** of a self-driving bus agent (Turtle syntax).

```
@prefix foaf: <http://xmlns.com/foaf/0.1/> .
@prefix pody: <http://someuri.ext/pody/> .
@prefix solid: <http://www.w3.org/ns/solid/terms#> .

<#agent-desc> a foaf:PersonalProfileDocument ;
    foaf:primaryTopic <#webagent> .

<#webagent> a foaf:Agent ;
    foaf:name "Self-driving Bus 101" ;
    # Link to a communication interface (e.g., mailbox, news feed, etc.)
    pody:contact <mbox> ;
    # Link to preferences (entry point to different kinds of preferences)
    pody:preferences <pref> ;
    # Links to the OpenID Provider that will validate the authentication
    # (part of the Solid protocol)
    solid:oidcIssuer <https://oidc.example> ;
    # Links to a relevant image of the bus
    foaf:img <images/picture.jpg> .
```

Listing 1.2 shows a sample description of the bus agent's mailbox. In this example, the mailbox is, in fact, a Web service that can be used to contact the bus agent – and the service is described by a W3C WoT Thing Description. The Thing Description allows other agents to use the service based on an abstract semantic model of the mailbox (rather than having to hardcode the specific interface of the mailbox). Other similar approaches, such as Hydra [10], could be used to describe the interface of the mailbox.

Listing 1.2. This listing shows an RDF representation of a W3C WoT Thing Description that describes the mailbox of the self-driving bus agent (Turtle syntax).

```
@prefix td: <https://www.w3.org/2019/wot/td#> .
@prefix hctl: <https://www.w3.org/2019/wot/hypermedia#> .
@prefix pody: <http://someuri.ext/pody/> .
@prefix xsd: <http://www.w3.org/2001/XMLSchema#> .
<mbox> a td:Thing;
  td:hasActionAffordance [
    a pody:SendDirectMessage ;
    td:name "send-mail";
    td:hasForm [
      hctl:hasTarget "https://domain.ext/mbox/inbox"^^xsd:anyURI
    ]
  ] .
```

Listing 1.3 shows a sample representation of the bus agent's **Preferences**. In this example, the preferences expose a basic access control policy using the Web Access Control[8] vocabulary (part of the Solid protocol). Other preferences could express, for instance, a prioritization of the **Communication Interfaces**

[8] `https://solidproject.org/TR/wac`

exposed by the bus agent – similar to the preferred ordering of contact addresses in a FIPA Agent Identifier as defined by the FIPA Agent Management Ontology[9].

Listing 1.3. This listing shows an RDF representation that describes the preferences of the self-driving bus agent (Turtle syntax).

```
@prefix acl: <http://www.w3.org/ns/auth/acl#> .

<pref> acl:accessControl [
    acl:accessTo <mbox> ;
    acl:agent <http://example.edu/p/Alice#Msc>,
     . <http://example.com/people/Mary/card#me> ;
    acl:mode acl:Read
] .
```

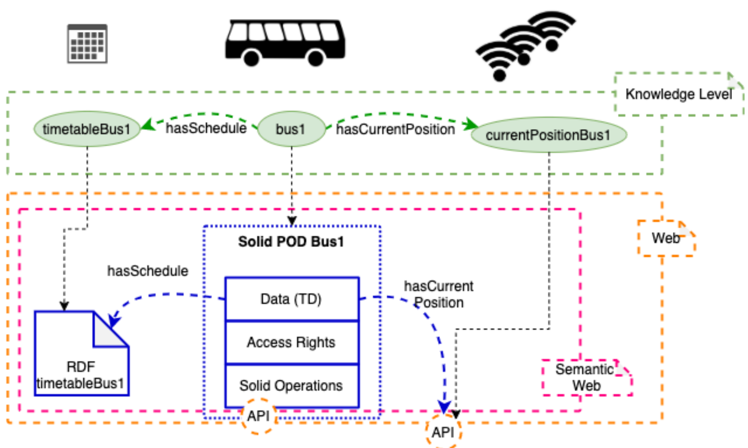

Fig. 1. Example of data provider agent in the Web using semantic technologies and Solid pods

In addition to the resources described thus far, the embodiment of the bus agent could include additional resources. A more elaborate illustration of this use case is shown in Figure 1. The bus agent could use its Solid pod, for instance, to publish an up-to-date schedule or its current position. Because such information is published under the bus agent's Solid pod, other agents would assume that it is indeed the bus agent communication through the Solid pod — similar to how a Twitter user would communicate updates via their TWitter account.

5 Discussion

The main advantage of our proposal is that it gives uniformity to how agents are embodied on the Web. The notion of a *pody* makes use of technologies that are

[9] See the FIPA Agent Management Specification for details: `http://fipa.org/specs/fipa00023/SC00023K.html`

mostly based on standards, as well as work that is under active development by public organisations and companies. The use of Linked Data enforces uniform identification (with URIs), a common data model (with RDF), and a way of serendipitously exploring data, especially for what concerns agents, their means of communication, and their specificities.

With agents being embodied in the Web thanks to *podies*, we can now envision how they can be situated and relate to other dimensions of a multi-agent system. Other abstractions would have to be introduced to describe the Web counterpart of a physical location. We can assume that agents will cooperate on the Web within abstract areas that delimit the scope of their interaction and offer the required resources to address specific missions, goals, and endeavours. For instance, agents may collaborate in Github projects, with a repository acting as a workspace where they are situated. These "abstract areas" or workspaces can themselves be described in Solid pods that would also offer interaction facilities, links to the agents situated in them, ways of taking roles, etc.

Additionally, agents cooperating in complex organisations, possibly with a mix of human beings, software agents, or robots, should be able to obtain organisational information, such as norms, regulation, and so forth, in a form that is easily machine-processable. Interestingly, existing Web ontologies already cover parts of these abstractions, and research is being conducted in order to provide shared vocabularies that precisely described these things.

6 Conclusion

Web agents can be embodied via a Solid pod that: 1) provides a recognisable identity to the agents acting/interacting on and via the Web; 2) provides a "shape" to the agent in the form of an agent description, materialised as an RDF graph; 3) provides an interface through which other agents can communicate with the embodied agent; 4) may optionally provide supporting features such as preferences, claimed goals and beliefs, etc. all possibly represented using standards.

This paper posits a shape, and an implementation method, that may be used to represent the intelligent agents that inhabit the Web, the same intelligent agents that Hendler was querying the existence of in [8]. We see this as a step in the direction of allowing agent technologies to be utilized in a Web context consuming semantically enriched data and interacting in an ad-hoc fashion with heterogeneous, semantically described Web services in order to provide services and pursue and achieve goals of their own. By defining a standard abstract "shape" for a *Web agent*, using Web standard technologies, we introduce the possibility of cross-organisational interaction and collaboration.

The contribution of this paper is a vision that still requires a realisation in an actual MAS. We argue that this vision already shows the benefits for engineering Web-based MAS. Future work will determine, by experimentation, the feasability, usability, ease of development, scalability, and perhaps limitations for Web-based Multi-Agent Systems engineering.

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