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Bluetooth Low Energy Throughput in Densely Deployed Radio Environment

Armands Ancans¹, Juris Ormanis¹, Ricards Cacurs¹, Modris Greitans¹, Elise Saoutieff²,
Adrien Faucon², Sebastien Boisseau²

¹*Institute of Electronics and Computer Science,
Dzerbenes St. 14, LV-1006, Riga, Latvia*

²*Universite Grenoble Alpes, CEA, LETI, MINATEC,
Campus, 38054 Grenoble, France
armands.ancans@edi.lv*

Abstract—Bluetooth Low Energy (BLE) is a promising 2.4 GHz technology for Body Area Networks (BAN) in healthcare and lifestyle applications. However, the global increase of wireless devices using the crowded spectrum in the 2.4 GHz frequency band can create coexistence issues. This work studies the performance of BLE in environments with multiple BLE devices. An experimental setup consisting of 10 BLE nodes is used to measure BLE application throughput with different connection parameters and under different interference sources, such as other BLE devices and WiFi. The results quantify the decrease of the application throughput and the influence of BLE connection parameters in the experimental settings, as well as suggest parameter values suitable for densely deployed environments.

Index Terms—Bluetooth; Low energy; Throughput; Interference; Coexistence; Body sensor networks.

I. INTRODUCTION

Bluetooth Low Energy (BLE) is a wireless technology developed by the Bluetooth Special Interest Group (SIG) to connect devices in short range. As the name of the technology suggests, the main feature of BLE is low power consumption which in combination with an extensible framework to exchange data, has created a massive market with low-power, task-specific, creative and innovative products. Since the introduction of BLE in 2010, it has been widely adopted in mobile devices and a great variety of applications, e.g. wearable electronics, automotive applications, domestics and smart houses, gaming, security, object positioning, marketing and others [1]. BLE is considered one of the key technologies in the evolution of body area networks (BAN) [2]. The global wireless sensors market is estimated to substantially grow over the period from 2015 to 2022 [3] and the statistics portal “Statista” estimates that in 2020 the average device count per person will reach the ratio of 6.58, resulting in 50 billion devices all around the world [4].

However, the limited bandwidth of wireless sensors can hinder the market growth. BLE operates in the unlicensed 2.4 GHz Industrial, Scientific and Medical (ISM) band

deployed by many other technologies like Classic Bluetooth, WiFi, Zigbee, microwave ovens and other. Multiple BLE features in Bluetooth Core specification [5] are included to improve flexibility, compatibility and efficient use of resources: space, time, spectrum and energy.

One of the largest contributors in wireless sensor market are healthcare and lifestyle applications. This study is carried out in the scope of the ERA-Net Flagship project CONVERGENCE – “Frictionless Energy Efficient Convergent Wearables for Healthcare and Lifestyle Applications” where the main concept is to develop an energy efficient wearable platform with embedded wireless low power biometric and environmental sensors.

As was mentioned before, the popularity of BLE is growing, however, owing to complex multiparameter BLE communication channel configuration possibilities and huge variety of areas of use, there is a lack of studies addressing BLE performance at application level for high throughput applications in crowded areas where many BLE devices are operating simultaneously. The main goal of this work is to experimentally check the performance of BLE protocol in densely deployed areas and crowded ISM band.

The paper is organized as follows: in Section II, related work regarding BLE throughput evaluation is presented. In Section III, theoretical application throughput limits are calculated according to BLE protocol specifications. In Section IV, experimental setup for application throughput measurements is described. In the Results and Conclusions sections, experimental application throughput measurements are presented and evaluated.

II. STATE OF THE ART

Bluetooth Low Energy (BLE) was introduced in 2010 as a part of Bluetooth core specification Bluetooth 4.0, and it was further improved in versions: 4.1, 4.2, 5.0 and 5.1 (the latest version at this time [5]).

BLE coexistence with other ISM band technologies is studied in multiple previous works. Silva *et al.* [6] conducted tests in an anechoic chamber measuring transmitted, received, re-sent and failed packets in the influence of a single interferer (classic Bluetooth, ZigBee or WiFi). Natarajan *et al.* [7] examined the coexistence between IEEE 802.15.4, BLE and IEEE 802.11. They

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performed mathematical analysis of cross-technology interference in the physical (PHY) layer and verified analytical results with experiments measuring packet-error rate. Al Kalaa *et al.* presented in [8] an analytical model for selection probability of 37 BLE data channels and used it to evaluate the probability of BLE collisions and aggregate throughput. La *et al.* developed a wireless testbed to conduct experimental studies, focusing on BLE and its coexistence capabilities in dense environments [9].

Marawaha *et al.* [10] performed experimental measurements using nRF52 development kits to determine BLE throughput variation for single connection by varying connection interval and application data payload size. In this work background interference was not considered.

The IETF 6LoWPAN Working Group has identified BLE as a key technology for the Internet of Things and is currently writing a specification for the transmission of IPv6 packets on top of BLE [11]. Also, as previously mentioned, the BLE gives tremendous amount of flexibility in any kind of applications. But, according to multiple papers, BLE protocol presents some constrains and bugs. Simulation results of channel selection probability has been presented to conclude that the algorithm does not provide fair usage of available data channels [8], [12]. Also, the Bluetooth protocol is vulnerable to multiple types of attacks, as shown in [13].

Previous studies have indicated, that BLE PHY layer is resilient to interference in ISM band [6], [7], [9]. However, currently there is a lack of studies evaluating BLE performance in crowded environments at application layer. BLE communication channel configuration presents multiple parameters, and a negligent selection of them could lead to the performance reduction not only due to non-optimal in-channel conditions (For example: data generation and refresh rate could be higher than current BLE channel throughput), but also due to higher sensitivity to certain environmental conditions.

III. THEORETICAL APPLICATION THROUGHPUT OF BLE

According to Bluetooth core specifications 1 Mbps (1M) and 2 Mbps (2M) PHY layer data rates are supported for BLE protocol uncoded data transmission [5]. However, it does not reflect BLE throughput limitations at upper layers. At the application level the throughput can be expressed as in (1)

$$S_{app} = N \cdot L_{app} / T_{ci}, \quad (1)$$

where N is the number of data transmission procedures per connection interval, L_{app} , exchanged application payload (bytes) and T_{ci} the connection interval.

BLE specification defines 4 Generic Attribute (GATT) procedures (features) to exchange application data: Reading, Writing, Notification and Indication. To maximize the application throughput without expecting any Attribute Protocol (ATT) layer acknowledgment, notifications of a characteristic value often are used to reduce protocol overhead. See Fig. 1 for an example of data transmission using notifications. In the attribute protocol layer, notifications are not acknowledged, however, acknowledgement in the link layer must be received before

the next data packet. Therefore, the time required to transmit a single notification can be calculated according to (2).

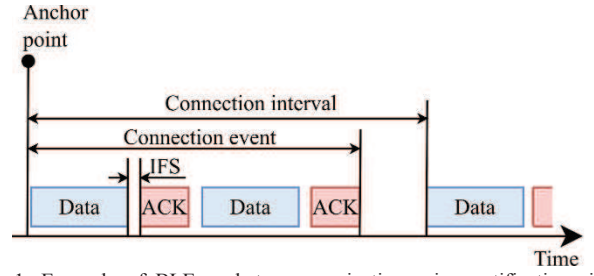


Fig. 1. Example of BLE packet communication using notifications in a connection.

$$T_{notif} = T_{data} + T_{ACK} + 2 \cdot T_{IFS}, \quad (2)$$

where T_{data} is the time required for data packet, T_{ACK} , the time required for link layer acknowledgement (empty packet) and T_{IFS} , the Inter Frame Space (150 μ s).

According to uncoded BLE packet size (Fig. 2):

$$T_{data}(1M) = (17 + L_{app}) \cdot 8 \mu s, \quad (3)$$

$$T_{data}(2M) = (18 + L_{app}) \cdot 4 \mu s, \quad (4)$$

$$T_{ACK}(1M) = 80 \mu s, \quad (5)$$

$$T_{ACK}(2M) = 44 \mu s, \quad (6)$$

Preamble	Access Address	PDU (0-257 bytes)						CRC
		LL Header	Payload (0-251 bytes)			MIC (optional)		
			L2CAP Header	ATT Data (0-247 bytes)				
				OP Code	Attribute Handle		Application Payload	
1 or 2 bytes	4 bytes	2 bytes	4 bytes	1 byte	2 bytes	0 - 244 bytes	4 bytes	3 bytes

Fig. 2. The structure of uncoded BLE packets shows BLE packet size. The size of preamble depends on PHY layer used for the connection: 1 byte for 1M and 2 bytes for 2M PHY layer.

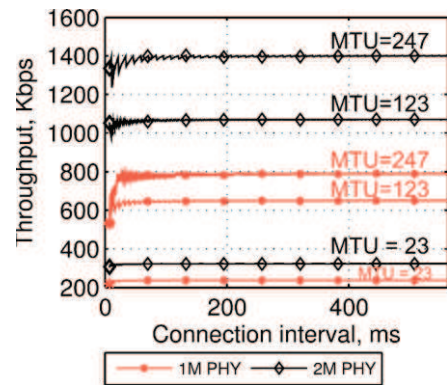


Fig. 3. Maximum BLE application throughput for 1M and 2M uncoded PHY layers. ATT MTU size values = {23, 123, 247}.

Therefore, the maximum amount of notifications in a single connection interval (N_{notif}) for corresponding PHY layer data rate can be calculated as follows:

$$N_{notif}(1M) = \left\lfloor \frac{T_{ci}}{L_{app} \cdot 8 + 516} \cdot 10^6 \right\rfloor, \quad (7)$$

average of at least 3 measurements are used (see Fig. 8).

In Fig. 8, is shown how Bluetooth throughput changes, depending on background environment. Based on previously mentioned data the following conclusion could be given – the more Bluetooth devices are working simultaneously, the more drastically Bluetooth throughput is decreasing. The Bluetooth co-interference causes throughput decrease for longer connection intervals. This behavior could be explained by collisions in data transfer channel. When the hopping algorithm of two or more pairs hits the same channel, the whole time slot is lost and transmission should be repeated during next connection interval on different channel, so the longer connection interval is, the bigger are throughput losses.

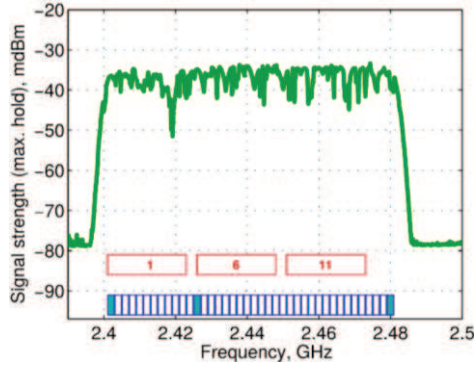


Fig. 6. The spectral occupancy of the ISM band in the test room when BLE devices are operating in connected state.

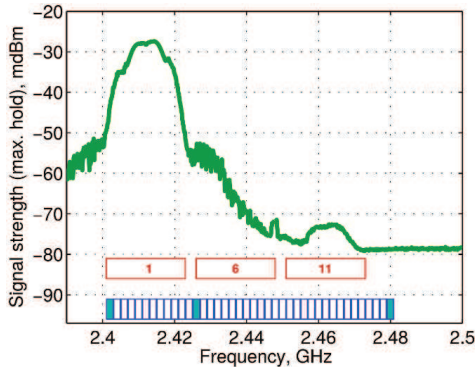


Fig. 7. The spectral occupancy of the ISM band in the test room when only the WiFi is operating.

To compare experimentally measured application throughput with theoretically expected values, the efficiency of data transmission $\eta_{protocol}$ was calculated

$$\eta_{protocol} = \frac{S_{exp}}{S_{protocol}}, \quad (9)$$

where S_{exp} is the throughput measurement of the experimental setup and $S_{protocol}$ the maximum theoretical BLE throughput for the experimental setup configuration referring to (1). Results are shown in Fig. 9.

In Fig. 9(f) is shown WiFi influences on single pair of Bluetooth device. The interesting thing is that throughput decreases on whole connection interval range unlike with Bluetooth. The WiFi, in turn, looks like is decreasing Bluetooth throughput by constant coefficient.

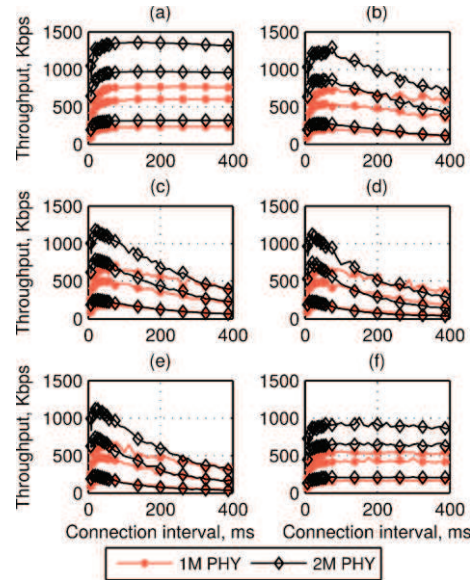


Fig. 8. The influence of BLE background devices on BLE application throughput: a) all background devices turned off; b) 1 background BLE pair operating; c) 2 background BLE pairs operating; d) 3 background BLE pairs operating; e) 4 background BLE pairs operating; f) WiFi operating on channel 1. For each PHY layer each line corresponds to different ATT MTU size = {23, 123, 247}.

To evaluate the impact of background devices, all throughput measurements were compared to initial measurements, when all background devices were turned off

$$\eta_{background} = \frac{S_{exp}}{S_0}, \quad (6)$$

where $\eta_{background}$ is the throughput ratio with respect to empty room, and S_0 the throughput measurements when all background devices are turned off. Average $\eta_{background}$ across all measurements for selected connection intervals and PHY layers are shown in Fig. 10.

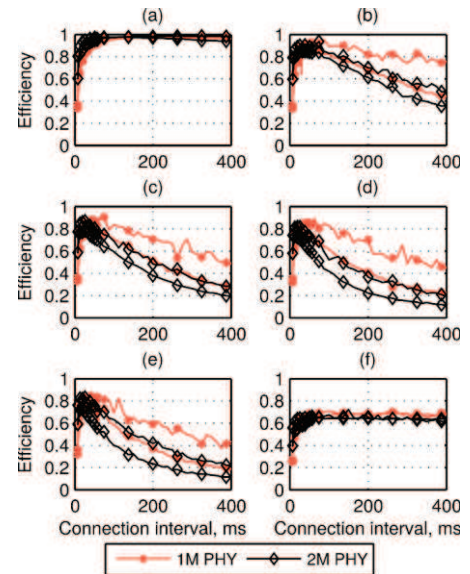


Fig. 9. BLE application throughput with respect to theoretically expected values: a) all background devices turned off; b) 1 background BLE pair operating; c) 2 background BLE pairs operating; d) 3 background BLE pairs operating; e) 4 background BLE pairs operating; f) WiFi operating on channel 1. For each PHY layer each line corresponds to different ATT MTU size = {23, 123, 247}.

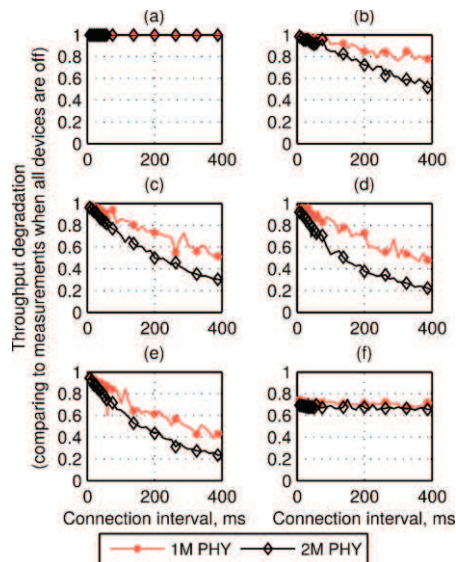


Fig. 10. Average BLE application throughput with respect to measurements when all background devices are turned off: a) all background devices turned off; b) 1 background BLE pair operating; c) 2 background BLE pairs operating; d) 3 background BLE pairs operating; e) 4 background BLE pairs operating; f) WiFi operating on channel 1.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

In this study, BLE protocol application throughput was tested with up to four concurrent background BLE connections simulating crowded environment. Even with a single background device for large connection intervals results revealed substantial deterioration of BLE protocol application throughput. According to Fig. 10, increasing the connection interval increases the susceptibility of application throughput to simultaneously operating BLE devices in densely deployed environment. However, additional tests are required to determine how it is influenced by different connection parameters used on the background devices.

Results suggest that 1M PHY layer is less susceptible to crowded BLE device environments: nevertheless, 2M PHY layer provides higher application throughput.

The effect of WiFi interference does not depend on the BLE connection interval. In this study, WiFi activity reduced BLE throughput approximately by 30% regardless

of the connection interval.

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