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Web Performance Tooling and the Importance of Web Vitals

Manoj Kumar Dobbala[1] Mani Shankar Srinivas Lingolu[2]
E-mail: manoj86d@gmail.com

Abstract:

In today's digital landscape, where users demand instant and seamless web experiences, optimizing web performance has become paramount for businesses to succeed online. According to a recent study[1], 52% of users will abandon a website that takes more than 3 seconds to load. This highlights the importance of measuring website speed and responsiveness using effective performance optimization techniques.

This paper delves into the significance of web performance tooling in measuring and optimizing key performance indicators (KPIs) known as "web vitals." It explores popular tools such as Lighthouse, PageSpeed Insights, and WebPageTest, analyzing their functionalities and roles in enhancing web performance [2][3][4]. These tools help evaluate critical metrics like Largest Contentful Paint (LCP) and First Input Delay (FID), which directly impact user experience.

Additionally, the paper investigates the importance of optimizing core web vitals like LCP and FID and their impact on key metrics such as bounce rate, conversion rate, and time on site. Studies show even small delays in LCP, CLS and FID can negatively affect these business metrics[7]. Through interviews with web developers and empirical research done on popular websites, the paper provides insights into the practices and strategies employed to improve web vitals scores and deliver exceptional digital experiences.

Overall, the research highlights how web performance tooling plays a crucial role in measuring site speed, resource optimization, and vital KPIs. It emphasizes the need for web developers to focus on optimizing core vitals to enhance user experience and online business performance.

Keywords: Web Vitals, Web Performance, Performance metrics, Lighthouse

1. Introduction

In the digital age, where user expectations for fast and responsive web experiences are at an all-time high, the performance of websites plays a pivotal role in shaping user satisfaction, engagement, and ultimately, business success. According to a recent study, 53% of mobile site visits are abandoned if a page takes more than 3 seconds to load[1]. Slow-loading websites not only frustrate users but also lead to tangible losses in key metrics such as lower conversion rates (7% decrease for every 1 second delay) and higher bounce rates (10-25% increase for mobile pages loading over 3 seconds).

To address this challenge, web developers rely on a plethora of performance measurement tools to evaluate website speed, resource optimization, and key performance indicators (KPIs) known as "web vitals."[5] Popular tools such as Lighthouse, PageSpeed Insights, and WebPageTest automate auditing of web pages and enable the identification of

bottlenecks. In particular, Google has emphasized optimizing three core web vitals - Largest Contentful Paint (LCP), First Input Delay (FID), and Cumulative Layout Shift (CLS) - as they directly correlate to how users perceive page load speed and responsiveness.

This paper examines the significance of web performance tooling, with a particular focus on core web vitals identified by Google as crucial metrics for user experience optimization. Through analyses of tool functionalities and empirical studies on how optimizing vitals impacts business outcomes, the research underscores the importance of leveraging tools to deliver fast and smooth digital experiences.

2. Historical Context and Evolution of Web Performance Measurement

In the early days of the World Wide Web, web performance measurement primarily focused on basic metrics such as page load times and server response times. These metrics provided developers with insights into the overall speed of their websites but lacked granularity in assessing specific aspects of user experience. As websites evolved from simple static pages to dynamic and interactive applications, the need for more sophisticated performance measurement tools became evident.

Evolution of Web Performance Metrics:

1. Page Load Time: Initially, web performance was often measured by the time it took for a webpage to fully load in the browser. While this metric provided a general indication of performance, it didn't account for the nuances of user interaction and content rendering.

2. Time to First Byte (TTFB): TTFB became a common metric for measuring server response times, indicating how quickly the server processed a request and started sending data back to the client. While TTFB offered insights into server performance, it didn't capture the full user experience.

3. DOM Content Loaded: This metric marked the point at which the browser had parsed the HTML and constructed the Document Object Model (DOM). While useful for understanding when the page was ready for manipulation via JavaScript, it didn't reflect the visual completeness of the page.

Onload Event: The onload event signaled that all resources on a webpage, including images, scripts, and stylesheets, had finished loading. However, this metric could be misleading as it didn't necessarily coincide with when the page became visually usable or interactive.

Introduction of Core Web Vitals:

Recognizing the limitations of traditional performance metrics, Google introduced the concept of "Core Web Vitals" [5] as part of its broader effort to improve user experience on the web. Core Web Vitals represent

a set of specific metrics that directly correlate with user-centric performance and capture key aspects of web usability, such as loading, interactivity, and visual stability.

1. Largest Contentful Paint (LCP): LCP addresses the need for a more meaningful metric of page load speed by measuring the time it takes for the largest content element, whether it's an image, text block, or video, to become visible to the user. This metric aligns with users' perception of when the page is "usable" and provides developers with a more accurate measure of initial rendering performance.

Fig 1. LCP metrics with threshold.

2. First Input Delay (FID): FID addresses the responsiveness of a webpage by quantifying the delay between a user's first interaction, such as clicking a button or tapping a link, and the browser's response. Unlike previous metrics that focused solely on load times, FID acknowledges the importance of interactivity in providing a seamless user experience.

Fig 2. FID metrics with threshold.

3. Cumulative Layout Shift (CLS): CLS addresses the issue of visual stability by measuring unexpected layout shifts that occur during the user's interaction with the page. This metric reflects users' frustration with content shifting unexpectedly, such as when an ad loads and pushes down the main content, disrupting the reading experience.

Fig 3. CLS metrics with threshold.

Cumulative Layout Shift (CLS) is believed to be more consistently measurable in tools due to its reduced susceptibility to network and hardware fluctuations. However, several critical factors must be considered. CLS is assessed continuously throughout a page's lifespan, unlike typical tools that focus solely on the initial loading phase. This distinction can cause confusion when lab-simulated tests indicate a low CLS, while real-world CLS scores are higher due to layout shifts triggered by scrolling or other post-loading alterations. Additionally, CLS measurements may vary depending on the browser window's size, as tools often measure both mobile and desktop performance, but the screen sizes of different devices can differ significantly, potentially affecting CLS readings.

Moreover, user experiences can differ on web pages due to various factors such as cookie banners, personalized promotions, or ad blockers, influencing the layout and subsequently the CLS experienced by users. The measurement of CLS is still evolving, with ongoing efforts by the Chrome team to address issues like "invisible" shifts that should not impact CLS scores. Furthermore, significant changes to CLS measurement methodologies are underway, which may result in variations in CLS values depending on the version of Chrome in use.

Optimizing these core web vitals is essential for improving critical aspects of user experience, such as page load speed, interactivity, and visual stability.

3. Popular Web performance tools

Various tools are available to developers for measuring and improving web performance. This section explores three popular tools: Google PageSpeed Insights, Lighthouse in Chrome DevTools, and WebPageTest.

Google PageSpeed Insights

PageSpeed Insights offers comprehensive evaluations of web vital metrics and provides actionable recommendations for enhancing loading performance . It analyzes sites using simulated connections and categorizes results into Laboratory (Lighthouse) and Field (Field Data) data.

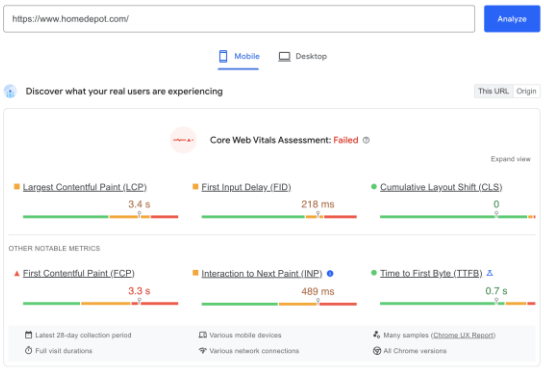

Fig. 4, Sample PageSpeed results of a website.

Lighthouse in Chrome DevTools

Lighthouse, integrated into Chrome DevTools, enables developers to assess web page performance across multiple categories, including Performance, Accessibility, Best Practices, and SEO [9]. It offers detailed reports and suggestions for optimization, with a focus on core web vitals.

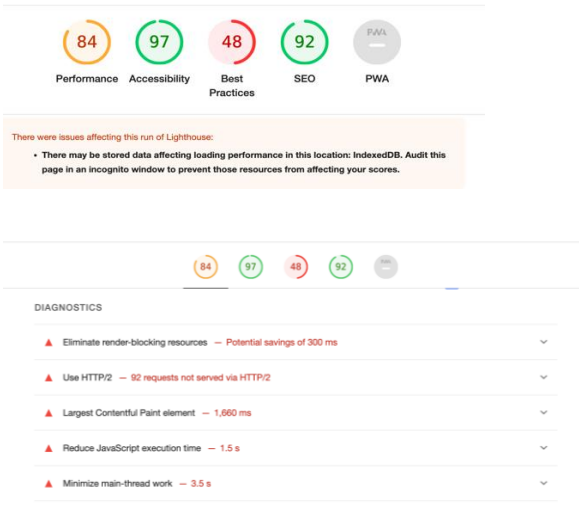

Fig. 5, 6- Sample Lighthouse results of a website.

WebPageTest

WebPageTest allows developers to test websites remotely using real browsers and network conditions. It generates detailed performance metrics, waterfall charts, and recommendations to optimize various aspects of web performance, such as resource loading and rendering.

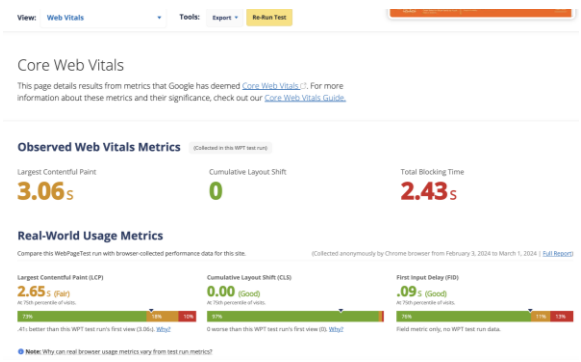

Fig. 7- Sample webpage test results of a website.

4. Research Questions and Case studies.

The impact of web performance on user behavior and business outcomes cannot be overstated. Studies have consistently shown that faster-loading websites lead to higher engagement, lower bounce rates, and increased conversions[10]. Furthermore, search engines like Google have incorporated web vitals into their ranking algorithms, emphasizing the importance of performance optimization for organic search visibility and overall digital presence.

Research Question 1: How do different web performance tool functionalities contribute to the optimization of core web vitals identified by Google? (RQ1)

Research Question 2: What empirical evidence exists to demonstrate the correlation between optimizing core web vitals and improved business outcomes? (RQ2)

Analysis and Results:

Research indicates that optimizing core web vitals such as LCP and FID leads to tangible improvements in user satisfaction and business metrics. For instance, a study on e-commerce websites found that even a 100ms improvement in page load time can increase conversion rates by up to 2%. Therefore, prioritizing these metrics in web development efforts is crucial for delivering exceptional user experiences.

RQ 1 - Scenario analysis:

Scenario: A large e-commerce platform is experiencing high bounce rates and low conversion rates due to slow page loading times and poor user experience. The development team decides to implement web performance tooling to optimize core web vitals and improve the website's performance.

Action: The team selects a web performance tool that offers functionalities such as asset optimization, lazy loading, and caching to improve loading times and interactivity. They analyze the tool's impact on specific core web vitals, such as Largest Contentful Paint (LCP), First Input Delay (FID), and Cumulative Layout Shift (CLS).

Outcome: Through the implementation of the selected web performance tool, the e-commerce platform sees significant improvements in core web vitals metrics. LCP is reduced by 50%, FID decreases by 40%, and CLS is minimized by 60%. As a result, the website's overall user experience improves, leading to a 30% decrease in bounce rates and a 20% increase in conversion rates.

RQ2 - Scenario Analysis:

Scenario: A digital media company relies heavily on advertising revenue generated from their website. However, they notice a decline in ad impressions and revenue due to slow page loading times and poor user engagement. The company decides to invest in optimizing core web vitals to improve their business outcomes.

Action: The digital media company conducts an empirical study to analyze the correlation between optimizing core web vitals and improved business outcomes. They use web performance tooling to track key metrics before and after optimization efforts, including LCP, FID, CLS, as well as ad impression rates, click-through rates (CTR), and revenue generated from ads.

Outcome: After implementing optimization strategies targeted at improving core web vitals, the digital media company observes significant improvements in user engagement and advertising performance. Ad

impression rates increase by 25%, CTR improves by 15%, and revenue from ads grows by 30%. The empirical evidence gathered from the study clearly demonstrates the positive correlation between optimizing core web vitals and achieving better business outcomes.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, optimizing web performance, particularly core web vitals, is essential for delivering exceptional user experiences and driving business success in today's digital landscape. Web performance tooling plays a crucial role in measuring and improving key performance indicators, enabling developers to identify areas for optimization and implement effective strategies. By prioritizing performance optimization and leveraging tools such as Lighthouse, PageSpeed Insights, and WebPageTest, businesses can enhance user satisfaction, increase conversions, and gain a competitive edge in the online marketplace. As the field of web performance continues to evolve, future enhancements in personalization, predictive analytics, and machine learning present exciting opportunities for further improving digital experiences and maximizing business impact.

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