Audio Expert System: aptX 'hiccup' Detected

This paper presents a case study in Bluetooth audio debugging that highlights the importance of Frontline's Audio Expert System (AES) in the process. The actual case involves transmission of a high quality, stereo audio using the aptX codec from a smartphone to a *Bluetooth* headset. The transmission contained SBC encoded packets despite a successful negotiation of aptX encoding and decoding mechanism between the source and the sink devices. Frontline's AES software discovered this transmission error which most likely would not have been easily discovered by using traditional *Bluetooth* protocol and event analysis. Without the Audio Expert System a product may have been shipped that was not performing as expected by the manufacturer.

Background

In *Bluetooth* technology, Audio/Video Distribution Transport Protocol (AVDTP) uses Advanced Audio Distribution Profile (A2DP) for streaming audio in stereo. The A2DP encompasses compression techniques to reduce the amount of radio frequency bandwidth required to transmit audio. In addition to A2DP, Audio/Video Remote Control Profile (AVRCP) controls certain functions of the sending device such as pause, play, next track, etc.

All *Bluetooth* products using A2DP are required to implement audio encoding and decoding using low complexity Sub Band Coding (SBC) that supports up to 345 kb per second bit rate for stereo audio. The SBC codec has some issues though. SBC coding and decoding produces some undesirable artifacts in the audio signal. In addition, the SBC encoding and decoding cycle introduces a time lag in the audio. To improve on SBC's artifacts and time lag issues, a CSR proprietary codec that is called aptX® is implemented on some Bluetooth products.

During the negotiation phase, both Bluetooth devices handshake and they automatically discover the best codec and the highest bit rate to use for audio. If both devices support aptX, it is used rather than the default SBC.

The AES software helps identify audio issues in *Bluetooth* protocol by highlighting information, warnings, and errors related to audio data, codec used, and *Bluetooth* protocol implementation. They are collectively called “events” in AES.The AES window shows audio data plotted as PCM samples versus time in the Wave Panel. The audio data, codec, and protocol events are also graphically displayed in the Wave Panel, and with a single click on an event, engineers and testers are brought directly to the exact packets or frames related to the event in the *Bluetooth* protocol trace in the Frame Display. This helps users find issues quickly and easily. The events are shown time aligned with both the actual audio waveform and bit rate variances graph in the Wave Panel. The bit rate variance graph shows the average or actual amount of Bluetooth audio data sent over a period of time.

AES can operate in two modes: 1) referenced mode, and 2) non-referenced mode. In referenced mode a Frontline provided audio test file is streamed between the Devices Under Test (DUTs). The test file content and parameters are known to the AES software that performs a comparison for deviations. This process helps the software accurately detect anomalies created by the streaming process. In non-referenced mode DUTs stream audio of unknown content, limiting the types of detectable events. The software automatically determines the operation mode with no user input required.

Test Setup

The following DUTs below were used in our test setup:

- DUT1 = smartphone with *Bluetooth* and aptX capability. The smartphone operating system was Android.
- DUT2 = Earphones with *Bluetooth* and aptX capability.

The protocol analyzer: ComProbe BPA 600 Dual Mode *Bluetooth* Protocol Analyzer with *Bluetooth* Audio Expert System activated. The BPA 600 is connected to a personal computer (PC) that is running ComProbe Protocol Analysis System software.

DUT1 was used as a source device. DUT1 was streaming an AES Reference file.

DUT2 was used as a sink device. After establishing a valid *Bluetooth* link, DUT2 played the AES Reference file.

The audio test file was played from the Bluetooth smart phone to the Bluetooth headphone. The data captured by the ComProbe BPA 600 hardware was sent to the analysis computer running ComProbe software with AES. As the data was captured, it was analyzed by the AES module and displayed live in the AES window. The AES software automatically detected the test ID tones in the captured audio and operated in the referenced mode. The figure 1 below shows the test setup.

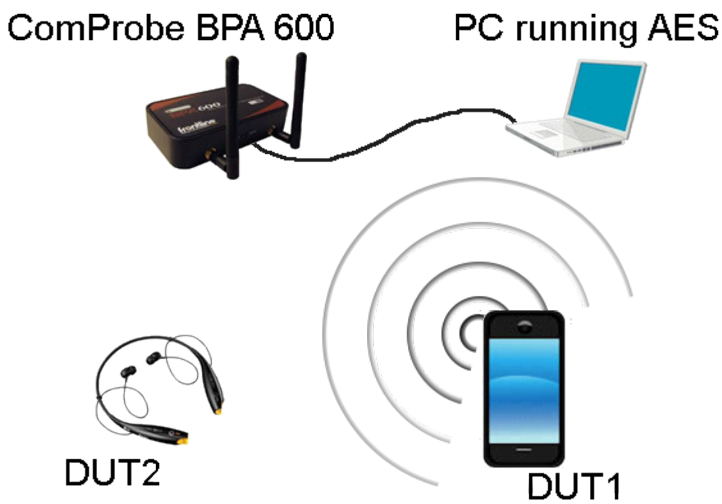


Figure 1 - The Test Setup.

Discussion

The test began without any issue. DUT1 and DUT2 negotiated a Bluetooth connection suitable for transmitting the audio. When the Reference Audio was played there were no obvious audio distortions or anomalies heard by the tester.

The tester used a ComProbe BPA 600 configured for capturing Classic Bluetooth over a single connection.

In Frame Display AVDTP Signaling tab we see the start of the negotiation between DUT1 and DUT2 to establish an audio connection, see Figure 2. At frames 2089 and 2092 the initiating or local device sends an AVDTP_DDISCOVER command. The remote device responds by identifying the ACP Stream Endpoint IDs. In this case the remote device identifies three audio media-type devices that are SNK (sink) devices currently not in use: SEPID (Stream Endpoint Identification) 5, 2, and 1.

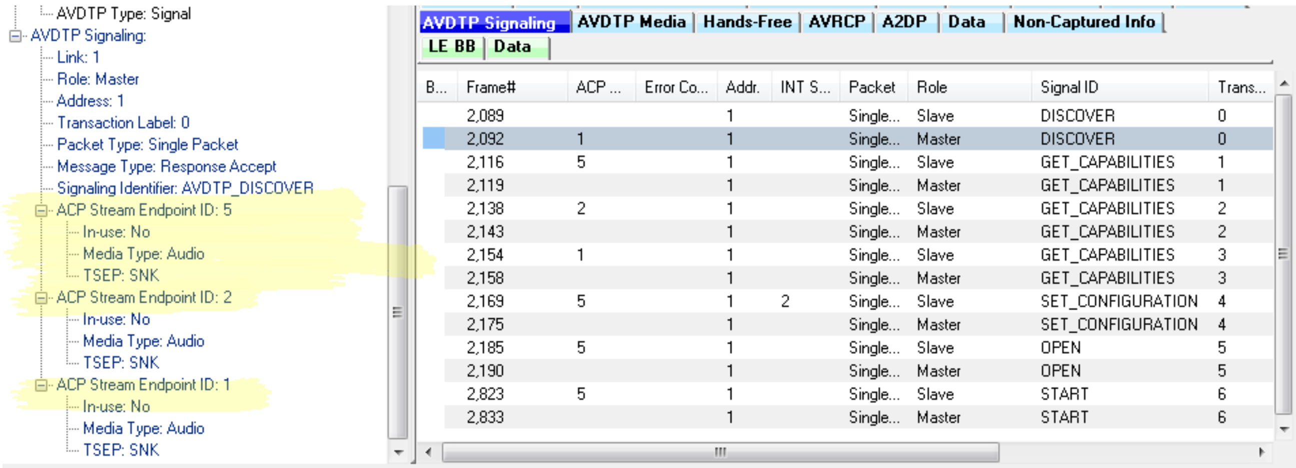


Figure 2 - Frame Display for AVDTP Signaling Frame 2089 & 2092

Note: "ACP" is AVDTP terminology for the remote device.

The next step in the negotiation is to get the audio capabilities of each SEPID. For each SEPID there is an exchange of GET_CAPABILITIES AVDTP signals.

Examination of the Frame Display AVDTP Signaling protocol tab shows at frame 2116 the slave device request SEP (Stream End Point) characteristics. for SEPID (SEP Identifier) 5. Details of the GET_CAPABILITIES command are shown in the Figure 3.

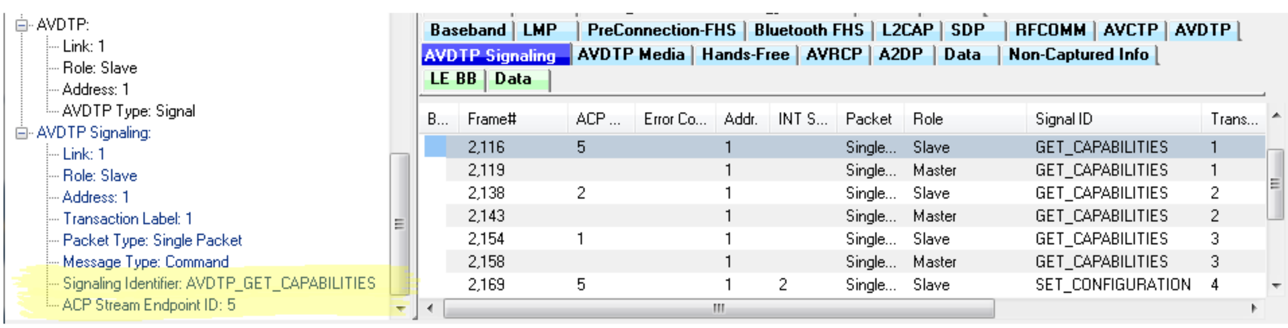


Figure 3 - Frame Display for AVDTP Signaling Frame 2116

At frame 2119 the remote device responds to the GET_CAPABILITIES for SEPID 5 reporting that this SEP codec is aptX with a Channel Mode Stereo.

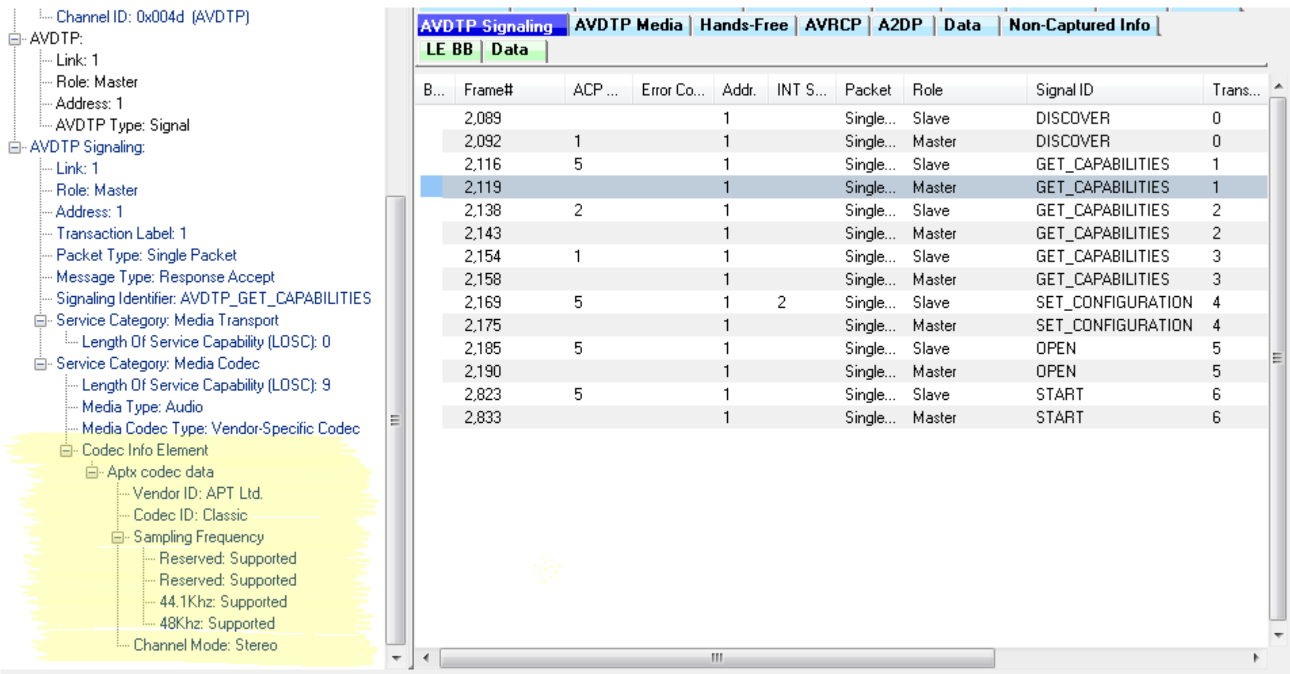


Figure 4 - Frame Display for AVDTP Signaling Frame 2119

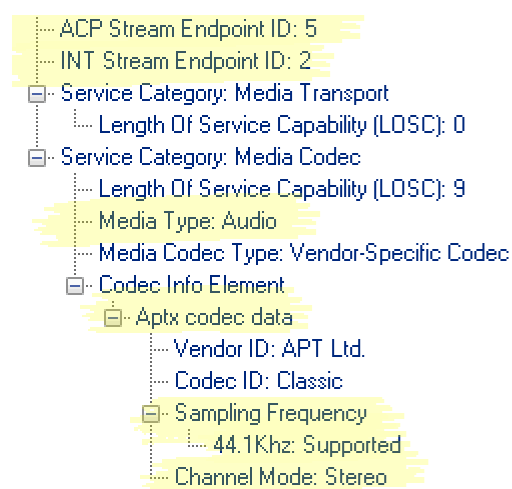
In Figure 4, frames 2138 through 2158 perform the GET_CAPABILITIES negotiation between the local and remote device for SEPIDs 2 and 1. SEPID 2 is an MPEG SEP, and SEPID 1 is the SBC SEP.

Frames 2169 and 2175 sets the specific details of the connection with the SET_CONFIGURATION signal. The local device sets the remote endpoint to the aptX device (ACP Stream Endpoint ID: 5), and sets the local endpoint to SEPID 1 (INT Stream Endpoint ID: 2). The Codec, Sampling Frequency, and Channel Mode are also configured. See Figure 5.

At frame 2175 the remote device sends the message "Response Accept" completing the audio stream setup.

Frames 2185 and 2190 are the local request and the remote response to OPEN the audio stream.

Frames 2823 and 2833 START the audio stream with the local request and the remote response respectively.



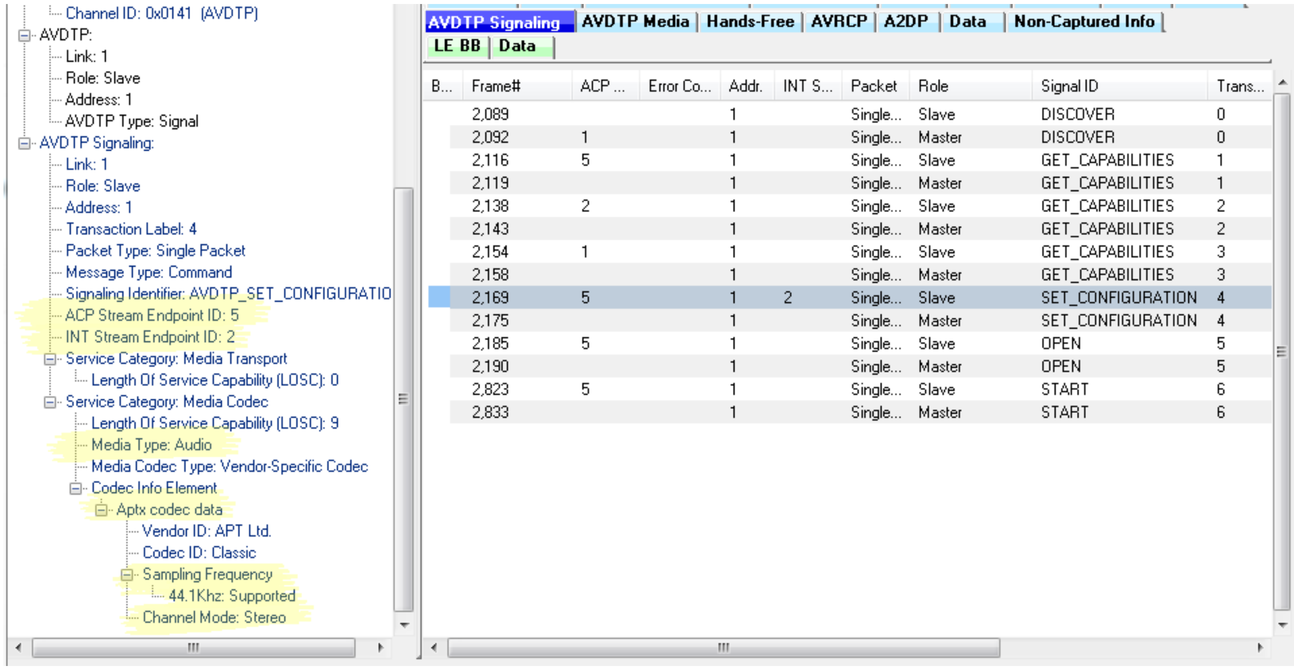


Figure 5 - Frame Display for AVDTP Signaling Frame 2169, SET_CONFIGURATION

So far the process of setting up an aptX audio connection between DUT1 and DUT2 appears normal, correct and error free. We now move from he AVDTP protocol to the A2DP protocol to observe the audio.

Problem Discovery

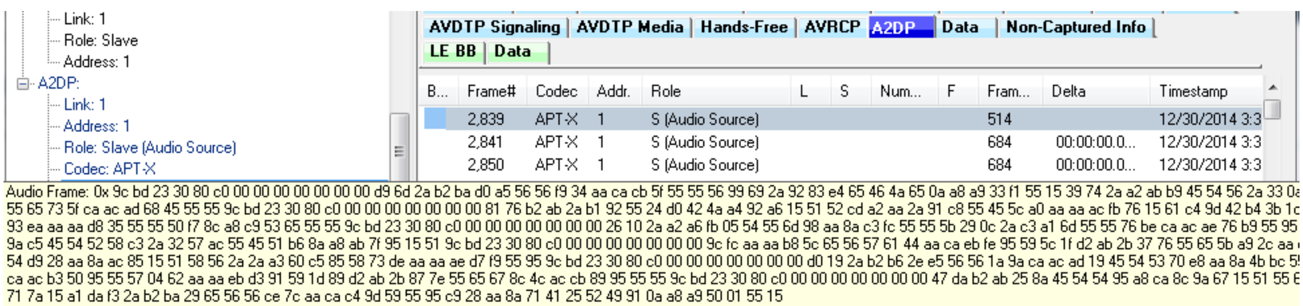


Figure 6 - Frame Display for A2DP Streaming at Frame 2839 with Audio Expanded

In the ComProbe software, the audio data is shown in the A2DP tab in the Frame Display, see Figure 6. The frame 2839, which is the first audio frame, is identified as being aptX encoded because of the successful codec negotiation. At this frame, the conventional audio data analysis methods do not show any issues. Assuming the data is aptX encoded, the AES software passes it to the AES aptX decoder. However, the data was not decoded.correctly and is marked as a bad aptX frame.On further analysis, the AES software discovers that the frame is not aptX encoded but is actually SBC encoded. Frame 2839 begins with “0x9C”, and all SBC audio frames begin with sync word “0x9c” as shown in Figure 6. The AES cannot solely rely on the sync word to determine if it is a SBC frame. To confirm the suspicion, the AES passed the data through its SBC decoder, and the data came out cleanly decoded.

The AES software not only showed that there is a problem in the audio data but also made it clear where the problem is.

The Error that is identified by Event 4, the Severity red circle , is a codec event at Frame 2839 states "Unable to process AptX data as extracted. It appears that SBC encoded data is being sent over this stream."

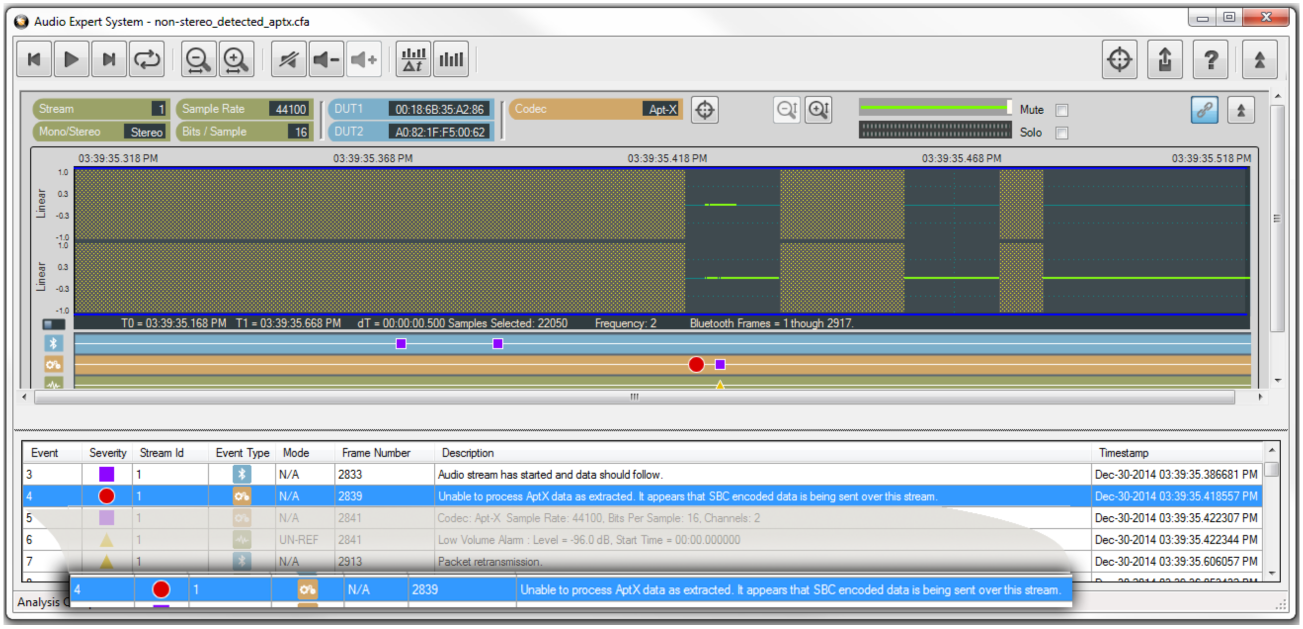


Figure 7 - Audio Expert System Error on Frame 2839: Data not aptX.

Conclusions

This case shows the value of Frontline's Audio Expert System. An error in the transmission of an audio stream compressed using aptX was not easily detected in the protocol analysis using frames. While, in this situation with audio streaming between a smartphone and a *Bluetooth* headset, there was not a significant disruption of the audio, but in playback using other devices there may have been a more significant interruption of the audio streaming.

The smartphone manufacturer may wish to find out why aptX compressed audio contained SBC compressed data in the stream. We can speculate that there may be an underlying problem with clearing stacks or memory between streaming events. This investigation is beyond the scope of this paper.

If there is interest in the Audio Expert System as an expansion of your ComProbe Bluetooth analyzer contact the Frontline sales at sales@fte.com or visit our web site at fte.com.

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