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Performance Improvements to the 802.11 Wireless Network Medium Access Control Sub-layer

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ABSTRACT

This thesis presents the outcome into the research and development of improvements to the 802.11 wireless networking medium access control (MAC) sublayer. The main products of the research are three types of improvement that increase the efficiency and throughput of the 802.11 protocol.

Beginning with an overview of the original 802.11 physical layer and MAC sub-layer standard, the introductory chapters then cover the many supplements to the original standard (including a brief on the future 802.11n supplement). The current state of the 802.11 MAC sub-layer is presented along with an assessment of the realistic performance available from 802.11. Lastly, the motivations for improving the MAC sub-layer are explained along with a summary of existing research into this area.

The main improvement presented within the thesis is that of packet aggregation. The operation of aggregation is explained in detail, along with the reasons for the significant available throughput increase to 802.11 from aggregation. Aggregation is then developed to produce even higher throughput, and to be a more robust mechanism. Additionally, aggregation is formally described in the form of an update to the existing 802.11 standard.

Following this, two more improvements are shown that can be used wither with or without the aggregation mechanism. Stored frame headers are designed to reduce repetition of control data, and combined acknowledgements are an expansion of the block acknowledgement system introduced in the 802.11e supplement.

This is followed by a description of the simulation environment used to test the three improvements presented, such as the settings used and metrics created. The results of the simulations of the improvements are presented along with the discussion. The developments to the basic improvements are also simulated and discussed in the same way.

Finally, conclusions about the improvements detailed and the results shown in the simulations are drawn. Also at the end of the thesis, the possible future direction of research into the improvements is given, as well as the aspects and issues of implementing aggregation on a personal computer based platform.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract ii

Acknowledgements iii

Table of contents iv

List of Figures viii

List of Tables xiii

List of Excerpts xiv

1 Introduction 1
- 1.1 Background 1
- 1.2 Content of Thesis 2

2 State of 802.11 Standards 4
- 2.1 Introduction to IEEE 802 and IEEE 802.11 4
  - 2.1.1 OSI Basic Reference Model 4
  - 2.1.2 IEEE 802 Part 11 6
- 2.2 802.11 Physical Layer 7
  - 2.2.1 802.11b 7
  - 2.2.2 802.11a 8
  - 2.2.3 802.11g 8
  - 2.2.4 The next standard - 802.11n 9
  - 2.2.5 Graphical Comparison of Physical Layer Standards 10
  - 2.2.6 Other Physical layer Supplements 10
- 2.3 802.11 MAC Sub-layer 11
  - 2.3.1 MAC Sub-layer Services 11
  - 2.3.2 Medium Access and Coordination Functions 13
  - 2.3.3 Frame Formats 14
  - 2.3.4 802.11e 16

3 Why Improve the MAC Sub-layer 18
3.1 Realistic 802.11 Performance 18
3.1.1 Data Rate and Throughput 18
3.1.2 Calculating the Maximum Throughput 19
3.1.3 Realistic Packets 24
3.2 Effect of the 802.11e Extension 26
3.3 MAC Sub-layer Efficiency 27
3.3.1 Overhead Percentage 27
3.3.2 Efficiency Results 29

4 Existing Improvements 31
4.1 Improving RTS/CTS Mechanism 31
4.2 Packet Aggregation 33

5 Aggregation 35
5.1 Basic Aggregation 35
5.1.1 Operational Details 36
5.2 Aggregation Types 37
5.2.1 Forced Delay Aggregation 37
5.2.2 Congestion Triggered Aggregation 38
5.2.3 Comparing the Two Types of Aggregation 39
5.3 Queues in Aggregation 41
5.3.1 Queueing Control 41
5.3.2 Different Control Algorithms 42

6 Extending Aggregation 43
6.1 Queueing Access 43
6.1.1 Look-Ahead Queueing 43
6.1.2 Indexed Queueing Machine 44
6.2 Temporary Queueing Priority 45
6.2.1 Load based temporary queueing priority 45
6.2.2 Time based temporary queueing priority 45
6.3 Payload Size Backoff 46

7 Standardising Aggregation 47
7.1 Frame Format 47
7.1.1 Frame Control and Frame Type 47
7.1.2 Duration, Address and BSS ID Header Fields 48
7.1.3 Sub-header Packet Check Sequence 49
7.1.4 Sub-header Length Field 51
7.1.5 Overall Frame and Sub-header Formats 52
7.2 MAC Sub-layer Formal Description 53
7.2.1 SDL Description of 802.11 MAC Sub-layer 53
7.2.2 Modifications to SDL Diagrams 54

8 Combined Acknowledgements 60
8.1 802.11e Block Acknowledgment 60
8.2 Combined Acknowledgements 60
8.3 Extensions 62
8.3.1 Integrating Combined Acknowledgements with Aggregation 62
8.3.2 Link Quality 62

9 Stored Frame Headers 63
9.1 Control system 63
9.1.1 Global Control System 63
9.1.2 Complexity 65
9.2 Frame formats 66
9.3 Benefits of Stored Headers 67

10 Simulation 68
10.1 Packet Generator 68
10.2 Simulation Details 70
10.2.1 Simulation Operation 70
10.2.2 Simulation Architecture 71
10.2.3 Simulation Statistics and Metrics 72
10.3 Error Model 74

11 Simulation Results and Discussion 75
11.1 Queueing Access 75
11.2 Simulation of Queueing Algorithms 78
11.2.1 Low traffic loads 79
11.2.2 Medium traffic loads 84
11.2.3 High traffic loads 90
11.2.4 Summary 91
11.3 Aggregation and 802.11b Physical Layer 92
11.4 Load Based Queueing: Byte load or Packet load 94
11.5 Temporary Queueing Priority 97
11.5.1 Load based TQP in the general case 98
11.5.2 Time based TQP and specific traffic characteristics 101
11.6 Payload Size Backoff 104
11.7 Larger Payload Sizes 108
11.8 Combined Acknowledgements 110
11.8.1 Low traffic loads 111
11.8.2 Medium to high traffic loads 112
11.8.3 Summary 115
11.9 Stored Frame Headers 115

12 Conclusions 118

13 Future Work 120
13.1 Implementation of Aggregation 120
13.1.1 Pre-MAC Sub-layer Aggregation 121
13.1.2 Aggregation within the MAC sub-layer 122
13.1.3 Implementation in Windows 123
13.1.4 Implementation in Linux 124
13.2 Further Extending Aggregation 125
13.2.1 Multiple Receiver Aggregation 125

14 Appendices 126

15 Authors Publications 127

16 References 128

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 2.1: The OSI basic reference model 5
Figure 2.2: IEEE 802 Standards Family as from [4] 6
Figure 2.3: Comparison of the different 802.11 Physical layer standards 10
Figure 2.4: General frame format as from [1] 15
Figure 2.5: MAC sub-layer Data frame (within BSS) 15

Figure 3.1: TCP data packet and acknowledgement over 802.11b 21
Figure 3.2: TCP data packet and acknowledgement over 802.11b 23
Figure 3.3: Packet Distribution as from Baker & Tang [11] 25
Figure 3.4: TCP ACK Transmission showing Physical and MAC overheads of 802.11b (refer to Figure 3.1 (b) for exact timing details) 28
Figure 3.5: TCP ACK Transmission showing Physical and MAC overheads of 802.11a (refer to Figure 3.2 (b) for exact timing details) 29

Figure 5.1: Aggregating several packets into a single frame 35
Figure 5.2: Proposed Aggregation Sub-Header 36
Figure 5.3: Forced delay aggregation mechanism 37
Figure 5.4: Congestion triggered aggregation mechanism 39

Figure 7.1: Example Data frame, including sub-headers, with 4 packets aggregated 50
Figure 7.2: Proposed aggregation sub-header format 52
Figure 7.3: Proposed extension to frame format 52
Figure 7.4: Existing section of Msdu_from_LLC_1b as from [1] 54
Figure 7.5: Modified section of Msdu_from_LLC_1b 55
Figure 7.6: New SDL diagram Aggregate_2b(2) 56
Figure 7.7: Modified block Protocol_Control_STA 57
Figure 7.8: Existing part of diagram sta_tx_idle_2d(10) as from [1] 58
Figure 7.9: Modified part of diagram sta_tx_idle_2d(10) 58
Figure 7.10: Modified diagram of block MAC_Data_Service 59

Figure 8.1: Combined acknowledgement frame format 60
Figure 8.2: Example of time triggered combined acknowledgement 61

Figure 9.1: Reduced Header Sizes of Stored Header System 66

Figure 10.1: Cumulative packet size distribution function of packet generator (compare with Figure 3.3, Tang and Bakers findings) 69

Figure 11.1: Overall throughput for queueing access simulation with 4 stations 76
Figure 11.2: Overall throughput for queueing access simulation with 12 stations..... 76
Figure 11.3: Average queue length for queueing access simulation with 12 stations..... 77
Figure 11.4: Overall throughput for queueing control simulation with 1 station..... 79
Figure 11.5: Byte efficiency for queueing control simulation with 1 station 80
Figure 11.6: Median packet delay for queueing control simulation with 1 station..... 80
Figure 11.7: Overall throughput for queueing control simulations with 2 stations 81
Figure 11.8: Byte efficiency for queueing control simulations with 2 stations 81
Figure 11.9: Median packet delay for queueing control simulations with 2 stations 82
Figure 11.10: Maximum packet delay for queueing control simulation with 2 stations 82
Figure 11.11: Overall throughput for queueing control simulation with inter-arrival rate of 500 packets per second at each station 83
Figure 11.12: Overall throughput for queueing control simulation with 4 stations 84
Figure 11.13: (magnified) Overall throughput for queueing control simulation with 4 stations 85
Figure 11.14: Byte efficiency for queueing control simulation with 4 stations 85
Figure 11.15: Median packet delay for queueing control simulation with 4 stations 86
Figure 11.16: Average packet delay for queueing control simulation for 4 stations 87
Figure 11.17: Maximum queue length for queueing control simulation for 4 stations 87

Figure 11.18: Overall throughput for queueing control simulations with 6 stations....88
Figure 11.19: (magnified) Overall throughput for queueing control simulations with 6 stations....88
Figure 11.20: Byte efficiency for queueing control simulation with 6 stations....89
Figure 11.21: Maximum queue length for queueing control simulation with 6 stations....90
Figure 11.22: Overall throughput for queueing control simulations with 12 stations....91
Figure 11.23: Byte efficiency for queueing control simulations with 12 stations....91
Figure 11.24: Overall throughput for 802.11b simulations with 500 packets per second per station....93
Figure 11.25: Overall throughput for 802.11b simulations with 1000 packets per second per station....93
Figure 11.26: Overall throughput for load based simulation with 2 stations....94
Figure 11.27: Overall throughput for load based simulations with 6 stations....95
Figure 11.28: Median packet delay for load based simulations with 6 stations....95
Figure 11.29: Average queue length (bytes) in load based simulation with 6 stations....96
Figure 11.30: Average queue length (packets) in load based simulations with 6 stations....96
Figure 11.31: Efficiency in load based simulations with 6 stations....97
Figure 11.32: Overall throughput for first TQP simulations with 4 stations....98
Figure 11.33: Efficiency for first TQP simulations with 4 stations....99
Figure 11.34: Median packet delay for first TQP simulations with 4 stations....100
Figure 11.35: Maximum queue length for first TQP simulations with 4 stations....100
Figure 11.36: Overall throughput *without* TQP enabled, for special case traffic TQP simulations with 4 stations....101
Figure 11.37: Overall throughput *with* TQP enabled, for special case traffic TQP simulations with 4 stations....102

Figure 11.38: Average packet delay *without* TQP enabled, for special case traffic TQP simulations with 4 stations..... 102
Figure 11.39: Average packet delay *with* TQP enabled, for special case traffic TQP simulations with 4 stations..... 103
Figure 11.40: Average queue length *without* TQP enabled, for special case traffic TQP simulations with 4 stations..... 103
Figure 11.41: Average queue length *with* TQP enabled, for special case traffic TQP simulations with 4 stations..... 104
Figure 11.42: Overall throughput for PSB simulations with 2 stations..... 105
Figure 11.43: Transmissions failed in PSB simulations with 2 stations 106
Figure 11.44: Efficiency in PSB simulations with 2 stations 106
Figure 11.45: Overall throughput for PSB simulations with 4 stations..... 107
Figure 11.46: Transmissions failed in PSB simulations with 4 stations 107
Figure 11.47: Overall throughput for large payload simulations with 4 stations 108
Figure 11.48: Average queue length for large payload simulations with 4 stations 109
Figure 11.49: Median packet delay for large payload simulations with 4 stations 109
Figure 11.50: Overall throughput for large payload simulations with 6 stations 110
Figure 11.51: Overall throughput for combined acknowledgement simulations with 2 stations 111
Figure 11.52: Overall throughput for combined acknowledgement simulations with 4 stations 112
Figure 11.53: Median packet delay for combined acknowledgement simulations with 4 stations..... 113
Figure 11.54: Average queue length for combined acknowledgement simulations with 4 stations..... 114
Figure 11.55: Overall throughput for combined acknowledgement simulations with 6 stations 114
Figure 11.56: Overall throughput for stored frame header simulation with 4 stations 115
Figure 11.57: Efficiency for stored frame header simulation with 4 stations 116
Figure 11.58: Median packet delay for stored frame header simulation for 4 stations 116

Figure 12.1: Throughput with aggregation and combined acknowledgements 119

Figure 13.1: Windows NDIS v5 Architecture as from [33] 123

Figure 13.2: Location of NetFilter Hooks 124

LIST OF TABLES

Table 3.1: Selected 802.11b timing details..... 20
Table 3.2: Time per 802.11b transaction 21
Table 3.3: Selected 802.11a timing details..... 22
Table 3.4: Number of 802.11a symbols per MAC frame..... 22
Table 3.5: Time per 802.11a transaction 23

Table 5.1: Summary of throughput achieved as from [27]..... 40
Table 5.2: Summary of median packet latency observed as from [27] 40

Table 7.1: Data Subtypes used in 802.11 [1] 48

Table 10.1: Packet inter-arrival rates per station and approximate data rates 70
Table 10.2: Station only statistics generated in simulation..... 72
Table 10.3: Overall network statistics generated in simulation 73

Table 11.1: Combinations for queue access simulations, with approximate data rates in Mbps..... 75
Table 11.2: Approximate combined traffic loads in Mbps for queueing algorithm simulations..... 78
Table 11.3: Loads for 802.11b simulations, with approximate data rates in Mbps 92

LIST OF EXCERPTS

Excerpt 2.1: Basic components of a MAC sub-layer frame – from 802.11 [1] 14

Excerpt 3.1: 802.11 Multirate support – from Section 9.6 of standards up to and including 802.11i [1 - 4] 19

Excerpt 7.1: Sequence Control field definition – from the 802.11 standard [1] 49

1 INTRODUCTION

The introduction to this thesis covers both the literature survey, and the background information, beginning with the general background and scope of the research. Then the remaining introduction is divided into three separate and distinct chapters following the overall introduction that provide a more detailed look at the facts of wireless networks.

The first of these covers the Institute of Electronic and Electrical Engineers (IEEE) 802.11 family of wireless local area network standards, where they come from and where are they headed. Secondly, the current 802.11 Medium Access Control (MAC) layer is analysed to find where and why it needs attention, and thirdly a summary of the existing ideas proposed for the improvement of the MAC sub-layer is presented.

1.1 BACKGROUND

The initial intention for this research was formulated during the years leading up to the conclusion of my undergraduate course. I developed an interest in wireless networks, and began to look beneath the surface, seeking the ability to understand the features of wireless networks - in particular the IEEE 802.11 standard used for Wireless Local Area Networks (WLAN).

Perhaps the most interesting facet of this topic was the use of 802.11's ad-hoc mode to create a wireless mesh network. Wireless mesh networks need no existing infrastructure – rather they simply and solely use the stations (wireless network devices) themselves. If two stations are out of range of each other, they form a route through other stations.

Many of these networks have been created across the globe. These have been largely private undertakings by groups of friends, neighbourhoods, municipal councils and many other organisations. They exist to improve connections between the members of these groups, or in many cases to create connections where none existed before.

However, while the connections are created, the throughput offered over the connections is often not great, and can be much lower than the notional maximum speed. This research was initially started to understand why the notional speeds were never attained in real world deployments. Once the reasons were found and understood, it was hoped that improvements could be found that would rectify the problem and provide a better service to the users of WLANs.

The main problem this research is targeted towards is the improvement of the throughput of 802.11 wireless networks. The improvements investigated within the research are also presented alongside some other improvements to the 802.11 standard that are focused upon other performances metrics – for example, greater priority for multimedia traffic.

The improvements detailed within this research, and the other improvements mentioned, have the goal of improving the user experience of 802.11 wireless networks. All of the improvements are part of an ongoing push for better performance, greater efficiency, improved robustness and stability and an overall maturity for the collection of 802.11 standards.

1.2 Content of Thesis

Firstly, the overall 802.11 standard is introduced as part of the IEEE's group of 802 networking standards. This is followed with an overview of the general operation of 802.11, as well as descriptions for the wide range of physical and MAC sub-layer supplements. This includes the 802.11a, 802.11b and 802.11g physical layer extensions, and the 802.11e MAC sub-layer extension. Also, the next generation version – 802.11n – is discussed.

After this, the need for improving the MAC sub-layer is detailed. This includes a look at the realistic performance delivered by the current set of extensions, and a look at the typical traffic distribution likely over a wireless network. This is followed by the current state of research into improving the MAC sub-layer, as well as an assessment of chipsets that claim to implement improvements.

Then the main improvement targeted in this research – packet aggregation – is introduced as a mechanism to significantly reduce the overheads of the 802.11 operation, and thus improve throughput. Three chapters are dedicated to aggregation, with the first detailing the two main types of aggregation and their respective operation, as well as how packet queues operate within an aggregator. This is followed by a chapter dealing with the development of specific parts of the aggregation mechanism in order to gain efficiency and cope with interference. The third chapter formally describes aggregation as an update to the existing 802.11 standard using the same formal description methods as the standard specification.

Then two more improvements to the MAC sub-layer are presented. Combined acknowledgements reduce the overhead incurred by the acknowledgement system of 802.11, thus giving an increase in the possible maximum throughput. A stored frame header system aims to improve the performance of static wireless links, such as a fixed point to point wireless link.

The design and details of the simulation environment for the assessment of the improvements is described. This is followed by a presentation and discussion of the results of the simulation of the improvements.

Finally, conclusions are made both against the objectives of the research presented by the thesis, and about the outcome of the individual improvements. Also included are comments about the future direction of this research.