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Network Characteristics for Server Selection in Online Games

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Network Characteristics for Server Selection in Online Games

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ABSTRACT
Online gameplay is impacted by the network characteristics for all players connected to the same server. Unfortunately, the network characteristics of online game servers are not well-understood, particularly for groups that wish to play together on the same server. As a step towards a remedy, this paper presents analysis of an extensive set of measurements of game servers on the Internet. Over the course of many months, actual Internet game servers were queried simultaneously by twenty emulated game clients, with both servers and clients spread out on the Internet. The data provides statistics on the uptime and populations of game servers over a month long period and an in-depth look at the suitability for game servers for multi-player server selection, concentrating on characteristics critical to playability – latency and fairness. Analysis finds most game servers have latencies suitable for third-person and omnipresent games, such as real-time strategy, sports and role-playing games, providing numerous server choices for game players. However, far fewer game servers have the low latencies required for first-person games, such as shooters or race games. In all cases, groups that wish to play together have a greatly reduced set of servers from which to choose because of inherent unfairness in server latencies and server selection is particularly limited as the group size increases. These results hold across different game types and even across different generations of games. The data should be useful for game developers and network researchers that seek to improve game server selection, whether for single or multiple players.

Categories and Subject Descriptors: C.2.m [Computer-Communication Networks]: Miscellaneous
General Terms: Measurement, Performance, Experimentation
Keywords: Network Games, Game Server Selection

1. INTRODUCTION
The growth in capability and penetration of broadband access networks to the home has fueled the growth of online games played over the Internet. As this article is being written, it is 4am (EST) on a typical weekday morning and Gamespy Arcade\(^1\) reports more than 310,000 players online playing over 100,000 games! This proliferation in online game players has been matched by an equivalent growth in the variety of online game offerings. The spectrum of online games has shifted from the 1990’s where a few players collaborating or competing on a Local Area Network (LAN) in first-person perspective games such as id’s Doom, to thousands of players interacting over the Internet in a wide variety of games ranging from first-person shooter games and role playing games to real-time strategy and sports games. This escalation in the popularity of online games is also reflected in the correspondingly high number of game servers spread across the globe that support and host thousands of players playing these games.

Most online games deploy a client-server model of interaction and so could seemingly benefit from network enhancements that support traditional client-server applications. Unfortunately, online games often cannot benefit because of significant differences. Traditional clients need specific content from a server and are not interested in alternate versions in the content. In contrast, game clients can often connect to a variety of servers for a different, yet acceptable, gameplay experience with alternate content (maps or players). Traditional applications care mostly about network throughput, while online games are care mostly about network latency. Traditional applications can benefit from transparent caching and local content access, such as content distribution networks and increased bandwidths. On the other hand, online game players want control over their server selection and especially need specific servers when playing online simultaneously with friends or family.

Many online games allow players to choose from among many servers for online play. For many games, this arises because users can run their own game servers, allowing clients to connect from anywhere on the Internet.\(^1\)

\(^1\)Gamespy provides popular services for the online gaming community, including game server browsing and player forums. Gamespy Arcade is online at http://www.gamespyarcade.com/.
Nearly all popular first-person shooter games (such as *Quake*, *Doom*, and *Unreal Tournament*) allow users to run their own game servers. Similarly, most real-time strategy games (such as *Warcraft* and *Age of Empires*) allow users to host a game, thus providing many server choices for clients playing online.

And the choice of game server impacts the online experience. Game servers can reach maximum player capacity, require clients to install cheat protection software (such as *PunkBuster*), or limit access to clients to specific versions or mods. The game map, game configuration and other in-game parameters (such as having friendly-fire enabled for a team-based first-person shooter) can influence a player’s choice to join a particular game server.

Even if all preferential game conditions are met by a game server, network latency will also impact the gameplay experienced. The range of latencies from a game client to all available game servers can be as broad as the range of end-to-end Internet latencies, going from milliseconds for a local game to thousands of milliseconds for a game across the world or over a congested, limited bandwidth network. Previous work has demonstrated that latencies can degrade player performance [1, 4, 19, 20, 14, 12, 21], making selection of fast server important for good online gameplay.

The problem of game server selection can be compounded when multiple players want to play online simultaneously on the same game server. This can arise when friends and family arrange for an on-line gaming session or when more formalized teams of players (typically called *clans*) compete against other teams during a pre-arranged match. Given the connected nature the world is heading, such players are increasingly likely to be geographically separated. A server that is fast for one player may be slow for the next player and vice versa. Support for finding a game server that performs acceptably for all players that want to play together remains an open research issue.

In order to improve game server selection, both for single and multiple players and for the increasingly diverse set of online games they play, there is a need for a better understanding of the network characteristics of current game servers. Understanding the availability and performance for existing game servers will provide insights as to whether there need to be alternate means for server deployment. Measuring game server performance from game clients simultaneously running on different Internet nodes will enable assessment of support for both single and multiple players, and can be extrapolated to assess support for a wide-range of game genres.

Some related work [7, 15] has looked at improving server selection for the current client-server online games, but has focused almost exclusively on helping single players without considering support for server selection for simultaneous players. Other related work [5, 18] proposes alternate structures for organizing game servers to provide for better online gameplay, but are not immediately useful for today’s predominantly client-server online game environment. Related work in third party architectures [23, 22] show promise in improving server selection for games and other client-server applications, but does not work without explicit buy-in by game developers. Other research has analyzed game traffic from the point of view of a server [6, 8] or a client [24, 16, 17, 13], but does not specifically consider traffic patterns or performance criteria for a group of servers and a group of clients.

In an effort to provide a better understanding of current game server selection, this paper provides a network characterization of actual game servers on the Internet. An extensive set of measurements were gathered over the course of several months, involving 25 geographically dispersed game clients and 60 geographically dispersed game servers from 3 different game types. The actual Internet game servers were queried simultaneously by the game clients, providing statistics on the uptime and populations of game servers and an in-depth look at the suitability for game servers to support single and multiple player server selection for a range of game genres.

Analysis of the data finds most game servers have latencies suitable for third-person and omnipresent games, such as real-time strategy, sports and role-playing games, providing numerous server choices for game players, whether selecting a server alone or simultaneously with friends and family. However, far fewer game servers have the low latencies required for first-person games, such as shooters or race games. Groups that wish to play together have a reduced set of servers from which to choose because of inherent unfairness in server latencies. These results hold across different game types and even across different generations of games.

The rest of this paper is organized as follows: Section 2 provides background on game server browsing; Section 3 describes our methodology to measure the network characteristics for online games; Section 4 analyzes the results; Section 5 introduces some of the research related to our own; Section 6 summarizes our conclusions; and Section 7 presents possible future work.

2. GAME SERVER BROWSING

Game server browsing allows players to find and select an online game server for their game clients. For online games that allow users to host their own game servers, game server browsing proceeds as follows.

A master server for a specific game, typically hosted and run by the company that created the game, runs at a well-known Internet domain name and port. Game
clients have this name and port number hard-coded into
the game or can be looked up via an Internet search.

Upon starting, a game server registers with a master
server, providing system and game information. The
master server keeps this information in its game server
directory until the game server gracefully shuts down
and unregisters, or until the master server purges the
information when it has not received a periodic update
from the individual game server.

A game client connects to a master server to obtain
information on the individual game servers available at
the moment. The master server provides information
on the IP address for each game server node, as well as
the port number on which the game server is listening.

The game client then has the option to individually
query each server returned in the list from the mas-
ter server, in order to verify that each server is, in-
deed, up and to update any statistics on the number
of players, map type, etc. These individual queries
also provide an estimate of the latency from the client
to the server, measured as the time elapsed between
sending out the single-packet query until receiving a
single-packet response. Typical game clients (and play-
ers) call this estimate the “ping” time, but it is dif-
ferent than ICMP ping times since game ping times
are application-layer to application-layer while ICMP
packets are handled at the operating system layer and
are sometimes treated differently by network routers.
Typically, game ping times are slightly (about 10 mill-
iseconds) higher than are ICMP ping times along the
same network path [3]. While there are other measures
of performance that may affect online game play, such
as packet loss and available bandwidth, player perfor-
mance is typically dominated by network latency (also
called “lag” by game players).

Figure 1 depicts a screen shot of a typical in-game
server browser, in this case from the game Counter-
Strike: Source. The main window shows the list of pos-
sible game servers, indicated with a text string name
created by the user that is hosting the game. Infor-
mation about the number of players, the map being
played and the latency (in milliseconds) is provided for
each game server. On the far left, the lock symbol indi-
cates whether the game server is password protected or
open to general access. At the bottom, a simple inter-
face allows the user to apply queries to filter the list of
results based on map, latency, population or other pref-
 erences. The tabs include an option to browse Internet-
wide games or only LAN games.

3. METHODOLOGY

In order to characterize server browsing and selec-
tion for online games, the following methodology was
deployed:

- Select games to study (Section 3.1).

3.1 Game Selection

While there are potentially numerous commercial game
types to study, most use the same model for server
browsing described in Section 2. Thus, the decision
was made to concentrate on games produced by one com-
mercial vendor with the assumption that the observed
characteristics would generally hold for game servers
from other vendors.

The vendor chosen was id Software, as they created
the game Doom (in 1993) that brought a deluge of re-
lated games that today make up the bulk of game-types
available online through server browsing. Since the
creation of Doom, id has gone on to create Doom 2
and Doom 3 and the popular Quake series (through to
Quake IV). The games Doom 3 and Quake IV (hence-
forth called Quake 4) were selected as representative ex-
amples of current games (released in 2004 and 2005, re-
spectively), allowing comparison with each other. Quake
3 (released in 1999) was selected as a representative
example of a previous generation game, but one that

3http://www.idsoftware.com/

4In fact, Doom was so popular that First Person Shooter
games were initially called “Doom clones” until the late
1990s.

Figure 1: Screen Shot of Typical In-Game
Server Browser

- Gather data on selected games via master server
  (Section 3.2).
- Select permanent game servers to study (also in
  Section 3.2).
- Develop software to emulate simultaneous game
  clients (Section 3.3).
- Gather data on permanent game servers (Section 3.4).
- Analyze results (Section 4).
is still quite popular, allowing comparison across game generations.

3.2 Master Server

Data was gathered from the master server for each of the selected games for a one month period. The purpose of this was two-fold: 1) long-term analysis of data from the master server can provide insights into the general ebb and flow of servers and player populations on those servers; 2) game servers that are consistently up (we call these permanent servers) were used in the second phase of data gathering, allowing individual clients to reliable gain server data over a long period of time.

The well-known domain names for the selected games are master3.idsoftware.com, q4master.idsoftware.com, and idnet.ua-corp.com for Quake 3, Quake 4 and Doom 3, respectively. For master server browsing and analysis, the location of the client is not relevant as the same information is returned by the master server regardless of the client location.

Master server data was gathered for the month of December 2006. From analysis on the individual game servers (see Section 4 for more details), 20 permanent servers for each game (Quake 3, Quake 4 and Doom 3) were selected. These permanent servers were used for queries by individual clients during the second phase of the study. The IP addresses and port numbers for the servers can be found online.4

3.3 Emulating Simultaneous Game Clients

The intent was to gather game server information, as would be seen by a typical game server browser in a game client, from actual Internet clients to actual Internet game servers. This provides insight into server characteristics for a single player seeking an online game. In addition, the intent was to gather information from multiple game clients simultaneously in order to represent multiple players looking for a suitable game server they could play on together. This provides insight into the problem space for game server selection for players that wish to play together as a group.

3.3.1 Game Clients

In order to emulate actual game clients, Qstat5 was used. Qstat is an open source game server browser that provides server information for a variety of game types. This is particularly useful since the information can be obtained from commercial, closed-source games without requiring installation of commercial game clients on each node. Qstat can be run from the command line, making it ideal for deployment in an automated fashion on remote computers, such as during our experiments.

Qstat includes support for both older and newer games, including all versions of Quake and Hexen, all versions of Unreal Tournament, versions of Half-Life and Counter-strike, versions of Tribes and numerous other games. The games selected for this study, Quake 3, Quake 4, and Doom 3, are supported.

Qstat can be used to query both master servers and individual game servers, providing information on the: name, IP address and latency of the server; maximum and current number of connected players; latency and scores for connected players; and the map and rules specific to the server. Qstat can produce results on screen or written to a file in text, HTML or XML. Our study used XML to make use of the variety of tools to ease parsing of data during the analysis.

3.3.2 Game Clients

In order to use actual Internet nodes, PlanetLab6 was used to provide a platform for the game clients from different Internet locations. Twenty-five clients were selected, geographically spread out on the Internet to reflect the truly global pervasiveness of online gaming. Clients were selected from Australia, France, Germany, Israel, Japan, Korea, Puerto Rico, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The domain names for the clients can be found online.7

Each PlanetLab client ran a custom perl script called the Gatherer that took as input the game type and a list of the individual game servers to query. The Gatherer then iterated through the server list, launching Qstat with the appropriate parameters, writing the output in XML to data files organized by client, server, game type, date and time.

3.3.3 Organizer

The launching of the emulated game clients on the PlanetLab nodes was coordinated from a custom perl and expect script called the Organizer. The Organizer first formed ssh connections to each of the clients, then simultaneously instructed them to launch their Gatherer scripts. Then, the Organizer monitored each client for completion of the Gatherers, whereupon the clients were instructed to send data back to the Organizer via scp.

The Organizer itself was controlled by means of a cron job, run from a Linux PC at Worcester Polytechnic Institute in Massachusetts, USA.

3.4 Game Servers

The Organizer was launched every half-hour. Data collection took place for a one-week period shortly after the data on the master servers was gathered and analyzed (Section 3.1). Altogether, this resulted in over 500,000 queries from individual game clients to individ-

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4http://www.cs.wpi.edu/~claypool/papers/game-server/
5http://www.qstat.org/
6http://www.planet-lab.org/
7http://www.cs.wpi.edu/~claypool/papers/game-server/
ual game servers, and over 1000 comparisons for simultaneous players to the same game servers.

4. ANALYSIS

Analysis proceeds first with the data from the master server for each game type providing game server characteristics (Section 4.1), then with the distributed client queries to the individual game servers to illustrate game server selection (Section 4.2)).

4.1 Server Characteristics

4.1.1 Number of Servers

Analysis using the month-long master server data provides a measure of the number of servers for each game type, shown in Table 1. Despite being older, Quake 3 has more servers than does Quake 4 with Doom 3 having by far the fewest. While not all of the servers returned by the master server are actually up (respond to Qstat queries), about 90% of servers listed are reachable.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Game</th>
<th>Listed</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Mean (%)</th>
<th>Std Dev</th>
<th>CoV</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Quake 3</td>
<td>1642</td>
<td>1397</td>
<td>(85%)</td>
<td>52.6</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quake 4</td>
<td>553</td>
<td>521</td>
<td>(94%)</td>
<td>15.9</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doom 3</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>(88%)</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>0.13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Aggregate Statistics for Game Servers for One Month

Analysis of the up servers over the month provides a means to visualize any correlation in number of game servers to day of the week. Figure 2 depicts the results, with the x-axis being the day of the week and the y-axis the number of servers obtained during each half-hour query. The number of servers is relatively constant across the month, with a slight upward trend in Quake 4 servers and a slight downward trend in Doom 3 servers. More importantly, there is no strong visual correlation with number of servers and day of the week.

Figure 3 depicts a zoomed in version of Figure 2, showing the number of servers over the course of one day. Here, one game type (Doom 3) is depicted in order to allow data focus, but the other games (Quake 3 and Quake 4) show similar trends. Figure 3 has no clear visual correlation with the number of servers and the time of day (times are all U.S. Eastern Standard Time, EST). This is perhaps explained by the global nature of online game play, where it is alway peak activity time (typically late afternoon to early evening) at some place in the world.

4.1.2 Number of Players
Analysis of the total number of players across all game servers for each game type is provided in Table 2. Similar to the trends in number of servers, Quake 3 has, on average, the most players with Quake 4 and Doom 3 trailing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Game</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std Dev</th>
<th>CoV</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Quake 3</td>
<td>2641</td>
<td>619</td>
<td>0.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quake 4</td>
<td>247</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>0.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doom 3</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>0.52</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Aggregate Statistics for Total Player Population for One Month

Using the data from Table 1 and Table 2, there are 1.3 players for every Quake 3 server, 0.45 players for every Quake 4 server, and 0.93 players for every Doom 3 server. However, the population spread of players among servers is not uniform, with some servers being filled more than others. Figure 4 depicts the cumulative distribution of the number of players on a server divided by the player capacity on the server (converted to a percentage). For all game types, half or slightly over half of the servers are completely empty of players. Also, there are few servers that are completely full for any game type, which is fortunate for players looking for a server that is not full.

The Coefficient of Variation (CoV) for the number of players (in Table 2) is much higher than the CoV for the number of servers (in Table 1), suggesting the players come and go more often than the servers. Figure 5 depicts the player population over the month for all games, and Figure 6 depicts the player population over a single game (Doom 3 – again, the other games were similar). Visually, there is considerably more variation in the data lines in Figure 5 than in Figure 2, but still no visual correlation between player population and day of the week. Unlike Figure 3, Figure 6, does show a correlation for the total number of players with time of day, with a rise in servers in the late morning (EST), peaking mid-afternoon, and declining until early evening. This is somewhat contrary to the analysis for number of servers, suggesting game players are not so evenly distributed around the world such that they exhibit time of day correlations in their game activity when seen in aggregate.

Given the visual time of day correlation with the number of players, it is natural to investigate if there is a visual correlation with network latency to the servers. Figure 7 depicts the network latencies for a single Doom
Figure 7: Latency for Single Client for One Game (Doom 3) in One Day

3 client over the course of a day. Each query (run every half-hour) returns a list of possible Doom 3 servers available for play. Analysis of this list provides a minimum, average, and maximum latency, shown as trendlines in Figure 7 and provided in summary statistics in Table 3. While the trend lines do vary in Figure 7, particularly for the minimum and maximum latencies that have a modest CoV, there is not the same strong visual correlation with time of day as there is with player population in Figure 6.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statistic</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std Dev</th>
<th>CoV</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Min</td>
<td>20.5</td>
<td>13.1</td>
<td>0.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>95.5</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>0.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Max</td>
<td>205.3</td>
<td>151.9</td>
<td>0.74</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Aggregate Latency Statistics (in milliseconds) for Single Client for One Game (Doom 3) in One Day

Given the lack of visual correlation for time of day and network performance (latency to servers) and server populations, and the lack of visual correlation for day of the week and player and server populations, for all subsequent analysis, the data sets for every day across the entire month are combined.

While Table 1 provides statistics on the percentage of servers returned by the master server that are up (about 90%), it does not indicate if these are the same servers that are up each half-hour query or if it an entirely different set of servers. Over the course of the month, the fraction of times each server (identified by IP address and port number) appears in a master server list over the course of the month is computed. Figure 8 depicts the results, showing a cumulative distribution of up fraction for each game type. The trends for each game are remarkably similar, with all game types generally having a bi-modal distribution. About 80% of servers are up only a handful of times and then are not up for the rest of the month, while about 5% of the servers are up for nearly the entire month. Most likely, the 80% group of servers are launched by individual players for the duration of their game session, with their next game session launching a different server. We call these servers that come and go ephemeral servers. The 5% group of servers are dedicated in that they stay up beyond the length of the game session of the player that launched them. We call these permanent servers.

For the purposes of the second phase of data collection, where many individual clients query specific servers, the 20 specific servers for each game were selected from the group of permanent servers. The IP addresses and port numbers for the servers can be found online.\(^8\)

The last aspect of master server data analysis examines the latencies reported by all game servers over the course of the month in order to see if there is a difference among the different game types. Figure 9 depicts a cumulative distribution of latency for each game type. There is an approximately uniform distribution of latencies from 0 to 400 milliseconds, whereupon the distribution has a heavier tail up to 2000 milliseconds. QStat has a timeout value of 2000 milliseconds, and while theoretically there could be latency values that are higher, such high latencies are above tolerable limits by nearly all online game players. Most importantly, however, note that the distributions for the three games are nearly identical. This suggests there is no quantitative performance difference among the game servers in

\(^8\)http://www.cs.wpi.edu/~claypool/papers/game-server/
terms of network latency. Thus, for analysis for individual clients in the next section (Section 4.2), the data sets for the three game types are combined.

4.2 Server Selection

4.2.1 Latency and Player Performance

In order to analyze the general ability of the pool of available game servers to support online gameplay, it is important to first understand the effects of network latency on player performance.

Earlier work [11] provided a classification for online games based on their perspective (first-person or third-person) and on their model (avatar or omnipresent). Practically, all games fall into one of three categories: first-person avatar (ex: first-person shooter, racing), third-person avatar (role-playing, side-scrolling) or omnipresent (real-time strategy). A meta analysis of previous work that measured the effects of latency and online games, normalized and combined, provides a way to quantify the effects of latency on online games.

Figure 10 summarizes the meta data analysis of performance versus latency for the different classes of online games, depicted by an exponential curve fit to the previously measured data. The horizontal gray area around 0.75 in Figure 10 is a visual indicator of typical player tolerances for latency. The exact threshold depends upon the game (and to some extent, the player), but generally game performance above this threshold is acceptable while game performance below this threshold is unacceptable. Overall, games that use the avatar model of player interaction are more sensitive to latency than games that use the omnipresent model, and games that use the first person perspective are more sensitive to latency than games that use the third person perspective.

Table 4 provides a summary of the effects of latency on player performance for the three classes of games. The “Thresholds” provided in the table serve as a yardstick with which to analyze the current ability of game server pools to support a range of online games.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Perspective</th>
<th>Example Genres</th>
<th>Thresholds</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Avatar</td>
<td>1st Person</td>
<td>FPS, Racing</td>
<td>100 msec</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3rd Person</td>
<td>Sports, RPG</td>
<td>500 msec</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Omnipresent</td>
<td>Varies</td>
<td>RTS, Sim</td>
<td>1000 msec</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: Summary of the Effects of Latency and Online Games

4.2.2 Server Suitability

For single players seeking a server with latency suitable for their online game play, in the absence of other, external criteria (such as map preference), the server with the lowest latency will be the best.

However, for multiple players that wish to play together on the same server, the shared latency of the server becomes important. A natural measure of how “good” a server is for two or more players is to compute the average latency for all players. However, the differences in the latency can have an effect on performance, too. When one player is further away (has a higher latency) from the server than another player, there may unfairness in the gameplay. For example, suppose two players defeat a monster after a battle. The server, controlling the game world state, generates some treasure as a reward for the players to pick-up. A packet having the location of the treasure is simultaneously sent to each of the players. If one player has low latency, that player can act first and gather the loot. If the other
player has high latency, that player will respond more slowly, probably after the first player has gathered the treasure. This unfairness can degrade the game play for many games.

A given server can be placed into a two-dimensional space with one axis representing the average network distance (computed as the average latency for all players) and the other axis representing the (un)fairness (computed as the standard deviation of latency across all players). Figure 11 depicts a scatter plot of unfairness versus distance (standard deviation versus average latency) for the entire population of game servers as seen from 20 simultaneous clients. In general, as the average latency increases, the unfairness (standard deviation) of the server also increases. Moreover, this unfairness increases at a faster rate, with a 2x increase in latency resulting in a 2.5x increase in unfairness.

While Figure 11 is visually interesting, using standard deviation as a measure of unfairness does not provide an easy way to map this with player tolerance for acceptable gameplay. However, latency compensation techniques deployed by many game servers do provide a means to quantify the effects of disparate latencies. Notably, a commonly deployed means of reducing the impact of latency is to manipulate game time [2]. With time delay, messages arriving at the server are delayed until the message from the client with the highest latency has arrived. Correspondingly, messages from the server are sent out first to the client that is farthest away, delaying messages to closer clients so that they have the same effective latency. While making latencies fair among clients, time delay makes the effective latency the same as the client with the maximum latency. Thus, the maximum latency for any player provides an approximation of how suitable a given server is for simultaneously connected players.

Figure 12 depicts the cumulative distribution of maximum latencies for players simultaneously browsing for a game server, in groups of 2, 5, 10 and 20 simultaneous players. For comparison, the latencies available to the same players choosing a server independent of the other players is also depicted. Looking at how the trendlines shift from left to right, there is a clear increase in the maximum latency as the number of simultaneous players increases. In addition, all the trendlines have a “knee” where the bulk of the latency values lie below this point and the rest of the latency values lie above this point. For example, for two simultaneous players, about 80% of the servers have a maximum latency (for one of the players) of 250 milliseconds or less. However, this knee-effect is less pronounced for higher numbers of simultaneous players.

Using the thresholds on acceptable performance from Table 4, the data in Figure 12 can be used to determine the ability of current game servers to support different types of games for simultaneous players. Visualize vertical lines can be drawn at the tolerance thresholds for different classes of games: 100 milliseconds for first-person avatar, 500 milliseconds for third-person avatar, and 1000 milliseconds for omnipresent. The distribution points to the left of these lines have acceptable performance for the corresponding game class, while the distribution points to the right have unacceptable performance.

Figure 13 depicts the fraction of acceptable servers versus the number of players that wish to play together simultaneously on the same game server. The three trendlines represent first-person avatar games (such as
a first-person shooter), third-person avatar games (such as a role-playing game) and omnipresent games (such as a real-time strategy game). At the far left is the fraction of servers that are acceptable for a single player game. In general, game servers are well-suited to support both third-person avatar and omnipresent games. Single players find over 95% of the servers acceptable, while even up to 20 players seeking a server as a group will find over half the servers suitable. However, for first-person avatar games, much more demanding in terms of latency than other game types, the story is much different. First-person avatar games can generally support single player games, although slightly less than half the servers are acceptable. However, as the number of simultaneous players increases, the fraction of acceptable servers quickly decreases, with almost no servers being acceptable for 7 or more players trying to play together as a group.

5. RELATED WORK

Research related to the work in this paper is divided broadly into three categories: (1) server selection that characterizes or improves game server selection; (2) traffic characterization that analyzes network game traffic; and (3) quality of play that quantifies the impact of network latency on online game players.

5.1 Server Selection

Henderson [15] provides some observations on game server discovery mechanisms, noting that game server selection mechanisms are inefficient and do not scale well. He presents a work-in-progress, distributed peer-to-peer server discovery mechanism. While some data on the number of available Half-Life servers is provided, the scope of data analyzed is significantly less than that of our work.

Chambers et al. [7] propose a redirection server for online games, where clients that contact a server are automatically re-directed to a geographically closer server. While the approach has merits when physical distance relates to latency, it fails when multiple players want to play together on the same game server.

Brun et al. [5] and Lee et al. [18] propose alternate structures for organizing game servers to provide for better online gameplay. While their solutions show promise compared to strictly centralized (and uncoordinated) game servers, they are not immediately applicable to today’s client-server online game environment.

Wong et al. present a novel architecture [23, 22] for node selection based on network location. The framework is an overlay network that is hierarchically arranged in rings, providing scalability with the number of servers. While providing potentially great benefits to server browsing, it does not have practical benefit unless current server browsing techniques are changed.

5.2 Traffic Characterization

Chambers et al. [6] propose an algorithm to schedule patches for online games, but also provide time of day analysis for a specific game server. Their server has significant time of day correlation, which is unlike the aggregate game server pool shown in our work.

Chambers et al. [8] also characterize by measurement a collection of online games, providing invaluable results to better analyze the impact of a server. Our results on server uptimes can be coupled with these to provide aggregate server traffic information.

Feng and Feng [9] show geographic distribution of online game servers and players. Generally, they conclude game players choose servers in their local geographic region, but the full pool of clients to a server come geographically spread out clients. These results support our choice of geographically distributed clients.

5.3 Quality of Play

Chen et al. [10] report on the sensitive to users for online play, providing data on how quickly players will leave a server based on total playing time and latency. Their results re-enforce other results that show users are more tolerant to latency for third-person games.

Wattimena et al. [21] provides a model for predicting the perceived quality of a first-person shooter, Quake 4. The data on sensitivity of players of a first-person game re-enforces the results in our paper.

Claypool and Claypool [11] provide the meta-analysis on the sensitivity of online game players to online latency. At the core of the analysis is a categorization of in-game tasks and game genres based on perspective. The work provides data for our analysis and also
provides references for other related work.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The increasing growth in computer networks has brought with it an increase in the interest and importance of online games. Most commercial games use a client-server architecture and many allow the players to connect their clients to their choice of game server. Given that players can also deploy their own server, many games provide players with a choice of many possible game servers. And server selection matters, not only for physical parameters such as player population and map, but because the latency between the game client and the server has been demonstrated to degrade gameplay. The selection process is made more difficult when players want to play together as a group, co-located on the same game server.

In order to enhance server browsing to support simultaneous players and consider alterations to support the increasingly wide-range of online games, there is first a need for a better understanding of the network characteristics of current game server browsing. This paper provides this needed first step by gathering data on real game servers and clients on the Internet. Months of master server data for three different games provide a characterization of server uptimes and populations, allowing observation of time of day and day of week correlations. A week of data gathers game server data from custom software that emulates the server browsing of players seeking to play simultaneously on the same game server.

The results allow us to draw the following conclusions:

- There is no visual day of week correlation to server uptime or player population.
- There is no visual time of day correlation to server uptime, but there is some correlation with player population. However, there is not a corresponding correlation with server performance (latency).
- Game server performance (latency) is nearly independent of game type and game generation.
- The number of simultaneous players in a group directly reduces the performance for all players by increasing the maximum latency.
- Game server pools are well-suited to support typical third person games, such as role-playing games or real-time strategy games. The pool of available game servers for third-person games can fairly easily support up to 20 simultaneous game players.
- Game server pools are not as able to support typical first-person games, such as first-person shooters or racing games. Players selecting a server outside of a group can find an adequate number of suitable servers, but the pool of servers that provide acceptable performance decreases rapidly with an increase in the group size.

7. FUTURE

Additional processing of the data may provide other insights into game server browsing:

1. Game servers provide information on the latencies and scores of players currently connected to the server. This data can be analyzed to study the range of latencies currently in use, and perhaps correlated with user scores.

2. Geographic information may play a role in the ease (or difficulty) in simultaneous users finding a suitable game server. Additional analysis could examine the physical relationship among the clients and servers, both geographically (in terms of physical distance) and topologically (in terms of network distance), to better understand server browsing.

Since the data obtained in this study has been made available to the public, the analysis can be undertaken by other researchers.

Some games have servers that are not setup or controlled by individual users, such as servers for one of the popular massively multi-player online (MMO) games. These servers typically have similar server selection issues and so may benefit from the analysis in this paper, but often have the selection done implicitly with a single head node re-directing players to appropriate servers. Study of server selection in this process, probably with support from industry, may be an interesting area of future work.

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8. REFERENCES


