

Collision-Free WLANs: From Concepts to Working Protocols. A PhD. Proposal

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Abstract. In the upcoming years the number of devices that exchange data wirelessly is thought to increase dramatically, even nowadays home environments no longer lack the wireless network congestion only seen before at office/public spaces (like wireless hot-spots). The current Medium Access Control (MAC) protocol is known to be prone to collisions, which increase with the number of stations in the wireless network. Many proposals have been made to amend the current standard, but at the time of this writing the drawbacks related to collisions have not been fixed. One of the reasons why implementing new MAC protocols is a challenging task relates to the need for really fast processing speed (which can only be achieved at hardware level) and the need for more realistic channel conditions and traffic scenarios.

This PhD Thesis Proposal aims at designing and prototyping next-generation MAC protocols for IEEE 802.11-like networks, going from concept proposals to hardware implementation.

1 Introduction

Carrier Sense Multiple Access with Collision Avoidance (CSMA/CA) is the protocol used in Wireless Local Area Networks (WLANs) to coordinate transmissions. Nodes should avoid simultaneous transmissions because the medium is shared, so concurrent transmissions attempts will result in indecipherable messages to the receivers. This event is referred to as a *collision*.

For CSMA/CA, time is slotted. As a result, there are three kind of slots: *empty*, *successful* and *collision* slots, where successful and collision slots contain successful transmissions or collision events. While the remaining are just tiny empty slots of a fixed time length.

Every time there is a contend for transmission, CSMA/CA forces contenders to count down from a randomly generated number (from now on referred to as backoff counter), decrementing it by one per every passing empty slot. When the backoff expires (reaches zero), contenders will attempt transmission. Nevertheless, because the backoff counter is generated at random, there might be cases where two or more contenders simultaneously attempt transmission and a collision occurs, significantly degrading the throughput of the system as more nodes join the contend for the medium.

It is possible to obtain greater levels of throughput than the achieved by CSMA/CA under optimal parameter configuration by picking a deterministic backoff counter after successful transmissions. This approach is called Carrier Sense Multiple Access with Enhanced Collision Avoidance (CSMA/ECA) [1]. Results also show that by making simple modifications on the behavior of the current protocol, CSMA/ECA is able to allocate more contenders in a collision-free fashion while preserving the system fairness by equally distributing the system throughput among all nodes.

Many years of testing have settled CSMA/CA as the default protocol for this type of networks, even-though many other proposals claim to outperform it [1–4]. Nevertheless, their proposed adjustments tested by simulation are not included in the current standard.

Recent approaches to design and implement MAC protocols on cheap commodity hardware [5, 6] opened the possibility to construct more realistic scenarios. Although at an early phase and steep learning curve, this alternative allows researchers of all levels to make substantial contributions.

1.1 Motivation

As mentioned before, many and more proposals to amend the collision problem in CSMA/CA have been made and none is included in the current standard.

Taking a guess-look at what is to come in a few years time, WLANs are expected to be as crowded as never before. From tablets, laptops, smart phones, watches, smart health/activity monitoring devices; to traffic prioritization, accommodating these many devices and services will soon out-challenge CSMA/CA.

Even-though CSMA/CA in theory is able to coordinate medium access for many contenders, it does so at the price of a reduced throughput induced by collisions. This is completely leveraged by CSMA/ECA, which in fact provides greater throughput than CSMA/CA in almost every testable scenario.

The goal of this PhD Thesis is twofold: 1) further analyze CSMA/ECA behavior considering unsaturated scenarios, and 2) to write the protocol into cheap commodity Wireless Network Interface Cards (WNICs) using the principles proposed in [5]. The expected results from this work will provide a complete overview of CSMA/ECA and sufficient documentation to make an amendment proposal to CSMA/CA.

References

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