Web routers: An explorative performance review

# Introduction

The focus of research in recent times has been on the client side of web development, as defined by the Hyper Text Transfer Protocol (HTTP) specification (Fielding, et al., 1999). The main body of research has been to produce better ways to present information, and with the interaction to the user.

The focus on the server side has been in making dynamic content (e.g. address book entries based upon a query) more easily created and manipulated. Anecdotally there does not appear to be much development in this area. This has left certain technologies in use by the web servers with limited work done on them; an example of this would be the web router.

Web routers are the core technology that maps HTTP requests to the web service (code) that produces the response to be sent back to the client. A web router does not interact with the user directly, instead it is configured by descriptions (routes) of websites. Software developers implement a web service to produce dynamic content for a website. Dynamic content and static content (e.g. a websites logo) utilize a web server router to locate the resource handling code to produce a response to the HTTP request.

While the web router implementation is unseen its performance is crucial to the overall of the response times for a request. This research is to compare the performance of various web router implementations to recommend potential improvements.

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# Literature Review

## Data structures

In computer science there are two primary data structure families. Lists and Tree graphs. These data structures are built on top of heap memory using two techniques, struct/class based storage and arrays in the form of either static or dynamic. A dynamic array is a pointer to a location within the heap or stack with a length to indicate how many indices has been allocated for.

Lists are a more expensive method (in amount of memory allocated and lookup times) to perform storage of linear data. The benefit of using a List over an array is having faster insertion and removal times.

A Tree graph instead of storing data linearly, stores data separated with multi layers of parents and children. This separation is very good for decreasing lookup times for data that is similar but with vast differences later on, which is the case with routes. Typically there is a root node with a set of children associated with it. The root node itself doesn’t have a value but is the starting point for lookup. Each node has children and a parent.

TODO: references!

## Current routing approaches

A web router maps incoming requests to a route handler (code). The approaches that are available to implement the routing can differ in functionality and performance. These different approaches each have a different set of costs (memory and CPU) and the performance will depend upon the profile of the web traffic.

There is a variety of different methods used in implementing a web router. The main ones used are: tree graphs such as a Red-Black as implemented in Nginx[[1]](#footnote-2) or a single Regular Expression (regex) (Popov, 2014). A single regex can simplify the code required but will result in a limited functionality

Current implementations typically use the path from the HTTP header to perform lookups. Routes may contain constants as path segments, parameters or a “catch all” for all following path segments. Existing basic data structures can handle paths in this format. E.g. regular expressions are typically used to implement them. These can cover most cases by utilizing multiple instances of the router implementation. Each instance of the router handles a different HTTP method such as GET and POST.

Some servers support a feature known as rewriting. Rewriting is the process by which requests are transformed into another; however only internally. After a ‘rewrite’ of a request takes place it must be evaluated as if it was a new request. The rules by which it can modify the request include the path, domain, time stamp, client IP address and any other HTTP request field. Most web routers do not implement this feature because of its complex nature however it is an add-on to many web servers.

In non-regex approaches, more information is stored in the data structure (HTTP method, port etc.). This allows the routing algorithm to use other conditions such as the HTTP request fields of User-Agent, Referer or Host. Support for this significantly increases the complexity of the implementation and limited research into this area was discovered in the creation of this proposal.

The data structure that the web router utilizes can take many forms including a list or a tree graph. These data structures are simple in design but have many optimisation opportunities (such as cache locality for children in a tree graph) which can improve performance by many magnitudes (Ross & Rao, 2000).

## The World Wide Web

The World Wide Web was conceptualised in 1989 (World Wide Web Consortium, n.d.) since then there has been a large uptake in its usage by everyone across the globe to an estimate of 3.4 billion users as of October 8th of 2016 (Internet Live Stats, 2016). With every one of those users working with the standards of Uniform Remote Locator[[2]](#footnote-3), Hypertext Transfer protocol (Fielding, et al., 1999) and Hypertext Markup Language[[3]](#footnote-4) in some form or another.

During the early days, many different web browsers and servers were created, the majority of these have since long died off but the legacy that is the definition of each has not. As defined by the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) (World Wide Web Consortium, 2014):

1. Web browser  
   A program which allows the display and execution of a web page for a user. Interacts with a web server to provide any data required. This is the most common form of client.
2. Web server  
   Retrieves files or resources from the file system or some form of backend such as a web application and sends them to the client as requested.
3. Web Server API or service  
   A standalone piece of software that will dynamically create content to send to a client. It communicates in some form to the web server to serve up content to the client.

These components are displayed in Figure 1.



Figure 1 The web (HTTP) request + response cycle

With greater usage of the internet coinciding and with greater speeds during 1990s as predicted by Nielsen’s Law (Nielsen, 1998), companies and developers alike experimented with dynamic web pages allowing for user interactions not possible with static web pages alone. The Common Gateway Interface[[4]](#footnote-5) was created to allow for external program to be executed as part of the web page processing by a server. From this point on existing programming languages gained new uses that were not seen before, which helped to introduce other new programming languages. Some examples of this would be PHP (The PHP Group) and JSP (Java Server Pages) which have the primary purpose of dynamic page creation on each request by the client.

## The Server

Web servers and web (server side) APIs alike are a field of research that continues to introduce new areas of study in both academic and in informal capacities. Combined they share a very similar technology set, with only slightly different purposes and entry points. The web router resides on a server and is a required component for the operation of both web servers and web APIs.



Figure 2 General HTTP request + response processing activities

A web routers, primary goal is to map an incoming request from a socket to a function (code) to process it. The execution and processing of a request once mapped can be done on the server or specific route handling code in a separate process. The handler can be written in any language. This is shown in Figure 2 General HTTP request + response processing ; it is based upon HTTP 1.x.

The primary focus of web developers is coding the requests and manipulating of the response for the client side. For the server side, the focus is upon handling the routes for a given purpose. There may be little consideration by those who use an implementation about, its performance. This can cause delays such as the time it takes to handle a request from getting it to sending a response back to the client. The algorithms used in web routers (e.g. linked list, B-Tree) and data structures were originally created for database engines. In the context of a database they have been optimised and analysed for best performance. For a web router, these algorithms may give improved performance once they have been analysed and optimised for this use case.

### Performance issues

The standard implementation of a web server has the following processing:

1. Asynchronous socket listener
2. Thread/Fiber router (choose the thread to handle the request)
3. HTTP request processing
4. Routing to handler function
5. HTTP response creation and return

In these steps there are a number of potential performance issues:

* Non-blocking asynchronous socket listening verses blocking synchronous socket listening
* Scheduling of the handling code on a thread/fiber
* Blocking operations (e.g. communicating with the database, file reading/writing)

These have been worked on by developers since the beginning of the web, but comparatively little has been done in the routing component. Hence the focus of this study is on improving the performance of the web router.

# Research context

The research proposal presented here has the end goal of trying to improve web routing performance which could make the world wide web faster. In previous work a considerable amount of research has gone into making the web faster by focusing upon the total performance of the web.

The overarching goal is to determine the performance of various web router algorithms for a given set of web request scenarios.

From this a set of sub-questions is formulated to help reach the overall research goal.

* What are the current performance metrics associated with the request/response cycle?
* What are common algorithms that web routers use and how do they relate to those used in other fields?
* What are the performance characteristics of commonly used algorithms to implement a web router given a range of routing scenarios as input?

The results of this investigation will allow for potential improvements in web router performance.

# Method

A benchmark harness will be created to execute tests to record the timings for routing of requests. The harness will provide a common interface to allow the timings to be gathered the same way for each web router implementation to be tested and compared.

The input data for the benchmarking comprise two different sets of information. The first is the routes to be stored into the relevant router data structure, and the second set is of requests to be executed by the router implementation. The routes will be preloaded before testing and will be fully optimised by the router before the execution of the benchmarking.

The design of the routes used in the data sets include: static paths “/my/path/goes/here” with variable number of parts “/part”, a number of parameters (aka “variables”) “/my/path/:variable” and a catch all “/my/path/\*” for all values following the previous values. These will be combined into the forms: “/path/:vars/\*”, “/path/\*” and “/path/:vars” with path and vars being variable in number. The combination and complexity will be produced algorithmically for the purposes of testing as many corner cases as possible.

Different input sets will be generated by: how many path parts they contain, the number of parameters/variables and how many have a catch all.

Each implementation is expected to run solely within a single thread. All input sets will be stored in memory and initialisation will have been performed before a test starts. Each input set is executed in multiples of a ten giving: 10, 100, 1000, etc. The result for each multiple is then averaged for comparison with the same multiple for all other inputs sets. Each test will occur without any breaks (e.g. no thread sleeping) and will not include the time for pre-loading and optimisation.

The computer that will perform the benchmarking has the following specification:

* CPU: Intel Xeon v3 E5-2630, 8 cores at 2.4ghz base frequency and 20mb cache
* Memory: DDR4 64GB at 3200mhz
* OS: Windows 10

Storage of input and results will be done in memory. Once results are fully generated and testing has concluded for a test set, they will then be stored on the hard disk. This will prevent performance penalties associated with hard drive storage appearing in results.

Once the results have been gathered, graphs comparing multiples for a test set as well as comparing specific multiples between implementations for a test set. Particular attention will be paid to outliers within these graphs to determine problems of the implementation. Comparisons will also be made between test sets to determine how the type of web requests impacts performance.

## Implementation

For the implementation two sets of artifacts were created, code and the data sets. The data sets comprise of a variety of values generating a set of website route descriptors that are to be benchmarked. Secondly the routers themselves as code within the benchmarking framework that was as well created.

### Data sets

The benchmark input data was generated using a generator which had its input provided by a script. The input generator produces a unique set of routes given a max number of entries, parts, parameters and tests per route. These can be combined together to produce a multi-site input into the router benchmarker.

The benchmark data generator runner script used a variety of values for max number of entries, parts, parameters, tests, specific number of sites and iterations. The number of catch all was derived from max parts and max parameters. The set of values that was used were:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Max entries | 10, 20, 50, 100, 200 |
| Max parts | 5, 10, 20, 30 |
| Max parameters | 4, 10, 20 |
| Max tests | 1, 2, 3, 5, 10, 20 |
| Site count | 1, 2, 3, 5, 10, 20, 30, 100 |
| Iterations count | 1, 10, 100, 1\_000 |

The values chosen were picked to try and get a range that fitted most web servers and web service frameworks use cases. A word dictionary was used to produce unique words per path part, using a random number to pick which one to replace at each node for a tree graph. The tree graph got walked to produce tests and route definitions. Each router implementation was tested during development to determine the correctness of routing. The input to output of the routing was assumed to have been successful and was not checked given the input was correct.

In total 287 benchmark input sets were created as part of the generation process. Only 150 of these were run and took over a week to complete. The last of these took over 24hours to run and the following sets would only become longer in time as the complexity could only rise as per the table.

TODO: reference table figure

### The Routers

Three routers were implemented. A tree graph, list (array) and regex. The tree graph was based on a rooted child array approach with multitude of specific node pointers per node to support parameters, catch all and other children. The list was an array sorted by the route value it contained. Lastly the regex router was implemented using D’s standard library implementation (std.regex). This implementation does not perform JIT’ing or any fancy or complex tricks to make it significantly faster making it a good base for how good/bad it can be.

The routers tree graph and regex have a second variant, an optimized version. The optimized version was benchmarked separately on top of the unoptimized instances of the other three. The optimizations used for the tree graph was a single block of memory for all nodes, where as for the regex was a single regex string.

# Experimental Results and Discussion

The results were gathered in a continuous time period of over a week. The earlier ones are the most representative of real world usage and have less irregularities visible.

A few of the results gathered is a yet to be explained resulting trend coming from irregular data created from the long running processes. This produced irregularities, are most apparent in the larger data sets further towards the end. During this discussion any results originating from beyond the 100 mark for set id is to be considered unreliable and a marker for possible trend, but not a trend in of itself.

The benchmarks are broken down into means of the sums of time over all iterations for the benchmark route and per iteration of the benchmark routes. With both averaged out over an entire input set. To illustrate the results graphs are shown, these are …. display the means of the sums for input sets 1-5, … for input sets 70-75 and … for input sets 140-145. For mean per iterations: … for 1-5, … for 70-75 and … for 140-145.

TODO: create these graphs.

To further study these results, each router must be understood how it compares to itself, over the number of routes it is supplied. For this the graphs: … 1-5 for per iteration of each router, … for 70-75 and … for 140-145 was created.

TODO: needs a graph here e.g. r2 for each column of data

TODO: quick discussion about it

## Time period of results

The generation of results required long running processes which produced irregularities within the output. The question to be taken is how much of an error compared to the earlier ones executed was it? This answers a new question, was the input data set generated too big given the problem domain.

The following table of R2 was calculated from the means of the times taken to benchmark a given input set to a router, not per iteration. A trend line was added to the given data set chosen using a polynomial form with 8 degrees of points.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Set 0-50 | Set 50-100 | Set 100-150 |
| List | 0.05523 | 0.04737 | 0.11400 |
| Tree | 0.04176 | 0.03878 | 0.09072 |
| Regex | 0.03768 | 0.04476 | 0.07980 |
| Optimized Tree | 0.04018 | 0.03989 | 0.09001 |
| Optimized Regex | 0.03910 | 0.05197 | 0.05632 |

The table was graphed to determine if any trends were occurring in data matching.

The graph shows three very noticeable traits, firstly 0-50 and 50-100 are very close to being similar in value. Second the 100-150 sets of data tend to be significantly higher than the other two sets. Lastly four out of the five router instances have the same curve shape. The router instance with a different one is the optimized regex which shows a much more predictable result.

# Conclusion

This work has found that the Tree graph data structure is best suited towards web router implementation. It represents routes the most accurately however the one tested does not perform optimizations as it is running. A common method for routing using a regex to represent routes was found to be slower. The performance of the regex implementation will be dependent upon the regex library and could be not conducive for performance.

# Recommendations for Future Work

A limited number of techniques were used in this research. To further this a number of web routers can be created:

* More Tree graph variants, Red-Black, Splay and AVL.
* Merging of a tree graph with regex on request, to provide more modeling power when required but reverting to a simpler algorithm lookup for performance.
* Using another data structure to represent sites to route storage. The current one used is a basic array with a child of the element to the root node.

Creating a different more randomized input set benchmarking. Instead of doing them linearly, randomize order and do some of them multiple times.

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