**multi**-**tier architecture**

In software engineering, **multi**-**tier architecture** (often referred to as n-**tier architecture**) is a client–server **architecture** in which presentation, application processing, and data management functions are physically separated.

**Distributed computing**

**Distributed computing** is a field of [computer science](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Computer_science) that studies distributed systems. A *distributed system* is a software system in which components located on [networked computers](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Computer_network) communicate and coordinate their actions by [passing messages](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Message_passing).[[1]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Distributed_computing#cite_note-Coulouris-1) The components interact with each other in order to achieve a common goal.  
Three significant characteristics of distributed systems are: concurrency of components, [lack of a global clock](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clock_synchronization), and independent failure of components.[[1]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Distributed_computing#cite_note-Coulouris-1) Examples of distributed systems vary from [SOA-based systems](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Service-oriented_architecture) to [massively multiplayer online games](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Massively_multiplayer_online_game) to [peer-to-peer applications](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peer-to-peer).  
  
**multi**-**tier vs Distributed architecture**  
Maybe these two sentences do convey intuitively the distinction between *distributed* and *multi-tier*:

* *Distributed*: You replicate the processing amongst nodes
* *Multi-tier*: You split the processing amongst tiers

In one case, the same processing is replicated over several nodes. In the other case, each tier has a distinct responsibility and the processing running on each tier differ.

Both notions are not exclusive: you can have non-distributed multi-tier apps (if there is no form of redundancy/replication), distributed apps which are not multi-tier, but also multi-tier apps which are distributed (if they have some form of redundancy).

There would be a lot more to say about the distinction, but the difference (to me) is essentially there.