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Using Blockchain for Video Game Distribution

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Abstract

Video game developers will often have to rely on third party platforms for the distribution of their games; this comes at a large monetary cost to the developer and leaves users at a greater risk of censorship and with weak digital ownership that is reliant on the platform staying active. This project uses the Ethereum blockchain to facilitate the large-scale distribution and continuous updating of video games that allows developers to directly interact with their users, who will now have true digital ownership.

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Acknowledgements

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Chapter 1

Problem Statement

1.1 The Problem

Video games are often large and highly popular pieces of software that are typically distributed for developers by a third party platform like Steam or Epic Games. Whilst these platforms provide benefits such as availability, and some social features they have some major downsides that include:

- (a) taking a large cut of all revenue,
Steam take a 30% cut [9, 2]
- (b) being vulnerable to censorship from governments,
The Chinese version of Steam is heavily censored [15]
- (c) the user's access to their games is linked to the platform.
If the platform shuts down, the user loses all their games

1.2 Goals

The goal of this project is to implement a large-scale distribution platform that will allow game developers to release and continuously update their games on a public network by directly interacting with their users. This is in the aim to provide greater profits to developer's, freedom from censorship, and better digital ownership for the user.

1.3 Scope

This project will be broken down into two distinct components:

1. **On-Chain** This component will consist of a set of Solidity Smart Contracts written for the Ethereum blockchain that will allow users to view metadata about and purchase games. It will be tested using a local test-net like Ganache using TypeScript. It will later be deployed to the Ethereum test-net to showcase the application in a live network.
2. **Off-Chain** This component will be what users will actually run. Each user will join a peer-to-peer network in which they can upload and download games off of other users. This will interface with the blockchain to allow users access to game metadata. See Section ?? for details about how this will be tested.

For both of these, a series of acceptance tests, that directly correlate to individual requirements, will be run and include a series of integration tests to show that my ap-

plication can meet the requirements and goals I set out. A more detailed description is given in Section ??.

Chapter 2

Background Research

2.1 BitTorrent

It is unrealistic to expect that every game uploaded to the network will be downloaded by every user so only a subset of users will have the game installed and available to share. In this section and Section 3.2, I will look at how various peer-to-peer file-sharing networks allow users to discover and download content that is fragmented across the network.

BitTorrent [5, 12] is the most popular P2P file-sharing platform, in which users will barter for chunks of files by downloading and uploading them in a tit-for-tat fashion, such that peers with a high upload rate will typically also have a high download rate. It is estimated that tens of millions of users use BitTorrent every day [16].

Download Protocol

For a user to download data from BitTorrent they would:

1. Find the corresponding .torrent file that contains metadata about the torrent.
2. The user will find peers, using a tracker identified in the .torrent, that are also interested in that content and will establish connections with them.
3. The user will download blocks¹, from peers, based upon the following priority:
 - (a) **Strict Priority** Data is split into pieces and sub-pieces with the aim that once a given sub-piece is requested then all of the other sub-pieces in the same piece are requested.
 - (b) **Rarest First** Aims to download the piece that the fewest peers have to increase supply.
 - (c) **Random First Piece** When a peer has no pieces, it will try to get one as soon as possible to be able to contribute.
4. The node will continuously upload blocks it has while active.

Availability

One of the most significant issues facing BitTorrent is the availability of torrents, where *‘38% of torrents become unavailable in the first month’* [5] and that *‘the majority of users disconnect from the network within a few hours after the download has finished’* [12]. This paper [11] looks at how the use of multiple trackers for the same content and DHTs can be used to boost availability.

¹nodes may reject downloads without the user providing data themselves in a tit-for-tat fashion

2.2 Ethereum

Ethereum is a Turing-complete, distributed, transaction-based blockchain that allows the deployment of decentralized applications through the use of smart contracts. Ether is the currency used on Ethereum and can be traded between accounts and is used to execute smart contract code on the network.

Smart Contracts

A smart contract is an executable piece of code, written in Solidity, that will automatically execute on every node in the Ethereum network when certain conditions are met. Smart contracts are enforced by the blockchain network and remove the need for intermediaries and reduce the potential of contractual disputes.

Gas is used to measure the computational effort of running a smart contract and must be paid, in Ether, before being processed and added to the blockchain. This helps prevent DoS attacks and provides economic incentives for users to behave in a way that benefits the whole network.

Example Use Cases

Some examples of applications that can be deployed to the Ethereum network are:

- Financial applications, such as decentralised exchanges and payment systems,
- supply chain management and tracking,
- voting and governance systems,
- unique digital asset systems, and
- data storage and sharing platforms.

Chapter 3

Literature Review

3.1 Blockchain-Based Cloud Storage

Blockchain technology can be leveraged for distributed cloud storage to provide both public and private storage. In table 3.1, I detail some examples of how blockchain has been used to create cloud storage platforms:

One gap found when researching these solutions was that few offered file versioning that would allow a user to view previous versions of uploaded data. File versioning is a particularly important to this project as users will likely all have varying versions of the same software.

Paper	Description of Solution
Blockchain Based Data Integrity Verification in P2P Cloud Storage [18]	This paper uses Merkle trees to help verify the integrity of data within a P2P blockchain cloud storage network. It also looks at how different structures of Merkle trees effect the performance of the system.
Deduplication with Blockchain for Secure Cloud Storage [7]	This paper describes a deduplication scheme that uses the blockchain to record storage information and distribute files to multiple servers. This is implemented as a set of smart contracts.
Block-secure: Blockchain based scheme for secure P2P cloud storage [6]	A distributed cloud system in which users divide their own data into encrypted chunks and upload those chunks randomly into the blockchain, P2P network.
Blockchain-Based Medical Records Secure Storage and Medical Service Framework [3]	Describes a secure and immutable storage scheme to manage personal medical records as well as a service framework to allow for the sharing of these records.
A Blockchain-Based Framework for Data Sharing With Fine-Grained Access Control in Decentralized Storage Systems [17]	This solution uses IPFS, Ethereum and ABE technology to provide distributed cloud storage with an access rights management system using secret keys distributed by the data owner.

Blockchain based Proxy Re-Encryption Scheme for Secure IoT Data Sharing [8]	An IoT distributed cloud system for encrypted IoT data that uses a proxy re-encryption scheme that allows the data to only be visible to the owner and any persons present in the smart contract.
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Table 3.1: Examples of blockchain cloud storage systems [14]

3.2 P2P File Sharing

It is unreasonable to expect every node to have a copy of each game uploaded to the blockchain so data will be fragmented across the network. This project will use ideas from various P2P file-sharing networks to help connect nodes interested in the same content Table 3.2 shows some example p2p file-sharing networks.

The main issues involving these networks are:

1. **Trust** Nodes are typically anonymous and you can never fully trust that what you're downloading isn't malicious, and
2. **Payment** These platform don't allow users to pay for content and are generally large sources of piracy.

System	Description of Solution
IPFS [1]	IPFS is a content-addressable, block storage system which forms a Merkle DAG, a data structure that allows the construction of versioned file systems, blockchains and a Permanent Web.
BitTorrent [12]	BitTorrent is a p2p file-sharing system that has user bartering for chunks of data in a tit-for-tat fashion, which provides incentive for users to contribute to the network. More on BitTorrent can be found in Section 2.1
AFS [10, 4]	The Andrew File System was a prototype distributed system by IBM and Carnegie-Mellon University in the 1980s that allowed users to access their files from any computer in the network.
Napster [13]	Napster uses a cluster of centralized servers to maintain an index of every file currently available and which peers have access to it. A node will maintain a connection to this central server and will query it to find files; the server responds with a list of peers and their bandwidth and the node will form a connection with one or many of them and download the data.
Gnutella [13]	Gnutella nodes form an overlay network by sending <i>ping-pong</i> messages. When a node sends a <i>ping</i> message to their peers, each of them replies with a <i>pong</i> message and the <i>ping</i> is forwarded to their peers. To download a file, a node will flood a message to its neighbors, who will check if they have and return a message saying so; regardless, the node will continue to flood their request till they find a suitable node to download off of.

Table 3.2: Various global distributed file systems.

Chapter 4

Design

4.1 Stakeholders & Requirements

Stakeholders

Game Developers

primary

This group will use the application to release their games and its updates to their users, who they will reward for helping to distribute it.

Players

primary

This group will use this application to download and update their games off of. They may also contribute to the distribution of the games to other players for an incentive provided by the developers.

Other Platforms

secondary

This group consists of platforms like Steam or Epic Games, which serve as the main competitor to this application. It is likely that as more developers choose this application, this group will see a loss in revenue.

Requirements

Tables 4.1 and 4.2 show the functional and non-functional requirements of this project organized using MoSCoW prioritisation.

Functional Requirements

ID	Description
<i>Must</i>	
F-M1	Store game metadata on a blockchain
F-M2	A node must download data as constant-sized shards from its peers
F-M3	A node must be able to discover peers who have their desired game installed
F-M4	Games must be updatable through the blockchain
F-M5	A node must be able to upload games

F-M6	A node must be able to download games in their entirety from nodes in the network
F-M7	A node must be able to verify the integrity of each block it downloads
F-M8	The application should run on the Ethereum network
F-M9	Users must be able to purchase games from developers over the network
F-M10	Users must be able to prove they have purchased a game
<i>Should</i>	
F-S1	Seeders should have a way to prove how much data they have seeded
F-S2	Seeders will only upload content to users who have a valid proof of purchase
F-S3	Allow for the distribution of Downloadable Content (DLC) for games
<i>Could</i>	
F-C1	Allow users to request specific game versions
F-C2	Provide a simple GUI for interacting with the blockchain

Table 4.1: These requirements define the functions of the application in terms of a behavioural specification

Non-Functional Requirements

ID	Description
<i>Must</i>	
NF-M1	The application is decentralized and cannot be controlled by any one party
NF-M2	Any user must be able to join and contribute to the network
NF-M3	Game uploaders should be publicly identifiable
NF-M4	Metadata required to download the game should be immutable
<i>Should</i>	
NF-S1	This application must be scalable, such that many users can upload and download the same game at the same time.
NF-S2	Only the original uploader can upload an update to their game
NF-S3	Only the original uploader can upload a DLC for their game
<i>Could</i>	
NF-C1	The application could have an intuitive GUI

Table 4.2: Requirements that specify the criteria used to judge the operation of this application

4.2 Design Considerations

Data

The first consideration is what kind of data we are going to be storing and where is it going to be stored.

Data	Size	Location	Explanation
Game Metadata	100 – 200B	Ethereum	<p>This data represents information about the game that help identify it, such as its title, developer, version, root hash, etc. This information should allow for the unique identification of every game uploaded, whilst remaining minimal.</p> <p>Due to the minimal amount of storage required and the fact that every user should be able to discover every game, this data is best stored on the blockchain.</p>
Game Hash Data	S_g/B ¹	IPFS	<p>This data will be the hash tree of a given game and will be used by a player to verify the contents of each block of data they download as well as the expected structure of the applications contents.</p> <p>Due to this data's moderate size and the fact that not every user will need to view every game's hash tree, there is no need to upload this to the blockchain as this will add an unnecessary expense in publishing games. IPFS is ideal for this as we do not need to restrict access to the data but still need to easily share it and we can simply include the IPFS ID within our game metadata stored on the blockchain.</p>
Game Data	avg. 60GB	Peers	<p>This will be the actual data for the game that is used to run it. To play a game, a user will need access to all of its data. More information about this is in Section 4.2.2.</p> <p>An important property for uploaded games is that all users do not have access to all games without having payed for them first so we shouldn't store them on public platforms like the blockchain or IPFS. Section 4.2.2 will discuss how this can be achieved using a distributed peer-to-peer file sharing model.</p>

4.2.1 Blockchain

Type of Blockchain

To satisfy (NF-M1) and (NF-M2), we will need to use a public blockchain, which will benefit our project by:

¹where S_g is the size of the game and B is the shard size

- being accessible to a larger user-base, which should boost availability and scalability (**NF-S1**),
- reducing the risk of censorship (**NF-M1**), and
- providing greater data integrity (**NF-M4**)

Ethereum is a public blockchain that allows developers to publish their own distributed applications to it. It comes with an extensive development toolchain so is an obvious choice for this project (**F-M8**).

Data to Store

To satisfy (**F-M1**), the data stored on the blockchain will be used for the identification games and will consist of the following fields, where *italic* fields will be automatically-generated for the user:

Name	Description
<i>For each game</i>	
<i>title</i>	The name of the game.
<i>version</i>	A version number of the game.
<i>release date</i>	When the game was released.
<i>developer</i>	The name of the developer releasing the game.
<i>previousVersion</i>	The root hash of the most previous version of the game if it exists.
<i>price</i>	The price of the game in Wei
<i>uploader</i>	The Ethereum address of the developer.
<i>root hash</i>	The root hash of the game that uniquely identifies it and is based upon its contents.
<i>IPFS address</i>	The ID of the hash tree of IPFS that can be used to download the hash tree before starting a download of a game.
<i>Other</i>	
<i>library</i>	A mapping for storing all games uploaded to the network, where a game's root hash is the key used to find its information.
<i>gameHashes</i>	Solidity doesn't allow us to enumerate maps so we will also store a list of hashes for all games uploaded.
<i>purchased</i>	A mapping which allows us to easily check if a user has purchased a game.

Table 4.4: All the data to be stored on the Ethereum blockchain

Purchasing Content

Users will purchase content from developers over Ethereum using Ether (**F-M9**) and this will be recorded on the blockchain (**F-M10**). Any user can see which other users have purchased the game users can prove this between each other using their public/private keys.

4.2.2 Distributed File Sharing

Hash Tree

The hash tree of a given directory is a tree object that stores information about its structure and contents. This is used to tell users what information they need to download, where it goes and what its contents should be. For every file, the hash tree stores a series of SHA-256 hashes.

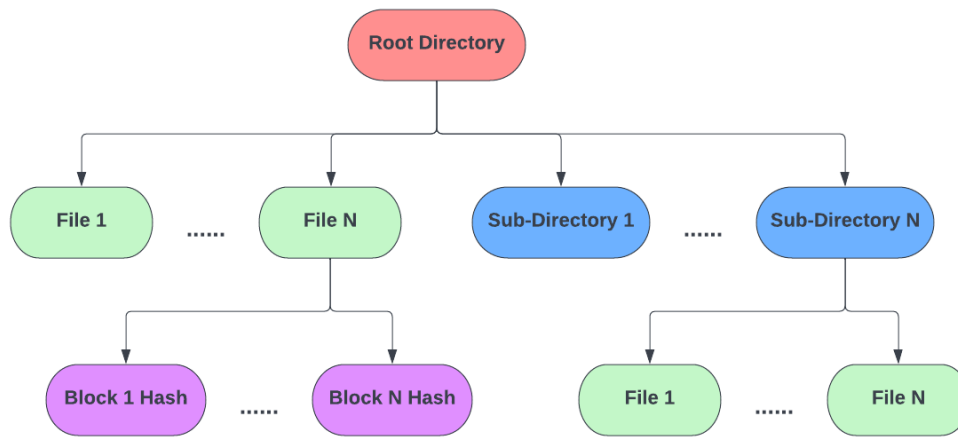


Figure 4.1: The structure of a hash tree

Uploading Content

For a developer to upload their game (**F-M5**) they must provide the required metadata outlined in Section 4.2.1 as well as the location of the game in storage. A hash tree is then produced of the game and this is uploaded to IPFS, and the metadata about the game is uploaded to Ethereum.

Downloading Content

Like mentioned in Section 4.2, it is impractical to store the game's data on the blockchain or even IPFS. Instead we will consider ideas from decentralised file-sharing networks, like BitTorrent, to facilitate the distribution of content.

Games are content addressable and are identified by their root hashes, which are stored on the blockchain and are calculated from the hash tree. Users will send messages using this hash to identify other users who are also interested in the same content (**F-M3**), so they can share data. When two nodes connect to share content the node seeking content will:

1. send their ethereum address along with an encrypted message to prove their address. The address is then looked up on the purchase list stored in the game's entry on the blockchain (**F-S2**).
2. Request individual shards from the node using the shard's hash (**F-M2**).
3. Use the hash tree, which has been fetched from IFPS, to verify the shard's contents (**F-M7**).

4. Send an encrypted encrypted certificate that the sender can use to prove their contribution.
5. Repeat this for an arbitrary number of shards.

Updating Content

To satisfy (**F-M4**), developers will perform the same steps outlined in Section 4.2.2 but must also provide the root hash of the most previous version of the game. Any users who have purchased the previous version, will be added to the list of users who have purchased the new version. Additionally, this will include the restriction that only the original uploader can upload an update for their game (**NF-S2**).

Each version is considered as its own game and will require users to download the updated version separately. Whilst this isn't reflective of how updates are typically managed, this will be acceptable for the scope of this project and any changes will be considered as a future extension to this project.

Downloadable Content

UNFINISHED

Proving Contribution

When a user successfully downloads a shard of data, they will reply with a confirmation certificate to prove that they have downloaded the game. Each Ethereum address is related to a public/private key pair so a confirmation certificate will be encrypted by a given node's private key to prove authenticity. A user will prove their contribution (**F-S1**) by sending a collection of certificates to the uploader, who will validate them and reward the user accordingly.

4.3 Limitations

This project will not attempt to mimic any of the social features (friends, achievements, message boards, etc.) provided by platforms like Steam.

Section 2.1 highlights the issue of availability in p2p sharing networks and this platform will likely suffer from similar issues. These can be mitigated by having an active community or good incentives to help distribute the game.

Chapter 5

Project Management

5.1 Risk Assessment

Risk	Loss	Prob	Risk	Mitigation
Difficulty with blockchain development	2	3	6	I will seek advice from my supervisor about how to tackle certain problems and if necessary, what aspects of my project I should change.
Personal illness	3	2	6	Depending on the amount of lost time, I may ignore some of the SHOULD or COULD requirements.
Laptop damaged or lost	3	1	5	All work is stored using version control and periodic backups will be made and stored locally and in cloud storage. I have other devices that could be used to continue development.
The application is not finished	1	3	3	Using agile development will ensure that I will at least have a minimal working application. If I feel that I am running out of time, I will focus on testing and finalising the report.

Table 5.1: The risk assessment of this project

5.2 Work to Date

My work has primarily been on research, looking at how blockchain has been used to build cloud storage systems as well as how various peer-to-peer function and perform. I have proposed a design for the application to be built on the EVM.

5.3 Plan of Future Work

Below is a high level plan for the work I have remaining.



In this phase I will use the agile development methodology to build my application. My sprints will all be structured into three phases:

- By using a preparation and review phase with each sprint, I can make detailed notes on my implementation as I go so when I come to write the full report I have a strong starting point.



This phase will consists of several sections:

1. **Testing Strategy** The approach I used for writing tests throughout the implementation phase and how these were used to evaluate the completion of the requirements set out in Section 4.1.
2. **Test Results** A report on the results of my automated and manual testing.

Evaluation

This phase will have me evaluating how successful my project was, as a whole, by focusing on several key areas:

1. **Project Organisation** How successfully did I structure my time in this project?
2. **Outcome of the Application** How successful was my application in regards to a solution to the problem set out in Section 1.1 and in terms of the requirements set out in Section 4.1?
3. **Limitations and Future Improvements** What were the limitations of my project and what would I change about it if I had more time or were to start again?

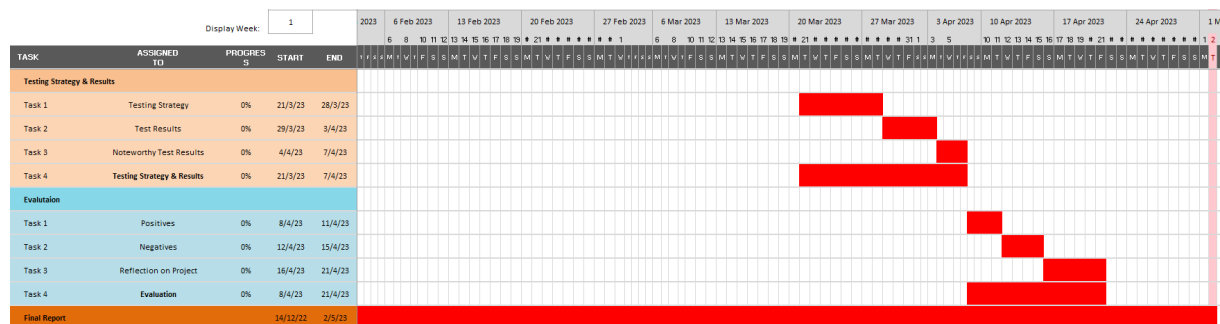


Figure 5.3: The plan for my testing and evaluation phases

Final Report

I will be writing the first draft of my report throughout the project, aiming to finalise sections at the end of each phase of this project. Any leftover time at the end will be focused on finishing the report.

Chapter 6

Implementation

6.1 Sections

6.1.1 Distributed File Sharing

Users running this application will be part of a distributed network of peers that are connected using TCP connections and will send structured messages to each other. Section 6.1.1 describes the commands that peers will send to each other.

Go <https://go.dev/> was chosen to write this in due its simple syntax, strong built in library, and excellent support for concurrent programming. On top of this, Go has good third party libraries that will be useful for interacting with Ethereum.

Commands

These commands typically consist of request/response pairs where a peer will request a piece of information and be sent it. Peers will not wait for a response after sending a request and will expect to receive it at a later point in time. This means that a peer can still respond to a given peers requests before receiving a response from it.

Message Format	Description
LIBRARY	Request that a peer sends their library of games in the form of a BLOCK message.
GAMES; <i>[hash₁]</i> ; <i>[hash₂]</i> ;...	The user sends a list of their games as a series of unique root hashes. These root hashes will map to games on the blockchain.
BLOCK; <i>[gameHash]</i> ; <i>[blockHash]</i> ;	The user will request a block of data off of a user by sending the root hash of the game and the hash of the block being requested. The response will be a SEND_BLOCK message.
SEND_BLOCK; <i>[gameHash]</i> ; <i>[blockHash]</i> ; <i>[data]</i> ;	The user sends a block of data in response to a BLOCK message.
ERROR; <i>[message]</i>	An error message that can be used to prompt a peer to resend a message.

Downloading

A downloader process will be used for each game being downloaded, where they will select blocks based upon:

- What file they are from, where downloading blocks from the same file is preferred.
- How many users have a given block, where rarer blocks are a priority to boost availability.

Each request is sent over a channel for the peer to read and forward the request to the relevant neighbouring peers.

6.1.2 User Interface

This application will have a GUI where users can interact with the platform and will need to include the following pages:

- **Library** The user's collection of owned games, where they can view details of each game owned as well as manage their download status.
- **Store** Where user's can find new games that have been uploaded by other users and purchase them.
- **Upload** Where user's can fill in details about a new game and have it be processed and uploaded to the blockchain.
- **Downloads** Where user's can track all of their ongoing downloads.
- **Peers** Where users can manage their list of connected peers.

Wails <https://wails.io/> was chosen to create the GUI because it allows us to use a reactive web-based framework and have it interface directly with controller functions written in Go. This meant building the UI was straight-forward and allowed me to use tools that I was familiar with. These were Vue.js v3 <https://vuejs.org/>, <https://pinia.vuejs.org/>, and SCSS <https://sass-lang.com/>.

Ethereum

The smart contract will be written in Solidity <https://docs.soliditylang.org/en/v0.8.19/>, and will have to be able to store the data mentioned in Section 4.2.1 as well as perform the following functions:

- **uploadGame** Upload a new game to the blockchain provided it doesn't already exist. Once uploaded, emit an event to let all peers aware of the new game.
- **purchaseGame** A peer purchases a game they don't already own and transfer ETH to the original uploader and are added to the list of authorised users.

The go-ethereum package <https://geth.ethereum.org/> will allow us to interact with the ethereum blockchain and Abigen <https://docs.avax.network/specs/abigen> will allow us to compile any smart contracts to Go code. This will allow us to interact with our smart contract on ethereum using a set of Go functions.

6.2 Sprint 1

Planning

Game Smart Contract

A smart contract can be created for each game with the following fields:

Attribute	Description
name	The name of the video game being published
version	The version number of the game
author	The address of the author
certificate	A digital signature from the author
price	The price in Ether
previousVersion	A reference to a previous version of the game if one exists

Chapter 7

Testing

7.1 Unit Testing

7.2 Integration Testing

Profiles

Profiles are minimal versions of the application that can be run on external devices for the purposes of testing how my application fares in a simulated environment. The following profiles are included:

- **Listen Only** A client which will fetch a repository from Git and upload it as a game to the network. Once uploaded it will listen for incoming messages and reply accordingly. This is supposed to simulate an ideal peer.
- **Send Only** This client will never respond to messages but will send them periodically to the peer. This represents a selfish client.
- **Spam** This client will spam the peer with expensive messages, such as requesting a block, and should trigger the client to disconnect the spammer.
- **Unreliable** This client will represent an unreliable peer who will take a long time to respond to messages and may reply with the wrong contents at random.

7.3 Acceptance Testing

Strategy

Each requirement must complete a series of acceptance tests to be considered complete. These tests should be run in a live environment that uses the platform as a whole and demonstrates that each section of the project the requirement covers is performing correctly.

Results

7.4 Benchmarking

Strategy

Benchmarking tests will be used to demonstrate how the scalability and performance of my application in a live environment, by tracking how it performs in a series of increasingly expensive tasks. The areas that will need to be benchmarked are:

1. **Large Downloads** How does a peer fare downloading and uploading an extremely large game?
2. **Many Peers** How does a peer cope with having many concurrent peers all sending messages to them?
3. **Hashing Tree Generation** How does a peer cope with generating a large hash tree?

Results

Hashing Tree Generation

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