Quality of Experience in Telepresence and Remote Collaboration Cloud Services

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Abstract

Cloud-based systems are gaining enormous popularity due to a number of promised benefits, including ease of use in terms of deployment, administration and maintenance, high scalability and flexibility to create new services, and others. However, as more personal and business applications migrate to the Cloud, the quality of the service becomes an important differentiator between providers. This paper addresses the problem of Quality of Experience in Telepresence and Remote Collaboration (TRC) services provided by Microsoft Lync Online (MLO). MLO is a Cloud-based service providing online meeting capabilities including videoconferencing, audio calls, and desktop sharing, and has become the default system for TRC in enterprise scenarios. We present a complete study of the QoE undergone by 44 MLO users (22 pairs, interactive sessions) in controlled subjective lab tests. The study is performed on three different interactive scenarios running on top of the real MLO Cloud service, additionally shaping the Lync flows at the access network to influence the participants’ experience. The scenarios include audio conferencing, videoconferencing, and remote collaboration through desktop sharing. By passively monitoring the end-to-end QoS achieved by the Lync flows, and correlating it with the QoE feedbacks provided by the participants, this study enables better understanding of the interplays between network performance and QoE in TRC Cloud services.

Index Terms: Telepresence; Audioconferencing; Videoconferencing; Remote Desktop Sharing; Cloud QoE; MOS.

1. Introduction

Cloud-based services are becoming more and more pervasive, both for enterprises aiming to outsource parts of their IT activities to third-party data centers or Cloud platforms, as well as for the end-user. An increasing number of Cloud-based services like Dropbox, YouTube, Lync Online, Google Mail, etc. are finding their way to the desktops and mobile devices of the end-users. This growing presence of Cloud-based services creates new problems for both users and providers, resulting in a number of challenges that need to be addressed in order to ensure successful adoption of this new paradigm. Besides well known and frequently raised issues of privacy and security, a major problem the Cloud Computing ecosystem faces is about the quality experienced by those using Cloud services. If performance levels do not reach expectations because quality is compromised too much, customers will reject the service or refuse its adoption. Ensuring that the users’ experience remains at least as good as it was before adoption will therefore be one of the key factors in promoting new Cloud services and migrations of existing ones. The issue becomes even more challenging for mobile network operators, who need to offer high quality levels to reduce the risks of clients churning for quality dissatisfaction, particularly in current highly competitive mobile broadband markets.

For these reasons, the concept of Quality of Experience (QoE) has the potential to become one of the main guiding paradigms for managing quality in the Cloud. Being very closely linked to the subjective perception of the end-user, QoE enables a broader, more holistic understanding of the factors that influence the performance of systems, complementing traditional technology-centric concepts such as Quality of Service (QoS).

Migrating services to the Cloud has motivated the emergence of a novel networking domain in recent years, namely the Cloud QoE domain [1]. Some concrete Cloud QoE studies have been recently conducted [2–4], including Cloud services such as Cloud Storage, Cloud Gaming, and Virtual Remote Desktop Access. This paper provides results in the same direction, for the specific case of Telepresence and Remote Collaboration (TRC) services provided by Microsoft Lync Online (MLO). MLO is a Cloud service providing online telemeeting capabilities including videoconferencing, audio calls, and desktop sharing. The MLO service is hosted on multi-tenant servers distributed around the globe in Microsoft data centers, and it is becoming the de-facto choice for TRC in enterprise scenarios. The terms telepresence and telemeeting are not to be misinterpreted as traditional teleconferencing in this paper. We emphasize that telepres-
ence and telemeeting span a broader view of the remote communication and collaboration among distant participants, providing interactive services such as videoconferencing and remote collaboration which actually complement or even replace face-to-face meetings. In spite of the increased use of telepresence systems, there is currently no standardized method to evaluate telepresence quality, or to efficiently plan and lay out such telemeetings. Given the wide deployment and usage of MLO Cloud services and the trends of service migration to the Clouds, we are interested in studying and understanding the complex interplay between network performance (i.e., network delay, bandwidth, etc.) and QoE in MLO services.

The standard approach to analyze the QoE of a system such as MLO is to conduct subjective lab experiments [12–18, 20]. The key benefits of such an approach rely on the participation of real end-users and on the full control the experimenter has on the overall evaluation process, providing as such tangible and solid results. In this paper we present a complete study of the QoE undergone by 44 MLO users in controlled subjective lab tests, spanning three different scenarios: audio conferencing, video conferencing, and collaboration through desktop sharing. The study consists of multiple tests performed by groups of two participants connected through the real MLO Cloud service, interacting with each other using standard laptops. To emulate different network conditions and different access technologies, up-link and down-link traffic is shaped for each participant, using a customized Linux-based traffic emulator.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows: Section 2 presents a brief overview of the related work on Cloud QoE and traditional teleconferencing services. Section 3 describes the evaluation methodology and the experimental setup employed in the QoE study. Section 4 presents the main results of the study, including both the characterization of the network traffic generated by the MLO application, as well as the overall quality and the service acceptability as declared by the participants of the different tests when confronted to changing network conditions. Finally, Section 5 concludes this work.

2. Related Work

The notion of Cloud QoE has been recently introduced in [1], but no concrete QoE studies are provided in that work. Some Cloud QoE studies have been recently conducted in [2–4], including for example the QoE in Cloud Storage and File Synchronization services [2], the QoE in Cloud gaming [3], and the QoE in Remote Virtual Desktop services [4].

When it comes to QoE in telepresence services through the Cloud, i.e., like those provided by MLO, there are to the date no papers on the subject, and we are the first providing results in this direction.

3. Experimental Methodology

The MLO QoE study is realized through the layered evaluation methodology depicted in Figure 1. In general terms, the experience of a user with any application is conditioned by multiple influence parameters, including dimensions such as technical characteristics of the application, user personality and expectations, user demographics, device usability, and usage context among others. Particularly when evaluating networking-based applications, the influence of the network and its interplays with the particular application have to be linked to the user’s opinions, additionally identifying those perceivable performance parameters that are most relevant to the user experience. This mapping is realized by analyzing and correlating the three layers depicted in Figure 1: the network layer accounts for the influence of the network QoS parameters (e.g., network bandwidth, RTT, etc.); the application layer considers both the technical characteristics (e.g., codecs, video resolution, etc.) and the perceivable performance parameters of the application (e.g., response times, video and audio artifacts, etc.); finally, the user layer spans the user subjective opinions on the evaluated application (e.g., MOS values, acceptability, etc.). The experimental evaluation conducted in this work was designed in such a way that all the three aforementioned layers could be properly measured.

The experimental subjective tests consist of 44 participants interacting through the Cloud MLO service in groups of two people, using standard laptops equipped
with multimedia capabilities. Figure 2 depicts a high-level diagram of the experimental testbed employed in the subjective tests for the MLO QoE analysis. The up-link and down-link traffic between the two Lync clients running on the end-point laptops is routed through a modified version of the very well known NetEm network emulator [23] so as to control the different access network performance levels under evaluation. After the emulator, the two clients are connected to each other through the MLO real servers running in the Cloud. The end-point machines of the testbed are managed by a telecommander system controlled by the tests’ operator, which provides full control, automation, tracking, and most important, repeatability of the tests. Participants are instructed to evaluate three different MLO scenarios which cover the most common activities in TRC in enterprise scenarios: audio conferencing, video conferencing, and desktop sharing. To some extend, the reader might wonder if full desktop sharing through MLO represents a reasonable scenario to evaluate, given that standard remote collaboration through MLO is performed by application sharing (e.g. PPT-slides sharing, white-board sharing, etc.) rather than full desktop sharing. We consider such a scenario as an interesting to analyze limit case for remote collaboration, given that the network QoS requirements are higher than in other remote collaboration scenarios.

Tests are performed in a dedicated lab for subjective studies, compliant with the recommendations provided by the QoE subjective studies standards [12–18, 20]. The audio conferencing scenario is realized through standardized Short Conversational Tests (SCT), which consists of short pre-defined interactive conversations aiming at sharing information and agreeing on a transaction (e.g., booking a flight, buying a product, scheduling a meeting, etc.). To increase the engagement of the participants on the evaluation tasks and to avoid user annoyance by the repeatability of the activities, both the videoconferencing and the desktop sharing scenarios are realized following a gamification approach. Gamification means performing tests which are realized through a game, and they have proved to be very effective in our previous studies [4, 9]. Videoconferencing is evaluated through the well-known “Who Am I” game, in which participants interact with each other to guess the name of the personage laying on their headbands. Such a game forces participants to actively use both the audio and video communication channels, avoiding partial usage of the audiovisual capabilities of the communication [9]. In the case of desktop sharing, participants share their desktops and run remotely a puzzle game, taking turns to fill it in, additionally relying on the audio channel to coordinate their actions.

All the traffic packets are captured and exported to standard pcap traces for off-line analysis and traffic characterization using high-performance Endance DAG cards. Regarding QoE feedbacks, participants were instructed to rate the overall experience according to an ordinal ACR-9 Mean Opinion Score (MOS) scale [14], ranging from “bad” to “excellent”. Participants also provided feedback on the acceptability of the application, stating whether they would continue using the application under the corresponding conditions or not. The MOS ratings and quality feedbacks are issued by participants through a custom questionnaire application running on the laptops, which pops-up immediately after a condition was tested. Participants are compensated with vouchers for their participation in the tests, which proved to be sufficient for achieving correct involvement in previous studies [2, 4].

Telepresence and remote collaboration through Lync represents a complex service to evaluate from the QoE perspective, as it spans multiple QoE dimensions (interactivity, image and audio quality, responsiveness), different QoS-based requirements for each application (bandwidth, RTT, losses, jitter), and the usage of different transport protocols (TCP and UDP). In the case of audio and videoconferencing, the interactivity and real time requirements make of network delays a main influencing QoS parameter. As both applications are transported on top of UDP, losses and bandwidth are additional network features to consider, specially for the case of video. Desktop sharing is realized on top of TCP, and the influence of different QoS parameters boils down to delay and bandwidth [4].

To limit the number of network conditions to evaluate in the study, we focus the QoS part of the study on RTT and bandwidth (BW), both at the access network. RTT at the access is varied symmetrically for each participant between 30 ms and 500 ms, covering as such the different usage scenarios of MLO through multiple network access technologies (DSL, LTE, 3G/2G, etc.). These RTT values particularly address broadband mobile scenarios, in which network delay is much more variable, and radio and cell-overloading issues result in very large latencies at the access network. For example, RTT in operational LTE and HSPA networks are close to 50 ms [21], whereas 500 ms are common values observed on EDGE scenarios.
Table 1: Average and maximum throughput achieved by Lync flows in the down-link direction.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scenario</th>
<th>$T_{down}$</th>
<th>$\text{max}(T_{down})$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Audioconferencing</td>
<td>58 kbps</td>
<td>105 kbps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Videoconferencing</td>
<td>200 kbps</td>
<td>530 kbps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desktop Sharing + Audio</td>
<td>1170 kbps</td>
<td>1800 kbps</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3: Characterization of the traffic generated by MLO in different scenarios.

4.2. QoE Analysis for MLO

In this section we present and discuss the results obtained from the subjective evaluation of the three aforementioned scenarios. Figure 5 reports the impacts of RTT and BW at the access network on the QoE of both audio and videoconferencing. QoE is expressed in terms of both the overall experience of the participants and the acceptability of the service under the evaluated QoS conditions. RTT is varied between 30 ms and 500 ms, whereas BW is varied between 256 kbps and 16 Mbps. The change in network QoS is done for one parameter at a time, keeping the other one constant at an optimal-conditions value. To be more precise, access RTT is kept at 30 ms when BW is varied, whereas BW is kept at 16 Mbps when RTT is the tested parameter. Both values correspond to near optimal performance in mobile networks (e.g., LTE), considering real values observed in the practice for access RTT and up-link BW (remember that BW is considered as symmetrical in this study).

Figure 5(a) depicts the overall MOS and the acceptance rate for the SCT conversational tests. Before commenting on the results, the reader should note that the maximum MOS ratings declared by the participants are never 5 but somewhere around 4.5. This is a well known phenomenon in QoE studies called rating scale saturation, where users hardly employ the limit values of the scale for their ratings [22]. So from now on, we shall con-
The overall QoE is near optimal for an access RTT of up to 300 ms, with an acceptance rate of 100%. Access RTT of up to 100 ms is almost imperceptible in terms of QoE, and QoE and acceptability start to drop from RTT > 300 ms. Regarding access BW, Figure 5(c) shows that BW should be high enough to avoid traffic shaping so as to limit QoE degradation, as QoE markedly improves for BW > 512 kbps (recall the BW profile of SD Videoconferencing depicted in Table 1). An access BW of 1 Mbps provides almost optimal results, with an overall MOS of 4.4 and an acceptance rate of 97%, and very limited gains are obtained for BW > 1 Mbps, already getting into QoE saturation.

The last part of the results corresponds to the QoE for the desktop sharing scenario. Different from the other two scenarios, the experience of each participant in the desktop sharing evaluation is not symmetrical, basically because the participant sharing his desktop will work on it locally, whereas the participant who is remotely accessing it will experience the effect of the network and the Cloud. Figure 6 reports the average results for both local and remote participants together. The first interesting observation from Figure 6(a) is that even under optimal access conditions (i.e., access RTT = 30 ms and BW = 16 Mbps), the QoE in not optimal but good, providing an overall QoE MOS score around 4.1 and an acceptance rate slightly below 90%. This is coherent with the fact that remote desktop services are highly sensitive to delays as shown in [4], and normally only LAN scenarios provide optimal quality for such services. QoE starts dropping for access RTT > 50 ms, and quality drops to
fair (i.e., MOS ≈ 3.5) for RTT = 150 ms. Figure 6(b) shows that bandwidth has a noticeable effect on MLO desktop sharing QoE, and near good QoE (i.e., MOS ≈ 4) is reached for bandwidth values higher than 2 Mbps, with an acceptance rate close to 85%. There is a clear saturation effect in terms of acceptability from BW > 4 Mbps, but the overall QoE still slightly improves with higher bandwidths. To sum up, RTT should be kept very low with an acceptance bandwidth sufficiently high to avoid traffic shaping so as to attain good QoE in desktop sharing through MLO.

5. Concluding Remarks

Migrating services to the Cloud is pushing forward the need for a better understanding of the effects of the network QoS on the experience of the end customers. The Cloud QoE domain is becoming a very active research domain, and more and more studies are being conducted for understanding the interplay between QoS and QoE in cloud services. In this paper we presented the study on the QoE of Telepresence and Remote Collaboration (TRC) services, using Microsoft Lync Online (MLO) as specific Cloud application. By conducting subjective tests on the experience undergone by 44 MLO participants in controlled scenarios, we showed interesting results on the impacts of RTT and bandwidth at the access network on the overall QoE, specially targeting the usage of MLO in mobile networks. We expect that such results will not only shed light on the challenging problem of QoE provisioning for general Cloud-based applications, but also provide guidelines for the future deployment of better TRC services.

6. Acknowledgements

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7. References