Remote Procedure Call (RPC) and Transparency

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Transparency in Distributed Systems

• Programmers accustomed to writing code for a single box
• Transparency: retain “feel” of writing for one box, when writing code that runs distributedly
• Goals:
  – Preserve original, unmodified client code
  – Preserve original, unmodified server code
  – RPC should glue together client and server without changing behavior of either
  – Programmer shouldn’t have to think about network
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How achievable is true transparency?
We will use NFS as a case study.
But first, an introduction to RPC itself.
Remote Procedure Call: Central Idea

• Within a single program, running on a single box, well-known notion of procedure call (aka function call):
  – Caller pushes arguments onto stack
  – Jumps to address of callee function
  – Callee reads arguments from stack
  – Callee executes, puts return value in register
  – Callee returns to next instruction in caller

• RPC aim: let distributed programming look no different from local procedure calls
RPC Abstraction

- Library makes an API available to locally running applications
- Let servers *export* their local APIs to be accessible over the network, as well
- On client, procedure call generates request over network to server
- On server, called procedure executes, result returned in response to client
RPC Implementation Details

• Data types may be different sizes on different machines (e.g., 32-bit vs. 64-bit integers)

• Little-endian vs. big-endian machines
  – Big-endian: 0x11223344 is 0x11, 0x22, 0x33, 0x44
  – Little-endian is 0x44, 0x33, 0x22, 0x11

• Need mechanism to pass procedure parameters and return values in machine-independent fashion

• Solution: Interface Description Language (IDL)
Interface Description Languages

• Compile interface description, produces:
  – Types in native language (e.g., Java, C, C++)
  – Code to marshal native data types into machine-neutral byte streams for network (and vice-versa)
  – **Stub** routines on client to forward local procedure calls as requests to server

• For Sun RPC, IDL is XDR (eXternal Data Representation)
Example: Sun RPC and XDR

- Define API for procedure calls between client and server in XDR file, e.g., proto.x
- Compile: rpcgen proto.x, producing
  - proto.h: RPC procedure prototypes, argument and return value data structure definitions
  - proto_clnt.c: per-procedure client stub code to send RPC request to remote server
  - proto_svc.c: server stub code to dispatch RPC request to specified procedure
  - proto_xdr.c: argument and result marshaling/unmarshaling routines, host-network/network-host byte order conversions
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Let’s consider a simple example…
Sun RPC and XDR: Programming Caveats

- Server routine return values must always be pointers (e.g., `int *`, not `int`)
  - should declare return value `static` in server routine

- Arguments to server-side procedures are pointers to temporary storage
  - to store arguments beyond procedure end, must copy data, not merely pointers
  - in these cases, typically allocate memory for copy of argument using `malloc()`

- If new to C, useful background in Mark Handley’s “C for Java programmers” tutorial:
  - [https://moodle.ucl.ac.uk/mod/resource/view.php?id=430247](https://moodle.ucl.ac.uk/mod/resource/view.php?id=430247)
  - § 2.9 – 2.13 describe memory allocation
Sun RPC and XDR: Programming Caveats

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- Arguments to server-side procedures are pointers to temporary storage
  - to store arguments beyond procedure end, must copy

Now, back to our NFS case study...

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“Non-Distributed” NFS

- Applications
- Syscalls
- Kernel filesystem implementation
- Local disk

- RPC must “split up” the above
- Where does NFS make the split?
NFS Structure on Client

- NFS splits client at vnode interface, below syscall implementation
- Client-side NFS code essentially stubs for system calls:
  - Package up arguments, send them to server
NFS and Syntactic Transparency

• Does NFS preserve the syntax of the client function call API (as seen by applications)?
  – Yes!
  – Arguments and return values of system calls not changed in form or meaning
NFS and Server-Side Transparency

• Does NFS require changes to pre-existing filesystem code on server?
  – Some, but not much.
  – NFS adds in-kernel threads (to block on I/O, much like user-level processes do)
  – Server filesystem implementation changes:
    • File handles over wire, not file descriptors
    • Generation numbers added to on-disk i-nodes
    • User IDs carried as arguments, rather than implicit in process owner
    • Support for synchronous updates (e.g., for WRITE)
NFS and File System Semantics

• You don’t get transparency merely by preserving the same API
• System calls must mean the same thing!
• If they don’t, pre-existing code may compile and run, but yield incorrect results!
• Does NFS preserve the UNIX filesystem’s semantics?
• No! Let us count the ways...
NFS’s New Semantics: Server Failure

• On one box, open() only fails if file doesn’t exist
• Now open() and all other syscalls can fail if server has died!
  – Apps must know how to retry or fail gracefully
• Or open() could hang forever—never the case before!
  – Apps must know how to set own timeouts if don’t want to hang
• This is not a quirk of NFS—it’s fundamental!
NFS’s New Semantics: close() Might Fail

• Suppose server out of disk space
• But client WRITEs asynchronously, only on close(), for performance
• Client waits in close() for WRITEs to finish
• close() never returns error for local fs!
  – Apps must check not only write(), but also close(), for disk full!

• Reason: NFS batches WRITEs
  – If WRITEs were synchronous, close() couldn’t fill disk, but performance would be awful
NFS’s New Semantics: Errors Returned for Successful Operations

• Suppose you call `rename(“a”, “b”)` on file in NFS-mounted fs
• Suppose server completes RENAME, crashes before replying
• NFS client resends RENAME
• “a” doesn’t exist; error returned!
• **Never happens on local fs**…
• Side effect of statelessness of NFS server:
  – Server could remember all ops it’s completed, but that’s hard
  – Must keep that state consistent and persistent across crashes (i.e., on disk)!
  – Update the state first, or perform the operation first?
NFS’s New Semantics: Deletion of Open Files

- Client A open()s file for reading
- Client B deletes it while A has it open
- Local UNIX fs: A’s subsequent reads work
- NFS: A’s subsequent reads fail
- Side effect of statelessness of NFS server:
  - Could have fixed this—server could track open()s
  - AFS tracks state required to solve this problem
Semantics vs. Performance

• Insight: **preserving semantics produces poor performance**

• e.g., for write() to local fs, UNIX can delay actual write to disk
  – Gather writes to multiple adjacent blocks, and so write them with one disk seek
  – If box crashes, you lose **both** the running app and its dirty buffers in memory

• Can we delay WRITEs in this way on NFS server?
NFS Server and WRITE Semantics

• Suppose WRITE RPC stores client data in buffer in memory, returns success to client
• Now server crashes and reboots
  – App doesn’t crash—in fact, doesn’t notice!
  – And written data mysteriously disappear!
• Solution: NFS server does synchronous WRITEs
  – Doesn’t reply to WRITE RPC until data on disk
  – If write() returns on client, even if server crashes, data safe on disk
  – Per previous lecture: 3 seeks, 45 ms, 22 WRITES/s, 180 KB/s max throughput!
  – < 10% of max disk throughput
• NFS v3 and AFS fix this problem (more complex)
Semantics vs. Performance (2)

- Insight: **improving performance changes consistency semantics!**
- Suppose clients cache disk blocks when they read them
- But writes always go through to server
- **Not enough to get consistency!**
  - Write editor buffer on one box, make on other
  - Do make/compiler see changes?
- Ask server “has file changed?” at every read()?  
  - Almost as slow as just reading from server...
NFS: Semantics vs. Performance

• NFS’ solution: close-to-open consistency
  – Ask server “has file changed?” at each open()
  – Don’t ask on each read() after open()
  – If B changes file while A has it open, A doesn’t see changes

• OK for emacs/make, but not always what you want:
  – make > make.log (on server)
  – tail -f make.log (on my desktop)

• Side effect of statelessness of NFS server
  – Server could track who has cached blocks on reads
  – Send “invalidate” messages to clients on changes
Security Radically Different

- Local system: UNIX enforces read/write protections per-user
  - Can’t read my files without my password
- How does NFS server authenticate user?
- Easy to send requests to NFS server, and to forge NFS replies to client
- Does it help for server to look at source IP address?
- **So why aren’t NFS servers ridiculously vulnerable?**
  - Hard to guess correct file handles!
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Fixable: SFS, AFS, some NFS versions use cryptography to authenticate client
Very hard to reconcile with statelessness!
NFS Still Very Useful

- People fix programs to handle new semantics
  - Must mean NFS useful enough to motivate them to do so!
- People install firewalls for security
- NFS still gives many advantages of transparent client/server
Multi-Module Distributed Systems

• NFS in fact rather simple:
  – One server, one data type (file handle)
• What if symmetric interaction, many data types?
• Say you build system with three modules in one address space:
  – Web front end, customer DB, order DB
• Represent user connections with object:
  
  ```
  class connection {
    int fd; int state; char *buf;
  }
  ```
• Easy to pass object references among three modules (e.g., pointer to current connection)
Multi-Module Distributed Systems

• NFS in fact rather simple:
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What if symmetric interaction, many data types?

What if we split system into three separate servers?

– Web front end, customer DB, order DB

• Represent user connections with object:
  
  class connection {
    int fd; int state; char *buf; }

• Easy to pass object references among three modules (e.g., pointer to current connection)
Multi-Module Systems: Challenges

• How do you pass class connection between servers?
  – Could RPC stub just send object’s elements?

• What if processing flow for connection goes: order DB -> customer DB -> front end to send reply?

• Front end only knows contents of passed connection object; underlying connection may have changed!

• Wanted to pass object references, not object contents

• NFS solution: file handles
  – No support from RPC to help with this!
RPC: Failure Happens

• New failure modes not seen in simple, same-host procedure calls:
  – Remote server failure
  – Communication (network) failure
• RPCs can return “failure” instead of results
• Possible failure outcomes:
  – Procedure didn’t execute
  – Procedure executed once
  – Procedure executed multiple times
  – Procedure partially executed
• Generally, “at most once” semantics preferred
Achieving At-Most-Once Semantics

• Risk: Request message lost
  – Client must retransmit requests when no reply received

• Risk: Reply message lost
  – Client may retransmit previously executed request
  – OK when operations idempotent; some aren’t, though (e.g., “charge customer”)
  – Server can keep “replay cache” to reply to repeated requests without re-executing them
Summary: RPC Non-Transparency

- Partial failure, network failure
- Latency
- Efficiency/semantics tradeoff
- Security—rarely transparent!
- Pointers: write-sharing, portable object references
- Concurrency (if multiple clients)

**Solutions:**
- Expose “remoteness” of RPC to application, or
- Work harder to achieve transparent RPC
Conclusions

• Of RPC’s goals, automatic marshaling most successful
• Mimicking procedure call interface in practice not so useful
• Attempt at full transparency mostly a failure!
  – (You can try hard: consider Java RMI)
• Next time: implicit communication through distributed shared memory!