11. Application Servers

CSEP 545 Transaction Processing
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11.1 Introduction

- An application server coordinates the flow of requests between message sources (displays, applications, etc.) and application programs that run requests as transactions.
Application Server Components

• Web Browser
  – A smart device, with forms, menus, input validation

• Web server
  – Performs front-end work, e.g., security, data caching, ….
  – “Calls” the web page associated with the URL, which in turn calls a request controller

• Request controller
  – Calls Start, Commit, and Abort
  – App logic that transforms request (automatic loan payment, money transfer) into calls on basic objects (loan, account). Sometimes called business rules.

• Transaction server
  – Business objects (customer, account, loan, teller)

• DBMS – Database Management System
Application Server Functions

- Glue and veneer for TP applications
  - glue fills in gaps in system functionality
  - covers the interface with a seamless veneer

- Mostly, it provides run-time functions for applications (request control and transaction servers).
  - OS functions: threading and inter-process communication, often passed through from the underlying OS.
  - Dist’d system functions: transactions, security, queuing, name service, object pools, load balancing, …
  - Portal functions: shopping cart, catalog mgmt, personalization …

- Provides some application development tools
- Provides system mgmt for the running application.
Application Server Products

- Apple WebObjects
- BEA Tuxedo
- BEA Weblogic
- Macromedia ColdFusion
- HP (Tandem) Pathway
- HP (DEC) ACMS
- IBM CICS
- IBM IMS/DC
- IBM Websphere

- Iona iPortal App Server
- Microsoft .NET Enterprise Services (formerly COM+, MS Transaction Server (MTS))
- Novell SilverStream
- Oracle Application Server
- Sun One Application Server
- Sybase EAServer
- And many others. See serverwatch.internet.com
11.2 Two-Tier vs. Three-Tier

• Before the web, most small-to-medium scale apps were implemented in 2 tiers on a LAN
  – PC runs a 4GL, such as Visual Basic, PowerBuilder, or Delphi
  – Server system includes transaction server application and DBMS
Two-Tier for the Web

- Front end program ⇒ Web server
  - In essence, the web browser is a device
- Web server invokes a web page that has embedded script
  - Active Server Page (ASP .NET) or Java Server Page (JSP)
  - Page (file) extension tells the web server to run the ASP/JSP interpreter
  - Script can include DBMS calls and can run as a transaction
Two-Tier is Enabled by DBMS Stored Procedures

• Stored procedure – An application procedure that runs inside the DBMS
  – Often in a proprietary language, such as PL/SQL (Oracle), T-SQL (MS, Sybase)
  – Moving toward standard languages, such as Java and C#

• Implement transaction servers as stored procedures

• Use DBMS client-server protocol

• No application server needed
  – Hence, sometimes called “TP lite”
Scalability Problem of Two-Tier

- 2-tier is feasible, but does not scale as well as 3-tier due to session management

- Session - shared state between communicating parties
  - Entails a memory cost and a setup (processing) cost

- Sessions reduce amount of per-request context passing (comm. addresses, authenticated user/device)
  - Standard DB APIs (e.g., ODBC) work this way
  - Hence, in 2-tier, N clients and M servers ⇒ N×M sessions
  - E.g. 10^5 presentation servers and 100 servers ⇒ 10^7 sessions

- Partition presentation servers across workflow controllers
  - Each workflow controller still connects to all txn servers but there are many fewer workflow controllers than presentation servers
3-Tier Reduces the Number of Sessions

- Partition the set of front end devices (e.g., $10^3$ devices per RC)
- $100 \times RC \times (10^3 \text{ devices/RC} + 10^2 \text{ TS/RC}) = 110,000 \text{ sessions}$
Partitioning Txn Servers

• If DB server is a bottleneck, then partition it.

• Request control is needed to direct a call the right DB partition (parameter-based routing)
  – E.g., partition Accounts by account range
  – RC sends a Debit request for Account $x$ to the TS connected to the DB partition containing Account $x$
2-Tier vs. 3 Tier — Other Issues

• In early 90’s people argued whether 2-Tier was enough
  – Scalability was the decisive factor, but there were other issues

• Database Servers
  – Nonstandard stored procedure language, usually less expressive with weaker development tools and it’s another language to learn
  – Limited interoperability of cross-server calls
  – Limited interoperability of distributed transactions
  – Poor fit with OO design, which are inherently 3-tier (client, business rules, business objects)

• Application Servers
  – more system complexity
How the Web Changed Things

• Front End Program \(\Rightarrow\) Web server

• All requests have to pass through a Web server
  – In 2-tier, each Web server needs sessions to all DB servers
  – Session reduction by request control is less critical but still useful
  – DB partitioning may be implemented by the DB server

• Request control is still useful for request mgmt
  – Calling Start, Commit, and Abort
  – Encapsulating business rules that transform each request into calls on basic objects
11.3 Web Servers

• Presentation independence - application is independent of the display device used
  – Today, this is via http and html
  – In the past, it was via a display controller or middle-tier minicomputer whose presentation functions insulated the rest of the back-end system from different device types

• Web server performs presentation functions:
  – Gathering input
  – Validating input
  – DB caching
  – Authentication

• They also do some basic request routing
  – Constructing requests
  – Invoking applications

• Examples - IIS (MS), Apache, Netscape Server
Gathering Input

• Gathering input - Select transaction type (menu item, etc.), and fill in a form (request’s parameters)
  – Today, Web forms, moving to XML (XForms, XSLT, …)

• 40 year evolution of presentation devices
  – Teletype, character-at-a-time terminal (async), block-mode terminal (IBM 3270)
  – Specialized devices - ATMs, bar code readers, gas pumps, robots, credit card authorization, cash registers, ticket printers, etc.
  – 4GL on a PC - ActiveX controls accessed from Visual Basic (VB), PowerBuilder, Delphi, etc.
Caching

• Every process-to-process call has a cost
  – Adds to response time and consumes resources

• Use a cache in Web server to avoid calling workflow controller or DB system
  – Cache popular read-only data that need not be refreshed frequently
  – E.g., catalog items, sale items, cover page at an auction site, recent news, etc.
  – Also, data required for input validation info
Input Validation

- Validate input against *locally cached* tables
  - E.g., product types, department numbers
- Avoids wasting communications and server resources for obvious input errors
  - Fewer round-trips to the DBMS
  - And faster feedback to the end user
- “Cache” is part of the web page
  - List boxes, script
  - Cache size is a factor (it affects page access time)
Authentication

- **Authentication** - determining the identity of a user and/or display device
  - Client system (e.g., PC) may do authentication, but the server usually does it too (doesn’t trust clients)
  - Encrypt the wire to avoid wiretapping and spoofing (on the Web, use https = http over secure socket layer)

- **Geographical entitlement** - check that a particular device is allowed access (e.g., security trading room)

- Need system mgmt functions to create accounts, initialize passwords, bracket hours of access (simplify it using a role abstraction)
Constructing Requests

• A request includes
  – User id – for authorization and personalization
  – Device id – where to send a reply
  – Device type - what message types can it understand?
  – ObjectID – in a OO setting
  – RequestID – to ask later about request status & to link a reply
  – Request type – name of transaction type requested
  – Request-specific parameters

• Can be combined with protocol header (e.g., http header)
Application Invocation

• Request arrives as an http message.
  – Need to call a program (i.e. a WFC), to perform the request

• Common Gateway Interface
  – Write a script, store it as a file in cgi-bin
  – Web server creates a process to execute the request (Slow!!)

• ISAPI (Microsoft) and NSAPI (Netscape)
  – Web server calls an in-proc .dll instead of creating a process
  – Web server can cache the .dll
  – More complex programming model, but much faster

• Active Server Pages and Java Server Pages
  – Offers the performance of ISAPI with programmability of CGI
Load Balancing

• Web servers enable **scale out**, so you can just add more server boxes to handle more load.

• To simplify this problem
  – Ensure all web servers are stateless. I.e., no server-specific state and don’t retain client state on web servers (hard to avoid …)
  – Statelessness implies any web server can process any request.
  – It also makes web server recovery is easy.
  – Randomly assign requests to web servers (e.g., an IP sprayer)
  – Avoid sending requests to a failed web server
11.4 Transaction Bracketing

- For the most part, Request Controllers (RC) and Transaction Servers are just plain old server programs.

- The main RC differentiating features:
  - Brackets transactions (issues Start, Commit, and Abort)
  - Handles Aborts (returns cause of the Abort)
  - Does not access the DBMS
Nested Transaction Calls

• What does Start do, when executed within a txn?
  1. it starts an independent transaction, or
  2. it does nothing, or
  3. it increments a nested transaction count (which is decremented by each commit and abort), or
  4. it starts a sub-transaction

• (2) and (3) are common.
  – Enables a transaction-bracketed program to be called by another transaction

• (1) implies Be Careful!
Transparent Transaction Bracketing

- Transaction-hood is a property of the app component.

- In COM+, a class is declared:
  - requires new - callee always starts a new transaction
  - required - if caller is in a transaction, then run callee in caller’s transaction, else start a new transaction
  - supported - if caller is in a transaction, then run callee in caller’s transaction, else run outside of any transaction
  - not supported - don’t run in a transaction

- Caller can create a transaction context, which supports Commit and Abort (chained model).
  - Callee issues SetComplete when it’s done and willing to commit, or SetAbort to abort.
Transparent Txn Bracketing (cont’d)

- Java Enterprise Edition
  - Implements COM+ technology in Java: RequiresNew, Required, Supported, NotSupported
  - It came later, so there are two additions.
  - Mandatory – If caller is in a transaction, then run the callee in that transaction, else raise an exception
  - Never – If caller is in a transaction, then raise an exception
Runtime Library Support

• TP services require runtime library support
  – May or may not be language-specific

• Language-specific
  – Java 2 Enterprise Edition (J2EE, formerly Enterprise Java Beans)
    • Encapsulates runtime library as a container object.
    • BEA Weblogic, IBM Websphere, ….
  – Older examples are Tandem Pathway (Screen COBOL) and Digital’s ACMSxp (Structured Txn Defn Lang)

• Language-independent runtime library
  – MS COM+, IBM’s CICS, Oracle App Server, …
Savepoints

• Savepoint - a point in a program where an application saves all its recoverable state

• Can restore a savepoint within the transaction that issued the savepoint. (It’s a partial rollback.)

• SQL DBMSs use them to support atomic SQL statements.

```plaintext
Start;
get-request;
Savepoint("B"); . . .;
if (error) {Restore("B"); ...; Commit;}
. . .;
Commit;
```

• Savepoints are not recoverable. If the system fails or the transaction aborts, the txn is completely undone.
11.5 Processes and Threads

• Application Server architecture is greatly affected by
  – which components share an address space
  – how many control threads per address space

• TP grew up in the days of batch processing, and reached maturity in the days of timesharing.

• TP users learned early that a process-per-user fails:
  – Too much context switching
  – Too much fixed memory overhead per process
  – Process per user per machine, when distributed
  – Some OS functions scan the list of processes
  – Load control is hard
Multithreading

• Have multiple threads of control in an address space
• Used to be a major Application Server feature
  – Application Server switches threads when app calls a Application Server function that blocks
• Now, most OS’s support it natively
  – Can run a process’s threads on different processors (SMP)
• Whether at the user or OS level,
  – multithreading has fewer processes and less context switching
  – but little protection between threads and a server failure affects many transactions
Mapping Servers to Processes

• Presentation/Web servers, workflow controllers, and transaction servers are multithreaded servers

• Costs 1500 - 25,000 instructions per process call, vs. 50 instructions per local procedure call …
  – but it scales, with flexible configuration and control
11.6 Remote Procedure Call

• Program calls remote procedure the same way it would call a local procedure

• Hides certain underlying complexities
  – communications and message ordering errors
  – data representation differences between programs

• Transactional RPC
  – Ideally, Start returns a transaction ID that’s hidden from the caller
  – Procedures don’t need to explicitly pass transaction id’s.
  – Easier and avoids errors
Binding

• Interface definitions
  – From app or written in an interface definition language (IDL)
  – compiles into Proxy and Stub programs
  – Client calls the Proxy (representing the server)
  – Stub calls the Server (represents the client on the server)

• Marshaling
  – proxy **marshals** (sequentially lays out) calling parameters in a packet and decodes marshaled return values
  – stub decodes marshaled calling params and marshals return params

• Communications binding
  – Client finds the server location via a directory service, based on server name and possibly a parameter value
  – To load balance across identical servers, randomly choose a server
Binding (cont’d)

• The binding process has security guarantees
  – The client must have privileges to bind to the server
  – The client must know it’s binding to an appropriate server to avoid being spoofed
  – E.g. client and server authenticate each other during session creation, and maybe per-access too
RPC Walkthrough

Client’s System

Client App
Call P
pack arguments
wait
receive
Pack results
Return to caller

Server’s System

Server App
P
work
return

RPC Runtime
send
receive
Call packet

Server stub
unpack arguments
Pack results

Client Proxy
unpack results

Performance

- There are basically 3 costs
  - marshaling and unmarshaling
  - RPC runtime and network protocol
  - physical wire transfer
- In a LAN, these are typically about equal
- Typical commercial numbers are 10-25K machine instructions
- Can do much better in the local case by avoiding a full context switch
Stateful Applications

• Sometimes an application maintains state on client’s behalf, possibly across transactions. E.g.,
  – Server scans a file. Each time it hits a relevant record it returns it. Next call picks up the scan where it left off.
  – Web server maintains a shopping basket or itinerary, etc.

Approach 1: client passes state to server on each call, and server returns it on each reply. Server retains no state.
  – Doesn’t work well for TP, because there’s too much state
  – Note that transaction id context is handled this way.
Stateful Servers (cont’d)

Approach 2: server maintains state, indexed by client id (txn id or cookie). Client’s later RPCs must go to same server.
  – If the client fails, server must be notified to release client’s state or deallocate based on timeout
  – For transaction RPC, encapsulate context as a (volatile) resource. Delete the state at commit/abort. Or possibly, maintain state across transaction boundaries, but reconstruct it after system failure.
• E.g., COM+: Client can call a server object many times
  – Client creates server object, which retains state across RPCs
  – SetComplete (or SetAbort) by server app says that transaction can be committed (or aborted) and state can be deleted
  – EnableCommit (or DisableCommit) by server app says transaction can (or cannot) be committed by client and don’t delete server state
Fault Tolerance

• If a client doesn’t receive a reply within its timeout period
  – RPC runtime can send a “ping” for non-idempotent calls
  – After multiple pings, it return an error.
  – For idempotent calls, RPC runtime can retry the call
    (server interface definition can say whether it’s idempotent)
Web Services

- Distributed computing standards to enable interoperation on the Internet
- SOAP - RPC with XML as marshalling format and WSDL as interface definition
- UDDI - directory for finding Web Service descriptions
- WS-Transaction - 2PC
- WS-Security, WS-Coordiniation, WS-Routing, …
- www.ws-i.org
Summary

- Scalability – 2 vs. 3 tier, sessions, stored procedures
- Web Server – gathering input, validating input, caching, authentication, constructing requests, invoking applications, load balancing
- Transaction bracketing – transparency, nesting, exceptions, request integrity, savepoints
- Server processes – threads
- RPC – binding, stateful servers