Remote Procedure Call

Clients and Servers

• A common model for structuring distributed computation is via the client/server paradigm.
• A server is a program (or collection of programs) that provide some service, e.g., file service, name service.
• The server may exist on one or more nodes.
• A client is a program that uses the service.
• A client first binds to the server, i.e., locates it in the network and establishes a connection.
• The client then sends requests to perform actions; this is done by sending messages that indicate which service is desired, along with params. The server returns a response.

The Problem with Messages

• While messages provide very flexible communication, they also have certain problems:
  – requires that programmer worry about message formats
  – messages must be packed and unpacked
  – messages have to be decoded by server to figure out what is requested
  – messages are often asynchronous
  – they may require special error handling functions
• Basically, messages are not a natural programming model for most programmers.

Procedure Call

• A more natural way to communicate is through procedure call:
  – every language supports it
  – semantics are well defined and understood
  – natural for programmers to use
• Basic idea: let’s just define a server as a module that exports a set of procedures that can be called by client programs.
• To use the server, the client just does a procedure call, as if it were linked with the server.
So, we would like to use procedure call as a model for distributed communication.

Lots of issues:
- how do we make this invisible to the programmer?
- what are the semantics of parameter passing?
- how is binding done (locating the server)?
- how do we support heterogeneity (OS, arch., language)
- etc.

Remote Procedure Call (RPC) was described by Birrell and Nelson in 1980, based on work done at Xerox PARC.

Goals was to make RPC look as much like local PC as possible.

Used computer/language support.

There are 3 components on each side:
- a user program (client or server)
- a set of stub procedures
- RPC runtime support

Basic process for building a server:
- Server program defines the server’s interface using an interface definition language (IDL)
- The IDL specifies the names, parameters, and types for all client-callable server procedures
- A stub compiler reads the IDL and produces two stub procedures for each server procedure: a client-side stub and a server-side stub
- The server writer writes the server and links it with the server-side stubs; the client writes her program and links it with the client-side stubs.
- The stubs are responsible for managing all details of the remote communication between client and server.

Basically, a client-side stub is a procedure that looks to the client as if it were a callable server procedure.

A server-side stub looks to the server as if it’s a calling client.

The client program thinks it’s calling the server; in fact, it’s calling the client stub.

The server program thinks it’s called by the client; in fact, it’s called by the server stub.

The stubs send messages to each other to make the RPC happen.
**RPC Call Structure**

1. **Call**
   - **client program** makes local call to **stub proc.**
   - **stub builds msg packet, inserts params**
   - **stub unpacks params and makes call**
   - **Runtime receives msg and calls stub**

2. **Return**
   - **Runtime unpacks msg, returns to caller**
   - **Server proc returns**
   - **Runtime responds to original msg**
   - **RPC runtime**

**RPC Return Structure**

- **Call**
  - **client makes local call to stub proc.**
  - **stub builds msg packet, inserts params**
  - **stub unpacks params and makes call**

- **Return**
  - **server proc returns**
  - **server receives msg, calls stub**
  - **stub builds result msg with output args**
  - **RPC runtime**

**RPC Binding**

- Binding is the process of connecting the client and server.
- The server, when it starts up, exports its interface, identifying itself to a network name server and telling the local runtime its dispatcher address.
- The client, before issuing any calls, imports the server, which causes the RPC runtime to lookup the server through the name service and contact the requested server to setup a connection.
- The import and export are explicit calls in the code.

**RPC Marshalling**

- Marshalling is the packing of procedure parameters into a message packet.
- The RPC stubs call type-specific procedures to marshall (or unmarshall) all of the parameters to the call.
- On the client side, the client stub marshalls the parameters into the call packet; on the server side the server stub unmarshalls the parameters in order to call the server’s procedure.
- On the return, the server stub marshalls return parameters into the return packet; the client stub unmarshalls return parameters and returns to the client.
RPC Final

- RPC is the most common model now for communications in distributed applications.
- RPC is essentially language support for distributed programming.
- RPC relies on a stub compiler to automatically produce client/server stubs from the IDL server description.
- RPC is commonly used, even on a single node, for communication between applications running in different address spaces. In fact, most RPCs are intra-node.