Web Server Admin

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Web Serving

- Static Content
- Dynamic Content and Security
- Distribution and Scaling
HTTP

• HyperText Transport Protocol
  – Usually implemented on TCP port 80

• Simple, stateless
  – Most conversations are: connect, get something, close connection

• You can actually telnet to a web server and type HTTP commands!

$ telnet www.oscar.cs.stonybrook.edu 80
GET /
Apache Web Server

• Lots of good web servers out there: IIS, lighttpd, etc.
  – Apache is a very popular one, though.
  – Most people use version 2

• Fairly simple to install

• Can be configured to run multiple sites on the same server
Simple Example Apache http.conf

# Ensure that Apache listens on port 80
Listen 80

# Listen for virtual host requests on all IP addresses
NameVirtualHost *:80

<VirtualHost *:80>
  DocumentRoot /www/example1
  ServerName www.example.com

  # Other directives here
</VirtualHost>

<VirtualHost *:80>
  DocumentRoot /www/example2
  ServerName www.example.org

  # Other directives here
</VirtualHost>
Key Points

• Easy to host multiple sites:
  – Just define a new virtual hosts

• DocumentRoot:
  – Just a directory full of html, javascript, css, etc.
  – index.html is the default page if none specified
Other useful directives

- **ErrorLog**: specify the file for error messages
  - Useful for debugging, can be different per VirtualHost
- **ServerAdmin**: specify the email address of the site admin (you)
.htaccess

- Site owners can specify access control on files using a file called .htaccess (in the same dir with content)
- Example (only allow access from SBU):

```html
<Limit GET>
order deny, allow
deny from all
allow from .sunysb.edu
allow from .stonybrook.edu
allow from 129.49.
allow from 130.245.
</Limit>
```
Dynamic Content

• Most of the web isn’t just simple web pages anymore

• You can think of most pages as interactive applications
  – E.g., Facebook shows different pages to different users
Idea: Server-side Apps

- Rather than just return the contents of an html file
- Run a program that outputs html, return that
- Similar to a Unix pipe
Common Gateway Interface (CGI)

- Basically, just a standard for how to pass input/output between a web server and an application
- CGI applications can be implemented in any language
  - Perl, PHP, Python, Ruby are popular
Storing Data

• Suppose I want to store data input by the user
  – E.g., a Facebook-style wall of status posts
• I could put these in a file on the server
• But often easier to use a database
  – Decouples data management from deploying scripts
LAMP Stack

- Linux Apache MySQL Perl/PHP/Python

- MySQL is a popular, open-source database

- Many Linux server installation discs make it easy to bring up a LAMP stack quickly
Script Security

• When you run a script on your server, that script is (generally) just like any other program on your server
• A compromised script can compromise your server
• Proceed with caution
• A lot of script security amounts to being resilient to carefully crafted, malicious inputs
• And limiting the damage a bad script can do
Input Example

• Suppose I am a script that stores user profiles as `<name>.txt`

• I have a form on my webpage that asks for a name:
  name = form_input("name");
  profile = execute("cat " + name + ".txt");
  print profile;

• Any issues?
Code injection

• What if I type in as my name:
  Insecure.txt; rm *; echo Hahahaha > pwned

profile = execute("cat " + name);
profile = execute("cat Insecure.txt; rm *; echo Hahaha > pwned.txt")
How to deal with inputs?

• In general, you have to carefully check that they are what you expect
  – No escape characters or other unusual strings

• Perl has something called “Taint mode”

• Basically, scripts that use unchecked input as output to a command will be killed
  – Developer still has to write good checks
Sandboxing

• In order to limit the damage of a bad script, you may also want to run it in a sandbox
• BSD has something called a jail: limited view of the file system, limited access to system resources
• Other sandboxing tools exist for this purpose
JavaScript

• In addition to running code on a web server to generate content, you can also load code into a user’s browser
  – Service some clicks locally

• JavaScript is the main language for client-side coding
AJAX and Web 2.0

• Most recent web apps use a combination of Javascript on the client and a server-side application.

• Server-Side app may not generate whole pages, but may handle smaller requests:
  – XML is often used to exchange data between Javascript and the server.
  – Hence the name: Asynchronous Javascript And XML.
Scaling Up

- As we’ve discussed before, round-robin DNS lets you have multiple web servers.
- And running a database on the back-end lets you have multiple front-end CGI scripts.
- You can also run more web servers in the cloud.
Content Distribution Networks (CDN)

• Big content providers can improve latency and reduce their own bandwidth by placing data close to users
  – E.g., netflix, facebook, etc.
  – Read-only data
  – Why should NY users have to pull all of their data from CA?

• Companies like Akamai transparently redirect you to the geographically closest server for your content

• Pretty expensive option, mostly for bigger ventures
Proxying, Caching, and Filtering

• Many organizations only allow outgoing web traffic through a proxy server

• 2 main reasons:
  – Caching: Can store (static, public) pages and serve locally, saving bandwidth
  – Filtering: Can refuse to let you see facebook, or illicit pages