Supporting Diverse Clients

At this point we've demonstrated ASP.NET Web API as an excellent platform on which to implement REST-based services. However, what if you found yourself in a situation where you had to support existing "legacy" (asmx, or SOAP-based) clients? Or clients that required all messages to be in XML format? Would that automatically eliminate ASP.NET Web API as a technology choice? Fortunately, the answer is no. And that leads us to the subject of the current chapter; namely, how to use ASP.NET Web API to simulteneously support legacy clients and extend reach to clients requiring various message formats. Along the way we'll throw in some ASP.NET Web API goodies, of course, just to keep it interesting for those who don't need to support SOAP-based clients or multiple message formats.

# The Situation

Recently, we were given the job of developing a REST-based Web API for an existing system. There were a couple of interesting requirements for this project:

1. New clients must be able to consume the service using their choice of either an XML or JSON message format.
2. The new REST-based API and the legacy SOAP-based API must be implemented and deployed as a single application.
3. Existing clients must be able to benefit from the new features of the new application without affecting any existing integration points; in other words, backwards compatibility is required.

An architectural overview of this is depicted in the following figures. Note that though the actual system didn't have anything to do with task-management, we will use our task-management service example for illustration throughout this chapter:



Figure 8-1. Architectural Overview - Current State

In the current state (Figure 8-1), we see the legacy service integrating with clients via the SOAP messaging protocol. The target architecture (Figure 8-2), however, shows the task-management service concurrently supporting existing clients and new clients by offering a choice of messaging protocols and formats.



Figure 8-2. Architectural Overview - Target State

We'll begin this chapter by demonstrating how to support various message formats (i.e., XML and JSON) in our REST-based API; this will satisfy requirement 1. Then we will demonstrate how to support the existing SOAP-based clients with the same application, satisfying requirements 2 and 3.

# Content Negotiation

We introduced the concept of content negotiation, defined by the HTTP specification as “the process of selecting the best representation for a given response when there are multiple representations available”, way back in Chapter 1. We also made mention of it in Chapter 5. In this brief section we will demonstrate how to leverage it to support clients that require specific message formats.

The following HTTP request headers are the primary mechanism for content negotiation with services built using ASP.NET Web API:

* Accept: Used to specify which media types are acceptable for the response, such as application/json, application/xml, or a custom media type.
* Accept-Charset: Used to specify which character sets are acceptable, such as UTF-8 or ISO 8859-1.

Such services will respond to request messages received without these headers with a default content type and character set (application/json and utf-8, respectively). For example, here is the request-response message pair to get all tasks using bhogg's highly-privileged credentials:

Get Tasks Request - Without Accept Header (abbreviated)

GET http://localhost:61589/api/v1/tasks HTTP/1.1

Authorization: Basic YmhvZ2c6aWdub3JlZA==

Get Tasks Response - Without Accept Header (abbreviated)

HTTP/1.1 200 OK

Content-Type: application/json; charset=utf-8

{"Items":[{"TaskId":1,"Subject":"Triage the important tasks","StartDate":"2014-04-24T15:20:58","DueDate":null,"CreatedDate":"2014-04-24T11:19:41","CompletedDate":null,"Status":{"StatusId":2…

Notice the difference when the caller specifies that it would like to receive the response in XML format:

Get Tasks Request - With Accept Header (abbreviated)

GET http://localhost:61589/api/v1/tasks HTTP/1.1

Authorization: Basic YmhvZ2c6aWdub3JlZA==

Accept: application/xml

Get Tasks Response - With Accept Header (abbreviated)

HTTP/1.1 200 OK

Content-Type: application/xml; charset=utf-8

<PagedDataInquiryResponseOfTaskQgo2FNlC xmlns:i="http://www.w3.org/2001/XMLSchema-instance" xmlns="http://schemas.datacontract.org/2004/07/WebApi2Book.Web.Api.Models"><Items><Task><Assignees><User><Firstname>Boss</Firstname><Lastname>Hogg</Lastname><Links><Link><Href>http://localhost:61589/api/v1/users/1</Href><Method>GET</Method><Rel>self</Rel></Link></Links><UserId>1</UserId><Username>bhogg</Username>…

The best part is that this content negotiation is built into ASP.NET Web API. Simply by specifying the Accept header, the caller is able to control the format that the server uses to create the response message. Pretty cool! We have satisfied requirement 1.

There are limitations to this, of course. For example, the service can not produce a response message in a format it knows nothing of (i.e., fooBar):

Get Tasks Request - Unknown Content Type (abbreviated)

GET http://localhost:61589/api/v1/tasks HTTP/1.1

Authorization: Basic YmhvZ2c6aWdub3JlZA==

Accept: application/fooBar

Get Tasks Response - Unknown Content Type (abbreviated)

HTTP/1.1 200 OK

Content-Type: application/json; charset=utf-8

{"Items":[{"TaskId":1,"Subject":"Triage the important tasks","StartDate":"2014-04-24T15:20:58","DueDate":null,"CreatedDate":"2014-04-24T11:19:41","CompletedDate":null,"Status":{"StatusId":2…

When presented with a request for an unknown content type like this, ASP.NET Web API tries to match on the media type of the request body, if any. In this case, the message was a GET, with no request body; therefore, the service simply returned the response message using the default format.

This concludes our brief introduction to content negotiation, and this is probably all you'll need to know about it for most projects. However, content negotiation, and related concerns such as serialization and formatting, can be highly customized on the server side. If you'd like to learn more about this, we encourage you to visit the official Microsoft ASP.NET Web API site and make use of the excellent resources they have available. This one is particularly apropos: <http://www.asp.net/web-api/overview/formats-and-model-binding/content-negotiation>.

# Supporting SOAP-based Clients

A couple of things made it relatively easy for us to satisfy requirements 2 and 3. First, the legacy-task management service was well-architected. We were able to use virtually all of the code implementing the business logic because it was decoupled from the asmx-based host plumbing, making this an example of why throughout this book we have emphasized the importance of "thin" controllers. After all, someday some new platform will replace ASP.NET Web API, and it will be a whole lot easier to reuse your core business logic if it is not all entangled with ASP.NET Web API-specific types.

Second - and this was key - was the realization that SOAP requests are merely HTTP POST messages with an XML body. Armed with this knowledge, we were sure that we could support existing clients with ASP.NET Web API... and some custom parsing and formatting to replace the functionality provided by the former asmx-based host.

Now we're ready to explore the code. However, because this particular topic may tend to appeal to a smaller audence than the rest of the book, we will be more brief than we have been previously. Instead of our usual exhaustive code walkthrough, including explanations of every dependency, we will highlight only the major components. We will also demonstrate some cool ASP.NET Web API features, including:

* A message handler that takes the place of a controller
* A route-specific message handler

So let's get started!

## Where is The Controller?

Not needed. Just use a route handler. As an additional benefit, this skips the overhead of model binding and controller, action selection.

## Formatter

## Security Using a Route-Specific Handler

Route-specific handler

<http://www.strathweb.com/2013/08/message-handlers-scoped-per-route-in-asp-net-web-api/>

Using this for custom legacy auth. Does not burden other routes with overhead. Returns 401 (Unauthorized) if auth fails.