

Research and Analysis (Remote Method Invocation: Mechanisms)

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Introduction

A Distributed system (DS) is a model/collection of independent computers linked together through a network which produce an integrated computing facility using software programs (*middleware*). Some widely used DS are Word Wide Web (WWW), Email, Cloud services like Google drive and Dropbox, teleconferencing services like Skype. In Distributed communication, services provided by a server can be accessed by multiple clients. "The goals in mind while implementing distributed systems are – scalability, reliability, openness, transparency and performance" (Lee , 2007). Inter-process communication is at the core of DS, and there are different ways to achieve that for example - Message Oriented or Stream Oriented communication but for the purpose of this research report will focus primarily on Remote Method Invocation (RMI) which is a Java implementation of Remote Procedure Calls (RPC) that allows server and client software to communicate with each other.

Let's, look at high level details about RMI: Remote Method Invocation is an object oriented Application Programming Interface which allows the creation of distributed applications using Java and this distributed environment supports/allows different computers running Java Virtual Machine (JVM) to communicate with each other using stub (*on client side*) and skeleton (*on server side*). Stub and Skeleton are responsible for marshalling and un-marshalling data, the RMI allows an object on client to invoke methods/services on an object (*called servant*) on the server running JVM. RMI does this in a way that the client application thinks its invoking a local Java object's methods.

There are several RMI alternatives which can be used but Common Request Broker Architecture (CORBA) is RMI is a serious competitor to RMI that can also be used to create distributed systems using Java. For this report we will not study CORBA in detail but some important points may be required to be addressed.

In CORBA, communication happens over Internet Inter-Orb Protocol (IIOP) but it is necessary to keep in mind IIOP stubs are properly connected with ORB (Object Request Broker) before starting operations on IIOP stub whereas this is not required with JRMP. Java implementation of CORBA/IIOP is known as Java IDL (*Interface Definition Language*) and supports mapping for Java. Which is Java IDL, helps to define, implement and access CORBA object using Java. Previously, Java developer's had to choose between RMI and Java IDL.

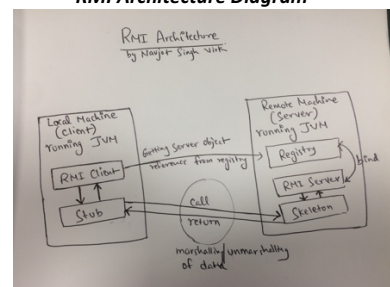
These days, RMI-IIOP is widely used to bring CORBA capabilities to Java platform with some limitations. RMI over IIOP provides Java developers the freedom to write CORBA applications without learning CORBA IDL.

But the original, Remote Java Object communication in RMI occurs using the Java Remote Method Protocol (JRMP).

So, far we understand that RMI allows communication between remote computers. And we also looked at RMI alternative CORBA. Well, it's hard to say one is better than the other. Now, let's look at RMI Architecture Diagram and RMI mechanisms that allows back and forth communication between server and client.

Mechanism involves generation of stub on the client-side which takes care of marshalling of parameters (*data*) and passing arguments to Skelton over the network when invoking a remote object method and un-marshal's data when receiving data from the skeleton which is generated on the server-side and is responsible for un-marshalling incoming arguments and marshalling results when returning values from the server object (*servant*) and passing it to client stub over network.

RMI Architecture Diagram



Next up let's look at some advantages and drawbacks of Java RMI –

Advantages	Drawbacks
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Easy implementation and portable across many platforms. • Automatic Marshalling and un-marshalling, puts developers at ease. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only available for platforms with Java support. Whereas CORBA, is language independent. • "Can be slower especially when compared to CORBA." (iupui.edu, Slide 56)

• Dynamic Interface creation is possible.	• “Remote methods are synchronous, which can cause problems when the network is down and the application may freeze.” (DevX, 2000)
• Remote Objects look like they are local objects.	• “Security threats with remote code execution, and limitations on functionality enforced by security restrictions.” (Reilly, 2006)
• “Ability to introduce new code to the foreign JVM’s.” (Reilly, 2006)	• No support for legacy systems

So far we know the basics, advantages and drawbacks of RMI. Next, I will share my views, opinions and experience with RMI.

Discussion

As we know now, RMI is Java implementation of RPC, and it allows us to bring distributed system capabilities to our Java applications. Under the Introduction heading, we talked about Java IDL (*CORBA/IIOP*) and RMI-IIOP which can be used to expose Java Objects to CORBA ORBs. But for the purpose of this report, we will focus on the original/basic RMI communication through JRMP used for Java to Java remote calls, and requires the client and server to use Java Objects.

Why use RMI? Any object that can be invoked remotely needs to implement Remote Interface (*serves to identify interfaces whose methods can be invoked from remote JVM*).

As a developer with 4 years’ experience working with Java, I believe RMI put you at ease as it is easy to implement, RMI is a part of the Java core platform and *java.rmi* provides the RMI package since JDK 1.02. RMI uses widely used language Java and its object-oriented nature makes it powerful. RMI is capable of passing full complex objects as arguments (*like a hash map*) and return values unlike in some existing RCP implementations, where the client would have to dissolve the object into primitive data types then transfer and re-assemble the object on the server whereas RMI out of the box allows you to transfer objects across the wire with no extra client code putting developers at ease.

But the experience for other people may differ based on different factors like their understanding of Java language, goals and needs because it may or may not be efficient to implement RMI for creating your own distributed applications for that you will need to list out your needs and requirements including security and speed and others. RMI uses Java’s security principles and when compared to CORBA it may not be the best choice when aiming for speed. Now, we know that RMI may not always suit all your needs and other alternatives like CORBA are available. Looking at if it suits your requirements how it will help - RMI allows to access remote objects in a distributed environment as if it’s a local object, and pass more than one objects with the request and it automatically takes care of things like marshalling and un-marshalling so the developers don’t have to deal working and writing complicated mechanisms to transfer data over the network.

Let’s understand the mechanisms involved in RMI –

Server – server program creates remote objects and makes these objects accessible for clients to invoke methods on these objects.

Client – client program obtains a remote reference to remote object/s and invokes methods on them.

RMI Registry – “A remote object registry is a bootstrap naming service that is used by RMI servers on the same host to bind remote objects to names. Clients on local and remote hosts can then look up remote objects and make remote method invocations.” (rmiregistry, Oracle Website).

Marshalling and Un-marshalling (at Client Stub and Server Skeleton) – marshalling the process of converting data into byte-stream and un-marshalling is the opposite converting byte-stream into arguments.

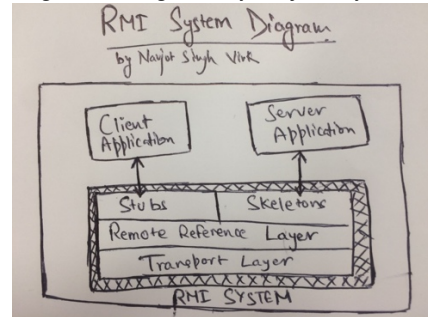
A typical RMI system contains three layers –

Stub/Skeleton layer: client stubs and server skeleton, *Remote reference layer*: responsible for interpretation of invocation. *Transport layer*: establish connection, remote object management and tracking.

Implementation

The implementation of RMI depends upon JVM class representation mechanism, meaning client and server must be running JVM in order to communicate and this Java mechanism only is possible using JRMP.

Diagram showing the 3 layers of RMI System



The

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The research report also uses moodle resources available on NCI college website (mainly the implementation).
<https://moodle.ncirl.ie>