

Crossfire - Multiprocess, Cross-Browser, Open Web Debugging Protocol

Subtitle Text, if any

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Abstract

We present Crossfire, a protocol designed to enable remote debugging with the Firebug Web debugging tool, and an implementation of this tool as a Firefox extension. We also present an architecture in which the user interface of Firebug is separated from the back-end debugger into separate processes connected via the Crossfire protocol.

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1. Introduction

Web Applications continue to grow in size and complexity. The emergence of common toolkits and libraries for Javascript along with performance increases in Web Browsers fuels growth in client-side Web application development. As more functionality shifts from server- to client-side, the size of Javascript codebases naturally increases. Unfortunately for developers, the tools to develop, manage, and debug larger codebases have not followed the applications into the Web application development space.

Sophisticated development tools become crucial for understanding and working with larger codebases. Compilers, debuggers, and other tools are often combined to create an Integrated Development Environment (IDE) where most, if not all, development tasks can be performed. Web development tools, on the other hand, often reside in the Web Browser. In 2011, all of the major Web browsers ship with some kind of Web development tools included[?], and still more are available as plugins or add-ons. These tools operate directly on the runtime Web application that is loaded into the browser, and do not retain any knowledge of or connection to the original source code. Therefore a developer must manually apply any changes made in one of these tools to his or her source code.

The rise of Mobile and Tablet computers which ship with fully functional Web browsers means that Web application developers have additional form-factors to consider.

Tools such as “Inspectors” and Firebug’s HTML Breakpoints[3] enable developers to quickly locate the section of code they are interested in.

2. Design Motivation

As a practical project supporting 3 million users, Firebug drove many of the design considerations behind *Crossfire*. These considerations are a mixture of purely technical issues and issues of open source project management. The main design goals, multiprocess support, remote and mobile debug, and open Web, cross-browser debugging lead to many of the technical design choices. On the project management side we must work with development resources motivated by goals: no matter how much value Firebug users may receive from a goal, the selection must be limited by the motivation of open source contributors.

Necessity motivated first *Crossfire* design goal, multiprocess support. Soon after the Google Chrome browser was released, the Firefox team at Mozilla began plans to convert Firefox to a multiprocessor design. The Google browser used one controlling process for the application and one process for each Web page. This allows the browser to use the operating system isolation to prevent problems on one page from bringing down the entire application and it allows each page to use a different physical processor on modern multi-core computers [?]. Depending upon the Firefox browser platform changes, a shift to multiprocess could render Firebug unusable. As a practical matter we could not wait for the new platform to be available: with more than 50kloc of code, only a few full-time developers, and a commitment to continuous compatibility with Firefox we had to begin work immediately to insure that our small resource could complete the transition in time to remain a viable project. Therefore we assumed that Firefox would adopt an architecture similar to Google Chrome: a client/server split debugger with a backend in one Web page process and a front end in another process. We believe that this assumption is planning for the worst case: converting Firebug to client/server is a multi-person-year effort but very likely to work with what ever the Firefox team decides to do.

While necessity forced our action, opportunity followed. The client/server choice, if successful, adds two new dimensions to Firebug for users: remote debug and mobile device debug. We expect the value of these dimensions to grow as more developers work in distributed teams and as mobile plays an increasingly important role in Web application development. In fact this value was recognized by the DragonFly Web debugger for Opera well before even the Google Chrome browser. The additional cost of designing for remote and mobile debug on top of a client/server design, primarily mechanisms for specifying the connection addresses, comes with

high potential benefit. Moreover, the benefit aligns with directions important to the projects primary open source contributors.

The final goal, open Web, cross-browser debugging, offers even more benefits to Firebug users. Web application developers by definition target all Web users, but the all Web users are not running identical Web platforms. Almost all potential users of a Web site will be running one of few similar but slightly different browsers. The commonality allows Web developers to do most of their work on one browser, then test for differences on other browsers. Of course when this fails, they need to debug the problem on a browser with unfamiliar debugging tools. A common debugging tool across the major browsers would help with this common and significant problem.

The benefit of cross-browser debugging comes at a steep cost for the project. Instead of one server and one client, we face at minimum one server for every browser. And for each server we have to deal with both the slight differences in browser implementation of standard Web APIs and potential large differences in how debuggers can connect to the browser. In addition this goal implies that the client and the communication protocol should be built from open web standards to maximize the reuse across servers.

Perhaps unique to open source projects, Firebug might balance the cost of implementing cross-browser debugging support by attracting more contributors interested in this particular goal. That is, by adding this costly goal we can attract new contributors, allowing us to create more total value. In particular new contributors from the Orion project[?], joined to create *Crossfire* server for Microsoft Internet Explorer and from the Eclipse project[Eclipse JSDT] to create new *Crossfire* client in Java for connecting to Eclipse.

These design goals created constraints for *Crossfire*. Above we outlined how the multiprocess support lead to a client-server design choice. Support for remote and mobile debug forces isolation of user interface to the client (excepting some small interface for connection specification). The cross-browser goal creates constraints indirectly: to minimize the extra cost of supporting multiple servers we chose to adopt the Google Chrome communications channel (sockets) and wire protocol format (JSON). Neither Firefox nor Internet Explorer had existing servers, so they did not alter our choices. Opera had a server but no one on the open source team planned to work with Opera and the server itself was not open source making implementation more difficult. Since Firebug is already written in JavaScript, JSON format is especially easy to work with and has good performance[?]. For the communications protocol, HTTP would be a better choice for the project: the JavaScript support for HTTP is much better than sockets and HTTP works better in practical remote scenarios through firewalls. However we made the judgement that better socket support was coming in future[?], support was adequate now, and lowering cost on the Google Chrome server was important.

3. Protocol

3.1 Overview

The Crossfire protocol is an asynchronous, bi-directional protocol designed to enable the full functionality of the Firebug debugger in a multi-process or remote scenario. Where it was possible, the design of the protocol took cues from existing debug protocols as well as common Web technologies (e.g. HTTP[1], JSON[?]). However certain features unique to Firebug and to debugging code running inside a Web Browser have to be taken into account.

Code that the user wishes to debug may not always be running.

The user may have several user interfaces in which to interact and debug the runtime.

3.2 Connection and Handshake

Crossfire does not specify a standard or well-known port. Port agreement is left up to the user, or the client software must start the server listening on the same port it will attempt to connect to.

The Crossfire server listens on for a TCP connection on the specified port (greater than 1024). A client wishing to connect sends the string "CrossfireHandshake" followed by a CRLF. The server replies with the same string, at which point the connection is established and the client may begin sending requests and receiving events from the server.

3.3 Message Packets

A well-formed Crossfire packet contains one or more headers consisting of the header name, followed by a colon (":"), the header value, and terminated by a CRLF. A "Content-Length" header containing the number of characters in the message body is required.

The message body is separated from the headers by a blank line (CRLF), followed by a well-formed JSON string, and terminated by a CRLF. The message must contain a "type" field with the value one of "request", "response", or "event", and a "seq" field which contains the sequence number of the packet.

Example: TODO example

3.4 Extensibility

3.5 Contexts

A context in Firebug represents a single Web page.

3.6 Breakpoints

Breakpoint debugging is a standard tool for debugging software at runtime in many languages and environments. The Web Browser environment creates several challenges for designing a remote protocol which supports breakpoint debugging. Firebug also introduces several types of breakpoints which are not present in other environments [3]

4. Implementation

4.1 Crossfire Firefox Extension

The Crossfire extension implements the protocol as an extension to Firefox and Firebug.

4.2 Crossfire Tools API

The Crossfire extension also implements an API, called the "Crossfire Tools API" which enables extensibility of the Crossfire system and protocol.

4.3 Modules

4.4 Browser Tools Interface

5. Related Work

5.1 GDB

5.2 JNDI/JDWP

5.3 DBGP

5.4 Opera Scope

Opera Scope Protocol [2]

5.5 V8 / Chrome Dev Tools

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6. Future Work

6.1 Web Sockets

6.2 Multi-user Debugging

A. Appendix Title

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References

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- [3] J. J. Barton and J. Odvarko. Web page breakpoints. In *WWW2010*, 2010.

References

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