

Authentication

For some, but not for all

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Outline

- The need for authentication
- HTTP sessions
- Authentication in Express and React
- Authorization and tokens (hints)



Who are you?

AUTHENTICATION IN WEB APPLICATIONS

Authentication vs. Authorization

Authentication

- Verify you are who you say you are (identity)
- Typically done with credentials
 - e.g., username, password
- Allows a personalized user experience

Authorization

- Decide if you have permission to access a resource
- Granted authorization rights depends on the identity
 - as established during authentication

Often used in conjunction to protect access to a system

https://auth0.com/docs/get-started/identity-fundamentals/authentication-and-authorization

Authentication and Authorization

- Developing authentication and authorization mechanisms
 - is complicated
 - is time-consuming
 - is prone to errors
 - may require interacting with third-party systems (login with Google, Meta, ...)
 - **—** ...
- Involve both client and server
 - and requires to understand several new concepts
- Better if you rely upon best practices and "standardized" processes

https://cheatsheetseries.owasp.org/cheatsheets/Authentication Cheat Sheet.html

The many Layers of Authorization

Who	What	How	When
User	Login / Logout / Navigate pages		
React App	Is the user logged? Remember user information	State/Context variables	Set at login Destroyed at logout Queried during navigation
Browser	Remembers navigation session	Session Cookie (stores session ID)	Received at login, in HTTP Response Re-sent to server at every HTTP Request
Server	Remember session data	Session storage (creates session ID, remembers associated data: username, group, level,)	Created at login Destroyed at logout Retrieved at every HTTP Request
Route (HTTP API) in the server	Check authorization Execute API	Verify session or token validity	At <u>every</u> HTTP Request for non-public API
Route (Login) in the server	Perform authentication	Check user/pass If ok, create session information	At Login time
Route (Logout) in server	Forget authentication	Destroy session information	At Logout request
Database (at Login)	Validates user information	Queries & password hashing	At Login time
Database (HTTP API)	Retrieves user information	Queries from session information	At every HTTP Request

Giving memory to HTTP

COOKIES AND SESSIONS

Sessions

HTTP is stateless

- each request is independent and must be self-contained
- A web application may need to keep some information between different interactions
- For example:
 - in an on-line shop, we put a book in a shopping cart
 - we do not want our book to disappear when we go to another page to buy something else!
 - we want our "state" to be remembered while we navigate through the website

Sessions

- A session is temporary and interactive data interchanged between two or more parties (e.g., devices)
- It involves one or more messages in each direction
- Often, one of the parties keeps the state of the application
- It is established at a certain point it time and ended at some later point

Session ID

- Basic mechanism to maintain session
- Upon authentication, the client receives from the server a session ID
- The session ID allows the server to recognize subsequent HTTP requests as part of an authenticated session
- The session ID
 - must be stored on the client side
 - must be sent by the client at every request which is part of the session
 - must not contain sensitive data: it is readable by the client!
 - must be protected from eavesdropping during communications
- Typically stored in and sent as a cookie

Cookie

- A small portion of information inserted in HTTP headers
- Automatically handled by browsers
 - Automatically stored in the browser cookie storage
 - Automatically sent by the browser to servers when performing a request to the same domain and path that originally sent the cookie (note that port is not included)
 - options are available to send them in other cases
- **NEVER** store sensitive information in a cookie (e.g., password, secrets, etc.): they can be read by the client/browser/user!

Cookie

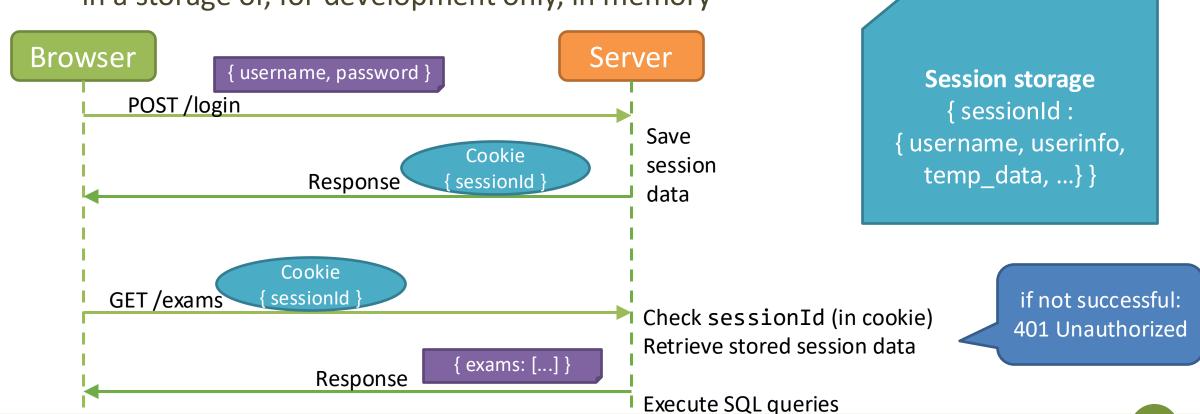
- Some relevant attributes, typically set by the server:
 - name: the name of the cookie [mandatory]. Example: SessionID
 - value: the value contained in the cookie [mandatory]. Example: 94\$KK763KCQ1!
 - secure: if set, the cookie will be sent to the server only if using HTTPS, i.e.,
 protected from eavesdropping
 - httpOnly: if set, the cookie will be inaccessible to JavaScript code running in the browser
 - expiration date

https://cheatsheetseries.owasp.org/cheatsheets/Session_Management_Cheat_Sheet.html#cookies

Session-based Authentication

The user state is stored on the server

in a storage or, for development only, in memory



Security Tips

- Always use HTTPS and the "secure" option in cookies (at least in production)
 - Always use "httpOnly" option in cookies
- Never, never store sensitive information in cookies

NB: Only for this course, only for configuration simplicity, HTTPS will NOT be used

Security Advice

- Rely on best practices and avoid to re-invent the wheel for auth, because web applications can be exposed to several attacks, for instance
 - XSS (Cross-Site Scripting): attackers inject malicious JS code into web pages
 - httpOnly prevents cookie access by any JS code, regardless of the source (Note that, however, also the original JS app code cannot access such cookies)
 - CSRF (Cross-Site Request Forgery): a user is tricked by an attacker into submitting a request that they did not intend, with the browser also automatically sending authentication cookies!
- Proper usage of frameworks, best practices, and dedicated libraries help preventing many attacks

https://cheatsheetseries.owasp.org/cheatsheets/Authentication Cheat Sheet.html

Authentication and authorization with Passport.js and React

AUTH IN PRACTICE

Basic Login Flow (part 1)

- 1. A user fills out a form in the client with a unique user identifier ("username") and a password
- 2. Data is validated and, if ok, is sent to the server, with a **POST** API
- 3. The server receives the request and checks whether the user is already registered, and if the password match the stored one
 - Password comparison exploits cryptographic hashes (more on this later)
- 4. If not, it sends back a (generic!) response to the client,

not to leak info!

"Wrong username or password"

https://cheatsheetseries.owasp.org/cheatsheets/Authentication_Cheat_Sheet.html

<u>#incorrect-and-correct-response-examples</u>

NO: "Login for User foo: invalid password."

NO: "Login failed, invalid user ID."

NO: "Login failed; account disabled."

NO: "Login failed; this user is not active."

OK: "Login failed; Invalid user ID or password."

Basic Login Flow (part 2)

- 5. If username and password are correct, the server generates a session ID
- 6. The server stores the session ID (together with some user info retrieved by the database) in its "server session storage"
- 7. The server replies to the login HTTP request by creating and sending a cookie
 - name: "SessionID", value: the generated session ID, httpOnly: true, secure: true (secure: true only if it sent over HTTPS)
- 8. The browser receives the response with the cookie
 - the cookie is automatically stored by the browser
 - the response body is handled by the web application (e.g., to say "Welcome!" etc.)

Login Form: Use Standard Practice

A React component with local state ("controlled" form components)

```
<LoginForm userLogin={userLoginCallback}/>
function LoginForm(props) => {
    const [username, setUsername] = useState('');
    const [password, setPassword] = useState('');
    doLogin = (event) => {
        event.preventDefault();
        if (... form valid ...) {
            props.userLoginCallback(username, password); // Make POST request to authentication server
        } else {
            // show invalid form fields, e.g. empty username or password
```

Authentication with Passport



- Suggested authentication middleware, to authenticate users in Express:
 - Passport, http://www.passportjs.org
 - install with: npm install passport
- Passport is flexible and modular
 - supporting 500+ different authentication strategies
 - for instance, username/password, login with Google, Meta (ex Facebook), etc.
 - able to adapt to different types of databases (SQL and noSQL)
 - adopting some best practices under-the-hood
 - e.g., httpOnly cookies for sessions

Passport: Configuration

An Express-based server app needs to be configured in three ways before using Passport for authentication:

- 1. Choose and set up which authentication strategy to adopt
- 2. Personalize (and install) additional middleware
- 3. Decide and configure which user info is linked with a specific session

1. LocalStrategy

- Strategies define how to authenticate users
- LocalStrategy supports authentication with username and password
 - install with: npm i passport-local
- function verify (username, password, callback)
 - Goal: to find the user and verify that it possesses the given credentials
- callback() supplies Passport with the user that was correctly authenticated
 - or false and an optional message

```
const passport = require('passport');
const LocalStrategy = require('passport-local');
passport.use(new LocalStrategy(
function verify (username, password, callback) {
  dao.getUser(username, password).then((user) =>
    if (!user)
      return callback(null, false, { message:
        'Incorrect username and/or password.' });
    return callback(null, user);
 });
}));
```

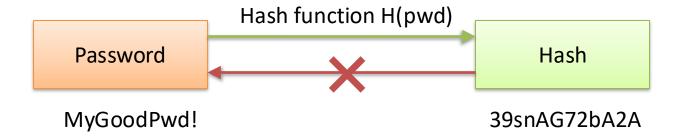
The verify Function in LocalStrategy

- username, password: automatically extracted from req.body.username and req.body.password
- Must check the validity of the credentials
- callback(): communicates the result
 - callback(null,user)
 - → valid credentials
 - callback(null,false)
 - → invalid credentials, login failed
 - callback(null,false,{message:'error'})
 - → invalid credentials, login failed, with explanation
 - callback({error: 'err msg'})
 - → application error (e.g., DB error)
- user: any object containing information about the currently validated user

```
const passport = require('passport');
const LocalStrategy = require('passport-local');
passport.use(new LocalStrategy( function verify
(username, password, callback) {
  dao.getUser(username, password).then((user) =>
    if (!user)
      return callback(null, false, { message:
        'Incorrect username and/or password.' });
    return callback(null, user);
 });
}));
```

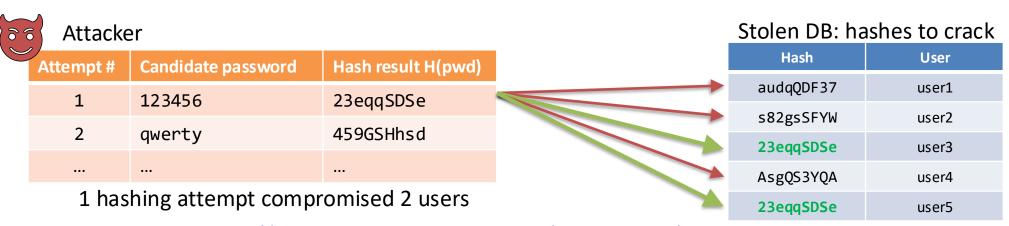
Storing Passwords in the Server

- Never store plain text passwords in the server (e.g., in the database)
- Always perform password hashing (NOT encryption)
 - so that nobody can read passwords even if it gets access to the database
 - hashing is a one-way function → password <u>cannot</u> be "decrypted"



Storing Passwords in the Server

- Good hashing is impossible to crack. But passwords can be guessed...
 - Guess/select possible password candidates (123456, qwerty, password1!, ...)
 - Compute the hash (computationally expensive) and compare it with all the available hashes (cheap)
 - When the DB of big sites are compromised (i.e., leaked) many hashes are available: the chance of success drastically increases
 - Also, users with the same hash = same password (typically a weak one...)



https://cheatsheetseries.owasp.org/cheatsheets/Password Storage Cheat Sheet.html

Password Salt

- A unique, randomly generated, string added to each password before the hashing process
- Salt is unique for every user, and stored in cleartext
 - Generated when creating a new username/password record in the DB
 - Force the attacker to run hashing for each password/salt pair
- Always use salt when hashing passwords
 - Most modern hashing algorithms automatically salt the password and store them as a part of the string representing the result
 - Using salt does not increase the complexity of the hashing process

Salt Effect

- Salt makes cracking large number of hashes significantly more complex
 - The time required increases linearly with the number of hashes to crack
 - Without salt, a single hashing attempt could quickly check millions of hashes

Attacker

Stolen DB: hashes to crack

Hash Salt Us

1 123456 W8sh sdg3A1283

Attempt #	Candidate password	Salt	Hash H(salt+pwd)
1	123456	w8sh	sdg3AJ28a
2	123456	as2s	d8wbd6sx7
3	123456	3ayu	aaASYA2sg
4	123456	465s	Qs23SGa2d
5	qwerty	w8sh	38rgsGFSa
6	qwerty	as2s	JHDs3y27s

Hash	Salt	User
AsgQS3YQA	w8sh	user1
aw83hsJJr	as2s	user2
aaASYA2sg	3ayu	user3
a3Ugsd7sg	465s	user4

Note: with salt, users with the same password cannot be detected

3 hashing attempts compromised 1 user

https://cheatsheetseries.owasp.org/cheatsheets/Password Storage Cheat Sheet.html

Storing Passwords in the Server

- scrypt is an easy to use (reasonably secure) password hashing function
 - it generates hashes in the form of a string, e.g.,
 d72c87d0f077c7766f2985dfab30e8955c373a13a1e93d315203939f542ff86e
 - test it at https://www.browserling.com/tools/scrypt
- In Node, it is available in the <u>already included</u> crypto module
- The salt must be handled/stored separately from the hash

scrypt

- Two main functions, both async and returning Promises:
 - 1. Hash a password:

2. Check if a given password matches with a stored hash: crypto.timingSafeEqual(storedPassword, hashedPassword)

The given password <u>must</u> be hashed with the same salt of the stored password

Password Hash Check (within Passport)

```
exports.getUser = (email, password) => {
  return new Promise((resolve, reject) => {
    const sql = 'SELECT * FROM user WHERE email = ?';
    db.get(sql, [email], (err, row) => {
     if (err) { reject(err); }
      else if (row === undefined) { resolve(false); }
     else {
        const user = {id: row.id, username: row.email};
        const salt = row.salt; // read in cleartext from the database
        crypto.scrypt(password, salt, 32, (err, hashedPassword) => {
         if (err) reject(err);
         if(!crypto.timingSafeEqual(Buffer.from(row.password, 'hex'), hashedPassword))
            resolve(false);
         else resolve(user);
       });
   });
```

2. Additional Middlewares

- Useful additional middleware to enable sessions: express-session
 - https://www.npmjs.com/package/express-session
 - install with: npm install express-session
- By default, it stores sessions in *memory*
 - which is highly inefficient and
 NOT recommended for production
- It also supports different session storages, from files to DB
 - Not discussed here

```
const session = require('express-session');

// enable sessions in Express
app.use(session({
    // set up here express-session
    secret: "a secret phrase of your choice",
    resave: false,
    saveUninitialized: false,
}));

// init Passport to use sessions
app.use(passport.authenticate('session'));
```

2. Session Options

- The express-session middleware supports various parameters
- The most used ones are:
 - secret: used to sign the session ID cookie [required]
 - store: the session store instance, defaults to MemoryStore if not specified
 - resave: forces the session to be saved back to the session store, even if the session was never modified during the request. Default (<u>deprecated</u>) value is true, typically set to *false*
 - saveUninitialized: forces a session that is new but not modified to be saved to the store. Choosing *false* is useful for implementing login sessions, reducing server storage usage, or complying with laws that require permission before setting a cookie. Default (deprecated) value is true.

3. Session Content

- After enabling sessions, you should decide the info to store in the session
 - The info is stored internally in req.session.passport (not to be accessed directly)
- The serializeUser() and deserializeUser() methods allow you to define callbacks to perform these operations
- The user object created by deserializeUser() will be available in every authenticated request in req.user

```
passport.serializeUser((user, cb) => {
   cb(null, {id: user.id, email: user.username, firstname: user.firstname});
});
passport.deserializeUser((user, cb) => {
   cb(null, user);
});
Session storage
{ sessionId: {
   username,
   userinfo,
   temp_data, ...}}
```

Minimal Content in a Session

- Just serialize a unique user ID (e.g., stored in user.id)
- Retrieve other info from DB during deserialization, if needed
 - Higher load on the DB: queried at every request to a protected API, but the advantage is that information is always updated (e.g., first name, last name, etc.)
- Later, use req.user in the API implementation to access info about user

```
passport.serializeUser((user, callback) => {
   callback(null, user.id);
});

passport.deserializeUser((id, callback) => {
   db.getUser(id)
        .then(user => callback(null, user))
        .catch(err => callback(err, null));
});
```

Login with Passport

- After setting everything up, log in a user with Passport
 - add an Express route able to receive the "login" requests
 - pass the authenticate(<strategy>) method as the first additional callback
 - authenticate('local') will look for username and password fields in req.body

```
app.post('/api/session', passport.authenticate('local'), (req,res) => {
    // This function is called if authentication is successful.
    // req.user contains the session info.
    res.json(req.user.username); // Just an example
});
```

Storing User Information in React

- With the login response, some user information might be sent back to the browser
 - e.g., the username, the first name, the last name, etc.
- Typically, this information is stored for later usage in the client app
 - could be stored in a React State (or even a Context) and made available to the whole app
 - In any case it can be asked by the app whenever needed (e.g., with API.getUserInfo() in a useEffect at component mount time, ...)
- More suggestions:
 - https://www.robinwieruch.de/react-router-authentication/

After the Login...

- Some routes in the server needs to be protected
 - i.e., they must provide a response only for authenticated users
- After the workflow shown before (session-based auth) is followed, the browser automatically sends the HTTP cookie header to any API belonging to the same domain and path
 - Beware: cookies cannot be sent to other domains and paths

With CORS Enabled

- By default, cookies can only be sent to the same origin
 - CORS has a mechanism to overcome this limitation
- In the server, we need to define *both* the credentials and the origin options, when setting up the cors module:

```
const corsOptions = {
  origin: 'http://localhost:5173',
  credentials: true,
};
app.use(cors(corsOptions));
```

Note: if "credentials" is set, CORS does not allow a generic origin *

With CORS Enabled

• In the client, all the fetch requests to protected APIs must include the "credentials: include" option:

```
const response = await fetch(SERVER_BASEURL + '/api/exams', {
    ...
    credentials: 'include',
});
```

- The login request must include such an option as well
 - even if it is not to a protected API
 - otherwise the cookie will not be available in subsequent requests even if sent with the 'include' option

Protecting Server APIs

- To protect server APIs, check if a request comes from an authenticated user by checking Passport's req.isAuthenticated()
 - returns true if the session id coming with the request is a valid one
- To be done at the beginning of every callback body in each API that needs protection
 - Same code to be inserted in different APIs \rightarrow Create a custom middleware!

Protecting APIs with a Middleware

- Create an Express middleware that includes req.isAuthenticated()
- Use it at the route level (or even app level to protect everything if needed)
 - The middleware is especially useful to handle errors

```
const isLoggedIn = (req, res, next) => {
  if(req.isAuthenticated())
   return next();

return res.status(400).json({message : "not authenticated"});
}
app.get('/api/exams', isLoggedIn, (req, res) => {
  ...
});
```

Authorization Check

- The API implementation must check if the user can do the operation
 - It checks the authorization (NB: not authentication).
 Only the application logic can determine which is the correct check to perform.
 It may apply to any operation (even just read, or create, update, delete)
- The server must retrieve authenticated **user** info in <u>a secure manner</u>
 - It cannot arrive from the client, even if it is in an authenticated session!
 - The code must always extract it from the session information which is safe since it never leaves the server (i.e., req.user content)
- Also, rely only on trusted information, e.g. info from DB

Major source of errors at exam, big vulnerability if wrong!

Example of Authorization Check

```
DELETE /reservations
HTTP request body: { resId: 1234 }

app.delete('/reservations', isLoggedIn(), (req, res) => {
   if (reservationOwnerFromDb(req.body.resId) == req.user.id) {
     delete(...);
     res.end();
   }
});
Major source of
errors at exam,
big vulnerability if
wrong!
```

- Any solution where the id of the user does not come from req.user is WRONG!
 - In particular, the user id <u>cannot be</u> part of an object coming from the client, <u>even if</u> the session exists and it is valid (i.e., isLoggedIn() == true)
 - Otherwise, any authenticated user could send the request and pass the isLoggedIn() check!

Logout

- The browser will send a "logout" request to the server
 - For example: DELETE /api/session
- The server will clear the session (and delete the stored session id)
 - extremely trivial with Passport!

```
app.delete('/api/session', (req, res) => {
   req.logout(() => {
     res.end();
   });
});
```



What are you allowed to you?

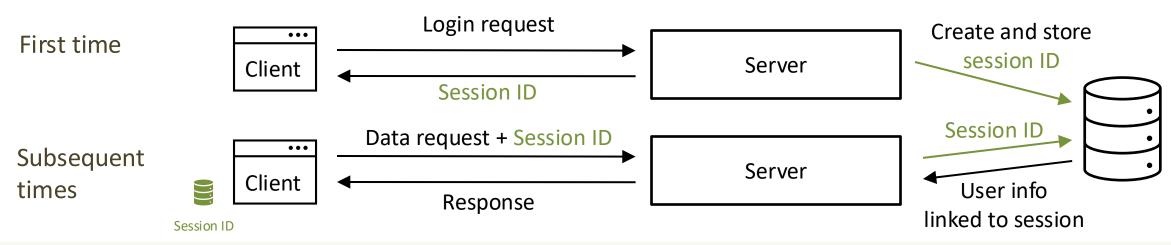
AUTHORIZATION IN WEB APPLICATIONS

Authorization after Authentication

- In general, there exists two approaches for web servers to handle authorization after authentication:
 - Stateful server
 - Stateless server

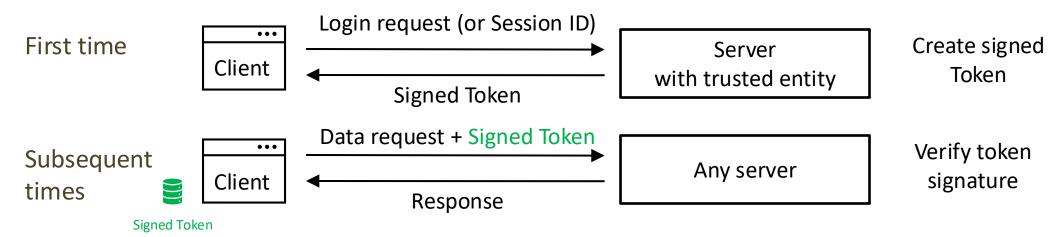
Stateful Server (described until now)

- The server **remembers** the valid session IDs and the associated user info (after login)
- Associated info cannot be maliciously altered: the trusted version is only in the server
- Each time a request arrives for a restricted resource, the server retrieves the info
 associated with the session and decides if the associated user is authorized or not
- Works best with a single server that manages everything



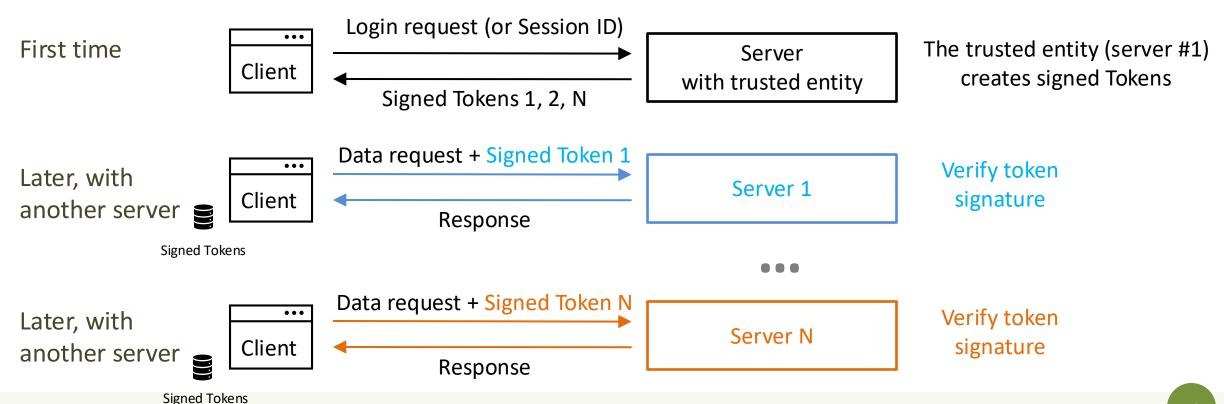
Stateless Server

- A trusted entity (e.g., the authentication server) **signs a payload** which contains information about what can be accessed and how, the user info (if needed), and when the authorization expires
- The client gets the signed payload (token) and stores it
- Each time a request arrives for a restricted resource, the receiving server verifies the signature, extracts and uses the authorization information
 - such information is trusted because it is signed



Stateless Server Scheme

- Works best where there are multiple servers which cannot easily share session information (but can easily verify a signature)
 - note: tokens can also be the same for all servers



Note on Tokens and Stateless Servers

- Standard token formats exists, e.g., JWT (JSON Web Token), RFC 7519
- Many schemes exists to implement complex authorization flows, for different purposes (access permission, Single Sign On, etc.)
- Examples:
 - OAuth
 SAML
 OpenID

 Out of the scope of this course

Tokens / authentication / authorization

- Note that tokens can also be used for identification purposes (i.e., after authentication, instead of a session ID)
 - NOT covered in this course
 - NOT to be used in this course (just for simplicity)
- In this course
 - Perform initial authentication, establish a session ID, then:
 - Every authorization must be checked on the server, in every API, through JS
 code, relying only on trusted information, i.e., the logged in user + info from DB

```
app.delete('/reservations', isLoggedIn(), (req, res) => {
  if (reservationOwnerFromDb(req.body.resId) == req.user.id) {
```

Important! Carefully checked at the exam



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