**A com compliant object has many interesting traits.**

1. **COM is language independent:**

A com interface can be written in C++, COBOL, vb, java etc. The only true requirement that a language must satisfy is that it should be able to generate a VTABLE (binary layout) mapping to a COM object.

1. Not only Developers can write COM objects in any language, the COM objects themselves can be accessed by any COM language.

For example a JAVA application can access a COM component written in C++ or Delphi.

1. COM encapsulates the inner implementation details of the object including the

Language it was written in. All that the COM object user sees is a set of well-defined interfaces supported by the object.

1. **COM provides location transparency**

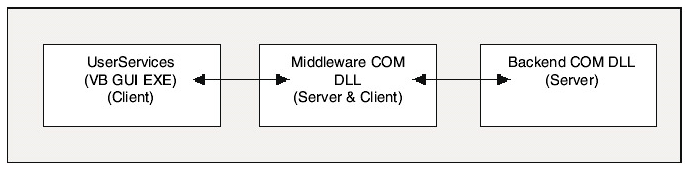
Before we understand location transparency lets add a few words to the COM vocabulary (lexicon)

1**. Process:** A process is a partition of memory containing a running application (i.e. an active main thread) along with any necessary system resources and subsidiary threads and external binaries required by the application.

2. **Client:** A client in COM is any piece of software that makes use of a COM object.

**3. Server:** In COM we define a server as a binary package (DLL or EXE) that contains one or more COM objects. Typically a single com server is known to be a home of many related COM objects, each supporting many number of interfaces.

Always keep in mind that the distinction between client and server can become blurred a little bit as it is common to have a client using a server that is a client to another server. The following diagram explains it:



Now with the three terms in place i.e. Client, Server and Process we can now distinguish between the possible relationships a client and server may have

1. An In-Process Relationship.

2. An Out of Process Relationship.

3. A Remote Relationship.

**UNDERSTANDING THE IN-PROCESS RELATIONSHIP:**

The relationship is abbreviated as in-proc relationship. In-proc servers are loaded into the same **memory partition (process)** in which the client application is running. They are in the same memory partition of the client that they are servicing.

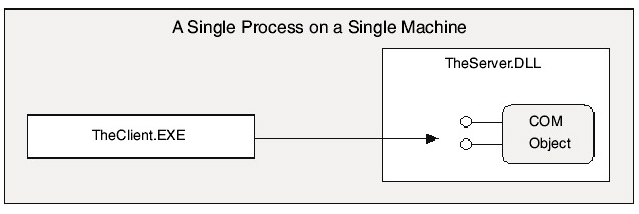
**Key Benefit:**

Speed. Since the servers are loaded into the same memory partition as client, the calls to the interfaces are as fast as making a local function call as the client and the server are **communicating through interface pointers.**

**Drawback:**

1. **Fault Tolerance**: The biggest drawback of an in-proc server is robustness or low level of fault tolerance. If the server crashes it will bring down the entire client process too.

2. **Security**: The in-process COM server will always take the security context of the Client Application they are loaded into.



**NOTE:**

COM has different threading models. IF the client and the server share different threading models then direct interface connection is not achieved.

**UNDERSTANDING THE OUT-OF-PROCESS RELATIONSHIP**

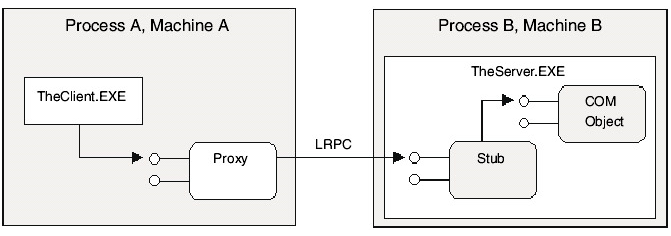
The out-of-process relationship is also termed as a local relationship. The client and the server reside on the same physical machine but they run in their own individual (distinct) memory segment as separate processes.

The two processes run with their own security contexts hence a higher level of security.

The major drawback is that it is slower as the requests have to be packaged, sent and unpackaged between process boundaries. While COM takes care of this packing and unpacking using a technique called **universal marshalling** and we rarely have to take care of it, but the process itself is time consuming.

**The major advantage** is that the system is fault tolerant as if the out of process com server crashes the client keeps running in its own process space.

The following diagram shows the out-of-process COM server and the relation between client/server.



As shown in the above example the client and the server processes communicate and send information through **LRPC (Lightweight remote procedure call).**They run on the same machine but in different processes.This is a proprietary communication protocol under the hood of the COM runtime.

In this local relationship the client and the server do not communicate directly through interface pointers but communicate using stubs and proxies. The data is transmitted between stubs and proxies.

As far as the client is concerned, the proxy is the COM object and can program against it as if it was an in-proc server. This will be discussed further.

**UNDERSTANDING THE REMOTE RELATIONSHIP**

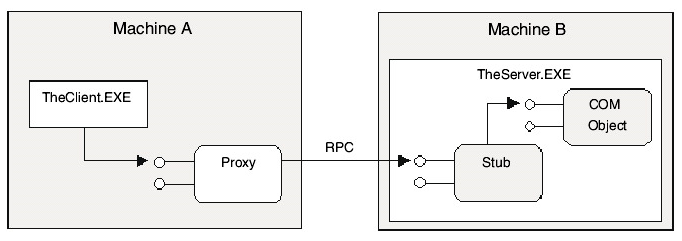
The remote COM server resides physically on any remote machine other than the machine on which the client is running.

This is a core requirement of any enterprise based solution, where the user services, business rules, and data retrieval objects can be distributed and reside on many networked computers on the network.

The remote client server COM relationships are the slowest amongst all the relationships as not only we need to package/unpackaged and marshal (assemble arrange in order) data but we also have to take into consideration the network and latency issues (Bandwidth etc.).

Remote communication is achieved through **DCOM protocol** which uses **Remote Procedure Call** mechanisms to **establish communications and forward information** between the Client and the server.

The following diagram represents a remote relationship:



**NOTE:**

The remote COM servers can be housed in DLLs or EXEs in the remote machine. Legacy COM servers can also be used and remoted using the special COM Surrogate process/utility called the dllhost.exe.

EXE server types were a “Classic” way to remote COM servers especially over LAN. This is still an effective solution.

However these days MTS is more popular. MTS is Microsoft transaction server which is a super surrogate and will host “only” COM dlls while taking care of all the details like threading concurrency, atomic transactions, and memory management and so on.

**LOCATION TRANSPARENCY**

One benefit of com states that COM provides location transparency where the client programs against the proxies as if it was making in-process function calls without knowing the location of the server.

This also states that the client side code used to access the interfaces of the server side COM object need not change based on the location of the COM object.

**Stubs and proxies** provide a level of encapsulation and the COM client treats the proxy object as a real object and can program against it as if the object was running in the clients own process space.

Likewise the COM server believes that the **STUB is the real client** leaving the server code intact.

The COM library does provide a number of methods and data structures to help optimize remote access. But these are optional. Using configuration utilities such as dcomcnfg.exe, you may redirect your client to access a server on any machine on the network without altering a single line of code.

These utilities and library extensions provide a far cleaner approach than we had before location transparency. At that time, developers needed to use different (and unrelated) APIs to move information between in-proc, local, and remote servers. As a COM developer, you do not write different code bases for client access to remote objects, local objects, or in-proc objects. Clients just see interfaces, and location transparency allows that client to be blissfully unaware of the exact location of the server.

**COM IS OBJECT ORIENTED**

Some people argue that COM is not object oriented. But it is.

* **ENCAPSULATION:**

COM does a good work in information hiding. All that is exposed to the clients are proxies. The underlying implementation is absolutely hidden from the clients.

* **POLYMORPHISM:**

As we have seen from the SHAPES example any object is allowed to implement the same interface with its own unique implementation. COM provides an ad-hoc polymorphism using the same interface.

* **INHERITANCE:**

COM does not provide a classical inheritance of binary objects. In other words we cannot say that COM object A derives from COM object B.

(For example, C3DRect used interface inheritance to bring in the definitions of IDraw and IShapeEdit). What we cannot do with COM is something along the lines of the following:

// this is not possible in COM.

// assume *BLOB* is a new keyword that defines a new binary COM object.

BLOB MyServer.NewBlob.EXE: public MyOtherServer.OldBlob.DLL

{

...

};

**COM CONTAINMENT AND AGGREGATION**

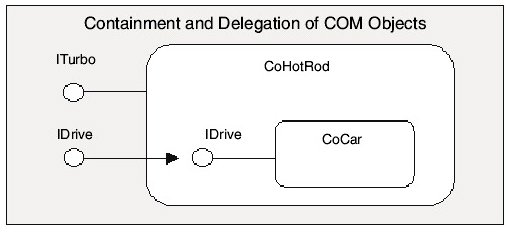
Although COM does not support inheritance it supports component reuse using Containment and Aggregation. **We can reuse behaviours (a.k.a. interfaces)** across binary COM objects via containment and aggregation. In fact on of the primary reasons COM does not support inheritance because COM was designed to keep the objects as self-sufficient as possible.

COM is a **binary standard**. So essentially a base class in **COM** will be a binary object. If we have to change something in the base class how do we know what to change? So COM side steps all these complexities by avoiding classical inheritance.

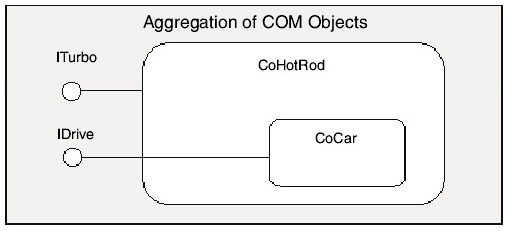
We however have binary reuse in COM using containment and delegation.

A COM object may create other COM objects and allow the access to the inner objects interfaces using delegation. Clients are unaware that the outer object (Server) is contains inner objects too. This is quite similar to out code based containment that we see in OOP where outer class contains inner class. The difference is that in the case of COM the outer class builds the inner class using the COM library.

The following figures show containment (delegation) and aggregation.



The notion of containment and delegation. Notice that CoHotRod is an "outer class" that creates and maintains an "inner class" named CoCar. CoHotRod supports the IDrive interface, which has methods that forward calls to the inner object.



COM does offer another form of binary reuse, **called *aggregation***. Here a COM object creates inner COM objects (just like the containment/delegation model). This time, however, the outer object directly extends its own set of interfaces with the interfaces of the inner objects. This gives clients the illusion that the object they are working with is composed of more interfaces than it really is, as shown above.

**In aggregation, the outer object does not "forward" calls via delegation**, as the inner object's interfaces are directly exposed as part of the outer object. We will detail the implementation of COM containment and aggregation later, so we will hold off on the specifics for now.

**COM Provides Clean Versioning of Components**

We have seen that interfaces may be safely versioned by using interface inheritance. COM uses these same versioning techniques. As we have already seen, when an object implements a given interface, it may not alter that interface in any way or else it risks breaking clients. The COM interface is the key to robust versioning.

**The COM, OLE, and ActiveX Relationship**

COM is the backbone of each and every ActiveX and OLE technology. Pick up your current issue of Microsoft Systems Journal, and I'd bet a pay check that at least one article discusses a new set of COM interfaces, COM service, or some other COM advancement. The point here (other than I can keep my pay check to myself) is that COM technologies are bombarding us left and right. These days, any new software item coming from those kind folks in Redmond is delivered as a set of COM extensions-not a C-based API.

Before we can really appreciate the full set of COM-based technologies examined throughout this book, a brief (and painless) history lesson is in order, beginning with OLE 1.0.

**OLE 1.0**

OLE 1.0 was a 16-bit technology that appeared on the scene circa 1991. This technology enabled software applications to share information through linking and embedding. As you may know, certain applications may export visual objects to other applications. A host application may embed this object inside itself (which produced a copy of the original data) or reference it through a link (which is a connection to the original data source). The classic example of this technology is an MS Word document containing an embedded MS Excel spreadsheet. Under the hood, OLE 1.0 was not based on the COM we know today, but rather the clunky Dynamic Data Exchange (DDE) protocol. At this time, OLE was a technology specifically used for object linking and embedding.

**OLE 2.0**

Around 1993, 16-bit OLE 2.0 was released for the Windows 3.x OS. This marked a huge directional change for OLE, as the underpinnings of DDE were beginning to be stripped away and replaced with the COM infrastructure. With the release of Windows NT 3.51, OLE 2.0 was moved into 32 bits. The major additions to the existing 16-bit technology set was the full support for Unicode string handling, as well as tweaking **COM itself to run completely on top of Microsoft's variation of the Open Software Foundation's Remote Procedure Call (OSF RPC) paradigm, rather than the older DDE paradigm.**

Linking and embedding technology was still a core service of OLE 2.0-however, it did not stop there. OLE 2.0 introduced a whole slew of COM-related technologies. The key to OLE 2.0 was the extendable COM architecture. Given this, we will never see an OLE 3.0. Instead, we'll see more COM-related technologies. **Thus, the terms OLE 1.0 and OLE 2.0 are not much more than historical footnotes in COM's family history.**

**ActiveX**

ActiveX is the current blanket name for any COM-based technology. At one time, ActiveX referred to only web-specific COM technologies; however, these days most things COM are dubbed "ActiveX" something or other (ActiveX controls, ActiveX documents, ActiveX servers, and so on). To make things a bit more confusing, Microsoft occasionally uses the legacy term "OLE" to name some newer COM-based services, such as OLE DB (which really should have been ActiveX-DB to be consistent). We will see many ActiveX services pop up throughout the remainder of this book. Just realize that all ActiveX/OLE technologies are built off the COM protocol.

**STANDARD AND CUSTOM INTERFACES IN COM**

**COM** is all about interfaces. The only way COM clients and servers communicate is through interfaces.

Each and every interface developed is developed to specify a possible behaviour some class may support. We define an interface as the following:

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***An interface is a collection of semantically related functions which define a unique and single behaviour supported by the class. For example text manipulation functionality can be clubbed together as an interface called ITextFun, Graphics as IGuiFun and so on.***

This same definition works almost perfectly in the world of COM. However, COM interfaces fall under two distinct categories. Under the hood, each type of interface is exactly the same: a collection of semantically related functions—no state, no implementation.

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COM interfaces fall under two categories.

1. Standard COM Interfaces
2. Custom COM interfaces

**CUSTOM COM INTERFACES**

Custom COM interfaces are developed to solve one particular programming problem. We may create custom COM interfaces as a C++ abstract classes and extend them through numerical versioning. Every Custom interface must directly or indirectly derive from IUNKNOWN or the de-facto COM interface.

For example IDRAW can be a COM interface only if it was specified as the following:

**Interface IDRAW: public IUNKNOWN {**

**//brings in pure virtual definitions of the functions Queryinterface (), addref () and release ()**

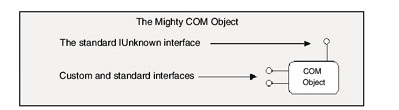
**Virtual void Draw () = 0;**

**}**

The above code suggests that the vtable of IDRAW will be coloured by the three members of IUNKNOWN (addref (), Queryinterface () and Release (). This is very true indeed. Every method of a com interface will have the three members of IUnknown as the first three members.

**Be aware that in interface inheritance, you are not required to explicitly relist inherited pure virtual methods in the derived interface. You may choose to relist the inherited pure virtual methods of IUnknown in your IDraw interface if you wish to be extremely clear; however, the compiler could care less. The class implementing IDraw would (of course) need to provide definitions for all four virtual functions**.

**Given that IUnknown is a mandatory requirement of any COM object, it holds a special place in COM notation. The IUnknown interface is always represented as the lollipop extending from the top of a COM class.**



**Standard COM Interfaces**

These are predesigned and well known COM interfaces useful in COM development. Every standard interface must be derived from IUnknown or other IUnknown derived interfcaes.

***Having a set of predefined standard interface is really good as it provides a really big area of standard behaviours necessary for a component-based distributed architecture such as COM.***

Infact what makes one COM based technology different from another is the set of standard interfaces supported by the COM object.

ActiveX controls support a number of interfaces not found in automation servers.

ActiveX documents support a number of interfaces not found in OLE/COM drag and Drop.

This does not mean that the aforementioned technologies are mutually exclusive. The interfaces providing rendering, persistence and many other standard behaviour are implemented by numerous COM technologies.