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Network Working Group
Request for Comments: 1035
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Obsoletes: RFCs 882, 883, 973

DOMAIN NAMES - IMPLEMENTATION AND SPECIFICATION

1. STATUS OF THIS MEMO

This RFC describes the details of the domain system and protocol, and assumes that the reader is familiar with the concepts discussed in a companion RFC, "Domain Names - Concepts and Facilities" [RFC-1034].

The domain system is a mixture of functions and data types which are an official protocol and functions and data types which are still experimental. Since the domain system is intentionally extensible, new data types and experimental behavior should always be expected in parts of the system beyond the official protocol. The official protocol parts include standard queries, responses and the Internet class RR data formats (e.g., host addresses). Since the previous RFC set, several definitions have changed, so some previous definitions are obsolete.

Experimental or obsolete features are clearly marked in these RFCs, and such information should be used with caution.

The reader is especially cautioned not to depend on the values which appear in examples to be current or complete, since their purpose is primarily pedagogical. Distribution of this memo is unlimited.

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2. INTRODUCTION

2.1. Overview

The goal of domain names is to provide a mechanism for naming resources in such a way that the names are usable in different hosts, networks, protocol families, internets, and administrative organizations.

From the user's point of view, domain names are useful as arguments to a local agent, called a resolver, which retrieves information associated with the domain name. Thus a user might ask for the host address or mail information associated with a particular domain name. To enable the user to request a particular type of information, an appropriate query type is passed to the resolver with the domain name. To the user, the domain tree is a single information space; the resolver is responsible for hiding the distribution of data among name servers from the user.

From the resolver's point of view, the database that makes up the domain space is distributed among various name servers. Different parts of the domain space are stored in different name servers, although a particular data item will be stored redundantly in two or more name servers. The resolver starts with knowledge of at least one name server. When the resolver processes a user query it asks a known name server for the information; in return, the resolver either receives the desired information or a referral to another name server. Using these referrals, resolvers learn the identities and contents of other name servers. Resolvers are responsible for dealing with the distribution of

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the domain space and dealing with the effects of name server failure by consulting redundant databases in other servers.

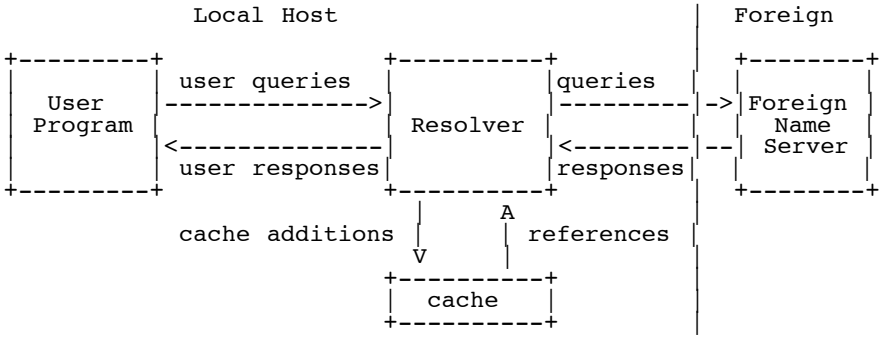
Name servers manage two kinds of data. The first kind of data held in sets called zones; each zone is the complete database for a particular "pruned" subtree of the domain space. This data is called authoritative. A name server periodically checks to make sure that its zones are up to date, and if not, obtains a new copy of updated zones

from master files stored locally or in another name server. The second kind of data is cached data which was acquired by a local resolver. This data may be incomplete, but improves the performance of the retrieval process when non-local data is repeatedly accessed. Cached data is eventually discarded by a timeout mechanism.

This functional structure isolates the problems of user interface, failure recovery, and distribution in the resolvers and isolates the database update and refresh problems in the name servers.

2.2. Common configurations

A host can participate in the domain name system in a number of ways, depending on whether the host runs programs that retrieve information from the domain system, name servers that answer queries from other hosts, or various combinations of both functions. The simplest, and perhaps most typical, configuration is shown below:



User programs interact with the domain name space through resolvers; the format of user queries and user responses is specific to the host and its operating system. User queries will typically be operating system calls, and the resolver and its cache will be part of the host operating system. Less capable hosts may choose to implement the resolver as a subroutine to be linked in with every program that needs its services. Resolvers answer user queries with information they acquire via queries to foreign name servers and the local cache.

Note that the resolver may have to make several queries to several different foreign name servers to answer a particular user query, and hence the resolution of a user query may involve several network accesses and an arbitrary amount of time. The queries to foreign name servers and the corresponding responses have a standard format described

in this memo, and may be datagrams.

Depending on its capabilities, a name server could be a stand alone program on a dedicated machine or a process or processes on a large timeshared host. A simple configuration might be:

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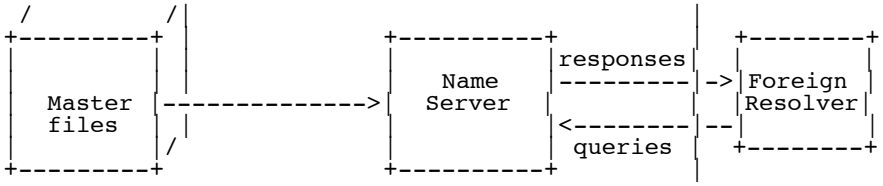
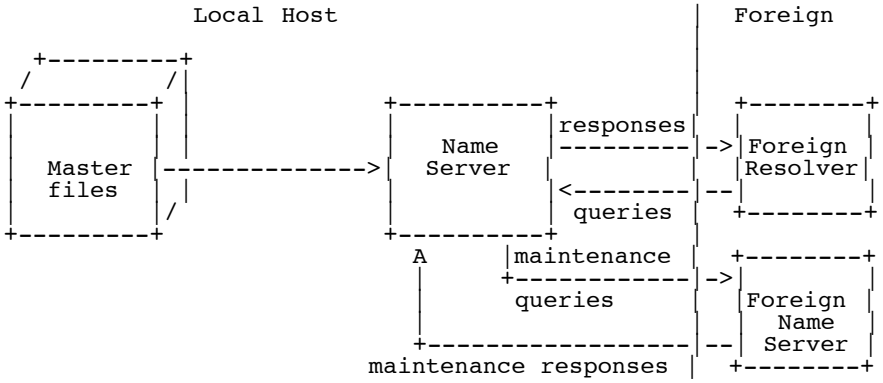


Here a primary name server acquires information about one or more zones by reading master files from its local file system, and answers queries about those zones that arrive from foreign resolvers.

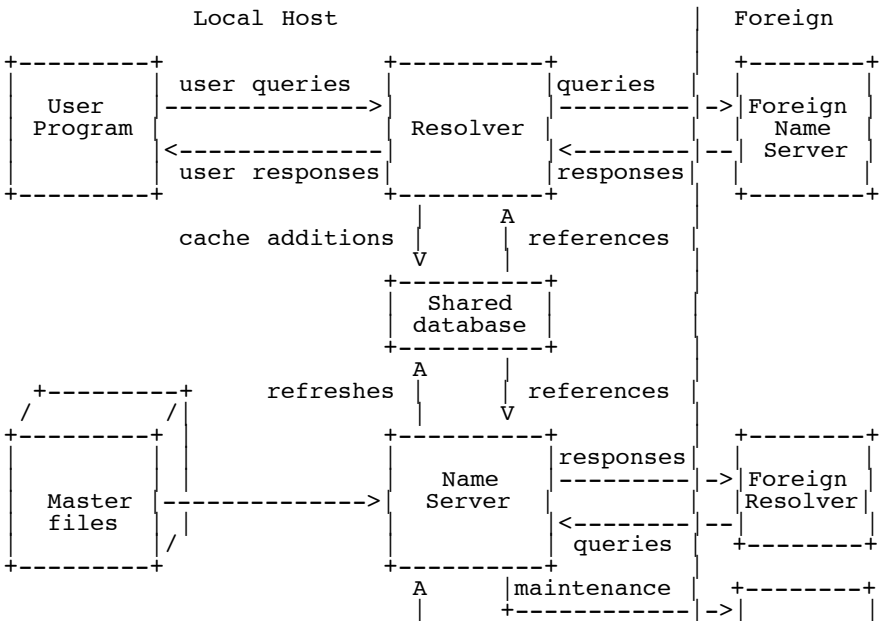
The DNS requires that all zones be redundantly supported by more than one name server. Designated secondary servers can acquire zones and check for updates from the primary server using the zone transfer protocol of the DNS. This configuration is shown below:



In this configuration, the name server periodically establishes a virtual circuit to a foreign name server to acquire a copy of a zone or to check that an existing copy has not changed. The messages sent for

these maintenance activities follow the same form as queries and responses, but the message sequences are somewhat different.

The information flow in a host that supports all aspects of the domain name system is shown below:



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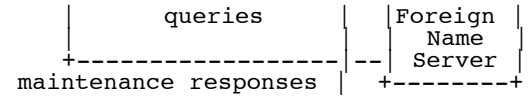
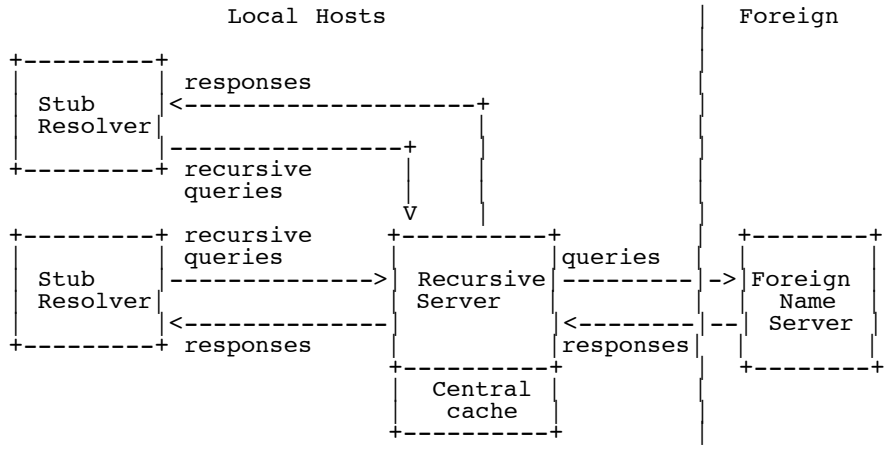


The shared database holds domain space data for the local name server and resolver. The contents of the shared database will typically be a mixture of authoritative data maintained by the periodic refresh operations of the name server and cached data from previous resolver requests. The structure of the domain data and the necessity for synchronization between name servers and resolvers imply the general characteristics of this database, but the actual format is up to the local implementor.

Information flow can also be tailored so that a group of hosts act together to optimize activities. Sometimes this is done to offload less capable hosts so that they do not have to implement a full resolver. This can be appropriate for PCs or hosts which want to minimize the amount of new network code which is required. This scheme can also allow a group of hosts can share a small number of caches rather than maintaining a large number of separate caches, on the premise that the centralized caches will have a higher hit ratio. In either case, resolvers are replaced with stub resolvers which act as front ends to resolvers located in a recursive server in one or more name servers known to perform that service:



In any case, note that domain components are always replicated for reliability whenever possible.

2.3. Conventions

The domain system has several conventions dealing with low-level, but fundamental, issues. While the implementor is free to violate these conventions WITHIN HIS OWN SYSTEM, he must observe these conventions in ALL behavior observed from other hosts.

2.3.1. Preferred name syntax

The DNS specifications attempt to be as general as possible in the rules for constructing domain names. The idea is that the name of any existing object can be expressed as a domain name with minimal changes.

However, when assigning a domain name for an object, the prudent user will select a name which satisfies both the rules of the domain system and any existing rules for the object, whether these rules are published

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