

Updates: IEN 133

THE TFTP PROTOCOL (REVISION 2)

Summary

TFTP is a very simple protocol used to transfer files. It is from this that its name comes, Trivial File Transfer Protocol or TFTP. Each nonterminal packet is acknowledged separately. This document describes the protocol and its types of packets. The document also explains the reasons behind some of the design decisions.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The protocol was originally designed by Noel Chiappa, and was redesigned by him, Bob Baldwin and Dave Clark, with comments from Steve Szymanski. The current revision of the document includes modifications stemming from discussions with and suggestions from Larry Allen, Noel Chiappa, Dave Clark, Geoff Cooper, Mike Greenwald, Liza Martin, David Reed, Craig Milo Rogers (of UCS-ISI), Kathy Yellick, and the author. The acknowledgement and retransmission scheme was inspired by TCP, and the error mechanism was suggested by PARC's EFTP abort message.

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1. Purpose

TFTP is a simple protocol to transfer files, and therefore was named the Trivial File Transfer Protocol or TFTP. It has been implemented on top of the Internet User Datagram protocol (UDP or Datagram) [2] so it may be used to move files between machines on different networks implementing UDP. (This should not exclude the possibility of implementing TFTP on top of other datagram protocols.) It is designed to be small and easy to implement. Therefore, it lacks most of the features of a regular FTP. The only thing it can do is read and write files (or mail) from/to a remote server. It cannot list directories, and currently has no provisions for user authentication. In common with other Internet protocols, it passes 8 bit bytes of data.

Three modes of transfer are currently supported: netascii¹; octet², raw 8 bit bytes; mail, netascii characters sent to a user rather than a file. Additional modes can be defined by pairs of cooperating hosts.

1

This is ascii as defined in "USA Standard Code for Information Interchange" [1] with the modifications specified in "Telnet Protocol Specification" [3]. Note that it is 8 bit ascii. The term "netascii" will be used throughout this document to mean this particular version of ascii.

2

This replaces the "binary" mode of previous versions of this

2. Overview of the Protocol

Any transfer begins with a request to read or write a file, which also serves to request a connection. If the server grants the request, the connection is opened and the file is sent in fixed length blocks of 512 bytes. Each data packet contains one block of data, and must be acknowledged by an acknowledgment packet before the next packet can be sent. A data packet of less than 512 bytes signals termination of a transfer. If a packet gets lost in the network, the intended recipient will timeout and may retransmit his last packet (which may be data or an acknowledgment), thus causing the sender of the lost packet to retransmit that lost packet. The sender has to keep just one packet on hand for retransmission, since the lock step acknowledgment guarantees that all older packets have been received. Notice that both machines involved in a transfer are considered senders and receivers. One sends data and receives acknowledgments, the other sends acknowledgments and receives data.

Most errors cause termination of the connection. An error is signalled by sending an error packet. This packet is not acknowledged, and not retransmitted (i.e., a TFTP server or user may terminate after sending an error message), so the other end of the connection may not get it. Therefore timeouts are used to detect such a termination when the error packet has been lost. Errors are caused by three types of events: not being able to satisfy the request (e.g., file not found, access violation, or no such user), receiving a packet which cannot be explained by a delay or duplication in the network (e.g. an incorrectly

formed packet), and losing access to a necessary resource (e.g., disk full or access denied during a transfer).

TFTP recognizes only one error condition that does not cause termination, the source port of a received packet being incorrect. In this case, an error packet is sent to the originating host.

This protocol is very restrictive, in order to simplify implementation. For example, the fixed length blocks make allocation straight forward, and the lock step acknowledgement provides flow control and eliminates the need to reorder incoming data packets.

3. Relation to other Protocols

As mentioned TFTP is designed to be implemented on top of the Datagram protocol. Since Datagram is implemented on the Internet protocol, packets will have an Internet header, a Datagram header, and a TFTP header. Additionally, the packets may have a header (LNI, ARPA header, etc.) to allow them through the local transport medium. As shown in Figure 3-1, the order of the contents of a packet will be: local medium header, if used, Internet header, Datagram header, TFTP header, followed by the remainder of the TFTP packet. (This may or may not be data depending on the type of packet as specified in the TFTP header.) TFTP does not specify any of the values in the Internet header. On the other hand, the source and destination port fields of the Datagram header (its format is given in the appendix) are used by TFTP and the length field reflects the size of the TFTP packet. The transfer identifiers (TID's)

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