Sessions

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How do we know what user sent request?

- Would like to authenticate user and have that information available each time we process a request.
- More generally web apps would like to keep state per active browser
  - Called session state
- Concretely:

```javascript
expressApp.get('/user/:user_id', function (httpRequest, httpResponse) {
    // Need to make a decision to accept the request or reject it
    var sessionState = GetSessionState(httpRequest);
});
```
Where could we get the session state from?

Maybe Here?
Web Browser

Not Here - Stateless
Web Server

Here
Storage System

HTTP

Internet

LAN
Session state lookup problem

- HTTP request just come into a web server
  - Not a lot information to uniquely identify "session"
- Solution: Include something in the request to tell us the session
  - Care must taken to avoid forgeries
- Early HTTP solution: Cookies
  - State set by web server that browser attaches to every request
  - Useful but with a checkered history
- Modern browser support local storage API
HTTP Cookies: Basic Idea

- Web server adds Set-Cookie: to HTTP response header
  
  `Set-Cookie: cookie_name1=cookie_value1`
  `Set-Cookie: cookie_name2=cookie_value2; expires=Sun, 16 Jul 2016 06:23:41 GMT`
  
  Each cookie is just a name-value pair.

- Future requests from browser to same server should include the Cookie: header
  
  `Cookie: cookie_name1=cookie_value1; cookie_name2=cookie_value2`
Cookie contents

- **Cookie: name and data**
  - Domain for this cookie: server, port (optional), URL prefix (optional)
  - The cookie is only included in requests matching its domain
  - Expiration date: browser can delete old cookies

- **Limits:**
  - Data size limited by browsers (typically < 4 KB)
  - Browsers limit the number of cookies per server (around 50)
Cookies as web app storage

● User can:
  ○ View cookies
  ○ Modify/corrupt cookies
  ○ Delete cookies
  ○ Create cookies
  ○ Lose cookies to hackers

● Simply switching browsers looks like you deleted the app's cookies
  ○ Cookies have been used in bad ways (more later in class): Users are suspicious of them

● Pretty unreliable web app storage
  ○ Limited to hint, shortcut, etc. that can be recovered if missing
  ○ While actively communicating with web app: Session cookies
Session state with cookies

- Early web frameworks (e.g. Rails) supported storing session state in cookies
  - Rails provided `session`, a JavaScript-like object, that you could store anything
    ```ruby
    session[:user_id] = "mendel"
    ```

- Rails packaged `session` into a cookie and added to HTTP response
  - Data will be available in all future requests from the same browser

- Rails automatically checks for a session cookie at the start of each request:
  - Cookie exists? use it to find session data
  - No cookie? Create new session, new cookie

- End of each request: save session data where it can be found by future requests. (where?)
Session state in cookies

● Early approach: Store session state in cookie
   ○ Since cookies can be viewed, changed, deleted, stolen, etc. care must be taken. Example:
     ■ session.user_id = "mendel";
     ■ session.password = "foobar";
   ○ Using cryptography you can:
     ■ Hide content from viewers, hackers
     ■ Detect forgeries and changes
     ■ Can't do much about deletions

● An alternative is to put a pointer to the session state in the cookie:

  Set-Cookie: session=0x4137fd6a; Expires=Wed, 09 Jun 2012 10:18:14 GMT

Less transfer overhead but still need to protect with cryptography
Options for storing session state

- **Web server's memory**
  - Fastest access
  - May be too large (many active users)
  - Makes load balancing across web servers hard

- **Storage system**
  - Easy shared across all the web servers
  - May be overkill: Don't need the super reliability of storage system
  - May be too much load for the storage system (Need on every request)

- **Specialized storage system**
  - Support fast fetching of small, short-lived data
  - Example: memcache, redis - in memory key-value stores
```javascript
var session = require('express-session');

● ExpressJS has a middleware layer for dealing with the session state
  ○ Stores a sessionID safely in a cookie
  ○ Store session state in a session state store
  ○ Like Rails, handles creation and fetching of session state for your request handlers

● Usage:

```javascript
app.use(session({secret: 'badSecret'}));
```

  secret is used to cryptographically sign the sessionID cookie

```javascript
app.get('/user/:user_id', function (httpRequest, httpResponse) ... 
  httpRequest.session is an object you can read or write
```
Express session usage example

- Login handler route can store into `httpRequest.session.user_id`
- All other handlers read `httpRequest.session.user_id`
  - If not set error or redirect to login page
  - Otherwise we know who is logged in

- Can put other per-session state in `httpRequest.session`

- On logged out you will want to destroy the session

  `httpRequest.session.destroy(function (err) { })`
Express Session: Session Store

- Default session store is in the Node.js memory
  - OK for development but not production
- Has session store backends for many storage systems
- Hooking up to MongoDB via Mongoose

```javascript
var MongoStore = require('connect-mongo')(express);
expressApp.use(session({
    store: new MongoStore({
        mongooseConnection: mongoose.connection
    })
}));
```
Cookie replacement: Web Storage API

- `sessionStorage` - Per origin storage available when page is open
- `localStorage` - Per origin storage with longer lifetime
- Standard key-value interface:
  ```javascript
  localStorage.appSetting = 'Anything';
  localStorage.setItem('appSetting', 'Anything');
  sessionStorage['app2Setting'] = 2;
  ```
- Limited space (~10MB) and similar reliability issues to cookies