XORP Design Overview

Version 1.5

XORP, Inc.
http://www.xorp.org/
feedback@xorp.org

July 22, 2008

1 Introduction

This document provides a brief overview of the XORP (eXtensible Open Router Platform) architecture. It is intended both for people who are interested in the architecture itself, and as a starting point for developers who wish to modify the software. People who are interested in the XORP multicast routing architecture should read also [8].

1.1 XORP Motivation

A gap exists between network research and Internet practice due to the nature of the Internet router software business. It is really hard for researchers to introduce new protocols and mechanisms into operational networks, and to study existing protocols in the wild. The primary goal of XORP is to fill this gap. To succeed it must be both a research tool and a stable deployment platform that can be used in production networks. It must also place a strong emphasis on extensibility, while coping with the impact of this on robustness, security and performance.

For more details about the XORP design *philosophy*, see [2].

2 Target

The goal for XORP is to become a suitable software platform that can be used as the core of practically any router. However, the *initial* focus is on an edge router running on commodity PC hardware with relatively low port density and moderate size routing tables [1].

However, given the flexibility of the XORP architecture, in the future we should not be limited to edge-router scenarios or PC hardware. For example:

- We can easily imagine using multiple PCs as forwarding engines, with a single control element. This would allow greater port density.
- Another useful target would be a PC with a number of network processors (*e.g.,* Intel IXP 2800) doing the bulk of the forwarding.

[1] A comparable production router might be a Cisco 7206VXR (or pretty much anything smaller than this).

- Finally, in the long run, the code base might be run the control processor of high-performance ASIC-based routers.

3 Functionality

XORP is designed to support both IPv4 and IPv6. Below is our initial target list of protocols and features to be supported by XORP. Those in bold are already implemented or supported to some degree. Not all of the implemented features have been tested yet.

Unicast Routing Protocols

- **BGP4+** (**IPv4** and **IPv6**)
- **OSPFv2 (IPv4)**, **OSPFv3 (IPv6)**
- **RIPv2 (IPv4)**, **RIPng (IPv6)**
- IS-IS

Multicast Routing Protocols

- **PIM-SM, PIM-SSM**, Bidir-PIM (**IPv4** and **IPv6**)
- **IGMPv1, v2, v3** (**IPv4**)
- **MLDv1, v2** (**IPv6**)

Network Management

- **Command Line Interface** (similar to Juniper)
- **SNMP**
- WWW

Forwarding Path

- **Traditional UNIX forwarding path**
- **Click forwarding path**
- **Windows Server 2003 forwarding path**
- User-level simulation-like environment

Miscellaneous

- **Routing policies** (**unicast** and multicast)

4 Architecture

4.1 Design Philosophy

The XORP design philosophy stresses *extensibility*, *performance* and *robustness*.

For routing and management modules, the primary goals are extensibility and robustness. These goals are achieved by carefully separating functionality into independent modules, running in separate UNIX processes, with well-defined APIs between them. Clearly, there are performance penalties to pay for such an architecture, but we believe that so long as careful attention is paid to computational complexity, the costs associated with inter-process communication will be acceptable given the obvious extensibility and robustness benefits.

For the forwarding path, the primary goals are extensibility and performance. Robustness here is primarily achieved through simplicity and a modular design that encourages re-use of well-tested components.

4.2 Design Overview

XORP can be divided into two subsystems. The higher-level ("user-space") subsystem consists of the routing protocols and management mechanisms. The lower-level ("kernel") provides the forwarding path, and provides APIs for the higher-level to access.

User-level XORP uses a multi-process architecture with one process per routing protocol, and a novel inter-process communication mechanism known as XORP Resource Locators (XRLs) [5]. XRL communication is not limited to a single host, and so XORP can in principle run in a distributed fashion. For example, we can have a distributed router, with the forwarding engine running on one machine, and each of the routing protocols that update that forwarding engine running on a separate control processor system.

The lower-level subsystem can use traditional UNIX kernel forwarding, the Click modular router [1] or Windows kernel forwarding (Windows Server 2003). The modularity and minimal dependencies between the lower-level and user-level subsystems allow for many future possibilities for forwarding engines. As standards such as those being developed in the IETF ForCES Working Group emerge, we expect to support them to provide true forwarding engine interchangeability.

Figure 1 shows the processes in XORP, although it should be noted that some of these modules use separate processes to handle IPv4 and IPv6. For simplicity, the arrows show only the main communication flows used for routing information. Control flows are not shown - for example, the FEA may need to inform the routing processes when an interface goes down. These processes are further described in Section 4.3.

We should note that even though our design philosophy is that each XORP component in Figure 1 will run as a separate process, it would also be possible to compile most of them together to run as one single process. Obviously, the robustness of such a router would suffer because the crash of a single component would bring down the whole router. However, the XORP architecture is designed to be flexible, and other developers building on this software can choose to use it in different ways.

4.3 XORP Processes Description

4.3.1 FEA (Forwarding Engine Abstraction)

The FEA provides a platform independent interface to the basic routing and network interface management functionality. For example, get or set information about network interfaces, install or modify unicast forwarding entries, multicast routing support, etc.

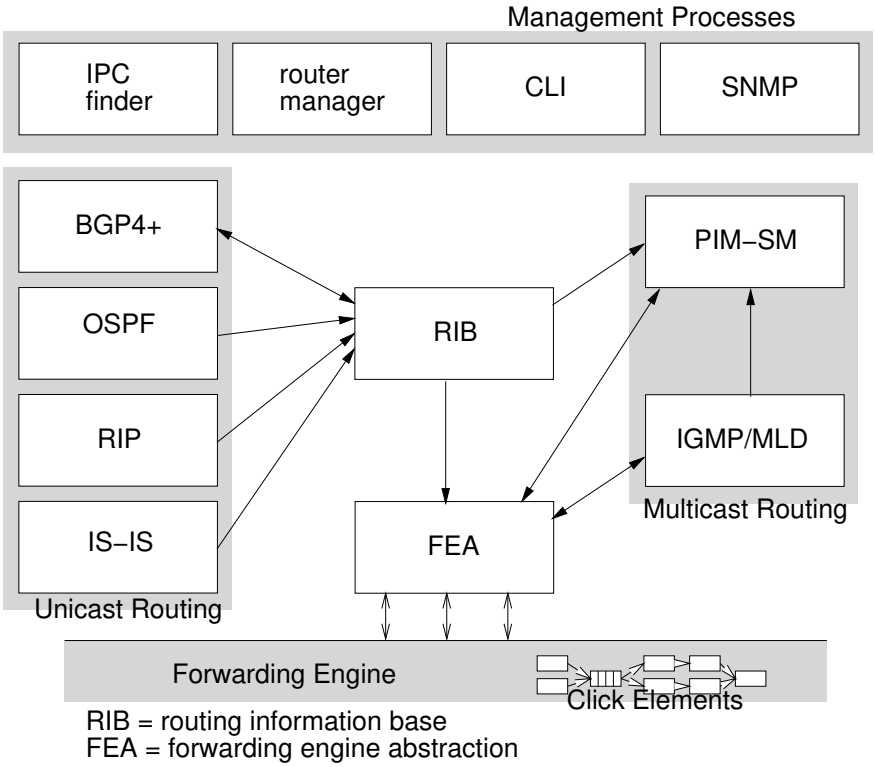

Figure 1: XORP Process Model

If the router is distributed, in the sense that some Forwarding Engines (FEs) are not in the same chassis as the control software, then the FEA will also handle control communications with the remote FEs. Note that, strictly speaking, it is not required that all communication with the FE must go through the FEA. For example, Click modules can communicate directly with a user-space process. However, the FEA abstracts all the details about the underlying system from the user-level XORP processes; therefore by using the common API provided by the FEA we can greatly simplify the rest of the XORP components.

Note that the multicast-related functionalities are logically separated from the unicast-based functionalities in the MFEA (Multicast Forwarding Engine Abstraction), though the MFEA is part of the FEA process.

For more information about the FEA see [4]. For more information about the MFEA see [7].

4.3.2 RIB (Routing Information Base)

The RIB holds a user-space copy of the entire routing/forwarding table, complete with information about where each route came from (*e.g.,* which protocol, and when). It communicates with the routing protocols such as BGP, RIP and OSPF to instantiate routes, and with the FEA to install the appropriate forwarding entries in the FEs.

The RIB also holds the routing information for multicast-capable routes (MRIB) to be used for multicast Reverse-Path Forwarding (RPF) information. For example, PIM-SM uses the MRIB information to route joins/prunes and to determine the RPF interface for sources and for RPs.

The MRIB is populated by whatever "unicast" protocol is used to provide multicast capable path information. Typically this is MBGP for inter-domain paths, where it is possible to tell the difference between unicast-capable and multicast-capable routers. For intra-domain routing, this usually is the regular unicast FIB information.

Note that for unicast, routing and forwarding tables are practically the same. In case of multicast, the RIB provides the RPF information, while the forwarding information (the incoming and outgoing interfaces) is computed by the particular multicast routing protocol. The multicast forwarding information is kept by the multicast routing protocol itself, and installed directly through the FEA. In the future, when there is more than one multicast routing protocols, XORP may have the multicast equivalent of RIB that would be responsible for coordinating among the different multicast routing protocols running on the same router.

On a router with multiple FEs, the RIB is responsible for splitting up the routing table amongst the FEs and for figuring out how to forward between FEs.

For more information about the RIB see [11].

4.3.3 BGP4+

This is the BGP routing daemon. It implements IPv4 and IPv6 unicast routing in a single process, as well as MBGP for both IPv4 and IPv6 multicast RIBs for multicast routing purpose.

For more information about the XORP BGP implementation, see [3].

4.3.4 OSPF

This is the OSPF routing daemon. There are separate IPv4 and IPv6 daemons, because unlike BGP there is no real need to tie them together.

4.3.5 RIP

This is the RIP routing daemon. Similarly to OSPF, the IPv4 and IPv6 daemons are separate.

4.3.6 MLD/IGMP

This is Multicast Listener Discovery/Internet Group Management Protocol handler. It implements the router-side part of MLD and IGMP. Its main purpose is to discover local multicast members and propagate this information to multicast routing daemons such as PIM-SM. Similar to OSPF and RIP, the IGMP (IPv4) and MLD (IPv6) daemons are separate.

For more information about the XORP MLD/IGMP implementation see [6].

4.3.7 PIM-SM

This is the PIM-SM multicast routing daemon. Similar to OSPF and RIP, the PIM-SM IPv4 and IPv6 daemons are separate. The PIM-SM protocol requires information about local multicast members, and Reverse-Path Forwarding to operate properly. The former is obtained from the IGMP/MLD process; the latter is obtained from the RIB.

For more information about the XORP PIM-SM implementation see [9].

4.3.8 RTRMGR: XORP Router Manager

The *rtrmgr* is the process responsible for starting all components of the router, to configure each of them, and to monitor and restart any failing process. It also provides the interface for the CLI to change the router configuration.

For more information about the *rtrmgr* see [10].

4.3.9 CLI: Command Line Interface

The CLI can be used by an user to access the router, view its internal state, or to configure it on-the-fly. Its functionality is closely related to the *rtrmgr*. However, because the robustness of the *rtrmgr* itself is extremely important, all functionality that can be run as a separate CLI process are separated from the *rtrmgr*. The process implementing this CLI functionality is called *xorpsh*.

For more information about the CLI and the xorpsh process see [10].

4.3.10 Inter-Process Communication Finder

The IPC finder is needed by the communication method used among all XORP components, *i.e.,* the XRLs. Each of the XORP components registers with the IPC finder. The finder assists the XRL communications (more specifically, it knows the location of each XRL target), therefore a XORP process does not need to know explicitly the location of all other processes, or how to communicate with them. The router manager process (*rtrmgr*) incorporates a finder, so a separate finder process is only needed if the *rtrmgr* is not being used such as during testing.

For more information about the IPC finder and XRLs see [5] and [12].

4.3.11 SNMP

This is the SNMP management process. It is used for SNMP access to the router. For example, it can be used to translate SNMP requests into XRL requests. Internally, SNMP will communicate with the other processes using XRLs.

4.3.12 Routing Policies

This is the routing policies coordination process. [2] It interacts with all routing protocols and RIB and instructs them how the handle the routes flowing to the system: export routes from one protocol to another, modify or remove routes as they flow through the system, etc. Currently only unicast routing policies are supported.

A Modification History

- December 11, 2002: Initial version 0.1 completed.
- March 10, 2003: Updated to match XORP release 0.2: Miscellaneous cleanup.
- June 9, 2003: Updated to match XORP release 0.3: Miscellaneous cleanup.
- August 28, 2003: Updated to match XORP release 0.4: SNMP is implemented.
- November 6, 2003: Updated to match XORP release 0.5: BGP supports IPv6.
- July 8, 2004: Updated to match XORP release 1.0: RIP and RIPng are implemented.
- April 13, 2005: Updated to match XORP release 1.1: Added support for Click forwarding path.
- March 8, 2006: Updated to match XORP release 1.2: OSPF is implemented. Added support for routing policy. Added support for Windows forwarding path.
- August 2, 2006: Updated to match XORP release 1.3: IGMPv3 and MLDv2 are implemented.
- March 20, 2007: Updated to match XORP release 1.4: OSPFv3 is implemented.
- July 22, 2008: Updated to match XORP release 1.5: No significant changes.

References

[1] The Click Modular Router Project. http://www.read.cs.ucla.edu/click/.

[2] Mark Handley, Orion Hodson, and Eddie Kohler. XORP: An Open Platform for Network Research. In *Proceedings of HotNets-I Workshop*, Princeton, New Jersey, USA, October 2002.

[3] XORP BGP Routing Daemon. XORP technical document. http://www.xorp.org/.

[4] XORP Forwarding Engine Abstraction. XORP technical document. http://www.xorp.org/.

[5] XORP Inter-Process Communication Library. XORP technical document. http://www.xorp.org/.

[6] XORP MLD/IGMP Daemon. XORP technical document. http://www.xorp.org/.

[7] XORP Multicast Forwarding Engine Abstraction. XORP technical document. http://www.xorp.org/.

[8] XORP Multicast Routing Design Architecture. XORP technical document. http://www.xorp.org/.

[2] This process is not shown in Figure 1 for simplicity purpose.

[9] XORP PIM-SM Routing Daemon. XORP technical document. http://www.xorp.org/.

[10] XORP Router Manager Process (rtrmgr). XORP technical document. http://www.xorp.org/.

[11] XORP Routing Information Base (RIB) Process. XORP technical document. http://www.xorp.org/.

[12] XRL Interfaces: Specification and Tools. XORP technical document. http://www.xorp.org/.