From Processes to Threads

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Portions courtesy Emmett Witchel

Processes, Threads and Processors

- Hardware can execute N instruction streams at once
  - Uniprocessor, N=1
  - Dual-core, N=2
  - Sun's Niagara T2 (2007) N == 64, but 8 groups of 8
- An OS can run 1 process on each processor at the same time
  - Concurrent execution increases performance
- An OS can run 1 thread on each processor at the same time

Processes and Threads

- Process abstraction combines two concepts
  - Concurrency
    - Each process is a sequential execution stream of instructions
  - Protection
    - Each process defines an address space
    - Address space identifies all addresses that can be touched by the program
- Threads
  - Key idea: separate the concepts of concurrency from protection
  - A thread is a sequential execution stream of instructions
  - A process defines the address space that may be shared by multiple threads
  - Threads can execute on different cores on a multicore CPU (parallelism for performance) and can communicate with other threads by updating memory

Example Redux

Virtual Address Space

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>hello</th>
<th>heap</th>
<th>stk1</th>
<th>stk2</th>
<th>libc.so</th>
<th>Linux</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0x00000000</td>
<td>0xffffffff</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

t 2 threads requires 2 stacks in the process
No problem!
Kernel can schedule each thread separately
- Possibly on 2 CPUs
- Requires some extra bookkeeping

The Case for Threads

Consider the following code fragment
for(k = 0; k < n; k++)
a[k] = b[k] * d[k] + d[k] * e[k];

Is there a missed opportunity here? On a Uni-processor?
On a Multi-processor?

The Case for Threads

Consider a Web server
get network message (URL) from client
get URL data from disk
compose response
send response

How well does this web server perform?
void fn1(int arg0, int arg1, ...){...}
main(){
    tid = CreateThread(fn1, arg0, arg1, ...);
    ...
}  
At the point CreateThread is called, execution continues in parent thread in main function, and execution starts at fn1 in the child thread, both in parallel (concurrently)

A thread represents an abstract entity that executes a sequence of instructions
- It has its own set of CPU registers
- It has its own stack
- There is no thread-specific heap or data segment (unlike process)
- Threads are lightweight
  - Creating a thread more efficient than creating a process.
  - Communication between threads easier than btw. processes.
  - Context switching between threads requires fewer CPU cycles and memory references than switching processes.
  - Threads only track a subset of process state (share list of open files, pid, ...)
- Examples:
  - OS-supported: Windows' threads, Sun’s LWP, POSIX threads
  - Language-supported: Modula-3, Java
  - These are possibly going the way of the Dodo

Context switch time for which entity is greater?
1. Process
2. Thread

How Can it Help?
- How can this code take advantage of 2 threads?
  for(k = 0; k < n; k++)
    a[k] = b[k] * d[k] + db[k] * a[k];
- Rewrite this code fragment as:
  do_mult(l, m){
    for(k = l; k < m; k++)
      a[k] = b[k] * d[k] + db[k] * a[k];
  } main(){
    CreateThread(do_mult, 0, n/2);
    CreateThread(do_mult, n/2, n);
- What did we gain?

How Can it Help?
- Consider a Web server
  Create a number of threads, and for each thread do
    - get network message from client
    - get URL data from disk
    - send data over network
- What did we gain?

Overlapping Requests (Concurrency)

Time
- Total time is less than request 1 + request 2
**Why threads? (summary)**
- Computation that can be divided into concurrent chunks
  - Same Instruction (or operation), Multiple Data (SIMD – easy)
  - Harder to identify parallelism in more complex cases
- Overlapping blocking I/O with computation
  - If my web server blocks on I/O for one client, why not work on another client’s request in a separate thread?
- Other abstractions we won’t cover (e.g., events)

**Threads have their own...?**
1. CPU
2. Address space
3. PCB
4. Stack
5. Registers

**Threads vs. Processes**
- **Threads**
  - A thread has no data segment or heap
  - A thread cannot live on its own; it must live within a process
  - There can be more than one thread in a process, and the first thread calls main & has the process’s stack
  - If a thread dies, its stack is reclaimed
  - Inter-thread communication via memory
  - Each thread can run on a different physical processor
  - Inexpensive creation and context switch
- **Processes**
  - A process has code/data/heap & other segments
  - There must be at least one thread in a process
  - Threads within a process share code/data/heap, share I/O, but each has its own stack & registers
  - If a process dies, its resources are reclaimed & all threads die
  - Inter-process communication via OS and data copying
  - Each process can run on a different physical processor
  - Expensive creation and context switch

**Implementing Threads**
- Processes define an address space; threads share the address space
- Process Control Block (PCB) contains process-specific information
  - Owner, PID, heap pointer, priority, active thread, and pointer to thread information
- Thread Control Block (TCB) contains thread-specific information
  - Stack pointer, PC, thread state (running, ...), registers values, a pointer to PCB, ...

**Threads’ Life Cycle**
- Threads (just like processes) go through a sequence of start, ready, running, waiting, and done states

**Threads have the same scheduling states as processes**
1. True
2. False
- In fact, OSes generally schedule threads to CPUs, not processes
User-level vs. Kernel-level threads

- User-level threads (M to 1 model)
  - Fast to create and switch
  - Natural fit for language-level threads
  - Duplicate effort (2 thread schedulers)
    - The schedulers can fight with each other
  - All user-level threads in process block on OS calls
    - E.g., read from file can block all threads

- Kernel-level threads (1 to 1 model)
  - Kernel-level threads do not block process for syscall
  - Only one scheduler (and kernel has global view)
  - Can be difficult to make efficient (create & switch)

Languages vs. Systems

- Kernel-level threads have won for systems
  - Linux, Solaris 10, Windows
  - pthreads tend to be kernel-level threads
  - User-level threads still used in some Java runtimes
    - User tells JVM how many underlying system threads
    - Default: 1 system thread
    - Java runtime intercepts blocking calls, makes them non-blocking
    - JNI code that makes blocking system calls can block JVM
      - JVMs are phasing this out because kernel threads are efficient enough and intercepting system calls is complicated

- Kernel-level thread vs. process
  - Each process requires its own page table & hardware state
    - Significant on the x86

Editorial on User vs. Kernel threads

- There is a 25+ year history of debating user vs. kernel threads
  - These discussions are couched in grand principles
  - The real issue is simple: Performance!
    - If the kernel implementation of thread context switching is slow, everyone starts writing user-level thread packages
      - Java did this for a while
    - If the kernel implementation gets faster, everyone just uses kernel threads, since they are easier
      - Java does this now, Linux 2.6 overhauled its thread implementation

Latency and Throughput

- Latency: time to complete an operation
- Throughput: work completed per unit time
- Multiplying vector example: reduced latency
- Web server example: increased throughput
- Consider plumbing
  - Low latency: needed for interactive gaming
  - High bandwidth: needed for downloading large files
- What is "High speed Internet?"
  - High bandwidth: lots of water (e.g., to fill a pool)

Relationship between Latency and Throughput

- Latency and bandwidth only loosely coupled
  - Henry Ford: assembly lines increase bandwidth without reducing latency
  - My factory takes 1 day to make a Model-T ford.
    - But I can start building a new car every 10 minutes
    - At 24 hrs/day, I can make 24 * 6 = 144 cars per day
    - A special order for 1 green car, still takes 1 day
    - Throughput is increased, but latency is not.
- Latency reduction is difficult
  - Often, one can buy bandwidth
    - E.g., more memory chips, more disks, more computers
    - Big server farms (e.g., google) are high bandwidth

Latency, Throughput, and Threads

- Can threads improve throughput?
  - Yes, as long as there are parallel tasks and CPUs available
- Can threads improve latency?
  - Yes, especially when one task might block on another task's I/O
- Can threads harm throughput?
  - Yes, each thread gets a time slice.
  - If # threads >> # CPUs, the % of CPU time each thread gets approaches 0
- Can threads harm latency?
  - Yes, especially when requests are short and there is little I/O
Best Practices?

- For CPU-intensive work, applications generally create one thread per CPU
- For work with I/O, the number of threads is tuned to keep the CPU busy but not overloaded
  - E.g., 3 * # CPUs
  - Tuning effort often application-specific
- Applications like web servers often keep thread pools, or a set of n ready threads
  - New requests are assigned to an existing thread to avoid overloading the system
  - Plus, reduce setup/tear down costs!

Thread or Process Pool

- Creating a thread or process for each unit of work (e.g., user request) is dangerous
  - High overhead to create & delete threads/processes
  - Can exhaust CPU & memory resources
- Thread/process pool controls resource use
  - Allows service to be well conditioned.

When a user level thread does I/O it blocks the entire process.

1. True
2. False

Lecture Summary

- Understand the distinction between a process and thread
- Understand the motivation for threads
- Kernel vs. User threads
- Concepts of Throughput vs. Latency
- Thread pools