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**Linux Kernel Development Second Edition**

By Robert Love

**Publisher:** Sams Publishing

**Pub Date:** January 12, 2005

**ISBN:** 0-672-32720-1

**Pages:** 432

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The Linux kernel is one of the most interesting yet least understood open-source projects. It is also a basis for developing new kernel code. That is why Sams is excited to bring you the latest Linux kernel development information from a Novell insider in the second edition of *Linux Kernel Development*. This authoritative, practical guide will help you better understand the Linux kernel through updated coverage of all the major subsystems, new features associated with Linux 2.6 kernel and insider information on not-yet-released developments. You'll be able to take an in-depth look at Linux kernel from both a theoretical and an applied perspective as you cover a wide range of topics, including algorithms, system call interface, paging strategies and kernel synchronization. Get the top information right from the source in *Linux Kernel Development*.

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Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 2004095004

Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: January 2005

08 07 06 05 4 3 2 1

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## Dedication

*To Doris and Helen.*

# Foreword

As the Linux kernel and the applications that use it become more widely used, we are seeing an increasing number of system software developers who wish to become involved in the development and maintenance of Linux. Some of these engineers are motivated purely by personal interest, some work for Linux companies, some work for hardware manufacturers, and some are involved with in-house development projects.

But all face a common problem: The learning curve for the kernel is getting longer and steeper. The system is becoming increasingly complex, and it is very large. And as the years pass, the current members of the kernel development team gain deeper and broader knowledge of the kernel's internals, which widens the gap between them and newcomers.

I believe that this declining accessibility of the Linux source base is already a problem for the quality of the kernel, and it will become more serious over time. Those who care for Linux clearly have an interest in increasing the number of developers who can contribute to the kernel.

One approach to this problem is to keep the code clean: sensible interfaces, consistent layout, "do one thing, do it well," and so on. This is Linus Torvalds' solution.

The approach that I counsel is to liberally apply commentary to the code: words that the reader can use to understand what the coder intended to achieve at the time. (The process of identifying divergences between the intent and the implementation is known as debugging. It is hard to do this if the intent is not known.)

But even code commentary does not provide the broad-sweep view of what a major subsystem is intended to do, and how its developers set about doing it.

This, the starting point of understanding, is what the written word serves best.

Robert Love's contribution provides a means by which experienced developers can gain that essential view of what services the kernel subsystems are supposed to provide, and how they set about providing them. This will be sufficient knowledge for many people: the curious, the application developers, those who wish to evaluate the kernel's design, and others.

But the book is also a stepping stone to take aspiring kernel developers to the next stage, which is making alterations to the kernel to achieve some defined objective. I would encourage aspiring developers to get their hands dirty: The best way to understand a part of the kernel is to make changes to it. Making a change forces the developer to a level of understanding that merely reading the code does not provide. The serious kernel developer will join the development mailing lists and will interact with other developers. This is the primary means by which kernel contributors learn and stay abreast. Robert covers the mechanics and culture of this important part of kernel life well.

Please enjoy and learn from Robert's book. And should you decide to take the next step and become a member of the kernel development community, consider yourself welcomed in advance. We value and measure people by the usefulness of their contributions, and when you contribute to Linux, you do so in the knowledge that your work is of small but immediate benefit to tens or even hundreds of millions of human beings. This is a most enjoyable privilege and responsibility.

Andrew Morton  
Open Source Development Labs

# Preface

When I was first approached about converting my experiences with the Linux kernel into a book, I proceeded with trepidation. I did not want to write simply yet another kernel book. Sure, there are not *that many* books on the subject, but I still wanted my approach to be somehow unique. What would place my book at the top of its subject? I was not motivated unless I could do something special, a best-in-class work.

I then realized that I could offer quite a unique approach to the topic. My job is hacking the kernel. My hobby is hacking the kernel. My love is hacking the kernel. Over the years, I have surely accumulated interesting anecdotes and important tips. With my experiences, I could write a book on how to hack the kernel and more importantly how *not* to hack the kernel. Primarily, this is a book about the design and implementation of the Linux kernel. The book's approach differs from would-be competition, however, in that the information is given with a slant to learning enough to actually get work done and getting it done right. I am a pragmatic guy and this is a practical book. It should be fun, easy to read, and useful.

I hope that readers can walk away from this book with a better understanding of the rules (written and unwritten) of the kernel. I hope readers, fresh from reading this book and the kernel source code, can jump in and start writing useful, correct, clean kernel code. Of course, you can read this book just for fun, too.

That was the first edition. Time has passed, and now we return once more to the fray. This edition offers quite a bit over the first: intense polish and revision, updates, and many fresh sections and all new chapters. Changes in the kernel since the first edition have been recognized. More importantly, however, is the decision made by the Linux kernel community [1] to not proceed with a 2.7 development kernel in the near future. Instead, kernel developers plan to continue developing and stabilizing 2.6. This implies many things, but one big item of relevance to this book is that there is quite a bit of staying power in a recent book on the 2.6 Linux kernel. If things do not move too quickly, there is a greater chance of a captured snapshot of the kernel remaining relevant long into the future. A book can finally rise up and become the canonical documentation for the kernel. I hope that you are holding that book.

[1] This decision was made in the summer of 2004 at the annual Linux Kernel Developers Summit in Ottawa, Canada.

Anyhow, here it is. I hope you enjoy it.

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## So Here We Are

Developing code in the kernel does not require genius, magic, or a bushy Unix-hacker beard. The kernel, although having some interesting rules of its own, is not much different from any other large software endeavor. There is much to learn as with any big project but there is not too much about the kernel that is more sacred or confusing than anything else.

It is imperative that you utilize the source. The open availability of the source code for the Linux system is a rarity that we must not take for granted. It is not sufficient *only* to read the source, however. You need to dig in and change some code. Find a bug and fix it. Improve the drivers for your hardware. Find an itch and scratch it! Only when you *write* code will it all come together.

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## Kernel Version

This book is based on the 2.6 Linux kernel series. Specifically, it is up to date as of Linux kernel version 2.6.10. The kernel is a moving target and no book can hope to capture a dynamic beast in a timeless manner. Nonetheless, the basics and core internals of the kernel are mature and I work hard to present the material with an eye to the future and with as wide applicability as possible.

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## Audience

This book targets software developers who are interested in understanding the Linux kernel. It is *not* a line-by-line commentary of the kernel source. Nor is it a guide to developing drivers or a reference on the kernel API (as if there even were a formal kernel APIhah!). Instead, the goal of this book is to provide enough information on the design and implementation of the Linux kernel that a sufficiently accomplished programmer can begin developing code in the kernel. Kernel development can be fun and rewarding, and I want to introduce the reader to that world as readily as possible. This book, however, in discussing both theory and application, should appeal to readers of either interest. I have always been of the mind that one needs to understand the theory to understand the application, but I do not feel that this book leans too far in either direction. I hope that whatever your motivations for understanding the Linux kernel, this book will explain the design and implementation sufficiently for your needs.

Thus, this book covers both the usage of core kernel systems and their design and implementation. I think this is important, and deserves a moment's discussion. A good example is [Chapter 7](#), "Bottom Halves and Deferring Work," which covers bottom halves. In that chapter, I discuss both the design and implementation of the kernel's bottom-half mechanisms (which a core kernel developer might find interesting) and how to actually use the exported interfaces to implement your own bottom half (which a device driver developer might find interesting). In fact, I believe both parties should find both discussions relevant. The core kernel developer, who certainly needs to understand the inner workings of the kernel, should have a good understanding of how the interfaces are actually used. At the same time, a device driver writer will benefit from a good understanding of the implementation behind the interface.

This is akin to learning some library's API versus studying the actual implementation of the library. At first glance, an application programmer needs only to understand the APIit is often taught to treat interfaces as a black box, in fact. Likewise, a library developer is concerned only with the library's design and implementation. I believe, however, both parties should invest time in learning the other half. An application programmer who better understands the underlying operating system can make much greater use of it. Similarly, the library developer should not grow out of touch with the reality and practicality of the applications that use the library. Consequently, I discuss both the design and usage of kernel subsystems, not only in hopes that this book will be useful to either party, but also in hopes that the *whole* book is useful to both parties.

I assume that the reader knows the C programming language and is familiar with Linux. Some experience with operating system design and related computer science concepts is beneficial, but I try to explain concepts as much as possibleif not, there are some excellent books on operating system design referenced in the bibliography.

This book is appropriate for an undergraduate course introducing operating system design as the *applied* text if an introductory book on theory accompanies it. It should fare well either in an advanced undergraduate course or in a graduate-level course without ancillary material. I encourage potential instructors to contact me; I am eager to help.

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## Book Website

I maintain a website at [http://tech9.net/rml/kernel\\_book/](http://tech9.net/rml/kernel_book/) that contains information pertaining to the book, including errata, expanded and revised topics, and information on future printings and editions. I encourage readers to check it out. I also apologize profusely for the previous end-of-sentence preposition, it was uncalled for, but the revamped sentence was hard to read, it was confusing, and you deserve better.

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## Second Edition Acknowledgments

Like most authors, I did not write this book in a cave (which is a good thing, because there are bears in caves) and consequently many hearts and minds contributed to the completion of this manuscript. Although no list would be complete, it is my sincere pleasure to acknowledge the assistance of many friends and colleagues who provided encouragement, knowledge, and constructive criticism.

First off, I would like to thank all of the editors who worked long and hard to make this book better. I would particularly like to thank Scott Meyers, my acquisition editor, for spearheading this second edition from conception to final product. I had the wonderful pleasure of again working with George Nedeff, production editor, who kept everything in order. Extra special thanks to my copy editor, Margo Catts. We can all only hope that our command of the kernel is as good as her command of the written word.

A special thanks to my technical editors on this edition: Adam Belay, Martin Pool, and Chris Rivera. Their insight and corrections improved this book immeasurably. Despite their sterling efforts, however, any remaining mistakes are my own fault. The same big thanks to Zack Brown, whose awesome technical editing efforts on the first edition still resonate loudly.

Many fellow kernel developers answered questions, provided support, or simply wrote code interesting enough on which to write a book. They are Andrea Arcangeli, Alan Cox, Greg Kroah-Hartman, Daniel Phillips, Dave Miller, Patrick Mochel, Andrew Morton, Zwane Mwaikambo, Nick Piggin, and Linus Torvalds. Special thanks to the kernel cabal (there is no cabal).

Respect and love to Paul Amici, Scott Anderson, Mike Babbitt, Keith Barbag, Dave Camp, Dave Eggers, Richard Erickson, Nat Friedman, Dustin Hall, Joyce Hawkins, Miguel de Icaza, Jimmy Krehl, Patrick LeClair, Doris Love, Jonathan Love, Linda Love, Randy O'Dowd, Sal Ribaudo and mother, Chris Rivera, Joey Shaw, Jon Stewart, Jeremy VanDoren and family, Luis Villa, Steve Weisberg and family, and Helen Whisnant.

Finally, thank you to my parents, for so much.

Happy Hacking!

Robert Love  
Cambridge,  
Massachusetts

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## About the Author

**Robert Love** is an open source hacker who has used Linux since the early days. Robert is active in and passionate about both the Linux kernel and the GNOME communities. Robert currently works as Senior Kernel Engineer in the Ximian Desktop Group at Novell. Before that, he was a kernel engineer at MontaVista Software.

Robert's kernel projects include the preemptive kernel, the process scheduler, the kernel events layer, VM enhancements, and multiprocessing improvements. He is the author and maintainer of *schedutils* and *GNOME Volume Manager*.

Robert has given numerous talks on and has written multiple articles about the Linux kernel. He is a Contributing Editor for *Linux Journal*.

Robert received a B.A. in Mathematics and a B.S. in Computer Science from the University of Florida. Born in South Florida, Robert currently calls Cambridge, Massachusetts home. He enjoys college football, photography, and cooking.

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## We Want to Hear from You!

As the reader of this book, *you* are our most important critic and commentator. We value your opinion and want to know what we're doing right, what we could do better, in what areas you'd like to see us publish, and any other words of wisdom you're willing to pass our way.

You can email or write me directly to let me know what you did or didn't like about this book as well as what we can do to make our books better.

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# Chapter 1. Introduction to the Linux Kernel

After three decades of use, the unix operating system is still regarded as one of the most powerful and elegant systems in existence. Since the creation of Unix in 1969, the brainchild of Dennis Ritchie and Ken Thompson has become a creature of legends, a system whose design has withstood the test of time with few bruises to its name.

Unix grew out of Multics, a failed multiuser operating system project in which Bell Laboratories was involved. With the Multics project terminated, members of Bell Laboratories' Computer Sciences Research Center were left without a capable interactive operating system. In the summer of 1969, Bell Lab programmers sketched out a file system design that ultimately evolved into Unix. Testing their design, Thompson implemented the new system on an otherwise idle PDP-7. In 1971, Unix was ported to the PDP-11, and in 1973, the operating system was rewritten in C, an unprecedented step at the time, but one that paved the way for future portability. The first Unix widely used outside of Bell Labs was Unix System, Sixth Edition, more commonly called V6.

Other companies ported Unix to new machines. Accompanying these ports were enhancements that resulted in several variants of the operating system. In 1977, Bell Labs released a combination of these variants into a single system, Unix System III; in 1982, AT&T released System V<sup>[1]</sup>.

[1] What about System IV? The rumor is it was an internal development version.

The simplicity of Unix's design, coupled with the fact that it was distributed with source code, led to further development at outside organizations. The most influential of these contributors was the University of California at Berkeley. Variants of Unix from Berkeley are called Berkeley Software Distributions (BSD). The first Berkeley Unix was 3BSD in 1979. A series of 4BSD releases, 4.0BSD, 4.1BSD, 4.2BSD, and 4.3BSD, followed 3BSD. These versions of Unix added virtual memory, demand paging, and TCP/IP. In 1993, the final official Berkeley Unix, featuring a rewritten VM, was released as 4.4BSD. Today, development of BSD continues with the Darwin, Dragonfly BSD, FreeBSD, NetBSD, and OpenBSD systems.

In the 1980s and 1990s, multiple workstation and server companies introduced their own commercial versions of Unix. These systems were typically based on either an AT&T or Berkeley release and supported high-end features developed for their particular hardware architecture. Among these systems were Digital's Tru64, Hewlett Packard's HP-UX, IBM's AIX, Sequent's DYNIX/ptx, SGI's IRIX, and Sun's Solaris.

The original elegant design of the Unix system, along with the years of innovation and evolutionary improvement that followed, have made Unix a powerful, robust, and stable operating system. A handful of characteristics of Unix are responsible for its resilience. First, Unix is simple: Whereas some operating systems implement thousands of system calls and have unclear design goals, Unix systems typically implement only hundreds of system calls and have a very clear design. Next, in Unix, *everything is a file*<sup>[2]</sup>. This simplifies the manipulation of data and devices into a set of simple system calls: `open()`, `read()`, `write()`, `ioctl()`, and `close()`. In addition, the Unix kernel and related system utilities are written in C a property that gives Unix its amazing portability and accessibility to a wide range of developers. Next, Unix has fast process creation time and the unique `fork()` system call. This encourages strongly partitioned systems without gargantuan multi-threaded monstrosities. Finally, Unix provides simple yet robust interprocess communication (IPC) primitives that, when coupled with the fast process creation time, allow for the creation of simple utilities that *do one thing and do it well*, and that can be strung together to accomplish more complicated tasks.

[2] Well, okay, not everything but much is represented as a file. Modern operating systems, such as Unix's successor at Bell Labs, Plan9, implement nearly everything as a file.

Today, Unix is a modern operating system supporting multitasking, multithreading, virtual memory, demand paging, shared libraries with demand loading, and TCP/IP networking. Many Unix variants scale to hundreds of processors, whereas other Unix systems run on small, embedded devices. Although Unix is no longer a research project, Unix systems continue to benefit from advances in operating system design while they remain practical and general-purpose operating systems.

Unix owes its success to the simplicity and elegance of its design. Its strength today lies in the early decisions that Dennis Ritchie, Ken Thompson, and other early developers made: choices that have endowed Unix with the capability to evolve without compromising itself.

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## Along Came Linus: Introduction to Linux

Linux was developed by Linus Torvalds in 1991 as an operating system for computers using the Intel 80386 microprocessor, which at the time was a new and advanced processor. Linus, then a student at the University of Helsinki, was perturbed by the lack of a powerful yet free Unix system. Microsoft's DOS product was useful to Torvalds for little other than playing *Prince of Persia*. Linus did use Minix, a low-cost Unix created as a teaching aid, but he was discouraged by the inability to easily make and distribute changes to the system's source code (because of Minix's license) and by design decisions made by Minix's author.

In response to his predicament, Linus did what any normal, sane, college student would do: He decided to write his own operating system. Linus began by writing a simple terminal emulator, which he used to connect to larger Unix systems at his school. His terminal emulator evolved and improved. Before long, Linus had an immature but full-fledged Unix on his hands. He posted an early release to the Internet in late 1991.

For reasons that will be studied through all of time, use of Linux took off. Quickly, Linux gained many users. More important to its success, however, Linux quickly attracted many developers adding, changing, improving code. Because of its license terms, Linux quickly became a collaborative project developed by many.

Fast forward to the present. Today, Linux is a full-fledged operating system also running on AMD x86-64, ARM, Compaq Alpha, CRIS, DEC VAX, H8/300, Hitachi SuperH, HP PA-RISC, IBM S/390, Intel IA-64, MIPS, Motorola 68000, PowerPC, SPARC, UltraSPARC, and v850. It runs on systems as small as a watch to machines as large as room-filling super-computer clusters. Today, commercial interest in Linux is strong. Both new Linux-specific corporations, such as MontaVista and Red Hat, as well as existing powerhouses, such as IBM and Novell, are providing Linux-based solutions for embedded, desktop, and server needs.

Linux is a Unix clone, but it is not Unix. That is, although Linux borrows many ideas from Unix and implements the Unix API (as defined by POSIX and the Single Unix Specification) it is not a direct descendant of the Unix source code like other Unix systems. Where desired, it has deviated from the path taken by other implementations, but it has not compromised the general design goals of Unix or broken the application interfaces.

One of Linux's most interesting features is that it is not a commercial product; instead, it is a collaborative project developed over the Internet. Although Linus remains the creator of Linux and the *maintainer* of the kernel, progress continues through a loose-knit group of developers. In fact, anyone can contribute to Linux. The Linux kernel, as with much of the system, is *free* or *open source software*<sup>[3]</sup>. Specifically, the Linux kernel is licensed under the GNU General Public License (GPL) version 2.0. Consequently, you are free to download the source code and make any modifications you want. The only caveat is that if you distribute your changes, you must continue to provide the recipients with the same rights you enjoyed, including the availability of the source code<sup>[4]</sup>.

[3] I will leave the *free* versus *open* debate to you. See <http://www.fsf.org> and <http://www.opensource.org>.

[4] You should probably read the GNU GPL version 2.0 if you have not. There is a copy in the file COPYING in your kernel source tree. You can also find it online at <http://www.fsf.org>.

Linux is many things to many people. The basics of a Linux system are the kernel, C library, compiler, toolchain, and basic system utilities, such as a login process and shell. A Linux system can also include a modern X Window System implementation including a full-featured desktop environment, such as GNOME. Thousands of free and commercial applications exist for Linux. In this book, when I say *Linux* I typically mean the *Linux kernel*. Where it is ambiguous, I try explicitly to point out whether I am referring to *Linux* as a full system or just the kernel proper. Strictly speaking, after all, the term *Linux* refers to only the kernel.

## Overview of Operating Systems and Kernels

Because of the ever-growing feature set and ill design of some modern commercial operating systems, the notion of what precisely defines an operating system is vague. Many users consider whatever they see on the screen to be the operating system. Technically speaking, and in this book, the *operating system* is considered the parts of the system responsible for basic use and administration. This includes the kernel and device drivers, boot loader, command shell or other user interface, and basic file and system utilities. It is the stuff you *need* not a web browser or music players. The term *system*, in turn, refers to the operating system and all the applications running on top of it.

Of course, the topic of this book is the *kernel*. Whereas the user interface is the outermost portion of the operating system, the kernel is the innermost. It is the core internals; the software that provides basic services for all other parts of the system, manages hardware, and distributes system resources. The kernel is sometimes referred to as the *supervisor*, *core*, or *internals* of the operating system. Typical components of a kernel are interrupt handlers to service interrupt requests, a scheduler to share processor time among multiple processes, a memory management system to manage process address spaces, and system services such as networking and interprocess communication. On modern systems with protected memory management units, the kernel typically resides in an elevated system state compared to normal user applications. This includes a protected memory space and full access to the hardware. This system state and memory space is collectively referred to as *kernel-space*. Conversely, user applications execute in *user-space*. They see a subset of the machine's available resources and are unable to perform certain system functions, directly access hardware, or otherwise misbehave (without consequences, such as their death, anyhow). When executing the kernel, the system is in kernel-space executing in kernel mode, as opposed to normal user execution in user-space executing in user mode. Applications running on the system communicate with the kernel via *system calls* (see [Figure 1.1](#)). An application typically calls functions in a library for example, the C library that in turn rely on the system call interface to instruct the kernel to carry out tasks on their behalf. Some library calls provide many features not found in the system call, and thus, calling into the kernel is just one step in an otherwise large function. For example, consider the familiar `printf()` function. It provides formatting and buffering of the data and only eventually calls `write()` to write the data to the console. Conversely, some library calls have a one-to-one relationship with the kernel. For example, the `open()` library function does nothing except call the `open()` system call. Still other C library functions, such as `strcpy()`, should (you hope) make no use of the kernel at all. When an application executes a system call, it is said that the *kernel is executing on behalf of the application*. Furthermore, the application is said to be *executing a system call in kernel-space*, and the kernel is running in *process context*. This relationship that applications *call into* the kernel via the system call interface is the fundamental manner in which applications get work done.

**Figure 1.1. Relationship between applications, the kernel, and hardware.**





The kernel also manages the system's hardware. Nearly all architectures, including all systems that Linux supports, provide the concept of *interrupts*. When hardware wants to communicate with the system, it issues an interrupt that asynchronously interrupts the kernel. Interrupts are identified by a number. The kernel uses the number to execute a specific *interrupt handler* to process and respond to the interrupt. For example, as you type, the keyboard controller issues an interrupt to let the system know that there is new data in the keyboard buffer. The kernel notes the interrupt number being issued and executes the correct interrupt handler. The interrupt handler processes the keyboard data and lets the keyboard controller know it is ready for more data. To provide synchronization, the kernel can usually disable interruptseither all interrupts or just one specific interrupt number. In many operating systems, including Linux, the interrupt handlers do not run in a process context. Instead, they run in a special *interrupt context* that is not associated with any process. This special context exists solely to let an interrupt handler quickly respond to an interrupt, and then exit.

These contexts represent the breadth of the kernel's activities. In fact, in Linux, we can generalize that each processor is doing one of three things at any given moment:

- In kernel-space, in process context, executing on behalf of a specific process
- In kernel-space, in interrupt context, not associated with a process, handling an interrupt
- In user-space, executing user code in a process

This list is inclusive. Even corner cases fit into one of these three activities: For example, when idle, it turns out that the kernel is executing an *idle process* in process context in the kernel.

## Linux Versus Classic Unix Kernels

Owing to their common ancestry and same API, modern Unix kernels share various design traits. With few exceptions, a Unix kernel is typically a monolithic static binary. That is, it exists as a large single-executable image that runs in a single address space. Unix systems typically require a system with a paged memory-management unit; this hardware enables the system to enforce memory protection and to provide a unique virtual address space to each process.

See the bibliography for my favorite books on the design of the classic Unix kernels.

### Monolithic Kernel Versus Microkernel Designs

Operating kernels can be divided into two main design camps: the monolithic kernel and the microkernel. (A third camp, exokernel, is found primarily in research systems but is gaining ground in real-world use.)

Monolithic kernels involve the simpler design of the two, and all kernels were designed in this manner until the 1980s. Monolithic kernels are implemented entirely as single large processes running entirely in a single address space. Consequently, such kernels typically exist on disk as single static binaries. All kernel services exist and execute in the large kernel address space. Communication within the kernel is trivial because everything runs in kernel mode in the same address space: The kernel can invoke functions directly, as a user-space application might. Proponents of this model cite the simplicity and performance of the monolithic approach. Most Unix systems are monolithic in design.

Microkernels, on the other hand, are not implemented as single large processes. Instead, the functionality of the kernel is broken down into separate processes, usually called *servers*. Ideally, only the servers *absolutely* requiring such capabilities run in a privileged execution mode. The rest of the servers run in user-space. All the servers, though, are kept separate and run in different address spaces. Therefore, direct function invocation as in monolithic kernels is not possible. Instead, communication in microkernels is handled via *message passing*: An interprocess communication (IPC) mechanism is built into the system, and the various servers communicate and invoke "services" from each other by sending messages over the IPC mechanism. The separation of the various servers prevents a failure in one server from bringing down another.

Likewise, the modularity of the system allows one server to be swapped out for another. Because the IPC mechanism involves quite a bit more overhead than a trivial function call, however, and because a context switch from kernel-space to user-space or vice versa may be involved, message passing includes a latency and throughput hit not seen on monolithic kernels with simple function invocation. Consequently, all practical microkernel-based systems now place most or all the servers in kernel-space, to remove the overhead of frequent context switches and potentially allow for direct function invocation. The Windows NT kernel and Mach (on which part of Mac OS X is based) are examples of microkernels. Neither Windows NT nor Mac OS X run any microkernel servers in user-space in their latest versions, defeating the primary purpose of microkernel designs altogether.

Linux is a monolithic kernel that is, the Linux kernel executes in a single address space entirely in kernel mode. Linux, however, borrows much of the good from microkernels: Linux boasts a modular design with kernel preemption, support for kernel threads, and the capability to dynamically load separate binaries (kernel modules) into the kernel. Conversely, Linux has none of the performance-sapping features that curse microkernel designs: Everything runs in kernel mode, with direct function invocation not message passing the method of communication. Yet Linux is modular, threaded, and the kernel itself is schedulable. Pragmatism wins again.

As Linus and other kernel developers contribute to the Linux kernel, they decide how best to advance Linux without neglecting its Unix roots (and more importantly, the Unix API). Consequently, because Linux is not based on any specific Unix, Linus and company are able to pick and choose the best solution to any given problem at times, invent new solutions! Here is an analysis of characteristics that differ between the Linux kernel and other Unix variants:

- Linux supports the dynamic loading of kernel modules. Although the Linux kernel is monolithic, it is capable of dynamically loading and unloading kernel code on demand.
- Linux has symmetrical multiprocessor (SMP) support. Although many commercial variants of Unix now support SMP, most traditional Unix implementations did not.
- The Linux kernel is preemptive. Unlike traditional Unix variants, the Linux kernel is capable of preempting a task even if it is running in the kernel. Of the other commercial Unix implementations, Solaris and IRIX have preemptive kernels, but most traditional Unix kernels are not preemptive.
- Linux takes an interesting approach to thread support: It does not differentiate between threads and normal processes. To the kernel, all processes are the same—some just happen to share resources.
- Linux provides an object-oriented device model with device classes, hotpluggable events, and a user-space device filesystem (sysfs).
- Linux ignores some common Unix features that are thought to be poorly designed, such as STREAMS, or standards that are brain dead.
- Linux is free in every sense of the word. The feature set Linux implements is the result of the freedom of Linux's open development model. If a feature is without merit or poorly thought out, Linux developers are under no obligation to implement it. To the contrary, Linux has adopted an elitist attitude toward changes: Modifications must solve a specific real-world problem, have a sane design, and have a clean implementation. Consequently, features of some other modern Unix variants, such as pageable kernel memory, have received no consideration.

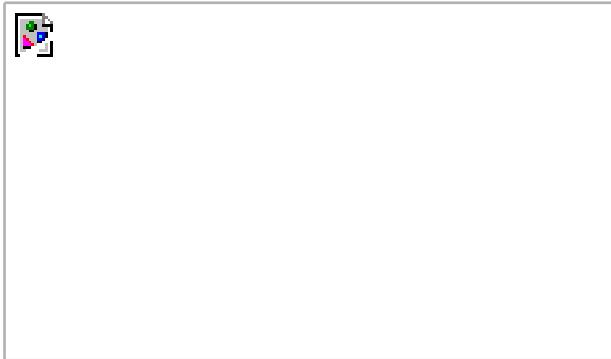
Despite any differences, Linux remains an operating system with a strong Unix heritage.

## Linux Kernel Versions

Linux kernels come in two flavors: stable or development. Stable kernels are production-level releases suitable for widespread deployment. New stable kernel versions are released typically only to provide bug fixes or new drivers. Development kernels, on the other hand, undergo rapid change where (almost) anything goes. As developers experiment with new solutions, often-drastic changes to the kernel are made.

Linux kernels distinguish between stable and development kernels with a simple naming scheme (see [Figure 1.2](#)). Three numbers, each separated by a dot, represent Linux kernels. The first value is the major release, the second is the minor release, and the third is the revision. The minor release also determines whether the kernel is a stable or development kernel; an even number is stable, whereas an odd number is development. Thus, for example, the kernel version 2.6.0 designates a stable kernel. This kernel has a major version of two, has a minor version of six, and is revision zero. The first two values also describe the "kernel series" in this case, the 2.6 kernel series.

**Figure 1.2. Kernel version naming convention.**



Development kernels have a series of phases. Initially, the kernel developers work on new features and chaos ensues. Over time, the kernel matures and eventually a feature freeze is declared. At that point, no new features can be submitted. Work on existing features, however, can continue. After the kernel is considered nearly stabilized, a code freeze is put into effect. When that occurs, only bug fixes are accepted. Shortly thereafter (one hopes), the kernel is released as the first version of a new stable series. For example, the development series 1.3 stabilized into 2.0 and 2.5 stabilized into 2.6.

### Everything I just told you is a lie

Well, not exactly. Technically speaking, the previous description of the kernel development process is true. Indeed, historically the process has proceeded exactly as described. In the summer of 2004, however, at the annual invite-only Linux Kernel Developers Summit, a decision was made to prolong the development of the 2.6 kernel without introducing a 2.7 development series in the near future. The decision was made because the 2.6 kernel is well

received, it is generally stable, and no large intrusive features are on the horizon. Additionally, perhaps most importantly, the current 2.6 maintainer system that exists between Linus Torvalds and Andrew Morton is working out exceedingly well. The kernel developers believe that this process can continue in such a way that the 2.6 kernel series both remains stable and receives new features. Only time will tell, but so far, the results look good.

This book is based on the 2.6 stable kernel series.

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## The Linux Kernel Development Community

When you begin developing code for the Linux kernel, you become a part of the global kernel development community. The main forum for this community is the *Linux kernel mailing list*. Subscription information is available at<http://vger.kernel.org>. Note that this is a high-traffic list with upwards of 300 messages a day and that the other readers which include all the core kernel developers, including Linus are not open to dealing with nonsense. The list is, however, a priceless aid during development because it is where you will find testers, receive peer review, and ask questions.

Later chapters provide an overview of the kernel development process and a more complete description of participating successfully in the kernel development community.

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## Before We Begin

This book is about the Linux kernel: how it works, why it works, and why you should care. It covers the design and implementation of the core kernel subsystems as well as the interfaces and programming semantics. The book is practical, and takes a middle road between theory and practice when explaining how all this stuff works. This approachcoupled with some personal anecdotes and tips on kernel hackingshould ensure that this book gets you off the ground running.

I hope you have access to a Linux system and have the kernel source. Ideally, by this point, you are a Linux user and have been poking and prodding at the source, but require some help making it all come together. Conversely, you might never have used Linux but just want to learn the design of the kernel out of curiosity. However, if your desire is to write some code of your own, there is no substitute for the source. The source code is *freely* available; use it!

Oh, and above all else, *have fun!*

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## Chapter 2. Getting Started with the Kernel

In this chapter, we introduce some of the Basics of the Linux kernel: where to get its source, how to compile it, and how to install the new kernel. We then go over some kernel assumptions, differences between the kernel and user-space programs, and common methods used in the kernel.

The kernel has some intriguing differences over other beasts, but certainly nothing that cannot be tamed. Let's tackle it.

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## Obtaining the Kernel Source

The current Linux source code is always available in both a complete tarball and an incremental patch from the official home of the Linux kernel, <http://www.kernel.org>.

Unless you have a specific reason to work with an older version of the Linux source, you *always* want the latest code. The repository at [kernel.org](http://kernel.org) is the place to get it, along with additional patches from a number of leading kernel developers.

## Installing the Kernel Source

The kernel tarball is distributed in both GNU zip (gzip) and bzip2 format. Bzip2 is the default and preferred format, as it generally compresses quite a bit better than gzip. The Linux kernel tarball in bzip2 format is named `linux-x.y.z.tar.bz2`, where `x.y.z` is the version of that particular release of the kernel source. After downloading the source, uncompressed and untarring it is simple. If your tarball is compressed with bzip2, run

```
$ tar xvjf linux-x.y.z.tar.bz2
```

If it is compressed with GNU zip, run

```
$ tar xvzf linux-x.y.z.tar.gz
```

This uncompresses and untars the source to the directory `linux-x.y.z`.

### Where to Install and Hack on the Source

The kernel source is typically installed in `/usr/src/linux`. Note that you should not use this source tree for development. The kernel version that your C library is compiled against is often linked to this tree. Besides, you do not want to have to be root to make changes to the kernel instead, work out of your home directory and use root only to install new kernels. Even when installing a new kernel, `/usr/src/linux` should remain untouched.

## Using Patches

Throughout the Linux kernel community, patches are the *lingua franca* of communication. You will distribute your code changes in patches as well as receive code from others as patches. More relevant to the moment is the *incremental patches* that are provided to move from one version of the kernel source to another. Instead of downloading each large tarball of the kernel source, you can simply apply an incremental patch to go from one version to the next. This saves everyone bandwidth and you time. To apply an incremental patch, from *inside* your kernel source tree, simply run

```
$ patch p1 < ../../patch-x.y.z
```

Generally, a patch to a given version of the kernel is applied against the previous version.

Generating and applying patches is discussed in much more depth in later chapters.

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## The Kernel Source Tree

The kernel source tree is divided into a number of directories, most of which contain many more subdirectories. The directories in the root of the source tree, along with their descriptions, are listed in [Table 2.1](#).

**Table 2.1. Directories in the Root of the Kernel Source Tree**

Directory	Description
arch	Architecture-specific source
crypto	Crypto API
Documentation	Kernel source documentation
drivers	Device drivers
fs	The VFS and the individual file systems
include	Kernel headers
init	Kernel boot and initialization
ipc	Interprocess communication code
kernel	Core subsystems, such as the scheduler
lib	Helper routines
mm	Memory management subsystem and the VM
net	Networking subsystem
scripts	Scripts used to build the kernel
security	Linux Security Module
sound	Sound subsystem
usr	Early user-space code (called initramfs)

A number of files in the root of the source tree deserve mention. The file COPYING is the kernel license (the GNU GPL v2). CREDITS is a listing of developers with a more than trivial amount of code in the kernel. MAINTAINERS lists the names of the individuals who maintain subsystems and drivers in the kernel. Finally, Makefile is the base kernel Makefile.

## Building the Kernel

Building the kernel is easy. In fact, it is surprisingly easier than compiling and installing other system-level components, such as glibc. The 2.6 kernel series introduces a new configuration and build system, which makes the job even easier and is a welcome improvement over 2.4.

Because the Linux source code is available, it follows that you are able to configure and custom tailor it before compiling. Indeed, it is possible to compile support into your kernel for just the features and drivers you require. Configuring the kernel is a required step before building it. Because the kernel offers a myriad of features and supports tons of varied hardware, there is a *lot* to configure. Kernel configuration is controlled by configuration options, which are prefixed by **CONFIG** in the form **CONFIG\_FEATURE**. For example, symmetrical multiprocessing (SMP) is controlled by the configuration option **CONFIG\_SMP**. If this option is set, SMP is enabled; if unset, SMP is disabled. The configure options are used both to decide which files to build and to manipulate code via preprocessor directives.

Configuration options that control the build process are either *Booleans* or *tristates*. A Boolean option is either *yes* or *no*. Kernel features, such as **CONFIG\_PREEMPT**, are usually Booleans. A tristate option is one of *yes*, *no*, or *module*. The *module* setting represents a configuration option that is set, but is to be compiled as a module (that is, a separate dynamically loadable object). In the case of tristates, a *yes* option explicitly means to compile the code into the main kernel image and not a module. Drivers are usually represented by tristates.

Configuration options can also be strings or integers. These options do not control the build process but instead specify values that kernel source can access as a preprocessor macro. For example, a configuration option can specify the size of a statically allocated array.

Vendor kernels, such as those provided by Novell and Red Hat, are precompiled as part of the distribution. Such kernels typically enable a good cross section of the needed kernel features and compile nearly all the drivers as modules. This provides for a great base kernel with support for a wide range of hardware as separate modules. Unfortunately, as a kernel hacker, you will have to compile your own kernels and learn what modules to include or not include on your own.

Thankfully, the kernel provides multiple tools to facilitate configuration. The simplest tool is a text-based command-line utility:

**\$ make config**

This utility goes through each option, one by one, and asks the user to interactively select *yes*, *no*, or (for tristates) *module*. Because this takes a *long* time, unless you are paid by the hour, you should use an ncurses-based graphical utility:

**\$ make menuconfig**

Or an X11-based graphical utility:

**\$ make xconfig**

Or, even better, a gtk+-based graphical utility:

**\$ make gconfig**

These three utilities divide the various configuration options into categories, such as "Processor type and features." You can move through the categories, view the kernel options, and of course change their values.

The command

**\$ make defconfig**

creates a configuration based on the defaults for your architecture. Although these defaults are somewhat arbitrary (on i386, they are rumored to be Linus's configuration!), they provide a good start if you have never configured the kernel before. To get off and running quickly, run this command and then go back and ensure that configuration options for your hardware are enabled.

The configuration options are stored in the root of the kernel source tree, in a file named `.config`. You may find it easier (as most of the kernel developers do) to just edit this file directly. It is quite easy to search for and change the value of the configuration options. After making changes to your configuration file, or when using an existing configuration file on a new kernel tree, you can validate and update the configuration:

**\$ make oldconfig**

You should always run this before building a kernel, in fact. After the kernel configuration is set, you can build it:

**\$ make**

Unlike kernels before 2.6, you no longer need to run `make dep` before building the kernelthe dependency tree is maintained automatically. You also do not need to specify a specific build type, such as `bzImage`, or build modules separately, as you did in old versions. The default Makefile rule will handle everything!

## Minimizing Build Noise

A trick to minimize build noise, but still see warnings and errors, is to redirect the output from `make(1)`:

**\$ make > ./some\_other\_file**

If you do need to see the build output, you can read the file. Because the warnings and errors are output to standard error, however, you normally do not need to. In fact, I just do

**\$ make > /dev/null**

which redirects all the worthless output to that big ominous sink of no return, `/dev/null`.

## Spawning Multiple Build Jobs

The `make(1)` program provides a feature to split the build process into a number of *jobs*. Each of these jobs then runs separately and concurrently, significantly speeding up the build process on multiprocessing systems. It also improves processor utilization because the time to build a large source tree also includes some time spent in I/O wait (time where the process is idle waiting for an I/O request to complete).

By default, `make(1)` spawns only a single job. Makefiles all too often have their dependency information screwed up. With incorrect dependencies, multiple jobs can step on each other's toes, resulting in errors in the build process. The kernel's Makefiles, naturally, have no such coding mistakes. To build the kernel with multiple jobs, use

```
$ make -jn
```

where *n* is the number of jobs to spawn. Usual practice is to spawn one or two jobs per processor. For example, on a dual processor machine, one might do

```
$ make j4
```

Using utilities such as the excellent `distcc(1)` or `ccache(1)` can also dramatically improve kernel build time.

## Installing the Kernel

After the kernel is built, you need to install it. How it is installed is very architecture and boot loader dependent consult the directions for your boot loader on where to copy the kernel image and how to set it up to boot. Always keep a known-safe kernel or two around in case your new kernel has problems!

As an example, on an x86 using grub, you would copy `arch/i386/boot/bzImage` to `/boot`, name it something like `vmlinuz-version`, and edit `/boot/grub/grub.conf` with a new entry for the new kernel. Systems using LILO to boot would instead edit `/etc/lilo.conf` and then rerun `lilo(8)`.

Installing modules, thankfully, is automated and architecture-independent. As root, simply run

```
% make modules_install
```

to install all the compiled modules to their correct home in `/lib`.

The build process also creates the file `System.map` in the root of the kernel source tree. It contains a symbol lookup table, mapping kernel symbols to their start addresses. This is used during debugging to translate memory addresses to function and variable names.

## A Beast of a Different Nature

The kernel has several differences compared to normal user-space applications that, although not making it necessarily harder to program than user-space, certainly provide unique challenges to kernel development.

These differences make the kernel a beast of a different nature. Some of the usual rules are bent; other rules are entirely new. Although some of the differences are obvious (we all know the kernel can do anything it wants), others are not so obvious. The most important of these differences are

- The kernel does not have access to the C library.
- The kernel is coded in GNU C.
- The kernel lacks memory protection like user-space.
- The kernel cannot easily use floating point.
- The kernel has a small fixed-size stack.
- Because the kernel has asynchronous interrupts, is preemptive, and supports SMP, synchronization and concurrency are major concerns within the kernel.
- Portability is important.

Let's briefly look at each of these issues because all kernel development must keep them in mind.

## No libc

Unlike a user-space application, the kernel is not linked against the standard C library (or any other library, for that matter). There are multiple reasons for this, including some chicken-and-the-egg situations, but the primary reason is speed and size. The full C library or even a decent subset of it is too large and too inefficient for the kernel.

Do not fret: Many of the usual libc functions have been implemented inside the kernel. For example, the common string manipulation functions are in `lib/string.c`. Just include `<linux/string.h>` and have at them.

### Header Files

When I talk about header files here or elsewhere in this book I am referring to the kernel header files that are part of the kernel source tree. Kernel source files cannot include outside headers, just as they cannot use outside libraries.

Of the missing functions, the most familiar is `printf()`. The kernel does not have access to `printf()`, but it does have access to  `printk()`. The

`printf()` function copies the formatted string into the kernel log buffer, which is normally read by the `syslog` program. Usage is similar to `printf()`:

```
printf("Hello world! A string: %s and an integer: %d\n", a_string, an_integer);
```

One notable difference between `printf()` and `printk()` is that `printk()` allows you to specify a priority flag. This flag is used by `syslogd(8)` to decide where to display kernel messages. Here is an example of these priorities:

```
printk(KERN_ERR "this is an error!\n");
```

We will use `printk()` throughout this book. Later chapters have more information on `printk()`.

## GNU C

Like any self-respecting Unix kernel, the Linux kernel is programmed in C. Perhaps surprisingly, the kernel is not programmed in strict ANSI C. Instead, where applicable, the kernel developers make use of various language extensions available in `gcc` (the GNU Compiler Collection, which contains the C compiler used to compile the kernel and most everything else written in C on a Linux system).

The kernel developers use both ISO C99<sup>[1]</sup> and GNU C extensions to the C language. These changes wed the Linux kernel to `gcc`, although recently other compilers, such as the Intel C compiler, have sufficiently supported enough `gcc` features that they too can compile the Linux kernel. The ISO C99 extensions that the kernel uses are nothing special and, because C99 is an official revision of the C language, are slowly cropping up in a lot of other code. The more interesting, and perhaps unfamiliar, deviations from standard ANSI C are those provided by GNU C. Let's look at some of the more interesting extensions that may show up in kernel code.

<sup>[1]</sup> ISO C99 is the latest major revision to the ISO C standard. C99 adds numerous enhancements to the previous major revision, ISO C90, including named structure initializers and a `complex` type. The latter of which you cannot use safely from within the kernel.

## Inline Functions

GNU C supports *inline functions*. An inline function is, as its name suggests, inserted inline into each function call site. This eliminates the overhead of function invocation and return (register saving and restore), and allows for potentially more optimization because the compiler can optimize the caller and the called function together. As a downside (nothing in life is free), code size increases because the contents of the function are copied to all the callers, which increases memory consumption and instruction cache footprint. Kernel developers use inline functions for small time-critical functions. Making large functions inline, especially those that are used more than once or are not time critical, is frowned upon by the kernel developers.

An inline function is declared when the keywords `static` and `inline` are used as part of the function definition. For example:

```
static inline void dog(unsigned long tail_size)
```

The function declaration must precede any usage, or else the compiler cannot make the function inline. Common practice is to place inline functions in header files. Because they are marked `static`, an exported function is not created. If an inline function is used by only one file, it can instead be placed toward the top of just that file.

In the kernel, using inline functions is preferred over complicated macros for reasons of type safety.

## Inline Assembly

The gcc C compiler enables the embedding of assembly instructions in otherwise normal C functions. This feature, of course, is used in only those parts of the kernel that are unique to a given system architecture.

The `asm()` compiler directive is used to inline assembly code.

The Linux kernel is programmed in a mixture of C and assembly, with assembly relegated to low-level architecture and fast path code. The vast majority of kernel code is programmed in straight C.

## Branch Annotation

The gcc C compiler has a built-in directive that optimizes conditional branches as either very likely taken or very unlikely taken. The compiler uses the directive to appropriately optimize the branch. The kernel wraps the directive in very easy-to-use macros, `likely()` and `unlikely()`.

For example, consider an `if` statement such as the following:

```
if (foo) {  
    /* ... */  
}
```

To mark this branch as very unlikely taken (that is, likely not taken):

```
/* we predict foo is nearly always zero ... */  
if (unlikely(foo)) {  
    /* ... */  
}
```

Conversely, to mark a branch as very likely taken:

```
/* we predict foo is nearly always nonzero ... */  
if (likely(foo)) {  
    /* ... */  
}
```

You should only use these directives when the branch direction is overwhelmingly a known priori or when you want to optimize a specific case at the cost of the other case. This is an important point: These directives result in a performance boost when the branch is correctly predicted, but a performance loss when the branch is mispredicted. A very common usage for `unlikely()` and `likely()` is error conditions. As one might expect, `unlikely()` finds much more use in the kernel because `if` statements tend to indicate a special case.

## No Memory Protection

When a user-space application attempts an illegal memory access, the kernel can trap the error, send **SIGSEGV**, and kill the process. If the kernel attempts an illegal memory access, however, the results are less controlled. (After all, who is going to look after the kernel?) Memory violations in the kernel result in an *oops*, which is a major kernel error. It should go without saying that you must not illegally access memory, such as dereferencing a **NULL** pointer but within the kernel, the stakes are much higher!

Additionally, kernel memory is not pageable. Therefore, every byte of memory you consume is one less byte of available physical memory. Keep that in mind next time you have to add *one more feature* to the kernel!

## No (Easy) Use of Floating Point

When a user-space process uses floating-point instructions, the kernel manages the transition from integer to floating point mode. What the kernel has to do when using floating-point instructions varies by architecture, but the kernel normally catches a trap and *does something* in response.

Unlike user-space, the kernel does not have the luxury of seamless support for floating point because it cannot trap itself. Using floating point inside the kernel requires manually saving and restoring the floating point registers, among possible other chores. The short answer is: *Don't do it*; no floating point in the kernel.

## Small, Fixed-Size Stack

User-space can get away with statically allocating tons of variables on the stack, including huge structures and many-element arrays. This behavior is legal because user-space has a large stack that can grow in size dynamically (developers of older, less intelligent operating systems might recall a time when even user-space had a fixed-sized stack).

The kernel stack is neither large nor dynamic; it is small and fixed in size. The exact size of the kernel's stack varies by architecture. On x86, the stack size is configurable at compile-time and can be either 4 or 8KB. Historically, the kernel stack is two pages, which generally implies that it is 8KB on 32-bit architectures and 16KB on 64-bit architectures (this size is fixed and absolute). Each process receives its own stack.

The kernel stack is discussed in much greater detail in later chapters.

## Synchronization and Concurrency

The kernel is susceptible to race conditions. Unlike a single-threaded user-space application, a number of properties of the kernel allow for concurrent access of shared resources and thus require synchronization to prevent races. Specifically,

- Linux is a preemptive multi-tasking operating system. Processes are scheduled and rescheduled at the whim of the kernel's process scheduler. The kernel must synchronize between these tasks.
- The Linux kernel supports multiprocessing. Therefore, without proper protection, kernel code executing on two or more processors can access the same resource.
- Interrupts occur asynchronously with respect to the currently executing code. Therefore, without proper protection, an

interrupt can occur in the midst of accessing a shared resource and the interrupt handler can then access the same resource.

- The Linux kernel is preemptive. Therefore, without protection, kernel code can be preempted in favor of different code that then accesses the same resource.

Typical solutions to race conditions include spinlocks and semaphores.

Later chapters provide a thorough discussion of synchronization and concurrency.

## Portability Is Important

Although user-space applications do not *have* to aim for portability, Linux is a portable operating system and should remain one. This means that architecture-independent C code must correctly compile and run on a wide range of systems, and that architecture-dependent code must be properly segregated in system-specific directories in the kernel source tree.

A handful of rules such as remain endian neutral, be 64-bit clean, do not assume the word or page size, and so on go a long way. Portability is discussed in extreme depth in a later chapter.

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## So Here We Are

The kernel is indeed a unique and inimitable beast: No memory protection, no tried-and-true libc, a small stack, a huge source tree. The Linux kernel plays by its own rules, running with the big boys and stopping just long enough to break the customs with which we are familiar. Despite this, however, the kernel is just a program. It is not very different from the usual, the accustomed, the status quo. Do not be afraid: Stand up to it, call it names, push it around.

Realizing that the kernel is not as daunting as first appearances might suggest is the first step on the road to having everything *just make sense*. To reach that utopia, however, you have to jump in, read the source, hack the source, and not be disheartened.

The introduction in the previous chapter and the basics in this chapter will hopefully lay the foundation for the monument of knowledge we will construct throughout the rest of this book. In the following chapters, we will look at specific concepts of and subsystems in the kernel.

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# Chapter 3. Process Management

The *process* is one of the fundamental abstractions in Unix operating systems<sup>[1]</sup>. A process is a program (object code stored on some media) in execution. Processes are, however, more than just the executing program code (often called the *text section* in Unix). They also include a set of resources such as open files and pending signals, internal kernel data, processor state, an address space, one or more *threads of execution*, and a *data section* containing global variables. Processes, in effect, are the living result of running program code.

[1] The other fundamental abstraction is files.

Threads of execution, often shortened to *threads*, are the objects of activity within the process. Each thread includes a unique program counter, process stack, and set of processor registers. The kernel schedules individual threads, not processes. In traditional Unix systems, each process consists of one thread. In modern systems, however, multithreaded programs—those that consist of more than one thread—are common. As you will see later, Linux has a unique implementation of threads: It does not differentiate between threads and processes. To Linux, a thread is just a special kind of process.

On modern operating systems, processes provide two virtualizations: a virtualized processor and virtual memory. The virtual processor gives the process the illusion that it alone monopolizes the system, despite possibly sharing the processor among dozens of other processes. [Chapter 4](#), "Process Scheduling," discusses this virtualization. Virtual memory lets the process allocate and manage memory as if it alone owned all the memory in the system. Virtual memory is covered in [Chapter 11](#), "Memory Management." Interestingly, note that threads share the virtual memory abstraction while each receives its own virtualized processor.

A program itself is not a process; a process is an *active* program and related resources. Indeed, two or more processes can exist that are executing the *same* program. In fact, two or more processes can exist that share various resources, such as open files or an address space.

A process begins its life when, not surprisingly, it is created. In Linux, this occurs by means of the `fork()` system call, which creates a new process by duplicating an existing one. The process that calls `fork()` is the *parent*, whereas the new process is the *child*. The parent resumes execution and the child starts execution at the same place, where the call returns. The `fork()` system call returns from the kernel twice: once in the parent process and again in the newborn child.

Often, immediately after a fork it is desirable to execute a new, different, program. The `exec()` family of function calls is used to create a new address space and load a new program into it. In modern Linux kernels, `fork()` is actually implemented via the `clone()` system call, which is discussed in a following section.

Finally, a program exits via the `exit()` system call. This function terminates the process and frees all its resources. A parent process can inquire about the status of a terminated child via the `wait4()`<sup>[2]</sup> system call, which enables a process to wait for the termination of a specific process. When a process exits, it is placed into a special zombie state that is used to represent terminated processes until the parent calls `wait()` or `waitpid()`.

[2] The kernel implements the `wait4()` system call. Linux systems, via the C library, typically provide the `wait()`, `waitpid()`, `wait3()`, and `wait4()` functions. All these functions return status about a terminated process, albeit with slightly different semantics.

Another name for a process is a *task*. The Linux kernel internally refers to processes as tasks. In this book, I will use the terms interchangeably, although when I say *task* I am generally referring to a process from the kernel's point of view.

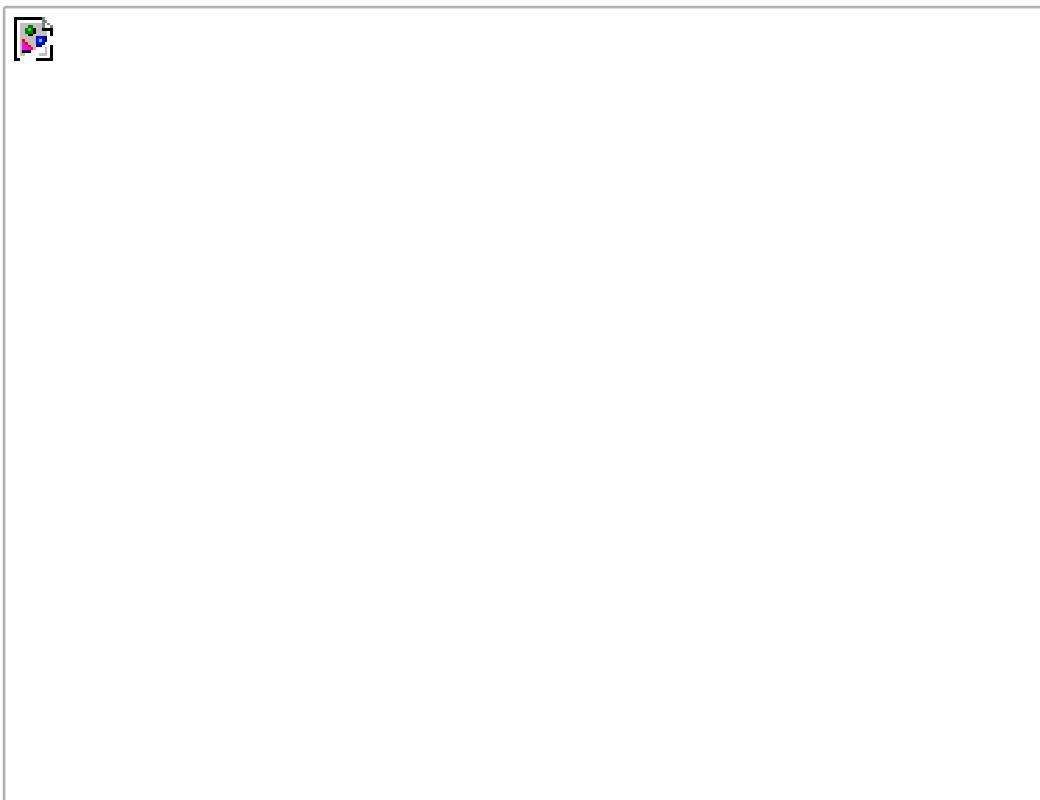
## Process Descriptor and the Task Structure

The kernel stores the list of processes in a circular doubly linked list called the *task list*<sup>[3]</sup>. Each element in the task list is a process descriptor of the type `struct task_struct`, which is defined in `<linux/sched.h>`. The process descriptor contains all the information about a specific process.

<sup>[3]</sup> Some texts on operating system design call this list the *task array*. Because the Linux implementation is a linked list and not a static array, it is called the *task list*.

The `task_struct` is a relatively large data structure, at around 1.7 kilobytes on a 32-bit machine. This size, however, is quite small considering that the structure contains all the information that the kernel has and needs about a process. The process descriptor contains the data that describes the executing program open files, the process's address space, pending signals, the process's state, and much more (see [Figure 3.1](#)).

**Figure 3.1. The process descriptor and task list.**

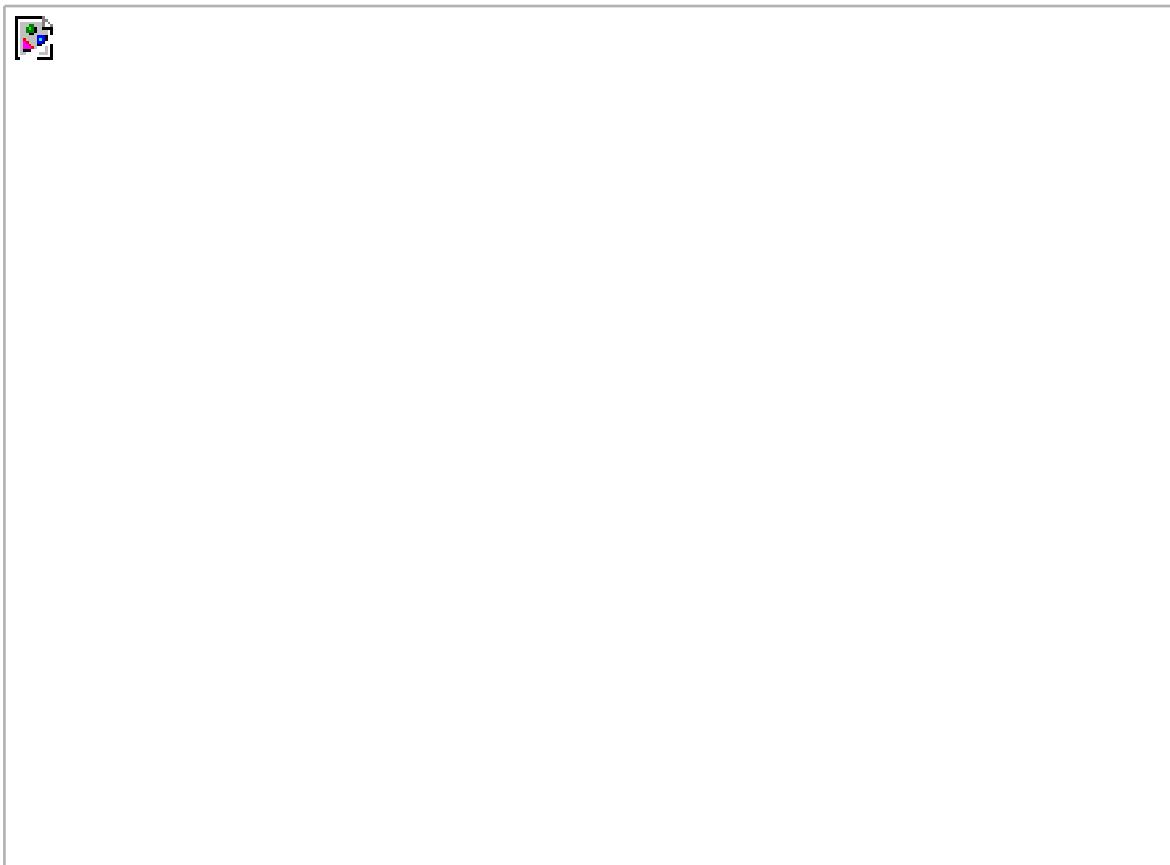


## Allocating the Process Descriptor

The `task_struct` structure is allocated via the *slab allocator* to provide object reuse and cache coloring (see [Chapter 11](#), "Memory Management"). Prior to the 2.6 kernel series, `struct task_struct` was stored at the end of the kernel stack of each process. This allowed architectures with few registers, such as x86, to calculate the location of the process descriptor via the *stack pointer* without using an extra register to store the location. With the process descriptor now dynamically created via the slab allocator, a new structure, `struct thread_info`, was created that again lives at the bottom of the stack (for stacks that grow down) and at the top of the stack (for stacks that grow up)<sup>[4]</sup>. See [Figure 3.2](#). The new structure also makes it rather easy to calculate offsets of its values for use in assembly code.

[4] Register-impaired architectures were not the only reason for creating `struct thread_info`.

**Figure 3.2. The process descriptor and kernel stack.**



The `thread_info` structure is defined on x86 in `<asm/thread_info.h>` as

```
struct thread_info {  
    struct task_struct *task;  
    struct exec_domain *exec_domain;  
    unsigned long flags;  
    unsigned long status;  
    __u32 cpu;  
    __s32 preempt_count;
```

```
mm_segment_t      addr_limit;
struct restart_block  restart_block;
unsigned long      previous_esp;
__u8              supervisor_stack[0];
};
```

Each task's `tHRead_info` structure is allocated at the end of its stack. The `task` element of the structure is a pointer to the task's actual `task_struct`.

## Storing the Process Descriptor

The system identifies processes by a unique *process identification* value or *PID*. The PID is a numerical value that is represented by the opaque type [5] `pid_t`, which is typically an `int`. Because of backward compatibility with earlier Unix and Linux versions, however, the default maximum value is only 32,768 (that of a `short int`), although the value can optionally be increased to the full range afforded the type. The kernel stores this value as `pid` inside each process descriptor.

[5] An opaque type is a data type whose physical representation is unknown or irrelevant.

This maximum value is important because it is essentially the maximum number of processes that may exist concurrently on the system. Although 32,768 might be sufficient for a desktop system, large servers may require many more processes. The lower the value, the sooner the values will wrap around, destroying the useful notion that higher values indicate later run processes than lower values. If the system is willing to break compatibility with old applications, the administrator may increase the maximum value via `/proc/sys/kernel/pid_max`.

Inside the kernel, tasks are typically referenced directly by a pointer to their `task_struct` structure. In fact, most kernel code that deals with processes works directly with `struct task_struct`. Consequently, it is very useful to be able to quickly look up the process descriptor of the currently executing task, which is done via the `current` macro. This macro must be separately implemented by each architecture. Some architectures save a pointer to the `task_struct` structure of the currently running process in a register, allowing for efficient access. Other architectures, such as x86 (which has few registers to waste), make use of the fact that `struct thread_info` is stored on the kernel stack to calculate the location of `thread_info` and subsequently the `task_struct`.

On x86, `current` is calculated by masking out the 13 least significant bits of the stack pointer to obtain the `thread_info` structure. This is done by the `current_thread_info()` function. The assembly is shown here:

```
movl $-8192, %eax
andl %esp, %eax
```

This assumes that the stack size is 8KB. When 4KB stacks are enabled, 4096 is used in lieu of 8192.

Finally, `current` dereferences the `task` member of `thread_info` to return the `task_struct`:

```
current_thread_info()->task;
```

Contrast this approach with that taken by PowerPC (IBM's modern RISC-based microprocessor), which stores the current `task_struct` in a register. Thus, `current` on PPC merely returns the value stored in the register `r2`. PPC can take this approach because, unlike x86, it has plenty of registers. Because accessing the process descriptor is a common and important job, the PPC kernel developers deem using a register worthy for the task.

## Process State

The **state** field of the process descriptor describes the current condition of the process (see [Figure 3.3](#)). Each process on the system is in exactly one of five different states. This value is represented by one of five flags:

- **TASK\_RUNNING** The process is runnable; it is either currently running or on a runqueue waiting to run (runqueues are discussed in [Chapter 4, "Scheduling"](#)). This is the only possible state for a process executing in user-space; it can also apply to a process in kernel-space that is actively running.
- **TASK\_INTERRUPTIBLE** The process is sleeping (that is, it is blocked), waiting for some condition to exist. When this condition exists, the kernel sets the process's state to **TASK\_RUNNING**. The process also awakes prematurely and becomes runnable if it receives a signal.
- **TASK\_UNINTERRUPTIBLE** This state is identical to **TASK\_INTERRUPTIBLE** except that it does not wake up and become runnable if it receives a signal. This is used in situations where the process must wait without interruption or when the event is expected to occur quite quickly. Because the task does not respond to signals in this state, **TASK\_UNINTERRUPTIBLE** is less often used than **TASK\_INTERRUPTIBLE**<sup>[6]</sup>.

[6] This is why you have those dreaded unkillable processes with state **D** in `ps(1)`. Because the task will not respond to signals, you cannot send it a **SIGKILL** signal. Further, even if you could terminate the task, it would not be wise as the task is supposedly in the middle of an important operation and may hold a semaphore.

- **TASK\_ZOMBIE** The task has terminated, but its parent has not yet issued `await4()` system call. The task's process descriptor must remain in case the parent wants to access it. If the parent calls `wait4()`, the process descriptor is deallocated.
- **TASK\_STOPPED** Process execution has stopped; the task is not running nor is it eligible to run. This occurs if the task receives the **SIGSTOP**, **SIGTSTP**, **SIGTTIN**, or **SIGTTOU** signal or if it receives any signal while it is being debugged.

**Figure 3.3. Flow chart of process states.**





## Manipulating the Current Process State

Kernel code often needs to change a process's state. The preferred mechanism is using

```
set_task_state(task, state); /* set task 'task' to state 'state' */
```

This function sets the given task to the given state. If applicable, it also provides a memory barrier to force ordering on other processors (this is only needed on SMP systems). Otherwise, it is equivalent to

```
task->state = state;
```

The method `set_current_state(state)` is synonymous to `set_task_state(current, state)`.

## Process Context

One of the most important parts of a process is the executing program code. This code is read in from an *executable file* and executed within the program's address space. Normal program execution occurs in *user-space*. When a program executes a system call (see [Chapter 5](#), "System Calls") or triggers an exception, it enters *kernel-space*. At this point, the kernel is said to be "executing on behalf of the process" and is in *process context*. When in process context, the `current` macro is valid<sup>[7]</sup>. Upon exiting the kernel, the process resumes execution in user-space, unless a higher-priority process has become runnable in the interim, in which case the scheduler is invoked to select the higher priority process.

<sup>[7]</sup> Other than process context there is *interrupt context*, which we discuss in [Chapter 6](#), "Interrupts and Interrupt Handlers." In interrupt context, the system is not running on behalf of a process, but is executing an interrupt handler. There is no process tied to interrupt handlers and consequently no process context.

System calls and exception handlers are well-defined interfaces into the kernel. A process can begin executing in kernel-space only through one of these interfaces all access to the kernel is through these interfaces.

## The Process Family Tree

A distinct hierarchy exists between processes in Unix systems, and Linux is no exception. All processes are descendants of the `init` process, whose PID is one. The kernel starts `init` in the last step of the boot process. The `init` process, in turn, reads the system `init scripts` and executes more programs, eventually completing the boot process.

Every process on the system has exactly one parent. Likewise, every process has zero or more children. Processes that are all direct children of the same parent are called *siblings*. The relationship between processes is stored in the process descriptor. Each `task_struct` has a pointer to the parent's `task_struct`, named `parent`, and a list of children, named `children`. Consequently, given the current process, it is possible to obtain the process descriptor of its parent with the following code:

```
struct task_struct *my_parent = current->parent;
```

Similarly, it is possible to iterate over a process's children with

```
struct task_struct *task;
struct list_head *list;

list_for_each(list, &current->children) {
    task = list_entry(list, struct task_struct, sibling);
    /* task now points to one of current's children */
}
```

The `init` task's process descriptor is statically allocated as `init_task`. A good example of the relationship between all processes is the fact that this code will always succeed:

```
struct task_struct *task;

for (task = current; task != &init_task; task = task->parent)
    ;
/* task now points to init */
```

In fact, you can follow the process hierarchy from any one process in the system to *any* other. Oftentimes, however, it is desirable simply to iterate over *all* processes in the system. This is easy because the task list is a circular doubly linked list. To obtain the next task in the list, given any valid task, use:

```
list_entry(task->tasks.next, struct task_struct, tasks)
```

Obtaining the previous works the same way:

```
list_entry(task->tasks.prev, struct task_struct, tasks)
```

These two routines are provided by the macros `next_task(task)` and `prev_task(task)`, respectively. Finally, the macro `for_each_process(task)` is provided, which iterates over the entire task list. On each iteration, `task` points to the next task in the list:

```
struct task_struct *task;

for_each_process(task) {
    /* this pointlessly prints the name and PID of each task */
    printk("%s[%d]\n", task->comm, task->pid);
}
```

Note: It can be expensive to iterate over every task in a system with many processes; code should have good reason (and no alternative) before doing so.

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## Process Creation

Process creation in Unix is unique. Most operating systems implement a *spawn* mechanism to create a new process in a new address space, read in an executable, and begin executing it. Unix takes the unusual approach of separating these steps into two distinct functions: `fork()` and `exec()`<sup>[8]</sup>. The first, `fork()`, creates a child process that is a copy of the current task. It differs from the parent only in its PID (which is unique), its PPID (parent's PID, which is set to the original process), and certain resources and statistics, such as pending signals, which are not inherited. The second function, `exec()`, loads a new executable into the address space and begins executing it. The combination of `fork()` followed by `exec()` is similar to the single function most operating systems provide.

[8] By `exec()` I mean any member of the `exec()` family of functions. The kernel implements the `execve()` system call on top of which `execvp()`, `execle()`, `execv()`, and `execvpe()` are implemented.

## Copy-on-Write

Traditionally, upon `fork()` all resources owned by the parent are duplicated and the copy is given to the child. This approach is significantly naïve and inefficient in that it copies much data that might otherwise be shared. Worse still, if the new process were to immediately execute a new image, all that copying would go to waste. In Linux, `fork()` is implemented through the use of *copy-on-write* pages. Copy-on-write (or COW) is a technique to delay or altogether prevent copying of the data. Rather than duplicate the process address space, the parent and the child can share a single copy. The data, however, is marked in such a way that if it is written to, a duplicate is made and each process receives a unique copy. Consequently, the duplication of resources occurs only when they are written; until then, they are shared read-only. This technique delays the copying of each page in the address space until it is actually written to. In the case that the pages are never written for example, if `exec()` is called immediately after `fork()` they never need to be copied. The only overhead incurred by `fork()` is the duplication of the parent's page tables and the creation of a unique process descriptor for the child. In the common case that a process executes a new executable image immediately after forking, this optimization prevents the wasted copying of large amounts of data (with the address space, easily tens of megabytes). This is an important optimization because the Unix philosophy encourages quick process execution.

### `fork()`

Linux implements `fork()` via the `clone()` system call. This call takes a series of flags that specify which resources, if any, the parent and child process should share (see the section on "[The Linux Implementation of Threads](#)" later in this chapter for more about the flags). The `fork()`, `vfork()`, and `_clone()` library calls all invoke the `clone()` system call with the requisite flags. The `clone()` system call, in turn, calls `do_fork()`.

The bulk of the work in forking is handled by `do_fork()`, which is defined in `kernel/fork.c`. This function calls `copy_process()`, and then starts the process running. The interesting work is done by `copy_process()`:

- It calls `dup_task_struct()`, which creates a new kernel stack, `thread_info` structure, and `task_struct` for the new process. The new values are identical to those of the current task. At this point, the child and parent process descriptors are identical.
- It then checks that the new child will not exceed the resource limits on the number of processes for the current user.

- Now the child needs to differentiate itself from its parent. Various members of the process descriptor are cleared or set to initial values. Members of the process descriptor that are not inherited are primarily statistically information. The bulk of the data in the process descriptor is shared.
- Next, the child's state is set to **TASK\_UNINTERRUPTIBLE**, to ensure that it does not yet run.
- Now, `copy_process()` calls `copy_flags()` to update the `flags` member of the `task_struct`. The **PF\_SUPERPRIV** flag, which denotes whether a task used super-user privileges, is cleared. The **PF\_FORKNOEXEC** flag, which denotes a process that has not called `exec()`, is set.
- Next, it calls `get_pid()` to assign an available PID to the new task.
- Depending on the flags passed to `clone()`, `copy_process()` then either duplicates or shares open files, filesystem information, signal handlers, process address space, and namespace. These resources are typically shared between threads in a given process; otherwise they are unique and thus copied here.
- Next, the remaining timeslice between the parent and its child is split between the two (this is discussed in [Chapter 4](#)).
- Finally, `copy_process()` cleans up and returns to the caller a pointer to the new child.

Back in `do_fork()`, if `copy_process()` returns successfully, the new child is woken up and run. Deliberately, the kernel runs the child process first<sup>[9]</sup>. In the common case of the child simply calling `exec()` immediately, this eliminates any copy-on-write overhead that would occur if the parent ran first and began writing to the address space.

[9] Amusingly, this does not currently function correctly, although the goal is for the child to run first.

## vfork()

The `vfork()` system call has the same effect as `fork()`, except that the page table entries of the parent process are not copied. Instead, the child executes as the sole thread in the parent's address space, and the parent is blocked until the child either calls `exec()` or exits. The child is *not* allowed to write to the address space. This was a welcome optimization in the old days of 3BSD when the call was introduced because at the time copy-on-write pages were not used to implement `fork()`. Today, with copy-on-write and child-runs-first semantics, the only benefit to `vfork()` is not copying the parent page tables entries. If Linux one day gains copy-on-write page table entries there will no longer be any benefit<sup>[10]</sup>. Because the semantics of `vfork()` are tricky (what, for example, happens if the `exec()` fails?) it would be nice if `vfork()` died a slow painful death. It is entirely possible to implement `vfork()` as a normal `fork()` in fact, this is what Linux did until 2.2.

[10] In fact, there are currently patches to add this functionality to Linux. In time, this feature will most likely find its way into the mainline Linux kernel.

The `vfork()` system call is implemented via a special flag to the `clone()` system call:

- In `copy_process()`, the `task_struct` member `vfork_done` is set to `NULL`.
- In `do_fork()`, if the special flag was given, `vfork_done` is pointed at a specific address.
- After the child is first run, the parent instead of returning waits for the child to signal it through the `vfork_done` pointer.
- In the `mm_release()` function, which is used when a task exits a memory address space, `vfork_done` is checked to see whether it is `NULL`. If it is not, the parent is signaled.
- Back in `do_fork()`, the parent wakes up and returns.

If this all goes as planned, the child is now executing in a new address space and the parent is again executing in its original address space. The overhead is lower, but the design is not pretty.

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## The Linux Implementation of Threads

Threads are a popular modern programming abstraction. They provide multiple threads of execution within the same program in a shared memory address space. They can also share open files and other resources. Threads allow for *concurrent programming* and, on multiple processor systems, true *parallelism*.

Linux has a unique implementation of threads. To the Linux kernel, there is *no* concept of a thread. Linux implements all threads as standard processes. The Linux kernel does not provide any special scheduling semantics or data structures to represent threads. Instead, a thread is merely a process that shares certain resources with other processes. Each thread has a unique `task_struct` and appears to the kernel as a normal process (which just happens to share resources, such as an address space, with other processes).

This approach to threads contrasts greatly with operating systems such as Microsoft Windows or Sun Solaris, which have *explicit* kernel support for threads (and sometimes call threads *lightweight processes*). The name "lightweight process" sums up the difference in philosophies between Linux and other systems. To these other operating systems, threads are an abstraction to provide a lighter, quicker execution unit than the heavy process. To Linux, threads are simply a manner of sharing resources between processes (which are already quite lightweight)<sup>[11]</sup>. For example, assume you have a process that consists of four threads. On systems with explicit thread support, there might exist one process descriptor that in turn points to the four different threads. The process descriptor describes the shared resources, such as an address space or open files. The threads then describe the resources they alone possess. Conversely, in Linux, there are simply four processes and thus four normal `task_struct` structures. The four processes are set up to share certain resources.

[11] As an example, benchmark process creation time in Linux versus process (or even thread!) creation time in these other operating systems. The results are quite nice.

Threads are created like normal tasks, with the exception that the `clone()` system call is passed flags corresponding to specific resources to be shared:

```
clone(CLONE_VM | CLONE_FS | CLONE_FILES | CLONE_SIGHAND, 0);
```

The previous code results in behavior identical to a normal `fork()`, except that the address space, filesystem resources, file descriptors, and signal handlers are shared. In other words, the new task and its parent are what are popularly called *threads*.

In contrast, a normal `fork()` can be implemented as

```
clone(SIGCHLD, 0);
```

And `vfork()` is implemented as

```
clone(CLONE_VFORK | CLONE_VM | SIGCHLD, 0);
```

The flags provided to `clone()` help specify the behavior of the new process and detail what resources the parent and child will share. [Table 3.1](#) lists the clone flags, which are defined in `<linux/sched.h>`, and their effect.

**Table 3.1. `clone()` Flags**

Flag	Meaning
<code>CLONE_FILES</code>	Parent and child share open files.
<code>CLONE_FS</code>	Parent and child share filesystem information.
<code>CLONE_IDLETASK</code>	Set PID to zero (used only by the idle tasks).
<code>CLONE_NEWNS</code>	Create a new namespace for the child.
<code>CLONE_PARENT</code>	Child is to have same parent as its parent.
<code>CLONE_PTRACE</code>	Continue tracing child.
<code>CLONE_SETTID</code>	Write the TID back to user-space.
<code>CLONE_SETTLS</code>	Create a new TLS for the child.
<code>CLONE_SIGHAND</code>	Parent and child share signal handlers and blocked signals.
<code>CLONE_SYSVSEM</code>	Parent and child share System V <code>SEM_UNDO</code> semantics.
<code>CLONE_THREAD</code>	Parent and child are in the same thread group.
<code>CLONE_VFORK</code>	<code>vfork()</code> was used and the parent will sleep until the child wakes it.
<code>CLONE_UNTRACED</code>	Do not let the tracing process force <code>CLONE_PTRACE</code> on the child.
<code>CLONE_STOP</code>	Start process in the <code>TASK_STOPPED</code> state.
<code>CLONE_SETTLS</code>	Create a new TLS (thread-local storage) for the child.
<code>CLONE_CHILD_CLEARTID</code>	Clear the TID in the child.
<code>CLONE_CHILD_SETTID</code>	Set the TID in the child.
<code>CLONE_PARENT_SETTID</code>	Set the TID in the parent.
<code>CLONE_VM</code>	Parent and child share address space.

## Kernel Threads

It is often useful for the kernel to perform some operations in the background. The kernel accomplishes this via *kernel threads*—standard processes that exist solely in kernel-space. The significant difference between kernel threads and normal processes is that kernel threads do not have an address space (in fact, their `mm` pointer is `NULL`). They operate only in kernel-space and do not context switch into user-space. Kernel threads are, however, schedulable and preemptible as normal processes.

Linux delegates several tasks to kernel threads, most notably the `pdflush` task and the `ksoftirqd` task. These threads are created on system boot by other kernel threads. Indeed, a kernel thread can be created only by another kernel thread. The interface for spawning a new kernel thread from an existing one is

```
int kernel_thread(int (*fn)(void *), void * arg, unsigned long flags)
```

The new task is created via the usual `clone()` system call with the specified `flags` argument. On return, the parent kernel thread exits with a pointer to the child's `task_struct`. The child executes the function specified by `fn` with the given argument `arg`. A special clone flag, `CLONE_KERNEL`, specifies the usual flags for kernel threads: `CLONE_FS`, `CLONE_FILES`, and `CLONE_SIGHAND`. Most kernel threads pass this for their `flags` parameter.

Typically, a kernel thread continues executing its initial function forever (or at least until the system reboots, but with Linux you never know). The initial function usually implements a loop in which the kernel thread wakes up as needed, performs its duties, and then returns to sleep.

We will discuss specific kernel threads in more detail in later chapters.

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## Process Termination

It is sad, but eventually processes must die. When a process terminates, the kernel releases the resources owned by the process and notifies the child's parent of its unfortunate demise.

Typically, process destruction occurs when the process calls the `exit()` system call, either explicitly when it is ready to terminate or implicitly on return from the main subroutine of any program (that is, the C compiler places a call to `exit()` after `main()` returns). A process can also terminate involuntarily. This occurs when the process receives a signal or exception it cannot handle or ignore. Regardless of how a process terminates, the bulk of the work is handled by `do_exit()`, which completes a number of chores:

- First, it set the `PF_EXITING` flag in the `flags` member of the `task_struct`.
- Second, it calls `del_timer_sync()` to remove any kernel timers. Upon return, it is guaranteed that no timer is queued and that no timer handler is running.
- Next, if BSD process accounting is enabled, `do_exit()` calls `acct_process()` to write out accounting information.
- Now it calls `__exit_mm()` to release the `mm_struct` held by this process. If no other process is using this address space (in other words, if it is not shared), then deallocate it.
- Next, it calls `exit_sem()`. If the process is queued waiting for an IPC semaphore, it is dequeued here.
- It then calls `__exit_files()`, `__exit_fs()`, `exit_namespace()`, and `exit_sighand()` to decrement the usage count of objects related to file descriptors, filesystem data, the process namespace, and signal handlers, respectively. If any usage counts reach zero, the object is no longer in use by any process and it is removed.
- Subsequently, it sets the task's exit code, stored in the `exit_code` member of the `task_struct`, to the code provided by `exit()` or whatever kernel mechanism forced the termination. The exit code is stored here for optional retrieval by the parent.
- It then calls `exit_notify()` to send signals to the task's parent, reparents any of the task's children to another thread in their thread group or the init process, and sets the task's state to `TASK_ZOMBIE`.
- Finally, `do_exit()` calls `schedule()` to switch to a new process (see [Chapter 4](#)). Because `TASK_ZOMBIE` tasks are never scheduled, this is the last code the task will ever execute.

The code for `do_exit()` is defined in [kernel/exit.c](#).

At this point, all objects associated with the task (assuming the task was the sole user) are freed. The task is not runnable (and in fact no longer has an address space in which to run) and is in the `TASK_ZOMBIE` state. The only memory it occupies is its kernel stack, the `thread_info` structure, and the `task_struct` structure. The task exists solely to provide information to its parent. After the parent retrieves the information, or notifies the kernel that it is uninterested, the remaining memory held by the process is freed and returned to the system for use.

## Removal of the Process Descriptor

After `do_exit()` completes, the process descriptor for the terminated process still exists but the process is a zombie and is unable to run. As discussed, this allows the system to obtain information about a child process after it has terminated. Consequently, the acts of cleaning up after a process and removing its process descriptor are separate. After the parent has obtained information on its terminated

child, or signified to the kernel that it does not care, the child's `task_struct` is deallocated.

The `wait()` family of functions are implemented via a single (and complicated) system call `wait4()`. The standard behavior is to suspend execution of the calling task until one of its children exits, at which time the function returns with the PID of the exited child. Additionally, a pointer is provided to the function that on return holds the exit code of the terminated child.

When it is time to finally deallocate the process descriptor, `release_task()` is invoked. It does the following:

- First, it calls `free_uid()` to decrement the usage count of the process's user. Linux keeps a per-user cache of information related to how many processes and files a user has opened. If the usage count reaches zero, the user has no more open processes or files and the cache is destroyed.
- Second, `release_task()` calls `unhash_process()` to remove the process from the pidhash and remove the process from the task list.
- Next, if the task was ptraced, `release_task()` reparents the task to its original parent and removes it from the ptrace list.
- Ultimately, `release_task()`, calls `put_task_struct()` to free the pages containing the process's kernel stack and `thread_info` structure and deallocate the slab cache containing the `task_struct`.

At this point, the process descriptor and all resources belonging solely to the process have been freed.

## The Dilemma of the Parentless Task

If a parent exits before its children, some mechanism must exist to *reparent* the child tasks to a new process, or else parentless terminated processes would forever remain zombies, wasting system memory. The solution, hinted upon previously, is to reparent a task's children on exit to either another process in the current thread group or, if that fails, the `init` process. In `do_exit()`, `notify_parent()` is invoked, which calls `forget_original_parent()` to perform the reparenting:

```
struct task_struct *p, *reaper = father;
struct list_head *list;

if (father->exit_signal != -1)
    reaper = prev_thread(reaper);
else
    reaper = child_reaper;

if (reaper == father)
    reaper = child_reaper;
```

This code sets `reaper` to another task in the process's thread group. If there is not another task in the thread group, it sets `reaper` to `child_reaper`, which is the `init` process. Now that a suitable new parent for the children is found, each child needs to be located and reparented to `reaper`:

```
list_for_each(list, &father->children) {
    p = list_entry(list, struct task_struct, sibling);
    reparent_thread(p, reaper, child_reaper);
}

list_for_each(list, &father->ptrace_children) {
    p = list_entry(list, struct task_struct, ptrace_list);
    reparent_thread(p, reaper, child_reaper);
}
```

This code iterates over two lists: the *child list* and the *ptraced child list*, reparenting each child. The rationale behind having both lists is interesting; it is a new feature in the 2.6 kernel. When a task is *ptraced*, it is temporarily reparented to the debugging process. When the task's parent exits, however, it must be reparented along with its other siblings. In previous kernels, this resulted in a loop over every *process in the system* looking for children. The solution, as noted previously, is simply to keep a separate list of a process's children that are being *ptraced* reducing the search for one's children from every process to just two relatively small lists.

With the process successfully reparented, there is no risk of stray zombie processes. The *init* process routinely calls *wait()* on its children, cleaning up any zombies assigned to it.

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## Process Wrap Up

In this chapter, we looked at the famed operating system abstraction of the *process*. We discussed the generalities of the process, why it is important, and the relationship between processes and threads. We then discussed how Linux stores and represents processes (with `task_struct` and `thread_info`), how processes are created (via `clone()` and `fork()`), how new executable images are loaded into address spaces (via the `exec()` family of system calls), the hierarchy of processes, how parents glean information about their deceased children (via the `wait()` family of system calls), and how processes ultimately die (forcefully or intentionally via `exit()`).

The process is a fundamental and crucial abstraction, at the heart of every modern operating system, and ultimately the reason we have operating systems altogether (to run programs).

The next chapter discusses process scheduling, which is the delicate and interesting manner in which the kernel decides which processes to run, at what time, and in what order.

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# Chapter 4. Process Scheduling

The previous chapter discussed *processes*, the operating system abstraction of active program code. This chapter discusses the *process scheduler*, the chunk of code that puts those processes to work.

The process scheduler is the component of the kernel that selects which process to run next. The process scheduler (or simply the *scheduler*, to which it is often shortened) can be viewed as the subsystem of the kernel that divides the finite resource of processor time between the runnable processes on a system. The scheduler is the basis of a *multitasking* operating system such as Linux. By deciding what process can run, the scheduler is responsible for best utilizing the system and giving the impression that multiple processes are executing simultaneously.

The idea behind the scheduler is simple. To best utilize processor time, assuming there are runnable processes, a process should always be running. If there are more runnable processes than processors in a system, some processes will not be running at a given moment. These processes are *waiting to run*. Deciding what process runs next, given a set of runnable processes, is a fundamental decision that the scheduler must make.

A multitasking operating system is one that can simultaneously interleave execution of more than one process. On single processor machines, this gives the illusion of multiple processes running concurrently. On multiprocessor machines, this also enables processes to actually run concurrently, in parallel, on different processors. On either machine, it also enables many processes to run in the background, not actually executing until work is available. These tasks, although in memory, are not *runnable*. Instead, such processes utilize the kernel to *block* until some event (keyboard input, network data, some time in the future, and so on) occurs. Consequently, a modern Linux system may have 100 processes in memory but only one in a runnable state.

Multitasking operating systems come in two flavors: *cooperative multitasking* and *preemptive multitasking*. Linux, like all Unix variants and most modern operating systems, provides preemptive multitasking. In preemptive multitasking, the scheduler decides when a process is to cease running and a new process is to resume running. The act of involuntarily suspending a running process is called *preemption*. The time a process runs before it is preempted is predetermined, and it is called the *timeslice* of the process. The timeslice, in effect, gives each runnable process a *slice* of the processor's time. Managing the timeslice enables the scheduler to make global scheduling decisions for the system. It also prevents any one process from monopolizing the processor. As we shall see, this timeslice is dynamically calculated in the Linux process scheduler to provide some interesting benefits.

Conversely, in *cooperative multitasking*, a process does not stop running until it voluntary decides to do so. The act of a process voluntarily suspending itself is called *yielding*. Processes are supposed to yield often, but the operating system cannot enforce this. The shortcomings of this approach are numerous: The scheduler cannot make global decisions regarding how long processes run, processes can monopolize the processor for longer than the user desires, and a hung process that never yields can potentially bring down the entire system. Thankfully, most operating systems designed in the last decade have provided preemptive multitasking, with Mac OS 9 and earlier being the most notable (and embarrassing) exceptions. Of course, Unix has been preemptively multitasked since the beginning.

During the 2.5 kernel development series, the Linux kernel received a scheduler overhaul. A new scheduler, commonly called the **O(1)** scheduler because of its algorithmic behavior<sup>[1]</sup>, solved the shortcomings of the previous Linux scheduler and introduced powerful new features and performance characteristics. This chapter discusses the fundamentals of scheduler design and how they apply to the new **O(1)** scheduler and its goals, design, implementation, algorithms, and related system calls.

[1] **O(1)** is an example of big-o notation. In short, it means the scheduler can do its thing in constant time, regardless of the size of the input. A full explanation of big-o notation is in [Appendix C](#), "Algorithmic Complexity," for the curious.

## Policy

Policy is the behavior of the scheduler that determines what runs when. A scheduler's policy often determines the overall feel of a system and is responsible for optimally utilizing processor time. Therefore, it is very important.

### I/O-Bound Versus Processor-Bound Processes

Processes can be classified as either *I/O-bound* or *processor-bound*. The former is characterized as a process that spends much of its time submitting and waiting on I/O requests. Consequently, such a process is often runnable, but for only short durations because it will eventually block waiting on more I/O (this is any type of I/O, such as keyboard activity, and not just disk I/O).

Conversely, processor-bound processes spend much of their time executing code. They tend to run until they are preempted because they do not block on I/O requests very often. Because they are not I/O-driven, however, system response does not dictate that the scheduler run them often. A scheduler policy for processor-bound processes, therefore, tends to run such processes less frequently but (optimally, to them) for longer durations. The ultimate example of a processor-bound process is one executing an infinite loop.

Of course, these classifications are not mutually exclusive. Processes can exhibit both behaviors simultaneously: The X Window server, for example, is both processor-intense and I/O-intense. Other processes may be I/O-bound but dive into periods of intense processor action. A good example of this is a word processor, which normally sits waiting for key presses but at any moment might peg the processor in a rabid fit of spell checking.

The scheduling policy in a system must attempt to satisfy two conflicting goals: fast process response time (low latency) and maximal system utilization (high throughput). To satisfy these at-odds requirements, schedulers often employ complex algorithms to determine the most worthwhile process to run while not compromising fairness to other, lower priority, processes. The scheduler policy in Unix variants tends to explicitly favor I/O-bound processes, thus providing good process response time. Linux, aiming to provide good interactive response, optimizes for process response (low latency), thus favoring I/O-bound processes over processor-bound processors. As you will see, this is done in a creative manner that does not neglect processor-bound processes.

## Process Priority

A common type of scheduling algorithm is *priority-based* scheduling. The idea is to rank processes based on their worth and need for processor time. Processes with a higher priority run before those with a lower priority, whereas processes with the same priority are scheduled round-robin (one after the next, repeating). On some systems, Linux included, processes with a higher priority also receive a longer timeslice. The runnable process with timeslice remaining and the highest priority always runs. Both the user and the system may set a process's priority to influence the scheduling behavior of the system.

Linux builds on this idea and provides *dynamic priority-based* scheduling. This concept begins with an initial base priority and then enables the scheduler to increase or decrease the priority dynamically to fulfill scheduling objectives. For example, a process that is spending more time waiting on I/O than running is clearly I/O bound. Under Linux, it receives an elevated dynamic priority. As a counterexample, a process that continually uses up its entire timeslice is processor boundit would receive a lowered dynamic priority.

The Linux kernel implements two separate priority ranges. The first is the *nice* value, a number from -20 to +19 with a default of 0. Larger nice values correspond to a lower priorityyou are being *nice* to the other processes on the system. Processes with a lower nice value (higher priority) run before processes with a higher nice value (lower priority). The nice value also helps determine how long a timeslice the process receives. A process with a nice value of -20 receives the maximum possible timeslice, whereas a process with a nice value

of 19 receives the minimum possible timeslice. Nice values are the standard priority range used in all Unix systems.

The second range is the real-time priority. The values are configurable, but by default range from 0 to 99. All real-time processes are at a higher priority than normal processes. Linux implements real-time priorities in accordance with POSIX standards on the matter. Most modern Unix systems implement a similar scheme.

## Timeslice

The timeslice<sup>[2]</sup> is the numeric value that represents how long a task can run until it is preempted. The scheduler policy must dictate a default timeslice, which is not a trivial exercise. Too long a timeslice causes the system to have poor interactive performance; the system will no longer feel as if applications are concurrently executed. Too short a timeslice causes significant amounts of processor time to be wasted on the overhead of switching processes because a significant percentage of the system's time is spent switching from one process with a short timeslice to the next. Furthermore, the conflicting goals of I/O-bound versus processor-bound processes again arise: I/O-bound processes do not need longer timeslices (although they do like to run often), whereas processor-bound processes crave long timeslices (to keep their caches hot, for example).

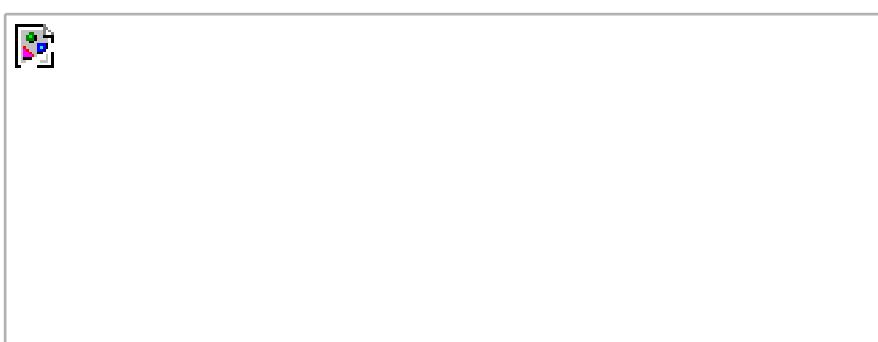
[2] Timeslice is sometimes called *quantum* or *processor slice* in other systems. Linux calls it timeslice, thus so should you.

With this argument, it would seem that *any* long timeslice would result in poor interactive performance. In many operating systems, this observation is taken to heart, and the default timeslice is rather low—for example, 20ms. Linux, however, takes advantage of the fact that the highest priority process always runs. The Linux scheduler bumps the priority of interactive tasks, enabling them to run more frequently. Consequently, the Linux scheduler offers a relatively high default timeslice (see [Table 4.1](#), later in this chapter). Furthermore, the Linux scheduler dynamically determines the timeslice of a process based on priority. This enables higher-priority (allegedly more important) processes to run longer and more often. Implementing dynamic timeslices and priorities provides robust scheduling performance.

**Table 4.1. Scheduler Timeslices**

Type of Task	Nice Value	Timeslice Duration
Initially created	parent's	half of parent's
Minimum Priority	+19	5ms ( <a href="#">MIN_TIMESLICE</a> )
Default Priority	0	100ms ( <a href="#">DEF_TIMESLICE</a> )
Maximum Priority	20	800ms ( <a href="#">MAX_TIMESLICE</a> )

**Figure 4.1. Process timeslice calculation.**





Note that a process does not have to use all its timeslice at once. For example, a process with a 100-millisecond timeslice does not have to run for 100 milliseconds in one go or risk losing the remaining timeslice. Instead, the process can run on five different reschedules for 20 milliseconds each. Thus, a large timeslice also benefits interactive tasks: Although they do not need such a large timeslice all at once, it ensures they remain runnable for as long as possible.

When a process's timeslice runs out, the process is considered expired. A process with no timeslice is not eligible to run until all other processes have exhausted their timeslices (that is, they all have zero timeslice remaining). At that point, the timeslices for all processes are recalculated. The Linux scheduler employs an interesting algorithm for handling timeslice exhaustion that is discussed later in this chapter.

## Process Preemption

As mentioned, the Linux operating system is *preemptive*. When a process enters the **TASK\_RUNNING** state, the kernel checks whether its priority is higher than the priority of the currently executing process. If it is, the scheduler is invoked to preempt the currently executing process and run the newly runnable process. Additionally, when a process's timeslice reaches zero, it is preempted and the scheduler is again invoked to select a new process.

## The Scheduling Policy in Action

Consider a system with two runnable tasks: a text editor and a video encoder. The text editor is I/O-bound because it spends nearly all its time waiting for user key presses (no matter how fast the user types, it is not *that* fast). Despite this, when the text editor does receive a key press, the user expects the editor to respond *immediately*. Conversely, the video encoder is processor-bound. Aside from reading the raw data stream from the disk and later writing the resulting video, the encoder spends all its time applying the video codec to the raw data, easily using 100% of the processor. The video encoder does not have any strong time constraints on when it runs if it started running now or in half a second, the user could not tell and would not care. Of course, the sooner it finishes the better, but latency is not a primary concern.

In this scenario example, ideally the scheduler gives the text editor a higher priority and larger timeslice than the video encoder receives because the text editor is interactive. This ensures that the text editor has plenty of timeslice available. Furthermore, because the text editor has a higher priority, it is capable of preempting the video encoder when needed say, the instant the user presses a key. This guarantees that the text editor is capable of responding to user key presses immediately. This is to the detriment of the video encoder, but because the text editor runs only intermittently, when the user presses a key, the video encoder can monopolize the remaining time. This optimizes the performance of both applications.

## The Linux Scheduling Algorithm

In the previous sections, we discussed process scheduling theory in the abstract, with only occasional mention of how Linux applies a given concept to reality. With the foundation of scheduling now built, we can dive into Linux's very own process scheduler.

The Linux scheduler is defined in `kernel/sched.c`. The scheduler algorithm and supporting code went through a large rewrite early in the 2.5 kernel development series.

Consequently, the scheduler code is entirely new and unlike the scheduler in previous kernels. The new scheduler was designed to accomplish specific goals:

- Implement fully **O(1)** scheduling. Every algorithm in the new scheduler completes in constant-time, regardless of the number of running processes.
- Implement perfect SMP scalability. Each processor has its own locking and individual runqueue.
- Implement improved SMP affinity. Attempt to group tasks to a specific CPU and continue to run them there. Only migrate tasks from one CPU to another to resolve imbalances in runqueue sizes.
- Provide good interactive performance. Even during considerable system load, the system should react and schedule interactive tasks immediately.
- Provide fairness. No process should find itself starved of timeslice for any reasonable amount of time. Likewise, no process should receive an unfairly high amount of timeslice.
- Optimize for the common case of only one or two runnable processes, yet scale well to multiple processors, each with many processes.

The new scheduler accomplished these goals.

## Runqueues

The basic data structure in the scheduler is the *runqueue*. The runqueue is defined in `kernel/sched.c`<sup>[3]</sup> as `struct runqueue`. The runqueue is the list of runnable processes on a given processor; there is one runqueue per processor. Each runnable process is on exactly one runqueue. The runqueue additionally contains per-processor scheduling information. Consequently, the runqueue is the primary scheduling data structure for each processor.

<sup>[3]</sup> Why `kernel/sched.c` and not `<linux/sched.h>`? Because it is desired to abstract away the scheduler code and provide only certain interfaces to the rest of the kernel. Placing the runqueue code in a header file would allow code outside of the scheduler to get at the runqueues, and this is not desired.

Let's look at the structure, with comments describing each field:

```
struct runqueue {  
    spinlock_t      lock; /* spin lock that protects this runqueue */  
    unsigned long   nr_running; /* number of runnable tasks */  
    unsigned long   nr_switches; /* context switch count */  
    unsigned long   expired_timestamp; /* time of last array swap */
```

```
unsigned long    nr_uninterruptible; /* uninterruptible tasks */
unsigned long long timestamp_last_tick; /* last scheduler tick */
struct task_struct *curr;           /* currently running task */
struct task_struct *idle;          /* this processor's idle task */
struct mm_struct *prev_mm;        /* mm_struct of last ran task */
struct prio_array *active;         /* active priority array */
struct prio_array *expired;        /* the expired priority array */
struct prio_array arrays[2];      /* the actual priority arrays */
struct task_struct *migration_thread; /* migration thread */
struct list_head migration_queue; /* migration queue*/
atomic_t       nr_iowait; /* number of tasks waiting on I/O */

};
```

Because runqueues are the core data structure in the scheduler, a group of macros are used to obtain the runqueue associated with a given processor or process. The macro `cpu_rq(processor)` returns a pointer to the runqueue associated with the given processor; the macro `this_rq()` returns the runqueue of the current processor; and the macro `task_rq(task)` returns a pointer to the runqueue on which the given task is queued.

Before a runqueue can be manipulated, it must be locked (locking is discussed in depth in [Chapter 8](#), "Kernel Synchronization Introduction"). Because each runqueue is unique to the current processor, it is rare when a processor desires to lock a different processor's runqueue. (It does happen, however, as we will see.) The locking of the runqueue prohibits any changes to it while the lock-holder is reading or writing the runqueue's members. The most common runqueue locking scenario is when you want to lock the runqueue on which a specific task runs. In that case, the `task_rq_lock()` and `task_rq_unlock()` functions are used:

```
struct runqueue *rq;
unsigned long flags;

rq = task_rq_lock(task, &flags);
/* manipulate the task's runqueue, rq */
task_rq_unlock(rq, &flags);
```

Alternatively, the method `this_rq_lock()` locks the current runqueue and `rq_unlock()` unlocks the given runqueue:

```
struct runqueue *rq;

rq = this_rq_lock();
/* manipulate this process's current runqueue, rq */
rq_unlock(rq);
```

To avoid deadlock, code that wants to lock multiple runqueues needs always to obtain the locks in the same order: by ascending runqueue address. (Again, [Chapter 8](#) offers a full explanation.) For example,

```
/* to lock ... */
if (rq1 == rq2)
    spinlock(&rq1->lock);
else {
    if (rq1 < rq2) {
        spin_lock(&rq1->lock);
        spin_lock(&rq2->lock);
    } else {
        spin_lock(&rq2->lock);
        spin_lock(&rq1->lock);
    }
}
```

```
/* manipulate both runqueues ... */  
  
/* to unlock ... */  
spin_unlock(&rq1->lock);  
if (rq1 != rq2)  
    spin_unlock(&rq2->lock);
```

These steps are made automatic by the `double_rq_lock()` and `double_rq_unlock()` functions. The preceding steps would then become

```
double_rq_lock(rq1, rq2);  
  
/* manipulate both runqueues ... */  
  
double_rq_unlock(rq1, rq2);
```

A quick example should help you see why the order of obtaining the locks is important. The topic of deadlock is covered in [Chapters 8](#) and [9](#) because this is not a problem unique to the runqueues; nested locks always need to be obtained in the same order. The spin locks are used to prevent multiple tasks from simultaneously manipulating the runqueues. They work like a key to a door. The first task to reach the door grabs the key and enters the door, locking the door behind it. If another task reaches the door and finds it locked (because another task is already inside), it must sit and wait for the first task to exit the door and return the key. This waiting is called *spinning* because the task actually sits in a tight loop, repeatedly checking for the return of the key. Now, consider if one task wants to lock the first runqueue and then the second while another task wants to lock the second runqueue and then the first. Assume the first task succeeds in locking the first runqueue while simultaneously the second task succeeds in locking the second runqueue. Now the first task tries to lock the second runqueue and the second task tries to lock the first runqueue. Neither task succeeds because the other task holds the lock. Both tasks sit, waiting forever for each other. Like an impasse creating a traffic deadlock, this out-of-order locking results in the tasks waiting for each other, forever, and thus deadlocking. If both tasks obtained the locks in the same order, this scenario could not happen. See [Chapters 8](#) and [9](#) for the full scoop on locking.

## The Priority Arrays

Each runqueue contains two *priority arrays*, the active and the expired array. Priority arrays are defined in `kernel/sched.c` as `struct prio_array`. Priority arrays are the data structures that provide  $O(1)$  scheduling. Each priority array contains one queue of runnable processors per priority level. These queues contain lists of the runnable processes at each priority level. The priority arrays also contain a *priority bitmap* used to efficiently discover the highest-priority runnable task in the system.

```
struct prio_array {  
    int          nr_active;      /* number of tasks in the queues */  
    unsigned long bitmap[BITMAP_SIZE]; /* priority bitmap */  
    struct list_head queue[MAX_PRIO]; /* priority queues */  
};
```

`MAX_PRIO` is the number of priority levels on the system. By default, this is 140. Thus, there is one `struct list_head` for each priority.

`BITMAP_SIZE` is the size that an array of `unsigned long` typed variables would have to be to provide one bit for each valid priority level. With 140 priorities and 32-bit words, this is five. Thus, `bitmap` is an array with five elements and a total of 160 bits.

Each priority array contains a `bitmap` field that has at least one bit for every priority on the system. Initially, all the bits are zero. When a task of a given priority becomes runnable (that is, its state is set to `TASK_RUNNING`), the corresponding bit in the bitmap is set to one. For example, if a task with priority seven is runnable, then bit seven is set. Finding the highest priority task on the system is therefore only a matter of finding the first set bit in the bitmap. Because the number of priorities is static, the time to complete this search is constant and

unaffected by the number of running processes on the system. Furthermore, each supported architecture in Linux implements a fast *find first set* algorithm to quickly search the bitmap. This method is called `sched_find_first_bit()`. Many architectures provide a *find-first-set* instruction that operates on a given word<sup>[4]</sup>. On these systems, finding the first set bit is as trivial as executing this instruction at most a couple of times.

<sup>[4]</sup> On the x86 architecture, this instruction is called `bsfl`. On PPC, `cntlzw` is used for this purpose.

Each priority array also contains an array named `queue` of `struct list_head` queues, one queue for each priority. Each list corresponds to a given priority and in fact contains all the runnable processes of that priority that are on this processor's runqueue. Finding the next task to run is as simple as selecting the next element in the list. Within a given priority, tasks are scheduled round robin.

The priority array also contains a counter, `nr_active`. This is the number of runnable tasks in this priority array.

## Recalculating Timeslices

Many operating systems (older versions of Linux included) have an explicit method for recalculating each task's timeslice when they have all reached zero. Typically, this is implemented as a loop over each task, such as

```
for (each task on the system) {
    recalculate priority
    recalculate timeslice
}
```

The priority and other attributes of the task are used to determine a new timeslice. This approach has some problems:

- It potentially can take a long time. Worse, it scales  $O(n)$  for  $n$  tasks on the system.
- The recalculation must occur under some sort of lock protecting the task list and the individual process descriptors. This results in high lock contention.
- The nondeterminism of a randomly occurring recalculation of the timeslices is a problem with deterministic real-time programs.
- It is just gross (which is a quite legitimate reason for improving something in the Linux kernel).

The new Linux scheduler alleviates the need for a recalculate loop. Instead, it maintains two priority arrays for each processor: both an *active* array and an *expired* array. The active array contains all the tasks in the associated runqueue that have timeslice left. The expired array contains all the tasks in the associated runqueue that have exhausted their timeslice. When each task's timeslice reaches zero, its timeslice is recalculated before it is moved to the expired array. Recalculating all the timeslices is then as simple as just switching the active and expired arrays. Because the arrays are accessed only via pointer, switching them is as fast as swapping two pointers. This is performed in `schedule()`:

```
struct prio_array *array = rq->active;
if (!array->nr_active) {
    rq->active = rq->expired;
    rq->expired = array;
}
```

This swap is a key feature of the new  $O(1)$  scheduler. Instead of recalculating each processes priority and timeslice all the time, the  $O(1)$  scheduler performs a simple two-step array swap. This resolves the previously discussed problems.

## schedule()

The act of picking the next task to run and switching to it is implemented via the `schedule()` function. This function is called explicitly by kernel code that wants to sleep and it is invoked whenever a task is to be preempted. The `schedule()` function is run independently by each processor. Consequently, each CPU makes its own decisions on what process to run next.

The `schedule()` function is relatively simple for all it must accomplish. The following code determines the highest priority task:

```
struct task_struct *prev, *next;
struct list_head *queue;
struct prio_array *array;
int idx;

prev = current;
array = rq->active;
idx = sched_find_first_bit(array->bitmap);
queue = array->queue + idx;
next = list_entry(queue->next, struct task_struct, run_list);
```

First, the active priority array is searched to find the first set bit. This bit corresponds to the highest priority task that is runnable. Next, the scheduler selects the first task in the list at that priority. This is the highest priority runnable task on the system and is the task the scheduler will run. See [Figure 4.2](#).

**Figure 4.2. The Linux  $O(1)$  scheduler algorithm.**





If `prev` does not equal `next`, then a new task has been selected to run. The function `context_switch()` is called to switch from `prev` to `next`. Context switching is discussed in a subsequent section.

Two important points should be noted from the previous code. First, it is very simple and consequently quite fast. Second, the number of processes on the system has no effect on how long this code takes to execute. There is no loop over any list to find the most suitable process. In fact, nothing affects how long the `schedule()` code takes to find a new task. It is constant in execution time.

## Calculating Priority and Timeslice

At the beginning of this chapter, you saw how priority and timeslice are used to influence the decisions that the scheduler makes. Additionally, you learned about I/O-bound and processor-bound tasks and why it is beneficial to boost the priority of interactive tasks. Now it's time to look at the actual code that implements this design.

Processes have an initial priority that is called the *nice* value. This value ranges from 20 to +19 with a default of zero. Nineteen is the lowest and 20 is the highest priority. This value is stored in the `static_prio` member of the process's `task_struct`. The variable is called the *static priority* because it does not change from what the user specifies. The scheduler, in turn, bases its decisions on the dynamic priority that is stored in `prio`. The *dynamic priority* is calculated as a function of the static priority and the task's interactivity.

The method `effective_prio()` returns a task's dynamic priority. The method begins with the task's nice value and computes a bonus or penalty in the range 5 to +5 based on the interactivity of the task. For example, a highly interactive task with a nice value of ten can have a dynamic priority of five. Conversely, a mild processor hog with a nice value of ten can have a dynamic priority of 12. Tasks that are only mildly interactive at some theoretical equilibrium of I/O versus processor usage receive no bonus or penalty and their dynamic priority is equal to their nice value.

Of course, the scheduler does not magically know whether a process is interactive. It must use some heuristic that is capable of accurately reflecting whether a task is I/O bound or processor bound. The most indicative metric is how long the task sleeps. If a task spends most of its time asleep, then it is I/O bound. If a task spends more time runnable than sleeping, it is certainly not interactive. This extends to the extreme: A task that spends nearly all the time sleeping is completely I/O bound, whereas a task that spends nearly all its time runnable is completely processor bound.

To implement this heuristic, Linux keeps a running tab on how much time a process is spent sleeping versus how much time the process spends in a runnable state. This value is stored in the `sleep_avg` member of the `task_struct`. It ranges from zero to `MAX_SLEEP_AVG`, which defaults to 10 milliseconds. When a task becomes runnable after sleeping, `sleep_avg` is incremented by how long it slept, until the value reaches `MAX_SLEEP_AVG`. For every timer tick the task runs, `sleep_avg` is decremented until it reaches zero.

This metric is surprisingly accurate. It is computed based not only on how long the task sleeps but also on how little it runs. Therefore, a task that spends a great deal of time sleeping, but also continually exhausts its timeslice, will not be awarded a huge bonus—the metric works not just to award interactive tasks but also to punish processor-bound tasks. It is also not vulnerable to abuse. A task that receives a boosted priority and timeslice quickly loses the bonus if it turns around and hogs the processor. Finally, the metric provides quick response. A newly created interactive process quickly receives a large `sleep_avg`. Despite this, because the bonus or penalty is applied against the initial nice value, the user can still influence the system's scheduling decisions by changing the process's nice value.

Timeslice, on the other hand, is a much simpler calculation. It is based on the static priority. When a process is first created, the new child and the parent split the parent's remaining timeslice. This provides fairness and prevents users from forking new children to get unlimited timeslice. After a task's timeslice is exhausted, however, it is recalculated based on the task's static priority. The function `task_timeslice()` returns a new timeslice for the given task. The calculation is a simple scaling of the static priority into a range of timeslices. The higher a task's priority, the more timeslice it receives per round of execution. The maximum timeslice, which is given to the highest priority tasks (a nice value of -20), is 800 milliseconds. Even the lowest-priority tasks (those with a nice value of +19) receive at least the minimum timeslice, `MIN_TIMESLICE`, which is either 5 milliseconds or one timer tick (see [Chapter 10, Timers and Time Management](#)), whichever is larger. Tasks with the default priority (a nice value of zero) receive a timeslice of 100 milliseconds. See [Table 4.1](#).

The scheduler provides one additional aide to interactive tasks: If a task is sufficiently interactive, when it exhausts its timeslice it will not

be inserted into the expired array, but instead reinserted back into the active array. Recall that timeslice recalculation is provided via the switching of the active and the expired arrays. Normally, as processes exhaust their timeslices, they are moved from the active array to the expired array. When there are no more processes in the active array, the two arrays are switched: The active becomes the expired, and the expired becomes the active. This provides  $O(1)$  timeslice recalculation. It also provides the possibility that an interactive task can become runnable but fail to run again until the array switch occurs because the task is stuck in the expired array. Reinserting interactive tasks back into the active array alleviates this problem. The task does not run immediately, but is scheduled round robin with the other tasks at its priority. The logic to provide this feature is implemented in `scheduler_tick()`, which is called via the timer interrupt (discussed in [Chapter 10](#), "Timers and Time Management"):

```
struct task_struct *task;
struct runqueue *rq;

task = current;
rq = this_rq();

if (!--task->time_slice) {
    if (ITASK_INTERACTIVE(task) || EXPIRED_STARVING(rq))
        enqueue_task(task, rq->expired);
    else
        enqueue_task(task, rq->active);
}
```

First, the code decrements the process's timeslice and checks whether it is now zero. If it is, the task is expired and it needs to be inserted into an array, so this code first checks whether the task is interactive via the `TASK_INTERACTIVE()` macro. This macro computes whether a task is "interactive enough" based on its nice value. The lower the nice value (the higher the priority) the less interactive a task needs to be. A nice +19 task can never be interactive enough to be reinserted. Conversely, a nice 20 task would need to be a heavy processor hog not to be reinserted. A task at the default nice value, zero, needs to be relatively interactive to be reinserted, but it is not too difficult. Next, the `EXPIRED_STARVING()` macro checks whether there are processes on the expired array that are starving that is, if the arrays have not been switched in a relatively long time. If they have not been switched recently, reinserting the current task into the active array further delays the switch, additionally starving the tasks on the expired array. If this is not the case, the process can be inserted into the active array. Otherwise, it is inserted into the expired array, which is the normal practice.

## Sleeping and Waking Up

Tasks that are sleeping (blocked) are in a special non-runnable state. This is important because without this special state, the scheduler would select tasks that did not want to run or, worse, sleeping would have to be implemented as busy looping. A task sleeps for a number of reasons, but always while it is waiting for some event. The event can be a specified amount of time, more data from a file I/O, or another hardware event. A task can also involuntarily go to sleep when it tries to obtain a contended semaphore in the kernel (this is covered in [Chapter 9](#), "Kernel Synchronization Methods"). A common reason to sleep is file I/O for example, the task issued `aead()` request on a file, which needs to be read in from disk. As another example, the task could be waiting for keyboard input. Whatever the case, the kernel behavior is the same: The task marks itself as sleeping, puts itself on a wait queue, removes itself from the runqueue, and calls `schedule()` to select a new process to execute. Waking back up is the inverse: the task is set as runnable, removed from the wait queue, and added back to the runqueue.

As discussed in the previous chapter, two states are associated with sleeping, `TASK_INTERRUPTIBLE` and `TASK_UNINTERRUPTIBLE`. They differ only in that tasks in the `TASK_UNINTERRUPTIBLE` state ignore signals, whereas tasks in the `TASK_INTERRUPTIBLE` state wake up prematurely and respond to a signal if one is issued. Both types of sleeping tasks sit on a wait queue, waiting for an event to occur, and are not runnable.

Sleeping is handled via wait queues. A wait queue is a simple list of processes waiting for an event to occur. Wait queues are represented in the kernel by `wake_queue_head_t`. Wait queues are created statically via `DECLARE_WAITQUEUE()` or dynamically via `init_waitqueue_head()`. Processes put themselves on a wait queue and mark themselves not runnable. When the event associated with the wait queue occurs, the processes on the queue are awakened. It is important to implement sleeping and waking correctly, to avoid race conditions.

Some simple interfaces for sleeping used to be in wide use. These interfaces, however, have races: It is possible to go to sleep *after* the condition becomes true. In that case, the task might sleep indefinitely. Therefore, the recommended method for sleeping in the kernel is a bit more complicated:

```
/* 'q' is the wait queue we wish to sleep on */
DECLARE_WAITQUEUE(wait, current);

add_wait_queue(q, &wait);
while (!condition) { /* condition is the event that we are waiting for */
    set_current_state(TASK_INTERRUPTIBLE); /* or TASK_UNINTERRUPTIBLE */
    if (signal_pending(current))
        /* handle signal */
    schedule();
}
set_current_state(TASK_RUNNING);
remove_wait_queue(q, &wait);
```

The task performs the following steps to add itself to a wait queue:

1. Creates a wait queue entry via `DECLARE_WAITQUEUE()`.
2. Adds itself to a wait queue via `add_wait_queue()`. This wait queue awakens the process when the condition for which it is waiting occurs. Of course, there needs to be code elsewhere that calls `wake_up()` on the queue when the event actually does occur.
3. Changes the process state to `TASK_INTERRUPTIBLE` or `TASK_UNINTERRUPTIBLE`.
4. If the state is set to `TASK_INTERRUPTIBLE`, a signal wakes the process up. This is called *spurious wake up* (a wake-up not caused by the occurrence of the event). So check and handle signals.
5. Tests whether the condition is true. If it is, there is no need to sleep. If it is not true, the task calls `schedule()`.
6. When the task awakens, it again checks whether the condition is true. If it is, it exits the loop. Otherwise, it again calls `schedule()` and repeats.
7. Now that the condition is true, the task can set itself to `TASK_RUNNING` and remove itself from the wait queue via `remove_wait_queue()`.

If the condition occurs before the task goes to sleep, the loop terminates, and the task does not erroneously go to sleep. Note that kernel code often has to perform various other tasks in the body of the loop. For example, it might need to release locks before calling `schedule()` and reacquire them after or react to other events.

Waking is handled via `wake_up()`, which wakes up all the tasks waiting on the given wait queue. It calls `try_to_wake_up()`, which sets the task's state to `TASK_RUNNING`, calls `activate_task()` to add the task to a runqueue, and sets `need_resched` if the awakened task's priority is higher than the priority of the current task. The code that causes the event to occur typically calls `wake_up()` afterward. For example, when data arrives from the hard disk, the VFS calls `wake_up()` on the wait queue that holds the processes waiting for the data.

An important note about sleeping is that there are spurious wake-ups. Just because a task is awakened does not mean that the event for which the task is waiting has occurred; sleeping should always be handled in a loop that ensures that the condition for which the task is waiting has indeed occurred. [Figure 4.3](#) depicts the relationship between each scheduler state.

**Figure 4.3. Sleeping and waking up.**



## The Load Balancer

As discussed, the Linux scheduler implements separate runqueues and locking for each processor on a symmetrical multiprocessing system. That is, each processor maintains its own list of processes and operates the scheduler on only those tasks. The entire scheduling system is, in effect, unique to each processor. How, then, does the scheduler enforce any sort of global scheduling policy on multiprocessor systems? What if the runqueues become unbalanced, say with five processes on one processor's runqueue, but only one on another? The solution is the load balancer, which works to ensure that the runqueues are balanced. The load balancer compares the current processor's runqueue to the other runqueues in the system. If it finds an imbalance, it *pulls* processes from the busier runqueue to the current runqueue. Ideally, every runqueue will have the same number of processes. That is a lofty goal, but the load balancer comes close.

The load balancer is implemented in `kernel/sched.c` as `load_balance()`. It has two methods of invocation. It is called by `schedule()` whenever the current runqueue is empty. It is also called via timer: every 1 millisecond when the system is idle and every 200 milliseconds otherwise. On uniprocessor systems, `load_balance()` is never called and in fact is not even compiled into the kernel image because there is only a single runqueue and thus no balancing is needed.

The load balancer is called with the current processor's runqueue locked and with interrupts disabled to protect the runqueues from concurrent access. In the case where `schedule()` calls `load_balance()`, its job is pretty clear because the current runqueue is empty and finding *any* process and pulling it onto this runqueue is advantageous. When the load balancer is called via timer, however, its job might be less apparent: It needs to resolve any imbalance between the runqueues to keep them about even. See [Figure 4.4](#).

**Figure 4.4. The load balancer.**





The `load_balance()` function and related methods are fairly large and complicated, although the steps they perform are comprehensible:

1. First, `load_balance()` calls `find_busiest_queue()` to determine the busiest runqueue. In other words, this is the runqueue with the greatest number of processes in it. If there is no runqueue that has at least 25% more processes than the current, `find_busiest_queue()` returns `NULL` and `load_balance()` returns. Otherwise, the busiest runqueue is returned.
2. Second, `load_balance()` decides from which priority array on the busiest runqueue it wants to pull. The expired array is preferred because those tasks have not run in a relatively long time and thus are most likely not in the processor's cache (that is, they are not "cache hot"). If the expired priority array is empty, the active one is the only choice.
3. Next, `load_balance()` finds the highest priority (smallest value) list that has tasks, because it is more important to fairly distribute high-priority tasks than lower-priority ones.
4. Each task of the given priority is analyzed to find a task that is not running, not prevented to migrate via processor affinity, and not cache hot. If the task meets this criteria, `pull_task()` is called to pull the task from the busiest runqueue to the current runqueue.
5. As long as the runqueues remain imbalanced, the previous two steps are repeated and more tasks are pulled from the busiest runqueue to the current. Finally, when the imbalance is resolved, the current runqueue is unlocked and `load_balance()` returns.

Here is `load_balance()`, slightly cleaned up but otherwise in all its glory:

```
static int load_balance(int this_cpu, runqueue_t *this_rq,
                      struct sched_domain *sd, enum idle_type idle)
{
    struct sched_group *group;
    runqueue_t *busiest;
    unsigned long imbalance;
    int nr_moved;

    spin_lock(&this_rq->lock);
```

```
group = find_busiest_group(sd, this_cpu, &imbalance, idle);
if (!group)
    goto out_balanced;

busiest = find_busiest_queue(group);
if (!busiest)
    goto out_balanced;

nr_moved = 0;
if (busiest->nr_running > 1) {
    double_lock_balance(this_rq, busiest);
    nr_moved = move_tasks(this_rq, this_cpu, busiest,
                          imbalance, sd, idle);
    spin_unlock(&busiest->lock);
}
spin_unlock(&this_rq->lock);

if (!nr_moved) {
    sd->nr_balance_failed++;

    if (unlikely(sd->nr_balance_failed > sd->cache_nice_tries+2)) {
        int wake = 0;

        spin_lock(&busiest->lock);
        if (!busiest->active_balance) {
            busiest->active_balance = 1;
            busiest->push_cpu = this_cpu;
            wake = 1;
        }
        spin_unlock(&busiest->lock);
        if (wake)
            wake_up_process(busiest->migration_thread);
        sd->nr_balance_failed = sd->cache_nice_tries;
    }
} else
    sd->nr_balance_failed = 0;

sd->balance_interval = sd->min_interval;

return nr_moved;

out_balanced:
spin_unlock(&this_rq->lock);

if (sd->balance_interval < sd->max_interval)
    sd->balance_interval *= 2;

return 0;
}
```

## Preemption and Context Switching

Context switching, the switching from one runnable task to another, is handled by the `context_switch()` function defined in `kernel/sched.c`. It is called by `schedule()` when a new process has been selected to run. It does two basic jobs:

- Calls `switch_mm()`, which is defined in `<asm/mmu_context.h>`, to switch the virtual memory mapping from the previous process's to that of the new process.
- Calls `switch_to()`, defined in `<asm/system.h>`, to switch the processor state from the previous process's to the current's. This involves saving and restoring stack information and the processor registers.

The kernel, however, must know when to call `schedule()`. If it called `schedule()` only when code explicitly did so, user-space programs could run indefinitely. Instead, the kernel provides the `need_resched` flag to signify whether a reschedule should be performed (see [Table 4.2](#)). This flag is set by `scheduler_tick()` when a process runs out of timeslice, and by `TRY_to_wake_up()` when a process that has a higher priority than the currently running process is awakened. The kernel checks the flag, sees that it is set, and calls `schedule()` to switch to a new process. The flag is a message to the kernel that the scheduler should be invoked as soon as possible because another process deserves to run. Upon returning to user-space or returning from an interrupt, the `need_resched` flag is checked. If it is set, the kernel invokes the scheduler before continuing.

**Table 4.2. Functions for Accessing and Manipulating `need_resched`**

Function	Purpose
<code>set_tsk_need_resched()</code>	Set the <code>need_resched</code> flag in the given process
<code>clear_tsk_need_resched()</code>	Clear the <code>need_resched</code> flag in the given process
<code>need_resched()</code>	Test the value of the <code>need_resched</code> flag; return true if set and false otherwise

The flag is per-process, and not simply global, because it is faster to access a value in the process descriptor (because of the speed of `current` and high probability of it being in a cache line) than a global variable. Historically, the flag was global before the 2.2 kernel. In 2.2 and 2.4, the flag was an `int` inside the `task_struct`. In 2.6, it was moved into a single bit of a special flag variable inside the `SHRead_info` structure. As you can see, the kernel developers are never satisfied.

## User Preemption

User preemption occurs when the kernel is about to return to user-space, `need_resched` is set, and therefore, the scheduler is invoked. If the kernel is returning to user-space, it knows it is in a safe quiescent state. In other words, if it is safe to continue executing the current task, it is also safe to pick a new task to execute. Consequently, whenever the kernel is preparing to return to user-space either on return from an interrupt or after a system call, the value of `need_resched` is checked. If it is set, the scheduler is invoked to select a new (more fit) process to execute. Both the return paths for return from interrupt and return from system call are architecture dependent and

typically implemented in assembly in `entry.S` (which, aside from kernel entry code, also contains kernel exit code).

In short, user preemption can occur

- When returning to user-space from a system call
- When returning to user-space from an interrupt handler

## Kernel Preemption

The Linux kernel, unlike most other Unix variants and many other operating systems, is a fully preemptive kernel. In non-preemptive kernels, kernel code runs until completion. That is, the scheduler is not capable of rescheduling a task while it is in the kernel. Kernel code is scheduled cooperatively, not preemptively. Kernel code runs until it finishes (returns to user-space) or explicitly blocks. In the 2.6 kernel, however, the Linux kernel became preemptive: It is now possible to preempt a task at any point, so long as the kernel is in a state in which it is safe to reschedule.

So when is it safe to reschedule? The kernel is capable of preempting a task running in the kernel so long as it does not hold a lock. That is, locks are used as markers of regions of non-preemptibility. Because the kernel is SMP-safe, if a lock is not held, the current code is reentrant and capable of being preempted.

The first change in supporting kernel preemption was the addition of a preemption counter, `preempt_count`, to each process's `thread_info`. This counter begins at zero and increments once for each lock that is acquired and decrements once for each lock that is released. When the counter is zero, the kernel is preemptible. Upon return from interrupt, if returning to kernel-space, the kernel checks the values of `need_resched` and `preempt_count`. If `need_resched` is set and `preempt_count` is zero, then a more important task is runnable and it is safe to preempt. Thus, the scheduler is invoked. If `preempt_count` is nonzero, a lock is held and it is unsafe to reschedule. In that case, the interrupt returns as usual to the currently executing task. When all the locks that the current task is holding are released, `preempt_count` returns to zero. At that time, the unlock code checks whether `need_resched` is set. If so, the scheduler is invoked. Enabling and disabling kernel preemption is sometimes required in kernel code and is discussed in [Chapter 9](#).

Kernel preemption can also occur explicitly, when a task in the kernel blocks or explicitly calls `schedule()`. This form of kernel preemption has always been supported because no additional logic is required to ensure that the kernel is in a state that is safe to preempt. It is assumed that the code that explicitly calls `schedule()` knows it is safe to reschedule.

Kernel preemption can occur

- When an interrupt handler exits, before returning to kernel-space
- When kernel code becomes preemptible again
- If a task in the kernel explicitly calls `schedule()`
- If a task in the kernel blocks (which results in a call to `schedule()`)

## Real-Time

Linux provides two real-time scheduling policies, **SCHED\_FIFO** and **SCHED\_RR**. The normal, not real-time scheduling policy is **SCHED\_NORMAL**. **SCHED\_FIFO** implements a simple first-in, first-out scheduling algorithm without timeslices. A runnable **SCHED\_FIFO** task is always scheduled over any **SCHED\_NORMAL** tasks. When a **SCHED\_FIFO** task becomes runnable, it continues to run until it blocks or explicitly yields the processor; it has no timeslice and can run indefinitely. Only a higher priority **SCHED\_FIFO** or **SCHED\_RR** task can preempt a **SCHED\_FIFO** task. Two or more **SCHED\_FIFO** tasks at the same priority run round robin, but again only yielding the processor when they explicitly choose to do so. If a **SCHED\_FIFO** task is runnable, all tasks at a lower priority cannot run until it finishes.

**SCHED\_RR** is identical to **SCHED\_FIFO** except that each process can run only until it exhausts a predetermined timeslice. That is, **SCHED\_RR** is **SCHED\_FIFO** with timeslices—it is a real-time round-robin scheduling algorithm. When a **SCHED\_RR** task exhausts its timeslice, any other real-time processes at its priority are scheduled round robin. The timeslice is used only to allow rescheduling of same-priority processes. As with **SCHED\_FIFO**, a higher-priority process always immediately preempts a lower-priority one, and a lower-priority process can never preempt a **SCHED\_RR** task, even if its timeslice is exhausted.

Both real-time scheduling policies implement static priorities. The kernel does not calculate dynamic priority values for real-time tasks. This ensures that a real-time process at a given priority *always* preempts a process at a lower priority.

The real-time scheduling policies in Linux provide soft real-time behavior. *Soft real-time* refers to the notion that the kernel tries to schedule applications within timing deadlines, but the kernel does not promise to always be able to achieve these goals. Conversely, *hard real-time* systems are guaranteed to meet any scheduling requirements within certain limits. Linux makes no guarantees on the ability to schedule real-time tasks. Despite not having a design that guarantees hard real-time behavior, the real-time scheduling performance in Linux is quite good. The 2.6 Linux kernel is capable of meeting very stringent timing requirements.

Real-time priorities range inclusively from zero to **MAX\_RT\_PRIO** minus one. By default, **MAX\_RT\_PRIO** is 100; therefore, the default real-time priority range is zero to 99. This priority space is shared with the nice values of **SCHED\_NORMAL** tasks: They use the space from **MAX\_RT\_PRIO** to **(MAX\_RT\_PRIO + 40)**. By default, this means the 20 to +19 nice range maps directly onto the priority space from 100 to 139.

## Scheduler-Related System Calls

Linux provides a family of system calls for the management of scheduler parameters. These system calls allow manipulation of process priority, scheduling policy, and processor affinity, as well as provide an explicit mechanism to *yield* the processor to other tasks.

Various books and your friendly system man pages provide reference to these system calls (which are all implemented in the C library without much wrapper they just invoke the system call). [Table 4.3](#) lists the system calls and provides a brief description. How system calls are implemented in the kernel is discussed in [Chapter 5](#), "System Calls."

**Table 4.3. Scheduler-Related System Calls**

System Call	Description
<code>nice()</code>	Sets a process's nice value
<code>sched_setscheduler()</code>	Sets a process's scheduling policy
<code>sched_getscheduler()</code>	Gets a process's scheduling policy
<code>sched_setparam()</code>	Sets a process's real-time priority
<code>sched_getparam()</code>	Gets a process's real-time priority
<code>sched_get_priority_max()</code>	Gets the maximum real-time priority
<code>sched_get_priority_min()</code>	Gets the minimum real-time priority
<code>sched_rr_get_interval()</code>	Gets a process's timeslice value
<code>sched_setaffinity()</code>	Sets a process's processor affinity
<code>sched_getaffinity()</code>	Gets a process's processor affinity
<code>sched_yield()</code>	Temporarily yields the processor

## Scheduling Policy and Priority-Related System Calls

The `sched_setscheduler()` and `sched_getscheduler()` system calls set and get a given process's scheduling policy and real-time priority, respectively. Their implementation, like most system calls, involves a lot of argument checking, setup, and cleanup. The important work, however, is merely to read or write the `policy` and `rt_priority` values in the process's `task_struct`.

The `sched_setparam()` and `sched_getparam()` system calls set and get a process's real-time priority. These calls merely encode `rt_priority` in a special `sched_param` structure. The calls `sched_get_priority_max()` and `sched_get_priority_min()` return the maximum and minimum priorities, respectively, for a given scheduling policy. The maximum priority for the real-time policies is `MAX_USER_RT_PRIO` minus one; the minimum is one.

For normal tasks, the `nice()` function increments the given process's static priority by the given amount. Only root can provide a negative value, thereby lowering the nice value and increasing the priority. The `nice()` function calls the kernel's `sset_user_nice()` function, which sets the `static_prio` and `prio` values in the task's `task_struct` as appropriate.

## Processor Affinity System Calls

The Linux scheduler enforces hard processor affinity. That is, although it tries to provide soft or natural affinity by attempting to keep processes on the same processor, the scheduler also enables a user to say, "This task must remain on this subset of the available processors no matter what." This hard affinity is stored as a bitmask in the task's `task_struct` as `cpus_allowed`. The bitmask contains one bit per possible processor on the system. By default, all bits are set and, therefore, a process is potentially runnable on any processor. The user, however, via `sched_setaffinity()`, can provide a different bitmask of any combination of one or more bits. Likewise, the call `sched_getaffinity()` returns the current `cpus_allowed` bitmask.

The kernel enforces hard affinity in a very simple manner. First, when a process is initially created, it inherits its parent's affinity mask. Because the parent is running on an allowed processor, the child thus runs on an allowed processor. Second, when a processor's affinity is changed, the kernel uses the *migration threads* to push the task onto a legal processor. Finally, the load balancer pulls tasks to only an allowed processor. Therefore, a process only ever runs on a processor whose bit is set in the `cpus_allowed` field of its process descriptor.

## Yielding Processor Time

Linux provides the `sched_yield()` system call as a mechanism for a process to explicitly yield the processor to other waiting processes. It works by removing the process from the active array (where it currently is, because it is running) and inserting it into the expired array. This has the effect of not only preempting the process and putting it at the end of its priority list, but also putting it on the expired list guaranteeing it will not run for a while. Because real-time tasks never expire, they are a special case. Therefore, they are merely moved to the end of their priority list (and not inserted into the expired array). In earlier versions of Linux, the semantics of the `sched_yield()` call were quite different; at best, the task was moved only to the end of its priority list. The yielding was often not for a very long time. Nowadays, applications and even kernel code should be certain they truly want to give up the processor before calling `sched_yield()`.

Kernel code, as a convenience, can call `yield()`, which ensures that the task's state is `TASK_RUNNING`, and then calls `sched_yield()`. User-space applications use the `sched_yield()` system call.

## Scheduler Finale

The process scheduler is an important part of the kernel because running processes is (for most of us, at least) the point of using the computer in the first place. Juggling the demands of process scheduling are nontrivial, however: A large number of runnable processes, scalability concerns, tradeoffs between latency and throughput, and the demands of various workloads make a one-size-fits-all algorithm hard to find. The Linux kernel's new process scheduler, however, comes very close to appeasing all parties and providing an optimal solution for all cases with perfect scalability and ever-apparent charm.

Remaining issues include fine tuning (or even totally replacing) the interactivity estimator, which is a godsend when it makes correct predictions and a total pain when it guesses wrong. Work on alternatives continues; one day we will likely see a new implementation in the mainline kernel.

Improved behavior on NUMA (non-uniform memory architecture) machines is of growing importance as the prevalence of NUMA machines increases. Support for *scheduler domains*, a scheduler abstraction used to describe process topology, was merged into the mainline kernel early in the 2.6 series.

This chapter looked at theory behind process scheduling and the specific implementation, algorithms, and interfaces used by the current Linux kernel. The next chapter covers the primary interface that the kernel provides to running processes: system calls.

# Chapter 5. System Calls

The kernel provides a set of interfaces by which processes running in user-space can interact with the system. These interfaces give applications access to hardware and other operating system resources. The interfaces act as the messengers between applications and the kernel, with the applications issuing various requests, and the kernel fulfilling them (or telling the application to go away). The fact that these interfaces exist, and that applications are not free to do directly whatever they please, is key to providing a stable system and avoiding a big mess.

System calls provide a layer between the hardware and user-space processes. This layer serves three primary purposes. First, it provides an abstracted hardware interface for user-space. When reading or writing from a file, for example, applications need not concern themselves with the type of disk, media, or even the filesystem on which the file resides. Second, system calls ensure system security and stability. With the kernel acting as a middleman between system resources and user-space, the kernel can arbitrate access based on permissions and other criteria. For example, this prevents applications from incorrectly using hardware, stealing other processes' resources, or doing harm to the system. Finally, a single common layer between user-space and the rest of the system allows for the virtualized system provided to processes, discussed in [Chapter 3](#), "Process Management." If applications were free to access system resources without the kernel's knowledge, it would be nearly impossible to implement multitasking and virtual memory, and certainly impossible to do so with stability and security. In Linux, system calls are the only means user-space has of interfacing with the kernel; they are the only legal entry point into the kernel other than exceptions and traps. Indeed, other interfaces, such as device files or [/proc](#), are ultimately accessed via system calls. Interestingly, Linux implements far fewer system calls than most systems.<sup>[1]</sup>

<sup>[1]</sup> About 250 system calls are on x86. (Each architecture is allowed to define unique system calls.) Although not all operating systems publish their exact system calls, some operating systems are estimated to have over one thousand.

This chapter addresses the role and implementation of system calls in Linux.

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## APIs, POSIX, and the C Library

Typically, applications are programmed against an Application Programming Interface (API), not directly to system calls. This is important, because no direct correlation is needed between the interfaces that applications make use of and the actual interface provided by the kernel. An API defines a set of programming interfaces used by applications. Those interfaces can be implemented as a system call, implemented through multiple system calls, or implemented without the use of system calls at all. In fact, the same API can exist on multiple systems and provide the same interface to applications while the implementation of the API itself can differ greatly from system to system.

One of the more common application programming interfaces in the Unix world is based on the POSIX standard. Technically, POSIX comprises a series of standards from the IEEE<sup>[2]</sup> that aim to provide a portable operating system standard roughly based on Unix. Linux strives to be POSIX and SUSv3 complaint where applicable.

[2] IEEE (eye-triple-E) is the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers. It is a nonprofit professional association involved in numerous technical areas and responsible for many important standards, such as POSIX. For more information, visit <http://www.ieee.org>.

POSIX is an excellent example of the relationship between APIs and system calls. On most Unix systems, the POSIX-defined API calls have a strong correlation to the system calls. Indeed, the POSIX standard was created to resemble the interfaces provided by earlier Unix systems. On the other hand, some systems that are far from Unix, such as Windows NT, offer POSIX-compatible libraries.

The system call interface in Linux, as with most Unix systems, is provided in part by the C library. The C library implements the main API on Unix systems, including the standard C library and the system call interface. The C library is used by all C programs and, because of C's nature, is easily wrapped by other programming languages for use in their programs. The C library additionally provides the majority of the POSIX API.

**Figure 5.1. The relationship between applications, the C library, and the kernel with a call to `printf()`.**



From the programmer's point of view, system calls are irrelevant; all the programmer is concerned with is the API. Conversely, the kernel is concerned only with the system calls; what library calls and applications make use of the system calls is not of the kernel's concern. Nonetheless, it is important for the kernel to keep track of the potential uses of a system call and keep the system call as general and flexible as possible.

A common motto related to interfaces in Unix is "provide mechanism, not policy." In other words, Unix system calls exist to provide a specific function in a very abstract sense. The manner in which the function is used is not any of the kernel's business.

## Syscalls

System calls (often called *syscalls* in Linux) are typically accessed via function calls. They can define one or more arguments (inputs) and might result in one or more side effects<sup>[3]</sup>, for example writing to a file or copying some data into a provided pointer. System calls also provide a return value of type `long`<sup>[4]</sup> that signifies success or error. Usually, although not always, a negative return value denotes an error. A return value of zero is usually (but again not always) a sign of success. Unix system calls, on error, write a special error code into the global `errno` variable. This variable can be translated into human-readable errors via library functions such as `perror()`.

[3] Note the "might" here. Although nearly all system calls have a side effect (that is, they result in some change of the system's state), a few syscalls, such as `getpid()`, merely return some data from the kernel.

[4] The use of type `long` is for compatibility with 64-bit architectures.

Finally, system calls have a defined behavior. For example, the system call `getpid()` is defined to return an integer that is the current process's PID. The implementation of this syscall in the kernel is very simple:

```
asmlinkage long sys_getpid(void)
{
    return current->tgid;
}
```

Note that the definition says nothing of the implementation. The kernel must provide the intended behavior of the system call, but is free to do so with whatever implementation it desires as long as the result is correct. Of course, this system call is as simple as they come and there are not too many other ways to implement it (certainly no simpler method exists)<sup>[5]</sup>.

[5] You might be wondering *why does `getpid()` return `tgid`, the thread group ID?* In normal processes, the TID is equal to the PID. With threads, the TID is the same for all threads in a thread group. This enables the threads to call `getpid()` and get the same PID.

You can make a couple of observations about system calls even from this simple example. First, note the `asmlinkage` modifier on the function definition. This is a bit of magic to tell the compiler to look only on the stack for this function's arguments. This is a required modifier for all system calls. Second, note that the `getpid()` system call is defined as `sys_getpid()` in the kernel. This is the naming convention taken with all system calls in Linux: System call `bar()` is implemented in the kernel as function `sys_bar()`.

## System Call Numbers

In Linux, each system call is assigned a *syscall number*. This is a unique number that is used to reference a specific system call. When a user-space process executes a system call, the syscall number delineates which syscall was executed; the process does not refer to the syscall by name.

The syscall number is important; when assigned, it cannot change, or else compiled applications will break. Likewise, if a system call is removed, its system call number cannot be recycled, or else previous compiled code would invoke the system call but in reality call another. Linux provides a "not implemented" system call, `sys_ni_syscall()`, which does nothing except return `ENOSYS`, the error

corresponding to an invalid system call. This function is used to "plug the hole" in the rare event that a syscall is removed or otherwise made unavailable.

The kernel keeps a list of all registered system calls in the system call table, stored in `sys_call_table`. This table is architecture dependent and typically defined in `enTRy.S`, which for x86 is `inarch/i386/kernel/`. This table assigns each valid syscall to a unique syscall number.

## System Call Performance

System calls in Linux are faster than in many other operating systems. This is partly because of Linux's incredibly fast context switch times; entering and exiting the kernel is a streamlined and simple affair. The other factor is the simplicity of the system call handler and the individual system calls themselves.

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## System Call Handler

It is not possible for user-space applications to execute kernel code directly. They cannot simply make a function call to a method existing in kernel-space because the kernel exists in a protected memory space. If applications could directly read and write to the kernel's address space, system security and stability would go out the window.

Instead, user-space applications must somehow signal the kernel that they want to execute a system call and have the system switch to kernel mode, where the system call can be executed in kernel-space by the kernel on behalf of the application.

The mechanism to signal the kernel is a software interrupt: Incur an exception and then the system will switch to kernel mode and execute the exception handler. The exception handler, in this case, is actually the system call handler. The defined software interrupt on x86 is the `int $0x80` instruction. It triggers a switch to kernel mode and the execution of exception vector 128, which is the system call handler. The system call handler is the aptly named function `system_call()`. It is architecture dependent and typically implemented in assembly in [entry.S](#)<sup>[6]</sup>. Recently, x86 processors added a feature known as `sysenter`. This feature provides a faster, more specialized way of trapping into a kernel to execute a system call than using the `int` interrupt instruction. Support for this feature was quickly added to the kernel. Regardless of how the system call handler is invoked, however, the important notion is that somehow user-space causes an exception or trap to enter the kernel.

<sup>[6]</sup> Much of the following description of the system call handler is based on the x86 version. Do not fret: They are all very similar.

## Denoting the Correct System Call

Simply entering kernel-space alone is not sufficient because there are multiple system calls, all of which enter the kernel in the same manner. Thus, the system call number must be passed into the kernel. On x86, the syscall number is fed to the kernel via the `eax` register. Before causing the trap into the kernel, user-space sticks in `eax` the number corresponding to the desired system call. The system call handler then reads the value from `eax`. Other architectures do something similar.

The `system_call()` function checks the validity of the given system call number by comparing it to `NR_syscalls`. If it is larger than or equal to `NR_syscalls`, the function returns `-ENOSYS`. Otherwise, the specified system call is invoked:

```
call *sys_call_table(%eax,4)
```

Because each element in the system call table is 32 bits (four bytes), the kernel multiplies the given system call number by four to arrive at its location in the system call table. See [Figure 5.2](#).

**Figure 5.2. Invoking the system call handler and executing a system call.**





## Parameter Passing

In addition to the system call number, most syscalls require that one or more parameters be passed to them. Somehow, user-space must relay the parameters to the kernel during the trap. The easiest way to do this is via the same means that the syscall number is passed: The parameters are stored in registers. On x86, the registers `ebx`, `ecx`, `edx`, `esi`, and `edi` contain, in order, the first five arguments. In the unlikely case of six or more arguments, a single register is used to hold a pointer to user-space where all the parameters are stored.

The return value is sent to user-space also via register. On x86, it is written into the `eax` register.

## System Call Implementation

The actual implementation of a system call in Linux does not need to concern itself with the behavior of the system call handler. Thus, adding a new system call to Linux is relatively easy. The hard work lies in designing and implementing the system call; registering it with the kernel is simple. Let's look at the steps involved in writing a new system call for Linux.

The first step in implementing a system call is defining its purpose. What will it do? The syscall should have exactly one purpose. Multiplexing syscalls (a single system call that does wildly different things depending on a flag argument) is discouraged in Linux. Look at `ioctl()` as an example of what *not* to do.

What are the new system call's arguments, return value, and error codes? The system call should have a clean and simple interface with the smallest number of arguments possible. The semantics and behavior of a system call are important; they must not change, because existing applications will come to rely on them.

Designing the interface with an eye toward the future is important. Are you needlessly limiting the function? Design the system call to be as general as possible. Do not assume its use today will be the same as its use tomorrow. The *purpose* of the system call will remain constant but its *uses* may change. Is the system call portable? Do not make assumptions about an architecture's word size or endianness. [Chapter 19](#), "Portability," discusses these issues. Make sure you are not making poor assumptions that will break the system call in the future. Remember the Unix motto: "provide mechanism, not policy."

When you write a system call, it is important to realize the need for portability and robustness, not just today but in the future. The basic Unix system calls have survived this test of time; most of them are just as useful and applicable today as they were thirty years ago!

## Verifying the Parameters

System calls must carefully verify all their parameters to ensure that they are valid and legal. The system call runs in kernel-space, and if the user is able to pass invalid input into the kernel without restraint, the system's security and stability can suffer.

For example, file I/O syscalls must check whether the file descriptor is valid. Process-related functions must check whether the provided PID is valid. Every parameter must be checked to ensure it is not just valid and legal, but correct.

One of the most important checks is the validity of any pointers that the user provides. Imagine if a process could pass any pointer into the kernel, unchecked, with warts and all, even passing a pointer for which it did not have read access! Processes could then trick the kernel into copying data for which they did not have access permission, such as data belonging to another process. Before following a pointer into user-space, the system must ensure that

- The pointer points to a region of memory in user-space. Processes must not be able to trick the kernel into reading data in kernel-space on their behalf.
- The pointer points to a region of memory in the process's address space. The process must not be able to trick the kernel into reading someone else's data.
- If reading, the memory is marked readable. If writing, the memory is marked writable. The process must not be able to bypass memory access restrictions.

The kernel provides two methods for performing the requisite checks and the desired copy to and from user-space. Note kernel code must never blindly follow a pointer into user-space! One of these two methods must always be used.

For writing into user-space, the method `copy_to_user()` is provided. It takes three parameters. The first is the destination memory

address in the process's address space. The second is the source pointer in kernel-space. Finally, the third argument is the size in bytes of the data to copy.

For reading from user-space, the method `copy_from_user()` is analogous to `copy_to_user()`. The function reads from the second parameter into the first parameter the number of bytes specified in the third parameter.

Both of these functions return the number of bytes they failed to copy on error. On success, they return zero. It is standard for the syscall to return `-EFAULT` in the case of such an error.

Let's consider an example system call that uses both `copy_from_user()` and `copy_to_user()`. This syscall, `silly_copy()`, is utterly worthless; it copies data from its first parameter into its second. This is highly suboptimal in that it involves the intermediate extraneous copy into kernel-space for absolutely no reason. But it helps illustrate the point.

```
/*
 * silly_copy - utterly worthless syscall that copies the len bytes from
 * 'src' to 'dst' using the kernel as an intermediary in the copy for no
 * good reason. But it makes for a good example!
 */
asmlinkage long sys_silly_copy(unsigned long *src,
                               unsigned long *dst,
                               unsigned long len)
{
    unsigned long buf;

    /* fail if the kernel wordsize and user wordsize do not match */
    if (len != sizeof(buf))
        return -EINVAL;

    /* copy src, which is in the user's address space, into buf */
    if (copy_from_user(&buf, src, len))
        return -EFAULT;

    /* copy buf into dst, which is in the user's address space */
    if (copy_to_user(dst, &buf, len))
        return -EFAULT;

    /* return amount of data copied */
    return len;
}
```

Both `copy_to_user()` and `copy_from_user()` may block. This occurs, for example, if the page containing the user data is not in physical memory but swapped to disk. In that case, the process sleeps until the page fault handler can bring the page from the swap file on disk into physical memory.

A final possible check is for valid permission. In older versions of Linux, it was standard for syscalls that require `root` privilege to use `suser()`. This function merely checked whether a user was root or not; this is now removed and a finer-grained "capabilities" system is in place. The new system allows specific access checks on specific resources. A call to `capable()` with a valid capabilities flag returns nonzero if the caller holds the specified capability and zero otherwise. For example, `capable(CAP_SYS_NICE)` checks whether the caller has the ability to modify nice values of other processes. By default, the superuser possesses all capabilities and non-root possesses none. Here is another worthless system call, this one demonstrating capabilities:

```
asmlinkage long sys_am_i_popular (void)
{
    /* check whether the user possesses the CAP_SYS_NICE capability */
    if (!capable(CAP_SYS_NICE))
        return EPERM;

    /* return zero for success */
    return 0;
}
```

See <[linux/capability.h](#)> for a list of all capabilities and what rights they entail.

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## System Call Context

As discussed in [Chapter 3](#), "Process Management," the kernel is in process context during the execution of a system call. The `current` pointer points to the current task, which is the process that issued the syscall.

In process context, the kernel is capable of sleeping (for example, if the system call blocks on a call or explicitly calls `schedule()`) and is fully preemptible. These two points are important. First, the capability to sleep means that system calls can make use of the majority of the kernel's functionality. As we will see in [Chapter 6](#), "Interrupts and Interrupt Handlers," the capability to sleep greatly simplifies kernel programming [7]. The fact that process context is preemptible implies that, like user-space, the current task may be preempted by another task. Because the new task may then execute the same system call, care must be exercised to ensure that system calls are reentrant. Of course, this is the same concern that symmetrical multiprocessing introduces. Protecting against reentrancy is covered in [Chapter 8](#), "Kernel Synchronization Introduction," and [Chapter 9](#), "Kernel Synchronization Methods."

[7] Interrupt handlers cannot sleep, and thus are much more limited in what they can do than system calls running in process context.

When the system call returns, control continues in `system_call()`, which ultimately switches to user-space and continues the execution of the user process.

## Final Steps in Binding a System Call

After the system call is written, it is trivial to register it as an official system call:

- First, add an entry to the end of the system call table. This needs to be done for each architecture that supports the system call (which, for most calls, is all the architectures). The position of the syscall in the table, starting at zero, is its system call number. For example, the tenth entry in the list is assigned syscall number nine.
- For each architecture supported, the syscall number needs to be defined in `<asm/unistd.h>`.
- The syscall needs to be compiled into the kernel image (as opposed to compiled as a module). This can be as simple as putting the system call in a relevant file in `kernel/`, such as `sys.c`, which is home to miscellaneous system calls.

Let us look at these steps in more detail with a fictional system call, `foo()`. First, we want to add `sys_foo()` to the system call table. For most architectures, the table is located in `enTRY.S` and it looks like this:

```
ENTRY(sys_call_table)
    .long sys_restart_syscall    /* 0 */
    .long sys_exit
    .long sys_fork
    .long sys_read
    .long sys_write
    .long sys_open             /* 5 */

...
    .long sys_mq_unlink
    .long sys_mq_timedsend
```

```
.long sys_mq_timedreceive /* 280 */
.long sys_mq_notify
.long sys_mq_getsetattr
```

The new system call is then appended to the tail of this list:

```
.long sys_foo
```

Although it is not explicitly specified, the system call is then given the next subsequent syscall number. In this case, 283. For each architecture you wish to support, the system call must be added to the architecture's system call table. The system call need not receive the same syscall number under each architecture. The system call number is part of the architecture's unique ABI. Usually, you would want to make the system call available to each architecture. Note the convention of placing the number in a comment every five entries; this makes it easy to find out which syscall is assigned which number.

Next, the system call number is added to `<asm/unistd.h>`, which currently looks somewhat like this:

```
/*
 * This file contains the system call numbers.
 */

#define __NR_restart_syscall 0
#define __NR_exit 1
#define __NR_fork 2
#define __NR_read 3
#define __NR_write 4
#define __NR_open 5

...
#define __NR_mq_unlink 278
#define __NR_mq_timedsend 279
#define __NR_mq_timedreceive 280
#define __NR_mq_notify 281
#define __NR_mq_getsetattr 282
```

The following is then added to the end of the list:

```
#define __NR_foo 283
```

Finally, the actual `foo()` system call is implemented. Because the system call must be compiled into the core kernel image in all configurations, it is put in `kernel/sys.c`. You should put it wherever the function is most relevant; for example, if the function is related to scheduling, you could put it in `kernel/sched.c`.

```
#include <asm/thread_info.h>

/*
 * sys_foo everyone's favorite system call.
 *
 * Returns the size of the per-process kernel stack.
 */
asmlinkage long sys_foo(void)
{
    return THREAD_SIZE;
}
```

That is it! Seriously. Boot this kernel and user-space can invoke the `foo()` system call.

## Accessing the System Call from User-Space

Generally, the C library provides support for system calls. User applications can pull in function prototypes from the standard headers and link with the C library to use your system call (or the library routine that in turn uses your syscall call). If you just wrote the system call, however, it is doubtful that glibc already supports it!

Thankfully, Linux provides a set of macros for wrapping access to system calls. It sets up the register contents and issues the trap instructions. These macros are named `_syscalln()`, where *n* is between zero and six. The number corresponds to the number of parameters passed into the syscall because the macro needs to know how many parameters to expect and, consequently, push into registers. For example, consider the system call `open()`, defined as

```
long open(const char *filename, int flags, int mode)
```

The syscall macro to use this system call without explicit library support would be

```
#define __NR_open 5
__syscall3(long, open, const char *, filename, int, flags, int, mode)
```

Then, the application can simply call `open()`.

For each macro, there are 2+2xn parameters. The first parameter corresponds to the return type of the syscall. The second is the name of the system call. Next follows the type and name for each parameter in order of the system call. The `__NR_open` define is in `<asm/unistd.h>`; it is the system call number. The `__syscall3` macro expands into a C function with inline assembly; the assembly performs the steps discussed in the previous section to push the system call number and parameters into the correct registers and issue the software interrupt to trap into the kernel. Placing this macro in an application is all that is required to use the `open()` system call.

Let's write the macro to use our splendid new `foo()` system call and then write some test code to show off our efforts.

```
#define __NR_foo 283
__syscall0(long, foo)

int main ()
{
    long stack_size;

    stack_size = foo ();
    printf ("The kernel stack size is %ld\n", stack_size);

    return 0;
}
```

## Why Not to Implement a System Call

With luck, the previous sections have shown that it is easy to implement a new system call, but that in no way should encourage you to do so. Indeed, after my sterling effort to describe how system calls work and how to add new ones, I now suggest caution and unparalleled restraint in adding new syscalls. Often, much more viable alternatives to providing a new system call are available. Let's look at the pros, the cons, and the alternatives.

The pros of implementing a new interface as a syscall are as follows:

- System calls are simple to implement and easy to use.
- System call performance on Linux is blindingly fast.

The cons:

- You need a syscall number, which needs to be officially assigned to you during a developmental kernel series.
- After the system call is in a stable series kernel, it is written in stone. The interface cannot change without breaking user-space applications.
- Each architecture needs to separately register the system call and support it.
- System calls are not easily used from scripts and cannot be accessed directly from the filesystem.
- For simple exchanges of information, a system call is overkill.

The alternatives:

- Implement a device node and `read()` and `write()` to it. Use `ioctl()` to manipulate specific settings or retrieve specific information.
- Certain interfaces, such as semaphores, can be represented as file descriptors and manipulated as such.
- Add the information as a file to the appropriate location in sysfs.

For many interfaces, system calls *are* the correct answer. Linux, however, has tried to avoid simply adding a system call to support each new abstraction that comes along. The result has been an incredibly clean system call layer with very few regrets or deprecations (interfaces no longer used or supported). The slow rate of addition of new system calls is a sign that Linux is a relatively stable and feature-complete operating system.

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## System Calls in Conclusion

In this chapter, we discussed what exactly system calls are and how they relate to library calls and the application programming interface (API). We then looked at how the Linux kernel implements system calls and the chain of events required to execute a system call: trapping into the kernel, transmitting the syscall number and any arguments, executing the correct system call function, and returning to user-space with the syscall's return value.

We then went over how to add system calls and provided a simple example of using a new system call from user-space. The whole process was quite easy! As the simplicity of adding a new system call demonstrates, the work is all in the syscall's implementation. The rest of this book discusses concepts and kernel interfaces needed to write well-behaved, optimal, and safe system calls.

Finally, we wrapped up the chapter with a discussion on the pros and cons of implementing system calls and a brief list of the alternatives to adding new ones.

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## Chapter 6. Interrupts and Interrupt Handlers

A primary responsibility of the kernel is managing the hardware connected to the machine. As part of this work, the kernel needs to communicate with the machine's individual devices. Given that processors are typically magnitudes faster than the hardware they talk to, it is not ideal for the kernel to issue a request and wait for a response from the potentially slow hardware. Instead, because the hardware is comparatively slow to respond, the kernel must be free to go off, handle other work, and deal with the hardware only after it has actually completed its work. One solution to this problem is *polling*. Periodically, the kernel can check the status of the hardware in the system and respond accordingly. This incurs overhead, however, regardless of whether the hardware is even active or ready because the polling occurs repeatedly at regular intervals. A better solution is to provide a mechanism for the hardware to signal the kernel when attention is needed. The solution is *interrupts*.

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## Interrupts

Interrupts allow hardware to communicate with the processor. For example, as you type, the keyboard controller (the hardware device that manages the keyboard) issues an electrical signal to the processor to alert the operating system to newly available key presses. These electrical signals are interrupts. The processor receives the interrupt and signals the operating system to allow the OS to respond to the new data. Hardware devices generate interrupts asynchronously with respect to the processor clock they can occur at any time. Consequently, the kernel can be interrupted at any time to process interrupts.

An interrupt is physically produced by electronic signals originating from hardware devices and directed into input pins on an interrupt controller. The interrupt controller, in turn, sends a signal to the processor. The processor detects this signal and interrupts its current execution to handle the interrupt. The processor can then notify the operating system that an interrupt has occurred, and the operating system can handle the interrupt appropriately.

Different devices can be associated with unique interrupts by means of a unique value associated with each interrupt. This way, interrupts from the keyboard are distinct from interrupts from the hard drive. This enables the operating system to differentiate between interrupts and to know which hardware device caused which interrupt. In turn, the operating system can service each interrupt with a unique handler.

These interrupt values are often called *interrupt request* (IRQ) lines. Typically, they are given a numeric value for example, on a PC, IRQ zero is the timer interrupt and IRQ one is the keyboard interrupt. Not all interrupt numbers, however, are so rigidly defined. Interrupts associated with devices on the PCI bus, for example, generally can be dynamically assigned. Other non-PC architectures have similar dynamic assignments for interrupt values. The important notion is that a specific interrupt is associated with a specific device, and the kernel knows this. The hardware then issues interrupts to get the kernel's attention: *Hey, I have new key presses waiting; read and process these bad boys!*

## Exceptions

In OS texts, exceptions are often discussed at the same time as interrupts. Unlike interrupts, exceptions occur synchronously with respect to the processor clock. Indeed, they are often called *synchronous interrupts*. Exceptions are produced by the processor while executing instructions either in response to a programming error (for example, divide by zero) or abnormal conditions that must be handled by the kernel (for example, a page fault). Because many processor architectures handle exceptions in a similar manner to interrupts, the kernel infrastructure for handling the two is similar. Much of the discussion of interrupts (asynchronous interrupts generated by hardware) in this chapter also pertains to exceptions (synchronous interrupts generated by the processor itself).

You are already familiar with one exception: In the previous chapter, you saw how system calls on the x86 architecture are implemented by the issuance of a software interrupt, which traps into the kernel and causes execution of a special system call handler. Interrupts work in a similar way, you shall see, except hardware not software issues interrupts.

## Interrupt Handlers

The function the kernel runs in response to a specific interrupt is called an *interrupt handler* or *interrupt service routine* (ISR). Each device that generates interrupts has an associated interrupt handler. For example, one function handles interrupts from the system timer, while another function handles interrupts generated by the keyboard. The interrupt handler for a device is part of the device's *driver*the kernel code that manages the device.

In Linux, interrupt handlers are normal C functions. They match a specific prototype, which enables the kernel to pass the handler information in a standard way, but otherwise they are ordinary functions. What differentiates interrupt handlers from other kernel functions is that the kernel invokes them in response to interrupts and that they run in a special context (discussed later in this chapter) called *interrupt context*.

Because an interrupt can occur at any time, an interrupt handler can in turn be executed at any time. It is imperative that the handler runs quickly, to resume execution of the interrupted code as soon as possible. Therefore, although it is important to the hardware that the interrupt is serviced immediately, it is important to the rest of the system that the interrupt handler execute in as short a period as possible.

At the very least, an interrupt handler's job is to acknowledge the interrupt's receipt to the hardware: *Hey, hardware, I hear ya, now get back to work!* Often, however, interrupt handlers have a large amount of work to perform. For example, consider the interrupt handler for a network device. On top of responding to the hardware, the interrupt handler needs to copy networking packets from the hardware into memory, process them, and push the packets down to the appropriate protocol stack or application. Obviously, this can be a lot of work, especially with today's gigabit and ten-gigabit Ethernet cards.

## Top Halves Versus Bottom Halves

These two goalsthat an interrupt handler execute quickly and perform a large amount of workare plainly in contrast. Because of these conflicting goals, the processing of interrupts is split into two parts, or halves. The interrupt handler is the *top half*. It is run immediately upon receipt of the interrupt and performs only the work that is time critical, such as acknowledging receipt of the interrupt or resetting the hardware. Work that can be performed later is delayed until the *bottom half*. The bottom half runs in the future, at a more convenient time, with all interrupts enabled. Linux provides various mechanisms for implementing bottom halves, and they are all discussed in the next chapter, "[Bottom Halves and Deferring Work](#)"

Let's look at an example of the top half/bottom half split, using our old friend, the network card. When network cards receive incoming packets off the network, they need to alert the kernel to their availability. They want and need to do this immediately, to optimize network throughput and latency and avoid timeouts. Thus, they immediately issue an interrupt: *Hey, kernel, I have some fresh packets here!* The kernel responds by executing the network card's registered interrupt.

The interrupt runs, acknowledges the hardware, copies the new networking packets into main memory, and readies the network card for more packets. These jobs are the important, time-critical, and hardware-specific work. The rest of the processing and handling of the packets occurs later, in the bottom half. In this chapter, we look at the top half; in the next, the bottom.

## Registering an Interrupt Handler

Interrupt handlers are the responsibility of the driver managing the hardware. Each device has one associated driver and, if that device uses interrupts (and most do), then that driver registers one interrupt handler.

Drivers can register an interrupt handler and enable a given interrupt line for handling via the function

```
/* request_irq: allocate a given interrupt line */
int request_irq(unsigned int irq,
    irqreturn_t (*handler)(int, void *, struct pt_regs *),
    unsigned long irqflags,
    const char *devname,
    void *dev_id)
```

The first parameter, `irq`, specifies the interrupt number to allocate. For some devices, for example legacy PC devices such as the system timer or keyboard, this value is typically hard-coded. For most other devices, it is probed or otherwise determined programmatically and dynamically.

The second parameter, `handler`, is a function pointer to the actual interrupt handler that services this interrupt. This function is invoked whenever the operating system receives the interrupt. Note the specific prototype of the handler function: It takes three parameters and has a return value of `irqreturn_t`. This function is discussed later in this chapter.

The third parameter, `irqflags`, might be either zero or a bit mask of one or more of the following flags:

- **SA\_INTERRUPT** This flag specifies that the given interrupt handler is a *fast interrupt handler*. Historically, Linux differentiated between interrupt handlers that were fast versus slow. Fast handlers were assumed to execute quickly, but potentially very often, so the behavior of the interrupt handling was modified to enable them to execute as quickly as possible. Today, there is only one difference: Fast interrupt handlers run with *all* interrupts disabled on the local processor. This enables a fast handler to complete quickly, without possible interruption from other interrupts. By default (without this flag), all interrupts are enabled except the interrupt lines of any running handlers, which are masked out on all processors. Sans the timer interrupt, most interrupts do not want to enable this flag.
- **SA\_SAMPLE\_RANDOM** This flag specifies that interrupts generated by this device should contribute to the kernel entropy pool. The kernel entropy pool provides truly random numbers derived from various random events. If this flag is specified, the timing of interrupts from this device are fed to the pool as entropy. Do *not* set this if your device issues interrupts at a predictable rate (for example, the system timer) or can be influenced by external attackers (for example, a networking device). On the other hand, most other hardware generates interrupts at nondeterministic times and is, therefore, a good source of entropy. For more information on the kernel entropy pool, see [Appendix B](#), "Kernel Random Number Generator."
- **SA\_SHIRQ** This flag specifies that the interrupt line can be shared among multiple interrupt handlers. Each handler registered on a given line must specify this flag; otherwise, only one handler can exist per line. More information on shared handlers is provided in a following section.

The fourth parameter, `devname`, is an ASCII text representation of the device associated with the interrupt. For example, this value for the keyboard interrupt on a PC is "keyboard". These text names are used by `/proc/irq` and `/proc/interrupts` for communication with the user, which is discussed shortly.

The fifth parameter, `dev_id`, is used primarily for shared interrupt lines. When an interrupt handler is freed (discussed later) `dev_id` provides a unique cookie to allow the removal of only the desired interrupt handler from the interrupt line. Without this parameter, it would be impossible for the kernel to know *which* handler to remove on a given interrupt line. You can pass `NULL` here if the line is not shared, but you must pass a unique cookie if your interrupt line is shared (and unless your device is old and crusty and lives on the ISA

bus, there is good chance it must support sharing). This pointer is also passed into the interrupt handler on each invocation. A common practice is to pass the driver's device structure: This pointer is unique and might be useful to have within the handlers and the Device Model.

On success, `request_irq()` returns zero. A nonzero value indicates error, in which case the specified interrupt handler was not registered. A common error is `-EBUSY`, which denotes that the given interrupt line is already in use (and either the current user or you did not specify `SA_SHIRQ`).

Note that `request_irq()` can sleep and therefore cannot be called from interrupt context or other situations where code cannot block. It is a common mistake to call `request_irq()` when it is unsafe to sleep. This is partly because of why `request_irq()` can sleep: It is indeed unclear. On registration, an entry corresponding to the interrupt is created in `/proc/irq`. The function `proc_mkdir()` is used to create new procfs entries. This function calls `proc_create()` to set up the new procfs entries, which in turn call `kmalloc()` to allocate memory. As you will see in [Chapter 11](#), "Memory Management," `kmalloc()` can sleep. So there you go!

Anyhow, enough of the nitty gritty. In a driver, requesting an interrupt line and installing a handler is done via `request_irq()`:

```
if (request_irq(irqn, my_interrupt, SA_SHIRQ, "my_device", dev)) {
    printk(KERN_ERR "my_device: cannot register IRQ %d\n", irqn);
    return -EIO;
}
```

In this example, `irqn` is the requested interrupt line, `my_interrupt` is the handler, the line can be shared, the device is named `my_device`, and we passed `dev` for `dev_id`. On failure, the code prints an error and returns. If the call returns zero, the handler has been successfully installed. From that point forward, the handler is invoked in response to an interrupt. It is important to initialize hardware and register an interrupt handler in the proper order to prevent the interrupt handler from running before the device is fully initialized.

## Freeing an Interrupt Handler

When your driver unloads, you need to unregister your interrupt handler and potentially disable the interrupt line. To do this, call

```
void free_irq(unsigned int irq, void *dev_id)
```

If the specified interrupt line is not shared, this function removes the handler and disables the line. If the interrupt line is shared, the handler identified via `dev_id` is removed, but the interrupt line itself is disabled only when the last handler is removed. Now you can see why a unique `dev_id` is important. With shared interrupt lines, a unique cookie is required to differentiate between the multiple handlers that can exist on a single line and allow `free_irq()` to remove only the correct handler. In either case (shared or unshared), if `dev_id` is non-`NULL`, it must match the desired handler.

A call to `free_irq()` must be made from process context.

**Table 6.1. Listing of Interrupt Registration Methods**

Function	Description
<code>request_irq()</code>	Register a given interrupt handler on a given interrupt line
<code>free_irq()</code>	Unregister a given interrupt handler; if no handlers now exist on the line, the given interrupt line is disabled

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## Writing an Interrupt Handler

The following is a typical declaration of an interrupt handler:

```
static irqreturn_t intr_handler(int irq, void *dev_id, struct pt_regs *regs)
```

Note that this declaration matches the prototype of the `handler` argument given to `request_irq()`. The first parameter, `irq`, is the numeric value of the interrupt line the handler is servicing. This is not entirely useful today, except perhaps in printing log messages. Before the 2.0 kernel, there was not a `dev_id` parameter and thus `irq` was used to differentiate between multiple devices using the same driver and therefore the same interrupt handler. As an example of this, consider a computer with multiple hard drive controllers of the same type.

The second parameter, `dev_id`, is a generic pointer to the same `dev_id` that was given to `request_irq()` when the interrupt handler was registered. If this value is unique (which is recommended to support sharing), it can act as a cookie to differentiate between multiple devices potentially using the same interrupt handler. `dev_id` might also point to a structure of use to the interrupt handler. Because the `device` structure is both unique to each device and potentially useful to have within the handler, it is typically passed for `dev_id`.

The final parameter, `regs`, holds a pointer to a structure containing the processor registers and state before servicing the interrupt. The parameter is rarely used, except for debugging. In fact, current developer interest has hinted that this parameter may not be around forever. Looking at the very small number of users of `reg` in existing interrupt handlers, few ought to miss it.

The return value of an interrupt handler is the special type `irqreturn_t`. An interrupt handler can return two special values, `IRQ_NONE` or `IRQ_HANDLED`. The former is returned when the interrupt handler detects an interrupt for which its device was not the originator. The latter is returned if the interrupt handler was correctly invoked, and its device did indeed cause the interrupt. Alternatively, `IRQ_RETVAL(val)` may be used. If `val` is non-zero, this macro returns `IRQ_HANDLED`. Otherwise, the macro returns `IRQ_NONE`. These special values are used to let the kernel know whether devices are issuing spurious (that is, unrequested) interrupts. If all the interrupt handlers on a given interrupt line return `IRQ_NONE`, then the kernel can detect the problem. Note the curious return type `irqreturn_t`, which is simply an `int`. This value is used to provide backward compatibility with earlier kernels, which did not have this feature before 2.6, interrupt handlers returned `void`. Drivers may simply typecast `irqreturn_t` to `void` and define the different return values to noops and then work in 2.4 without further modification.

The interrupt handler is normally marked `static` because it is never called directly from another file.

The role of the interrupt handler depends entirely on the device and its reasons for issuing the interrupt. At a minimum, most interrupt handlers need to provide acknowledgment to the device that they received the interrupt. Devices that are more complex need to additionally send and receive data and perform extended work in the interrupt handler. As mentioned, the extended work is pushed as much as possible into the bottom half handler, which is discussed in the next chapter.

## Reentrancy and Interrupt Handlers

Interrupt handlers in Linux need not be reentrant. When a given interrupt handler is executing, the corresponding interrupt line is masked out on all processors, preventing another interrupt on the same line from being received. Normally all other interrupts are enabled, so other interrupts are serviced, but the current line is always disabled. Consequently, the same interrupt handler is never invoked concurrently to service a nested interrupt. This greatly simplifies writing your interrupt handler.

## Shared Handlers

A shared handler is registered and executed much like a non-shared handler. There are three main differences:

- The `SA_SHIRQ` flag must be set in the `flags` argument to `request_irq()`.
- The `dev_id` argument must be unique to each registered handler. A pointer to any per-device structure is sufficient; a common choice is the `device` structure as it is both unique and potentially useful to the handler. You cannot pass `NULL` for a shared handler!
- The interrupt handler must be capable of distinguishing whether its device actually generated an interrupt. This requires both hardware support and associated logic in the interrupt handler. If the hardware did not offer this capability, there would be no way for the interrupt handler to know whether its associated device or some other device sharing the line caused the interrupt.

All drivers sharing the interrupt line must meet the previous requirements. If any one device does not share fairly, none can share the line. When `request_irq()` is called with `SA_SHIRQ` specified, the call succeeds only if the interrupt line is currently not registered, or if all registered handlers on the line also specified `SA_SHIRQ`. Note that in 2.6, unlike the behavior in older kernels, shared handlers can mix usage of `SA_INTERRUPT`.

When the kernel receives an interrupt, it invokes sequentially each registered handler on the line. Therefore, it is important that the handler be capable of distinguishing whether it generated a given interrupt. The handler must quickly exit if its associated device did not generate the interrupt. This requires the hardware device to have a status register (or similar mechanism) that the handler can check. Most hardware does indeed have such a feature.

## A Real-Life Interrupt Handler

Let's look at a real interrupt handler, from the RTC (real-time clock) driver, found in `drivers/char/rtc.c`. An RTC is found in many machines, including PCs. It is a device, separate from the system timer, which is used to set the system clock, provide an alarm, or supply a periodic timer. On most architectures, the system clock is set by writing the desired time into a specific register or I/O range. Any alarm or periodic timer functionality is normally implemented via interrupt. The interrupt is equivalent to a real-world clock alarm: The receipt of the interrupt is analogous to a buzzing alarm.

When the RTC driver loads, the function `rtc_init()` is invoked to initialize the driver. One of its duties is to register the interrupt handler:

```
/* register rtc_interrupt on RTC_IRQ */
if (request_irq(RTC_IRQ, rtc_interrupt, SA_INTERRUPT, "rtc", NULL)) {
    printk(KERN_ERR "rtc: cannot register IRQ %d\n", RTC_IRQ);
    return -EIO;
}
```

Note in this example that the interrupt line is stored in `RTC_IRQ`. This is a preprocessor define that specifies the RTC interrupt for a given architecture. On the PC the RTC is always located at IRQ 8. The second parameter is the interrupt handler, `rtc_interrupt`, which runs with all interrupts disabled, thanks to the `SA_INTERRUPT` flag. From the fourth parameter, you can see that the driver name is "rtc". Because this device cannot share the interrupt line and the handler has no use for any special value, `NULL` is passed for `dev_id`.

Finally, the handler itself:

```
/*
```

```
* A very tiny interrupt handler. It runs with SA_INTERRUPT set,
* but there is a possibility of conflicting with the set_rtc_mmss()
* call (the rtc irq and the timer irq can easily run at the same
* time in two different CPUs). So we need to serialize
* accesses to the chip with the rtc_lock spinlock that each
* architecture should implement in the timer code.
* (See ./arch/XXXX/kernel/time.c for the set_rtc_mmss() function.)
*/
static irqreturn_t rtc_interrupt(int irq, void *dev_id, struct pt_regs *regs)
{
/*
 * Can be an alarm interrupt, update complete interrupt,
 * or a periodic interrupt. We store the status in the
 * low byte and the number of interrupts received since
 * the last read in the remainder of rtc_irq_data.
 */
spin_lock(&rtc_lock);

rtc_irq_data += 0x100;
rtc_irq_data &= ~0xff;
rtc_irq_data |= (CMOS_READ(RTC_INTR_FLAGS) & 0xF0);

if (rtc_status & RTC_TIMER_ON)
    mod_timer(&rtc_irq_timer, jiffies + HZ/rtc_freq + 2*HZ/100);

spin_unlock(&rtc_lock);

/*
 * Now do the rest of the actions
 */
spin_lock(&rtc_task_lock);
if (rtc_callback)
    rtc_callback->func(rtc_callback->private_data);
spin_unlock(&rtc_task_lock);
wake_up_interruptible(&rtc_wait);

kill_fasync(&rtc_async_queue, SIGIO, POLL_IN);

return IRQ_HANDLED;
}
```

This function is invoked whenever the machine receives the RTC interrupt. First, note the spin lock calls: The first set ensures that `rtc_irq_data` is not accessed concurrently by another processor on an SMP machine, and the second set protects `rtc_callback` from the same. Locks are discussed in [Chapter 9](#), "Kernel Synchronization Methods."

The `rtc_irq_data` variable is an `unsigned long` that stores information about the RTC and is updated on each interrupt to reflect the status of the interrupt.

Next, if an RTC periodic timer is set, it is updated via `mod_timer()`. Timers are discussed in [Chapter 10](#), "Timers and Time Management."

The final bunch of code, wrapped with the second set of spin locks, executes a possible preset callback function. The RTC driver enables a callback function to be registered and executed on each RTC interrupt.

Finally, this function returns `IRQ_HANDLED` to signify that it properly handled this device. Because the interrupt handler does not support sharing, and there is no mechanism for the RTC to detect a spurious interrupt, this handler always returns `IRQ_HANDLED`.

## Interrupt Context

When executing an interrupt handler or bottom half, the kernel is in *interrupt context*. Recall that process context is the mode of operation the kernel is in while it is executing on behalf of a process for example, executing a system call or running a kernel thread. In process context, the `current` macro points to the associated task. Furthermore, because a process is coupled to the kernel in process context, process context can sleep or otherwise invoke the scheduler.

Interrupt context, on the other hand, is not associated with a process. The `current` macro is not relevant (although it points to the interrupted process). Without a backing process, interrupt context cannot sleep how would it ever reschedule? Therefore, you cannot call certain functions from interrupt context. If a function sleeps, you cannot use it from your interrupt handler this limits the functions that one can call from an interrupt handler.

Interrupt context is time critical because the interrupt handler interrupts other code. Code should be quick and simple. Busy looping is discouraged. This is a very important point; always keep in mind that your interrupt handler has interrupted other code (possibly even another interrupt handler on a different line!). Because of this asynchronous nature, it is imperative that all interrupt handlers be as quick and as simple as possible. As much as possible, work should be pushed out from the interrupt handler and performed in a bottom half, which runs at a more convenient time.

The setup of an interrupt handler's stacks is a configuration option. Historically, interrupt handlers did not receive their own stacks.

Instead, they would share the stack of the process that they interrupted<sup>[1]</sup>. The kernel stack is two pages in size; typically, that is 8KB on 32-bit architectures and 16KB on 64-bit architectures. Because in this setup interrupt handlers share the stack, they must be exceptionally frugal with what data they allocate there. Of course, the kernel stack is limited to begin with, so all kernel code should be cautious.

[1] A process is always running. When nothing else is schedulable, the idle task runs.

Early in the 2.6 kernel process, an option was added to reduce the stack size from two pages down to one, providing only a 4KB stack on 32-bit systems. This reduced memory pressure because every process on the system previously needed two pages of nonswappable kernel memory. To cope with the reduced stack size, interrupt handlers were given their own stack, one stack per processor, one page in size. This stack is referred to as the *interrupt stack*. Although the total size of the interrupt stack is half that of the original shared stack, the average stack space available is greater because interrupt handlers get the full page of memory to themselves.

Your interrupt handler should not care what stack setup is in use or what the size of the kernel stack is. Always use an absolute minimum amount of stack space.

## Implementation of Interrupt Handling

Perhaps not surprising, the implementation of the interrupt handling system in Linux is very architecture dependent. The implementation depends on the processor, the type of interrupt controller used, and the design of the architecture and machine itself.

[Figure 6.1](#) is a diagram of the path an interrupt takes through hardware and the kernel.

**Figure 6.1. The path that an interrupt takes from hardware and on through the kernel.**

[View full size image]



A device issues an interrupt by sending an electric signal over its bus to the interrupt controller. If the interrupt line is enabled (they can be masked out), the interrupt controller sends the interrupt to the processor. In most architectures, this is accomplished by an electrical signal that is sent over a special pin to the processor. Unless interrupts are disabled in the processor (which can also happen), the processor immediately stops what it is doing, disables the interrupt system, and jumps to a predefined location in memory and executes the code located there. This predefined point is set up by the kernel and is the *entry point* for interrupt handlers.

The interrupt's journey in the kernel begins at this predefined entry point, just as system calls enter the kernel through a predefined exception handler. For each interrupt line, the processor jumps to a unique location in memory and executes the code located there. In this manner, the kernel knows the IRQ number of the incoming interrupt. The initial entry point simply saves this value and stores the current register values (which belong to the interrupted task) on the stack; then the kernel calls `do_IRQ()`. From here onward, most of the interrupt handling code is written in C. However, it is still architecture dependent.

The `do_IRQ()` function is declared as

```
unsigned int do_IRQ(struct pt_regs regs)
```

Because the C calling convention places function arguments at the top of the stack, the `pt_regs` structure contains the initial register values that were previously saved in the assembly entry routine. Because the interrupt value was also saved, `do_IRQ()` can extract it. The x86 code is

```
int irq = regs.orig_eax & 0xff;
```

After the interrupt line is calculated, `do_IRQ()` acknowledges the receipt of the interrupt and disables interrupt delivery on the line. On normal PC machines, these operations are handled by `mask_and_ack_8259A()`, which `do_IRQ()` calls.

Next, `do_IRQ()` ensures that a valid handler is registered on the line, and that it is enabled and not currently executing. If so, it calls `handle_IRQ_event()` to run the installed interrupt handlers for the line. On x86, `handle_IRQ_event()` is

```
asmlinkage int handle_IRQ_event(unsigned int irq, struct pt_regs *regs,
                               struct irqaction *action)
{
    int status = 1;
    int retval = 0;

    if (!(action->flags & SA_INTERRUPT))
        local_irq_enable();

    do {
        status |== action->flags;
        retval |== action->handler(irq, action->dev_id, regs);
        action = action->next;
    } while (action);

    if (status & SA_SAMPLE_RANDOM)
        add_interrupt_randomness(irq);

    local_irq_disable();

    return retval;
}
```

First, because the processor disabled interrupts, they are turned back on unless `SA_INTERRUPT` was specified during the handler's registration. Recall that `SA_INTERRUPT` specifies that the handler must be run with interrupts disabled. Next, each potential handler is executed in a loop. If this line is not shared, the loop terminates after the first iteration. Otherwise, all handlers are executed. After that, `add_interrupt_randomness()` is called if `SA_SAMPLE_RANDOM` was specified during registration. This function uses the timing of the interrupt to generate entropy for the random number generator. [Appendix B](#), "Kernel Random Number Generator," has more information on the kernel's random number generator. Finally, interrupts are again disabled (`do_IRQ()` expects them still to be off) and the function returns. Back in `do_IRQ()`, the function cleans up and returns to the initial entry point, which then jumps to `ret_from_intr()`.

The routine `ret_from_intr()` is, as with the initial entry code, written in assembly. This routine checks whether a reschedule is pending (recall from [Chapter 4](#), "Process Scheduling," that this implies that `need_resched` is set). If a reschedule is pending, and the kernel is returning to user-space (that is, the interrupt interrupted a user process), `schedule()` is called. If the kernel is returning to kernel-space (that is, the interrupt interrupted the kernel itself), `schedule()` is called only if the `preempt_count` is zero (otherwise it is not safe to preempt the kernel). After `schedule()` returns, or if there is no work pending, the initial registers are restored and the kernel resumes whatever was interrupted.

On x86, the initial assembly routines are located in `arch/i386/kernel/entry.S` and the C methods are located in `arch/i386/kernel/irq.c`. Other

supported architectures are similar.

## /proc/interrupts

Procfs is a virtual filesystem that exists only in kernel memory and is typically mounted at `/proc`. Reading or writing files in procfs invokes kernel functions that simulate reading or writing from a real file. A relevant example is the `/proc/interrupts` file, which is populated with statistics related to interrupts on the system. Here is sample output from a uniprocessor PC:

```
CPU0
0: 3602371 XT-PIC timer
1: 3048 XT-PIC i8042
2: 0 XT-PIC cascade
4: 2689466 XT-PIC uhci-hcd, eth0
5: 0 XT-PIC EMU10K1
12: 85077 XT-PIC uhci-hcd
15: 24571 XT-PIC aic7xxx
NMI: 0
LOC: 3602236
ERR: 0
```

The first column is the interrupt line. On this system, interrupts numbered 02, 4, 5, 12, and 15 are present. Handlers are not installed on lines not displayed. The second column is a counter of the number of interrupts received. A column is present for each processor on the system, but this machine has only one processor. As you can see, the timer interrupt has received 3,602,371 interrupts<sup>[2]</sup>, whereas the sound card (EMU10K1) has received none (which is an indication that it has not been used since the machine booted). The third column is the interrupt controller handling this interrupt. XT-PIC corresponds to the standard PC programmable interrupt controller. On systems with an I/O APIC, most interrupts would list IO-APIC-level or IO-APIC-edge as their interrupt controller. Finally, the last column is the device associated with this interrupt. This name is supplied by the `devname` parameter to `request_irq()`, as discussed previously. If the interrupt is shared, as is the case with interrupt number four in this example, all the devices registered on the interrupt line are listed.

<sup>[2]</sup> As an exercise, after reading [Chapter 10](#), "Timers and Time Management," can you tell how long the system has been up (in terms of `HZ`), knowing the number of timer interrupts that have occurred?

For the curious, procfs code is located primarily in `fs/proc`. The function that provides `/proc/interrupts` is, not surprisingly, architecture dependent and named `show_interrupts()`.

## Interrupt Control

The Linux kernel implements a family of interfaces for manipulating the state of interrupts on a machine. These interfaces enable you to disable the interrupt system for the current processor or mask out an interrupt line for the entire machine. These routines are all very architecture dependent and can be found in `<asm/system.h>` and `<asm/irq.h>`. See [Table 6.2](#), later in this chapter, for a complete listing of the interfaces.

**Table 6.2. Listing of Interrupt Control Methods**

Function	Description
<code>local_irq_disable()</code>	Disable local interrupt delivery
<code>local_irq_enable()</code>	Enable local interrupt delivery
<code>local_irq_save()</code>	Save the current state of local interrupt delivery and then disable it
<code>local_irq_restore()</code>	Restore local interrupt delivery to the given state
<code>disable_irq()</code>	Disable the given interrupt line and ensure no handler on the line is executing before returning
<code>disable_irq_nosync()</code>	Disable the given interrupt line
<code>enable_irq()</code>	Enable the given interrupt line
<code>irqs_disabled()</code>	Returns nonzero if local interrupt delivery is disabled; otherwise returns zero
<code>in_interrupt()</code>	Returns nonzero if in interrupt context and zero if in process context
<code>in_irq()</code>	Returns nonzero if currently executing an interrupt handler and zero otherwise

Reasons to control the interrupt system generally boil down to needing to provide synchronization. By disabling interrupts, you can guarantee that an interrupt handler will not preempt your current code. Moreover, disabling interrupts also disables kernel preemption. Neither disabling interrupt delivery nor disabling kernel preemption provides any protection from concurrent access from another processor, however. Because Linux supports multiple processors, kernel code more generally needs to obtain some sort of lock to prevent another processor from accessing shared data simultaneously. These locks are often obtained in conjunction with disabling local interrupts. The lock provides protection against concurrent access from another processor, whereas disabling interrupts provides protection against concurrent access from a possible interrupt handler. [Chapters 8](#) and [9](#) discuss the various problems of synchronization and their solutions. Nevertheless, understanding the kernel interrupt control interfaces is important.

## Disabling and Enabling Interrupts

To disable interrupts locally for the current processor (and *only* the current processor) and then later reenable them, do the following

```
local_irq_disable();
/* interrupts are disabled .. */
local_irq_enable();
```

These functions are usually implemented as a single assembly operation (of course, this depends on the architecture). Indeed, on x86, `local_irq_disable()` is a simple `cli` and `local_irq_enable()` is a simple `sti` instruction. For non-x86 hackers, `cli` and `sti` are the assembly calls to *clear* and *set* the *allow interrupts* flag, respectively. In other words, they disable and enable interrupt delivery on the issuing processor.

The `local_irq_disable()` routine is dangerous if interrupts were already disabled *prior* to its invocation. The corresponding call to `local_irq_enable()` unconditionally enables interrupts, despite the fact that they were off to begin with. Instead, a mechanism is needed to restore interrupts to a previous state. This is a common concern because a given code path in the kernel can be reached both with and without interrupts enabled, depending on the call chain. For example, imagine the previous code snippet is part of a larger function. Imagine that this function is called by two other functions, one which disables interrupts and one which does not. Because it is becoming harder as the kernel grows in size and complexity to know all the code paths leading up to a function, it is much safer to save the state of the interrupt system before disabling it. Then, when you are ready to reenable interrupts, you simply restore them to their original state:

```
unsigned long flags;
```

```
local_irq_save(flags); /* interrupts are now disabled */
/* ... */
local_irq_restore(flags); /* interrupts are restored to their previous state */
```

Note that these methods are implemented at least in part as macros, so the `flags` parameter (which must be defined as an `unsigned long`) is seemingly passed by value. This parameter contains architecture-specific data containing the state of the interrupt systems. Because at least one supported architecture incorporates stack information into the value (ahem, SPARC), `flags` *cannot* be passed to another function (specifically, it must remain on the same stack frame). For this reason, the call to save and the call to restore interrupts must occur in the same function.

All the previous functions can be called from both interrupt and process context.

## No more global `cli()`

The kernel formerly provided a method to disable interrupts on *all* processors in the system. Furthermore, if another processor called this method, it would have to wait until interrupts were enabled before continuing. This function was named `cli()` and the corresponding enable call was named `sti()` (very x86-centric, despite existing for all architectures). These interfaces were removed during 2.5, and consequently all interrupt synchronization must now use a combination of local interrupt control and spin locks (discussed in [Chapter 9](#)). This means that code that previously only had to disable interrupts globally to ensure mutual exclusive access to shared data now needs to do a bit more work.

Previously, driver writers could assume a `cli()` used in their interrupt handlers and anywhere else the shared data was accessed would provide mutual exclusion. The `cli()` call would ensure that no other interrupt handlers (and thus their specific handler) would run. Furthermore, if another processor entered a `cli()` protected region, it would not continue until the original processor exited its `cli()` protected region with a call to `sti()`.

Removing the global `cli()` has a handful of advantages. First, it forces driver writers to implement real locking. A fine-grained lock with a specific purpose is faster than a global lock, which is effectively what `cli()` is. Second, the removal streamlined a lot of code in the interrupt system and removed a bunch more. The result is simpler and easier to comprehend.

## Disabling a Specific Interrupt Line

In the previous section, we looked at functions that disable all interrupt delivery for an entire processor. In some cases, it is useful to disable only a *specific* interrupt line for the *entire* system. This is called *masking out* an interrupt line. As an example, you might want to disable delivery of a device's interrupts before manipulating its state. Linux provides four interfaces for this task:

```
void disable_irq(unsigned int irq);
void disable_irq_nosync(unsigned int irq);
void enable_irq(unsigned int irq);
void synchronize_irq(unsigned int irq);
```

The first two functions disable a given interrupt line in the interrupt controller. This disables delivery of the given interrupt to *all* processors in the system. Additionally, the `disable_irq()` function does not return until any currently executing handler completes. Thus, callers are assured not only that new interrupts will not be delivered on the given line, but also that any already executing handlers have exited. The function `disable_irq_nosync()` does not wait for current handlers to complete.

The function `synchronize_irq()` waits for a specific interrupt handler to exit, if it is executing, before returning.

Calls to these functions nest. For each call to `disable_irq()` or `disable_irq_nosync()` on a given interrupt line, a corresponding call to `enable_irq()` is required. Only on the last call to `enable_irq()` is the interrupt line actually enabled. For example, if `disable_irq()` is called twice, the interrupt line is not actually reenabled until the second call to `enable_irq()`.

All three of these functions can be called from interrupt or process context and do not sleep. If calling from interrupt context, be careful! You do not want, for example, to enable an interrupt line while you are handling it. (Recall that the interrupt line of a handler is masked out while it is being serviced.)

It would be rather rude to disable an interrupt line that is shared among multiple interrupt handlers. Disabling the line disables interrupt delivery for *all* devices on the line. Therefore, drivers for newer devices tend not to use these interfaces<sup>[3]</sup>. Because PCI devices have to support interrupt line sharing by specification, they should not use these interfaces at all. Thus, `disable_irq()` and friends are found more often in drivers for older legacy devices, such as the PC parallel port.

[3] Many older devices, particularly ISA devices, do not provide a method of obtaining whether or not they generated an interrupt. Therefore, often interrupt lines for ISA devices cannot be shared. Because the PCI specification mandates the sharing of interrupts, modern PCI-based devices support interrupt sharing. In contemporary computers, nearly all interrupt lines can be shared.

## Status of the Interrupt System

It is often useful to know the state of the interrupt system (for example, whether interrupts are enabled or disabled) or whether you are currently executing in interrupt context.

The macro `irqs_disabled()`, defined in `<asm/system.h>`, returns nonzero if the interrupt system on the local processor is disabled. Otherwise, it returns zero.

Two macros, defined in `<asm/hardirq.h>`, provide an interface to check the kernel's current context. They are

```
in_interrupt()
```

## in\_irq()

The most useful is the first: It returns nonzero if the kernel is in interrupt context. This includes either executing an interrupt handler or a bottom half handler. The macro `in_irq()` returns nonzero only if the kernel is specifically executing an interrupt handler.

More often, you want to check whether you are in process context. That is, you want to ensure you are *not* in interrupt context. This is often the case because code wants to do something that can only be done from process context, such as sleep. `!fin_interrupt()` returns zero, the kernel is in process context.

Yes, the names are confusing and do little to impart their meaning. [Table 6.2](#) is a summary of the interrupt control methods and their description.

Team LiB

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## Don't Interrupt Me; We're Almost Done!

This chapter looked at interrupts, a hardware resource used by devices to asynchronously signal the processor. Interrupts, in effect, are used by hardware to *interrupt* the operating system.

Most modern hardware uses interrupts to communicate with operating systems. The device driver that manages a given piece of hardware registers an interrupt handler to respond to and process interrupts issued from their associated hardware. Work performed in interrupts includes acknowledging and resetting hardware, copying data from the device to main memory and vice versa, processing hardware requests, and sending out new hardware requests.

The kernel provides interfaces for registering and unregistering interrupt handlers, disabling interrupts, masking out interrupt lines, and checking the status of the interrupt system. [Table 6.2](#) provided an overview of many of these functions.

Because interrupts interrupt other executing code (processes, the kernel itself, and even other interrupt handlers), they must execute quickly. Often, however, there is a lot of work to do. To balance the large amount of work with the need for quick execution, the kernel divides the work of processing interrupts into two halves. The interrupt handler, the top half, was discussed in this chapter. Now, let's look at the bottom half.

# Chapter 7. Bottom Halves and Deferring Work

The previous chapter looked at interrupt handlers as the kernel mechanism for dealing with interrupts. Interrupt handlers are a useful indeed, required part of any operating system kernel. Because of various limitations, however, interrupt handlers can form only the first half of the interrupt processing solution. The limitations include the following:

- Interrupt handlers run asynchronously and thus interrupt other potentially important code, including other interrupt handlers. Therefore, to avoid stalling the interrupted code for too long, interrupt handlers need to run as quickly as possible.
- Interrupt handlers run with the current interrupt level disabled at best (if `SA_INTERRUPT` is unset), and at worst (if `SA_INTERRUPT` is set) with all interrupts on the current processor disabled. Again, interrupt handlers need to run as quickly as possible.
- Interrupt handlers are often very timing critical because they deal with hardware.
- Interrupt handlers do not run in process context, therefore they cannot block. This limits what they can do.

It should now be obvious that interrupt handlers are only a piece of the whole solution to managing hardware interrupts. We certainly need a quick, asynchronous, simple handler for immediately responding to hardware and performing any time-critical actions. Interrupt handlers serve this function well; but other, less critical work should be deferred to a later point when interrupts are enabled.

Consequently, managing interrupts is divided into two parts, or *halves*. The first part, interrupt handlers (*top halves*), are executed by the kernel asynchronously in immediate response to a hardware interrupt, as discussed in the previous chapter. This chapter looks at the second part of the interrupt solution, *bottom halves*.

## Bottom Halves

The job of bottom halves is to perform any interrupt-related work not performed by the interrupt handler itself. In an ideal world, this is nearly all the work because you want the interrupt handler to perform as little work (and in turn be as fast) as possible. The goal is simply to have interrupt handlers return as quickly as possible.

Nonetheless, the interrupt handler must perform *some* of the work. For example, the interrupt handler almost assuredly needs to acknowledge the receipt of the interrupt with the hardware. It might also need to copy data to or from the hardware. This work is timing sensitive, so it makes sense to perform it in the interrupt handler itself.

Almost anything else is fair game for performing in the bottom half. For example, if you copy data from the hardware into memory in the top half, it certainly makes sense to process it in the bottom half. Unfortunately, no hard and fast rules exist about what work to perform wherethe decision is left entirely up to the device driver author. Although no arrangement is *wrong*, an arrangement can easily be *suboptimal*. Remember, interrupt handlers run asynchronously, with at least the current interrupt line disabled. Minimizing their duration is important. No strict rules about how to divide the work between the top and bottom half exist, but a couple of useful tips might help:

- If the work is time sensitive, perform it in the interrupt handler.
- If the work is related to the hardware itself, perform it in the interrupt handler.
- If the work needs to ensure that another interrupt (particularly the same interrupt) does not interrupt it, perform it in the interrupt handler.
- For everything else, consider performing the work in the bottom half.

When attempting to write your own device driver, looking at other interrupt handlers and their corresponding bottom halves will help.

When deciding how to divide your interrupt processing work between the top and bottom half, ask yourself what *has* to be in the top half and what *can* be in the bottom half. Generally, the quicker the interrupt handler executes, the better.

## Why Bottom Halves?

It is crucial to understand why to defer work, and when exactly to defer it. You want to limit the amount of work you perform in an interrupt handler because interrupt handlers run with the current interrupt line disabled on all processors. Worse, handlers that register with **SA\_INTERRUPT** run with *all* local interrupts disabled (plus the local interrupt line globally disabled). Minimizing the time spent with interrupts disabled is important to system response and performance. Add to this the fact that interrupt handlers run asynchronously with respect to other codeeven other interrupt handlersand then it is clear that you should work to minimize how long interrupt handlers run. The solution is to defer some of the work until later.

But when is "later"? The important thing to realize is that *later* is often simply *not now*. The point of a bottom half is *not* to do work at some specific point in the future, but simply to defer work until *any* point in the future when the system is less busy and interrupts are again enabled. Often, bottom halves run immediately after the interrupt returns. The key is that they run with all interrupts enabled.

Not just Linux, but many operating systems separate the processing of hardware interrupts into two parts. The top half is quick and simple and runs with some or all interrupts disabled. The bottom half (however it is implemented) runs later with all interrupts enabled. This design keeps system response time low by running with interrupts disabled for as little time as necessary.

## A World of Bottom Halves

Unlike the top half, which is implemented entirely via the interrupt handler, multiple mechanisms are available for implementing a bottom half. These mechanisms are different interfaces and subsystems that enable you to implement bottom halves. Whereas the previous chapter looked at just a single way of implementing interrupt handlers, this chapter looks at multiple methods of implementing bottom halves. In fact, over the course of Linux's history there have been many bottom-half mechanisms. Confusingly, some of these mechanisms have similar or even really dumb names. It requires a special type of programmer to name bottom halves.

This chapter discusses both the design and implementation of the bottom-half mechanisms that exist in 2.6. We also discuss how to use them in the kernel code you write. The old, but long since removed, bottom-half mechanisms are historically significant, and so they are mentioned when relevant.

In the beginning, Linux provided only the "bottom half" for implementing bottom halves. This name was logical because at the time that was the only means available for deferring work. The infrastructure was also known as "BH," which is what we will call it to avoid confusion with the generic term "bottom half." The BH interface was very simple, like most things in those good old days. It provided a statically created list of 32 bottom halves. The top half could mark whether the bottom half would run by setting a bit in a 32-bit integer. Each BH was globally synchronized. No two could run at the same time, even on different processors. This was easy to use, yet inflexible; simple, yet a bottleneck.

Later on, the kernel developers introduced *task queues* both as a method of deferring work and as a replacement for the BH mechanism. The kernel defined a family of queues. Each queue contained a linked list of functions to call. The queued functions were run at certain times, depending on which queue they were in. Drivers could register their bottom halves in the appropriate queue. This worked fairly well, but it was still too inflexible to replace the BH interface entirely. It also was not lightweight enough for performance-critical subsystems, such as networking.

During the 2.3 development series, the kernel developers introduced *softirqs* and *tasklets*. With the exception of compatibility with existing drivers, softirqs and tasklets were capable of completely replacing the BH interface<sup>[1]</sup>. Softirqs are a set of 32 statically defined bottom halves that can run simultaneously on any processor even two of the same type can run concurrently. Tasklets, which have an awful and confusing name<sup>[2]</sup>, are flexible, dynamically created bottom halves that are built on top of softirqs. Two different tasklets can run concurrently on different processors, but two of the same type of tasklet cannot run simultaneously. Thus, tasklets are a good tradeoff between performance and ease of use. For most bottom-half processing, the tasklet is sufficient. Softirqs are useful when performance is critical, such as with networking. Using softirqs requires more care, however, because two of the same softirq can run at the same time. In addition, softirqs must be registered statically at compile-time. Conversely, code can dynamically register tasklets.

[1] It is nontrivial to convert BHs to softirqs or tasklets because BHs are globally synchronized and, therefore, assume that no other BH is running during their execution. The conversion did eventually happen, however, in 2.5.

[2] They have nothing to do with tasks. Think of a tasklet as a simple and easy-to-use softirq.

To further confound the issue, some people refer to all bottom halves as software interrupts or softirqs. In other words, they call both the softirq mechanism and bottom halves in general softirqs. Ignore those people. They run with the same crowd that named the BH and tasklet mechanisms.

While developing the 2.5 kernel, the BH interface was finally tossed to the curb as all BH users were converted to the other bottom-half interfaces. Additionally, the task queue interface was replaced by the work queue interface. Work queues are a very simple yet useful method of queueing work to later be performed in process context. We will get to them later.

Consequently, today 2.6 has three bottom-half mechanisms in the kernel: softirqs, tasklets, and work queues. The kernel used to have the BH and task queue interfaces, but today they are mere memories.

## Kernel Timers

Another mechanism for deferring work is kernel timers. Unlike the mechanisms discussed in the chapter thus far, timers defer work for a specified amount of time. That is, although the tools discussed in this chapter are useful to defer work to *any time but now*, you use timers to defer work until at least a specific time has elapsed.

Therefore, timers have different uses than the general mechanisms discussed in this chapter. A full discussion of timers is given in [Chapter 10](#), "Timers and Time Management."

## Bottom Half Confusion

This is some seriously confusing stuff, but really it involves just naming issues. Let's go over it again.

"Bottom half" is a generic operating system term referring to the deferred portion of interrupt processing, so named because it represents the second, or bottom, half of the interrupt processing solution. In Linux, the term currently has this meaning, too. All the kernel's mechanisms for deferring work are "bottom halves." Some people also confusingly call all bottom halves "softirqs," but they are just being annoying.

"Bottom half" also refers to the original deferred work mechanism in Linux. This mechanism is also known as a "BH," so we call it by that name now and leave the former as a generic description. The BH mechanism was deprecated a while back and fully removed in 2.5.

Currently, there are three methods for deferring work: softirqs, tasklets, and work queues. Tasklets are built on softirqs and work queues are entirely different. [Table 7.1](#) presents a history of bottom halves.

**Table 7.1. Bottom Half Status**

Bottom Half	Status
BH	Removed in 2.5
Task queues	Removed in 2.5
Softirq	Available since 2.3
Tasklet	Available since 2.3
Work queues	Available since 2.5

With this naming confusion settled, let's look at the individual mechanisms.

## Softirqs

The place to start this discussion of the actual bottom half methods is with softirqs. Softirqs are rarely used; tasklets are a much more common form of bottom half. Nonetheless, because tasklets are built on softirqs we'll cover them first. The softirq code lives in `kernel/softirq.c`.

## Implementation of Softirqs

Softirqs are statically allocated at compile-time. Unlike tasklets, you cannot dynamically register and destroy softirqs. Softirqs are represented by the `softirq_action` structure, which is defined in `<linux/interrupt.h>`:

```
/*
 * structure representing a single softirq entry
 */
struct softirq_action {
    void (*action)(struct softirq_action *); /* function to run */
    void *data;                            /* data to pass to function */
};
```

A 32-entry array of this structure is declared in `kernel/softirq.c`:

```
static struct softirq_action softirq_vec[32];
```

Each registered softirq consumes one entry in the array. Consequently, there can be a maximum of 32 registered softirqs. Note that this cap is fixed—the maximum number of registered softirqs cannot be dynamically changed. In the current kernel, however, only 6 of the 32 entries are used.<sup>[3]</sup>

[3] Most drivers use tasklets for their bottom half. Tasklets are built off softirqs, as the next section explains.

## The Softirq Handler

The prototype of a softirq handler, `action`, looks like:

```
void softirq_handler(struct softirq_action *)
```

When the kernel runs a softirq handler, it executes this `action` function with a pointer to the corresponding `softirq_action` structure as its

lone argument. For example, if `my_softirq` pointed to an entry in the `softirq_vec` array, the kernel would invoke the softirq handler function as

```
my_softirq->action(my_softirq)
```

It seems a bit odd that the kernel passes the entire structure, and not just the `data` value, to the softirq handler. This trick allows future additions to the structure without requiring a change in every softirq handler. Softirq handlers can retrieve the data value, if they need to, simply by dereferencing their argument and reading the `data` member.

A softirq never preempts another softirq. In fact, the only event that can preempt a softirq is an interrupt handler. Another softirq even the same one can run on another processor, however.

## Executing Softirqs

A registered softirq must be marked before it will execute. This is called *raising the softirq*. Usually, an interrupt handler marks its softirq for execution before returning. Then, at a suitable time, the softirq runs. Pending softirqs are checked for and executed in the following places:

- In the return from hardware interrupt code
- In the `ksoftirqd` kernel thread
- In any code that explicitly checks for and executes pending softirqs, such as the networking subsystem

Regardless of the method of invocation, softirq execution occurs in `do_softirq()`. The function is really quite simple. If there are pending softirqs, `do_softirq()` loops over each one, invoking its handler. Let's look at a simplified variant of the important part of `do_softirq()`:

```
u32 pending = softirq_pending(cpu);

if (pending) {
    struct softirq_action *h = softirq_vec;

    softirq_pending(cpu) = 0;

    do {
        if (pending & 1)
            h->action(h);
        h++;
        pending >>= 1;
    } while (pending);
}
```

This snippet is the heart of softirq processing. It checks for, and executes, any pending softirqs. Specifically,

1. It sets the `pending` local variable to the value returned by the `softirq_pending()` macro. This is a 32-bit mask of pending softirqs if bit `n` is set, the `nth` softirq is pending.<sup>[4]</sup>
2. Now that the pending bitmask of softirqs is saved, it clears the actual bitmask.

<sup>[4]</sup> This actually occurs with local interrupts disabled, but that is omitted in this simplified example. If interrupts were not disabled, a softirq could have been raised (and thus be pending) in the intervening time between saving the mask and clearing it. This would result in incorrectly clearing a pending bit.

3. The pointer `h` is set to the first entry in the `softirq_vec`.
4. If the first bit in `pending` is set, `h->action(h)` is called.
5. The pointer `h` is incremented by one so that it now points to the second entry in the `softirq_vec` array.
6. The bitmask `pending` is right-shifted by one. This tosses the first bit away, and moves all other bits one place to the right. Consequently, the second bit is now the first (and so on).
7. The pointer `h` now points to the second entry in the array and the `pending` bitmask now has the second bit as the first. Repeat the previous steps.
8. Continue repeating until `pending` is zero, at which point there are no more pending softirqs and the work is done. Note, this check is sufficient to ensure `h` always points to a valid entry in `softirq_vec` because `pending` has at most 32 set bits and thus this loop executes at most 32 times.

## Using Softirqs

Softirqs are reserved for the most timing-critical and important bottom-half processing on the system. Currently, only two subsystems networking and SCSI directly use softirqs. Additionally, kernel timers and tasklets are built on top of softirqs. If you are adding a new softirq, you normally want to ask yourself why using a tasklet is insufficient. Tasklets are dynamically created and are simpler to use because of their weaker locking requirements, and they still perform quite well. Nonetheless, for timing-critical applications that are able to do their own locking in an efficient way, softirqs might be the correct solution.

## Assigning an Index

You declare softirqs statically at compile-time via an `enum` in `<linux/interrupt.h>`. The kernel uses this index, which starts at zero, as a relative priority. Softirqs with the lowest numerical priority execute before those with a higher numerical priority.

Creating a new softirq includes adding a new entry to this `enum`. When adding a new softirq you might not want to simply add your entry to the end of the list, as you would elsewhere. Instead, you need to insert the new entry depending on the priority you want to give it. Historically, `HI_SOFTIRQ` is always the first and `TASKLET_SOFTIRQ` is always the last entry. A new entry probably belongs somewhere after the network entries, but prior to `TASKLET_SOFTIRQ`. [Table 7.2](#) contains a list of the existing tasklet types.

**Table 7.2. Listing of Tasklet Types**

Tasklet	Priority	Softirq Description
<code>HI_SOFTIRQ</code>	0	High-priority tasklets
<code>TIMER_SOFTIRQ</code>	1	Timer bottom half
<code>NET_TX_SOFTIRQ</code>	2	Send network packets
<code>NET_RX_SOFTIRQ</code>	3	Receive network packets
<code>SCSI_SOFTIRQ</code>	4	SCSI bottom half
<code>TASKLET_SOFTIRQ</code>	5	Tasklets

## Registering Your Handler

Next, the softirq handler is registered at run-time via `open_softirq()`, which takes three parameters: the softirq's index, its handler function, and a value for the `data` field. The networking subsystem, for example, registers its softirqs like this:

```
open_softirq(NET_TX_SOFTIRQ, net_tx_action, NULL);
open_softirq(NET_RX_SOFTIRQ, net_rx_action, NULL);
```

The softirq handlers run with interrupts enabled and cannot sleep. While a handler runs, softirqs on the current processor are disabled. Another processor, however, can execute other softirqs. In fact, if the same softirq is raised again while it is executing, another processor can run it simultaneously. This means that any shared data even global data used only within the softirq handler itself needs proper locking (as discussed in the next two chapters). This is an important point, and it is the reason tasklets are usually preferred. Simply preventing your softirqs from running concurrently is not ideal. If a softirq obtained a lock to prevent another instance of itself from running simultaneously, there would be no reason to use a softirq. Consequently, most softirq handlers resort to per-processor data (data unique to each processor and thus not requiring locking) or some other tricks to avoid explicit locking and provide excellent scalability.

The raison d'être to softirqs is scalability. If you do not need to scale to infinitely many processors, then use a tasklet. Tasklets are ultimately softirqs where multiple instances of the same handler do not run concurrently on multiple processors.

## Raising Your Softirq

After a handler is added to the `enum` list and registered via `open_softirq()`, it is ready to run. To mark it pending, so that it is run at the next invocation of `do_softirq()`, call `raise_softirq()`. For example, the networking subsystem would call

```
raise_softirq(NET_TX_SOFTIRQ);
```

This raises the `NET_TX_SOFTIRQ` softirq. Its handler, `net_tx_action()`, runs the next time the kernel executes softirqs. This function disables interrupts prior to actually raising the softirq, and then restores them to their previous state. If interrupts are already off, the function `raise_softirq_irqoff()` can be used as a minor optimization. For example:

```
/*
 * interrupts must already be off!
 */
raise_softirq_irqoff(NET_TX_SOFTIRQ);
```

Softirqs are most often raised from within interrupt handlers. In the case of interrupt handlers, the interrupt handler performs the basic hardware-related work, raises the softirq, and then exits. When processing interrupts, the kernel invokes `do_softirq()`. The softirq then runs and picks up where the interrupt handler left off. In this example, the "top half" and "bottom half" naming should make sense.

## Tasklets

Tasklets are a bottom-half mechanism built on top of softirqs. As already mentioned, they have nothing to do with tasks. Tasklets are similar in nature and work in a similar manner to softirqs; however, they have a simpler interface and relaxed locking rules.

The decision between whether to use softirqs versus tasklets is simple: You usually want to use tasklets. As we saw in the previous section, you can count on one hand the users of softirqs. Softirqs are required only for very high-frequency and highly threaded uses. Tasklets, on the other hand, see much greater use. Tasklets work just fine for the vast majority of cases and they are very easy to use.

## Implementation of Tasklets

Because tasklets are implemented on top of softirqs, they are softirqs. As discussed, tasklets are represented by two softirqs: `HI_SOFTIRQ` and `TASKLET_SOFTIRQ`. The only real difference in these types is that the `HI_SOFTIRQ`-based tasklets run prior to the `TASKLET_SOFTIRQ` tasklets.

## The Tasklet Structure

Tasklets are represented by the `tasklet_struct` structure. Each structure represents a unique tasklet. The structure is declared in `<linux/interrupt.h>`:

```
struct tasklet_struct {
    struct tasklet_struct *next; /* next tasklet in the list */
    unsigned long state;        /* state of the tasklet */
    atomic_t count;             /* reference counter */
    void (*func)(unsigned long); /* tasklet handler function */
    unsigned long data;         /* argument to the tasklet function */
};
```

The `func` member is the tasklet handler (the equivalent of `action` to a softirq) and it receives `data` as its sole argument.

The `state` member is one of zero, `TASKLET_STATE_SCHED`, or `TASKLET_STATE_RUN`. `TASKLET_STATE_SCHED` denotes a tasklet that is scheduled to run and `TASKLET_STATE_RUN` denotes a tasklet that is running. As an optimization, `TASKLET_STATE_RUN` is used only on multiprocessor machines because a uniprocessor machine always knows whether the tasklet is running (it is either the currently executing code, or not).

The `count` field is used as a reference count for the tasklet. If it is nonzero, the tasklet is disabled and cannot run; if it is zero, the tasklet is enabled and can run if marked pending.

## Scheduling Tasklets

Scheduled tasklets (the equivalent of raised softirqs)<sup>[5]</sup> are stored in two per-processor structures `tasklet_vec` (for regular tasklets) and `tasklet_hi_vec` (for high-priority tasklets). Both of these structures are linked lists of `tasklet_struct` structures. Each `tasklet_struct` structure in the list represents a different tasklet.

[5] Yet another example of the evil naming schemes at work here. Why are softirqs raised but tasklets scheduled? Who knows? Both terms mean to mark that bottom half pending so that it is executed soon.

Tasklets are scheduled via the `tasklet_schedule()` and `tasklet_hi_schedule()` functions, which receive a pointer to the tasklet's `tasklet_struct` as their lone argument. The two functions are very similar (the difference being that one uses `TASKLET_SOFTIRQ` and one uses `HI_SOFTIRQ`). Writing and using tasklets is covered in the next section. For now, let's look at the details of `tasklet_schedule()`:

1. Check whether the tasklet's `state` is `TASKLET_STATE_SCHED`. If it is, the tasklet is already scheduled to run and the function can immediately return.
2. Save the state of the interrupt system, and then disable local interrupts. This ensures that nothing on this processor will mess with the tasklet code while `tasklet_schedule()` is manipulating the tasklets.
3. Add the tasklet to be scheduled to the head of the `tasklet_vec` or `tasklet_hi_vec` linked list, which is unique to each processor in the system.
4. Raise the `TASKLET_SOFTIRQ` or `HI_SOFTIRQ` softirq, so `do_softirq()` will execute this tasklet in the near future.
5. Restore interrupts to their previous state and return.

At the next earliest convenience, `do_softirq()` is run as discussed in the previous section. Because most tasklets and softirqs are marked pending in interrupt handlers, `do_softirq()` most likely runs when the last interrupt returns. Because `TASKLET_SOFTIRQ` or `HI_SOFTIRQ` is now raised, `do_softirq()` executes the associated handlers. These handlers, `tasklet_action()` and `tasklet_hi_action()`, are the heart of tasklet processing. Let's look at what they do:

1. Disable local interrupt delivery (there is no need to first save their state because the code here is always called as a softirq handler and interrupts are always enabled) and retrieve the `tasklet_vec` or `tasklet_hi_vec` list for this processor.
2. Clear the list for this processor by setting it equal to `NULL`.
3. Enable local interrupt delivery. Again, there is no need to restore them to their previous state because this function knows that they were always originally enabled.
4. Loop over each pending tasklet in the retrieved list.
5. If this is a multiprocessor machine, check whether the tasklet is running on another processor by checking the `TASKLET_STATE_RUN` flag. If it is currently running, do not execute it now and skip to the next pending tasklet (recall, only one tasklet of a given type may run concurrently).
6. If the tasklet is not currently running, set the `TASKLET_STATE_RUN` flag, so another processor will not run it.
7. Check for a zero `count` value, to ensure that the tasklet is not disabled. If the tasklet is disabled, skip it and go to the next pending tasklet.
8. We now know that the tasklet is not running elsewhere, is marked as running so it will not start running elsewhere, and has a zero `count` value. Run the tasklet handler.
9. After the tasklet runs, clear the `TASKLET_STATE_RUN` flag in the tasklet's `state` field.
10. Repeat for the next pending tasklet, until there are no more scheduled tasklets waiting to run.

The implementation of tasklets is simple, but rather clever. As you saw, all tasklets are multiplexed on top of two softirqs, `HI_SOFTIRQ`

and **TASKLET\_SOFTIRQ**. When a tasklet is scheduled, the kernel raises one of these softirqs. These softirqs, in turn, are handled by special functions that then run any scheduled tasklets. The special functions ensure that only one tasklet of a given type is running at the same time (but other tasklets can run simultaneously). All this complexity is then hidden behind a clean and simple interface.

## Using Tasklets

In most cases, tasklets are the preferred mechanism with which to implement your bottom half for a normal hardware device. Tasklets are dynamically created, easy to use, and very quick. Moreover, although their name is mind-numbingly confusing, it grows on you: It is cute.

### Declaring Your Tasklet

You can create tasklets statically or dynamically. What option you choose depends on whether you have (or want) a direct or indirect reference to the tasklet. If you are going to statically create the tasklet (and thus have a direct reference to it), use one of two macros in `<linux/interrupt.h>`:

```
DECLARE_TASKLET(name, func, data)
DECLARE_TASKLET_DISABLED(name, func, data);
```

Both these macros statically create a `struct tasklet_struct` with the given name. When the tasklet is scheduled, the given function `func` is executed and passed the argument `data`. The difference between the two macros is the initial reference count. The first macro creates the tasklet with a `count` of zero, and the tasklet is enabled. The second macro sets `count` to one, and the tasklet is disabled. Here is an example:

```
DECLARE_TASKLET(my_tasklet, my_tasklet_handler, dev);
```

This line is equivalent to

```
struct tasklet_struct my_tasklet = { NULL, 0, ATOMIC_INIT(0),
                                      my_tasklet_handler, dev };
```

This creates a tasklet named `my_tasklet` that is enabled with `tasklet_handler` as its handler. The value of `dev` is passed to the handler when it is executed.

To initialize a tasklet given an indirect reference (a pointer) to a dynamically created `struct tasklet_struct`, `t`, call `tasklet_init()`:

```
tasklet_init(t, tasklet_handler, dev); /* dynamically as opposed to statically */
```

### Writing Your Tasklet Handler

The tasklet handler must match the correct prototype:

```
void tasklet_handler(unsigned long data)
```

As with softirqs, tasklets cannot sleep. This means you cannot use semaphores or other blocking functions in a tasklet. Tasklets also run with all interrupts enabled, so you must take precautions (for example, disable interrupts and obtain a lock) if your tasklet shares data with an interrupt handler. Unlike softirqs, however, two of the same tasklets never run concurrently although two different tasklets can run at the same time on two different processors. If your tasklet shares data with another tasklet or softirq, you need to use proper locking (see [Chapter 8](#), "Kernel Synchronization Introduction," and [Chapter 9](#), "Kernel Synchronization Methods").

## Scheduling Your Tasklet

To schedule a tasklet for execution, `tasklet_schedule()` is called and passed a pointer to the relevant `tasklet_struct`:

```
tasklet_schedule(&my_tasklet); /* mark my_tasklet as pending */
```

After a tasklet is scheduled, it runs once at some time in the near future. If the same tasklet is scheduled again, before it has had a chance to run, it still runs only once. If it is already running, for example on another processor, the tasklet is rescheduled and runs again. As an optimization, a tasklet always runs on the processor that scheduled it making better use of the processor's cache, you hope.

You can disable a tasklet via a call to `tasklet_disable()`, which disables the given tasklet. If the tasklet is currently running, the function will not return until it finishes executing. Alternatively, you can use `tasklet_disable_nosync()`, which disables the given tasklet but does not wait for the tasklet to complete prior to returning. This is usually not safe because you cannot assume the tasklet is not still running. A call to `tasklet_enable()` enables the tasklet. This function also must be called before a tasklet created with `DECLARE_TASKLET_DISABLED()` is usable. For example:

```
tasklet_disable(&my_tasklet); /* tasklet is now disabled */
```

```
/* we can now do stuff knowing that the tasklet cannot run .. */
```

```
tasklet_enable(&my_tasklet); /* tasklet is now enabled */
```

You can remove a tasklet from the pending queue via `tasklet_kill()`. This function receives a pointer as a lone argument to the tasklet's `tasklet_struct`. Removing a scheduled tasklet from the queue is useful when dealing with a tasklet that often reschedules itself. This function first waits for the tasklet to finish executing and then it removes the tasklet from the queue. Nothing stops some other code from rescheduling the tasklet, of course. This function must not be used from interrupt context because it sleeps.

## ksoftirqd

Softirq (and thus tasklet) processing is aided by a set of per-processor kernel threads. These kernel threads help in the processing of softirqs when the system is overwhelmed with softirqs.

As already described, the kernel processes softirqs in a number of places, most commonly on return from handling an interrupt. Softirqs might be raised at very high rates (such as during intense network traffic). Further, softirq functions can reactivate themselves. That is,

while running, a softirq can raise itself so that it runs again (indeed, the networking subsystem does this). The possibility of a high frequency of softirqs in conjunction with their capability to remark themselves active can result in user-space programs being starved of processor time. Not processing the reactivated softirqs in a timely manner, however, is unacceptable. When softirqs were first designed, this caused a dilemma that needed fixing, and neither obvious solution was a good one. First, let's look at each of the two obvious solutions.

The first solution is simply to keep processing softirqs as they come in and to recheck and reprocess any pending softirqs before returning. This ensures that the kernel processes softirqs in a timely manner and, most importantly, that any reactivated softirqs are also immediately processed. The problem lies in high load environments, in which many softirqs occur, that continually reactivate themselves. The kernel might continually service softirqs without accomplishing much else. User-space is neglected indeed, nothing but softirqs and interrupt handlers run and, in turn, the system's users get mad. This approach might work fine if the system is never under intense load; if the system experiences even moderate interrupt levels this solution is not acceptable. User-space cannot be starved for significant periods.

The second solution is *not* to handle reactivated softirqs. On return from interrupt, the kernel merely looks at all pending softirqs and executes them as normal. If any softirqs reactivate themselves, however, they will not run until the *next* time the kernel handles pending softirqs. This is most likely not until the next interrupt occurs, which can equate to a lengthy amount of time before any new (or reactivated) softirqs are executed. Worse, on an otherwise idle system it is beneficial to process the softirqs right away. Unfortunately, this approach is oblivious to which processes may or may not be runnable. Therefore, although this method prevents starving user-space, it does starve the softirqs, and it does not take good advantage of an idle system.

In designing softirqs, the developers realized that some sort of compromise was needed. The solution ultimately implemented in the kernel is to *not* immediately process reactivated softirqs. Instead, if the number of softirqs grows excessive, the kernel wakes up a family of kernel threads to handle the load. The kernel threads run with the lowest possible priority (nice value of 19), which ensures they do not run in lieu of anything important. This concession prevents heavy softirq activity from completely starving user-space of processor time. Conversely, it also ensures that "excess" softirqs do run eventually. Finally, this solution has the added property that on an idle system, the softirqs are handled rather quickly (because the kernel threads will schedule immediately).

There is one thread per processor. The threads are each named `ksoftirqd/n` where `n` is the processor number. On a two-processor system, you would have `ksoftirqd/0` and `ksoftirqd/1`. Having a thread on each processor ensures an idle processor, if available, is always able to service softirqs. After the threads are initialized, they run a tight loop similar to this:

```
for (;;) {
    if (!softirq_pending(cpu))
        schedule();

    set_current_state(TASK_RUNNING);

    while (softirq_pending(cpu)) {
        do_softirq();
        if (need_resched())
            schedule();
    }

    set_current_state(TASK_INTERRUPTIBLE);
}
```

If any softirqs are pending (as reported by `softirq_pending()`), `ksoftirqd` calls `do_softirq()` to handle them. Note that it does this repeatedly to handle any reactivated softirqs, too. After each iteration, `schedule()` is called if needed, to allow more important processes to run. After all processing is complete, the kernel thread sets itself `TASK_INTERRUPTIBLE` and invokes the scheduler to select a new runnable process.

The softirq kernel threads are awakened whenever `do_softirq()` detects an executed kernel thread reactivating itself.

## The Old BH Mechanism

Although the old BH interface, thankfully, is no longer present in 2.6, it was around for a *long* time since the earliest versions of the kernel. Seeing as it had immense staying power, it certainly carries some historical significance that requires more than a passing look. Nothing in this brief section actually pertains to 2.6, but the history is important.

The BH interface is ancient, and it showed. Each BH must be statically defined, and there are a maximum of 32. Because the handlers must all be defined at compile-time, modules could not directly use the BH interface. They could piggyback off an existing BH, however. Over time, this static requirement and the maximum of 32 bottom halves became a major hindrance to their use.

All BH handlers are strictly serialized—no two BH handlers, even of different types, can run concurrently. This made synchronization easy, but it wasn't a good thing for multiprocessor scalability. Performance on large SMP machines was sub par. A driver using the BH interface did not scale well to multiple processors. The networking layer, in particular, suffered.

Other than these attributes, the BH mechanism is similar to tasklets. In fact, the BH interface was implemented on top of tasklets in 2.4. The 32 possible bottom halves were represented by constants defined in `<linux/interrupt.h>`. To mark a BH as pending, the function `mark_bh()` was called and passed the number of the BH. In 2.4, this in turn scheduled the BH tasklet `bh_action()`, to run. Before the 2.4 kernel, the BH mechanism was independently implemented and did not rely on any lower-level bottom-half mechanism, much as softirqs are implemented today.

Because of the shortcomings of this form of bottom half, kernel developers introduced task queues to replace bottom halves. Task queues never accomplished this goal, although they did win many new users. In 2.3, the softirq and tasklet mechanisms were introduced to put an end to the BH. The BH mechanism was reimplemented on top of tasklets. Unfortunately, it was complicated to port bottom halves from the BH interface to tasklets or softirqs because of the weaker inherent serialization of the new interfaces<sup>[6]</sup>. During 2.5, however, the conversion did occur when timers and SCSI users finally moved over to softirqs. The kernel developers summarily removed the BH interface. Good riddance, BH!

<sup>[6]</sup> That is, the weaker serialization was beneficial to performance but also harder to program. Converting a BH to a tasklet, for example, required careful thinking: *Is this code safe running at the same time as any other tasklet?* When finally converted, however, the performance was worth it.

**Team LiB**

**◀ PREVIOUS** **NEXT ▶**

## Work Queues

Work queues are a different form of deferring work from what we have looked at so far. Work queues defer work into a kernel thread this bottom half always runs in process context. Thus, code deferred to a work queue has all the usual benefits of process context. Most importantly, work queues are schedulable and can therefore sleep.

Normally, it is easy to decide between using work queues and softirqs/tasklets. If the deferred work needs to sleep, work queues are used. If the deferred work need not sleep, softirqs or tasklets are used. Indeed, the usual alternative to work queues is kernel threads. Because the kernel developers frown upon creating a new kernel thread (and, in some locales, it is a punishable offense), work queues are strongly preferred. They are *really* easy to use, too.

If you need a schedulable entity to perform your bottom-half processing, you need work queues. They are the only bottom-half mechanisms that run in process context, and thus, the only ones that can sleep. This means they are useful for situations where you need to allocate a lot of memory, obtain a semaphore, or perform block I/O. If you do not need a kernel thread to handle your deferred work, consider a tasklet instead.

## Implementation of Work Queues

In its most basic form, the work queue subsystem is an interface for creating kernel threads to handle work that is queued from elsewhere. These kernel threads are called *worker threads*. Work queues let your driver create a special worker thread to handle deferred work. The work queue subsystem, however, implements and provides a default worker thread for handling work. Therefore, in its most common form, a work queue is a simple interface for deferring work to a generic kernel thread.

The default worker threads are called `events/n` where `n` is the processor number; there is one per processor. For example, on a uniprocessor system there is one thread, `events/0`. A dual processor system would additionally have `events/1`. The default worker thread handles deferred work from multiple locations. Many drivers in the kernel defer their bottom-half work to the default thread. Unless a driver or subsystem has a strong requirement for creating its own thread, the default thread is preferred.

Nothing stops code from creating its own worker thread, however. This might be advantageous if you are performing large amounts of processing in the worker thread. Processor-intense and performance-critical work might benefit from its own thread. This also lightens the load on the default threads, which prevents starving the rest of the queued work.

## Data Structures Representing the Threads

The worker threads are represented by the `workqueue_struct` structure:

```
/*
 * The externally visible workqueue abstraction is an array of
 * per-CPU workqueues:
 */
struct workqueue_struct {
    struct cpu_workqueue_struct cpu_wq[NR_CPUS];
    const char *name;
    struct list_head list;
};
```

This structure, defined in `kernel/workqueue.c`, contains an array of struct `cpu_workqueue_struct`, one per possible processor on the system. Because the worker threads exist on each processor in the system, there is one of these structures per worker thread, per processor, on a given machine. The `cpu_workqueue_struct` is the core data structure and is also defined in `kernel/workqueue.c`:

```
struct cpu_workqueue_struct {  
    spinlock_t lock; /* lock protecting this structure */  
  
    long remove_sequence; /* least-recently added (next to run) */  
    long insert_sequence; /* next to add */  
    struct list_head worklist; /* list of work */  
    wait_queue_head_t more_work;  
    wait_queue_head_t work_done;  
  
    struct workqueue_struct *wq; /* associated workqueue_struct */  
    task_t *thread; /* associated thread */  
  
    int run_depth; /* run_workqueue() recursion depth */  
};
```

Note that each type of worker thread has one `workqueue_struct` associated to it. Inside, there is one `cpu_workqueue_struct` for every thread and, thus, every processor, because there is one worker thread on each processor.

## Data Structures Representing the Work

All worker threads are implemented as normal kernel threads running the `worker_thread()` function. After initial setup, this function enters an infinite loop and goes to sleep. When work is queued, the thread is awakened and processes the work. When there is no work left to process, it goes back to sleep.

The work is represented by the `work_struct` structure, defined in `<linux/workqueue.h>`:

```
struct work_struct {  
    unsigned long pending; /* is this work pending? */  
    struct list_head entry; /* link list of all work */  
    void (*func)(void *); /* handler function */  
    void *data; /* argument to handler */  
    void *wq_data; /* used internally */  
    struct timer_list timer; /* timer used by delayed work queues */  
};
```

These structures are strung into a linked list, one for each type of queue on each processor. For example, there is one list of deferred work for the generic thread, per processor. When a worker thread wakes up, it runs any work in its list. As it completes work, it removes the corresponding `work_struct` entries from the linked list. When the list is empty, it goes back to sleep.

Let's look at the heart of `worker_thread()`, simplified:

```
for (;;) {  
    set_task_state(current, TASK_INTERRUPTIBLE);  
    add_wait_queue(&cwq->more_work, &wait);  
  
    if (list_empty(&cwq->worklist))  
        schedule();  
    else
```

```
    set_task_state(current, TASK_RUNNING);
    remove_wait_queue(&cwq->more_work, &wait);

    if (!list_empty(&cwq->worklist))
        run_workqueue(cwq);
}
```

This function performs the following functions, in an infinite loop:

1. The thread marks itself sleeping (the task's state is set to **TASK\_INTERRUPTIBLE**) and adds itself to a wait queue.
2. If the linked list of work is empty, the thread calls **schedule()** and goes to sleep.
3. If the list is not empty, the thread does not go to sleep. Instead, it marks itself **TASK\_RUNNING** and removes itself from the wait queue.
4. If the list is nonempty, the thread calls **run\_workqueue()** to perform the deferred work.

### **run\_workqueue()**

The function **run\_workqueue()**, in turn, actually performs the deferred work:

```
while (!list_empty(&cwq->worklist)) {
    struct work_struct *work;
    void (*f)(void *);
    void *data;

    work = list_entry(cwq->worklist.next, struct work_struct, entry);
    f = work->func;
    data = work->data;

    list_del_init(cwq->worklist.next);

    clear_bit(0, &work->pending);
    f(data);
}
```

This function loops over each entry in the linked list of pending work and executes the **func** member of the **workqueue\_struct** for each entry in the linked list:

1. While the list is not empty, it grabs the next entry in the list.
2. It retrieves the function that should be called, **func**, and its argument, **data**.
3. It removes this entry from the list and clears the pending bit in the structure itself.
4. It invokes the function.
5. Repeat.

## Excuse Me?

The relationship between the different data structures is admittedly a bit convoluted. [Figure 7.1](#) provides a graphical example, which should bring it all together.

**Figure 7.1. The relationship between work, work queues, and the worker threads.**



At the highest level, there are worker threads. There can be multiple types of worker threads. There is one worker thread per processor of a given type. Parts of the kernel can create worker threads as needed. By default, there is the `events` worker thread. Each worker thread is represented by the `cpu_workqueue_struct` structure. The `workqueue_struct` structure represents all the worker threads of a given type.

For example, assume that in addition to the generic `events` worker type, I also create `afalcon` worker type. Also, assume I have a four-processor computer. Then there are four `events` threads (and thus four `cpu_workqueue_struct` structures) and four `falcon` threads (and thus another four `cpu_workqueue_struct` structures). There is one `workqueue_struct` for the `events` type and one for the `falcon` type.

Now, let's approach from the lowest level, which starts with work. Your driver creates work, which it wants to defer to later. The `work_struct` structure represents this work. Among other things, this structure contains a pointer to the function that will handle the deferred work. The work is submitted to a *specific* worker thread in this case, a specific `falcon` thread. The worker thread then wakes up and performs the queued work.

Most drivers use the existing default worker threads, named `events`. They are easy and simple. Some more serious situations, however, demand their own worker threads. The XFS file system, for example, creates two new types of worker threads.

## Using Work Queues

Using work queues is easy. We cover the default `events` queue first, and then look at creating new worker threads.

### Creating Work

The first step is actually creating some work to defer. To create the structure statically at run-time, use `DECLARE_WORK`:

```
DECLARE_WORK(name, void (*func)(void *), void *data);
```

This statically creates a `work_struct` structure named `name` with handler function `func` and argument `data`.

Alternatively, you can create work at run-time via a pointer:

```
INIT_WORK(struct work_struct *work, void (*func)(void *), void *data);
```

This dynamically initializes the work queue pointed to by `work` with handler function `func` and argument `data`.

### Your Work Queue Handler

The prototype for the work queue handler is

```
void work_handler(void *data)
```

A worker thread executes this function, and thus, the function runs in process context. By default, interrupts are enabled and no locks are held. If needed, the function can sleep. Note that, despite running in process context, the work handlers cannot access user-space memory because there is no associated user-space memory map for kernel threads. The kernel can access user memory only when running on behalf of a user-space process, such as when executing a system call. Only then is user memory mapped in.

Locking between work queues or other parts of the kernel is handled just as with any other process context code. This makes writing work handlers much easier. The next two chapters cover locking.

### Scheduling Work

Now that the work is created, we can schedule it. To queue a given work's handler function with the default `events` worker threads, simply call

```
schedule_work(&work);
```

The work is scheduled immediately and is run as soon as the `events` worker thread on the current processor wakes up.

Sometimes you do not want the work to execute immediately, but instead after some delay. In those cases, you can schedule work to execute at a given time in the future:

```
schedule_delayed_work(&work, delay);
```

In this case, the `work_struct` represented by `&work` will not execute for at least `delay` timer ticks into the future. Using ticks as a unit of time is covered in [Chapter 10](#).

## Flushing Work

Queued work is executed when the worker thread next wakes up. Sometimes, you need to ensure that a given batch of work has completed before continuing. This is especially important for modules, which almost certainly want to call this function before unloading. Other places in the kernel also might need to make certain no work is pending, to prevent race conditions.

For these needs, there is a function to flush a given work queue:

```
void flush_scheduled_work(void);
```

This function waits until all entries in the queue are executed before returning. While waiting for any pending work to execute, the function sleeps. Therefore, you can call it only from process context.

Note that this function does not cancel any delayed work. That is, any work that was scheduled via `schedule_delayed_work()`, and whose delay is not yet up, is not flushed via `flush_scheduled_work()`. To cancel delayed work, call

```
int cancel_delayed_work(struct work_struct *work);
```

This function cancels the pending work, if any, associated with the given `work_struct`.

## Creating New Work Queues

If the default queue is insufficient for your needs, you can create a new work queue and corresponding worker threads. Because this creates one worker thread per processor, you should create unique work queues only if your code really needs the performance of a unique set of threads.

You create a new work queue and the associated worker threads via a simple function:

```
struct workqueue_struct *create_workqueue(const char *name);
```

The parameter `name` is used to name the kernel threads. For example, the `defaultevents` queue is created via

```
struct workqueue_struct *keventd_wq;
keventd_wq = create_workqueue("events");
```

This function creates *all* the worker threads (one for each processor in the system) and prepares them to handle work.

Creating work is handled in the same manner regardless of the queue type. After the work is created, the following functions are analogous to `schedule_work()` and `schedule_delayed_work()`, except that they work on the given work queue and not the `defaultevents` queue.

```
int queue_work(struct workqueue_struct *wq, struct work_struct *work)

int queue_delayed_work(struct workqueue_struct *wq,
                      struct work_struct *work,
                      unsigned long delay)
```

Finally, you can flush a wait queue via a call to the function

```
flush_workqueue(struct workqueue_struct *wq)
```

As previously discussed, this function works identically to `flush_scheduled_work()`, except that it waits for the given queue to empty before returning.

## The Old Task Queue Mechanism

Like the BH interface, which gave way to softirqs and tasklets, the work queue interface grew out of shortcomings in the task queue interface. The task queue interface (often called simply `tq` in the kernel), like tasklets, also has nothing to do with tasks in the process sense [7]. The users of the task queue interface were ripped in half during the 2.5 development kernel. Half of the users were converted to tasklets, whereas the other half continued using the task queue interface. What was left of the task queue interface then became the work queue interface. Briefly looking at task queues, which were around for some time, is a useful historical exercise.

Task queues work by defining a bunch of queues. The queues have names, such as the scheduler queue, the immediate queue, or the timer queue. Each queue is run at a specific point in the kernel. A kernel thread, `keventd`, ran the work associated with the scheduler queue. This was the precursor to the full work queue interface. The timer queue was run at each tick of the system timer and the immediate queue was run in a handful of different places to ensure it was run "immediately" (*hack!*). There were other queues, too. Additionally, you could dynamically create new queues.

All this might sound useful, but the reality is that the task queue interface was a mess. All the queues were essentially arbitrary abstractions, scattered about the kernel as if thrown in the air and kept where they landed. The only meaningful queue was the scheduler queue, which provided the only way to defer work to process context.

The other good thing about task queues was the brain-dead simple interface. Despite the myriad of queues and the arbitrary rules about when they ran, the interface was as simple as possible. But that's about itthe rest of task queues needed to go.

The various task queue users were converted to other bottom-half mechanisms. Most of them switched to tasklets. The scheduler queue users stuck around. Finally, the `keventd` code was generalized into the excellent work queue mechanism we have today and task queues were finally ripped out of the kernel.

## Which Bottom Half Should I Use?

The decision over which bottom half to use is important. In the current 2.6 kernel, there are three choices: softirqs, tasklets, and work queues. Tasklets are built on softirqs and, therefore, both are similar. The work queue mechanism is an entirely different creature and is built on kernel threads.

Softirqs, by design, provide the least serialization. This requires softirq handlers to go through extra steps to ensure that shared data is safe because two or more softirqs of the same type may run concurrently on different processors. If the code in question is already highly threaded, such as in a networking subsystem that is chest-deep in per-processor variables, softirqs make a good choice. They are certainly the fastest alternative for timing-critical and high-frequency uses. Tasklets make more sense if the code is not finely threaded. They have a simpler interface and, because two tasklets of the same type might not run concurrently, they are easier to implement. Tasklets are effectively softirqs that do not run concurrently. A driver developer should always choose tasklets over softirqs, unless prepared to utilize per-processor variables or similar magic to ensure that the softirq can safely run concurrently on multiple processors.

If your deferred work needs to run in process context, your only choice of the three is work queues. If process context is not a requirement specifically, if you have no need to sleepsoftirqs or tasklets are perhaps better suited. Work queues involve the highest overhead because they involve kernel threads and, therefore, context switching. This is not to say that they are inefficient, but in light of thousands of interrupts hitting per second (as the networking subsystem might experience), other methods make more sense. For most situations, however, work queues are sufficient.

In terms of ease of use, work queues take the crown. Using the default events queue is child's play. Next come tasklets, which also have a simple interface. Coming in last are softirqs, which need to be statically created and require careful thinking with their implementation.

[Table 7.3](#) is a comparison between the three bottom-half interfaces.

**Table 7.3. Bottom Half Comparison**

Bottom Half	Context	Inherent Serialization
Softirq	Interrupt	None
Tasklet	Interrupt	Against the same tasklet
Work queues	Process	None (scheduled as process context)

In short, normal driver writers have two choices. First, do you need a schedulable entity to perform your deferred work fundamentally, do you need to sleep for any reason? Then work queues are your only option. Otherwise, tasklets are preferred. Only if scalability becomes a concern do you investigate softirqs.

## Locking Between the Bottom Halves

We have not discussed locking yet, which is such a fun and expansive topic that we devote the next two chapters to it. Nonetheless, it is important to understand that it is crucial to protect shared data from concurrent access while using bottom halves, even on a single processor machine. Remember, a bottom half can run at virtually any moment. You might want to come back to this section after reading the next two chapters if the concept of locking is foreign to you.

One of the benefits of tasklets is that they are serialized with respect to themselves: The same tasklet will not run concurrently, even on two different processors. This means you do not have to worry about intratasklet [8] concurrency issues. Intertasklet concurrency (that is, when two different tasklets share the same data) requires proper locking.

Because softirqs provide no serialization, (even two instances of the same softirq might run simultaneously), all shared data needs an appropriate lock.

If process context code and a bottom half share data, you need to disable bottom-half processing and obtain a lock before accessing the data. Doing both ensures local and SMP protection and prevents a deadlock.

If interrupt context code and a bottom half share data, you need to disable interrupts and obtain a lock before accessing the data. This also ensures both local and SMP protection and prevents a deadlock.

Any shared data in a work queue requires locking, too. The locking issues are no different from normal kernel code because work queues run in process context.

[Chapter 8](#) covers the magic behind locking, and [Chapter 9](#) covers the kernel locking primitives. These chapters cover how to protect data that bottom halves use.

## Disabling Bottom Halves

Normally, it is not sufficient to only disable bottom halves. More often, to safely protect shared data, you need to obtain a lock *and* disable bottom halves. Such methods, which you might use in a driver, are covered in [Chapter 9](#). If you are writing core kernel code, however, you might need to disable just the bottom halves.

To disable all bottom-half processing (specifically, all softirqs and thus all tasklets), call `local_bh_disable()`. To enable bottom-half processing, call `local_bh_enable()`. Yes, the function is misnamed; no one bothered to change the name when the BH interface gave way to softirqs. [Table 7.4](#) is a summary of these functions.

**Table 7.4. Listing of Bottom Half Control Methods**

Method	Description
<code>void local_bh_disable()</code>	Disable softirq and tasklet processing on the local processor
<code>void local_bh_enable()</code>	Enable softirq and tasklet processing on the local processor

The calls can be nested only the final call to `local_bh_enable()` actually enables bottom halves. For example, the first time `local_bh_disable()` is called, local softirq processing is disabled. If `local_bh_disable()` is called three more times, local processing remains disabled. Processing is not reenabled until the fourth call to `local_bh_enable()`.

The functions accomplish this by maintaining a per-task counter via the `preempt_count` (interestingly, the same counter used by kernel preemption)<sup>[9]</sup>. When the counter reaches zero, bottom-half processing is possible. Because bottom halves were disabled, `local_bh_enable()` also checks for any pending bottom halves and executes them.

[9] In fact, this counter is used both by the interrupt and bottom-half subsystems. Thus, in Linux, a single per-task counter represents the atomicity of a task. This has proven very useful for work such as debugging sleeping-while-atomic bugs.

The functions are unique to each supported architecture and are usually written as complicated macros in `<asm/softirq.h>`. The following are close C representations for the curious:

```
/*
 * disable local bottom halves by incrementing the preempt_count
 */
void local_bh_disable(void)
{
    struct thread_info *t = current_thread_info();

    t->preempt_count += SOFTIRQ_OFFSET;
}

/*
 * decrement the preempt_count - this will 'automatically' enable
 * bottom halves if the count returns to zero
 *
 * optionally run any bottom halves that are pending
 */
void local_bh_enable(void)
{
    struct thread_info *t = current_thread_info();

    t->preempt_count -= SOFTIRQ_OFFSET;

    /*
     * is preempt_count zero and are any bottom halves pending?
     * if so, run them
     */
    if (unlikely(!t->preempt_count && softirq_pending(smp_processor_id())))
        do_softirq();
}
```

These calls do not disable the execution of work queues. Because work queues run in process context, there are no issues with asynchronous execution, and thus, there is no need to disable them. Because softirqs and tasklets can occur asynchronously (say, on return from handling an interrupt), however, kernel code may need to disable them. With work queues, on the other hand, protecting shared data is the same as in any process context. [Chapters 8](#) and [9](#) give the details.

## The Bottom of Bottom-Half Processing

In this chapter, we covered the three mechanisms used to defer work in the Linux kernel: softirqs, tasklets, and work queues. We went over their design and implementation. We discussed how to use them in your own code and we insulted their poorly conceived names. For historical completeness, we also looked at the bottom-half mechanisms that existed in previous versions of the Linux kernel: BH's and task queues.

We talked a lot in this chapter about synchronization and concurrency because such topics apply quite a bit to bottom halves. We even wrapped up the chapter with a discussion on disabling bottom halves for reasons of concurrency protection. It is now time to dive head first into these topics. The next chapter discusses kernel synchronization and concurrency in the abstract, providing a foundation for understanding the very issues at the heart of the problem. The subsequent chapter discusses the specific interfaces provided by our beloved kernel to solve these problems. Armed with the next two chapters, the world is your oyster.

**Team LiB**

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## Endnotes

7.

Bottom-half names are apparently a conspiracy to confuse new kernel developers. Seriously, these names are awful.

8.

I made this word up.

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# Chapter 8. Kernel Synchronization Introduction

In a shared memory application, care must be taken to ensure that shared resources are protected from concurrent access. The kernel is no exception. Shared resources require protection from concurrent access because if multiple threads of execution<sup>[1]</sup> access and manipulate the data at the same time, the threads may overwrite each other's changes or access data while it is in an inconsistent state. Concurrent access of shared data is a recipe for instability that often proves very hard to track down and debuggetting it right off the bat is important.

[1] The term *threads of execution* implies any instance of executing code. This includes, for example, a task in the kernel, an interrupt handler, a bottom half, or a kernel thread. This chapter may shorten *threads of execution* to simply *threads*. Keep in mind that this term describes any executing code.

Properly protecting shared resources can be tough. Years ago, before Linux supported symmetrical multiprocessing, preventing concurrent access of data was simple. Because only a single processor was supported, the only way data could have been accessed concurrently was if an interrupt occurred or if kernel code explicitly rescheduled and allowed another task to run. Back in those days, life was simple.

Those days are over. Symmetrical multiprocessing support was introduced in the 2.0 kernel and has been continually enhanced ever since. Multiprocessing support implies that kernel code can simultaneously run on two or more processors. Consequently, without protection, code in the kernel, running on two different processors, can simultaneously access shared data at exactly the same time. With the introduction of the 2.6 kernel, the Linux kernel is preemptive. This implies that (again, in the absence of protection) the scheduler can preempt kernel code at virtually any point and reschedule another task. Today, a number of scenarios allow for concurrency inside the kernel and they all require protection.

This chapter discusses the issues of concurrency and synchronization, as they exist in an operating system kernel. The next chapter details the mechanisms and interfaces that the Linux kernel provides to solve these synchronization issues and prevent race conditions.

## Critical Regions and Race Conditions

Code paths that access and manipulate shared data are called *critical regions*. It is usually unsafe for multiple threads of execution to access the same resource simultaneously. To prevent concurrent access during critical regions, the programmer must ensure that the code executes *atomically* that is, the code completes without interruption as if the entire critical region were one indivisible instruction. It is a bug if it is possible for two threads of execution to be simultaneously in the same critical region. When this actually occurs, we call it a *race condition* (named because the threads *raced* to get there). Note how rare this could be debugging race conditions is often very hard because they are not easily reproducible. Ensuring that unsafe concurrency is prevented and that race conditions do not occur is called *synchronization*.

## Why Do We Need Protection?

To best identify race conditions, let's look at just how ubiquitous critical regions are. For a first example, let's consider a real world case: an ATM (Automated Teller Machine, called a cash machine, cashpoint, or ABM outside of the United States).

One of the most common functions performed by cash machines is withdrawing money from a person's personal bank account. A person walks up to the machine, inserts an ATM card, types in a PIN providing a modicum of authentication, selects *Withdrawal*, inputs a pecuniary amount, hits OK, takes the money, and mails it to me.

After the user has asked for a specific amount of money, the cash machine needs to ensure that the money actually exists in that user's account. If the money exists, it then needs to deduct the withdrawal from the total funds available. The code to implement this would look something like

```
int total = get_total_from_account(); /* total funds in account */
int withdrawal = get_withdrawal_amount(); /* amount user asked to withdrawal */

/* check whether the user has enough funds in her account */
if (total < withdrawal)
    error("You do not have that much money!")

/* OK, the user has enough money: deduct the withdrawal amount from her total */
total -= withdrawal;
update_total_funds(total);

/* give the user their money */
spit_out_money(withdrawal);
```

Now, let's presume that another deduction in the user's funds is happening at the same time. It does not matter *how* the simultaneous deduction is happening: Assume that the user's spouse is initiating another withdrawal at another ATM, or electronically transferring funds out of the account, or the bank is deducting a fee from the account (as banks these days are so wont to do), or whatever.

Both systems performing the withdrawal would have code similar to what we just looked at: first check whether the deduction is possible, then compute the new total funds, and finally execute the physical deduction. Now let's make up some numbers. Presume that the first deduction is a withdrawal from an ATM for \$100 and that the second deduction is the bank applying a fee of \$10 because the customer walked into the bank, (which is not allowed, you must use the ATM, *we do not want to see you*). Assume the customer has a total of \$105 in the bank. Obviously, one of these transactions *cannot* correctly complete without sending the account into the red.

What you would expect is something like this: The fee transaction happens first. Ten dollars is less than \$105, so ten is subtracted from 105 to get a new total of 95, and \$10 is pocketed by the bank. Then the ATM withdrawal comes along and fails because \$95 is less than \$100.

Life can be much more interesting. Assume that the two transactions are initiated at roughly the same time. Both transactions verify that sufficient funds exist: \$105 is more than both \$100 and \$10, so all is good. Then the withdrawal process subtracts \$100 from \$105, yielding \$5. The fee transaction then does the same, subtracting \$10 from \$105 and getting \$95. The withdrawal process then updates the user's new total available funds to \$5. Now the fee transaction also updates the new total, resulting in \$95. Free money!

Clearly, financial institutions must ensure that this can never happen. They must lock the account during certain operations, making each transaction atomic with respect to any other transaction. Such transactions must occur in their entirety, without interruption, or not occur at all.

## The Single Variable

Now, let's look at a specific computing example. Consider a very simple shared resource, a single global integer, and a very simple critical region, the operation of merely incrementing it:

`i++;`

This might translate into machine instructions to the computer's processor that resemble the following:

get the current value of `i` and copy it into a register  
add one to the value stored in the register  
write back to memory the new value of `i`

Now, assume that there are two threads of execution, both enter this critical region, and the initial value of `i` is seven. The desired outcome is then similar to the following (with each row representing a unit of time):

Thread 1	Thread 2
<code>get i (7)</code>	-
<code>increment i (7 -&gt; 8)</code>	-
<code>write back i (8)</code>	-
-	<code>get i (8)</code>
-	<code>increment i (8 -&gt; 9)</code>
-	<code>write back i (9)</code>

As expected, seven incremented twice is nine. A possible outcome, however, is the following:

Thread 1	Thread 2
<code>get i (7)</code>	<code>get i (7)</code>
<code>increment i (7 -&gt; 8)</code>	-
<code>write back i (8)</code>	-
-	<code>increment i (8 -&gt; 9)</code>
-	<code>write back i (9)</code>

### Thread 1

increment i (7 -> 8)

-

write back i (8)

-

### Thread 2

increment i (7 -> 8)

-

write back i (8)

If both threads of execution read the initial value of *i* before it is incremented, both threads will increment and save the same value. As a result, the variable *i* contains the value eight when, in fact, it should now contain nine. This is one of the simplest examples of a critical region. Thankfully, the solution is equally as simple: We merely need a way to perform these operations in one indivisible step. Most processors provide an instruction to atomically read, increment, and write back a single variable. Using this *atomic instruction*, the only possible outcome is

### Thread 1

increment i (7 -> 8)

-

### Thread 2

increment i (8 -> 9)

Or:

### Thread 1

-

increment i (8 -> 9)

### Thread 2

increment i (7 -> 8)

-

It would never be possible for the two atomic operations to interleave. The processor would physically ensure that it was impossible. Using such an instruction would alleviate the problem. The kernel provides a set of interfaces that implement these atomic instructions; they are discussed in the next chapter.

## Locking

Now, let's consider a more complicated race condition that requires a more complicated solution. Assume you have a queue of requests that need to be serviced. How you implement the queue is irrelevant, but you can assume it is a linked list, where each node represents a request. Two functions manipulate the queue. One function adds a new request to the tail of the queue. Another function removes a request from the head of the queue and does something useful with the request. Various parts of the kernel invoke these two functions; thus, requests are continually being added, removed, and serviced. Manipulating the request queues certainly requires multiple instructions. If one thread attempts to read from the queue while another is in the middle of manipulating it, the reading thread will find the queue in an inconsistent state. It should be apparent the sort of damage that could occur if access to the queue could occur concurrently. Often, when the shared resource is a complex data structure, the result of a race condition is corruption of the data structure.

The previous scenario, at first, might not have a clear solution. How can you prevent one processor from reading from the queue while another processor is updating it? Although it is feasible for a particular architecture to implement simple instructions, such as arithmetic and comparison, atomically it is ludicrous for architectures to provide instructions to support the indefinitely sized critical regions that would exist in the previous example. What is needed is a way of making sure that only one thread manipulates the data structure at a time or, *locking* access to it while another thread of execution is in the marked region.

A lock provides such a mechanism; it works much like a lock on a door. Imagine the room beyond the door as the critical region. Inside the room, only one thread of execution can be present at a given time. When a thread enters the room, it locks the door behind it. When the thread is finished manipulating the shared data, it leaves the room and unlocks the door. If another thread reaches the door while it is locked, it must wait for the thread inside to exit the room and unlock the door before it can enter. Threads hold locks; locks protect data.

In the previous request queue example, a single lock could have been used to protect the queue. Whenever there was a new request to add to the queue, the thread would first obtain the lock. Then it could safely add the request to the queue and ultimately release the lock. When a thread wanted to remove a request from the queue, it too would obtain the lock. Then it could read the request and remove it from the queue. Finally, it would release the lock. Any other access to the queue would similarly need to obtain the lock. Because the lock can be held by only one thread at a time, only a single thread can manipulate the queue at a time. If a thread comes along while another thread is already updating it, the second thread has to wait for the first to release the lock before it can continue. The lock prevents concurrency and protects the queue from race conditions.

Any code that accesses the queue first needs to obtain the relevant lock. If another thread of execution comes along, the lock prevents concurrency:

### Thread 1

TRY to lock the queue

succeeded: acquired lock

access queue...

unlock the queue

...

### Thread 2

try to lock the queue

failed: waiting...

waiting...

waiting...

succeeded: acquired lock

access queue...

unlock the queue

Notice that locks are *advisory* and *voluntary*. Locks are entirely a programming construct that the programmer must take advantage of. Nothing prevents you from writing code that manipulates the fictional queue without the appropriate lock. Such a practice, of course, would eventually result in a race condition and corruption.

Locks come in various shapes and sizesLinux alone implements a handful of different locking mechanisms. The most significant difference between the various mechanisms is the behavior when the lock is *contended* (already in use)some locks simply busy wait<sup>[2]</sup>, whereas other locks put the current task to sleep until the lock becomes available. The next chapter discusses the behavior of the different locks in Linux and their interfaces.

[2] That is, spin in a tight loop, waiting for the lock to become available.

Astute readers are now screaming. The lock does not solve the problem; it simply shrinks the critical region down to just the lock and unlock code: probably much smaller, sure, but still a potential race! Fortunately, locks are implemented using atomic operations that ensure no race exists. A single instruction can verify whether the key is taken and, if not, seize it. How this is done is very architecture-specific, but almost all processors implement an atomic *test and set* instruction that tests the value of an integer and sets it to a new value only if it is zero. A value of zero means unlocked.

## What Causes Concurrency, Anyway?

In user-space, the need for synchronization stems from the fact that programs are scheduled preemptively by the will of the scheduler. Because a process can be preempted at any time and another process can be scheduled onto the processor, it is possible for a process to be involuntarily preempted in the middle of accessing a critical region. If the newly scheduled process then enters the same critical region (say, if the two processes are threads and they access the same shared memory), a race can occur. The same problem can occur with multiple single-threaded processes sharing files, or within a single program with signals, because signals can occur asynchronously. This type of concurrencywhere two things do not actually happen at the same time, but interleave with each other such that they might as wellis called *pseudo-concurrency*.

If you have a symmetrical multiprocessing machine, two processes can actually be executed in a critical region at the exact same time. That is called *true concurrency*. Although the causes and semantics of true versus pseudo concurrency are different, they both result in the same race conditions and require the same sort of protection.

The kernel has similar causes of concurrency. They are

- *Interrupts* An interrupt can occur asynchronously at almost any time, interrupting the currently executing code.
- *Softirqs and tasklets* The kernel can raise or schedule a softirq or tasklet at almost any time, interrupting the currently executing code.
- *Kernel preemption* Because the kernel is preemptive, one task in the kernel can preempt another.
- *Sleeping and synchronization with user-space* A task in the kernel can sleep and thus invoke the scheduler, resulting in the running of a new process.
- *Symmetrical multiprocessing* Two or more processors can be executing kernel code at exactly the same time.

It is important that all kernel developers understand and prepare for these causes of concurrency. It is a major bug if an interrupt occurs in the middle of code that is manipulating a resource and the interrupt handler can access the same resource. Similarly, it is a bug if kernel code can be preempted while it is accessing a shared resource. Likewise, it is a bug if code in the kernel sleeps while in the middle of a critical section. Finally, two processors should never be able to simultaneously access the same shared data. With a clear picture of what data needs protection, it is not hard to provide the locking to keep the world safe. Rather, the hard part is identifying these conditions and realizing that to prevent concurrency, you need some form of protection. Let us reiterate this point, because it is quite important. Implementing the actual locking in your code to protect shared data is not hard, especially when done early on while designing the code. The tricky part is identifying the actual shared data and the corresponding critical sections. This is why designing locking into your code from the get-go, and not as an afterthought, is of paramount importance. It can be very hard to go in, after the fact, and identify what needs locking and retrofit locking into the existing code. The result is usually not pretty, either. The moral of this is to *always* design

proper locking into your code from the beginning.

Code that is safe from concurrent access from an interrupt handler is said to be *interrupt-safe*. Code that is safe from concurrency on symmetrical multiprocessing machines is *SMP-safe*. Code that is safe from concurrency with kernel preemption is *preempt-safe*<sup>[3]</sup>. The actual mechanisms used to provide synchronization and protect against race conditions in all these cases is covered in the next chapter.

<sup>[3]</sup> You will also see that, barring a few exceptions, being SMP-safe implies being preempt-safe.

## So, How Do I Know What Needs Protecting?

Identifying what data specifically needs protection is vital. Because any data that can be accessed concurrently probably needs protection, it is often easier to identify what data does *not* need protection and work from there. Obviously, any data that is local to one particular thread of execution does not need protection, because only that thread can access the data. For example, local automatic variables (and dynamically allocated data structures whose address is stored only on the stack) do not need any sort of locking because they exist solely on the stack of the executing thread. Likewise, data that is accessed by only a specific task does not require locking (because a process can execute on only one processor at a time).

What does need locking? Most global kernel data structures do. A good rule of thumb is that if another thread of execution can access the data, the data needs some sort of locking; if anyone else can see it, lock it. Remember to lock *data*, not *code*.

### CONFIG Options: SMP Versus UP

Because the Linux kernel is configurable at compile-time, it makes sense that you can tailor the kernel specifically for a given machine. Most importantly, the `CONFIG_SMP` configure option controls whether the kernel supports SMP. Many locking issues disappear on uniprocessor machines; consequently, when `CONFIG_SMP` is unset, unnecessary code is not compiled into the kernel image. For example, such configuration enables uniprocessor machines to forego the overhead of spin locks. The same trick applies to `CONFIG_PREEMPT` (the configure option enabling kernel preemption). This was an excellent design decision—the kernel maintains one clean source base, and the various locking mechanisms are used as needed. Different combinations of `CONFIG_SMP` and `CONFIG_PREEMPT` on different architectures compile in varying lock support.

In your code, provide appropriate protection for the most pessimistic case, SMP with kernel preemption, and all scenarios will be covered.

Whenever you write kernel code, you should ask yourself these questions:

- Is the data global? Can a thread of execution other than the current one access it?
- Is the data shared between process context and interrupt context? Is it shared between two different interrupt handlers?
- If a process is preempted while accessing this data, can the newly scheduled process access the same data?
- Can the current process sleep (block) on anything? If it does, in what state does that leave any shared data?
- What prevents the data from being freed out from under me?
- What happens if this function is called again on another processor?

- What am I going to do about it?

In short, nearly all global and shared data in the kernel requires some form of the synchronization methods, discussed in the next chapter.

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## Deadlocks

A **deadlock** is a condition involving one or more threads of execution and one or more resources, such that each thread is waiting for one of the resources, but all the resources are already held. The threads are all waiting for each other, but they will never make any progress toward releasing the resources that they already hold. Therefore, none of the threads can continue, which means we have a deadlock.

A good analogy is a four-way traffic stop. If each car at the stop decides to wait for the other cars before going, no car will ever go and we have a traffic deadlock.

The simplest example of a deadlock is the self-deadlock<sup>[4]</sup>. If a thread of execution attempts to acquire a lock it already holds, it has to wait for the lock to be released.

<sup>[4]</sup> Some kernels prevent this type of deadlock by having recursive locks. These are locks that a single thread of execution may acquire multiple times. Linux, thankfully, does not provide recursive locks. This is usually considered a good thing. Although recursive locks might alleviate the self-deadlock problem, they very readily lead to sloppy locking semantics.

But it will never release the lock, because it is busy waiting for the lock, and the result is deadlock:

```
acquire lock  
acquire lock, again  
wait for lock to become available  
...
```

Similarly, consider  $n$  threads and  $n$  locks. If each thread holds a lock that the other thread wants, all threads block while waiting for their respective locks to become available. The most common example is with two threads and two locks, which is often called the *deadly embrace* or the *ABBA deadlock*.

Thread 1	Thread 2
acquire lock A	acquire lock B
TRY to acquire lock B	try to acquire lock A
wait for lock B	wait for lock A

Each thread is waiting for the other and neither thread will ever release its original lock; therefore, neither lock will ever become available.

Prevention of deadlock scenarios is important. Although it is difficult to prove that code is free of deadlocks, it *is* possible to write deadlock-free code. A few simple rules go a long way:

- Lock ordering is vital. Nested locks must *always* be obtained in the same order. This prevents the deadly embrace deadlock. Document the lock ordering so others will follow it.
- Prevent starvation. Ask, *does this code always finish? If too does not occur, will bar wait forever?*
- Do not double acquire the same lock.

- Complexity in your locking scheme invites deadlocks, so design for simplicity.

The first point is important, and worth stressing. If two or more locks are ever acquired at the same time, they must *always* be acquired in the same order. Let's assume you have the *cat*, *dog*, and *fox* lock that protect data structures of the same name. Now assume you have a function that needs to work on all three of these data structures simultaneously perhaps to copy data between them. Whatever the case, the data structures require locking to ensure safe access. If one function acquires the locks in the order *cat*, *dog*, and then *fox*, then every other function must obtain these locks (or a subset of them) in this same order. For example, it is a potential deadlock (and hence a bug) to first obtain the *fox* lock, and then obtain the *dog* lock (because the *dog* lock must always be acquired prior to the *fox* lock). Once more, here is an example where this would cause a deadlock:

#### Thread 1

```
acquire lock cat  
acquire lock dog  
try to acquire lock fox  
wait for lock fox
```

#### Thread 2

```
acquire lock fox  
try to acquire lock dog  
wait for lock dog  
-
```

Thread one is waiting for the *fox* lock, which thread two holds, while thread two is waiting for the *dog* lock, which thread one holds. Neither ever releases its lock and hence both wait foreverbam, deadlock. If the locks were always obtained in the same order, a deadlock in this manner would not be possible.

Whenever locks are nested within other locks, a specific ordering must be obeyed. It is good practice to place the ordering in a comment above the lock. Something like the following is a good idea:

```
/*  
 * cat_lock - always obtain before the dog lock  
 */
```

Note that the order of *unlock* does not matter with respect to deadlock, although it is common practice to release the locks in an order inverse to that in which they were acquired.

Preventing deadlocks is very important. The Linux kernel has some basic debugging facilities for detecting deadlock scenarios in a running kernel. These features are discussed in the next chapter.

## Contention and Scalability

The term *lock contention*, or simply *contention*, is used to describe a lock that is currently in use, but that another thread is trying to acquire. A lock that is *highly contended* often has threads waiting to acquire it. High contention can occur because a lock is frequently obtained, held for a long time, or both. Because a lock's job is to serialize access to a resource, it comes as no surprise that locks can slow down a system's performance. A highly contended lock can become a bottleneck in the system, quickly limiting its performance. Of course, the locks are also required to prevent the system from tearing itself to shreds, so a solution to high contention must continue to provide the necessary concurrency protection.

*Scalability* is a measurement of how well a system can be expanded. In operating systems, we talk of the scalability with a large number of processes, a large number of processors, or large amounts of memory. We can discuss scalability in relation to virtually any component of a computer to which we can attach a quantity. Ideally, doubling the number of processors should result in a doubling of the system's processor performance. This, of course, is never the case.

The scalability of Linux on a large number of processors has increased dramatically in the time since multiprocessing support was introduced in the 2.0 kernel. In the early days of Linux multiprocessing support, only one task could execute in the kernel at a time. During 2.2, this limitation was removed as the locking mechanisms grew more fine-grained. Through 2.4 and onward, kernel locking became even finer grained. Today, in the 2.6 Linux kernel, kernel locking is very fine-grained and scalability is very good.

The granularity of locking is a description of the size or amount of data that a lock protects. A very coarse lock protects a large amount of data for example, an entire subsystem's set of data structures. On the other hand, a very fine-grained lock protects a very small amount of data say, only a single element in a larger structure. In reality, most locks fall somewhere in between these two extremes, protecting neither an entire subsystem nor an individual element, but perhaps a single structure or list of structures. Most locks start off fairly coarse, and are made more fine-grained as lock contention proves to be a problem.

One example of evolving to finer-grained locking is the scheduler runqueues, discussed in [Chapter 4](#), "Process Scheduling." In 2.4 and prior kernels, the scheduler had a single runqueue (recall, a runqueue is the list of runnable processes). In 2.6, the O(1) scheduler introduced per-processor runqueues, each with a unique lock. The locking evolved from a single global lock to separate locks for each processor. This was an important optimization, because the runqueue lock was highly contended on large machines, essentially serializing the entire scheduling process down to a single processor executing in the scheduler at a time.

Generally, this scalability improvement is a very good thing because it improves Linux's performance on larger and more powerful systems. Rampant scalability "improvements" can lead to a decrease in performance on smaller SMP and UP machines, however, because smaller machines may not need such fine-grained locking, but will nonetheless have to put up with the increased complexity and overhead. Consider a linked list. An initial locking scheme would provide a single lock for the entire list. In time, this single lock might prove to be a scalability bottleneck on very large multiprocessor machines that frequently access this linked list. In response, the single lock could be broken up into one lock per node in the linked list. For each node that you wanted to read or write, you obtained the node's unique lock. Now there is only lock contention when multiple processors are accessing the same exact node. What if there is still lock contention, however? Do you provide a lock for each element in each node? Each bit of each element? The answer is *no*. Seriously, even though this very fine-grained locking might ensure excellent scalability on very large SMP machines, how does it perform on dual processor machines? The overhead of all those extra locks is wasted if a dual processor machine does not see significant lock contention to begin with.

Nonetheless, scalability is an important consideration. Designing your locking from the beginning to scale well is important. Coarse locking of major resources can easily become a bottleneck on even small machines. There is a thin line between too-coarse locking and too-fine locking. Locking that is too coarse results in poor scalability if there is high lock contention, whereas locking that is too fine results in wasteful overhead if there is little lock contention. Both scenarios equate to poor performance. *Start simple and grow in complexity only as needed. Simplicity is key.*

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## Locking and Your Code

Making your code SMP-safe is not something that can be added as an afterthought. Proper synchronization locking that is free of deadlocks, scalable, and clean requires design decisions from start through finish. Whenever you write kernel code, whether it is a new system call or a rewritten driver, protecting data from concurrent access needs to be a primary concern.

Provide sufficient protection for every scenario SMP, kernel preemption, and so on and rest assured the data will be safe on any given machine and configuration. The next chapter discusses just how to do this.

With the fundamentals and the theories of synchronization, concurrency, and locking behind us, let's now dive into the actual tools that the Linux kernel provides to ensure that your code is race and deadlock free.

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## Chapter 9. Kernel Synchronization Methods

The previous chapter discussed the sources of and solutions to race conditions. Thankfully, the Linux kernel implements a large family of synchronization methods. This chapter discusses these methods and their interface, behavior, and use. These methods enable kernel developers to write efficient race-free code.

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## Atomic Operations

Atomic operations provide instructions that execute *atomically* without interruption. Just as the atom was originally thought to be an indivisible particle, atomic operators are indivisible instructions. For example, as discussed in the previous chapter, an atomic increment can read and increment a variable by one in a single indivisible and uninterruptible step. Instead of the race discussed in the previous chapter, the outcome is always similar to the following (assume `i` is initially seven):

Thread 1

atomic increment i (7 -> 8)

-

Thread 2

atomic increment i (8 -> 9)

The resulting value, nine, is correct. It is never possible for the two atomic operations to occur on the same variable concurrently. Therefore, it is not possible for the increments to race.

The kernel provides two sets of interfaces for atomic operations—one that operates on integers and another that operates on individual bits. These interfaces are implemented on every architecture that Linux supports. Most architectures either directly support simple atomic operations or provide an operation to lock the memory bus for a single operation (and thus ensure another operation cannot occur simultaneously). Architectures that cannot easily support primitive atomic operations, such as SPARC, somehow cope. (The only atomic instruction that is guaranteed to exist on all SPARC machines is `ldstub`.)

## Atomic Integer Operations

The atomic integer methods operate on a special data type, `atomic_t`. This special type is used, as opposed to having the functions work directly on the C `int` type, for a couple of reasons. First, having the atomic functions accept only the `atomic_t` type ensures that the atomic operations are used only with these special types. Likewise, it also ensures that the data types are not passed to any other nonatomic functions. Indeed, what good would atomic operations be if they were not consistently used on the data? Next, the use of `atomic_t` ensures the compiler does not (erroneously but cleverly) optimize access to the value—it is important the atomic operations receive the correct memory address and not an alias. Finally, use of `atomic_t` can hide any architecture-specific differences in its implementation.

Despite being an integer, and thus 32 bits on all of the machines that Linux supports, developers and their code once had to assume that an `atomic_t` was no larger than 24 bits in size. The SPARC port in Linux has an odd implementation of atomic operations: A lock was embedded in the lower 8 bits of the 32-bit `int` (it looked like [Figure 9.1](#)). The lock was used to protect concurrent access to the atomic type because the SPARC architecture lacks appropriate support at the instruction level. Consequently, only 24 usable bits were available on SPARC machines. Although code that assumed that the full 32-bit range existed would work on other machines, it would have failed in strange and subtle ways on SPARC machines—and that is just rude. Recently, clever hacks have allowed SPARC to provide a fully usable 32-bit `atomic_t`, and this limitation is no more. The old 24-bit implementation is still used by some internal SPARC code, however, and lives in SPARC's `<asm/atomic.h>`.

**Figure 9.1. Old layout of the 32-bit `atomic_t` on SPARC.**



The declarations needed to use the atomic integer operations are in [`<asm/atomic.h>`](#). Some architectures provide additional methods that are unique to that architecture, but all architectures provide at least a minimum set of operations that are used throughout the kernel. When you write kernel code, you can ensure that these operations are correctly implemented on all architectures.

Defining an `atomic_t` is done in the usual manner. Optionally, you can set it to an initial value:

```
atomic_t v;           /* define v */  
atomic_t u = ATOMIC_INIT(0); /* define u and initialize it to zero */
```

Operations are all simple:

```
atomic_set(&v, 4); /* v = 4 (atomically) */  
atomic_add(2, &v); /* v = v + 2 = 6 (atomically) */  
atomic_inc(&v);   /* v = v + 1 = 7 (atomically) */
```

If you ever need to convert an `atomic_t` to an `int`, use `atomic_read()`:

```
printf("%d\n", atomic_read(&v)); /* will print "7" */
```

A common use of the atomic integer operations is to implement counters. Protecting a sole counter with a complex locking scheme is silly, so instead developers use `atomic_inc()` and `atomic_dec()`, which are much lighter in weight.

Another use of the atomic integer operators is atomically performing an operation and testing the result. A common example is the atomic decrement and test:

```
int atomic_dec_and_test(atomic_t *v)
```

This function decrements by one the given atomic value. If the result is zero, it returns true; otherwise, it returns false. A full listing of the standard atomic integer operations (those found on all architectures) is in [Table 9.1](#). All the operations implemented on a specific architecture can be found in [`<asm/atomic.h>`](#).

**Table 9.1. Full Listing of Atomic Integer Operations**

Atomic Integer Operation	Description
ATOMIC_INIT(int i)	At declaration, initialize an <code>atomic_t</code> to <i>i</i>
int atomic_read( <code>atomic_t</code> *v)	Atomically read the integer value of <i>v</i>
void atomic_set( <code>atomic_t</code> *v, int i)	Atomically set <i>v</i> equal to <i>i</i>
void atomic_add(int i, <code>atomic_t</code> *v)	Atomically add <i>i</i> to <i>v</i>
void atomic_sub(int i, <code>atomic_t</code> *v)	Atomically subtract <i>i</i> from <i>v</i>
void atomic_inc( <code>atomic_t</code> *v)	Atomically add one to <i>v</i>
void atomic_dec( <code>atomic_t</code> *v)	Atomically subtract one from <i>v</i>
int atomic_sub_and_test(int i, <code>atomic_t</code> *v)	Atomically subtract <i>i</i> from <i>v</i> and return true if the result is zero; otherwise false
int atomic_add_negative(int i, <code>atomic_t</code> *v)	Atomically add <i>i</i> to <i>v</i> and return true if the result is negative; otherwise false
int atomic_dec_and_test( <code>atomic_t</code> *v)	Atomically decrement <i>v</i> by one and return true if zero; false otherwise
int atomic_inc_and_test( <code>atomic_t</code> *v)	Atomically increment <i>v</i> by one and return true if the result is zero; false otherwise

The atomic operations are typically implemented as inline functions with inline assembly (apparently, kernel developers like inlines). In the case where a specific function is inherently atomic, the given function is usually just a macro. For example, on most sane architectures, a word-sized read is always atomic. That is, a read of a single word cannot complete in the middle of a write to that word. The read will always return the word in a consistent state, either before or after the write completes, but never in the middle. Consequently, `atomic_read()` is usually just a macro returning the integer value of the `atomic_t`.

## Atomicity Versus Ordering

The preceding discussion on atomic reading begs a discussion on the differences between atomicity and ordering. As discussed, a word-sized read will always occur atomically. It will never interleave with a write to the same word; the read will always return the word in a consistent state perhaps before the write completed, perhaps after, but never during. For example, if an integer is initially 42 and then set to 365, a read on the integer will always return 42 or 365 and never some commingling of the two values. This is *atomicity*.

It might be that your code wants something more than this, perhaps for the read to always occur *before* the pending write. This is *not* atomicity, but *ordering*. Atomicity ensures that instructions occur without interruption and that they complete either in their entirety or not at all. Ordering, on the other hand, ensures that the desired order of two or more instructionseven if they are to occur in separate threads of execution or even separate processorsis preserved.

The atomic operations discussed in this section guarantee only atomicity. Ordering is enforced via *barrier operations*, which we will discuss later in this chapter.

In your code, it is usually preferred to choose atomic operations over more complicated locking mechanisms. On most architectures, one or two atomic operations incur less overhead and less cache-line thrashing than a more complicated synchronization method. As with any performance-sensitive code, however, testing multiple approaches is always smart.

## Atomic Bitwise Operations

In addition to atomic integer operations, the kernel also provides a family of functions that operate at the bit level. Not surprisingly, they are architecture specific and defined in [`<asm/bitops.h>`](#).

What may be surprising is that the bitwise functions operate on generic memory addresses. The arguments are a pointer and a bit number. Bit zero is the least significant bit of the given address. On 32-bit machines, bit 31 is the most significant bit and bit 32 is the least significant bit of the following word. There are no limitations on the bit number supplied, although most uses of the functions provide a word and, consequently, a bit number between 0 and 31 (or 63, on 64-bit machines).

Because the functions operate on a generic pointer, there is no equivalent of the atomic integer's `atomic_t` type. Instead, you can work with a pointer to whatever data you desire. Consider an example:

```
unsigned long word = 0;

set_bit(0, &word); /* bit zero is now set (atomically) */
set_bit(1, &word); /* bit one is now set (atomically) */
printf("%ul\n", word); /* will print "3" */
clear_bit(1, &word); /* bit one is now unset (atomically) */
change_bit(0, &word); /* bit zero is flipped; now it is unset (atomically) */

/* atomically sets bit zero and returns the previous value (zero) */
if (test_and_set_bit(0, &word)) {
    /* never true */
}

/* the following is legal; you can mix atomic bit instructions with normal C */
word = 7;
```

A listing of the standard atomic bit operations is in [Table 9.2](#).

**Table 9.2. Listing of Atomic Bitwise Operations**

Atomic Bitwise Operation	Description
void set_bit(int nr, void *addr)	Atomically set the <i>nr-th</i> bit starting from <i>addr</i>
void clear_bit(int nr, void *addr)	Atomically clear the <i>nr-th</i> bit starting from <i>addr</i>
void change_bit(int nr, void *addr)	Atomically flip the value of the <i>nr-th</i> bit starting from <i>addr</i>
int test_and_set_bit(int nr, void *addr)	Atomically set the <i>nr-th</i> bit starting from <i>addr</i> and return the previous value
int test_and_clear_bit(int nr, void *addr)	Atomically clear the <i>nr-th</i> bit starting from <i>addr</i> and return the previous value
int test_and_change_bit(int nr, void *addr)	Atomically flip the <i>nr-th</i> bit starting from <i>addr</i> and return the previous value
int test_bit(int nr, void *addr)	Atomically return the value of the <i>nr-th</i> bit starting from <i>addr</i>

Conveniently, nonatomic versions of all the bitwise functions are also provided. They behave identically to their atomic siblings, except they do not guarantee atomicity and their names are prefixed with double underscores. For example, the nonatomic form of `test_bit()` is `__test_bit()`. If you do not require atomicity (say, for example, because a lock already protects your data), these variants of the bitwise functions might be faster.

## What the Heck Is a Non-Atomic Bit Operation?

On first glance, the concept of a non-atomic bit operation may not make any sense. Only a single bit is involved, thus there is no possibility of inconsistency. So long as one of the operations succeeds, what else could matter? Sure, *ordering* might be important, but we are talking about *atomicity* here. At the end of the day, if the bit has a value that was provided by any of the instructions, we should be good to go, right?

Let's jump back to just what atomicity means. Atomicity means that either instructions succeed in their entirety, uninterrupted, or instructions fail to execute at all. Therefore, if you issue two atomic bit operations, you expect two operations to succeed. Sure, the bit needs to have a consistent and correct value (the specified value from the last successful operation, as suggested in the previous paragraph). Moreover, however, if the other operations succeed, then at some point in time the bit needs to have those intermediate values, too.

For example, assume you issue two atomic bit operations: Initially set the bit and then clear the bit. Without atomic operations, the bit may end up cleared, but it may *never* have been set. The set operation could occur simultaneously with the clear operation and fail. The clear operation would succeed, and the bit would emerge cleared as intended. With atomic operations, however, the set would actually occur there would be a moment in time when a read would show the bit as set and then the clear would execute and the bit be zero.

This behavior might be important, especially when ordering comes into play.

The kernel also provides routines to find the first set (or unset) bit starting at a given address:

```
int find_first_bit(unsigned long *addr, unsigned int size)
int find_first_zero_bit(unsigned long *addr, unsigned int size)
```

Both functions take a pointer as their first argument and the number of bits in total to search as their second. They return the bit number of the first set or first unset bit, respectively. If your code is searching only a word, the routines [\\_ffs\(\)](#) and [ffz\(\)](#), which take a single parameter of the word in which to search, are optimal.

Unlike the atomic integer operations, code typically has no choice whether to use the bitwise operations they are the only portable way to set a specific bit. The only question is whether to use the atomic or nonatomic variants. If your code is inherently safe from race conditions, you can use the nonatomic versions, which might be faster depending on the architecture.

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## Spin Locks

Although it would be nice if every critical region consisted of code that did nothing more complicated than incrementing a variable, reality is much crueler. In real life, critical regions can span multiple functions. For example, it is often the case that data must be removed from one structure, formatted and parsed, and added to another structure. This entire operation must occur atomically; it must not be possible for other code to read from or write to either structure before its update is done. Because simple atomic operations are clearly incapable of providing the needed protection in such a complex scenario, a more general method of synchronization is neededlocks.

The most common lock in the Linux kernel is the *spin lock*. A spin lock is a lock that can be held by at most one thread of execution. If a thread of execution attempts to acquire a spin lock while it is *contended* (already held), the thread busy loops spinning waiting for the lock to become available. If the lock is not contended, the thread can immediately acquire the lock and continue. The spinning prevents more than one thread of execution from entering the critical region at any one time. Note that the same lock can be used in multiple locations so all access to a given data structure, for example, can be protected and synchronized.

Going back to the door and key analogy from last chapter, spin locks are akin to sitting outside the door, waiting for the fellow inside to come out and hand you the key. If you reach the door and no one is inside, you can grab the key and enter the room. If you reach the door and someone is currently inside, you must wait outside for the key, effectively checking for its presence repeatedly. When the room is vacated, you can grab the key and go inside. Thanks to the key (read: spin lock), only one person (read: thread of execution) is allowed inside the room (read: critical region) at the same time.

The fact that a contended spin lock causes threads to spin (essentially wasting processor time) while waiting for the lock to become available is important. This behavior is the *point* of the spin lock. It is *not* wise to hold a spin lock for a long time. This is the nature of the spin lock: a lightweight single-holder lock that should be held for short durations. An alternative behavior when the lock is contended is to put the current thread to sleep and wake it up when it becomes available. Then the processor can go off and execute other code. This incurs a bit of overhead most notably the two context switches required to switch out of and back into the blocking thread, which is certainly a lot more code than the handful of lines used to implement a spin lock. Therefore, it is wise to hold spin locks for less than the duration of two context switches. Because most of us have better things to do than measure context switches, just try to hold the lock as little time as possible<sup>[1]</sup>. The next section covers [semaphores](#), which provide a lock that makes the waiting thread sleep, rather than spin, when contended.

[1] This is especially important now that the kernel is preemptive. The duration that locks are held is equivalent to the scheduling latency of the system.

Spin locks are architecture dependent and implemented in assembly. The architecture-dependent code is defined in [`<asm/spinlock.h>`](#). The actual usable interfaces are defined in [`<linux/spinlock.h>`](#). The basic use of a spin lock is

```
spinlock_t mr_lock = SPIN_LOCK_UNLOCKED;  
  
spin_lock(&mr_lock);  
/* critical region */  
spin_unlock(&mr_lock);
```

The lock can be held simultaneously by at most only one thread of execution. Consequently, only one thread is allowed in the critical region at a time. This provides the needed protection from concurrency on multiprocessor machines. On uniprocessor machines, the locks compile away and do not exist. They simply act as markers to disable and enable kernel preemption. If kernel preempt is turned off, the locks compile away entirely.

## Warning: Spin Locks Are Not Recursive!

Unlike spin lock implementations in other operating systems and threading libraries, the Linux kernel's spin locks are not recursive. This means that if you attempt to acquire a lock you already hold, you will spin, waiting for yourself to release the lock. But because you are busy spinning, you will never release the lock and you will deadlock. Be careful!

Spin locks can be used in interrupt handlers, whereas semaphores cannot be used because they sleep. If a lock is used in an interrupt handler, you must also disable local interrupts (interrupt requests on the current processor) before obtaining the lock. Otherwise, it is possible for an interrupt handler to interrupt kernel code while the lock is held and attempt to reacquire the lock. The interrupt handler spins, waiting for the lock to become available. The lock holder, however, does not run until the interrupt handler completes. This is an example of the double-acquire deadlock discussed in the previous chapter. Note that you need to disable interrupts only on the *current* processor. If an interrupt occurs on a different processor, and it spins on the same lock, it does not prevent the lock holder (which is on a different processor) from eventually releasing the lock.

The kernel provides an interface that conveniently disables interrupts and acquires the lock. Usage is

```
spinlock_t mr_lock = SPIN_LOCK_UNLOCKED;  
unsigned long flags;  
  
spin_lock_irqsave(&mr_lock, flags);  
/* critical region ... */  
spin_unlock_irqrestore(&mr_lock, flags);
```

The routine `spin_lock_irqsave()` saves the current state of interrupts, disables them locally, and then obtains the given lock. Conversely, `spin_unlock_irqrestore()` unlocks the given lock and returns interrupts to their previous state. This way, if interrupts were initially disabled, your code would not erroneously enable them, but instead keep them disabled. Note that the `flags` variable is seemingly passed by value. This is because the lock routines are implemented partially as macros.

On uniprocessor systems, the previous example must still disable interrupts to prevent an interrupt handler from accessing the shared data, but the lock mechanism is compiled away. The lock and unlock also disable and enable kernel preemption, respectively.

## What Do I Lock?

It is important that each lock is clearly associated with what it is locking. More importantly, it is important that you protect *data* and not *code*. Despite the examples in this chapter explaining the importance of protecting the critical sections, it is the actual data inside that needs protection and not the code.

Big Fat Rule: Locks that simply wrap code regions are hard to understand and prone to race conditions. Lock data, not code.

Rather than lock code, always associate your shared data with a specific lock. For example, "the `struct foo` is locked by `foo_lock`." Whenever you access the data, make sure it is safe. Most likely, this means obtaining the appropriate lock before manipulating the data and releasing the lock when finished.

If you always know before the fact that interrupts are initially enabled, there is no need to restore their previous state. You can unconditionally enable them on unlock. In those cases, `spin_lock_irq()` and `spin_unlock_irq()` are optimal:

```
spinlock_t mr_lock = SPIN_LOCK_UNLOCKED;  
  
spin_lock_irq(&mr_lock);  
/* critical section ... */  
spin_unlock_irq(&mr_lock);
```

As the kernel grows in size and complexity, it is increasingly hard to ensure that interrupts are always enabled in any given code path in the kernel. Use of `spin_lock_irq()` therefore is not recommended. If you do use it, you had better be positive that interrupts were originally on or people will be upset when they expect interrupts to be off but find them on!

## Debugging Spin Locks

The configure option `CONFIG_DEBUG_SPINLOCK` enables a handful of debugging checks in the spin lock code. For example, with this option the spin lock code checks for the use of uninitialized spin locks and unlocking a lock that is not yet locked. When testing your code, you should always run with spin lock debugging enabled.

## Other Spin Lock Methods

The method `spin_lock_init()` can be used to initialize a dynamically created spin lock (a `spinlock_t` that you do not have a direct reference to, just a pointer).

The method `spin_trylock()` attempts to obtain the given spin lock. If the lock is contended, rather than spin and wait for the lock to be released, the function immediately returns zero. If it succeeds in obtaining the lock, it returns nonzero. Similarly, `spin_is_locked()` returns nonzero if the given lock is currently acquired. Otherwise, it returns zero. In neither case does this function actually obtain the lock.<sup>[2]</sup>

[2] Use of these two functions can lead to gross code. You should not frequently have to check the values of spin locks; your code should either always acquire the lock itself or always be called while the lock is already held. Some legitimate uses do exist, however, so these interfaces are provided.

See [Table 9.3](#) for a complete list of the standard spin lock methods.

**Table 9.3. Listing of Spin Lock Methods**

Method	Description
<code>spin_lock()</code>	Acquires given lock
<code>spin_lock_irq()</code>	Disables local interrupts and acquires given lock

Method	Description
<code>spin_lock_irqsave()</code>	Saves current state of local interrupts, disables local interrupts, and acquires given lock
<code>spin_unlock()</code>	Releases given lock
<code>spin_unlock_irq()</code>	Releases given lock and enables local interrupts
<code>spin_unlock_irqrestore()</code>	Releases given lock and restores local interrupts to given previous state
<code>spin_lock_init()</code>	Dynamically initializes given <code>spinlock_t</code>
<code>spin_trylock()</code>	Tries to acquire given lock; if unavailable, returns nonzero
<code>spin_is_locked()</code>	Returns nonzero if the given lock is currently acquired, otherwise it returns zero

## Spin Locks and Bottom Halves

As mentioned in [Chapter 7](#), "Bottom Halves and Deferring Work," certain locking precautions must be taken when working with bottom halves. The function `spin_lock_bh()` obtains the given lock and disables all bottom halves. The function `spin_unlock_bh()` performs the inverse.

Because a bottom half may preempt process context code, if data is shared between a bottom half process context, you must protect the data in process context with both a lock and the disabling of bottom halves. Likewise, because an interrupt handler may preempt a bottom half, if data is shared between an interrupt handler and a bottom half, you must both obtain the appropriate lock and disable interrupts.

Recall that two tasklets of the same type do not ever run simultaneously. Thus, there is no need to protect data used only within a single type of tasklet. If the data is shared between two different tasklets, however, you must obtain a normal spin lock before accessing the data in the bottom half. You do not need to disable bottom halves because a tasklet never preempts another running tasklet on the same processor.

With softirqs, regardless of whether it is the same softirq type or not, if data is shared by softirqs it must be protected with a lock. Recall that softirqs, even two of the same type, may run simultaneously on multiple processors in the system. A softirq will never preempt another softirq running on the same processor, however, so disabling bottom halves is not needed.

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## Reader-Writer Spin Locks

Sometimes, lock usage can be clearly divided into readers and writers. For example, consider a list that is both updated and searched. When the list is updated (written to), it is important that no other threads of execution concurrently write to or read from the list. Writing demands mutual exclusion. On the other hand, when the list is searched (read from), it is only important that nothing else write to the list. Multiple concurrent readers are safe so long as there are no writers. The task list's access patterns (discussed in [Chapter 3](#), "Process Management") fit this description. Not surprisingly, the task list is protected by a reader-writer spin lock.

When a data structure is neatly split into reader/writer paths like this, it makes sense to use a locking mechanism that provides similar semantics. In this case, Linux provides reader-writer spin locks. Reader-writer spin locks provide separate reader and writer variants of the lock. One or more readers can concurrently hold the reader lock. The writer lock, conversely, can be held by at most one writer with no concurrent readers. Reader/writer locks are sometimes called *shared/exclusive* or *concurrent/exclusive locks* because the lock is available in a shared (for readers) and an exclusive (for writers) form.

Usage is similar to spin locks. The reader-writer spin lock is initialized via

```
rwlock_t mr_rwlock = RW_LOCK_UNLOCKED;
```

Then, in the reader code path:

```
read_lock(&mr_rwlock);
/* critical section (read only) ... */
read_unlock(&mr_rwlock);
```

Finally, in the writer code path:

```
write_lock(&mr_rwlock);
/* critical section (read and write) ... */
write_unlock(&mr_rwlock);
```

Normally, the readers and writers are in entirely separate code paths, such as in this example.

Note that you cannot "upgrade" a read lock to a write lock. This code

```
read_lock(&mr_rwlock);
write_lock(&mr_rwlock);
```

deadlocks as the write lock spins, waiting for all readers to release the lock including yourself. If you ever need to write, obtain the write lock from the very start. If the line between your readers and writers is muddled, it might be an indication that you do not need to use reader-writer locks. In that case, a normal spin lock is optimal.

It is safe for multiple readers to obtain the same lock. In fact, it is safe for the same thread to recursively obtain the same read lock. This lends itself to a useful and common optimization. If you have only readers in interrupt handlers but no writers, you can mix use of the "interrupt disabling" locks. You can use `read_lock()` instead of `read_lock_irqsave()` for reader protection. You still need to disable interrupts for write access, a la `write_lock_irqsave()`, otherwise a reader in an interrupt could deadlock on the held write lock. See [Table 9.4](#) for a full listing of the reader-writer spin lock methods.

**Table 9.4. Listing of Reader-Writer Spin Lock Methods**

<b>Method</b>	<b>Description</b>
<code>read_lock()</code>	Acquires given lock for reading
<code>read_lock_irq()</code>	Disables local interrupts and acquires given lock for reading
<code>read_lock_irqsave()</code>	Saves the current state of local interrupts, disables local interrupts, and acquires the given lock for reading
<code>read_unlock()</code>	Releases given lock for reading
<code>read_unlock_irq()</code>	Releases given lock and enables local interrupts
<code>read_unlock_irqrestore()</code>	Releases given lock and restores local interrupts to the given previous state
<code>write_lock()</code>	Acquires given lock for writing
<code>write_lock_irq()</code>	Disables local interrupts and acquires the given lock for writing
<code>write_lock_irqsave()</code>	Saves current state of local interrupts, disables local interrupts, and acquires the given lock for writing
<code>write_unlock()</code>	Releases given lock
<code>write_unlock_irq()</code>	Releases given lock and enables local interrupts
<code>write_unlock_irqrestore()</code>	Releases given lock and restores local interrupts to given previous state
<code>write_trylock()</code>	Tries to acquire given lock for writing; if unavailable, returns nonzero
<code>rw_lock_init()</code>	Initializes given <code>rwlock_t</code>
<code>rw_is_locked()</code>	Returns nonzero if the given lock is currently acquired, or else it returns zero

A final important consideration in using the Linux reader-writer spin locks is that they favor readers over writers. If the read lock is held and a writer is waiting for exclusive access, readers that attempt to acquire the lock will continue to succeed. The spinning writer does not acquire the lock until all readers release the lock. Therefore, a sufficient number of readers can starve pending writers. This is important to keep in mind when designing your locking.

Spin locks provide a very quick and simple lock. The spinning behavior is optimal for short hold times and code that cannot sleep (interrupt handlers, for example). In cases where the sleep time might be long or you potentially need to sleep while holding the lock, the semaphore is a solution.

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## Semaphores

Semaphores in Linux are sleeping locks. When a task attempts to acquire a semaphore that is already held, the semaphore places the task onto a wait queue and puts the task to sleep. The processor is then free to execute other code. When the processes [3] holding the semaphore release the lock, one of the tasks on the wait queue is awakened so that it can then acquire the semaphore.

[3] As you will see, multiple processes can simultaneously hold a semaphore, if desired.

Let's jump back to the door and key analogy. When a person reaches the door, he can grab the key and enter the room. The big difference lies in what happens when another dude reaches the door and the key is not available. In this case, instead of spinning, the fellow puts his name on a list and takes a nap. When the person inside the room leaves, he checks the list at the door. If anyone's name is on the list, he goes over to the first name and gives him a playful jab in the chest, waking him up and allowing him to enter the room. In this manner, the key (read: semaphore) continues to ensure that there is only one person (read: thread of execution) inside the room (read: critical region) at one time. If the room is occupied, instead of spinning, the person puts his name on a list (read: wait queue) and takes a nap (read: blocks on the wait queue and goes to sleep), allowing the processor to go off and execute other code. This provides better processor utilization than spin locks because there is no time spent busy looping, but semaphores have much greater overhead than spin locks. Life is always a trade-off.

You can draw some interesting conclusions from the sleeping behavior of semaphores:

- Because the contending tasks sleep while waiting for the lock to become available, semaphores are well suited to locks that are held for a long time.
- Conversely, semaphores are not optimal for locks that are held for very short periods because the overhead of sleeping, maintaining the wait queue, and waking back up can easily outweigh the total lock hold time.
- Because a thread of execution sleeps on lock contention, semaphores can be obtained only in process context because interrupt context is not schedulable.
- You can (although you may not want to) sleep while holding a semaphore because you will not deadlock when another process acquires the same semaphore. (It will just go to sleep and eventually let you continue.)
- You cannot hold a spin lock while you acquire a semaphore, because you might have to sleep while waiting for the semaphore, and you cannot sleep while holding a spin lock.

These facts highlight the uses of semaphores versus spin locks. In most uses of semaphores, there is little choice as to what lock to use. If your code needs to sleep, which is often the case when synchronizing with user-space, semaphores are the sole solution. It is often easier, if not necessary, to use semaphores because they allow you the flexibility of sleeping. When you do have a choice, the decision between semaphore and spin lock should be based on lock hold time. Ideally, all your locks should be held as briefly as possible. With semaphores, however, longer lock hold times are more acceptable. Additionally, unlike spin locks, semaphores do not disable kernel preemption and, consequently, code holding a semaphore can be preempted. This means semaphores do not adversely affect scheduling latency.

A final useful feature of semaphores is that they can allow for an arbitrary number of simultaneous lock holders. Whereas spin locks permit at most one task to hold the lock at a time, the number of permissible simultaneous holders of semaphores can be set at declaration time. This value is called the *usage count* or simply the *count*. The most common value is to allow, like spin locks, only one lock holder at a time. In this case, the count is equal to one and the semaphore is called either a *binary semaphore* (because it is either held by one task or not held at all) or a *mutex* (because it enforces mutual exclusion). Alternatively, the count can be initialized to a nonzero value greater than one. In this case, the semaphore is called a *counting semaphore*, and it allows at most *count* holders of the lock at a time. Counting semaphores are not used to enforce mutual exclusion because they allow multiple threads of execution in the critical region at once. Instead, they are used to enforce limits in certain code. They are not used much in the kernel. If you use a semaphore, you almost assuredly want to use a mutex (a semaphore with a count of one).

Semaphores were formalized by Edsger Wybe Dijkstra [4] in 1968 as a generalized locking mechanism. A semaphore supports two atomic operations, *P()* and *V()*, named after the Dutch word *Proberen*, to test (literally, to probe), and the Dutch word *Verhogen*, to increment. Later systems called these methods *down()* and *up()*, respectively, and so does Linux. The *down()* method is used to acquire a

semaphore by decrementing the count by one. If the new count is zero or greater, the lock is acquired and the task can enter the critical region. If the count is negative, the task is placed on a wait queue and the processor moves on to something else. These names are used as verbs: You *down* a semaphore to acquire it. The *up()* method is used to release a semaphore upon completion of a critical region. This is called *upping* the semaphore. The method increments the count value; if the semaphore's wait queue is not empty, one of the waiting tasks is awakened and allowed to acquire the semaphore.

[<sup>4</sup>] Dr. Dijkstra (1930-2002) is one of the most accomplished computer scientists in the (admittedly brief) history of computer scientists. His numerous contributions include work in OS design, algorithm theory, and the concept of semaphores. He was born in Rotterdam, The Netherlands, and taught at the University of Texas for 15 years. He is probably not happy with the large number of GOTO statements in the Linux kernel, however.

## Creating and Initializing Semaphores

The semaphore implementation is architecture dependent and defined in `<asm/semaphore.h>`. The `struct semaphore` type represents semaphores. Statically declared semaphores are created via

```
static DECLARE_SEMAPHORE_GENERIC(name, count)
```

where `name` is the variable's name and `count` is the usage count of the semaphore. As a shortcut to create the more common mutex, use

```
static DECLARE_MUTEX(name);
```

where, again, `name` is the variable name of the semaphore. More frequently, semaphores are created dynamically, often as part of a larger structure. In this case, to initialize a dynamically created semaphore to which you have only an indirect pointer reference, use

```
sema_init(sem, count);
```

where `sem` is a pointer and `count` is the usage count of the semaphore. Similarly, to initialize a dynamically created mutex, you can use

```
init_MUTEX(sem);
```

I do not know why the "mutex" in `init_MUTEX()` is capitalized or why the "init" comes first here but second in `sema_init()`. I do know, however, that it looks dumb and I apologize for the inconsistency. I hope, however, that after you've read [Chapter 7](#), the kernel's symbol naming does not shock anyone.

## Using Semaphores

The function `down_interruptible()` attempts to acquire the given semaphore. If it fails, it sleeps in the `TASK_INTERRUPTIBLE` state. Recall from [Chapter 3](#) that this process state implies that a task can be awakened with a signal, which is generally a good thing. If the task receives a signal while waiting for the semaphore, it is awakened and `down_interruptible()` returns `-EINTR`. Alternatively, the function `down()` places the task in the `TASK_UNINTERRUPTIBLE` state if it sleeps. You most likely do not want this because the process waiting for the semaphore does not respond to signals. Therefore, use of `down_interruptible()` is much more common than `down()`. Yes, again,

the naming is not ideal.

You can use `down_trylock()` to try to acquire the given semaphore with blocking. If the semaphore is already held, the function immediately returns nonzero. Otherwise, it returns zero and you successfully hold the lock.

To release a given semaphore, `callup()`. Consider an example:

```
/* define and declare a semaphore, named mr_sem, with a count of one */
static DECLARE_MUTEX(mr_sem);

/* attempt to acquire the semaphore ... */
if (down_interruptible(&mr_sem)) {
    /* signal received, semaphore not acquired ... */
}

/* critical region ... */

/* release the given semaphore */
up(&mr_sem);
```

A complete listing of the semaphore methods is in [Table 9.5](#).

**Table 9.5. Listing of Semaphore Methods**

Method	Description
<code>sema_init(struct semaphore *, int)</code>	Initializes the dynamically created semaphore to the given count
<code>init_MUTEX(struct semaphore *)</code>	Initializes the dynamically created semaphore with a count of one
<code>init_MUTEX_LOCKED(struct semaphore *)</code>	Initializes the dynamically created semaphore with a count of zero (so it is initially locked)
<code>down_interruptible(struct semaphore *)</code>	Tries to acquire the given semaphore and enter interruptible sleep if it is contended
<code>down(struct semaphore *)</code>	Tries to acquire the given semaphore and enter uninterruptible sleep if it is contended
<code>down_trylock(struct semaphore *)</code>	Tries to acquire the given semaphore and immediately return nonzero if it is contended
<code>up(struct semaphore *)</code>	Releases the given semaphore and wakes a waiting task, if any

## Reader-Writer Semaphores

Semaphores, like spin locks, also come in a reader-writer flavor. The situations where reader-writer semaphores are preferred over standard semaphores are the same as with reader-writer spin locks versus standard spin locks.

Reader-writer semaphores are represented by the `struct rw_semaphore` type, which is declared in `<linux/rwsem.h>`. Statically declared reader-writer semaphores are created via

```
static DECLARE_RWSEM(name);
```

where `name` is the declared name of the new semaphore.

Reader-writer semaphores that are created dynamically are initialized via

```
init_rwsem(struct rw_semaphore *sem)
```

All reader-writer semaphores are mutexes (that is, their usage count is one). Any number of readers can concurrently hold the read lock, so long as there are no writers. Conversely, only a sole writer (with no readers) can acquire the write variant of the lock. All reader-writer locks use uninterruptible sleep, so there is only one version of each `down()`. For example:

```
static DECLARE_RWSEM(mr_rwsem);

/* attempt to acquire the semaphore for reading ... */
down_read(&mr_rwsem);

/* critical region (read only) ... */

/* release the semaphore */
up_read(&mr_rwsem);

/* ... */

/* attempt to acquire the semaphore for writing ... */
down_write(&mr_rwsem);

/* critical region (read and write) ... */

/* release the semaphore */
up_write(&mr_sem);
```

As with semaphores, implementations of `down_read_trylock()` and `down_write_trylock()` are provided. Each has one parameter: a pointer to a reader-writer semaphore. They both return nonzero if the lock is successfully acquired and zero if it is currently contended. Be careful: For admittedly no good reason, this is the opposite of normal semaphore behavior!

Reader-writer semaphores have a unique method that their reader-writer spin lock cousins do not have: `downgrade_writer()`. This function atomically converts an acquired write lock to a read lock.

Reader-writer semaphores, as spin locks of the same nature, should not be used unless there is a clear separation between write paths and read paths in your code. Supporting the reader-writer mechanisms has a cost, and it is worthwhile only if your code naturally splits along a reader/writer boundary.

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## Spin Locks Versus Semaphores

Knowing when to use a spin lock versus a semaphore is important to writing optimal code. In many cases, however, there is little choice. Only a spin lock can be used in interrupt context, whereas only a semaphore can be held while a task sleeps. [Table 9.6](#) reviews the requirements that dictate which lock to use.

**Table 9.6. What to Use: Spin Locks Versus Semaphores**

Requirement	Recommended Lock
Low overhead locking	Spin lock is preferred
Short lock hold time	Spin lock is preferred
Long lock hold time	Semaphore is preferred
Need to lock from interrupt context	Spin lock is required
Need to sleep while holding lock	Semaphore is required

## Completion Variables

Using completion variables is an easy way to synchronize between two tasks in the kernel when one task needs to signal to the other that an event has occurred. One task waits on the completion variable while another task performs some work. When the other task has completed the work, it uses the completion variable to wake up any waiting tasks. If this sounds like a semaphore, you are rightthe idea is much the same. In fact, completion variables merely provide a simple solution to a problem whose answer is otherwise semaphores. For example, the `vfork()` system call uses completion variables to wake up the parent process when the child process execs or exits.

Completion variables are represented by the `struct completion` type, which is defined in `<linux/completion.h>`. A statically created completion variable is created and initialized via

```
DECLARE_COMPLETION(mr_comp);
```

A dynamically created completion variable is initialized via `init_completion()`.

On a given completion variable, the tasks that want to wait call `wait_for_completion()`. After the event has occurred, calling `complete()` signals all waiting tasks to wake up. [Table 9.7](#) has a listing of the completion variable methods.

**Table 9.7. Completion Variables Methods**

Method	Description
<code>init_completion(struct completion *)</code>	Initializes the given dynamically created completion variable
<code>wait_for_completion(struct completion *)</code>	Waits for the given completion variable to be signaled
<code>complete(struct completion *)</code>	Signals any waiting tasks to wake up

For sample usages of completion variables, see `kernel/sched.c` and `kernel/fork.c`. A common usage is to have a completion variable dynamically created as a member of a data structure. Kernel code waiting for the initialization of the data structure calls `wait_for_completion()`. When the initialization is complete, the waiting tasks are awakened via a call to `completion()`.

## BKL: The Big Kernel Lock

Welcome to the redheaded stepchild of the kernel. The Big Kernel Lock (BKL) is a global spin lock that was created to ease the transition from Linux's original SMP implementation to fine-grained locking. The BKL has some interesting properties:

- You can sleep while holding the BKL. The lock is automatically dropped when the task is unscheduled and reacquired when the task is rescheduled. Of course, this does not mean it is always *safe* to sleep while holding the BKL, merely that you *can* and you will not deadlock.
- The BKL is a recursive lock. A single process can acquire the lock multiple times and not deadlock, as it would with a spin lock.
- You can use the BKL only in process context.
- It is evil.

These features helped ease the transition from kernel version 2.0 to 2.2. When SMP support was introduced in kernel version 2.0, only one task could be in the kernel at a time. (Of course, now the kernel is quite finely threaded we have come a long way.) A goal of 2.2 was to allow multiple processors to execute in the kernel concurrently. The BKL was introduced to help ease the transition to finer grained locking. It was a great aide then; now it is a scalability burden<sup>[5]</sup>.

[5] It may not be as terrible as some make it out to be; some people believe it to be the kernel incarnation of the devil.

Use of the BKL is discouraged. In fact, new code should never introduce locking that uses the BKL. The lock is still fairly well used in parts of the kernel, however. Therefore, understanding the BKL and its interfaces is important. The BKL behaves like a spin lock, with the additions previously discussed. The function `lock_kernel()` acquires the lock and the function `unlock_kernel()` releases the lock. A single thread of execution may acquire the lock recursively, but must then call `unlock_kernel()` an equal number of times to release the lock. On the last unlock call the lock will be released. The function `kernel_locked()` returns nonzero if the lock is currently held; otherwise, it returns zero. These interfaces are declared in `<linux/smp_lock.h>`. Here is sample usage:

```
lock_kernel();  
  
/*  
 * Critical section, synchronized against all other BKL users...  
 * Note, you can safely sleep here and the lock will be transparently  
 * released. When you reschedule, the lock will be transparently  
 * reacquired. This implies you will not deadlock, but you still do  
 * not want to sleep if you need the lock to protect data here!  
 */  
  
unlock_kernel();
```

The BKL also disables kernel preemption while it is held. On UP kernels, the BKL code does not actually perform any physical locking. [Table 9.8](#) has a complete list of the BKL functions.

**Table 9.8. List of BKL functions**

Function	Description
<code>lock_kernel()</code>	Acquires the BKL
<code>unlock_kernel()</code>	Releases the BKL
<code>kernel_locked()</code>	Returns nonzero if the lock is held and zero otherwise (UP always returns nonzero)

One of the major issues concerning the BKL is determining what the lock is protecting. Too often, the BKL is seemingly associated with code (for example, "it synchronizes callers to `foo()`" instead of data ("it protects the `foo` structure"). This makes replacing BKL uses with a spin lock difficult because it is not easy to determine just what is being locked. The replacement is made even harder in that the relationship between all BKL users needs to be determined.

## Seq Locks

The seq lock is a new type of lock introduced in the 2.6 kernel. It provides a very simple mechanism for reading and writing shared data. It works by maintaining a sequence counter. Whenever the data in question is written to, a lock is obtained and a sequence number is incremented. Prior to and after reading the data, the sequence number is read. If the values are the same, then a write did not begin in the middle of the read. Further, if the values are even then a write is not underway (grabbing the write lock makes the value odd, whereas releasing it makes it even because the lock starts at zero).

To define a seq lock:

```
seqlock_t mr_seq_lock = SEQLOCK_UNLOCKED;
```

The write path is then

```
write_seqlock(&mr_seq_lock);
/* write lock is obtained... */
write_sequnlock(&mr_seq_lock);
```

This looks like normal spin lock code. The oddness comes in with the read path, which is quite a bit different:

```
unsigned long seq;

do {
    seq = read_seqbegin(&mr_seq_lock);
    /* read data here ... */
} while (read_seqretry(&mr_seq_lock, seq));
```

Seq locks are useful to provide a very lightweight and scalable lock for use with many readers and a few writers. Seq locks, however, favor writers over readers. The write lock always succeeds in being obtained so long as there are no other writers. Readers do not affect the write lock, as is the case with reader-writer spin locks and semaphores. Furthermore, pending writers continually cause the read loop (the previous example) to repeat, until there are no longer any writers holding the lock.

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## Preemption Disabling

Because the kernel is preemptive, a process in the kernel can stop running at any instant to allow a process of higher priority to run. This means a task can begin running in the same critical region as a task that was preempted. To prevent this, the kernel preemption code uses spin locks as markers of nonpreemptive regions. If a spin lock is held, the kernel is not preemptive. Because the concurrency issues with kernel preemption and SMP are the same, and the kernel is already SMP-safe, this simple change makes the kernel preempt-safe, too.

Or so we hope. In reality, some situations do not require a spin lock, but do need kernel preemption disabled. The most frequent of these situations is per-processor data. If the data is unique to each processor, there may be no need to protect it with a lock because only that one processor can access the data. If no spin locks are held, the kernel is preemptive, and it would be possible for a newly scheduled task to access this same variable, as shown here:

```
task A manipulates per-procesor variable foo, which is not protected by a lock
task A is preempted
task B is scheduled
task B manipulates variable foo
task B completes
task A is rescheduled
task A continues manipulating variable foo
```

Consequently, even if this were a uniprocessor computer, the variable could be accessed pseudo-concurrently by multiple processes. Normally, this variable would require a spin lock (to prevent true concurrency on multiprocessor machines). If this were a per-processor variable, however, it might not require a lock.

To solve this, kernel preemption can be disabled via `preempt_disable()`. The call is nestable; you may call it any number of times. For each call, a corresponding call to `preempt_enable()` is required. The final corresponding call to `preempt_enable()` re-enables preemption. For example:

```
preempt_disable();
/* preemption is disabled ... */
preempt_enable();
```

The preemption count stores the number of held locks and `preempt_disable()` calls. If the number is zero, the kernel is preemptive. If the value is one or greater, the kernel is not preemptive. This count is incredibly usefulit is a great way to do atomicity and sleep debugging. The function `preempt_count()` returns this value. See [Table 9.9](#) for a listing of kernel preemptionrelated functions.

**Table 9.9. Kernel PreemptionRelated Functions**

Function	Description
preempt_disable()	Disables kernel preemption by incrementing the preemption counter
preempt_enable()	Decrement the preemption counter and check and service any pending reschedules if the count is now zero
preempt_enable_no_resched()	Enables kernel preemption but do not check for any pending reschedules
preempt_count()	Returns the preemption count

As a cleaner solution to per-processor data issues, you can obtain the processor number (which presumably is used to index into the per-processor data) via `get_cpu()`. This function disables kernel preemption prior to returning the current processor number:

```
int cpu;  
  
/* disable kernel preemption and set "cpu" to the current processor */  
cpu = get_cpu();  
/* manipulate per-processor data ... */  
  
/* reenable kernel preemption, "cpu" can change and so is no longer valid */  
put_cpu();
```

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## Ordering and Barriers

When dealing with synchronization between multiple processors or with hardware devices, it is sometimes a requirement that memory-reads (loads) and memory-writes (stores) issue in the order specified in your program code. When talking with hardware, you often need to ensure that a given read occurs before another read or write. Additionally, on symmetrical multiprocessing systems, it may be important for writes to appear in the order that your code issues them (usually to ensure subsequent reads see the data in the same order). Complicating these issues is the fact that both the compiler and the processor can reorder reads and writes<sup>[6]</sup> for performance reasons. Thankfully, all processors that do reorder reads or writes provide machine instructions to enforce ordering requirements. It is also possible to instruct the compiler not to reorder instructions around a given point. These instructions are called *barriers*.

<sup>[6]</sup> Intel x86 processors do not ever reorder writes. That is, they do not do out-of-order stores. But other processors do.

Essentially, on some processors the code

```
a = 1;  
b = 2;
```

may allow the processor to store the new value in **b** *before* it stores the new value in **a**. Both the compiler and processor see no relation between **a** and **b**. The compiler would perform this reordering at compile time; the reordering would be static, and the resulting object code would simply set **b** before **a**. The processor, however, could perform the reordering dynamically during execution by fetching and dispatching seemingly un-related instructions in whatever order it feels is best. The vast majority of the time, such reordering is optimal because there is no apparent relation between **a** and **b**. Sometimes the programmer knows best, though.

Although the previous example might be reordered, the processor would never reorder writes such as

```
a = 1;  
b = a;
```

where **a** and **b** are global, because there is clearly a data dependency between **a** and **b**. Neither the compiler nor the processor, however, know about code in other contexts. Occasionally, it is important that writes are seen by other code and the outside world in the specific order you intend. This is often the case with hardware devices, but is also common on multiprocessing machines.

The **rbm()** method provides a read memory barrier. It ensures that no loads are reordered across the **rbm()** call. That is, no loads prior to the call will be reordered to after the call and no loads after the call will be reordered to before the call.

The **wmb()** method provides a write barrier. It functions in the same manner as **smb()**, but with respect to stores instead of loads it ensures no stores are reordered across the barrier.

The **mb()** call provides both a read barrier and a write barrier. No loads or stores will be reordered across a call to **mb()**. It is provided because a single instruction (often the same instruction used by **rbm()**) can provide both the load and store barrier.

A variant of **rbm()**, **read\_barrier\_depends()**, provides a read barrier, but only for loads on which subsequent loads depend. All reads prior to the barrier are guaranteed to complete before any reads after the barrier that depend on the reads prior to the barrier. Got it? Basically, it enforces a read barrier, like **rbm()**, but only for certain readstthose that depend on each other. On some architectures, **read\_barrier\_depends()** is much quicker than **rbm()** because it is not needed and is, thus, anoop.

Let's consider an example using **mb()** and **rbm()**. The initial value of **a** is one and the initial value of **b** is two.

Thread 1	Thread 2
a = 3;	-
mb();	-
b = 4;	c = b;
-	rmb();
-	d = a;

Without using the memory barriers, on some processors it is possible that **c** receives the *new* value of **b**, whereas **d** receives the *old* value of **a**. For example, **c** could equal four (what you'd expect), yet **d** could equal one (not what you'd expect). Using the `mbarrier()` ensured that **a** and **b** were written in the intended order, whereas the `mbarrier()` insured **c** and **d** were read in the intended order.

This sort of reordering occurs because modern processors dispatch and commit instructions out of order, to optimize use of their pipelines. What can end up happening in the previous example is that the instructions associated with the loads of **b** and **a** occur out of order. The **rmb()** and **wmb()** functions correspond to instructions that tell the processor to commit any pending load or store instructions, respectively, before continuing.

Let's look at a similar example, but one that uses `read_barrier_depends()` instead of `rmw()`. In this example, initially `a` is one, `b` is two, and `p` is `&b`.

Thread 1	THRead 2
a = 3;	-
mb();	-
p = &a;	pp = p;
-	read_barrier_depends();
-	b = *pp;

Again, without memory barriers, it would be possible for `b` to be set to `pp` before `pp` was set to `p`. The `read_barrier_depends()`, however, provides a sufficient barrier because the load of `*pp` depends on the load of `p`. It would also be sufficient to use `mb()` here, but because the reads are data dependent, we can use the potentially faster `read_barrier_depends()`. Note that in either case, the `mb()` is required to enforce the intended load/store ordering in the left thread.

The macros `smp_rmb()`, `smp_wmb()`, `smp_mb()`, and `smp_read_barrier_depends()` provide a useful optimization. On SMP kernels they are defined as the usual memory barriers, whereas on UP kernels they are defined only as a compiler barrier. You can use these SMP variants when the ordering constraints are specific to SMP systems.

The `barrier()` method prevents the compiler from optimizing loads or stores across the call. The compiler knows not to rearrange stores and loads in ways that would change the effect of the C code and existing data dependencies. It does not have knowledge, however, of events that can occur outside the current context. For example, the compiler cannot know about interrupts that might read the same data you are writing. For this reason, you might want to ensure a store is issued before a load, for example. The previous memory barriers also function as compiler barriers, but a compiler barrier is much lighter in weight than a memory barrier. Indeed, a compiler barrier is practically free, because it simply prevents the compiler from *possibly* rearranging things.

[Table 9.10](#) has a full listing of the memory and compiler barrier methods provided by all architectures in the Linux kernel.

**Table 9.10. Memory and Compiler Barrier Methods**

Barrier	Description
rmb()	Prevents loads from being reordered across the barrier
read_barrier_depends()	Prevents data-dependent loads from being reordered across the barrier
wmb()	Prevents stores from being reordered across the barrier
mb()	Prevents load or stores from being reordered across the barrier
smp_rmb()	Provides an rmb() on SMP, and on UP provides abARRIER()
smp_read_barrier_depends()	Provides a read_barrier_depends() on SMP, and provides abARRIER() on UP
smp_wmb()	Provides a wmb() on SMP, and provides abARRIER() on UP
smp_mb()	Provides an mb() on SMP, and provides abARRIER() on UP
barrier()	Prevents the compiler from optimizing stores or loads across the barrier

Note that the actual effects of the barriers vary for each architecture. For example, if a machine does not perform out-of-order stores (for example, Intel x86 chips do not) then wmb() does nothing. You can use the appropriate memory barrier for the worst case (that is, the weakest ordering processor) and your code will compile optimally for your architecture.

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## Synchronization Summarization

This chapter applied the concepts and theories of the last chapter to help you understand the actual methods provided by the Linux kernel for enforcing synchronization and concurrency. We started with the simplest method of ensuring synchronization, atomic operations. We then looked at spin locks, the most common lock in the kernel, which provide a lightweight single-holder lock that busy waits while contended. We also discussed semaphores, a sleeping lock, and less common more specialized locking primitives such as completion variables and seq locks. We poked fun at the BKL, looked at preemption disabling, and tackled barriers. It has been a wild ride.

Armed with this chapter's arsenal of synchronization methods, you can now write kernel code that prevents race conditions and ensures the desired synchronization, with luck picking the best tool for the job.

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# Chapter 10. Timers and Time Management

The passing of time is very important to the kernel. A large number of kernel functions are time driven, as opposed to event driven<sup>[1]</sup>. Some of these functions are periodic, such as balancing the scheduler runqueues or refreshing the screen. They occur on a fixed schedule, such as 100 times per second. The kernel schedules other functions, such as delayed disk I/O, at a relative time in the future. For example, the kernel might schedule work for 500 milliseconds from now. Finally, the kernel must also manage the system uptime and the current date and time.

[1] More accurately, time-driven events are also event driven—the event being the passing of time. In this chapter, however, we will single out time-driven events because of their frequency in and importance to the kernel.

Note the differences between relative and absolute time. Scheduling an event for five seconds in the future requires no concept of the *absolute* time only the *relative* time (for example, five seconds from now). Conversely, managing the current time of day requires the kernel to understand not just the passing of time, but also some absolute measurement of it. Both these concepts are crucial to the management of time.

Also note the differences between events that occur periodically and events the kernel schedules for a fixed point in the future. Events that occur periodically say, every 10 milliseconds are driven by the *system timer*. The system timer is a programmable piece of hardware that issues an interrupt at a fixed frequency. The interrupt handler for this timer called the *timer interrupt* updates the system time and performs periodic work. The system timer and its timer interrupt are central to Linux, and a large focus of this chapter.

The other focus is *dynamic timer*s—the facility used to schedule events that run once after a specified time has elapsed. For example, the floppy device driver uses a timer to shut off the floppy drive motor after a specified period of inactivity. The kernel can create and destroy timers dynamically. This chapter covers the kernel implementation of dynamic timers, as well as the interface available for their use in your code.

## Kernel Notion of Time

Certainly, the concept of *time* to a computer is a bit obscure. Indeed, the kernel must work with the system's hardware to comprehend and manage time. The hardware provides a system timer that the kernel uses to gauge the passing of time. This system timer works off of an electronic time source, such as a digital clock or the frequency of the processor. The system timer goes off (often called *hitting* or *popping*) at a preprogrammed frequency, called the *tick rate*. When the system timer goes off, it issues an interrupt that the kernel handles via a special interrupt handler.

Because the kernel knows the preprogrammed tick rate, it knows the time between any two successive timer interrupts. This period is called a *tick* and is equal to *one-over-the-tick-rate* seconds. This is how the kernel keeps track of both wall time and system uptime. Wall time is the actual time of day, which is of most importance to user-space applications. The kernel keeps track of it simply because the kernel controls the timer interrupt. A family of system calls provide the date and time of day to user-space. The system uptime is the relative time since the system booted, which is useful to both kernel-space and user-space. A lot of code must be aware of the passing of time. The difference between two uptime readings now and then is a simple measure of this relativity.

The timer interrupt is very important to the management of the operating system. A large number of kernel functions live and die by the passing of time. Some of the work executed periodically by the timer interrupt includes

- Updating the system uptime
- Updating the time of day
- On an SMP system, ensuring that the scheduler runqueues are balanced, and if not, balancing them (as discussed in [Chapter 4](#), "Process Scheduling")
- Checking whether the current process has exhausted its timeslice and, if so, causing a reschedule (also discussed in [Chapter 4](#))
- Running any dynamic timers that have expired
- Updating resource usage and processor time statistics

Some of this work occurs on every timer interrupt; that is, the work is carried out with the frequency of the tick rate. Other functions execute periodically, but only every *n* timer interrupts. That is, these functions occur at some fraction of the tick rate. The section "[The Timer Interrupt Handler](#)" looks at the timer interrupt handler itself.

## The Tick Rate: HZ

The frequency of the system timer (the tick rate) is programmed on system boot based on a static preprocessor define, **HZ**. The value of **HZ** differs for each supported architecture. In fact, on some supported architectures, it even differs between machine types.

The kernel defines the value in `<asm/param.h>`. The tick rate has a frequency of **HZ** hertz and a period of  $1/\text{HZ}$  seconds. For example, in `include/asm-i386/param.h`, the i386 architecture defines:

```
#define HZ 1000      /* internal kernel time frequency */
```

Therefore, the timer interrupt on i386 has a frequency of 1000HZ and occurs 1,000 times per second (every one-thousandth of a second, which is every millisecond). Most other architectures have a tick rate of 100. [Table 10.1](#) is a complete listing of the supported architectures and their defined tick rates.

**Table 10.1. Frequency of the Timer Interrupt**

Architecture	Frequency (in Hertz)
Alpha	1024
Arm	100
Cris	100
h8300	100
i386	1000
ia64	32 or 1024 <a href="#">[2]</a>
m68k	100
m68knommu	50, 100, or 1000
Mips	100
mips64	100 or 1000
Parisc	100 or 1000
Ppc	1000
ppc64	1000
s390	100
Sh	100 or 1000
Sparc	100
sparc64	1000

Architecture	Frequency (in Hertz)
Um	100
v850	24, 100, or 122
x86-64	1000

[2] The IA-64 simulator has a tick rate of 32Hz. Real IA-64 machines have a tick rate of 1024Hz.

When writing kernel code, never assume that **HZ** has any given value. This is not a common mistake these days because so many architectures have varying tick rates. In the past, however, Alpha was the only architecture with a tick rate not equal to 100Hz, and it was common to see code incorrectly hard-code the value **100** when the **HZ** value should have been used. Examples of using **HZ** in kernel code are shown later.

The frequency of the timer interrupt is rather important. As you already saw, the timer interrupt performs a lot of work. Indeed, the kernel's entire notion of time derives from the periodicity of the system timer. Picking the right value, like a successful relationship, is all about compromise.

## The Ideal **HZ** Value

Starting with the initial version of Linux, the i386 architecture has had a timer interrupt frequency of 100 Hz. During the 2.5 development series, however, the frequency was raised to 1000 Hz and was (as such things are) controversial. Because so much of the system is dependent on the timer interrupt, changing its frequency has a reasonable impact on the system. Of course, there are pros and cons to larger versus smaller **HZ** values.

Increasing the tick rate means the timer interrupt runs more frequently. Consequently, the work it performs occurs more often. This has the following benefits:

- The timer interrupt has a higher resolution and, consequently, all timed events have a higher resolution
- The accuracy of timed events improves

The resolution increases by the same factor as the tick rate increases. For example, the granularity of timers with **HZ=100** is 10 milliseconds. In other words, all periodic events occur on the timer interrupt's 10 millisecond boundary and no finer *precision*<sup>[3]</sup> is guaranteed. With **HZ=1000**, however, resolution is 1 millisecond ten times finer. Although kernel code can create timers with 1-millisecond resolution, there is no guarantee the precision afforded with **HZ=100** is sufficient to execute the timer on anything better than 10-millisecond intervals.

[3] Use *precision* here in the computer sense, not the scientific. Precision in science is a statistical measurement of repeatability. In computers, precision is the number of significant figures used to represent a value.

Likewise, accuracy improves in the same manner. Assuming the kernel starts timers at random times, the average timer is off by half the period of the timer interrupt because timers might expire at any time, but are executed only on occurrences of the timer interrupt. For example, with **HZ=100**, the average event occurs +/- 5 milliseconds off from the desired time. Thus, error is 5 milliseconds on average. With **HZ=1000**, the average error drops to 0.5 milliseconds a tenfold improvement.

This higher resolution and greater accuracy provides multiple advantages:

- Kernel timers execute with finer resolution and increased accuracy (this provides a large number of improvements, one of

which is the following).

- System calls such as `poll()` and `select()` that optionally employ a timeout value execute with improved precision.
- Measurements, such as resource usage or the system uptime, are recorded with a finer resolution.
- Process preemption occurs more accurately.

Some of the most readily noticeable performance benefits come from the improved precision of `poll()` and `select()` timeouts. The improvement might be quite large; an application that makes heavy use of these system calls might waste a great deal of time waiting for the timer interrupt, when, in fact, the timeout has actually expired. Remember, the average error (that is, potentially wasted time) is half the period of the timer interrupt.

Another benefit of a higher tick rate is the greater accuracy in process preemption, which results in decreased scheduling latency. Recall from [Chapter 4](#) that the timer interrupt is responsible for decrementing the running process's timeslice count. When the count reaches zero, `need_resched` is set and the kernel runs the scheduler as soon as possible. Now assume a given process is running and has 2 milliseconds of its timeslice remaining. In 2 milliseconds, the scheduler *should* preempt the running process and begin executing a new process. Unfortunately, this event does not occur until the next timer interrupt, which might not be in 2 milliseconds. In fact, at worst the next timer interrupt might be  $1/HZ$  of a second away! With  $HZ=100$ , a process can get nearly ten extra milliseconds to run. Of course, this all balances out and fairness is preserved, because all tasks receive the same imprecision in scheduling but that is not the issue. The problem stems from the latency created by the delayed preemption. If the to-be-scheduled task had something time sensitive to do, such as refill an audio buffer, the delay might not be acceptable. Increasing the tick rate to 1000Hz lowers the worst-case scheduling overrun to just 1 millisecond, and the average-case overrun to just 0.5 milliseconds.

Now, there must be *some* downside to increasing the tick rate or it would have been 1000Hz (or even higher) to start. Indeed, there is one large issue: A higher tick rate implies more frequent timer interrupts, which implies higher overhead, because the processor must spend more time executing the timer interrupt handler. The higher the tick rate, the more time the processor spends executing the timer interrupt. This adds up to not just less processor time available for other work, but also a more frequent thrashing of the processor's cache. The issue of the overhead's impact is debatable. A move from  $HZ=100$  to  $HZ=1000$  clearly brings with it ten times greater overhead. However, how substantial is the overhead to begin with? The final agreement is that, at least on modern systems,  $HZ=1000$  does not create unacceptable overhead and the move to a 1000Hz timer has not hurt performance too much. Nevertheless, it is possible in 2.6 to compile the kernel with a different value for `HZ`<sup>[4]</sup>.

[4] Because of architectural and NTP-related issues, however, not just any value is acceptable for `HZ`. On x86, 100, 500, and 1000, all work fine.

## A Tickless OS?

You might wonder whether an operating system even needs a fixed timer interrupt. Is it possible to design an OS without ticks? Yes, *it is possible* but *it might not be pretty*.

There is no absolute need for a fixed timer interrupt. Instead, the kernel can use a dynamically programmed timer for each pending event. This quickly adds a lot of timer overhead, so a better idea is to have just *one* timer, and program it to occur when the next earliest event is due. When that timer executes, create a timer for the next event and repeat. With this approach, there is no periodic timer interrupt and no `HZ` value.

Two issues need to be overcome with this approach. The first is how to manage some concept of ticks, at least so the kernel can keep track of relative time. This is not too hard to solve. Solving the second issue how to overcome the overhead of managing all the dynamic timers, even with an optimized approach is a bit harder. The overhead and complexity is high enough that the Linux kernel does not take this approach. Nonetheless, people have tried and the results are interesting search online archives if interested.



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## Jiffies

The global variable **jiffies** holds the number of ticks that have occurred since the system booted. On boot, the kernel initializes the variable to zero, and it is incremented by one during each timer interrupt. Thus, because there are **HZ** timer interrupts in a second, there are **HZ** jiffies in a second. The system uptime is therefore **jiffies/HZ** seconds.

### The Etymology of the Jiffy

The origin of the term *jiffy* is unknown. Phrases such as *in a jiffy* are thought to originate from eighteenth-century England. In lay terms, *jiffy* refers to an indeterminate but very brief period of time.

In scientific applications, *jiffy* represents various intervals of time, most commonly 10ms. In physics, a jiffy is sometimes used to refer to the time it takes for light to travel some specific distance (usually a foot or a centimeter or across a nucleon).

In computer engineering, a jiffy is often the time between two successive clock cycles. In electrical engineering, a jiffy is the time to complete one AC (alternating current) cycle. In the United States, this is 1/60 of a second.

In operating systems, especially Unix, a jiffy is the time between two successive clock ticks. Historically, this has been 10ms. As we have seen in this chapter, however, a jiffy in Linux can have various values.

The **jiffies** variable is declared in `<linux/jiffies.h>` as

```
extern unsigned long volatile jiffies;
```

In the next section, we will look at its actual definition, which is a bit peculiar. For now, let's look at some sample kernel code. The following code converts from seconds to a unit of **jiffies**:

```
(seconds * HZ)
```

Likewise, this code converts from **jiffies** to seconds:

```
(jiffies / HZ)
```

The former is more common. For example, code often needs to set a value for some time in the future, for example:

```
unsigned long time_stamp = jiffies;      /* now */  
unsigned long next_tick = jiffies + _1;    /* one tick from now */  
unsigned long later = jiffies + 5*HZ;        /* five seconds from now */
```

The latter is typically reserved for communicating with user-space, as the kernel itself rarely cares about any sort of absolute time.

Note that the `jiffies` variable is prototyped as `unsigned long` and that storing it in anything else is incorrect.

## Internal Representation of Jiffies

The `jiffies` variable has always been an `unsigned long`, and therefore 32 bits in size on 32-bit architectures and 64-bits on 64-bit architectures. With a tick rate of 100, a 32-bit `jiffies` variable would overflow in about 497 days. With `HZ` increased to 1000, however, that overflow now occurs in just 49.7 days! If `jiffies` were stored in a 64-bit variable on all architectures, then for any reasonable `HZ` value the `jiffies` variable would never overflow in anyone's lifetime.

For performance and historical reasons mainly compatibility with existing kernel code the kernel developers wanted to keep `jiffies` an `unsigned long`. Some smart thinking and a little linker magic saved that day.

As you previously saw, `jiffies` is defined as an `unsigned long`:

```
extern unsigned long volatile jiffies;
```

A second variable is also defined in `<linux/jiffies.h>`:

```
extern u64 jiffies_64;
```

The `ld(1)` script used to link the main kernel image (`arch/i386/kernel/vmlinux.lds.S` on x86) then overlays the `jiffies` variable over the start of the `jiffies_64` variable:

```
jiffies = jiffies_64;
```

Thus, `jiffies` is the lower 32 bits of the full 64-bit `jiffies_64` variable. Code can continue to access the `jiffies` variable exactly as before. Because most code uses `jiffies` simply to measure elapses in time, most code cares about only the lower 32 bits. The time management code uses the entire 64 bits, however, and thus prevents overflow of the full 64-bit value. [Figure 10.1](#) shows the layout of `jiffies` and `jiffies_64`. Code that accesses `jiffies` simply reads the lower 32 bits of `jiffies_64`. The function `get_jiffies_64()` can be used to read the full 64-bit value<sup>[5]</sup>. Such a need is rare; consequently, most code simply continues to read the lower 32 bits directly via the `jiffies` variable.

[5] A special function is needed because 32-bit architectures cannot atomically access both 32-bit words in a 64-bit value and because `jiffies_64` is not marked volatile. The special function locks the jiffies count via the `xtime_lock` lock before reading.

**Figure 10.1. Layout of `jiffies` and `jiffies_64`.**





On 64-bit architectures, `jiffies_64` and `jiffies` refer to the same thing. Code can either read `jiffies` or call `get_jiffies_64()` because both actions have the same effect.

## Jiffies Wraparound

The `jiffies` variable, like any C integer, experiences *overflow* when its value is increased beyond its maximum storage limit. For a 32-bit unsigned integer, the maximum value is  $2^{32} - 1$ . Thus, a possible 4294967295 timer ticks can occur before the tick count overflows. When the tick count is equal to this maximum and it is incremented, it wraps around to zero.

Look at an example of a wraparound:

```
unsigned long timeout = jiffies + HZ/2;      /* timeout in 0.5s */

/* do some work ... */

/* then see whether we took too long */
if (timeout > jiffies) {
    /* we did not time out, good ... */
} else {
    /* we timed out, error ... */
}
```

The intention of this code snippet is to set a timeout for some time in the future for one half second from now, in this example. The code then proceeds to perform some work, presumably poking hardware and waiting for a response. When done, if the whole ordeal took longer than the timeout, the code handles the error as appropriate.

Multiple potential overflow issues are here, but let's study one of them: Consider what happens if `jiffies` wrapped back to zero after setting `timeout`. Then the first conditional would fail because the `jiffies` value would be smaller than `timeout` despite logically being larger. Conceptually, the `jiffies` value should be a very large number larger than `timeout`. Because it overflowed its maximum value, however, it is now a very small value perhaps only a handful of ticks over zero. Because of the wraparound, the results of the `if` statement are switched. Whoops!

Thankfully, the kernel provides four macros for comparing tick counts that correctly handle wraparound in the tick count. They are in `<linux/jiffies.h>`:

```
#define time_after(unknown, known) ((long)(known) - (long)(unknown) < 0)
#define time_before(unknown, known) ((long)(unknown) - (long)(known) < 0)
#define time_after_eq(unknown, known) ((long)(known) - (long)(unknown) >= 0)
#define time_before_eq(unknown, known) ((long)(unknown) - (long)(known) >= 0)
```

The `unknown` parameter is typically `jiffies` and the `known` parameter is the value against which you want to compare.

The `time_after(unknown, known)` macro returns true if time `unknown` is after time `known`; otherwise, it returns false. The `time_before(unknown, known)` macro returns true if time `unknown` is before time `known`; otherwise, it returns false. The final two macros perform identically to the first two, except they also return true if the parameters are equal.

The timer-wraparound-safe version of the previous example would look like this:

```
unsigned long timeout = jiffies + HZ/2;      /* timeout in 0.5s */

/* ...
if (time_before(jiffies, timeout)) {
    /* we did not time out, good ...
} else {
    /* we timed out, error ...
}
```

If you are curious as to why these macros prevent errors because of wraparound, try various values for the two parameters. Then assume one parameter wrapped to zero and see what happens.

## User-Space and `Hz`

In kernels earlier than 2.6, changing the value of `Hz` resulted in user-space anomalies. This happened because values were exported to user-space in units of ticks-per-second. As these interfaces became permanent, applications grew to rely on a specific value of `Hz`. Consequently, changing `Hz` would scale various exported values by some constant without user-space knowing! Uptime would read 20 hours when it was in fact two!

To prevent such problems, the kernel needs to scale all exported `jiffies` values. It does this by defining `USER_HZ`, which is the `Hz` value that user-space expects. On x86, because `Hz` was historically 100, `USER_HZ` is 100. The macro `jiffies_to_clock_t()` is then used to scale a tick count in terms of `Hz` to a tick count in terms of `USER_HZ`. The macro used depends on whether `USER_HZ` and `Hz` are integer multiples of themselves. If so, the macro is rather simple:

```
#define jiffies_to_clock_t(x)      ((x) / (HZ / USER_HZ))
```

A more complicated algorithm is used if the values are not integer multiples.

Finally, the function `jiffies_64_to_clock_t()` is provided to convert a 64-bit `jiffies` value from `Hz` to `USER_HZ` units.

These functions are used anywhere a value in ticks-per-seconds needs to be exported to user-space. Example:

```
unsigned long start;
unsigned long total_time;

start = jiffies;
/* do some work ...
total_time = jiffies - start;
printf("That took %lu ticks\n", jiffies_to_clock_t(total_time));
```

User-space expects the previous value as if `Hz=USER_HZ`. If they are not equivalent, the macro scales as needed and everyone is happy. Of course, this example is silly: It would make more sense to print the message in seconds, not ticks. For example:

```
printf("That took %lu seconds\n", total_time / HZ);
```

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## Hardware Clocks and Timers

Architectures provide two hardware devices to help with time keeping: the system timer, which we have been discussing, and the real-time clock. The actual behavior and implementation of these devices varies between different machines, but the general purpose and design is about the same for each.

### Real-Time Clock

The real-time clock (RTC) provides a nonvolatile device for storing the system time. The RTC continues to keep track of time even when the system is off by way of a small battery typically included on the system board. On the PC architecture, the RTC and the CMOS are integrated and a single battery keeps the RTC running and the BIOS settings preserved.

On boot, the kernel reads the RTC and uses it to initialize the wall time, which is stored in the `xtime` variable. The kernel does not typically read the value again; however, some supported architectures, such as x86, periodically save the current wall time back to the RTC. Nonetheless, the real time clock's primary importance is only during boot, when the `xtime` variable is initialized.

### System Timer

The system timer serves a much more important (and frequent) role in the kernel's timekeeping. The idea behind the system timer, regardless of architecture, is the same to provide a mechanism for driving an interrupt at a periodic rate. Some architectures implement this via an electronic clock that oscillates at a programmable frequency. Other systems provide a decrementer: A counter is set to some initial value and decrements at a fixed rate until the counter reaches zero. When the counter reaches zero, an interrupt is triggered. In any case, the effect is the same.

On x86, the primary system timer is the programmable interrupt timer (PIT). The PIT exists on all PC machines and has been driving interrupts since the days of DOS. The kernel programs the PIT on boot to drive the system timer interrupt (interrupt zero) at `HZ` frequency. It is a simple device with limited functionality, but it gets the job done. Other x86 time sources include the local APIC timer and the processor's time stamp counter (TSC).

## The Timer Interrupt Handler

Now that we have an understanding of `HZ`, `jiffies`, and what the system timer's role is, let's look at the actual implementation of the timer interrupt handler. The timer interrupt is broken into two pieces: an architecture-dependent and an architecture-independent routine.

The architecture-dependent routine is registered as the interrupt handler for the system timer and, thus, runs when the timer interrupt hits. Its exact job depends on the given architecture, of course, but most handlers perform at least the following work:

- Obtain the `xtime_lock` lock, which protects access to `jiffies_64` and the wall time value, `xtime`
- Acknowledge or reset the system timer as required
- Periodically save the updated wall time to the real time clock
- Call the architecture-independent timer routine, `do_timer()`

The architecture-independent routine, `do_timer()`, performs much more work:

- Increment the `jiffies_64` count by one (this is safe, even on 32-bit architectures, because the `xtime_lock` lock was previously obtained)
- Update resource usages, such as consumed system and user time, for the currently running process
- Run any dynamic timers that have expired (discussed in the following section)
- Execute `scheduler_tick()`, as discussed in [Chapter 4](#), "Process Scheduling"
- Update the wall time, which is stored in `xtime`
- Calculate the infamous load average

The actual routine is very simple because other functions handle most of the previously discussed work:

```
void do_timer(struct pt_regs *regs)
{
    jiffies_64++;

    update_process_times(user_mode(regs));
    update_times();
}
```

The `user_mode()` macro looks at the state of the processor registers, `regs`, and returns one if the timer interrupt occurred in user-space and zero if the interrupt occurred in kernel mode. This enables `update_process_times()` to attribute the previous tick to the proper mode, either user or system:

```
void update_process_times(int user_tick)
{
    struct task_struct *p = current;
    int cpu = smp_processor_id();
    int system = user_tick ^ 1;
```

```
update_one_process(p, user_tick, system, cpu);
run_local_timers();
scheduler_tick(user_tick, system);
}
```

The `update_one_process()` function does the actual updating of the process's times. It is rather elaborate, but note how one of either the `user_tick` or the `system` value is equal to one and the other is zero, because of the exclusive-or (XOR). Therefore `updates_one_process()` can simply add each value to the corresponding counter without a branch:

```
/*
 * update by one jiffy the appropriate time counter
 */
p->utime += user;
p->stime += system;
```

The appropriate value is increased by one and the other value remains the same. You might realize that this implies that the kernel credits a process for running the *entire* previous tick in whatever mode the processor was in when the timer interrupt occurred. In reality, the process might have entered and exited kernel mode many times during the last tick. In fact, the process might not even have been the only process running in the last tick! This granular process accounting is classic Unix, and without much more complex accounting, this is the best the kernel can provide. It is also another reason for a higher frequency tick rate.

Next, the `run_local_timers()` function marks a softirq (see [Chapter 7](#), "Bottom Halves and Deferring Work") to handle the execution of any expired timers. Timers are covered in a following section, "[Timers](#)".

Finally, the `scheduler_tick()` function decrements the currently running process's timeslice and sets `need_resched` if needed. On SMP machines, it also balances the per-processor runqueues as needed. This was all discussed in [Chapter 4](#).

When `update_process_times()` returns, `do_timer()` calls `update_times()` to update the wall time:

```
void update_times(void)
{
    unsigned long ticks;

    ticks = jiffies - wall_jiffies;
    if (ticks) {
        wall_jiffies += ticks;
        update_wall_time(ticks);
    }
    last_time_offset = 0;
    calc_load(ticks);
}
```

The `ticks` value is calculated to be the change in ticks since the last update. In normal cases, this is, of course, one. In rare situations, timer interrupts can be missed and the ticks are said to be *lost*. This can occur if interrupts are off for a long time. It is not the norm and quite often a bug. The `wall_jiffies` value is increased by the `ticks` value thus, it is equal to the `jiffies` value of the most recent wall time update and `update_wall_time()` is called to update `xtime`, which stores the wall time. Finally, `calc_load()` is called to update the load average and `update_times()` returns.

The `do_timer()` function returns to the original architecture-dependent interrupt handler, which performs any needed cleanup, releases the `xtime_lock` lock, and finally returns.

All this occurs every  $1/\text{HZ}$  of a second. That is 1000 times per second on your PC.

## The Time of Day

The current time of day (the wall time) is defined in `kernel/timer.c`:

```
struct timespec xtime;
```

The `timespec` data structure is defined in `<linux/time.h>` as:

```
struct timespec {  
    time_t tv_sec;          /* seconds */  
    long   tv_nsec;         /* nanoseconds */  
};
```

The `xtime.tv_sec` value stores the number of seconds that have elapsed since January 1, 1970 (UTC). This date is called the epoch. Most Unix systems base their notion of the current wall time as relative to this epoch. The `xtime.tv_nsec` value stores the number of nanoseconds that have elapsed in the last second.

Reading or writing the `xtime` variable requires the `xtime_lock` lock, which is *not* a normal spinlock but a seqlock. [Chapter 9](#), "Kernel Synchronization Methods," discusses seqlocks.

To update `xtime`, a write seqlock is required:

```
write_seqlock(&xtime_lock);  
  
/* update xtime ... */  
  
write_sequnlock(&xtime_lock);
```

Reading `xtime` requires the use of the `read_seqbegin()` and `read_seqretry()` functions:

```
do {  
    unsigned long lost;  
    seq = read_seqbegin(&xtime_lock);  
  
    usec = timer->get_offset();  
    lost = jiffies - wall_jiffies;  
    if (lost)  
        usec += lost * (1000000 / HZ);  
    sec = xtime.tv_sec;  
    usec += (xtime.tv_nsec / 1000);  
} while (read_seqretry(&xtime_lock, seq));
```

This loop repeats until the reader is assured that it read the data without an intervening write. If the timer interrupt occurred and updated `xtime` during the loop, the returned sequence number is invalid and the loop repeats.

The primary user-space interface for retrieving the wall time is `gettimeofday()`, which is implemented `assys_gettimeofday()`:

```
asmlinkage long sys_gettimeofday(struct timeval *tv, struct timezone *tz)
{
    if (likely(tv)) {
        struct timeval ktv;
        do_gettimeofday(&ktv);
        if (copy_to_user(tv, &ktv, sizeof(ktv)))
            return -EFAULT;
    }
    if (unlikely(tz)) {
        if (copy_to_user(tz, &sys_tz, sizeof(sys_tz)))
            return -EFAULT;
    }
    return 0;
}
```

If the user provided a non-**NULL** `tv` value, the architecture-dependent `do_gettimeofday()` is called. This function primarily performs the `xtime` read loop previously discussed. Likewise, if `tz` is non-**NULL**, the system time zone (stored in `sys_tz`) is returned to the user. If there were errors copying the wall time or time zone back to user-space, the function returns `-EFAULT`. Otherwise, it returns zero for success.

The kernel also implements the `time()`<sup>[6]</sup> system call, but `gettimeofday()` largely supersedes it. The C library also provides other wall timerelated library calls, such as `ftime()` and `ctime()`.

<sup>[6]</sup> Some architectures, however, do not implement `sys_time()` and instead specify that it is emulated in the C library through the use of `gettimeofday()`.

The `settimeofday()` system call sets the wall time to the specified value. It requires the `CAP_SYS_TIME` capability.

Other than updating `xtime`, the kernel does not make nearly as frequent use of the current wall time as user-space does. One notable exception is in the filesystem code, which stores various timestamps (created, accessed, modified, and so on) in inodes.

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## Timers

Timers sometimes called *dynamic timers* or *kernel timers* are essential for managing the flow of time in kernel code. Kernel code often needs to delay execution of some function until a later time. In previous chapters, we looked at using the bottom-half mechanisms, which are great for deferring work until later. Unfortunately, the definition of *later* is intentionally quite vague. The purpose of bottom halves is not so much to *delay work*, but simply to *not do the work now*. What we need is a tool for delaying work a specified amount of time certainly no less, and with hope, not much longer. The solution is kernel timers.

A timer is very easy to use. You perform some initial setup, specify an expiration time, specify a function to execute upon said expiration, and activate the timer. The given function will run after the timer expires. Timers are *not cyclic*. The timer is destroyed after it expires.

This is one reason for the *dynamic* nomenclature<sup>[7]</sup>. Timers are constantly created and destroyed, and there is no limit on the number of timers. Timers are very popular throughout the entire kernel.

[7] Another reason is because of the existence of *static timers* in older (pre-2.3) kernels. They were created at compile-time, not runtime. They were lame, so no one shed tears over their demise.

## Using Timers

Timers are represented by `struct timer_list`, which is defined in `<linux/timer.h>`:

```
struct timer_list {  
    struct list_head entry;      /* entry in linked list of timers */  
    unsigned long expires;       /* expiration value, in jiffies */  
    spinlock_t lock;            /* lock protecting this timer */  
    void (*function)(unsigned long); /* the timer handler function */  
    unsigned long data;          /* lone argument to the handler */  
    struct tvec_t_base_s *base;   /* internal timer field, do not touch */  
};
```

Fortunately, the usage of timers requires little understanding of this data structure. In fact, toying with it is discouraged to keep code forward compatible with changes. The kernel provides a family of timer-related interfaces to make timer management easy. Everything is declared in `<linux/timer.h>`. Most of the actual implementation is in `kernel/timer.c`.

The first step in creating a timer is defining it:

```
struct timer_list my_timer;
```

Next, the timer's internal values must be initialized. This is done via a helper function and must be done prior to calling *any* timer management functions on the timer:

```
init_timer(&my_timer);
```

Now you fill out the remaining values as required:

```
my_timer.expires = jiffies + delay; /* timer expires in delay ticks */
```

```
my_timer.data = 0;           /* zero is passed to the timer handler */  
my_timer.function = my_function; /* function to run when timer expires */
```

The `my_timer.expires` value specifies the timeout value in absolute ticks. When the current `jiffies` count is equal to or greater than `my_timer.expires`, the handler function `my_timer.function` is run with the lone argument of `my_timer.data`. As you can see from the `timer_list` definition, the function must match this prototype:

```
void my_timer_function(unsigned long data);
```

The `data` parameter enables you to register multiple timers with the same handler, and differentiate between them via the argument. If you do not need the argument, you can simply pass zero (or any other value).

Finally, you activate the timer:

```
add_timer(&my_timer);
```

And, voila, the timer is off and running! Note the significance of the `expired` value. The kernel runs the timer handler when the current tick count is *equal to or greater than* the specified expiration. Although the kernel guarantees to run no timer handle *prior* to the timer's expiration, there may be a delay in running the timer. Typically, timers are run fairly close to their expiration; however, they might be delayed until the first timer tick after their expiration. Consequently, timers cannot be used to implement any sort of hard real-time processing.

Sometimes you might need to modify the expiration of an already active timer. The kernel implements a function, `mod_timer()`, which changes the expiration of a given timer:

```
mod_timer(&my_timer, jiffies + new_delay); /* new expiration */
```

The `mod_timer()` function can operate on timers that are initialized but not active, too. If the timer is inactive, `mod_timer()` activates it. The function returns zero if the timer was inactive and one if the timer was active. In either case, upon return from `mod_timer()`, the timer is activated and set to the new expiration.

If you need to deactivate a timer prior to its expiration, use the `del_timer()` function:

```
del_timer(&my_timer);
```

The function works on both active and inactive timers. If the timer is already inactive, the function returns zero; otherwise, the function returns one. Note that you do *not* need to call this for timers that have expired because they are automatically deactivated.

A potential race condition that must be guarded against exists when deleting timers. When `del_timer()` returns, it guarantees only that the timer is no longer active (that is, that it will not be executed in the future). On a multiprocessor machine, however, the timer handler might already be executing on another processor. To deactivate the timer and wait until a potentially executing handler for the timer exits, use `del_timer_sync()`:

```
del_timer_sync(&my_timer);
```

Unlike `del_timer()`, `del_timer_sync()` cannot be used from interrupt context.

## Timer Race Conditions

Because timers run asynchronously with respect to the currently executing code, several potential race conditions exist. First, never do the following as a substitute for a mere `mod_timer()`, because this is unsafe on multiprocessing machines:

```
del_timer(my_timer)
my_timer->expires = jiffies + new_delay;
add_timer(my_timer);
```

Second, in almost all cases, you should use `del_timer_sync()` over `del_timer()`. Otherwise, you cannot assume the timer is not currently running, and that is why you made the call in the first place! Imagine if, after deleting the timer, the code went on to free or otherwise manipulate resources used by the timer handler. Therefore, the synchronous version is preferred.

Finally, you must make sure to protect any shared data used in the timer handler function. The kernel runs the function asynchronously with respect to other code. Data with a timer should be protected as discussed in [Chapters 8](#) and [9](#).

## The Timer Implementation

The kernel executes timers in bottom-half context, as softirqs, after the timer interrupt completes. The timer interrupt handler runs `update_process_times()`, which calls `run_local_timers()`:

```
void run_local_timers(void)
{
    raise_softirq(TIMER_SOFTIRQ);
}
```

The `TIMER_SOFTIRQ` softirq is handled by `run_timer_softirq()`. This function runs all the expired timers (if any) on the current processor.

Timers are stored in a linked list. However, it would be unwieldy for the kernel to either constantly traverse the entire list looking for expired timers, or keep the list sorted by expiration value; the insertion and deletion of timers would then become very expensive. Instead, the kernel partitions timers into five groups based on their expiration value. Timers move down through the groups as their expiration time draws closer. The partitioning ensures that, in most executions of the timer softirq, the kernel has to do little work to find the expired timers. Consequently, the timer management code is very efficient.

## Delaying Execution

Often, kernel code (especially drivers) needs a way to delay execution for some time without using timers or a bottom-half mechanism. This is usually to allow hardware time to complete a given task. The time is typically quite short. For example, the specifications for a network card might list the time to change Ethernet modes as two microseconds. After setting the desired speed, the driver should wait at least the two microseconds before continuing.

The kernel provides a number of solutions, depending on the semantics of the delay. The solutions have different characteristics. Some hog the processor while delaying effectively preventing the accomplishment of any real work. Other solutions do not hog the processor, but offer no guarantee that your code will resume in exactly the required time<sup>[8]</sup>.

<sup>[8]</sup> Actually, no approach guarantees that the delay will be for exactly the time requested. Some come extremely close, however and they all promise to wait at least as long as needed. Some just wait longer.

## Busy Looping

The simplest solution to implement (although rarely the optimal solution) is *busy waiting* or *busy looping*. This technique works only when the time you want to delay is some integer multiple of the tick rate or precision is not very important.

The idea is simple: Spin in a loop until the desired number of clock ticks pass. For example,

```
unsigned long delay = jiffies + 10; /* ten ticks */  
  
while (time_before(jiffies, delay))  
    ;
```

The loop continues until **jiffies** is larger than **delay**, which will occur only after 10 clock ticks have passed. On x86 with **HZ** equal to 1000, this results in a wait of 10 milliseconds. Similarly,

```
unsigned long delay = jiffies + 2*HZ; /* two seconds */  
  
while (time_before(jiffies, delay))  
    ;
```

This will spin until **2\*HZ** clock ticks has passed, which is always two seconds regardless of the clock rate.

This approach is not nice to the rest of the system. While your code waits, the processor is tied up spinning in a silly loop no useful work is accomplished! In fact, you rarely want to take this brain-dead approach, and it is shown here because it is a clear and simple method for delaying execution. You might also encounter it in someone else's not-so-pretty code.

A better solution would be to reschedule your process to allow the processor to accomplish other work while your code waits:

```
unsigned long delay = jiffies + 5*HZ;
```

```
while (time_before(jiffies, delay))
    cond_resched();
```

The call to `cond_resched()` schedules a new process, but only if `need_resched` is set. In other words, this solution conditionally invokes the scheduler only if there is some more important task to run. Note that because this approach invokes the scheduler, you cannot make use of it from an interrupt handler only from process context. In fact, all these approaches are best used from process context, because interrupt handlers should execute as quickly as possible (and busy looping does not help accomplish that goal!). Furthermore, delaying execution in any manner, if at all possible, should not occur while a lock is held or interrupts are disabled.

C aficionados might wonder what guarantee is given that the previous loops even work. The C compiler is usually free to perform a given load only once. Normally, no assurance is given that the `jiffies` variable in the loop's conditional statement is even reloaded on each loop iteration. The kernel requires, however, that `jiffies` be reread on each iteration, as the value is incremented elsewhere: in the timer interrupt. Indeed, this is why the variable is marked `volatile` in `<linux/jiffies.h>`. The `volatile` keyword instructs the compiler to reload the variable on each access from main memory and never alias the variable's value in a register, guaranteeing that the previous loop completes as expected.

## Small Delays

Sometimes, kernel code (again, usually drivers) requires very short (smaller than a clock tick) and rather precise delays. This is often to synchronize with hardware, which again usually lists some minimum time for an activity to complete often less than a millisecond. It would be impossible to use `jiffies`-based delays, as in the previous examples, for such a short wait. With a timer interrupt of 100Hz, the clock tick is a rather large 10 milliseconds! Even with a 1000Hz timer interrupt, the clock tick is still one millisecond. Another solution is clearly necessary for smaller, more precise delays.

Thankfully, the kernel provides two functions for microsecond and millisecond delays, both defined in `<linux/delay.h>`, which do not use `jiffies`:

```
void udelay(unsigned long usecs)
void mdelay(unsigned long msecs)
```

The former function delays execution by busy looping for the specified number of *microseconds*. The latter function delays execution for the specified number of *milliseconds*. Recall one second equals 1000 milliseconds, which equals 1,000,000 microseconds. Usage is trivial:

```
udelay(150); /* delay for 150 µs */
```

The `udelay()` function is implemented as a loop that knows how many iterations can be executed in a given period of time. The `mdelay()` function is then implemented in terms of `udelay()`. Because the kernel knows how many loops the processor can complete in a second (see the sidebar on BogoMips), the `udelay()` function simply scales that value to the correct number of loop iterations for the given delay.

## My BogoMIPS Are Bigger than Yours!

The BogoMIPS value has always been a source of confusion and humor. In reality, the BogoMIPS calculation has very

little to do with the performance of your computer and is primarily used only for the `udelay()` and `mdelay()` functions. Its name is a contraction of *bogus* (that is, fake) and *MIPS* (million of instructions per second). Everyone is familiar with a boot message similar to the following (this is on a 1GHz Pentium 3):

```
Detected 1004.932 MHz processor.  
Calibrating delay loop... 1990.65 BogoMIPS
```

The BogoMIPS value is the number of busy loop iterations the processor can perform in a given period. In effect, BogoMIPS are a measurement of how fast a processor can do nothing! This value is stored in the `loops_per_jiffy` variable and is readable from `/proc/cpuinfo`. The delay loop functions use the `loops_per_jiffy` value to figure out (fairly precisely) how many busy loop iterations they need to execute to provide the requisite delay.

The kernel computes `loops_per_jiffy` on boot via `calibrate_delay()` in `init/main.c`.

The `udelay()` function should be called only for small delays because larger delays on fast machines might result in overflow. As a rule, do not use `udelay()` for delays over one millisecond in duration. For longer durations `mdelay()` works fine. Like the other busy waiting solutions for delaying execution, neither of these functions (especially `mdelay()`, because it is used for such long delays) should be used unless absolutely needed. Remember that it is rude to busy loop with locks held or interrupts disabled because system response and performance will be adversely affected. If you require precise delays, however, these calls are your best bet. Typical uses of these busy waiting functions delay for a very small amount of time, usually in the microsecond range.

## `schedule_timeout()`

A more optimal method of delaying execution is to use `schedule_timeout()`. This call puts your task to sleep until at least the specified time has elapsed. There is no guarantee that the sleep duration will be *exactly* the specified time only that the duration is at least as long as specified. When the specified time has elapsed, the kernel wakes the task up and places it back on the runqueue. Usage is easy:

```
/* set task's state to interruptible sleep */  
set_current_state(TASK_INTERRUPTIBLE);  
  
/* take a nap and wake up in "s" seconds */  
schedule_timeout(s * HZ);
```

The lone parameter is the desired relative timeout, in jiffies. This example puts the task in interruptible sleep for `s` seconds. Because the task is marked `TASK_INTERRUPTIBLE`, it wakes up prematurely if it receives a signal. If the code does not want to process signals, you can use `TASK_UNINTERRUPTIBLE` instead. The task must be in one of these two states before `schedule_timeout()` is called or else the task will not go to sleep.

Note that because `schedule_timeout()` invokes the scheduler, code that calls it must be capable of sleeping. See [Chapters 8](#) and [9](#) for discussions on atomicity and sleeping. In short, you must be in process context and must not hold a lock.

The `schedule_timeout()` function is fairly straightforward. Indeed, it is a simple application of kernel timers, so let's take a look at it:

```
signed long schedule_timeout(signed long timeout)  
{  
    timer_t timer;  
    unsigned long expire;  
  
    switch (timeout)
```

```
{  
    case MAX_SCHEDULE_TIMEOUT:  
        schedule();  
        goto out;  
    default:  
        if (timeout < 0)  
        {  
            printk(KERN_ERR "schedule_timeout: wrong timeout "  
                  "value %lx from %p\\n", timeout,  
                  __builtin_return_address(0));  
            current->state = TASK_RUNNING;  
            goto out;  
        }  
    }  
  
    expire = timeout + jiffies;  
  
    init_timer(&timer);  
    timer.expires = expire;  
    timer.data = (unsigned long) current;  
    timer.function = process_timeout;  
  
    add_timer(&timer);  
    schedule();  
    del_timer_sync(&timer);  
  
    timeout = expire - jiffies;  
  
out:  
    return timeout < 0 ? 0 : timeout;  
}
```

The function creates a timer with the original name `timer` and sets it to expire in `timeout` clock ticks in the future. It sets the timer to execute the `process_timeout()` function when the timer expires. It then enables the timer and calls `schedule()`. Because the task is supposedly marked `TASK_INTERRUPTIBLE` or `TASK_UNINTERRUPTIBLE`, the scheduler does *not* run the task, but instead picks a new one.

When the timer expires, it runs `process_timeout()`:

```
void process_timeout(unsigned long data)  
{  
    wake_up_process((task_t *) data);  
}
```

This function puts the task in the `TASK_RUNNING` state and places it back on the runqueue.

When the task reschedules, it returns to where it left off in `schedule_timeout()` (right after the call to `schedule()`). In case the task was awakened prematurely (if a signal was received), the timer is destroyed. The function then returns the time slept.

The code in the `switch()` statement is for special cases and is not part of the general usage of the function. The `MAX_SCHEDULE_TIMEOUT` check enables a task to sleep indefinitely. In that case, no timer is set (because there is no bound on the sleep duration) and the scheduler is immediately invoked. If you do this, you had better have another method of waking your task up!

## Sleeping on a Wait Queue, with a Timeout

[Chapter 4](#) looked at how process context code in the kernel can place itself on a wait queue to wait for a specific event, and then invoke the scheduler to select a new task. Elsewhere, when the event finally occurs, `wake_up()` is called and the tasks sleeping on the wait queue are awakened and can continue running.

Sometimes it is desirable to wait for a specific event *or* wait for a specified time to elapse whichever comes first. In those cases, code might simply call `schedule_timeout()` instead of `schedule()` after placing itself on a wait queue. The task wakes up when the desired event occurs or the specified time elapses. The code needs to check *why* it woke up; it might be because of the event occurring, the time elapsing, or a received signal and continue as appropriate.

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## Out of Time

In this chapter, we looked at the kernel's concept of time and how both wall time and uptime are managed. We contrasted relative time with absolute time and absolute events with periodic events. We then covered time concepts such as the timer interrupt, timer ticks, HZ, and jiffies.

We looked at the implementation of timers and how you can use them in your own kernel code. We finished the chapter with an overview of other methods developers can use to pass time.

Much of the kernel code that you write will require some understanding of time and its passing. With high probability especially if you hack on drivers you will need to deal with kernel timers. Reading this chapter is good for more than just passing the time.

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# Chapter 11. Memory Management

Memory allocation *inside* the kernel is not as easy as memory allocation *outside* the kernel. Many factors contribute to this. Primarily, the kernel simply lacks the luxuries enjoyed by user-space. Unlike user-space, the kernel is not always afforded the capability to easily allocate memory. For example, often the kernel cannot sleep and the kernel cannot easily deal with memory errors. Because of these limitations, and the need for a lightweight memory allocation scheme, getting hold of memory in the kernel is more complicated than in user-space. This is not to say that kernel memory allocations are difficult, however, as you'll see. Just different.

This chapter discusses the methods used to obtain memory inside the kernel. Before you can delve into the actual allocation interfaces, however, you need to understand how the kernel handles memory.

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## Pages

The kernel treats physical pages as the basic unit of memory management. Although the processor's smallest addressable unit is usually a word (or even a byte), the memory management unit (MMU, the hardware that manages memory and performs virtual to physical address translations) typically deals in pages. Therefore, the MMU manages the system's page tables with page-sized granularity (hence their name). In terms of virtual memory, pages are the smallest unit that matters.

As you'll see in [Chapter 19](#), "Portability," each architecture enforces its own page size. Many architectures even support multiple page sizes. Most 32-bit architectures have 4KB pages, whereas most 64-bit architectures have 8KB pages. This implies that on a machine with 4KB pages and 1GB of physical memory, physical memory is divided up into 262,144 distinct pages.

The kernel represents every physical page on the system with a `struct page` structure. This structure is defined in `<linux/mm.h>`:

```
struct page {
    page_flags_t      flags;
    atomic_t          _count;
    atomic_t          _mapcount;
    unsigned long     private;
    struct address_space *mapping;
    pgoff_t           index;
    struct list_head   lru;
    void              *virtual;
};
```

Let's look at the important fields. The `flags` field stores the status of the page. Such flags include whether the page is dirty or whether it is locked in memory. Bit flags represent the various values, so at least 32 different flags are simultaneously available. The flag values are defined in `<linux/page-flags.h>`.

The `_count` field stores the usage count of the page that is, how many references there are to this page. When this count reaches negative zero, no one is using the page, and it becomes available for use in a new allocation. Kernel code should not check this field directly but instead use the function `page_count()`, which takes a `page` structure as its sole parameter. Although internally `_count` is negative one when the page is free, `page_count()` returns zero to indicate free and a positive nonzero integer when the page is in use. A page may be used by the page cache (in which case the `mapping` field points to the `address_space` object that is associated with this page), as private data (pointed at by `private`), or as a mapping in a process's page table.

The `virtual` field is the page's virtual address. Normally, this is simply the address of the page in virtual memory. Some memory (called high memory) is not permanently mapped in the kernel's address space. In that case, this field is `NULL` and the page must be dynamically mapped when needed. We'll discuss high memory shortly.

The important point to understand is that the `page` structure is associated with physical pages, not virtual pages. Therefore, what the structure describes is transient at best. Even if the data contained in the page continues to exist, it might not always be associated with the same `page` structure because of swapping and so on. The kernel uses this data structure to describe whatever is stored in the associated physical page at that moment. The data structure's goal is to describe physical memory, not the data contained therein.

The kernel uses this structure to keep track of all the pages in the system, because the kernel needs to know whether a page is free (that is, if the page is not allocated). If a page is not free, the kernel needs to know who owns the page. Possible owners include user-space processes, dynamically allocated kernel data, static kernel code, the page cache, and so on.

Developers are often surprised that an instance of this structure is allocated for each physical page in the system. They think, "*What a lot of memory used!*" Let's look at just how bad (or good) the space consumption is from all these pages. Assume `struct page` consumes 40 bytes of memory, the system has 4KB physical pages, and the system has 128MB of physical memory. In that case, all the `page`

structures in the system consume slightly more than 1MB of memorynot too high a cost for managing all of the sys tem's physical pages.

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## Zones

Because of hardware limitations, the kernel cannot treat all pages as identical. Some pages, because of their physical address in memory, cannot be used for certain tasks. Because of this limitation, the kernel divides pages into different *zones*. The kernel uses the zones to group pages of similar properties. In particular, Linux has to deal with two shortcomings of hardware with respect to memory addressing:

- Some hardware devices are capable of performing DMA (direct memory access) to only certain memory addresses.
- Some architectures are capable of physically addressing larger amounts of memory than they can virtually address. Consequently, some memory is not permanently mapped into the kernel address space.

Because of these constraints, there are three memory zones in Linux:

- **ZONE\_DMA** This zone contains pages that are capable of undergoing DMA.
- **ZONE\_NORMAL** This zone contains normal, regularly mapped, pages.
- **ZONE\_HIGHMEM** This zone contains "[high memory](#)," which are pages not permanently mapped into the kernel's address space.

These zones are defined in [`<linux/mmzone.h>`](#).

The actual use and layout of the memory zones is architecture independent. For example, some architectures have no problem performing DMA into any memory address. In those architectures, **ZONE\_DMA** is empty and **ZONE\_NORMAL** is used for allocations regardless of their use. As a counterexample, on the x86 architecture, ISA devices<sup>[1]</sup> cannot perform DMA into the full 32-bit address space, because ISA devices can access only the first 16MB of physical memory. Consequently, **ZONE\_DMA** on x86 consists of all memory in the range 016MB.

[1] Some broken PCI devices can perform DMA into only a 24-bit address space. But they are broken

**ZONE\_HIGHMEM** works in the same regard. What an architecture can and cannot directly map varies. On x86 **ZONE\_HIGHMEM** is all memory above the physical 896MB mark. On other architectures, **ZONE\_HIGHMEM** is empty because all memory is directly mapped.

The memory contained in **ZONE\_HIGHMEM** is called *high memory*<sup>[2]</sup>. The rest of the system's memory is called *low memory*.

[2] This has nothing to do with high memory in DOS.

**ZONE\_NORMAL** tends to be whatever is left over after the previous two zones claim their requisite shares. On x86, for example, **ZONE\_NORMAL** is all physical memory from 16MB to 896MB. On other (more fortunate) architectures, **ZONE\_NORMAL** is all available memory. [Table 11.1](#) is a listing of each zone and its consumed pages on x86.

**Table 11.1. Zones on x86**

Zone	Description	Physical Memory
ZONE_DMA	DMA-able pages	< 16MB
ZONE_NORMAL	Normally addressable pages	16896MB
ZONE_HIGHMEM	Dynamically mapped pages	> 896MB

Linux partitions the system's pages into zones to have a pooling in place to satisfy allocations as needed. For example, having a **ZONE\_DMA** pool gives the kernel the capability to satisfy memory allocations needed for DMA. If such memory is needed, the kernel can simply pull the required number of pages from **ZONE\_DMA**. Note that the zones do not have any physical relevance; they are simply logical groupings used by the kernel to keep track of pages.

Although some allocations may require pages from a particular zone, the zones are not hard requirements in both directions. Although an allocation for DMA-able memory must originate from **ZONE\_DMA**, a normal allocation can come from **ZONE\_DMA** or **ZONE\_NORMAL**. The kernel prefers to satisfy normal allocations from the normal zone, of course, to save the pages in **ZONE\_DMA** for allocations that need it. But if push comes to shove (say, if memory should get low), the kernel can dip its fingers in whatever zone is available and suitable.

Each zone is represented by **struct zone**, which is defined in <linux/mmzone.h>:

```
struct zone {
    spinlock_t      lock;
    unsigned long   free_pages;
    unsigned long   pages_min;
    unsigned long   pages_low;
    unsigned long   pages_high;
    unsigned long   protection[MAX_NR_ZONES];
    spinlock_t      lru_lock;
    struct list_head active_list;
    struct list_head inactive_list;
    unsigned long   nr_scan_active;
    unsigned long   nr_scan_inactive;
    unsigned long   nr_active;
    unsigned long   nr_inactive;
    int             all_unreclaimable;
    unsigned long   pages_scanned;
    int             temp_priority;
    int             prev_priority;
    struct free_area free_area[MAX_ORDER];
    wait_queue_head_t *wait_table;
    unsigned long   wait_table_size;
    unsigned long   wait_table_bits;
    struct per_cpu_pageset pageset[NR_CPUS];
    struct pglist_data *zone_pgdat;
    struct page     *zone_mem_map;
    unsigned long   zone_start_pfn;
    char            *name;
    unsigned long   spanned_pages;
    unsigned long   present_pages;
};
```

The structure is big, but there are only three zones in the system and, thus, only three of these structures. Let's look at the more important fields.

The `lock` field is a spin lock that protects the structure from concurrent access. Note that it protects just the structure, and not all the pages that reside in the zone. A specific lock does not protect individual pages, although parts of the kernel may lock the data that happens to reside in said pages.

The `free_pages` field is the number of free pages in this zone. The kernel tries to keep at least`pages_min` pages free (through swapping), if possible.

The `name` field is, unsurprisingly, aNULL-terminated string representing the name of this zone. The kernel initializes this value during boot in `mm/page_alloc.c` and the three zones are given the names "DMA," "Normal," and "HighMem."

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## Getting Pages

Now with an understanding of how the kernel manages memory via pages, zones, and so on let's look at the interfaces the kernel implements to allow you to allocate and free memory within the kernel.

The kernel provides one low-level mechanism for requesting memory, along with several interfaces to access it. All these interfaces allocate memory with page-sized granularity and are declared in `<linux/gfp.h>`. The core function is

```
struct page * alloc_pages(unsigned int gfp_mask, unsigned int order)
```

This allocates  $2^{\text{order}}$  (that is,  $1 \ll \text{order}$ ) contiguous physical pages and returns a pointer to the first page's `page` structure; on error it returns `NULL`. We will look at the `gfp_mask` parameter in a later section. You can convert a given page to its logical address with the function

```
void * page_address(struct page *page)
```

This returns a pointer to the logical address where the given physical page currently resides. If you have no need for the actual `struct page`, you can call

```
unsigned long __get_free_pages(unsigned int gfp_mask, unsigned int order)
```

This function works the same as `alloc_pages()`, except that it directly returns the logical address of the first requested page. Because the pages are contiguous, the other pages simply follow from the first.

If you need only one page, two functions are implemented as wrappers to save you a bit of typing:

```
struct page * alloc_page(unsigned int gfp_mask)
```

```
unsigned long __get_free_page(unsigned int gfp_mask)
```

These functions work the same as their brethren but pass zero for the order ( $2^0$  = one page).

## Getting Zeroed Pages

If you need the returned page filled with zeros, use the function

```
unsigned long get_zeroed_page(unsigned int gfp_mask)
```

This function works the same as `__get_free_page()`, except that the allocated page is then zero-filled. This is useful for pages given to user-space because the random garbage in an allocated page is not so random it might "randomly" contain sensitive data. All data must be zeroed or otherwise cleaned before it is returned to user-space, to ensure system security is not compromised. [Table 11.2](#) is a listing

of all the low-level page allocation methods.

**Table 11.2. Low-Level Page Allocations Methods**

Flag	Description
<code>alloc_page(gfp_mask)</code>	Allocate a single page and return a pointer to its <code>page</code> structure
<code>alloc_pages(gfp_mask, order)</code>	Allocate $2^{\text{order}}$ pages and return a pointer to the first page's <code>page</code> structure
<code>__get_free_page(gfp_mask)</code>	Allocate a single page and return a pointer to its logical address
<code>__get_free_pages(gfp_mask, order)</code>	Allocate $2^{\text{order}}$ pages and return a pointer to the first page's logical address
<code>get_zeroed_page(gfp_mask)</code>	Allocate a single page, zero its contents, and return a pointer to its logical address

## Freeing pages

A family of functions allows you to free allocated pages when you no longer need them:

```
void __free_pages(struct page *page, unsigned int order)
void free_pages(unsigned long addr, unsigned int order)
void free_page(unsigned long addr)
```

You must be careful to free only pages you allocate. Passing the wrong `struct page` or address, or the incorrect `order`, can result in corruption. Remember, the kernel trusts itself. Unlike user-space, the kernel happily hangs itself if you ask it.

Let's look at an example. Here, we want to allocate eight pages:

```
unsigned long page;

page = __get_free_pages(GFP_KERNEL, 3);
if (!page) {
    /* insufficient memory: you must handle this error! */
    return ENOMEM;
}

/* 'page' is now the address of the first of eight contiguous pages ... */

free_pages(page, 3);

/*
 * our pages are now freed and we should no
 * longer access the address stored in 'page'
*/
```

The `GFP_KERNEL` parameter is an example of `agfp_mask` flag. It is discussed shortly.

Make note of the error checking after the call to `__get_free_pages()`. A kernel allocation *can* fail and your code *must* check for and handle such errors. This might mean unwinding everything you have done thus far. It therefore often makes sense to allocate your memory at the start of the routine, to make handling the error easier. Otherwise, by the time you attempt to allocate memory, it may be rather hard to bail out.

These low-level page functions are useful when you need page-sized chunks of physically contiguous pages, especially if you need exactly a single page or two. For more general byte-sized allocations, the kernel provides `kmalloc()`.

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## kmalloc()

The `kmalloc()` function's operation is very similar to that of user-space's familiar `malloc()` routine, with the exception of the addition of a `flags` parameter. The `kmalloc()` function is a simple interface for obtaining kernel memory in byte-sized chunks. If you need whole pages, the previously discussed interfaces might be a better choice. For most kernel allocations, however, `kmalloc()` is the preferred interface.

The function is declared in `<linux/slab.h>`:

```
void * kmalloc(size_t size, int flags)
```

The function returns a pointer to a region of memory that is at *least* `size` bytes in length<sup>[3]</sup>. The region of memory allocated is physically contiguous. On error, it returns `NULL`. Kernel allocations always succeed, unless there is an insufficient amount of memory available. Thus, you must check for `NULL` after all calls to `kmalloc()` and handle the error appropriately.

<sup>[3]</sup> It may allocate more than you asked, although you have no way of knowing how much more! Because at its heart the kernel allocator is page-based, some allocations may be rounded up to fit within the available memory. The kernel never returns less memory than requested. If the kernel is unable to find at least the requested amount, the allocation fails and the function returns `NULL`.

Let's look at an example. Assume you need to dynamically allocate enough room for a fictional `dog` structure:

```
struct dog *ptr;  
  
ptr = kmalloc(sizeof(struct dog), GFP_KERNEL);  
if (!ptr)  
    /* handle error ... */
```

If the `kmalloc()` call succeeds, `ptr` now points to a block of memory that is at least the requested size. The `GFP_KERNEL` flag specifies the behavior of the memory allocator while trying to obtain the memory to return to the caller of `kmalloc()`.

## gfp\_mask Flags

You've seen various examples of allocator flags in both the low-level page allocation functions and `kmalloc()`. Now it's time to discuss these flags in depth.

The flags are broken up into three categories: action modifiers, zone modifiers, and types. Action modifiers specify *how* the kernel is supposed to allocate the requested memory. In certain situations, only certain methods can be employed to allocate memory. For example, interrupt handlers must instruct the kernel not to sleep (because interrupt handlers cannot reschedule) in the course of allocating memory. Zone modifiers specify *from where* to allocate memory. As you saw earlier in this chapter, the kernel divides physical memory into multiple zones, each of which serves a different purpose. Zone modifiers specify *from which* of these zones to allocate. Type flags specify a combination of action and zone modifiers as needed by a certain *type* of memory allocation. Type flags simplify specifying numerous modifiers; instead, you generally specify just one type flag. The `GFP_KERNEL` is a type flag, which is used for code in process context inside the kernel. Let's look at the flags.

## Action Modifiers

All the flags, the action modifiers included, are declared in `<linux/gfp.h>`. The file `<linux/slab.h>` includes this header, however, so you often need not include it directly. In reality, you will usually use only the type modifiers, which are discussed later. Nonetheless, it is good to have an understanding of these individual flags. [Table 11.3](#) is a list of the action modifiers.

**Table 11.3. Action Modifiers**

Flag	Description
<code>__GFP_WAIT</code>	The allocator can sleep.
<code>__GFP_HIGH</code>	The allocator can access emergency pools.
<code>__GFP_IO</code>	The allocator can start disk I/O.
<code>__GFP_FS</code>	The allocator can start filesystem I/O.
<code>__GFP_COLD</code>	The allocator should use cache cold pages.
<code>__GFP_NOWARN</code>	The allocator will not print failure warnings.
<code>__GFP_REPEAT</code>	The allocator will repeat the allocation if it fails, but the allocation can potentially fail.
<code>__GFP_NOFAIL</code>	The allocator will indefinitely repeat the allocation. The allocation cannot fail.
<code>__GFP_NORETRY</code>	The allocator will never retry if the allocation fails.
<code>__GFP_NO_GROW</code>	Used internally by the slab layer.
<code>__GFP_COMP</code>	Add compound page metadata. Used internally by the <code>hugetlb</code> code.

These allocations can be specified together. For example,

```
ptr = kmalloc(size, __GFP_WAIT | __GFP_IO | __GFP_FS);
```

instructs the page allocator (ultimately `alloc_pages()`) that the allocation can block, perform I/O, and perform filesystem operations, if needed. This allows the kernel great freedom in how it can find the free memory to satisfy the allocation.

Most allocations specify these modifiers, but do so indirectly by way of the type flags we will discuss shortly. Don't worry you won't have to figure out which of these weird flags to use every time you allocate memory!

## Zone Modifiers

Zone modifiers specify from which memory zone the allocation should originate. Normally, allocations can be fulfilled from any zone. The kernel prefers `ZONE_NORMAL`, however, to ensure that the other zones have free pages when they are needed.

There are only two zone modifiers because there are only two zones other than `ZONE_NORMAL` (which is where, by default, allocations originate). [Table 11.4](#) is a listing of the zone modifiers.

**Table 11.4. Zone Modifiers**

Flag	Description
<code>__GFP_DMA</code>	Allocate only from <code>ZONE_DMA</code>
<code>__GFP_HIGHMEM</code>	Allocate from <code>ZONE_HIGHMEM</code> or <code>ZONE_NORMAL</code>

Specifying one of these two flags modifies the zone from which the kernel attempts to satisfy the allocation. The `__GFP_DMA` flag forces the kernel to satisfy the request from `ZONE_DMA`. This flag says, with an odd accent, *I absolutely must have memory into which I can perform DMA*. Conversely, the `__GFP_HIGHMEM` flag instructs the allocator to satisfy the request from either `ZONE_NORMAL` or (preferentially) `ZONE_HIGHMEM`. This flag says, *I can use high memory, so I can be a doll and hand you back some of that, but normal memory works, too*. If neither flag is specified, the kernel fulfills the allocation from either `ZONE_DMA` or `ZONE_NORMAL`, with a strong preference to satisfy the allocation from `ZONE_NORMAL`. No zone flag essentially says, *I don't care so long as it behaves normally*.

You cannot specify `__GFP_HIGHMEM` to either `__get_free_pages()` or `kmalloc()`. Because these both return a logical address, and not a `page` structure, it is possible that these functions would allocate memory that is not currently mapped in the kernel's virtual address space and, thus, does not have a logical address. Only `alloc_pages()` can allocate high memory. The majority of your allocations, however, will not specify a zone modifier because `ZONE_NORMAL` is sufficient.

## Type Flags

The type flags specify the required action and zone modifiers to fulfill a particular type of transaction. Therefore, kernel code tends to use the correct type flag and not specify the myriad of other flags it might need. This is both simpler and less error prone. [Table 11.5](#) is a list of the type flags and [Table 11.6](#) shows which modifiers are associated with each type flag.

**Table 11.5. Type Flags**

Flag	Description
GFP_ATOMIC	The allocation is high priority and must not sleep. This is the flag to use in interrupt handlers, in bottom halves, while holding a spinlock, and in other situations where you cannot sleep.
GFP_NOIO	This allocation can block, but must not initiate disk I/O. This is the flag to use in block I/O code when you cannot cause more disk I/O, which might lead to some unpleasant recursion.
GFP_NOFS	This allocation can block and can initiate disk I/O, if it must, but will not initiate a filesystem operation. This is the flag to use in filesystem code when you cannot start another filesystem operation.
GFP_KERNEL	This is a normal allocation and might block. This is the flag to use in process context code when it is safe to sleep. The kernel will do whatever it has to in order to obtain the memory requested by the caller. This flag should be your first choice.
GFP_USER	This is a normal allocation and might block. This flag is used to allocate memory for user-space processes.
GFP_HIGHUSER	This is an allocation from ZONE_HIGHMEM and might block. This flag is used to allocate memory for user-space processes.
GFP_DMA	This is an allocation from ZONE_DMA. Device drivers that need DMA-able memory use this flag, usually in combination with one of the above.

**Table 11.6. Listing of the Modifiers Behind Each Type Flag**

Flag	Modifier Flags
GFP_ATOMIC	__GFP_HIGH
GFP_NOIO	__GFP_WAIT
GFP_NOFS	(__GFP_WAIT   __GFP_IO)
GFP_KERNEL	(__GFP_WAIT   __GFP_IO   __GFP_FS)
GFP_USER	(__GFP_WAIT   __GFP_IO   __GFP_FS)
GFP_HIGHUSER	(__GFP_WAIT   __GFP_IO   __GFP_FS   __GFP_HIGHMEM)
GFP_DMA	__GFP_DMA

Let's look at the frequently used flags and when and why you might need them. The vast majority of allocations in the kernel use the **GFP\_KERNEL** flag. The resulting allocation is a normal priority allocation that might sleep. Because the call can block, this flag can be used only from process context that can safely reschedule (that is, no locks are held and so on). Because this flag does not make any stipulations as to how the kernel may obtain the requested memory, the memory allocation has a high probability of succeeding.

On the far other end of the spectrum is the **GFP\_ATOMIC** flag. Because this flag specifies a memory allocation that cannot sleep, the allocation is very restrictive in the memory it can obtain for the caller. If no sufficiently sized contiguous chunk of memory is available, the kernel is not very likely to free memory because it cannot put the caller to sleep. Conversely, the **GFP\_KERNEL** allocation can put the caller to sleep to swap inactive pages to disk, flush dirty pages to disk, and so on. Because **GFP\_ATOMIC** is unable to perform any of

these actions, it has less of a chance of succeeding (at least when memory is low) compared to **GFP\_KERNEL** allocations. Nonetheless, the **GFP\_ATOMIC** flag is the only option when the current code is unable to sleep, such as with interrupt handlers, softirqs, and tasklets.

In between these two flags are **GFP\_NOIO** and **GFP\_NOFS**. Allocations initiated with these flags might block, but they refrain from performing certain other operations. A **GFP\_NOIO** allocation does not initiate any disk I/O whatsoever to fulfill the request. On the other hand, **GFP\_NOFS** might initiate disk I/O, but does not initiate filesystem I/O. Why might you need these flags? They are needed for certain low-level block I/O or filesystem code, respectively. Imagine if a common path in the filesystem code allocated memory *without* the **GFP\_NOFS** flag. The allocation could result in *more* filesystem operations, which would then beget other allocations and, thus, more filesystem operations! This could continue indefinitely. Code such as this that invokes the allocator must ensure that the allocator also does not execute it, or else the allocation can create a deadlock. Not surprisingly, the kernel uses these two flags only in a handful of places.

The **GFP\_DMA** flag is used to specify that the allocator must satisfy the request from **ZONE\_DMA**. This flag is used by device drivers, which need DMA-able memory for their devices. Normally, you combine this flag with the **GFP\_ATOMIC** or **GFP\_KERNEL** flag.

In the vast majority of the code that you write you will use either **GFP\_KERNEL** or **GFP\_ATOMIC**. [Table 11.7](#) is a list of the common situations and the flags to use. Regardless of the allocation type, you must check for and handle failures.

**Table 11.7. Which Flag to Use When**

Situation	Solution
Process context, can sleep	Use <b>GFP_KERNEL</b>
Process context, cannot sleep	Use <b>GFP_ATOMIC</b> , or perform your allocations with <b>GFP_KERNEL</b> at an earlier or later point when you can sleep
Interrupt handler	Use <b>GFP_ATOMIC</b>
Softirq	Use <b>GFP_ATOMIC</b>
Tasklet	Use <b>GFP_ATOMIC</b>
Need DMA-able memory, can sleep	Use <b>(GFP_DMA   GFP_KERNEL)</b>
Need DMA-able memory, cannot sleep	Use <b>(GFP_DMA   GFP_ATOMIC)</b> , or perform your allocation at an earlier point when you can sleep

## kfree()

The other end of **kmalloc()** is **kfree()**, which is declared in `<linux/slab.h>`:

```
void kfree(const void *ptr)
```

The **kfree()** method frees a block of memory previously allocated with **kmalloc()**. Calling this function on memory not previously allocated with **kmalloc()**, or on memory which has already been freed, results in very bad things, such as freeing memory belonging to another part of the kernel. Just as in user-space, be careful to balance your allocations with your deallocations to prevent memory leaks and other bugs. Note, calling **kfree(NULL)** is explicitly checked for and safe.

Look at an example of allocating memory in an interrupt handler. In this example, an interrupt handler wants to allocate a buffer to hold

incoming data. The preprocessor macro **BUF\_SIZE** is the size in bytes of this desired buffer, which is presumably larger than just a couple of bytes.

```
char *buf;  
  
buf = kmalloc(BUF_SIZE, GFP_ATOMIC);  
if (!buf)  
    /* error allocting memory ! */
```

Later, when you no longer need the memory, do not forget to free it:

```
kfree(buf);
```

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## vmalloc()

The `vmalloc()` function works in a similar fashion to `kmalloc()`, except it allocates memory that is only virtually contiguous and not necessarily physically contiguous. This is how a user-space allocation function works: The pages returned by `malloc()` are contiguous within the virtual address space of the processor, but there is no guarantee that they are actually contiguous in physical RAM. The `kmalloc()` function guarantees that the pages are physically contiguous (and virtually contiguous). The `vmalloc()` function only ensures that the pages are contiguous within the virtual address space. It does this by allocating potentially noncontiguous chunks of physical memory and "fixing up" the page tables to map the memory into a contiguous chunk of the logical address space.

For the most part, only hardware devices require physically contiguous memory allocations. On many architectures, hardware devices live on the other side of the memory management unit and, thus, do not understand virtual addresses. Consequently, any regions of memory that hardware devices work with must exist as a physically contiguous block and not merely a virtually contiguous one. Blocks of memory used only by software for example, process-related buffers are fine using memory that is only virtually contiguous. In your programming, you will never know the difference. All memory appears to the kernel as logically contiguous.

Despite the fact that physically contiguous memory is required in only certain cases, most kernel code uses `kmalloc()` and not `vmalloc()` to obtain memory. Primarily, this is for performance. The `vmalloc()` function, to make nonphysically contiguous pages contiguous in the virtual address space, must specifically set up the page table entries. Worse, pages obtained via `vmalloc()` must be mapped by their individual pages (because they are not physically contiguous), which results in much greater TLB [4] thrashing than you see when directly mapped memory is used. Because of these concerns, `vmalloc()` is used only when absolutely necessary typically, to obtain very large regions of memory. For example, when modules are dynamically inserted into the kernel, they are loaded into memory created via `vmalloc()`.

[4] The TLB (translation lookaside buffer) is a hardware cache used by most architectures to cache the mapping of virtual addresses to physical addresses. This greatly improves the performance of the system, because most memory access is done via virtual addressing.

The `vmalloc()` function is declared in `<linux/vmalloc.h>` and defined in `mm/vmalloc.c`. Usage is identical to user-space's `malloc()`:

```
void * vmalloc(unsigned long size)
```

The function returns a pointer to at least `size` bytes of virtually contiguous memory. On error, the function returns `NULL`. The function might sleep, and thus cannot be called from interrupt context or other situations where blocking is not permissible.

To free an allocation obtained via `vmalloc()`, use

```
void vfree(void *addr)
```

This function frees the block of memory beginning at `addr` that was previously allocated via `vmalloc()`. The function can also sleep and, thus, cannot be called from interrupt context. It has no return value.

Usage of these functions is simple:

```
char *buf;  
  
buf = vmalloc(16 * PAGE_SIZE); /* get 16 pages */  
if (!buf)  
    /* error! failed to allocate memory */
```

```
/*
 * buf now points to at least a 16*PAGE_SIZE bytes
 * of virtually contiguous block of memory
 */
```

After you are finished with the memory, make sure to free it by using

```
vfree(buf);
```

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## Slab Layer

Allocating and freeing data structures is one of the most common operations inside any kernel. To facilitate frequent allocations and deallocations of data, programmers often introduce *free lists*. A free list contains a block of available, already allocated, data structures. When code requires a new instance of a data structure, it can grab one of the structures off the free list rather than allocate the sufficient amount of memory and set it up for the data structure. Later on, when the data structure is no longer needed, it is returned to the free list instead of deallocated. In this sense, the free list acts as an object cache, caching a frequently used *type* of object.

One of the main problems with free lists in the kernel is that there exists no global control. When available memory is low, there is no way for the kernel to communicate to every free list that it should shrink the sizes of its cache to free up memory. In fact, the kernel has no understanding of the random free lists at all. To remedy this, and to consolidate code, the Linux kernel provides the slab layer (also called the slab allocator). The slab layer acts as a generic data structure-caching layer.

The concept of a slab allocator was first implemented in Sun Microsystem's SunOS 5.4 operating system<sup>[5]</sup>. The Linux data structurecaching layer shares the same name and basic design.

[5] And subsequently documented in Bonwick, J. "The Slab Allocator: An Object-Caching Kernel Memory Allocator," USENIX, 1994.

The slab layer attempts to leverage several basic tenets:

- Frequently used data structures tend to be allocated and freed often, so cache them.
- Frequent allocation and deallocation can result in memory fragmentation (the inability to find large contiguous chunks of available memory). To prevent this, the cached free lists are arranged contiguously. Because freed data structures return to the free list, there is no resulting fragmentation.
- The free list provides improved performance during frequent allocation and deallocation because a freed object can be immediately returned to the next allocation.
- If the allocator is aware of concepts such as object size, page size, and total cache size, it can make more intelligent decisions.
- If part of the cache is made per-processor (separate and unique to each processor on the system), allocations and frees can be performed without an SMP lock.
- If the allocator is NUMA-aware, it can fulfill allocations from the same memory node as the requestor.
- Stored objects can be *colored* to prevent multiple objects from mapping to the same cache lines.

The slab layer in Linux was designed and implemented with these premises in mind.

## Design of the Slab Layer

The slab layer divides different objects into groups called *caches*, each of which stores a different type of object. There is one cache per object type. For example, one cache is for process descriptors (a free list of `task_struct` structures), whereas another cache is for inode objects (`struct inode`). Interestingly, the `kmalloc()` interface is built on top of the slab layer, using a family of general purpose caches.

The caches are then divided into *slabs* (hence the name of this subsystem). The slabs are composed of one or more physically

contiguous pages. Typically, slabs are composed of only a single page. Each cache may consist of multiple slabs.

Each slab contains some number of *objects*, which are the data structures being cached. Each slab is in one of three states: full, partial, or empty. A full slab has no free objects (all objects in the slab are allocated). An empty slab has no allocated objects (all objects in the slab are free). A partial slab has some allocated objects and some free objects. When some part of the kernel requests a new object, the request is satisfied from a partial slab, if one exists. Otherwise, the request is satisfied from an empty slab. If there exists no empty slab, one is created. Obviously, a full slab can never satisfy a request because it does not have any free objects. This strategy reduces fragmentation.

Let's look at the `inode` structure as an example, which is the in-memory representation of a disk inode (see [Chapter 12](#)). These structures are frequently created and destroyed, so it makes sense to manage them via the slab allocator. Thus, `struct inode` is allocated from the `inode_cachep` cache (such a naming convention is standard). This cache is made up of one or more slabs probably a lot of slabs because there are a lot of objects. Each slab contains as many `struct inode` objects as possible. When the kernel requests a new `inode` structure, the kernel returns a pointer to an already allocated, but unused structure from a partial slab or, if there is no partial slab, an empty slab. When the kernel is done using the `inode` object, the slab allocator marks the object as free. [Figure 11.1](#) diagrams the relationship between caches, slabs, and objects.

**Figure 11.1. The relationship between caches, slabs, and objects.**



Each cache is represented by a `kmem_cache_s` structure. This structure contains three lists: `slabs_full`, `slabs_partial`, and `slabs_empty` stored inside a `kmem_list3` structure. These lists contain all the slabs associated with the cache. A slab descriptor `struct slab`, represents each slab:

```
struct slab {
```

```
struct list_head list; /* full, partial, or empty list */
unsigned long colouroff; /* offset for the slab coloring */
void *s_mem; /* first object in the slab */
unsigned int inuse; /* allocated objects in the slab */
kmem_bufctl_t free; /* first free object, if any */
};
```

Slab descriptors are allocated either outside the slab in a general cache or inside the slab itself, at the beginning. The descriptor is stored inside the slab if the total size of the slab is sufficiently small, or if internal slack space is sufficient to hold the descriptor.

The slab allocator creates new slabs by interfacing with the low-level kernel page allocator via `__get_free_pages()`:

```
static void *kmem_getpages(kmem_cache_t *cachep, int flags, int nodeid)
{
    struct page *page;
    void *addr;
    int i;

    flags |= cachep->gfpflags;
    if (likely(nodeid == -1)) {
        addr = (void *)__get_free_pages(flags, cachep->gfporder);
        if (!addr)
            return NULL;
        page = virt_to_page(addr);
    } else {
        page = alloc_pages_node(nodeid, flags, cachep->gfporder);
        if (!page)
            return NULL;
        addr = page_address(page);
    }

    i = (1 << cachep->gfporder);
    if (cachep->flags & SLAB_RECLAIM_ACCOUNT)
        atomic_add(i, &slab_reclaim_pages);
    add_page_state(nr_slab, i);
    while (i--) {
        SetPageSlab(page);
        page++;
    }
    return addr;
}
```

This function uses `__get_free_pages()` to allocate memory sufficient to hold the cache. The first parameter to this function points to the specific cache that needs more pages. The second parameter points to the flags given to `__get_free_pages()`. Note how this value is binary OR'ed against another value. This adds default flags that the cache requires to the `flags` parameter. The power-of-two size of the allocation is stored in `cachep->gfporder`. The previous function is a bit more complicated than one might expect because code that makes the allocator NUMA-aware. When `nodeid` is not negative one, the allocator attempts to fulfill the allocation from the same memory node that requested the allocation. This provides better performance on NUMA systems, where accessing memory outside your node results in a performance penalty.

For educational purposes, we can ignore the NUMA-aware code and write a simple `kmem_getpages()`:

```
static inline void * kmem_getpages(kmem_cache_t *cachep, unsigned long flags)
{
    void *addr;

    flags |= cachep->gfpflags;
```

```
addr = (void*) __get_free_pages(flags, cachep->gfporder);

return addr;
}
```

Memory is then freed by `kmem_freepages()`, which calls `free_pages()` on the given cache's pages. Of course, the point of the slab layer is to refrain from allocating and freeing pages. In turn, the slab layer invokes the page allocation function only when there does not exist any partial or empty slabs in a given cache. The freeing function is called only when available memory grows low and the system is attempting to free memory, or when a cache is explicitly destroyed.

The slab layer is managed on a per-cache basis through a simple interface, which is exported to the entire kernel. The interface allows the creation and destruction of new caches and the allocation and freeing of objects within the caches. The sophisticated management of caches and the slabs within is entirely handled by the internals of the slab layer. After you create a cache, the slab layer works just like a specialized allocator for the specific type of object.

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## Slab Allocator Interface

A new cache is created via

```
kmem_cache_t * kmem_cache_create(const char *name, size_t size,
    size_t align, unsigned long flags,
    void (*ctor)(void*, kmem_cache_t *, unsigned long),
    void (*dtor)(void*, kmem_cache_t *, unsigned long))
```

The first parameter is a string storing the name of the cache. The second parameter is the size of each element in the cache. The third parameter is the offset of the first object within a slab. This is done to ensure a particular alignment within the page. Normally, zero is sufficient, which results in the standard alignment. The `flags` parameter specifies optional settings controlling the cache's behavior. It can be zero, specifying no special behavior, or one or more of the following flags OR'ed together:

**SLAB\_NO\_REAP** This flag instructs the slab layer not to automatically reap objects (that is, free the memory backing unused objects) when memory is low. Normally, you do *not* want to set this flag because your cache could then prevent the system from recovering enough memory to continue operation when memory is low.

**SLAB\_HWCACHE\_ALIGN** This flag instructs the slab layer to align each object within a slab to a cache line. This prevents "false sharing" (two or more objects mapping to the same cache line despite existing at different addresses in memory). This improves performance, but comes at a cost of increased memory footprint because the stricter alignment results in more wasted slack space. How large the increase in memory consumption is depends on the size of the objects and how they naturally align with respect to the system's cache lines. For frequently used caches in performance-critical code, setting this option is a good idea; otherwise, think twice.

**SLAB\_MUST\_HWCACHE\_ALIGN** If debugging is enabled, it might be infeasible to both perform debugging and cache-align the objects. This flag forces the slab layer to cache-align the objects. Normally, this flag is not needed and the previous is sufficient. Specifying this flag while slab debugging is enabled (it is disabled by default) might result in a large increase in memory consumption. Only objects where cache alignment is critical, such as the process descriptor, should set this flag.

**SLAB\_POISON** This flag causes the slab layer to fill the slab with a known value (a5a5a5a5). This is called *poisoning* and is useful for catching access to uninitialized memory.

**SLAB\_RED\_ZONE** This flag causes the slab layer to insert "red zones" around the allocated memory to help detect buffer overruns.

**SLAB\_PANIC** This flag causes the slab layer to panic if the allocation fails. This flag is useful when the allocation *must not fail*, as in, say, allocating the VMA structure cache (see [Chapter 14](#), "The Process Address Space") during bootup.

**SLAB\_CACHE\_DMA** This flag instructs the slab layer to allocate each slab in DMA-able memory. This is needed if the allocated object is used for DMA and must reside in `ZONE_DMA`. Otherwise, you do not need this and you should not set it.

The final two parameters, `ctor` and `dtor`, are a constructor and destructor for the cache, respectively. The constructor is called whenever new pages are added to the cache. The destructor is called whenever pages are removed from the cache. Having a destructor requires a constructor. In practice, caches in the Linux kernel do not often utilize a constructor or destructor. You can pass `NULL` for both of these

parameters.

On success, `kmem_cache_create()` returns a pointer to the created cache. Otherwise, it returns `NULL`. This function must not be called from interrupt context because it can sleep.

To destroy a cache, call

```
int kmem_cache_destroy(kmem_cache_t *cachep)
```

As the name implies, this function destroys the given cache. It is generally invoked from module shutdown code in modules that create their own caches. It must not be called from interrupt context because it may sleep. The caller of this function must ensure two conditions are true prior to invoking this function:

- All slabs in the cache are empty. Indeed, if an object in one of the slabs were still allocated and in use, how could the cache be destroyed?
  - No one accesses the cache during (and obviously after) a call to `kmem_cache_destroy()`. The caller must ensure this synchronization.

On success, the function returns zero; it returns nonzero otherwise.

After a cache is created, an object is obtained from the cache via

```
void * kmem_cache_alloc(kmem_cache_t *cache, int flags)
```

This function returns a pointer to an object from the given cache `cachep`. If no free objects are in any slabs in the cache, and the slab layer must obtain new pages via `kmem_getpages()`, the value of `flags` is passed to `__get_free_pages()`. These are the same flags we looked at earlier. You probably want `GFP_KERNEL` or `GFP_ATOMIC`.

To later free an object and return it to its originating slab, use the function

```
void kmem_cache_free(kmem_cache_t *cachep, void *objp)
```

This marks the object `objp` in `cachep` as free.

## Example of Using the Slab Allocator

Let's look at a real-life example that uses the `task_struct` structure (the process descriptor). This code, in slightly more complicated form, is in `kernel/fork.c`.

First, the kernel has a global variable that stores a pointer to the `task_struct` cache:

```
kmem_cache_t *task_struct_cachep;
```

During kernel initialization, in `fork_init()`, the cache is created:

```
ARCH_MIN_TASKALIGN,  
SLAB_PANIC,  
NULL,  
NULL);
```

This creates a cache named `task_struct`, which stores objects of type `struct task_struct`. The objects are created with an offset of `ARCH_MIN_TASKALIGN` bytes within the slab. This preprocessor define is an architecture-specific value. It is usually defined as `L1_CACHE_BYTES` the size in bytes of the L1 cache. There is no constructor or destructor. Note that the return value is not checked for `NULL`, which denotes failure, because the `SLAB_PANIC` flag was given. If the allocation fails, the slab allocator calls `panic()`. If you do not provide this flag, you must check the return! The `SLAB_PANIC` flag is used here because this is a requisite cache for system operation (the machine is not much good without process descriptors).

Each time a process calls `fork()`, a new process descriptor must be created (recall [Chapter 3](#), "Process Management"). This is done in `dup_task_struct()`, which is called from `do_fork()`:

```
struct task_struct *tsk;  
  
tsk = kmem_cache_alloc(task_struct_cachep, GFP_KERNEL);  
if (!tsk)  
    return NULL;
```

After a task dies, if it has no children waiting on it, its process descriptor is freed and returned to the `task_struct_cachep` slab cache. This is done in `free_task_struct()` (where `tsk` is the exiting task):

```
kmem_cache_free(task_struct_cachep, tsk);
```

Because process descriptors are part of the core kernel and always needed, the `task_struct_cachep` cache is never destroyed. If it were, however, you would destroy the cache via

```
int err;  
  
err = kmem_cache_destroy(task_struct_cachep);  
if (err)  
    /* error destroying cache */
```

Easy enough? The slab layer handles all the low-level alignment, coloring, allocations, freeing, and reaping during low-memory conditions. If you are frequently creating many objects of the same type, consider using the slab cache. Definitely do not implement your own free list!

## Statically Allocating on the Stack

In user-space, allocations such as some of the examples discussed thus far could have occurred on the stack because we knew the size of the allocation a priori. User-space is afforded the luxury of a very large and dynamically growing stack, whereas the kernel has no such luxury—the kernel's stack is small and fixed. When each process is given a small, fixed stack, memory consumption is minimized and the kernel need not burden itself with stack management code.

The size of the per-process kernel stacks depends on both the architecture and a compile-time option. Historically, the kernel stack has been two pages per process. This is usually 8KB for 32-bit architectures and 16KB for 64-bit architectures because they usually have 4KB and 8KB pages, respectively.

Early in the 2.6 kernel series, however, an option was introduced to move to single-page kernel stacks. When enabled, each process is given only a single page—4KB on 32-bit architectures, 8KB on 64-bit architectures. This was done for two reasons. First, it results in a page with less memory consumption per process. Second and most important is that as uptime increases, it becomes increasingly hard to find two physically contiguous unallocated pages. Physical memory becomes fragmented, and the resulting VM pressure from allocating a single new process is expensive.

There is one more complication. Keep with me: We have almost grasped the entire universe of knowledge with respect to kernel stacks. Now, each process's entire call chain has to fit in its kernel stack. Historically, however, interrupt handlers also used the kernel stack of the process they interrupted, thus they too had to fit. This was efficient and simple, but it placed even tighter constraints on the already meager kernel stack. When the stack moved to only a single page, interrupt handlers no longer fit.

To rectify this problem, an additional option was implemented: interrupt stacks. Interrupt stacks provide a single per-processor stack used for interrupt handlers. With this option, interrupt handlers no longer share the kernel stack of the interrupted process. Instead, they use their own stacks. This consumes only a single page per processor.

Summarily, kernel stacks are either one or two pages, depending on compile-time configuration options. The stack can therefore range from 4 to 16KB. Historically, interrupt handlers shared the stack of the interrupted process. When single page stacks are enabled, interrupt handlers are given their own stacks. In any case, unbounded recursion and `alloca()` are obviously not allowed.

Okay. Got it?

## Playing Fair on the Stack

In any given function, you must keep stack usage to a minimum. There is no hard and fast rule, but you should keep the sum of all local (that is, automatic) variables in a particular function to a maximum of a couple hundred bytes. Performing a large static allocation on the stack, such as of a large array or structure, is dangerous. Otherwise, stack allocations are performed in the kernel just as in user-space. Stack overflows occur silently and will undoubtedly result in problems. Because the kernel does not make any effort to manage the stack, when the stack overflows, the excess data simply spills into whatever exists at the tail end of the stack. The first thing to eat it is the `tHRead_info` structure. (Recall from [Chapter 3](#) that this structure is allocated at the end of each process's kernel stack.) Beyond the stack, any kernel data might lurk. At best, the machine will crash when the stack overflows. At worst, the overflow will silently corrupt data.

Therefore, it is wise to use a dynamic allocation scheme, such as one of those discussed earlier in this chapter for any large memory allocations.

## High Memory Mappings

By definition, pages in high memory might not be permanently mapped into the kernel's address space. Thus, pages obtained via `alloc_pages()` with the `__GFP_HIGHMEM` flag might not have a logical address.

On the x86 architecture, all physical memory beyond the 896MB mark is high memory and is not permanently or automatically mapped into the kernel's address space, despite x86 processors being capable of physically addressing up to 4GB (64GB with PAE<sup>[6]</sup>) of physical RAM. After they are allocated, these pages must be mapped into the kernel's logical address space. On x86, pages in high memory are mapped somewhere between the 3 and 4GB mark.

[6] PAE stands for Physical Address Extension. It is a feature of x86 processors that enables them to physically address 36 bits (64GB) worth of memory, despite having only a 32-bit virtual address space.

## Permanent Mappings

To map a given `page` structure into the kernel's address space, use

```
void *kmap(struct page *page)
```

This function works on either high or low memory. If the `page` structure belongs to a page in low memory, the page's virtual address is simply returned. If the page resides in high memory, a permanent mapping is created and the address is returned. The function may sleep, so `kmap()` works only in process context.

Because the number of permanent mappings are limited (if not, we would not be in this mess and could just permanently map all memory), high memory should be unmapped when no longer needed. This is done via

```
void kunmap(struct page *page)
```

which unmaps the given `page`.

## Temporary Mappings

For times when a mapping must be created but the current context is unable to sleep, the kernel provides *temporary mappings* (which are also called *atomic mappings*). These are a set of reserved mappings that can hold a temporary mapping. The kernel can atomically map a high memory page into one of these reserved mappings. Consequently, a temporary mapping can be used in places that cannot sleep, such as interrupt handlers, because obtaining the mapping never blocks.

Setting up a temporary mapping is done via

```
void *kmap_atomic(struct page *page, enum km_type type)
```

The `type` parameter is one of the following enumerations, which describe the purpose of the temporary mapping. They are defined in `<asm/kmap_types.h>`:

```
enum km_type {
    KM_BOUCLE_READ,
    KM_SKB_SUNRPC_DATA,
    KM_SKB_DATA_SOFTIRQ,
    KM_USER0,
    KM_USER1,
    KM_BIO_SRC_IRQ,
    KM_BIO_DST_IRQ,
    KM_PTE0,
    KM_PTE1,
    KM_PTE2,
    KM_IRQ0,
    KM_IRQ1,
    KM_SOFTIRQ0,
    KM_SOFTIRQ1,
    KM_TYPE_NR
};
```

This function does not block and thus can be used in interrupt context and other places that cannot reschedule. It also disables kernel preemption, which is needed because the mappings are unique to each processor (and a reschedule might change which task is running on which processor).

The mapping is undone via

```
void kunmap_atomic(void *kvaddr, enum km_type type)
```

This function also does not block. In fact, in many architectures it does not do anything at all except enable kernel preemption, because a temporary mapping is valid only until the next temporary mapping. Thus, the kernel can just "forget about" the `kmap_atomic()` mapping, and `kunmap_atomic()` does not need to do anything special. The next atomic mapping then simply overwrites the previous one.

## Per-CPU Allocations

Modern SMP-capable operating systems use per-CPU data that is unique to a given processor extensively. Typically, per-CPU data is stored in an array. Each item in the array corresponds to a possible processor on the system. The current processor number indexes this array, which is how the 2.4 kernel handles per-CPU data. Nothing is wrong with this approach, so plenty of 2.6 kernel code still uses it. You declare the data as

```
unsigned long my_percpu[NR_CPUS];
```

Then you access it as

```
int cpu;  
  
cpu = get_cpu(); /* get current processor and disable kernel preemption */  
my_percpu[cpu]++; /* ... or whatever */  
printk("my_percpu on cpu=%d is %lu\n", cpu, my_percpu[cpu]);  
put_cpu(); /* enable kernel preemption */
```

Note that no lock is required because this data is unique to the current processor. So long as no processor touches this data except the current, no concurrency concerns exist, and the current processor can safely access the data without lock.

Kernel preemption is the only concern with per-CPU data. Kernel preemption poses two problems, listed here:

- If your code is preempted and reschedules on another processor, the `cpu` variable is no longer valid because it points to the wrong processor. (In general, code cannot sleep after obtaining the current processor.)
- If another task preempts your code, it can concurrently access `my_percpu` on the *same* processor, which is a race condition.

Any fears are unwarranted, however, because the call `get_cpu()`, on top of returning the current processor number, also disables kernel preemption. The corresponding call to `put_cpu()` enables kernel preemption. Note that if you use a call to `smp_processor_id()` to get the current processor number, kernel preemption is not disabled—always use the aforementioned methods to remain safe.

## The New `percpu` Interface

The 2.6 kernel introduced a new interface, known as `percpu`, for creating and manipulating per-CPU data. This interface generalizes the previous example. Creation and manipulation of per-CPU data is simplified with this new approach.

The previously discussed method of creating and accessing per-CPU data is still valid and accepted. This new interface, however, grew out of the needs for a simpler and more powerful method for manipulating per-CPU data on large symmetrical multiprocessing computers.

The header `<linux/percpu.h>` declares all the routines. You can find the actual definitions there, `imm/slab.c`, and in `<asm/percpu.h>`.

## Per-CPU Data at Compile-Time

Defining a per-CPU variable at compile-time is quite easy:

```
DEFINE_PER_CPU(type, name);
```

This creates an instance of a variable of type `type`, named `name`, for each processor on the system. If you need a declaration of the variable elsewhere, to avoid compile warnings, the following macro is your friend:

```
DECLARE_PER_CPU(type, name);
```

You can manipulate the variables with the `get_cpu_var()` and `put_cpu_var()` routines. A call to `get_cpu_var()` returns an lvalue for the given variable on the current processor. It also disables preemption, which `put_cpu_var()` correspondingly enables.

```
get_cpu_var(name)++; /* increment name on this processor */  
put_cpu_var(name); /* done; enable kernel preemption */
```

You can obtain the value of *another* processor's per-CPU data, too:

```
per_cpu(name, cpu)++; /* increment name on the given processor */
```

You need to be careful with this approach because `per_cpu()` neither disables kernel preemption nor provides any sort of locking mechanism. The lockless nature of per-CPU data exists only if the current processor is the only manipulator of the data. If other processors touch other processors' data, you need locks. Be careful. [Chapter 8, "Kernel Synchronization Introduction,"](#) and [Chapter 9, "Kernel Synchronization Methods,"](#) discuss locking.

Another subtle note: These compile-time per-CPU examples do not work for modules because the linker actually creates them in a unique executable section (for the curious, `.data.percpu`). If you need to access per-CPU data from modules, or if you need to create such data dynamically, there is hope.

## Per-CPU Data at Runtime

The kernel implements a dynamic allocator, similar to `kmalloc()`, for creating per-CPU data. This routine creates an instance of the requested memory for each processor on the systems. The prototypes are in `<linux/percpu.h>`:

```
void *alloc_percpu(type); /* a macro */
void * __alloc_percpu(size_t size, size_t align);
void free_percpu(const void *);
```

The `alloc_percpu()` macro allocates one instance of an object of the given type for every processor on the system. It is a wrapper around `__alloc_percpu()`, which takes the actual number of bytes to allocate as a parameter and the number of bytes on which to align the allocation. The `alloc_percpu()` macro aligns the allocation on a byte boundary that is the natural alignment of the given type. Such alignment is the usual behavior. For example,

```
struct rabid_cheetah = alloc_percpu(struct rabid_cheetah);
```

is the same as

```
struct rabid_cheetah = __alloc_percpu(sizeof (struct rabid_cheetah),
                                         __alignof__(struct rabid_cheetah));
```

The `__alignof__` construct is a gcc feature that returns the required (or recommended, in the case of weird architectures with no alignment requirements) alignment in bytes for a given type or lvalue. Its syntax is just like that of `sizeof`. For example,

```
__alignof__(unsigned long)
```

would return four on x86. When given an lvalue, the return value is the largest alignment that the lvalue might have. For example, an lvalue inside a structure could have a greater alignment requirement than if an instance of the same type were created outside of the structure, because of structure alignment requirements. Issues of alignment are further discussed in [Chapter 19](#), "Portability."

A corresponding call to `free_percpu()` frees the given data on all processors.

A call to `alloc_percpu()` or `__alloc_percpu()` returns a pointer, which is used to indirectly reference the dynamically created per-CPU data. The kernel provides two macros to make this easy:

```
get_cpu_ptr(ptr); /* return a void pointer to this processor's copy of ptr */
put_cpu_ptr(ptr); /* done; enable kernel preemption */
```

The `get_cpu_ptr()` macro returns a pointer to the specific instance of the current processor's data. It also disables kernel preemption, which a call to `put_cpu_ptr()` then enables.

Let's look at a full example of using these functions. Of course, this example is a bit silly because you would normally allocate the memory once (perhaps in some initialization function), use it in various places, and free it once (perhaps in some shutdown function). Nevertheless, this example should make usage quite clear:

```
void *percpu_ptr;
```

```
unsigned long *foo;

percpu_ptr = alloc_percpu(unsigned long);
if (!ptr)
    /* error allocating memory .. */

foo = get_cpu_ptr(percpu_ptr);
/* manipulate foo .. */
put_cpu_ptr(percpu_ptr);
```

Finally, the function `per_cpu_ptr()` returns a given processor's unique data:

```
per_cpu_ptr(ptr, cpu);
```

Again, it does not disable kernel preemption and if you touch another processor's data keep in mind that you probably need to implement locking.

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## Reasons for Using Per-CPU Data

There are a couple benefits to using per-CPU data. The first is the reduction in locking requirements. Depending on the semantics by which processors access the per-CPU data, you might not need any locking at all. Keep in mind that the "*only this processor accesses this data*" rule is only a programming convention. You need to ensure that the local processor accesses only its unique data. Nothing stops you from cheating.

Second, per-CPU data greatly reduces cache invalidation. This occurs as processors try to keep their caches in sync. If one processor manipulates data held in another processor's cache, that processor must flush or otherwise update its cache. Constant cache invalidation is called *thrashing the cache* and wreaks havoc on system performance. The use of per-CPU data keeps cache effects to a minimum because processors ideally access only their own data. The `percpu` interface cache-aligns all data to ensure that accessing one processor's data does not bring in another processor's data on the same cache line.

Consequently, the use of per-CPU data often removes (or at least minimizes) the need for locking. The only safety requirement for the use of per-CPU data is disabling kernel preemption, which is much cheaper than locking, and the interface does so automatically. Per-CPU data can safely be used from either interrupt or process context. Note, however, that you cannot sleep in the middle of accessing per-CPU data (or else you might end up on a different processor).

No one is currently required to use the new per-CPU interface. Doing things manually (with an array as originally discussed) is fine, as long as you disable kernel preemption. The new interface, however, is much easier to use and might gain additional optimizations in the future. If you do decide to use per-CPU data in your kernel code, consider the new interface. One caveat *against* its use is that it is not backward compatible with earlier kernels.

## Which Allocation Method Should I Use?

If you need contiguous physical pages, use one of the low-level page allocators or `kmalloc()`. This is the standard manner of allocating memory from within the kernel, and most likely, how you will allocate most of your memory. Recall that the two most common flags given to these functions are `GFP_ATOMIC` and `GFP_KERNEL`. Specify the `GFP_ATOMIC` flag to perform a high priority allocation that will not sleep. This is a requirement of interrupt handlers and other pieces of code that cannot sleep. Code that can sleep, such as process context code that does not hold a spin lock, should use `GFP_KERNEL`. This flag specifies an allocation that can sleep, if needed, to obtain the requested memory.

If you want to allocate from high memory, use `alloc_pages()`. The `alloc_pages()` function returns a `struct page`, and not a pointer to a logical address. Because high memory might not be mapped, the only way to access it might be via the corresponding `struct page` structure. To obtain an actual pointer, use `kmap()` to map the high memory into the kernel's logical address space.

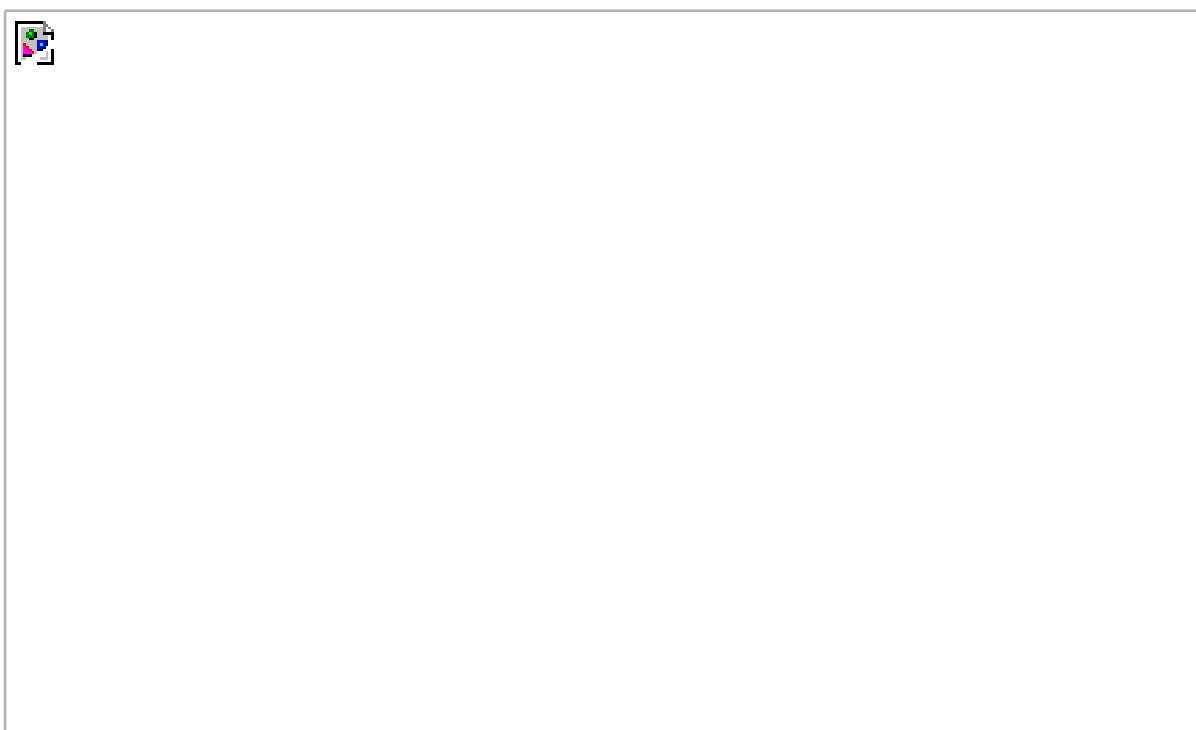
If you do not need physically contiguous pages only virtually contiguous use `vmalloc()`, although bear in mind the slight performance hit taken with `vmalloc()` over `kmalloc()`. The `vmalloc()` function allocates kernel memory that is virtually contiguous but not, per se, physically contiguous. It performs this feat much as user-space allocations do, by mapping chunks of physical memory into a contiguous logical address space.

If you are creating and destroying many large data structures, consider setting up a slab cache. The slab layer maintains a per-processor object cache (a free list), which might greatly enhance object allocation and deallocation performance. Rather than frequently allocate and free memory, the slab layer stores a cache of already allocated objects for you. When you need a new chunk of memory to hold your data structure, the slab layer often does not need to allocate more memory and instead simply can return an object from the cache.

## Chapter 12. The Virtual Filesystem

The Virtual Filesystem (sometimes called the *Virtual File Switch* or more commonly simply the *VFS*) is the subsystem of the kernel that implements the filesystem-related interfaces provided to user-space programs. All filesystems rely on the VFS to allow them not only to coexist, but also to interoperate. This enables programs to use standard Unix system calls to read and write to different filesystems on different media, as shown in [Figure 12.1](#).

**Figure 12.1. The VFS in action: Using the cp(1) utility to move data from a hard disk mounted as ext3 to a removable disk mounted as ext2. Two different filesystems, two different media. One VFS.**



## Common Filesystem Interface

The VFS is the glue that enables system calls such as `open()`, `read()`, and `write()` to work regardless of the filesystem or underlying physical medium. It might not sound impressive these days we have long been taking such a feature for granted but it is a nontrivial feat for such generic system calls to work across all supported filesystems and media. More so, the system calls work *between* these different filesystems and media we can use standard system calls to copy or move files from one filesystem to another. In older operating systems (think DOS), this would never have worked; any access to a nonnative filesystem would require special tools. It is only because modern operating systems, Linux included, abstract access to the filesystems via a virtual interface that such interoperation and generic access is possible. New filesystems and new varieties of storage media can find their way into Linux, and programs need not be rewritten or even recompiled.



## Filesystem Abstraction Layer

Such a generic interface for any type of filesystem is feasible only because the kernel itself implements an abstraction layer around its low-level filesystem interface. This abstraction layer enables Linux to support different filesystems, even if they differ greatly in supported features or behavior. This is possible because the VFS provides a common file model that is capable of representing any conceivable filesystem's general features and behavior. Of course, it is biased toward Unix-style filesystems (you will see what constitutes a Unix-style filesystem later in this chapter). Regardless, wildly different filesystems are still supportable in Linux.

The abstraction layer works by defining the basic conceptual interfaces and data structures that all filesystems support. The filesystems mold their view of concepts such as "*this is how I open files*" and "*this is what a directory is to me*" to match the expectations of the VFS. The actual filesystem code hides the implementation details. To the VFS layer and the rest of the kernel, however, each filesystem looks the same. They all support notions such as files and directories, and they all support operations such as creating and deleting files.

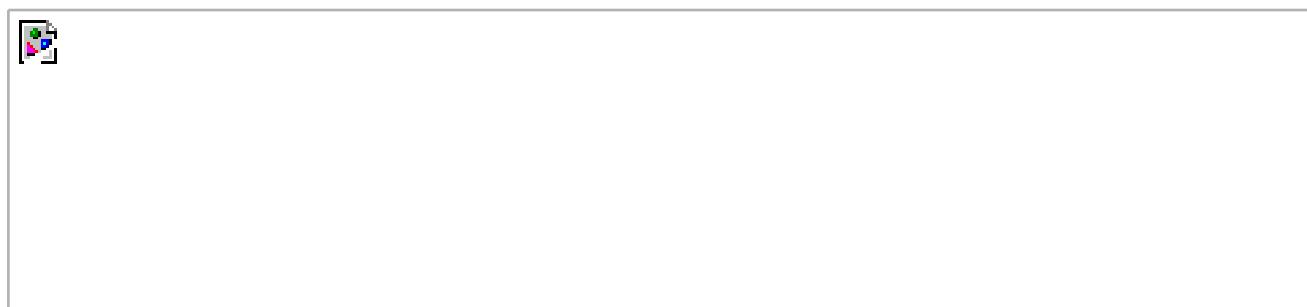
The result is a general abstraction layer that enables the kernel to support many types of filesystems easily and cleanly. The filesystems are programmed to provide the abstracted interfaces and data structures the VFS expects; in turn, the kernel easily works with any filesystem and the exported user-space interface seamlessly works on any filesystem.

In fact, nothing in the kernel needs to understand the underlying details of the filesystems, except the filesystems themselves. For example, consider a simple user-space program that does

```
write(f, &buf, len);
```

This writes the `len` bytes pointed to by `&buf` into the current position in the file represented by the file descriptor `f`. This system call is first handled by a generic `sys_write()` system call that determines the actual file writing method for the filesystem on which `f` resides. The generic write system call then invokes this method, which is part of the filesystem implementation, to write the data to the media (or whatever this filesystem does on write). [Figure 12.2](#) shows the flow from user-space's `write()` call through the data arriving on the physical media. On one side of the system call is the generic VFS interface, providing the frontend to user-space; on the other side of the system call is the filesystem-specific backend, dealing with the implementation details. The rest of this chapter looks at how the VFS achieves this abstraction and provides its interfaces.

**Figure 12.2. The flow of data from user-space issuing a `write()` call, through the VFS's generic system call, into the filesystem's specific `write` method, and finally arriving at the physical media.**



## Unix Filesystems

Historically, Unix has provided four basic filesystem-related abstractions: files, directory entries, inodes, and mount points.

A *filesystem* is a hierarchical storage of data adhering to a specific structure. Filesystems contain files, directories, and associated control information. Typical operations performed on filesystems are creation, deletion, and mounting. In Unix, filesystems are mounted at a specific mount point in a global hierarchy<sup>[1]</sup> known as a *namespace*. This enables all mounted filesystems to appear as entries in a single tree<sup>[2]</sup>.

[1] Recently, Linux has made this hierarchy per-process, to give a unique namespace to each process. Because each process inherits its parent's namespace (unless you specify otherwise), there is seemingly one global namespace.

[2] As opposed to at a given drive letter, such as C:, which breaks the namespace up among partition and device boundaries. Because this is an arbitrary delineation to present to the user, it is considered far less than ideal.

A *file* is an ordered string of bytes. The first byte marks the beginning of the file and the last byte marks the end of the file. Each file is assigned a human-readable name for identification by both the system and the user. Typical file operations are read, write, create, and delete. The Unix concept of the file is in stark contrast to record-oriented filesystems, such as OpenVMS's Files-11. Record-oriented filesystems provide a richer, more structured representation of files than Unix's simple byte-stream abstraction, at the cost of simplicity and ultimate flexibility.

Files are organized in directories. A *directory* is analogous to a folder and usually contains related files. Directories can also contain subdirectories; in this fashion, directories may be nested to form paths. Each component of a path is called a *directory entry*. A path example is "/home/wolfman/butter" the root directory /, the directories home and wolfman, and the file butter are all directory entries, called *dirent*s. In Unix, directories are actually normal files that simply list the files contained therein. Because a directory is a file to the VFS, the same operations performed on files can be performed on directories.

Unix systems separate the concept of a file from any associated information about it, such as access permissions, size, owner, creation time, and so on. This information is sometimes called *file metadata* (that is, data about the file's data) and is stored in a separate data structure from the file, called the *inode*. This name is short for *index node*, although these days the term "inode" is much more ubiquitous.

All this information is tied together with the filesystem's control information, which is stored in the superblock. The superblock is a data structure containing information about the filesystem as a whole. Sometimes the collective data is referred to as *filesystem metadata*. Filesystem metadata includes information about both the individual files and the filesystem as a whole.

Traditional, Unix filesystems implement these notions as part of their physical on-disk layout. For example, file information is stored as an inode in a separate block on the disk; directories are files; control information is stored centrally in a superblock, and so on. The Linux VFS is designed to work with filesystems that understand and implement such concepts. Non-Unix filesystems, such as FAT or NTFS, still work in Linux, but their filesystem code must provide the appearance of these concepts. For example, even if a filesystem does not support distinct inodes, it must assemble the inode data structure in memory as if it did. Or, if a filesystem treats directories as a special object, to the VFS they must represent directories as mere files. Oftentimes, this involves some special processing done on the fly by the non-Unix filesystems to cope with the Unix paradigm and the requirements of the VFS. Such filesystems still work, however, and usually suffer very little.

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## VFS Objects and Their Data Structures

The VFS is object-oriented<sup>[3]</sup>. A family of data structures represents the common file model. These data structures are akin to objects. Because the kernel is programmed strictly in C, without the benefit of a language directly supporting object-oriented paradigms, the data structures are represented as C structures. The structures contain both data and pointers to filesystem-implemented functions that operate on the data.

<sup>[3]</sup> People often miss this, or even deny it, but there are many examples of object-oriented programming in the kernel. Although the kernel developers may shun C++ and other explicitly object-oriented languages, *thinking* in terms of objects is often useful. The VFS is a good example of how to do clean and efficient OOP in C, which is a language that lacks any OOP constructs.

The four primary object types of the VFS are

- The *superblock* object, which represents a specific mounted filesystem.
- The *inode* object, which represents a specific file.
- The *dentry* object, which represents a directory entry, a single component of a path.
- The *file* object, which represents an open file as associated with a process.

Note that because the VFS treats directories as normal files, there is not a specific directory object. Recall from earlier in this chapter that a dentry represents a component in a path, which might include a regular file. In other words, a dentry is not the same as a directory, but a directory is the same as a file. Got it?

An *operations* object is contained within each of these primary objects. These objects describe the methods that the kernel invokes against the primary objects. Specifically, there are

- The *super\_operations* object, which contains the methods that the kernel can invoke on a specific filesystem, such as *read\_inode()* and *sync\_fs()*.
- The *inode\_operations* object, which contains the methods that the kernel can invoke on a specific file, such as *create()* and *link()*.
- The *dentry\_operations* object, which contains the methods that the kernel can invoke on a specific directory entry, such as *d\_compare()* and *d\_delete()*.
- The *file* object, which contains the methods that a process can invoke on an open file, such as *read()* and *write()*.

The operations objects are implemented as a structure of pointers to functions that operate on the parent object. For many methods, the objects can inherit a generic function if basic functionality is sufficient. Otherwise, the specific instance of the particular filesystem fills in the pointers with its own filesystem-specific methods.

Again, note that *objects* refer to structures not explicit object data types, such as those in C++ or Java. These structures, however, represent specific instances of an object, their associated data, and methods to operate on themselves. They are very much objects.

## Other VFS Objects

The VFS loves structures, and it comprises a couple more than the primary objects previously discussed. Each registered filesystem is represented by a *file\_system\_type* structure. This object describes the filesystem and its capabilities. Furthermore, each mount point is

represented by the `vfsmount` structure. This structure contains information about the mount point, such as its location and mount flags.

Finally, three per-process structures describe the filesystem and files associated with a process. They are the `file_struct`, `fs_struct`, and `namespace` structures.

The rest of this chapter concentrates on discussing these objects and the role they play in implementing the VFS layer.

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## The Superblock Object

The superblock object is implemented by each filesystem, and is used to store information describing that specific filesystem. This object usually corresponds to the *filesystem superblock* or the *filesystem control block*, which is stored in a special sector on disk (hence the object's name). Filesystems that are not disk-based (a virtual memorybased filesystem, such as sysfs, for example) generate the superblock on the fly and store it in memory.

The superblock object is represented by `struct super_block` and defined in `<linux/fs.h>`. Here is what it looks like, with comments describing each entry:

```
struct super_block {
    struct list_head    s_list;        /* list of all superblocks */
    dev_t              s_dev;         /* identifier */
    unsigned long       s_blocksize;   /* block size in bytes */
    unsigned long       s_old_blocksize; /* old block size in bytes */
    unsigned char       s_blocksize_bits; /* block size in bits */
    unsigned char       s_dirty;       /* dirty flag */
    unsigned long long  s_maxbytes;   /* max file size */
    struct file_system_type s_type;    /* filesystem type */
    struct super_operations s_op;     /* superblock methods */
    struct dquot_operations *dq_op;   /* quota methods */
    struct quotactl_ops  *s_qcop;     /* quota control methods */
    struct export_operations *s_export_op; /* export methods */
    unsigned long        s_flags;       /* mount flags */
    unsigned long        s_magic;      /* filesystem's magic number */
    struct dentry       *s_root;       /* directory mount point */
    struct rw_semaphore  s_umount;     /* umount semaphore */
    struct semaphore     s_lock;        /* superblock semaphore */
    int                 s_count;      /* superblock ref count */
    int                 s_syncing;     /* filesystem syncing flag */
    int                 s_need_sync_fs; /* not-yet-synced flag */
    atomic_t            s_active;     /* active reference count */
    void               *s_security;   /* security module */
    struct list_head    s_dirty;       /* list of dirty inodes */
    struct list_head    s_io;          /* list of writebacks */
    struct hlist_head   s_anon;        /* anonymous dentries */
    struct list_head    s_files;       /* list of assigned files */
    struct block_device *s_bdev;       /* associated block device */
    struct list_head    s_instances;   /* instances of this fs */
    struct quota_info   s_dquot;      /* quota-specific options */
    char                s_id[32];      /* text name */
    void               *s_fs_info;    /* filesystem-specific info */
    struct semaphore    s_vfs_rename_sem; /* rename semaphore */
};
```

The code for creating, managing, and destroying superblock objects lives in `fs/super.c`. A superblock object is created and initialized via the `alloc_super()` function. When mounted, a filesystem invokes this function, reads its superblock off of the disk, and fills in its superblock object.

## Superblock Operations

The most important item in the superblock object is `s_op`, which is the superblock operations table. The superblock operations table is represented by `struct super_operations` and is defined in `<linux/fs.h>`. It looks like this:

```
struct super_operations {  
    struct inode *(*alloc_inode) (struct super_block *sb);  
    void (*destroy_inode) (struct inode *);  
    void (*read_inode) (struct inode *);  
    void (*dirty_inode) (struct inode *);  
    void (*write_inode) (struct inode *, int);  
    void (*put_inode) (struct inode *);  
    void (*drop_inode) (struct inode *);  
    void (*delete_inode) (struct inode *);  
    void (*put_super) (struct super_block *);  
    void (*write_super) (struct super_block *);  
    int (*sync_fs) (struct super_block *, int);  
    void (*write_super_lockfs) (struct super_block *);  
    void (*unlockfs) (struct super_block *);  
    int (*statfs) (struct super_block *, struct statfs *);  
    int (*remount_fs) (struct super_block *, int *, char *);  
    void (*clear_inode) (struct inode *);  
    void (*umount_begin) (struct super_block *);  
    int (*show_options) (struct seq_file *, struct vfsmount *);  
};
```

Each item in this structure is a pointer to a function that operates on a superblock object. The superblock operations perform low-level operations on the filesystem and its inodes.

When a filesystem needs to perform an operation on its superblock, it follows the pointers from its superblock object to the desired method. For example, if a filesystem wanted to write to its superblock, it would invoke

```
sb->s_op->write_super(sb);
```

where `sb` is a pointer to the filesystem's superblock. Following that pointer into `s_op` yields the superblock operations table and ultimately the desired `write_super()` function, which is then directly invoked. Note how the `write_super()` call must be passed a superblock, despite the method being associated with one. This is because of the lack of object-oriented support in C. In C++ or C#, a call such as

```
sb.write_super();
```

would suffice. In C, there is no way for the method to cleanly obtain its parent, so you have to pass it.

Take a look at the superblock operations, which are specified by `super_operations`:

- ```
struct inode *  
alloc_inode(struct super_block *sb)
```

This function creates and initializes a new inode object under the given superblock.

- ```
void destroy_inode(struct inode *inode)
```

This function deallocates the given inode.

- ```
void read_inode(struct inode *inode)
```

This function reads the inode specified by `inode->i_ino` from disk and fills in the rest of the inode structure.

- `void dirty_inode(struct inode *inode)`

This function is invoked by the VFS when an inode is dirtied (modified). Journaling filesystems (such as ext3) use this function to perform journal updates.

- `void write_inode(struct inode *inode,  
int wait)`

Writes the given inode to disk. The `wait` parameter specifies whether the operation should be synchronous.

- `void put_inode(struct inode *inode)`

This function releases the given inode.

- `void drop_inode(struct inode *inode)`

This function is called by the VFS when the last reference to an inode is dropped. Normal Unix filesystems do not define this function, in which case the VFS simply deletes the inode. The caller must hold the `inode_lock`.

- `void delete_inode(struct inode *inode)`

This function deletes the given inode from the disk.

- `void put_super(struct super_block *sb)`

This function is called by the VFS on unmount to release the given superblock object.

- `void write_super(struct super_block *sb)`

This function updates the on-disk superblock with the specified superblock. The VFS uses this function to synchronize a modified in-memory superblock with the disk.

- `int sync_fs(struct super_block *sb, int wait)`

This function synchronizes filesystem metadata with the on-disk filesystem. The `wait` parameter specifies whether the operation is synchronous.

- `void write_super_lockfs(struct super_block *sb)`

This function prevents changes to the filesystem, and then updates the on-disk superblock with the specified superblock. It is currently used by LVM (the Logical Volume Manager).

- `void  
unlockfs(struct super_block *sb)`

This function unlocks the filesystem against changes as done by `write_super_lockfs()`.

- `int statfs(struct super_block *sb,  
struct statfs *statfs)`

This function is called by the VFS to obtain filesystem statistics. The statistics related to the given filesystem are placed in `statfs`.

- `int remount_fs(struct super_block *sb,  
int *flags, char *data)`

This function is called by the VFS when the filesystem is remounted with new mount options.

- `void clear_inode(struct inode *)`

This function is called by the VFS to release the inode and clear any pages containing related data.

- `void umount_begin(struct super_block *sb)`

This function is called by the VFS to interrupt a mount operation. It is used by network filesystems, such as NFS.

All these functions are invoked by the VFS, in process context. They may all block if needed.

Some of these functions are optional; a specific filesystem can then set its value in the superblock operations structure to `NULL`. If the associated pointer is `NULL`, the VFS either calls a generic function or does nothing, depending on the operation.

## The Inode Object

The inode object represents all the information needed by the kernel to manipulate a file or directory. For Unix-style filesystems, this information is simply read from the on-disk inode. If a filesystem does not have inodes, however, the filesystem must obtain the information from wherever it is stored on the disk<sup>[4]</sup>.

<sup>[4]</sup> Filesystems without inodes generally store the information as part of the file itself. Some modern filesystems also employ a database to store the file's data. Whatever the case, the inode object is constructed in whatever manner is applicable to the filesystem.

The inode object is represented by `struct inode` and is defined in `<linux/fs.h>`. Here is the structure, with comments describing each entry:

```
struct inode {
    struct hlist_node    i_hash;          /* hash list */
    struct list_head     i_list;          /* list of inodes */
    struct list_head     i_dentry;        /* list of dentries */
    unsigned long        i_ino;           /* inode number */
    atomic_t             i_count;         /* reference counter */
    umode_t              i_mode;          /* access permissions */
    unsigned int          i_nlink;         /* number of hard links */
    uid_t                i_uid;           /* user id of owner */
    gid_t                i_gid;           /* group id of owner */
    kdev_t               i_rdev;          /* real device node */
    loff_t               i_size;          /* file size in bytes */
    struct timespec      i_atime;         /* last access time */
    struct timespec      i_mtime;         /* last modify time */
    struct timespec      i_ctime;         /* last change time */
    unsigned int          i_blkbits;       /* block size in bits */
    unsigned long         i_blksize;       /* block size in bytes */
    unsigned long         i_version;       /* version number */
    unsigned long         i_blocks;        /* file size in blocks */
    unsigned short        i_bytes;         /* bytes consumed */
    spinlock_t            i_lock;          /* spinlock */
    struct rw_semaphore   i_alloc_sem;     /* nests inside of i_sem */
    struct semaphore      i_sem;           /* inode semaphore */
    struct inode_operations *i_op;         /* inode ops table */
    struct file_operations *i_fop;        /* default inode ops */
    struct super_block    *i_sb;           /* associated superblock */
    struct file_lock      *i_flock;        /* file lock list */
    struct address_space   *i_mapping;      /* associated mapping */
    struct address_space   i_data;          /* mapping for device */
    struct dquot          *i_dquot[MAXQUOTAS]; /* disk quotas for inode */
    struct list_head     i_devices;        /* list of block devices */
    struct pipe_inode_info *i_pipe;         /* pipe information */
    struct block_device   *i_bdev;          /* block device driver */
    unsigned long         i_dnotify_mask;   /* directory notify mask */
    struct dnotify_struct *i_dnotify;      /* dnotify */
    unsigned long         i_state;          /* state flags */
    unsigned long         dirtied_when;     /* first dirtying time */
    unsigned int          i_flags;          /* filesystem flags */
    unsigned char         i_sock;           /* is this a socket? */
```

```
atomic_t      i_writecount;    /* count of writers */
void         *i_security;     /* security module */
__u32        i_generation;   /* inode version number */
union {
    void     *generic_ip;    /* filesystem-specific info */
} u;
};
```

An inode represents each file on a filesystem (although an inode object is constructed in memory only as the files are accessed). This includes special files, such as device files or pipes. Consequently, some of the entries in `struct inode` are related to these special files. For example, the `i_pipe` entry points to a named pipe data structure. If the inode does not refer to a named pipe, this field is simply `NULL`. Other special file-related fields are `i_devices`, `i_bdev`, and `i_cdev`.

It might occur that a given filesystem does not support a property represented in the inode object. For example, some filesystems might not record an access timestamp. In that case, the filesystem is free to implement the feature however it sees fit; it can store zero for `i_atime`, make `i_atime` equal to `i_mtime`, or whatever floats its boat.

## Inode Operations

As with the superblock operations, the `inode_operations` member is very important. It describes the filesystem's implemented functions that the VFS can invoke on an inode. As with the superblock, inode operations are invoked via

```
i->i_op->truncate(i)
```

where `i` is a reference to a particular inode. In this case, the `truncate()` operation defined by the filesystem on which `i` exists is called on the given inode. The `inode_operations` structure is defined in `<linux/fs.h>`:

```
struct inode_operations {
    int (*create) (struct inode *, struct dentry *,int);
    struct dentry * (*lookup) (struct inode *, struct dentry *);
    int (*link) (struct dentry *, struct inode *, struct dentry *);
    int (*unlink) (struct inode *, struct dentry *);
    int (*symlink) (struct inode *, struct dentry *, const char *);
    int (*mkdir) (struct inode *, struct dentry *, int);
    int (*rmdir) (struct inode *, struct dentry *);
    int (*mknod) (struct inode *, struct dentry *, int, dev_t);
    int (*rename) (struct inode *, struct dentry *,
                  struct inode *, struct dentry *);
    int (*readlink) (struct dentry *, char *, int);
    int (*follow_link) (struct dentry *, struct nameidata *);
    int (*put_link) (struct dentry *, struct nameidata *);
    void (*truncate) (struct inode *);
    int (*permission) (struct inode *, int);
    int (*setattr) (struct dentry *, struct iattr *);
    int (*getattr) (struct vfsmount *, struct dentry *, struct kstat *);
    int (*setxattr) (struct dentry *, const char *,
                    const void *, size_t, int);
    ssize_t (*getxattr) (struct dentry *, const char *, void *, size_t);
    ssize_t (*listxattr) (struct dentry *, char *, size_t);
    int (*removexattr) (struct dentry *, const char *);
};
```

The following interfaces constitute the various functions that the VFS may perform, or ask a specific filesystem to perform, on a given inode:

- ```
int create(struct inode *dir,
          struct dentry *dentry, int mode)
```

The VFS calls this function from the `creat()` and `open()` system calls to create a new inode associated with the given dentry object with the specified initial mode.

- ```
struct dentry * lookup(struct inode *dir,
                      struct dentry *dentry)
```

This function searches a directory for an inode corresponding to a filename specified in the given dentry.

- ```
int link(struct dentry *old_dentry,
         struct inode *dir,
         struct dentry *dentry)
```

The function is invoked by the `link()` system call to create a hard link of the file `old_dentry` in the directory `dir` with the new filename `dentry`.

- ```
int unlink(struct inode *dir,
           struct dentry *dentry)
```

This function is called from the `unlink()` system call to remove the inode specified by the directory entry `dentry` from the directory `dir`.

- ```
int symlink(struct inode *dir,
            struct dentry *dentry,
            const char *symname)
```

This function is called from the `symlink()` system call to create a symbolic link named `symname` to the file represented by `dentry` in the directory `dir`.

- ```
int mkdir(struct inode *dir,
          struct dentry *dentry, int mode)
```

This function is called from the `mkdir()` system call to create a new directory with the given initial mode.

- ```
int rmdir(struct inode *dir,
          struct dentry *dentry)
```

This function is called by the `rmdir()` system call to remove the directory referenced by `dentry` from the directory `dir`.

```
int mknod(struct inode *dir,
           struct dentry *dentry,
           int mode, dev_t rdev)
```

This function is called by the `mknod()` system call to create a special file (device file, named pipe, or socket). The file is referenced by the device `rdev` and the directory entry `dentry` in the directory `dir`. The initial permissions are given via `mode`.

- ```
int rename(struct inode *old_dir,
           struct dentry *old_dentry,
           struct inode *new_dir,
           struct dentry *new_dentry)
```

This function is called by the VFS to move the file specified by `old_dentry` from the `old_dir` directory to the directory `new_dir`, with the filename specified by `new_dentry`.

- ```
int readlink(struct dentry *dentry,
             char *buffer, int buflen)
```

This function is called by the `readlink()` system call to copy at most `buflen` bytes of the full path associated with the symbolic link specified by `dentry` into the specified buffer.

- ```
int follow_link(struct dentry *dentry,
                 struct nameidata *nd)
```

This function is called by the VFS to translate a symbolic link to the inode to which it points. The link pointed at by `dentry` is translated and the result is stored in the `nameidata` structure pointed at by `nd`.

- ```
int put_link(struct dentry *dentry,
             struct nameidata *nd)
```

This function is called by the VFS to clean up after a call to `follow_link()`.

- ```
void truncate(struct inode *inode)
```

This function is called by the VFS to modify the size of the given file. Before invocation, the inode's `i_size` field must be set to the desired new size.

- ```
int permission(struct inode *inode, int mask)
```

This function checks whether the specified access mode is allowed for the file referenced by `inode`. This function returns zero if the access is allowed and a negative error code otherwise. Most filesystems set this field to `NULL` and use the generic VFS method, which simply compares the mode bits in the inode's objects to the given mask. More complicated filesystems, such as those supporting access control lists (ACLs), have a specific `permission()` method.

- ```
int setattr(struct dentry *dentry,
            struct iattr *attr)
```

This function is called from `notify_change()` to notify a "change event" after an inode has been modified.

```
int getattr(struct vfsmount *mnt,  
           struct dentry *dentry,  
           struct kstat *stat)
```

This function is invoked by the VFS upon noticing that an inode needs to be refreshed from disk.

- ```
int setxattr(struct dentry *dentry,  
             const char *name,  
             const void *value, size_t size,  
             int flags)
```

This function is used by the VFS to set the extended attribute [5] **name** to the value **value** on the file referenced by **dentry**.

[5] Extended attributes are a new feature introduced in the 2.6 kernel for pairing key/value pairs to files, similar to a database. They allow the association of user-specified arbitrary metadata and files.

- ```
ssize_t getxattr(struct dentry *dentry,  
                  const char *name,  
                  void *value, size_t size)
```

This function is used by the VFS to copy into **value** the value of the extended attribute **name** for the specified file.

- ```
ssize_t listxattr(struct dentry *,  
                  char *list, size_t size)
```

This function copies the list of all attributes for the specified file into the buffer **list**.

- ```
int removexattr(struct dentry *dentry,  
                 const char *name)
```

This function removes the given attribute from the given file.

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## The Dentry Object

As discussed, the VFS treats directories as files. In the path `/bin/vi`, both `bin` and `vi` are files, `bin` being the special directory file and `vi` being a regular file. An inode object represents both these components. Despite this useful unification, the VFS often needs to perform directory-specific operations, such as path name lookup. Path name lookup involves translating each component of a path, ensuring it is valid, and following it to the next component.

To facilitate this, the VFS employs the concept of a directory entry (dentry). A *dentry* is a specific component in a path. Using the previous example, `/`, `bin`, and `vi` are all dentry objects. The first two are directories and the last is a regular file. This is an important point: dentry objects are *all* components in a path, including files. Resolving a path and walking its components is a nontrivial exercise, time-consuming and rife with string comparisons. The dentry object makes the whole process easier.

Dentries might also include mount points. In the path `/mnt/cdrom/foo`, the components `/`, `mnt`, `cdrom`, and `foo` are all dentry objects. The VFS constructs dentry objects on the fly, as needed, when performing directory operations.

Dentry objects are represented by `struct dentry` and defined in `<linux/dcache.h>`. Here is the structure, with comments describing each member:

```
struct dentry {  
    atomic_t      d_count; /* usage count */  
    unsigned long d_vfs_flags; /* dentry cache flags */  
    spinlock_t    d_lock;   /* per-dentry lock */  
    struct inode  *d_inode;  /* associated inode */  
    struct list_head d_lru;   /* unused list */  
    struct list_head d_child; /* list of dentries within */  
    struct list_head d_subdirs; /* subdirectories */  
    struct list_head d_alias; /* list of alias inodes */  
    unsigned long  d_time;   /* revalidate time */  
    struct dentry_operations *d_op; /* dentry operations table */  
    struct super_block *d_sb;   /* superblock of file */  
    unsigned int   d_flags;   /* dentry flags */  
    int           d_mounted; /* is this a mount point? */  
    void          *d_fsdatal /* filesystem-specific data */  
    struct rcu_head d_rcu;   /* RCU locking */  
    struct dcookie_struct *d_cookie; /* cookie */  
    struct dentry  *d_parent; /* dentry object of parent */  
    struct qstr     d_name;   /* dentry name */  
    struct hlist_node d_hash;   /* list of hash table entries */  
    struct hlist_head *d_bucket; /* hash bucket */  
    unsigned char   d_iname[DNAME_INLINE_LEN_MIN]; /* short name */  
};
```

Unlike the previous two objects, the dentry object does not correspond to any sort of on-disk data structure. The VFS creates it on the fly from a string representation of a path name. Because the dentry object is not physically stored on the disk, no flag in `struct dentry` specifies whether the object is modified (that is, whether it is dirty and needs to be written back to disk).

## Dentry State

A valid dentry object can be in one of three states: used, unused, or negative.

A used dentry corresponds to a valid inode (`d_inode` points to an associated inode) and indicates that there are one or more users of the

object (`d_count` is positive). A used dentry is in use by the VFS and points to valid data and, thus, cannot be discarded.

An unused dentry corresponds to a valid inode (`d_inode` points to an inode), but indicates that the VFS is not currently using the dentry object (`d_count` is zero). Because the dentry object still points to a valid object, the dentry is kept around cached in case it is needed again. Because the dentry has not been destroyed prematurely, the dentry need not be re-created if it is needed in the future and path name lookups can complete quicker. If it is necessary to reclaim memory, however, the dentry can be discarded because it is not in use.

A negative dentry [6] is not associated with a valid inode (`d_inode` is `NULL`) because either the inode was deleted or the path name was never correct to begin with. The dentry is kept around, however, so that future lookups are resolved quickly. Although the dentry is useful, it can be destroyed, if needed, because nothing can actually be using it.

[6] The name is misleading. There is nothing particularly negative about a negative dentry. A better name might be *invalid dentry*.

A dentry object can also be freed, sitting in the slab object cache, as discussed in the previous chapter. In that case, there is no valid reference to the dentry object in any VFS or any filesystem code.

## The Dentry Cache

After the VFS layer goes through the trouble of resolving each element in a path name into a dentry object and arriving at the end of the path, it would be quite wasteful to throw away all that work. Instead, the kernel caches dentry objects in the dentry cache or, simply, the `dcache`.

The dentry cache consists of three parts:

- Lists of "used" dentries that are linked off their associated inode via the `i_dentry` field of the inode object. Because a given inode can have multiple links, there might be multiple dentry objects; consequently, a list is used.
- A doubly linked "least recently used" list of unused and negative dentry objects. The list is insertion sorted by time, such that entries toward the head of the list are newest. When the kernel must remove entries to reclaim memory, the entries are removed from the tail; those are the oldest and presumably have the least chance of being used in the near future.
- A hash table and hashing function used to quickly resolve a given path into the associated dentry object.

The hash table is represented by the `dentry_hashtable` array. Each element is a pointer to a list of dentries that hash to the same value. The size of this array depends on the amount of physical RAM in the system.

The actual hash value is determined by `d_hash()`. This enables filesystems to provide a unique hashing function.

Hash table lookup is performed via `d_lookup()`. If a matching dentry object is found in the `dcache`, it is returned. On failure `NULL` is returned.

As an example, assume that you are editing a source file in your home directory, `/home/dracula/src/the_sun_sucks.c`. Each time this file is accessed (for example, when you first open it, later save it, compile it, and so on), the VFS must follow each directory entry to resolve the full path: `/`, `home`, `dracula`, `src`, and finally `the_sun_sucks.c`. To avoid this time-consuming operation each time this path name is accessed, the VFS can first try to look up the path name in the dentry cache. If the lookup succeeds, the required final dentry object is obtained without serious effort. Conversely, if the dentry is not in the dentry cache, the VFS must manually resolve the path by walking the filesystem for each component of the path. After this task is completed, the kernel adds the dentry objects to the `dcache` to speed up any future lookups.

The `dcache` also provides the front end to an inode cache, the `icache`. Inode objects that are associated with dentry objects are not freed because the dentry maintains a positive usage count over the inode. This enables dentry objects to pin inodes in memory. As long as the dentry is cached, the corresponding inodes are cached, too. Consequently, when a path name lookup succeeds from cache, as in the previous example, the associated inodes are already cached in memory.

## Dentry Operations

The `dentry_operations` structure specifies the methods that the VFS invokes on directory entries on a given filesystem.

The `dentry_operations` structure is defined in `<linux/dcache.h>`:

```
struct dentry_operations {  
    int (*d_revalidate) (struct dentry *, int);  
    int (*d_hash) (struct dentry *, struct qstr *);  
    int (*d_compare) (struct dentry *, struct qstr *, struct qstr *);  
    int (*d_delete) (struct dentry *);  
    void (*d_release) (struct dentry *);  
    void (*d_iput) (struct dentry *, struct inode *);  
};
```

The methods are as follows:

- `int d_revalidate(struct dentry *dentry,  
 int flags)`

This function determines whether the given dentry object is valid. The VFS calls this function whenever it is preparing to use a dentry from the dcache. Most filesystems set this method to `NULL` because their dentry objects in the dcache are always valid.

- `int d_hash(struct dentry *dentry,  
 struct qstr *name)`

This function creates a hash value from the given dentry. The VFS calls this function whenever it adds a dentry to the hash table.

- `int d_compare(struct dentry *dentry,  
 struct qstr *name1,  
 struct qstr *name2)`

This function is called by the VFS to compare two filenames, `name1` and `name2`. Most filesystems leave this at the VFS default, which is a simple string compare. For some filesystems, such as FAT, a simple string compare is insufficient. The FAT filesystem is not case sensitive and therefore needs to implement a comparison function that disregards case. This function requires the `dcache_lock`.

- `int d_delete (struct dentry *)`

This function is called by the VFS when the specified dentry object's `d_count` reaches zero. This function requires the `dcache_lock`.

- `void d_release(struct dentry *)`

This function is called by the VFS when the specified dentry is going to be freed. The default function does nothing.

- `void d_iput(struct dentry *)`

```
struct inode *inode)
```

This function is called by the VFS when a dentry object loses its associated inode (say, because the entry was deleted from the disk). By default, the VFS simply calls the [iput\(\)](#) function to release the inode. If a filesystem overrides this function, it must also call [iput\(\)](#) in addition to performing whatever filesystem-specific work it requires.

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## The File Object

The final primary VFS object that we shall look at is the file object. The file object is used to represent a file opened by a process. When we think of the VFS from the perspective of user-space, the file object is what readily comes to mind. Processes deal directly with files, not superblocks, inodes, or dentries. It is not surprising that the information in the file object is the most familiar (data such as access mode and current offset) or that the file operations are familiar system calls such as `read()` and `write()`.

The file object is the in-memory representation of an open file. The object (but not the physical file) is created in response to the `open()` system call and destroyed in response to the `close()` system call. All these file-related calls are actually methods defined in the file operations table. Because multiple processes can open and manipulate a file at the same time, there can be multiple file objects in existence for the same file. The file object merely represents a process's view of an open file. The object points back to the dentry (which in turn points back to the inode) that actually represents the open file. The inode and dentry objects, of course, are unique.

The file object is represented by `struct file` and is defined in `<linux/fs.h>`. Let's look at the structure, again with comments added to describe each entry:

```
struct file {
    struct list_head f_list;      /* list of file objects */
    struct dentry *f_dentry;      /* associated dentry object */
    struct vfsmount *f_vfsmnt;   /* associated mounted fs */
    struct file_operations *f_op;  /* file operations table */
    atomic_t f_count;           /* file object's usage count */
    unsigned int f_flags;        /* flags specified on open */
    mode_t f_mode;              /* file access mode */
    loff_t f_pos;               /* file offset (file pointer) */
    struct fown_struct f_owner;  /* owner data for signals */
    unsigned int f_uid;          /* user's UID */
    unsigned int f_gid;          /* user's GID */
    int f_error;                /* error code */
    struct file_ra_state f_ra;   /* read-ahead state */
    unsigned long f_version;     /* version number */
    void *f_security;           /* security module */
    void *private_data;          /* tty driver hook */
    struct list_head f_ep_links; /* list of eventpoll links */
    spinlock_t f_ep_lock;        /* eventpoll lock */
    struct address_space *f_mapping; /* page cache mapping */
};
```

Similar to the dentry object, the file object does not actually correspond to any on-disk data. Therefore, no flag is in the object to represent whether the object is dirty and needs to be written back to disk. The file object does point to its associated dentry object via the `f_dentry` pointer. The dentry in turn points to the associated inode, which reflects whether the file is dirty.

## File Operations

As with all the other VFS objects, the file operations table is quite important. The operations associated with `struct file` are the familiar system calls that form the basis of the standard Unix system calls.

The file object methods are specified in `file_operations` and defined in <linux/fs.h>:

```
struct file_operations {
    struct module *owner;
    loff_t (*llseek) (struct file *, loff_t, int);
    ssize_t (*read) (struct file *, char *, size_t, loff_t *);
    ssize_t (*aio_read) (struct kiocb *, char *, size_t, loff_t);
    ssize_t (*write) (struct file *, const char *, size_t, loff_t *);
    ssize_t (*aio_write) (struct kiocb *, const char *, size_t, loff_t);
    int (*readdir) (struct file *, void *, filldir_t);
    unsigned int (*poll) (struct file *, struct poll_table_struct *);
    int (*ioctl) (struct inode *, struct file *, unsigned int, unsigned long);
    int (*mmap) (struct file *, struct vm_area_struct *);
    int (*open) (struct inode *, struct file *);
    int (*flush) (struct file *);
    int (*release) (struct inode *, struct file *);
    int (*fsync) (struct file *, struct dentry *, int);
    int (*aio_fsync) (struct kiocb *, int);
    int (*fasync) (int, struct file *, int);
    int (*lock) (struct file *, int, struct file_lock *);
    ssize_t (*readv) (struct file *, const struct iovec *,
                     unsigned long, loff_t *);
    ssize_t (*writev) (struct file *, const struct iovec *,
                      unsigned long, loff_t *);
    ssize_t (*sendfile) (struct file *, loff_t *, size_t,
                        read_actor_t, void *);
    ssize_t (*sendpage) (struct file *, struct page *, int,
                        size_t, loff_t *, int);
    unsigned long (*get_unmapped_area) (struct file *, unsigned long,
                                       unsigned long, unsigned long,
                                       unsigned long);
    int (*check_flags) (int flags);
    int (*dir_notify) (struct file *filp, unsigned long arg);
    int (*flock) (struct file *filp, int cmd, struct file_lock *fl);
};
```

Filesystems can implement unique functions for each of these operations, or they can use a generic method if one exists. The generic methods tend to work fine on normal Unix-based filesystems. A filesystem is under no obligation to implement all these methods although not implementing the basics is silly and can simply set the method to `NULL` if not interested.

Here are the individual operations:

- `loff_t llseek(struct file *file,  
 loff_t offset, int origin)`

This function updates the file pointer to the given offset. It is called via the `llseek()` system call.

- `ssize_t read(struct file *file,  
 char *buf, size_t count,  
 loff_t *offset)`

This function reads `count` bytes from the given file at position `offset` into `buf`. The file pointer is then updated. This function is called by the `read()` system call.

```
ssize_t aio_read(struct kiocb *iocb,
                 char *buf, size_t count,
                 loff_t offset)
```

This function begins an asynchronous read of `count` bytes into `buf` of the file described in `iocb`. This function is called by the `aio_read()` system call.

- ```
ssize_t write(struct file *file,
              const char *buf, size_t count,
              loff_t *offset)
```

This function writes `count` bytes from `buf` into the given file at position `offset`. The file pointer is then updated. This function is called by the `write()` system call.

- ```
ssize_t aio_write(struct kiocb *iocb,
                  const char *buf,
                  size_t count, loff_t offset)
```

This function begins an asynchronous write of `count` bytes into `buf` of the file described in `iocb`. This function is called by the `aio_write()` system call.

- ```
int readdir(struct file *file, void *dirent,
           filldir_t filldir)
```

This function returns the next directory in a directory listing. This function is called by the `readdir()` system call.

- ```
unsigned int poll(struct file *file,
                  struct poll_table_struct *poll_table)
```

This function sleeps, waiting for activity on the given file. It is called by the `poll()` system call.

- ```
int ioctl(struct inode *inode,
          struct file *file,
          unsigned int cmd,
          unsigned long arg)
```

This function is used to send a command and argument pair to a device. It is used when the file is an open device node. This function is called from the `ioctl()` system call.

- ```
int mmap(struct file *file,
         struct vm_area_struct *vma)
```

This function memory maps the given file onto the given address space and is called by the `mmap()` system call.

```
int open(struct inode *inode,
        struct file *file)
```

This function creates a new file object and links it to the corresponding inode object. It is called by the `open()` system call.

- `int flush(struct file *file)`

This function is called by the VFS whenever the reference count of an open file decreases. Its purpose is filesystem dependent.

- `int release(struct inode *inode,
 struct file *file)`

This function is called by the VFS when the last remaining reference to the file is destroyed for example, when the last process sharing a file descriptor calls `close()` or exits. Its purpose is filesystem dependent.

- `int fsync(struct file *file,
 struct dentry *dentry,
 int datasync)`

This function is called by the `fsync()` system call to write all cached data for the file to disk.

- `int aio_fsync(struct iocb *iocb,
 int datasync)`

This function is called by the `aio_fsync()` system call to write all cached data for the file associated with `iocb` to disk.

- `int fasync(int fd, struct file *file, int on)`

This function enables or disables signal notification of asynchronous I/O.

- `int lock(struct file *file, int cmd,
 struct file_lock *lock)`

This function manipulates a file lock on the given file.

- `ssize_t ready(struct file *file,
 const Pstruct iovec *vector,
 unsigned long count,
 loff_t *offset)`

This function is called by the `readv()` system call to read from the given file and put the results into the `count` buffers described by `vector`. The file offset is then incremented.

- `ssize_t writev(struct file *file,
 const struct iovec *vector,
 unsigned long count,
 loff_t *offset)`

This function is called by the `writenv()` system call to write from the `count` buffers described by `vector` into the file specified by `file`. The file offset is then incremented.

- ```
ssize_t sendfile(struct file *file,
                 loff_t *offset,
                 size_t size,
                 read_actor_t actor,
                 void *target)
```

This function is called by the `sendfile()` system call to copy data from one file to another. It performs the copy entirely in the kernel and avoids an extraneous copy to user-space.

- ```
ssize_t sendpage(struct file *file,
                  struct page *page,
                  int offset, size_t size,
                  loff_t *pos, int more)
```

This function is used to send data from one file to another.

- ```
unsigned long get_unmapped_area(struct file
                                  *file,
                                  unsigned long addr,
                                  unsigned long len,
                                  unsigned long offset,
                                  unsigned long flags)
```

This function gets unused address space to map the given file.

- `int check_flags(int flags)`

This function is used to check the validity of the flags passed to the `fcntl()` system call when the `SETFL` command is given. As with many VFS operations, filesystems need not implement `check_flags()`; currently, only NFS does so. This function enables filesystems to restrict invalid `SETFL` flags that are otherwise allowed by the generic `fcntl()` function. In the case of NFS, combining `O_APPEND` and `O_DIRECT` is not allowed.

- ```
int flock(struct file *filp,
          int cmd,
          struct file_lock *fl)
```

This function is used to implement the `flock()` system call, which provides advisory locking.

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## Data Structures Associated with Filesystems

In addition to the fundamental VFS objects, the kernel uses other standard data structures to manage data related to filesystems. The first object is used to describe a specific variant of a filesystem, such as ext3 or XFS. The second data structure is used to describe a mounted instance of a filesystem.

Because Linux supports so many different filesystems, the kernel must have a special structure for describing the abilities and behavior of each filesystem.

```
struct file_system_type {
    const char          *name; /* filesystem's name */
    struct subsystem    subsys; /* sysfs subsystem object */
    int                 fs_flags; /* filesystem type flags */

    /* the following is used to read the superblock off the disk */
    struct super_block  *(*get_sb) (struct file_system_type *, int,
                                    char *, void *);

    /* the following is used to terminate access to the superblock */
    void               (*kill_sb) (struct super_block *);

    struct module       *owner; /* module owning the filesystem */
    struct file_system_type *next; /* next file_system_type in list */
    struct list_head     fs_supers; /* list of superblock objects */
};

};
```

The `get_sb()` function is used to read the superblock from the disk and populate the superblock object when the filesystem is loaded. The remaining functions describe the filesystem's properties.

There is only one `file_system_type` per filesystem, regardless of how many instances of the filesystem are mounted on the system, or whether the filesystem is even mounted at all.

Things get more interesting when the filesystem is actually mounted, at which point the `vfsmount` structure is created. This structure is used to represent a specific instance of a filesystem in other words, a mount point.

The `vfsmount` structure is defined in `<linux/mount.h>`. Here it is:

```
struct vfsmount {
    struct list_head  mnt_hash; /* hash table list */
    struct vfsmount  *mnt_parent; /* parent filesystem */
    struct dentry    *mnt_mountpoint; /* dentry of this mount point */
    struct dentry    *mnt_root; /* dentry of root of this fs */
    struct super_block *mnt_sb; /* superblock of this filesystem */
    struct list_head  mnt_mounts; /* list of children */
    struct list_head  mnt_child; /* list of children */
    atomic_t         mnt_count; /* usage count */
    int              mnt_flags; /* mount flags */
    char             *mnt_devname; /* device file name */
    struct list_head  mnt_list; /* list of descriptors */
    struct list_head  mnt_fslink; /* fs-specific expiry list */
    struct namespace *mnt_namespace /* associated namespace */
};

};
```

The complicated part of maintaining the list of all mount points is the relation between the filesystem and all the other mount points. The various linked lists in `vfsmount` keep track of this information.

The `vfsmount` structure also stores the flags, if any, specified on mount in the `mnt_flags` field. [Table 12.1](#) is a list of the standard mount flags.

**Table 12.1. Listing of Standard Mount Flags**

| Flag       | Description                                                                              |
|------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| MNT_NOSUID | Forbids <code>setuid</code> and <code>setgid</code> flags on binaries on this filesystem |
| MNT_NODEV  | Forbids access to device files on this filesystem                                        |
| MNT_NOEXEC | Forbids execution of binaries on this filesystem                                         |

These flags are most useful on removable devices that the administrator does not trust. They are defined in `<linux/mount.h>`.

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## Data Structures Associated with a Process

Each process on the system has its own list of open files, root filesystem, current working directory, mount points, and so on. Three data structures tie together the VFS layer and the processes on the system: the `files_struct`, `fs_struct`, and `namespace` structure.

The `files_struct` is defined in `<linux/file.h>`. This table's address is pointed to by the `files` entry in the processor descriptor. All per-process information about open files and file descriptors is contained therein. Here it is, with comments:

```
struct files_struct {  
    atomic_t count;          /* structure's usage count */  
    spinlock_t file_lock;    /* lock protecting this structure */  
    int max_fds;            /* maximum number of file objects */  
    int max_fdset;          /* maximum number of file descriptors */  
    int next_fd;             /* next file descriptor number */  
    struct file **fd;        /* array of all file objects */  
    fd_set *close_on_exec;   /* file descriptors to close on exec() */  
    fd_set *open_fds;        /* pointer to open file descriptors */  
    fd_set close_on_exec_init; /* initial files to close on exec() */  
    fd_set open_fds_init;    /* initial set of file descriptors */  
    struct file *fd_array[NR_OPEN_DEFAULT]; /* default array of file objects */  
};
```

The `fd` array points to the list of open file objects. By default, this is the `fd_array` array. Because `NR_OPEN_DEFAULT` is equal to 32, this includes room for 32 file objects. If a process opens more than 32 file objects, the kernel allocates a new array and points the `fd` pointer at it. In this fashion, access to a reasonable number of file objects is quick, taking place in a static array. In the case that a process opens an abnormal number of files, the kernel can create a new array. If the majority of processes on a system open more than 32 files, for optimum performance the administrator can increase the `NR_OPEN_DEFAULT` preprocessor macro to match.

The second process-related structure is `fs_struct`, which contains filesystem information related to a process and is pointed at by the `fs` field in the process descriptor. The structure is defined in `<linux/fs_struct.h>`. Here it is, with comments:

```
struct fs_struct {  
    atomic_t count;          /* structure usage count */  
    rwlock_t lock;           /* lock protecting structure */  
    int umask;               /* default file permissions */  
    struct dentry *root;     /* dentry of the root directory */  
    struct dentry *pwd;      /* dentry of the current directory */  
    struct dentry *altroot;   /* dentry of the alternative root */  
    struct vfsmount *rootmnt; /* mount object of the root directory */  
    struct vfsmount *pwdmnt;  /* mount object of the current directory */  
    struct vfsmount *altrootmnt; /* mount object of the alternative root */  
};
```

This structure holds the current working directory (`pwd`) and root directory of the current process.

The third and final structure is the `namespace` structure, which is defined in `<linux/namespaces.h>` and pointed at by the `namespace` field in the process descriptor. Per-process namespaces were added to the 2.4 Linux kernel. They enable each process to have a unique view of the mounted filesystems on the system not just a unique root directory, but an entirely unique filesystem hierarchy, if desired. Here is the structure, with the usual comments:

```
struct namespace {  
    atomic_t count; /* structure usage count */  
    struct vfsmount *root; /* mount object of root directory */
```

```
struct list_head list; /* list of mount points */  
struct rw_semaphore sem; /* semaphore protecting the namespace */  
};
```

The `list` member specifies a doubly linked list of the mounted filesystems that make up the namespace.

These data structures are linked from each process descriptor. For most processes, the process descriptor points to unique `files_struct` and `fs_struct` structures. For processes created with the clone flag `CLONE_FILES` or `CLONE_FS`, however, these structures are shared.<sup>[7]</sup> Consequently, multiple process descriptors might point to the same `files_struct` or `fs_struct` structure. The `count` member of each structure provides a reference count to prevent destruction while a process is still using the structure.

<sup>[7]</sup> Threads usually specify `CLONE_FILES` and `CLONE_FS` and, thus, share a single `files_struct` and `fs_struct` among themselves. Normal processes, on the other hand, do not specify these flags and consequently have their own filesystems information and open files tables.

The `namespace` structure works the other way around. By default, all processes share the same namespace (that is, they all see the same filesystem hierarchy from the same mount table). Only when the `CLONE_NEWNS` flag is specified during `clone()` is the process given a unique copy of the `namespace` structure. Because most processes do not provide this flag, all the processes inherit their parents' namespaces. Consequently, on many systems there is only one namespace, although the functionality is but a single `CLONE_NEWNS` flag away.

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## Filesystems in Linux

Linux supports a wide range of filesystems, from native filesystems, such as ext2 and ext3, to networked filesystems, such as NFS and Coda. More than 50 filesystems alone in the official kernel. The VFS layer provides these disparate filesystems with both a framework for their implementation and an interface for working with the standard system calls. The VFS layer, thus, both makes it clean to implement new filesystems in Linux and allows those filesystems to automatically interoperate via the standard Unix system calls.

This chapter described the purpose of the VFS and discussed its various data structures, including the all-important inode, dentry, and superblock objects. The next chapter, "[The Block I/O Layer](#)," discusses how data physically ends up in a filesystem.

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## Chapter 13. The Block I/O Layer

*Block devices* are hardware devices distinguished by the random (that is, not necessarily sequential) access of fixed-size chunks of data, called blocks. The most common block device is a hard disk, but many other block devices exist, such as floppy drives, CD-ROM drives, and flash memory. Notice how these are all devices on which you mount a filesystemfilesystems are the lingua franca of block devices.

The other basic type of device is a *character device*. Character devices, or char devices, are accessed as a stream of sequential data, one byte after another. Example character devices are serial ports and keyboards. If the hardware device is accessed as a stream of data, it is implemented as a character device. On the other hand, if the device is accessed randomly (nonsequentially), it is a block device.

Basically, the difference comes down to whether the device accesses data randomlyin other words, whether the device can seek to one position from another. As an example, consider the keyboard. As a driver, the keyboard provides a stream of data. You type "fox" and the keyboard driver returns a stream with those three letters in exactly that order. Reading the letters out of order, or reading any letter but the next one in the stream, makes little sense. The keyboard driver is thus a char device; the device provides a stream of characters that the user types onto the keyboard. Reading from the keyboard returns a stream first with f, then o, then x, and ultimately end of file (EOF). When no keystrokes are waiting, the stream is empty. A hard drive, conversely, is quite different. The hard drive's driver might ask to read the contents of one arbitrary block and then read the contents of a different block; the blocks need not be consecutive. Therefore, the hard disk's data is accessed randomly, and not as a stream, and thus the hard disk is a block device.

Managing block devices in the kernel requires more care, preparation, and work than managing character devices. Character devices have only one positionthe current onewhereas block devices must be able to navigate back and forth between any location on the media. Indeed, the kernel does not have to provide an entire subsystem dedicated to the management of character devices, but block devices receive exactly that. Such a subsystem is a necessity partly because of the complexity of block devices. A large reason, however, for such extensive support is that block devices are quite performance sensitive; getting every last drop out of your hard disk is much more important than squeezing an extra percent of speed out of your keyboard. Furthermore, as you will see, the complexity of block devices provides a lot of room for such optimizations. The topic of this chapter is how the kernel manages block devices and their requests. This part of the kernel is known as the *block I/O layer*. Interestingly, revamping the block I/O layer was the primary goal for the 2.5 development kernel. This chapter covers the all-new block I/O layer in the 2.6 kernel.

## Anatomy of a Block Device

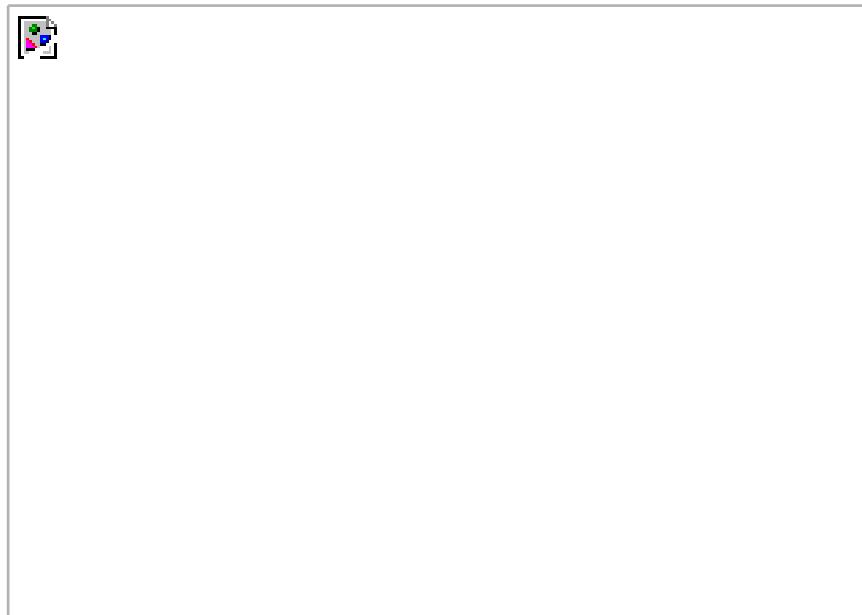
The smallest addressable unit on a block device is known as a *sector*. Sectors come in various powers of two, but 512 bytes is the most common size. The sector size is a physical property of the device and the sector is the fundamental unit of all block devices—the device cannot address or operate on a unit smaller than the sector, although many block devices can transfer multiple sectors at once. Although most block devices have 512-byte sectors, other sizes are common (for example, many CD-ROM discs have 2-kilobyte sectors).

Software has different goals, however, and therefore imposes its own smallest logically addressable unit, which is the block. The block is an abstraction of the filesystems—filesystems can be accessed only in multiples of a block. Although the physical device itself is addressable at the sector level, the kernel performs all disk operations in terms of blocks. Because the device's smallest addressable unit is the sector, the block size can be no smaller than the sector and must be a multiple of a sector. Furthermore, the kernel (like hardware with the sector) needs the block to be a power of two. The kernel also requires that a block be no larger than the page size (see [Chapter 11](#), "Memory Management," and [Chapter 19](#), "Portability")<sup>[1]</sup>. Therefore, block sizes are a power-of-two multiple of the sector size and are not greater than the page size. Common block sizes are 512 bytes, 1 kilobyte, and 4 kilobytes.

[1] This is an artificial constraint that could go away in the future. Forcing the block to remain equal to or smaller than the page size, however, simplifies the kernel.

Somewhat confusingly, some people refer to sectors and blocks with different names. Sectors, the smallest addressable unit to the device, are sometimes called "hard sectors" or "device blocks." Meanwhile, blocks, the smallest addressable unit to the filesystem, are sometimes referred to as "filesystem blocks" or "I/O blocks." This chapter continues to call the two notions "sectors" and "blocks," but you should keep these other terms in mind. [Figure 13.1](#) is a diagram of the relationship between sectors and buffers.

**Figure 13.1. Relationship between sectors and buffers.**



Other terminology, at least with respect to hard disks, is common terms such as *clusters*, *cylinders*, and *heads*. Those notions are specific only to certain block devices and, for the most part, are invisible to user-space software. The reason that the sector is important to the kernel is because all device I/O must be done in units of sectors. In turn, the higher-level concept used by the kernel blocks is built on top of sectors.

**Team LiB**

**◀ PREVIOUS** **NEXT ▶**

## Buffers and Buffer Heads

When a block is stored in memory (say, after a read or pending a write), it is stored in a *buffer*. Each buffer is associated with exactly one block. The buffer serves as the object that represents a disk block in memory. Recall that a block comprises one or more sectors, but is no more than a page in size. Therefore, a single page can hold one or more blocks in memory. Because the kernel requires some associated control information to accompany the data (such as from which block device and which specific block the buffer is), each buffer is associated with a descriptor. The descriptor is called a *buffer head* and is of type `struct buffer_head`. The `buffer_head` structure holds all the information that the kernel needs to manipulate buffers and is defined in `<linux/buffer_head.h>`.

Take a look at this structure, with comments describing each field:

```
struct buffer_head {
    unsigned long      b_state;      /* buffer state flags */
    atomic_t           b_count;     /* buffer usage counter */
    struct buffer_head *b_this_page; /* buffers using this page */
    struct page        *b_page;      /* page storing this buffer */
    sector_t           b_blocknr;   /* logical block number */
    u32                b_size;       /* block size (in bytes) */
    char               *b_data;      /* buffer in the page */
    struct block_device *b_bdev;     /* device where block resides */
    bh_end_io_t        *b_end_io;    /* I/O completion method */
    void               *b_private;   /* data for completion method */
    struct list_head   b_assoc_buffers; /* list of associated mappings */
};
```

The `b_state` field specifies the state of this particular buffer. It can be one or more of the flags in [Table 13.1](#). The legal flags are stored in the `bh_state_bits` enumeration, which is defined in `<linux/buffer_head.h>`.

**Table 13.1. `bh_state` Flags**

| Status Flag                 | Meaning                                                                                                                                                        |
|-----------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <code>BH_Uptodate</code>    | Buffer contains valid data                                                                                                                                     |
| <code>BH_Dirty</code>       | Buffer is dirty (the contents of the buffer are newer than the contents of the block on disk and therefore the buffer must eventually be written back to disk) |
| <code>BH_Lock</code>        | Buffer is undergoing disk I/O and is locked to prevent concurrent access                                                                                       |
| <code>BH_Req</code>         | Buffer is involved in an I/O request                                                                                                                           |
| <code>BH_Mapped</code>      | Buffer is a valid buffer mapped to an on-disk block                                                                                                            |
| <code>BH_New</code>         | Buffer is newly mapped via <code>get_block()</code> and not yet accessed                                                                                       |
| <code>BH_Async_Read</code>  | Buffer is undergoing asynchronous read I/O via <code>end_buffer_async_read()</code>                                                                            |
| <code>BH_Async_Write</code> | Buffer is undergoing asynchronous write I/O via <code>end_buffer_async_write()</code>                                                                          |
| <code>BH_Delay</code>       | Buffer does not yet have an associated on-disk block                                                                                                           |
| <code>BH_Boundary</code>    | Buffer forms the boundary of contiguous blocks; the next block is discontinuous                                                                                |

The `bh_state_bits` enumeration also contains as the last value in the list a `BH_PrivateStart` flag. This is not a valid state flag, but instead corresponds to the first usable bit of which other code can make use. All bit values equal to and greater than `BH_PrivateStart` are not used by the block I/O layer proper, so these bits are safe to use by individual drivers who want to store information in the `b_state` field. Drivers can base the bit values of their internal flags off this flag and rest assured that they are not encroaching on an official bit used by the block I/O layer.

The `b_count` field is the buffer's usage count. The value is incremented and decremented by two inline functions, both of which are defined in `<linux/buffer_head.h>`:

```
static inline void get_bh(struct buffer_head *bh)
{
    atomic_inc(&bh->b_count);
}

static inline void put_bh(struct buffer_head *bh)
{
    atomic_dec(&bh->b_count);
}
```

Before manipulating a buffer head, you must increment its reference count via `get_bh()` to ensure that the buffer head is not deallocated out from under you. When finished with the buffer head, decrement the reference count via `put_bh()`.

The physical block on disk to which a given buffer corresponds is the `b_blocknr`-th logical block on the block device described by `b_bdev`.

The physical page in memory to which a given buffer corresponds is the page pointed to by `b_page`. More specifically, `b_data` is a pointer directly to the block (that exists somewhere in `b_page`), which is `b_size` bytes in length. Therefore, the block is located in memory starting at address `b_data` and ending at address (`b_data + b_size`).

The purpose of a buffer head is to describe this mapping between the on-disk block and the physical in-memory buffer (which is a sequence of bytes on a specific page). Acting as a descriptor of this buffer-to-block mapping is the data structure's only role in the kernel.

Before the 2.6 kernel, the buffer head was a much more important data structure: It was *the* unit of I/O in the kernel. Not only did the buffer head describe the disk-block-to-physical-page mapping, but it also acted as the container used for all block I/O. This had two primary problems. First, the buffer head was a large and unwieldy data structure (it has shrunken a bit nowadays), and it was neither clean nor simple to manipulate data in terms of buffer heads. Instead, the kernel prefers to work in terms of pages, which are simple and allow for greater performance. A large buffer head describing each individual buffer (which might be smaller than a page) was inefficient. Consequently, in the 2.6 kernel, much work has gone into making the kernel work directly with pages and address spaces instead of buffers. Some of this work is discussed in [Chapter 15](#), "The Page Cache and Page Writeback," where the `address_space` structure and the `pdflush` daemons are discussed.

The second issue with buffer heads is that they describe only a single buffer. When used as the container for all I/O operations, the buffer head forces the kernel to break up potentially large block I/O operations (say, a write) into multiple `buffer_head` structures. This results in needless overhead and space consumption. As a result, the primary goal of the 2.5 development kernel was to introduce a new, flexible, and lightweight container for block I/O operations. The result is the `bio` structure, which is discussed in the next section.

## The `bio` structure

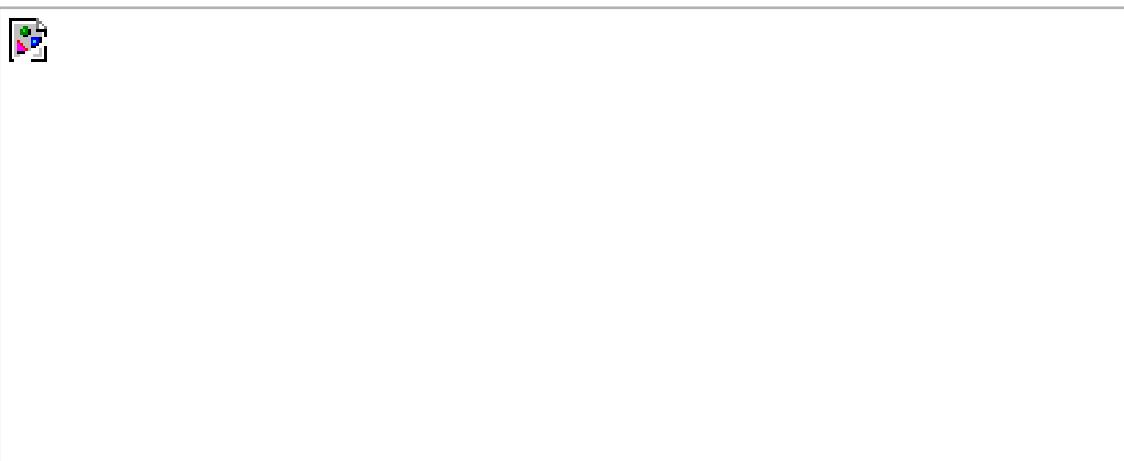
The basic container for block I/O within the kernel is the `bio` structure, which is defined in `<linux/bio.h>`. This structure represents block I/O operations that are in flight (active) as a list of *segments*. A segment is a chunk of a buffer that is contiguous in memory. Thus, individual buffers need not be contiguous in memory. By allowing the buffers to be described in chunks, the `bio` structure provides the capability for the kernel to perform block I/O operations of even a single buffer from multiple locations in memory. Vector I/O such as this is called *scatter-gather I/O*.

Here is `struct bio`, defined in `<linux/bio.h>`, with comments added for each field:

```
struct bio {
    sector_t      bi_sector;      /* associated sector on disk */
    struct bio    *bi_next;       /* list of requests */
    struct block_device *bi_bdev;   /* associated block device */
    unsigned long   bi_flags;       /* status and command flags */
    unsigned long   bi_rw;         /* read or write? */
    unsigned short  bi_vcnt;       /* number of bio_vecs off */
    unsigned short  bi_idx;        /* current index in bi_io_vec */
    unsigned short  bi_phys_segments; /* number of segments after coalescing */
    unsigned short  bi_hw_segments; /* number of segments after remapping */
    unsigned int    bi_size;        /* I/O count */
    unsigned int    bi_hw_front_size; /* size of the first mergeable segment */
    unsigned int    bi_hw_back_size; /* size of the last mergeable segment */
    unsigned int    bi_max_vecs;    /* maximum bio_vecs possible */
    struct bio_vec  *bi_io_vec;     /* bio_vec list */
    bio_end_io_t    *bi_end_io;     /* I/O completion method */
    atomic_t        bi_cnt;        /* usage counter */
    void           *bi_private;    /* owner-private method */
    bio_destructor_t *bi_destructor; /* destructor method */
};
```

The primary purpose of a `bio` structure is to represent an in-flight block I/O operation. To this end, the majority of the fields in the structure are housekeeping related. The most important fields are `bi_io_vecs`, `bi_vcnt`, and `bi_idx`. [Figure 13.2](#) shows the relationship between the `bio` structure and its friends.

**Figure 13.2. Relationship between `struct bio`, `struct bio_vec`, and `struct page`.**





The `bi_io_vecs` field points to an array of `bio_vec` structures. These structures are used as lists of individual segments in this specific block I/O operation. Each `bio_vec` is treated as a vector of the form `<page, offset, len>`, which describes a specific segment: the physical page on which it lies, the location of the block as an offset into the page, and the length of the block starting from the given offset. The full array of these vectors describes the entire buffer. The `bio_vec` structure is defined in `<linux/bio.h>`:

```
struct bio_vec {  
    /* pointer to the physical page on which this buffer resides */  
    struct page *bv_page;  
  
    /* the length in bytes of this buffer */  
    unsigned int bv_len;  
  
    /* the byte offset within the page where the buffer resides */  
    unsigned int bv_offset;  
};
```

In each given block I/O operation, there are `bi_vcnt` vectors in the `bio_vec` array starting with `bi_io_vecs`. As the block I/O operation is carried out, the `bi_idx` field is used to point to the current index into the array.

In summary, each block I/O request is represented by a `bio` structure. Each request comprises one or more blocks, which are stored in an array of `bio_vec` structures. These structures act as vectors and describe each segment's location in a physical page in memory. The first segment in the I/O operation is pointed to by `bi_io_vec`. Each additional segment follows after the first, for a total of `bi_vcnt` segments in the list. As the block I/O layer submits segments in the request, the `bi_idx` field is updated to point to the current segment.

The `bi_idx` field is used to point to the current `bio_vec` in the list, which helps the block I/O layer keep track of partially completed block I/O operations. A more important usage, however, is to allow the splitting of `bio` structures. With this feature, drivers such as RAID (Redundant Array of Inexpensive Disks, a hard disk setup that allows single volumes to span multiple disks for performance and reliability purposes) can take a single `bio` structure, initially intended for a single device, and split it up among the multiple hard drives in the RAID array. All the RAID driver needs to do is copy the `bio` structure and update the `bi_idx` field to point to where the individual drive should start its operation.

The `bio` structure maintains a usage count in the `bi_cnt` field. When this field reaches zero, the structure is destroyed and the backing memory is freed. Two functions, which follow, manage the usage counters for you.

```
void bio_get(struct bio *bio)  
void bio_put(struct bio *bio)
```

The former increments the usage count, whereas the latter decrements the usage count (and, if the count reaches zero, destroys the `bio` structure). Before manipulating an in-flight `bio` structure, be sure to increment its usage count to make sure it does not complete and deallocate out from under you. When you're finished, decrement the usage count in turn.

Finally, the `bi_private` field is a private field for the owner (that is, creator) of the structure. As a rule, you can read or write this field only if you allocated the `bio` structure.

## The Old Versus the New

The difference between buffer heads and the new `bio` structure is important. The `bio` structure represents an I/O operation, which may include one or more pages in memory. On the other hand, the `buffer_head` structure represents a single buffer, which describes a single block on the disk. Because buffer heads are tied to a single disk block in a single page, buffer heads result in the unnecessary dividing of requests into block-sized chunks, only to later reassemble them. Because the `bio` structure is lightweight, it can describe discontiguous blocks, and does not unnecessarily split I/O operations.

Switching from `struct buffer_head` to `struct bio` provided other benefits, as well:

- The `bio` structure can easily represent high memory (see [Chapter 11](#)), because `struct bio` deals with only physical pages and not direct pointers.
- The `bio` structure can represent both normal page I/O and direct I/O (I/O operations that do not go through the page cache; see [Chapter 15](#) for a discussion on the page cache).
- The `bio` structure makes it easy to perform scatter-gather (vectored) block I/O operations, with the data involved in the operation originating from multiple physical pages.
- The `bio` structure is much more lightweight than a buffer head because it contains only the minimum information needed to represent a block I/O operation and not unnecessary information related to the buffer itself.

The concept of buffer heads is still required, however; buffer heads function as descriptors, mapping disk blocks to pages. The `bio` structure does not contain any information about the state of a buffer; it is simply an array of vectors describing one or more segments of data for a single block I/O operation, plus related information. In the current setup, the `buffer_head` structure is still needed to contain information about buffers while the `bio` structure describes in-flight I/O. Keeping the two structures separate allows each to remain as small as possible.

## Request Queues

Block devices maintain *request queues* to store their pending block I/O requests. The request queue is represented by the `request_queue` structure and is defined in `<linux/blkdev.h>`. The request queue contains a doubly linked list of requests and associated control information. Requests are added to the queue by higher-level code in the kernel, such as filesystems. As long as the request queue is nonempty, the block device driver associated with the queue grabs the request from the head of the queue and submits it to its associated block device. Each item in the queue's request list is a single request, of type `struct request`.

## Requests

Individual requests on the queue are represented by `struct request`, which is also defined in `<linux/blkdev.h>`. Each request can be composed of more than one `bio` structure because individual requests can operate on multiple consecutive disk blocks. Note that although the blocks on the disk must be adjacent, the blocks in memory need not be each `bio` structure can describe multiple segments (recall, segments are contiguous chunks of a block in memory) and the request can be composed of multiple `bio` structures.

## I/O Schedulers

Simply sending out requests to the block devices in the order that the kernel issues them, as soon as it issues them, results in awful performance. One of the slowest operations in a modern computer is disk seeks. Each seekpositioning the hard disk's head at the location of a specific blocktakes many milliseconds. Minimizing seeks is absolutely crucial to the system's performance.

Therefore, the kernel does not issue block I/O requests to the disk in the order they are received or as soon as they are received.

Instead, it performs operations called *merging* and *sorting* to greatly improve the performance of the system as a whole<sup>[2]</sup>. The subsystem of the kernel that performs these operations is called the *I/O scheduler*.

[2] This point must be stressed. A system without these features, or wherein these features are poorly implemented, would perform horribly with even a modest number of block I/O operations.

The I/O scheduler divides the resource of disk I/O among the pending block I/O requests in the system. It does this through the merging and sorting of pending requests in the request queue. The I/O scheduler is not to be confused with the process scheduler (see [Chapter 4](#) "Process Scheduling"), which divides the resource of the processor among the processes on the system. The two subsystems are similar in nature but not the same. Both the process scheduler and the I/O scheduler virtualize a resource among multiple objects. In the case of the process scheduler, the processor is virtualized and shared among the processes on the system. This provides the illusion of virtualization inherent in a multitasking and timesharing operating system, such as any Unix. On the other hand, the I/O scheduler virtualizes block devices among multiple outstanding block requests. This is done to minimize disk seeks and ensure optimum disk performance.

## The Job of an I/O Scheduler

An I/O scheduler works by managing a block device's request queue. It decides the order of requests in the queue and at what time each request is dispatched to the block device. It manages the request queue with the goal of reducing seeks, which results in greater *global throughput*. The "global" modifier here is important. An I/O scheduler, very openly, is unfair to some requests at the expense of improving the *overall* performance of the system.

I/O schedulers perform two primary actions to minimize seeks: merging and sorting. Merging is the coalescing of two or more requests into one. Consider an example request that is submitted to the queue by a filesystemsay, to read a chunk of data from a file. (At this point, of course, everything is occurring in terms of sectors and blocks and not files, but presume that the requested blocks originate from a chunk of a file.) If a request is already in the queue to read from an adjacent sector on the disk (for example, an earlier chunk of the same file), the two requests can be merged into a single request operating on one or more adjacent on-disk sectors. By merging requests, the I/O scheduler reduces the overhead of multiple requests down to a single request. More importantly, only a single command needs to be issued to the disk and servicing the multiple requests can be done without seeking. Consequently, merging requests reduces overhead and minimizes seeks.

Now, assume your fictional read request is submitted to the request queue, but there is no read request to an adjacent sector. You are therefore unable to merge this request with any other request. Now, you could simply stick this request onto the tail of the queue. But, what if there are other requests to a similar location on the disk? Would it not make sense to insert this new request into the queue at a spot near other requests operating on physically near sectors? In fact, I/O schedulers do exactly this. The entire request queue is kept sorted, sector-wise, so that all seeking activity along the queue moves (as much as possible) sequentially over the sectors of the hard disk. The goal is not just to minimize each individual seek, but to minimize all seeking by keeping the disk head moving in a straight line. This is similar to the algorithm employed in elevatorsellevators do not jump all over, wildly, from floor to floor. Instead, they try to move gracefully in a single direction. When the final floor is reached in one direction, the elevator can reverse course and move in the other direction. Because of this similarity, I/O schedulers (or sometimes just their sorting algorithm) are called *elevators*.

## The Linus Elevator

Now let's look at some real-life I/O schedulers. The first I/O scheduler is called the *Linus Elevator* (yes, Linus has an elevator named after him!). It was the default I/O scheduler in 2.4. In 2.6, it was replaced by the following I/O schedulers that we will look at however, because this elevator is simpler than the subsequent ones, while performing many of the same functions, it still deserves discussion.

The Linus Elevator performs both merging and sorting. When a request is added to the queue, it is first checked against every other pending request to see whether it is a possible candidate for merging. The Linus Elevator I/O scheduler performs both *front* and *back merging*. The type of merging performed depends on the location of the existing adjacent request. If the new request immediately proceeds an existing request, it is front merged. Conversely, if the new request immediately precedes an existing request, it is back merged. Because of the way files are laid out (usually by increasing sector number) and the I/O operations performed in a typical workload (data is normally read from start to finish and not in reverse), front merging is very rare compared to back merging. Nonetheless, the Linus Elevator checks for and performs both types of merge.

If the merge attempt fails, a possible insertion point in the queue (a location in the queue where the new request fits sector-wise between the existing requests) is then sought. If one is found, the new request is inserted there. If a suitable location is not found, the request is added to the tail of the queue. Additionally, if an existing request is found in the queue that is older than a predefined threshold, the new request is added to the tail of the queue even if it can be insertion sorted elsewhere. This prevents many requests to nearby on-disk locations from indefinitely starving requests to other locations on the disk. Unfortunately, this "age" check is not very efficient. It does not provide any real attempt to service requests in a given timeframe; it merely stops insertion-sorting requests after a suitable delay. This improves latency but can still lead to request starvation, which was the big must-fix of the 2.4 I/O scheduler.

In summary, when a request is added to the queue, four operations are possible. In order, they are

1. First, if a request to an adjacent on-disk sector is in the queue, the existing request and the new request are merged into a single request.
2. Second, if a request in the queue is sufficiently old, the new request is inserted at the tail of the queue to prevent starvation of the other, older, requests.
3. Next, if there is a suitable location sector-wise in the queue, the new request is inserted there. This keeps the queue sorted by physical location on disk.
4. Finally, if no such suitable insertion point exists, the request is inserted at the tail of the queue

## The Deadline I/O Scheduler

The Deadline I/O scheduler sought to prevent the starvation caused by the Linus Elevator. In the interest of minimizing seeks, heavy disk I/O operations to one area of the disk can indefinitely starve request operations to another part of the disk. Indeed, a stream of requests to the same area of the disk can result in other far-off requests never being serviced. This starvation is unfair.

Worse, the general issue of request starvation introduces a specific instance of the problem known as *writes starving reads*. Write operations can usually be committed to disk whenever the kernel gets around to them, entirely asynchronous with respect to the submitting application. Read operations are quite different. Normally, when an application submits a read request, the application blocks until the request is fulfilled. That is, read requests occur synchronously with respect to the submitting application. Although system response is largely unaffected by write latency (the time required to commit a write request), read latency (the time required to commit a read request) is very important. Write latency has little bearing on application performance<sup>[3]</sup>, but an application must wait, twiddling its thumbs, for the completion of each read request. Consequently, read latency is very important to the performance of the system.

[3] We still do not want to delay write requests indefinitely, however, because the kernel wants to ensure that data is eventually written to disk to prevent in-memory buffers from growing too large or too old.

Compounding the problem, read requests tend to be dependent on each other. For example, consider the reading of a large number of files. Each read occurs in small buffered chunks. The application does not start reading the next chunk (or the next file, for that matter) until the previous chunk is read from disk and returned to the application. Worse, both read and write operations require the reading of various metadata, such as inodes. Reading these blocks off the disk further serializes I/O. Consequently, if each read request is individually starved, the total delay to such applications compounds and can grow enormous. Recognizing that the asynchrony and interdependency of read requests results in a much stronger bearing of read latency on the performance of the system, the Deadline I/O scheduler implements several features to ensure that request starvation in general, and read starvation in specific, is minimized.

Note that reducing request starvation comes at a cost to global throughput. Even the Linus Elevator makes this compromise, albeit in a much milder manner—the Linus Elevator could provide better overall throughput (via a greater minimization of seeks) if it always inserted requests into the queue sector-wise and never checked for old requests and reverted to insertion at the tail of the queue. Although minimizing seeks is very important, indefinite starvation is not good either. The Deadline I/O scheduler, therefore, works harder to limit starvation while still providing good global throughput. Make no mistake: It is a tough act to provide request fairness, yet maximize global throughput.

In the Deadline I/O scheduler, each request is associated with an expiration time. By default, the expiration time is 500 milliseconds in the future for read requests and 5 seconds in the future for write requests. The Deadline I/O scheduler operates similarly to the Linus Elevator in that it maintains a request queue sorted by physical location on disk. It calls this queue the *sorted queue*. When a new request is submitted to the sorted queue, the Deadline I/O scheduler performs merging and insertion like the Linus Elevator<sup>[4]</sup>. The Deadline I/O scheduler also, however, inserts the request into a second queue that depends on the type of request. Read requests are sorted into a special read FIFO queue and write requests are inserted into a special write FIFO queue. Although the normal queue is sorted by on-disk sector, these queues are kept FIFO (effectively, they are sorted by time). Consequently, new requests are always added to the tail of the queue. Under normal operation, the Deadline I/O scheduler pulls requests from the head of the sorted queue into the dispatch queue. The dispatch queue is then fed to the disk drive. This results in minimal seeks.

[4] Performing front merging is optional in the Deadline I/O scheduler, however. It is not always worth the trouble because many workloads have very few requests that can be front merged.

If the request at the head of either the write FIFO queue or the read FIFO queue expires (that is, if the current time becomes greater than the expiration time associated with the request), the Deadline I/O scheduler then begins servicing requests from the FIFO queue. In this manner, the Deadline I/O scheduler attempts to ensure that no request is outstanding longer than its expiration time. See [Figure 13.3](#).

**Figure 13.3. The three queues of the Deadline I/O scheduler.**



Note that the Deadline I/O scheduler does not make any strict guarantees over request latency. It is capable, however, of generally committing requests on or before their expiration. This prevents request starvation. Because read requests are given a substantially smaller expiration value than write requests, the Deadline I/O scheduler also works to ensure that write requests do not starve read requests. This preference toward read requests provides minimized read latency.

The Deadline I/O scheduler lives in `drivers/block/deadline-iosched.c`.

## The Anticipatory I/O Scheduler

Although the Deadline I/O scheduler does a great job minimizing read latency, it does so at the expense of global throughput. Consider a system undergoing heavy write activity. Every time a read request is submitted, the I/O scheduler quickly rushes to handle the read request. This results in the disk seeking over to where the read is, performing the read operation, and then seeking back to continue the ongoing write operation, repeating this little charade for each read request. The preference toward read requests is a good thing, but the resulting pair of seeks (one to the location of the read request and another back to the ongoing write) is detrimental to global disk throughput. The Anticipatory I/O scheduler aims to continue to provide excellent read latency, but also provide excellent global throughput.

First, the Anticipatory I/O scheduler starts with the Deadline I/O scheduler as its base. Therefore, it is not entirely different. The Anticipatory I/O scheduler implements three queues (plus the dispatch queue) and expirations for each request, just like the Deadline I/O scheduler. The major change is the addition of an *anticipation heuristic*.

The Anticipatory I/O scheduler attempts to minimize the seek storm that accompanies read requests issued during other disk I/O activity. When a read request is issued, it is handled as usual, within its usual expiration period. After the request is submitted, however, the Anticipatory I/O scheduler does not immediately seek back and return to handling other requests. Instead, it does absolutely nothing for a few milliseconds (the actual value is configurable; by default it is six milliseconds). In those few milliseconds, there is a good chance that the application will submit another read request. Any requests issued to an adjacent area of the disk are immediately handled. After the waiting period elapses, the Anticipatory I/O scheduler seeks back to where it left off and continues handling the previous requests.

It is important to note that the few milliseconds that are spent in *anticipation* for more requests are well worth it if they minimize even a modest percentage of the back-and-forth seeking that results from the servicing of read requests during other heavy requests. If an adjacent I/O request is issued within the waiting period, the I/O scheduler just saved a pair of seeks. As more and more reads are issued to the same area of disk, many more seeks are prevented.

Of course, if no activity occurs within the waiting period, the Anticipatory I/O scheduler loses and a few milliseconds are wasted. The key to reaping maximum benefit from the Anticipatory I/O scheduler is correctly anticipating the actions of applications and filesystems. This is done via a set of statistics and associated heuristics. The Anticipatory I/O scheduler keeps track of per-process statistics pertaining to block I/O habits in hopes of correctly anticipating the actions of applications. With a sufficiently high percentage of correct anticipations, the Anticipatory I/O scheduler can greatly reduce the penalty of seeking to service read requests, while still providing the attention to such requests that system response requires. This allows the Anticipatory I/O scheduler to minimize read latency, while also minimizing the number and duration of seeks. This results in low system latency and high system throughput.

The Anticipatory I/O scheduler lives in the file `drivers/block/as-iosched.c` in the kernel source tree. It is the default I/O scheduler in the Linux kernel. It performs well across most workloads. It is ideal for servers, although it performs very poorly on certain uncommon but critical workloads involving seek-happy databases.

## The Complete Fair Queuing I/O Scheduler

The Complete Fair Queuing (CFQ) I/O scheduler is an I/O scheduler designed for specialized workloads, but that in practice actually provides good performance across multiple workloads. It is fundamentally different from the previous I/O schedulers that have been covered, however.

The CFQ I/O scheduler assigns incoming I/O requests to specific queues based on the process originating the I/O request. For example, I/O requests from process foo go in foo's queues, and I/O requests from process bar go in bar's queue. Within each queue, requests are coalesced with adjacent requests and insertion sorted. The queues are thus kept sorted sector-wise, as with the other I/O scheduler's queues. The difference with the CFQ I/O scheduler is that there is one queue for each process submitting I/O.

The CFQ I/O scheduler then services the queues round robin, plucking a configurable number of requests (by default, four) from each

queue before continuing on to the next. This provides fairness at a per-process level, assuring that each process receives a fair slice of the disk's bandwidth. The intended workload is multimedia, in which such a fair algorithm can guarantee that, for example, an audio player is able to always refill its audio buffers from disk in time. In practice, however, the CFQ I/O scheduler performs well in many scenarios.

The Complete Fair Queuing I/O scheduler lives in `drivers/block/cfq-iosched.c`. It is recommended for desktop workloads, although it performs reasonably well in nearly all workloads without any pathological corner cases.

## The Noop I/O Scheduler

A fourth and final I/O scheduler is the Noop I/O scheduler, so named because it is basically a noop it does not do much. The Noop I/O scheduler does not perform sorting or any other form of seek-prevention whatsoever. In turn, it has no need to implement anything akin to the slick algorithms to minimize request latency that you saw in the previous three I/O schedulers.

The Noop I/O scheduler does perform merging, however, as its lone chore. When a new request is submitted to the queue, it is coalesced with any adjacent requests. Other than this operation, the Noop I/O Scheduler truly is a noop, merely maintaining the request queue in near-FIFO order, from which the block device driver can pluck requests.

The Noop I/O scheduler is not the lazy and worthless I/O scheduler of the bunch; its lack of hard work is with reason. It is intended for block devices that are truly random-access, such as flash memory cards. If a block device has little or no overhead associated with "seeking," then there is no need for insertion sorting of incoming requests, and the Noop I/O scheduler is the ideal candidate.

The Noop I/O scheduler lives in `drivers/block/noop-iosched.c`. It is intended only for random-access devices.

## I/O Scheduler Selection

You have now seen four different I/O schedulers in the 2.6 kernel. Each of these I/O schedulers can be enabled and built into the kernel. By default, block devices use the Anticipatory I/O scheduler. This can be overridden via the boot-time option `elevator=foo` on the kernel command line, where `foo` is a valid and enabled I/O Scheduler. See [Table 13.2](#).

**Table 13.2. Parameters Given to the `elevator` Option**

| Parameter             | I/O Scheduler         |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| <code>as</code>       | Anticipatory          |
| <code>cfq</code>      | Complete Fair Queuing |
| <code>deadline</code> | Deadline              |
| <code>noop</code>     | Noop                  |

For example, the kernel command line option `elevator=cfq` would enable use of the Complete Fair Queuing I/O scheduler for all block devices.

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## Summary

In this chapter, we discussed the fundamentals of block devices and we looked at the data structures used by the block I/O layer: The `bio`, representing in-flight I/O; the `buffer_head`, representing a block-to-page mapping; and the `request` structure, representing a specific I/O request. We followed the I/O request on its brief but important life, culminating in the I/O scheduler. We discussed the dilemmas involved in scheduling I/O and went over the four I/O schedulers currently in the Linux kernel, as well as the old Linus Elevator from 2.4.

Next up, we will tackle the process address space.

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# Chapter 14. The Process Address Space

[Chapter 11](#), "Memory Management," looked at how the kernel manages physical memory. In addition to managing its own memory, the kernel also has to manage the process address space—the representation of memory given to each user-space process on the system. Linux is a virtual memory operating system, and thus the resource of memory is virtualized among the processes on the system. To an individual process, the view is as if it alone has full access to the system's physical memory. More importantly, the address space of even a single process can be much larger than physical memory. This chapter discusses how the kernel manages the process address space.

The process address space consists of the linear address range presented to each process and, more importantly, the addresses within this space that the process is allowed to use. Each process is given a *flat* 32- or 64-bit address space, with the size depending on the architecture. The term "flat" describes the fact that the address space exists in a single range. (As an example, a 32-bit address space extends from the address 0 to 429496729.) Some operating systems provide a *segmented address space*, with addresses existing not in a single linear range, but instead in multiple segments. Modern virtual memory operating systems generally have a flat memory model and not a segmented one. Normally, this flat address space is unique to each process. A memory address in one process's address space tells nothing of that memory address in another process's address space. Both processes can have different data at the same address in their respective address spaces. Alternatively, processes can elect to share their address space with other processes. We know these processes as *threads*.

A memory address is a given value within the address space, such as `4021f000`. This particular value identifies a specific byte in a process's 32-bit address space. The interesting part of the address space is the intervals of memory addresses, such as `08048000-0804c000`, that the process has permission to access. These intervals of legal addresses are called *memory areas*. The process, through the kernel, can dynamically add and remove memory areas to its address space.

The process can access a memory address only in a valid memory area. Memory areas have associated permissions, such as readable, writable, and executable, that the associated process must respect. If a process accesses a memory address not in a valid memory area, or if it accesses a valid area in an invalid manner, the kernel kills the process with the dreaded "Segmentation Fault" message.

Memory areas can contain all sorts of goodies, such as

- A memory map of the executable file's code, called the *text section*
- A memory map of the executable file's initialized global variables, called the *data section*
- A memory map of the zero page (a page consisting of all zeros, used for purposes such as this) containing uninitialized global variables, called the *bss section*<sup>[1]</sup>

[1] The term "BSS" is historical and quite old. It stands for *block started by symbol*. Uninitialized variables are not stored in the executable object because they do not have any associated value. But the C standard decrees that uninitialized global variables are assigned certain default values (basically, all zeros), so the kernel loads the variables (without value) from the executable into memory and maps the zero page over the area, thereby giving the variables the value zero, without having to waste space in the object file with explicit initializations.

- A memory map of the zero page used for the process's user-space stack (do not confuse this with the process's kernel stack, which is separate and maintained and used by the kernel)
- An additional text, data, and bss section for each shared library, such as the C library and dynamic linker, loaded into the process's address space
- Any memory mapped files

- Any shared memory segments
- Any anonymous memory mappings, such as those associated with `malloc()`<sup>[2]</sup>

<sup>[2]</sup> Newer versions of glibc implement `malloc()` via `mmap()`, in addition to `brk()`.

All valid addresses in the process address space exist in exactly one area; memory areas do not overlap. As you can see, there is a separate memory area for each different chunk of memory in a running process: the stack, the object code, global variables, mapped file, and so on.

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## The Memory Descriptor

The kernel represents a process's address space with a data structure called the *memory descriptor*. This structure contains all the information related to the process address space. The memory descriptor is represented by `struct mm_struct` and defined in

`<linux/sched.h>`<sup>[3]</sup>.

<sup>[3]</sup> There is a rather tangled interdependency between the process descriptor, the memory descriptor, and their related functions. Consequently, `struct mm_struct` ends up in `sched.h`.

Let's look at the memory descriptor, with comments added describing each field:

```
struct mm_struct {  
    struct vm_area_struct *mmap;          /* list of memory areas */  
    struct rb_root    mm_rb;            /* red-black tree of VMAs */  
    struct vm_area_struct *mmap_cache;    /* last used memory area */  
    unsigned long     free_area_cache;   /* 1st address space hole */  
    pgd_t           *pgd;              /* page global directory */  
    atomic_t         mm_users;        /* address space users */  
    atomic_t         mm_count;        /* primary usage counter */  
    int              map_count;       /* number of memory areas */  
    struct rw_semaphore mmap_sem;      /* memory area semaphore */  
    spinlock_t       page_table_lock;  /* page table lock */  
    struct list_head mmlist;         /* list of all mm_structs */  
    unsigned long    start_code;       /* start address of code */  
    unsigned long    end_code;        /* final address of code */  
    unsigned long    start_data;      /* start address of data */  
    unsigned long    end_data;        /* final address of data */  
    unsigned long    start_brk;       /* start address of heap */  
    unsigned long    brk;             /* final address of heap */  
    unsigned long    start_stack;     /* start address of stack */  
    unsigned long    arg_start;      /* start of arguments */  
    unsigned long    arg_end;        /* end of arguments */  
    unsigned long    env_start;      /* start of environment */  
    unsigned long    env_end;        /* end of environment */  
    unsigned long    rss;             /* pages allocated */  
    unsigned long    total_vm;       /* total number of pages */  
    unsigned long    locked_vm;      /* number of locked pages */  
    unsigned long    def_flags;       /* default access flags */  
    unsigned long    cpu_vm_mask;    /* lazy TLB switch mask */  
    unsigned long    swap_address;   /* last scanned address */  
    unsigned         dumpable:1;     /* can this mm core dump? */  
    int              used_hugetlb;   /* used hugetlb pages? */  
    mm_context_t    context;        /* arch-specific data */  
    int              core_waiters;   /* thread core dump waiters */  
    struct completion *core_startup_done; /* core start completion */  
    struct completion *core_done;     /* core end completion */  
    rwlock_t         iocxt_list_lock; /* AIO I/O list lock */  
    struct kiocx     *iocxt_list;    /* AIO I/O list */  
    struct kiocx     default_iocxt; /* AIO default I/O context */  
};
```

The `mm_users` field is the number of processes using this address space. For example, if two threads share this address space, `mm_users` is equal to two. The `mm_count` field is the primary reference count for the `mm_struct`. All `mm_users` equate to one increment of

`mm_count`. Thus, in the previous example, `mm_count` is only one. Only when `mm_users` reaches zero (when both threads exit) is `mm_count` decremented. When `mm_count` finally reaches zero, there are no remaining references to this `mm_struct` and it is freed. Having two counters enables the kernel to differentiate between the main usage counter (`mm_count`) and the number of processes using the address space (`mm_users`).

The `mmap` and `mm_rb` fields are different data structures that contain the same thing: all the memory areas in this address space. The former stores them in a linked list, whereas the latter stores them in a red-black tree. A red-black tree is a type of binary tree; like all binary trees, searching for a given element is an  $O(\log n)$  operation. For further discussion on red-black trees, see [Lists and Trees of Memory Areas](#), later in this chapter.

Although the kernel would normally avoid the extra baggage of using two data structures to organize the same data, the redundancy comes in handy here. The `mmap` data structure, as a linked list, allows for simple and efficient traversing of all elements. On the other hand, the `mm_rb` data structure, as a red-black tree, is more suitable to searching for a given element. Memory areas are discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

All of the `mm_struct` structures are strung together in a doubly linked list via the `mm_list` field. The initial element in the list is the `init_mm` memory descriptor, which describes the address space of the init process. The list is protected from concurrent access via the `mmlist_lock`, which is defined in `kernel/fork.c`. The total number of memory descriptors is stored in the `mmlist_nr` global integer, which is defined in the same place.

## Allocating a Memory Descriptor

The memory descriptor associated with a given task is stored in the `mm` field of the task's process descriptor. Thus, `current->mm` is the current process's memory descriptor. The `copy_mm()` function is used to copy a parent's memory descriptor to its child during `fork()`. The `mm_struct` structure is allocated from the `mm_cachep` slab cache via the `allocate_mm()` macro in `kernel/fork.c`. Normally, each process receives a unique `mm_struct` and thus a unique process address space.

Processes may elect to share their address spaces with their children by means of the `CLONE_VM` flag to `clone()`. The process is then called a thread. Recall from [Chapter 3](#), "Process Management," that this is essentially the only difference between normal processes and so-called threads in Linux; the Linux kernel does not otherwise differentiate between them. Threads are regular processes to the kernel that merely share certain resources.

In the case that `CLONE_VM` is specified, `allocate_mm()` is *not* called and the process's `mm` field is set to point to the memory descriptor of its parent via this logic in `copy_mm()`:

```
if (clone_flags & CLONE_VM) {
    /*
     * current is the parent process and
     * tsk is the child process during a fork()
     */
    atomic_inc(&current->mm->mm_users);
    tsk->mm = current->mm;
}
```

## Destroying a Memory Descriptor

When the process associated with a specific address space exits, the `exit_mm()` function is invoked. This function performs some housekeeping and updates some statistics. It then calls `mmput()`, which decrements the memory descriptor's `mm_users` user counter. If the user count reaches zero, `mmdrop()` is called to decrement the `mm_count` usage counter. If *that* counter is finally zero, then the `free_mm()` macro is invoked to return the `mm_struct` to the `mm_cachep` slab cache via `kmem_cache_free()`, because the memory

descriptor does not have any users.

## The `mm_struct` and Kernel Threads

Kernel threads do not have a process address space and therefore do not have an associated memory descriptor. Thus, the `mm` field of a kernel thread's process descriptor is `NULL`. This is pretty much the *definition* of a kernel thread processes that have no user context.

This lack of an address space is fine, because kernel threads do not ever access any user-space memory (whose would they access?). Because kernel threads do not have any pages in user-space, they do not really deserve their own memory descriptor and page tables (page tables are discussed later in the chapter). Despite this, kernel threads need some of the data, such as the page tables, even to access kernel memory. To provide kernel threads the needed data, without wasting memory on a memory descriptor and page tables, or wasting processor cycles to switch to a new address space whenever a kernel thread begins running, kernel threads use the memory descriptor of whatever task ran previously.

Whenever a process is scheduled, the process address space referenced by the process's `mm` field is loaded. The `active_mm` field in the process descriptor is then updated to refer to the new address space. Kernel threads do not have an address space and `mm` is `NULL`. Therefore, when a kernel thread is scheduled, the kernel notices that `mm` is `NULL` and keeps the previous process's address space loaded. The kernel then updates the `active_mm` field of the kernel thread's process descriptor to refer to the previous process's memory descriptor. The kernel thread can then use the previous process's page tables as needed. Because kernel threads do not access user-space memory, they make use of only the information in the address space pertaining to kernel memory, which is the same for all processes.

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## Memory Areas

Memory areas are represented by a memory area object, which is stored in the `vm_area_struct` structure and defined in `<linux/mm.h>`. Memory areas are often called *virtual memory areas* or VMA's in the kernel.

The `vm_area_struct` structure describes a single memory area over a contiguous interval in a given address space. The kernel treats each memory area as a unique memory object. Each memory area shares certain properties, such as permissions and a set of associated operations. In this manner, the single VMA structure can represent multiple types of memory areas for example, memory-mapped files or the process's user-space stack. This is similar to the object-oriented approach taken by the VFS layer (see [Chapter 12](#), "The Virtual Filesystem"). Here's the structure, with comments added describing each field:

```
struct vm_area_struct {
    struct mm_struct      *vm_mm;      /* associated mm_struct */
    unsigned long         vm_start;   /* VMA start, inclusive */
    unsigned long         vm_end;     /* VMA end , exclusive */
    struct vm_area_struct *vm_next;   /* list of VMA's */
    pgprot_t              vm_page_prot; /* access permissions */
    unsigned long         vm_flags;    /* flags */
    struct rb_node        vm_rb;      /* VMA's node in the tree */
    union {               /* links to address_space->i_mmap or i_mmap_nonlinear */
        struct {
            struct list_head    list;
            void                *parent;
            struct vm_area_struct *head;
        } vm_set;
        struct prio_tree_node prio_tree_node;
    } shared;
    struct list_head       anon_vma_node; /* anon_vma entry */
    struct anon_vma        *anon_vma;    /* anonymous VMA object */
    struct vm_operations_struct *vm_ops;   /* associated ops */
    unsigned long          vm_pgoff;    /* offset within file */
    struct file            *vm_file;     /* mapped file, if any */
    void                  *vm_private_data; /* private data */
};

};
```

Recall that each memory descriptor is associated with a unique interval in the process's address space. The `vm_start` field is the initial (lowest) address in the interval and the `vm_end` field is the first byte after the final (highest) address in the interval. That is, `vm_start` is the inclusive start and `vm_end` is the exclusive end of the memory interval. Thus, `vm_end - vm_start` is the length in bytes of the memory area, which exists over the interval `[vm_start, vm_end]`. Intervals in different memory areas in the same address space cannot overlap.

The `vm_mm` field points to this VMA's associated `mm_struct`. Note each VMA is unique to the `mm_struct` to which it is associated. Therefore, even if two separate processes map the same file into their respective address spaces, each has a unique `vm_area_struct` to identify its unique memory area. Conversely, two threads that share an address space also share all the `vm_area_struct` structures therein.

## VMA Flags

The `vm_flags` field contains bit flags, defined in `<linux/mm.h>`, that specify the behavior of and provide information about the pages contained in the memory area. Unlike permissions associated with a specific physical page, the VMA flags specify behavior for which the kernel is responsible, not the hardware. Furthermore, `vm_flags` contains information that relates to each page in the memory area, or the

memory area as a whole, and not specific individual pages. [Table 14.1](#) is a listing of the possible `vm_flags` values.

**Table 14.1. VMA Flags**

| Flag                       | Effect on the VMA and its pages                     |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|
| <code>VM_READ</code>       | Pages can be read from                              |
| <code>VM_WRITE</code>      | Pages can be written to                             |
| <code>VM_EXEC</code>       | Pages can be executed                               |
| <code>VM_SHARED</code>     | Pages are shared                                    |
| <code>VM_MAYREAD</code>    | The <code>VM_READ</code> flag can be set            |
| <code>VM_MAYWRITE</code>   | The <code>VM_WRITE</code> flag can be set           |
| <code>VM_MAYEXEC</code>    | The <code>VM_EXEC</code> flag can be set            |
| <code>VM_MAYSHARE</code>   | The <code>VM_SHARE</code> flag can be set           |
| <code>VM_GROWSDOWN</code>  | The area can grow downward                          |
| <code>VM_GROWSUP</code>    | The area can grow upward                            |
| <code>VM_SHM</code>        | The area is used for shared memory                  |
| <code>VM_DENYWRITE</code>  | The area maps an unwritable file                    |
| <code>VM_EXECUTABLE</code> | The area maps an executable file                    |
| <code>VM_LOCKED</code>     | The pages in this area are locked                   |
| <code>VM_IO</code>         | The area maps a device's I/O space                  |
| <code>VM_SEQ_READ</code>   | The pages seem to be accessed sequentially          |
| <code>VM_RAND_READ</code>  | The pages seem to be accessed randomly              |
| <code>VM_DONTCOPY</code>   | This area must not be copied on <code>fork()</code> |
| <code>VM_DONTEXPAND</code> | This area cannot grow via <code>mremap()</code>     |
| <code>VM_RESERVED</code>   | This area must not be swapped out                   |
| <code>VM_ACCOUNT</code>    | This area is an accounted VM object                 |
| <code>VM_HUGETLB</code>    | This area uses <code>hugetlb</code> pages           |
| <code>VM_NONLINEAR</code>  | This area is a nonlinear mapping                    |

Let's look at some of the more important and interesting flags in depth. The `VM_READ`, `VM_WRITE`, and `VM_EXEC` flags specify the usual read, write, and execute permissions for the pages *in this particular memory area*. They are combined as needed to form the appropriate access permissions that a process accessing this VMA must respect. For example, the object code for a process might be mapped with `VM_READ` and `VM_EXEC`, but not `VM_WRITE`. On the other hand, the data section from an executable object would be mapped with `VM_WRITE` and `VM_EXEC`, but not `VM_READ`. The `VM_SHARED` flag specifies whether the memory area contains a mapping that is shared among multiple processes. If the flag is set, it is intuitively called a *shared mapping*. If the flag is not set, only a single process can view this particular mapping, and it is called a *private mapping*. A memory area with `VM_SHARED` mapped `VM_READ` and `VM_WRITE`, but `VM_EXEC` would make little sense. Meanwhile, a read-only memory mapped

data file would be mapped with only the `VM_READ` flag.

The `VM_IO` flag specifies that this memory area is a mapping of a device's I/O space. This field is typically set by device drivers when `mmap()` is called on their I/O space. It specifies, among other things, that the memory area must not be included in any process's core dump. The `VM_RESERVED` flag specifies that the memory region must not be swapped out. It is also used by device driver mappings.

The `VM_SEQ_READ` flag provides a hint to the kernel that the application is performing sequential (that is, linear and contiguous) reads in this mapping. The kernel can then opt to increase the read-ahead performed on the backing file. The `VM_RAND_READ` flag specifies the exact opposite: that the application is performing relatively random (that is, not sequential) reads in this mapping. The kernel can then opt to decrease or altogether disable read-ahead on the backing file. These flags are set via the `madvice()` system call with the `MADV_SEQUENTIAL` and `MADV_RANDOM` flags, respectively. Read-ahead is the act of reading sequentially ahead of requested data, in hopes that the additional data will be needed soon. Such behavior is beneficial if applications are reading data sequentially. If data access patterns are random, however, read-ahead is not effective.

## VMA Operations

The `vm_ops` field in the `vm_area_struct` structure points to the table of operations associated with a given memory area, which the kernel can invoke to manipulate the VMA. The `vm_area_struct` acts as a generic object for representing any type of memory area, and the operations table describes the specific methods that can operate on this particular instance of the object.

The operations table is represented by `struct vm_operations_struct` and is defined in `<linux/mm.h>`:

```
struct vm_operations_struct {
    void (*open) (struct vm_area_struct *);
    void (*close) (struct vm_area_struct *);
    struct page * (*nopage) (struct vm_area_struct *, unsigned long, int);
    int (*populate) (struct vm_area_struct *, unsigned long, unsigned long,
                    pgprot_t, unsigned long, int);
};
```

Here's a description for each individual method:

- `void open(struct vm_area_struct *area)`

This function is invoked when the given memory area is added to an address space.

- `void close(struct vm_area_struct *area)`

This function is invoked when the given memory area is removed from an address space.

- `struct page * nopage(struct vm_area_struct *area,`  
    `unsigned long address,`  
    `int unused)`

This function is invoked by the page fault handler when a page that is not present in physical memory is accessed.

- `int populate(struct vm_area_struct *area,`  
    `unsigned long address,`  
    `unsigned long len, pgprot_t prot,`  
    `unsigned long pgoff, int nonblock)`

This function is invoked by the `remap_pages()` system call to prefault a new mapping.

## Lists and Trees of Memory Areas

As discussed, memory areas are accessed via both the `mmap` and the `mm_rb` fields of the memory descriptor. These two data structures independently point to all the memory area objects associated with the memory descriptor. In fact, they both contain pointers to the very same `vm_area_struct` structures, merely represented in different ways.

The first field, `mmap`, links together all the memory area objects in a singly linked list. Each `vm_area_struct` structure is linked into the list via its `vm_next` field. The areas are sorted by ascended address. The first memory area is the `vm_area_struct` structure to which `mmap` points. The last structure points to `NULL`.

The second field, `mm_rb`, links together all the memory area objects in a red-black tree. The root of the red-black tree is `mm_rb`, and each `vm_area_struct` structure in this address space is linked to the tree via its `vm_rb` field.

A *red-black tree* is a type of balanced binary tree. Each element in a red-black tree is called *a node*. The initial node is called the *root* of the tree. Most nodes have two children: a left child and a right child. Some nodes have only one child, and the final nodes, called *leaves*, have no children. For any node, the elements to the left are smaller in value, whereas the elements to the right are larger in value. Furthermore, each node is assigned a color (red or black, hence the name of this tree) according to two rules: The children of a red node are black and every path through the tree from a node to a leaf must contain the same number of black nodes. The root node is always red. Searching of, insertion to, and deletion from the tree is an  $O(\log(n))$  operation.

The linked list is used when every node needs to be traversed. The red-black tree is used when locating a specific memory area in the address space. In this manner, the kernel uses the redundant data structures to provide optimal performance regardless of the operation performed on the memory areas.

## Memory Areas in Real Life

Let's look at a particular process's address space and the memory areas inside. For this task, I'm using the useful `/proc` filesystem and the `pmap(1)` utility. The example is a very simple user-space program, which does absolutely nothing of value, except act as an example:

```
int main(int argc, char *argv[])
{
    return 0;
}
```

Take note of a few of the memory areas in this process's address space. Right off the bat, you know there is the text section, data section, and bss. Assuming this process is dynamically linked with the C library, these three memory areas also exist for `libc.so` and again for `ld.so`. Finally, there is also the process's stack.

The output from `/proc/<pid>/maps` lists the memory areas in this process's address space:

```
rml@phantasy:~$ cat /proc/1426/maps
00e80000-00faf000 r-xp 00000000 03:01 208530  /lib/tls/libc-2.3.2.so
00faf000-00fb2000 rw-p 0012f000 03:01 208530  /lib/tls/libc-2.3.2.so
00fb2000-00fb4000 rw-p 00000000 00:00 0
08048000-08049000 r-xp 00000000 03:03 439029  /home/rml/src/example
08049000-0804a000 rw-p 00000000 03:03 439029  /home/rml/src/example
40000000-40015000 r-xp 00000000 03:01 80276   /lib/ld-2.3.2.so
40015000-40016000 rw-p 00015000 03:01 80276   /lib/ld-2.3.2.so
```

```
4001e000-4001f000 rw-p 00000000 00:00 0
bfff000-c0000000 rwxp fffff000 00:00 0
```

The data is in the form

```
start-end permission offset major:minor inode file
```

The `pmap(1)` utility<sup>[4]</sup> formats this information in a bit more readable manner:

<sup>[4]</sup> The `pmap(1)` utility displays a formatted listing of a process's memory areas. It is a bit more readable than the `/proc` output, but it is the same information. It is found in newer versions of the `procps` package.

```
rml@phantasy:~$ pmap 1426
example[1426]
00e80000 (1212 KB)    r-xp (03:01 208530)  /lib/tls/libc-2.3.2.so
00faf000 (12 KB)      rw-p (03:01 208530)  /lib/tls/libc-2.3.2.so
00fb2000 (8 KB)       rw-p (00:00 0)
08048000 (4 KB)       r-xp (03:03 439029)  /home/rml/src/example
08049000 (4 KB)       rw-p (03:03 439029)  /home/rml/src/example
40000000 (84 KB)     r-xp (03:01 80276)   /lib/ld-2.3.2.so
40015000 (4 KB)       rw-p (03:01 80276)   /lib/ld-2.3.2.so
4001e000 (4 KB)       rw-p (00:00 0)
bfff000 (8 KB)        rwxp (00:00 0)      [ stack ]
mapped: 1340 KB      writable/private: 40 KB  shared: 0 KB
```

The first three rows are the text section, data section, and bss of `libc.so`, the C library. The next two rows are the text and data section of our executable object. The following three rows are the text section, data section, and bss for `ld.so`, the dynamic linker. The last row is the process's stack.

Note how the text sections are all readable and executable, which is what you expect for object code. On the other hand, the data section and bss (which both contain global variables) are marked readable and writable, but not executable. The stack is, naturally, readable, writable, and executable not of much use otherwise.

The entire address space takes up about 1340KB, but only 40KB are writable and private. If a memory region is shared or nonwritable, the kernel keeps only one copy of the backing file in memory. This might seem like common sense for shared mappings, but the nonwritable case can come as a bit of a surprise. If you consider the fact that a nonwritable mapping can never be changed (the mapping is only read from), it is clear that it is safe to load the image only once into memory. Therefore, the C library need only occupy 1212KB in physical memory, and not 1212KB multiplied by every process using the library. Because this process has access to about 1340KB worth of data and code, yet consumes only about 40KB of physical memory, the space savings from such sharing is substantial.

Note the memory areas without a mapped file that are on device `00:00` and inode zero. This is the zero page. The zero page is a mapping that consists of all zeros. By mapping the zero page over a writable memory area, the area is in effect "initialized" to all zeros. This is important in that it provides a zeroed memory area, which is expected by the bss. Because the mapping is not shared, as soon as the process writes to this data a copy is made (à la copy-on-write) and the value updated from zero.

Each of the memory areas that are associated with the process corresponds to a `vm_area_struct` structure. Because the process was not a thread, it has a unique `mm_struct` structure referenced from its `task_struct`.

## Manipulating Memory Areas

The kernel often has to find whether any memory areas in a process address space match a given criteria, such as whether a given address exists in a memory area. These operations are frequent, and form the basis of the `mmap()` routine, which is covered in the next section. A handful of helper functions are defined to assist these jobs.

These functions are all declared in `<linux/mm.h>`.

### `find_vma()`

The `find_vma()` function is defined in `mm/mmap.c`.

The function searches the given address space for the first memory area whose `vm_end` field is greater than `addr`. In other words, this function finds the first memory area that contains `addr` or begins at an address greater than `addr`. If no such memory area exists, the function returns `NULL`. Otherwise, a pointer to the `vm_area_struct` structure is returned. Note that because the returned VMA may start at an address greater than `addr`, the given address does not necessarily lie *inside* the returned VMA. The result of the `find_vma()` function is cached in the `mmap_cache` field of the memory descriptor. Because of the probability of an operation on one VMA being followed by more operations on that same VMA, the cached results have a decent hit rate (about 30-40% in practice). Checking the cached result is quick. If the given address is *not* in the cache, you must search the memory areas associated with this memory descriptor for a match. This is done via the red-black tree:

```
struct vm_area_struct * find_vma(struct mm_struct *mm, unsigned long addr)
{
    struct vm_area_struct *vma = NULL;

    if (mm) {
        vma = mm->mmap_cache;
        if (!(vma && vma->vm_end > addr && vma->vm_start <= addr)) {
            struct rb_node *rb_node;

            rb_node = mm->mm_rb.rb_node;
            vma = NULL;
            while (rb_node) {
                struct vm_area_struct * vma_tmp;

                vma_tmp = rb_entry(rb_node,
                                   struct vm_area_struct, vm_rb);
                if (vma_tmp->vm_end > addr) {
                    vma = vma_tmp;
                    if (vma_tmp->vm_start <= addr)
                        break;
                    rb_node = rb_node->rb_left;
                } else
                    rb_node = rb_node->rb_right;
            }
            if (vma)
                mm->mmap_cache = vma;
        }
    }
}
```

```
    return vma;
}
```

The initial check of `mmap_cache` tests whether the cached VMA contains the desired address. Note that simply checking whether the VMA's `vm_end` field is bigger than `addr` would not ensure that this is the first such VMA that is larger than `addr`. Thus, for the cache to be useful here, the given `addr` must lie in the VMA thankfully, this is just the sort of scenario in which consecutive operations on the same VMA would occur.

If the cache does not contain the desired VMA, the function must search the red-black tree. If the current VMA's `vm_end` is larger than `addr`, the function follows the left child; otherwise, it follows the right child. The function terminates as soon as a VMA is found that contains `addr`. If such a VMA is not found, the function continues traversing the tree and returns the first VMA it found that starts after `addr`. If no VMA is ever found, `NULL` is returned.

### `find_vma_prev()`

The `find_vma_prev()` function works the same as `find_vma()`, but it also returns the last VMA before `addr`. The function is also defined in `mm/mmap.c` and declared in `<linux/mm.h>`:

```
struct vm_area_struct * find_vma_prev(struct mm_struct *mm, unsigned long addr,
                                      struct vm_area_struct **pprev)
```

The `pprev` argument stores a pointer to the VMA preceding `addr`.

### `find_vma_intersection()`

The `find_vma_intersection()` function returns the first VMA that overlaps a given address interval. The function is defined in `<linux/mm.h>` because it is inline:

```
static inline struct vm_area_struct *
find_vma_intersection(struct mm_struct *mm,
                     unsigned long start_addr,
                     unsigned long end_addr)
{
    struct vm_area_struct *vma;

    vma = find_vma(mm, start_addr);
    if (vma && end_addr <= vma->vm_start)
        vma = NULL;
    return vma;
}
```

The first parameter is the address space to search, `start_addr` is the start of the interval, and `end_addr` is the end of the interval.

Obviously, if `find_vma()` returns `NULL`, so would `find_vma_intersection()`. If `find_vma()` returns a valid VMA, however, `find_vma_intersection()` returns the same VMA only if it does not start after the end of the given address range. If the returned memory

area does start after the end of the given address range, the function returns **NULL**.

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## mmap() and do\_mmap(): Creating an Address Interval

The `do_mmap()` function is used by the kernel to create a new linear address interval. Saying that this function creates a new VMA is not technically correct, because if the created address interval is adjacent to an existing address interval, and if they share the same permissions, the two intervals are merged into one. If this is not possible, a new VMA is created. In any case, `do_mmap()` is the function used to add an address interval to a process's address space whether that means expanding an existing memory area or creating a new one.

The `do_mmap()` function is declared in `<linux/mm.h>`:

```
unsigned long do_mmap(struct file *file, unsigned long addr,
                      unsigned long len, unsigned long prot,
                      unsigned long flag, unsigned long offset)
```

This function maps the file specified by `file` at offset `offset` for length `len`. The `file` parameter can be `NULL` and `offset` can be zero, in which case the mapping will not be backed by a file. In that case, this is called an *anonymous mapping*. If a file and offset are provided, the mapping is called a *file-backed mapping*.

The `addr` function optionally specifies the initial address from which to start the search for a free interval.

The `prot` parameter specifies the access permissions for pages in the memory area. The possible permission flags are defined in `<asm/mman.h>` and are unique to each supported architecture, although in practice each architecture defines the flags listed in [Table 14.2](#).

**Table 14.2. Page Protection Flags**

| Flag                    | Effect on the Pages in the New Interval |
|-------------------------|-----------------------------------------|
| <code>PROT_READ</code>  | Corresponds to <code>VM_READ</code>     |
| <code>PROT_WRITE</code> | Corresponds to <code>VM_WRITE</code>    |
| <code>PROT_EXEC</code>  | Corresponds to <code>VM_EXEC</code>     |
| <code>PROT_NONE</code>  | Page cannot be accessed                 |

The `flags` parameter specifies flags that correspond to the remaining VMA flags. These flags are also defined in `<asm/mman.h>`. See [Table 14.3](#).

**Table 14.3. Page Protection Flags**

| Flag           | Effect on the New Interval                                          |
|----------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|
| MAP_SHARED     | The mapping can be shared                                           |
| MAP_PRIVATE    | The mapping cannot be shared                                        |
| MAP_FIXED      | The new interval <i>must</i> start at the given address <i>addr</i> |
| MAP_ANONYMOUS  | The mapping is not file-backed, but is anonymous                    |
| MAP_GROWSDOWN  | Corresponds to VM_GROWSDOWN                                         |
| MAP_DENYWRITE  | Corresponds to VM_DENYWRITE                                         |
| MAP_EXECUTABLE | Corresponds to VM_EXECUTABLE                                        |
| MAP_LOCKED     | Corresponds to VM_LOCKED                                            |
| MAP_NORESERVE  | No need to reserve space for the mapping                            |
| MAP_POPULATE   | Populate (prefault) page tables                                     |
| MAP_NONBLOCK   | Do not block on I/O                                                 |

If any of the parameters are invalid, `do_mmap()` returns a negative value. Otherwise, a suitable interval in virtual memory is located. If possible, the interval is merged with an adjacent memory area. Otherwise, a new `vm_area_struct` structure is allocated from the `vm_area_cachep` slab cache, and the new memory area is added to the address space's linked list and red-black tree of memory areas via the `vma_link()` function. Next, the `total_vm` field in the memory descriptor is updated. Finally, the function returns the initial address of the newly created address interval.

## The `mmap()` System Call

The `do_mmap()` functionality is exported to user-space via the `mmap()` system call. The `mmap()` system call is defined as

```
void * mmap2(void *start,
           size_t length,
           int prot,
           int flags,
           int fd,
           off_t pgoff)
```

This system call is named `mmap2()` because it is the second variant of `mmap()`. The original `mmap()` took an offset in bytes as the last parameter; the current `mmap2()` receives the offset in pages. This enables larger files with larger offsets to be mapped. The original `mmap()`, as specified by POSIX, is available from the C library as `mmap()`, but is no longer implemented in the kernel proper, whereas the new version is available as `mmap2()`. Both library calls use the `mmap2()` system call, with the original `mmap()` converting the offset from bytes to pages.

## **munmap() and do\_munmap(): Removing an Address Interval**

The **do\_munmap()** function removes an address interval from a specified process address space. The function is declared in `<linux/mm.h>`:

```
int do_munmap(struct mm_struct *mm, unsigned long start, size_t len)
```

The first parameter specifies the address space from which the interval starting at address **start** of length **len** bytes is removed. On success, zero is returned. Otherwise, a negative error code is returned.

## **The munmap() System Call**

The **munmap()** system call is exported to user-space as a means to allow processes to remove address intervals from their address space; it is the complement of the **mmap()** system call:

```
int munmap(void *start, size_t length)
```

The system call is defined in `mm/mmap.c` and acts as a very simple wrapper to `do_munmap()`:

```
asmlinkage long sys_munmap(unsigned long addr, size_t len)
{
    int ret;
    struct mm_struct *mm;

    mm = current->mm;
    down_write(&mm->mmap_sem);
    ret = do_munmap(mm, addr, len);
    up_write(&mm->mmap_sem);
    return ret;
}
```

## Page Tables

Although applications operate on virtual memory that is mapped to physical addresses, processors operate directly on those physical addresses. Consequently, when an application accesses a virtual memory address, it must first be converted to a physical address before the processor can resolve the request. Performing this lookup is done via page tables. Page tables work by splitting the virtual address into chunks. Each chunk is used as an index into a table. The table points to either another table or the associated physical page.

In Linux, the page tables consist of three levels. The multiple levels allow a sparsely populated address space, even on 64-bit machines. If the page tables were implemented as a single static array, their size on even 32-bit architectures would be enormous. Linux uses three levels of page tables even on architectures that do not support three levels in hardware (for example, some hardware uses only two levels or implements a hash in hardware). Using three levels is a sort of "greatest common denominator" architectures with a less complicated implementation can simplify the kernel page tables as needed with compiler optimizations.

The top-level page table is the page global directory (PGD). The PGD consists of an array of `pgd_t` types. On most architectures, the `pgd_t` type is an `unsigned long`. The entries in the PGD point to entries in the second-level directory, the PMD.

The second-level page table is the page middle directory (PMD). The PMD is an array of `pmd_t` types. The entries in the PMD point to entries in the PTE.

The final level is called simply the page table and consists of page table entries of type `pte_t`. Page table entries point to physical pages.

In most architectures, page table lookups are handled (at least to some degree) by hardware. In normal operation, hardware can handle much of the responsibility of using the page tables. The kernel must set things up, however, in such a way that the hardware is happy and can do its thing. [Figure 14.1](#) diagrams the flow of a virtual to physical address lookup using page tables.

**Figure 14.1. Page tables.**

[\[View full size image\]](#)



Each process has its own page tables (threads share them, of course). The `pgd` field of the memory descriptor points to the process's page global directory. Manipulating and traversing page tables requires the `page_table_lock`, which is located inside the associated memory descriptor.

Page table data structures are quite architecture dependent and thus are defined in `<asm/page.h>`.

Because nearly every access of a page in virtual memory must be resolved to its corresponding address in physical memory, the performance of the page tables is very critical. Unfortunately, looking up all these addresses in memory can be done only so quickly. To facilitate this, most processors implement a *translation lookaside buffer*, or simply *TLB*, which acts as a hardware cache of virtual-to-physical mappings. When accessing a virtual address, the processor first checks whether the mapping is cached in the TLB. If there is a hit, the physical address is immediately returned. Otherwise, if there is a miss, the page tables are consulted for the corresponding physical address.

Nonetheless, page table management is still a critical and evolving part of the kernel. Changes to this area in 2.6 include allocating parts of the page table out of high memory. Future possibilities include shared page tables with copy-on-write semantics. In that scheme, page tables would be shared between parent and child across a `fork()`. When the parent or the child attempted to modify a particular page table entry, a copy would be created and the two processes would no longer share that entry. Sharing page tables would remove the overhead of copying the page table entries on `fork()`.

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## Conclusion

In this suspense-laden chapter, we looked at the abstraction of virtual memory provided to each process. We looked at how the kernel represents the process address space (via `struct mm_struct`) and how the kernel represents regions of memory within that space (`struct vm_area_struct`). We covered how the kernel creates (via `mmap()`) and destroys (via `munmap()`) these memory regions. Finally, we covered page tables. Because Linux is a virtual memory-based operating system, these concepts are essential to its operation and process model.

The next chapter covers the page cache, a general in-memory data cache used to fulfill all page I/O, and how the kernel performs page-based data writeback. Hold on!

# Chapter 15. The Page Cache and Page Writeback

The Linux kernel implements a primary disk cache called the *page cache*. The goal of this cache is to minimize disk I/O by storing in physical memory data that would otherwise be accessed from disk. This chapter deals with the page cache and page writeback.

Disk caches are beneficial for two reasons. First, disk access is magnitudes slower than memory access. Accessing data from memory rather than the disk is much faster. Second, data accessed once will, with a high likelihood, find itself accessed again in the near future. This principle, that access to a particular piece of data tends to be clustered in time, is called *temporal locality*. Temporal locality ensures that if data is cached on its first access, there is a high probability of a cache hit (access to data that is in the cache) in the near future.

The page cache consists of physical pages in RAM. Each page in the cache corresponds to multiple blocks on the disk. Whenever the kernel begins a page I/O operation (a disk operation in page-size chunks, usually to a regular file), it first checks whether the requisite data is in the page cache. If it is, the kernel can forego accessing the disk and use the data straight from the page cache.

Individual disk blocks can also tie into the page cache, by way of block I/O buffers. Recall from [Chapter 13](#), "The Block I/O Layer," that a buffer is the in-memory representation of a single physical disk block. Buffers act as descriptors that map pages in memory to disk blocks; thus, the page cache also reduces disk access during block I/O operations by both caching disk blocks and buffering block I/O operations until later. This caching is often referred to as the "buffer cache," although in reality it is not a separate cache and is part of the page cache.

Let's look at the sort of operations and data that end up in the page cache. The page cache is primarily populated by page I/O operations, such as `read()` and `write()`. Page I/O operations manipulate entire pages of data at a time; this entails operations on more than one disk block. Consequently, the page cache caches page-size chunks of files.

Block I/O operations manipulate a single disk block at a time. A common block I/O operation is reading and writing inodes. The kernel provides the `bread()` function to perform a low-level read of a single block from disk. Via buffers, disk blocks are mapped to their associated in-memory pages and, thus, cached in the page cache.

For example, when you first open a source file in a text editor, data from the file is read into memory from disk. As you edit the file, more and more pages are read in. When you later compile the file, the kernel can use the pages directly from the page cache; it need not reread the file from disk. Because users tend to read and manipulate the same files repeatedly, the page cache reduces the need for a large number of disk operations.

## Page Cache

The page cache, as its name suggests, is a cache of pages. The pages originate from reads and writes of regular filesystem files, block device files, and memory-mapped files. In this manner, the page cache contains entire pages from recently accessed files. During a page I/O operation, such as `read()`<sup>[1]</sup>, the kernel checks whether the data resides in the page cache. If the data is in the page cache, the kernel can quickly return the requested page rather than read the data off the disk.

<sup>[1]</sup> As you saw in [Chapter 12](#), "The Virtual Filesystem," it is not the `read()` and `write()` system calls that perform the actual page I/O operation, but the filesystem-specific methods specified by `file->f_op->read()` and `file->f_op->write()`.

## The `address_space` Object

A physical page might comprise multiple noncontiguous physical blocks<sup>[2]</sup>. Checking the page cache to see whether certain data has been cached is rendered more difficult because of the noncontiguous nature of the blocks that constitute each page. Therefore, it is not possible to index the data in the page cache using only a device name and block number, which would otherwise be the simplest solution.

<sup>[2]</sup> For example, a physical page is 4KB in size on the x86 architecture, whereas a disk block on most filesystems can be as small as 512 bytes. Therefore, 8 blocks might fit in a single page. The blocks need not be contiguous because the files themselves might be laid out all over the disk.

Furthermore, the Linux page cache is quite general in what pages it can cache. Indeed, the original page cache introduced in System V Release 4 cached only filesystem data. Consequently, the SVR4 page cache used its equivalent of the file object (called `struct vnode`) to manage the page cache. The Linux page cache aims to cache *any* page-based object, which includes many forms of files and memory mappings.

To remain generic, the Linux page cache uses the `address_space` structure to identify pages in the page cache. This structure is defined in `<linux/fs.h>`:

```
struct address_space {
    struct inode      *host;          /* owning inode */
    struct radix_tree_root page_tree;  /* radix tree of all pages */
    spinlock_t        tree_lock;      /* page_tree lock */
    unsigned int      i_mmap_writable; /* VM_SHARED ma count */
    struct prio_tree_root i_mmap;     /* list of all mappings */
    struct list_head   i_mmap_nonlinear; /* VM_NONLINEAR ma list */
    spinlock_t        i_mmap_lock;    /* i_mmap lock */
    atomic_t          truncate_count; /* truncate re count */
    unsigned long     nrpages;        /* total number of pages */
    pgoff_t           writeback_index; /* writeback start offset */
    struct address_space_operations *a_ops; /* operations table */
    unsigned long     flags;          /* gfp_mask and error flags */
    struct backing_dev_info *backing_dev_info; /* read-ahead information */
    spinlock_t        private_lock;   /* private lock */
    struct list_head   private_list;  /* private list */
```

```
    struct address_space *assoc_mapping; /* associated buffers */  
};
```

The `i_mmap` field is a priority search tree of all shared and private mappings in this address space. A priority search tree is a clever mix of heaps and radix trees<sup>[3]</sup>.

[3] The kernel implementation is based on the radix priority search tree proposed by Edward M. McCreight in SIAM Journal of Computing, volume 14, number 2, pages 257-276, May 1985.

There are a total of `nrpages` in the address space.

The `address_space` is associated with some kernel object. Normally, this is an inode. If so, the `host` field points to the associated inode. The `host` field is `NULL` if the associated object is not an inode; for example, if the `address_space` is associated with the swapper.

The `a_ops` field points to the address space operations table, in the same manner as the VFS objects and their operations tables. The operations table is represented by `struct address_space_operations` and is also defined in <linux/fs.h>:

```
struct address_space_operations {  
    int (*writepage)(struct page *, struct writeback_control *);  
    int (*readpage) (struct file *, struct page *);  
    int (*sync_page) (struct page *);  
    int (*writepages) (struct address_space *, struct writeback_control *);  
    int (*set_page_dirty) (struct page *);  
    int (*readpages) (struct file *, struct address_space *,  
                     struct list_head *, unsigned);  
    int (*prepare_write) (struct file *, struct page *, unsigned, unsigned);  
    int (*commit_write) (struct file *, struct page *, unsigned, unsigned);  
    sector_t (*bmap)(struct address_space *, sector_t);  
    int (*invalidatepage) (struct page *, unsigned long);  
    int (*releasepage) (struct page *, int);  
    int (*direct_IO) (int, struct kiocb *, const struct iovec *,  
                     loff_t, unsigned long);  
};
```

The `readpage()` and `writepage()` methods are most important. Let's look at the steps involved in a page read operation.

First, the `readpage()` method is passed an `address_space` plus offset pair. These values are used to search the page cache for the desired data:

```
page = find_get_page(mapping, index);
```

Here, `mapping` is the given address space and `index` is the desired position in the file.

If the page does not exist in the cache, a new page is allocated and added to the page cache:

```
struct page *cached_page;  
int error;  
  
cached_page = page_cache_alloc_cold(mapping);  
if (!cached_page)  
    /* error allocating memory */  
error = add_to_page_cache_lru(cached_page, mapping, index, GFP_KERNEL);  
if (error)  
    /* error adding page to page cache */
```

Finally, the requested data can be read from disk, added to the page cache, and returned to the user:

```
error = mapping->a_ops->readpage(file, page);
```

Write operations are a bit different. For file mappings, whenever a page is modified, the VM simply calls

```
SetPageDirty(page);
```

The kernel later writes the page out via the `writepage()` method. Write operations on specific files are more complicated. Basically, the generic write path in `mm/filemap.c` performs the following steps:

```
page = __grab_cache_page(mapping, index, &cached_page, &lru_pvec);
status = a_ops->prepare_write(file, page, offset, offset+bytes);
page_fault = filemap_copy_from_user(page, offset, buf, bytes);
status = a_ops->commit_write(file, page, offset, offset+bytes);
```

First, the page cache is searched for the desired page. If it is not in the cache, an entry is allocated and added. Next, the `prepare_write()` method is called to set up the write request. The data is then copied from user-space into a kernel buffer. Finally, the data is written to disk via the `commit_write()` function.

Because the previous steps are performed during all page I/O operations, all page I/O is guaranteed to go through the page cache. Consequently, the kernel attempts to satisfy all read requests from the page cache. If this fails, the page is read in from disk and added to the page cache. For write operations, the page cache acts as a staging ground for the writes. Therefore, all written pages are also added to the page cache.

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## Radix Tree

Because the kernel must check for the existence of a page in the page cache before initiating any page I/O, such a check must be quick. Otherwise, the overhead of searching and checking the page cache could nullify any benefits the cache might provide (at least if the cache hit rate is low the overhead would have to be awful to cancel out the benefit of retrieving the data from memory in lieu of disk).

As you saw in the previous section, the page cache is searched via the `address_space` object plus an offset value. Each `address_space` has a unique radix tree stored as `page_tree`. A radix tree is a type of binary tree. The radix tree allows very quick searching for the desired page, given only the file offset. Page cache searching functions such as `find_get_page()` call `radix_tree_lookup()`, which performs a search on the given tree for the given object.

The core radix tree code is available in generic form `lib/radix-tree.c`. Users of the radix tree need to include `<linux/radix-tree.h>`.

## The Old Page Hash Table

Prior to the 2.6 kernel, the page cache was not searched via radix tree. Instead, a global hash was maintained over all the pages in the system. The hash returned a doubly linked list of entries that hash to the same given value. If the desired page was in the cache, one of the items in the list was the corresponding page. Otherwise, the page was not in the page cache and the hash function returned `NULL`.

The global hash had four primary problems:

- A single global lock protected the hash. Lock contention was quite high on even moderately sized machines, and performance suffered as a result.
- The hash was larger than necessary because it contained all the pages in the page cache, whereas only pages pertaining to the current file were relevant.
- Performance when the hash lookup failed (that is, the given page was not in the page cache) was slower than desired, particularly because it was necessary to walk the chains off of a given hash value.
- The hash consumed more memory than other possible solutions.

The introduction of a radix tree-based page cache in 2.6 solved these issues.

## The Buffer Cache

Linux no longer has a distinct buffer cache. Way back in the 2.2 kernel, there were two separate disk caches: the page cache and the buffer cache. The former cached pages; the latter cached buffers. The two caches were not unified in the least; a disk block could exist in both caches simultaneously. This led to extensive effort in synchronization between the two cached copies not to mention wasted memory.

This was the case in the 2.2 Linux kernel and earlier, but starting with the 2.4 Linux kernel the two caches were unified. Today, we have one disk cache: the page cache.

The kernel still needs to use buffers, however, to represent disk blocks in memory. Thankfully, the buffers describe the mapping of a block onto a page, which is in the page cache.

## The pdflush Daemon

Write operations are deferred in the page cache. When data in the page cache is newer than the data on the backing store, that data is called *dirty*. Dirty pages that accumulate in memory eventually need to be written back to disk. Dirty page writeback occurs in two situations:

- When free memory shrinks below a specified threshold, the kernel must write dirty data back to disk to free memory.
- When dirty data grows older than a specific threshold, sufficiently old data is written back to disk, to ensure that dirty data does not remain dirty indefinitely.

These two jobs have rather different goals. In fact, in the older kernel they were performed by two separate kernel threads (see the following section). In 2.6, however, a gang<sup>[4]</sup> of kernel threads, the **pdflush** background writeback daemons (or, simply, the **pdflush tHReads**), performs these jobs. Rumor has it that **pdflush** is short for "dirty page flush." Ignore the confusing name; let's look at each of these goals in more detail.

[4] The term "gang" is commonly used in computer science to denote a group of things that can operate in parallel.

First, the **pdflush tHReads** need to flush dirty data to disk when the amount of free memory in the system shrinks beyond a specified level. The goal of this background writeback is to regain memory from dirty pages when available physical memory is low. The specified memory level is configurable by the **dirty\_background\_ratio** sysctl. When free memory drops below this threshold, the kernel invokes the **wakeup\_bflush()**<sup>[5]</sup> call to wake up a pdflush thread and have it run the **background\_writeout()** function to begin writeback of dirty pages. This function takes a lone parameter, which is the number of pages to attempt to write back. The function continues writing out data until two conditions are true:

[5] Yes, it is misnamed. It should be **wakeup\_pdflush()**. See the following section for the heritage of this call.

- The specified minimum number of pages has been written out.
- The amount of free memory is above the **dirty\_background\_ratio** threshold.

These conditions ensure that pdflush does its part to relieve low-memory conditions. Writeback stops prior to these conditions only if pdflush writes back *all* the dirty pages and there is nothing left to do.

For its second goal, **pdflush** periodically wakes up (unrelated to low memory conditions) and writes out very old dirty pages. This is done to ensure that no dirty pages remain in memory indefinitely. During a system failure, because memory is volatile, dirty pages in memory that have not been written to disk are lost. Consequently, periodically synchronizing the page cache with the disk is important. On system boot, a timer is initialized to wake up a **pdflush** thread and have it run the **wb\_kupdate()** function. This function then writes back all data that was modified longer than **dirty\_expire\_centisecs** hundredths of a second ago. The timer is then reinitialized to expire again in **dirty\_writeback\_centisecs** hundredths of a second. In this manner, the **pdflush** threads periodically wake up and write to disk all dirty pages that are older than a specified limit.

The system administrator may set these values either in **/proc/sys/vm** or via sysctl. [Table 15.1](#) lists the variables.

**Table 15.1. `pdflush` Settings**

| Variable                               | Description                                                                                                                                    |
|----------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <code>dirty_background_ratio</code>    | As a percentage of total memory, the number of pages at which the <code>pdflush</code> threads will begin writeback of dirty data.             |
| <code>dirty_expire_centisecs</code>    | In hundredths of a second, how old data must be to be written out next time a <code>pdflush</code> thread wakes to perform periodic writeback. |
| <code>dirty_ratio</code>               | As a percentage of total memory, the number of pages a process generates before it begins writeback of dirty data.                             |
| <code>dirty_writeback_centisecs</code> | In hundredths of a second, how often the <code>pdflush</code> threads should wake up to write data back out to disk.                           |
| <code>laptop_mode</code>               | A Boolean value controlling <i>laptop mode</i> . See the following section.                                                                    |

The `pdflush` code lives in `mm/pdflush.c` and the writeback mechanism lives in `mm/page-writeback.c` and `fs/fs-writeback.c`.

## Laptop Mode

*Laptop mode* is a special page writeback strategy intended to optimize battery life by minimizing hard disk activity and allowing hard drives to remain spun down as long as possible. It is configurable via `/proc/sys/vm/laptop_mode`. By default, this file contains a zero and laptop mode is disabled. Writing a one to this file enables laptop mode.

Laptop mode makes a single change to page writeback behavior. In addition to performing writeback of dirty pages when they grow too old, `pdflush` also piggybacks off any other physical disk I/O, flushing all dirty buffers to disk. In this manner, `pdflush` takes advantage of the fact that the disk was just spun up, ensuring that it will not cause the disk to spin up later.

This behavioral change makes the most sense when `dirty_expire_centisecs` and `dirty_writeback_centisecs` are set to large values, say, 10 minutes. With writeback so delayed, the disk is spun up infrequently and when it does spin up, laptop mode ensures that the opportunity is well utilized.

Many Linux distributions automatically enable and disable laptop mode, as well as modify other `pdflush` tunables, when going on and off battery. This would allow a machine to benefit from laptop mode when on battery power and then automatically return to normal page writeback behavior when plugged into AC.

## `bdflush` and `kupdated`

Prior to the 2.6 kernel, the job of the `pdflush` threads was met by two other kernel threads, `bdflush` and `kupdated`.

The `bdflush` kernel thread performed background writeback of dirty pages when available memory was low. A set of thresholds was maintained, similar to `pdflush`, and `bdflush` was awakened via `wakeup_bdflush()` whenever free memory dropped below those thresholds.

Two main differences distinguish `bdflush` and `pdflush`. The first, which is discussed in the next section, is that there was always only one `bdflush` daemon, whereas the number of `pdflush` threads is dynamic. The second difference is that `bdflush` was buffer-based; it wrote

back dirty buffers. Conversely, `pdflush` is page-based; it writes back whole pages. Of course, the pages may correspond to buffers, but the actual I/O unit is a full page and not a single buffer. This is beneficial as managing pages is easier than managing buffers, because pages are a more general and common unit.

Because `bdflush` flushes buffers only when memory is low or the number of buffers is too large, the `kupdated` tHRead was introduced to periodically write back dirty pages. It served an identical purpose to `pdflush`'s `wb_kupdate()` function.

Both the `bdflush` kernel threads and their functionality were replaced by the `pdflush` tHReads.

## Congestion Avoidance: Why We Have Multiple Threads

One of the major flaws in the `bdflush` solution was that `bdflush` consisted of one thread. This led to possible congestion during heavy page writeback where the single `bdflush` tHRead would block on a single congested device queue (the list of I/O requests waiting to submit to disk), while other device queues would sit relatively idle. If the system has multiple disks and the associated processing power, the kernel should be able to keep each disk busy. Unfortunately, even with plenty of data needing writeback, `bdflush` can become stuck handling a single queue and fail to keep all disks saturated. This occurs because the throughput of disks is a finite and unfortunately rather small number. If only a single thread is performing page writeback, that single thread can easily spend a long time waiting for a single disk because disk throughput is such a limiting quantity. To mitigate this, the kernel needs to multithread page writeback. In this manner, no single device queue can become a bottleneck.

The 2.6 kernel solves this problem by allowing multiple `pdflush` threads to exist. Each thread individually flushes dirty pages to disk, allowing different `pdflush` threads to concentrate on different device queues.

The number of threads changes throughout the uptime of a system, according to a simple algorithm. If all existing `pdflush` tHReads are busy for at least one second, a new `pdflush` thread is created. The total number of threads cannot exceed `MAX_PDFLUSH_THREADS`, which by default is eight. Conversely, if a `pdflush` tHRead is asleep for more than a second, it is terminated. The minimum number of threads is at least `MIN_PDFLUSH_THREADS`, which by default is two. In this manner, the number of `pdflush` tHReads adjusts dynamically depending on the amount of page writeback and congestion. If all existing `pdflush` threads are busy writing back data, a new thread is created. This ensures that a single device queue is not congested while other, less busy, device queues sit around needing but not receiving data writeback. If the congestion diminishes, however, the number of `pdflush` threads is scaled back to conserve memory.

This is all well and good, but what if each `pdflush` thread were to get hung up writing to the same, congested, queue? In that case, the performance of multiple `pdflush` tHReads would not be much improved over a single thread. The memory wasted, however, would be significantly greater. To mitigate this effect, the `pdflush` threads employ congestion avoidance: They actively try to write back pages whose queues are not congested. As a result, the `pdflush` threads spread out their work and refrain from merely hammering on the same busy device. When the `pdflush` tHReads are "busy" and thus, a new thread is spawned they are truly busy.

Because of the improvements in page writeback, including the introduction of `pdflush`, the 2.6 kernel is capable of keeping many more disks saturated than any earlier kernel. In the face of heavy activity, the `pdflush` tHReads can maintain high throughput across multiple disks.

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## To Make a Long Story Short

This chapter looked at the page cache and page writeback. You saw how the kernel performs all page I/O through the page cache and how writes are deferred in the page cache and eventually written out to disk via the `pdflush` gang of kernel threads.

Over the last few chapters, you have built a solid understanding of memory and filesystem management. Now let's segue over to the topic of modules, and see how the Linux kernel provides a modular and dynamic infrastructure for the run-time insertion and removal of kernel code.

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## Chapter 16. Modules

Despite being "monolithic," in the sense of the whole kernel running in a single protection domain, the Linux kernel is modular, allowing the dynamic insertion and removal of code from the kernel at run-time. Related subroutines, data, and entry and exit points are grouped together in a single binary image, a loadable kernel object, called a *module*. Support for modules allows systems to have only a minimal base kernel image, with optional features and drivers supplied via module. Modules also provide easy removal and reloading of kernel code, facilitate debugging, and allow for the loading of new drivers on demand in response to the hotplugging of new devices.

This chapter looks at the magic behind modules in the kernel and how you can write your very own module.

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## Hello, World!

Unlike development on core subsystems of the kernel much of what has been discussed thus far module development is more like writing a new application, at least in that modules have entry points and exit points and live in their own files.

It might be trite and cliché, but it would be a travesty of the highest order to have the opportunity to write a Hello, World! program and not capitalize on the occasion.

Ladies and gentlemen, the kernel module Hello, World:

```
/*
 * hello.c Hello, World! As a Kernel Module
 */

#include <linux/init.h>
#include <linux/module.h>
#include <linux/kernel.h>

/*
 * hello_init the init function, called when the module is loaded.
 * Returns zero if successfully loaded, nonzero otherwise.
 */
static int hello_init(void)
{
    printk(KERN_ALERT "I bear a charmed life.\n");
    return 0;
}

/*
 * hello_exit the exit function, called when the module is removed.
 */
static void hello_exit(void)
{
    printk(KERN_ALERT "Out, out, brief candle!\n");
}

module_init(hello_init);
module_exit(hello_exit);

MODULE_LICENSE("GPL");
MODULE_AUTHOR("Shakespeare");
```

This is as simple a kernel module as one can get. The `hello_init()` function is registered via `module_init()` as this module's entry point. It is invoked by the kernel when the module is loaded. The call to `module_init()` is not really a function call at all but a macro that assigns its sole parameter as the initialization function for this module. All init functions must have the form

```
int my_init(void);
```

Because init functions are typically not directly called by external code, you need not export the function, and it can be marked as `static`.

Init functions return an `int`. If initialization (or whatever your init function does) was successful, the function returns zero. On failure, it returns nonzero.

This init function merely prints a simple message and returns zero. Init functions in real world modules typically register resources, allocate data structures, and so on. Even if this file were compiled statically into the kernel image, the init function would be kept and run on kernel boot.

The `hello_exit()` function is registered as this module's exit point via `module_exit()`. The kernel invokes `hello_exit()` when the module is removed from memory. Exit functions might clean up resources, ensure that hardware is in a consistent state, and so on before returning. After the exit function returns, the module is unloaded.

Exit functions must have the form

```
void my_exit(void);
```

As with the init function, you probably want to mark it `static`.

If this file were compiled into the static kernel image, the exit function would *not* be included and it would *never* be invoked (because, if it were not a module, the code could never be removed from memory).

The `MODULE_LICENSE()` macro specifies the copyright license for this file. Loading a non-GPL module into memory results in the tainted flag being set in the kernel. This flag is also just for informational purposes, but many kernel developers give bug reports less credence when the tainted flag is set in the oops. Further, non-GPL modules cannot invoke GPL-only symbols (see the section "[Exported Symbols](#)" later in this chapter).

Finally, the `MODULE_AUTHOR()` macro specifies this file's author. The value of this macro is entirely for informational purposes.

## Building Modules

In 2.6, building modules is easier than ever, thanks to the new "kbuild" build system. The first decision in building modules is deciding where the module source is to live. You can add the module source to the kernel source proper, either as a patch or by eventually merging your code into the official tree. Alternatively, you can maintain and build your module source outside the source tree.

### At Home in the Source Tree

Ideally, your module is an official part of Linux and thus lives in the kernel source tree. Getting your work into the kernel proper may require more maintenance at first, but it is usually the preferred solution.

The first step is deciding *where* in the kernel source tree your module is to live. Drivers are stored in subdirectories of the `drivers/` directory in the root of the kernel source tree. Inside, they are further organized by class, type, and eventually specific driver. Character devices live in `drivers/char/`, whereas block devices live in `drivers/block/` and USB devices live in `drivers/usb/`. The rules are not hard and fast because many USB devices are character devices. But the organization is fairly understandable and accurate.

Assume you have a character device and want to store it in `drivers/char/`. Inside this directory are numerous C source files and a handful of other directories. Drivers with only one or two source files might simply stick their source in this directory. Drivers with multiple source files and other accompanying junk might create a new subdirectory. There is no hard and fast rule.

Presume that you want to create your own subdirectory. In this fantasy, your driver is for a fishing pole with a computer interface, the Fish Master XL 2000 Titanium, so you need to create a `fishing` subdirectory inside `drivers/char/`.

Now you need to add a line to the Makefile in `drivers/char/`. So you edit `drivers/char/Makefile` and add

```
obj-m += fishing/
```

This causes the build system to descend into the `fishing/` subdirectory whenever it compiles modules. More likely, your driver's compilation is contingent on a specific configuration option; for example, perhaps `CONFIG_FISHING_POLE` (see the section "[Managing Configuration Options](#)" later in this chapter for how to add a new configuration option). In that case, you would instead add the line

```
obj-$(CONFIG_FISHING_POLE) += fishing/
```

Finally, inside `drivers/char/fishing/`, you add a new Makefile with the following line:

```
obj-m += fishing.o
```

The build system will now descend into `fishing/` and build the module `fishing.ko` from `fishing.c`. Yes, you write an extension of `.o` but the module is compiled as `.ko`.

Again, more likely, your fishing pole driver's compilation is conditional on a configuration option. So you probably want to do the following:

```
obj-$(CONFIG_FISHING_POLE) += fishing.o
```

One day, your fishing pole driver may get so complicated autodetection of fishing line test is just the latest "must have" that it grows to occupy more than one source file. No problem, anglers! You simply make your Makefile read

```
obj-$(CONFIG_FISHING_POLE) += fishing.o
fishing-objs := fishing-main.o fishing-line.o
```

Now, `fishing-main.c` and `fishing-line.c` will be compiled and linked into `fishing.ko`.

Finally, you may need to pass to gcc additional compile flags during the build process solely for your file. To do so, simply add a line such as the following to your Makefile:

```
EXTRA_CFLAGS += -DTITANIUM_POLE
```

If you opted to place your source file(s) in `drivers/char/` and not create a new subdirectory, you would merely place the preceding lines (that you placed in your Makefile in `drivers/char/fishing/`) into `drivers/char/Makefile`.

To compile, run the kernel build process as usual. If your module's build was conditioned on a configuration option, as it was with `CONFIG_FISHING_POLE`, make sure that the option is enabled before beginning.

## Living Externally

If you prefer to maintain and build your module outside the kernel source tree, to live the life of an outsider, simply create a Makefile in your own source directory like the single line

```
obj-m := fishing.o
```

This compiles `fishing.c` into `fishing.ko`. If your source spans multiple files, then two lines will suffice:

```
obj-m := fishing.o
fishing-objs := fishing-main.o fishing-line.o
```

This compiles `fishing-main.c` and `fishing-line.c` into `fishing.ko`.

The main difference in living externally is the build process. Because your module lives outside the kernel tree, you need to instruct `make` on how to find the kernel source files and base Makefile. This is also easy:

```
make -C /kernel/source/location SUBDIRS=$PWD modules
```

where `/kernel/source/location` is the location of your configured kernel source tree. Recall that you should *not* store your working copy of the kernel source tree in `/usr/src/linux` but somewhere else, easily accessible, in your home directory.

[REDACTED]

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## Installing Modules

Compiled modules are installed into `/lib/modules/version/kernel/`. For example, with a kernel version of 2.6.10, the compiled fishing pole module would live at `/lib/modules/2.6.10/kernel/drivers/char/fishing.ko` if you stuck it directly in `drivers/char/`.

The following build command is used to install compiled modules into the correct location:

```
make modules_install
```

Naturally, this needs to be run as root.

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## Generating Module Dependencies

The Linux module utilities understand dependencies. This means that module **chum** can depend on module **bait** and when you load the **chum** module, the **bait** module is automatically loaded. This dependency information must be generated. Most Linux distributions generate the mapping automatically and keep it up to date on each boot. To build the module dependency information, as root simply run

```
depmod
```

To perform a quick update, rebuilding only the information for modules newer than the dependency information itself, run as root

```
depmod -A
```

The module dependency information is stored in the file *lib/modules/version/modules.dep*.

## Loading Modules

The simplest way to load a module is via **insmod**. This utility is very basic. It simply asks the kernel to load the module you specify. The **insmod** program does not perform any dependency resolution or advanced error checking. Usage is trivial. As root, simply run

```
insmod module
```

where *module* is the name of the module that you want to load. To load the fishing pole module, you would run

```
insmod fishing
```

In like fashion, to remove a module, you use the **rmmmod** utility. As root, simply run

```
rmmmod module
```

For example,

```
rmmmod fishing
```

removes the fishing pole module.

These utilities, however, are trivial and unintelligent. The utility **modprobe** provides dependency resolution, intelligent error checking and reporting, and more advanced features and options. Its use is highly encouraged.

To insert a module into the kernel via **modprobe**, run as root

```
modprobe module [ module parameters ]
```

where *module* is the name of the module to load. Any following arguments are taken as parameters to pass to the module on load. See the section "[Module Parameters](#)" for a discussion on module parameters.

The **modprobe** command attempts to load not only the requested module, but also any modules on which it depends. Consequently, it is the preferred mechanism for loading kernel modules.

The **modprobe** command can also be used to remove modules from the kernel. Again, as root, run

```
modprobe r modules
```

where *modules* specifies one or more modules to remove. Unlike **rmmmod**, **modprobe** also removes any modules on which the given module depends, if they are unused.

Section eight of the Linux manual pages provides a reference on their other, less used, options.

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## Managing Configuration Options

An earlier section in this chapter looked at compiling the fishing pole module only if the `CONFIG_FISHING_POLE` configuration option was set. Configuration options have been discussed in earlier chapters, too, but now let's look at actually adding a new one, continuing with the fishing pole example.

Thanks to the new "kbuild" system in the 2.6 kernel, adding new configuration options is very easy. All you have to do is add an entry to the `Kconfig` file responsible for the neck of the kernel source tree. For drivers, this is usually the very directory in which the source lives. If the fishing pole driver lives in `drivers/char/`, then you use `drivers/char/Kconfig`.

If you *created* a new subdirectory and want a new `Kconfig` file to live there, you have to source it from an existing `Kconfig`. You do this by adding a line such as

```
source "drivers/char/fishing/Kconfig"
```

to the existing `Kconfig` file, say `drivers/char/Kconfig`.

Entries in `Kconfig` are easy to add. The fishing pole module would look like

```
config FISHING_POLE
    tristate "Fish Master XL support"
    default n
    help
        If you say Y here, support for the Fish Master XL 2000 Titanium with
        computer interface will be compiled into the kernel and accessible via
        device node. You can also say M here and the driver will be built as a
        module named fishing.ko.

    If unsure, say N.
```

The first line defines what configuration option this entry represents. Note that the `CONFIG_` prefix is assumed and not written.

The second line states that this option is a *tristate*, meaning that it can be built into the kernel (Y), built as a module (M), or not built at all (N). To disable the option of building as a module say, if this option represented a feature and not a module use the directive `bool` instead of `tristate`. The quoted text following the directive provides the name of this option in the various configuration utilities.

The third line specifies the default for this option, which is off.

The `help` directive signifies that the rest of the text, indented as it is, is the help text for this entry. The various configuration tools can display this text when requested. Because this text is for users and developers building their own kernels, it can be succinct and to the point. Home users do not typically build kernels and, if they did, they could probably understand the configuration help as is.

There are other options, too. The `depends` directive specifies options that must be set before this option can be set. If the dependencies are not met, the option is disabled. For example, if you added the directive

```
depends on FISH_TANK
```

to the config entry, the module could not be enabled until the **CONFIG\_FISH\_TANK** module is enabled.

The **select** directive is like **depends**, except it forces the given option on if this option is selected. It should not be used as frequently as **depends** because it automatically enables other configuration options. Use is as simple as **depends**:

```
select BAIT
```

The configuration option **CONFIG\_BAIT** is automatically enabled when **CONFIG\_FISHING\_POLE** is enabled.

For both **select** and **depends**, you can request multiple options via **&&**. With **depends**, you can also specify that an option *not* be enabled by prefixing the option with an exclamation mark. For example,

```
depends on DUMB_DRIVERS && !NO_FISHING_ALLOWED
```

specifies that the driver depends on **CONFIG\_DUMB\_DRIVERS** being set and **CONFIG\_NO\_FISHING\_ALLOWED** being unset.

The **TRistate** and **bool** options can be followed by the directive **if**, which makes the entire option conditional on another configuration option. If the condition is not met, the configuration option is not only disabled but does not even appear in the configuration utilities. For example, the directive

```
bool "Deep Sea Mode" if OCEAN
```

instructs the configuration system to display this option only if **CONFIG\_X86** is set. Presumably, *deep sea mode* is available only if **CONFIG\_OCEAN** is enabled.

The **if** directive can also follow the **default** directive, enforcing the default only if the conditional is met.

The configuration system exports several meta-options to help make configuration easier. The option **CONFIG\_EMBEDDED** is enabled only if the user specified that he or she wishes to see options designed for disabling key features (presumably to save precious memory on embedded systems). The option **CONFIG\_BROKEN\_ON\_SMP** is used to specify a driver that is not SMP-safe. Normally this option is not set, forcing the user to explicitly acknowledge the brokenness. New drivers, of course, should not use this flag. Finally, the **CONFIG\_EXPERIMENTAL** option is used to flag options that are experimental or otherwise of beta quality. The option defaults to off, again forcing users to explicitly acknowledge the risk before they enable your driver.

## Module Parameters

The Linux kernel provides a simple framework, allowing drivers to declare parameters that the user can specify on either boot or module load and then have these parameters exposed in your driver as global variables. These module parameters also show up in sysfs (see [Chapter 17](#), "kobjects and sysfs"). Consequently, creating and managing module parameters that can be specified in a myriad of convenient ways is trivial.

Defining a module parameter is done via the macro `module_param()`:

```
module_param(name, type, perm);
```

where `name` is the name of both the parameter exposed to the user and the variable holding the parameter inside your module. The `type` argument holds the parameter's data type; it is one of `byte`, `short`, `ushort`, `int`, `uint`, `long`, `ulong`, `charp`, `bool`, or `invbool`. These types are, respectively, a byte, a short integer, an unsigned short integer, an integer, an unsigned integer, a long integer, an unsigned long integer, a pointer to a `char`, a Boolean, and a Boolean whose value is inverted from what the user specifies. The `byte` type is stored in a single `char` and the Boolean types are stored in variables of type `int`. The rest are stored in the corresponding primitive C types. Finally, the `perm` argument specifies the permissions of the corresponding file in sysfs. The permissions can be specified in the usual octal format, for example `0644` (owner can read and write, group can read, everyone else can read), or by ORing together the usual defines, for example `S_IRUGO | S_IWUSR` (everyone can read, user can also write). A value of zero disables the sysfs entry altogether.

The macro does not declare the variable for you. You must do that *before* using the macro. Therefore, typical use might resemble

```
/* module parameter controlling the capability to allow live bait on the pole */
static int allow_live_bait = 1;           /* default to on */
module_param(allow_live_bait, bool, 0644); /* a Boolean type */
```

This would be in the outermost scope of your module's source file. In other words, `allow_live_bait` is global.

It is possible to have the internal variable named differently than the external parameter. This is accomplished via `module_param_named()`:

```
module_param_named(name, variable, type, perm);
```

where `name` is the externally viewable parameter name and `variable` is the name of the internal global variable. For example,

```
static unsigned int max_test = DEFAULT_MAX_LINE_TEST;
module_param_named(maximum_line_test, max_test, int, 0);
```

Normally, you would use a type of `charp` to define a module parameter that takes a string. The kernel copies the string provided by the user into memory and points your variable to the string. For example,

```
static char *name;
module_param(name, charp, 0);
```

If so desired, it is also possible to have the kernel copy the string directly into a character array that you supply. This is done via `module_param_string()`:

```
module_param_string(name, string, len, perm);
```

where `name` is the external parameter name, `string` is the internal variable name, `len` is the size of the buffer named by `string` (or some smaller size, but that does not make much sense), and `perm` is the sysfs permissions (or zero to disable a sysfs entry altogether). For example,

```
static char species[BUF_LEN];
module_param_string(species, species, BUF_LEN, 0);
```

You can accept a comma-separated list of parameters that are stored in a C array via `module_param_array()`:

```
module_param_array(name, type, nump, perm);
```

where `name` is again the external parameter and internal variable name, `type` is the data type, and `perm` is the sysfs permissions. The new argument, `nump`, is a pointer to an integer where the kernel will store the number of entries stored into the array. Note that the array pointed to by `name` must be statically allocated. The kernel determines the array's size at compile-time and ensures that it does not cause an overrun. Use is simple. For example,

```
static int fish[MAX_FISH];
static int nr_fish;
module_param_array(fish, int, &nr_fish, 0444);
```

You can name the internal array something different than the external parameter with `module_param_array_named()`:

```
module_param_array_named(name, array, type, nump, perm);
```

The parameters are identical to the other macros.

Finally, you can document your parameters by using `MODULE_PARM_DESC()`:

```
static unsigned short size = 1;
module_param(size, ushort, 0644);
MODULE_PARM_DESC(size, "The size in inches of the fishing pole \" \
    \"connected to this computer.");
```

All these macros require the inclusion of `<linux/moduleparam.h>`.

## Exported Symbols

When modules are loaded, they are dynamically linked into the kernel. As with user-space, dynamically linked binaries can call only into external functions that are explicitly *exported* for use. In the kernel, this is handled via special directives called `EXPORT_SYMBOL()` and `EXPORT_SYMBOL_GPL()`.

Functions that are exported are available for use by modules. Functions that are not exported cannot be invoked from modules. The linking and invoking rules are much more stringent for modules than code in the core kernel image. Core code can call any non-static interface in the kernel because all core source files are linked into a single base image. Exported symbols, of course, must be non-static too.

The set of kernel symbols that are exported are known as the *exported kernel interfaces* or even (gasp) the *kernel API*.

Exporting a symbol is easy. After the function is declared, it is usually followed by an `EXPORT_SYMBOL()`. For example,

```
/*
 * get_pirate_beard_color - return the color of the current pirate's beard.
 * pirate is a global variable accessible to this function.
 * the color is defined in <linux/beard_colors.h>.
 */
int get_pirate_beard_color(void)
{
    return pirate->beard->color;
}
EXPORT_SYMBOL(get_pirate_beard_color);
```

Presuming that `get_pirate_beard_color()` is also declared in an accessible header file, any module can now access it.

Some developers want their interfaces accessible to only GPL-compliant modules. This is enforced by the kernel linker through use of the `MODULE_LICENSE()`. If you wanted the previous function accessible to only modules that labeled themselves as GPL licensed, you would use instead

```
EXPORT_SYMBOL_GPL(get_pirate_beard_color);
```

If your code is configurable as a module, you must ensure that when compiled as a module all interfaces that it uses are exported. Otherwise linking errors (and a broken module) will result.

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## Wrapping Up Modules

This chapter looked at writing, building, loading, and unloading modules. We discussed what modules are and how Linux, despite being "monolithic," can load modular code dynamically. We discussed module parameters and exported symbols. We used a fictional fishing pole module (a creative device, if you will) to illustrate writing a module and adding features such as parameters to it.

The next chapter looks at kobjects and the sysfs filesystem, which are of paramount utility to device drivers and, consequently, modules.

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## Chapter 17. kobjects and sysfs

A significant new feature in the 2.6 Linux kernel is the addition of a unified *device model*. The device model provides a single mechanism for representing devices and describing their topology in the system. Such a system provides several benefits:

- Minimization of code duplication
- A mechanism for providing common facilities, such as reference counting
- The capability to enumerate all the devices in the system, view their status, and see to what bus they attach
- The capability to generate a complete and valid tree of the entire device structure of the system, including all buses and interconnections
- The capability to link devices to their drivers and vice versa
- The capability to categorize devices by their class, such as input device, without the need to understand the physical device topology
- The ability to walk the tree of devices from the leaves up to the root, powering down devices in the correct order

The initial motivation for the device model was this final point. To implement intelligent power management in the kernel, you need to be able to build a tree representing the device topology in the system. When powering down devices on a tree that grows down, the kernel must power down the lower (leaf) nodes of the tree before the higher nodes. For example, the kernel needs to turn off a USB mouse before it turns off the USB controller, and the kernel must power down the USB controller before the PCI bus. To do this accurately and efficiently for the entire system, the kernel needs a tree of devices.

## kobjects

At the heart of the device model is the *kobject*, which is represented by `struct kobject` and defined in `<linux/kobject.h>`. The *kobject* is similar to the *Object* class in object-oriented languages such as C# or Java. It provides basic facilities, such as reference counting, a name, and a parent pointer, allowing the creation of a hierarchy of objects.

Without further ado:

```
struct kobject {  
    char      *k_name;  
    char      name[KOBJ_NAME_LEN];  
    struct kref   kref;  
    struct list_head entry;  
    struct kobject  *parent;  
    struct kset     *kset;  
    struct kobj_type *ktype;  
    struct dentry   *dentry;  
};
```

The `k_name` pointer points to the name of this *kobject*. If the name is less than `KOBJ_NAME_LEN` currently 20bytes, the name is stored in `name` and `k_name` points there. If the name is larger than `KOBJ_NAME_LEN` bytes, a buffer sufficient in size to hold the name is dynamically allocated, the name is stored in the buffer, and `k_name` points there.

The `parent` pointer points to this *kobject*'s parent. In this manner, *kobjects* build an object hierarchy in the kernel and allow the expression of the relationship between multiple objects. As you shall see, this is actually all that sysfs is: a user-space filesystem representation of the *kobject* object hierarchy inside the kernel.

The `dentry` pointer points to the `dentry` structure that represents this *kobject* in sysfs, assuming that this *kobject* is represented in sysfs.

The `kref`, `ktype`, and `kset` members point to structures used in support of *kobjects*. The `enTRy` member is used in conjunction with `kset`. Those structures and their use are discussed shortly.

*kobjects* are usually embedded in other structures and are generally not interesting on their own. Instead, a more important structure, such as `struct cdev`, has a `kobj` member:

```
/* cdev structure - object representing a character device */  
struct cdev {  
    struct kobject  kobj;  
    struct module   *owner;  
    struct file_operations *ops;  
    struct list_head list;  
    dev_t          dev;  
    unsigned int    count;  
};
```

When *kobjects* are embedded inside other structures, the structures receive the standardized functions that a *kobject* provides. Most importantly, the structure's embedded *kobject* now allows the structure to become part of an object hierarchy. For example, the `cdev` structure is presentable in an object hierarchy via the parent pointer `cdev->kobj->parent` and the list `cdev->kobj->entry`.

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## ktypes

kobjects are associated with a specific type, called `a ktype`. ktypes are represented by `struct kobj_type` and defined in `<linux/kobject.h>`:

```
struct kobj_type {  
    void (*release)(struct kobject *);  
    struct sysfs_ops     *sysfs_ops;  
    struct attribute    **defaultAttrs;  
};
```

Ktypes have the simple job of describing default behavior for a family of kobjects. Instead of each kobject defining its own behavior, the behavior is stored in a ktype, and kobjects of the same "type" share the same behavior.

The `release` pointer points to the deconstructor called when a kobject's reference count reaches zero. This function is responsible for freeing any memory associated with this kobject and otherwise cleaning up.

The `sysfs_ops` variable points to a `sysfs_ops` structure. This structure describes the behavior of sysfs files on read and write. It's covered in more detail in the section "[Adding Files to sysfs](#)."

Finally, `defaultAttrs` points to an array of `attribute` structures. These structures define the default `attributes` associated with this kobject. Attributes represent properties related to a given object. If this kobject is exported to sysfs, the attributes are exported as files. The last entry in the array must be `NULL`.

## ksets

ksets aggregate collections of kobjects. ksets work as the base container class for a set of objects, collecting related kobjects, such as "all block devices," together in a single place. ksets may sound very similar to ktypes and beg the question, "Why have both?" Although ksets collect kobjects into a set, ktypes describe properties shared by kobjects of a related type. The distinction is kept to allow kobjects of identical ktypes to be grouped into different ksets.

The `kset` pointer points at a kobject's associated kset. ksets are represented by the `kset` structure, which is defined in `<linux/kobject.h>`:

```
struct kset {  
    struct subsystem    *subsys;  
    struct kobj_type   *ktype;  
    struct list_head    list;  
    struct kobject      kobj;  
    struct kset_hotplug_ops *hotplug_ops;  
};
```

The `ktype` pointer points to the ktype for the kobjects in this kset, `list` is a linked list of all kobjects in this kset, `kobj` is a kobject representing the base class for this set, and `hotplug_ops` points to a structure that describes the hotplug behavior of kobjects in this kset.

Finally, the `subsys` pointer points to the `struct subsystem` associated with this kset.

## Subsystems

Subsystems represent high-level concepts in the kernel and are a collection of one or more ksets. Whereas ksets contain kobjects, subsystems contain ksets, but the relationship between ksets in a subsystem is much weaker than the relationship between kobjects in a kset. The ksets in a subsystem may share only some large overarching generalization.

Despite this important role, subsystems are represented by a rather simple object `struct subsystem`:

```
struct subsystem {  
    struct kset      kset;  
    struct rw_semaphore   rwsem;  
};
```

Whereas the `subsystem` structure only points to a single kset, multiple ksets may point to a single subsystem via their `subsys` pointer. This unidirectional relationship implies that it is not possible to find all ksets in a subsystem given only a `subsystem` structure.

The kset that is contained in the subsystem is the default kset of that subsystem, used to cement the subsystem's location in the object hierarchy.

The `rwsem` member of the `subsystem` structure is a read-write semaphore (see [Chapter 9](#), "Kernel Synchronization Methods") used to protect against concurrent access of this subsystem and all its ksets. All ksets *must* belong to a subsystem because they use this read-write semaphore to synchronize access to their internal data.

## Structure Confusion

The handful of structures thus far discussed is confusing not because of their sheer number (there are only four) or their complexity (they are all fairly simple), but because they are all very interrelated. In the world of kobjects, it is hard to discuss one structure without involving the others. With the basics of each structure covered, however, you can develop a firm understanding of their relationships.

The important guy here is the kobject, represented by `struct kobject`. The kobject is used to introduce basic object properties such as reference counting, parent-child relationship, and object name to kernel data structures. The kobject can provide these features in a standard unified way. kobjects, in and of themselves, are not overly useful. Instead, kobjects are typically embedded in other data structures.

kobjects are associated with a specific ktype, which is represented by `struct kobj_type` and pointed at by the `ktype` variable inside of the kobject. Ktypes define some default properties of related kobjects: deconstruction behavior, sysfs behavior, and default attributes.

kobjects are then grouped into sets, called ksets. ksets are represented by `struct kset`. ksets provide two functions. First, their embedded kobjects act as a base class for a group of kobjects. Second, ksets aggregate together related kobjects. In sysfs, kobjects are the individual directories in the filesystem. Related directoressay, perhaps all subdirectories of a given directory might be in the same kset.

Subsystems represent large pieces of the kernel and are collections of ksets. They are represented by `struct subsystem`. The root level directories in sysfs are all subsystems.

[Figure 17.1](#) depicts the relationship between these data structures.

**Figure 17.1. Relationship between kobjects, ksets, and subsystems**





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## Managing and Manipulating kobjects

With the basic internals of kobjects and friends behind you, it's time to look at the exported interfaces used for managing and manipulating kobjects. Most of the time, driver writers will not have to deal with kobjects directly. Instead, kobjects will be embedded in some class-specific structure (as you saw with the character device structure) and managed "behind the scenes" by the associated driver subsystem. Nonetheless, kobjects are not intended to remain hidden and may seep through into driver code or you may be hacking on the driver subsystem itself.

The first step in using a kobject is declaring and initializing it. kobjects are initialized via the function `kobject_init`, which is defined in `<linux/kobject.h>`:

```
void kobject_init(struct kobject *kobj);
```

The function's lone parameter is the kobject to initialize. Before calling this function, the kobject must be zeroed. This may normally happen during the initialization of the larger function in which the kobject is embedded. If not, a simple call to `memset()` does the trick:

```
memset(kobj, 0, sizeof (*kobj));
```

It is safe to initialize `parent` and `kset` after the zeroing. For example,

```
kobj = kmalloc(sizeof (*kobj), GFP_KERNEL);
if (!kobj)
    return -ENOMEM;
memset(kobj, 0, sizeof (*kobj));
kobj->kset = kset;
kobj->parent = parent_kobj;
kobject_init(kobj);
```

After initialization, you must set the kobject's name via `kobject_set_name()`:

```
int kobject_set_name(struct kobject * kobj, const char * fmt, ...);
```

This function uses a variable argument list in the style of `printf()` and `printk()` to set the name of the provided kobject. As you saw, `k_name` points to the kobject's name. If the name is small enough, it is stored in the static array `name`, so it makes sense to not needlessly provide a huge name.

After allocating a kobject and proving it with a name, you need to set its `kset` field and optionally its `ktype` field. You need to set the `ktype` only if the `kset` does not provide one. Otherwise, the `ktype` in the `kset` takes precedence. If you are wondering why kobjects even have `ktype` fields, welcome to the club.

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## Reference Counts

One of the primary features provided by kobjects is a unified reference counting system. After initialization, the kobject's reference count is set to one. So long as the reference count is nonzero, the object continues to exist in memory and is said to be *pinned*. Any code that holds a reference to the object first elevates the reference count. When the code is finished with the object, the reference count is decremented. Bumping the reference count is called *getting* a reference to the object, and decrementing the reference count is called *putting* reference to the object. When the reference count reaches zero, the object may be destroyed and any associated memory freed.

Incrementing the reference count is done via `kobject_get()`:

```
struct kobject * kobject_get(struct kobject *kobj);
```

This function returns a pointer to the kobject or `NULL` on failure.

Decrementing the reference count is done via `kobject_put()`:

```
void kobject_put(struct kobject *kobj);
```

If the provided kobject's reference count reaches zero, the release function pointed at by the ktype associated with the kobject is invoked.

## krefs

Internally, the kobject reference counting is provided by the `kref` structure, which is defined in `<linux/kref.h>`:

```
struct kref {
    atomic_t refcount;
};
```

The lone member is an atomic variable used to hold the reference count. A structure is used simply to provide type checking. Before using a `kref`, you must initialize it via `kref_init()`:

```
void kref_init(struct kref *kref)
{
    atomic_set(&kref->refcount, 1);
}
```

As you can see, this function simply initializes the internal `atomic_t` to one. Consequently, krefs are pinned with a reference count of one as soon as they are initialized; this is the same behavior as kobjects.

To obtain a reference to a `kref`, use `kref_get()`:

```
void kref_get(struct kref *kref)
```

```
{  
    WARN_ON(!atomic_read(&kref->refcount));  
    atomic_inc(&kref->refcount);  
}
```

This function bumps the reference count. It has no return value. To drop a reference to a kref, use `kref_put()`:

```
void kref_put(struct kref *kref, void (*release) (struct kref *kref))  
{  
    WARN_ON(release == NULL);  
    WARN_ON(release == (void (*)(struct kref *))kfree);  
  
    if (atomic_dec_and_test(&kref->refcount))  
        release(kref);  
}
```

This function drops the reference count by one and calls the provided `release()` function if the count is now zero. As noted by the ominous `WARN_ON()` statement, the provided `release()` function cannot simply be `kfree()`, but must be a specialized function that accepts `struct kref` as its lone argument and has no return value.

Rather than having kernel code implement its own reference counting via `atomic_t` types and simple "get" and "put" wrapper functions, developers are encouraged to use the kref type and its helpers to provide a common and known-correct reference counting mechanism in the kernel.

All these functions are defined in `lib/kref.c` and declared in `<linux/kref.h>`.

## sysfs

The sysfs filesystem is an in-memory virtual filesystem that provides a view of the kobject object hierarchy. It enables users to view the device topology of their system as a simple filesystem. Using attributes, kobjects can export files that allow kernel variables to be read from and optionally written to.

Although the intended purpose of the device model was initially to provide a device topology for power management reasons, a quite spectacular offshoot was sysfs. To facilitate debugging, the device model's developer decided to export the tree as a file-system. This quickly proved quite useful, at first as a replacement for device-related files that previously found themselves in `/proc`, and later as a powerful view into the system's object hierarchy. Indeed, sysfs, originally called driverfs, predated kobjects. Eventually sysfs made it clear that a new object model would be quite beneficial, and kobject was born. Today, every system with a 2.6 kernel has sysfs and nearly all have it mounted.

The magic behind sysfs is simply tying kobjects to directory entries via the `dentry` variable inside each kobject. Recall from [Chapter 12, "The Virtual Filesystem,"](#) that the `dentry` structure represents directory entries. By linking kobjects to dentries, kobjects trivially map to directories. Exporting the kobjects as a filesystem is now as easy as building a tree of the dentries in memory. But wait! kobjects already form a tree, our beloved device model. With kobjects mapping to dentries and the object hierarchy already forming an in-memory tree, sysfs became trivial.

[Figure 17.2](#) is a partial view of the sysfs filesystem as mounted at `/sys`.

**Figure 17.2. A view of part of the `/sys` tree.**





The root of the sysfs contains seven directories: `block`, `bus`, `class`, `devices`, `firmware`, `module`, and `power`. The `block` directory contains one directory for each of the registered block devices on the system. Each of those directories, in turn, contains any partitions on the block device. The `bus` directory provides a view of the system buses. The `class` directory contains a view of the devices on the system organized by high-level function. The `devices` directory is a view of the device topology of the system. It maps directly to the hierarchy of device structures inside the kernel. The `firmware` directory contains a system-specific tree of low-level subsystems such as ACPI, EDD, EFI, and so on. The `power` directory contains system-wide power management data.

The most important directory is `devices`, which exports the device model to the world. The directory structure is the actual device topology of the system. Much of the data in other directories is simply alternative organizations of the data in the `devices` directory. For example, `/sys/class/net/` organizes devices by the high-level concept of registered network interfaces. Inside this directory might be the subdirectory `eth0`, which contains the symlink `device` back to the actual device directory `indevices`.

Take a look at `/sys` on any Linux systems that you have access to. Such an accurate view into the system's device is pretty neat, and seeing the interconnection between the high-level concepts in `class` versus the low-level physical devices `indevices` and the actual drivers in `bus` is very informative. The whole experience is even more rewarding when you realize that this data is free, that this is the very representation of the system maintained inside the kernel<sup>[1]</sup>.

[1] If you find sysfs interesting, you might be interested in HAL, a hardware abstraction layer, which can be found at <http://hal.freedesktop.org/>. HAL builds an in-memory database based on the data in sysfs, linking together the concepts of class, device, and driver. On top of this data, HAL provides a rich API allowing for smarter, more aware applications.

## Adding and Removing kobjects from sysfs

Initialized kobjects are not automatically exported to sysfs. To represent a kobject to sysfs, you use `kobject_add()`:

```
int kobject_add(struct kobject *kobj);
```

The kobject's location in sysfs depends on the kobject's location in the object hierarchy. If the kobject's `parent` pointer is set, the kobject will map to a subdirectory in sysfs inside its parent. If the `parent` pointer is not set, the kobject will map to a subdirectory inside `kset->kobj`. If neither the `parent` nor the `kset` fields are set in the given kobject, the kobject is assumed to have no parent and will map to a root-level directory in sysfs. This is almost assuredly what you want, so one or both of `parent` and `kset` should be set appropriately before `kobject_add()` is called. Regardless, the name of the directory representing the kobject in sysfs is given by `kobj->k_name`.

Rather than call both `kobject_init()` and `kobject_add()`, you can call `kobject_register()`:

```
int kobject_register(struct kobject *kobj)
```

This function both initializes the given kobject and adds it to the object hierarchy.

Removing a kobject's sysfs representation is done via `kobject_del()`:

```
void kobject_del(struct kobject *kobj);
```

The function `kobject_unregister()` combines both `kobject_del()` and `kobject_put()`:

```
void kobject_unregister(struct kobject *kobj)
```

All four of these functions are defined in `lib/kobject.c` and declared in `<linux/kobject.h>`.

## Adding Files to sysfs

kobjects map to directories, and the complete object hierarchy maps nicely to the complete sysfs directory structure, but what about files? sysfs is nothing but a pretty tree without files to provide actual data.

### Default Attributes

A default set of files is provided via the `ktype` field in kobjects and ksets. Consequently, all kobjects of the same type have the same default set of files populating their sysfs directories. The `kobj_type` structure contains a member, `default_attrs`, that is an array of `attribute` structures. Attributes map kernel data to files in sysfs.

The `attribute` structure is defined in `<linux/sysfs.h>`:

```
/* attribute structure - attributes map kernel data to a sysfs file */
struct attribute {
    char          *name; /* attribute's name */
    struct module *owner; /* owning module, if any */
    mode_t        mode; /* permissions */
};
```

The `name` member provides the name of this attribute. This will be the filename of the resulting file in sysfs. The `owner` member points to a `module` structure representing the owning module, if any. If a module does not own this attribute, this field is `NULL`. The `mode` member is a `mode_t` type that specifies the permissions for the file in sysfs. Read-only attributes probably want to set this to `S_IRUGO` if they are world readable and `S_IRUSR` if they are only owner readable. Writable attributes probably want to set `mode` to `S_IRUGO | S_IWUSR`. All files and directories in sysfs are owned by uid zero and gid zero.

Although `default_attrs` lists the default attributes, `sysfs_ops` describes how to use them. The `sysfs_ops` member is a pointer to a structure of

the same name, which is defined in <linux/sysfs.h>:

```
struct sysfs_ops {  
    /* method invoked on read of a sysfs file */  
    ssize_t (*show) (struct kobject *kobj,  
                    struct attribute *attr,  
                    char *buffer);  
  
    /* method invoked on write of a sysfs file */  
    ssize_t (*store) (struct kobject *kobj,  
                     struct attribute *attr,  
                     const char *buffer,  
                     size_t size);  
};
```

The `show()` method is invoked on read. It must copy the value of the attribute given by `attr` into the buffer provided by `buffer`. The buffer is `PAGE_SIZE` bytes in length; on x86, `PAGE_SIZE` is 4096 bytes. The function should return the size in bytes of data actually written into `buffer` on success or a negative error code on failure.

The `store()` method is invoked on write. It must read `size` bytes from `buffer` into the variable represented by the attribute `attr`. The size of the buffer is always `PAGE_SIZE` or smaller. The function should return the size in bytes of data read from `buffer` on success or a negative error code on failure.

Because this single set of functions must handle file I/O requests on *all* attributes, they typically need to maintain some sort of generic mapping to invoke a handler specific to each attribute.

## Creating New Attributes

Generally, the default attributes provided by the `ktype` associated with a `kobject` are sufficient. Indeed, because all the `kobjects` of the same `ktype` are supposed to be related if not identical in nature as in, say, all partitions the same set of attributes should satisfy all `kobjects`. This not only simplifies life, but also provides code consolidation and a uniform look and feel to sysfs directories of related objects.

Nonetheless, often some specific instance of a `kobject` is somehow special. It wants or even needs its own attributes perhaps to provide data or functionality not shared by the more general `ktype`. To this end, the kernel provides the `sysfs_create_file()` interface for adding new attributes on top of the default set:

```
int sysfs_create_file(struct kobject *kobj, const struct attribute *attr);
```

This badboy will associate the `attribute` structure pointed at by `attr` with the `kobject` pointed at by `kobj`. Before it is invoked, the given attribute should be filled out. This function returns zero on success and a negative error code otherwise.

Note that the `sysfs_ops` specified in the `kobject`'s `ktype` is invoked to handle this new attribute. The existing default `show()` and `store()` methods must be capable of handling the newly created attribute.

In addition to creating actual files, it is possible to create symbolic links. Creating a symlink in sysfs is very easy:

```
int sysfs_create_link(struct kobject *kobj, struct kobject *target, char *name);
```

This function creates a link named `name` in the directory mapped from `kobj` to the directory mapped from `target`. This function returns zero on success and a negative error code otherwise.

## Destroying New Attributes

Removing an attribute is handled via `sysfs_remove_file()`:

```
void sysfs_remove_file(struct kobject *kobj, const struct attribute *attr);
```

Upon call return, the given attribute will no longer appear in the given kobject's directory.

Symbolic links created with `sysfs_create_link()` may be removed with `sysfs_remove_link()`:

```
void sysfs_remove_link(struct kobject *kobj, char *name);
```

Upon return, the symbolic link `name` in the directory mapped from `kobj` is removed.

All four of these functions are declared in `<linux/kobject.h>`. The `sysfs_create_file()` and `sysfs_remove_file()` functions are defined in `fs/sysfs/file.c`. The `sysfs_create_link()` and `sysfs_remove_link()` functions are defined in `fs/sysfs/symlink.c`.

## sysfs Conventions

The sysfs filesystem is currently *the place* for implementing functionality previously reserved for `ioctl()` calls on device nodes or the procfs filesystem. These days, the chic thing to do is implement such functionality as sysfs attributes in the appropriate directory. For example, instead of a new `ioctl()` on a device node, add a sysfs attribute in the driver's sysfs directory. Such an approach avoids the type-unsafe use of obscure `ioctl()` arguments and the haphazard mess of `/proc`.

To keep sysfs clean and intuitive, however, developers must follow certain conventions.

First, sysfs attributes should export one value per file. Values should be text-based and map to simple C types. The goal is to avoid the highly structured or highly messy representation of data we have today in `/proc`. Providing one value per file makes reading and writing trivial from the command line and enables C programs to easily slurp the kernel's data from sysfs into their own variables. In situations where the one-value-per-file rule results in an inefficient representation of data, it *is* acceptable to place multiple values of the same type in one file. Delineate them as appropriate; a simple space probably makes the most sense. Ultimately, think of sysfs attributes as mapping to individual kernel variables (as they usually do) and keep in mind ease of manipulation from user-space, particularly from the shell.

Second, organize data in sysfs in a clean hierarchy. Correctly parent kobjects so that they map intuitively into the sysfs tree. Associate attributes with the correct kobject and keep in mind that the kobject hierarchy exists not only in the kernel but also as an exported tree to user-space. Keep the sysfs tree sane!

Finally, keep in mind that sysfs provides a kernel-to-user service and is thus some sort of user-space ABI. User programs may come to rely on the existence, location, value, and behavior of sysfs directories and files. Changing existing files in any way is discouraged, and modifying the *behavior* of a given attribute but keeping its name and location is surely begging for trouble.

These simple conventions should allow sysfs to provide a rich and intuitive interface to user-space. Use sysfs correctly and user-space developers will not curse your existence but praise your beautiful code.

## The Kernel Events Layer

The Kernel Event Layer implements a kernel-to-user notification system on top of you guessed it kobjects. After the release of 2.6.0, it became clear that a mechanism for pushing events out of the kernel and up into user-space was needed, particularly for desktop systems that yearned for a more integrated and asynchronous system. The idea was to have the kernel push events up the stack: Hard drive full! Processor is overheating! Partition mounted! Pirate ship on the horizon!

Just kidding about the last one.

Early revisions of the event layer came and went, and it was not long before the whole thing was tied intimately to kobjects and sysfs. The result, it turns out, is pretty neat. The Kernel Event Layer models events as *signals* emitting from objects specifically, kobjects. Because kobjects map to sysfs paths, the *source* of each event is a sysfs path. If the event in question has to do with your first hard drive, then `/sys/block/hda` is the source address. Internally, inside the kernel, we model the event as originating from the backing kobject.

Each event is given a *verb* or *action* string representing the signal. The strings are terms such as `modified` or `unmounted` that describe *what* happened.

Finally, each event has an optional payload. Rather than pass an arbitrary string to user-space that provides the payload, the kernel event layer represents payloads as sysfs attributes.

Internally, the kernel events go from kernel-space out to user-space via netlink. Netlink is a high-speed multicast socket used to transmit networking information. Using netlink means that obtaining kernel events from user-space is as simple as blocking on a socket. The intention is for user-space to implement a system daemon that listens on the socket, processes any read events, and transmits the events up the system stack. One possible proposal for such a user-space daemon is to tie the events into D-BUS<sup>[2]</sup>, which already implements a system-wide messaging bus. In this manner, the kernel can emit signals just as any other component in the system.

[2] More information on D-BUS is available at <http://dbus.freedesktop.org/>.

To send events out to user-space from your kernel code, use `kobject_uevent()`:

```
int kobject_uevent(struct kobject *kobj,  
                   enum kobject_action action,  
                   struct attribute *attr);
```

The first parameter specifies the kobject that is emitting this signal. The actual kernel event will contain the sysfs path to which this kobject maps.

The second parameter specifies the *action* or *verb* describing this signal. The actual kernel event will contain a string that maps to the provided `enum kobject_action` value. Rather than directly provide the string, the function uses an enumeration to encourage value reuse, provide type safety, and prevent typos and other mistakes. The enumerations are defined in `<linux/kobject_uevent.c>` and have the form `KOBJ_foo`. Current values include `KOBJ_MOUNT`, `KOBJ_UNMOUNT`, `KOBJ_ADD`, `KOBJ_REMOVE`, and `KOBJ_CHANGE`. These values map to the strings "mount", "unmount", "add", "remove", and "change", respectively. Adding new action values is acceptable, so long as an existing value is insufficient.

The final parameter is an optional pointer to an `attribute` structure. This can be seen as the "payload" of the event. If the action value is insufficient in describing the event, the event can point at a specific file in sysfs that provides more information.

This function allocates memory and thus can sleep. An atomic version is provided that is identical to the non-atomic variant, except that it allocates memory via `GFP_ATOMIC`:

```
int kobject_uevent_atomic(struct kobject *kobj,
```

```
enum kobject_action action,  
struct attribute *attr);
```

Using the standard non-atomic interface is encouraged if possible. The parameters and behavior are otherwise the same between both functions.

Using kobjects and attributes not only encourages events that fit nicely in a sysfs-based world, but also encourages the creation of new kobjects and attributes to represent objects and data not yet exposed through sysfs.

Both these functions are defined in `lib/kobject_uevent.c` and declared in `<linux/kobject_uevent.h>`.

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## kobjects and sysfs in a Nutshell

This chapter looked at the device model, sysfs, kobjects, and the kernel event layer. But a discussion on these topics drags in a plethora of their friends: We had to touch also on ksets, subsystems, attributes, ktypes, and krefs, to name a few. These structures are of different uses to different people. Driver writers need only a peripheral view of these topics. Most driver subsystems nicely hide the internals of kobjects and their friends. Understanding the basics and perhaps interfaces such as `sysfs_create_file()` is enough for a driver writer. Developers working on the core kernel, however, may need a more in-depth understanding of kobjects. kobjects are becoming sufficiently important that many of their users may not be working on drivers or driver subsystems at all!

This chapter discussed the last subsystem in the kernel that we will cover. The following chapters cover general but important topics that every kernel developer need know. First off, debugging!

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## Chapter 18. Debugging

One of the defining factors that sets apart kernel development from user-space development is the hardship associated with debugging. It is difficult, at least relative to user-space, to debug the kernel. To complicate the matter, the stakes are much higher. A fault in the kernel could bring the whole system down hard.

Growing successful at debugging the kernel ultimately, becoming successful at kernel development as a whole is largely a function of your experience and understanding of the operating system. Sure, looks and charm help, too, but to successfully debug kernel issues, you need to understand the kernel. You have to start somewhere, however, so this chapter looks at approaches to debugging the kernel.

## What You Need to Start

So, you are ready to start bug hunting? It might be a long and frustrating journey. Some bugs have perplexed the entire kernel development community for months. Fortunately, for every one of these evil bugs, there are many simple bugs with an equally simple fix. With luck, all your bugs will remain simple and trivial. You will not know that, however, until you start investigating. For that, you need

- A bug. It might sound silly, but you need a well-defined and specific bug. It helps if it is reliably reproducible (at least for someone), but unfortunately bugs are not always well behaved or well defined.
- A kernel version on which the bug exists (presumably in the latest kernel, or who cares?). Even better is if you know the kernel version where the bug first appeared. You will learn how to figure that out if you do not know it.
- Some good luck, kernel hacking skill, or a combination thereof.

If you cannot reproduce the bug, many of the following approaches become worthless. It is rather crucial that you be able to duplicate the problem. If you cannot, fixing the bug is limited to conceptualizing the problem and finding a flaw in the code. This does often happen (yep, the Linux kernel developers are that good), but chances of success are obviously much more favorable if you can reproduce the problem.

It might seem strange that there would be a bug that someone cannot reproduce. In user-space programs, bugs are quite often a lot more straightforward. For example, *doing foo makes me core dump*. The kernel is an entirely different beast. The interactions between the kernel, user-space, and hardware can be quite delicate. Race conditions might rear their ugly heads only once in a million iterations of an algorithm. Poorly designed or even miscompiled code can result in acceptable performances on some systems, but terrible performances on others. It is very common for some specific configuration, on some random machine, under some odd workload, to trigger a bug otherwise unseen. The more information you have when tackling a bug, the better. Many times, if you can reliably reproduce the bug, you are more than halfway home.

## Bugs in the Kernel

Bugs in the kernel are as varied as bugs in user-space applications. They occur for a myriad of reasons and manifest themselves in just as many forms. Bugs range from clearly incorrect code (for example, not storing the correct value in the proper place) to synchronization errors (for example, not properly locking a shared variable). They manifest themselves as everything from poor performance to incorrect behavior to corrupt data.

Often, it is a long chain of events that leads from the error in the code to the error witnessed by the user. For example, a shared structure without a reference count might cause a race condition. Without proper accounting, one process might free the structure while another process still wants to use it. Later on, the second process may attempt to use the no longer existent structure through a now invalid pointer. This might result in a **NULL** pointer dereference, reading of garbage data, or nothing bad at all (if the data was not yet overwritten). The **NULL** pointer dereference causes an oops, whereas the garbage data leads to corruption (and then bad behavior or an oops). The user reports the oops or incorrect behavior. The kernel developer must then work backward from the error and see that the data was accessed after it was freed, there was a race, and the fix is proper reference counting on the shared structure. It probably needs locking, too.

Debugging the kernel might sound difficult, but in reality, the kernel is not unlike any other large software project. The kernel does have unique issues, such as timing constraints and race conditions, which are a consequence of allowing multiple threads of execution inside the kernel. I assure you that with a little effort and understanding, you can debug kernel problems (and perhaps even enjoy the challenge).

## printf()

The kernel print function, `printf()`, behaves almost identically to the C library `printf()` function. Indeed, throughout this book we have not made use of any real differences. For most intentions, this is fine; `printf()` is simply the name of the kernel's formatted print function. It does have some differences, however.

### The Robustness of printf()

One property of `printf()` quickly taken for granted is its robustness. The `printf()` function is callable from just about anywhere in the kernel at *any time*. It can be called from interrupt or process context. It can be called while a lock is held. It can be called simultaneously on multiple processors, yet it does not require the caller to hold a lock.

It is a resilient function. This is important because the usefulness of `printf()` rests on the fact that it is always there and always works.

### The Nonrobustness of printf()

A chink in the armor of `printf()`'s robustness does exist. It is unusable before a certain point in the kernel boot process, prior to console initialization. Indeed, if the console is not initialized, where is the output supposed to go?

This is normally not an issue, unless you are debugging issues very early in the boot process (for example, in `setup_arch()`, which performs architecture-specific initialization). Such debugging is a challenge to begin with, and the absence of any sort of print method only compounds the problem.

There is some hope, but not a lot. Hardcore architecture hackers use the hardware that does work (say, a serial port) to communicate with the outside world. Trust me this is not fun for most people. Some supported architectures do implement a sane solution, however and others (i386 included) have patches available that also save the day.

The solution is a `printf()` variant that can output to the console very early in the boot process `early_printf()`. The behavior is the same as `printf()`, only the name and its capability to work earlier are changed. This is not a portable solution, however, because not all supported architectures have such a method implemented. It might become your best friend, though, if it does.

Unless you need to write to the console very early in the boot process, you can rely on `printf()` to always work.

## Loglevels

The major difference between `printf()` and `print()` is the capability of the former to specify a *loglevel*. The kernel uses the loglevel to decide whether to print the message to the console. The kernel displays all messages with a loglevel below a specified value on the console.

You specify a loglevel like this:

```
printf(KERN_WARNING "This is a warning!\n");
printf(KERN_DEBUG "This is a debug notice!\n");
printf("I did not specify a loglevel!\n");
```

The `KERN_WARNING` and `KERN_DEBUG` strings are simple defines found in `<linux/kernel.h>`. They expand to a string such as `<4>` or `<7>` that is concatenated onto the front of the `printf()` message. The kernel then decides which messages to print on the console based on this specified loglevel and the current console loglevel, `console_loglevel`. [Table 18.1](#) is a full listing of the available loglevels.

**Table 18.1. Available Loglevels**

| Loglevel                  | Description                                         |
|---------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|
| <code>KERN_EMERG</code>   | An emergency condition; the system is probably dead |
| <code>KERN_ALERT</code>   | A problem that requires immediate attention         |
| <code>KERN_CRIT</code>    | A critical condition                                |
| <code>KERN_ERR</code>     | An error                                            |
| <code>KERN_WARNING</code> | A warning                                           |
| <code>KERN_NOTICE</code>  | A normal, but perhaps noteworthy, condition         |
| <code>KERN_INFO</code>    | An informational message                            |
| <code>KERN_DEBUG</code>   | A debug message typically superfluous               |

If you do not specify a loglevel, it defaults to `DEFAULT_MESSAGE_LOGLEVEL`, which is currently `KERN_WARNING`. Because this value might change, you should always specify a loglevel for your messages.

The kernel defines the most important loglevel, `KERN_EMERG`, as `<0>` and it defines `KERN_DEBUG`, the least critical loglevel, as `<7>`. For example, after the preprocessor is done, the previous examples resemble the following:

```
printf("<4>This is a warning!\n");
printf("<7>This is a debug notice!\n");
printf("<4>did not specify a loglevel!\n");
```

The avenue that you take with your `printf()` loglevels is up to you. Of course, normal messages that you intend to keep around should have the appropriate loglevel. But the debugging messages you sprinkle everywhere when trying to get a handle on a problem admit it, we all do it and it works can have any loglevel you want. One option is to leave your default console loglevel where it is, and make all your debugging messages `KERN_CRIT` or so. Conversely, you can make the debugging messages `KERN_DEBUG` and change your console loglevel. Each has pros and cons; you decide.

Loglevels are defined in `<linux/kernel.h>`.

## The Log Buffer

Kernel messages are stored in a circular buffer of size `LOG_BUF_LEN`. This size is configurable at compile time via the `CONFIG_LOG_BUF_SHIFT` option. The default for a uniprocessor machine is 16KB. In other words, the kernel can simultaneously store 16KB of kernel messages. As messages are read in user-space, they are removed from the queue. If the message queue is at this maximum and another call to `printf()` is made, the new message overwrites the oldest one. The log buffer is called *circular* because the reading and writing occur in a circular pattern.

Using a circular buffer has multiple advantages. Because it is easy to simultaneously write to and read from a circular buffer, even interrupt context can easily use `printf()`. Furthermore, it makes log maintenance easy. If there are too many messages, new messages simply overwrite the older ones. If there is a problem that results in the generation of many messages, the log simply overwrites itself in lieu of uncontrollably consuming memory. The lone disadvantage of a circular bufferthe possibility of losing messagesis a small price to pay for the simplicity and robustness it affords.

## syslogd and klogd

On a standard Linux system, the user-space `klogd` daemon retrieves the kernel messages from the log buffer and feeds them into the system log file via the `syslogd` daemon. To read the log, the `klogd` program can either read the `/proc/kmsg` file or call the `syslog()` system call. By default, it uses the `/proc` approach. In either case, `klogd` blocks until there are new kernel messages to read. It then wakes up, reads any new messages, and processes them. By default, it sends the messages to the `syslogd` daemon.

The `syslogd` daemon appends all the messages it receives to a file, which is by default `/var/log/messages`. It is configurable via `/etc/syslog.conf`.

You can have `klogd` change the console loglevel when it loads by specifying the `c` flag when you start it.

## A Note About `printf()` and Kernel Hacking

When you first start developing kernel code, you most likely will often transpose `printf()` for `printf()`. This transposition is only natural, as you cannot deny years of experience using `printf()` in user-space programs. With luck, this mistake will not last long because the repeated linker errors will eventually grow rather annoying.

Someday, you might find yourself accidentally using `printf()` instead of `printf()` in your user-space code. When that day comes, you can say you are a true kernel hacker.

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## Oops

An *oops* is the usual way a kernel communicates to the user that something bad happened. Because the kernel is the supervisor of the entire system, it cannot simply fix itself or kill itself as it can when user-space goes awry. Instead, the kernel issues an oops. This involves printing an error message to the console, dumping the contents of the registers, and providing a back trace. A failure in the kernel is hard to manage, so the kernel must jump through many hoops to issue the oops and clean up after itself. Often, after an oops the kernel is in an inconsistent state. For example, the kernel could have been in the middle of processing important data when the oops occurred. It might have held a lock or been in the middle of talking to hardware. The kernel must gracefully back out of its current context and try to resume control of the system. In many cases, this is not possible. If the oops occurred in interrupt context, the kernel cannot continue and it panics. A panic results in an instant halt of the system. If the oops occurred in the idle task (pid zero) or the init task (pid one), the result is also a panic because the kernel cannot continue without these important processes. If the oops occurs in any other process, however, the kernel kills the process and tries to continue executing.

An oops might occur for multiple reasons, including a memory access violation or an illegal instruction. As a kernel developer, you will often deal with (and undoubtedly cause) oopses.

What follows is an oops example from a PPC machine, in the timer handler of the tulip network interface card:

```
Oops: Exception in kernel mode, sig: 4
Unable to handle kernel NULL pointer dereference at virtual address 00000001

NIP: C013A7F0 LR: C013A7F0 SP: C0685E00 REGS: c0905d10 TRAP: 0700
Not tainted
MSR: 00089037 EE: 1 PR: 0 FP: 0 ME: 1 IR/DR: 11
TASK = c0712530[0] 'swapper' Last syscall: 120
GPR00: C013A7C0 C0295E00 C0231530 0000002F 00000001 C0380CB8 C0291B80 C02D0000
GPR08: 000012A0 00000000 00000000 C0292AA0 4020A088 00000000 00000000 00000000
GPR16: 00000000 00000000 00000000 00000000 00000000 00000000 00000000 00000000
GPR24: 00000000 00000005 00000000 00001032 C3F7C000 00000032 FFFFFFFF C3F7C1C0
Call trace:
[c013ab30] tulip_timer+0x128/0x1c4
[c0020744] run_timer_softirq+0x10c/0x164
[c001b864] do_softirq+0x88/0x104
[c0007e80] timer_interrupt+0x284/0x298
[c00033c4] ret_from_except+0x0/0x34
[c0007b84] default_idle+0x20/0x60
[c0007bf8] cpu_idle+0x34/0x38
[c0003ae8] rest_init+0x24/0x34
```

PC users might marvel at the number of registers (a whopping 32!). An oops on x86, which you might be more familiar with, is a little simpler. The important information, however, is identical for all the architectures: the contents of the registers and the back trace.

The back trace shows the exact function call chain leading up to the problem. In this case, you can see exactly what happened: The machine was idle and executing the idle loop, `cpu_idle()`, which calls `default_idle()` in a loop. The timer interrupt occurred, which resulted in the processing of timers. A timer handler, the `tulip_timer()` function, was executed, which performed a `NULL` pointer dereference. You can even use the offsets (those numbers such as `0x128/0x1c4` to the right of the functions) to find exactly the offending line.

The register contents can be equally useful, although less commonly so. With a decoded copy of the function in assembly, the register values help you re-create the exact events leading to the problem. Seeing an unexpected value in a register might shine some light on the root of the issue. In this case, you can see which registers held `NULL` (a value of all zeros) and discover which variable in the function had the unexpected value. In situations such as this, the problem is often a race in this case, between the timer and some other part of this network card. Debugging a race condition is always a challenge.

## ksymoops

The previous oops is said to be *decoded* because the memory addresses are translated into the functions they represent. An undecoded version of the previous oops is shown here:

```
NIP: C013A7F0 LR: C013A7F0 SP: C0685E00 REGS: c0905d10 TRAP: 0700
Not tainted
MSR: 00089037 EE: 1 PR: 0 FP: 0 ME: 1 IR/DR: 11
TASK = c0712530[0] 'swapper' Last syscall: 120
GPR00: C013A7C0 C0295E00 C0231530 0000002F 00000001 C0380CB8 C0291B80 C02D0000
GPR08: 000012A0 00000000 00000000 C0292AA0 4020A088 00000000 00000000 00000000
GPR16: 00000000 00000000 00000000 00000000 00000000 00000000 00000000 00000000
GPR24: 00000000 00000005 00000000 00001032 C3F7C000 00000032 FFFFFFFF C3F7C1C0
Call trace: [c013ab30] [c0020744] [c001b864] [c0007e80] [c00061c4]
[c0007b84] [c0007bf8] [c0003ae8]
```

The addresses in the back trace need to be converted into symbolic names. This is done via the **ksymoops** command in conjunction with the **System.map** generated during kernel compile. If you are using modules, you also need some module information **ksymoops** tries to figure out most of this information, so you can usually invoke it via

```
ksymoops saved_oops.txt
```

The program then spits out a decoded version of the oops. If the default information **ksymoops** uses is unacceptable, or you want to provide alternative locations for the information, the program understands various options. Its manual page has a lot of information that you should read before using.

The **ksymoops** program most likely came with your distribution.

## kallsyms

Thankfully, dealing with **ksymoops** is no longer a requirement. This is a big deal, because although developers might have had little problem using it, end users often mismatched **System.map** files or failed to decode oopses altogether.

The 2.5 development kernel introduced the **kallsyms** feature, which is enabled via the **CONFIG\_KALLSYMS** configuration option. This option loads the symbolic kernel name of memory address mapping into the kernel image, so the kernel can print predecoded back traces. Consequently, decoding oopses no longer requires **System.map** or **ksymoops**. On the downside, the size of the kernel increases a bit because the address-to-symbol mappings must reside in permanently mapped kernel memory. It is worth the memory use, however, at least during development.

## Kernel Debugging Options

Multiple configure options that you can set during compile to aid in debugging and testing kernel code are available. These options are in the Kernel Hacking menu of the Kernel Configuration Editor. They all depend on `CONFIG_DEBUG_KERNEL`. When hacking on the kernel, consider enabling as many of these options as practical.

Some of the options are rather useful, enabling slab layer debugging, high-memory debugging, I/O mapping debugging, spin-lock debugging, and stack-overflow checking. One of the most useful settings, however, is sleep-inside-spinlock checking, which actually does much more.

## Atomicity Debugging

Starting with 2.5, the kernel has an excellent infrastructure for detecting all sorts of atomicity violations. Recall from [Chapter 8](#), "Kernel Synchronization Introduction," that *atomic* refers to something's capability to execute without division; the code completes without interruption or it does not complete at all. Code that holds a spin lock or has disabled kernel preemption is atomic. Code cannot sleep while atomicsleeping while holding a lock is a recipe for deadlock.

Thanks to kernel preemption, the kernel has a central atomicity counter. The kernel can be set such that if a task sleeps while atomic, or even does something that *might* sleep, the kernel will print a warning and provide a back trace. Potential bugs that are detectable include calling `schedule()` while holding a lock, issuing a blocking memory allocation while holding a lock, or sleeping while holding a reference to per-CPU data. This debugging infrastructure catches a lot of bugs and is highly recommended.

The following options make the best use of this feature:

```
CONFIG_PREEMPT=y  
CONFIG_DEBUG_KERNEL=y  
CONFIG_KALLSYMS=y  
CONFIG_SPINLOCK_SLEEP=y
```

## Asserting Bugs and Dumping Information

A number of kernel routines make it easy to flag bugs, provide assertions, and dump information. Two of the most common are `BUG()` and `BUG_ON()`. When called, they cause an oops, which results in a stack trace and an error message dumped to the kernel. Why these statements cause an oops is architecture-dependent. Most architectures define `BUG()` and `BUG_ON()` as illegal instructions, which result in the desired oops. You normally use these routines as assertions, to flag situations that should not happen:

```
if (bad_thing)
    BUG();
```

Or, even better,

```
BUG_ON(bad_thing);
```

Most kernel developers believe that `BUG_ON()` is easier to read and more self-documenting compared to `BUG()`. Also, `BUG_ON()` wraps its assertion in an `unlikely()` statement. Do note that some developers have discussed the idea of having an option to compile `BUG_ON()` statements away, saving space in embedded kernels. This means that your assertion inside a `BUG_ON()` should not have any side effects.

A more critical error is signaled via `panic()`. A call to `panic()` prints an error message and then halts the kernel. Obviously, you want to use it only in the worst of situations:

```
if (terrible_thing)
    panic("foo is %ld!\n", foo);
```

Sometimes, you just want a simple stack trace issued on the console to help you in debugging. In those cases, `dump_stack()` is used. It simply dumps the contents of the registers and a function back trace to the console:

```
if (!debug_check) {
    printk(KERN_DEBUG "provide some information...\n");
    dump_stack();
}
```

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## Magic SysRq Key

A possible lifesaver is the Magic SysRq Key, which is enabled via the `CONFIG_MAGIC_SYSRQ` configure option. The **SysRq** (system request) key is a standard key on most keyboards. On the i386 and PPC, it is accessible via [Alt-PrintScreen](#). When this configure option is enabled, special combinations of keys enable you to communicate with the kernel regardless of what else it is doing. This enables you to perform some useful tasks in the face of a dying system.

In addition to the configure option, there is a sysctl to toggle this feature on and off. To turn it on:

```
echo 1 > /proc/sys/kernel/sysrq
```

From the console, you can hit **SysRq-h** for a list of available options. **SysRq-s** syncs dirty buffers to disk, **SysRq-u** unmounts all file systems, and **SysRq-b** reboots the machine. Issuing these three key combinations in a row is a safer way to reboot a dying machine than simply hitting the machine reset switch.

If the machine is badly locked, it might not respond to any Magic SysRq combinations, or it might fail to complete a given command. With luck, however, these options might save your data or aid in debugging. [Table 18.2](#) is a listing of the supported SysRq commands.

**Table 18.2. Supporting *SysRq* Commands**

| Key Command    | Description                                           |
|----------------|-------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>SysRq-b</b> | Reboot the machine                                    |
| <b>SysRq-e</b> | Send a <b>SIGTERM</b> to all processes except init    |
| <b>SysRq-h</b> | Display SysRq help on the console                     |
| <b>SysRq-i</b> | Send a <b>SIGKILL</b> to all processes except init    |
| <b>SysRq-k</b> | Secure Access Key: kill all programs on this console  |
| <b>SysRq-l</b> | Send a <b>SIGKILL</b> to all processes including init |
| <b>SysRq-m</b> | Dump memory information to console                    |
| <b>SysRq-o</b> | Shut down the machine                                 |
| <b>SysRq-p</b> | Dump registers to console                             |
| <b>SysRq-r</b> | Turn off keyboard raw mode                            |
| <b>SysRq-s</b> | Sync all mounted file systems to disk                 |
| <b>SysRq-t</b> | Dump task information to console                      |
| <b>SysRq-u</b> | Unmount all mounted file systems                      |

The file `Documentation/sysrq.txt` in the kernel source tree has more information. The actual implementation is in `drivers/char/sysrq.c`. The Magic **SysRq** Key is a vital tool for aiding in debugging or saving a dying system. Because it provides powerful capabilities to any user on the console, however, you should exercise caution on important machines. For your development machine, however, it is a great help.

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## The Saga of a Kernel Debugger

Many kernel developers have long demanded an in-kernel debugger. Unfortunately, Linus does not want a debugger in his tree. He believes that debuggers lead to bad fixes by misinformed developers. No one can argue with his logic: fix derived from real understanding of the code is certainly more likely to be correct. Nonetheless, plenty of kernel developers want an official in-kernel debugger. Because it is unlikely to happen anytime soon, a number of patches have arisen that add kernel-debugging support to the standard Linux kernel. Despite being external unofficial patches, these tools are quite well featured and powerful. Before you delve into these solutions, however, it's a good idea to look at how much help the standard Linux debugger, `gdb`, will give you.

### `gdb`

You can use the standard GNU debugger to glimpse inside a running kernel. Starting the debugger on the kernel is about the same as debugging a running process:

```
gdb vmlinux /proc/kcore
```

The `vmlinux` file is the uncompressed kernel image stored in the root of the build directory, not the compressed `zImage` or `bzImage`.

The optional `/proc/kcore` parameter acts as a core file, to let `gdb` actually peek into the memory of the running kernel. You need to be root to read it.

You can issue just about any of the `gdb` commands for reading information. For example, to print the value of a variable:

```
p global_variable
```

To disassemble a function:

```
disassemle function
```

If you compile the kernel with the `-g` flag (add `-g` to the `CFLAGS` variable in the kernel `Makefile`), `gdb` is able to provide much more information. For example, you can dump the contents of structures and follow pointers. You also get a much larger kernel, so do not routinely compile with debugging information included.

Unfortunately, this is about the limit of what `gdb` can do. It cannot modify kernel data in any way. It is unable to single-step through kernel code or set breakpoints. The inability to modify kernel data structures is a large downside. Although it is undoubtedly useful for it to disassemble functions on occasion, it would be much more useful if it could modify data, too.

### `kgdb`

**kgdb** is a patch that enables **gdb** to fully debug the kernel remotely over a serial line. It requires two computers. The first runs a kernel patched with **kgdb**. The second debugs the first over the serial line (a null modem cable connecting the two machines) using **gdb**. With **kgdb**, the entire feature set of **gdb** is accessible: reading and writing any variables, settings breakpoints, setting watch points, single stepping, and so on! Special versions of **kgdb** even allow function execution.

Setting up **kgdb** and the serial line is a little tricky, but when complete, debugging is simple. The patch installs plenty of documentation in [Documentation](#)/check it out.

Different people maintain the **kgdb** patch for various architectures and kernel releases. Searching online is your best bet for finding a patch for a given kernel.

## **kdb**

An alternative to **kgdb** is **kdb**. Unlike **kgdb**, **kdb** is not a remote debugger. **kdb** is a kernel patch that extensively modifies the kernel to allow direct debugging on the host system. It provides variable modification, breakpoints, and single-stepping, among other things. Running the debugger is simple: Just hit the **break** key on the console. The debugger also automatically executes when the kernel oopses. Much documentation is available in [Documentation/kdb](#), after the patch is applied.

**kdb** is available at <http://oss.sgi.com/>.

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## Poking and Probing the System

As you gain experience in kernel debugging, you gain little tricks to help you poke and probe the kernel for answers. Because kernel debugging can prove rather challenging, every little tip and trick helps. Let's look at a couple.

### Using UID as a Conditional

If the code you are developing is process-related, sometimes you can develop alternative implementations without breaking the existing code. This is helpful if you are rewriting an important system call and would like a fully functional system with which to debug it. For example, assume you are rewriting the `fork()` algorithm to take advantage of an exciting new feature. Unless you get everything right on the first try, it would not be easy to debug the system: A nonfunctioning `fork()` system call is certain to result in a nonfunctioning system. As always, there is hope.

Often, it is safe to keep the remaining algorithm in place and construct your replacement on the side. You can achieve this by using the user id (UID) as a conditional with which to decide which algorithm to use:

```
if (current->uid != 7777) {  
    /* old algorithm .. */  
} else {  
    /* new algorithm .. */  
}
```

All users except UID 7777 will use the old algorithm. You can create a special user, with UID 7777, for testing the new algorithm. This makes it much easier to test critical process-related code.

### Using Condition Variables

If the code in question is not in process context, or if you want a more global method of controlling the feature, you can use a condition variable. This approach is even simpler than using the UID. Simply create a global variable and use it as a conditional check in your code. If the variable is zero, you follow one code path. If it is nonzero, you follow another. The variable can be set via an interface you export or a poke from the debugger.

### Using Statistics

Sometimes you want to get a feel for how often a specific event is occurring. Sometimes you want to compare multiple events and generate some ratios for comparison. You can do this easily by creating statistics and a mechanism to export their values.

For instance, say you want to look at the occurrence of `foo` and the occurrence of `bar`. In a file, ideally the one where these events occur,

declare two global variables:

```
unsigned long foo_stat = 0;
unsigned long bar_stat = 0;
```

For each occurrence of these events, increment the appropriate variable. Then export the data however you feel fit. For example, you can create a file in `/proc` with the values or write a system call. Alternatively, simply read them via a debugger.

Note that this approach is not particularly SMP-safe. Ideally, you would use atomic operations. For a trivial one-time debugging statistic, however, you normally do not need such protection.

## Rate Limiting Your Debugging

Often, you want to stick some debugging checks (with some corresponding print statements) in an area to sniff out a problem. In the kernel, however, some functions are called many times per second. If you stick a call to `printf()` in such a function, the system is overwhelmed with debugging output and quickly grows unusable.

Two relatively simple tricks exist to prevent this problem. The first is *rate limiting*, which is useful when you want to watch the progression of an event, but the event occurs rather often. To prevent a deluge of debugging output, you print your debug message (or do whatever you are doing) only every few seconds. For example,

```
static unsigned long prev_jiffy = jiffies; /* rate limiting */

if (time_after(jiffies, prev_jiffy + 2*HZ)) {
    prev_jiffy = jiffies;
    printk(KERN_ERR "blah blah blah\n");
}
```

In this example, the debug message is printed at most every two seconds. This prevents any flood of information on the console and the computer remains usable. You might need the rate limiting to be larger or smaller, depending on your needs.

Another sticky situation arises if you are looking for any occurrence of an event. Unlike the previous example, you do not want to monitor the progress of the kernel, but simply receive a notification when something happens. Perhaps you want to receive this notice only once or twice. This is an especially sticky problem if after the check is triggered once, it is triggered a lot. The solution here is not to rate limit the debugging, but *occurrence limit* it:

```
static unsigned long limit = 0;

if (limit < 5) {
    limit++;
    printk(KERN_ERR "blah blah blah\n");
}
```

This example caps the debugging output to five. After five such messages, the conditional is always false.

In both examples, the variables should be `static` and local to the function, as shown. This enables the variable's values to persist across function calls.

Neither of these examples are SMP- or preempt-safe, although a quick switch to atomic operators will make them safe. Frankly, however, this is just debugging code, so why go through the trouble?

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## Binary Searching to Find the Culprit Change

It is usually useful to know when a bug was introduced into the kernel source. If you know that a bug occurred in version 2.6.10, but not 2.4.9, then you have a clear picture of the changes that occurred to cause the bug. The bug fix is often as simple as reverting or otherwise fixing the bad change.

Many times, however, you do not know what kernel version introduced the bug. You know that the bug is in the *current* kernel, but it seemed to have always have been in the current kernel! It takes some investigative work, but with a little effort, you can find the offending change. With the change in hand, the bug fix is usually near.

To start, you need a reliably reproducible problempreferably, a bug that you can verify immediately after boot. Next, you need a known-good kernel. You might already know this. For example, if you know a couple months back the kernel worked, grab a kernel from that period. If you are wrong, try an earlier release. It shouldn't be too hardunless the bug has existed foreverto find a kernel without the bug.

Next, you need a known-bad kernel. To make things easier, start with the earliest kernel you know to have the bug.

Now, you begin a binary search from the known-bad kernel down to the known-good kernel. Let's look at an example. Assume the latest known-good kernel is 2.4.11 and the earliest known-bad is 2.4.20. Start by picking a kernel in the middle, such as 2.4.15. Test 2.4.15 for the bug. If 2.4.15 works, then you know the problem began in a later kernel, so try a kernel in between 2.4.15 and 2.4.20say, 2.4.17. On the other hand, if 2.4.15 does not work, you know the problem is in an earlier kernel, so you might try 2.4.13. Rinse and repeat.

Eventually you should narrow the problem down to two kernelsone of which has the bug and one of which does not. You then have a clear picture of the changes that caused the bug.

This approach beats looking at every kernel!

## When All Else Fails: The Community

Perhaps you have tried everything that you can think of. You have slaved over the keyboard for countless hoursindeed, perhaps countless daysand the solution still escapes you. If the bug is in the mainstream Linux kernel, you can always elicit the help of the other developers in the kernel community.

A brief, but complete, email sent to the kernel mailing list describing the bug and your findings might help aid in discovery of a solution. After all, no one likes bugs.

[Chapter 20](#), "Patches, Hacking, and the Community," specifically addresses the community and its primary forum, the Linux Kernel Mailing List (LKML).

# Chapter 19. Portability

Linux is a portable operating system that supports a wide range of computer architectures. *Portability* refers to how easily if at all code can move from one system architecture to another. We all know that Linux is *portable* because it has already been *ported* to various systems. But this portability did not occur overnight; it required many important design decisions along the way. Consequently, it is now easy (relatively speaking) to bring Linux up on a new system. This chapter discusses how to write portable code—the issues you need to keep in mind when writing core kernel code or device drivers.

Some operating systems are designed with portability as a primary feature. As little code as possible is machine specific. Assembly is kept to a minimum and interfaces and features are sufficiently general and abstract that they work on a wide range of architectures. The obvious benefit is the relative ease with which a new architecture can be supported. In some cases, highly portable and simple operating systems can be moved to a new architecture with just a few hundred lines of unique code. The downside is that architecture-specific features are not supported and code cannot be hand-tuned for a specific machine. With this design choice, optimal code is traded for portable code. Some examples of highly portable operating systems are Minix, NetBSD, and many research systems.

On the opposite side are operating systems that trade all portability for highly customized optimum code. As much as possible, code is written in assembly or otherwise designed for a specific architecture. Kernel features are designed around specific architectural features. Consequently, moving the operating system to a new architecture is tantamount to rewriting the kernel from scratch. With this design decision, portable code is traded for optimal code. Such systems are often harder to maintain than more portable systems (DOS and Windows 9x). Now these systems need not be more optimal than a more portable system; their willingness to disregard portability, however, allows for a no-compromise design.

Linux takes the middle road toward portability. As much as practical, interfaces and core code are architecture-independent C code. Where performance is critical, however, kernel features are tuned for each architecture. For example, much fast-path and low-level code is architecture dependent and often written in assembly. This approach enables Linux to remain portable without forgoing optimizations. Where portability would hinder performance, performance generally wins. Otherwise, code is kept portable.

Generally, exported kernel interfaces are architecture independent. If any parts of the function need to be unique for each supported architecture (either for performance reasons or as a necessity), that code is implemented in separate functions and called as needed. Each supported architecture then implements its architecture-specific functions and links them into the kernel image.

A good example is the scheduler. The large majority of the scheduler is written in architecture-independent C and lives in `kernel/sched.c`. A few jobs of the scheduler, such as switching processor state or switching the address space, are very architecture dependent. Consequently, the C method `context_switch()`, which switches from one process to another, calls the methods `switch_to()` and `switch_mm()`, to switch processor state and switch address space, respectively.

The code for `switch_to()` and `switch_mm()` is uniquely implemented by each architecture that Linux supports. When Linux is ported to a new architecture, the new architecture must provide an implementation for these functions.

Architecture-specific files are located in `arch/architecture/` and `include/asm-architecture/`, where `architecture` is a short name representing each architecture in Linux. As an example, the Intel x86 architecture is given the short name `i386`. Architecture-specific files for these machines live in `arch/i386` and `include/asm-i386`. The supported architectures in the 2.6 kernel series are `alpha`, `arm`, `cris`, `h8300`, `i386`, `ia64`, `m32r`, `m68k`, `m68knommu`, `mips`, `mips64`, `parisc`, `ppc`, `ppc64`, `s390`, `sh`, `sparc`, `sparc64`, `um`, `v850`, and `x86-64`. A more complete listing of these architectures is in [Table 19.1](#), later in this chapter.

**Table 19.1. Supported Linux Architectures**

| Architecture | Description       | Word size        |
|--------------|-------------------|------------------|
| alpha        | Digital Alpha     | 64-bit           |
| arm          | ARM and StrongARM | 32-bit           |
| cris         | CRIS              | 32-bit           |
| h8300        | H8/300            | 32-bit           |
| i386         | Intel x86         | 32-bit           |
| ia64         | IA-64             | 64-bit           |
| m32r         | M32xxx            | 32-bit           |
| m68k         | Motorola 68k      | 32-bit           |
| m68knommu    | m68k without MMU  | 32-bit           |
| mips         | MIPS              | 32-bit           |
| mips64       | 64-bit MIPS       | 64-bit           |
| parisc       | HP PA-RISC        | 32-bit or 64-bit |
| ppc          | PowerPC           | 32-bit           |
| ppc64        | POWER             | 64-bit           |
| s390         | IBM S/390         | 32-bit or 64-bit |
| sh           | Hitachi SH        | 32-bit           |
| sparc        | SPARC             | 32-bit           |
| sparc64      | UltraSPARC        | 64-bit           |
| um           | Usermode Linux    | 32-bit or 64-bit |
| v850         | v850              | 32-bit           |
| x86_64       | x86-64            | 64-bit           |

## History of Portability in Linux

When Linus first unleashed Linux on the unsuspecting world, it ran only on Intel 386 machines. Although the operating system was rather generalized and well written, portability was not a major concern. In fact, Linus even once suggested Linux would never run on anything but the i386 architecture! In 1993, however, work began on porting Linux to the Digital Alpha architecture. The Digital Alpha was a modern high-performance RISC-based architecture with 64-bit memory addressing. This is a stark contrast to Linus's original 386. Nonetheless, the initial port of Linux to the Alpha took about a year, and the Alpha became the first officially supported architecture after x86. This port was perhaps rather difficult because it had the unwelcome challenge of being the first. Instead of simply grafting support for the Alpha onto the kernel, pieces of the kernel were rewritten as needed with portability in mind<sup>[1]</sup>. Although this made for more work overall, the result was much cleaner and future porting was made much easier.

Although the first releases of Linux supported only the Intel x86 architecture, the 1.2 kernel series supported Digital Alpha, Intel x86, MIPS, and SPARC although support was somewhat experimental.

With the release of the 2.0 kernel, Linux officially added support for the Motorola 68k and PowerPC. Additionally, the architectures previously supported in 1.2 were labeled official and stable.

The 2.2 kernel series brought even more architecture support with the addition of ARM, IBM S/390, and UltraSPARC. A few years later, 2.4 nearly doubled the number of supported architectures to 15, as support was added for the CRIS, IA-64, 64-bit MIPS, HP PA-RISC, 64-bit IBM S/390, and Hitachi SH.

The current kernel, 2.6, brought the number of supported architectures to 20 with the addition of Motorola 68k without MMU, M32xxx, H8/300, IBM POWER, v850, x86-64, and a version of the kernel that runs in a virtual machine under Linux, known as Usermode Linux. The 64-bit s390 port was folded into the 32-bit s390 port, removing the duplication.

It should be noted that each of these architectures supports various chip and machine types. Some supported architectures, such as ARM and PowerPC, each support many different chips and machine types. Therefore, although Linux runs under 20 broad architectures, it runs on many more different machines!

## Word Size and Data Types

A *word* is the amount of data that a machine can process at one time. This fits into the document analogy that includes *characters* (usually eight bits) and *pages* (many words, often 4 or 8KB worth) as other measurements of data. A word is an integer number of bytes for example, one, two, four, or eight. When someone talks about the "n-bits" of a machine, they are generally talking about the machine's *word size*. For example, when people say the Pentium is a 32-bit chip, they are referring to its word size, which is 32 bits, or four bytes.

The size of a processor's general-purpose registers (GPR's) is equal to its word size. The widths of the components in a given architecture for example, the memory bus are usually at least as wide as the word size. Typically, at least in the architectures that Linux supports, the memory address space is equal to the word size<sup>[2]</sup>. Consequently, the size of a pointer is equal to the word size. Additionally, the size of the C type `long` is equal to the word size, whereas the size of the `int` type is sometimes less than that of the word size. For example, the Alpha has a 64-bit word size. Consequently, registers, pointers, and the `long` type are 64 bits in length. The `int` type, however, is 32 bits long. The Alpha can access and manipulate 64 bits one word at a time.

### Words, Doublewords, and Confusion

Some operating systems and processors do not call the standard data size a *word*. Instead, a word is some fixed size based on history or arbitrary naming decisions. For example, some systems might partition data sizes into bytes (8 bits), words (16 bits), double words (32 bits), and quad words (64 bits), despite the fact the system in question may be 32 bits. In this book and Linux in general a word is the standard data size of the processor, as discussed previously.

Each supported architecture under Linux defines `BITS_PER_LONG` in `<asm/types.h>` to the length of the C `long` type, which is the system word size. A full listing of all supported architectures and their word size is in [Table 19.1](#).

The C standard explicitly leaves the size of the standard types up to implementations<sup>[3]</sup>, although it does dictate a minimum size. The uncertainty in the standard C types across architectures is both a pro and a con. On the plus side, the standard types can take advantage of the word size of various architectures, and types need not explicitly specify a size. The size of the C `long` type is guaranteed to be the machine's word size. On the downside, however, code cannot assume that the standard C types have any specific size. Furthermore, there is no guarantee that an `int` is the same size as a `long`<sup>[4]</sup>.

<sup>[3]</sup> With the exception of `char`, which is always 8 bits.

<sup>[4]</sup> On the 64-bit architectures supported in Linux, in fact, a `int` and a `long` are not the same size; a `int` is 32 bits and a `long` is 64 bits. The 32-bit architectures we are all familiar with have both types equal to 32 bits.

The situation grows even more confusing because there doesn't need to be a relation between the types in user-space and kernel-space. The `sparc64` architecture provides a 32-bit user-space and therefore pointers and both the `int` and `long` types are 32-bit. In kernel-space, however, `sparc64` has a 32-bit `int` type and 64-bit pointers and `long` types. This is not the norm, however.

Some rules to keep in mind:

- A `char` is always eight bits.

- Although there is no rule that the `int` type be 32 bits, it is in Linux on all currently supported architectures.
- The same goes for the `short` type, which is 16 bits on all current architectures, although no rule explicitly decrees that.
- Never assume the size of a pointer or a `long`, which can be either 32 or 64 bits on the currently supported machines in Linux.
- Because the size of a `long` varies on different architectures, *never assume that `sizeof(int)` is equal to `sizeof(long)`.*
- Likewise, do not assume that a pointer and an `int` are the same size.

## Opaque Types

Opaque data types do not reveal their internal format or structure. They are about as "black box" as you can get in C. There is not a lot of language support for them. Instead, developers declare a `typedef`, call it an opaque type, and hope no one typecasts it back to a standard C type. All use is generally through a special set of interfaces that the developer creates. An example is the `pid_t` type, which stores a process identification number. The actual size of this type is not revealed although anyone can cheat and take a peak and see that it is an `int`. If no code makes explicit use of this type's size, it can be changed without too much hassle. Indeed, this was once the case: In older Unix systems, `pid_t` was declared as `short`.

Another example of an opaque type is `atomic_t`. As discussed in [Chapter 9](#), "Kernel Synchronization Methods," this type holds an integer value that can be manipulated atomically. Although this type is an `int`, using the opaque type helps ensure that the data is used only in the special atomic operation functions. The opaque type also helps hide the size of the type, which was not always the full 32 bits because of architectural limitations on 32-bit SPARC.

Other examples of opaque types in the kernel include `dev_t`, `gid_t`, and `uid_t`.

Keep the following rules in mind when dealing with opaque types:

- Do not assume the size of the type.
- Do not convert the type back to a standard C type.
- Write your code so that the actual storage and format of the type can change.

## Special Types

Some data in the kernel, despite not being represented by an opaque type, requires a specific data type. Two examples are `jiffies` counts and the `flags` parameter used in interrupt control, both of which should always be stored in `unsigned long`.

When storing and manipulating specific data, always pay careful attention to the data type that represents the type and use it. It is a common mistake to store one of these values in another type, such as `unsigned int`. Although this will not result in a problem on 32-bit architectures, 64-bit machines will have trouble.

## Explicitly Sized Types

Often, as a programmer, you need explicitly sized data in your code. This is usually to match an external requirement, such as with hardware, networking, or binary files. For example, a sound card might have a 32-bit register, a networking packet might have a 16-bit

field, or an executable file might have an 8-bit cookie. In these cases, the data type that represents the data needs to be *exactly* the right size.

The kernel defines these explicitly sized data types in `<asm/types.h>`, which is included by `<linux/types.h>`. [Table 19.2](#) is a complete listing.

**Table 19.2. Explicitly-Sized Data Types**

| Type             | Description             |
|------------------|-------------------------|
| <code>s8</code>  | Signed byte             |
| <code>u8</code>  | Unsigned byte           |
| <code>s16</code> | Signed 16-bit integer   |
| <code>u16</code> | Unsigned 16-bit integer |
| <code>s32</code> | Signed 32-bit integer   |
| <code>u32</code> | Unsigned 32-bit integer |
| <code>s64</code> | Signed 64-bit integer   |
| <code>u64</code> | Unsigned 64-bit integer |

The signed variants are rarely used.

These explicit types are merely `typedefs` to standard C types. On a 64-bit machine, they may look like this:

```
typedef signed char s8;
typedef unsigned char u8;
typedef signed short s16;
typedef unsigned short u16;
typedef signed int s32;
typedef unsigned int u32;
typedef signed long s64;
typedef unsigned long u64;
```

On a 32-bit machine, however, they are probably defined as follows:

```
typedef signed char s8;
typedef unsigned char u8;
typedef signed short s16;
typedef unsigned short u16;
typedef signed int s32;
typedef unsigned int u32;
typedef signed long long s64;
typedef unsigned long long u64;
```

These types can be used only inside the kernel, in code that is never revealed to user-space (say, inside a user-visible structure in a header file). This is for reasons of namespace. The kernel also defines user-visible variants of these types, which are simply the same type prefixed by two underscores. For example, the unsigned 32-bit integer type that is safe to export to user-space is `_u32`. This type

is the same as `u32`; the only difference is the name. You can use either name inside the kernel, but if the type is user-visible you must use the underscored prefixed version to prevent polluting user-space's namespace.

## Signedness of Chars

The C standard says that the `char` data type can be either signed or unsigned. It is the responsibility of the compiler, the processor, or both to decide what the suitable default for the `char` type is.

On most architectures, `char` is signed by default and thus has a range from 128 to 127. On a few other architectures, such as ARM, `char` is unsigned by default and has a range from 0 to 255.

For example, on systems where `char` is by default unsigned, this code ends up storing 255 instead of 1 in:

```
char i = -1;
```

On other machines, where `char` is by default signed, this code correctly stores 1 in. If the programmer's intention is to store 1, the previous code should be

```
signed char i = -1;
```

And if the programmer really intends to store 255, then the code should read

```
unsigned char = 255;
```

If you use `char` in your code, assume it can be either a `signed char` or an `unsigned char`. If you need it to be explicitly one or the other, declare it as such.

## Data Alignment

*Alignment* refers to a piece of data's location in memory. A variable is *naturally aligned* if it exists at a memory address that is a multiple of its size. For example, a 32-bit type is naturally aligned if it is located in memory at an address that is a multiple of four (that is, its lowest two bits are zero). Thus, a data type with size  $2^N$  bytes must have an address with the least significant bits set to zero.

Some architectures have very stringent requirements on the alignment of data. On some systems, usually RISC-based ones, a load of unaligned data results in a processor trap (a handled error). On other systems, accessing unaligned data works, but results in a degradation of performance. When writing portable code, alignment issues must be avoided and all types should be naturally aligned.

## Avoiding Alignment Issues

The compiler generally prevents alignment issues by naturally aligning all data types. In fact, alignment issues are normally not major concerns of the kernel developersthe gcc folks have to worry about them. Issues arise, however, when the programmer plays too closely with pointers and accesses data outside the environment anticipated by the compiler.

Accessing an aligned address with a recast pointer of a larger-aligned address causes an alignment issue (whatever that might mean for a particular architecture). That is, this is bad news:

```
char dog[10];
char *p = &dog[1];
unsigned long l = *(unsigned long *)p;
```

This example treats the pointer to a `char` as a pointer to an `unsigned long`, which might result in the 32-bit `unsigned long` being loaded from an address that is not a multiple of four.

If you are thinking, "When in the world would I do this?" you are probably right. Nevertheless, it has come up, and it will again, so be careful. The real-world examples might not be so obvious.

## Alignment of Nonstandard Types

As mentioned, the aligned address of a standard data type is a multiple of the size of that data type. Nonstandard (complex) C types have the following alignment rules:

- The alignment of an array is the alignment of the base type (and thus, each element is further aligned correctly).
- The alignment of a `union` is the alignment of the largest included type.
- The alignment of a structure is the alignment of the largest included type.

Structures also introduce padding, which introduces other issues.

## Structure Padding

Structures are padded so that each element of the structure is naturally aligned. This ensures that when the processor accesses a given element in the structure, that element itself is aligned. For example, consider this structure on a 32-bit machine:

```
struct animal_struct {  
    char dog;          /* 1 byte */  
    unsigned long cat; /* 4 bytes */  
    unsigned short pig; /* 2 bytes */  
    char fox;          /* 1 byte */  
};
```

The structure is not laid out exactly like this in memory because the natural alignment of the structure's members is insufficient. Instead, the compiler creates the structure such that in memory, the **struct** resembles the following:

```
struct animal_struct {  
    char dog;          /* 1 byte */  
    u8 __pad0[3];     /* 3 bytes */  
    unsigned long cat; /* 4 bytes */  
    unsigned short pig; /* 2 bytes */  
    char fox;          /* 1 byte */  
    u8 __pad1;        /* 1 byte */  
};
```

The padding variables exist to ensure proper natural alignment. The first padding provides a 3-byte waste-of-space to place **cat** on a 4-byte boundary. This automatically aligns the remaining types because they are all smaller than **cat**. The second and final padding is to pad the size of the **struct** itself. The extra byte ensures the structure is a multiple of four, and thus each member of an array of this structure is naturally aligned.

Note that **sizeof(animal\_struct)** returns 12 for *either* of these structures on most 32-bit machines. The C compiler automatically adds this padding to ensure proper alignment.

You can often rearrange the order of members in a structure to obviate the need for padding. This gives you properly aligned data without the need for padding, and therefore a smaller structure:

```
struct animal_struct {  
    unsigned long cat; /* 4 bytes */  
    unsigned short pig; /* 2 bytes */  
    char dog;          /* 1 byte */  
    char fox;          /* 1 byte */  
};
```

This structure is only eight bytes in size. It might not always be possible to rearrange structure definitions, however. For example, if this structure was specified as part of a standard or already used in existing code, its order is set in stone, although such requirements are less common in the kernel (which lacks a formal ABI) than user-space. Often, you might want to use a specific order for other reasons for example, to best lay out variables to optimize cache behavior. Note that ANSI C specifies that the compiler itself must never change the order of members in a structure [5]. It is always up to you, the programmer. The compiler can help you out, however: The **Wpadded** flag instructs gcc to generate a warning whenever padding is added to a structure.

[5] If the compiler could arbitrarily change the order of items in a structure, any existing code using the structure would break. In C, functions calculate the location of variables in a structure simply by adding offsets to the base address of the structure.

Kernel developers need to be aware of structure padding when using structures wholesale that is, when sending them out over the network or when saving a structure directly to disk, because the required padding might differ among various architectures. This is one reason C does not have a native structure comparison operator. The padding in a structure might contain gibberish, and it is not possible to do a byte-by-byte comparison of one structure to another. The C designers (correctly) felt it is best for the programmer to write a comparison function for each unique situation, to take advantage of the structure's layout.

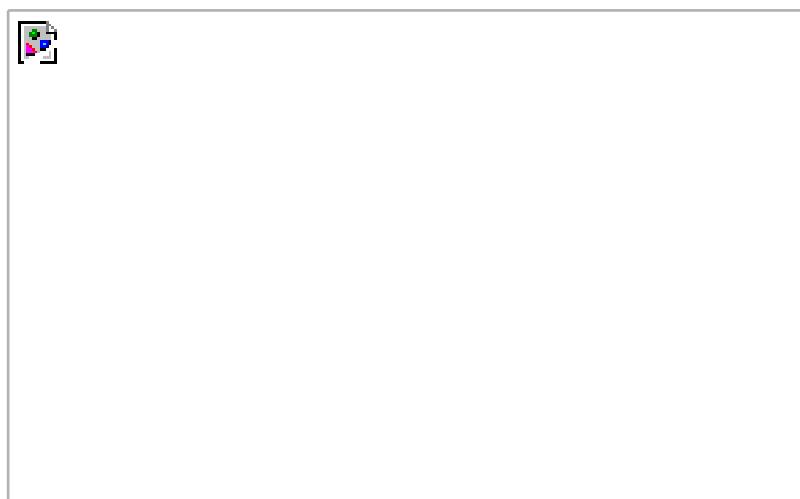
## Byte Order

*Byte ordering* is the order of bytes within a word. Processors can number the bytes in a word such that the least significant bit is either the first (left-most) or last (right-most) value in the word. The byte ordering is called *big-endian* if the most significant byte is encoded first, with the remaining bytes decreasing in significance. The byte ordering is called *little-endian* if the least significant byte is encoded first, with the remaining bytes growing in significance.

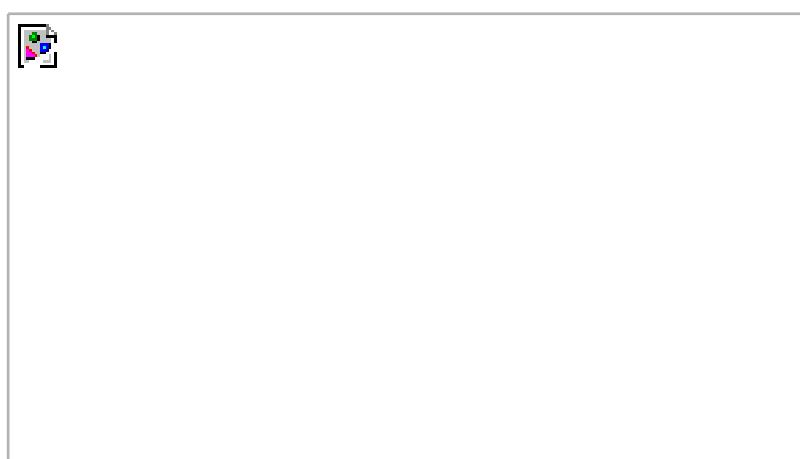
Do not ever assume any given byte ordering when writing kernel code (unless you are writing code for a specific architecture, of course). The Linux kernel supports machines of both byte orders including machines that can select from either ordering upon boot and generic code must be compatible with either.

[Figure 19.1](#) is an example of a big-endian byte ordering. [Figure 19.2](#) is an example of a little-endian byte ordering.

**Figure 19.1. Big-endian byte ordering.**



**Figure 19.2. Little-endian byte ordering.**





The i386 architecture is little-endian. Most other architectures are big-endian.

Let's look at what this encoding means in practice. Consider the number 1027, stored as a four-byte integer in binary:

00000000 00000000 00000100 00000011

The internal storage in memory is different on big- versus little-endian, as shown in [Table 19.3](#).

**Table 19.3. Explicitly-Sized Data Types**

| Address | Big Endian | Little Endian |
|---------|------------|---------------|
| 0       | 00000000   | 00000011      |
| 1       | 00000000   | 00000100      |
| 2       | 00000100   | 00000000      |
| 3       | 00000011   | 00000000      |

Notice how the big-endian architecture stores the most significant bytes in its smallest address. This is the exact inverse of little-endian.

As a final example, here is a simple code snippet to test whether a given architecture is big- or little-endian:

```
int x = 1;  
  
if (*(char *)&x == 1)  
    /* little endian */  
else  
    /* big endian */
```

This works either in user-space or inside the kernel.

## History of Big- and Little-Endian

The terms *big-endian* and *little-endian* derive from Jonathan Swift's 1726 satirical novel, *Gulliver's Travels*. In the novel, the fictional Lilliputians' major political issue is whether eggs should be cracked open on the big end or the little end. Those who favor the big end are big-endians, whereas those who favor the small are little-endians.

The similarity between the Lilliputians and our big-endian versus little-endian debate is that the argument is rooted deeper in politics than technical merits.

## Byte Ordering in the Kernel

Each supported architecture in Linux defines one of `__BIG_ENDIAN` or `__LITTLE_ENDIAN` in `<asm/byteorder.h>` in correspondence to the machine's byte order.

This header file also includes a family of macros from `include/linux/byteorder/`, which help with conversions to and from the various orderings. The most commonly needed macros are

```
u23 __cpu_to_be32(u32); /* convert cpu's byte order to big-endian */  
u32 __cpu_to_le32(u32); /* convert cpu's byte order to little-endian */  
u32 __be32_to_cpu(u32); /* convert big-endian to cpu's byte order */  
u32 __le32_to_cpus(u32); /* convert little-endian to cpu's byte order */
```

These convert from one byte order to another. In the case that the orders are the same (for example, if converting from native ordering to big-endian, and the processor is big-endian), the macros do nothing. Otherwise, they return the converted value.

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## Time

Never assume the frequency of the timer interrupt or the number of jiffies per second. Instead, always use `HZ` to scale your units of time correctly. This is very important because not only can the timer frequency differ among the various architectures, but it can also change on a given architecture from one kernel release to the next.

For example, `HZ` is 1000 on the x86 platforms. That is, the timer interrupt occurs 1000 times per second, or every millisecond. Before 2.6, however, `HZ` was 100 on x86. On other architectures, the value differs: Alpha has `HZ` equal to 1024 and ARM has it equal to 100.

Never simply compare `jiffies` to a number such as 1000 and assume that always means the same thing. To scale time appropriately, multiply or divide by `HZ`. For example:

```
HZ      /* one second */  
(2*HZ)  /* two seconds */  
(HZ/2)  /* half a second */  
(HZ/100) /* 10 ms */  
(2*HZ/100) /* 20 ms */
```

`HZ` is defined in `<asm/param.h>`. The subject is discussed further in [Chapter 10](#), "Timers and Time Management."

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## Page Size

When working with pages of memory, never assume the page size. It is a common mistake for x86 programmers to assume that the page size is 4KB. Although this is true on x86 machines, other architectures have different sizes. Some architectures support multiple page sizes, in fact! [Table 19.4](#) lists each support architecture's valid page size(s).

**Table 19.4. Architecture Page Size(s)**

| Architecture | PAGE_SHIFT     | PAGE_SIZE            |
|--------------|----------------|----------------------|
| alpha        | 13             | 8KB                  |
| arm          | 12, 14, 15     | 4KB, 16KB, 32KB      |
| cris         | 13             | 8KB                  |
| h8300        | 12             | 4KB                  |
| i386         | 12             | 4KB                  |
| ia64         | 12, 13, 14, 16 | 4KB, 8KB, 16KB, 64KB |
| m32r         | 12             | 4KB                  |
| m68k         | 12, 13         | 4KB, 8KB             |
| m68knommu    | 12             | 4KB                  |
| mips         | 12             | 4KB                  |
| mips64       | 12             | 4KB                  |
| parisc       | 12             | 4KB                  |
| ppc          | 12             | 4KB                  |
| ppc64        | 12             | 4KB                  |
| s390         | 12             | 4KB                  |
| sh           | 12             | 4KB                  |
| sparc        | 12, 13         | 4KB, 8KB             |
| sparc64      | 13             | 8KB                  |
| v850         | 12             | 4KB                  |
| x86_64       | 12             | 4KB                  |

When working with pages of memory, use **PAGE\_SIZE** as the size of a page, in bytes. The value**PAGE\_SHIFT** is the number of bits to

left-shift an address to get its page number. For example, on x86 with 4KB pages, **PAGE\_SIZE** is 4096 and **PAGE\_SHIFT** is 12. These values are defined in `<asm/page.h>`.

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## Processor Ordering

Recall from [Chapter 9](#) that architectures have varying degrees of processor ordering. Some have very strict ordering constraints in which all loads and stores occur in the order prescribed by the code. Other chips have very weak ordering and loads and stores are reordered as the processor sees fit.

In your code, if you depend on data ordering, ensure that even the weakest ordered processor commits your load and stores in the right order by using the appropriate barriers, such as `rmb()` and `wmb()`. [Chapter 9](#) has more information.

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## SMP, Kernel Preemption, and High Memory

It might seem somewhat incorrect to include symmetrical multiprocessing, kernel preemption, and high memory in a discussion of portability. After all, these are not machine characteristics that affect an operating system, but instead they are features of the Linux kernel that are indeed somewhat architecture-agnostic. They represent, however, important configuration options that you should always assume are available in your code. That is, always program for an SMP/preempt/highmem system and you will always be safe, in any configuration. In addition to the previous portability rules, you need to follow these as well:

- Always assume your code will run on an SMP system and use appropriate locking.
- Always assume your code will run with kernel preemption enabled and use appropriate locking and kernel preemption statements.
- Always assume your code will run on a system with high memory (non-permanently mapped memory) and use `kmap()` as needed.

## Portability Is Fun

In short, writing portable, clean, proper code has two major implications:

- Always code for the highest common factor: Assume anything can happen and any potential constraint is in place.
- Always assume that only the lowest common denominator is available: Do not assume any given kernel feature is available and require only the minimum architectural features.

Writing portable code requires awareness of many issues, including wordsize, data type size, alignment, byte order, page size, processor ordering. In the large majority of kernel programming, the primary concern is only ensuring that data types are used correctly. Nonetheless, one day an archaic architecture issue will arise, so it is important to understand portability issues and always write clean, portable code inside the kernel.

## Endnotes

1.

This is a common occurrence in Linux kernel development. If something is going to be done at all, it should be done right! Kernel developers are not averse to rewriting large amounts of code in the name of perfection.

2.

However, the actual addressable memory may be less than the word size. For example, although a 64-bit architecture might have 64-bit pointers, only 48 bits may be usable and addressable. In addition, the total physical memory may be larger than the word size, thanks to things such as Intel's PAE.

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## Chapter 20. Patches, Hacking, and the Community

One of the greatest benefits of Linux is the large community of users and developers that surround it. The community provides eyes to check your code and users to test and report issues. Additionally, the community ultimately decides what code is accepted into the kernel. Understanding how everything works is very important.

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## The Community

If the Linux kernel community had to exist somewhere physically, it would call the *Linux Kernel Mailing List* home. The Linux Kernel Mailing List (or, as the regulars abbreviate it, just *lkml*) is the location of the majority of the announcements, discussions, debates, and flame wars over the kernel. New features are discussed and most code is posted to the list before any action is taken. The list sees upward of 300 messages a day, so it is not for the faint of heart. Subscribing (or at least reading a digest or the archives) is recommended for anyone interested in serious kernel development. You can learn a lot simply by watching the wizards at work.

You can subscribe by sending the message:

**subscribe linux-kernel <your@email.address>**

in plain text to [majordomo@vger.kernel.org](mailto:majordomo@vger.kernel.org). More information can be had at <http://vger.kernel.org/> and a FAQ is available at <http://www.tux.org/lkml/>.

Numerous websites and other mailing lists pertain to the kernel specifically and Linux in general. An excellent resource for beginning kernel hackers is <http://www.kernelnewbies.org>/a website that, of all things, caters to those cutting their teeth on the kernel. Two other excellent sources of kernel information include <http://www.lwn.net/>, Linux Weekly News, which has a great kernel news section, and <http://www.kerneltraffic.org/>, Kernel Traffic, which includes a summary of the previous week's lkml emails with insightful commentary.

## Linux Coding Style

The Linux Kernel, like any large software project, has a defined coding style that stipulates the formatting, style, and layout of your code. This is done not because the Linux kernel style is superior (although it might be) or because your style is illegible (although it might well be), but because *consistency* of coding style is crucial to *productivity* in coding. Yet, it is often argued that coding style is irrelevant because it does not affect the compiled object code. In a large project, such as the kernel, in which many developers are involved, consistency of coding style is crucial. Consistency implies familiarity, which leads to ease of reading, lack of confusion, and further expectations that code will continue to follow a given style. This increases the number of developers who can read your code, and the amount of code you can read. In an open-source project, the more eyes the better.

It is not so important *what* style is chosen as long as one is indeed selected and used exclusively. Fortunately, Linus long ago laid out the style we should use and most code sticks to it. The majority of the style is covered in Linus's usual humor in the file [Documentation/CodingStyle](#) in the kernel source tree.

## Indentation

The kernel style for indentation is to use tabs that are eight characters in length. This does not mean it is okay to use eight spaces for indentation or four spaces or anything else. It means each level of indentation is a tab from the previous, and a tab is eight characters. For an unknown reason, this rule is one of the most commonly broken, despite its very high impact on readability. Eight-character tabs make clearly identifying indentation of different code blocks magnitudes easier after hours of hacking.

## Braces

Brace placement is personal, and few technical reasons exist for one convention over the other, but we have to agree on something. The accepted kernel style is to put the opening brace on the first line, at the end of the statement. The closing brace goes on a new line as the first character. Example:

```
if (fox) {  
    dog();  
    cat();  
}
```

Note that the closing brace is not on a line by itself when the following token is a continuation of the same statement. For example:

```
if (fox) {  
    ant();  
    pig();  
} else {  
    dog();  
    cat();  
}
```

And,

```
do {
    dog();
    cat();
} while(fox);
```

This rule is broken for functions, because functions cannot nest inside functions:

```
unsigned long func(void)
{
    /* ... */
}
```

Finally, statements that do not *need* braces can omit them. For example, the following is acceptable:

```
if (foo)
    bar();
```

The logic behind all this is *K&R*.<sup>[1]</sup>

<sup>[1]</sup> *The C Programming Language*, by Brian Kernighan and Dennis Ritchie (Prentice Hall, ISBN# 0-13-11-362-8), nicknamed K&R, is the bible of C, written by C's author and his colleague.

## Line Size

Code in the kernel, as much as possible, should be kept to fewer than 80 character lines in length. This allows code to fit length-wise on a standard 80x24 terminal.

There is no accepted standard on what to do in cases where code absolutely must wrap 80 lines. Some developers just allow the line to wrap, letting their editor handle the chore of displaying the code in a readable fashion. Other developers break up the lines, manually inserting line breaks where appropriate, perhaps starting each new line two tab stops over from the original.

Similarly, some developers line up function parameters that wrap lines with the open parenthesis. For example

```
static void get_pirate_parrot(const char *name,
                             unsigned long disposition,
                             unsigned long feather_quality)
```

Other developers break up the lines but do not line the parameters up, instead using a standard two tabs, for example

```
int find_pirate_flag_by_color(const char *color,
                            const char *name, int len)
```

As there is no definitive rule in this case, the choice is left up to you, the developer.

## Naming

No name should have mixed case. Calling a local variable `idx` or even `justi` is perfectly fine if it is clear what it does. A cute name such as `theLoopIndex` is unacceptable. Hungarian notation (encoding the variable type in the variable name) is evil and should never ever be used this is C, not Java; Unix, not Windows.

Nonetheless, global variables and functions should have very descriptive names. Calling a global function `atty()` is confusing; something like `get_active_tty()` is much more acceptable. This is Linux, not BSD.

## Functions

As a rule of thumb, functions should not exceed one or two screens of text and should have fewer than ten local variables. A function should do one thing and do it well. There is no harm in breaking a function into a series of smaller functions. If you are worried about function call overhead, use `inline`.

## Comments

Commenting your code is very important, but the commenting must be done correctly. Generally, you want to describe *what* and *why* your code is doing what it is doing, not *how* it is doing it. The *how* should be apparent from the code itself. If not, maybe you need to rethink what you wrote. Additionally, comments should not include who wrote a function, the modification date, or other trivial nonsense. Such information is generally acceptable at the top of the source file, however.

The kernel uses C-style comments, even though `gcc` supports C++-style comments, too. The general style of a comment in the kernel resembles:

```
/*
 * get_ship_speed() - return the current speed of the pirate ship
 * We need this to calculate the ship coordinates. As this function can sleep,
 * do not call while holding a lock.
 */
```

In comments, important notes are often prefixed with "`XXX:`", and bugs are often prefixed with "`FIXME:`" like so:

```
/*
 * FIXME: We assume dog == cat which may not be true in the future
 */
```

The kernel has a facility for self-generating documentation. It is based on GNOME-doc, but slightly modified and renamed Kernel-doc. To create the standalone documentation in HTML format, run:

```
make htmldocs
```

Or, for postscript,

`make psdocs`

You can use the system to document your functions by following a special format for your comments:

```
/**  
 * find_treasure find 'X marks the spot'  
 * @map treasure map  
 * @time time the treasure was hidden  
 *  
 * Must call while holding the pirate_ship_lock.  
 */  
void find_treasure(int map, struct timeval *time)  
{  
/* ... */  
}
```

For more information, see [Documentation/kernel-doc-nano-HOWTO.txt](#).

## Typedefs

For various reasons, the kernel developers have a certain hatred for `typedef` that almost defies explanation. Their rationale is

- `typedef` hides the real type of data structures.
- Because the type is hidden, code is more prone to do bad things, such as pass a structure by value on the stack.
- `typedef` is just being lazy.

Therefore, to avoid ridicule, avoid `typedef`.

Of course, there are a few good uses of `typedefs`: hiding an architecture-specific implementation of a variable or providing forward compatibility when a type may change. Decide carefully whether the `typedef` is truly needed or exists just to reduce the number of characters you need to type.

## Using What Is Already Provided

*Do not reinvent the wheel.* The kernel provides string manipulation functions, compression routines, and a linked list interface, so use them.

Do not wrap existing interfaces in generic interfaces. Often you see code that was obviously ported from one operating system to Linux, and various kernel interfaces are wrapped in some gross glue function. No one likes this, so just use the provided interfaces directly.

## No ifdefs in the Source

Putting `#ifdef` preprocessor directives directly in the C source is frowned upon. You should never do something like the following in your functions:

```
...
#ifndef CONFIG_FOO
    foo();
#endif
...
```

Instead, define `foo()` to nothing if `CONFIG_FOO` is not set:

```
#ifdef CONFIG_FOO
static int foo(void)
{
    /* .. */
}
#else
static inline int foo(void) { }
#endif
```

Then, you can unconditionally call `foo()`. Let the compiler do the work for you.

## Structure Initializers

Labeled identifiers need to be used to initialize structures. This is good because it prevents structure changes from resulting in incorrect initialization. It also enables values to be omitted. Unfortunately, C99 adopted quite an ugly format for labeled identifiers, and `gcc` is deprecating usage of the previous GNU-style labeled identifier, which was rather handsome. Consequently, kernel code needs to use the new C99 labeled identifier format, however ugly it is:

```
struct foo my_foo = {
    .a = INITIAL_A,
    .b = INITIAL_B,
};
```

In this code, `a` and `b` are members of `struct foo` and `INITIAL_A` and `INITIAL_B` are their initialized values, respectively. If a field is not set, it is set to its default value per ANSI C (e.g., pointers are `NULL`, integers are zero, and floats are 0.0). For example, if `struct foo` also has `int c` as a member, the previous statement would initialize `c` to zero.

Yes, it is ugly. No, we do not have a choice.

## Fixing Code Up Ex Post Facto

If a pile of code falls into your lap that fails to even mildly resemble the Linux kernel coding style, do not fret. A little elbow grease and the `indent(1)` utility will make everything perfect. The `indent` program, an excellent GNU utility found on most Linux systems, formats source according to given rules. The default settings are for the GNU coding style, which is not too pretty. To get the utility to follow the Linux kernel style, do

```
indent -kr -i8 -ts8 -sob -l80 -ss -bs -psl <file>
```

This instructs the utility to format the code according to the kernel coding style. Alternatively, the script `scripts/Lindent` automatically invokes `indent` with the desired options.

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## Chain of Command

Kernel hackers are the developers who work on the kernel. Some do it for pay, some as a hobby, but nearly all for fun. Kernel hackers with significant contributions are listed in the **CREDITS** file in the root of the kernel source tree.

Most parts of the kernel have an associated *maintainer*. The maintainer is the individual (or individuals) who is in charge of specific parts of the kernel. For example, each individual driver has an associated maintainer. Each kernel subsystem for example, networking also has an associated maintainer. The maintainer for a specific driver or subsystem is usually listed in the file **MAINTAINERS**, which is also located in the root of the kernel source tree.

There is a special type of maintainer, known as the kernel maintainer. This individual actually maintains the kernel tree itself. Historically, Linus maintains the development kernel (where the real fun is) and the stable kernel for some period after development ends. Shortly after a development kernel becomes a stable kernel, Linus passes the torch to one of the top kernel developers. That developer continues to maintain the tree while Linus begins work on the new development tree. In this fashion, the 2.0, 2.2, and 2.4 kernels are still actively maintained.

Despite the rumors, there is *no* cabal. Really.

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## Submitting Bug Reports

If you encounter a bug, the best course of action is to write a fix, create a patch, test it, and submit it as discussed in the following sections. Of course, you can also report the problem and get someone to fix it for you.

The most important part of submitting a bug report is fully describing the problem. Describe the symptoms, any system output, and a fully decoded oops (if there is an oops). More importantly, if you can, provide steps to reliably reproduce the problem and a brief description of your hardware.

Determining to whom to send the bug report is the next step. The file **MAINTAINERS** lists the individuals associated with each driver and subsystem they should receive any issues related to the code they maintain. If you cannot find an interested party, send the report to the Linux Kernel Mailing List at [linux-kernel@vger.kernel.org](mailto:linux-kernel@vger.kernel.org). Even if you do find a maintainer, carbon copying the kernel mailing list never hurts.

The files **REPORTING-BUGS** and **Documentation/oops-tracing.txt** provide more information.

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## Generating Patches

All changes to the Linux kernel are distributed in the form of patches, which are the output of the GNU `diff(1)` program in a form that is readable by the `patch(1)` program. The simplest way to generate a patch is to have two source trees, one that is the vanilla stock kernel and another that is the stock tree with your modifications. A common scheme is to name the stock tree `linux-x.y.z` (which is what the source tarball extracts to, initially) and to name your modified tree simply `linux`. Then, to generate a patch of the two trees, issue the command

```
diff -urN linux-x.y.z/ linux/ > my-patch
```

from one directory below your trees. This is typically done somewhere in your home, and not `/usr/src/linux`, so that you do not need to be root. The `-u` flag specifies that the unified diff format should be used. Without this, the patch is ugly and not very readable by humans. The `-r` flag specifies to recursively diff all directories, and the `-N` flag specifies that new files in the modified tree should be included in the diff. Alternatively, if you need to diff only a single file, you can do

```
diff -u linux-x.y.z/some/file linux/some/file > my-patch
```

Note that it is important to always diff the trees from one directory below your source trees. This creates a patch that is very usable by others, even if their directory names differ. To apply a patch made in this format, do

```
patch -p1 < ./my-patch
```

from the root of your source tree. In this example, the patch is named `my_patch` and is created one directory below the current. The `-p1` flag specifies that the first directory name is to be stripped from the patch. This enables you to apply a patch regardless of the directory-naming convention used by the patch maker.

A useful utility is `diffstat`, which generates a histogram of a patch's changes (line additions and removals). To generate the output on one of your patches, do

```
diffstat -p1 my-patch
```

It is often useful to include this output when you post a patch to lkml. Because the `patch(1)` program ignores all lines until a diff is detected, you can even include a short description at the top of the patch itself.

## Submitting Patches

Patches should be generated as described in the previous section. If the patch touches a specific driver or subsystem, the patch should be sent to the maintainer listed in **MAINTAINER**. Either way, the Linux Kernel Mailing List at [linux-kernel@vger.kernel.org](mailto:linux-kernel@vger.kernel.org) should be carbon copied. The patch should be sent to the kernel maintainer (for example, Linus) only after extensive discussion, or if the patch is trivial and clearly correct.

Typically, the subject line of the email containing the patch is of the form "*[PATCH] brief description*". The body of the email describes in technical detail the changes your patch makes and the rationale behind them. Be as specific as possible. Somewhere in the email, note the kernel version against which the patch was created.

Most kernel developers want to be able to read your patch inline with your email and optionally save the whole thing to a single file. Consequently, it is best to insert the patch directly inline in the email, at the end of your message. Be aware that some evil email clients might wrap lines or otherwise change formatting; this will break the patch and annoy developers. If your email client does this, see whether it has an "Insert Inline," "Preformat," or similar feature. Otherwise, attaching the patch as plain text without encoding works, too.

If your patch is large or contains several logical changes, you should break the patch into chunks, with each chunk representing a logical change. For example, if you both introduce a new API and change a handful of drivers to use it, you can break the changes into two patches (the new API and then the driver changeover) and two emails. If any chunk requires a previous patch, explicitly state that.

After posting, remain patient and wait for a reply. Do not be discouraged by any negative response at least you got a response! Discuss the issues and provide updated patches as needed. If you fail to receive *any* response, try to discover what was wrong and resolve the issues. Solicit additional comments from the mailing list and maintainer. With luck, you may see your changes in the next kernel release congratulations!

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## Conclusion

The most important quality of any hacker is desire and drivean itch to scratch, and the determination to scratch it. This book provided a tour of key parts of the kernel, discussing interfaces, data structures, algorithms, and rationale. It provided an insider's view of the kernel, in a practical fashion, to satisfy your curiosity or get you off the ground running in your kernel endeavors.

As I have said before, however, the only way to start is by *reading* and *writing* code. Linux provides a community that not only allows but also *encourages* both activities, whatever your pursuit, so get on that!

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## Appendix A. Linked Lists

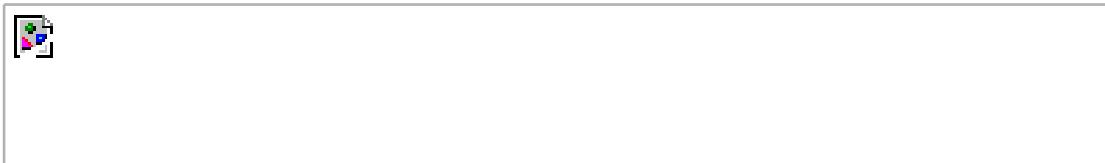
A *linked list* is a data structure that allows the storage and manipulation of a variable number of nodes of data. Unlike a static array, the elements in a linked list are dynamically created. This enables the creation of a variable number of elements that are unknown at compile time. Because the elements are created at different times, they do not necessarily occupy contiguous regions in memory. Therefore, the elements need to be *linked* together, so each element contains a pointer to the next element. As elements are added or removed from the list, the pointer to the next node is simply adjusted.

The simplest data structure representing such a linked list would look similar to the following:

```
/* an element in a linked list */
struct list_element {
    void *data;           /* the payload */
    struct list_element *next; /* pointer to the next element */
};
```

[Figure A.1](#) is a linked list.

**Figure A.1. A singly linked list.**



In some linked lists, each element also contains a pointer to the previous element. These lists are called *doubly linked lists* because they are linked both forward and backward. Linked lists, similar to the one in [Figure A.1](#), that do not have a pointer to the previous element are called *singly linked lists*.

A data structure representing a doubly linked list would look similar to this:

```
/* an element in a linked list */
struct list_element {
    void *data;           /* the payload */
    struct list_element *next; /* pointer to the next element */
    struct list_element *prev; /* pointer to the previous element */
};
```

[Figure A.2](#) is a doubly linked list.

**Figure A.2. A doubly linked list.**



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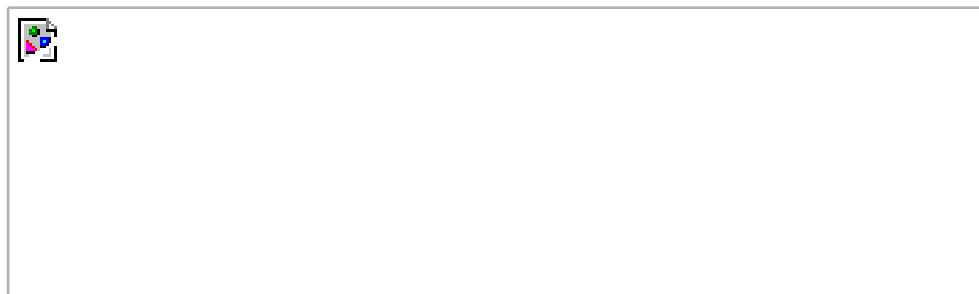
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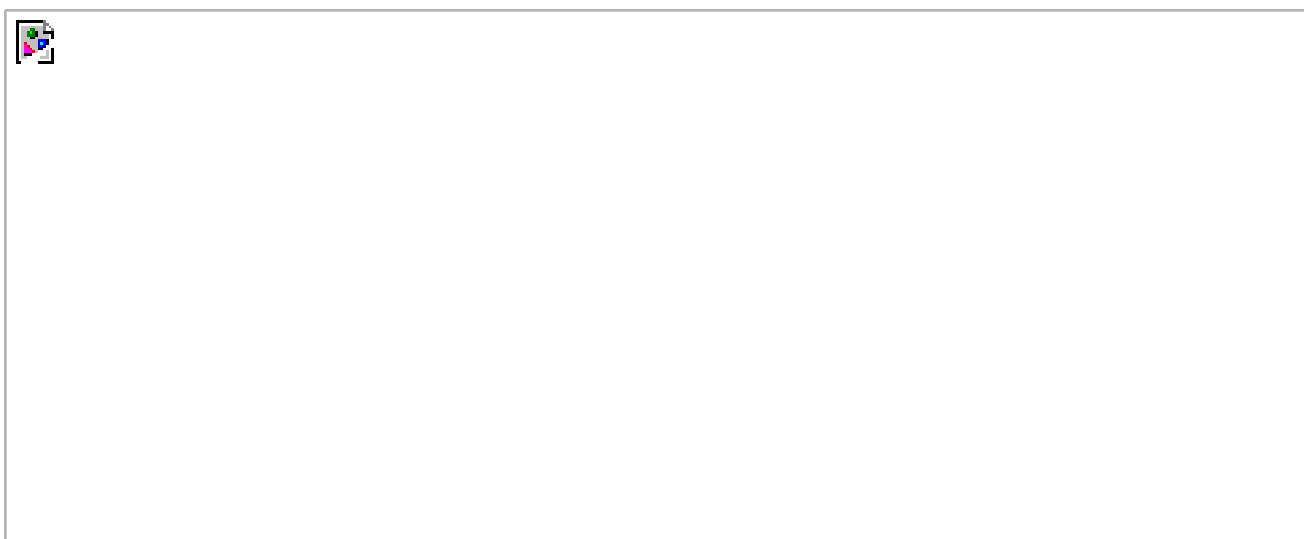
## Circular Linked Lists

Normally, because the last element in a linked list has no next element, it is set to point to a special value, usually **NULL**, to indicate it is the last element in the list. In some linked lists, the last element does *not* point to a special value. Instead, it points back to the first value. This linked list is called a *circular linked list* because the links are cyclic. Circular linked lists can come in both doubly and singly linked versions. In a circular doubly linked list, the first node's "previous" pointer points to the last node. [Figures A.3](#) and [A.4](#) are singly and doubly circular linked lists, respectively.

**Figure A.3. A circular singly linked list.**



**Figure A.4. A circular doubly linked list.**



The Linux kernel's standard linked list implementation is a *circular doubly linked list*. Going with this type of linked list provides the greatest flexibility.

## Moving Through a Linked List

Movement through a linked list occurs linearly. You visit one element, follow the next pointer, and visit the next element. Rinse and repeat. This is the easiest method of moving through a linked list, and the one by which linked lists are best suited. Linked lists are usually not used when random access is an important goal. Instead, you use linked lists when iterating over the whole list is important and the dynamic addition and removal of elements is required.

Often the first element is represented by a special pointer called the *head* that makes it quick and easy to find. In a noncircular-linked list, the last element is delineated by its next pointer being **NULL**. In a circular-linked list, the last element is delineated by the fact that it points to the head element. Traversing the list, therefore, occurs linearly through each element from the first to the last. In a doubly linked list, movement can also occur backward, linearly from the last element to the first. Of course, given a specific element in the list, you can go back and forth any number of elements, too. You need not traverse the whole list.

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## The Linux Kernel's Implementation

The Linux kernel has a unique approach to traversing linked lists. When traversing a linked list, unless ordering is important, it does not matter if you start at the head element; in fact, it doesn't matter *where* you start at all! All that matters is that you visit each and every node. Indeed, we do not even need the concept of a first and last node. If a circular linked list simply contains a collection of unordered data, *any* element can be the head element. To traverse the list, simply pick an element and follow the pointers until you get back to the original element. This removes the need for a special head pointer. Additionally, the routines for manipulating a linked list are simplified. Each routine simply needs a pointer to a single element in the list *any* element. The kernel hackers are particularly proud of this clever implementation.

Linked lists in the kernel, as with any complex program, are common. For example, the kernel uses a linked list to store the task list: Each process's `task_struct` is an element in the linked list.

## The Linked-List Structure

In the old days, there were multiple implementations of linked lists in the kernel. A single, powerful linked list implementation was needed to remove duplicate code. During the 2.1 kernel development series, the official kernel linked-list implementation was introduced. All existing uses of linked lists now use the official implementation: *All new users must use the existing interface, we are serious about this, do not reinvent the wheel.*

The linked-list code is declared in `<linux/list.h>` and the data structure is simple:

```
struct list_head {  
    struct list_head *next  
    struct list_head *prev;  
};
```

Note the curious name, `list_head`. The name takes a cue from the fact that there is no head node. Instead, because the list can be traversed starting with any given element, each element is in effect a head. Thus, the individual nodes are all called *list heads*.

The `next` pointer points to the next element in the list and the `prev` pointer points to the previous element. Thanks to the kernel's elegant list implementation with no concept of start or finish, you can ignore any concept of *first* and *last* element. Consider the list a big cycle with no start or finish.

A `list_head` by itself is worthless; it is normally embedded inside your own structure:

```
struct my_struct {  
    struct list_head list;  
    unsigned long dog;  
    void *cat;  
};
```

The list needs to be initialized before it can be used. Because most of the elements are created dynamically (probably why you need a linked list), the most common way of initializing the linked list is at runtime:

```
struct my_struct *p;  
/* allocate my_struct .. */  
p->dog = 0;  
p->cat = NULL;  
INIT_LIST_HEAD(&p->list);
```

If the structure is statically created at compile time, and you have a direct reference to it, you can simply do this:

```
struct my_struct mine = {  
    .list = LIST_HEAD_INIT(mine.list),  
    .dog = 0,  
    .cat = NULL  
};
```

To declare and initialize a static list directly, use

```
static LIST_HEAD(fox);
```

This declares and initializes a static list named fox.

You should never actually need to play with the internal members of the linked list. Instead, just embed the structure in your data, and you can make use of the linked list interface to easily manipulate and traverse your data.

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## Manipulating Linked Lists

A family of functions is provided to manipulate linked lists. They all take pointers to one or more `list_head` structures. The functions are implemented as inlines in generic C and can be found in `<linux/list.h>`.

Interestingly, all these functions are  $O(1)$ <sup>[1]</sup>. This means they execute inconstant time, regardless of the size of the list or any other inputs. For example, it takes the same amount of time to add or remove an entry to or from a list whether that list has 3 or 3,000 entries. This is perhaps not surprising, but still good to know.

[1] See [Appendix C](#) for an overview of algorithmic complexity.

To add a node to a linked list:

```
list_add(struct list_head *new, struct list_head *head)
```

This function adds the `new` node to the given list immediately *after* the `head` node. Because the list is circular and generally has no concept of *first* or *last* nodes, you can pass any element for `head`. If you do pass the "last" element, however, this function can be used to implement a stack.

To add a node to the end of a linked list:

```
list_add_tail(struct list_head *new, struct list_head *head)
```

This function adds the `new` node to the given list immediately *before* the `head` node. As with `list_add()`, because the lists are circular you can generally pass any element for `head`. This function can be used to implement a queue, however, if you do indeed pass the "first" element.

To delete a node from a linked list,

```
list_del(struct list_head *entry)
```

This function removes the element `entry` from the list. Note, it does not free any memory belonging to `entry` or the data structure in which it is embedded; this function merely removes the element from the list. After calling this, you would typically destroy your data structure and the `list_head` inside it.

To delete a node from a linked list and reinitialize it,

```
list_del_init(struct list_head *entry)
```

This function is the same as `list_del()`, except it also reinitializes the given `list_head` with the rationale that you no longer want the entry in the list, but you can reuse the data structure itself.

To move a node from one list to another,

```
list_move(struct list_head *list, struct list_head *head)
```

This function removes the `list` entry from its linked list and adds it to the given list *after* the `head` element.

To move a node from one list to the end of another,

```
list_move_tail(struct list_head *list, struct list_head *head)
```

This function does the same as `list_move()`, but inserts the `list` element *before* the `head` entry.

To check if a list is empty,

```
list_empty(struct list_head *head)
```

This returns nonzero if the given list is empty; otherwise it returns zero.

To splice two unconnected list together:

```
list_splice(struct list_head *list, struct list_head *head)
```

This function splices together two lists by inserting the list pointed to by `list` to the given list after the element `head`.

To splice two unconnected lists together and reinitialize the old list,

```
list_splice_init(struct list_head *list, struct list_head *head)
```

This function works the same as `list_splice()`, except that the emptied list pointed to by `list` is reinitialized.

## Saving a Couple Dereferences

If you happen to already have the `next` and `prev` pointers available, you can save a couple cycles (specifically, the dereferences to get the pointers) by calling the internal list functions directly. Every previously discussed function actually does nothing except find the `next` and `prev` pointers and then call the internal functions. The internal functions generally have the same name as their wrappers, except they are prefixed by double underscores. For example, rather than call `list_del(list)`, you can call `__list_del(prev, next)`. This is useful only if the next and previous pointers are *already* dereferenced. Otherwise, you are just writing ugly code. See [`<linux/list.h>`](#) for the exact interfaces.

## Traversing Linked Lists

Now you know how to declare, initialize, and manipulate a linked list in the kernel. This is all very well and good, but it is meaningless if you have no way to access your data! The linked lists are just containers that hold your important data; you need a way to use lists to move around and access the actual structures that contain the data. The kernel (thank goodness) provides a very nice set of interfaces for traversing linked lists and referencing the data structures that include them.

Note that, unlike the list manipulation routines, iterating over a linked list in its entirety is clearly an  $O(n)$  operation, for  $n$  entries in the list.

The simplest way to iterate over a list is with the `list_for_each()` macro. The macro takes two parameters, both `list_head` structures. The first is a pointer used to point to the current entry; it is a temporary variable that you must provide. The second is a `list_head` in the list you want to traverse. On each iteration of the loop, the first parameter points to the next entry in the list, until each entry has been visited. Usage is as follows:

```
struct list_head *p;

list_for_each(p, list) {
    /* p points to an entry in the list */
}
```

Well, that is still worthless! A pointer to the list structure is usually no good; what we need is a pointer to the structure that contains the list. For example, with the previous `my_struct` example, we want a pointer to each `my_struct`, not a pointer to the `list` member in the structure. The macro `list_entry()` is provided, which returns the structure that contains a given `list_head`. It takes three parameters: a pointer to the given element, the type of structure in which the list is embedded, and the member name of the list within that structure.

Consider the following example:

```
struct list_head *p;
struct my_struct *my;

list_for_each(p, &mine->list) {
    /* my points to the structure in which the list is embedded */
    my = list_entry(p, struct my_struct, list);
}
```

The `list_for_each()` macro expands to a simple `for` loop. For example, the previous use expands to

```
for (p = mine->list->next; p != mine->list; p = p->next)
```

The `list_for_each()` macro also uses processor prefetching, if the processor supports such a feature, to prefetch subsequent entries into memory before they are actually referenced. Prefetching improves memory bus utilization on modern pipelined processors. To *not* perform prefetching, the macro `_list_for_each()` works just identically to this `for` loop. Unless you know the list is very small or empty, you should always use the prefetching version. You should never hand code the loop; always use the provided macros.

If you need to iterate through the list backward, you can use `list_for_each_prev()`, which follows the `prev` pointers instead of the `next` pointer.

Note that nothing prevents removal of list entries from the list while you are traversing it. Normally, the list needs some sort of lock to prevent concurrent access. The macro `list_for_each_safe()`, however, uses temporary storage to make traversing the list safe from removals:

```
struct list_head *p, *n;
struct my_struct *my;
list_for_each_safe(p, n, &mine->list) {
    /* my points to each my_struct in the list */
    my = list_entry(p, struct my_struct, list);
}
```

This macro provides protection from *only* removals. You probably require additional locking protection to prevent concurrent manipulation of the actual list data.

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## Appendix B. Kernel Random Number Generator

The Linux kernel implements a strong *random number generator* that is theoretically capable of generating *true random numbers*. The random number generator gathers environmental noise from device drivers into an *entropy pool*. This pool is accessible from both user processes and the kernel as a source of data that is not only random but also non-deterministic to an outside attacker. Such numbers are of use in various applications, most notably cryptography.

True random numbers differ from the pseudo-random numbers generated by functions such as those found in the C library. Pseudo-random numbers are created by a *deterministic* function. Although the function may generate a sequence of numbers that exhibit some properties of a true random number, they are only statistically random. Pseudo-random numbers are deterministic: Knowing one number in the sequence provides information about the rest of the sequence. In fact, the initial value of the sequence (known as the *seed*) usually determines the entire sequence. For applications that need truly random and non-deterministic numbers, such as cryptography, a pseudo-random number is usually unacceptable.

As opposed to a pseudo-random number, a true random is produced independently of its generating function. Further, knowing some value in a sequence of truly random numbers does not enable an external party to deduce future values from the generator because the generator is non-deterministic.

From physics, *entropy* is a measurement of disorder and randomness in a system. In thermodynamics, entropy is measured in energy per unit temperature (Joules/Kelvin). When Claude Shannon<sup>[1]</sup>, the founder of information theory, looked for a term to represent randomness in information, the great mathematician John von Neumann<sup>[2]</sup> supposedly suggested he use the term entropy because no one really understand what that meant anyhow. Shannon agreed, and today the term is sometimes called *Shannon entropy*. In hindsight, some scientists find the dual use confusing, and prefer simply the term *uncertainty* when discussing information. Kernel hackers, on the other hand, think entropy sounds cool and encourage its use.

[1] Claude E. Shannon (April 30, 1916February 24, 2001) was an engineer at Bell Labs whose most famous work,*Mathematical Theory of Communication*, published in 1948, introduced the concept of information theory and Shannon entropy. Shannon also enjoyed riding his unicycle.

[2] John von Neumann (December 28, 1903February 8, 1957) was a member of the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton. In his life, he made numerous contributions to mathematics, economics, and computer science. Some of his most important contributions were game theory, Neumann algebras, and the von Neumann bottleneck.

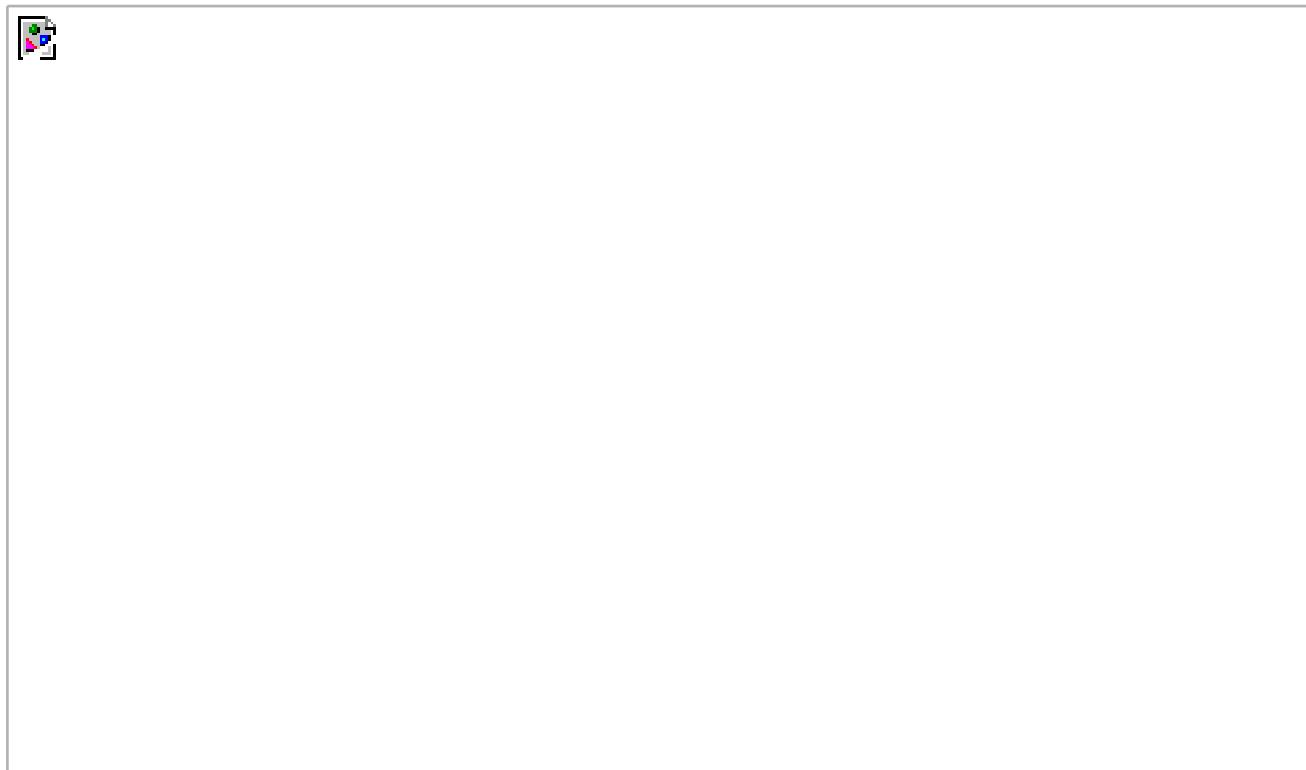
In discussions of random number generators, Shannon entropy is an important property. It is measured in bits per symbol; high entropy implies there is little useful information (but lots of random junk) in a sequence of characters. The kernel maintains an entropy pool that is fed data obtained from non-deterministic device events. Ideally, this pool is entirely random. To help keep track of the entropy in the pool, the kernel keeps a measurement of the uncertainty of the data in the pool. As the kernel feeds data into the pool, it estimates the amount of randomness in the data that it is adding. Conversely, the kernel keeps track of entropy as it is removed from the pool. This measurement is called the *entropy estimate*. Optionally, the kernel can refuse a request for a random number if the entropy estimate is zero.

The kernel random number generator was introduced in kernel version 1.3.30 and lives at `drivers/char/random.c` in the kernel source.

## Design and Implementation

Computers are predictable devices. Indeed, it is hard to find randomness in a system whose behavior is entirely programmed. The environment of the machine, however, is full of *noise* that is accessible and non-deterministic. Such sources include the timing of various hardware devices and user interaction. For example, the time between key presses, the movement of the mouse, the timing particularly the low-order bits of such timing between certain interrupts, and the time taken to complete a block I/O request are all both non-deterministic and not measurable by an outside attacker. Randomness from these values is taken and fed into the entropy pool. The pool grows to become a random and unpredictable mixture of noise. As the values are added to the pool, an estimate of the randomness is calculated and a tally is kept. This allows the kernel to keep track of the entropy in the pool. [Figure B.1](#) is a diagram of the flow of entropy into and out of the pool.

**Figure B.1. The flow of entropy into and out of the kernel entropy pool.**



The kernel provides a set of interfaces to allow access to the entropy pool, both from within the kernel and from user-space. When the interfaces are accessed, the kernel first takes the *SHA* hash of the pool. SHA (Secure Hash Algorithm) is a message digest algorithm developed by the National Security Agency (NSA) and made a U.S. federal standard by NIST (via FIPS 186). A message digest is an algorithm that takes a variable-sized input (small or large) and outputs a fixed-size hash value (typically 128 or 160 bits) that is a "digest" of the original input. From the outputted hash value, the input cannot be reconstructed. Further, trivial manipulations to the input (for example, changing a single character) result in a radically different hash value. Message digest algorithms have various uses, including data verification and fingerprinting. Other message digest algorithms include MD4 and MD5. The SHA hash, not the raw contents of the pool, is returned to the user; the contents of the entropy pool are never directly accessible. It is assumed impossible to derive any

information about the state of the pool from the SHA hash. Therefore, knowing some values from the pool does not lend any knowledge to past or future values. Nonetheless, the kernel can use the entropy estimate to refuse to return data if the pool has zero entropy. As entropy is read from the pool, the entropy estimate is decreased in response to how much information is now known about the pool.

When the estimate reaches zero, the kernel can still return random numbers. Theoretically, however, an attacker is then capable of inferring future output given prior output. This would require that the attacker have nearly all the prior outputs from the entropy pool and that the attacker successfully perform cryptanalysis on SHA. Because SHA is believed to be secure, this possibility is not feasible. To high-security cryptography users who accept no risk, however, the entropy estimate ensures the strength of the random numbers. To the vast majority of users this extra assurance is not needed.

## Why is this done in the kernel?

A criterion for kernel features in Linux is that they cannot be also be implemented in user-space. Tossing things in the kernel "because we can" is not acceptable. At first glance, a random number generator and entropy pool have no place in the kernel. Three conditions, however, all but require it live in the kernel. First, the random number generator needs access to system timings, such as interrupts and user input. It is not possible for user-space to access such timings without exporting various interfaces and hooks to notify user-space of these events. Even if the data were exported, use would be neither clean nor fast. Second, the random number generator must be secure. Although the system could run as *root* and institute various security measures, the kernel provides a much safer home for the entropy pool. Finally, the kernel itself needs access to the data. It is neither practical nor clean for the kernel to have to obtain the values from a user-space agent. Therefore, the random number generator lives happily in the kernel.

## The Dilemma of System Startup

When the kernel first boots, it completes a series of actions that are almost entirely predictable. Consequently, an attacker is able to infer much about the state of the entropy pool at boot. Worse, each boot is largely similar to the next and the pool would initialize to largely the same contents on each boot. This reduces the accuracy of the entropy estimate, which has no way of knowing that the entropy contributed during the boot sequence is less predictable than entropy contributed at other times.

To offset this problem, most Linux systems save some information from the entropy pool across system shutdowns. They do this by saving the contents of the entropy pool on each shutdown. When the system boots, the data is read and fed into `/dev/urandom`. This effectively loads the previous contents of the pool into the current pool, without increasing the entropy estimate.

Therefore, an attacker cannot predict the state of the entropy pool without knowledge of both the current state of the system and the *previous* state of the system.

## Interfaces to Input Entropy

The kernel exports a family of interfaces to facilitate feeding data into the entropy pool. They are called by the appropriate kernel subsystems or drivers. They are

```
void add_interrupt_randomness(int irq)
void add_keyboard_randomness(unsigned char scancode)
void add_mouse_randomness(__u32 mouse_data)
```

`add_interrupt_randomness()` is called by the interrupt system whenever an interrupt is received whose handler was registered with `SA_SAMPLE_RANDOM`. The parameter `irq` is the interrupt number. The random number generator uses the timing between interrupts as a source of noise. Note that not all devices are suitable for this; if the device generates interrupts deterministically (for example, the timer interrupt) or may be influenced by an outside attacker (for example, a network device) it should not feed the pool. An acceptable device is a hard disk, which generates interrupts at an unpredictable rate.

`add_keyboard_randomness()` uses the scancode and the timing between successive key presses to feed the entropy pool. Interestingly, the routine is smart enough to ignore *autorepeat* (when the user holds a key down) because both the scancode and timing interval would then be constant, contributing no entropy. The sole parameter is the scancode of the pressed key.

`add_mouse_randomness()` uses the mouse position as well as the timing between interrupts to feed the pool. The parameter `mouse_data` is the hardware-reported position of the mouse.

All three of these routines add the supplied data to the entropy pool, calculate an estimate of the entropy of the given data, and increment the entropy estimate by this amount.

All these exported interfaces use the internal function `add_timer_randomness()` to feed the pool. This function calculates the timing between successive events of the same time and adds the delay to the pool. For example, the timing between two successive disk interrupts is largely random especially when measured very precisely. Often, the low-order bits are electrical noise. After this function feeds the pool, it calculates how much randomness was present in the data. It does this by calculating the first-, second-, and third-order deltas from the previous timing and first- and second-order deltas. The greatest of these deltas, rounded down to 12 bits, is used as the entropy estimate.

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## Interfaces to Output Entropy

The kernel exports one interface for obtaining random data from within the kernel:

```
void get_random_bytes(void *buf, int nbytes)
```

This function stores `nbytes` worth of random data in the buffer pointed to by `buf`. The function returns the values, whether or not the entropy estimate is zero. This is less of a concern to the kernel than user-space cryptography applications. The random data is suitable for a handful of kernel tasks, most notably in networking, where the random data seeds the initial TCP sequence number.

Kernel code can do the following to receive a word-size helping of randomness:

```
unsigned long rand;  
  
get_random_bytes(&rand, sizeof (unsigned long));
```

For user-space processes, the kernel provides two character devices, `/dev/random` and `/dev/urandom`, for obtaining entropy. The first, `/dev/random`, is more suitable when very strong random numbers are desired, as in high-security cryptographic applications. It returns only up to the maximum number of bits of random data noted by the entropy estimate. When the entropy estimate reaches zero, `/dev/random` blocks and does not return the remaining data until the entropy estimate is sufficiently positive. Conversely, the device `/dev/urandom` does *not* have this feature and is generally just as secure. Both devices return numbers from the same pool.

Reading from either file is simple. Here is an example of a user-space function that an application can use to extract a word of entropy:

```
unsigned long get_random(void)  
{  
    unsigned long seed;  
    int fd;  
  
    fd = open("/dev/urandom", O_RDONLY);  
    if (fd == -1) {  
        perror("open");  
        return 0;  
    }  
    if (read(fd, &seed, sizeof (seed)) < 0) {  
        perror("read");  
        seed = 0;  
    }  
    if (close(fd))  
        perror("close");  
  
    return seed;  
}
```

Alternatively, you can easily read `bytes` bytes into the file `file` by using the `dd(1)` program:

```
dd if=/dev/urandom of=file count=1 bs=bytes
```

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## Appendix C. Algorithmic Complexity

Often, in computer science and related disciplines, it is useful to express the algorithmic complexity or *scalability* of algorithms as a meaningful value (as opposed to less descriptive terms, such as *gross*). Various methods exist for representing scalability. One common technique is to study the *asymptotic behavior* of the algorithm. This is the behavior of the algorithm as its inputs grow exceedingly large and approach infinity. Asymptotic behavior shows how well an algorithm scales as its input grows larger and larger. Studying an algorithm's scalability how it performs as the size of its input increases enables us to model the algorithm against a benchmark and better understand its behavior.

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## Algorithms

An algorithm is a series of instructions, possibly one or more inputs, and ultimately a result or output. For example, the steps carried out to count the number of people in a room are an algorithm, with the people being the input and the count being the output. In the Linux kernel, both page eviction and the process scheduler are examples of algorithms. Mathematically, an algorithm is like a function (or at least, you can model it as one). For example, if you call the people counting algorithm  $f$  and the number of people to count  $x$ , you can write:

$$y = f(x) \quad \text{people counting function}$$

where  $y$  is the time required to count the  $x$  people.

## Big-O Notation

One useful asymptotic notation is the upper bound, which is a function whose value, after an initial point, is always greater than the value of the function that you are studying. It is said that the upper bound grows faster than the function in question. A special notation, big-o (pronounced *big oh*) notation, is used to describe this growth. It is written  $f(x)$  is  $O(g(x))$  and is read as  $f$  is *big-oh* of  $g$ . The formal mathematical definition is

If  $f(x)$  is  $O(g(x))$ , then

$$\exists c, x' \text{ such that } f(x) \leq c \cdot g(x), \forall x > x'$$

In English, the time to complete  $f(x)$  is always less than or equal to the time to complete  $g(x)$  multiplied by some arbitrary constant, so long as the input  $x$  is larger than some initial value  $x'$ .

Essentially, you are looking for a function whose behavior is as bad as or worse than the algorithm. You can then look at the result of very large inputs to this function and obtain an understanding of the bound of your algorithm.

## Big Theta Notation

When most people talk about big-oh notation, they are more accurately referring to what Donald Knuth describes as *big-theta notation*. Technically, big-oh notation refers to an upper bound. For example, seven is an upper bound of six; so are 9, 12, and 65. Subsequently, when most people discuss function growth they talk about the *least upper bound*, or a function that models both the upper and lower bounds<sup>[1]</sup>. Professor Knuth, the father of the field of algorithmic analysis, describes this as big-theta notation and gives the following definition:

[1] If you're curious, the lower bound is modeled by big-omega notation. The definition is the same as big-o, except  $g(x)$  is always less than or equal to  $f(x)$ , not greater than or equal to. Big-omega notation is less interesting than big-oh because finding functions smaller than your function is rarely interesting.

If  $f(x)$  is big-theta of  $g(x)$ , then

$g(x)$  is both an upper bound and a

lower bound for  $f(x)$ .

Then, you can say that  $f(x)$  is of *order*  $g(x)$ . The order, or big-theta, of an algorithm is one of the most important mathematical tools for understanding algorithms in the kernel.

Consequently, when people refer to big-o notation they are more often talking about the least such big-o, the big-theta. You really do not have to worry about this, unless you want to make Professor Knuth really happy.

## Putting It All Together

Consider the original example of having to count the number of people in a room. Pretend you can count one person per second. Then, if there are seven people in the room, it will take seven seconds to count them. More generally, given  $n$  people it will take  $n$  seconds to count everyone. Thus, you can say this algorithm is  $O(n)$ . What if the task was to dance in front of everyone in the room? Because it would take the same amount of time to dance whether there were five or five thousand people in the room, this task is  $O(1)$ . See [Table C.1](#) for other common complexities.

**Table C.1. Table of Common Time Complexity Values**

| $O(g(x))$ | Name                           |
|-----------|--------------------------------|
| 1         | constant (perfect scalability) |
| $\log n$  | logarithmic                    |
| $n$       | linear                         |
| $n^2$     | quadratic                      |
| $n^3$     | cubic                          |
| $2^n$     | exponential (evil)             |
| $n!$      | factorial (pure evil)          |

What is the complexity of introducing everyone in the room to everyone else? What is a possible function that models this algorithm? If it took thirty seconds to introduce each person, how long would it take to introduce 10 people to each other? What about one hundred people to each other?

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## Perils of Time Complexity

Obviously, it is wise to avoid complexities such as  $O(n!)$  or  $O(2^n)$ . Likewise, it is usually an improvement to replace an  $O(n)$  algorithm with a functionally equivalent  $O(1)$  algorithm. This is not always the case, however, and a blind assumption should not be made based solely on big-o notation. Recall that, given  $O(g(x))$ , there is a constant,  $c$ , multiplied by  $g(x)$ . Therefore, it is possible that an  $O(1)$  algorithm takes three hours to complete. Sure, it is *always* three hours, regardless of how large the input, but that can still be a long time compared to an  $O(n)$  algorithm with few inputs. The typical input size should always be taken into account when comparing algorithms.

Favor less complex algorithms, but keep in mind the overhead of the algorithm in relation to the typical input size. Do not optimize blindly for some random case!

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## Bibliography and Reading List

This bibliography is sorted by subject and contains some of the more interesting and useful books on subjects that are similar or complimentary to those in this book.

All these books have proved themselves quite useful over time. Some of them represent "sacred tomes" (what I like to call *Ninja books*) in their respective subjects, whereas others I have simply found interesting, insightful, or entertaining in some capacity. I hope that they can assist you as well.

Note that the absolute best reference or "additional reading" to compliment this book is the kernel source. Working on Linux, we are all gifted with full and unrestricted access to the source code for an entire modern operating system. Do not take that for granted! Dive in! Read code! Write code!

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## Books on Operating System Design

These books cover OS Design as discussed in an undergraduate course. They all tackle the concepts, algorithms, problems, and solutions involved in designing a functional operating system. I recommend them all, but if I had to pick only one, the Deitel book seriously rocks.

H. Deitel, P. Deitel, and D. Choffnes . *Operating Systems*. Prentice Hall, 2003. An awesome tour de force on the theory of operating systems, with some excellent case studies putting the theory to practice. I helped tech edit it and this might make me biased, but I like to think that it makes the book that much better.

Tanenbaum, Andrew . *Operating Systems: Design and Implementation*. Prentice Hall, 1997. A great introductory work on both the design and implementation of a Unix-like system, Minix.

Tanenbaum, Andrew . *Modern Operating Systems*. Prentice Hall, 2001. A strong overview of the standard operating system design issues, plus discussion on many of the concepts used in today's modern operating systems, such as Unix and Windows.

A. Silberschatz, P. Galvin, and G. Gagne . *Operating System Concepts*. John Wiley and Sons, 2001. Also known as "the dinosaur book," for the seemingly irrelevant dinosaurs on the cover. A great introduction to OS design. The book has frequent revisions; any of them should do fine.

## Books on Unix Kernels

These books tackle the design and implementation of Unix kernels. The first five discuss a specific flavor of Unix, and the later two focus on issues common to all Unix variants.

Bach, Maurice . *The Design of the Unix Operating System*. Prentice Hall, 1986. A good discussion on the design of Unix System V Release 2.

M. McKusick, K. Bostic, M. Karels, and J. Quarterman . *The Design and Implementation of the 4.4BSD Operating System*. Addison-Wesley, 1996. A good discussion on the design of the 4.4BSD system by the system designers themselves.

M. McKusick and G. Neville-Neil . *The Design and Implementation of the FreeBSD Operating System*. Addison-Wesley, 2004. A good discussion on the design and implementation of FreeBSD 5.

J. Mauro and R. McDougall . *Solaris Internals: Core Kernel Architecture*. Prentice Hall, 2000. An interesting discussion on the core subsystems and algorithms in the Solaris kernel.

C. Cooper and C. Moore .*HP-UX 11i Internals*. Prentice Hall, 2004. A look at the internals of HP-UX and the PA-RISC architecture.

Vahalia, Uresh . *Unix Internals: The New Frontiers*. Prentice Hall, 1995. A superb book on very modern Unix features, such as thread management and kernel preemption.

Schimmel, Curt . *UNIX Systems for Modern Architectures: Symmetric Multiprocessing and Caching for Kernel Programmers*. Addison-Wesley, 1994. A superb book on the perils of supporting a modern Unix on a modern architecture. Highly recommended.

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## Books on Linux Kernels

These books, like this one, discuss the Linux kernel. Unfortunately, there are not too many good books in this category I guess that is good for this book. These two books are great, though.

A. Rubini and J. Corbet . *Linux Device Drivers*. O'Reilly and Associates, 2001. An excellent discussion on how to write device drivers for the 2.4 kernel. Jon Corbet is an excellent writer and friend, and I recommend this book wholeheartedly to compliment my own.

D. Mosberger and S. Eranian . *IA-64 Linux Kernel: Design and Implementation*. Prentice Hall, 2002. A great look at the Intel Itanium architecture and its port of the Linux 2.4 kernel. Written by the maintainer of the IA-64 kernel port.

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## Books on Other Kernels

Understanding your enemieserr, competitorsnever hurts. These books discuss the design and implementation of operating systems other than Linux. See what they got right and what they got wrong.

M. Kogan and H. Deitel .*The Design of OS/2*. Addison-Wesley, 1996. An interesting look at OS/2 2.0.

D. Solomon and M. Russinovich .*Inside Windows 2000*. Microsoft Press, 2000. An interesting look at a very non-Unix operating system.

Richter, Jeff .*Advanced Windows* Microsoft Press, 1997. A thorough discussion of low-level and systems programming in Windows.

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## Books on the Unix API

In-depth discussions of the Unix system and its API are important not only for writing powerful user-space programs, but for also understanding the responsibilities of the kernel.

Stevens, W. Richard . *Advanced Programming in the UNIX Environment*. Addison-Wesley, 1992. An excellent if not definitive discussion on the Unix system call interface.

Stevens, W. Richard . *UNIX Network Programming, Volume 1*. Prentice Hall, 1998. A classic text on the sockets API used by Unix systems.

M. Johnson and E. Troan . *Linux Application Development*. Addison-Wesley, 1998. A general overview of the Linux system and Linux-specific interfaces.

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## Books on the C Programming Language

The Linux kernel, along with much of the Linux system, is written in C. These two books rock that subject.

B. Kernighan and D. Ritchie . *The C Programming Language*. Prentice Hall, 1988. The definitive book on the C programming language, written by the author of C and his coworker.

Peter van der Linden . *Expert C Programming*. Prentice Hall, 1994. A great discussion on some of the less understood details in C. The author has a wonderful sense of humor and the book is rife with nonsense. I love it.

## Other Works

This is a collection of other books not strictly related to operating systems, but discussing topics which undoubtedly affect them.

Knuth, Donald . *The Art of Computer Programming, Volume 1*. Addison-Wesley, 1997. A priceless tomb of perfection (seriously) in the fundamental algorithms of computer science, including best- and worst-fit algorithms used in memory management.

Hofstadter, Douglas . *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid*. Basic Books, 1999. A profound and indispensable look at human thought that delves wildly into multiple subjects, including computer science.

## Websites

*Kernel Traffic.* An excellent summary of the previous week's traffic on the Linux kernel mailing list (lkml). Highly recommended.  
<http://www.kerneltraffic.org/>

*Linux Weekly News.* A great news site with an excellent commentary on the week's kernel happenings. Also highly recommended.  
<http://www.lwn.net/>

*Kernel Newbies.* Kernel Newbies is a community project to provide information and help to aspiring kernel hackers.  
<http://www.kernelnewbies.org/>

*Kernel.org.* The official repository of the kernel source. It is also home to a large number of the core kernel hacker's patches.  
<http://www.kernel.org/>

*KernelTrap.* A website devoted to all things kernel-related, with a strong focus on the Linux kernel. Rife with news and summaries of Linux kernel development, KernelTrap is also home to a large number of interviews with leading kernel developers.  
<http://www.kerneltrap.org/>

*OS News.* Operating System News, along with original articles, interviews, and reviews <http://www.osnews.com/>

*This book's website.* News, errata, and such related to this fine book [http://tech9.net/rml/kernel\\_book/](http://tech9.net/rml/kernel_book/)

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