Flattening the Page Tables on Linux in x86_64: Design, Implementation, and Evaluation in EMT Linux

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Abstract

The abstract of the project report

1 Introduction

When the computing system was first invented, the memory was limited and expensive, and relevant logic was simple, because there were only one program running on the CPU. As time went on, the memory became larger and cheaper, and multiple users might run their programs on the same computers, but the CPU could only run one program at a time. The operating system should be able to take control of the CPU and manage the memory access of the user programs. Paging is a memory management scheme that eliminates the need for contiguous allocation of physical memory and creates the illusion to users of a very large (virtual) main memory. Paging scheme partitions the physical memory into fixed-size blocks called frames, and uses a table to map each virtual page to a physical frame. The page table contains information about each page.

Originally, the page table in x86 architecture is a two-level page table, where the address field in the first level points to the starting address of the second level page table, and the address field in the second level page table points to the starting address of the physical frame. Then, in x86_64 architecture, the page table is extended to four levels. Later, it also supports 5-level page table extension. Typically, the page table is stored in memory due to its large size. For a memory access, in the worst case, the CPU needs to walk through all the levels of the page table to find the physical address. This is inefficient, and it could be the bottleneck of the system performance. Because of the popularity of machine learning, which consists of complex memory access patterns, the page table walking could be a performance bottleneck.

In this project, we implements a new page table structure called flattened page table (FPT). FPT maintains the logical behavior and interface of the traditional multi-level tree-structured page table, while enabling the selective flattening of adjacent levels to reduce the depth of the page table walk. Specifically, assuming the 5-level paging extension is not used, we support three folding modes: L4L3, L3L2, and L4L3-L2L1 folding. In each mode, the virtual address range covered by individual levels remains unchanged, but the number of levels traversed per walk is reduced by merging multiple levels into a single larger page table. The resulting structure remains logically hierarchical, but folded levels are stored as wider tables in memory, decreasing the number of required memory accesses for translation.

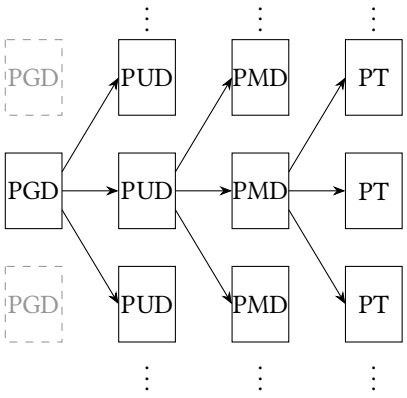

Figure 1. Traditional 4-level Radix Tree Strcuture in x86_64

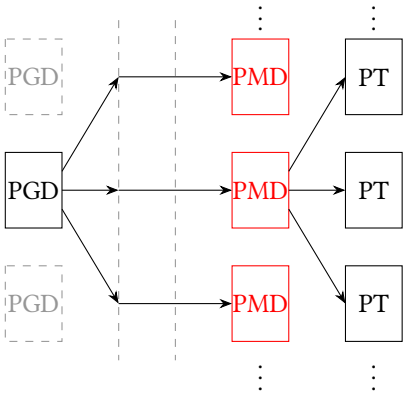

Figure 2. Flattened Page Table (FPT) in L3L2 Mode

2 Design

Figure ?? shows the traditional 4-level radix tree structure in x86_64. The radix tree is a tree data structure that stores the page table entries. Each node in the tree represents a level of the page table, and each edge represents a page table entry. The leaf nodes represent the physical frames. In the traditional 4-level radix tree structure, the uppermost level

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(L4) is the Page Global Directory (PGD), which points to the Page Upper Directory (PUD, L3). The PUD points to the Page Middle Directory (PMD, L2), and the PMD points to the Page Table (PT, L1). The PT points to the physical frames. In our design, we enables some level(s) of tables to be flattened. The lower level now spans the virtual address space spanned by the folded levels, but the size of the folded level(s) table is increased (from 4KB to 2MB). Take L3L2 folding as an example. An L3 page table page is 4KB and maps a 1GB address space; an L2 page table page is 4KB and maps a 2MB address space. In FPT L3L2 mode, however, the level 3 no longer exists, and L2 page table page is 2MB and maps a 1GB address space. Each entry in the L2 page table page points to an L1 page table page. Figure **??** shows the flattened page table in L3L2 mode. The PUD level no longer exists (even in hardware), and the PMD level (marked as red) is enlarged to 2MB.

3 Implementation

In this section, we will discuss the implementation of the FPT in Linux. Since x86_64 is a complex architecture, and it is not open-source, we can only emulate the behavior of the FPT mechanism in Linux by emulators. We modified QEMU with version 6.1.50 to support the FPT mechanism in "hardware". We also used Linux kernel version 5.15.0 to support the FPT mechanism. We changed the kernel to support the FPT mechanism by modifying the logic for page allocation logic, page table walk logic, and some TLB logic.

Before we start to discuss the implementation, we need to activate the FPT mechanism in the kernel. The FPT mechanism is not enabled by default in the kernel, but allowed by some new Kconfig options - one for enabling the FPT mechanism and one for selecting the folding level, as we mentioned before. The configuration becomes effective in the kernel image after the kernel is compiled with the new Kconfig options. We retain the backward compatibility with the radix structure, and the kernel could jump to suitable routines based on the enabled configuration.

3.1 Page Allocation Logic

The page allocation logic is responsible for allocating physical pages to the virtual address space of a process. The Linux kernel uses a buddy allocator to allocate physical pages. We do not need to modify the buddy allocator, but we need to modify the page allocation logic to support the FPT mechanism. Traditionally, the page table pages in each level have size 4KB. The kernel uses `struct page` to represent a 4KB page frame, and contiguous `struct page` maps to physically contiguous address space. In FPT, however, the page table pages of the flattened level could have size 2MB. Hence, we need to modify the page allocation logic to check the level we are allocating the page table. If the level is the flattened level, we need to allocate a contiguous address space of 2MB, which corresponds to 512 (2^9) `struct page` objects.

3.2 Page Table Walk Logic

3.3 Page Table Free Logic

3.4 TLB Logic

TLB, or Translation Lookaside Buffer, is a hardware cache that stores the most recently used page table entries. The TLB is used to speed up the translation of virtual addresses to physical addresses. Flushing the TLB is a process of invalidating the TLB entries to ensure that the TLB does not contain stale entries. In Linux kernel, the TLB flush is associated with `struct page`, too. Since flushing the TLB is an expensive operation, the Linux kernel batches page frames to be flushed, until the batched list reaches some certain threshold. Nevertheless, in FPT, everytime we release a flattened page table page, there will be 512 (2^9) pages to be flushed, which is higher than all possible existing thresholds. Hence, we need to modify the TLB flush logic to support the FPT mechanism. Currently, our design is to enforce a TLB flush if some flattened page table pages are being released, which also helps release the pages existing in the batched list. This might not be a best design. Some improvements could be made in the future. For example, we could reprogram the existing TLB interfances to accommondate the changing page sizes (because we found some routines accept the `struct page` only, but not the size or the order). We could also change the policy to trigger a TLB flush, design a specialized TLB interface for the FPT mechanism, or even further polish the hardware structure of TLB.

4 Conclusion

This project is awesome.

5 Metadata

The presentation of the project can be found at:

https://zoom/cloud/link/

The code/data of the project can be found at:

https://github.com/you/repo