

Chapter 2: Operating System Structures

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An *operating system* allows us to allocate resources to a machine. We can use either a graphical environment or all from the *command line*.

Operating System Services

The OS has some key services that it provides:

- **User Interface:** How does the user interact with the system?
There have traditionally been two ways, **command-line interface**, where the user types the commands it wants the computer to execute. There is also the option for a **user interface**, where the user clicks icons and opens graphical programs to run commands and operate the computer.
- **Program Execution:** One of the main functions of an operating system is to load programs into memory and run those programs. One of the main abstractions that the OS provides is to load/execute programs.
- **I/O operations:** For safety reasons, the user seldom interacts directly with I/O devices, but the computer has to communicate with the outside. Writing to a network interface or talking with the filesystem maybe should not be left to the user.....
- **Communication:** Sometimes programs need to communicate with each other, maybe about error detection through sockets.
- **Error Detection:** When there is an error allocating the resources, memory or I/O error, the OS has to be there to detect and correct the error, or to halt the system operation.
- **Resource Allocation:** If there are multiple processes, the CPU has to manage the CPU scheduling routines for each process. There are some routines to manage the CPU schedule to manage multiple processes.
- **Logging:** If there is an error in your system, then the OS will write what happened to some files. Then we can know what is happening in each process.

The way we interact with the operating system is also different. In Linux, the main way to interact with the computer is through the **command line interface**, where the user types the commands the

computer is to execute. Other systems such as Windows and MacOS intend for the user to use a graphical environment with icons and graphical folders.

System Calls

When we want our system to perform some action, we will usually specify the filename to run, and provide it with any arguments necessary. For example, if we were to type

```
cp foo.txt bar.txt
```

in our terminal, then our OS would know what commands we wanted to run and on which files to do it. In this example, the `cp` will *copy* a file called `foo.txt` and copy to another file on the same directory called `bar.txt`. Even in this simple command, there are multiple system calls going on, for example we have to open or create the files, then enter a loop which copies the lines, which requires even more system calls.

Usually the way that these calls are implemented is through an **Application Programming Interface**. The shell program might make a request to the API which then makes the system call. The reason for this is mostly to provide a standard format for systems using the same interface. For example, systems all using the POSIX standard can all expect similar functionality from its function calls.

When our API runs a command, how do we pass the information that the OS requires? There are two common approaches: **register method** and **block method**. On Linux, if there are 5 or fewer parameters, we store the individual parameters in registers. For more arguments, we use the block method. In this method we store all the parameters in a block in memory and pass the address of the block. We can also use a stack to pass the arguments, since stacks don't care about the size or number of the arguments.

Types of System Calls

There are six major categories of system calls: **process control**, **file management**, **device management**, **information maintenance**, **communications** and **protection**.

1. **Process Control**: These are the calls responsible for running programs. If the program terminates normally or abnormally, we will generate an appropriate error message. The system might generate a memory dump and place the results in a file for the program to check.

In programs involving system calls, we have to call direct system calls from inside our program. For example, if we have a `printf()` instruction, we might have to call the equivalent `write()` system call. This type of processes could also apply when we want to **lock** a certain resource, or prevent its modification until a later point in time.

2. **File Management:** When we interact with files, we might also need to create, close, modify, move, etc... files around the directory if we have one.
3. **Device Management:** When we have to interact with another device such as disk, we have to ask for control of the device first, then we can read the data, and finally close the connection. Since these functions are similar to the ones used for files, some OSes (Linux) combine the two into one. This means that devices are treated as files. The data from one device might be available directly somewhere on the file system!
4. **Information Maintenance:** There are also system calls for getting information about the system. For example, we can get the `date()` or `time()`, how much free space there is on the system, etc... These system calls are useful for debugging and knowing what order of system calls are being executed. We can use a CPU's **single step** mode to find the order of instructions being executed.
5. **Communication:** A common theme is that we need to allow different programs to communicate with each other. We already saw some general model of how to do this, either with a shared memory model or registers. How do we identify the program we want to talk to?

Each program gets a unique **process name** and **host name**, which will pass a message along. **Daemons** are programs that accept connections from a client.

6. **Protection:** When computers had multiple users, it was important for the system to control resource allocation among the users. Now, with the Internet the OS still has to control how resources are allocated and how we protect the system.

System Services

Some of the functionality that we have come to expect in an operating system includes file management, networking and communication, program loading and execution.

Services or **daemons** are programs that usually run in the background. These programs might wait for requests, such as network managers, and others might be monitoring processes.

Linkers and Loaders

Whenever we run a program, we have to first compile the source file into some object file such as `a.out` or `a.exe`. The compiler will take the source file and make an output file with the name as the previous one.

It is the job of a linker to include any other code necessary in a source file, for example if we include `math.h`, the linker is responsible for making a coherent file that we can run, with all the references to the pieces of code in the correct places.

When we then type the executable name in the command prompt, we then create a new process for the program to run in. We normally assume that the file was all linked and that all the required libraries were incorporated into the executable file. However, on Windows **dynamically linked libraries** are only loaded conditionally if they are needed by the program.

Once we have the final executable file, inside there will a **symbol table** where we will have the address for the first instruction and maybe info on the functions and variables.

Why Are Applications Operating System Specific?

Application files will usually have some system calls which are unique to the operating system it's being run on. Some interpreted languages such as Python will read one instruction at a time, and execute the corresponding instruction on the host machine. This would solve the problem for the programmer, who could write a single program and leave the actual implementation to the interpreter. The interpreter could then run on many different environments.¹

Another solution, offered by languages like Java, includes running an entire RTE in the form of a virtual machine, where we sometimes transform the code into an intermediate language. Then the same source code could run on multiple systems, but likewise the performance will be impacted.

Once we have an executable file, the operating system expects a certain structure for the files, with elements that are a certain size, and even the CPU might only accept instructions of a different type.²

¹ The Executable and Linkable Format **ELF** is used by most UNIX varieties. This format specifies how the function/variable metadata is structured and stores the address of the starting point for our program.

² I'm not sure if this is more of an ISA problem or an OS one. But then again, every OS is built to use a certain ISA, right?