

Exploring the low level design space of back-end services

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Abstract—Most of the popular modern web-development frameworks, like Node.js and Go, handle the creation and management of a running back-end service in a mostly abstracted high-level way that does not allow a developer much freedom to modify the inherent system architecture of the server. Such an inflexible and abstracted, often plug-and-play, server implementation helps to facilitate web development by concealing the system-level design choices from the end user. The problem of blindly relying on a web framework without understanding its internal architecture is that it might not be the most suitable choice for a particular web application, which then ends up having unnecessarily bloated and difficult to maintain dependency-prone services. The aim of this paper is to explore the design space of a dependency-free, cloud-deployable back-end service purely written in C, through a literature review and an actual software implementation of a command-line based chat server. In order to compare the advantages and challenges, in terms of both performance and software development ease, of a highly abstracted back-end framework and a self-made low-level service.

Index Terms—back-end services, concurrency, C, Go, databases, software architecture, systems programming, software engineering, design principles

I. INTRODUCTION

When using any of the most popular modern web development frameworks the inherent system architecture supporting multiple concurrent client connections is often concealed from the developer. Moreover, the system-level design choices to handle concurrent connections tend to be immutable, so that, for instance, a framework based on a single-threaded event loop architecture, like Node.js, cannot be modified or configured to work in a multi-threaded or multi-procedural way. It could be argued that modern web development ecosystems have entirely renounced providing the user with the full spectrum of system-level primitives that can enable concurrency, in favour of abstracting the complexity of concurrent systems away from the framework’s APIs and making portability invisible to the developer.

Another aspect that characterizes some of these frameworks, is that the developer ends up having many different library or packet dependencies from a diverse range of sources, which are sometimes fundamental to enable basic functionality or enhance the capabilities of the framework. With an increasing number of dependencies numerous issues can arise, e.g. mutual incompatibilities between different package versions, a cumbersome management of patches for vulnerabilities and difficulties recreating the same behaviour of an application between the development and the production environments.

The goal of this work is to develop a stand-alone, almost dependency-free, command-line interface chat service independent of current back-end frameworks. In order to explore the challenges and advantages of different system-level networking architectures. There is an unexplored technological gap, because current web frameworks do not offer the ability to implement back-end services in a multi-procedural and dependency-free way.

The chat service back-end will be entirely developed using C, due to the fact that this language provides all possible system calls (syscalls) capable of directly interacting with kernel concurrency primitives in Unix systems. Moreover, the secondary goal of requiring as little dependencies as possible for this application fits well with a development environment consisting of only GCC as a compiler and the C standard library, which are ubiquitous in Unix systems nowadays.

From a more philosophical point of view, the choice to develop a messaging application capable of being self-hosted by the user was a very deliberate decision. Although, this is not the main goal of this work, it is motivated by the fact that there are no good mainstream alternatives for messaging services. WhatsApp fails miserably as a suitable option since it coerces users to remain on its platform to indiscriminately harvest metadata as a means to increase ad revenue [1]. Signal seems to be a viable alternative at first glance. But it is actually as vulnerable as WhatsApp to fail catastrophically regarding its availability, since its back-end is a centralized and closed platform [2]. Also, at least until 2016 it allowed some user metadata to traverse through Google cloud services [3] and has already handed user metadata to law enforcement authorities in the past [4]. To some extent, more than a coding exercise, the fully functional chat app that came out of this work (which can be found in this GitHub repository [5]) is a way of regaining control over the most sensitive data and metadata produced from our daily communication needs, and shielding it against commercialization.

II. STATE OF THE ART

As mentioned previously, choosing C as the sole development language is a deliberate design decision, since it provides all possible concurrency primitives natively in Unix systems (threads, message queues, processes, file locks, etc.), while only requiring the standard library. This fact provides as much freedom as possible to experiment and explore diverse concurrent back-end architectures, while also making the code easily portable to all Unix systems.



Fig. 1. High level depiction of the runtime environment in Go. *Goroutines* are depicted as circles, OS threads as rectangles. Active goroutines running on a *context* are green, idle goroutines waiting in a queue are yellow. The same color semantics apply to active and idle OS threads.

Arguably, Go is very well suited to be used as a state of the art comparison to this paper’s proposed implementation in C. First of all, Go was created at Google in 2010 by some of the computer science pioneers that originally came up with Unix and C at Bell Labs, so it is no surprise that Go has been described as a “C-like language” or as “C for the 21st Century” [6]. Furthermore, it was created with “built-in concurrency” to tackle modern large distributed infrastructure problems and it is currently widely used at all network traffic levels as a server side service provider [7]. Therefore, it is a great candidate as a point of reference of how modern server side network concurrency can be handled, from which a totally different architecture based on blocking processes can be developed.

If the main goal of this paper is to open a developer’s eyes to the many different concurrency paradigms that can be used for server side development, then the philosophy of Go (and for that matter, also of other popular frameworks like Node.js) is the antithesis of this work, because these frameworks provide an inflexible architecture that handles concurrency. In the case of Go, the syntax to handle the creation of concurrent workloads (so-called “*goroutines*”) and of communication channels between the goroutines is so simple that an unaware or beginner programmer might be completely oblivious of the scheduling work being performed under the hood by the Go runtime, or even of the fact that its code is running concurrently.

A. Goroutines

The idiomatic way of dealing with client connections in Go, either in an HTTP server or through solely raw TCP communication, is by spawning a new goroutine that handles each client concurrently [8][9][10]. From a software engineering perspective this is a very practical approach, since it elevates the level of abstraction that the programmer has to deal with, so that it is unnecessary to directly intervene in memory synchronization and the management of a thread pool. This should have as a consequence gains in developer productivity, with the trade-off that there is less design freedom. The pledge of Go is that the runtime will single-handedly manage the

scheduling of goroutines in the most effective way possible and that goroutines are so lightweight that the developer should not worry upfront about the amount of goroutines that would simultaneously be spawned [11].

Goroutines are very lightweight concurrent subroutines supervised by the Go *runtime* in userspace. Their memory footprint is very small, the assigned memory by default is only a few kilobytes at their creation [11]. From the perspective of the kernel, goroutines are non-preemptive, i.e. they are not interrupted by the OS scheduler to run other goroutines. They have defined *points of entry* where they can be suspended or activated by the runtime scheduler, which is entirely running in userspace. Since a context-switch between goroutines happens in userspace and the runtime decides which data should be persistent between context-switches, it is orders of magnitude faster than context-switching between OS threads [11] or between OS processes [12]. A context-switch between OS threads or processes is a costly operation in terms of both the kernel-side data structures needed to maintain all threads and processes, the operations performed in kernel space to make the transition happen and, possibly, the shifting of memory blocks during the transition.

B. Runtime scheduler

Each Go executable is compiled with its own statically linked runtime environment in charge of scheduling the goroutines, garbage collection and other tasks. The system model that describes the runtime scheduler consists of three main elements: all statically and dynamically called goroutines, a context and the OS threads where the goroutines are run. Goroutines are placed by the runtime in either the local queue of a context or in the global queue pending to be run by the context in one of the OS threads, as illustrated in figure 1. The contexts are in charge of managing the scheduling of the goroutine queues.

Parallelism in the system is achieved by having multiple contexts (in fig. 1 only two contexts are simultaneously running, depicted as blue rectangles), each using a different core of the processor through different OS threads, in order to run the goroutines waiting in their queues. The runtime manages a set of working threads (illustrated as green rectangles) coupled with contexts and another set of idle threads (yellow rectangles). If a goroutine performs a syscall that would block, e.g. listens for clients on a TCP socket, the overlying OS thread in which the context is executing the goroutine would also have to block. In this scenario, the blocking thread is decoupled from the context, so that the context can re-activate one of the idle threads and keep working with other non-blocking goroutines.

As long as the goroutines running in the contexts do not call a blocking system call, the different goroutines in the queues can be freely interchanged at the given *points of entry* by the scheduler within the same set of OS threads. This, as previously stated, avoids a costly context-switch in kernel space.

Nonetheless, blocking syscalls for networking are handled in a special way by the runtime. As previously stated, Go

idiomatically creates a new goroutine for each client connected to a server. If the server were to have thousands of simultaneously connected clients and most of the clients were to call blocking system calls at the same time, it would then have to create a unique blocked OS thread for each client. This state would be very costly because every blocked client goroutine translates to one blocked OS thread, consequently defeating Go's goal of keeping context-switches primarily in userspace.

Therefore, Go handles network connections in a way that avoids using too many system resources. First, when a new connection is accepted by the server, its file descriptor is set in non-blocking mode, which means that if I/O is not possible in the network socket, the syscall returns an error, instead of automatically blocking. Hence, when a goroutine tries to perform I/O in a network socket and it returns an error, the goroutine notifies a special perpetually running thread called the "netpoller", which polls the status of network sockets[8] (the netpoller thread is depicted as a blue rectangle in fig. 1). The goroutine which could not perform its network operation is placed back on a queue (making its OS thread once again free to run another goroutine). The netpoller notifies a context when it is again possible to perform I/O in the file descriptor, so that the goroutine can be scheduled back in the future. Thereupon, the runtime environment avoids overloading the kernel with unnecessarily too many blocked threads for the client connections.

III. PROBLEM STATEMENT

After having seen how modern web frameworks provide their users with an immutable low level architecture to handle concurrent client connections, exemplified by Go's standard library implementation of an HTTP(s) server, it will be discussed in this paper what other Unix system primitives could potentially be used to handle concurrency on a server.

The topic is first handled with a comparison of the advantages and disadvantages of different architectures. Afterwards, specific challenges regarding the implementation of the chat application will be covered, namely: how to guarantee a secure continuous operation of the server daemon, after opening a public port, what has to be considered when implementing a dependency-free database in a concurrent distributed system and is the application more easily portable when only having the standard C library as a dependency and compiling only with GCC?

IV. IMPLEMENTATION

The requirements for the chat application are that an undefined number of participants can simultaneously exchange text messages in a chatroom. Furthermore, the communication might be asynchronous, so that the participants can read messages sent to them while they were not connected to the server. The application should use the least amount of dependencies as possible to enable portability across Unix systems, i.e. the chat server should compile natively to FreeBSD or a Linux distribution with the same source file.

The server fundamentally requires a process working as a daemon accepting incoming connection attempts from clients.



Fig. 2. Server's back-end architectural overview. The blue rectangle denotes the process cluster created exclusively for each client taking part in a chat service.

For each accepted client connection there are multiple possibilities regarding the architecture of the server. The daemon could handle each client separately in a unique thread or child process.

The server will mostly have an IO-bound workload, consisting of handling asynchronous network packets and writing the messages from the users into files in the server's filesystem. An IO-bound workload benefits from the use of a pre-emptive scheduler, since the threads or processes are constantly changing alternatively between a blocked and an unblocked state in an unpredictable manner. As soon as a client goes silent the pre-emptive scheduler can run any other runnable process [13]. Hence, the context-switching is actually advantageous for IO-bound workloads, whereas in CPU-bound workloads (e.g. intensive long-running sequential computations) it becomes a performance bottleneck.

Therefore, handling each client connection separately by forking a child process seems like a good fit for the kind of workload that is expected. Nonetheless, it must be acknowledged that a counterargument against using processes is that thread creation and context-switching times are generally faster than for processes, since processes have an inherently more complex memory layout than threads [12].

However, other reasons settled the decision towards processes instead of threads. Before going into these reasons, it makes sense to review the architecture that was actually implemented as a solution. Figure 2 shows a high-level representation of how the server handles every client connection. After successfully authenticating a client, the server daemon calls the *fork* syscall and creates a new child process exclusively for the new client.

This child process, called "Child RECV" in fig. 2, inherits a copy of the newly established socket which handles the client. Child RECV is responsible for reading any incoming messages from the client, writing these messages in a concurrently-safe way into a central chat log, sending a multicast signal to let all other clients know that there is a new message and creating a further child process called "Child SEND". Child SEND also inherits the client's socket in order to send the messages stored in the central chat log at an appropriate time to the

client. The blue rectangle depicted in figure 2 comprises a single process cluster for a particular client. For every client connected simultaneously to the server there is one of this process clusters running concurrently.

Compartmentalizing the different clients into separate processes has the intrinsic advantage of granting more availability in case of a distributed denial of service (DDoS) attack or simply heavy traffic in the server's public-facing daemon. If for any reason, the daemon is getting cluttered with connection attempts, to a point in which the high load threatens to affect the communication performance of the clients already participating inside a chat service, then the daemon's process can be temporarily stopped, or even killed, so that the public-facing port is closed. Since each client's process cluster works completely independently from the daemon accepting new clients and from all other clients' process clusters, the service can continue uninterrupted for all clients already connected.

From a system administration perspective it is also very convenient to handle each client connection with different processes, since it makes the monitoring and administration of system resource utilization in a *per-client* granular way easy through the use of command line tools like *kill*, *ps*, *ss* or *sockstat*, and *top*.

A. Transactional isolation and atomicity

Although the data model of the chat application would fit well within a relational database, since the types of the data fields for every message exchange are immutable and translatable into the data types used in relational databases, the system intentionally avoids using any kind of external database system. This design decision makes the application more easily portable and deployable, due to the fact that the same executable of the chat server entirely handles the message storing and retrieving for all data exchanges. Deploying the chat server into a cloud server is as easy as pulling the repository, compiling and running the binary, there is no need to first install and configure a (No)SQL server.

Nonetheless, this implies that the chat program has to fulfil some data safety guarantees that would otherwise be outsourced entirely to the database management system (DBMS). Mainstream DBMS have the ability to perform a series of reads and writes to the underlying data system as a single "logical unit" [14], a so-called "transaction". A transaction is useful as a way of ensuring atomicity and isolation within a distributed system.

Since the incoming messages from the clients will all be centrally stored in a log file and messages from different clients can arrive at any time simultaneously to the server, a transactional mechanism is implemented to avoid race conditions.

Therefore, the data management system must fulfil the following four requirements. Multiple clients simultaneously writing to the log file should not over-write their messages. Furthermore, it should not be possible to read the log file during a write-operation from another client to avoid reading incomplete data, and, conversely, it should not be possible to write to the log, while another client is reading from it. Finally,

unlimited concurrent reading operations from multiple clients are permitted on the log file, since reading from the log file does not have any side effects on the stored data.

To satisfy these criteria, the server creates and opens the central log file with the "O_APPEND" flag (append mode), so that before each write to the file the offset is positioned at the end of the file and the write operation is subsequently performed in a single atomic operation [12]. Thus, old data written to the log cannot get corrupted by new writes to the file.

Moreover, a file locking system is implemented using the *flock* syscall, in order to fulfil the previously mentioned four requirements. Two different types of locks can be placed on a file: a shared lock and an exclusive lock. When multiple clients try to simultaneously send messages to the chat log, the child process Child RECV tries to place an exclusive lock on the chat log file. If no other lock is currently placed on the file, Child RECV can write exclusively into the chat log until the placed lock is released. Meanwhile, no other process can write or read from the file, the other Child RECV processes trying to write to the chat log file would block on the call to *flock*, until the process holding the exclusive lock releases it. All the necessary writes to the chat log file would be scheduled sequentially.

Conversely, when the server sends new messages to a client through Child SEND, it has to read the messages from the chat log. Hence, the child process places a shared lock on the chat log and reads from it. Any other process trying to simultaneously read from the same file can place another shared lock and read from the file, but a process trying to write to the file would block when placing the exclusive lock, until all shared locks have been released.

This file handling architecture makes sending messages to multiple clients a highly parallelizable operation, while writing to the chat log is a secure isolated task performed in an atomic way.

B. Multicasting with Unix IPC

The system should deliver new messages instantly through the respective Child SEND process of every client each time a new message is received, in other words, every message must be multicasted to all participating clients. The number of connected clients can change over time and it is unlimited.

The two main IPC (inter-process communication) mechanisms capable of multicasting to multiple processes are sockets and signals [12]. Signals are used in this implementation, because from a software engineering perspective configuring sockets to handle multicasting is less portable and requires more code-refactoring.

The Unix standard *SIGUSR1* signal, which is reserved for "user defined behaviour", can be used to synchronously inform a group of processes about an event, in this case, the need to send new messages to the clients.

By choosing to multicast with signals the possibility to work with threads, instead of with processes, was eliminated. Since all threads in a process share the same signal dispositions and for this design different signal disposition between parent and

child processes are a requirement. Moreover, this architecture does not require an administrative centralized process constantly monitoring which clients are currently online, to whom the messages should be delivered. Instead, it outsources this task to the kernel which manages signal distribution.

C. Portability issues

Even though, only portable Unix syscalls are used and the number of dependencies is reduced to the utmost minimum of GCC and the C standard library, some portability issues arise when deploying in a multi-platform fashion.

The back-end is compiled with GCC and run in two Debian-based distros: Ubuntu and Kali Linux, the former is a 32-bit system. A single compilation difference between the two platforms rendered the back-end service completely useless in one instance. The root cause of the faulty behaviour was then established using a syscall and signals monitoring tool like *strace* in a very cumbersome process. The bug was caused by a difference in the default flags assigned by the compiler to the syscall assigning a signal disposition.

Thus, it is illusory to think that restricting the dependencies to the bare minimum of the C standard library and GCC will make the code perfectly compatible across GNU/Linux systems. Debugging unexplained behaviour will still be arduous.

D. Security

The chat server runs as a long-lasting daemon, therefore leaving at least one port open to the public internet from which the clients will establish a connection with the server. It must be taken for granted that the open port will eventually be discovered by web-scanning botnets that periodically scan targeted hitlists (specially know IP ranges from cloud providers) or random IP ranges [15][18]. Accordingly, it is necessary to secure the application to not compromise the infrastructure.

The back-end service is not run inside a container, since this would reduce the portability across Unix systems, e.g. the BSDs do not have kernel features such as cgroups and Linux namespaces, which make natively running typical container management systems like Docker impossible [16].

An alternative way of sandboxing the application without containers is running the service as a specially created system user account with the minimum amount possible of privileges. Thereupon, even if the service is compromised the amount of possible damage is limited to the reduced capabilities of the system user. Furthermore, a long authentication token is required to access any given chat session.

V. CONCLUSION

Creating a back-end service from the ground up gives the developer the freedom of choosing between a thread-oriented, process-oriented, pre-emptively or non-pre-emptively scheduled architecture. The chat service developed in this work consists of a mainly IO-bound workload, so that it benefits from a pre-emptively scheduled architecture which changes process handling clients as soon as they block [13]. Nonetheless, it must be acknowledged that the development

productivity, particularly because of the debugging of syscalls with *strace*, is not high compared to a high-level framework with mature networking libraries.

Furthermore, although the software was exclusively tested on Debian-based platforms, the dependency restriction of only using the C standard library and compiling with GCC did not guaranteed an entirely bug-free portability between Unix platforms. A different default initialization of the parameters of some syscalls generated difficult to find sources of faulty and unequal behaviour between platforms. Therefore, even when reducing dependencies to a bare minimum, it is an illusion to think that fully portable code can easily be generated, so that to some extent the appeal and reasoning behind OS-virtualization (container management systems) can be better grasped.

On the other hand, since the data model used in this implementation is immutable and uncomplicated, the implementation of an asynchronous data management system with transactional guarantees delivers benefits due to the reduction of system dependencies. A deployment in the cloud or in a local system is very expeditious and those not require the management and configuration of a DBMS.

The software created and distributed through the public repository

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