

Transactifying Apache

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Abstract

Apache is a large-scale industrial multi-process and multi-threaded application, which uses lock-based synchronization. We report on our experience in modifying Apache to employ transactional memory instead of locks, a process we refer to as *transactification*; we are not aware of any previous efforts to transactify legacy software of such a large scale. Along the way, we learned some valuable lessons about which tools one should use, which parts of the code one should transactify and which are better left untouched, as well as on the intricacy of commit blocks. We also stumbled across weaknesses of existing software transactional memory (STM) toolkits, leading us to identify desirable features they are currently lacking. Finally, we present performance results from running Apache on a 32-core machine, showing that, there are scenarios where the performance of the STM-based version is close to that of the lock-based version. These results suggest that there are applications for which the overhead of using a software-only implementation of transactional memory is insignificant.

Categories and Subject Descriptors D.1.3 [Programming Techniques]: Concurrent Programming

General Terms Measurement, Performance, Experimentation

Keywords Software Transactional Memory

1. Introduction

The vast shift to multi-core machines in recent years creates a major challenge for software developers, who must learn how to exploit the parallelism that such architectures can offer. In this context, *Transactional Memory (TM)* is one of the leading paradigms targeted at allowing programmers to easily harness the parallelism of future multi-core machines and to extract the performance promise these systems can offer. Since hardware transactional memory implementations are not yet in the market, *Software Transactional Memory (STM)* tools offer a viable alternative in the interim.

One of the principal challenges that TM systems confront, (besides delivering performance), is the ability to handle large-scale commercial applications. Developers that wish to employ TM, face the challenge of applying it to large legacy code. As TM systems are maturing, these aspects of convertibility and completeness are becoming critical in order to allow TM to shift from a promising concept to a full-fledged commercial tool. In this work, we try, via a design example, to answer how far we are from achieving these goals.

To date, TM was mostly employed within the niche of complex concurrent data structures, such as red-black trees and skip lists [9, 7], and isolated scientific algorithms (such as STAMP [3]); it was additionally used for benchmarks such as STMBench7 [8], which measures operations on a complex yet still artificial object graph. Moreover, Transactional Memory was mostly used thus far in benchmarks that were implemented explicitly with TM from the outset.

In this paper, we use Transactional Memory for the first time in the context of large-scale industrial software, which, moreover, does not pertain to any of the typical niches of transactional memory benchmarks. Furthermore, we convert legacy code, which used lock-based synchronization, to work with transac-

tional memory, rather than write the benchmark from scratch. We refer to this conversion process as *transactification*. Specifically, we transactify the Apache web server. Since Apache is written in C, we needed to employ C-based STM toolkits. We next recognized that it would not be feasible to use *library-based* STM tools, as this would entail changing all reads and writes to global variables in the code. Instead, we opted for *compiler-based* STMs. We experimented with two such tools, TANGER [5] and Intel’s STM Compiler [15]. Section 2 provides background on Apache and the two STM tools we attempted to use in this endeavor.

Our goal in this exercise is twofold. First, we wanted to examine whether the transactional memory paradigm is broadly applicable, outside its traditional niches, in contexts where a high level of parallelism is already obtained using lock-based synchronization. Second, as transactional memory is being touted as the panacea for the limited parallelism of coarse-grained locks, and since coarse-grained locks that limit parallelism are widely used in legacy code, one can anticipate a growing need for transactification of legacy software. We sought to learn how painful such a process can be, and what can be done in order to facilitate it.

In the course of this project, we learned some valuable lessons. For example, we have seen that tools vary in the features they are able to support, which has significant impact on their usability in such a large-scale projects. We have further learned that in such a large system, it is more realistic to transactify only pertinent parts of the code, while most of the code is better left untouched. Finally, we have found that there is a vital need to sometimes defer irrevocable actions to the end of a transaction; this feature is provided by a language construct called a *commit block*. In Section 3, we describe in detail our transactification process, including the hurdles we have encountered and the means used to overcome them.

Though we finally managed to overcome the hurdles and create working transactified code, the process left us somewhat unsatisfied with the current state of the art. In Section 4, we compile a *wish list* of features that would have been very helpful in this process, had they been provided by TM toolkits; for the consideration of developers of future STM versions.

In Section 5 we study the performance of the transactified version of Apache on a 32-core machine. Note that since the legacy Apache code is already tuned

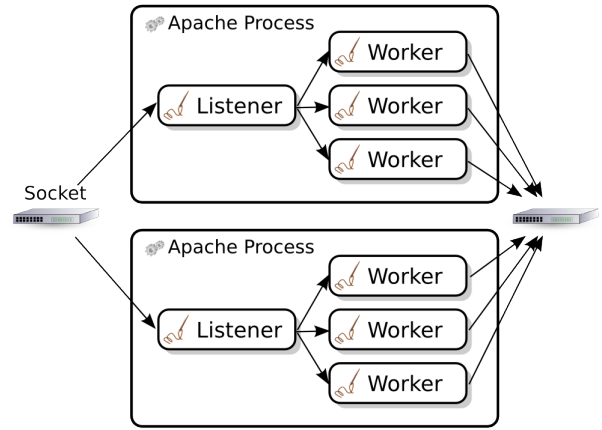


Figure 1. Apache worker MPM architecture.

to work well with multiple threads and multiple processes, and since we use software-only TM solutions, which were not optimized for this application, one could expect the transactified version to be significantly slower than the original. Somewhat surprisingly, we show that this is not the case, and the transactified version’s performance is competitive to that of the lock-based legacy code. As future TMs are expected to incorporate hardware support, and also to be better optimized for a range of application, our results suggests that in the future, porting applications to TM may be valuable.

Section 6 summarizes the lesson we learned in the transactification process.

2. Background: Software and Tools

2.1 Apache

Apache [16] HTTP server is a popular web server application written in C. It supports working on multiprocessor machines with several multi-processing modules (MPMs) each offering a different strategy for handling requests and distributing the work. The most popular threaded MPM is the *worker* MPM, which works by running multiple worker-threads under several processes, each thread handles a single request at a time. In each such process there are several worker threads, and also a listener thread that fetches incoming requests and dispatches them to the available workers, as illustrated in Figure 1.

There are not many points of interaction between the worker threads themselves, where transactional memory can be used. One such place is Apache’s memory

cache implemented by the `mod_mem_cache` module. This module enables the workers of each process to share a cache of recently served requests. A new request can be served from the memory cache, and save the time required to access the disk and generate the requested page. Since the cache is shared among multiple threads, it is synchronized by a single lock, therefore a good candidate for converting into transactional memory.

Apache's cache is implemented with a couple of modules. The first, `mod_cache`, implements the logic related to caching. It tests the metadata of each requests to see if it can be supplied from the cache, according to the request's HTTP headers and the system configuration. It uses one of the underlying cache implementation modules, `mod_mem_cache` or `mod_disk_cache` to do the actual caching.

The `mod_mem_cache` module implements a memory cache using a shared hash table and priority queue. The key to the hash table is the URL of the request, converted into a canonical form. The cache is limited both by size and by the number of elements, and by memory size, so on insertion, sometimes lower priority entries are removed from the cache. The priority is determined by one of two algorithms: LRU, removing the least recently used entries first, and GDSF (Greedy Dual Size Frequency) assigning score to entries based on the cost of a cache miss, and the entry size.

2.2 C STM Systems

C and C++ STM systems divide into two kinds: Library based and compiler based. Library based STMs [4, 6, 13] are built as a C library. Every transaction begins with a call into the library, and commits by another call. All reads and writes to global variables must be done through special library functions when in a transaction. This requires a great amount of work for converting an application to use STM. Not only accesses to global memory in the function that started the transaction must be converted, but also any access from any function being called from this function. We therefore ruled out this approach.

In contrast, compiler-based STM [5, 15, 1, 2] use a specialized compiler, which has extended syntax for transactional memory atomic blocks. The compiler can then automatically convert memory accesses inside transactions into calls to the underlying library. The term *transactification* sometimes refer to this pro-

cess. We experimented with two compiler-based STMs, which we now describe.

2.2.1 TANGER

The TANGER [5] transctifying compiler is an open-source academic compiler extension for LLVM [12], an extensible compiler framework. Tanager aims at creating a transactifying compiler that is independant of the STM system used. It works with the `tinySTM` [6] library, but can easily be extended to use other STM libraries by writing a simple plugin.

TANGER is accompanied with the TARIFA [5] tool, which transactifies compiled binaries, even without the sources. This feature is a very important advantage when modifying legacy code, where often not all the source code is available, as the code uses legacy libraries.

2.2.2 Intel STM Compiler

Intel has published [15] an experimental STM compiler based on their industrial compiler ICC. It solves the missing code problem by adding some new function attributes to the language in order to tell the compiler which functions need to be transactified. The attribute `tm_callable` tells the compiler that a transactified version of the function will be needed. This way, only functions that are required inside transactions can be marked as `tm_callable` and be transactified.

Although ICC uses a proprietary STM manager, Intel has published their ABI [10] allowing for other STM managers to replace their own. This feature and its selective transactification ability were the main reasons why we preferred ICC.

In the latest version of Intel STM Compiler, support for abort and commit handlers was also added to the system, by registering a callback function from inside a transaction.

An extension to the Gnu Compiler Collection (GCC) is being developed [1] to enable transactional memory support for GCC. It is intended to work with `tinySTM`, but being open source, other STM systems will probably be ported too. The syntax of the C/C++ language extensions is designed to be compatible with ICC. This means that applications converted for ICC will probably be compilable under GCC with this extension, without much modification.

3. Transactification

3.1 Which STM to use?

TANGER created a transactified version of each function in a compilation unit. Every function call inside a transaction was then converted to a call to the new version. This method is a major disadvantage when working on a large application. Many functions do not need a transactified version and this causes unneeded work for the compiler and the linker. Moreover, sometimes the transactification might fail because of calls to functions whose source is not available and cannot be transactified. This can cause the entire build process to fail, where in fact the code can be transactified without any error.

This drawback was the main reason why we eventually chose to use Intel's STM Compiler. Lately, a new release of tanger was announced, one in which the developer can annotate which functions should be transactified. However, we did not get a chance to try it.

3.2 What to transactify

We have decided to focus our change in Apache with the memory cache module. As described in Section 2.1, it is a significant point of interaction between Apache's worker threads, and since it is implemented with a course-grained lock, it is ideal for converting into STM. Another advantage is that it is a well encapsulated module, allowing us to see how can we convert only a small part of a larger system.

The conversion process included converting critical sections protected by the cache module's main lock into atomic blocks, and decorating required functions as `tm_callable`. The module had used atomic instructions for some memory accesses, and these were converted to full transactions in atomic blocks, so that collisions with these accesses will be detected.

3.3 Defining atomic blocks

Some transactions, after conversion contained code that belonged with the transactions, but did not need necessarily to run atomically with the transaction. An example might be a transaction removing an object from the cache, and freeing its memory. While the removal operation must be protected inside a transaction as it is using the shared memory structure of the cache, the memory release can happen any time later, since no other thread can point to the removed object after it had been removed from the cache.

For lock based systems, having the memory release as part of the critical section might cause a thread to hold the critical section a little longer than needed, but does not cause any problems other than that. On transactional memory systems, having accesses to other memory structures such as those required by memory management might cause collisions with other threads, thus slowing down the system in a similar way. In addition, the cleanup functions need to be transactified, which requires additional work both from the programmer and the compiler.

In our case, we chose not to transactify such functions, but instead remove them from the atomic section, and execute them after the transaction had committed. Although this requires some changes to the code, the changes are limited to the call-site, and need not modify any of the called libraries.

For example, the following critical section in the `open_entity` function (Figure 2) is responsible for retrieving a page to fulfill a request from the server. It will increment the reference count on the cached page, and register a decrement function to be invoked upon completing the request. When we converted the critical section into a transaction, we did not want the function `apr_pool_cleanup_register` to be called from inside the transaction, as transactifying it would require working on another library, the Apache Portable Runtime library, thus breaking encapsulation.

The semantics of requests and subrequests in apache guaranteed the request could not be completed before the return of this function, therefore we could move the registration of the cleanup function out of the atomic section, as seen in Figure 3. However, having a commit handler construct in the language would make such conversions easier, with it we could register a commit handler from within the transaction, and have the STM system automatically invoke it once the transaction had committed.

3.4 Commit Handlers

Commit and undo handlers are pieces of code that are scheduled by a transaction to run when the transaction will commit, or abort, respectively. This mechanism, was suggested in [14]. Commit handlers are described there as a mechanism that allows finalization of tasks, for instance, a transactional system call such as write to file might have its permanent side effects be executed in a commit handler. Abort handlers are called

```

static int open_entity(cache_handle_t *h, request_rec *r, const char *key) {
    ...
    if (sconf->lock) apr_thread_mutex_lock(sconf->lock);

    obj = (cache_object_t *) cache_find(sconf->cache_cache, key);
    if (obj) {
        if (obj->complete) {
            request_rec *rmain=r, *rtmp;
            apr_atomic_inc32(&obj->refcount);
            /* cache is worried about overall counts, not 'open' ones */
            cache_update(sconf->cache_cache, obj);

            /* If this is a subrequest, register the cleanup against the main
             * request. This will prevent the cache object from being cleaned up
             * from under the request after the subrequest is destroyed. */
            rtmp = r;
            while (rtmp) {
                rmain = rtmp;
                rtmp = rmain->main;
            }
            apr_pool_cleanup_register(rmain->pool, obj, decrement_refcount,
                apr_pool_cleanup_null);
        }
        else obj = NULL;
    }

    if (sconf->lock) apr_thread_mutex_unlock(sconf->lock);
    ...
}

```

Figure 2. Original open_entity function.

when a transaction is aborted and can reverse the side-effects of a transaction. These handlers can sometimes be used to implement more efficient transactions. For example, if allocating memory inside a transaction, (assuming without a specialized memory allocator which is available in many STMs), the STM would need to log all the memory accesses to the memory management data structures, and undo these writes in case of an abort. A more efficient solution could be allocating the memory immediately, and in case of an abort just free the memory in an abort handler.

From our perspective, commit handlers could have been used to make the modifications we wanted in the atomic blocks, and move finalization functions out of atomic blocks just by registering them as commit handlers. In the given example, the call to `apr_pool_cleanup_register` could have been converted into a call registering this function as a commit handler.

4. Wish List

4.1 Handler Closures

While commit handlers can aid a lot in the process of transactifying a legacy application, their current syntax in Intel STM Compiler is very limiting. Handlers must be given as a pointer to function of a specific signature, so a developer trying to move a piece of code out of an atomic block, would still need to write a new function. It would be nice to have a language construct that defines a new commit handler right where it is being registered, however this requires the language to support closures, and of course there are many problems implementing those in a statically-typed language without garbage collection such as C.

4.2 Statistics and Profiling

Intel's STM manager collects statistics about the transactions being run, their size, abort rates, etc. Unfortunately however, it cannot work with a multiprocess application such as Apache. This limits the ability to investigate the performance of converted applications to

```

static int open_entity(cache_handle_t *h, request_rec *r, const char *key)
{
    ...
    __tm_atomic {
        obj = (cache_object_t *) cache_find(sconf->cache_cache, key);
        if (obj) {
            if (obj->complete) {
                ++obj->refcount;
                /* cache is worried about overall counts, not 'open' ones */
                cache_update(sconf->cache_cache, obj);
            }
            else obj = NULL;
        }
    }

    /* Register the object for removal from the cache after cleanup */
    if (obj && obj->complete) {
        request_rec *rmain=r, *rtmp;
        /* If this is a subrequest, register the cleanup against the main
         * request. This will prevent the cache object from being cleaned up
         * from under the request after the subrequest is destroyed. */
        rtmp = r;
        while (rtmp) {
            rmain = rtmp;
            rtmp = rmain->main;
        }
        apr_pool_cleanup_register(rmain->pool, obj, decrement_refcount,
            apr_pool_cleanup_null);
    }
    ...
}

```

Figure 3. Transactified open_entity function.

only limited runs with only one process, or having only black box measurements of the system.

5. Evaluation

5.1 Methodology

The transactified web server was evaluated using *Siege* [11], an HTTP load testing tool. The server was loaded with the set of UNIX man-pages - a set of small textual files typical of some web sites. Each page was served using the *man2html* program, uncompressed and converted into HTML, to make sure the serving of files requires enough computational resources to make the use of cache worthwhile.

The *man2html* program is a Common Gateway Interface (CGI) program that serves unix manual (man) pages on internet sites. The pages are usually stores compressed in gzip format, and formatted using the troff format. The program receives a request for a man page from the webserver, uncompresses the required

file and converts it to HTML. As every CGI program it outputs the result with relevant HTTP headers.

The default caching policy of apache forbids caching dynamically generated pages such as those of *man2html*, unless the HTTP headers of the resulting page clearly specify otherwise. To make caching of the *man2html* pages possible, we modified *man2html* to output such headers, specifying the output can be cached for one hour.

The pages were requested randomly according to Zipf distribution, whose parameter *s* determines how frequently the most popular pages were visited, thus controlling the amount of locality in the requests.

The experiments were done with two computers connected with Gigabit ethernet. Both machines were an 8 processors SMP of quad core 2.3GHz AMD Opterons with 126GB of RAM, with a total of 32 cores.

```

static int open_entity(cache_handle_t *h, request_rec *r, const char *key) {
    ...
    __tm_atomic {
        obj = (cache_object_t *) cache_find(sconf->cache_cache, key);
        if (obj) {
            if (obj->complete) {
                request_rec *rmain=r, *rtmp;
                ++obj->refcount;
                /* cache is worried about overall counts, not 'open' ones */
                cache_update(sconf->cache_cache, obj);

                /* If this is a subrequest, register the cleanup against the main
                 * request. This will prevent the cache object from being cleaned
                 * up from under the request after the subrequest is destroyed. */
                rtmp = r;
                while (rtmp) {
                    rmain = rtmp;
                    rtmp = rmain->main;
                }
                on_commit {
                    apr_pool_cleanup_register(rmain->pool, obj, decrement_refcount,
                    apr_pool_cleanup_null);
                }
            }
            else obj = NULL;
        }
    }
    ...
}

```

Figure 4. open_entity function with a commit handler closure

5.2 Results

We compared the average latency and request throughput when running on different number of cores, and with different values. For every graph there are three experiments comparing the results of an Apache server running without a cache, a cached version without our transactional modifications, and the transactified version.

With low locality ($s = 0.1$), the cache has almost no benefit, and the penalty of the STM increases with the number of processors, causing it to be less practical, as we learn from Figure 5(a) and 5(b). Almost all of the requests results in cache misses, therefore causing more work inside transactions, and increasing the relative cost of using STM. However, this situation is not a typical use of Apache's cache.

With higher locality, such as $s = 1$ (Figure 6(a), 6(b)), the overhead of STM is still significant, but using the cache is now worthwhile, even with STM.

With even higher locality ($s = 2$), the contention on the cache is high even with small number of cores, and both versions show similar results. (Figure 7(a), 7(b)).

It is worth noting that in all the tests above there is a minimum number of cores above which the transactified version performs as good as or better than the original version. For some reason the lock based version's performance also decrease when using a large number of cores, and while this is also true for the transactified version, it still remains with a little higher throughput than the original.

In order to investigate this decrease in throughput, we wanted to show the transaction abort rate for these experiments. As notes in Section 4.2, Intel STM manager statistics mechanism was unable to work with multiple processes. In order to collect internal data about the transactions we ran Apache in a single process debugging mode. Figure 8(b) shows the average number of aborts per second is shown, for the experiment with the transactified version, while Figure 8(a), shows the throughput achieved by this experiment, com-

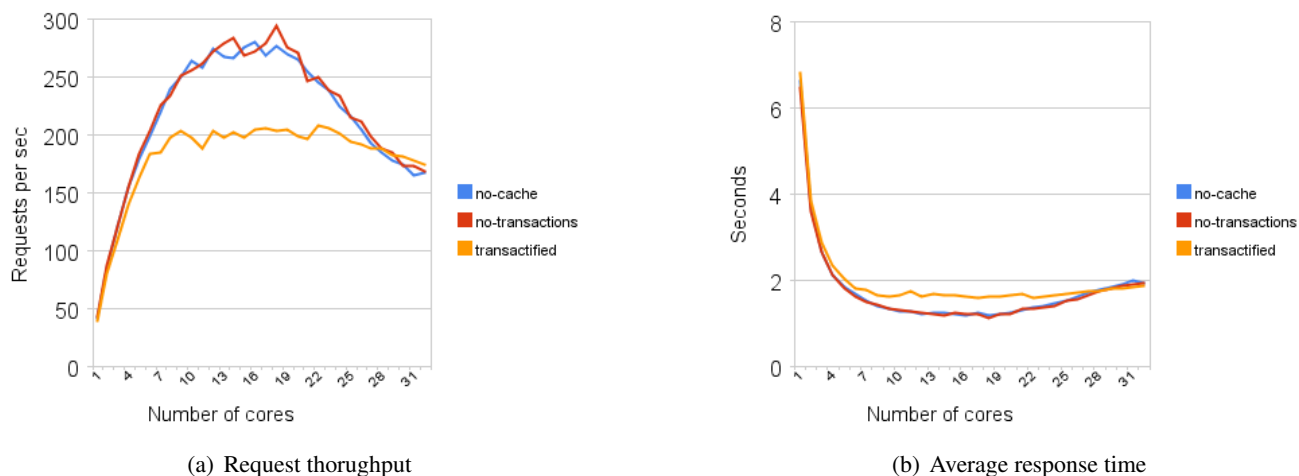


Figure 5. $s = 0.1$: Low locality. The penalty of STM increases to the point it outweighs the benefit of using the cache.

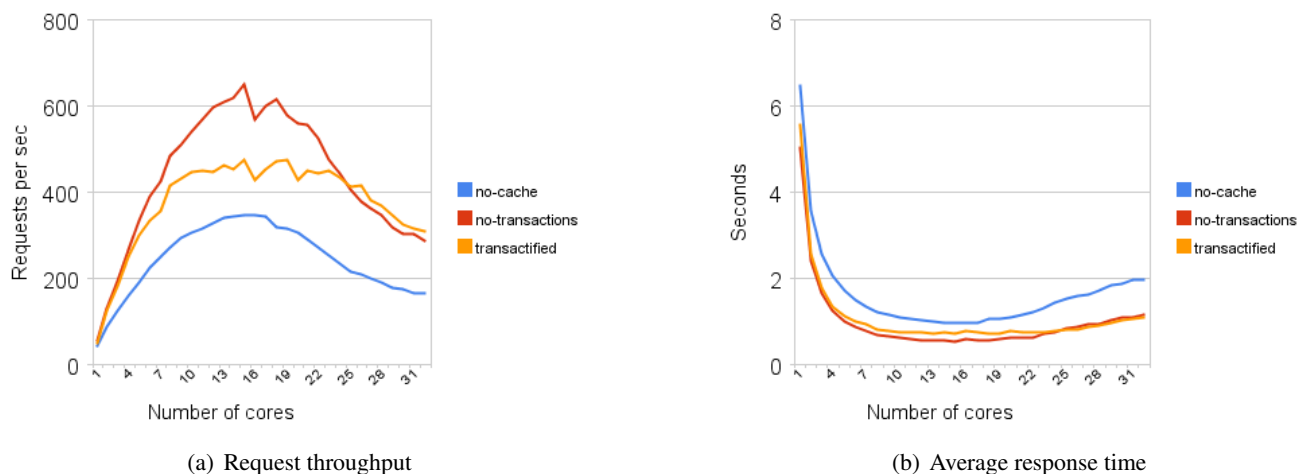


Figure 6. $s = 1$: Medium locality. The penalty of STM remains but the cache is an improvement.

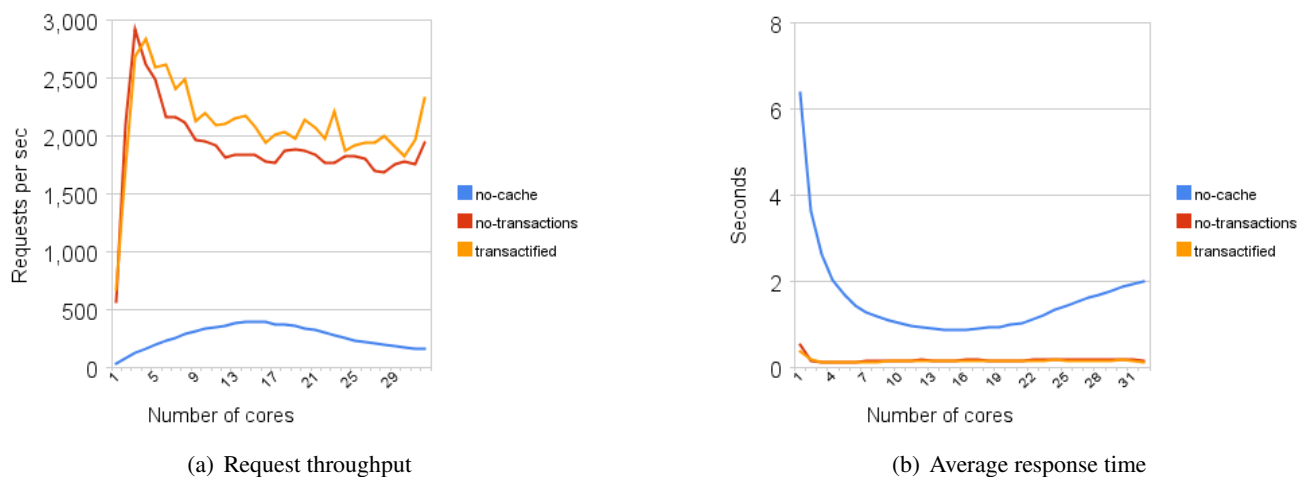


Figure 7. $s = 2$: High locality

pared with running the no-cache and no-transactions versions under the same settings. The increase in contention shown in Figure 8(b) explains the decrease in request throughput, for the transactional version.

6. Conclusions

- Out of 340,000 lines of code in the Apache Web server, the cache module is comprised of only 6651 lines of code, of which only 273 lines were changed by our modifications. This shows the importance of being able to modify only encapsulated sections of the code, and interoperating with legacy code that still uses locks.
- Having commit handlers in the STM system is not only needed for creating efficient open transactions, but can also aid the process of transactifying legacy code.
- There is great importance in working on real-world applications as they may reveal challenges resulting from engineering problems and not only algorithmic and theoretical problems.

There are many STM systems currently available, and one immediate direction would be to compare them using this benchmark. This would require writing plugins for any such system to match Intel's TM ABI.

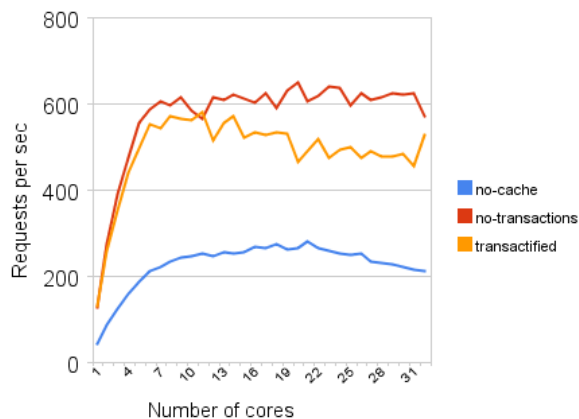
In addition, there are other applications that might be interesting as transactional memory applications, following the methods we used.

Acknowledgments

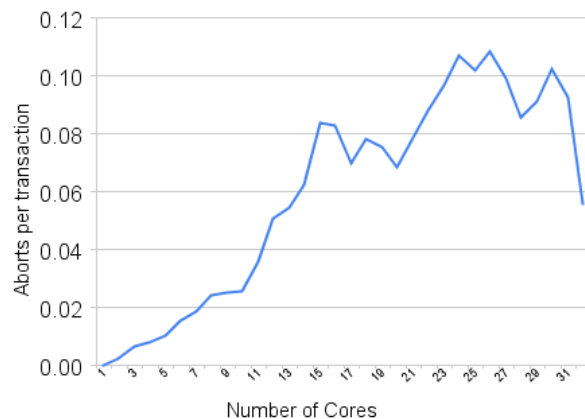
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(a) Request throughput. Without the additional processes apache fails to scale with high number of cores. STM suffers a decrease in performance but is comparable.



(b) Abort rate. The abort rate increase with the number of cores might explain the decrease in transaction rate.

Figure 8. $s = 1$: Medium locality, a single process.

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