

Systemd for Administrators

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1 Abstract

As many of you know, systemd is the new Fedora init system, starting with F14, and it is also on its way to being adopted in a number of other distributions as well (for example, OpenSUSE). For administrators systemd provides a variety of new features and changes and enhances the administrative process substantially. This blog story is the first part of a series of articles I plan to post roughly every week for the next months. In every post I will try to explain one new feature of systemd. Many of these features are small and simple, so these stories should be interesting to a broader audience. However, from time to time we'll dive a little bit deeper into the great new features systemd provides you with.

2 Disclaimer

This handbook is written by Lennart Poettering. There are maybe some additions, cuts or other changes for increasing readability. Please visit Lennarts Blog for the original Blogposts:

<https://0pointer.de/blog>

3 Verifying Bootup

Traditionally, when booting up a Linux system, you see a lot of little messages passing by on your screen. As we work on speeding up and parallelizing the boot process these messages are becoming visible for a shorter and shorter time only and be less and less readable – if they are shown at all, given we use graphical boot splash technology like Plymouth these days. Nonetheless the information of the boot screens was and still is very relevant, because it shows you for each service that is being started as part of bootup, whether it managed to start up successfully or failed (with those green or red [OK] or [FAILED] indicators). To improve the situation for machines that boot up fast and parallelized and to make this information more nicely available during runtime, we added a feature to systemd that tracks and remembers for each service whether it started up successfully, whether it exited with a non-zero exit code, whether it timed out, or whether it terminated abnormally (by segfaulting or similar), both during start-up and runtime. By simply typing `systemctl` in your shell you can query the state of all services, both systemd native and SysV/LSB services:

```
[root@lambda] ~# systemctl
```

UNIT	LOAD	ACTIVE	SUB
dev-hugepages.automount	loaded	active	running
dev-mqueue.automount	loaded	active	running
proc-sys-fs-binfmt.misc.automount	loaded	active	waiting
sys-kernel-debug.automount	loaded	active	waiting
sys-kernel-security.automount	loaded	active	waiting
sys-devices-pc...0000:02:00.0-net-eth0.device	loaded	active	plugged
sys-devices-virtual-tty-tty9.device	loaded	active	plugged
-.mount	loaded	active	mounted
boot.mount	loaded	active	mounted
dev-hugepages.mount	loaded	active	mounted
dev-mqueue.mount	loaded	active	mounted
home.mount	loaded	active	mounted
proc-sys-fs-binfmt.misc.mount	loaded	active	mounted
abrtd.service	loaded	active	running
bus.service	loaded	active	running
getty@tty2.service	loaded	active	running
getty@tty3.service	loaded	active	running
getty@tty4.service	loaded	active	running
getty@tty5.service	loaded	active	running
getty@tty6.service	loaded	active	running
haldaemon.service	loaded	active	running
hdapsd@sda.service	loaded	active	running
irqbalance.service	loaded	active	running
iscsi.service	loaded	active	exited
iscsid.service	loaded	active	exited
livesys-late.service	loaded	active	exited
livesys.service	loaded	active	exited
lvm2-monitor.service	loaded	active	exited
mdmonitor.service	loaded	active	running
modem-manager.service	loaded	active	running
netfs.service	loaded	active	exited
NetworkManager.service	loaded	active	running
ntpd.service	loaded	maintenance	maintenance

LOAD = Reflects whether the unit definition was properly loaded.
 ACTIVE = The high-level unit activation state, i.e. generalization of SUB.
 SUB = The low-level unit activation state, values depend on unit type.
 JOB = Pending job for the unit.

221 units listed. Pass --all to see inactive units, too.

```
[root@lambda] ~#
```

(I have shortened the output above a little, and removed a few lines not relevant for this blog post.) Look at the **ACTIVE** column, which shows you the high-level state of a service (or in fact of any kind of unit systemd maintains, which can be more than just services, but we'll have a look on this in a later blog posting), whether it is **active** (i.e. running), **inactive** (i.e. not running) or in any other state. If you look closely you'll see one item in the list that is marked

maintenance and highlighted in red. This informs you about a service that failed to run or otherwise encountered a problem. In this case this is `ntpd`. Now, let's find out what actually happened to `ntpd`, with the `systemctl status` command:

```
[root@lambda] ~# systemctl status ntpd.service
ntpd.service - Network Time Service
   Loaded: loaded (/etc/systemd/system/ntpd.service)
   Active: maintenance
     Main: 953 (code=exited, status=255)
    CGroup: name=systemd:/systemd-1/ntpd.service
[root@lambda] ~#
```

This shows us that NTP terminated during runtime (when it ran as PID 953), and tells us exactly the error condition: the process exited with an exit status of 255.

In a later `systemd` version, we plan to hook this up to ABRT, as soon as this enhancement request is fixed. Then, if `systemctl status` shows you information about a service that crashed it will direct you right-away to the appropriate crash dump in ABRT.

Summary: use `systemctl` and `systemctl status` as modern, more complete replacements for the traditional boot-up status messages of SysV services. `systemctl status` not only captures in more detail the error condition but also shows runtime errors in addition to start-up errors. That's it for this week, make sure to come back next week, for the next posting about `systemd` for administrators!

4 Which Service Owns Which Processes?

On most Linux systems the number of processes that are running by default is substantial. Knowing which process does what and where it belongs to becomes increasingly difficult. Some services even maintain a couple of worker processes which clutter the "ps" output with many additional processes that are often not easy to recognize. This is further complicated if daemons spawn arbitrary 3rd-party processes, as Apache does with CGI processes, or cron does with user jobs.

A slight remedy for this is often the process inheritance tree, as shown by "ps xaf". However this is usually not reliable, as processes whose parents die get reparented to PID 1, and hence all information about inheritance gets lost. If a process "double forks" it hence loses its relationships to the processes that started it. (This actually is supposed to be a feature and is relied on for the traditional Unix daemonizing logic.) Furthermore processes can freely change their names with `PR_SETNAME` or by patching `argv[0]`, thus making it harder to recognize them. In fact they can play hide-and-seek with the administrator pretty nicely this way.

In `systemd` we place every process that is spawned in a control group named after its service. Control groups (or cgroups) at their most basic are simply groups

of processes that can be arranged in a hierarchy and labelled individually. When processes spawn other processes these children are automatically made members of the parents cgroup. Leaving a cgroup is not possible for unprivileged processes. Thus, cgroups can be used as an effective way to label processes after the service they belong to and be sure that the service cannot escape from the label, regardless how often it forks or renames itself. Furthermore this can be used to safely kill a service and all processes it created, again with no chance of escaping.

In today's installment I want to introduce you to two commands you may use to relate systemd services and processes. The first one, is the well known ps command which has been updated to show cgroup information along the other process details. And this is how it looks:

\$ ps xawf -eo	pid,user,cgroup,args	COMMAND
PID USER	CGROUP	
2 root	-	[kthreadd]
3 root	-	_ [ksoftirqd/0]
[...]		
4281 root	-	_ [flush-8:0]
1 root	name=systemd:/systemd-1	/sbin/init
455 root	name=systemd:/systemd-1/sysinit.service	/sbin/udevd -d
28188 root	name=systemd:/systemd-1/sysinit.service	_ /sbin/udevd -d
28191 root	name=systemd:/systemd-1/sysinit.service	_ /sbin/udevd -d
1131 root	name=systemd:/systemd-1/auditd.service	auditd
1133 root	name=systemd:/systemd-1/auditd.service	_ /sbin/audispd
1135 root	name=systemd:/systemd-1/auditd.service	_ /usr/sbin/sedispd
1193 root	name=systemd:/systemd-1/rsyslog.service	/sbin/rsyslogd -c 4
1195 root	name=systemd:/systemd-1/cups.service	cupsd -C /etc/cups/cupsd.conf
1210 root	name=systemd:/systemd-1/irqbalance.service	irqbalance
1216 root	name=systemd:/systemd-1/dbus.service	/usr/sbin/modem-manager
1219 root	name=systemd:/systemd-1/dbus.service	/usr/libexec/polkit-1/polkitd
1317 root	name=systemd:/systemd-1/abrt.service	/usr/sbin/abrt -d -s
1332 root	name=systemd:/systemd-1/getty@.service	/tty2 /sbin/mingetty tty2
1339 root	name=systemd:/systemd-1/getty@.service	/tty3 /sbin/mingetty tty3
1342 root	name=systemd:/systemd-1/getty@.service	/tty5 /sbin/mingetty tty5
1343 root	name=systemd:/systemd-1/getty@.service	/tty4 /sbin/mingetty tty4
1344 root	name=systemd:/systemd-1/crond.service	crond
1346 root	name=systemd:/systemd-1/getty@.service	/tty6 /sbin/mingetty tty6
1362 root	name=systemd:/systemd-1/ssh.service	/usr/sbin/ssh
1759 lennart	name=systemd:/user/lennart/1	gnome-screensaver
909 lennart	name=systemd:/user/lennart/1	gnome-terminal
1913 lennart	name=systemd:/user/lennart/1	_ gnome-pty-helper
1914 lennart	name=systemd:/user/lennart/1	_ bash
29231 lennart	name=systemd:/user/lennart/1	_ ssh tango
2221 lennart	name=systemd:/user/lennart/1	_ bash
4193 lennart	name=systemd:/user/lennart/1	_ ssh tango
2461 lennart	name=systemd:/user/lennart/1	_ bash
27251 lennart	name=systemd:/user/lennart/1	_ empathy

(Note that this output is shortened, I have removed most of the kernel threads here, since they are not relevant in the context of this blog story)

In the third column you see the cgroup systemd assigned to each process. You'll find that the udev processes are in the name=systemd:/systemd-1/sysinit.service cgroup, which is where systemd places all processes started by the sysinit.service service, which covers early boot.

My personal recommendation is to set the shell alias `psc` to the `ps` command line shown above:

```
alias psc='ps xawf -eo pid,user,cgroup,args '
```

With this service information of processes is just four keypresses away! A different way to present the same information is the `systemd-cgls` tool we ship with `systemd`. It shows the `cgroup` hierarchy in a pretty tree. Its output looks like this:

```
$ systemd-cgls
+ 2 [kthreadd]
[... ]
+ 4281 [flush -8:0]
+ user
| \ lennart
| | \ 1
| | | + 1495 pam: gdm-password
| | | + 1521 gnome-session
| | | + 1534 dbus-launch --sh-syntax --exit-with-session
| | | + 1603 /usr/libexec/gconfd-2
| | | + 1612 /usr/libexec/gnome-settings-daemon
| | | + 1615 /usr/libexec/gvfsd
| | \ 29519 systemd-cgls
| \ systemd-1
| | + 1 /sbin/init
| | + ntpd.service
| | | \ 4112 /usr/sbin/ntpd -n -u ntp:ntp -g
| | + systemd-logger.service
| | | \ 1499 /lib/systemd/systemd-logger
| | + accounts-daemon.service
| | | \ 1496 /usr/libexec/accounts-daemon
| | + rtkit-daemon.service
| | | \ 1473 /usr/libexec/rtkit-daemon
| | + console-kit-daemon.service
| | | \ 1408 /usr/sbin/console-kit-daemon --no-daemon
| | + prefdm.service
| | | + 1376 /usr/sbin/gdm-binary -nodaemon
| | | + 1419 /usr/bin/dbus-launch --exit-with-session
| | | \ 1511 /usr/bin/gnome-keyring-daemon --daemonize --login
| | + getty@.service
| | | + tty6
| | | | \ 1346 /sbin/mingetty tty6
| | | + tty4
| | | | \ 1343 /sbin/mingetty tty4
| | | + tty5
| | | | \ 1342 /sbin/mingetty tty5
| | | + tty3
| | | | \ 1339 /sbin/mingetty tty3
| | | \ tty2
| | | | \ 1332 /sbin/mingetty tty2
| | \ 28191 /sbin/udev -d
```

(This too is shortened, the same way)

As you can see, this command shows the processes by their `cgroup` and hence service, as `systemd` labels the `cgroups` after the services. For example, you can easily see that the auditing service `auditd.service` spawns three individual processes, `auditd`, `auditp` and `sedispatch`.

If you look closely you will notice that a number of processes have been assigned to the `cgroup` `/user/1`. At this point let's simply leave it at that `systemd` not only maintains services in `cgroups`, but user session processes as well. In a later installment we'll discuss in more detail what this about.

So much for now, come back soon for the next installment!

5 How Do I Convert A SysV Init Script Into A systemd Service File?

Traditionally, Unix and Linux services (daemons) are started via SysV init scripts. These are Bourne Shell scripts, usually residing in a directory such as `/etc/rc.d/init.d/` which when called with one of a few standardized arguments (verbs) such as `start`, `stop` or `restart` controls, i.e. starts, stops or restarts the service in question. For starts this usually involves invoking the daemon binary, which then forks a background process (more precisely daemonizes). Shell scripts tend to be slow, needlessly hard to read, very verbose and fragile. Although they are immensely flexible (after all, they are just code) some things are very hard to do properly with shell scripts, such as ordering parallelized execution, correctly supervising processes or just configuring execution contexts in all detail. systemd provides compatibility with these shell scripts, but due to the shortcomings pointed out it is recommended to install native systemd service files for all daemons installed. Also, in contrast to SysV init scripts which have to be adjusted to the distribution systemd service files are compatible with any kind of distribution running systemd (which become more and more these days...). What follows is a terse guide how to take a SysV init script and translate it into a native systemd service file. Ideally, upstream projects should ship and install systemd service files in their tarballs. If you have successfully converted a SysV script according to the guidelines it might hence be a good idea to submit the file as patch to upstream. How to prepare a patch like that will be discussed in a later installment, suffice to say at this point that the `daemon(7)` manual page shipping with systemd contains a lot of useful information regarding this.

So, let's jump right in. As an example we'll convert the init script of the ABRT daemon into a systemd service file. ABRT is a standard component of every Fedora install, and is an acronym for Automatic Bug Reporting Tool, which pretty much describes what it does, i.e. it is a service for collecting crash dumps. Its SysV script I have uploaded [here](#).

The first step when converting such a script is to read it (surprise surprise!) and distill the useful information from the usually pretty long script. In almost all cases the script consists of mostly boilerplate code that is identical or at least very similar in all init scripts, and usually copied and pasted from one to the other. So, let's extract the interesting information from the script linked above:

- A description string for the service is "Daemon to detect crashing apps". As it turns out, the header comments include a redundant number of description strings, some of them describing less the actual service but the init script to start it. systemd services include a description too, and it should describe the service and not the service file.
- The LSB header[1] contains dependency information. systemd due to its design around socket-based activation usually needs no (or very little) manually configured dependencies. (For details regarding socket activation see the original announcement blog post.) In this case the dependency on \$syslog (which encodes that abrttd requires a syslog daemon), is the only valuable information. While the header lists another dependency (\$local.fs) this one is redundant with systemd as normal system services are always started with all local file systems available.
- The LSB header suggests that this service should be started in runlevels 3 (multi-user) and 5 (graphical).
- The daemon binary is /usr/sbin/abrttd

And that's already it. The entire remaining content of this 115-line shell script is simply boilerplate or otherwise redundant code: code that deals with synchronizing and serializing startup (i.e. the code regarding lock files) or that outputs status messages (i.e. the code calling echo), or simply parsing of the verbs (i.e. the big case block).

From the information extracted above we can now write our systemd service file:

```
[Unit]
Description=Daemon to detect crashing apps
After=syslog.target

[Service]
ExecStart=/usr/sbin/abrttd
Type=forking

[Install]
WantedBy=multi-user.target
```

A little explanation of the contents of this file: The [Unit] section contains generic information about the service. systemd not only manages system services, but also devices, mount points, timer, and other components of the system. The generic term for all these objects in systemd is a unit, and the [Unit] section encodes information about it that might be applicable not only to services but also in to the other unit types systemd maintains. In this case we set the following unit settings: we set the description string and configure that

the daemon shall be started after Syslog[2], similar to what is encoded in the LSB header of the original init script. For this Syslog dependency we create a dependency of type `After=` on a systemd unit `syslog.target`. The latter is a special target unit in systemd and is the standardized name to pull in a syslog implementation. For more information about these standardized names see the `systemd.special(7)`. Note that a dependency of type `After=` only encodes the suggested ordering, but does not actually cause syslog to be started when `abrt` is – and this is exactly what we want, since `abrt` actually works fine even without syslog being around. However, if both are started (and usually they are) then the order in which they are is controlled with this dependency.

The next section is `[Service]` which encodes information about the service itself. It contains all those settings that apply only to services, and not the other kinds of units systemd maintains (mount points, devices, timers, ...). Two settings are used here: `ExecStart=` takes the path to the binary to execute when the service shall be started up. And with `Type=` we configure how the service notifies the init system that it finished starting up. Since traditional Unix daemons do this by returning to the parent process after having forked off and initialized the background daemon we set the type to `forking` here. That tells systemd to wait until the start-up binary returns and then consider the processes still running afterwards the daemon processes.

The final section is `[Install]`. It encodes information about how the suggested installation should look like, i.e. under which circumstances and by which triggers the service shall be started. In this case we simply say that this service shall be started when the `multi-user.target` unit is activated. This is a special unit (see above) that basically takes the role of the classic SysV Runlevel 3[3]. The setting `WantedBy=` has little effect on the daemon during runtime. It is only read by the `systemctl enable` command, which is the recommended way to enable a service in systemd. This command will simply ensure that our little service gets automatically activated as soon as `multi-user.target` is requested, which it is on all normal boots[4].

And that's it. Now we already have a minimal working systemd service file. To test it we copy it to `/etc/systemd/system/abrt.service` and invoke `systemctl daemon-reload`. This will make systemd take notice of it, and now we can start the service with it: `systemctl start abrt.service`. We can verify the status via `systemctl status abrt.service`. And we can stop it again via `systemctl stop abrt.service`. Finally, we can enable it, so that it is activated by default on future boots with `systemctl enable abrt.service`.

The service file above, while sufficient and basically a 1:1 translation (feature- and otherwise) of the SysV init script still has room for improvement. Here it is a little bit updated:

```
[Unit]
Description=ABRT Automated Bug Reporting Tool
After=syslog.target

[Service]
Type=dbus
BusName=com.redhat.abrt
ExecStart=/usr/sbin/abrt -d -s

[Install]
WantedBy=multi-user.target
```

So, what did we change? Two things: we improved the description string a bit. More importantly however, we changed the type of the service to dbus and configured the D-Bus bus name of the service. Why did we do this? As mentioned classic SysV services daemonize after startup, which usually involves double forking and detaching from any terminal. While this is useful and necessary when daemons are invoked via a script, this is unnecessary (and slow) as well as counterproductive when a proper process babysitter such as systemd is used. The reason for that is that the forked off daemon process usually has little relation to the original process started by systemd (after all the daemonizing scheme's whole idea is to remove this relation), and hence it is difficult for systemd to figure out after the fork is finished which process belonging to the service is actually the main process and which processes might just be auxiliary. But that information is crucial to implement advanced babysitting, i.e. supervising the process, automatic respawning on abnormal termination, collecting crash and exit code information and suchlike. In order to make it easier for systemd to figure out the main process of the daemon we changed the service type to dbus. The semantics of this service type are appropriate for all services that take a name on the D-Bus system bus as last step of their initialization[5]. ABRT is one of those. With this setting systemd will spawn the ABRT process, which will no longer fork (this is configured via the -d -s switches to the daemon), and systemd will consider the service fully started up as soon as com.redhat.abrt appears on the bus. This way the process spawned by systemd is the main process of the daemon, systemd has a reliable way to figure out when the daemon is fully started up and systemd can easily supervise it.

And that's all there is to it. We have a simple systemd service file now that encodes in 10 lines more information than the original SysV init script encoded in 115. And even now there's a lot of room left for further improvement utilizing more features systemd offers. For example, we could set `Restart=restart-always` to tell systemd to automatically restart this service when it dies. Or, we could use `OOMScoreAdjust=-500` to ask the kernel to please leave this process around when the OOM killer wreaks havoc. Or, we could use `CPU schedulingPolicy=idle` to ensure that abrt processes crash dumps in background only, always allowing the kernel to give preference to whatever else might be running and needing CPU time.

For more information about the configuration options mentioned here, see the respective man pages `systemd.unit(5)`, `systemd.service(5)`, `systemd.exec(5)`. Or, browse all of `systemd`'s man pages.

Of course, not all SysV scripts are as easy to convert as this one. But gladly, as it turns out the vast majority actually are.

That's it for today, come back soon for the next installment in our series.

6 Killing Services

Killing a system daemon is easy, right? Or is it?

Sure, as long as your daemon persists only of a single process this might actually be somewhat true. You type `killall rsyslogd` and the syslog daemon is gone. However it is a bit dirty to do it like that given that this will kill all processes which happen to be called like this, including those an unlucky user might have named that way by accident. A slightly more correct version would be to read the `.pid` file, i.e. `kill 'cat /var/run/syslogd.pid'`. That already gets us much further, but still, is this really what we want?

More often than not it actually isn't. Consider a service like Apache, or `crond`, or `atd`, which as part of their usual operation spawn child processes. Arbitrary, user configurable child processes, such as cron or at jobs, or CGI scripts, even full application servers. If you kill the main `apache/crond/atd` process this might or might not pull down the child processes too, and it's up to those processes whether they want to stay around or go down as well. Basically that means that terminating Apache might very well cause its CGI scripts to stay around, reassigned to be children of `init`, and difficult to track down.

`systemd` to the rescue: With `systemctl kill` you can easily send a signal to all processes of a service. Example:

```
# systemctl kill crond.service
```

This will ensure that `SIGTERM` is delivered to all processes of the `crond` service, not just the main process. Of course, you can also send a different signal if you wish. For example, if you are bad-ass you might want to go for `SIGKILL` right-away:

```
# systemctl kill -s SIGKILL crond.service
```

And there you go, the service will be brutally slaughtered in its entirety, regardless how many times it forked, whether it tried to escape supervision by double forking or fork bombing.

Sometimes all you need is to send a specific signal to the main process of a

service, maybe because you want to trigger a reload via SIGHUP. Instead of going via the PID file, here's an easier way to do this:

```
# systemctl kill -s HUP --kill-who=main crond.service
```

So again, what is so new and fancy about killing services in systemd? Well, for the first time on Linux we can actually properly do that. Previous solutions were always depending on the daemons to actually cooperate to bring down everything they spawned if they themselves terminate. However, usually if you want to use SIGTERM or SIGKILL you are doing that because they actually do not cooperate properly with you.

How does this relate to `systemctl stop`? `kill` goes directly and sends a signal to every process in the group, however `stop` goes through the official configured way to shut down a service, i.e. invokes the stop command configured with `ExecStop=` in the service file. Usually `stop` should be sufficient. `kill` is the tougher version, for cases where you either don't want the official shutdown command of a service to run, or when the service is hosed and hung in other ways.

(It's up to you BTW to specify signal names with or without the SIG prefix on the `-s` switch. Both works.)

It's a bit surprising that we have come so far on Linux without even being able to properly kill services. `systemd` for the first time enables you to do this properly.

7 The Three Levels of "Off"

In `systemd`, there are three levels of turning off a service (or other unit). Let's have a look which those are:

1. You can stop a service. That simply terminates the running instance of the service and does little else. If due to some form of activation (such as manual activation, socket activation, bus activation, activation by system boot or activation by hardware plug) the service is requested again afterwards it will be started. Stopping a service is hence a very simple, temporary and superficial operation. Here's an example how to do this for the NTP service:

```
$ systemctl stop ntpd.service
```

This is roughly equivalent to the following traditional command which is available on most SysV inspired systems:

```
$ service ntpd stop
```

In fact, on Fedora 15, if you execute the latter command it will be transparently converted to the former.

2. You can disable a service. This unhooks a service from its activation triggers. That means, that depending on your service it will no longer be activated on boot, by socket or bus activation or by hardware plug (or any other trigger that applies to it). However, you can still start it manually if you wish. If there is already a started instance disabling a service will not have the effect of stopping it. Here's an example how to disable a service:

```
$ systemctl disable ntpd.service
```

On traditional Fedora systems, this is roughly equivalent to the following command:

```
$ chkconfig ntpd off
```

And here too, on Fedora 15, the latter command will be transparently converted to the former, if necessary.

Often you want to combine stopping and disabling a service, to get rid of the current instance and make sure it is not started again (except when manually triggered):

```
$ systemctl disable ntpd.service
$ systemctl stop ntpd.service
```

Commands like this are for example used during package deinstallation of systemd services on Fedora.

Disabling a service is a permanent change; until you undo it it will be kept, even across reboots.

3. You can mask a service. This is like disabling a service, but on steroids. It not only makes sure that service is not started automatically anymore, but even ensures that a service cannot even be started manually anymore. This is a bit of a hidden feature in systemd, since it is not commonly useful and might be confusing the user. But here's how you do it:

```
$ ln -s /dev/null /etc/systemd/system/ntpd.service
$ systemctl daemon-reload
```

By symlinking a service file to `/dev/null` you tell systemd to never start the service in question and completely block its execution. Unit files stored in `/etc/systemd/system` override those from `/lib/systemd/system` that carry the same name. The former directory is administrator territory, the latter territory of your package manager. By installing your symlink in `/etc/systemd/system/ntpd.service` you hence make sure that systemd will never read the upstream shipped service file `/lib/systemd/system/ntpd.service`.

systemd will recognize units symlinked to `/dev/null` and show them as masked. If you try to start such a service manually (via `systemctl start`

for example) this will fail with an error.

A similar trick on SysV systems does not (officially) exist. However, there are a few unofficial hacks, such as editing the init script and placing an exit 0 at the top, or removing its execution bit. However, these solutions have various drawbacks, for example they interfere with the package manager.

Masking a service is a permanent change, much like disabling a service.

Now that we learned how to turn off services on three levels, there's only one question left: how do we turn them on again? Well, it's quite symmetric. Use `systemctl start` to undo `systemctl stop`. Use `systemctl enable` to undo `systemctl disable` and use `rm` to undo `ln`.

8 Changing Roots

As administrator or developer sooner or later you'll encounter `chroot()` environments. The `chroot()` system call simply shifts what a process and all its children consider the root directory `/`, thus limiting what the process can see of the file hierarchy to a subtree of it. Primarily `chroot()` environments have two uses:

1. For security purposes: In this use a specific isolated daemon is `chroot()`ed into a private subdirectory, so that when exploited the attacker can see only the subdirectory instead of the full OS hierarchy: he is trapped inside the `chroot()` jail.
2. To set up and control a debugging, testing, building, installation or recovery image of an OS: For this a whole guest operating system hierarchy is mounted or bootstrapped into a subdirectory of the host OS, and then a shell (or some other application) is started inside it, with this subdirectory turned into its `/`. To the shell it appears as if it was running inside a system that can differ greatly from the host OS. For example, it might run a different distribution or even a different architecture (Example: host `x86_64`, guest `i386`). The full hierarchy of the host OS it cannot see.

On a classic System-V-based operating system it is relatively easy to use `chroot()` environments. For example, to start a specific daemon for test or other reasons inside a `chroot()`-based guest OS tree, mount `/proc`, `/sys` and a few other API file systems into the tree, and then use `chroot(1)` to enter the `chroot`, and finally run the SysV init script via `/sbin/service` from inside the `chroot`.

On a `systemd`-based OS things are not that easy anymore. One of the big advantages of `systemd` is that all daemons are guaranteed to be invoked in a completely clean and independent context which is in no way related to the context of the user asking for the service to be started. While in `sysvinit`-based systems a large part of the execution context (like resource limits, environment variables and suchlike) is inherited from the user shell invoking the init script,

in systemd the user just notifies the init daemon, and the init daemon will then fork off the daemon in a sane, well-defined and pristine execution context and no inheritance of the user context parameters takes place. While this is a formidable feature it actually breaks traditional approaches to invoke a service inside a chroot() environment: since the actual daemon is always spawned off PID 1 and thus inherits the chroot() settings from it, it is irrelevant whether the client which asked for the daemon to start is chroot()ed or not. On top of that, since systemd actually places its local communications sockets in /run/systemd a process in a chroot() environment will not even be able to talk to the init system (which however is probably a good thing, and the daring can work around this of course by making use of bind mounts.)

This of course opens the question how to use chroot()s properly in a systemd environment. And here's what we came up with for you, which hopefully answers this question thoroughly and comprehensively:

Let's cover the first usecase first: locking a daemon into a chroot() jail for security purposes. To begin with, chroot() as a security tool is actually quite dubious, since chroot() is not a one-way street. It is relatively easy to escape a chroot() environment, as even the man page points out. Only in combination with a few other techniques it can be made somewhat secure. Due to that it usually requires specific support in the applications to chroot() themselves in a tamper-proof way. On top of that it usually requires a deep understanding of the chroot()ed service to set up the chroot() environment properly, for example to know which directories to bind mount from the host tree, in order to make available all communication channels in the chroot() the service actually needs. Putting this together, chroot()ing software for security purposes is almost always done best in the C code of the daemon itself. The developer knows best (or at least should know best) how to properly secure down the chroot(), and what the minimal set of files, file systems and directories is the daemon will need inside the chroot(). These days a number of daemons are capable of doing this, unfortunately however of those running by default on a normal Fedora installation only two are doing this: Avahi and RealtimeKit. Both apparently written by the same really smart dude. Chapeau! ;-) (Verify this easily by running `ls -l /proc/*/root` on your system.)

That all said, systemd of course does offer you a way to chroot() specific daemons and manage them like any other with the usual tools. This is supported via the `RootDirectory=` option in systemd service files. Here's an example:

```
[Unit]
Description=A chroot()ed Service

[Service]
RootDirectory=/srv/chroot/foobar
ExecStartPre=/usr/local/bin/setup-foobar-chroot.sh
ExecStart=/usr/bin/foobard
RootDirectoryStartOnly=yes
```

In this example, `RootDirectory=` configures where to chroot() to before invoking

ing the daemon binary specified with `ExecStart=`. Note that the path specified in `ExecStart=` needs to refer to the binary inside the `chroot()`, it is not a path to the binary in the host tree (i.e. in this example the binary executed is seen as `/srv/chroot/foobar/usr/bin/foobard` from the host OS). Before the daemon is started a shell script `setup-foobar-chroot.sh` is invoked, whose purpose it is to set up the `chroot` environment as necessary, i.e. `mount /proc` and similar file systems into it, depending on what the service might need. With the `RootDirectoryStartOnly=` switch we ensure that only the daemon as specified in `ExecStart=` is `chrooted`, but not the `ExecStartPre=` script which needs to have access to the full OS hierarchy so that it can bind mount directories from there. (For more information on these switches see the respective man pages.) If you place a unit file like this in `/etc/systemd/system/foobar.service` you can start your `chroot()`ed service by typing `systemctl start foobar.service`. You may then introspect it with `systemctl status foobar.service`. It is accessible to the administrator like any other service, the fact that it is `chroot()`ed does – unlike on `SysV` – not alter how your monitoring and control tools interact with it.

Newer Linux kernels support file system namespaces. These are similar to `chroot()` but a lot more powerful, and they do not suffer by the same security problems as `chroot()`. `systemd` exposes a subset of what you can do with file system namespaces right in the unit files themselves. Often these are a useful and simpler alternative to setting up full `chroot()` environment in a subdirectory. With the switches `ReadOnlyDirectories=` and `InaccessibleDirectories=` you may setup a file system namespace jail for your service. Initially, it will be identical to your host OS' file system namespace. By listing directories in these directives you may then mark certain directories or mount points of the host OS as read-only or even completely inaccessible to the daemon. Example:

```
[Unit]
Description=A Service With No Access to /home

[Service]
ExecStart=/usr/bin/foobard
InaccessibleDirectories=/home
```

This service will have access to the entire file system tree of the host OS with one exception: `/home` will not be visible to it, thus protecting the user's data from potential exploiters. (See the man page for details on these options.)

File system namespaces are in fact a better replacement for `chroot()`s in many many ways. Eventually `Avahi` and `RealtimeKit` should probably be updated to make use of namespaces replacing `chroot()`s.

So much about the security usecase. Now, let's look at the other use case: setting up and controlling OS images for debugging, testing, building, installing or recovering.

`chroot()` environments are relatively simple things: they only virtualize the file system hierarchy. By `chroot()`ing into a subdirectory a process still has com-

plete access to all system calls, can kill all processes and shares about everything else with the host it is running on. To run an OS (or a small part of an OS) inside a `chroot()` is hence a dangerous affair: the isolation between host and guest is limited to the file system, everything else can be freely accessed from inside the `chroot()`. For example, if you upgrade a distribution inside a `chroot()`, and the package scripts send a `SIGTERM` to PID 1 to trigger a reexecution of the init system, this will actually take place in the host OS! On top of that, SysV shared memory, abstract namespace sockets and other IPC primitives are shared between host and guest. While a completely secure isolation for testing, debugging, building, installing or recovering an OS is probably not necessary, a basic isolation to avoid accidental modifications of the host OS from inside the `chroot()` environment is desirable: you never know what code package scripts execute which might interfere with the host OS.

To deal with `chroot()` setups for this use `systemd` offers you a couple of features:

First of all, `systemctl` detects when it is run in a `chroot`. If so, most of its operations will become NOPs, with the exception of `systemctl enable` and `systemctl disable`. If a package installation script hence calls these two commands, services will be enabled in the guest OS. However, should a package installation script include a command like `systemctl restart` as part of the package upgrade process this will have no effect at all when run in a `chroot()` environment.

More importantly however `systemd` comes out-of-the-box with the `systemd-nspawn` tool which acts as `chroot(1)` on steroids: it makes use of file system and PID namespaces to boot a simple lightweight container on a file system tree. It can be used almost like `chroot(1)`, except that the isolation from the host OS is much more complete, a lot more secure and even easier to use. In fact, `systemd-nspawn` is capable of booting a complete `systemd` or `sysvinit` OS in container with a single command. Since it virtualizes PIDs, the init system in the container can act as PID 1 and thus do its job as normal. In contrast to `chroot(1)` this tool will implicitly mount `/proc`, `/sys` for you.

Here's an example how in three commands you can boot a Debian OS on your Fedora machine inside an `nspawn` container:

```
# yum install debootstrap
# debootstrap --arch=amd64 unstable debian-tree /
# systemd-nspawn -D debian-tree /
```

This will bootstrap the OS directory tree and then simply invoke a shell in it. If you want to boot a full system in the container, use a command like this:

```
# systemd-nspawn -D debian-tree / /sbin/init
```

And after a quick bootup you should have a shell prompt, inside a complete OS, booted in your container. The container will not be able to see any of the processes outside of it. It will share the network configuration, but not be able

to modify it. (Expect a couple of EPERMs during boot for that, which however should not be fatal). Directories like `/sys` and `/proc/sys` are available in the container, but mounted read-only in order to avoid that the container can modify kernel or hardware configuration. Note however that this protects the host OS only from accidental changes of its parameters. A process in the container can manually remount the file systems read-writeable and then change whatever it wants to change.

So, what's so great about `systemd-nspawn` again?

1. It's really easy to use. No need to manually mount `/proc` and `/sys` into your `chroot()` environment. The tool will do it for you and the kernel automatically cleans it up when the container terminates.
2. The isolation is much more complete, protecting the host OS from accidental changes from inside the container.
3. It's so good that you can actually boot a full OS in the container, not just a single lonesome shell.
4. It's actually tiny and installed everywhere where `systemd` is installed. No complicated installation or setup.

`systemd` itself has been modified to work very well in such a container. For example, when shutting down and detecting that it is run in a container, it just calls `exit()`, instead of `reboot()` as last step.

Note that `systemd-nspawn` is not a full container solution. If you need that LXC is the better choice for you. It uses the same underlying kernel technology but offers a lot more, including network virtualization. If you so will, `systemd-nspawn` is the GNOME 3 of container solutions: slick and trivially easy to use – but with few configuration options. LXC OTOH is more like KDE: more configuration options than lines of code. I wrote `systemd-nspawn` specifically to cover testing, debugging, building, installing, recovering. That's what you should use it for and what it is really good at, and where it is a much much nicer alternative to `chroot(1)`.

So, let's get this finished, this was already long enough. Here's what to take home from this little blog story:

1. Secure `chroot()`s are best done natively in the C sources of your program.
2. `ReadOnlyDirectories=`, `InaccessibleDirectories=` might be suitable alternatives to a full `chroot()` environment.
3. `RootDirectory=` is your friend if you want to `chroot()` a specific service.
4. `systemd-nspawn` is made of awesome.
5. `chroot()`s are lame, file system namespaces are totally l33t.

All of this is readily available on your Fedora 15 system.

9 The Blame Game

Fedora 15[1] is the first Fedora release to sport systemd. Our primary goal for F15 was to get everything integrated and working well. One focus for Fedora 16 will be to further polish and speed up what we have in the distribution now. To prepare for this cycle we have implemented a few tools (which are already available in F15), which can help us pinpoint where exactly the biggest problems in our boot-up remain. With this blog story I hope to shed some light on how to figure out what to blame for your slow boot-up, and what to do about it. We want to allow you to put the blame where the blame belongs: on the system component responsible.

The first utility is a very simple one: systemd will automatically write a log message with the time it needed to syslog/kmsg when it finished booting up.

```
systemd[1]: Startup finished in 2s 65ms 924us (kernel)
+ 2s 828ms 195us (initrd)
+ 11s 900ms 471us (userspace)
= 16s 794ms 590us.
```

And here's how you read this: 2s have been spent for kernel initialization, until the time where the initial RAM disk (initrd, i.e. dracut) was started. A bit less than 3s have then been spent in the initrd. Finally, a bit less than 12s have been spent after the actual system init daemon (systemd) has been invoked by the initrd to bring up userspace. Summing this up the time that passed since the boot loader jumped into the kernel code until systemd was finished doing everything it needed to do at boot was a bit less than 17s. This number is nice and simple to understand – and also easy to misunderstand: it does not include the time that is spent initializing your GNOME session, as that is outside of the scope of the init system. Also, in many cases this is just where systemd finished doing everything it needed to do. Very likely some daemons are still busy doing whatever they need to do to finish startup when this time is elapsed. Hence: while the time logged here is a good indication on the general boot speed, it is not the time the user might feel the boot actually takes.

Also, it is a pretty superficial value: it gives no insight which system component systemd was waiting for all the time. To break this up, we introduced the tool `systemd-analyze blame`:

```

$ systemd-analyze blame
6207ms udev-settle.service
5228ms cryptsetup@luks.service
735ms NetworkManager.service
642ms avahi-daemon.service
600ms abrt.service
517ms rtkit-daemon.service
478ms fedora-storage-init.service
396ms dbus.service
390ms rpcidmapd.service
346ms systemd-tmpfiles-setup.service
322ms fedora-sysinit-unhack.service
316ms cups.service
310ms console-kit-log-system-start.service
309ms libvirtd.service
303ms rpcbind.service
298ms ksm-tuned.service
288ms lvm2-monitor.service
281ms rpcgssd.service
277ms sshd.service
276ms livesys.service
267ms iscsid.service
236ms mdmonitor.service
234ms nfslock.service
223ms ksm.service
218ms mcelog.service
...

```

This tool lists which systemd unit needed how much time to finish initialization at boot, the worst offenders listed first. What we can see here is that on this boot two services required more than 1s of boot time: `udev-settle.service` and `cryptsetup@luks.service`. This tool's output is easily misunderstood as well, it does not shed any light on why the services in question actually need this much time, it just determines that they did. Also note that the times listed here might be spent "in parallel", i.e. two services might be initializing at the same time and thus the time spent to initialize them both is much less than the sum of both individual times combined.

Let's have a closer look at the worst offender on this boot: a service by the name of `udev-settle.service`. So why does it take that much time to initialize, and what can we do about it? This service actually does very little: it just waits for the device probing being done by `udev` to finish and then exits. Device probing can be slow. In this instance for example, the reason for the device probing to take more than 6s is the 3G modem built into the machine, which when not having an inserted SIM card takes this long to respond to software probe requests. The software probing is part of the logic that makes `ModemManager` work and enables `NetworkManager` to offer easy 3G setup. An obvious reflex might now be to blame `ModemManager` for having such a slow probe. But that's actually ill-directed: hardware probing quite frequently is this slow, and in the case of `ModemManager` it's a simple fact that the 3G hardware takes this long. It is an essential requirement for a proper hardware probing solution that individual probes can take this much time to finish probing. The actual culprit is something else: the fact that we actually wait for the probing, in other words: that `udev-settle.service` is part of our boot process.

So, why is `udev-settle.service` part of our boot process? Well, it actually doesn't need to be. It is pulled in by the storage setup logic of Fedora: to be precise, by the LVM, RAID and Multipath setup script. These storage services have not been implemented in the way hardware detection and probing work today: they

expect to be initialized at a point in time where "all devices have been probed", so that they can simply iterate through the list of available disks and do their work on it. However, on modern machinery this is not how things actually work: hardware can come and hardware can go all the time, during boot and during runtime. For some technologies it is not even possible to know when the device enumeration is complete (example: USB, or iSCSI), thus waiting for all storage devices to show up and be probed must necessarily include a fixed delay when it is assumed that all devices that can show up have shown up, and got probed. In this case all this shows very negatively in the boot time: the storage scripts force us to delay bootup until all potential devices have shown up and all devices that did get probed – and all that even though we don't actually need most devices for anything. In particular since this machine actually does not make use of LVM, RAID or Multipath![2]

Knowing what we know now we can go and disable `udev-settle.service` for the next boots: since neither LVM, RAID nor Multipath is used we can mask the services in question and thus speed up our boot a little:

```
# ln -s /dev/null /etc/systemd/system/udev-settle.service
# ln -s /dev/null /etc/systemd/system/fedora-wait-storage.service
# ln -s /dev/null /etc/systemd/system/fedora-storage-init.service
# systemctl daemon-reload
```

After restarting we can measure that the boot is now about 1s faster. Why just 1s? Well, the second worst offender is `cryptsetup` here: the machine in question has an encrypted `/home` directory. For testing purposes I have stored the passphrase in a file on disk, so that the boot-up is not delayed because I as the user am a slow typer. The `cryptsetup` tool unfortunately still takes more than 5s to set up the encrypted partition. Being lazy instead of trying to fix `cryptsetup`[3] we'll just tape over it here [4]: `systemd` will normally wait for all file systems not marked with the `noauto` option in `/etc/fstab` to show up, to be fscked and to be mounted before proceeding bootup and starting the usual system services. In the case of `/home` (unlike for example `/var`) we know that it is needed only very late (i.e. when the user actually logs in). An easy fix is hence to make the mount point available already during boot, but not actually wait until `cryptsetup`, `fsck` and `mount` finished running for it. You ask how we can make a mount point available before actually mounting the file system behind it? Well, `systemd` possesses magic powers, in form of the `comment=systemd.automount` mount option in `/etc/fstab`. If you specify it, `systemd` will create an automount point at `/home` and when at the time of the first access to the file system it still isn't backed by a proper file system `systemd` will wait for the device, `fsck` and `mount` it.

And here's the result with this change to `/etc/fstab` made:

```
systemd[1]: Startup finished in 2s 47ms 112us (kernel)
+ 2s 663ms 942us (initrd)
+ 5s 540ms 522us (userspace)
= 10s 251ms 576us.
```

Nice! With a few fixes we took almost 7s off our boot-time. And these two

changes are only fixes for the two most superficial problems. With a bit of love and detail work there's a lot of additional room for improvements. In fact, on a different machine, a more than two year old X300 laptop (which even back then wasn't the fastest machine on earth) and a bit of decrufting we have boot times of around 4s (total) now, with a reasonably complete GNOME system. And there's still a lot of room in it.

systemd-analyze blame is a nice and simple tool for tracking down slow services. However, it suffers by a big problem: it does not visualize how the parallel execution of the services actually diminishes the price one pays for slow starting services. For that we have prepared systemd-analyze plot for you. Use it like this:

```
$ systemd-analyze plot > plot.svg
$ eog plot.svg
```

It creates pretty graphs, showing the time services spent to start up in relation to the other services. It currently doesn't visualize explicitly which services wait for which ones, but with a bit of guess work this is easily seen nonetheless.

To see the effect of our two little optimizations here are two graphs generated with systemd-analyze plot, the first before and the other after our change:

Now, before you now take these tools and start filing bugs against the worst boot-up time offenders on your system: think twice. These tools give you raw data, don't misread it. As my optimization example above hopefully shows, the blame for the slow bootup was not actually with `udev-settle.service`, and not with the `ModemManager` prober run by it either. It is with the subsystem that pulled this service in in the first place. And that's where the problem needs to be fixed. So, file the bugs at the right places. Put the blame where the blame belongs.

As mentioned, these three utilities are available on your Fedora 15 system out-of-the-box.

And here's what to take home from this little blog story:

- `systemd-analyze` is a wonderful tool and `systemd` comes with profiling built in.
- Don't misread the data these tools generate!
- With two simple changes you might be able to speed up your system by 7s!
- Fix your software if it can't handle dynamic hardware properly!
- The Fedora default of installing the OS on an enterprise-level storage managing system might be something to rethink.

10 The New Configuration Files

One of the formidable new features of `systemd` is that it comes with a complete set of modular early-boot services that are written in simple, fast, parallelizable and robust C, replacing the shell "novels" the various distributions featured before. Our little Project Zero Shell[1] has been a full success. We currently cover pretty much everything most desktop and embedded distributions should need, plus a big part of the server needs:

- Checking and mounting of all file systems
- Updating and enabling quota on all file systems
- Setting the host name
- Configuring the loopback network device
- Loading the SELinux policy and relabelling `/run` and `/dev` as necessary on boot
- Registering additional binary formats in the kernel, such as Java, Mono and WINE binaries

- Setting the system locale
- Setting up the console font and keyboard map
- Creating, removing and cleaning up of temporary and volatile files and directories
- Applying mount options from `/etc/fstab` to pre-mounted API VFS
- Applying `sysctl` kernel settings
- Collecting and replaying readahead information
- Updating `utmp` boot and shutdown records
- Loading and saving the random seed
- Statically loading specific kernel modules
- Setting up encrypted hard disks and partitions
- Spawning automatic gettys on serial kernel consoles
- Maintenance of Plymouth
- Machine ID maintenance
- Setting of the UTC distance for the system clock

On a standard Fedora 15 install, only a few legacy and storage services still require shell scripts during early boot. If you don't need those, you can easily disable them and enjoy your shell-free boot (like I do every day). The shell-less boot `systemd` offers you is a unique feature on Linux.

Many of these small components are configured via configuration files in `/etc`. Some of these are fairly standardized among distributions and hence supporting them in the C implementations was easy and obvious. Examples include: `/etc/fstab`, `/etc/crypttab` or `/etc/sysctl.conf`. However, for others no standardized file or directory existed which forced us to add `ifdef` orgies to our sources to deal with the different places the distributions we want to support store these things. All these configuration files have in common that they are dead-simple and there is simply no good reason for distributions to distinguish themselves with them: they all do the very same thing, just a bit differently.

To improve the situation and benefit from the unifying force that `systemd` is we thus decided to read the per-distribution configuration files only as fallbacks – and to introduce new configuration files as primary source of configuration wherever applicable. Of course, where possible these standardized configuration files should not be new inventions but rather just standardizations of the best distribution-specific configuration files previously used. Here's a little overview over these new common configuration files `systemd` supports on all distributions:

- `/etc/hostname`: the host name for the system. One of the most basic and trivial system settings. Nonetheless previously all distributions used different files for this. Fedora used `/etc/sysconfig/network`, OpenSUSE `/etc/HOSTNAME`. We chose to standardize on the Debian configuration file `/etc/hostname`.
- `/etc/vconsole.conf`: configuration of the default keyboard mapping and console font.
- `/etc/locale.conf`: configuration of the system-wide locale.
- `/etc/modules-load.d/*.conf`: a drop-in directory for kernel modules to statically load at boot (for the very few that still need this).
- `/etc/sysctl.d/*.conf`: a drop-in directory for kernel sysctl parameters, extending what you can already do with `/etc/sysctl.conf`.
- `/etc/tmpfiles.d/*.conf`: a drop-in directory for configuration of runtime files that need to be removed/created/cleaned up at boot and during up-time.
- `/etc/binfmt.d/*.conf`: a drop-in directory for registration of additional binary formats for systems like Java, Mono and WINE.
- `/etc/os-release`: a standardization of the various distribution ID files like `/etc/fedora-release` and similar. Really every distribution introduced their own file here; writing a simple tool that just prints out the name of the local distribution usually means including a database of release files to check. The LSB tried to standardize something like this with the `lsb_release` tool, but quite frankly the idea of employing a shell script in this is not the best choice the LSB folks ever made. To rectify this we just decided to generalize this, so that everybody can use the same file here.
- `/etc/machine-id`: a machine ID file, superseding D-Bus' machine ID file. This file is guaranteed to be existing and valid on a systemd system, covering also stateless boots. By moving this out of the D-Bus logic it is hopefully interesting for a lot of additional uses as a unique and stable machine identifier.
- `/etc/machine-info`: a new information file encoding meta data about a host, like a pretty host name and an icon name, replacing stuff like `/etc/favicon.png` and suchlike. This is maintained by `systemd-hostnamed`.

It is our definite intention to convince you to use these new configuration files in your configuration tools: if your configuration frontend writes these files instead of the old ones, it automatically becomes more portable between Linux distributions, and you are helping standardizing Linux. This makes things simpler to understand and more obvious for users and administrators. Of course, right now, only systemd-based distributions read these files, but that already covers

all important distributions in one way or another, except for one. And it's a bit of a chicken-and-egg problem: a standard becomes a standard by being used. In order to gently push everybody to standardize on these files we also want to make clear that sooner or later we plan to drop the fallback support for the old configuration files from systemd. That means adoption of this new scheme can happen slowly and piece by piece. But the final goal of only having one set of configuration files must be clear.

Many of these configuration files are relevant not only for configuration tools but also (and sometimes even primarily) in upstream projects. For example, we invite projects like Mono, Java, or WINE to install a drop-in file in `/etc/binfmt.d/` from their upstream build systems. Per-distribution downstream support for binary formats would then no longer be necessary and your platform would work the same on all distributions. Something similar applies to all software which need creation/cleaning of certain runtime files and directories at boot, for example beneath the `/run` hierarchy (i.e. `/var/run` as it used to be known). These projects should just drop in configuration files in `/etc/tmpfiles.d`, also from the upstream build systems. This also helps speeding up the boot process, as separate per-project SysV shell scripts which implement trivial things like registering a binary format or removing/creating temporary/volatile files at boot are no longer necessary. Or another example, where upstream support would be fantastic: projects like X11 could probably benefit from reading the default keyboard mapping for its displays from `/etc/vconsole.conf`.

Of course, I have no doubt that not everybody is happy with our choice of names (and formats) for these configuration files. In the end we had to pick something, and from all the choices these appeared to be the most convincing. The file formats are as simple as they can be, and usually easily written and read even from shell scripts. That said, `/etc/bikeshed.conf` could of course also have been a fantastic configuration file name!

So, help us standardizing Linux! Use the new configuration files! Adopt them upstream, adopt them downstream, adopt them all across the distributions!

Oh, and in case you are wondering: yes, all of these files were discussed in one way or another with various folks from the various distributions. And there has even been some push towards supporting some of these files even outside of systemd systems.

11 On `/etc/sysconfig` and `/etc/default`

So, here's a bit of an opinion piece on the `/etc/sysconfig/` and `/etc/default` directories that exist on the various distributions in one form or another, and why I believe their use should be faded out. Like everything I say on this blog

what follows is just my personal opinion, and not the gospel and has nothing to do with the position of the Fedora project or my employer. The topic of `/etc/sysconfig` has been coming up in discussions over and over again. I hope with this blog story I can explain a bit what we as `systemd` upstream think about these files.

A few lines about the historical context: I wasn't around when `/etc/sysconfig` was introduced – suffice to say it has been around on Red Hat and SUSE distributions since a long long time. Eventually `/etc/default` was introduced on Debian with very similar semantics. Many other distributions know a directory with similar semantics too, most of them call it either one or the other way. In fact, even other Unix-OSes sported a directory like this. (Such as SCO. If you are interested in the details, I am sure a Unix greybeard of your trust can fill in what I am leaving vague here.) So, even though a directory like this has been known widely on Linuxes and Unixes, it never has been standardized, neither in POSIX nor in LSB/FHS. These directories very much are something where distributions distinguish themselves from each other.

The semantics of `/etc/default` and `/etc/sysconfig` are very loosely defined only. What almost all files stored in these directories have in common though is that they are sourcable shell scripts which primarily consist of environment variable assignments. Most of the files in these directories are sourced by the SysV init scripts of the same name. The Debian Policy Manual (9.3.2) and the Fedora Packaging Guidelines suggest this use of the directories, however both distributions also have files in them that do not follow this scheme, i.e. that do not have a matching SysV init script – or not even are shell scripts at all.

Why have these files been introduced? On SysV systems services are started via init scripts in `/etc/rc.d/init.d` (or a similar directory). `/etc/` is (these days) considered the place where system configuration is stored. Originally these init scripts were subject to customization by the administrator. But as they grew and become complex most distributions no longer considered them true configuration files, but more just a special kind of programs. To make customization easy and guarantee a safe upgrade path the customizable bits hence have been moved to separate configuration files, which the init scripts then source.

Let's have a quick look what kind of configuration you can do with these files. Here's a short incomplete list of various things that can be configured via environment settings in these source files I found browsing through the directories on a Fedora and a Debian machine:

- Additional command line parameters for the daemon binaries
- Locale settings for a daemon
- Shutdown time-out for a daemon
- Shutdown mode for a daemon

- System configuration like system locale, time zone information, console keyboard
- Redundant system configuration, like whether the RTC is in local timezone
- Firewall configuration data, not in shell format (!)
- CPU affinity for a daemon
- Settings unrelated to boot, for example including information how to install a new kernel package, how to configure nspluginwrap or whether to do library prelinking
- Whether a specific service should be started or not
- Networking configuration
- Which kernel modules to statically load
- Whether to halt or power-off on shutdown
- Access modes for device nodes (!)
- A description string for the SysV service (!)
- The user/group ID, umask to run specific daemons as
- Resource limits to set for a specific daemon
- OOM adjustment to set for a specific daemon

Now, let's go where the beef is: what's wrong with `/etc/sysconfig` (resp. `/etc/default`)? Why might it make sense to fade out use of these files in a systemd world?

- For the majority of these files the reason for having them simply does not exist anymore: systemd unit files are not programs like SysV init scripts were. Unit files are simple, declarative descriptions, that usually do not consist of more than 6 lines or so. They can easily be generated, parsed without a Bourne interpreter and understood by the reader. Also, they are very easy to modify: just copy them from `/lib/systemd/system` to `/etc/systemd/system` and edit them there, where they will not be modified by the package manager. The need to separate code and configuration that was the original reason to introduce these files does not exist anymore, as systemd unit files do not include code. These files hence now are a solution looking for a problem that no longer exists.
- They are inherently distribution-specific. With systemd we hope to encourage standardization between distributions. Part of this is that we want that unit files are supplied with upstream, and not just added by the packager – how it has usually been done in the SysV world. Since

the location of the directory and the available variables in the files is very different on each distribution, supporting `/etc/sysconfig` files in upstream unit files is not feasible. Configuration stored in these files works against de-balkanization of the Linux platform.

- Many settings are fully redundant in a `systemd` world. For example, various services support configuration of the process credentials like the user/group ID, resource limits, CPU affinity or the OOM adjustment settings. However, these settings are supported only by some SysV init scripts, and often have different names if supported in multiple of them. OTOH in `systemd`, all these settings are available equally and uniformly for all services, with the same configuration option in unit files.
- Unit files know a large number of easy-to-use process context settings, that are more comprehensive than what most `/etc/sysconfig` files offer.
- A number of these settings are entirely questionable. For example, the aforementioned configuration option for the user/group ID a service runs as is primarily something the distributor has to take care of. There is little to win for administrators to change these settings, and only the distributor has the broad overview to make sure that UID/GID and name collisions do not happen.
- The file format is not ideal. Since the files are usually sourced as shell scripts, parse errors are very hard to decipher and are not logged along the other configuration problems of the services. Generally, unknown variable assignments simply have no effect but this is not warned about. This makes these files harder to debug than necessary.
- Configuration files sourced from shell scripts are subject to the execution parameters of the interpreter, and it has many: settings like IFS or LANG tend to modify drastically how shell scripts are parsed and understood. This makes them fragile.
- Interpretation of these files is slow, since it requires spawning of a shell, which adds at least one process for each service to be spawned at boot.
- Often, files in `/etc/sysconfig` are used to "fake" configuration files for daemons which do not support configuration files natively. This is done by glueing together command line arguments from these variable assignments that are then passed to the daemon. In general proper, native configuration files in these daemons are the much prettier solution however. Command line options like `"-k"`, `"-a"` or `"-f"` are not self-explanatory and have a very cryptic syntax. Moreover the same switches in many daemons have (due to the limited vocabulary) often very much contradicting effects. (On one daemon `-f` might cause the daemon to daemonize, while on another one this option turns exactly this behaviour off.) Command lines generally cannot include sensible comments which most configuration files however can.

- A number of configuration settings in `/etc/sysconfig` are entirely redundant: for example, on many distributions it can be controlled via `/etc/sysconfig` files whether the RTC is in UTC or local time. Such an option already exists however in the 3rd line of the `/etc/adjtime` (which is known on all distributions). Adding a second, redundant, distribution-specific option overriding this is hence needless and complicates things for no benefit.
- Many of the configuration settings in `/etc/sysconfig` allow disabling services. By this they basically become a second level of enabling/disabling over what the init system already offers: when a service is enabled with `systemctl enable` or `chkconfig` on these settings override this, and turn the daemon of even though the init system was configured to start it. This of course is very confusing to the user/administrator, and brings virtually no benefit.
- For options like the configuration of static kernel modules to load: there are nowadays usually much better ways to load kernel modules at boot. For example, most modules may now be autoloaded by `udev` when the right hardware is found. This goes very far, and even includes ACPI and other high-level technologies. One of the very few exceptions where we currently do not do kernel module autoloading is CPU feature and model based autoloading which however will be supported soon too. And even if your specific module cannot be auto-loaded there's usually a better way to statically load it, for example by sticking it in `/etc/load-modules.d` so that the administrator can check a standardized place for all statically loaded modules.
- Last but not least, `/etc` already is intended to be the place for system configuration ("Host-specific system configuration" according to FHS). A subdirectory beneath it called `sysconfig` to place system configuration in is hence entirely redundant, already on the language level.

What to use instead? Here are a few recommendations of what to do with these files in the long run in a `systemd` world:

- Just drop them without replacement. If they are fully redundant (like the local/UTC RTC setting) this should be a relatively easy way out (well, ignoring the need for compatibility). If `systemd` natively supports an equivalent option in the unit files there is no need to duplicate these settings in `sysconfig` files. For a list of execution options you may set for a service check out the respective man pages: `systemd.exec(5)` and `systemd.service(5)`. If your setting simply adds another layer where a service can be disabled, remove it to keep things simple. There's no need to have multiple ways to disable a service.
- Find a better place for them. For configuration of the system locale or system timezone we hope to gently push distributions into the right direction, for more details see previous episode of this series.

- Turn these settings into native settings of the daemon. If necessary add support for reading native configuration files to the daemon. Thankfully, most of the stuff we run on Linux is Free Software, so this can relatively easily be done.

Of course, there's one very good reason for supporting these files for a bit longer: compatibility for upgrades. But that's is really the only one I could come up with. It's reason enough to keep compatibility for a while, but I think it is a good idea to phase out usage of these files at least in new packages.

If compatibility is important, then systemd will still allow you to read these configuration files even if you otherwise use native systemd unit files. If your sysconf file only knows simple options `EnvironmentFile=/etc/sysconfig/foobar` (See `systemd.exec(5)` for more information about this option.) may be used to import the settings into the environment and use them to put together command lines. If you need a programming language to make sense of these settings, then use a programming language like shell. For example, place a short shell script in `/usr/lib/[your package]/` which reads these files for compatibility, and then `exec`'s the actual daemon binary. Then spawn this script instead of the actual daemon binary with `ExecStart=` in the unit file.

12 Instantiated Services

Most services on Linux/Unix are singleton services: there's usually only one instance of Syslog, Postfix, or Apache running on a specific system at the same time. On the other hand some select services may run in multiple instances on the same host. For example, an Internet service like the Dovecot IMAP service could run in multiple instances on different IP ports or different local IP addresses. A more common example that exists on all installations is `getty`, the mini service that runs once for each TTY and presents a login prompt on it. On most systems this service is instantiated once for each of the first six virtual consoles `tty1` to `tty6`. On some servers depending on administrator configuration or boot-time parameters an additional `getty` is instantiated for a serial or virtualizer console. Another common instantiated service in the systemd world is `fsck`, the file system checker that is instantiated once for each block device that needs to be checked. Finally, in systemd socket activated per-connection services (think classic `inetd`!) are also implemented via instantiated services: a new instance is created for each incoming connection. In this installment I hope to explain a bit how systemd implements instantiated services and how to take advantage of them as an administrator.

If you followed the previous episodes of this series you are probably aware that services in systemd are named according to the pattern `foobar.service`, where `foobar` is an identification string for the service, and `.service` simply a fixed suffix that is identical for all service units. The definition files for these services

are searched for in `/etc/systemd/system` and `/lib/systemd/system` (and possibly other directories) under this name. For instantiated services this pattern is extended a bit: the service name becomes `foobar@quux.service` where `foobar` is the common service identifier, and `quux` the instance identifier. Example: `serial-getty@ttyS2.service` is the serial getty service instantiated for `ttyS2`.

Service instances can be created dynamically as needed. Without further configuration you may easily start a new getty on a serial port simply by invoking a `systemctl start` command for the new instance:

```
# systemctl start serial-getty@ttyUSB0.service
```

If a command like the above is run `systemd` will first look for a unit configuration file by the exact name you requested. If this service file is not found (and usually it isn't if you use instantiated services like this) then the instance id is removed from the name and a unit configuration file by the resulting template name searched. In other words, in the above example, if the precise `serial-getty@ttyUSB0.service` unit file cannot be found, `serial-getty@.service` is loaded instead. This unit template file will hence be common for all instances of this service. For the serial getty we ship a template unit file in `systemd` (`/lib/systemd/system/serial-getty@.service`) that looks something like this:

```
[Unit]
Description=Serial Getty on %I
BindTo=dev-%i.device
After=dev-%i.device systemd-user-sessions.service

[Service]
ExecStart=/sbin/agetty -s %I 115200,38400,9600
Restart=always
RestartSec=0
```

(Note that the unit template file we actually ship along with `systemd` for the serial gettys is a bit longer. If you are interested, have a look at the actual file which includes additional directives for compatibility with `SysV`, to clear the screen and remove previous users from the TTY device. To keep things simple I have shortened the unit file to the relevant lines here.)

This file looks mostly like any other unit file, with one distinction: the specifiers `%I` and `%i` are used at multiple locations. At unit load time `%I` and `%i` are replaced by `systemd` with the instance identifier of the service. In our example above, if a service is instantiated as `serial-getty@ttyUSB0.service` the specifiers `%I` and `%i` will be replaced by `ttyUSB0`. If you introspect the instantiated unit with `systemctl status serial-getty@ttyUSB0.service` you will see these replacements having taken place:

```
$ systemctl status serial-getty@ttyUSB0.service
serial-getty@ttyUSB0.service - Getty on ttyUSB0
   Loaded: loaded (/lib/systemd/system/serial-getty@.service; static)
   Active: active (running) since Mon, 26 Sep 2011 04:20:44 +0200; 2s ago
     Main PID: 5443 (agetty)
    CGroup: name=systemd:/system/getty@.service/ttyUSB0
           5443 /sbin/agetty -s ttyUSB0 115200,38400,9600
```

And that is already the core idea of instantiated services in `systemd`. As you can see `systemd` provides a very simple templating system, which can be used

to dynamically instantiate services as needed. To make effective use of this, a few more notes:

You may instantiate these services on-the-fly in `.wants/` symbolic links in the file system. For example, to make sure the serial getty on `ttyUSB0` is started automatically at every boot, create a symlink like this:

```
# ln -s /lib/systemd/system/serial-getty@.service \
    /etc/systemd/system/getty.target.wants/serial-getty@ttyUSB0.service
```

systemd will instantiate the symlinked unit file with the instance name specified in the symlink name.

You cannot instantiate a unit template without specifying an instance identifier. In other words `systemctl start serial-getty@.service` will necessarily fail since the instance name was left unspecified.

Sometimes it is useful to opt-out of the generic template for one specific instance. For these cases make use of the fact that systemd always searches first for the full instance file name before falling back to the template file name: make sure to place a unit file under the fully instantiated name in `/etc/systemd/system` and it will override the generic templated version for this specific instance.

The unit file shown above uses `%i` at some places and `%I` at others. You may wonder what the difference between these specifiers are. `%i` is replaced by the exact characters of the instance identifier. For `%I` on the other hand the instance identifier is first passed through a simple unescaping algorithm. In the case of a simple instance identifier like `ttyUSB0` there is no effective difference. However, if the device name includes one or more slashes (`"/`) this cannot be part of a unit name (or Unix file name). Before such a device name can be used as instance identifier it needs to be escaped so that `"/` becomes `"_"` and most other special characters (including `"_"`) are replaced by `"xAB"` where AB is the ASCII code of the character in hexadecimal notation[1]. Example: to refer to a USB serial port by its bus path we want to use a port name like `serial/by-path/pci-0000:00:1d.0-usb-0:1.4:1.1-port0`. The escaped version of this name is `serial-by`

`x2dpath-pci`

`x2d0000:00:1d.0`

`x2dusb`

`x2d0:1.4:1.1`

`x2dport0`. `%I` will then refer to former, `%i` to the latter. Effectively this means `%i` is useful wherever it is necessary to refer to other units, for example to express additional dependencies. On the other hand `%I` is useful for usage in command lines, or inclusion in pretty description strings. Let's check how this looks with the above unit file:

```
# systemctl start \
'serial-getty@serial-by\x2dpath-pci\x2d0000:00:1d.0\x2dusb
\x2d0:1.4:1.1\x2dport0.service'
# systemctl status \
'serial-getty@serial-by\x2dpath-pci\x2d0000:00:1d.0\x2dusb
\x2d0:1.4:1.1\x2dport0.service'
```

```

serial-getty@serial-by\x2dpath-pci\x2d0000:00:1d.0\x2dusb
\x2d0:1.4:1.1\x2dport0.service \
- Serial Getty on serial/by-path/pci-0000:00:1d.0-usb-0:1.4:1.1-port0
  Loaded: loaded (/lib/systemd/system/serial-getty@.service; static)
  Active: active (running) since Mon, 26 Sep 2011 05:08:52 +0200; 1s ago
    Main PID: 5788 (agetty)
      CGroup:
name=systemd:/system/serial-getty@.service/serial-by
\x2dpath-pci\x2d0000:00:1d.0\x2dusb\x2d0:1.4:1.1\x2dport0
          5788 /sbin/agetty -s serial/by-path/pci-0000:00:
1d.0-usb-0:1.4:1.1-port0 115200 38400 9600

```

As we can see the while the instance identifier is the escaped string the command line and the description string actually use the unescaped version, as expected.

(Side note: there are more specifiers available than just %i and %I, and many of them are actually available in all unit files, not just templates for service instances. For more details see the man page which includes a full list and terse explanations.)

And at this point this shall be all for now. Stay tuned for a follow-up article on how instantiated services are used for inetd-style socket activation.

13 references