Managing Heavy Network Load: Eliminating Receive Livelock

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Engineering for Performance

• Much of the work in distributed systems concerns designing for
  – Consistency
  – Availability
  – Performance

• Performance is multi-faceted
  – Not just determined by design of distributed system itself (algorithms, protocols)
  – Low-level hardware, OS behavior play major role

• Achieving high performance requires deep understanding of all layers: hardware, OS, all the way through algorithms and protocols!
Engineering for Performance

Systems Thinking: the ability to reason about complex interactions among many layers, to find problems (and (re)design to avoid them)

- Availability
- Performance

- Performance is multi-faceted
  - Not just determined by design of distributed system itself (algorithms, protocols)
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- Achieving high performance requires deep understanding of all layers: hardware, OS, all the way through algorithms and protocols!
Heavy Load Happens

• Servers have limited CPU, network link capacity, memory, disk bandwidth
• Demand often approaches or exceeds a server’s capacity, e.g.,
  – Flash crowds at web server
  – Busy NFS server as client population grows
  – IP router or firewall carrying flash crowd traffic (or denial of service attack traffic!)
• But software design can limit performance at loads lighter than where these hardware limits kick in...
Example:
IP Packet Forwarding Performance

- Hardware: commodity workstation (DECstation 3000/300; PC-like), two 10 Mbps Ethernet interfaces
- Software: Digital UNIX 3.2 OS, screend firewall application in userspace
- Workload: forward IP packets from one Ethernet to another (UDP packets, 4 bytes of payload each)
- Packet-generating host has faster CPU than forwarder
Example:
IP Packet Forwarding Performance

**Question:** How well does whole system scale as load increases?

**Experiment:** vary input packet rate to forwarder; observe output packet rate

- Firewall application in userspace

- Workload: forward IP packets from one Ethernet to another (UDP packets, 4 bytes of payload each)

- Packet-generating host has faster CPU than forwarder
Example: IP Packet Forwarding Performance

- Peak output rate w/o firewall: ~4700 pkt/s
- Beyond ~4700 pkt/s, output rate decreases with further increasing load!
Example: IP Packet Forwarding Performance

Suppose **hardware’s capacity** is 4700 pkt/s. What would ideal system behavior be beyond that input rate?
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Background: 
I/O Device Hardware

• I/O devices need to notify CPU of events
  – Packet arrival at network interface
  – Disk read complete
  – Key pressed on keyboard

• Two main ways CPU can learn of events:
  – Polling: CPU “asks” hardware device if any events have occurred (synchronous)
  – Interrupt: hardware device sends a signal to CPU saying “events have completed” (asynchronous)

• Key concerns: event latency and CPU load
Polling

- Requires **programmed or memory-mapped I/O** (relatively slow; over I/O bus)
- CPU “blindly” polls device **explicitly in code**
  - to guarantee low latency, must **poll very often**
  - high **CPU overhead** to poll very often
- For rare I/O events, CPU overhead of polling unattractive
- Disk I/Os complete only 100s of times per second; in 1980s-90s, only hundreds of network packets arrived per second
- OSes in that era **eschewed polling**
Interrupts

- I/O devices have dedicated wire(s) that they can use to signal interrupt(s) to CPU

- On interrupt, if interrupt priority level (IPL) > CPU priority level:
  - CPU saves state of currently running program
  - jumps to interrupt service routine (ISR) in kernel
  - invokes device driver, which asks device for events
  - returns to previously running program

- CPU priority level: kernel-set machine state specifying which interrupts allowed (others postponed by CPU)

- On modern x86_64, interrupt latency of ~3 us from device interrupt to start of ISR
Interrupts

Interrupts well-suited to **rare I/O events**: lower latency than rarely polling, lower CPU cost than constantly polling

Interrupts asynchronous—they **preempt other system activity**

- invokes device driver, which asks device for events
- returns to previously running program

- **CPU priority level**: kernel-set machine state specifying which interrupts allowed (others postponed by CPU)
- On modern x86_64, interrupt latency of ~3 us from device interrupt to start of ISR
Interrupts and Network I/O

- Disk I/O requests come from OS itself; completion interrupts inherently rate-controlled
- Network packets come from other hosts; no “local” rate control for received packet interrupts
- Remember: interrupts take priority over all other system processing (over other kernel execution, user-space applications)
- What will happen when received packet rate extremely high?
  - Answer depends on detailed software structure...
Interrupts and Network I/O

Receive Livelock:
When event rate (pkt arrival rate) so high, system spends all its time servicing interrupts, gets no other work done!

- Interrupts
  - Remember: interrupts take priority over all other system processing (over other kernel execution, user-space applications)
  - What will happen when received packet rate extremely high?
    - Answer depends on detailed software structure...
Design Goals for Network I/O System

• Goals:
  – Low latency for responding to I/O events
  – Low jitter (variance in latency)
  – Fairness: resources allocated evenly among tasks
  – High throughput for I/O (e.g., achievable packet receive rate, transmit rate)

• What are the tasks for a network server?
  – Packet reception
  – Packet transmission
  – Protocol processing (often in kernel)
  – Other I/O processing
  – Application processing
Background: OS Architecture for Interrupt-Driven Networking

- Packet arrives
- Network card interrupts at “high” IPL
- ISR looks at Ethernet header, enqueues packet for further processing, returns
- “Low” IPL software interrupt dequeues packets from queue, does IP/UDP/TCP processing, enqueues data for dst process
- Process reads data with read() system call
- Queues denote scheduling and priority level boundaries
Background: OS Architecture for Interrupt-Driven Networking

Queues are **scheduling** and **priority level** boundaries

Minimizing work in ISR **reduces service latency** for other device I/O interrupts

- “Low” IPL software interrupt dequeues packets from queue, does IP/UDP/TCP processing, **enqueues** data for dst process
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- Queues denote **scheduling and priority level boundaries**
Interrupt-Driven Networking, UNIX Style

receive ISR

input queue

IP forwarding/reception software interrupt

output queue

transmit complete ISR

increasing priority level

kernel

user

socket buffer

socket buffer

application (e.g., firewall)
Interrupt-Driven Networking, UNIX Style

Design prioritizes **packet reception** above all else

Original motivation: small buffers on network interfaces (no longer a concern)
Interrupt-Driven Networking,
UNIX Style

How will this system behave as packet receive rate
increases—what will output packet rate do?
Receive Livelock Pathologies

- As input rate increases beyond maximum loss-free receive rate, output rate decreases.
- System wastes CPU preparing arriving packets for queue, all of which dropped.
- For input burst of packets, first packet not delivered to user level until whole burst put on queue (e.g., leaves NFS server disk idle!)
- In systems where transmit lower-priority than receive, transmit starves.
Livelnock Avoidance Technique 1: Minimize Receive Interrupts

- **Goal:** limit the receive interrupt rate

- **Receive ISR:**
  - sets flag indicating this network interface has received one or more packets
  - schedules kernel thread that polls network interfaces for received packets
  - does not re-enable receive interrupts

- That’s it! Set flag, schedule kernel thread, and return, leaving receive interrupts disabled.
Livellock Avoidance Technique 2: Kernel Polling Thread

• When scheduled, checks all network interfaces’ “packets received” flags
• For such interfaces:
  – process packet all the way through kernel protocol stack (IP/forwarding/UDP/TCP), ending with interface output queue or socket buffer to application
  – maximum quota on packets processed for same interface on one invocation for fairness
  – round-robins among interfaces and between transmit and receive
  – Re-enable interface’s receive interrupts only when no pending packets at that interface
Livellok Avoidance Technique 2: Kernel Polling Thread

**Under overload, where do packets go?**
Dropped by network interface card when buffering exhausted (either in card, or in host RAM), **at no CPU cost!**

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  - **Re-enable interface’s receive interrupts only when no pending packets at that interface**
Performance Evaluation: Techniques 1 and 2

- No screend firewall
- Without quotas for input processing, big trouble! (Why?)
What about screend?

- User-level application still cannot run under heavy receive load!
- Technique 3: disable receive interrupts when queue to user application fills
Receive Livelock: Summary

• Scheduling vital to performance of a busy server
  – may be implicit (e.g., interrupts), not explicit (e.g., OS scheduler)

• Understanding cross-layer behavior vital to finding performance limitations and designing for high performance

• General lessons:
  – Don’t discard data after doing work on it
  – Poll while busy, interrupt while lightly loaded