Managing Heavy Network Load: Eliminating Receive Livelock

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CS GZ03 / M030
4th November 2015
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

![Graph showing IP packet forwarding performance](image)

- 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!

interruption

• 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?
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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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Interrupt-Driven Networking, UNIX Style

receive ISR

input queue

IP forwarding/reception software interrupt

application (e.g., firewall)

socket buffer

output queue

transmit complete ISR

socket buffer

increasing priority level

kernel user
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.
Livelock 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
Livelock 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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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 Liveloop: 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