Lecture 7: Signals and Events

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Angela Demke Brown

Signals

- Software equivalent of hardware interrupts
- Allows process to respond to asynchronous external events (or synchronous internal events)
  - Process may specify its own signal handlers or may use OS default action
  - Defaults include
    - Ignoring the signal
    - Terminating all threads in the process (with or without a core dump)
    - Stopping all threads in the process
    - Resuming all threads in the process
  - Provide a simple form of inter-process communication (IPC)

Signal Terminology

- **Posting** - action taken when event occurs that process needs to be notified of (aka signal generation)
- **Delivery** - action taken when process recognizes arrival of event (aka signal handling)
- **Catching** - if user-level signal handler is invoked, process is said to catch the signal
- **Pending** - signals that have been posted, but not yet delivered

User-Level View

- Write a signal handler function
  - E.g. handle SIGINT (interrupt signal) ourselves
    ```c
    void sigint_handler(int sig) {
      fprintf(stderr,"Interrupted!\n");
      close(tmp_file_fd);
      unlink(tmp_file_name);
    }
    ```
- Install it:
  ```c
  struct sigaction new_action, old_action;
  new_action.sa_handler = sigint_handler;
  sigaction(SIGINT, &new_action, &old_action);
  ```
Other user-level actions

- Block signal delivery by masking signals
  - Similar in spirit to disabling interrupts
  - sigsetmask(how, newset, oldset)
- Specify that signal handlers run on separate stack
  - sigaltstack(signal_stack, old_signal_stack)
- Retrieve list of pending signals
  - sigpending(signal_set)
- Block process until signal is posted
  - sigsuspend(signal_set)
- Send signal to process
  - kill(pid, signal_number)

Complications

- Handler may execute at any time
  - Need to be careful of manipulating global state in signal handler
- Signal delivery may interrupt execution of signal handler!
  - Code should be re-entrant
  - Should block signals if this is not acceptable
- In some implementations (System V Unix, older Linux kernel, libc4,5), handler is reset to default action when it is dispatched
  - Can lead to ugly races... default is often terminate process
- Only one signal handler per signal per process
  - Can't use in library code
- In many implementations, no signal queuing

Kernel View

- Define fixed set of signals, identified numerically
  - E.g. #define SIGKILL 9 /* kill program */
  - Signal sets are bitvectors; each bit position gives the status of corresponding signal
- Process structure has field to mark pending signals
  - FreeBSD: sigset_t p_siglist;
- Thread structure has similar field to mark pending signals for each thread
  - sigset_t td_siglist;

Signal Posting (FreeBSD)

- Mark bit for specified signal in process' p_siglist, and set process to run
  - Process is woken up if in interruptible sleep
  - Many blocking system calls can be interrupted by signals!
- If process is multi-threaded, search for appropriate thread to post signal to
  - Synchronous signals (caused by thread's execution) are posted only to that thread
  - Other signals search thread list for first thread not masking signal and add to that thread td_siglist
  - If all threads are masking signals, mark process p_siglist
- Some actions can be taken immediately
  - E.g., stopping or continuing the process
**Signal Delivery**

- Thread checks pending signals (at least once) each time it enters kernel
- If user-level handler exists, arranges for that handler to be invoked
  - Saves signal state on stack
  - Sets up registers to begin executing user-mode signal handler trampoline
  - Trampoline calls signal handler function
  - When handler returns, trampoline makes sigreturn() system call
  - OS cleans up stack

**Using Signals**

- Used to implement timers
  - E.g., send SIGALRM after N seconds
- Used in some programming language interpreters to implement language-defined exceptions
  - E.g., JamVM, SableVM (open source Java VMs) implement NULL pointer checks by catching the SIGSEGV that the access causes, and then handling it according to the Java specification
- Simple “X has occurred” communication between processes
  - E.g., parent forks child and wants to know when child has completed initialization before continuing, child sends signal to parent, or parent wants to tell all children to stop after a certain amount of time has elapsed
- Portability can be a concern as different systems have different signal behavior
  - E.g., Linux implements signal queues so multiple signals of the same type can be recorded, but FreeBSD just has the bit marking so repeated signals can be lost