Lecture 6: Signals

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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
    void sigint_handler(int sig) {
      fprintf(stderr,"Interrupted!\n");
      close(tmp_file_fd);
      unlink(tmp_file_name);
    }

• Install it:
  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
  - `sigprocmask(int how, sigset_t *newset, sigset_t *oldset)`
- Specify that signal handlers run on separate stack
  - `sigaltstack(stack_t *signal_stack, stack_t *old_signal_stack)`
- Retrieve list of pending signals
  - `sigpending(sigset_t *signal_set)`
- Block process until signal is posted
  - `sigsuspend(setset_t *signal_mask)`
- Send signal to process
  - `kill(pid_t pid, int 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
- FreeBSD:
  - Process structure has field to mark pending signals
    - `sigset_t p_siglist;`
  - Thread structure field to mark pending signals for each thread
    - `sigset_t td_siglist;`
- Linux:
  - `task_struct` has field “struct sigpending pending”
  - List of signals and traditional `sigset_t` field

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’s `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 (FreeBSD)

- Thread checks pending signals (at least once) each time it enters kernel
  - Often just before leaving 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

Real-Time Signals (POSIX.4)

- Ordinary signals carry no information other than signal number
- Real-time signals can include a value as well
- POSIX defines *SIGRTMIN* and *SIGRTMAX* for range of real-time signals
  - All ignored by default - have no predefined meaning
- Linux queues real-time signals so they won't be lost or merged
  - Uses the "list" field of the sigpending struct

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 time can be recorded, but FreeBSD just has the bit marking so repeated signals can be lost