CSE 374  
Programming Concepts & Tools  

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Lecture 11 – gdb and Debugging
Agenda

• Debuggers, particularly gdb
• Why?
  – To learn general features of breakpoint-debugging
  – To learn specifics of gdb
  – To learn general debugging “survival skills”
    • Skill #1: don’t panic!
An execution monitor?

- What would you like to “see inside” and “do to” a running program?
- Why might all that be helpful?
- What are reasonable ways to debug a program?
- A “debugger” is a tool that lets you stop running programs, inspect (sometimes set) values, etc.
  - A “CAT scan” for observing executing code
Issues

• Source information for compiled code. (Get compiler help)
• Stopping your program too late to find the problem. (Art)
• Trying to “debug” the wrong algorithm
• Trying to “run the debugger” instead of understanding the program
• It’s an important tool
• Debugging C vs. Java
  – Eliminating crashes does not make your C program correct
  – Debugging Java is “easier” because (some) crashes and memory errors do not exist
  – But programming Java is “easier” for the same reason!
gdb

- gdb (Gnu debugger) is part of the standard Linux toolchain.
- gdb supports several languages, including C compiled by gcc.
- Modern IDEs have fancy GUI interfaces, which help, but concepts are the same.
- Compiling with debugging information: gcc -g
  - Otherwise, gdb can tell you little more than the stack of function calls.
- Running gdb: gdb executable
  - Source files should be in same directory (or use the -d flag).
- At prompt: run args
- Note: You can also inspect core files, which is why they get saved.
  - (Mostly useful for analyzing crashed programs after-the-fact, not for systematic debugging. The original use of db.)
Basic functions

- backtrace
- frame, up, down
- print expression, info args, info locals

Often enough for “crash debugging”

Also often enough for learning how “the compiler does things” (e.g., stack direction, malloc policy, ...)
Breakpoints

• break function (or line-number or ...)
• conditional breakpoints (break XXX if expr)
  1. to skip a bunch of iterations
  2. to do assertion checking
• going forward: continue, next, step, finish
  – Some debuggers let you “go backwards” (typically an illusion)
• Often enough for “binary search debugging”
• Also useful for learning program structure (e.g., when is some function called)
• Skim the manual for other features.
A few tricks

• Everyone develops their own “debugging tricks”; here are a few:
  – Printing pointer values to see how big objects were.
  – Always checking why a seg-fault happened (infinite stack and array-overflow very different)
  – “Staring at code” even if it does not crash
  – Printing array contents (especially last elements)
  – . . .
Advice

• Understand what the tool provides you
• Use it to accomplish a task, for example “I want to know the call-stack when I get the NULL-pointer dereference”
• Optimize your time developing software
  – Think of debugging as a systematic experiment to discover what’s wrong — not a way to randomly poke around
• Use development environments that have debuggers?
• See also: jdb for Java
• Like any tool, takes extra time at first but designed to save you time in the long run
  – Education is an investment
gdb summary – running programs

• Be sure to compile with gcc –g
• Open the program with: gdb <executable file>
• Start or restart the program: run <command args>
• Quit the program: kill
• Quit gdb: quit
• Reference information: help

• Most commands have short abbreviations
• <return> often repeats the last command
  – Particularly useful when stepping through code
gdb summary – looking around

- bt – stack backtrace
- up, down – change current stack frame
- list – display source code (list n, list <function name>)
- print expression – evaluate and print expression
- display expression – (re-)evaluate and print expression every time execution pauses.
  - undisplay – remove an expression from this recurring list.
gdb summary – breakpoints, stepping

- **break** – set breakpoint. (break <function name>, break <linenumber>, break <file>:<linenumber>)
- **info break** – print table of currently set breakpoints
- **clear** – remove breakpoints
- **disable/enable** – temporarily turn breakpoints off/on without removing them from the breakpoint table

- **continue** – resume execution to next breakpoint or end of program
- **step** – execute next source line
- **next** – execute next source line, but treat function calls as a single statement and don't step into them
- **finish** – execute to the conclusion of the current function
  - **How to recover if you meant “next” instead of “step”**