What’s in a process?

• A process consists of (at least):
  – an address space
  – the code for the running program
  – the data for the running program
  – an execution stack and stack pointer (SP)
  – traces state of procedure calls made
  – the program counter (PC), indicating the next instruction
  – a set of general-purpose processor registers and their values
  – a set of OS resources
    • open files, network connections, sound channels, …
• That’s a lot of concepts bundled together!

Concurrency

• Imagine a web server, which might like to handle multiple requests concurrently
  – While waiting for the credit card server to approve a purchase for one client, it could be retrieving the data requested by another client from disk, and assembling the response for a third client from cached information
• Imagine a web client (browser), which might like to initiate multiple requests concurrently
  – The CSE home page has 46 "src= ..." html commands, each of which is going to involve a lot of sitting around! Wouldn’t it be nice to be able to launch these requests concurrently?
• Imagine a parallel program running on a multiprocessor, which might like to concurrently employ multiple processors
  – For example, multiplying a large matrix – split the output matrix into k regions and compute the entries in each region concurrently using k processors

What’s needed?

• In each of these examples of concurrency (web server, web client, parallel program):
  – Everybody wants to run the same code
  – Everybody wants to access the same data
  – Everybody has the same privileges
  – Everybody uses the same resources (open files, network connections, etc.)
• But you’d like to have multiple hardware execution states:
  – an execution stack and stack pointer (SP)
  – traces state of procedure calls made
  – the program counter (PC), indicating the next instruction
  – a set of general-purpose processor registers and their values
How could we achieve this?

- Given the process abstraction as we know it:
  - fork several processes
  - cause each to map to the same address space to share data
    - see the `shmat()` system call for one way to do this (kind of)
- This is like making a pig fly – it’s really inefficient
  - space: PCB, page tables, etc.
  - time: creating OS structures, fork and copy addr space, etc.
- Some equally bad alternatives for some of the cases:
  - Entirely separate web servers
  - Asynchronous programming (explicitly programming of non-blocking I/Os) in the web client (browser)

Can we do better?

- Key idea:
  - separate the concept of a process (address space, etc.)
  - from that of a minimal “thread of control” (execution state: PC, etc.)
- This execution state is usually called a thread, or sometimes, a lightweight process

Threads and processes

- Most modern OS’s (Mach, Chorus, Win/XP, modern Unix) therefore support two entities:
  - the process, which defines the address space and general process attributes (such as open files, etc.)
  - the thread, which defines a sequential execution stream within a process
- A thread is bound to a single process
  - processes, however, can have multiple threads executing within them
  - sharing data between threads is cheap: all see same address space
- Threads become the unit of scheduling
  - processes are just containers in which threads execute

The design space

- key
  - address space
  - thread
- MS/DOS
  - one thread/process
  - one process
- Java
  - many threads/process
  - one process
- older UNIXes
  - one thread/process
  - many processes
- Mach, NT, Chorus, Linux, ...
  - many threads/process
  - many processes
Process/thread separation

• Concurrency (multithreading) is useful for:
  – handling concurrent events (e.g., web servers and clients)
  – building parallel programs (e.g., matrix multiply, ray tracing)
  – improving program structure (the Java argument)

• Multithreading is useful even on a uniprocessor
  – even though only one thread can run at a time

• Supporting multithreading – that is, separating the concept of a process (address space, files, etc.) from that of a minimal thread of control (execution state), is a big win
  – creating concurrency does not require creating new processes
  – “faster better cheaper”

“Where do threads come from, Mommy?”

• Natural answer: the kernel is responsible for creating/managing threads
  – for example, the kernel call to create a new thread would
    • allocate an execution stack within the process address space
    • create and initialize a Thread Control Block
      – stack pointer, program counter, register values
    • stick it on the ready queue
    – we call these kernel threads
• Threads can also be managed at the user level (that is, entirely from within the process)
  – a library linked into the program manages the threads
    • because threads share the same address space, the thread
      manager doesn’t need to manipulate address spaces (which
      only the kernel can do)
    • threads differ (roughly) only in hardware contexts (PC, SP,
      registers), which can be manipulated by user-level code
    • Thread package multiplexes user-level threads on top of kernel
      thread(s), which it treats as “virtual processors”
  – we call these user-level threads

The design space

Kernel threads

User-level threads, conceptually
**Kernel threads**

- OS now manages threads and processes
  - all thread operations are implemented in the kernel
  - OS schedules all of the threads in a system
  - if one thread in a process blocks (e.g., on I/O), the OS knows about it, and can run other threads from that process
  - possible to overlap I/O and computation inside a process
- Kernel threads are cheaper than processes
  - less state to allocate and initialize
- But, they’re still pretty expensive for fine-grained use (e.g., orders of magnitude more expensive than a procedure call)
  - thread operations are all system calls
    - context switch
    - argument checks
  - must maintain kernel state for each thread

**User-level threads**

- To make threads cheap and fast, they need to be implemented at the user level
  - managed entirely by user-level library, e.g. libpthreads.a
- User-level threads are small and fast
  - each thread is represented simply by a PC, registers, a stack, and a small thread control block (TCB)
  - creating a thread, switching between threads, and synchronizing threads are done via procedure calls
    - no kernel involvement is necessary
  - user-level thread operations can be 10-100x faster than kernel threads as a result
Performance example

- On a 700MHz Pentium running Linux 2.2.16:
  - Processes
    - fork/exit: 251 μs
  - Kernel threads
    - pthread_create()/pthread_join(): 94 μs
  - User-level threads
    - pthread_create()/pthread_join: 4.5 μs

User-level thread implementation

- The kernel thread (the kernel-controlled executable entity associated with the address space) executes the code in the address space
- This code includes the thread support library and its associated thread scheduler
- The thread scheduler determines when a thread runs
  - it uses queues to keep track of what threads are doing: run, ready, wait
    - just like the OS and processes
    - but, implemented at user-level as a library

Thread interface

- This is taken from the POSIX pthreads API:
  - t = pthread_create(attributes, start_procedure)
    - creates a new thread of control
    - new thread begins executing at start_procedure
  - pthread_cond_wait(condition_variable)
    - the calling thread blocks, sometimes called thread_block()
  - pthread_signal(condition_variable)
    - starts the thread waiting on the condition variable
  - pthread_exit()
    - terminates the calling thread
  - pthread_wait(t)
    - waits for the named thread to terminate

How to keep a thread from hogging the CPU?

- Strategy 1: force everyone to cooperate
  - a thread willingly gives up the CPU by calling yield()
  - yield() calls into the scheduler, which context switches to another ready thread
  - what happens if a thread never calls yield()??
- Strategy 2: use preemption
  - scheduler requests that a timer interrupt be delivered by the OS periodically
    - usually delivered as a UNIX signal (man signal)
    - signals are just like software interrupts, but delivered to user-level by the OS instead of delivered to OS by hardware
  - at each timer interrupt, scheduler gains control and context switches as appropriate
Thread context switch

- Very simple for user-level threads:
  - save context of currently running thread
    - push machine state onto thread stack
  - restore context of the next thread
    - pop machine state from next thread's stack
  - return as the new thread
    - execution resumes at PC of next thread
- This is all done by assembly language
  - it works at the level of the procedure calling convention
    - thus, it cannot be implemented using procedure calls

What if a thread tries to do I/O?

- The kernel thread “powering” it is lost for the duration of the (synchronous) I/O operation!
- Could have one kernel thread “powering” each user-level thread
  - “common case” operations (e.g., synchronization) would be quick
- Could have a limited-size “pool” of kernel threads “powering” all the user-level threads in the address space
  - the kernel will be scheduling its threads obliviously to what’s going on at user-level

What if the kernel preempts a thread holding a lock?

- Other threads will be unable to enter the critical section and will block (stall)
  - tradeoff, as with everything else
- Solving this requires coordination between the kernel and the user-level thread manager
  - “scheduler activations”
    - a research paper from UW with huge effect on industry
  - each process can request one or more kernel threads
    - process is given responsibility for mapping user-level threads onto kernel threads
    - kernel promises to notify user-level before it suspends or destroys a kernel thread
  - ACM TOCS 10.1

Summary

- You really want multiple threads per address space
- Kernel threads are much more efficient than processes, but they’re still not cheap
  - all operations require a kernel call and parameter verification
- User-level threads are:
  - fast as blazes
    - great for common-case operations
    - creation, synchronization, destruction
  - can suffer in uncommon cases due to kernel obliviousness
    - I/O
    - preemption of a lock-holder
- Scheduler activations are the answer
  - pretty subtle though