CS 318 Principles of Operating Systems

Fall 2018

Lecture 12: Dynamic Memory Allocation

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Slides adapted from David Mazières’ lecture
• Lab 1 grades out
  - If you did not do well, don’t be stressed out. Many chances to catch up.
  - If you feel sad, talk with the Professor (appointment or office hour)

• Lab 2 due this Thursday midnight
  - Submit through lab2-handin branch.
  - If using late hours, send email to staff mailing list.
  - Please don’t cheat (we are examining a few suspicious lab 1 submissions).

• Next Tuesday is Midterm
Memory Allocation

• **Static Allocation (fixed in size)**
  - want to create data structures that are fixed and don’t need to grow or shrink
  - global variables, e.g., char name[16];
  - done at compile time

• **Dynamic Allocation (change in size)**
  - want to increase or decrease the size of a data structure according to different demands
  - done at run time
Dynamic Memory Allocation

- Almost every useful program uses it
  - Gives wonderful functionality benefits
  - Don’t have to statically specify complex data structures
  - Can have data grow as a function of input size
  - Allows recursive procedures (stack growth)
  - But, can have a huge impact on performance

- Two types of dynamic memory allocation
  - Stack allocation: restricted, but simple and efficient
  - Heap allocation (focus today): general, but difficult to implement.
Dynamic Memory Allocation

• Today: how to implement dynamic heap allocation
  - Lecture based on [1] (good survey from 1995)

• Some interesting facts:
  - Two or three line code change can have huge, non-obvious impact on how well allocator works (examples to come)
  - Proven: impossible to construct an "always good" allocator
  - Surprising result: after 35 years, memory management still poorly understood
    - Mallacc: Accelerating Memory Allocation: ASPLOS 2017 Highlights
  - Big companies may write their own “malloc”
    - Google: TCMalloc
    - Facebook: jemalloc

Why Is It Hard?

• Satisfy arbitrary set of allocation and frees.

• Easy without free: set a pointer to the beginning of some big chunk of memory (“heap”) and increment on each allocation:

• Problem: free creates holes (“fragmentation”) Result? Lots of free space but cannot satisfy request!
More Abstractly

• What an allocator must do?
  - Track which parts of memory in use, which parts are free
  - Ideal: no wasted space, no time overhead

• What the allocator cannot do?
  - Control order of the number and size of requested blocks
  - Know the number, size, & lifetime of future allocations
  - Move allocated regions (bad placement decisions permanent), unlike Java allocator

• The core fight: minimize fragmentation
  - App frees blocks in any order, creating holes in “heap”
  - Holes too small? cannot satisfy future requests
What Is Fragmentation Really?

• Inability to use memory that is free

• Two factors required for fragmentation
  1. Different lifetimes—if adjacent objects die at different times, then fragmentation:

  ![Diagram showing different lifetimes and resulting fragmentation](image)

  • If all objects die at the same time, then no fragmentation:

  ![Diagram showing all objects dying at the same time](image)

  2. Different sizes: If all requests the same size, then no fragmentation (that’s why no external fragmentation with paging):

  ![Diagram showing different sizes and resulting fragmentation](image)
Important Decisions

• **Placement choice: where in free memory to put a requested block?**
  - Freedom: can select any memory in the heap
  - Ideal: put block where it won’t cause fragmentation later (impossible in general: requires future knowledge)

• **Split free blocks to satisfy smaller requests?**
  - Fights internal fragmentation
  - Freedom: can choose any larger block to split
  - One way: choose block with smallest remainder (best fit)

• **Coalescing free blocks to yield larger blocks**
  - Freedom: when to coalesce (deferring can save work)
  - Fights external fragmentation
Impossible to “Solve” Fragmentation

• If you read allocation papers to find the best allocator
  - All discussions revolve around tradeoffs
  - The reason? There cannot be a best allocator

• Theoretical result:
  - For any allocation algorithm, there exist streams of allocation and deallocation requests that defeat the allocator and force it into severe fragmentation 😞

• How much fragmentation should we tolerate?
  - Let $M = \text{bytes of live data}$, $n_{\text{min}} = \text{smallest allocation}$, $n_{\text{max}} = \text{largest allocation}$
  - Bad allocator: $M \cdot \left(\frac{n_{\text{max}}}{n_{\text{min}}}\right)$
    • E.g., make all allocations of size $n_{\text{max}}$ regardless of requested size
  - Good allocator: $\sim M \cdot \log\left(\frac{n_{\text{max}}}{n_{\text{min}}}\right)$
Pathological Examples

• Suppose heap currently has 7 20-byte chunks

- What’s a bad stream of frees and then allocates?

• Next: two allocators (best fit, first fit) that, in practice, work pretty well

- “pretty well” = ~20% fragmentation under many workloads
Pathological Examples

- Suppose heap currently has 7 20-byte chunks

  - What’s a bad stream of frees and then allocates?
  - Free every other chunk, then alloc 21 bytes

- Next: two allocators (best fit, first fit) that, in practice, work pretty well
  - “pretty well” = ~20% fragmentation under many workloads
Best Fit

- **Strategy:** minimize fragmentation by allocating space from block that leaves smallest fragment
  - Data structure: heap is a list of free blocks, each has a header holding block size and a pointer to the next block
  - Code: Search freelist for block closest in size to the request. (Exact match is ideal)
  - During free return free block, and (usually) coalesce adjacent blocks

- **Potential problem: Sawdust**
  - Remainder so small that over time left with “sawdust” everywhere
  - Fortunately not a problem in practice
Best Fit Gone Wrong

- Simple bad case: allocate $n, m$ ($n < m$) in alternating orders, free all the $n$s, then try to allocate an $n + 1$

- Example: start with 99 bytes of memory

  - alloc 19, 21, 19, 21, 19

  - free 19, 19, 19:

  - alloc 20? Fails! (wasted space = 57 bytes)

- However, doesn’t seem to happen in practice
First Fit

- **Strategy:** pick the first block that fits
  - Data structure: free list, sorted LIFO, FIFO, or by address
  - Code: scan list, take the first one

- **Suppose memory has free blocks:**
  - Workload 1: `alloc(10), alloc(20)`
    - First Fit
    - Best Fit
  - Workload 2: `alloc(8), alloc(12), alloc(12)`
    - First Fit
    - Best Fit
    - Fail!
First Fit

• LIFO: put free object on front of list.
  - Simple, but causes higher fragmentation
  - Potentially good for cache locality

• Address sort: order free blocks by address
  - Makes coalescing easy (just check if next block is free)
  - Also preserves empty/idle space (locality good when paging)

• FIFO: put free object at end of list
  - Gives similar fragmentation as address sort, but unclear why
Storage management example of subtle impact of simple decisions

LIFO first fit seems good:
- Put object on front of list (cheap), hope same size used again (cheap + good locality)

But, has big problems for simple allocation patterns:
- E.g., repeatedly intermix short-lived $2^n$-byte allocations, with long-lived $(n + l)$-byte allocations
- Each time large object freed, a small chunk will be quickly taken, leaving useless fragment. Pathological fragmentation
First Fit: Nuances

• **First fit sorted by address order, in practice**
  - Blocks at front preferentially split, ones at back only split when no larger one found before them
  - Result? Seems to roughly sort free list by size
  - So? Makes first fit operationally similar to best fit: a first fit of a sorted list = best fit!

• **Problem: sawdust at beginning of the list**
  - Sorting of list forces a large requests to skip over many small blocks. Need to use a scalable heap organization
Some Other Ideas

• **Worst-fit:**
  - Strategy: fight against sawdust by splitting blocks to maximize leftover size
  - In real life seems to ensure that no large blocks around

• **Next fit:**
  - Strategy: use first fit, but remember where we found the last thing and start searching from there
  - Seems like a good idea, but tends to break down entire list

• **Buddy systems:**
  - Round up allocations to power of 2 to make management faster
Buddy Allocator Motivation

- Allocation requests: frequently $2^n$
  - E.g., allocation physical pages in Linux
  - Generic allocation strategies: overly generic

- Fast search (allocate) and merge (free)
  - Avoid iterating through free list

- Avoid external fragmentation for req of $2^n$

- Keep physical pages contiguous

- Used by Linux, FreeBSD
Buddy Allocator Implementation

- **Data structure**
  - $N$ free lists of blocks of size $2^0$, $2^1$, …, $2^N$

- **Allocation restrictions:** $2^k$, $0 \leq k \leq N$

- **Allocation of $2^k$:**
  - Search free lists $(k, k+1, k+2, …)$ for appropriate size
  - Recursively divide larger blocks until reach block of correct size
  - Insert “buddy” blocks into free lists

- **Free**
  - recursively coalesce block with “buddy” if buddy free
Buddy Allocation

- Recursively divide larger blocks until reach suitable block
  - Big enough to fit but if further splitting would be too small

- Insert “buddy” blocks into free lists
  - The addresses of the buddy pair only differ by one bit!

- Upon free, recursively coalesce block with buddy if buddy free
Buddy Allocation Example

```
p1 = alloc(2^0)
```

```
p2 = alloc(2^2)
freelist[0] = {1}, freelist[1] = {2}
```

```
free(p1)
freelist[2] = {0}
```

```
free(p2)
freelist[3] = {0}
```

Note: $2^3$
Known Patterns of Real Programs

• So far we’ve treated programs as black boxes.

• Most real programs exhibit 1 or 2 (or all 3) of the following patterns of alloc/dealloc:

  - *Ramps*: accumulate data monotonically over time
  - *Peaks*: allocate many objects, use briefly, then free all
  - *Plateaus*: allocate many objects, use for a long time
Pattern 1: ramps

- In a practical sense: ramp = no free!
  - Implication for fragmentation?
  - What happens if you evaluate allocator with ramp programs only?
Pattern 2: Peaks

- Peaks: allocate many objects, use briefly, then free all
  - Fragmentation a real danger
  - What happens if peak allocated from contiguous memory?
  - Interleave peak & ramp? Interleave two different peaks?

trace of gcc compiling with full optimization
Exploiting Peaks

• **Peak phases:** allocate a lot, then free everything
  - Change allocation interface: allocate as before, but only support free of everything all at once
  - Called “arena allocation”, “obstack” (object stack), or alloca/procedure call (by compiler people)

• **Arena = a linked list of large chunks of memory**
  - Advantages: alloc is a pointer increment, free is “free”
  - No wasted space for tags or list pointers
  - See Pintos `threads/malloc.c`
Pattern 3: Plateaus

- Plateaus: allocate many objects, use for a long time
  - What happens if overlap with peak or different plateau?

trace of perl running a string processing script
Kernel allocates many instances of same structures
  - E.g., a 1.7 KB `task_struct` for every process on system

Often want contiguous physical memory (for DMA)

Slab allocation optimizes for this case:
  - A slab is multiple pages of contiguous physical memory
  - A cache contains one or more slabs
  - Each cache stores only one kind of object (fixed size)

Each slab is full, empty, or partial
Slab Allocation

• E.g., need new task_struct?
  - Look in the task_struct cache
  - If there is a partial slab, pick free task_struct in that
  - Else, use empty, or may need to allocate new slab for cache

• Free memory management: bitmap
  - Allocate: set bit and return slot, Free: clear bit

• Advantages: speed, and no internal fragmentation

• Used in FreeBSD and Linux, implemented on top of buddy page allocator
• **malloc is a library call, how does malloc gets free space?**
  - Note in Pintos, malloc is provided as a kernel function (see threads/malloc.c)

• **On Unix, can use sbrk and brk**
  - **int brk(void *p)**
    - Move the program break to address p
    - Return 0 if successful and -1 otherwise
  - **void *sbrk(intptr_t n)**
    - Increment the program break by n bytes
    - If n is 0, then return the current location of the program break
    - Return 0 if successful and (void*)-1 otherwise
Implement `malloc()`

```c
void *malloc(size_t n) {
    char *p = sbrk(0); // get current “program break”
    if (brk(p + n) == -1) // set “program break” to be current plus n
        return NULL;
    return p;
}

void free(void * p) {
}
```

**Problem?**

- Two system calls for every `malloc`!
- Freed blocks are not reused

**Solutions**

- Allocators request memory pool
- Keep track of free list
- If can’t find free chunk, request from OS
Returning Heap Memory

• Allocator can mark blocks as free when `free()` is called
  - But these blocks can be reused later by the process
  - i.e., they are not returned to the system!
  - Can cause memory pressure

• Allocator can return heap memory with `brk(pBrk−n)`, but...
  - `p` in `free(p)` is not always at the end of the heap!
  - So can’t reduce the heap size with `brk(pBrk−n)`

• Therefore, for large allocations, `sbrk()` is a bad idea
  - Can’t return memory to the system
Solution: VM Mapping

- void *mmap(void *p, size_t n, int prot, int flags, int fd, off_t offset);
  - Creates a new mapping in the virtual address space of the calling process
  - p: the starting address for the new mapping
  - n: the length of the mapping
  - If p is NULL, the kernel chooses the address at which to create the mapping
  - On success, returns address of the mapped area

- int munmap(void *p, size_t n);
  - Deletes the mappings for the specified address range
Implement `malloc()` with `mmap`

```c
void *malloc(size_t n)
{
    size_t *p;
    if (n == 0) return NULL;
    p = mmap(NULL, n + sizeof(size_t), PROT_READ|PROT_WRITE, MAP_PRIVATE|MAP_ANONYMOUS, 0, 0);
    if (p == (void*)-1) return NULL;
    *p = n + sizeof(size_t); // Store size in header
    p++;// Move forward from header to payload
    return p;
}
```

```c
void free(void *p)
{
    if (p == NULL) return;
    p--;// Move backward from payload to header
    munmap(p, *p);
}
```
Next Time…

• Midterm Review
Simple, Fast Segregated Free Lists

- Array of free lists for small sizes, tree for larger
  - Place blocks of same size on same page
  - Have count of allocated blocks: if goes to zero, can return page

- Pro: segregate sizes, no size tag, fast small alloc

- Con: worst case waste: 1 page per size even w/o free, After pessimal free: waste 1 page per object

- TCMalloc [Ghemawat] is a well-documented malloc like this
Typical Space Overheads

- Free list bookkeeping and alignment determine minimum allocatable size:
- If not implicit in page, must store size of block
- Must store pointers to next and previous freelists

![Diagram of memory alignment](image)

- Allocator doesn’t know types
  - Must align memory to conservative boundary