

Emulation — 2

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1 I/O examples

In an emulator, we implement each I/O device as an object, or a set of objects. The real device in the target system is connected to the CPU via an interface consisting of a set of registers, which may reside in a separate address space (e.g., the I/O address space of IA32 architectures, or the configuration space of PCI devices), or just in memory space. In all cases, the emulated CPU will access the emulated device via a (at least) a pair of functions provided by the object that implements the device, which we can define as follows (assuming 8 bit registers only):

```
class IOdev {
public:
    // get the contents of register at address a
    virtual uint8_t get_register (address a) = 0;
    // write v into register at address a
    virtual void set_register (address a, uint8_t v) = 0;
}
```

These functions are the interface between the device object and the emulated interface. The object will implement them to complete the I/O emulation. In order to do that, the object has to interact with the host operating system. Therefore, there will be another interface, between the I/O object and the host OS. The details of this latter interface depend on the kind of device we are emulating *and* the way we are using the host resources to emulate it.

It is often useful to split the code that emulates a device into two parts:

- a *frontend*, that only depends on the device we are emulating (e.g., which registers the devices has and what they do);
- a *backend*, that depends on how we are using the host to emulate the device (e.g., we are using a file, a terminal, ...).

The frontend implements the interface between the emulated CPU and the emulated device (the *CPU-frontend interface*), while the backend implements the interface between the emulated device and the host (the *host-backend interface*).

In some emulators the backend and frontend are implemented as two independent objects, interacting through yet another interface: the *frontend-backend* interface. This setup enhances the flexibility of the emulator since now we can attach one of several equivalent emulated devices (e.g., Ethernet cards from Realtek, Intel, Novell, ...) to any of several possible host resources (e.g., sockets, software bridges, tap devices, ...). This interface is also dependent on the kind of emulated device (e.g., video adapter, network interface, block device, ...).

1.1 Multi-threading

If the emulator uses several threads (e.g., one for the CPU loop and another for the I/O `select()` loop), then the I/O device object will be accessed concurrently and will need to be protected from interference problems with any of the techniques you already know or you are studying right now.

Be careful not to mistake the frontend/backend separation with the CPU-thread/IO-thread one: it is generally *not* the case that the frontend is only accessed by the CPU-thread and the backend only by the IO-thread. Instead, depending on the emulator and the kind of device, it may well be the case that *both* frontend and backend are accessed concurrently by both threads. In a typical interaction, the CPU thread executes an I/O instruction that accesses a register in the I/O device and it calls the corresponding `set_register` (or `get_register`) method on the device. This method will update the state of the object (to match the state of the target system) and then will call into the backend (using the frontend-backend interface) to complete the I/O operation, all in the same thread. Concurrently, the I/O thread may exit from the `select()` and find out that the same device needs to be updated (e.g., a new key has been pressed on the keyboard). Then, it will call some function of the backend (from the host-backend interface), which will in turn call some function in the frontend (from the frontend-backend interface). All these function calls occur in the context of the I/O thread. In the following we will omit the solution to the concurrency problems: assume that each interface function is protected by per-object mutual exclusion (it is *synchronized* in the Java sense).

We now sketch the implementation of some I/O interface we already know. It is a useful exercise to fill the missing details and to think at the emulation of other interfaces.

1.2 Hard Disk

Let us consider a simplified and abstract version of the ATA interface, with:

- a set of registers SN1, SN2, SN3, SN4 to specify the Sector Number (we assume there are four of them since a sector number does not fit into a single one);
- one CMD register to specify the operation we want the device to perform (e.g., sector read or sector write);

- a BR register that gives us access to an internal buffer of the interface.

Assume all registers are 8 bits wide and a sector is 512 bytes. A write operation is started as follows:

1. write the sector number in the SN1, ..., SN4 registers;
2. write the code for “write sector” in the CMD register;
3. perform a sequence of writes in the BR register to fill the internal buffer with the data we want to write.

Only when the buffer is full the interface starts the write operation, ordering the device to move the read/write head to seek for the desired sector, and then start writing the buffered data to the disk plate.

To emulate this interface, the corresponding (frontend) I/O object in our emulator program will look like the following (assuming C++):

```

class HDFrontend: public IODev {
    enum { iSN1, iSN2, ... };
    static const uint8_t WRITE = ...;
    static const uint8_t READ = ...;

    uint8_t SN1, SN2, SN3, SN4;
    uint8_t CMD;
    uint8_t buf[512]; // the internal buffer
    int next; // next read/write position in the buffer

    /* we assume split frontend/backend */
    HDBackend *be;

public:
    HD(HDBackend *be): next(0), be(be_) {}

    void set_register (address a, uint8_t v) {
        /* the interface may be mounted at several addresses,
         * but the the lower bits of the address always
         * identify the same register
         */
        int index = a & ADDR_MASK;
        switch (index) {
        case iSN1:
            /* just store it for later */
            SN1 = v;
            break;
        case iSN2:
            /* just store it for later */
            SN2 = v;

```

```

        break;
    ...
    case CMD:
        /* just store it for later */
        CMD = v;
        break;
    case iBR:
        if (CMD != WRITE) {
            /* an error */
        }
        buf[next++] = v;
        if (next == 512) {
            /* compute the sector number */
            uint32_t sn = SN1 | SN2 << 8 | ...;
            /* start the write */
            be->write_sector(sn, buf);
            /* reset */
            next = 0;
        }
        break;
    ...
}
...
};

```

The backend may use a file in the host system to emulate the target hard disk. It needs to translate the sector number into a file offset and perform the write.

```

class FileBackend: public BlockDeviceBackend {
    int fd; // file descriptor
    size_t hdsz;
    ...
public:
    FileBackend(const char *filename, size_t hdsz):
        fd(0), hdsz(hdsz)
    {
        /* create if it does not exist, but do not O_TRUNC! */
        fd = open(filename, O_RDWR|O_CREAT, 0660);
        if (fd < 0) {
            /* cannot continue, throw error */
            throw ...;
        }
    }
    ~FileBackend() {
        close(fd);
    }
};

```

```

    }
    void write_sector(int sn, const uint8_t *buf) {
        if (outsideHD(sn)) {
            /* do not write, update internal state */
            ...
            return;
        }
        off_t offset = sn * 512;
        lseek(fd, offset, SEEK_SET);
        write(fd, buf, 512);
    }
    ...
};

```

The *BlockDeviceBackend* should define the frontend-backend interface for block devices. It should contain the declaration of the `write_sector()` and, of course, `read_sector()` functions. A *FileBackend* is only one of several possible *BlockDeviceBackends*, other options being a disk partition in some host hard disk, an host device such as a DVD, ...

Note the difference in the error handling in the constructor and in the `write_sector()` function. In the former case, our emulator is not able to open the file: this is an error in the host and the emulator most likely cannot continue. In the latter case, the frontend passed the backend an invalid sector number (one that is outside the emulated hard disk): this is an error *in the guest*, and now we should emulate the behavior of the target hard disk in the same scenario (set some error bit in its status register).

1.3 Video

Let us briefly recall how VGA-compatible video adapters work. If the adapter is in text mode, the display is organized in rows and columns of characters and there is an area of memory that describes the contents of each character. In the memory area, each character is represented by a pair of bytes, one byte for the ASCII value of the symbol that must be displayed and another byte for the foreground/background colors and optional blinking. In the simplest to use graphics modes, the display is organized in rows and columns of pixels and there is a much bigger memory area where the programmer can set the color of each pixel.

The main point to note is that programs show output on the video by simply writing in the video memory area, where each write modifies only one or two characters or a few pixels (possibly just one). If we map each of these writes to a function, video updates are going to take a lot of time. Instead, we can draw inspiration from the target hardware itself: writes into video memory do not instantly cause video updates; instead, the video adapter periodically (with a frequency of, say, 60 times a second) scan the entire video memory to generate the corresponding signals for the display. We can adopt the same strategy for

our emulator: we implement video memory with a plain buffer, so that writes to emulated video memory translate to writes into the buffer, with no other immediate side effect (and, therefore, no function to call). At the same time, we arrange for the I/O tread (or a dedicated thread) to periodically read the buffer and, e.g., draw the corresponding contents in a window on the host display.

1.4 Interrupt Controller

We know that I/O devices do not send interrupts directly to the CPU, which typically only has one interrupt request pin for I/O. Instead, the target system may have an interrupt controller which collects all interrupt requests coming from the I/O devices, prioritizes them and then sends them to the CPU one at a time, possibly with a number that identifies the interrupt source. This is how things work for IA32 processors coupled with the APIC. If interrupts are enabled in the CPU, it responds to the interrupt request from the APIC with a jump to an interrupt handler routine. When the routine completes, it has to write an EOI word in an APIC register: the APIC is then enabled to pass the CPU lower priority interrupts that may have been queued in the meantime.

In our emulator, the interrupt controller is another *IODEV* object, since the CPU must be able to read and write into its registers (in particular, the EOI register). At the same time, the interrupt controller is used by other objects: when an emulated device want to raise an interrupt, it cannot simply set the CPU interrupt flag, but it has to notify the controller instead. This notification can be implemented by a call to a method in the interrupt controller interface. This method will update the internal state of the controller and either set the interrupt flag, or queue the request internally if it cannot pass it right away (e.g., because there are higher priority requests pending). The `set_register()` method of the interrupt controller object, when it identifies a write to the EOI register, can then inspect the internal queue and pass other interrupts as needed. Note that, in a multi-threaded emulator, the actions corresponding to an interrupt request will be performed in the I/O thread, while the actions following the EOI are executed by the CPU thread.

2 Virtual Memory

One of the most complex part of virtualization is the management of virtual memory. Here, we are talking about virtual memory *in the guest*. If the target system includes a MMU, the target system code will try to program it to implement its own virtual memory.

Assume, for example, that we use an array of bytes, call it *Mem*, to emulate the target physical memory, and assume that our CPU loop is trying to execute the following IA32 instruction

```
movl 4100, %eax
```

If pagination is not enabled, the emulator will correctly read the operand at `Mem[4100]`, since the target CPU will load the operand from the corresponding address 4100 in its physical memory. If pagination is enabled, however, address 4100 is virtual and the target CPU will not load the operand from address 4100. Instead, the address will be translated into something else, say 8196, by the MMU, and then address 8196 will be loaded from memory. Accordingly, our emulator must read `Mem[8196]` instead of `Mem[4100]`. We need to make a distinction among several kinds of addresses:

- address 4100 in the example is a *guest virtual address*; it is an address that needs to be translated according to the rules set up by the guest MMU;
- address 8196, the result of this translation, is a *guest physical address*; it is the address of a location in the guest physical memory;
- `&Mem[8196]`, i.e., the address of the location the emulator will actually read, is a *host virtual address*, if pagination is enabled in the host (as it is usually the case);
- finally, the host virtual address will be translated to an *host physical address* by the host MMU.

The translation from guest virtual to guest physical is performed by the guest MMU and we need to emulate it. We need to provide a `translate_address()` function that returns a guest physical address when given a guest virtual address, then we need to call this function whenever the CPU loop needs to access guest memory. Recall that these accesses not only occur during instruction operands loads and stores, but also during instruction fetches, since instructions are in memory.

There is also a translation, that must not be overlooked, from guest physical to host virtual addresses. In this simple example the translation is simple: we use the guest physical address as an index in the `Mem` array. In the example, we translate 8196 to whatever the value of `&Mem[8196]` is. Note, however, that if the memory data structure we use is more complex, this translation will accordingly be more complex. We already know of a source of complexity here: if the target system has memory mapped I/O devices, before accessing memory we first need to check whether the address maps to any I/O device.

Finally, the host virtual address is translated into an host physical address. In our example, we have nothing special to do to make this translation happen: the emulator is an unprivileged program in the host system and it typically has no control at all on its virtual memory, which is transparently managed by the host kernel.

2.1 Translating guest virtual addresses

To implement the `translate_address()` function we need to implement in software the actions performed in hardware by the target MMU. Assuming an IA32

system, we need to read the (guest physical) address in the cr3 field of the emulated CPU data structure and read the emulated physical memory at offset

```
CPU->cr3 + 4 * ((virtual_address & 0xFFC00000) >> 22)
```

to obtain the page table descriptor, and so on. If we find some reset P bit, we also need to throw a page fault exception.

We can speed up this process, again, by drawing inspiration from the hardware. The target MMU includes a TLB, which caches recently used translations. We can also define a software TLB of sorts, where we put recently used translations in a form that is more easily accessed. Note that the hardware TLB is useful because it is a much faster memory compared to the main memory containing the actual page tables. The software TLB, instead, is a data structure in our program just like the emulated physical memory is. The software TLB can be still useful, however, if it allows us to complete the translation from guest virtual address to guest physical address using fewer instructions.

A simple TLB is an array of entries like the following:

```
struct TLB_entry {
    uint32_t guest_virtual;
    uint8_t* host_virtual;
};
```

where we directly cache the mapping from guest virtual address to host virtual address (in the above example, we would cache the mapping from 4096 to &Mem[8192]: recall that mappings are between pages, while the offset in the page, which is 4 in the example, simply has to be added to the resulting pointer). We can use NULL in the second field to mark an empty entry.

Assume we keep an array of, say, 1024 TLB_entry's. When we need to translate a guest virtual address, we first use a hash function to obtain an index into the array from the address, we check that the corresponding entry is not empty and it actually contains the address we are looking for. If this is the case, the host_virtual field already gives us a pointer into the emulated memory. Otherwise, we complete the translation in the ordinary way, then store the resulting pointer in the entry (replacing any previous one). The hash function may be very simple: since programs typically access their memory in order, we can simply use the 10 lower order bits of the guest virtual page address.

3 The IA32 case study

We conclude this notes on emulation by focussing a little more on the emulation of the IA32 architecture.

Several features of the IA32 architecture make its emulation particularly inefficient. The worst offenders are:

- the incredibly complex instruction format;

- the EFLAGS register.

3.1 The IA32 instruction format

The IA32 instruction format has evolved over time, starting with 16 bits processors, moving to 32 bits, then adding new sets of instructions in several rounds. The format was variable length already in the first processors, and this forces any emulator to have a combined fetch&decode function. In the current processors, the format is as follows:

1. optional 1–4 prefix bytes;
2. 1–3 opcode bytes;
3. optional Mod R/M byte;
4. optional SIB byte;
5. optional 1/2/4 bytes displacement;
6. optional 1/2/4 bytes immediate operand.

Prefix bytes are used for several purposes, among them we can mention:

- the REP, REPE, REPNE, . . . prefixes for string instructions;
- the LOCK prefix, to lock the bus and turn instructions like XCHG into atomic operations;
- some prefixes to change the default size of “large” operands. Operands may be either “short” (8 bits) or “large” (either 16 or 32 bits depending on several things, including these prefixes).

The opcode may include three bits that encode a register operand, so that instructions like `pushl %eax` may be encoded in just one byte. The “Mod R/M” byte encodes, in complex ways, the mode of one of the two operands, which may be either register, immediate, or memory, the latter in several formats. The “SIB” byte encodes the Scale, Index and Base of memory operand expressions like `16(%ebx, %ecx, 4)`. The “16” displacement in this expression is encoded in the “displacement” field. The optional “immediate” field encodes the value of operands such as `$1000`.

The encoding is not regular at all, since several special cases have been added over the years to add new features and new instructions. The Bochs file that implements the fetch&decode function for IA32 is more than 2000 lines long!

Of course, all this complexity adds to the time needed to decode each IA32 instruction.

3.2 The IA32 EFLAGS register

The main problem with the EFLAGS register is that almost all instructions update it: this includes the arithmetic instructions, the compare instructions, the logic instructions, the shift and rotate instructions. Depending on the emulator architecture, and on the host CPU, the emulator may need to compute all the flags in software. Some of these are both complex to compute, and little known and used:

- the PF (parity) flag is set if the number of set bits in the least significant byte of the result is even;
- the AF (adjust) flag is set if there has been a borrow/carry out of the four least significant bits of the result (used in BCD arithmetic).

Our emulator will have to compute all these things, for many instructions.

Note that, even if the EFLAGS bits are updated very often, they are very seldom read. Essentially, they are only read by conditional jump instructions. Therefore, there is room for optimization here, since we can think to compute these flags in a “lazy” way, delaying their computation until they are actually needed, which in many cases means never.

We don’t explore this optimization here, since we are going to introduce a better technique that allows us to address this and other problems: *binary translation*.