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Adam M. Costello and George Varghese

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Redesigning the BSD Callout and Timer Facilities

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1. Introduction

To satisfy the needs of real-time applications and communication protocols, operating systems provide timers. In BSD\(^1\) kernels, timers are provided by the callout facility, which allows a function and argument to be registered to be called at a future time. A clock interrupt routine periodically checks the outstanding callouts, and calls the functions due to be called.

There are four measures of performance of the callout facility:

1. Time to set a callout.
2. Time to cancel a callout.
3. Time to process a clock tick.
4. Time to process an expired callout.

Also of interest is the maximum amount of time that interrupts can be locked out during these operations. If interrupts are locked out for too long, time-critical I/O events may be missed by the system.

The existing implementation takes constant time (usually) to process a clock tick or an expired callout, but takes linear time (in the number of outstanding callouts) to set or cancel a callout. Interrupts are locked out for the duration of a set or cancel operation, which can take linear time in the number of outstanding callouts. Our new implementation achieves worst-case constant time for all operations except processing a clock tick, for which it achieves average-case constant time.

It also never locks out interrupts for more than a constant amount of time.

Why Redesign? When we examined a typical UNIX workstation kernel, we found only 5–6 outstanding callouts (in use by RPC, NFS, and TCP). With such a small number of outstanding callouts, taking linear time to start or stop a callout is not very onerous, and the BSD implementation seems adequate. So why bother with a new implementation anyway?

Clearly, our new implementation is motivated by environments which have a large number of outstanding timers. Network protocol implementations provide the easiest example. Typically, for every packet sent by a reliable transport protocol such as TCP, a retransmission timer is started. If an acknowledgement arrives promptly, the timer is cancelled; when the timer expires, the packet is retransmitted. Several recent network implementations [CJRS89] have been tuned to send packets at a rate of 25,000–40,000 packets per second. The situation is exacerbated because most transport protocols use sliding window protocols (in which a large number of packets are allowed to be outstanding to allow pipelined throughput) and because servers often maintain several outstanding conversations with clients. Most other network protocols also use several timers for error recovery and rate control.

How then can the BSD TCP implementation get away with two callouts? This is possible because the TCP implementation maintains its own timers for all outstanding packets, and uses two kernel callouts as clocks to run its own timers.

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\(^1\)Throughout this paper, "BSD" refers to 4.4BSD-Lite and its derivatives, such as NetBSD.
TCP maintains its packet timers in the simplest fashion: Whenever its single kernel timer expires, it ticks away at all its outstanding packet timers. This method works reasonably well if the granularity of timers is low. However, it is desirable to improve the resolution of the retransmission timer to allow speedier recovery. With a large number of finer granularity timers, it is necessary to have more efficient timer algorithms. Rather than have every protocol duplicate these efficient algorithms [CJRS89, TNML93], it is better to have the kernel directly provide an efficient callout facility.

Besides networking applications, process control and other real-time applications will also benefit from large numbers of fine granularity timers. Also, the number of users on a system may grow large enough to lead to a large number of outstanding timers. This is the reason cited (for redesigning the timer facility) by the developers of the IBM VM/XA SP1 operating system [Dav89].

With a large number of outstanding callouts, it becomes important to bound the amount of time that interrupts can be locked out. Finally, regardless of the number of callouts, the current UNIX limit of one timer per process seems too restrictive. This forces user applications that need multiple timers either to fork additional processes or to maintain their own timers.

Therefore we believe that we can make a case for new callout and timer implementations that are scalable, robust, and flexible. Unlike many scalable designs, there is no performance penalty when the number of outstanding callouts is small. Also, the increase in the code size is small (158 lines for the new callout facility, and 310 lines for the extended interval timer facility). Thus, considering the general environments in which UNIX kernels are and will be deployed, the new implementation appears to be a wise and cheap piece of insurance.

Previous Work: Varghese and Lauck [VL87] described a number of new schemes to implement timers. The basis of our implementation is Scheme 6 in [VL87], which is based on a data structure called a hashed timing wheel. The work in [VL87] is mostly theoretical and does not consider some of the issues that occur in actual operating systems; for example, it assumes that all the per tick bookkeeping can be done at the interrupt level, which is clearly infeasible in a real system. A few fairly well known networking implementations (e.g., [CJRS89, TNML93]) have used the ideas in [VL87] in specialized timer packages for their networking routines (as opposed to a general operating system facility). Brown [Bro88] extends hashed timing wheels to what he calls calendar queues; the major difference is that calendar queue implementations also periodically resize the wheel in order to reduce the overhead of stepping through empty buckets. For timer applications, the clock time must be incremented on every clock tick anyway; thus adding a few instructions to step through empty buckets is not significant. Davison [Dav89] describes a timer implementation for the IBM VM/XA SP1 operating system based on calendar queues. In our setting, the small improvement in per tick bookkeeping (from resizing the wheel periodically) does not appear to warrant the extra complexity of resizing.

Organization: The rest of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 describes the existing NetBSD 1.0 kernel implementation of the callout facility. Section 3 reviews a timing wheel algorithm proposed in [VL87]. Section 4 illustrates how we implemented this algorithm in the NetBSD 1.0 kernel and the implementation issues that we encountered. We also describe in Section 5 an extension to the user-level interval timer facility to allow multiple outstanding timers; this was essential for the performance tests of the new callout facility, but we believe this feature is useful in its own right. Section 6 presents performance results. Section 7 describes future work in the areas of dynamic storage allocation and cleaning up the interval timer interface. Finally, Section 8 states our conclusions.

2. Existing Callout Implementation

In the existing BSD implementation, each callout is represented by a callout structure containing

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2Currently TCP uses two virtual clocks: one with 200 ms ticks and one with 500 ms ticks.

3The larger the recovery time, the larger the amount of data that could have been sent, especially at high speeds. While packet loss due to corruption is rare today, packet loss due to congestion is still quite common.

4The improvement is not worst-case, but is demonstrated empirically for certain benchmarks.
a pointer to the function to be called (c_func), a pointer to the function’s argument (c_arg), and a time (c_time) expressed in units of clock ticks. Outstanding callouts are kept in a linked list, sorted by their expiration times. The c_time member of each callout structure is differential, not absolute—the first callout in the list stores the number of ticks from now until expiration, and each subsequent callout in the list stores the number of ticks between its own expiration and the expiration of its predecessor.

Figure 1: The calltodo data structure.

This data structure (called calltodo, see Figure 1) dictates the performance. Because the times are differential, the clock interrupt routine hardclock() needs only to decrement the time of the first callout in the list and check whether it becomes zero, which takes constant time. If the first callout has expired, a software clock interrupt is generated. Its handler, softclock(), repeatedly checks the callout at the head of the list, and if it is expired (c_time member equal to zero), removes it and calls its function. Interrupts are locked out while the calltodo list is being manipulated, but not while the function is executing.

Callouts are set and canceled using timeout() anduntimeout(), respectively. timeout(func, arg, time) registers func(arg) to be called at the specified time. untimout(func, arg) cancels the callout with matching function and argument. Because the calltodo list must be searched linearly, both operations take time proportional to the number of outstanding callouts. Interrupts are locked out for the duration of the search.

There is one complication: Because the processing of expired callouts by softclock(), which can be interrupted by hardclock(), might take longer than one clock tick, callouts might become overdue. This is represented in the calltodo list by callouts at the start of the list with negative c_time members. A c_time member of −t indicates that the callout is overdue by t ticks. hardclock() must decrement all non-positive c_time members at the beginning of the list, as well as the first positive c_time member in the list. Therefore, the processing of a clock tick does not necessarily take constant time (if there are a number of expired timers at the head of the list that softclock() has not yet processed).

3. Replacement Callout Algorithm

The algorithm used by the existing implementation is very similar to Scheme 2 of [VL87]. The new implementation is based on Scheme 6 of [VL87].

Figure 2: The callwheel data structure.

Instead of a single sorted list of callout structures, we use a circular array of unsorted lists. The array, called callwheel (see Figure 2), contains callwheelsize entries. All callouts scheduled to expire at time t appear in the list callwheel[t % callwheelsize], and their c_time members are set to t / callwheelsize. callwheelsize should be chosen to be comparable to the maximum possible number of outstanding callout structures.
On each clock tick, the appropriate list must be traversed completely, the c.time member of each callout in the list decremented, and the expired callouts handled and removed. In the worst case, all outstanding callouts could be in the same list, but since the number of lists is comparable to the maximum number of outstanding callouts, and the lists are processed in a round-robin fashion, the average list length is a small constant. Thus, it takes average-case constant time to process a clock tick. To handle an expired timer still requires nothing more than removing the callout from a list, which takes worst-case constant time, and then calling its function.

Setting a callout requires determining the appropriate list and inserting at the head, which takes worst-case constant time. For canceling a callout, the original Scheme 6 algorithm assumes that it will be given a handle to the callout (i.e. an identifier which locates the callout immediately), in which case it needs only to delete the callout from the list, taking worst-case constant time. But the existing timeout() interface does not use handles, so this becomes a problem in the implementation. Section 4 will describe how this problem has been overcome in two different ways. The original algorithm also assumes that each timer routine (especially the equivalent of hardclock()) runs to completion, and does not worry about the details of mutual exclusion and locking out interrupts. These problems are also addressed in Section 4.

4. Replacement Callout Implementation

callwheelsize is constrained to be a power of 2, equal to 2^callwheelbits. This simplifies the division and remainder operations to bit shifting and masking. The lists in callwheel are doubly-linked (requiring an additional member in the callout structures), allowing the removal of a callout structure given only a pointer to it.

The old hardclock() had to manipulate the calltode structure, but the new hardclock() has nothing to do but increment the global ticks variable\(^5\) (which the old hardclock() did anyway), which represents the current time. softclock() has its own static variable, softticks. softclock() repeatedly checks whether softticks equals ticks, and if not, increments softticks and checks all the callouts in callwheel[softticks & callwheelmask], expiring the ones with c.time members equal to zero, decrementing the c.time members of the others. As an optimization, after hardclock() increments ticks, it checks to see if softticks equals ticks - 1 and callwheel[ticks & callwheelmask] is empty. If not, a software interrupt is generated to cause softclock() to run. Otherwise, hardclock() increments softticks itself rather than incur the overhead of a software interrupt, since that is all softclock() would have done.

Figures 3, 4, and 5 show the new code for hardclock() and softclock().

If it were not for the lack of handles in the existing timeout()/untimout() interface, the implementation of those functions would be straightforward, and there would be nothing to say about them here. There are two possible solutions to the problem. We could try to find a way, given a function pointer and argument pointer, to produce a pointer to the matching callout in constant time. A hash table is the obvious mechanism. The disadvantage is that a hash table cannot guarantee constant time in the worst case; it can only provide constant time in the expected case. The other solution would be to provide new interface functions called, say, setcallout() and unsetcallout(), which work very much like timeout() and untimout(), except that setcallout() returns a handle, and unsetcallout() takes a handle as its only argument. The disadvantage here is that existing code elsewhere in the kernel already uses the existing interface. In the new implementation, both solutions are used. Both interfaces are available for adding and removing callouts to and from a single callwheel. A hash table is used only by the old interface.

At first, we used a closed-chaining hash table. If untimout(func, arg) were called, and no outstanding callout matched the specified function and argument, the entire hash table would have to be searched. We did not expect untimout() ever to be called this way, but it turns out that

\(^5\)Actually, hardclock() also does other things entirely unrelated to the callout facility.
struct callout {
    struct callout *c_next;        /* next callout in queue */
    struct callout **c_back;       /* pointer back to the ptr */
    struct callout *hash_next;     /* next and back pointers */
    struct callout **hash_back;    /* for the callhash array */
    /* hash_back is NULL iff this callout is not in the hash table. */
    struct callout_handle {
        unsigned long lo, hi;
    } handle;                       /* handle for this callout */
    /* The lowest calloutbits of handle.hi are the */
    /* index into the callout array of this callout. */
    void  *c_arg;                   /* function argument */
    void (*c_func) ((void *));     /* function to call */
    int   c_time;                   /* ticks to the event >> calhwheelbits */
};

int ticks;                        /* Current time, in ticks. */
static int softicks;              /* Like ticks, but for softclock(). */
static struct callout *nextsoftcheck; /* Next callout to be checked. */

Figure 3: Declarations used by hardclock() and softclock().

void hardclock(frame)
    register struct clockframe *frame;
{
    /* The real hardclock() also does other, non-callout-related things. */
    ticks++;
    if (calhwheel[ticks & callwheelmask]) { /* This condition changed. */
        if (CLKF_BASEPRI(frame)) {
            /* Save the overhead of a software interrupt; */
            /* it will happen as soon as we return, so do it now. */
            (void) splsoftclock();
            softclock();
        } else
            setsoftclock();
    } else if (softicks + 1 == ticks) ++softicks; /* This line is new. */
}

Figure 4: The new hardclock() function. From the old function, several lines dealing with calltodo have been removed, one line has been changed, and one line has been added.
void softclock()
{
    register struct callout *c;
    register int steps;  /* Number of steps taken since */
                        /* we last allowed interrupts. */
    register int s;

    s = splhigh();
    steps = 0;
    while (softticks != ticks) {
        if (++steps >= MAX_SOFTCLOCK_STEPS) {
            nextsoftcheck = NULL;
            splx(s);  /* Give hardclock() a chance. */
            (void) splhigh();
            steps = 0;
        }
        c = callwheel[++softticks & callwheelmask];
        while (c) {
          if (c->c_time > 0) {
            --c->c_time;
            c = c->c_next;
            if (++steps >= MAX_SOFTCLOCK_STEPS) {
                nextsoftcheck = c;
                splx(s);  /* Give hardclock() a chance. */
                (void) splhigh();
                c = nextsoftcheck;
                steps = 0;
            }
          }
          else {
            if (nextsoftcheck == *c->c_back = c->c_next) {
                nextsoftcheck->c_back = c->c_back;
            if (c->hash_back) callhash_remove(c);
            else if (++c->handle.lo == 0) c->handle.hi += calloutsize;
            splx(s);
            c->c_func(c->c_arg);
            (void) splhigh();
            steps = 0;
            c->c_next = callfree;
            callfree = c;
            c = nextsoftcheck;
          }
        }
    }
}

nextsoftcheck = NULL;
splx(s);
}

Figure 5: The new softclock() function. It is entirely different from the old one.
such calls are quite common. In the old implementation, the cost of canceling a non-existent callout was about the same as canceling an existent callout (both require a linear search of the calltodo structure). We wanted both sorts of calls to have equal costs in the new implementation as well, so we switched to an open-chaining hash table, in which only one bucket needs to be searched in any case. This required the addition of two more members to the callout structure, so that each callout, which might already belong to a doubly-linked list in callwheel, might also belong to a doubly-linked list in callhash (the hash table). timeout() always inserts the new callout into the hash table, and untimeout() always removes it, but softclock() must check to see whether an expiring callout is in the hash table before removing it. Fortunately, it need not compute the hash function to do this; it can merely check the links in the the callout structure.

The hash function was chosen to be fast to compute, but still provide a fairly even distribution among the buckets. callhashsize is constrained to be a power of 2, equal to 2^callhashbits. Both the func and arg pointers are likely to be longword-aligned, so the lowest 2 bits of each are not used. The lower bits of function pointers are likely to be more random than the higher bits, so the next higher callhashbits bits of func are used. For data pointers, the low bits might be constant (in the case of pointers to large aligned structures, such as mbus) or they might be the only bits that are significant (in the case of pointers into an array, for example). Therefore, we use not only the next higher callhashbits bits from arg, but also the next higher callhashbits bits above those. The three bit strings, each of length callhashbits, are aligned and XORed to produce the index into the hash table. The computation requires 3 shifts and 3 boolean operations.

For the new setcallout() interface, the design of the handle was not trivial. A simple pointer to a callout structure would not be safe, because those structures get recycled. Between the time setcallout() returns a pointer and the time unsetcallout() is passed that pointer, the callout could have expired and been reused, in which case the call to unsetcallout() will cancel someone else's callout. The solution was to give each callout structure an ID that gets incremented each time the callout is canceled by unsetcallout(). The ID is included in the handle, so that unsetcallout() can compare the IDs before canceling the callout. The size of the ID must be large enough that it will never wrap around. 32 bits was deemed insufficient. But the handle also needs to include a "pointer" to the callout structure, and a real pointer is overkill. Since all of the callout structures are allocated as a single array at boot time, we only need an index into this array, which takes calloutbits bits (this is much less than 32). So a callout.handle structure contains two unsigned longs, lo and hi. The lowest calloutbits bits of hi are the index into the callout array, and all remaining bits are used for the ID. Incrementing the ID amounts to incrementing lo, and if the result is zero, adding calloutsizex2calloutbits to hi. Each callout structure contains a full callout.handle structure, with the lowest calloutbits bits of hi initialized at boot time, so that unsetcallout() may compare the entire handle, rather than just the ID portion.

The only remaining wrinkle in the implementation is motivated by the desire to limit the time that interrupts may be disabled. timeout() and untimeout(), which use the hash table, cannot guarantee a limit on the time that interrupts are disabled, but setcallout() and unsetcallout() can (and do). hardclock() always takes constant time. The remaining concern is softclock(), which must lock out interrupts while it is manipulating the callwheel structure. While it is traversing a list (which could be long in the worst case), it cannot allow itself to be interrupted by untimeout() or unsetcallout(), because those functions might remove a callout structure right out from under softclock(). This problem was eliminated by a bit of unholy data-sharing between softclock() and untimeout() and unsetcallout(). As softclock() traverses a list, it uses a local pointer into the list. Whenever it wishes to enable interrupts briefly, it first copies its local pointer into the global variable nextsoftcheck, then enables interrupts, then disables interrupts, then copies nextsoftcheck back into its local pointer. Whenever untimeout() or unsetcallout() cancels a callout, it checks to see whether nextsoftcheck

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*For its callout-related duties, that is.
points at the structure just removed, and if so, it sets nextsoftcheck to point to the next structure in the list. softclock() keeps track of the number of steps it has taken since it last enabled interrupts, and whenever the count reaches MAX_SOFTCLOCK_STEPS, it briefly enables them. Therefore, softclock() never disables interrupts for more than a constant amount of time. There are no guarantees on the timeliness of callout expirations, but there never were in the old implementation either.

5. Multiple Timers

Testing the performance of the new callout implementation would be easiest to do in a user-level process. A user process can cause callouts to be set, canceled, and expired via the interval timer facility, through the getitimer() and setitimer() system calls.

Unfortunately, the existing interval timer facility allows each process only one outstanding real-time timer, which means one outstanding callout. The first tests used multiple processes to achieve multiple outstanding callouts, but there were mysterious problems whenever more than 80 processes were spawned, no matter how high MAXUSERS was set.

While this was a pragmatic reason, we also believe that users will benefit from the ability to allow each process to have multiple outstanding real-time timers. Our extensions involved adding a new timer type tag, ITIMER_MULTIREAL, and overloading the semantics of the other arguments passed to getitimer() and setitimer().

The details of the interface extensions are described in Figures 6 and 7. The extended interface allows the user process to create many real-time timers, which have 64-bit kernel-chosen handles associated with them, as well as 64-bit user-chosen labels. The user process can change the values and labels of existing timers, and destroy existing timers. Whenever a timer expires, the timer is put in a queue, and a SIGALRM is sent to the process. The process can pop an expired timer off of this queue and obtain both its handle and its label.

The implementation of the extended timer facility required much new code in the getitimer() and setitimer() system calls, of course. Also, two new pointer members were added to the proc structure to keep track of running and queued timers belonging to the processes.7 Since each timer is represented by an itimer structure allocated from a shared pool, code needed to be added to exit() to free any timers still belonging to the dying process. Each itimer structure contains a pointer to the process that owns it, so one process cannot forge handles and trick the kernel into manipulating timers belonging to another process.

The kernel may be configured at compile-time to use either the timeout() interface or the setcallout() interface for the ITIMER_MULTIREAL facility.

6. Performance

Three kernels were tested on a Sun 4/360. All included the ITIMER_MULTIREAL facility. In one kernel, it used the timeout() interface to the old callout facility. In another kernel, it used the timeout() interface to the new callout facility. In the last kernel, it used the setcallout() interface to the new callout facility.

In each test, one process created a number of outstanding timers set for random times far in the future, causing a number of outstanding callouts. It then created one more timer, and repeatedly set it for a random time farther in the future than the others, causing repeated calls to untimeout() and timeout() (or unsetcallout() and setcallout(), depending on which kernel was being used). The results show that the time for the original callout facility increases linearly with the number of outstanding callouts, whereas the time for the replacement callout facility is constant with respect to the number of outstanding callouts, for both the old interface (using hashing) and the new interface (using handles). (See Figure 8 and Table 1.) The new interface performs very slightly better, and provides guaranteed constant time operations, but the old interface is needed for compatibility with the rest of the kernel.

7It would have been easier to use three pointers, but there were already 8 bytes of padding in the structure. By using only two pointers, it was possible to add the members without changing the size of the structure.
The existing interface, `setitimer(ITIMER_REAL, value, ovaleur)`, sets the process's real-time interval timer to `value->it.value`, putting the former contents into `ovaleur` if `ovaleur` is not NULL. The timer decrements in real time, causing a `SIGALRM` when it reaches zero. If `value->it.interval` was not zero, the timer reloads with that value, otherwise it stops.

The new interface, `setitimer(ITIMER_MULTIREAL, value, ovaleur)`, behaves similarly, but with the following differences:

- `ovaleur` must not be NULL; it must point to a struct `itimerval`.
- If `value->it.value` is not zero, and `ovaleur->it.value` is `{ -1, -1 }`, this is a create-new-timer operation. `ovaleur->it.interval` must already be set to an arbitrary user-chosen “label” for the new timer. `ovaleur->it.value` will be overwritten with a kernel-chosen “handle” for the timer. The timer will be initialized with `value`.
- If `value->it.value` is not zero, and `ovaleur->it.value` is not `{ -1, -1 }`, this is a reset-existing-timer operation. `ovaleur->it.value` is interpreted as a timer handle, and `ovalue->it.interval` must already be set to an arbitrary user-chosen label, which may differ from the existing timer’s current label. The existing timer is removed from the expired timer queue (see `getitimer()`) if necessary, and its value and label are overwritten with `value` and `ovalue->it.interval`. As with `ITIMER_REAL`, `ovaleur` is overwritten with the former value of the timer. If the handle in `ovalue->it.value` did not refer to an existing timer, -1 is returned and `errno` is set to `EINVAL`.
- If `value->it.value` is zero, this is a cancel-timer operation. `value->it.value` and `ovalue->it.interval` are ignored. `ovalue->it.value` is interpreted as a timer handle. If the handle is valid and the timer exists, it is destroyed, and its final value is stored in `ovaleur`. Otherwise, -1 is returned and `errno` is set to `EINVAL`. Note that timers in the expired queue (see `getitimer()`) are still considered to exist.

Figure 6: Extensions to `setitimer()`.

The existing interface, `getitimer(ITIMER_REAL, value)`, writes the current contents of the process’s real-time interval timer into `value`.

The new interface, `getitimer(ITIMER_MULTIREAL, value)`, behaves similarly, but with the following differences:

- `value->it.value` must be set by the user before the call. `value->it.interval` is ignored.
- If `value->it.value` is `{ -1, -1 }`, this is a reap-expired-timer operation. As timers expire, they are enqueued. This call removes the timer at the head of the queue, writes its handle into `value->it.value`, and writes its label into `value->it.interval`. If the timer is not set up to reload, it is destroyed, otherwise it starts running again (its next expire time is based on its last expire time, not the time at which it was reap). If the queue is empty, -1 is returned and `errno` is set to `EAGAIN`. When a process exits, all of its running and queued timers are destroyed. It is impolite for a long-lived process to let timers expire and neither reap them nor cancel them, because that wastes system resources.
- In all other cases, `value->it.value` is interpreted as a timer handle. If the handle is valid and the timer exists, `value` is overwritten with the current timer value. Otherwise, it is left untouched, -1 is returned, and `errno` is set to `EINVAL`.

Figure 7: Extensions to `getitimer()`.
The exact number of outstanding callouts cannot be known exactly, because other parts of the kernel also use callouts. However, a search through the kernel code only revealed about 5 or 6 of them, being used by RPC, NFS, and TCP.

Table 2 shows the number of instructions required for the execution of each function. The longest paths were counted, except that instructions for changing the hi member of a callout_handle structure were never counted, because that happens in only one of every $2^{32}$ cases.

The compiler used was gcc 2.4.5 for SPARC (which came with NetBSD) with the -O2 option.

The performance of the new hardclock() and softclock() were not tested, but the instruction counts suggest that hardclock() performs about the same as before, while softclock() is about half as fast as before (given that usually $i = 1$, $j = 0$, and $k + m + n \leq 1$).

The memory usage of the new callout facility is within a constant factor of the original. Origi-
nally, n callout structures required 4n longwords. The new implementation needs 9n longwords for them, plus n to 2n for the callwheel array, plus 2n to 4n for the callhash array (unless the vast majority of the callout structures are intended for use with the setcallout() interface, in which case callhash is very small).

The ITIMER.MULTITREAL facility requires ten longwords per timer, plus two per process.

7. Future Work

Currently, the kernel panics if it runs out of callout structures. There was a comment in the old callout code saying that new callout structures should be allocated dynamically, and we would like to fulfill that wish. We will have to enlarge the callout.handle structure, because we will no longer be able to use an index into a single callout array—we will have to use an honest-to-goodness pointer. The ID will then have two unsigned longs all to itself.

There is a caveat: increasing the maximum possible number of outstanding callouts without increasing the size of callwheel or callhash could degrade performance, because the average list lengths could increase. Allowing callwheel and callhash to grow dynamically is conceivable, but probably not worth the effort.

We would also like to improve the appearance of the ITIMER_MULTITREAL facility. Although its design is functionally clean, the overloading of the value and ovalue parameters is distasteful. We would like to hide this overloading from the user, or at least provide alternate names for structure members which correspond to their usage.

Finally, we have just learned, to our dismay, that after we decided to use the two longwords of padding in the proc structure to support ITIMER_MULTITREAL, the NetBSD authors claimed one of those longwords for another purpose. This conflict will have to be resolved, probably by enlarging the structure.

8. Conclusion

We have described a new implementation of the NetBSD timer facility that appears to be more scalable, robust, and flexible than the current NetBSD implementation. It is scalable (see Figure 8) in that the overhead to start, stop, or maintain timers does not depend on the number of outstanding timers. It is robust in that we can precisely bound the amount of time interrupts are locked out in terms of a parameter, MAX_SOFTCLOCK_STEPS. It is flexible in that user processes are allowed to have multiple outstanding timers. The new implementation is fully compatible with existing software because existing interfaces are supported. However, applications that require slightly better performance (handlers for deleting callouts) or flexibility (more than one outstanding timer) must use the new interfaces. The implementation does not incur any extra cost: for these new features, and the code expansion is small (468 lines total\(^8\)). The software is available for use or experiment at:

http://www.cs.wustl.edu/~amc/research/ctime/

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\(^8\)As of this writing. We reserve the right to further develop the code!
References


