

Mechanism: Address Translation

In developing the virtualization of the CPU, we focused on a general mechanism known as **limited direct execution** (or **LDE**). The idea behind LDE is simple: for the most part, let the program run directly on the hardware; however, at certain key points in time (such as when a process issues a system call, or a timer interrupt occurs), arrange so that the OS gets involved and makes sure the “right” thing happens. Thus, the OS, with a little hardware support, tries its best to get out of the way of the running program, to deliver an *efficient* virtualization; however, by **interposing** at those critical points in time, the OS ensures that it maintains *control* over the hardware. Efficiency and control together are two of the main goals of any modern operating system.

In virtualizing memory, we will pursue a similar strategy, attaining both efficiency and control while providing the desired virtualization. Efficiency dictates that we make use of hardware support, which at first will be quite rudimentary (e.g., just a few registers) but will grow to be fairly complex (e.g., TLBs, page-table support, and so forth, as you will see). Control implies that the OS ensures that no application is allowed to access any memory but its own; thus, to protect applications from one another, and the OS from applications, we will need help from the hardware here too. Finally, we will need a little more from the VM system, in terms of *flexibility*; specifically, we’d like for programs to be able to use their address spaces in whatever way they would like, thus making the system easier to program. And thus we arrive at the refined crux:

THE CRUX:

HOW TO EFFICIENTLY AND FLEXIBLY VIRTUALIZE MEMORY

How can we build an efficient virtualization of memory? How do we provide the flexibility needed by applications? How do we maintain control over which memory locations an application can access, and thus ensure that application memory accesses are properly restricted? How do we do all of this efficiently?

The generic technique we will use, which you can consider an addition to our general approach of limited direct execution, is something that is referred to as **hardware-based address translation**, or just **address translation** for short. With address translation, the hardware transforms each memory access (e.g., an instruction fetch, load, or store), changing the **virtual** address provided by the instruction to a **physical** address where the desired information is actually located. Thus, on each and every memory reference, an address translation is performed by the hardware to redirect application memory references to their actual locations in memory.

Of course, the hardware alone cannot virtualize memory, as it just provides the low-level mechanism for doing so efficiently. The OS must get involved at key points to set up the hardware so that the correct translations take place; it must thus **manage memory**, keeping track of which locations are free and which are in use, and judiciously intervening to maintain control over how memory is used.

Once again the goal of all of this work is to create a beautiful **illusion**: that the program has its own private memory, where its own code and data reside. Behind that virtual reality lies the ugly physical truth: that many programs are actually sharing memory at the same time, as the CPU (or CPUs) switches between running one program and the next. Through virtualization, the OS (with the hardware's help) turns the ugly machine reality into something that is a useful, powerful, and easy to use abstraction.

15.1 Assumptions

Our first attempts at virtualizing memory will be very simple, almost laughably so. Go ahead, laugh all you want; pretty soon it will be the OS laughing at you, when you try to understand the ins and outs of TLBs, multi-level page tables, and other technical wonders. Don't like the idea of the OS laughing at you? Well, you may be out of luck then; that's just how the OS rolls.

Specifically, we will assume for now that the user's address space must be placed *contiguously* in physical memory. We will also assume, for simplicity, that the size of the address space is not too big; specifically, that it is *less than the size of physical memory*. Finally, we will also assume that each address space is exactly the *same size*. Don't worry if these assumptions sound unrealistic; we will relax them as we go, thus achieving a realistic virtualization of memory.

15.2 An Example

To understand better what we need to do to implement address translation, and why we need such a mechanism, let's look at a simple example. Imagine there is a process whose address space is as indicated in Figure 15.1. What we are going to examine here is a short code sequence

TIP: INTERPOSITION IS POWERFUL

Interposition is a generic and powerful technique that is often used to great effect in computer systems. In virtualizing memory, the hardware will interpose on each memory access, and translate each virtual address issued by the process to a physical address where the desired information is actually stored. However, the general technique of interposition is much more broadly applicable; indeed, almost any well-defined interface can be interposed upon, to add new functionality or improve some other aspect of the system. One of the usual benefits of such an approach is **transparency**; the interposition often is done without changing the client of the interface, thus requiring no changes to said client.

that loads a value from memory, increments it by three, and then stores the value back into memory. You can imagine the C-language representation of this code might look like this:

```
void func()
{
    int x;
    ...
    x = x + 3; // this is the line of code we are interested in
}
```

The compiler turns this line of code into assembly, which might look something like this (in x86 assembly). Use `objdump` on Linux or `otool` on Mac OS X to disassemble it:

```
128: movl 0x0(%ebx), %eax    ;load 0+ebx into eax
132: addl $0x03, %eax        ;add 3 to eax register
135: movl %eax, 0x0(%ebx)    ;store eax back to mem
```

This code snippet is relatively straightforward; it presumes that the address of `x` has been placed in the register `ebx`, and then loads the value at that address into the general-purpose register `eax` using the `movl` instruction (for “longword” move). The next instruction adds 3 to `eax`, and the final instruction stores the value in `eax` back into memory at that same location.

In Figure 15.1, you can see how both the code and data are laid out in the process’s address space; the three-instruction code sequence is located at address 128 (in the code section near the top), and the value of the variable `x` at address 15 KB (in the stack near the bottom). In the figure, the initial value of `x` is 3000, as shown in its location on the stack.

When these instructions run, from the perspective of the process, the following memory accesses take place.

- Fetch instruction at address 128
- Execute this instruction (load from address 15 KB)
- Fetch instruction at address 132
- Execute this instruction (no memory reference)
- Fetch the instruction at address 135
- Execute this instruction (store to address 15 KB)

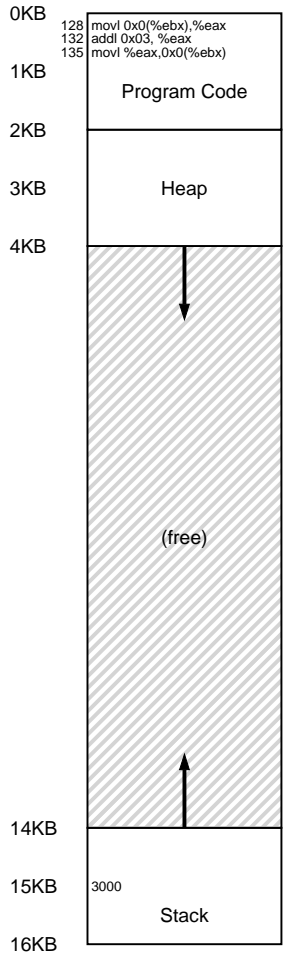


Figure 15.1: A Process And Its Address Space

From the program’s perspective, its **address space** starts at address 0 and grows to a maximum of 16 KB; all memory references it generates should be within these bounds. However, to virtualize memory, the OS wants to place the process somewhere else in physical memory, not necessarily at address 0. Thus, we have the problem: how can we **relocate** this process in memory in a way that is **transparent** to the process? How can we provide the illusion of a virtual address space starting at 0, when in reality the address space is located at some other physical address?

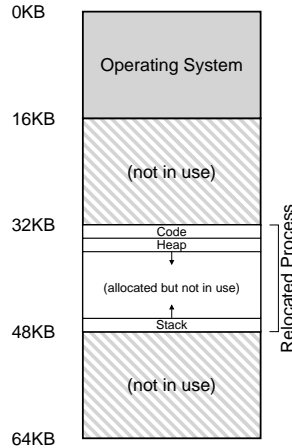


Figure 15.2: Physical Memory with a Single Relocated Process

An example of what physical memory might look like once this process’s address space has been placed in memory is found in Figure 15.2. In the figure, you can see the OS using the first slot of physical memory for itself, and that it has relocated the process from the example above into the slot starting at physical memory address 32 KB. The other two slots are free (16 KB-32 KB and 48 KB-64 KB).

15.3 Dynamic (Hardware-based) Relocation

To gain some understanding of hardware-based address translation, we’ll first discuss its first incarnation. Introduced in the first time-sharing machines of the late 1950’s is a simple idea referred to as **base and bounds** (the technique is also referred to as **dynamic relocation**; we’ll use both terms interchangeably) [SS74].

Specifically, we’ll need two hardware registers within each CPU: one is called the **base** register, and the other the **bounds** (sometimes called a **limit** register). This base-and-bounds pair is going to allow us to place the address space anywhere we’d like in physical memory, and do so while ensuring that the process can only access its own address space.

In this setup, each program is written and compiled as if it is loaded at address zero. However, when a program starts running, the OS decides where in physical memory it should be loaded and sets the base register to that value. In the example above, the OS decides to load the process at physical address 32 KB and thus sets the base register to this value.

Interesting things start to happen when the process is running. Now, when any memory reference is generated by the process, it is **translated** by the processor in the following manner:

$$\text{physical address} = \text{virtual address} + \text{base}$$

ASIDE: SOFTWARE-BASED RELOCATION

In the early days, before hardware support arose, some systems performed a crude form of relocation purely via software methods. The basic technique is referred to as **static relocation**, in which a piece of software known as the **loader** takes an executable that is about to be run and rewrites its addresses to the desired offset in physical memory.

For example, if an instruction was a load from address 1000 into a register (e.g., `movl 1000, %eax`), and the address space of the program was loaded starting at address 3000 (and not 0, as the program thinks), the loader would rewrite the instruction to offset each address by 3000 (e.g., `movl 4000, %eax`). In this way, a simple static relocation of the process's address space is achieved.

However, static relocation has numerous problems. First and most importantly, it does not provide protection, as processes can generate bad addresses and thus illegally access other process's or even OS memory; in general, hardware support is likely needed for true protection [WL+93]. A smaller negative is that once placed, it is difficult to later relocate an address space to another location [M65].

Each memory reference generated by the process is a **virtual address**; the hardware in turn adds the contents of the base register to this address and the result is a **physical address** that can be issued to the memory system.

To understand this better, let's trace through what happens when a single instruction is executed. Specifically, let's look at one instruction from our earlier sequence:

```
128: movl 0x0(%ebx), %eax
```

The program counter (PC) is set to 128; when the hardware needs to fetch this instruction, it first adds the value to the base register value of 32 KB (32768) to get a physical address of 32896; the hardware then fetches the instruction from that physical address. Next, the processor begins executing the instruction. At some point, the process then issues the load from virtual address 15 KB, which the processor takes and again adds to the base register (32 KB), getting the final physical address of 47 KB and thus the desired contents.

Transforming a virtual address into a physical address is exactly the technique we refer to as **address translation**; that is, the hardware takes a virtual address the process thinks it is referencing and transforms it into a physical address which is where the data actually resides. Because this relocation of the address happens at runtime, and because we can move address spaces even after the process has started running, the technique is often referred to as **dynamic relocation** [M65].

TIP: HARDWARE-BASED DYNAMIC RELOCATION

With dynamic relocation, we can see how a little hardware goes a long way. Namely, a **base** register is used to transform virtual addresses (generated by the program) into physical addresses. A **bounds** (or **limit**) register ensures that such addresses are within the confines of the address space. Together, they combine to provide a simple and efficient virtualization of memory.

Now you might be asking: what happened to that bounds (limit) register? After all, isn't this supposed to be the base-and-bounds approach? Indeed, it is. And as you might have guessed, the bounds register is there to help with protection. Specifically, the processor will first check that the memory reference is *within bounds* to make sure it is legal; in the simple example above, the bounds register would always be set to 16 KB. If a process generates a virtual address that is greater than the bounds, or one that is negative, the CPU will raise an exception, and the process will likely be terminated. The point of the bounds is thus to make sure that all addresses generated by the process are legal and within the "bounds" of the process.

We should note that the base and bounds registers are hardware structures kept on the chip (one pair per CPU). Sometimes people call the part of the processor that helps with address translation the **memory management unit (MMU)**; as we develop more sophisticated memory-management techniques, we will be adding more circuitry to the MMU.

A small aside about bound registers, which can be defined in one of two ways. In one way (as above), it holds the *size* of the address space, and thus the hardware checks the virtual address against it first before adding the base. In the second way, it holds the *physical address* of the end of the address space, and thus the hardware first adds the base and then makes sure the address is within bounds. Both methods are logically equivalent; for simplicity, we'll usually assume that the bounds register holds the size of the address space.

Example Translations

To understand address translation via base-and-bounds in more detail, let's take a look at an example. Imagine a process with an address space of size 4 KB (yes, unrealistically small) has been loaded at physical address 16 KB. Here are the results of a number of address translations:

- Virtual Address 0 → Physical Address 16 KB
- VA 1 KB → PA 17 KB
- VA 3000 → PA 19384
- VA 4400 → Fault (out of bounds)

ASIDE: DATA STRUCTURE — THE FREE LIST

The OS must track which parts of free memory are not in use, so as to be able to allocate memory to processes. Many different data structures can of course be used for such a task; the simplest (which we will assume here) is a **free list**, which simply is a list of the ranges of the physical memory which are not currently in use.

As you can see from the example, it is easy for you to simply add the base address to the virtual address (which can rightly be viewed as an *offset* into the address space) to get the resulting physical address. Only if the virtual address is “too big” or negative will the result be a fault (e.g., 4400 is greater than the 4 KB bounds), causing an exception to be raised and the process to be terminated.

15.4 OS Issues

There are a number of new OS issues that arise when using base and bounds to implement a simple virtual memory. Specifically, there are three critical junctures where the OS must take action to implement this base-and-bounds approach to virtualizing memory.

First, The OS must take action when a process is created, finding space for its address space in memory. Fortunately, given our assumptions that each address space is (a) smaller than the size of physical memory and (b) the same size, this is quite easy for the OS; it can simply view physical memory as an array of slots, and track whether each one is free or in use. When a new process is created, the OS will have to search a data structure (often called a **free list**) to find room for the new address space and then mark it used.

An example of what physical memory might look like can be found in Figure 15.2. In the figure, you can see the OS using the first slot of physical memory for itself, and that it has relocated the process from the example above into the slot starting at physical memory address 32 KB. The other two slots are free (16 KB–32 KB and 48 KB–64 KB); thus, the **free list** should consist of these two entries.

Second, the OS must take action when a process is terminated, reclaiming all of its memory for use in other processes or the OS. Upon termination of a process, the OS thus puts its memory back on the free list, and cleans up any associated data structures as need be.

Third, the OS must also take action when a context switch occurs. There is only one base and bounds register on each CPU, after all, and their values differ for each running program, as each program is loaded at a different physical address in memory. Thus, the OS must *save and restore* the base-and-bounds pair when it switches between processes. Specifically, when the OS decides to stop running a process, it must save the

values of the base and bounds registers to memory, in some per-process structure such as the **process structure** or **process control block (PCB)**. Similarly, when the OS resumes a running process (or runs it the first time), it must set the values of the base and bounds on the CPU to the correct values for this process.

We should note that when a process is stopped (i.e., not running), it is possible for the OS to move an address space from one location in memory to another rather easily. To move a process's address space, the OS first deschedules the process; then, the OS copies the address space from the current location to the new location; finally, the OS updates the saved base register (in the process structure) to point to the new location. When the process is resumed, its (new) base register is restored, and it begins running again, oblivious that its instructions and data are now in a completely new spot in memory!

We should also note that access to the base and bounds registers is obviously **privileged**. Special hardware instructions are required to access base-and-bounds registers; if a process, running in user mode, attempts to do so, the CPU will raise an exception and the OS will likely terminate the process. Only in kernel (or privileged) mode can such registers be modified. Imagine the havoc a user process could wreak¹ if it could arbitrarily change the base register while running. Imagine it! And then quickly flush such dark thoughts from your mind, as they are the ghastly stuff of which nightmares are made.

15.5 Summary

In this chapter, we have extended the concept of limited direct execution with a specific mechanism used in virtual memory, known as **address translation**. With address translation, the OS can control each and every memory access from a process, ensuring the accesses stay within the bounds of the address space. Key to the efficiency of this technique is hardware support, which performs the translation quickly for each access, turning virtual addresses (the process's view of memory) into physical ones (the actual view). All of this is performed in a way that is *transparent* to the process that has been relocated; the process has no idea its memory references are being translated, making for a wonderful illusion.

We have also seen one particular form of virtualization, known as base and bounds or dynamic relocation. Base-and-bounds virtualization is quite *efficient*, as only a little more hardware logic is required to add a base register to the virtual address and check that the address generated by the process is in bounds. Base-and-bounds also offers *protection*; the OS and hardware combine to ensure no process can generate memory references outside its own address space. Protection is certainly one of the most important goals of the OS; without it, the OS could not control

¹Is there anything other than "havoc" that can be "wreaked"?

the machine (if processes were free to overwrite memory, they could easily do nasty things like overwrite the trap table and take over the system).

Unfortunately, this simple technique of dynamic relocation does have its inefficiencies. For example, as you can see in Figure 15.2 (back a few pages), the relocated process is using physical memory from 32 KB to 48 KB; however, because the process stack and heap are not too big, all of the space between the two is simply *wasted*. This type of waste is usually called **internal fragmentation**, as the space *inside* the allocated unit is not all used (i.e., is fragmented) and thus wasted. In our current approach, although there might be enough physical memory for more processes, we are currently restricted to placing an address space in a fixed-sized slot and thus internal fragmentation can arise². Thus, we are going to need more sophisticated machinery, to try to better utilize physical memory and avoid internal fragmentation. Our first attempt will be a slight generalization of base and bounds known as **segmentation**, which we will discuss next.

²A different solution might instead place a fixed-sized stack within the address space, just below the code region, and a growing heap below that. However, this limits flexibility by making recursion and deeply-nested function calls challenging, and thus is something we hope to avoid.

References

[M65] “On Dynamic Program Relocation”

W.C. McGee

IBM Systems Journal

Volume 4, Number 3, 1965, pages 184–199

This paper is a nice summary of early work on dynamic relocation, as well as some basics on static relocation.

[P90] “Relocating loader for MS-DOS .EXE executable files”

Kenneth D. A. Pillay

Microprocessors & Microsystems archive

Volume 14, Issue 7 (September 1990)

An example of a relocating loader for MS-DOS. Not the first one, but just a relatively modern example of how such a system works.

[SS74] “The Protection of Information in Computer Systems”

J. Saltzer and M. Schroeder

CACM, July 1974

From this paper: “The concepts of base-and-bound register and hardware-interpreted descriptors appeared, apparently independently, between 1957 and 1959 on three projects with diverse goals. At M.I.T., McCarthy suggested the base-and-bound idea as part of the memory protection system necessary to make time-sharing feasible. IBM independently developed the base-and-bound register as a mechanism to permit reliable multiprogramming of the Stretch (7030) computer system. At Burroughs, R. Barton suggested that hardware-interpreted descriptors would provide direct support for the naming scope rules of higher level languages in the B5000 computer system.” We found this quote on Mark Smotherman’s cool history pages [S04]; see them for more information.

[S04] “System Call Support”

Mark Smotherman, May 2004

<http://people.cs.clemson.edu/~mark/syscall.html>

A neat history of system call support. Smotherman has also collected some early history on items like interrupts and other fun aspects of computing history. See his web pages for more details.

[WL+93] “Efficient Software-based Fault Isolation”

Robert Wahbe, Steven Lucco, Thomas E. Anderson, Susan L. Graham

SOSP ’93

A terrific paper about how you can use compiler support to bound memory references from a program, without hardware support. The paper sparked renewed interest in software techniques for isolation of memory references.

Homework

The program `relocation.py` allows you to see how address translations are performed in a system with base and bounds registers. See the README for details.

Questions

- Run with seeds 1, 2, and 3, and compute whether each virtual address generated by the process is in or out of bounds. If in bounds, compute the translation.
- Run with these flags: `-s 0 -n 10`. What value do you have set `-1` (the bounds register) to in order to ensure that all the generated virtual addresses are within bounds?
- Run with these flags: `-s 1 -n 10 -l 100`. What is the maximum value that bounds can be set to, such that the address space still fits into physical memory in its entirety?
- Run some of the same problems above, but with larger address spaces (`-a`) and physical memories (`-p`).
- What fraction of randomly-generated virtual addresses are valid, as a function of the value of the bounds register? Make a graph from running with different random seeds, with limit values ranging from 0 up to the maximum size of the address space.