Microkernel Design Yields Real Time in a Distributed Environment

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A real time distributed computing environment places different demands on today's operating system software than do non distributed environments. First, the machines in a distributed environment may vary from multipurpose operator workstations or PCs, to dedicated servers to rapid response, real time environments. The traditional boundary between "host workstation" and "target board" with incompatible interfaces is out of date. A highly modular operating system with built-in support for efficient cooperative computing is a solid basis to support these various requirements uniformly.

Second, a distributed environment has, by nature, a dynamically changing configuration: it makes sense for the operating system to provide facilities for flexible and dynamic application configuration and reconfiguration. When real time response requirements are added to the distributed equation, the problem of providing services to users becomes greater still.

Evolution Towards Distributed Real Time

Operating system have evolved towards real time distributed environments along two paths. On the one hand, real time executives, originally small and efficient, have been progressively overloaded with additional services, in particular those needed to reduce the gap towards UNIX®. Nothing in the original system was intended to support this addition. On the other hand, UNIX has been disemboweled to extend its use to real time, despite of its unsuitability for such applications.

The main obstacle to further evolution is rooted deeply in operating system technology. Since the beginning, operating systems have been built as monoliths, and often dedicated to a single hardware architecture. UNIX marked an important step in operating system evolution by being portable. The new real time, distributed computing environments demand another evolutionary

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step – a *new technology* for building operating systems.

There are several reasons for this:

Traditional Monolithic Operating Systems are too Complex

Traditional operating systems, real time as well as UNIX-like, are built as a single piece of code where potentially, and in fact too often, every module may interact with any other and get access to shared global data. Operating systems have to evolve to provide new services to their applications, to be adapted to new hardware architectures or to support new classes of applications. Each evolutionary step aimed at solving all performance or side-effect issues affects a large part of the operating system. As the operating system grows, mastering the evolution becomes a problem whose complexity begins to exceed the ability of software engineering to handle it.

Adding Services is Difficult

As the services provided increase, real time executives tend towards a catalogue of unrelated and heterogeneous features, adding complexity to the system and making its features difficult to use. In the same way, several trends are pulling UNIX away from its roots. As more functions has been demanded of UNIX, today's versions should be more complex. Unfortunately, a byproduct of this increasing complexity is the gradual undermining of the original benefits of UNIX original benefits: simplicity and portability.

Adaptation to New Hardware Architectures is a Challenge

Real time executives have traditionally been built with one objective in mind: performance. Consequently, every hardware feature has been exploited to squeeze one more nano-second of speed, the result being a very non-portable. The stability of interfaces between various implementations on different hardware platforms simplifies the programmer's job, but does not help porting the operating system to new architectures such as multi-processors, or hypercubes.

Instead of evolving towards greater portability, new UNIX releases require increasing effort to implement on new platforms, particularly when they are built around emerging hardware architectures which UNIX was not initially designed to support.

Distributed Environments Need to be Supported at All Levels

Today's computing environments require that new hardware and software resources, such as specialised servers and applications, be integrated into a single system, distributed over some kind of communication medium. The range of communication media commonly encountered includes shared memory, buses, high speed networks, local- and wide-area networks. This trend will become critical as collective computing environments emerge to better map natural human organisation of systems.

The Scope of Applications is Extending

Real time systems builders want the capabilities of real time executives to be extended to support UNIX applications. Conversely, UNIX is being extended to support the execution of some categories of real time applications. Similar trends can be found in transaction processing environments, which have already led to the addition of on-line transaction processing facilities for UNIX. This requires extending open systems to areas in which they don't often fit well.

The Micro-Kernel Based View of Operating System

A recent trend in operating system development is structuring the operating system as a modular set of system servers sitting on top of a minimal μ-kernel, rather than using the traditional monolithic structure. This approach promises to help meet systems and platform builders' needs to support sophisticated and varied environments and that can cope with growing complexity and new architectures. The high priority among these needs is the ability to integrate real time applications, with new hardware technologies and distributed environments, all within an "open systems" context.

In this operating system architecture, the μ-kernel provides system servers with generic services independent of a particular operating system, such as (real time) scheduling of one or more processors and memory management. The μ-kernel also provides a simple Interprocess Communication facility (IPC) that allows system servers to call each other and exchange data independently of where they are executed in a multiprocessor, multicomputer or network configuration.

This combination of elementary services forms a standard base which can support all other system-specific functions. These system-specific functions can then be configured into appropriate system servers managing the other physical and logical resources of a computer system, such as files, devices and high-level communication services.

Compared with traditional real time executives, the μ-kernel approach adds two new aspects to the low-level kernel foundation: distribution and subsystem support. In other words, this technology adds to the traditional monolithic architectures the necessary modularity, the key to their evolution.

IPC Builds Subsystems

μ-kernel architecture has been, and remains, strongly related to real time distributed computing. Message passing, which has come to be one of the often distinguishing characteristics of μ-kernel architecture, is a natural way to structure systems components distributed over a loosely-coupled set of individual processors, boards or complete machines. Message passing enforces very clear isolation between each individual component of the system, by making explicit the communications rules used between them, while providing a very flexible way to assemble distributed components into a higher level global entity. Message passing can take the form of simple send/receive protocols and can be combined into a form of remote procedure call (RPC) to better suit client-server types of communications. This concept has been used under various forms in automation-driven systems, parallel scientific applications and transaction-oriented systems.

Challenges for Commercial Micro-Kernel Based Systems

Traditionally, there have been two major challenges to developing commercial μ-kernel systems. First, the virtues of a generalised, message passing foundation for assembling operating system functions are well known, as long as these functions do not share common state information and global data. Second, when applied to shared memory, a closely coupled environment, or a single-processor architecture, the challenge is more significant. But there are mature techniques for structuring operating system functions and the data structures they manipulate, to minimise their interactions, and to optimise message-passing algorithms by taking advantage of the locality of correspondents.

Modularity – The Key To Evolution

μ-kernel technology adds a natural modularity to an operating system architecture. Services are provided by independent servers to which any machine can get access, as a result of the power of the underlying IPC. Distribution, therefore, is a natural quality of the subsystem built on top of the μ-kernel.

As a consequence servers can be configured on the different machines according to specific requirements, allowing the varying requirements to be met with a single set of servers. The evolution of a server or the development of new servers is largely facilitated by the clear interfaces between components and the absence of side-effects between them.

Adaptation to new hardware architectures is left to the μ-kernel which is the most hardware dependent part of the overall system; modern μ-kernel, developed in high-level languages with efficient and clear structures, make this task simple.

A good example of the requirements and benefits of a commercial μ-kernel OS is furnished by the CHORUS® operating system, which was developed around μ-kernel technology. The CHORUS product line includes the CHORUS Nucleus, a μ-kernel for core operating system services, and CHORUS/MiX, a binary compatible, multi-server UNIX System V implementation. Some of the critical aspects of a distributed real time operating system – to support such important trends as distribution, multiprocessing, and open systems – illustrated by CHORUS include:

- Efficient low-level real time foundations.
- Optimised interprocess and interprocessor communications and user-transparent distribution of resources.
- Portability across hardware architectures from single processor to multiprocessors (loosely or tightly coupled) to advanced distributed environments, from linear to segmented to virtual memory architectures.
- Interoperability of a wide range of operating systems, from real time to fault-tolerant, in a single distributed environment.
- Scalability and flexibility, in design, configuration and in run-time resource utilisation.
- A framework for operating system innovation, integration, development, testing, debugging, maintenance and extension.
- Absolute conformance to industry standards.

Basic Structure – Nucleus and Subsystems

The CHORUS architecture is based on a minimal real time distributed **Nucleus** that integrates distributed processing and communication at the lowest level. The Nucleus provides generic tools – thread scheduling, real time event handling, network-transparent inter-process communications (IPC) and virtual memory management – to sets of independent servers called *subsystems*, which coexist on top of the Nucleus.

Subsystems separate the functions of the operating system into sets of services provided by autonomous servers, and provide operating system interfaces to application programs. In the past, these functions were incorporated in the kernel of monolithic systems.

The CHORUS organisation of Nucleus and subsystems (see Figure 1.) represents the most logical view of an open operating system for cooperative computing environments. Separating functions increases the modularity, portability, scalability and "distributability" of the overall system, which has a small, trustworthy μ-kernel as its foundation.

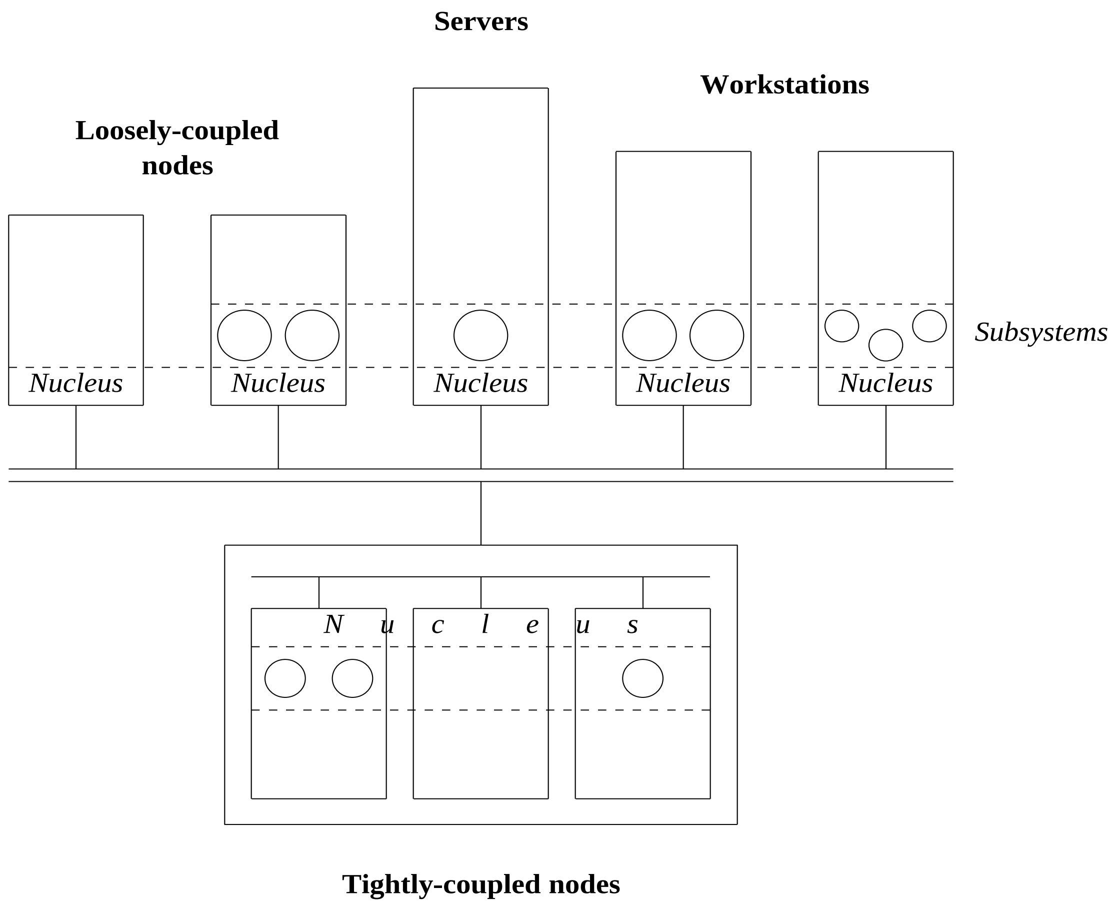

Figure 1. The CHORUS Nucleus and Subsystems

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The Nucleus

The CHORUS Nucleus (see Figure 2.) provides both local and global management of services. At the lowest level, it manages the physical resources at each “site” with four clearly defined components:

- a classical **real time multi-tasking executive** which controls allocation of local processors, manages priority-based preemptive scheduling of CHORUS *threads,* and provides primitives for fine grain synchronisation of, and low-level communication between, threads;
- a **distributed memory manager** which can support the full range of memory architectures – linear, segmented or virtual;
- a low level hardware **supervisor** which dynamically dispatches external events such as interrupts, traps and exceptions to dynamically defined routines or ports;
- an **Inter Process Communication** (IPC) manager provides the high-performance global communication services (exchange of *messages* through *ports*) which are the key to CHORUS architecture’s real time, distributed capabilities.

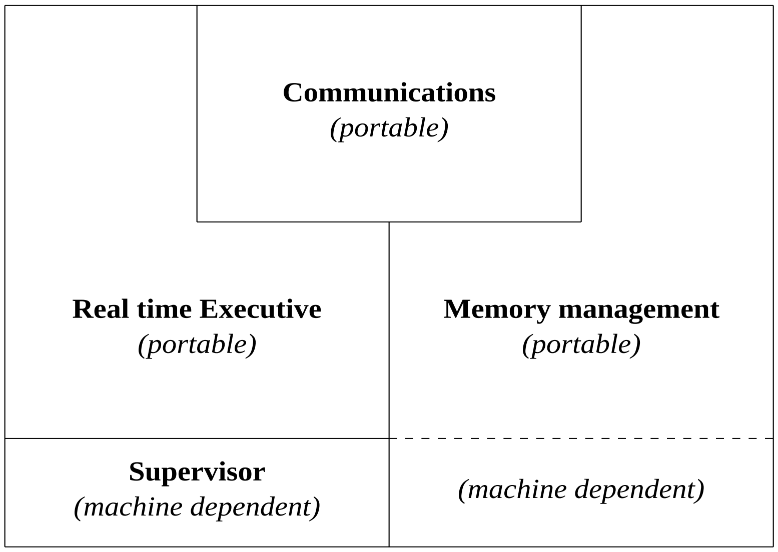

Figure 2. The CHORUS Nucleus

The CHORUS Subsystems Concept

Subsystems in CHORUS architecture are sets of system servers that use the generic services of the Nucleus to provide higher-level services. More simply, a subsystem is an operating system built on top of the CHORUS Nucleus.

Subsystems manage physical and logical resources such as files, devices and high-level communication services and they communicate via the **IPC** facility provided by the Nucleus. Their position “on top” of the Nucleus provides a structured, well-defined way for system builders to cope with complexities of operating system development.

In the operating system context, a subsystem offers the means by which to supply a complete standard operating system interface to standard application programs. New servers can then be added to the set of servers delivering this interface as a means of gracefully extending system and operating system capability. **Servers** are the building block, the toolset, that system builders use to incorporate new distributed functions. This framework for innovation within the open system context can facilitate the addition of product differentiators usually found only in proprietary systems, such as fault tolerance and security features. Price/performance and reliability can also be enhanced because developers can efficiently incorporate new hardware connection technologies and new processors in their next-generation designs.

The CHORUS/MiX Subsystem

CHORUS/MiX (see Figure 3.) integrates a UNIX System V subsystem with the CHORUS Nucleus to provide system builders with a standards-based, real time, transparently distributed UNIX environment. CHORUS/MiX UNIX services conform to X/Open® specifications and have been extended to real time and to the distributed environment (distribution of programs as well as files), all in a way that is completely transparent to UNIX application programs. CHORUS/MiX is compatible at *the executable binary code level* with a vanilla UNIX. A CHORUS/MiX that conforms UNIX System V.4, with real time and distributed features, is under development.

CHORUS/MiX offers the traditional set of UNIX functions for managing signals, but extends them to manage real time, multi-threaded and distributed processes. This extension permits the creation – and manipulation from a distance – of processes on any machine, while respecting rules of UNIX regarding environments, open files and so on.

Finally, because CHORUS/MiX is fully compatible with and actually *contains* UNIX System V source code, it allows UNIX processes to take advantage of such CHORUS facilities as multi-threading, location transparent IPC, virtual memory management, device drivers and servers development in user space and more.

Real Time and Distribution in CHORUS/MiX

The modular design of CHORUS/MiX allows binary compatibility with UNIX, while maintaining a well-structured, portable and efficient implementation. It also includes several significant extensions which offer, at the UNIX subsystem level, access to CHORUS facilities.

Powerful real time facilities available at the UNIX subsystem level make it possible to dynamically connect handlers to hardware interrupts. UNIX processes enjoy the benefit of priority-based preemptive scheduling provided by the CHORUS Nucleus, possibly at a higher priority than the CHORUS/MiX subsystem servers themselves.

UNIX processes running on CHORUS can communicate with other UNIX processes, bare CHORUS processes or entities from other subsystems using the CHORUS IPC mechanisms. Processes, for example, are able to create and manipulate CHORUS ports; send and receive messages; and issue remote procedure calls.

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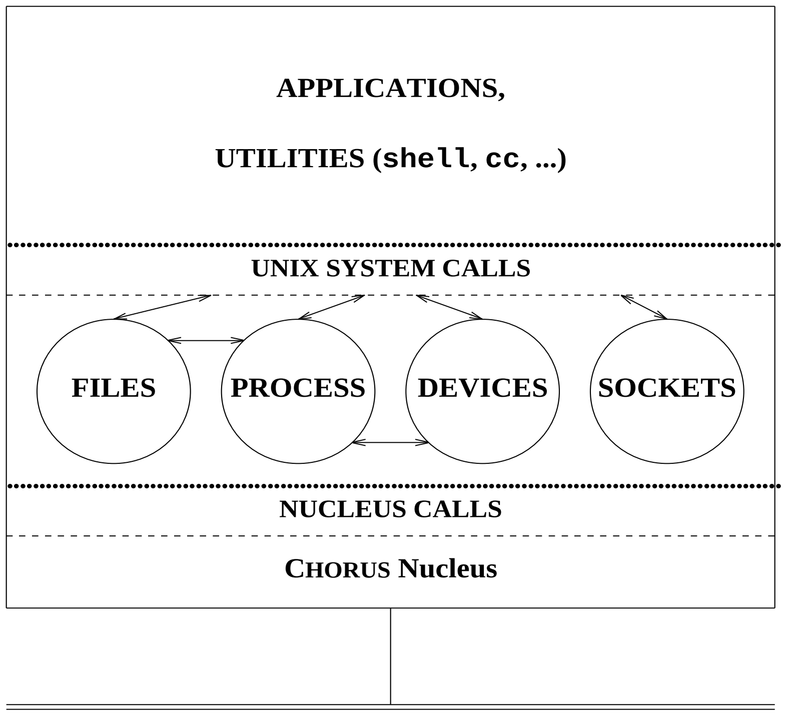

Figure 3. The CHORUS/MiX subsystem

User Defined Servers

The CHORUS architecture provides a powerful, convenient platform for operating system development. The homogeneity of server interfaces provided by the CHORUS IPC allows system builders to develop new servers and integrate them at will into a system, either as user or as system servers. For example, new file management strategies such as real time file systems, or fault-tolerant servers can be developed and tested as a user level utility without disturbing a running system, using the powerful debugging tools available for user-level application development. Later, the server can be migrated easily within the system for performance consideration.

Enablers

CHORUS incorporates both distributed system and real time concerns at the lowest levels in a manner consistent with emerging computer and communications requirements. Further, modularity extends from the CHORUS Nucleus to higher levels and in between. The result is a set of well-engineered *enablers* for the design, implementation and operation of next-generation systems.

Because CHORUS uses modular, independent servers, to divide the operating system into manageable units, debugging and testing can be handled more efficiently. The clear, message-based interfaces between server modules permit greater independence, which simplifies and speeds integration. The simpler μ-kernel interfaces can also be used to build higher level semantics.

CHORUS Reconciles Real Time, Distribution and UNIX

The future for real time distributed computing environment is the renewal of operating systems technology without impacting their interface, allowing smooth migration from old-fashioned current operating systems to new generations of operating systems. CHORUS is the first commercially available product to reconcile real time, distribution and UNIX.

The CHORUS Nucleus maintains real time in the heart of the operating system, while associating it gracefully with distribution. The consecutive modularity, applied to subsystems, allows system builders to construct a compatible UNIX which, in addition, benefits from CHORUS's underlying real time and distribution nature.