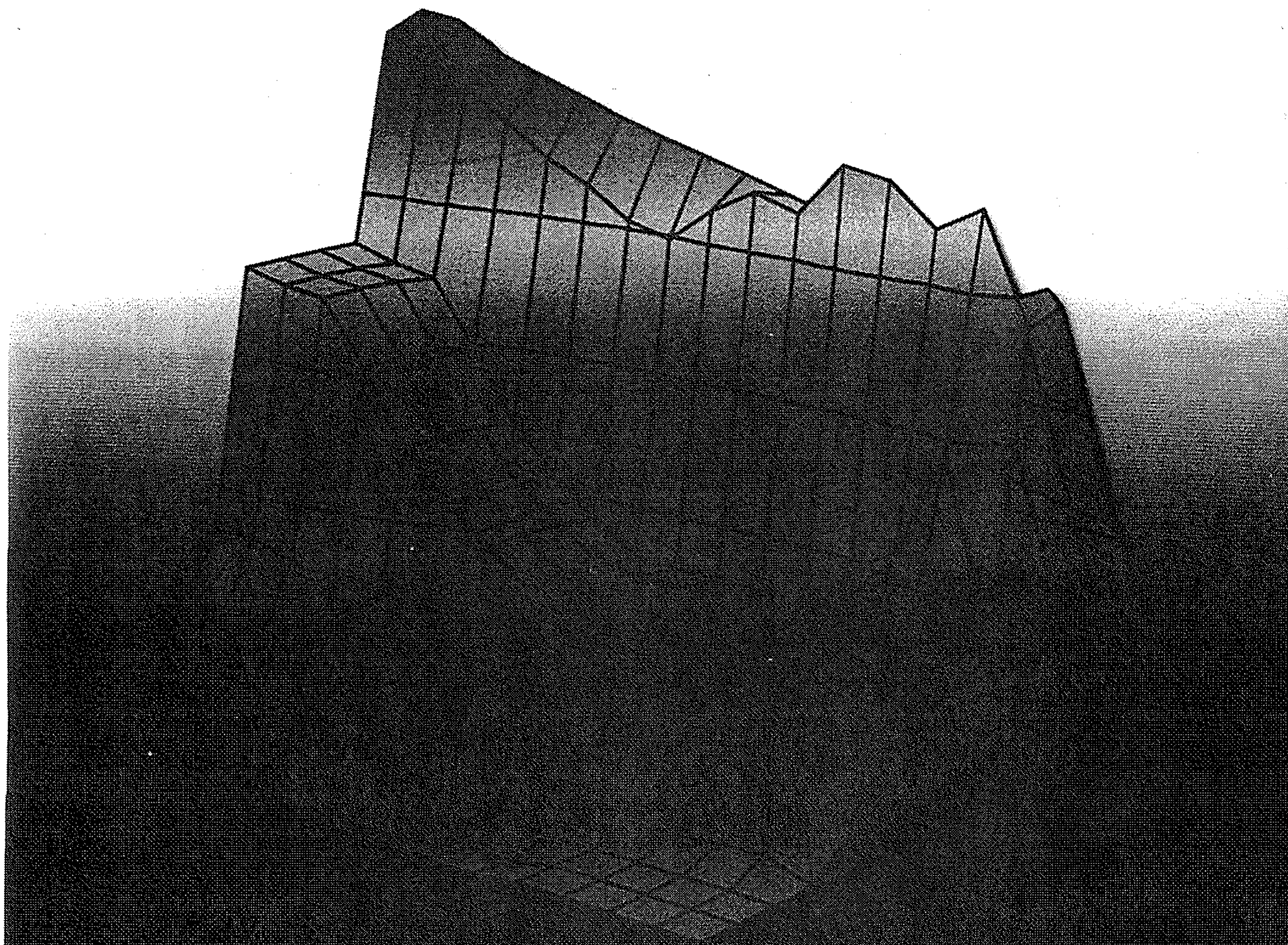
COMPUTER SYSTEMS

A PROGRAMMER'S PERSPECTIVE



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8.2 Processes

Exceptions provide the basic building blocks that allow the operating system to provide the notion of a *process*, one of the most profound and successful ideas in computer science.

When we run a program on a modern system, we are presented with the illusion that our program is the only one currently running in the system. Our program appears to have exclusive use of both the processor and the memory. The processor appears to execute the instructions in our program, one after the other, without interruption. Finally, the code and data of our program appear to be the only objects in the system's memory. These illusions are provided to us by the notion of a process.

The classic definition of a process is *an instance of a program in execution*. Each program in the system runs in the *context* of some process. The context consists of the state that the program needs to run correctly. This state includes the program's code and data stored in memory, its stack, the contents of its general-purpose registers, its program counter, environment variables, and the set of open file descriptors.

Each time a user runs a program by typing the name of an executable object file to the shell, the shell creates a new process and then runs the executable object file in the context of this new process. Application programs can also create new processes and run either their own code or other applications in the context of the new process.

A detailed discussion of how operating systems implement processes is beyond our scope. Instead, we will focus on the key abstractions that a process provides to the application:

- An independent *logical control flow* that provides the illusion that our program has exclusive use of the processor.
- A private address space that provides the illusion that our program has exclusive use of the memory system.

Let's look more closely at these abstractions.

8.2.1 Logical Control Flow

A process provides each program with the illusion that it has exclusive use of the processor, even though many other programs are typically running on the system. If we were to use a debugger to single step the execution of our program, we would observe a series of program counter (PC) values that corresponded exclusively to instructions contained in our program's executable object file or in shared objects linked into our program dynamically at run time. This sequence of PC values is known as a *logical control flow*.

Consider a system that runs three processes, as shown in Figure 8.10. The single physical control flow of the processor is partitioned into three *logical flows*, one for each process. Each vertical line represents a portion of the logical flow for a process. In the example, process A runs for a while, followed by B, which runs

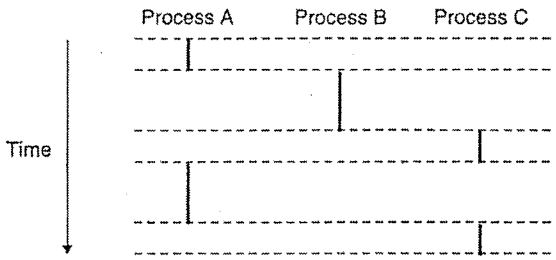

Figure 8.10
Logical control flows. Processes provide each program with the illusion that it has exclusive use of the processor. Each vertical bar represents a portion of the logical control flow for a process.

to completion. C then runs for awhile, followed by A, which runs to completion. Finally, C is able to run to completion.

The key point in Figure 8.10 is that processes take turns using the processor. Each process executes a portion of its flow and then is *preempted* (temporarily suspended) while other processes take their turns. To a program running in the context of one of these processes, it appears to have exclusive use of the processor. The only evidence to the contrary is that if we were to precisely measure the elapsed time of each instruction (see Chapter 9), we would notice that the CPU appears to periodically stall between the execution of some of the instructions in our program. However, each time the processor stalls, it subsequently resumes execution of our program without any change to the contents of the program's memory locations or registers.

In general, each logical flow is independent of any other flow in the sense that the logical flows associated with different processes do not affect the states of any other processes. The only exception to this rule occurs when processes use interprocess communication (IPC) mechanisms such as pipes, sockets, shared memory, and semaphores to explicitly interact with each other.

Any process whose logical flow overlaps in time with another flow is called a *concurrent process*, and the two processes are said to run *concurrently*. For example, in Figure 8.10, processes A and B run concurrently, as do A and C. On the other hand, B and C do not run concurrently because the last instruction of B executes before the first instruction of C.

The notion of processes taking turns with other processes is known as *multitasking*. Each time period that a process executes a portion of its flow is called a *time slice*. Thus, multitasking is also referred to as *time slicing*.

8.2.2 Private Address Space

A process also provides each program with the illusion that it has exclusive use of the system's address space. On a machine with n-bit addresses, the *address space* is the set of 2^n possible addresses, $0, 1, \ldots, 2^n - 1$. A process provides each program with its own *private address space*. This space is private in the sense that a byte of memory associated with a particular address in the space cannot in general be read or written by any other process.

Although the contents of the memory associated with each private address space is different in general, each such space has the same general organization.

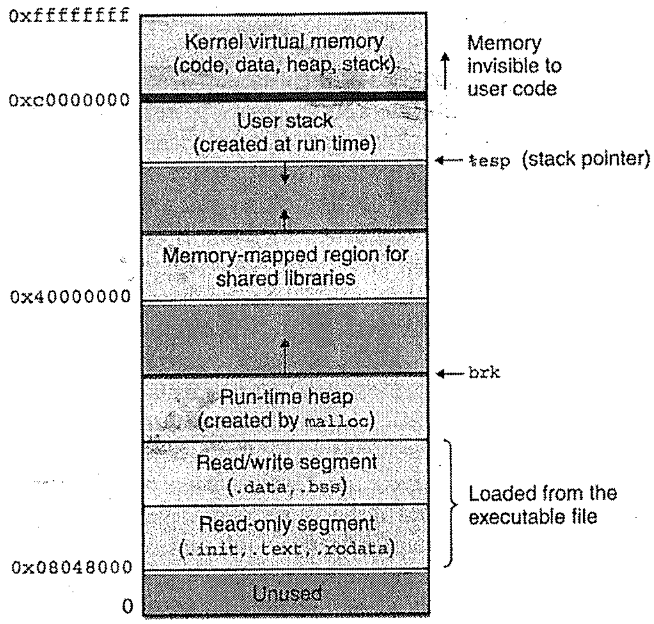

Figure 8.11
Process address space.

For example, Figure 8.11 shows the organization of the address space for a Linux process. The bottom three-fourths of the address space is reserved for the user program, with the usual text, data, heap, and stack segments. The top quarter of the address space is reserved for the kernel. This portion of the address space contains the code, data, and stack that the kernel uses when it executes instructions on behalf of the process (e.g., when the application program executes a system call).

8.2.3 User and Kernel Modes

In order for the operating system kernel to provide an airtight process abstraction, the processor must provide a mechanism that restricts the instructions that an application can execute, as well as the portions of the address space that it can access.

Processors typically provide this capability with a *mode bit* in some control register that characterizes the privileges that the process currently enjoys. When the mode bit is set, the process is running in *kernel mode* (sometimes called *supervisor mode*). A process running in kernel mode can execute any instruction in the instruction set and access any memory location in the system.

When the mode bit is not set, the process is running in *user mode*. A process in user mode is not allowed to execute *privileged instructions* that do things such as halt the processor, change the mode bit, or initiate an I/O operation. Nor is it allowed to directly reference code or data in the kernel area of the address space. Any such attempt results in a fatal protection fault. User programs must instead access kernel code and data indirectly via the system call interface.

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