The Art and Science of Memory Allocation

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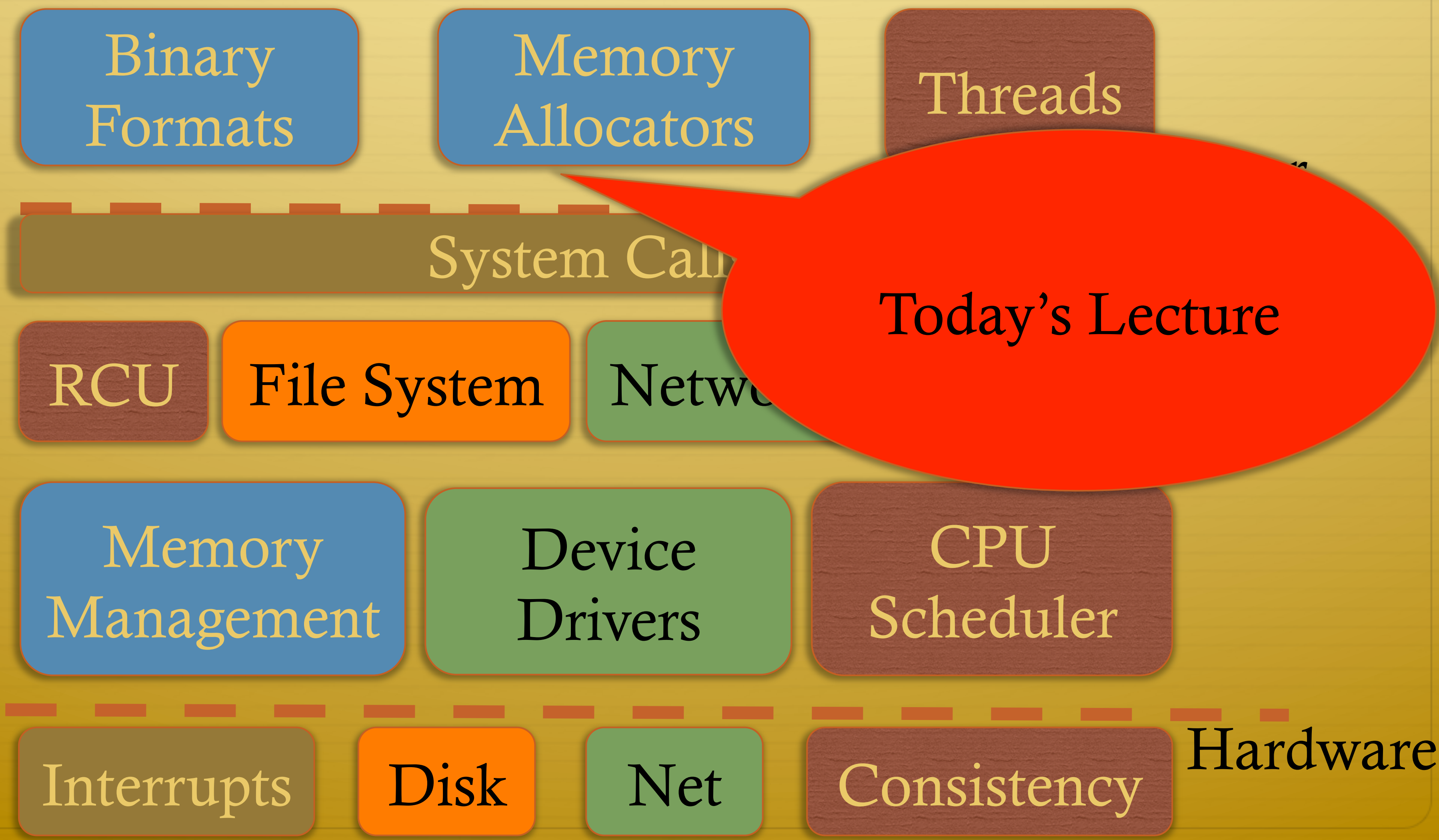
CSE 506

Logical Diagram



Lecture goal

- Understand how memory allocators work
  - In both kernel and applications
- Understand trade-offs and current best practices

Bump allocator

- malloc (6)
- malloc (12)
- malloc(20)
- malloc (5)

Bump allocator

- Simply "bumps" up the free pointer
- How does free() work? It doesn't
  - Well, you could try to recycle cells if you wanted, but complicated bookkeeping
- Controversial observation: This is ideal for simple programs
  - You only care about free() if you need the memory for something else

Assume memory is limited

- Hoard: best-of-breed concurrent allocator
  - User applications
  - Seminal paper
- We'll also talk about how Linux allocates its own memory

Overarching issues

- Fragmentation
- Allocation and free latency
  - Synchronization/Concurrency
- Implementation complexity
- Cache behavior
  - Alignment (cache and word)
  - Coloring

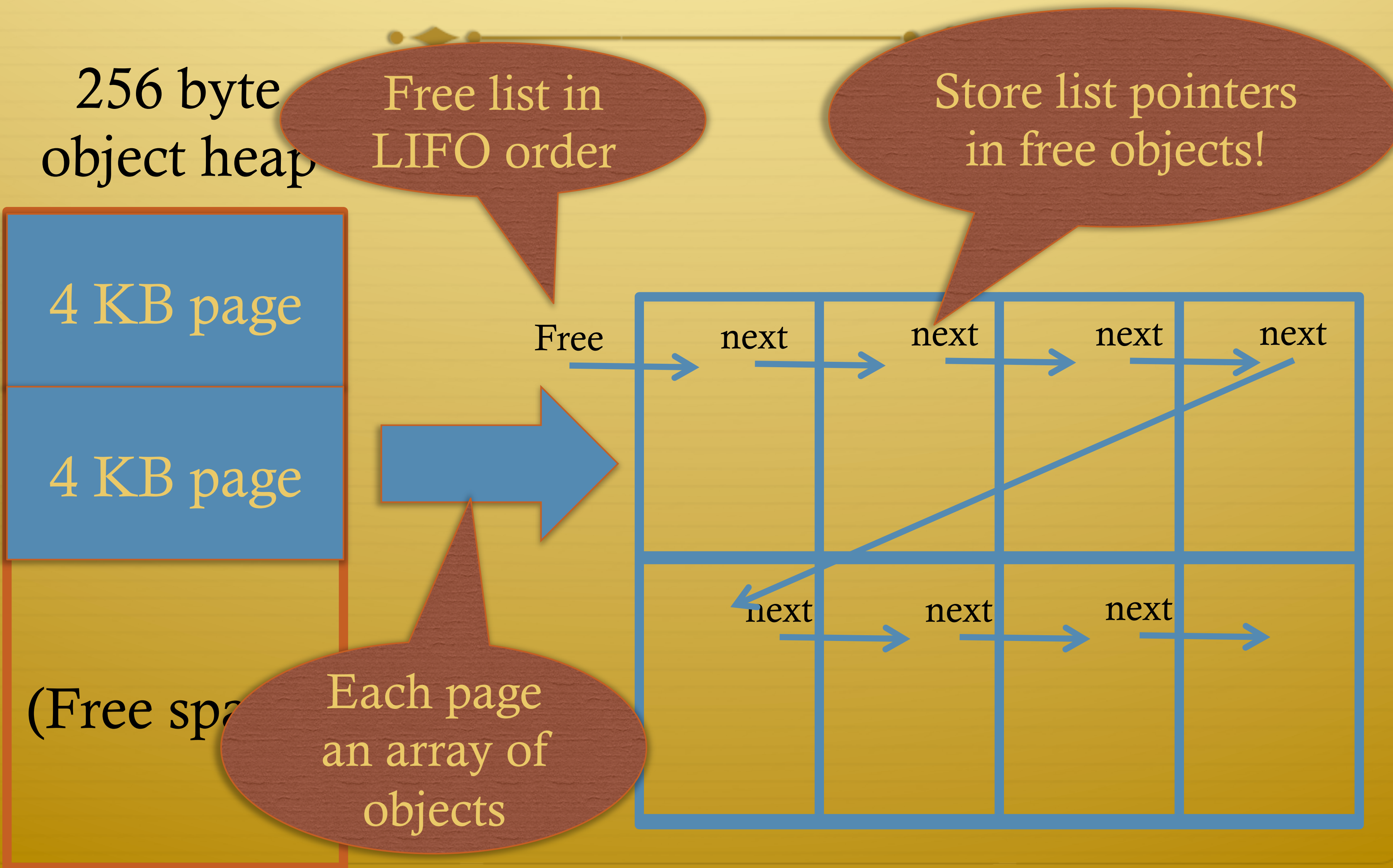
Fragmentation

- Undergrad review: What is it? Why does it happen?
- What is
  - Internal fragmentation?
    - Wasted space when you round an allocation up
  - External fragmentation?
    - When you end up with small chunks of free memory that are too small to be useful
- Which kind does our bump allocator have?

Hoard: Superblocks

- At a high level, allocator operates on superblocks
  - Chunk of (virtually) contiguous pages
  - All objects in a superblock are the same size
- A given superblock is treated as an array of same-sized objects
  - They generalize to “powers of b > 1”;
  - In usual practice, b == 2

Superblock intuition



Superblock Intuition

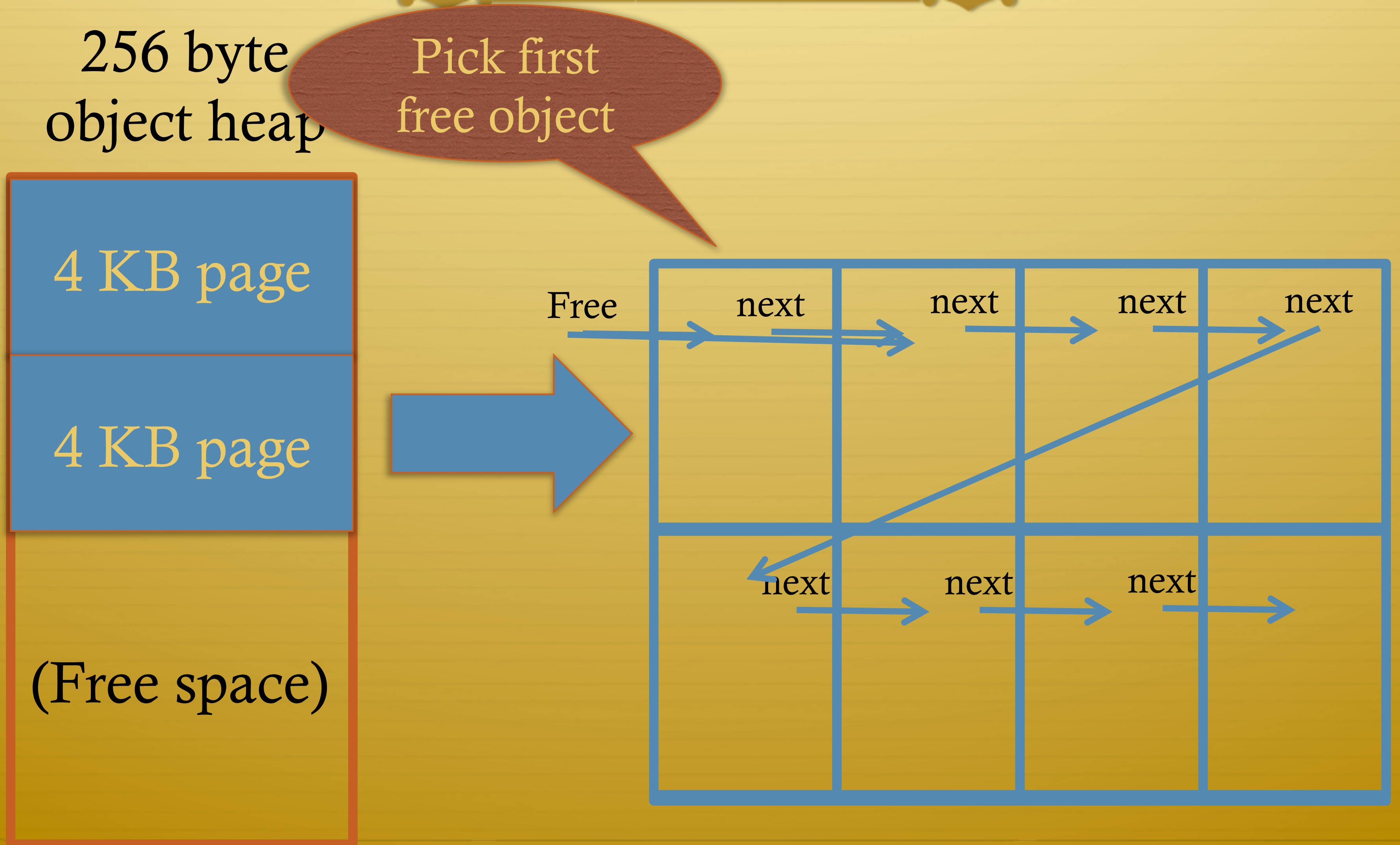
```
malloc (8);
```

1) Find the nearest power of 2 heap (8)

2) Find free object in superblock

3) Add a superblock if needed. Goto 2.

malloc (200)


256 byte object heap
Pick first free object
4 KB page
4 KB page
(Free space)
Free
next
next
next
next
next
next
next

Superblock example

- Suppose my program allocates objects of sizes:
  - 4, 5, 7, 34, and 40 bytes.
- How many superblocks do I need (if b ==2)?
  - 3 – (4, 8, and 64 byte chunks)
- If I allocate a 5 byte object from an 8 byte superblock, doesn't that yield internal fragmentation?
  - Yes, but it is bounded to < 50%
  - Give up some space to bound worst case and complexity

Memory free

- Simple most-recently-used list for a superblock
- How do you tell which superblock an object is from?
  - Round address down: suppose superblock is 8k (2pages)
  - Object at address 0x431a01c
  - Came from a superblock that starts at 0x431a000 or 0x4319000
  - Which one? (assume superblocks are virtually contiguous)
    - Subtract first superblock virtual address and it is the one divisible by two
- Simple math can tell you where an object came from!

Big objects

- If an object size is bigger than half the size of a superblock, just mmap() it
  - Recall, a superblock is on the order of pages already
- What about fragmentation?
  - Example: 4097 byte object (1 page + 1 byte)
  - Argument (preview): More trouble than it is worth
    - Extra bookkeeping, potential contention, and potential bad cache behavior

LIFO

- Why are objects re-allocated most-recently used first?
  - Aren't all good OS heuristics FIFO?
  - More likely to be already in cache (hot)
  - Recall from undergrad architecture that it takes quite a few cycles to load data into cache from memory
  - If it is all the same, let's try to recycle the object already in our cache

High-level strategy

- Allocate a heap for each processor, and one shared heap
  - Note: not threads, but CPUs
  - Can only use as many heaps as CPUs at once
  - Requires some way to figure out current processor
- Try per-CPU heap first
- If no free blocks of right size, then try global heap
- If that fails, get another superblock for per-CPU heap

Simplicity

- The bookkeeping for alloc and free is pretty straightforward; many allocators are quite complex (slab)
- Overall: Need a simple array of (# CPUs + 1) heaps
- Per heap: 1 list of superblocks per object size
- Per superblock:
  - Need to know which/how many objects are free
    - LIFO list of free blocks

Locking

- On alloc and free, superblock and per-CPU heap are locked
- Why?
  - An object can be freed from a different CPU than it was allocated on
- Alternative:
  - We could add more bookkeeping for objects to move to local superblock
  - Reintroduce fragmentation issues and lose simplicity

How to find the locks?

- Again, page alignment can identify the start of a superblock
- And each superblock keeps a small amount of metadata, including the heap it belongs to
  - Per-CPU or shared Heap
  - And heap includes a lock

Locking performance

- Acquiring and releasing a lock generally requires an atomic instruction
  - Tens to a few hundred cycles vs. a few cycles
- Waiting for a lock can take thousands
  - Depends on how good the lock implementation is at managing contention (spinning)
  - Blocking locks require many hundreds of cycles to context switch

Performance argument

- Common case: allocations and frees are from per-CPU heap
- Yes, grabbing a lock adds overheads
  - But better than the fragmented or complex alternatives
  - And locking hurts scalability only under contention
- Uncommon case: all CPUs contend to access one heap
  - Had to all come from that heap (only frees cross heaps)
  - Bizarre workload, probably won't scale anyway

New topic: alignment

- Word
- Cacheline

Alignment (words)

```
struct foo {
    bit x;
    int y;
};
```

- Naïve layout: 1 bit for x, followed by 32 bits for y
- CPUs only do aligned operations
  - 32-bit add expects arguments to start at addresses divisible by 32

Word alignment, cont.

- If fields of a data type are not aligned, the compiler has to generate separate instructions for the low and high bits
  - No one wants to do this
- Compiler generally pads this out
  - Waste 31 bits after x
  - Save a ton of code reinventing simple arithmetic
    - Code takes space in memory too!

Memory allocator + alignment

- Compiler generally expects a structure to be allocated starting on a word boundary
  - Otherwise, we have same problem as before
  - Code breaks if not aligned
- This contract often dictates a degree of fragmentation
  - See the appeal of 2^n sized objects yet?

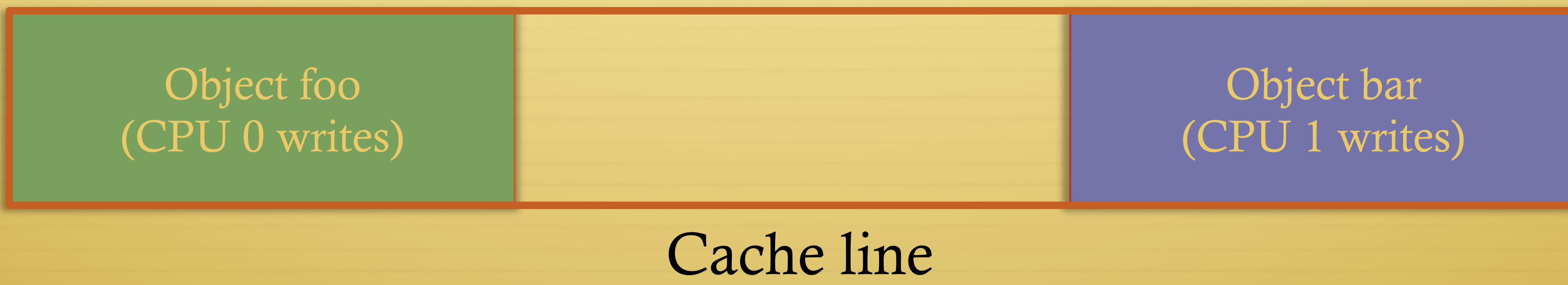
Cacheline alignment

- Different issue, similar name
- Cache lines are bigger than words
  - Word: 32-bits or 64-bits
  - Cache line – 64—128 bytes on most CPUs
- Lines are the basic unit at which memory is cached

Simple coherence model

- When a memory region is cached, CPU automatically acquires a reader-writer lock on that region
  - Multiple CPUs can share a read lock
  - Write lock is exclusive
- Programmer can't control how long these locks are held
  - Ex: a store from a register holds the write lock long enough to perform the write; held from there until the next CPU wants it

False sharing



- These objects have nothing to do with each other
  - At program level, private to separate threads
- At cache level, CPUs are fighting for a write lock

False sharing is BAD

- Leads to pathological performance problems
  - Super-linear slowdown in some cases
- Rule of thumb: any performance trend that is more than linear in the number of CPUs is probably caused by cache behavior

Strawman

- Round everything up to the size of a cache line
- Thoughts?
  - Wastes too much memory; a bit extreme

Hoard strategy (pragmatic)

- Rounding up to powers of 2 helps
  - Once your objects are bigger than a cache line
- Locality observation: things tend to be used on the CPU where they were allocated
- For small objects, always return free to the original heap
  - Remember idea about extra bookkeeping to avoid synchronization: some allocators do this
    - Save locking, but introduce false sharing!

Hoard strategy (2)

- Thread A can allocate 2 small objects from the same line
- "Hand off" 1 to another thread to use; keep using 2^{nd}
- This will cause false sharing
- Question: is this really the allocator's job to prevent this?

Where to draw the line?

- Encapsulation should match programmer intuitions
  - (my opinion)
- In the hand-off example:
  - Hard for allocator to fix
  - Programmer would have reasonable intuitions (after 506)
- If allocator just gives parts of same lines to different threads
  - Hard for programmer to debug performance

Hoard summary

- Really nice piece of work
- Establishes nice balance among concerns
- Good performance results

Linux kernel allocators

- Focus today on dynamic allocation of small objects
  - Later class on management of physical pages
  - And allocation of page ranges to allocators

kmem_caches

- Linux has a kmalloc and kfree, but caches preferred for common object types
- Like Hoard, a given cache allocates a specific type of object
  - Ex: a cache for file descriptors, a cache for inodes, etc.
- Unlike Hoard, objects of the same size not mixed
  - Allocator can do initialization automatically
  - May also need to constrain where memory comes from

Caches (2)

- Caches can also keep a certain “reserve” capacity
  - No guarantees, but allows performance tuning
  - Example: I know I’ll have ~100 list nodes frequently allocated and freed; target the cache capacity at 120 elements to avoid expensive page allocation
  - Often called a **memory pool**
- Universal interface: can change allocator underneath
- Kernel has kmalloc and kfree too
  - Implemented on caches of various powers of 2 (familiar?)

Superblocks to slabs

- The default cache allocator (at least as of early 2.6) was the slab allocator
- Slab is a chunk of contiguous pages, similar to a superblock in Hoard
- Similar basic ideas, but substantially more complex bookkeeping
  - The slab allocator came first, historically

Complexity backlash

- I'll spare you the details, but slab bookkeeping is complicated
- 2 groups upset: (guesses who?)
  - Users of very small systems
  - Users of large multi-processor systems

Small systems

- Think 4MB of RAM on a small device/phone/etc.
- As system memory gets tiny, the bookkeeping overheads become a large percent of total system memory
- How bad is fragmentation really going to be?
  - Note: not sure this has been carefully studied; may just be intuition

SLOB allocator

- Simple List Of Blocks
- Just keep a free list of each available chunk and its size
- Grab the first one big enough to work
  - Split block if leftover bytes
- No internal fragmentation, obviously
- External fragmentation? Yes. Traded for low overheads

Large systems

- For very large (thousands of CPU) systems, complex allocator bookkeeping gets out of hand
- Example: slabs try to migrate objects from one CPU to another to avoid synchronization
  - Per-CPU * Per-CPU bookkeeping

SLUB Allocator

- The Unqueued Slab Allocator
- A much more Hoard-like design
  - All objects of same size from same slab
  - Simple free list per slab
  - No cross-CPU nonsense

SLUB status

- Does better than SLAB in many cases
- Still has some performance pathologies
  - Not universally accepted
- General-purpose memory allocation is tricky business

Forward pointer

- Hoard gets more Superblocks via mmap
- What is the kernel's equivalent of mmap?
  - Everything we've talked about today posits something that can give us reasonably-sized, contiguous chunks of pages

Conclusion

- Different allocation strategies have different trade-offs
  - No one, perfect solution
- Allocators try to optimize for multiple variables:
  - Fragmentation, low false conflicts, speed, multi-processor scalability, etc.
- Understand tradeoffs: Hoard vs Slab vs. SLOB

Misc notes

- When is a superblock considered free and eligible to be move to the global bucket?
  - See figure 2, free(), line 9
  - Essentially a configurable “empty fraction”
- Is a "used block" count stored somewhere?
  - Not clear, but probably