Assembly Language: Function Calls

Goals of this Lecture

Help you learn:
- Function call problems
- x86-64 solutions
- Pertinent instructions and conventions

Function Call Problems

(1) Calling and returning
- How does caller function jump to callee function?
- How does callee function jump back to the right place in caller function?

(2) Passing arguments
- How does caller function pass arguments to callee function?

(3) Storing local variables
- Where does callee function store its local variables?

(5) Returning a value
- How does callee function send return value back to caller function?
- How does caller function access the return value?

(6) Optimization
- How do caller and callee function minimize memory access?

Running Example

Calls standard C labs() function

```c
long labsadd(long a, long b)
{
    long absA, absB, sum;
    absA = labs(a);
    absB = labs(b);
    sum = absA + absB;
    return sum;
}
```

Agenda

- Calling and returning
- Passing arguments
- Storing local variables
- Returning a value
- Optimization

Problem 1: Calling and Returning

How does caller jump to callee?
- I.e., Jump to the address of the callee’s first instruction

How does the callee jump back to the right place in caller?
- I.e., Jump to the instruction immediately following the most-recently-executed call instruction
Attempted Solution: jmp Instruction

Attempted solution: caller and callee use jmp instruction

```
f: ...
jmp g # Call g
fReturnPoint: ...
```

```
g: ...
jmp fReturnPoint # Return
```

Problem: callee may be called by multiple callers

```
f1: ...
jmp g # Call g
f1ReturnPoint: ...
```

```
g: ...
jmp ??? # Return
```

```
f2: ...
jmp g # Call g
f2ReturnPoint: ...
```

Attempted Solution: Use Register

Attempted solution: Store return address in register

```
f1: 
movq $f1ReturnPoint, %rax
jmp g # Call g
f1ReturnPoint: ...
```

```
g: ...
jmp %rax # Return
```

```
f2: 
movq $f2ReturnPoint, %rax
jmp g # Call g
f2ReturnPoint: ...
```

Special form of jmp instruction

```
Problem: Cannot handle nested function calls
```

```
f: 
movq $fReturnPoint, %rax
jmp g # Call g
fReturnPoint: ...
```

```
g: 
movq $gReturnPoint, %rax
jmp h # Call h
gReturnPoint: ...
jmp %rax # Return
```

```
h: ...
jmp %rax # Return
```

x86-64 Solution: Use the Stack

Observations:
- May need to store many return addresses
  - The number of nested function calls is not known in advance
  - A return address must be saved for as long as the invocation of this function is live, and discarded thereafter
- Stored return addresses are destroyed in reverse order of creation
  - f() calls g() ⇒ return addr for g is stored
  - g() calls h() ⇒ return addr for h is stored
  - h() returns to g() ⇒ return addr for h is destroyed
  - g() returns to f() ⇒ return addr for g is destroyed
- LIFO data structure (stack) is appropriate

x86-64 solution:
- Use the STACK section of memory
- Via call and ret instructions

call and ret Instructions

ret instruction “knows” the return address

```
f: ...
call h ...
call g ...
```

```
h: ...
ret ...
```

```
g: ...
call h ...
... \ret
```

```
RIP for h
RIP for g
RIP for f
```
Implementation of call

**RSP** (stack pointer) register points to top of stack

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instruction</th>
<th>Equivalent to</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>pushq src</td>
<td>subq $8, %rsp movq src, (%rsp)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>popq dest</td>
<td>movq (%rsp), dest addq $8, %rsp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>call addr</td>
<td>pushq %rip jmp addr</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**RIP** (instruction pointer) register points to next instruction to be executed

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<td>pushq %rip</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>call addr</td>
<td>jmp addr</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Can’t really access RIP directly, but this is implicitly what call is doing

call instruction pushes return addr (old RIP) onto stack, then jumps

Implementation of call

**RSP** before call

Old RIP

Implementation of ret

**RSP** before ret

Old RIP

Note: Can’t really access RIP directly, but this is implicitly what ret is doing

ret instruction pops stack, thus placing return addr (old RIP) into RIP

Implementation of ret

**RSP** after ret

Running Example

```c
# long absadd(long a, long b)
absadd:
  # long absA, absB, sum
  ...
  # absA = labs(a)
  ...
call labs
  # absB = labs(b)
  ...
call labs
  # sum = absA + absB
  ...
  # return sum
  ...
ret
```
Problem 2: Passing Arguments

Problem:
- How does caller pass arguments to callee?
- How does callee accept parameters from caller?

```c
long absadd(long a, long b) {
    long absA, absB, sum;
    absA = labs(a);
    absB = labs(b);
    sum = absA + absB;
    return sum;
}
```

X86-64 Solution 1: Use the Stack

Observations (déjà vu):
- May need to store many arg sets
  - The number of arg sets is not known in advance
  - Arg set must be saved for as long as the invocation of this function is live, and discarded thereafter
- Stored arg sets are destroyed in reverse order of creation
- LIFO data structure (stack) is appropriate

X86-64 Solution: Use the Stack

x86-64 solution:
- Pass first 6 (integer or address) arguments in registers
  - RDI, RSI, RDX, RCX, R8, R9
- More than 6 arguments ⇒
  - Pass arguments 7, 8, ... on the stack
    - (Beyond scope of COS 217)
  - Arguments are structures ⇒
    - Pass arguments on the stack
    - (Beyond scope of COS 217)

Callee function then saves arguments to stack
- Or maybe not!
  - See “optimization” later this lecture
  - Callee accesses arguments as positive offsets vs. RSP

Running Example

```asm
# long absadd(long a, long b)
absadd:
pushq %rdi # Push a
pushq %rsi # Push b

# long absA, absB, sum
...
# absA = labs(a)
movq 8(%rsp), %rdi
call labs
...
# absB = labs(b)
movq 0(%rsp), %rdi
call labs
...
# sum = absA + absB
...
# return sum
...
addq $16, %rsp
ret
```

Agenda

Calling and returning
Passing arguments
Storing local variables
Returning a value
Optimization
Problem 3: Storing Local Variables

Where does callee function store its local variables?

```c
long absadd(long a, long b)
{
    long absA, absB, sum;
    absA = labs(a);
    absB = labs(b);
    sum = absA + absB;
    return sum;
}
```

x86-64 Solution: Use the Stack

Observations (déjà vu again!):
- May need to store many local var sets
- The number of local var sets is not known in advance
- Local var set must be saved for as long as the invocation of this function is live, and discarded thereafter
- Stored local var sets are destroyed in reverse order of creation

x86-64 solution:
- Use the STACK section of memory
- Or maybe not!
  - See later this lecture

Running Example

```assembly
# long absadd(long a, long b) absadd:
    pushq %rdi # Push a
    pushq %rsi # Push b
    # long absA, absB, sum
    subq $24, %rsp # absA = labs(a)
    movq 32(%rsp), %rdi
    call labs
    # absB = labs(b)
    movq 24(%rsp), %rdi
    call labs
    # sum = absA + absB
    movq 16(%rsp), %rax
    addq 8(%rsp), %rax
    movq %rax, 0(%rsp)
    # return sum
    addq $40, %rsp
    ret
```

Agenda

Calling and returning
Passing arguments
Storing local variables
Returning a value
Optimization

Problem 4: Return Values

Problem:
- How does callee function send return value back to caller function?
- How does caller function access return value?

```c
long absadd(long a, long b)
{
    long absA, absB, sum;
    absA = labs(a);
    absB = labs(b);
    sum = absA + absB;
    return sum;
}
```

x86-64 Solution: Use RAX

In principle:
- Store return value in stack frame of caller

Or, for efficiency:
- Known small size ⇒ store return value in register
- Other ⇒ store return value in stack

x86-64 convention:
- Integer or address:
  - Store return value in RAX
- Floating-point number:
  - Store return value in floating-point register
  - (Beyond scope of COS 217)
- Structure:
  - Store return value on stack
  - (Beyond scope of COS 217)
Running Example

```assembly
# long absadd(long a, long b)
absadd:
    pushq %r13 # Save R13, use for absA
    pushq %r14 # Save R14, use for absB
    pushq %r15 # Save R15, use for sum
    subq %r15, %rip # sub a
    subq %r15, %rip # sub b
    movq %r15, %rax # mov qw, 16(%rip)
    # absA = labs(a)
    pushq %rsi # Save RSI
    call labs
    movq %rax, %r13 # mov qw, 16(%rip)
    popq %rsi # Restore RSI
    # absB += labs(b)
    movq %rsi, %rdi
    call labs
    movq %rax, %r14
    # sum = absA + absB
    movq %r13, %rax
    addq %r14, %rax
    # return sum
    movq %rax, %r15
    popq %r15 # Restore R15
    popq %r14 # Restore R14
    popq %r13 # Restore R13
    ret
```

Agenda

- Calling and returning
- Passing arguments
- Storing local variables
- Returning a value
- Optimization

Problem 5: Optimization

Observation: Accessing memory is expensive
- More expensive than accessing registers
- For efficiency, want to store parameters and local variables in registers (and not in memory) when possible

Observation: Registers are a finite resource
- In principle: Each function should have its own registers
- In reality: All functions share same small set of registers

Problem: How do caller and callee use same set of registers without interference?
- Callers may use register that the caller also is using
- When callee returns control to caller, old register contents may have been lost
- Caller function cannot continue where it left off

x86-64 Solution: Register Conventions

Callers-save registers
- RBX, RBP, R12, R13, R14, R15
- Call function must preserve contents
- If necessary...
  - Callee saves to stack near beginning
  - Callee restores from stack near end

Callers-save registers
- RDI, RSI, RDX, RCX, R8, R9, RAX, R10, R11
- Call function can change contents
- If necessary...
  - Caller saves to stack before call
  - Caller restores from stack after call

Running Example

Local variable handling in unoptimized version:
- At beginning, absadd() allocates space for local variables (absA, absB, sum) in stack
- Body of absadd() uses stack
- At end, absadd() pops local variables from stack

Local variable handling in optimized version:
- absadd() keeps local variables in R13, R14, R15
- Body of absadd() uses R13, R14, R15
- Must be careful:
  - absadd() cannot change contents of R13, R14, or R15
  - So absadd() must save R13, R14, and R15 near beginning, and restore near end

Running Example

```assembly
# long absadd(long a, long b)
absadd:
    pushq %rax # Use %rax as sum
    pushq %rsi # Push a
    pushq %rdx # Push b
    # long absA, absB, sum
    subq $24, %rsp # subq $24, %rip
    # absA = labs(a)
    movq 32(%rsp), %rdi
    call labs
    movq %rax, 16(%rsp)
    # absB = labs(b)
    movq 24(%rsp), %rdi
    call labs
    movq %rax, 8(%rsp)
    # sum = absA + absB
    movq 16(%rsp), %rax
    addq 8(%rsp), %rax
    movq %rax, 0(%rsp)
    # return sum
    movq 0(%rsp), %rax
    addq $40, %rsp
    ret
```

```assembly
absadd() stores local vars in R13, R14, R15, not in memory
absadd() cannot destroy contents of R13, R14, R15
So absadd() must save R13, R14, R15 near beginning and restore near end
```
Running Example

Parameter handling in unoptimized version:
- absadd() accepts parameters (a and b) in RDI and RSI
- At beginning, absadd() copies contents of RDI and RSI to stack
- Body of absadd() uses stack
- At end, absadd() pops parameters from stack

Parameter handling in optimized version:
- absadd() accepts parameters (a and b) in RDI and RSI
- Body of absadd() uses RDI and RSI
- Must be careful:
  - Call of labs() could change contents of RDI and/or RSI
  - absadd() must save contents of RDI and/or RSI before call of labs(), and restore contents after call

Running Example

```c
# long absadd(long a, long b)
absadd:
    pushq %r13  # Save R13, use for absA
    pushq %r14  # Save R14, use for absB
    pushq %r15  # Save R15, use for sum
    # absA = labs(a)
    pushq %rsi  # Save RSI
    call labs
    movq %rax, %r13
    popq %rsi   # Restore RSI
    # absB += labs(b)
    movq %rsi, %rdi
    call labs
    movq %rax, %r14
    # sum = absA + absB
    movq %r13, %r15
    addq %r14, %r15
    # return sum
    movq %r15, %rax
    popq %r15   # Restore R15
    popq %r14   # Restore R14
    popq %r13   # Restore R13
    ret
```

Unoptimized vs. Optimized Patterns

Unoptimized pattern
- Parameters and local variables all in memory (stack)
- Pro: Always possible
- Con: Inefficient
  - gcc compiler uses when invoked without -O option

Optimized pattern
- Parameters and local variables all in registers
- Pro: Efficient
  - More than 6 local variables
  - Local variable is a structure or array
  - Need to pass address of parameter or local variable: &foo
- Con: Sometimes impossible
  - gcc compiler uses when invoked with -O option, when it can!

Hybrid Patterns

Hybrids are possible
- Example: Parameters in registers, Local variables in memory (stack)

Hybrids are error prone for humans
- Example (continued from previous)
  - Step 1: Access local variable ← local var is at stack offset X
  - Step 2: Push caller-save register
  - Step 3: Access local variable ← local var is at stack offset X+8
  - Step 4: Call labs()
  - Step 6: Access local variable ← local var is at stack offset X+8
  - Step 7: Pop caller-save register
  - Step 8: Access local variable ← local var is at stack offset X

Solution: set up stack frame immediately on function entry, then there are consistent offsets for variables in the frame

Summary

Function calls in x86-64 assembly language
- call instruction pushes RIP onto stack and jumps
- ret instruction pops from stack to RIP

Passing arguments
- Caller copies args to caller-saved registers (in prescribed order)
  - Unoptimized pattern:
    - Callee pushes args to stack
    - Callee uses args as positive offsets from RSP
    - Callee pops args from stack
  - Optimized pattern:
    - Callee keeps args in callee-saved registers
    - Be careful!

Storing local variables
- Unoptimized pattern:
  - Callee pushes local vars onto stack
  - Callee uses local vars as positive offsets from RSP
  - Callee pops local vars from stack
- Optimized pattern:
  - Callee keeps local vars in callee-saved registers
  - Be careful!

Returning values
- Callee places return value in RAX
- Callee accesses return value in RAX

Summary (cont.)
struct tree {
    int key;
    struct tree *left;
    struct tree *right;
};

int sum (struct tree *t) {
    if (t==NULL)
        return 0;
    else return t->key +
        sum(t->left) +
        sum(t->right);
}

This would make an excellent exam question...