Embedded Systems FS 2016

Lab 3: BTnut and Threads


In the first part of this lab session, you will get to know the BTnut operating system (OS). BTnut allows you to use convenient library functions for accessing BTnode resources (e.g., the LEDs) and scheduling periodic as well as one-time operations (e.g., to send an “alive” message once per hour). Afterwards, you will learn how to write programs using multiple threads in BTnut, which enables running several tasks concurrently (e.g., to compute intermediate results from sensor readings while communicating with neighboring nodes).

1 BTnut

BTnodes run an embedded systems OS from the open source domain, called Nut/OS. Nut/OS is designed (among others) for the Atmel ATmega128 microcontroller (which is used on the BTnodes) and is thus an excellent base on which additional device drivers provide access to BTnode-specific hardware. Overall, the BTnut OS architecture consists of three layers: the rudimentary C-libraries as implemented by avr-gcc’s avr-libc; the higher-level OS routines built on top of avr-libc by Nut/OS; and the BTnode-specific device drivers.

BTnut programs are written in C and compiled using avr-gcc, a freeware C compiler for the Atmel processor platform. Fortunately, make btnode3 and make btnode3 upload provide a convenient interface for compiling and uploading to a BTnode. Here is a minimal BTnut program:

```c
#include <hardware/btn-hardware.h>
int main(void)
{
  /* ALWAYS call this function at the beginning of main */
  btn_hardware_init(); /* initialize SRAM */

  for(;;) /* endless loop */
  {
    // do something clever here
  }

  /* main should NEVER return */
}
```

The main function is the first function that gets executed after powering up a BTnode. The mandatory call btn_hardware_init() initializes the BTnode hardware. As BTnodes are expected to continuously execute their task, the main routine should never return; otherwise, the behavior of a BTnode is undefined.
Task 1: On-board LEDs

The BTnut library <led/btn-led.h> offers two functions for setting and unsetting the four BTnode LEDs: void btn_led_set (u_char n) and void btn_led_clear (u_char n). The parameter n specifies the LED using a number (0, ..., 3) or a symbolic constant (LED0, ..., LED3). First, however, the LEDs need to be initialized by calling btn_led_init(0).

Write a program that continuously cycles through the four LEDs (i.e., it turns one after another on and off). Observe the output. Use NutSleep(time) from library <sys/timer.h> to slow down the execution until it becomes easily visible, where the unit of time is milliseconds.

Task 2: Timers

Timers provide an elegant way to schedule recurring function calls. You use timers in BTnut as follows:

```c
#include <hardware/btn-hardware.h>
#include <sys/timer.h>
HANDLE hTimer; /* the timer */
static void _tm_callback(HANDLE h, void* a) /* callback function */
{
    // do something when timer expires
}
int main (void)
{
    btn_hardware_init(); /* initialize SRAM */
    hTimer = NutTimerStart(3000, _tm_callback, NULL, 0); /* install the timer */
    for (;;) { NutSleep(1000); } /* never end main */
}
```

NutTimerStart installs a timer. In particular, it sets a time interval (3000 ms), registers a callback function (static void _tm_callback(HANDLE h, void* a)) that is executed when the timer (hTimer) expires, provides arguments to be passed to the callback function (here NULL as nothing is passed), and specifies whether the timer is periodic (0) or fires only once (TM_ONESHOT).

Write a program with two timed callback functions: one should repeatedly turn on the blue LED (using btn_led_set(LED0)) and switch off the red LED (using btn_led_clear(LED1)), the other should do the opposite (i.e., turn on the red LED and switch off the blue LED).

Task 3: Terminal

When testing a program, it can be extremely helpful to display debugging information via printf. To do this with a BTnode, we have to route the output of printf through the BTnode’s serial port (i.e., USB cable) to our host PC, where we observe the output in a so-called terminal program. On a Linux machine, you simply run minicom usb0 to setup a terminal connection to a BTnode via port usb0: make sure the terminal session is configured to 57.6k, 8N1, no flow control. On the BTnode, you have to route the standard output appropriately:
After initializing the BTnode hardware, `void init_stdout(void)` does the desired output routing. Keep two things in mind: i) `printf` supports most standard conversion strings (e.g., `%s` and `%d`) and special characters (e.g., `
`) but not float conversion (%f); ii) exit the terminal program (minicom) on the host PC before uploading a new program to the BTnode.

Augment your program from Task 2 by printing a debug message whenever one of the callback functions alters the state of a LED. Check whether the output correlates with the state of the BTnode’s LEDs using the minicom terminal program.

### 2 Programming with Threads

In BTnut, a thread is a function that runs concurrently to other threads. To support multithreading on a single core processor, the OS needs to repeatedly start and stop (i.e., schedule) individual threads in a completely transparent fashion. BTnut uses cooperative multithreading; that is, each thread manually gives up control to the OS scheduler, which then decides which thread to run next based on priorities. While cooperative multithreading simplifies resource sharing and typically results in faster and smaller code (making it thus well suited to embedded systems programming), it entails the risk that a poorly designed thread brings the entire system to a halt.

Threads are functions. The `main` routine itself is also a thread that is started automatically after powering up the BTnode. You can define and create additional threads as follows:

```c
#include <sys/thread.h>

THREAD(my_thread, arg) /* define thread */
{
    for (;;) /* endless loop */
    {
        // do something
    }
}

int main(void)
{
    if (NutThreadCreate("My Thread", my_thread, 0, 192) == 0) /* create and start thread */
```
The THREAD macro defines thread my_thread, where the arg parameter can be used to pass an argument of arbitrary type to the thread when it is created. As thread functions should never return, they loop endlessly (but you can explicitly call NutThreadExit to end a thread). The function NutThreadCreate creates and starts thread my_thread, gives it a name ("My Thread"), passes nothing to the thread (0), and specifies the size of the stack that is allocated for the thread (simply use 192 for now in your own code and you will be fine).

**Task 4: Running and Yielding Threads**

Active threads only yield the CPU to other threads if they explicitly do so. Calling NutThreadYield() means: “Is there any thread more important than myself (i.e., has higher priority)? If so, feel free to take over control. Otherwise, I will continue.” Once control has been given away and is returned later on, the thread continues to run right after the call of NutThreadYield(). Alternatively, a thread can call NutSleep(time). This puts the current thread to sleep and transfers control to a waiting thread. If no thread is waiting, the idle thread takes over (which is always waiting but with lowest priority).

Write a program that creates a single thread. This thread should repeatedly turn on the blue LED (LED0) and switch off the red LED (LED1). The main routine, after creating the thread, should do the opposite (i.e., turn on the red LED and switch off the blue LED). Which LEDs are switched on? Why? Add a NutThreadYield() to the main routine such that the other LED is switched on. Add a second NutThreadYield() to your own thread such that both LEDs are switched on in turns. (You will see both LEDs switched on, because the main routine and the thread alternate very quickly.)

**Task 5: Thread Priorities**

In BTnut, each thread has a priority ranging from 0 (highest) to 254 (lowest). The idle thread has priority 254, whereas the main routine and all manually created threads have a default priority of 64. Priorities become important if several threads are competing for control. Each thread can be in three different states: RUNNING, READY, or SLEEPING. While only one thread can be RUNNING, several can either be READY or SLEEPING. A sleeping thread has ceded control either by calling NutSleep(time) or is waiting for an event (e.g., an incoming packet or a message from another thread). Once the running thread cedes control using NutThreadYield(), its state becomes READY and BTnut transfers control to another ready-to-run thread—the one with the highest priority. If all other ready-to-run threads have a lower priority, control is returned to the yielding thread immediately. Multiple threads with the same priority are executed in FIFO order.

You can assign the current thread a different priority as follows:
Take the program from Task 4 and give the self-created thread a higher priority. Compare the output with the original program from Task 4. Repeat the experiment giving the self-created thread a lower priority. What do you observe?

**Task 6: Events**

Using events, threads can communicate with each other and coordinate their operation. For example, a thread can signal other threads to wake up after it has finished processing a particular data structure. The following code snippet demonstrates how threads post and wait for events in BTnut:

```c
#include <sys/event.h>
HANDLE my_event;

THREAD(thread_A, arg) 
{ 
    for (;;) 
    { 
        // some code 
        NutEventWait(&my_event, NUT_WAIT_INFINITE); 
        // some code 
    } 
}

THREAD(thread_B, arg) 
{ 
    for (;;) 
    { 
        // some code 
        NutEventPost(&my_event); 
        // some code 
    } 
}
```

Thread `thread_B` executes some code and then posts an event via `NutEventPost(&event)`. Thread `thread_A` also executes some code but then blocks in the `NutEventWait(&event, timeout)` function. It only continues after `thread_B` has posted an event or the timeout expires. Here, the timeout is disabled by specifying an infinite time with the `NUT_WAIT_INFINITE` macro.

Write a program with three threads (main and two additional threads) and a global variable with initial value 2. The three threads should execute in turns, which you implement with events. One thread computes the square of the global variable, the second decrements it by one and the third multiplies it by two. After each computation, a thread prints its name and the result of the computation on the terminal. When the global value has reached a value greater than 10000, all threads except the main routine terminate themselves; the main routine enters an endless loop. Print appropriate messages to see when a thread terminates and when the main routine enters the loop. (Hint: A thread can access its own name using `runningThread->td_name` and can terminate itself through `NutThreadExit(void)`.) To repeat the experiment, simply press the RESET button on the BTnode.)