A METHOD AND SYSTEM FOR ORDERING PRIORITY COMMANDS ON A COMMODITY DISK DRIVE

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

The present invention relates to the ordering of commands on a disk drive and more particularly, to the determination of whether to issue a command to a disk drive based on a priority level of the command and an availability of the disk drive.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Fig. 1 is a block diagram of a computer system 100. Its main components are a host computer 110, a disk controller 115 and a disk drive 125. Disk drive 125 may be a commercial, off-the-shelf, component, sometimes referred to as a commodity disk drive, that conforms to the small computer system interface (SCSI) protocol.

Host computer 110 operates on data stored on disk drive 125. When host computer 110 wishes to read data, it issues a read-command, which identifies the data, to disk controller 115. In turn, disk controller 115 issues a read-command to disk drive 125. When disk drive 125 executes the read-command, it sends the data to disk controller 115, which passes the data to host computer 110. For the case where host computer 110 wishes to write data, it issues a write-

command, and sends associated data, to disk controller 115. Thereafter, disk controller 115 issues a write-command to disk drive 125. When disk drive 125 is prepared to execute the write-command, it notifies disk controller 115, which sends the associated data to disk drive 125.

Disk controller 115 includes a processor 117 and related memory 118 for executing procedures related to the exchanges of information with host computer 110 and disk drive 125. It also includes a controller command queue 120 that contains commands that have yet to be issued to disk drive 125.

Disk drive 125 also includes some local intelligence in the form of a processor (not shown) and related memory 128, which includes a disk drive command queue 130. Disk drive command queue 130 contains commands that have been issued to, but not yet been executed by, disk drive 125.

The performance of a system such as computer system 100 is often evaluated in terms of response time and throughput. Response time, also referred to as latency, is the interval of time between when a command is issued and when it is executed. A short response time is preferable to a long response time. Throughput is the total number of commands processed by a system during a specified period of time. A greater throughput is preferable to a lesser throughput.

Disk controller 115 and disk drive 125 each include

features that are intended to reduce response time and increase throughput. The features include prioritizing commands and organizing the commands on controller command queue 120 and disk drive command queue 130.

Disk controller 115 assigns a priority level to each command that it will issue to disk drive 125. Commands of the greatest importance are assigned the highest priority level. Three priority levels are relevant to this discussion, they are, demand stage, prestage and destage.

The demand stage priority level is the highest priority level. It is associated with commands where host computer 110 wishes to read data. Generally, when host computer 110 issues a read-command to disk controller 115, host computer 110 has an immediate need for the data. Accordingly, when disk controller 115 receives a read-command from host computer 110, it assigns the demand stage priority level to the read-command.

The prestage priority level is the next highest priority level. It is assigned to read-commands that are initiated by disk controller 115, as opposed to read-commands initiated by host computer 110. Disk controller 115 evaluates a recent history of commands received from host computer 110, and attempts to predict the next command that host computer 110 will issue. For example, in a case where host computer 110 has issued read-commands for two adjacent data blocks, disk

controller 115 may predict that the next command from host computer 110 will be a read-command for a third adjacent data block. In anticipation of this command, disk controller 115 issues a read-command to disk drive 125 for the third adjacent data block. Such a read-command from disk controller 115, made in anticipation of a read-command from host computer 110, is assigned the prestage priority level.

The destage priority level is lower than the prestage priority level. Disk controller 115 assigns the destage priority level to write-commands with which it wishes to write data to disk drive 125. When host computer 110 writes data to a storage device, it generally has finished processing the data, at least for the short term. Host computer 110 passes the data to disk controller 115 and then moves on to other business. Host computer 110 does not wait for disk controller 115 to actually write the data to disk drive 125, so there is no immediate urgency for disk drive 125 to execute a write-command.

Disk controller 115 organizes commands on controller command queue 120 in order of priority. That is, commands with the highest priority level are placed at the front of controller command queue 120, while commands with the lowest priority level are placed at the end of controller command queue 120. Commands with the same priority level are ordered according to the amount of time they have been on queue. That is, commands are ordered according to priority and age.

The command at the front of controller command queue 120 is the next command that disk controller 115 wishes to issue to disk drive 125. This organization of commands on controller command queue 120 is intended to minimize response time for the highest priority commands.

Disk controller 115 can promote commands from the prestage priority level to the demand stage priority level. When such a command is promoted to demand stage, the command is placed among other commands of the demand stage priority, and further ordered according to the age of the commands. When a command is promoted, disk controller 115 will reorder controller command queue 120, if necessary. Note that commands of the destage priority level are not eligible for promotion.

Disk controller 115 also employs an aging algorithm that advances the priority level of all commands on controller command queue 120 after a predetermined period of time. More specifically, after the predetermined time has elapsed, all commands on controller command queue 120 are advanced to a higher priority level. The aging algorithm is intended to prevent a low priority command from starving, i.e., not being serviced, in the case where new commands are of a higher priority level. Note that the aging algorithm applies to all commands regardless of priority level, but it does not reorder command queue 120.

Disk drive 125 holds commands, which it has yet to execute, on disk drive command queue 130. Disk drive 125 can operate in either of two modes, i.e., In Order Mode or Reorder Mode. During In Order Mode, disk drive 125 places commands onto disk drive command queue 130, and executes the commands, in the order they have been received from disk controller 115. In Reorder Mode, disk drive 125 changes the order of commands on disk drive command queue 130 to minimize seek time and rotational latency between execution of consecutive commands, and thus improve throughput.

In Reorder Mode, as the number of commands on disk drive command queue 130 increases, disk drive 125 becomes more efficient because it has more commands from which to choose when selecting the next command to execute. Therefore, throughput increases. However, as the number of commands on disk drive command queue 130 increases, the potential maximum latency for a given command also increases. Also, note that disk drive 125 is not aware of the priority level used by disk controller 115, and consequently, in Reorder Mode it may execute one or more low priority commands before a high priority command.

Another feature, referred to as the Head of Queue Option, allows disk controller 115 to assert that a particular command shall be placed at the head of disk drive command queue 130. When disk controller 115 issues a command and designates the Head of Queue Option, the designation

prevents disk drive 125 from reordering disk drive command queue 130, and the designated command will be the next to be executed by disk drive 125. This feature minimizes latency for the designated command, but sacrifices disk drive efficiency and increases the latency of other commands that are on disk drive command queue 130.

A problem occurs in the case where several successive commands are issued with the Head of Queue Option faster than the rate at which disk drive 125 can execute the commands. Three commands issued with the Head of Queue Option in the sequence of C1, C2 and C3 will be executed in the order of C3, C2 and C1. The oldest command, C1, will be the last executed regardless of its priority level. Also, because of the Head of Queue Option, the disk drive cannot reorder the commands to improve throughput. Consequently, in this case, the Head of Queue Option adversely impacts the response time of command C1 and the overall throughput of computer system 100.

An ideal system would minimize response time while maximizing throughput. The following patents are representative of some prior art techniques employed to address this challenge.

U.S. Patent No. 4,425,615 provides for a Hierarchical Memory System Having Cache/Disk Subsystem With Command Queues For Plural Disks. It describes a disk subsystem including a

plurality of disk drives wherein a command queue is provided for each disk drive. A priority value and a sequence number are assigned to each command queue so that the highest priority queued command number is executed when the disk drive corresponding to the queue becomes idle.

U.S. Patent No. 5,548,795 provides a Method For Determining Command Execution Dependencies Within Command Queue Reordering Process. This invention describes a method for calculating least-latency, maintaining the dependency information in a disk drive command queue, and using this information to constrain command reordering in a time and computationally efficient manner.

U.S. Patent No. 5,469,560 provides for Prioritizing Pending Read Requests In An Automated Storage Library. It describes an information processing system having a prioritized method of reading objects from disks in an automated storage library to minimize latency.

U.S. Patent No. 5,729,718 provides a System For Determining Lead Time Latency As Function Of Head Switch, Seek, And Rotational Latencies And Utilizing Embedded Disk Drive Controller For Command Queue Recording. It describes a system for reordering commands received by a disk drive. Lead time latencies are determined for commands in a queue with respect to an active command. The command having the least lead time latency is selected and promoted to the front

of the queue where it will be executed after the active command.

U.S. Patent No. 5,848,226 provides for a Prioritized Data Transfer Through Buffer Memory In A Digital Printing System. A control means within a disk drive assigns priority values to command outputs by software entities and executes the command having the highest priority.

The prior art techniques for reducing response time or maximizing throughput are generally directed to methods that actively reprioritize commands or reorder a queue to improve system efficiency. Typically, an improvement in terms of response time is accompanied by an impairment in throughput, or vice versa. Also, these techniques are often complex and are not necessarily compatible with commodity disk drives.

Accordingly, it is an object of the present invention to provide a disk controller and method for determining whether to issue a command to a disk drive that minimizes response time for high priority commands and maximizes throughput for all commands.

It is another object of the present invention to provide such a disk controller and method that is compatible with the operation of a commodity disk drive.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

In a computer system including a disk controller and a disk drive, the disk controller determines whether to issue a command to the disk drive by considering both a priority level associated with the command, and an availability of the disk drive.

In the preferred embodiment, the disk controller maintains a count of outstanding commands, that is, commands which have been issued to, but not yet executed by, the disk drive. When considering whether to issue a command to the disk drive, the disk controller first determines the priority level of the command. If the command priority is of the highest level, the command will be issued only if the outstanding command count is less than 8. If the command priority is not of the highest level, the command will be issued only if the outstanding command count is less than 2.

By using a first threshold value of 8 outstanding commands when considering a high priority command, and a second threshold value of 2 outstanding commands when considering a lower priority command, the disk controller readily accommodates the need to minimize response times for the high priority commands without adversely impacting the throughput of the disk drive with regard to all commands.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

Fig. 1 is a block diagram of a computer system according to the prior art;

Fig. 2 is a block diagram of a computer system particularly adapted to carry out the present invention; and

Fig. 3 is a flowchart of a process for determining whether to issue a command to a disk drive, according to the present invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

Fig. 2 is a block diagram of a computer system 200. The main components are a host computer 210, a disk controller 215 and a disk drive 225. The operation of these components, and their relationship to one another, is similar to that described in the context of Fig. 1, above.

Disk drive 225 may be a commercial, off-the-shelf, component, sometimes referred to as a commodity disk drive, that conforms to the small computer system interface (SCSI) protocol. However, the present invention is not limited to the SCSI protocol, but can be applied to any disk drive that reorders commands based on execution command efficiency.

Disk drive 225 includes a processor (not shown) and related memory 228, which includes a disk drive command queue 230. Disk drive command queue 230 contains commands that have been issued to, but not yet been executed by, disk drive 225. Disk drive 225 is capable of reordering commands on disk drive command queue 230.

Disk controller 215 includes a processor 216 and related memory 217 for executing procedures related to the exchanges of information with host computer 210 and disk drive 225. A controller command queue 220 contains commands that have yet to be issued to disk drive 225. Disk controller 215 also maintains a disk availability value 218 that indicates an availability of disk drive 225. Disk availability value 218 can be any quantitative indicator that represents the availability of disk drive 225, such as estimated time to execute outstanding commands or a number of outstanding commands. Command issuing process 219 determines whether to issue a command to disk drive 225.

In the preferred embodiment, the disk availability value 218 is an outstanding command count (OCC), that is, a count of commands that have been issued to, but not yet executed by, disk drive 225. In other words, disk availability value 218 indicates the number of commands on disk drive command queue 230. When disk controller 215 issues a command to disk drive 225, it increments the outstanding command count in disk availability value 218. When disk drive 225 executes a

command, disk controller 215 decrements the outstanding command count in disk availability value 218.

Disk controller 215 assigns a priority level to each command that it will issue to disk drive 225. As discussed above, in the context of Fig. 1, demand stage is the highest priority level. In the preferred embodiment, a command priority can be at demand stage, or it can be at a lower priority level. The lower priority levels are not distinguished from one another. That is, a command priority is either at demand stage, or it is not at demand stage. However, in the general case, the invention can operate with any number of priority levels.

When considering whether to issue a command to disk drive 225, command issuing process 219 first determines the priority level of the command. If the command priority is at demand stage, the command will be issued only if the outstanding command count is less than 8. If the command priority is not at demand stage, the command will be issued only if the outstanding command count is less than 2.

This algorithm allows up to 8 commands to be enqueued on disk drive command queue 230 when computer system 200 is busy enough to accumulate 8 demand stage commands, when 8 lower priority commands have aged to the demand stage, or a combination of these two cases. If computer system 200 is operating under a light workload, then a demand stage command

will wait behind no more than 2 previously issued commands. This scheme gives preferential treatment to demand stage commands to minimize their response times, yet it allows disk drive 225 to reorder commands on disk drive command queue 230 to maximize throughput.

Fig. 3 is a flowchart 300 of command issuing process 219. Command issuing process 219 is invoked when disk controller 215 must decide whether to issue a command to disk drive 225. This would occur when a new command is received from host computer 110, when a previously issued command has been completed by disk drive 125, or when a command has been promoted to a higher priority level. The command under consideration is the command at the front of controller command queue 220.

As mentioned earlier, disk availability 218 indicates an availability of disk drive 225, and in the preferred embodiment it holds an outstanding command count. As shown in Fig. 3, command issuing process 219 evaluates outstanding command count (OCC) 305.

In step 310, the process begins by determining whether the command under consideration has a demand stage priority level. If the priority level is at demand stage, then the process advances to step 315. If the priority level is not at demand stage, then the process advances to step 325. Note that in this embodiment, demand stage is a threshold priority

level, and there is no need to consider the case of a priority level greater than demand stage because demand stage is the highest possible priority level. However, in the general case, the threshold priority level need not be the highest priority level, and the process would determine whether the command priority level is greater than or equal to the threshold priority level.

In step 315, the process determines whether the outstanding command count 305 is less than a first threshold of 8 counts. In other words, it determines whether disk drive command queue 230 contains less than 8 outstanding commands. If the outstanding command count is less than 8, then the process advances to step 320. If the outstanding command count is not less than 8, then the process advances to step 335.

In step 320, the process issues the command under consideration to disk drive 225. Thereafter, the process advances to step 335.

In step 325, the process determines whether the outstanding command count 305 is less than a second threshold of 2 counts. In other words, it determines whether disk drive command queue 230 contains less than 2 outstanding commands. If the outstanding command count is less than 2, then the process advances to step 330. If the outstanding command count is not less than 2, then the process advances

to step 335.

In step 330, the process issues the command under consideration to disk drive 225. Thereafter, the process advances to step 335.

In step 335, the process terminates.

Note that command issuing process 220 does not use the Head of Queue Option that was discussed earlier. Disk drive 225 can operate in Reorder Mode and reorder commands on disk drive command queue 230. This permits disk drive 230 to optimize its throughput to the extent available in Reorder Mode.

While the procedures required to execute the invention hereof are indicated as already loaded into memory 217 of disk controller 215, they may be configured on a storage media, such as data memory 250 in Fig. 2, for subsequent loading into memory 217.

It should be understood that the foregoing description is only illustrative of the invention. Various alternatives and modifications can be devised by those skilled in the art without departing from the invention. For example, the process is not necessarily limited to two priority levels or two disk availability thresholds. Multiple priority levels and thresholds can be considered. Secondly, the disk

controller need not be a stand-alone component as represented by disk controller 215 in Fig. 2, but instead, it can be embedded in another device, such as host computer 210. Also, the invention is not limited to a computer system having only one disk drive. In a system with multiple disk drives, disk controller 215 maintains a controller command queue 220 and a disk availability 218 for each of the multiple disk drives. Accordingly, the present invention is intended to embrace all such alternatives, modifications and variances that fall within the scope of the appended claims.

CLAIMS

What is claimed is:

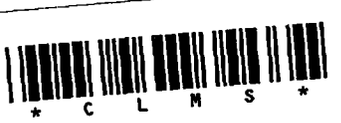
1. A method for determining whether to issue a command from a disk controller to a disk drive, said disk controller maintaining a disk availability value that quantitatively represents an availability of said disk drive, said command having an associated priority level, said disk controller performing the steps of:

(A) determining whether said priority level is greater than or equal to a threshold priority level;

(B) determining whether said disk availability value is less than a first threshold value, when step A determines said priority level is greater than or equal to said threshold priority level;

(C) determining whether said disk availability value is less than a second threshold value, when step A determines said priority level is not greater than or equal to said threshold priority level; and

(D) issuing said command to said disk drive when either step B determines said disk availability value is less than said first threshold value, or step C determines said disk availability value is less than said second



threshold value.

2. The method recited in claim 1, wherein said disk drive includes a disk queue containing outstanding commands that have been issued to, but not yet executed by, said disk drive.

3. The method recited in claim 2, wherein said disk drive is capable of reordering said outstanding commands on said disk queue.

4. The method recited in claim 1, wherein said disk availability value is a count of outstanding commands, which have been issued to, but not yet executed by, said disk drive.

5. The method recited in claim 4, wherein said count of outstanding commands is incremented when said command is issued to said disk drive, and decremented when said command is executed by said disk drive.

6. The method recited in claim 1, wherein said priority level is one of a plurality of priority levels.

7. The method recited in claim 1, wherein said controller includes a queue containing unissued commands.

8. A disk controller that determines whether to issue a



command to a disk drive, said command having an associated priority level, said disk controller comprising:

(A) a disk availability indicator for maintaining a disk availability value that quantitatively represents an availability of said disk drive;

(B) a first comparator for determining whether said priority level is greater than or equal to a threshold priority level;

(C) a second comparator for determining whether said disk availability value is less than a first threshold value, when said first comparator determines that said priority level is greater than or equal to said threshold priority level;

(D) a third comparator for determining whether said disk availability value is less than a second threshold value, when said first comparator determines that said priority level is not greater than or equal to said threshold priority level; and

(E) a command issuer for issuing said command to said disk drive when either said second comparator determines said disk availability value is less than said first threshold value, or said third comparator determines said disk availability value is less than said second

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threshold value.

9. The disk controller recited in claim 8, wherein said disk drive includes a disk queue containing outstanding commands that have been issued to, but not yet executed by, said disk drive.

10. The disk controller recited in claim 9, wherein said disk drive is capable of reordering said outstanding commands on said disk queue.

11. The disk controller recited in claim 8, wherein said disk availability value is a count of outstanding commands, which have been issued to, but not yet executed by, said disk drive.

12. The disk controller recited in claim 11, wherein said disk availability indicator increments said count of outstanding commands when said command is issued to said disk drive, and decrements said count of outstanding commands when said command is executed by said disk drive.

13. The disk controller recited in claim 8, wherein said priority level is one of a plurality of priority levels.

14. The disk controller recited in claim 8, further comprising a queue containing unissued commands.



15. A memory media that stores a program for a disk controller that determines whether to issue a command to a disk drive, said disk controller maintaining a disk availability value that quantitatively represents an availability of said disk drive, said command having an associated priority level, said memory media comprising:

(A) means for controlling said disk controller to determine whether said priority level is greater than or equal to a threshold priority level;

(B) means for controlling said disk controller to determine whether said disk availability value is less than a first threshold value, when means A determines said priority level is greater than or equal to said threshold priority level;

(C) means for controlling said disk controller to determine whether said disk availability value is less than a second threshold value, when means A determines said priority level is not greater than or equal to said threshold priority level; and

(D) means for controlling said disk controller to issue said command to said disk drive when either means B determines said disk availability value is less than said first threshold value, or means C determines said disk availability value is less than said second

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threshold value.

16. The memory media recited in claim 15, wherein said disk drive includes a disk queue containing outstanding commands that have been issued to, but not yet executed by, said disk drive.

17. The memory media recited in claim 16, wherein said disk drive is capable of reordering said outstanding commands on said disk queue.

18. The memory media recited in claim 15, wherein said disk availability value is a count of outstanding commands, which have been issued to, but not yet executed by, said disk drive.

19. The memory media recited in claim 18, further comprising means for controlling said disk controller to increment said count of outstanding commands when said command is issued to said disk drive, and decrement said count of outstanding commands when said command is executed by said disk drive.

20. The memory media recited in claim 15, wherein said priority level is one of a plurality of priority levels.

21. The memory media recited in claim 15, wherein said disk controller includes a queue containing unissued commands.

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