

A Systematic Approach to Understanding MACB Timestamps on Unix-like Systems

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Motivation & Contribution

File timestamps: fundamental forensics artifact

- 1 What timestamps are modified by a given operation?
- 2 Given timestamps, what happened to the file(s)?

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Windows® Time Rules
STANDARD_INFORMATION

File Creation	File Access	File Modification	File Rename	File Copy	Local File Move	Volume File Move (same volume)	Volume File Move (different volume)	File Deletion
Modified: Time of Day Created: No Change	Modified: No Change	Modified: Time of Day Created: No Change	Modified: No Change	Modified: Time of Day Created: No Change	Modified: No Change	Modified: No Change	Modified: No Change	Modified: No Change
Access: Time of Day Modified: No Change	Modified: No Change	Access: Time of Day Modified: No Change	Access: No Change	Access: Time of Day Modified: No Change	Access: No Change	Access: No Change	Access: No Change	Access: No Change
Modified: Time of Day Created: No Change	Modified: No Change	Modified: Time of Day Created: No Change	Created: No Change	Created: Time of Day Modified: No Change	Created: No Change	Created: No Change	Created: No Change	Created: No Change

FILENAME

File Creation	File Access	File Modification	File Rename	File Copy	Local File Move	Volume File Move (same volume)	Volume File Move (different volume)	File Deletion
Modified: Time of Day Created: No Change	Modified: No Change	Modified: No Change	Modified: No Change	Modified: Time of Day Created: No Change	Modified: No Change	Modified: No Change	Modified: No Change	Modified: No Change
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Modified: Time of Day Created: No Change	Modified: No Change	Modified: No Change	Modified: No Change	Created: Time of Day Modified: No Change	Created: No Change	Created: Time of Day Modified: No Change	Created: No Change	Created: No Change

Windows Time Rules based off testing on Windows 10 Release on June 2015

(SANS Institute)

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The image shows a 'Windows Time Rules' matrix. It is divided into two main sections: 'STANDARD_INFORMATION' and 'FILENAME'. Each section contains a grid of 10 columns (representing different timestamp types: Creation, Access, Modification, Removal, Copy, Move, Move (same parent), Move (different parent), Deletion) and 10 rows (representing different operations: File Creation, File Access, File Modification, File Removal, File Copy, Local File Move, Volume File Move (same parent), Volume File Move (different parent), File Deletion). Each cell in the grid contains a small table with 'Modified' and 'Created' status for 'Time of Day' and 'File Name'.

(SANS Institute)

Our contributions:

- Study of timestamp updates on **Linux, OpenBSD, FreeBSD and macOS**
- Framework for automated testing and profiling
- Better understanding
- Tables for practitioners

POSIX: Portable Operating System Interface

POSIX: Specifications for portability across Unix systems

- **Specifies:** utilities (cp, cat...), libc, kernel (system calls)
- Loosely applies to Linux, OpenBSD, FreeBSD, macOS
- Only Mac OS X 10.5 Leopard is POSIX-certified

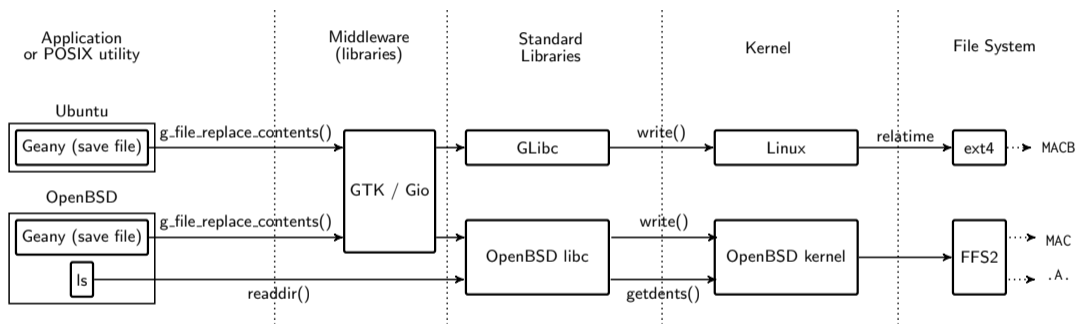
MACB Timestamps:

- M: Last data **M**odification
- A: Last data **A**ccess
- C: Last file status **C**hange (typically: chmod)
- B: File Creation (**B**irth)

```
u@h$ statx test.txt
test.txt: (stat + B)
M: Tue Mar 22 15:42:41 2022 - ns: 895045511
A: Tue Mar 22 15:42:46 2022 - ns: 571081872
C: Tue Mar 22 15:42:41 2022 - ns: 899045542
B: Wed Dec 1 19:09:40 2021 - ns: 295783662
```

POSIX: MAC only (**M**odify, **A**ccess, **C**hange) - no **B**irth timestamp

Unix: Software Stack



Each layer has to be considered.

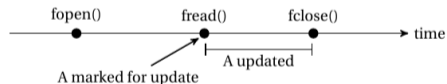
POSIX: marked for update, updated

Timestamp updates are a two-step process: **Marked for update** → **Updated**

Update shall happen:

- When file is not open anymore (`fclose()`)
- Before timestamp manipulation occurs (`stat()`, `futimens()`)
- When the kernel decides (after some time)

File Read (libc):



- 1 `fopen("r")`: No impact on timestamps
- 2 `fread()`: Mark A for update
- 3 A shall be updated before `fclose()`

The last data access timestamp shall be marked for update by the first successful execution of `fgetc()`, `fgets()`, `fread()`, `fscanf()`, `getc()`, `getchar()`, `getdelim()`, `getline()`, `gets()`, or `scanf()`

Tests against POSIX Compliance

Approach: tests run on the OS

- | | |
|--|--|
| | File Read (file.txt): |
| 1 For each watched file: <code>stat(file.path)</code> | <code>stat("file.txt")</code> |
| 2 <code>sleep(1.1s)</code> | |
| 3 <code>t₁ = current_time()</code> | |
| 4 Run the tested operation | <code>fopen("r"), fread(), fclose()</code> |
| 5 <code>t₂ = current_time()</code> | |
| 6 <code>sleep(1.1s)</code> | |
| 7 For each watched file: <code>t_{MAC} = stat(file.path)</code> | <code>stat("file.txt")</code> |
| 8 Compare <code>t_{MAC}</code> with <code>t₁</code> and <code>t₂</code> and against the specification | A ✓ |

Compliance Tests & Automated Profiling

Compliance tests only verify expected behavior (POSIX Utilities, libc, Kernel, File System)

- C framework

Automated Profiling: Determine timestamp updates of any given operation

1 Typical Operations (New File, File Read, File Write, File Copy...):

- Multiple implementations for each operation
- **File Read:** `fopen("r")+fread()+fclose()`, or `cat`
- C implementation

2 Middleware: GTK (GNOME) and Qt (KDE)

- C implementation

3 Applications: Text Editors

- python implementation with `pyautogui` (keystrokes)

Tested Operating Systems

System	Version	File System	Machine
Linux	Ubuntu 20.04.3 LTS (Linux 5.10.0)	ext4 mounted with strictatime	Lenovo P1
	Ubuntu 18.04.3 LTS		Lenovo P1
	ArchLinux 5.3.8		VirtualBox
OpenBSD	6.5, 6.8, 7.0	FFS1, FFS2	VirtualBox
FreeBSD	12.0, 13.0-RELEASE-p4	UFS2	VirtualBox
macOS	10.13.6 (Supported until 2020)	HFS+	Mac mini

Tools

- Specification and documentation (POSIX, man pages...)
- Automated compliance checks and profiling (C and python)

Challenges:

- Unexpected results, sometimes difficult to reproduce
- Interference from other processes
- **Source code analysis**
- **Debug** (strace...)

The worst of all namespace operations - renaming directory. "Perverted" doesn't even start to describe it. Somebody in UCB had a heck of a trip...

Linux: comment on renaming directory (Local Dir Move)

```
$ strace cat test.txt
execve("/usr/bin/cat", ["cat", "test.txt"], 0x7ffedd5e24b8 /* 60 vars */) = 0
openat(AT_FDCWD, "/lib/x86_64-linux-gnu/libc.so.6", O_RDONLY|O_CLOEXEC) = 3
[...]
openat(AT_FDCWD, "test.txt", O_RDONLY) = 3
fstat(3, {st_mode=S_IFREG|0664, st_size=14, ...}) = 0
read(3, "lorem ipsum\n", 131072) = 14
write(1, "lorem ipsum\n", 12) = 14
read(3, "", 131072) = 0
close(3) = 0
```

File Systems & Kernels

File Systems:

	POSIX	ext4 (Linux)	FFS2 (OpenBSD)	UFS2 (FreeBSD)	HFS+ (macOS)
Birth timestamp (B)	(No)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Timestamp Resolution	$\leq 1s$	1ns	1ns	1ns	1s

Kernels:

- OpenBSD (FFS2): The **B** field exists but is always 0
- FreeBSD (UFS2): Timestamp resolution can be configured (1s, **default: 1 μ s**, 1ns)

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Kernels: Mount Options

Mount options act as a filter for timestamp updates

- Disable A updates → improve performance

Linux:

- **relatime (default)**: A only updated if more than 1 day old, or if earlier than M or C
- **strictatime**: A updates are always performed
- **noatime**: A updates are never performed

Mount option	OpenBSD	FreeBSD	macOS
(default)	MAC updates are all performed, B is always 0	MACB updates are all performed	
noatime	A updates are performed only if M or C is also marked for update	A updates are never performed	

Timestamping

root can directly modify the file system and alter any timestamp

What can a *standard user* arbitrarily set? (touch, futimensat())

	POSIX	Linux	OpenBSD	FreeBSD	macOS
M	Yes				
A	Yes				
C	No				
B		No	No	Yes	Yes

C can only be updated:

- Modifying M, A or B (with touch) updates C to the current time
- It cannot be arbitrarily set to any other time (past or future)

Timestamp Rules

	New File/Dir touch, mkdir	File Read /Execute cat, exec()	Symlink Read/Follow readlink	File Write >, >>	File/Dir Change chmod, chown	New/Delete Hardlink ln, rm	File/Dir Rename, Local File Move mv, rename()	Local Dir Move mv, rename()	Volume File/Dir Move mv	File/Dir Copy (new) cp	File Copy (existing) cp	
M	M	.	POSIX Linux OpenBSD FreeBSD macOS	M	.	.	POSIX Linux OpenBSD FreeBSD macOS	POSIX Linux OpenBSD FreeBSD macOS	POSIX Linux OpenBSD FreeBSD macOS	M	M	
A	A	A	A	.	.	.	.	.	a	a	A	.
C	C	.	.	C	C	C	* C	* C	* C	C	C	C
B ¹	B	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	B	m	B	.

	Dir Traversal cd	Dir Listing ls	Dir: New/Rename/Delete Child (File/Dir/Hardlink), File Moved into (Local) touch, mkdir, ln, mv, cp, rm	Dir: Dir Moved into (Local) mv	Dir: Child Read/Exec /Write/Change cat, readlink, >>
M	.	POSIX Linux OpenBSD macOS FreeBSD	M	POSIX Linux FreeBSD macOS OpenBSD	.
A	.	A	.	A	.
C	.	.	C	C	.
B ¹

M/A/C/B	M/A/C/B is updated to current time
m/a/c/b	M/A/C/B is inherited from m/a/c/b of source file/dir
.	M/A/C/B is not modified
*	POSIX: Choice is left to the implementation

Legend

¹: Linux, FreeBSD and macOS only; always 0 on OpenBSD; not specified by POSIX

Mount options have to be considered as filters



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	New File/Dir touch, mkdir	File Read /Execute cat, exec()	Symlink Read/Follow readlink	File Write >, >>	File/Dir Change chmod, chown	New/Delete Hardlink ln, rm	File/Dir Rename, Local File Move mv, rename()	Local Dir Move mv, rename()	Volume File/Dir Move mv	File/Dir Copy (new) cp	File Copy (existing) cp
M	M	.	POSIX Linux OpenBSD FreeBSD macOS	M	.	.	POSIX Linux OpenBSD FreeBSD macOS	POSIX Linux OpenBSD FreeBSD macOS	POSIX Linux OpenBSD FreeBSD macOS	M	M
A	A	A	A	a	a	A
C	C	.	.	C	C	C	* C	* C	C	C	C
B ¹	B	B	m	B

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M	.	POSIX Linux OpenBSD macOS FreeBSD	M	POSIX Linux FreeBSD macOS OpenBSD	.
A	.	A	.	.	A
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A	A	A	A	a	a	a	A	.
C	C	.	.	C	C	C	* C	* C	C	C	C	C	C
B ¹	B	B	m	B	.	.

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M	.	POSIX Linux OpenBSD macOS FreeBSD	M	POSIX Linux FreeBSD macOS OpenBSD	.
A	.	A	.	.	A
C	.	.	C	C	C
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A	A	A	A	a	a	A	.
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M	.	POSIX Linux OpenBSD macOS FreeBSD	M	POSIX Linux FreeBSD macOS OpenBSD	.
A	.	A	.	.	A
C	.	.	C	C	C
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A	A	A	A	a	a	A
C	C	.	.	C	C	C	* C	* C	C	C	C
B ¹	B	B	m	B

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M	POSIX Linux OpenBSD macOS FreeBSD	.	M	POSIX Linux FreeBSD macOS OpenBSD	.
A	.	A	.	.	A
C	.	.	C	C	C
B ¹

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A	A	A	A	A	.
C	C	.	.	C	C	C	* C	* C	* C	C	C
B ¹	B	B	m	B

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M	.	POSIX Linux OpenBSD macOS FreeBSD	M	POSIX Linux FreeBSD macOS OpenBSD	.
A	.	A	.	.	A
C	.	.	C	C	C
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M	M	.	POSIX Linux OpenBSD FreeBSD macOS	M	.	.	POSIX Linux OpenBSD FreeBSD macOS	POSIX Linux OpenBSD FreeBSD macOS	M	M	M
A	A	A	A	a	A	.
C	C	.	.	C	C	C	* C	* C	C	C	C
B ¹	B	B	B	.

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M	.	POSIX Linux OpenBSD macOS FreeBSD	M	POSIX Linux FreeBSD macOS OpenBSD	.
A	.	A	.	A	.
C	.	.	C	C	.
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POSIX Compliance: Results

279 tests implemented:

- Including 177 tests against mandatory POSIX (C181, 2018) behavior
- **No implementation is fully compliant**
- Linux (with strictatime) is mostly compliant

Failed tests:

- Irrelevant edge-cases (stdin, abort(), identical chmod, missing gets())

Bugs (?) to be investigated:

- FreeBSD: Missing some A updates
- macOS: futimens() sometimes fails to modify timestamps

Gio (GLib, GTK/GNOME): File Copy

`g_file_copy()`:

Tested on Linux (Ubuntu)

- M is inherited from source, ACB are updated
 - \neq Standard File Copy (`cp`): MACB updated
- MA truncated to the microsecond resolution
 - Known Gio bug from 2010³ (low priority)
 - Could be used to identify files copied with Nautilus⁴ (default file manager for GNOME)

```
u@h$ statx test.txt
test.txt: (stat + B)
M: Mon Mar 14 14:34:34 2022 - ns: 977007889
A: Mon Mar 14 14:34:33 2022 - ns: 672996104
C: Mon Mar 14 14:34:36 2022 - ns: 381020578
B: Mon Mar 14 14:33:14 2022 - ns: 840282157
u@h$ # Nautilus: copy "test.txt" to "test (copy).txt"
u@h$ statx test\ \ (copy\).txt
test (copy).txt: (stat + B)
M: Mon Mar 14 14:34:34 2022 - ns: 977007000
A: Mon Mar 14 14:34:48 2022 - ns: 233127000
C: Mon Mar 14 14:34:48 2022 - ns: 233127654
B: Mon Mar 14 14:34:48 2022 - ns: 233127654
```

³<https://gitlab.gnome.org/GNOME/glib/-/issues/369>

⁴<https://bugs.launchpad.net/ubuntu/+source/nautilus/+bug/642596>

Text editors - Modifying files: Two strategies

- 1 Direct write: MC updated
- 2 Write to a new temporary file then replace the original file with it: MACB updated

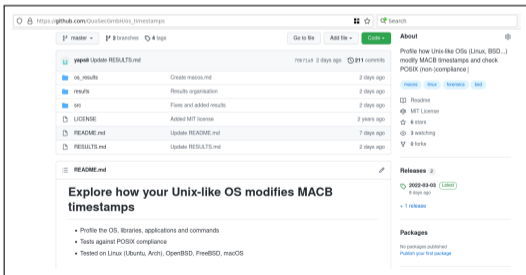
Editor	IO Middleware	Read	Modify
Vim nowritebackup	POSIX	A	MC
nano	POSIX	A	MC
Leafpad	POSIX	A	MC
Visual Studio Code	Electron	A	MC
Notepadqq	Qt	A	MC
Sublime Text	(Unknown)	A	MC
Kate	KTextEditor (KIO)	A	MAC
Atom	Electron	A	MAC
Vim -clean	POSIX	A	MACB
Emacs	POSIX	A	MACB
Code::Blocks	POSIX	A ¹	MACB
gedit	GTK	A	MACB
Bluefish	Gio	A	MACB
Geany	Gio	A	MACB
TeXstudio	Qt	A	MACB
JED	S-Lang	A	MACB

¹ Code::Blocks, when reading an empty file, does not modify any timestamp.

os_timestamps (Github)

https://github.com/QuoSecGmbH/os_timestamps/

- Open-Source (MIT License)
- Up-to-date results and tables
- Open to **feedback**, discussion, contributions (new tests?)...



OpenBSD MAC(B) Timestamps

H	A	C	B	Resolution	Mixed Option	Description
				1 nanosecond	default	MAC updates are all performed
					noatime	A updates are performed only if M or C is also marked for update

H/A/C	M/A/C	W/A/C	File/Dir	File/Dir	File/Dir	File/Dir	Local	Local	Volume	File/Dir	File/Dir
			touch, mkdir	cat, exec()	readlink	>, >, >	chmod, chown	ln, rm	mv	mv	mv
M	M	-	-	-	M	-	-	-	-	M	M
A	A	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	A	A
C	C	-	-	C	-	C	C	C	C	C	C

	Dir	Dir	Dir	Dir	Dir	Dir	Dir
	Throttle	Listing	Do-Moved	Do-Local	New/Rename ChM	Delete ChM	ChM
	cp	ls	mv	(Local)	(File/Dir/Hardlink)	(File/Dir/Hardlink)	Read/Exec/Write/Charge
M	-	-	M	-	M	M	-
A	-	A	A	-	-	-	-
C	-	-	C	-	C	C	-

2022-03-09 Tested against FFS1 and FFS2 on OpenBSD 6.5, 6.6 and 7.0

• PDF: [openbsd_mac.pdf](#)

File Systems: FFS1 and FFS2

	FFS1	FFS2 (default)
Timestamp Resolution	1 ns	1 ns
Timestamp Size	32 bits (seconds) + 32 bits (nanosecond)	64 bits (seconds) + 32 bits (nanosecond)
Fields for B Timestamp (file creation)	No	Yes

Though FFS2 has fields (64 bits + 32 bits) for the B timestamp, OpenBSD does not fill them, B is always 0.



Conclusion & Next Steps

Open-source framework with tables https://github.com/QuoSecGmbH/os_timestamps/

Understanding timestamp updates:

- Need to consider the software stack, especially **mount options**
- Many variations despite POSIX (Symlink, Directory Listing, Dir Move, B...)

Next:

- Investigate unexpected results (kernel bugs?)
- Up-to-date macOS with APFS, File Managers, Mobile (Android, iOS), Windows?

Questions ?

(aurelien.thierry@telekom.de, Twitter: @yaps8)