MDB: A Memory-Mapped Database and Backend for OpenLDAP

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Abstract

This paper introduces MDB ("Memory-Mapped Database"), a read-optimized database library and slapd backend developed for OpenLDAP. In this paper we will discuss OpenLDAP's traditional primary database as well as some other alternatives that were examined before arriving at the MDB implementation. Early results from testing the new MDB implementation will also be presented. This work is in progress but essentially complete, and will be integrated into the OpenLDAP public releases in the near future.

1. Introduction

While OpenLDAP already provides a reliable high performance transactional backend database (using Oracle BerkeleyDB "BDB"[1]), it requires careful tuning to get good results and the tuning aspects can be quite complex. Data comes through three separate layers of caches before it may be used, and each cache layer has a significant footprint. Balancing the three layers against each other can be a difficult juggling act. Additionally, there are two layers of locking needed to safely manipulate these caches, and the locks severely limit the scalability of the database on multi-processor machines.

Rather than continue to attempt to adapt other third-party database software into OpenLDAP, the MDB library was written specifically for use in OpenLDAP. The library is fully transactional and implements B+ trees[2] with Multi-Version Concurrency Control[3]. The entire database is mapped into virtual memory and all data fetches are performed via direct access to the mapped memory instead of through intermediate buffers and copies.

2. Background

Before describing the improvements offered by the MDB design, an overview of the existing BDB-based backends (back-bdb and back-hdb) will be presented.

LDAP and BDB have a long history together; Netscape commissioned the 2.0 release of BDB specifically for use in their LDAP server[4]. The OpenLDAP Project's first release using the BDB-specific APIs was OpenLDAP 2.1 in June 2002. Since BDB maintains its own internal cache, it was hoped that the back-bdb backend could be deployed without any backend-level caching, but early benchmark results showed that retrieving entries directly from the database on every query was too slow. Despite radical improvements in entry fetch and decoding speed[5], the decision was made to introduce an entry cache for the backend, and the cache management problems grew from there.

These problems include:

- Multiple caches that each need to be carefully configured. On top of the BDB cache, there are caches for entries, DNs, and attribute indexing in the backend. All of these waste memory since the same data may be present in three places - the filesystem cache, the BDB cache, and the backend caches. Configuration is a tedious job because each cache layer has different size and speed characteristics and it is difficult to strike a balance that is optimal for all use cases.
- Caches with very complex lock dependencies. For speed, most of the backend caches are protected by simple mutexes. However, when interacting with the BDB API, these mutexes must be dropped and exchanged for (much slower) database locks. Otherwise deadlocks which could not be detected by BDB's deadlock detector may occur. Deadlocks occur very frequently in routine operation of the backend.
- Caches with pathological behavior if they were smaller than the whole database. When the cache size was small enough that a significant number of queries were not being satisfied from the cache, extreme heap fragmentation was observed[6], as the cache freed existing entries to make room for new entries. The fragmentation would cause the size of the slapd process to rapidly grow, defeating the purpose of setting a small cache size. The problem was worst with the memory allocator in GNU libc[7], and could be mitigated by using alternatives such as Hoard[8] or Google tcmalloc[9], but additional changes were made in slapd to reduce the number of calls to malloc() and free() to delay the onset of this fragmentation issue[10].
- Caches with very low effectiveness. When multiple queries arrive whose result sets are larger than the entry cache, the cache effectiveness drops to zero because entries are constantly being freed before they ever get any chance of being re-used[11]. A great deal of effort was expended exploring more advanced cache replacement algorithms to combat this problem[12][13].

From the advent of the back-bdb backend until the present time, the majority of development and debugging effort in these backends has all been devoted to backend cache management. The present state of affairs is difficult to configure, difficult to optimize, and extremely labor intensive to maintain.

Another issue relates to administrative overhead in general. For example, BDB uses write-ahead logs for its transaction support. These logs are written before database updates are performed, so that in case an update is interrupted or aborted, sufficient information is present to undo the updates and return the database to the state it was in before the update began. The log files grow continuously as updates are made to a database, and can only be removed after an expensive checkpoint operation is performed. Later versions of BDB added an auto-remove option to delete old log files automatically, but if the system crashed while this option was in use, generally the database could not be recovered successfully because the necessary logs had been deleted.

3. Solutions

The problems with back-bdb and back-hdb can be summed up in two main areas: cache management, and lock management. The approach to a solution with back-mdb is simple - do no caching, and do no locking. The other issues of administrative overhead are handled as side-effects of the main solutions.

3.1 Eliminating Caching

One fundamental concept behind the MDB approach is known as "Single-Level Store"[14]. The basic idea is to treat all of computer memory as a single address space. Pages of storage may reside in primary storage (RAM) or in secondary storage (disk) but the actual location is unimportant to the application. If a referenced page is currently in primary storage the application can use it immediately, if not a page fault occurs and the operating system brings the page into primary storage. The concept was introduced in 1964 in the Multics[15] operating system but was generally abandoned by the early 1990s as data volumes surpassed the capacity of 32 bit address spaces. (We last knew of it in the Apollo DOMAIN[16] operating system, though many other Multics-influenced designs carried it on.) With the ubiquity of 64 bit processors today this concept can again be put to good use. (Given a virtual address space limit of 63 bits that puts the upper bound of database size at 8 exabytes. Commonly available processors today only implement 48 bit address spaces, limiting us to 47 bits or 128 terabytes.)

Another operating system requirement for this approach to be viable is a Unified Buffer Cache. While most POSIX-based operating systems have supported an mmap() system call for many years, their initial implementations kept memory managed by the VM subsystem separate from memory managed by the filesystem cache. This was not only wasteful (again, keeping data cached in two places at once) but also led to coherency problems - data modified through a memory map was not visible using filesystem read() calls, or data modified through a filesystem write() was not visible in the memory map. Most modern operating systems now have filesystem and VM paging unified, so this should not be a concern in most deployments[17][18][19].

The MDB library is designed to access an entire database thru a single read-only memory map. Keeping the mapping read-only prevents stray writes from buggy application code from corrupting the database. Updates are performed using regular write() calls. (Updating through the map would be difficult anyway since files cannot be grown through map references; only updates to existing pages could be done through the map. For simplicity all updates are done using write() and it doesn't matter whether the update grows the file or not.) This update approach requires that the filesystem and VM views are kept coherent, thus the requirement that the OS uses a Unified Buffer Cache.

The memory-mapped approach makes full use of the operating system's filesystem cache, and eliminates any database-level caching. Likewise the back-mdb backend performs no caching of its own; it uses information from the database directly. Using the memory-mapped data thus eliminates two levels of caching relative to back-hdb, as well as eliminating redundant memcpy() operations between those caches. It also eliminates all cache tuning/configuration issues, thus easing deployment for administrators.

Of course, by eliminating caching, one would expect to incur a significant performance hit. It should be much faster to dump out the contents of a cached, fully decoded entry in response to a search request, than to read the entry in from disk and decode it on every request. Early results with back-mdb showed this to be true, but further optimization in back-mdb has mostly eliminated this performance hit.

3.2 Eliminating Locking

The other fundamental concept behind MDB is the use of Multi-Version Concurrency Control (MVCC). The basic idea is that updates of data never overwrite existing data; instead the updates write to new pages and thus create a new version of the database. Readers only ever see the snapshot of the database as it existed when a read transaction began, so they are fully isolated from writers. Because of this isolation read accesses require no locks, they always have a self-consistent view of the database.

BDB has supported MVCC since version 4.5.20, but because of the caching layer in back-bdb/hdb there was no benefit to using it. The only way to get any gain from using MVCC was to also eliminate the backend caching layer, and without the caching layer back-bdb/hdb's performance would be too slow because data lookups in BDB were still too slow.

A major downside of MVCC-based systems is that since they always write new data to new disk pages, the database files tend to grow without bound. They need periodic compaction or garbage collection in order to keep their disk usage constrained, and the required frequency of such compaction efforts is very high on databases with high update rates. Additionally, systems based on garbage collection generally require twice as much disk space as the actual data occupies. Also, in order to sustain a write rate of N operations/second, the I/O system must actually support >>2N operations/second, since the compaction task needs to run faster than the normal write task in order to catch up and actually complete its job, and the volume of data already written always exceeds the volume being written. If this over-provisioning of I/O resources cannot be guaranteed, then the typical solution to this problem is to deny updates while compaction is being performed.

Causing a service outage for writes while garbage collection is performed is unacceptable, so MDB uses a different approach. Within a given MDB database environment, MDB maintains two B+tree structures - one containing application data, and another one containing a free list with the IDs of pages that are no longer in use. Tracking the in-use status is typically done with reference counters and other such mechanisms that require locking. Obviously the use of locking would defeat the purpose of using MVCC in the first place, so a lockless solution was designed instead. With this solution, pages that are no longer in use by any active snapshot of the database are re-used by updaters, so the database size remains relatively static. This is a key advantage of MDB over other well-known MVCC databases such as CouchDB[20].

4. Implementation Highlights

Since all of the source code has been publicly available from the outset, and due to space limitations in this paper, only a few of the most notable implementation details will be described here. Interested parties are invited to read the code in the OpenLDAP git repository and post questions on the openldap-technical mailing list.

The MDB library API was loosely modeled after the BDB API, to ease migration of BDB-based code. The first cut of the back-mdb code was simply copied from the back-bdb source tree, and then all references to the caching layers were deleted. After a few minor API differences were accounted for, the backend was fully operational (though still in need of optimization). As of today back-mdb comprises 340KB of source code, compared to 476KB for back-bdb/hdb, so back-mdb is approximately 30% smaller.

The MDB code itself started from Martin Hedenfalk's append-only Btree code in the OpenBSD ldapd source repository[21]. The first cut of the MDB code was simply copied from the ldapd source, and then all of the Btree page cache manager was deleted and replaced with mmap accesses. The original Btree source yielded an object file of 39KB; the MDB version was 32KB. Initial testing with the append-only code proved that approach to be completely impractical. With a small test database and only a few hundred add/delete operations, the DB occupied 1027 pages but only 10 pages actually contained current data; over 99% of the space was wasted.

Along with the mmap management and page reclamation, many other significant changes were made to arrive at the current MDB library, mostly to add features from BDB that back-mdb would need. As of today the MDB library comprises 35KB of object code. (Comparing source code is not very informative since the MDB source code has been heavily expanded with Doxygen comments. The initial version of mdb.c was 59KB as opposed to btree.c at 76KB but with full documentation embedded mdb.c is now 162KB. Also for comparison, BDB is now over 1.5MB of object code.)

4.1 MDB Change Summary

The append-only Btree code used a meta page at the end of the database file to point at the current root node of the Btree. New pages were always written out sequentially at the end of the file, followed by a new meta page upon transaction commit. Any application opening the database needed to search backward from the end of the file to find the most recent meta page, to get a current snapshot of the database. (Further explanation of append-only operation is available at Martin's web site[22].)

In MDB there are two meta pages occupying page 0 and page 1 of the file. They are used alternately by transactions. Each meta page points to the root node of two Btrees - one for the free list and one for the application data. New data first re-uses any available pages from the free list, then writes sequentially at the end of the file if no free pages are available. Then the older meta page is written on transaction commit. This is nothing more than standard double-buffering - any application opening the database uses the newer meta page, while a committer overwrites the older one. No locks are needed to protect readers from writers; readers are guaranteed to always see a valid root node.

The original code only supported a single Btree in a given database file. For MDB we wanted to support multiple trees in a single database file. The back-mdb indexing code uses individual databases for each attribute index, and it would be a non-starter to require a sysadmin to configure multiple mmap regions for a single back-mdb instance. Additionally, the indexing code uses BDB's sorted duplicate feature, which allows multiple data items with the same key to be stored in a Btree, and this feature needed to be added to MDB as well. These features were both added using a subdatabase mechanism, which allows a data item in a Btree to be treated as the root node of another Btree.

4.2 Locking

For simplicity the MDB library allows only one writer at a time. Creating a write transaction acquires a lock on a writer mutex; the mutex normally resides in a shared memory region so that it can be shared between multiple processes. This shared memory is separate from the region occupied by the main database. The lock region also contains a table with one slot for every active reader in the database. The slots record the reader's process and thread ID, as well as the ID of the transaction snapshot the reader is using. (The process and thread ID are recorded to allow detection of stale entries in the table, e.g. threads that exited without releasing their reader slot.) The table is constructed in processor cache-aligned memory such that False Sharing[23] of cache lines is avoided.

Readers acquire a slot the first time a thread opens a read transaction. Acquiring an empty slot in the table requires locking a mutex on the table. The slot address is saved in thread-local storage and re-used the next time the thread opens a read transaction, so the thread never needs to touch the table mutex ever again. The reader stores its transaction ID in the slot at the start of the read transaction and zeroes the ID in the slot at the end of the transaction. In normal operation, there is nothing that can block the operation of readers.

The reader table is used when a writer wants to allocate a page, and knows that the free list is not empty. Writes are performed using copy-on-write semantics; whenever a page is to be written, a copy is made and the copy is modified instead of the original. Once copied, the original page's ID is added to an in-memory free list. When a transaction is committed, the in-memory free list is saved as a single record in the free list DB along with the ID of the transaction for this commit. When a writer wants to pull a page from the free list DB, it compares the transaction ID of the oldest record in the free list DB with the transaction IDs of all of the active readers. If the record in the free list DB is older than all of the readers, then all of the pages in that record may be safely re-used because nothing else in the DB points to them any more.

The writer's scan of the reader table also requires no locks, so readers cannot block writers. The only consequence of a reader holding onto an old snapshot for a long time is that page reclaiming cannot be done; the writer will simply use newly allocated pages in the meantime.

4.3 Backend Features

The database layout in back-mdb is functionally identical to the one used in back-hdb so it is also fully hierarchical. Entries are stored in a binary format based on the one used for back-hdb, but with further encoding optimizations. The most significant optimization was to use a mapping of AttributeDescriptions to small integers, so that their canonical names were no longer stored in each entry. This saved a bit of space in the encoded entry, but more importantly made Attribute decoding an O(1) operation instead of O(logN). Also, while the MDB library doesn't need to allocate any memory to return data, entries still require Entry and Attribute structures to be allocated. But since entries don't need to be kept persistently in a cache, all allocations can be done from temporary thread-local memory. As a result of these optimizations the entry decoder is 6.5 times faster overall than the one used in back-hdb.

Configuration for back-mdb is much simplified - there are no cache configuration directives. The backend requires only a pathname for storing the database files, and a maximum allowed size for the database. The configuration settings only affect the capacity of the database, not its performance; there is nothing to tune.

5. Results

Profiling was done using multiple tools, including FunctionCheck[24], valgrind callgrind[25], and oprofile[26], to aid in optimization of MDB. Oprofile has the least runtime overhead and provides the best view of multi-threaded behavior, but since it is based on random samples it tends to miss some data of interest. FunctionCheck is slower, at four times slower than normal, but since it uses instrumented code it always provides a complete profile of overall function run times. callgrind is slowest, at thirty times slower than normal, and only provides relevant data for single-threaded operation, but since it does instruction-level profiling it gives the most detailed view of program behavior. Since program behavior can vary wildly between single-threaded and multi-processor operation, it was important to gather performance data from a number of different perspectives.

Table 1 compares basic performance of back-mdb vs back-hdb for initially loading a test database using slapadd in "quick" mode.

	real	user	sys
back-hdb	66m09.831s	115m52.374s	5m15.860s
back-mdb	29m33.212s	22m21.264s	7m11.851s

Table 1: Time to slapadd -q 5 million entries

back-hdb has a much higher user time than real time because it was using multi-threaded indexing. At present back-mdb doesn't support multi-threaded operation for slapadd. back-hdb was using BDB 4.7.25 in these tests, but results with BDB 5.2.28 were essentially the same.

With the databases loaded, the next test was to start up slapd and time how long it took to scan the entire database with a single ldapsearch. Also the slapd process sizes were compared, relative to their DB sizes on disk. These results are summarized in Table 2.

	first	second	slapd size	DB size
back-hdb	4m15.395s	0m16.204s	26GB	15.6GB
back-mdb	0m14.725s	0m10.807s	10GB	12.8GB

Table 2: ldapsearch comparison

back-hdb is configured with an entry cache size of 5 million entries, so all of the database is fully cached after the first ldapsearch is run. Also note that the DB files are entirely resident in the filesystem cache since slapadd had just completed before. Also the BDB cache was configured at 32GB so the entire database is resident there too; no disk I/O occurs during these tests. This table shows the overhead of retrieving data from the BDB cache and decoding it into the back-hdb entry cache. But even with that overhead eliminated in the second run, back-mdb is still faster. For back-mdb the extra time required in the first run reflects the time needed for the OS to map the database pages into the slapd process' address space. The slapd process size for mdb is smaller than the DB size for a couple of reasons: first, the DB contains attribute indices, and this search doesn't reference any indices, so those pages are not mapped into the process. second, the DB contains a number of free pages that were left over from the last slapadd transaction.

Before development began it was estimated that the MDB approach would use 1/3 to 1/2 as much RAM as the equivalent back-hdb database; this estimate was confirmed with back-mdb using only 37% as much RAM as back-hdb on our fully cached test database.

Next, a basic concurrency test was performed by running the same ldapsearch operation 2, 4, 8, and 16 times concurrently and measuring the time to obtain the results. The averages of the result times are shown in Table 3.

	2	4	8	16
back-hdb, debian	0m23.147s	0m30.384s	1m25.665s	17m15.114s
back-hdb	0m24.617s	0m32.171s	1m04.817s	3m04.464s
back-mdb	0m10.789s	0m10.842s	0m10.931s	0m12.023s

Table 3: Concurrent Search Times

The first time this test was run with back-hdb yielded some extraordinarily poor results. Later testing revealed that this test was accidentally run using the stock build of BDB 4.7 provided by Debian, instead of the self-compiled build we usually use in our testing. The principle difference is that we always build BDB with the configure option --with-mutex=POSIX/pthread, whereas by default BDB uses a hybrid of spinlocks and pthread mutexes. The spinlocks are fairly efficient within a single CPU socket, but they scale extremely poorly as the number of processors increases. back-mdb's scaling is essentially flat across arbitrary numbers of processors since it has no locking to slow it down. The performance degrades slightly at the 16 search case because at that point all of the processors on our test machine are busy so the clients and slapd are competing with other system processes for CPU time. As another point of reference, the time required to copy the MDB database to /dev/null using 'dd' was 10.20 seconds. Even with all of the decoding and filtering that slapd needed to do, scanning the entire DB was only 6% slower than a raw copy operation.

The previous tests show worst-case performance for search operations. For more real-world results, we move on to using SLAMD[27]. (SLAMD has known performance issues, but we've gotten used to them, and staying with the same tool lets us compare with historical results from our previous work as well.) Table 4 summarizes the results for back-hdb vs back-mdb with randomly generated queries across the 5 million entry database.

	Searches/sec	Duration, msec
back-hdb	67456.11	1.89
back-mdb	119255.42	0.63

Table 4: SLAMD Search Rate Results

The back-hdb result is actually extremely good - it's about 15% faster than the second fastest directory software we've tested previously on this machine (OpenDS 2.3). But they're all utterly outclassed by back-mdb. If you look at the actual stats in Illustration 1 you'll see that the performance was still increasing as the process' page map was filling in.

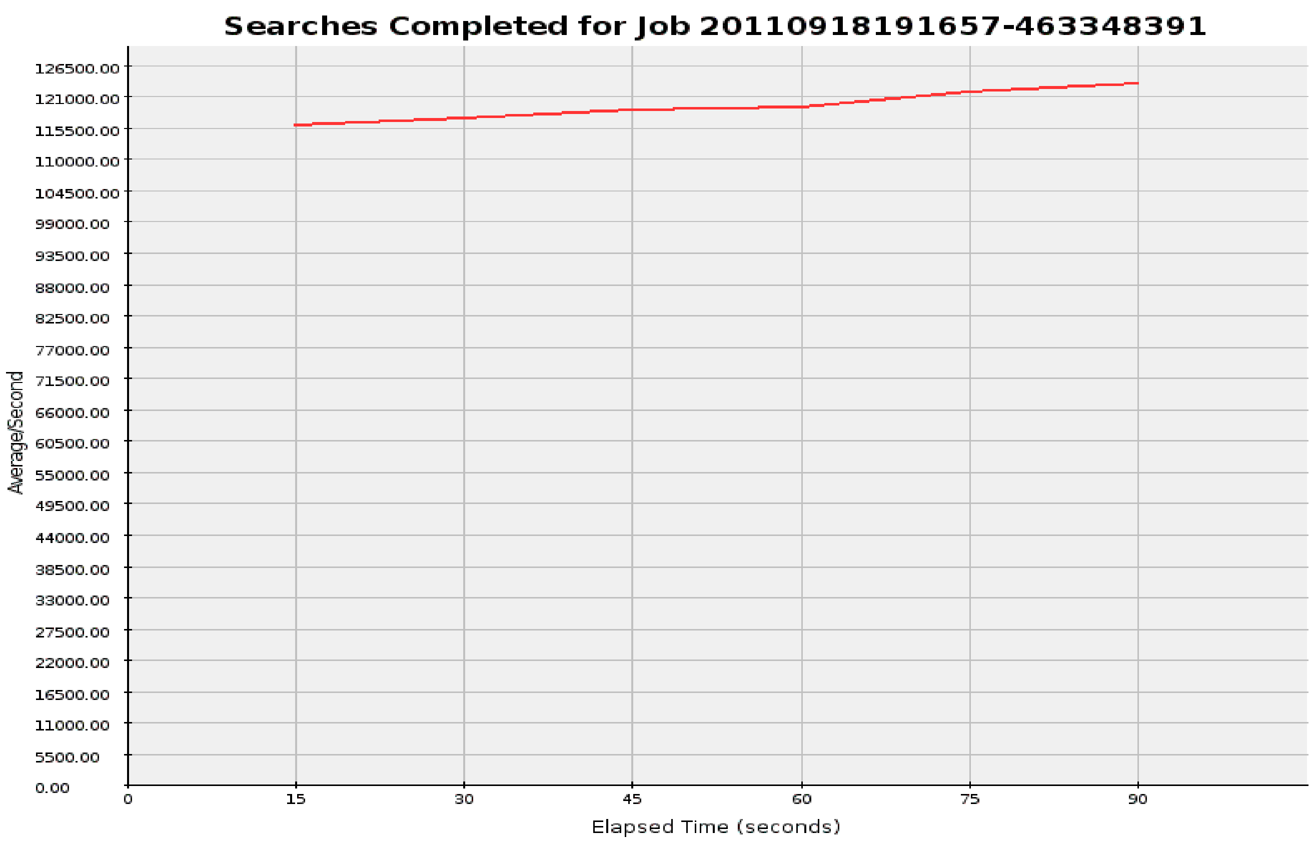

Illustration 1: back-mdb Search Rate results

After seeing these results we considered renaming MDB as "LightningDB" - its read performance is blindingly fast and totally unparalleled.

For write speeds, back-mdb is significantly slower than back-hdb. Table 5 shows the throughput in a pure Modify test, modifying a single attribute in random entries across the 5 million entry database.

	Modifies/sec	Duration, msec
back-hdb	20440.83	1.56
back-mdb	6131.77	1.29

Table 5: SLAMD Modify Rate Results

Note that back-mdb actually completes modifies quickly, but because MDB enforces single-writer behavior, it does not accept as many writes per second. Our final comparison in Table 6 shows a Modify Rate job running concurrently with a Search Rate job.

	Searches/sec	Search msec	Modifies/sec	Modify msec
back-hdb	40629.49	1.47	12321.36	1.62
back-mdb	85918.92	1.77	2844.95	2.80

Table 6: SLAMD Combined Search and Modify Rate

Most of the effort has been focused on read performance so far; future work may be able to boost MDB's write performance but it is not perceived as a critical problem for now.

6. Conclusions

The combination of memory-mapped operation with Multi-Version Concurrency Control proves to be extremely potent for LDAP directories. The administrative overhead is minimal since MDB databases require no periodic cleanup or garbage collection, and no particular tuning is needed. Code size and complexity have been drastically reduced, while read performance has been significantly raised. Write performance has been traded for read performance, but this is acceptable and can be addressed in more depth in the future.

6.1 Portability

While initial development was done on Linux, MDB and back-mdb have been ported to MacOSX and Windows. No special problems are anticipated in porting to other platforms.

6.2 Other Directions

A port of SQLite to use MDB has also been done. The MDB library needed to be extended to support nested transactions, but otherwise needed very little changes. Basic functionality is working already, and the code can be obtained at http://gitorious.org/mdb/sqlightning. There are probably many other applications for a small-footprint database library with relatively low write rates and near-zero read overhead.

6.3 Future Work

A number of items remain on our ToDo list.

- Write optimization has not yet been investigated.
- A bulk-loading API for further speedups in slapadd would be nice.
- It would be nice to allow the database map size and other configuration settings to be grown dynamically instead of statically configured.
- Functions to facilitate incremental and/or full backups would be nice to have.
- A back-mdb that stores entries in the DB in their in-memory format, thus requiring no decoding at all, is still being considered.

None of these items are seen as critical show-stoppers. MDB and back-mdb already meet all the goals set for them and fulfill all of the functions required of an OpenLDAP backend, while setting a new standard for database efficiency, scalability, and performance.

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