CSE373: Data Structures & Algorithms
Lecture 26: Introduction to Multithreading & Fork-Join Parallelism

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Changing a major assumption

So far most or all of your study of computer science has assumed

One thing happened at a time

Called sequential programming – everything part of one sequence

Removing this assumption creates major challenges & opportunities

– Programming: Divide work among threads of execution and coordinate (synchronize) among them
– Algorithms: How can parallel activity provide speed-up (more throughput: work done per unit time)
– Data structures: May need to support concurrent access (multiple threads operating on data at the same time)
A simplified view of history

Writing correct and efficient multithreaded code is often much more difficult than for single-threaded (i.e., sequential) code
- Especially in common languages like Java and C
- So typically stay sequential if possible

From roughly 1980-2005, desktop computers got exponentially faster at running sequential programs
- About twice as fast every couple years

But nobody knows how to continue this
- Increasing clock rate generates too much heat
- Relative cost of memory access is too high
- But we can keep making “wires exponentially smaller” (Moore’s “Law”), so put multiple processors on the same chip (“multicore”)
What to do with multiple processors?

• Next computer you buy will likely have 4 processors (your current one might already)
  – Wait a few years and it will be 8, 16, 32, …
  – The chip companies have decided to do this (not a “law”)

• What can you do with them?
  – Run multiple totally different programs at the same time
    • Already do that? Yes, but with time-slicing
  – Do multiple things at once in one program
    • Our focus – more difficult
    • Requires rethinking everything from asymptotic complexity to how to implement data-structure operations
Parallelism vs. Concurrency

Note: Terms not yet standard but the perspective is essential
- Many programmers confuse these concepts

Parallelism:
- Use extra resources to solve a problem faster

Concurrency:
- Correctly and efficiently manage access to shared resources

There is some connection:
- Common to use *threads* for both
- If parallel computations need access to shared resources, then the concurrency needs to be managed

We will just do a little parallelism, avoiding concurrency issues
An analogy

CS1 idea: A program is like a recipe for a cook
  – One cook who does one thing at a time! (Sequential)

Parallelism:
  – Have lots of potatoes to slice?
  – Hire helpers, hand out potatoes and knives
  – But too many chefs and you spend all your time coordinating

Concurrency:
  – Lots of cooks making different things, but only 4 stove burners
  – Want to allow access to all 4 burners, but not cause spills or incorrect burner settings
Shared memory

The model we will assume is shared memory with explicit threads
- Not the only approach, may not be best, but time for only one

Old story: A running program has
- One program counter (current statement executing)
- One call stack (with each stack frame holding local variables)
- Objects in the heap created by memory allocation (i.e., `new`)
  - (nothing to do with data structure called a heap)
- Static fields - belong to the class and not an instance (or object) of the class. Only one for all instances of a class.

New story:
- A set of threads, each with its own program counter & call stack
  - No access to another thread’s local variables
- Threads can (implicitly) share static fields / objects
  - To communicate, write somewhere another thread reads
Shared memory

Threads each have own unshared call stack and current statement
– (pc for “program counter”)
– local variables are numbers, null, or heap references

Any objects can be shared, but most are not
Our Needs

To write a shared-memory parallel program, need new primitives from a programming language or library

- Ways to create and run multiple things at once
  - Let’s call these things threads

- Ways for threads to share memory
  - Often just have threads with references to the same objects

- Ways for threads to coordinate (a.k.a. synchronize)
  - A way for one thread to wait for another to finish
  - [Other features needed in practice for concurrency]
Java basics

Learn a couple basics built into Java via java.lang.Thread
  – But for style of parallel programming we’ll advocate, do not use these threads; use Java 7’s ForkJoin Framework instead

To get a new thread running:
1. Define a subclass C of java.lang.Thread, overriding run
2. Create an object of class C
3. Call that object’s start method
   • start sets off a new thread, using run as its “main”

What if we instead called the run method of C?
   – This would just be a normal method call, in the current thread

Let’s see how to share memory and coordinate via an example…
Parallelism idea

• Example: Sum elements of a large array
• Idea: Have 4 threads simultaneously sum 1/4 of the array
  – Warning: This is an inferior first approach, but it’s usually good to start with something naïve works

– Create 4 thread objects, each given a portion of the work
  – Call `start()` on each thread object to actually run it in parallel
  – `Wait` for threads to finish using `join()`
  – Add together their 4 answers for the final result
First attempt, part 1

```java
class SumThread extends java.lang.Thread {
    int lo; // arguments
    int hi;
    int[] arr;

    int ans = 0; // result

    SumThread(int[] a, int l, int h) {
        lo=l; hi=h; arr=a;
    }

    public void run() { //override must have this type
        for(int i=lo; i < hi; i++)
            ans += arr[i];
    }
}
```

Because we must override a no-arguments/no-result `run`, we use fields to communicate across threads
First attempt, continued (wrong)

class SumThread extends java.lang.Thread {
    int lo, int hi, int[] arr; // arguments
    int ans = 0; // result
    SumThread(int[] a, int l, int h) { ... }
    public void run(){ ... } // override
}

int sum(int[] arr){ // can be a static method
    int len = arr.length;
    int ans = 0;
    SumThread[] ts = new SumThread[4];
    for(int i=0; i < 4; i++) // do parallel computations
        ts[i] = new SumThread(arr,i*len/4,(i+1)*len/4);
    for(int i=0; i < 4; i++) // combine results
        ans += ts[i].ans;
    return ans;
}
Second attempt (still wrong)

class SumThread extends java.lang.Thread {
    int lo, int hi, int[] arr; // arguments
    int ans = 0; // result
    SumThread(int[] a, int l, int h) { ... }
    public void run(){ ... } // override
}

int sum(int[] arr){ // can be a static method
    int len = arr.length;
    int ans = 0;
    SumThread[] ts = new SumThread[4];
    for(int i=0; i < 4; i++){// do parallel computations
        ts[i] = new SumThread(arr, i*len/4, (i+1)*len/4);
        ts[i].start(); // start not run
    }
    for(int i=0; i < 4; i++) // combine results
        ans += ts[i].ans;
    return ans;
}
Third attempt (correct in spirit)

class SumThread extends java.lang.Thread {
   int lo, int hi, int[] arr; // arguments
   int ans = 0; // result
   SumThread(int[] a, int l, int h) { ... }
   public void run(){ ... } // override
}

int sum(int[] arr){ // can be a static method
   int len = arr.length;
   int ans = 0;
   SumThread[] ts = new SumThread[4];
   for(int i=0; i < 4; i++) { // do parallel computations
      ts[i] = new SumThread(arr, i*len/4, (i+1)*len/4);
      ts[i].start();
   }
   for(int i=0; i < 4; i++) { // combine results
      ts[i].join(); // wait for helper to finish!
      ans += ts[i].ans;
   }
   return ans;
}
Join (not the most descriptive word)

• The Thread class defines various methods you could not implement on your own
  – For example: start, which calls run in a new thread

• The join method is valuable for coordinating this kind of computation
  – Caller blocks until/unless the receiver is done executing (meaning the call to run returns)
  – Else we would have a race condition on ts[i].ans
    (answer would depend on what finishes first)

• This style of parallel programming is called “fork/join”

• Java detail: code has 1 compile error because join may throw java.lang.InterruptedException
  – In basic parallel code, should be fine to catch-and-exit
Shared memory?

- Fork-join programs (thankfully) do not require much focus on sharing memory among threads

- But in languages like Java, there is memory being shared. In our example:
  - `lo`, `hi`, `arr` fields written by “main” thread, read by helper thread
  - `ans` field written by helper thread, read by “main” thread

- When using shared memory, you must avoid race conditions
  - We will stick with `join` to do so
A better approach

Several reasons why this is a poor parallel algorithm

1. Want code to be reusable and efficient across platforms
   – “Forward-portable” as core count grows
   – So at the very least, parameterize by the number of threads

```java
int sum(int[] arr, int numTs) {
    int ans = 0;
    SumThread[] ts = new SumThread[numTs];
    for (int i=0; i < numTs; i++) {
        ts[i] = new SumThread(arr, (i*arr.length)/numTs,
                               ((i+1)*arr.length)/numTs);
        ts[i].start();
    }
    for (int i=0; i < numTs; i++) {
        ts[i].join();
        ans += ts[i].ans;
    }
    return ans;
}
```
A Better Approach

2. Want to use (only) processors “available to you now”
   - Not used by other programs or threads in your program
     • Maybe caller is also using parallelism
     • Available cores can change even while your threads run

```c
// numThreads == numProcessors is bad
// if some are needed for other things
int sum(int[] arr, int numTs)
{
    ...
}
```
A Better Approach

3. Though unlikely for sum, in general subproblems may take significantly different amounts of time

  - Example: Apply method \( f \) to every array element, but maybe \( f \) is much slower for some data items
    - Example: Is a large integer prime?
  
  - If we create 4 threads and all the slow data is processed by 1 of them, we won’t get nearly a 4x speedup
    - Example of a load imbalance
A Better Approach

The counterintuitive (?) solution to all these problems is to use lots of threads, far more than the number of processors

- But this will require changing our algorithm
- [And using a different Java library]

1. Forward-portable: Lots of helpers each doing a small piece
2. Processors available: Hand out “work chunks” as you go
3. Load imbalance: No problem if slow thread scheduled early enough
   - Variation probably small anyway if pieces of work are small
Naïve algorithm is poor

Suppose we create 1 thread to process every 1000 elements

```java
int sum(int[] arr){
  ...
  int numThreads = arr.length / 1000;
  SumThread[] ts = new SumThread[numThreads];
  ...
}
```

Then combining results will have \( \text{arr.length} / 1000 \) additions

- Linear in size of array (with constant factor 1/1000)
- Previously we had only 4 pieces (constant in size of array)

In the extreme, if we create 1 thread for every 1 element, the loop to combine results has length-of-array iterations

- Just like the original sequential algorithm
A better idea

This is straightforward to implement using divide-and-conquer
  – Parallelism for the recursive calls
Divide-and-conquer to the rescue!

class SumThread extends java.lang.Thread {
    int lo; int hi; int[] arr; // arguments
    int ans = 0; // result
    SumThread(int[] a, int l, int h) { ... }
    public void run(){ // override
        if(hi - lo < SEQUENTIAL_CUTOFF)
            for(int i=lo; i < hi; i++)
                ans += arr[i];
        else {
            SumThread left = new SumThread(arr,lo,(hi+lo)/2);
            SumThread right = new SumThread(arr,(hi+lo)/2,hi);
            left.start();
            right.start();
            left.join(); // don’t move this up a line – why?
            right.join();
            ans = left.ans + right.ans;
        }
    }
}

int sum(int[] arr){
    SumThread t = new SumThread(arr,0,arr.length);
    t.run();
    return t.ans;
}
Divide-and-conquer really works

- The key is divide-and-conquer parallelizes the result-combining
  - *If* you have enough processors, total time is height of the tree: $O(\log n)$ (optimal, exponentially faster than sequential $O(n)$)
**Being realistic**

- In theory, you can divide down to single elements, do all your result-combining in parallel and get optimal speedup
  - Total time $O(n/\text{numProcessors} + \log n)$

- In practice, creating all those threads and communicating swamps the savings, so:
  - Use a *sequential cutoff*, typically around 500-1000
    - Eliminates *almost all* the recursive thread creation (bottom levels of tree)
    - *Exactly* like quicksort switching to insertion sort for small subproblems, but more important here
  - Do not create two recursive threads; create one and do the other “yourself”
    - Cuts the number of threads created by another 2x
Being realistic, part 2

• Even with all this care, Java’s threads are too “heavyweight”
  – Constant factors, especially space overhead
  – Creating 20,000 Java threads is just a bad idea 😞

• The ForkJoin Framework is designed to meet the needs of divide-and-conquer fork-join parallelism
  – In the Java 7 standard libraries
  – Library’s implementation is a fascinating but advanced topic
    • Next lecture will discuss its guarantees, not how it does it
  – Names of methods and how to use them slightly different