Experience with Processes and Monitors in Mesa

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Focus of this paper: light-weight processes (threads) and how they synchronize with each other

History:
- Xerox Alto: first personal computer
- Pilot is the OS for its successor (Xerox Star)
- Single user system
- Safety was to come from language
Background

• Large system, many programmers, many applications
  • Module-based programming with information hiding

• They were starting “from scratch”
  • They could integrate the hardware, the runtime software, and the language with each other
Discuss:

• what you liked about the paper?
• what you disliked?
• what did not make sense or what was not clear?
Programming model

- Two choices for programming concurrency:
  - Shared memory
  - Message passing
- Needham & Lauer claimed the two models are duals
  - message vs. process
  - process vs. monitor
  - send/reply vs. call/return
- They both have their strengths/weaknesses
Synchronizing Processes

• Goal: mutual exclusion

• An option: non-preemptive scheduler
  • Process owns the processor till it yields
  • What are the downsides of using a non-preemptive scheduler?

• Another option: simple locking (e.g., semaphores)
  • Considered lower level than monitors
Mesa Language Constructs

- Light weight processes
- Monitors
- Condition variables
Light weight Processes

• Easy forking and synchronization
• Shared address space
• Fast performance for creation, switching, and synchronization
  • Low storage overheads
• Mesa is a single user system; what would change if it were to be used in a multi-user system?
• Dangling process references similar to those of pointers
  • How can you prevent these dangling references?
Monitors

- Monitor lock for synchronization
  - Tied to module structure of the language; makes it clear what is being monitored
  - Language automatically acquires and releases the lock
- Tied to a particular invariant, which helps users think about the program
Modules and Monitors

- Three types of procedures in a monitor module:
  - entry (acquires and releases lock)
  - internal (no locking done): can’t be called from outside the module
  - external (no locking done): externally callable

- Allows grouping of related things into a module
- Allows doing some of the work outside the monitor lock
- Allows controlled release and reacquisition of monitor lock
Condition Variables

- Notify semantics options:
  - Cede lock to waking process
  - Notifier keeps lock, waking process gets put in front of monitor queue
  - Notifier keeps lock, wakes process with no guarantees

- What are the strengths/weaknesses of the different options?
Notification in Mesa

- It is a “hint”. Notifying process keeps the lock/control
- Other related aspects of notify:
  - Timeouts
  - Broadcasts: why is this useful?
  - Aborts:
    - Request to abort; allows the target process to reach a wait or monitor exit and then it voluntarily aborts
    - No need to re-establish the invariant, as compared to just killing the process outright
Deadlocks

- Typical deadlock scenarios:
  - Recursion on the same module
  - Enter multiple monitors in different orders
    - Process 1 obtains monitor A followed by B; Process 2 obtains monitor B followed by A
  - Enter multiple monitors in the same order, but wait inside the second monitor does not release the lock of the first monitor

- General problem with modular systems and synchronization
  - Synchronization requires global knowledge about locks, which violates the information hiding paradigm
Other Issues

• Lock granularity
  • introduced monitored records so that the same monitor code could handle multiple instances of something in parallel

• Interrupts: interrupt handler can’t block waiting
  • Introduced naked notifies: notifies done without holding the monitor lock
  • What is the problem with naked notifies?
  • How can this be addressed?
Priority, locks, scheduling

• There are subtle interactions between priorities and scheduling and holding locks

• Mars Pathfinder:
  • Success story for the first few days
  • Landed with fancy airbags, released a “rover”
    • shot some spectacular photos of the Mars landscape
  • Few days later, system started resetting itself periodically
Priority Inversion

- "Information bus" is a shared memory region shared across the following processes:
  - Bus manager (high priority process)
  - Meteorological data gatherer (low priority)
  - Reset if Bus Manager hasn’t run for a while
  - Protected by a lock
  - If Bus Manager is scheduled by context-switching out the data gatherer, it will sleep for a bit, let the data gatherer run, which will release the lock in a short while
Priority Inversion

- Another thread: communications task
  - Medium priority, long running task
  - Sometimes the communications task would get scheduled instead of the data gatherer
  - Neither the lower priority data gatherer nor the higher priority bus manager would run

- Works in pairs, but not all three together. Resulted in periodic resets
- How do we fix this problem?
Other Issues

- Exceptions
  - Must restore monitor invariant as you unwind the stack
  - The idea that you just kill a process and release the locks is naive
  - Entry procedures that have an exception, but no exception handler do not release the monitor lock
  - This ensures deadlock and a trip into the debugger, but at least it maintains the invariant
Performance

• Context switch is very fast
  • Two procedure calls
  • But ran only on uniprocessor systems
    • Concurrency mostly used for clean structuring purposes
• Procedure calls: 30 instructions
  • a bit high
• Process creation is about 1100 instructions
  • Good enough; “fast fork” implemented later keeps around a pool of available processes
Key Features of the Paper

• Describes the experiences designers had with designing, building, and using a large system that relies on lightweight processes

• Describes various subtle issues of implementing monitors

• Discusses the performance and overheads of various primitives
Discussion

- What about distributed memory systems or clusters? What is a good programming model for concurrency in such systems?

- What other issues come up for multi-core systems? Is the Mesa model appropriate for multi-cores?

- What are the key differences between Mesa and its modern counterparts?