Synchronization

Coherency protocols guarantee that a reading processor (thread) sees the most current update to shared data.

Coherency protocols do not:

- make sure that only one thread accesses shared data or a shared hardware or software resource at a time
  - **Critical sections** order thread access to shared data

- force threads to start executing particular sections of code together
  - **Barriers** force threads to start executing particular sections of code together
Critical Sections

A critical section

- a sequence of code that only one thread can execute at a time
- provides mutual exclusion
  - a thread has exclusive access to the code & the data that it accesses
  - guarantees that only one thread can update the data at a time
- to execute a critical section, a thread
  - acquires a lock that guards it
  - executes its code
  - releases the lock

The effect is to synchronize/order the access of threads wrt their accessing shared data
Barriers

Barrier synchronization

• a **barrier**: point in a program which all threads must reach before any thread can cross
  • threads reach the barrier & then wait until all other threads arrive
  • all threads are released at once & begin executing code beyond the barrier
• example implementation of a barrier:
  • set a lock-protected counter to # processors
  • each thread (assuming 1/processor) decrements it
  • when the lock value becomes 0, all threads cross the barrier
• code that implements a barrier is a critical section
• useful for:
  • programs that execute in phases
  • synchronizing after a parallel loop
**Locking**

Locking facilitates access to a critical section.

Locking protocol:

- **synchronization variable or lock**
  - 0: lock is available
  - 1: lock is unavailable because another thread holds it
- a thread obtains the lock before it can enter a critical section
  - sets the lock to 1
- thread releases the lock before it leaves the critical section
  - clears the lock
Acquiring a Lock

Atomic exchange instruction: swap a value in a register & a value in memory in one operation
• set the register to 1
• swap the register value & the lock value in memory
• new register value determines whether got the lock

AcquireLock:
```assembly
li R3, #1 /* create lock value
swap R3, 0(R4) /* exchange register & lock
bnez R3, AcquireLock /* have to try again */
```
• also known as atomic read-modify-write a location in memory

Other examples
• test & set: tests the value in a memory location & sets it to 1
• fetch & increment: returns the value of a memory location & increments it
Releasing a Lock

Store a 0 in the lock
Load-linked & Store Conditional

Performance problem with atomic read-modify-write:
- 2 memory operations in one
- must hold the bus until both operations complete

Pair of instructions appears atomic
- avoids need for uninterruptible memory read & write
- **load-locked & store-conditional**
  - load-locked returns the original (lock) value in memory
  - if the contents of lock memory has not changed when the store-conditional is executed, the processor still has the lock
  - store-conditional returns a 1 if successful

GetLk:

```
li    R3, #1         /* create lock value
li    R2, 0(R1)     /* read lock variable
...  
sc    R3, 0(R1)     /* try to lock it
beqz  R3, GetLk    /* cleared if sc failed
...  (critical section)
```
Load-linked & Store Conditional

Implemented with special lock-flag & lock-address registers

- load-locked sets lock-address register to memory address & lock-flag register to 1
- store-conditional updates memory if lock-flag register is still set & returns lock-flag register value to store register
- lock-flag register cleared when the address is written by another processor
- lock-flag register cleared if context switch or interrupt
Synchronization APIs

User-level software synchronization library routines constructed with atomic hardware primitives

- **spin locks**
  - **busywaiting** until obtain the lock
    - repeated stores in an atomic exchange cause invalidations (for the write) & coherency misses (for the read)
    - separate reading the lock & testing it
    - spinning done in the cache rather than over the bus

```assembly
getLk:     li     R2, #1
spinLoop:  ll     R1, lockVariable
blbs      R1, spinLoop
sc        R2, lockVariable
beqz      R2, getLk
.... (critical section)
st        R0, lockVariable
```

- **blocking locks**
  - block the thread after a certain number of spins
Synchronization Performance

An example overall synchronization/coherence strategy:

- design cache coherency protocol for little interprocessor contention for locks (the common case)
- add techniques to avoid performance loss if there is contention for a lock & still provide low latency if no contention

Have a race condition for acquiring a lock when it is unlocked

- $O(n^2)$ bus transactions for $n$ contending processors (write-invalidate)
- **exponential back-off** - software solution
  - each processor retries at a different time
  - successive retries done an exponentially increasing time later
- **queuing locks** - hardware solution
  - lock is passed from unlocking processor to waiting processor
  - also addresses fairness
Atomic Exchange in Practice

Alpha
  • load-linked, store-conditional

UltraSPARC (V9 architecture)
  • several primitives
    compare & swap, test & set, etc.

Pentium Pro
  • compare & swap