CSE 451: Operating Systems
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Module 7
Synchronization

Gary Kimura
Temporal relations

- Instructions executed by a single thread are totally ordered
  - $A < B < C < \ldots$
- Absent synchronization, instructions executed by distinct threads must be considered unordered / simultaneous
  - Not $X < X'$, and not $X' < X$
Example

Example: In the beginning...

main()

A

pthread_create()

B

foo()

A'

• A < B < C
• A' < B'
• A < A'
• C == A'
• C == B'

Y-axis is “time.”

Could be one CPU, could be multiple CPUs (cores).
Critical Sections / Mutual Exclusion

- Sequences of instructions that may get incorrect results if executed simultaneously are called **critical sections**
- (We also use the term **race condition** to refer to a situation in which the results depend on timing)
- **Mutual exclusion** means “not simultaneous”
  - $A < B$ or $B < A$
  - We don’t care which
- Forcing mutual exclusion between two critical section executions is sufficient to ensure correct execution – guarantees ordering
- One way to guarantee mutually exclusive execution is using **locks**
Critical sections

\[ \rightarrow \text{ is the "happens-before" relation} \]

Possibly incorrect  
Correct  
Correct
When do critical sections arise?

• One common pattern:
  – read-modify-write of
  – a shared value (variable)
  – in code that can be executed concurrently
    (Note: There may be only one copy of the code (e.g., a
     procedure), but it can be executed by more than one thread
     at a time)

• Shared variable:
  – Globals and heap-allocated variables
  – NOT local variables (which are on the stack)
    (Note: Never give a reference to a stack-allocated (local)
     variable to another thread, unless you’re superhumanly
     careful …)
Example: buffer management

- Threads cooperate in multithreaded programs
  - to share resources, access shared data structures
    - e.g., threads accessing a memory cache in a web server
  - also, to coordinate their execution
    - e.g., a disk reader thread hands off blocks to a network writer thread through a circular buffer
Example: shared bank account

• Suppose we have to implement a function to withdraw money from a bank account:

```c
int withdraw(account, amount) {
    int balance = get_balance(account);    // read
    balance -= amount;                     // modify
    put_balance(account, balance);         // write
    spit out cash;
}
```

• Now suppose that you and your partner share a bank account with a balance of $100.00
  – what happens if you both go to separate ATM machines, and simultaneously withdraw $10.00 from the account?
• Assume the bank’s application is multi-threaded
• A random thread is assigned a transaction when that transaction is submitted

```c
int withdraw(account, amount) {
    int balance = get_balance(account);
    balance -= amount;
    put_balance(account, balance);
    spit out cash;
}
```
Interleaved schedules

- The problem is that the execution of the two threads can be interleaved, assuming preemptive scheduling:

```
balance = get_balance(account);
balance -= amount;
```

```
balance = get_balance(account);
balance -= amount;
put_balance(account, balance);
spit out cash;
```

```
put_balance(account, balance);
spit out cash;
```

- What’s the account balance after this sequence?
  - who’s happy, the bank or you?

- How often is this sequence likely to occur?
Other Execution Orders

• Which interleavings are ok? Which are not?

```c
int withdraw(account, amount) {
    int balance = get_balance(account);
    balance -= amount;
    put_balance(account, balance);
    spit out cash;
}
```
int xfer(from, to, amt) {
    withdraw(from, amt);
    deposit(to, amt);
}

int xfer(from, to, amt) {
    withdraw(from, amt);
    deposit(to, amt);
}

• Morals:
  – Interleavings are hard to reason about
    • We make lots of mistakes
    • Control-flow analysis is hard for tools to get right
  – Identifying critical sections and ensuring mutually exclusive access is … “easier”
Another example

```plaintext
i++; 
```

```plaintext
i++; 
```
Correct critical section requirements

Correct critical sections have the following requirements

- **mutual exclusion**
  - at most one thread is in the critical section

- **progress**
  - if thread T is outside the critical section, then T cannot prevent thread S from entering the critical section

- **bounded waiting (no starvation)**
  - if thread T is waiting on the critical section, then T will eventually enter the critical section
    - assumes threads eventually leave critical sections

- **performance**
  - the overhead of entering and exiting the critical section is small with respect to the work being done within it
Mechanisms for building critical sections

• Spinlocks
  – primitive, minimal semantics; used to build others

• Semaphores (and non-spinning locks)
  – basic, easy to get the hang of, somewhat hard to program with

• Monitors
  – higher level, requires language support, implicit operations
  – easier to program with; Java “synchronized()” as an example

• Messages
  – simple model of communication and synchronization based on (atomic) transfer of data across a channel
  – direct application to distributed systems
Locks

• A lock is a memory object with two operations:
  – `acquire()` : obtain the right to enter the critical section
  – `release()` : give up the right to be in the critical section

• `acquire()` prevents progress of the thread until the lock can be acquired

• (Note: terminology varies: acquire/release, lock/unlock)
Locks: Example

lock()
lock()
unlock()
unlock()
Acquire/Release

• Threads pair up calls to `acquire()` and `release()`
  – between `acquire()` and `release()`, the thread holds the lock
  – `acquire()` does not return until the caller “owns” (holds) the lock
    • at most one thread can hold a lock at a time
  – What happens if the calls aren’t paired (I acquire, but neglect to release)?
  – What happens if the two threads acquire different locks (I think that access to a particular shared data structure is mediated by lock A, and you think it’s mediated by lock B)?
    • (granularity of locking)
Using locks

```c
int withdraw(account, amount) {
    acquire(lock);
    balance = get_balance(account);
    balance -= amount;
    put_balance(account, balance);
    release(lock);
    spit out cash;
}
```

- What happens when green tries to acquire the lock?
Roadmap …

• Where we are eventually going:
  – The OS and/or the user-level thread package will provide some sort of efficient primitive for user programs to utilize in achieving mutual exclusion (for example, *locks* or *semaphores*, used with *condition variables*)
  – There may be higher-level constructs provided by a programming language to help you get it right (for example, *monitors* – which also utilize condition variables)

• But somewhere, underneath it all, there needs to be a way to achieve “hardware” mutual exclusion (for example, *test-and-set* used to implement *spinlocks*)
  – This mechanism will not be utilized by user programs
  – But it will be utilized in implementing what user programs see
Spinlocks

• How do we implement spinlocks? Here’s one attempt:

```c
struct lock_t {
    int held = 0;
};

void acquire(lock) {
    while (lock->held);
    lock->held = 1;
}

void release(lock) {
    lock->held = 0;
}
```

• Why doesn’t this work?
  – where is the race condition?

  the caller “busy-waits”, or spins, for lock to be released ⇒ hence spinlock
Implementing spinlocks (cont.)

• Problem is that implementation of spinlocks has critical sections, too!
  – the acquire/release must be atomic
    • atomic == executes as though it could not be interrupted
    • code that executes “all or nothing”

• Need help from the hardware
  – atomic instructions
    • test-and-set, compare-and-swap, …
  – disable/reenable interrupts
    • to prevent context switches
Spinlocks redux: Hardware Test-and-Set

• CPU provides the following as one atomic instruction:

```c
bool test_and_set(bool *flag) {
    bool old = *flag;
    *flag = True;
    return old;
}
```

• Remember, this is a single **atomic** instruction …
Implementing spinlocks using Test-and-Set

- So, to fix our broken spinlocks:

```c
struct lock {
    int held = 0;
}
void acquire(lock) {
    while(test_and_set(&lock->held));
}
void release(lock) {
    lock->held = 0;
}
```

- **mutual exclusion?** (at most one thread in the critical section)
- **progress?** (T outside cannot prevent S from entering)
- **bounded waiting?** (waiting T will eventually enter)
- **performance?** (low overhead (modulo the spinning part …))
• How does a thread blocked on an “acquire” (that is, stuck in a test-and-set loop) yield the CPU?
  – calls yield() (spin-then-block)
  – there’s an involuntary context switch (e.g., timer interrupt)
Problems with spinlocks

• Spinlocks work, but are wasteful!
  – if a thread is spinning on a lock, the thread holding the lock cannot make progress
    • You’ll spin for a scheduling quantum
      – (pthread_spin_t)

• Only want spinlocks as primitives to build higher-level synchronization constructs
  – Why is this okay?

• We’ll see later how to build blocking locks
  – But there is overhead – can be cheaper to spin
    – (pthread_mutex_t)
Another approach: Disabling interrupts

```c
struct lock {
}

void acquire(lock) {
    cli();  // disable interrupts
}

void release(lock) {
    sti();  // reenable interrupts
}
```
Problems with disabling interrupts

• Only available to the kernel
  – Can’t allow user-level to disable interrupts!
• Insufficient on a multiprocessor
  – Each processor has its own interrupt mechanism
• “Long” periods with interrupts disabled can wreak havoc with devices

• Just as with spinlocks, you only want to use disabling of interrupts to build higher-level synchronization constructs
Race conditions

• Informally, we say a program has a race condition (aka “data race”) if the result of an executing depends on timing
  – i.e., is non-deterministic

• Typical symptoms
  – I run it on the same data, and sometimes it prints 0 and sometimes it prints 4
  – I run it on the same data, and sometimes it prints 0 and sometimes it crashes
Summary

• Synchronization introduces temporal ordering
• Adding synchronization can eliminate races
• Synchronization can be provided by locks, semaphores, monitors, messages …
• Spinlocks are the lowest-level mechanism
  – primitive in terms of semantics – error-prone
  – implemented by spin-waiting (crude) or by disabling interrupts (also crude, and can only be done in the kernel)
• In our next exciting episode …
  – semaphores are a slightly higher level abstraction
    • Importantly, they are implemented by blocking, not spinning
    • Locks can also be implemented in this way
  – monitors are significantly higher level
    • utilize programming language support to reduce errors