A Sophomoric Introduction to Shared-Memory Parallelism and Concurrency

Lecture 4
Shared-Memory Concurrency & Mutual Exclusion

Dan Grossman

Last Updated: January 2016
For more information, see http://www.cs.washington.edu/homes/djg/teachingMaterials/
Toward sharing resources (memory)

Have been studying parallel algorithms using fork-join
– Lower span via parallel tasks

Algorithms all had a very simple structure to avoid race conditions
– Each thread had memory “only it accessed”
  • Example: array sub-range
– On fork, “loan” some memory to “forkee” and do not access that memory again until after join on the “forkee”

Strategy won’t work well when:
– Memory accessed by threads is overlapping or unpredictable
– Threads are doing independent tasks needing access to same resources (rather than implementing the same algorithm)
Concurrent Programming

Concurrency: Correctly and efficiently managing access to shared resources from multiple possibly-simultaneous clients

Requires coordination, particularly synchronization to avoid incorrect simultaneous access: make somebody block

- join is not what we want
- Want to block until another thread is “done using what we need” not “completely done executing”

Even correct concurrent applications are usually highly non-deterministic: how threads are scheduled affects what operations from other threads they see when

- non-repeatability complicates testing and debugging
Examples

Multiple threads:

1. Processing different bank-account operations
   – What if 2 threads change the same account at the same time?

2. Using a shared cache of recent files (e.g., hashtable)
   – What if 2 threads insert the same file at the same time?

3. Creating a pipeline (think assembly line) with a queue for handing work to next thread in sequence?
   – What if enqueuer and dequeuer adjust a circular array queue at the same time?
Why threads?

Unlike parallelism, not about implementing algorithms faster

But threads still useful for:

• *Code structure for responsiveness*
  – Example: Respond to GUI events in one thread while another thread is performing an expensive computation

• *Processor utilization (mask I/O latency)*
  – If 1 thread “goes to disk,” have something else to do

• *Failure isolation*
  – Convenient structure if want to *interleave* multiple tasks and do not want an exception in one to stop the other
Sharing, again

It is common in concurrent programs that:

• Different threads might access the same resources in an unpredictable order or even at about the same time

• Program correctness requires that simultaneous access be prevented using synchronization

• Simultaneous access is rare
  – Makes testing difficult
  – Must be much more disciplined when designing / implementing a concurrent program
  – Will discuss common idioms known to work
Canonical example

Correct code in a single-threaded world

```java
class BankAccount {
    private int balance = 0;
    int getBalance() { return balance; }
    void setBalance(int x) { balance = x; }
    void withdraw(int amount) {
        int b = getBalance();
        if (amount > b)
            throw new WithdrawTooLargeException();
        setBalance(b - amount);
    }
    ...
    // other operations like deposit, etc.
}
```
Interleaving

Suppose:

- Thread $T_1$ calls $x\.withdraw(100)$
- Thread $T_2$ calls $y\.withdraw(100)$

If second call starts before first finishes, we say the calls interleave

- Could happen even with one processor since a thread can be pre-empted at any point for time-slicing

If $x$ and $y$ refer to different accounts, no problem

- "You cook in your kitchen while I cook in mine"
- But if $x$ and $y$ alias, possible trouble…
A bad interleaving

Interleaved `withdraw(100)` calls on the same account

– Assume initial `balance == 150`

Thread 1

```java
int b = getBalance();
if (amount > b)
    throw new ...;
setBalance(b - amount);
```

Thread 2

```java
int b = getBalance();
if (amount > b)
    throw new ...;
setBalance(b - amount);
```

“Lost withdraw” – unhappy bank
Incorrect “fix”

It is tempting and almost always wrong to fix a bad interleaving by rearranging or repeating operations, such as:

```java
void withdraw(int amount) {
    if(amount > getBalance())
        throw new WithdrawTooLargeException();
    // maybe balance changed
    setBalance(getBalance() – amount);
}
```

This fixes nothing!

- Narrows the problem by one statement
- (Not even that since the compiler could turn it back into the old version because you didn’t indicate need to synchronize)
- And now a negative balance is possible – why?
Mutual exclusion

Sane fix: Allow at most one thread to withdraw from account $A$ at a time
  – Exclude other simultaneous operations on $A$ too (e.g., deposit)

Called mutual exclusion: One thread using a resource (here: an account) means another thread must wait
  – a.k.a. critical sections, which technically have other requirements

Programmer must implement critical sections
  – “The compiler” has no idea what interleavings should or should not be allowed in your program
  – Buy you need language primitives to do it!
Wrong!

Why can’t we implement our own mutual-exclusion protocol?

- It’s technically possible under certain assumptions, but won’t work in real languages anyway

```java
class BankAccount {
    private int balance = 0;
    private boolean busy = false;
    void withdraw(int amount) {
        while(busy) { /* “spin-wait” */ }
        busy = true;
        int b = getBalance();
        if(amount > b)
            throw new WithdrawTooLargeException();
        setBalance(b - amount);
        busy = false;
    }
    // deposit would spin on same boolean
}
```
Just moved the problem!

Thread 1

```java
while (busy) { } 
busy = true;
int b = getBalance();
if (amount > b)
    throw new ...;
setBalance(b - amount);
```

Thread 2

```java
while (busy) { } 
busy = true;
int b = getBalance();
if (amount > b)
    throw new ...;
setBalance(b - amount);
```

“Lost withdraw” – unhappy bank
What we need

• There are many ways out of this conundrum, but we need help from the language

• One basic solution: **Locks**
  – Not Java yet, though Java’s approach is similar and slightly more convenient

• An ADT with operations:
  – **new**: make a new lock, initially “not held”
  – **acquire**: blocks if this lock is already currently “held”
    • Once “not held”, makes lock “held” [all at once!]
  – **release**: makes this lock “not held”
    • If >= 1 threads are blocked on it, exactly 1 will acquire it
Why that works

• An ADT with operations new, acquire, release

• The lock implementation ensures that given simultaneous acquires and/or releases, a correct thing will happen
  – Example: Two acquires: one will “win” and one will block

• How can this be implemented?
  – Need to “check if held and if not make held” “all-at-once”
  – Uses special hardware and O/S support
    • See computer-architecture or operating-systems course
  – Here, we take this as a primitive and use it
class BankAccount {
    private int balance = 0;
    private Lock lk = new Lock();
    ...
    void withdraw(int amount) {
        lk.acquire(); // may block
        int b = getBalance();
        if (amount > b)
            throw new WithdrawTooLargeException();
        setBalance(b - amount);
        lk.release();
    }
    // deposit would also acquire/release lk
}
Some mistakes

• A lock is a very primitive mechanism
  – Still up to you to use correctly to implement critical sections

• Incorrect: Use different locks for withdraw and deposit
  – Mutual exclusion works only when using same lock
  – balance field is the shared resource being protected

• Poor performance: Use same lock for every bank account
  – No simultaneous operations on different accounts

• Incorrect: Forget to release a lock (blocks other threads forever!)
  – Previous slide is wrong because of the exception possibility!

```java
if (amount > b) {
    lk.release(); // hard to remember!
    throw new WithdrawTooLargeException();
}
```
Other operations

- If `withdraw` and `deposit` use the same lock, then simultaneous calls to these methods are properly synchronized.

- But what about `getBalance` and `setBalance`?
  - Assume they are `public`, which may be reasonable.

- If they do not acquire the same lock, then a race between `setBalance` and `withdraw` could produce a wrong result.

- If they do acquire the same lock, then `withdraw` would block forever because it tries to acquire a lock it already has.
Re-acquiring locks?

int setBalance1(int x) {
    balance = x;
}
int setBalance2(int x) {
    lk.acquire();
    balance = x;
    lk.release();
}
void withdraw(int amount) {
    lk.acquire();
    ...
    setBalance1(b - amount);
    lk.release();
}

• Can’t let outside world call setBalance1
• Can’t have withdraw call setBalance2
• Alternately, we can modify the meaning of the Lock ADT to support re-entrant locks
  – Java does this
  – Then just use setBalance2
Re-entrant lock

A re-entrant lock (a.k.a. recursive lock)

- “Remembers”
  - the thread (if any) that currently holds it
  - a count

- When the lock goes from not-held to held, the count is set to 0

- If (code running in) the current holder calls acquire:
  - it does not block
  - it increments the count

- On release:
  - if the count is > 0, the count is decremented
  - if the count is 0, the lock becomes not-held
Re-entrant locks work

This simple code works fine provided `lk` is a reentrant lock:

- Okay to call `setBalance` directly
- Okay to call `withdraw` (won’t block forever)

```c
int setBalance(int x) {
    lk.acquire();
    balance = x;
    lk.release();
}

void withdraw(int amount) {
    lk.acquire();
    ...
    setBalance(b - amount);
    lk.release();
}
```
Now some Java

Java has built-in support for re-entrant locks

- Several differences from our pseudocode
- Focus on the `synchronized` statement

```java
synchronized (expression) {
    statements
}
```

1. Evaluates `expression` to an object
   - Every object (but not primitive types) “is a lock” in Java
2. Acquires the lock, blocking if necessary
   - “If you get past the {}, you have the lock”
3. Releases the lock “at the matching ”
   - Even if control leaves due to `throw`, `return`, etc.
   - So `impossible` to forget to release the lock
Java version #1 (correct but non-idiomatic)

class BankAccount {
    private int balance = 0;
    private Object lk = new Object();
    int getBalance() {
        synchronized (lk) {
            return balance;
        }
    }
    void setBalance(int x) {
        synchronized (lk) {
            balance = x;
        }
    }
    void withdraw(int amount) {
        synchronized (lk) {
            int b = getBalance();
            if (amount > b) {
                throw ...
            }
            setBalance(b - amount);
        }
    }
    // deposit would also use synchronized(lk)
}
Improving the Java

• As written, the lock is private
  – Might seem like a good idea
  – But also prevents code in other classes from writing
    operations that synchronize with the account operations

• More idiomatic is to synchronize on this...
  – Also more convenient: no need to have an extra object
class BankAccount {
    private int balance = 0;
    int getBalance() {
        synchronized (this) {
            return balance;
        }
    }
    void setBalance(int x) {
        synchronized (this) {
            balance = x;
        }
    }
    void withdraw(int amount) {
        synchronized (this) {
            int b = getBalance();
            if (amount > b)
                throw ...
            setBalance(b - amount);
        }
    }
    // deposit would also use synchronized(this)
}
Syntactic sugar

Version #2 is slightly poor style because there is a shorter way to say the same thing:

Putting `synchronized` before a method declaration means the entire method body is surrounded by

```
synchronized(this){…}
```

Therefore, version #3 (next slide) means exactly the same thing as version #2 but is more concise
Java version #3 (final version)

class BankAccount {
    private int balance = 0;
    synchronized int getBalance() {
        return balance;
    }
    synchronized void setBalance(int x) {
        balance = x;
    }
    synchronized void withdraw(int amount) {
        int b = getBalance();
        if(amount > b) throw ...
        setBalance(b - amount);
    }
    // deposit would also use synchronized
}
More Java notes

• Class `java.util.concurrent.locks.ReentrantLock` works much more like our pseudocode
  – Often use `try { ... } finally { ... }` to avoid forgetting to release the lock if there’s an exception

• Also library and/or language support for readers/writer locks and condition variables (future lecture)

• Java provides many other features and details. See, for example:
  – Chapter 14 of CoreJava, Volume 1 by Horstmann/Cornell
  – Java Concurrency in Practice by Goetz et al