CSE 451: Operating Systems
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Module 6
Synchronization

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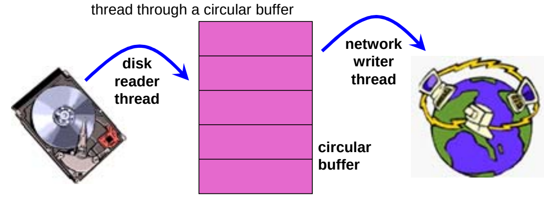
Synchronization

- 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



- For correctness, we have to control this cooperation
  – must assume threads interleave executions arbitrarily and at different rates
    - scheduling is not under application writers' control
- We control cooperation using synchronization
  – enables us to restrict the interleaving of executions
- Note: this also applies to processes, not just threads
  – (I'll almost never say "process" again!)

  It also applies across machines in a distributed system

Shared resources

- We'll focus on coordinating access to shared resources
  – basic problem:
    - two concurrent threads are accessing a shared variable
    - if the variable is read/modified/written by both threads, then access to the variable must be controlled
    - otherwise, unexpected results may occur
- Over the next several lectures, we'll look at:
  – mechanisms to control access to shared resources
    - low level mechanisms like locks
    - higher level mechanisms like mutexes, semaphores, monitors, and condition variables
  – patterns for coordinating access to shared resources
    - bounded buffer, producer-consumer, …

The classic example

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

```
int withdraw(account, amount) {
  balance = get_balance(account);
  balance -= amount;
  put_balance(account, balance);
  return balance;
}
```

- Now suppose that you and your S.O. 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?

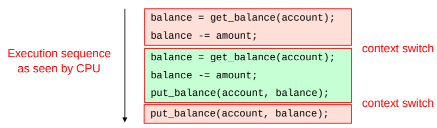
- Represent the situation by creating a separate thread for each person to do the withdrawals
  – have both threads run on the same bank mainframe:

```
int withdraw(account, amount) {
  balance = get_balance(account);
  balance -= amount;
  put_balance(account, balance);
  return balance;
}
```

```
int withdraw(account, amount) {
  balance = get_balance(account);
  balance -= amount;
  put_balance(account, balance);
  return balance;
}
```

Interleaved schedules

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



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

The crux of the matter

- The problem is that two concurrent threads (or processes) access a shared resource (account) without any synchronization
  - creates a **race condition**
    - output is non-deterministic, depends on timing
- We need mechanisms for controlling access to shared resources in the face of concurrency
  - so we can reason about the operation of programs
    - essentially, re-introducing determinism
- Synchronization is necessary for any shared data structure
  - buffers, queues, lists, hash tables, …

Which resources are shared?

- Local variables are *not* shared
  - refer to data on the stack, each thread has its own stack
  - *never* pass/share/store a pointer to a local variable on another thread's stack
- Global variables are shared
  - stored in the static data segment, accessible by any thread
- Dynamic objects are shared
  - stored in the heap, shared if you can name it
    - in C, can conjure up the pointer
      - e.g., void *x = (void *) 0xDEADBEEF
    - in Java, strong typing prevents this
      - must pass references explicitly

Mutual exclusion

- We want to use mutual exclusion to synchronize access to shared resources
- Code that uses mutual exclusion to synchronize its execution is called a critical section
  - only one thread at a time can execute in the critical section
  - all other threads are forced to wait on entry
  - when a thread leaves a critical section, another can enter
- The critical section problem is "how do you implement critical sections?"

Critical section requirements

- A solution to the critical section problem should meet 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

- Locks
  - very primitive, minimal semantics; used to build others
- Semaphores
  - basic, easy to get the hang of, hard to program with
- Monitors
  - high level, requires language support, implicit operations
  - easy to program with; Java "`synchronized()`" as 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 object (in memory) that provides the following two operations:
  - acquire( ): a thread calls this before entering a critical section
  - release( ): a thread calls this after leaving a critical section
- Threads pair up calls to acquire( ) and release( )
  - between acquire( ) and release( ), the thread holds the lock
  - acquire( ) does not return until the caller holds the lock
    - at most one thread can hold a lock at a time (usually)
  - so: what can happen if the calls aren't paired?
- Two basic flavors of locks
  - spinlock
  - blocking (a.k.a. "mutex")

Using locks

```
int withdraw(account, amount) {
  acquire(lock);
  balance = get_balance(account);
  balance -= amount;
  put_balance(account, balance);
  release(lock);
  return balance;
}
```

critical section

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

```
acquire(lock)
```

```
put_balance(account, balance);
release(lock);
```

```
balance = get_balance(account);
balance -= amount;
put_balance(account, balance);
release(lock);
```

- What happens when green tries to acquire the lock?
- Why is the "return" outside the critical section?
  - is this ok?

Spinlocks

- How do we implement locks? Here's one attempt:

```
struct lock {
  int held = 0;
}
void acquire(lock) {
   while (lock->held);
   lock->held = 1;
}
void release(lock) {
  lock->held = 0;
}
```

the caller "busy-waits", or spins for lock to be released, hence spinlock

- Why doesn't this work?
  - where is the race condition?

Implementing locks (cont.)

- Problem is that implementation of locks 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: Test-and-Set

- CPU provides the following as one atomic instruction:

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

- So, to fix our broken spinlocks, do:

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


Reminder of use …

```
int withdraw(account, amount) {
  acquire(lock);
  balance = get_balance(account);
  balance -= amount;
  put_balance(account, balance);
  release(lock);
  return balance;
}
```

critical section

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

```
acquire(lock)
```

```
put_balance(account, balance);
release(lock);
```

```
balance = get_balance(account);
balance -= amount;
put_balance(account, balance);
release(lock);
```

- How does a thread blocked on an "acquire" (that is, stuck in a test-and-set loop) yield the CPU?
  - calls yield( ), or there's an involuntary context switch

Problems with spinlocks

- Spinlocks work, but are horribly wasteful!
  - if a thread is spinning on a lock, the thread holding the lock cannot make progress
  - And neither can anyone else!
- Only want spinlocks as primitives to build higher-level synchronization constructs
  - "Do not try this at home!"

Another approach: Disabling interrupts

```
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, only want to use disabling of interrupts to build higher-level synchronization constructs

Summary

- Synchronization can be provided by locks, semaphores, monitors, messages …
- Locks are the lowest-level mechanism
  - very 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
    - less crude implementation too
  - monitors are significantly higher level
    - utilize programming language support to reduce errors