Chapter 9
Processes & Concurrency

Each core in the computer can only execute a single program. How can a computer concurrently execute more than one program?

9.1 Process Scheduling

Definition 9.1 (Process). A program is a sequence of instructions. A process is a program that is being executed.

Definition 9.2 (Process States). A process can be in one of three states at any time:

- it can be running: some processor core is executing the process;
- it can be ready (or waiting): the process could be executed, but is not;
- it can be blocked: the process is not currently being executed and some external event (e.g. an I/O operation) has to happen before the process becomes ready again; we say the process blocks on or is blocked on that event.

1. Process is selected for execution
2. Process execution is suspended to run another process
3. Process blocks on some external event; its execution is suspended and cannot be resumed before the event happened
4. External event that blocked process happens

Figure 9.3: Transitions between the states of a process.

9.2 Threads

Definition 9.5 (Multithreaded Processes). A multithreaded process is a process that contains more than one threads (of execution). All threads within a process share the address space managed by the process and the files opened by any thread in the process.
Remarks:

- In modern OS, the scheduler schedules threads. This allows multiple threads within the same process to run concurrently.
- Since the scheduler schedules threads, the process states from Definition 9.2 would therefore more aptly be called thread states; we use "process states" since this is the term used in the literature.
- When we switch execution from one thread to another thread, we have to store the state information of the currently running thread and load the state information of the newly selected thread. This is called a context switch. A context switch between different processes is more expensive than a context switch between threads of the same process.
- The thread state information (that is saved and loaded during a thread context switch) is stored in a data structure called the thread control block (TCB) of the thread. A TCB stores the state of the thread (in the sense of Definition 9.2), the unique thread ID, the instruction pointer (also called the program counter; this is the number of the last instruction of the process' code that was executed), the stack of function calls this thread made, and other accounting information.
- The process state information (that is saved and loaded during a process context switch) is stored in an OS data structure called the process control block (PCB) of the process. A PCB stores the code of the program, the unique process ID, a list of open file handles, the address space available to the process, and other accounting information.
- If multiple processes/threads want to access shared resources while the scheduler can interleave their execution arbitrarily, how do we make sure everything works as intended?

9.3 Interprocess Communication

There are two general categories for sharing data between processes: message passing, and shared memory. In Definition 4.21, we already saw the concept of a socket as a message passing mechanism. There are other important mechanisms.

Definition 9.6 (Remote Procedure Call). A remote procedure call (RPC) is a message passing mechanism that allows a process on one machine (the client) to run a procedure on another machine (the server). The calling process packs the arguments for the procedure in a message, sends it to the server, and blocks until the call returns. The server unpacks the message, runs the procedure, and sends the result back to the client.

Definition 9.7 (Pipe). A pipe is a unidirectional channel of data between processes that is handled within the OS. One process only writes to the pipe, and the other process only reads from the pipe. The OS buffers the written data until it is read.

9.4 Mutual Exclusion

A classic problem in shared memory systems is mutual exclusion. We are given a number of processes which occasionally need to access the same resource. The resource may be a shared variable, or a more general object such as a data structure or a shared printer. The catch is that only one process at the time is allowed to access the resource. If that is not guaranteed, problems like the following can happen:

Example 9.10. Consider two processes $p_1$ and $p_2$ that can concurrently update the balance of an account $A$ in a banking system using Algorithm 9.11 on $A$.

Now assume $A$ has an initial balance of 0 before $p_1$ executes $A.deposit(1)$ and $p_2$ executes $A.deposit(2)$. If the execution of $p_1$ and $p_2$ can be interleaved
Algorithm 9.11 Deposit Money to Account

Account internals: balance

Input: deposit amount 

1: balance = balance + deposit;

Algorithm 9.14 Mutual Exclusion: Test-and-Set

Init: Shared memory word \( W := 0 \)

\(<\text{Entry}>\) 

1: lock(\( W \)) \quad // Algorithm 9.15

\(<\text{Critical Section}>\)

2: 

\(<\text{Exit}>\)

3: unlock(\( W \)) \quad // Algorithm 9.16

\(<\text{Remainder Code}>\)

Proof. Mutual exclusion follows directly from the test-and-set definition: Initially \( W = 0 \). Let \( p_i \) be the \( i^{th} \) process to successfully execute the test-and-set, where successfully means that the result of the test-and-set is 0. This happens at time \( t_i \). At time \( t_i \), process \( p_i \) resets the shared memory word \( W \) to 0. Between \( t_i \) and \( t_i' \), no other process can successfully test-and-set, hence no other process can enter the critical section concurrently.

Proving no deadlock works similar: One of the processes loitering in the entry section will successfully test-and-set as soon as the process in the critical section exits.

Since the exit section only consists of a single instruction (no potential infinite loops) we have unobstructed exit.

Remarks:

- No starvation, on the other hand, is not given by this algorithm. Even with only two processes, there are asynchronous executions where always the same process wins the test-and-set.
- Algorithm 9.14 can be adapted to guarantee fairness (no starvation), essentially by ordering the processes in the entry section in a queue.
- The problem of providing mutual exclusion is called synchronization, and the algorithms and data structures used to provide mutual exclusion are called synchronization mechanisms.
- A natural question is whether one can achieve mutual exclusion with only reads and writes, that is without advanced RMW operations. The answer is yes!
The general idea of Algorithm 9.17 is that process \( p_i \) (for \( i \in \{0, 1\} \)) has to mark its desire to enter the critical section in a “want” memory word \( W_i \) by setting \( W_i := 1 \). Only if the other process is not interested (\( W_{1-i} = 0 \)) access is granted. This however is too simple since we may run into a deadlock. This deadlock (and at the same time also starvation) is resolved by adding a priority variable \( \Pi \).

Note that Line 3 in Algorithm 9.17 represents a “spinlock” or “busy-wait”, similar to Algorithm 9.15.

Algorithm 9.17 Mutual Exclusion: Peterson’s Algorithm

Initialization: Shared words \( W_0, W_1, \Pi \), all initially 0.

Code for process \( p_i \) , \( i \in \{0, 1\} \)

\[
<\text{Entry}>
\]
1. \( W_i := 1 \)
2. \( \Pi := 1 - i \)
3. \( \text{repeat until } \Pi = i \text{ or } W_{1-i} = 0 \)

\[
<\text{Critical Section}>
\]
4. \( \ldots \)

\[
<\text{Exit}>
\]
5. \( W_i := 0 \)

\[
<\text{Remainder Code}>
\]
6. \( \ldots \)


Proof. The shared variable \( \Pi \) elegantly grants priority to the process that passes Line 2 first. If both processes are competing, only process \( p_i \) can access the critical section because of \( \Pi \). The other process \( p_{1-i} \) cannot access the critical section because \( W_{1-i} = 1 \) (and \( \Pi \neq 1 - i \)). The only other reason to access the critical section is because the other process is in the remainder code (that is, not interested). This proves mutual exclusion!

No deadlock comes directly with \( \Pi \). Process \( p_1 \) gets direct access to the critical section, no matter what the other process does. Since the exit section only consists of a single instruction (no potential infinite loops) we have unobstructed exit.

Thanks to the shared variable \( \Pi \) also no starvation (fairness) is achieved: If a process \( p_i \) loses against its competitor \( p_{1-i} \), in Line 2, it will have to wait until the competitor resets \( W_{1-i} := 0 \) in the exit section. If process \( p_i \) is unlucky it will not check \( W_{1-i} = 0 \) early enough before process \( p_{1-i} \) sets \( W_{1-i} := 1 \) again in Line 1. However, as soon as \( p_{1-i} \) hits Line 2, process \( p_i \) gets the priority due to \( \Pi \), and can enter the critical section.

9.5 Semaphores

Definition 9.19 (Semaphore). A semaphore is a non-negative integer variable that can only be modified via atomic operations wait() and signal().

- wait() checks if the semaphore is strictly positive, and if so, decrements it; if it is 0, the calling process is blocked until the semaphore becomes positive.
- signal() unblocks a process that is blocked on the semaphore if one exists, and otherwise increments the semaphore.

Remarks:
- Internally, a semaphore contains an integer \( S \) initialized to a non-negative value, a list \( L \) of blocked processes, and a memory word \( W \).

Definition 9.22 (Mutex, Counting Semaphore). A semaphore that only takes the values 0 and 1 is called a binary semaphore or a mutex or a lock. A semaphore that takes more than two values is called a counting semaphore.
Algorithm 9.20 Semaphore: wait()
Input: process P that called wait()
<Entry>
1. lock(W)
// Algorithm 9.15
<Critical Section>
2. if S == 0 then
3. L.addAtLast(P);
<Exit>
4. unlock(W)
// Algorithm 9.16
5. P.block(); // changes state of P to blocked, deschedules it
6. else
7. S--;
<Exit>
8. unlock(W)
// Algorithm 9.16
9. end if

Algorithm 9.21 Semaphore: signal()
<Entry>
1. lock(W)
// Algorithm 9.15
<Critical Section>
2. if L is not empty then
3. P = L.removeFirst();
4. P.unlock(); // changes state of P to ready
5. else
6. S++;
7. end if
<Exit>
8. unlock(W)
// Algorithm 9.16

Remarks:
- Decrementing a mutex from 1 to 0 is also called locking it, while incrementing a mutex from 0 to 1 is unlocking it.
- Mutexes provide mutual exclusion. Some OS offer data structures called mutex that behave like a binary semaphore.
- Counting semaphores are useful when there is a limited amount of a given resource that concurrent processes can use.
- Notice that signal() (see Algorithm 9.21) has no way to check whether the semaphore is incremented above an intended maximum value. Thus a semaphore that is used incorrectly can take values outside the intended range without providing feedback to the user.

9.6 Classic Problems in Synchronization

To illustrate what problems can occur in a concurrent environment, we show three classical problems along with solutions using semaphores.

Definition 9.23 (Dining Philosophers Problem). In the dining philosophers problem, k philosophers sit around a round table. Between every two philosophers, there is exactly one chopstick. In the middle of the table there is a big bowl of food. A philosopher needs two chopsticks to eat and can only pick up the two chopsticks to her left and right. Each philosopher keeps thinking until she gets hungry, then she eats (this is the critical section), then thinks again, and so on. Is there an algorithm that ensures neither deadlock nor starvation occur?

Remarks:
- We could proceed as follows: every hungry philosopher tries to get both chopsticks to either side of her, then eats, and only then releases the chopsticks.
- In this solution, a deadlock occurs if each philosopher grabbed a chopstick since then none of them can eat and none of them will release their chopstick.
- We can prevent this by numbering philosophers and chopsticks in a clockwise fashion from 0 to k−1, with chopstick i to the right-hand side of philosopher i. Each philosopher tries to grab the even-numbered chopstick she can reach first; if k is odd, then philosopher k−1 will have two even-numbered chopsticks (0 and k−1), and she tries to grab 0 first.
- Algorithm 9.24 is one way to solve the dining philosophers problem.

Algorithm 9.24 Dining Philosophers Algorithm for Process i
Input: process ID i ∈ {0, …, k − 1}
Shared data structures: semaphore array chopsticks[k], all initially 1
1. if i is even then
2. even = i mod k;
3. odd = i − 1 mod k;
4. else
5. even = i − 1 mod k;
6. odd = i mod k;
7. end if
8. while true do
9. thinkUntilHungry();
10. chopSticks[even].wait();
11. chopSticks[odd].wait();
12. eat();
13. chopSticks[odd].signal();
14. chopSticks[even].signal();
15. end while

Definition 9.25 (Producer-Consumer Problem). The producer-consumer problem (or bounded-buffer problem) consists of two processes that have access to a shared buffer of a fixed size that acts like a queue. The producer
process wants to put units of data into the buffer if it is not full, the consumer
process wants to take units of data out of the buffer if it is not empty.

Remarks:
• The producer-consumer problem occurs in situations where one pro-
cess needs the output of another process to continue working, e.g. an
assembler that needs the output of a compiler.
• We can solve the producer-consumer problem using three semaphores:
one counts how much empty space there is in the buffer, one counts
how much data there is in the buffer, and a mutex for modifying
the buffer, see Algorithms 9.26 and 9.27. The solution also works for
multiple producers and multiple consumers.

Algorithm 9.26 Producer
Input: process ID i
Shared data structures: buffer B, semaphore space initialized to size of B,
semaphore data initially 0, semaphore mutex initially 1
1: while true do
2:   space.wait(i);
3:   mutex.wait(i);
4:   B.put(generateData()); // put new data into buffer
5:   data.signal();
6:   mutex.signal();
7: end while

Algorithm 9.27 Consumer
Input: process ID i
Shared data structures: buffer B, semaphore space initialized to size of B,
semaphore data initially 0, semaphore mutex initially 1
1: while true do
2:   data.wait(i);
3:   mutex.wait(i);
4:   newData = B.pop(); // remove data from buffer
5:   space.signal();
6:   mutex.signal();
7: end while

Definition 9.28 (Readers-Writers Problem). In the readers-writers prob-
lem there is shared data that some processes (the readers) want to read from
time to time, while other processes (the writers) want to modify. Multiple
readers should be able to read the data at the same time, but while a writer is
modifying the data, no other process can be allowed to read or modify the data.
Is there an algorithm to make sure no deadlock and no starvation occur?

9.7 MONITORS

Remarks:
• Notice that the readers-writers problem is a little underspecified: what
if readers want to read and writers want to write at the same time, in
what order should they be allowed to do so?
  – One variant of the problem, the Readers-writers problem, priori-
tizes readers: if at least one process is already reading, no other
process that wants to start reading can be kept waiting. Here,
the possibility of writer starvation is built into the problem, and
not just into solutions to the problem!
  – The readers-Writers problem prioritizes writers, where a process
can only start reading when no writer is active. The possibility
of reader starvation is built in here.

• For the Readers-writers problem, we use a variable readCount to
count how many processes are currently reading the data. Writers
are only allowed to modify the data when readCount is zero, while
readers increment it whenever they start reading and decrement it
when they stop. We protect modification of readCount with a mutex
readCountMutex.

To make sure that no other process accesses the data while a writer is
modifying it, we use a separate mutex accessMutex. The first
process to start reading the data locks accessMutex to show that
reading is currently ongoing, and the last process to stop reading un-
locks it again. Every writer has to lock accessMutex before writing.

• Algorithms 9.29 and 9.30 solve the Readers-writers problem.

Remarks:
• As we have seen, semaphores are powerful in solving synchronization
problems. However, they have problems: the use of semaphores is
scattered throughout the code of several processes, making the code
hard to understand, and a single misuse of a single semaphore can
already produce bugs.
• Such bugs can lead to undefined behavior. Since they often only man-
ifest under certain race conditions, they are hard to debug.
• The fundamental problem with semaphores is that the synchronization
mechanism is decoupled from the data it protects.

9.7 Monitors

Definition 9.31 (Monitor). A monitor is an abstract data type that encapsu-
lates shared data with methods to operate on the data. At most one process
can execute any method of the monitor at any given time (mutual exclusion).
Algorithm 9.29 Readers-writers problem: Reader

Input: process ID \(i\)

Shared data structures: semaphores \(\text{readCountMutex}, \text{accessMutex}\) both initially 1, integer \(\text{readCount} := 0\)

1. while true do
2. \(\text{readCountMutex.wait}(i)\);
3. \(\text{readCount}++\);
4. if \(\text{readCount} == 1\) then // first reader waits until last writer finishes
   5. \(\text{accessMutex.wait}(i)\);
   6. end if
7. \(\text{readCountMutex.signal}()\);
8. \(\text{read}()\);
9. \(\text{readCountMutex.wait}(i)\);
10. \(\text{readCount}--\);
11. if \(\text{readCount} == 0\) then // last reader lets writers start writing
12. \(\text{accessMutex.signal}()\);
13. end if
14. \(\text{readCountMutex.signal}()\);
15. end while

Algorithm 9.30 Readers-writers problem: Writer

Input: process ID \(i\)

Shared data structures: semaphore \(\text{accessMutex}\) initially 1

1. while true do
2. \(\text{accessMutex.wait}(i)\);
3. \(\text{write}()\);
4. \(\text{accessMutex.signal}()\);
5. end while

Remarks:

- The shared data encapsulated by the monitor is only accessible via the monitor’s methods.
- In the Java Virtual Machine, the keyword \texttt{synchronized} is implemented as a monitor.
- When a process executes a method of a monitor, we say the process is \textit{active} in the monitor. If process \(Q\) tries to enter monitor \(M\) while process \(P\) is currently active in \(M\), then \(Q\) will block on \(M\).
- While process \(P\) is active in monitor \(M\), it can happen that some condition has to be satisfied for the method to complete. For example, let \(P\) be a producer in the producer-consumer problem, and let \(M\) be the monitor for the buffer. While \(P\) waits until the buffer has empty space, consumers have to be allowed to consume data from the buffer. As the buffer is only accessible via \(M\), \(P\) has to block on the condition “buffer not full” and exit \(M\) so consumers can consume data. Once the condition is satisfied, \(P\) can unblock and attempt to re-enter \(M\).

9.7. Monitors

- Abstractly, it can happen that \(P\) needs to block while in \(M\)’s critical section. When it does, it has to exit the monitor and try to re-enter once the condition it blocked on is satisfied. Monitors coordinate such issues with \textit{condition variables}.

Definition 9.32 (Condition Variable). A \textit{condition variable} is a monitor-private queue of processes that represents some condition \(C\). A condition variable offers the following interface:

- \(\text{conditionWait}(\text{Semaphore monitorMutex, Process } P)\), which performs the following:
  1. \(P\) is added to the condition variable associated with \(C\).
  2. \(P\) signals the monitorMutex and then blocks.
  3. Once it is unblocked, \(P\) waits on the monitorMutex so it can safely re-enter the monitor.
- \(\text{conditionSignal}()\) unblocks a process that blocked on \(C\).

Algorithm 9.33 Condition Variable: conditionWait()

Condition Variable internals: list of processes blocked on this condition variable \(L\), semaphore \(\text{conditionMutex}\) initialized to 1

Input: semaphore \(\text{monitorMutex}\), process \(P\) that called \(\text{conditionWait}()\)

1. \(\text{conditionMutex.wait}(P)\);
2. \(L\).addAsLast\((P)\);
3. \(\text{conditionMutex.signal}()\); // leave the monitor’s critical section
4. \(P\).block(); // re-enter monitor once unblocked

Algorithm 9.34 Condition Variable: conditionSignal()

Condition Variable internals: list of processes blocked on this condition variable \(L\), semaphore \(\text{conditionMutex}\) initialized to 1

Input: process \(P\) that called \(\text{conditionSignal}()\)

1. \(\text{conditionMutex.wait}(P)\);
2. if \(L\) is not empty then
3. \(P_{\text{blocked}}\).removeFirst();
4. \(P_{\text{blocked}}.\text{unblock}()\);
5. end if
6. \(\text{conditionMutex.signal}()\);

Remarks:

- Algorithms 9.33 and 9.34 implement a condition variable.
- A condition variable does not internally represent the condition it is used to control, instead that condition will be checked for in the monitor. That way, condition variables are very flexible.
In the example of producer-consumer, we would have the conditions "buffer not full" and "buffer not empty". A producer-consumer monitor would offer a method produce(data) that checks whether "buffer not full" before letting a producer add data, and a method consume() that checks whether "buffer not empty" before letting a consumer take data.

Algorithms 9.35, 9.36 and 9.37 solve the producer-consumer problem with a monitor. The significant difference to the solution with semaphores is that all synchronization mechanisms are now encapsulated in the monitor. This makes them easier to design, understand and debug, and any process can use the methods of the monitor to safely take part without having to implement any synchronization.

Algorithm 9.35 Producer-Consumer-Monitor

| Internals: | semaphore monitorMutex initially 1; |
| condition variables bufferNotFull, bufferNotEmpty, initially empty; |
| bufferSize := size of buffer, used := 0 |
| procedure produce(Data data, Process P){ |
| 1. monitorMutex.wait(P); |
| 2. while used == bufferSize do |
| 3. bufferNotFull.conditionWait(monitorMutex, P); |
| 4. end while |
| 5. used++; |
| 6. bufferNotEmpty.conditionSignal(); |
| 7. monitorMutex.signal(); |
| } |
| procedure consume(Process P){ |
| 8. monitorMutex.wait(P); |
| 9. while used == 0 do |
| 10. bufferNotEmpty.conditionWait(monitorMutex, P); |
| 11. end while |
| 12. used--; |
| 13. bufferNotFull.conditionSignal(); |
| 14. monitorMutex.signal(); |
| } |

Chapter Notes

The first solution to the mutual exclusion problem for two processes was given by the Dutch mathematician T. J. Dekker in 1959 according to an unpublished paper by Edsger W. Dijkstra. Dijkstra himself is widely credited with publishing the founding paper in the field of concurrent programming [2] that solved the mutual exclusion problem for n processes.

Semaphores were invented by Dijkstra around 1962/1963 [4]. He called the operations P() and V() (from the Dutch words “probeer” for “try” and “verhogen” for “increase”) instead of wait() and signal().

Monitors were the result of a number of refinements to the basic idea of encapsulating data with synchronization mechanisms by C.A.R. Hoare and P. Brinch Hansen [6, 7, 8]. The ideas by Hoare and Hansen have slightly different semantics which was too much detail for this script; most concurrency textbooks expound on Hoare monitor semantics and Hansen monitor semantics.

The Dining Philosophers Problem, the Producer Consumer Problem, and the Readers Writers Problem (both versions) are classic examples often used to evaluate newly suggested synchronization mechanisms. Dijkstra posed the Dining Philosophers Problem as an exam problem in 1965 in terms of access to tape drives; Hoare came up with the formulation in terms of hungry philosophers soon after. Dijkstra also introduced the Producer Consumer Problem [5] in 1972 to illustrate the usefulness of Hoare’s/Hansen’s developing ideas about conditional critical sections that would evolve and be incorporated into monitors.

The two original variants of the Readers Writers Problem were posed and solved with the use of semaphores by Courtois, Heymans, and Parnas [1]. The Readers-writers problem is called the first readers-writers problem in the literature, and the readers-Writers problem is the second readers-writers problem in the literature, using “first” and “second” derives from Courtois et al. naming the variants “Problem 1” and “Problem 2” in their paper.

This chapter was written in collaboration with Georg Bachmeier.

Bibliography


