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 interchange 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.
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Algorithm 9.11 Deposit Money to Account

Account internals: balance
Input: deposit amount
1. balance = balance + deposit;

arbitrarily due to scheduling, we could get this schedule:

(1) $p_1$: evaluate balance + deposit; // $0 + 1$
(2) $p_2$: evaluate balance + deposit; // $0 + 2$
(3) $p_1$: assign balance = 1;
(4) $p_2$: assign balance = 2;

Considering all possible schedules, instead of always arriving at the expected balance of 3, we can get a balance of 1, 2, or 3 depending on scheduling decisions.

Remarks:
• If a result depends on scheduling decisions, we have a race condition.
• Race conditions make the behavior of programs unpredictable; they are notoriously difficult to understand.
• We formalize the prevention of race conditions as follows:

Definition 9.12 (Mutual Exclusion). We are given a number of processes, each executing the following code sections:

$<\text{Entry}> \rightarrow <\text{Critical Section}> \rightarrow <\text{Exit}> \rightarrow <\text{Remaining Code}>$

A mutual exclusion algorithm consists of code for entry and exit sections, such that the following holds:

• Mutual Exclusion: At all times at most one process is in the critical section.
• No deadlock: If some process manages to get to the entry section, later some (possibly different) process will get to the critical section.

Sometimes we additionally ask for

• No starvation (or no lockout): If some process manages to get to the entry section, later the same process will get to the critical section.
• Unobstructed exit: No process can get stuck in the exit section.

Remarks:
• Using RMW primitives one can build mutual exclusion algorithms quite easily. Algorithm 9.14 shows an example with the test-and-set primitive.


Algorithm 9.14 Mutual Exclusion: Test-and-Set

Init: Shared memory word $W := 0$

$<\text{Entry}>$
1. lock($W$) // Algorithm 9.15
$<\text{Critical Section}>$
2. 
$<\text{Exit}>$
3. unlock($W$) // Algorithm 9.16
$<\text{Remainder Code}>$

Algorithm 9.15 lock()

Init: Shared memory word $W := 0$
1. repeat
2. $r := \text{test-and-set}(W)$
3. until $r = 0$

Algorithm 9.16 unlock()

Init: Shared memory word $W := 0$
1. $W := 0$

Proof. Mutual exclusion follows directly from the test-and-set definition: Initially $W$ is 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 exited.

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 $p_i$, $i = \{0, 1\}$
<Entry>
1 $W_i := 1$
2 $\Pi := 1 - i$
3 repeat until $\Pi = i$ or $W_{1-i} = 0$ end repeat
<Critical Section>
4 $\ldots$
<Exit>
5 $W_i := 0$
<Remainder Code>
6 $\ldots$

Theorem 9.18. Algorithm 9.17 solves the mutual exclusion problem as in Def-
inition 9.12.
Proof. The shared variable $\Pi$ elegantly grants priority to the process that passes
Line 2 first. If both processes are competing, only process $p_0$ 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 in-
finite 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 $p_0$ 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 $\text{wait}(\cdot)$ and $\text{signal}(\cdot)$.

• $\text{wait}(\cdot)$ 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.

• $\text{signal}(\cdot)$ 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 $W$.

Remarks:

• OS and programming libraries offer semaphores as a synchronization
mechanism.

• What value a semaphore is initialized depends on how it is used.

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.
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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 \( i \in \{0, \ldots, k-1\} \)

Shared data structures: semaphore array \( \text{chopsticks}[k] \), 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 process 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 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. process(newData);
   8. end while

Definition 9.28 (Readers-Writers Problem). In the readers-writers problem 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

Definition 9.31 (Monitor). A monitor is an abstract data type that encapsulates 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 readCountMutex, accessMutex initially 1, integer readCount := 0
1. while true do
   2. readCountMutex.wait(i);
   3. readCount++;
   4. if readCount == 1 then first reader waits until last writer finishes
      5. accessMutex.wait();
   6. end if
   7. readCountMutex.signal();
   8. i();
   9. readCountMutex.wait(i);
 10. if readCount == 0 then last reader lets writers start writing
     11. accessMutex.signal();
 12. end if
 13. readCountMutex.signal();
 14. end while

Algorithm 9.30 Readers-writers problem: Writer

Input: process ID i
Shared data structures: semaphore accessMutex initially 1
1. while true do
   2. accessMutex.wait(i);
 3. write();
 4. 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 synchronized is implemented as a monitor.
- When a process executes a method of a monitor, we say the process is 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.

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- 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 condition variables.

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

- conditionWait(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.
- 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 conditionMutex initialized to 1

Input: semaphore monitorMutex, process P that called conditionWait()
1. conditionMutex.wait(P);
2. L.addLast(P);
3. conditionMutex.signal();
4. monitorMutex.signal(); // leave the monitor’s critical section
5. 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 conditionMutex initialized to 1

Input: process P that called conditionSignal()
1. conditionMutex.wait(P);
2. if L is not empty then
   3. P_unblocked = L.removeFirst();
   4. P_unblocked.unblock();
   5. end if
3. 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 prob-
  lem with a monitor. The significant difference to the solution with 
  semaphores is that all synchronization mechanisms are now encapsu-
  lated 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; full := 0

procedure produce(Data data, Process P){
1. monitorMutex.wait(P);
2. while full == bufferSize do
3. bufferNotFull.conditionWait(monitorMutex, P);
4. end while
5. full++;
6. bufferNotEmpty.conditionSignal(monitorMutex);
7. monitorMutex.signal();
}

procedure consume(Process P){
8. monitorMutex.wait(P);
9. while full == 0 do
10. bufferNotEmpty.conditionWait(monitorMutex, P);
11. end while
12. full--;
13. bufferNotFull.conditionSignal(monitorMutex);
14. monitorMutex.signal();
}
```

```
Algorithm 9.36 Producer for Monitor from Algorithm 9.35

Internals: Producer-Consumer-Monitor M
Input: Producer process P
1. while true do
2. M.produce(P.generateData(), P);
3. end while
```

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 [3]. Dijkstra himself is widely credited with 
issuing 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 “ver-
hoog” 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 litera-
ture, 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


