COMP1521 24T2 — Concurrency, Parallelism, Threads

https://www.cse.unsw.edu.au/~cs1521/24T2/
• Concurrency vs Parallelism
• Flynn’s taxonomy
• Threads in C
• What can go wrong?
• Synchronisation with mutexes
• What can still go wrong?
• Atomics
Concurrent? Parallelism?

Concurrency:
multiple computations in overlapping time periods ...
does not have to be simultaneous

Parallelism:
multiple computations executing simultaneously
Common classifications of types of parallelism (Flynn’s taxonomy):

- **SISD**: Single Instruction, Single Data (“no parallelism”)
  - e.g. our code in *mipsy*

- **SIMD**: Single Instruction, Multiple Data (“vector processing”):
  - multiple cores of a CPU executing (parts of) same instruction
  - e.g., GPUs rendering pixels

- **MISD**: Multiple Instruction, Single Data (“pipelining”):
  - data flows through multiple instructions; very rare in the real world
  - e.g., fault tolerance in space shuttles (task replication), sometimes A.I.

- **MIMD**: Multiple Instruction, Multiple Data (“multiprocessing”)
  - multiple cores of a CPU executing different instructions

Both parallelism and concurrency need to deal with *synchronisation*.
Data Parallel Computing: Parallelism Across An Array

- multiple, identical processors
- each given one element of a data structure from main memory
- each performing same computation on that element: SIMD
- results copied back to data structure in main memory

- But not totally independent: need to *synchronise* on completion
- Graphics processing units (GPUs) provide this form of parallelism
  - used to compute the same calculation for every pixel in an image quickly
  - popularity of computer gaming has driven availability of powerful hardware
  - there are tools & libraries to run some general-purpose programs on GPUs
  - if the algorithm fits this model, it might run 5-10x faster on a GPU
  - e.g., GPUs used heavily for neural network training (deep learning)
Parallelism can also occur between multiple computers!

Example: Map-Reduce is a popular programming model for

- manipulating very large data sets
- on a large network of computers — local or distributed
  - spread across a rack, data center or even across continents

The map step filters data and distributes it to nodes

- data distributed as (key, value) pairs
- each node receives a set of pairs with common key

Nodes then perform calculation on received data items.

The reduce step computes the final result

- by combining outputs (calculation results) from the nodes

There also needs a way to determine when all calculations completed.
Parallelism Across Processes

One method for creating parallelism:
create multiple processes, each doing part of a job.

- child executes concurrently with parent
- runs in its own address space
- inherits some state information from parent, e.g. open fd’s

Processes have some disadvantages:

- process switching is expensive
- each require a significant amount of state — memory usage
- communication between processes potentially limited and/or slow

But one big advantage:

- separate address spaces make processes more robust.

The web server providing the class website uses process-level parallelism

An android phone will have several hundred processes running.
Threads allow us parallelism within a process.

- Threads allow simultaneous execution.
- Each thread has its own execution state often called Thread control block (TCB).
- Threads within a process share address space:
  - threads share code: functions
  - threads share global/static variables
  - threads share heap: malloc
- But a separate stack for each thread:
  - local variables not shared
- Threads in a process share file descriptors, signals.
Thread with POSIX Threads (pthreads)

POSIX Threads is a widely-supported threading model.
Supported in most Unix-like operating systems, and beyond

Describes an API/model for managing threads (and synchronisation).

```
#include <pthread.h>
```

More recently, ISO C:2011 has adopted a pthreads-like model...
Less well-supported generally, but very, very similar.
pthread_create(3): create a new thread

```c
int pthread_create (  
    pthread_t    *thread,  
    const pthread_attr_t *attr,  
    void       *(*thread_main)(void *),  
    void    *arg);
```

- Starts a new thread running the specified `thread_main(arg)`.
- Information about newly-created thread stored in `thread`.
- Thread has attributes specified in `attr` (NULL if you want no special attributes).
- Returns 0 if OK, -1 otherwise and sets `errno`
- analogous to `posix_spawn(3)`

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**pthread_join(3):** wait for, and join with, a terminated thread

```c
int pthread_join (pthread_t thread, void **retval);
```

- waits until `thread` terminates
  - if `thread` already exited, does not wait
- thread return/exit value placed in `**retval`
- if `main` returns, or `exit(3)` called, all threads terminated
  - program typically needs to wait for all threads before exiting
- analogous to `waitpid(3)`
**pthread_exit(3): terminate calling thread**

```c
void pthread_exit (void *retval);
```

- terminates the execution of the current thread (and frees its resources)
- `retval` returned — see `pthread_join(3)`
- analogous to `exit(3)`
#include <pthread.h>
#include <stdio.h>

// This function is called to start thread execution.
// It can be given any pointer as an argument.
void *run_thread(void *argument) {
    int *p = argument;
    for (int i = 0; i < 10; i++) {
        printf("Hello this is thread #\%d: i=%d\n", *p, i);
    }

    // A thread finishes when either the thread's start function
    // returns, or the thread calls `pthread_exit(3)'.
    // A thread can return a pointer of any type --- that pointer
    // can be fetched via `pthread_join(3)'
    return NULL;
}

source code for two_threads.c
int main(void) {
    // Create two threads running the same task, but different inputs.
    pthread_t thread_id1;
    int thread_number1 = 1;
    pthread_create(&thread_id1, NULL, run_thread, &thread_number1);
    pthread_t thread_id2;
    int thread_number2 = 2;
    pthread_create(&thread_id2, NULL, run_thread, &thread_number2);
    // Wait for the 2 threads to finish.
    pthread_join(thread_id1, NULL);
    pthread_join(thread_id2, NULL);
    return 0;
}
Example: n_threads.c — creating many threads

```c
int n_threads = strtol(argv[1], NULL, 0);
assert(0 < n_threads && n_threads < 100);
pthread_t thread_id[n_threads];
int argument[n_threads];
for (int i = 0; i < n_threads; i++) {
    argument[i] = i;
    pthread_create(&thread_id[i], NULL, run_thread, &argument[i]);
}
// Wait for the threads to finish
for (int i = 0; i < n_threads; i++) {
    pthread_join(thread_id[i], NULL);
}
return 0;
```
Example: `thread_sum.c` — dividing a task between threads (i)

```c
struct job {
    long start, finish;
    double sum;
};

void *run_thread(void *argument) {
    struct job *j = argument;
    long start = j->start;
    long finish = j->finish;
    double sum = 0;
    for (long i = start; i < finish; i++) {
        sum += i;
    }
    j->sum = sum;
}
```

[source code for `thread_sum.c`]

https://www.cse.unsw.edu.au/~cs1521/24T2/
printf("Creating %d threads to sum the first %lu integers\n"
    "Each thread will sum %lu integers\n",
    n_threads, integers_to_sum, integers_per_thread);

pthread_t thread_id[n_threads];
struct job jobs[n_threads];
for (int i = 0; i < n_threads; i++) {
    jobs[i].start = i * integers_per_thread;
    jobs[i].finish = jobs[i].start + integers_per_thread;
    if (jobs[i].finish > integers_to_sum) {
        jobs[i].finish = integers_to_sum;
    }
    // create a thread which will sum integers_per_thread integers
    pthread_create(&thread_id[i], NULL, run_thread, &jobs[i]);
}
Example: thread_sum.c — dividing a task between threads (iii)

double overall_sum = 0;
for (int i = 0; i < n_threads; i++) {
    pthread_join(thread_id[i], NULL);
    overall_sum += jobs[i].sum;
}
printf("\nCombined sum of integers 0 to %lu is %.0f\n", integers_to_sum,
        overall_sum);
return 0;

source code for thread_sum.c

https://www.cse.unsw.edu.au/~cs1521/24T2/
thread_sum.c performance

Seconds to sum the first $10^{10}$ (10,000,000,000) integers using double arithmetic, with $N$ threads, on some different machines...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>host</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>12</th>
<th>24</th>
<th>50</th>
<th>500</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>6.6</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>1.6</td>
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<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.6</td>
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</tr>
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<td>6.3</td>
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<td>0.9</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illi</td>
<td>136.6</td>
<td>68.4</td>
<td>68.6</td>
<td>68.4</td>
<td>68.5</td>
<td>68.6</td>
<td>68.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5800X: AMD Ryzen 5800X; 8 cores, 16 threads, 3.8 GHz, 2020
3900X: AMD Ryzen 3900X; 12 cores, 24 threads, 3.8 GHz, 2019
i5-4590: Intel Core i5-4590; 4 cores, 4 threads, 3.3 GHz, 2014
E7330: Intel Xeon E7330; 4 sockets, 4 cores, 4 threads, 2.4 GHz, 2007
Illi: Sun UltraSPARC Illi; 2 sockets, 1 core, 1 thread, 1.5 GHz, 2003
Example: `two_threads_broken.c` — shared mutable state gonna hurt you

```c
int main(void) {
    pthread_t thread_id1;
    int thread_number = 1;
    pthread_create(&thread_id1, NULL, run_thread, &thread_number);
    thread_number = 2;
    pthread_t thread_id2;
    pthread_create(&thread_id2, NULL, run_thread, &thread_number);
    pthread_join(thread_id1, NULL);
    pthread_join(thread_id2, NULL);
    return 0;
}
```

- variable `thread_number` will probably change in `main`, before thread 1 starts executing...
- → thread 1 will probably print `Hello this is thread 2 ...` ?!
Example: bank_account_broken.c — unsafe access to global variables (i)

```c
int bank_account = 0;
// add $1 to Andrew's bank account 100,000 times
void *add_100000(void *argument) {
    for (int i = 0; i < 100000; i++) {
        // execution may switch threads in middle of assignment
        // between load of variable value
        // and store of new variable value
        // changes other thread makes to variable will be lost
        nanosleep(&(struct timespec){ .tv_nsec = 1 }, NULL);
        // RECALL: shorthand for `bank_account = bank_account + 1`
        bank_account++;
    }
    return NULL;
}
```

(source code for bank_account_broken.c)

https://www.cse.unsw.edu.au/~cs1521/24T2/COMP1521-24T2-Concurrency-Parallelism-Threads.21/45
```c
int main(void) {
    // create two threads performing the same task
    pthread_t thread_id1;
    pthread_create(&thread_id1, NULL, add_100000, NULL);
    pthread_t thread_id2;
    pthread_create(&thread_id2, NULL, add_100000, NULL);
    // wait for the 2 threads to finish
    pthread_join(thread_id1, NULL);
    pthread_join(thread_id2, NULL);
    // will probably be much less than $200000
    printf("Andrew's bank account has $%d\n", bank_account);
    return 0;
}
```

Source code for `bank_account_broken.c`
Global Variables and Race Conditions

Incrementing a global variable is not an atomic operation.

• \textit{(atomic, from Greek — “indivisible”)}

```c
int bank_account;

void *thread(void *a) {
    // ...
    bank_account++;
    // ...
}
```

```
la $t0, bank_account
lw $t1, ($t0)
addi $t1, $t1, 1
sw $t1, ($t0)
.data
bank_account: .word 0
```
Global Variables and Race Condition

If, initially, `bank_account = 42`, and two threads increment simultaneously...

```
la    $t0, bank_account
# { | bank_account = 42 | }
lw    $t1, ($t0)
# { | $t1 = 42 | }
addi  $t1, $t1, 1
# { | $t1 = 43 | }
sw    $t1, ($t0)
# { | bank_account = 43 | }
```

```
la    $t0, bank_account
# { | bank_account = 42 | }
lw    $t1, ($t0)
# { | $t1 = 42 | }
addi  $t1, $t1, 1
# { | $t1 = 43 | }
sw    $t1, ($t0)
# { | bank_account = 43 | }
```

Oops! We lost an increment.

Threads do not share registers or stack (local variables)...
but they do share global variables.
Global Variable: Race Condition

If, initially, `bank_account = 100`, and two threads change it simultaneously...

```
la $t0, bank_account
# { | bank_account = 100 |}
lw $t1, ($t0)
# { | $t1 = 100 |}
addi $t1, $t1, 100
# { | $t1 = 200 |}
sw $t1, ($t0)
# { | bank_account = ...? |}
```

```
la $t0, bank_account
# { | bank_account = 100 |}
lw $t1, ($t0)
# { | $t1 = 100 |}
addi $t1, $t1, -50
# { | $t1 = 50 |}
sw $t1, ($t0)
# { | bank_account = 50 or 200 |}
```

This is a **critical section**.

We don’t want two processes in the critical section — we must establish *mutual exclusion*. 
**pthread_mutex_lock(3), pthread_mutex_unlock(3): Mutual Exclusion**

```c
int pthread_mutex_lock (pthread_mutex_t *mutex);
int pthread_mutex_unlock (pthread_mutex_t *mutex);
```

- We associate a `mutex` with the resource we want to protect.
  - In the case the resources is access to a global variable
- For a particular mutex, only one thread can be running between _lock and _unlock
- Other threads attempting to `pthread_mutex_lock` will block (wait) until the first thread executes `pthread_mutex_unlock`

For example:

```c
pthread_mutex_lock (&bank_account_lock);
andrews_bank_account += 1000000;
pthread_mutex_unlock (&bank_account_lock);
```
Example: bank_account_mutex.c — guard a global with a mutex

```c
int bank_account = 0;
pthread_mutex_t bank_account_lock = PTHREAD_MUTEX_INITIALIZER;

// add $1 to Andrew's bank account 100,000 times
void *add_100000(void *argument) {
    for (int i = 0; i < 100000; i++) {
        pthread_mutex_lock(&bank_account_lock);
        // only one thread can execute this section of code at any time
        bank_account = bank_account + 1;
        pthread_mutex_unlock(&bank_account_lock);
    }
    return NULL;
}
```

source code for bank_account_mutex.c

https://www.cse.unsw.edu.au/~cs1521/24T2/
 Mutex the world!

- Mutexes solve all our data race problems!
- So, just put a mutex around everything?
- This works, but then we lose the advantages of parallelism
- Python does this - *the global interpreter lock* (GIL)
  - although they are (trying to stop)[https://peps.python.org/pep-0703/]
- Linux used to do this - *the Big Kernel Lock*
  - removed in 2011
Deadlock

- No thread can make progress!
- The system is deadlocked

THREAD 1
1. acquire lock_A
2. acquire lock_B
   \[ \text{\textbf{\blackcross} BLOCKED!} \]
3. do_something(A, B)
4. release lock_B
5. release lock_A

THREAD 2
1. acquire lock_B
2. acquire lock_A
   \[ \text{\textbf{\blackcross} BLOCKED!} \]
3. do_something(A, B)
4. release lock_A
5. release lock_B

---

https://www.cse.unsw.edu.au/~cs1521/24T2/
Example: bank_account_deadlock.c — deadlock with two resources (i)

```c
void *andrew_send_xavier_money(void *argument) {
    for (int i = 0; i < 100000; i++) {
        pthread_mutex_lock(&andrews_bank_account_lock);
        pthread_mutex_lock(&xaviers_bank_account_lock);
        if (andrews_bank_account > 0) {
            andrews_bank_account--;  // Andrew sends money
            xaviers_bank_account++;   // Xavier receives money
        }
        pthread_mutex_unlock(&xaviers_bank_account_lock);
        pthread_mutex_unlock(&andrews_bank_account_lock);
    }
    return NULL;
}
```

source code for bank_account_deadlock.c

https://www.cse.unsw.edu.au/~cs1521/24T2/
Example: bank_account_deadlock.c — deadlock with two resources (ii)

```c
void *xavier_send_andrew_money(void *argument) {
    for (int i = 0; i < 100000; i++) {
        pthread_mutex_lock(&xaviers_bank_account_lock);
        pthread_mutex_lock(&andrews_bank_account_lock);
        if (xaviers_bank_account > 0) {
            xaviers_bank_account--;
            andrews_bank_account++;
        }
        pthread_mutex_unlock(&andrews_bank_account_lock);
        pthread_mutex_unlock(&xaviers_bank_account_lock);
    }
    return NULL;
}
```

source code for bank_account_deadlock.c

[source code for bank_account_deadlock.c](https://www.cse.unsw.edu.au/~cs1521/24T2/COMP1521%2024T2%20-%20Concurrency,%20Parallelism,%20Threads)
int main(void) {
    // create two threads sending each other money
    pthread_t thread_id1;
    pthread_create(&thread_id1, NULL, andrew_send_xavier_money, NULL);
    pthread_t thread_id2;
    pthread_create(&thread_id2, NULL, xavier_send_andrew_money, NULL);
    // threads will probably never finish
    // deadlock will likely likely occur
    // with one thread holding andrews_bank_account_lock
    // and waiting for xaviers_bank_account_lock
    // and the other thread holding xaviers_bank_account_lock
    // and waiting for andrews_bank_account_lock
    pthread_join(thread_id1, NULL);
    pthread_join(thread_id2, NULL);
    return 0;
}
Avoiding Deadlock

- A simple rule can avoid deadlock in many programs
- All threads should acquire locks in same order
  - also best to release in reverse order (if possible)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>THREAD 1</th>
<th>THREAD 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. acquire lock_A</td>
<td>1. acquire lock_A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. acquire lock_B</td>
<td>2. acquire lock_B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. do_somthing(A, B)</td>
<td>3. do_somthing(A, B)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. release lock_B</td>
<td>4. release lock_B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. release lock_A</td>
<td>5. release lock_A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Avoiding Deadlock

• Previous program deadlocked because one thread executed:

```c
pthread_mutex_lock(&andrews_bank_account_lock);
pthread_mutex_lock(&xaviers_bank_account_lock);
```

and the other thread executed:

```c
pthread_mutex_lock(&xaviers_bank_account_lock);
pthread_mutex_lock(&andrews_bank_account_lock);
```

• Deadlock avoided if same order used in both threads, e.g.
Atomics!

Atomic instructions allow a small subset of operations on data, that are guaranteed to execute atomically! For example,

- **fetch_add**: \( n += value \)
- **fetch_sub**: \( n -= value \)
- **fetch_and**: \( n &= value \)
- **fetch_or**: \( n |= value \)
- **fetch_xor**: \( n ^= value \)

**compare_exchange**:

```c
if (n == v1) {
    n = v2;
}
return n;
```

Complete list: https://en.cppreference.com/w/c/atomic
Atomics!

- With mutexes, a program can lock mutex A, and then (before unlocking A) lock some mutex B.
  - multiple mutexes can be locked simultaneously.
- Atomic instructions are (by definition!) atomic, so there’s no equivalent to the above problem.
  - Goodbye deadlocks!
- Atomics are a fundamental tool for lock-free/wait-free programming.
- Non-blocking: If a thread fails or is suspended, it cannot cause failure or suspension of another thread.
- Lock-free: **non-blocking** + the system (as a whole) always makes progress.
- Wait-free: **lock-free** + every thread always makes progress.
#include <stdatomic.h>
atomic_int bank_account = 0;
// add $1 to Andrew's bank account 100,000 times
void *add_100000(void *argument) {
    for (int i = 0; i < 100000; i++) {
        // NOTE: This *cannot* be `bank_account = bank_account + 1`,
        // as that will not be atomic!
        // However, `bank_account++` would be okay
        // and, `atomic_fetch_add(&bank_account, 1)` would also be okay
        bank_account += 1;
    }
    return NULL;
}
What’s the catch with atomics?

- Specialised hardware support is required
  - essentially all modern computers provide atomic support
  - may be missing on more niche / embedded systems.

- Although faster and simpler than traditional locking, there is still a performance penalty using atomics (and increases program complexity).

- Can be incredibly tricky to write correct code at a low level (e.g. memory ordering, which we won’t cover in COMP1521).

- Some issues can arise in application; e.g. ABA problem.
Final issue: data lifetime

- When sharing data with a thread, we can only pass the address of our data.
- This presents a lifetime issue
  - what if by the time the thread reads the data, that data no longer exists?
- How have we avoided this so far?
- What kind of code could trigger this issue?
- How can this issue be avoided?
so far we have put data in local variables in main
  - local variables live until their function returns
main has created threads by calling `pthread_create`
main has waited for all threads to finish by calling `pthread_join`
so main “outlives” all the created threads.
  - hence the local variables in main outlive the threads
  - so the data we pass to each thread will be valid for the entire lifetime of each thread.

but what if we pass data with a lifetime shorter than the thread lifetime?
Data lifetime: triggering the issue

```c
pthread_t create_thread(void) {
    int super_special_number = 0x42;
    pthread_t thread_handle;
    pthread_create(&thread_handle, NULL, my_thread, &super_special_number);
    // super_special_number is destroyed when create_thread returns
    // but the thread just created may still be running and access it
    return thread_handle;
}
```

```c
void *my_thread(void *data) {
    int number = *(int *)data;
    sleep(1);
    // should print 0x42, probably won't
    printf("The number is 0x%x!\n", number);
    return NULL;
}
```
Data lifetime: solving our problem – malloc

- Stack memory is automatically cleaned up when a function returns
  - In MIPS $sp returns to its original value
  - Local variables are destroyed
  - The lifetime of a local variable ends with return

- When function `create_thread` returns `super_special_number` is destroyed – which is causing us problems.

- The function `say_hello` makes this obvious
  - It changes the stack memory which used to hold `super_special_number` (by using it for `greeting`)

- We've solved this problem before in `COMP1[59]11` by using `malloc`
  - The programmer controls the lifetime of memory allocated with `malloc`
  - It lives until `free` is called
  - The thread can call `free` when it is finished with the data
Data lifetime: solving our problem – malloc

```c
pthread_t function_creates_thread(void) {
    int *super_special_number = malloc(sizeof(int));
    *super_special_number = 0x42;
    pthread_t thread_handle;
    pthread_create(&thread_handle, NULL, my_thread, super_special_number);
    return thread_handle;
}
```

```c
void *my_thread(void *data) {
    int number = *(int *)data;
    sleep(1);
    printf("The number is 0x%x!\n", number);
    free(data);
    return NULL;
}
```

source code for thread_data_malloc.c

[https://www.cse.unsw.edu.au/~cs1521/24T2/](https://www.cse.unsw.edu.au/~cs1521/24T2/)
• For interested students, another solution is to use barriers.
• This will not be covered and is not examined in the course.
Concurrency is really complex!

- This is just a taste of concurrency!

- Other fun concurrency problems/concepts: livelock, starvation, thundering herd, memory ordering, semaphores, software transactional memory, user threads, fibers, etc.

- A number of courses at UNSW offer more:
  - COMP3231/COMP3891: [Extended] operating systems e.g more on deadlock
  - COMP3151: Foundations of Concurrency
  - COMP6991: Solving Modern Programming Problems with Rust - e.g safety through types
  - and more!