

# Races and Synchronization

CSE 220: Systems Programming

Ethan Blanton & Carl Alphonse

Department of Computer Science and Engineering  
University at Buffalo



# Races

**Races**, or **race conditions**, are situations where:

- Two or more events are **dependent upon each other**
- Some of the events **may happen in more than one order**, or even simultaneously
- There exists some ordering of the events that is **incorrect**

For example:

- Some state will be updated multiple times
- Output will be produced based on the state

If some order of updates results in invalid output, **this is a race**.

# Synchronization

**Synchronization**, in the context of a computer program, is the **deliberate ordering of events** via some mechanism.

There are many synchronization mechanisms, working in different ways.

Synchronization mechanisms may:

- Directly **order** events
- Simply ensure that events **do not happen simultaneously**
- Ensure that two events **begin** at the same time
- ...

Synchronization is how we **avoid races**.

# Race Conditions

CS:APP [1] defines a **race** as:

*[...] when the correctness of a program depends on one thread reaching point  $x$  in its control flow before another thread reaches point  $y$ .*

Note that there may be **many points**  $x$  and  $y$  in a program!

The relationship between  $x$  and  $y$  **may change over time**, as well.

For example, “**once thread  $T_1$  has reached point  $p$** , it must reach point  $x$  before **any other thread** reaches point  $y$ .”

# Data Races

While **data races**, or races involving **modification of data**, are not the only kind of race, they are **very common**.

A data race occurs when:

- Two or more **concurrent flows access shared state**
- One or more of these flows **modifies** the state
- The **order** of the accesses/modifications **is important**
- The **synchronization** in use is **insufficient** to preserve the necessary order

Races among **any number of concurrent flows** for the **same data** may be reduced to **a set of pairwise races**.

At least one access in each pair **must be a modifying operation**.

# Example Race

Consider two threads running the following code:

```
char *strings[4];
int nstrings;

void setstring(char *str) {
    int index = nstrings;
    strings[index] = str;
    nstrings++;
}
```

$T_1$  index:  
 $T_2$  index:

nstrings: 0

strings: 

NULL
NULL
NULL
NULL

 ←

# Example Race

Consider two threads running the following code:

```
char *strings[4];
int nstrings;
```

```
void setstring(char *str) {
    int index = nstrings;
    strings[index] = str;
    nstrings++;
}
```

$T_1 \rightarrow$

$T_1$  index: 0

$T_2$  index:

nstrings: 0

strings: 

NULL
NULL
NULL
NULL

 ←

# Example Race

Consider two threads running the following code:

```

char *strings[4];
int nstrings;

void setstring(char *str) {
  T1 → int index = nstrings; ← T2
  strings[index] = str;
  nstrings++;
}
  
```

T<sub>1</sub> index: 0

T<sub>2</sub> index: 0

nstrings: 0

strings: 

NULL
NULL
NULL
NULL

 ←



# Example Race

Consider two threads running the following code:

```

char *strings[4];
int nstrings;

void setstring(char *str) {
  T1 → int index = nstrings;
        strings[index] = str; ← T2
        nstrings++;
}
  
```

T<sub>1</sub> index: 0

T<sub>2</sub> index: 0

nstrings: 0

strings: 

T <sub>2</sub>
NULL
NULL
NULL

 ←

# Example Race

Consider two threads running the following code:

```

char *strings[4];
int nstrings;

void setstring(char *str) {
    int index = nstrings;
    T1 → strings[index] = str; ← T2
    nstrings++;
}
  
```

T<sub>1</sub> index: 0

T<sub>2</sub> index: 0

nstrings: 0

strings: 

T <sub>1</sub>
NULL
NULL
NULL

 ←

# Example Race

Consider two threads running the following code:

```
char *strings[4];
int nstrings;
```

```
void setstring(char *str) {
    int index = nstrings;
    strings[index] = str;
    nstrings++;
}
```

$T_1 \rightarrow$

$T_1$  index: 0

$T_2$  index: 0

nstrings: 1

strings:

$T_1$	←
NULL	
NULL	
NULL	



# Example Race

Consider two threads running the following code:

```
char *strings[4];
int nstrings;

void setstring(char *str) {
    int index = nstrings;
    strings[index] = str;
    nstrings++;
}
```

$T_1$  index:  
 $T_2$  index:

nstrings: 2

strings:

$T_1$
NULL
NULL
NULL

←

This is probably not what was intended!

# Critical Sections

```
1 void setstring(char *str) {  
2     int index = nstrings;  
3     strings[index] = str;  
4     nstrings++;  
5 }
```

Lines 2-4 of `setstring()` form a **critical section**.

A **critical section** is a **region of code** that must be accessed by **at most one control flow at a time**.

# Critical Sections

Critical sections often contain code that accesses shared state.

In most cases, any write to shared state is a critical section.<sup>1</sup>

Reads from shared state may not be critical sections, particularly if the state is immutable or changes infrequently.

It is important to define critical sections carefully and completely.

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<sup>1</sup>There exist protocols that allow concurrent writes, however.

# Atomic Operations

Atomic operations are the simplest synchronization mechanism.

An atomic operation:

- Cannot be interrupted
- Appears as if no other operations run concurrently
- Always either fully succeeds or fails with no effects

Every atomic operation requires hardware support.

Not all machine instructions are atomic!

(In fact, often very few are.)



# Atomic Operations in C

C provides **no guaranteed atomic operations**.<sup>2</sup>

Atomic operations for synchronization from C require one of:

- Inline assembly code
- Library functions
- Knowledge of the compiler implementation
- Kernel assistance

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<sup>2</sup>There is `sig_atomic_t`, which is atomic *with respect to signals*.

# Mutual Exclusion

Mutual exclusion is a tool for ensuring that **only one logical control flow** accesses some resource.

It is one of the **most basic** synchronization methods.

Mutual exclusion maps almost directly to critical sections:

- The code of the critical section is the resource

# The Mutex

A software tool for providing mutual exclusion is the **mutex**.

It provides two operations:

- Lock
- Unlock

<i>Operation</i>	<i>Mutex State</i>	<i>Action</i>
Lock	Unlocked	Lock mutex immediately <sup>3</sup>
Lock	Locked	Block until unlocked, then lock
Unlock	Locked	Unlock mutex immediately
Unlock	Unlocked	Implementation dependent

<sup>3</sup>If a flow locks a mutex that the *same flow* has already locked, behavior is implementation-dependent.

# Synchronization with Mutexes

Mutexes can be used to provide **synchronization**.

They can:

- Ensure that two actions do not happen **simultaneously**
- Ensure that one action **follows another**

They can be **used to create** mechanisms to:

- Directly **order events**
- Ensure that two events **begin** at the same time
- ...

Many **other synchronization “primitives”** use mutexes.

# Using Mutexes around Critical Sections

The typical use of a mutex is to **protect a critical section**.

Every concurrent flow will:

1. Lock a mutex
2. Execute the critical section
3. Unlock the mutex

Since **only one flow** can lock the mutex at a time, this **ensures mutual exclusion in the critical section**.

# Semaphores

Semaphores are a **generalization of the mutex**.

A semaphore is associated with a **number**.

There are two operations on a semaphore, variously named:

- P and V
- down and up
- wait and post
- ...

We will use **P and V** (after the original Dijkstra paper).

# Semaphore Operations

P (for *proberen* in Dutch, or “to test”)

V (for *verhogen*, “to increment”)

A semaphore  $s$  is initialized with a nonnegative integer.

P( $s$ ) attempts to decrement the integer:

- If it can be decremented and remain nonnegative (*i.e.*, it is  $\geq 1$ ), P returns immediately
- If decrementing it would make it negative (*i.e.*, it is 0), P blocks until it is  $> 0$

V( $s$ ) increments the integer:

- If the incremented value is 1, it releases one flow blocked on P, if such a flow exists

# Semaphores as Mutexes

A semaphore **initialized with the value 1** behaves like a mutex.

- P(s) succeeds immediately for the first logical control flow to attempt it
- Any further flows **block on P(s)** because s is now zero
- V(s) **releases one flow** blocked on s because s is now one

<i>Semaphore value</i>	<i>Equivalent mutex state</i>
1	Unlocked
0	Locked



# Condition Variables

Condition variables allow a logical control flow to **block until some condition is met**.

They work **with mutexes** to provide **efficient blocking**.

The **holder of a mutex that is locked** can **block for a certain condition** by:

- **Waiting** on a condition variable in a loop
- **Testing** the condition when awakened
- **Breaking the loop** if the condition is met

A concurrent flow that **may have satisfied the condition** can:

- **Broadcast** to all waiting flows
- **Signal** one waiting flow

# Mutex Interactions

The waiting flow **must hold a mutex** to wait.

The mutex **must protect data** used in the condition check.

Upon waiting, **the mutex will be unlocked**.

Upon awaking, **the waiting flow will re-lock the mutex**.

This means that the waiting flow **cannot assume the protected data remained unchanged** while it waited.

This complicated mutex interaction **allows the signaling flow to modify the protected data**.

# Wake and Check

The **wake and check** procedure allows:

- A thread to safely signal the condition even if it is **not sure** it has been met
- A condition to be signaled **in the presence of newcomers** that may falsify it before the waiting thread is scheduled
- Threads to be **spuriously woken** for other reasons (e.g., asynchronous notifications)

# Example Condition Control Flow

```
Mutex m
ConditionVariable cv
Data d

waiter() {
    lock m
    while condition on d {
        wait on cv
    }
    take action
    unlock m
}

signaler() {
    lock m
    modify d
    signal cv
    unlock m
}
```

# Deadlock

**Deadlock** is a condition in concurrent programming where two or more concurrent flows are **waiting for each other** and thus can never make progress.

Consider:

flow A:

```
lock mutex m0
lock mutex m1
do something
```

flow B:

```
lock mutex m1
lock mutex m0
do something
```

If flow A is interrupted by flow B **after locking m0 and before locking m1**, deadlock occurs.

Neither flow can **proceed**, and neither can **release the other**.

# Necessary Conditions

For deadlock to occur, **all of the following** must be true [2]:

- At least one resource is **mutually exclusive**.
- Flows **hold locks** while waiting for other locks to become available
- Locks cannot be **preempted**: once a flow holds a lock, it holds it until it voluntarily releases it.
- A circular chain of flows exists, such that each flow holds some lock required by the next flow

# Avoiding Deadlock

Deadlock is **caused by synchronization**.

There are **various techniques to avoid deadlock**.

For deadlock caused by **mutual exclusion on multiple locks**, there is a simple solution:

- All mutexes in a system are **ordered** (perhaps artificially)
- All flows lock mutexes **in order**
- All flows unlock mutexes **in reverse order**

# Summary

- A **race** is a situation where program correctness depends on the **order of operations in concurrent flows**.
- **Data races** are races involving **modification of data**.
- **Synchronization** is the **deliberate ordering of events**.
- A **critical section** is a **region of code** that must be accessed by **at most one concurrent flow at a time**.
- Synchronization primitives:
  - Atomic operations
  - Mutexes
  - Semaphores
  - Condition variables
- **Deadlock** is a program error **caused by synchronization**.



# Next Time ...

- POSIX threads
- POSIX mutexes
- POSIX semaphores
- POSIX condition variables
- Basically POSIX

# References I

## Required Readings

- [1] Randal E. Bryant and David R. O'Hallaron. *Computer Science: A Programmer's Perspective*. Third Edition. Chapter 12: 12.4-12.7. Pearson, 2016.

## Optional Readings

- [2] E. G. Coffman Jr., M. J. Elphick, and A. Shoshani. "System Deadlocks". In: *Computing Surveys* 3.2 (June 1971).

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