Concurrent Programming (I)

Overview

- A concurrent program is a program designed to have two or more execution contexts. Such a program is said to be multithreaded, since more than once execution context can be active simultaneously.
- Although the programs used in this course so far are all single-threaded, multithread programming is widely used in daily life.

- Do you know any examples of concurrent programming?
  • One typical example is the networks. Take myColby for instance, what we use on a web browser is the front end of myColby system. We call it the client side. There is a database system on the other side of the network managing all kinds of information, such as students’ information, faculty’s information, courses’ information, and etc. We all the database system the server side, which is the back end of the myColby system.
  • Every time a student logs into myColby, a new thread is created for the student. So that the server side must be able to handle multithreads.
  • Please note that all these threads share the same database systems. A database consists of a number of tables. A table is actually a piece of memory. It is very possible that several users want to access the same piece of memory at the same time: read the information or modify the information stored at that piece of memory (the remaining seats of a course).
  • How to make those uses can access to the same piece of memory successfully and get the correct information. These make concurrent programming challenging but interesting.

- Two fundamental problems:
  • Race condition
  • Deadlock
Race Condition

- **Race condition** is one of the **fundamental problems** that can occur while **executing** different threads **asynchronously**.
- A race condition **occurs when the meaning of a program depends upon the order in which** each thread accesses a shared variable.
- Take post-increment for example. **Post-increment** is **not atomic**. It actually takes three machine instructions:
  1. fetch the value from memory
  2. calculate the new value
  3. write the new value back to the memory

- Suppose there are two threads, A and B, executing the post-increment statement simultaneously, and suppose the initial value of i is 0.

- **What are the possible results we can get?**
  - If A and B execute the three steps in the second order, the value of i is 2 after finishing executing.
  - All other possible orders lead to the value of i is 2.

```
i++
```

```markdown
1. fetch i value, v, from memory
2. calculate new value v' based on v
3. store v' back to the memory allocated to i
```

Dinning Philosophers

- It is **unrealistic and fanciful**. But the **synchronization behavior** that it models can happen in **real system**.
- The **description** of this problem is that:
  - A collection of **N philosophers** sits at a round table, where N > 1.
  - **N chopsticks** are placed on the table, one between each pair of adjacent philosophers.
  - No philosopher can eat unless he has **two chopsticks**.
• If a philosopher doesn’t eat, the he/she is back to sleep.
- Obviously, adjacent philosophers cannot eat at the same time. Each philosopher alternately
eats and sleeps, waiting when necessary for the requisite chopsticks before eating.
- Our task is to write code simulating the dining philosophers so that no philosopher starves.
- An obvious protocol that each philosopher might follow is:
  ```java
  while (true) {
    grab left chopstick;
    grab right chopstick;
    eat;
    release left chopstick;
    release right chopstick;
    sleep;
  }
  ```

- What is the problem of this program? How could the problem happen?
  • This code leads to a deadlock.
  • Now assume that action of the philosophers are perfectly interleaved: the first philosopher
    grabs his left chopstick, then the second philosopher grabs his left chopstick, and so in until
    the Nth philosopher grabs his left chopstick. Then the first philosopher tries to grab his right
    chopstick, the second philosopher tries to grab his right chopstick, and so on. they all have
to wait because no right chopstick is available and they all starve.

Deadlocks
- A deadlock occurs when a ring of threads comes to a point in the program where each needs
  a resource from the next thread in the ring in order to continue. No thread can provide the
  resource because each thread is waiting for another thread.
- What are the possible solutions to this problem?
  • Theoretical computer scientists have proven that there is no deterministic uniform
    solution to this problem. (By uniform, we mean that every philosopher executes exactly
    the same code with no access to identifying state information such as the name of the
    “current” philosopher.) But many non-uniform solutions exists.
  • For example, we could number the philosophers. Even numbered philosophers ask for
    the left chopstick first, odd numbered ones ask for
    the right chopstick first.
  • Another common solution to this sort of deadlock is to order the resources (in this case chopsticks) and force
    the processes (philosophers) to grab chopsticks in ascending order. This solution is very general and is
    widely used in practice.
  - Consider the case where we have 3 philosophers: P1, P2, P3. Then we order the chopsticks C1, C2, C3,
    as shown in the figure on the right.
Now, no matter what, all the philosophers will be able to eat. For instance, if P2 gets C1, and P3 gets C2, P1 must wait until C1 is free (grabbing in ascending order). So P3 will get C3 (since there will be no contention), and finish eating. This will release C2 and C3, allowing P2 to get C2 and finish eating. Finally, this will release C1, allowing P1 to get C1 and C3 (since there will be no further contention) and finish eating.