

# Lecture 31: Concurrency issues

David Hovemeyer

April 20, 2026

601.229 Computer Systems Fundamentals



# Outline

- ▶ Deadlocks
- ▶ Condition variables
- ▶ Amdahl's Law
- ▶ Atomic machine instructions, lock free data structures

Code examples on web page: `synch2.zip`

# Deadlocks

# Modified shared counter program

```
// Data structure
typedef struct {
    volatile int count;
    pthread_mutex_t lock, lock2;
} Shared;

// thread 1 critical section
pthread_mutex_lock(&obj->lock);
pthread_mutex_lock(&obj->lock2);
obj->count++;
pthread_mutex_unlock(&obj->lock2);
pthread_mutex_unlock(&obj->lock);

// thread 2 critical section
pthread_mutex_lock(&obj->lock2);
pthread_mutex_lock(&obj->lock);
obj->count++;
pthread_mutex_unlock(&obj->lock);
pthread_mutex_unlock(&obj->lock2);
```

# Modified shared counter program

Acquire obj->lock, then obj->lock2

```
// Data structure
typedef struct {
    volatile int count;
    pthread_mutex_t lock, lock2;
} Shared;

// thread 1 critical section
pthread_mutex_lock(&obj->lock);
pthread_mutex_lock(&obj->lock2);
obj->count++;
pthread_mutex_unlock(&obj->lock2);
pthread_mutex_unlock(&obj->lock);

// thread 2 critical section
pthread_mutex_lock(&obj->lock2);
pthread_mutex_lock(&obj->lock);
obj->count++;
pthread_mutex_unlock(&obj->lock);
pthread_mutex_unlock(&obj->lock2);
```

# Modified shared counter program

Acquire obj->lock2, then obj->lock

```
// Data structure
typedef struct {
    volatile int count;
    pthread_mutex_t lock, lock2;
} Shared;

// thread 1 critical section
pthread_mutex_lock(&obj->lock);
pthread_mutex_lock(&obj->lock2);
obj->count++;
pthread_mutex_unlock(&obj->lock2);
pthread_mutex_unlock(&obj->lock);

// thread 2 critical section
pthread_mutex_lock(&obj->lock2);
pthread_mutex_lock(&obj->lock);
obj->count++;
pthread_mutex_unlock(&obj->lock);
pthread_mutex_unlock(&obj->lock2);
```

# Running the program

```
$ make incr_deadlock
gcc -Wall -Wextra -pedantic -std=gnu11 -O2 -c incr_deadlock.c
gcc -o incr_deadlock incr_deadlock.o -lpthread
$ ./incr_deadlock
hangs indefinitely...
```

# Deadlock

Use of blocking synchronization constructs such as semaphores and mutexes can lead to *deadlock*

In the previous example:



# Deadlock

Use of blocking synchronization constructs such as semaphores and mutexes can lead to *deadlock*

In the previous example:

- ▶ Thread 1 acquires `obj->lock` and waits to acquire `obj->lock2`

# Deadlock

Use of blocking synchronization constructs such as semaphores and mutexes can lead to *deadlock*

In the previous example:

- ▶ Thread 1 acquires `obj->lock` and waits to acquire `obj->lock2`
- ▶ Thread 2 acquires `obj->lock2` and waits to acquire `obj->lock`

# Deadlock

Use of blocking synchronization constructs such as semaphores and mutexes can lead to *deadlock*

In the previous example:

- ▶ Thread 1 acquires `obj->lock` and waits to acquire `obj->lock2`
- ▶ Thread 2 acquires `obj->lock2` and waits to acquire `obj->lock`

*Neither thread can make progress!*

# Resource allocation graph

Resource allocation graph:

# Resource allocation graph

Resource allocation graph:

- ▶ Nodes represent threads and lockable resources

# Resource allocation graph

Resource allocation graph:

- ▶ Nodes represent threads and lockable resources
- ▶ Edges between threads and resources

# Resource allocation graph

Resource allocation graph:

- ▶ Nodes represent threads and lockable resources
- ▶ Edges between threads and resources
- ▶ Edge from resource to thread: thread has locked the resource

# Resource allocation graph

Resource allocation graph:

- ▶ Nodes represent threads and lockable resources
- ▶ Edges between threads and resources
- ▶ Edge from resource to thread: thread has locked the resource
- ▶ Edge from thread to resource: thread is waiting to lock the resource



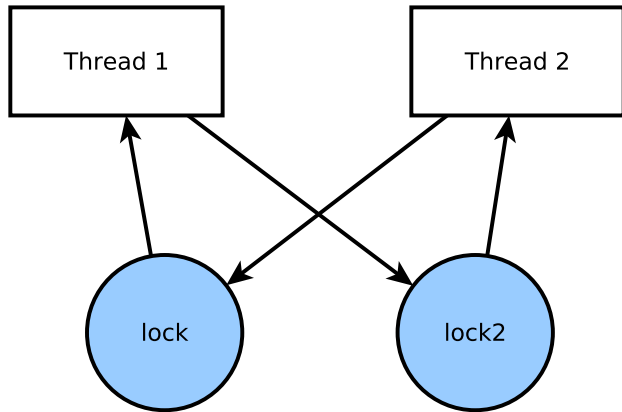
# Resource allocation graph

Resource allocation graph:

- ▶ Nodes represent threads and lockable resources
- ▶ Edges between threads and resources
- ▶ Edge from resource to thread: thread has locked the resource
- ▶ Edge from thread to resource: thread is waiting to lock the resource

Cycle indicates a deadlock

# Deadlock situation



# Avoiding deadlocks

Deadlocks can only occur if

# Avoiding deadlocks

Deadlocks can only occur if

- ▶ threads attempt to acquire multiple locks simultaneously, and

# Avoiding deadlocks

Deadlocks can only occur if

- ▶ threads attempt to acquire multiple locks simultaneously, and
- ▶ there is not a globally-consistent lock acquisition order

# Avoiding deadlocks

Deadlocks can only occur if

- ▶ threads attempt to acquire multiple locks simultaneously, and
- ▶ there is not a globally-consistent lock acquisition order

Trivially, if threads only acquire one lock at a time, deadlocks can't occur

Maintaining a consistent lock acquisition order also works

# Clicker quiz!

Clicker quiz omitted from public slides

# Clicker quiz!

Clicker quiz omitted from public slides



# Trivial self-deadlock

Can you spot the error in the following critical section?

```
pthread_mutex_lock(&obj->lock);  
obj->count++;  
pthread_mutex_lock(&obj->lock);
```

# Trivial self-deadlock

Can you spot the error in the following critical section?

```
pthread_mutex_lock(&obj->lock);  
obj->count++;  
pthread_mutex_lock(&obj->lock);
```

This mistake is easy to make because `pthread_mutex_lock` and `pthread_mutex_unlock` have very similar names

# Less trivial self-deadlock

Another type of self-deadlock can occur if multiple functions have critical sections, and one calls another:

```
void func1(Shared *obj) {  
    pthread_mutex_lock(&obj->lock);  
    // critical section...  
    pthread_mutex_unlock(&obj->lock);  
}
```

```
void func2(Shared *obj) {  
    pthread_mutex_lock(&obj->lock);  
    // another critical section...  
    func1(obj);  
    pthread_mutex_unlock(&obj->lock);  
}
```

# Avoiding self-deadlock

A good approach to avoiding self-deadlock is:

- ▶ avoid acquiring locks in helper functions
- ▶ make “higher-level” functions (often, the “public” API functions of the locked data structure) responsible for acquiring locks

Example:

```
void highlevel_fn(Shared *obj) {  
    pthread_mutex_lock(&obj->lock);  
    helper(obj);  
    pthread_mutex_unlock(&obj->lock);  
}
```

```
void helper(Shared *obj) {  
    // critical section...  
}
```

# Condition variables

# Condition variables

*Condition variables* are another type of synchronization construct supported by pthreads

They allow threads to wait for a condition to become true: for example,

- ▶ Wait for queue to become non-empty
- ▶ Wait for queue to become non-full
- ▶ etc.

They work in conjunction with a mutex

# Condition variable API

Data type: `pthread_cond_t`

Functions:

- ▶ `pthread_cond_init`: initialize a condition variable
- ▶ `pthread_cond_destroy`: destroy a condition variable
- ▶ `pthread_cond_wait`: wait on a condition variable, unlocking mutex (so other threads can enter critical sections)
- ▶ `pthread_cond_broadcast`: wake up waiting threads because condition may have been enabled

# Bounded queue example

BoundedQueue data type:

```
typedef struct {  
    void **data;  
    unsigned max_items, count, head, tail;  
    pthread_mutex_t lock;  
    pthread_cond_t not_empty, not_full;  
} BoundedQueue;
```

Creating a BoundedQueue:

```
BoundedQueue *bqueue_create(unsigned max_items) {  
    BoundedQueue *bq = malloc(sizeof(BoundedQueue));  
    bq->data = malloc(max_items * sizeof(void *));  
    bq->max_items = max_items;  
    bq->count = bq->head = bq->tail = 0;  
    pthread_mutex_init(&bq->lock, NULL);  
    pthread_cond_init(&bq->not_full, NULL);  
    pthread_cond_init(&bq->not_empty, NULL);  
    return bq;  
}
```



# Bounded queue example

Enqueueing an item:

```
void bqueue_enqueue(BoundedQueue *bq, void *item) {  
    pthread_mutex_lock(&bq->lock);  
  
    while (bq->count >= bq->max_items) {  
        pthread_cond_wait(&bq->not_full, &bq->lock);  
    }  
  
    bq->data[bq->head] = item;  
    bq->head = (bq->head + 1) % bq->max_items;  
    bq->count++;  
  
    pthread_cond_broadcast(&bq->not_empty);  
  
    pthread_mutex_unlock(&bq->lock);  
}
```

# Bounded queue example

Enqueuing an item:

Acquire mutex

```
void bqueue_enqueue(BoundedQueue *bq, void *item) {  
    pthread_mutex_lock(&bq->lock);  
  
    while (bq->count >= bq->max_items) {  
        pthread_cond_wait(&bq->not_full, &bq->lock);  
    }  
  
    bq->data[bq->head] = item;  
    bq->head = (bq->head + 1) % bq->max_items;  
    bq->count++;  
  
    pthread_cond_broadcast(&bq->not_empty);  
  
    pthread_mutex_unlock(&bq->lock);  
}
```

# Bounded queue example

Enqueueing an item:

```
void bqueue_enqueue(BoundedQueue *bq, void *item) {  
    pthread_mutex_lock(&bq->lock);
```

Wait for queue to  
become non-full

```
    while (bq->count >= bq->max_items) {  
        pthread_cond_wait(&bq->not_full, &bq->lock);  
    }
```

```
    bq->data[bq->head] = item;  
    bq->head = (bq->head + 1) % bq->max_items;  
    bq->count++;
```

```
    pthread_cond_broadcast(&bq->not_empty);
```

```
    pthread_mutex_unlock(&bq->lock);  
}
```

# Bounded queue example

Enqueuing an item:

```
void bqueue_enqueue(BoundedQueue *bq, void *item) {  
    pthread_mutex_lock(&bq->lock);  
  
    while (bq->count >= bq->max_items) {  
        pthread_cond_wait(&bq->not_full, &bq->lock);  
    }  
  
    bq->data[bq->head] = item;  
    bq->head = (bq->head + 1) % bq->max_items;  
    bq->count++;  
  
    pthread_cond_broadcast(&bq->not_empty);  
  
    pthread_mutex_unlock(&bq->lock);  
}
```

Add item to  
queue

# Bounded queue example

Enqueuing an item:

```
void bqueue_enqueue(BoundedQueue *bq, void *item) {  
    pthread_mutex_lock(&bq->lock);  
  
    while (bq->count >= bq->max_items) {  
        pthread_cond_wait(&bq->not_full, &bq->lock);  
    }  
  
    bq->data[bq->head] = item;  
    bq->head = (bq->head + 1) % bq->max_items;  
    bq->count++;  
  
    pthread_cond_broadcast(&bq->not_empty);  
  
    pthread_mutex_unlock(&bq->lock);  
}
```

Wake up threads  
waiting for queue  
to be non-empty

# Bounded queue example

Enqueuing an item:

```
void bqueue_enqueue(BoundedQueue *bq, void *item) {  
    pthread_mutex_lock(&bq->lock);  
  
    while (bq->count >= bq->max_items) {  
        pthread_cond_wait(&bq->not_full, &bq->lock);  
    }  
  
    bq->data[bq->head] = item;  
    bq->head = (bq->head + 1) % bq->max_items;  
    bq->count++;  
  
    pthread_cond_broadcast(&bq->not_empty);  
  
    pthread_mutex_unlock(&bq->lock);  
}
```

Release mutex

# Using condition variables

Principles for using condition variables:

# Using condition variables

Principles for using condition variables:

- ▶ Each condition variable must be associated with a mutex



# Using condition variables

Principles for using condition variables:

- ▶ Each condition variable must be associated with a mutex
- ▶ Multiple condition variables can be associated with the same mutex

# Using condition variables

Principles for using condition variables:

- ▶ Each condition variable must be associated with a mutex
- ▶ Multiple condition variables can be associated with the same mutex
- ▶ The mutex must be locked when waiting on a condition variable
  - ▶ `pthread_cond_wait` releases the mutex, then reacquires it when the wait is ended (by another thread doing a broadcast)

# Using condition variables

Principles for using condition variables:

- ▶ Each condition variable must be associated with a mutex
- ▶ Multiple condition variables can be associated with the same mutex
- ▶ The mutex must be locked when waiting on a condition variable
  - ▶ `pthread_cond_wait` releases the mutex, then reacquires it when the wait is ended (by another thread doing a broadcast)
- ▶ `pthread_cond_wait` must be done in a loop!
  - ▶ Spurious wakeups are possible, so waited-for condition must be re-checked

# Using condition variables

Principles for using condition variables:

- ▶ Each condition variable must be associated with a mutex
- ▶ Multiple condition variables can be associated with the same mutex
- ▶ The mutex must be locked when waiting on a condition variable
  - ▶ `pthread_cond_wait` releases the mutex, then reacquires it when the wait is ended (by another thread doing a broadcast)
- ▶ `pthread_cond_wait` must be done in a loop!
  - ▶ Spurious wakeups are possible, so waited-for condition must be re-checked
- ▶ Use `pthread_cond_broadcast` whenever a condition *might* have been enabled

# Amdahl's Law

# Speedup

Let's say you're parallelizing a computation: goal is to make the computation complete as fast as possible

Say that  $t_s$  is the sequential running time, and  $t_p$  is the parallel running time

*Speedup* (denoted  $S$ ) is  $t_s/t_p$

E.g., say that  $t_s$  is 10 and  $t_p$  is 2, then  $S = 10/2 = 5$

# Maximum speedup

Let  $P$  be the number of processor cores

In theory, speedup  $S$  cannot be greater than  $P$

So, in the ideal case,

$$S = P = t_s/t_p$$

implying that

$$t_p = t_s/P$$

# Maximum speedup

Let  $P$  be the number of processor cores

In theory, speedup  $S$  cannot be greater than  $P$

So, in the ideal case,

$$S = P = t_s/t_p$$

implying that

$$t_p = t_s/P$$

Note that  $\lim_{P \rightarrow \infty} t_s/P$  is 0

- ▶ Meaning that throwing an arbitrary number of cores at a computation should improve performance by an arbitrary factor
- ▶ That would be great!



When speedup  $S = P$ , we have perfect *scalability*

This is difficult to achieve in practice because parallel computations generally have some *sequential overhead* which cannot be (easily) parallelized:

- ▶ Divide up work
- ▶ Synchronization overhead
- ▶ Combining solutions to subproblems
- ▶ etc.

# Amdahl's Law

Say that, for some computational problem, the proportions of inherently sequential and parallelizable computation are  $w_s$  and  $w_p$ , respectively

Note that  $w_s + w_p = 1$ , so  $w_p = 1 - w_s$

Normalized sequential execution time  $t_s$ :

$$t_s = 1 = w_s + w_p$$

Parallel execution time using  $P$  cores:

$$t_p = w_s + \frac{w_p}{P} = w_s + \frac{1 - w_s}{P}$$

# Amdahl's Law

Speedup using  $P$  cores:

$$S = \frac{t_s}{t_p} = \frac{1}{w_s + \frac{1-w_s}{P}}$$

As  $P \rightarrow \infty$ ,  $\frac{1-w_s}{P} \rightarrow 0$ , so

$$S \rightarrow \frac{1}{w_s}$$

Let's say  $w_s = .05$ : maximum speedup is  $1/.05 = 20$

► This is regardless of how many cores we use!

# Gustafson-Barsis's Law

Amdahl's Law assumes that the proportion of inherently sequential computation ( $w_s$ ) is independent of the problem size

Gustafson-Barsis's Law: for some important computations, the proportion of parallelizable computation scales with the problem size

- ▶ These are called *scalable* computations
- ▶ Such computations can realize speedups proportional to  $P$  for a large number of processors

# Atomic machine instructions

# Atomicity

We noted previously that incrementing an integer variable (`obj->count++`) is not atomic

However, modern processors typically support *atomic machine instructions*

- ▶ These are atomic even when used on shared variables by multiple threads

Various ways to use these:

- ▶ Assembly language
- ▶ Compiler intrinsics
- ▶ Language support

# Atomic machine instructions

Typical examples of atomic machine instructions:

- ▶ Increment
- ▶ Decrement
- ▶ Exchange (swap contents of two variables)
- ▶ Compare and swap (compare register and variable, if equal, swap variable's contents with another value)
- ▶ Load linked/store conditional (load from variable, store back to variable only if variable wasn't updated concurrently)

# Atomic increment in x86-64

x86-64 memory instructions can have a *lock* prefix to guarantee atomicity, e.g.:

```
.globl atomic_increment
atomic_increment:
    lock; incl (%rdi)
    ret
```

Calling from C code:

```
void atomic_increment(volatile int *p);

...

atomic_increment(&obj->count);
```

See `incr_atomic.c` and `atomic.S`



# Atomic increment using gcc intrinsics

gcc has a number of intrinsic functions for atomic operations

E.g., atomic increment:

```
__atomic_fetch_add(&obj->count, 1, __ATOMIC_ACQ_REL);
```

See `incr_atomic2.c`

# Atomic increment using C11 `_Atomic`

The C11 standard introduces the `_Atomic` type qualifier

Defining shared counter type:

```
typedef struct {  
    _Atomic int count;  
} Shared;
```

Incrementing the shared counter:

```
obj->count++;
```

See `incr_atomic3.c`

# Lock-free data structures

Atomic machine instructions can be the basis for *lock-free data structures*

Basic ideas:

- ▶ Data structure must always be in a valid state!
- ▶ Transactional: mutators speculatively create a proposed update and attempt to commit it using compare-and-swap (or load linked/ store conditional)
- ▶ Retry transaction if another thread committed an update concurrently, invalidating proposed update

Issue: waits and wake-ups are not really possible

- ▶ E.g., when trying to dequeue from an empty queue, can't easily wait for item to be available, calling thread must spin