Lecture 34: Synchronization and Communication

Problem From Last Time

- Simultaneous operations on data from two different programs can cause incorrect (even bizarre) behavior.
- Example: In

```
Program #1                          Program #2
balance = balance + deposit         balance = balance + deposit
```

  both programs can pick up the old value of `deposit` before either of them has incremented it. One deposit is lost.

- We define the desired outcomes as those that would happen if withdrawals happened sequentially, in *some* order.
- The *nondeterminism* as to which order we get is acceptable, but results that are inconsistent with both orderings are not.
- These latter happen when operations overlap, so that the two processes see *inconsistent* views of the account.
- We want the withdrawal operation to act as if it is *atomic*—as if, once started, the operation proceeds without interruption and without any overlapping effects from other operations.

One Solution: Critical Sections

- Some programming languages (e.g., Java) have special syntax for this. In Python, we can arrange something like this:

```
manager = CriticalSection()
def withdraw(amount):
    with manager:
        if amount > self._balance:
            raise ValueError("insufficient funds")
        else:
            self._balance -= amount
            return self._balance
```

- The `with` construct essentially does this:

```
manager.__enter__()
try:
    if amount > self._balance:
    ...
finally:
    manager.__exit__()
```

- Idea is that our *CriticalSection* object should let just one process through at a time. How?

Aside: Context managers

- The **with** statement may be used for anything that requires establishing a (temporary) *local context* for doing some action.
- A common use: files:

```
with open(input_name) as inp, open(output_name, "w") as out:
    out.write(inp.read())  # Copy from input to output
```

- `inp` and `out` are local names for two files created by `open`.
- File objects happen to have `__enter__` and `__exit__` methods.
- The `__exit__` method on files closes them.
- Thus, the program above is *guaranteed* to close all its files, no matter what happens.
- *[End of Aside]*

Locks

- To implement our critical sections, we'll need some help from the operating system or underlying hardware.
- A common low-level construct is the *lock* or *mutex* (for "mutual exclusion"): an object that at any given time is "owned" by one process.
- If `L` is a lock, then
  - `L.acquire()` attempts to own `L` on behalf of the calling process. If someone else owns it, the caller *waits* for it to be release.
  - `L.release()` relinquishes ownership of `L` (if the calling process owns it).

Implementing Critical Regions

- Using locks, it's easy to create the desired context manager:

```
from threading import Lock

class CriticalSection:
    def __init__(self):
        self.__lock = Lock()

    def __enter__(self):
        self.__lock.acquire()

    def __exit__(self, exception_type, exception_val, traceback):
        self.__lock.release()
CriticalSectionManager = CriticalSection()
```

- The extra arguments to `__exit__` provide information about the exception, if any, that caused the **with** body to be exited.
- (In fact, the bare `Lock` type itself already has `__enter__` and `__exit__` procedures, so you don't really have to define an extra type).

Granularity

- We've envisioned critical sections as being atomic with respect to *all* other critical sections.
- Has the advantage of simplicity and safety, but causes unnecessary waits.
- In fact, different accounts need not coordinate with each other. We can have a separate critical section manager (or lock) for each account object:

```
class BankAccount:
    def __init__(self, initial_balance):
        self._balance = initial_balance
        self._critical = CriticalSection()
    def withdraw(self, amount):
        with self._critical:
          ...
```

- That is, can produce a solution with finer *granularity* of locks.

Synchronization

- Another kind of problem arises when different processes must communicate. In that case, one may have to wait for the other to send something.
- This, for example, doesn't work too well:

```
class Mailbox:
    def __init__(self):
        self._queue = []
    def deposit(self, msg):
        self._queue.append(msg)
    def pickup(self):
        while not self._queue:
            pass
        return self._queue.pop()
```

- Idea is that one process deposits a message for another to pick up later.
- What goes wrong?

Problems with the Naive Mailbox

```
class Mailbox:
    def __init__(self):
        self._queue = []
    def deposit(self, msg):
        self._queue.append(msg)
    def pickup(self):
        while not self._queue:
            pass
        return self._queue.pop()
```

- *Inconsistency:* Two processes picking up mail can find the queue occupied simultaneously, but only one will succeed in picking up mail, and the other will get exception.
- *Busy-waiting:* The loop that waits for a message uses up processor time.
- *Deadlock:* If one is running two logical processes on one processor, busy-waiting can lead to nobody making any progress.
- *Starvation:* Even without busy-waiting one process can be shut out from ever getting mail.

Conditions

- One way to deal with this is to augment locks with *conditions:*

```
from threading import Condition
class Mailbox:
    def __init__(self):
        self._queue = []
        self._condition = Condition()
    def deposit(self, msg):
        with self._condition:
            self._queue.append(msg)
            self._condition.notify()
    def pickup(self):
        with self._condition:
             while not self._queue:
                 self._condition.wait()
             return self._queue.pop()
```

- Conditions act like locks with methods `wait`, `notify` (and others).
- `wait` releases the lock, waits for someone to call `notify`, and then reacquires the lock.

Another Approach: Messages

- Turn the problem inside out: instead of client processes deciding how to coordinate their operations on data, let the *data* coordinate its actions.
- From the Mailbox's perspective, things look like this:

```
self._queue = []
while True:
   wait for a request, R, to deposit or pickup
   if R is a deposit of msg:
      self.__queue.append(msg)
      send back acknowledgement
   elif self.__queue and R is a pickup:
      msg = self.__queue.pop()
      send back msg
```

- From a bank account's:

```
while True:
   wait for a request, R, to deposit or withdraw
   if R is a deposit of d:
      self.balance += d
   elif R is a withdrawal of w:
      self.balance -= w
```

Rendezvous

- Following ideas from C.A.R Hoare, the Ada language used the notion of a *rendezvous* for this purpose:

```
task type Mailbox is
   entry deposit(Msg: String);
   entry pickup(Msg: out String);
end Mailbox;

task body Mailbox is
    Queue: ...
begin
    loop
        select
          accept deposit(Msg: String) do Queue.append(Msg); end;
        or when not Queue.empty =>
          accept pickup(Msg: out String) do Queue.pop(Msg); end;
        end select;
    end loop;
end;
```

Observation: Processes as Structure

- We've been talking about using multiple processes to do multiple things simultaneously.
- But we can also think of them as expressing *logically* independent tasks in a way that makes their independence clear.
- We've seen an example already: *generators* are a kind of highly synchronized process that express some operation (say, traversing a tree) purely from the point of view of one of the participants (the tree).
- Operating systems running on single processors may have many users' processes, but they don't all run at the same time—they take turns.
- Conceptually, however, these processes are independent and their operation can be expressed without reference to other processes.

Concurrent Processes In Python

- Python provides two different kinds of concurrent process: the *thread* and (newer) the *Process*.
- Threads are intended to be used for structural purposes, as in the last slide, and do not really run in parallel on our Python implementation.
- Processes are intended to express possibly parallel operation.

Example of Process

```
from multiprocessing import Process, Queue

def search(file_name, Q):
    with open(file_name, out) as inp:
        for line in inp:
            if ok(line):
                Q.put(line)

if __name__ == '__main__':
    q = Queue()
    p1 = Process(target=search, args=(file1, q))
    p1.start()
    p2 = Process(target=search, args=(file2, q))
    p2.start()
    print(q.get())    # prints first result
    print(q.get())    # prints second result
    p1.join()
    p2.join()
```