University of Glasgow | School of Computing Science

Transactions

Advanced Operating Systems
Tutorial 8

Tutorial Outline

- Review of lectured material
- Key points
- Discussion
  - Transactions for managing concurrency
  - Transactions vs. message passing

Review of Lectured Material

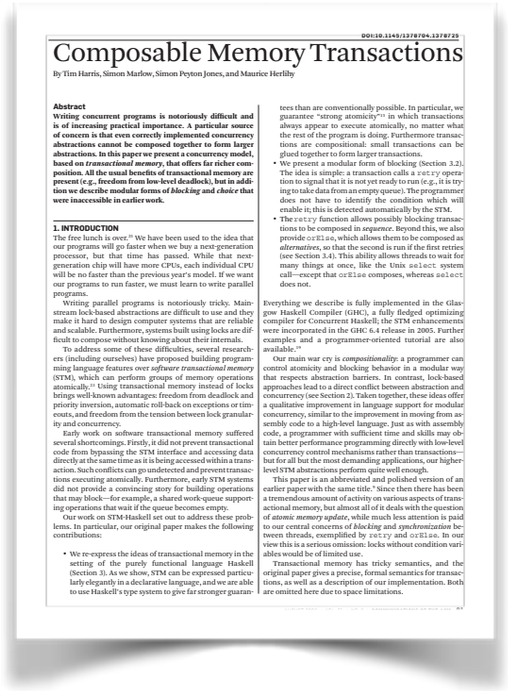
- Concepts of transactions
  - ACID properties
  - Concurrent execution
  - Possible to compose transactions
- Implementation challenges
  - Controlling I/O operations
  - Controlling memory access – rollback and recovery
  - Implementation using monadic concepts
- Integration into Haskell
- Integration challenges for other languages

Key Points

- Understanding of the concepts of transactions
- Understanding of implementation techniques in functional languages
- Awareness of practical challenges

Discussion: Transactions

- T. Harris, S. Marlow, S. Peyton Jones and M. Herlihy, “Composable Memory Transactions”, CACM, 51(8), August 2008. DOI:10.1145/1378704.1378725


DOI:10.1145/1378704.1378725

Composable Memory Transactions

By Tim Harris, Simon Marlow, Simon Peyton Jones, and Maurice Herlihy

Abstract

Writing concurrent programs is notoriously difficult and is of increasing practical importance. A particular source of concern is that even correctly implemented concurrency abstractions cannot be composed together to form larger abstractions. In this paper we present a concurrency model, based on *transactional memory*, that offers far richer composition. All the usual benefits of transactional memory are present (e.g., freedom from low-level deadlock), but in addition we describe modular forms of *blocking* and *choice* that were inaccessible in earlier work.

1. INTRODUCTION

The free lunch is over.” We have been used to the idea that our programs will go faster when we buy a next-generation processor, but that time has passed. While that next-generation chip will have more CPUs, each individual CPU will be no faster than the previous year's model. If we want our programs to run faster, we must learn to write parallel programs.

Writing parallel programs is notoriously tricky. Mainstream lock-based abstractions are difficult to use and they make it hard to design computer systems that are reliable and scalable. Furthermore, systems built using locks are difficult to compose without knowing about their internals.

To address some of these difficulties, several researchers (including ourselves) have proposed building programming language features over *software transactional memory* (STM), which can perform groups of memory operations atomically.[9] Using transactional memory instead of locks brings well-known advantages: freedom from deadlock and priority inversion, automatic roll-back on exceptions or timeouts, and freedom from the tension between lock granularity and concurrency.

Early work on software transactional memory suffered several shortcomings. Firstly, it did not prevent transactional code from bypassing the STM interface and accessing data directly at the same time as it is being accessed within a transaction. Such conflicts can go undetected and prevent transactions executing atomically. Furthermore, early STM systems did not provide a convincing story for building operations that may block—for example, a shared work-queue supporting operations that wait if the queue becomes empty.

Our work on STM-Haskell set out to address these problems. In particular, our original paper makes the following contributions:

- We re-express the ideas of transactional memory in the setting of the purely functional language Haskell (Section 3). As we show, STM can be expressed particularly elegantly in a declarative language, and we are able to use Haskell's type system to give far stronger guarantees than are conventionally possible. In particular, we guarantee “strong atomicity”[11] in which transactions always appear to execute atomically, no matter what the rest of the program is doing. Furthermore transactions are compositional: small transactions can be glued together to form larger transactions.
- We present a modular form of blocking (Section 3.2). The idea is simple: a transaction calls a `retry` operation to signal that it is not yet ready to run (e.g., it is trying to take data from an empty queue). The programmer does not have to identify the condition which will enable it; this is detected automatically by the STM.
- The `retry` function allows possibly blocking transactions to be composed in *sequence*. Beyond this, we also provide `orElse`, which allows them to be composed as *alternatives*, so that the second is run if the first retries (see Section 3.4). This ability allows threads to wait for many things at once, like the Unix `select` system call—except that `orElse` composes, whereas `select` does not.

Everything we describe is fully implemented in the Glasgow Haskell Compiler (GHC), a fully fledged optimizing compiler for Concurrent Haskell; the STM enhancements were incorporated in the GHC 6.4 release in 2005. Further examples and a programmer-oriented tutorial are also available.”

Our main war cry is *compositionality*: a programmer can control atomicity and blocking behavior in a modular way that respects abstraction barriers. In contrast, lock-based approaches lead to a direct conflict between abstraction and concurrency (see Section 2). Taken together, these ideas offer a qualitative improvement in language support for modular concurrency, similar to the improvement in moving from assembly code to a high-level language. Just as with assembly code, a programmer with sufficient time and skills may obtain better performance programming directly with low-level concurrency control mechanisms rather than transactions—but for all but the most demanding applications, our higher-level STM abstractions perform quite well enough.

This paper is an abbreviated and polished version of an earlier paper with the same title.” Since then there has been a tremendous amount of activity on various aspects of transactional memory, but almost all of it deals with the question of *atomic memory update*, while much less attention is paid to our central concerns of *blocking* and *synchronization* between threads, exemplified by `retry` and `orElse`. In our view this is a serious omission: locks without condition variables would be of limited use.

Transactional memory has tricky semantics, and the original paper gives a precise, formal semantics for transactions, as well as a description of our implementation. Both are omitted here due to space limitations.

- Assumption: shared memory system, doesn't work with distributed and networked systems
- Concurrent Haskell:
  - Monadic IO; do notation; IORefs; spawning threads
  - Type system separates state and stateless computation
- The STM interface
  - Composition; the STM monad, atomic, retry, and orElse, TVars
  - Is transactional memory a realistic technique?
- Do its requirements for a purely functional language, with controlled I/O, restrict it to being a research toy?
- How much benefit can be gained from transactional memory in more traditional languages

Discussion: Transactions vs. Messages

- Two very different approaches to concurrency offered by transactions and message passing

- Conceptual purity vs. engineering pragmatics?
  - Message passing is intuitive, easy to integrate into existing systems, but doesn't solve the problem of composition?
  - Transactions are theoretically elegant, but cannot be integrated into real-world systems?

- How should future systems be designed?

- Are we still missing the right programming model for massively concurrent systems?



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contributed articles

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The same component isolation that made it effective for large distributed telecom systems makes it effective for multicore CPUs and networked applications.

BY JOE ARMSTRONG

Erlang

ERLANG IS A concurrent programming language designed for programming fault-tolerant distributed systems at Ericsson and has been (since 2000) freely available subject to an open-source license. More recently, we've seen renewed interest in Erlang, as the Erlang way of programming maps naturally to multicore computers. In it the notion of a process is fundamental, with processes created and managed by the Erlang runtime system, not by the underlying operating system. The individual processes, which are programmed in a simple dynamically typed functional programming language, do not share memory and exchange data through message passing, simplifying the programming of multicore computers.

Erlang[2] is used for programming fault-tolerant, distributed, real-time applications. What differentiates it from most other languages is that it's a concurrent programming language; concurrency belongs to the language, not to the operating system. Its programs are collections of parallel processes cooperating to solve a particular problem that can be created quickly and have only limited memory overhead; programmers can create large numbers of Erlang processes yet ignore any preconceived ideas they might have about limiting the number of processes in their solutions.

All Erlang processes are isolated from one another and in principle are "thread safe." When Erlang applications are deployed on multicore computers, the individual Erlang processes are spread over the cores, and programmers do not have to worry about the details. The isolated processes share no data, and polymorphic messages can be sent between processes. In supporting strong isolation between processes and polymorphism, Erlang could be viewed as extremely object-oriented though without the usual mechanisms associated with traditional OO languages.

Erlang has no mutexes, and processes cannot share memory.[a] Even within a process, data is immutable. The sequential Erlang subset that executes within an individual process is a dynamically typed functional programming language with immutable state.[b] Moreover, instead of classes, methods, and inheritance, Erlang has modules that contain functions, as well as higher-order functions. It also includes processes, sophisticated error handling, code-replacement mechanisms, and a large set of libraries.

Here, I outline the key design criteria behind the language, showing how they are reflected in the language itself, as well as in programming language technology used since 1985.

Shared Nothing

The Erlang story began in mid-1985 when I was a new employee at the Ericsson Computer Science Lab in Stock-

a The shared memory is hidden from the programmer. Practically all application programmers never use primitives that manipulate shared memory; the primitives are intended for writing special system processes and not normally exposed to the programmer.

b This is not strictly true; processes can mutate local data, though such mutation is discouraged and rarely necessary.

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