

# POSIX Threads and Synchronization

CSE 220: Systems Programming

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# POSIX Threads

The **POSIX threads API** adds **threading** to Unix.

You will also see this API called **Pthreads** or **pthread**.

Early Unix provided only the **process model** for concurrency.

POSIX threads **look like processes**, but **share more resources**.

Every POSIX thread starts with a **function**.

# POSIX Synchronization

Pthreads also provides [synchronization mechanisms](#).

In fact, it provides a [rather rich set](#) of options!

- Mutexes
- Semaphores
- Condition variables
- Thread joining
- Memory barriers<sup>1</sup>

Only [semaphores](#) are covered in detail in CS:APP.

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<sup>1</sup>We won't talk about these.

# Compilation with Pthreads

Pthreads may **require extra compilation options**.

On modern Linux, **use `-pthread` both when compiling and linking**.

On some other systems, other options may be required:

- Provide a different compiler or linker option (such as `-pthread`)
- Compile with some preprocessor define (e.g., `-DPTHREAD`, `-D_REENTRANT`)
- Link with a library (e.g., `-lpthread`)
- ...read the documentation!

# Thread Creation

Threads are created with the `pthread_create()` function:

```
#include <pthread.h>

int pthread_create(pthread_t *thread,
                  const pthread_attr_t *attr,
                  void *(*start_function)(void *), void *arg)
```

The created thread will:

- **begin** at the given `start_function` **function argument**
- have the given data **passed in as an argument**

# Pthread Object Declarations

Threads (and other Pthread objects) are **declared as values**.

They are often **used as pointers**.

For example:

```
pthread_t thread;  
pthread_create(&thread, NULL, thread_function, NULL);
```

This allows them to be created **without dynamic allocation**.

# Thread Functions

The thread `start function` has the following signature:

```
void *(*start_function)(void *);
```

This is a `function` that:

- Accepts a single `void *` argument
- Returns `void *`

Example:

```
void *thread_main(void *arg) {  
    return NULL;  
}
```

# Thread Semantics

When `pthread_create()` is called, it:

- Creates a new **execution context**, including **stack**
- Creates a **concurrent flow** using that stack and context
- Causes the new flow to **invoke the provided function** and **passes the provided argument**

The separation of **thread start function** and its **argument** allows one function to **perform multiple tasks** based on its argument.

The new thread **appears to be scheduled independently**.

It can do **anything the original thread could**.



# Thread Attributes

The function `pthread_create()` accepts a **thread attribute object**.

This object has type `pthread_attr_t`.

Passing `NULL` for this argument will use **default attributes**.

Thread attributes include:

- Processor **affinity**
- The desired **scheduler** for the thread and its **configuration**
- The **detach state** of the new thread
- The thread's **stack location and size**

We will not use thread attributes this semester.

# Thread Termination

POSIX threads can terminate in several ways:

- The **application can exit**
- By calling `pthread_exit()`
- By **returning** from the thread start function
- It can be **canceled** by another thread using `pthread_cancel()`

# Joining

A thread can be **joined**, which is a **synchronous operation**.

```
#include <pthread.h>
```

```
int pthread_join(pthread_t thread, void **retval);
```

**Joining** a thread:

- **blocks** the caller until the thread exits
- **retrieves** the thread's exit status

# POSIX Mutexes

POSIX mutexes are of type `pthread_mutex_t`.

They provide basic mutex functionality with several features:

- Optional recursive lock detection
- A try lock operation that will return immediately whether or not the mutex could be locked

It is an error to unlock a POSIX mutex on a different thread than the thread that locked it.

# Mutex Initialization

POSIX mutexes have [static](#) and [dynamic](#) initializers:

```
#include <pthread.h>
```

```
pthread_mutex_t fastmutex = PTHREAD_MUTEX_INITIALIZER;
```

```
int pthread_mutex_init(pthread_mutex_t *mutex,  
    const pthread_mutexattr_t *mutexattr);
```

In [older POSIX specifications](#), the static initializer could be used [only for compile-time initializers](#).

The [dynamic initializer](#) accepts [attributes](#) to configure the mutex. (Pass NULL to get default behavior.)

# Mutex Operations

A mutex can be **locked** or **unlocked**:

```
#include <pthread.h>
```

```
int pthread_mutex_lock(pthread_mutex_t *mutex);  
int pthread_mutex_trylock(pthread_mutex_t *mutex);  
int pthread_mutex_unlock(pthread_mutex_t *mutex);
```

The **lock** and **unlock** functions operate exactly as expected.

`pthread_mutex_trylock()` will **always return immediately**.

- If the mutex is **already locked**, it will return EBUSY.
- If the mutex is **unlocked**, it will lock it and return 0.

# Destroying Mutexes

When you are finished with a mutex, you should **destroy it**.

On Linux, **destroying a mutex is essentially no-op**.

However, other platforms **may associate resources** with a mutex.

Destroying the mutex allows those resources to be **released**.

Destroying a **locked mutex is an error**.

Destroying a **mutex being waited upon<sup>2</sup> is an error**.

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<sup>2</sup>More on this later...

# Default Mutex Behaviors

The default mutex **may not allow recursive locks**.

The following code could **deadlock** (and **will** on Linux!):

```
void deadlock() {  
    pthread_mutex_t mutex = PTHREAD_MUTEX_INITIALIZER;  
    pthread_mutex_lock(&mutex);  
    pthread_mutex_lock(&mutex);  
}
```

Mutexes can be initialized with a **recursive attribute**.

Recursive mutexes maintain a **lock count**, and the above would simply require **unlocking twice**.



# Condition Variables

POSIX **condition variables** work **in conjunction with mutexes**.

A thread **must hold a mutex** to wait on a condition variable.

Waiting on a condition variable **atomically**:

- **Unlocks** the mutex
- Puts the thread **to sleep** until the condition is signaled

A thread can signal **one** or **all** threads sleeping on a condition variable.

# Creating a Condition Variable

Condition variables are created **like mutexes**:

```
#include <pthread.h>
```

```
pthread_cond_t cond = PTHREAD_COND_INITIALIZER;  
int pthread_cond_init(pthread_cond_t *cond,  
    pthread_condattr_t *cond_attr);
```

The Linux implementation of Pthreads **recognizes no condition variable attributes**.

# Waiting on Condition Variables

A thread can **wait** on a condition variable.

```
#include <pthread.h>
```

```
int pthread_cond_wait(pthread_cond_t *cond,  
pthread_mutex_t *mutex);
```

Note that there is **an associated mutex**.

The mutex should **protect the condition state**.

As previously discussed, threads can **spuriously wake**.

# Waiting Example

```
extern pthread_mutex_t lock;
extern pthread_cond_t cond;
extern bool done;

void *block_until_done(void *ignored) {
    pthread_mutex_lock(&lock);
    while (!done) {
        pthread_cond_wait(&cond, &lock);
    }
    pthread_mutex_unlock(&lock);
}
```

# Signaling Condition Variables

Condition variables can signal:

- **one** waiting thread
- **all** waiting threads

```
#include <pthread.h>
```

```
int pthread_cond_signal(pthread_cond_t *cond);  
int pthread_cond_broadcast(pthread_cond_t *cond);
```

Signaling a variable if **no threads are waiting** does nothing.

The **mutex protecting shared state** should be used appropriately!

# Signaling Example

```
extern pthread_mutex_t lock;
extern pthread_cond_t cond;
extern bool done;

void signal_done() {
    pthread_mutex_lock(&lock);
    done = true;
    pthread_mutex_unlock(&lock);
    pthread_cond_signal(&cond);
}
```

## Putting it Together

```
pthread_mutex_t lock = PTHREAD_MUTEX_INITIALIZER;  
pthread_cond_t cond = PTHREAD_COND_INITIALIZER;  
bool done;
```

```
int main(int argc, char *argv[]) {  
    pthread_t t;  
  
    pthread_create(&t, NULL, block_until_done, NULL);  
    usleep(100000);  
    signal_done();  
    pthread_join(t, NULL);  
  
    return 0;  
}
```

# Destroying Condition Variables

Like mutexes

- Condition variables **should be destroyed**
- Destroying condition variables **does nothing on Linux**

```
#include <pthread.h>
```

```
int pthread_cond_destroy(pthread_cond_t *cond);
```

Destroying a condition variable **with waiting threads is an error.**



# POSIX Semaphores

POSIX semaphores can operate between either threads or processes.

They provide counting semaphore semantics.

They obsolete System V semaphores, which you may also see.

POSIX semaphores:

- Do not begin with `pthread_`
- Are not found in `pthread.h`

# POSIX Semaphore Creation

```
#include <semaphore.h>

int sem_init(sem_t *sem, int pshared,
             unsigned int value);
```

There **is no static initializer** for POSIX semaphores.

If **pshared is true**:

- The semaphore **can be used between processes**
- **Must be located in shared memory** for this to work

The given value **is its initial count**.

# POSIX Semaphore Manipulation

```
#include <semaphore.h>
```

```
int sem_wait(sem_t *sem);
```

```
int sem_trywait(sem_t *sem);
```

```
int sem_post(sem_t *sem);
```

The wait operation corresponds to Dijkstra's P(), and post to V().

sem\_trywait() is like pthread\_mutex\_trylock():

- It will return immediately **even if it cannot decrement the semaphore**
- If it succeeds **it returns zero**
- If it does not, **it returns EAGAIN**

# Summary

- The **POSIX threads** (pthreads) API provides a **thread abstraction** on Unix
- POSIX provides many **synchronization primitives**:
  - Mutexes
  - Semaphores
  - Condition variables
  - Thread joining
- CS:APP covers semaphores in detail

# References I

## Required Readings

- [1] Randal E. Bryant and David R. O'Hallaron. *Computer Science: A Programmer's Perspective*. Third Edition. Chapter 12: 12.3, 12.5-12.7. Pearson, 2016.

## Optional Readings

- [2] IEEE and The Open Group. *The Open Group Base Specifications Issue 7*. 2017. URL: <http://pubs.opengroup.org/onlinepubs/9699919799/>.
- [3] Bradford Nichols, Dick Buttlar, and Jacqueline Proulx Farrell. *Pthreads Programming*. O'Reilly & Associates, Inc., 1996.

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