Instructor: Dawson Engler and David Mazières

CAs: Ali Mashtizadeh, Sumedh Sawant, . . .

Stanford University

Outline

1. Administrivia
2. Remote procedure call
3. Consensus in asynchronous systems

Administrivia

- **Class web page:** `http://cs244b.scs.stanford.edu/`
- **All handouts and lecture notes on line**
  - Please print them out yourselves
- **Part of each class will be spent discussing papers**
  - Print, read the papers before class
  - Slides and discussion/lecture notes will be on-line
- **Staff mailing list:** `cs244b-staff@scs.stanford.edu`
  - Please email all staff rather than individual members

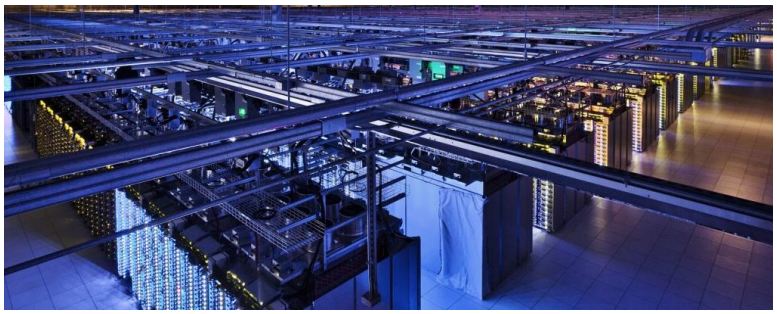
Programming assignments

- **Two solo programming assignments in C++11**
  - Goal: familiarize you with RPC, consensus, consistency
- **Final project**
  - Perform a small research project in teams of 1–3 students
  - Welcome to use code from first labs
  - Use ideas from papers we've discussed in class
  - Turn in short paper, make presentation
- **Presentations: Thursday, December 11, (7–10pm??)**
  - Present project in mini-conference
  - We will serve dinner
  - Might need second slot, student PC, or parallel tracks given enrollment

Grading

- **Grading based on four factors:**
  1. Paper reading and class participation (c)
  2. Midterm and final quizes (q)
  3. Lab assignments (l)
  4. Final project paper & presentation (p)
- **Combined as follows (subject to adjustment):**
  - Compute average: $a = q/4 + l/4 + p/2$.
  - Adjusted score is: **if** $p > a$ **then** $cp + (1 - c)a$ **else** a.
- **Final project is most important component**
- **With participation, good project overrides bad quiz/lab**
  - SCPD students can earn participation credit by emailing good questions to staff before 11am

Why study distributed systems?



- **Most real systems are actually distributed systems**
- **If you want fault-tolerance or scalability**
  - Must replicate across multiple machines
- **If you want systems that span administrative realms**
  - Web sites, peer-to-peer systems, communication systems

Class topics

- **Distributed programming models**
- **Dealing with failure, including Byzantine failure**
- **Scalability**
- **Techniques: Consensus, Replication, . . .**
- **Case studies of production systems at Google, Amazon, Facebook, . . .**

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Remote procedure call (RPC)

- **Procedure calls are a well-understood mechanism**
  - Transfer control and data on single computer
- **RPC's goal is to make distributed programming look like as much as possible like normal programming**
  - Code libraries provide APIs to access functionality
  - RPC servers export interfaces accessible through local APIs
  - See [Birrell] for good description of one implementation
- **Implement RPC through request-response protocol**
  - Procedure call generates network request to server
  - Server return generates response
- **Good example of how distributed systems differ. . .**

Procedure vs. RPC

- **Consider the following ordinary procedure:**

```
bool add_user(string user, string password);
```

- **Possible return values:** `true`, `false`
- **Now say you have an RPC version**
  - Must somehow set up connections, bind to server, think about authentication, etc., but ignore all that for now
- **What are the possible return value of** `add_user` **RPC?**

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- **What are the possible return value of** `add_user` **RPC?**

1. `true`
2. `false`
3. "I don't know"

RPC Failure

- **Normal procedure call has fate sharing**
  - Single process: if callee fails, caller fails, too
- **RPC introduces more failure modes**
  - Machine failures at only one end (caller/callee)
  - Communication failures
- **Result: RPCs can return "failure" instead of results**
- **What are the possible outcomes after failure?**
  - Procedure did not execute
  - Procedure executed once
  - Procedure executed multiple times
  - Procedure partially executed
- **Many systems aspire to "at most once semantics"**

Implementing at most once semantics

- **Danger: Request message lost**
  - Client must retransmit requests when it gets no reply
- **Danger: Reply message may be lost**
  - Client may retransmit previously executed request
  - Okay if operations are idempotent, but many are not (e.g., process order, charge customer, . . .)
  - Server must keep "replay cache" to reply to already executed requests
- **Danger: Server takes too long to execute procedure**
  - Client will retransmit request already in progress
  - Server must recognize duplicate—can reply "in progress"

Server crashes

- **Danger: Server crashes and reply lost**
  - Can make replay cache persistent—slow
  - Can hope reboot takes long enough for all clients to fail
- **Danger: Server crashes during execution**
  - Can log enough to restart partial execution—slow and hard
  - Can hope reboot takes long enough for all clients to fail
- **Can use "cookies" to inform clients of crashes**
  - Server gives client cookie which is time of boot
  - Client includes cookie with RPC
  - After server crash, server will reject invalid cookie

Parameter passing

- **Trivial for normal procedure calls**
- **RPC must worry about different data representations**
  - Big/little endian
  - Size of data types
- **RPC has no shared memory**
  - No global variables
  - How to pass pointers
  - How to garbage-collect distributed objects
- **How to pass unions over RPC?**

Interface Definition Languages

- **Idea: Specify RPC call and return types in IDL**
- **Compile interface description with IDL compiler. Output:**
  - Native language types (e.g., C/Java/C++ structs/classes)
  - Code to *marshal* (serialize) native types into byte streams
  - *Stub* routines on client to forward requests to server
- **Stub routines handle communication details**
  - Helps maintain RPC transparency, but. . .
  - Still have to bind client to a particular server
  - Still need to worry about failures

C++ RPC-related systems in use today

- **XML or JSON over HTTP – no IDL, hard to parse**
- **Cereal – C++11 structure serializer**
- **Google protobufs, Apache Thrift**
  - + Compact encoding, defensively coded (protobufs)
  - + Good support for incrementally evolving messages
  - – Not complete system (protobufs), complex encoding, not C++11
- **Apache Avro – self-describing messages contain schema**
- **Cap'n Proto, Google FlatBuffers**
  - + Same representation in memory and on wire, very fast
  - – Less mature, non-deterministic wire format, bigger attack surface
- **XDR (+ RPC) – used by Internet standards such as NFS**
  - + Simple, good features (unions, fixed- and variable-size arrays, . . .)
  - – Big endian, binary but rounds everything to multiple of 4 bytes

Case study: XDR

```
enum MyEnum { NO, YES, MAYBE };

struct MyMessage {
  string name<16>;  /* up to 16 characters */
  string desc<>;    /* up to 2^32-1 characters */
  opaque cookie[8]; /* 8 bytes (fixed) */
  opaque sig<16>;   /* 0-16 bytes (variable-length) */
  unsigned int u;   /* Unsigned 32-bit integer */
  hyper ii;         /* Signed 64-bit integer */
  MyEnum me;        /* Another user-defined type */
  int ia[5];        /* Fixed-length array */
  int iv<>;         /* Variable length array */
  int iv1<5>;       /* Up to 5 ints */
  MyMessage *mep;   /* optional MyMessage (or NULL) */
};

typedef MyMessage *OptionalMyStruct;
```

XDR base types

- **All numeric values encoded in big-endian order**
- `int`, `unsigned [int]`, **all** `enum`**s: 4 bytess**
- `bool`**: equivalent to "**`enum bool { FALSE, TRUE }`**"**
- `hyper`, `unsigned hyper`**: 8 bytes**
- `float`, `double`, `quadruple`**: 4-, 8-, or 16-byte floating point**
- `opaque bytes[Len]` **(fixed-size)**
  - Encoded as content + 0–3 bytes padding to make size multiple of 4
- `string s<MaxLen>`, `opaque a<MaxLen>` **(variable-size)**
  - 4-byte length + content + (0–3 bytes) padding

XDR containers and structs

- **(Fixed) arrays –** `MyType var[`n**5**`]`
  - Encoded as n copies of `MyType`
- **Vectors –** `MyType var<>` **or** `MyType var<`n`>`
  - Can hold variable number (0–n) `MyTypes`
  - Encoded as 4-byte length followed by that many
  - Empty maximum length means maximum length $2^{32} - 1$ `MyTypes`
- **Optional data –** `MyType *var`
  - Encoded exactly as `MyType var<1>`
  - Note this means single "present" bit consumes 4 bytes
- `struct` **– each field encoded in turn**

XDR `union` types

```
union type switch (simple_type which) {
  case value_A:
    type_A varA;
  case value_B:
    type_B varB;
  /* ... */
  default:
    void;
};
```

- **Must be discriminated, unlike C/C++**
- `simple_type` **must be** `[unsigned] int`, `bool`, **or** `enum`
- **Wire representation:**
  - 4-bytes for `which` + encoding of selected case
  - Special `void` type encoded as 0 bytes

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The identity function

- **One of the simplest functions is the identity function**
- **E.g., in Haskell:** `id x = x`
- **In C++11:**

```
template<typename T> inline T &&
id(T &&t)
{
  return static_cast<T &&>(t);
}
```

- **The distributed equivalent turns out to be much harder**
  - Problem: agents might not start with the same input
  - So to agree on output, must somehow pick one of the inputs

Asynchronous systems[1]

- **A theoretical model for distributed systems**
  - Consists of a set of agents exchanging messages
  - No bound on message delays
  - No bound on the relative execution speed of agents
  - For convenience, model internal events such as timeouts as special messages, so the "network" controls all timing
- **Can't distinguish failed agent from slow network**
- **Idea of model is to be conservative**
  - Want robustness under any possible timing conditions
  - E.g., say backhoe tears fiber, takes a day to repair
  - Could see messages delays a *billion* times more than usual

[1] Unrelated to "asynchronous IO" as used in event-driven systems.

The consensus problem

- **Goal: For multiple agents to agree on an output value**
- **Each agent starts with an input value**
  - Agents' inputs may differ; any agent's input is okay to output
- **Agents communicate following some *consensus protocol***
  - Use protocol to agree on one of the agent's input values
- **Once decided, agents output the chosen value**
  - Output is write-once (an agent cannot change its value)

Example

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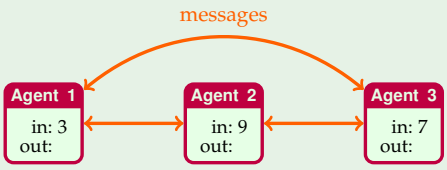

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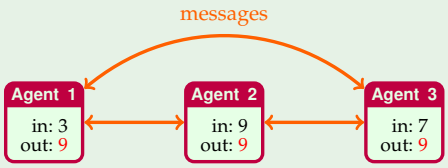


Properties of a consensus protocol

- **A consensus protocol provides *safety* if...**
  - Agreement – All outputs produced have the same value, and
  - Validity – The output value equals one of the agents' inputs
- **A consensus protocol provides *liveness* if...**
  - Termination – Eventually non-failed agents output a value
- **A consensus protocol provides *fault tolerance* if...**
  - It can survive the failure of an agent at any point

Theorem (FLP impossibility result)

No deterministic consensus protocol provides all three of safety, liveness, and fault tolerance in an asynchronous system.

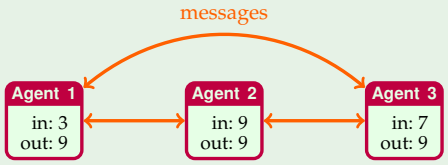
Bivalent states

Definition (Bivalent)

An execution of a consensus protocol is in a bivalent state when the network can affect which value agents choose.

Example

- Recall agents chose value 9 in last example
- But say Agent 2's messages delayed... would look like failure
- Agents 1 & 3 might decide to output 7
- Once network back, Agent 2 must also output 7



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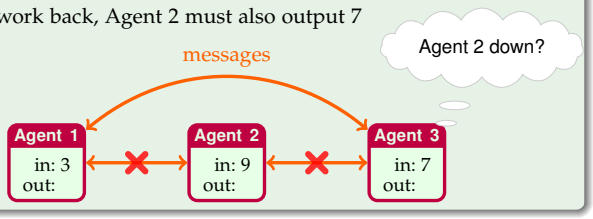

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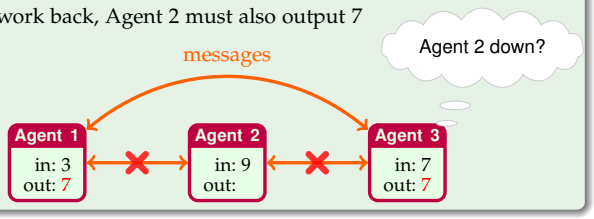

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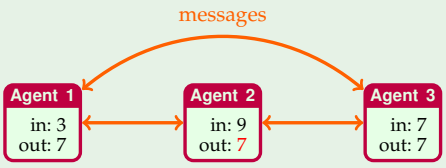


Univalent states

Definition (Univalent)

An execution of a consensus protocol is in a univalent state when only one output value remains possible.

Definition (i-valent)

An i-valent state is a univalent state with output value i.

- **Any state must be univalent or bivalent (or stuck)**
- **Nodes can produce outputs only in a univalent state**
  - Recall output is write once and all outputs must agree
  - Hence first output fixes only possible consensus result
- **If an execution starts in a bivalent state and terminates, it must at some point reach a univalent state**

FLP intuition

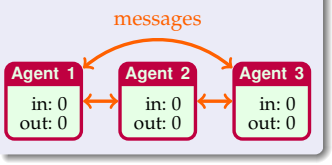
- **Consider a terminating execution of a bivalent system**
- **Let m be last message received in a bivalent state**
  - Call m the execution's deciding message
  - Any terminating execution requires a deciding message
- **Suppose the network had delayed m**
  - Other messages could cause transitions to other bivalent states
  - Then, receiving m might no longer lead to a univalent state
  - In this case, we say m has been neutralized

Overview of FLP proof.

1. **There are bivalent starting configurations**
2. **The network can neutralize any deciding message**
3. **Hence, the system can remain bivalent in perpetuity** □

There exists a bivalent state

Scenario A



- **Assume you could have liveness with an agent failure**
- **If all inputs 0, correct agents must eventually output 0**
  - Similarly, if all inputs 1, correct agents must eventually output 1
- **Now say we start flipping one input bit at a time**
- **Find 0- and 1-valent states differing at only one input**
  - Suppose node with this differing input fails
  - By assumption, the system nonetheless reaches consensus
  - Hence output depends on network; at least one state was bivalent

There exists a bivalent state

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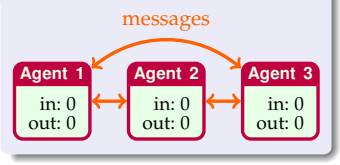

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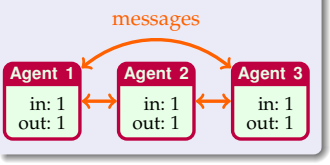

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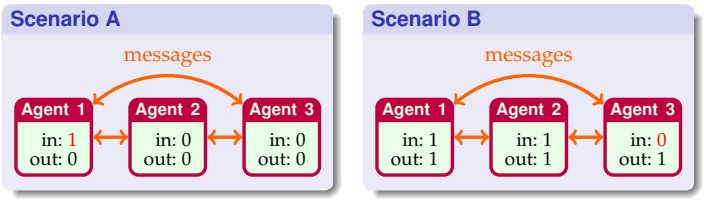

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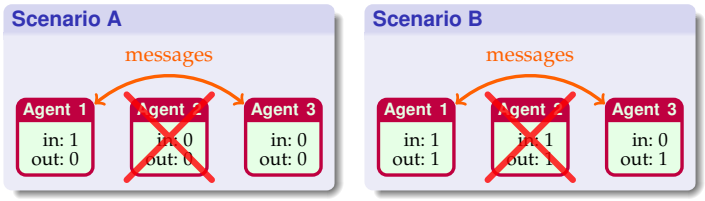

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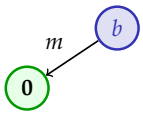

- **Let m be a deciding message for value 0 from state b**
- **Consider a message schedule from b to a 1-valent state**
  - If m is on the path, it leads to a bi-valent state
  - If m is not on the path, append it to the (1-valent) path
- **Apply m to each node on the path**
  - Either m will lead to a bi-valent state, or it will produce differing univalent states on adjacent nodes c_0 and c_1

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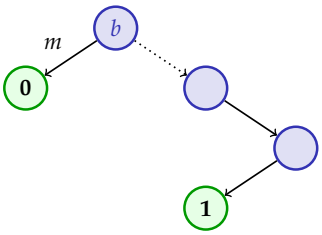

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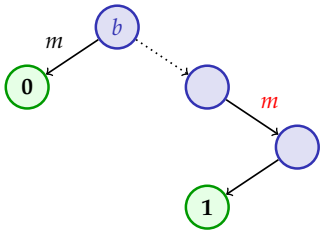

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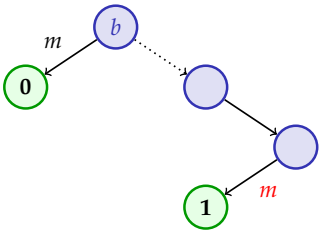

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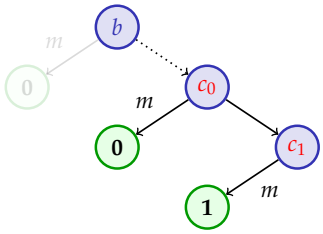

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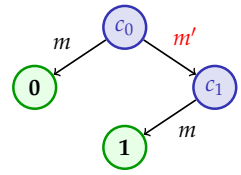

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- **If m, m' received by different agents, order won't matter**
  - But if delivering *both* messages yields a 1-valent state, delivering just m can't yield a 0-valent state
- **Hence, either m is neutralized at c_1, or same agent A received m and m', making order significant**
- **Yet if A slow after c_0, system must terminate without it**

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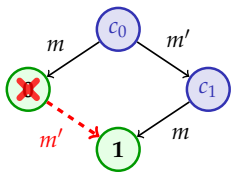

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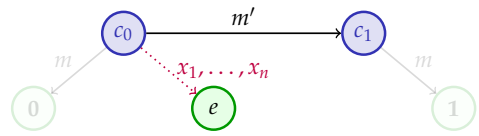
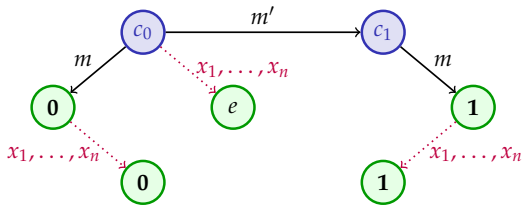


- **Consider a run that terminates without A**
  - Let $x_1, \ldots, x_n$ be the messages received (by nodes other than A)
  - Let e be a univalent state reached during the run
- **Deliver $x_1, \ldots, x_n$ to terminating states after m**
  - Since ms and xs received by different nodes, can re-order
  - Means e not univalent (leads to both 0- and 1-valent states)!
- **Contradiction means m must be neutralized somewhere**

Any message can be neutralized



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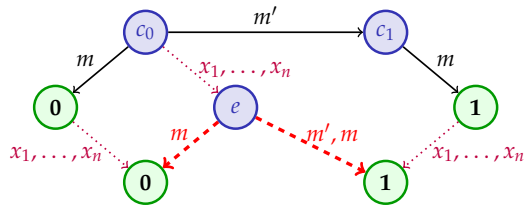

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Coping with FLP

- **This class will cover**
  - Many systems that require consensus
  - Many techniques for consensus
- **Safety is generally pretty important**
- **But can reasonably weaken liveness requirement**
  - Termination not guaranteed doesn't mean it won't happen
  - If your algorithm prevents completely stuck states
    ...can often make it terminate "in practice"
- **Can weaken asynchronous system assumption**
- **Can make agents non-deterministic**
  - Make it intractable for network to "guess" pathological delivery
    100% accurately in perpetuity