CS5412: PAXOS
Centers on state machine replication

- We have a set of replicas that each implement some given, deterministic, state machine and we start them in the same state.
- Now we apply the same events in the same order. The replicas remain in the identical state.
- To tolerate $\leq t$ failures, deploy $2t+1$ replicas (e.g. Paxos with 3 replicas can tolerate 1 failure).

How best to implement this model?
One option is to build a totally ordered reliable multicast protocol, also called an “atomic broadcast” protocol in some papers.

- To send a request, you give it to the library implementing that protocol (for cs5412: probably Isis\(^2\)).
- Eventually it does *upcalls* to event handlers in the replicated application and they apply the event.
- In this approach the application “is” the state machine and the multicast “is” the replication mechanism.

Use “state transfer” to initialize a joining process if we want to replace replicas that crash.
Two paths forwards...

- A second option, explored in Lamport’s Paxos protocol, achieves a similar result but in a very different way.

- We’ll look at Paxos first because the basic protocol is simple and powerful, but we’ll see that Paxos is slow.
  - Can speed it up... but doing so makes it very complex!
  - The basic, slower form of Paxos is currently very popular.

- Then will look at faster but more complex reliable multicast options (many of them...)

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Key idea in Paxos: Quorums

- Starts with a simple observation:
  - Suppose that we lock down the membership of a system: It has replicas \{P, Q, R, \ldots\}
  - But sometimes, some of them can’t be reached in a timely way.
  - How can we manage replicated data in this setting?
- Updates would wait, potentially forever!
- If a Read sees a copy that hasn’t received some update, it returns the wrong value
Quorum policy: Updates (writes)

- To permit progress, allow an update to make progress without waiting for all the copies to acknowledge it.
- Instead, require that a “write quorum” (or update quorum) must participate in the update.
- Denote by $Q_W$. For example, perhaps $Q_W = N - 1$ to make progress despite 1 failure (assumes $N > 1$, obviously).
- Can implement this using a 2-phase commit protocol.

- With this approach some replicas might “legitimately” miss some updates. How can we know the state?
Quorum policy: Reads

- To compensate for the risk that some replicas lack some writes, we must read multiple replicas
  - ... enough copies to compensate for gaps

- Accordingly, we define the read quorum, $Q_R$ to be large enough to overlap with any prior update that was successful. E.g. might have $Q_R = 2$
So: we want

- $Q_W + Q_R > N$: Read overlaps with updates
- $Q_W + Q_W > N$: Any two writes, or two updates, overlap

The second rule is needed to ensure that any pair of writes on the same item occur in an agreed order.

R1
R2
R3

Read x
Write x=7

N = 3
$Q_W = 2$
$Q_R = 2$
Paxos builds on this idea

- Lamport’s work, which appeared in 1990, basically takes the elements of a quorum system and reassembles them in an elegant way
  - Basic components of what Herlihy was doing are there
  - Actual scheme was used in nearly identical form by Oki and Liskov in a paper on “Viewstamped Replication”
- Lamport’s key innovation was the proof methodology he pioneered for Paxos
Paxos: Step by step

- Paxos is designed to deal with systems that
  - Reach **agreement** on what “commands” to execute, and on the order in which to execute them in
  - Ensure **durability**: once a command becomes executable, the system will never forget the command. In effect, the data ends up in a database that Paxos is used to update.

- The term command is interchangeable with “message” and the term “execute” means “take action”

- But we will see later that Paxos is **not** a reliable multicast protocol. It normally needs to be part of a replicated system, not a separate library.
In Paxos we distinguish several roles

- A single process might (often will) play more than one role at the same time
- The roles are a way of organizing the code and logic and thinking about the proof, not separate programs that run on separate machines

These roles are:

- Proposer, which represents the application “talking to” Paxos
- Coordinator (a leader that runs the protocol),
- Acceptor (a participant), and
- Learner, which represents Paxos “talking to” the application
The proposer requests that the Paxos system accept some command. Paxos is like a “postal system”

- It thinks about the letter for a while (replicating the data and picking a delivery order)
- Once these are “decided” the learners can execute the command
Why even mention proposers/learners?

- We need to “model” the application that uses Paxos.

- It turns out that correct use of Paxos requires very specific behavior from that application.

- You need to get this right or Paxos doesn’t achieve your application objectives.
  - In effect, Paxos and the application are “combined”
  - In other words, Paxos is not a multicast library.
Proposer role

- When an application wants the state machine to perform some action, it prepares a “command” and gives it to a process that can play the proposer role.
  - The coordinator will run the Paxos protocol
  - Ideally there is just one coordinator, but nothing bad happens if there happen to be two or more for a while
  - Coordinator is like the leader in a 2PC protocol

- The command is application-specific and might be, e.g., “dispense $100 from the ATM in Statler Hall”
It runs the Paxos protocol, which has two phases

- Phase 1 “prepares” the acceptors to commit some action. Several tries may be required
- Phase 2 “decides” what command will be performed. Sometimes the decision is that no command will be executed.

We run this protocol for a series of “slots” that constitute a list of commands the system has decided

Once decided, the commands are performed in the order corresponding to the slot numbers by “learners”
The Paxos replicas maintain a long list of commands

- Think of it as a vector indexed by “slot number”
- Slots are integers numbered 0, 1, ...
- While running the protocol, a given replica might have a command in a slot, and that command may be in an “accepted” state or in a “decided” state

- Replicas each have distinct copies of this data
Goal is to reach agreement that a specific command will be performed in a particular slot.

But it can take multiple rounds of trying (in fact, theoretically, it can take an unlimited number, although in practice this won’t be an issue).

These rounds are numbered using “ballot numbers”.
Basic idea of the protocol

- Coordinator proposes a specific command in a specific slot in a particular ballot
  - If two coordinators compete the one with the higher ballot will always dominate.
  - If two coordinators compete with the same slot # and ballot #, at most one (perhaps neither) will succeed.
  - Also, when they notice that they are competing, one of them yields to the other we soon end up with just one coordinator.

- We never talk about a command without slot and ballot #s
  - Paxos is about agreeing to execute the “Withdraw $100” first, and then the “Deposit $250” second.
  - Slot # is the order in which to perform the commands.
Commands go through “states”

- Initially a command is known only to proposer & coordinator

- Then it gets sent to “acceptors” and is asked to “prepare” to execute the command.

- If a quorum is reached, then the acceptors are told that the command has been “accepted”.

- A command is “decided” by running a second phase

- A decided command can be executed (unless you overdraw your account)

Request denied: Exceeds current balance ($31.17)
Learner role

- The learner watches and waits until new commands become committed (decided)
  - As slots become decided, the learner is able to find out if a decided slot has a command, or nothing in it.
    - Goes to the next slot if “no command”
    - Performs the command if a command is present
  - Can’t skip a slot: learner takes one step at a time
Phase 1: Coordinator sends `prepare(slot,b,c)` to acceptors

- It thinks this is a free slot and the next ballot number
- An acceptor looks at the slot and ballot number
  - If it hasn’t previously voted in this slot, for this ballot number, it votes to accept the ballot and remembers the command
  - Otherwise it votes against the ballot and sends back the command it previously accepted
Coordinator wants to achieve a write quorum
- If it succeeds, it starts phase 2 by asking acceptors to commit \((slot, b, c)\) for the ballot number on which it got a quorum
- Acceptor agrees if this is the highest ballot number for which it has been asked to participate in phase 2, otherwise rejects the request
- If it again achieves a quorum of acknowledgments, the request has been decided and the coordinator sends out a “decide” (“commit”) message
- Otherwise it retries phase 1
Failed command

- If two coordinators both run phase 2, at most one command can be decided.
- The coordinator that fails will need to retry with some other slot number.
- There is also a case in which neither is able to succeed and both move to the next slot number.
Things to notice

- If a command is decided in some slot, for some ballot number, no other command can be accepted into that same slot (for any ballot number)
  - To prove this, observe that for this to be violated, some acceptor would need to accept a phase 1 message after accepting a phase 2 message
  - This is because $Q^W + Q^W > N$
More things to notice

- A coordinator may not actually realize that its command was accepted by a majority!
  - Messages are unreliable so the accepted messages can be lost, just like “yes” votes in 2PC
  - This would cause the coordinator to retry the same command with some other ballot number
  - Nothing bad will happen
Two coordinators could both try to enter phase 2 with different commands

- One with ballot number b
- Another with some ballot number b' > b

In phase 2, only the latter could succeed and commit because there won’t be a “surviving” quorum that have voted for command c with ballot b

- Even though some acceptors might phase for the earlier command in phase 2, that coordinator definitely can’t get a quorum and will fail
- The case that leads to a “nothing” decision combines this scenario with an actual failure, so that both coordinators enter phase 2, and neither can decide
The learner might see a “decide” message, but if not can still advance by doing quorum reads
- Its local replica of the command list, if it is also an acceptor, might have gaps, or lack outcomes for some commands
- By doing a quorum read, a learner can be certain to discover any committed command. If it also notices an unterminated entry in the history, it can fix it

A learner executes an accepted (decided) command if
- It knows the decision for every slot up to and including the slot in which that command was decided, and
- It has executed every prior accepted command
Failures?

- Paxos “rides out” many kinds of failures
  - As long as a quorum remain available, Paxos can make progress
  - But this also reminds us that no single command list will necessarily include every decided command
  - If we look at just one command list, we would often see gaps where some coordinator didn’t reach that acceptor, but didn’t turn out to need to do so
Failed coordinator?

- If a coordinator crashes, the next time a coordinator tries to run, it will notice any pending but undecided commands in the history.
- It completes those interrupted protocol instances on behalf of the failed coordinator.
- This way Paxos makes progress.
In Failure-Free Synchronous Runs

Simple Paxos implementation always trusts process 1

decide \(v_1\)
Lamport extended Paxos to support changing membership.

- Basically, this entails:
  - Suspending the current configuration ("wedge" it)
  - Reaching agreement on the initial state (initial command list and new quorum configuration policy \((N, Q_W, Q_R)\) that will be used in the new state machine)
    - A version of the learner role
    - In effect, the members of the new configuration learn the outcome of the prior configuration
    - Then can start the new configuration
  - The old wedged configuration has been "terminated"
Using a leader-election scheme we can reduce the risk of having two proposers that interfere with each other (if that happens, they can repeatedly abort).

- We can batch requests and do several at a time.
- We can combine several proposals and run them all at the same time, for distinct slots.

The trick is that we build this as incremental steps so the “correctness” of the core protocol is unchanged.
Comments on Paxos

- The solution is very robust
  - Guarantees agreement and durability
  - Elegant, simple correctness proofs

- FLP impossibility result still applies!
  - Question: How would the adversary “attack” Paxos?

- Paxos is quite slow. Quorum updates with a 2PC structure plus quorum reads to “learn” state
Paxos with a disk

- Very often we want a system to survive complete crashes where all members go down, then recover.
- An “in-memory” Paxos won’t have this property.
- Accordingly, the command list must often be kept on a disk, as a disk log.
  - Now accept and commit actions involved disk writes that must complete before next step can occur.
  - Further slows the protocol down.
  - In Isis² implemented by SafeSend DiskLogger durability plugin (enabled via g.SetDurabilityMethod).
Paxos in Isis²

- Access via the g.SafeSend API
  - You chose between in-memory and disk Paxos
  - Must also tell the system how many acceptors to use

- Is SafeSend really Paxos?
  - Yes... but... it includes an optimization that simplifies the protocol and speeds up learners
  - Discussed in Appendix A of textbook
  - The properties are exactly those of standard Paxos
Paxos isn’t a reliable multicast!

Consider the following common idea:

- Take a file, or a database
- Make N replicas
- Now put a program that runs Paxos in front of the replicated file/db
- Learner just asks the file to do the command (a write or append), or the DB to run an update query
- Would this be correct? Why?
Correct use of Paxos

- The learner needs to be a part of the application!
- By treating the learner as part of Paxos, we erroneously ignore the durability of actions in the application state, and this causes potential error
  - The *application* must perform every operation, at least once
  - Learner retries after crashes until application has definitely performed each action.
  - To avoid duplicated actions, application should check for and ignore actions already applied to the database
- Many Paxos-based replication systems are incorrect because they fail to implement this logic!
The DiskLogger durability method has a “dialog” with the application

- DiskLogger+application are like a learner
  - When DiskLogger delivers a message the application must “confirm” accepting that operation
  - E.g. might apply it to a database and wait until done
  - If a crash happens, DiskLogger will redeliver any unconfirmed messages until it gets confirmation

With in-memory durability, SafeSend skips this step

- But this is weaker than the way Paxos is “normally” used
To increase performance, Paxos introduces a “window of concurrency” $\alpha$: as many as $\alpha$ commands might be concurrently decided.

- E.g. instead of proposing the next slot, we can allow proposals for slots $s$, $s+1$, ... $s+\alpha-1$.
- But this adds an issue: when new configuration is defined, as many as $\alpha-1$ commands may still be decided “late”, in the new configuration.
- This can be a problem for application with configuration-specific commands; they need to add “guards” like “As long as the configuration is still $\{P,Q,R\}$ deduct $100$ from the account and dispense the cash.”
- This is annoying and error-prone, so many run with $\alpha=1$ but then run slowly because they can’t leverage concurrency.
A really strange thing can happen if we add members in new configurations

- Paxos requires that we “learn” the configuration
- But some Paxos implementations short-cut this by copying some command list from an old member to a new one: “state transfer”
- That’s a mistake: some command that was marked as accepted but never committed (never decided) because it lacked a write quorum could later pass the write-quorum threshold retroactively!
Example: command x reaches just P in \{P,Q,R\} in slot 17 on ballot 1.

- x doesn’t achieve a quorum and eventually slot 17 decides “nothing”
- Some time later Q and R are replaced by S and T in a new configuration and S and T initialize themselves from rather than “learning” from \{P,Q,R\}
- Now x is in P,Q,R’s command list and hence has a quorum
- So it sort of gets decided “very late” and at a time long in the past!
- Causes serious bugs in applications that use Paxos reconfiguration if this style of reconfiguration plus state transfer is used. The version with a learner, though, can be slow and hard to implement!
Paxos summary

- An important and widely studied/used protocol (perhaps the most important agreement protocol)
- Developed by Lamport but the protocol per-se wasn’t really the innovation
  - Similar protocols were widely used prior to Paxos
- The key advance was the proof methodology
  - We touched on one corner of it
  - Lamport addresses the full set of features in his
Leslie Lamport’s Reflections

“Inspired by my success at popularizing the consensus problem by describing it with Byzantine generals, I decided to cast the algorithm in terms of a parliament on an ancient Greek island.

“To carry the image further, I gave a few lectures in the persona of an Indiana-Jones-style archaeologist.

“My attempt at inserting some humor into the subject was a dismal failure.
“I submitted the paper to TOCS in 1990. All three referees said that the paper was mildly interesting, though not very important, but that all the Paxos stuff had to be removed. I was quite annoyed at how humorless everyone working in the field seemed to be, so I did nothing with the paper.”

“A number of years later, a couple of people at SRC needed algorithms for distributed systems they were building, and Paxos provided just what they needed. I gave them the paper to read and they had no problem with it. So, I thought that maybe the time had come to try publishing it again.”

Along the way, Leslie kept extending Paxos and proving the extensions correct. And this is what made Paxos important: the process of getting there while preserving correctness!