

Distributed Computing

Proposal for a MAP-I optional curricular unit on Theory and Foundations
(2009-2010 edition)

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Abstract

This document describes a Ph.D. level course, corresponding to a Curricular Unit covering the Theory of Distributed Computing, currently running in the joint MAP-i doctoral programme in Informatics, organized by three Portuguese universities (Minho, Aveiro and Porto).

This course has been taught in the two previous editions of the MAP-i programme. Lecture material of the previous edition can be found in the `slides` folder at <http://gsd.di.uminho.pt/teaching/DC/2008/>.

This course has been submitted for accreditation by the CMU doctoral programme in August 2008 and awaits for the process' outcome.

The current proposal for the 2009-2010 edition fundamentally builds on the previous course further emphasizing on critical systems with deeper study of agreement problems, state-of-the-art formal modeling of timed asynchronous networks, and real-time systems. Moreover, the proponent team has been extended encompassing now researchers from two universities, Minho and Porto.

1 Context

1.1 Overview

Distributed computing refers to algorithms running on a set of machines connected by a network. Its importance has increased as computation migrated from monolithic mainframes to decentralized structures connected by the internet. Examples of distributed systems appear in many areas such as telecommunication, web applications, distributed data processing and massively multi-player games.

While a distributed system can be built with redundancy (e.g. with replicated components) so as to provide availability in the presence of faults, this can be difficult to achieve if the software is programmed in an informal way, without strong theoretical foundations.

Concurrency, which occurs naturally in a distributed system, is already a difficult subject. On top of that, the problems that arise in asynchronous distributed systems subject to processor or link failures are difficult to comprehend. Even knowing what is possible to achieve may be non-intuitive. This means that people may waste years trying to solve an impossible problem; or they may build a software toolkit or a middleware platform (which will be used by many others) that will malfunction, or behave unpredictably in a non-repeatable and incomprehensible way.

1.2 Aims

This course aims at providing the theoretical foundations of distributed systems. It is targeted to graduate students and researchers wishing to advance the state-of-the-art in distributed systems. The course is technology agnostic and the abstractions presented are independent of any given technology. In fact, no technologies will be presented at all.

Although theoretical in nature, the course will also benefit students doing a more practical research. For example, database replication can be based on group communication protocols for which it is important to understand the agreement problem and algorithms.

The course focuses on formal models (e.g. I/O automata), abstractions (e.g. logical time), problems (e.g. agreement) and algorithms to solve them. It also focuses on impossibility results (e.g. the impossibility of fault-tolerant consensus in asynchronous networks).

1.3 Related Courses

From other graduate-level courses which are similar to this one, we highlight the following:

- “*Distributed Algorithms*” at the MIT, by Nancy Lynch.
- “*Theory of Distributed Computing*” at the EPFL, by Rachid Guerraoui.
- “*Advanced Operating Systems and Distributed Systems*” at CMU, by David Andersen.

In the CMU Computer Science Department course offers in Fall 2007, we refer the course 15-712 on “*Advanced Operating Systems and Distributed Systems*” by David Andersen. Although our focus is different, with less systems component.

2 Objectives

The goal of this course is to provide an advanced theoretical background on distributed computing, addressing fundamental problems, models, algorithms and results. This provides a solid foundation for research on distributed computing in the context of a graduate program.

3 Learning Outcomes

Upon successful completion of this course, students should be able to:

- build formal models of distributed systems;
- differentiate between synchronous, asynchronous and hybrid models;
- understand the assumptions and limitations underlying models of distributed systems;
- describe the more relevant problems in distributed systems;
- reason about distributed algorithms;
- design new distributed algorithms;
- invoke impossibility results to avoid wasting time trying to solve an unsolvable problem;
- prove impossibility results.

4 Topics

- Synchronous networks: (Weeks 1-4)
 - Formal model (lockstep rounds) and proof methods
 - Basic algorithms: Leader Election
 - Agreement with process and link failures
- Asynchronous networks: (Weeks 5-7)
 - Formal models (I/O automata) and proof methods
 - Basic algorithms: (revisited)
 - Logical time and State-machine simulation
- Agreement in asynchronous networks: (Weeks 8-11)
 - Impossibility of fault-tolerant consensus
 - Failure Detectors and Indulgence
 - Unreliable communication channels
 - Agreement problems: Distributed commit, Atomic broadcast
- Timed/Hybrid Asynchronous networks: (Weeks 12-14)
 - Formal model (timed I/O automata) and proof methods
 - Clock synchronization and Failure Detectors implementation
 - Timeliness and Real-time guarantees

5 Format

The course is organized around formal lectures, 3 hours per week, during one semester. The course is credited with 5 ECTS in the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System. Some lecture time (around 1/4) is used for recitation, where a given student will have to present and defend a previously assigned research paper, leading to a discussion involving the other students.

In the previous editions the following papers were discussed:

- A New Approach to Proving the Correctness of Multiprocess Programs. by Leslie Lamport, 1979.
- A Distributed Algorithm for Minimum-Weight Spanning Trees. by G. Gallager, P. A. Humblet, P. M. Spira, 1983.
- Using Time Instead of Timeout for Fault-Tolerant Distributed Systems. by Leslie Lamport, 1984.
- Reaching Agreement in the Presence of Faults. by M. Pease, R. Shostak, L. Lamport, 1980.
- Model Checking TLA+ Specifications. by Y. Yu, P. Manolios, L. Lamport, 1999.
- Reliable Communication over Unreliable Channels. Y. Afek, H. Attiya, A. Fekete, M. Fischer, N. Lynch, Y. Mansour, D. Wang, L. Zuck, 1994.
- Proving Safety Properties of an Aircraft Landing Protocol Using I/O Automata and the PVS Theorem Prover: A Case Study. S. Umeno, N. Lynch, 2006.
- Optimal Time Self Stabilization in Dynamic Systems. S. Dolev, 1993.
- Computation in Networks of Passively Mobile Finite-State Sensors. D. Angluin, J. Aspnes, Z. Diamadi, M. Fischer, R. Peralta, 2004.
- Renaming in an Asynchronous Environment. H. Attiya, A. Bar-Novm D. Dolev, D. Peleg, R. Reischuk. 1990.

Lectures notes of the 2008/09 edition of the Curricular Unit can be found at:
<http://gsd.di.uminho.pt/teaching/DC/2008/slides/>

6 Grading

The grading is based on two components:

- continuous grading along the semester, involving recitations and research paper analysis;
- individual monograph at the end of the course.

7 References

- [1] N. Lynch. *Distributed Algorithms*. Morgan-Kaufmann, 1996.
- [2] L. Lamport. Time, clocks and the ordering of events in a distributed system. *Communication of the ACM* 21, no.7, July 1978.
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- [5] T. Chandra and S. Toueg. Unreliable failure detectors for reliable distributed systems. *Journal of the ACM*, Volume 43, Issue 2, March 1996.
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- [9] J. Pereira, R. Oliveira. The mutable consensus protocol. Proc. 23rd international symposium on reliable distributed systems, pages 218-227. Florianopolis, Brazil, 2004. IEEE, IEEE Computer Society.
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A Research Background

The proponent team consists of members of the Informatics Department of University of Minho, of the Mechanical Engineering Department and Informatics Engineering Department of the University of Porto.

The team has considerable experience of teaching and research in distributed systems, with strong emphasis on dependability and critical systems.

Dependability on large-scale networks The work has been focused on fundamental and applied research on models, algorithms and tools enabling to build dependable services and applications on large-scale networks. The approaches being pursued depart from solid ground on fault-tolerant distributed coordination and group communication protocols and explore novel ideas and intuitions deemed to adapt well to large-scale networks. Current research, namely on optimistic and semantically reliable group protocols and on models of partial replication, is strongly supported by ongoing projects and represent the basis of future research.

Safety-critical networks This work has focused both at the level of the communications network and at the level of services. With respect to communications network, we have developed communication protocols to ensure reliable and real-time communication. Current research on this topic focuses on wireless communication. With respect to services, we have been working on algorithms for core services, such as group membership and reliable broadcast, that facilitate the development of safety critical applications.

Selected Related Publications

- [1] A. Sousa, J. Pereira, F. Moura, R. Oliveira. Optimistic total order in wide area networks. In Proc. of the 21st IEEE International Symposium on Reliable Distributed Systems. 2002. IEEE Computer Society.
- [2] J. Pereira, L. Rodrigues and R. Oliveira. Semantically reliable broadcast: Sustaining high throughput in reliable distributed systems. In *Concurrency in Dependable Computing*, Paul Ezhilchelvan and Alexander Romanovsky (eds.), Chapter 10, Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002.
- [3] J. Pereira, L. Rodrigues and R. Oliveira. Semantically reliable multicast: Definition, implementation and performance Evaluation. *IEEE Transactions on Computers, Special Issue on Reliable Distributed Systems*, 2003.
- [4] L. M. Pinho, F. Vasques, A. Wellings. Replication Management in Reliable Real-Time Systems. In *Journal of Real-Time-Systems*, Volume 26, Issue 3, April 2004, pp. 261-296. Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- [5] L. M. Pinho, F. Vasques. Reliable Real-Time Communication in CAN Networks. In *IEEE Transactions on Computers*, Volume 52, Issue 12, Dec. 2003 pp. 1594-1607.
- [6] J. Pereira, R. Oliveira. The Mutable Consensus Protocol. In Proc. of 23rd IEEE International Symposium on Reliable Distributed Systems. 2004. IEEE Computer Society.

- [7] J. Almeida, P. Almeida, C. Baquero. Bounded version vectors. In Proc. of 18th Annual Conference on Distributed Computing, LNCS 3274, pages 102-116. 2004. Springer Verlag.
- [8] V. Rosset, P. F. Souto, F. Vasques. A group membership protocol for communications systems with both static and dynamic scheduling. n Proc. of 6th IEEE International Workshop on Factory Communication Systems. 2006. IEEE Computer Society.
- [9] V. Rosset, P. F. Souto, F. Vasques. Formal Verification of a Group Membership Protocol Using Model Checking. In Proc. of 9th International Symposium on the Distributed Objects, Middleware, and Applications, LNCS 4803, pages 471-488. 2007. Springer Verlag.

Related Projects

SHIFT: Group Communication with Differentiated Messages

Funded by FCT POSI/CHS/33792/1999, EUR 20.000, 2000-2003

More information at <http://shift.di.fc.ul.pt>.

ESCADA: Fault-Tolerant Scalable Distributed Databases

Funded by FCT POSI/CHS/33792/1999, EUR 55.900, 2000-2003

More information at <http://escada.lsd.di.uminho.pt>.

StrongRep: Strongly Consistent Replicated Databases in Geographically Large-Scale Systems

Funded by FCT POSI/CHS/41285/2001, EUR 44.000, 2002-2005

More information at <http://strongrep.lsd.di.uminho.pt>.

GORDA: Open Replication of Databases

Funded by FP6 IST 004758, EUR 1.250.000, 2004-

More information at <http://gorda.di.uminho.pt>.

Safe-DuST: Services for Safety Critical Applications for Dual Scheduled TDMA Networks

Funded by FCT POSI/EIA/74313/2006, EUR 60.000, 2008-

B Proponents and Instructors

The current proposal is supported by seven faculty from University of Minho and University of Porto. As required by the MAP-i doctoral programme, only the following four elements will be lecturing in the 2009/2010 edition:

José Orlando Pereira is Lecturer at the Department of Informatics of University of Minho, and a researcher at CCTC (area of *Distributed Systems*).

His research interests are in dependable distributed systems and are split between gossip-based communication and database replication. Regarding gossip-based communication, he leads the P-SON research project, which focuses on gossip-based communication protocols. Regarding database replication, he is the Technical Manager of the IST GORDA project. He is currently supervising a Ph.D. project on *Database Replication on Shared Storage Clusters*.

José Orlando Pereira lectures Distributed Systems at the 2nd Cycle level to the M.Sc. program on Biomedical Engineering, with emphasis multi-tiered architectures, and to the M.Sc. program on Mobile Computing, with emphasis on message passing algorithms and systems.

Paulo Sérgio Almeida is a Lecturer at the Department of Informatics of University of Minho, and a researcher member of CCTC.

His scientific research activities are centered in distributed systems. The two main topics of research have been time/version stamping mechanisms and distributed data aggregation algorithms. The main results of late have been Dynamic Version Stamps, Bounded Version Vectors and Scalable Bloom Filters.

Pedro Ferreira do Souto is Lecturer at the Informatic Engineering Department of University of Porto, and a researcher at Instituto de Sistemas e Robótica-Porto.

His research interests are in the field of distributed systems, in particular in fault-tolerance and dependability and the application of formal methods for their assessment. He is the principal investigator of the Safe-DUST project, funded by the FCT, that investigates novel fault-tolerant algorithms for dual-scheduled TDMA networks and the application of model checking to their evaluation. He is currently supervising a Ph.D. student under this project.

Pedro Ferreira do Souto teaches a Distributed Systems course at the 2nd Cycle level of the Mestrado Integrado em Engenharia Informática at the Faculdade de Engenharia da Universidade do Porto.

Rui Oliveira is Associate Professor at the Department of Informatics of University of Minho, and a researcher at CCTC in the area of Distributed Systems.

His research interests are in dependable distributed systems and cover consistent database replication, distributed agreement problems and gossip-based communication. He is the coordinator of the IST GORDA project on open replication of databases and previously led two related, FCT funded, research projects ESCADA and StrongRep. He currently supervises two Ph.D. students with projects on the topic of database replication.

Rui Oliveira lectures Dependable Distributed Systems at 1st and 2nd Cycles levels. He is the coordinator of the Curricular Unit.