

Parallel Computing - Notes - v0.2.0-dev

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Preface

Every theory section in these notes has been taken from the sources:

- Course slides. [\[1\]](#)

About:

 [GitHub repository](#)

These notes are an unofficial resource and shouldn't replace the course material or any other book on parallel computing. It is not made for commercial purposes. I've made the following notes to help me improve my knowledge and maybe it can be helpful for everyone.

As I have highlighted, a student should choose the teacher's material or a book on the topic. These notes can only be a helpful material.

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1 PRAM

1.1 Prerequisites

Before we introduce the PRAM model, we need to cover some useful topics.

- A **Machine Model** describes a “machine”. It gives a value to the operations on the machine. It is necessary because: it makes it easy to deal with algorithms; it achieves complexity bounds; it analyses maximum parallelism.
- A **Random Access Machine (RAM)** is a model of computation that describes an abstract machine in the general class of register machines. Some features are:
 - **Unbounded** number of local memory cells;
 - Each memory cell can hold an integer of **unbounded** size;
 - Instruction set includes simple operations, data operations, comparator, branches;
 - All operations take **unit time**;
 - The definition of **time complexity** is the number of instructions executed;
 - The definition of **space complexity** is the number of memory cells used.

1.2 Definition

Definition 1: PRAM

A **parallel random-access machine (parallel RAM or PRAM)** is a **shared-memory abstract machine**. As its name indicates, the PRAM is intended as the parallel-computing analogy to the random-access machine (RAM) (not to be confused with random-access memory). In the same way that the RAM is used by sequential-algorithm designers to model algorithmic performance (such as time complexity), the **PRAM is used by parallel-algorithm designers to model parallel algorithmic performance** (such as time complexity, where the number of processors assumed is typically also stated).

The PRAM model has many interesting features:

- **Unbounded collection of RAM processors** (P_0 , P_1 , and so on);
- Processors don't have tape;
- Each processor has **unbounded registers**;
- **Unbounded collection of share memory cells**;
- All **processors can access all memory cells in unit time**;
- All **communication via shared memory**.

1.3 How it works

1.3.1 Computation

A single **processor** of the PRAM, at each computation, is **composed of 5 phases** (carried out in parallel by all the processors):

1. **Reads a value from one of the cells** $X(1), \dots, X(N)$
2. Reads one of the shared memory cells $A(1), A(2), \dots$
3. Performs some internal computation
4. **May write into one of the output cells** $Y(1), Y(2), \dots$
5. May write into one of the shared memory cells $A(1), A(2), \dots$

1.3.2 PRAM Classification

During execution, a subset of processors may remain idle. Also, some processors can read from the same cell at the same time (not really a problem), but they could also try to write to the same cell at the same time (**write conflict**). For these reasons, PRAMs are classified according to their read/write capabilities (realistic and useful):

- **Exclusive Read (ER)**. All processors can simultaneously read from distinct memory locations.
- **Exclusive Write (EW)**. All processors can simultaneously write to distinct memory locations.
- **Concurrent Read (CR)**. All processors can simultaneously read from any memory location.
- **Concurrent Write (CW)**. All processors can write to any memory location.

❓ But what value is ultimately written?

It depends on the mode we choose:

- **Priority Concurrent Write**. Processors have priority based on which value is decided, the **highest priority is allowed to complete write**.
- **Common Concurrent Write**. All processors are allowed to complete write **if and only if all the value to be written are equal**. Any **algorithm** for this model has to **make sure that this condition is satisfied**. Otherwise, the **algorithm is illegal** and the **machine state will be undefined**.
- **Arbitrary/Random Concurrent Write**. One **randomly chosen processor** is allowed to complete write.

1.3.3 Strengths of PRAM

PRAM is attractive and important model for designers of parallel algorithms because:

- It is **natural**. The number of operations executed per one cycle on P processors is at most P (equal to P is the ideal case).
- It is **strong**. Any processor can read/write any shared memory cell in unit time.
- It is **simple**. It abstracts from any communication or synchronization overhead, which makes the complexity and correctness of PRAM algorithm easier.
- It can be used as a **benchmark**. If a problem has no feasible/efficient solution on PRAM, it has no feasible/efficient solution for any parallel machine.

1.3.4 How to compare PRAM models

Consider two generic PRAMs, models A and B . Model A is **computationally stronger** than model B ($A \geq B$) **if and only if any algorithm** written for model B will **run unchanged** on model A in the **same parallel time** and with the **same basic properties**.

However, there are some useful metrics that can be used to compare models:

- **Time to solve problem of input size n on one processor, using best sequential algorithm:**

$$T^*(n) \tag{1}$$

- **Time to solve problem of input size n on p processors:**

$$T_p(n) \tag{2}$$

- **Speedup on p processors:**

$$SU_p(n) = \frac{T^*(n)}{T_p(n)} \tag{3}$$

- **Efficiency**, which is the work done by a processor to solve a problem of input size n divided by the work done by p processors:

$$E_p(n) = \frac{T_1(n)}{pT_p(n)} \tag{4}$$

- **Shortest run time** on any process p :

$$T_\infty(n) \tag{5}$$

- **Cost**, equal to processors and time:

$$C(n) = P(n) \cdot T(n) \quad (6)$$

- **Work**, equal to the total **number of operations**:

$$W(n) \quad (7)$$

Some properties on the metrics:

- The time to solve a problem of input n on a single processor using the best sequential algorithm *is not equal to* the time to solve a problem of input n in parallel using one of the p processors available. In other words, **the problem should not be solvable on a single processor on a parallel machine** (otherwise, what would be the point of using a parallel model?)

$$T^* \neq T_1$$

- $SU_P \leq P$
- $SU_P \leq \frac{T_1}{T_\infty}$
- $E_p \leq 1$
- $T_1 \geq T^* \geq T_p \geq T_\infty$
- $T^* \approx T_1 \Rightarrow E_p \approx \frac{T^*}{pT_p} = \frac{SU_p}{p}$
- $E_p = \frac{T_1}{pT_p} \leq \frac{T_1}{pT_\infty}$
- $T_1 \in O(C), T_p \in O\left(\frac{C}{p}\right)$
- $W \leq C$
- $p \approx \text{AREA} \quad W \approx \text{ENERGY} \quad \frac{W}{T_p} \approx \text{POWER}$

References

- [1] Ferrandi Fabrizio. Parallel computing. Slides from the HPC-E master's degree course on Politecnico di Milano, 2024.

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