

# Defining Atomicity (and Integrity) for Snapshots of Storage in Forensic Computing

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## ABSTRACT

The acquisition of data from main memory or from hard disk storage is usually one of the first steps in a forensic investigation. We revisit the discussion on quality criteria for “forensically sound” acquisition of such storage and propose a new way to capture the intent to acquire an *instantaneous* snapshot from a single target system. The idea of our definition is to allow a certain flexibility into when individual portions of memory are acquired, but at the same time require being consistent with causality (i.e., cause/effect relations). Our concept is much stronger than the original notion of atomicity defined by Vömel and Freiling (2012) but still attainable using copy-on-write mechanisms. As a minor result, we also fix a conceptual problem within the original definition of integrity.

## 1. Introduction

Data from storage devices or main memory are crucial pieces of evidence today. The acquisition of such data usually means to copy the data from storage to another storage (controlled by the analyst) in a way that preserves as much of its evidential value as possible. A common way to define a “good” copy is to formulate a set of quality metrics that capture the intention of forensic soundness.

Attaining good quality copies appears seemingly simple if storage can be “frozen”. As an example, there has been little debate about the classical way to produce a forensic copy of a hard disk using `dd` as described by Carrier (2005). This is in contrast to the acquisition of main memory which — apart from approaches that literally “freeze” RAM (Halderman, Schoen, Heninger, Clarkson, Paul, Calandino, Feldman, Appelbaum and Felten, 2009) — has received considerable attention if the acquisition target is not a virtual machine (Vömel and Freiling, 2012; Pagani, Fedorov and Balzarotti, 2019; Inoue, Adelstein and Joyce, 2011; Campbell, 2013; Lempereur, Merabti and Shi, 2012; Gruhn and Freiling, 2016). In the form of solid state drives, hard disks have turned into increasingly active devices which has made forensic data acquisition in the classical sense impossible (Nisbet, Lawrence and Ruff, 2013). In practice, circumstances may prohibit freezing altogether even though it may be technically feasible. Examples are production servers that cannot be paused for operational reasons. On such systems, acquisition is often improvised and part of a live analysis.

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### 1.1. Inconsistencies in RAM acquisition

As mentioned, quality criteria for data acquisition have most often been discussed in the context of volatile memory because of the common problems that occur if RAM is acquired inconsistently.

Page smearing, for example, is a common problem on systems under heavy load or with more than 8 GB of RAM according to Case and Richard III (2017). When page smearing occurs, the page tables in the memory snapshot are not consistent with the contents of the physical pages because changes were made to the referenced physical pages after the page tables were acquired. This can result, for example, in pages being attributed to wrong processes or inconsistencies in kernel data structures. Some of these inconsistencies can lead to problems during the memory analysis or hinder an analysis completely if it uses kernel data structures. But not all inconsistencies have to be apparent during an analysis. Therefore, precise measurement criteria, to define the quality of a memory imaging method, can help to evaluate tools without having to rely on visible problems.

### 1.2. The quest for suitable quality criteria

To be able to qualify the effects of RAM acquisition, Vömel and Freiling (2012) introduced three criteria to evaluate the quality of a memory snapshot: *correctness*, *integrity*, and *atomicity*. A correct snapshot contains all memory regions of the main memory and for each region exactly the value it had in main memory at the time of the acquisition. Thus, to achieve correctness not only a correct implementation is necessary but the used system components must return the correct values as well. The integrity criterion focuses on memory content changes between the start of the acquisition process and the acquisition of each memory region. Integrity is violated for memory content that changed after the acquisition was started and before it could be copied by the acquisition process. The atomicity criterion in contrast allows changes of memory contents if the acquired memory regions are causally consistent. This means that no

memory region content in the snapshot was influenced by changes to a memory region that are not part of the snapshot.

Recently, [Pagani et al. \(2019\)](#) criticized the atomicity definition by [Vömel and Freiling \(2012\)](#) for being “extremely difficult to measure in practice”. Instead, they suggested a criterion called *time consistency*. A snapshot is time consistent if there “exists a hypothetical atomic acquisition process that could have returned the same result”. However, they do not provide a precise formalization of this concept.

### 1.3. Related work

There exists a large body of work that investigates the creation of snapshots in distributed concurrent systems often with the aim to detect predicates on the state of a distributed computation ([Chase and Garg, 1998](#)). In this work, focus has been on *asynchronous* distributed systems where the best available notion of time is causality ([Mattern, 1989](#); [Schwarz and Mattern, 1994](#)). In such systems, concurrent execution of events makes the global state “relativistic”, i.e., it is often not possible to exactly say in which state the system is or has been ([Cooper and Marzullo, 1991](#); [Gärtner and Kloppenburg, 2000](#); [Chu and Brockmeyer, 2008](#)).

In forensic computing, data acquisition is (currently) usually performed in a synchronous environment. While concurrency arises even in such systems from different threads that operate on shared memory, such systems provide a common centralized clock that can be used to order events. If events can potentially be totally ordered, the sequence of global states through which the system progresses is well defined. In contrast to the assumptions made in previous theoretical work that describes algorithms for predicate detection in synchronizable systems ([Stoller, 2000](#)), real systems usually do not keep track of timestamps of individual events. The application of complex snapshot algorithms in forensics appears not advisable anyway since taking forensic snapshots should minimize interference with the observed system. So, while the literature on distributed systems gives many insights into the problem area, we are not aware of work that is of direct help.

Other related work is concerned with measurement of the quality of snapshots. Early work avoided the need to define quality criteria by simply comparing the output of a tool with the memory content of the machine from which the snapshot was taken ([Inoue et al., 2011](#); [Campbell, 2013](#); [Lempereur et al., 2012](#)). [Vömel and Stütgen \(2013\)](#) were the first to perform a practical evaluation of memory acquisition tools against the abstract quality criteria of [Vömel and Freiling \(2012\)](#). They implemented the evaluation platform using *Bochs* and took a white-box testing approach. With the help of inserted hypercalls, three tools were evaluated. Correctness could be measured exactly by comparing the memory image created by the acquisition process to an image created in parallel by the host. Atomicity could not be measured exactly as this would have required to keep track of all causal dependencies in the guest, a task deemed nearly infeasible by the authors. Instead, possible atomicity violations were measured by keeping track of which threads

accessed already acquired pages and then modified a page that was not already acquired. Therefore, the results present an upper bound of atomicity violations. Integrity was estimated by comparing a memory image taken by the host shortly before the acquisition process was loaded into the guest memory with one taken by the host shortly after the acquisition process finished.

Building on the results by [Vömel and Stütgen \(2013\)](#), [Gruhn and Freiling \(2016\)](#) took correctness for granted and followed a black-box approach to measure atomicity and integrity. Because their method does not rely on modifying the source code of tools, more tools could be evaluated, including direct memory access (DMA) and cold boot. For the tests they wrote a program which allocates sequentially numbered memory regions and one to extract the numbered regions from a memory snapshot. The numbers serve as a counter that allows to *estimate* the level of atomicity and integrity.

### 1.4. Contributions

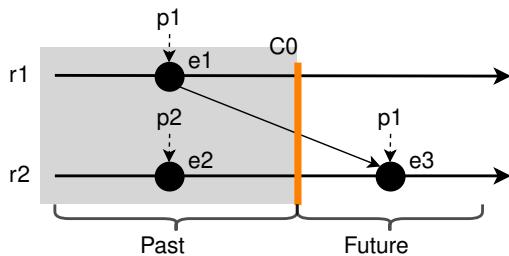
In this paper, we revisit [Vömel and Freiling \(2012\)](#) and follow the demand formulated by [Pagani et al. \(2019\)](#) for more “permissive” quality metrics for the acquisition of storage: We formalize two new definitions of atomicity which we call *instantaneous* and *quasi-instantaneous consistency*. Both can be seen as possible formalizations of the notion of “time consistent” by [Pagani et al. \(2019\)](#).

Instantaneous consistency resembles the quality of an “ideal” snapshot taken from a frozen system and implies quasi-instantaneous consistency. But although being slightly weaker in guarantees, a quasi-instantaneous snapshot is indistinguishable from an instantaneous snapshot. We show that quasi-instantaneous snapshots can be achieved (by performing memory snapshots using the idea of copy-on-write). Moreover, under certain assumptions quasi-instantaneous consistency implies the (classic) causal consistency of [Vömel and Freiling \(2012\)](#) so quasi-instantaneous snapshots do not violate cause-effect relations. Since the common memory snapshot techniques based on software generally do not even guarantee causal consistency, we also raise the question of how to assess a memory snapshot regarding its level of atomicity.

As a minor contribution, we propose a new definition of integrity that is refined from [Vömel and Freiling \(2012\)](#) and removes some of its theoretical weaknesses. We formulate all concepts independent from concrete storage technologies so that they can be applied to any block-based digital storage, be it volatile or persistent.

### 1.5. Outline

The following section introduces the model used to formalize our concepts. Section 3 continues with a formal definition of the two new forms of atomicity. Section 4 provides an overview of methods with which these consistency criteria can be achieved, while Section 5 discusses some ideas on how to evaluate snapshots of storage with respect to the new metrics. Section 6 briefly presents our result on the notion of integrity. Old and new concepts are compared



**Figure 1:** Space/time diagram of a computation and one possible cut  $C_0$ . The events to the left of the cut are part of the past, those to the right part of the future.

in Section 7. Section 8 discusses legal implications of our concepts for concrete investigations. Finally, Section 9 concludes the paper.

## 2. Model

We now define the notation to describe computations on memory regions and the timing relations of the events that happen therein (the definitions are adapted from [Zheng and Garg \(2019\)](#) using the timing notation of [Chu and Brockmeyer \(2008\)](#)).

### 2.1. Processes, memory regions and events

We consider a finite set  $P = \{p_1, \dots\}$  of processes (or threads) that perform operations on a set of  $n$  memory regions  $R = \{r_1, \dots, r_n\}$ . Performing an operation results in an event  $e = (p, r)$ , where  $e.p$  denotes the process that performed  $e$  and  $e.r$  denotes the memory region on which the process performed the operation. The set of all events is denoted  $E$ . We assume that operations on a single memory region are performed sequentially (e.g., by using hardware arbitration or locks).

### 2.2. Space/time diagrams and cuts

We use space/time diagrams, commonly used in distributed computing ([Mattern, 1989](#)), to depict computations. The sequence of events within the memory regions serves as timeline from left to right, and the sequential activities of processes are depicted as arrows that connect events. An example is shown in Fig. 1 with two memory regions  $r_1$  and  $r_2$ , a process  $p_1$  executing events  $e_1$  and  $e_3$  and a process  $p_2$  executing event  $e_2$ .

A *cut* through the space/time diagram is indicated by a line that intersects each memory region exactly once. Formally, a cut is a subset of events of the computation and can be regarded as separating the events into a “past” (to the left of the cut) and a “future” (to the right of the cut). Fig. 1 shows an example of a cut through a computation.

### 2.3. Causal order on events

A computation is modeled as a tuple  $(E, \rightarrow)$  where  $E$  is the set of events and  $\rightarrow$  is the *causal order* on  $E$ , i.e., the smallest transitive relation such that

1. if  $e.p = f.p$  and  $e$  immediately precedes  $f$  in the sequential order of that process, then  $e \rightarrow f$ , and
2. if  $e.r = f.r$  and  $e$  immediately precedes  $f$  in that memory region, then  $e \rightarrow f$ .

The order  $\rightarrow$  corresponds to Lamport’s happened-before relation ([Lamport, 1978](#)).

The order  $\rightarrow$  merely encodes which events might have influenced which other events, i.e., if  $e \rightarrow f$  or  $f \rightarrow e$  then either  $e$  may have influenced  $f$  or vice versa. However, if neither  $e \rightarrow f$  nor  $f \rightarrow e$  we say that  $e$  and  $f$  are *concurrent*, i.e., it is not possible to order the two events regarding causality.

### 2.4. Observability of causal relations

The causal order relation between events is by definition independent of the concrete values that processes read from or write to memory regions. For example, in the computation depicted in Fig. 1 all events  $e_1$ ,  $e_2$  and  $e_3$  could be read events that do not modify the content of the memory regions. Causal dependencies, therefore, may not be observable unless they are somehow reflected by the stored values. A minimum requirement for events to be observable is that they perform a state change of the memory region, e.g., to change the stored value from 0 to 1. Events that always update the state of a memory region to a different state as before are called *modifying events*.

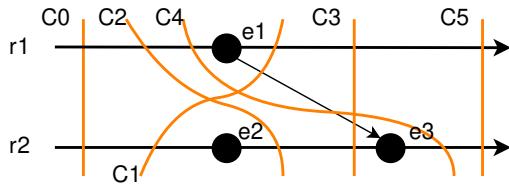
Merely requiring that events modify the state of a memory region does not imply that state changes can always be observed. The reason for this is that subsequent state changes can annihilate effects of previous state changes. For example, event  $e_2$  in Fig. 1 could change the value of memory region  $r_2$  from 0 to 1, and event  $e_3$  could change it back from 1 to 0. The fact that an event has occurred is not observable if the starting and ending state of  $r_2$  is inspected. This can be avoided by demanding that every event assigns a “fresh” value to the memory region. This is the case, for example, if the stored value is a counter that is incremented with every event. Events that change the value of the memory region to a new unique value are called *uniquely modifying events*.

Techniques to observe causal relationships in distributed systems (like vector clocks ([Mattern, 1989](#))) are commonly based on the assumption of uniquely modifying events. We will revisit these concepts later when exploring the compatibility between our new consistency notions and causal order.

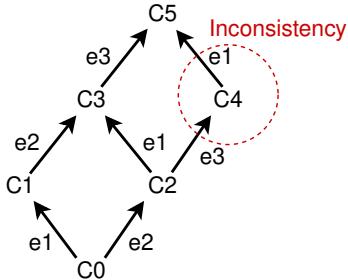
### 2.5. Consistent global states

Cuts are often considered as representations of global states of the computation. Fig. 2 depicts multiple possible cuts through the computation shown in Fig. 1. For example, cut  $c_0$  is the initial cut (no event has happened yet),  $c_1$  is the cut where  $e_1$  is the only event that has happened, and  $c_4$  is the cut where  $e_2$  and  $e_3$  have happened but not  $e_1$ . The causal order  $\rightarrow$  on events induces a partial order on these states that form a lattice. The lattice of all such global states of the computation shown in Fig. 2 is depicted in Fig. 3.

Note, in the absence of any notion of real-time, it cannot be determined whether event  $e_1$  happened before  $e_2$  or not



**Figure 2:** Space/time diagram and possible cuts of a computation.



**Figure 3:** Lattice of global states of the computation depicted in Fig. 2.

(with respect to  $\rightarrow$  they are not ordered). Hence, it cannot be determined which sequence of global states occurred in the computation, as long as the cut respects the causality relation  $\rightarrow$ . Cut  $c_4$  is one that violates  $\rightarrow$  in that events  $e_2$  and  $e_3$  are contained in the global state while  $e_1$  is not. This cannot have happened since  $e_3$  is the effect of  $e_1$ , i.e., if  $e_3$  is contained in the cut, then  $e_1$  also must be. This is the basis of the definition of a *consistent cut*.

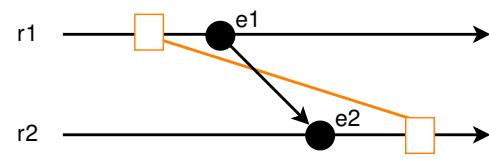
## 2.6. Realtime

In systems where real-time clocks are available, it may be possible to order two events  $e_1$  and  $e_2$  in Fig. 2 by comparing the real-time readings of when they occurred. For an event  $e$  we denote by  $rt(e)$  the real-time clock reading when  $e$  occurred. Formally,  $rt$  is a function mapping the set of events to the time domain  $T$ . For simplicity and without loss of generality, we equate  $T$  with the set of natural numbers. Using  $rt$ , it is possible to transform the partial order  $\rightarrow$  into a total order by ordering every event  $e \in E$  using  $rt(e)$ .

## 2.7. Snapshots

The effects of events are possible value changes in the memory regions. Following the notation of Vömel and Freiling (2012), we define the set of all possible values of a memory region as  $V$ . The contents of the memory regions can then be formalized as a function  $m : R \times T \rightarrow V$  that returns the value of a specific memory region at a specific point in time. Function  $m$  encodes a form of *ground truth* of what values the memory contained at any specific time.

Informally, a *snapshot* is a copy of all memory regions. Since individual memory regions might be copied at different points in time, we formalize a snapshot as a function  $s : R \rightarrow V \times T$ , i.e., for every memory region we store the value and the time this value was copied from memory. We denote



**Figure 4:** Causally inconsistent snapshot.

by  $s(r).v$  the value stored for region  $r$  in snapshot  $s$  and by  $s(r).t$  the corresponding time. For example, if  $s(r_i) = (15, 3)$  then memory region  $r_i$  was copied at time  $s(r_i).t = 3$  with a value of  $s(r_i).v = 15$ . Snapshots correspond to cuts through the space-time diagram of a computation.

Taking a snapshot of a computation means to copy the current values from memory regions into the snapshot, but a snapshot does not contain any references to events that have happened. To be able to formally connect events in and snapshots of a computation, we introduce one additional notation: For a real-time value  $t$  and a memory region  $r$  we denote by  $event(r, t)$  the *most recent event* that happened on memory region  $r$  at a time before or equal to  $t$ . Formally,  $event$  is a function  $event : R \times T \rightarrow E$ . If  $event(r, t) = e$  then  $rt(e) \leq t$  and there exists no other event on  $r$  that happened between  $rt(e)$  and  $t$ .

Technically, the set of events contained in the cut corresponding to a snapshot  $s$  consists of all events that lie to the left of  $event(r, s(r).t)$  (including the event itself).

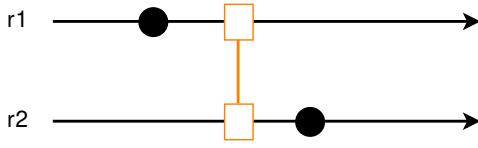
## 3. Defining Atomicity

Intuitively, atomicity is a notion to characterize the degree of freedom of signs of concurrent activity. High atomicity therefore attempts to bound the effects that arise from an observation taking place concurrently to a computation.

### 3.1. Causal consistency

The original definition of atomicity introduced by Vömel and Freiling (2012) is based on the causal dependency relation  $\rightarrow$  between events. It states that the set of events derived from a snapshot corresponds to a consistent cut. The rationale behind this definition was that snapshots should respect causality, i.e., for each effect the snapshot contains its cause. The definition rules out any inconsistent cuts as allowed snapshots. Such an example is depicted in Fig. 4 where two events  $e_1$  and  $e_2$  occurred on region  $r_1$  and  $r_2$  respectively and  $e_1 \rightarrow e_2$ . A snapshot that contains the contents of  $r_1$  before  $e_1$  happened and the contents of  $r_2$  after  $e_2$  happened is causally inconsistent because the change introduced by  $e_1$  that caused  $e_2$  is missing.

Vömel and Freiling (2012) argued that snapshots should at least be consistent with causality because causally inconsistent snapshots clearly cannot have happened. Unfortunately, many software-based snapshot approaches for RAM do not produce even causally consistent snapshots.



**Figure 5:** When an instantaneous snapshot is taken, all memory regions are copied at the same time.

### 3.2. Instantaneous consistency

Causally consistent snapshots guarantee that snapshots respect causal relationships. However, causal consistency is a notion defined for asynchronous distributed system, i.e., systems where no notion of real-time exists and time is reduced to causality. In such systems, events can be reordered along the sequential timeline if causal relationships are respected. Therefore, *every* consistent global state is a state that the computation *potentially* could have passed through. In practice, and in particular in those systems that we focus on here (smartphones, PCs, servers), often a notion of real-time exists that allows to narrow down the set of consistent global states that *actually* have happened (Stoller, 2000).

Based on these insights, we now define an idealistic (and much stricter) consistency criterion based on the time at which the memory regions are copied. The notion of *instantaneous consistency* formalizes the idealistic intent of snapshots in which all memory regions are copied at exactly the same time.

**Definition 1** (instantaneous consistency). *A snapshot s satisfies instantaneous consistency iff all memory regions in s were acquired at the same point in time. Formally:*

$$\forall r, r' \in R : s(r).t = s(r').t$$

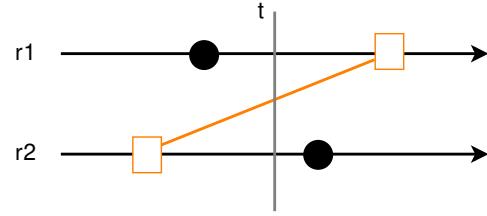
If a snapshot satisfies instantaneous consistency, we say that the snapshot *is* instantaneous. Obtaining instantaneous snapshots is possible if the system of which the memory contents are extracted can be paused, for example when the main memory of a virtual machine is dumped. An example of an instantaneous snapshot is depicted in Fig. 5.

From a forensic point of view, it is desirable that a snapshot is instantaneous because it resembles something that is easy to understand and “obviously” free of any problems of concurrency. This aspect is important for legal proceedings in which doubts on the way evidence was gathered can severely degrade its evidential value.

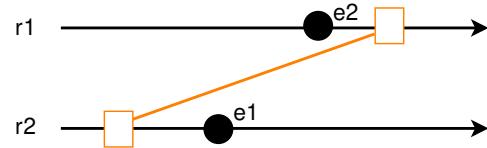
### 3.3. Quasi-instantaneous consistency

Taking instantaneous snapshots usually requires freezing the system from which memory is copied, at least this is the case for systems where no inherent (hardware) mechanism exists to copy all memory regions at the same time. So taking instantaneous snapshots in practice is hard, if not impossible.

We therefore define a slightly weaker criterion that captures the main ideas of instantaneous consistency while allowing to take snapshots without freezing the system. We call this *quasi-instantaneous consistency*.



**Figure 6:** When a snapshot satisfies quasi-instantaneous consistency, a point in time can be found at which the contents of the memory regions in the snapshot coexisted in the copied main memory. The same result would have been achieved with an instantaneous snapshot at time  $t$ .



**Figure 7:** A snapshot that is not quasi-instantaneously consistent if  $e_1$  and  $e_2$  modify the values of  $r_1$  and  $r_2$ , respectively.

**Definition 2** (quasi-instantaneous consistency). *A snapshot s satisfies quasi-instantaneous consistency iff the values in the snapshot could have also been acquired with an instantaneous snapshot s'. Formally:*

$$\exists s' : (\forall r, r' \in R : s'(r).t = s'(r').t) \wedge \forall r \in R : s'(r).v = s(r).v$$

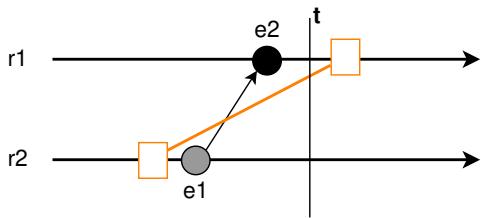
The above definition does not require that the snapshot *is* taken instantaneously but that it *could* have been taken instantaneously, i.e., that the values of all memory regions in the snapshot were coexistent in memory at (at least) one point in time during the acquisition.

Fig. 6 shows an example of a snapshot which is quasi-instantaneous. In this example a point in time can be found at which the contents of the two memory regions in the snapshot were coexistent in memory. When such a point in time cannot be found, the snapshot is not quasi-instantaneous. Assuming modifying events, Fig. 7 shows an example for this case. Because of the order of the events  $e_1$  and  $e_2$  and the time points at which the memory regions were added to the snapshot, the snapshot contains values that were never coexistent in main memory. In this case it is impossible to find a time at which a snapshot containing the same values could have been taken instantaneously.

### 3.4. Relations between the consistency definitions

Instantaneous consistency is the strongest concept of the presented consistency definitions. If all memory regions can be copied at the same time, no inconsistencies can arise due to concurrent activity. Therefore, instantaneous consistency implies quasi-instantaneous consistency.

The relation between quasi-instantaneous and causal consistency is slightly less apparent. We first argue that



**Figure 8:** If  $e_1$  is an event that does not change the memory contents, then the snapshot is quasi-instantaneously consistent but not causally consistent. If  $e_1$  and  $e_2$  are modifying events, then the snapshot is neither quasi-instantaneously nor causally consistent.

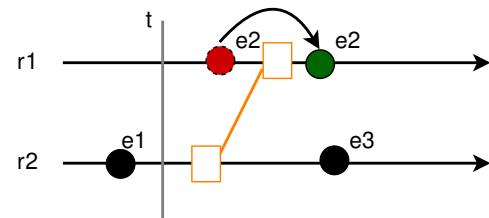
a causally consistent snapshot is not necessarily quasi-instantaneously consistent. To see this, consider the computation in Fig. 7 and note that the events  $e_1$  and  $e_2$  are independent of each other. Therefore, any snapshot of this computation is causally consistent. However, if  $e_1$  and  $e_2$  are modifying events, the snapshot is not quasi-instantaneously consistent. So causal consistency does not generally imply quasi-instantaneous consistency.

But what about the inverse question, i.e., is every quasi-instantaneous snapshot also causally consistent? Interestingly, the answer to this question depends on the nature of events that determine causal consistency. To see this, consider the computation in Fig. 8 which is similar to the one depicted in Fig. 7 but where events  $e_1$  and  $e_2$  have a causal relationship. If neither  $e_1$  nor  $e_2$  are modifying events then the values stored in memory do not change and so any snapshot would be quasi-instantaneous, also the one depicted in Fig. 8. So in this case, a snapshot might be quasi-instantaneously consistent but still causally inconsistent. But even if we only have modifying events, the changes of  $e_1$  or  $e_2$  could be reverted and the resulting quasi-instantaneously consistent snapshot might again not be causally consistent. But if we assume that we only have uniquely modifying events, this cannot happen anymore.

**Proposition 1.** *If all events are uniquely modifying, then any quasi-instantaneously consistent snapshot is also causally consistent.*

*Proof.* Let  $s$  be a snapshot satisfying quasi-instantaneous consistency. From the definition of quasi-instantaneous consistency follows that there exists an instantaneous snapshot  $s'$  that contains the same values as  $s$  for every memory region. Since  $s'$  is instantaneous, it is also causally consistent. But since all events are uniquely modifying, no events can have happened between  $s'$  and  $s$ . Therefore,  $s$  is also causally consistent.  $\square$

As observed by Pagani et al. (2019), causal consistency is very permissive but appears to be the smallest common denominator of any acceptable quality measure of atomicity. However, it is too permissive to be easily attainable. Instantaneous consistency, the ideal notion of atomicity, is too strong. Quasi-instantaneous consistency is an intermediate



**Figure 9:** After the acquisition has been started at time  $t$ , no changes to memory regions that have not been copied yet are allowed. Once a region has been copied its content may be changed by events.

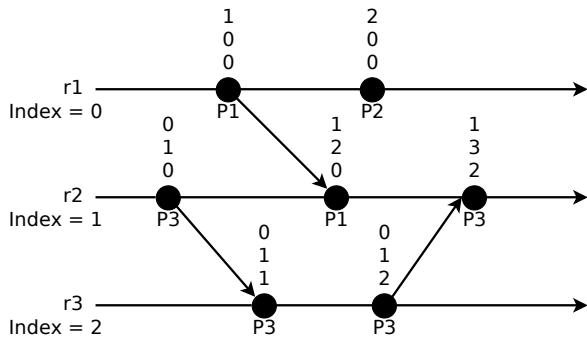
definition that does not need to halt the system but still can express a similar level of instantaneousness. It is close in spirit to Pagani et al.'s concept of *time consistency*, which is satisfied “if there was a point in time during the acquisition process in which the content of those pages co-existed in the memory of the system” (Pagani et al., 2019).

#### 4. Achieving Consistency

One possibility to achieve quasi-instantaneous consistency of snapshots created on a running system is to ensure that, after the acquisition process has been started, no memory content will be modified before it has been copied. This method is known as *copy-on-write* in the area of systems software. It is rather easy to see that a snapshot created using this technique satisfies quasi-instantaneous consistency, because any state changes occurring after the start of the acquisition are not included into the memory snapshot. Therefore, the contents in the snapshot are equal to those in the memory regions contained at the start of the acquisition.

An example can be seen in Fig. 9: Because  $e_2$  would have been executed on memory region  $r_2$  after the start of the acquisition process but before it was copied, the event is interrupted and the region is copied first. Afterwards the event can be executed.

Manipulating the page table entries is a convenient method to do this. By taking away the write permission of all page tables entries, trying to change the page will result in a page fault that can be handled accordingly. But the system of which the memory snapshot is created should not be manipulated to such a great extent. Therefore, instead of manipulating the page tables of the operating system, a hypervisor can be used. By taking away the write permissions of the guest pages on the hypervisor level, write accesses will cause an exit to the hypervisor. Then the page can be copied and the write permission for the page can be turned on again. Over the last years the technical means to implement the technique changed, as can be seen in the works of Martignoni, Fattori, Paleari and Cavallaro (2010); Yu, Qi, Lin, Zhong, Li and Guan (2012) and Kiperberg, Leon, Resh, Algawi and Zaidenberg (2019). As it cannot always be expected that a system is already virtualized, methods for the “on the fly” virtualization of a system have



**Figure 10:** Each memory region has an assigned vector clock and an index for the local counter. Three processes,  $p_1$ ,  $p_2$ , and  $p_3$ , interact with the memory regions. Whenever a process accesses a memory region the vector clock the process saw last and the local vector clock are combined and the counter at the index of the region is increased.

also been proposed (Palutke, Ruderich, Wild and Freiling, 2020).

## 5. Measuring Consistency

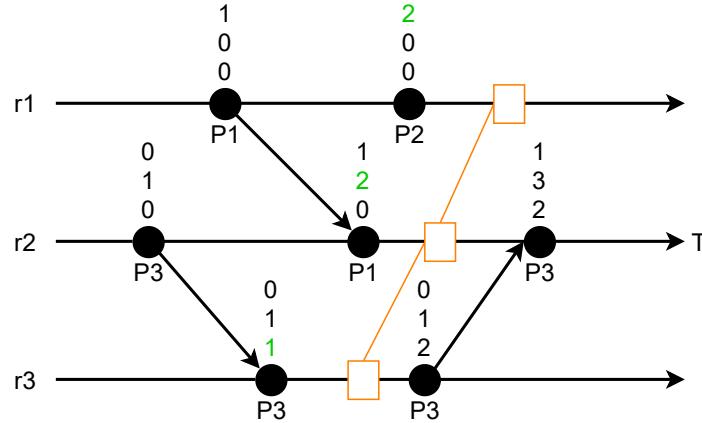
While theoretical quality criteria are an important step towards understanding which factors influence the usefulness of a memory snapshot, the question remains how these criteria can be measured. Because of the limitations of previous measurement approaches, we describe an alternative method to evaluate a snapshot with regard to causal consistency.

Since it is difficult to trace all causal relationships in a system, we suggest to only keep track of causal relationships in a part of the system. Tracking causal relationships within one process is a manageable task. It also allows to perform the evaluation for closed source tools and on different operating systems. The idea is to use a simple test program in which memory regions are allocated, and causally dependent changes on the regions, observed using vector clocks. If quasi-instantaneous consistency should be measured instead, realtime timestamps can be used in place of vector clocks.

### 5.1. Using vector clocks

Vector clocks are a concept from distributed computing that allows to track logical time by ordering events (Mattern, 1989). Usually, vector clocks are assigned to different processes in a distributed system. When events are executed by a process or messages between different processes are exchanged, the clocks need to be updated. As we want to observe changes on memory regions, all subsequent examples assign vector clocks to memory regions not processes, the original definitions by Mattern (1989) are adapted accordingly.

The idea is to assign a counter to each memory region that increases every time an event (i.e., an access by a process) is executed on the region. Such counters allow to track causal relationships between events in the following



**Figure 11:** In a consistent snapshot the values of the global time at each region's index and that region's vector at the index are equal.

way: Additionally, to the local counter, each memory region's vector clock has fields for all other memory regions' counters. If we assume a system with  $n$  memory regions, each region has a vector clock (a vector of counters)  $C$  of size  $n$ . Each region is assigned a unique index to this vector at which its local counter is found. Whenever a process accesses a memory region it saves the region's vector clock. When it accesses the next region the two vector clocks are compared and for each index the higher value is chosen. Then the local counter is incremented.

Causal relationships can be detected with vector clocks by ordering them using the happened-before relation (Mattern, 1989): For two vector clocks,  $C_i$  and  $C_j$ ,  $C_i < C_j$  holds iff

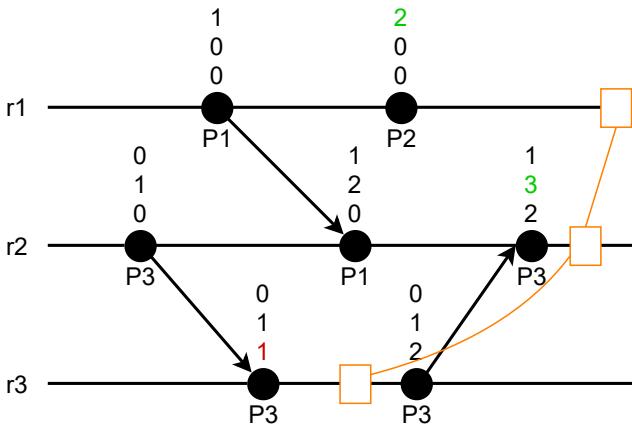
$$\forall x \in \{1, \dots, n\} : C_i[x] \leq C_j[x] \wedge (\exists x : C_i[x] < C_j[x])$$

Whenever this does not hold for two vector clocks, the causing events are concurrent to each other. Fig. 10 shows an example for three memory regions and their assigned vector clocks. Each time a process accesses a memory region the vector clocks are updated. Using the definition we can, for example, see that the event caused by process  $p_2$  on region  $r_1$  is only causally dependent on the event caused by  $p_1$  on the same memory region and concurrent to all other events.

With the help of the vector clocks, inconsistencies in a snapshot (or cut) can be found. First, the *global time* vector  $t_s$  of the snapshot  $s$  needs to be calculated. This vector consists of the highest value for each index in all vector clocks (Mattern, 1989) as

$$t_s = \sup(C_1, \dots, C_n).$$

Next, each region's vector clock is compared to the global time. More precisely, the value of the region's vector clock at its index is compared to  $t_s$  at the same index. Snapshot  $s$  is consistent iff  $t_s = (C_1[1], \dots, C_n[n])$  (Mattern, 1989). Fig. 11 shows an example for a consistent snapshot. Comparing the



**Figure 12:** This snapshot is inconsistent because the event on region  $r_3$  on which the last event included in the snapshot on region  $r_2$  is causally dependent is not included as well. This becomes evident when comparing the vector clock of  $r_3$  with the global time.

global time to the regions' vector clocks shows that for all memory regions the value at the respective index is equal to the global time vector at the same index. This means that for all regions the causing event of the latest access on them is included in the snapshot. Fig. 12 shows an example for an inconsistent snapshot. In this case the last event on  $r_3$  is missing from the snapshot. This is a problem as the last event on  $r_2$  which is included in the snapshot is causally dependent on the event. Therefore, the vector clock has not been updated yet and the inconsistency can be identified by comparing the vector clock to the global time vector.

## 5.2. Using realtime clocks

While they allow to capture any programmable cause-effect relationship, vector clocks are rather expensive in terms of memory. A cheap replacement of vector clocks is to simply take the measurement of a realtime clock as timestamp (if such a clock exists). With this idea, the same approach as described above can be used to track the sequence in which events occurred: Each memory region is assigned a single realtime timestamp which corresponds to the time that the most recent event happened in that memory region. The vector of all such timestamps is called the *current time*.

A snapshot algorithm now has to keep track of these most recent timestamps during the acquisition of memory regions. In analogy to the definitions for vector clocks, the global time  $t_s$  of a snapshot  $s$  is the vector of these timestamps, one for each memory region. A snapshot  $s$  is consistent if the current time is equal to the global time  $t_s$ . This is a sufficient criterion for quasi-instantaneous consistency not a necessary one. Finding a *necessary* criterion is an open question.

Obviously, this method is much more space efficient than using vector clocks, but it can only be used to check for *quasi-instantaneous* consistency and not for causal consistency.

## 6. Defining Integrity

We briefly revisit the concept of integrity. Integrity wishes to capture the degree to which a snapshot was influenced by the measurement method itself. To do this, it is necessary to distinguish changes on storage that are due to the snapshot mechanism and those that are not. Vömel and Freiling<sup>2</sup>(2012) do this by defining a specific point in time  $\tau$  which indicates the “start” of the measurement. Changes before  $\tau$  are not due to the measurement mechanism and changes after  $\tau$  affect integrity.

In the definition of Vömel and Freiling (2012), a snapshot satisfies *integrity with respect to  $\tau$*  if the memory contents did not change between this point in time and the time of the acquisition of the region, formally:

$$\forall r \in R : \tau \leq s(r).t \implies \forall t' \in T : \\ \tau \leq t' \leq s(r).t : s(r).v = m(r, t')$$

With this definition, whenever a memory region's content changes after  $\tau$ , integrity is not satisfied anymore. We therefore call it *restrictive integrity*. However, if the original value is restored before the memory region is added to the snapshot, then the result is the same as if the change never happened. We therefore propose a slightly weaker definition of integrity, called *permissive integrity*, that allows changes in memory after  $\tau$  as long as the value that is written to the snapshot is the same as the value that existed in memory at time  $\tau$ .

**Definition 3** (permissive integrity). *A snapshot  $s$  satisfies integrity with respect to time  $\tau$  iff*

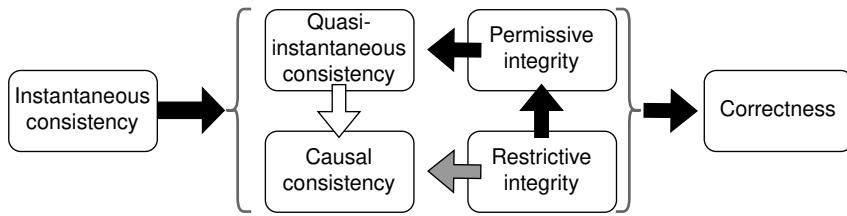
$$\forall r \in R : \tau \leq s(r).t \implies s(r).v = m(r, \tau)$$

This definition is more permissive and enables new acquisition techniques that selectively overwrite memory regions if the snapshot contains the original data. Obviously, a snapshot that satisfies restrictive integrity with respect to  $\tau$  also satisfies permissive integrity with respect to  $\tau$ .

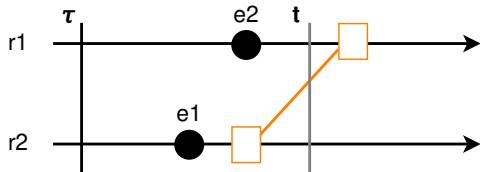
## 7. Relations between the Quality Criteria

In the original definitions of Vömel and Freiling (2012), the three notions of correctness, atomicity and integrity were not fully independent. In fact, integrity appeared to be unnecessarily strong and complex: A snapshot that satisfied integrity also satisfied atomicity and correctness. From a conceptual point of view, it is better to have definitions that do not imply each other to separate concerns.

Fig. 13 shows an overview of the quality criteria and their relations with respect to implication. The implications between the different consistency definitions (see section 3) and between the two integrity definitions (see section 6) are already integrated. As might be expected, instantaneous consistency and restrictive integrity are the strongest notions and do not imply each other in any way. Weaker consistency and integrity definitions are, however, not so easily separable.



**Figure 13:** The relationships between the different quality criteria. Black arrows indicate implications without further assumptions. The gray arrow stands for an implication that only exists if we assume that we only observe causal relationships between modifying events. The implication shown by the white arrow assume that all events are uniquely modifying.



**Figure 14:** While this snapshot does not satisfy integrity with respect to  $\tau$  it still satisfies quasi-instantaneous consistency because an instantaneous snapshot at time  $t$  would have contained the same values.

As already observed above, their relations also depend on further assumptions about the observability of events.

We first note that restrictive integrity implies causal consistency under the assumption that only modifying events are observed. This is because restrictive integrity, for every memory region, disallows any state changes between  $\tau$  and the time the snapshot is taken. Therefore, if all events are modifying, no event can happen between  $\tau$  and the snapshot, and therefore the snapshot must be causally consistent.

The relation between permissive integrity and quasi-instantaneous consistency is particularly delicate. Fig. 14 shows a quasi-instantaneous snapshot that does not satisfy permissive integrity: The snapshot does not satisfy (permissive) integrity with regard to  $\tau$  but a point in time  $t$  can be found at which an instantaneous snapshot would have contained the same values. So quasi-instantaneous consistency does not imply permissive integrity. The inverse, however, is true.

**Proposition 2.** *Every snapshot that satisfies permissive integrity with respect to  $\tau$  also satisfies quasi-instantaneous consistency.*

*Proof.* Let  $s$  be a snapshot that satisfies permissive integrity with respect to  $\tau$ . From the definition this implies that

$$\forall r \in R : \tau \leq s(r).t \Rightarrow s(r).v = m(r, \tau).$$

Now consider the instantaneous snapshot  $s'$  taken at time  $\tau$ . Since  $s'$  was taken at time  $\tau$ , for all memory regions  $r$  holds that  $s'(r).t = \tau$  and  $s'(r).v = m(r, \tau)$ . This means that  $s$  and  $s'$  were taken at different times but contain the same values, namely the values stored in memory at time  $\tau$ . So overall there exists an instantaneous snapshot that has the same values as  $s$ . Therefore,  $s$  is quasi-instantaneous.  $\square$

Note that Proposition 2 holds without any further assumptions about the observability of events. Therefore, restrictive integrity also implies quasi-instantaneous consistency without any further assumptions. If we assume that we have only uniquely modifying events, both quasi-instantaneous consistency and permissive integrity imply causal consistency. Integrity and consistency therefore seem hard to disentangle completely from each other. If events do not necessarily change the values of memory regions, then permissive integrity and causal consistency are independent of each other.

Both integrity definitions imply correctness because they compare the contents of the snapshot with the contents of memory. If the acquisition method were functioning incorrectly this comparison would be likely to fail. This fact shows that correctness is not really necessary as an independent concept. Integrity and consistency suffice to determine the quality of snapshots.

## 8. Legal Implications

Knowing about the quality of the memory snapshots produced by different tools under certain circumstances can help investigators to choose the tool best suited for a concrete investigation. But does it also oblige them to use the best available tool?

When we try to answer this question, we have to think about the evidential value of the memory snapshot. Because the quality of the memory snapshot influences the reliability and completeness of the subsequent analysis results, their evidential value is also influenced by the memory snapshot's evidential value. The value a piece of evidence has is equal to the probability that deductions based on it will be true (Heinson, 2016). As the evidence a court grounds its decision in has to be of the highest possible quality to justify a conviction (Hannich, 2019)[§261 recital 5 ff.] investigators should strive for gathering evidence with an as high as possible evidential value. The evidential value of data is determined by the forensic process with which it was gathered. Among others its authenticity, and integrity as well as the reliability of used methods should be ensured (Fröwis, Gottschalk, Haslhofer, Rückert and Pesch, 2020). Tools that are known to produce incorrect memory snapshots must be excluded from usage in an investigation because this would also cast doubt on any analysis results and conclusions

derived from them, their evidential value would be too low to justify a conviction.

In the case of integrity and atomicity a closer look is needed. A tool that produces a snapshot with low integrity overwrites more parts of the memory than a tool that produces a snapshot with a higher degree of integrity. Therefore, loss of information in the memory snapshot is more likely if less integrity can be achieved. As the presented evidence should also be as authentic as possible (Fröwis et al., 2020) the method that extracts memory snapshots with higher integrity should be chosen if it also produces correct ones.

Because less atomic snapshots are also more likely to have inconsistencies than more atomic snapshots, the reliability and completeness of the results of an analysis of such a snapshot can be questioned. Therefore, in trying to adhere to the quality requirements of evidence used in court decisions, the more atomic method should be chosen if possible. It should also fulfill the requirements regarding correctness and integrity. Another influencing factor on the evidential value of results based on less atomic memory snapshots would be how likely it is that inconsistencies in memory snapshots lead to analysis results that suggest the presence of incriminating evidence even though it never existed in memory. To the best of the authors' knowledge no research has been published about this topic.

Tools with atomicity guarantees, be they instantaneous, quasi-instantaneous or causal consistency, can often not be used due to the technical circumstances of the investigation and time constraints. If a tool without atomicity guarantees is used, many inconsistencies might occur. The information how likely their occurrence is for a specific snapshot is helpful because investigators or expert witnesses who present the results of a technical analysis need to explain the likeliness of errors or missing information to the court. The court should also be enabled to evaluate how likely different hypotheses based on the presented evidence are and if the evidence is reliable (Fröwis et al., 2020). While it is possible to find some inconsistencies by examining the data structures of the operating system, thereby enabling analysts to report them exactly, others might not be visible. Therefore indicators for the likeliness of the occurrence of inconsistencies, like for example suggested by Pagani et al. (2019), should be made available by the memory snapshotting tool to the analyst. This would enable analysts to provide founded estimates about the likeliness of the analysis results being incomplete or the possibility of wrong results due to inconsistencies.

## 9. Conclusions and Future Work

The new notions of atomicity and integrity wish to clarify the conditions under which snapshots of storage can be considered as “good”. The definitions assume a synchronous system but cover any form of storage which cannot be “frozen” and where individual memory regions have to be acquired sequentially.

The measurement approach described in Section 5 needs to be evaluated in future work. The question remains how the

results for a subset of memory regions can be transferred to the quality of the complete memory snapshot. Therefore, it will be necessary to perform an evaluation of the method itself before testing different memory dumping tools. To evaluate the method, the same steps as for a tool evaluation can be performed. Memory snapshots are created while the test program is running and, with the help of vector clocks, atomicity violations are identified. Then, other indicators for inconsistencies, like those described by Pagani et al. (2019), need to be examined. A ground truth of the memory state might be helpful to identify further inconsistencies. The ground truth could be created in a virtualized environment by taking atomic snapshots from the hypervisor. Identifying as many indicators for inconsistencies as possible and creating a big data set of analyzed memory snapshots is another challenge. Indicators can be identified from the related literature.

The creation of a big data set requires the automation of memory snapshot creation and the analysis of memory snapshots, and the organization of the analysis results. A big data set enables statistical analysis with which it can be evaluated, e.g., if the number of atomicity violations in a subset of memory can be used to extrapolate the occurrence of other inconsistency indicators in other memory areas. Another question that seems worth examining is if scenarios can be observed in which inconsistencies lead to false conclusions that create incriminating evidence where none is present.

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## CRediT authorship contribution statement

**Jenny Ottmann:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Writing - Original Draft, Writing - Review and Editing. **Frank Breitinger:** Conceptualization, Writing - Review and Editing, Supervision. **Felix Freiling:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Writing - Original Draft, Writing - Review and Editing, Supervision.