

# SIFT case study

From: D.P. Siewiorek, R. S. Swarz  
Reliable Computer Systems (Design and Evaluation) Prentice Hall, 1998.  
Chapter 10 – “The SIFT Case: Design and Analysis of a Fault Tolerant  
Computer for Aircraft Control”.

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# SIFT

SIFT (Software-Implemented Fault Tolerance)  
is a multiprocessor computer designed for advanced commercial aircraft applications  
1978-1982

“ Commercial aircrafts use computers to carry out many functions, such as navigation, auto-pilot and other tasks that are not critical. If a computer fails, the pilot can take over, under almost all circumstances.”

Objective: to reduce fuel consumption, design future aircraft in a way that they operate with greatly reduced stability margins; that is, the safety of flights depends upon active controls derived from computer outputs.

Safety depends on reliability of a flight-control computer.

Goal of SIFT project:  
achieve of a probability of failure less than  $10^{-9}$  per hour over a 10 hour mission.

*(can be accomplished only by considering fault-tolerance as an inherent property of the computer)*

# SIFT

- SRI International (founded as Stanford Research Institute): responsible of the overall design, the software and the testing
- Bendix Corporation: responsible for the design and the construction of the hardware.
- SIFT was delivered to NASA's Avionics Integration Research Laboratory in April 1982 (1978-1982).

SRI International is an American independent, nonprofit research institute with a rich history of supporting government and industry, headquartered in Menlo Park, California. The trustees of Stanford University established SRI in 1946 as a center of innovation to support economic development in the region. Formerly Stanford Research Institute (1946–70)

SRI approach to the design of such computers:

- keep the hardware as simple as possible (reduce the hw failure rate)
  - implement the fault tolerant functions in software
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- The software was formally specified to aid in the proof of its correctness. Failure due to software error would be eliminated by formal proof of correctness. This software intensive design deliberately sacrificed performance to maximize reliability.
  - The SIFT effort began with broad, in-depth, studies stating the reliability and processing requirements for digital computers which would control flight-critical functions.
  - Detailed design studies were made of fault-tolerant architectures that could meet reliability and processing requirements.

# SIFT

- Fully distributed configuration processors
- Transparent fault tolerance (hw and sw replication and voting)
- Assignment of tasks to processors predetermined by a task schedule table defined by the designer
- As processors fail, the available hardware changes (reconfiguration), and a new task schedule is defined
- Processor synchronization fundamental to the correct functioning
- The decision to reconfigure is based on error information obtained when replicated data are voted

# SIFT

- Fault tolerance includes:
  - error detection and correction,
  - diagnosis,
  - reconfiguration, and
  - the prevention of a faulty unit from having an adverse effect on the system
- Use of a Consensus algorithm to tolerate “malicious processes” failure modes
- Two level of authority:
  - The “**local executive**” software contains procedures that support scheduling, voting and communications
  - The “**global executive**” software consists of tasks that cooperate to provide synchronization, redundancy management, fault isolation and reconfiguration and interactive consistency

# SIFT HW

SIFT consists of a number of Bendix BDX930 processors:

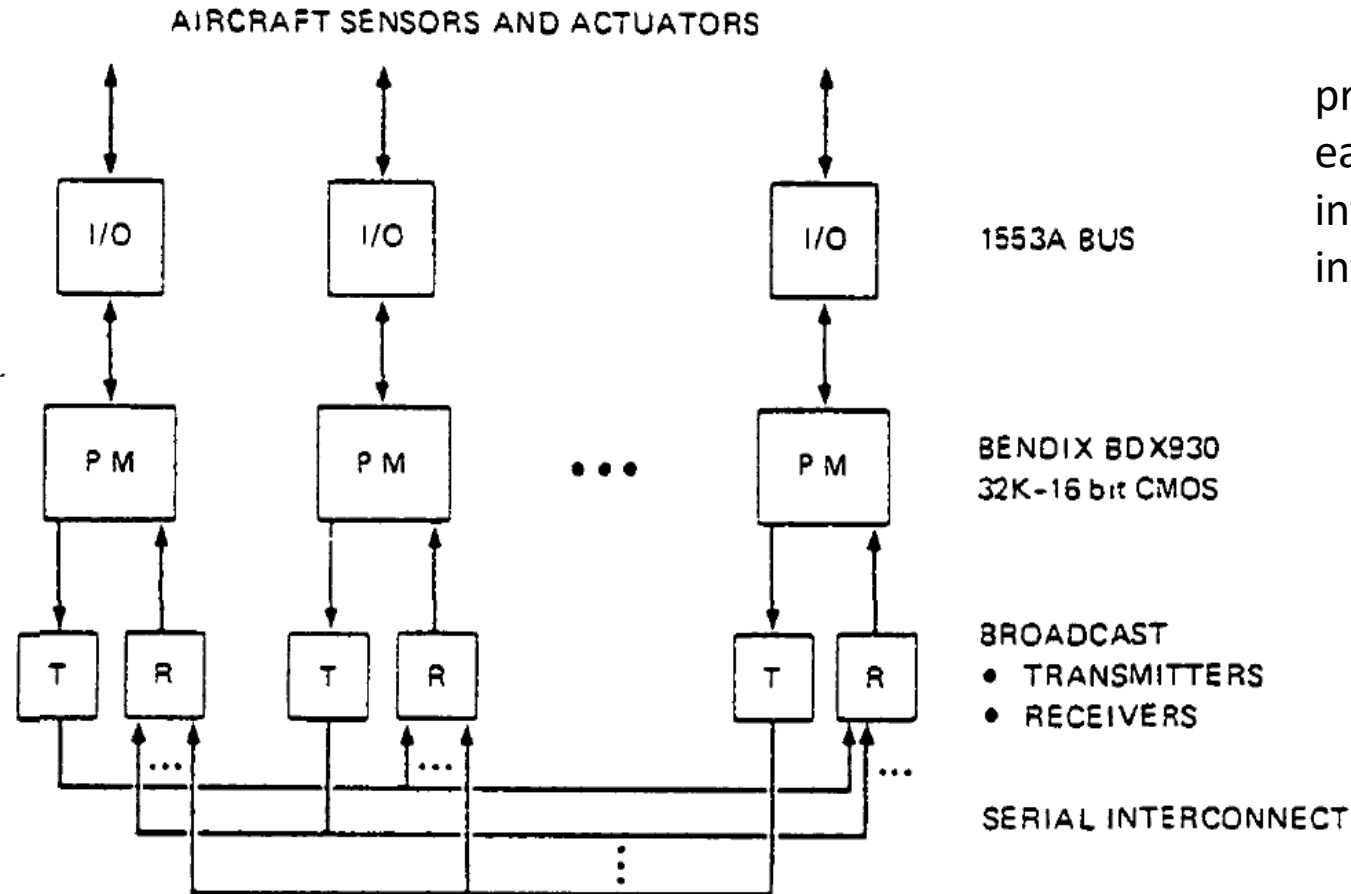
- 32k words of 16 bit memory
- 16 registers
- a real-time clock
- an interface to a MIL STD 1553A bus controller for communications with the aircraft
- a broadcast-mode interprocessor communication interface
- speed of approximately 1 million instructions per second, additional registers and expanded instruction set
- Processors are physically isolated from each other to avoid fault propagation

MIL STD 1553A: military standard published by the United States Department of Defense that defines the mechanical, electrical, and functional characteristics of a serial data bus.

# SIFT HW

Data broadcast by processors are received and stored in data buffers. A separate data buffer used for information from each processor

Broadcasting processor stores a sequence of data into the transaction file and sets the transaction pointer to the start of the sequence



processors connected to  
each other via the  
interprocessors comm.  
interface

- all processors receive all broadcast data
- not all processors run all tasks
- some data are ignored

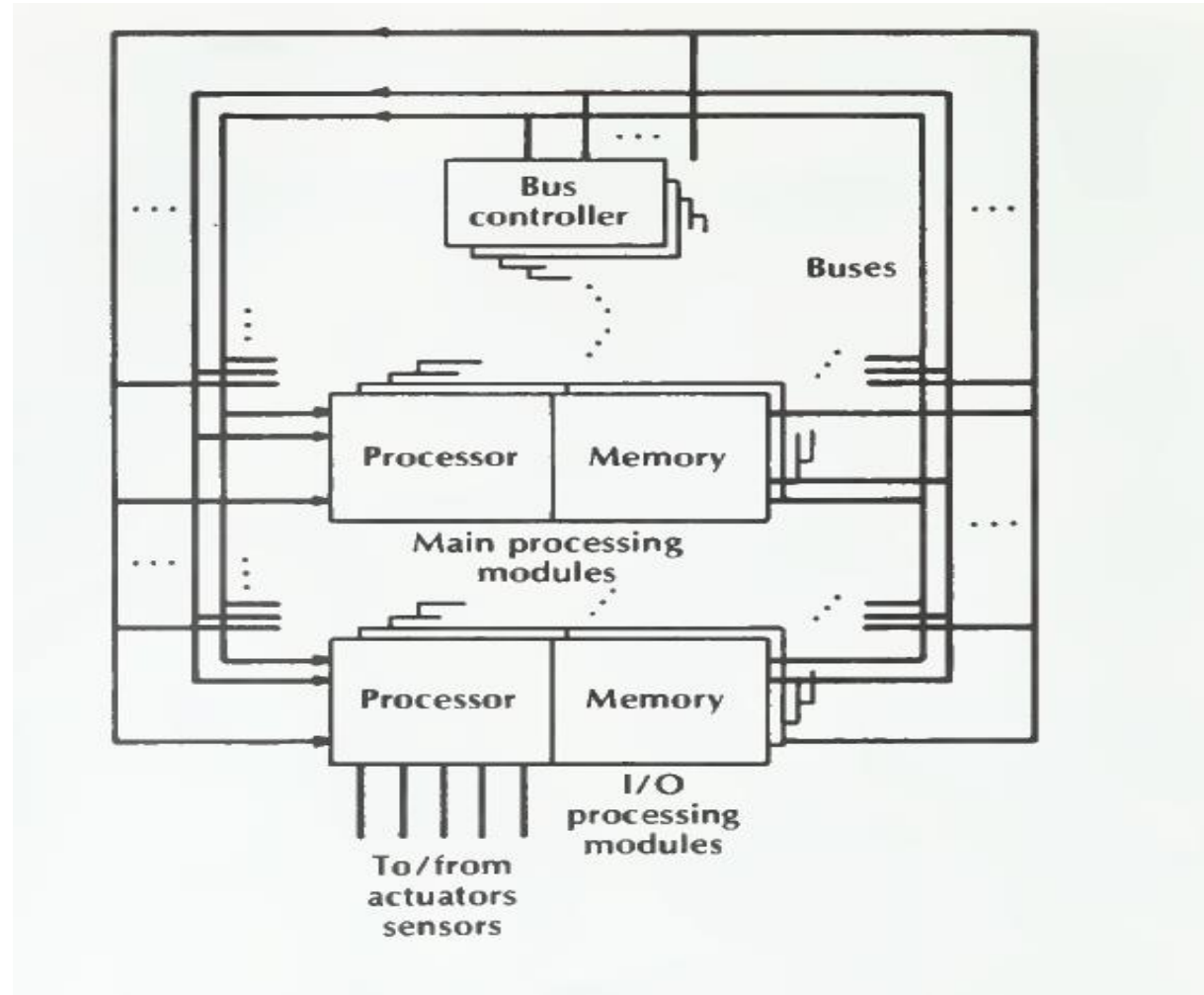
SRI technical report  
N83-72663, 1980



# System overview: hw

each processing module is connected to a multiple bus system

I/O processing module: smaller computational and memory capacity



unit of fault detection and of reconfiguration: processing module or the bus

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# System overview: hw

- **Main processors:**

Computing is carried out by the main processors. Each processor's results are stored in a main memory that is uniquely associated with the processor.

A processor and its memory are connected by a conventional high bandwidth connection.

- **I/O processors:**

The I/O processors and memories are structurally similar to the main processors and memories but are of much smaller computational and memory capacity. They connect to the input and output units of the system which are the sensors and actuators of the aircraft.

- **Processing module:**

Each processor and its associated memory form a **processing module**, and each of the modules is connected to a **multiple bus system**.

The SIFT design approach makes no assumptions about the failure modes, distinguishing only between failed and nonfailed units.

**The unit of fault detection and of reconfiguration in SIFT is a processing module or a bus.**

# System overview: execution of tasks

- The SIFT system executes a set of tasks, each of which consists of a **sequence of iterations**.

The **input data to each iteration of a task are the output data produced by the previous iteration of some collection of tasks** (which may include the task itself).

- The input and output of the entire system is accomplished by tasks executed in the I/O processors.
- Reliability is achieved by having **each iteration of a task independently executed by a number of modules**.
- After executing the iteration, a processor places the iteration's output in the memory associated with the processor.
- A processor that uses the output of this iteration determines its value by examining the output generated by each processor that executed the iteration
- The output is chosen by **two-out-of-three vote**  
If all copies of the output are not identical, an error has occurred. The **error is recorded in the processor memory**. It will be used by the executive system to determine which unit is faulty.

# System overview: synchronization

SIFT uses the iterative nature of the tasks to limit the amount of voting by

- **voting on the state data of the aircraft (or the computer system) only at the beginning of each iteration.**

- We must ensure only that the different processors allocated to a task are executing the same iteration.
- This means that the processors need be only loosely synchronized (50 microseconds), so we do not need tight synchronization to the instruction or clock interval.

An important benefit of this loose synchronization is that an iteration of a task can be scheduled for execution at slightly different times by different processors.

-> Simultaneous **transient failures** of several processors will be less likely to produce **correlated failures** in the replicated versions of a task.

# System overview: task replication

- The number of processors executing a task can be different for the same the task at different times—for example, if a task that is not critical at one time becomes critical at another time.  
(critical tasks may be replicated (3 or 5 replicas))
- The allocation of **tasks to modules** is, in general, different for each module.
- It is determined dynamically by a task called the **global executive**, which diagnoses errors to determine which modules and buses are faulty.
- When the global executive decides that a module has become faulty, it reconfigures the system by appropriately changing the allocation of tasks to modules.

# Damage isolation

## 1) Damage isolation

preventing physical damage from spreading beyond carefully prescribed boundaries.

Techniques for damage isolation include physical barriers to prevent propagation of mechanical and thermal effects and electrical barriers (for example, high-impedance electrical connections and optical couplers).

In SIFT, such **damage isolation** is provided at the **boundaries between processing modules and buses**.

# Fault isolation

## 2) Fault isolation:

preventing a faulty unit from causing incorrect behaviour in a nonfaulty unit

**2.1** Technique for fault isolation include protection against the corruption of data of the nonfaulty units

Fault isolation is provided in SIFT by the way in which units can communicate

- A processing module can read data from any processing module's memory, but it can write only into **its own memory**. Thus a faulty processor can corrupt the data only in its own memory and not in that of any other processing modules.

# Fault isolation

**2.2** Fault isolation also requires that invalid control signals not produce incorrect behavior in a nonfaulty unit.

In general, a faulty set of control signals can cause two types of faulty behavior in another unit:

- (1) The unit carries out the wrong action (possibly by doing nothing), and
- (2) the unit does not provide service to other units.

In SIFT these two types of fault propagation are prevented by making **each unit autonomous, with its own control**.

Improper control signals are ignored, and time-outs are used to prevent the unit from hanging up, waiting for a signal that never arrives.



# Fault masking

**All faults within a module are treated as if they have the same effect: that they produce bad data in that module's memory.**

The system does not attempt to distinguish the nature of a module fault. In particular, it does not distinguish between a faulty memory and a processor that puts bad data into an otherwise nonfaulty memory.

A processor can obtain bad data if those data are read from a faulty processing module or over a faulty bus.

Preventing these bad data from causing the generation of incorrect results is solved by **fault masking (voting)**. A processor receives multiple copies of the data. Each copy is obtained by different memory, over a different bus, and the processor use majority voting

# An abstract view of data transfer

Connections among processors, buses, and memories.

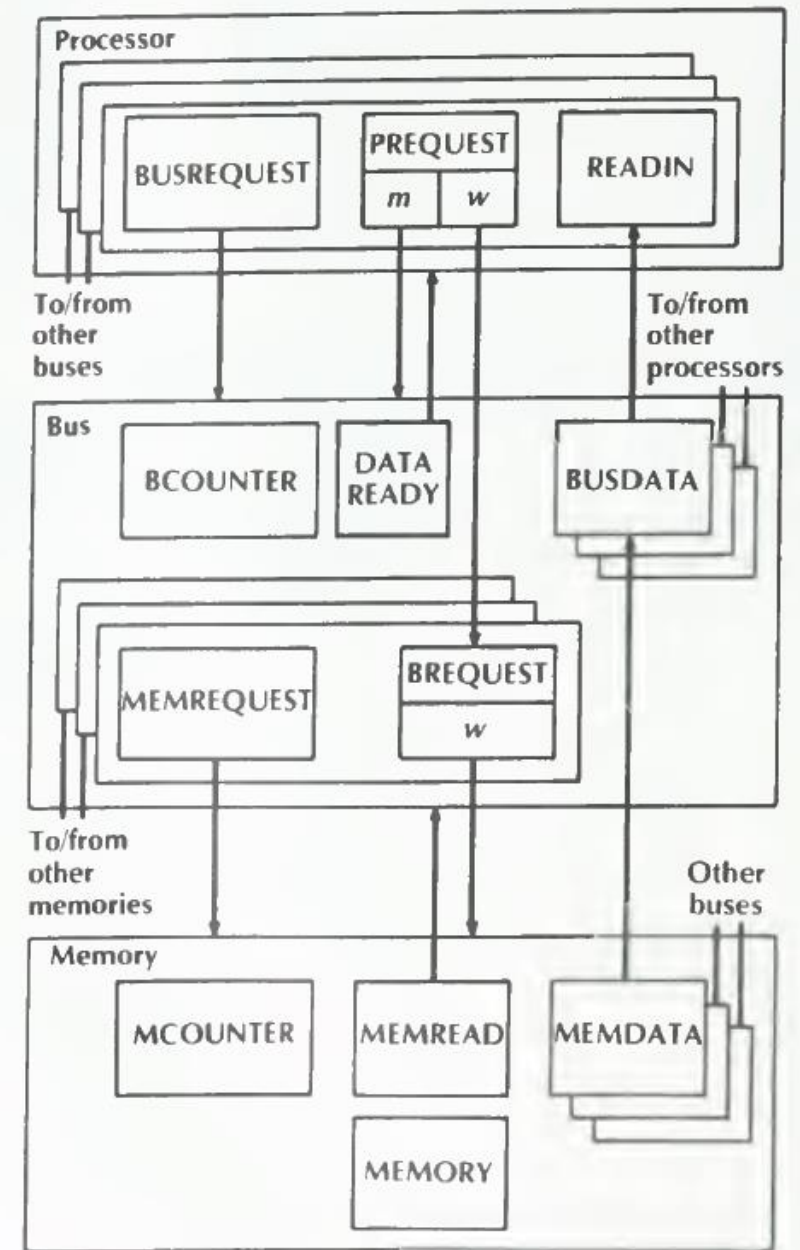
Within each unit: a number of abstract registers that contain data or control information.

Arrows that terminate at a register indicate the flow of data to the register.

Arrows that terminate at the boundary of a unit indicate control signals for that unit.

Time-outs are used to prevent any bus or memory failure from hanging up the unit

The bus control scanner that detects processors requests is controlled by a microprogram read-only memory (PROM)



# An abstract view of data transfer:

Processor p reads a word from location w of memory m via bus b

## PREQUEST – separate register for each BUS

**P:** insert m, w in PREQUEST

set BUSREQUEST

wait for the BUS to complete its actions

**BUS:** BCOUNTER driven scanner to continuously scan PREQUEST, BUSREQUEST  
when it is set, the bus is seized by the processor P, BCOUNTER contains the the id of the processor P  
transfer w from P to a register connect with memory m  
MEMREQUEST is raised  
wait for the MEMORY to complete its actions

**MEMORY:** MCOUNTER to scan for bus requesting service

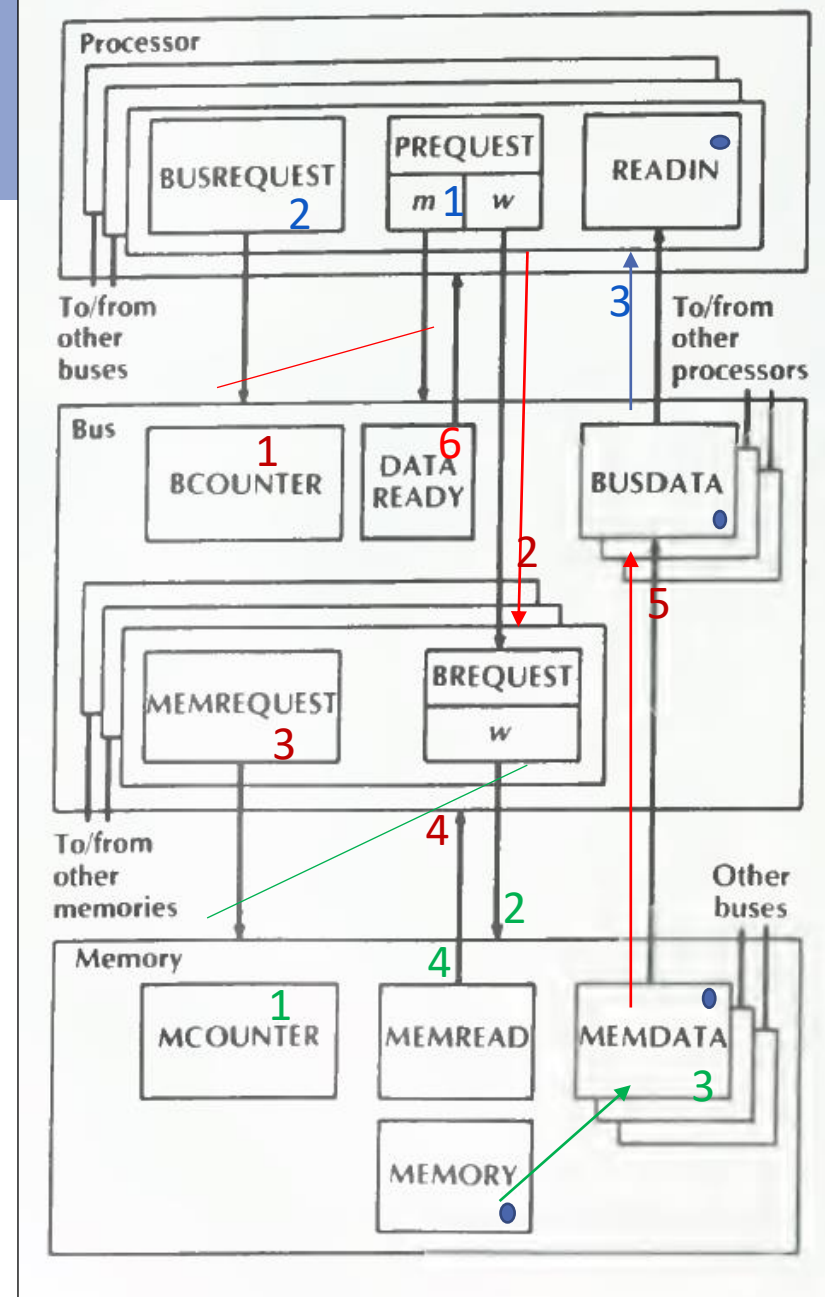
read the value of w from the bus which seized the memory

read the data at the location w into the MEMDATA

raise MEMREAD to inform the bus that the data are available

wait MEMREQUEST dropped by the bus (has received data)

drop MEMREAD and resume scanning



# Scheduling

Types of timing requirements on the SIFT system:

- **Output to the actuators must be generated with specified frequency.**
- **The delay between the reading of sensors and the generation of output to the actuators based upon those readings must be kept below specified limits.**
- **To fulfill these requirements, an iteration rate is specified for each task.**
- The scheduling strategy must guarantee that the processing of each iteration of the task will be completed within the time frame of that iteration. It does not matter when the processing is performed, provided that it is completed by the end of the frame.
- Moreover, **the time needed to execute an iteration of a task is highly predictable.** The iteration rates required by different tasks differ, but they can be adjusted somewhat to simplify the scheduling.
- The scheduling strategy chosen for the SIFT system is **a slight variant of the simply periodic method.**
  - **Simply periodic scheduling:** tasks with the fastest iteration rates are given the highest priority and iteration rates of the tasks are constrained: each iteration rate is an integral multiple of the next smaller rate. Workload does not exceed the capacity of the processor.

# Scheduling

- The scheduling strategy chosen for the SIFT system is **a slight variant of the simply periodic method.**
- Simply periodic scheduling
  - tasks with the fastest iteration rates are given the highest priority and
  - iteration rates of the tasks are constrained: each iteration rate is an integral multiple of the next smaller rate.
  - If workload does not exceed the capacity of the processor, all tasks will complete within their time frame

# Processor synchronization

- The SIFT intertask and interprocessor communication mechanism allows a degree of asynchronism between processors. However the processors must periodically resynchronize their clocks to ensure that no clock drifts too far from any other.

# Processor synchronization

- The traditional clock synchronization algorithm for reliable systems is the **median clock algorithm**, requiring at least three clocks. In this algorithm, each clock observes every other clock and sets itself to the median of the values that it sees.
- The justification for this algorithm is that, in the presence of only a single fault, either the median value must be the value of one of the valid clocks (case 1, case 2) or else it must lie between a pair of valid clock values (case 3). In either case, the median is an acceptable value for resynchronization.

Clock A, Clock B, Clock C: faulty

- 1)  $C < A, B$
- 2)  $C > A, B$
- 3)  $A < C < B$

- **The weakness of this algorithm is the Byzantine fault, that may cause other clocks to observe different values for the failing clock**

# Processor synchronization (Consensus problem)

In the presence of a fault that results in other clocks seeing different values for the failing clock, the median resynchronization algorithm can lead to a system failure.

Consider a system of three clocks A, B, and C, of which C is faulty. Assume clock A < clock B.

Assume the failure mode of clock C is such that clock A sees a value for clock C that is slightly earlier than its own value, while clock B sees a value for clock C that is slightly later than its own value (Byzantine faults).

Clock C: faulty

A:10	B: 20	C: 8	-> Clock A=10
A:10	B:20	C: 22	-> Clock B=20

Clocks A and B will both see their own value as the median value, and therefore not change it.

To synchronise clocks a Consensus algorithm is applied.

Impossibility result for three clocks. Four processors (clocks) are used.



# Processor synchronization (Consensus problem)

Let  $\delta$  the maximum amount by which the value of two non-faulty processors may disagree (depends upon the synchronisation interval and the rate of clock drift)

Any component that is not within  $\delta$  of at least two other components is ignored. Any NIL component is ignored.

The clock takes the median value of the remaining components.

Since each non-faulty processor agrees on the value of the clocks, each will compute exactly the same median value.

The value is within  $\delta$  of the original value of each non-faulty clock.

# The software system

The software of SIFT consists of the **application software** and the **executive software**.

The **application software** performs the actual flight-control computations.

The **executive software** is responsible for

- the reliable execution of the application tasks and
- implements the error-detection and reconfiguration mechanisms.

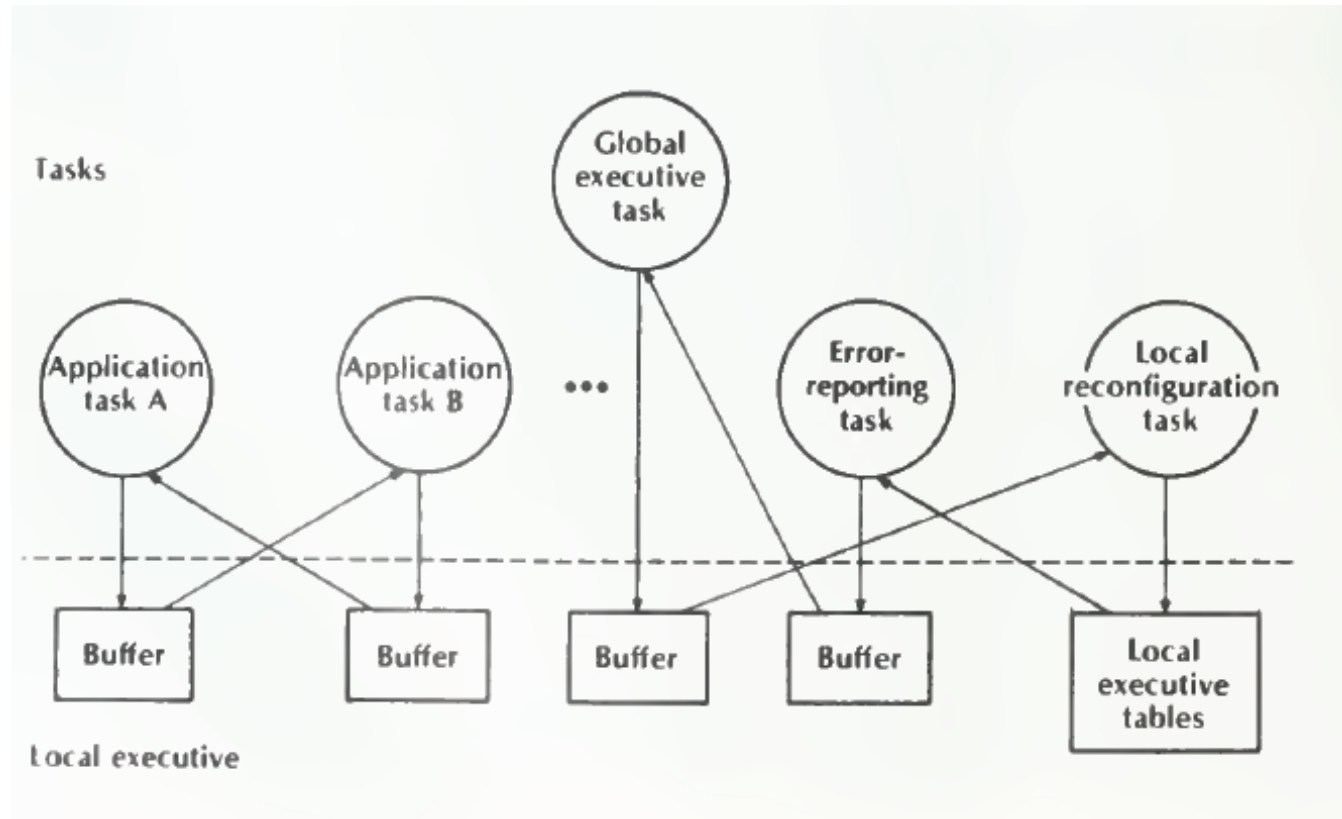
**Formal specifications of the executive software** have been written in a rigorous form using the SPECIAL language [Robinson and Roubine, 1977] developed at SRI.

These formal specifications are needed for the proof of the correctness of the system. Moreover, they are also intended to force the designer to produce a well-structured system.

# Logical structure of the SIFT software system

Tasks communicate through buffers maintained by the local executives

Application tasks communicate with each other and with the Global executive, not with the Local executives



Local executives communicate only with the Global executive task (not with each other)

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From the point of view of the software, a **processing module, with its processor, memory, and associated registers, is a single logical unit.**

# Application software

- The application software is structured as a set of iterative tasks.
- A task is executed by several processors; this fact is invisible to the application software.
- In each iteration, an application task obtains its **inputs by executing calls to the executive software**.
- After computing its **outputs**, it makes them available as inputs to the next iteration of tasks **by executing calls to the executive software**.
- The input and output of a task iteration will consist of at most a few words of data.

# Executive software

The executive software performs the following functions:

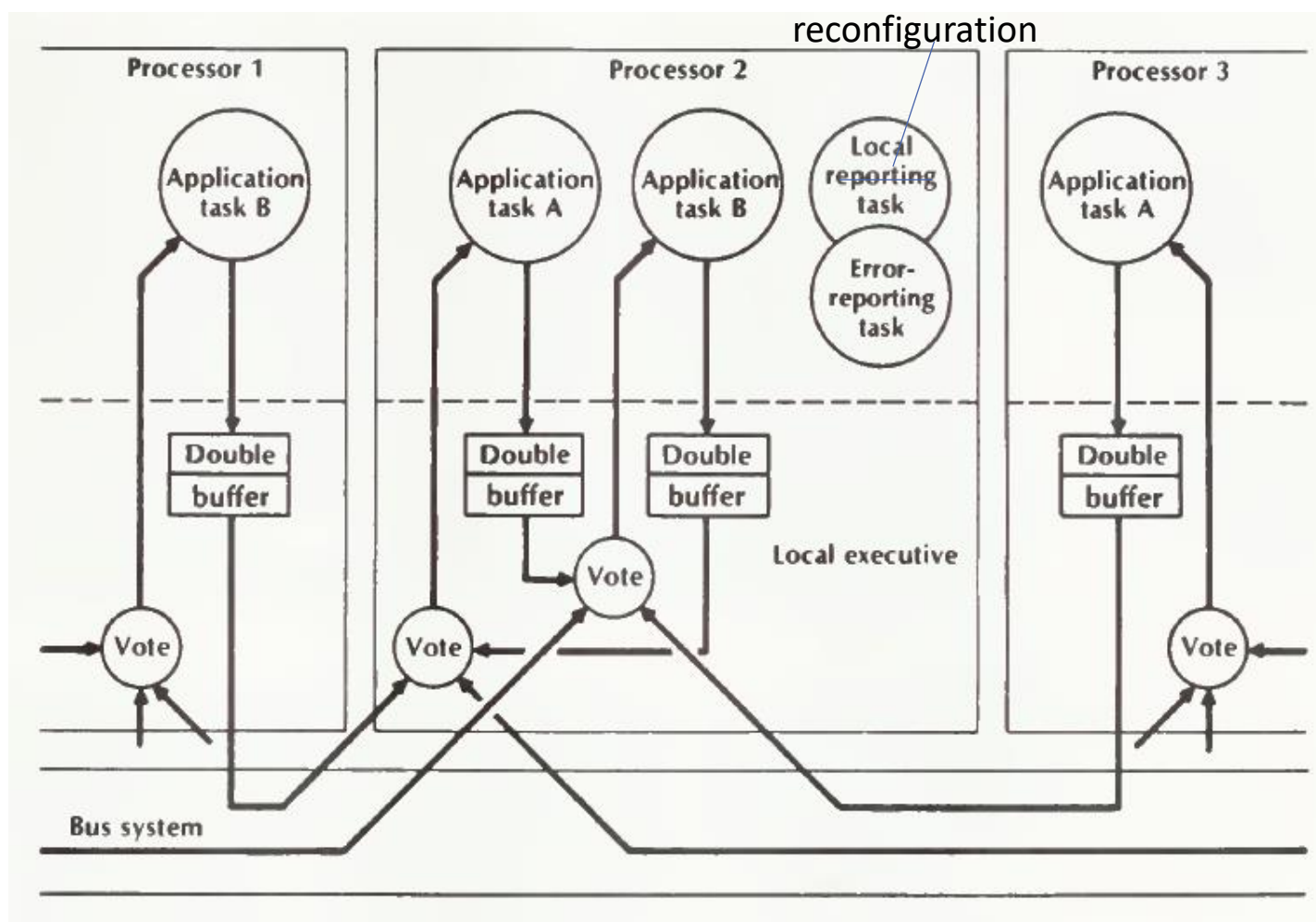
1. Run each task at the required iteration rate.
2. Provide correct input values for each iteration of a critical task (masking any errors).
3. Detect errors and diagnose their cause.
4. Reconfigure the system to avoid the use of failed components.

***To perform the last three functions, the executive software implements the techniques of redundant execution and majority voting.***

The executive software is structured into three parts:

**the global executive task,  
the local executive, and  
the local-global communicating tasks.**

# Arrangement of application tasks within SIFT configuration



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critical tasks are replicated on several Processors

The local executive

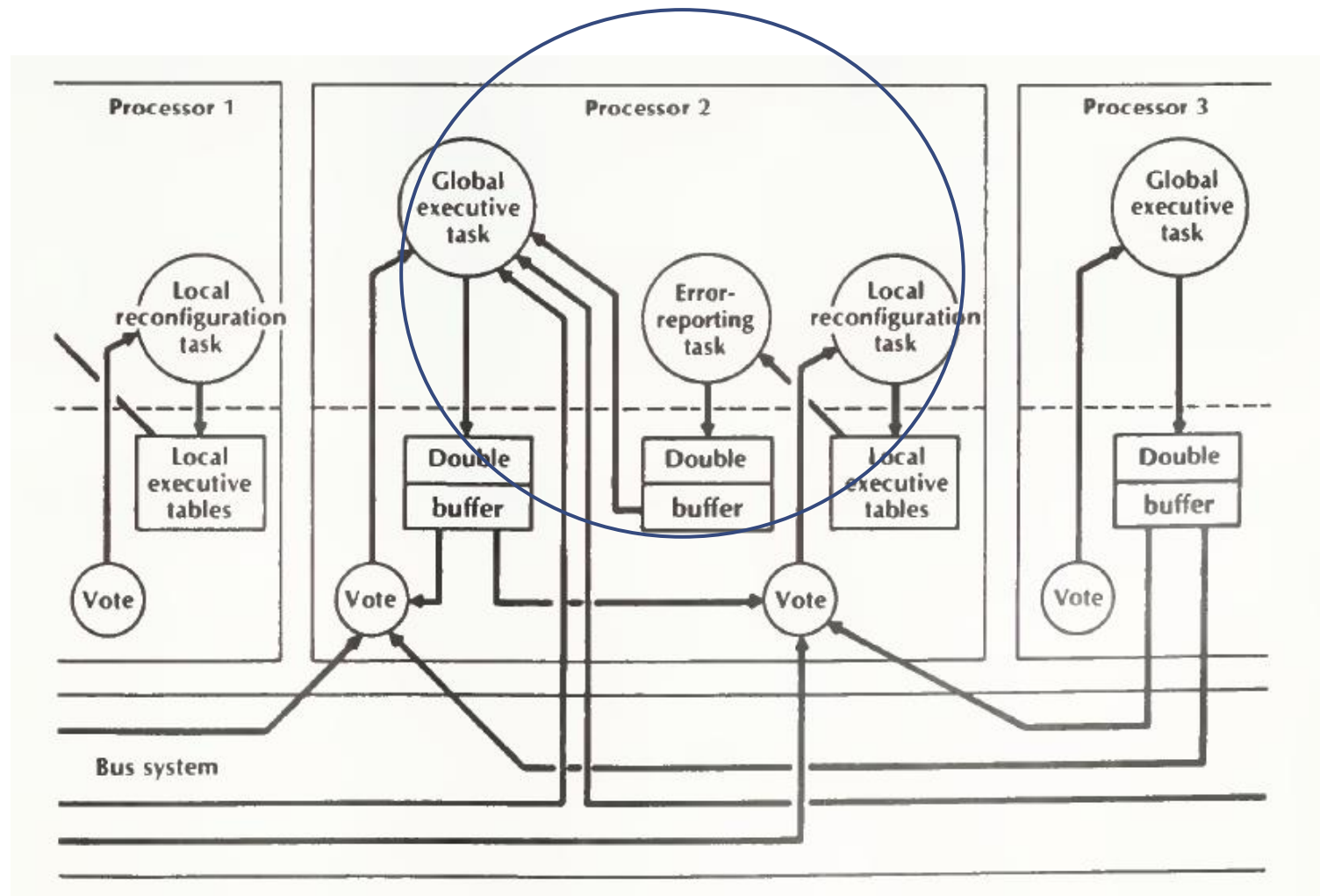
- detects an error when it obtains different output values for the same task iteration from different processors
- reports such errors to the Error-reporting task, which executes a preliminary analysis and communicates results to the Global executive

Local executive uses this results to detect possible faulty units before the Global executive has diagnosed the errors

# Executive software

- **One global executive task is provided for the whole system.**  
It is run just like a highly critical application task, being executed by several processors and using majority voting to obtain the output of each iteration. It diagnoses errors to decide which units have failed and determines the appropriate allocation of tasks to processors.
- **Each processing module has its own local executive and local-global communicating tasks.**
- The **local-global communicating tasks** are the **error-reporting task** and the **local reconfiguration task**.
- Each of these tasks is regarded as a separate task executed on a single processor, so there are as **many separate error-reporting tasks and local reconfiguration tasks as there are processors**.

## Arrangement of executive tasks within SIFT configuration



Each Processor runs its  
Local reconfiguration  
task and Local  
Error reporting tasks

They communicate with the Global executive via buffers

The Local reconfiguration task maintains the tables used by the local executive to schedule the execution of tasks

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# The Global Executive Task: reconfiguration

- The global executive task uses the results of every processor's error task to determine which processing modules and buses are faulty.
- When the global executive decides that a component has failed, it initiates a reconfiguration by sending the appropriate information to the local reconfiguration task of each processor.
- The global executive may also reconfigure the system as a result of directives from the application tasks. For example, an application task may report a change of flight phase that changes the criticality of various tasks.

# The Local Executive.

The local executive is a collection of routines to perform the following functions:

- (1) run each task allocated to it at the task's specified iteration rate;
- (2) provide input values to and receive output values from each task iteration; and
- (3) report errors to the local error reporting task.

Routines:

- Error-handler routine: invoked by the Voter when an error condition is detected
- Scheduler routine: every task runs at a specified iteration rate. The scheduler is invoked by the completion of a task or by the clock interrupt.
- Buffer-interface routines: invoked by a task when generates outputs for an iteration. These outputs are used by the Voter
- Voter routine: invoked by a task to obtain the inputs for its current iteration

# Fault Detection

- Fault detection is the analysis of errors to determine which components are faulty.
- **Processor/bus error table**, an  $m$  by  $n$  matrix, where  $m$  is the number of processors and  $n$  the number of buses in the system.
- Each processor  $p$  has its own processor/bus error table  $X_p$  that is maintained by its **local executive's error handler**.
- $X_p[i,j]$  represents the number of errors detected by processor  $p$ 's local executive that involve processor  $i$  and bus  $j$ .

Assume processor  $p$  is reading from processor  $i$  using bus  $j$ . There are five distinct kinds of errors:

1. The connection from bus  $j$  to processor  $i$  is faulty.
2. The connection from processor  $p$  to bus  $j$  is faulty.
3. Bus  $j$  is faulty.
4. Processor  $i$  is faulty.
5. Processor  $p$  is faulty.

# Fault Detection

## **Processor p's error-reporting task analyzes the processor/bus error table**

If the number of errors is greater than a given threshold, an appropriate action can be taken.

In case 1, processor p will stop using bus j to talk to processor i.

In cases 2 and 3, processor p will stop using bus j, and will report to the global executive that bus j is faulty.

In case 4, processor p will report to the global executive that processor i is faulty.

## **The global executive task makes the final decision about which unit is faulty.**

It reads the faulty processor reports provided by the error-reporting task

**- if two or more processors report that another processor is faulty, then the global executive decides that this other processor has indeed failed.**

**- if two or more processors report that a bus is faulty, then the global executive decides that the bus has failed.**

# Fault Detection

- It can be shown that **in the presence of a single fault, the above procedure cannot cause the global executive to declare a nonfaulty unit to be faulty.**
- With the appropriately malicious behavior, a faulty unit may generate error reports without giving the global executive enough information to determine that it is faulty.
- For example, if processor  $p$  fails in such a way that it gives incorrect results only to processor  $q$ , then the global executive cannot decide whether it is  $p$  or  $q$  that is faulty.
- However, the majority-voting technique will mask these errors and prevent a system failure.

# Reliability prediction

- Reliability requirement is that the probability of failure should be less than  $10^{-9}$  per hour in a flight of 10 hours' duration.
- High reliability of survival for a short period time (10-hour flight).
- For a flight of T duration survival will occur unless certain combination of failure events occur within the interval T or have already occurred prior to the interval T and were undetected by the initial checkout of the system.
- Show that the probability of a more catastrophic sequence of failures is sufficient small.
- Finite state Markov process. The combined probability of all event sequences that lead to a failed state is the system failure probability.

# Reliability prediction

## Assumptions:

- Hardware-fault events are independent and exponentially distributed in time (constant failure rate)
- All failures are permanent for the duration of the flight

## Accurate because:

- the physical design of the system prevents fault propagation between functional units
  - a multiple fault in a functional unit is no more serious than a single fault
- 
- Effects of transient errors are masked by the executive system which requires a unit to make multiple errors before it considers the unit to be faulty.
  - The execution of critical tasks in loose synchronism also helps protect against correlation of fast transient errors.
  - Failure rates for hardware have been estimated on the basis of active component counts, using typical figures for similar hardware : main processors  $10^{-4}$  per hour failure rate

# Reliability prediction

- State of the system in the reliability model  $(h, d, f)$  with  $h \leq d \leq f$
- $(h, d, f)$  represents a situation in which:
  - $f$  failures of individual components have occurred
  - $d$  of those failures have been detected
  - $h$  of these detected failures have been handled in reconfiguration
- Three types of possible transitions:

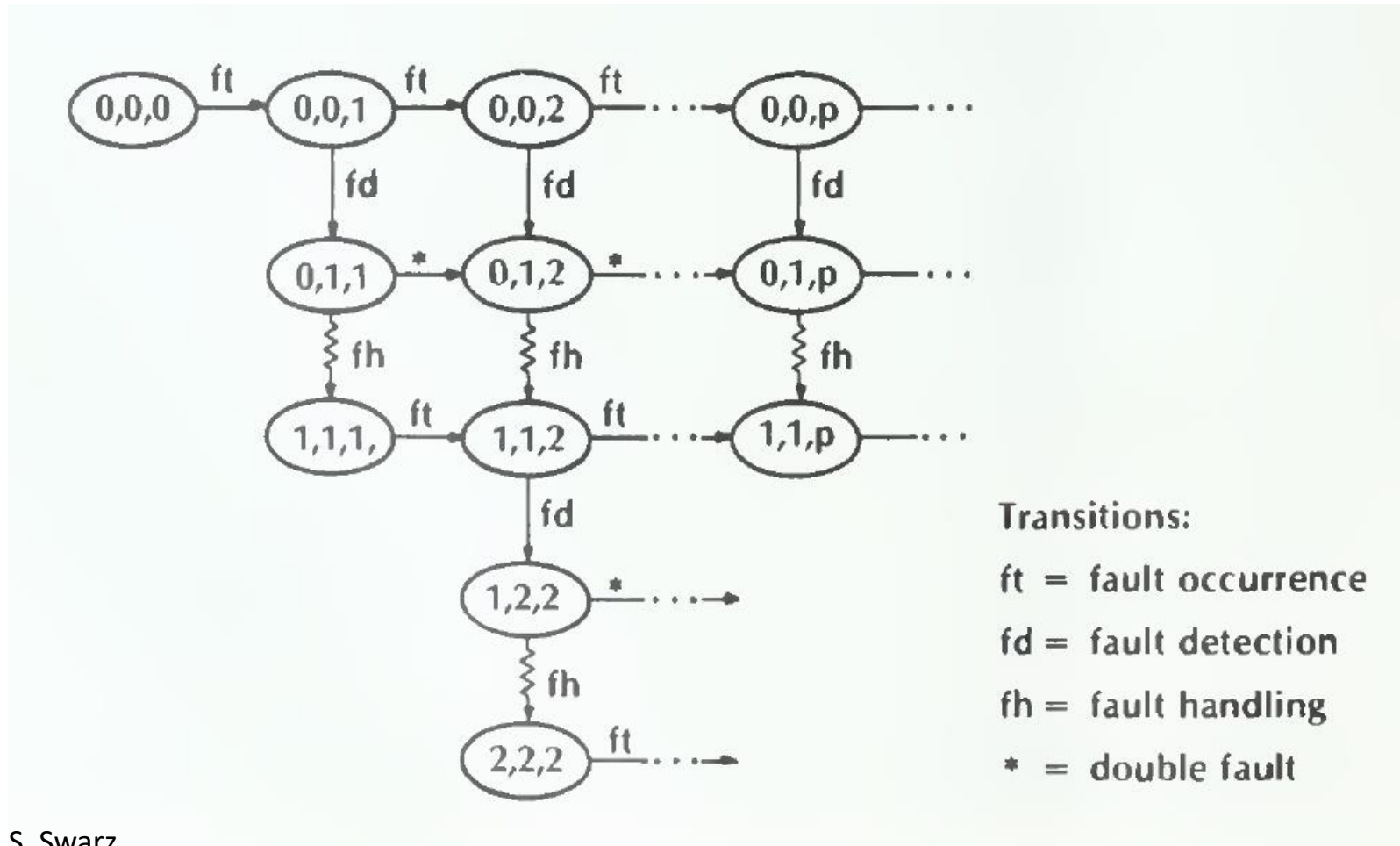
- $(h, d, f) \rightarrow (h, d, f + 1)$ , representing the failure of a processor
- $(h, d, f) \rightarrow (h, d + 1, f)$ ,  $d < f$ , representing the detection of a failure
- $(h, d, f) \rightarrow (h + 1, d, f)$ ,  $h < d$ , representing the handling of a detected failure

The first two types of transitions are represented by straight arrows (constant probabilities for unit of time)

The third type of transition is represented by wave arrows, represents the completion of a reconfiguration procedure (these transitions are assumed to occur within some fixed length of time  $\tau$ )



# Reliability prediction



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# Reliability prediction

- A state  $(h,d,f)$  with  $h < d$  represents a situation in which the system is reconfiguring.
- In make the system immune to an additional failure while in this state is a difficult problem because it means that the procedure to reconfigure around a failure must work despite an additional undetected failure.
- Instead of solving this problem, designers took the approach of trying to  
*ensure that the time  $\tau$  that the system remains in such state is small enough to make it highly unlikely for an additional failure to occur before reconfiguration is completed.*
- They made the pessimistic assumption that a process failure that occurs while the system is reconfiguring will cause a system failure
  - **represented by the double fault transitions indicated by asterisks.**  
**Each of this transition results in a system failure.**

# Reliability prediction

Designers calculated the probability of system failure through a double-fault transition and also through reaching a state with fewer than two nonfaulty processors, for which they said the system has failed because it has run out of spares.

Failure probability for a 5 processor system and  $T = 10$  hours

Failure Cause	Failure Probability
Exhaustion of spares	$5 \times 10^{-12}$
Double fault ( $\tau = 100$ msec)	$7 \times 10^{-11}$
Double fault ( $\tau = 1$ sec)	$7 \times 10^{-10}$

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# Summary

- SIFT basic approach to fault tolerance involves the replication of standard components, relying upon the software to detect and analyze errors and to dynamically reconfigure the system to bypass faulty units.
- Special hardware is needed only to isolate the units from one another, so a faulty unit does not cause the failure of a nonfaulty one.
- Processor/memory modules and bus modules as the basic units of fault detection and reconfiguration have been used. These units make system reconfiguration easy and are small and inexpensive enough to allow sufficient replication to achieve the desired reliability.

# Summary

- By using software to achieve fault tolerance, SIFT allows considerable flexibility in the choice of error handling policies and mechanisms.
- For example, algorithms for fault masking and reconfiguration can be easily modified on the basis of operational experience.
- Novel approaches to the tolerance of programming errors can be incorporated. Moreover, it is fairly easy to enhance the performance of the system by adding more hardware.