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Grokking Modern System Design Interview for Engineers & Managers

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The Spectrum of Failure Models

Learn about failures in distributed systems and the complexity of dealing with them.

We'll cover the following

- Fail-stop
- Crash
- Omission failures
- Temporal failures
- Byzantine failures

Failures are obvious in the world of distributed systems and can appear in various ways. They might come and go, or persist for a long period.

Failure models provide us a framework to reason about the impact of failures and possible ways to deal with them.

Here is an illustration that presents a spectrum of different failure models:

This is a spectrum of failure models. The difficulty level when dealing with a failure increases as we move to the right

Fail-stop#

In this type of failure, a node in the distributed system halts permanently. However, the other nodes can still detect that node by communicating with it.

From the perspective of someone who builds distributed systems, fail-stop failures are the simplest and the most convenient.

Crash#

In this type of failure, a node in the distributed system halts silently, and the other nodes can't detect that the node has stopped working.

Omission failures#

In **omission failures**, the node fails to send or receive messages. There are two types of omission failures. If the node fails to respond to the incoming request, it's said to be a **send omission failure**. If the node fails to receive the request and thus can't acknowledge it, it's said to be a **receive omission failure**.

Temporal failures#

In **temporal failures**, the node generates correct results, but is too late to be useful. This failure could be due to bad algorithms, a bad design strategy, or a loss of synchronization between the processor clocks.

Byzantine failures#

In **Byzantine failures**, the node exhibits random behavior like transmitting arbitrary messages at arbitrary times, producing wrong results, or stopping midway. This mostly happens due to an attack by a malicious entity or a software bug. A byzantine failure is the most challenging type of failure to deal with.

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Spectrum of Consistency Models

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