

**Lecture 16:**

**Implementing Locks,  
Fine-Grained Synchronization,  
and (a short intro to) Lock-Free Programming**

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**Parallel Computing  
Stanford CS149, Fall 2025**

# Today

- **Lock implementations**
- **Using locks**
  - **Fine-grained locking examples**
  - **Lock-free data structure designs**



# Preliminaries: some terminology

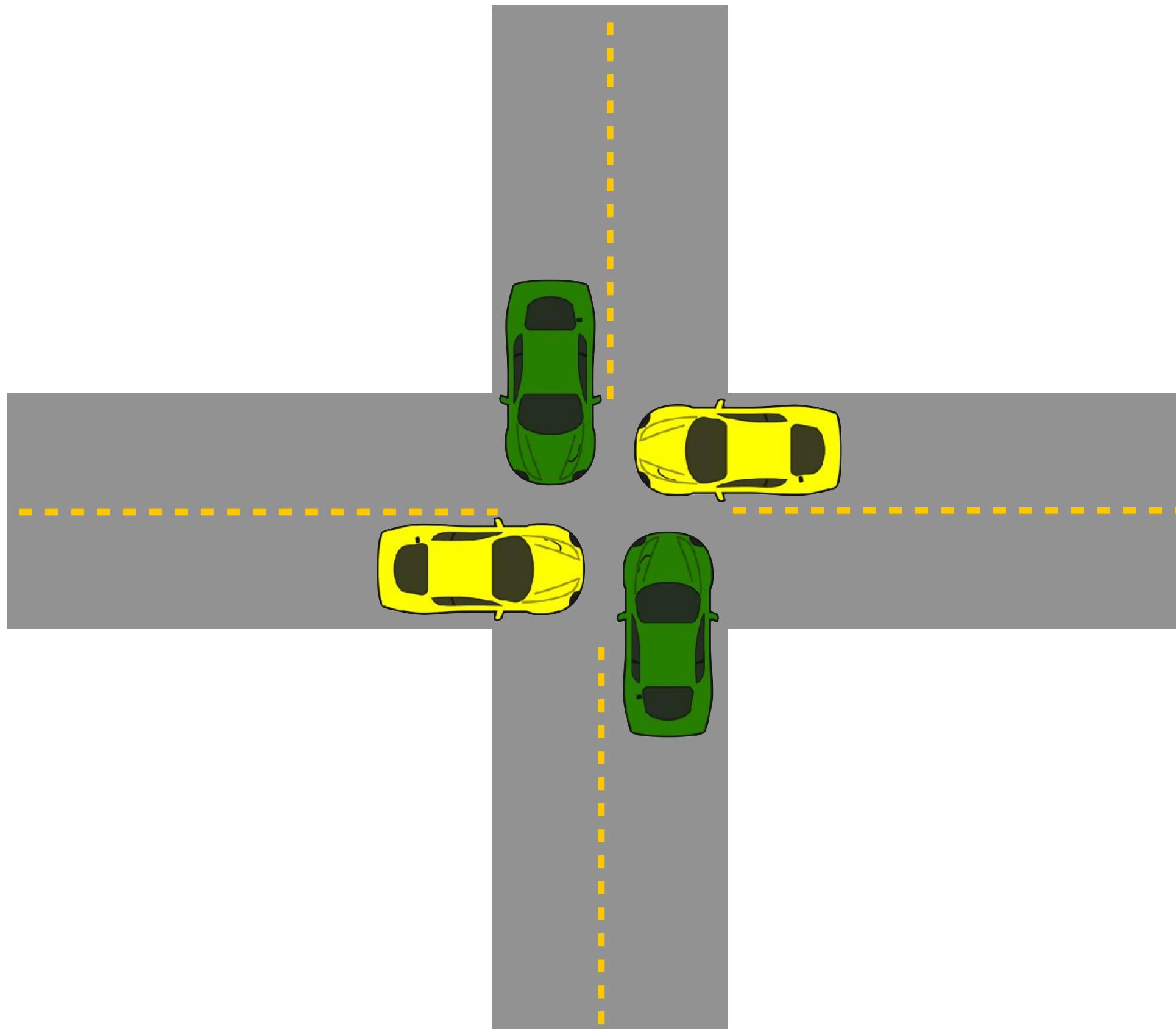
**Deadlock**

**Livelock**

**Starvation**

**(Deadlock and livelock concern program correctness. Starvation is really an issue of fairness.)**

# Deadlock



**Deadlock is a state where a system has outstanding operations to complete, but no operation can make progress.**

**Deadlock can arise when each operation has acquired a shared resource that another operation needs.**

**In a deadlock situations, there is no way for any thread (or, in this illustration, a car) to make progress unless some thread relinquishes a resource ("backs up")**

# Traffic deadlock

**Non-technical side note for car-owning students:  
Deadlock happens all the %\$\*\*\* time in SF.**

**(However, deadlock can be amusing when a bus  
driver decides to let another driver know they have  
caused deadlock... “go take cs149 you fool!”)**



# More illustrations of deadlock

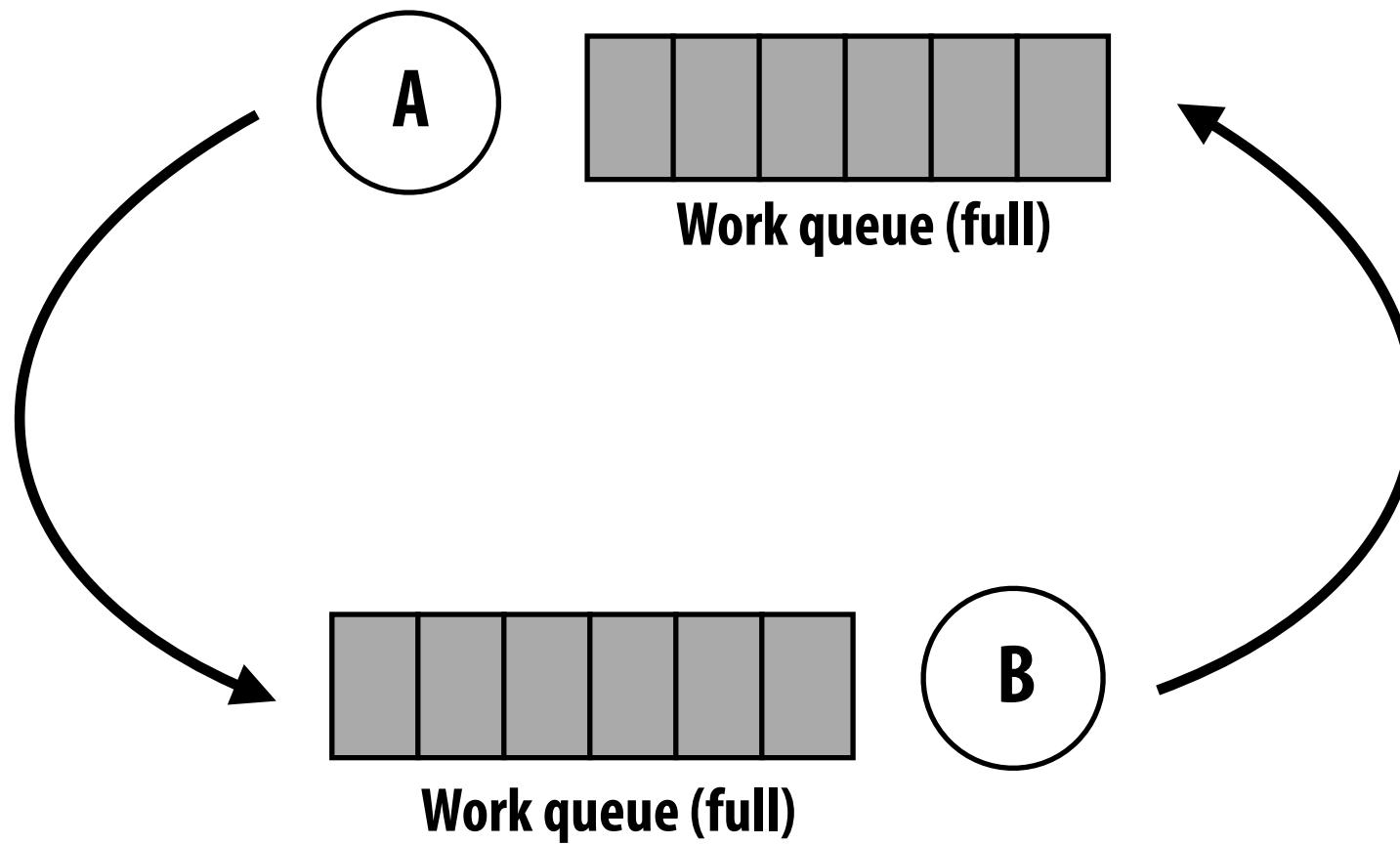


Credit: David Maitland, National Geographic

Why are these examples of deadlock?

# Deadlock in computer systems

## Example 1:



**Thread A produces work for B's work queue**

**Thread B produces work for A's work queue**

**Queues are finite and workers wait if  
no output space is available**

## Example 2:

```
const int numEl = 1024;  
float msgBuf1[numEl];  
float msgBuf2[numEl];  
  
int threadId getThreadId();  
  
... do work ...
```

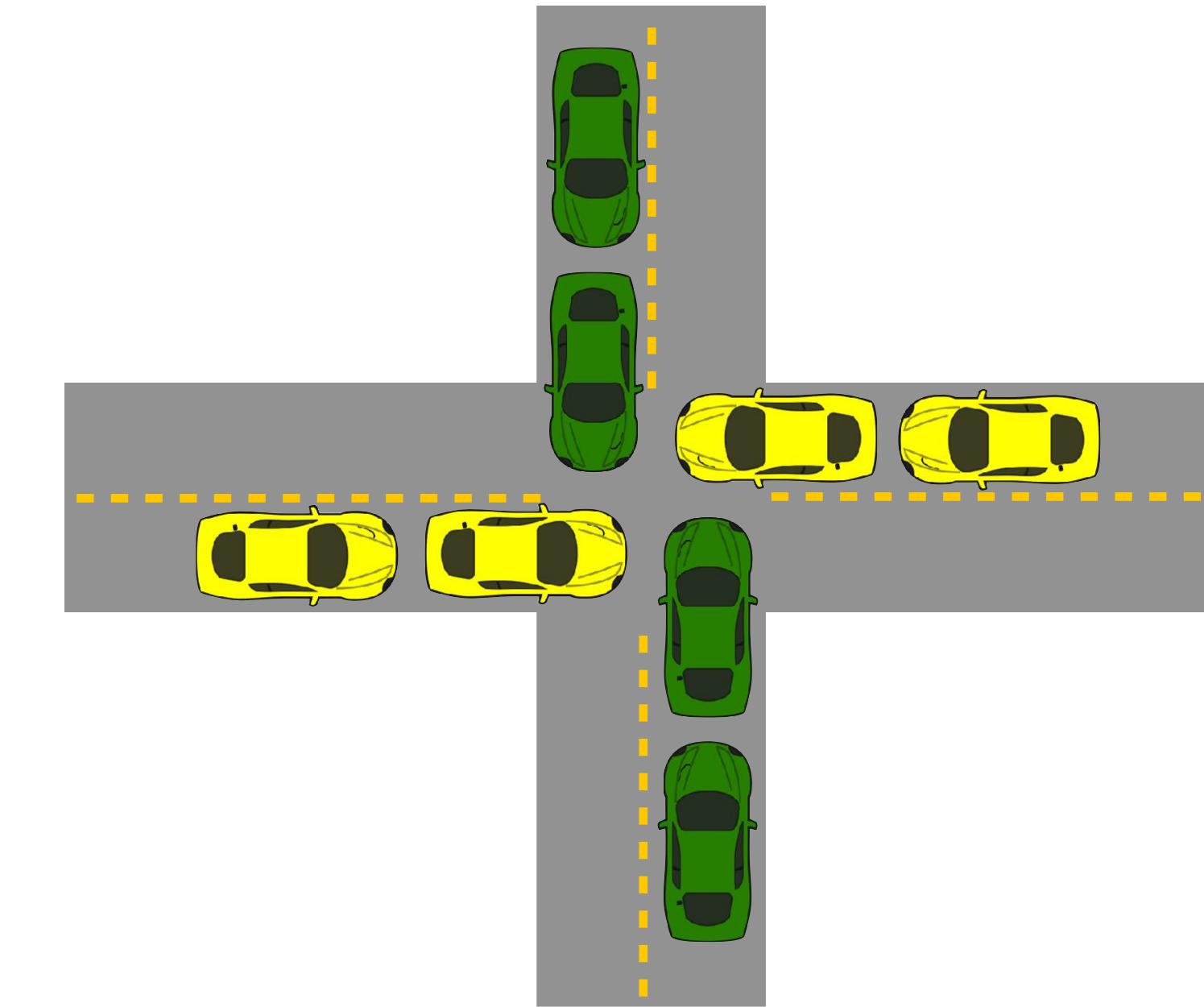
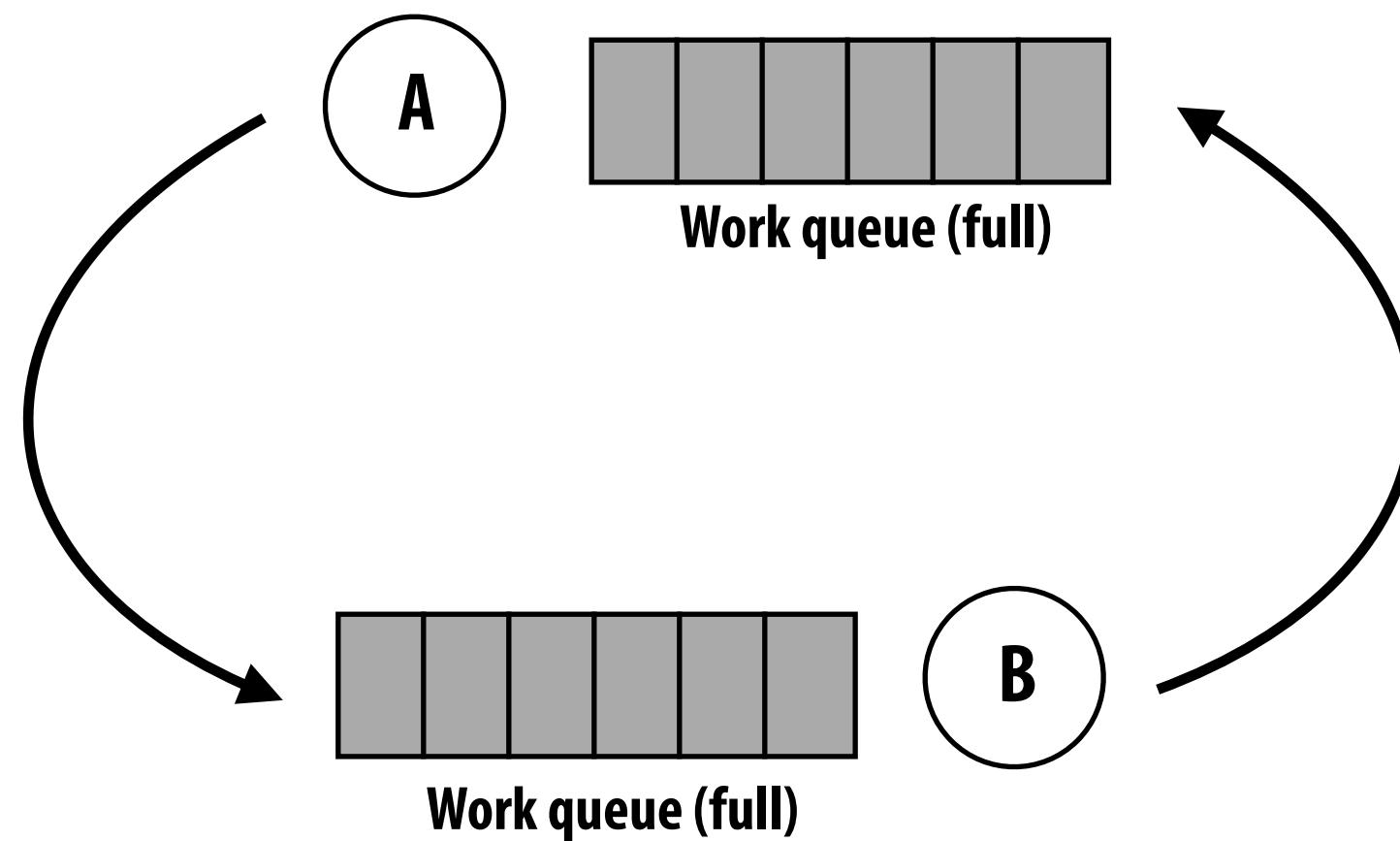
```
MsgSend(msgBuf1, numEl * sizeof(int), threadId+1, ...  
MsgRecv(msgBuf2, numEl * sizeof(int), threadId-1, ...
```

**Every thread sends a message (blocking send)  
to the thread with the next higher id**

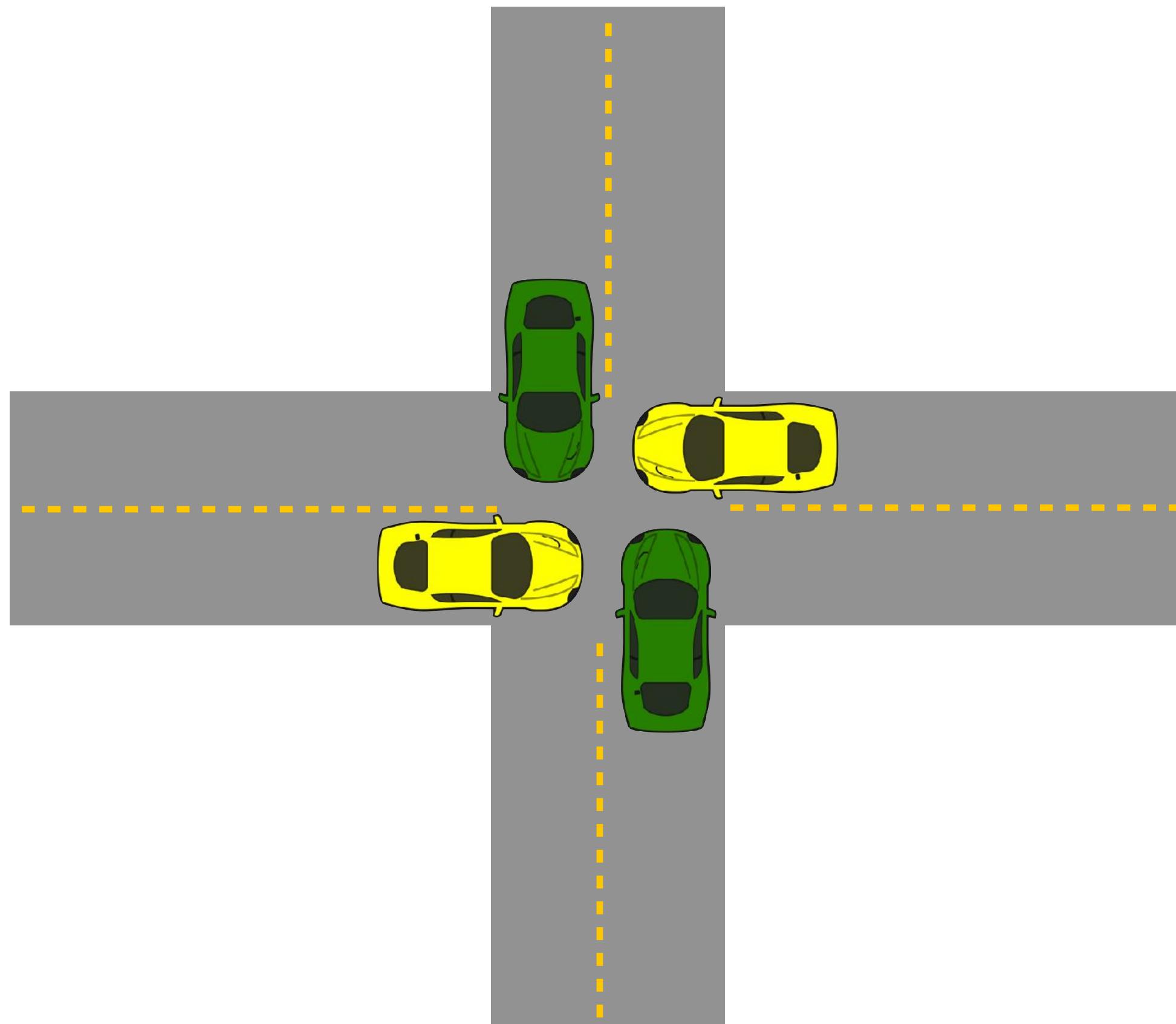
**Then thread receives message from thread with  
next lower id.**

# Required conditions for deadlock

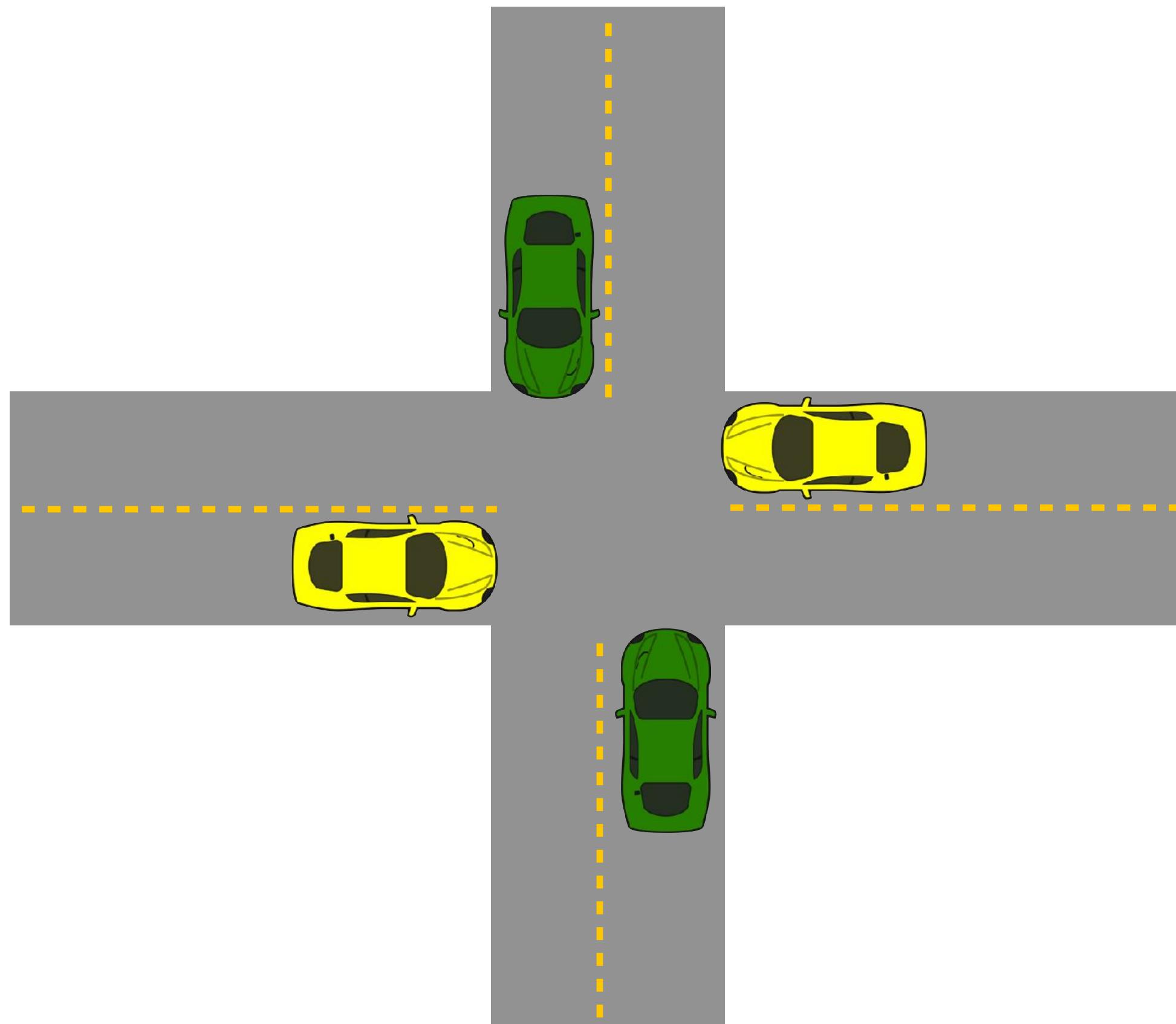
1. Mutual exclusion: only one processor can hold a given resource at once
2. Hold and wait: processor must hold the resource while waiting for other resources it needs to complete an operation
3. No preemption: processors don't give up resources until operation they wish to perform is complete
4. Circular wait: waiting processors have mutual dependencies (a cycle exists in the resource dependency graph)



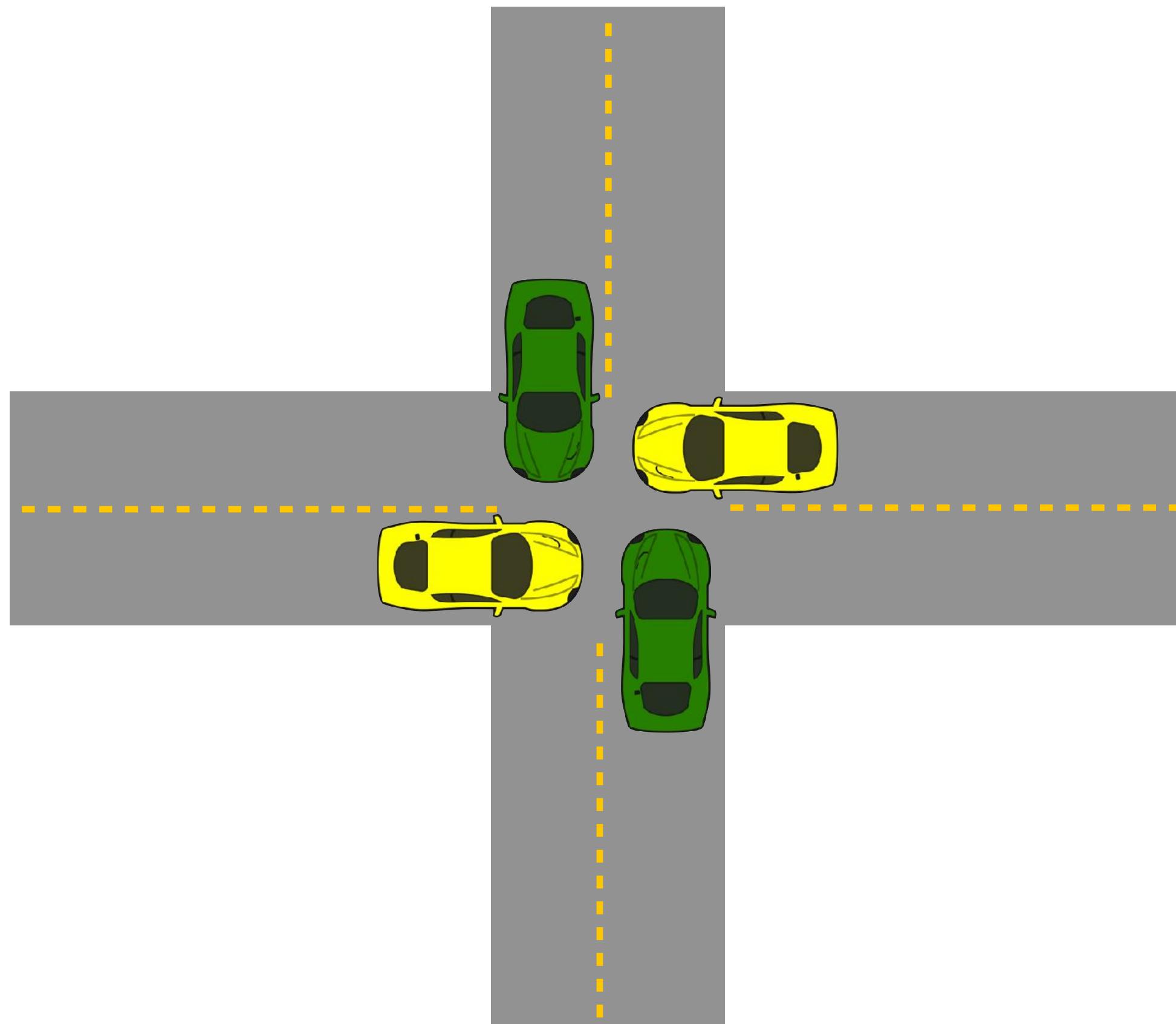
# Livelock



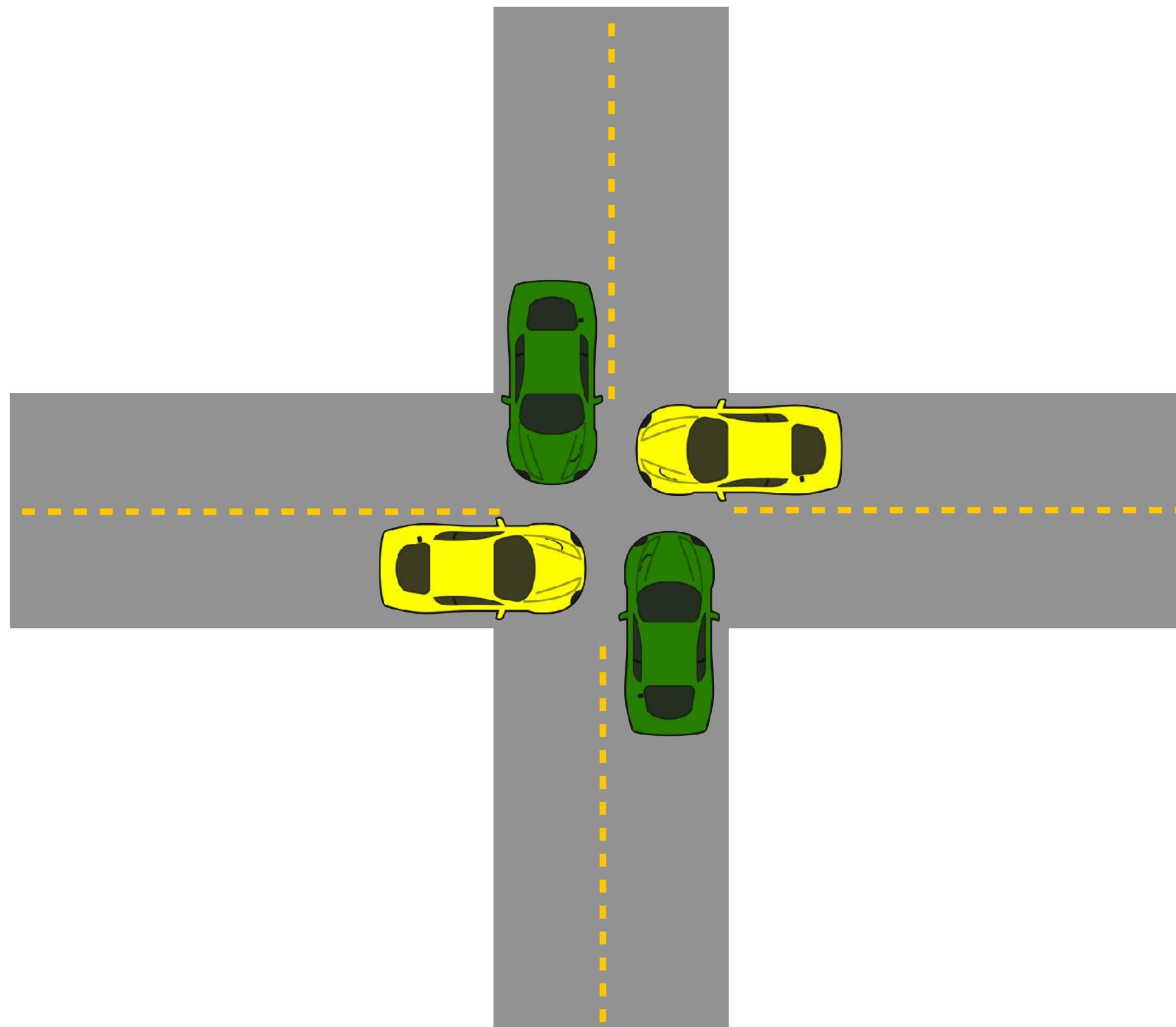
# Livelock



# Livelock



# Livelock



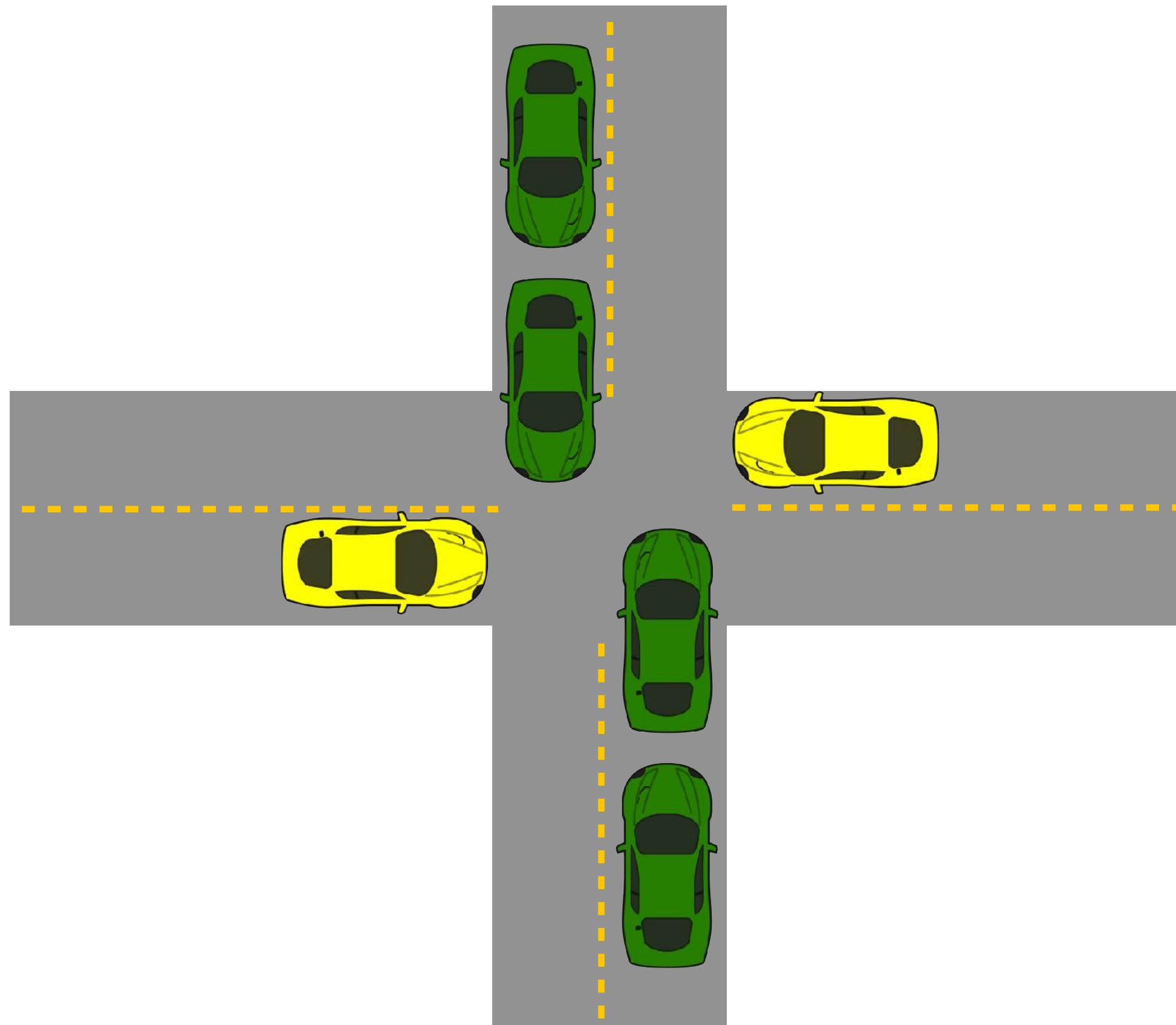
**Livelock is a state where a system is executing many operations, but no thread is making meaningful progress.**

**Can you think of a good daily life example of livelock?**

**Computer system examples:**

**Operations continually abort and retry**

# Starvation



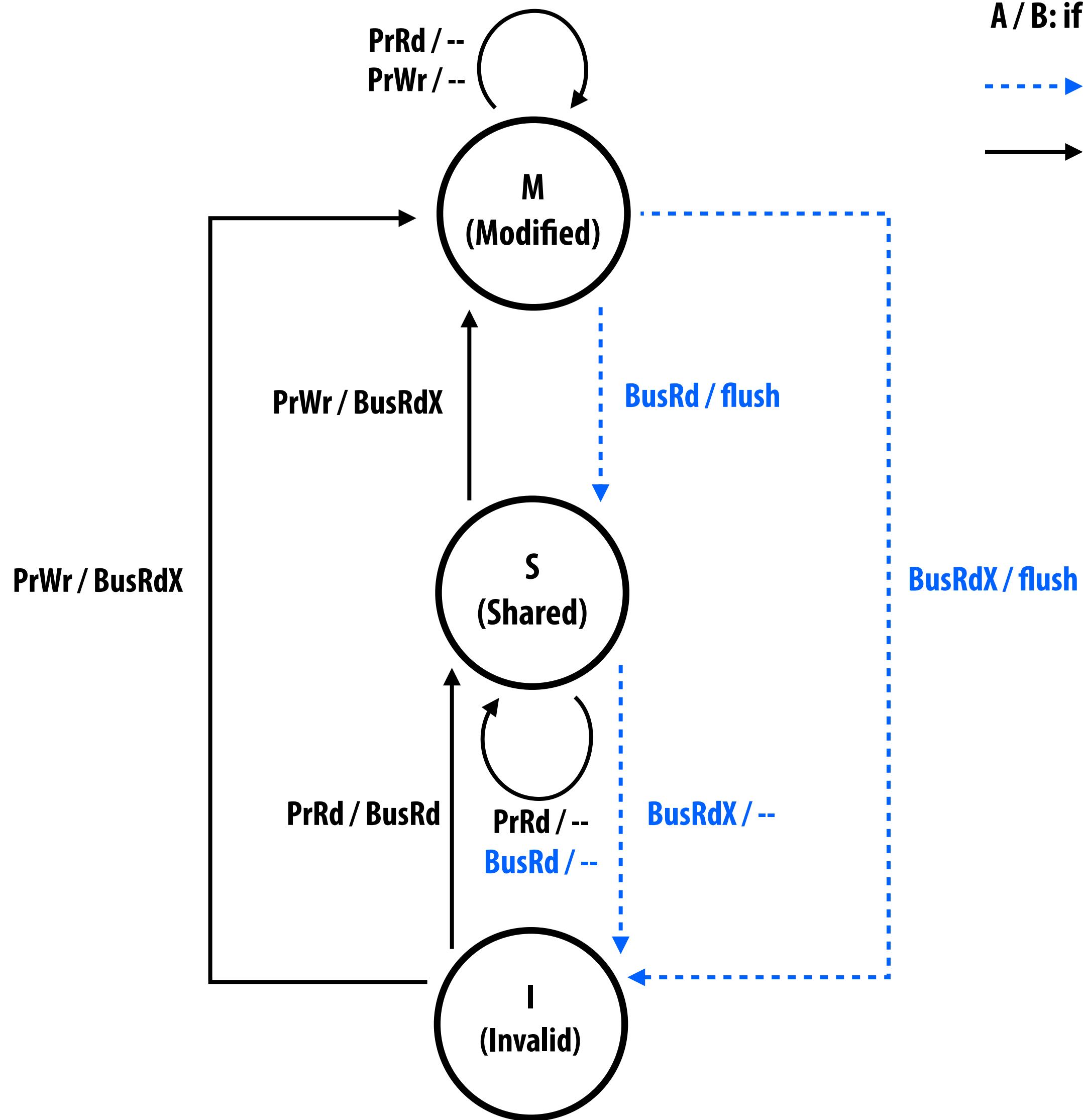
**State where a system is making overall progress,  
but some processes make no progress.  
(green cars make progress, but yellow cars are stopped)**

**Starvation is usually not a permanent state  
(as soon as green cars pass, yellow cars can go)**

**In this example: assume traffic moving left/right (yellow cars)  
must yield to traffic moving up/down (green cars)**

**Ok, let's get started...**

# Review: MSI state transition diagram \*



A / B: if action A is observed by cache controller, action B is taken

-----> Remote processor (coherence) initiated transaction

→ Local processor initiated transaction

**flush = flush dirty line to memory**

# Example: testing your understanding

Consider this sequence of loads and stores to addresses X and Y by processors P0 and P1

Assume that X and Y reside on different cache lines, and contain the value 0 at the start of execution.

	What cache 0 does:	What cache 1 does:
P0: LD X	issue BusRd, load line X in S state	observe BusRd, do nothing (line is in I state)
P0: LD X	cache hit	do nothing
P0: ST X ← 1	issue BusRdX, load line X in M state	observe BusRdX, do nothing (line is in I state)
P0: ST X ← 2	cache hit	do nothing
P1: ST X ← 3	observe BusRdX, flush line X, move line to I state	issue BusRdX, load line X in M state
P1: LD X	Do nothing	cache hit
P0: LD X	issue BusRd, load line X in S state	observe BusRd, flush line X, move to S state
P0: ST X ← 4	issue BusRdX, load line X in M state	observe BusRdX, move to I state
P1: LD X	observe BusRd, flush line X, move to S state	issue BusRd, load line X in S state
P0: LD Y	issue BusRd, load line Y in S state	observe BusRd, do nothing (line Y is in I state)
P0: ST Y ← 1	issue BusRdX, load line Y in M state	observe BusRdX, do nothing (line Y is in I state)
P1: ST Y ← 2	observe BusRdX, flush line Y, move to I state	issue BusRdX, load line Y in M state

# Test-and-set based lock

## Atomic test-and-set instruction:

```
ts R0, mem[addr]          // load mem[addr] into R0  
                          // if mem[addr] is 0, set mem[addr] to 1
```

---

```
lock:      ts   R0, mem[addr]          // load word into R0  
            bnz  R0, lock           // if 0, lock obtained
```

```
unlock:    st   mem[addr], #0          // store 0 to address
```

# x86 cmpxchg

## ■ Compare and exchange (atomic when used with lock prefix)

**lock cmpxchg dst, src**

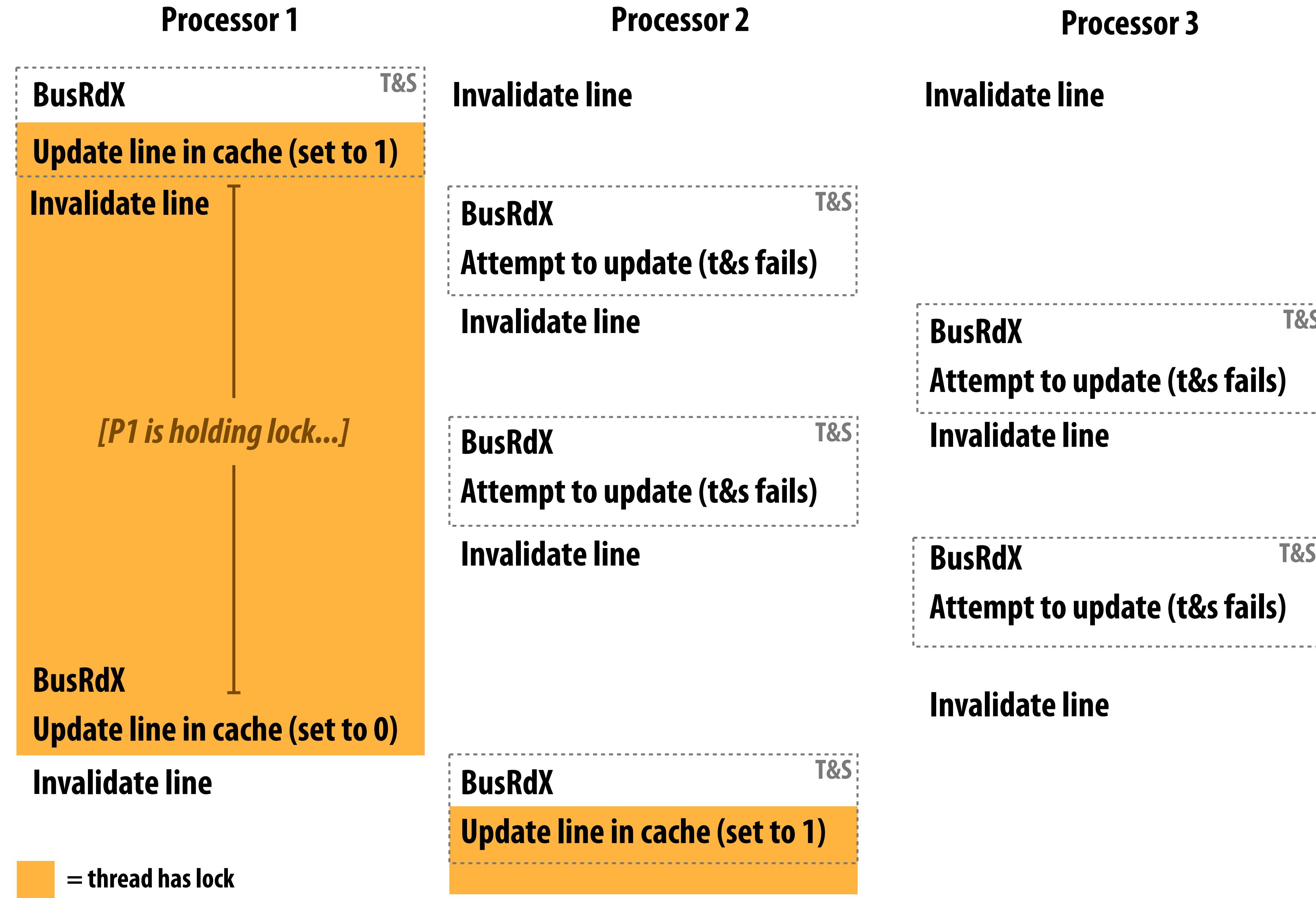
**lock prefix (designates operation is atomic)**



**often a memory address**

```
if (dst == EAX)
    ZF = 1 ← x86 register
    dst = src
else
    ZF = 0
    EAX = dst
    flag register holds result of check
```

# Test-and-set lock: consider coherence traffic



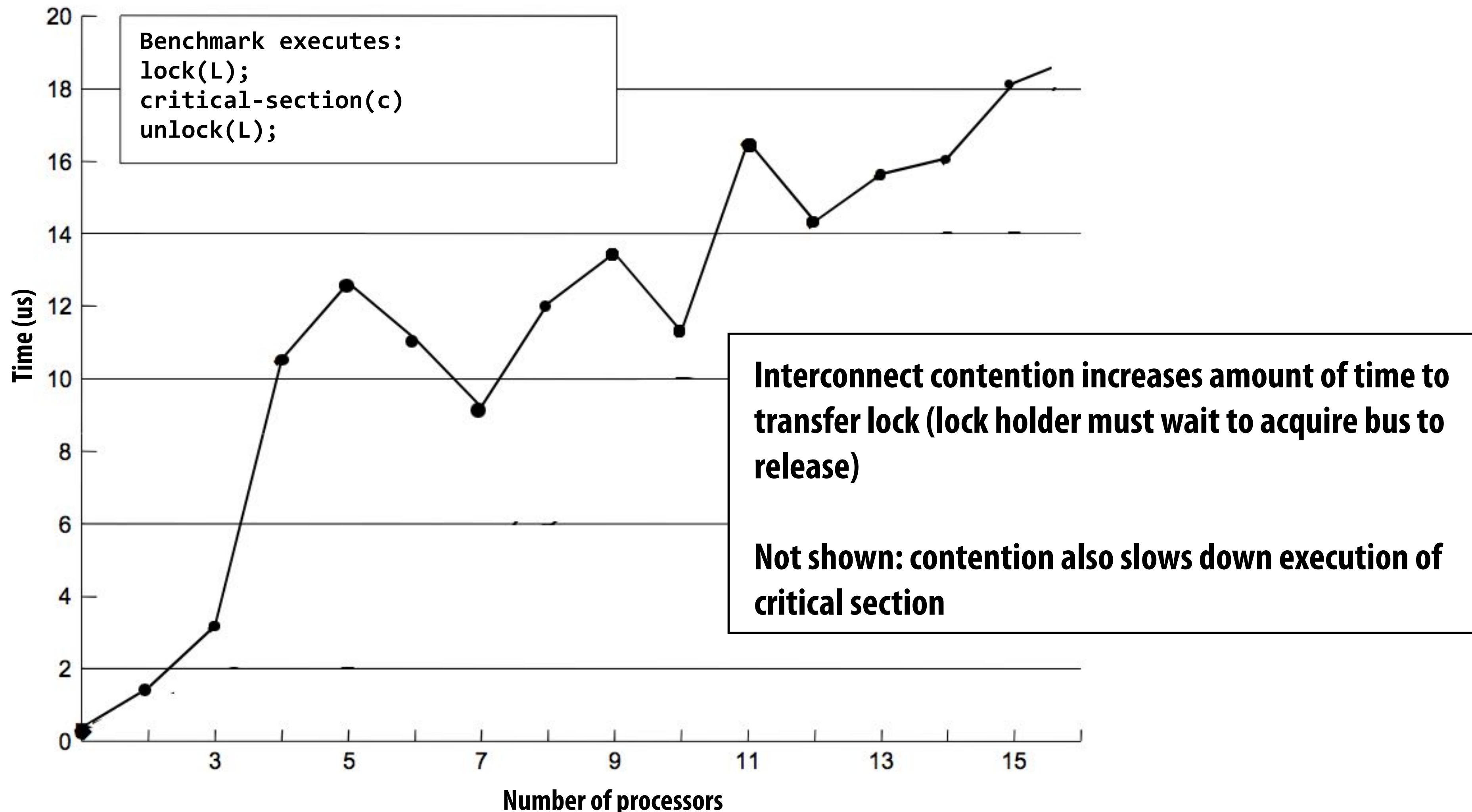
# Check your understanding

- On the previous slide, what is the duration of time the thread running on P1 holds the lock?
- At what points in time does P1's cache contain a valid copy of the cache line containing the lock variable?

# Test-and-set lock performance

Benchmark: execute a total of  $N$  lock/unlock sequences (in aggregate) by  $P$  processors

Critical section time removed so graph plots only time acquiring/releasing the lock



# Desirable lock performance characteristics

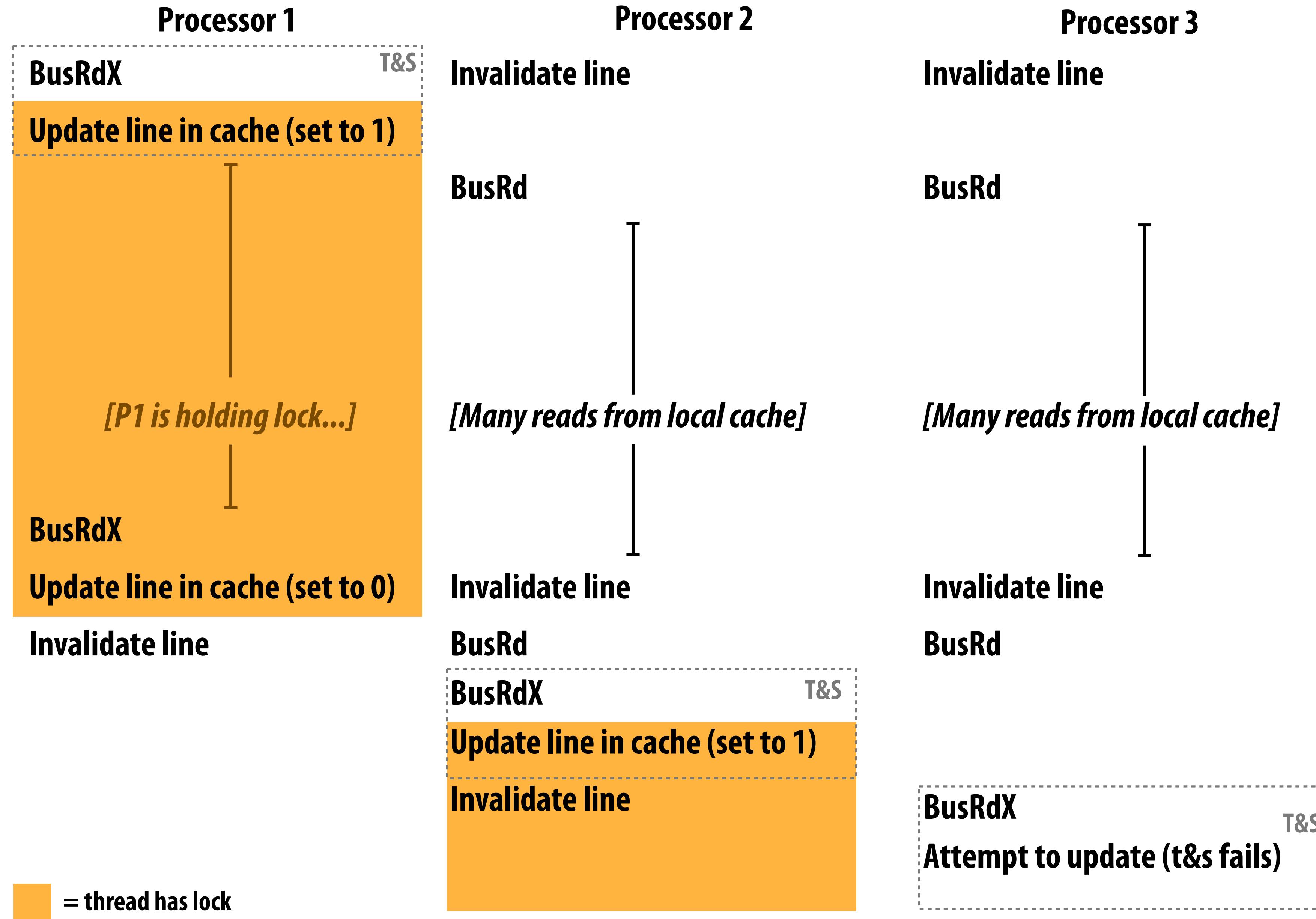
- **Low latency**
  - If lock is free and no other processors are trying to acquire it, a processor should be able to acquire the lock quickly
- **Low interconnect traffic**
  - If all processors are trying to acquire lock at once, they should acquire the lock in succession with as little traffic as possible
- **Scalability**
  - Latency / traffic should scale reasonably with number of processors
- **Low storage cost**
- **Fairness**
  - Avoid starvation or substantial unfairness
  - One ideal: processors should acquire lock in the order they request access to it

**Simple test-and-set lock: low latency (under low contention), high traffic, poor scaling, low storage cost (one int), no provisions for fairness**

# Test-and-test-and-set lock

```
void Lock(int* lock) {  
    while (1) {  
  
        while (*lock != 0); // while another processor has the lock...  
                            // (assume *lock is NOT register allocated)  
  
        if (test_and_set(*lock) == 0) // when lock is released, try to acquire it  
            return;  
    }  
}  
  
void Unlock(int* lock) {  
    *lock = 0;  
}
```

# Test-and-test-and-set lock: coherence traffic



# Test-and-test-and-set characteristics

- Slightly higher latency than test-and-set in no contention case
  - Must test... then test-and-set
- Generates much less interconnect traffic
  - One invalidation, per waiting processor, per lock release ( $O(P)$  invalidations)
  - This is  $O(P^2)$  interconnect traffic if all processors have the lock cached
  - Recall: test-and-set lock generated one invalidation per waiting processor per test
- More scalable (due to less traffic)
- Storage cost unchanged (one int)
- Still no provisions for fairness

# Another impl: ticket lock

Main problem with test-and-set style locks: upon release, all waiting processors attempt to acquire lock using test-and-set



```
struct lock {  
    int next_ticket;  
    int now_serving;  
};  
  
void Lock(lock* l) {  
    int my_ticket = atomic_increment(&l->next_ticket);      // take a “ticket”  
    while (my_ticket != l->now_serving);                      // wait for number to be called  
}  
  
void unlock(lock* l) {  
    l->now_serving++;  
}
```

No atomic operation needed to acquire the lock (only a read)

Result: only one invalidation per lock release ( $O(P)$  interconnect traffic)

# Atomic operations (provided by CUDA)

```
int    atomicAdd(int* address, int val);
float atomicAdd(float* address, float val);
int    atomicSub(int* address, int val);
int    atomicExch(int* address, int val);
float atomicExch(float* address, float val);
int    atomicMin(int* address, int val);
int    atomicMax(int* address, int val);
unsigned int atomicInc(unsigned int* address, unsigned int val);
unsigned int atomicDec(unsigned int* address, unsigned int val);
int    atomicCAS(int* address, int compare, int val);
int    atomicAnd(int* address, int val); // bitwise
int    atomicOr(int* address, int val); // bitwise
int    atomicXor(int* address, int val); // bitwise
```

(omitting additional 64 bit and unsigned int versions)

# Implementing atomic fetch-and-op

**Exercise:** how can you build an atomic fetch+op out of atomicCAS()?

**Example:** atomic\_min()

```
// atomicCAS: ("compare and swap")
// performs the following logic atomically
int atomicCAS(int* addr, int compare, int val) {
    int old = *addr;
    *addr = (old == compare) ? val : old;
    return old;
}
```

```
void atomic_min(int* addr, int x) {
    int old = *addr;
    int new = min(old, x);
    while (atomicCAS(addr, old, new) != old) {
        old = *addr;
        new = min(old, x);
    }
}
```

**What about these operations?**

```
int atomic_increment(int* addr, int x); // for signed values of x
void lock(int* addr);
```

# Another exercise: build a lock

Let's build a lock using compare and swap:

```
// atomicCAS:  
// atomic compare and swap performs the following logic atomically  
int atomicCAS(int* addr, int compare, int val) {  
    int old = *addr;  
    *addr = (old == compare) ? val : old;  
    return old;  
}
```

```
typedef int lock;  
  
void lock(Lock* l) {  
    while (atomicCAS(l, 0, 1) == 1);  
}  
  
void unlock(Lock* l) {  
    *l = 0;  
}
```

**The following is potentially more efficient under contention: Why?**

```
void lock(Lock* l) {  
    while (1) {  
        while(*l == 1);  
        if (atomicCAS(l, 0, 1) == 0)  
            return;  
    }  
}
```

# Load-linked, store conditional (LL/SC)

- Pair of corresponding instructions (not a single atomic instruction like compare-and-swap)
  - `load_linked(x)`: load value from address
  - `store_conditional(x, value)`: store value to x, if x hasn't been written to by any processor since the corresponding load linked operation
- Corresponding ARM instructions: **LDREX** and **STREX**
- How might LL/SC be implemented on a cache coherent processor?

# C++ 11 atomic<T>

- Provides atomic read, write, read-modify-write of entire objects
  - Atomicity may be implemented by mutex or efficiently by processor-supported atomic instructions (if T is a basic type)
- Provides memory ordering semantics for operations before and after atomic operations
  - By default: sequential consistency
  - See std::memory\_order or more detail

```
atomic<int> i;
i++; // atomically increment i

int a = i;
// do stuff
i.compare_exchange_strong(a, 10); // if i has same value as a, set i to 10
bool b = i.is_lock_free();       // true if implementation of atomicity
                                // is lock free
```

# Using locks

# Example: a sorted linked list

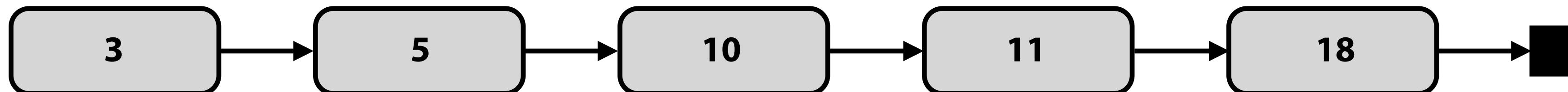
What can go wrong if multiple threads operate on the linked list simultaneously?

```
struct Node {           struct List {  
    int value;         Node* head;  
    Node* next;        };  
};  
  
void insert(List* list, int value) {  
  
    Node* n = new Node;  
    n->value = value;  
  
    // assume case of inserting before head of  
    // of list is handled here (to keep slide simple)  
  
    Node* prev = list->head;  
    Node* cur = list->head->next;  
  
    while (cur) {  
        if (cur->value > value)  
            break;  
  
        prev = cur;  
        cur = cur->next;  
    }  
  
    n->next = cur;  
    prev->next = n;  
}  
  
void delete(List* list, int value) {  
  
    // assume case of deleting first node in list  
    // is handled here (to keep slide simple)  
  
    Node* prev = list->head;  
    Node* cur = list->head->next;  
  
    while (cur) {  
        if (cur->value == value) {  
            prev->next = cur->next;  
            delete cur;  
            return;  
        }  
  
        prev = cur;  
        cur = cur->next;  
    }  
}
```

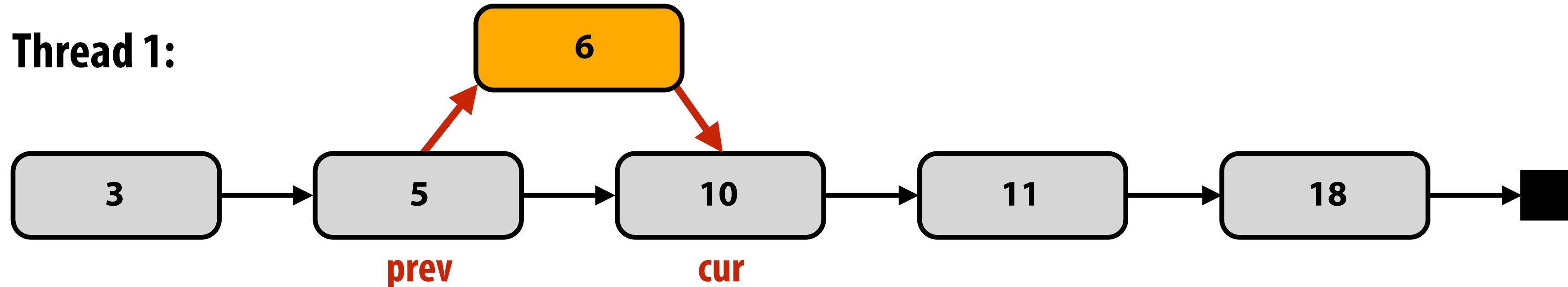
# Example: simultaneous insertion

Thread 1 attempts to insert 6

Thread 2 attempts to insert 7



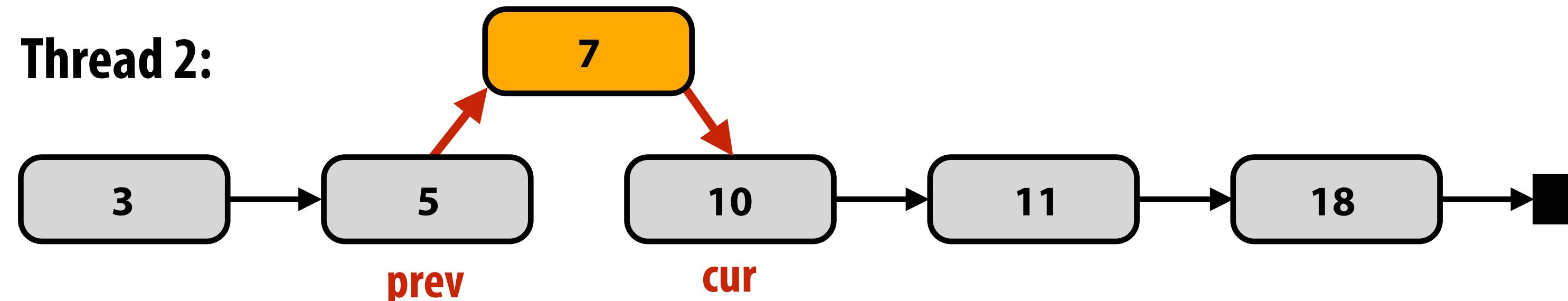
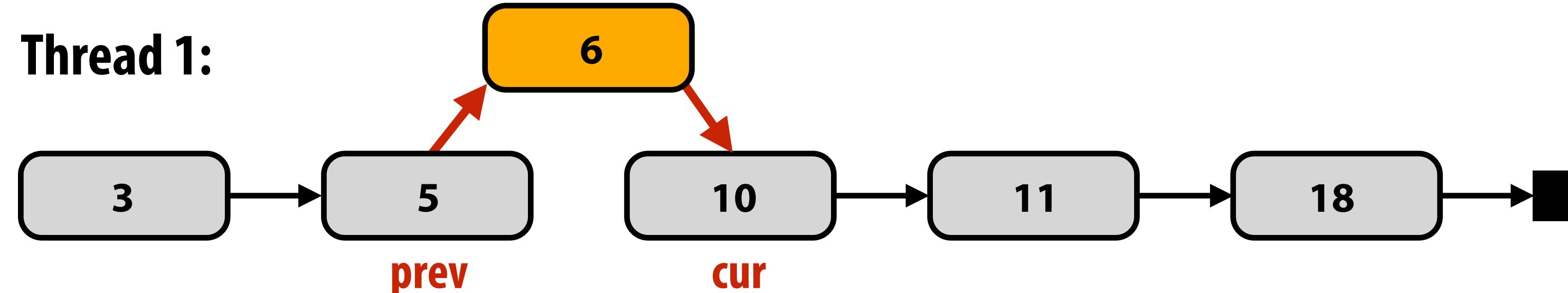
**Thread 1:**



# Example: simultaneous insertion

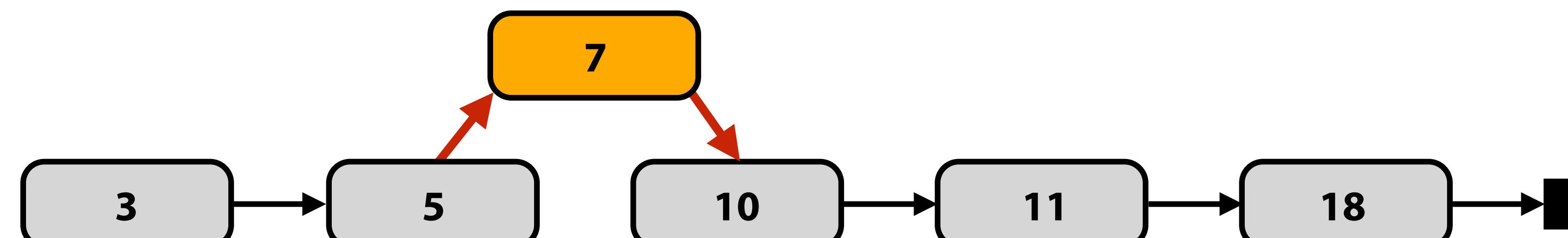
Thread 1 attempts to insert 6

Thread 2 attempts to insert 7



Thread 1 and thread 2 both compute same prev and cur.  
Result: one of the insertions gets lost!

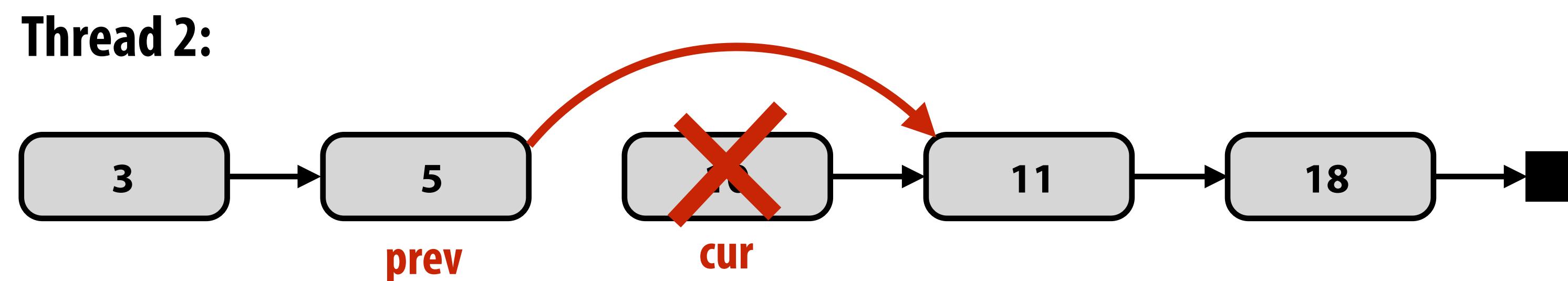
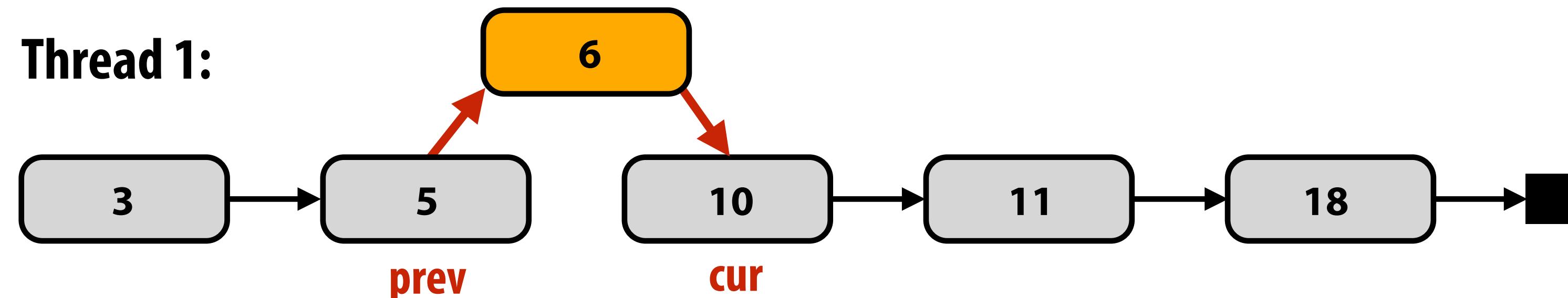
Result: (assuming thread 1 updates prev->next before thread 2)



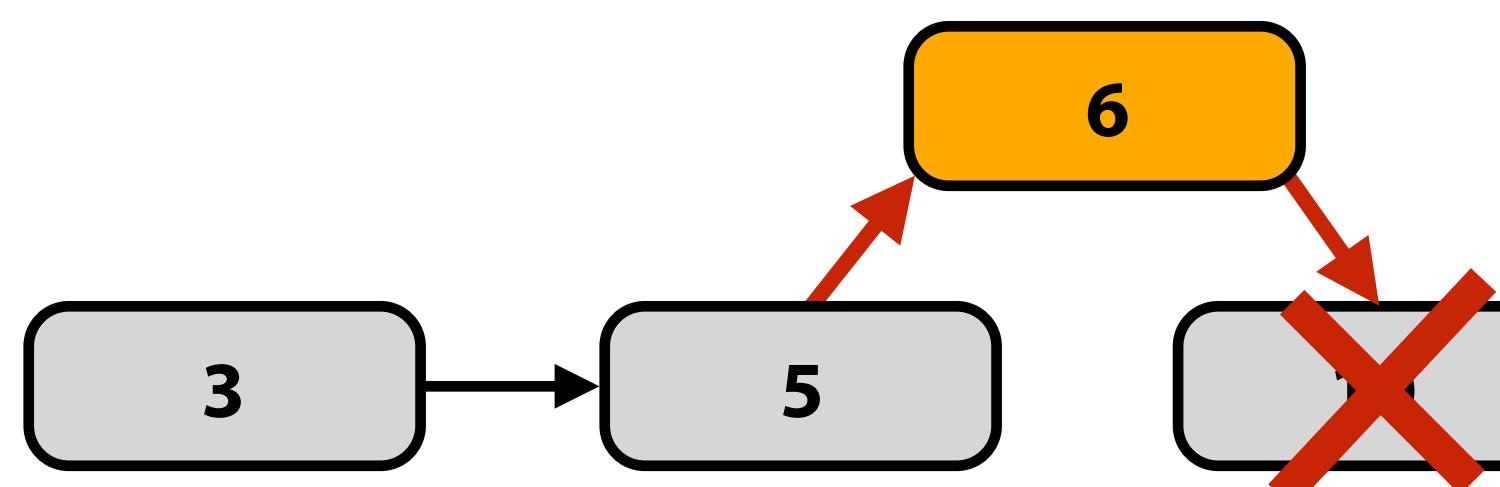
# Example: simultaneous insertion/deletion

Thread 1 attempts to insert 6

Thread 2 attempts to delete 10



Possible result: (thread 2 finishes delete first)



# Solution 1: protect the list with a single lock

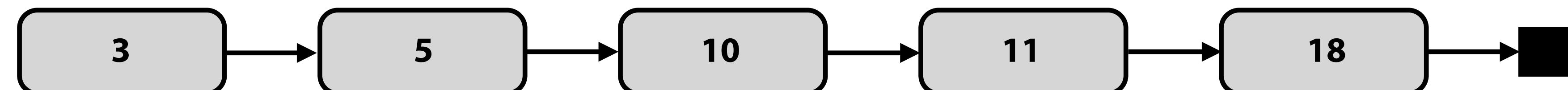
```
struct Node {           struct List {  
    int value;          Node* head;  
    Node* next;         Lock  lock; ←———— Per-list lock  
};                      };  
  
void insert(List* list, int value) {  
  
    Node* n = new Node;  
    n->value = value;  
  
    lock(list->lock);  
  
    // assume case of inserting before head of  
    // of list is handled here (to keep slide simple)  
  
    Node* prev = list->head;  
    Node* cur = list->head->next;  
  
    while (cur) {  
        if (cur->value > value)  
            break;  
  
        prev = cur;  
        cur = cur->next;  
    }  
    n->next = cur;  
    prev->next = n;  
    unlock(list->lock);  
}  
  
void delete(List* list, int value) {  
  
    lock(list->lock);  
  
    // assume case of deleting first element is  
    // handled here (to keep slide simple)  
  
    Node* prev = list->head;  
    Node* cur = list->head->next;  
  
    while (cur) {  
        if (cur->value == value) {  
            prev->next = cur->next;  
            delete cur;  
            unlock(list->lock);  
            return;  
        }  
        prev = cur;  
        cur = cur->next;  
    }  
    unlock(list->lock);  
}
```

# Single global lock per data structure

- **Good:**
  - It is relatively simple to implement correct mutual exclusion for data structure operations (we just did it!)
- **Bad:**
  - Operations on the data structure are serialized
  - May limit parallel application performance

# Challenge: who can do better?

```
struct Node {           struct List {  
    int value;         Node* head;  
    Node* next;        };  
};  
  
void insert(List* list, int value) {  
  
    Node* n = new Node;  
    n->value = value;  
  
    // assume case of inserting before head of  
    // of list is handled here (to keep slide simple)  
  
    Node* prev = list->head;  
    Node* cur = list->head->next;  
  
    while (cur) {  
        if (cur->value > value)  
            break;  
  
        prev = cur;  
        cur = cur->next;  
    }  
  
    prev->next = n;  
    n->next = cur;  
}  
  
void delete(List* list, int value) {  
  
    // assume case of deleting first element is  
    // handled here (to keep slide simple)  
  
    Node* prev = list->head;  
    Node* cur = list->head->next;  
  
    while (cur) {  
        if (cur->value == value) {  
            prev->next = cur->next;  
            delete cur;  
            return;  
        }  
  
        prev = cur;  
        cur = cur->next;  
    }  
}
```



# Hand-over-hand traversal

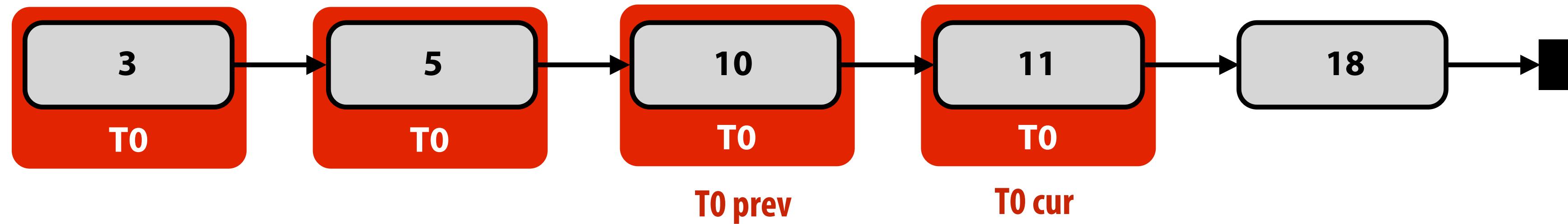


Credit: (Hal Boedeker, Orlando Sentinel) American Ninja Warrior

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# Solution 2: “hand-over-hand” locking

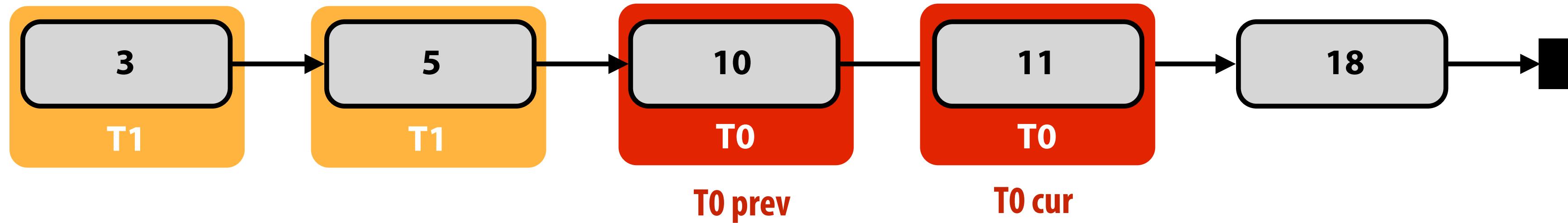
Thread 0: delete(11)



# Solution 2: “hand-over-hand” locking

Thread 0: delete(11)

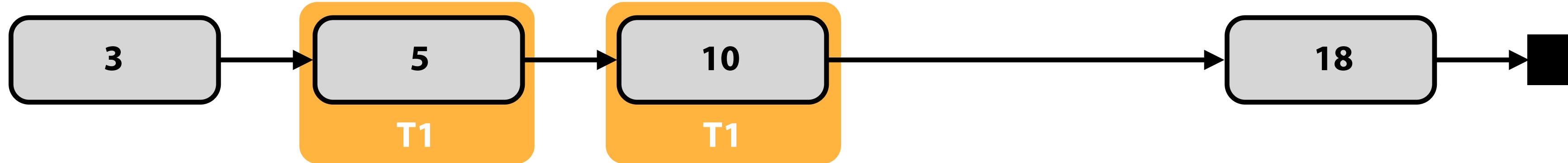
Thread 1: delete(10)



# Solution 2: “hand-over-hand” locking

Thread 0: delete(11)

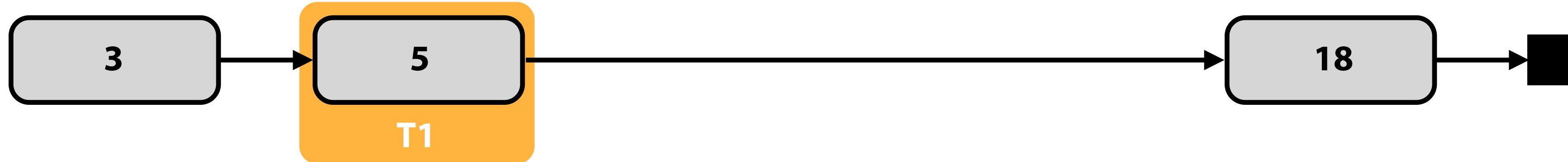
Thread 1: delete(10)



# Solution 2: “hand-over-hand” locking

Thread 0: delete(11)

Thread 1: delete(10)



# Solution 2: fine-grained locking

```
struct Node {  
    int value;  
    Node* next;  
    Lock* lock;  
};
```

```
void insert(List* list, int value) {  
  
    Node* n = new Node;  
    n->value = value;  
  
    // assume case of insert before head handled  
    // here (to keep slide simple)
```

```
Node* prev, *cur;
```

```
lock(list->lock);  
prev = list->head;
```

```
lock(prev->lock);  
unlock(list->lock);
```

```
cur = prev->next;  
if (cur) lock(cur->lock);
```

```
while (cur) {  
    if (cur->value > value)  
        break;
```

```
    Node* old_prev = prev;  
    prev = cur;  
    cur = cur->next;  
    unlock(old_prev->lock);  
    if (cur) lock(cur->lock);
```

```
}
```

```
n->next = cur;  
prev->next = n;
```

```
unlock(prev->lock);  
if (cur) unlock(cur->lock);
```

```
}
```

```
struct List {  
    Node* head;  
    Lock* lock;  
};
```

**Challenge to students: there is way to further improve the implementation of insert(). What is it?**

```
void delete(List* list, int value) {  
  
    // assume case of delete head handled here  
    // (to keep slide simple)  
  
    Node* prev, *cur;  
  
    lock(list->lock);  
    prev = list->head;  
  
    lock(prev->lock);  
    unlock(list->lock);  
  
    cur = prev->next;  
    if (cur) lock(cur->lock);  
  
    while (cur) {  
        if (cur->value == value) {  
            prev->next = cur->next;  
            unlock(prev->lock);  
            unlock(cur->lock);  
            delete cur;  
            return;  
        }  
  
        Node* old_prev = prev;  
        prev = cur;  
        cur = cur->next;  
        unlock(old_prev->lock);  
        if (cur) lock(cur->lock);  
    }  
    unlock(prev->lock);
```

# Fine-grained locking

## ■ Goal: enable parallelism in data structure operations

- Reduces contention for global data structure lock
- In the linked-list example: a single monolithic lock is overly conservative (operations on different parts of the linked list can proceed in parallel)

## ■ Challenge: tricky to ensure correctness

- Determining when mutual exclusion is required
- Deadlock? (Self-check: in the linked-list example, why do you immediately know that the code is deadlock free?)
- Livelock?

## ■ Costs?

- Overhead of taking a lock each traversal step (extra instructions + traversal now involves memory writes)
- Extra storage cost (a lock per node)
- What is a middle-ground solution that trades off some parallelism for reduced overhead? (hint: similar issue to selection of task granularity)

# Practice exercise (on your own time)

- Implement a fine-grained locking implementation of a binary search tree supporting insert and delete

```
struct Tree {  
    Node* root;  
};  
  
struct Node {  
    int value;  
    Node* left;  
    Node* right;  
};  
  
void insert(Tree* tree, int value);  
void delete(Tree* tree, int value);
```

# **A quick introduction to lock-free data structures**

# Blocking algorithms/data structures

- A blocking algorithm allows one thread to prevent other threads from completing operations on a shared data structure indefinitely
- Example:
  - Thread 0 takes a lock on a node in our linked list
  - Thread 0 is swapped out by the OS, or crashes, or is just really slow (takes a page fault), etc.
  - Now, no other threads can complete operations on the data structure (although thread 0 is not actively making progress modifying it)
- An algorithm that uses locks is blocking regardless of whether the lock implementation uses spinning or pre-emption

# Lock-free algorithms

- Non-blocking algorithms are lock-free if some thread is guaranteed to make progress (“systemwide progress”)
  - In lock-free case, it is not possible to preempt one of the threads at an inopportune time and prevent progress by rest of system
  - Note: this definition does not prevent starvation of any one thread

# Single reader, single writer bounded queue \*

```
struct Queue {  
    int data[N];  
    int head; // head of queue  
    int tail; // next free element  
};  
  
void init(Queue* q) {  
    q->head = q->tail = 0;  
}  
  
// return false if queue is full  
bool push(Queue* q, int value) {  
  
    // queue is full if tail is element before head  
    if (q->tail == MOD_N(q->head - 1))  
        return false;  
  
    q->data[q->tail] = value;  
    q->tail = MOD_N(q->tail + 1);  
    return true;  
}  
  
// returns false if queue is empty  
bool pop(Queue* q, int* value) {  
  
    // if not empty  
    if (q->head != q->tail) {  
        *value = q->data[q->head];  
        q->head = MOD_N(q->head + 1);  
        return true;  
    }  
    return false;  
}
```

- Only two threads (one producer, one consumer) accessing queue at the same time
- Threads never synchronize or wait on each other
  - When queue is empty (pop fails), when it is full (push fails)

\* Assume a sequentially consistent memory system for now

(or the presence of appropriate memory fences, or C++ 11 atomic<>)

# Single reader, single writer unbounded queue \*

Source: Dr. Dobbs Journal

```
struct Node {  
    Node* next;  
    int value;  
};  
  
struct Queue {  
    Node* head;  
    Node* tail;  
    Node* reclaim;  
};  
  
void init(Queue* q) {  
    q->head = q->tail = q->reclaim = new Node;  
}
```

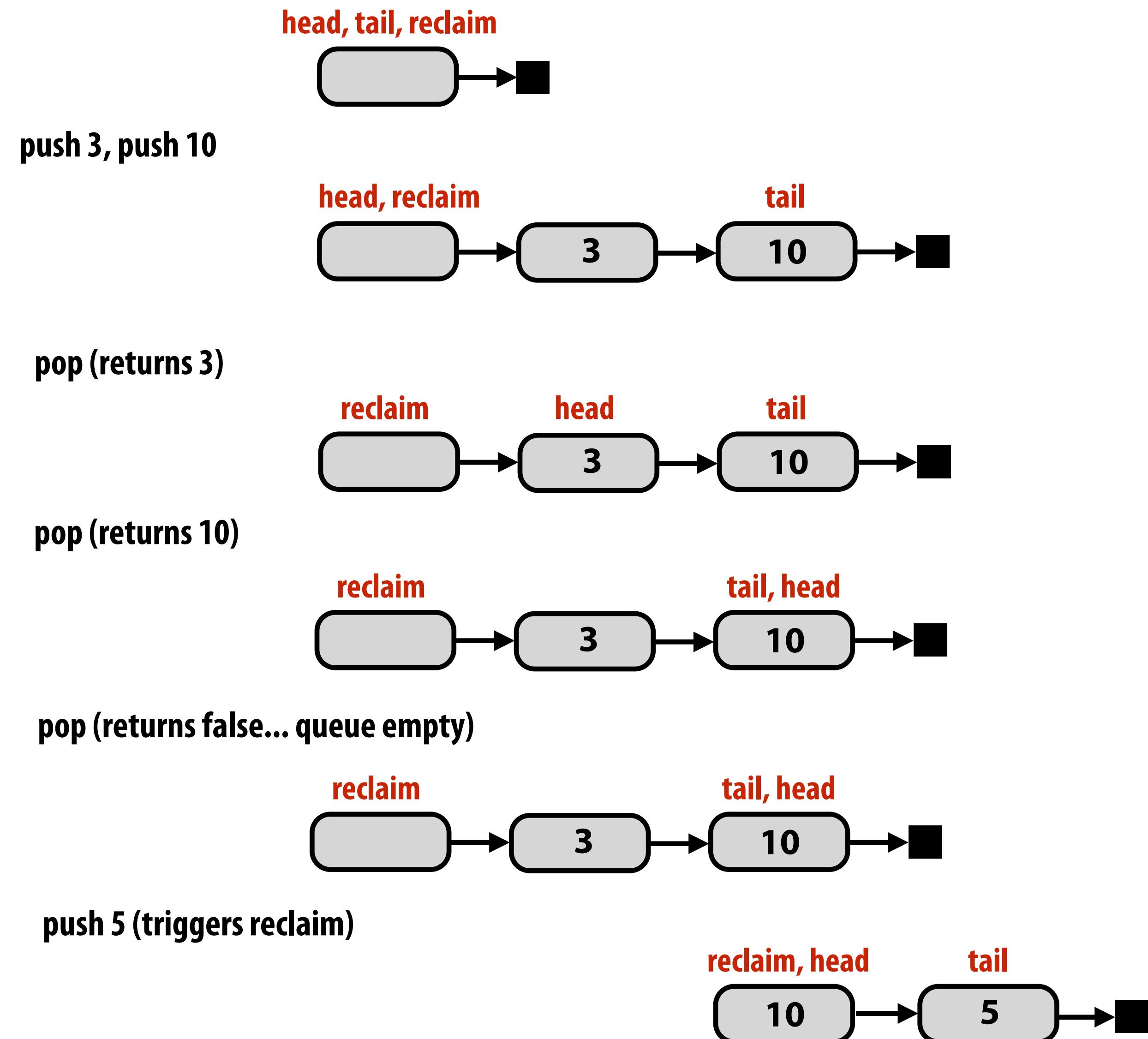
- Tail points to last element added (if non-empty)
- Head points to element BEFORE head of queue
- Node allocation and deletion performed by the same thread (producer thread)

```
void push(Queue* q, int value) {  
  
    Node* n = new Node;  
    n->next = NULL;  
    n->value = value;  
  
    q->tail->next = n;  
    q->tail = q->tail->next;  
  
    while (q->reclaim != q->head) {  
        Node* tmp = q->reclaim;  
        q->reclaim = q->reclaim->next;  
        delete tmp;  
    }  
}
```

```
// returns false if queue is empty  
bool pop(Queue* q, int* value) {  
  
    if (q->head != q->tail) {  
        *value = q->head->next->value;  
        q->head = q->head->next;  
        return true;  
    }  
    return false;  
}
```

\* Assume a sequentially consistent memory system for now  
(or the presence of appropriate memory fences, or C++ 11 atomic<>)

# Single reader, single writer unbounded queue



# Lock-free stack (first try)

```
struct Node {  
    Node* next;  
    int   value;  
};  
  
struct Stack {  
    Node* top;  
};  
  
void init(Stack* s) {  
    s->top = NULL;  
}  
  
void push(Stack* s, Node* n) {  
    while (1) {  
        Node* old_top = s->top;  
        n->next = old_top;  
        if (compare_and_swap(&s->top, old_top, n) == old_top)  
            return;  
    }  
}  
  
Node* pop(Stack* s) {  
    while (1) {  
        Node* old_top = s->top;  
        if (old_top == NULL)  
            return NULL;  
        Node* new_top = old_top->next;  
        if (compare_and_swap(&s->top, old_top, new_top) == old_top)  
            return old_top;  
    }  
}
```

**Main idea: as long as no other thread has modified the stack, a thread's modification can proceed.**

**Note difference from fine-grained locking:** In fine-grained locking, the implementation locked a part of a data structure. Here, threads do not hold lock on data structure at all.

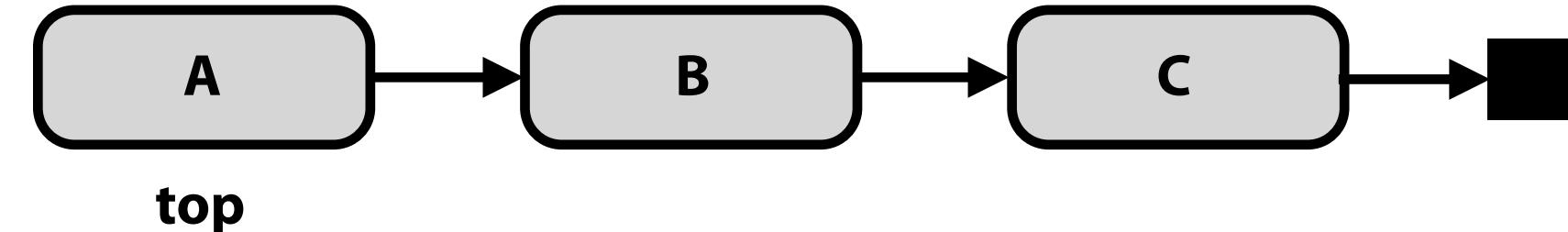
\* Assume a sequentially consistent memory system for now  
(or the presence of appropriate memory fences, or C++ 11 atomic<>)

# The ABA problem \*

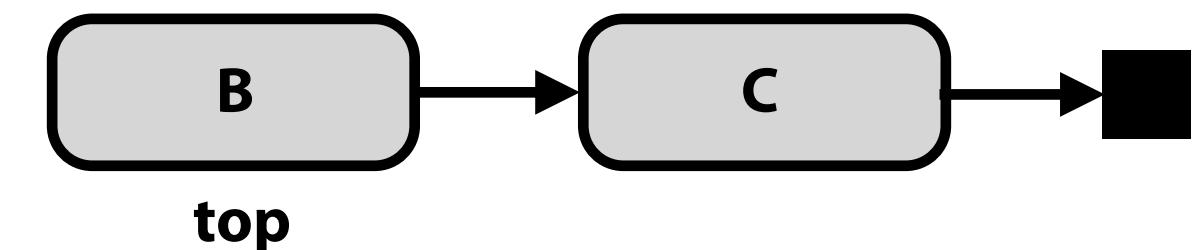
Careful: On this slide A, B, C, and D are addresses of nodes, not the value stored by the nodes!

Thread 0

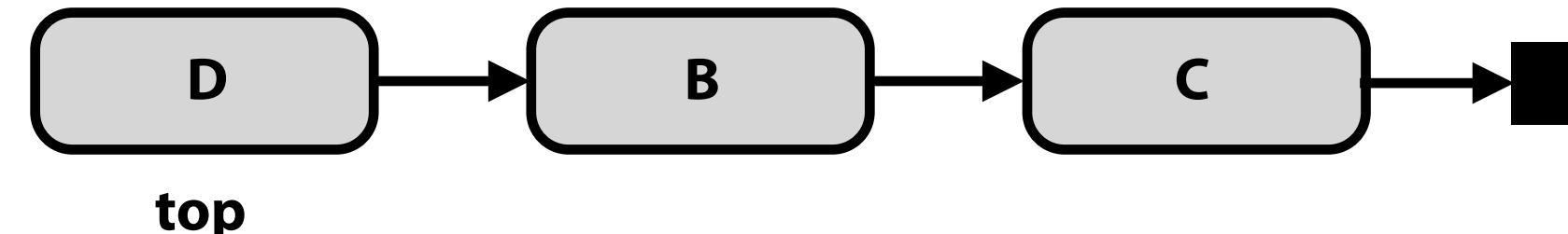
Thread 1



**begin pop()** (local variable: old\_top = A, new\_top = B)

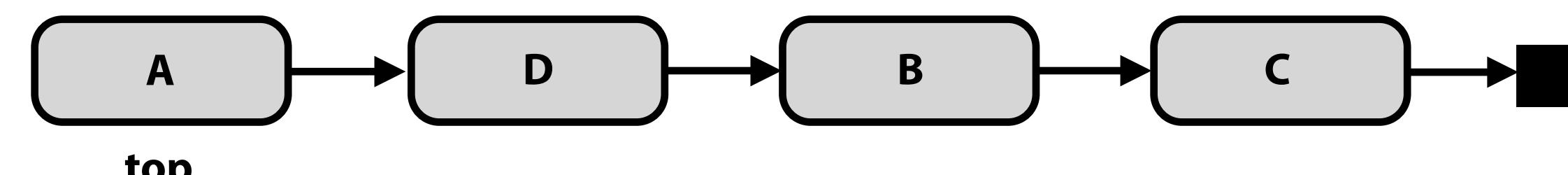


**begin pop()** (local variable old\_top == A)  
**complete pop()** (returns A)

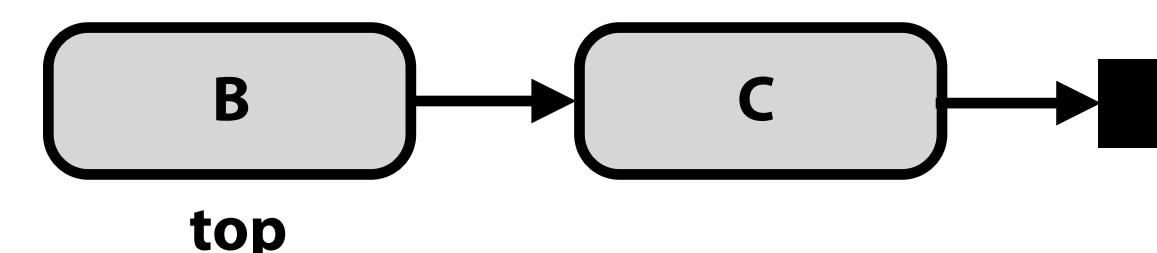


**begin push(D)**  
**complete push(D)**

**modify node A: e.g., set value = 42**  
**begin push(A)**  
**complete push(A)**



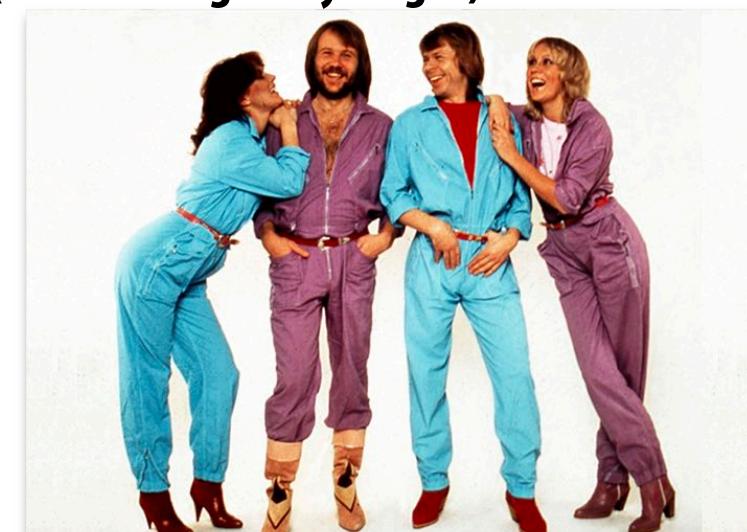
**CAS succeeds (sets top to B!)**  
**complete pop() (returns A)**



**Stack structure is corrupted! (lost D)**

time

\* Do not confuse with the ABBA problem  
(which is arguably larger)



# Lock-free stack using counter for ABA soln

```
struct Node {           void init(Stack* s) {  
    Node* next;         s->top = NULL;  
    int   value;        }  
};  
  
struct Stack {  
    Node* top;  
    int   pop_count;  
};  
  
void push(Stack* s, Node* n) {  
    while (1) {  
        Node* old_top = s->top;  
        n->next = old_top;  
        if (compare_and_swap(&s->top, old_top, n) == old_top)  
            return;  
    }  
}  
  
Node* pop(Stack* s) {  
    while (1) {  
        int pop_count = s->pop_count;  
        Node* top = s->top;  
        if (top == NULL)  
            return NULL;  
        Node* new_top = top->next;  
        if (double_compare_and_swap(&s->top,          top,          new_top,  
                                     &s->pop_count, pop_count, pop_count+1))  
            return top;  
    }  
}
```

test to see if either have changed  
(assume function returns true if no changes)

- Maintain counter of pop operations
- Requires machine to support “double compare and swap” (DCAS) or doubleword CAS
- Could also solve ABA problem with careful node allocation and/or element reuse policies

# Compare and swap on x86

- **x86 supports a “double-wide” compare-and-swap instruction**
  - Not quite the “double compare-and-swap” used on the previous slide
  - But could simply ensure the stack’s count and top fields are contiguous in memory to use the 64-bit wide single compare-and-swap instruction below.
- **cmpxchg8b**
  - “compare and exchange eight bytes”
  - Can be used for compare-and-swap of two 32-bit values
- **cmpxchg16b**
  - “compare and exchange 16 bytes”
  - Can be used for compare-and-swap of two 64-bit values

# Another problem: referencing freed memory

```
struct Node {           void init(Stack* s) {
    Node* next;        s->top = NULL;
    int    value;       }
};

struct Stack {
    Node* top;
    int    pop_count;
};

void push(Stack* s, int value) {
    Node* n = new Node;
    n->value = value;
    while (1) {
        Node* old_top = s->top;
        n->next = old_top;
        if (compare_and_swap(&s->top, old_top, n) == old_top)
            return;
    }
}

int pop(Stack* s) {
    while (1) {
        Stack old;
        old.pop_count = s->pop_count;
        old.top = s->top;

        if (old.top == NULL)
            return NULL;

        Stack new_stack;
        new_stack.top = old.top->next;
        new_stack.pop_count = old.pop_count+1;

        if (doubleword_compare_and_swap(s, old, new_stack))
            int value = old.top->value;
            delete old.top;
            return value;
    }
}
```

old top might have been freed at this point  
(by some other thread that popped it)

# [Advanced topic] Hazard pointer: avoid freeing a node until it's known that all other threads do not hold reference to it

```
struct Node {  
    Node* next;  
    int value;  
};  
  
struct Stack {  
    Node* top;  
    int pop_count;  
};  
  
// per thread ptr (node that cannot  
// be deleted since the thread is  
// accessing it)  
Node* hazard;  
  
// list of nodes this thread must  
// delete (this is a per thread list)  
Node* retireList;  
int retireListSize;  
  
// delete nodes if possible  
void retire(Node* ptr) {  
    push(retireList, ptr);  
    retireListSize++;  
  
    if (retireListSize > THRESHOLD)  
        for (each node n in retireList) {  
            if (n not pointed to by any  
                thread's hazard pointer) {  
                remove n from list  
                delete n;  
            }  
        }  
    }  
}  
  
void init(Stack* s) {  
    s->top = NULL;  
}  
  
void push(Stack* s, int value) {  
    Node* n = new Node;  
    n->value = value;  
    while (1) {  
        Node* old_top = s->top;  
        n->next = old_top;  
        if (compare_and_swap(&s->top, old_top, n) == old_top)  
            return;  
    }  
}  
  
int pop(Stack* s) {  
    while (1) {  
        Stack old;  
        old.pop_count = s->pop_count;  
        old.top = hazard = s->top;  
  
        if (old.top == NULL) {  
            return NULL;  
        }  
  
        Stack new_stack;  
        new_stack.top = old.top->next;  
        new_stack.pop_count = old.pop_count+1;  
  
        if (doubleword_compare_and_swap(s, old, new_stack)) {  
            int value = old.top->value;  
            retire(old.top);  
            return value;  
        }  
        hazard = NULL;  
    }  
}
```

# Lock-free linked list insertion \*

```
struct Node {           struct List {  
    int value;          Node* head;  
    Node* next;         };  
};  
  
// insert new node after specified node  
void insert_after(List* list, Node* after, int value) {  
  
    Node* n = new Node;  
    n->value = value;  
  
    // assume case of insert into empty list handled  
    // here (keep code on slide simple for class discussion)  
  
    Node* prev = list->head;  
  
    while (prev->next) {  
        if (prev == after) {  
            while (1) {  
                Node* old_next = prev->next;  
                n->next = old_next;  
                if (compare_and_swap(&prev->next, old_next, n) == old_next)  
                    return;  
            }  
        }  
        prev = prev->next;  
    }  
}
```

**Compared to fine-grained locking implementation:**

**No overhead of taking locks**  
**No per-node storage overhead**

\* For simplicity, this slide assumes the \*only\* operation on the list is insert. Delete is more complex.

# Lock-free linked list deletion

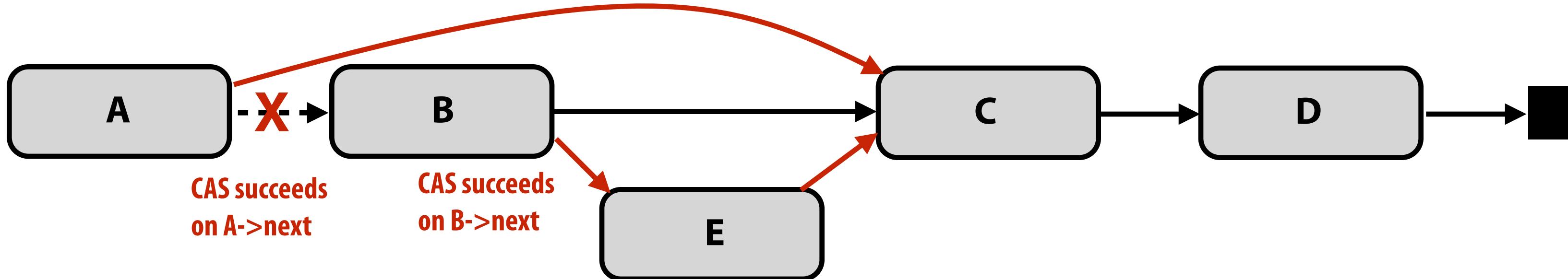
Supporting lock-free deletion significantly complicates data-structure

Consider case where B is deleted simultaneously with insertion of E after B.

B now points to E, but B is not in the list!

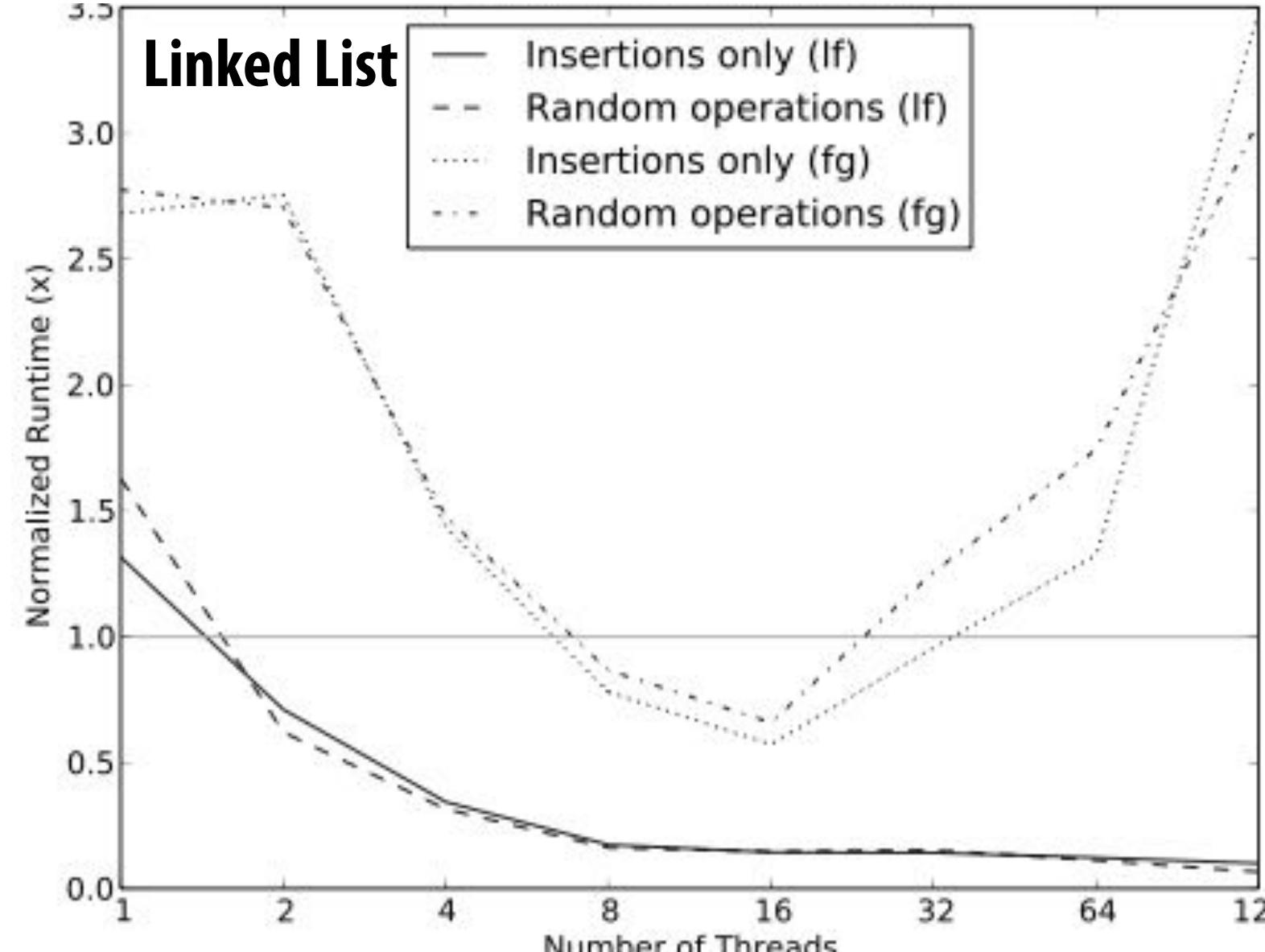
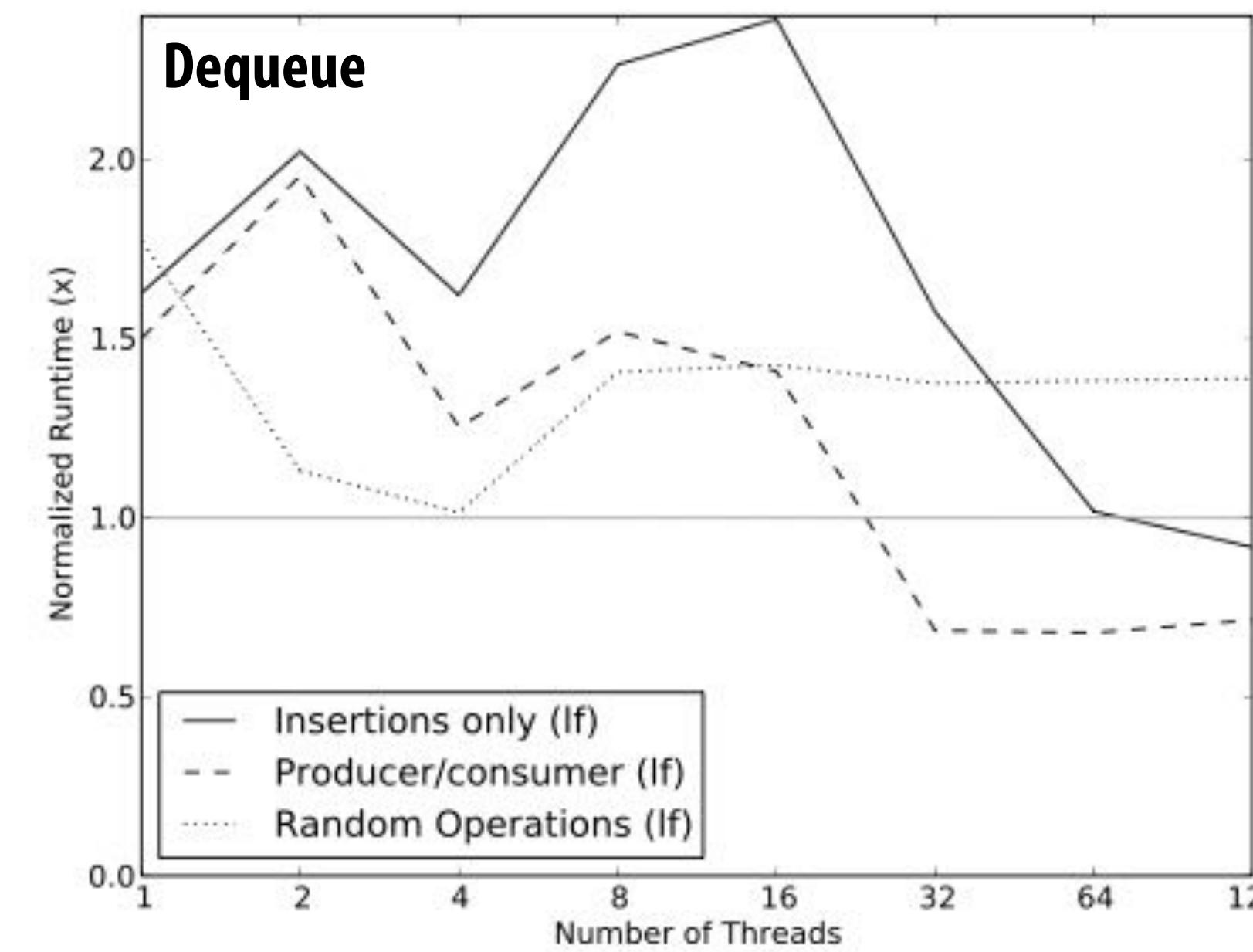
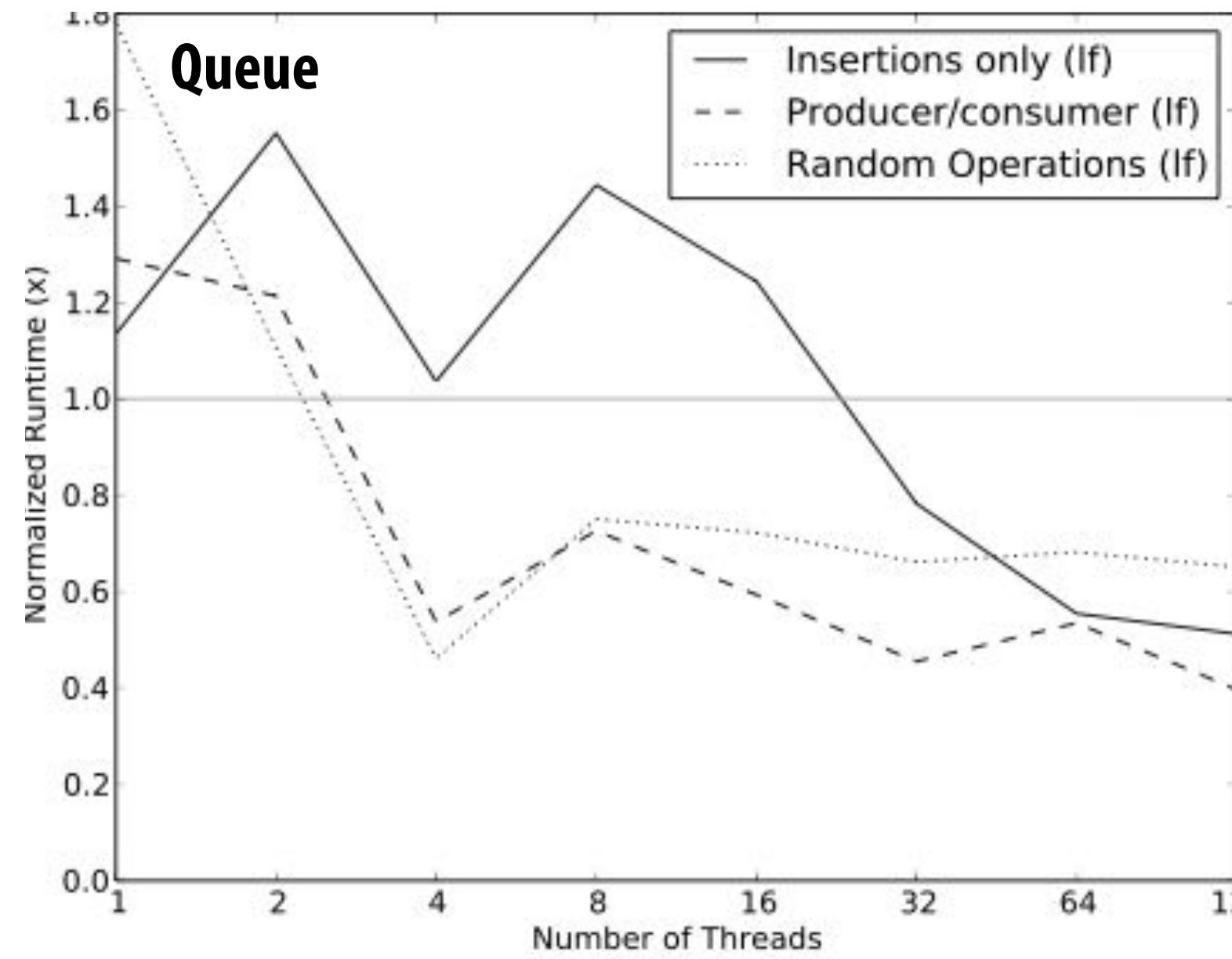
For the curious:

- Harris 2001. "A Pragmatic Implementation of Non-blocking Linked-Lists"
- Fomitchev 2004. "Lock-free linked lists and skip lists"



# Lock-free vs. locks performance comparison

Lock-free algorithm run time normalized to run time of using pthread mutex locks



If = “lock free”

fg = “fine grained lock”

Source: Hunt 2011. Characterizing the Performance and Energy Efficiency of Lock-Free Data Structures

# In practice: why lock free data structures?

- When optimizing parallel programs in this class you often assume that only your program is using the machine
  - Because you care about performance
  - Typical assumption in scientific computing, graphics, machine learning, data analytics, etc.
- In these cases, well-written code with locks can be as fast (or faster) than lock-free code
  - And is often much simpler to implement
- But there are situations where code with locks can suffer from tricky performance problems
  - Situations where a program features many threads (e.g., database, webserver) and page faults, pre-emption, etc. can occur while a thread is in a critical section
  - Locks create problems like priority inversion, convoying, crashing in critical section, etc. that are often discussed in OS classes

# Summary

- **Use fine-grained locking to reduce contention (maximize parallelism) in operations on shared data structures**
  - But fine-granularity can increase code complexity (errors) and increase execution overhead
- **Lock-free data structures: non-blocking solution to avoid some overheads/pitfalls of locks**
  - But can be tricky to implement (and ensuring correctness in a lock-free setting has its own overheads)
  - Still requires appropriate memory fences on modern relaxed consistency hardware
- **Note: a lock-free design does not eliminate contention**
  - Compare-and-swap can fail under heavy contention, requiring spins

# Preview: transactional memory

- **Q. What was the role of the compare and swap in our lock-free implementations?**
- **A. Determining if another thread had modified the data structure while the calling thread was in the middle of an operation.**
- **Next time... transactional memory**
  - A more general mechanism to allow a system to speculate that an operation will be successfully completed before another thread attempts to modify the structure
  - With mechanisms to “abort” an operation in the event another thread does.

# More reading on lock-free structures

- Michael and Scott 1996. Simple, Fast and Practical Non-Blocking and Blocking Concurrent Queue Algorithms
  - Multiple reader/writer lock-free queue
- Harris 2001. A Pragmatic Implementation of Non-Blocking Linked-Lists
- Michael Sullivan's Relaxed Memory Calculus (RMC) compiler
  - <https://github.com/msullivan/rmc-compiler>
- Many good blog posts and articles on the web:
  - <http://www.drdobbs.com/cpp/lock-free-code-a-false-sense-of-security/210600279>
  - <http://developers.memsql.com/blog/common-pitfalls-in-writing-lock-free-algorithms/>