

Transparent Standby for Low-Power, Resource-Constrained Embedded Systems

A Programming Language-Based Approach

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Abstract

Standby efficiency for connected devices is one of the priorities of the G20's *Energy Efficiency Action Plan*. We propose transparent programming language mechanisms to enforce that applications remain in deepest standby modes for longest periods of time. We extend the synchronous programming language CÉU with support for interrupt service routines and with a simple power management runtime. We developed device drivers based on these primitives on top of which applications can be built to take advantage of standby automatically. We also show that programs in CÉU can keep a sequential structure to lower the barrier of adoption, even when applications require non-trivial concurrent behaviors.

CCS Concepts • **Computer systems organization** → **Embedded systems**; *Redundancy*; Robotics; • **Networks** → Network reliability;

Keywords ACM proceedings, L^AT_EX, text tagging

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According to the International Energy Agency (IEA), the number of network-connected devices is expected to reach 50 billion by 2020 with the expansion of the Internet of Things (IoT) [5]. However, most of the energy to power these devices will be consumed in *standby mode*, i.e., when they are neither transmitting or processing data. For instance, standby power currently accounts for 10–15% of residential electricity consumption, and CO₂ emissions related to standby are equivalent to those of 1 million cars [5, 6]. The projected growth of IoT devices, together with the surprising effects of

standby consumption, made network standby efficiency one of the six pillars of the G20's *Energy Efficiency Action Plan*¹.

Given the projected scale of the IoT and the role of low-power standby towards energy efficiency, this paper has the following goals:

1. Address energy efficiency through extensive use of standby.
2. Target low-power, resource-constrained embedded architectures that form the IoT.
3. Provide standby mechanisms at the programming language level that scale to all applications.
4. Support transparent/non-intrusive standby mechanisms that reduce barriers of adoption.

Our approach lies at the bottom of the software development layers—programming language mechanisms—meaning that *all* applications take advantage of low-power standby modes automatically, without extra programming efforts. We extend the synchronous programming language CÉU [8, 9] with support for interrupt service routines (ISRs) and with a simple power management runtime (PMR). Each supported microcontroller requires bindings in C for the ISRs and PMR, and each peripheral requires a driver in CÉU. These are a one-time procedures and are typically packaged and distributed in a software development kit (SDK). Then, all new applications built on top of these drivers take advantage of standby automatically. As a proof of concept, we provide an open source SDK with support for 8-bit AVR/ATmega and 32-bit ARM/Cortex-M0 microcontrollers, and a variety of peripherals, such as GPIO, A/D converter, USART, SPI, and the nRF24L01 transceiver.

We developed a number of applications using these peripherals concurrently and could verify that the applications remain in deepest standby modes for longest periods of time. We also compare the structure of programs in CÉU and Arduino [2], whose primary goal is to reduce the barrier of adoption for non-technical users (e.g., designers and artists). We show that we can keep the intended sequential reasoning of Arduino even when applications require non-trivial concurrent behaviors.

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¹G20's Energy Efficiency Action Plan: <https://www.iea-4e.org/projects/g20>

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|--|---|
| <pre> 111 while (1) { 112 delay(1000); 113 int v = 114 analogRead(A0); 115 radioWrite(v); 116 } </pre> | <pre> 1 loop do 2 await 1s; 3 var int v = 4 await AnalogRead(A0); 5 await RadioWrite(v); 6 end </pre> |
| [a] Version in Arduino | [b] Version in C    |

Figure 1. Sequence of I/O operations running in a loop.

1 The Structured Synchronous Programming Language C   

C    is a Esterel-based[8] reactive programming language targeting resource-constrained embedded systems [9]. It is grounded on the synchronous concurrency model, which has been successfully adopted in the context of hard real-time systems such as avionics and automobiles industry since the 80's [3]. The synchronous model trades power for reliability and has a simpler model of time that suits most requirements of IoT applications. On the one hand, this model cannot directly express time-consuming computations, such as compression and cryptography algorithms, which are typically either absent or delegated to auxiliary chips in the context of the IoT. On the other hand, all reactions to the external world are guaranteed to be computed in bounded time, ensuring that applications always reach an idle state amenable to standby mode. Overall, C    aims to offer a concurrent, safe, and expressive alternative to C with the characteristics that follow:

Reactive: code only executes in reactions to events.

Structured: programs use structured control mechanisms, such as `await` (to suspend a line of execution), and `par` (to combine multiple lines of execution).

Synchronous: reactions run atomically and to completion on each line of execution, i.e., there's no implicit preemption or real parallelism.

Structured reactive programming lets developers write code in direct style, recovering from the inversion of control imposed by event-driven execution [1, 4, 7].

A Motivating Example

Figure 1.a shows a simple, easy-to-read program chunk in Arduino that executes forever in a loop a sequence of operations as follows: waits for 1 second (ln. 2), performs an A/D conversion (ln. 3–4), and broadcasts the value read (ln. 5). Figure 1.b shows the same chunk in C   , with a noteworthy difference that operations that interact with the environment and take time use the `await` keyword. The traditional structured paradigm encouraged in Arduino (with blocks, loops, and sequences) allows for simple and readable code, avoiding the complexity of dealing with ISRs. However, the

| | | |
|---|--|--|
| <pre> uint32_t prv = millis(); while (1) { if (radioAval()) { break; } uint32_t cur = millis(); if (cur>prv+1000) { prv = cur; int v = analogRead(A0); radioWrite(v); } } </pre> | <pre> 1 par/or do 2 await RadioAval(); 3 with 4 loop do 5 await 1s; 6 var int v = 7 await AnalogRead(A0); 8 await RadioWrite(v); 9 end 10 end 11 12 . </pre> | <pre> 166 167 168 169 170 171 172 173 174 175 176 177 178 179 180 181 182 </pre> |
| [a] Version in Arduino | [b] Version in C    | |

Figure 2. Achieving concurrency between I/O operations.

use of blocking operations, such as `delay(1000)`, prevents that other operations execute concurrently.

Suppose we now want that, at any time, receiving a message via radio should immediately abort the loop in Figure 1.a. Since the message might arrive concurrently with any of the blocking operations, we need to change the structure of the program. Figure 2.a changes the blocking operation `delay` to the polling operation `millis`, which immediately returns the number of milliseconds since the reset. Now, we start by registering the current time (ln. 1–2) and, on each loop iteration, we recheck the time to see if one second has elapsed (ln. 7–9). Since these operations are non-blocking, we can intercalate the execution with checks for message arrivals (ln. 4–6). If the time is up, we start counting it again (ln. 10) before proceeding to the original operations in sequence (ln. 11–13). The original structured style has been drastically violated to accommodate concurrency. In the example, we only adapted the `delay` operation, but the other blocking operations (`analogRead` and `radioWrite`) would also need to be changed to achieve maximum concurrency. Alternatively, we could resort to ISRs or implement an event-driven scheduler to handle the operations [?], but ultimately, the program readability would still be compromised.

The program in Figure 2.b in C    extends the one in Figure 1.b to accommodate concurrency. The original code remains unmodified (ln. 4–9) and concurrency is achieved through the `par/or` construct, which creates two lines of execution and terminates when either of them terminates, aborting the other automatically. This approach preserves the sequential, easy-to-read style while accommodating concurrency seamlessly.

```

221 1 output (int pin) ANALOG_REQUEST do
222 2   <...> // port manipulation to start the conversion
223 3 end
224 4
225 5 spawn async/isr [CEU_ADC_IRQ_N, 0] do
226 6   var int value = <...>; // port with the value read
227 7   emit ANALOG_DONE(value);
228 8 end
229 9
230 10 code AnalogRead (var int pin) -> int do
231 11   {ceu_pm_set(CEU_PM_ANALOG, 1);}
232 12   do finalize with
233 13     {ceu_pm_set(CEU_PM_ANALOG, 0);}
234 14   end
235 15
236 16   emit ANALOG_REQUEST(pin);
237 17   var int value = await ANALOG_DONE;
238 18
239 19   escape value;
240 20 end

```

Figure 3. CÉU driver for the A/D converter.

Standby Considerations

The structure of the program in Figure 2.b also indicates which peripherals are active at a given time. For instance, when the program is awaiting concurrently in lines 2 and 7, only the radio transceiver and A/D converter can awake the program. Hence, the language runtime can choose the most energy-efficient sleep mode that allows these peripherals to awake the microcontroller from associated interrupts. Since the semantics of CÉU enforces the program to always reach `await` statements in all active lines of execution, it is always possible to put the microcontroller into the optimal sleep mode after each reaction to the environment.

2 Transparent Standby Mechanisms

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