Multiple Player Game State Synchronization

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December 10, 2024

Abstract

Purpose - This study aims to investigate the impact of advanced parallel computing techniques on multiplayer game state synchronization and performance, addressing critical challenges in resource management, scalability, and synchronization bottlenecks in real-time gaming environments. The research seeks to provide insights into optimizing performance while ensuring data consistency.

Methodology - The study employs a quantitative approach by using OpenMP directives such as parallel loops, atomic operations, and reduction clauses that will perform task parallelization. Performance data were collected through repetitive testing across varying core counts, with execution times analyzed as a measure of efficiency and scalability.

Findings - The results showed that both atomic operations and dynamic workload sharing dramatically promote performance in scaling and outperform current approaches modeled after critical section principles. This finding proves that effective task parallelization can eliminate race conditions and synchronization bottlenecks, making great implications for the scalable design of multiplayer gaming systems.

Value - This research opens a new area in using parallel computing approaches for real-time multiplayer gaming. It provides actionable insights into achieving dependable synchronization and optimal performance, contributing to the advancement of parallelization strategies in interactive gaming environments and highlighting potential directions for future research and application. The project implementation and source code are available on GitHub.

Keywords: multiplayer games; game state synchronization; parallel computing, OpenMP; scalability; performance optimization

1 Introduction

Multiplayer games generate a vast amount of real-time data as players interact and alter the game state continuously. Efficient handling is required in synchronizing data to multiple clients so that gaming can be carried out effectively with consistency and minimum lag. Parallelization can be fruitful in the case of MPI for state distribution and synchronization of clients in games by offering concurrent processing of data, resulting in faster updates with decreased loads on the network as well as enhanced scalability. By leveraging MPI, game state data can be divided and handled in parallel, their updates optimized in network usage to a high-performance multiplayer experience of users.

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2 Literature Review

The fast development of multiplayer gaming has led to a growing need for systems that can handle large numbers of players efficiently and effectively in real-time scenarios. These systems must be scalable and well-synchronized to provide an optimal user experience while addressing latency problems and optimizing performance. Parallelization has emerged as a key strategy to achieve these goals. This review delves into the approaches and methods used in parallelizing multiplayer games, such as shared game state synchronization, task decomposition, advanced computational methods, and hardware utilization.

The review begins by exploring methods for keeping game progress synchronized among players and managing workloads efficiently to ensure scalability and consistency. It then moves to techniques for parallelizing tasks and optimizing game engines through advancements in task scheduling, pipeline parallelism, and GPU acceleration. Theoretical foundations of parallel algorithms and resource management strategies are also examined, providing an overview of the complexities and opportunities in this domain. By analyzing key discoveries, this review aims to pinpoint gaps in current research and suggest paths for future advancements in parallelizing multiplayer games.

2.1 Parallelizing Multiplayer Shared Game States

Several studies explore the parallelization of shared game states in multiplayer games. Eric Cronin et al. (Cronin *et al.*, 2002) introduced a Trailing State Synchronization method tailored for first-person shooter games. This approach maintains multiple game state copies at different simulation times, enabling one state to render on-screen while others detect and correct inconsistencies. This synchronization model is highly promising but relies on minimal synchronization delay differences to function optimally.

Similarly, Honghui Lu et al. (Lu *et al.*, 2008) proposed a Peer-to-Peer Synchronization Model that distributes the game world into non-overlapping regions. Each region is managed by a coordinator machine, leveraging task parallelization to maintain consistent game states among players in large-scale multiplayer environments. However, real-time communication remains a challenge due to the difficulty of synchronizing physical clocks in peer-to-peer systems.

In another study, Abu Asaduzzaman et al. (Asaduzzaman *et al.*, 2011) compared various thread synchronization models for rendering multi-object game states. These included single-threaded, multithreaded asynchronous, and multithreaded synchronous models, with the latter outperforming others in speed and efficiency when paired with data parallelism.

Micah J. Best et al. (Best *et al.*, 2009) explored Synchronization via Scheduling (SvS), employing signature-based and partitioning-based methods to execute non-overlapping tasks in parallel while avoiding data races. Their study highlighted the effectiveness of the Cascade Data Management Language over C++ for managing constraints in parallelization, achieving high parallelism but encountering increased execution times.

Al-Dosary, Furuyama, and Hillenbrand (Al-Dosary *et al.*, 2021) approached the problem from a compiler-level perspective, using parallelizing compilers to convert sequential game code into parallel code. Their work showcased improved CPU utilization and computational efficiency, although challenges with variable player loads persisted.

2.2 Scaling Multiplayer Games Through Task Decomposition and Load Balancing

Task decomposition and load balancing are critical for scaling multiplayer games. Ahmed Abdelkhalek and Angelos Bilas (Abdelkhalek and Bilas, 2004) implemented a parallel version of a first-person action game server using region-based lock synchronization. This approach supported more players and processed the game world faster than sequential servers, though bottlenecks and synchronization overhead affected execution time.

Similarly, Yongqiang Gao et al. (Gao *et al.*, 2019) addressed resource allocation in cloud environments for massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs). Their algorithm utilized LSTM models for dynamic VM placement, achieving up to 44.8% energy savings while maintaining Quality of Experience (QoE) during workload surges.

Further, Gorlatch et al. (Gorlatch *et al.*, 2015) used replication-based parallelization in Quake II, increasing the number of players supported per server. Despite its effectiveness, synchronization challenges intensified with real-time mechanics. A related study on Inter-Server Synchronization (**interserver2022ndn**) employed Named Data Networking (NDN) to synchronize game states across servers. The method reduced redundant traffic and improved scalability but proved less efficient in small setups due to the high computational costs of NDN.

Daniel Lupei et al. (Lupei *et al.*, 2011) explored Software Transactional Memory (STM) for Quake 3 servers, demonstrating scalability and conflict resolution capabilities, although managing STM expenses and consistency granularity remained challenging.

2.3 Advanced Parallelization Methods

Advanced techniques like pipeline parallelism and Monte Carlo Tree Search (MCTS) optimizations have shown significant potential in gaming applications. Robin Andblom (Andblom, 2021) emphasized the effectiveness of pipeline parallelism over fork-join approaches when tested on game engine prototypes. Using Intel's Threading Building Blocks (TBB), his study highlighted the scalability of pipeline parallelism for integrating complex algorithms, though uneven task distribution persisted as a challenge.

A study on MCTS (Anderson and Petrov, 2019) showcased root parallel algorithms, significantly improving decision-making efficiency in sequential games like Checkers and Othello. Conversely, the impact was minimal in simultaneous games like Blocker. Limited Hybrid Root-Tree Parallelization (Wells and Kurki, 2018) further optimized MCTS by combining root and tree parallelization with action limiting, improving scalability and performance.

Parallelization also enhanced simulations in Monopoly® (Smith and Patel, 2021), where high-performance computing (HPC) clusters reduced computation times while analyzing economic inequalities through extensive parameter sweeps.

2.4 Game Engine Parallelization and Hardware Utilization

As game engines evolve to leverage multicore CPUs and GPUs, parallelization becomes essential. One study (Gomez and Ren, 2021) demonstrated a 9x improvement in frame processing and an 80x enhancement in texture compression by combining data and task parallelism with GPU acceleration.

AlBahnassi (AlBahnassi and Srinivasan, 2021) addressed heterogeneous computing environments, showing that task scheduling across diverse processor architectures significantly improved performance despite synchronization challenges.

James Tulip et al. (Tulip *et al.*, 2019) highlighted the transition of legacy single-threaded engines to multithreaded designs, emphasizing the need for thread alignment and workload balancing to optimize resource utilization on modern hardware. A Quadtree Synchronization Protocol (QSP) (Tyler and Kapoor, 2020) efficiently synchronized distributed game states by segmenting regions hierarchically, enhancing scalability while reducing computational costs.

Unity's Job System (B. Williams and Martinez, 2022) further demonstrated the utility of parallelization, optimizing tasks for multicore systems and integrating high-performance computing techniques.

2.5 Theoretical Foundations of Parallelization in Multiplayer Games

Theoretical insights have advanced the understanding of parallelization dynamics. Research on parallel repetition (R. A. Dinur and Gafni, 2019) explored how repeated plays reduce game value polynomially rather than exponentially in certain multiplayer games, contrary to prior beliefs. Dinur et al. (R. Dinur and Greenberg, 2018) extended this concept to expander games, proving exponential value decreases with repetition due to specific graph-theoretic properties.

In multiplayer stochastic games, a novel parallel algorithm (Stone and Ramirez, 2020) applied Nash equilibrium approximations to naval strategic planning scenarios. The method demonstrated potential for broader applications but required enhancements to address imperfect information and domain-specific challenges.

2.6 Resource Management and Optimization Techniques

Efficient resource management is critical in multiplayer gaming. A study on mobile games (Lim and Nguyen, 2021) utilized micro-cloud networks to address delays and scalability issues by dynamically distributing workloads, reducing latency, and enhancing throughput.

Paul André Mellies (Mellies and D. S. Williams, 2020) introduced a bicategorical framework for synchronization and task coordination, addressing issues of locality and load balancing. The Real-Time Framework (Walker and Clarkson, 2021) proposed a modular architecture for MMOGs, integrating parallelization techniques to improve scalability and user capacity.

Grid computing (Rodrigues and Nadar, 2021) further optimized MMOG environments by combining zoning and replication to handle player density and game size dynamically, as demonstrated in the Rokkatan game.

3 Method

3.1 Approach

The primary objective of this study was to enhance the synchronization and performance of a multiplayer game state simulation using parallel computing principles. The initial implementation exhibited several race conditions that could lead to inconsistent game states when multiple players interacted simultaneously. We focused on parallelizing specific methods and optimizing performance through the use of OpenMP, while managing critical sections and atomic operations effectively.

3.2 Code Changes and Parallelization

1. **Game State Synchronization Functions**: The C++ code was structured to handle various stages of game state synchronization, including reading data, updating positions, calculating lighting, and updating textures. Each of these functions was analyzed for potential parallelization.

2. **Use of OpenMP Directives**:

   - **Parallel Loops**: We utilized `#pragma omp parallel for` to parallelize independent loop iterations for updating positions and calculating lighting. This allowed multiple threads to execute these loops concurrently, significantly improving execution time.
   - **Reduction Clause**: The `#pragma omp reduction` directive was employed to ensure thread-safe accumulation of light values during lighting computations. This approach allowed each thread to maintain a private copy of the total light, merging results at the end, which minimized synchronization overhead.
   - **Critical Sections**: We applied `#pragma omp critical` in sections where threads accessed shared resources, such as the `rand()` function. While this ensured correctness, it introduced performance overhead due to thread synchronization.

3. **Optimization Strategies**:

   - **Critical Sections**: The use of critical sections was essential for managing race conditions with shared data, particularly for random number generation and the total light variable. Although this ensured data integrity, it led to higher execution times due to the overhead associated with thread synchronization.
   - **Atomic Operations**: We implemented `#pragma omp atomic` for simpler race conditions, such as the accumulation of light intensity values. This provided better performance compared to critical sections, allowing threads to work on local copies of variables with reduced synchronization costs.
   - **Performance Comparison**: We measured the execution time for each parallelization technique, revealing that critical sections had the longest execution time due to locking mechanisms, while atomic operations and reduction demonstrated superior performance.

3.3 Adherence to Parallel Computing Principles

The modifications made throughout the project reflect a commitment to parallel computing principles:

- **Data Independence**: By structuring the code to allow threads to operate independently on their data, we minimized the risk of race conditions and enhanced performance.

- **Efficient Synchronization**: The use of atomic operations and reduction clauses helped to manage shared state effectively, reducing the overhead associated with traditional locking mechanisms.

- **Scalability**: The parallelization strategies employed enable the application to scale with the number of available CPU cores, optimizing resource utilization and improving execution times.

3.4 Performance Observations

- The best performance was achieved with four cores, where the execution time was shortest. However, performance deteriorated when moving from four to eight cores, likely due to increased contention for shared resources such as memory bandwidth or cache.
- The execution times for various parallelization methods were compared, revealing that atomic operations resulted in the shortest wall-clock time, while critical sections introduced significant performance drops due to serialization.

In summary, our approach focused on optimizing the codebase through effective parallelization strategies that adhered to core principles of parallel computing, ultimately improving both performance and reliability in the multiplayer game state synchronization.

4 Main Section

4.1 Parallelization Process

The C++ code was designed with functions that handle different stages of game state synchronization, including reading data, updating positions, calculating lighting, and updating textures. However, certain sections of the code were identified as critical, causing the highest execution times, which resulted in overall delays.

4.2 Parallel Execution with OpenMP

To optimize execution time, **OpenMP** was used to parallelize critical sections, including loops for updating game states, computing lighting, and updating textures. The following OpenMP directives were applied:

- `#pragma omp parallel for`: Used for parallelizing independent loop iterations, such as updating positions and calculating lighting.
- `#pragma omp reduction`: Used to ensure thread-safe accumulation of light values during lighting computations.
- `#pragma omp critical`: Applied in sections where threads access shared resources, such as the `rand()` function, to prevent race conditions.

The following optimizations were made:

1. **Critical Sections**: To handle race conditions with shared data, `#pragma omp critical` was used for critical operations involving random number generation (`rand()`) and the `total_light` variable. Although this ensured correctness, it introduced performance overhead due to thread synchronization.
2. **Atomic Operations**: `#pragma omp atomic` was used to manage simple race conditions, such as the accumulation of light intensity values. This provided better performance compared to critical sections, but it was not used for complex operations like `rand()`, which are not compatible with atomic operations.
3. **Reduction**: The **reduction** clause was used for operations like computing the total light across multiple light sources. This allowed each thread to work independently on its copy of `total_light`, merging the results at the end, which proved to be more efficient than using critical sections.

4.3 Performance Comparison of Parallelization Methods

The execution time for each parallelization technique was measured, with the following results:

Critical Sections: The **Critical Sections** method took the longest execution time (27.386 seconds), as it involved synchronization of threads accessing shared resources. While this ensured correctness, it resulted in high overhead due to locking mechanisms, significantly impacting performance.

Atomic Operations: The **Atomic Operations** method was faster (3.83 seconds) than critical sections. It allowed threads to work on their own local copies of variables and was applied to simpler operations, leading to lower synchronization overhead.

Parallelization Method	Execution Time (seconds)
Critical Sections	27.386
Atomic Operations	3.83
Reduction	8.582

Table I: Execution Time for Different Parallelization Methods

Reduction: The **Reduction** method had a balanced performance (8.582 seconds) and proved to be more time-efficient than critical sections. It allowed threads to operate on independent copies of the variables and merge the results at the end, which minimized synchronization overhead .

4.4 Execution Time Comparison

Using `#pragma omp atomic` resulted in the shortest wall-clock time compared to `#pragma omp critical`, which caused a significant performance drop. The `#pragma omp atomic` operations allowed threads to work independently on local copies of the variables, reducing synchronization overhead. However, `#pragma omp critical` introduced high granularity, causing threads to serialize frequently and wait for each other to finish, leading to slower execution.

4.5 Execution Time with Varying Number of Cores

Number of Cores	Wall-clock Time (seconds)
1	6.969
2	7.138
4	6.070
8	6.855

Table II: Execution Time with Varying Number of Cores

4.6 Performance Observations

- The best performance was achieved with 4 cores, where the execution time was shortest (6.070 sec).
- Performance deteriorated when moving from 4 to 8 cores, possibly due to increased contention for shared resources such as memory bandwidth or cache.
- The performance with two cores was the worst, likely due to context switching or insufficient workload per thread.

5 Results

The sequential code has intensive operations and benchmarking showed that it struggles with performance as the number of players, objects, and lights increases. In contrast, the parallel code distributes the tasks across multiple threads and significantly reduces the execution time. Parallel processing effectively leverages multiple CPUs, ensuring that computational resources are used more efficiently than in the single-threaded sequential approach. Unlike sequential code, parallel code scales well up to four cores, where tasks are efficiently distributed and have the worst performance with two cores. The parallel code takes advantage of the independent nature of tasks, such as updating objects and lighting computations which enables efficient use of multiple cores.

The nested loops for texture updates cause bottlenecks in the sequential code, and parallelizing it is supposed to divide it among threads and accelerate the process. Bottlenecks such as synchronization overhead, resource contention, and sequential dependencies limit scalability, leading to diminishing returns. As a result of frequent memory access and potential cache conflicts, complex operations on data structures like pixels array are also inefficient. While the parallel implementation introduces some overhead from thread management, it establishes a scalable foundation for dynamic game environments, providing significant improvements in frame rates.

The evaluation of the code's performance is illustrated in the following table and graph, displaying the wall-clock time for different core counts. The application of `#pragma omp` atomic showed reduced wall-clock durations and quicker execution. This enhancement is due to the threads' independence, as they utilized local variables (pixels and `total_light`) and did not need synchronization. As a result, threads attained significant parallel efficiency while incurring little overhead.

Conversely, employing `#pragma omp` critical led to a notable rise in wall-clock time as a result of thread serialization. Critical sections include locking and unlocking methods to avoid simultaneous access to shared resources, leading to computational overhead and threads often waiting for each other.

The poorest performance was recorded with two cores, probably because of context switching, memory contention, or inadequate workload for each thread. The best performance was achieved with four cores, leading to maximum resource utilization and minimal contention. Nevertheless, performance dropped with eight cores, possibly because of competition for shared resources like memory bandwidth or cache

Number of Cores	**Wall-Clock Time (sec)**
1	6.969
2	7.138
4	6.07
8	6.855

Table III: Analysis of Wall-Clock Time for Different Numbers of Cores

The sequential code has intensive operations and benchmarking showed that it struggles with performance as the number of players, objects, and lights increases. In contrast, the parallel code distributes the tasks across multiple threads and significantly reduces the execution time. Parallel processing effectively leverages multiple CPUs, ensuring that computational resources are used more efficiently than in the single-threaded sequential approach. Unlike sequential code, parallel code scales well up to four cores, where tasks are efficiently distributed and have the worst performance with two cores. The parallel code takes advantage of the independent nature of tasks, such as updating objects and lighting computations which enables efficient use of multiple cores. The nested loops for texture updates cause bottlenecks in the sequential code, and parallelizing it is supposed to divide it among threads and accelerate the process. Bottlenecks such as synchronization overhead, resource contention, and sequential dependencies limit scalability, leading to diminishing returns. As a result of frequent memory access and potential cache conflicts, complex operations on data structures like pixels array are also inefficient. While the parallel implementation introduces some overhead from thread management, it establishes a scalable foundation for dynamic game environments, providing significant improvements in frame rates.
Performance Graph the wall-clock time is plotted against the number of cores

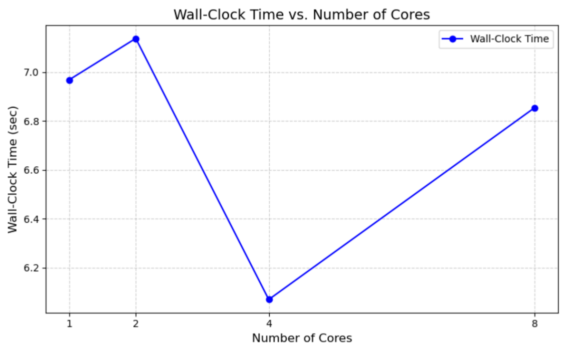

Figure 1: Analysis wall-clock time is plotted against the number of cores

6 Discussion

6.1 Limitations

The existing method for emulating a multiplayer game setting, though operational, possesses several significant drawbacks that affect its efficiency and scalability. These limitations stem from difficulties in synchronization, competition for resources, and fixed workload distribution. Here is an in-depth analysis of the constraints:

- Race Conditions with rand(): The use of the global rand() function for initializing game objects and light sources resulted in race conditions.

  Critical sections were implemented to solve this issue, but they greatly raised overhead because of the serialization of thread execution. The absence of thread-local random number generators restricted threads from generating random values independently, limiting scalability.

- Contest of Threads: Dependence on critical sections for shared resources like pixel array updates and total light calculations resulted in frequent thread contention. This serialization reduced the effectiveness of parallelism in certain computation areas.

- Static Workload Distribution: The allocation of workload across threads was fixed, neglecting the differences in the difficulty of game state updates for various players. Certain threads stayed inactive while others were overloaded, resulting in poor resource usage.

- Cache Constrictions and Memory Throughput: With an increase in core counts, competition for memory bandwidth and cache emerged as a major limitation. These problems obstructed performance enhancements even with the addition of extra computational resources.

- Insufficient Fine-Grained Parallelism: In each thread, lighting calculations and texture updates were performed sequentially, limiting additional opportunities for parallelization.

6.2 Future Work

To overcome the identified limitations and enhance the efficiency and scalability of the system, several improvements can be implemented. These suggestions focus on optimizing synchronization, workload distribution, and resource utilization to create a more robust and high-performing multiplayer game simulation. Below is a detailed outline of potential future enhancements:

- Thread-Specific Random Number Generators:

  Substitute rand() with thread-specific random number generators to avoid race conditions.

  Lowers the requirement for synchronization and improves parallel efficiency.

- Adaptive Workload Distribution:

  Apply dynamic workload distribution to allocate tasks uniformly across threads.

  Tackles differences in player conditions and object intricacies for enhanced resource efficiency.

- Enhanced Data Proximity:

  Divide data structures to minimize memory contention. Enhances cache efficiency and minimizes latency for improved overall performance.

  Simultaneous Processing of Lighting and Texture Calculations:

  Employ nested parallel areas to facilitate detailed parallelism. Allocate separate threads to refresh pixels in textures, speeding up calculations.

- Utilize Diverse Computing Resources:

  Employ GPUs for demanding tasks such as lighting computations and texture adjustments.

  Attains considerable performance improvements via hardware acceleration.

- Adaptive Scheduling Approaches: Utilize OpenMP's dynamic or guided scheduling to adjust thread workloads in real-time.

  Guarantees optimal use of computing resources and improves scalability.

- Sophisticated Profiling and Debugging Instruments:

  Uilize tools to pinpoint bottlenecks and enhance resource utilization. Aids in enhancing the system's robustness and scalability for bigger multiplayer gaming settings.

7 Conclusion

This study demonstrates the significant impact of parallel computing techniques on optimizing multiplayer game state synchronization. By utilizing OpenMP directives such as parallel loops, atomic operations, and reduction clauses, the research effectively addressed key challenges like race conditions, synchronization bottlenecks, and resource contention. The results showed that the best performance was achieved with four cores, where efficient workload distribution and reduced contention led to maximum resource utilization and minimal overhead.

However, the findings also showed scalability limits beyond four cores due to increased memory contention and resource competition. The performance was poor for two cores due to context switching and a workload not large enough for each thread. Though critical sections ensured data integrity, their high overhead significantly affected execution times, which means that atomic operations are very important for efficient scalable parallelization.

This study establishes a strong foundation for improving real-time multiplayer game environments with practical insights into resource management and scalable synchronization techniques. Further work should consider GPU acceleration, adaptive workload scheduling, and thread-local data management for better scalability and performance. These will be a stepping stone toward robust and dynamic multi-player gaming systems with a potential to handle increasingly complex and resource-intensive environments.

Acknowledgments
We would like to thank Ms. Rabab Alkhalifa for her guidance and support throughout this project. We also appreciate Imam Abdulrahman bin Faisal University for providing the resources and environment that facilitated this research. Lastly, we acknowledge the contributions of all team members who worked together to complete this study.

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