Déjà Fu: A Concurrency Testing Library for Haskell

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Abstract

Systematic concurrency testing (SCT) is an approach to testing potentially nondeterministic concurrent programs. SCT avoids potentially unrepeatable results that may arise from unit testing concurrent programs. It seems to have received little attention from Haskell programmers. This paper introduces a generalisation of Haskell’s concurrency abstraction in the form of typeclasses, and a library for testing concurrent programs. A number of examples are provided, some of which come from pre-existing packages.

Categories and Subject Descriptors D.2.5 [Software Engineering]: Testing and Debugging—Testing tools

Keywords Concurrency, functional programming, Haskell, nondeterminism, systematic concurrency testing

1. Introduction

Haskell has been extended in different ways to express parallelism and concurrency. Deterministic parallelism implementations, such as the Par monad[12] and Strategies[11] are very suitable for data-parallel tasks where the difficulty is efficiently performing some pure computation. However, they achieve their determinism by constraining the functionality of shared state, and so lose some convenience and utility.

In this paper, the interest is more general: computations with constrained nondeterminism, or interaction with the real world, as a key part of their functioning. Though very general, such computations can give rise to race conditions and deadlocks.

Example

```haskell
main :: IO ()
main = do
  shared <- newMVar 0
  forkIO . void $ swapMVar shared 1
  forkIO . void $ swapMVar shared 2
  readMVar shared >>= print
```

This program may look like it will output either “1” or “2” depending on the ordering of swaps. Actually, a parent thread does not wait for child threads before terminating[10], so the output may also be “0”, although this behaviour can only be exhibited in GHC with multiple OS threads. As we shall see in §4, we can test this program to produce the following trace:

```
[pass] Never Deadlocks (checked: 23)
[pass] No Exceptions (checked: 23)
[fail] Consistent Result (checked: 1)
  0 S0------
  2 S0----P2---S0---
  1 S0----P1---S0---
```

Here each of the last three lines represents a possible execution of the program: “S” indicates the start of execution of a thread, “P” indicates the pre-emption of the running thread by another, and each dash represents one execution step.

1.1 Contributions

The contributions of this paper are:

• a generalisation of the standard concurrency abstraction, allowing different concrete implementations to be used;

• a library called Déjà Fu for systematically testing concurrent Haskell programs for possible deadlocks, race-conditions, or uncaught exceptions, with the testing functionality based on monadic concurrency[14] and schedule bounding[13].

1.2 Roadmap

The rest of the paper is organised as follows.

• §2 reviews the solutions for deterministic parallelism in Haskell, and highlights their limitations.

• §3 presents the typeclass concurrency-abstraction, emphasising the few points where it departs from the usual concurrency model.

• §4 introduces writing tests with Déjà Fu.

• §5 explains how the library implements systematic concurrency testing.

• §6 presents a small selection of case studies.

• §7 gives pointers to existing concurrency testing work in both Haskell and other programming languages.

• §8 draws conclusions and suggests further work.

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[Déjà Fu is] A martial art in which the user’s limbs move in time as well as space, [...] It is best described as “the feeling that you have been kicked in the head this way before”. (Terry Pratchett, Thief of Time)
2. Deterministic Parallelism and Concurrency in Haskell

2.1 The Eval Monad

The Eval monad, and the Strategies[11] package built on top of it, is a way of evaluating data structures in parallel. The programmer is provided with primitives to evaluate something sequentially, in parallel (without blocking), and to run an Eval computation.

The following example applies a function to both elements of a tuple in parallel, waits until the evaluation is complete, and returns the result:

```haskell
tupleMap :: (a -> b) -> (a, a) -> (b, b)
tupleMap f (x, y) = runEval $ do
  x' <- rpar $ f x
  y' <- rpar $ f y
  rseq x'
  rseq y'
  return (x', y')
```

There is no notion of threading, or of shared mutable state. The Eval monad is for the use-case of having a large data structure which is expensive to compute.

2.2 The Par Monad

The Par monad[12] is a library providing a traditional-looking concurrency abstraction, providing the programmer with threads and mutable state, however it maintains determinism by restricting its shared variables to one write, and operations to read block until a value has been written. Thus, Par’s IVars are futures, not mutable state. Par uses a work-stealing scheduler running on multiple operating system threads, fully evaluating values on their own threads before inserting them into an IVar. Despite its limitations, the Par monad can be very effective in speeding up pure code.

The following example maps a function in parallel over a list, returns the result:

```haskell
parMap :: NFData b => (a -> b) -> [a] -> [b]
parMap f as = runPar $ do
  bs <- mapM (spawnP . f) as
  mapM get bs

  return (x', y')
```

However, with a lack of multi-write shared variables and non-blocking reads, Par is unsuitable for long-lived concurrent programs with a central shared state. It could not be used to implement a multi-threaded work-stealing scheduler, such as the one underpinning Par itself.

2.3 LVish

A recent development is the LVish[9] library, which overcomes some of the limitations of the Par monad by allowing multiple writes, as long as they only ever add information to the shared structure. To maintain determinism, reads of the same kind return the same value that they always did. LVish allows shared state which forms a lattice, and reads correspond to seeing a small part of that lattice.

Necessarily, reads block until there is enough information in the structure to determine the result. This approach means that the entire data structure must be kept around for as long as there is a single reference, even if that reference is only ever used to read a small part of the data.

3. Déjà Fu: Concurrency and Haskell Revisited

Readers already familiar with Haskell’s concurrency primitives may find it enough to skim this section noting the syntactic differences in the Déjà Fu variant.

Departure Departures from the semantics of the traditional concurrency abstraction are highlighted like this.

If we remove the limitations, allowing non-blocking reads and multiple writes, we get to Haskell’s traditional concurrency abstraction in the IO monad. Déjà Fu1 generalises a very large subset of that abstraction to work in arbitrary members of a typeclass, named MonadConc. There is an instance of MonadConc for IO, and so existing code using only the functions generalised over can be made suitable for testing quite simply. Existing code which makes use of more functionality may require a light dusting of liftIOs.

To make use of the Déjà Fu library, we must first import the class:

```haskell
import Control.Monad.Conc.Class
```

3.1 Threads

Threads let a program do multiple things at once. Every program has at least one thread, which starts where main does and runs until the program terminates. A thread is the basic unit of concurrency. It lets us pretend (with parallelism, it might even be true!) that we’re computing multiple things at once.

We can start a new thread with the fork2 function:

```haskell
fork :: ... => m () -> m (ThreadId m)
```

This starts evaluating its argument in a separate thread. It also gives us back a (monad-specific) ThreadId value, which we can use to kill the thread later on, if we want.

In a real machine, there are of course a number of processors and cores. It may be that a particular application of concurrency is only a net gain if every thread is operating on a separate core, so that threads are not interrupting each other. The GHC runtime refers to the number of Haskell threads that can run truly simultaneously as the number of capabilities. We can query this value, and fork threads which are bound to a particular capability:

```haskell
getNumCapabilities :: ... => m Int
forkOn :: ... => Int -> m () -> m (ThreadId m)
```

The forkOn function interprets the capability number modulo the value returned by getNumCapabilities.

Departure getNumCapabilities is not required to return a true result. The testing instances return “2” despite executing everything in the same capability, to encourage more concurrency. The IO instance does return a true result.

Sometimes we just want the special case of evaluating something in a separate thread, for which we can use spawn (implemented in terms of fork):

```haskell
spawn :: ... => m a -> m (CVar m a)
```

This returns a CVar (Concurrent Variable), to which we can apply readCVar, blocking until the computation is done and the value is stored.

---

1. https://github.com/barrucadu/dejafu
2. To save on horizontal space, a MonadConc m => has been omitted from type signatures.
3.2 Mutable State

Threading by itself is not really enough. We need to be able to communicate between threads: we’ve already seen an instance of this with the spawn function.

The simplest type of mutable shared state provided is the CRef (Concurrent Reference). CRefs are shared variables which can be written to and read from:

```haskell
newCRef :: ... => a -> m (CRef m a)
readCRef :: ... => CRef m a -> m a
modifyCRef :: ... => CRef m a -> (a -> (a, b)) -> m b
writeCRef :: ... => CRef m a -> a -> m ()
```

Departure IORef actions can be re-ordered[7], but this is not the case for CRef actions. The modifyCRef function corresponds to atomicModifyIORef, and writeCRef corresponds to atomicWriteIORef.

As any thread can write at any time, we risk threads overwriting each other’s work! At least modifyCRef is atomic: no thread can update it between the value being read and the new value being stored, as could happen if readCRef and writeCRef were composed. Even so, CRefs quickly fall down if we want to do anything complicated. We need something more robust.

3.3 Mutual Exclusion

A CVar is a shared variable under mutual exclusion. It has two possible states: full or empty. Writing to a full CVar blocks until it is empty, and reading or taking from an empty CVar blocks until it is full. There are also non-blocking functions which return an indication of success:

```haskell
putCVar :: ... => CVar m a -> a -> m ()
tryPutCVar :: ... => CVar m a -> a -> m Bool
readCVar :: ... => CRef m a -> m a
modifyCRef :: ... => CRef m a -> (a -> (a, b)) -> m b
writeCRef :: ... => CRef m a -> a -> m ()
```

Unfortunately, the mutual exclusion behaviour of CVars means that computations can become deadlocked. For example, deadlock occurs if every thread tries to take from the same CVar. The GHC runtime can detect this (and will complain if it does), and so can Déjà Fu in a more informative way, as we shall see in §4.

3.4 Software Transactional Memory

CVars are nice, until we need more than one, and find they need to be kept synchronised. As we can only claim one CVar atomically, it seems we need to introduce a CVar to control access to CVars!

This is unwieldy and prone to bugs.

Software transactional memory (STM) is the solution. STM uses CVars, or Concurrent Transactional Variables, and is based upon the idea of atomic transactions. An STM transaction consists of one or more operations over a collection of CVars, where a transaction may be aborted part-way through depending on their values. If the transaction fails, none of its effects take place, and the thread blocks until the transaction can succeed. This means we need to limit the possible actions in an STM transaction, so we have another typeclass:

```haskell
import Control.Monad.STM.Class
```

CTVars always contain a value, as shown in the types of the functions:

```haskell
newCTVar :: MonadSTM m => a -> m (CTVar s a)
readCTVar :: MonadSTM s => CTVar s a -> s a
writeCTVar :: MonadSTM s => CTVar s a -> a -> s a
```

If we read a CVar and don’t like the value it has, the transaction can be aborted, and the thread will block until any of the referenced CVars have been mutated:

```haskell
retry :: MonadSTM s => m a
check :: MonadSTM s => Bool -> s ()
```

We can also try executing a transaction, and do something else if it fails:

```haskell
orElse :: MonadSTM s => m a -> s a -> s a
```

The nice thing about STM transactions is that they compose. We can take small transactions and build bigger transactions from them, and the whole is still executed atomically. This means we can do complex state operations involving multiple shared variables without worrying!

We have emphasised that STM transactions are atomic. The function which atomically executes a transaction:

```haskell
atomically :: ... => STMLike m a -> m a
```

Departure Every MonadConc has an associated MonadSTM, whereas there is just one STM normally. This is so that STM transactions can be tested without needing to bring IO into the test runner. The IO MonadConc instance uses STM as its MonadSTM.

For example, suppose we have a collection of worker threads each of which can either produce a result or fail. We might want to block until either one completes successfully and kill the other threads, or until all fail. We can implement this using CTMVars, an analogue of CVars built from CTVars:

```haskell
awaitResult :: MonadConc m => m a
awaitResult workers = do
  out <- atomically $ do
    progress <- mapM (tryReadCTMVar . snd) workers
    let finished = catMaybes progress
case catMaybes finished of
  (x:_ ) -> return $ Just x
  [] -> check (length finished < length workers)
        => return Nothing
mapM_ (killThread . fst) workers
return out
```

Here tryReadCTMVar attempts to read from a CTMVar and, if there is no value present, calls retry.

3.5 Exceptions

Exceptions are a way to bail out of a computation early. Whether they’re a good solution to that problem is a question of style, but they can be used to jump quickly to error handling code when necessary. The basic functions for dealing with exceptions are:

```haskell
catch :: ... => e -> m a
throw :: ... => e -> m a
```

Where throw causes the computation to jump back to the nearest enclosing catch capable of handling the particular exception. As exceptions belong to a typeclass, rather than being a concrete type, different catch functions can be nested, to handle different types of exceptions.
to block exceptions from other threads. There are three masking it; and
interruptible unmask to it if it is blocked; and interruptible unmask in which a thread can only have exceptions thrown to it if it is blocked; and uninterruptible, in which a thread cannot have exceptions thrown to it. When a thread is started, it inherits the masking state of its parent, and the forkWithUnmask function forks a thread and passes it a function which can be used to execute a subcomputation in the unmasked state. We can also execute a subcomputation with a new masking state:

$$
\text{mask} :: \ldots \Rightarrow ((\forall a. m a \rightarrow m a) \rightarrow m b) \rightarrow m b
$$

$$
\text{uninterruptibleMask} :: \ldots \Rightarrow ((\forall a. m a \rightarrow m a) \rightarrow m b) \rightarrow m b
$$

forkWithUnmask

$$
\text{forkWithUnmask} :: \ldots \Rightarrow ((\forall a. m a \rightarrow m a) \rightarrow m (\text{ThreadId} m))
$$

STM can also use exceptions, with its throwSTM and catchSTM functions. If an exception propagates uncaught to the top of a subcomputation with a new masking state:

$$(\forall a. m a \rightarrow m a) \rightarrow m b
$$

4. Testing using Déjà Fu

Testing with Déjà Fu consists in writing a small concurrent computation to test, and some predicates over the return value and traces produced. Predicates may be lazy; they need not examine the entire output before determining whether the test has passed or failed.

import Test.DejaFu

runTest :: Eq a => (forall t. Conc t a) -> IO Bool

The abstract Conc t type is one of the instances of MonadConc for testing purposes (there’s also ConcIO t for computations which do IO). The locally quantified type t prevents mutable state from leaking out of the computation, similarly to the ST monad.

type Predicate a = [[(Either Failure a -> Bool) -> Predicate a]]

somewhereTrue :: (Either Failure a -> Bool) -> Predicate a

alwaysTrue :: (Either Failure a -> Bool) -> Predicate a

There are also variants which take binary predicates for checking properties over the entire collection as a whole, for example:

alwaysSame :: Eq a => Predicate a

alwaysSame = alwaysTrue2 (==)

alwaysTrue2 :: (Either Failure a -> Either Failure a -> Bool) -> Predicate a

somewhereTrue2 :: (Either Failure a -> Either Failure a -> Bool) -> Predicate a

The functions alwaysTrue2 and somewhereTrue2 only check the predicate between values adjacent in the result list. The order of this list depends on the scheduling algorithm used, and so these functions should only be used for properties which are symmetric and transitive. There is also a collection of standard predicates, for doing things like checking for the existence of deadlock.

For the common case of checking for determinism, deadlock freedom, and proper exception handling, there is an autocheck function:

autocheck :: (Eq a, Show a) => (forall t. Conc t a) -> IO Bool

Let’s see what we get from testing the example from the start of this paper. We’ll have it return the value, rather than print it, though:

bad :: MonadConc m => m Int

bad = do

shared <- newCVar 0

fork . void $ swapCVar shared 1

fork . void $ swapCVar shared 2

readCVar shared

Firstly let’s put it through autocheck:

> autocheck bad

[pass] Never Deadlocks (checked: 23)
[pass] No Exceptions (checked: 23)
[fail] Consistent Result (checked: 1)

0 S0--------

2 S0----P2---S0---

1 S0----P1---S0---

False

Déjà Fu reports three distinct failures! Two failures are distinct if they have different results, or the same result but one trace is not a simplification of another. For each failure, the result is shown, along with the trace that led to it. “Sx” means that thread “x” started execution; “Px” means that thread “x” pre-empted the running thread; and the number of dashes indicates how many steps each thread ran for. So this output means that we get a “0” if there is no pre-emption, a “1” if thread 1 pre-empts the initial thread before the read, and a “2” if thread 2 pre-empts the initial thread before the read.

This output is nice for automated test suites, but perhaps not so friendly for interactive debugging. There are functions to run tests and return a more detailed result:

> runTest alwaysSame bad

Result { _pass = False, _casesChecked = 1, _casesTotal = 23, _failures = [...] }
The Result value tells us testing failed after looking at 1 case, there are 23 cases in total, and there is a simplified list of failures. These are quite long, so here is the second only:

```
bad :: MonadConc m Int
bad = do
  _concAllKnown
  a <- newEmptyCVar
  b <- newEmptyCVar
  fork $ do
    _concKnowsAbout (Left a)
    _concAllKnown
    let loop = takeCVar a >> loop in loop
  fork $ do
    _concKnowsAbout (Left a)
    _concAllKnown
    let loop = putCVar a 1 >> loop in loop
  takeCVar b
```

The main thread is blocked on “b”, to which neither of the other two threads has a reference. By adding annotations, this can be detected and reported. There are three annotations: _concKnowsAbout records that the current thread has a reference to a CVar or CTVar; _concAllKnown records that the current thread will never touch the referenced CVar or CTVar again; and _concAllKnown indicates that all CVars or CTVars which were passed in to the thread have been recorded. If every thread is in a known state, then detection of non-global deadlock is enabled. Otherwise the example above never terminates, as the two forked threads run forever, even though the main thread can never progress.

Misuse of these aids can lead to invalid test results. In particular, _concNoTest should only be used for actions which involve no shared variables from a larger scope. If two threads with a reference to the same shared variable are executed under _concNoTest, then the test runner will not consider possible interleavings of those threads.

4.2 IO

By itself, MonadConc cannot do IO. However, by adding in a MonadIO context and applying liftIO as appropriate, concurrency can be separated from other IO, allowing testing.

However, once IO is involved, the test runner loses control of what’s going on. If a thread, during some IO, blocks on the action of another thread, this cannot be detected, and deadlock may arise. Furthermore, it is assumed for testing that the only source of nondeterminism is the scheduler (see §5). Any IO that is done should be deterministic given the same set of scheduling decisions, to not invalidate test results, although this is good practice in any sort of testing. Finally, the test runner cannot pre-empt within liftIO blocks, they should be as small as possible to avoid the risk of obscuring bugs.

5. Implementation

Readers who just want to use the Déjà Fu library can skip over this section and go straight to the example applications in §6.

5.1 Systematic Concurrency Testing

Systematic concurrency testing[16] (SCT) is a method for testing concurrent programs which works by forcing a particular set of scheduling decisions to be made. Different schedules can then be explored in order to try to find bugs. It is systematic because the order of exploration is generally not random, but follows some deterministic search pattern.

SCT can be implemented by overriding the concurrency primitives of the programming language, forcing all threads to run on one controlling thread, and making scheduling decisions between effectively-atomic blocks. An effectively-atomic block consists of a number of thread-local actions followed by a single access to a shared resource. This is preferable to exploring all possible points.
for making scheduling decisions, as the order of interleaving of thread-local operations cannot affect the final result.

There is some terminology associated with scheduling:

**Blocked** A thread awaiting access to a shared resource which is currently unavailable.

**Blocking** An operation which may result in its thread becoming blocked.

**Pre-emption** Pausing the execution of a thread which is not blocked, and executing another in its place.

**Pre-emption count** The number of pre-emptions in a schedule.

One common SCT algorithm is **pre-emption bounding**[13], where all schedules with a fixed pre-emption count are explored. A variant is **iterative pre-emption bounding**, where all schedules with a count of 0, and then 1, and so on up to the limit, are explored. A common bound chosen is 2, as empirical studies have found that many concurrency errors arise within that limit[13][16].

Another common algorithm is **delay bounding**[4], which explores schedules with a fixed number of deviations from an otherwise deterministic scheduler. This tends to perform about as well as pre-emption bounding in terms of finding bugs[16] although the number of schedules to explore grows slower, leading to more rapid testing. Despite this, it is not used in D´ej`a Fu as it is difficult to intuitively relate the lack of bugs found to some sort of correctness criteria for the program, unlike pre-emption bounding which has a direct relation to the complexity of the run-time behaviour.

### 5.2 Primitive Actions and Threading

The Conc and ConcIO monads represent threads as continuations over primitive actions, with the entire computation actually happening in a single Haskell thread. The primitives actions are shown, in abbreviated form, in Figure 1. Execution is more similar to co-operative multitasking than pre-emptive multitasking on a single processor. If executing a primitive action fails to terminate, the entire computation would lock up.

There are also a few other primitives omitted here for brevity, which are introduced by evaluating other primitives (for example, resetting the masking state). Execution happens in the context of an underlying monad, which implements mutable variables. For Conc t this is ST t, hence the type parameter. For ConcIO t it is IO, the parameter is retained to keep types similar.

Threads are stored in a map, from thread IDs to a record of the current state:

```haskell
data Thread ... = Thread
  { _continuation :: Action ...
  , _blocking :: Maybe BlockedOn
  , _handlers :: [Handler ...]
  , _masking :: MaskingState
}
```

Evaluation is defined as repeating a single-step function until the main thread terminates, or deadlock is detected.

#### 5.3 Shared State and Blocking

CRefs and CVars are both implemented in terms of the reference type of the underlying monad, as a pair (id, value), where CVars have a Maybe value.

```haskell
data BlockedOn =
  OnCVarFull CVarId
  | OnCVarEmpty CVarId
  | OnCTVar [CTVarId]
  | OnMask ThreadId deriving Eq
```

### Figure 1: Primitive actions

When a CVar is accessed, the running thread is blocked if the CVar is in an inappropriate state. Otherwise the action of the thread is replaced with the relevant continuation. If the CVar has been mutated, then all threads blocked on reading that CVar (if it was put in to) or writing (if it was taken from) are unblocked. This unblocking behaviour is slightly different to MVars, where the order of awakening is FIFO.

The implementation of manipulating thread block statuses is shown in Figure 2. Note the special case in `wake` for being blocked on a collection of CTVars: if there is any intersection between the lists of CTVars, the thread is woken.

### 5.4 Exceptions

A thread has a stack of exception handlers. Upon entering a catch, the handler is pushed to the stack, and a primitive action to pop it is inserted at the end of the enclosed action. A handler, when invoked, replaces the action of the thread entirely, jumping to the continuation of the catch after the programmer-supplied function terminates:

```haskell
data Handler ... = forall e. Exception e => Handler (e -> Action ...)
```

Upon evaluating a throw, the exception handler stack is popped until a handler capable of handling the exception is reached. The action of the thread is then replaced with the handler, and the new stack is restored. If no handler is found, the thread is killed. If this is the main thread, the entire computation terminates with an error.

When a mask is entered, a primitive action to restore the masking state is added on to the end of the subcomputation.
block :: BlockedOn -> ThreadId -> Threads n r s
    -> Threads n r s
block blockedOn = M.alter doBlock
    where
doBlock (Just thread) = Just $
    thread { _blocking = Just blockedOn }

wake :: BlockedOn -> Threads n r s
    -> (Threads n r s, [ThreadId])
wake blockedOn threads =
    ( M.map unblock threads
    , M.keys $ M.filter isBlocked threads )
    where
unblock t
    | isBlocked t = t { _blocking = Nothing } |
    | otherwise = t
isBlocked t = case (_blocking t, blockedOn) of
    (Just (OnCTVar ctvids, OnCTVar blockedOn'))
    -> ctvids 'intersect' blockedOn' /= []
    (theblock, _) -> theblock == Just blockedOn

Figure 2: Manipulating thread blocks

5.5 Software Transactional Memory

STM is implemented in terms of its own primitive actions, also shown in Figure 1. CTVars are implemented in terms of STRefs, if using Conc, or IORefs, if using ConcIO.

As STM transactions are atomic, the implementation is quite simple. It repeats a single-step function until the transaction reaches a fixed point: an ARetry, AThrow, or AStop action. Only the AStop action indicates successful termination. If a transaction terminates due to an ARetry action, the thread is blocked.

Executing an STM transaction returns a result (or indication of failure), a list of CTVars written to (if success) or read from (if failure), and an action in the underlying monad to undo the effects of the transaction.

An ACatch action is implemented by simply executing the entire subcomputation and pattern matching on the return value: if it is a success, the value is returned; if it is an exception of the appropriate type, it is passed to the handler; and if it is a different exception, it is propagated upwards.

5.6 Detecting Deadlock

Deadlock detection is implemented in GHC as part of garbage collection: if a thread is blocked on a variable to which no running thread has a reference, that thread is deadlocked. Unfortunately, the garbage collector is beyond the reach of D´ej`a Fu (and even if it wasn’t, would require everything to be in IO). So by default in D´ej`a Fu the only deadlock detection is global: where every thread is blocked simultaneously.

Deadlock where the main thread is blocked on a shared variable for which no other thread has a reference is optionally implemented with special _conc functions. See §4. These record for each thread which shared variables are known about, allowing largely the same approach as the GC one if the state of every thread is fully known. However if these functions are incorrectly used, there may be false results of testing.

5.7 Schedule Bounding

Testing in D´ej`a Fu is, by default, implemented using pre-emption bounding with a bound of two. Other bounds can be set. Also, enough of the internals are exposed such that other SCT runners could be implemented.

An execution is parameterised with a deterministic scheduler which may have some state. The execution returns the result, an execution trace, and the final scheduler state. Using the scheduler state, we can implement a very simple scheduler which takes some list of initial decisions to make (a schedule prefix), and which makes non-pre-emptive decisions after that point.

Schedule bounding generates new schedules from a schedule prefix and suffix. Given a schedule suffix, there are functions to generate siblings and offspring. A sibling is a new partial prefix which, when appended to any prefix at all, does not result in a prefix in a different bounding level. An offspring is a new partial prefix which, when appended to any prefix at all, results in a prefix in the next bounding level up. In the case of pre-emption bounding, siblings are partial prefixes with no pre-emptions, and offspring are partial prefixes with one pre-emption, so producing a prefix with \( n + 1 \) pre-emptions when appended to the original prefix.

Example

```plaintext
prefix = [Start 0]
suffix = [ [(Continue, [1, Fork 1])
          ,(Continue, [SwitchTo 1], Stop)]

Given this prefix and suffix, under pre-emption bounding there are no siblings, as the only available alternative choice would introduce a pre-emption. There is one offspring, by making the alternative decision at step 2 of the suffix:

siblings suffix == []
offspring suffix == [[Continue, SwitchTo 1]]
```

This offspring would not actually be generated, however. Pre-emptions are only introduced around actions such as access to a CVar, where pre-emption may affect the final result.

This splitting into prefixes and suffixes makes it easy to prevent duplicate schedules. The schedule bounding runner stops generating offspring when the bound is reached, and explores schedules in a mostly breadth-first fashion. Furthermore, there is an option to explore all schedules.

Also implemented is a delay-bounding scheduler. A delay is a deviation from an otherwise deterministic scheduler. So delay-bounding has the advantage that the number of schedules grows more slowly than pre-emption bounding: there is exactly one schedule with a delay count of 0, but potentially many with a pre-emption count of 0. The default testing mechanisms use pre-emption bounding because the guarantees that delay-bounding gives are influenced by the choice of scheduler, whereas pre-emption bounding gives a global property of all schedules. The two methods tend to perform about the same in terms of bug-finding ability[16].

6. Examples

Four examples are discussed, two of which are external libraries. The first is a variation of an example in Parallel and Concurrent Programming in Haskell[10] of a concurrent message logger, into which a bug has intentionally been introduced. The entire program is presented, as it is small. Then two known bugs in the auto-update package are reproduced, and one of the schedulers in the monad-par package is tested. The last is a bug that arose, unintentionally, in the implementation of a library for performing search problems in parallel, where an incorrect use of CTMVars allowed a user of the library to obtain an incomplete result.
6.1 Message Logger

Suppose we want a concurrent message logger with the following properties:

- The logger can be sent a message, or it can be told to stop; when told to stop, all messages sent before that point are returned to the thread which stopped it.
- Messages from the same thread should be in order, but messages from different threads may be in any order.

Firstly, we shall define the types we’re going to use:

```haskell
data Logger m = Logger (CVar m LogCommand)  
  (CVar m [String])
```

```haskell
data LogCommand = Message String | Stop
```

```haskell
initLogger :: MonadConc m => m (Logger m)
initLogger = do
  cmd <- newEmptyCVar
  let l = Logger cmd log
  fork $ logger l
  return l
```

Now we need to be able to send a message to the logger. As CVars are being used, these functions will block if there is already a command there. We need not worry about threads overwriting each other’s commands.

```haskell
logMsg :: MonadConc m => m (Logger m) -> String -> m ()
logMsg (Logger cmd log) = putCVar cmd . Message
```

```haskell
logStop :: MonadConc m => Logger m -> m [String]
logStop (Logger cmd log) = do
  putCVar cmd Stop
  readCVar log
```

Finally, we have the main loop of the logger. It blocks on taking a command. If the communication is a new message, the logger appends the message to the list and loops, otherwise it terminates.

```haskell
logger :: MonadConc m => Logger m -> m ()
logger (Logger cmd log) = loop where
  loop = do
    command <- takeCVar cmd
    case command of
      Message str -> do
        strs <- takeCVar log
        putCVar log $ strs ++ [str]
      Stop -> return ()
```

If at least two threads attempt to communicate with the logger after it has been stopped, one will block indefinitely. We assume one supervising process which orchestrates the concurrency (for example, a managing thread which starts a logger and a collection of worker threads, which report their status to the log), so this isn’t a problem.

The actual bug is less obvious, so let’s write a simple test case and see what autocheck does for us:

```haskell
test :: MonadConc m => m([ThreadId m, String])
test = do
  l <- initLogger
  j1 <- spawn (logMsg l "a" >> logMsg l "b")
  j2 <- spawn (logMsg l "c" >> logMsg l "d")
  readCVar j1; readCVar j2
  logStop l
```

Here we start a logger, fork off two threads which each write two messages to the log, wait for them to terminate, and stop the logger. We should always see 4 log entries, with “a” before “b”, “c” before “d”, but all other orderings.

Running with autocheck, we see the following:

```haskell
> autocheck test
[fail] Consistent Result (checked: 5)
"a", "b", "c", "d" S1------S2----S1----S3----S1----S2--
-S1----S2----S1----S2----S1----S3--
"a", "b", "c", "d" S2------S1----S2----S1----S2--
-S1----S2----S1----S2----S1----S3--
"a", "b", "c", "d" S3------S1----S2----S1----S2--
-S1----S2----S1----S2----S1----S3--
"a", "b", "c", "d" S4------S1----S2----S1----S2--
-S1----S2----S1----S2----S1----S3--
```

Well, we found a bug: sometimes the last message gets missed. Also, the cases where the last message is dropped all appear to end with a pre-emption of thread 1 by thread 0. As threads are numbered sequentially in order of creation, thread 0 is the initial thread and thread 1 is the logger thread. We can restrict the results by checking a different condition:

```haskell
> dejafu test
"4 Values"
, alwaysTrue $ \(Right xs) -> length xs == 4)
```

6.2 The auto-update Package

The `auto-update` library runs tasks periodically, but only if needed. For example, a single worker thread might get the time every second and store it to a shared `IORef`, rather than have many threads starting within a second of each other all get the time independently[15]. Despite the core functionality being very simple, two race conditions were noticed by users inspecting the code in October 2014.

[1] Traces have been broken into multiple lines here, but the tool does not do any output wrapping by itself.

data UpdateSettings a = UpdateSettings
  { updateFreq :: Int
  , updateSpawnThreshold :: Int
  , updateAction :: IO a
  }

defaultUpdateSettings :: UpdateSettings ()
defaultUpdateSettings = UpdateSettings
  { updateFreq = 1000000
  , updateSpawnThreshold = 3
  , updateAction = return ()
  }

mkAutoUpdate :: UpdateSettings a -> IO (IO a)
mkAutoUpdate us = do
  currRef <- newIORef Nothing
  needsRunning <- newEmptyMVar
  lastValue <- newEmptyMVar
  void $ forkIO $ forever $ do
    takeMVar needsRunning
    a <- catchSome $ updateAction us
    writeIORef currRef $ Just a
    void $ tryTakeMVar lastValue
    putMVar lastValue a
    threadDelay $ updateFreq us
    writeIORef currRef Nothing
    void $ takeMVar lastValue
  return $ do
    mval <- readIORef currRef
    case mval of
      Just val -> return val
      Nothing -> do
        void $ tryPutMVar needsRunning ()
        readMVar lastValue

catchSome :: IO a -> IO a
catchSome act = catch act $ \\e -> return $ throw (e :: SomeException)

Figure 3: auto-update implementation

The entire implementation, excluding comments and imports, is reproduced in Figure 3. The mkAutoUpdate function spawns a worker thread, which performs the update action at the given frequency, only if the needsRunning flag has been set. It returns an action to attempt to read the current result, demanding one be computed and blocking until it has been done if there isn’t one.

The simpler race condition occurs if the reading thread is pre-empted by the worker thread after putting into needsRunning, and does not run again until after the delay has passed. In this case the worker thread can become blocked on taking for a second time from needsRunning. The reader thread will be unable to read from lastValue as the worker thread emptied it as the last action it performed. The transformation to the MonadConc typeclass is mostly simple, however the threadDelay must be wrapped inside a call to liftIO. The first race condition can be exhibited with the following test:

test :: MonadConc m => m ()
test = do
  auto <- mkAutoUpdate defaultUpdateSettings
  auto

The output is as we would expect, knowing the bug is present:

autocheck test
[fail] Never Deadlocks (checked: 1)
     [deadlock] S0--------S1--------S0-
[pass] No Exceptions (checked: 17)
[fail] Consistent Result (checked: 4)
     () S0--------S1--------P0---
     [deadlock] S0--------P1--------S0-
     () S0--------S1--------P0---
False

This deadlock may arise in any use of the library, as it depends only on the timing of the delay, and not on the computation performed.

The more complex race condition arises if readMVar isn’t atomic, as in GHC versions before 7.8. In this case an old value can be returned if the read of lastValue is pre-empted between the internal put and take operations, as shown in this test:

test :: MonadConc m => m Int
  test = do
    var <- newCRef 0
    auto <- mkAutoUpdate $ defaultUpdateSettings
      { updateAction = modifyCRef var (\x -> (x+1, x)) }
    auto
    auto

Here auto is called twice to update the counter variable twice. Actually reproducing this bug requires a new readCVar function be written, as the library does not currently provide an option for non-atomic reads. Exhibiting this bug requires three pre-emptions:

> dejafus' 3 test [("Consistent Result", alwaysSame)]
[fail] Consistent Result (checked: 5)
    0 S0--------S1--------P0---
    [deadlock] S0--------P1--------S0-
    1 S0--------S1--------P0---P1---S0----S1----
    ----P0---
    1 S0--------S1--------P0---P1---S0----S1----
    ----P0---
    0 S0--------S1--------P0---
    ...
False

Despite the bugs being rather simple, one not requiring any pre-emptions at all to trigger, they both arose in practice. How easy it is to make mistakes when implementing concurrent programs!

6.3 Parallel Search

The Search Party\(^1\) library supports speculative parallelism in generate-and-test search problems. It is motivated by the consideration that: if multiple acceptable solutions exist, it may not matter which one is returned. Initially, only single results could be returned, but support for returning all results was later added, incorrectly, introducing a bug.

The key piece of code causing the problem was this part of the worker loop:

\(^1\)https://github.com/barrucadu/search-party
6.4 The Par Monad

As mentioned in Section §2.2, the Par monad allows for deterministic data-flow parallelism in Haskell. The library provides a number of different schedulers, the default being the “trace” scheduler. Due to reports of potential deadlocks with the “direct” scheduler from a year ago[1], it was tested with Déjà Fu.

To reduce the effort in modifying the code, only the direct dependencies of the “direct” scheduler were modified, the rest of the library being left unchanged. This resulted in four files needing change: two from the abstract-deque\(^1\) package and two from the monad-par\(^2\) package.

Converting monad-par to use Déjà Fu was quite simple. All relevant types were parametrised by the underlying monad, all functions had a MonadConc context added, functions were swapped for their Déjà Fu alternatives, and a runPar’ function was added:

```haskell
runPar' :: MonadConc m => Par m a -> m a
```

Some simplifications were made in the conversion process:

- Par normally uses the mwc-random\(^3\) package when performing its internal scheduling. This was initially replaced with a constant function, and then a StdGen.
- Behaviour of the Par scheduler is configured by cpp, but only the default configuration was tested.

Figure 4 shows the original and converted scheduler initialisation code. As can be seen, they are very similar, even though this is a core component of a rather sophisticated library, where the types have been changed.

Converting the abstract-deque package proved a little more challenging, as the typeclass interface requires knowledge of both the queue type and the monad results are produced in. This issue was solved by use of type families:

```haskell
class MonadConc (MConc d) => DequeClass d where
  newQ :: MConc d elt -> * -> *
  process remaining res
```

The problem was a lack of any indication that a list-producing computation had finished. As results were written directly to the CTMVar, partial result lists could be read depending on how the worker threads and the main thread were interleaved.

In this case, fixing the failure did not require any interactive debugging. Only one place had been modified in introducing the new functionality, and the bug was found by re-reading the code with the possibility of error in mind. However, the ability to produce a test case which reliably reproduces the problem gives confidence that it will not be accidentally reintroduced.

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makeScheds :: Int -> IO [Sched]
makeScheds main = do
  caps <- getNumCapabilities
  workpools <- replicateM caps R.newQ
  rngs <- replicateM caps (newHotVar (mkStdGen 0))
  idle <- newHotVar []
  sessionFinished <- newHotVar False
  sess = [Session baseSessionID sessionFinished]
  sessionStacks <- mapM newHotVar sess
  activeSessions <- newHotVar S.empty
  sessionCounter <- newHotVar (baseSessionID + 1)
  let allscheds = [ Sched { no=x, idle, isMain=(x==main),
              workpool=wp, scheds=allscheds,
              rng=rng, sessions=stk,
              activeSessions=activeSessions,
              sessionCounter=sessionCounter } |
              x <- [0 .. caps-1],
              wp <- workpools,
              rng <- rngs,
              stk <- sessionStacks ]
  return allscheds

makeScheds :: MonadConc m => Int -> m [Sched m]
makeScheds main = do
  caps <- getNumCapabilities
  workpools <- replicateM caps R.newQ
  rngs <- replicateM caps (newHotVar (mkStdGen 0))
  idle <- newHotVar []
  sessionFinished <- newHotVar False
  sess = [Session baseSessionID sessionFinished]
  sessionStacks <- mapM newHotVar sess
  activeSessions <- newHotVar S.empty
  sessionCounter <- newHotVar (baseSessionID + 1)
  let allscheds = [ Sched { no=x, idle, isMain=(x==main),
              workpool=wp, scheds=allscheds,
              rng=rng, sessions=stk,
              activeSessions=activeSessions,
              sessionCounter=sessionCounter } |
              x <- [0 .. caps-1],
              wp <- workpools,
              rng <- rngs,
              stk <- sessionStacks ]
  return allscheds

Figure 4: Par “direct” scheduler initialisation

Whilst the MonadConc typeclass was structured to be similar to the standard concurrency primitives, the inspiration for this approach, and the basic idea behind how to do SCT in Haskell, was provided by a blog post[2]. However, both the family of primitives and the approach to testing have been significantly advanced.

8. Conclusions & Further Work

Although a commonly reported experience amongst Haskell programmers is that “if it compiles, it works”, there are times where it does not work. A number of profiling and debugging tools exist, typically requiring special runtime support. Concurrency is a particularly difficult area to get right, as everyone who has had to move outside the realm of guaranteed determinism will know. Yet there are no debugging tools for concurrent Haskell programs (ThreadScope[8] is a profiling tool, and merely gathers information on sample executions). This paper contributes such a tool, at the cost of a programmer having to use a generalisation of the familiar concurrency abstraction.

Is this cost too high? Programmers are notoriously unwilling to restructure their code to allow for easier analysis or testing, unless the current situation is truly unbearable. It is generally regarded in the Haskell community as good practice to write IO-using functions as thin wrappers around calls to pure code. This practice should limit the amount of change needed. The MonadConc and Monad-STM interfaces have been kept intentionally very similar to the IO and STM interfaces. Typically all that a programmer needs to do is to change some imports, some names, and a few type signatures.

It is impossible in the current implementation to include functions like threadDelay, as testing assumes that any nondeterminism is due to the scheduler. Cauing a thread to sleep is a notoriously nondeterministic operation, as the actual amount of time slept depends partly on the operating system’s scheduler, which remains out of reach.

If a thread enters an infinite loop in a primitive action call, the entire test runner will lock up, even if that would not happen when executing normally. This is because the test runner cannot do things on a granularity smaller than one primitive action.

Despite these limitations, our tool solves a problem, and makes writing reliable Haskell programs a little easier.

We implemented a library for fast parallel search on top of this abstraction, and some shortcomings were identified and rectified. In particular, there was originally no CRef type, as IORefs operate on a granularity smaller than one primitive action. In the case of thread stealing, and so they were added.

Although the library allows re-ordering to make testing of large programs.

More could be done. For example:

- **Swapping out the regular concurrency primitives for the MonadConc primitives could be done at compile- or link-time, as a GHC plugin, rather than at the level of code. This would allow testing of legacy code, and also free the programmer from needing to modify their code. However, it would require recompiling all dependencies with this functionality enabled.**

- **Dynamic partial-order reduction (DPOR)[6] is a technique for dynamically deciding which traces will not be interesting based on thread interactions, and so greatly reducing the search space. This would increase testing performance, and make feasible the testing of large programs.**

- **In practice, schedulers are biased towards a particular subset of the possible schedules. They may try to guarantee fairness, for example. At the cost of less complete results, schedules which are not sufficiently fair could be ignored, reducing the search space.**
References


