Concurrent Haskell

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Abstract

Some applications are most easily expressed in a programming language that supports concurrency, notably interactive and distributed systems. We propose extensions to the purely-functional language Haskell that allows it to express explicitly concurrent applications; we call the resulting language Concurrent Haskell.

The resulting system appears to be both expressive and efficient, and we give a number of examples of useful abstractions that can be built from our primitives.

We have developed a freely-available implementation of Concurrent Haskell, and are now using it as a substrate for a graphical user interface toolkit.

1 Introduction

Concurrent Haskell is a concurrent extension to the lazy functional language Haskell. Our principal motivation is to provide a more expressive substrate upon which to build sophisticated I/O-performing programs, notably ones that support graphical user interfaces for which the usefulness of concurrency is well established. Our earlier work showed how to use monads to express I/O (Peyton Jones & Wadler [1993]), and how the same idea could be generalised to accommodate securely encapsulated mutable state (Launchbury & Peyton Jones [1996]; Launchbury & Peyton Jones [1994]). Concurrent Haskell represents the next step in this research programme, which aims to build a bridge between the tidy world of purely functional programming and the gory mess of of I/O-intensive programs.

Concurrent Haskell is more than "yet another concurrency extension", however:

- We show how concurrency can be smoothly integrated into a lazy language. For example, processes can communicate as-yet-unevaluated data structures to each other.
- We give a semantics for Concurrent Haskell that is clearly stratified into a deterministic layer and a concurrency layer. Existing reasoning techniques can be retained unmodified; for example, program transformations that preserves the correctness of a sequential Haskell programs also preserve correctness of a Concurrent Haskell program. This is an unusual feature: more commonly, the non-determinism that arises from concurrency pervades the entire language.
- There are only four new primitive operations, which are both expressive and easy to implement.

Concurrent Haskell is implemented, freely available, and is the substrate upon which we are building the Haggis graphical user interface toolkit (Finne & Peyton Jones [1995]).

This paper is not at all about concurrency as a means of increasing performance by exploiting multiprocessors. Our approach to that goal uses *implicit*, semantically transparent, parallelism; but that is another story. Rather, this paper concerns the use of *explicit*, semantically visible, concurrent I/O-performing processes. Our goal is to extend Haskell's usefulness into a new class of applications.

2 The basic ideas

Concurrent Haskell adds two main new ingredients to Haskell:

- processes, and a mechanism for process initiation (Section 2.2); and
- atomically-mutable state, to support inter-process communication and cooperation (Section 2.3).

Before we discuss either of these, though, it is necessary to review the monadic approach to I/O introduced by Peyton Jones & Wadler [1993], and adopted by the Haskell language in Haskell 1.3.

The semantics of Concurrent Haskell is discussed later, in Section 6.

2.1 A review of monadic I/O

In a non-strict language it is completely impractical to perform input/output using side-effecting "functions", because the order in which sub-expressions are evaluated — and indeed whether they are evaluated at all — is determined by the context in which the result of the expression is used, and hence is hard to predict. This difficulty can be addressed by treating an I/O-performing computation as a *state transformer*; that is, a function that transforms the current state of the world to a new state. In addition, we need the ability for an I/O-performing computation to return a result. This reasoning leads to the following type definition:

```
type IO a = World -> (a, World)
```

That is, a value of type `IO t` takes a world state as input, and delivers a modified world state together with a value of type `t`. Of course, the implementation performs the I/O right away — thereby modifying the state of the world "in place".

We call a value of type `IO t` an *action*. Here are two useful actions:

```
hGetChar :: Handle -> IO Char
hPutChar :: Handle -> Char -> IO ()
```

The action `hGetChar` reads a character from the specified handle (which identifies some file or other byte stream), and returns it as the result of the action. `hPutChar` takes a handle and a character and returns an action that writes the character to the specified file or stream.

Actions can be combined in sequence using the infix combinators `>>` and `>>=`:

```
>>  :: IO a -> IO b -> IO b
>>= :: IO a -> (a -> IO b) -> IO b
```

For example, here is an action that reads a character from the standard input, and then prints it twice to the standard output:

```
hGetChar stdin        >>= \c ->
hPutChar stdout c     >>
hPutChar stdout c
```

(The notation `\c->E`, for some expression `E`, denotes a lambda abstraction. In Haskell, the scope of a lambda abstraction extends as far to the right as possible; in this example the body of the `\c`-abstraction includes everything after the `\c`.) The sequencing combinators, `>>` and `>>=`, feed the result state of their left hand argument to the input of their right hand argument, thereby forcing the two actions (via the data dependency) to be performed in the correct order. The combinator `>>` throws away the result of its first argument, while `>>=` takes the result of its first argument and passes it on to its second argument. The similarity of monadic I/O-performing programs to imperative programs is no surprise: when performing I/O we specifically want to impose a total order on I/O operations.

It is often also useful to have an action that performs no I/O, and immediately returns a specified value:

```
return :: a -> IO a
```

For example, an echo action that reads a character, prints it, and returns the character read, might look like this:

```
echo :: IO Char
echo = hGetChar stdin   >>= \c ->
       hPutChar stdout  >>
       return c
```

As well as performing input/output, we also provide actions to create new mutable variables, and then to read and write them. The relevant primitives are [1]:

```
newMutVar   :: MutVar a
readMutVar  :: MutVar a -> IO a
writeMutVar :: MutVar a
```

A value of type `MutVar t` can be thought of as the name of, or reference to, a mutable location in the state that holds a value of type `t`. This location can be modified with `writeMutVar` and read with `readMutVar`.

So far we have shown how to build larger actions out of smaller ones, but how do actions ever get performed — that is, applied to the real world? Every program defines a value `main` that has type `IO ()`. The program can then be run by applying `main` to the state of the world. For example, a complete program that reads and echos a single line of input is:

```
main :: IO ()
main = echo   >>= \c ->
       if c == '\n'
       then return ()
       else main
```

In principle, then, a program is just a state transformer that is applied to the real world to give a new world. In practice, however, it is crucial that the side-effects the program specifies are performed *incrementally*, and not all at once when the program finishes. A state-transformer semantics for I/O is therefore, alas, unsatisfactory, and becomes untenable when concurrency is introduced, a matter to which we return in Section 6.

More details of monadic I/O and state transformers can be found in Launchbury & Peyton Jones [1994], Peyton Jones & Wadler [1993]

2.2 Processes

Concurrent Haskell provides a new primitive `forkIO`, which starts a concurrent process[2]:

```
forkIO :: IO () -> IO ()
```

`forkIO a` is an action which takes an action, `a`, as its argument and spawns a concurrent process to perform that action. The I/O and other side effects performed by `a` are interleaved in an unspecified fashion with those that follow the `forkIO`. Here's an example:

```
let
-- loop ch prints an infinite sequence of ch's
  loop ch = hPutChar stdout ch >> loop ch
in
forkIO (loop 'a')     >>
loop 'z'
```

[1] In reality the types a little more general than these, allowing state-manipulating computations to be encapsulated, but we omit these details here. They can be found in Launchbury & Peyton Jones [1994].

[2] We use the term *process* to distinguish explicit concurrency from implicit parallelism, for which we use the term *threads*. A process is managed by the Haskell runtime system, and certainly does not correspond to a Unix process.

The `forkIO` spawns a process which performs the action `loop 'a'`. Meanwhile, the "parent" process continues on to perform `loop 'z'`. The result is that an infinite sequence of interleaved `'a'`s and `'z'`s appears on the screen; the exact interleaving is unspecified (but see Section 6.3).

As a more realistic example of `forkIO` in action, a mail tool might incorporate the following loop:

```
mailLoop :: IO ()
mailLoop
  = getButtonPress b  >>= \ v ->
    case v of
      Compose -> forkIO doCompose >>
                 mailLoop
      ...other things

doCompose :: IO ()     -- Pop up and manage
doCompose = ...        -- composition window
```

Here, `getButtonPress` is very like `hGetChar`; it awaits the next button press on button `b`, and then delivers a value indicating which button was pressed. This value is then scrutinised by the `case` expression. If its value is `Compose`, then the action `doCompose` is forked to handle an independent composition window, while the main process continues with the next `getButtonPress`.

The following features of `forkIO` are worth noting:

(1) Because our implementation of Haskell uses lazy evaluation, `forkIO` immediately requires that the underlying implementation supports inter-process synchronisation. Why? Because a process might try to evaluate a thunk (or suspension) that is already being evaluated by another process, in which case the former must be blocked until the latter completes the evaluation and overwrites the thunk with its value.

(2) Since the parent and child processes may both mutate (parts of) the same shared state (namely, the world), `forkIO` immediately introduces non-determinism. For example, if one process decides to read a file, and the other deletes it, the effect of running the program will be unpredictable. Whilst this non-determinism is not desirable, it is not avoidable; indeed, every concurrent language is non-deterministic. The only way to enforce determinism would be by somehow constraining the two processes to work on separate parts of the state (different files, in our example). The trouble is that *essentially all the interesting applications of concurrency involve the deliberate and controlled mutation of shared state*, such as screen real estate, the file system, or the internal data structures of the program. The right solution, therefore, is to provide mechanisms which allow (though alas they cannot enforce) the safe mutation of shared state, a matter to which we return in the next subsection.

(3) `forkIO` is asymmetrical: when a process executes a `forkIO`, it spawns a child process that executes concurrently with the continued execution of the parent. It would have been possible to design a symmetrical fork, an approach taken by Jones & Hudak [1993]:

```
symFork :: IO a -> IO b -> IO (a,b)
```

The idea here is `symFork p1 p2` is an action that forks two processes, `p1` and `p2`. When both complete, the `symFork` pairs their results together and returns this pair as its result. We rejected this approach because it *forces* us to synchronise on the termination of the forked process. If the desired behaviour is that the forked process lives as long as it desires, then we have to provide the whole of the rest of the parent as the other argument to `symFork`, which is extremely inconvenient.

(4) In common with most process calculi, but unlike Unix, the forked process has no name. We cannot, therefore, provide operators to wait for its termination or to kill it. The former is easily simulated (using an `MVar`, introduced next), while the latter introduces a host of new difficulties (what if the process is in the middle of an atomic action?).

2.3 Synchronisation and communication

At first we believed that `forkIO` alone would be sufficient to support concurrent programming in Haskell, provided that the underlying implementation correctly handled the synchronisation between two processes that try to evaluate the same thunk. Our belief was based on the idea that two processes could communicate *via* a lazily-evaluated list, produced by one and consumed by the other. Whilst processes can indeed communicate in this way, we found at least three distinct reasons to introduce additional mechanisms for synchronisation and communication between processes:

(1) Processes may need exclusive access to real-world objects such as files. The straightforward way to implement such exclusive access requires a shared, mutable lock variable or semaphore.

(2) How can a server process read a stream of values produced by more than one client process? One way to solve this is to provide a non-deterministic merge operation, but that is quite a sophisticated operation to provide as a primitive. Worse, it is far from clear that the quest ends there; for example, one might also want several server processes to service a single stream of requests, which seems to require a non-deterministic split primitive. We wanted to find some very simple truly-primitive operations that can be used to implement non-deterministic merge, and split, and anything else we might desire.

(3) Writing stream-processing programs is throughly awkward, especially if a function consumes several streams and produces several others, as well as performing input/output. One of the reasons that monadic I/O has become so popular is precisely because stream-style I/O is so tiresome to program with. It would be ironic if Concurrent Haskell re-introduced stream processing for inter-process communication just as monadic I/O abolished it for input/output! We wanted to find a way to make communication between processes look just as convenient as I/O; indeed, from the point of view of any particular process the other processes might just as well be considered part of the external world.

Our solution is to combine our work on mutable state (Launchbury & Peyton Jones [1994]) with the I-structures and M-structures of the dataflow language Id (Arvind, Nikhil & Pingali [1989]; Barth, Nikhil & Arvind [1991]). First of all we have a new primitive type:

```
type MVar a
```

A value of type `MVar t`, for some type `t`, is the name of a mutable location that is either *empty* or *contains a value* of type `t`. We provide the following primitive operations on `MVar`s:

`newMVar :: IO (MVar a)` creates a new `MVar`.

`takeMVar :: MVar a -> IO a` blocks until the location is non-empty, then reads and returns the value, leaving the location empty.

`putMVar :: MVar a -> a -> IO ()` writes a value into the specified location. If there are one or more processes blocked in `takeMVar` on that location, one is thereby allowed to proceed. It is an error to perform `putMVar` on a location which already contains a value. (See Section 8 for a discussion of other possible design choices for `putMVar`.)

A useful derived operation is `swapMVar`:

```
swapMVar :: MVar a -> a -> IO a
swapMVar var new = takeMVar var       >>= \ old ->
                   putMVar var new    >>
                   return old
```

The type `MVar` can be seen in three different ways:

- It can be seen as a synchronised version of the type `MutVar` introduced in Section 2.1.
- It can be seen as the type of channels, with `takeMVar` and `putMVar` playing the role of receive and send.
- A value of type `MVar ()` can be seen as a binary semaphore, with the signal and wait operations implemented by `putMVar` and `takeMVar` respectively.

`MVar`s are also somewhat reminiscent of ML's `ref` types, which require quite a bit of work in the type system to preserve soundness. It turns out that this type-soundness problem does not arise for us, because values of type `MVar t` can only be lambda-bound, and hence must be monomorphic.

3 A standard abstraction: buffering

A good way to understand a concurrency construct is by means of examples. The following sections describe how to implement a number of standard abstractions using `MVar`s: using standard examples (such as buffering) allows easy comparison with the literature.

The first example is usually a memory cell, but of course an `MVar` implements that directly. Another common example is a semaphore, but an `MVar` implements that directly too.

3.1 A buffer variable

An `MVar` can very nearly be used to mediate a producer/consumer connection: the producer puts items into the `MVar` and the consumer takes them out. The fly in the ointment is, of course, that there is nothing to stop the producer overrunning, and writing a second value before the consumer has removed the first.

This problem is easily solved, by using a second `MVar` to handle acknowledgements from the consumer to the producer. We call the resulting abstraction a `CVar` (short for channel variable).

```
type CVar a = (MVar a,  -- Producer -> consumer
               MVar ()) -- Consumer -> producer

newCVar :: IO (CVar a)
newCVar
  = newMVar                  >>= \ data_var ->
    newMVar                  >>= \ ack_var ->
    putMVar ack_var ()       >>
    return (data_var, ack_var)

putCVar :: CVar a -> a -> IO ()
putCVar (data_var,ack_var) val
  = takeMVar ack_var  >>
    putMVar data_var val

getCVar :: CVar a -> IO a
getCVar (data_var,ack_var)
  = takeMVar data_var        >>= \ val ->
    putMVar ack_var ()       >>
    return val
```

3.2 A buffered channel

A `CVar` can contain but a single value. Next, we show how to implement a channel with unbounded buffering, along with some variants. Its interface is as follows:

```
type Channel a
newChan :: IO (Channel a)
putChan :: Channel a -> a -> IO ()
getChan :: Channel a -> IO a
```

The channel should permit multiple processes to write to it, and read from it, safely.

The implementation is illustrated in Figure 1. The channel is represented by a pair of `MVar`s (drawn as small boxes with thick borders), that hold the read end and write end of the buffer:

```
type Channel a = (MVar (Stream a),    -- Read
                  MVar (Stream a))    -- Write
```

The `MVar`s in a `Channel` are required so that channel put and get operations can atomically modify the write and read end of the channels respectively. The data in the buffer is held in a `Stream`; that is, an `MVar` which is either empty (in which case there is no data in the `Stream`), or holds an `Item`:

```
type Stream a = MVar (Item a)
```

An `Item` is just a pair of the first element of the `Stream` together with a `Stream` holding the rest of the data:

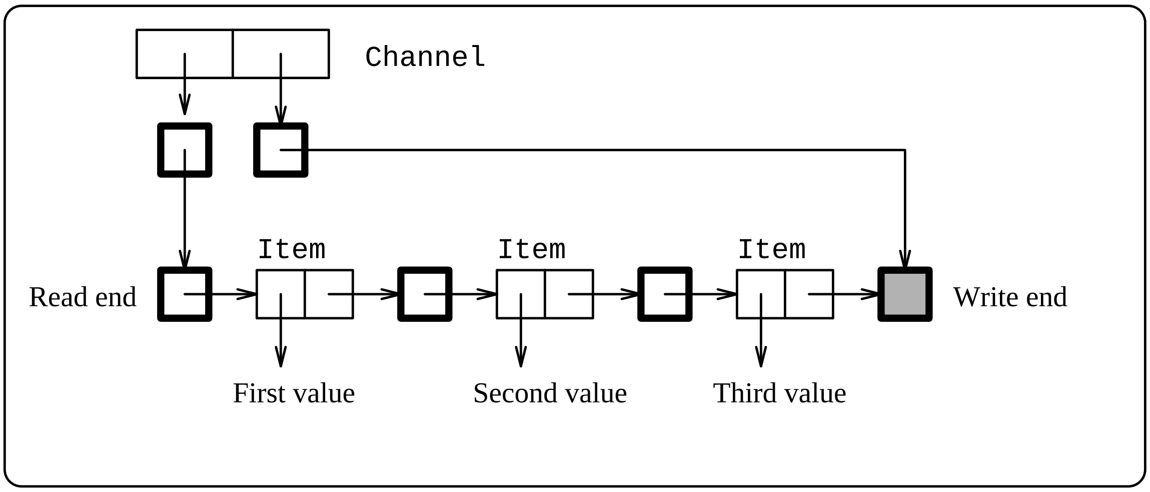

Figure 1: A channel with unbounded buffering

```
data Item a = Item a (Stream a)
```

A `Stream` can therefore be thought of as a list, consisting of alternating `Items` and full `MVars`, terminated with a "hole" consisting of an empty `MVar`. The write end of the channel points to this hole.

Creating a new channel is now just a matter of creating the read and write `MVars`, plus one (empty) `MVar` for the stream itself:

```
newChan = newMVar             >>= \read ->
          newMVar             >>= \write ->
          newMVar             >>= \hole ->
          putMVar read hole   >>
          putMVar write hole  >>
          return (read,write)
```

Putting into the channel entails creating a new empty `Stream` to become the hole, extracting the old hole and replacing it with the new hole, and then putting an `Item` in the old hole.

```
putChan (read,write) val
  = newMVar                   >>= \new_hole ->
    takeMVar write            >>= \old_hole ->
    putMVar write new_hole    >>
    putMVar old_hole (Item val new_hole)
```

Getting an item from the channel is similar. Notice that `getChan` may block at the second `takeMVar` if the channel is empty, until some other process does a `putChan`.

```
getChan (read,write)
  = takeMVar read     >>= \cts ->
    takeMVar cts      >>= \(Item val new) ->
    putMVar read new  >>
    return val
```

It is worth noting that any number of processes can safely write into the channel and read from it. The values written will be merged in (non-deterministic, scheduling-dependent) arrival order, and each value read will go to exactly one process.

Other variants are readily programmed. For example, consider a multi-cast channel, in which there are multiple readers, each of which should see all the values written to the channel. All that is required is to add a new operation:

```
dupChan :: Channel a -> IO (Channel a)
```

The idea is that the channel returned by `dupChan` can be read independently of the original, and sees all (and only) the data written to the channel after the `dupChan` call. The implementation is simple, since it amounts to setting up a separate read pointer, initialised to the current write pointer:

```
dupChan (read,write)
  = newMVar                   >>= \ new_read ->
    takeMVar write            >>= \ hole ->
    putMVar write hole        >>
    putMVar new_read hole     >>
    return (new_read, write)
```

Another easy modification, left as an exercise for the reader, is to add an inverse to `getChan`:

```
unGetChan :: Channel a -> a -> IO ()
```

4 Reifying scheduling

In the full paper this section shows how Concurrent Haskell allows the programmer to take control over the order in which processes are freed when several are waiting for an event. In effect, decisions usually taken by the scheduler (guided, for example, by static priorities) are instead reified and brought into the control of the programmer.

The key idea is simple enough: the abstractions arrange that each process is blocked on a separate `MVar`*. These* `MVars` *can then be manipulated by the program to decide which process to re-awaken. The approach is illustrated by several more concurrency abstractions, including a counting semaphore and bounded buffer.*

5 Choice

Most process languages provide a choice construct — ALT in Occam, select in Concurrent ML, + in the π-calculus — that allows a process to determine what to do next based on which of a number of communications are ready to proceed. For example, in the π-calculus the process

```
x(v).P + y(w).Q
```

will either read a value `v` from channel `x` and then behave like `P`, or read a value `w` from channel `y` and then behave like `Q`, but not both. We say that `x?v` is the *guard* for the first alternative, and similarly `y?w` guards the second.

We do not provide a choice construct in Concurrent Haskell, for several reasons:

(1) Most languages that provide choice restrict it in the following way: *alternatives can only be guarded with single primitive actions.* As Reppy persuasively argues, such a restriction interacts very badly with abstraction (Reppy [1995]). For example, we might want to guard an alternative with a call to `getChan`, without knowing anything about how `getChan` is implemented.

Of course, lifting this restriction is not straightforward. For example, it is no good synchronising on the first primitive action performed by the guard: just because the first primitive operation (doing a `take` on the read-end `MVar`) succeeds does not mean that the `getChan` succeeds! Furthermore, if the guard can be a compound action, as `getChan` certainly is, what should be done with partially completed actions from the non-chosen alternatives?

(2) In our experience, the generality of choice is rarely if ever used.

(3) Implementing a general choice construct can be costly, especially in a distributed setting, and especially if guards can contain both read and write operations.

(4) `MVar`s already provide non-determinism, as we have seen in the case of channels with multiple writers, and can be used to build application-specific choice constructs.

In short, contrary to initial impressions, choice is expensive to implement, rarely used in its full generality, and limits abstraction.

In the rest of this section we describe how we live without choice. In common with the programming language Pict, we distinguish *singular choice* from *iterated choice*, the latter being by far the most common in practice.

5.1 Iterated choice

A very common paradigm is for a process to service several distinct sources of work. On each iteration the server chooses one of its clients, services the request, and then returns to select a new client. Such a server would be understood by the concurrent object-oriented programming community as a concurrent object.

The important thing about iterated choice is that partially-executed guards of the alternatives that "lose" — that is, are not selected — do not need to be undone, because they can simply await the next iteration of the server.

As an example, suppose that the server is dealing with network traffic arriving from two distinct sources. The functions `get1` and `get2` get a packet from the two sources respectively; `processPacket` does whatever the server does to the packet:

```
get1,get2 :: IO Packet
processPacket :: Packet -> IO ()
```

Of course, `get1` and `get2` can be as complicated as necessary. They might consist of a large series of I/O interactions, not just one primitive operation.

We can program the server by using a `CVar` as a rendezvous buffer. The server simply reads packets from this buffer. Before it does so, it forks a process for each packet source that simply reads a packet from its source and tries to write it into the buffer.

```
server :: IO ()
server
  =   -- Create empty buffer and full token
    newCVar            >>= \buf ->

      -- Create "sucking" processes
    forkIO (suck get1 buf)    >>
    forkIO (suck get2 buf)    >>

    server_loop buf

server_loop :: CVar Packet -> IO ()
server_loop buf
  = getCVar buf        >>= \pkt ->
    processPacket pkt >>
    server_loop buf

suck :: IO () -> CVar Packet -> IO ()
suck get_op buf
  = get_op             >>= \pkt ->
    putCVar buf pkt   >>
    suck get buf
```

Of course, if the clients can be "told" how to write to the server the "suck" processes are not necessary. In practice we find that doing so often breaks the abstraction that the client presents, and hence the formulation given above is required.

5.2 Singular choice

On those occasions when we want to make a "one-off" choice among competing alternatives, we put the obligation on the programmer to make the alternatives abortable. The way we choose to express this obligation is by making the alternatives have type[3]

```
type Alternative a = Commitment a -> IO ()
type Commitment  a = IO (Maybe (a -> IO ()))
```

[3] The Maybe type is standard in Haskell, and corresponds to option in Standard ML. A value of type Maybe t is either Nothing or is of the form Just v, where v has type t. Maybe types are useful for encoding values which may or may not be there.

```
data Maybe a        = Nothing
                    | Just a
```

An alternative takes an I/O action, of type `Commitment`, as an argument, which it performs exactly when it wants to commit. This `Commitment` returns either `Nothing`, indicating that some other alternative got there first and the alternative should abort, or `Just reply` where `reply` is an action that should be applied to the result of the alternative. Exactly one alternative will receive `Just reply` when it reaches its commitment point; the others will all receive `Nothing`, whereupon they carry out any necessary abort actions and then die quietly.

It is now simple to define `select`:

```
select :: [Alternative a] -> IO a

select arms
  = newMVar              >>= \ result_var ->
    newMVar              >>= \ committed ->
    putMVar committed
            (Just (putMVar result_var)) >>
    let
      commit = swapMVar committed Nothing
      do_arm arm = forkIO (arm commit)
    in
    mapIO (do_arm committed result) arms  >>
    takeMVar result_var
```

6 Semantics

We have already hinted that regarding a program as a purely-functional state transformer gives an inadequate semantics for input/output behaviour. For example, a program that goes into an infinite loop printing `'a'` repeatedly, would just have the value $\perp$, even though its behaviour is quite different to one that goes into an infinite loop performing no input/output.

The situation worsens when concurrency is introduced, since now multiple concurrent processes are simultaneously mutating a single state. The purely-functional state-transformer semantics becomes untenable.

Instead, we adopt the standard approach to giving the semantics of a concurrent language, using an operational semantics.

6.1 Deterministic Reduction

Suppose we already have an operational semantics for a purely functional fragment of Haskell. Gordon [1994] presents a suitable operational semantics for a small fragment of Haskell, and the approach could be extended to the full language.

We shall show how to incorporate our concurrency primitives into such a semantics. Suppose A and B stand for types and a and b stand for programs, that is, closed, well-typed expressions, and that the operational semantics consists of a deterministic, small-step reduction relation, $a \leadsto b$. We extend the grammar of types by

$$A \quad ::= \quad \ldots \mid \texttt{MVar}\, A \mid \texttt{IO}\, A$$

and allow the following new constants as expressions.

```
return   >>=
forkIO   newMVar
putMVar  takeMVar
```

Let a *name*, n, be a pair (t, A) where t is drawn from an infinite set of tags. Such a name is a reference to an `MVar` that contains values of type A, and can be used as an expression of type `MVar` A. We extend the reduction relation to reduce the first argument of (`>>=`) and of `putMVar` and `takeMVar`, but we do not provide any reductions for `forkIO`, `>>=`, `putMVar` and `takeMVar`. It follows that a *value* — that is, a fully reduced program of type `IO`() — is of the form $\mathcal{M}[v_{IO}]$ where

$$\begin{array}{rcl} v_{IO} & ::= & \texttt{return}\, a \mid \texttt{forkIO}\, a \mid \texttt{newMVar} \mid \\ & & \texttt{putMVar}\, n\, a \mid \texttt{takeMVar}\, n \\ \mathcal{M}[] & ::= & [] \mid \mathcal{M}[] \mathbin{\texttt{>>=}} a \end{array}$$

In a value $\mathcal{M}[v_{IO}]$, the expression v_{IO} represents the next concurrent action, and the context $\mathcal{M}[]$ represents the continuation that consumes the result of that action. This mild extension preserves determinacy of $\leadsto$.

6.2 Concurrent Reaction

To model the concurrent aspects of Concurrent Haskell we need to consider systems of interacting monadic processes. We use P and Q to stand for processes.

$$\begin{array}{rcll} P & ::= & a & \text{if } a{::}\texttt{IO}\,() \\ & \mid & P \mid Q & \text{parallel composition} \\ & \mid & \mathbf{0} & \text{inactive process} \\ & \mid & (\nu n)P & \text{restriction of name } n \text{ to } P \\ & \mid & \langle a \rangle_n & \text{full } \texttt{MVar} \text{ at } n = (t, A) \text{ holding } a{::}A \\ & \mid & \langle \rangle_n & \text{empty } \texttt{MVar} \text{ at } n \end{array}$$

The only binding construct for names is $(\nu n)P$. We write $fn(P)$ for the set of names free in process P, and $P[{}^m\!/\!_n]$ for the outcome of substituting m for each occurrence of name n free in process P.

We adapt the 'chemical abstract machine' presentation of polyadic π-calculus (Milner [1991]). First, we formalise the idea of a 'solution' of programs and `MVar`s waiting to react by defining a structural congruence relation. Second, we specify the reaction of programs and `MVar`s by simple reaction rules.

Let *structural congruence*, $\equiv$, be the least congruence (that is, an equivalence relation preserved by all process contexts) to include alpha-conversion of bound variables and names, plus the following two collections of rules. The first group says that a process solution is roughly a multiset:

$$\begin{array}{lrcl} (1) & P_1 \mid (P_2 \mid P_3) & \equiv & (P_1 \mid P_2) \mid P_3 \\ & P \mid Q & \equiv & Q \mid P \\ & P \mid \mathbf{0} & \equiv & P \end{array}$$

The second group are the standard rules for restriction from π-calculus. Restriction represents the locality of access of `MVar`s.

$$\begin{array}{lrcl} (2) & (\nu n)(\nu m)P & \equiv & (\nu m)(\nu n)P \\ & (\nu n)\mathbf{0} & \equiv & \mathbf{0} \\ & (\nu n)(P \mid Q) & \equiv & P \mid (\nu n)Q, \textit{if } n \notin \textit{fn}(P) \end{array}$$

Secondly, we extend the deterministic reduction relation, $\leadsto$, on programs to a nondeterministic *reaction* relation, $\rightarrow$, on processes, identified up to structural congruence. The first two rules specify the interaction of programs and `MVar`s:

$$\begin{array}{llll} \text{(Put)} & \langle\rangle_n \mid \mathcal{M}[\texttt{putMVar}\,n\,a] & \rightarrow & \langle a\rangle_n \mid \mathcal{M}[\texttt{return}()] \\ \text{(Get)} & \langle a\rangle_n \mid \mathcal{M}[\texttt{takeMVar}\,n] & \rightarrow & \langle\rangle_n \mid \mathcal{M}[\texttt{return}\,a] \end{array}$$

The operations `forkIO` and `newMVar` turn into process restriction and composition:

$$\begin{array}{llll} \text{(Fork)} & \mathcal{M}[\texttt{forkIO}\,a] & \rightarrow & a \mid \mathcal{M}[\texttt{return}()] \\ \text{(New)} & \mathcal{M}[\texttt{newMVar}] & \rightarrow & (\nu n)(\langle\rangle_n \mid \mathcal{M}[\texttt{return}\,n]) \\ & & & \text{if } n \notin \mathit{fn}(\mathcal{M}) \end{array}$$

A `return` reacts with its continuation:

$$\text{(Return)} \quad \mathcal{M}[\texttt{return}\,a \texttt{ >>= } b] \quad \rightarrow \quad b(a)$$

These two structural rules allow reactions within compositions and beneath restrictions:

$$\begin{array}{lllll} \text{(Par)} & P \mid Q & \rightarrow & P' \mid Q & \text{if } P \rightarrow P' \\ \text{(Res)} & (\nu n)P & \rightarrow & (\nu n)P' & \text{if } P \rightarrow P' \end{array}$$

The final reaction rule turns a reduction of a program into a reaction of that program considered as a process:

$$\text{(Reduce)} \quad a \quad \rightarrow \quad b \quad \text{if } a \leadsto b$$

Since processes are identified up to $\equiv$, we may freely use the rules of $\equiv$ to bring together partner programs and `MVar`s for (Put) or (Get) interactions, and to enlarge the scope of an `MVar` allocated by (New).

Our semantics is intentionally minimal but nonetheless it does support at least the following result. Say that a process P passes a test R iff $\exists Q(P \mid R \rightarrow^* \texttt{done} \mid Q)$, where `done` is a new process constant allowed only in test processes such as R. Then two processes are *testing equivalent* iff they pass the same tests. This is a standard definition from concurrency theory (de Nicola & Hennessy [1983]).

> **Conjecture.** If two programs a and b are $\beta\eta$-equivalent as functional programs, they are testing equivalent when considered as processes.

(We believe this result holds, but have not written out all the details.) This is a useful result, because it means that existing compiler optimisations based on $\beta\eta$-equivalence remain valid for Concurrent Haskell. It would not hold in a language with unrestricted side-effects such as Concurrent ML.

6.3 Fairness

In any real system the programmer is likely to want some fairness guarantees. What, precisely, does "fairness" mean? At least, it must imply that *no runnable process will be indefinitely delayed.*

Is that enough? No, it is not. Consider a situation in which several processes are competing for access to a single `MVar`. Assuming that no process holds the `MVar` indefinitely, it should not be possible for any of the competing processes to be denied access indefinitely. One way to avoid such indefinite denial would be to specify a FIFO order for processes blocked on an `MVar`, but that is perhaps too strong. It would be sufficient to specify that *no process can be blocked indefinitely on an* `MVar` *unless another process holds that* `MVar` *indefinitely.*

6.4 Summary

There have been several previous semantics for concurrent functional languages (Holmstrom [1983]; Jeffrey [1995]; Reppy [1992]; Scholz [1995]). Scholz' set-based semantics is closest, but nothing in his semantics corresponds to our restriction, $(\nu n)-$, which captures locality of `MVar`s.

A notable feature of our semantics is its stratification into a deterministic reduction relation $\leadsto$, and a non-deterministic reaction relation $\rightarrow$. We might consider $\rightarrow$ as specifying an imperative *coordination* language, and $\leadsto$ as specifying a functional *computation* language.

Our semantics is sufficient to show that the nondeterministic, concurrent computation ($\rightarrow$) at `IO` types does not affect the deterministic, functional computation ($\leadsto$) at non-`IO` types. We sought the simplest semantics that would do so. We have not gone further — for instance, by seeking to approximate testing equivalence using a labelled transition system and bisimilarity — because the presence of both higher-order functions and local names is known to make bisimilarity problematic (Jeffrey [1995]). Although bisimilarity for Concurrent Haskell would be a worthwhile research project, our minimal semantics suffices for many practical purposes. It provides a simple, precise and abstract specification of the operational behaviour of Concurrent Haskell programs.

7 Implementation

We have implemented Concurrent Haskell as a small extension to the Glasgow Haskell Compiler (GHC), a highly-optimising compiler for Haskell.

Concurrent Haskell runs as a single Unix process, performing its own scheduling internally. Each use of `forkIO` creates a new process, with its own (heap-allocated) stack. The scheduler can be told to run either pre-emptively (time-slicing among runnable processes) or non-pre-emptively (running each process until it blocks). The scheduler only switches processes at well-defined points at the beginning of basic blocks; at these points there are no half-modified heap objects, and the liveness of all registers (notably pointers) is known.

A thunk is represented by a heap-allocated object containing a code pointer and the values of the thunk's free variables. A thunk is evaluated by loading a pointer to it into a defined register and jumping to its code. When a process begins the evaluation of a thunk, it replaces the thunk's code pointer with a special "under-evaluation" code pointer. Accordingly, any other process that attempts to evaluate that thunk while it is under evaluation will automatically jump to the "under-evaluation" code, which queues the process on the thunk. When the original process completes evaluation of the thunk it overwrites the thunk with its final value, and frees any blocked processes.

An `MVar` is represented by a pointer to a mutable, heap-allocated, location. This location includes a flag to indicate whether the `MVar` is full or empty, together with either the value itself, or a queue of blocked processes.

7.1 Other primitives

One tiresome aspect is that when a process performs ordinary Unix I/O might block the whole Concurrent Haskell program, rather than just that process, which is obviously wrong. There seems to be no easy way around this. We provide a primitive that enables a solution to be built, however:

```
waitInputFD :: Int -> IO ()
```

`waitInputFD` blocks the process until the specified Unix file descriptor has input available.

The final useful primitive we have added allows a process to go to sleep for specified number of milliseconds:

```
delay :: Int -> IO ()
```

7.2 Garbage collection

An interesting question is the following: is it ever possible to garbage-collect a process? At first its seems that the answer might be quite complicated: after all, process garbage collection is a notoriously tricky business (see, for example, Hudak [1983]).

Fortunately, it turns out to be rather easy in Concurrent Haskell. The principle is as follows: *a process can be garbage-collected only if it can perform no further side effects.* Here are two immediate consequences:

(1) A runnable process cannot be garbage collected, because it might perform more I/O.

(2) A process blocked on an `MVar` can be garbage-collected if that `MVar` is not accessible from another non-garbage process. Why? Because the blocked process can only be released if another process puts a value into the blocking `MVar`, and that certainly can't happen if the `MVar` is unreachable from any non-garbage process.

This leads us to a very simple modification to the garbage collector:

- When tracing accessible heap objects, treat all runnable processes as roots.
- When an `MVar` is identified as reachable, identify all the processes blocked on that `MVar` as reachable too (and hence anything reachable from them).

Like any system, this one is not perfect; for example, an `MVar` might be reachable even though no further writes to it will take place. It does, however, do as well as can be reasonably expected, and it succeeds in some common cases. For example, a server with no possibility of future clients will be garbage-collected, since it is blocked on its input `MVar` and no other process now has that `MVar`.

7.3 Distributed implementation

We are working on a distributed implementation of Concurrent Haskell. One nice property of `MVar`s is that they seem relatively easy to implement in a distributed setting, compared to generalised choice for example.

Each `MVar` resides in one place, and a `putMVar` or `getMVar` operation on a remote `MVar` is implemented with a message send. The message for a `getMVar` carries with it the identity of the sending process, and may be blocked indefinitely at the far end, on an empty `MVar`. When the `MVar` is written to, the blocked `getMVar` message is returned to the sender, now carrying the value written to the `MVar`. On arrival at the original sender, the reply awakens the process whose identity it carries.

A `putMVar` message is simpler, since it requires no reply. Either it succeeds in writing to an empty `MVar`, or it finds a full `MVar`, which is a run-time error (but see Section 8).

8 Design choices

In this section of the full paper we discuss two main design choices:

(1) *Synchronous vs asynchronous. Concurrent Haskell provides asynchronous communication, like Pict, actor languages and concurrent object oriented languages, but unlike CCS, CSP, Occam, Concurrent ML and FACILE. While synchronous communication looks at first to be more primitive, we argue that it is (a) profligate with process creation, (b) absolutely requires choice and (c) is hard to implement in a distributed setting.*

(2) *We discuss some alternative design choices for* `MVar`*s:*

- *Make an* `MVar` *hold a multiset of values, as in Pict channels.*
- *Make an* `MVar` *hold a sequence of values.*
- *Make an* `MVar` *hold a single value, but specify that a* `putMVar` *on a full* `MVar` *should block, rather than cause an error.*

We are undecided whether any of these choices are "better" than our current semantics (a `putMVar` *on a full* `MVar` *is an error). The semantics of each is fairly easy to describe, and their implementations are not hard either.*

9 Comparison with related work

We originally borrowed the idea of `MVar`s directly from Id, where they are called M- structures. Id's motivation is rather different to ours: M-structures are used to allow certainly highly-parallel algorithms to be expressed that are difficult or impossible to express without them (Barth, Nikhil & Arvind [1991]). However the basic problem they solve is identical: convenient synchronisation between parallel processes. We also share with Id the expectation that programmers should rarely, if ever, encounter `MVar`s. Rather, `MVar`s are the "raw iron" from which more friendly abstractions can be built.

One big difference between Concurrent Haskell and Id is that in Concurrent Haskell operations on `MVar`s can only be done in the I/O monad, and cannot be performed in purely-functional contexts. In Id, since everything is eventually evaluated, side effects are permitted everywhere.

It is interesting to compare `MVar`s with ordinary semaphores, when each are used to provide mutual exclusion. Using semaphores (or mutex locks in ML-threads) one must remember to claim the lock before side-effecting the data it protects; that is, the mutex *implicitly* protects the data. With an `MVar`, the protected data is *explicitly inside* the `MVar`, which means that one cannot possibly forget to claim the lock before side-effecting it! Not only that, but the connection between the lock and the data it protects is more explicit: `MVar t` rather than `(t, mutex)`. Lastly, mutual exclusion using a semaphore requires at least two mutable locations: the semaphore and the data. Using an `MVar` usually collapses these two locations into one, and thereby also reduces the number of side-effecting operations. In complex situations implicit locking may still be unavoidable, but `MVar`s simplify the common case.

In the full paper, the rest of this section discusses the relationship of Concurrent Haskell to: PFL (Holmstrom [1983]), Amber (Cardelli [1986]),, Concurrent ML (Reppy [1992]; Reppy [1991]), Facile (Giacalone, Mishra & Prasad [1989]), ML-threads (Cooper & Morrisett [1990]), and to Jones & Hudak [1993]. Concurrent ML gets the largest coverage.

We also mention related work on functional operating systems (Cupitt [1992]; Henderson [1982]; Jones [1983]; Jones [1984]; Stoye [1985]), and on actor languages (Agha [1986]) and concurrent object-oriented languages (Agha [1990]; Yonezawa [1990]).

10 Conclusions and further work

We have described a small and simple extension to Haskell that allows concurrent programs to be written. Using this substrate we are now well advanced in the construction of a graphical user interface toolkit, Haggis (Finne & Peyton Jones [1995]). Indeed this application has been the driving force for Concurrent Haskell throughout, just as eXene was used as a test case for CML. Despite the apparently primitive nature of our single synchronisation mechanism, `MVar`s, we have found the language surprisingly expressive.

One obvious topic for further work is further development of the semantics. On the implementation side we are actively working on a distributed, multiprocessor implementation of Concurrent Haskell.

Concurrent Haskell is freely available by FTP. (Connect to `ftp.dcs.glasgow.ac.uk`, look in `pub/haskell/glasgow`, and grab any version of Glasgow Haskell from 0.24 or later.)

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