Chapter 9

CPU scheduling

In general, scheduling is deciding how to allocate a single temporal resource among multiple clients, in what order and for how long. This is a highly complex subject, as well as being a problem much older and broader than computer science. Here we focus on CPU scheduling, but the OS also schedules other resources (e.g., disk and network IO).

CPU scheduling involves deciding which task to run next on a given CPU, how long to run it for, and why CPU a given task should run on. “Task” here is intentionally vague: it might be a process, thread, batch job, dispatcher, etc.

**Definition 9.1 (Scheduling).** *Scheduling* is the problem of deciding, at any point in time, which process or thread on every core (or hardware thread) in a system is currently executing.

**Definition 9.2 (Dispatch).** In contrast to scheduling, *dispatching* refers to the mechanism for (re)starting a particular process or thread running on a particular core.

Remarks:

- We distinguish between scheduling and dispatch here so we can focus on actual scheduling algorithms in this chapter, and ignore dispatch (which we dealt with earlier in chapters 4 and 5), but it’s a useful distinction in practice. You will see people use the term “scheduling a process” to mean actually running it, but we’ll try and avoid that usage.

To break it down, we start here with very simple scheduling problems and gradually complicate them; this happens to roughly coincide with the computing chronology as well.

### 9.1 Non-preemptive uniprocessor batch-oriented scheduling

**Definition 9.3 (Uniprocessor scheduling).** *Uniprocessor scheduling* is the problem of scheduling tasks on a single processor core (or, more precisely, hardware execution context).
9.1. NON-PREEMPTIVE UNIPROCESSOR BATCH-ORIENTED SCHEDULING

Definition 9.4 (Batch scheduling). A batch workload consists of a set of batch jobs, each of which runs for a finite length of time and then terminates. Batch scheduling is the problem of scheduling a (potentially unbounded) set of batch jobs, which appear according to some arrival process.

Definition 9.5 (Non-preemptive scheduling). A non-preemptive scheduler always allows a job to run to completion once it has started.

Remarks:

- Batch scheduling is typically performed on mainframes, supercomputers, and large-scale compute clusters such as those used in machine learning or internet search.

9.1.1 Batch scheduling terminology

See Figure 9.6.

**Figure 9.6: Batch job terms**

Definition 9.7 (Arrival time). The arrival time, or request time, or release time of a job is the point at which it enters the scheduling system (i.e. the time at which it becomes runnable).

Definition 9.8 (Start time). The start time of a batch job is the point in time that it starts executing.

Definition 9.9 (End time). The end time or completion time of a job is the point in time that it terminates.

Definition 9.10 (Execution time). The execution time or run time of a job is the duration of the job: the number of seconds it takes to complete from its start time.

Definition 9.11 (Hold time). The hold time of a job is the time taken to start executing the job from the point where it arrives.

Definition 9.12 (Wait time). The wait time or turnaround time of a job is the time taken to finish the job from the point where it entered the system.
9.1.2 Batch scheduling metrics

What makes a good scheduler? A scheduler is generally trying to optimize some metric relative to some workload.

**Definition 9.13** (Batch scheduler throughput). The *throughput* of a batch scheduler is the number of jobs the scheduler completes per unit time.

**Definition 9.14** (Overhead). The *overhead* of a scheduler is the proportion of CPU time spend running the scheduler itself, as opposed to a client job. Overhead consists of the context switch time (strictly speaking, the time to do two half-context-switches) plus the scheduling cost.

Remarks:

- For run-to-completion (non-preemptive) uniprocessor schedulers, throughput for a given workload really only the overhead. However, as things get more complex the throughput starts to depend on the algorithmic properties of the scheduler as well.

- There are plenty of more interesting scheduler metrics, even in the simplistic case we are considering here: mean (or median, or maximum, or ...) wait time, for example. Other examples are various definitions of “fairness”, or keeping to some kind of external policy for sharing resources between paying clients.

- Overhead can be a problem for jobs with short run times.

- You should have already spotted that we’re assuming the CPU runs at fixed speed. This is not true in reality for power reasons (and cache effects, etc.). In many batch cases, however, the most efficient way to use the CPU is to run it flat-out until there are no more runnable jobs.

**Example 9.15.** Suppose the scheduling cost plus context switch time is 1ms, and each job runs for 4ms. The overhead is therefore $1/(4+1) = 20\%$.

**Algorithm 9.16** First-come-first-served (FCFS) scheduling

1. Assume each job $P_i$ arrives at time $t_i$

   *When the scheduler is entered:*

2. Dispatch the job $P_j$ with the earliest arrival time $t_j$

Remarks:

- This pretty much the simplest scheduling algorithm possible, though it is used in some cases.

- It’s low-overhead, but even for simple cases its performance is unpredictable.
Example 9.17. Three jobs $a$, $b$, $c$ arrive in quick succession, with execution times of 24, 3, and 3 seconds respectively. Dispatching them in this order leads to a mean wait time of \((24 + 27 + 30)/3 = 27\) s. If the arrival order instead was $c$, $b$, $a$ we would see a mean wait time of \((3 + 3 + 24)/3 = 10\) s.

Definition 9.18 (Convoying). The **convoy phenomenon** occurs in FIFO schedulers (among others) when many short processes back up behind long-running processes, greatly inflating mean wait times.

Remarks:

- This is a well-known (and widely seen!) problem, famously first identified in databases with disk I/O.
- It is a simple form of self-synchronization, a wider class of generally undesirable effects in systems.
- Despite this, FIFO is still used, for example in memcached, Facebook’s front-tier cache.

Algorithm 9.19 Shortest-Job First (SJF) scheduling

1: Assume each job $P_i$ has an execution time of $t_i$ seconds

When the scheduler is entered:

2: Dispatch the job $P_j$ with the shortest execution time $t_j$

Theorem 9.20. Shortest-job first is optimal in the sense that it minimizes the average (mean) waiting time for all jobs in the system, at least for the case when all jobs have the same release time.

Proof. By contradiction: consider a sequence of $n$ jobs with execution times $t_k$, for $0 < k \leq n$. Let $w_k$ be the waiting time for job $k$. Then $w_k = w_{k-1} + t_k$, where $w_0 = 0$, and the average waiting time is $W/n$ where $W$ is the total waiting time:

$$W = \sum_{k=1}^{n} w_k = \sum_{k=1}^{n} (n-k)t_k$$

Suppose this sequence minimizes the mean wait time, but is not sorted by increasing execution time. Then $\exists j, 0 < j < n$, such that $t_j > t_{j+1}$.

Now consider the alternative sequence obtained by swapping the positions of jobs $j$ and $j + 1$. The total wait time for this new sequence is:

$$W' = \sum_{k=1}^{j-1} w_k(n-k)t_k + (n-j)t_{j+1} + (n-j-1)t_j + \sum_{k=j+2}^{n} (n-k)t_k$$

Subtracting:

$$W - W' = (n-j)t_j + (n-j-1)t_{j+1} - (n-j)t_{j+1} - (n-j-1)t_j$$

$$= t_j - t_{j+1} > 0$$

Consequently, $W' < W$ and either the original sequence cannot have been optimal, or there was no $j$ (i.e. the sequence was sorted). \qed
Remarks:

- This algorithm is already more complex computationally: it required a sort. If execution times are discrete (e.g. integer minutes), this requires time linear in the number of jobs. This points to a fundamental tradeoff in scheduling complexity (which hopefully corresponds to efficiency of the resulting schedule!) and the scheduling overhead. A simpler, less theoretically efficient scheduler may be better than an optimal scheduler that takes too long to schedule.

- In the real world, jobs arrive at any time. SJF can only make a scheduling decision when a job terminates, which means that newly arrived job with a short runtime can experience long hold times because a long job is already running.

- SJF requires knowledge in advance of the job execution times. This is notoriously hard to estimate in practice, but can be finessed by having the clients guess it and penalize them if they get it wrong, or by preempting unexpected long jobs.

9.2 Uniprocessor preemptive batch scheduling

**Definition 9.21** (Preemption). A scheduler which can interrupt a running job and switch to another one is preemptive.

**Algorithm 9.22** SJF with preemption

> When a new job enters the system or the running job terminates:

1. Preempt and suspend the currently running job (if there is one)
2. Dispatch (start or resume) the job $P_j$ with the shortest execution time

Remarks:

- This requires the OS to have a mechanism for interrupting the current job, such as a programmable interrupt timer.

- SJF with preemption is still problematic: new, short jobs may preempt longer jobs already running, extending their wait time unacceptably.

- “Shortest remaining time next” is a variant of preemptive SJF which mitigates, but does not solve, this problem.

- Preemption means that jobs (and, below, processes) are dispatched and descheduled without warning. This is the norm in modern operating systems, and neatly handles other reasons why a job might stop running (page faults, device interrupts, blocking I/O operations, etc.).

- Despite this, there cases where preventing preemption is a good thing: hard real-time scheduling, for example, or low-latency communication-intensive parallel jobs.
• Some workloads which are not batch-oriented can nevertheless be approximated as a sequence of jobs. Some interactive workloads can be modeled by viewing each CPU burst as a job (and using exponential averages of previous bursts to predict the execution time). Transaction-based workloads like web page serving can also be viewed as jobs with (hopefully) predictable run times.

9.3 Uniprocessor interactive scheduling

Definition 9.23 (Interactive scheduling). In contrast to batch-oriented job scheduling, an interactive workload consists of long-running processes most of which are blocked waiting for an external event, such as user input.

Remarks:

• Interactive scheduling covers a wide range of workloads: almost anything that runs for a long time (such as online services, databases, media servers, user interfaces, etc.), and where the CPU demand is dynamic and unpredictable.

• In addition to cases where the OS preempts the running process, preemptive schedule also captures the case where the process is paused for other reasons: page faults, I/O requests, etc.

• There have always been interactive, non-preemptive systems. Often called “cooperative multitasking” systems, they have included Windows up to version 3.1, the Macintosh OS before version 7, and many embedded systems. Such systems require each process to explicitly give up the processor to the scheduler by performing an I/O request or executing a yield() system call every so often.

Definition 9.24 (Response time). The response time of an interactive program is the time taken to respond to a request for service.

Remarks:

• Response time is different from wait time: it refers to long-running processes which handle a sequence of external requests (possibly in addition to other computation). Examples include a game responding to user control, a word processor responding to typing, or Facebook responding to a request for a home page.

• Response time, or some statistical measure of it, is often the key metric of interest for interactive scheduling.
Algorithm 9.25 Round-robin (RR) scheduling

1: Let $R$ be a double-ended queue of runnable processes
2: Let $q$ be the scheduling quantum (a fixed time period)

When the scheduler is entered:

3: Push the previously-running job on the tail of $R$
4: Set an interval timer for an interrupt $q$ seconds in the future
5: Dispatch the job at the head of $R$

Remarks:

- RR is the simplest interactive scheduling algorithm – in the absence of I/O or other activity, it runs all runnable tasks for a fixed quantum in turn. It is the interactive counterpart to FIFO.
- RR is easy to implement, understand, and analyze.
- Unless you’re testing an OS, it’s rarely what you want. For one thing, it allocates all processes in the system the same share of CPU time. Moreover, if a process blocks, it implicitly donates the rest of its current time quantum to the rest of the system.
- The response time of a process highly unpredictable, since it essentially depends on where the process is in the run queue.
- RR has a fundamental tradeoff between response time and scheduling overhead, determined by the choice of quantum $q$. However, it is exacerbated that RR usually switches the running process more than is necessary for the system to make progress.

Example 9.26. Suppose we have 50 processes, the process switch time is 10µs, and the scheduling quantum is 100µs. This leads to a scheduling overhead of about 9%, but an average response time of $100 \times 110/2 = 2750$ µs.

Alternatively, if we increase the quantum to 1000µs, the overhead is reduced to 0.99%, but average response time increases to $100 \times 1010/2 = 50500$ µs or 50ms.

9.3.1 Priority-based scheduling

Definition 9.27 (Priority). Priority-based scheduling is a broad class of scheduling algorithms in which each process is assigned a numeric priority, and the scheduler always dispatches the highest priority runnable task. A strict priority scheduling algorithm is one where these priorities do not change.

Remarks:

- Processes with the same priority can be scheduled using some other algorithm, such as RR.

Definition 9.28 (Starvation). Strict priority scheduling can lead to starvation: low-priority processes may be starved by high-priority ones which remain runnable and do not block. For this reason, strict priority systems are rare, and
processes that run at high priority in such systems are carefully written to avoid hogging the processor. Instead most priority-based schedulers are not strict but **dynamic**: the priorities of tasks change over time in response to system event and application behavior.

**Definition 9.29** (Process aging). **Aging** is one solution to starvation: Tasks which have waited a long time are gradually increased in priority. Eventually, any starving task ends up with the highest priority and runs. The original priorities periodically reset.

**Definition 9.30** (Multi-level queues). In practice, priority-based schedulers are based on **multi-level queues**: there are a finite number priorities (e.g. 256), and each has a queue of processes at that priority. Priority levels are grouped into classes; queues in different classes are scheduled differently. For example, interactive queues are high priority and scheduled using round-robin, batch and background tasks are low-priority and scheduled FCFS, etc.

**Definition 9.31** (Priority Inversion). Priority inversion occurs when a low-priority $P_l$ process holding a lock $R$ is preempted by a high-priority process $P_h$, which then attempts to acquire $R$. If when $P_h$ blocks, a runnable medium-priority process $P_m$ gets to run, this inverts the effect of priority in the schedule.

Remarks:
- In the worst case, the medium-priority process can prevent the high-priority process from running for an arbitrarily long duration.
- Priority inversion is an old and well-studied problem, but it recurs with disturbing frequency as in the infamous case of the Mars Pathfinder rover.
- Classically, there are two approaches to dealing with priority inversion.

**Definition 9.32** (Priority inheritance). In a system with **priority inheritance**, a process holding a lock temporarily acquires the priority of the highest-priority process waiting for the lock until it releases the lock.

Remarks:
- Priority inheritance mostly solves the priority inversion problem, but at a cost: the scheduler must now be involved in every lock acquire/release. This increases runtime overhead.

**Definition 9.33** (Priority ceiling). In a system with **priority ceiling**, a process holding a lock runs at the priority of the highest-priority process which can ever hold the lock, until it releases the lock.

Remarks:
- Priority ceiling incurs much less runtime overhead than priority inheritance, but potentially requires static analysis of the entire system to work. Its use is therefore restricted to embedded real-time systems.
• A (rather conservative) approximation to priority ceiling is to disable
interrupts during the lock hold time, but this is only applicable in
limited situations.

**Definition 9.34** (Hierarchical scheduling). A **hierarchical scheduler** is a
further generalization of multi-level queues: queues are instead organized in a
nested hierarchy or tree of **scheduling domains**. Within each domain (node
in tree), sub-nodes are scheduled according to a potentially different policy.

**Definition 9.35** (Multilevel Feedback Queues). A **multilevel feedback queue
scheduler** is a class of multi-level queue which aims to deliver good response
for interactive jobs plus good throughput for background tasks. The key idea is
to penalize CPU-bound tasks in favor of I/O bound tasks. Processes which do
not block but run continuously during a time interval have their priority reduced
(a form of aging). I/O bound (including interactive) tasks tend to block, and
therefore remain at high priority. CPU-bound tasks are eventually re-promoted.

Remarks:

• MLFQ schedulers are a very general class of algorithm. Almost any
non-real-time scheduling algorithm can be approximated by multi-
level feedback queues.

**Example 9.36** (The Linux o(1) scheduler). This version of the Linux sched-
uler is a 140-level Multilevel Feedback Queue. Levels 0-99 (high priority) are
static, fixed, “real-time” priorities scheduled with FCFS or RR. Levels 100-139
are user tasks scheduling using RR, with priority aging for interactive (I/O
intensive) tasks.

This makes the complexity of scheduling independent of the number of tasks.
The scheduler uses two arrays of queues: “runnable” and “waiting”; when no
tasks remain in the runnable array, the two arrays are simply swapped.

**Example 9.37** (The Linux “completely fair scheduler”). In the CFS as de-
scribed in the documentation, a task’s priority is determined by how little progress
it has made adjusted by fudge factors over time. The task gets a “bonus” if it
yields or blocks early (this time is distributed evenly). The implementation uses
a Red-Black tree to maintain a sorted list of tasks, meaning that operations are
now $O(\log n)$, but still fast.

In fact, this is the very old idea of “fair queuing” from packet networks, also
known as “generalized processor scheduling”. It ensures a guaranteed service rate
for all processes, although CFS does not expose (or maintain) this guarantee.

Remarks:

• Stepping back a bit from the details, the schedulers we have seen in
Unix conflate protection domains with resource principals: priorities
and scheduling decisions are per-process (or threads). In practice,
applications may span multiple processes, and at the same time share
server processes with other applications. This means we may want
to allocate resources across processes, or provide separate resource
allocations within a single process – think of a web server, for instance.
• Scheduling processes can also lead to unfairness between users: If I run more compiler jobs than you, I get more CPU time.

• The algorithms we have seen do not deal cleanly with in-kernel processing, for example interrupts or the overhead of scheduling itself.

• Some (though not all) of these issues are addressed by virtual machines or containers.

9.4 Real-time scheduling

Definition 9.38 (Hard real-time). An application is hard real-time if its correctness depends not only on the I/O actions it performs, but also the time it takes to execute. Hard real-time task correctness is often expressed in terms of deadlines: each task has a specific point in time by which it must have completed in order to be correct.

Remarks:

• Hard real-time systems include engine management units (EMUs) for cars, control systems for critical machinery, avionics, etc.

• In the general case, hard real-time scheduling is impossible: tasks can appear at any time, with any deadlines. Hard real-time systems in practice must impose constraints on the set of tasks they are prepared to schedule so that they can guarantee correctness (including every task meeting its deadline).

• In hard real-time systems, the execution time of each task is generally known in advance along with the deadline

• Tasks in a hard real-time system can be periodic (they recur at regular intervals) or aperiodic.

• If the task set is not know in advance, the system must reject tasks for which no feasible schedule is possible, a process called admission control.

• Real-time does not mean fast! Both hard- and soft-real-time scheduling are about predictability, not performance. Hard real-time systems in particular are often quite slow.

Definition 9.39 (Rate-monotonic scheduling). Rate-monotonic scheduling (RMS) schedules periodic tasks by always running the task with shortest period first. This is a static (offline) scheduling algorithm.

Suppose there are \( n \) (periodic) tasks, each task \( i \) has execution time \( C_i \) and period \( P_i \). Then RMS will find a feasible schedule if:

\[
\sum_{i=1}^{n} \frac{C_i}{P_i} \leq n(2^{1/n} - 1)
\]
Remarks:

- The proof [LL73] is beyond scope of this course, but worth reading.
- This condition puts a limit on the processor utilization (the left-hand side of the inequality) before deadlines get missed. As the number of tasks increases, this tends to:

\[
\lim_{n \to \infty} n(\sqrt{2} - 1) = \ln 2 \approx 0.693147\ldots
\]

The implication here is that it’s hard to use more than 69% of the system under RM.
- RM is one of the two classic hard real-time schedulers: it is extremely efficient provided that tasks are periodic and the full workload is known in advance – this is the case in many embedded control applications.

So what should we do if we need to run online (that is, we don’t know the job mix in advance)?

**Definition 9.40** (Earliest-deadline first). *Earliest deadline first [EDF] scheduling sorts tasks by deadline and always runs the earliest deadline first. It is dynamic and online, and tasks are not necessarily periodic.*

**EDF** is guaranteed to find a feasible schedule if:

\[
\sum_{i=1}^{n} C_i / P_i \leq 1
\]

I.e. it can use 100% of a processor, if we ignore the overhead of scheduling and context switching.

**Remarks:**

- EDF is more complex (scheduling decisions can be \(o(\log n)\) in the number of tasks). It is typically implemented by maintaining a priority queue of jobs sorted by deadline, often represented as a heap.
- It is much more flexible, and admission control can be performed online.
- If utilization exceeds 100%, however, EDF is unstable: its behavior is unpredictable.

**Definition 9.41** (Soft real-time scheduling). *In contrast to hard real-time systems, a soft real-time task has timing requirements which are non-strict, but nevertheless affect the quality and utility of the result.*
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Remarks:

• A classic example of a soft real-time task is multimedia, like video playback. In practice, users can tolerate some degradation in the quality of a video they are watching, but the task is still organized around displaying a sequence of video frames at the correct time, and/or playing a set of audio samples with the correct synchronization.

Definition 9.42 (Reservation-based scheduling). In contrast to conventional priority-based schedulers, a \textit{reservation-based scheduling policy} guarantees a minimum number of CPU time units to each job.

Remarks:

• EDF scheduling can be used to provide a long-running task (such as video playback) with a \textit{guaranteed processor rate}, by breaking the task into a set of \textit{periods} (for example, video frame times) during which the task is guaranteed a certain number of CPU cycles. This provides a sequence of jobs to EDF, where the execution time of each one is the number of cycles required, and the deadline is the end of the period.

• Such a scheduler actually provides a good approximation to \textit{weighted fair queuing}, which you may be familiar with from networking.

9.5 Multiprocessor scheduling

So far we’ve considered scheduling a single processor (and its workload) in isolation. As soon as we have more than one processor to manage, things get much more complicated. Fully general multiprocessor scheduling is NP-hard - it tends to reduce to 2-dimensional bin-packing. The two-dimensionality comes from having to decide which core to run a given thread on as well as when to dispatch it on that core.

In general, multiprocessor scheduling is beyond the scope of this course. We just present a simplified overview here, starting with some simplifying assumptions:

• The system can always preempt a task. This rules out some very small embedded systems or hard-real-time systems (and early PC and Macs, it turns out) but otherwise is reasonable.

• The scheduler is \textit{work-conserving}.

Definition 9.43 (Work conserving). A \textit{scheduler} is \textit{work conserving} if no processor is ever idle when there is a runnable task.

9.5.1 Sequential programs on multiprocessors

Scheduling a collection of sequential programs on multiprocessors is relatively simple, although more complex than uniprocessor scheduling.

Definition 9.44 (Naive sequential multiprocessor scheduling). The simplest model for multiprocessor scheduling maintains a single system-wide \textit{run queue}. Whenever an individual processor makes a scheduling decision, it picks a thread from the \textit{run queue} to remove and dispatch.
Remarks:

- As described, this scheduler is work-conserving (modulo overhead).

- We haven’t said anything about the per-core scheduling algorithm used when a core looks at the run queue. It can be almost any uniprocessor scheme, but note that most of the guarantees vanish. For example, priority invariants might not be maintained across the whole system.

- Basic multi-queue models from queuing theory can be applied to analyze a system like this, but one must also take into account the overheads of locking and sharing the queue.

- In many situations, the single run queue becomes a significant bottleneck due to the need to globally lock it whenever any core needs to reschedule.

- Threads or tasks in this scheme also end up being allocated arbitrarily to cores, and so tend to move frequently between cores and, more critically, between different groups of cores sharing a cache. This dramatically reduces locality and hence performance.

Definition 9.45 (Affinity-based scheduling). To remove the bottleneck of a single run queue and improve cache locality of running processes, **affinity-based scheduling** tries to keep jobs on one core as much as possible. Each core has its own run queue, and jobs are periodically re-balanced between all the individual queues.

Remarks:

- This is much more efficient, but note that it is not work conserving any more. A processor can end up with an empty run queue when other queues have jobs which are runnable, but not currently running,

- One way to mitigate this is for a processor which is idle to “steal” a job from a more heavily loaded processor.

Definition 9.46 (Work-stealing). A **work-stealing** scheduler allows one core which would otherwise be idle to “steal” runnable jobs from neighboring cores so as keep doing useful work.

9.5.2 Parallel programs on multiprocessors

Things get much more complex when we consider jobs not as single threads, but as collections of parallel threads which coordinate among themselves. For example, global barriers in parallel applications present a significant challenge: one slow thread has huge effect on performance.

Multiple threads in many (but not all) applications would benefit from cache sharing, and different competing applications on the same machine can pollute each others caches. However, in other cases, it’s better to have each thread have its own cache and thereby maximize use of the cache across the whole machine.
The first case leads to clustering threads of the same process on a single socket, whereas the second leads to spreading them across a machine.

This topic is huge, and an active area of research (the more so when we consider that not all cores these days are uniform).

Bibliography