

Lightweight Annotations for Controlling Sharing in Concurrent Data Structures

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Abstract

SharC is a recently developed system for checking data-sharing in multithreaded programs. Programmers specify sharing rules (read-only, protected by a lock, etc.) for individual objects, and the SharC compiler enforces these rules using static and dynamic checks. Violations of these rules indicate unintended data sharing, which is the underlying cause of harmful data-races. Additionally, SharC allows programmers to change the sharing rules for a specific object using a *sharing cast*, to capture the fact that sharing rules for an object often change during the object's lifetime. SharC was successfully applied to a number of multi-threaded C programs.

However, many programs are not readily checkable using SharC because their sharing rules, and changes to sharing rules, effectively apply to whole data structures rather than to individual objects. We have developed a system called *Shoal* to address this shortcoming. In addition to the sharing rules and sharing cast of SharC, our system includes a new concept that we call *groups*. A group is a collection of objects all having the same sharing mode. Each group has a distinguished member called the *group leader*. When the sharing mode of the group leader changes by way of a sharing cast, the sharing mode of all members of the group also changes. This operation is made sound by maintaining the invariant that at the point of a sharing cast, the only external pointer into the group is the pointer to the group leader. The addition of groups allows checking safe concurrency at the level of data structures rather than at the level of individual objects.

We demonstrate the necessity and practicality of groups by applying Shoal to a wide range of concurrent C programs (the largest approaching a million lines of code). In all benchmarks groups entail low annotation burden and no significant additional performance overhead.

Categories and Subject Descriptors CR-number [subcategory]: third-level; D.3.3 [Programming Languages]: Language Constructs and Features; F.3.1 [Logics and Meanings of Programs]: Specifying and Verifying and Reasoning about Programs

General Terms Languages, Verification

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PLDI'09, June 15–20, 2009, Dublin, Ireland.

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1. Introduction

The increasing prevalence of multicore processors requires languages and tools that support safe concurrent programming. C itself provides no such support — most concurrency errors in C programs happen silently, and do not become observable until the program fails catastrophically. In these cases, it is common for the bug to be difficult to deduce from the way the program fails.

A number of tools [33, 12] have been developed for modern languages like C# and Java to detect one type of concurrency error: the data-race. A data-race occurs when two threads access the same location in memory without synchronization, and at least one of the accesses is a write. In these systems an exception is raised immediately whenever a data-race occurs. The fail-fast approach used by these runtimes is in agreement with good systems design. However, in the same way that a program crash is a symptom of some deeper problem, a data-race is a symptom of unintended data sharing.

SharC [1] is a recently-developed system that attempts to identify instances of unintended data sharing. Using SharC, programmers make type annotations that describe how data is intended to be shared (or not) among threads. These annotations are called *sharing modes*. Additionally, SharC provides a checked cast operation called a *sharing cast* that a programmer can use to identify places in a program where the sharing mode for an object changes. Using a combination of static and dynamic analysis, SharC checks that no data is shared among threads in the program except in ways that have been explicitly declared by the programmer. This stronger condition also precludes the existence of unintended data-races.

Unfortunately, SharC has a fairly serious limitation that prevents it from being easily applied to some widely-used multithreaded C programs: sharing casts apply to individual objects to which only a single reference remains. Therefore, changing the sharing mode of data structures, such as linked lists and trees, is either unsafe, impossible, or prohibitively expensive in SharC. Complex data structures occur frequently in all C programs including multithreaded C programs. Some of the structures used have different sharing modes at different points in time. For example, data structures are initialized before being shared with other threads, or become private to a thread after being removed from shared queues, lists, and hash tables. Applying SharC to such programs is thus difficult or impossible.

We have extended SharC to address this shortcoming. In addition to the existing sharing modes and sharing cast of SharC, we have developed a new concept that we call *groups* by borrowing ideas from region, ownership, and dependent type systems. For the purposes of this paper, we use the name *Shoal* to refer to SharC extended with groups, and SharC to refer to the original system. A *group* is a collection of objects all having the same sharing mode. Each group has a distinguished member called the *group leader*.

When the sharing mode of the group leader changes by way of a sharing cast, the sharing mode of all members of the group also changes. We distinguish these casts from SharC’s single-object casts by calling them *group casts*. We ensure soundness of group casts by requiring that all external pointers into a group have a type that *depends* on a pointer to the group leader, and using reference counting to prevent casts when more than one pointer to the group leader remains. Objects can be added or removed from groups, and group casts can be used to combine groups. We present the syntax along with examples of group use in Section 2, and formalize and prove the soundness of our group type system in Section 3. Our formalism for groups is not strongly tied to the concept of a sharing mode, and could be used to track other properties, such as tainting, immutability, etc. We hope that groups and group casts represent a promising approach to describing the runtime evolution of such properties.

We have used Shoal, to check data sharing in several interesting benchmarks, including the GIMP image manipulation program which is over 900k lines. Our benchmarks include scientific codes using graphs and trees to organize calculations; a simple webserver using an in-memory cache shared among threads that process requests from clients; and two image manipulation programs that use threads to improve performance and hide latency. To support these benchmarks, Shoal includes a sharing mode that checks a common idiom in parallel scientific applications; barrier synchronization is used to separate updates in one thread from reads by other threads. We have observed that Shoal’s annotation burden is manageable. For small (a few thousand line) programs we made about one change for every 50 lines, but for the GIMP we only needed one for every 10 000 lines. Additionally, making the right annotations requires minimal program understanding — the GIMP required one person only three days to annotate. The scientific benchmarks had overheads around 40% (mostly due to concurrent reference counting), the overheads on the other benchmarks were less than 20%, and overheads were not affected by the number of threads. We discuss our experimental results in full in Section 4.

To summarize, this paper makes the following contributions:

- We present *groups* and *group casts*, lightweight mechanisms for describing data structure properties, and evolution of these properties. Groups borrows ideas from region, ownership and dependent type systems to describe sets of objects with a common property, represented by a distinguished leader.
- We describe how groups can be used to specify the sharing strategy used in concurrent programs that use complex data structures.
- We demonstrate the practicality of Shoal by using it to check data sharing in several applications which require groups, with both low performance overheads, and low annotation burden. We also discuss how these applications would have been difficult and impractical to check without groups.

2. Overview

SharC [1] is a system in which programmers add annotations, called sharing modes, to types. These modes include `private`, for objects accessible only by a single thread, `readonly` for objects that cannot be modified, and `locked(L)` (a dependent type) for objects that must only be accessed when lock *L* is held. SharC uses a combination of static and dynamic checking to ensure that these rules are followed. Additionally, SharC allows the programmer to specify where the sharing mode for an object changes using a *sharing cast*. SharC checks these casts using reference counting: if only one reference to an object exists, then the sharing mode of

```

1 typedef struct list {
2   int data;
3   struct list *next;
4 } list_t;
5 mutex_t *Lck;
6 list_t *lckL;
7 void init() {
8   list_t *pL = NULL, *end = NULL;
9   for (int i = 0; i < 10; i++) {
10    list_t *t;
11    t = malloc(sizeof(list_t));
12    t->data = i;
13    t->next = NULL;
14    if (pL == NULL) { pL = t; end = pL;}
15    else { end->next = t; end = t; }
16  }
17  mutex_lock(Lck);
18  lckL = pL;
19  mutex_unlock(Lck);
20 }

```

Figure 1. Code that defines a linked structure, and shows how it is initialized by one thread before being shared through a lock with other threads.

the object can be changed by atomically copying the pointer to a pointer with the new sharing mode, and nulling out the old pointer.

2.1 SharC’s Limitation

With these capabilities SharC is able to describe the sharing strategy in a variety of legacy multithreaded C programs. Unfortunately, the restriction that the sharing cast may apply only to single objects prevents SharC from being easily applied to a number of common code patterns.

In this section, we will refer to a simple example in which a singly-linked list is initialized by one thread before being shared through a lock with other threads. The code for this example is given in Figure 1. This code snippet defines a type for list nodes, and gives a function that initializes a list before sharing it with other threads through a global variable protected by a lock.

The sharing strategy for this code dictates that the list is private when being constructed, and then becomes lock-protected when it is shared with other threads on line 18. We would like to simply declare that `lckL` is a pointer to a `locked()` `list_t`, and that its `next` field also points to `locked()` `list_t`’s, and that similarly `pL` is a pointer to a private `list_t` with a `next` field pointing to private `list_t`’s. However, if we do that SharC will not let us do a sharing cast from `pL` to `lckL` at line 18 because that would be unsound as as there might still be a private pointer into the tail of the list now pointed to by `lckL`.

Alternately, we might try to define two different list structures, each with the appropriate annotation given explicitly on the `next` field, say `plist_t` and `lcklist_t`. Then, we could traverse the list, doing a sharing cast on each node while casting from one list node type to the other¹. We might write something like the code in Figure 2. In this snippet `scast` is SharC’s single object sharing cast. This approach has a few problems. First, we would have to compel SharC to accept the dubious cast between two different aggregate types, which it currently does not. Second, code with a similar goal may become quite cumbersome to write for anything beyond the simplest data structures. Finally, for data structures consisting of many individual objects, the above code would adversely affect run-time performance. Furthermore, condoning such an approach

¹This tactic might require writing to `readonly` objects, if that is the intended target mode, and so will trivially violate SharC’s type system, but suppose for a moment that this is not a problem.

```

lcklist_t locked(Lck) *convert(plist_t private *L) {
    plist_t *pt1 = L, *pt2;
    lcklist_t locked(Lck) *lckhp = NULL,
    lcklist_t locked(Lck) **lcktp = &lckhp;
    while (pt1) {
        pt2 = pt1->next;
        pt1->next = NULL;
        *lcktp = scast (lcklist_t locked(Lck) *,pt1);
        lcktp = &(*lcktp)->next;
        pt1 = pt2;
    }
    return lckhp;
}

```

Figure 2. Code that uses SharC’s single object cast to convert a private list to a locked() list. `scast` is SharC’s single object sharing cast.

would violate SharC’s design goal of requiring the programmer to write only simple type annotations and casts to specify a program’s sharing strategy.

2.2 Shoal’s Goals

The goal of Shoal is to allow changing the sharing mode, not only of individual objects, but also of complex data structures in one atomic action. In order to ensure the soundness of these operations, we require the programmer to add annotations that describe a *group* of objects that have the same sharing mode. A group is identified by a distinguished object called the *group leader*. Internal and external pointers to the group have distinct types such that external pointers must identify the group leader. We combine static and runtime checks to maintain the invariant that no object is referred to by pointers with different sharing modes at the same time. In brief, we ensure that all external pointers identify the same object as the group leader, and that group casts are only performed when there is a single external pointer to the group. The rest of this section explains the syntax for groups, and how our type system enforces the above semantics.

Orthogonally, to better support scientific applications, Shoal also adds a new sharing mode, `barrier` for objects protected by barrier synchronization: between any two barriers a chunk² of the object is either only read, or only accessed by a single thread.

2.3 Group Annotations and Casts

Groups are specified using two annotations. First, we provide a dependent type annotation, `group(p)`, which indicates that objects of that type belong to the group with leader pointed to by `p`. Second, we provide an annotation for structure field pointer types, `same`, which indicates that the structure field points into the same group as the containing structure. The `group(p)` annotation identifies *external* pointers, while the `same` annotations identifies *internal* pointers. We also provide an additional checked cast operation, `gcast`, which indicates that the sharing mode or group leader for a group of objects is changing. `gcast` ensures that there is only one external reference to a group leader, and atomically copies the value of the pointer into the new pointer with the new type, and nulls out the old pointer so that no pointers with the old type refer to the same data structure after the cast.

Consider the code snippet in Figure 3. This is our linked list example from above, but now it is fully annotated with Shoal’s sharing modes, and casts. Bolded annotations must be provided by the programmer, while the unbolded annotations are inferred. First note the `same` annotation in the type of the `next` field on line 3.

²We break objects into 16-byte chunks, to allow concurrent non-racy updates to composite objects such as arrays.

```

1 typedef struct list {
2     int data;
3     struct list same *next;
4 } list_t;
5 mutex_t *Lck
6 list_t group(lckL) locked(Lck) * locked(Lck) lckL;
7 void init() {
8     list_t group(pL) private * private pL = NULL;
9     list_t group(pL) private * private end = NULL;
10    for (int i = 0; i < 10; i++) {
11        list_t group(pL) private * private t = NULL;
12        t = malloc(sizeof(list_t));
13        t->data = i;
14        t->next = NULL;
15        if (pL == NULL) {pL = t; end = pL}
16        else {end->next = t; end = t;}
17    }
18    mutex_lock(Lck);
19    lckL = gcast (list_t group(lckL) locked(Lck) *, pL);
20    mutex_unlock(Lck);
21 }

```

Figure 3. Code that defines a linked structure, and shows how it is initialized by one thread before being shared through a lock with other threads. Bolded annotations are provided by the programmer. Unbolded annotations are inferred.

This indicates that `next` is an internal pointer in the same group as the enclosing structure. Next, note that `lckL` is a `locked()` pointer into a `locked()` list. The `group(lckL)` annotation indicates that `lckL` is an external pointer into the group identified by the target of `lckL`. That is, `lckL` is a pointer to the group leader. Inside of the `init()` function, `pL` and `t` are `private` pointers to `private` lists. They are both external pointers into the group identified by the target of `pL`. In the `for` loop, nodes are added to the list.

After the list is built, on line 19, the mode for the entire list is changed from `private` to `locked()`. This is safe because `pL` is the only external reference to the list, and because no other live, non-null variable refers to `pL` in its type. These checks are sufficient to ensure that there are no pointers with the wrong type. If our list building code had, e.g., stored an external reference into the middle of the list, then its type would have to refer to the group leader. If the type referred to a reference aside from `pL`, then the reference count on the group leader would be too high. If its type referred to `pL`, then the null check on pointers that refer to `pL` would fail.

2.4 The Group Leader

As mentioned, when a cast of a group is attempted, we must be able to verify that there is only one external pointer into the group. Further, for soundness reasons when a pointer mentioned in a dependent type is assigned to, pointers of types that depend on it must be null.

To enforce the first requirement, we restrict what expressions may appear as parameters to a `group()` annotation. In the annotation `group(p)`, `p` is a pointer expression built from variables and field names: the types of structure fields may refer to other fields of the same structure, and the types of locals may refer to other locals (including formal parameters) in the same function. Globals may be mentioned in the `group()` parameter, but only when they are declared `static readonly`. Finally, pointers mentioned in the `group()` parameter may not have their addresses taken. These restrictions permit us to reason locally about what values types depend on. That is, we require no alias analysis to discover what the dependencies of a type are. These are the same restrictions as those used in the Deputy [9] dependent type system for C.

The second requirement exists to ensure that the group of an object cannot change without a group cast. That is, changing the

group of an object by simply changing the value of the pointer in its `group()` annotation is forbidden. To enforce this, we simply insert dynamic checks for null-ness ahead of assignments to group leader pointers on which other live pointers depend. Note that in our linked list example in Figure 3, on line 15 `t` is dead after the assignment, so no null-check is required for `t`. However, `pL` is live after the assignment, and so we must check that it is null beforehand. In short, pointers whose type depends on `pL` must be null before an assignment to `pL` or dead afterwards. These restrictions may seem cumbersome, however they have not caused any substantial difficulties in porting our benchmarks.

In a fully typed program, every pointer type has either a `group()` annotation or a `same` annotation. However, the `group()` parameter may be null. When this is the case, the object cannot be the subject of a group cast as it clearly cannot be the group leader, however it can be extracted from the “null” group using the single-object sharing cast as described in Section 3. In our system we use the shorthand `nogroup` for `group(NULL)`. In our linked list example, the `nogroup` annotations would go on types that do not have a `group()` or `same` annotation, but these have been omitted for readability. In our implementation `nogroup` is the default annotation. This is so that the programmer is required to make annotations only for instances of data structures where the group cast is needed.

2.5 Operations on Groups

Objects can be added to and removed from groups, while group casts can be used to change a group’s sharing mode and/or merge two groups. Consider the linked list structure above. Adding a node to the list is straightforward. We simply declare a new list node pointer, and indicate that it points into the needed group as shown in the linked list example.

In our first example with `list_t`, we demonstrated the use of the group cast to change the sharing mode of an entire linked list. This idiom is fairly common in concurrent C programs. That is, a data structure is initialized privately to one thread before being shared among all threads either protected by a lock, or read-only. We can also merge one group into another group. This operation requires a checked cast because we do not currently support any notion of “subgroups,” and so no pointers identifying the leader of the old group as their group leader may exist after the merge:

```
list_t group(Ltail) private * private Ltail;
list_t group(Lhead) private * private Lhead;
// ... nodes are added to Ltail ...
Lhead->next = gcast (list_t group(Lhead) private *,
                    Ltail);
```

Due to the few restrictions placed on internal group pointers (i.e. the same pointers), our type system does not support group splitting. However, we do support the removal of individual objects from a group using the single-object sharing cast; if the same fields of an object are null, then it can be cast to any group. The inability to split groups has not been problematic in our benchmarks.

2.6 Instrumentation

In Figure 4 we show the instrumentation that Shoal uses for its dynamic analysis. In fact, this snippet is simply meant to show logically what the instrumentation does since the actual implementation involves some amount of optimization to reduce the cost of reference counting, and some additional complexity because the reference counting must be thread safe. Since this example involves only the `private` and `locked()` modes, all of the instrumentation comes from checking that `Lck` is held when `LckL` is accessed (line 29), reference counting, and checking the reference count at the group cast (line 31). Since we can verify statically that `t` is dead at the assignment at line 15 of Figure 3, and that `t` and `end` are dead at the group cast at line 19 of Figure 3, the only dynamic checking

```
1 void init() {
2   list_t *pL = NULL, *t = NULL, *end = NULL;
3   for (int i = 0; i < 10; i++) {
4     decrc(t);
5     t = malloc(sizeof(list_t));
6     incrc(t);
7     t->data = i;
8     t->next = NULL;
9     if (pL == NULL) {
10      assert (pL == NULL);
11      decrc(pL);
12      pL = t;
13      incrc(pL);
14      decrc(end);
15      end = pL;
16      incrc(end);
17    }
18    else {
19      decrc(end->next);
20      end->next = t;
21      incrc(end->next);
22      decrc(end);
23      end = t;
24      incrc(end);
25    }
26  }
27  mutex_lock(Lck);
28  sharc_lock_acquire(Lck);
29  assert (sharc_has_lock(Lck));
30  // The following six lines are performed atomically
31  assert(refcount(pL) == 1);
32  decrc(LckL);
33  LckL = pL;
34  incrc(LckL);
35  decrc(pL);
36  pL = NULL;
37  sharc_lock_release(Lck);
38  mutex_unlock(Lck);
39 }
```

Figure 4. Our linked list example shown after instrumentation by Shoal. Since the example is using only the `private` and `locked()` modes, the only instrumentation is for reference counting, checking that locks are held, and checking the group cast.

needed for the `group()` types is ensuring that `pL` is null before it is assigned (line 10). If `t` and `end` were not determined statically to be dead at the above mentioned locations, the instrumented code would contain assertions requiring them to be null.

2.7 A More Complex Example

Figure 5 gives pseudo-code for an n-body simulation using the Barnes-Hut algorithm [3]. At each simulation time-step, Barnes-Hut constructs an oct-tree based on the locations of the bodies, then computes the center of mass of each node in the oct-tree. The force on each particle is computed by walking the oct-tree; the effect of all particles within an oct-tree node can be approximated by the node’s center of mass as long as this is far enough from the particle. Finally, the computed force is used to update a particle’s velocity and position.

Figure 5 omits the code that builds the tree and does the calculations to highlight the data structures, sharing modes and group casts. This pseudo-code has been adapted to pthreads from a Split-C [19] program (itself inspired by the Barnes-Hut Splash2 [32] benchmark) written in an SPMD style; it uses barriers to synchronize accesses to shared data structures, and each thread has a unique id given by `MYPROC`. The tree is built out of `node_t` structures. Each `node_t` records the total mass of the bodies below that node and the position of their center of mass. Further, leaf nodes in the tree can

```

1 typedef struct node {
2     double mass;
3     double pos[3];
4     struct node same *parent;
5     int bodies[8];
6     struct node same *children[8];
7 } node_t;
8
9 typedef struct body {
10    double mass;
11    double pos[3];
12    double vel[3];
13    double acc[3];
14 } body_t;
15
16 void BuildTree(node_t group(root) private *root,
17               body_t private *Bodies);
18
19 void run() {
20     node_t group(root) private *root;
21     node_t group(roRoot) readonly *roRoot;
22     body_t private *bodies;
23     body_t barrier *barBodies;
24
25     if (MYPROC == 0)
26         initBodies(bodies);
27     while (not_done) {
28         if (MYPROC == 0) {
29             root = malloc(sizeof(node_t));
30             BuildTree(root,bodies);
31             roRoot =
32                 gcast(node_t group(roRoot) readonly *,root);
33             barBodies =
34                 scast(body_t barrier *,bodies);
35         }
36         barrier();
37         // Share roRoot and barBodies, then calculate
38         // new body positions.
39         barrier();
40         if (MYPROC == 0) {
41             root =
42                 gcast(node_t group(root) private *,roRoot);
43             bodies =
44                 scast(body_t private *,barBodies);
45             free_tree(root);
46         }
47     }
48 }

```

Figure 5. An oct-tree is built privately to one thread, and then the entire tree is cast to `readonly` to be shared with all other threads.

point to up to eight bodies, while internal nodes have eight children. The bodies are represented in the `node_t`'s as an index into a `body_t` array whose elements represent the particles. Finally, every node has a pointer to its parent node.

The function `run()`, executed by each thread, shows an outline of how the simulation runs. First, the initial positions and velocities of the bodies are written into the array of `body_t` structures (line 26) by one of the threads. This initialization occurs privately to this thread. This is reflected by the `private` sharing mode of the bodies array on line 22.

Next, the threads enter the main loop. First, an oct-tree is built by the same thread that initialized the bodies (line 30). While the tree is being built, the parent pointers in the nodes are filled in. In the last step of `BuildTree()`, the tree is walked up from each

leaf node to calculate the mass and center of mass for each node³. During this process the parent nodes are nulled out, as they will not be used again.

After the tree is built, it will no longer need to be written. Further it will need to be read by the other threads. This sharing mode change is implicit in the original program through the use of the `barrier()` call, but with Shoal such changes must be explicit. Hence, we use a group cast to make the entire tree `readonly` (line 32). This cast succeeds because there is only one external reference to the whole oct-tree, and because no other pointers aside from `root` mention `root` in their types. Further, no other pointers aside from `roRoot` mention `roRoot` in their types, so it is also safe to write `roRoot`. If `BuildTree` had saved an external reference into the tree, then this external reference would have been dependent on some pointer to the group leader. This unsafe condition would then be caught during the checked cast because the reference count to the group leader would be greater than one.

We also cast the `bodies` array (line 34). We use the `barrier` sharing mode because different threads “own” different parts of the array. The thread that owns a body calculates its new position, velocity, and acceleration based on the masses of nearby bodies (distant bodies are not accessed as their effects are summarised in the oct-tree). Some parts of the body structure are `readonly`, and other parts are `private`. This fact cannot be represented by our static type system, but we can check the desired access pattern using the `barrier` sharing mode. The cast of `bodies` can use the single-object sharing cast (`scast`) as the `body_t` type contains no same pointers.

Following these casts, the pointers to the body array and the tree `root` are shared through globals with the other threads, and the simulation is updated. Subsequently, these pointers are nulled out in all threads but one, and more casts are used to indicate that the body array and oct-tree are `private` again (lines 41 and 43). The oct-tree can then be destroyed (line 45).

If this program compiles and runs without errors with Shoal, then we know that no pointers exist to the oct-tree or to the bodies with the wrong type, that there are no data races on the bodies while they are protected by the barrier synchronization (or on other objects in other sharing modes), and that only one thread accesses the oct-tree or the bodies while they are in the `private` mode.

On this example, Shoal’s dynamic checking incurs a runtime overhead of 38% when running a simulation of 100 time steps for approximately 16000 bodies. Most of this overhead is due to the cost of reference counting.

2.8 Static vs. Dynamic Checking

Shoal does very little dynamic checking beyond what is already done by SharC, i.e. reference counting, and checking for the `locked` sharing modes. As mentioned above, our `group()` type is dependent, and as one might expect, some of the type checking must be done at runtime. In our case, this entails inserting a small number of checks to make sure that certain pointers are null. In practice the number of checks is small, and our timing primitives are not precise enough to measure their affect on the performance of our benchmarks.

Shoal’s `barrier` mode is checked at runtime. For objects in the `barrier` mode, in between barriers, dynamic checks are inserted that require these objects to be either `private` or `read-only` between barriers. At each barrier, the analysis is reset to reflect the fact that the ownership of `barrier` mode objects changes at barriers.

All other components of our analysis are done statically.

³We note here that it is sometimes necessary when using groups to pass an unused pointer to the group leader to recursive functions. This has not caused problems in our benchmarks.

Program	$P ::= \Delta \mid P; P$
Definition	$\Delta ::= x : \tau \mid t = (f_1 : \phi_1, \dots, f_n : \phi_n)$ $\mid f() \{x_1 : \tau_1, \dots, x_n : \tau_n; s\}$
Dependent Type	$\tau ::= m \langle \ell \rangle t$
Field Type	$\phi ::= t \mid \tau$
Sharing Mode	$m ::= \text{locked} \mid \text{private}$
Statement	$s ::= s_1; s_2 \mid \text{spawn } f() \mid \text{lock } x \mid \text{unlock } x$ $\mid \ell := e \mid \text{when } \omega_1, \dots, \omega_n \mid$ $\mid \text{wait} \mid \text{done}$
L-expression	$\ell ::= x \mid x.f$
Expression	$e ::= \ell \mid \text{new} \mid \text{gcast } x$
Predicate	$\omega ::= \text{oneref}(x) \mid m(x) \mid \ell_1 = \ell_2 \mid \ell = \text{null}$
Identifiers	f, x, t

Figure 6. A simple imperative language. Elements in bold are only used in the operational semantics.

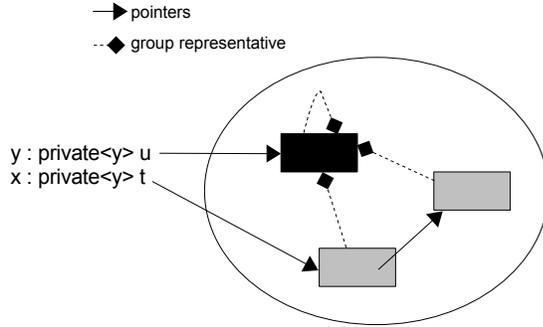


Figure 7. A simple group

3. The Formal Model

Shoal’s formalism is derived from that SharC [1], with significant changes to handle data structures, and our notion of groups and group casts. Our language (Figure 6) consists of global variable ($x : \tau$), C-like structure ($t = \dots$) and function ($f()\{\dots\}$) definitions (we assume all identifiers are distinct). Our global variables are unusual: for each global variable $x : \tau$ a structure instance o_x of type τ is allocated at program startup, and newly created threads have a local variable $x : \tau$ that is initialized to o_x . This allows sharing between our threads while simplifying our semantics by allowing all variables to be treated as local.

Figure 7 shows typical type declarations for two variables x and y : a type τ of the form $m \langle x \rangle t$ represents a pointer to the structure named t , that can be null. The sharing mode m is the sharing mode of the pointer’s target; our formalization supports **private** (accessible to only one thread) and **locked** (each structure protected by an implicit lock, Java-style). As we described earlier, each group is identified by a distinguished *leader* object. In our type system, all pointer types must include the name x of a variable or field that points to the leader (the syntax allows for arbitrary lvalues, but these can only appear during type-checking and in the operational semantics). For instance, in Figure 7 y points to the leader for x ’s target. In the rest of this section, we simply call y x ’s *leader*. Note that the leader of y is y itself (this is required for soundness), however it is legal to have multiple pointers to the group leader. For instance, we could add declarations

```
y1 : private<y1> u
x1 : private<y1> t
```

and legally assign y to $y1$ and x to $x1$. Thus, the declaration ($y : m \langle x \rangle t$) is equivalent to the C language declaration (t **group**(x) * **private** y) since all variables in the formalism are locals. Our pointer types depend on variables and are thus a form of dependent types. To ensure soundness in the presence of mutation, we use similar type rules to the Deputy system [9] (see below).

Structures consist of a set of typed fields $f : \phi$, where ϕ is either a dependent type τ or an unqualified pointer to a structure t . In the first case, the type τ can only depend on other fields (as in Deputy) and cannot be **private**⁴, in the second case the pointer is a “same group” pointer, i.e. it’s target is in the same group and has the same sharing mode as the structure itself. For example

```
list = (data: locked<data> stuff, next: list)
x : private<x> list
```

declares a linked-list type where the list node structures are in a single group. Thus, these declarations are equivalent to the C language declarations:

```
struct list {
  stuff locked(data) group(data) *data;
  struct list same *next;
}
struct list private group(x) * x;
```

The variable x is thus a private list with locked contents: $x, x.next, x.next.next, \dots$ are all private objects in the same group, while the list contents $x.data, x.next.data, \dots$ are in separate groups protected by locks.

Functions f consist of local variable definitions and a sequence of thread-spawning, locking and assignment statements. Assignments are guarded by runtime checks (ω) which check sharing modes are respected ($m(x)$), compare lvalues ($\ell = \ell'$ and $\ell = \text{null}$) and assert that x is the sole reference to a particular object ($\text{oneref}(x)$). These runtime checks are added automatically during type checking. The most important expression is **gcast** x which performs a *group cast* on x ’s target. For instance:

```
y : locked<y> list
y := gcast x
```

casts our list x whose node structures were **private** into a list y whose node structures are protected by locks. A group cast can also merge two groups:

```
y : locked<z> list
y = gcast x
z.next = y
```

Our formalism can readily be extended with primitive types, further sharing modes and an **scast** x expression to extract a single object from a group (under the condition that all same-group fields are null). However, our formalism does not currently support splitting a group into two arbitrary parts.

3.1 Static Semantics

Figure 8 presents the type-checking rules for our language. These rules both check a program for validity and rewrite it to include necessary runtime checks. Also, we restrict assignments to the forms $x := e$ and $x.f := y$. To simplify exposition, we assume in the rules that $\Gamma_G(x)$ gives the type of global variable x , T is the set of all structure types, and $t(f)$ gives the type of field f of structure t .

The GLOBAL, STRUCTDEF and THREAD rules enforce the restriction that variable types are only dependent on other variable types, while

⁴ This requirement can be relaxed to forbidding non-private pointers to such structures.

field types are only dependent on other fields of the same structure. Furthermore, globals cannot be `private` and structures cannot contain explicitly `private` fields, as having a non-private pointer to a structure with a private field would be unsound. The `DEPENDENT` rule requires that the leader of a group uses itself as leader.

Reading or writing lvalue ℓ (`READ`, `WRITE`) requires three sets of runtime checks. First, if $\ell = x.f$ we must enforce x 's sharing mode. Second, we must ensure that the lvalues denoting the assignment's source and target group match after the assignment. Third, the function `D` adds runtime checks to ensure that any variables or fields dependent on the assignment's target ℓ' are null before the assignment, as the assignment would otherwise be unsound. The scoping rules enforced in `GLOBAL`, `STRUCTDEF` and `THREAD` make these checks tractable: if $\ell' = x.f$, fields dependent on f must be in the same structure instance, while variables dependent on $\ell' = x$ must be variables of the same function. Finally, these checks remain sound even in the presence of concurrent updates by other threads: variables cannot be modified by other threads, while the runtime check ω that enforces $\ell = x.f$'s sharing mode also guarantees that any other fields of x can be accessed without races.

A group cast of y can be performed if y is the only reference to the target object. Because the group cast nulls-out y , the dependent-type restrictions (`D`) must hold for y , as in a regular assignment to y .

3.2 Operational Semantics

The parallel operational semantics of Figure 9 models the fine-grained interleaving of threads in a shared memory setting. The shared memory $M : \mathbb{N}^+ \rightarrow \rho \times \mathbb{N} \times \mathbb{N} \times (\text{name} \rightarrow \mathbb{N})$ maps a cell's address to its runtime type, owner, locker, and value. The runtime types ρ are of the form $m\langle a \rangle t$, where a is the address of the cell's group leader. The owner is the thread identifier (an integer) that owns the cell if it's sharing mode is `private`. The locker is the thread identifier that currently holds a lock on the cell, or 0 if the cell is unlocked. Finally, the value is a map from field names to cell addresses. We use the notation $M_\rho(a)$, $M_o(a)$, $M_L(a)$ and $M_v(a)$ to denote respectively the type, owner, locker and value of cell a , while $M[a \xrightarrow{\rho} \rho]$, $M[a \xrightarrow{o} n]$, $M[a \xrightarrow{L} n]$ and $M[a \xrightarrow{v} v]$ represent the corresponding updates to cell a . For convenience, we also write $M_v(a.f)$ and $M_\rho(a.f)$ to return respectively the value and type of field f of cell a , and $M[a.f \xrightarrow{v} b]$ to update field f of cell a . Note that $M_\rho(a.f)$ returns the static type τ of field f , not the runtime type of cell $M_v(a.f)$.

Thread identifiers are simply the address of a memory cell whose value is a map of the thread's variable names to their values. States of the operational semantics are of the form

$$M, (id_1, s_1), \dots, (id_n, s_n)$$

representing a computation whose memory is M and which has n threads, each identified by address id_i and about to execute s_i . To handle thread creation, each thread definition f is represented by a *prototype thread* of the form $(id_f, \text{wait}; s_f)$ where s_f is the body of thread f and $M(id_f)$ is a memory cell with the initial state of f 's variables: $M_v(id_f.x)$ is null for all local variables of f and a pointer to the preallocated structure instance o_x for global variable x .

Transitions between states are defined with a number of helper judgments and functions:

- $M, id : s \xrightarrow{s} M'$: execution of simple statement s by thread id updates the memory M to M' .
- $M, id \models \omega$ holds if runtime check ω is valid.
- $\text{lval}(M, id, \ell)$ converts a static lvalue ℓ of thread id to a runtime lvalue of the form $a.f$ (field f of cell a), and is undefined if ℓ requires dereferencing a null pointer.

$\vdash P \Rightarrow P'$	P' is identical to P except for runtime checks that ensure P' 's sound execution.
---------------------------	---

(DEFINITIONS)	(GLOBAL)
$\frac{\vdash \Delta_1 \Rightarrow \Delta'_1 \quad \vdash \Delta_2 \Rightarrow \Delta'_2}{\vdash \Delta_1; \Delta_2 \Rightarrow \Delta'_1; \Delta'_2}$	$\frac{\Gamma_G \vdash m\langle y \rangle t \quad m \neq \text{private}}{\vdash x : m\langle y \rangle t \Rightarrow x : m\langle y \rangle t}$

(STRUCTDEF)
$\frac{[f_1 : \phi_1, \dots, f_n : \phi_n] \vdash \phi_i \quad \phi_i \neq \text{private}\langle f \rangle u}{\vdash t : (f_1 : \phi_1, \dots, f_n : \phi_n) \Rightarrow t : (f_1 : \phi_1, \dots, f_n : \phi_n)}$

(THREAD)
$\frac{\Gamma = \Gamma_G[x_1 : \tau_1, \dots, x_n : \tau_n] \quad \Gamma \vdash \tau_i \quad \Gamma \vdash s \Rightarrow s'}{\vdash f : \{x_1 : \tau_1, \dots, x_n : \tau_n; s\} \Rightarrow f : \{x_1 : \tau_1, \dots, x_n : \tau_n; s'\}}$

$\Gamma \vdash \phi$	Type ϕ is valid in environment Γ .
----------------------	--

(SAME)	(DEPENDENT)
$\frac{t \in T}{\Gamma \vdash t}$	$\frac{\Gamma(x) = m\langle x \rangle u \quad t \in T}{\Gamma \vdash m\langle x \rangle t}$

$\Gamma \vdash \ell : \tau, \omega$	In environment Γ , ℓ is a well-typed lvalue with type τ assuming ω holds.
-------------------------------------	---

(NAME)	(SAME FIELD)
$\frac{\Gamma(x) = m\langle y \rangle t}{\Gamma \vdash x : m\langle y \rangle t, \epsilon}$	$\frac{\Gamma(x) = m\langle y \rangle t \quad t(f) = t'}{\Gamma \vdash x.f : m\langle y \rangle t', m(x)}$

(DEPENDENT FIELD)
$\frac{\Gamma(x) = m\langle x \rangle t \quad t(f) = m'\langle g \rangle t'}{\Gamma \vdash x.f : m'\langle x, g \rangle t', m(x)}$

$\Gamma \vdash s \Rightarrow s'$	In environment Γ statement s compiles to s' , which is identical to s except for added runtime checks.
----------------------------------	---

(NEW)
$\frac{\Gamma(x) = \tau}{\Gamma \vdash x := \text{new} \Rightarrow x := \text{new} \text{ when } D(\Gamma, x)}$

(GROUP CAST)
$\frac{x \neq y \quad \Gamma(x) = \tau \quad \Gamma(y) = m'\langle y \rangle t}{\Gamma \vdash x := \text{gcast } y \Rightarrow x := \text{gcast } y \text{ when } \text{oneref}(x), D(\Gamma, x), D(\Gamma, y)}$

(READ)
$\frac{\Gamma(x) = m\langle x' \rangle t \quad \Gamma \vdash \ell : m\langle \ell' \rangle t, \omega}{\Gamma \vdash x := \ell \Rightarrow x := \ell \text{ when } \omega, x'[\ell/x] = \ell', D(\Gamma, x)}$

(WRITE)
$\frac{\Gamma \vdash x.f : m\langle \ell \rangle t, \omega \quad \Gamma(y) = m\langle y' \rangle t}{\Gamma \vdash x.f := y \Rightarrow x.f := y \text{ when } \omega, \ell[y/x.f] = y', D(\Gamma, x.f)}$

Runtime checks for dependent-type assignments

$$D(\Gamma, x) = \{y = \text{null} \mid x \neq y \wedge \Gamma(y) = m\langle x \rangle t\}$$

$$D(\Gamma, x.f) = \{x.g = \text{null} \mid \Gamma(x) = m\langle y \rangle t \wedge f \neq g \wedge t(g) = m\langle f \rangle t\}$$

Figure 8. Typing judgments. We omit the straightforward rules for non-assignment statements.

$$\begin{array}{l}
M, id : \text{lock } x \xrightarrow{s} M[M_v(id.x) \xrightarrow{L} id] \text{ if } M_L(M_v(id.x)) = 0 \\
M, id : \text{unlock } x \xrightarrow{s} M[M_v(id.x) \xrightarrow{L} 0] \text{ if } M_L(M_v(id.x)) = id \\
M, id : x := \text{new} \xrightarrow{s} \text{extend}(M[id.x \xrightarrow{v} a], id, a, \text{rtype}(M[id.x \xrightarrow{v} a]), id, M_\rho(id.x)) \text{ where } a = \max(\text{dom}(M)) + 1 \\
M, id : x := \text{gcast } y \xrightarrow{s} \text{gcast}(M', id, c, \text{rtype}(M', id, M_\rho(id.x))) \text{ where } c = M_v(id.y), M' = M[id.x \xrightarrow{v} c, id.y \xrightarrow{v} 0] \\
M, id : \ell := \ell' \xrightarrow{s} M[lval(\ell) \xrightarrow{v} M_v(lval(\ell'))]
\end{array}$$

$$\begin{array}{c}
\frac{M_v(lval(\ell)) = M_v(lval(\ell'))}{M, id \models \ell = \ell'} \quad \frac{M_v(lval(\ell)) = 0}{M, id \models \ell = \text{null}} \quad \frac{}{M, id \models \text{private}(x)} \quad \frac{M_L(M_v(id.x)) = id}{M, id \models \text{locked}(x)} \quad \frac{\{|b.f|M_v(b.f) = M_v(id.x)\} = 1}{M, id \models \text{oneref}(x)} \\
\text{(SIMPLE STATEMENT)} \quad \text{(RUNTIME CHECK)} \\
\frac{M, id : s_1 \xrightarrow{s} M'}{M, \{(id, s_1; s_2)\} \oplus S \rightarrow M', \{(id, s_2)\} \cup S} \quad \frac{M, id \models \omega_1}{M, \{(id, \ell := e \text{ when } \omega_1, \omega_2 \dots, \omega_n; s)\} \oplus S \rightarrow M, \{(id, \ell := e \text{ when } \omega_2 \dots, \omega_n; s)\} \cup S} \\
\text{(THREAD CREATION)} \quad \text{(THREAD DESTRUCTION)} \\
\frac{id' = \max(\text{dom}(M)) + 1 \quad M' = \text{extend}(M, id', id', M_\rho(id_f)) \quad M'' = M'[id' \xrightarrow{v} M_v(id_f)]}{M, \{(id, \text{spawn } f(); s), (id_f, \text{wait}; s_f)\} \oplus S \rightarrow M'', \{(id', s_f; \text{done}), (id, s), (id_f, \text{wait}; s_f)\} \cup S} \quad \frac{M' = M \setminus id}{M, \{(id, \text{done})\} \oplus S \rightarrow M', S} \\
\begin{array}{l}
lval(M, id, x) = id.x \quad lval(M, id, x.f) = M_v(id.x).f \text{ if } M_v(id.x) \neq 0 \\
\text{rtype}(M, id, m < x > t) = m < M_v(id.x) > t \\
\text{extend}(M, id, a, \rho) = M[a \rightarrow (\rho, id, 0, \lambda f.0)] \\
\text{gcast}(M, id, c, \rho) = M' \text{ where } \begin{cases} M'_\rho(a) = \rho \text{ if } M_\rho(a) = m' < c > t \wedge c \neq 0, M_\rho(a) \text{ otherwise} \\ M'_o(a) = id \text{ if } M_\rho(a) = m' < c > t \wedge c \neq 0, M_o(a) \text{ otherwise} \\ M'_v(a) = M_v(a), M'_L(a) = M_L(a) \end{cases}
\end{array}
\end{array}$$

Figure 9. Operational semantics.

- $\text{rtype}(M, id, \tau)$ converts a static type τ of thread id to the corresponding runtime type ρ .
- $\text{extend}(M, id, \rho)$ represents allocation of a cell of runtime type ρ by thread id .
- $\text{gcast}(M, id, c, \rho)$ performs a group cast to ρ in thread id of the group whose leader is $M(c)$.

The rules are mostly straightforward, but a few points are worth noting. We use \oplus to denote disjoint union ($A = B \oplus C \Rightarrow B \cap C = \emptyset$). Individual runtime checks are executed atomically, but involve at most one lvalue of the form $x.f$. Other threads may execute between runtime checks and between the checks and the assignment they protect. The $\text{oneref}(x)$ check is computed by heap inspection, but we implement it in practice using reference-counting. We could exclude non-dependent fields from $\text{oneref}(x)$ check, this would correspond to not reference-counting **same** pointers.

A group cast of a variable y whose value is null should have no effect. To ensure this, gcast never updates cells whose type is $m < 0 > t$. Effectively, group 0 corresponds to our `nogroup` C-level annotation: once in group 0, you can no longer be subject to a group cast. Our formalism does allow casts to group 0, and allocations in group 0. Finally, and most importantly, the type and owner fields of M are not required in an actual implementation, thus gcast has no runtime cost.

3.3 Soundness

We have proved [2] the following theorems, that show that type safety is preserved and that the program respects the behavior specified by the sharing mode declarations.

THEOREM 1. Soundness. Let P be a program with $\vdash P \Rightarrow P'$ and M_0, S_0 be the initial memory and threads for program P' . Let $M, \{(id_1, s_1), \dots, (id_n, s_n)\}$ be a state reachable in i steps from

M_0, S_0 . Then types and owners are consistent in M , and all statements s_i typecheck.

THEOREM 2. Safety of private accesses. During the execution of a program P' such that $\vdash P \Rightarrow P'$, if thread id writes to cell a with type $M_\rho(a) = \text{private} < b > t$ then $M_o(a) = id$.

THEOREM 3. Safety of Locked accesses. During the execution of a program P' such that $\vdash P \Rightarrow P'$, if thread id writes to cell a with type $M_\rho(a) = \text{locked} < b > t$ then $M_L(a) = id$.

4. Evaluation

We applied Shoal to 5 interesting applications, the largest of which approaches 1 million lines of code. All but one of these benchmarks use multithreading to improve performance; we have included in our benchmarks a webserver that uses a thread pool to serve clients in parallel and hide I/O latency.

None of the benchmarks required more than a few days to make sufficient annotations to suppress a small number of false error reports and achieve good performance. The amount of human program understanding required to make these annotations is not especially burdensome.

The goal of these experiments is to show that Shoal allows practical checking of data sharing in a substantially wider range of programs than it would be able to without groups, while maintaining low overhead. In the course of running our benchmarks, we found no bugs, and the only sharing errors found were benign data races on flags used for condition variables. These races would at worst cause a thread to needlessly call a `condition_wait()` function an extra time. For these flags we used Shoal's `racy` annotation to suppress the false error reports. It is not surprising that we did not find more serious bugs because our testing of the benchmark applica-

Name	Conc.	Benchmark			Max Group	Performance	
		Lines	Anns.	Casts		Orig.	Shoal
ebarnes	2	3k	60	16	16384	6.26s	38%
em3d-s	2	1k	42	2	100000	3.59s	42%
knot	3	5k	60	17	75	0.69s	19%
eog	4	38k	67	38	20	1.42s	6%
GIMP	4	936k	37	32	8	9.67s	13%

Table 1. Benchmarks for Shoal. For each test we show the maximum number of threads running concurrently(Conc.), the size of the benchmark including comments (Lines), the number of annotations we added (Anns.), sharing casts required (Casts), and the maximum size of a group in a run of the benchmark. We also report the time overhead caused by Shoal

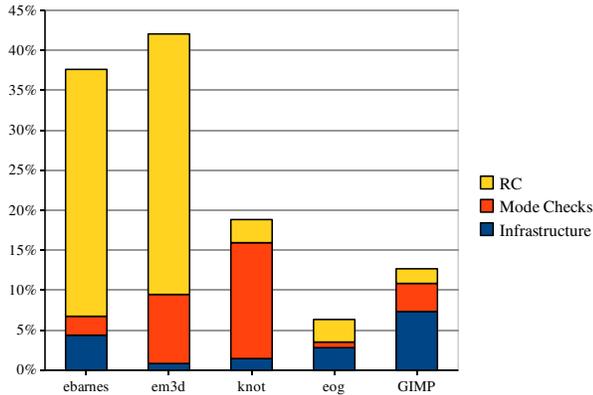


Figure 10. The breakdown of overheads in Shoal. For each benchmark, we show the cost of reference counting(RC), the dynamic checks for sharing modes (Mode Checks), and the cost of using our compiler front-end and infrastructure.

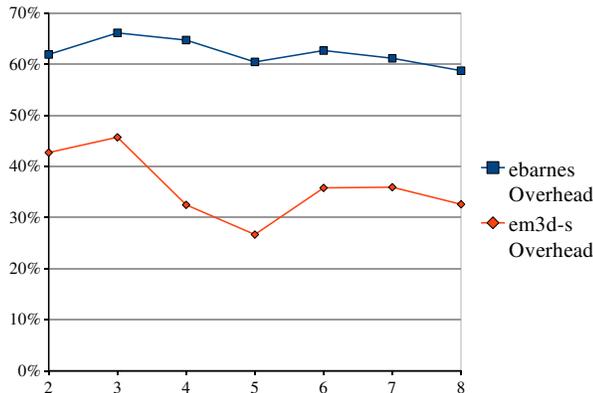


Figure 11. The overhead incurred by Shoal as the number of threads increases and the workload remains fixed for the ebarnes and em3d-s benchmarks.

tions was intended only to measure the performance overhead seen in typical use-cases.

4.1 Implementation

We extended the static type system of SharC to include our `group()` and same annotations. Further, we added our group cast operation, and extended the dynamic analysis with the null checks required by our dependent group types. We also implemented the `barrier` mode by generalizing SharC’s existing dynamic analysis.

We reduced the additional annotation burden presented by the addition of groups by automatically applying common default annotations to unannotated objects. First, the default group annotation on pointer types that need one is `nogroup`. This way, the programmer must only annotate objects needing a group annotation if they may eventually be involved in a group cast. Secondly, the default annotation on structure fields in objects that may be subject to a group cast is `same`. This prevents SharC from forbidding casts of these structures.

4.2 Benchmarks

The results of our experiments are reported in Table 1. The figures we report are averages over 50 runs of each benchmark. These experiments were performed on a machine with a dual core 2GHz Intel® Xeon® 5130 processor with 2GB of memory. Excepting the scientific benchmarks, the runtime overhead imposed by Shoal is less than 20%. The higher overhead in the scientific benchmarks is due to reference count updates in the inner loops. We also observed a reasonable annotation burden, ranging from one annotation or cast per 25 lines in the small benchmarks to less than one per 10 000 lines on the largest.

Ebarnes was presented in Section 2.7. Em3d-s is another adapted Split-C scientific program that models the propagation of electromagnetic waves through objects in three dimensions. In this simulation the system is modeled as a bipartite graph. One partition models the electric field, and the other partition models the magnetic field. At the beginning of the simulation the graph is constructed privately to one thread. Then, a sharing cast is used to indicate that the graph is shared with other threads with accesses synchronized by barriers. To allow the sharing mode of the entire graph to change, the nodes and edges form a group whose leader is the structure containing pointers to the lists of nodes and edges.

Knot [30] is a simple multithreaded webserver. It maintains a thread pool for processing client requests. The threads share an in-memory cache of the files on disk. The cache is implemented as a hash table and is protected by a lock. Each call to the hash table API is made while the lock is held. Therefore, we cast the entire hash table to `private` before passing it to the hash table functions. The primary advantage of this approach is that it allows the hash table API to be used both in single-threaded and multi-threaded contexts. The benchmark for knot involves two clients simultaneously making 10k requests for small files that fit entirely

in the in-memory cache. The webserver and clients both ran on the same host. The goal of this setup is to minimize the extent to which the benchmark is I/O bound. The overhead for knot in Table 1 is reported as the percent increase in CPU utilization. However, runtime for the benchmark did not increase significantly, nor did the throughput decrease significantly. Because the sharing mode of the entire in-memory cache changes from locked to private and back, the hash table data structure used for the cache forms a single group along with all cache entries. The hash table object containing pointers to the array used for the hash table and other metadata is the group leader.

Eog is the Eye-of-Gnome image manipulation program distributed with the Gnome desktop environment. It can open, display, and rotate many different image formats. Eog uses threads to hide the latency of the operations performed on images from the user interface. These operations include loading and saving images, transforming them, and creating image thumbnails. The GUI places “Job” data structures in a lock protected queue. When worker threads take jobs off of the queue, they must cast the entire Job data structure, which contains the image, and image metadata, to the private mode. Each Job structure and the objects to which it has pointers are placed in a group with the Job structure itself being the group leader. For this benchmark we measured the CPU time needed to open an image, rotate it, and then save it back to disk.

The GIMP is also an image manipulation program, but with many more features than Eye-of-Gnome. In particular, it is scriptable, and capable of many more sophisticated image transformations. On loading an image, the GIMP divides it up into distinct sections, which are stored in data structures called “Tiles.” To perform a transformation, the GIMP creates a thread pool and an iterator over tiles that is protected by a lock. When a tile is in the iterator it is in the locked mode, but when a thread removes it from the iterator it casts it to the private mode. The Tile object contains pointers that would be cumbersome to cast individually, so each Tile object and the objects to which it has pointers are made a group with the Tile object itself being the group leader. For this benchmark, we wrote a script that opened an image, performed 20 separate “Blur” operations, and then saved the image back to disk.

4.3 Scaling

In order to see how Shoal scales with the number of threads, we ran the two scientific benchmarks on a server machine with 4GB of memory and two quad-core Intel® Xeon® E5462 processors running at 2.8GHz. As shown in Figure 11, we observed that the overhead incurred by our system did not increase significantly as the number of threads ranged from two to eight while the workload was held constant. The difference in relative overhead on this machine vs the dual core machine used in the main experiments is due to differential speedup in the application and overhead: absolute overhead for both ebares and em3d-s decreased by 30%, as expected from the clock speed increase, while the application code sped up by 51%–59%, much more than the clock speed increase. We suspect, though have not confirmed, that the application code gets an extra advantage from the larger L2 cache (2x6MB vs 4MB) and memory bus speed (1600MHz vs 1333MHz).

The main scaling bottleneck in Shoal is that only one thread may be computing a reference count at any time. This could impact programs performing many group or sharing casts. However, this effect was not observed in our experiments.

4.4 Sources of Overhead

Figure 10 shows the sources of performance overhead for our benchmarks. They are broken down into concurrent reference counting, the Shoal runtime checks, and various infrastructure

costs. Infrastructure costs are incurred by the use of the CIL [22] compiler front end⁵, a custom malloc implementation needed for concurrent reference counting, and the need to null out pointers on allocation for soundness reasons.

We observe substantial reference counting overhead in the ebares and em3d-s benchmarks due to the reference count updates needed when building and traversing the oct-trees and graph respectively. In eog and the GIMP, the overall low overhead makes the cost of our custom runtime more apparent.

4.5 The Need for Groups

In Table 1, we also report the maximum size of a group in each of our benchmarks. We interpret group size to be a rough measure of how costly it would be to port a program to SharC without groups, both in terms of performance and programmer effort. This interpretation is justified in the following ways. Without groups, it would be necessary to cast each object in a group individually. In order to meet the single reference requirement for the sharing cast, it is necessary to completely remove an object from a data structure before casting it. If a data structure has cycles, the code to perform this operation can be complex, and goes far beyond the low level of effort needed to annotate a program. Further, the additional data structure traversal, reconstruction, and reference counts would cause additional programmer and performance overhead.

5. Related Work

The most closely related work is our paper describing the original SharC system [1]. This paper described our extensions to SharC’s type system with support for handling complex data structures. Many other researchers have investigated both type systems for describing aggregates of objects, and methods for making concurrent programs safe.

5.1 Ownership and Region Type Systems

Ownership types have been used to statically enforce properties such as object encapsulation, race-freedom, and memory safety [4]. An ownership type system statically guarantees that every object has a unique owner and that the ownership relation is a forest of trees. The type system allows multiple pointers to an object but statically checks that only the pointer from its owner has special privileges. For instance, an ownership type system for object encapsulation prevents unrestricted accesses to an object by checking that all accesses happen via the pointer from its owner [6]. Likewise, an ownership type system for race-freedom requires each access to an object o to be protected by a lock held on its *root* owner, which is the object at the root of the tree in the ownership relation forest that contains o [5]. Finally, an ownership type system can be combined with a region type system and used for region-based memory management [7] in which each object is allocated in the same region as its owner. The resulting type system is more restrictive and enforces memory safety by forbidding pointers from outside the region to objects inside the region which enables it to safely free all objects in the region whenever the region handle is freed. Further, dynamic analyses have been developed to help programmers visualize ownership relationships in their programs [24]. In these systems, instead of requiring programmers to annotate instances of encapsulation, which is the common case, the programmer is shown the cases in which encapsulation is violated, which is typically less common.

The relationship of a group leader to objects in its group is analogous to that of an owner to objects it owns. Groups however

⁵ Using the CIL front end can cause changes in performance. CIL performs some transformations (e.g. introducing additional temporary variables) that can both enable and prevent certain C compiler optimizations.

are more general in that objects can be added to or removed from them and group leaders can change dynamically, in contrast to the ownership relation, which cannot be changed dynamically. We have found that this ability is crucial for applying an ownership-like system to large C programs.

Region type systems have strong similarities to groups: they use types to identify a collection of objects, and allow global operations (typically deallocation) to be performed on that group. RC [16] is the closest to our groups: it uses reference counting to track pointers into regions, and has a `sameregion` qualifier to identify pointers that stay within a region. However, as with other regions systems, region membership is fixed at allocation time and tracked explicitly at runtime, regions cannot be merged and `sameregion` is mostly a performance hint to avoid the need for reference-counting. Tofte and Talpin’s statically checked region type system [29] places further restrictions on region lifetimes and pointers between regions: essentially, region lifetimes are nested and pointers are only allowed from longer-lived regions to shorter-lived regions, but not vice-versa. Crary and Walker’s [10] use of capabilities relaxes these restrictions somewhat, but still does not allow unrestricted pointers between regions. Effectively, Shoal’s use of reference-counting allows a runtime-check to recover the linearity property of a group (region) reference that the static type systems must ensure at compile-time.

The authors of Cyclone [18] note the similarity in their type system between types for region membership and types for lock protection. Indeed, they go so far as providing a shorthand for when objects in the same region are protected by the same lock. Shoal expands on this idea by allowing objects belonging to the same data structure (which may be unrelated with respect to memory allocation concerns) to be related not only by locking, but also a variety of mechanisms for safe concurrency. Further, we note that Shoal would likely benefit from some of the polymorphism in Cyclone’s type system, but we leave this extension for future work.

5.2 Safe Concurrency Checking

There has been much work on finding concurrency related bugs in multi-threaded programs. Researchers have attempted to find and prevent data races, and atomicity violations, using both static [21, 25, 15, 23, 31, 13, 18, 20] and dynamic [26, 33, 12, 14, 8] analysis. SharC differs from these approaches because it attempts to find violations of a programmer specified sharing strategy rather than searching for violations using lock-set or happens-before based heuristics. The original SharC paper discusses in detail its relation to these traditional concurrency checking methods.

We also wish to mention a few other related projects. First, race freedom can be checked by translation to a linear program based on fractional capabilities [28]. Since linear programming instances can be solved in parallel, this technique may be able to scale to large programs. However, the possibly substantial collection of warnings may be difficult to investigate because analysis results do not indicate what locks may be held at each program point. Shoal scales to large programs, and gives detailed error reports.

Some other tools are also guided by programmer annotations. LockLint [11] is a static system that checks that locks are used consistently to protect program variables. It uses annotations to suppress false warnings, to describe hierarchical locking, and procedure side-effects, and as documentation. Further, the Fluid Project [17] has investigated a system for Java that allows a programmer to make annotations describing hierarchical regions, aliasing intent, and a locking strategy that can apply to regions, among other annotations. Shoal differs from these systems primarily because it allows the sharing mode for data structures to change through sharing and group casts as the program executes.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, we have presented groups, a lightweight mechanism for describing properties of data structures, and applied groups to checking data sharing strategies in several multithreaded C programs. An important feature of our system is the group cast, which allows the programmer to describe where in the program the properties of a group change. For instance, in many of the C programs we examined, data structures switch between stages where they are protected by locks and stages where they are private to a single thread. We have proved the soundness of groups, and implemented Shoal, our group-based sharing checker as an extension to the earlier SharC system. We are able to check the correctness of sharing in our benchmarks with reasonable overhead (6%–42%) and a reasonable annotation burden.

Our formalism for groups is not strongly tied to the concept of a sharing mode. In the future, we plan to investigate further uses of groups, including memory management and tracking user-specified properties like tainting. We also wish to continue improving Shoal, to reduce concurrent reference counting overhead, to be able to describe and check more kinds of sharing, such as double-checked locking [27] and to be able to check more kinds of sharing statically, rather than, like `barrier`, dynamically.

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