AN EXTENDED IMPOSSIBILITY RESULT
FOR ASYNCHRONOUS COMPLETE NETWORKS

by

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ABSTRACT

It is proved that a large class of distributed tasks cannot be solved in presence of faulty processors. This class contains tasks whose unsolvability in presence of faults is known (the consensus task and its variants, cf. [FLP]) as well as some new tasks. In particular, we introduce the notion of decision graph of a task, and show that every problem whose decision graph is disconnected cannot be solved in the presence of one faulty processor, by reducing the unsolvability of this problem to the unsolvability of the consensus problem. The notion of unsolvability used here is very weak: We say that a protocol solves a given problem if in any execution it satisfies (1) all non faulty processors eventually halt, and (2) if no processor is faulty, it solves the problem. Hence, the unsolvability of a problem in this model implies its unsolvability in other models appearing in the literature.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The model under investigation is an asynchronous network of \( N \) processors, where each processor has a unique identity. Processors communicate by exchanging messages along communication links.

System reliability is a factor of crucial effect on the complexity of distributed tasks in asynchronous networks. A great amount of effort has been spent in attempts to understand the nature of that effect as well as in devising fault tolerant protocols (cf. [DDS,DLS,FLP,KW,ISP]).

We investigate the performability of a common type of distributed tasks, namely, decision tasks, in presence of faulty processors. We assume that failures may occur without any warning: a failed processor sends no messages, may not recover and its failure is undetectable (fail-stop).

A decision task is a function that maps each input vector, that is, a vector composed of initial values assigned to the processors, to a subset of decision (output) vectors. For example, the consensus task and the election task are typical decision tasks.

A protocol solves a decision task in spite of one fault if, in any execution of the protocol the following holds:

1. If no processor is faulty, the execution terminates and the eventual decision vector agrees with the task function.
2. If at-most one processor is faulty, all non-faulty processors eventually halt.

We obtain an impossibility result for a large class of decision tasks in presence of faults, in the sense that no protocol designed to accomplish such task is guaranteed to ever terminate in presence of one faulty processor. That class contains tasks whose unsolvability in presence of faults is known (the consensus task and its variants, cf. [FLP]) as well as some new tasks, e.g. constructing a spanning tree.

The rest of this paper is organized as follows. The model of computation, decision tasks, protocols and unreliability are defined in section 2. In section 3 we prove our impossibility result. A summary and conclusions are finally given in section 4.
2. DEFINITIONS

2.1 The Model

An asynchronous distributed system $S$ is a network of $N$ ($N \geq 2$) asynchronous processors where each processor has a unique identity.

The system is viewed as an undirected graph $S = (V, E)$ where $V = \{p_1, p_2, \ldots, p_N\}$ is the set of processors and $E$ is the set of communication links connecting them. Processors communicate by sending each other messages along the communication links. Each processor knows the identity of the processor on the other end of each of its incident links. We assume that messages arrive with no error in a finite but unbounded and unpredictable time.

2.2 Decision Tasks

A decision task for a given network is a task where a decision is to be taken by the network, based on input values given to the processors. The decision consists of the decision values of all the processors, and belongs to a pre-defined set of possible decisions. The consensus task, where all processors are to decide on the same value, and the election task, in which exactly one processor is to decide on an "election value", are typical decision tasks.

We now give a more precise definition of decision tasks. Let $X$ and $D$ be sets of input values and decision values, respectively. A distributed decision task $T$ for a network of $N$ processors is a mapping $T : X^N \rightarrow 2^D$, which maps each $N$-tuple in $X^N$ to a subset of $N$-tuples in $D^N$. An input vector $\vec{x} \in X^N$ is of the form $\vec{x} = (x_1, x_2, \ldots, x_N)$ where $x_i$ is the input value of processor $p_i$. Similarly, a decision vector $\vec{d} \in D^N$ as a vector $\vec{d} = (d_1, d_2, \ldots, d_N)$ where $d_i$ is the decision value computed by processor $p_i$. A decision task represents, for each input vector given from some outside source, the allowable decision vectors. The set of different decision vectors in the range of $T$ is called the decision set of $T$, and is denoted by $D_T$.

Following are some examples of decision tasks.

(1) Spanning Tree. In this task, the input for each processor is a list of its incident links. The decision value of each processor is a set of links incident to that processor in a certain spanning tree of the network.
(2) Consensus. In this task the input set is \{0,1\}, and all the processors must agree on the same output bit. It is also required that for some input the processors agree on 0, and for a different input they agree on 1. The corresponding decision set is \{(1,1,\ldots,1),(0,0,\ldots,0)\}

(3) \(\epsilon\)-Approximate Agreement [DLPSW, DLS]. In this task each processor is assigned an initial real value, and the decision vector satisfies the following two conditions:

\textit{Agreement}: The decision values of the processors are within \(\epsilon\) of each other.

\textit{Validity}: The decision value of each processor must be in the range of the initial values of the processors.

The decision set of this task is the set of all real vectors \((d_1,\ldots,d_N)\) satisfying \(|d_i - d_j| \leq \epsilon\) for all \(1\leq i,j \leq N\).

(4) Election. In this task the input vector consists of \(N\) distinct integers, and exactly one processor is to decide "1" while all other processors are to decide "0". The corresponding decision set is

\[
\{(1,0,0,\ldots,0), (0,1,0,0,\ldots,0), \ldots, (0,0,\ldots,0,1)\};
\]

A well known version of this task is to elect the processor having the largest input. In this version, an input vector where \(x_i\) is the largest component is mapped to a single output vector where \(d_i=1\) and \(d_j=0\) for all \(j \neq i\).

(5) Ranking. In this task an input vector consists of \(N\) distinct integers. Each input vector is mapped to a single output vector, where the value of each component is the rank of the corresponding input component. The corresponding decision set is \(\{\vec{d} \mid \vec{d} \text{ is a permutation of } (1,2,\ldots,N)\}\).

2.3 Protocols

A protocol (also referred to as a distributed algorithm elsewhere) for a given network is a set of \(N\) programs, each associated with a single processor in the network. Within a protocol each processor acts deterministically according to its program, which includes operations of

1) sending a message to a neighbor along a communication link,
2) receiving a message, and
3) processing information in its local memory. A processor that has completed its program is said to halt. Halting is always associated with writing a decision value.
A configuration of the system consists of the memory contents of each processor (including the program counter's value) together with the messages that were sent to that processor but not yet received. An initial configuration is one in which each processor is assigned an input value and none has started its program; note that an initial configuration is defined by an input vector. A configuration is final if all processors have halted; a final configuration defines a decision vector. Note that in a non-final configuration, the values of some components of the eventual decision vector are not yet defined. Call such components B-components, and call a vector with B-components a partial decision vector.

Let $\mathbf{d}_1$ be a decision vector. A partial decision vector $\mathbf{d}_2$ is extendible to $\mathbf{d}_1$ if it is possible to obtain $\mathbf{d}_1$ by replacing all the B-components of $\mathbf{d}_2$ by appropriate decision values.

An execution of a protocol $P$ is a sequence of events, each being either sending a message, receiving a message or doing some local computation. A protocol $P$ solves a task $T$ if in every execution of $P$, the eventual decision vector agrees with the function defined by $T$.

### 2.4 System Unreliability

Decision tasks are accomplishable provided that the corresponding function is computable and the participating processors are completely reliable. Real systems, however, may be subject to processor faults. In this section we discuss the impact of unreliability on decision tasks in presence of faults.

First, we define the notion of failure (fail-stop): A processor is faulty in an execution if all messages sent by that processor after a certain time are destroyed.

Since the model is fully asynchronous, in the sense that no assumptions are made about message delays, there is no way a processor can detect the failure of another processor, nor is there any way to tell whether the latter is faulty or its messages are delayed. This fact is of crucial effect on the performability of various tasks in unreliable distributed systems. For example, assume that there is an election protocol that whenever at most one processor fails, halts with exactly one processor elected (i.e., outputs "1"), and consider the following scenario: The protocol is executed, and some processor outputs "1". However, all messages sent by that processor informing the network about its election are delayed. In this case, the network cannot decide whether this processor already output "1" or not, and hence whether a
leader was already elected or not. It follows that the protocol cannot guarantee that exactly one processor will be elected in the presence of a faulty processor.

Consequently, we focus our attention to a weaker form of solvability in presence of faults, as follows. Let $T$ be a decision task. A protocol $P$ solves $T$ in spite of one fault if the following hold for any execution of $P$:

1. If no processor is faulty, then $P$ solves $T$.
2. If at most one processor is faulty, then all non-faulty processors eventually halt.

A decision task is solvable in spite of one fault if there exist a protocol that solves that task in spite of one fault.

3. AN IMPOSSIBILITY RESULT

In this section we prove an impossibility result for a large class of decision tasks. We proceed with some further definitions.

Let $T$ be a decision task and $D_T$ be $T$'s decision set. Two decision vectors $\vec{d}_1, \vec{d}_2 \in D_T$ are adjacent if $\vec{d}_1$ and $\vec{d}_2$ differ in the value of a single component only. Define the decision graph of $T$ as $G_T=(D_T,E_T)$ where $E_T=\{ (\vec{d}_1, \vec{d}_2) \mid \vec{d}_1, \vec{d}_2 \text{ are adjacent vectors in } D_T \}$. $T$ is disconnected if its decision graph is not connected.

For example, consensus tasks whose decision set is

\[
\{ (1,1, \cdots, 1), (0,0, \cdots, 0) \}
\]

and election tasks whose decision set is

\[
\{ (1,0,0, \cdots, 0), (0,1,0, \cdots, 0), \cdots, (0,0, \cdots, 0,1) \}
\]

are disconnected. Another example is the spanning tree (ST) task. In this task, any $N-1$ decision values correspond to a set of ST-edges covered by $N-1$ nodes, which must be the complete set of the ST. Yet another example is the ranking task. In all these examples, the decision graphs contain no edges. On the other hand, one can verify that the decision graph of the approximate agreement task is connected.

We show in the sequel that no disconnected decision task is solvable in spite of one fault.

In our result we make use of a theorem proved by Fischer, Lynch and Paterson [FLP], restated below in terms of our model (the theorem applies here although our model slightly
differs from the model of Fischer et al.).

**Theorem 1.** [FLP]

No protocol solves the consensus task in spite of one fault.

Our impossibility result is proved assuming that the topology of the system is a complete graph, where any two processors have a communication link connecting them. Thus, it holds for a distributed system of arbitrary topology, since assuming completeness of the underlying graph serves to strengthen the model. Furthermore, since the result is established assuming that (only) one processor is faulty, it holds for an arbitrary number of faulty processors.

First, we bring two lemmas. These lemmas describe properties of decision tasks, to be used in the proof of the impossibility result.

**Lemma 1.**

Let $T$ be a decision task and suppose that there exists a protocol $P$ that solves $T$ in spite of one fault. Consider an execution of $P$ in presence of one faulty processor. Eventually, the system will enter a configuration whose corresponding (partial) decision vector is extendible to a decision vector of $T$.

**Proof.**

Since the protocol solves $T$ in spite of one fault, eventually all non-faulty processors will halt. Suppose that the partial decision vector achieved is not extendible to a decision vector of $T$. As far as the non-faulty processors are concerned, that execution is indistinguishable from another execution, in which the remaining processor is not faulty, but all messages sent by that processor are delayed until all other processors halt. In that execution, when the remaining processor halts the achieved decision vector is not a decision of $T$, which contradicts the assumption that the protocol solves $T$ in spite of one fault.
components of $\overline{d}$ uniquely determine the connected component of $\overline{d}$ in $G_T$.

**Proof.**

A set of $N-1$ decision components of $\overline{d}$ can be viewed as a partial decision vector with exactly one $B$-component. Consider two such sets, and let $\overline{d}_1$ and $\overline{d}_2$ be the corresponding partial decision vectors. Let $\overline{e}_1$ and $\overline{e}_2$ be two decision vectors which $\overline{d}_1$ and $\overline{d}_2$, respectively, are extendible to. Both $\overline{e}_1$ and $\overline{e}_2$ are adjacent to $\overline{d}$. It follows that both belong to the same connected component (which is $\overline{d}$'s connected component).

We are now able to state our impossibility result. The next theorem shows that the class of disconnected decision tasks is not solvable in spite of one fault. The theorem is proved by reducing the unsolvability of any disconnected task to the unsolvability of the consensus task (whose unsolvability in spite of one fault was mentioned above).
Theorem 2.
No disconnected task is solvable in spite of one fault.

Proof. Let $T$ be a disconnected task, and let $C_1, \ldots, C_k$ be the connected components of $G_T$ ($k \geq 2$). Assume that $T$ is solvable in spite of one fault by a protocol $P$. We show that this implies that there exists a protocol $P^*$ which solves the consensus task in spite of one fault.

The claim is proved by constructing $P^*$, which is based on $P$ with the following modifications. Whenever a processor is about to halt and write a decision value in $P$, it broadcasts in $P^*$ the decision value it would have if $P$ was executed by the system (call this value a virtual decision value) and waits. Since $P$ solves $T$ in spite of one fault, eventually $N-1$ processors will broadcast their virtual decision values. Thus, each non-faulty processor will eventually receive $N-1$ such virtual decision values that comprise, by lemma 1, a partial decision vector of $T$.

Let $\rho$ be a decision vector to which this partial decision vector is extendible. By Lemma 2, the connected component $G_\iota$ to which $\rho$ belongs is uniquely defined, independently on the actual choice of $\rho$. Upon receiving $N-1$ virtual decision values and determining the connected component $G_\iota$, the processor will output the parity bit of $i$ and will halt. By Lemma 1, all the processors will agree on the same component, and hence will output the same bit. Thus, $P^*$ solves the consensus task in spite of one fault.

Since assuming that $T$ is solvable in spite of one fault implies that there exists a protocol which solves the consensus task in spite of one fault, a contradiction to theorem 1 arises. It follows that no disconnected task is solvable in spite of one fault.

Note: In the proof above we assumed that all processors agree on a certain order of the connected components of $G_T$. Such an agreement is easily achieved (with no communication) if each processor knows the identities of all other processors.
4. CONCLUSIONS

An impossibility result for a large class of decision tasks in presence of faults has been proved. This class contains tasks whose unsolvability in presence of faults is known (the consensus task and its variants) as well as some new tasks, such as election and constructing a spanning tree. We have shown that no protocol devised to accomplish a disconnected decision task is ever guaranteed to halt in the presence of one faulty processor.

The model of computation which was used for the impossibility proof is very powerful, since the following assumptions have been made:

1. The underlying graph of the network is complete, so each processor can directly communicate with any other processor.
2. The communication links are totally reliable.
3. The type of failure is fail-stop, leaving no room for arbitrary or malicious behavior of faulty processors.
4. The number of faulty processors has been limited to one.
5. Each processor may have a different internal program.
6. The processors' identities are mutually known.
7. A protocol is considered to be reliable as long as the failure of a single processor does not prevent the others from halting (regardless of their decision value).

Since most reasonable models are weaker than the one discussed above, our result applies there also.

The model is fully asynchronous, in the sense that both message delay and the rate of drift of the processors' internal clocks are unbounded. However, our result applies to some partially synchronous models as well. Some models in which the consensus task (hence any disconnected task) is unsolvable in spite of faults are identified in [DDS]. For example, it is proved in [DDS] that unbounded message delay and an arbitrary order of message delivery render the consensus task unsolvable in spite of one fault, even if the processors are lock-stepped.
The notion of a decision graph and its connected components, that has been introduced in this paper, seems to provide a convenient tool to identify tasks which cannot be solved in the presence of a faulty processor.

The result has some pessimistic practical implications. For example, the unsolvability of the election task in presence of faults implies that serializing access to distributed network resources is impossible in presence of faults, since the election task may be viewed as a task where exactly one processor is allowed to access a resource.

Since no deterministic protocol is adequate for handling disconnected decision tasks in presence of faults, a probabilistic approach seems to be the best solution in hand for these tasks. In fact, a randomized asynchronous agreement protocol like the protocol devised by Rabin [R] can be adapted to solve any disconnected decision task.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that there exist (connected) tasks which can be solved in presence of faults. Approximate agreement, for example, is reachable provided that $t$, the number of faulty processors, satisfies $N > 5t$ [DLPSW].

REFERENCES

[DDS]

[DLPSW]

[DLS]
[FLP]  

[KW]  

[LSP]  

[R]  