Synchronization: Another Perspective

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Interleaved Execution

- The execution of the two threads can be **interleaved**
  - Assume **preemptive scheduling**
    - i.e., Thread may be context switched arbitrarily, without cooperation from the thread
  - Each thread may context switch after **each** assembly instruction
    (or, in some cases, part of an assembly instruction!)
  - We need to worry about the worst-case scenario!

account.bal = $1500

```
balance = get_balance(account);
balance -= amount;
```
local balance = $1400

Execution sequence as seen by CPU

```
balance = get_balance(account);
balance -= amount;
```
local balance = $1400

```
put_balance(account, balance);
```
account.bal = $1400

```
put_balance(account, balance);
```
account.bal = $1400

- What's the account balance after this sequence?
  - And who's happier, the bank or you???

Little white lie...

- Sleeping does not help!
- Earlier I showed some examples to highlight which locations were shared between threads

```
int i = 0; // global variable
void bar() {
  i++;
  sleep(1);
  printf("i is %d.\n", i);
}
```

```
int i = 0; // global variable
void bar() {
  i++;
  sleep(1);
  printf("i is %d.\n", i);
}
```

- Possible outputs: 1 2, 1 2, 2 2, 2 2
- All are possible, not all equally likely.

Race Conditions

- The problem: concurrent threads accessing a shared resource without any synchronization
  - This is called a **race condition**
  - The result of the concurrent access is non-deterministic, depends on
    - Timing
    - When context switches occurred
    - Which thread ran at which context switch
    - What the threads were doing
- A solution: mechanisms for controlling concurrent access to shared resources
  - Allows us to reason about the operation of programs
  - We want to **re-introduce some determinism** into the execution of multiple threads

Race conditions in real life

- Race conditions are bugs, and difficult to detect
- Northeast Blackout of 2003
  - About 55 million people in North America affected
  - Race condition in monitoring code in part responsible: alarm system failed
  - Code had been running since 1990, over 3 million hours of operation, without manifesting bug

Vincent Laforet

Race conditions in real life

- Race conditions are bugs, and difficult to detect
- Therac-25 radiation therapy machine
    - Designed to give non-lethal doses of radiation to cancer patients
    - Race conditions contributed to incorrect lethal doses
    - Several fatalities in mid-80s.

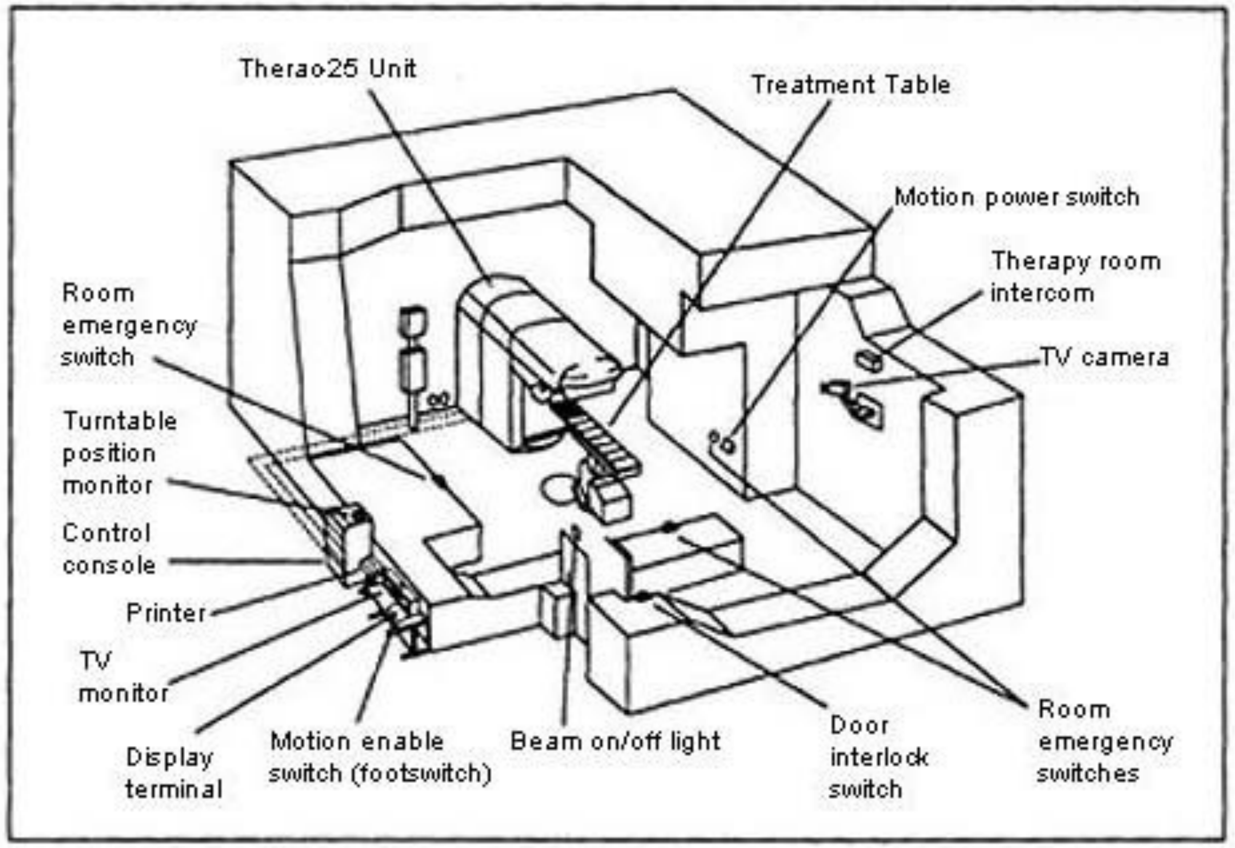
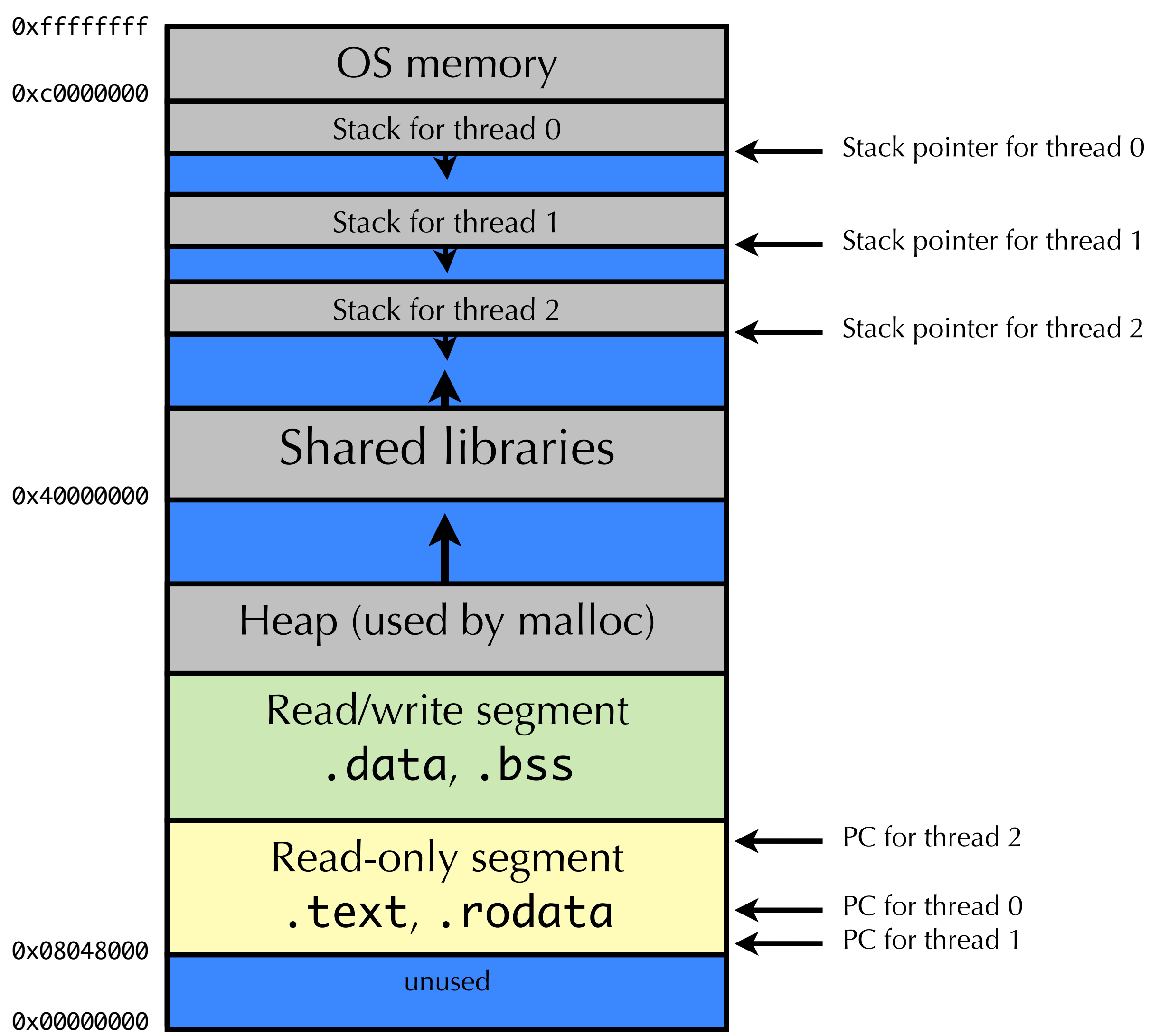


Figure 1. Typical Therac-25 facility

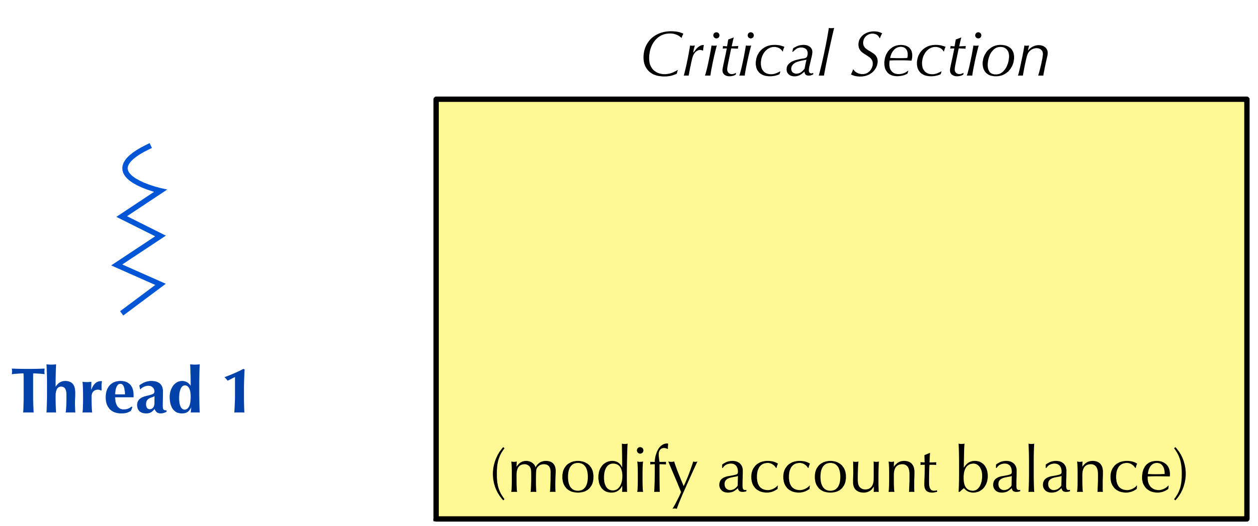
Which resources are shared?

- Local variables in a function are not shared
  - They exist on the stack, and each thread has its own stack
  - Cannot safely pass a pointer from a local variable to another thread
    - Why?
- Global variables are shared
  - Stored in static data portion of the address space
  - Accessible by any thread
- Dynamically-allocated data is shared
  - Stored in the heap, accessible by any thread



Mutual Exclusion

- We want to use **mutual exclusion** to synchronize access to shared resources
  - Mutual exclusion: only one thread can access a shared resource at a time.
- Code that uses mutual exclusion to synchronize its execution is called a **critical section**
  - Only one thread at a time can execute code in the critical section
  - All other threads are forced to wait on entry
  - When one thread leaves the critical section, another can enter



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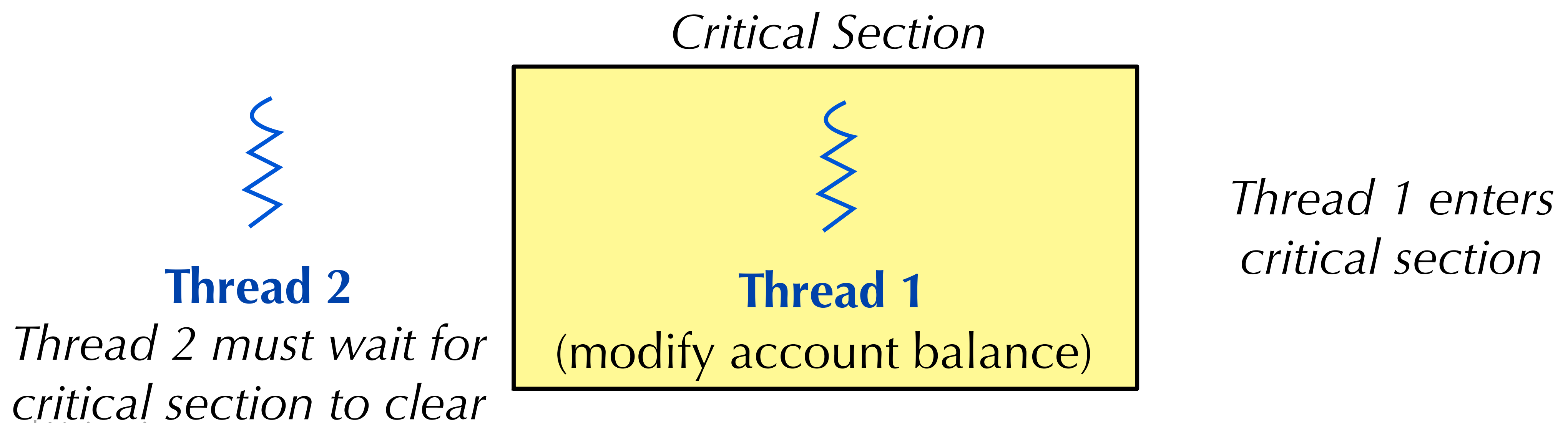

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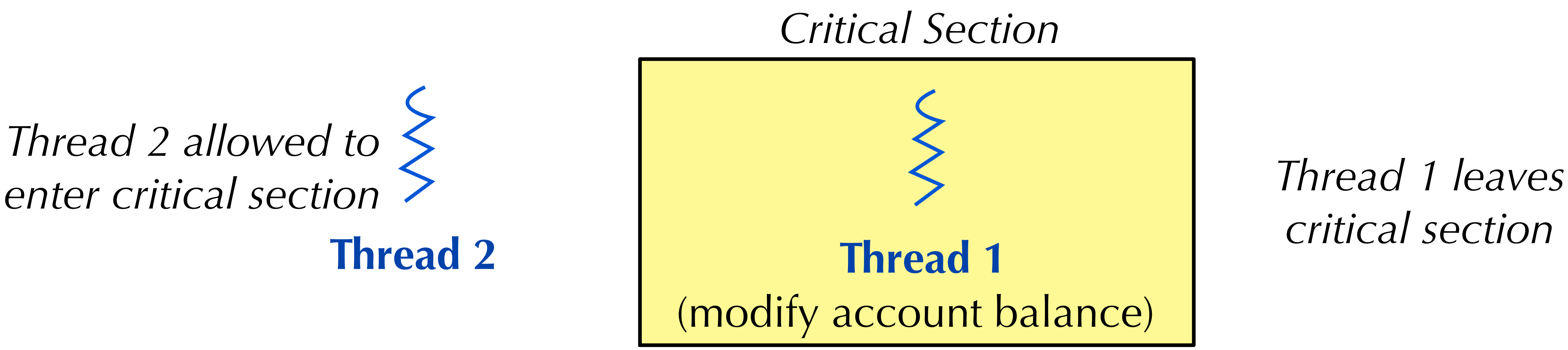

Critical Section Requirements

- Mutual exclusion
  - At most one thread is currently executing in the critical section
- Progress
  - If thread T1 is **outside** the critical section, then T1 cannot prevent T2 from entering the critical section
- Bounded waiting (no starvation)
  - If thread T1 is waiting on the critical section, then T1 will **eventually** enter the critical section
    - Requires threads eventually leave critical sections
- Performance
  - The overhead of entering and exiting the critical section is small with respect to the work being done within it

Locks

- A lock is an object (in memory) that provides two operations:
  - `acquire( )`: a thread calls this before entering a critical section
    - May require waiting to enter the critical section
  - `release( )`: a thread calls this after leaving a critical section
    - Allows another thread to enter the critical section
- A call to `acquire( )` must have corresponding call to `release( )`
  - Between `acquire( )` and `release( )`, the thread holds the lock
  - `acquire( )` does not return until the caller holds the lock
    - At most one thread can hold a lock at a time (usually!)
    - We'll talk about the exceptions later...
- What can happen if `acquire( )` and `release( )` calls are not paired?

Using Locks

```
int withdraw(account, amount) {
  acquire(lock);
  balance = get_balance(account);
  balance -= amount;
  put_balance(account, balance);
  release(lock);
  return balance;
}
```

critical section

- Why is the `return` statement outside of the critical section?

Execution with Locks

Execution sequence as seen by CPU

```
acquire(lock);
balance = get_balance(account);
balance -= amount;
```

Thread 1 runs

```
acquire(lock);
```

Thread 2 waits on lock

```
put_balance(account, balance);
release(lock);
```

Thread 1 completes
Thread 2 resumes

```
balance = get_balance(account);
balance -= amount;
put_balance(account, balance);
release(lock);
```

Spinlocks

- Very simple way to implement a lock:

```
struct lock {
  int held = 0;
}
void acquire(lock) {
   while (lock->held)
        ;
   lock->held = 1;
}
void release(lock) {
  lock->held = 0;
}
```

The caller **busy waits** for the lock to be released

Why doesn't this work?

Implementing Spinlocks

- Problem: internals of the lock acquire/release have critical sections too!

```
struct lock {
  int held = 0;
}
void acquire(lock) {
   while (lock->held)
         ;
   lock->held = 1;
}
void release(lock) {
  lock->held = 0;
}
```

What can happen if there is a context switch here?

- The `acquire( )` and `release( )` actions must be **atomic**
- Atomic means that the code cannot be interrupted during execution
  - "All or nothing" execution

Implementing Spinlocks

- Problem: internals of the lock acquire/release have critical sections too!

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struct lock {
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void acquire(lock) {
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}
```

This sequence needs to be atomic!

- The `acquire( )` and `release( )` actions must be **atomic**
- Atomic means that the code cannot be interrupted during execution
  - "All or nothing" execution

Implementing Spinlocks

- Achieving atomicity requires hardware support
  - Disabling interrupts
    - Prevent context switches from occurring
    - Only works on uniprocessors. Why?
  - Atomic instructions – CPU guarantees entire action will execute atomically
    - Test-and-set
    - Compare-and-swap

Spinlocks using test-and-set

- CPU provides the following as one atomic instruction:

```
bool test_and_set(bool *flag) {
  bool old = *flag;
  *flag = True;
  return old;
}
```

- So to fix our broken spinlocks, we do this:

```
struct lock {
  int held = 0;
}
void acquire(lock) {
   while(test_and_set(&lock->held));
}
void release(lock) {
  lock->held = 0;
}
```

What's wrong with spinlocks?

- So spinlocks work (if you implement them correctly), and are simple.
- What's the catch?

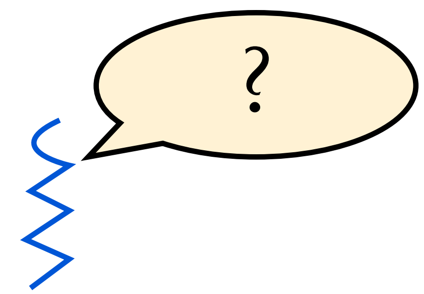
```
struct lock {
  int held = 0;
}
void acquire(lock) {
   while(test_and_set(&lock->held));
}
void release(lock) {
  lock->held = 0;
}
```

Problems with spinlocks

- Inefficient!
  - Threads waiting to acquire locks spin on the CPU
  - Eats up lots of cycles, slows down progress of other threads
    - Note that other threads can still run ... how?
  - What happens if you have a lot of threads trying to acquire the lock?
- Usually, spinlocks are only used as **primitives** to build higher-level, more efficient, synchronization constructs

Efficiently implementing locks

- Really want a thread waiting to enter a critical section to **block**
  - Put the thread to sleep until it can enter the critical section
  - Frees up the CPU for other threads to run



Thread 1

1) Check lock state

Lock state

unlocked

Lock wait queue

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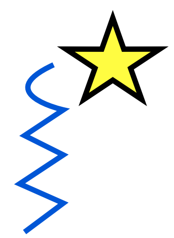

Thread 1

1) Check lock state
2) Set state to locked
3) Enter critical section

Lock state

locked

Lock wait queue

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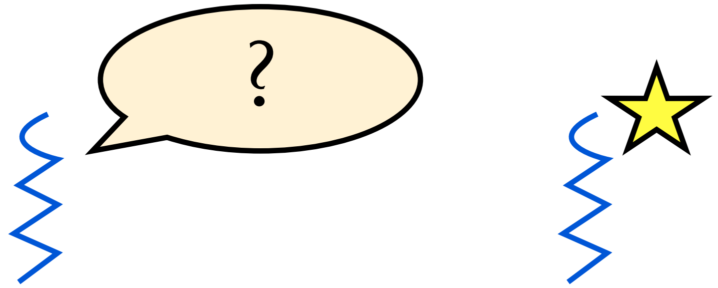

Thread 2 Thread 1

1) Check lock state

2) Add self to wait queue (sleep)

Lock state

locked

Lock wait queue

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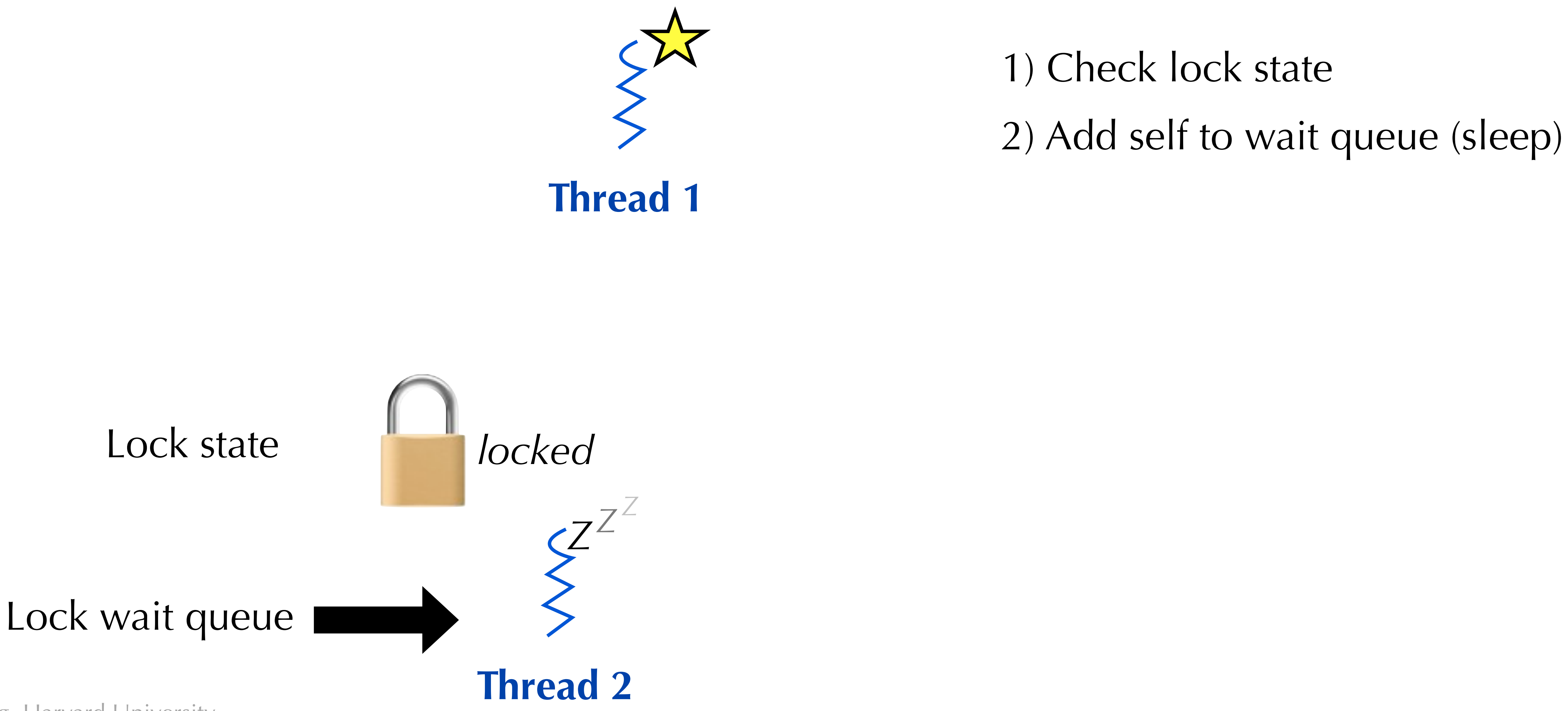

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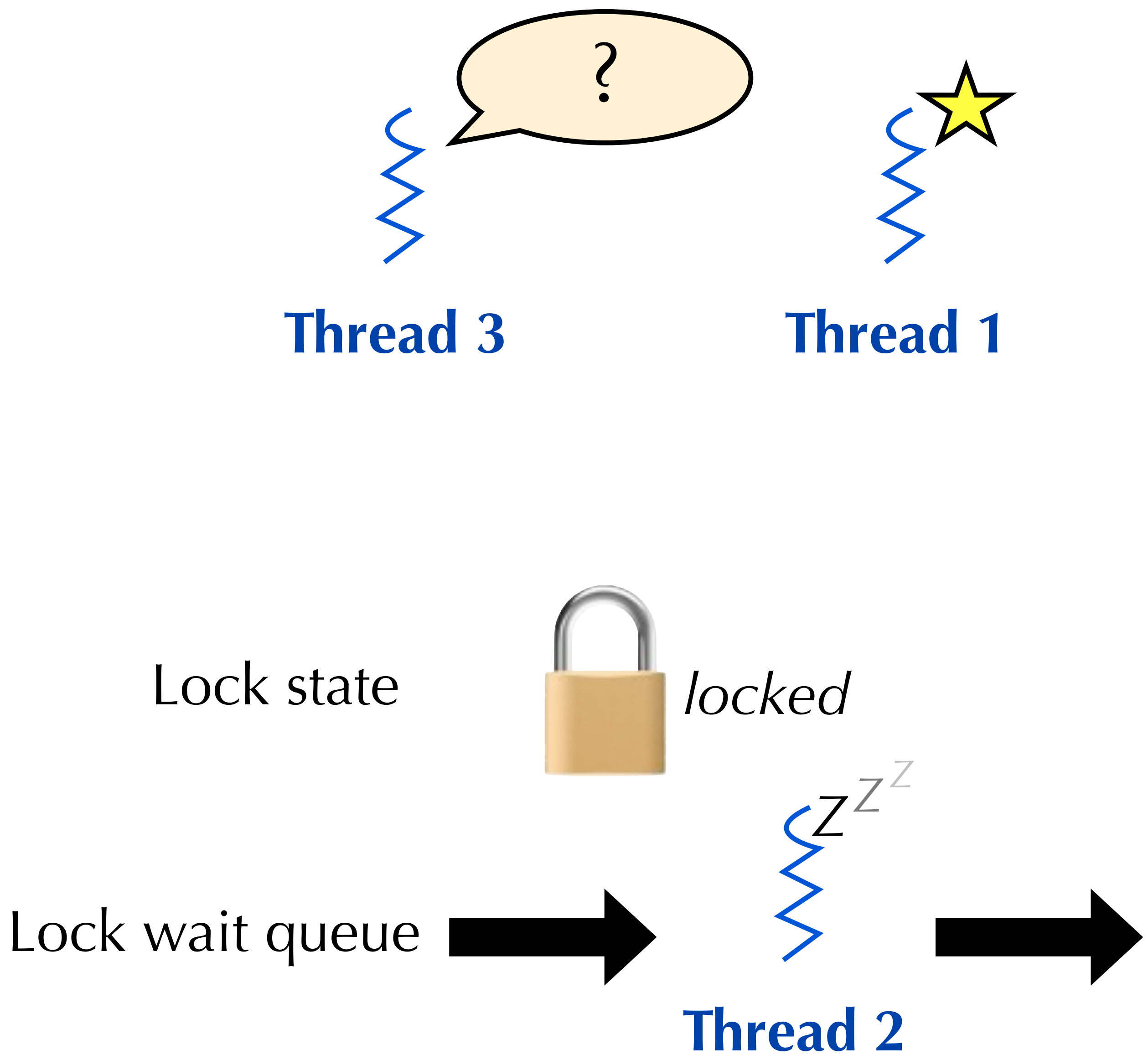

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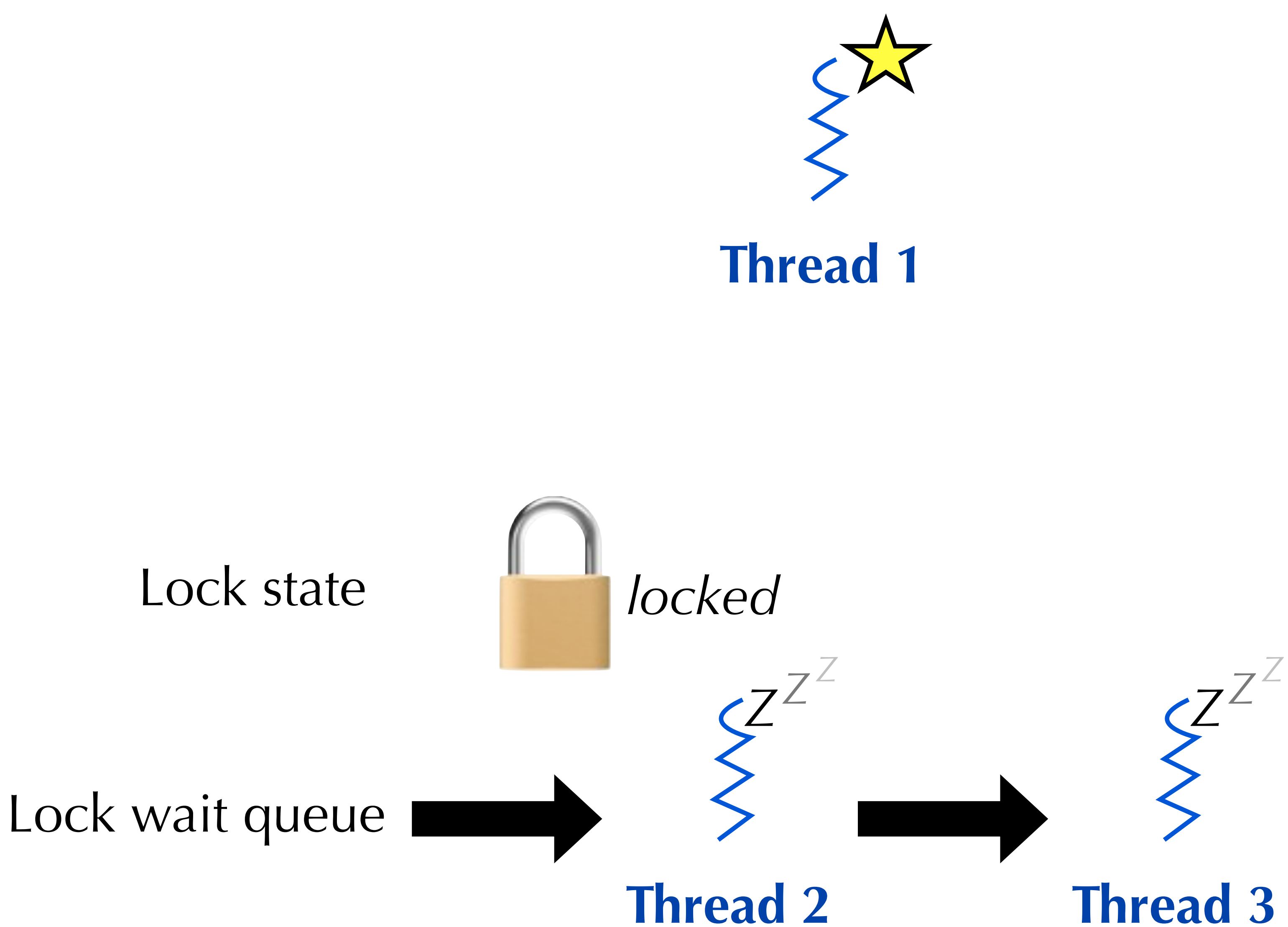

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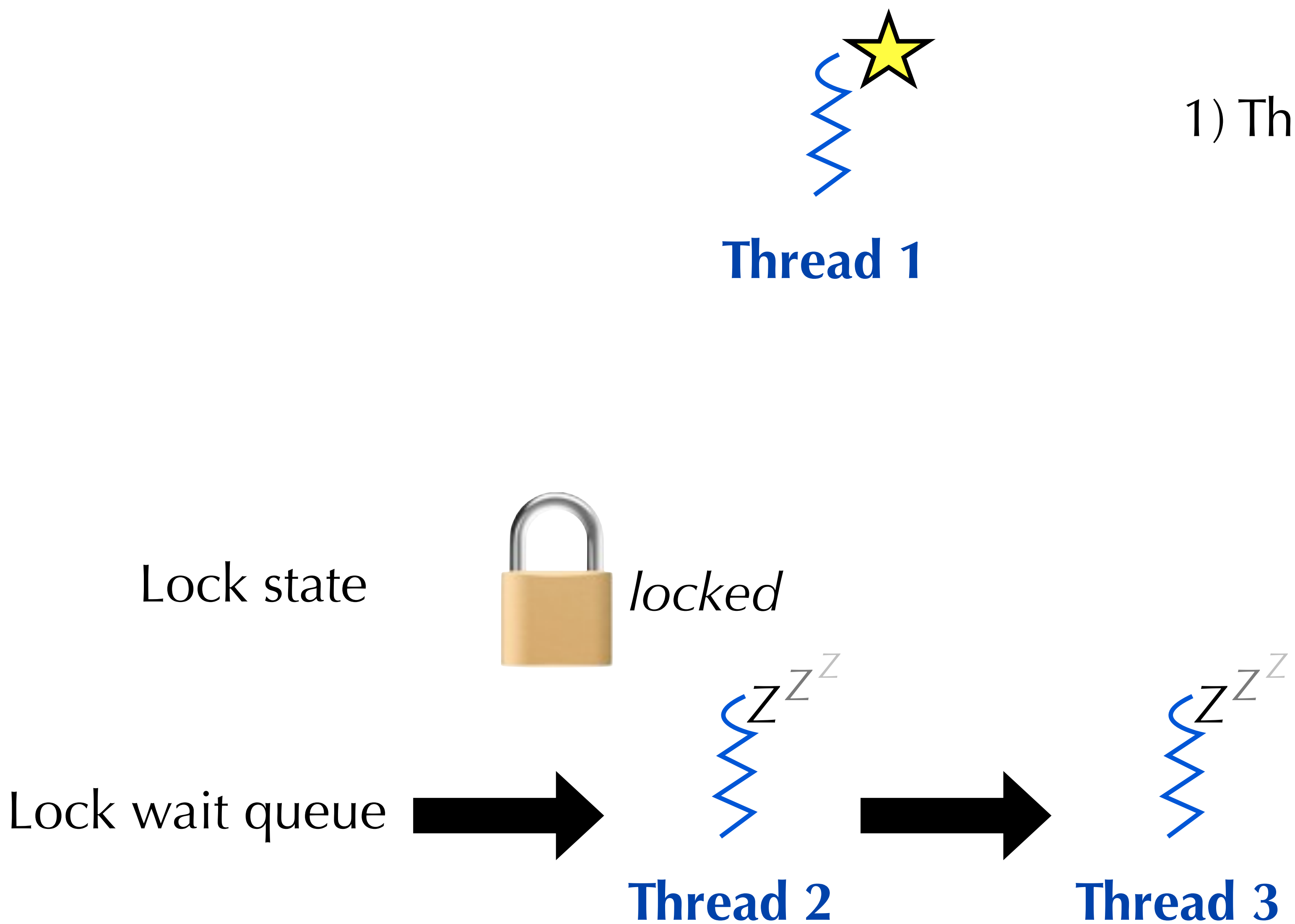

1) Thread 1 finishes critical section

Efficiently implementing locks

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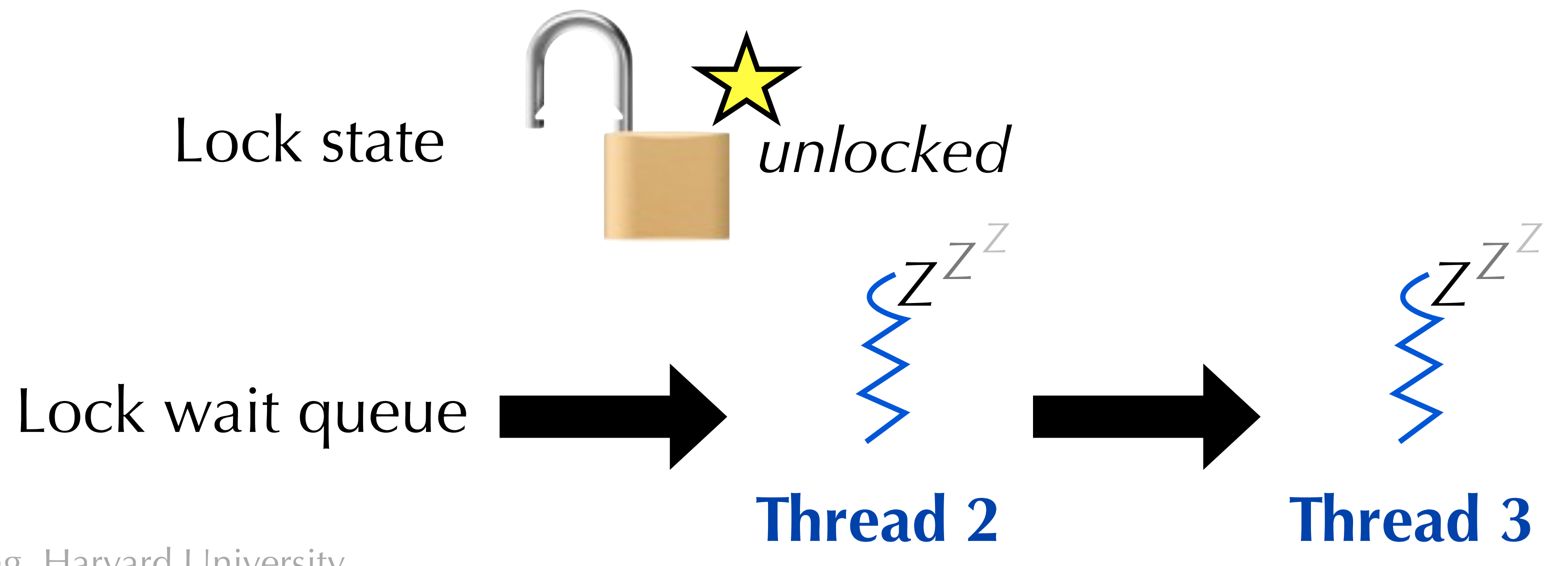
A blocked thread can now acquire lock



Efficiently implementing locks

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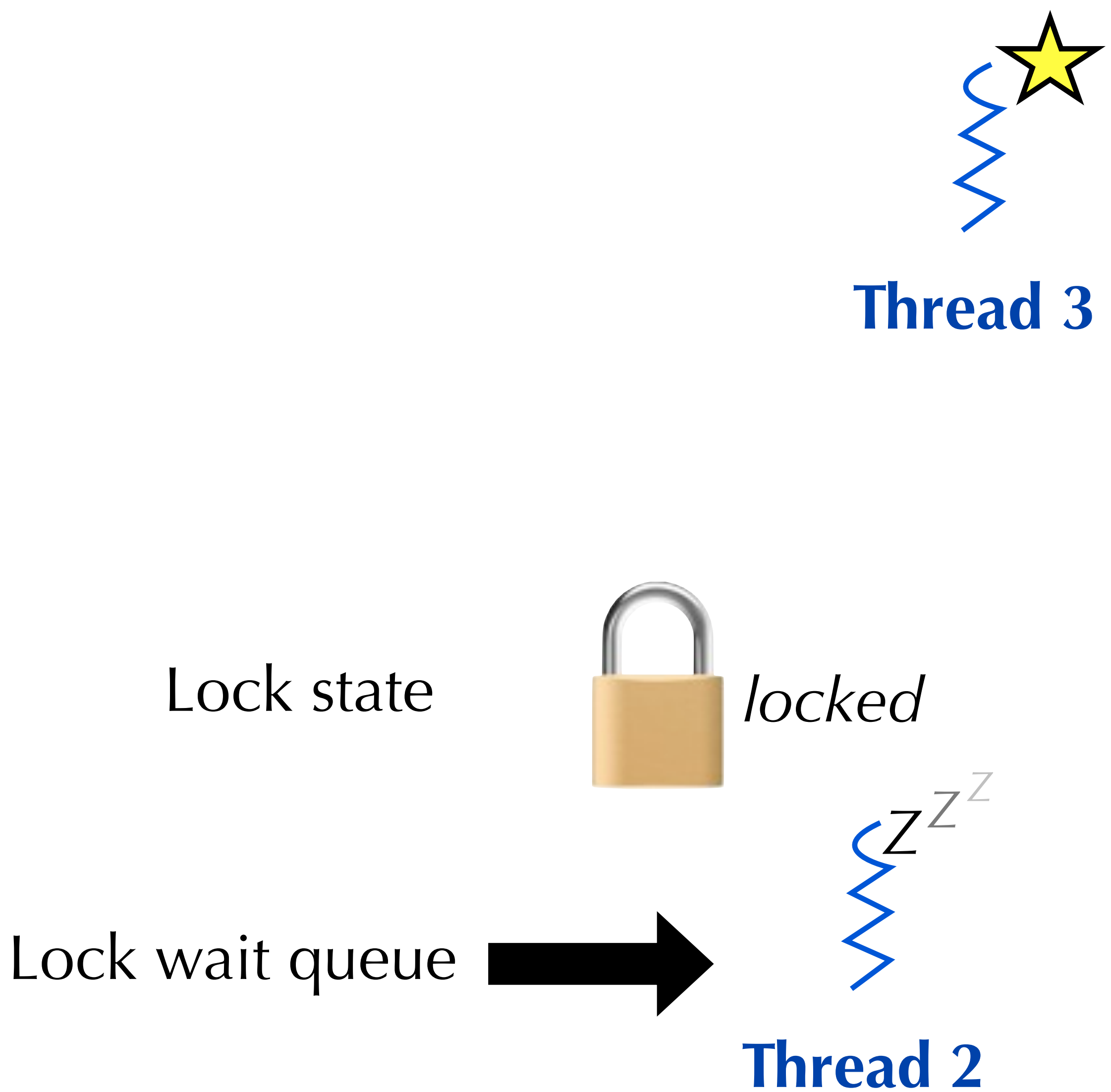

A blocked thread can now acquire lock

No guarantee on which blocked thread will get the lock!!!

Locks in PThreads

- Pthreads provides a `pthread_mutex_t` to represent a lock for mutual exclusion, a **mutex**.
  - Threads using the mutex must have access to the `pthread_mutex_t` object.
  - Usually, this means declaring it as a global variable.

```
pthread_mutex_t myLock; /* Must be global so all
                         * threads using the lock
                         * can access this variable. */

/* Initialize it. */
/* Only one thread has to do this. */
pthread_mutex_init(&myLock, NULL);

void *mythread(void *arg) {
  /* Do something with the lock */
  pthread_mutex_lock(&myLock);

  /* Do stuff... */

  pthread_mutex_unlock(&myLock);
}
```

Lock granularity

- Locks are great, and simple, but have limitations
- What if you have a more complex resource than a single location?
- **Coarse-grained lock:** Could use one lock to protect all resources
  - E.g., Many bank accounts, use one lock to protect access to all accounts
- **Fine-grained lock:** Protect each resource with a separate lock
  - E.g., Many bank accounts, one lock per account
- Coarse vs. fine-grained?
  - More locks → harder to manage locks
    - E.g., transfer money from account A to account B at same time as transferring from B to A. What order to acquire locks?
    - More on this next week...
  - Fewer locks → less concurrency