Java Volatile Variables: Usage Considerations

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Learning Objectives in this Part of the Lesson

• Understand how Java volatile variables provide concurrent programs with thread-safe mechanisms to read from & write to single variables

• Know how to use a Java volatile variable in practice

• Appreciate usage considerations for Java volatile variables
Usage Considerations for Volatile Variables
Usage Considerations for Volatile Variables

- Concurrent apps should use volatile variables carefully to avoid “busy waiting”

```java
class LoopMayNeverEnd {
    volatile boolean mDone = false;

    void work() {
        // Thread T2 read
        while (!mDone) {
            // do work
        }
    }

    void stopWork() {
        // Thread T1 write
        mDone = true;
    }

    ...
}
```

If “do work” isn’t time consuming this loop will spin excessively.

See [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Busy_waiting](en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Busy_waiting)
Usage Considerations for Volatile Variables

- Concurrent apps should use volatile variables carefully to avoid “busy waiting”
- Busy waiting is most effective when encapsulated in higher-level concurrency libraries

```java
public class AtomicLong {
    ... {
        private volatile long value;
        ...
        private static final Unsafe unsafe = Unsafe.getUnsafe();
        private static final long valueOffset;
        static {
            ...
            valueOffset = unsafe.objectFieldOffset(
                AtomicLong.class
                .getDeclaredField("value"));
            ...
```
Usage Considerations for Volatile Variables

- Complex operations that perform multiple instructions can’t use volatile by itself

```java
volatile int counter = 0;

// In Thread t1
counter++;  
// load counter into register r1
// increment register r1
// store register r1 into counter

// In Thread t2
counter++;  
// load counter into register r1
// increment register r1
// store register r1 into counter
```
Usage Considerations for Volatile Variables

• Complex operations that perform multiple instructions can’t use volatile by itself, e.g.
  • Incrementing an integer

```c
volatile int counter = 0;

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```
### Usage Considerations for Volatile Variables

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Thread\textsubscript{1}</th>
<th>Thread\textsubscript{2}</th>
<th>Long value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>initialized</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>read value</td>
<td></td>
<td>read value ←</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>increase value by 1</td>
<td>increase value by 1</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>write back</td>
<td></td>
<td>write back →</td>
<td>1 or 2?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*If these steps interleave in multiple threads the results may be inconsistent*

See [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Write-write_conflict](en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Write-write_conflict)
Usage Considerations for Volatile Variables

- Complex operations that perform multiple instructions can’t use volatile by itself, e.g.
  - Incrementing an integer
  - Use an atomic variable instead of a volatile variable

```java
AtomicLong mCounter =
    new AtomicLong(0);

// In Thread t1
mCounter.getAndIncrement();
// load counter into register r1
// increment register r1
// store register r1 into counter

// In Thread t2
mCounter.getAndIncrement();
// load counter into register r1
// increment register r1
// store register r1 into counter
```

See docs.oracle.com/javase/tutorial/essential/concurrency/atomicvars.html
Usage Considerations for Volatile Variables

- Declaring an array or an object as volatile only makes the reference volatile

```java
public class Vector<E> ... {
    /**
     * The number of elements or the size of the vector.
     */
    protected int elementCount;

    /**
     * The elements of the vector.
     */
    protected Object[] elementData;
...
}

volatile Vector v = new Vector();
```
Usage Considerations for Volatile Variables

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See [docs.oracle.com/javase/8/docs/api/java/util/Vector.html](http://docs.oracle.com/javase/8/docs/api/java/util/Vector.html)
Usage Considerations for Volatile Variables

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Usage Considerations for Volatile Variables

- Declaring an array or an object as volatile only makes the *reference* volatile
- However, the contents pointed to by the reference are not volatile
Usage Considerations for Volatile Variables

- Declaring an array or an object as volatile only makes the
  reference volatile
- However, the contents pointed to by the reference are not volatile
- Therefore, more powerful types of synchronization are needed

```java
public class Vector<E> ...
{
    ...

    public synchronized E set
        (int location, E object) {
        if (location < elementCount)
            E result = (E)
                elementData[location];
            elementData[location] =
                object;
            return result;
    }

    ...

}

volatile Vector v = new Vector();
```

See upcoming lessons on "Java Monitor Object" & "Java Synchronizers"
Usage Considerations for Volatile Variables

- Java semantics of volatile aren’t the same as in C or C++

In C and C++

In C, and consequently C++, the `volatile` keyword was intended to:

- allow access to memory mapped devices
- allow uses of variables between `setjmp` and `longjmp`
- allow uses of `sig_atomic_t` variables in signal handlers.

Operations on `volatile` variables are not atomic, nor do they establish a proper happens-before relationship for threading. This is according to the relevant standards (C, C++, POSIX, Win32), and this is the matter of fact for the vast majority of current implementations. Thus, the usage of `volatile` keyword as a portable synchronization mechanism is discouraged by many C/C++ groups.

Example of memory-mapped I/O in C

In this example, the code sets the value stored in `foo` to 0. It then starts to poll that value repeatedly until it changes to 255:

```c
static int foo;

void bar(void) {
    foo = 0;

    while (foo != 255)
        ;
}
```

An optimizing compiler will notice that no other code can possibly change the value stored in `foo`, and will assume that it will remain equal to 0 at all times. The compiler will therefore replace the function body with an infinite loop similar to:

```c
static int foo;

void bar(void) {
    foo = 0;
}
```
Usage Considerations for Volatile Variables

- Java semantics of volatile aren’t the same as in C or C++
- Volatiles in C/C++ aren’t atomic & don’t create a happens-before relationship

See en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Volatile_variable#In_C_and_C++
Usage Considerations for Volatile Variables

- Java semantics of volatile aren’t the same as in C or C++
  - Volatiles in C/C++ aren’t atomic & don’t create a happens-before relationship
  - They largely just disable compiler optimizations

---

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End of Java Volatile Variables: Usage Considerations