

# Report Lab Assignment

## Running x264 on Host Processor

### Extracting and Accelerating Kernel on Co-processor

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#### Samenvatting

During this lab, we are speeding up the x264 application by extracting the `pixel_satd_8x4` and the `pixel_satd_4x4` kernel for parallel processing on a  $\rho$ -VEX co-processor. This involves running the x264 application on an FPGA which runs a MicroBlaze operating system. The required instructions and data for the extracted kernels is being written to the instruction and data memory of the  $\rho$ -VEX. This lab report describes in detail our chosen approach, problems we encountered along the way, measurements of the execution time before and after extracting the kernels and an overall evaluation.

## 1 Introduction

For the lab, a computational intensive kernel has to be extracted from the x264 software application, which is a free software library for encoding video stream into H.236/MPEG-4 AVC format. It is able to use Periodic Intra Refresh instead of keyframes used by H.264, refreshing the image of the video by moving a column of intra blocks from one side of the screen to the other. This hides the refreshing effect from the user while the frame loads. The x264 application is executed on a FPGA running a MicroBlaze host processor. By running the particular kernel on the  $\rho$ -VEX co-processor, the execution time can be decreased by making use of parallel processing.

## 2 Exploring the x264 application

During the first lab we got familiar with the x264 application, a powerful coding tool to remove temporal redundancy by using motion estimation. In Section 2.1 we will discuss the various computational intensive kernels within the x264 algorithm. The chosen kernel will be explained in Section 2.2, the provided memory layout of the FPGA architecture in Section 2.3 and the actual implementation will be discussed in Section 2.4.

### 2.1 Detecting the Computationally Most Intensive Kernel

A few input files are provided in the first lab to demonstrate the compile and run commands of the x264 application. The `.y4m` input files are decoded to create a short `.mkv` movie using this command in the terminal: `./x264 eledream_64x32_3.y4m -o testframe.mkv`. By adding the `gprof` flag to the compile command, a list is created of all functions ordered by their share of the total execution time (in percentage).

The number of function calls is also shown, as well as the total execution time for each input file. These five input .y4m files vary in resolution (either 64x32 or 640x320 pixels) and amount of frames (either 1, 3, 8, 32 or 128). Profiling the x264 execution for the .y4m files that are provided by the lab leads to the ranking show in table 1.

Input file	Time (sec)	Share (%)	Calls	Kernel name
eledream_32x18_1.y4m	0.02	100.00	71	x264_analyse_init_costs
		0.00	1646	x264_free
		0.00	784	x264_cabac_encode_decision_c
eledream_64x32_3.y4m	0.03	66.67	71	x264_analyse_init_costs
		33.33	1971	x264_pixel_satd_4x4
		0.00	4830	x264_pixel_satd_8x4
eledream_640x320_8.y4m	1.61	14.29	1599044	x264_pixel_satd_8x4
		11.80	570708	x264_get_ref
		4.97	38770	x264_pixel_satd_x4_16x16
eledream_640x320_32.y4m	8.54	20.61	7228633	get_ref
		13.23	15386501	x264_pixel_satd_8x4
		4.57	1009690	x264_pixel_satd_x4_8x8
eledream_640x320_128.y4m	29.86	17.48	21956292	get_ref
		14.17	49862831	x264_pixel_satd_8x4
		6.56	1023315	x264_pixel_satd_x4_16x16

Tabel 1: Chart with computationally most intensive kernels for each input stream.

## 2.2 The `pixel_satd_8x4` kernel

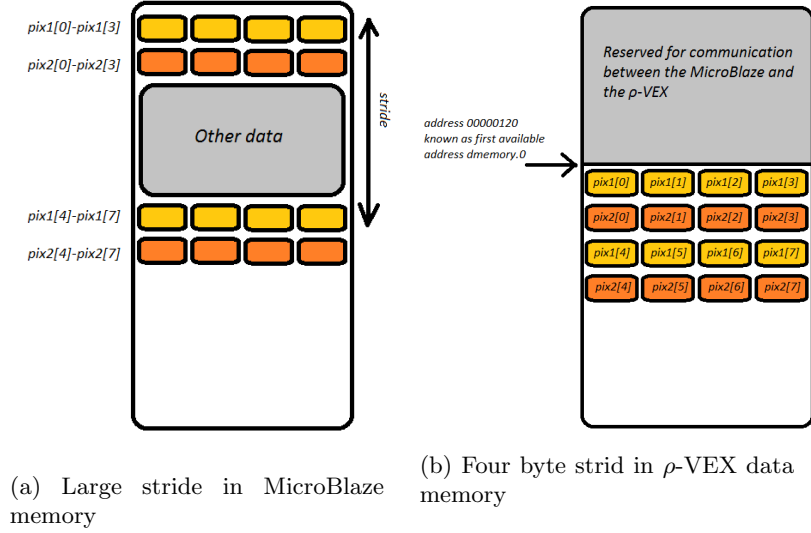
Given these statistics, we decide to extract the `x264_pixel_satd_8x4` kernel, since it has a fair share in the execution time and was advised by the teaching assistants. This kernel evaluates the Sum of Transformed Differences (SATD) between a 8x4 pixel block from the input stream and reference blocks. The SATD is a metric used for video compression where the differences between the pixels are taken and put into a frequency transform, usually a Hadamard transform. These blocks can have various sizes depending on the inputs and constraint of the system varying from 4x4 pixel blocks to 8x4 blocks and even 16x16 blocks. The reference block with the lowest SATD value can be used to estimate motion in video coding to remove temporal redundancy.

## 2.3 Memory layout of the MicroBlaze

When writing pixels to the  $\rho$ -VEX for SATD calculation, these pixels need to be picked from the MicroBlaze memory. However, these pixels are not written as one block of contiguous bytes. Rows of four bytes (MicroBlaze has 32-bit registers) are interrupted by a fixed amount of memory called a stride. This value is often given in bytes to be skipped in order to continue reading the particular data file. Figure 1a shows the concept of strides for two pixels from the MicroBlaze memory, which are splitted into two rows of 4 bytes since a pixels consists of eight bytes. When writing data to the  $\rho$ -VEX memory we use a stride of four bytes, resulting in a configuration as shown in figure 1b

## 2.4 Executing an Application on the Development Board and $\rho$ -VEX

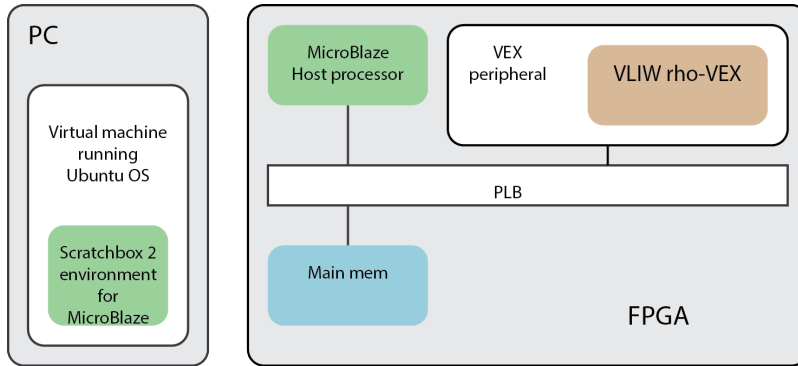
When executing `./configure`, a file is created for configuration of the application. However, the resulting `config.mak` file is made for applications running on the guest (Ubuntu). In order to configure for MicroBlaze, the `config.mak` file has to be altered. All references to `m32` have to be removed and the `--DWORDS_BIGENDIAN`



Figuur 1: MicroBlaze memory uses strides to split up data files

flag has to be added to the `CFLAGS` variable. This has to be done everytime when configuring the application for MicroBlaze.

After doing this, the application now can be 'made' for MicroBlaze by first moving to the Scratchbox 2 environment for MicroBlaze and then execute the `make` command. Figure 2 shows a block diagram of both the platforms.

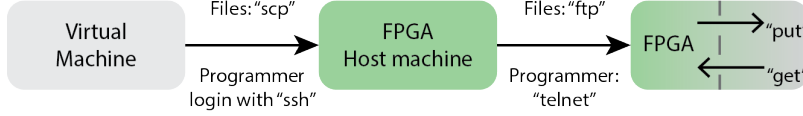


Figuur 2: Block diagram of the Virtual Machine and the ERA platform

In order to run the application on the MicroBlaze host processor, the `x264` executable must be compressed along with an input stream in a `tar.gz` file. This file can be put, via the MicroBlaze host processor, on one of the three FPGAs using the `scp`, `ftp` and `put` command. In order to connect the programmer to the development board, one must use the `ssh` and `telnet` command. See also figure 3.

For the first lab, the `pixel.satd.8x4` kernel has to be:

- extracted into a separate file
- supplemented to a proper `.c` file which can be compiled and run using the  $\rho$ -VEX
- included in the `makefile` that creates a `bytecode` and `bytedata` file of the kernel



Figuur 3: Ubuntu commands for putting files on and navigating to the FPGAs

- debugged

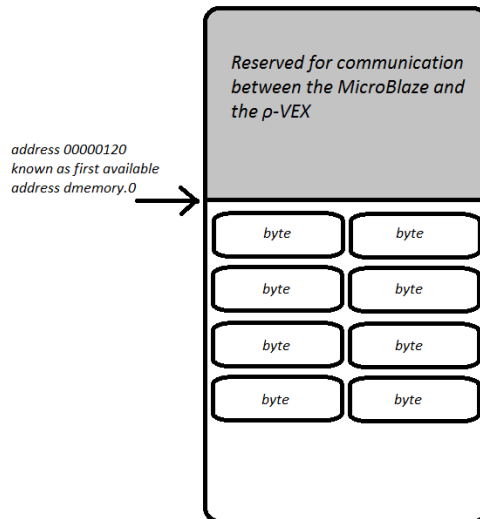
Looking back, the debugging part has been chasing us all the way through the lab. Not only did we suffer from bugs in our source code, the  $\rho$ -VEX itself did also have shortcomings that had to be circumvented by downloading several fixes, competing for FPGA availability and break downs of the entire host machine due to insufficient capacity for the amount of students.

### 3 Approach

The kernel can run in the  $\rho$ -VEX by putting the bytecode generated by the makefile into the instruction memory of the  $\rho$ -VEX and placing all required data in its data memory dynamically. By executing `make byte-` command two files are created:

- `bytecode`, containing all the instructions to be executed by the  $\rho$ -VEX
- `bytedata`, containing the pixels of the input stream

In order to make the extracted kernel qualified for compilation and execution, a few things have to be altered. First, the new file has to be recognized by the makefile in the `rovex-examples` directory. Second, some type definitions have to be made. Originally, `pixel_satd_8x4` resides in the `pixel.c` file of the `x264` application. When extracting this kernel, all prior knowledge is lost and has to be defined again. Then, in order to make the kernel compile and run on the  $\rho$ -VEX, the development board has to be reset and started. Bytecode has to be written to the instruction memory (`rvex-imemory`) and `bytedata` to the data memory (`rvex-dmemory`). Finally, the calculated result should be returned to the host. Figure 4 shows the  $\rho$ -VEX memory layout for our kernel.



Figuur 4: Memory layout of the  $\rho$ -VEX

### 3.1 Adjusting the `makefile`

We added the kernel to the `EXECUTABLES` defined in the `makefile`. Other files defined here can be removed since we will not need them for our application. An important issue is the difference between logical memory and physical memory. While the first address of a logical memory is obviously address '0', the physical memory can have the first part of the register being occupied (e.g. by the operating system). For the  $\rho$ -VEX, the first address which is allowed to be written to is 0x120. Thus, when writing the result of the kernel to the logical address '0', it is actually writing to the physical address '120' of the data memory.

Despite the fact that this is a rather simplistic operation, it took us some struggling to properly distinguish these address spaces. For example, we were told by the TA to remove the `autoinline` flag which resulted in a lot of wrong hexdumps. Also, the introduced fix discussed in 4.2 caused some problems that took us until the end of the second week to resolve.

### 3.2 Constraints of the $\rho$ -VEX

Using the  $\rho$ -VEX as a co-processor comes with some limitations. First, the  $\rho$ -VEX supports a very old and basic C compiler, so using `printf` statements to find bugs in the extracted kernel file is not possible. Everytime the application is being run concurrently on the  $\rho$ -VEX, the status is being inspected by placing `printf` statements in the `pixel.c` file, the origin of the kernel. Also, the  $\rho$ -VEX is very strict in the order of variable declarations and initialization. One of our bugs involved `int i` being declared and initialized, followed by a declaration of `int result`. This is not supported by the  $\rho$ -VEX, since it wants to have `int i, result;` both to be declared first, before initializing `i = 4;`.

When running an extracted kernel on the  $\rho$ -VEX, the kernel is unable to obtain information from previous code. Consequently, all parameters have to be re-defined. Table 2 shows all required type definitions.

Parameter	Type definition	Motivation
<code>intptr_t</code>	<code>unsigned int</code>	This parameter represents the stride, which cannot be $<0$
<code>pixel</code>	<code>unsigned char</code>	Pixels are made out of bytes, which have 8 bits (like a <code>char</code> )
<code>sum_t</code>	<code>short int</code>	Same type definition as in the source code (16 bits)
<code>sum2_t</code>	<code>long int</code>	Same type definition as in the source code (32 bits)
<code>BIT_DEPTH</code>	defined as 8	Also in the source code, plus the kernel handles pixels (bytes)
<code>BIT_PER_SUM</code>	<code>(8 * sizeof(sum_t))</code>	Also predefined as in the source code, being 16

Tabel 2: Type definitions in the extracted kernel file.

### 3.3 Communication between the MicroBlaze and the $\rho$ -VEX

In order to delegate the `pixel_satd_8x4` kernel from the MicroBlaze to the  $\rho$ -VEX, both the environments need to communicate with each other. When executing the x264 application, the MicroBlaze has to load the instructions of the extracted kernel into the instruction memory of the  $\rho$ -VEX and the data (for which the SATD has to be evaluated) into the data memory. This is when the source code of x264 becomes involved. The `pixel_satd_8x4` kernel, which is residing in the `pixel.c` file of the application, needs to be adjusted. Instead of calculating the SATD itself, it should send the instructions and input data to the  $\rho$ -VEX. The commands `open()`, `close()`, `read()` and `write()` are therefor added to the `pixel.c` file of the x264 application. These pixels are written at physical address 120, the first address on the  $\rho$ -VEX that is not set apart for communication between the driver and the  $\rho$ -VEX, defined as address '0'. To be sure that the data is always written to the same location we use the `lseek()` function to specify the start location of data as 0x00 from the `SEEK_SET`, or the beginning of the file.

To control the  $\rho$ -VEX from the x264 application, the control registers can be written too. By writing '2' to the control registers, the  $\rho$ -VEX is being reset. It can then be started by writing '1' to the register, telling the  $\rho$ -VEX to start running the instructions available in the instruction memory, calculating the SATD of

the two pixels. While calculating, the status of the  $\rho$ -VEX can be checked in a `while`-loop by reading the status variable of the status memory (`rvex-smemory`). When the kernel is finished, the result can be read from the data memory. See also `pixel.c`.

### 3.4 Result Hypothesis

By having the computational intensive kernel being run concurrently on a co-processor, one would expect an overall speedup of the application. A problem is, however, that the `bytecode` and the data have to be sent to the  $\rho$ -VEX every time the kernel is being called. The data contains two new pixels of which the SATD has to be calculated, whereas `bytecode` holds the kernel instructions. Because of this constant data traffic between the MicroBlaze and the  $\rho$ -VEX we don't expect the intended speed up to be achieved.

The reason that `bytecode` has to be sent every time the kernel is called, is that the three available FPGAs are shared among a lot of students. When running their application concurrently, the instruction memory is constantly being overwritten by another group. If there was a one-to-one setup, `bytecode` could have to been placed in `main.c`, written to the `imemory` of the  $\rho$ -VEX only once when starting the application.

## 4 Implementation

This section will cover some difficulties that came along during the lab. Section 4.1 will discuss our method for debugging and testing the working manner of the  $\rho$ -VEX. The fix, provided to help us defining address 0x120 in the  $\rho$ -VEX as the start address, is discussed in Section 4.2. Important features to be considered were the difference in Endianness as will be discussed in Section 4.3 and the reliability of the code, discussed in Section 4.4.

The approach was to first let the `pixel.c` write mock up pixel data to the data memory. The instruction memory would already contain the `bytecode` of our extracted kernel as it was put in manual. The kernel would only contain a single public declared variable `pixel datamem[128];`. This array of pixels points towards the first address of the data memory as no other variables are declared and thus there are no competing variables after this data memory location. The `pixel.map` file and the `hexdump` proved this to be correct. By declaring a pointer to this data memory location we could determine the result on the  $\rho$ -VEX and write the result into this array at a set location where the `pixel.c` can read and return it.

### 4.1 Mock up pixels

In order to get some insight in how to communicate with the  $\rho$ -VEX we made `hexdumps` of the data memory and created a mock up version of the kernel using 2 pixels we took from the original application. In order to check where the  $\rho$ -VEX is writing the data, a debugging file `Debugging_pixel.c` is created. When using this debugging file, `bytecode` is manually put into the instruction memory using `scp`, `ftp` and `put`. The data that is being sent from the MicroBlaze are two pre-defined pixels. By knowing the expected result and the possibility to write easy recognizable hexadecimal numbers such as `0xdead`, we can use the `hexdump` to examine the registers. The `hexdump` in figure 5 portrays all but the first two bytes of our mock up bytes. These first bytes display the correct result written to a convenient address `0x00`.

### 4.2 Issues with the fix

Halfway the lab, a fix was introduced. The physical address was supposed to be set to 0x120 and did not have to be passed on using `_DATA_START`. In order to make the  $\rho$ -VEX read the pixels in the data memory correct a pointer to the first logical address 0 would be enough. However as we would later discover this was not the case. The fix we applied did not adjust our working directory as it was designed to alter the tools folder in the home directory and we were working in a separate folder. When we did find out, we changed the script of the fix to match our own tools folder, but it did cause some days delay.

```

00000000 00 b0 2d 2a 28 25 22 20 31 2e 2c 29 27 24 21 1f |..-*(%" 1.,)'$!.|
00000010 30 2d 2b 28 25 23 20 1e 2f 2c 2a 27 24 22 1f 1d |0-+(%# ./,*'$"..|
00000020 30 32 2f 21 1b 1a 1e 1d 30 32 2f 21 1b 1a 1e 1d |02/!....02/!....|
*
00000040 80 80 01 43 80 80 80 80 80 80 80 80 80 80 80 80 |...C.....|
00000050 80 80 80 80 80 80 80 80 80 80 80 80 80 80 80 80 |.....|
*

```

Figuur 5: Hexdump of the kernel run with two mock up pixels

### 4.3 Endianness

The MicroBlaze and the  $\rho$ -VEX understand basic operations like `open()`, `close()`, `read()` and `write()`. However, they differ in Endiannes.  $\rho$ -VEX operates in Little Endian, meaning the bytes are read from right to left, as seen in figure 6a. MicroBlaze, on the other hand, operates in Big Endian and thus reads the bytes from left to right (see figure 6b). This becomes an issue when reading the `result` variable from the data memory, as we will get the bytes in reversed order. This problem is solved by manually reversing the order of the `result` bytes, realized by the piece of code in figure 6c.

Byte[3] | Byte[2] | Byte[1] | Byte[0]

(a) Little Endian

Byte[0] | Byte[1] | Byte[2] | Byte[3]

(b) Big Endian

```

// write result in reverse endianness
datamem[0x00] = (result >> 24) & 0xFF;
datamem[0x01] = (result >> 16) & 0xFF;
datamem[0x02] = (result >> 8) & 0xFF;
datamem[0x03] = result & 0xFF;

```

(c) Reversing the order of bytes

Figuur 6: Different reading direction due to Endianness

### 4.4 Reliability of the code

When writing pixels to the data memory of the  $\rho$ -VEX, the data pointer is automatically increased. To ensure that `pixel.c` reads the correct result from the memory location we can use `lseek`, a system call that is used to change the location of the read/write pointer of a file descriptor. Using `lseek(data, 0, SEEK_SET)`, the pointer in the  $\rho$ -VEX is set to the address that is the start address from his point of view (thus, physical address 0x120). Translating the logical address '0' to the physical address 0x120 is done by the linker and is not of our concern. We also added some `if`-statements to ensure that if memory locations are not opened correctly, they return 0xff and print an error to the screen. These measures increase the reliability of the code.

## 5 Extracting a Second Kernel

For lab 3, a second kernel has to be extracted in order to achieve an even higher speed up. For this assignment, we wanted to choose our kernel more wisely. Given the constant competition for the use of the FPGAs, bytecode has to be written to the instruction memory everytime the kernel is being called. In combination

with the data to be processed by the kernel, this leads to huge data traffic which is actually slowing down the application. This is why we wanted, at first, to pick a kernel that is not being called too often but requires a lot of heavy computation. A candidate for this would be the `halfpel` kernel, which has quite its share in execution time but not that many functions calls. The half- and quarter are the functions that ensure the motion estimation in x264 and can consume up to 90% of the total computing time in HD videos. As these functions are not called that often, they consume relatively less time in communication between the MicroBlaze and the  $\rho$ -VEX and are therefor far more valuable to optimize using parallel computing. However, considering the time constraints and the set backs in this projects we choose a kernel similar to `pixel_satd_8x4` which also has a large share in the execution time: `pixel_satd_4x4`.

## 5.1 Extract `pixel_satd_4x4`

There is not a lot of difference in `pixel_satd_8x4` and `pixel_satd_4x4`. The main difference concerns the stride when writing the pixel streams to the data memory. Other than `pixel_satd_8x4`, the stride is four instead of eight bytes. Because this kernel is relatively easy to implement in the  $\rho$ -VEX as well, we decided to invest some time into comparing the effect of using a merged bytecode or two separate bytecodes. The first approach is to use a single bytecode, which extends the `pixel_satd_8x4` bytecode with a second kernel that implemented `pixel_satd_4x4`. The `pixel.c` informs the  $\rho$ -VEX about which function it has to run. This is being solved by reserving a byte in the datamemory at location `0x40` where we either wrote `0x84` or `0x44`. The  $\rho$ -VEX is then able to read from this data location and determine which function it would have to run.

A big downside on this solution however is that the total bytecode of these combined kernels is 3744 bytes. Loading such a large amount into the instruction memory everytime the function is called can slow down the application a lot. Therefor we decide to divide the two kernels into two separate bytecodes of less than 2000 bytes. Now, `pixel.c` only has to load a different bytecode into the instruction memory when the different kernels are called. Both bytecodes have to be loaded into a codebuffer. This is done in the `x264.c` file and the codebuffers are declared in the common file `common.h`.

## 6 Evaluation

As was to be expected in a lab of 60 students and 3 FPGAs there was no speed up compared to the initial x264 application. However, we still stick to our result hypothesis that when choosing a kernel that does not spend too much time in communication a definite speed up can be achieved as discussed in Section 5. We did gain some insight in comparing the time spend when executing the application using a single or using two bytecodes.

`time ./x264 eledream_64x32_3.y4m -o testtime.mkv` provides a nice overview of the time spend in the application. Both implementations are measured and put in table 3.

Time parameter	Single bytecode	Two bytecodes
real	7m 2.17s	6m 15.13s
user	2m 21.16s	2m 20.81s
sys	1m 17.39s	1m 14.68s

Tabel 3: Execution times of the x264 application variating in bytecodes

We would have liked to achieve some sort of speed up that would actually benefit the initial application. However, concerning the (amount of) tools and time that was handed to us we considere to have done fairly well. We learned a lot from this lab, but some better guiding in the available information about fixes or limitations in compiling would have been appreciated prior to the lab.