

Comparing the benefits and disbenefits of different SIMD programming paradigms in C++

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Introduction

Vectorization is an old buzzword that has recently gotten a lot of attention in the worlds of graphics, AI, and big data. In part, the term ‘vectorization’ refers to the execution of a single instruction on multiple pieces of data at the same time. SIMD (‘Single instruction multiple data’) registers in the CPU are responsible for this. In contrast, the modern norm: the MIMD (‘Multiple instruction multiple data’) register, utilizes multiple cores to achieve high degrees of parallelism and runs multiple instructions concurrently on multiple pieces of data. MIMD has proven extremely effective for increasing performance in general-purpose processing, particularly running lots of processes concurrently (Flynn, 1972). SIMD registers have a more specialized use case which can optimize a single process if used credibly. The terms SIMD, and MIMD are classifications for computer architectures (Flynn’s taxonomy) proposed by Michael J. Flynn in 1966.

Consequently, modern x86 CPUs generally have many more MIMD registers than SIMD registers (Intel, 2023). These SIMD registers can generally be given instructions using the SSE instruction set or the AltiVec instruction set depending on the CPU. Programs written in any modern programming language process statements, and hence the data being processed, in a scalar form by executing each statement according to a control flow. This is necessary because each statement processes data that has a dependency to this control flow.

Therefore, to simplify for the purpose of this paper, vectorization is enabling a part of a program to process a single instruction N times simultaneously (vectorized) as opposed to processing that instruction N times consecutively (scalar).

The recent realization that Moore’s law no longer holds due to extreme heat build-up at higher CPU clock speeds has driven the shift toward multicore architectures (Etiemble, 2018). Furthermore, “the DRAM structures and interfaces have evolved to avoid a ‘memory wall’. However, even with a reduced memory CPI component, pipeline stalls due to memory waits still exist when executing a single program” (Etiemble, 2018). Indicating that even with the SIMD register’s ability to effectively process N statements simultaneously, N values still need to be loaded into the SIMD register. Thus the ‘memory wall’ as described by Etiemble et al. quickly becomes the new bottleneck instead of the clock speed. Regardless, SIMD technology can still increase our programs’ performance although the expected N times increase is usually not visible due to the abovementioned limitations.

The present study will compare and contrast the different SIMD programming paradigms that C++ developers have available to them. Furthermore, this paper will explore the impact on performance, portability, maintainability, and the development process that each SIMD programming paradigm has whilst also discussing ongoing advancements in each. This topic is relevant since a notable amount of research and development has gone into SIMD registers and CPUs in

recent years. However, the research addressing the application of these recent CPU developments is lacking. Whilst the former is important, the latter also needs widespread adoption to increase the performance of applications as a whole.

Literature Review

This literature review aims to explore all SIMD programming paradigms available in C++ as well as evaluate the current developments for each. Preliminary research suggests that the methods for writing vectorized code (programming paradigms) can be categorically divided into four distinct sections, namely: auto-vectorization, OpenMP directives, intrinsics, and high-level libraries.

Through my exhaustive search on article databases such as Google Scholar and Jstor, a thorough examination of the existing literature was conducted. Despite SIMD being a well-researched area, it was observed that the literature regarding how to implement SIMD as a developer effectively was sparse. The paper “An Evaluation of Current SIMD Programming Models for C++” from the Technical University of Berlin (Pohl et al., 2016) stands out since it was the only paper found in this search that bears a resemblance to the aim and scope of this study.

Pohl et al. (2016), similarly to this study, evaluates current SIMD programming paradigms, benchmarking each paradigm and weighing the benefits and disbenefits of each. While this paper provides foundational knowledge into the different SIMD programming paradigms available to C++ developers, there are distinct differences to the aim of this study. First and foremost, “An Evaluation of Current SIMD Programming Models for C++” primarily compares and contrasts well-established high-level libraries that facilitate SIMD programming using benchmarks and performance measurements. Contrarily, this study aims to evaluate high-level libraries as a whole, as a SIMD programming paradigm, and compare and contrast this paradigm against others (OpenMP Pragma directives, Auto-vectorization, and SIMD intrinsics).

Secondly, Pohl et al. (2016) does not discuss the ongoing challenges and advancements in the field, but instead has a deep focus on performance. The present study aims to evaluate all aspects of each programming paradigm, namely, performance, portability, ongoing advancements, as well as developer experience.

Auto-vectorization

Auto-vectorization is when the compiler generates assembly that makes use of the SIMD registers. This SIMD programming paradigm is practically equivalent to programming without the knowledge of the SIMD register’s existence. Thus making auto-vectorization the most maintainable and most portable SIMD programming paradigm because the written code does not change. Unfortunately, reviewing the implementation of popular static single-assignment (SSA) based compilers highlights that given the information a compiler has at compile time,

it is impossible to perfectly auto-vectorize. James Rainders, a former developer of Intel’s C/C++ compiler (ICC) auto-vectorization feature mentioned in a C++ conference in 2016 that there is “No magic compiler coming soon”.

To answer the question of whether we can trust a compiler to vectorize our code, a basic understanding of how a compiler sees our code is required. The present study is based on the models presented in Rastello et al. (2022) “SSA-based compiler design”. Given this understanding, a discussion of the vectorization methods used by popular compilers such as LLVM and GCC is discussed thoroughly in Wei et al. (2015). Wei et al. (2015) provides details about loop-level, function-level, and block-level optimization techniques used in compiler design to auto-vectorize our C++ code. Tayeb et al. (2023) discusses methods to improve auto-vectorization given irregular data access patterns. The IBM research report by Nuzman et al. (2005) discusses the challenges faced by auto-vectorizing compilers due to non-uniformity, limited data types, and memory access restrictions and provides an efficient method to handle non-contiguous data with power-of-2 strides while exploiting data reuse.

From reviewing the aforementioned sources, it is clear that automatic vectorization is a highly complex topic and has its limitations, and generally does not provide the performance increase that one would expect. To summarize, the primary reasons for this are: 1. Taking Intel’s SIMD extended instructions as an example, the execution time required to implement vectorization of one 16-bit operation is $\frac{1}{2}$ of the time of eight 16-bit operations, not $\frac{1}{8}$ as would be expected. 2. The program itself calculates the constraints of the memory access ratio, and secondly, the program is divided into vectorizable parts and non-vectorizable parts. Constrained by Amdahl’s law, The acceleration ratio is also limited by the proportion of vectorizable code in the application. When there are too many non-vectorizable parts of the program, the acceleration effect is still poor. 3. Due to the limitations of program analysis and optimization technical capabilities, it is not all vectorizable parts of the program are discovered.

By analyzing the implementation of auto-vectorization in GCC and LLVM, it is obvious that the SIMD compilation process is roughly divided into three parts. Namely, building the dependency graph, reasoning what optimizations can be made, and code generation. Building the dependency graph contains processes such as: converting code to compilers intermediate representation (SSA), In-lining, and clustering. Following this, the compiler can reason with the information gathered from the previous steps and perform loop-level optimization, block-level optimization, and function-level optimization. Due to the complexity of this topic, the given explanation presents a deliberate simplification to build a foundational model of auto-vectorization and its core principles. A more detailed overview will be presented in the analysis section.

OpenMP pragma flags

OpenMP (2012) defines their programming paradigm as: “The OpenMP API supports multi-platform shared-memory parallel programming in C/C++ and Fortran.”. OpenMP provides a standardized set of Pragma directives which can provide the compiler with more context to aid in the automatic optimizations performed by the compiler. We can utilize OpenMP pragma flags to leave a hint for the compiler to vectorize a certain section of the code using the flag `#pragma omp simd`. It is up to the compiler’s implementation to decide what to do with this hint.

From reviewing ICC’s documentation (Intel, 2023:678563), the market-leading and proprietary compiler from Intel, it is clear that the use of OpenMP Single Instruction Multiple Data (SIMD) directives to tell the compiler what code to vectorize has a strong effect (Breshears, 2020). In essence, the OpenMP SIMD directive will only have an effect when the ICC compiler observes an opportunity where a loop can be vectorized, but cannot be certain at compile time that vectorizing this loop would not change the order of execution. Other sources primarily praise OpenMP directives due to their ease of use and low impact on portability. “Compared to manually parallelizing the relevant code (e.g., using the pthreads library) or manually vectorizing the relevant code (e.g., using SIMD-intrinsics or assembly), annotating a loop with OpenMP pragmas yields much higher programmer productivity.” (Kruse and Finkel, 2022)

Intrinsics

Krukunas (2015:12.5.3) defines compiler intrinsics as “built-in functions provided by the compiler that share a one-to-one, or many-to-one, relationship with specific instructions.”. Intrinsics actual implementation is directly handled by the compiler. hence the burden of optimization is taken from the compiler to the developer. Unfortunately, due to the unstandardized nature of CPU’s SIMD instruction sets (AltiVec, SSE, NEON etc.) writing a program with intrinsics is extremely dependent on its architecture.

Intrinsics provides a middle ground between high-level C++ and low-level assembly, allowing programmers to write user-friendly and easy-to-understand code. While still allowing developers to interact directly with machine instructions. This transparent use of SIMD instructions, without the use of assembly language, gives the programmer more control over the hardware, often resulting in significant performance improvements in specialized applications.

Intrinsics result in the best performance compared to other SIMD programming paradigms but sacrifices portability, maintainability, and stability in turn due to its dependency on specific architectures and compilers. Intrinsics should not be used outside of high-performance computing applications. Apart from compromising maintainability and portability, their long names and complicated documentation increase the risk of bugs due to the potential for incorrect assumptions. This is the consensus observed from an analysis of various sources.

Namely, the publication High Performance Programming by Jeffers et al. (2016) in the chapters: exploration of Quantum Chromodynamics, and Vectorization with AVX-512 intrinsics, recognizes the trade-off between performance and portability due to the architectural dependency. Similarly, Martin et al. (2023) in The Designer’s Guide to the Cortex-M Processor Family states “The Cortex-M CPU supports saturated maths instructions which stick at their maximum and minimum values. . . . If you want to use the saturated maths instructions, you have to access them by using compiler intrinsics or by using the CMSIS-Core functions. . . .”. Most notably, Krukunas (2015) in Power and Performance bluntly states that “Unfortunately, compiling intrinsics with GCC can be somewhat annoying.” and continues with a explanation detailing intrinsics lack of portability: “This stems from the fact that certain instruction sets can only be generated by the compiler when they are explicitly enabled in the CFLAGS. However, when the instruction sets are enabled in the CFLAGS, they are enabled to be generated everywhere, that is, there is no guarantee that all of the instructions will be protected by a CPUID check. For example, attempting to compile Intel AVX2 compiler intrinsics without the -mavx2 compiler flag will result in compilation failure.”

Reinders et al. in High Performance Parallelism Pearls (2016) commends the active developments of ‘portable intrinsics’ alternatively referred to as high-level libraries. “Portable intrinsics can also provide a fast and effective way to develop and experiment with new or proposed hardware architectures. Instead of waiting for hardware availability and fully matured auto-vectorizers for an architecture, developers can use portable intrinsics to generate efficient vector code and take advantage of hardware emulators.” (Reinders et al., 2016).

High-level libraries

The most popular approach to SIMD programming is to leverage already existing high-level C++ libraries. This method abstracts away intrinsics from the developer by detecting at compile time what architecture the program is being run on and consequently running the appropriate intrinsic directives given the architecture. This approach enables the use of intrinsics whilst supporting portability and maintainability.

Many of these libraries take a specialized approach to applying SIMD by providing a tool that applies SIMD intrinsics to increase the performance of its processes. Interesting examples of such libraries: ‘simdjson’ which is capable of “parsing gigabytes of JSON per second” (simdjson, 2024). ‘sneller’ which is “World’s fastest log analysis: Lambda + SQL + JSON + S3” (sneller, 2024). ‘computeLibrary’ which is “a set of computer vision and machine learning functions optimised for both Arm CPUs and GPUs using SIMD technologies.” (computeLibrary, 2024).

The limitations of using high-level libraries are readily apparent. Due to the nature of how these libraries are created, the resulting size of an executable binary will be inflated with ‘dead’ code. Furthermore, due to the support for portability,

and the unstandardized nature of SIMD registers, a lowest common denominator has to be established. As a result, this method may inadvertently constrain the full usage of more advanced and efficient features in newer architectures.

The consensus regarding performance when it comes to high-level libraries is established to be significantly lower than the same implementations using intrinsics but significantly faster than not using the library.

As announced by the C++ International Organization for Standardization (ISO) in their technical specification: ISO/IEC 19570, a high-level SIMD library is coming to the standard C++ library as `std::simd` in C++ 26. It is worth noting that the latest stable release of C++ is version 20 and the experimental release of C++ is 23. This addition to the C++ standard library is highly welcomed by the community and has gathered much traction even though the planned release is still far in the future. Intel has published an official response to the technical specification published by the C++ ISO where much feedback was shared and discussed. Intel being responsible for the market-leading C/C++ compiler (ICC), makes their feedback particularly valuable for the C++ ISO. The current implementation of the proposed high-level SIMD library to be added to the standard library can be found on Github.

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