

Python User Interface for the mbsolve Project

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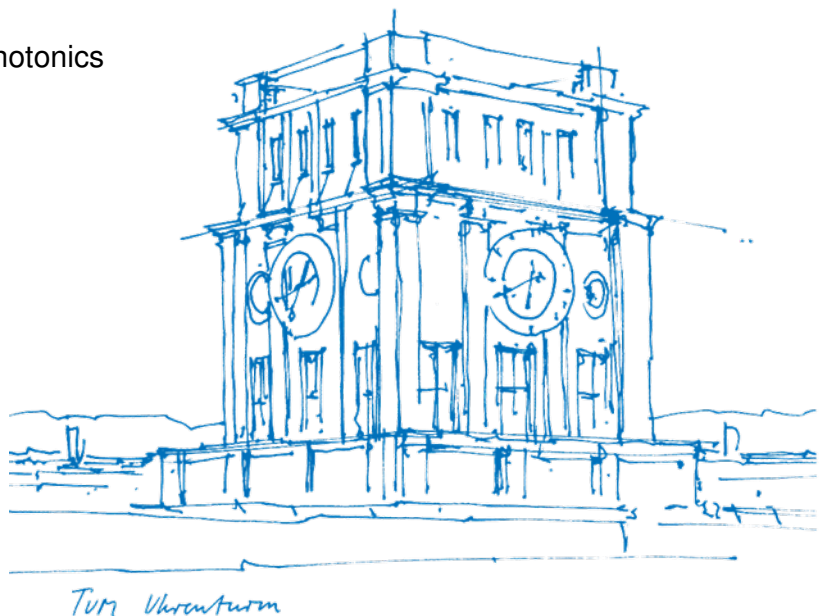
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Contents

1	Introduction	1
2	Theoretical Background	2
3	Conception and Realisation	3
3.1	Literature and basics	3
3.2	Python/C++ Interface	3
3.3	Serialisation of input parameters	4
3.4	Storing results	4
3.5	Git	4
3.6	Makefile/CMake	5
4	Results	6
4.1	Python/C++ Interface	6
4.1.1	C++ Library	6
4.1.2	CMakeLists file	6
4.1.3	Python Testprogram	6
4.2	Compatibility with Python3	6
4.3	SWIG on Windows	7
5	Conclusion	8
	Bibliography	9

1 Introduction

Quantum cascade laser is a type of semiconductor emitting mid-infrared portion of electromagnetic spectrum. This frequency range allows a multitude of applications especially in the field of spectroscopy where it enables the detection of toxic chemicals, explosives, and drugs. In this context, the mbsolve Project provides the required simulation relying on C++ programming. This engineer's practice aims at the design of a Python user interface for this project. Chapter 2 provides the theoretical background and starting point. Chapter 3 describes the conception and realisation of the project. The results are detailed in chapter 4, followed by a conclusion, discussing the outcome.

2 Theoretical Background

In this project, a high performing programming language was required for the simulation because of the large size of data and the elaborate numerical treatments. C++ fulfills these criteria not to mention that it is available everywhere and reasonably well standardized. Nevertheless it has some drawbacks: First of all it is not interactive and implementing it for user-interfaces (especially graphic user interfaces) can be quite complex. That is why it was opted for Python for the interface which brings flexibility, interactivity and simplicity (see Tab. 2.1). To sum it up, the goal is to create a common interface that enables the user to wrap different C++ libraries in Python modules and load them dynamically during the execution of the program.

C++	Python
Advantages	Advantages
High performance and speed useful for intensive tasks	Flexibility (fast edit-build-debug cycle) Interactivity
Parallelization techniques	(create, change, view objects at runtime)
Drawbacks	Drawbacks
Non-interactive Writing user-interfaces is complex	relatively slow Limitations with memory intensive tasks Limitations with database access

Table 2.1 Characteristics of C++ and Python.

3 Conception and Realisation

3.1 Literature and basics

At the beginning, it was necessary to acquire some basics about quantum mechanics (density matrix, Maxwell-Bloch equations..) by reading some introductory literature [1]. A concrete example for the simulation and the numerical solving of the Maxwell-Bloch system was described in the paper of Ziolkowski.

QuTiP, a Python Toolbox for simulating the dynamics of open quantum systems, was then the starting point. It offered a variety of examples using Jupyter Notebooks: an interactive tool designed to display neatly arranged code blocks with human-friendly text which makes project easier to manage and share, they are used in this case to describe quantum mechanic systems, such as single-atom lasing, quantum Monte Carlo trajectories...

3.2 Python/C++ Interface

Creating the Python/C++ Interface was possible through different means:

- **Boost.Python:** Boost.Python is an open source C++ library which provides an interface for binding C++ classes and functions to Python. But it is bound to GCC which leads to a huge dependance and its extensive use of C++ template can cause compilation problems and the consumption of a large amount of memory.
- **ctypes:** ctypes is a foreign library for Python, that allows calling DLLs or shared libraries and wrapping them in Python modules. It is a convenient way to reach for a few functions within a DLL, but not to make large C++ libraries available to Python in performance-critical situations.
- **SWIG (Simplified Wrapper and Interface Generator):** It is a language neutral compiler that turns C/C++ declarations into scripting language interfaces. It targets Python, Tcl, Perl, MATLAB, etc.. One of its important features is that it is simple and completely automated. In fact, it creates two different files; a C/C++ source file (module_name)_wrap.c or (module_name)_wrap.cxx and a Python source file (module_name).py. The first one needs to be compiled and linked with the rest of the C/C++ library to create an extension module. The second one is the file that will be imported in Python(see Fig.3.1).

After installing SWIG, a Python module was created starting from an interface file and a header file written in C++. The next step was to wrap a C++ class in order to create instances of this class and modify its attributes in the Python Testprogram. Then the complete C++ library was gradually elaborated, adding each time required attributes and declarations.

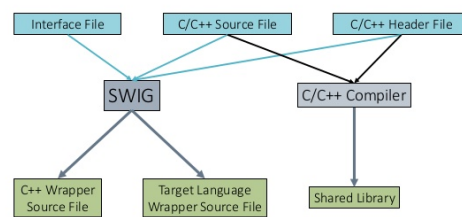


Figure 3.1 Functionality of SWIG

Source: <https://www.slideshare.net>

3.3 Serialisation of input parameters

The next point to handle was the input parameters, how to extract them from an XML File and then store them with results at the end. The first option was to use `xml` or `lxml` libraries, which could parse XML files but the resulting objects having `NoType` made handling them problematic. Therefore, a simple object-XML mapper for Python called `dexml` was applied to serialize the metadata by defining subclasses of the class `dexml.Model` and saving the parameters as instances.

3.4 Storing results

Furthermore, it was necessary to specify the file format for the simulation results, which lead to the following options:

- XML (Extensible Markup Language): XML's biggest advantage is that it provides developers with a tool that concisely and unambiguously defines the format of data records. However it is not suitable for large amount of data.
- VTK (Visualization Toolkit): It is a powerful tool to visualize scalars, vectors, complex numbers.. but requires a difficult setup and an understanding of the framework.
- HDF5 (Hierarchical Data Format): HDF5 is a file format that enables the storage and management of data of different types. It is suitable for high volume and complex data. In fact, a HDF5 file consists of datasets (multidimensional arrays) and groups, which contain diverse data: datasets, graphics, other groups.. Another advantage is the ability of compression and chunking, which makes the storage more flexible and efficient.

All that considered, HDF5 is the most suitable file format not only to store large amount of data (results) but also different types simultaneously (Metadata).

3.5 Git

After settling the C++ library that contains all the necessary classes and functions, using SWIG to incorporate it in Python, choosing dxml for serialisation of metadata and HDF5 for

storage of results, a Git project was created to gather all the pieces, register every step of the realisation and facilitate data exchange and work coordination between me and my supervisor.

3.6 Makefile/CMake

To get more experience in handling scientific projects, it was extremely efficient to understand the process of Makefiles and then CMake and apply them on my work. both aim at building executable programs starting from many modules.

- Makefiles are a simple way to organize code compilation, they consist of a list of target entries, where it is specified for each target the dependencies needed as well as the command line to apply. Besides it only rebuilds in case of new modules added to the program.
- CMake is a cross platform build system, that automatically generates Makefiles using the CMakeListst.txt file, that specifies the packages, libraries, source files,.. needed to build.

4 Results

4.1 Python/C++ Interface

The user interface consists of:

4.1.1 C++ Library

- C++ Class Record: specifies which results should be stored and in which interval.
- C++ Class Material: contains the characteristics of each material (name, electric permittivity, magnetic permeability).
- C++ Class Region: includes the specifications of each region (name, start, end, material index).
- C++ Class Device: lists the materials and regions applied in the simulation.
- C++ Class Scenario: contains the total time of the simulation, the timestep and the list of the records.
- C++ Class Result: gives a vector of values corresponding to the measured result (electric field, elements of the density matrix)
- C++ Function: Depending on the device and scenario, calculates the results.

4.1.2 CMakeLists file

SWIG can be incorporated in many build systems, in this case CMake, which can detect the SWIG executable and find the required packages and libraries for linking in order to build shared libraries. Using a single cross platform file (CMakeLists.txt) and two simple commands: cmake and make, CMake generates native build files such as makefiles, nmake files and Visual Studio projects which call SWIG and compile the generated C++ files into shared objects (.so for UNIX or .pyd for Windows).

4.1.3 Python Testprogram

The testprogram (available as a skript and a notebook) allows the setup of materials, sevice, Scenario etc., extracts metadata from an XML file, calls the C++ function that calculates the required results, displays them and stores them in addition to the metadata in a HDF5 File.

4.2 Compatibility with Python3

SWIG is compatible with the different versions of Python (Python 2.7 and Python 3.x). To choose a specific version, all that has to be done is to indicate it in the CMakeLists.txt File, which will find the corresponding packages and libraries and use them to compile and link.

4.3 SWIG on Windows

Another approach is available on Windows: building the extension module using a configuration file (conventionally called `setup.py`), it creates an extension module object using the source code files generated by swig, in addition to the original C++ source and compiles it into a shared object file or DLL (`.pyd` on Windows), which can be called in the testprogram.

5 Conclusion

The Python/C++ Interface is estimated to be the most suitable way to combine the efficiency and performance of C++ programming with the flexibility and interactivity of Python. SWIG was implemented to automatically create the wrappers needed to access the C++ Library from Python. Nevertheless, there are other possibilities to achieve this goal, such as Cython which is a Python like language for writing C/C++ extensions. In addition, further optimizations can be sought on Windows using Visual Studio.

Bibliography

- [1] C. L. Tang, *Fundamentals of Quantum Mechanics: For Solid State Electronics and Optics* (Cambridge University Press, 2009).