

POLITECNICO DI TORINO

Master's Degree in Computer Engineering

Master's Degree Thesis

Acceleration by Separate-Process Cache for Memory-Intensive Algorithms on FPGA via High-Level Synthesis



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Abstract

The end of the Moore's Law validity is making the performance advance of software run on general purpose processors more challenging than ever. Since current technology cannot scale anymore it is necessary to approach the problem from a different point of view: application-specific hardware can provide higher performance and lower power consumption, while requiring higher design efforts and higher deployment costs.

The problem of the high design efforts can be mitigated by the High-Level Synthesis, since it helps improving designer productivity thanks to convenient software-like tools.

The problem of high deployment costs can be tackled with Field-Programmable Gate Arrays, which allow to implement special-purpose hardware modules on general-purpose underlying physical architectures.

One of the open issues of HLS is the memory bandwidth bottleneck which limits performance, especially critical in case of memory-bound algorithms.

FPGAs memory system is composed of three main kind of resources: registers, Block-RAMs and external DRAMs. Current HLS tools allow to exploit this memory hierarchy manually, in a scratchpad-like fashion: the objective of this thesis work is to automate the memory management by providing a easily integrable and fully customizable cache system for High-Level Synthesis.

The proposed implementation has been developed using Vitis HLS tool by Xilinx.

The first development phase produced a single-port cache module, in the form of a C++ class configurable through templates in terms of number of sets, ways, words per line and replacement policy. The cache lines have been mapped to BRAMs. To obtain the desired performance an unconventional (for HLS) multi-process architecture has been developed: the cache module is a separate process with respect to the algorithm using it: the algorithm logic sends a memory access request to the cache and reads its response, communicating through FIFOs.

In the second development phase the focus was put on performance optimization, in two dimensions: increasing the memory hierarchy depth by introducing a Level 1 cache and increasing parallelism by enabling multiple ports.

The L1 cache is composed of cache logic inlined in the user algorithm: this solution allows to cut the costs of FIFOs communications. To keep L1 cache simple it has been implemented with a write-through write policy, therefore it provides advantages for read

accesses only. It is configurable in the number of lines and each line contains the same number of words of the associated L2 cache.

The multi-port solution provides a single L2 cache accessible from multiple FIFO ports, each of which can be associated with a dedicated L1 cache. It is possible to specify the number of ports through a template parameter and it typically corresponds to the unroll factor of the loop in which the cache is accessed.

In order to evaluate performance and resource usage impact of the developed cache module, multiple algorithms with different memory access patterns have been synthesized and simulated, with all data accessed to DRAM (performance lower bound), to BRAM (performance higher bound) and to cache (with multiple configurations).

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List of Acronyms

AXI Advanced eXtensible Interface

BRAM Block Random Access Memory

DRAM Dynamic Random Access Memory

FIFO First-In First-Out

FPGA Field-Programmable Gate Array

HDL Hardware Description Language

HLS High-Level Synthesis

RAM Random Access Memory

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Chapter 1

Background

1.1 Cache memory

Memory devices are usually the performance bottleneck in the execution of memory-bound algorithms. The ideal memory should be fast, large and cheap, but current technology forces the designer to choose a trade-off between the metrics.

A common solution to this problem is to setup a memory hierarchy in which fast but small memories are paired with large but slow memories, which allows to get good performance on average while containing costs.

This hierarchy can be managed by two main approaches:

- *Scratchpad*: different memories belongs to different addressing spaces: the user is in charge of manually choosing what memory to access: this approach allows to optimally exploit the hierarchy at the cost of high design effort.
- *Cache*: different memories belongs to the same addressing space: the system automatically uses the whole hierarchy exploiting spatial locality (accessed data is likely physically close to previously accessed data) and temporal locality (accessed data has likely recently been accessed), which are typical of many algorithms.

1.1.1 Structure

A cache memory is logically split into *sets* containing *lines* (or *ways*) which are in turn made up of *words*, as shown in Figure 1.1.

Whenever a word w is requested there are two possibilities:

- *Hit*: w is present in the cache: the request can be immediately fulfilled.
- *Miss*: w is not present in the cache: it is necessary to retrieve it from lower level memory before fulfilling the request.

During the data retrieving a cache line is filled with a block of contiguous words loaded from the lower level memory, trying to exploit spatial locality of future accesses, while

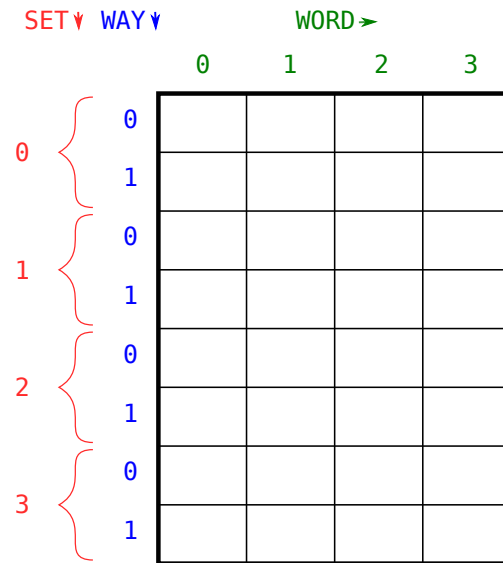


Figure 1.1: Cache logic structure.

mapping policies and replacement policies determine which cache line to overwrite, trying to exploit temporal locality.

If the cache memory is writable, data consistency is ensured by a consistency policy.

1.1.2 Policies

Mapping policy

The mapping policy is in charge of statically associating a lower level memory line to a cache set.

The *set associative* policy is the most common mapping policy: given a cache memory with s sets of w words, the word address (referred to the lower level memory) bits are split into three parts (as shown in Figure 1.2):

1. $\log_2(w)$: offset of the word in the line.
2. $\log_2(s)$: set.
3. remaining MSBs: tag identifying the specific line.

Special cases of this policy are:

- *Direct mapped* policy: each set is composed of a single line: the set bits identify a specific cache line, therefore there is no need for a replacement policy.



Figure 1.2: Set associative policy address bits meaning.

- *Fully associative* policy: there is only a single set, therefore the line is fully determined by the replacement policy.

Replacement policy

The replacement policy is in charge of dynamically associating a lower level memory line to a cache line of a set.

Multiple solutions of this problem have been developed, trying to maximize the temporal locality exploitation. Among the most commonly used solutions there are:

- *First-In First-Out*: the line to be replaced is the first one that has been inserted to the cache.
- *Least recently used*: the line to be replaced is the one that has least recently been accessed.

Consistency policy

The consistency policy is in charge of ensuring data consistency between memories belonging to different hierarchy levels.

The most common solutions to this problem are:

- *Write-back*: write accesses are performed to the highest level memory and lower level memories are updated when the cache line is replaced only.
- *Write-through*: each write access is propagated along the whole hierarchy.

1.2 FPGAs

Field Programmable Gate Arrays are integrated circuits able to implement special purpose circuits described in HDL, thanks to their programmable logic blocks and interconnections.

1.2.1 Memory system

An FPGA memory system is typically made up of:

- registers: the fastest but most expensive memories, therefore there are only a few.

- block RAMs: on chip RAMs accessible through simple and fast interface.
- external DRAM: off chip RAMs through complex and slow interface (e.g. AXI).

1.3 High-Level Synthesis

The High-Level Synthesis (HLS) is an Electronic Design Automation technique aimed at translating an algorithm description in an high-level software programming language (such as C and C++) into an Hardware Description Language (HDL) description.

HLS allows to design more complex systems in less time, compared to HDL design, moreover makes the hardware and software co-design much easier, at the cost of less expressiveness.

1.3.1 Workflow

The typical HLS workflow consists of:

1. software implementation: the top level entity is a C function: the function arguments are the entity ports and the functionality is implemented in SW; in order to guarantee synthesizability some constraints should be respected (e.g. no dynamic memory allocation).
2. software verification: the testbench can be developed as a simple main function which calls the top level entity function, therefore the functionality is verified like any SW: it is possible to exploit traditional tools (e.g. debuggers, print statements...).
3. hardware synthesis: the synthesizer generates an RTL description of the top level entity. It is possible to generate different architectures by setting up some parameters through dedicated directives.
4. hardware verification: the RTL description is simulated, to make sure that SW and HW outputs match.

1.3.2 Optimization techniques

Typical optimization techniques used by HLS for improving performance include:

- pipelining: loops and functions logic can be pipelined so that successive iterations/calls can start while previous ones are still running. The introduced parallelism allows to increase the throughput at a limited additional area cost (only pipeline registers and an FSM are required).
- dataflow: different functions composing the design are called in a pipelined fashion (similarly to pipelining, but at task level, instead of instruction level).

- loop unrolling: the loop logic is instantiated multiple times, to execute multiple loop iterations in parallel, reducing latency and improving throughput.
- memory optimizations
 - bursting: multiple memory accesses are aggregated to reduce overall latency and improving throughput.
 - interface widening: multiple data elements are packed into a single bigger word, to perform multiple accesses at the same time.

1.4 Previous work

Liang Ma et al. proposed an inlined cache implementation [1] in the form of `C++` classes: each of them implements an access type (read only, write only and read write) and a mapping policy (direct mapped and set associative).

Each cache is associated with a specific array stored to off-chip DRAM and stores its data to on-chip BRAMs and registers. Since the cache is dedicated to a specific array and the accesses to a single array are usually regular it is in general easy to tune the different parameters to get high hit ratios.

The `operator[]` has been overloaded such that the cache can be used in the same way of arrays, allowing to reduce the coding efforts when integrating the cache in an existing algorithm.

During the synthesis the cache is inlined in the user algorithm: this may clutter the logic and limit the maximum achievable performance.

Chapter 2

Basic architecture

The *Basic architecture* splits cache logic from application logic inserting them into separate processes (Figure 2.1). It starts from same assumptions of Ma's architecture (introduced in Section 1.4): accelerate accesses to off-chip DRAM arrays associating them with dedicated caches which store their data to on-chip BRAM and registers. The acceleration is achieved by:

- optimizing AXI accesses: the cache aggregates DRAM accesses in lines, allowing to exploit automatic port widening and burst accesses.
- reducing AXI accesses: the AXI interface is accessed in case of cache miss only.

The *Basic architecture* is aimed at solving the main limitation of Ma's one: inlining the cache into application makes the logic more complex and the synthesis may tool may not be able to build a circuit with optimal performance.

Since the cache process is isolated from the application logic, it should always perform in the same manner, independently from the algorithm in which it is used, while the algorithm may get better performance, since it would only contain FIFO accesses instead of the whole cache logic.

From the functional point of view, when application needs to access memory:

1. application writes the request to the request FIFO.
2. cache reads the request FIFO and checks if it causes a miss
3. in case of miss, cache issues a request to the AXI interface to prepare its own memory (mapped to BRAM) for fulfilling the requested access.
4. cache performs the access to BRAM and writes the outcome to the response FIFO (in case of a read request).

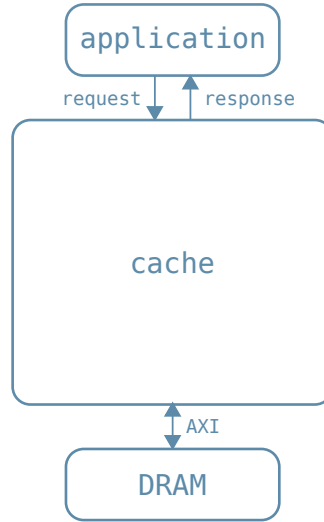


Figure 2.1: Single-process cache architecture.

2.1 Single-process

The single-process basic architecture is composed of a single pipelined process which performs all the cache functionalities.

In case of Read-Only memory accesses this process can be pipelined with an Initiation Interval of 1, while write accesses generate some dependencies on the AXI interface which cause the process II to increase, dropping cache performance.

2.1.1 Implementation

The single-process basic architecture has been implemented in the form of a C++14 class, compatible with *Vitis HLS 2021.1*.

It is compliant with the set associative mapping policy and the write-back consistency policy. Template parameters allow to select word type, number of words per line, number of sets and ways (therefore it is possible to obtain a fully associative policy by setting the number of sets to 1 or a direct mapped policy by setting the number of ways to 1). It is also possible to select the replacement policy between Least Recently Used and Last-In First-Out.

Similarly to Ma's implementation, the `operator[]` has been overloaded so that a cache object can be used as a traditional array (e.g. `cache[i] = val` assigns the `val` value to the `i`-th element of `cache` and `val = cache[i]` assigns the `i`-th element of `cache` value to `val`).

	Single-process basic implementation	Ma's implementation
Integration with algorithm	Separate process	Inlined
Underlying memory	Single DRAM array	Single DRAM array
Configurability	Template arguments	Template arguments and dedicated classes
operator[] overload	Array-like	Array-like

Table 2.1: Comparison between basic single-process and Ma's implementations.

Multi-process modeling

HLS is intended for synthesizing sequential software code, therefore it has been necessary to develop a novel technique for modeling multi-process designs.

A process is modeled as an infinite loop and their parallelism is modeled differently depending on the compilation target:

- *SW simulation*: each process is mapped to an `std::thread`.
- *HW synthesis*: each process is a dataflow function, in a dataflow region with the `disable_start_propagation` option disabled (which allow each function to run in parallel, without waiting for the completion of previous ones).

The distinction between simulation and synthesis code can be performed through the `"#ifdef __SYNTHESIS__"` preprocessor directive.

Different processes can communicate by means of FIFOs (`hls::stream` provided by Vitis HLS), which allow unidirectional point-to-point communication between two processes. It is possible to insert multiple FIFOs between each process, in both directions, therefore allowing to setup duplex communication.

Since `hls::stream` provides blocking operations, these FIFOs can be also used for synchronization purposes.

RAW dependencies

The cache process II is limited by the Read-After-Write dependencies on the cache lines, therefore the RAW cache has been developed: it is a single-line cache which provides the functions:

- `get_line`: in case of hit, read the RAW cache line; in case of miss, read the cache line.
- `set_line`: write both the RAW cache line and the cache line.

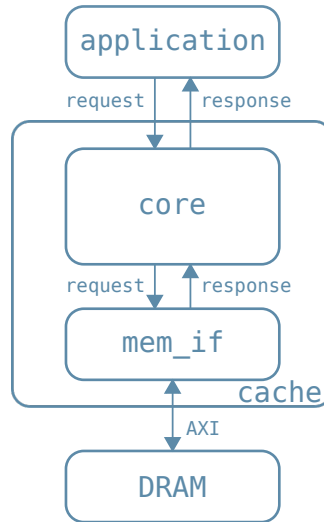


Figure 2.2: Multi-processes cache architecture.

The cache process always accesses cache memory through the RAW cache and it calls the `set_line` function once per iteration at most: if a cache line has been written it is impossible that it is read in the next iteration, since the RAW cache would hit and return its line. This allows to falsify the RAW dependency with distance of 1 on the cache memory, making it possible to schedule the cache process with an II of 1.

2.2 Multi-processes

The *Multi-processes Basic architecture* splits cache into two processes (Figure 2.2):

- core process: manage communication with application and keep cache data structures up to date.
- memory interface process: deal with the AXI interface.

This architecture is aimed at solving the performance limitations of the *Single-process Basic architecture* in case of writable caches: it manages to pipeline the *core* process with an II of 1, even in case of write accesses, since the AXI interfacing resides in the separate *memory interface* process.

The latency of the response to an hitting request depends on the *core* process only, therefore with this solution desired performance is achieved in case of writable caches too.

2.2.1 Implementation

The *Multi-processes Basic architecture* has been implemented as an extension of the *Single-process* one: the *core* process coincides with the *Single-process Basic architecture* cache process, with the only difference that it does not directly access the AXI bus, but it issues requests to the *memory interface* process through FIFOs; the *memory interface* process has been instead implemented from scratch.

Conditional code compilation

The *Multi-processes Basic architecture* has worse performance and resource usage with respect to *Single-process Basic architecture*, when dealing with read-only caches: in this case the latter architecture is automatically instantiated.

Alternatively executing the *Multi-processes* or the *Single-process* code with traditional `if` statements would generate errors during the synthesis, particularly in the *Dataflow check* step (which checks that each `hls::stream` having a writer/reader also has a reader/writer): the compiler builds both branches of the `if` statements, independently from the fact that one of them is never executed.

The problem can be solved through the *SFINAE* (Substitution Failure Is Not An Error) pattern, which allows to make the compiler ignore parts of code when the template substitution is invalid, instead of throwing an error. This technique can be easily implemented by using the `std::enable_if` structure which conditionally returns an invalid type, triggering the *SFINAE* pattern.

Chapter 3

Optimized architectures

3.1 L1 cache

Each FIFO access costs one clock cycle, which has to be paid for each memory access. To improve performance each read request to the cache does not return a single data element, but a whole cache line. This allows to insert a Level 1 cache above the underlying cache, directly inlined in the user logic, similarly to the cache described in Section 1.4.

Since it is important not to clutter the user logic, the L1 cache is kept as simple as possible: it complies with the direct mapped mapping policy and the write-through consistency policy.

The read accesses only can benefit from the L1 cache insertion, due to the write-through consistency policy: read accesses are usually more frequent than write accesses, therefore the optimization efforts has been focused on them.

3.1.1 Implementation

3.2 Multiple ports

The vast majority of algorithms access memory inside loops, which in HLS can be optimized in two main ways: pipelining, which perfectly fits the single-port cache architecture, and unrolling, with which the II would increase, since each unrolled iteration should access the same FIFO at the same time.

To solve this problem a multi-port architecture is proposed: each port has dedicated FIFOs and the cache process serves each request in order. Each port has also a dedicated L1 cache, which can be used without any coherency problem, since they follow the write-through consistency policy.

3.2.1 Implementation

Port binding

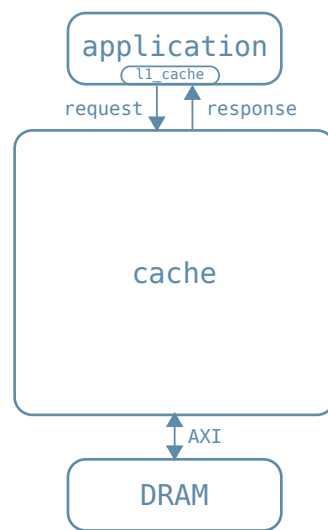


Figure 3.1: Cache architecture optimized with the insertion of a L1 cache.

Chapter 4

Results

4.1 Matrix multiplication

4.2 Bitonic sorting

4.3 Lucas-Kanade

Chapter 5

Conclusion

Bibliography

- [1] Liang Ma et al. “Acceleration by Inline Cache for Memory-Intensive Algorithms on FPGA via High-Level Synthesis”. In: *IEEE Access* PP (Sept. 2017), pp. 1–1. DOI: [10.1109/ACCESS.2017.2750923](https://doi.org/10.1109/ACCESS.2017.2750923).