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Computer Science Tripos

Part II Dissertation

The implementation of a compiler from BASIC 78 to LLVM

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Project Originator: Michael Gale

Project Supervisor: Michael Gale

The aim of the project was to implement a compiler for BASIC. The compiler was to output LLVM bytecode which can then be compiled by third-party compilers to target one of many computer architectures. More specifically the language implemented was to be ANSI X3.60-1978. The compiler was to be written in C#, making use of the language’s object-oriented features to simplify parser development . The compiler was to make use of a parser generator to produce the skeleton of a parser and the LLVM API in the code generation module.

A compiler has been written in C# that correctly and efficiently compiles BASIC code to LLVM bytecode. The compiler adheres to the ANSI X.60-1978 standard for BASIC, with some additions to modernise the language and improve usability. The resultant LLVM bytecode successfully compiles to multiple different architectures, on which the executable files run faster than those generated by similar compilers

<any special difficulties>

I David Hoare of Robinson College , being a candidate for Part II of the Computer Science Tripos, hereby declare that this dissertation and the work described in it are my own work, unaided except as may be specified below, and that the dissertation does not contain material that has already been used to any substantial extent for a comparable purpose.

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# Introduction

The BASIC language was an important development in the field of Computer Science in the 60s and 70s. It was the first verbose, entry-level programming language aimed at home users, and an interpreter was included on most of the personal computers released at this time, thus introducing a generation to the basics of programming. Although not as widely distributed BASIC is still often used as an introductory programming language for beginners. It has also influenced many modern languages, most notably Microsoft Visual Basic .NET, one of the two primary languages targeting Microsoft’s .NET framework.

LLVM is a modern compiler construction infrastructure. The principle is that compilers built with the LLVM framework output LLVM Intermediate Representation, a bytecode assembly language. This bytecode can then be compiled by an LLVM backend to native code for a target architecture. Backends exist for targeting all major modern instruction sets. Hence building a compiler with LLVM is an easy way of enabling it to build for multiple platforms. Moreover the LLVM framework performs advanced code optimisation passes at every stage of compilation. This is made easier by the Static Single Assignment form of LLVM bytecode. LLVM-based compilers are therefore able to produce machine code that often runs faster than that produced by conventional compile pipelines.

The project brief was simple – to develop an LLVM frontend (ie compiler targeting LLVM IR) for the original BASIC programming language. The ANSI X.60-1978 standard was selected as an appropriate starting point for the definition of the language, with new features being added as necessary to update the language.

# Preparation

A language needed to be selected with which to implement the compiler. I chose Microsoft C# .NET for this purpose because of my personal experience using the language and also its object-oriented design. Looking at the 1978 BASIC standard made it clear that it would be very advantageous to the development of the parser and compiler for object-oriented language features such as inheritance and overloading to be available.

The first stage in any compiler is the lexer, which converts input code to a stream of lexical tokens to be passed to the parser. To avoid the tedious task of building a lexer from scratch I elected to use a lexer generator to produce this component. After exploring available tools I selected the ANTLR 4.5 lexer generator for this task. ANTLR takes a standard context-free grammar and has a well-documented C# target. The system is mature and well supported and was a good choice.

# Implementation

I used the ANSI X.60-1978 standard to write a complete context-free grammar for BASIC. To debug the CFG I used ANTLR 4.5’s TestRig component, which produces a graphical representation of how an input string is parsed by the grammar. Once the grammar correctly interpreted the language I used ANTLR to produce C# class files that could be used to incorporate the lexer component into the compiler.

I then built a parser to produce an abstract syntax tree from the token stream returned by the lexer. To aid with this task I implemented the listener interface produced by the ANTLR compiler. This provided stubs for all methods required by the parser. I chose an iterative approach for the development of the compiler. Hence I initially implemented a small subset of the parser and then implemented the code generation module for this subset. This allowed an end-to-end demonstration of the compiler from an earlier stage.

The code generation module of the compiler involved use of the LLVM API. A complication to this step was the fact that there do not exist a complete set of bindings of the (very extensive) API for .NET development. There do exist several attempts at writing said bindings at differing stages of completeness. The solution was therefore to select an appropriate set of bindings and then add to them when required functionality is not implemented. After investigating several options I opted to use the incomplete bindings written by my project supervisor Michael Gale some years ago. With Michael’s assistance I was able to add to the bindings all functionality I needed from the LLVM API when necessary.

# Evaluation

The initial aim of the project was to produce a correctly working compiler. Therefore the obvious first step was to run a number of test programs through the compiler to ensure the expected output was produced. This was a valuable bug-finding exercise and verified that the compiler was indeed correctly compiling the BASIC code. To assist with this task I made use of LLVM’s lli.exe tool. This is an interpreter which works directly on the LLVM IR bytecode produced by my compiler, running it in real-time by use of a just-in-time compiler. This allowed me to rapidly test output without needing to compile the bytecode to native assembly.

Part of the reason for using LLVM was the cross-platform nature of its backend, allowing a variety of architectures to be targeted by the compiler. I was developing on a 64-bit Windows machine, on which code was being successfully compiled and run. To test the cross-platform capabilities of the compiler, I compiled some BASIC test code for the ARM platform, 32-bit Windows and 64-bit Linux architectures. I then assembled and ran the resultant assembly on machines using the respective instruction sets. To test the ARM output I used a Raspberry Pi. The code compiled and ran successfully on all architectures I tested it on.

As a real-world example and to give my compiler a real workout I implemented the Fast Fourier Transform (FFT) algorithm in BASIC. This is an efficient algorithm for computing the discrete Fourier transform of a sampled signal, ie decomposes the signal into its constituent frequencies and their relative sizes. I found an implementation of FFT for a different dialect of BASIC [http://www.nicholson.com/dsp.fft1.html] and adapted it to fit my specification.

# Conclusions

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# Bibliography

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# Appendices

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# Project Proposal