

# The LLVM compiler framework

## Introduction

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*These slides are based on material originally written by Michele Scandale, Ettore Speziale and Stefano Cherubin for the “Code Transformation and Optimization” course.*

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# Compilers and compilers

You might have already have had experience working in a **toy compiler**...

## Toy Compiler

- small codebase
- easy to modify
- limited capabilities

## Production-Quality Compiler

- huge codebase
- hard to modify
- produces high-quality code

*Initially*, working with a production-quality compiler might seem **hard**...  
...however it provides a huge set of tools that toy compilers **miss**!

# Why LLVM

Why is this course focused on LLVM?

- Key technology in the **industry**
  - AMD, Apple, Google, Intel, NVIDIA...
- Biggest platform for **research** about compilers
- **Modular** and **hackable**

Initially started as a small research project at Urbana-Champaign.

Now it has grown to a huge size...

# GCC vs LLVM

**LLVM** [1] is Open Source

If you are familiar with Linux you might have used **GCC** [2]...

GCC is older than LLVM

- ⇒ GCC produces better code
- ⇒ LLVM is generally faster
- ⇒ LLVM is more modular and *clean*

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# Compiler pipeline

Typically a compiler is a **pipeline**.

Advantages of the pipeline model:

- **simplicity** – read something, produce something
- **locality** – no superfluous state

Complexity lies on **chaining** together stages.

# Frontends and Drivers

## C Language Family Front-end

The external interface to LLVM is provided by the **compiler driver**.

The **compiler driver** is the program that:

- Provides the interface to the user
- Performs setup of the frontend and LLVM itself.

The driver invokes the **first stage of the pipeline**, the **frontend**.

### Example

**Clang**[3] is the frontend for the C language family.

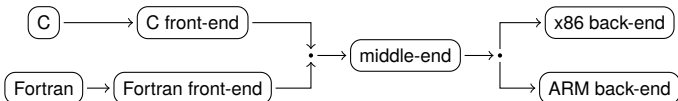
The driver of *Clang* is the `clang` executable (compatible with GCC).



# Compiler pipeline

## Internal pipelines

High-level pipeline structure of a compiler:



There are three main components:

**Front-end** **translates** a source file into the intermediate representation

**Middle-end** **analyzes** the intermediate representation, **optimizes** it

**Back-end** **generates** target machine assembly from the intermediate representation

# The LLVM compiler pipeline

We will focus on the *middle-end*.

Same concepts are valid also for {front,back}-end.

- The *front-end* is completely language-specific
  - There are no special facilities in LLVM for parsing and AST generation
  - This is slowly changing: **MLIR**
- The *back-end* uses its own machine-specific IR
  - As opposed to the frontend, in LLVM there are generalized facilities for implementing a backend
  - Complex topic, not enough time...
  - Most optimizations happen in the middle-end anyway

# The LLVM compiler pipeline

The lingua franca of LLVM is its **Intermediate Representation** called  
LLVM-IR

The LLVM-IR is:

- **Produced** by the **front-end**
- **Transformed and optimized** by the **middle-end**
- **Consumed** by the **back-end**

Understanding LLVM-IR is the key to hacking within LLVM.

# Remember...

LLVM is a **compiler construction framework**  
It operates on the **LLVM-IR** language.



Using LLVM *by itself* does not make much sense!  
Writing LLVM-IR by hand is unfeasible.

# The Middle End

The middle-end is not a monolithic block,  
but it is a pipeline in and of itself.

**LLVM-IR** the **language** used in the middle-end

**Pass** a **pipeline stage**  
a Pass may have **dependencies** on other Passes.

**Pass Manager** component that **schedules** passes according to their **dependencies** and **executes** them  
(*builds the pipeline*)

Our focus: **writing a pass**

# First insights

A compiler is **complex**:

- passes are the **elementary unit of work**
- Pass Manager must be **advised** about pass chaining
- pipeline shapes are **not fixed** – they can change from one compiler execution to another  
e.g. optimized/not optimized builds, compiler options, ...

# A word of warning!

Compilers must be **conservative**:



All passes **must preserve the program semantics**



Compiler passes must be designed **very carefully!**

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# Classical Algorithm Design

In algorithm design, a good approach is the following:

- 1 study the problem
- 2 make some example
- 3 identify the **common case**
- 4 derive the algorithm for the common case
- 5 add handling for **corner cases**
- 6 improve performance by **optimizing the common case**

Weakness of the approach:

- **corner cases:**  
a *correct* algorithm **must** consider *all the corner cases*!

# Compiler Algorithm Design

## Be Conservative

Corner cases are difficult to handle, but they cannot be ignored

Compiler algorithms must be **proven** to preserve  
program semantic **at all times**

As an aid, a *standard methodology* is employed.

Compiler algorithms are built combining **three** kinds of passes:

Analysis, Optimization, Normalization

# Compiler Algorithm Design

## Be Conservative

Corner cases are difficult to handle, but they cannot be ignored

Compiler algorithms must be **proven** to preserve  
program semantic **at all times**

As an aid, a *standard methodology* is employed.

Compiler algorithms are built combining **three** kinds of passes:

Analysis, Optimization, Normalization

We now consider a simple example: *loop hoisting*.

# Loop Hoisting

It is a transformation that:

- looks for statements (inside a loop) not depending on the loop state
- move them outside the loop body

## Loop Hoisting – Before

```
do {  
    a += i;  
    b = c;  
    i++;  
} while (i < k);
```

## Loop Hoisting – After

```
b = c;  
do {  
    a += i;  
    i++;  
} while (i < k);
```

# Loop Hoisting

## Focus on the Transformation

### The general idea:

- move “good” statement outside of the loop

This **pass** modifies the code, thus it is an **optimization pass**.

It needs to know:

- which pieces of code are loops
- which statements are “good” statements

This information is computed by the the **analysis** passes:

- detecting loops in the program
- detecting loop-independent statements

The loop hoisting pass declares which analyses it needs:

- pipeline automatically built: **analysis** → **optimization**

# Loop Hoisting

## Proving Program Semantic Preservation

The **proof** is trivial:

- the transformation shall preserve program semantics
- the analyses shall be correct

Analysis passes are usually built starting from other analyses already implemented inside the compiler, or are already present in LLVM

- often, no proof is necessary for the analyses

### However...

You also have to prove that the combination of analysis + transformation is correct!

"Beware of bugs in the above code;  
I have only proved it correct, not tried it."

— Knuth

# The importance of normalization

We have spoken about loops, but which kind of loop?

**do-while? while? for?**

Almost all loops are different forms of the **same exact thing**



We can convert a lot of loops to a loop of another kind!

To account for the various kinds of loops, we choose a **normal** kind of loop, and then we write a **normalization** pass.

Usually, **do-while** loops are chosen to be the *normal* loops.

Sometimes, normalization is also called **canonicalization**.

The more loops we recognize, the higher the potential **optimization impact!**

# A Methodology

You have to:

- 1 analyze the problem
- 2 make some examples
- 3 detect the common case
- 4 determine the **input conditions**
- 5 determine which **analyses** you need
- 6 design the **optimization** pass
- 7 proof its **correctness**
- 8 improve algorithm performance on the common case
- 9 improve the effectiveness of the algorithm by adding **normalization passes**



# Ignore corner cases!

Something is missing...

## Corner Cases!

Why?

- 1 It makes no sense to optimize code that is seldom executed
- 2 Your optimization will be based on **properties of the code that are true only in the common case you are considering**
  - If the code does not fit the common case, it shall stay as-is
  - Otherwise you **risk breaking program semantics!**

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# LLVM-IR is like a box of chocolates

You never know what you're gonna get

LLVM-IR comes in 3 different flavours:

**assembly** on-disk human-readable format  
(file extension: `.ll`)

**bitcode** on-disk machine-oriented binary format  
(file extension: `.bc`)

**in-memory** in-memory binary format  
(used during compilation process)

All formats have the same expressiveness!

# Using the driver to produce LLVM-IR

We can generate LLVM-IR assembly using the `clang` driver:

```
clang -emit-llvm -S -o out.ll in.c
```

If you want to generate bitcode instead:

```
clang -emit-llvm -o out.bc in.c
```

The compiler driver can also generate native code starting from  
LLVM-IR assembly

(Like compiling an assembly file with GCC)

# Playing with LLVM Passes

Run one or more passes on the LLVM-IR on-demand by using `opt`:

- Syntax is like `clang` (supports even `-O1`, `-O2...`)
- `-passes` argument specifies which passes to run
- Order of execution is as specified!
  - Different order, different results! (**phase/stage ordering**)

Some useful passes for debugging (they do not transform anything):

**print CFG** `opt -passes='view-cfg' input.ll`

**print dominator tree** `opt -passes='view-dom' input.ll`

## Example

- Run *mem2reg*, then view the CFG:
  - `opt -passes='mem2reg,view-cfg' input.ll`

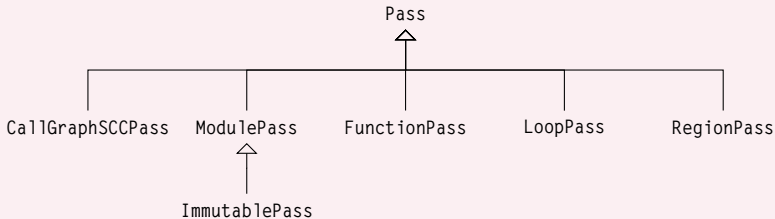
# Pass Hierarchy

LLVM provides a lot of passes...

- Try `opt -print-passes!`

There are different kind of passes:

## LLVM Passes



# LLVM Passes

Each kind of pass visits particular elements of a module:

- ImmutablePass** compiler configuration – never run
- CallGraphSCCPass** post-order visit of CallGraph SCCs
- ModulePass** visit the whole module
- FunctionPass** visit functions
- LoopPass** post-order visit of loop nests
- RegionPass** visit a custom-defined region of code

Specializations come with restrictions:

- e.g. a **FunctionPass** cannot add or delete functions
- refer to “Writing a LLVM Pass” [4, 5] for documentation on features and limitations of each kind of pass

# Recap

- The **user** invokes the **compiler** via the **driver**
- The **compiler** is made of three **stages** (front-end, middle-end, back-end)
- The **middle-end** is made of **passes**

If you want things done, you want to work on a **pass**.

- Edit an existing pass
- Create a new pass

To design a pass, you must follow the principle of **conservativeness**.

Next step: how to actually code a pass!



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# How passes work

A **pass** is a **subroutine** that programmatically transforms a piece of code.

The code of the pass operates on the LLVM-IR using a set of **object-oriented APIs**.

Let's examine the LLVM-IR [6] more closely, first by looking at its **human-readable** form.

# LLVM-IR

## Example: factorial

```
define i32 @fact(i32 noundef %n) {  
entry:  
    %retval = alloca i32, align 4  
    %n.addr = alloca i32, align 4  
    store i32 %n, ptr %n.addr, align 4  
    %0 = load i32, ptr %n.addr, align 4  
    %cmp = icmp eq i32 %0, 0  
    br i1 %cmp, label %if.then, label %if.else  
  
if.then:  
    store i32 0, ptr %retval, align 4  
    br label %return  
  
if.else:  
    %1 = load i32, ptr %n.addr, align 4  
    %2 = load i32, ptr %n.addr, align 4  
    %sub = sub nsw i32 %2, 1  
    %call = call i32 @fact(i32 noundef %sub)  
    %mul = mul nsw i32 %1, %call  
    store i32 %mul, ptr %retval, align 4  
    br label %return  
  
return:  
    %3 = load i32, ptr %retval, align 4  
    ret i32 %3  
}
```

# LLVM-IR

## What it looks like

LLVM-IR looks a lot like a RISC assembly language:

- Few instructions, all perfectly orthogonal
  - There are infinite registers
  - There are no special-purpose registers
  - No implicit flags register
- Basic block boundaries are denoted by **labels**
- Only **load** and **store** access memory

There are also a few CISC-like **high level instructions**:

- Reserve memory on the stack – **alloca**
- Function call – **call**
  - The calling convention is abstracted away
  - There is an implicit call stack
- Pointer arithmetics – **getelementptr**
- ...

# LLVM-IR

## How it is actually structured

In reality LLVM-IR is much more high-level than assembly.

- The topmost object of a LLVM-IR program is the **Module**.
- **Modules** contain a list of **Globals**.
  - Globals can be either **Functions** or **Global Variables**.
  - A global can be a **Forward declaration**.
- **Functions** contain a list of **Basic Blocks** + **Arguments**.
- **Basic Blocks** are a list of **Instructions**.

### The in-memory representation

All these parts will correspond directly to **C++ objects**.

The abundance of lists guarantees low overhead and scalability to very large programs.

# LLVM-IR

## Values & Types

LLVM-IR is **strongly typed**:

- e.g. you cannot assign a floating point value to an integer register without an explicit cast

**Almost everything is typed:**

<b>functions</b>	@fact	→	i32 (i32)
<b>registers</b>	%3 = icmp eq i32 %2, 0	→	i1
<b>global vars.</b>	@var = common global i32 0	→	i32

These objects that have a type are called (somewhat confusingly)

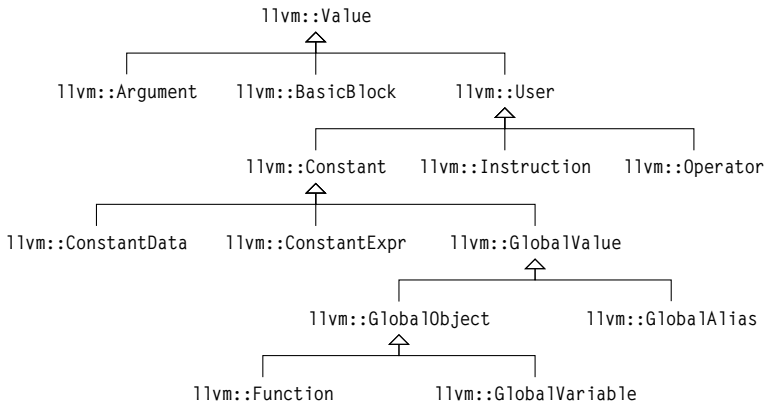
**LLVM Values.**

### The in-memory representation

llvm::Value is the **base class** of almost all interesting LLVM-IR objects!

# LLVM-IR

## Hierarchy



# LLVM-IR

## Static Single Assignment

LLVM-IR is SSA-based:

- every register is **statically assigned** exactly **once**

Statically means that:

- inside each function...
- ...for each register %foo...
- ...there is **only one** statement in the form %foo = ...

**Static** (compile time)  $\neq$  **dynamic** (runtime)

- Single *Dynamic* Assignment:  
*in the execution trace* there is only one assignment to a variable x
- Single *Static* Assignment:  
*in the code listing* there is only one assignment to a variable x
  - Assignments **can** be performed multiple times (in a loop for example)



# Static Single Assignment

## Examples

### Scalar SAXPY

```
float saxpy(float a, float x, float y) {  
    return a * x + y;  
}
```

### Scalar LLVM SAXPY

```
define float @saxpy(float %a, float %x, float %y) {  
    %1 = fmul float %a, %x  
    %2 = fadd float %1, %y  
    ret float %2  
}
```

Temporary %1 not reused! %2 is used for the second assignment!

# Static Single Assignment

## Examples

### Array SAXPY

```
void saxpy(float a, float x[4], float y[4], float z[4]) {  
    for(unsigned i = 0; i < 4; ++i)  
        z[i] = a * x[i] + y[i];  
}
```

### Array LLVM SAXPY

```
for.cond:  
    %i.0 = phi i32 [ 0, %entry ], [ %inc, %for.inc ]  
    %cmp = icmp ult i32 %i.0, 4  
    br i1 %cmp, label %for.body, label %for.end  
    [...]  
for.inc:  
    %inc = add i32 %i.0, 1  
    br label %for.cond
```

One assignment for loop counter %i.0

# Static Single Assignment

## Handling Multiple Assignments

### Max

```
float max(float a, float b) {  
    return a > b ? a : b;  
}
```

### LLVM Max – WRONG

```
%1 = fcmp ogt float %a, %b  
br i1 %1, label %if.then, label %if.else  
if.then:  
    %2 = %a  
    br label %if.end  
if.else:  
    %2 = %b  
    br label %if.end  
if.end:  
    ret float %2
```

Why is it **wrong**?

# Static Single Assignment

## Use `phi` to Avoid Troubles

The `%2` variable must be statically assigned once!

How do we handle conditional assignments then?

### LLVM Max

```
%1 = fcmp ogt float %a, %b
br i1 %1, label %if.then, label %if.end
if.then:
br label %if.end
if.else:
br label %if.end
if.end:
%2 = phi float [ %a, %if.then ], [ %b, %if.else ]
ret float %2
```

The `phi` instruction is a *conditional move*:

- it takes  $(\text{variable}_i, \text{label}_i)$  pairs
- if coming from predecessor identified by  $\text{label}_i$ , its value is  $\text{variable}_i$

# Static Single Assignment

## Definition and Uses

Each SSA variable is assigned only once:

- variable **definition**

Each SSA variable can be referenced by multiple instructions:

- variable **uses**

Algorithms and technical language abuse of these terms!

*Let %foo be a variable. If the definition of %foo does not have side-effects nor uses, the aforementioned %foo variable can be erased from the CFG without altering program semantics.*

# SSA & LLVM-IR

## Static Single Assignment

### Important observation

SSA means that  
**there is always a 1:1 correspondence**  
**between a register and the instruction that assigns it.**

### Consequence

As a result, in LLVM-IR  
**registers are not separate objects**  
but **every LLVM Instruction**  
**is the output “register” of itself.**

# Static Single Assignment

## Rationale

Old compilers are not SSA-based:

- converting non-SSA input into SSA form is expensive
- cost must be amortized

New compilers are SSA-based:

- SSA easier to work with
- SSA-based analysis/optimizations are faster

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# A step back...

Remember how we described the internal structure of an LLVM-IR module:

- `llvm::Module` is a list of `llvm::GlobalValues`.
  - `llvm::Function` is a kind of `llvm::GlobalValue`.
- `llvm::Function` is a list of `llvm::BasicBlocks`.
- `llvm::BasicBlock` is a list of `llvm::Instructions`.

Functions and basic blocks act like containers:

- STL-like accessors: `front()`, `back()`, `size()`, ...
- STL-like iterators: `begin()`, `end()`

Each contained element is aware of its container:

- `getParent()`

Warning for BBs: order of iteration  $\neq$  order of execution!

# A step back...

In a `llvm::BasicBlock`, the `llvm::Instructions` execute in the order specified by the list.

- In which order do the `llvm::BasicBlocks` execute?

The way the basic blocks are executed is implicitly described by the **branches** in each block.

- These branches describe the **Control Flow Graph** of the function.

# Control Flow Graph

LLVM automatically maintains a simple API for operating on the CFG:

- no need to run passes
- no need to search the branch instructions in each basic block

Every CFG has an **entry** basic block:

- the **first** executed basic block
- it is the **root/source** of the graph
- get it with `llvm::Function::getEntryBlock()`

# Control Flow Graph

## Walking

At the end of a basic blocks there's always a **terminator** instruction:

- **ret, br, switch, unreachable, ...**

More than one **exit** block can be present in a function:

- they are the **leaves/sinks** of the graph
- their terminator instructions are always **rets**

- 1 `llvm::BasicBlock::getTerminator()`

- 2 check the opcode of the terminator

# Side Note

## Casting Framework

For performance reasons, a custom casting framework is used:

- you cannot use **static\_cast** and **dynamic\_cast** with types/classes provided by LLVM

### LLVM Casting Functions

Static cast of Y* to X	<code>X *llvm::cast&lt;X&gt;(Y *)</code>
Dynamic cast of Y* to X	<code>X *llvm::dyn_cast&lt;X&gt;(Y *)</code>
Is Y* an instance of X?	<code>bool llvm::isa&lt;X&gt;(Y *)</code>

Example:

- is BB a sink?  
`llvm::isa<llvm::ReturnInst>(BB.getTerminator())`

# Control Flow Graph

## Basic Blocks

Every basic block BB has one or more\*:

**predecessors** from `pred_begin(BB)` to `pred_end(BB)`

**successors** from `succ_begin(BB)` to `succ_end(BB)`

Other convenience methods available in `llvm::BasicBlock`:

- useful getters
  - `BasicBlock *getUniquePredecessor()`
  - ...
- moving a basic block
  - `moveBefore(llvm::BasicBlock *)`
  - `moveAfter(llvm::BasicBlock *)`
- split a basic block:
  - `splitBasicBlock(llvm::BasicBlock::iterator)`
- ...

---

\*see `include/llvm/IR/CFG.h`

# Instructions

The `llvm::Instruction` class defines common operations:

- getting an operand
  - `getOperand(unsigned)`

Subclasses provide specialized accessors:

- the **load** instruction takes as operand the pointer to the memory to be loaded:
  - `llvm::LoadInst::getPointerOperand()`

# Instructions

## Creating New Instructions

Instructions are created using:

- constructors
  - `llvm::LoadInst::LoadInst(...)`
- factory methods
  - `llvm::GetElementPtrInst::Create(...)`
- the helper class `llvm::IRBuilder`
  - `llvm::IRBuilder<> builder(insPoint);`  
`builder.CreateAdd(...);`

**Interface is not homogeneous!**

Some instructions support all methods, others support only one.



# Instructions

## Inserting New Instructions

Instructions can be inserted:

- automatically by IRBuilder
  - insertion point is given at IRBuilder instantiation
- manually by appending to a basic block
- manually by inserting after/before another instruction

# From Control Flow to Data Flow

## Definitions and Uses

In LLVM, the data flow generated by the various instructions is represented by a simple hierarchy:

**value** something that can be used: `llvm::Value`

**user** something that can use: `llvm::User`

**use** the link between the **value** and the **user**: `llvm::Use`

A value is a **definition**:

- Visiting where a definition is used:
  - `llvm::Value::use_begin()`, `llvm::Value::use_end()`

An user accesses **definitions**:

- Visiting the definitions that are used:
  - `llvm::User::op_begin()`, `llvm::User::op_end()`

# From Control Flow to Data Flow

## Instructions are Values

- `llvm::Value` inherits from `llvm::User`
- `llvm::Instruction` inherits from `llvm::Value`
  - ⇒ The value produced by the instruction is the **instruction itself**!

### Example

```
%6 = load i32, i32* %1, align 4
```

The **load** is described by an instance of `llvm::Instruction`.  
That instance also represents the %6 variable.

Not all instances of `llvm::Value` are also `llvm::Instructions`!  
i.e. function arguments

# From Control Flow to Data Flow

## Value Typing

Every `llvm::Value` is typed:

- use `llvm::Value::getType()` to get the type

Since every instruction is a value:

- instructions are typed

### Example

```
%6 = load i32, i32* %1, align 4
```

The type of the `%6` variable is the type of the return value of the `load` instruction, `i32`

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# Conclusions

LLVM is a **production-quality** compiler framework:

⇒ impossible knowing all details

But:

- it is well organized
- if you know compiler theory, it is relatively easy to find what you need inside the source code

Remember it's written in C++!

- To hack around LLVM you need at least basic C++ skills
- C++  $\neq$  C

# Thank You!

Questions?

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