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ABSTRACT

In this paper we analyze the real-time performance of the LinuxCNC distribution.  In particular we study the performance of the kernel by writing a real-time application that writes a timestamped ‘hello’ message every millisecond for one minute, and analyze the results by comparing the actual time difference between ‘hello’ messages and the expected one millisecond difference.  We find that on a laptop under no load that the kernel performs with maximum difference of 1.1 millisecond, which occurred just one time and under full CPU load, the kernel holds to a difference of 1 millisecond 99.94% of the time.  We find therefore that the kernel in use on the LinuxCNC distribution is indeed real time.

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**Keywords**

LinuxCNC, real-time, analysis, RTAI kernel, hardware abstraction layer, arduino

INTRODUCTION

CNC machines are commonly used in industrial applications to accurately manufacture parts from plastics, woods, and metals such as aluminum or steel.  These machines can perform very precise operations down to the thousandth, or ten thousandth of an inch precision, and very fast operations at hundreds of inches per minute.  It is not uncommon for the mechanics and control hardware of the machines to last several decades, and outlive the control computer and software that was state of the art in the 1970s and 1980s, but are now hard to interface with modern CAD and CAM packages that engineers use to design new products.

LinuxCNC is a replacement machine control software that can replace the outdated control computer and control software that these older machines use, and allow them to be reintegrated with modern workflows at a fraction of the cost of new machines.  However, it is essential that the software controlling these machines runs in a real-time fashion in order to ensure safety of the machine operator and the machine itself.  Additionally, it is desireable to have robust, bidirectional, real-time control of the machines in order to take best advantage of the high speeds and accuracies of the machine.

We want to show, therefore, that the software does run in realtime during normal operation when commanding a machine’s operation.  Unfortunately due to complications with the code for the LinuxCNC software, and with our hardware limited to a laptop without a serial or parallel port, we chose to scale back our performance analysis.

A careful analysis of the differences between vanilla Linux and the distribution provided as a live CD for easy setup and installation (which will be a standard installation in use on real machines) suggested that there were two classes of changes made.  First, a hardware abstraction layer (HAL) was added to allow the kernel to communicate through virtual ports to real machines, avoiding the need to recompile the kernel for different hardware setups.  Second, a real time RTAI patched kernel is used between the HAL and the standard Linux completely fair scheduler kernel.  The normal kernel sees the hardware and hardware interrupts as software interrupts given the highest priority.

We chose to focus on an analysis of the kernel’s performance.  By verifying that the kernel was capable of real time operation, we could verify at least that is is possible for LinuxCNC to be real-time.

System

PREPARING THE SYSTEM

To analyze LinuxCNC we began by installing LinuxCNC on a ***insert laptop type***laptop available for free usage.  This laptop was an older dual core model, originally running Windows Vista.  In order to best analyze the real world installation of LinuxCNC we downloaded and installed LinuxCNC 2.7 Wheezy following the directions as provided on <http://linuxcnc.org/docs/2.7/html/getting-started/getting-linuxcnc.html#_download_the_image> for writing to and installing from a USB drive.

ARDUINO SETUP

In order to realistically, but safely, analyse LinuxCNC we wanted to setup a simple synthetic workload on an Arduino and were lucky to find that there was already an open source Arduino code base designed as a daughter board for LinuxCNC at <https://github.com/dewy721/EMC-2-Arduino>

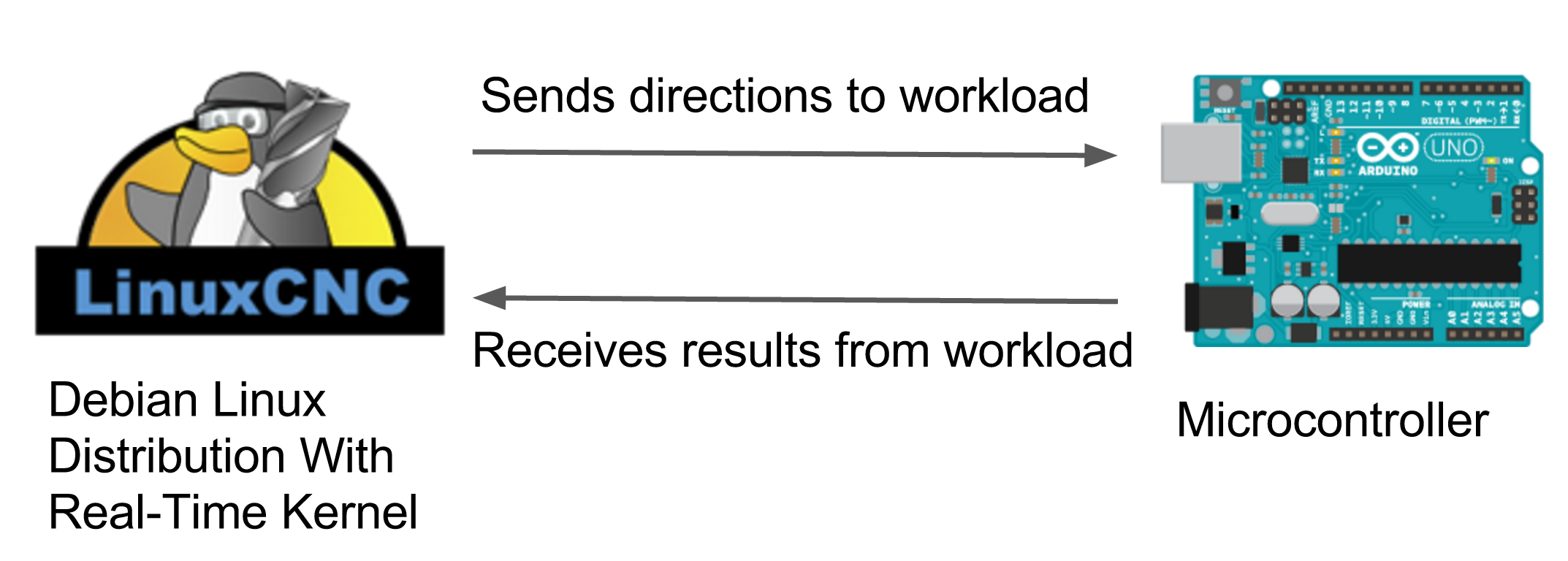


Figure : Our original system

SYSTEM ARCHITECTURE

We study the system architecture once the laptop is prepared and we can focus our investigation.  In particular we considered <http://linuxcnc.org/docs/2.7/html/code/code-notes.html> where a diagram of the system architecture, as described by the LinuxCNC programming team, provides the ideal starting point.

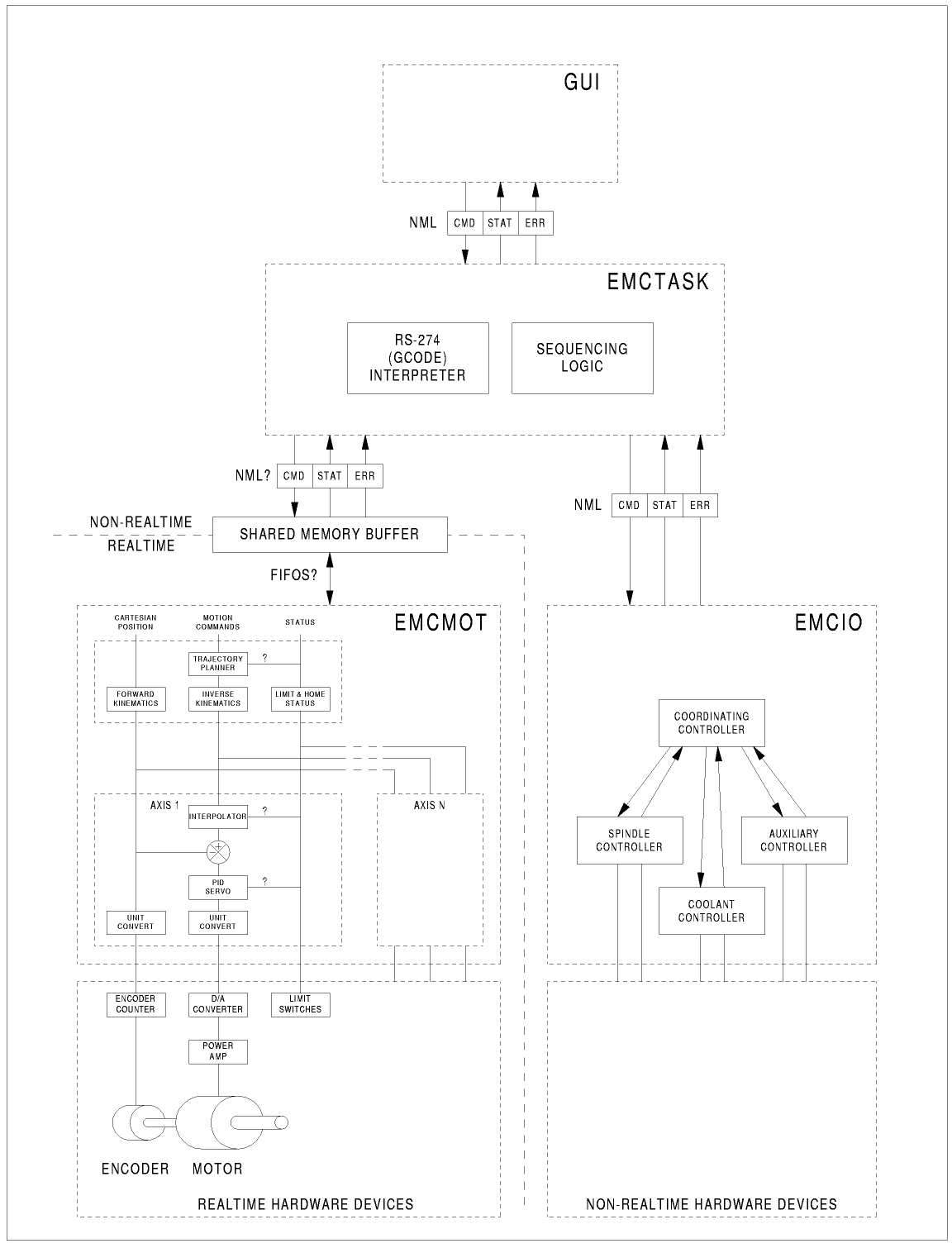


Figure : Full LinuxCNC architecture

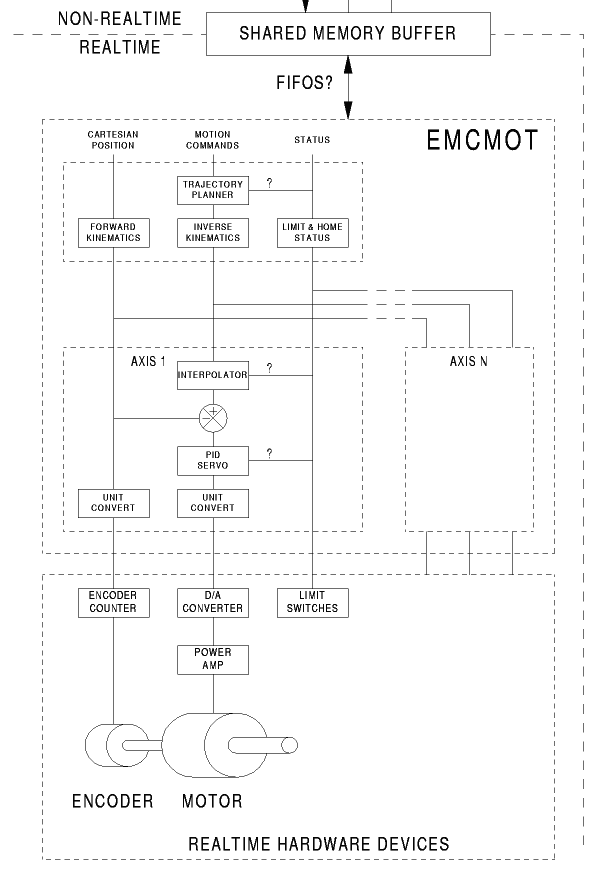


Figure : LinuxCNC realtime architecture only

There is a clear distinction between the realtime and non-realtime portions of the system, and we must clearly focus on the portions in the real-time section of the diagram in our investigation.  However, as we recall from the INTRODUCTION, the HAL is only one of two major types of changes made from vanilla Linux.  We intended to investigate the real-time portions of the LinuxCNC architecture but had difficulties getting using a USB connection between LinuxCNC and the arduino.  (See USB ISSUES for details)

We pivoted the focus of our investigations to primarily considering the kernel of the provided operating system environment, assuming that without building a good foundation (a real-time kernel) it is impossible to build a good building (a real-time program).

Kernel

Analyzing Kernel

After shifting our focus to the kernel, rather than the LinuxCNC program we wrote a simple real-time application to provide a data set to analyze the performance of the kernel.

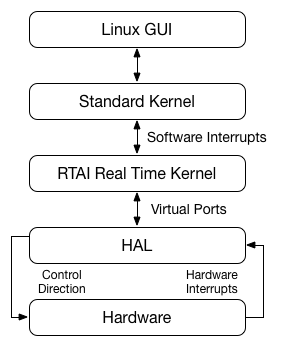


Figure : Kernel architecture

Sample Code

Real-time kernel space code

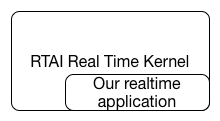


Figure : Real time kernel application location

User space code

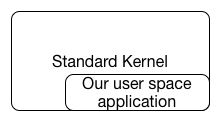


Figure : User space application location

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Results

Plots

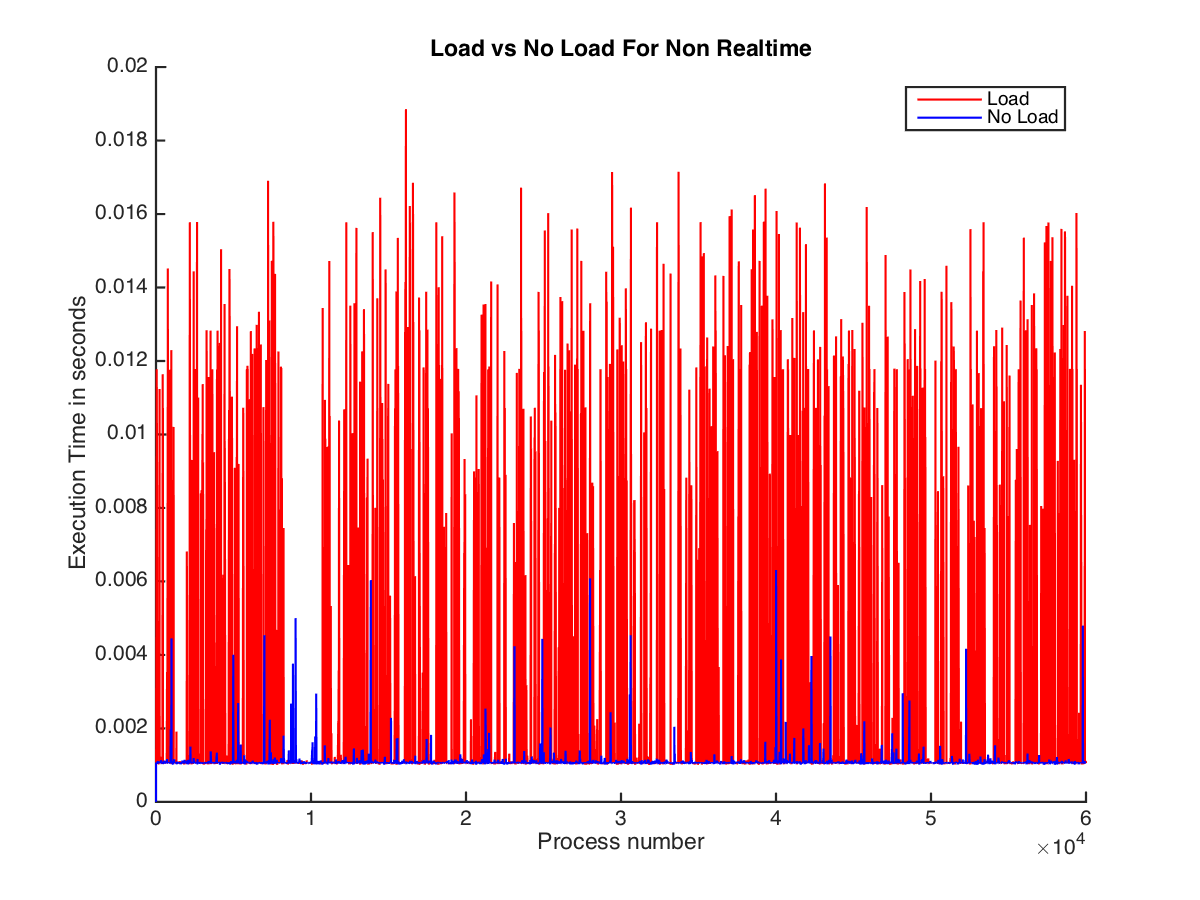


Figure : Non realtime

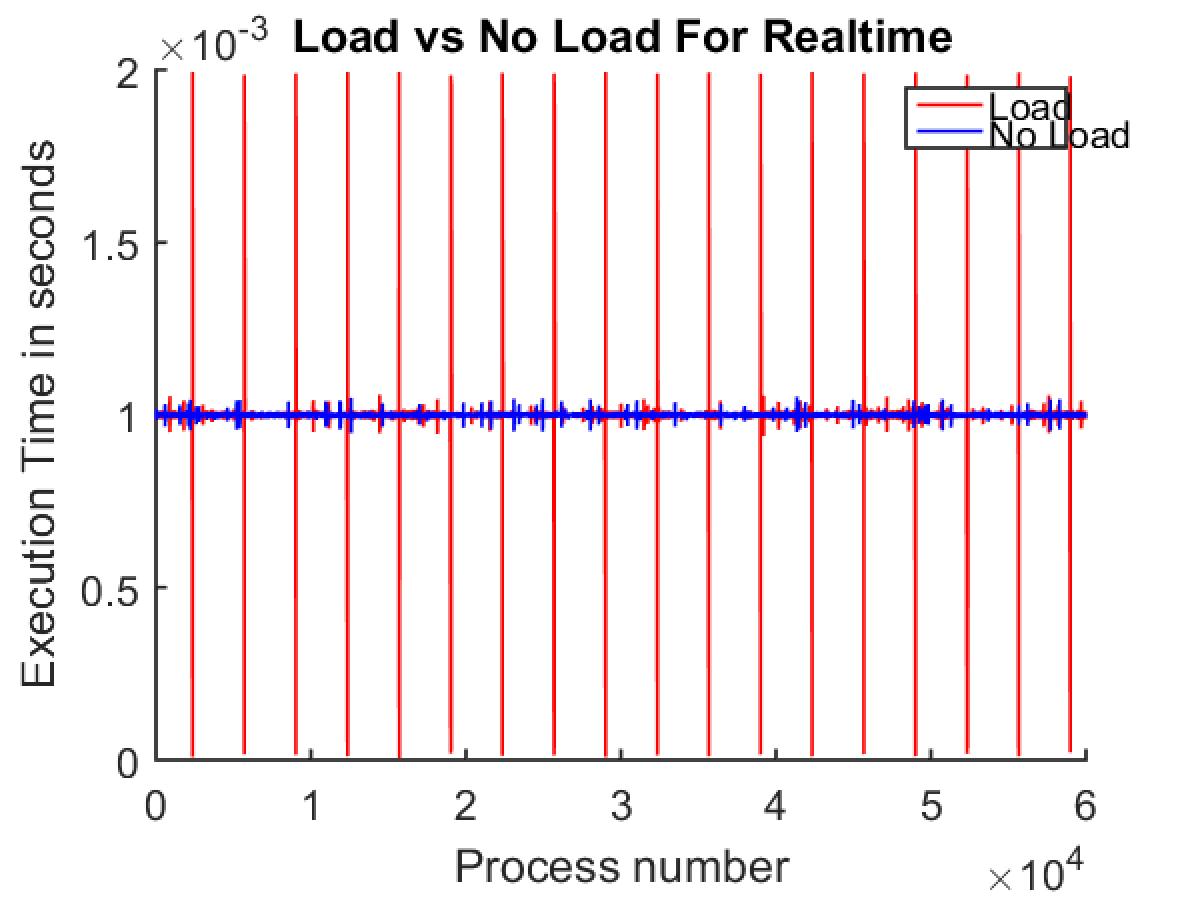


Figure : Realtime

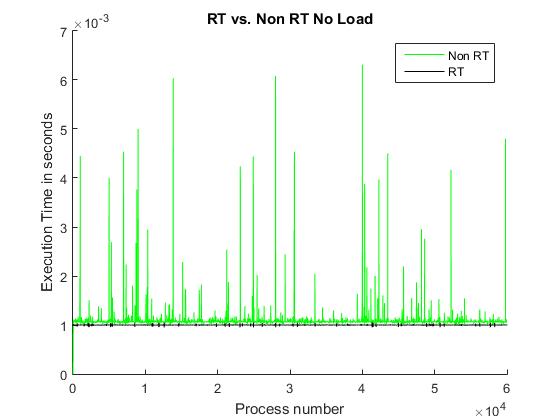


Figure : Compare no load

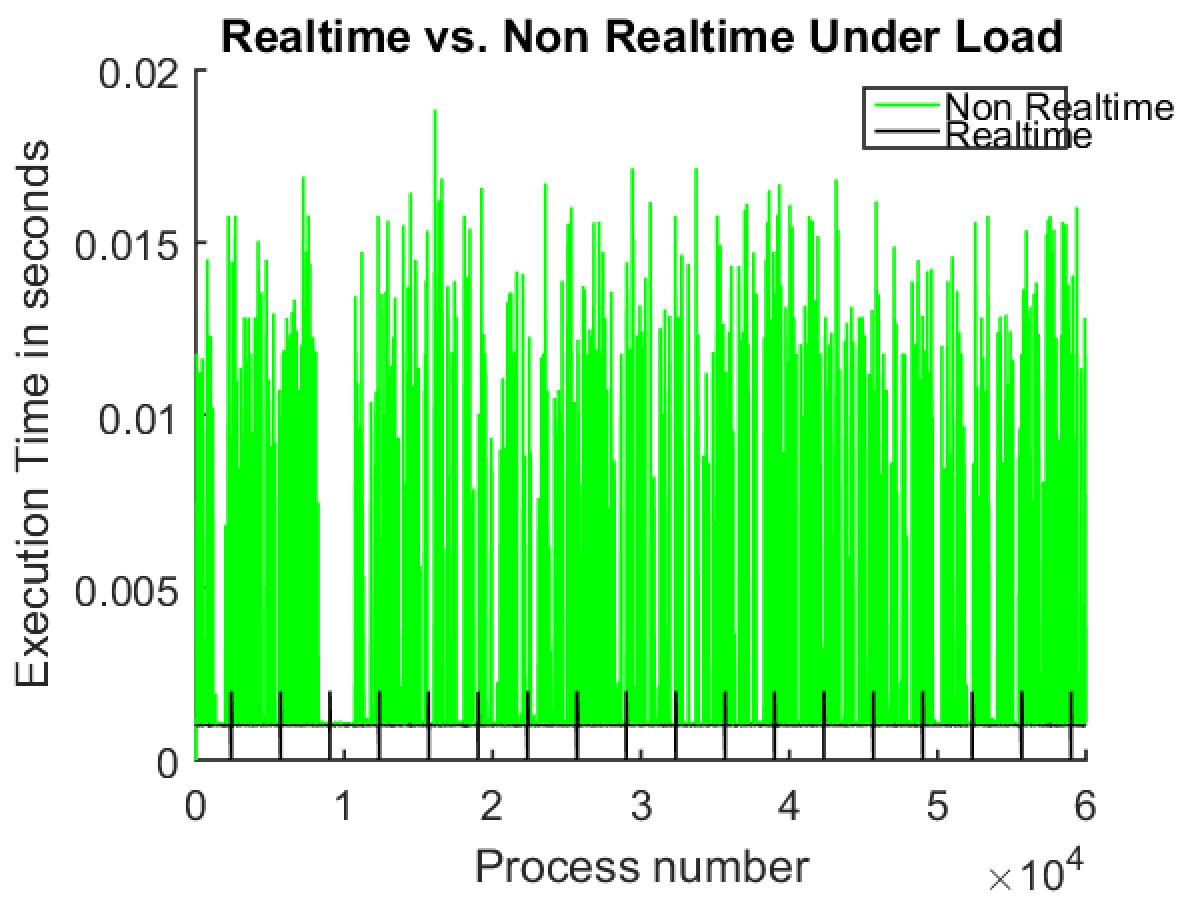


Figure : Compare under load

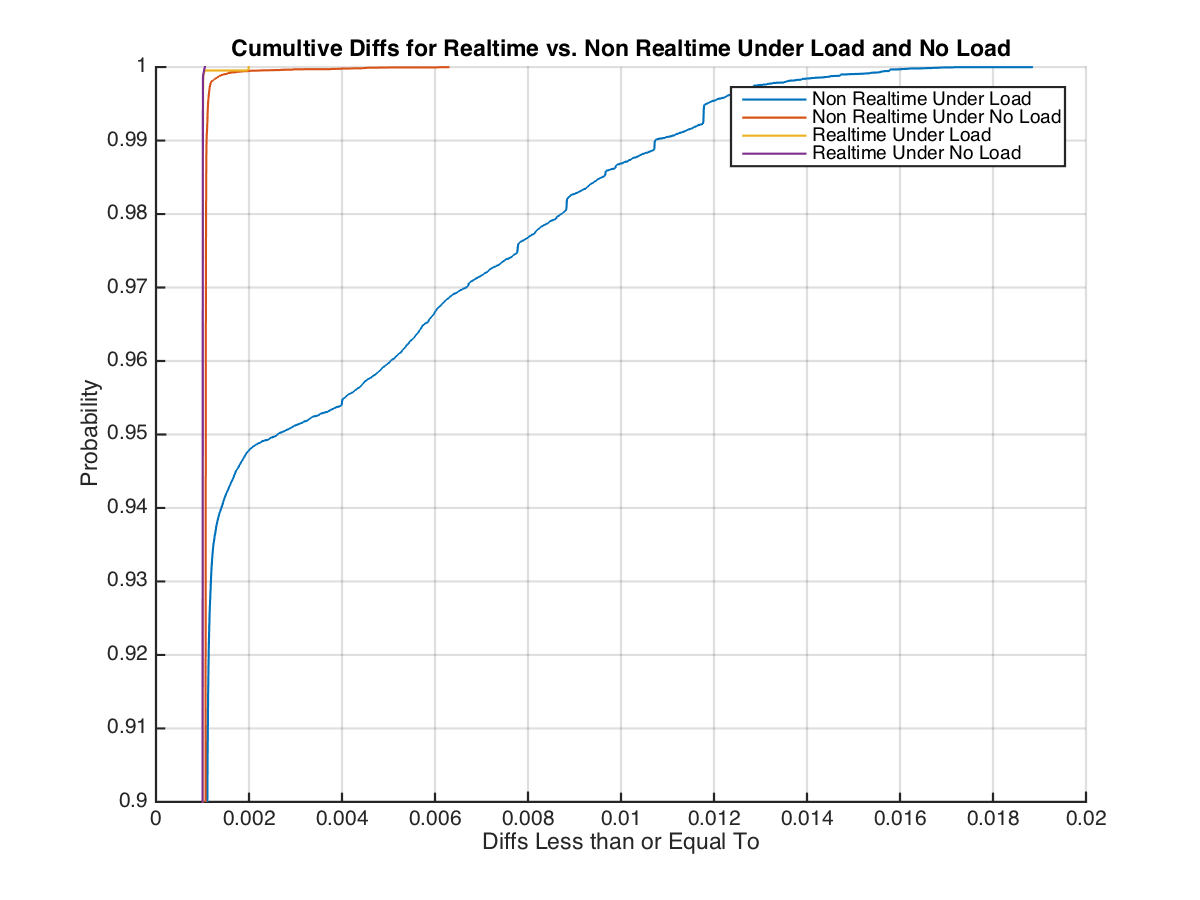


Figure : CDF no zoom

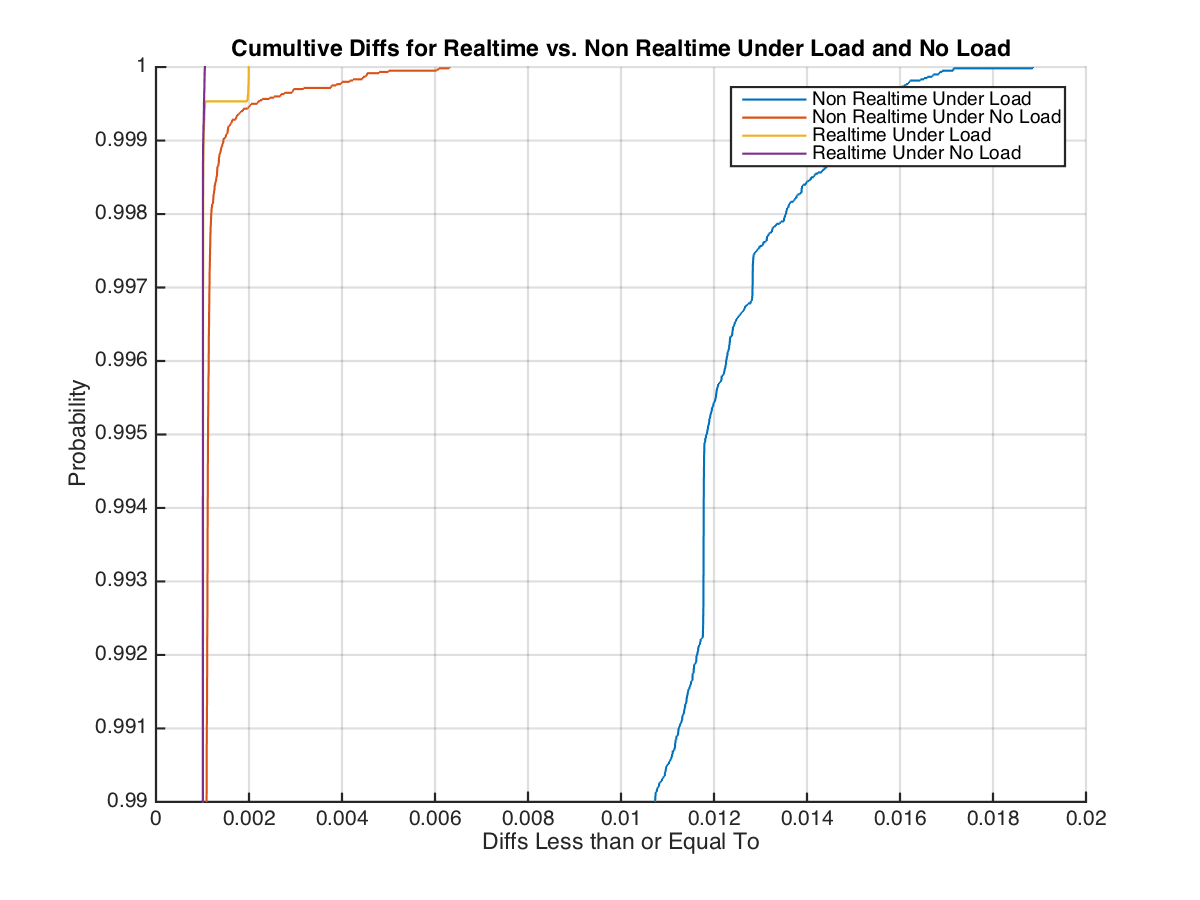


Figure : CDF partial zoom

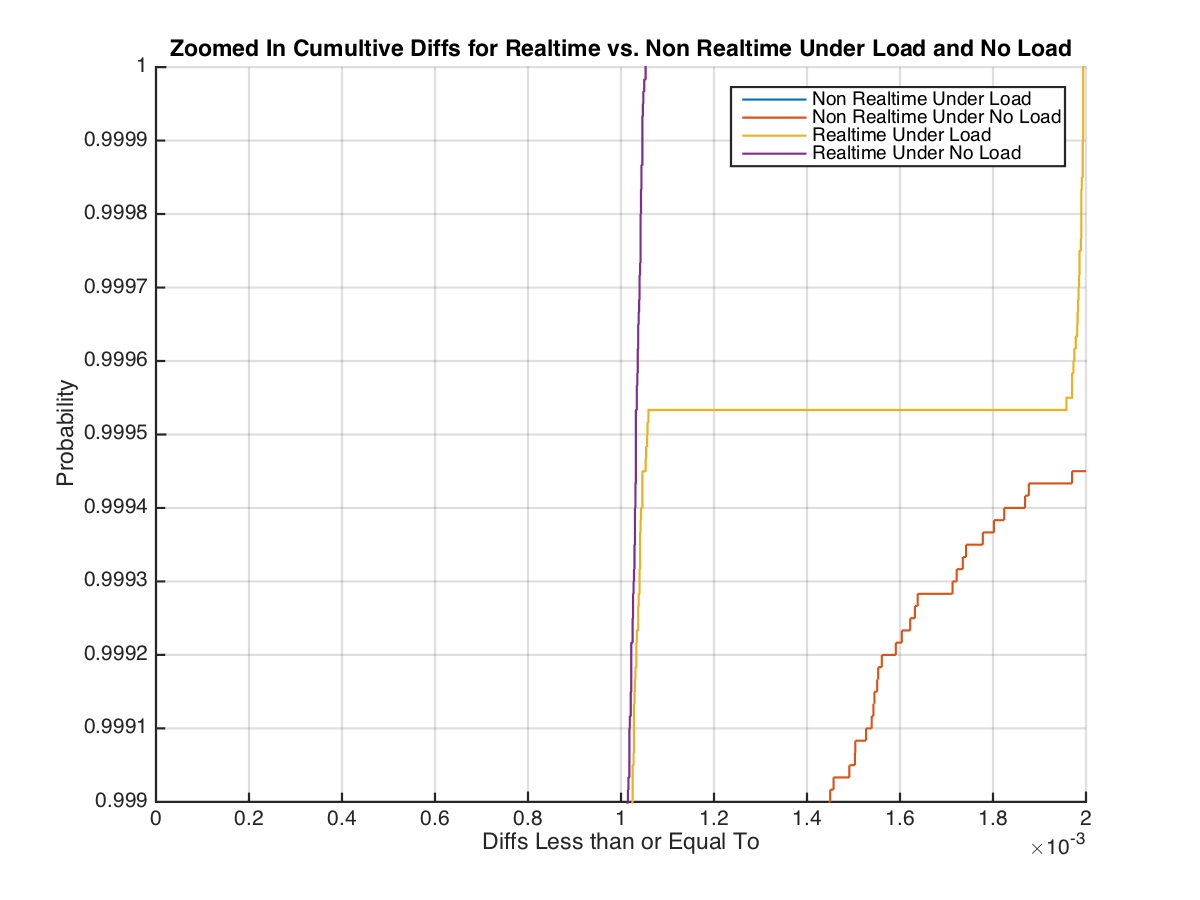


Figure : CDF full zoom

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#### Subsubsections

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Our thanks to Dr.

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