Candidate features for future OpenGL 5 / Direct3D 12 hardware and beyond

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# Introduction

The announcement of Mantle has triggered a lot of discussions about graphics API design. I think there are technical issues in the OpenGL API but those are precise issues that need to be address individually and following the GPU hardware designs.

Sadly, these API design discussions have hidden the actual major graphics APIs issues that are ecosystem related in my opinion:

**How to reliably solve cross compilation between shader languages?**

Aras [Pranckevičius](https://twitter.com/aras_p) is regularly discussing this issue on [his blog](http://aras-p.info/blog/2014/03/28/cross-platform-shaders-in-2014/) as this remains a major headache. I believe the approach followed by [HLSLCrossCompiler](https://github.com/James-Jones/HLSLCrossCompiler) is potentially the most reliable way to solve this issue today but to my knowledge HLSLCrossCompiler hasn’t been battlefield tested yet.

**How to debug and profile graphics code including shader languages?**

NVIDIA has [Nsight](http://www.nvidia.com/object/nsight.html); Intel has [GPA](https://software.intel.com/en-us/vcsource/tools/intel-gpa); AMD has [CodeXL](http://developer.amd.com/tools-and-sdks/heterogeneous-computing/codexl/); each mobile vendor also has its things. Debugging and profiling graphics code is a mess and the tools are not even good. Despite the fancy GUIs, I am still relying on [GLIntercept](https://code.google.com/p/glintercept/) that is still doing the job best to this point for me: It’s reliable. Sadly, no Linux or MacOS support. Thanks to Valve, there is new hope with [VOGL](https://github.com/ValveSoftware/vogl) which is taking the right directions: open source and targetting Linux, Windows and MacOSX support. If IHVs really want to solve that problem, I think allocating some engineering time on that project is the move forward.

**How to scale shaders compilation?**

Most engines work with the concept of shader variations: Each little shader feature comes with multiple variations to support performance scalability and fallbacks. Combining all these little shader features create a shader but the engine needs to generate shaders for each variation, performance level and fallbacks. This quickly produce thousands of shaders with a significant compilation time making real time editing of shaders only hypothetical in the near future. Furthermore, topics like Physically Based Rendering might remove a lot of illegimate artist hand peaked edits but energy concervation is such a complex issue that the number of variations will keep increasing.

**How to get a good understanding of how GPUs work?**

Some vendors like [Intel](https://01.org/linuxgraphics/documentation/2013-intel-core-processor-family) and [AMD](http://www.x.org/docs/AMD/) have made an amazing contributing to the graphics community by publishing their GPU specifications. NVIDIA has some documentation with the [PTX ISA](http://docs.nvidia.com/cuda/pdf/ptx_isa_4.0.pdf) but it’s far from exhaustive. For example, I still don’t understand how NVIDIA manage to support any indexing of resources where other vendors only support dynamically uniform indexing. More importantly, I don’t understand the concequences so it’s a dead feature to me. Mobile vendors are kind of making an effort these days but it’s not nearly as good as it is needed especially considering how specific they are compare with desktop GPUs. Finally, GPU specifications allow clearing out mythologies, pretty well spread these days because of too many missleading API design discussions.

**How to ensure that ecosystem platforms will get updated drivers?**

How good is a new feature or a driver bug fix if the user doesn’t have the driver supporting these improvements? Vendors are putting in place new driver notifications systems or the drivers get package with the OS updates. In practice, only OSX and iOS seems to really manage to keep their ecosystems up to date.

**How to get consistent performance level between ecosystem platforms?**

This is particularly an issue with OpenGL where the ecosystem is really complex: On Windows, Linux or Android, IHVs provide each the full software stacks. On MacOSX, Apple wrote most of the OpenGL drivers. Furthermore, each vendor has a different level of quality and coverage of OpenGL leaving the ecosytem particularly fragmented. Conscenquently, graphics engines are filled with arrays of flags for supported features, workarounds and implementation bugs.

Why should we care about new graphics APIs? For an essential side of real time rendering evolution: Exposing the new hardware features. The purpose of a graphics API is nothing but exposing the hardware to the graphics programmers. [If we use the OpenGL API with the GPU architectures in mind](http://gdcvault.com/play/1020791/), there is no reason to suffer of CPU overhead.

With Direct3D, Microsoft was able to drive the standardization of hardware features. Meanwhile, we experienced structural changes in the ecosystem: Windows became just another platform; new consoles are based on modern architecture; Valve announced the Steam Box on Linux; the mobile market became relevant for every actors; WebGL transformed the web browsers into real-time rendering platforms; etc. Furthermore, The Khronos Group became a force capable to resolve ecosystem issues through hardware standardization. [ASTC texture format](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/KHR/texture_compression_astc_hdr.txt) gives a good example, with an expected support on all future mobile and desktop GPUs.

The future of real-time graphics will pass by hardware standardization through a new hardware level beyond the OpenGL 4 hardware level. What would be an OpenGL 5 hardware feature? Following the conversions for OpenGL 3 and OpenGL 4, it's any hardware feature that can't be implemented on all OpenGL 4 hardware but would be implementable on newer hardware by all IHVs.

In this article, we are looking at hardware features available through OpenGL extensions and possible ideas that may or may not be standardize. We will have a particular focus on the two mains topics that will drive future GPU designs in my opinion: Programmable vertex pulling and programmable blending.

* What are the vendor specific features currently supported?
* What are the current limitations?
* What are the possible future hardware directions?

# 1. Draw submission

Draw submission has been a subject of API evolution since the very first version of OpenGL. With OpenGL 1.0, it was done through the *immediate mode* using [glBegin](http://www.opengl.org/sdk/docs/man2/xhtml/glBegin.xml)/[glEnd](http://www.opengl.org/sdk/docs/man2/xhtml/glEnd.xml). Quickly, it appeared that an approach based on building and sending vertex one by one was way too slow to be efficient enough because the GPUs were faster to consume the primitives than the CPU was able to submit them. A lot of new features got introduced along the life of OpenGL to compensate this increasing GPU / CPU performance ratio:

* [Vertex Array](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/EXT/vertex_array.txt) (GL1.1);
* [Vertex Buffer Object](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/ARB/vertex_buffer_object.txt) (GL1.5);
* [Vertex Array Object](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/ARB/vertex_array_object.txt) (GL3.0);
* [Base Vertex](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/ARB/draw_elements_base_vertex.txt) (GL3.2);
* [Instancing](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/ARB/draw_instanced.txt) (GL3.2);
* [Instanced Arrays](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/ARB/instanced_arrays.txt) (GL3.3);
* [Base Instance](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/ARB/base_instance.txt) (GL4.2); and
* [Vertex Attrib Binding](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/ARB/vertex_attrib_binding.txt) (GL4.3)

OpenGL 4.3 took a new direction aiming at providing a magnitude of draw performances thanks to [ARB\_multi\_draw\_indirect](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/ARB/multi_draw_indirect.txt) leading the way to Programmable Vertex Pulling. With this approach, the GPU takes over the CPU responsible to dispatch the draws.

## 1.1. [GL\_ARB\_multi\_draw\_indirect](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/ARB/multi_draw_indirect.txt)

By batching the data of multiple VAOs into a single VAO and calling [glDrawArraysInstancedBaseInstance](http://www.opengl.org/sdk/docs/man4/xhtml/glDrawArraysInstancedBaseInstance.xml" \t "pagedisp) or [glDrawElementsInstancedBaseVertexBaseInstance](http://www.opengl.org/sdk/docs/man4/xhtml/glDrawElementsInstancedBaseVertexBaseInstance.xml" \t "pagedisp) many times in a tight loop, we can archive extremely good performances with a very low CPU overhead. We can push this concept further, by batching textures into texture arrays and uniforms into buffers sorted by update frequencies and indexing any resource used by a shader invocation in the tight loop.

However, the CPU remains in charge of submitting the draws and worse, it needs to figure out which meshes needs to be drawn for a specific frame. That operation alone can require an entire CPU core.

Thanks to [ARB\_multi\_draw\_indirect](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/ARB/multi_draw_indirect.txt), the application can build a thinner OpenGL back-end by collecting all the draws that need to be dispatched in a C++ array from many threads having no interaction with the OpenGL API. Such array can be transfer to GPU memory to be read by the GPU command processor that will schedule the draws for execution at a speed that the CPU is not likely to follow.

Furthermore, if multi core CPU performance is not enough, [ARB\_multi\_draw\_indirect](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/ARB/multi_draw_indirect.txt) can be coupled with [ARB\_compute\_shader](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/ARB/compute_shader.txt) to move the draw array generation processing from CPU to the GPU. Effectively, the compute shader writes into a draw indirect buffer, storing the parameters for multiple draw calls. This buffer is consumed by [glMultiDrawElementsIndirect](http://www.opengl.org/sdk/docs/man4/xhtml/glMultiDrawElementsIndirect.xml) or [glMultiDrawArraysIndirect](http://www.opengl.org/sdk/docs/man4/xhtml/glMultiDrawArraysIndirect.xml).

The glMultiDraw\*Indirect functions are nothing more than an evolution of the glDraw\*Indirect introduced with OpenGL 4.0. Instead of processing a single draw per draw call, the new functions can submit many draws per calls.

|  |
| --- |
| glBindBuffer(GL\_DRAW\_INDIRECT\_BUFFER, BufferName);  for(std::size\_t DrawIndex = 0; DrawIndex < DrawCount; ++DrawIndex)  glDrawElementsIndirect(GL\_TRIANGLES, GL\_UNSIGNED\_SHORT, BUFFER\_OFFSET(Offset)); |

Listing 1.1.1: CPU draw dispatching in a tight loop

|  |
| --- |
| glBindBuffer(GL\_DRAW\_INDIRECT\_BUFFER, BufferName);  glMultiDrawElementsIndirect(GL\_TRIANGLES, GL\_UNSIGNED\_SHORT, nullptr, GLsizei(DrawCount), 0); |

Listing 1.1.2: GPU draw dispatching by the command processor

Multi draw indirect is part of OpenGL 4.3 core specification but it's arguably an OpenGL 5 hardware feature allowing the GPU to submit itself draws to be executed. This feature can be implemented through software emulation quite easily using the CPU to push each individual draw but this is really slow. Currently, all the Intel GPUs and AMD Evergreen support multi draw in software. Hardware implementations like AMD Southern Islands or NVIDIA Fermi give another magnitude of performance. For example, Kepler can submit up to 800000 draws per frame at 60Hz and Southern Islands can submit up to 300000 draws per frame on with a synthetic test rendering 2 triangles per draw on 4 pixels. That huge amount of draws provides such an amazing control over the rendering that not only the CPU overhead become insignificant but we can increase the GPU processing efficiency by submitting many more thin draws reducing overdraw and unnecessary processing of clipped primitives.

More details are given in [GPU Pro 4](http://www.amazon.com/GPU-Pro-Advanced-Rendering-Techniques/dp/1466567430/ref=pd_sim_b_4?ie=UTF8&refRID=09PXANNDHPFHZ120P8M5) chapter “*Introducing the Programmable Vertex Pulling Rendering Pipeline”* by Sean Lilley and I.

Current support: NVIDIA Fermi; AMD Evergreen (emulated), Southern Islands; Intel Haswell (emulated)

Expected support: All OpenGL 5 hardware

## 1.2. [GL\_ARB\_shader\_draw\_parameters](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/ARB/multi_draw_indirect.txt)

This extension exposes three new built-in inputs to the vertex shader stage: gl\_BaseIntanceARB, gl\_BaseVertexARB that exposes the values passed in the draw commands but also gl\_DrawIDARB that behaves for multi-draws just like [gl\_InstanceID](http://www.opengl.org/sdk/docs/man/html/gl_InstanceID.xhtml) for draw instancing. A massive difference between these new vertex shader inputs and [gl\_InstanceID](http://www.opengl.org/sdk/docs/man/html/gl_InstanceID.xhtml) is that there are dynamically uniform variables so that we can use them to address arrays of resources.

|  |
| --- |
| layout(binding = INDIRECTION) uniform indirection {  int Transform[MAX\_DRAW];  } Indirection;  layout(binding = TRANSFORM0) uniform transform {  mat4 MVP[MAX\_DRAW];  } Transform;  layout(location = POSITION) in vec3 Position;  layout(location = TEXCOORD) in vec3 Texcoord;  out gl\_PerVertex {  vec4 gl\_Position;  };  out block {  vec2 Texcoord;  } Out;  void main(){  Out.Texcoord = Texcoord.st;  gl\_Position = Transform.MVP[Indirection.Transform[gl\_DrawIDARB]] \* vec4(Position, 1.0);  } |

Listing 2.1.1: Use sample of gl\_DrawIDARB to use a different matrix per draw in a multi draw call

With the perspective of programmable vertex pulling, we could imagine removing the Position and Texcoord input variables and store them into a [shader storage buffer](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/ARB/shader_storage_buffer_object.txt); using gl\_BaseVertexARB and gl\_VertexID to fetch ourselves the vertex data.

Reading the Southern Islands programming guide, we see that implementing such functionality means in AMD architecture that SPI (a GPU block part of the command processor) has to write the value of gl\_DrawID into SH registers. It seems that such operation should not be a real issue as this is already how BaseVertex and BaseInstance are passed to the vertex shader stage for the fetch shader. At the very least exposing gl\_BaseVertexARB or gl\_BaseIntanceARB is trivial on Southern Islands architecture.

[*Surviving without gl\_DrawID*](http://www.g-truc.net/post-0518.html#menu) presents an approach to perform per-draw indexing of resources.

Current hardware support: NVIDIA Fermi, AMD Southern Islands

Expected hardware support: All OpenGL 5 hardware

## 1.3. [GL\_ARB\_indirect\_parameters](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/ARB/multi_draw_indirect.txt)

An issue of [ARB\_multi\_draw\_indirect](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/ARB/multi_draw_indirect.txt) is that it requires that we submit the number of draws from the CPU side, as drawcount is [glMultiDrawElementsIndirect](http://www.opengl.org/sdk/docs/man/xhtml/glMultiDrawElementsIndirect.xml) parameter. What if we use a compute shader to build the indirect multi-draw buffer? We need to query on the CPU side the number of draws stored in that buffer to feed the drawcount parameter: Very inefficient because we stall the CPU waiting on the query result. Another workaround is to reserve a large buffer of drawcount elements and set to zero the primitive counts of each draw we want to skip. Unfortunately, according to my measurements, that solution is inefficient because GPUs are barely faster at skipping a draw than executing it.

The proposed solution is to add a parameter called maxdrawcount which value is sourced from an indirect parameter buffer. The maximum of executed draws becomes min(drawcount, maxdrawcount). Why not only source drawcount from a buffer? Because some command processors needs to know from the CPU the drawcount.

Current hardware support: NVIDIA Fermi

Expected hardware support: All OpenGL 5 hardware, AMD Southern Islands

## 1.4. A shader code path per draw in a multi draw

With [ARB\_multi\_draw\_indirect](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/ARB/multi_draw_indirect.txt) we can submit a huge number of draws however in many use cases, each draw would need to execute a dedicated shader code path. An application could choose to batch multiple code paths into an uber-shader as dynamically uniform indexing or unconditional branching is really fast on current hardware.

However, GPU execution units (CU on Southern Islands / SM on NVDIA) need to allocate an amount of registers according to the shader complexity. The GLSL compiler is in charge of figuring out how many registers is required to guarantee the execution of any code path in the uber-shader. Hence, using a trivial code path from an uber-shader will result in over-allocating GPU registers and underutilizing the GPU.

Looking at GPU architectures, it appears that each GPU execution unit has a shader code pointer that can be different for each CU. Hence, it seems possible to execute a different shader code path for each draw by providing a different pointer. Furthermore, we could allocate the correct number of registers if we had an API to bake the code paths per draw and if the DrawArraysIndirectCommand and DrawElementsIndirectCommand could add a parameter to identify the shader code path per draw.

|  |
| --- |
| typedef struct{  uint count;  uint primCount;  uint firstIndex;  int baseVertex;  uint baseInstance;  uint programID; // Added to identify a shader code path  } DrawElementsIndirectCommand;  typedef struct{  uint count;  uint primCount;  uint first;  uint baseInstance;  uint programID; // Added to identify a shader code path  } DrawArraysIndirectCommand; |

Listing 1.4: DrawElementsIndirectCommand and DrawArraysIndirectCommand with an extra parameter

Sadly, considering the poor performance of NVIDIA gl\_DrawID implementation which is the only one to implement it at the moment, it seems unlikely that any current hardware would be able to implement such behavior to provide [ARB\_multi\_draw\_indirect](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/ARB/multi_draw_indirect.txt) like performance for shader code path switching.

Southern Islands introduced a new class or register called SH that can contain frequently update registers including user data or program base. Once again, Southern Islands architecture doesn’t seem far off for such future idea.

Expected hardware support: Future hardware

## 1.5. Shader indexed lose states

OpenGL has a lot of lose states. Many of them could disappeared thanks to fully programmable blending, this include the fixed function blend states, dithering and the logical operations. Other seems to remain relevant for a long time, including the following states:

* Scissor test
* Depth test
* Stencil operations
* Face culling
* Polygon mode
* Polygon offset
* DrawBuffers indirection

With OpenGL 4.1 and [ARB\_viewport\_array](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/ARB/viewport_array.txt), the OpenGL ARB introduced shader indexed lose-states for the viewport. Writing to gl\_ViewportIndex in the geometry shader, we can choose with the shader code which one of the GL\_MAX\_VIEWPORTS viewports should be used to rasterize a primitive.

Enabling such indexing of lose-states by either the GPU command processor or the shader invocations will allow pushing forward the multi draw indirect approach for more complex scenarios. Tile based GPU architectures might benefit the most of such approach: it allows reducing the number of draw and dispatch calls but also it could be used to reduce the number of rendering passes necessary for a frame, reducing the bandwidth consumption and the CPU overhead.

Expected hardware support: Future mobile hardware first followed by future desktop hardware

## 1.6. [GL\_NV\_bindless\_multi\_draw\_indirect](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/NV/bindless_multi_draw_indirect.txt)

This is the last piece of NVIDIA bindless API allowing draw submission without binding vertex arrays or indirect draw buffer for lower CPU overhead.

Current hardware support: NVIDIA Fermi

Not needed with OpenGL 5 hardware

## 1.7. [GL\_AMD\_interleaved\_elements](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/AMD/interleaved_elements.txt)

This extension is really ugly but the functionality is really interesting. Instead of having a single element array, thanks to this extension we can have up to 4 element arrays and we can index each vertex attribute with the element array of our choice. There is quite a few software actually generating meshes using multiple element array so this functionality sounds extremely useful. Taking advantage of this feature can save bandwidth avoiding duplicating vertex attributes.

Current hardware support: AMD Southern Islands

# 2. Resources

## 2.1. [GL\_ARB\_bindless\_texture](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/ARB/bindless_texture.txt)

[ARB\_bindless\_texture](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/ARB/bindless_texture.txt) was promoted from [NV\_bindless\_texture](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/NV/bindless_texture.txt). It allows a shader invocation to access an “infinite” number of textures, any texture resident in GPU memory. Texture handles are stored in a uniform buffer and accessed through indexing.

|  |
| --- |
| #version 420 core  #extension GL\_ARB\_bindless\_texture : require  #define handle uvec2  #define FRAG\_COLOR 0  #define MATERIAL 0  layout(binding = MATERIAL) uniform material  {  handle Diffuse; // This is the handle for the bindless texture  } Material;  in block  {  vec2 Texcoord;  } In;  layout(location = FRAG\_COLOR, index = 0) out vec4 Color;  void main()  {  Color = texture(sampler2D(Material.Diffuse), In.Texcoord.st);  } |

Listing 2.1.1: Example of a fragment shader sampling and bindless texture

One great side effect of that API is that textures can be part of data representing the materials for example.

Current hardware support: NVIDIA Kepler, AMD Southern Islands

Expected hardware support: All OpenGL 5 hardware

## 2.2. [GL\_NV\_shader\_buffer\_load](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/NV/shader_buffer_load.txt) and [GL\_NV\_shader\_buffer\_store](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/NV/shader_buffer_store.txt)

NVIDIA buffer load and store is pretty much a set of bindless buffer extensions. Going toward such design really emphasizes that there is no element array buffer, array buffer, shader storage buffer, transform feedback buffer: It’s all just memory and we should manage the same way we manage any form of memory.

A major different with [ARB\_shader\_storage\_buffer\_object](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/ARB/shader_storage_buffer_object.txt) extension in OpenGL 4.3 is that the access to the data is performed through a pointer in the shader code.

Current hardware support: NVIDIA Fermi

Expected hardware support: All OpenGL 5 hardware, AMD Southern Islands

## 2.3. [GL\_ARB\_sparse\_texture](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/ARB/sparse_texture.txt)

[ARB\_sparse\_texture](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/ARB/sparse_texture.txt) is a subset of [AMD\_sparse\_texture](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/AMD/sparse_texture.txt) enabling virtual texturing with seamless texture filtering. Thanks to this extension we can create 16K by 16K texels textures that memory isn’t fully resident. In practice when we create a sparse texture, a large table of pointers to memory pages is allocated. The allocation of these memory pages is an independent task performed with glTexPageCommitmentARB on a subsection of that texture.

Sparse textures can be used for sampling and rendering. Supported formats are not specified. Multisample textures are explicitly not supported. For others formats, including compressed and depth stencil formats, it’s a matter of querying GL\_NUM\_VIRTUAL\_PAGE\_SIZES\_ARB. Supporting depth formats is a serious advantage to do high-resolution shadow map generation.

Current hardware support: AMD Southern Islands, NVIDIA Fermi

Expected hardware support: All OpenGL 5 hardware

## 2.4. [GL\_AMD\_sparse\_texture](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/AMD/sparse_texture.txt)

[ARB\_sparse\_texture](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/ARB/sparse_texture.txt) is essentially a fixed design of [AMD\_sparse\_texture](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/AMD/sparse_texture.txt). However, AMD extension provides shader functions to query the status of a sparse texture fetch using dedicated sampling functions.

|  |
| --- |
| #version 420 core  #extension GL\_AMD\_sparse\_texture : require  #define handle uvec2  #define FRAG\_COLOR 0  #define MATERIAL 0  layout(binding = DIFFUSE) uniform sampler2D Diffuse;  in block  {  vec2 Texcoord;  } In;  layout(location = FRAG\_COLOR, index = 0) out vec4 Color;  void main()  {  if(GL\_AMD\_sparse\_texture)  {  vec4 Fetch = vec4(0);  int Code = sparseTexture(Diffuse, In.Texcoord.st, Fetch);  if(sparseTexelResident(Code))  Color = Fetch;  else  Color = vec4(0.0, 0.5, 1.0, 1.0);  }  else  {  texture(Diffuse, In.Texcoord.st);  }  } |

Listing 2.4.1: Example of texel residence query with [AMD\_sparse\_texture](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/AMD/sparse_texture.txt) extension

The following functions are used to interpret the status.

* bool sparseTexelResident(int code) : Returns true if the texture read that produced code retrieved valid data, and produced code retrieved valid data, and false otherwise ;
* bool sparseTexelMinLodWarning(int code) : Returns true if the texture read that produced code required a texel fetch from any LOD lower than the user specified LOD warning threshold ;
* int sparseTexelLodWarningFetch(int code) : Returns the LOD calculated by the texture read that generated <code> and resulted in a condition that would cause sparseTexelMinLodWarning to return true. If the LOD warning was not encountered, this function returns zero.

Current hardware support: AMD Southern Islands

Expected hardware support: Future hardware

## 2.5. GL\_AMD\_sparse\_texture\_pool

A limitation of [ARB\_sparse\_texture](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/ARB/sparse_texture.txt) is that each single texture page is backed by its own memory. We could imagine a design where multiple texture pages could share the same memory, providing new ways for texture compression.

This is what AMD\_sparse\_texture\_pool is aiming at sadly the specification haven’t been released yet.

Current hardware support: AMD Volcanic Islands

Expected hardware support: Future hardware

## 2.6. Seamless texture stitching

Unfortunately texture and sparse texture share the same limitations for the maximum texture sizes. 16K\*16K is a very large texture but it’s a very small sparse texture. What we really want is something like 1M\*1M pixels sparse texture however having such large texture would require a lot more precision for the texture coordinates in texture units.

An alternative to making texture bigger is called seamless texture stitching which is pretty much what the hardware does for seamless cubemap filtering. Applied to sparse textures, the hardware would be able to seamlessly filter across texture layers of a sparse texture 2D array.

Expected hardware support: Future hardware

## 2.7. 3D memory layout for sparse 3D textures

On AMD Southern Islands, when we query the texture page sizes of a sparse 3D texture, we realize that internally a 3D texture is stored as layers of 2D textures. This make filtering 3D textures less efficient but it also implies that sparse 3D texture pages are not little dices but 2D plans.

On NVIDIA Fermi, sparse 3D texture pages are stored as dices which make them better candidates for volumetric rendering technics.

Current hardware support: NVIDIA Fermi

Expected hardware support: All OpenGL 5 hardware

## 2.8. Sparse buffer

The OpenGL ARB released [ARB\_sparse\_texture](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/ARB/sparse_texture.txt) at Siggraph 2013 but sadly it didn’t came with an equivalent sparse buffer extension. Direct3D 11.2 has such feature and it would be nice to have it with OpenGL too.

Expected hardware support: AMD Southern Islands, NVIDIA Fermi, All OpenGL 5 hardware

## 2.9. [GL\_KHR\_texture\_compression\_astc](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/KHR/texture_compression_astc_hdr.txt)

The Khronos Group has standardized a new texture format called ASTC that provides very low bit rate and HDR support. Because, it's a KHR extension, it means that both the OpenGL ES group and the OpenGL ARB group voted to support that feature which gives me good hope that we will "soon" have support for this format on all desktop and mobile platforms.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Block size | Bits per pixels | Compression ratio |
| 4x4 | 8.00 | 4:1 |
| 5x4 | 6.40 | 5:1 |
| 5x5 | 5.12 | 6.25:1 |
| 6x5 | 4.27 | 7.5:1 |
| 6x6 | 3.56 | 9:1 |
| 8x5 | 3.20 | 10:1 |
| 8x6 | 2.67 | 12:1 |
| 8x8 | 2.00 | 16:1 |
| 10x5 | 2.56 | 12.5:1 |
| 10x6 | 2.13 | 15:1 |
| 10x8 | 1.60 | 20:1 |
| 10x10 | 1.28 | 25:1 |
| 12x10 | 1.07 | 30:1 |
| 12x12 | 0.89 | 36:1 |

Current hardware support: Imagination Technologies PowerVR6XT, ARM Mali T700, NVIDIA Maxwell

Expected hardware support: Future hardware

## 2.10. [GL\_INTEL\_map\_texture](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/INTEL/map_texture.txt)

GL\_INTEL\_map\_texture allows choosing the memory layout of a texture between a customs swizzle order (GL\_LAYOUT\_DEFAULT\_INTEL) and a linear order (GL\_LAYOUT\_LINEAR\_INTEL) that can be cached (GL\_LAYOUT\_LINEAR\_CPU\_CACHED\_INTEL). Textures created with a linear memory layout can be mapped just like a buffer with:

|  |
| --- |
| void\* glMapTexture2DINTEL(GLuint texture,  GLint level, GLbitfield access, GLint \*stride, GLenum \*layout); |

Caching the texture on the client side can result in better performance when reading texture on CPU but might negatively impact the GPU side access to the texture. Thus the option is intended only for cases when volume of the read access from CPU justifies such effect.

Unfortunately, we can’t map textures created with GL\_LAYOUT\_DEFAULT\_INTEL memory layout. For that Intel would have to expose its memory layout. It’s probably not a big issue as such layout is exposed on consoles for example. However on PC, the memory layout of each format; each architecture; each vendor; can be different which is quickly not tractable for any software. For each, capabilities IHV would have to agree on a standard memory layout.

Current hardware support: Intel Sandy Bridge

Expected hardware support: All OpenGL 5 hardware, AMD Evergreen, NVIDIA Fermi

## 2.11. [GL\_ARB\_seamless\_cubemap\_per\_texture](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/ARB/seamless_cubemap_per_texture.txt)

OpenGL 3.2 and [ARB\_seamless\_cube\_map](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/ARB/seamless_cube_map.txt) provide a state for sampling a cube map accessing multiple faces to avoid seams. This functionality is embodied by a global state that affects every cubemaps. If we want to use seamless cube map filtering for one cube map we need to call [glEnable](http://www.opengl.org/sdk/docs/man/html/glEnable.xhtml)(GL\_TEXTURE\_CUBE\_MAP\_SEAMLESS). If we don’t want to use it on another texture, we need to call [glDisable](http://www.opengl.org/sdk/docs/man/html/glEnable.xhtml)(GL\_TEXTURE\_CUBE\_MAP\_SEAMLESS). If we want to apply these two textures on a single mesh, then we need to do two rendering passes. [ARB\_seamless\_cubemap\_per\_texture](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/ARB/seamless_cubemap_per_texture.txt) changes this behavior giving each cube map texture and sampler a state to enable or not the seamless cubemap filtering so that we can sample cube maps with both ways in a single draw.

Current hardware support: AMD RV700, NVIDIA Kepler

Expected hardware support: All OpenGL 5 hardware

## 2.12. DMA engines

NVIDIA Fermi and AMD Northern Islands have dedicated DMA engines that can live their lives on their own. Hence a dedicated thread could be in charge of streaming resources because at some point the application figure out that they might become useful. During these transfers, the graphics engine can continue its life independently without any required synchronization. Obviously, the transfers would have to be completed before using the resources but with enough anticipation we could need a synchronization object only for the purpose of guarantying correctness on all possible hardware but without actually hitting that fence.

Currently NVIDIA supports this behavior but only by creating a separated context on a dedicated thread. This is workable but cumbersome and it costs thread safety penalty for the entire OpenGL implementation.

An explicit use of the DMA engine for fully asynchronous transfers and performing transfer outside of the rendering code would be really nice to have.

Current hardware support: AMD Northern Islands, NVIDIA Fermi

Expected hardware support: All OpenGL 5 hardware

# 3. Shader operations

## 3.1. [GL\_ARB\_shader\_group\_vote](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/ARB/shader_group_vote.txt)

Branching is a very interesting topic with GPUs. I guess GPU design is essentially based on how we access memory and how multiple shader invocations diverge. After that, ALUs are just the cherry on the cake. As a result, branching is a very important (if not the most important) topic when it comes to performance. For example, in [AMD Southern Islands architecture](http://developer.amd.com/wordpress/media/2012/12/AMD_Southern_Islands_Instruction_Set_Architecture.pdf), I found five different methods to handle branching.

The OpenGL ARB has tackled this issue by considering how we could help the compiler to produce more efficient branching code. The proposed solution is exposed by [ARB\_shader\_group\_vote](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/ARB/shader_group_vote.txt), a small subset of [NV\_gpu\_shader5](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/NV/gpu_shader5.txt) which provides the GLSL functions anyInvocationARB, allInvocationsARB, allInvocationsEqualARB to compare values across shader invocations.

Current hardware support: NVIDIA Fermi

Expected hardware support: All OpenGL 5 hardware, AMD Southern Islands

## 3.2. [GL\_NV\_shader\_thread\_group](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/NV/shader_thread_group.txt)

This extension goes into the super resolution range of ideas where we no longer want to think at a fixed pixel resolutions but instead we want to think at higher or lower resolution than the native resolution.

GPUs don't actually execute anything on a per-pixel or a per-vertex rate but in many different kind of group. A first group, the warp/wavefront is actually an array of shader invocations. Another famous group is the quadpixel, a set of 4 fragments. The texture LOD calculation is computed per quadpixel because the analytic computation of derivatives required for the texture LOD computation is very complex. However, it is really easy to compute within a quadpixel: It's only the different between the values across quadpixels.

This extension gives access to quadpixels allowing swizzling the intermediate results across all fragment shader invocations. Let's say that fragment shader requires 4 texture sampling. In some areas, we could consider that it is not that useful to sample per fragment and we can deal will sampling per quadpixels. This feature should interact pretty well with [ARB\_shader\_group\_vote](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/ARB/shader_group_vote.txt).

Current hardware support: NVIDIA Fermi

Expected hardware support: All OpenGL 5 hardware, AMD Evergreen

## 3.3. [GL\_NV\_shader\_thread\_shuffle](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/NV/shader_thread_shuffle.txt)

This extension extends [NV\_shader\_thread\_group](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/NV/shader_thread_group.txt) to any of the shader invocations of a wrap/wavefront. It seems very likely that we could use [NV\_shader\_thread\_group](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/NV/shader_thread_group.txt) on any GPU because all GPUs use quadpixels however, the warp/wavefront size is different for each GPU vendors: 32 for NVIDIA; 64 for AMD; and variable for Intel, between 4 to 16 shader invocations. This feature sounds particularly useful for post processed antialiazing and maybe things like soft shadows.

Current hardware support: NVIDIA Kepler

Expected hardware support: Future hardware

## 3.4. [GL\_NV\_shader\_atomic\_float](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/NV/shader_atomic_float.txt)

This extension is simply extending add and exchange to float atomic operations.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Interaction with: | New GLSL atomic operation functions |
| NV\_shader\_buffer\_store | float imageAtomicAdd(IMAGE\_PARAMS, float data)  float imageAtomicExchange(IMAGE\_PARAMS, float data) |
| ARB\_shader\_image\_load\_store | float atomicAdd(float \*address, float data);  float atomicExchange(float \*address, float data); |
| ARB\_shader\_storage\_buffer\_object | float atomicAdd(inout float mem, float data);  float atomicExchange(inout float mem, float data); |

Only atomic counter operations are not affected by this extension.

Current hardware support: NVIDIA Fermi

Expected hardware support: Future hardware

## 3.5. [GL\_AMD\_shader\_atomic\_counter\_ops](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/AMD/shader_atomic_counter_ops.txt)

[ARB\_shader\_atomic\_counters](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/ARB/shader_atomic_counters.txt) and OpenGL 4.2 introduced the concept of atomic counter operations: increment, decrement and query. Atomic counters are designed to expose the fastest atomic operations.

AMD GPUs support these atomic operations in GDS memory which is faster than image and buffer atomic operations. However, AMD GPUs support more GDS atomic operations: Increment and decrement with wrap ; addition and subtraction ; minimum and maximum ; bitwise operators (AND, OR, XOR, etc.) ; masked OR operator ; exchange, and compare and exchange operators. [AMD\_shader\_atomic\_counter\_ops](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/AMD/shader_atomic_counter_ops.txt) exposes all these operations.

Current hardware support: AMD Southern Islands

## 3.6. [GL\_ARB\_compute\_variable\_group\_size](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/ARB/compute_variable_group_size.txt)

The purpose of this extension is simply to specify the sizes of a workgroup at dispatch time instead of compile time. This is an OpenCL 1.2 features that is not effectively implemented by AMD implementation. Also it sounds like an interesting feature, the implementation needs to be capable to set this size without recompiling the shaders.

|  |
| --- |
| // GLSL side  #define LOCAL\_SIZE\_X \* #define LOCAL\_SIZE\_Y \*  #define LOCAL\_SIZE\_Z \*  layout(  local\_size\_x = LOCAL\_SIZE\_X,  local\_size\_y = LOCAL\_SIZE\_Y,  local\_size\_z = LOCAL\_SIZE\_Z) in;  // C++ side  void glDispatchCompute(GLuint num\_groups\_x, GLuint num\_groups\_y, GLuint num\_groups\_z); |

Listing 3.6.1: Compute shader invocation with built-in local sizes.

With ARB\_compute\_variable\_group\_size the sizes of a workgroup can change between compute dispatches.

|  |
| --- |
| // C++ side  void glDispatchComputeGroupSizeARB(  GLuint num\_groups\_x, GLuint num\_groups\_y, GLuint num\_groups\_z,  GLuint group\_size\_x, GLuint group\_size\_y, GLuint group\_size\_z); |

Listing 3.6.2: Compute shader invocation with per-draw group sizes

Current hardware support: NVIDIA Fermi

Expected hardware support: All OpenGL 5 hardware

## 3.7. Multi compute dispatch

Just like draw indirect benefits from multi draw indirect, it seems that compute dispatch indirect could benefit from multi compute dispatch. With such feature we could imagine compute shaders designed to build the list of compute dispatch to be executed.

Such feature would require a gl\_DispatchID providing a way to index resources per dispatch. However, gl\_DispatchID is equivalent to gl\_DrawID which is pretty inefficient on NVIDIA hardware.

Expected hardware support: Future hardware

## 3.8. [GL\_NV\_gpu\_shader5](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/NV/gpu_shader5.txt)

This extension was released with Fermi GPUs and it extends [ARB\_gpu\_shader5](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/ARB/gpu_shader5.txt) with a variety of Fermi specific features at the time. It contains the features later promoted into [ARB\_shader\_group\_vote](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/ARB/shader_group_vote.txt), the features picked up by [AMD\_gpu\_shader\_int64](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/AMD/gpu_shader_int64.txt) for AMD Southern Islands and the following:

* Support for a full set of 8-, 16-, 32-, and 64-bit scalar and vector data types, including uniform API, uniform buffer object, and shader input and output support (int8\_t, int16\_t, int64\_t, uint8\_t, uint16\_t, uint64\_t, float16\_t, i8vec2, i8vec3, i8vec4, i16vec2, i16vec3, i16vec4, i64vec2, i64vec3, i64vec4, u8vec2, u8vec3, u8vec4, u16vec2, u16vec3, u16vec4, u64vec2, u64vec3, u64vec4, f16vec2, f16vec3, f16vec4);
* The ability to aggregate samplers into arrays, index these arrays with arbitrary expressions, and not require that non-constant indices be uniform across all shader invocations;
* New built-in functions to pack and unpack 32-bit unsigned integer types into a two-component 16-bit floating-point vector (uint packFloat2x16(f16vec2 v), f16vec2 unpackFloat2x16(uint v));
* Vector relational functions supporting comparisons of vectors of 8-, 16-, and 64-bit integer types or 16-bit floating-point types;
* Extending texel offset support to allow loading texel offsets from regular integer operands computed at run-time, except for lookups with gradients ([textureGrad\*](http://www.opengl.org/sdk/docs/man/html/textureGrad.xhtml));
* Relaxing the requirement of a tessellation shader stage when processing patches. This allows the “patches” layout qualifier can be used for geometry shader input, as input to transform feedback and as input to the fixed-function rasterization stages where each point is drawn as independent points; and
* The capability to read per-patch variable written by a tessellation control shader by the geometry shader.

Current hardware support: NVIDIA Fermi

## 3.9. [GL\_AMD\_gpu\_shader\_int64](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/AMD/gpu_shader_int64.txt)

[AMD\_gpu\_shader\_int64](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/AMD/gpu_shader_int64.txt) is a superset of the 64-bit support exposed by [NV\_gpu\_shader5](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/NV/gpu_shader5.txt) and supported by AMD Southern Islands. This extension introduces the following features:

* Support for 64-bit scalar (int64\_t, uint64\_t) and vector integer data types (i64vec\*, u64vec\*), including uniform API, uniform buffer object, transform feedback, and shader input and output support;
* New built-in functions to pack and unpack 64-bit integer types into a two-component 32-bit integer vector (int64BitsToDouble, uint64BitsToDouble);
* New built-in functions to convert double-precision floating-point values to or from their 64-bit integer bit encodings (doubleBitsToInt64, doubleBitsToUint64);
* Vector relational functions supporting comparisons of vectors of 64-bit integer types; and
* Common functions abs, sign, min, max, clamp, and mix supporting arguments of 64-bit integer types.

[AMD\_gpu\_shader\_int64](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/AMD/gpu_shader_int64.txt) seems to be an obvious candidate to become an ARB extension and OpenGL 5 hardware feature.

Current hardware support: AMD Southern Islands

Expected hardware support: All OpenGL 5 hardware, NVIDIA Fermi

## 3.10. [GL\_AMD\_gcn\_shader](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/AMD/gcn_shader.txt)

AMD has released an extension of miscellaneous features supported by Southern Islands GPUs called AMD\_gcn\_shader:

* New cubemap addressing GLSL functions: cubeFaceIndexAMD to identify which cubemap face is addressed for a specific cubemap texture coordinate argument; cubeFaceCoordAMD to compute the 2D texture coordinates used to address that face.
* A new shader invocation group GLSL function: ballotAMD which returns a 64-bit bitfield indicating for each shader invocation of a wavefront whether the evaluation of an expression is true.
* A new timing GLSL function: timeAMD returns a 64-bit value representing the current clock as seen by the shader processor. Each shader invocation of a shader invocation group timeAMD may produce a different value.

timeAMD will be extremely useful to optimize shader code. While, being ALU bound is very unlikely on modern GPUs, this function can be used to study the behavior of atomic operations, texture fetching, branching, etc.

ballotAMD is also very useful in a similar way than anyInvocationARB, allInvocationsARB and allInvocationsEqualARB but with more control. With ballotAMD we can express ideas like if an expression is true for 75% of the shader invocations, choose code path A otherwise use code path B.

Current hardware support: AMD Southern Islands

Expected hardware support: Future hardware

## 3.11. [GL\_NV\_vertex\_attrib\_integer\_64bit](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/NV/vertex_attrib_integer_64bit.txt)

[NV\_vertex\_attrib\_integer\_64bit](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/AMD/gpu_shader_int64.txt) requires [NV\_gpu\_shader5](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/NV/gpu_shader5.txt) to provide 64-bit integer and unsigned integer support for vertex attributes.

Current hardware support: NVIDIA Fermi

Expected hardware support: Not needed in OpenGL 5 hardware

## 3.12. [GL\_AMD\_ shader\_trinary\_minmax](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/AMD/shader_trinary_minmax.txt)

This extension adds functions to find the minimum, maximum and median of three float or integer scalar or vector inputs.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Syntax | Description |
| genType min3(genType x, genType y, genType z) genIType min3(genIType x, genIType y, genIType z) genUType min3(genUType x, genUType y, genUType z) | Returns the per-component minimum value of x, y, and z |
| genType max3(genType x, genType y, genType z) genIType max3(genIType x, genIType y, genIType z) genUType max3(genUType x, genUType y, genUType z) | Returns the per-component maximum value of x, y, and z |
| genType mid3(genType x, genType y, genType z) genIType mid3(genIType x, genIType y, genIType z) genUType mid3(genUType x, genUType y, genUType z) | Returns the per-component median value of x, y, and z |

Current hardware support: AMD Southern Islands

Expected hardware support: Future Hardware

# 4. Framebuffer

## 4.1. [GL\_AMD\_sample\_positions](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/AMD/sample_positions.txt)

Setting the sample positions is to me a very useful feature for post processing antialiasing but also for very high multisample rendering using multiple passes. Another approach is based on considering that the eye is a continuous integrator of a signal. Using different sample position per frame each frame will be slightly different and the eye will perceive less aliasing.

Current hardware support: AMD Evergreen

Expected hardware support: All OpenGL 5 hardware

## 4.2. [GL\_EXT\_framebuffer\_multisample\_blit\_scaled](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/EXT/framebuffer_multisample_blit_scaled.txt)

This extension is collaboration between Apple and NVIDIA. It seems design to handle the high DPI screens by allowing in a single call of [glBlitFramebuffer](http://www.opengl.org/sdk/docs/man/html/glBlitFramebuffer.xhtml) to resolve a multisampled framebuffer and scale the resulting framebuffer.

Current hardware support: NVIDIA G80

Expected hardware support: All OpenGL 5 hardware

## 4.3. [GL\_NV\_multisample\_coverage](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/NV/multisample_coverage.txt) and [GL\_NV\_framebuffer\_multisample\_coverage](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/NV/framebuffer_multisample_coverage.txt)

Multisample coverage is a method based on using more coverage samples than color samplers. The implementation can modulate the multisampling resolution according to the number of coverage samples covering the color sample.

For example, if each color sample is associated with four coverage samples but only 50% of its coverage samples are covered then we can apply an equivalent weight while resolving the multisampling for this color sample.

Current hardware support: NVIDIA G80

## 4.4. [GL\_AMD\_depth\_clamp\_separate](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/AMD/depth_clamp_separate.txt)

[NV\_depth\_clamp](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/NV/depth_clamp.txt) introduced the concept of depth clamping so that primitive rendered outside the view near and far planes can be no longer clipped but the depth value is clamped in the depth range. [AMD\_depth\_clamp\_separate](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/AMD/depth_clamp_separate.txt) goes a step further, by independently enabling depth clamping on either the near or far planes.

Current hardware support: AMD RV670

# 5. Blending

Programmable blending has been on the wish list of many graphics programmers for a long time. There are three possible approaches forward: Through a per tile shader stage, through a new per pixel shader stage or by modifying the fragment shader stage. The Khronos Group released [EXT\_pixel\_local\_storage](https://www.khronos.org/registry/gles/extensions/EXT/EXT_shader_pixel_local_storage.txt) OpenGL ES extension for PowerVR Series 6 and ARM Mali T700. It’s a huge step toward the fragment shader stage approach. However it seems that the three approaches are pretty realistic for future hardware.

## 5.1. [GL\_NV\_texture\_barrier](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/NV/texture_barrier.txt)

Texture barrier is an NVIDIA extension but it has been largely implemented by others vendors (even Apple!). This extension was the very first step toward programmable blending allowing reading once and writing once at the same pixel location within a fragment shader invocation.

Effectively, this extension relaxes the interdiction to bind a texture that is also used as a framebuffer attachment. It also provides a mechanism to avoid read-after-write hazard.

Current hardware support: AMD R600, NVIDIA G80

Expected hardware support: Intel Sandy Bridge

## 5.2. [GL\_EXT\_shader\_framebuffer\_fetch](https://www.khronos.org/registry/gles/extensions/EXT/EXT_shader_framebuffer_fetch.txt) (OpenGL ES)

This extension provides a basic form of programmable blending providing an effective approach to replace the fixed function blending operations.

It allows declaring the fragment better outputs with an inout qualifier so that we can read the previous values of stored in the framebuffer. We can logically think this behavior as giving access to the destination values of the blend equation to the framebuffer.

Looking at the tiled base GPUs, this extension is a first step allowing reading the on-chip memory.

Current hardware support: Imagination Technologies PowerVR 5XT Series

Expected hardware support: Future hardware

## 5.3. [GL\_ARM\_shader\_framebuffer\_fetch](https://www.khronos.org/registry/gles/extensions/ARM/ARM_shader_framebuffer_fetch.txt) (OpenGL ES)

[ARM\_shader\_framebuffer\_fetch](https://www.khronos.org/registry/gles/extensions/ARM/ARM_shader_framebuffer_fetch.txt) is a superset of [EXT\_shader\_framebuffer\_fetch](https://www.khronos.org/registry/gles/extensions/EXT/EXT_shader_framebuffer_fetch.txt) providing a switchable mode to indicate that reading the framebuffer value should be performed once per sample or once per pixel. With [EXT\_shader\_framebuffer\_fetch](https://www.khronos.org/registry/gles/extensions/EXT/EXT_shader_framebuffer_fetch.txt), this is an undefined behavior.

Current hardware support: ARM Mali T700

Expected hardware support: Future hardware

## 5.4. [GL\_ARM\_shader\_framebuffer\_fetch\_depth\_stencil](https://www.khronos.org/registry/gles/extensions/ARM/ARM_shader_framebuffer_fetch_depth_stencil.txt) (OpenGL ES)

[ARM\_shader\_framebuffer\_fetch](https://www.khronos.org/registry/gles/extensions/ARM/ARM_shader_framebuffer_fetch.txt) and [EXT\_shader\_framebuffer\_fetch](https://www.khronos.org/registry/gles/extensions/EXT/EXT_shader_framebuffer_fetch.txt) allow reading the framebuffer attachment color values previously stored. However, those extensions don’t interact with the depth and stencil framebuffer attachments. [ARM\_shader\_framebuffer\_fetch\_depth\_stencil](https://www.khronos.org/registry/gles/extensions/ARM/ARM_shader_framebuffer_fetch_depth_stencil.txt) removes this limitation by exposing gl\_LastFragDepthARM and gl\_LastFragStencilARM input variables.

A use case of this extension is soft particle rendering in a single pass.

Current hardware support: ARM Mali T700

Expected hardware support: Future hardware

## 5.5. [GL\_EXT\_pixel\_local\_storage](https://www.khronos.org/registry/gles/extensions/EXT/EXT_shader_pixel_local_storage.txt) (OpenGL ES)

[EXT\_pixel\_local\_storage](https://www.khronos.org/registry/gles/extensions/EXT/EXT_shader_pixel_local_storage.txt) provides the most advance programmable blending extension to date.

It allows writing data into a pixel local storage block instead of the framebuffer for on-chip memory storage. The application gets control over the reads, writes and invalidations of the on-chip memory for potential huge bandwidth and power savings.

For example, pixel local storage can be used to store the deferred shading / lighting G-Buffer and then subsequently resolve it with another fragment shader invocation using a different shader code. This is pretty similar to [EXT\_shader\_framebuffer\_fetch](https://www.khronos.org/registry/gles/extensions/EXT/EXT_shader_framebuffer_fetch.txt) but it’s explicit so that we could store and read the depth buffer. Furthermore, the pixel local storage can contain arrays so that we can store multiple fragments giving opportunities for Order Independent Transparency with no bandwidth cost.

Obviously, on-ship memory is pretty limited but GPU architectures could rely on the cache hierarchy to extend the pixel local storage size. This behavior is exposed in this extension by two constants: GL\_MAX\_SHADER\_PIXEL\_LOCAL\_STORAGE\_FAST\_SIZE\_EXT and GL\_MAX\_SHADER\_PIXEL\_LOCAL\_STORAGE\_SIZE\_EXT.

|  |
| --- |
| #version 300 es  #extension GL\_EXT\_shader\_pixel\_local\_storage : enable  \_\_pixel\_localEXT FragDataLocal {  layout(r11f\_g11f\_b10f) mediump vec3 normal;  layout(rgb10\_a2) highp vec4 color;  layout(rgba8ui) mediump uvec4 flags;  } gbuf;  /\* .... \*/  void main()  {  /\* .... \*/  gbuf.normal = v;  gbuf.color = texture(sampler, coord);  gbuf.flags = material\_id;  } |

Listing 5.5.1: Write data to pixel local storage block, example from [EXT\_pixel\_local\_storage](https://www.khronos.org/registry/gles/extensions/EXT/EXT_shader_pixel_local_storage.txt)

|  |
| --- |
| #version 300 es  #extension GL\_EXT\_shader\_pixel\_local\_storage : enable  \_\_pixel\_localEXT FragDataLocal {  layout(r11f\_g11f\_b10f) mediump vec3 normal;  layout(rgb10\_a2) highp vec4 color;  layout(rgba8ui) mediump uvec4 flags;  } gbuf;  out highp vec4 fragColor;  void main()  {  fragColor = do\_lighting(gbuf.normal, gbuf.color, gbuf.flags, light\_pos);  } |

Listing 5.5.2: Resolve pixel local storage block, example from [EXT\_pixel\_local\_storage](https://www.khronos.org/registry/gles/extensions/EXT/EXT_shader_pixel_local_storage.txt)

As great this extension is, using the fragment shader stage for both filling the pixel local storage block and resolving a pixel local storage seem odd and limited. Other approach would be to enable compute shader resolution to store the final result in shader storage buffers or texture images. In such case we could have to figure out a way to express the window xy coordinates to locate the corresponding pixel local storage which is probably not easy.

Going further, we could imagine extending this feature to generalize local storage to any shader stage. It would be a form of compute shader shared memory that would be persistent after the completion of the shader invocations.

Another and more even more powerful approach would be adding a dedicated and independent tile shader stage and give it read only access to the pixel local storage blocks for all the pixel of a tile. This approach effectively provides access to the entire on-chip memory.

Unfortunately, this extension is written against OpenGL ES 3.0 so there is no interaction with OpenGL ES 3.1 or OpenGL 4.3 framebuffer with no attachments, shader storage buffer or texture images. Furthermore, it can’t be used with multisampling. Effectively, the pixel local storage is tightly baked with the framebuffer and clears are even performed through the framebuffer clear functions as both pixel local storage and the fragment shader ouputs are aliased.

Current hardware support: Imagination Technologies PowerVR Rogue, ARM Mali T700

Expected hardware support: Future hardware

## 5.6. Tile shading

[EXT\_pixel\_local\_storage](https://www.khronos.org/registry/gles/extensions/EXT/EXT_shader_pixel_local_storage.txt) allows expressing the most sophisticated programmable blending to date but it seems that it should be possible to go one step further. What about adding a dedicated tile shader stage after the fragment shader stage? The fragment shader stage would only need to write data to the pixel local storage per pixel but the tile shader stage could read every data for each pixel of a tile to output a single pixel per tile shader invocation.

|  |
| --- |
| #extension GL\_EXT\_shader\_pixel\_local\_storage2 : enable  \_\_pixel\_localEXT FragDataLocal {  layout(r11f\_g11f\_b10f) mediump vec3 normal;  layout(rgb10\_a2) highp vec4 color;  layout(rgba8ui) mediump uvec4 flags;  } gbuf**[][]**;  const uvec2 gl\_TileSize; // Sizes of the tile  in uvec2 gl\_Tilecoord; // Pixel coordinates within the current tile  in uvec2 gl\_TileID; // Identifier for the current tile reflecting the position in the window |

Listing 5.5.3: Resolve pixel local storage block, example from [EXT\_pixel\_local\_storage](https://www.khronos.org/registry/gles/extensions/EXT/EXT_shader_pixel_local_storage.txt)

The use case of this could be to perform single pass, no bandwidth screen space antialiasing, some form of motion estimation, some blurring, per-tile evaluations, etc. Obviously, such shader stage would be bound to a tile which can quickly results in blocky artifacts so the graphics programmer would need to remain wise.

Expected hardware support: Imagination Technologies PowerVR Rogue, ARM Mali T700

## 5.7. [GL\_INTEL\_fragment\_shader\_ordering](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/INTEL/fragment_shader_ordering.txt)

GPUs guaranty that framebuffer writes are processed in primitive rasterization order however there is no guarantee for texture image or shader storage buffer reads and writes.

[INTEL\_fragment\_shader\_ordering](https://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/INTEL/fragment_shader_ordering.txt) introduces GLSL beginFragmentShaderOrderingINTEL function which block the fragment shader invocation until all the previous fragment shader invocations for the same window (x, y) coordinates returns. All the memory transactions are guaranteed to be completed so that the fragment shader invocation could read the texture images and shader storage buffers previously written.

Hence, this extension provides an elaborated form of programmable blending applying on both texture and buffer data. On the contrary to [EXT\_pixel\_local\_storage](https://www.khronos.org/registry/gles/extensions/EXT/EXT_shader_pixel_local_storage.txt), this extension implies a high performance cost.

A possible approach for how AMD is implementing this extension is using the GDS memory (64KB of cache with built-in atomic operations shared across execution units). Tahiti (Radeon HD7900 ASIC) has 40 execution units, each working on 16 \* 16 pixels tile for a total of 10240 pixels at a time (40 \* 16 \* 16). Hence, the GDS has about 6.4 bytes per pixel which implies that trashing the cache will be very quick without screen space coherence. With atomic exchange, a wavefront would have to spin on beginFragmentShaderOrderingINTEL waiting for GDS changes preventing the launch of further wavefronts to hide the wait. Southern Islands being capable to have up to 10 wavefronts live per execution unit we are limiting ourselves to 1/10 of the GPU peak performance. Without carefully profiling using this extension will be particularly slow on AMD hardware.

I have found time yet to read Haswell hardware specification yet but hopefully there are hardware improvements that may reduce this performance penalty.

Current hardware support: Intel Haswell, AMD Southern Islands

Expected hardware support: Future hardware

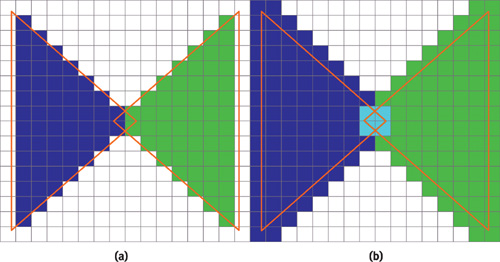
## 5.8. [GL\_INTEL\_conservative\_rasterization](http://http.developer.nvidia.com/GPUGems2/gpugems2_chapter42.html)

If we explore [glCapsViewer](http://delphigl.de/glcapsviewer/listreports.php?listreportsbyextension=GL_INTEL_conservative_rasterization) database we will see an extension called [INTEL\_conservative\_rasterization extension exposed in an Intel HD 4600 GPUs](http://delphigl.de/glcapsviewer/listreports.php?listreportsbyextension=GL_INTEL_conservative_rasterization). The specification hasn’t been released but conservative rasterization has been largely described in the [Chapter 42](http://http.developer.nvidia.com/GPUGems2/gpugems2_chapter42.html) of GPU Gem 2.

There are two variants of conservative rasterization:

* Overestimated conservative rasterization: A polygon includes all pixels for which the intersection between the pixel cell and the polygon is nonempty.
* Underestimated conservative rasterization: A polygon includes only the pixels whose pixel cell lies completely inside the polygon.

Use cases for conservative rasterization are GPU based collision detections and occlusion culling. With currently OpenGL 4 hardware to ensure somewhat correct result with need to keep framebuffer resolution high to reduce (but not avoid!) missing intersections. With conservative rasterization, we can get all the intersections and even save some fill-rate and bandwidth if this is useful. Another perspective for such feature would be to implementable a programmable form of *binning* on desktop and mobile GPUs. In tile based GPUs, *binning* is typically the fixed function step where primitives are sorted per tile.

**  
Figure 5.6.1: Comparing standard (a) and overestimated conservative (b) rasterization (GPU Gems 2)

Current hardware support: Intel Haswell

Expected hardware support: Future hardware

## 5.9. [GL\_KHR\_blend\_equation\_advanced](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/NV/blend_equation_advanced.txt)

This extension is the embodiment for why we need programmable blending. Clearly, most of the new blend equations of this extension are not computed by the ROPs but by shader invocations. It seems that an application could use image load and store and a compute shader to perform the same behavior.

Current hardware support: NVIDIA Fermi

## 5.10. [GL\_AMD\_blend\_minmax\_factor](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/AMD/blend_minmax_factor.txt)

This extension provides two new blend equations that produce the minimum or maximum of the products of the source color and source factor, and the destination color and destination factor.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Mode | RGB Components | Alpha Component |
| GL\_FACTOR\_MIN\_AMD | R = min(Rs \* Sr, Rd \* Dr) G = min(Gs \* Sg, Gd \* Dg) B = min(Bs \* Sb, Bd \* Db) | A = min(As \* Sa, Ad \* Da) |
| GL\_FACTOR\_MAX\_AMD | R = max(Rs \* Sr, Rd \* Dr) G = max(Gs \* Sg, Gd \* Dg) B = max(Bs \* Sb, Bd \* Db) | A = max(As \* Sa, Ad \* Da) |

Current hardware support: AMD Northern Islands

# 6. Stencil

## 6.1. GL\_[AMD\_shader\_stencil\_export](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/AMD/shader_stencil_export.txt)

This extension exposed the fragment shader built-in output variable gl\_FragStencilRefAMD, allowing writing per invocation the stencil reference value used by the stencil test. For example, the extension allows writing directly to the stencil buffer when the stencil operation is set to GL\_REPLACE.

Current hardware support: AMD RV670

## 6.2. GL\_[AMD\_stencil\_operation\_extended](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/AMD/stencil_operation_extended.txt)

The stencil operation takes the three arguments sfail, dpfail and dppass describing the operations for updating the stencil buffer. With OpenGL 4.4 the available operation a pretty trivial: GL\_KEEP, GL\_ZERO, GL\_REPLACE, GL\_INCR, GL\_DECR, GL\_INVERT, GL\_INCR\_WRAP and GL\_DECR\_WRAP. This AMD extension adds new possible operations for the stencil buffer:

* GL\_SET\_AMD; (setting to the maximum representable value)
* GL\_AND;
* GL\_XOR;
* GL\_OR;
* GL\_NOR;
* GL\_EQUIV;
* GL\_NAND; and
* GL\_REPLACE\_VALUE\_AMD (replacing with the operation source value instead of the reference value)

This extension also separate the value used for the stencil tests from the value used for the stencil operation. The operation value can be set with glStencilOpValueAMD for either face.

Current hardware support: AMD Southern Islands

## 6.3. GL\_[AMD\_shader\_stencil\_value\_export](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/AMD/shader_stencil_export.txt)

[AMD\_stencil\_operation\_extended](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/AMD/stencil_operation_extended.txt) decouples the stencil reference value (gl\_FragStencilRefAMD) from the stencil operation value.

This extension introduces a new fragment shader built-in output variable called gl\_FragStencilValueAMD allowing writing the operation value per shader invocation.

Current hardware support: AMD Southern Islands

# 7. Rendering pipeline

## 7.1. [GL\_AMD\_vertex\_shader\_layer](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/AMD/vertex_shader_layer.txt)

OpenGL 3 hardware introduced layered rendering allowing rendering each primitive to a different framebuffer attachment. However, to leverage this functionality, we need to use a geometry shader to specify [gl\_LayerID](http://www.opengl.org/sdk/docs/man/html/gl_Layer.xhtml) per generated primitive. Using a geometry shader is not free on contrary of setting [gl\_LayerID](http://www.opengl.org/sdk/docs/man/html/gl_Layer.xhtml). Following this reasoning, AMD published [AMD\_vertex\_shader\_layer](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/AMD/vertex_shader_layer.txt) which allows setting [gl\_LayerID](http://www.opengl.org/sdk/docs/man/html/gl_Layer.xhtml) in the vertex shader. Considering that mobile GPUs don't have a geometry shader, it would be particularly useful to use layered rendering.

Because most mobile hardware doesn’t have a geometry shader stage, such feature would enable layered rendering on them.

Current hardware support: AMD Southern Islands

Expected hardware support: Future mobile hardware

## 7.2. [GL\_AMD\_vertex\_shader\_viewport\_index](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/AMD/vertex_shader_viewport_index.txt)

This extension follows the same reasoning than [AMD\_vertex\_shader\_layer](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/AMD/vertex_shader_layer.txt), enabling to choose the rendering view port [gl\_ViewportIndex](http://www.opengl.org/sdk/docs/man/html/gl_ViewportIndex.xhtml) from the vertex shader stage.

Current hardware support: AMD Southern Islands

Expected hardware support: Future mobile hardware

## 7.3. [GL\_AMD\_transform\_feedback3\_lines\_triangles](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/AMD/transform_feedback3_lines_triangles.txt)

With OpenGL 4.4, the application can use multiple transform feedback streams but only the first stream can output primitives that are not points. [AMD\_transform\_feedback3\_lines\_triangles](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/AMD/transform_feedback3_lines_triangles.txt) removes this restriction. Any primitive can be generated with any stream.

Current hardware support: AMD Southern Islands

## 7.4. [GL\_AMD\_transform\_feedback4](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/AMD/transform_feedback4.txt)

[AMD\_transform\_feedback4](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/AMD/transform_feedback4.txt) extends [AMD\_transform\_feedback3\_lines\_triangles](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/AMD/transform_feedback3_lines_triangles.txt) so that each stream can be rendered in a single draw.

Current hardware support: AMD Southern Islands

## 7.5. [GL\_AMD\_occlusion\_query\_event](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/AMD/occlusion_query_event.txt)

OpenGL provides occlusion queries to count the number of fragments that pass the tests. This extension provides finer queries to determine the number of fragments that pass specific tests.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| GL\_QUERY\_DEPTH\_PASS\_EVENT\_BIT\_AMD | Indicates that the fragment passed all tests |
| GL\_QUERY\_DEPTH\_FAIL\_EVENT\_BIT\_AMD | Indicates that the fragment passed the depth bounds and stencil tests, but failed the depth test |
| GL\_QUERY\_STENCIL\_FAIL\_EVENT\_BIT\_AMD | Indicates that the fragment passed the depth bounds test but failed the stencil test |
| GL\_QUERY\_DEPTH\_BOUNDS\_FAIL\_EVENT\_BIT\_AMD | Indicates that the fragment failed the depth bounds test |
| GL\_QUERY\_ALL\_EVENT\_BITS\_AMD | Indicates that any event generated by the fragment should be counted |

Current hardware support: Intel Haswell, AMD Sea Islands

## 7.6. [WGL\_AMD\_gpu\_association](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/AMD/wgl_gpu_association.txt) and [WGL\_NV\_gpu\_affinity](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/NV/gpu_affinity.txt)

I have never really explored either [AMD\_gpu\_association](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/AMD/wgl_gpu_association.txt) or [NV\_gpu\_affinity](http://www.opengl.org/registry/specs/NV/gpu_affinity.txt) by lack of interest of multi GPU solution. These extensions enable CrossFire and SLI on AMD and NVIDIA GPUs. Such feature could probably be standardized into an OpenGL ARB extension. Still, rendering a frame on one GPU and a second frame on the other GPU is a pretty relevant scenario for example.

Expected hardware support: OpenGL 3 hardware

# 8. Hardware rings and task parallelism

Graphics APIs such as OpenGL, Mantle or Direct3D12 exposes concepts such as display lists, command queues and command lists. Exploring hardware specifications, we see a gap between what these APIs exposed and the hardware architectures even on AMD hardware that is the friendliest to such concepts.

Considering command queues such as things that the GPU can execute in parallel is missing leading. On Southern Islands the GPU Draw Engine (DE) can execute a PM4 packet at a time. A PM4 packet can be seen as a macro instruction in the CPU world. Southern Islands introduce a new hardware block called the Constant Engine (CE) which aims at compensating the removal of the fixed hardware register for the shader resource descriptors. With Southen Islands, the shader resource descriptors are fetched from memory but cached by the constant engine. The Constant Engine as its own hardware ring so that both the Draw Engine and Constant Engine could execute PM4 packets in parallel. Neither the Draw Engine nor the Constant Engine can execute all the PM4 packets, each support dedicated subsets. DE and CE form what we call the Command Processor (CP) but really in Southern Islands it’s two hardware blocks. Even if both can run in parallel, there are designed for instructions parallelism, not really task parallelism.

Southern Islands has two DMA engines that can do transfers on both directions: from device to client or from client to device memory. The DMA engines can run fully independently from the command processor.

Southern Islands also has 2 Asynchronous Compute Engines (ACE). These engines allow efficient multi-tasking with independent scheduling and workgroup dispatch. These engines can run in parallel with the Draw Engine without any form of contention. OpenCL 1.2 exposes them with something called device partitioning. Sea Islands raised the number of ACE to 8.

There is a lot of room for task parallelism in a GPU but the idea of submitting draws from multiple threads in parallel simply doesn’t make any sense from the GPU architectures at this point. Everything will need to be serialized at some point and if applications don’t do it, the driver will have to do it. This is true until GPU architectures add support for multiple command processors which is not unrealistic in the future.

For example, having multiple command processors would allow to render shadow passes at the same time as filling G-Buffers or shading the previous frame. Having such drastically different task live on the GPU at the same time could make a better usage of the GPU as both tasks will probably have different hardware bottleneck.

Task parallelism is interesting as long as the architecture allows load balancing. On AMD Tahiti, there are 32 execution units so and each of them can process independent tasks. However, Tahiti is a high-end GPU and the lower end we got the less execution units it contains. On mobile GPU, PowerVR GX6650 contains only 6 execution units despite that it is really high-end on mobile. NVIDIA Kepler uses fat execution units so that GK104 only has 8 execution units and Tegra K1 only has a single execution unit.

Current hardware support: AMD Southern Islands

Expected hardware support: Future hardware

# Conclusions

I think we are going toward the convergence of the tile-based GPUs and the immediate mode GPUs and it’s particularly exciting to see architecture innovations coming from both the desktop and mobile worlds.

On current immediate mode hardware, it already makes a lot of sense to do tile based image computation like shading. On current tile based GPUs, it makes a lot of sense to enable programmable vertex pulling to ensure that the meshes will be process at fine granularity and with screen space coherence to avoid flushing on-chip memory to graphics memory.

Hence, I expect that future hardware will converge with both worlds moving toward each other. First, by enabling a full programmable vertex pulling allowing the GPUs to submit itself a lot of small draws with MultiDrawIndirect and executing significantly different shader code path fine granularity draws. Second, by introducing a tile shader stage used for a fully programmable blending allowing single pass deferred rendering, OIT or immediate antialiasing resolution for a massive bandwidth saving.

Some additional information:

* [OpenGL 4.4 core specification](http://www.opengl.org/registry/doc/glspec44.core.withchanges.pdf)
* [GLSL 4.4 specification](http://www.opengl.org/registry/doc/GLSLangSpec.4.40.diff.pdf)
* [OpenGL 4.4 review](http://www.g-truc.net/doc/OpenGL%204.4%20review.pdf)
* [OpenGL 4.3 review](http://www.g-truc.net/doc/OpenGL%204.3%20review.pdf)
* [OpenGL 4.2 review](http://www.g-truc.net/doc/OpenGL%204.2%20review.pdf)
* [OpenGL 4.1 review](http://www.g-truc.net/doc/OpenGL%204.1%20review.pdf)
* [OpenGL 4.0 review](http://www.g-truc.net/doc/OpenGL%204.0%20review.pdf)
* [OpenGL 3.3 review](http://www.g-truc.net/doc/OpenGL%203.3%20review.pdf)
* [OpenGL 4.4 Pipeline Map](http://www.g-truc.net/doc/OpenGL%204.4%20Pipeline%20Map.pdf)
* [OpenGL ES 3.0 Pipeline Map](http://www.g-truc.net/doc/OpenGL%20ES%203.0%20Pipeline%20Map.pdf)
* [OpenGL extensions support matrix - February 2014](http://www.g-truc.net/doc/OpenGL%20matrix%202014-02.pdf)

Thanks to [Patrick Cozzi](http://www.seas.upenn.edu/~pcozzi/) for the review of this article.

If programmable vertex pulling and programmable blending is the future of GPU architectures, we could look at the convergence of tiled base and immediate GPUs.