The Maze Inside the Machine

Aaron Okano, Jason Wong, Meenal Tambe,
and Gowtham Vijayaragavan

June 4, 2011

The code that we decided to use was a C program titled maze.c. In the program, a two-dimensional array was placed into a file. An "O" indicated an open space while an "X" represented a closed portion in the maze. The goal of the program was to find the best possible path to complete the maze. The method for finding the best path was written into the **find_path()** function, which had recursive properties since it only called either itself or the **printf()** function. When running the program, the coordinates for the best path were printed in row-major order. Because of its frequent dependence on two-dimensional arrays, maze.c was the best example to analyze the differences from its optimized and unoptimized source code files. After compiling maze.c, two .s files were made using the -S option for the unoptimized file and the -O3 option for the optimized files. The attached files were titled maze-opt.s for the optimized file and maze-noopt.s for the unoptimized file.

One of the most noteworthy changes in the optimized code is the new ordering. Many of the instructions that follow immediately after another instruction are placed right below it, so that the code may run smoothly. The optimized code also combines some functions that were separate in the unoptimized code. Instead of separating the functions, the optimized code reduces the number of jumps. The generous use of conditional jumps plays a big part in this. If a jump is not absolutely needed, the code just executes downward, which would not be possible if not for the appropriate ordering. A vast majority of the instructions in the unoptimized code end with the **jmp**, whereas there are only 4 calls to **jmp** in the optimized code. An instruction that clearly benefits from this is **main()**:

```
main:
```

```
pushl    %ebp
movl     %esp, %ebp
andl     $-16, %esp
subl     $96, %esp
cmpl     $2, 8(%ebp)
movl     %ebx, 88(%esp)
movl     %esi, 92(%esp)
je       .L20
```

A jump is made if there are only two arguments. Otherwise, the instruction after **main()**, .L18, which performs necessary stack operations, and returns. It is extremely minimalist, and nothing else is performed unless the condition, that the number of arguments is two, is met.

Additionally, when comparing the two files, an observation we made was that the **find_path()** function in the optimized file was slightly longer in length than the **find_path()** function in the unoptimized file. It also appears that it is called quite often, with many checks and calculations being done inside **find_path()** itself. Then, after the jump from the function is made, the instructions do not get tangled in a series of jumps. If a jump is made, it is to terminate the program. Otherwise, the function, **find_path()**, is called again. This is in contrast to the unoptimized version, where jumps are made quite frequently from instruction to instruction.

The -O3 modification also makes some other very subtle changes. One of these subtle changes is how if statements are handled. When we look at the unoptimized version, we see that it it writes the function as if it was building the instructions based on the how the program would be during a straight run while in -O3 we see it more of a function based implementation. For example, take the first if statement checking whether or not there is a correct number of arguments. On the unoptimized version, we see that the jump is to occur if it is not equal. However, in the optimized version, we see that it jumps when it is equal to zero. This implementation can either hurt the run-time or help it. In our case it hurts it during **main()** because it is doing an unnecessary jump. However, if we were searching for a very specific condition such as in our **find_path()**, looking for something that has a probability of less than one third of happening, then the optimized implementation is superior because it prevents excess jumps.

Another subtlety that we found was that the optimized version would push things straight into the stack. We can take our example from the time

before the **fopen()** call. The unoptimized version has

```
movl $.LC0, %edx
movl 12(%ebp), %eax
addl $4, %eax
movl (%eax), %eax
movl %edx, 4(%esp)
movl %eax, (%esp)
call fopen
```

while the optimized version has the following:

```
movl $.LC1, 4(%esp)
movl 4(%eax), %eax
movl %eax, (%esp)
call fopen
```

We see that the last argument (.LC0 and LC1) is put directly into the stack in the optimized version while in the unoptimized version, we see that it is first put into EDX and then into the stack. Right there we can see that the optimized version is better. Why is it better? Because it is shorter. That means there are fewer instructions for the CPU, which means the run-time is faster and still reaches the same desired outcome.

In addition to function calls, loops are also handled very differently in the two versions. In the unoptimized version we see that after each iteration of the loop, it jumps back to the top of the loop until the counter reaches 7. In the optimized file, the .L20 section combined .L3 and .L4 from the unoptimized code and repeats it eight times:

```
leal    24(%esp), %eax
movl    %ebx, 8(%esp)
movl    $11, 4(%esp)
movl    %eax, (%esp)
call    fgets
leal    32(%esp), %eax
...
```

This helps the program run faster in two ways. The first way it helps is that it no longer needs to check whether a loop has fulfilled its conditions. We can avoid that comparison thus saving CPU time and the time it takes to

increment the counter. Second, because the code is merely "copy-pasted" eight times, the need for jumps is eliminated. In this case, code compactness is sacrificed for speed.

As we traverse the program, we notice another subtlety. Every time we want to make a register 0, the unoptimized code moves 0 into the corresponding register (ie. `movl $0, %eax`). The optimized version, however, uses a different syntax. The function, .L8, uses the **xorl** command in the optimized code:

```
xorl    %eax, %eax
```

This command provides a more concise way of using the **movl** command since it doesnt need to initialize the EAX register to 0 first. This saves one line of instruction that would have used up space on the stack. The purpose of **xorl** in this program is to initialize the for loop that was written in the maze.c code. **xorl** shares similar properties with .L7 in the unoptimized code, where the EAX register was set to zero so that the recursive section could loop again without carrying values from the previous run. Moving a 0 into a register is considered an integer operation while **xorl** is considered a bitwise operation. Since bitwise operations are always faster than integer operations, using **xorl** is more efficient. Overall, the reduction in the number of jumps and the increase in immediate code allows the program to run faster since this process does not need to move throughout the stack as frequently as the unoptimized file.

The reduction of jumps is not the only change that affects the performance of the program. The optimized version also takes advantage of the speed of registers to improve the performance of the program. In the unoptimized version of the **find_path()** function, the index and the index2 variables are compared from the stack, while the optimized version copies the values from the stack into the registers. Although it is an extra instruction, it pays off as the program progresses. If it fails the first if statement (the compound if statement), it progresses to the second one. Here, index and index2 are accessed again. In the optimized version, it simply uses the copied value in the registers instead of looking at the stack again. Since registers are within the CPU, the access speed to registers are many magnitudes faster the from memory. With the reduction of accesses to memory, the running time of the program is reduced, thus improving the performance of the program further.

Because the optimized version places arguments to **find_path()** in registers, it is able to access the 2d array much more efficiently than the unopti-

mized code. To access a particular portion of the maze array, the computer needs to calculate maze+(index*8+index2). In the unoptimized version, the code to do this appears as such:

```
movl    12(%ebp), %eax
sall    $3, %eax
movl    %eax, %edx
addl    8(%ebp), %edx
movl    16(%ebp), %eax
leal    (%edx,%eax), %eax
movzbl  (%eax), %eax
cmpb    $88, %al
```

The values for the address of the maze pointer and the two index values need to be copied from the stack into registers to perform the necessary arithmetic operations. On top of that, there are still unnecessary operations, such as the MOV from EAX to EDX. The optimized code can take shortcuts because the arguments are already in registers:

```
leal    (%edi,%ebx,8), %edx
cmpb    $88, (%edx,%esi)
```

Because of the easier access to the arguments, not only are the calculations easier to perform, the code can also take advantage of more advanced addressing modes.

One feature of GCC's optimizations that appears in maze-opt.s is the emphasis that is placed on safety. Encompassed within GCC's -O3 flag is the optimization -fcaller-saves, which tells GCC to place the current register values at the front of the stack frame of the calling function. For example, surrounding the recursive calls to **find_path()** appears the code:

```
movl %edx, -28(%ebp)
movl %esi, 8(%esp)
movl %edi, (%esp)
call find_path
movl -28(%ebp), %edx
```

Here, the compiler put c(EDX) 28 bytes into the stack frame and then put it back into EDX after the **find_path()** call. The reason for this is to deal

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with situations where subroutines or malicious leprechauns change the EDX register.

We also observed GCCs security emphasis in its use of the function **__printf_chk()** in maze-opt.s in place of **printf()**, which the unoptimized version uses. The optimized version uses the stack far more than the unoptimized one, so the need to check for stack overflows is more necessary. In particular, the **printf()** function tends to use a tremendous amount of space on the stack, and added on top of the increased stack usage from optimizations such as `-fcaller-saves`, the possibility of a stack overflow is increased. **__printf_chk()** partially solves this problem by checking the size of the stack prior to doing any stack-heavy calculations. Naturally, the extra action of checking the stack translates to slower performance. This illustrates how GCC does not focus entirely on the improving the speed of the program in its optimizations.

Overall, the optimized version of maze.c was efficient, faster, and provided more safety than the unoptimized code. Although the code was longer and initially gave the illusion of a less organized—and therefore less efficient— way of decreasing the run-time of the program, the optimized file superseded this notion by providing a different approach to run the program and save memory. By changing the order of instructions around significantly, reducing the number of jumps, and dealing with registers directly, the optimized code has traded conciseness for speed. However, when it comes to discovering the leprechaun's pot of gold at the end of the maze, it is a worthwhile sacrifice.

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Appendices

A   Contributions

B   Code used in this report

maze.c:

```
1   /*
2    * File:   maze.c
3    * Author: Gowtham
4    *
5    * Created on July 17, 2010, 8:01 PM
6    */
7
8   #include <stdio.h>
9   #include <stdlib.h>
10  #include <string.h>
11
12  //The purpose of this program is to scan in a file that has
13  //a grid of sorts, X being locations to which you cannot
14  //move to. Locations with an O are ok. The sequence of
15  //positions to take to get from (0,1) to (7,7) is
16  //printed out.
17
18  void find_path2(char maze[8][8], int index, int index2);
19  int find_path(char maze[][8], int index, int index2);
20  /*
21   *
22   */
23  int main(int argc, char* argv[]) {
24    FILE *inp;
25    char maze[8][8];
26    int i;
27    if (argc == 2)
28    {
29      inp = fopen(argv[1], "r");
30
31      for (i = 0; i < 8; i++)
32      {
33        fgets(maze[i], 11, inp);
34      } //for
35
36      if (find_path(maze, 7 , 7) == 0)
37        printf("No path was found.");
38      else
```

```c
39        printf("(7, 7)");
40
41    } //if
42
43
44    return 0;
45
46  } //main()
47
48  int find_path(char maze[][8], int index, int index2)
49  {
50    if (index < 0 || index2 < 0 || index > 7 || index2 > 7)
51    {
52      return 0;
53    } //if
54
55    if (maze[index][index2]== 'X')
56    {
57      return 0;
58
59    } //if
60
61    if (index == 0 && index2 == 1)
62    {
63      return 1;
64    } //if
65
66    maze[index][index2] = 'X';
67
68
69    if (find_path(maze, index, index2 + 1) == 1)
70    {
71      printf("(%d, %d) \n", index, index2 + 1);
72      return 1;
73    } //if
74    if (find_path(maze, index, index2 - 1) == 1)
75    {
76      printf("(%d, %d) \n", index, index2 - 1);
77      return 1;
78    } //if
79    if (find_path(maze, index - 1, index2) == 1)
80    {
81      printf("(%d, %d) \n", index - 1, index2);
82      return 1;
83    } //if
84    if (find_path(maze, index + 1, index2) == 1)
85    {
86      printf("(%d, %d) \n", index + 1, index2);
87      return 1;
88    } //if
89
90
91
92    return 0;
93  } //find_path()
```

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maze-noopt.s:

```
1            .file        "maze.c"
2            .section     .rodata
3    .LC0:
4            .string      "r"
5    .LC1:
6            .string      "No path was found."
7    .LC2:
8            .string      "(7, 7)"
9            .text
10   .globl main
11           .type        main, @function
12   main:
13           pushl        %ebp
14           movl         %esp, %ebp
15           andl         $-16, %esp
16           subl         $96, %esp
17           cmpl         $2, 8(%ebp)
18           jne          .L2
19           movl         $.LC0, %edx
20           movl         12(%ebp), %eax
21           addl         $4, %eax
22           movl         (%eax), %eax
23           movl         %edx, 4(%esp)
24           movl         %eax, (%esp)
25           call         fopen
26           movl         %eax, 88(%esp)
27           movl         $0, 92(%esp)
28           jmp          .L3
29   .L4:
30           leal         24(%esp), %eax
31           movl         92(%esp), %edx
32           sall         $3, %edx
33           leal         (%eax,%edx), %edx
34           movl         88(%esp), %eax
35           movl         %eax, 8(%esp)
36           movl         $11, 4(%esp)
37           movl         %edx, (%esp)
38           call         fgets
39           addl         $1, 92(%esp)
40   .L3:
41           cmpl         $7, 92(%esp)
42           jle          .L4
43           movl         $7, 8(%esp)
44           movl         $7, 4(%esp)
45           leal         24(%esp), %eax
46           movl         %eax, (%esp)
47           call         find_path
48           testl        %eax, %eax
49           jne          .L5
50           movl         $.LC1, %eax
51           movl         %eax, (%esp)
52           call         printf
53           jmp          .L2
54   .L5:
```

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```
55          movl        $.LC2, %eax
56          movl        %eax, (%esp)
57          call        printf
58  .L2:
59          movl        $0, %eax
60          leave
61          ret
62          .size       main, .-main
63          .section        .rodata
64  .LC3:
65          .string     "(%d, %d) \n"
66          .text
67  .globl find_path
68          .type       find_path, @function
69  find_path:
70          pushl       %ebp
71          movl        %esp, %ebp
72          subl        $24, %esp
73          cmpl        $0, 12(%ebp)
74          js          .L7
75          cmpl        $0, 16(%ebp)
76          js          .L7
77          cmpl        $7, 12(%ebp)
78          jg          .L7
79          cmpl        $7, 16(%ebp)
80          jle         .L8
81  .L7:
82          movl        $0, %eax
83          jmp         .L9
84  .L8:
85          movl        12(%ebp), %eax
86          sall        $3, %eax
87          movl        %eax, %edx
88          addl        8(%ebp), %edx
89          movl        16(%ebp), %eax
90          leal        (%edx,%eax), %eax
91          movzbl      (%eax), %eax
92          cmpb        $88, %al
93          jne         .L10
94          movl        $0, %eax
95          jmp         .L9
96  .L10:
97          cmpl        $0, 12(%ebp)
98          jne         .L11
99          cmpl        $1, 16(%ebp)
100         jne         .L11
101         movl        $1, %eax
102         jmp         .L9
103 .L11:
104         movl        12(%ebp), %eax
105         sall        $3, %eax
106         movl        %eax, %edx
107         addl        8(%ebp), %edx
108         movl        16(%ebp), %eax
109         leal        (%edx,%eax), %eax
110         movb        $88, (%eax)
111         movl        16(%ebp), %eax
```

```
112         addl        $1, %eax
113         movl        %eax, 8(%esp)
114         movl        12(%ebp), %eax
115         movl        %eax, 4(%esp)
116         movl        8(%ebp), %eax
117         movl        %eax, (%esp)
118         call        find_path
119         cmpl        $1, %eax
120         jne         .L12
121         movl        16(%ebp), %eax
122         leal        1(%eax), %edx
123         movl        $.LC3, %eax
124         movl        %edx, 8(%esp)
125         movl        12(%ebp), %edx
126         movl        %edx, 4(%esp)
127         movl        %eax, (%esp)
128         call        printf
129         movl        $1, %eax
130         jmp         .L9
131   .L12:
132         movl        16(%ebp), %eax
133         subl        $1, %eax
134         movl        %eax, 8(%esp)
135         movl        12(%ebp), %eax
136         movl        %eax, 4(%esp)
137         movl        8(%ebp), %eax
138         movl        %eax, (%esp)
139         call        find_path
140         cmpl        $1, %eax
141         jne         .L13
142         movl        16(%ebp), %eax
143         leal        -1(%eax), %edx
144         movl        $.LC3, %eax
145         movl        %edx, 8(%esp)
146         movl        12(%ebp), %edx
147         movl        %edx, 4(%esp)
148         movl        %eax, (%esp)
149         call        printf
150         movl        $1, %eax
151         jmp         .L9
152   .L13:
153         movl        12(%ebp), %eax
154         leal        -1(%eax), %edx
155         movl        16(%ebp), %eax
156         movl        %eax, 8(%esp)
157         movl        %edx, 4(%esp)
158         movl        8(%ebp), %eax
159         movl        %eax, (%esp)
160         call        find_path
161         cmpl        $1, %eax
162         jne         .L14
163         movl        12(%ebp), %eax
164         leal        -1(%eax), %ecx
165         movl        $.LC3, %eax
166         movl        16(%ebp), %edx
167         movl        %edx, 8(%esp)
168         movl        %ecx, 4(%esp)
```

```
169            movl        %eax, (%esp)
170            call        printf
171            movl        $1, %eax
172            jmp         .L9
173    .L14:
174            movl        12(%ebp), %eax
175            leal        1(%eax), %edx
176            movl        16(%ebp), %eax
177            movl        %eax, 8(%esp)
178            movl        %edx, 4(%esp)
179            movl        8(%ebp), %eax
180            movl        %eax, (%esp)
181            call        find_path
182            cmpl        $1, %eax
183            jne         .L15
184            movl        12(%ebp), %eax
185            leal        1(%eax), %ecx
186            movl        $.LC3, %eax
187            movl        16(%ebp), %edx
188            movl        %edx, 8(%esp)
189            movl        %ecx, 4(%esp)
190            movl        %eax, (%esp)
191            call        printf
192            movl        $1, %eax
193            jmp         .L9
194    .L15:
195            movl        $0, %eax
196    .L9:
197            leave
198            ret
199            .size       find_path, .-find_path
200            .ident      "GCC: (Ubuntu/Linaro 4.5.2-8ubuntu4) 4.5.2"
201            .section        .note.GNU-stack,"",@progbits
```

maze-opt.s:

```
1               .file           "maze.c"
2               .section        .rodata.str1.1,"aMS",@progbits,1
3      .LC0:
4               .string         "(%d, %d) \n"
5               .text
6               .p2align 4,,15
7      .globl find_path
8               .type           find_path, @function
9      find_path:
10              pushl           %ebp
11              movl            %esp, %ebp
12              subl            $56, %esp
13              movl            %esi, -8(%ebp)
14              movl            16(%ebp), %esi
15              movl            %ebx, -12(%ebp)
16              movl            12(%ebp), %ebx
17              movl            %edi, -4(%ebp)
18              movl            8(%ebp), %edi
19              testl           %esi, %esi
20              js              .L8
21              movl            %ebx, %eax
22              shrl            $31, %eax
23              testb           %al, %al
24              jne             .L8
25              cmpl            $7, %esi
26              jg              .L8
27              cmpl            $7, %ebx
28              jg              .L8
29              leal            (%edi,%ebx,8), %edx
30              xorl            %eax, %eax
31              cmpb            $88, (%edx,%esi)
32              je              .L2
33              cmpl            $1, %esi
34              jne             .L12
35              testl           %ebx, %ebx
36              movb            $1, %al
37              je              .L2
38     .L12:
39              movb            $88, (%edx,%esi)
40              leal            1(%esi), %edx
41              movl            %edx, 8(%esp)
42              movl            %edx, -28(%ebp)
43              movl            %ebx, 4(%esp)
44              movl            %edi, (%esp)
45              call            find_path
46              movl            -28(%ebp), %edx
47              cmpl            $1, %eax
48              je              .L14
49              leal            -1(%esi), %edx
50              movl            %edx, 8(%esp)
51              movl            %edx, -28(%ebp)
52              movl            %ebx, 4(%esp)
53              movl            %edi, (%esp)
54              call            find_path
55              movl            -28(%ebp), %edx
```

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```
56          cmpl        $1, %eax
57          je          .L14
58          leal        -1(%ebx), %edx
59          movl        %edx, 4(%esp)
60          movl        %edx, -28(%ebp)
61          movl        %esi, 8(%esp)
62          movl        %edi, (%esp)
63          call        find_path
64          movl        -28(%ebp), %edx
65          cmpl        $1, %eax
66          je          .L16
67          addl        $1, %ebx
68          movl        %esi, 8(%esp)
69          movl        %ebx, 4(%esp)
70          movl        %edi, (%esp)
71          call        find_path
72          movl        %eax, %edx
73          xorl        %eax, %eax
74          cmpl        $1, %edx
75          jne         .L2
76          movl        %esi, 12(%esp)
77   .L13:
78          movl        %ebx, 8(%esp)
79          movl        $.LC0, 4(%esp)
80          movl        $1, (%esp)
81          call        __printf_chk
82          movl        $1, %eax
83          jmp         .L2
84          .p2align 4,,7
85          .p2align 3
86   .L8:
87          xorl        %eax, %eax
88   .L2:
89          movl        -12(%ebp), %ebx
90          movl        -8(%ebp), %esi
91          movl        -4(%ebp), %edi
92          movl        %ebp, %esp
93          popl        %ebp
94          ret
95          .p2align 4,,7
96          .p2align 3
97   .L14:
98          movl        %edx, 12(%esp)
99          jmp         .L13
100         .p2align 4,,7
101         .p2align 3
102  .L16:
103         movl        %esi, 12(%esp)
104         movl        %edx, 8(%esp)
105         movl        $.LC0, 4(%esp)
106         movl        $1, (%esp)
107         call        __printf_chk
108         movl        $1, %eax
109         jmp         .L2
110         .size       find_path, .-find_path
111         .section       .rodata.str1.1
112  .LC1:
```

```
113          .string        "r"
114    .LC2:
115          .string        "No path was found."
116    .LC3:
117          .string        "(7, 7)"
118          .text
119          .p2align 4,,15
120    .globl main
121          .type          main, @function
122    main:
123          pushl          %ebp
124          movl           %esp, %ebp
125          andl           $-16, %esp
126          subl           $96, %esp
127          cmpl           $2, 8(%ebp)
128          movl           %ebx, 88(%esp)
129          movl           %esi, 92(%esp)
130          je             .L20
131    .L18:
132          xorl           %eax, %eax
133          movl           88(%esp), %ebx
134          movl           92(%esp), %esi
135          movl           %ebp, %esp
136          popl           %ebp
137          ret
138          .p2align 4,,7
139          .p2align 3
140    .L20:
141          movl           12(%ebp), %eax
142          leal           16(%esp), %esi
143          movl           $.LC1, 4(%esp)
144          movl           4(%eax), %eax
145          movl           %eax, (%esp)
146          call           fopen
147          movl           $11, 4(%esp)
148          movl           %esi, (%esp)
149          movl           %eax, %ebx
150          movl           %eax, 8(%esp)
151          call           fgets
152          leal           24(%esp), %eax
153          movl           %ebx, 8(%esp)
154          movl           $11, 4(%esp)
155          movl           %eax, (%esp)
156          call           fgets
157          leal           32(%esp), %eax
158          movl           %ebx, 8(%esp)
159          movl           $11, 4(%esp)
160          movl           %eax, (%esp)
161          call           fgets
162          leal           40(%esp), %eax
163          movl           %ebx, 8(%esp)
164          movl           $11, 4(%esp)
165          movl           %eax, (%esp)
166          call           fgets
167          leal           48(%esp), %eax
168          movl           %ebx, 8(%esp)
169          movl           $11, 4(%esp)
```

```
170         movl        %eax, (%esp)
171         call        fgets
172         leal        56(%esp), %eax
173         movl        %ebx, 8(%esp)
174         movl        $11, 4(%esp)
175         movl        %eax, (%esp)
176         call        fgets
177         leal        64(%esp), %eax
178         movl        %ebx, 8(%esp)
179         movl        $11, 4(%esp)
180         movl        %eax, (%esp)
181         call        fgets
182         leal        72(%esp), %eax
183         movl        %ebx, 8(%esp)
184         movl        $11, 4(%esp)
185         movl        %eax, (%esp)
186         call        fgets
187         movl        $7, 8(%esp)
188         movl        $7, 4(%esp)
189         movl        %esi, (%esp)
190         call        find_path
191         testl       %eax, %eax
192         je          .L21
193         movl        $.LC3, 4(%esp)
194         movl        $1, (%esp)
195         call        __printf_chk
196         xorl        %eax, %eax
197         movl        88(%esp), %ebx
198         movl        92(%esp), %esi
199         movl        %ebp, %esp
200         popl        %ebp
201         ret
202         .p2align 4,,7
203         .p2align 3
204   .L21:
205         movl        $.LC2, 4(%esp)
206         movl        $1, (%esp)
207         call        __printf_chk
208         jmp         .L18
209         .size       main, .-main
210         .ident      "GCC: (Ubuntu/Linaro 4.5.2-8ubuntu4) 4.5.2"
211         .section    .note.GNU-stack,"",@progbits
```