

Decompiler internals: microcode

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Presentation Outline

- Decompiler architecture
- Overview of the microcode
- Opcodes and operands
- Stack and registers
- Data flow analysis, aliasibility
- Microcode availability
- Your feedback

 Online copy of this presentation is available at http://www.hex-rays.com/products/ida/support/ppt/recon2018.ppt

Hex-Rays Decompiler

- Interactive, fast, robust, and programmable decompiler
- Can handle x86, x64, ARM, ARM64, PowerPC
- Runs on top of IDA Pro
- Has been evolving for more than 10 years
- Internals were not really published
- Namely, the intermediate language

Decompiler architecture

It uses very straightforward sequence of steps: Generate microcode Transform microcode (optimize, resolve memrefs, analyze calls, etc) Allocate local vars Generate ctree Beautify ctree Print ctree

Decompiler architecture

• We will focus on the first two steps: Generate microcode Transform microcode (optimize, resolve memrefs, analyze calls, etc) Allocate local vars Generate ctree Beautify ctree Print ctree

Why microcode?

- It helps to get rid of the complexity of processor instructions
- Also we get rid of processor idiosyncrasies. Examples:
 - x86: segment registers, fpu stack
 - ARM: thumb mode addresses
 - PowerPC: multiple copies of CF register (and other condition registers)
 - MIPS: delay slots
 - Sparc: stack windows
- It makes the decompiler portable. We "just" need to replace the microcode generator
- Writing a decompiler without an intermediate language looks like waste of time

Is implementing an IR difficult?

- Your call:)
- How many IR languages to you know?

Why not use an existing IR?

- There are tons of other intermediate languages: LLVM, REIL, Binary Ninja's ILs, RetDec's IL, etc.
- Yes, we could use something
- But I started to work on the microcode when none of the above languages existed
- This is the main reason why we use our own IR

mov.d EAX,, T0
Idc.d #5,, T1
mkcadd.d T0, T1, CF
mkoadd.d T0, T1, CF
add.d T0, T1, TT
setz.d TT,, ZF
sets.d TT,, ZF
mov.d TT,, EAX

(this is how it looked like in 1999)

A long evolution

- I started to work on the microcode in 1998 or earlier
- The name is nothing fancy but reflects the nature of it
- Some design decisions turned out to be bad (and some of them are already very difficult to fix)
- For example, the notion of virtual stack registers
- We will fix it, though. Just takes time
- Even today we modify our microcode when necessary
- For example, I reshuffled the instruction opcodes for this talk...

Design highlights

Simplicity:

- No processor specific stuff
- One microinstruction does one thing
- Small number of instructions (only 45 in 1999, now 72)
- Simple instruction operands (register, number, memory)
- Consider only compiler generated code
- Discard things we do not care about:
 - Instruction timing (anyway it is a lost battle)
 - Instruction order (exceptions are a problem!)
 - Order of memory accesses (later we added logic to preserve indirect memory accesses)

Handcrafted code

Generated microcode

- Initially the microcode looks like RISC code:
 - Memory loads and stores are done using dedicated microinstructions
 - The desired operation is performed on registers
 - Microinstructions have no side effects
 - Each output register is initialized by a separate microinstruction
- It is very verbose. Example:

```
004014FB mov eax, [ebx+4]
004014FE mov dl, [eax+1]
00401501 sub dl, 61h; 'a'
00401504 jz short loc_401517
```

Initial microcode: very verbose

```
ebx.4, eoff.4
2. 0 mov
                             ; 4014FB u=ebx.4 d=eoff.4
         ds.2, seg.2
                             ; 4014FB u=ds.2 d=seg.2
2. 1 mov
2. 2 add eoff.4, #4.4, eoff.4 ; 4014FB u=eoff.4 d=eoff.4
2. 3 ldx seg.2, eoff.4, et1.4 ; 4014FB u=eoff.4, seg.2,
                                             ; (STACK, GLBMEM)
d=et1.4
         et1.4, eax.4 ; 4014FB u=et1.4
2. 4 mov
                                              d=eax.4
       eax.4, eoff.4 ; 4014FE u=eax.4 d=eoff.4
2. 5 mov
                           : 4014FE u=ds.2 d=seg.2
2. 6 mov ds.2, seg.2
2. 7 add eoff.4, #1.4, eoff.4 ; 4014FE u=eoff.4 d=eoff.4
2. 8 ldx
        seg.2, eoff.4, t1.1
                             ; 4014FE u=eoff.4, seg.2,
                                             ; (STACK, GLBMEM)
d=t1.1
2. 9 mov t1.1, dl.1
                      ; 4014FE u=t1.1
                                               d=dl.1
                      ; 401501 u=
2.10 mov
        #0x61.1, t1.1
                                              d=t1.1
2.11 setb
        dl.1, t1.1, cf.1 ; 401501 u=dl.1,t1.1 d=cf.1
2.12 seto dl.1, t1.1, of.1 ; 401501 u=dl.1,t1.1 d=of.1
        dl.1, t1.1, dl.1 ; 401501 u=dl.1,t1.1 d=dl.1
2.13 sub
2.14 setz dl.1, #0.1, zf.1 ; 401501 u=dl.1 d=zf.1
2.15 setp dl.1, #0.1, pf.1 ; 401501 u=dl.1 d=pf.1
2.16 sets dl.1, sf.1
                             : 401501 u=dl.1 d=sf.1
2.17 mov cs.2, seg.2
                         ; 401504 u=cs.2 d=seg.2
2.18 mov #0x401517.4, eoff.4
                             ; 401504 u=
                                             d=eoff.4
2.19 jcnd zf.1, $loc 401517
                             : 401504 u=zf.1
```

The first optimization pass

```
2. 0 ldx
          ds.2, (ebx.4+#4.4), eax.4; 4014FB u=ebx.4,ds.2,
                                ;(STACK,GLBMEM) d=eax.4
2. 1 ldx ds.2, (eax.4+#1.4), dl.1; 4014FE u=eax.4,ds.2,
                                ;(STACK,GLBMEM) d=dl.1
                               ; 401501 u=dl.1
2. 2 setb dl.1, #0x61.1, cf.1
                                                 d=cf.1
2. 3 seto dl.1, #0x61.1, of.1
                               ; 401501 u=dl.1 d=of.1
2. 4 sub dl.1, #0x61.1, dl.1
                              ; 401501 u=dl.1
                                                 d=dl.1
2. 5 setz dl.1, #0.1, zf.1
                               ; 401501 u=dl.1
                                                 d=zf.1
2. 6 setp dl.1, #0.1, pf.1 ; 401501 u=dl.1 d=pf.1
2. 7 sets dl.1, sf.1
                               ; 401501 u=dl.1
                                                 d=sf.1
2. 8 jcnd zf.1, $loc_401517
                               ; 401504 u=zf.1
```

- Only 8 microinstructions
- Some intermediate registers disappeared
- Sub-instructions appeared
- Still too noisy and verbose

Further microcode transformations

```
2. 1 ldx ds.2{3}, ([ds.2{3}:(ebx.4+#4.4)].4+#1.4), dl.1{5}; 4014FE; u=ebx.4,ds.2,(GLBLOW,sp+20..,GLBHIGH) d=dl.1
2. 2 sub dl.1{5}, #0x61.1, dl.1{6}; 401501 u=dl.1 d=dl.1
2. 3 jz dl.1{6}, #0.1, @7; 401504 u=dl.1
```

And the final code is:

```
2. 0 jz [ds.2{4}:([ds.2{4}:(ebx.4{8}+#4.4){7}].4{6}+#1.4){5}].1{3},
#0x61.1,
@7
; 401504 u=ebx.4,ds.2,(GLBLOW,GLBHIGH)
```

This code is ready to be translated to ctree.

(numbers in curly braces are value numbers)

The output will look like this:

```
if ( argv[1][1] == 'a' )
...
```

Minor details

- Reading microcode is not easy (but hey, it was not designed for that! :)
- All operand sizes are spelled out explicitly
- The initial microcode is very simple (RISC like)
- As we transform microcode, nested subinstructions may appear
- We implemented the translation from processor instructions to microinstructions in plain C++
- We do not use automatic code generators or machine descriptions to generate them. Anyway there are too many processor specific details to make them feasible

Opcodes: constants and move

- Copy from (I) to (d)estination
- Operand sizes must match

Opcodes: changing operand size

- Copy from (I) to (d)estination
- Operand sizes must differ
- Since real world programs work with partial registers (like al, ah), we absolutely need low/high

```
xds l, d // extend (signed)
xdu l, d // extend (unsigned)
low l, d // take low part
high l, d // take high part
```

Opcodes: load and store

- {sel, off} is a segment:offset pair
- Usually seg is ds or cs; for processors with flat memory it is ignored
- 'off' is the most interesting part, it is a memory address

```
stx l, sel, off // store value to memory
ldx sel, off, d // load value from memory
```

Example:

```
ldx ds.2, (ebx.4+#4.4), eax.4 stx #0x2E.1, ds.2, eax.4
```

Opcodes: comparisons

- Compare (I)left against (r)right
- The result is stored into (d)estination, a bit register like CF,ZF,SF,...

```
sets l, d // sign
setp l, r, d // unordered/parity
setnz l, r, d // not equal
setz l, r, d // equal
setae l, r, d // above or equal
setb l, r, d // below
seta l, r, d // below or equal
setbe l, r, d // below or equal
setg l, r, d // greater
setge l, r, d // greater or equal
setl l, r, d // less
setle l, r, d // less or equal
seto l, r, d // overflow of (1-r)
```

Opcodes: arithmetic and bitwise operations

- Operand sizes must be the same
- The result is stored into (d)estination

```
neg 1, d // -1 -> d lnot 1, d // !1 -> d
bnot 1, d // \sim1 -> d
add 1, r, d // 1 + r -> d
sub 1, r, d // 1 - r -> d
mul 1, r, d // 1 * r -> d
udiv 1, r, d // 1 / r -> d
sdiv 1, r, d // 1 / r -> d
umod 1, r, d // 1 \% r \rightarrow d
smod 1, r, d // 1 \% r \rightarrow d
or 1, r, d // bitwise or
and l, r, d // bitwise and
xor 1, r, d // bitwise xor
```

Opcodes: shifts (and rotations?)

- Shift (I)eft by the amount specified in (r)ight
- The result is stored into (d)estination
- Initially our microcode had rotation operations but they turned out to be useless because they can not be nicely represented in C

```
shl l, r, d // shift logical left
shr l, r, d // shift logical right
sar l, r, d // shift arithmetic right
```

Opcodes: condition codes

- Perform the operation on (I)left and (r)ight
- Generate carry or overflow bits
- Store CF or OF into (d)estination
- We need these instructions to precisely track carry and overflow bits
- Normally these instructions get eliminated during microcode transformations

```
cfadd l, r, d // carry of (l+r)
ofadd l, r, d // overflow of (l+r)
cfshl l, r, d // carry of (l<<r)
cfshr l, r, d // carry of (l>>r)
```

Opcodes: unconditional flow control

- Initially calls have only the callee address
- The decompiler retrieves the callee prototype from the database or tries to guess it
- After that the 'd' operand contains all information about the call, including the function prototype and actual arguments

```
ijmp {sel, off} // indirect jmp
goto l // unconditional jmp
call l d // direct call
icall {sel, off} d // indirect call
ret // return
```

```
call $__org_fprintf <...:
    "FILE *" &($stdout).4,
    "const char *" &($aArIllegalSwitc).4,
    _DWORD xds.4([ds.2:([ds.2:(ebx.4+#4.4)].4+#1.4)].1)>.0
```

Opcodes: conditional jumps

- Compare (I)eft against (r)right and jump to (d)estination if the condition holds
- Jtbl is used to represent 'switch' idioms

Opcodes: floating point operations

- Basically we have conversions and a few arithmetic operations
- There is little we can do with these operations, they are not really optimizable
- Other fp operations use helper functions (e.g. sqrt)

Opcodes: miscellaneous

- Some operations can not be expressed in microcode
- If possible, we use intrinsic calls for them (e.g. sqrtpd)
- If no intrinsic call exists, we use "ext" for them and only try to keep track of data dependencies (e.g. "aam")
- "und" is used when a register is spoiled in a way that we can not predict or describe (e.g. ZF after mul)

```
nop // no operation
und d // undefine
ext l, r, d // external insn
push l
pop d
```

More opcodes?

- We quickly reviewed all 72 instructions
- Probably we should extend microcode
- Ternary operator?
- Post-increment and post-decrement?
- All this requires more research

Operands!

- As everyone else, initially we had only:
 - constant integer numbers
 - registers
- Life was simple and easy in the good old days!
- Alas, the reality is more diverse. We quickly added:
 - stack variables
 - global variables
 - address of an operand
 - list of cases (for switches)
 - result of another instruction
 - helper functions
 - call arguments
 - string and floating point constants

Register operands

- The microcode engine provides unlimited (in theory) number of microregisters
- Process registers are mapped to microregisters:
 - eax => microregisters (mreg) 8, 9, 10, 11
 - al => mreg 8
 - ah => mreg 9
- Usually there are more microregisters than the processor registers. We allocate them as needed when generating microcode
- Examples:

```
eax.4
rsi.8
ST00_04.4
```

Stack as microregisters

- I was reluctant to introduce a new operand type for stack variables and decided to map the stack frame to microregisters
- Like, the stack frame is mapped to the microregister #100 and higher
- A bright idea? Nope!
- Very soon I realized that we have to handle indirect references to the stack frame
- Not really possible with microregisters
- But there was so much code relying on this concept that we still have it

Laziness pays off now and in the future (negatively)

Stack as viewed by the decompiler

 Yellow part is mapped to microregisters Red is aliasable inargtop Input stkargs minargref Input stkargs inargoff Shadow stkargs Return address Saved registers typical ebp Local variables minstkref Local variables stkvar base 0 Output stkargs (not visible in IDA) minimal esp

More operand types!

- 64-bit values are represented as pairs of registers
- Usually it is a standard pair like edx:eax
- Compilers get better and nowadays use any registers as a pair; or even pair a stack location with a register: sp+4:esi
- We ended up with a new operand type:
 - operand pair
- It consists of low and high halves
- They can be located anywhere (stack, registers, glbmem)

Scattered operands

- The nightmare has just begun, in fact
- Modern compilers use very intricate rules to pass structs and unions by value to and from the called functions
- A register like RDI may contain multiple structure fields
- Some structure fields may be passed on the stack
- Some in the floating registers
- Some in general registers (unaligned wrt register start)
- We had no other choice but to add
- scattered operands
 that can represent all the above

A simple scattered return value

A function that returns a struct in rax:

```
struct div_t { int quot; int rem; };
div_t div(int numer, int denom);
```

Assembler code:

```
mov edi, esi
mov esi, 1000
call _div
movsxd rdx, eax
sar rax, 20h
add [rbx], rdx
imul eax, 1000
cdqe
add rax, [rbx+8]
```

A simple scattered return value

...and the output is:

```
v2 = div(a2, 1000);
*a1 += v2.quot;
result = a1[1] + 1000 * v2.rem;
```

Our decompiler managed to represent things nicely!

- Similar or more complex situations exist for all 64-bit processors
- Support for scattered operands is not complete yet but we constantly improve it

More detailed look at microcode transformations

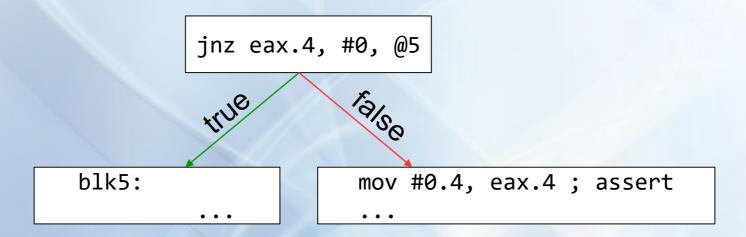
- The initial "preoptimization" step uses very simple constant and register propagation algorithm
- It is very fast
- It gets rid of most temporary registers and reduces the microcode size by two
- Normally we use a more sophisticated propagation algorithm
- It also works on the basic block level
- It is much slower but can:
 - handle partial registers (propagate eax into an expression that uses ah)
 - move entire instruction inside another
 - work with operands other that registers (stack and global memory, pair and scattered operands)

Global optimization

- We build the control flow graph
- Perform data flow analysis to find where each operand is used or defined
- The use/def information is used to:
 - delete dead code (if the instruction result is not used, then we delete the instruction)
 - propagate operands and instructions across block boundaries
 - generate assertions for future optimizations (we know that eax is zero at the target of "jz eax" if there are no other predecessors; so we generate "mov 0, eax")

Synthetic assertion instructions

If jump is not taken, then we know that eax is zero



 Assertions can be propagated and lead to more simplifications

Simple algebraic transformations

 We have implemented (in plain C++) hundreds of very small optimization rules. For example:

```
(x-y)+y => x

x- ~y => x+y+1

x*m-x*n => x*(m-n)

(x<<n)-x => (2**n-1)*x

-(x-y) => y-x

(~x) < 0 => x >= 0

(-x)*n => x*-n
```

- They are simple and sound
- They apply to all cases without exceptions
- Overall the decompiler uses sound rules
- They do not depend on the compiler

More complex rules

For example, this rule recognizes 64-bit subtractions:

```
CMB18 (combination rule #18):
    sub xlow.4, ylow.4, rlow.4
    sub xhigh.4, (xdu.4((xlow.4 <u ylow.4))+yhigh.4), rhigh.4
=>
    sub x.8, y.8, r.8

if yhigh is zero, then it can be optimized away

a special case when xh is zero:
    sub xl, yl, rl
    neg (xdu(lnot(xl >=u yl))+yh), rh
```

 We have a swarm of rules like this. They work like little ants:)

Data dependency dependent rules

- Naturally, all these rules are compiler-independent, they use common algebraic number properties
- Unfortunately we do not have a language to describe these rules, so we manually added these rules in C++
- However, the pattern recognition does not naively check if the previous or next instruction is the expected one. We use data dependencies to find the instructions that form the pattern
- For example, the rule CMB43 looks for the 'low' instruction by searching forward for an instruction that accesses the

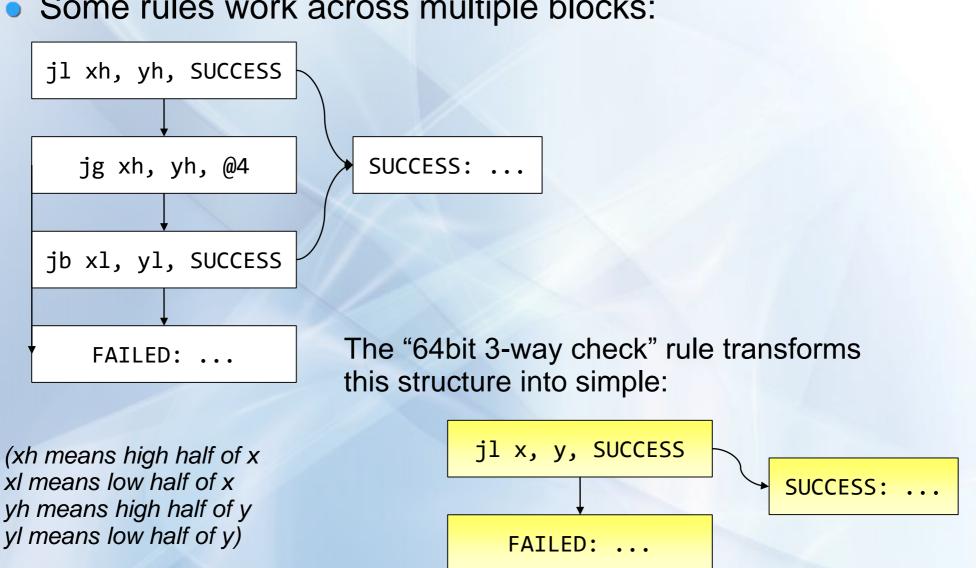
'x' operand:

```
CMB43:
mul #(1<<N).4, xl.4, yl.4
low (x.8 >>a #M.1), yh.4, M == 32-N

=>
mul x.8, #(1<<N).8, y.8
```

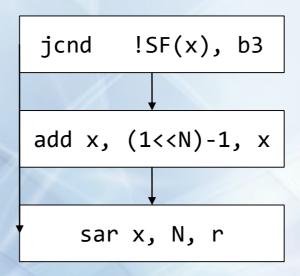
Interblock rules

Some rules work across multiple blocks:



Interblock rules: signed division by power2

Signed division is sometimes replaced by a shift:



A simple rule transforms it back:

sdiv x, (1<<N), r

Hooks

- It is possible to hook to the optimization engine and add your own transformation rules
- The Decompiler SDK has some examples how to do it
- Currently it is not possible to disable an existing rule
- However, since (almost?) all of them are sound and do not use heuristics, it is not a problem
- In fact the processor specific parts of the decompiler internally use these hooks as well

ARM hooks

For example, the ARM decompiler has the following rule:

```
ijmp cs, initial_lr => ret
```

so that a construct like this: BX LR

will be converted into: RET

only if we can prove that the value of LR at the "BX LR" instruction is equal to the initial value of LR at the entry point.

 However, how do we find if we jump to the initial_Ir? Data analysis is to help us

Data flow analysis

- In fact virtually all transformation rules are based on data flow analysis. Very rarely we check the previous or the next instruction for pattern matching
- Instead, we calculate the use/def lists for the instruction and search for the instructions that access them
- We keep track of what is used and what is defined by every microinstruction (in red). These lists are calculated when necessary:

```
mov %argv.4, ebx.4 ; 4014E9 u=arg+4.4 d=ebx.4

mov %argc.4, edi.4 ; 4014EC u=arg+0.4 d=edi.4

mov &($dword_41D128).4, ST18_4.4 ; 4014EF u= d=ST18_4.4

goto @12 ; 4014F6 u= d=
```

Use-def lists

 Similar blocks are maintained for each block. Instead of calculating them on request we keep them precalculated:

- We keep both "must" and "may" access lists
- The values in parenthesis are part of the "may" list
- For example, an indirect memory access may read any memory:

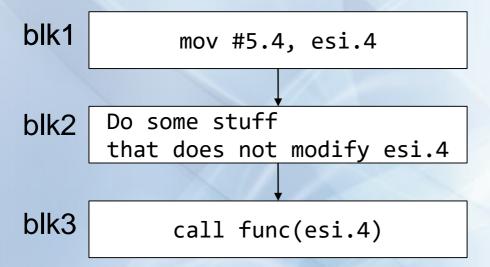
```
add [ds.2:(ebx.4+#4.4)].4, #2.4, ST18_4.4; u=ebx.4,ds.2,(GLBLOW,GLBHIGH); d=ST18_4.4
```

Usefulness of use-def lists

- Based on use-def lists of each block the decompiler can build global use-def chains and answer questions like:
 - Is a defined value used anywhere? If yes, where exactly? Just one location? If yes, what about moving the definition there? If the value is used nowhere, what about deleting it?
 - Where does a value come from? If only from one location, can we propagate (or even move) it?
 - What are the values are the used but never defined? These are the candidates for input arguments
 - What are the values that are defined but never used but reach the last block? These are the candidates for the return values

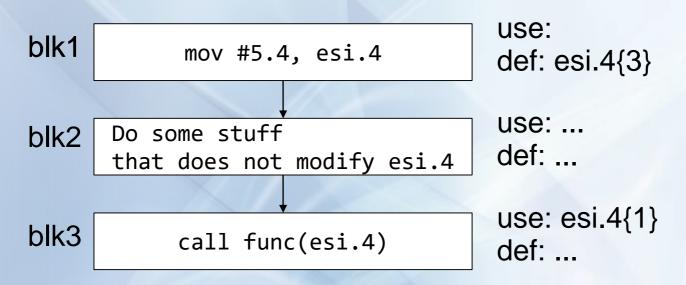
Global propagation in action

Image we have code like this:



Global propagation in action

 The use-def chains clearly show that esi is defined only in block #1:



Therefore it can be propagated:

```
call func(#5.4)
```

Data flow analysis

- The devil is in details
- Our analysis engine can handle partial registers (they are a pain)
- Big endian and little endian can be handled as well (however, we sometimes end up with the situations when a part of the operand is little endian and another part – big endian)
- The stack frame and registers are handled
- Registers can be addressed only directly
- Stack location can be addressed indirectly and our analysis takes this into account

Well, we have to make some assumptions...

Aliasability

Take this example:

```
mov #1.4, %stkvar ; store 1 into stkvar
stx #0.4, ds.2, eax.4; store 0 into [eax]
call func(%stkvar)
```

can we claim that %stkvar == 1 after stx?

- Naturally, in general case we can not
- But it turns out that in some case we can claim it
- Namely:
 - If we haven't taken the address of any stack variable
 - Or, if we did, the address we took is higher (*)
 - Or, if the address is lower, it was not moved into eax
- Overall it is a tough question

Stack as viewed by the decompiler

 Yellow part is mapped to microregisters Red is aliasable inargtop Input stkargs minargref Input stkargs inargoff Shadow stkargs Return address Saved registers typical ebp Local variables minstkref Local variables stkvar base 0 Output stkargs (not visible in IDA) minimal esp

Minimal stack reference

- Aliasability is unsolvable problem in general
- We should optimize things only if we can prove the correctness of the transformation
- We keep track of expressions like &stkvar and calculate the minimal reference (minstkref)
- We assume that everything below minstkref can be accessed only directly, i.e. is not aliasable
- We propagate this information over the control graph
- One value is maintained per block (we could probably improve things by calculating minstkref for each instruction)

 A similar value is maintained for the incoming stack arguments (minargref)

Minstkref propagation

• We use the control flow graph:

```
minstkref=10
lea ecx, [esp+10]; take offset 10
call func ; probably uses ecx
mov rax, [esp+14]; stkvar sp+14
                                      minstkref=20
lea ecx, [esp+20]; take offset 20
call func ; probably uses ecx
mov rax, [esp+14]; microregister ST14
                                      minstkref=10
  mov rax, [esp+14]; stkvar sp+14
```

Testing the microcode

- Microcode if verified for consistency after every transformation
- BTW, third party plugins should do the same
- Very few microcode related bug reports
- We have quite extensive test suites that constantly grow
- A hundred or so of processors cores running tests
- However, after publishing microcode there will be a new wave of bug reports
- Found a bug? Send us the database with the description how to reproduce it
- Most problems are solved within one day or faster

Publishing microcode

- The microcode API for C++ will be available in the next version of IDA
- Python API won't be available yet
- We will start beta testing the next week
- Decompiler users with active support: feel free to send an email to
 if you want to participate
- Check out the sample plugins that show how to use the new API

Was it interesting?

Thank you for your attention! Questions?