C++26 Reflection for JSON Serialization

A Practical Journey

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JSON

- Portable, simple
- Used by ~97% of API requests. Landscape of API Traffic 2021 Cloudflare
- scalar values
 - strings (must be escaped)
 - o numbers (but not NaN or Inf)
- composed values
 - objects (key/value)
 - arrays (list)

```
"username": "Alice",
  "level": 42,
  "health": 99.5,
  "inventory": ["sword", "shield", "potion"]
}
```

JSON downside?

Reading and writing JSON can be *slow*. E.g., 20 MB/s to 200 MB/s.

• Slower than fast disks or fast networks



Source: Gwen (Chen) Shapira

Micron shows off world's fastest PCIe 6.0 SSD, hitting 27 GB/s speeds — Astera Labs PCIe 6.0 switch enables impressive sequential reads



By Sunny Grimm published March 8, 2025

The next-gen of networking and storage is hitting the trade shows

Performance

- simdjson was the first library to break the gigabyte per second barrier
 - Parsing Gigabytes of JSON per Second, VLDB Journal 28 (6), 2019
 - o On-Demand JSON: A Better Way to Parse Documents? SPE 54 (6), 2024
- JSON for Modern C++ can be $100\times$ slower!



SIMD (Single Instruction, multiple data)

- Allows us to process 16 (or more) bytes or more with one instruction
- Supported on all modern CPUs (phone, laptop)
- <Add a bullet point for language support voted on C++26>

Not all processors are equal

processor	year	arithmetic logic units	SIMD units
Apple M*	2019	6+	4 imes 128
Intel Lion Cove	2024	6	4 imes256
AMD Zen 5	2024	6	4 imes512

SIMD support in simdjson

- x64: SSSE3 (128-bit), AVX-2 (256-bit), AVX-512 (512-bit)
- ARM NEON
- POWER (PPC64)
- Loongson: LSX (128-bit) and LASX (256-bit)
- RISC-V: upcoming

simdjson: Parsing design

- First scan identifies the structural characters, start of all strings at about 10 GB/s using SIMD instructions.
- Validates Unicode (UTF-8) at 30 GB/s.
- Rest of parsing relies on the generated index.
- Allows fast skipping. (Only parse what we need)



https://openbenchmarking.org/test/pts/simdjson

Usage

The simdjson library is found in...

- Node.js
- ClickHouse
- Velox
- Milvus
- QuestDB
- StarRocks
- ...



The Problem

Imagine you're building a game server that needs to persist player data.



You start simple:

```
struct Player {
    std::string username;
    int level;
    double health;
    std::vector<std::string> inventory;
};
```

The Traditional Approach: Manual Serialization

Without reflection, you may write this tedious code:

```
// Serialization - converting Player to JSON
fmt::format(
        "\"username\":\"{}\","
        "\"level\":{},"
        "\"health\":{},"
        "\"inventory\":{}"
        "}}",
        escape_json(p.username),
        p.level,
        std::isfinite(p.health) ? p.health : -1.0,
        p.inventory| std::views::transform(escape_json)
);
```

Manual Deserialization (simdjson)

```
object obj = val.get_object();
p.username = obj["username"].get_string();
p.level = obj["level"].get_int64();
p.health = obj["health"].get_double();
array arr = obj["inventory"].get_array();
for (auto item : arr) {
   p.inventory.emplace_back(item.get_string());
}
```

When Your Game Grows...

```
struct Equipment {
    std::string name;
    int damage; int durability;
};
struct Achievement {
    std::string title; std::string description; bool unlocked;
    std::chrono::system_clock::time_point unlock_time;
};
struct Player {
    std::string username;
    int level; double health;
    std::vector<std::string> inventory;
    std::map<std::string, Equipment> equipped;
                                               // New!
    std::vector<Achievement> achievements;
                                           // New!
    std::optional<std::string> guild_name;
                                                   // New!
};
```



The Pain Points

This manual approach has several problems:

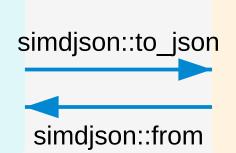
- 1. Maintenance Nightmare: Add a new field? Update both functions!
- 2. Error-Prone: Typos in field names, forgotten fields, type mismatches

Goal: Seamless Serialization/Deserialization

Player Class

name: "Alice"

score: 100



JSON

{ "name": "Alice", "score": 100 }

The Solution: C++26 Static Reflection

With C++26 reflection and simdjson, all that boilerplate disappears:

```
// Just define your struct - no extra code needed!
struct Player {
    std::string username;
    int level;
    double health;
    std::vector<std::string> inventory;
    std::map<std::string, Equipment> equipped;
    std::vector<Achievement> achievements;
    std::optional<std::string> guild_name;
};
```

Automatic Serialization

```
// Serialization - one line!
void save_player(const Player& p) {
   std::string json = simdjson::to_json(p); // That's it!
   // Save json to file...
}
```

Automatic Deserialization

```
// Deserialization - one line!
Player load_player(const std::string& json_str) {
    return simdjson::from<Player>(json_str); // That's it!
}
```

Benefits

- No manual field mapping
- No maintenance burden
- Handles nested structures automatically
- Performance tuned by the library

C#

```
string jsonString = JsonSerializer.Serialize(player, options);
Player deserializedPlayer = JsonSerializer.Deserialize<Player>(jsonInput, options);
```



Rust (serde)

```
// Rust with serde
let json_str = serde_json::to_string(&player)?;
let player: Player = serde_json::from_str(&json_str)?;
```



Rust reflection

- Rust does not have ANY reflection.
- You cannot enumerate the methods of a struct. Either at runtime or at compiletime.
- Serde relies on annotation followed by re-parsing of the code.



Reflection as accessing the attributes of a struct.

language	runtime reflection	compile-time reflection
C++ 26		
Go		
Java		
C#		
Rust	F B	F

With C++26: simple, maintainable, performant code

```
std::string json_str = simdjson::to_json(player);
Player player = simdjson::from<Player>(json_str);
```

- no extra tooling required
- no annotation

How Does It Work?

The Key Insight: Compile-Time Code Generation

"How can compile-time reflection handle runtime JSON data?"

The answer: Reflection operates on types and structure, not runtime values.

It generates regular C++ code at compile time that handles your runtime data.

What Happens Behind the Scenes

```
// What you write:
Player p = simdjson::from<Player>(runtime_json_string);
// What reflection generates at COMPILE TIME (conceptually):
Player deserialize_Player(const json& j) {
    Player p;
    p.username = j["username"].get<std::string>();
    p.level = j["level"].get<int>();
    p.health = j["health"].get<double>();
    p.inventory = j["inventory"].get<std::vector<std::string>>();
    // ... etc for all members
    return p;
```

The Actual Reflection Magic

```
// Simplified snippet, members stores information about the class
// obtained via std::define_static_array(std::meta::nonstatic_data_members_of(^^T, ...))...
template for (constexpr auto member : members) {
    // These are compile-time constants
    constexpr std::string_view field_name = std::meta::identifier_of(member);
    constexpr auto member_type = std::meta::type_of(member);

    // This generates code for each member
    obj[field_name].get(out.[:member:]);
}
```

See full implementation on GitHub

Compile-Time vs Runtime: What Happens When

```
struct Player {
   std::string username; // ← Compile-time: reflection sees this
                  // ← Compile-time: reflection sees this
   int level;
   double health; // ← Compile-time: reflection sees this
};
// COMPILE TIME: Reflection reads Player's structure and generates:
// - Code to read "username" as string
// - Code to read "level" as int
// - Code to read "health" as double
// RUNTIME: The generated code processes actual JSON data
std::string json = R"({"username":"Alice","level":42,"health":100.0})";
Player p = simdjson::from<Player>(json);
// Runtime values flow through compile-time generated code
```

Real-World Benefits

Before Reflection (Our Game Server example)

- 1000+ lines of serialization code
- Prone to bugs due to serialization mismatching
- Adding new features can imply making tedious changes to boilerplate serialization code

After Reflection

- **0 lines** of serialization code
- **0 serialization bugs** (if it compiles, it works!)
- New features can be added much faster

The Bigger Picture

This pattern extends beyond games:

- **REST APIs**: Automatic request/response serialization
- Configuration Files: Type-safe config loading
- Message Queues: Serialize/deserialize messages
- Databases: Object-relational mapping
- RPC Systems: Automatic protocol generation

With C++26 reflection, C++ finally catches up to languages like Rust (serde), Go (encoding/json), and C# (System.Text.Json) in terms of ease of use, but with **better performance** thanks to simdjson's SIMD optimizations.

Try It Yourself

```
struct Meeting {
    std::string title;
    std::chrono::system_clock::time_point start_time;
    std::vector<std::string> attendees;
    std::optional<std::string> location;
    bool is_recurring;
};
// Automatically serializable/deserializable!
std::string json = simdjson::to_json(Meeting{
    .title = "CppCon Planning",
    .start_time = std::chrono::system_clock::now(),
    .attendees = {"Alice", "Bob", "Charlie"},
    .location = "Denver",
    .is_recurring = true
});
Meeting m = simdjson::from<Meeting>(json);
```

Round-Trip Any Data Structure

```
struct TodoItem {
    std::string task;
    bool completed;
    std::optional<std::string> due_date;
};
struct TodoList {
    std::string owner;
    std::vector<TodoItem> items;
    std::map<std::string, int> tags; // tag -> count
};
// Serialize complex nested structures
TodoList my_todos = { /* ... */ };
std::string json = simdjson::to_json(my_todos);
// Deserialize back - perfect round-trip
TodoList restored = simdjson::from<TodoList>(json);
assert(my_todos == restored); // Works if you define operator==
```

The Entire API Surface

Just two functions. Infinite possibilities.

```
simdjson::to_json(object) // → JSON string
simdjson::from<T>(json) // → T object
```

That's it.

No macros. No code generation. No external tools.

Just simdjson leveraging C++26 reflection.

The Container Challenge

We can say that serializing/parsing the basic types and custom classes/structs is pretty much effortless.

How do we automatically serialize ALL these different containers?

- std::vector<T> , std::list<T> , std::deque<T>
- std::map<K,V>, std::unordered_map<K,V>
- std::set<T> , std::array<T,N>
- Custom containers from libraries
- Future containers not yet invented

The Naive Approach: Without Concepts

Without concepts, you'd need a separate function for EACH container type:

```
// The OLD way - repetitive and error-prone! 
void serialize(string_builder& b, const std::vector<T>& v) { /* ... */ }
void serialize(string_builder& b, const std::list<T>& v) { /* ... */ }
void serialize(string_builder& b, const std::deque<T>& v) { /* ... */ }
void serialize(string_builder& b, const std::set<T>& v) { /* ... */ }
// ... 20+ more overloads for each container type!
```

Problem: New container type? Write more boilerplate!

The Solution: Concepts as Pattern Matching

Concepts let us say: "If it walks like a duck and quacks like a duck..."

```
// The NEW way - one function handles ALL array-like containers!
template<typename T>
  requires(has_size_and_subscript<T>) // "If it has .size() and operator[]"
void serialize(string_builder& b, const T& container) {
    b.append('[');
    for (size_t i = 0; i < container.size(); ++i) {
        serialize(b, container[i]);
    }
    b.append(']');
}</pre>
```

✓ Works with vector, array, deque, custom containers...

Concepts + Reflection = Automatic Support

When you write:

The magic:

- 1. **Reflection** discovers your struct's fields
- 2. **Concepts** match container behavior to serialization strategy
- 3. **Result**: ALL containers work automatically standard, custom, or future!

Write once, works everywhere™

Runtime dispatching

- One function semantically
- Several implementations
- Select the best one at runtime for performance.

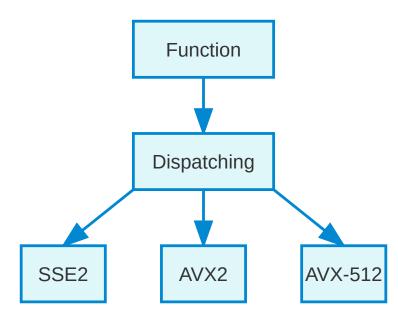
Issue: x64 processors support different instructions

A Zen 5 CPU and a Pentium 4 CPU can be quite different.

```
bool has_sse2() { /* query the CPU */ }
bool has_avx2() { /* query the CPU */ }
bool has_avx512() { /* query the CPU */ }
```

These functions cannot be consteval.

Runtime dispatching



Example: Sum function

```
using SumFunc = float (*)(const float *, size_t);
```

Setup a reassignable implementation

```
SumFunc &get_sum_fnc() {
   static SumFunc sum_impl = sum_init;
   return sum_impl;
}
```

We initialize it with some special initialization function.

```
float sum_init(const float *data, size_t n) {
   SumFunc &sum_impl = get_sum_fnc();
   if (has_avx2()) {
      sum_impl = sum_avx2;
   } else if (has_sse2()) {
      sum_impl = sum_sse2;
   } else {
      sum_impl = sum_generic;
   }
   return sum_impl(data, n);
}
```

On first call, get_sum_fnc() is modified, and then it will remain constant.

Runtime dispatching and metaprogramming

- Metaprogramming is at compile-time.
- Runtime dispatching is fundamentally at runtime.

Does your string need escaping?

- In JSON, you must escape control characters, quotes.
- Most strings in practice do not need escaping.

```
bool simple_needs_escaping(std::string_view v) {
  for (unsigned char c : v) {
    if(json_quotable_character[c]) { return true; }
  }
  return false;
}
```

SIMD (Pentium 4 and better)

SIMD (AVX-512)

```
__m512i word = _mm512_loadu_si512(data); // load 64 bytes
// check for control characters:
_mm512_cmple_epu8_mask(word, _mm512_set1_epi8(31));
```

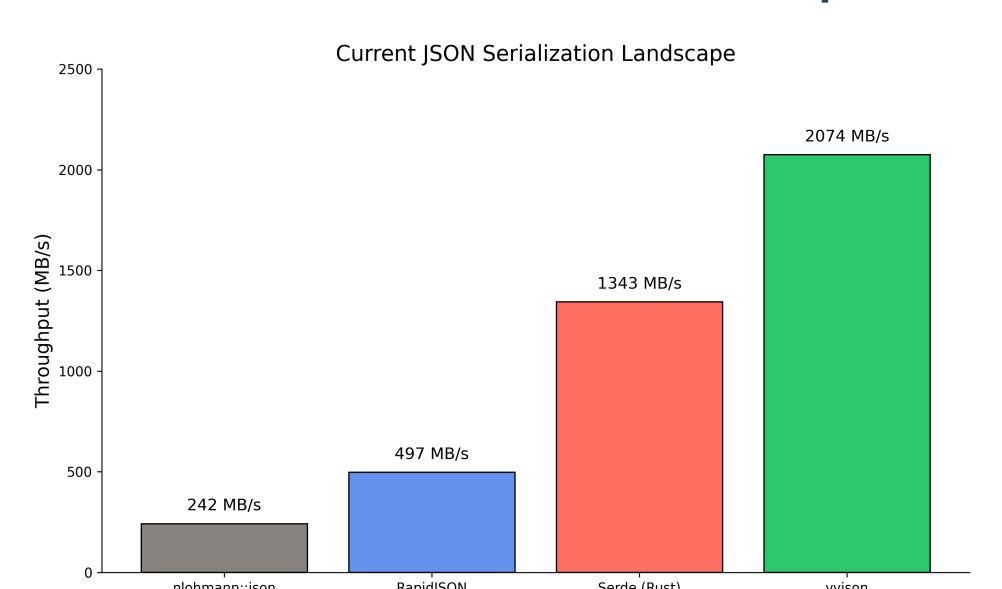
Runtime dispatching is poor with quick functions

- Calling a fast function like fast_needs_escaping without inlining prevents useful optimizations.
- Runtime dispatching implies a function call!

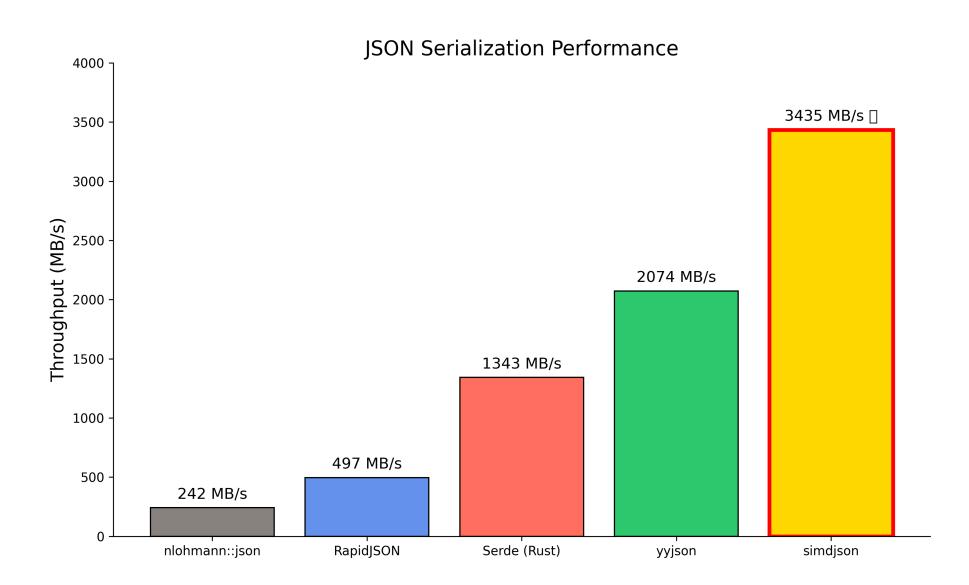
Current solution

- No runtime dispatching (sad face).
- All x64 processors support Pentium 4-level SIMD. Use that in a short function.
- Easy if programmer builds for specific machine (-march=native), use fancier tricks.

Current JSON Serialization Landscape



How fast are we? ...



Ablation Study: How We Achieved 3.2 GB/s

What is Ablation?

From neuroscience: systematically remove parts to understand function

Our Approach (Apple Silicon M2):

- 1. **Baseline**: All optimizations enabled (3,211 MB/s)
- 2. Disable one optimization at a time
- 3. Measure performance impact
- 4. Calculate contribution: (Baseline Disabled) / Disabled

Five Key Optimizations

- 1. Consteval: Compile-time field name processing
- 2. **SIMD String Escaping**: Vectorized character checks
- 3. Fast Digit Counting: Optimized digit count
- 4. Branch Prediction Hints: CPU pipeline optimization
- 5. **Buffer Growth Strategy**: Smart memory allocation

Optimization #1: Consteval

The Power of Compile-Time

The Insight: JSON field names are known at compile time!

Traditional (Runtime):

```
// Every serialization call:
write_string("\"username\""); // Quote & escape at runtime
write_string("\"level\""); // Quote & escape again!
```

With Consteval (Compile-Time):

```
constexpr auto username_key = "\"username\":"; // Pre-computed!
b.append_literal(username_key); // Just memcpy!
```

Consteval Performance Impact (Apple Silicon)

Dataset	Baseline	No Consteval	Impact	Speedup
Twitter	3,211 MB/s	1,607 MB/s	-50%	2.00x
CITM	2,360 MB/s	978 MB/s	-59%	2.41x

Twitter Example (100 tweets):

• 100 tweets × 15 fields = **1,500 field names**

• Without: 1,500 runtime escape operations

• With: 0 runtime operations

Result: 2-2.6x faster serialization!

Optimization #2: SIMD String Escaping

The Problem: JSON requires escaping ", \, \, and control chars

Traditional (1 byte at a time):

```
for (char c : str) {
   if (c == '"' || c == '\\' || c < 0x20)
       return true;
}</pre>
```

SIMD (16 bytes at once):

```
__m128i chunk = load_16_bytes(str);
__m128i needs_escape = check_all_conditions_parallel(chunk);
if (!needs_escape)
   return false; // Fast path!
```

SIMD Escaping Performance Impact (Apple Silicon)

Dataset	Baseline	No SIMD	Impact	Speedup
Twitter	3,211 MB/s	2,269 MB/s	-29%	1.42x
CITM	2,360 MB/s	2,259 MB/s	-4%	1.04x

Why Different Impact?

- **Twitter**: Long text fields (tweets, descriptions) → Big win
- **CITM**: Mostly numbers → Small impact

Optimization #3: Fast Digit Counting

Traditional:

```
std::to_string(value).length(); // Allocates string just to count!
```

Optimized:

```
fast_digit_count(value); // Bit operations + lookup table
```

Dataset	Baseline	No Fast Digits	Speedup
Twitter	3,211 MB/s	3,035 MB/s	1.06x
CITM	2,360 MB/s	1,767 MB/s	1.34x

CITM has ~10,000+ integers!

Optimizations #4 & #5: Branch Hints & Buffer Growth

Branch Prediction:

```
if (UNLIKELY(buffer_full)) { // CPU knows this is rare
   grow_buffer();
}
// CPU optimizes for this path
```

Buffer Growth:

Linear: 1000 allocations for 1MB

• Exponential: 10 allocations for 1MB

Both Optimizations	Impact	Speedup
Twitter & CITM	~1%	1.01x

Combined Performance Impact

All Optimizations Together:

Optimization	Twitter Contribution	CITM Contribution
Consteval	+100% (2.00x)	+141% (2.41x)
SIMD Escaping	+42% (1.42x)	+4% (1.04x)
Fast Digits	+6% (1.06x)	+34% (1.34x)
Branch Hints	+1%	+5%
Buffer Growth	-0.4%	+2%
TOTAL	~2.9x faster	~3.4x faster

From Baseline to Optimized:

Real-World Impact

API Server Example:

- 10 million API responses/day
- Average response: ~5KB JSON
- Total: 50GB JSON serialization/day

Serialization Time:

```
nlohmann::json: 210 seconds (3.5 minutes)
RapidJSON: 102 seconds (1.7 minutes)
Serde (Rust): 38 seconds
yyjson: 24 seconds
simdjson: 14.5 seconds ★
```

Time saved: 195 seconds vs nlohmann (93% reduction)

Key Technical Insights

1. Compile-Time optimizations can be awesome

- Consteval: 2-2.6x speedup alone
- C++26 reflection enables unprecedented optimization

2. SIMD Everywhere

- Not just for parsing anymore
- String operations benefit hugely

3. Avoid Hidden Costs

- Hidden allocations: std::to_string()
- Hidden divisions: log10(value)
- Hidden mispredictions: rare conditions

Conclusion

C++26 Reflection + simdjson =

- Zero boilerplate
- **Compile-time** safety
- **W** Blazing fast performance
- **Clean, modern API**

Welcome to the future of C++ serialization!

Thank You!

Special Recognition

C++ Reflection Paper Authors

The authors of P2996 for making compile-time reflection a reality

Compiler Implementation Teams

- Everyone that implemented P2996 and made it publicly available.
- Early adopters testing and providing feedback

Compiler Explorer Team

- Matt Godbolt and contributors
- Essential for validating our reflection approach
- Enabling rapid prototyping before integration

Questions?

Daniel Lemire and Francisco Geiman Thiesen

GitHub: github.com/simdjson/simdjson

Thank you!

BONUS: Assembly Deep Dive

Want to see the actual machine code?

Let's look under the hood!

The Shocking Truth: Instruction Counts

Instruction Count Analysis

The Numbers:

• Manual: 1,635 instructions

• **Reflection**: 648 instructions

• **Speedup:** 2.5x fewer!

You Write:

• **Manual:** 70+ lines of C++

• Reflection: 1 line!

Try it yourself →

Field Names: The Power of Compile-Time Constants

Manual: Byte-by-byte

```
byte ptr [rdx], 34
mov
                            ; 'm'
    byte ptr [rdx+1], 109
mov
                            ; 'a'
    byte ptr [rdx+2], 97
mov
                            ; 'k'
    byte ptr [rdx+3], 107
mov
    byte ptr [rdx+4], 101
                            ; 'e'
mov
    byte ptr [rdx+5], 34
                            . 1 11 1
mov
                            ; 1:1
    byte ptr [rdx+6], 58
; ... plus bounds checks
```

50+ instructions per field name

Reflection: 64-bit constant

Branch Prediction: The Hidden Performance Killer

Manual: 311 branches! 🔐



```
al, 34 ; quote?
cmp
je .LBB0_19 ; branch!
cmp al, 92 ; backslash?
je .LBB0_27 ; branch!
cmp al, 10 ; newline?
je .LBB0_35 ; branch!
cmp al, 13 ; return?
je .LBB0_42 ; branch!
; ... 300+ more conditions
```

Problem: Each branch = potential CPU pipeline stall

Reflection: 20 branches @

Memory Allocation: Death by a Thousand Cuts

Operation	Manual	Reflection	Impact
String appends	40	5	8x fewer
Memory reallocations	235	1	235x fewer!
Escape checks	600+	(inside lib)	Bulk SIMD

Manual: Growing pain

Reflection: Pre-sized perfection

Real Code Comparison

What developers write (Manual):

```
std::string serialize_manual(const Car& car) {
   std::string json = "{";
   json += "\"make\":\"";
   for (char c : car.make) {
        switch(c) {
            case '"': json += "\\\""; break;
            case '\\': json += "\\\"; break;
            case '\n': json += "\\n"; break;
            // ... more escape cases
            default: json += c;
    json += "\",\"model\":\"";
   // ... 70+ more lines of similar code
```

Branch Complexity Analysis

Branch Complexity

What the Numbers Mean:

- Manual: 311 conditional branches in assembly
- Reflection: 20 conditional branches in assembly
- **Impact:** Fewer branches = fewer potential mispredictions
- Note: Actual performance depends on data patterns

How Reflection Optimizes

Compile-Time Field Discovery

Result: Pre-computed Constants

- Field names → 64-bit integers
- String lengths → compile-time constants
- Escape sequences → eliminated entirely
- Buffer sizes → calculated at compile time

Escape Processing: Different Approaches

Manual: Character-by-character checking

```
for (char c : str) {
    if (c == '"') output += "\\\";
    else if (c == '\\') output += "\\\";
    else if (c < 0x20) {
        // Unicode escape sequence
        snprintf(buf, 7, "\\u%04x", c);
        output += buf;
    }
    // ... more checks
}</pre>
```

Reflection: Library handles escaping

• Escaping logic encapsulated in simdjson

Try It Yourself!

Compiler Explorer Links:

1. Basic Comparison (Manual vs Reflection):

https://godbolt.org/z/1n539e7cq

2. Reflection-Only Serialization:

https://godbolt.org/z/94jPx6bEb

3. Full simdjson Integration (requires reflection support):

```
clang++ -std=c++26 -freflection \
-fexpansion-statements -03
```

What to Look For:

Why This Matters for Real Applications

Benefits Compound:

- 1. Fewer instructions → Better I-cache usage
- 2. Fewer branches → Better speculation
- 3. Compile-time strings → Better D-cache usage
- 4. SIMD-ready layout → Vectorization opportunities

Key Takeaways from Assembly Analysis

1. Reflection generates highly optimized code

- Consistently applies optimizations
- Eliminates manual boilerplate
- Reduces opportunity for errors

2. Compile-time is powerful

- Field names become constants
- No runtime string building
- Pre-computed buffer sizes

3. Modern C++ delivers on its promises

Zero-overhead abstraction is real

End of Bonus Section

Return to main presentation or explore the code yourself!

Remember: The assembly doesn't lie! 🚀