



# From CUDA to OpenCL: Towards a performance-portable solution for multi-platform GPU programming ☆,☆☆

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## ABSTRACT

In this work, we evaluate OpenCL as a programming tool for developing performance-portable applications for GPGPU. While the Khronos group developed OpenCL with programming portability in mind, performance is not necessarily portable. OpenCL has required performance-impacting initializations that do not exist in other languages such as CUDA. Understanding these implications allows us to provide a single library with decent performance on a variety of platforms. We choose triangular solver (TRSM) and matrix multiplication (GEMM) as representative level 3 BLAS routines to implement in OpenCL. We profile TRSM to get the time distribution of the OpenCL runtime system. We then provide tuned GEMM kernels for both the NVIDIA Tesla C2050 and ATI Radeon 5870, the latest GPUs offered by both companies. We explore the benefits of using the texture cache, the performance ramifications of copying data into images, discrepancies in the OpenCL and CUDA compilers' optimizations, and other issues that affect the performance. Experimental results show that nearly 50% of peak performance can be obtained in GEMM on both GPUs in OpenCL. We also show that the performance of these kernels is not highly portable. Finally, we propose the use of auto-tuning to better explore these kernels' parameter space using search harness.

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## 1. Introduction

People associated Graphics Processing Units (GPUs) with fast image rendering until the turn of the century. This is when the science community turned their attention to the hardware predominantly discussed in the computer gaming circles. One of the first attempts of non-graphical computations on a GPU was a matrix–matrix multiply [1]. In 2001, low-end graphics cards had no floating-point support; floating-point color buffers did not arrive until 2003 [2]. For the gaming industry, support for floating-point meant more realistic game-play; rich advanced lighting effects no longer suffered from banding effects common in older generations of hardware that only allowed a single byte per color channel. For the scientific community, the addition of floating point meant that overflow associated with fixed-point arithmetic was no longer a problem. Many research publications thoroughly analyzed the new breed of GPU hardware using languages borrowed from the graphics community [3–5]. It goes without saying that these computational advances would not be possible if it were not for the programmable shaders that broke the rigidity of the fixed graphics pipeline. LU factorization with partial pivoting on a

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GPU was one of the first common computational kernels that ran faster than an optimized CPU implementation [6]. The introduction of NVIDIA's CUDA [7,8] (Compute Unified Device Architecture), ushered a new era of improved performance for many applications as programming GPUs became simpler: archaic terms such as texels, fragments, and pixels were superseded with threads, vector processing, data caches and shared memory.

Further changes occurring in ATI's and NVIDIA's offerings made GPU acceleration even more pertinent to the scientific community. ATI's FireStream and NVIDIA's Fermi architecture added support for Fused Multiply-Add (FMA): a more accurate version of the former MAD (Multiply-Add) instruction. With only a single rounding step, this new instruction brings GPUs even closer to compliance with the IEEE 754 standard for floating-point arithmetic. Additionally, reworking of the cache hierarchy helped with some of the performance issues of the past. Finally, Error Correction Codes (ECC) are now used to protect the GPU device's memory as its capacity grows to the point of being vulnerable to errors induced by nature, such as cosmic radiation.

In our project called Matrix Algebra on GPU and multicore architectures [9] (MAGMA), we mainly focus on dense matrix routines for numerical linear algebra, similar to those available in LAPACK [10]. While CUDA is only available for NVIDIA GPUs, there are other existing frameworks that allow platform-independent programming for GPUs:

1. DirectCompute from Microsoft and
2. OpenCL.

DirectCompute allows access to graphics cards from multiple vendors. However, it is specific to Microsoft Windows and therefore it is not portable between host Operating Systems (OS).

OpenCL [11] has been designed for general purpose computing on GPUs (GPGPU). It is an open standard maintained by the Khronos group with the backing of major graphics hardware vendors as well as large computer industry vendors interested in off-loading computations to GPUs. As such, there exist working OpenCL implementations for graphics cards and, multi-core processors; OpenCL offers portability across GPU hardware, OS software, and multicore processors. In this work, BLAS routines are used to evaluate OpenCL's usefulness in creating a portable high performance GPU numerical linear algebra library.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows: Section 2 discusses related work. Section 3 details OpenCL's programming considerations. This involves a comparison between CUDA and OpenCL as programming languages for the GPU, and the profiling analysis of the run-time of each component in an OpenCL program. Sections 4 and 5 give an evaluation of both NVIDIA and ATI GPU platforms by implementing fast GEMM and analyzing performance. Section 6 discusses cross-platform issues and Section 7 lays out the basic structure of an auto-tuning system for cross-platform GPU math library design. Section 8 shows the performance result and Section 9 concludes the paper. In the text we use the terms "ATI card" and Radeon 5870; "Fermi card" and Tesla C2050 interchangeably.

## 2. Related work

Synthetic benchmarks of GPUs have been used extensively to understand graphics accelerators when technical details of the hardware remain an industrial secret [12]. In the context of scientific applications, such benchmarking efforts lead to algorithms that provide significant performance improvements [13].

The Ocelot [14] project did a performance-oriented study of NVIDIA's PTX (Parallel Thread eXecution) architecture [15]. Another project, MCUDA [16], applied code transformations to CUDA kernels, enabling them to run efficiently on multicore CPUs. Unfortunately for legacy code maintainers, the reverse operation – porting multicore code to GPUs – proved difficult [14].

Work on optimizing CUDA implementations of basic linear algebra kernels has demonstrated that the performance of a GPU is sensitive to the formulation of your kernel [17] and that an enormous amount of well-thought experimentation and benchmarking [13,17] is needed in order to optimize the performance. Tuning OpenCL applications for a particular architecture faces the same challenges. Optimizing a fixed OpenCL code for several architectures is very difficult, perhaps impossible, and naturally, many authors claim that OpenCL does not provide performance portability. This, along with the fact that GPUs are quickly evolving in complexity, has made tuning numerical libraries for them challenging. One approach (that we explore) to systematically resolve these issues is the use of auto-tuning, a technique that in the context of OpenCL would involve collecting and generating multiple kernel versions, implementing the same algorithm optimized for different architectures, and heuristically selecting the best performing one. Auto-tuning has been used intensively on CPUs in the past to address these challenges to automatically generate near optimal numerical libraries, e.g., ATLAS [18,19] and PhiPAC [20] used it to generate highly optimized BLAS. Work on auto-tuning CUDA kernels for NVIDIA GPUs [21,22] has shown that the technique is a very practical solution to easily port existing algorithmic solutions on quickly evolving GPU architectures and to substantially speed up even highly tuned hand-written kernels. The challenge of providing performance portability is by no means limited to linear algebra.

**Table 1**  
Comparison of terms used by CUDA and OpenCL to describe very similar concepts.

CUDA term	OpenCL term
Host CPU	Host
Streaming multiprocessor (SM)	Compute unit (CU)
Scalar core	Processing element (PE)
Host thread	Host program
Thread	Work-item
Thread block	Work-group
Grid	NDRange
Shared memory	Local memory
Constant memory	Constant memory
Texture cache	Image

In our previous work [23], the authors<sup>1</sup> examined performance portability in OpenCL. In their study, they compared CUDA and OpenCL implementations of a Monte Carlo Chemistry application running on an NVIDIA GTX 285. They also compared the same application written in ATI's now defunct Brook+ to an OpenCL version on a Firestream 9170 and Radeon 4870, respectively. Finally they compared OpenCL to a C++ implementation running on multi-core Intel processors. The paper showed that while OpenCL does provide code portability, it does not necessarily provide performance portability. Furthermore, they showed that platform-specific languages often, but not always, outperformed OpenCL.

### 3. OpenCL as a programming tool

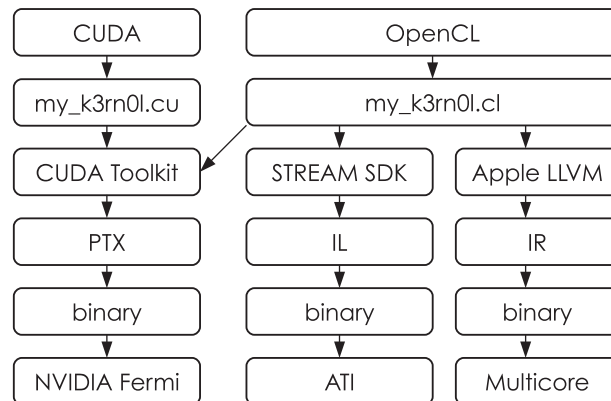
To evaluate OpenCL as a programming tool for implementing high performance linear algebra routines, we pick the triangular solver (TRSM) routine from BLAS and profile each component of the program: environment setup, program compilation, kernel extraction, and execution. The reasoning behind this choice is that the routine has a mix of matrix–matrix multiplies and matrix inversions. The former allows for many parallelization and vectorization strategies while the latter limits performance optimization options. Equally detailed treatment of the rest of the BLAS routines would by far exceed the size limitations of this publications and we refer the reader to our previous work in the area [23].

TRSM solves the linear equation  $Ax = b$  where  $A$  is an upper or lower triangular matrix and  $b$  is a known vector called *right-hand side vector*. Its implementation involves a blocking algorithm in which the diagonal triangular blocks are inverted (TRTRI) in parallel followed by a series of matrix multiplications (GEMM). Porting these routines from CUDA to OpenCL requires some translation.

CUDA and OpenCL have many conceptual similarities but they diverge on terminology. Table 1 shows the corresponding terms in both frameworks while Fig. 1 highlights differences in the CUDA and OpenCL software stacks. Similarly, ATI and NVIDIA GPUs have analogous platform definitions as shown in Table 2. Table 3 shows the platform details of two different NVIDIA GPUs and one GPU from ATI/AMD. We show what these differences mean to application developers.

#### 3.1. Relation to CUDA

Fig. 2 shows side-by-side differences of the kernel codes for triangular inversion routine (TRTRI) for OpenCL and CUDA. The changes are in the lines annotated in red. They belong to the following categories:



**Fig. 1.** Comparison of software stacks used with CUDA and OpenCL on various hardware platforms.

**Table 2**

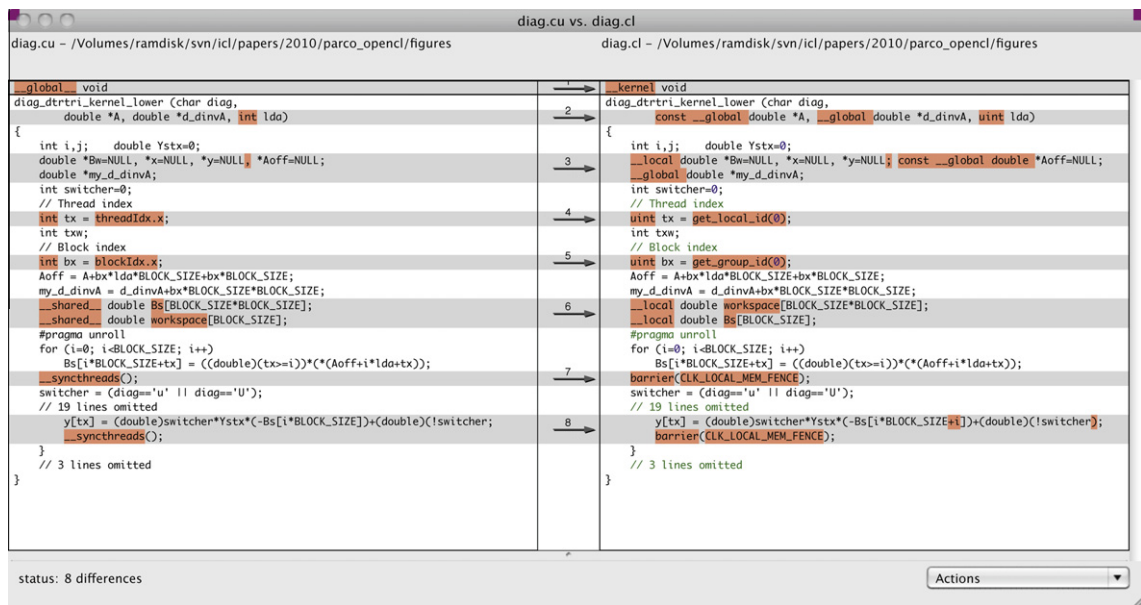
Comparison of terms used by ATI and NVIDIA to describe very similar concepts.

NVIDIA term	ATI term
Scalar core	Stream core
Streaming multiprocessor (SM)	Compute unit (CU)
Shared memory	Local data store (LDS)
Warp	Wavefront
PTX	IL

**Table 3**

Comparison of computational resources available on NVIDIA's GTX 280 and C2050 as well as ATI Radeon 5870.

GPU device	NVIDIA GTX 280	NVIDIA C2050 (Fermi)	ATI Radeon 5870
Compute units	30	32	20
Processing elements	8	14	16

**Fig. 2.** Comparison of code syntax between CUDA and OpenCL for a sample device kernel.

- Obtaining the ID for the thread/work-item and block/work-group.
- The definition of shared memory in CUDA is replaced in OpenCL by local memory: `__shared__` is replaced with `__local`.
- Syntax for synchronization primitives such as `__syncthreads()` in CUDA and `barrier()` in OpenCL.
- OpenCL makes explicit differentiation in syntax between global memory addresses (device memory address space) and local memory addresses (register variable or pointer to shared memory) whereas CUDA makes no such distinction. This is less of a concern in practice, as the spills to global memory have a dramatic effect for both programming frameworks and the unification of address spaces did not happen until the arrival of the Fermi hardware.

Differences in the CUDA and OpenCL front-ends yield different timing profiles.

### 3.2. Profiling

Unlike CUDA, OpenCL requires environmental setup on the host (CPU) before launching kernels to run on GPU. This process also includes compiling kernels. The process for setting up kernels to execute is similar for all GPU kernels and an analysis of TRSM gives a typical breakdown of initialization. Fig. 3 shows the breakdown of initialization time. We run `oclDtrsm` (OpenCL double precision triangular solver) with  $M = 10240$  and  $NRHS = 128$  on an Intel Q9300 running at 2.5 GHz and a Tesla C2050. Setting up the kernel takes longer than the kernel execution itself.

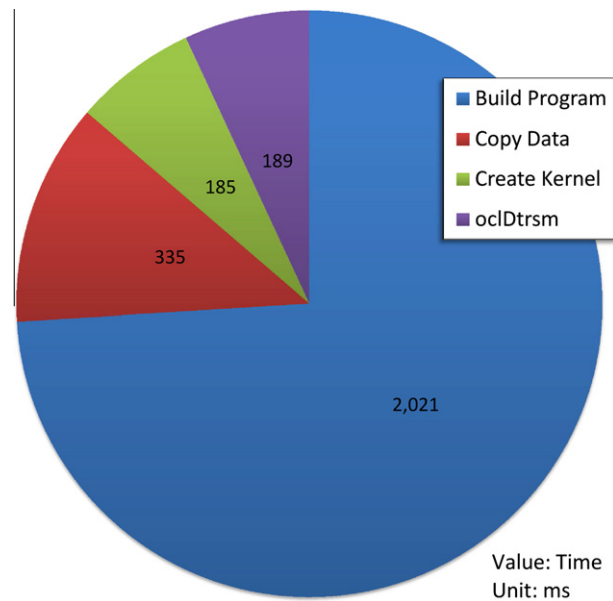


Fig. 3. Runtime break down.

Compiling OpenCL source code into an intermediate representation takes the most time in initialization. We observed similar results on older NVIDIA cards (e.g. GTX 280) and ATI cards (e.g. Radeon 5870) using ATI STREAM SDK version 2.2 [24]. On Tesla C2050, the compilation of 300+ lines of OpenCL C code into 7000+ lines of PTX takes just over 2 s, while the computation on fairly large problem takes less than 0.2 s. This overhead can lead to a severe performance impact if not accounted for when dealing with many OpenCL routines calling each other in a software library. One solution to reduce this overhead is to separate compilation and execution.

Since OpenCL includes separate compilation and build functions in its API, source code compilation can be performed once during the deployment/installation stage of the math library. As of writing, there is no off-line kernel compiler in NVIDIA's OpenCL platform. Documentation suggests [25] for this to be implemented by the developers. We can do this by fetching intermediate representation (IR) resulting from compilation using `clGetProgramInfo` and saving it to disk. During the initialization phase, IR can be read from disk and processed with a call to `clBuildProgram`. This method reduced the time of getting the binary code ready to run from 2+ s to 0.2 s. While the time to create a kernel from a pre-built program still takes more time than TRSM, initialization is 10× faster when the raw source code isn't compiled every time the user runs the application. Having sped up initialization, the time profile for the TRSM kernel itself is the next item to optimize.

The performance of TRSM is dominated by GEMM [26]. Since GEMM is one of the most important kernels in linear algebra, we will focus on implementing and analyzing a fast OpenCL GEMM in the coming sections.

In comparison, the compilation of the kernels' source code is far less burdensome in CUDA due to two main reasons:

1. it occurs implicitly upon the first invocation of the kernel (no need for explicit caching), and
2. the code being compiled is in PTX form rather than the C source (much less parsing overhead).

## 4. NVIDIA platform

### 4.1. Fermi architecture

Fermi is NVIDIA's latest GPU product line that includes the GTX4xx series and the Tesla C2050. It introduces several changes over the previous GPU offerings including more plentiful and capable compute units and a revamped memory hierarchy. Multiple kernels can run simultaneously on Fermi hardware as opposed to previous generations which only support a single kernel executing at any given time [7]. This feature increases device utilization for matrix operations with small problem sizes by increasing the number of thread blocks beyond that which a single kernel allows. On the Tesla C2050 GPU, the number of double precision ALUs as compared to single precision ALUs has increased to 1:2; for every double precision ALU, there are 2 single precision ALUs [27]. In previous generations, this ratio was 1:8. This implies the double precision peak performance (515 Gflops/s [28]) is half that of single precision (1030 Gflops/s [28]). In addition to extra compute units, the memory architecture of Fermi has been revamped in comparison with the GPUs of the previous generation.

Fermi's retooled memory system mainly features changes in caching. Global memory loads and stores are now fetched through the L1 cache, which shares hardware with shared memory. Shared memory and L1 can be configured as 48 kB/

16 kB or 16 kB/48 kB, respectively. The former configuration can increase occupancy in applications that use a large amount of shared memory while the latter configuration can decrease global memory access latencies within a compute unit. Fermi cards feature more registers (the other limiting factor in occupancy) available to applications to 128 kB per compute unit [27]. The Tesla C2050 has 144 GB/s of memory bandwidth.

#### 4.2. Fast GEMM

We have previously published a fast GEMM algorithm for the Fermi architecture [29]. This work expanded on the work of Volkov and Demmel [13], who provided a high performance matrix multiply for NVIDIA's previous generation GPUs. The new algorithm is available in the MAGMA library. Both MAGMA and Volkov's GEMM algorithms are written in CUDA. We extend this work to the cross platform OpenCL API.

In this work, we rewrite the MAGMA algorithm in OpenCL, tune the implementation for the Fermi architecture, and compare this new implementation's performance to that of our existing CUDA version. Additionally, we run the MAGMA algorithm on both NVIDIA and ATI GPUs, illustrating OpenCL's cross platform design and examining the portability of algorithm performance. We then run reverse the experiment by running an optimized ATI kernel on the Tesla C2050.

We created the OpenCL GEMM kernels by translating the original CUDA source by hand. This mainly consists of two parts: keyword substitution and loop unrolling. As previously described, CUDA and OpenCL are conceptually similar and many kernels require only keyword changes to run in OpenCL. Unfortunately, the original MAGMA GEMM kernels rely on the compiler to make sophisticated unrolling and register optimizations. When we directly ported these kernels to OpenCL under CUDA 4.0b with just keyword substitution, performance dropped by an order of magnitude. To overcome this, we manually unrolled the inner-most compute loop and used a `#pragma unroll` to unroll the second loop 15 times. With manual unrolling, our OpenCL implementation yields nearly the same performance as the original CUDA SGEMM and acceptable performance for CUDA DGEMM as shown in Figs. 4 and 5.

One point of debate in the CUDA version of MAGMA is the efficacy of streaming A and B through the texture cache before moving to shared memory. In previous work [29], we found this gives marginal performance increases. However, CUDA allows developers to directly map a 1-D texture onto an existing buffer, where OpenCL does not. This means that using texture memory in OpenCL requires copying A and B if they don't already reside in textures; in general putting A and B into textures incurs additional overheads not found in CUDA. While this does provide auxiliary benefits (namely we can use a single GEMM kernel for all transpose combinations) we decided to re-evaluate whether or not to use them for both SGEMM and DGEMM.

In SGEMM, we found that OpenCL's performance nearly matches CUDA's without using the texture cache. Since we saw only a 5% performance increase in CUDA, which has little overhead using textures, we expect that OpenCL will benefit even

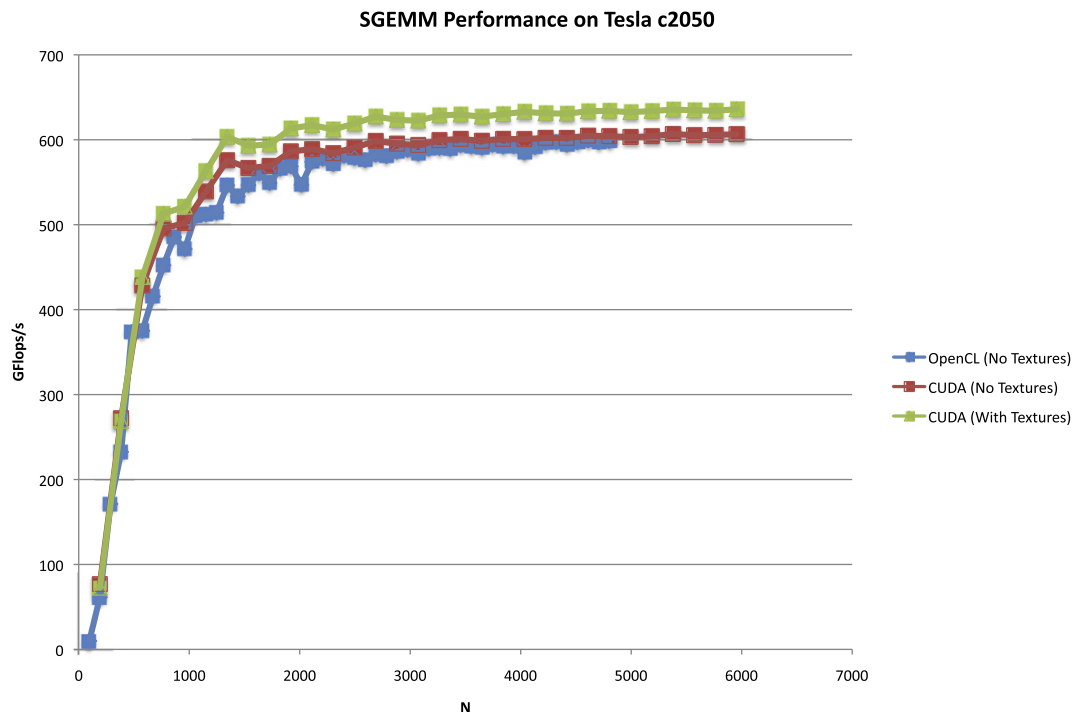


Fig. 4. MAGMA SGEMM performance with CUDA and OpenCL.



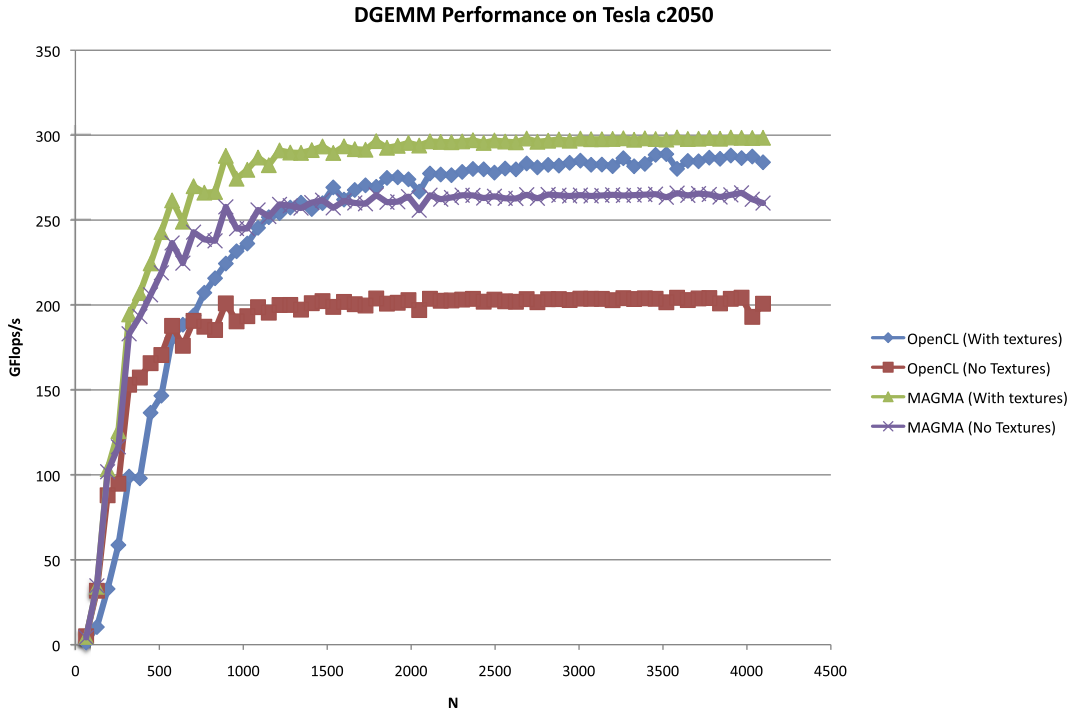


Fig. 5. DGEMM performance on Tesla C2050 under OpenCL and CUDA.

less (if at all) because of additional memory copies. In the end, our OpenCL SGEMM kernel is nearly as fast as either CUDA implementation. Our DGEMM implementation does not perform quite as well, especially without the use of textures.

In our CUDA DGEMM implementation, we found that using textures yielded large performance improvement. As such, our OpenCL DGEMM implementation uses them, despite the copy overhead. Fig. 5 shows the effects of using textures in both OpenCL and CUDA. The copy overhead puts our OpenCL kernel at a disadvantage compared to our CUDA version, which just maps images onto the buffers containing A and B; our OpenCL kernel performs copies of A and B while CUDA does not. However, streaming data from images yields significant performance increases over reading the matrices from global memory.

All reported results are run on a Tesla C2050. Timings for our OpenCL SGEMM and all CUDA kernels include the kernels' run times. Our OpenCL DGEMM additionally includes the cost of memory copies into textures. Timings for PCIe data transfers aren't included in any results; for smaller problem sizes this can be a performance issue if data cannot be reused.

## 5. ATI platform

### 5.1. Radeon 5870 architecture

ATI's evergreen architecture has many analogues with NVIDIA GPUs. Like Fermi-based cards, the Radeon 5xxx GPUs have copious memory bandwidth and many parallel computation units to exploit data parallelism. Our work focuses on the Radeon 5870.

The Radeon 5870 GPU has 1600 ALUs organized in groups as shown in Fig. 6. This graphics processor has 20 compute units, each of which contains 16 stream cores. Each stream core within a compute unit executes an instance of a kernel in lockstep. This SIMD hierarchy is analogous to NVIDIA's SIMT engines. However, unlike NVIDIA's Fermi architecture, each stream core is a 5 ALU Very Long Instruction Word (VLIW) processor. Threads are grouped and interleaved on compute units.

Threads are interleaved to hide memory access latency. They are grouped into sets of 64 called a wavefront. A wavefront is analogous to a warp on NVIDIA hardware. Of these 64 threads, 16 execute on a given clock cycle on the 16 stream cores within a compute unit. Over the course of 4 clock cycles, all threads are interleaved, executing an instruction. This hides memory latency; while one thread is loading data another thread can be performing computation [30].

Each ALU in a stream core can independently perform basic floating point operations. In single precision, each ALU can issue one basic floating point instruction such as subtract, multiply, Multiply-Add (MAD), etc. instruction per clock cycle with a pipeline latency of 8 cycles. In addition to basic floating point instructions (such as multiply, add, subtract, divide, and MAD), the fifth ALU can perform transcendental functions including log, square root, etc. To perform double precision floating point operations, some number of the ALUs are fused together. In the case of Fused Multiply Add (FMA), four of the five ALUs are used per operation [30]. The fifth unit is free to do integer or single precision calculations during this time.

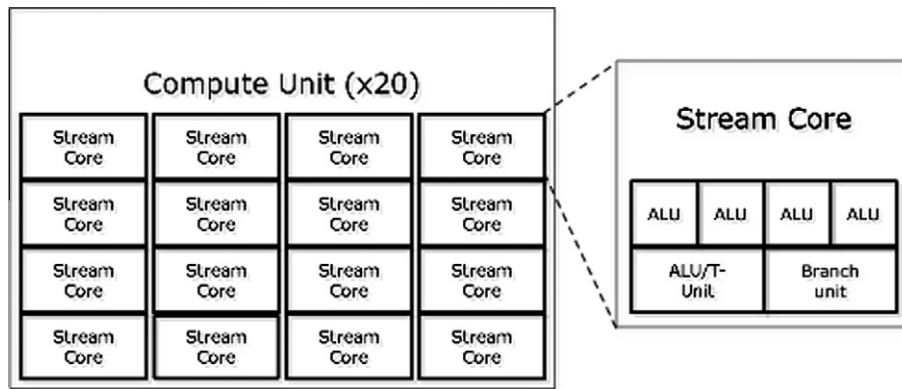


Fig. 6. Radeon 5870 architecture.

Since four ALUs are fused per operation and the fifth does not perform double precision operations, the peak double precision throughput is 1/5 that of single precision. The Radeon 5870's 1600 ALUs run at 850 MHz, yielding a peak throughput of 2.72 Tflops/s in single precision and 544 Gflops/s in double. Like NVIDIA's offerings, the Radeon 5870 has high off-chip memory bandwidth and even higher on-chip bandwidth.

To balance the performance of floating point units, the Radeon 5870 features high bandwidth to global memory augmented with a texture cache. Global memory has a peak data throughput of 154 GB/s divided over 8 memory controllers. Unlike the Fermi architecture, reads and writes to global memory are generally not cached. However, reads and writes to textures are cached. Each compute unit has its own 8 KB L1 cache yielding an aggregate bandwidth of 1 TB/s and can produce 4 bytes of data (1 float or half a double) per cycle per stream core. Multiple compute units share a 512 kB L2 cache with 435 GB/s of bandwidth between L1 and L2. In addition to automatically controlled texture caches, data reuse can also be facilitated using shared memory [30].

The Radeon 5870 features 32 KB of shared memory per compute unit. This shared memory provides 2 TB/s of aggregate bandwidth. As with the Fermi architecture, local memory usage dictates how many concurrent wavefronts can run on a compute unit. Each compute unit can produce 2 4-byte (2 floats or 1 double) shared memory requests per cycle. As with NVIDIA cards, bank conflicts can hurt shared memory performance and need to be minimized. Since each stream core can perform 5 MADs per cycle in single precision, more bandwidth is needed for operands than shared memory can provide. This is also true for double precision. As such, register blocking becomes crucial in obtaining a high performance GEMM kernel [30].

Registers provide the highest memory bandwidth on-chip. The Radeon 5870 has 256 KB of register space per compute unit (5.1 MB for the whole GPU) and can produce 48 bytes/cycle of data per stream core. Results generated on the previous cycle used as operands do not count towards this limit, as they can be forwarded using the previous vector or previous scalar register [30]. Each of the 5 MADs per cycle takes 4 operands yielding 20 total operands of 4 bytes a piece. 4 of these operands can be mitigated using the previous vector register and one of these operands can be shared among the 5 ALUs. This equates to exactly 48 bytes/cycle needed to fully utilize all 5 ALUs in a perfectly scheduled SGEMM. If the scheduling is not perfect, registers can actually serve as a bottleneck in the computation. For DGEMM, registers provide sufficient bandwidth for the single FMA instruction per stream core regardless of operand reuse. Like shared memory, register usage dictates the number of concurrent wavefronts executing on a compute unit. Unlike NVIDIA GPUs, registers are 128-bit and support swizzling at no performance cost.

## 5.2. Fast GEMM

We present a fast GEMM algorithms for single and double precision optimized for ATI hardware. These kernels are based on Nakasato's matrix multiply [31] written in ATI's Intermediate Language (IL). This work focused on computing row major matrix multiplication  $C = A^T B$ . We expanded this work to perform a column major  $C = \alpha A B^T + \beta C$ . Our algorithm makes extensive use of the texture cache, which requires copies in OpenCL. We use custom copy kernels to move data into images configured with RGBA color mode and float values. We pad the leading dimension of the image with zeros if needed. For single and double precision, we pad the leading dimension of the image to a multiple of 4 float and 2 doubles, respectively. In double precision, the concatenation of the red and green channels represents the first double, while the blue and alpha channel represent the second double. A is copied without transposition into its corresponding padded image while B is transposed and copied into its image. The time to perform these copies is  $O(N^2)$ , which is amortized by the  $O(N^3)$  operations in GEMM for large problems. As shown in Fig. 7, copying A into an image efficiently uses the Radeon 5870's memory bandwidth, while copying B does not.

The kernels copying data from global memory into images achieve a high fraction of the Radeon 5870's available bandwidth. For non transposed copies, our kernels used over 100 GB/s of the 154 GB/s of available bandwidth with little variance.



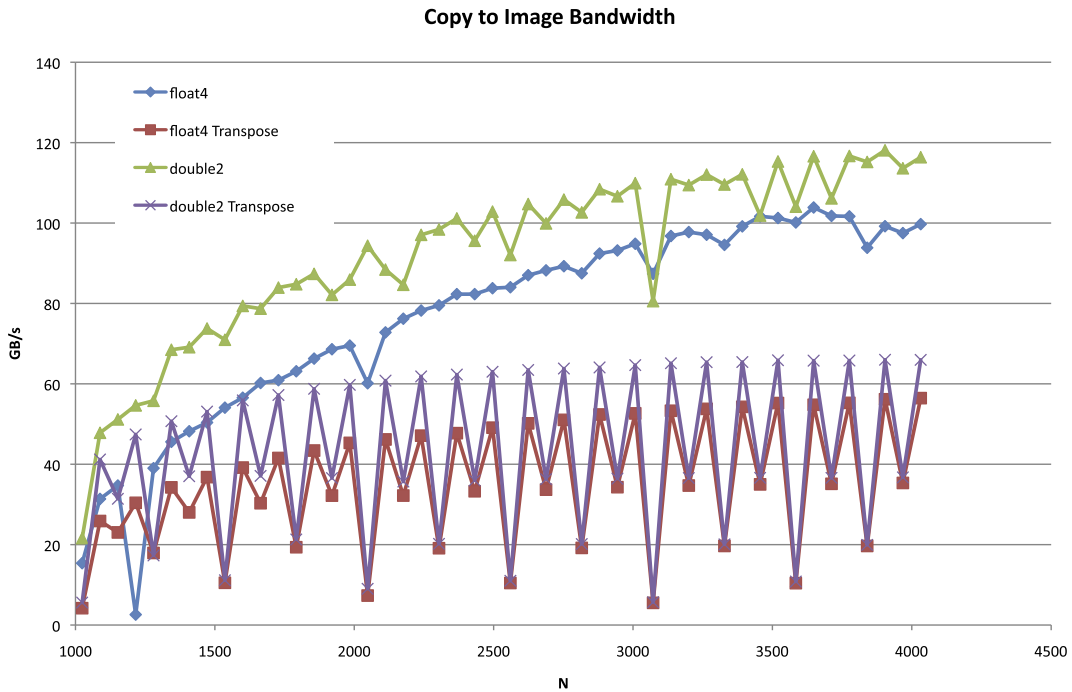


Fig. 7. ATI Memory bandwidth utilization during image copies.

Our transpose-and-copy kernels achieved half that amount and were far more sensitive to problem size. Poor memory coalescing in the transpose kernels is to blame for the low memory throughput. These kernels and the ones needed for texture use for the NVIDIA texture-based kernel ran an order of magnitude more quickly on the Radeon 5870 than on the Tesla C2050. Oddly enough, our float and double copy kernels were significantly faster than `clEnqueueCopyBufferToImage` on the Radeon 5870.

Once A and B have been copied, the matrix multiplication kernel executes. Our DGEMM algorithm is shown in Fig. 8. Each thread computes a single  $4 \times 4$  block of C as double2s. Since B is transposed, the columns of B reside in its leading dimension. The rows of A reside in its leading dimension. We scale the double2 row vectors of A by the corresponding double of B using swizzling to extract and duplicate the required element. This scaled vector is then accumulated into the corresponding double2 of C. All of this is done with a single MAD and swizzling.

To maximize outstanding loads from the texture cache, we use 8 samplers. 2 samplers load 2 double2s from A into registers and 2 samplers fetch 2 double2s of B. We unroll the k loop twice to use the other 4 samplers. A useful feature of images is that when its sampler is declared using `CL_CLAMP`, fetching outside the bounds of the 2D image yields 0.0, which has no effect on the result when accumulated. This allows  $k$  to be indivisible by 2 yet still function correctly; in this case, our

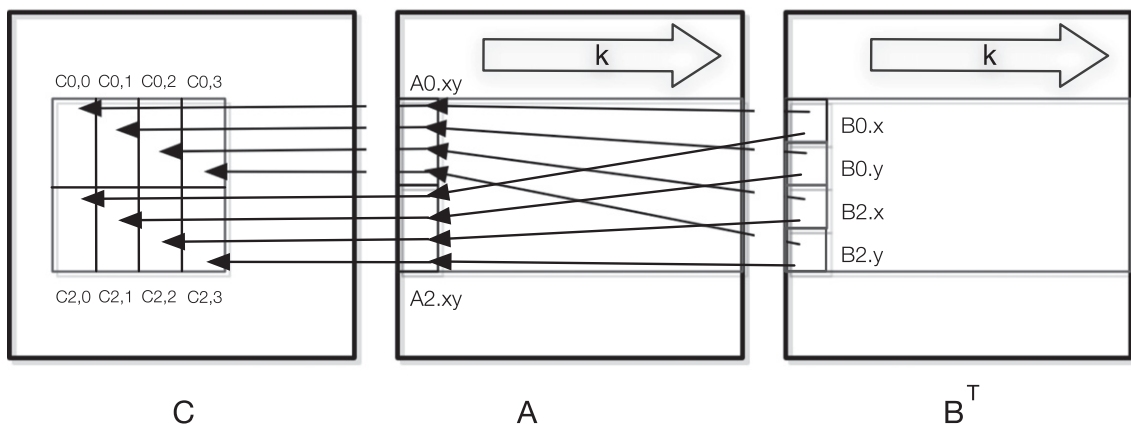


Fig. 8. ATI DGEMM algorithm.

DGEMM kernel samples beyond the bounds of A and B and accumulates 0.0 into the result. Handling cases when  $m$  is not a multiple of 2 is non-trivial and our algorithm currently does not handle this case. In fact, our algorithm requires both  $m$  and  $n$  be multiples of 4. Padding C can overcome this limitation. SGEMM is analogous to our DGEMM kernel, where each thread computes an  $8 \times 8$  block of C in float4 registers and has analogous limitations.

We compare our OpenCL results to Nakasato's IL performance in Figs. 9 and 10. Nakasato's timings do not include copy times, which exaggerates performance for small problems. Our timings do include this copy. Furthermore, Nakasato's algorithm performs only the matrix multiplication while we perform the alpha and beta scaling (a negligible amount of time for large  $N$ ). Neither timings include PCIe data transfer times, which would be amortized in large multiplications or when data can be heavily reused on the GPU.

Our SGEMM kernel exceeds 1.3 Tflops/s for  $N = 3840, 4352$ , and  $4864$ . Nakasato's IL implementation just exceeds 2 Tflops/s for these same  $N$ , implying our OpenCL MAGMA implementation achieves 65% of a fast matrix multiply algorithm written in high-level assembly code. Nakasato achieves 74% of the Radeon 5870's peak performance while we achieve 49%.

Our OpenCL ATI DGEMM algorithm achieves 308 Gflops/s on the Radeon 5870. In comparison, Nakasato's matrix multiply algorithm achieves 472 Gflops/s. This means that our OpenCL implementation has 69% of the performance of Nakasato's IL matrix multiply. The ATI OpenCL kernel computes at 57% of the hardware's peak performance while Nakasato's kernel operates at 87% of maximum throughput. From this performance comparison, we illustrate that OpenCL provides fair performance with a high degree of programmability on ATI hardware. Furthermore, we found that the relevant data copy and pack kernels effectively used the Radeon 5870's memory bandwidth (refer to Fig. 7 for more details).

## 6. Performance portability

In this section, we run our device specific kernels on hardware for which they are not tuned to evaluate performance portability. OpenCL is designed with program portability in mind. Despite different vendors having added extra functionality in their OpenCL implementations, our work only uses features in the OpenCL standard [11]. This theoretically allows the front-end and GPU kernels to run on any platform without changes.

Fig. 11 shows our ATI SGEMM kernel running on a Tesla C2050. While achieving over 1 Tflop/s (more than 50% of peak) on a Radeon 5870, it only manages to execute at 40 Gflop/s (4% of peak) on the Tesla C2050. We attribute this to inappropriate blocking factors that are not tuned for the Fermi's hardware features. We reverse this experiment and run the OpenCL version of MAGMA's Fermi GEMM on the Radeon 5870. The result is shown in Fig. 12. While achieving 400+ Gflop/s (40+% peak) on the Tesla C2050, it has a very low performance when run on a Radeon 5870. By reading the generated IL, we found that the array variables were not cached and resided in global memory, leading to orders of magnitude more data fetch latency.

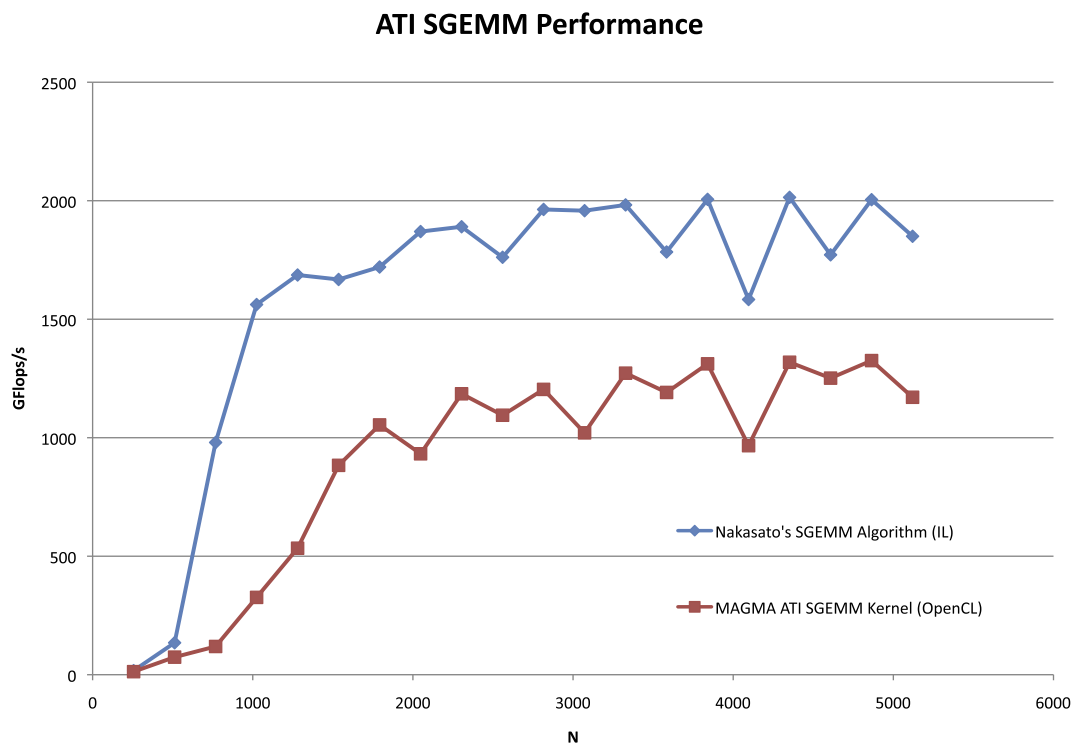


Fig. 9. ATI SGEMM performance.

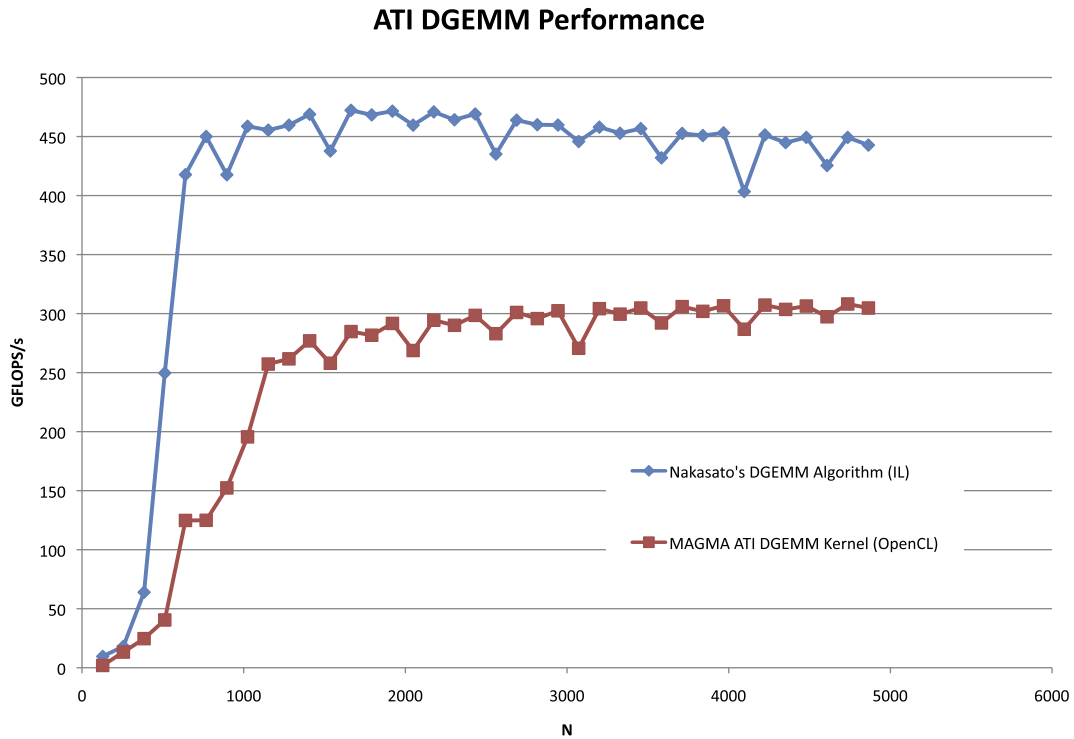


Fig. 10. ATI DGEMM performance.

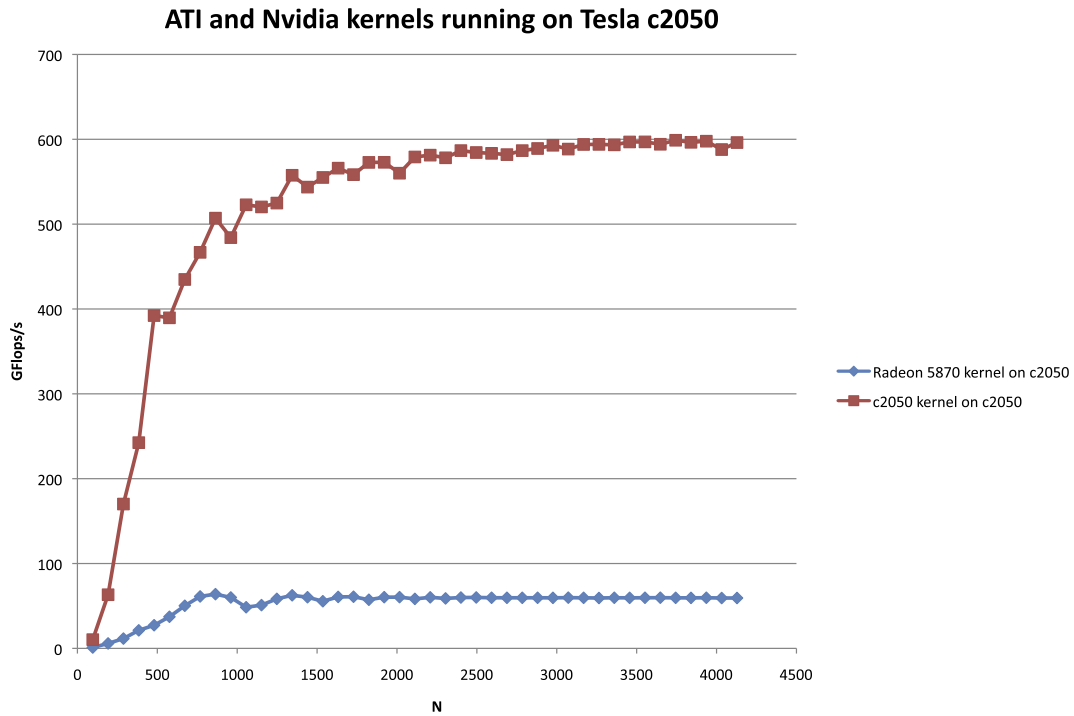


Fig. 11. Fast ATI SGEMM running on Fermi card in OpenCL.

We suspect this is due to the compiler's failure to fully unroll loops that access these arrays. As a result, the generated code performed runtime indexing which does not cache data in registers. To resolve this, we replaced the arrays with standalone

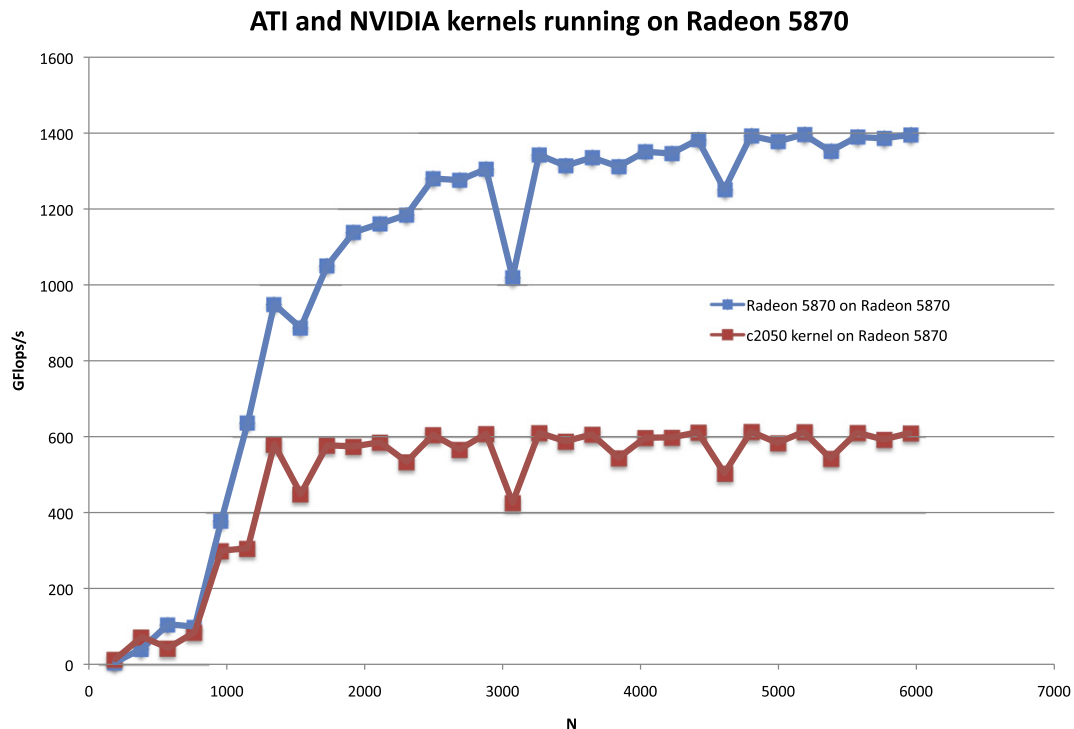


Fig. 12. Fast Fermi SGEMM running on ATI Radeon 5870 card in OpenCL.

variables and performance increased to 600 Gflop/s (22% peak). This kernel, despite being tuned for Fermi, ran faster on the Radeon 5870 than the C2050 in absolute terms. The percentage of peak was still lower, though.

From these two experiments we show that performance is not portable through simply using OpenCL. Without paying attention to the underlying architecture and designing algorithms accordingly, an algorithm's performance suffers.

## 7. Performance portability with Auto-tuning

The goal behind the OpenCL standard is to provide functional portability, enabling a single OpenCL application to run across a variety of hardware platforms. Although necessary, functional portability by itself, e.g., without performance portability, would be insufficient to establish OpenCL in the area of high-performance scientific computing. In this section we address this issue by discussing *auto-tuning* – the vehicle that we recognize as the potential driver of OpenCL applications towards performance portability.

Automatic performance tuning (optimization), or auto-tuning in short, is a technique that has been used intensively on CPUs to automatically generate near-optimal numerical libraries. For example, ATLAS [18,19] and PhiPAC [20] are used to generate highly optimized BLAS. The main approach for doing auto-tuning is based on empirical optimization techniques. Namely, these are techniques to generate a large number of parametrized code variants for a given algorithm and run these variants on a given platform to discover the one that gives the best performance. The effectiveness of empirical optimization depends on the chosen parameters to optimize, and the search heuristic used. A disadvantage of empirical optimization is the time cost of searching for the best code variant, which is usually proportional to the number of variants generated and evaluated. Therefore, a natural idea is to combine it with some “model-driven” approach in a first stage that would limit the search space for the second stage of an empirical search.

Work on auto-tuning CUDA kernels for NVIDIA GPUs [21,22] has already shown that the technique is a very practical solution to easily port existing algorithmic solutions on quickly evolving GPU architectures and to substantially speed up even hand-tuned kernels. We expand this early work, as described below, in the context of today's high-end GPGPU from NVIDIA and ATI, using both CUDA and OpenCL.

### 7.1. Auto-tuning infrastructure

The performance of CUDA GEMM implementations rely on a number of very well selected parameters and optimizations [17]. Previous work in the area has managed to auto-tune the selection of these parameters and optimizations used, to quickly find the best performing implementations for particular cases of GEMM [21,22]. However, with the introduction

of the Fermi architecture, these auto-tuning frameworks were not able to find the new “optimal” implementations for Fermi, simply because their search space did not consider the newly introduced features in the architecture [29]. Performance portability problems are even further aggravated when porting kernels across hardware vendors – kernels optimized for one vendor’s architecture perform poorly on another vendor’s architecture, e.g., as illustrated throughout the paper with the GEMM kernels optimized correspondingly for NVIDIA and ATI GPUs. Therefore, our work on providing performance portability has concentrated on building up an auto-tuning infrastructure with the following two-components (characteristic for a complete auto-tuning system):

**Code generator.** The code generator produces code variants according to a set of pre-defined, parametrized templates and/or algorithms. Currently we have identified and collected best GEMM candidates for both NVIDIA and ATI GPUs. We have identified several key parameters that affect performance. The code generator will automatically create kernels using parameters and applying certain state of the art optimization techniques.

**Evaluation harness.** The harness runs the variants produced by the code generator and discovers the best one. Optionally, a feedback loop may be employed, e.g., the performance results of previously evaluated variants are used as a guidance for the search on currently unevaluated variants.

## 7.2. Autotuning GPU kernels

We have already parameterized MAGMA’s code generator to create kernels that correspond to the fastest known tiling approach for Fermi [29]. We now propose adding additional parameters to allow MAGMA to generate the blocking algorithm developed by Nakasato. With these new parameters, MAGMA’s code generator can also create hybridized blocking schemes. Table 4 lists these parameters and Fig. 13 shows their effects on blocking. VL defines the basic data type vector length (float, float4, double2, etc.) and is useful for doing wide data loads, SIMD operations, and provides trivial scheduling on VLIW processors. TC and TR define the number of columns and rows of C that each thread computes per block. TBC and TBR define the number of threads in a thread block. TCR and TRR determine how many blocks each thread computes. KB defines how many times to unroll the  $k$  loop and thus, how many elements of A and B to load on a given iteration. The remaining two parameters, TXC and SM, determine how to load A and B from memory. Setting TXC to true streams data from the texture cache rather than global memory, while SM blocks A and B into shared memory. This parameter set is sufficient to create the same kernels we’ve presented (Table 5).

Using these parameters, we can quickly generate many kernel variants and test them on new architectures. Furthermore, we can generate kernels that explore OpenCL’s performance on x86 processors. This is interesting because it would provide a unified platform for running GEMM on the CPU and GPU. However, this remains as future work.

To illustrate the effect of auto-tuning we present numerical results in tuning SGEMM. In particular, we parameterize the new Fermi GEMM kernels running in CUDA. Fig. 14 gives the single precision performance of several versions derived from the original and run on a Fermi C2050 GPU. We manually vary TCR and TRR and plot the performance of these variants, as the search engine itself remains as future work.

## 8. Performance comparisons with CPUs

So far we have presented performance results for GPU platforms from ATI and NVIDIA using the CUDA and OpenCL software stacks. To put these numbers in a proper perspective, it is informative to compare them to the results obtained from optimized BLAS routines coming from ATLAS and Intel’s MKL (Math Kernel Library) running on a multicore hardware – a well researched experimental setting. We use ATLAS as a representative of performance levels achievable from C with extensive use of auto-tuning (the tuning of ATLAS library may take many hours). Intel’s MKL represents one of the best performing libraries for Intel processors. When such libraries are distributed by the hardware vendor, most performance sensitive ker-

**Table 4**  
Description of the autotuning parameters.

Parameter	Description
VL	Vector length (i.e. use float2, float4, etc.)
TC	Columns per block
TR	Rows per block
TBC	Threads per work group (column dimension)
TBR	Threads per work group (row dimension)
TCR	Blocks each thread computes (row dimension)
TRR	Blocks each thread computes (column dimension)
KB	Number of elements to block in K dimension
TXC	Use texture cache A and B
SM	Block A and B into shared memory

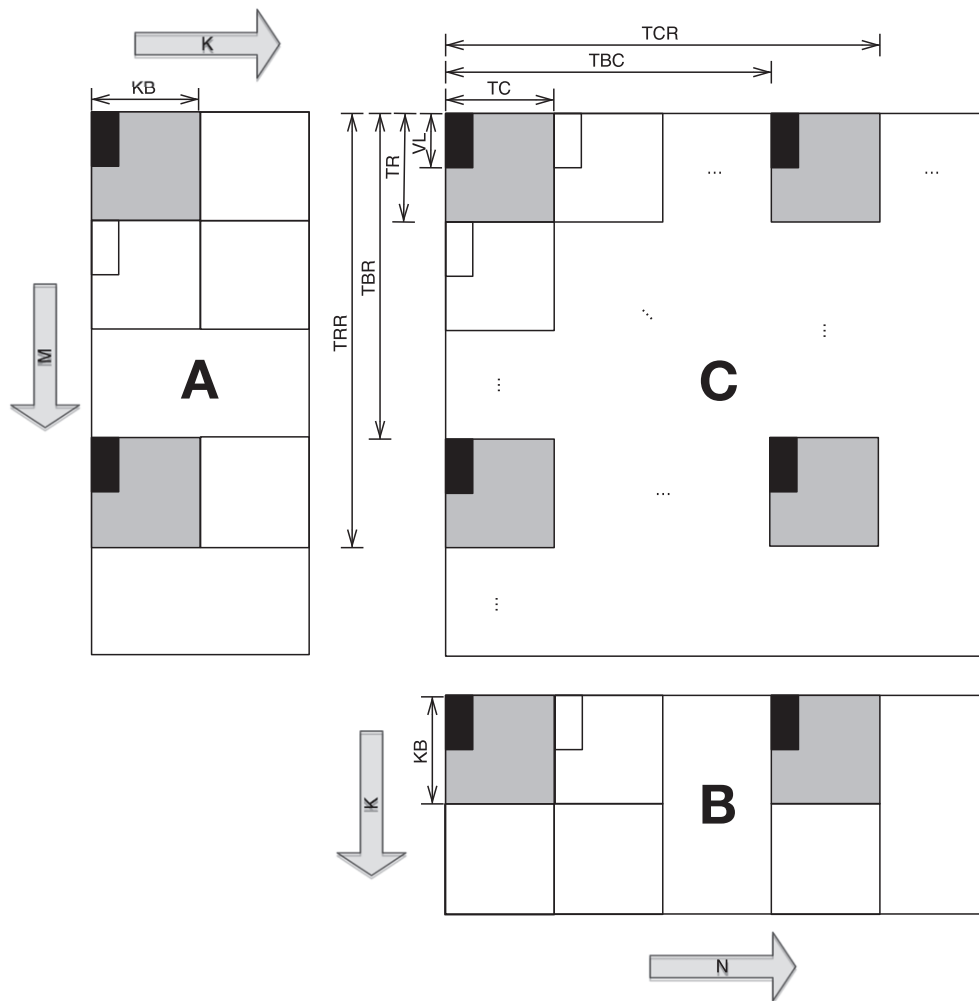


Fig. 13. Illustration of proposed kernel generation parameter effects.

**Table 5**  
Autotuning parameter values for Radeon 5870 and C2050.

SGEMM parameters	Radeon 5870	C2050
VL	4	1
TC	8	1
TR	8	1
TBC	8	16
TBR	8	16
TCR	1	3
TRR	1	3
KB	8	6
TXC	True	True
SM	False	True

nels are written in optimized assembly code. The results from Intel Tigerton multicore system are shown in Fig. 15. The tested system had 4 processors, each one being a quad-core clocked at 2.4 GHz for a total peak performance of 307.2 Gflop/s in single precision and half of that in double.

Table 6 compares efficiency metrics of the Tesla C2050 and Radeon 5870. We estimate Gflops/s per Watt by dividing achieved performance by Peak TDP and Gflops/s per dollar by dividing each cards' realized performance by its MSRP. Since GEMM taxes the memory and ALUs on the GPU, using peak TDP likely an accurate estimate, but verifying this argument re-



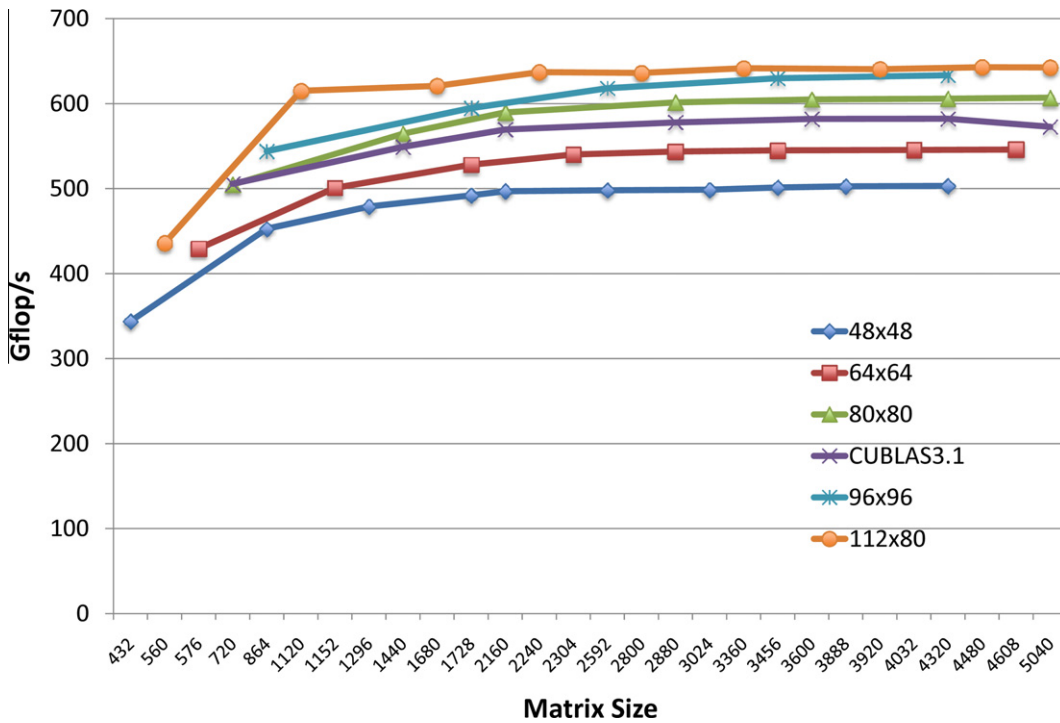


Fig. 14. Performance of various automatically generated SGEMM kernels for Fermi C2050 GPU.

### Performance of xGEMM on Intel Tigerton (4x quad-core)

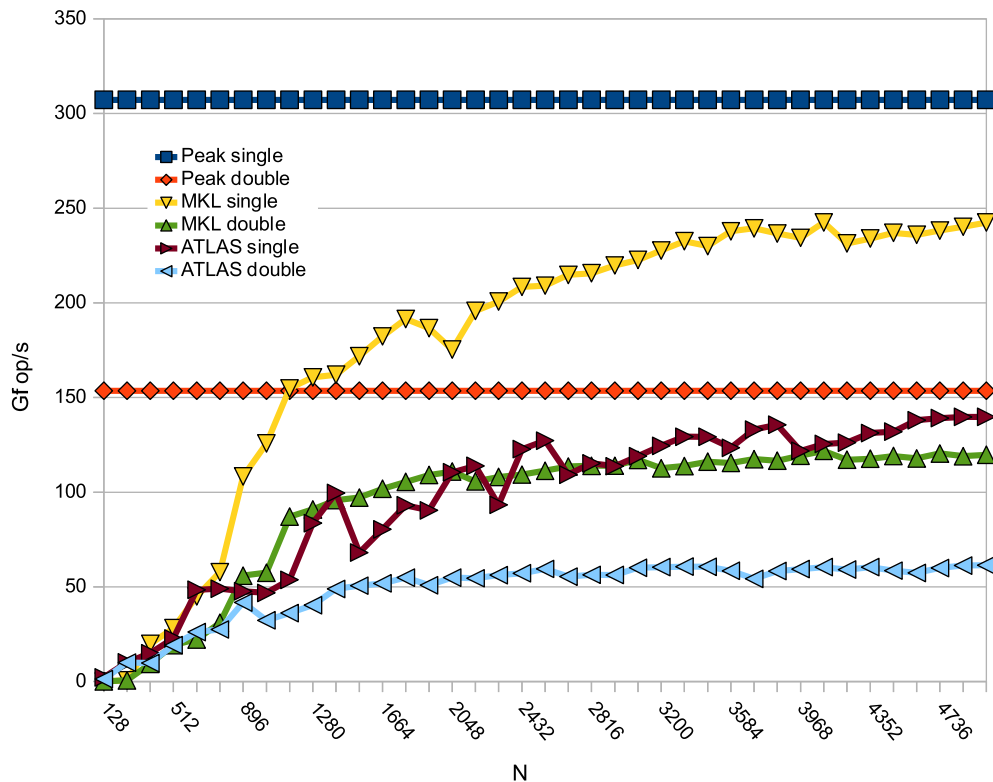


Fig. 15. Performance of xGEMM routines on a multicore processor with 16 cores.

**Table 6**

Efficiency comparisons of C2050 and Radeon 5870. IL refers to Nakasato's implementation using assembly-like language [31].

Tesla C2050	SGEMM CUDA/OpenCL	DGEMM CUDA/OpenCL
Achieved Gflops/s	636/559	300/288
% of peak	63/57	58/49
Gflops/s per Watt	2.67/2.34	1.26/1.21
Gflops/s per dollar	0.265/0.233	0.125/0.120
Radeon 5870	IL/OpenCL	IL/OpenCL
Achieved Gflops/s	2005/1318	468/308
% of peak	74/52	87/57
Gflops/s per Watt	10.66/7.01	2.49/1.64
Gflops/s per dollar	5.29/3.48	1.23/0.81
Tigerton 2.4Ghz	MKL/ATLAS	MKL/ATLAS
Achieved Gflops/s	242/140	121/61
% of peak	79/46	79/40
Gflops/s per Watt	0.76/0.44	0.38/0.19
Gflops/s per dollar	0.03/0.02	0.02/0.01
ATLAS version 3.8.4		
MKL version 10.3		

mains as future work. Since the CPU numbers correspond to 4 E7340 processors, we multiply the MSRP and Peak TDP by 4 in our calculations.

The Radeon 5870 outperforms the Tesla C2050 in all but one category; ATI's GPU achieves less of its theoretical SGEMM performance in OpenCL than the NVIDIA card. The per-dollar rates strongly favor the ATI GPU with an order of magnitude better performance – this is the direct consequence of the fact that the ATI device is meant as gaming hardware while the NVIDIA card is of server-grade quality with ECC protection for its main memory. Under OpenCL, the Radeon 5870 provides 3-fold better the power efficiency of the Tesla card in single precision, and 1.4-fold in double. Comparing IL versus CUDA, the Radeon's improvements grow 4-fold and 2-fold in single and double precision, respectively. When using OpenCL, The Radeon 5870 is 14-fold more cost effective in single precision and nearly 7-fold more cost effective than the C2050 – in double precision. When using IL and CUDA, the difference is even greater, at almost 20-fold and 10-fold, respectively. Both GPUs offer significant efficiency improvements over the four E7340 processors.

As with any benchmark, these numbers are caveat emptor. Firstly, the C2050 is a \$2500 card designed with HPC applications in mind. As such, it has many features not found in low end graphics cards such as ECC and 3 GB RAM. The Radeon 5870 has at most 1 or 2 GB of RAM (depending on the vendor) and no ECC since it is a consumer grade card. Furthermore, IL is an assembly-like language, whereas CUDA is a high-level language. Finally, the accuracy of the cost efficiency estimate of the Tigerton processor is unclear since we cite its MSRP from 2007 (\$1980 [32]), but don't include the cost of a four socket motherboard.

## 9. Conclusions

In this paper, we evaluated various aspects of using OpenCL as a performance-portable method for GPGPU application development. Profiling results showed that environment setup overhead is large and should be minimized. OpenCL is fairly competitive with CUDA on Nvidia hardware in terms of performance, but is less so when compared to IL on ATI hardware. In the end, performance results for both the Tesla C2050 and Radeon 5870 show that OpenCL has good potential to be used to implement high performance kernels so long as architectural specifics are taken into account in the algorithm design.

If architecture specifics are unknown, autotuning is an effective way to generate tuned kernels that deliver acceptable levels of performance with little programmer effort. We used the characteristics of the MAGMA and Nakasato kernels to derive kernel generator parameters for an autotuning framework, and showed that these parameters are sufficient to automatically generate both of these kernel blocking styles. Implementing the autotuning framework remains as future work.

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