Vector Processing as a Soft-CPU Accelerator

by

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Abstract

Soft processors simplify hardware design by being able to implement complex control strategies using software. However, they are not fast enough for many intensive data-processing tasks, such as highly data-parallel embedded applications. This thesis suggests adding a vector processing core to the soft processor as a general-purpose accelerator for these types of applications. The approach has the benefits of a purely software-oriented development model, a fixed ISA allowing parallel software and hardware development, a single accelerator that can accelerate multiple functions in an application, and scalable performance with a single source code. With *no hardware design experience needed*, a software programmer can make area-versus-performance tradeoffs by scaling the number of functional units and register file bandwidth with a single parameter. The soft vector processor can be further customized by a number of secondary parameters to add and remove features for the specific application to optimize resource utilization. This thesis shows that a vector processing architecture maps efficiently into an FPGA and provides a scalable amount of performance for a reasonable amount of area. Configurations of the soft vector processor with different performance levels are estimated to achieve speedups of 2–24× for 5–26× the area of a Nios II/s processor on three benchmark kernels.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Advanced signal processing algorithms and large volumes of multimedia data in many embedded applications today demand high performance embedded systems. These systems rely on programmable microprocessors, digital signal processors (DSPs), or field-programmable gate arrays (FPGAs) to do intensive computations. Designing embedded systems using these platforms requires expertise in both hardware and software, and is increasingly becoming a challenge due to increasing complexity and performance requirements of today's applications. A high performance platform that is also easy to use and reduces time to market is needed to address these challenges, and an effective FPGA-based soft processor platform is one possible solution.

FPGAs are a specialized type of integrated circuit (IC) that can be programmed and reprogrammed by the user after fabrication to implement any digital circuit. FPGAs achieve this reconfigurability through the use of flexible lookup tables and routing connections that are configured by a user-downloaded bitstream. There are a number of advantages to using FPGAs in embedded systems. Manufacturing a set of masks to fabricate application specific integrated circuits (ASICs) such as most microprocessors and DSPs costs millions of dollars in today's advanced fabrication technologies. The design, fabrication, and validation steps needed to produce an ASIC is a lengthy process with a long turnaround time, and mistakes found after fabrication require a new set of masks to correct and are thus very costly. These high non-recurring engineering costs (NRE) make ASICs only practical for devices with sufficiently large market and volume. FPGAs, on the other hand, can be purchased off the shelf with a low up-front cost. The devices have been pre-tested by the FPGA vendor and are guaranteed to function correctly. The reconfigurable nature allows users to quickly iterate their designs

during development, speeding up time to market. Even in the final product, reconfigurability can allow the system firmware to be updated to take advantage of new firmware features or to adhere to new standards. A single FPGA can also replace multiple components in a system that would have required separate ICs, again reducing cost.

From a performance perspective, FPGAs are generally considered lower performance than ASICs due to a lower maximum clock speed. Nonetheless, FPGAs are capable of tremendous raw processing power. The reconfigurable lookup tables of an FPGA form one large computational fabric that is able to perform many operations in parallel, and the large number of embedded on-chip memories can provide tremendous on-chip memory bandwidth. Consider the largest Altera Stratix III FPGA, EP3SL340, which has approximately 135,000 adaptive logic modules (ALMs). Each ALM is able to compute a one-bit function of up to six inputs per clock cycle or implement up to two three-bit adders [1]. Taking the adders alone, if they can be fully utilized, is equivalent to almost 8,440 three-input 32-bit adders. In comparison, many low-cost microprocessors in embedded systems have only one two-input adder in a single arithmetic logic unit (ALU).

Using FPGAs has traditionally required specialized hardware design knowledge and familiarity with a hardware description language (HDL) such as the VHSIC (Very High Speed Integrated Circuit) Hardware Description Language (VHDL) or Verilog in order to implement the desired circuitry. The introduction of embedded processor cores into FPGAs, both as hard cores that are implemented in silicon like the rest of the FPGA circuitry, and as soft cores that are synthesized and then programmed on to the FPGA like other user designs, has simplified the design process and technical requirement of using FPGAs. According to a survey conducted in 2007 [2], 36% of respondants used a processor (either hard or soft core) inside the FPGA in their embedded designs, and this figure had increased from 33% in 2006, and 32% in 2005. Embedded software developers can now program in a high-level language such as C or C++, and compile their programs to run on the embedded processor core within the FPGA. This combination of embedded processor core and programmable logic has also opened up the

possibility of implementing custom hardware circuitry in the programmable logic to interact with the processor core.

1.1 Motivation

More and more embedded systems today target multimedia, signal processing, and other computationally intensive workloads. These applications typically have a relatively small set of operations that have to be repeatedly performed over a large volume of data. This form of parallelism is referred to as *data-level parallelism*. Current soft processors designed for FPGAs such as Nios II [3] by Altera and MicroBlaze [4] by Xilinx frequently do not deliver enough computational power to achieve the desired performance in these workloads. These soft processors have only a single ALU and can only perform one computation per clock cycle. Although they come in a few performance levels that successively add more advanced and complex architectural features, even the highest performing core is frequently insufficient to handle the intensive processing tasks.

Many solutions have been proposed in both commercial and academic spaces to improve the performance of soft core processors on FPGAs. They can be largely categorized into four categories: multiprocessor systems, custom-designed hardware accelerators, synthesized hardware accelerators, and other soft processor architectures. Multiprocessor systems contain multiple processor cores, and rely upon shared memory or message passing to communicate and synchronize. They generally require parallel programming knowledge from the user, and as a result are more difficult to program and use. Hardware accelerators utilize the programmable logic of an FPGA to implement dedicated accelerators for processing certain functions. Custom-designed hardware accelerators have to be designed by the user in HDL, but the FPGA development tools may provide an automated way to connect the accelerator to the processor core once it has been designed. They still require the user to design hardware, and verify and test the accelerator in hardware to ensure correct operation. Synthesized hardware accelerators are

automatically synthesized from a high-level language description or from a visual representation of the function to be accelerated. The major improvement is that users can use hardware accelerators without knowledge of an HDL, and with little or no knowledge of hardware design.

An improved soft processor architecture has the benefit of a purely software solution, requiring no hardware design or synthesis effort from the user. Depending on the complexity of the programming model of the architecture, it can allow users to improve performance of their applications with minimal learning curve. A soft processor also provides a specification across hardware and software (in the form of a fixed instruction set architecture) that does not change throughout the design cycle, allowing hardware and software development to proceed in parallel.

Some common processor architectures have already been implemented in FPGAs. Very Long Instruction Word (VLIW) architectures have been proposed for soft processors on FPGAs, and superscalar architectures have also been attempted, but neither of them map efficiently to the FPGA architecture, bloating resource usage and introducing unnecessary bottlenecks in performance. To improve performance of data-parallel embedded applications on soft processor systems, it is imperative to take advantage of the parallelism in the hardware. Given the pure software advantage of using an improved soft processor architecture, an ideal solution would be a processor architecture that is inherently parallel, and maps well to the FPGA architecture.

The solution proposed by this thesis is a soft processor tailored to FPGAs based on a vector processor architecture. A vector processor is capable of high performance in data-parallel embedded workloads. Kozyrakis [5] studied the vectorizability of the 10 consumer and telecommunications benchmarks in the EEMBC suite using the VIRAM [6] compiler, and found the average vector length of the benchmarks ranged from 13 to 128 (128 is the maximum vector length supported by VIRAM). The study shows that many embedded applications are vectorizable to long vector lengths, allowing significant performance improvements using vector processing. Vector processing also satisfies the requirements of a parallel architecture, and can be implemented efficiently in FPGAs, as will be shown in this thesis.

1.2 Contributions

The main contribution of this research is applying vector processing, an inherently parallel programming model, to the architecture of soft core processors to improve their performance on data-parallel embedded applications. A soft vector processor provides scalable and user-selectable amount of acceleration and resource usage, and a configurable feature set, in a single application-independent accelerator that requires zero hardware design knowledge or effort from the user. The scalability of vector processoring allows users to make large performance and resource tradeoffs in the vector processor with little or no modification to software. A soft vector processor can further exploit the configurability of FPGAs by customizing the feature set and instruction support of the processor to the target application. Customization extends even to a configurable vector memory interface that can implement a memory system tailored to the application. This makes accessible to the user a much larger design space and larger possible tradeoffs than current soft processor solutions. The application-independent architecture of the vector processor allows a single accelerator to accelerate multiple sections of an application and multiple applications.

As part of this research, a complete soft vector processor was implemented in Verilog targetting an Altera Stratix III FPGA to illustrate the feasibility of the approach and possible performance gains. The processor adopts the VIRAM instruction set architecture (ISA), but makes modifications to tailor the ISA features to FPGAs. A novel instruction execution model that is a hybrid between traditional vector and single-instruction-multiple-data (SIMD) is used in the processor. This work also identifies three ways traditional vector processor architectures can be adapted to better exploit features of FPGAs:

1. Use of a partitioned register file to scale bandwidth and reduce complexity,
2. Use of multiply-accumulate (MAC) units for vector reduction,
3. Use of a local memory in each vector lane for lookup-table functions.

Table 1.1 lists new instructions that are added to the soft vector processor instruction set

Table 1.1: New soft vector processor instruction extensions

Instruction	Description
`vmac`	Multiply-accumulate
`vcczacc`	Compress copy from accumulator and zero
`vldl`	Load from local memory
`vstl`	Store to local memory
`veshift`	Vector element shift
`vabsdiff`	Vector absolute difference

to support new features that did not exist in VIRAM.

1.3 Thesis Outline

The remainder of the thesis is organized as follows. Chapter 2 gives an overview of vector processing and previously implemented vector processors, and describes other solutions to accelerate applications on soft processor systems, highlighting their advantages and limitations. Chapter 3 describes in detail the architecture of the soft vector processor and its extensions to traditional vector architectures. Chapter 4 provides experimental results illustrating the strengths of the soft vector processor compared to a recent commercial solution in the synthesized accelerator category. Finally, Chapter 5 summarizes the work in this thesis and provides suggestions for future work.

Chapter 2

Background

This chapter provides background on vector processing and application acceleration for soft processor-based systems in FPGAs. First, an overview of how vector processing accelerates data-parallel computations is presented, followed by a discussion of previously implemented vector processors. The remainder of the chapter surveys other current solutions for improving the performance of soft processors and accelerating FPGA-based applications. A representative set of academic and commercial tools are described according to the four categories introduced in Chapter 1: multiprocessor systems, custom-designed hardware accelerators, synthesized accelerators, and other soft processor architectures.

2.1 Vector Processing Overview

Vector processing has been in use in supercomputers for scientific tasks for over two decades. As semiconductor technology improved, single-chip vector processors have become possible, and recent supercomputing systems like the Earth Simulator [7] and Cray X1 are based on such single-chip vector processors. The next sections will give an overview of how vector processing can accelerate data-parallel computations, and the characteristics of a vector instruction set, with the goal of demonstrating that vector processing is a suitable model for soft processor acceleration.

2.1.1 Exploiting Data-level Parallelism

The vector processing model operates on vectors of data. Each vector operation specifies an identical operation on the individual data elements of the source vectors, producing an equal number of independent results. Being able to specify a single operation on multiple data elements makes vector processing a natural method to exploit data-level parallelism, which has the same properties. The parallelism captured by vector operations can be exploited by vector processors in the form of multiple parallel datapaths—called *vector lanes*—to reduce the time needed to execute each vector operation.

To illustrate the vector processing programming model, consider an 8-tap finite impulse response (FIR) filter

$$y[n] = \sum_{k=0}^{7} x[n-k]h[k],$$

which can be implemented in MIPS asembly code as shown in Figure 2.1. The code segment contains one inner loop to perform multiply-accumulate on the data buffer and filter coefficients, and an outer loop to demonstrate processing multiple new data samples. In a real application, the outer loop will iterate as long as there are new inputs to be filtered. The inner loop iterates 8 times for the 8-tap filter. Adding the 10 instructions in the outer loop (assuming branch taken on line 17) gives a total of 74 instructions per result.

The same FIR filter implemented in VIRAM vector code is shown in Figure 2.2. The vector processor extracts data-level parallelism in the multiplication operation by multiplying all the coefficients and data samples in parallel. One common operation in vector processing is reduction of the data elements in a vector register. In the FIR filter example, the multiplication products need to be sum-reduced to the final result. The `vhalf` instruction facilitates reduction of data elements by extracting the lower half of a vector register to the top of a destination vector register. A total of log(VL) `vhalf` and add instructions are needed to reduce the entire vector. In the vector code, the filter coefficients and previous data samples are kept in vector registers when a new data sample is read to reduce the number of memory accesses. Line 15

```
.L10:                                   ; Loop while new inputs received
        mov     r6, zero                ; Zero sum
        mov     r4, sp                  ; Load address of sample buffer
        movi    r5, 8                   ; Set number of taps
.L8:
        ldw     r12, 0(r4)              ; Load data from buffer
        ldw     r3, 100(r4)             ; Load coefficient
        addi    r5, r5, -1
        addi    r4, r4, 4
        mul     r2, r12, r3             ; Multiply
        add     r6, r6, r2              ; Accumulate
        bne     r5, zero, .L8

        stw     r6, 0(r9)               ; Store filter result
        stw     r11, 0(r7)              ; Store new sample to buffer
        addi    r7, r7, 4               ; Increment buffer position
        bgeu    r10, r7, .L4            ; Check for end of buffer
        mov     r7, sp                  ; Reset new sample pointer
.L4:
        addi    r8, r8, -1
        addi    r9, r9, 4
        bne     r8, zero, .L10
```

Figure 2.1: 8-tap FIR filter MIPS assembly

to 21 of Figure 2.2 stores the reduced result to memory, shifts the filter data elements by one position using a vector extract opertaion to align them with the coefficients, and copies a new data element from the scalar core. A total of 18 instructions are needed to calculate a single result. The capitalized instructions are specific to the VIRAM implementation of the FIR filter, and can be compared to Figure 3.7 for differences between the VIRAM and soft vector processor implementations.

The vector code has a significant advantage over the MIPS code in terms of the number of instructions executed. Scaling the FIR filter example to 64 filter taps, the MIPS code would require executing 522 instructions, while the vector code would still only execute 18 instructions, but have a different value of VL.

```
        vmstc      vbase0, sp     ; Load base address
        vmstc      vbase1, r3     ; Load coefficient address
        vmstc      VL, r2         ; Set VL to num taps
        vld.h      v2, vbase1     ; Load filter coefficients
        vld.h      v1, vbase0     ; Load input vector                       5
.L5:
        VMULLO.VV  v3, v0, v2     ; Multiply data and coefficients
        VHALF      v4, v3         ; Extract half of the vector
        VADD.VV    v3, v4, v3     ; VL is automatically halved by vhalf
        VHALF      v4, v3                                                   10
        VADD.VV    v3, v4, v3
        VHALF      v4, v3         ; 3 half-reductions for 8 taps
        VADD.VV    v3, v4, v3
        vmstc      VL, r9         ; Reset VL to num taps (vhalf changes VL)
                                                                            15
        vmstc      vindex, r8     ; Set vindex to 0
        vext.vs    r10, v3        ; Extract final summation result
        stw        r10, 0(r4)     ; Store result
        VMSTC      vindex, r7     ; Set vindex to 1
        VEXT.VV    v1, v1         ; Shift vector up 1                       20
        vmstc      vindex, r6     ; Set vindex to NTAP-1
        vins.vs    v1, r5         ; Insert new sample
        addi       r3, r3, -1
        addi       r4, r4, 4
        bne        r3, zero, .L5                                            25
```

Figure 2.2: 8-tap FIR filter VIRAM vector assembly

2.1.2 Vector Instruction Set Architecture

Vector instructions are a compact way to encode large amounts of data parallelism, each specifying tens of operations and producing tens of results at a time. Modern vector processors like the Cray X1 use a register-register architecture similar to RISC processors [8]. Source operands are stored in a large vector register file that can hold a moderate number of vector registers, each containing a large number of data elements.

A vector architecture contains a vector unit and a separate scalar unit. The scalar unit is needed to execute non-vectorizable portions of the code, and most control flow instructions. In many vector instruction sets, instructions that require both vector and scalar operands, such as adding a constant to a vector, also read from the scalar unit.

Vector addressing modes can efficiently gather and scatter entire vectors to and from memory. The three primary vector addressing modes are: unit stride, constant stride, and indexed addressing. Unit stride accesses data elements in adjacent memory locations, constant stride accesses data elements in memory with a constant size separation between elements, and indexed addressing accesses data elements by adding a variable offset for each element to a common base address.

Vector instructions are controlled by a vector length (VL) register, which specifies the number of elements within the vector to operate on. This vector length register can be modified on a per-instruction basis. A common method to implement conditional execution is using vector flag registers as an execution mask. In this scheme, a number of vector flag registers are defined in addition to the vector registers, and have the same vector length such that one bit in the vector flag register is associated with each data element. Depending on this one bit value, the operation on the data element will be conditionally executed. Some instructions use the flag register slightly differently. For example the vector merge instruction uses the bit value in the flag register to choose between two source registers.

Besides inter-vector operations, vector instruction sets also support intra-vector operations that manipulate data elements within a vector. Implementing these instructions are, however, tricky, as they generally require inter-lane communication due to partitioning of data elements over multiple lanes. For example, the VIRAM instruction set implements a number of instructions like `vhalf`, `vhalfup`, and `vhalfdn` to support element permutations.

2.1.3 Microarchitectural Advantages of Vector Processing

The previous sections have already illustrated the ease-of-use and instruction set efficiency of the vector programming model. Vector processing also has many advantages that simplify the vector processor microarchitecture. Vector instructions alleviate bottlenecks in instruction issue by specifying and scheduling tens of operations, which occupy the processor for many cycles at a time. This reduces instruction bandwidth needed to keep the functional units busy [9]. Vector

instructions also ease dependency checking between instructions, as the data elements within a vector instruction are guaranteed to be independent, so each vector instruction only needs to be checked once for dependencies before issuing. By replacing entire loops, vector instructions eliminate loop control hazards. Finally, vector memory accesses are effective against the ever-increasing latency to main memory, as they are able to amortize the penalty over the many accesses made in a single memory instruction. This makes moderate-latency, high-throughput memory technologies such as DDR-SDRAM good candidates for implementing main memory for vector processors.

2.2 Vector Processors and SIMD Extensions

Having discussed the merits of vector processing, the following sections will describe a number of single-chip and FPGA-based vector processors in literature, and briefly explain processors based on vector-inspired SIMD processing. SIMD processing is a more limited form of the vector computing model. The most well-known usage of SIMD processing is in multimedia instruction extensions common in mainstream microprocessors. Recent microprocessors from Intel, IBM, and some MIPS processors all support SIMD extensions.

2.2.1 SIMD Extensions

SIMD extensions such as Intel SSE and PowerPC AltiVec are oriented towards short vectors. Vector registers are typically 128 bits wide for storing an entire vector. The data width is configurable from 8 to 32 bits, allowing vector lengths to range from 16 (8 bits) to 4 (32 bits). SIMD instructions operate on short, fixed-length vectors, and each instruction typically executes in a single cycle. In contrast, vector architectures have a vector length register that can be used to modify the vector length during runtime, and one vector instruction can process a long vector over multiple cycles. In general, SIMD extensions lack support for strided memory access patterns and more complex memory manipulation instructions, hence they must devote many

instructions to address transformation and data manipulation to support the few instructions that do the actual computation [10]. Full vector architecture mitigates these effects by providing a rich set of memory access and data manipulation instructions, and longer vectors to keep functional units busy and reduce overhead [11].

2.2.2 Single-chip Vector Processors

The Torrent T0 [12] and VIRAM [6] are single-chip vector microprocessors that support a complete vector architecture and are implemented as custom ASICs. T0 is implemented in full-custom 1.0 μm CMOS technology. The processor contains a custom MIPS scalar unit, and the vector unit connects to the MIPS unit as a co-processor. The vector unit has 16 vector registers, a maximum vector length of 32, and 8 parallel vector lanes. VIRAM is implemented in 0.18 μm technology and runs at 200MHz. It has 32 registers, a 16-entry vector flag register file, and two ALUs replicated over 4 parallel vector lanes. VIRAM has been shown to outperform superscalar and VLIW architectures in the consumer and telecommunications categories of the EEMBC [13] benchmarks by a wide margin [14]. These two vector processors share the most similarity in processor architecture to this work.

RSVP [15] is a reconfigurable streaming vector coprocessor implemented in 0.18 μm technology, and was shown to achieve speedup of 2 to 20 times over its ARM9 host processor alone on a number of embedded kernel benchmarks. Some other vector architectures proposed recently for ASIC implementation are the CODE architecture [16] which is based on multiple vector cores, and the SCALE processor based on the vector-thread architecture [17] that combines multi-thread execution with vector execution. These two architectures were only studied in simulation.

2.2.3 FPGA-based Vector Processors

There have been a few past attempts to implement vector processors in FPGAs. However, most of them targeted only a specific application, or were only prototypes of ASIC implementations.

A vector computer is described in [18] that has pipelined 32-bit floating-point units augmented with custom instructions for solving a set of sparse linear equations. The vector computer has 8 adders and multipliers, supports a vector length of 16, and has a 128-bit data bus that can transfer four 32-bit words. Little additional information is given about the system other than it was mapped to a Xilinx Virtex II FPGA. ProHos [19] is a vector processor for computing higher order statistics. Its core is a pipelined MAC unit with three multipliers and one accumulator. The processor is implemented on the RVC [20] platform consisting of five Xilinx 4000E devices, and runs at 7.5MHz. The SCALE vector processor [17] was prototyped in an FPGA [21], but no specific attempt was made to optimize the architecture or implementation for FPGAs.

Three vector processors that, similar to this work, were specifically designed for FPGAs are described in [22], [23], and [24]. The first vector processor [22] consists of two identical vector processors located on two Xilinx XC2V6000 FPGA chips. Each vector microprocessor runs at 70MHz, and contains a simplified scalar processor with 16 instructions, a vector unit consisting of 8 vector registers, 8 lanes (each containing a 32-bit floating-point unit), and supports a maximum vector length (MVL) of 64. Eight vector instructions are supported: vector load/store, vector indexed load/store, vector-vector and vector-scalar multiplication/addition. However, only matrix multiplication was demonstrated on the system. Although the vector processor presented in this thesis lacks floating-point support, it presents a more complete solution consisting of full scalar unit (Nios II) and a full vector unit (based on VIRAM instructions) that supports over 45 distinct vector instructions plus variations.

The second vector processor [23] was designed for Xilinx Virtex-4 SX and operated at 169MHz. It contains 16 processing lanes of 16-bit and 17 on-chip memory banks connected to a MicroBlaze processor through fast simplex links (FSL). It is not clear how many vector registers were supported. Compared to the MicroBlaze, speedups of 4–10× were demonstrated with four applications (FIR, IIR, matrix multiply, and 8×8 DCT). The processor implementation seems fairly complete.

The third vector processor [24] is a floating point processing unit based on the T0 archi-

tecture, and operated at 189MHz on a Xilinx Virtex II Pro device. It has 16 vector registers of 32 bits and a vector length of 16. Three functional units were implemented: floating-point adder, floating-point multiplier, and vector memory unit that interfaces to a 256-bit memory bus. All three functional units can operate simultaneously, which together with the 8 parallel vector lanes in the datapath, can achieve 3.02 GFLOPS. No control processor was included for non-floating-point or memory instructions, and it is unclear whether addressing modes other than unit-stride access were implemented.

A Softcore Vector Processor is also presented in [25] for biosequence applications. The processor consists of an instruction controller that executes control flow instructions and broadcast vector instructions to an array of 16-bit wide processing elements (PE). Compared to this thesis, it is a more limited implementation with less features and instructions, but like this thesis it also argues for a soft vector processor core.

Many SIMD systems have also been developed for FPGAs. A SIMD system is presented in [26] that is comprised of 2 to 88 processing elements built around DSP multiplier blocks on a Altera Stratix FPGA, and controlled by a central instruction stream. The system utilizes all the DSP blocks of an Altera Stratix EP1S80 FPGA, but only 17% of the logic resources. Only matrix multiplication was illustrated on the system, but the actual implementation of the application was not described. This system demonstrates the tremendous amount of parallelism available on modern FPGAs for performing parallel computations.

2.3 Multiprocessor Systems

In contrast to vector processing systems, where everything executes in lock-step, multiprocessor systems have become popular recently as a way to obtain greater performance. In particular, FPGA-based multiprocessors can be composed of multiple soft core[1] processors, or a combi-

[1]Soft core processors are described fully in software, usually in HDL, and is synthesized into hardware and programmed into the device with the rest of the user design.

nation of soft and hard core[2] processors. The parallelism in multiprocessor systems can be described as multiple instruction multiple data (MIMD). Each processor in a MIMD multiprocessor system has its own instruction memory and executes its own instruction stream and operates on different data. In contrast, SIMD systems have a single instruction stream that is shared by all processors. For example, vector processing is a type of SIMD system. In the context of soft processor acceleration, the discussion will focus on multiprocessor systems that utilize multiple soft processors on FPGAs.

Most multiprocessor systems that have been implemented in FPGAs are unique as there are not yet any de facto or formal standards. They usually differ in number of processors, interconnect structure, how processors communicate, and how they access memory. However, the communication scheme in multiprocessor systems can generally be categorized into shared memory or message passing, and the memory architecture can be categorized as either centralized or distributed [27].

FPGA-based multiprocessor systems can be very flexible, allowing them to adapt to accelerate heterogeneous workloads that otherwise do not parallelize effectively. Specialized systems with unique architectures can be designed to exploit the characteristics of a particular application for better performance. For example, the multiprocessor system in [28] for LU matrix factorization has a unique architecture that consists of a system controller that connects to a number of processing elements in a star topology, and seven kinds of memory for communicating data and storing instructions. The IPv4 packet forwarding system in [29] has 12 MicroBlaze processors arranged in four parallel pipelines of processors with each stage performing a specific task. Table 2.1 lists a number of FPGA multiprocessor systems found in literature and their features.

The disadvantage of MIMD multiprocessor systems is their complexity. Significant hardware knowledge is needed to design a multiprocessor system, including consideration of issues

[2]Hard core processors are implemented directly in transistors in the device, separate from the user design which is programmed into the programmable logic fabric.

Multiprocessor	Application	# CPUs	Speedup	Communication	Memory
CerberO [30]	Discrete wavelet transform	4	4	Shared memory	Centralized
Kulmala [31]	MPEG-4 encoding	4	1–3	Shared memory	Centralized
Martina [32]	Digital signal processing	8	7–8	Shared memory	Centralized
Ravindran [29]	IPv4 packet forwarding	16	n/a	Message-passing	Distributed
SoCrates [33]	General purpose	2	n/a	Shared memory	Distributed
Wang [28]	Matrix operations	6	4	Shared memory	Distributed

Table 2.1: Partial list of FPGA-based multiprocessor systems in literature

such as interconnect, memory architecture, cache coherence and memory consistency protocols. Creating a custom multiprocessor system architecture to tailor to the needs of a particular application can be a daunting task due to the large design space. On the software front, the user will need parallel programming knowledge to use these systems, which is not within the skillset of the average software developer. Specialized multiprocessor systems add further difficulty of writing software to effectively take advantage of the architecture.

2.4 Custom-designed Hardware Accelerators

Hardware accelerators are frequently used in conjunction with soft processors to accelrate certain portions of an application. Traditionally these accelerators are designed manually in HDL by a hardware designer, and connect to the processor via an interface specified by the processor vendor. The next two sections describe two different methods of interfacing custom-designed hardware accelerators to a soft processor. The fundamental disadvantage of these accelerators is they require hardware design effort to implement, verify, and test. Each accelerator, in most cases, also performs only one function. Hence for each portion of the application to accelerate, a different hardware accelerator is needed. This adds further time and design effort.

2.4.1 Decoupled Co-processor Accelerators

The co-processor accelerator model is akin to the use of floating-point co-processors in early computer systems. These accelerators are decoupled from the main processor in operation.

The processor provides inputs to start the accelerator, then has the option of executing a different part of the program while the accelerator is running, and finally reads results when they are computed. This is the model adopted by the Xilinx MicroBlaze to interface to custom co-processor accelerators. The MicroBlaze interfaces to accelerators through 16 32-bit Fast Simplex Link (FSL) channels, which are unidirectional point-to-point first in first out (FIFO) communication buffers. The MicroBlaze CPU uses blocking or non-blocking reads and writes to access the FSL channels, and can use up to 8 FSL channels for outputs from the CPU, and 8 FSL channels for inputs to the CPU.

Co-processor accelerators have the advantage that they are decoupled from the main CPU core, allowing both the CPU and accelerator to execute concurrently. Adding co-processor accelerators are less likely to negatively impact the performance of the CPU core compared to more tightly-coupled methods due to their decoupled nature. The design tools also tend to have good support for these accelerators, allowing the programmer to interact with them as easily as calling a function, and without having to write parallel programs. As an example, the MicroBlaze FSL provides simple send and receive functions to communicate with multiple accelerators. Co-processor accelerators also have the advantage that they can act as data master and communicate directly to memory. However, it is frequently up to the user to create the interface manually, which is added work.

2.4.2 Custom Instruction Accelerators

An alternate connection scheme interfaces an accelerator as a custom logic block within the processor's datapath, in parallel to the processor's main ALU. This scheme allows an accelerator to fetch operands directly from the processor's register file, and write results back to the processor's register file using the ALU's result bus. These accelerators effectively extend the functionality of the processor's ALU. The Nios II CPU supports this type of accelerator as *custom instructions* to the processor. To control the custom accelerators, new instructions are added to the processor, mapping to an unused opcode in the Nios II ISA. These instructions

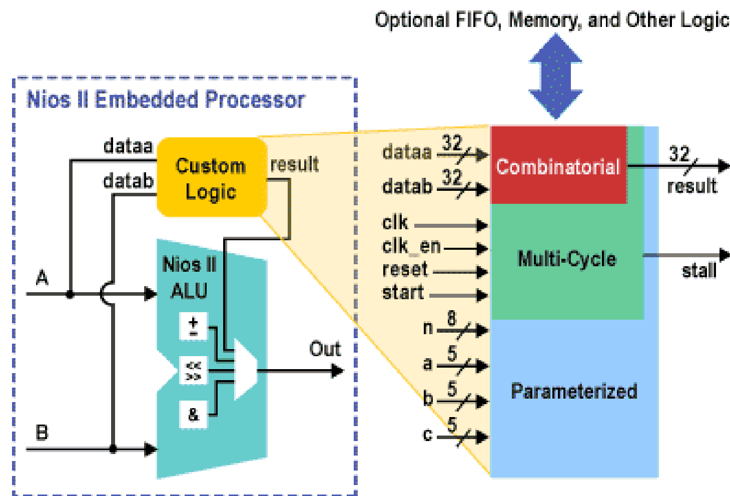

Figure 2.3: Nios II custom instruction accelerators can be combinational, multi-cycle, or contain internal register states (parameterized) (Source: [34])

are then executed directly by the extended ALU of the processor.

The main advantage of custom instructions and other such tightly-coupled accelerators is they can directly access the register file, saving the data movement instructions needed by co-processor accelerators to move data between the processor and accelerator. They are well-integrated into the CPU and development tools due to their exposed nature as CPU instructions, allowing software developers to easily access them at the software level. For example, the Nios II CPU can integrate up to 256 custom instruction accelerators, and they can be accessed in software by calling special functions built into the development tools. These accelerators are also relatively simple to interface to the CPU because the types of custom instructions and their interfaces are already defined in the CPU specification. Nios II defines single-cycle combinational and multi-cycle custom instructions that stall the CPU, and accelerators with additional internal register state (internal flip-flops) programmed by CPU instructions to hold data to process. Figure 2.3 summarizes the Nios II custom instruction formats.

Transferring large amounts of data into and out of these accelerators is, however, a slow process. Due to their intended lightweight nature, custom instruction accelerators generally

do not define their own memory interface (although it can be done manually by the designer). Instead, they rely on the processor to perform memory access. In the Nios II case, custom instructions can only read up to two 32-bit operands from the processor register file and write one 32-bit result per instruction, like other Nios II R-type instructions. Another drawback is the accelerators lie on the critical path of the processor ALU. Adding one or more accelerators with complex combinational logic can unnecessarily reduce the maximum frequency of the CPU core, affecting performance of the entire system.

2.5 Synthesized Hardware Accelerators

Synthesized hardware accelerators use behavioural synthesis techniques to automatically create hardware accelerators from software. These accelerators and processor systems take on different architectures, and several of them will be described in this section. A common drawback of these approaches is since the tools synthesize hardware from the user's software application, if the user changes hardware-accelerated sections of the software, the register transfer level (RTL) description of the hardware accelerators, and possibly of the entire system, will have to be regenerated and recompiled. This can make it difficult to achieve a targeted clock frequency for the whole design, for example. Synthesis tools also generally create separate hardware accelerators for each accelerated function, with no opportunity for resource sharing between accelerators.

2.5.1 C-based Synthesis

Hardware circuits synthesized from software written in the C programming language or variations of it has long been advocated due to the widespread use of C in embedded designs. Although the idea is attractive, in reality there are many difficulties such as identifying and extracting parallelism, scheduling code into properly timed hardware, and analyzing communication patterns and pointer aliasing [35]. Due to these difficulties, C-based synthesis tools

usually do not support full American National Standards Institute (ANSI) C, but only a subset, or employ extensions to the language. For example, floating-point data types are often not supported due to the hardware complexity required. With current automatic synthesis methods, the user also needs to have a good understanding of how to write “C” code that synthesizes efficiently to hardware. Unfortunately, the rules and language subsets often change from one tool to the next.

Given these limitations, C-based synthesis is still a powerful method for creating hardware accelerators, which can be seen from the large number of solutions in this area. The following sections will describe three compilers that support FPGAs: Altera C2H Compiler, Xilinx CHiMPS, and Catapult C. Descriptions of some other C-based synthesis tools can be found in [36].

Altera C2H Compiler

The Altera C2H compiler is a recently released tool that synthesizes a C function into a hardware accelerator for the Nios II soft CPU. The System-on-Programmable-Chip (SOPC) Builder tool in Quartus II automatically connects these accelerators to the Nios II memory system through the Avalon system fabric [37]. The compiler synthesizes pipelined hardware from the C source code using parallel scheduling and direct memory access [38]. Initially, each memory reference in the C language is handled by creating a master port in the accelerator hardware for each memory reference. In theory, this allows the maximum number of concurrent memory accesses. When several master ports connect to the same memory block, the Avalon system fabric creates an arbiter to serialize accesses. As an additional optimization, the C2H compiler will merge several master ports connected to the same memory block by combining the references and scheduling them internally. The ANSI C *restrict* keyword is used to indicate no aliasing can occur with a pointer to help optimize concurrency. Figure 2.4 shows an example Nios II processor system with C2H accelerators, and the connections between the various components of the system.

The C2H compiler is convenient, and the design flow is simple and well-integrated into the

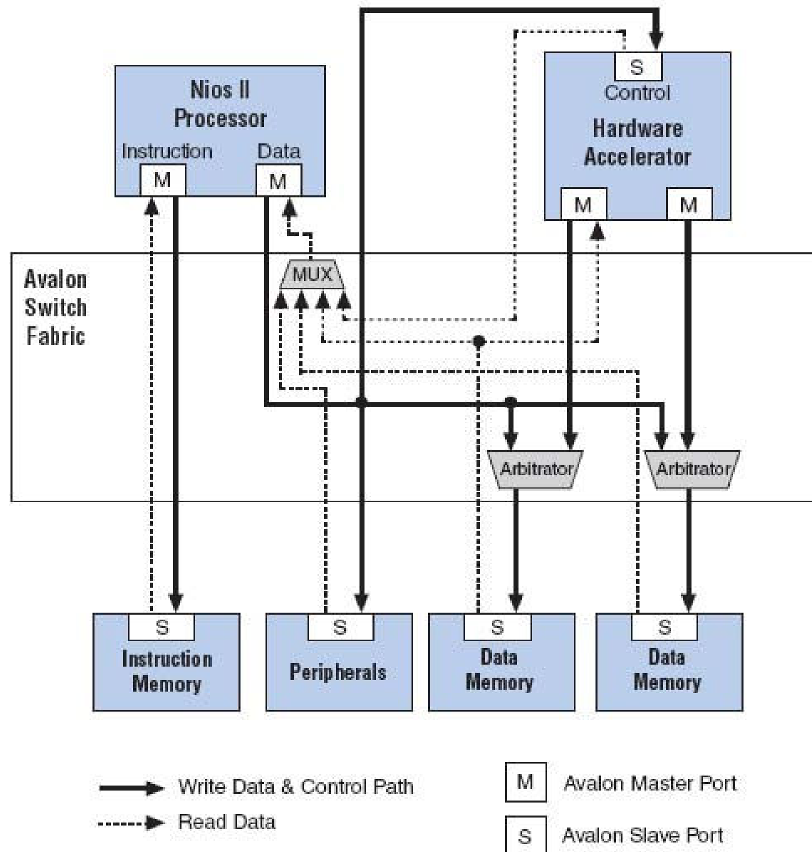

Figure 2.4: Example Nios II system with C2H accelerators (Source: [38]).

development tools. The pipelined, decoupled co-processors do not have the disadvantages of tightly-coupled custom instruction accelerators, and direct memory access is a powerful feature that further simplifies usage. Despite its ease of use, the performance of the automatically synthesized accelerators are not as good as one might presume. The C2H compiler generates only a single solution in the design space. It has no option to control the amount of loop unrolling to set the performance and resource level of the accelerator. As can be seen from Figure 2.4, if one of the accelerators have to access multiple data elements from a single data memory, it will be forced to serialize the memory accesses, possibly creating a bottleneck in the accelerator. To alleviate this bottleneck, data needs to be partitioned efficiently over multiple memories to reduce overlap. However, this is a step that needs to be done manually by the user, and requires

a good understanding of the hardware system and application. The hardware accelerators also do not have caches, nor do they support cache coherency with the Nios II processor's cache. The user either has to ensure that data does not overlap, or force the processor to flush its cache before transferring execution to the accelerator.

CHiMPS Target Language

Compiling HLL Into Massively Pipelined Systems (CHiMPS) is an experimental compiler by Xilinx Labs [39] that compiles high level languages such as C into hardware accelerators that can be implemented on Xilinx FPGAs. The compiler uses the CHiMPS Target Language (CTL), which is a predefined instruction set, as an intermediate language for synthesis, then extracts a dataflow graph from the CTL. This dataflow graph is then implemented in hardware, and pipelined for performance. One additional feature of CHiMPS is it automatically generates caches to cache data inside the FPGA, and supports coherency between multiple cache blocks and multiple FPGAs. Few additional details have been released about CHiMPS, and it is still unclear what further functionality it provides.

Catapult Synthesis

Catapult Synthesis [40] by Mentor Graphics synthesizes ANSI C++ into an RTL description that can then be targeted to an ASIC or FPGA. Catapult Synthesis can actually synthesize entire systems without processor cores, and it has been used to design production ASIC and FPGA designs [40]. The tool automatically generates multiple microarchitectures for a given design, allowing the user to explore performance, area, and power tradeoffs. The user can use synthesis directives to specify high-level decisions. A number of main architectural transformations are applied to generate a hardware architecture. Interface synthesis converts the way the C function communicates with the rest of the design, variable and array mapping controls how variables are mapped to registers or memory, loop pipelining allows multiple iterations of a loop to execute in parallel, loop unrolling exploits parallelism across subsequent loop itera-

tions, and scheduling transforms the untimed C code into an architecture with a well-defined cycle-by-cycle behaviour.

The Catapult Synthesis tool allows designers to automate parts of the detailed implementation of a design, while the automatic exploration process allows them to explore tradeoffs in the implementation. However, the user must still specify how data is transferred to and from the accelerator during interface synthesis, and use directives to guide the other phases of compilation. User experience reports [41] emphasize that the user must have a good understanding of the algorithm and implications of different C/C++ constructs to generate good hardware. As Catapult Synthesis is designed to synthesize entire systems, it does not have natural support for connecting to a processor.

2.5.2 Block-based Synthesis

Block-based synthesis describes methods that synthesize hardware from a graphical design environment that allows the user to design systems by graphically connecting functional blocks. This synthesis flow is frequently incorporated into model-based design environments, in which the user creates a high-level executable specification using functional blocksets to define the desired functional behaviour with minimal hardware detail. This executable specification is then used as a reference model while the hardware representation is further specified. The most commonly used such environment is the Mathworks Simulink design environment. This design method allows algorithm designers and hardware designers to work in a common environment, and allows architectural exploration without specifying detailed implementation. Automated synthesis methods from these environments simplify the final implementation phase, bridging the gap between algorithm and hardware designers.

The following subsections will describe four specific tools: Xilinx System Generator for DSP, Altera DSP Builder, Simulink HDL Coder, and Starbridge Viva. Starbridge Viva is the only solution of the four that does not operate within Simulink. Another similar tool that interfaces to Simulink is DSPLogic Reconfigurable Toolbox [42].

Xilinx System Generator for DSP & Altera DSP Builder

The Xilinx System Generator for DSP [43] is an add-on that uses Simulink as a front-end to interface to Xilinx IP cores for DSP applications. The Xilinx Blockset includes over 90 common DSP building blocks that interface to Xilinx IP core generators. The System Generator also allows hardware co-simulation of the Simulink model using a Xilinx FPGA-based DSP platform communicating through ethernet or JTAG to accelerate the simulation.

The Altera DSP Builder has mostly the same features as the Xilinx System Generator but is targeted to Altera FPGAs. Pre-designed DSP blocks from the Altera MegaCore functions can be imported into the Simulink design, and the system can be co-simulated using an Altera FPGA through JTAG. The DSP Builder also has blocks for communicating with the Avalon fabric so the accelerators generated by DSP Builder can be instantiated in SOPC Builder systems, and used with the Nios II soft processor.

The advantage of these vendor-specific block libraries is they are highly optimized to the vendor's platform. But since they are specific to a target platform, the Simulink models generated using these flows are no longer platform independent and suffer in portability.

Simulink HDL Coder

Simulink HDL Coder [44] generates synthesizable Verilog or VHDL code from Simulink models and Embedded MATLAB [45] code for datapath implementations, as well as from finite-state machines described with the Stateflow tool for control logic implementations. The generated HDL is target independent, bit-exact and cycle-accurate to the Simulink model, and can be implemented on FPGA or ASIC. The tool is a mix of synthesis and a set of supported Simulink models with HDL code. Over 80 Simulink models are supported in version 1.0, with multiple implementations included for some commonly used blocks. The HDL Coder can automatically pipeline Embedded MATLAB function blocks and state machines.

Starbridge Viva

Starbridge Viva [46] provides its own drag and drop graphical and object oriented environment for algorithmic development. A parallel algorithm can be modelled by connecting functional objects on a design pallet using transports that represent the data flow. Objects are "polymorphic" and can be used with different data types, data rates, and data precisions allowing reuse and experimentation with design tradeoffs. Built-in objects are, however, relatively primitive constructs like comparators and registers compared to Simulink blocks or DSP blocks in the Xilinx/Altera tools. The software supports a number of reconfigurable high-performance computing (HPC) systems with both FPGA and CPUs, as well as the vendor's own Starbridge Hypercomputers.

2.5.3 Application Specific Instruction Set Processor

Application-specific instruction set processors (ASIPs) have configurable instruction sets that allow the user to extend the processor by adding custom hardware accelerators and instructions. They provide a similar level of configurability as soft processors with custom instructions on FPGAs, but are configured only once before being inserted into an ASIC flow. Adding custom hardware and instructions to ASIPs, however, frequently requires the use of proprietary synthesis languages and compilers. They also share the common disadvantages of synthesized hardware accelerators of requiring separate accelerators for each accelerated function. The Tensilica Xtensa processor will be described in the next section. Another commercial ASIP is the ARC configurable processor [47].

Tensilica Xtensa

The Tensilica Xtensa [48] processor is a configurable and extensible processor for ASIC and FPGA design flows. It allows the customer to configure the processor to include or omit features, and add application-specific extensions to the base processor using the Tensilica Instruction Extension language (TIE). These instructions expand the base instruction set of the processor.

TIE is flexible and can be used to describe accelerators that range from multi-cycle pipelined hardware to VLIW, SIMD, and vector architectures. The Tensilica XPRES (Xtensa PRocessor Extension Synthesis) Compiler [49] furthermore creates TIE descriptions from ANSI C/C++ code, allowing direct generation of processor hardware RTL from C/C++ specification. It also allows design space exploration by generating different TIE source files that represent a range of Xtensa processors that trade off performance of the application versus area. However, accelerators generated from TIE are optimized for ASIC and not for FPGA implementation. FPGA support is mainly provided for validation purposes.

2.5.4 Synthesis from Binary Decompilation

Another method of synthesizing hardware accelerators is by binary decompilation techniques that decompile the software binary, and synthesize hardware accelerators from the resulting assembly instructions or description. Two commercial products in this category are Cascade [50] by CriticalBlue and Binachip-FPGA [51]. There are not many details on the performance of Binachip-FPGA, but simulation results reported in [52] of hardware accelerator synthesis from binary decompilation and mapping to a microprocessor plus FPGA system-on-chip are less than impressive. CriticalBlue adopts a different architecture for its accelerators to achieve higher performance, as will be described in the following section.

CriticalBlue Cascade

Cascade by CriticalBlue is another tool that automatically synthesizes co-processors to a main processor for SoC, structured ASIC, and Xilinx FPGA platforms. Cascade differs from synthesis-based solutions described in previous sections in that it synthesizes a co-processor by analyzing the compiled object code of an application. The Cascade co-processor has a distinct VLIW processor architecture, different from other dataflow or custom-hardware and loop-pipelining based co-processors such as CHiMPS and the Altera C2H compiler. The co-processor connects to the main CPU via the bus interface of the main processor, and can be

configured as a slave co-processor of the main CPU, or an autonomous streaming co-processor with direct memory access. It is customizable, and the tool automatically performs architecture exploration by generating a range of co-processors with different performance and area. Furthermore, it has options to configure the instruction format and control the amount of instruction decode logic. A single co-processor can also be reused to accelerate multiple non-overlapping portions of an application. The VLIW architecture is, however, not ideal for FPGA implementation, as will be explained in Section 2.6.2.

2.6 Other Soft Processor Architectures

Rather than offloading sections of an application from the soft processor to a hardware accelerator or co-processor to speed up execution, the soft processor itself can be improved to achieve higher performance without the addition of accelerators. More advanced architectures than standard RISC architectures have been explored for soft processors, and several of these will be described in the following sections.

2.6.1 Mitrion Virtual Processor

The Mirion Virtual Processor by Mitrionics [53] is a fine-grained, massively parallel, configurable soft core processor. It is based on a collection of ALU tiles that each perform a different function, and are interconnected by a network. The processor is progammed in the proprietary Mitrion-C programming language, which has C-like syntax and allows the programmer to identify parallelism within the code. The user can partially control resource usage by selecting the level of loop unroll in the application. The compiler and configurator then analyzes the application source code, and generates a configuration of the processor that executes the application. Currently, the processor is supported on Xilinx FPGAs.

Although the processor and tools provide a complete solution to automatically synthesize a system to execute the user application, similar to synthesized hardware accelerators, the

processor has to be reconfigured whenever the application changes, due to the code-specific nature of the processor configurator.

2.6.2 VLIW Processors

VLIW architectures have also been used in FPGAs for acceleration. VLIW soft processors like [54] are designed for a specific application, while others like [55–57] are more general purpose. The 4-way VLIW processor described in [56] has four identical, general-purpose functional units, connected to a single, multi-ported, 32×32-bit register file. It supports automatically generated custom hardware units that can be placed inside each of the identical ALUs. A similar VLIW processor in architecture is [57], which is configurable and is automatically generated by a configuration tool. It has multiple heterogeneous functional units, but also supports custom hardware units coded in VHDL. The register file is separated into three smaller register files for address, data, and data to custom hardware units. Each of the smaller register files are further separated into even and odd register banks to reduce the number connections.

Another FPGA-based VLIW processor is the VPF [58], which is a simplified version of the EVP [59] ASIC. Each funtional unit in the VLIW architecture is itself a SIMD unit that can processes a number of 16-bit operands, with the SIMD width configurable at compile time. The processor has three functional units: MAC, shuffle, and load/store, and seems relatively complete with 52 instructions. A 200MHz clock frequency was achieved for SIMD width of 4 and 8, and performance degrades significantly past SIMD width of 16, mainly due to the shuffle unit which allows arbitrary permutation of data elements across the SIMD unit.

A model of the Intel Itanium microarchitecture supporting a subset of the Itanium ISA was also prototyped on an FPGA [60].

The drawback of VLIW archtiectures for FPGAs is the multiple write ports required in the register file to support multiple functional units. Since embedded memory blocks on current FPGAs have only two ports, and one is needed for reading, a register file with multiple write ports is commonly implemented either as a collection of discrete registers as in [56], or divided

into multiple banks as in [57]. In either case, multiplexers are needed at the write side to connect multiple functional units to the register file, and this overhead increases as the processor is made wider with more functional units to exploit parallelism. For multiple bank implementations, there are additional restrictions on which registers can be written to by each instruction.

2.6.3 Superscalar Processors

The PowerPC 440 core on Xilinx Virtex 5 devices has a superscalar pipeline, but it is a hard processor core implemented in transistors inside the FPGA device, and does not provide the level of customization available in soft core processors. However, the Auxilliary Processor Unit (APU) does allow the PowerPC core to connect to custom co-processors implemented in the FPGA fabric.

FPGAs are frequently used to prototype ASIC microprocessors, and recently there has been interest in using FPGAs to more quickly and accurately explore microprocessor design space [61]. The Intel Pentium was implemented on an FPGA and connected to a complete computer system for architectural exploration in [62], and a speculative out-of-order superscalar core based on the SimpleScalar PISA was implemented in an FPGA in [63]. The lack of soft superscalar processors specifically designed for FPGAs could be due to a number of difficulties in mapping this type of architecture to FPGAs. Wide-issue superscalar processors require complex dependency checking hardware to identify dependences during instruction decode, as well as comparators to detect when operands are available so the instruction can be issued. The data forwarding multiplexers that carry results from outputs of functional units to inputs also add to complexity. And similar to VLIW processors, the register file of superscalar processors also needs many read and write ports to support multiple functional units.

2.7 Summary

Each of the four categories of soft processor accelerators described in this chapter has its advantages and drawbacks. Multiprocessor systems are very flexible with respect to the type of application that can be accelerated, but are complex both to design and use. Custom-designed hardware accelerators require significant hardware design knowledge and effort, and generally require a separate accelerator for each accelerated function. Although synthesized accelerators automatically create hardware accelerators from software, the accelerators have to be regenerated and resynthesized when the software changes. An improved soft processor can accelerate the entire application and does not require hardware design knowledge or effort to use. However, current VLIW and superscalar soft processors implemented in FPGAs do not scale well to high performance.

The next chapter will discuss in detail the design and architecture of the soft vector processor, an approach that combines the best advantages of most of these accelerator techniques.

Chapter 3

Configurable Soft Vector Processor

This chapter describes the design and implementation of the configurable soft vector processor, targeted specifically to the Altera Stratix III FPGA. The chapter first outlines the requirements of an effective soft processor accelerator, and shows how the soft vector processor meets these requirements. It then gives an overview of the processor, and presents the design and implementation details. The novel features and instructions of the soft vector processor are highlighted, and the improvements over the VIRAM instruction set are demonstrated using a simple FIR filter example. Finally, the design flow of the soft vector processor is compared to a commercial C-based synthesis flow, namely the Altera C2H compiler.

3.1 Requirements

The previous chapter described currently available soft processor accelerator solutions. Given each of their advantages and drawbacks, an ideal soft processor accelerator that combines the best of different solutions should:

- have scalable performance and resource usage,
- be simple to use, ideally requiring no hardware design effort,
- separate hardware and software design flows early in the design,
- allow rapid development by minimizing the number of times the design has to be synthesized, placed and routed.

Vector processing, in particular a soft vector processor, addresses all these requirements. It provides a simple programming model that can be easily understood by software developers,

and its application-independent architecture allows hardware and software development to be separated. A soft vector processor delivers scalable performance and resource usage through soft processor configurability and a scalable architecture. Modifying the application also requires only changing the software and a software recompilation.

3.2 Soft Vector Architecture

The soft vector architecture is a configurable soft-core vector processor architecture developed specifically for FPGAs. It leverages the configurability of FPGAs to provide many parameters to configure the processor for a desired performance level, and for a specific application.

The soft vector processor instruction set borrows heavily from the instruction set of VIRAM, but makes modifications to target embedded applications and FPGAs. In particular, the soft vector processor removes support for virtual memory, floating-point data types, and certain vector and flag manipulation instructions, but adds new instructions to take advantage of DSP functionality and embedded memories in FPGAs. The following sections describe the high level architecture of the soft vector processor, and how the instruction execution differs from traditional vector processors.

3.2.1 System Overview

The soft vector architecture specifies a family of soft vector processors with varying performance and resource utilization, and a configurable feature set to suit different applications. A software configurator uses a number of parameters to configure the highly parameterized Verilog source code and generate an application- or domain-specific instance of the processor. The configurability gives designers flexibility to trade-off performance and resource utilization, and to further fine-tune resource usage by removing unneeded processor features and instruction support.

Figures 3.1 illustrates the high level view of the soft vector processor. The architecture consists of a scalar core, a vector processing unit, and a memory interface unit. The scalar

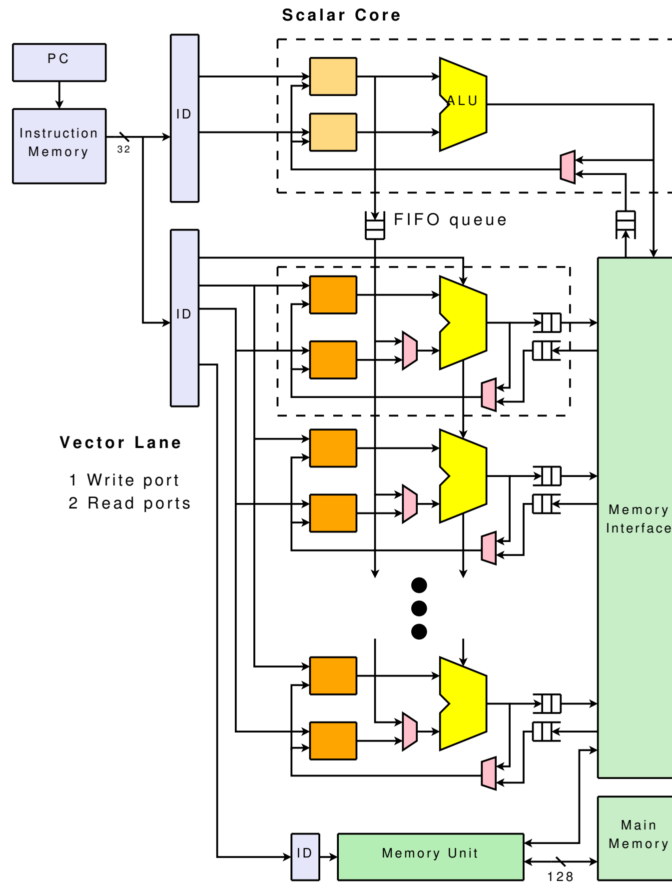

Figure 3.1: Scalar and vector core interaction

core is the single-threaded version of the UTIIe [64], a 32-bit Nios II-compatible soft processor with a four-stage pipeline. The scalar core and vector unit share the same instruction memory and instruction fetch logic. Vector instructions are 32-bit, and can be freely mixed with scalar instructions in the instruction stream. The scalar and vector units can execute different instructions concurrently, but will coordinate via the FIFO queues for instructions that require both cores, such as instructions with both scalar and vector operands.

The soft vector processor architecture is tailored to the Altera Stratix III FPGA architecture. The sizes of embedded memory blocks, functionality of the hard-wired DSP blocks, and mix of logic and other resources in the Stratix III family drove many of the design decisions.

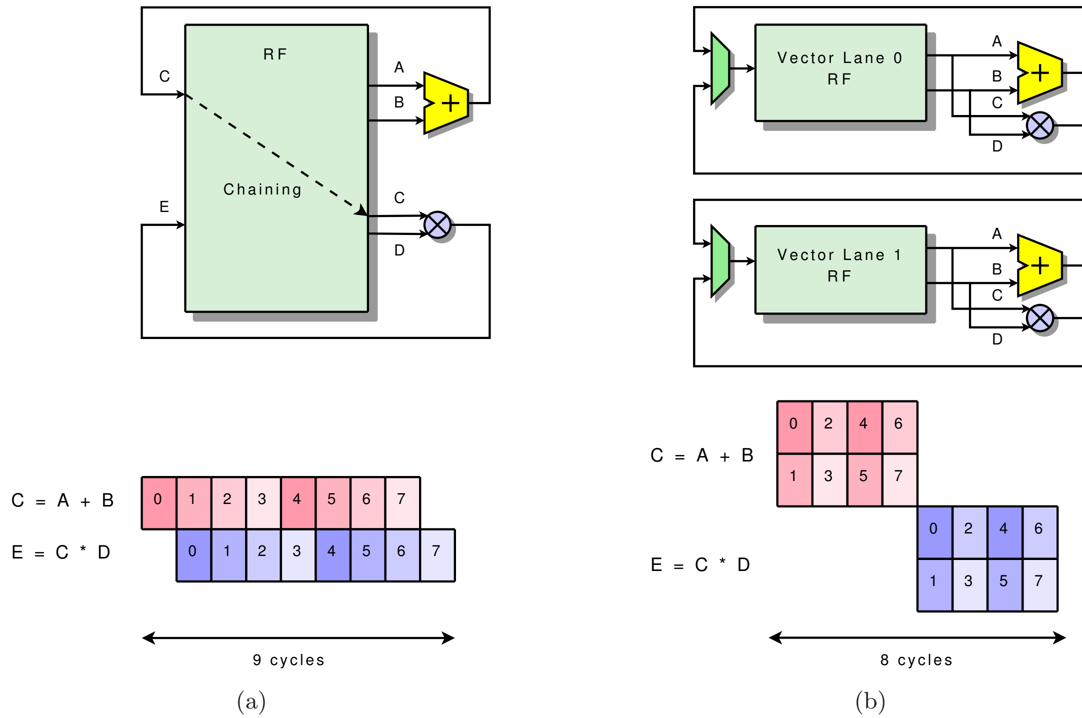

Figure 3.2: Traditional vector processor execution using chaining is shown in (a), while hybrid vector-SIMD execution is shown in (b).

3.2.2 Hybrid Vector-SIMD Model

Traditional vector processors are optimized towards processing long vectors. Since they tend not to have a large number of parallel datapath or vector lanes, they rely on pipelining and instruction *chaining* through the vector register file to achieve high performance. Instruction chaining is illustrated in Figure 3.2(a), which refers to the passing of partial results from one functional unit to the next between two data dependent instructions before the entire result vector has been computed by the first unit. Chaining through the register file has a significant drawback: it requires one read port and one write port for each functional unit to support concurrent computations. This contributes to the complexity and size of the traditional vector register file. Since such a vector register file cannot be implemented efficiently on an FPGA, a different scheme was implemented.

The soft vector processor combines vector and SIMD processing to create a hybrid vector-SIMD model, illustrated in Figure 3.2(b). In the hybrid model, computations are performed both in parallel in SIMD fashion, and over time as in the traditional vector model. Since the number of vector lanes will generally be large in the soft vector processor to take advantage of the large programmable fabric on an FPGA, the number of clock cycles required to process each vector will generally be small. This allows chaining to be removed, simplifying the design of control logic for the register file.

3.3 Vector Lane Datapath

The vector lane datapath of the vector unit is shown in detail in Figure 3.3. The vector unit is composed of a configurable number of vector lanes, with the number specified by the *NLane* parameter. Each vector lane has a complete copy of the functional units, a partition of the vector register file and vector flag registers, a load-store unit, and a local memory if parameter *LMemN* is greater than zero. The internal data width of the vector processing unit, and hence width of the vector lanes, is determined by the parameter *VPUW*. All vector lanes receive the same control signals and operate independently without communication for most vector instructions. *NLane* is the primary determinant of the processor's performance (and area). With additional vector lanes, a fixed-length vector can be processed in fewer cycles, improving performance. In the current implementation, *NLane* must be a power of 2.

3.3.1 Vector Pipeline

The vector co-processor of the soft vector processor has a 4 stage execution pipeline, plus the additional instruction fetch stage from the scalar core. The pipeline is intentionally kept short so vector instructions can complete in small number of cycles to take advantage of many parallel vector lanes, and to eliminate the need for forwarding multiplexers for reduced area. With the shared instruction fetch stage, the entire processor can only fetch and issue a single instruction

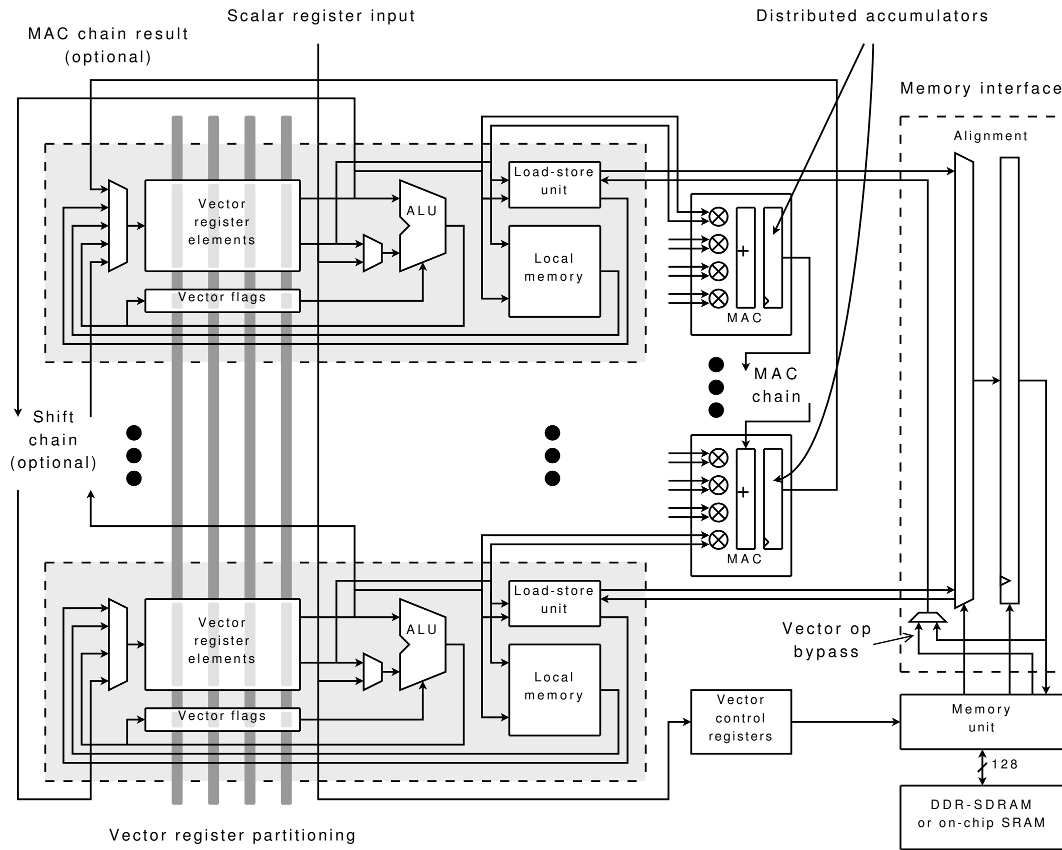

Figure 3.3: Vector co-processor system block diagram

per cycle. As shown in Figure 3.1, the vector unit has a separate decoder for decoding vector instructions. The memory unit has an additional decoder and issue logic to allow overlapped execution of a vector instruction that uses the ALU and a vector memory instruction.

The vector unit implements read after write (RAW) hazard resolution through pipeline interlocking. The decode stage detects data dependency between instructions, and stalls the later instruction if a pipeline hazard is detected until it is resolved. The decode stage also detects RAW hazards between the vector processing core and the memory unit for load/store and register instructions. Indexed memory access stalls the entire vector core for the memory unit to read address offsets from the vector register file.

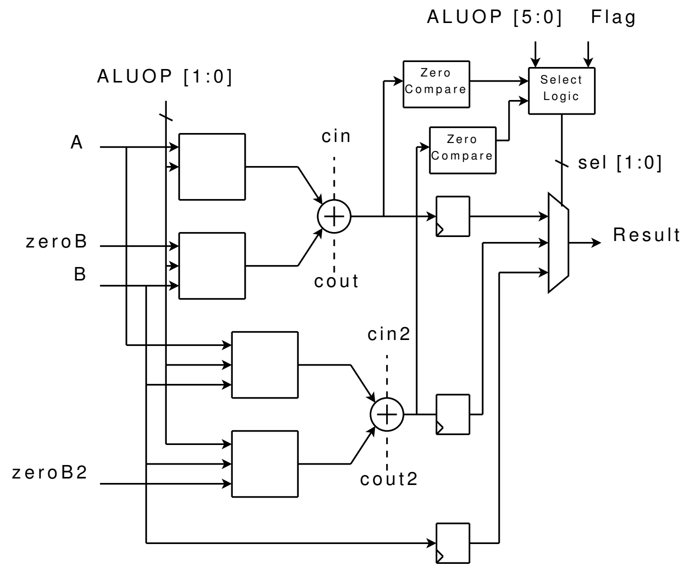

Figure 3.4: Vector Lane ALU

3.3.2 Datapath Functional Units

The functional units within each vector lane datapath include an ALU, a single-cycle barrel shifter, and a multiplier. The ALU takes advantage of the Stratix III ALM architecture to implement an efficient adder/subtractor. Figure 3.4 shows how the ALU is implemented using ALMs configured in arithmetic mode. The ALU supports arithmetic and logical operations, maximum/minimum, merge, absolute value, absolute difference, and comparisons. The first adder performs the bulk of the arithmetic operations, while the second adder is used for the absolute difference instruction (to compute subtraction with inputs reversed), and for logical operations (using the lookup tables at the adder inputs). The barrel shifter is implemented in log(n) levels of multiplexers, and the multiplier is implemented using embedded DSP blocks. The multiplier takes up one quarter of a DSP block in 16-bit operation, and half a DSP block in 32-bit operation.

3.3.3 Distributed Vector Register File

The soft vector processor uses a vector register file that is distributed across vector lanes. This differs from traditional vector architectures which employ a large, centralized vector register file with many ports. The vector register file is element-partitioned — each vector lane has its own register file that contains all the vector registers, but only a few data elements of each vector register [12]. The partitioning scheme naturally divides the vector register file into parts that can be implemented using the embedded memory blocks on the FPGA. It also allows SIMD-like access to multiple data elements in the vector register file by the vector lanes. Furthermore, the distributed vector register file saves area compared to a large, multi-ported vector register file. The collection of vertical dark-gray stripes in Figure 3.3 together represent a single vector register spanning all lanes, and containing multiple vector elements per lane. The soft vector processor ISA defines 64 vector registers[3]. Assigning four 32-bit elements of each register to each lane fills one M9K RAM; this is duplicated to provide two read ports. For this reason, MVL is typically 4 times *NLane* for a 32-bit $VPUW$, and most vector instructions that use the full vector length execute in 4 clock cycles. Vector flag registers are distributed the same way.

3.3.4 Load Store Unit

The load store unit within the vector lane interfaces with the memory unit for vector memory access. Two FIFO queues inside the load store unit buffer load and store data. For a vector memory store, the vector lane datapath can process a different instruction as soon as it transfers data from the vector register file to the store queue. During a vector memory load, the vector memory unit places data from memory into the load buffers without interrupting the vector lane datapath until all data has been loaded for the instruction. Pipeline interlocking allows vector loads to be statically scheduled ahead of independent instructions for increased concurrency.

[3]VIRAM supports only 32 architectural registers. The large embedded memory blocks in Stratix III encouraged the extension to 64 registers in the ISA.

3.3.5 Local Memory

Each vector lane can instantiate a local memory by setting the *LMemN* parameter to specify the number of words in the local memory. The local memory uses register-indirect addressing, in which each vector lane supplies the address to access its own local memory. Like the distributed vector register file, it is normally split into 4 separate sections — one for each of the four data elements in a vector lane. However, if the parameter *LMemShare* is On, the four sections are merged, and the entire local memory becomes shared between all the elements that reside in the same lane. This mode is intended for table-lookup applications that share the same table contents between data elements.

3.4 Memory Unit

The memory unit handles memory accesses for both scalar and vector units. Scalar and vector memory instructions are processed in program order. Vector memory instructions are processed independently from vector arithmetic instructions by the memory unit, allowing their execution to be overlapped. The memory interface is intended to be connected to an external 128-bit DDR-SDRAM module, which is suited for burst reading and writing of long vectors, or to large on-chip SRAMs. As a result, it interfaces to a single memory bank, and supports access of this single memory bank in all three vector addressing modes. To support arbitrary stride and access in different granularities (32-bit word, 16-bit halfword, 8-bit byte), crossbars are used to align read and write data. Width of the crossbars are equal to *MemWidth* (128), and the configurable parameter *MemMinWidth* (8) specifies the crossbar granularity which dictates the smallest width data that can be accessed for all vector memory addressing modes. The (128) and (8) shown after the parameters are meant to suggest their default values.

The memory unit has three major components: load store controller, read interface, and write interface. The three components will be discussed in more detail in the following sections. The memory unit is also used to implement vector insert and extract instructions: a bypass

register between the write and read interfaces allows data to be passed between the interfaces, and rearranged using the write and read crossbars.

3.4.1 Load Store Controller

The load store controller implements a state machine to control the operation of the memory unit. It handles both scalar and vector memory accesses, but only either one at a time, and stalls the core that makes the later request if it is already busy. Memory access ordering between the two cores is preserved by using a FIFO queue to store a flag that indicates whether a scalar or vector memory instruction is fetched by the fetch stage. The load store controller reads from this FIFO queue to maintain memory access order. The controller also generates control signals to the load and store address generators depending on the memory instruction. For vector stores, the controller commences the memory store after the vector lane datapath has transferred data to the store buffers. For vector loads, the controller waits until all data has been transferred by the load address generator to the vector lane load buffers, then notifies the vector lane datapath that load data is ready. This causes the vector processing core to issue a transfer instruction to move loaded data from the load buffers to the vector register file. After the transfer, the load store controller is again free to accept the next memory instruction.

3.4.2 Read Interface

The read interface consists of the read address generator and the read data crossbar — a full crossbar *MemWidth* bits wide, and *MinDataWidth* bits in granularity. The read address generator produces select signals to control the read crossbar, and write enable signals to write the read data to the vector lane load buffers. Each cycle, the address generator calculates how many data elements can be aligned and stored into the vector lane load buffers given the stride and byte offset into the *MemWidth*-bit wide memory word, and asserts the write enable of the same number of vector lane load buffers. The read interface can align up to $\frac{MemWidth}{MemDataWidth}$ number of elements per cycle, where *MemDataWidth* is the data width of the particular vector

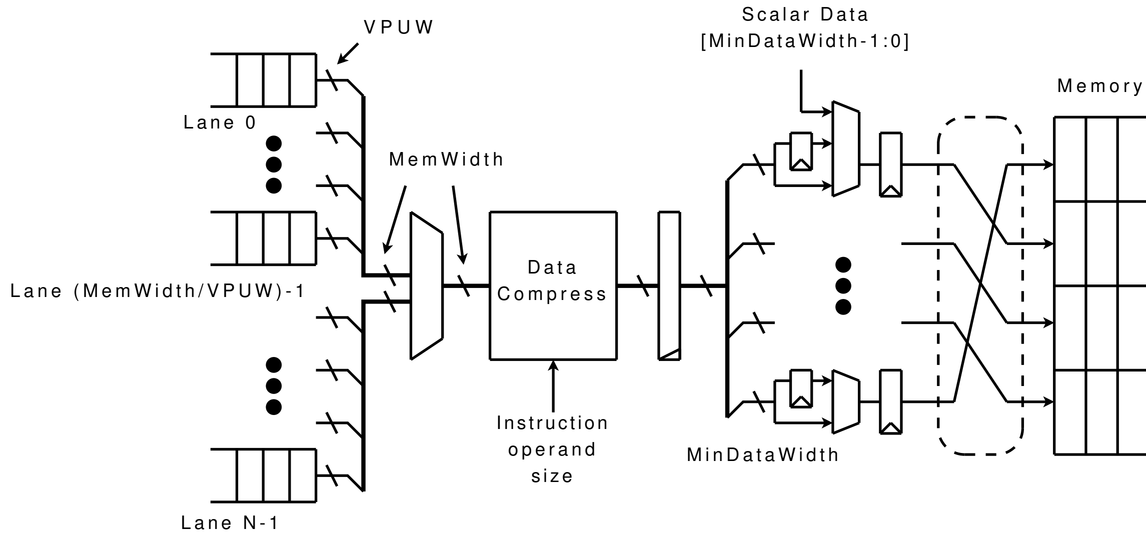

Figure 3.5: Soft vector processor write interface. The write interface selects *VPUW* bit wide data to be written from the store buffers and concatenates the elements into a *MemWidth*-bit wide memory word. The data compress block discards the extra bits if the memory access granularity is smaller than *VPUW*. This compressed memory word is then stored in an intermediate register, and passes through the delay network and crossbar before being written to memory.

read instruction, for unit stride and constant stride reads. Indexed vector load executes at one data element per cycle.

3.4.3 Write Interface

The write interface consists of the write address generator and the write interface datapath. The write interface datapath is shown in Figure 3.5. It is comprised of a multiplexer to select data from vector lane store buffers to pass to the write logic, a data compress block, a selectable delay network to align data elements, and a write crossbar in *MinDataWidth*-bit granularity, and *MemWidth* bits wide that connects to main memory. The design of the selectable delay network is derived from the T0 vector processor [12].

Figure 3.6 shows how the delay network and alignment crossbars are used to handle write offsets and data misalignment for a vector core with four lanes. The write address generator can generate a single write address to write several data elements to memory each cycle. A

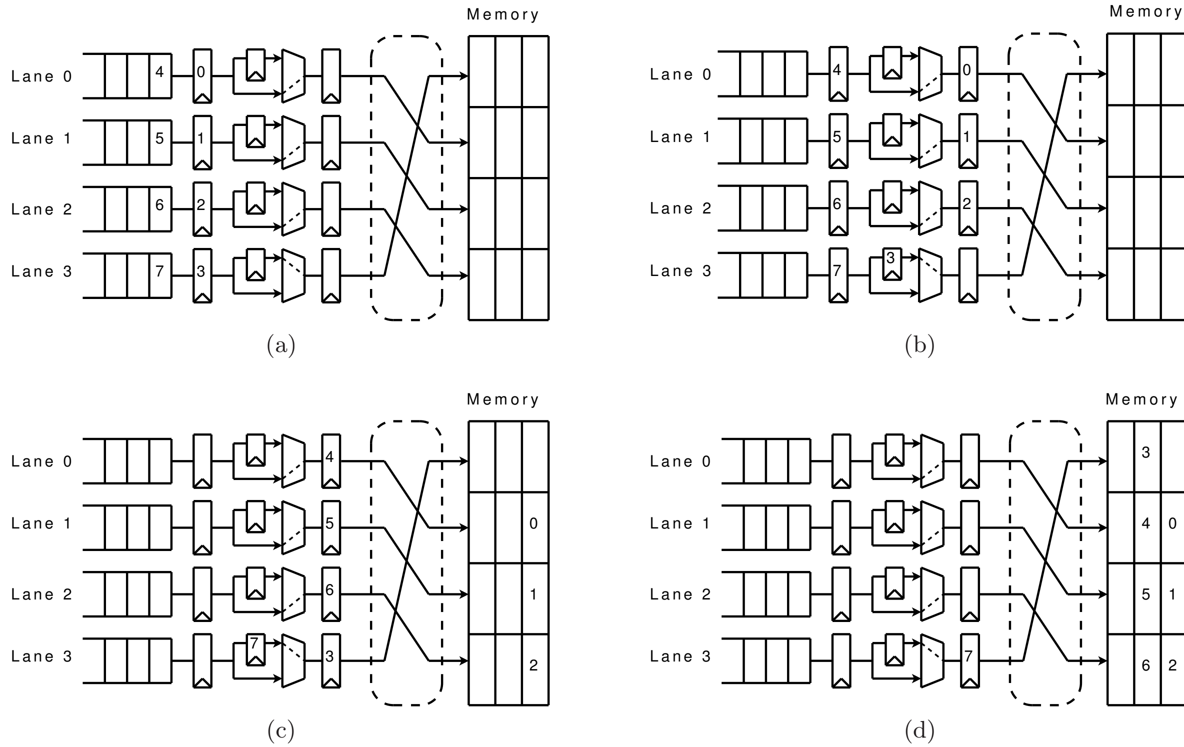

Figure 3.6: Four cycles of a unit stride vector store with a one word offset. The delay network aligns data elements to the correct write cycle, while the crossbar moves the data elements to the correct positions (Source: [12]).

unit stride vector store is shown in the figure, but the crossbar logic handles arbitrary stride. If $NLane * VPUW > MemWidth$, a set of multiplexers are placed between the store buffers and the first set of registers to select data from vector lanes to write. The data compress block handles writing of smaller data widths than $VPUW$ by selecting the valid inputs bits to pass to the register. The write address generator can handle writing up to $\frac{MemWidth}{MemDataWidth}$ number of elements per cycle, where $MemDataWidth$ is the data width of the particular vector write instruction, for unit stride and constant stride writes. Indexed vector store executes at one data element per cycle.

3.5 FPGA-Specific Vector Extensions

The soft vector processor borrows heavily from VIRAM. The instruction set includes 45 vector integer arithmetic, logical, memory, and vector and flag manipulation instructions. For nearly all instructions, the instruction opcode selects one of two *mask registers* to provide conditional execution. Complex execution masks are formed by special instructions that manipulate several *flag registers*. Some flag registers are general-purpose, while others hold condition codes from vector comparisons and arithmetic.

The soft vector processor also differs from VIRAM by extending it to take advantage of on-chip memory blocks and hardware DSP blocks common in FPGAs. These features are described below.

A new feature of this processor is distributed multiply-accumulators and a multiply-accumulate chain, implemented using the multiply-accumulate (MAC) feature of the Stratix III DSP blocks, and are shown in Figure 3.3. Multipliers in the vector lane ALUs are also implemented using the Stratix III DSP blocks. The MAC feature configures the DSP block in a 4-multiply-accumulate mode, each of which can multiply and accumulate inputs from 4 vector lane datapaths into a single *distributed accumulator*. The cascade chain in the Stratix III DSP blocks allows cascade adding of these distributed accumulators, speeding up the otherwise inefficient vector reduction operation. $MACL$ specifies the number of distributed accumulators chained together to produce one accumulation result. If $MACL$ is smaller than $\frac{NLane}{4}$, the accumulate chain generates $\frac{NLane}{4*MACL}$ partial results and writes them as a contiguous vector to the beginning of the destination vector register so it can be accumulated again. The MAC units are incorporated into the soft vector processor through the `vmac` and `vcczacc` instructions. The `vmac` instruction multiplies two source vectors and accumulates the result to the distributed accumulators. The `vcczacc` instruction cascade adds the distributed accumulator results in the entire MAC chain, copies the final result (or the partial result vector if the cascade chain does not span all MAC units) to a vector register, and zeros the distributed accumulators. The accumulators allow easy

accumulation of multi-dimensional data, and the accumulate chain allows fast sum reduction of data elements within a vector.

The distributed vector register file efficiently utilizes embedded memory blocks on the FPGA, as described in Section 3.3.3. The vector lane local memory described in Section 3.3.5 is also implemented using these memory blocks. This local memory is non-coherent, and exists in a separate address space from main memory. The local memory can be read through the `vldl` instruction, and written using the `vstl` instruction. Data to be written into the local memory can be taken from a vector register, or the value from a scalar register can be broadcast to all local memories. A scalar broadcast writes a data value from a scalar register to the local memory at an address given by a vector register, which facilitates filling the local memory with values computed by the scalar unit.

The adjacent element shift chain is also shown in Figure 3.3. It allows fast single-direction shifting of data elements in a vector register by one position, avoiding a slow vector insert or extract instruction for this common operation. This feature can be accessed through the `veshift` instruction.

One final extension is the inclusion of an absolute difference instruction, `vabsdiff`, which is useful in sum of absolute difference calculations.

To demonstrate the effectiveness of the vector extensions, the same FIR filter example implemented in VIRAM vector code in Figure 2.2 can be implemented in soft vector processor assembly as shown in Figure 3.7. The capitalized instructions highlight the differences in the assembly code. The soft vector processor code sequence is significantly shorter, with 12 instructions in the loop instead of 18. The MAC units and cascade chain speed up the reduction operation, and the shift chain simplifies adjacent element shifting.

The `vabsdiff` instruction is used by the MPEG motion estimation benchmark discussed in the next chapter. Also, the `vldl` and `vstl` instructions are used by the AES encryption benchmark also discussed in Chapter 4.

```
        vmstc      vbase0, sp     ; Load base address
        vmstc      vbase1, r3     ; Load coefficient address
        vmstc      VL, r2         ; Set VL to num taps
        vld.h      v2, vbase1     ; Load filter coefficients
        vld.h      v1, vbase0     ; Load input vector                          5
.L5:
        VMAC       v1, v2         ; Multiply−accumulate up to 16 values
        VCCZACC    v3             ; Copy result from accumulator and zero
        vmstc      VL, r9         ; Reset VL to num taps (vcczacc changes VL)
        vmstc      vindex, r8     ; Set vindex to 0                            10
        vext.vs    r10, v3        ; Extract final summation result
        stw        r10, 0(r4)     ; Store result
        VESHIFT    v1, v1         ; Vector element shift
        vmstc      vindex, r6     ; Set vindex to NTAP−1
        vins.vs    v1, r5         ; Insert new sample                          15
        addi       r3, r3, −1
        addi       r4, r4, 4
        bne        r3, zero, .L5
```

Figure 3.7: 8-tap FIR filter vector assembly

3.6 Configurable Parameters

Table 3.1 lists the configurable parameters and features of the soft vector processor architecture. *NLane*, *MVL*, *VPUW*, *MemWidth*, and *MemMinWidth* are the primary parameters, and have a large impact on the performance and resource utilization of the processor. Typically *MVL* is determined by *NLane* and *VPUW*, as the number of registers defined in the ISA, a given *VPUW*, and the FPGA embedded memory block size constrain how many data elements can fit in a vector lane. The secondary parameters enable or disable optional features of the processor, such as MAC units, local memory, vector lane hardware multipliers, vector element shift chain, and logic for vector insert/extract instructions. The *MACL* parameter enables the accumulate chain in the Stratix III DSP blocks, and specifies how many MAC units to chain together to calculate one sum.

Table 3.1: List of configurable processor parameters

Parameter	Description	Typical
NLane	Number of vector lanes	4–128
MVL	Maximum vector length	16–512
VPUW	Processor data width (bits)	8,16,32
MemWidth	Memory interface width	32–128
MemMinWidth	Minimum accessible data width in memory	8,16,32
Secondary Parameters		
MACL	MAC chain length (0 is no MAC)	0,1,2,4
LMemN	Local memory number of words	0–1024
LMemShare	Shared local memory address space within lane	On/Off
Vmult	Vector lane hardware multiplier	On/Off
Vupshift	Vector adjacent element up-shifting	On/Off
Vmanip	Vector manipulation instructions (vector insert/extract)	On/Off

3.7 Design Flow

This section describes the design flow for using the soft vector processor. Section 3.7.1 describes an ideal design flow based on vectorizing compilers, and Section 3.7.2 looks at the current state of vectorizing compilers and the feasibility of adopting such compilers for this processor.

3.7.1 Soft Vector Processor Flow versus C-based Synthesis

One major advantage of using a general-purpose soft processor versus automatic hardware synthesis methods is the hardware does not have to be resynthesized or recompiled when the underlying software changes. To illustrate this difference, Figure 3.8 compares the soft vector processor design flow versus the design flow of using a C-based synthesis tool designed for FPGA, in this case, the Altera C2H Compiler.

The C2H design flow begins with software code development, and has hardware acceleration as a second phase in development. The user must identify and isolate the sections to be hardware-accelerated, run the C2H compiler, and analyze the compilation estimates. As the compilation estimates only give the performance estimates of the accelerators, in order to

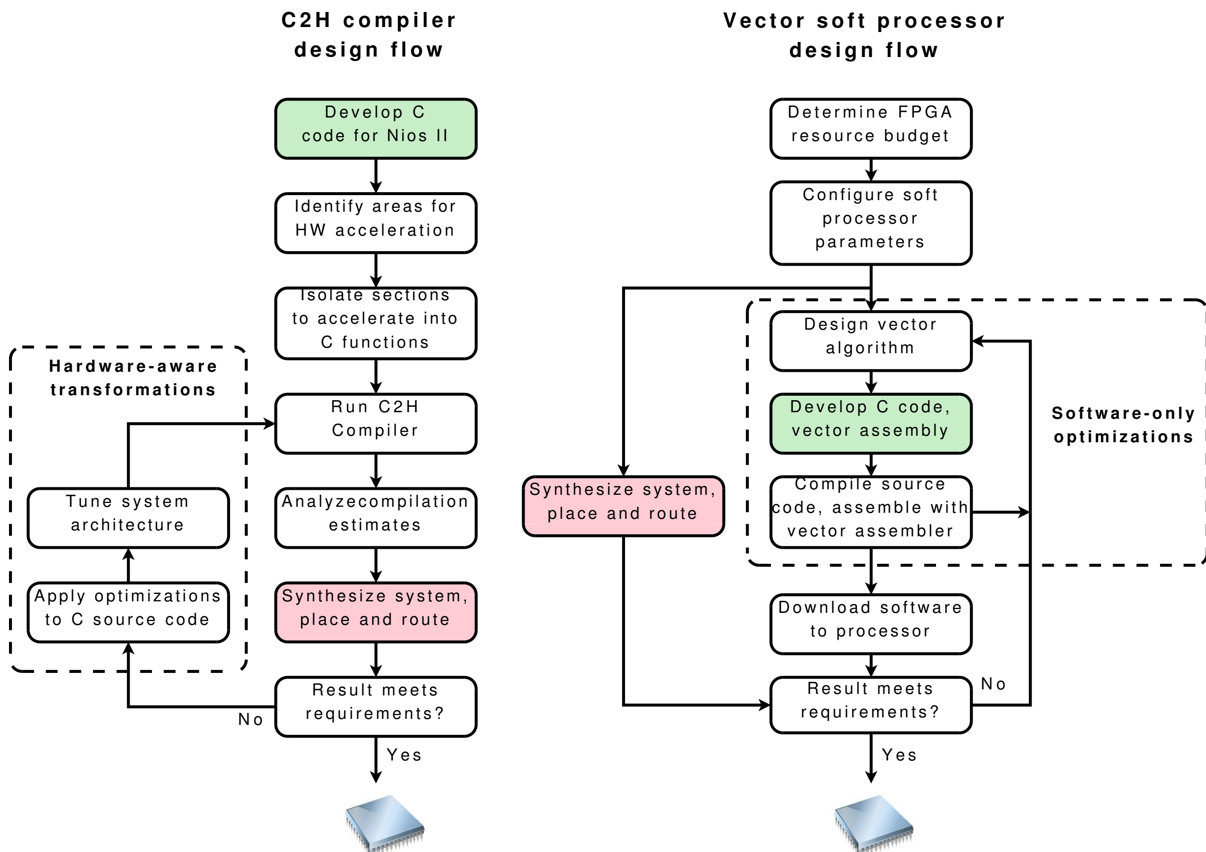

Figure 3.8: Altera C2H compiler design flow versus soft vector processor design flow

determine the maximum frequency and performance of the entire system, a full synthesis, placement, and routing must be performed.

The soft vector processor design flow begins with determining the resource budget and performance requirements of the design, which dictate the performance level and resource utilization of the core that is to be selected. This initial specification phase sets the configuration and specifications of the processor, and allows software and hardware development to proceed in parallel rather than serial. Fixing the hardware netlist of the processor simplifies hardware design of other blocks, and fixing processor features and capabilities gives software developers constraints for writing code that will remain fixed throughout the design cycle. Application de-

velopment is independent of the synthesis flow, which is only needed to determine the maximum frequency and end performance. No resynthesis is necessary from modifications in software.

The optimization methods of the two design flows also differ. Due to the limitation of requiring manual partitioning of memory, typical optimization steps with the C2H compiler are to create more on-chip memories, reorganize data in memory by partitioning, use programming pragmas to control connections between accelerators and memories, and manually unroll loops to increase parallelism of the accelerator. These optimizations, especially optimizing the memory architecture, require not only a good understanding of the algorithm, but also hardware design knowledge and thinking. On the contrary, optimizations in the soft vector processor design flow do not require any understanding of the hardware implementation of the processor or to alter any parts of the hardware besides setting a few high level parameters according to the software needs. Optimizing the algorithm on the software level to achieve better vectorization is something that an average software developer can do. Hence the soft vector processor can deliver FPGA accelerated performance to a wider software developer user base.

3.7.2 Comment on Vectorizing Compilers

The ease-of-use of the vector programming model depends greatly on the availability of a vectorizing compiler. No vectorizing compiler was developed or used in this thesis due to time constraints. However, vectorizing compilers exist and have been used, for example, in the past and present Cray supercomputers. The VIRAM project, which much of this work and the soft vector processor instruction set is based on, originally developed a compiler based on the Cray PDGS system for vector supercomputers. The compiler for the Cell processor supports *auto-SIMDization* to automatically extract SIMD parallelism and generate code for the Cell SIMD processors. Furthermore, GCC also has an auto-vectorization feature (partially developed by IBM) that is partially enabled and being continually developed. Therefore it should be feasible to modify an existing vectorizing compiler for this soft vector processor.

Chapter 4

Results

This chapter presents performance results from benchmarking the soft vector processor, and compares its performance to the Nios II soft processor and the Altera C2H compiler discussed in Section 2.5.1. The chapter first describes the benchmarks and the methodology, then presents the results and comparisons between the different systems.

4.1 Benchmark Suite

Three benchmark kernels representative of data-parallel embedded applications are chosen to compare the performance of the different approaches. They are taken from algorithms in MPEG encoding, image processing, and encryption. The following sections describe the operation of the three benchmarks.

Block Matching Motion Estimation

Block matching motion estimation is used in video compression algorithms to remove temporal redundancy within frames and allow coding systems to achieve a high compression ratio. The algorithm divides each luma frame into blocks of size $N \times N$, and matches each block in the current frame with candidate blocks of the same size within a search area in the reference frame. The best matched block has the lowest distortion among all candidate blocks, and the displacement of the block, or the motion vector, is used to encode the video sequence. The metric is typically sum of absolute differences (SAD), defined as:

```
for(l=0; l<nVERT; l++)
    for(k=0; k<nHORZ; k=++) {
        answer = 0;
        for(j=0; j<16; j++)
            for(i=0; i<16; i++) {                                          5
                temp = x[l+j][k+i] - y[l+j][k+i];
                answer += ((temp >> 31) == 1)? (~temp + 1) : temp;
            }
        result[l][k] = answer;
 }                                                                         10
```

Figure 4.1: Motion estimation C code

$$SAD(m,n) = \sum_{i=0}^{N-1} \sum_{j=0}^{N-1} |c(i,j) - s(i+m, j+n)|.$$

A full search block matching algorithm (FSBMA) matches the current block c to all candidate blocks in the reference frame s within a search range $[-p, p-1]$, and finds the motion vector of the block with minimum SAD among the $(2p)^2$ search positions. Performing full search requires huge computational power. For example, real time motion estimation for CIF (352×288) 30 frames per second (fps) video with $[-16, +15]$ search range requires 9.3 giga-operations per second (GOPS) [65]. Due to the large computational requirements and regularity of data flow, many FSBMA hardware architectures have been developed. Figure 4.1 shows example C code for the motion estimation kernel.

Image Median Filter

The median filter is commonly used in image processing to reduce noise in an image and is particularly effective against impulse noise. It replaces each pixel with the median value of surrounding pixels within a window. Figure 4.2 shows example C code for a simple median filtering algorithm that processes an image using the median of a 5×5 image region. It operates by performing a bubble sort, stopping early when the top half is sorted to locate the median.

```
for (i=0; i<=12; i++) {
        min = array[i];
        for (j=i; j<=24; j++) {
                if (array[j] < min) {
                        temp = min;                                     5
                        min = array[j];
                        array[j] = temp;
                }
        }
}                                                                       10
```

Figure 4.2: 5×5 median filter C code

AES Encryption

The 128-bit AES Encryption algorithm [66] is an encryption standard adopted by the U.S. government. The particular implementation used here is taken from the MiBench benchmark suite [67]. It is a block cipher, and has a fixed block size of 128 bits. Each block of data can be logically arranged into a 4×4 matrix of bytes, termed the AES state. A 128-bit key implementation, which consists of 10 encryption rounds, is used. Each round in the algorithm consists of four steps: `SubBytes`, `ShiftRows`, `MixColumns`, and `AddRoundKey`. The first 3 steps can be implemented efficiently on 32-bit processors using a single 1 KB lookup table. A single round is then accomplished through four table-lookups, three byte rotations, and four EXOR operations [68].

4.2 Benchmark Preparation

The following sections describe how the benchmarks were prepared for performance measurements on the different systems. Specific steps taken to vectorize the benchmarks for the soft vector processor, and to tune the benchmarks for the C2H compiler are also described.

4.2.1 General Methodology

The benchmarks include only the main loop section of the kernels. The median filter kernel calculates one output pixel from the 5×5 window. The motion estimation kernel calculates SAD values for each position of a $[-16, +15]$ search range and stores the values into an array. It makes no comparisons between the values. The AES encryption kernel computes all rounds of encryption on 128 bits of data. The instruction and cycle counts for one intermediate round of the 10-round algorithm are reported, as the final round is handled differently and is not within the main loop.

As there is no vector compiler for this project, the benchmark kernels were vectorized by embeddeding vector assembly instructions for the soft vector processor using gcc style inline assembly, then compiled using the Nios II gcc (nios2-elf-gcc 3.4.1) with optimization O3. A modified Nios II assembler that adds vector instruction support was used to assemble the code.

4.2.2 Benchmark Vectorization

The three kernel benchmarks were vectorized manually using a mix of assembly and C code. The following sections describe at a high level how the kernels were vectorized, and show segments of the vector assembly codes.

Motion Estimation

In a vector processor implementation of full search motion estimation, one of the dimensions is handled by vectorizing (removing) the innermost loop. This vectorization step supports up to a vector length of 16 due to the 16×16 pixel size of macroblocks in MPEG. With 8 lanes and MVL of 32, two copies of the current macroblock can be matched against the search area simultaneously, reducing the number of iterations required to process the entire search range. To keep the innermost loop fast, only unit stride vector load instructions, which execute the fastest, are used.

Figure 4.3 shows how the matching is accomplished using only unit stride load memory

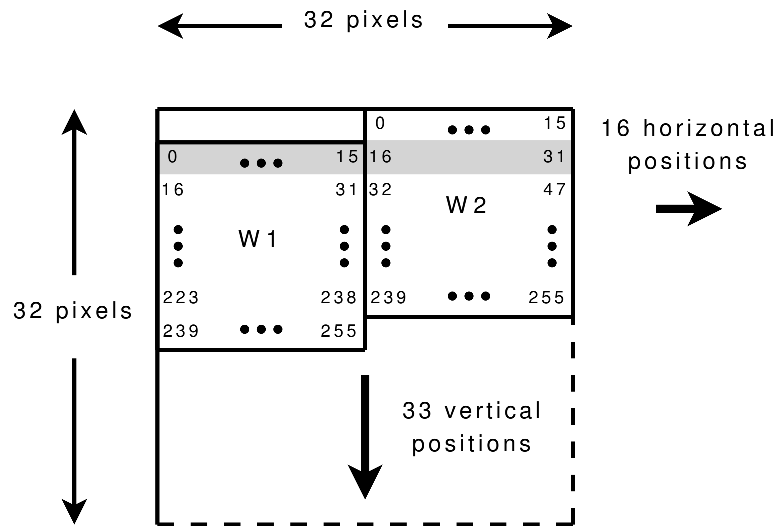

Figure 4.3: Simultaneously matching two copies of the macroblock to a reference frame

instructions. The two copies of the macroblock are offset vertically by one row. For each position within the search range, 17 rows are processed, with the calculations in the first and last row partially masked using a vector flag register. The search range also increases by one row vertically as a result of the offsetting. This implementation actually executes faster than replicating the macroblock without the row offset, which requires a slow vector insert instruction in the inner loop of the kernel.

Figure 4.4 shows the vector code for the inner loop, plus vector code in the next outer loop to extract and accumulate results after processing the entire 16×16 window. Code to handle the first and last rows are not shown, but the instruction sequence is similar to the inner loop. The assembly code accumulates the rows of the two windows into a single vector register, then uses a vector mask to select between the two accumulated rows to do the final sum using the accumulate chain. The MAC chain is used to reduce partial results to one final result in the `vcczacc` instruction. The ".1" instruction extension indicates conditional execution using `vfmask1` as the mask. This implementation requires 6 instructions in the innermost loop.

To further improve performance, the number of memory accesses can be greatly reduced

```
        vmstc      vbase1, r5             ; Load x base
        vmstc      vbase2, r6             ; Load y base
        vadd       v5, v0, v0             ; Zero sum

.L15:                                     ; Innermost loop over rows                    5
        vld.b      v2, vbase1, vinc1      ; load block pixels, vinc1 = 16
        vld.b      v3, vbase2, vinc2      ; load frame pixels, vinc2 = IMAGEWIDTH
        vabsdiff   v4, v2, v3
        vadd       v5, v5, v4             ; Accumulate to sum
        addi       r2, r2, −1             ; j++                                         10
        bne        r2, zero, .L15         ; Loop again if (j<15)

        vfld       vfmask1, vbase4, vinc4 ; Load flag mask
        vmac.1     v6, v5                 ; Accumulate across sum
        vcczacc    v6                     ; Copy from accumulator                       15
        vmstc      VL, r9                 ; Reset VL after vcczacc
        vext.vs    r3, v6                 ; Extract result to scalar core
```

Figure 4.4: Code segment from the motion estimation vector assembly. The code to handle the first and last rows of the windows are not shown.

by unrolling the loop so pixels in the floating blocks only need to be loaded once into vector registers. To slide the window horizontally, the rows from the reference frame can be shifted using vector element shift instead of loading the pixels repeatedly with new offsets.

Two versions of the motion estimation vector assembly are required. One is used for a 4 vector lane configuration to handle the one block, while the other is used to handle two offset blocks with 8 or 16 vector lanes.

Image Median Filter

The median filter kernel vectorizes very nicely by exploiting outer-loop parallelism. Figure 4.5 shows how this can be done. Each strip represents one row of MVL number of pixels, and each row is loaded into a separate vector register. The window of pixels that is being processed will then reside in the same data element over 25 vector registers. After initial setup, the same filtering algorithm as the scalar code can then be used. The vector processor uses masked execution to implement conditionals, and will execute all instructions inside the conditional

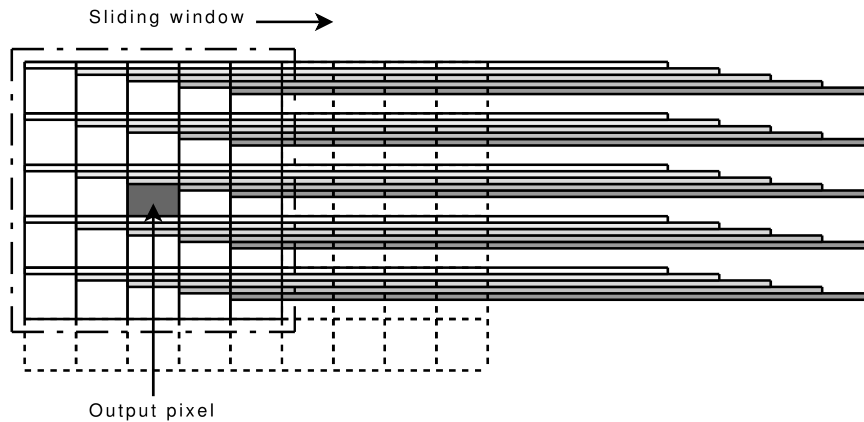

Figure 4.5: Vectorizing the image median filter

```
.L8:
        vmstc      vbase0, r1        ; load address of array[j]
        vld.b      v1, vbase0        ; vector load array[j]
        vld.b      v2, vbase1        ; vector load min
        vcmpltu    vf1, v1, v2       ; compare, set vector flags      5
        vmov.1     v3, v2            ; copy min to temp
        vst.b.1    v1, vbase1        ; vector store array[j] to min
        vst.b.1    v3, vbase0        ; store temp to array[j]
        addi       r3, r3, 1
        addi       r2, r2, 16                                         10
        bge        r7, r3, .L8
```

Figure 4.6: Median filter inner loop vector assembly

block every iteration. Figure 4.6 shows the inner loop vector assembly. `vbase1` is initialized in the outer loop to the address of *min*. This implementation of the median filter can generate as many results at a time as MVL supported by the processor. An 8-lane vector processor will generate 32 results at once, achieving a large speedup over scalar processing. This example highlights the importance of outer-loop parallelism, which the vector architecture, with help from the programmer, can exploit. The median filter vector assembly does not require any modification for soft vector processor configurations with different number of vector lanes.

```
vlds.w      v1, vbase0, vstride4, vinc1     ; stride 4 word load one
                                            ; AES state column (4 times)

                                            ; Begin encryption round loop
vlds.w      v12, vbase1, vstride0, vinc1    ; stride 0 word load one          5
                                            ; round key column (4 times)
vadd        v8, v4, v0                      ; copy last column of AES state
vsrl.vs     v8, v8, r3                      ; shift right 24 bits
vldl        v8, v8                          ; S−box table lookup
vrot.vs     v8, v8, r8                      ; rotate byte                     10
vadd        v7, v3, v0                      ; copy 3rd column of AES state
vsrl.vs     v7, v7, r2                      ; shift right 16 bits
vand.vs     v7, v7, r7                      ; mask with 0x000000ff
vldl        v7, v7                          ; S−box table lookup
vrot.vs     v7, v7, r8                      ; rotate byte                     15
vxor        v8, v8, v7                      ; XOR 2 columns
```

Figure 4.7: Vector assembly for loading AES data and performing AES encryption round

AES Encryption

The AES encryption kernel can also exploit outer-loop parallelism by loading multiple blocks to be encrypted into different vector lanes, achieving speedup over scalar processing. Each column in the 128-bit AES state can fit into one element of a vector register in a 32-bit ($VPUW$) soft vector processor. A vector processor with 8 lanes has MVL of 32, and can encrypt 32 blocks or 4096 bits of data in parallel. The vector assembly code for loading data and for two rotate-lookup steps of a round transformation is shown in Figure 4.7. This implementation first initializes all local memories with the substitution lookup table through broadcast from the scalar core (not shown). The AES state is then loaded from memory with four stride-four, load word instructions, which loads the four columns of multiple 128-bit AES blocks into four vector registers. Each AES block will then reside within a single vector lane, across the four vector registers. All the loaded AES blocks perform parallel table-lookup using the local memories. Assuming the round keys have already been generated, a total of 92 instructions are needed to perform the round transformation. The vector assembly for the AES encryption kernel does not require any modification for processor configurations with different number of vector lanes.

4.2.3 Benchmark Tuning for C2H Compiler

The C2H compiler generates only a single hardware accelerator for a given C function. The only built-in options for customization are pragmas for controlling interrupt behaviour and generation of master ports to access memory. One set of accelerators were generated by directly compiling the kernels with as little modification to the C code as possible. These are named the "push-button" C2H accelerators. To compare the scalability of C2H-generated accelerators versus the soft vector processor, the C source code of the benchmark kernels were manually modified to generate accelerators with different performance and resource tradeoff for a second set of results. Vector processing concepts were applied to the C code by unrolling loops and declaring additional variables to calculate multiple results in parallel.

The median filter kernel did not require any additional optimization besides unrolling.

For the motion estimation kernel, the horizontal-move outer loop was moved inside and unrolled, resulting in one pixel of the moving block being compared to up to 32 possible horizontal locations in parallel, creating 32 accumulators for the SAD operation. One pixel datum is loaded from memory to register once, then re-used 32 times by the 32 accumulators. Hardware knowledge is needed to know that the 32 accumulators will be inferred to hold the intermediate results. The manual unrolling also created very hard-to-maintain C code.

The AES encryption kernel requires four table lookup operations for the four columns in the AES state. These operations were optimized to be performed in parallel by instantiating four separate 256-entry, 32-bit memories local to the accelerator. This was not done automatically by the compiler as the lookup tables were initially declared as global variables, which the compiler automatically placed in main memory. The AES engine was further replicated to increase performance at the expense of increased resources. The effects of these optimizations on performance will be shown in Section 4.4.3.

Table 4.1: Per benchmark soft vector processor configuration parameter settings

	Vector Processor Configuration		
Parameter	*V4-Median*	*V4-Motion*	*V4-AES*
NLane	4	4	4
MVL	16	16	16
VPUW	16	16	32
MemWidth	64	64	64
MemMinWidth	8	8	32
MACL	0	1	0
LMemN	0	0	256
LMemShare	Off	Off	On
Vmult	On	On	On
Vmanip	Off	Off	Off
Vupshift	On	On	Off

4.2.4 Soft Vector Processor Per Benchmark Configuration

To illustrate the scalability of the soft vector processor, several configurations with a different number of vector lanes were generated for each benchmark. These different configurations are named *Vx*, with *x* being the number of vector lanes. Furthermore, for each of the benchmarks, the soft vector processor was customized to the minimal set of features required to execute the benchmark. Table 4.1 shows the configuration parameters for a *V4* processor for each of the benchmarks. Median filtering and motion estimation do not require any 32-bit vector processing, so 16-bit ALUs are used. The AES encryption kernel only requires 32-bit word memory access, so the minimum data width for vector memory accesses is set to 32 bits to remove the byte and halfword memory crossbars.

4.3 Resource Utilization Results

The application-specific configurations of the soft vector processor, C2H accelerators, and the Nios II/s processor were compiled in Quartus II to measure their resource usage. The Nios II/s (standard) processor core is used as the baseline for comparison. The Nios II/s core has a 5-

Table 4.2: Resource usage of vector processor and C2H accelerator configurations

Stratix III (C3)	ALM	DSP Elements	M9K	Fmax
EP3SL50 device	19,000	216	108	–
EP3SL340 device	135,000	576	1,040	–
Nios II/s	537	4	6	203
UTIIe	376	0	3	170
UTIIe+V4F	5,825	25	21	106
UTIIe+V8F	7,501	46	33	110
UTIIe+V16F	10,955	86	56	105
UTIIe+V16 Median	7,330	38	41	111
UTIIe+V16 Motion	7,983	54	41	105
UTIIe+V16 AES	7,381	66	56	113
Stratix II (C3)	**ALM**	**DSP Elements**	**M4K**	**Fmax**
Nios II/s + C2H				
Median Filtering	825	8	4	147
Motion Estimation	972	10	4	121
AES Encryption	2,480	8	6	119

stage pipeline and supports static branch prediction, hardware multiply, and shift. It is further configured with 1 KB instruction cache, 32 KB each of on-chip program and data memory and no debug core. The Nios II/s core and the soft vector processor cores were compiled targetting a Stratix III EP3SL340 device in the C3 speed grade. The C2H accelerators were compiled targetting a Stratix II device, also in the C3 speed grade, because the C2H compiler did not yet support Stratix III devices.

Table 4.2 summarizes the resource usage of several configurations of the vector processor with different number of vector lanes, as well as benchmark-specific configurations of the vector processor and C2H accelerator. The *VxF* configurations of the soft vector processor support the full feature set of the architecture, and can perform byte-level vector memory access. The flexible memory interface which supports bytes, halfwords, and words is the single largest component, using over 50% of the ALMs in the *V4F* processor, and 35% of the ALMs in the *V16F* processor. The *Median*, *Motion*, *AES* configurations are the application-specific configurations used for performance benchmarking.

Table 4.3: Resource usage of vector processor when varying *NLane* and *MemMinWidth* with 128-bit *MemWidth* and otherwise full features

Configuration	*NLane*	*MemMinWidth*	ALM	DSP Elements	M9K	Fmax
UTIIe+V16F	16	8	10,955	86	56	105
UTIIe+V16M16	16	16	9,149	82	57	110
UTIIe+V16M32	16	32	8,163	82	54	107
UTIIe+V8F	8	8	7,501	46	33	110
UTIIe+V8M16	8	16	5,845	42	33	114
UTIIe+V8M32	8	32	5,047	42	30	109
UTIIe+V4F	4	8	5,825	25	21	106
UTIIe+V4M16	4	16	4,278	21	21	113
UTIIe+V4M32	4	32	3,414	21	20	116

Table 4.3 illustrates the range and gradual change in resource utilization when varying *NLane* from 16 – 4, and *MemMinWidth* from 8 – 32 for each number of vector lanes. *MemWidth* is 128-bit for all configurations in the table, and the configurations support the full feature set as in the *VxF* configurations. The *Mx* tag represent the simpler memory crossbars that support only vector memory accesses of width x or greater. Reducing the memory interface to 16-bit halfword, or even 32-bit word access only, leads to a large savings in area. The minor fluctuations in number of M9K memories is due to variations in the synthesis and placement tool solutions.

Table 4.4 shows the effect of successively removing processor features from a baseline *V8F* configuration. The three *V8Cx* custom configurations remove local memory, distributed accumulators and vector lane multipliers, and vector insert/extract and element shifting instructions, respectively. The *V8W16* configuration further uses 16-bit vector lane datapaths. The results illustrate that resource utilization can be improved by tailoring processor features and instruction support to the application, especially by supporting only the required data and ALU width.

Table 4.4: Resource utilization from varying secondary processor parameters

	Vector Processor Configuration (UTIIe+)				
Resource	*V8F*	*V8C1*	*V8C2*	*V8C3*	*V8W16*
ALM	7,501	7,505	6,911	6,688	5,376
DSP Elements	46	46	6	6	6
M9K	33	25	25	25	25
Fmax	110	105	107	113	114
Parameter Values					
NLane	8	8	8	8	8
MVL	32	32	32	32	32
VPUW	32	32	32	32	16
MemWidth	128	128	128	128	128
MemMinWidth	8	8	8	8	8
MACL	2	2	0	0	0
LMemN	256	0	0	0	0
LMemShare	On	Off	Off	Off	Off
Vmult	On	On	Off	Off	Off
Vmanip	On	On	On	Off	Off
Vupshift	On	On	On	Off	Off

4.4 Performance Results

The following sections present performance results of the soft vector processor, and compares them to the Nios II/s processor and the C2H compiler. Performance models were used to estimate the performance of each of the systems, with two models for the soft vector processor. The performance models will be described in the following sections together with the results.

Execution time is used as the metric to compare the different performance models. It is estimated from instruction count, clock cycle count, and operating frequency. Fmax estimates are obtained by compiling the systems in Quartus II 7.2 targetting a EP3SL340 device, and running the TimeQuest timing analyzer in single-corner mode.

4.4.1 Performance Models

Four performance models for the Nios II, soft vector processor, and C2H compiler are compared using execution time for the three benchmark kernels. The four models are Ideal Nios Model, soft vector processor RTL Model, Ideal Vector Model, and C2H Model.

Ideal Nios Model

The Ideal Nios Model simulates ideal execution conditions for a Nios II processor, and is used as the baseline for comparison. The model executes all Nios II assembly instructions in a single cycle; this presumes perfect caching and branch prediction. Execution time is calculated by counting the number of cycles needed to execute the assembly code, and dividing by the processor maximum frequency.

RTL Model

The RTL model measures performance of the soft vector processor by performing a cycle-by-cycle functional simulation in ModelSim of the processor RTL description executing the benchmarks kernels. The RTL implementation of the soft vector processor uses the UTIIe, which is a multicycle processor, as a scalar unit. Each scalar instruction takes 6 cycles, with additional cycles needed for shift instructions. The performance of a multicycle scalar processor is significantly worse than a fully pipelined scalar processor such as the real Nios II. As a result, the performance of the RTL model is highly limited by the use of the UTIIe core. Single cycle memory access is also assumed for the functional simulation, which is realistic for accessing on-chip memories on the FPGA.

Ideal Vector Model

The Ideal Vector Model is used to estimate the potential performance of the soft vector processor with a fully pipelined scalar unit. The Ideal Vector Model incorporates the Ideal Nios Model

Table 4.5: Ideal vector performance model

Instruction Class	Instruction Cycles
Scalar instructions	1
Vector non-memory	$\lceil VL/NLane \rceil$
Vector local memory	$\lceil VL/NLane \rceil$
Vector memory store	$\lceil VL/NLane \rceil$
Vector memory load	$2 + \lceil VL/min(NLane, MaxElem) \rceil + \lceil VL/NLane \rceil$

$MaxElem = MemWidth/MemDataWidth$

$MemDataWidth$ is the data width of the particular vector memory access

for scalar instructions (scalar instructions execute in a single cycle). Vector instructions are separated into different classes, each taking a different number of cycles. Table 4.5 shows the number of cycles needed for each vector instruction class. Memory store instructions take the same number of cycles as non-memory instructions due to write buffering. The first non-constant term in memory load cycles models the number cycles needed to transfer data from memory to the load buffer. *MaxElem* is the maximum number of data elements that can be transferred per cycle through the *MemWidth*-bit memory interface. The second term models transferring data from load buffer to the vector register file. Single cycle memory accesses is again assumed.

Performance of the Ideal Vector Model is calculated by manually counting the number of assembly instructions executed, then multiplying the instruction count of different instruction classes by the cycle per instruction of the instruction class to calculate the total cycle count. Execution time is then calculated by dividing the cycle count by the maximum frequency.

The Ideal Vector Model is optimistic in that pipeline execution and memory accesses are ideal. No pipeline interlocks due to dependent instructions are modeled in the scalar or vector core. However, the Ideal Vector Model is also pessimistic in one aspect because it does not model the concurrent execution of scalar, vector arithmetic, and vector memory instructions that is accounted for in the RTL model.

C2H Model

The C2H model simulates performance of the C2H accelerators in a SOPC system built with the Altera SOPC Builder. Execution times of the accelerators is calculated for the main loop only from loop latency and cycles per loop iteration (CPLI) given in the C2H compilation performance report as well as the Fmax calculated by Quartus II.

Performance Model Usage

No board-level measurement results are presented in this thesis because a Stratix III-based development board (DE3 development board) was not available to test the processor at the time of writing. Also, two different performance models of the soft vector processor are presented because the RTL model alone is severely limited by the performance of the UTIIe and is not indicative of speedups that can be obtained with a fully pipelined scalar unit.

4.4.2 RTL Model Performance

Table 4.6 shows the simulated performance of the soft vector processor on the three benchmarks measured by instruction count and clock cycle count. The clock cycle count and Fmax are used to compute speedup over the baseline Ideal Nios Model. All vector configurations show speedup over the baseline, where greater performance is obtained when more vector lanes are used. The instruction count and clock cycle per result decreases for median filtering and AES encryption as more vector lanes are added because more results are computed in parallel. In particular, the fractional instruction counts for AES encryption results from dividing the total instructions by the number of blocks encrypted in parallel. For the motion estimation kernel, instruction count changes from *V4* to *V8* because the assembly source was modified to handle two SAD calculations in parallel, but no further modification was necessary for *V16*. Vector length is 16 for *V4* and 32 for both *V8* and *V16*. With 16 vector lanes, *V16* can process a fixed 32 length vector in fewer cycles, yielding a smaller cycle count.

Figure 4.8 plots speedup of the soft vector processor, comparing the RTL Model to the Ideal

Table 4.6: Performance measurements of the four performance models

	Ideal Nios Model	C2H Model	Vector Architecture Models V4	V8	V16
Fmax (MHz)					
Median Filtering	203	147	117	108	111
Motion Estimation	203	121	119	108	105
AES Encryption Round	203	119	130	120	113
Dynamic Instruction Count					
Median Filtering (per pixel)	5,375	n/a	166	83	41
Motion Estimation (entire search range)	2,481,344	n/a	113,888	64,185	64,185
AES Encryption Round (per 128-bit block)	94	n/a	5.9	2.9	1.5
Clock Cycles (RTL Model)					
Median Filtering (per pixel)	5,375	2,101	952	484	277
Motion Estimation (entire search range)	2,481,344	694,468	755,040	411,840	333,168
AES Encryption Round (per 128-bit block)	94	25	29.6	14.8	7.4
Speedup (RTL Model)					
Median Filtering (per pixel)	1	2.5	3.3	5.9	10.6
Motion Estimation (entire search range)	1	2.8	1.9	3.2	3.9
AES Encryption Round (per 128-bit block)	1	2.9	2.1	3.8	7.1
Clock Cycles (Ideal Vector Model)					
Median Filtering (per pixel)	-	-	748	374	187
Motion Estimation (entire search range)	-	-	608,480	359,337	229,449
AES Encryption Round (per 128-bit block)	-	-	25	13	6
Speedup (Ideal Vector Model)					
Median Filtering (per pixel)	-	-	4.1	7.6	15.7
Motion Estimation (entire search range)	-	-	2.4	3.7	5.6
AES Encryption Round (per 128-bit block)	-	-	2.5	4.4	8.3

Nios Model results in Table 4.6. This is plotted against the number of ALMs used, normalized to the Nios II/s core. The 4-lane configurations for all three benchmarks have a 64-bit memory interface, while configurations with more vector lanes have a 128-bit memory interface. The 64-bit interface requires fewer ALMs, which explains the "kink" in the *V8* configuration that is the most visible in median filtering.

All three benchmarks show relatively linear increase in performance relative to resource usage, with a dropoff at large number of vector lanes due to decrease in attainable clock speed. The three curves have noticeably different slopes. The vectorized median filtering and AES encryption kernels efficiently exploit outer-loop parallelism, increasing the actual vector length

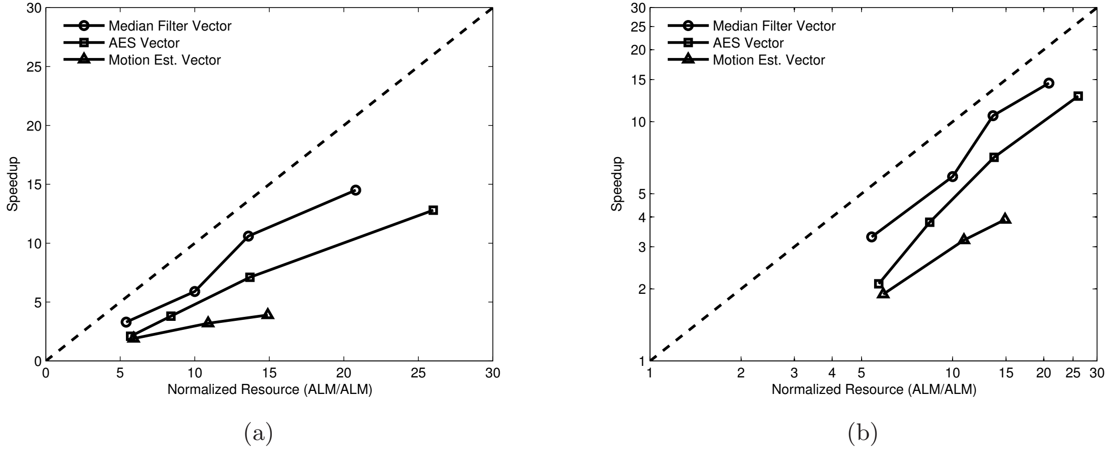

Figure 4.8: RTL Model speedup over Ideal Nios Model shown in linear scale (a), and log-log scale (b). The dashed line shows one to one speedup versus area. The data points for median filtering and AES encryption are for 4, 8, 16, and 32 vector lanes, while the data points for motion estimation are for 4, 8, 16 vector lanes.

of the calculations proportionally to the number of vector lanes. As a result, these two benchmarks achieve good speedup and scalability. Motion estimation has a shallower slope due to the extra instruction overhead of processing two offset blocks in the *V8* processor configuration, and not being able to use the full vector length of the *V16* processor configuration. The shortened vector length causes data dependent instructions to stall the pipeline due to the pipeline length and lack of forwarding multiplexers.

The *V8* configuration for the AES encryption kernel is noticeably smaller due to the simpler memory interface which supports only 32-bit vector memory transfers. This illustrates the large overhead of the vector memory interface. As the number of vector lanes increases to 16 and 32, AES quickly catches up in ALM usage because it uses a 32-bit ALU in the datapath.

4.4.3 Ideal Vector Model

The clock cycle count and speedup of the Ideal Vector Model on the three benchmarks are again shown in Table 4.6. The instruction count of the Ideal Vector Model is the same as the RTL

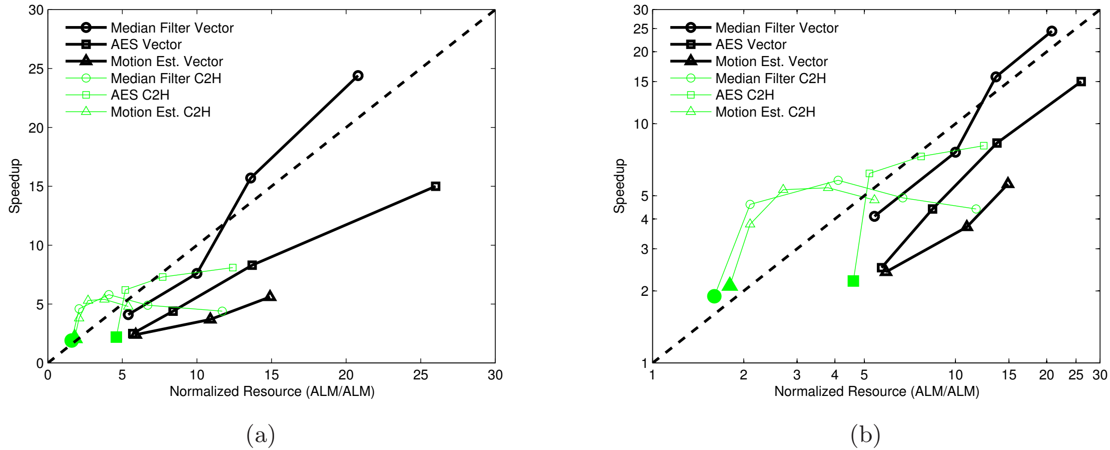

Figure 4.9: Ideal Vector Model and C2H Model speedup over Ideal Nios Model shown in linear scale (a), and log-log scale (b). The dashed line shows one to one speedup versus area. The solid grey points show performance of "push-button" C2H accelerators from direct compilation with no optimizations. The soft vector processor data points for median filtering and AES encryption are for 4, 8, 16, and 32 vector lanes, while the data points for motion estimation are for 4, 8, 16 vector lanes.

Model. The bold/dark lines in Figure 4.9 plot speedup of the Ideal Vector Model over the Ideal Nios Model against FPGA resource usage in number of ALMs, normalized to the Nios II/s core.

The Ideal Vector Model achieves greater speedup than the RTL Model largely due to single cycle scalar instructions. The AES kernel, which has only 2 scalar instructions in the inner loop, performs similarly in the Ideal Vector Model as the RTL Model. The performance of the soft vector processor in the median filter kernel actually exceeds the diagonal for configurations above 8 vector lanes, illustrating the effectiveness of vector processing over MIMD multiprocessing in this type of data-parallel application. Superlinear speedup is possible because the soft vector processor configuration for median filter uses only 16-bit ALUs, while the baseline Nios II/s core is a 32-bit processor. This also illustrates the effectiveness of customizing the soft vector processor to the application. The "kink" in the *V8* configuration for median filtering and motion estimation is again due to the 4-lane configurations having only a 64-bit memory interface, while the 8-lane configurations have a 128-bit memory interface.

4.4.4 C2H Accelerator Results

The C2H accelerator performance numbers are also summarized in Table 4.6, measured by the same clock cycle count and speedup over the Ideal Nios Model. These numbers represent results achieveable by "push-button" acceleration with the compiler, with no modification to the original C code[4]. These results are shown by the solid grey dots in Figure 4.9. Performance of the "push-button" C2H accelerators are similar to those of the *V4* processor configurations, but they do not match those of the larger vector processor configurations.

The thin/gray lines in Figure 4.9 show the performance improvement trend when the C2H accelerators are scaled and optimized as described in Section 4.2.3. Applying vector processing concepts and loop unrolling makes it possible to increase C2H performance at the expense of increased resources.

Although performance increases, notice that it also saturates in all C2H accelerators as memory access becomes the bottleneck. This occurs in the median filter kernel when the loop is unrolled 64 times to find 64 medians in parallel, because each iteration requires 64 new data items to be read and 64 new values to be written back. For motion estimation, comparing a single pixel to 32 copies of the window and reading from 32 possible horizontal locations creates a memory bottleneck.

For AES encryption, memory saturation was initially avoided by adding 4 memory blocks for the 256-entry, 32-bit lookup tables in the Nios II system as a hardware-level optimization. This single change achieved a large speedup over the "push-button" result, indicated by the large jump of the second data point on the curve. Further replicating the AES engine up to four times created contention at the lookup table memories. Resolving this bottleneck would require a dedicated copy of all tables for each engine. In all three benchmarks, additional performance from C2H accelerators is possible by making changes to the Nios II memory system.

[4]Stratix II was used for the C2H estimates because Quartus II does not yet support C2H hardware accelerators for Stratix III-based designs. We expect results to be similar to Stratix II due to the similar ALM architecture.

4.4.5 Vector versus C2H

Figure 4.9 illustrated the difference in scalability of the soft vector processor and C2H accelerators. By scaling the number of vector lanes, the soft vector processor simultaneously scales the vector register file bandwidth. And since most operations inside inner loops of kernels read from and write to vector registers, increasing the register file bandwidth allows more data elements to be accessed and processed in parallel each cycle, increasing performance. The vector programming model abstracts the scalable architecture, providing the same unified memory system to the user across different configurations. This abstraction also allows the user to take advantage of scalable performance with zero hardware design effort.

It is also possible to scale bandwidth to internal register states of the C2H accelerators, and in fact that was already done by manually unrolling loops and declaring additional variables. However, the C2H accelerators are not able to efficiently gather data from main memory when bandwidth of the internal state registers is increased, leading to performance saturation. The flexible vector memory interface of the soft vector processor did accomplish this.

The soft vector processor is an application-independent accelerator, where a single configuration of the processor could have been used to accelerate all three benchmarks (albeit, for slightly lower performance), or multiple portions of the application. Synthesized hardware accelerator tools will require separate accelerators for different sections.

As a rough comparison of effort, it took approximately 3 days to learn to use the C2H compiler, modify the three benchmark kernels so they compile, and apply the simple loop unrolling software optimization. It took another full day to apply the single hardware optimization for the AES benchmark of adding the additional memories. With the vector processor, it took 2 days to design the initial vectorized algorithms and assembly code for all three kernels. The rich instruction set of the processor allows many possible ways to vectorize an algorithm to tune performance using software skills. The vector assembly code of the AES encryption and motion estimation kernels have actually each been rewritten once using a different vectorization method during the course of software development. Each iteration of designing and coding the

vector assembly took less than half a day.

Chapter 5

Conclusions and Future Work

As the performance requirements and complexity of embedded systems continue to increase, designers need a high performance platform that reduces development effort and time-to-market. This thesis applies vector processing to soft processor systems on FPGAs to improve their performance in data-parallel embedded workloads. Previous work in vector microprocessors [6, 12] have demonstrated the feasibility and advantages of accelerating embedded applications with vector processing. The soft vector processor provides the same advantages, with the added benefit of soft processor configurability. Compared to other soft processor accelerator solutions, a soft vector processor allows application acceleration with purely software development effort and requires no hardware knowledge. The application-independent architecture helps separate hardware and software development early in the design flow.

The soft vector processor leverages the configurability of soft processors and FPGAs to provide user-selectable performance and resource tradeoff, and application-specific tuning of the instruction set and processor features. It incorporates a range of configurable parameters that can significantly impact the area and performance of the processor, the most important of which are *NLane* (the number of vector lanes; also determines the maximum vector length supported by the processor), and *VPUW* (the vector lane ALU width). The processor also introduces a flexible and configurable vector memory interface to a single memory bank that supports unit stride, constant stride, and indexed vector memory accesses. The width of the memory interface is configurable, and the interface can be configured to only support a minimum data width of 8-bit bytes, 16-bit halfwords, or 32-bit words for vector memory accesses through the *MemMinWidth* parameter. Setting the minimum data width to 32-bit words, for example,

removes logic for accessing smaller data widths, reducing the size of the memory crossbars and results in a large savings in area. This additional level of configurability enlarges the design space, allowing the designer to make larger tradeoffs than other soft processor solutions.

The soft vector processor is shown in this thesis to outperform an ideal Nios II and the Altera C2H compiler. Functional simulation of the RTL model with a multicycle scalar unit achieved speedup of up to 11× for 16 vector lanes over an *ideal* Nios II processor model. The ideal vector model that incorporates a fully pipelined scalar unit estimates speedup of up to 24× for 32 vector lanes, versus up to 8× for C2H accelerators. By customizing the soft processor to the benchmarks, area savings of up to 33% was achieved for 16 vector lanes compared to a generic configuration of the processor that supported the full range of features.

The instruction set of the soft vector processor is adapted from the VIRAM instruction set. The architecture is tailored to the Stratix III FPGA, and introduces novel features to take advantage of the embedded memory blocks and hardwired DSP blocks. The datapath uses a partitioned register file to reduce complexity of the vector register file, and executes instructions in a novel hybrid vector-SIMD fashion to speed instruction execution. MAC units are added for accumulating multi-dimensional data and vector sum reduction. Together with new vector adjacent element shift and vector absolute difference instructions, they significantly reduce the execution time of the motion estimation kernel over an implementation with the VIRAM instruction set. A vector lane local memory is also introduced for table lookup operations within a vector lane, and is used by the AES encryption kernel.

A soft vector processor has advantages over many currently available soft processor accelerator tools, and is most suitable when rapid development time is required, or when a hardware designer is not available, or when several different applications must share a single accelerator.

5.1 Future Work

This thesis has described a prototype of a soft vector processor targeted to FPGAs, and illustrated its advantages and potential performance. The implementation details of the soft vector processor prototype can be optimized and improved in many ways. However, the next sections will focus on possible major improvements to the processor architecture that can potentially have a significant impact on performance or area usage.

Pipelined and Multiple-Issue Scalar Unit

Performance of a vector processor depends significantly on perfomance of the scalar unit on non-vectorizable portions of the application due to Amdahl's Law. Implementing a fully-pipelined scalar unit in the soft vector processor will boost the performance of the current processor prototype tremendously, as shown by the results in this thesis, and would be the logical next step in improving the processor.

Even with a fully-pipelined scalar unit, the soft vector processor would still be limited by the single instruction fetch from sharing a common fetch stage between the scalar and vector units. As the scalar and vector units already have separate decode logic, a multiple instruction fetch and issue core can be considered to further improve pipeline utilization. To avoid the complexity of superscalar processors, the compiler can statically arrange the code (similar to VLIW techniques) such that vector instructions always enter the vector issue pipeline, and scalar instructions always enter the scalar pipeline.

Addition of Caches

Modern processors rely on multiple levels of cache to bridge the gap between processor clock speed and speed of external memory. Instruction and data caches can be implemented for the scalar unit of the soft vector processor in the same manner as other RISC processor cores. Synchronization mechanisms will be required to keep the data cache of the scalar unit in sync

with vector memory accesses. Traditional vector processors like the NEC SX-7 [69] do not employ data caches for the vector core, and instead hide memory latency by overlapping vector execution and memory fetching. The soft vector processor is similar in this respect, plus the fast on-chip SRAMs of FPGAs provide low latency memory access (if on-chip SRAM is used as main data memory).

Integration as Nios II Custom Instruction

Nios II custom instructions with internal register file allow a single accelerator to execute up to 256 different instructions. This type of accelerator is tightly coupled to the Nios II processor, and can read operands directly from the Nios II register file. The soft vector processor can potentially be implemented as such a custom instruction, which would allow it to integrate to a fully-pipelined Nios II processor. The 256 custom instruction limit would require processor features and instruction set to be stripped down to reduce the number of instructions and variations. The opcode formats will also have to be significantly altered. This integration was not considered initially as it was unclear the number of vector instructions the soft vector processor should implement.

Permutation & Shuffle Network

One of the underlying assumptions of the vector programming model is that different data elements within a single vector are independent. However, this does not hold true in all applications, and it is sometimes necessary to manipulate a vector to reorder data elements within a vector register. The butterfly structure in the fast fourier transform (FFT) is one prime example. To address this need, microprocessor SIMD extensions frequently provide a shuffle instruction that allows arbitrary shuffling of subwords, which is akin to shuffling of data elements within a vector. The vector manipulation instructions in this soft vector processor provide limited support for reordering data elements. VIRAM provides `vhalfup` and `vhalfdn` instructions to support FFT butterfly transformations, but no support for general shuffling.

A general permutation or shuffle network can be implemented to support these operations, or an application-specific permutation network can be devised and configured with the rest of the soft processor. Several efficient software permutation networks and instructions for cryptography are considered in [70], and many of the ideas can be applied to the soft vector processor. Another alternative is to implement arbitrary shuffling using the memory crossbars as in [23]. The vector insert and vector extract operations in the soft vector processor are already implemented this way.

Improvements to Configurable Memory Interface

The large overhead of the vector memory interface has been noted throughout this thesis. Configurability was introduced into the vector memory interface to reduce its resource usage by removing logic for memory access patterns not used in the benchmark kernel. Much of the complexity stemmed from supporting complex access patterns on a single bank of memory. Implementing a multi-banked and interleaved memory system like [23] may prove to be simpler and more scalable as data alignment problems would be reduced. For example, it will no longer be necessary to align data across memory words using a selectable delay network. In the extreme, the memory interface can also be extended to multiple off-chip memory banks to increase memory bandwidth.

Stream processors like [15] can describe more complex memory access patterns using stream descriptors. The key additions are two parameters for memory access in addition to *stride*: *span*, and *skip*. Span describes how many elements to access before applying the second level *skip* offset. A streaming memory interface can describe complex data accesses with fewer instructions, and the streaming nature of data potentially increases the amount of parallelism that can be exploited for acceleration, improving performance.

Adopting Architectural Features from Other Vector Processors

More advanced vector architectures that depart from traditional vector architecture have been proposed recently, and it would be instructive to evaluate these new architectural features for their suitability on FPGAs. CODE [6] is a clustered vector processor microarchitecture that supports the VIRAM ISA. Each cluster contains a single vector functional unit supporting one class of vector instructions, and a small vector register file that stores a small number of short vectors. The processor uses register renaming to issue instructions to different clusters, and to track architectural vector registers. The clusters communicate through an on-chip network for vector operation chaining. In general, CODE outperforms VIRAM by 21% to 42%, depending on the number of lanes within each microarchitecture, but underperforms VIRAM in benchmarks with many inter-cluster transfers [6].

The vector-thread (VT) architecture [17] combines multi-threaded execution with vector execution, allowing the processor to take advantage of both data-level and thread-level parallelism, and even instruction-level parallelism within functional units. The architecture consists of a control processor, and a number of virtual processors in vector lanes. These virtual processors can execute a common code block to simulate SIMD execution as in traditional vector processors, or can each branch from the main execution path to execute its own stream of instructions. The SCALE instantiation of the VT architecture also incorporates the clustering idea of CODE to form several execution clusters with different functionality.

Both of the above architectures break up the traditionally large, centralized register file and lock-step functional units into smaller independent clusters. The smaller cluster register files are actually more suited to the small embedded memory blocks of FPGAs. It would be interesting to investigate whether the rest of the architecture can also be mapped efficiently to an FPGA.

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Appendix A

Soft Vector Processor ISA

A.1 Introduction

A vector processor is a single-instruction-multiple-data (SIMD) array of virtual processors (VPs). The number of VPs is the same as the vector length (VL). All VPs execute the same operation specified by a single vector instruction. Physically, the VPs are grouped in parallel datapaths called *vector lanes*, each containing a section of the vector register file and a complete copy of all functional units.

This vector architecture is defined as a co-processor unit to the Altera Nios II soft processor. The ISA is designed with the Altera Stratix III family of FPGAs in mind. The architecture of the Stratix III FPGA drove many of the design decisions such as number of vector registers and the supported DSP features.

The instruction set in this ISA borrows heavily from the VIRAM instruction set, which is designed as vector extensions to the MIPS-IV instruction set. A subset of the VIRAM instruction set is adopted, complemented by several new instructions to support new features introduced in this ISA.

Differences of this ISA from the VIRAM ISA are:

- increased number of vector registers,
- different instruction encoding,
- configurable processor parameters,
- sequential memory consistency instead of VP-consistency,
- no barrier instructions to order memory accesses,

- new multiply-accumulate (MAC) units and associated instructions (`vmac`, `vccacc`, `vcczacc`),
- new vector lane local memory and associated instructions (`vldl`, `vstl`),
- new adjacent element shift instruction (`vupshift`),
- new vector absolute difference instruction (`vabsdiff`),
- no support for floating point arithmetic,
- fixed-point arithmetic not yet implemented, but defined as a future extension,
- no support for virtual memory or speculative execution.

A.1.1 Configurable Architecture

This ISA specifies a set of features for an entire family of soft vector processors with varying performance and resource utilization. The ISA is intended to be implemented by a CPU generator, which would generate an instance of the processor based on a number of user-selectable configuration parameters. An implementation or instance of the architecture is not required to support all features of the specifcation. Table A.1 lists the configurable parameters and their descriptions, as well as typical values. These parameters will be referred to throughout the specification.

NLane and *MVL* are the the primary determinants of performance of the processor. They control the number of parallel vector lanes and functional units that are available in the processor, and the maximum length of vectors that can be stored in the vector register file. *MVL* will generally be a multiple of *NLane*. The minimum vector length should be at least 16. *VPUW* and *MemMinWidth* control the width of the VPs and the minimum data width that can be accessed by vector memory instructions. These two parameters have a significant impact on the resource utilization of the processor. The remaining parameters are used to enable or disable optional features of the processor.

Table A.1: List of configurable processor parameters

Parameter	Description	Typical
NLane	Number of vector lanes	4–128
MVL	Maximum vector length	16–512
VPUW	Processor data width (bits)	8,16,32
MemWidth	Memory interface width (bits)	32, 64, 128
MemMinWidth	Minimum accessible data width in memory	8,16,32
MACL	MAC chain length (0 is no MAC)	0,1,2,4
LMemN	Local memory number of words	0–1024
LMemShare	Shared local memory address space within lane	On/Off
Vmult	Vector lane hardware multiplier	On/Off
Vupshift	Vector adjacent element shifting	On/Off
Vmanip	Vector manipulation instructions (vector insert/extract)	On/Off

A.1.2 Memory Consistency

The memory consistency model used in this processor is sequential consistency. Order of vector and scalar memory instructions is preserved according to program order. There is no guarantee of ordering between VPs during a vector indexed store, unless an ordered indexed store instruction is used, in which case the VPs access memory in order starting from the lowest vector element.

A.2 Vector Register Set

The following sections describe the register states in the soft vector processor. Control registers and distributed accumulators will also be described.

A.2.1 Vector Registers

The architecture defines 64 vector registers directly addressable from the instruction opcode. Vector register zero (`vr0`) is fixed at 0 for all elements.

Table A.2: List of vector flag registers

Hardware Name	Software Name	Contents
$vf0	vfmask0	Primary mask; set to 1 to disable VP operation
$vf1	vfmask1	Secondary mask; set to 1 to disable VP operation
$vf2	vfgr0	General purpose
...	...	...
$vf15	vfgr13	General purpose
$vf16		Integer overflow
$vf17		Fixed-point saturate
$vf18		*Unused*
...	...	
$vf29		*Unused*
$vf30	vfzero	All zeros
$vf31	vfone	All ones

A.2.2 Vector Scalar Registers

Vector scalar registers are located in the scalar core of the vector processor. As this architecture targets a Nios II scalar core, the scalar registers are defined by the Nios II ISA. The ISA defines thirty-two 32-bit scalar registers. Vector-scalar instructions and certain memory operations require a vector register and a scalar register operand. Vector scalar register values can also be transferred to and from vector registers or vector control registers using the `vext.vs`, `vins.vs`, `vmstc`, `vmcts` instructions.

A.2.3 Vector Flag Registers

The architecture defines 32 vector flag registers. The flag registers are written to by comparison instructions and are operated on by flag logical instructions. Almost all instructions in the instruction set support conditional execution using one of two vector masks, specified by a mask bit in most instruction opcodes. The vector masks are stored in the first two vector flag registers. Writing a value of 1 into a VP's mask register will cause the VP to be disabled for operations that specify the mask register. Table A.2 shows a complete list of flag registers.

Table A.3: List of control registers

Hardware Name	Software Name	Description
\$vc0	VL	Vector length
\$vc1	*VPUW*	Virtual processor width
\$vc2	vindex	Element index for insert (vins) and extract (vext)
\$vc3	vshamt	Fixed-point shift amount
...	...	...
\$vc28	*ACCncopy*	Number of `vccacc/vcczacc` to sum reduce MVL vector
\$vc29	*NLane*	Number of vector lanes
\$vc30	*MVL*	Maximum vector length
\$vc31	*logMVL*	Base 2 logarithm of MVL
\$vc32	vstride0	Stride register 0
...	...	...
\$vc39	vstride7	Stride register 7
\$vc40	vinc0	Auto-increment Register 0
...	...	...
\$vc47	vinc7	Auto-increment Register 7
\$vc48	vbase0	Base register 0
...	...	...
\$vc63	vbase15	Base register 15

A.2.4 Vector Control Registers

Table A.3 lists the vector control registers in the soft vector processor. The registers in italics hold a static value that is initialized at compile time, and is determined by the configuration parameters of the specific instance of the architecture.

The `vindex` control register holds the vector element index that controls the operation of vector insert and extract instructions. The register is writeable. For vector-scalar insert/extract, `vindex` specifies which data element within the vector register will be written to/read from by the scalar core. For vector-vector insert/extract, `vindex` specifies the index of the starting data element for the vector insert/extract operation.

The `ACCncopy` control register specifies how many times the copy-from-accumulator instructions (`vccacc`, `vcczacc`) needs to be executed to sum-reduce an entire MVL vector. If the value

is not one, multiple multiply-accumulate and copy-from-accumulator instructions will be needed to reduce a MVL vector. Its usage will be discussed in more detail in Section A.2.5.

A.2.5 Multiply-Accumulators for Vector Sum Reduction

The architecture defines distributed MAC units for multiplying and sum reducing vectors. The MAC units are distributed across the vector lanes, and the number of MAC units can vary across implementations. The `vmac` instruction multiplies two inputs and accumulates the result into accumulators within the MAC units. The `vcczacc` instruction sum reduces the MAC unit accumulator contents, copies the final result to element zero of a vector register, and zeros the accumulators. Together, the two instructions `vmac` and `vcczacc` perform a multiply and sum reduce operation. Multiple vectors can be accumulated and sum reduced by executing `vmac` multiple times. Since the MAC units sum multiplication products internally, they cannot be used for purposes other than multiply-accumulate-sum reduce operations.

Depending on the number of vector lanes, the `vcczacc` instruction may not be able to sum reduce all MAC unit accumulator contents. In such cases it will instead copy a partially sum-reduced result vector to the destination register. Figure A.1 shows how the MAC units generate a result vector and how the result vector is written to the vector register file. The MAC chain length is specified by the $MACL$ parameter. The `vcczacc` instruction sets VL to the length of the partial result vector as a side effect, so the partial result vector can be again sum-reduced using the `vmac, vcczacc` sequence. The `ACCncopy` control register specifies how many times `vcczacc` needs to be executed (including the first) to reduce the entire MVL vector to a single result in the destination register.

A.2.6 Vector Lane Local Memory

The soft vector architecture supports a vector lane local memory. The local memory is partitioned into private sections for each VP if the *LMemShare* option is off. Turning the option on allows the local memory block to be shared between all VPs in a vector lane. This mode is

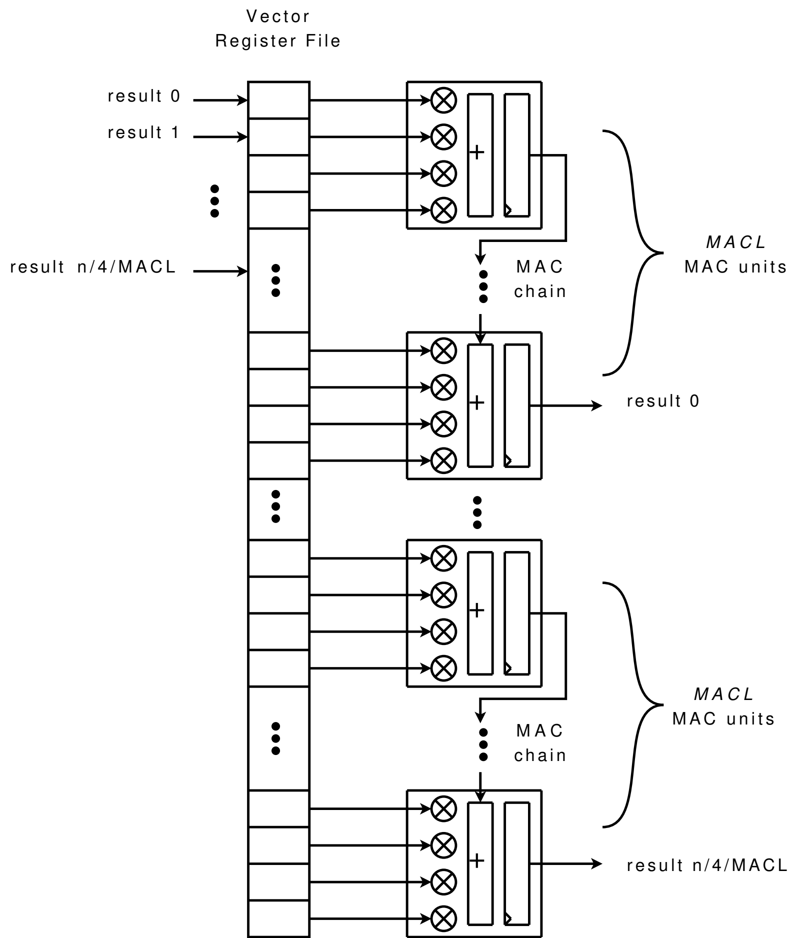


Figure A.1: Connection between distributed MAC units and the vector register file

useful if all VPs need to access the same lookup table data, and allows for a larger table due to shared storage. With *LMemShare*, the *VL* for a local memory write must be less than or equal to *NLane* to ensure VPs do not overwrite each other's data.

The address and data width of the local memory is *VPUW*, and the number of words in the memory is given by *LMemN*. The local memory is addressed in units of *VPUW* wide words. Data to be written into the local memory can be taken from a vector register, or the value from a scalar register can be broadcast to all local memories. A scalar broadcast writes a data value from a scalar register to the VP local memory at an address given by a vector register. This

facilitates filling the VP local memory with fixed lookup tables computed by the scalar unit.

A.3 Instruction Set

The following sections describe in detail the instruction set of the soft vector processor, and different variations of the vector instructions.

A.3.1 Data Types

The data widths supported by the processor are 32-bit words, 16-bit halfwords, and 8-bit bytes, and both signed and unsigned data types. However, not all operations are supported for 32-bit words. Most notably, 32-bit multiply-accumulate is absent.

A.3.2 Addressing Modes

The instruction set supports three vector addressing modes:

1. Unit stride access
2. Constant stride access
3. Indexed offsets access

The vector lane local memory uses register addressing with no offset.

A.3.3 Flag Register Use

Almost all instructions can specify one of two vector mask registers in the opcode to use as an execution mask. By default, `vfmask0` is used as the vector mask. Writing a value of 1 into the mask register will cause that VP to be disabled for operations that use the mask. Some instructions, such as flag logical operations, are not masked.

A.3.4 Instructions

The instruction set includes the following categories of instructions:

1. Vector Integer Arithmetic Instructions
2. Vector Logical Instructions
3. Vector Fixed-Point Arithmetic Instructions
4. Vector Flag Processing Instructions
5. Vector Processing Intructions
6. Memory Instructions

A.4 Instruction Set Reference

The complete instruction set is listed in the following sections, separated by instruction type. Table A.4 describes the possible qualifiers in the assembly mnemonic of each instruction.

Table A.4: Instruction qualifiers

Qualifier	Meaning	Notes
op.vv *op*.vs *op*.sv	Vector-vector Vector-scalar Scalar-vector	Vector arithmetic instructions may take one source operand from a scalar register. A vector-vector operation takes two vector source operands; a vector-scalar operation takes its second operand from the scalar register file; a scalar-vector operation takes its first operand from the scalar register file. The .sv instruction type is provided to support non-commutative operations.
op.b *op*.h *op*.w	1B Byte 2B Halfword 4B Word	The saturate instruction, and all vector memory instructions need to specify the width of integer data.
op.1	Use vfmask1 as the mask	By default, the vector mask is taken from vfmask0. This qualifier selects vfmask1 as the vector mask.

In the following tables, instructions in italics are not yet implemented.

A.4.1 Integer Instructions

Name	*Mnemonic*	*Syntax*	*Summary*
Absolute Value	`vabs`	`.vv[.1] vD, vA`	Each unmasked VP writes into vD the absolute value of vA.
Absolute Difference	`vabsdiff`	`.vv[.1] vD, vA, vB` `.vs[.1] vD, vA, rS`	Each unmasked VP writes into vD the absolute difference of vA and vB/rS.
Add	`vadd` `vaddu`	`.vv[.1] vD, vA, vB` `.vs[.1] vD, vA, rS`	Each unmasked VP writes into vD the signed/unsigned integer sum of vA and vB/rS.

Subtract	`vsub`
	`vsubu`
		`.vv[.1] vD, vA, vB`
		`.vs[.1] vD, vA, rS`
		`.sv[.1] vD, rS, vB`
			Each unmasked VP writes into vD the signed/unsigned integer result of vA/rS minus vB/rS.

Multiply Hi	`vmulhi` `vmulhiu`	`.vv[.1] vD, vA, vB` `.vs[.1] vD, vA, rS`	Each unmasked VP multiplies vA and vB/rS and stores the upper half of the signed/unsigned product into vD.
Multiply Low	`vmullo` `vmullou`	`.vv[.1] vD, vA, vB` `.vs[.1] vD, vA, rS`	Each unmasked VP multiplies vA and vB/rS and stores the lower half of the signed/unsigned product into vD.

Integer Divide	*vdiv*
	vdivu
		`.vv[.1] vD, vA, vB`
		`.vs[.1] vD, vA, rS`
		`.sv[.1] vD, rS, vB`
			Each unmasked VP writes into vD the signed/unsigned result of vA/rS divided by vB/rS, where at least one source is a vector.

Shift Right Arithmetic	`vsra`	`.vv[.1] vD, vA, vB`
		`.vs[.1] vD, vA, rS`
		`.sv[.1] vD, rS, vB`
			Each unmasked VP writes into vD the result of arithmetic right shifting vB/rS by the number of bits specified in vA/rS, where at least one source is a vector.

Minimum	`vmin` `vminu`	`.vv[.1] vD, vA, vB` `.vs[.1] vD, vA, rS`	Each unmasked VP writes into vD the minimum of vA and vB/rS.
Maximum	`vmax` `vmaxu`	`.vv[.1] vD, vA, vB` `.vs[.1] vD, vA, rS`	Each unmasked VP writes into vD the maximum of vA and vB/rS.
Compare Equal, Compare Not Equal	`vcmpe` `vcmpne`	`.vv[.1] vF, vA, vB` `.vs[.1] vF, vA, rS`	Each unmasked VP writes into vF the boolean result of comparing vA and vB/rS

Name	*Mnemonic*	*Syntax*	*Summary*

Compare Less Than	`vcmplt`
	`vcmpltu`
		`.vv[.1] vF, vA, vB`
		`.vs[.1] vF, vA, rS`
		`.sv[.1] vF, rS, vB`
			Each unmasked VP writes into vF the boolean result of whether vA/rS is less than vB/rS, where at least one source is a vector.

Compare Less Than or Equal	`vcmple`
	`vcmpleu`
		`.vv[.1] vF, vA, vB`
		`.vs[.1] vF, vA, rS`
		`.sv[.1] vF, rS, vB`
			Each unmasked VP writes into vF the boolean result of whether vA/rS is less than or equal to vB/rS, where at least one source is a vector.

Multiply Accumulate	`vmac` `vmacu`	`.vv[.1] vA, vB` `.vs[.1] vD, vA, rS`	Each unmasked VP calculates the product of vA and vB/rS. The products of vector elements are summed, and the summation results are added to the distributed accumulators.
Compress Copy from Accumulator	`vccacc`	`vD`	The contents of the distributed accumulators are reduced, and the result written into vD. Only the bottom $VPUW$ bits of the result are written. If the number of accumulators is greater than $MACL$, multiple partial results will be generated by the accumulate chain, and they are compressed such that the partial results form a contiguous vector in vD. If the number of accumulators is less than or equal to $MACL$, a single result is written into element zero of vD. This instruction is not masked and the elements of vD beyond the partial result vector length are not modified. Additionally, VL is set to the number of elements in the partial result vector as a side effect.
Compress Copy and Zero Accumulator	`vcczacc`	`vD`	The operation is identical to `vccacc`, except the distributed accumulators are zeroed as a side effect.

A.4.2 Logical Instructions

Name	Mnemonic	Syntax	Summary
And	vand	.vv[.1] vD, vA, vB .vs[.1] vD, vA, rS	Each unmasked VP writes into vD the logical AND of vA and vB/rS.
Or	vor	.vv[.1] vD, vA, vB .vs[.1] vD, vA, rS	Each unmasked VP writes into vD the logical OR of vA and vB/rS.
Xor	vxor	.vv[.1] vD, vA, vB .vs[.1] vD, vA, rS	Each unmasked VP writes into vD the logical XOR of vA and vB/rS.
Shift Left Logical	vsll	.vv[.1] vD, vA, vB .vs[.1] vD, vA, rS .sv[.1] vD, rS, vB	Each unmasked VP writes into vD the result of logical left shifting vB/rS by the number of bits specified in vA/rS, where at least one source is a vector.
Shift Right Logical	vsrl	.vv[.1] vD, vA, vB .vs[.1] vD, vA, rS .sv[.1] vD, rS, vB	Each unmasked VP writes into vD the result of logical right shifting vB/rS by the number of bits specified in vA/rS, where at least one source is a vector.
Rotate Right	vrot	.vv[.1] vD, vA, vB .vs[.1] vD, vA, rS .sv[.1] vD, rS, vB	Each unmasked VP writes into vD the result of rotating vA/rS right by the number of bits specified in vB/rS, where at least one source is a vector.

A.4.3 Fixed-Point Instructions (Future Extension)

Name	*Mnemonic*	*Syntax*	*Summary*
Saturate	*vsat* *vsatu*	{.b, .h, .w} [.1] vD, vA	Each unmasked VP places into vD the result of saturating vA to a signed/unsigned integer narrower than the VP width. The result is sign/zero-extended to the VP width.

Name	*Mnemonic*	*Syntax*	*Summary*
Saturate Signed to Unsigned	*vsatsu*	{.b, .h, .w} [.1] vD, vA	Each unmasked VP places into vD the result of saturating vA from a signed VP width value to an unsigned value that is as wide or narrower than the VP width. The result is zero-extended to the VP width.
Saturating Add	*vsadd* *vsaddu*	.vv[.1] vD, vA, vB .vs[.1] vD, vA, rS	Each unmasked VP writes into vD the signed/unsigned integer sum of vA and vB/rS. The sum saturates to the VP width instead of overflowing.
Saturating Subtract	*vssub* *vssubu*	.vv[.1] vD, vA, vB .vs[.1] vD, vA, rS .sv[.1] vD, rS, vB	Each unmasked VP writes into vD the signed/unsigned integer subtraction of vA/rS and vB/rS, where at least one source is a vector. The difference saturates to the VP width instead of overflowing.
Shift Right and Round	*vsrr* *vsrru*	[.1] vD, vA	Each unmasked VP writes into vD the right arithmetic/logical shift of vD. The result is rounded as per the fixed-point rounding mode. The shift amount is taken from vc_{vshamt}.
Saturating Left Shift	*vsls* *vslsu*	[.1] vD, vA	Each unmasked VP writes into vD the signed/unsigned saturating left shift of vD. The shift amount is taken from vc_{vshamt}.
Multiply High	*vxmulhi* *vxmulhiu*	.vv[.1] vD, vA, vB .vs[.1] vD, vA, rS	Each unmasked VP computes the signed/unsigned integer product of vA and vB/rS, and stores the upper half of the product into vD after arithmetic right shift and fixed-point round. The shift amount is taken from vc_{vshamt}

Name	*Mnemonic*	*Syntax*	*Summary*
Multiply Low	*vxmullo* *vxmullou*	`.vv[.1] vD, vA, vB` `.vs[.1] vD, vA, rS`	Each unmasked VP computes the signed/unsigned integer product of vA and vB/rS, and stores the lower half of the product into vD after arithmetic right shift and fixed-point round. The shift amount is taken from vc_{vshamt}
Copy from Accumulator and Saturate	*vxccacc*	`[.1] vD`	The contents of the distributed accumulators are reduced, and the result written into vD. Only the bottom *VPUW* bits of the result are written. If the number of accumulators is greater than *MACL*, multiple partial results will be generated by the accumulate chain, and they are compressed such that the partial results form a contiguous vector in vD. If the number of accumulators is less than or equal to *MACL*, a single result is written into element zero of vD. This instruction is not masked and the elements of vD beyond the partial result vector length are not modified. Additionally, VL is set to the number of elements in the partial result vector as a side effect.
Compress Copy from Accumulator, Saturate and Zero	*vxcczacc*	`vD[.1]`	The operation is identical to `vxccacc`, except the distributed accumulators are zeroed as a side effect.

A.4.4 Memory Instructions

Name	*Mnemonic*	*Syntax*	*Summary*
Unit Stride Load	vld vldu	{.b, .h, .w} [.1] vD, vbase [,vinc]	The VPs perform a contiguous vector load into vD. The base address is given by the control register vbase, and must be aligned to the width of the data being accessed. The signed increment vinc (default is vinc0) is added to vbase as a side effect. The width of each element in memory is given by the opcode. The loaded value is sign/zero-extended to the VP width.
Unit Stride Store	vst	{.b, .h, .w} [.1] vA, vbase [,vinc]	The VPs perform a contiguous vector store of vA. The base address is given by vbase (default vbase0), and must be aligned to the width of the data being accessed. The signed increment in vinc (default is vinc0) is added to vbase as a side effect. The width of each element in memory is given by the opcode. The register value is truncated from the VP width to the memory width. The VPs access memory in order.

Name	*Mnemonic*	*Syntax*	*Summary*
Constant Stride Load	vlds vldsu	{.b, .h, .w} [.1] vD, vbase, vstride [,vinc]	The VPs perform a strided vector load into vD. The base address is given by vbase (default vbase0), and must be aligned to the width of the data being accessed. The signed stride is given by vstride (default is vstride0). The stride is in terms of elements, not in terms of bytes. The signed increment vinc (default is vinc0) is added to vbase as a side effect. The width of each element in memory is given by the opcode. The loaded value is sign/zero-extended to the VP width.
Constant Stride Store	vsts	{.b, .h, .w} [.1] vA, vbase, vstride [,vinc]	The VPs perform a contiguous store of vA. The base address is given by vbase (default vbase0), and must be aligned to the width of the data being accessed. The signed stride is given by vstride (default is vstride0). The stride is in terms of elements, not in terms of bytes. The signed increment in vinc (default is vinc0) is added to vbase as a side effect. The width of each element in memory is given by the opcode. The register value is truncated from the VP width to the memory width. The VPs access memory in order.

Name	*Mnemonic*	*Syntax*	*Summary*
Indexed Load	vldx vldxu	{.b, .h, .w} [.1] vD, vOff, vbase	The VPs perform an indexed-vector load into vD. The base address is given by vbase (default vbase0), and must be aligned to the width of the data being accessed. The signed offsets are given by vOff and are in units of bytes, not in units of elements. The effective addresses must be aligned to the width of the data in memory. The width of each element in memory is given by the opcode. The loaded value is sign/zero-extended to the VP width.
Unordered Indexed Store	*vstxu*	{.b, .h, .w} [.1] vA, vOff vbase	The VPs perform an indexed-vector store of vA. The base address is given by vbase (default vbase0). The signed offsets are given by vOff. The offsets are in units of bytes, not in units of elements. The effective addresses must be aligned to the width of the data being accessed. The register value is truncated from the VP width to the memory width. The stores may be performed in any order.
Ordered Indexed Store	vstx	{.b, .h, .w} [.1] vA, vOff vbase	Operation is identical to vstxu, except that the VPs access memory in order.
Local Memory Load	vldl	.vv[.1] vD, vA	Each unmasked VP performs a register-indirect load into vD from the vector lane local memory. The address is specified in vA/rS, and is in units of *VPUW*. The data width is the same as VP width.

Name	*Mnemonic*	*Syntax*	*Summary*
Local Memory Store	`vstl`	`.vv[.1] vA, vB` `.vs[.1] vA, rS`	Each unmasked VP performs a register-indirect store of vB/rS into the local memory. The address is specified in vA, and is in units of *VPUW*. The data width is the same as VP width. If the scalar operand width is larger than the local memory width, the upper bits are discarded.
Flag Load	`vfld`	`vF, vbase [,vinc]`	The VPs perform a contiguous vector flag load into vF. The base address is given by vbase, and must be aligned to *VPUW*. The bytes are loaded in little-endian order. This instruction is not masked.
Flag Store	`vfst`	`vF, vbase [,vinc]`	The VPs perform a contiguous vector flag store of vF. The base address is given by vbase, and must be aligned to *VPUW*. A multiple of *VPUW* bits are written regardless of vector length (or more precisely, $\lceil (VL/VPUW) * VPUW \rceil$ flag bits are written). The bytes are stored in little-endian order. This instruction is not masked.

A.4.5 Vector Processing Instructions

Name	Mnemonic	Syntax	Summary

Merge	`vmerge`	`.vv[.1] vD, vA, vB`
		`.vs[.1] vD, vA, rS`
		`.sv[.1] vD, rS, vB`
			Each VP copies into vD either vA/rS if the mask is 0, or vB/rS if the mask is 1. At least one source is a vector. Scalar sources are truncated to the VP width.

Vector Insert	`vins`	`.vv vD, vA`	The leading portion of vA is inserted into vD. vD must be different from vA. Leading and trailing entries of vD are not touched. The lower vc_{logmvl} bits of vector control register vc_{vindex} specifies the starting position in vD. The vector length specifies the number of elements to transfer. This instruction is not masked.
Vector Extract	`vext`	`.vv vD, vA`	A portion of vA is extracted to the front of vD. vD must be different from vA. Trailing entries of vD are not touched. The lower vc_{logmvl} bits of vector control register vc_{vindex} specifies the starting position in vD. The vector length specifies the number of elements to transfer. This instruction is not masked.
Scalar Insert	`vins`	`.vs vD, rS`	The contents of rS are written into vD at position vc_{vindex}. The lower vc_{logmvl} bits of vc_{vindex} are used. This instruction is not masked and does not use vector length.
Scalar Extract	`vext` `vextu`	`.vs rS, vA`	Element vc_{vindex} of vA is written into rS. The lower vc_{logmvl} bits of vc_{index} are used to determine the element in vA to be extracted. The value is sign/zero-extended. This instruction is not masked and does not use vector length.
Compress	*vcomp*	`[.1] vD, vA`	All unmasked elements of vA are concatenated to form a vector whose length is the population count of the ask (subject to vector length). The result is placed at the front of vD, leaving trailing elements untouched. vD must be different from vA.

Expand	*vexpand*	`[.1] vD, vA`	The first n elements of vA are written into the unmasked positions of vD, where n is the population count of the mask (subject to vector length). Masked positions in vD are not touched. vD must be different from vA.
Vector Element Shift	`vupshift`	`vD, vA`	The contents of vA are shifted up by one element, and the result is written to vD (vD[i] = vA[i+1]). The first element in vA is wrapped to the last element (MVL-1) in vD. This instruction is not masked and does not use vector length.

A.4.6 Vector Flag Processing Instructions

Name	Mnemonic	Syntax	Summary
Scalar Flag Insert	`vfins`	`.vs vF, rS`	The boolean value of rS is written into vF at position vc_{vindex}. The lower vc_{logmvl} bits of vc_{vindex} are used. This instruction is not masked and does not use vector length.
And	`vfand`	`.vv vFD, vFA, vFB` `.vs vFD, vFA, rS`	Each VP writes into vFD the logical AND of vFA and vFB/rS. This instruction is not masked, but is subject to vector length.
Or	`vfor`	`.vv vFD, vFA, vFB` `.vs vFD, vFA, rS`	Each VP writes into vFD the logical OR of vFA and vFB/rS. This instruction is not masked, but is subject to vector length.
Xor	`vfxor`	`.vv vFD, vFA, vFB` `.vs vFD, vFA, rS`	Each VP writes into vFD the logical XOR of vFA and vFB/rS. This instruction is not masked, but is subject to vector length.
Nor	`vfnor`	`.vv vFD, vFA, vFB` `.vs vFD, vFA, rS`	Each VP writes into vFD the logical NOR of vFA and vFB/rS. This instruction is not masked, but is subject to vector length.
Clear	`vfclr`	`vFD`	Each VP writes zero into vFD. This instruction is not masked, but is subject to vector length.
Set	`vfset`	`vFD`	Each VP writes one into vFD. This instruction is not masked, but is subject to vector length.
Population Count	*vfpop*	`rS, vF`	The population count of vF is placed in rS. This instruction is not masked.
Find First One	*vfff1*	`rS, vF`	The location of the first set bit of vF is placed in rS. This instruction is not masked. If there is no set bit in vF, then the vector length is placed in rS.

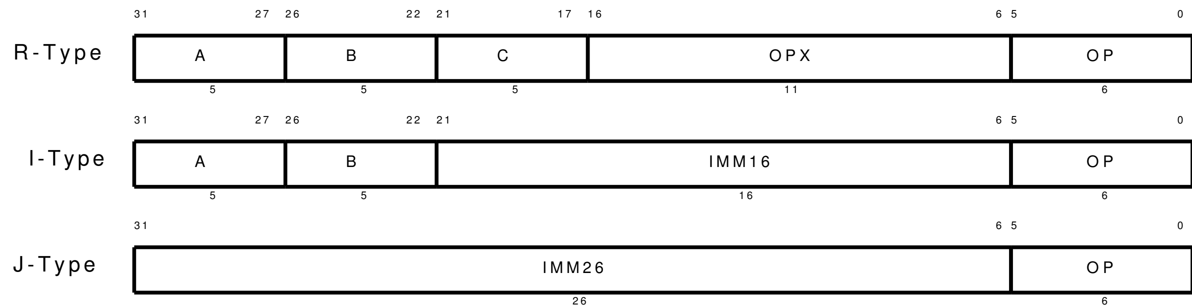
Find Last One	*vffl1*	`rS, vF`	The location of the last set bit of vF is placed in rS. The instruction is not masked. If there is no set bit in vF, then the vector length is placed in rS.
Set Before First One	*vfsetbf*	`vFD, vFA`	Register vFD is filled with ones up to and not including the first set bit in vFA. Remaining positions in vF are cleared. If vFA contains no set bits, vFD is set to all ones. This instruction is not masked.
Set Including First One	*vfsetif*	`vFD, vFA`	Register vFD is filled with ones up to and including the first set bit in vFA. Remaining positions in vF are cleared. If vFA contains no set bits, vFD is set to all ones. This instruction is not masked.
Set Only First One	*vfsetof*	`vFD, vFA`	Register vFD is filled with zeros except for the position of the first set bit in vFA. If vFA contains no set bits, vFD is set to all zeros. This instruction is not masked.

A.4.7 Miscellaneous Instructions

Name	Mnemonic	Syntax	Summary
Move Scalar to Control	`vmstc`	`vc, rS`	Register rS is copied to vc. Writing vc_{vpw} changes vc_{mvl}, vc_{logmvl} as a side effect.
Move Control to Scalar	`vmcts`	`rS, vc`	Register vc is copied to rS.

A.5 Instruction Formats

The Nios II ISA uses three instruction formats.



The defined vector extension uses up to three 6-bit opcodes from the unused/reserved Nios II opcode space. Each opcode is further divided into two vector instruction types using the OPX bit in the vector instruction opcode. Table A.11 lists the Nios II opcodes used by the soft vector processor instructions.

Table A.11: Nios II Opcode Usage

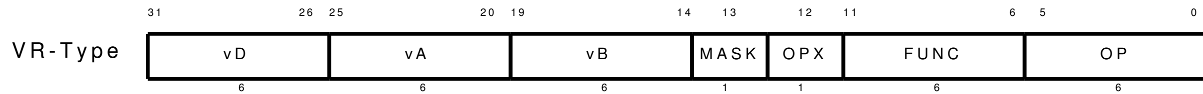
Nios II Opcode	OPX Bit	Vector Instruction Type
0x3D	0	Vector register instructions
	1	Vector scalar instructions
0x3E	0	Fixed-point instructions
	1	Vector flag, transfer, misc
0x3F	0	Vector memory instructions
	1	Unused except for `vstl.vs`

A.5.1 Vector Register and Vector Scalar Instructions

The vector register format (VR-type) covers most vector arithmetic, logical, and vector processing instructions. It specifies three vector registers, a 1-bit mask select, and a 7-bit vector opcode. Instructions that take only one source operand use the vA field. Two exceptions are the vector local memory load and store instructions, which also use VR-type instruction format.

Table A.12: Scalar register usage as source or destination register

Instruction	Scalar register usage
op.vs	Source
op.sv	Source
vins.vs	Source
vext.vs	Destination
vmstc	Source
vmcts	Destination



Scalar-vector instructions that take one scalar register operand have two formats, depending on whether the scalar register is the source (SS-Type) or destination (SD-Type) of the operation.

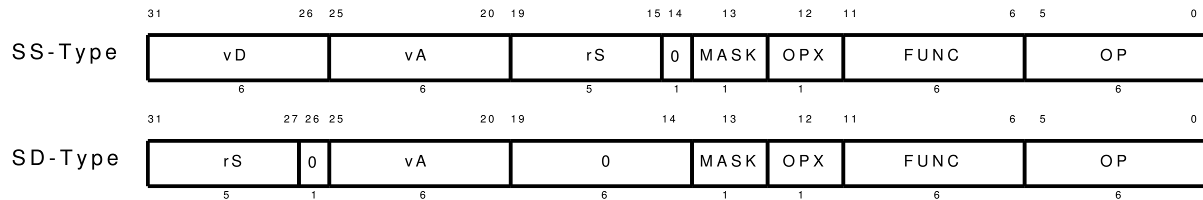
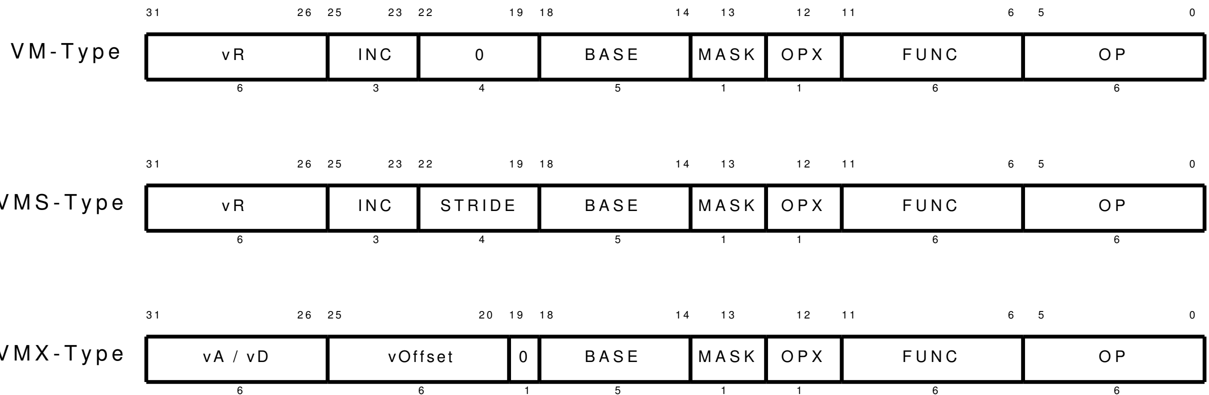


Table A.12 lists which instructions use scalar register as a source and as a destination.

A.5.2 Vector Memory Instructions

Separate vector memory instructions exist for the different addressing modes. Each of unit stride, constant stride, and indexed memory access has its own instruction format: VM, VMS, and VMX-type, respectively.



Vector load and store to the local memory use the VR-type instruction format. Scalar store to vector lane local memory uses the SS-type instruction format with all zeros in the vD field.

A.5.3 Instruction Encoding

Arithmetic/Logic Instructions

Table A.13 lists the function field encodings for vector register instructions. Table A.14 lists the function field encodings for vector-scalar and scalar-vector (non-commutative vector-scalar) operations. These instructions use the vector-scalar instruction format.

Table A.13: Vector register instruction function field encoding (OPX=0)

	[2:0] Function bit encoding for .vv							
[5:3]	000	001	010	011	100	101	110	111
000	vadd	vsub		vmac	vand		vor	vxor
001	vaddu	vsubu		vmacu		vabsdiff		
010	vsra	vcmpeq	vsll	vsrl	vrot	vcmplt	*vdiv*	vcmple
011	vmerge	vcmpneq				vcmpltu	*vdivu*	vcmpleu
100		vmax	vext	vins		vmin	vmulhi	vmullo
101		vmaxu				vminu	vmulhiu	vmullou
110	vccacc	vupshift	*vcomp*	*vexpand*		vabs		
111	vcczacc							

Table A.14: Scalar-vector instruction function field encoding (OPX=1)

	[2:0] Function bit encoding for .vs							
[5:3]	000	001	010	011	100	101	110	111
000	vadd	vsub		vmac	vand		vor	vxor
001	vaddu	vsubu		vmacu		vabsdiff		
010	vsra	vcmpeq	vsll	vsrl	vrot	vcmplt	*vdiv*	vcmple
011	vmerge	vcmpneq				vcmpltu	*vdivu*	vcmpleu
100		vmax	vext	vins		vmin	vmulhi	vmullo
101		vmaxu	vextu			vminu	vmulhiu	vmullou
	[2:0] Function bit encoding for .sv							
[5:3]	000	001	010	011	100	101	110	111
110	vsra	vsub	vsll	vsrl	vrot	vcmplt	*vdiv*	vcmple
111	vmerge	vsubu				vcmpltu	*vdivu*	vcmpleu

Fixed-Point Instructions (Future extension)

Table A.15 lists the function field encodings for fixed-point arithmetic instructions. These instructions are provided as a specification for future fixed-point arithmetic extension.

Table A.15: Fixed-point instruction function field encoding (OPX=0)

	[2:0] Function bit encoding for fixed-point instructions							
[5:3]	000	001	010	011	100	101	110	111
000	*vsadd*	*vssub*		*vsat*	*vsrr*	*vsls*	*vxmulhi*	*vxmullo*
001	*vsaddu*	*vssubu*		*vsatu*	*vsrru*	*vslsu*	*vxmulhiu*	*vxmullou*
010	*vxccacc*			*vsatsu*				
011	*vxcczacc*							
100	*vsadd.sv*	*vssub.sv*					*vxmulhi.sv*	*vxmullo.sv*
101	*vsaddu.sv*	*vssubu.sv*					*vxmulhiu.sv*	*vxmullou.sv*
110		*vssub.vs*						
111		*vssubu.vs*						

Flag and Miscellaneous Instructions

Table A.16 lists the function field encoding for vector flag logic and miscellaneous instructions.

Table A.16: Flag and miscellaneous instruction function field encoding (OPX=1)

	[2:0] Function bit encoding for flag/misc instructions							
[5:3]	000	001	010	011	100	101	110	111
000	vfclr	vfset			vfand	vfnor	vfor	vfxor
001	*vfff1*	*vffl1*						
010	*vfsetof*	*vfsetbf*	*vfsetif*					
011			vfins.vs		vfand.vs	vfnor.vs	vfor.vs	vfxor.vs
100								
101	vmstc	vmcts						
110								
111								

Memory Instructions

Table A.17 lists the function field encoding for vector memory instructions. The vector-scalar instruction `vstl.vs` is the only instruction that has opcode of 0x3F and OPX bit of 1.

Table A.17: Memory instruction function field encoding

	[2:0] Function bit encoding for memory instructions (OPX=0)							
[5:3]	000	001	010	011	100	101	110	111
000	vld.b	vst.b	vlds.b	vsts.b	vldx.b	vstxu.b	vstx.b	
001	vldu.b		vldsu.b		vldxu.b			
010	vld.h	vst.h	vlds.h	vsts.h	vldx.h	vstxu.h	vstx.h	
011	vldu.h		vldsu.h		vldxu.h			
100	vld.w	vst.w	vlds.w	vsts.w	vldx.w	vstxu.w	vstx.w	
101								
110	vldl	vstl	vfld	vfst				
111								
	[2:0] Function bit encoding for memory instructions (OPX=1)							
[5:3]	000	001	010	011	100	101	110	111
110		vstl.vs						