Piko: A Design Framework for Programmable Graphics Pipelines

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**Introduction**

We present Piko, an abstraction for designing efficient programmable graphics pipelines. Piko is built around managing work granularity in a programmable and flexible manner, allowing programmers to build load-balanced parallel pipeline implementations, to exploit spatial and producer-consumer locality in the pipeline, and to explore tradeoffs between these considerations.

**Graphics pipelines inherently consist of logically separate stages that operate on primitives.** Ordinarily, a programmer needs to combine these stages together in order to achieve high performance. Reusing a stage in a different pipeline requires rewriting the stage to fit with the new pipeline. Furthermore, the pipeline needs to be altered significantly or even rewritten entirely to achieve high performance on different architectures. Piko aims to alleviate these limitations by emphasizing programmability, efficiency, and portability. In addition, Piko is flexible so that programmers can express a wide variety of current pipelines using this abstraction. Piko can also be used to develop new and unique pipelines, and it promotes such exploration through modular stage reuse.

**Piko uses programmable spatial binning to divide workloads in a manner that both exploits spatial locality and exposes parallelism.** The screen is divided into uniform 2D bins, and each primitive in a pipeline is assigned to a bin or (multiple bins) in a programmatically (e.g. based on its location in screen space or based on its bin in the previous stage). Then, these bins onto cores, where the primitives are modified and transformed based on the pipeline stages.

**Pipeline Synthesis**

Given a pipeline definition, Piko's job is to combine the logically separate stages into efficient kernels. While the AssignBin and Process phases depend only on the stage in which they reside, the Schedule phase is inherently pipeline- and architecture-dependent. Thus, the Schedule phase contains information to help Piko optimize the kernels for specific architectures. A programmer can specify whether a stage should prefer locality over load-balanced execution, and vice versa, for example. Using information about successful stages, Piko can perform various optimizations.

**Kernel Fusion** (exploits producer-consumer locality):

- AssignBin: Per-Primitive
- Schedule: Per-Bin
- Process: Per-Bin

**Static dependency resolution (e.g. synchronization between stages):**

- Kernel 1
- Kernel 2
- Kernel 3
- Kernel 4

**Runtime Implementation**

We implemented Piko on two different architectures, a manycore GPU (NVIDIA GTX 460) and a heterogeneous CPU / GPU processor (Intel i7-3770K). We program the GPU using CUDA and the heterogeneous processor using OpenCL, which can target both devices on the chip. Both architectures use atomics to update bins and share similar kernel code (differences are in API format).

**Manycore GPU**: The most important concern for the GPU is to keep all lanes of all cores busy. Thus, we prefer a load balance scheduling policy (as opposed to a locality based one) to maximize throughput. To maximize the efficiency of Piko implementations on the GPU, we make the following design decisions for runtime:

- Warp-synchronous Design: We use multiple per core, but instead of operating on one bin at a time, we assign a separate bin to each warp. This allows us to exploit locality within a single bin, but at the same time we avoid losing performance when bins do not have a large number of primitives.
- Compile-Time Customization: We use CUDA templates to specialize kernels at compile-time.

**Heterogeneous CPU/GPU**: The GPU / CPU on a chip design allows both devices to share a common memory system and allows work to be executed on both devices simultaneously. Piko allows bins to be partitioned for each processor. We find the bin partition by profiling the kernel and adjusting the split ratio accordingly so that each device takes roughly the same amount to time to execute.

**Future Work**

- Non-uniform bin sizes (which may offer better load balance)
- Non-uniform bin sizes in higher dimensions (e.g. for voxel pipelines and volume rendering)
- Design a language better suited to describing Piko pipelines

The figure to the right shows the flow of data in each Piko. Primitives are first assigned to bins. These bins are then scheduled for processing on the cores of the hardware. The primitives that result are then assigned to bins in the next stage, and these steps are repeated until the primitives reach the final pipeline stage.

The result of the above scenes to evaluate our Piko implementation of a triangle rasterizer. Fairy Forest (left) has 174K triangles with many small and large triangles. Butterfly (middle) has 1.1M very small triangles. Mecha (right) has 250K small- to medium-sized triangles. Large triangles produce more fragments during raster and thus cause more irregular parallelism in the system.

Below are the results from rendering these scenes. We tested four different Piko version of a triangle rasterizer: a strawman pipeline (no Piko optimization), freepipe (based on FreePipe*), a pipeline that prefers locality, and a pipeline that prefers load-balance.

**Results (cont.)**

<table>
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<th>Pipeline</th>
<th>Fairy Forest</th>
<th>Mecha</th>
<th>Buddha</th>
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