Pipeflow: An Efficient Task-Parallel Pipeline Programming Framework using Modern C++

Cheng-Hsiang Chiu  
Dept. of ECE, University of Utah  
u1305418@utah.edu

Zizheng Guo  
Dept. of CS, Peking University  
gzz@pku.edu.cn

Tsung-Wei Huang  
Dept. of ECE, University of Utah  
twh760812@gmail.com

Yibo Lin  
Dept. of CS, Peking University  
yibolin@pku.edu.cn

Abstract
Pipeline is a fundamental parallel programming pattern. Mainstream pipeline programming frameworks count on data abstractions to perform pipeline scheduling. This design is convenient for data-centric pipeline applications but inefficient for algorithms that only exploit task parallelism in pipeline. As a result, we introduce a new task-parallel pipeline programming framework called Pipeflow. Pipeflow does not design yet another data abstraction but focuses on the pipeline scheduling itself, enabling more efficient implementation of task-parallel pipeline algorithms than existing frameworks. We have evaluated Pipeflow on both micro-benchmarks and real-world applications. As an example, Pipeflow outperforms oneTBB 24% and 10% faster in a VLSI placement and a timing analysis workloads that adopt pipeline parallelism to speed up runtimes, respectively.

1 Introduction
Motivation: Pipeline is a fundamental parallel pattern to model parallel executions through a linear chain of stages. Each stage processes a data token after the previous stage, and then reschedules the dependency for the next stage. Multiple data tokens can be processed simultaneously across different stages whenever dependencies are met. For example, in circuit simulation, some gate operations on a gate (e.g., NAND, OR, AND) do not depend on other gates and thus can be done at multiple logic levels simultaneously, while operations at the same level require processing prior levels first [14]. As modern computing applications continue to adopt pipeline parallelism in various forms, there is always a need for new pipeline programming frameworks to streamline the implementation complexity of pipeline algorithms.

Limitation of state-of-art approaches: Recent years have seen much research on pipeline programming frameworks to assist developers in implementing pipeline algorithms without worrying about scheduling details. Some famous frameworks are oneTBB [1], FastFlow [4], GRPPI [8], Cilk-P [19], SPAR [10], and HPX-pipeline [17]. While each of these frameworks has its pros and cons, a common design philosophy is to achieve transparent pipeline scheduling using data abstractions. This design is convenient for data-centric pipeline applications, but it also brings three limitations: 1) Users are forced to design their pipeline algorithms in the center of data. As we shall give a concrete example, many applications exhibit pipeline parallelism among tasks rather than data. 2) Under this circumstance, users need to sort out a data mapping strategy between applications and frameworks to perform pipeline scheduling, although such mapping is totally redundant. 3) Existing frameworks have very limited composable with other types of parallelism, such as task graphs which have become essential to many irregular parallel algorithms.

Key insights and contributions: After years of research, we have arrived at the key conclusion that data abstraction and task scheduling should be decoupled from each other in programming pipeline parallelism. Consequently, we introduce in this paper Pipeflow, a new task-parallel pipeline programming framework to overcome the limitations of existing ones. We establish Pipeflow atop the open-source task graph programming system, Taskflow, developed by Huang et al. [15], to leverage its powerful tasking infrastructure. As Taskflow is being used by several important research projects [3, 22, 36], building Pipeflow on top will not only benefit existing users but also allow us to gain timely feedback from the Taskflow community. We summarize our contributions as follows:

- Programming Model. We have introduced a new C++ programming model for developers to create a pipeline scheduling framework. Unlike existing models, we do not provide yet another data abstraction but a flexible framework for users to fully control their application data atop a task-parallel pipeline scheduling framework.
- Task Composition. We have introduced a composable interface to enable seamless integration of Pipeflow into Taskflow. Users can combine pipeline tasks with all existing task types of Taskflow to express a large parallel workload in a single end-to-end task graph.
- Scheduling Algorithm. We have introduced a lightweight scheduling algorithm to schedule stage tasks across
parallel lines. Our algorithm formulates the pipeline scheduling into a task graph and thus can efficiently solve the scheduling problem with dynamic load balancing using Taskflow’s work-stealing runtime.

*Experimental methodology and artifact availability:* We have evaluated Pipeflow on both micro-benchmarks and real-world applications. As an example, Pipeflow outperforms oneTBB 24% and 10% faster in a VLSI placement and a timing analysis workloads that adopt pipeline parallelism to speed up runtimes, respectively. Pipeflow is open-source and available in Taskflow as an algorithm module [2].

*Limitations of the proposed approach:* Like all programming frameworks, Pipeflow is not perfect. Specifically, our design choice sacrifices the expressiveness for data-parallel pipeline applications, as users need to explicitly manage data storage using Pipeflow’s runtime methods. Yet, our experience leads us to believe that this challenge can be mitigated by deriving an application-dependent data abstraction from our pipeline programming interface.

## 2 Background

We first review mainstream pipeline models and detail the motivation of Pipeflow. We then argue that a new task-parallel pipeline programming model is needed for many important industrial and research areas, e.g., circuit design.

### 2.1 Pipeline Basics

Pipeline parallelism is commonly used to parallelize various applications, such as stream processing, video processing, and dataflow systems. These applications exhibit parallelism in the form of a linear pipeline, where a linear sequence of abstraction functions, namely stages, \( F = (f_1, f_2, \ldots, f_j) \), is applied to an input sequence of data tokens, \( D = (d_1, d_2, \ldots, d_l) \). A linear pipeline can be thought of a loop over the data tokens of \( D \). Each iteration \( i \) processes an input token \( d_i \) by applying the stage functions \( F \) to \( d_i \) in order. Depending on the number of parallel lines, \( L = (l_1, l_2, \ldots, l_k) \), to process data tokens, parallelism arises when iterations overlap in time. For instance, the execution of token \( d_i \) at stage \( f_j \) of line \( l_k \), denoted as \( f_j^k(d_i) \), can overlap with \( f_{j+1}^{k+1}(d_{i+1}) \). A stage can be a parallel type or a serial type to specify whether \( f_j^k(d_i) \) can overlap with \( f_{j+1}^{k+1}(d_{i+1}) \) or not. Figure 1 shows the dependency diagram of a 3-stage (serial-parallel-serial) pipeline.

Mainstream pipeline programming libraries employ data-centric models. Users declare input and output data types for each stage using library-specific data abstractions (e.g., template instantiation). Taking oneTBB [1] for example, Listing 1 implements Figure 1 using four parallel lines and a series of callable objects called filter, where each filter receives an input data, performs work on that data, and then produces a result for the next filter. To support arbitrary application data types, libraries typically leverage dynamic polymorphism to allocate and convert data from a generic type (e.g., `void*`, `std::any`) to an application type. To further minimize the allocation cost, some libraries, such as oneTBB [1], have implemented specialized object allocators and buffer structures to handle temporary results between stages.

```cpp
// Listing 1. oneTBB code of Figure 1, assuming a void=float-string-void data transformation.
```

### 2.2 Pipeline Parallelism in CAD Algorithms

Pipeflow is motivated by our research projects on developing parallel timing analysis algorithms for very large scale integration (VLSI) computer-aided design (CAD). Timing analysis is a critical step in the overall CAD flow because it validates the timing performance of a digital circuit. As design complexity continues to grow exponentially, the need to efficiently analyze the timing of large designs has become the major bottleneck to the design closure flow. For instance, generating a comprehensive timing report (e.g., pessimism removal, hundreds of corners, etc.) for a multi-million-gate design can take several hours to finish [16]. To reduce the long analysis runtime, recent years have seen increasing adoptions of manycore parallelism by new timing analysis algorithms [3].
3 Pipeflow

Inspired by the need of parallel CAD algorithms, Pipeflow introduces a new task-parallel pipeline programming model for users to create a pipeline scheduling framework without data abstraction. We establish Pipeflow atop the open-source parallel task graph programming system, Taskflow [15], because it has been successfully adopted by many important CAD projects under the DARPA IDEA program [3, 22, 36]. In this section, we will first give a brief introduction about Taskflow and then dive into the technical details of Pipeflow.

3.1 State of the Art: Taskflow

Taskflow is a general-purpose parallel and heterogeneous programming system using modern C++ [15]. Taskflow introduces a new control task flow graph (CTFG) model that enables end-to-end implementation of task graph parallelism coupled with in-graph control flow. A CTFG consists of several task types, such as static task, dynamic task, condition task, module task, runtime task, and so on. Figure 3 shows a CTFG of iterative tasking, implemented in Listing 2. The loop continuation condition is implemented by a single condition task, cond, that precedes two static tasks, body and done. When cond returns 0, the execution loops back to body. When cond returns 1, the execution moves onto done and stops. This example uses four tasks to implement a tasking loop of 100 iterations.

Figure 3. A Taskflow graph of iterative control flow using one condition task and three static tasks.

Listing 2. Taskflow program of Figure 3.

Another powerful feature of Taskflow is composable tasking. Composable tasking enables users to define task hierarchies and compose large task graphs from modular and reusable algorithm blocks that are easier to optimize. Figure 4 gives an example of a Taskflow graph using composition. The top-level taskflow defines one static task C that runs before a dynamic task D that spawns two dependent tasks D1 and D2. Task D precedes a module task E composed of a taskflow of two dependent tasks A and B. Listing 3 shows the Taskflow code of Figure 4. It declares two taskflows, taskflow1 and...
Taskflow2. The second taskflow defines a module task that is composed of the first taskflow, preceded by task D. A module task does not own the taskflow but maintains a soft mapping to the taskflow. Users can create multiple module tasks from the same taskflow, but they must not run concurrently.

Figure 4. An example of taskflow composition.

Listing 3. Taskflow code of Figure 4.

Integration with Taskflow: Pipeflow leverages conditional tasking and composable tasking to implement the pipeline algorithm in a module task. Unlike existing pipeline programming frameworks that often operate in a standalone programming environment, Pipeflow is designed to work seamlessly with Taskflow. We make this architecture-level decision for three reasons: First, the tasking patterns of parallel CAD algorithms are massive and irregular. Pipeline is just one part and needs to work with other tasks, such as graph traversal and control flow, to compose the whole application algorithm. Second, integrating Pipeflow into Taskflow enables a unified scheduling runtime with dynamic load balancing and improved inter-operability with other Taskflow tasks. Third, from the ease of use standpoint, existing Taskflow users need not to learn a different set of application programming interface (API) but the scheduling concept of Pipeflow to implement pipeline algorithms. While Pipeflow is primarily designed as an algorithm module of Taskflow, we believe many of our ideas are applicable to other task-based parallel programming frameworks.

Listing 4. Pipeflow code of Figure 1.

3.2 Programming Model

Pipeflow leverages modern C++ and template techniques to strike a balance between expressiveness and generality. Listing 4 shows the Pipeflow counterpart of the oneTBB code in Listing 1 that implements the pipeline in Figure 1. There are three steps to create a Pipeflow application, 1) define the pipeline structure using template instantiation, 2) define the data storage, if needed, and 3) define the pipeline task using taskflow composition. Users define the number of parallel lines and the abstract function of each stage in a tf::Pipeline object. For each stage, users define the stage type and a pipe callable using tf::Pipe. A stage can be either a serial type (tf::PipeType::SERIAL) or a parallel type (tf::PipeType::PARALLEL). The pipe callable takes an argument of tf::PipeFlowType which is created by the scheduler at runtime. A tf::PipeFlow object represents a scheduling token and contains several extensible methods for users to query the runtime statistics of that token, including the line, pipe, and token numbers. In Pipeflow, pipe and stage are interchangeable.
as Pipeflow schedules only one token per line. Each entry buf[i] stores the data that is being processed at line \( i \), which can be retrieved by \( \text{tf::Pipeflow::line} \). This organization is very space-efficient because we use only 1D array to represent data processing in a two-dimensional (2D) scheduling map. Additionally, by delegating data management to applications, we can avoid dynamic data conversion between the library and the application, which typically counts on virtual function calls to convert a generic type (e.g., void*, std::any) to an arbitrary user type [1, 4].

Based on the above pipeline structure and data layout, we instantiate a \( \text{tf::Pipeline} \) object, \( \text{pl} \). This template-based design enables the compiler to optimize each pipe type, such as using fixed-layout functor to store the callable and its captured data. Finally, we create a pipeline module task pipeline with \( \text{pl} \) using the taskflow composition method composed_of and submit this taskflow to an executor to run the pipeline.

```cpp
using P =
  tf::Pipe<
    std::function<void(tf::Pipeflow&)> >,
  std::vector<P> p(6, create_pipe());  // pipes

tf::ScalablePipeline pl(4, p.begin(), p.end());
taskflow.composed_of(pl);
executor.run(taskflow).wait();
p.resize(3);
pl.reset(p.begin(), p.end());
executor.run(taskflow).wait();
```

**Listing 5.** Scalable pipeline model in Pipeflow to accept variable assignments of pipes.

\( \text{tf::Pipeline} \) requires instantiation of all pipes at the construction time. While this design gives compilers freedom to optimize the layout of each pipe type, it prevents applications from varying the pipeline structure at runtime; for instance, the number of pipes might depend on the problem size, which can be runtime variables. To overcome this limitation, Pipeflow provides a scalable alternative, \( \text{tf::ScalablePipeline} \), to allow variable assignments of pipes using range iterators. In Listing 5, we create a scalable pipeline, \( \text{pl} \), from a vector of six pipes. After the first run, we reset \( \text{pl} \) to another range of three pipes for the next run. A scalable pipeline is thus more flexible for applications to create pipeline scheduling framework with dynamic structures.

### 3.3 Pipeline Task Composition

A key advantage of Pipeflow is its composability with Taskflow. By encapsulating a pipeline in a module task, we enable seamless integration with all existing task types in Taskflow. This result largely facilitates the implementation of complex pipeline applications that require intensive interaction with different types of task parallelism. Figure 5 shows a Taskflow graph that emulates a data streaming application using a pipeline module task and a condition task. The condition task is used to decide if the pipeline needs to be run again depending on the application control flow. Listing 6 shows the Taskflow code of Figure 5, using the pipeline task in Listing 4. When the condition task \( \text{cond} \) returns 0, it informs the scheduler to rerun the pipeline task \( \text{pl} \), or proceeds to done to stop the program otherwise.

![Figure 5. A Taskflow graph of an iterative streaming application using one pipeline module task, one condition task, and one static task.](image)

```cpp
auto cond = taskflowemplace([&](){
  if (data.ready()) {
    std::cout << "rerun the pipeline";
    return 0;
  } else {
    return 1;
  }
});
auto done = taskflowemplace([&](){
  std::cout << "stop";
});
pipeline.precede(cond);
cond.precede(pipeline, done);
```

**Listing 6.** Taskflow code of Figure 5 using the pipeline of Listing 4.

Figure 6 demonstrates another common application that embeds task graph parallelism inside a pipeline. The pipeline consists of three serial stages and four parallel lines. Each scheduled token runs a taskflow that implements a stage algorithm in the pipeline. The three taskflows are self-explanatory. Different taskflows can overlap across different lines, but only one taskflow runs on the same stage due to the serial type. Listing 7 implements Figure 6. We create a 1D array, \( \text{buf} \), to store the three taskflows (defined elsewhere). In each stage, we obtain its taskflow at \( \text{buf[pf.pipe()]} \), submit it to the executor, and wait until the execution finishes. As we need only four tokens, the first pipe stops the scheduler at the fifth.

```cpp
tf::Taskflow taskflow;
tf::Executor executor;
const size_t num_lines = 4;
const size_t num_pipes = 3;
std::array<tf::Taskflow, num_pipes> buf;
tf::Pipeline pl(num_lines, ···

if (pf.token() == 4) {
  pf.stop();
  return;
}
executor.run(buf[pf.pipe()]).wait();
}
```

**Listing 7.** Taskflow code of Figure 6.
3.4 Scheduling Algorithm

Pipeflow leverages Taskflow’s work-stealing runtime to design an efficient scheduling algorithm with dynamic load balancing. As Pipeflow does not touch data abstraction, we can simplify the pipeline scheduling problem to deciding which task to run at which pipe and line. Similar to oneTBB, the key idea of our scheduling algorithm is to enable only one scheduling token per line and process all tokens in a circular fashion across all parallel lines. Based on the idea, we formulate the pipeline scheduling into a lightweight Taskflow graph where 1) one task deals with a scheduling token per line and 2) each task decides which task to run on its next line. Since the pipeline is running in a circular fashion, the index is equal to the remainder of the total number of scheduled tokens divided by the number of parallel lines. Next, we define the runtime task using build_runtime_task for each line (line 3) and specify the dependency between each runtime task and the condition task (line 4).

Algorithm 1 implements the construction of the Taskflow graph for a pipeline. First, we define the condition task to return on the index of the next task (line 1). Since the pipeline is running in a circular fashion, the index is equal to the remainder of the total number of scheduled tokens divided by the number of parallel lines. Next, we define the runtime task using build_runtime_task for each line (line 3) and specify the dependency between each runtime task and the condition task (line 4).

Algorithm 2 implements build_runtime_task. When a runtime task is scheduled, we need to know which stage at which line for the scheduling token to work. We keep the line and stage information in a Pipeflow object. Each runtime task owns a Pipeflow object pf of a specific line (line 1). Once a scheduling token is done, there are two cases for its runtime task to proceed: 1) for a parallel type, the runtime task moves to the next stage at the same line; 2) for a serial type, the runtime task additionally checks if it can move to the next line.

To carry out such a dependency constraint, each stage keeps a join counter of an atomic integer to represent its dependency.
Algorithm 2: build_runtime_task(l)

```
global: pipeflows: a vector of Pipeflow objects
global: jcs: a 2D array of join counters
global: num_tokens: the number of tokens
global: num_lines: the number of lines
global: num_pipes: the number of pipes
global: tasks: a vector of tasks in Algorithm 1
Input: l: an integer

1) pf ← pipeflows[l];
2)AtomStore(
   lines[pf.line][pf.pipe].jc, jc_of_pf.type);
3) if pf.pipe == 0 then
   4) pf.token ← num_tokens;
   5) invoke_pipe_callable(pf.pipe, pf);
   6) if pf.stop == True then
      7) return;
   8) end
   9) Increment(num_tokens);
end
11) if pf.pipe != 0 then
   12) invoke_pipe_callable(pf.pipe, pf);
end
14) curr_pipe ← pf.pipe;
15) next_pipe ← (pf.pipe + 1)%num_pipes;
16) next_line ← (pf.line + 1)%num_lines;
17) pf.pipe ← next_pipe;
18) next_tasks = {};
19) if curr_pipe is SERIAL and
   AtomDec(lines[next_line][curr_pipe].jc) == 0
   then
      20) next_tasks.insert(1);
   end
22) if AtomDec(lines[pf.line][next_pipe]) == 0 then
   23) next_tasks.insert(0);
end
25) if next_tasks.size == 2 then
   26) call_scheduler(tasks[next_line + 1]);
   27) goto Line 2;
28) end
29) if next_tasks.size == 1 then
   30) if next_task[0] == 1 then
      31) pf ← pipeflows[next_line];
   end
33) goto Line 2;
end
```

Figure 8. The scheduling diagram of the pipeline in Listing 7. Each line runs one scheduling token. Multiple lines overlap tokens in a circular fashion.

Figure 8 illustrates our scheduling algorithm using the pipeline in Listing 7. Since the pipeline runs in a circular fashion, there are four dependencies (dashed edges) from the last stages to the first stages, and one dashed edge from the first stage of the last line to the first stage of the first line. Each line runs only one scheduling token. Multiple lines overlap tokens in a circular fashion. Compared to existing algorithms, such as oneTBB [1], that count on non-trivial synchronization between tasks and internal data buffers, our algorithm focuses on the task parallelism itself and thus largely reduces the scheduling complexity of pipeline using simple atomic operations. We draw the following lemmas and sketch their proofs to justify the correctness of our scheduling algorithm:

**Lemma 1.** Only one runtime task runs a pipe callable (line 5 and line 12 in Algorithm 2) on a scheduling token.

**Proof.** Assuming there are two runtime tasks running the same pipe callable, this means one runtime task reiterates its execution from the previous stage and the other runtime task
We evaluate the performance of Pipeflow on two fronts: we pass a nominal integer between successive stages (i.e., which has been widely used in the CAD community. We believe this selection is sufficient and fair to highlight the advantage of Pipeflow, considering the similar tasking infrastructure between oneTBB and Pipeflow. For oneTBB pipelines, we pass a nominal integer between successive stages (i.e., tbb::f11ter), because oneTBB does not allow void type but implements a specialized memory allocator to hold intermediate results returned by stages.

Lemma 2. The scheduler does not miss any stage.

Proof. We consider the situation where one runtime task moves to the next line (line 31 in Algorithm 2) instead of the next stage at the same line. Under this circumstance, we need to make sure one runtime task will run that next stage. Take Figure 8 for example, suppose a runtime task finishes token 4t+1 at stage 1 and precedes to token 4t+2 on stage 1, meaning that the join counter of token 4t+1 at stage 2 is not 0 yet. Another runtime task that works on token 4t+0 at stage 2 will eventually decrement the join counter to run it (line 27 in Algorithm 2) or invoke another worker thread to run it (line 26 in Algorithm 2).

4 Experimental Results

We evaluate the performance of Pipeflow on two fronts: micro-benchmarks and two real-world industrial CAD applications. We study the performance across runtime, memory (RSS), and throughput. We do not use conventional pipeline benchmarks as their sizes are relatively small compared to CAD (e.g., 6 pipes in ferret[6]). The runtime difference between Pipeflow and the baseline is not obvious on small pipelines. We compiled all programs using clang++ v10 with C++17 standard -std=c++17 and optimization flag -O3 enabled. We run all the experiments on a Ubuntu Linux 5.3.0-64-generic x86 machine with 40 Intel Xeon CPU cores at 2.00 GHz and 256 GB RAM. Each application thread corresponds to one CPU core. All data is an average of five runs.

4.2 Micro-benchmarks

The purpose of micro-benchmarks is to measure the pure scheduling performance of Pipeflow without much computation bias from the application. We compare the runtime and memory between Pipeflow and oneTBB for completing pipelines of different numbers of serial stages, scheduling tokens, and threads. We do not use parallel stages as the callable of a parallel pipe can be absorbed into the previous serial pipe. Each stage performs a nominal work of constant space and time complexity and forwards the scheduling token to the next stage.

Figure 9 draws the runtime improvement of Pipeflow over oneTBB and memory performance at different numbers of scheduling tokens using 16 threads, 80 parallel lines, and 80 serial stages.

Figure 10 draws the runtime and memory performance using 16 threads to schedule 65K tokens through different numbers of scheduling tokens, where the number of parallel lines is equal to the stage count. We observe that Pipeflow is consistently faster than oneTBB when the number of stages is larger than 16, despite the difference being slight (<1%). At 8 stages, the available task parallelism is smaller than the given thread parallelism, and oneTBB is faster in this scenario. This is due to Taskflow’s scheduling algorithm. Taskflow always keeps one thread busy in stealing while there is an active worker. When the available task parallelism is scarce, the scheduling cost becomes expensive. Yet, this problem can be mitigated by users selecting the right line number in their pipeline applications.
Figure 10. Runtime (improvement of Pipeflow over oneTBB) and memory performance at different numbers of serial stages using 16 threads and 65K scheduling tokens. The number of parallel lines equals the number of the stages.

For instance, beyond 8 stages, Pipeflow starts to outperform oneTBB. In terms of memory, we can clearly see the difference between Pipeflow and oneTBB (e.g., 19% at 80 stages). As we increase the number of stages, oneTBB needs more space for internal data buffers, whereas Pipeflow delegates the data management completely to applications.

Figure 11. Runtime and memory performance at different number of threads running 65K tokens on a pipeline of 80 stages and 80 parallel lines. The bars illustrate the runtime improvement of Pipeline over oneTBB.

Figure 11 shows the runtime and memory results at different numbers of threads to run 65K tokens on a pipeline of 80 stages and 80 parallel lines. Both Pipeflow and oneTBB scale equally well as the number of cores increases. At each point, we observe a small win of Pipeflow. For instance, at 32 cores, Pipeflow is 4.3% faster than oneTBB. In terms of memory, both Pipeflow and oneTBB use more memory with more threads. However, there remains a clear gap between Pipeflow and oneTBB (e.g., 22% less by Pipeflow at 40 cores).

Figure 12 compares the throughput by corunning the same program up to 10 times. We use the weighted speedup to measure the system throughput, which is the sum of the individual speedup of each process over a baseline execution time [9]. A throughput of one implies that the corun throughput is the same as if those processes run consecutively. On the left, the pipeline has 8 stages and 8 parallel lines. On the right, the pipeline has 80 stages and 80 parallel lines. Both of them run 65K scheduling tokens using 40 threads. The experiment emulates a server-like environment where different pipeline applications compete for the same resources. We can see that Pipeflow outperforms oneTBB in most coruns. For example, at 10 coruns, Pipeflow is 1.1 × and 1.5× better than oneTBB with 8 and 80 stages, respectively.

Figure 13. Runtime and memory comparisons between Pipeflow and oneTBB to complete a design of 1.5M nodes and 3.5M edges with different numbers of serial stages.
4.3 VLSI Circuit Timing Analysis Algorithm

We applied Pipeflow to solve a VLSI static timing analysis (STA) problem. The goal is to analyze the timing landscape of a circuit design and report critical paths that do not meet the given constraints (e.g., setup and hold). As presented in Figure 2, modern STA engines leverage pipeline parallelism to speed up the timing propagations. However, nearly all of them count on OpenMP-based loop parallelism with layer-by-layer synchronization [14]. With Pipeflow, we can directly formulate the problem as a task-parallel pipeline to improve task asynchrony. As the analysis complexity continues to increase, more analysis tasks (e.g., RC, delay calculators, pessimism reduction) are incorporated into each node in the STA graph. These tasks can be encapsulated in a sequence of stage functions to overlap in graph across parallel lines. We modify a large circuit design of 1.5M nodes and 3.5M edges from [14] and study the performance under different stage counts. Each node has a stage task to calculate delay values at a specific configuration using 2D matrix multiplication.

Figure 13 compares the runtime and memory between Pipeflow and oneTBB up to 80 stages. We use 80 parallel lines for all experiments; we do not observe much difference in other numbers of parallel lines as both Taskflow and oneTBB have an adaptive work-stealing strategy to balance the number of running threads with dynamic task parallelism. In general, Pipeflow outperforms oneTBB at large stage numbers. For example, using 40 cores and 72 stages, Pipeflow is 10% faster than oneTBB. In terms of memory usage, Pipeflow is always better than oneTBB regardless of the number of stages and cores. Pipeflow consumes less memory than oneTBB does because all stage tasks perform computations directly on a global graph data structure captured in the pipe callable. The data passing interface between successive stages in oneTBB thus becomes a significant yet unnecessary overhead.

Figure 14. Throughput of corunning the STA program.

Next, we compare the throughput by corunning the same program up to 10 times. Corunning an STA program is very common for reporting the timing data of a design at different input library files [16]. The effect of pipeline scheduling propagates to all simultaneous processes. Hence, throughput is a good measurement for the inter-operability of a pipeline-based STA algorithm. We corun the same analysis program up to 10 processes that compete for 40 cores. Again, we use the weighted speedup to measure the throughput. Figure 14 plots the throughput across 10 coruns at 8 and 80 stages. We can see that Pipeflow outperforms oneTBB at all coruns. For instance, at 10 coruns, Pipeflow is 1.7× and 1.2× better than oneTBB with 8 and 80 stages, respectively.

4.4 VLSI Detailed Placement Algorithm

We applied Pipeflow to solve a VLSI detailed placement problem. Detailed placement is a critical step in physical optimization. The goal is to optimize the interconnect among millions of logic gates or instances for improved timing and power. Connected instances are grouped to a net with interconnect modeled in Manhattan distance. We consider the detailed placement algorithm in DREAMPlace [22], namely local reordering. The algorithm decides an optimal order of four consecutive instances in a window of a placement row that produces minimum interconnect wirelength. We can parallelize the reordering algorithm using pipeline. Each row corresponds to a parallel stage that finds the best ordering of cells in a window from the top to the bottom. The scheduling tokens sweep through all windows from the left to the right. Figure 15 illustrates the algorithm.

Figure 15. Parallel local reordering algorithm using pipeline. Reordering cells in window 1 of row 1 (R1W1) cannot run in parallel with R2W1 due to the vertical dependency D–E. However, R1W1 can overlap with R2W2 despite D–F, because the algorithm deals with Manhattan distance for wirelength. We can always assume that F is fixed on the right of window 1 within the view of R1W1. Thus, we update vertical windows in a linear pipeline, R1→R2→R3.

Figure 16 compares the runtime and memory data between Pipeflow and oneTBB for two industrial designs, adaptec1 and bigblue4. adaptec1 is a medium design with 211K instances and 221K nets (instance dependencies), defining 890 stages for 890 placement rows and 10692 windows. bigblue4 is a large design with 2.1M instances and 2.2M nets, defining 2694 stages for 2694 placement rows and 32190 columns. Both Pipeflow and oneTBB scale with increasing numbers of cores, whereas Pipeflow always outperforms oneTBB 3–24%. For instance, in bigblue4 (40 cores), Pipeflow finishes the placement
we capture the row data from a global database in each pipe. As an experienced parallel CAD researcher, Pipeflow has abstracted these components out, and we have to implement another mapping strategy to get these data from each filter. Similar problems exist in other libraries too. For instance, when implementing the placement algorithm, our focus; FDP [33] proposes a learning-based mechanism to adapt scheduling to an environment, but it requires expensive runtime profiling that may not work well for highly irregular applications like CAD. In terms of load balancing, most pipeline schedulers leverage work stealing, which has been reported with better performance than static policies [5, 13, 19, 21, 28, 32]. However, for some special cases, such as fine-grained load-imbalanced pipelines, static policies perform comparably. For example, Pipelight [27] implements a load balancing technique based on two static scheduling algorithms. DSWP [29–31] and LBPP [18]; Pipelite [26] and URTS [25] introduce dynamic schedulers using ticket-based synchronization and directive-based model language for linear pipelines, respectively. While co-designing task scheduling and buffer structures has certain advantages for data-centric pipeline (e.g., data locality), the cost of managing data

Figure 16. Runtime and memory data of the pipeline-based placement algorithm for two industrial designs, adaptec1 (890 stages) and bigblue4 (2694 stages).

4.5 Insight from the CAD Algorithm Developers
As an experienced parallel CAD researcher, Pipeflow has assisted us to overcome many programming challenges. In the previous two experiments, the data is explicitly managed by the application algorithms and does not go through any data abstraction layers of oneTBB. The real need is a task-parallel pipeline programming framework that 1) gives us full control over data and 2) allows us to probe each scheduled task. For instance, when implementing the placement algorithm, we capture the row data from a global database in each pipe callable and use the pipeflow variable to get the line numbers of a scheduled task to index its window locations. However, oneTBB has abstracted these components out, and we have to implement another mapping strategy to get these data from each filter. Similar problems exist in other libraries too.

5 Related Work

Pipeline programming models have received intensive research interest. Most of them are data-centric using static template instantiation or dynamic runtime polymorphism to model data processing in a pipeline. To name a few popular examples: oneTBB [1] and TPL [20] require explicit definitions of input and output types for each stage; GrPPI [8] provides a composable abstraction for data- and stream-parallel patterns with a pluggable back-end to support task scheduling; FastFlow [4] models parallel dataflow using pre-defined sequential and parallel building blocks; TTG [7] focuses on dataflow programming using various template optimization techniques; SPar [10–12, 23] analyzes annotated attributes extracted from the data and stream parallelism domain, and automatically generates parallel patterns defined in FastFlow; Proteas [24] introduces a programming model for directive-based parallelization of linear pipeline; [34, 35] propose self-adaptive mechanism to decide the degree of parallelism and generate the pattern compositions in FastFlow. These programming models, however, constrain users to design pipeline algorithms using their data models, making it difficult to use especially for applications that only need pipeline scheduling atop custom data structures.

Existing pipeline scheduling algorithms typically co-design task scheduling and buffer structures to strive for the best performance. For instance, oneTBB [1] defines a per-stage buffer counter to synchronize data tokens among stages and lines, coupled with a small object allocator to minimize the data allocation overhead; GRAMPS [32] designs a buffer manager with per-thread fix-sized memory pools to dynamically allocate new data and release used ones; FastFlow [4] design a lock-free queue with a mechanism to transfer data ownership between senders and receivers, but this method can incur imbalanced load and requires non-trivial back-pressure management; HPX [17] counts on a channel data structure and standard future objects to pass data around tasks, but the creation of share states becomes expensive when the pipeline is large; Cilk-P [19] employs per-stage queues coupled with two counter types to track static and dynamic dependencies of each node, but it targets on-the-fly pipeline parallelism which is orthogonal to our focus; FDP [33] proposes a learning-based mechanism to adapt scheduling to an environment, but it requires expensive runtime profiling that may not work well for highly irregular applications like CAD.
can be significant yet unnecessary, especially for applications that only exploit task parallelism in pipeline.

6 Conclusion

We have introduced Pipeflow, an efficient C++ pipeline programming framework atop the Taskflow system. We have designed a new task-parallel programming model that separates data abstraction and task scheduling. By focusing on the pipeline tasking, we have introduced a simple yet efficient scheduling algorithm based on Taskflow’s work-stealing runtime with dynamic load balancing. We have evaluated the performance of Pipeflow on micro-benchmarks and real applications. For example, Pipeflow outperforms oneTBB 24% and 10% faster in a VLSI placement and a timing analysis workloads that adopt pipeline parallelism to speed up runtimes, respectively. Our future work plans to apply Pipeflow to more CAD applications and bring interdisciplinary ideas to the HPC domain.

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