An Evaluation of WebAssembly and eBPF as Offloading Mechanisms in the Context of Computational Storage

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Abstract
As the volume of data that needs to be processed continues to increase, we also see renewed interests in near-data processing in the form of computational storage, with eBPF (extended Berkeley Packet Filter) being proposed as a vehicle for computation offloading. However, discussions in this regard have so far ignored viable alternatives, and no convincing analysis has been provided. As such, we qualitatively and quantitatively evaluated eBPF against WebAssembly, a seemingly similar technology, in the context of computation offloading. This report presents our findings.

1 Introduction
Lately, a data processing paradigm called “computational storage” has been gaining traction. The idea behind it is to do “code shipping” and process data within storage devices directly, thereby reducing data movement and energy consumption [4].

While past research and commercial development in this direction have largely focused on specialized, ad-hoc hardware or software that tries to eke out as much performance as possible for specific types of workloads [41, 48, 54, 58], lately we have observed some renewed interests in enabling general computation offloading (i.e., user-programmable, dynamically loadable computation).

However, recent discussions in this direction [6, 35, 51] have focused almost exclusively on using eBPF [9] as the offloading mechanism, ignoring other platform-independent bytecode. Naturally, we have some reservations about this trend, as there has yet been a convincing analysis showing that eBPF is the best option for the job.

In this work, we hope to initiate the conversation around general offloading mechanisms by qualitatively and quantitatively evaluating eBPF and WebAssembly. Specifically, we would like to pose and answer the following questions:

- What are the current states of the options?
- How can we improve these options with regards to computational storage (and near-data processing in general)?

2 Background
In this section, we describe briefly the various topics and building blocks relevant to our work.

Near-data processing [1,5,36] Near-data processing (NDP) puts computations close to data to reduce data movement. It promises a number of benefits, such as avoiding I/O bottlenecks. It can take various forms, including, but not limited to, processing in-memory (PIM) and computational storage.

The idea of NDP is not new, and research about it can be dated back to at least 2 decades ago. Nonetheless, we note that recently there has been a resurgence of interests in NDP, both in academia and in industry (e.g., [2, 45]).

Computational Storage [4, 35] Strictly speaking, computational storage is a special case of NDP that concerns only with processing data inside of storage devices. However, in practice, computational storage is not always implemented in storage (e.g., in the computational storage array (CSA) architecture). In that sense, near-storage processing is perhaps a better name for it.

Storage devices that support this kind of data processing are called computational storage devices (CSDs), and there are already a few generally available CSDs on the market (e.g., [50, 52]). Moreover, there are some ongoing standardization efforts as well (e.g., [6, 35]).

eBPF [9] eBPF is an umbrella term covering numerous pieces of technology that enable running sandboxed programs inside the Linux kernel (i.e., “kernel programming”), but we are specifically interested in the register-based eBPF bytecode here. eBPF has a number of use cases, such as packet filtering and system monitoring with minimal overhead. Consider the following possible workflow: users can write an I/O tracer
WebAssembly is a portable, low-level bytecode format for a stack-based VM. It is designed for secure and efficient execution in web browsers, but recent research has shown that WebAssembly can still use some improvements in terms of security and efficiency [39,42].

To generate WebAssembly code, tooling exists for several languages (e.g., [17] for Python and [10] for C/C++). To execute WebAssembly code outside of browsers, one can use `wasmtime`, a VM with JIT and embedding support [55], or `wasmer` [23], a more customizable option than `wasmtime`, or GraalVM, a VM with JIT and language interop support [12]. To interface with certain system calls (e.g., for I/O), WASI may be used [19].

Table 1: Evaluation summaries of the offloading mechanisms

|                  | eBPF  | WebAssembly |
|------------------|-------|-------------|
| safety           | ?     | ***         |
| tooling          | **    | ***         |
| compatibility    | *     | **          |
| portability      | **    | ***         |
| ergonomics       | **    | **          |
| language-agnosticity | *     | **         |

3 Limitations

Before diving into the evaluation, we would like to address some potential issues with our work.

Implementation Dependence Given that both eBPF and WebAssembly are just bytecode formats at the core, any evaluation of them that goes beyond mere theoretical analysis will inevitably be implementation-dependent. However, we believe that such evaluations still have their value.

First, having an implementation-dependent analysis is better than having no analysis at all. Second, from an engineering point of view, “what is achievable today?” is just as important as “what is possible in the future?” If a certain solution is lacking at the moment, the question of whether we can justify the costs of improving it naturally arises. Finally, if the analysis happens to reveal some potential improvements for the implementations, then being implementation-dependent actually helps to “kill two birds with one stone”.

Single Node We do not concern ourselves with offloading in a distributed setting, as then the focus would lean towards scheduling and coordination, which are out of the scope of this work.

Safety and not Security We will discuss the safety (i.e., protection against human errors) afforded by the offloading mechanisms, but not their security (i.e., protection against attacks), as we are not security experts.

That said, we speculate that securing a WebAssembly runtime is likely easier than securing an eBPF runtime, as the former has some isolation features built in (e.g., linear memory [37]), but the latter relies more heavily on load-time verification.

4 Qualitative Evaluation

In this section, we will present our findings on the usability (i.e., the user experience) of the two offloading mechanisms. Specifically, we will compare them along 6 axes: safety, tooling, compatibility, portability, ergonomics, and language-agnostic-ity. A summary of the comparison is provided in Table 1 (* = poor, ** = ok, *** = good).

4.1 Safety

As suggested above, we will not cover multi-tenant or public-facing usage here, so we only consider safety in terms of programmer mistakes – “what’s the worst that can happen if the offloads misbehave due to bugs in them?”

For WebAssembly, the safety is pretty good, as the offload code will run in an isolated memory space [28,37] and also has no access to the file system by default [21]. Since these properties are specified at the design level, they are not implementation-dependent. While it is possible for WebAssembly code to hang or waste CPU cycles, it is rather unlikely for careless mistakes to wreak havoc outside of the WebAssembly runtime.

For eBPF, the situation is mostly dependent on the verifier. The one used by the Linux kernel is very strict, banning many kinds of loops and memory accesses [15]. However, using that verifier (and kernel-oriented verifiers [34] in general) for data processing is not very practical, and a new verifier implementation is needed [40]. Therefore, we cannot yet say much about the safety of eBPF as an offloading mechanism.

Nonetheless, we suspect that getting eBPF runtime safety right will be a trickier task, as it relies on a specific verifier to catch undesirable behaviors. In comparison, WebAssembly clearly specifies what is allowed at the spec level.

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1 As of v21.2, GraalVM’s WebAssembly support is still “experimental.”

2 For `wasmtime` [55] hanging can be avoided via the “fuel” feature.
4.2 Tooling

**Development Tools** For WebAssembly, a suite of tools called *wabt* (The WebAssembly Binary Toolkit) is available for inspecting and transforming WebAssembly binaries [25].

For eBPF, *bpftool* can be used to inspect eBPF programs and maps [33]. It also has some features meant for in-kernel eBPF usage, such as loading programs and updating maps. However, since *bpftool* is inherently tied to in-kernel usage, eBPF programs cannot be inspected unless they are loaded or attached into the kernel. For a standalone option, *llvm-objdump* is a better choice [16].

**Virtual Machines** As mentioned before, WebAssembly has at least three feature-rich VM implementations: *wasmtime* [55], *wasmer* [23], and *GraalVM* [12]. While they share some common features like JIT support for common architectures, each offers a number of unique features as well. For *wasmtime*, as of v0.29:

- profiling via *perf* and *VTune*
- debugging via *lldb* and *gdb*
- embedding in several host languages
- async host functions
- host functions from closures
- traps and backtraces
- custom memory allocator
- stack and heap limits
- caching of compiled binaries
- controlled code execution via fuel credits
- SIMD and threading

For *wasmer*, as of v2.0:

- embedding in several host languages
- ahead-of-time and cross compilation via LLVM
- multiple ways of storing compiler output
- dynamic and static functions
- custom heap management via *Tunables*
- errors and backtraces
- custom import resolution via *Resolver*
- support for many experimental features like SIMD

For *GraalVM*, as of v21.2:

- interop & embedding for a dozen languages
- access to mature JVM technologies
- creating standalone native binaries (“native images”)
- debugging via *Chrome DevTools* and more
- built-in CPU & memory profilers
- visualizing compilation graphs

eBPF, on the other hand, still has a long way to go in this department. Both *ubPF* [53] and *rBPF* [49] have JIT support (x86_64 only), but they are still rather lacking when it comes to features like profiling and debugging, which is not surprising, as they are not meant for in-production usage. In fact, the README of *rBPF* clearly states that:

- several features of the kernel eBPF implementation are not yet available (e.g., tail calls)
- it has a very simple verifier, so safety cannot be guaranteed
- the JIT compiler does not emit run-time memory checks, so crashes are possible
- a small number of eBPF instructions are not yet implemented
- *uBPF* is mostly the same, so the above points likely hold for *uBPF* as well

4.3 Compatibility

Compatibility here refers to the users’ ability to re-use existing libraries in the ecosystem. Any external dependency, including *libc*, must be re-compiled and statically linked. For WebAssembly, this means that the *wasi-sdk* [22] is likely needed for compilation. For example, to build *zstd* [32]:

```
make: Entering directory `zstd/lib'
CC=obj/conf_01069ccb7af676f69e2a2a05bd0468/static/debug.o
CC=obj/conf_01069ccb7af676f69e2a2a05bd0468/static/entropy_common.o
  o
In file included from common/entropy_common.c:18:
  In file included from common/mem.h:24:
  In file included from common/zstd_deps.h:27:
  In file included from /usr/lib/llvm-12/lib/clang/12.0.0/include/limits.h:21:
    /usr/include/limits.h:26:10: fatal error: `bits/libc-header-start.h' file not found
        ^
#include <bits/libc-header-start.h>
```

For eBPF, building *zstd* would fail, as *libc* is not available in the absence of a WASI equivalent:

```
make: Entering directory `zstd/lib'
CC=clang++ "CC=clang" CFLAGS=-target bpf -Wall -Werror -O2
  o
In file included from conf_01069ccb7af676f69e2a2a05bd0468/static/debug.o
  In file included from common/zstd_deps.h:27:
  In file included from /usr/lib/llvm-12/lib/clang/12.0.0/include/limits.h:21:
    /usr/include/limits.h:26:10: fatal error: `bits/libc-header-start.h' file not found
```

Without access to *libc*, a huge swath of existing libraries would be unusable, so the compatibility of eBPF is quite poor. Additionally, *clang --target bpf*, as of v12.0.1, also does not support several kinds of numeric operations. For example, 164 divisions:

```
make[2]: *** [Makefile:344: obj/conf_01069ccb7af676f69e2a2a05bd0468/static/entropy_common.o] Error 1
```

```bash
make: *** [Makefile:240: libzstd.a] Error 2
make[1]: *** [Makefile:240: libzstd.a] Error 2
make: Leaving directory `zstd/lib'
```

The above example shows that the addition of WASI to the eBPF ecosystem would provide a significant boost. Additionally, the absence of *libc* in WASI would require the re-compilation of many existing libraries.

Unfortunately, the current state of the ecosystem is that many existing libraries cannot be re-used in eBPF without significant modification. This poses a significant challenge for developers looking to leverage existing libraries in their eBPF applications.
and floating point operations (passing -fno-built-in did not help here):

```c
double pi_digit(unsigned long n_th) {
```

4.4 Portability

Since eBPF and WebAssembly are bytecodes designed to be executed by virtual machines, they both have decent portability in theory (i.e., users can compile their code once and reuse the built binaries everywhere).

4.5 Ergonomics

For this section, we will take a look at the development processes of the two offloading mechanisms and see if they are easy and straightforward.

4.5.1 Compilation

WebAssembly As mentioned before, it is possible to generate WebAssembly code from several source languages. To have a direct comparison with eBPF, we will focus on C here. From C code, there are at least 2 ways to compile to WebAssembly with `libc` support: Emscripten [10] and wasi-sdk [22]. With Emscripten:

```
emcc 
-Wall -O3 -flto 
--no-entry --no-startfiles 
-o code.wasm code.c
```

With `wasi-sdk`:

```
wasi-sdk/bin/clang 
--sysroot=./wasi-sdk/share/wasi-sysroot 
-Wl,-nostartfiles 
-Wl,-no-entry 
-o code.wasm code.c
```

-fito enables link-time optimization (LTO), -nostartfiles disables the system `libc`, -Wl,-no-entry allows the absence of `main()`, and -Wl,-export-all makes sure that all functions, including unused ones, are emitted.

After compilation, `wasm-opt` from the `binaryen` toolchain [8] may be used to further reduce code size:

However, in practice, eBPF is at a slight disadvantage on this front because it is not endianness-independent. The LLVM static compiler `llc` 12.0.1 gives:

Registered Targets:

```
... 
bpfe - BF (big endian) 
... 
```

For many use cases, the host endianness is not that relevant, as they do not involve parsing and interpreting data at the byte level. However, this “parsing” task is arguably quite common during data processing (e.g., reading numbers out of a file to perform calculations), so eBPF’s endianness-dependence will likely affect the portability of many offload binaries.

For WebAssembly, little-endianness is always used [26], and it is up to the runtime to handle the conversion if the host architecture is big-endian [30], so there is no endianness-related portability concern. Moreover, the difference between `wasm32` and `wasm64` is mostly about the largest memory size supported [24], which can be transparently handled by the runtime and hence should not lead to any difference in program behavior.

3Furthermore, as WebAssembly gains more traction, we expect to see more libraries providing official WebAssembly support. TensorFlow would be one example. For now, the same cannot be said of eBPF.

4This should not be a performance concern either, as modern architectures often provide instructions for handling endianness (e.g., MOVBE from x86).
4.5.2 Bytecode Inspection

**WebAssembly** A tool called `wasm2wat` is included in `wabt` for the purpose of converting WebAssembly binaries to an official, human-readable text format[^31]. Here is an example of this text format:

```
(module
  (func (export "addTwo") (param i32 i32) (result i32)
    local.get 0
    local.get 1
    i32.add)
)
```

One can also disassemble WebAssembly binaries using `wasm-objdump`:

```
wasm-objdump add_one.wasm
```

**eBPF** Although eBPF does not yet have an official textual format, if the eBPF binary of interest was compiled with debugging information, it is possible to view the disassembled binary with interleaved source code:

```
llvm-objdump -S --no-show-raw-insn bpf.o
```

```
bpf.o: file format elf64-bpf
Disassembly of section fentry/blk_account_io_start:
```

For eBPF, the only supported source language at the moment is C. While it is possible to use other source languages in theory [^7], significant efforts are required from the user.

5 Quantitative Evaluation

In this section, we will describe how we evaluated the performance of the two offloading mechanisms. We will also present the evaluation results.

5.1 Setup

The evaluation was carried out on two platforms, an AMD workstation (Ryzen Threadripper Pro 3975WX [^3] (x64), 128 GiB of RDIMM DDR4 ECC DRAM (3200 MHz), Linux kernel 5.13.13) and an AWS c6g.xlarge instance (4 vCPU from AWS Graviton2 (arm64), 8 GiB DRAM, Linux kernel 5.11.0) and for the configurations as summarized in Table 2.

| VM    | wasmtime v0.29.0 [^55] |
|-------|-------------------------|
|       | wasmer v2.0.0 [^23]    |
|       | GraalVM v21.2.0 [^12]  |
|       | rBPF @ 6c524b3 [^49]   |
|       | uBPF @ 9eb26b4 [^53]   |
| toolchain | llvm / clang 12.0.1 (WX) & 12.0.0 (AWS) |
|         | wabt 1.0.24 (WX) & 1.0.20 (AWS) [^25] |
|         | rustc 1.57.0-nightly (c30b68353 2021-09-05) |

Table 2: Evaluation configurations

Since there is currently no `libc` support for eBPF, our evaluation consisted only of simple arithmetic programs that are written in C:
• a baseline dummy program that simply returns 1
• fibonacci calculation
• integer summing
• Erdős prime counting
• multi-factorial calculation

For our evaluation, clang -O2 was used to compile to all targets,7 and wasm-opt was used to further optimize WebAssembly binaries after clang finishes. Moreover, the following VM configurations were evaluated:

• graal: for running WASM binaries on GraalVM via a native image
• rbpf: for running patched (see next section) eBPF binaries on rBPF
• ubpf: for running patched (see next section) eBPF binaries on uBPF
• wasmer: for running WASM binaries on wasmer
• wasmtime: for running WASM binaries on wasmtime
• wasmtime_cached: like wasmtime but with caching enabled

In addition to the WebAssembly VMs and the eBPF VMs, the native binaries were also benchmarked8 so that they may serve as a baseline. The performance metrics shown below were collected using our own scripts and GNU time v1.9 [18] over 10 consecutive runs.

Note that, since rBPF and uBPF do not currently provide JIT implementations for arm64, we did not evaluate them on that architecture. The same applies for wasmer, which was not able to compile the WebAssembly code on arm64 due to LLVM errors. Thus, the tables below will show “NA” for the relevant cells.

5.2 Patching eBPF Binaries

eBPF programs cannot allocate memory (either statically or dynamically) or call non-helper functions (i.e., functions that are not registered with the VM). To make things work,7 the binaries produced directly by clang had to be disassembled and manually patched for our evaluation:10

1. in the original code file, add a pointer parameter to all functions that need external memory, which shall be accessed through the said pointer
2. compile the code file and disassemble the binary file produced
3. create a plaintext file

7Of course, there were additional flags involved. Please check the Makefile in the repo.
8The native binaries were loaded using dlopen() and the functions were invoked via dlsym(), so that the native binaries were used in a way that is similar to how eBPF and WebAssembly binaries were used.
9In our case, that means to have some support for function calls and static memory.
10See our repository for more information and examples.

Figure 1: 10-run averages of max resident set sizes (bytes) of all (program,VM) combinations, absolute values

4. put the expected output of the program on the first line; this should be a u64 integer
5. put the size of the needed static memory on the second line; this should be in unit of bytes and can be 0
6. paste the disassembled code after the second line, with the entry point pasted first and all other functions pasted afterwards
7. replace all call instructions and all exit instructions of the callees with ja instructions to simulate function calls
8. the address of the external memory will be placed in register r1, so make sure you do not mess with r1 at the beginning
9. make sure the file ends with an exit instruction

We will also surmise that it is unlikely for this patching process to be automated post-compilation, as clang currently emits all eBPF function calls as call –1, making it impossible to stitch assembly blocks together without source information.

5.3 Runtime Memory Footprint

As the environments for computational storage and near-data processing tend to be resource-constrained, the memory footprints of the VMs are naturally of interest here.11 Thus, we measured the memory usage of the VMs for each of the programs mentioned before.

From Tables 3 and 4 (column 3) and Figures 1 and 2, we can see that on x64 rBPF and uBPF were able to achieve near-native performance when it comes to max resident set

11It is worth noting that neither WebAssembly nor eBPF has GC at the moment. For the former, a GC proposal is in early-stage development [27], and the current approach to reclaim resources is to use short-lived, one-off execution contexts, which admittedly are inadequate for long-running programs. For the latter, since in-kernel usage does not support libc and therefore memory allocation, how memory management will be handled in a data processing context is yet to be seen.
Table 3: Evaluation results for all \((\text{program}, \text{VM})\) combinations from the AMD workstation. **Col. 3**: max resident set sizes (bytes). **Col. 4**: startup latencies (ms). **Col. 5**: execution times (ms). **Col. 6**: total running times (ms). All values are 10-run averages and are relative to those of native binaries (= 1).

| program          | VM                | rel. avg. max RSS | rel. avg. latencies | rel. avg. times | rel. avg. times |
|------------------|-------------------|-------------------|---------------------|----------------|----------------|
| dummy            | wasmtime          | 3.85              | 92.0                | 4.37           | 2.71           |
|                  | wasmtime\_cached | 3.52              | 80.6                | 4.25           | 2.59           |
|                  | graal             | 10.4              | 25.5                | 20.4           | 2.87           |
|                  | wasmer            | 16.0              | 267.0               | 4.63           | 7.31           |
|                  | rbpf              | 1.11              | 1.59                | 0.0972         | 0.852          |
|                  | ubpf              | 1.10              | 3.23                | 0.0887         | 1.11           |
| fibonacci        | wasmtime          | 3.85              | 94.0                | 3.77           | 2.89           |
|                  | wasmtime\_cached | 3.52              | 79.2                | 4.10           | 2.62           |
|                  | graal             | 10.4              | 27.9                | 34.1           | 3.22           |
|                  | wasmer            | 16.8              | 283.0               | 3.82           | 8.00           |
|                  | rbpf              | 1.09              | 2.53                | 0.185          | 0.962          |
|                  | ubpf              | 1.11              | 3.83                | 0.160          | 1.07           |
| integer summing  | wasmtime          | 3.82              | 79.7                | 1.99           | 2.17           |
|                  | wasmtime\_cached | 3.48              | 64.5                | 1.99           | 2.10           |
|                  | graal             | 21.4              | 18.7                | 12.5           | 10.6           |
|                  | wasmer            | 16.6              | 223.0               | 1.06           | 2.35           |
|                  | rbpf              | 1.09              | 2.26                | 2.22           | 1.97           |
|                  | ubpf              | 1.09              | 2.97                | 1.98           | 1.79           |
| prime counting   | wasmtime          | 2.81              | 77.7                | 0.969          | 1.55           |
|                  | wasmtime\_cached | 2.48              | 58.8                | 0.978          | 1.43           |
|                  | graal             | 39.1              | 26.1                | 36.8           | 27.2           |
|                  | wasmer            | 12.3              | 297.0               | 0.814          | 3.34           |
|                  | rbpf              | 1.02              | 4.73                | 0.907          | 0.935          |
|                  | ubpf              | 1.05              | 6.71                | 0.942          | 0.999          |
| multi-factorial  | wasmtime          | 3.80              | 78.7                | 3.55           | 2.58           |
|                  | wasmtime\_cached | 3.47              | 68.6                | 3.32           | 2.45           |
|                  | graal             | 10.2              | 22.8                | 27.1           | 2.91           |
|                  | wasmer            | 16.2              | 238.0               | 3.93           | 7.30           |
|                  | rbpf              | 1.08              | 2.12                | 0.171          | 0.997          |
|                  | ubpf              | 1.07              | 3.14                | 0.140          | 1.03           |

Figure 2: max resident set sizes (bytes) of all \((\text{program}, \text{VM})\) combinations, absolute values in \(\log_{10}\) scale sizes (RSS). Next comes wasmtime, whose max RSS values were 3~4 times those of native binaries on both architectures.

The much higher max RSS values of wasmer on x64 were likely due to its usage of LLVM for ahead-of-time compilation (AOT). As for GraalVM native images, we do not have sufficient knowledge of their inner workings to comment, but we speculate that its support for language interop would require a heavier runtime, which might have contributed to the high max RSS values.

From Figure 2, we can see that the max RSS values were fairly consistent across runs, even though a few outliers do exist. However, it is worth noting that max RSS values are max values – the VMs most likely do not need this much memory for their entire lifetimes.

### 5.4 Runtime Startup Latency

Generally, runtime startup latencies do not matter, as they are one-off costs that can be amortized by the execution times
| program    | VM            | rel. avg. max RSS | rel. avg. latencies | rel. avg. times | rel. avg. times |
|------------|---------------|-------------------|---------------------|----------------|----------------|
| dummy      | wasmtime      | 3.58              | 48.3                | 51.6           | 1.84           |
|            | wasmtimeCached| 3.28              | 29.2                | 63.1           | 1.65           |
|            | graal         | 13.8              | 40.4                | 233.0          | 3.60           |
|            | wasmer        | NA                | NA                  | NA             | NA             |
|            | rbpf          | NA                | NA                  | NA             | NA             |
|            | ubpf          | NA                | NA                  | NA             | NA             |
| fibonacci  | wasmtime      | 3.61              | 39.1                | 27.8           | 1.80           |
|            | wasmtimeCached| 3.28              | 24.9                | 31.1           | 1.63           |
|            | graal         | 13.8              | 34.7                | 241.0          | 3.58           |
|            | wasmer        | NA                | NA                  | NA             | NA             |
|            | rbpf          | NA                | NA                  | NA             | NA             |
|            | ubpf          | NA                | NA                  | NA             | NA             |
| integer summing | wasmtime      | 3.53              | 39.8                | 1.24           | 1.30           |
|            | wasmtimeCached| 7.84              | 26.4                | 1.24           | 1.31           |
|            | graal         | 28.2              | 37.1                | 11.5           | 10.7           |
|            | wasmer        | NA                | NA                  | NA             | NA             |
|            | rbpf          | NA                | NA                  | NA             | NA             |
|            | ubpf          | NA                | NA                  | NA             | NA             |
| prime counting | wasmtime      | 2.33              | 49.2                | 1.27           | 1.47           |
|            | wasmtimeCached| 3.44              | 23.6                | 1.27           | 1.40           |
|            | graal         | 48.0              | 45.3                | 48.1           | 38.1           |
|            | wasmer        | NA                | NA                  | NA             | NA             |
|            | rbpf          | NA                | NA                  | NA             | NA             |
|            | ubpf          | NA                | NA                  | NA             | NA             |
| multi-factorial | wasmtime      | 3.55              | 38.1                | 32.3           | 1.80           |
|            | wasmtimeCached| 3.24              | 23.7                | 37.2           | 1.67           |
|            | graal         | 13.7              | 34.1                | 243.0          | 3.57           |
|            | wasmer        | NA                | NA                  | NA             | NA             |
|            | rbpf          | NA                | NA                  | NA             | NA             |
|            | ubpf          | NA                | NA                  | NA             | NA             |

Table 4: Evaluation results for all \((\text{program,VM})\) combinations from AWS c6g.xlarge. \textbf{Col. 3}: max resident set sizes (bytes). \textbf{Col. 4}: startup latencies (ms). \textbf{Col. 5}: execution times (ms). \textbf{Col. 6}: total running times (ms). All values are 10-run averages and are relative to those of native binaries (= 1). \textbf{NA} is shown for failed configurations.

of the offload code. However, in certain cases, offload code might have to be repeatedly invoked (e.g., on a series of small files/objects), and significant runtime startup latencies can be quite undesirable or even unacceptable in these situations. Thus, we will also take a look at the startup latencies of the VMs when running our test programs.

To get the startup latencies, we would record \(t_0\), the time when runtime setup starts, and \(t_1\), the time when the test program can be executed, and calculate \(t_1 - t_0\). Note that this value also includes the JIT/AOT overhead. Fortunately, this process is not that complicated, as all VMs’ APIs clearly differentiate between runtime setup calls and code execution calls.

From Tables 3 and 4 (column 4) and Figures 3 and 4, we can see some quite dramatic variations in the startup latencies of different VMs. As discussed before, \(rBPF\) and \(uBPF\) are a bit lacking in terms of their features, which means they are likely more lightweight than the competition, so it is not surprising that they were able to perform well in this category.

On the other hand, \texttt{wasmer} was once again bogged down by the expensive AOT compilation step, making it the worst performer in this category.

That said, if one pays attention to the scale of the y-axis in Figure 3, which shows absolute values, then one would notice that the startup latencies are all quite small – on both architectures, they are mostly under 3 ms. As such, they should not become a performance concern in general.

5.5 Execution Speed

In this section, we present the execution times of the aforementioned programs on different VMs. Here, execution time refers to the amount of time spent on actual computation (i.e., from calling the test program’s entry point function to receiving its return value).

The results can be found in column 5 of Tables 3 and 4 and in Figures 5 and 6. For the execution times of the actual computation, the programs can be divided into 2 groups for dis-
cussion: \((\text{dummy}, \text{fibonacci}, \text{multi}_\text{factorial}), (\text{erdos}_\text{prime}, \text{and} \text{summing})\).

The first group is relatively light on computation – their bars are not even visible in Figure 5. For these programs, \(rBPF\) and \(uBPF\) performed so well that, amusingly, they were able to beat the native binaries by some margin. But since these programs finished so quickly, it is not clear if we can draw any meaningful conclusion here.

The second group of programs, due to their significant usage of loops and/or memory accesses, are more intensive and can arguably put the VMs to test a little bit. For these programs, \(\text{wasmer}\)’s high peak memory usage and startup latencies finally paid off, as it ended up getting the best performance for \(\text{erdos}_\text{prime}\) and \(\text{summing}\) on \(x64\), excluding the native binaries in the latter case. Otherwise, \(\text{wasmtime}\)’s performance was similar to that of \(rBPF\) and \(uBPF\).

There are also two more points worth mentioning. First, on \(x64\), the native binary for \(\text{erdos}_\text{prime}\) performed rather poorly, as it got outperformed by all VMs except \(\text{GraalVM}\). Since \(\text{erdos}_\text{prime}\) is heavy on memory accesses, one might speculate that the VMs somehow emitted more efficient machine code in this regard. Second, \(\text{GraalVM}\)’s performance was pretty poor across the board, which was, again, likely due to the weight of its language interop infrastructure.

5.6 Total Time

In this section, we present the total running times of the aforementioned programs on different VMs. The total running time of a test program goes from when the VM process is spawned to when the VM process exits. Thus, it can include the time taken by the OS to perform symbol resolution and relocation, spawn the process, etc., thereby also reflecting the weightiness of the VMs a bit.

Since we collected the data in a Python script, on top of GNU \(\text{time}\), the exact values might be slightly off, but since we only report the relative values in the tables above, the skew should be consistent and thus irrelevant. The results can be
found in column 6 of Tables 3 and 4 and in Figures 7 and 8. Taking everything into account, rBPF and uBPF come on top once again on x64, often beating the native binaries. After them comes wasmtime, whose total times are still close to those of the native binaries, especially on the arm64 AWS instance. Enabling caching for wasmtime certainly helps with the total times, but the margin is not dramatic by any means. 12 The AOT cost of wasmer cannot yet be fully amortized on small programs like ours, but its numbers for erdos_prime and summing are not that far behind wasmtime’s, so we believe it has great potentials. As for GraalVM, once there is substantial operation involved, it is a bit too slow to compete with the other options, so unless language interop or the Java ecosystem is indispensable, we do not see why it should be used for running WebAssembly programs. 13

The native binaries consistently have the largest sizes due to their inclusion of much metadata information (e.g., the .symtab, or symbol table, section), whereas the WebAssembly binaries consistently have the smallest sizes, if we ignore “patched eBPF” for a second. Patched eBPF “binaries” are a bit special. As discussed before, these have to be manually created by a human at the moment, and they are stored as plaintext, so they are not really compiled binaries in some sense. Nevertheless, if we take them into consideration as well, then they are indeed the smallest except for the erdos_prime program. However, since erdos_prime also happens to be the most complicated among the programs, we would argue that, as program complexity increases, WebAssembly will likely be the winner in terms of binary sizes.

6 Discussion

While the eBPF VMs had a slight edge in our quantitative evaluation, the amount of restrictions and extra efforts that eBPF
currently imposes on its users suggests that it is not yet ready
to support data processing and general-purpose computation.
For that, WebAssembly seems to be a more sensible choice,
and it is ready for deployment. Below, we will propose some
potential improvements for both technologies.

WebAssembly  Being a fairly mature technology, We-
bAssembly and its implementations can still use some im-
provements in these directions:
• stabilize and finish implementing the SIMD and threading
proposals
• provide an interface for (preferably zero-copy) sharing
of host data
• address the security concerns pointed out by researchers
(e.g. [42])

eBPF  Following the evaluation in the previous sections, it is
our opinion that eBPF still needs a lot of work before it can
become a suitable vehicle for data processing:
• a mature VM, with support for things like debugging
and profiling
• an extended instruction set to support all common nu-
meric operations (e.g., signed divisions)
• a specification that clearly defines permitted operations
• a reliable verifier developed in tandem with the specifi-
cation
• implementation of libc and other system services
• undergo thorough security evaluations in the context of
data processing

7 Conclusion
In this work, we have evaluated two mechanisms for the
purpose of enabling general computation offloading in the
context of near-data processing – WebAssembly and eBPF.
From our point of view, we believe that WebAssembly is a
better choice for the job, but we welcome differing opinions,
and we hope more discussions in these directions will ensue.

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