Abstract Shade Trees

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Abstract.
As GPU-powered special effects in games become more sophisticated, it becomes harder to create and manage effect interaction using the fairly primitive GPU shading languages. This difficulty also introduces a workflow problem: artists design effects, but only programmers can implement and interface the main renderer with them. This paper borrows current ideas from the programming language community to improve the shader authoring process.

We introduce abstract shade trees for compactly expressing shaders. We implemented a visual programming front-end tool for creating such trees and a back-end tool called a weaver that transforms them into executable OpenGL Shading Language source code. Like previous visual tools for shader programming, ours represents core operations called atoms as tree nodes. Unlike previous tools, it abstracts the parameter connections between atoms. This dramatically simplifies the user's view of the tree and ensures that users cannot create a shader with type errors. Because the specific connections are abstract, our tools allow special effect creators (artists) and atom creators (programmers) to develop and modify their products independent of each other for efficient workflow.

We further abstract shader authoring with controls for visualizing and manipulating whole features like shadows and bump-mapping. The potentially interleaved and overlapping nodes of a feature are encircled in the front-end tool to show their cross-cutting relationship to the rest of the tree.

1. Introduction
Modern GPUs manifest another turn of Ivan Sutherland’s “Wheel of Reincarnation,” where general-purpose and specialized hardware alternate as the best implementation technology. Unfortunately, 3D graphics and other media APIs have not kept pace with the move to general-purpose graphics processors. Current APIs for GPU programming avoid layering, moving the application logic very close to the hardware. The emphasis is on time-to-market, not on robustness, and exposing hardware peculiarities is seen as a competitive advantage. With the notable exception of Sh [McCool02], current shading languages for GPUs (e.g., GLSL) lack language mechanisms for encapsulation, modularity, and abstraction. This makes it very hard to create and maintain long GPU programs. Because GPUs are inherently digital signal processors with long pipelines, no stack, and unusual performance limitations on random access to memory, it is likely that they will remain difficult to program by hand.

The lack of abstraction also makes it difficult for artists to create new graphics effects without learning how to program. It leads to a close coupling between programmers and artists: The artist tells the programmer what the effect should be, the programmer writes the shader, the artist changes the requirements, the programmer revises the code, etc. Once a special effect is created, it is practically impossible to re-use it within the framework of another shader without substantial additional coding. This stifles productivity and creativity.

One way to address this problem is to look for other representations of shader programs. Cook [1984] introduced the notion of modular shading components with shade trees. He describes a system in which basic shading blocks (called atoms) are nodes linked by edges representing variables. Because shaders have one output (the pixel color) and many inputs, the root of the tree represents the output and the leaves are the input.
Shade trees weren’t originally intended for visual programming. In fact, Cook’s shaders were authored as code and converted to trees as a post-process for compilation. Abram and Whitted [1990] invert this paradigm with Building Block Shaders. Their visual programming tool represents shaders directly as directed acyclic graphs (DAGs), which are essentially Cook’s trees extended with side effects and confluent paths. Although they are DAGs, we continue to refer to visual shader representations as trees in deference to the original work.

Implementations of this idea have since been created for today’s GPUs and hardware programming languages [Borau04][Unreal06]. Figure 1 (left) shows an example shader for “bumpy glass” that combines the rendering effects of parallax mapping, Fresnel reflection, and Fresnel refraction. The immediate advantage over source code is that shade trees encourage experimentation and are more approachable by non-programmers [Abram90]. Programmers implement a library of carefully optimized atoms, which non-programmers combine to build shaders. A visual editor with preview capabilities offers the advantage that artists can experiment without understanding the inner workings of the atoms.

Figure 1 also demonstrates some of the drawbacks of shade trees. Although this example uses a simple shader, the tree appears complicated and visually cluttered. The tree also contains atoms that an artist might not understand, like 

\[ \text{TangentToObjectSpace} \]

and

\[ \text{ExtendToHomogeneousVector} \]. Most importantly, there is the potential for type mismatches between input and output arguments of atoms. When they introduced the first visual shade tree editor, Abram and Whitted [1990] noted:

“One problem with [the Building Block] graphical shading language is the potential for type mis-matching.”

In fact, this problem extends beyond storage types to interface mismatches between atoms, e.g., assumptions like “the light vector has unit length” or “RGB values are pre-multiplied by the alpha channel.” It is almost impossible for the user to ensure that the types are correct when the programming tool conceals those types.

In this paper we introduce abstract shade trees (ASHT) for pixel shaders. Of course, many of the same ideas can be applied to vertex shaders (and other programmable units, e.g., the geometry shaders in DirectX 10).

Figure 1(right) shows the abstract shade tree for our previous example. This tree is visually uncluttered and only contains atoms that are meaningful to the user. To avoid type and interface mismatches we implement parameter matching with automatic type coercions. This allows us to abstract all parameters between two atoms into a single data connection. The bubbles surrounding sub-graphs indicate the boundaries of the features that were combined to create the graph.

We build a system for abstract shade trees that consists of a visual programming tool and a weaver program that translates the abstract shade tree into OpenGL Shading Language (GLSL) code. The weaver determines how to connect parameters between atoms. It automatically introduces new atoms into the graph in cases where there is no output that exactly matches each input.

Automatic parameter matching by the weaver is our primary contribution. Because of it, abstract shade trees not only simplify shader authoring but also allow a programmer to change an atom interface without affecting the artist using that atom. This in turn allows complete separation between the roles of programmers and artists and asynchronous workflow. Automatic matching also guarantees that the output is legal and correctly typed code, which solves the type mismatch problem noted by Abram and Whitted.

We also introduce the notion of feature-based programming to GPU shader development. Artists can easily extend and combine previously completed effects (features) whose boundaries are displayed in the editor.

2. Related Work

2.1. Shade Trees

Cook’s [1984] Shade Trees first introduced the notions of shading languages, uniform shading parameters, and modular shading components. Abram and Whitted’s [1990] Building Block Shaders (BBS) was the first visual programming tool for shaders. Others have since created implementations similar to BBS for today’s GPUs and hardware programming languages [Borau04][Unreal06]. These all map one-to-one traditional programming elements like variables and functions to visual elements. Thus, while making programming more approachable, they still retain the complexity of source code.

We extend the previous work by abstracting programming elements, solving the type mismatch problem, and introducing feature abstractions.

2.2. Shader Compilers

Efficient compilation of shading language code to GPU assembler is an active area of research and beyond the scope of this paper. We instead focus on producing reasonable high-level code from still higher-level abstractions. Nonetheless, we briefly review compiler work as it is the natural compilation target for our weaver.

McCool et. al’s Shader Algebra [2004] extends their Sh language [2002] with connect and combine operations on primitives. These allow shaders to be optimized by a compiler and manipulated by a programmer without knowledge of the primitives. The connect operator requires the number, type, and storage classifier (and implicitly, the semantics) of arguments to agree. Therefore the output of the weaver provides ideal input for McCool et al.’s optimizing compilers.

Many hand-written shaders are short in part because it is impractical to write large shaders by hand in today’s shading languages. By simplifying the process of creating complex shaders, abstract shade trees naturally raise the problem of creating shaders too large for resource-limited GPUs. The solution is to follow our tree compilation with a partitioning compiler. Chan et. al’s [2002] compiler naturally fits within our framework—their system partitions trees into subtrees that execute in a single rendering pass.

The Brook language [Buck04] extends the C language so that it can be efficiently compiled for streaming processors like GPUs for non-graphics tasks. This is not directly related to our work; however, we note that the purely functional style of programming that is enforced by our system has been long noted to be ideal for compilation on parallel processors.

Like our work, Pellacini’s [2005] recent shader simplification system manipulates the structure of shaders in semi-blind manner. Neither compiler is fully aware of the intent of the manipulated code and could introduce a transformation that destroys the underlying rendering effect. Yet in both cases one can perform useful work despite the potential pitfall. Our transformations go beyond single expressions and must synthesize the glue code between them. To reduce errors in this synthesis, we extend the type system with stronger semantics and require that the weaver preserve this semantic type safety.
2.3. Feature-Based Programming

In the software engineering literature, the term feature refers to a user-identifiable attribute of a system, which a client might be willing to pay for [Turner99]. It is therefore natural to consider a rendering effect like shadows to be a feature. Thinking of programs as collections of features is not new: the idea is inherent in Parnas’ [1972] seminal paper on modularity, and in Dijkstra’s [1976] book on programming, where the latter discusses the “separation of concerns.”

More recently, there has been significant activity on building programming languages—particularly modular systems—that enable programmers to explicitly represent a system’s features [Batory92, Kiczales97, Batory04]. In these languages, each module describes some feature, and module composition corresponds to building a system that consists of these features. (We adopt the term ‘weaver’ from one of these languages, known as aspect-oriented programming [Kiczales97]). Because client requirements tend to be in terms of features, these systems can more easily be reconfigured to accommodate evolving requirements. Indeed, it is now routine to talk about a product line of programs that can be built from a collection of features, by analogy to manufacturing. Software product lines have long been popular in the telecommunications industry, and are now increasingly popular in application software [Clements02]. Our tool offers a pre-created library of effects as well as the ability to create new ones from atoms, so a library of effects defines a product line of shaders.

3. System and Workflow Overview

Our system comprises a GUI tree-editor on the front-end (Figure 2) and a back-end that compiles trees to GLSL shaders. It leverages existing tools (e.g., ATI RenderMonkey) to provide real-time execution and preview of the shaders. We assume a library of hand-optimized primitives and pre-created effects is available.

To create a shader, an artist uses a drag-and-drop interface to place multiple existing effects in a common workspace. These effects can more easily be reconfigured to accommodate evolving requirements. Indeed, it is now routine to talk about a product line of programs that can be built from a collection of features, by analogy to manufacturing. Software product lines have long been popular in the telecommunications industry, and are now increasingly popular in application software [Clements02]. Our tool offers a pre-created library of effects as well as the ability to create new ones from atoms, so a library of effects defines a product line of shaders.

The tree is abstract because arrows represent a data dependency, not individual parameter mappings between atoms. As shown in Figure 1(right), when instances of a node common to two features are combined into a single node, the rendered feature boundaries correctly overlap.

Pressing the “preview” button executes the weaver, which follows the algorithm described in Section 5. This algorithm works backwards through the tree from the shader output (a pixel color) to the inputs, producing GLSL code. Its primary task is replacing each abstract arrow with pairs of input and output parameters for the atoms it connects. In many cases, those parameters do not naturally correspond and the weaver must inject substantial code to correct the problem. The output code resembles that produced when implementing a shader by hand, which shows that we have removed the tedium of shader production while preserving the creative aspects.

Two asynchronous editing cycles exist in the workflow around our system. A programmer continually optimizes the atoms and introduces new atoms and sample effects into the system. Meanwhile, the artist edits abstract shade trees. Because the connections in the tree are abstract, the programmer may frequently change not only the implementation of atoms but also the API, i.e., the number and type of arguments, without requiring the artist to update the abstract shade tree.

4. Atom Definitions

Atoms are defined by a declaration, a set of struct/global function definitions, and a body. They are hand-coded and optimized in an extension to GLSL that includes atom declarations and semantic types. Atom declarations describe the number, name, and type of inputs and outputs of a block of code. They differ from traditional shading function declarations in two ways. First, there may be multiple output arguments. Second, no lexical scope is applied to the definition. Instead, free variables must be explicitly declared as global parameters. These globals also serve as hints to the weaver during parameter matching. The declaration syntax is a structured comment so atoms are backwards compatible to GLSL.

It is common practice in the games industry to squeeze every possible cycle from graphics routines. Programmers commonly examine the assembly produced by both shading and C++ compilers. To support this scrutiny, the weaver preserves whitespace, variable names, and documentation comments from atom bodies. This helps the programmer trace the effect of a code change on the abstract shade tree, the weaver’s GLSL output, and the GLSL compiler’s assembly output.

Many atoms, like the one in Listing 1, are simply GLSL standard library routines wrapped by a declaration. Often these standard library routines are intrinsics that map directly to a hardware feature.

```cpp
//! START CubeMapping
//! @uniform environmentMap:TEX3D
//! @param cubeTexCoord:VEC3__W_VEC__
//! @param cubeMap:TEX3D = environmentMap
//! @uniform lightMap:TEX3D

outColor = textureCube(cubeMap, cubeTexCoord);
#endif Geo CubeMapping
```

Listing 1: Sample atom code for cube mapping.

In the atom syntax\(^\d\), `param` declares an input parameter and `return` declares an output parameter. Atom declarations may also include two kinds of immutable **global parameters**. A uniform parameter is passed from the application to the entire shader. It is uniform over a series of rendering calls. A varying parameter is passed from the vertex shader. It is interpolated between vertices by the hardware. Global parameters have two roles. In addition to declaring inputs passed outside the call chain, they may also appear as default values to satisfy a specific input parameter if the weaver is unable to find an appropriate output parameter from a connected node. For example, in Listing 1, the `environmentMap` is not explicitly used by the atom body. However, it is declared as

\(^\d\) The actual atom syntax in our implementation is more verbose, containing documentation comments and other non-semantic fields.
4.1. Semantic Types

We introduce semantic types, which are so specific that two variables with precisely the same type are likely semantically interchangeable. Some examples appear to the right of the colons in the annotations of Listing 1.

Regular GLSL types are merely C-style storage specifiers with little value as abstractions. For example, a color, a 3D location, and a row of a 3×3 matrix have the same type, which is also indistinguishable from an array of three floating-point numbers. Another extreme is a possible choice for a type system, where types are so specific and abstracted that each value has its own type; e.g., the integers ‘7’ and ‘8’ might have separate types. This latter extreme is unreasonable because types are sets of values, so an all-singleton type implementation eliminates the power of the type system. However, we find it advantageous to extend GLSL towards this extreme in order to encapsulate graphics concepts directly into the type system. Just as many languages assign different types to natural (unsigned) numbers and integers, we type vectors differently based on several mathematically meaningful properties. For example, in the case of vector length, we recognize two important values: unit and arbitrary. This allows the system to distinguish normalized vectors within the type system. We use a convention where the name of a vector is the concatenation of a series of short codes for each semantic property. The properties and codes for vectors are:

- **Dimension**: [2, 3, 4, _]
- **Length**: [U: Unit, _]
- **Basis**: [T: tangent, O: object, W: world, S: screen space, _]
- **Interpretation**: [RGB: color, TEX: texture coordinate, NOR: surface normal (covector), VEC: direction, PNT: point, _]
- **Precision**: [F: float32, I: int32, B: Boolean, _]

The underline is a wildcard for supporting polymorphic types, for example, _vec4_ is a four-component vector in any basis. These can also be viewed as type unions, e.g., "_vec4_ = _vec4_O ∪ _vec4_W ∪ _vec4_T ∪ _vec4_S." We created the whole list of properties based on distinctions we found meaningful and expect that more properties will be added in the future to help further distinguish semantics.

The type and naming scheme extends naturally to matrices, scalars, and textures. Semantic types can be made legal GLSL code by inserting a series of macros mapping them to storage classes, e.g., \#define _VEC3_U_W_NOR_F vec3.

A compiler uses a type system in order to verify the correctness of programs. The weaver instead applies the type system as a set of rules for steering code generation creation—that is, generation is governed by the constraint that the output must be correctly typed. We define and use traditional typing rules on our semantic types, e.g.,

```glsl
if v has type _VEC3_T_
then (ObjectToTangentSpace * v)
has type _VEC3_O_
```

except that we apply these rules backward when seeking to coerce expression types. Thus the above rule would not be applied to type-check the product expression but instead to find a coercion of v from _VEC3_T_ to _VEC3_O_. Section 5.4 describes how this coercion search occurs.

We wish to note that the extremely narrow application domain of shading languages is what makes this type system reasonable: these special-case typing rules and highly specified types probably cannot be generalized to other domains or general purpose languages.

5. Weaving Algorithm

We chose to implement the weaver as a pre-processor, without a full parser. This allows the weaver to preserve whitespace and comments within the atom bodies and allows atom bodies with partial statements, e.g., "if (dot(N,V) > 0) {

Because the weaver doesn’t parse the atom code, it can operate on a variety of shading language syntaxes (GLSL, HLSL, Cg), provided all atoms are implemented in the same language. This design decision also leads to a straightforward implementation in Java, which provides regular expressions and many other string manipulation routines.

We now detail the four steps of the weaving algorithm.

5.1. α-Rename Variables

Because the atoms are implemented individually, it is likely that some variable names are shared between them. In some cases this is because an output of one atom becomes the input of another and it really is the same variable. In other cases the same name is used for distinct variables that cannot be combined.

The weaver first creates a unique code body for each node. From this point forward there are no atoms bodies, only node bodies. Where two nodes use the same atom, two copies of that atom body are created. The weaver then assigns each node in the tree a unique ID. It iterates over all input and output parameter declarations (but not global declarations) of all nodes, seeking variable name conflicts where the same name is used in two different node bodies. Once all conflicts have been detected, the weaver renames all variables within node bodies that conflict by appending the unique node ID to the original name, e.g. surfaceNormal → surfaceNormal_0001. We include the original variable name to preserve readability of the output. This process is a common compiler operation called α-renaming.

Employing α-renaming is overly conservative because it destroys parameter linkage between nodes. However, this is not a problem because subsequent weaver steps ensure correct linkage, independent of parameter names.

Renaming only affects parameters that appear in the atom declaration. We avoid atom-local variable name conflicts by the convention of wrapping atom bodies with a local scope "[…]".

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5.2. Topologically Sort Nodes

The weaver creates a new terminal node accepting a single input for the pixel color and a directed edge into this node from any node with no output (there is typically only one such node).

In the abstract tree DAG, edges represent the data dependencies between atoms. Without destroying the tree structure, the weaver assigns a topological ordering to the graph nodes based on these dependencies. The new node appears last in the topological ordering.

5.3. Match Inputs to Outputs

We now come to the core of the algorithm. The weaver begins with the terminal node at the bottom and works up the shade tree in reverse topological order to the inputs at the top.

For each node, the weaver matches each input parameter to an output parameter from a parent node. Two parameters match only if both have precisely the same semantic type. Our semantic types are specific enough that there is rarely a perfect match. The weaver therefore seeks an output and a coercion that will transform the output type to the input type. The coercion search proceeds as follows. Consider the implicit coercion tree in Figure 3 where the root is the type of the input parameter for which a corresponding output is being sought (note that this is unrelated to the shade tree). The leaves are the types of the available outputs from nodes higher up the abstract shade tree. The edges are coercions (i.e., typing rules run backwards) and the internal nodes are the types of intermediate expressions produced during a series of coercion operations. The tree is infinite because of cycles: one may reach world space from tangent space by the two-step coercion $tangent \rightarrow object \rightarrow world$, but also by any coercion of the form $tangent \rightarrow object \rightarrow tangent \rightarrow object \rightarrow world$.

Of course, we never want to apply such a complicated coercion path when a better alternative exists. Our notion of ‘better’ includes both the length of a coercion path and the time cost of traversing each edge. The cost of each coercion edge is based on the anticipated cycle count for executing that operation at run-time. For example, transforming a pre-normalized world-space light vector to object space by a matrix multiplication may be faster than normalizing an existing but non-unit object-space light vector. The type rules in our system are in a total order based on this anticipated time cost. The children of a coercion tree node are arranged from left to right according to the increasing cost of each rule. The tree is implicit because it is created as it is traversed; the rules are applied blindly without an awareness of the output that will be their eventual destination.

The search for a viable coercion begins at the root of the coercion tree and proceeds downwards breadth-first, left-to-right. It terminates when the first type node is encountered that matches one of the available output types, or when depth seven is reached. Any value around seven is a reasonable cutoff; the key idea is to one of the available output types, or when depth seven is reached.

5.4 Concatenate Node Bodies

To form the shader code, the weaver concatenates all global parameter declarations, struct declarations, and the node bodies in topological order wrapped by “void main(void) {…”.

Since we preserved variable names, the uniform parameters will have meaningful names. This makes it possible to map them to GUI elements in IDEs such as RenderMonkey or FX Composer for interactive adjustment.

Finally, the weaver inserts a series of #define macros that map all semantic types used in the shader to legal GLSL storage classes. The output shader can be run from any OpenGL program or shader preview tool.

6. GUI Implementation

Our GUI tree editor, shown in Figure 2 with a 3D scene in the RenderMonkey, is implemented as a plug-in to the Eclipse IDE. This allows programmers to easily move between atom editing in a traditional code editor and experimentation with those atoms in the abstract shade tree editor. Eclipse provides automatic layout and rendering of graphs, simplifying the implementation.

We render the feature outlines to off-screen bitmaps and then composite them over the tree. Each feature outline is rendered with a variation on [Raskar99] as follows: Clear the off-screen bitmap to transparent. For each node in the feature (note that a node may belong to multiple features, like Fresnel in Figure 1), render a colored, solid, rounded rectangle $f$ pixels larger than the node itself, where $f$ is a unique small integer for each feature. The varying radii keep adjacent features outlines from overlapping. Likewise, render a thickened line segment for each arrow between two nodes in the feature. Finally, clear the interior by rendering the same shape with an $f – 2$ radius and a transparent fill color, and composite the resulting outline over the graph.

![Figure 3: Sample coercion tree mapping the possible paths through the type rules for coercing a tangent space normal to an eye-space normal. Many possible paths are not explored because the all-left branch leads to a successful coercion.](image-url)
7. Results

Figures 4-7 show abstract shade trees created with our system. Each figure displays the actual tree as it appears in the authoring system (left) and the GLSL shader produced by the weaver for that tree (right), superimposed over an image of an object rendered with that shader. The GLSL output in the result figures is color-coded. Light lines of code correspond to atoms that have been inlined. Dim lines correspond to parameter linkage, coercions, and type macros inferred by the weaver.

Figure 4 is the bumpy glass shader we considered in Figure 1. The full code is given in the Appendix to give a sense of the weaver’s output. In allowing non-programmers to effectively create shaders, we have not diminished the importance of programmers on a team but instead focused their role. Note that most of the output code in the Appendix is necessary but uninteresting because it is boilerplate and linkage between atoms. This is also true in the other examples. Because the weaver assumes the duty of generating the necessary “glue” code, programmers concentrate on creating and optimizing atom bodies, which is the interesting part of their role that requires graphics, programming, and mathematical expertise.

The underlying features/effects described in the captions are clearly visible in the tree diagrams. Even a non-programmer can see the interaction between features and manipulate them easily. In Figures 4 and 7 the features share central nodes where they overlap. To create these, the user dropped the separate features into the workspace, which created duplicate nodes. The user then explicitly combined those common nodes.

7.1. Performance

The result figures demonstrate that shader creation is easy in our system, that the weaver can produce correct GLSL code, and that the abstract shade tree is both more compact and easier to understand than a traditional tree or code. The generated shaders are efficient; all examples run at hundreds of frames per second on a laptop with a Radeon 9700 Mobile GPU.

To compare the performance of the generated code to hand written code, we hand-wrote an optimized GLSL shader for the effects in the bumpy glass shader. The manual implementation contained only 58 lines of GLSL code compared to the weaver’s 188 lines, which are shown in the appendix. However, the weaver generates a lot of comment and variable name linkage overhead.

When both shaders are compiled to hardware assembly with NVIDIA’s Cg compiler, the weaver’s implementation contains 51 instructions and the manual implementation contains 46 instructions. Shading every pixel at 512x512, the weaver’s implementation achieves 240 fps and the manual implementation achieves 245 fps. At 1024x768, both render at 50 fps. We conclude that the weaver produces code comparable to that written by an experienced shader programmer.

7.2. Limitations

Our system always produces a legal, type-safe program. However, there are three ways that program can still fail to meet expectations. The first is that it allows creation of shaders that exceed the instruction and register count limits of today’s hardware. See Chan et. al [2002] for a multi-pass solution.

Second, the weaver can produce less efficient code than a programmer in cases where a whole-program optimization is appropriate, e.g., moving all lighting from world space to object space to avoid repeated per-pixel transformations. To perform such an optimization, the compiler would have to both understand
spatial transformations at not just a semantic but an operational level, and have control over not only the shading algorithm but also the host C++ program into which it is integrated. This is interesting future work but significantly beyond the scope of our semantic type approach.

The third case, semantic errors, is the most interesting. We invited laypeople (non-programmers, non-artists) to experiment with effect creation. After we explained the UI and primitives they were generally able to produce shaders, which we consider a great success compared to current tools. However, they had difficulty choosing between similar primitives with different types, which often led to inefficient semantic type coercions for the desired effects. When the tool failed to produce the effect that the user expected, it was usually because two nodes received input from the same output when they should have been distinct (e.g., imagine both Modulate nodes linked to input x in Figure 1). This occurs when the user fails to add sufficient dependency arrows and when the dependency is implicit in a global variable. Like the excessive transformations, missing dependencies are a user error that would likely not occur with real artists; a follow-up user study will measure the experiences of trained artists.

Incorrect linkage of two primitives to the same global variable only occurs when the common semantic type of the primitives is too general. Here, fault lies with the programmer who created the primitives and not the artist or the weaver. The programmer must tread a delicate line, however: types that are too specific will never match exactly and require more coercions, but types that are too general produce incorrect semantics. On one hand, it is a drawback of our system that programmers must spend a lot of thought and time tailoring the interface types. On the other hand, we argue that interface semantics are exactly where programmers should think hard! We automate the linkage, boilerplate, and coercion precisely so that programmers can focus on design, which requires human input.

8. Future Work

Our cost ranking of coercions is based on instruction count and intuition. A natural step is to use an actual cycle count. The challenge here is that the true time cost of a GPU operation depends on the instructions surrounding it, cache state, and the instruction scheduler.

On the programming language side, we envision an extension to parameterized types like C++ templates, which would enable more specific function types than our polymorphism. For example, we assign the addition operator the type \( \text{VEC}_{\rightarrow \text{VEC}} \times \text{VEC}_{\rightarrow \text{VEC}} \rightarrow \text{VEC}_{\rightarrow \text{VEC}} \), yet \( \text{VEC}_{\rightarrow \text{VEC}} \times \text{VEC}_{\rightarrow \text{VEC}} \rightarrow \text{VEC}_{\rightarrow \text{VEC}} \) is more specific.

A formal semantics, type system, and proofs for our system will serve as a good case study for the literature on domain-specific languages and feature-based programming.

9. Conclusions

We addressed the problem originally noted by Abram and Whitted by making type mismatches in shaders impossible. We also enable shader creation by users who do not even have knowledge of types, programming concepts like variables, or the vector math used to implement algorithms inside the atoms.

We presented a new system for authoring complex GPU programs through automatic combination of primitive shading functions. In doing so, we extended GLSL with semantics types specific to computer graphics in a backwards-compatible manner. We anticipate that GLSL (like assembly language and C before it) will increasingly be produced as the output of a higher order tool. We will propose to the OpenGL architectural review board that semantic types be considered for the language standard, for use by both programmers and other tools like ours.

Our system uses many heuristics to infer parameter linkage. Even with our strong semantic types, it is a natural concern that the heuristics can produce a legal program with semantic errors. Fortunately, in graphics a semantic error is easily diagnosed because the image produced is incorrect. The interactive editing context of our Eclipse plug-in and RenderMonkey allows the shader author to correct the shade tree until the desired result is achieved. We speculate that our methodology is appropriate for similar domains like image- and audio-filter design, but inappropriate for general purpose programming that lacks easy feedback and a small set of semantic types.

Our system extends previous work, allowing non-programmers to more easily create more complex shaders. It also visualizes shaders easy-to-understand block diagrams. The advantage of abstract shade trees over hand-coded shaders or the one-to-one visual editors will only increase as hardware becomes ever more capable and the desired shaders increase commensurately in complexity. It literally took only seconds to create each of the abstract shade trees for our result figures; implementing similar shaders by hand in GLSL took us hours of coding and debugging for each shader. These shader examples contain about four effects each. Now consider GPUs of the future that are able to render ten or twenty interacting effects in realtime. Under today’s workflow, an artist might ask a programmer to hand code a different effect combination for every object in a scene. That will not be feasible when each shader contains thousands of lines of code. Our tool solves the authoring problem by making it not only possible for artists to create these shaders themselves but also making the process easy and enjoyable.

10. References


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void main(void) {
    float cosT2=1.0-etaRatio*etaRatio*(1.0-cosI*cosI);
    vec3 T = etaRatio*I+((etaRatio*etaRatio-1.0)*cosI)*N);

    vec3 refract(vec3 I, vec3 N, float etaRatio) {
        varying VEC2____TEX texCoo;
        uniform TEX2D heightTex;
        uniform FLOAT bumpBias;
        uniform FLOAT bumpScale;
        uniform TEX2D normalMap;
        varying VEC3___O____ bin;
        varying VEC3___O_NOR nor;
        uniform TEX4D evntCubeMap;
        uniform FLOAT fresPower;

        #define VEC3___W____ vec3
        #define VEC3___O_NOR vec3
        #define VEC3___O____ vec3
        #define MAT4 mat4
        #define TEX2D sampler2D
        #define VEC3___T____ vec3
        #define VEC2_____TEX vec2
        #define VEC4________ vec4
        #define VEC4_____RGB vec4
        #define VEC3_____TEX vec3
        #define VEC3_____NOR vec3
        #define VEC4_____NOR vec4
        #define VEC4___W_NOR vec4
        #define VEC3___T_NOR vec3

    return T*vec3(cosT2>0.0);
}

47 lines are parameter linkage and coercions generated by the weaver.
comments carried through from atom declarations. The remaining

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Appendix
GLSL code produced by the weaver from the shader abstraction in the
title of the paper. Gray lines are comments carried through from atom declarations. The remaining lines are parameter linkage and coercions generated by the weaver.

1   #define VEC3__T_NOR vec3
2   #define VEC3__M_NOR vec3
3   #define VEC3__W_NOR vec4
4   #define VEC4____MOR vec4
5   #define VEC3____TEX vec3
6   #define VEC3____TEX vec2
7   #define VEC4____RGB vec4
8   #define VEC4____vec4
9   #define VEC2_____TEX vec2
10  #define VEC3____T_vec3
11  #define MAT4 mat4
12  #define VEC3____O___ vec3
13  #define VEC3____O_NOR vec3
14  #define VEC3____O_NOR vec3
15  #define VEC3____M_NOR vec3
16  #define VEC4__RGB vec4
17  #define VEC4__vec4
18  #define VEC3____T_vec2
19  #define TEX2D sampler2D
20  #define VEC3____TEX vec3
21  #define VEC3_____TEX vec3
22  #define VEC4_____RGB vec4
23  #define VEC4_____vec4
24  #define VEC3_____TEX vec2
25  #define TEX4D sampler4D
26  #define VEC3____T_vec3
27  #define VEC3____T_NOR vec3
28  #define VEC4____RGB vec4
29  #define VEC4____vec4
30  #define VEC3_____TEX vec2
31  #define VEC3_____TEX vec2
32  #define VEC4____RGB vec4
33  #define VEC4____vec4
34  #define VEC3____T_vec2
35  #define VEC3____T_NOR vec3
36  #define VEC3__T_NOR vec3
37  #define VEC3__M_NOR vec3
38  #define VEC3__W_NOR vec4
39  #define VEC4____MOR vec4
40  #define VEC3____TEX vec3
41  #define VEC3____TEX vec2
42  #define VEC4____RGB vec4
43  #define VEC4____vec4
44  #define VEC3_____TEX vec2
45  #define VEC3_____TEX vec2
46  #define VEC4____RGB vec4
47  #define VEC4____vec4
48  #define VEC3_____TEX vec2
49  #define VEC3_____TEX vec2
50  #define VEC4____RGB vec4
51  #define VEC4____vec4
52  #define VEC3_____TEX vec2
53  #define VEC3_____TEX vec2
54  #define VEC4____RGB vec4
55  #define VEC4____vec4
56  #define VEC3_____TEX vec2
57  #define VEC3_____TEX vec2
58  #define VEC4____RGB vec4
59  #define VEC4____vec4
60  #define VEC3_____TEX vec2
61  #define VEC3_____TEX vec2
62  #define VEC4____RGB vec4
63  #define VEC4____vec4
64  #define VEC3_____TEX vec2
65  #define VEC3_____TEX vec2
66  #define VEC4____RGB vec4
67  #define VEC4____vec4
68  #define VEC3_____TEX vec2
69  #define VEC3_____TEX vec2
70  #define VEC4____RGB vec4
71  #define VEC4____vec4
72  #define VEC3_____TEX vec2
73  #define VEC3_____TEX vec2
74  #define VEC4____RGB vec4
75  #define VEC4____vec4
76  #define VEC3_____TEX vec2
77  #define VEC3_____TEX vec2
78  #define VEC4____RGB vec4
79  #define VEC4____vec4
80  #define VEC3_____TEX vec2
81  #define VEC3_____TEX vec2
82  #define VEC4____RGB vec4
83  #define VEC4____vec4
84  #define VEC3_____TEX vec2
85  #define VEC3_____TEX vec2
86  #define VEC4____RGB vec4
87  #define VEC4____vec4
88  #define VEC3_____TEX vec2
89  #define VEC3_____TEX vec2
90  #define VEC4____RGB vec4
91  #define VEC4____vec4
92  #define VEC3_____TEX vec2
93  #define VEC3_____TEX vec2
94  #define VEC4____RGB vec4
95  #define VEC4____vec4
96  #define VEC3_____TEX vec2
97  #define VEC3_____TEX vec2
98  #define VEC4____RGB vec4
99  #define VEC4____vec4
100 #define VEC3_____TEX vec2
101 #define VEC3_____TEX vec2
102 #define VEC4____RGB vec4
103 #define VEC4____vec4
104 #define VEC3_____TEX vec2
105 #define VEC3_____TEX vec2
106 #define VEC4____RGB vec4
107 #define VEC4____vec4
108 #define VEC3_____TEX vec2
109 #define VEC3_____TEX vec2
110 #define VEC4____RGB vec4
111 #define VEC4____vec4
112 #define VEC3_____TEX vec2
113 #define VEC3_____TEX vec2
114 #define VEC4____RGB vec4
115 }
Figure 1 Revisited: A conventional Shade Tree (left) for a “Bumpy Glass” shader, mocked up in the Visio drawing program. The equivalent Abstract Shade Tree on the right is an actual screenshot from our shader authoring plugin to the Eclipse IDE.

Figure 8. Color result composites of Figures 4-7.