**BLOCKWATCH: Leveraging Similarity in Parallel Programs for Error Detection**

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**Abstract**—The scaling of Silicon devices has exacerbated the unreliability of modern computer systems, and power constraints have necessitated the involvement of software in hardware error detection. Simultaneously, the multi-core revolution has impelled software to become parallel. Therefore, there is a compelling need to protect parallel programs from hardware errors.

Parallel programs’ tasks have significant similarity in control data due to the use of high-level programming models. In this study, we propose BLOCKWATCH to leverage the similarity in parallel program’s control data for detecting hardware errors. BLOCKWATCH statically extracts the similarity among different threads of a parallel program and checks for similarities at runtime. We evaluate BLOCKWATCH on seven SPLASH-2 benchmarks to measure its performance overhead and error detection coverage. We find that BLOCKWATCH incurs an average overhead of 16% across all programs, and provides an average SDC coverage of 97% for faults in the control data.

**Keywords:** Parallel programs, Control-data, SPMD, Static Analysis, Runtime checks

I. INTRODUCTION

The continued scaling of Silicon devices has exacerbated their unreliability and error-proneness. In the near future, microprocessors will experience significantly higher rates of hardware faults [1]. Processor faults have hitherto been masked from software through redundancy at the hardware level [2] (e.g., dual modular redundancy). However, as power consumption becomes a first class concern in computer systems, hardware-only solutions become infeasible due to their high power costs. Therefore, software applications must be designed to tolerate hardware faults.

On another front, the microprocessor industry has adopted the multi-core paradigm, or the integration of multiple cores on a single die. Already, eight-core processors are available on the market, and the number of cores is expected to increase in future generations [3]. The multi-core paradigm has revolutionized software development, and industry experts have predicted that parallel programs will become the de-facto standard in the future [4]. Therefore, parallel programs that run on future multi-core processors will need to be capable of detecting and recovering from hardware errors. While error recovery for parallel programs has received considerable attention [5], efficient error detection remains a challenge.

In this paper, we explore the use of similarity among tasks (i.e., threads) of a parallel program for runtime error detection. The similarity arises as a result of high-level programming models, such as Single Program Multiple Data (SPMD) paradigm. Our approach statically extracts the similarity through compiler-based analysis, and inserts runtime checks in the program. The runtime checks compare the behaviors of the tasks at runtime, and flag any deviation from the statically extracted similarity as an error. Because we leverage similarity among a group of tasks for error detection, we call our approach BLOCKWATCH.

SPMD is the most commonly used style for parallel programming [6]. While there are many sources of similarity in an SPMD program [7], we focus on the similarity of control-data (i.e. the data that is used to make branch and loop decisions), to detect faults that corrupt the control-data. We define two threads as exhibiting control-data similarity at a branch if the behavior of a thread for the branch is constrained by the behavior of the other threads for the same branch. We focus on control-data because: (1) control-data is critical for the correctness of a program, and errors in this data lead disproportionately to Silent Data Corruptions (SDCs) [8], (2) SPMD programs exhibit substantial similarity in the control-data (Section V), and (3) no software technique other than duplication can protect this class of program data.

Duplication, or running two copies of a program and comparing their outputs, has been used to detect errors in sequential programs [9]. The main advantage of duplication is that it is simple to apply and requires no knowledge of the application. However, duplication has two main disadvantages when applied to parallel programs. First, parallel programs are often non-deterministic, and duplicated versions of a parallel program may yield different results, thus rendering them ineffective for error detection. Second, duplication requires twice the amount of hardware resources, and hence reduces the resources available for the actual program, thus leading to significant slowdowns [10].

We are not the first to observe that parallel programs exhibit similarity among their tasks - other techniques have used parallel programs’ similarity for error detection [11], [12]. BLOCKWATCH differs from these techniques in two ways. First, the other techniques learn the similarity by observing the program at runtime, and may consequently incur false-positives because they cannot distinguish between an unexpected corner case and a deviation due to an error. In contrast, BLOCKWATCH is based on the static characteristics of the program, which by definition, incorporates a superset of the dynamic runtime behaviors, and hence has no false positives. This is especially important in production settings where a false-positive can trigger wasteful recovery. Secondly, BLOCKWATCH operates at the granularity of individual branches in the program while the other techniques operate at the function

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1 BLOCKWATCH is a program for crime prevention by residents watching for suspicious activities in a neighbourhood and reporting them.

2 An SDC is a deviation from the output in an error-free execution.
or region granularities. As a result, BLOCKWATCH can detect
errors that affect a single branch, even if the error does not
cause deviations at other granularities. To our knowledge,
BLOCKWATCH is the first technique to statically extract the
similarity among a parallel programs’ tasks, and leverage it
for runtime error detection.

The main contributions we make in this paper are as follows:
1) Identify generic code patterns that characterize control-
data similarity in parallel programs.
2) Develop compiler techniques to statically extract the
control-data similarity patterns, and instrument the pro-
gram with runtime checks corresponding to the patterns.
3) Build a scalable, lock-free monitor for dynamically
executing the runtime checks inserted by the compiler.
4) Evaluate BLOCKWATCH on seven SPLASH-2 bench-
mark programs [13]. The results of our empirical evalua-
tion show that BLOCKWATCH, (1) finds considerable
control-data similarity in the programs (50% to 95%),
(2) incurs average performance overheads of about 16%
across the programs (for 32 threads on a 32-core ma-
chine), and (3) provides average coverage of 97% for
transient errors in the control-data\footnote{We measure coverage as fraction of errors that do not lead to SDCs.}.

Although the current implementation of BLOCKWATCH
focuses on control-data, it can be extended to detect faults
that propagate to regular instructions. Studies have shown that
around 80% of the runtime instructions in SPMD parallel
programs exhibit similarity [7], which means they can be
used for error detection.

BLOCKWATCH has three aspects that make it practical.
First, BLOCKWATCH does not require any modifications to
the hardware, and can work on today’s multi-core systems.
Secondly, it does not require any intervention from the pro-
grammer, and is fully automated. Finally, BLOCKWATCH
incurs no false positives (i.e., does not detect an error unless
one occurs in the program).

The rest of this paper is organized as follows: Section II
discusses the BLOCKWATCH approach with an example, while
Section III details its implementation. Section IV introduces
the experimental setup, and Section V presents the evalua-
tion. Section VI quantitatively compares BLOCKWATCH
to software-based duplication. Finally, Section VII surveys
related work and Section VIII concludes the paper.

II. APPROACH

This section describes the high-level approach of BLOCK-
WATCH. Section II-A presents the fault model for BLOCK-
WATCH, while Section II-B lists the assumptions we make
about the parallel program. Section II-C uses an example
parallel program to illustrate the kinds of similarity considered
by BLOCKWATCH. Section II-D illustrates the runtime checks
introduced by BLOCKWATCH on the example program.

A. Fault Model

We consider transient or intermittent hardware faults that
affect at most one processor or core in a multi-processor or
multi-core processor. The fault can occur in the processor
datapath, control logic or memory elements in the core (e.g.,
caches). However, we assume that no more than one core or
processor is affected by a fault at any time. This is reasonable
as hardware faults are rare events (relative to the total time of
execution of a parallel program).

Our fault model also captures certain kinds of software
errors such as rare race conditions and memory corruption
errors that result in a thread deviating from its static semantics.
However, we do not consider software errors in this paper.

B. Assumptions on Parallel Program

We make three assumptions regarding the parallel program.
First, we assume that it is written using a shared memory
model, which is the common case with multi-core processors
today. We have implemented BLOCKWATCH for pthreads style
parallel programs, though it can be extended for other kinds
of shared memory parallel programs (e.g., CUDA programs).
Second, we assume that the parallel program is written in an
SPMD style. This ensures that the code to be executed by each
thread is identical, and hence it suffices to analyze the common
code to identify the similarity of branch runtime behavior
among threads. Finally, we assume that the entire source code
of the program is available for analysis by BLOCKWATCH.
If this is not the case, BLOCKWATCH will not be able to
statically extract the program’s similarity characteristics.

C. Control-data Similarity in Parallel Programs

We use Figure 1 to illustrate the presence of similarity in the
control-data of a parallel program. In Figure 1, the program
starts from function main(), which spawns nprocs threads, all
of which execute the function slave() concurrently. The slave()
function first assigns a unique thread ID procid to each thread
in line 17 - 20 in Figure 1. It then executes four branches
labeled 1 through 4 in the figure. The bold italic variables
in the slave() are either constants or global variables that are
shared among all threads. In this paper, we include loops in
our definition of branches.

We now illustrate the control-data similarity among
the program’s threads in Figure 1 for each of the four branches
in the slave() function. The generic code patterns that result
in the similarity are shown in Table I. The similarity of the
control-data in the four branches are as follows:

1) **Branch 1**: The branch condition tests equality of thread
ID and a constant $0$. Because the constant is the same
for all threads, and the thread ID is different, at most one
thread will take the branch in a correct execution. This
would be classified as threadID according to Table I.

2) **Branch 2**: The variable $i$ shares the same initial value,
increment value and end value among all threads. Assum-
ing there are no break statements in the loop, all
threads execute the same number of loop iterations. This
would be classified as shared according to Table I.

3) **Branch 3**: The variable $gp[procid].num$ is thread local
and may be different for different threads. This would
be classified as none according to Table I.

4) **Branch 4**: The variable $private$ is also thread local.
However, it’s value is either $i$ or $-1$, depending on the
outcome of branch 3. Therefore, threads in which private
takes the same value will make the same decision in this
branch. This is classified as partial according to Table I.

Thus, the control-data for each of the four branches above
belongs to a different similarity category according to Table I.
The table also illustrates the type of similarity exhibited by
the branches belonging to each category. This similarity is
encoded as a runtime check in Section II-D.
Note that the similarity inference only relied on static analysis of the program’s code, and did not require us to execute it. In this example, we showed the analysis on the program’s source code for simplicity. In reality, the analysis is done on the program’s intermediate code generated by the compiler (Section III-A).

```c
int id = 0;
long im = DEFAULT_N;
struct global_private *gp;
int nprocs;

int main(int argc, char *argv[]) {
  int i;
  nprocs = argc[1];
  for(i = 0; i < nprocs; i++)
    gp[i].num = rand();
  for (i = 0; i < nprocs; i++)
    pthread_create((void *)slave);
}

void slave() {
  int private, procid;
  pthread_mutex_lock();
  //procid is the thread id
  procid = id++;
  pthread_mutex_unlock();
  //Branch 1: threadID
  if (procid == 0) {
    ...
  }
  ...
  //Branch 2: shared
  for(i = 0; i <= im - 1; i = i + 1) {
    ...
  }
  ...
  //Branch 3: none
  if (gp[procid].num > im - 1) {
    private = 1;
  } else {
    private = -1;
  }
  ...
  //Branch 4: partial
  if (private > 0) {
    ...
  }
}
```

Fig. 1. Sample pthreads parallel program to illustrate the static similarity among all threads in the program. The comments indicate the similarity categories for each branch according to the classification in Table I.

D. Runtime Checking

In the previous section, we saw how to statically identify the similarity of the control data used in the branches in Figure 1. In this section, we illustrate how the similarity can be encoded as a runtime check within the program.

The basic idea is as follows: the statically inferred branch similarity behavior among threads is consistent with the actual runtime branch behavior similarity in an error-free execution. However, if a hardware error propagates to the branch condition data of one thread and causes the branch’s outcome to flip, the program will deviate from the statically inferred behavior. BLOCKWATCH detects the deviation and stops the program.

As an example, we use branch 1 in Figure 1 to explain the runtime checks. As we show in Section II-C, branch 1 belongs to category threadID according to the classification in Table I. This means that no more than one thread (thread 0 in this case) takes the branch. To check this constraint, we insert a call to the checking code immediately after the branch decision to record its status. Assume that a hardware error propagates to procid variable in thread 2, thus causing it to take the branch. This violates the constraint that no more than one thread takes the branch, and is hence detected by the check.

III. IMPLEMENTATION

The implementation of BLOCKWATCH consists of two steps. The first step is to infer the branches’ similarity category through static analysis at compile time, and is described in

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Similarity Category</th>
<th>Static characteristics of control data</th>
<th>Branch runtime behavior</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>shared</td>
<td>All operands of the instruction are shared variables among threads, such as global variables and constants</td>
<td>All threads take the same decision at the branch.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>threadID</td>
<td>One operand depends on thread ID, and the remaining operands are shared variables</td>
<td>The branch decision is related to thread ID - threads of certain thread IDs take the same decision. For example, if the condition comparison statement is an equality comparison between thread ID and shared variables, one thread follows one path and the remaining threads follow the other path at run time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>partial</td>
<td>Local variables, but these local variables are assigned with one of a small subset of shared variables</td>
<td>The threads which are assigned to the same shared variable take the same decision.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>none</td>
<td>Local variables that cannot be statically inferred to be similar across threads</td>
<td>No known similarity in branch runtime behavior among the threads.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Section III-A. The second step is to compare the actual runtime behaviors’ of the branches with the inferred behavior according to the branches’ similarity categories using a runtime monitor, and is described in Section III-B.

A. Similarity Category Identification

In this section, we introduce an algorithm to identify the branches’ similarity categories. Our algorithm is implemented as part of an optimizing compiler. The algorithm assumes that the program has been translated into a low-level intermediate representation (IR) by the compiler’s front-end. Therefore, all the branches in the program, including those in loops, have been explicitly represented as branch instructions prior to the algorithm. Further, we assume that the IR uses Static Single Assignment (SSA) form [14], which requires that a variable be assigned exactly once in the program i.e., every variable in the program has a unique instruction that assigns to it.

As we show in Section II, the similarity category of a branch depends upon the nature of the variables used in the branch condition i.e., whether they are shared, dependent on the thread ID or local to the thread. Therefore, in order to infer the similarity category of a branch, we need to find the similarity categories of the operands used in the branch instruction. However, the operands may themselves be produced by other instructions, and hence we need to determine the operand type of all instructions in the program. This determination is based on whether each operand is derived from a shared variable (shared), a variable containing the thread ID (threadID), or from a local variable that can only take one of a small number of shared variables (partial).

Initially, all instructions in the program are assigned a classification of “NA”, or “Not Assigned”. Then instructions that are directly assigned from the thread ID variable are assigned to the category threadID. Similarly, instructions that are directly assigned from a shared variable are assigned to the category shared. After this step, the similarity categories are propagated to other instructions in the program as follows: (1) if it is a unary instruction, the similarity category of the instruction is the same as that of its operand (shared), or if it is a binary or ternary instruction, we consider each operand separately and update the similarity category of the instruction based on the rules in Table II.

Propagation Rules: Before we present the overall algorithm, we first explain Table II. The rows of Table II correspond to the current instruction’s similarity category, while the columns correspond to the operand’s similarity category. The entries in the table indicate the similarity category to which the instruction should be assigned after processing the operand. Because we process each operand separately and update the instruction’s similarity category after doing so, the same table applies for both binary and ternary instructions.

We explain the rationale behind Table II with an example. Assume that the current instruction’s similarity category is partial. This corresponds to the fifth row in Table II. If the next operand belongs to category NA, then the instruction’s category is set to NA and the inferring process ends for this instruction (the instruction will be revisited later). If the next operand is shared or partial, the instruction’s category is set to partial because the instruction continues to depend on local variables that may come from one of the shared variables. If the next operand belongs to threadID, the instruction’s category is set to none because the instruction depends neither exclusively on one of several shared variables nor the thread ID, and hence does not satisfy either category. If the next operand belongs to none, then the instruction’s category also becomes none as it depends on private variables. Note that the inference rules are conservative: even if a single operand belongs to category none, the instruction is updated to this category (see optimizations for how to mitigate this effect).

One case where we deviate from the rules in Table II is when a local variable is assigned with a shared value in one path of an if-else branch but not assigned in another, or is assigned different shared values in both paths. We update its category to partial instead of shared at the convergence point of the branch (i.e., the phi instruction in the SSA form). This is because the shared value is only one possible value that the variable may take at runtime. An example of this case occurs in the variable private in Figure 1, which is assigned to one of the two different constants 1 and −1 in the two outcomes of branch 3. Hence, its category is assigned to partial.

Multiple Instances: Because a static branch in the program may be executed multiple times e.g., if it is inside a loop or the function containing it is called multiple times, its similarity category may vary depending on the way we group the runtime instances to check. We illustrate this case with an example in Figure 2, which is adapted from FFT in the SPLASH-2 Benchmark Suite [13].

In Figure 2, there are two functions slave() and foo() that are executed by each thread. The slave() function calls foo() in two different places. Consider branch 1 which is inside function foo(). The function is called at two different places in slave(), each time with a different local variable. However, in each invocation of the function, the local variable used in the branch condition is the same, namely arg.

There are two ways to classify the similarity of this branch. We can classify it as shared in which case we need to track the value at each call site separately and ensure that we are comparing the values from each call site separately. Another possibility is to merge the values across the call sites, and treat the branch as belonging to category partial, as it is derived from multiple shared variables. In this case, we need not track each invocation separately. We adopt the former policy in spite of the additional performance overhead it entails, as it allows us to perform tighter checks on the branch.

Algorithm: We now present the overall algorithm for inferring each instruction’s similarity category in Figure 3. The algorithm iterates over all instructions in the program and updates the similarity category of each instruction by calling

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>curr ins</th>
<th>operand</th>
<th>NA</th>
<th>shared</th>
<th>threadID</th>
<th>partial</th>
<th>none</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>shared</td>
<td>threadID</td>
<td>partial</td>
<td>none</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shared</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>shared</td>
<td>threadID</td>
<td>partial</td>
<td>none</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>threadID</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>threadID</td>
<td>threadID</td>
<td>partial</td>
<td>none</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>partial</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>partial</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>partial</td>
<td>none</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>none</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>none</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The visit function (lines 4 - 9) on the instruction. This process is repeated until there are no more changes in the instructions’ similarity categories. The categorymap contains the inferred categories of all similar branches at the end of the iterations. The other branches are assigned to none in line 18.

The visitInst function (lines 23 - 36) takes an instruction as an argument, and walks through each of its operands in turn. For each operand, it infers the similarity category based on the category of the operand or by looking up the operand in the categorymap. Then it calls function lookupTable (not shown in figure) with the current instruction’s category as well as the category of the operand. The lookupTable function uses Table II to find the similarity category of the current instruction and update it accordingly.

Note that the algorithm terminates in a finite number of iterations (say k) because the number of similarity categories is finite and the updated categories in Table II flow monotonically (i.e., in one direction only). Also, each iteration is proportional to the number of instructions in the program (say N). In the worst case, ‘k’ can be at most equal to ‘N’, and hence the worst-case complexity of the algorithm is O(N²). In practice, ‘k’ is less than ten for the programs we studied.

Example: We illustrate the algorithm in Figure 3 with the example in Figure 2. Table III shows the similarity categories of the variables and branches in the example after each iteration of the algorithm. The variables are used as proxies for the instructions that define them (these are not visible at the source code level). The algorithm converges within three iterations in this example. Note that the categories of the two branches in the first iteration are NA because in SSA form, the definition instruction of variable i has two operands: 0 and i + 1, and i + 1 is executed after the branch 1 and branch 2. Therefore, when we visit the two branches in the first iteration, the category of i is still NA and hence the branches’ categories are not updated. Later in this iteration, the category of i is determined as shared and the two branches’ categories are changed in the 2nd iteration, after which there are no more changes and hence the process is terminated.

Optimizations: We perform two optimizations over the base algorithm in Figure 3 to improve the coverage and the performance of the technique.

Because the algorithm for inferring static branch similarity is conservative, it will label some branches as none even if there is a single operand that it determines as private (not shared). However, in practice we find that considerable similarity exists even in these branches, as the private variable may have the same value across threads. We therefore promote

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Fig. 2. Example code of multiple runtime instances of the same branch

```c
bool test;
void slave() {
    ... foo(1);
    ... if (test) {
        foo(2);
    }
    ...
}

void foo(int arg) {
    // Branch 2
    for (int i = 0; i < 5; i = i + 1) {
        // Branch 1
        if (i < arg) {
            ...
        }
    }
}
```

Fig. 3. Pseudo-code to show the similarity category identification algorithm

```c
map categorymap;
int main() {
    bool changed = true;
    while (changed) {
        changed = false;
        for (inst in program) {
            changed = visitInst (inst) || changed;
        }
        for (branch in program) {
            if (branch in categorymap) {
                branchcategory = categorymap[branch];
            } else {
                branchcategory = "none";
            }
        }
    }

    bool visitInst (inst) {
        Category category = NA;
        for (op in operands) {
            if (op is constant/global) {
                category = lookupTable (category, "share");
            } else if (op is thread id) {
                category = lookupTable (category, "threadID");
            } else if (op in categorymap) {
                category = lookupTable (category, categorymap[op]);
            } else { // op is NA
                return false;
            }
        }
        Category old = categorymap[inst];
        categorymap[inst] = category;
        return (category != old);
    }

    
```
such branches to the partial category and only compare the threads which have the same value for the private variable.

In some cases, a branch can be executed by no more than one thread at a time (e.g., branches inside critical sections). We remove the checks on such branches as BLOCKWATCH needs a minimum of two threads to detect errors that violate the threads’ similarity. Checking such branches would incur runtime overheads while providing no coverage benefit. We assume that the program has no race conditions which violate this constraint.

B. Runtime Checking

This section details the implementation of a runtime monitor to check the statically inferred similar branches in Section III-A. The monitor is spawned as a separate thread in the program (BLOCKWATCH adds instrumentation to spawn the monitor thread), and has three design goals as follows.

1) Asynchronous: The monitor must interfere minimally with the program’s execution. In particular, it should not be in the critical path of the program, and must execute asynchronously with the program’s threads.

2) Unique branch identifier and fast lookup: The monitor must assign a unique identifier for each runtime branch. Moreover, given a specific branch identifier, it must be possible to do a fast lookup of the branch’s runtime characteristics of different threads. The two requirements are important for correlating the information across multiple threads when storing the branches’ runtime behaviors.

3) Lock freedom: The monitor must acquire no locks, as doing so may introduce deadlocks in the program, and also lead to unnecessary serialization of the program.

Architecture: We achieve goals 1 and 3 through separate lock-free front-end queues adapted from Lamport’s algorithm [15] for each thread to send its branch information. The monitor thread asynchronously scans the queues and processes the information without using any locks. We achieve goal 2 through the use of a back-end hash table to store the branches based on their identifiers. The architecture of the monitor is illustrated in Figure 4.

Operation: The operation of the monitor is as follows:

• When a branch is executed by a thread in the program, it will execute an instrumentation function that transfers the branch’s information to the monitor. This function is inserted by the compiler for the branches identified as similar by the algorithm in Section III-A.

• The function appends the branch information to the thread-specific front-end queue of the monitor (recall that in a shared memory architecture, the entire address space is visible to all the threads), without taking a lock. The function returns immediately after the insertion.

• The monitor thread asynchronously removes the branch information from the thread-specific front-end queues in round robin fashion. No lock is required as the removal is done from the front of the queue while the insertion is done at the back. Further the queues are of fixed length\(^6\), so there is no need to dynamically allocate memory.

• The monitor thread inserts the branch information into the back-end hash-table using the identifier of the branch as the key (see below). Thus, all instances of a given branch across different threads will occupy the same entry in the hash table.

• Once all threads have reported the outcomes of a specific branch, the monitor checks them by reading the hash table entry corresponding to the branch.

Instrumentation: We instrument the similar branches identified by the static analysis algorithm in Section III-A with calls to our custom library, which send the branches’ runtime behaviours to the monitor.

We illustrate the instrumentation with an example. Figure 5 shows the instrumentation added for branch 4 in Figure 1. Recall that this branch belongs to the partial category. The library calls are highlighted with boldface in Figure 5, and consist of the following two functions.

• sendBranchCondition: Sends the branch condition to the monitor, so that the monitor can check if all threads for which the condition variable is identical, have the same branch outcome.

• sendBranchAddr: Sends the branch address to the monitor, so that the monitor can compare the target addresses of all threads for which the condition is the same.

In both cases, the functions send the static branch identifier, the outer loop iteration number, and the thread ID. The former two fields are used to find the hash table key of the branch, while the thread ID is used to identify which thread sends the data.

Hash table Key: The hash table key of a branch is obtained by combining its static identifier with a runtime identifier. The static identifier encodes the static position of the branch in the program. Each branch within a function or loop is assigned the same static identifier. The runtime identifier distinguishes among different instances of the branch in different loop iterations and at different call sites (through instrumentation). This is obtained by dynamically encoding the call stack corresponding to the parent function’s invocation and the loop iterations of outer loops. The combination of the

\(^6\)We set the queue length to a sufficiently large value to prevent it from being a bottleneck. This value can be modified if needed.
Fig. 5. Example code to show the instrumented program

static and runtime identifier yields a unique hash table key for each runtime instance of a branch. This key is used to store the information about the branch in the hash table by each thread that executes it.

We implement the hash table as a two level table. In the first level, the function’s call site ID (added by instrumented code) and the static branch identifier is used to generate the key. In the second level, the loop iteration number of all outer loops is used to generate the key. We separate the function’s call site IDs and the loop iteration numbers to achieve better utilization of the memory and reduction of access times. We describe these and other optimizations made to the hash table in more detail in the technical report version of this paper [16].

IV. EXPERIMENTAL SETUP

In this section, we first describe the tools used in implementing BLOCKWATCH. Then we describe the benchmarks used to evaluate BLOCKWATCH. Finally, we discuss how we evaluate the performance and the fault coverage of BLOCKWATCH.

Implementation Tools: We implement BLOCKWATCH using the LLVM compiler infrastructure [17]. LLVM is a compilation infrastructure for lifeprogram analysis and transformation. It has an intermediate representation (IR) that uses Static Single Assignment (SSA) form. The IR is manipulated by our custom passes before being compiled to machine code. We first compile the program to LLVM IR and apply BLOCKWATCH’s static analysis to: (1) analyze the program’s IR and find the similarity category for each branch; (2) instrument the program’s IR with calls to our custom library. For each of the benchmarks, the static analysis and instrumentation passes take less than 1 second on a quad-core machine i7). Finally, we compile the instrumented IR to machine code on our target platform. We also use the Boost library’s hash table in the runtime monitor’s implementation [18].

Benchmarks: We use seven programs in the SPLASH-2 Benchmark Suite [13] for evaluating BLOCKWATCH. The SPLASH-2 Benchmark Suite has been extensively used for studies of shared memory parallel programs. We use the default configurations of the suite except that we vary the number of threads in order to study the scalability of BLOCKWATCH. Table IV describes the characteristics of the programs. In the table, the parallel section refers to the part of the program which is executed concurrently by two or more threads. Because BLOCKWATCH relies on the similarity across threads to detect errors, we focus on the parallel section of the program in reporting the similarity categories assigned to branches.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Benchmark</th>
<th>Total lines of code (LOC)</th>
<th>LOC in parallel section</th>
<th>Total number of branches</th>
<th>Number of branches in parallel section</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>continuous ocean</td>
<td>5329</td>
<td>4217</td>
<td>876</td>
<td>785</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FFT</td>
<td>1086</td>
<td>561</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FMM</td>
<td>4772</td>
<td>3246</td>
<td>395</td>
<td>321</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>non-continuous ocean</td>
<td>3549</td>
<td>2487</td>
<td>543</td>
<td>478</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>radix</td>
<td>1112</td>
<td>441</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>raytrace</td>
<td>10861</td>
<td>7709</td>
<td>726</td>
<td>268</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>water-nsquared</td>
<td>2564</td>
<td>1474</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Performance Evaluation: We evaluate the performance overhead of BLOCKWATCH on a 32-core processor that contains four 8-core AMD Opteron 6128 processors running at 2 Ghz each. In order to study the performance overhead and the scalability of BLOCKWATCH, we vary the number of threads from 1 to 32 and measure the time spent in the parallel section of the program, both with and without BLOCKWATCH. We do not measure the checking time of monitor thread, as the monitor thread is executed asynchronously and hence does not have a significant effect on the execution time of the program’s parallel section. The SPLASH-2 programs can scale to at least 64 threads [13].

To measure the performance with 32 threads, we disable the monitor thread during the execution of the main program so as not to interfere with it. This is because our machine has only 32 cores and we need 33 threads to execute the program with the monitor. We have verified that the difference in execution times is negligible under this scenario for the 16 thread case. Note that the threads still send the branch information to the front-end queues of the monitor - the only difference is that the monitor does not do anything with the information.

False Positives: To verify there are no false positives, we perform 100 error-free runs for each program instrumented by BLOCKWATCH and check if there are errors reported by it. The results show that BLOCKWATCH does not report any errors, i.e., there are no false positives.

Coverage Evaluation: We evaluate the error detection coverage of BLOCKWATCH through fault injection studies. Specially, we focus on detections of Silent Data Corruptions (SDCs). SDCs are failures in which the program finishes

We cannot set the thread number to 31 because the SPLASH-2 benchmarks require the number of threads to be a power of 2.
executing but the output deviates from the golden result in an error-free run. In this paper, we focus on SDCs because crashes and hangs can be easily detected through other means (e.g., heartbeats). Further, the program can be restarted from a checkpoint upon a crash or a hang, and continued.

We build a fault injector with the PIN tool [19]. PIN is a dynamic instrumentation framework for programs on X86 processors. The goal of the fault injector is to simulate transient hardware faults that propagate to a branch instruction in exactly one thread of the program. We focus on branch instructions because BLOCKWATCH targets hardware faults that propagate to the control data of programs (i.e., data used by branches) in this study.

The fault injection procedure consists of three steps. First, we instrument an m-thread program using PIN and record the number of branches executed by each thread of the program at runtime (say ni where 0 < i < m). In the second step, we randomly pick a thread from 1 to m, say j, and choose the jth thread to inject faults. Then we select a number from 1 to ni, say k, and choose the kth branch of jth thread at runtime to inject. Thirdly, we flip a single bit in either the flag register or condition variable of the chosen branch instruction of jth thread. The former fault leads to the branch being flipped, i.e., going the wrong (but legal) way. This is to verify the correctness of BLOCKWATCH in detecting branch runtime behavior deviations. The latter fault may or may not lead to the branch being flipped. For example, a fault in a branch condition that flips the least significant bit of the condition variable, may not affect the comparison being performed by the branch. However, the corruption introduced in the condition variable will persist even after the execution of the branch, and is more representative of hardware faults in the control data. This is to verify that the effectiveness of BLOCKWATCH in detecting control-data errors. Only one fault is injected in each run of the program to ensure controllability.

Because PIN can monitor all executed instructions in the program, the fault injection considers all branches in the program, and is not restricted to those that are instrumented by BLOCKWATCH. However, we do not consider the instrumentation added by BLOCKWATCH for injection, as errors that affect these branches can at worst lead to additional crashes or hangs, but not to SDCs, as they do not affect the program.

After injecting the fault, we track its activation and whether it is detected by the monitor. If not, we let the program execute to completion (if it does not crash/hang), and compare the results with the golden result to measure the SDC percentage.

For each experiment, we inject 1000 faults of each type and count how many faults are activated (over 75% of the injected faults are activated in our experiments). We calculate the coverage as the probability that an activated fault will not lead to an SDC [20]. In other words, coverage = 1 − SDCf, where SDCf is the fraction of activated faults that lead to an SDC. Thus the coverage includes faults that lead to program crashes or hangs as well as masked faults. In reality, even an unprotected program will typically have non-zero coverage due to natural redundancies and memory protections provided by the operating system, and hence we measure the coverage of the program both with and without BLOCKWATCH.

V. RESULTS

In this section, we first present the relative frequencies of the branch similarity categories in the benchmark programs as discovered by BLOCKWATCH. Then we present the performance overheads and error detection coverage of BLOCKWATCH.

A. Similarity Category Statistics of Branches

We run the static analysis part of BLOCKWATCH on the seven SPLASH-2 programs. Table V shows the number of branches in each program that fall into the similarity categories in Table I, as discovered by the static analysis phase of BLOCKWATCH. We also calculate the percentage of the branches that belong to each similarity category based on the total number of branches in the program’s parallel section.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table V</th>
<th>Similarity Category Statistics of the Branches in 7 Programs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Program</td>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------</td>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>continuous ocean</td>
<td>785</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FFT</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FMM</td>
<td>321</td>
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<tr>
<td>non-continuous ocean</td>
<td>478</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>radix</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>raytrace</td>
<td>268</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>water-nsquared</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results in Table V are as follows. In general, between 49% to 98% of the branches fall into the shared, threadID and partial categories. This means the BLOCKWATCH is able to statically identify at least 50% of the branches as similar across the seven programs. FMM and raytrace have relatively fewer similar branches, as many branches in these programs have both variables in the branch conditions to be local variables. These branches are identified as belonging to category none according to the propagation rules in Section III-A.

Thus we see that a significant fraction of branches in each program are identified as similar by the static analysis phase of BLOCKWATCH, and are hence eligible for checking in the runtime phase. This shows that BLOCKWATCH can be applied to commonly used parallel programs. Note that our static analysis is rather conservative and hence these are lower bounds on the number of similar branches in a program.

B. Performance Overheads

Figure 6 shows the execution times of the seven SPLASH-2 programs with BLOCKWATCH for 4 threads and 32 threads. The results are normalized to the execution time of the program without BLOCKWATCH (for the same number of threads), and hence the baseline is 1.0.

From Figure 6, the geometric mean of the performance overhead of BLOCKWATCH is 2.15X with 4 threads, and 1.16X with 32 threads. Thus the performance overhead of...
**Fig. 6.** Execution time of program with **BLOCKWATCH**/ execution time of program without **BLOCKWATCH**. Lower is better

**BLOCKWATCH with 32 threads is only 16%**, and is lower than that for 4 threads (see below for why).

**Scalability:** We study the scalability of **BLOCKWATCH** by considering the variation of the geometric mean of the performance overheads (across all 7 programs) with the number of threads. The results are shown in Figure 7 as the number of threads is varied from 1 to 32.

**Fig. 7.** Geometric mean of **BLOCKWATCH** overhead (baseline is program without **BLOCKWATCH**) Vs. number of threads

In Figure 7, we find that the overhead of **BLOCKWATCH** first increases as the number of threads increases from 1 to 2, and then decreases as the number of threads increases from 2 to 32. The reason for the overhead increase from 1 to 2 threads is that the machine we use consists of four 8-core processors and is not fully symmetric. This asymmetry causes the memory access time to depend on where the threads execute. When we increase the number of threads from 1 to 2, the operating system assigns the 2 threads to cores in different processors. Thus, the threads cannot share data at the cache level and the memory access time increases. This hurts the program with **BLOCKWATCH** more than the original program, and the overhead of **BLOCKWATCH** increases.

The reason for the decrease of overhead from 2 to 32 threads is that when the number of threads doubles, the work done by each thread reduces by half and so does the number of branches executed by each thread. However, due to communication and waiting among threads, the reduction in execution time of the program is less than 2X. Nonetheless, when the number of threads increases, the relative time spent by **BLOCKWATCH** reduces and so does the overhead of **BLOCKWATCH** (up to 32 threads in Figure 7).

**C. Error Detection Coverage**

We study the coverage of **BLOCKWATCH** under two kinds of faults: branch-flip faults and branch-condition faults. The former type of fault is guaranteed to flip the branch but does not corrupt any program data directly. The latter type of fault corrupts the branch's condition data but does not necessarily lead to branch flip.

The results are shown in Figure 8 and Figure 9. Note that the coverage of y axis in both figures start from 50%. In the figures, coverage\textsubscript{original} is the coverage of the original program, and coverage\textsubscript{BLOCKWATCH} is the coverage of the program protected by **BLOCKWATCH**.

1) **Coverage results for branch-flip faults:** Figure 8 shows the coverage with and without **BLOCKWATCH** for all programs under branch flip faults. Across the programs, the average coverage\textsubscript{original} is 83%, while average coverage\textsubscript{BLOCKWATCH} is 97% for the 4-thread program, and 98% for the 32-thread program. Other than raytrace, all programs have a coverage value between 99% - 100% when protected with **BLOCKWATCH**, whereas without **BLOCKWATCH**, their coverage value is between 60% (radix) and 98% (FMM). In other words, **BLOCKWATCH** detects almost all branch-flip faults that cause SDCs for six of the seven programs.

For raytrace, the coverage with **BLOCKWATCH** is about 85%, which is comparable to the coverage obtained without **BLOCKWATCH** (for both 4 and 32 threads). Thus, the coverage benefit provided by **BLOCKWATCH** for this program is negligible. There are two main reasons for this result. First, raytrace makes extensive use of function pointers, that may point to different functions for different threads at runtime. Therefore, the number of threads that execute the same function is low, and hence **BLOCKWATCH** does not have enough threads to compare at runtime. Second, **BLOCKWATCH** uses the outer loops' iteration numbers to generate the hash table key for a branch (Section III-B). However, due to overhead considerations, we choose to only check the branches whose nesting levels are smaller than six. In other words, any branch that occurs in loops deeper than six levels of nesting is not checked by **BLOCKWATCH**. Raytrace has many loops deeper than six levels of nesting which are not checked.
2) Coverage results for branch-condition faults: Figure 9 shows the results of coverage of the seven programs both with and without BLOCKWATCH, when faults are injected into the branch’s condition data. The results are similar to those in Figure 8. For example, when BLOCKWATCH is used, the coverage increases from 90% to 97% for both the 4-thread and 32-thread cases. However, the average coverage value is 90%, which is much higher than the original value for branch-flip faults (average 83%). This is because unlike branch-flip faults, branch-condition faults may or may not cause the branch to flip, and branch flips are more likely to lead to SDC in the programs.

VI. DISCUSSION

In this section, we compare the error-detection coverage and performance overhead of BLOCKWATCH with that of software-based duplication. Duplication is a general technique that can protect programs from a large class of errors. However, we focus on control-data errors in this section as this is the focus of BLOCKWATCH.

Coverage: Our results show that BLOCKWATCH improves the SDC coverage of the SPLASH-2 programs under both branch-flip faults and branch-condition faults. Other than raytrace, all programs have a coverage value between 98% and 100% for errors in the control data. This indicates that when the program is protected with BLOCKWATCH, the percentage of SDCs is less than 2% for 6 of the 7 programs. To our knowledge, duplication is the only other generic technique that can provide near 100% coverage for SDCs. However, it has other disadvantages (see below).

The coverage results can be improved in several ways: for example, we use a fairly conservative method to classify the branches’ category in this study, the result of which is that there are some branches that may have runtime similarities but are not checked by BLOCKWATCH. Therefore, it is possible to improve the coverage of BLOCKWATCH by using a more aggressive static analysis or by incorporating the program’s dynamic information in the classification of the branches.

Performance: The average performance overhead of BLOCKWATCH is 115% for 4 threads and 16% for 32 threads. In contrast, software-based duplication incurs overheads of 200% to 300% for sequential programs [10]. Although this overhead can be reduced through the use of speculative optimizations, doing so is not straightforward for parallel programs due to their non-determinism. Thus, the overhead of BLOCKWATCH is comparable to that of software-based duplication in the 4-thread case, but is almost an order of magnitude lower in the 32-thread case.

Further, BLOCKWATCH is scalable while duplication is not. This is because duplication requires program determinism, which may not hold for parallel programs. This problem can be solved by using determinism inducing techniques [21], [22]. However, determinism inducing techniques require the replica threads and the programs’ threads to follow the same execution order. Forcing execution order among threads incurs communication and waiting overheads that are proportional to the number of threads in the program, and does not scale. In contrast, BLOCKWATCH scales as it neither requires program determinism nor locking.

BLOCKWATCH can be optimized to further reduce its overhead. For example, our current implementation adds checks for every branch that is eligible for checking. However, there may be many branches that depend on the same set of variables, and faults propagating to the data will affect all of them. Therefore, it is sufficient to check one of the branches.

As we scale BLOCKWATCH to higher numbers of threads, it is possible that the monitor itself becomes a bottleneck. To alleviate this, we can have multiple monitor threads structured in a hierarchical fashion, each of which is assigned to a subgroup of threads. This is an avenue for future work.

VII. RELATED WORK

We classify related work into six broad categories. Because we discuss duplication in detail in Section VI, we do not consider it here.

Control-flow checking: Control-flow Checking (CFC) techniques such as ECCA [23], PECOS [24] and CFCSS [25] check the conformance of the program’s control-flow to its static control flow graph. However, CFC techniques cannot detect errors that propagate to the control data and lead to a valid but incorrect branch outcome, i.e., control-data errors that result in the branch going the other way than its error-free behavior. BLOCKWATCH detects this class of errors.

Statistical techniques: AutomaDeD [11] uses Semi-Markov Models (SMMs) to find parallel tasks that deviate from other tasks’ behavior. AutomaDeD is similar to
In these cases, the goal is to find bugs in the program, rather than detect runtime errors arising in hardware. Patterson et al. [30] use static analysis to derive runtime error detectors for sequential programs. Their technique differs from ours in three ways. First, they confine themselves to critical variables that have high fanout in the program. Second, they duplicate the backward slice of the critical variable, and compare the value computed by the slice with that in the program. This approach will not work for non-deterministic parallel programs. Finally, they use support from the hardware to track control-flow within the program, and hence require hardware modifications.

Dynamic analysis techniques detect errors by learning invariants over one or more executions [31], [32], [33]. These techniques target only sequential programs, and hence do not consider similarity across threads. Yim et al. [34] propose a technique to learn invariants for GPU programs, and use the invariants for detecting errors. However, their focus is on errors that can cause large deviations in the output as GPU programs are inherently error-tolerant. A generic problem with all dynamic techniques is that of false-positives, which can trigger unwanted detection and recovery.

Algorithmic techniques: Algorithm-based Fault Tolerance (ABFT) is an error detection technique for specialized parallel computations such as matrix manipulation and signal processing [35], [36]. Sloan et al. [37] develop error-resilient gradient descent algorithms for stochastic processors, or processors that allow variation-induced errors to occur by drastically shaving off design margins in order to save power. Finally, Geist et al. develop a class of naturally fault-tolerant algorithms for certain classes of iterative parallel computations [38]. While these techniques are efficient, they only protect programs of the specific type they target. In contrast, BLOCKWATCH targets general-purpose parallel programs.

Simularity based performance improvement: Long et al. [7] exploit the similarity in SPMD applications for performance improvement. They merge instruction fetching if certain instructions are the same among different threads and merge instruction execution if the instructions and their input operands are shared among different threads. However, they do not leverage the similarity for error checking.

VIII. Conclusion

This paper presented BLOCKWATCH to detect control-data errors in SPMD parallel programs. BLOCKWATCH statically infers the similarity of the program’s control-data across threads, and checks their conformance to the inferred similarity at runtime. Upon detecting a violation, it raises an exception and reports the error. Experimental results show that
BLOCKWATCH increases the average SDC coverage across seven programs from 83% (90%) to 97% for branch-flip faults (branch-condition faults), while incurring only 16% overhead in the 32 thread case (on a 32 core machine). BLOCKWATCH is automated, incurs zero false-positives and can run on unmodified hardware, thus making it suitable for today’s multicore processors.

Future work will consist of extending BLOCKWATCH to other classes of parallel programs (than pthreads-style programs), and to other program data (in addition to control-data). We will also explore optimizations to reduce the performance overhead of BLOCKWATCH even further.

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