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MPI: The Last Large Scale Success?

(I Hope Not!)

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Quotes from “System Software and Tools for High Performance Computing Environments” (1993)

- **“The strongest desire expressed by these users was simply to satisfy the urgent need to get applications codes running on parallel machines as quickly as possible”**
- **In a list of enabling technologies for mathematical software, “Parallel prefix for arbitrary user-defined associative operations should be supported. Conflicts between system and library (e.g., in message types) should be automatically avoided.”**
  - Note that MPI-1 provided both
- **Immediate Goals for Computing Environments:**
  - Parallel computer support environment
  - Standards for same
  - Standard for parallel I/O
  - Standard for message passing on distributed memory machines
- **“The single greatest hindrance to significant penetration of MPP technology in scientific computing is the absence of common programming interfaces across various parallel computing systems”**

Quotes from "Enabling Technologies for Petaflops Computing" (1995):

- **"The software for the current generation of 100 GF machines is not adequate to be scaled to a TF…"**
- **"The Petaflops computer is achievable at reasonable cost with technology available in about 20 years [2014]."**
  - (estimated clock speed in 2004 — 700MHz)*
- **"Software technology for MPP's must evolve new ways to design software that is portable across a wide variety of computer architectures. Only then can the small but important MPP sector of the computer hardware market leverage the massive investment that is being applied to commercial software for the business and commodity computer market."**
- **"To address the inadequate state of software productivity, there is a need to develop language systems able to integrate software components that use different paradigms and language dialects."**
- **(9 overlapping programming models, including shared memory, message passing, data parallel, distributed shared memory, functional programming, O-O programming, and evolution of existing languages)**

Some History

- The Cray 1 was a very successful machine. Why?
  - Not the first or fastest vector machine (CDC Star 100 and later Cyber 203/205 had much higher peaks)
  - Early users were thrilled that Cray 1 was 1.76 x faster than CDC 7600
    - *1.76 = 22/12.5 = ratio of (scalar) clock speed*
    - *Applications were not vectorizing!*
    - *These were legacy applications*
  - Balanced (by comparison with Star100 etc.) performance
  - Hardware supported programming model; predictable performance
  - Software (compiler) trained users
    - *Worked with the user to performance-tune code*
  - Of course, this was before the memory wall

Why Was MPI Successful?

- It address all of the following issues:
  - Portability
  - Performance
  - Simplicity and Symmetry
  - Modularity
  - Composability
  - Completeness
- For a more complete discussion, see “Learning from the Success of MPI”, http://www.mcs.anl.gov/~gropp/bib/papers/2001/mpi-lessons.pdf

Portability and Performance

- Portability does not require a “lowest common denominator” approach
  - Good design allows the use of special, performance enhancing features without requiring hardware support
  - For example, MPI’s nonblocking message-passing semantics allows but does not require “zero-copy” data transfers
- MPI is really a “Greatest Common Denominator” approach
  - It *is* a “common denominator” approach; this is portability
    - *To fix this, you need to change the hardware (change “common”)*
  - It *is* a (nearly) greatest approach in that, within the design space (which includes a library-based approach), changes don’t improve the approach
    - *Least suggests that it will be easy to improve; by definition,* any *change would improve it.*
    - *Have a suggestion that meets the requirements? Lets talk!*
  - More on “Greatest” versus “Least” at the end of this talk…

Simplicity and Symmetry

- MPI is organized around a small number of concepts
  - The number of routines is not a good measure of complexity
  - E.g., Fortran
    - *Large number of intrinsic functions*
  - C and Java runtimes are large
  - Development Frameworks
    - *Hundreds to thousands of methods*
  - This doesn’t bother millions of programmers

Symmetry

- Exceptions are hard on users
  - But easy on implementers — less to implement and test
- Example: MPI_Issend
  - MPI provides several send modes:
    - *Regular*
    - *Synchronous*
    - *Receiver Ready*
    - *Buffered*
  - Each send can be blocking or non-blocking
  - MPI provides all combinations (symmetry), including the “Nonblocking Synchronous Send”
    - *Removing this would slightly simplify implementations*
    - *Now users need to remember which routines are provided, rather than only the concepts*
  - It turns out he MPI_Issend is useful in building performance and correctness debugging tools for MPI programs

Modularity

- Modern algorithms are hierarchical
  - Do not assume that all operations involve all or only one process
  - Provide tools that don't limit the user
- Modern software is built from components
  - MPI designed to support libraries
  - Communication contexts in MPI are an example
    - *Other features, such as communicator attributes, were less successful features*

Composability

- Environments are built from components
  - Compilers, libraries, runtime systems
  - MPI designed to “play well with others”
- MPI exploits newest advancements in compilers
  - … without ever talking to compiler writers
  - OpenMP is an example
    - *MPI (the standard) required no changes to work with OpenMP*

Completeness

- MPI provides a complete parallel programming model and avoids simplifications that limit the model
  - Contrast: Models that require that synchronization only occurs collectively for all processes or tasks
  - Contrast: Models that provide support for a specialized (sub)set of distributed data structures
- Make sure that the functionality is there when the user needs it
  - Don’t force the user to start over with a new programming model when a new feature is needed

Conclusions: Lessons From MPI

- A successful parallel programming model must enable more than the simple problems
  - It is nice that those are easy, but those weren't that hard to begin with
- Scalability is essential
  - Why bother with limited parallelism?
  - Just wait a few months for the next generation of hardware
- Performance is equally important
  - But not at the cost of the other items

More Lessons

- A general programming model for high-performance technical computing must address many issues to succeed, including:
- Completeness
  - Support the evolution of applications
- Simplicity
  - Focus on users not implementors
  - Symmetry reduces the burden on users
- Portability rides the hardware wave
  - Sacrifice only if the advantage is huge and persistent
  - Competitive performance and elegant design is not enough
- Composability rides the software wave
  - Leverage improvements in compilers, runtimes, algorithms
  - Matches hierarchical nature of systems
- Even that is not enough. Also need:
  - Good design
  - Buy-in by the community
  - Effective implementations
- MPI achieved these through an Open Standards Process

An Open and Balanced Process

- Open Process
  - No entry fee
  - Anyone can (and did!) comment on the deliberations, not just draft products
- Balanced representation from
  - Users
    - *What users want and need*
      - Including correctness
  - Implementers (Vendors)
    - *What can be provided*
      - Many MPI features determined by implementation needs
  - Researchers
    - *Directions and Futures*
      - MPI planned for interoperation with OpenMP before OpenMP conceived
      - Support for libraries strongly influenced by research
- Quality of work is clear from
  - Success of MPI
  - Recent work at the University of Utah on a formal specification of MPI (from the standard documents) has shown that the standard, though informal, is very solid (though it is not perfect)

Multiple MPI Implementations

- Freely available implementations ensured that MPI was
  - Ubiquitous
  - Safe for applications to rely on (can always support source directly if required)
  - Basis for proprietary implementations (through a “FreeBSD”-style license)
    - *This was a trade off --- the community would be better off with a GPL, but only if that did not hinder adoption. Unfortunately, a GPL might have killed MPI because the HPC market is too small*
- Multiple implementations
  - Ensured friendly competition in performance and features
  - Provided users with different design points (e.g., scalability, different sets of optimizations, progress modes, extra features)
  - A separate market for test suites (ensuring that MPI is defined by the specification, not a particular implementation)

Improving Parallel Programming

- How can we make the programming of real applications easier?
- Problems with the Message-Passing Model
  - User’s responsibility for data decomposition
  - “Action at a distance”
    - *Matching sends and receives*
    - *Remote memory access*
  - Performance costs of a library (no compile-time optimizations)
  - Need to choose a particular set of calls to match the hardware
- In summary, the lack of abstractions that match the applications

Challenges

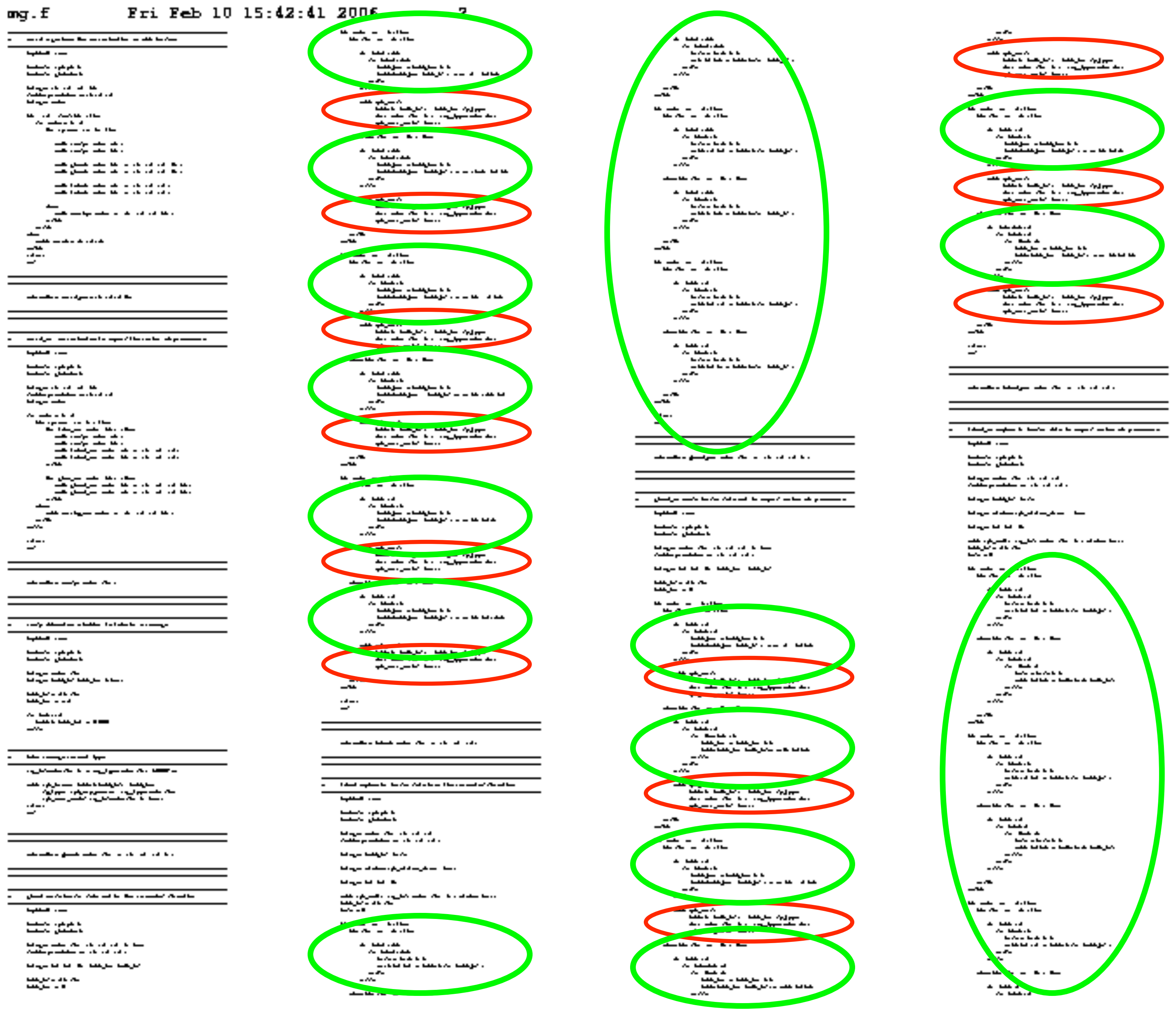
- Must avoid the traps:
  - The challenge is not to make easy programs easier. The challenge is to make hard programs possible.
  - We need a “well-posedness” concept for programming tasks
    - *Small changes in the requirements should only require small changes in the code*
    - *Rarely a property of “high productivity” languages*
      - Abstractions that make easy programs easier don’t solve the problem
  - Evaluating a specifi Fortress X10 Chapel plementation is not the same as evaluatir Fortress X10 Chapel e programming mode
  - Latency hiding is not the same as low latency
    - *Need “Support for aggregate operations on large collections”*
- An even harder challenge: make it hard to write incorrect programs.
  - OpenMP is not a step in the (entirely) right direction
  - In general, current shared memory programming models are very dangerous.
    - *They also perform action at a distance*
    - *They require a kind of user-managed data decomposition to preserve performance without the cost of locks/memory atomic operations*
  - Deterministic algorithms should have provably deterministic implementations

What is Needed To Achieve Real High Productivity Programming

- Simplify the construction of correct, high-performance applications
- Managing Data Decompositions
  - Necessary for both parallel and uniprocessor applications
  - Many levels must be managed
  - Strong dependence on problem domain (e.g., halos, load-balanced decompositions, dynamic vs. static)
- Possible approaches include
  - Language-based
    - *Limited by predefined decompositions*
      - Some are more powerful than others; Divacon provided a built-in divided and conquer
  - Library-based
    - *Overhead of library (incl. lack of compile-time optimizations), tradeoffs between number of routines, performance, and generality*
  - Domain-specific languages

Distributed Memory code

- Single node performance is clearly a problem.
- What about parallel performance?
  - Many successes at scale (e.g., Gordon Bell Prizes for >200TF on 64K BG nodes
  - Some difficulties with load-balancing, designing code and algorithms for latency, but skilled programmers and applications scientists have been remarkably successful
- Is there a problem?
  - There is the issue of productivity.
  - It isn't just Message-passing vs shared memory
    - *Message passing codes can take longer to write but bugs are often deterministic (program hangs). Explicit memory locality simplifies fixing performance bugs*
    - *Shared memory codes can be written quickly but bugs due to races are difficult to find; performance bugs can be harder to identify and fix*
  - It isn't just the way in which you move data
    - *Consider the NAS parallel benchmark code for Multigrid (mg.f):*


```
mg.f          Fri Feb 10 15:42:41 2006          2
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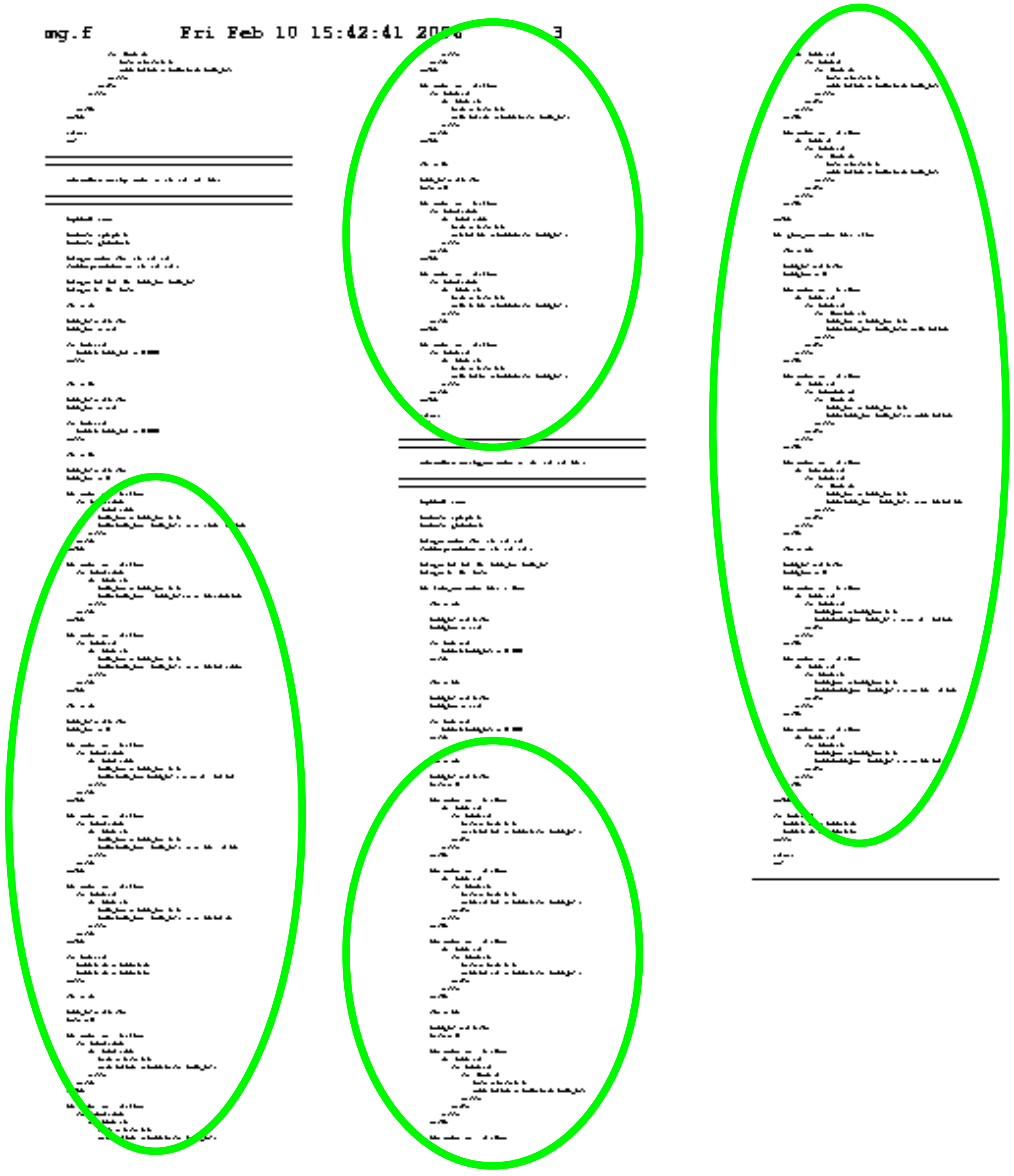
[illegible]



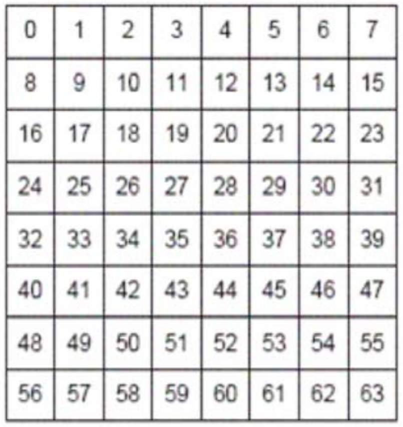
mg.f Fri Feb 10 15:42:41 200 3

What is the problem?
The user is responsible for all steps in the decomposition of the data structures across the processors

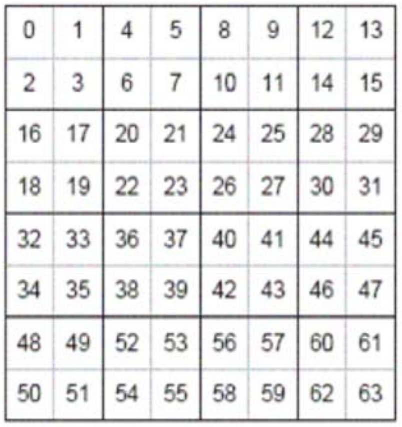
Note that this does give the user (or someone) a great deal of flexibility, as the data structure can be distributed in arbitrary ways across arbitrary sets of processors

Another example…

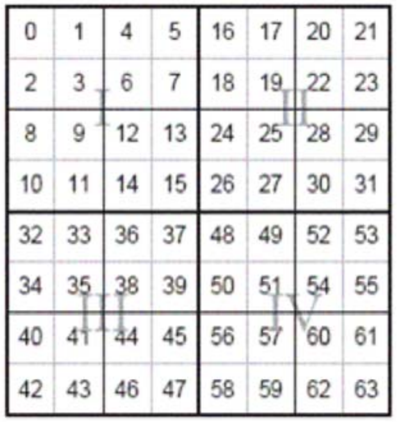
Manual Decomposition of Data Structures



0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23
24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31
32	33	34	35	36	37	38	39
40	41	42	43	44	45	46	47
48	49	50	51	52	53	54	55
56	57	58	59	60	61	62	63



0	1	4	5	8	9	12	13
2	3	6	7	10	11	14	15
16	17	20	21	24	25	28	29
18	19	22	23	26	27	30	31
32	33	36	37	40	41	44	45
34	35	38	39	42	43	46	47
48	49	52	53	56	57	60	61
50	51	54	55	58	59	62	63



0	1	4	5	16	17	20	21
2	3	6	7	18	19	22	23
8	9	12	13	24	25	28	29
10	11	14	15	26	27	30	31
32	33	36	37	48	49	52	53
34	35	38	39	50	51	54	55
40	41	44	45	56	57	60	61
42	43	46	47	58	59	62	63

- Trick!
  - This is from a paper on dense matrix tiling for uniprocessors!
- This suggests that managing data decompositions is a common problem for real machines, whether they are parallel or not
  - *Not just an artifact of MPI-style programming*
  - Aiding programmers in data structure decomposition is an important part of solving the productivity puzzle

How to Replace MPI

- Retain MPI’s strengths
  - Performance from matching programming model to the realities of underlying hardware
  - Ability to compose with other software (libraries, compilers, debuggers)
  - Determinism (without MPI_ANY_{TAG,SOURCE})
  - Run-everywhere portability
- Add to what MPI is missing, such as
  - Distributed data structures (not just a few popular ones)
  - Low overhead remote operations; better latency hiding/management; overlap with computation (not just latency; MPI can be implemented in a few hundred instructions, so overhead is roughly the same as remote memory reference (memory wall))
  - Dynamic load balancing for dynamic, distributed data structures
  - Unified method for treating multicores, remote processors, other resources
- Enable the transition from MPI programs
  - Build component-friendly solutions
    - *There is no one, true language*

Is MPI the Least Common Denominator Approach?

- "Least common denominator"
  - Not the correct term
  - It is "Greatest Common Denominator"! (Ask any Mathematician)
  - This is critical, because it changes the way you make improvements
- If it is "Least" then improvements can be made by picking a better approach. I.e., anything better than "the least".
- If it is "Greatest" then improvements require changing the rules (either the "Denominator," the scope ("Common"), or the goals (how "Greatest" is evaluated)
- Where can we change the rules for MPI?

Changing the Common

- Give up on ubiquity/portability and aim for a subset of architectures
  - Vector computing was an example (and a cautionary tale)
  - Possible niches include
    - *SMT for latency hiding*
    - *Reconfigurable computing; FPGA*
    - *Stream processors*
    - *GPUs*
    - *Etc.*
- Not necessarily a bad thing (if you are willing to accept being on the fringe)
  - Risk: Keeping up with the commodity curve (remember vectors)

Changing the Denominator

- This means changing the features that are assumed present in every system on which the programming model must run
- Some changes since MPI was designed:
  - RDMA Networks
    - *Best for bulk transfers*
    - *Evolution of these may provide useful signaling for shorter transfers*
  - Cache-coherent SMPs (more precisely, lack of many non-cache-coherent SMP nodes)
  - Exponentially increasing gap between memory and CPU performance
  - Better support for source-to-source transformation
    - *Enables practical language solutions*
- If DARPA HPCS is successful at changing the “base” HPC systems, we may also see
  - Remote load/store
  - Hardware support for hiding memory latency

Changing the Goals

- Change the space of features
  - That is, change the problem definition so that there is room to expand (or contract) the meaning of “greatest”
- Some possibilities
  - Integrated support for concurrent activities
    - *Not threads:*
      - See, e.g., Edward A. Lee, "The Problem with Threads," Computer, vol. 39, no. 5, pp. 33-42, May, 2006.
      - “Night of the Living Threads”, http://weblogs.mozillazine.org/roc/archives/2005/12/night_of_the_living_threads.html, 2005
      - “Why Threads Are A Bad Idea (for most purposes)” John Ousterhout (~2004)
      - “If I were king: A proposal for fixing the Java programming language's threading problems” http://www-128.ibm.com/developerworks/library/j-king.html, 2000
  - Support for (specialized or general) distributed data structures

Conclusions

- MPI is a successful “Greatest Common Denominator” parallel programming model
- The next success must
  - Change the rules
  - Be an developed as an open process
  - Have a clear focus on the audience

Further Reading

- For a historical perspective (and a reality check),
  - "*Enabling Technologies for Petaflops Computing*", Thomas Sterling, Paul Messina, and Paul H. Smith, MIT Press, 1995
  - "*System Software and Tools for High Performance Computing Environments*", edited by Paul Messina and Thomas Sterling, SIAM, 1993
- For recent thinking on possible directions,
  - "*Report of the Workshop on High-Productivity Programming Languages and Models*", edited by Hans Zima, May 2004.