Abstract

We introduce exotypes, user-defined types that combine the flexibility of meta-object protocols in dynamically-typed languages with the performance control of low-level languages. Like objects in dynamic languages, exotypes are defined programmatically at runtime, allowing behavior based on external data such as a database schema. To achieve high performance, we use staged programming to define the behavior of an exotype during a runtime compilation step and implement exotypes in Terra, a low-level staged programming language.

We show how exotype constructors compose, and use exotypes to implement high-performance libraries for serialization, dynamic assembly, automatic differentiation, and probabilistic programming. Each exotype achieves expressiveness similar to libraries written in dynamically-typed languages but implements optimizations that exceed the performance of existing libraries written in low-level statically-typed languages. Though each implementation is significantly shorter, our serialization library is 11 times faster than Kryo, and our dynamic assembler is 3–20 times faster than Google’s Chrome assembler.

Categories and Subject Descriptors D.3.4 [Programming Languages]: Processors – Code Generation, Compilers

General Terms Design, Performance

Keywords Lua, Staged computation, DSL

1. Introduction

A language’s object representation and implementation has a significant effect on both the concepts that can be easily expressed and the ease of generating high-performance code. For instance, Norvig [21] found that, of the 23 original design patterns proposed by Gamma et al. [8], 16 became simpler or are implementable as libraries using the built-in language features of Lisp or Dylan. One reason is that many dynamic languages such as Lisp, Python, or Lua support so-called meta-object protocols, meaning there is a mechanism for the user to programmatically modify the semantics and implementation of user-defined types [1, 14, 15]. Higher-level policies such as inheritance or accessor permissions can be defined on top of these mechanisms, giving the programmer great flexibility in defining object behavior.

However, when an object’s behavior and in-memory representation are defined dynamically, it is difficult to perform some optimizations, resulting in performance losses. For instance, in Section 4, we implement a microbenchmark of an Array object that forwards methods to each of its elements. The JIT-compiled Lua version runs 18 times slower than equivalent C++ code due to object boxing and dynamic dispatch. JIT compilers can optimize some dynamic patterns [6, 13], but it is difficult to know if a pattern will result in high-performance code.

In this work, we introduce exotypes as a way to achieve the expressiveness of dynamic languages while retaining the performance of statically-typed objects. Exotypes combine meta-object protocols with multi-stage programming to give the programmer more control over the code’s performance. Rather than define an object’s behavior as a function that is evaluated at runtime, an exotype describes the behavior with a function that is evaluated once during a staged compilation step. These functions generate the code that implements the behavior of the object in the next stage rather than implementing the behavior directly. This design allows the programmer to optimize behavior and memory layout before any instances of the object are used.

As a concrete example, consider joining two different employee databases that both contain an “employee ID” field. To implement the join efficiently in a low-level language, the structure of both databases must be described in code beforehand. In a dynamic language, the structure can be deduced at runtime by reading a database schema, but the programmer has less control over the layout of the objects. They may be boxed, adding an extra level of indirection, and their fields may be stored in hash-tables rather than linearly in memory. With exotypes, the database structure can be read at runtime while retaining a compact object layout. The first stage of the program reads the database schema and generates exotypes with fixed, compact data layouts. With the object layout known, the second stage actually compiles and runs the join, exploiting the compact layout of the generated types to store objects unboxed and access them with simple pointer arithmetic.

We implement this approach by extending the object system of the Terra language. Terra is a staged, low-level system programming language similar to C that is embedded in Lua, a high-level dynamically typed language [7]. Terra’s user-defined types are replaced with exotypes that are defined external to the Terra language using a meta-object protocol based in Lua. Types are defined via user-provided property functions that describe their behavior and in-memory layout using multi-stage programming. Terra has a low level of abstraction, so it is possible to control the performance of the staged code. It is also a staged language, so new exotypes can be defined dynamically over the course of the program. Higher-level features, such as object serialization or polymorphic class systems,
can be built on top of these types. We present the following contributions related to exotypes:

- We introduce the concept of an exotype and present a concrete implementation in the Terra compiler based on programatically-defined properties queried during typechecking.
- We show that high-level type features such as type constructors can be created with exotypes. When specified in a well-behaved manner, independently-defined type constructors can be composed.
- We evaluate the use of exotypes in several performance-critical scenarios: serialization, dynamic assembly, automatic differentiation, and probabilistic programming.

In the scenarios we evaluate, we show how we can achieve expressiveness similar to libraries written in dynamically-typed languages while matching the performance of existing implementations written in statically-typed languages. The added expressiveness makes it feasible to implement aggressive optimizations that were not attempted in existing static languages. Our serialization library is 11 times faster than Kryo (a fast Java serialization library). Our dynamic x86 assembler can assemble templates of assembly 3–20 times faster than the assembler in Google Chexmer, and our implementation of a probabilistic programming language runs 5 times faster than existing implementations.

2. Background

Meta-object protocols. Modern dynamic languages allow programmatic definition of object behavior. For instance, Python provides metaclasses which can override the default behaviors of method definition and invocation, and CLOS allows for the dynamic specification of all behavior of objects using so-called meta-object protocols [1, 15]. The Lua language uses a meta-object protocol based on metatables to extend the normal semantics of objects [14]. Metatables are Lua tables containing functions that define new semantics for default behaviors. For instance, we can change the behavior of the table indexing operator obj.field by setting the __index field in a metatable:

```lua
local myobj = {}
setmetatable(myobj,
){__index = function(self, field) return field end })
print(myobj.somefield) -- prints "somefield"
```

When the expression myobj.somefield is evaluated, the Lua interpreter will look for the key "somefield" in the myobj table. If the key does not exist, it will instead call the __index function of myobj’s metatable passing the object and the missing key as arguments and returning the result as the value of the original expression. Metatables also contain other functions that similarly define other behaviors such as function application and arithmetic operators.

We use a meta-object protocol defined using Lua tables to describe the behavior of exotypes. However, the behaviors in exotypes are expressed using staged programming and queried before code that uses the objects is compiled. While most meta-object protocols are applied dynamically, some, such as those in Open-C++, are applied statically during compilation [3]. In these systems, no new types are defined at runtime. Exotypes blend the two approaches. New types can be created and compiled as the program runs, but since exotype behavior is described with staged programming of a low-level language (Terra), the programmer retains control over low-level representation and implementation.

Multi-stage programming. Our implementation of exotypes relies on multi-stage programming (MSP) to dynamically generate expressions that implement object behavior. MSP as described by Taha and Sheard allows the programmer to separate a program into multiple phases using explicit program annotations [29]. This design can be viewed as an abstraction over code generation and compilation. An earlier stage of the program can generate and compile code that runs at a later stage. By explicitly representing these compilation steps, MSP gives the programmer precise control over generated code and allows code generation to be based on dynamic information.

Our implementation builds on the Terra language, a staged programming language embedded in Lua and designed for generating high-performance code [7]. Lua is used for constructing Terra programs and writing high-level program transformations. Terra is a low-level language with semantics and types similar to C. Since it has a low level of abstraction, it is relatively easy to reason about and tune the performance of generated Terra code.

A Terra function is defined in Lua code using the terra keyword (in Lua, a function is normally created using function). A Terra function can be called directly from Lua:

```lua
terra powf(v : double, N : int)
  var r = 1.0
  for i = 0,N do r = r * v end
  return r
end
```

Staged programming in Lua and Terra involves two phases of meta-programming. First, untyped Terra expressions are constructed using quotations and stitched together using escapes in a process we call specialization. Second, type-level computation can be carried out during typechecking with user-defined type-macros, which we will use to implement exotypes. The interaction between these phases is summarized in Figure 1 (left).

A quotation (the backtick operator `exp`, or the block structured quote <exp> end) used in Lua code creates an unevaluated Terra expression, and an escape (the bracket operator [lua_exp]) used in Terra code evaluates lua_exp and splices its result (normally a Terra quotation) into the surrounding Terra code. Consider how to use these operators to generate a specialized version of powf for a particular value of N:

```lua
function genpowf(N)
  local function genexp(vr)
    local r = 1.0
    for i = 1,N do r = r \* vr end
    return r
  end
  local terra powfN(v : double)
    return [genexp\'(v)\]
  end
  return "powfN"
end
pow2 = genpowf(2)
print(pow2(3)) -- '9'
```

We begin by evaluating Lua expressions, invoking genpowf(2), which defines genexp and then defines the Terra function powfN. When a Terra function or quotation is defined, it is specialized in the local environment. Specialization resolves the escaped Lua expressions by calling back into Lua evaluation, splicing the resulting values into the Terra code. In powfN, it evaluates the escaped call to genexp, which will generate the body of powfN. The loop on line 4 alternates between defining a Terra quotation \'(r \* vr)\), and specializing it with values of the Lua variables r and vr. Here r holds the power expression being built `1.0 \* vr \* vr`, while vr is a quotation of a variable that refers to parameter v of powfN. The result of the loop is the Terra quotation `1.0 \* vr \* vr`, which will be spliced into the body of powfN, completing its specialization.

When a Terra function is first called, such as pow2 on line 13, it is typechecked and compiled, producing machine code. The function is then evaluated computing the result 9.

To support our implementation of exotypes, we use an additional operator, the type macro that allows for user-defined behav-
ior during typechecking. These macros can be used in Terra code like a function, but they are evaluated when the Terra code is typechecked. Unlike escapes and quotes, which are used to create and stitch code together before typechecking, type macros have access to their arguments’ types, and are used to generate behavior based on the types as shown in this example:

```lua
printnum = macro(function(num)
  local format
  if num:gettype() == float then
    format = "%f"
  else
    format = "%d"
  end
  return \c.print(fmt(format),[num])
end)
```

When `printint` is first called on line 11, it will be typechecked. When typechecking the call `printint(a)`, the typechecker will invoke the `printint` macro, which examines the type of the argument `num` to generate the appropriate formatting code for the type.

### 3. Exotypes Interface

We define an **exotype** as a tuple of functions which will be called during typechecking to define the layout and behavior of a user-defined type:

\[
\left( \left( \rightarrow \text{MemoryLayout} \right) \ast \left( \text{Op}_0 \rightarrow \text{Quote} \right) \ast \ldots \ast \left( \text{Op}_n \rightarrow \text{Quote} \right) \right)
\]

The first function computes the in-memory layout of a type, which is specified with `MemoryLayout`. The remaining functions describe the *semantics* of the type when it appears in a primitive operation of the language such as a method invocation, binary operator, or cast. Given an instance of a primitive operation (`Op_p`), the corresponding function returns a `Quote`, a concrete expression that implements the instance. These functions are evaluated by the typechecker whenever it encounters an operation on an exotype and may reference and modify program state. We call these functions *property functions* and the results of these functions *properties* of the type.

In the remainder of this section, we discuss an implementation of exotypes that uses Lua to define types in Terra, and type macros to define the type’s behavior. In this implementation, exotypes are the only mechanism for creating user-defined Terra types. Terra’s *struct* syntax to define types is implemented via desugaring to exotypes. An exotype is created via an API call in Lua:

```lua
Student = terralib.types.newstruct()
```

Property functions are defined in the type’s metamethods table. The in-memory layout of a type is specified with `_getentries`. For instance, the `Student` type can be defined to have two fields — a name and a class year:

```lua
Student.metamethods.__getentries = function()
  return {
    "name", type = rawstring,
    "year", type = int
  }
end
```

Since properties are defined programmatically, we are not limited to explicitly enumerated entries. A type can define its layout by querying the layout of another type or accessing external information. For example, we define `Student2` by reading a comma-separated value file of student data and inferring the type of the fields from the data:

```lua
Student2.metamethods.__getentries = function()
  local file = io.open("data.csv", "r")
  local titles = split("", file:read("*line"))
  local data = split("", file:read("*line"))
  local entries = ()
  for i,field in ipairs(titles) do
    -- is the data a string or an integer?
    local type = tonumber(data[i]) and int or rawstring
    entries[i] = { field = field, type = type }
  end
  return entries
end
```

To keep code concise, we include simple default implementations. For `_getentries` in type `T`, we return `T.entries`, which is automatically populated by Terra’s *struct* statement:

```lua
struct Student3 { name : rawstring, year : int }
```

Semantics are also specified with property functions in the metamethods table. When a method is invoked on an instance of type `T` (e.g., `t:mymethod(arg)`), the implementation of the method is defined using the `_getmethod` property of type `T`. By default it looks up the method in the table `T.methods`. But if the method being invoked does not exist, it will query the `_methodmissing` property. Here is an example of using methods with the `Student2`
PROPERTY | OPERATION
---|---
__getentries() | Defines the in-memory representation of T as a list of named fields.
__getmethod(name) | Gets the static implementation of name for type T.
__add(lhs, rhs) | Defines the behavior of the + operator on the object (lhs or rhs has type T).
__cast(from, to, exp) | Defines how to convert expression exp of type from to type to.
__apply(arg1, ..., argN) | Defines how to apply an instance of T to a list of arguments.

Table 1. A selection of exotype properties and example operations that cause the type checker to invoke them.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Property</th>
<th>Operation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>obj.myfield</td>
<td>__getentries()</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>obj:mymethod()</td>
<td>__getmethod(name)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>obj + 1</td>
<td>__add(lhs, rhs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><a href="obj">int</a></td>
<td>__cast(from, to, exp)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>obj(1.0, true)</td>
<td>__apply(arg1, ..., argN)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The typechecking process for example code that uses Student2 is illustrated in Figure 1 (right). When the typechecker sees an instantiation of the type, it queries __getentries to get its memory layout. For Student2 this will load the data.csv file to determine the layout. If the typechecker sees a call to a method like setname which is not in Student2:methods, then the __getmethod property will query the __methodmissing property for its behavior. Since __methodmissing is defined as a type macro, it will be evaluated during the typechecking process to produce a Terra quotation that implements the behavior.

Other properties define the behaviors for built-in operators (e.g. __add for +), and how to convert between user-defined types (__cast). Table 1 lists some common properties and the operations they define.

**Defining behavior programmatically allows generic behaviors to be expressed concisely.** For instance, we can interface with externally-defined class systems. Objective-C is an extension to C that adds objects similar in behavior to Smalltalk. We can embed Objective-C objects by creating an exotype ObjC wrapper:

```lua
C = terralib.includec("objc/message.h") --include ObjC runtime
struct ObjC { handle : &C.objc_object } --define wrapper for ObjC types
ObjC.methods._methodmissing = macro(function(sel, obj, ...)
  local arguments = {...}
  local self = C.sel_registerName(sanitizeSelector(sel, #arguments))
  --generate expression to implement method call 'sel'
  return 'ObjC ( C.objc_msgSend(self, handle, #sel, #arguments))');
end

local sel = C.sel_registerName('setname')
return createarray(C, self: C.sel_registerName('setname'), arguments))
end

When the typechecker sees a method called on an ObjC object (e.g. obj:init()), its _methodmissing property will insert code to call the Objective-C runtime API, e.g.:

```lua
C.objc_msgSend(obj, handle, init_name, 1)
```

**Staging of properties gives the programmer control over the performance of the type.** Since behavior can be defined in type macros that are evaluated during typechecking, information known statically can be pre-computed. In the ObjC type, the method name sel is known during typechecking, so we can pre-compute the Objective-C method selector (line 5), which makes the expression executed at runtime (line 7) faster.

Furthermore, __getentries provides low-level control of the memory layout of a type similar to that of C structs. Types are laid out linearly by default and can also be overlapped in unions. This control allows __getentries to describe more efficient memory layouts. We implemented Student objects individually, as if they were entries in a row-oriented database. But we can change __getentries to store students as entries in a column-oriented database which may be more efficient.

4. Example: Array(T)

Exotypes allow us to express the generic behavior of objects in a way similar to meta-object protocols in dynamic languages while still achieving the the performance of low-level languages. Consider how to represent the type constructor Array(), which takes a type T and produces a new type, Array(T), that holds a collection of Ts. In addition, for each method m of T, Array(T) has its own method m that invokes the original m on each member of the array. This is a Proxy design pattern [8], where methods on one object are forwarded to methods on another. This specification is different from that in most functional languages, where this behavior is implemented as a higher-order map function, but is widely used in array-based languages such as APL and R to concisely operate on collections.

Proxy patterns are difficult to express generically in many modern languages. While simple, it is hard to control the performance of the object. As an example, Array() can be implemented concisely using metatables in Lua:

```lua
local function createmethod(self, methodname)
  local impl = function(self, ...)
    for i, element in ipairs(self.data) do
      element[methodname](element, ...)
    end
    return impl
  end
  self[methodname] = impl --cache result
  return impl
end

local function createarray()
  local arr = (data = terralib.newlist())
  return setmetatable(arr, { _index = createmethod })
end
```

When a missing method on an array is referenced, the metatable’s __index field (line 12) causes createmethod to be called, which generates an implementation for the method (line 2) that loops over the objects in the array forwarding the method call to each.

While simple, it is hard to control the performance of the object. Methods are looked up dynamically on each object in the array. The objects themselves are boxed, limiting memory locality. We implemented a micro-benchmark that invoked a simple counter function on each member of an array object and evaluated it using LuaJIT, a state-of-the-art tracing JIT [23]. Despite tracing and compiling the loop, it still performs 18 times slower than hand-written C++ that implements the proxy by hand due to the overhead of guards and unboxing of objects.
With exotypes, we can specify `Array(\cdot)` almost as concisely as the Lua code, but staging of its behavior and layout allows us to remove the inefficiencies:

```lua
Array = memoize(function(T)
  local struct ArrayImpl { data : &T, N : int
    i = /zero.noslash,self.N
  }
  ArrayImpl.metamethods.__methodmissing = macro(function(methodname,selfexp,...)
    local args = terralib.newlist {...}
    return quote
      var self = selfexp
      for i = 0,self.N do
        self.data[i][methodname]([args])
    end
  end)
end
```

This macro performs a similar purpose to the `createMetaMethod` function in the Lua example. It generates the code that loops over elements of the array and forwards the method call, but it does so during typechecking rather than evaluation. Furthermore, the declaration of `ArrayImpl` provides a concrete layout for the type before it is compiled.

Since the layout of `ArrayImpl` is described before compilation, we can store the array’s T objects unboxed rather than as an array of pointers. Furthermore, the forwarders to `methodname` on line 9 are resolved at compile time and inlined. In our micro-benchmark, this staging allowed us to generically generate the same code as the hand-written C++ proxy, and run at the same speed.

5. Composability

It is possible to apply type constructors such as `Array(\cdot)` to other programmatically-defined exotypes. To support composability, we allow an implementation of an exotype to query the properties of other exotypes. However, type hierarchies are often recursive, making it possible for two types to mutually depend on properties of the other. Consider the following `Tree` type:

```lua
struct Tree ( data : int, children : Array(Tree) )
Tree.methods.print = terra(self : @Tree) : ()
  print(self.data)
  self.children:print()
end
```

The `Tree` type contains a type `Array(Tree)` that is defined programmatically with the `Array(\cdot)` function using `Tree` itself as an argument. The in-memory layout of `Tree` depends on the layout of `Array(Tree)`. Similarly, the method print of `Array(Tree)` depends on the method `print` in `Tree`. (The layout of `Array(Tree)` does not depend on `Tree`, since it only stores a pointer to it.)

Since the dependencies are for different properties, there is no actual circular dependence between the types. The required type information can be determined from the specification in steps. First, the in-memory layout is determined for `Array(Tree)` and then `Tree`, then the two methods are defined, first `print` for `Tree` and finally `print` for `Array(Tree)`.

The layout and method definitions of `Array(Tree)` and `Tree` must be interleaved to avoid causing a cyclic dependence. In recursive cases similar to this example, eagerly defining all the properties of one type before another can introduce a false dependency. However, interleaving the definition of `Array(Tree)` and `Tree` makes it impossible to define a single type constructor function `Array(\cdot)` that completely defines the properties of a new type. These type-constructors are desirable because they can be provided as libraries and composed with other exotypes without requiring the caller to understand the specific implementation.

Our interface to exotypes resolves this problem by defining each property separately as a lazily evaluated function. The compiler queries an individual property of a type only when it is needed during typechecking. Evaluating properties separately and lazily allows the compiler to interleave property queries from different types while allowing them to be specified entirely for one type in a single function. Since typechecking and compilation of functions are also performed lazily, type properties are not requested earlier than needed.

In the original publication on Terra [7] types were described using eagerly built tables that specified the layout and methods, in addition to ad-hoc user-defined callbacks invoked by the typechecker. Our experience with issues causing subtle cycles while building type constructors such as `Array(\cdot)` led us to replace this design with exotypes based on lazily queried properties.

Lazily queried properties also make it possible to create types that have an unbounded number of behaviors. For instance, the Objective-C wrapper object presented previously can respond to an unlimited number of messages. Despite being unbounded, these methods can compose with other type constructors. For instance, it is possible to make an `Array(ObjC)` that stores OS windows and call `getWindow(\cdot)` to focus them. In this case, the method `getWindow(\cdot)` is requested by the typechecker via the `getMetaMethod` property of `Array(ObjC)`, which will in turn query the `getMetaMethod` property of `ObjC` to generate the method call. If `Array` required all methods to be available up-front, these two types would not compose.

6. Formalization of Properties

Exotype property functions can directly query properties of other exotypes. Properties are also queried indirectly by generated code. For instance, `Array(ObjC)` generates code that calls a method on `ObjC`, querying its `getMetaMethod` property. It is possible for an exotype to request a property resulting in true cyclic property lookups. In this case, our system emits an error. Furthermore, properties are arbitrary programs, so they are not guaranteed to terminate and may have other undesirable behaviors.

To discuss some constraints that make properties well-behaved we formally define the typechecking and property evaluation process for exotypes in Terra. We also examine the consequences of relaxing these constraints to make exotypes more flexible.

Terra is evaluated in multiple phases. To keep our formalization of exotypes simple, we focus on the typechecking and evaluation of Terra code with exotype property queries. In particular, we omit the machinery for queries, escapes, and specialization used to generate Terra code, which can be found in previous work [7], and assume that an environment P holds a mapping between exotypes and their properties is already constructed. This environment would normally be created in Lua by API calls that create types and set entries in their metamethods table.

We model the Terra language with exotypes (ExoTerra) as the typed lambda calculus:

\[
\begin{align*}
\epsilon & ::= \lambda x : \top . \epsilon | \epsilon | \epsilon \cup Int | cI \epsilon | unwrap \epsilon \\
T & ::= Int | T \to T \\
\nu & ::= cI | \lambda x : \top . \nu | cI
\end{align*}
\]

Types are either a base type `Int`, a function `T \to T`, or an exotype represented by a type identifier `t`. An exotype constructor `cI \epsilon` takes an expression `\epsilon` to initialize the internal value of the exotype, and `unwrap \epsilon` retrieves the internal value. The environment `P` holds a mapping from an exotype `t` to its property lookup function, `P(t) = \lambda x.e`. In real Terra, each property is a different function, but

\[\text{Other behavior is possible. A recursively requested property could initially return the value } T \text{ and iterate property lookup until a fixed point is reached.}\]
Given a type \( T \) and an expression \( \Theta \), a runprop rule for \( T \) is of the form
\[
\text{runprop} \ T \ 
\]
This rule is used to query a property of a type. Its first argument \( e_0 \) should evaluate to an exotype identifier \( t \), and \( e_1, ..., e_n \) are additional arguments describing the query. Properties are evaluated in the context of querying other properties. This evaluation is done with the \text{runprop} \ S \ e \ expression, which evaluates a property lookup expression \( e \) in the context \( S \), where \( S \) is a set of properties. Each property in \( S \) is already being queried when \( e \) is requested, and has the form \( \{v_0, ..., v_n\} \).

The rules for typechecking ExoTerra are shown in Figure 2. Rule \text{TYCTOR} illustrates how the typechecking process queries the property function to retrieve information about the type. In particular, \text{TYCTOR} asks the property function for the type of the concrete value that will represent the exotype, and makes sure it matches the type of the expression used to initialize it. Rule \text{TYEXOAPP} shows how a property function defines the behavior of an exotype when it is applied like a function. It queries the exotype for its behavior when applied to a value of type \( T' \) (runprop \( T \) \( \text{apply} \) \( x \) \( e \) \( \text{apply} \) \( T' \)).

This query should produce an implementation of behavior in the form of a function (\( \Theta' \)). This function takes the exotype \( \Theta \) and the argument \( \Theta' \) to compute the value of the expression. We check \( \Theta' \) with modified typing rules \( \rightarrow \) which omit \text{TYEXOAPP}. This change prevents the implementation \( \Theta'' \) of an exotype from relying on exotype behavior itself, which can prevent typechecking from terminating if, for instance, a query about exotype application included the same application in its implementation. This behavior does not restrict what implementations can be expressed, since the property generating the implementation function can query exotypes for the appropriate behavior. Rules for evaluating ExoTerra are presented in Figure 3 and show how the results of property queries will be applied to evaluate Terra code.

The rules for evaluating ExoLua are shown in Figure 4. Exceptions are handled using the computation (ERROR). The rules \text{LPROP} and \text{LPROPCYCLE} perform property queries. A property is computed as the nested application \( v_0 ... v_n \), where \( v_0 \) is the property lookup function for type \( t \). We say that the tuple \( (t, v_1, ..., v_n) \) is the property being queried. For example, the expression \( P(t) \) \( \text{apply} \) \( T \) is a query of the \( (t, \text{apply} \ Y \ T) \) property. Property statements (prop) can only stop inside of a runprop rule which specifies the set \( S \) of active property lookups. If the same property is already being queried, it is in set \( S \) and will evaluate to error (rule \text{LPROPCYCLE}), otherwise the property will be evaluated in a new runprop context that records the fact that the property is currently being queried (rule \text{LPROP}). The values in property queries can be functions; for the purposes of \( S \), we consider two lambda terms equal if they are equivalent up to alphabetic conversion. Given this formalization, we can define sufficient conditions to ensure that a property lookup during typechecking will terminate:

- **Individual termination.** A property evaluation \( e \) in a program \( P \) with \text{runprop} \( S \) \( e \) reduces to \( P \) \( C[v] \) or \( P \) \( \text{error} \) assuming that all of the subsequent property evaluations that it evaluates (\( P \) \( C[\text{runprop} \ S \ C[v]] \) \( e \) \( P \) \( C[\text{runprop} \ S \ C[v]] \) or \( P \) \( \text{error} \).

- **Closed universe.** There exist a finite number \( N \) of unique properties of the form \( \{v_0, ..., v_n\} \) that can be queried.
Theorem Assuming individual termination and closed universe, a property lookup \( \text{runprop} \emptyset \theta \) will terminate with a value \( v \) or error. The proof uses the fact that there is a bounded set of properties to show that a program will eventually terminate or reach a cycle.

Lemma Let \( E_n \) be a property lookup evaluation with individual termination. \( P \in \{\text{runprop} S_n \}, \) that does not terminate, and \( |S_n| = n \). Then \( E_n \) reduces to a property lookup \( E_{n+1} \rightarrow \gamma^* E_{n+1} \), with \( E_{n+1} = P \in \{\text{runprop} S_{n+1} C[\text{runprop} S_{n+1} C]\} \) and \( |S_{n+1}| = n + 1 \). Proof: from individual termination, there must exist a sequence of steps \( E_n \rightarrow \gamma^* E_{n+1} \), where \( E_{n+1} = P \in \{\text{runprop} S_{n+1} C[\text{runprop} S_{n+1} C]\} \) and \( E_{n+1} \) does not terminate. Furthermore, the only rule that applies to \( E_{n+1} \) is LPROP, since LPROP_CYCLE terminates with an error. Hence, \( E_{n+1} \rightarrow \gamma P \in \{\text{runprop} S_{n+1} C[\text{runprop} S_{n+1} C]\} \), where \( S_{n+1} = S_n \cup \{v_0, \ldots, v_m\} \). From LPROP we know that the new property was not already in \( S_n \), so \( |S_{n+1}| = n + 1 \).

Proof of Theorem Assume a property lookup \( P \in \{\text{runprop} \emptyset \theta \) does not terminate. By induction using the Lemma, evaluation will step to a property lookup \( E_{n+1} \) with \( |S_{n+1}| = N + 1 \) active properties. However, this contradicts the closed universe assumption, since there are at most \( N \) properties that can be queried.

Removing either of these conditions allows properties to run forever. If we remove individual termination then it is possible that an individual property lookup function will not terminate. We expect programmers can debug issues that arise from non-termination within a single property.

If we remove closed universe, it also possible to run forever. Consider a _getmethod property that, for each method \( n \), appends the string "foo" to \( n \) and tries to call this new method on itself. This property will not terminate because the property being requested at each depth is different from the previous properties. In our implementation, we track which properties are being queried and throw an exception when a cycle is found. However, in cases such as _getmethod, there are an unbounded number of possible method names, so some property lookups may not terminate. In practice, we cap the depth of property lookup and report a trace of property requests when the limit is reached to ensure termination.

The semantics of property lookup suggest a few design principles to ensure properties functions are composable. First, though Lua is not a purely functional language, property lookup functions should be written in a functional style. The semantics show that in some cases such as _TCTOR and _TUNWRAP, the same property will be evaluated multiple times. Furthermore, typechecking occurs when a function is first used, so the order in which type properties are evaluated is determined dynamically. Since the formal languages are functional, they will always produce the same result regardless of when they are evaluated. In our actual implementation where side effects are possible, we memoize property queries to guarantee the same result. Since the writer of a property does not control when it is queried, it is a good idea to write property functions so that they will produce the same result regardless of when they are evaluated.

Furthermore, it is important to avoid creating cyclic property queries. It is sometimes convenient to calculate a group of properties (e.g. all methods of a type) at once during a property lookup. This implementation is problematic, since querying additional properties can cause additional cycles. Consider an analogous case when typechecking the exotype constructor \( P \in \text{ctor} \), with the following property lookup functions:

\[
P(t_1) = \lambda \text{name} . \text{prop} t_2 \text{name} \\
P(t_2) = \lambda \text{name} . \text{first Int} \ (\text{prop} t_1 \text{name})
\]

If \( t_1 \) will forward its property query to \( t_2 \), \( t_2 \) will first query the same property on \( t_1 \), discard the result, and return Int. This evaluation would cause a cycle on \( (t_1, \text{layout}) \) that could be avoided if \( t_2 \) only queried properties it needed. This example suggests that a property should only query other properties when they are needed to calculate the result of the original query. Querying other properties only when needed and writing properties in a functional style ensures that property queries are as composable as possible.

7. Examples and Evaluation

To evaluate the expressiveness and performance of libraries built with exotypes, we have implemented example solutions for several domains where performance is critical. In each scenario, we show how exotypes can express a solution similar to those written in dynamic languages with meta-object protocols while matching the performance of existing state-of-the-art implementations written in C++ or Java. In some cases, the added expressiveness enables more aggressive optimizations, allowing our implementations to exceed the performance of existing libraries.

Evaluation was performed on an Intel Core i7-3720QM with 16GB of RAM running OS X 10.8.5. Our implementation of exotypes was built by modifying the original Terra typechecker to make user-defined property queries while tracking cyclic property lookups. Lua’s protected call mechanism was used to recover from and report any errors in user-defined properties.

7.1 Serialization

Fast serialization is necessary for implementing high-performance distributed systems. Writing robust and efficient serialization libraries is difficult because different use-cases often demand different features, impacting the set of implementations and optimizations that can be used. Design choices include binary vs. text encodings, the presence of type and versioning annotations, whether complete object graphs need to be serialized, and many other considerations.

One solution is to provide robust libraries that attempt to address every possibility. Google’s Protocol Buffers provide cross-language data-description and versioning [11]. Java includes a built-in library for serialization that can serialize entire object graphs and ensure type safety [22]. To optimize performance, some libraries such as the Kryo library for Java generate specialized serialization code for each type ahead-of-time [26]. The robust features in these libraries often make them difficult to customize, which is unfortunate, since advanced features such as supporting object graphs can incur runtime overhead.

Using exotypes, we can create custom serialization libraries that are generic (work on arbitrary types) and efficient (code to serialize each object is precompiled) with very little code. We focus on the example of serializing 3D scene data from an interactive scene editor connected to a storage server. Scenes are trees, so the serializer must recursively serialize sub-trees but need not handle generic graphs. Tree nodes contain a mixture of numeric and string data. The server and client exchange a binary representation of scene data.

We created a generic exotype suited to serialize this kind of data. It responds to two polymorphic methods _write and _read. A partial list of the code for the implementation of _write is shown in Figure 5, focusing on serialization of structs (other exotypes). Code is generated for each type seen in the object tree. For _struct objects, it queries the layout of the _struct to generate code for each of the entries.

Performance for a 1.28MB scene is shown in Figure 6. We compare against Java’s native serialization, the state-of-the-art Kryo library, and Google’s C++ implementation of protocol buffers. Objects were serialized to a pre-allocated buffer in memory so that the benchmark would capture encoding time rather than buffer allocation/resizing time. For Java implementations, the JIT was
Figure 5. Implementation of a generic serializer, focusing on code for serializing aggregate types.

Figure 6. Throughput of scene graph serialization. Our specialized exotype implementation performs an order of magnitude faster.

warmed up by serializing the entire scene 250 times before timing. For Kryo, classes were pre-registered, support for object graphs was disabled, and UnsafeMemoryOutput was used to increase performance.

Our baseline implementation can serialize input data at 627 MB/s, which is comparable to Kryo’s 432 MB/s. This is expected since both libraries take the same approach, pre-generating code to serialize each object up front. The Java serializer performs substantially worse (107MB/s) since it interprets the structure of each object during serialization.

Given a specific use-case, we can apply more aggressive optimizations. Our baseline implementation calls a user-provided function pointer to write data. We can turn our serialization type into a construction. For instance the Riposte JIT [30] for vector code in R.

Protocol makes the expression of this custom serializer concise. In the full Terra implementation, the code to implement both serialization and deserialization is less than 200 lines. At this size, it is feasible for a programmer to modify it to fit different serialization cases, something that is not as feasible with much larger serialization libraries such as Kryo or protocol buffers which each contain several thousand lines of code.

7.2 Dynamic x86 Assembly

Dynamic assemblers form the basis of JIT compilers. Unlike normal assemblers which run during compilation, dynamic assemblers are used at runtime to dynamically generate code. A JIT compiler uses the assembler to translate its own intermediates into executable machine code. Higher-level JIT-compiled languages may emit templates of x86 assembly that correspond to a single high-level instruction. For instance the Riposte JIT [30] for vector code in R uses the following template to emit a vector gather:

```c
void emitGather(Assembler &a,
   XMMRegister RegR, XMMRegister RegA, int disp) {
   if (disp > 0) {
      a.movlpd(RegR,Operand(r12,r8,times_8,disp));
   } else {
      a.movlpd(RegR,Operand(r12,r9,times_8,disp));
   }
}
```

The gather takes 2 addresses in RegA and then loads the two values in RegR, requiring 5 instructions total.

The performance of a JIT depends on compilation speed, so it is important for the Assembler type to be efficient. Riposte uses the assembler used in Google Chrome [10] to get high performance. To ensure speed, each instruction is explicitly implemented as a method on the assembler object. As an example, here is the implementation of the movlpd instruction:

```c
void Assembler::movlpd(XMMRegister dst,
   const Operands &src) {
   EnsureSpace ensure_space(this);
   emit(0x66); emit_rex_64(dst, src);
   emit(0x0F); emit Ox12; // load emit sse_operand(dst, src);
}
```

This approach is able to produce code that can assemble x86 instructions at the rate of 720 MB/s of instructions. While fast, writing the implementation of each of these functions is tedious and prone to error. There are hundreds of x86 instructions, many with multiple versions.
Another approach is to describe the instruction concisely in a
small language, similar to how string matching can be encoded
with regular expressions. LuaJIT’s DynAsm library [23] takes this
approach to describe the movlpd instruction in a table:

```
movlpd_2 = "rx:oq:660F12M|xr:oq:n60F13M"
```

Each line describes the valid arguments ("rx"), their sizes ("oq"),
and a recipe to encode the instruction ("66..."), listing multiple
variants per line. When instructions share a similar form (e.g. add
and sub), meta-programming is used to generate the table entries.

While these tables are concise, interpreting the table to encode
instructions incurs substantial overhead. A micro-benchmark using
this table directly encodes at only 336KB/s, three orders of mag-
nitude slower. To get high-performance, DynAsm pre-compiles the
table into fast code using a source-to-source translation of C code.
It is designed to optimize code size rather than speed, encoding the
gather code at 168MB/s but using only 30 bytes to represent it.

We can use exotypes to perform this transformation directly
in the object system of Terra without the need for preprocessors.
Instead of optimizing for code size like DynAsm, we optimize
for encoding speed. Our implementation uses the __methodmissing
property to compile assembly functions on demand. For instance, a
user might write:

```
A:emit(op.movd, r8, RegA, disp) "word")
```

This will invoke __methodmissing for the movlpd instruction. The
implementation will then examine the encoding table (adapted from
DynAsm) to produce an implementation of the instruction
equivalent to C code shown previously from the Chrome assem-
blier.

Generating the assembler implementations on demand provides
more opportunities for optimization. Only instructions that are ac-
tually used need to be generated, reducing the total amount of code
in the library. Also, we can aggressively specialize instructions to
their use. For instance, in the invocation of movlpd above, the only
dynamically determined arguments are RegR and disp. We can gen-
erate a specific version of movlpd for this invocation.

To generate specialized assembly instructions we take the fol-
lowing approach similar to DynAsm. First, in __methodmissing, we
determine which arguments are constants and which are determined
dynamically. We then use the constant arguments to create a tem-
plate that leaves the dynamically determined information blank.
Finally, we generate code that first copies the template into the
code buffer, and then patches it up with dynamically provided arg-
uments. This approach keeps the code size small by separating the
template from the assembler code. Furthermore, since the template
is normally multiple bytes, we can benefit from vectorized copies.
We can also use this template-based approach to generate assem-
blery code for multiple instructions in a single template. The pro-
grammer can call emit, which supports multiple instructions. Here
is the gather operator expressed using this approach:

```
terra emitGather(RegR : O, RegA : O, disp : int)
A:emit(op.movd, r8, RegA, op.movhps.RegR, RegA, op.movr, r9, RegR,
op.movlpd.RegR, index(r12, r8, disp, "qword"), op.movhpd.RegR, index(r12, r9, disp, "qword"))
end
```

This function fuses the assembly into a single template copy fol-
lowed by patch-up instructions to insert RegR, RegA, and disp. The
resulting code runs at 5.96 GB/s, or 8.3 times faster than the hand-
written Chrome version.

To validate the approach, we rewrote 10 kernels taken from the
Riposte JIT compiler using our dynamic assembler written in Terra
and compare their performance to those of the original code which
uses the Chrome assembler. Figure 7 shows the results for each
kernel. While the Chrome assembler always emits code at a rate
of 700MB/s, the Terra assembler can perform anywhere from 1.64
GB/s to 15 GB/s, depending on the amount of instruction fusion
that is possible. For instance, the add instruction only includes two
x86 instructions, and one of them is only emitted conditionally.
This limits performance to 1.64 GB/s. The emitfn kernel emits
13 instructions and does little patching, enabling it to encode at
15GB/s.

Using exotypes we were able to implement our Terra-based
assembler, including the parts of DynAsm we used to implement
assembly instruction encoding, with only 2100 lines of Lua-Terra code—
less than half the size of the Chrome assembler. Furthermore, by
specializing the assembler code for each call to the assembly object,
we were able to produce assembly code that ran up to 17 times
faster than the reference code.

### 7.3 Automatic Differentiation

Automatic differentiation (AD) computes derivatives of programs
by differentiating elementary operations (such as multiplication)
and composing those derivatives using the chain rule [5]. It elim-
inates tedious and error-prone hand-authoring of derivative code,
and it gives exact derivatives, unlike finite difference approaches.
AD is widely applied to sensitivity analysis and optimization in
scientific computing and engineering.

Many applications, such as optimizing an objective function,
require the gradient of a single output with respect to multiple pa-
rameters, a setting well-suited to reverse-mode AD. Reverse-mode
AD first runs the program forward, recording each elementary op-
eration and the data needed to compute its derivative on a tape.
It then interprets the tape backward, accumulating the partial deriva-
tive of the output with respect to each intermediate (the interme-
diate’s adjoint), terminating with the partial derivatives for the in-
put parameters. Reverse-mode AD can compute arbitrarily many
partial derivatives with just two sweeps through the program (one
forward and one backward), but the space overhead for the inter-
mediate tape may be significant.

We implemented a reverse-mode AD library with exotypes in
Terra, using an approach similar to that of Stan, a C++ library
for high-performance statistical inference [23]. Programs written
against this library replace floating point numbers with a custom
dual number type for which arithmetic functions and operators
are overloaded. These overloaded functions store their inputs in
an object which is placed on an in-memory tape. The reverse pass
interprets the tape by calling virtual functions on those objects.

Our implementation uses exotypes to programatically gener-
ate the tape object type for each elementary operator. New opera-
tors are defined using a simple interface:

```
-- Defining the "__add" metamethod
addADoperator("__add", -- Forward function code
  "terra(lhs: double, rhs: double) return lhs + rhs end",
  -- Adjoint code
  adjoint(function(T1, T2)
    return terra(v: &TapeObjectBase, lhs: T1, rhs: T2)
      setadj(lhs, adj(lhs) + adj(v))
      setadj(rhs, adj(rhs) + adj(v))
      end)
end)
```

v is the output of the add operator stored on the tape. The inputs
to the operator, lhs and rhs, may be either doubles or dual numbers.
adj(x) extracts the adjoint of x, and setadj(x, v) sets the adjoint
of x to v. In the above example, when lhs or rhs is a double (i.e. a
program constant), the first setadj line is unnecessary, since a has
no adjoint. Our implementation detects this at compile time (adj
and setadj are macros) and does not add an entry for lhs to the tape
object type. In contrast, Stan uses a class hierarchy for tape objects:
Add is a subclass of BinaryOp, whose subclasses all have the same
7.4 Probabilistic Programming

Probabilistic programming languages (PPLs) are a general-purpose modeling tool for artificial intelligence, machine learning, and statistics [9, 16]. Probabilistic programs define probability distributions: the program makes random choices (such as flipping a weighted coin), and running the program produces a sample from the marginal distribution implied by those choices. By conditioning the output of the program on a predicate, programmers can pose interesting queries of their models.

A universal PPL such as the probabilistic Scheme dialect Church can describe any Turing-complete, stochastic process, including recursive processes and distributions with infinite support [9]. These languages are expressive, but their implementations are slower than equivalent hand-coded models. One reason for the performance gap is algorithmic: inference algorithms (i.e. implementations of conditioning semantics) must be general-purpose and cannot easily optimize for the statistical traits of specific models. Another reason is computational: probabilistic inference is a numerically-intensive task, but existing universal PPL implementations are high-level and dynamically-typed, making it harder to control their performance.

Addressing this second problem, we implemented a Church-style universal PPL as a library in Terra using exotypes. The query “What is the chance that a patient has lung cancer, given that she has a cough?” in a simplistic medical diagnosis model is expressed in our Terra-based language as:

```terralib
(terra()
  var lungcancer = flip(0.01)
  var cold = flip(0.2)
  var cough = lungcancer or cold
  condition(cough)
  return lungcancer
end)
```

We will highlight two major components built using exotypes and describe why they would be difficult to implement in a low-level language without exotypes, such as C++.

First, the Markov Chain Monte Carlo (MCMC) inference algorithm used to sample from conditioned programs requires that every random choice in the program be given an address that is uniquely determined by the choice’s structural position in program execution traces [31]. Typically, addresses are managed with a global stack of function callsites: every function call pushes a unique ID on entry and pops the stack on exit. When a random choice is invoked, the sequence of IDs on the stack, plus the number of times that sequence has occurred in the current program execution, uniquely identifies the random choice.

We implement this behavior through multi-stage programming with exotypes. Terra functions are replaced with instances of an exotype `Pfn`, whose `__apply` metamethod wraps the function with code to manage the address stack:

```terralib
function pfn(fn)
  -- Exotype declaration
  local Pfn = terralib.types.newstruct()
  -- Wrap function call with address stack code
  Pfn.metamethods.__apply = macro(function(self, ...))
  local id = 0
  local args = terralib.newlist((...))
  local argIntermediates = args:map(
    function(a) return symbol(a:gettype()) end
  )
  return quote
    id = id + 1
    local callsiteStack = push(id)
    result = fn(argIntermediates)
    callsiteStack:pop()
  in result end
end
return Pfn
end
```

Critically, `__apply` is a macro executed at compile time, so each `callsite` of the function receives a distinct ID.

Managing random choice addresses is more complicated in non-staged languages without exotypes. Previous implementations of universal PPL use either a custom interpreter or a source-to-source transformation [9, 31]. Interpretation is too slow for our performance goals, and source transformation requires a complete parse of the program, which is a steep price to pay for embedding universal PPL in most low-level languages.

We must also define the behavior of primitive random choices (e.g. `flip`). These constructs must sample a value from an underlying probability distribution (e.g. Bernoulli), compute the probability of their values under the distribution, and propose changes to their values for use in MCMC inference. Our implementation exposes a Lua function `makeRandomChoice` for this purpose:

```lua
flip = makeRandomChoice(  -- Sampling function
  terra(p: double) return rand() < p end,  -- Probability function
  terra(val: bool, p: double) if val then return log(p) else return log(1-p) end end,
  -- Proposal function
  terra(currval: bool, p: double) return (not currval) end)
```

Internally, `makeRandomChoice` defines a new exotype `RCRecord` that records the value and parameters for each invocation of this random choice. The entries of `RCRecord` are determined programmatically by examining the argument and return types of the sampling function. `makeRandomChoice` returns a `Pfn` that constructs an instance of `RCRecord` and stores it in a global table mapping random choice addresses to values.

Because exotypes allow reflection on functions to drive the generation of new types, we can abstract the details of the random choice as a single library routine. The user only needs to provide three functions, which can be overloaded to handle random choices taking different parameter types. Without exotypes, the behavior of every random choice would be implemented independently for each set of parameter types. This approach would result in redundant code and is more error-prone.
We evaluate the performance of our Terra PPL implementation on three example programs: conditioned sampling of a length-100 sequence from a Hidden Markov Model with 9 hidden states and 10 possible observations (HMM); learning the parameters of a three-component Gaussian Mixture Model from 1000 data points (GMM); and simulating a 1000-site one-dimensional Ising model (Ising). All examples were run for 5000 iterations of MCMC. We compare performance to that of Bher (a compiled implementation of Church [31]) and a probabilistic dialect of V8 Javascript actively used in teaching. We only evaluate Church on the first example because the other two require language primitives not available in Church.

Results are shown in Figure 9. The Javascript implementation is an order of magnitude faster than Bher on the HMM example. This difference is due in part to V8’s optimization engine, and also to the overhead of Bher’s purely functional data structures (particularly the trie it uses for random choice addressing). Our Terra implementation is, on average, an order of magnitude faster than Javascript. Terra’s static typing allows up-front compilation of much more monomorphic code, reducing the number of virtual function calls as well as boxing/unboxing overhead.

Finally, the exotype constructors used in this library are composable with other exotypes. For example, the dual number type from our automatic differentiation library can compose with RCRecord to automatically compute derivatives of program probabilities with respect to random choices. We have implemented an MCMC algorithm that uses these derivatives to perform more efficient inference for programs defining mostly-continuous distributions [19].

8. Related Work

Previous work has proposed several optimizations to improve the performance of meta-object protocols in dynamic languages. Most of this work has focused on dynamically-dispatched protocols. For instance, S elf, a language based on prototypes that was a precursor to more general protocols, used polymorphic inline caching to optimize method dispatch [13]. Kiczales et al. propose a meta-object protocol for CLOS that uses memoization to speed up method dispatch [15]. These approaches normally still incur some runtime overhead (e.g., to check the cache). In contrast, exotypes are executed during staged compilation, which removes all runtime overhead that is not desired by the user.

There is some work on meta-object protocols that are evaluated statically [3, 17]. The most popular of these approaches provides a meta-object protocol for C++, OpenC++, based on source-to-source translation that allows a programmer to customize the semantics of C++ classes and functions using meta-classes that produce program fragments [3]. Since these methods are applied ahead-of-time, they do not add any runtime overhead, but require that all information used to create the type be available during compilation. In contrast, Terra is a staged programming language, so new exotypes can be introduced during the execution of a Lua-Terra program, and used in newly generated functions.

The original work on multi-stage programming such as MetaML or MetaOCaml focused on generating new code rather than new types [28, 29]. Other systems extend this work to object-oriented languages and provide some degree of staged type computation. Metaphor is a multi-stage language with support for type reflection on a built-in class system [20], and Ur [4] allows first-class computation of records and names based on principles from dependently-typed languages. Both try to guarantee that any code produced using staging will be type correct, making it difficult to generate some types whose semantics depend on dynamically provided data.

Other work on staged programming has focused on optimizations that can be applied to object representations. Rompf et al. propose a system that implements internal compiler passes that use staging to optimize the behavior and the layout of objects in an intermediate representation suited to parallel programming embedded in the Scala language [24]. Type signatures are originally described using Scala’s class system, but then their representation and implementation can be optimized through staging. Exotypes additionally allow the original type signatures and behavior to be described programmatically.

Several industrial languages also implement systems similar to exotypes [2, 27]. F# allows type providers which can specify types and methods based on external data [27]. Like exotypes, these providers are queried lazily when an operation on the type is requested. However, the goal of type providers is to safely type complex data representations, so providers are normally compiled ahead-of-time rather than during program execution. Furthermore they normally describe types on top of the CLR’s object system rather than have the programmer describe their own low-level implementation of types. In the Scala language, the combination of compile-time macros and syntax sugar for supporting dynamic objects allows some types to be described programmatically. Similar to F#, this approach is normally applied ahead-of-time and built on top of the JVM objects rather than a low-level language. Other solutions are tailored to specific problems such as Google’s protocol buffers, which provides a language for generating types with serialization behavior in several target languages [11].

9. Discussion and Future Work

We have shown how to supplement a low-level language with a meta-object protocol based on staged programming for describing the behavior and memory layout of types. Exotypes described this way are concise and composable while still allowing the programmer to control their performance. Using these types, we were able to implement libraries for serialization, assembly, differentiation, and probabilistic programming that perform as well as or better than state-of-the-art counterparts while often being substantially more concise. Furthermore, types generated in our examples have simple interfaces similar to existing libraries, encapsulating the use of staged programming inside their implementation. We believe this approach will allow a wider audience to benefit from the performance of staging.

Defining libraries using exotypes has some limitations that can be improved in the future. Dynamically evaluated meta-object protocols like those in Lua can mutate the behavior of objects in existing code by changing the implementation of métaméthodes. Since Terra is a compiled language focused on high-performance code, we do not allow the results of property queries to change during evaluation if it would require recompilation of Terra code. For instance, the layout of a type provided by __getentries cannot change, and methods cannot be modified or removed once they are compiled. However, it is still possible to create new types and methods.
Statically-typed high-level languages generally provide more robust guarantees of type-safety. Lua-Terra programs are dynamically typed, so type errors in exotypes are not reported until a function is compiled. For some uses it is possible to compile all Terra code upfront before evaluating Terra code. In this case, Lua can be viewed as a safer replacement to C++’s preprocessor or template meta-programming that occurs during compilation. We provide the additional flexibility of generating new exotypes at later stages in exchange for complete up-front typechecking.

Furthermore, exotypes are implemented in Terra, a language that allows unsafe type casts, making it possible for programs with poorly written exotypes to crash. It is still possible to implement similar behavior in type-safe runtimes. For instance, # type providers translate to objects in the CLR, which provides more safety guarantees [27]. However, since type-constructors and other higher-kinded types are implemented in a full language, it is still not possible to guarantee that they will work for all intended inputs. In the future, we want to investigate ways of constraining the properties that a type constructor can request to provide better guarantees of type-safety for all inputs.

Exotypes allow the optimization of individual objects. However, optimizations across objects such as optimizing linear algebra equations on matrices and vectors are more difficult to express. We would like to integrate rewrite-based systems such as the one suggested by Rompf et al. [24] by adding additional meta-methods that are called when an exotype is found in an expression. Integrated with common compiler optimizations, we think these additional rewrites can provide optimization across expressions of objects.

Finally, our examples show that by making libraries more concise using exotypes, it becomes feasible to specialize them for particular uses. In the case of serialization or assemblers, this specialization allows fusion optimizations that lead to large speed-ups over state-of-the-art libraries. We believe that this approach of writing concise but aggressively optimized libraries for specialized uses can be extended to more domains. An object-relation mapping can be optimized for particular data layouts. Class systems can be tailored to the specific code reuse and subtyping requirements of a domain such as abstract syntax trees or graphs. In the future we hope that more patterns of code reuse and optimization can be distributed as concise exotype libraries.

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