Evaluating STT-RAM as an Energy-Efficient Main Memory Alternative

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Introduction

• Memory trends in data centers
  – More memory capacity,
  – Higher memory access rates.

• Result
  – Increasing memory power,
  – Reports indicate 30% of overall power from memory.

• Cost
  – Operational + acquisition costs = Total cost of ownership (TCO)
  – 30% power from memory: high operational cost of memory
    • How to reduce memory power?

• DRAM? Alternative technology to DRAM?
  – (possibly) Higher acquisition cost, but
  – Reduced TCO by means of better energy efficiency.
Introduction

- What technology to use?
  - Prior research focused: Flash or PCRAM as main memory.
- (NAND) Flash
  - Enables running applications that require huge memory,
  - Very slow, incompatible block-based operation; not adopted widely.
- PCRAM
  - Higher capacity than DRAM,
  - Performance and energy vs. DRAM: not very good
    - 2-4X read, 10-100X write performance; similar trend in energy.
- STT-RAM
  - Considered as replacement for on-chip SRAM caches.
  - Main memory? Not evaluated.
  - vs. DRAM? Similar read latency and energy, slightly worse in writes.
In this work, we ask:

- Can we use STT-RAM to completely replace DRAM main memory?

For a positive answer, we need from STT-RAM:

- Similar capacity and performance as DRAM
- Better energy
  - Enough to offset potentially higher acquisition costs
DRAM Basics

- System: Cores, L2 caches, MCs over a network.
- A MC controls one channel (one or more DIMMs).
- A DIMM has many DRAM chips.
  - A DRAM request: Served by all chips simultaneously.
DRAM Basics

- A DRAM chip has multiple banks
  - Banks operate independently.
  - Banks share external buses.
  - Use row and column address to identify data in a bank.

- High level DRAM operations:
  - Activate (ACT): Sense data stored in array, recover it in the row buffer.
  - Read (RD), Write (WR): Access row buffer (and bitlines, and cells, simultaneously).
  - Precharge (PRE): Reset bitlines to sensing voltage.
  - Refresh (REF): Read/Write each row periodically to recover leaking charges.
STT-RAM Basics

• Magnetic Tunnel Junction (MTJ)
  – Reference layer: Fixed
  – Free layer: Parallel or anti-parallel

• Cell
  – Access transistor, bit/sense lines

• Read and Write
  – Read: Apply a small voltage across bitline and senseline; read the current.
  – Write: Push large current through MTJ. Direction of current determines new orientation of the free layer.
Major DRAM/STT-RAM Differences

• Dynamic memory
  – Charge in DRAM cell capacitor leaks slowly
    • Refresh or lose your data.
  – Need no refresh in STT-RAM (non-volatile)
    • Data stays (practically) forever (>10 years).

• Non-destructive (array) reads
  – DRAM (destructive)
    • PRE: Pull bitlines to $V_{\text{bitline}} = Vcc/2$; Data in cell: $V_{\text{cell}} = 0$ or $V_{\text{cell}} = Vcc$
    • ACT: Charge shared across bitlines and cell capacitors.
    • Differential Sense: $Vcc/2 \pm \Delta V$; then slowly recover to full value (0 or Vcc).
  – STT-RAM (non-destructive)
    • ACT: Does not disturb cell data. Copy array data to "decoupled row buffer".
    • RB can operate "independent" from the array when sensing is done.
Experimental Setup

• Simulator
  – In-house instruction trace based cycle-level

• Cores
  – Out-of-order model with instruction window
  – Maximum 3 instructions/cycle

• Caches
  – 32KB L1 (2 cycles), 512KB L2 (12 cycles)

• Memory
  – Channel, rank, bank, bus conflicts and bandwidth limitations
  – DDR3 memory timing parameters
    • 75/125 cycles RB hit and conflict, 25 cycles STT-RAM write pulse (10ns).
  – 1GB memory capacity; one channel

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Energy Breakdown

• Memory energy
  – Activity based model

• Energy per memory activity
  – From modified CACTI models (DRAM and STT-RAM)

• DRAM energy components
  – ACT+PRE: Switching from one row to another
  – RD+WR: Performing a RD or a WR operation that is a DRAM RB hit.
  – REF: Periodic refresh (background)

• STT-RAM energy components
  – ACT+PRE: Switching the active row (similar to DRAM)
  – RB: Requests served from the RB
    (unlike DRAM, does not involve bitline charge/discharge: decoupled RB)
  – WB: Flushing RB contents to the STT-RAM array.
Workloads

• Single-threaded applications
  – 14 applications from SPEC CPU2006 suite
  – Running on a uniprocessor

• Multiprogrammed workloads
  – 10 workload mixes
  – 4 applications on 4 cores

• Simulation duration
  – 5 billion cycles
  – Equivalent to 2 seconds of real execution (at 2.5GHz)
Baseline DRAM Memory

- Baseline DRAM main memory (1GB capacity).

- IPC
  - 0.66 to 2.05

- Energy breakdown
  - ACT+PRE=62%, RD+WR=24%, REF=14%, on average.

- Rest of the results will be normalized to
  - IPC and total energy with this DRAM main memory.
Baseline STT-RAM Memory

- Unoptimized STT-RAM: Directly replace DRAM.
- No special treatment of STT-RAM.

- Performance: Degrades by 5%.
- Energy: Degrades by 96% (almost 2X!).
  - REF (14%) eliminated.
  - WB dominates: high cost of STT-RAM writes.

STT-RAM Main Memory: Not a good idea?
Optimizations for STT-RAM

- **How dirty is the row buffer?**
  - Clean: 60% of the time.
  - Dirty>3: Only 6%.

- **Selective Write**
  - One dirty bit per row buffer: skip writeback if clean.
  - Save energy by less writes; faster row switching possible.

- **Partial Write**
  - More dirty bits: One dirty bit per cache block sized data
  - Write even less data upon RB conflict.
Optimizations for STT-RAM

• A look at the row buffer hit rates:
  – Reads 81%, writes 64%.

• Consider writes as:
  – Operations with less locality,
  – Operations that can be delayed more (less CPU stalls).

• **Write Bypass**
  – Reads still served from row buffer.
  – Writes bypass the row buffer: do not cause RB conflicts, do not pollute RB.
  – RB is always clean: Just discard to get the next row.
    • No write-back: faster row switching.
**Experimental Evaluation**

- **Selective write**
  - 1 dirty bit per row
  - Energy
    - 196% down to 108%
  - RB clean 60% of the time.

- **Partial Write**
  - 1 dirty bit per 64B block
  - Energy
    - Down to 59% of DRAM.
  - Low dirtiness in RB.
Experimental Evaluation

• Write Bypass:
  – Energy: 42% of DRAM.
  (with also partial write)

• Performance of Optimized STT-RAM:
  – Partial write, write bypass
  – -1% to +4% variation.
  – +1% vs. DRAM, on avg.
Evaluation: Multiprogrammed Workloads

- 4 applications executed together
  - On 4-cores; 1 MC with 4GB capacity
  - More memory pressure: shared bandwidth and row buffers.

- Energy results

Without partial write and write bypass: Down from 200% of DRAM to 40% of DRAM.

With partial write and write bypass: Down from 200% of DRAM to 40% of DRAM.
Evaluation: Multiprogrammed Workloads

• Performance
  – Weighted Speedup of 4 applications,
  – 6% degradation vs. DRAM.
  – More degradation with high WBPKI mixes.
Sensitivity: STT-RAM Write Pulse Duration

- STT-RAM write pulse in this work: 10ns (25 cycles)
- Research on reducing pulse width
  - 2-3 ns pulses promised.
  - Same energy, higher current in shorter amount of time.

- Results with multiprogrammed workloads:
Effect of Optimizations on PCRAM

• PCRAM main memory
  – Higher capacity on same area,
  – Suffers from high latency and energy.
• Evaluated a PCRAM main memory with
  – 2X/10X read/write energy of DRAM,
  – Two latency values
    • 2X/3X of DRAM (conservative)
    • 1X/2X of DRAM (optimistic)
• Results:
  (with iso-capacity memory, using partial write and write bypass)
  – Performance vs. DRAM
    • 17% and 7% degradation. Degrades a lot more than STT-RAM.
  – Energy vs. DRAM
    • 6% and 18% saving. Not as significant as STT-RAM.
Conclusions

• Optimizing STT-RAM
  – Applying partial write and write bypass,
  – Same capacity, similar performance (-5% to +1%),
  – Much better energy than DRAM (60% better),
    (also better than PCRAM, and other hybrid memories)

• STT-RAM main memory has the potential to realize better total cost of ownership.

• Motivation for future study and optimization of STT-RAM technology and architecture as DRAM alternative.