Displays and framebuffers

Brian Curless
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Modern graphics systems

Current graphics systems consist of:

- An application, which talks to a...
- Graphics library (e.g., OpenGL or Direct3D), which talks to the...
- Graphics hardware

The graphics hardware can do a lot of fancy work these days. We'll take a brief tour, starting from the display...

Light as an EM wave

We can model light as an electromagnetic wave:

The E and M fields are tightly coupled, so we usually just talk about the E field.

The orientation of the E field is the polarization. The example above is monochromatic (one wavelength) and linearly polarized (E field oscillates in a line, up and down in this case).
Light as an EM wave (cont’d)

Polychromatic, linearly polarized:

Polychromatic, unpolarized:

A linear polarizer is a filter that extracts the vector component of the light wave along a particular direction.

Liquid Crystal Display

Laptops typically use liquid crystal displays (LCD’s).

- Light enters a vertical polarizer
- Nematic crystal twists light based on applied voltage (more voltage, less twisting)
- Light passes through horizontal polarizer

Thin Film Transistors (TFTs), addressed by row and column, are used to hold a voltage at each cell.

There are variations on this design, but the polarization-rotating crystal always a key element.

Additive color mixing

All colors on a display are produced using combinations of red, green, and blue.

Anatomy of an RGB image
**LCD Color**

Color is obtained using color filters:

Pixel

Pixel is one region on the display corresponding to one color sample of an image being shown.

Our eyes average the closely spaced RGB colors spatially to create the impression of a composite color at each pixel.

**LCD Backlights**

Backlighting can be fluorescent or LED:

The lighting is arranged into a column or a sparse array and then diffused evenly:

**OLEDs**

Organic Light Emitting Diodes are a competing technology now found in many mobile devices.

Idea:
- layer of organic molecules is sandwiched between two electrodes.
- Excitons release their energy in the form of light.
- Electrons and holes are injected into the organic layer, forming "excitons" (energetic, neutral quasiparticles).


**OLEDs (cont’d)**

Several pros vs. LCDs:
- Easy to make front and back sides transparent, good for augmented reality (e.g., Google Glass)
- Can be deposited onto flexible material
- Power is consumed to create light as needed, not to “throw it away”.
- Avoid color filters by choosing different polymers → more power savings.

Several cons vs. LCDs:
- Power needed for bright light can be substantially greater than LCD. E.g., OLED consumes more power than LCD for black text on white background.
- The organic molecules decay over time, shorter lifespan than LCD.
- The decay of molecules is different based on color → color balance changes over time.
Electrophoretic Ink Displays

Most non-LCD/OLED electronic readers use electrophoretic ink. One of the biggest manufacturers is E Ink.

The idea is to embed charged white balls and oppositely charged black balls inside of tiny capsules. Applied voltages control how many white vs. black balls float to the viewing surface. This kind of display is bistable, which means that the image holds after removing the voltage. A front light can be added for night reading.

RGB framebuffer

The brightness of each LCD element is controlled by a dedicated memory array called a framebuffer.

Each element of the framebuffer is associated with a single pixel on the screen. Typically, a display allows 256 voltage settings for each of R, G, and B.

We sometimes call each R, G, or B component a channel (so the “red channel” of an image is only the R component per pixel).

Q: What happens when you write to the framebuffer while it is being displayed on the monitor?

OpenGL

The API we’ll be using for drawing to the framebuffer is OpenGL.

For 2D graphics, OpenGL lets you specify colors of primitives and then draw them to the screen. Typical primitives include:

- Points
- Lines
- Unfilled polygons
- Filled polygons

You just name a color, declare the primitive type, and specify the vertices, and OpenGL does the rest.

OpenGL also supports “alpha” blending. A typical operation is a linear mixture that blends a new color into the framebuffer:

\[ F_{\text{new}} = \alpha C + (1 - \alpha) F_{\text{old}} \]
Summary

Here’s what you should take home from this lecture:

- All of the **boldfaced terms**.
- The principles of operation for an LCD display.
- The correspondence between elements of framebuffer memory and pixels on-screen.
- How double-buffering works.