Division, Pentium Style

An Analysis of Intel's Mistake(s)

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Overview

Summary

- **Pentium is Intel's most advanced microprocessor**
  - 3.3 Million transistors
  - In 42% of all personal computers sold Dec. '94
- **Until recently, all had error in floating point division hardware**
  - 5 missing transistors, fixed with change to single mask
- **Disclosed largely via Internet**
- **Intel ultimately offered replacements to everyone**
  - $475 Million charge from 4Q94 revenue

Outline

- **Brief chronology**
- **Technical details**
- **Overall impact**

Discovery and Disclosure

Events

- **Prof. Thomas Nicely, Lynchburg College, VA**
  - Looking at properties of “twin primes”
  - Incorrect reciprocals for 824633702441 and 824633702443
    - » ~ Single precision accuracy (4×10^{-9})
  - Contacted others on Oct. 30, ‘94
- **Spreading of Information on Internet news group `comp.sys.intel`**
  - Terje Mathisen of Norway posts Nicely’s findings on Nov. 3
  - Andreas Kaiser of Germany finds 23 bad reciprocals, Nov. 10
- **Tim Coe, Vitesse Semiconductor, Nov. 16**
  - Created (good enough) software model of flawed divide algorithm
  - Discovered (nonreciprocal) cases with errror up to 6×10^{-5}
  - Later showed 1738 cases with less than single precision accuracy

Intel Plays Tough

- **Claimed had discovered in Summer '94**
  - Logged as minor bug, to be fixed on next revision
- **Andy Grove "posted" to Internet, Nov. 24**
  - Stating that other posters are overreacting
    - » All chips have flaws
  - Different Intel employee actually did the post
- **Agrees to replace, but only to those who can justify need**
- **Nov. 30: Report made available via WWW**
  - Describes algorithm and error
  - Estimates average user will encounter once in 27,000 years

The Uproar

IBM Breaks Ranks

- **Produces report stating error may be encountered as much as once every 24 days, Dec. 12**
  - Nonuniform number distribution
  - 4000X more divides per day than Intel estimates
- **Stops shipment of all Pentium-based PCs**
- **Some question IBM's motives**

Internet

- **Hundreds of posts daily to `comp.sys.intel`**
- **Arguments on both sides**
- **Angered about Intel's attitude**

Popular Press

- **Starts following controversy in November**
- **Generally accepts Intel's description as "obscure error"**

Resolution

Free Replacement Policy, Dec. 20

- No need to argue need
- Complex logistics
  - Many different versions
  - Actual replacement easy

Intel Not Humbled

- Still state that error is “technically an extremely minor problem”

Numerical Basics

Floating Point Numbers

- **Numerical Form:** $-1^s \; m \; 2^e$
  - Mantissa m either 24, 53, or 64 bits

Given

- **Dividend mantissa** p
- **Divisor mantissa** d
- **Normalized forms:** $\mathtt{1.xxxx}_2$
  - Range Constraint: $1 \leq p, d < 2$

Compute

- **Quotient mantissa** q
  - To sufficient precsion
- **Exponent**
  - Based on exponents of dividend & divisor

Radix 4 Division

Conventional "Restoring" Algorithm

- Select quotient digit q_i
  - 0, 1, 2, or 3
- Subtract $q_i d$ from p
- Shift p left

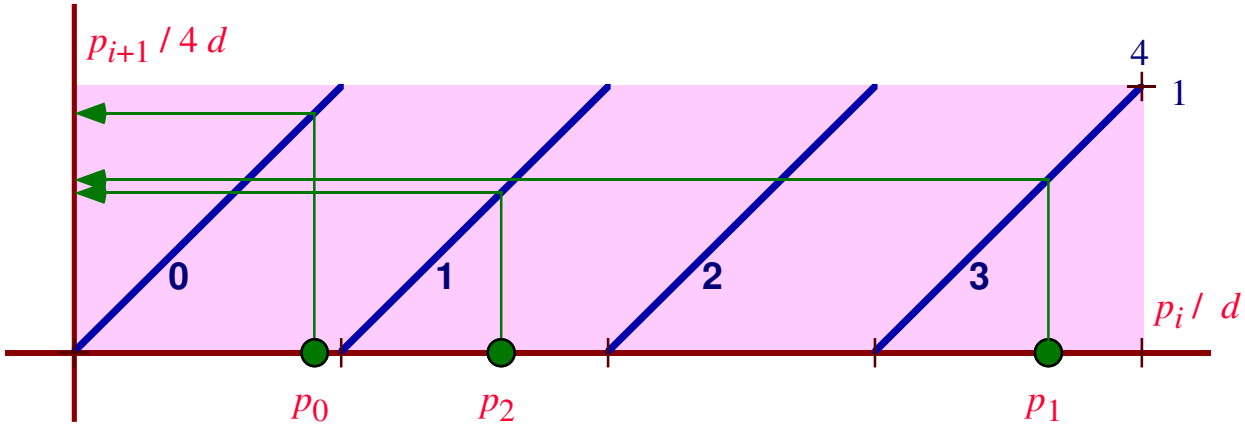
Divisor	d
X 1	1.301
X 2	3.202
X 3	11.103

- Must consider all digits to select digit q_i
- Must form "awkward multiple" $3d$

Example

p_0	1.2130	q_1	0
$-q_1 d$	- 0.		
	1.2130		
p_1	12.1300	q_2	3
$-q_2 d$	-11.1030		
	1.0210		
p_2	10.2100	q_3	2
$-q_3 d$	- 3.2020		
	1.0020		
	10.0200		

Visualization of Digit Selection



Interpretation

- **Horizontal axis indicates scaled partial remainder**
  - In range [0, 4)
- **Vertical axis indicates result of subtracting quotient digit**
  - Unique choice of digit
  - In range [0, 1)

SRT Division

History

- Radix 4 version due to Atkins (1968)
- Commonly used by others, first time for Intel

Goals

- Predict quotient digit based on incomplete information about partial remainder and divisor
- No awkward multiples

Key Ideas of Method

- Quotient Digits –2, –1, 0, +1, +2
  - Redundancy allows imperfect digit prediction
  - Power of two multiples
    - » Implement with shift and/or complement

SRT Iteration Step

Given

- **Partial Remainder** p_i
  - Two's complement representation
  - Can bound range $-16/3 < p_i < 16/3$
- **Divisor** d
  - Range Constraint: $-8/3\ d \leq p_i \leq 8/3\ d$

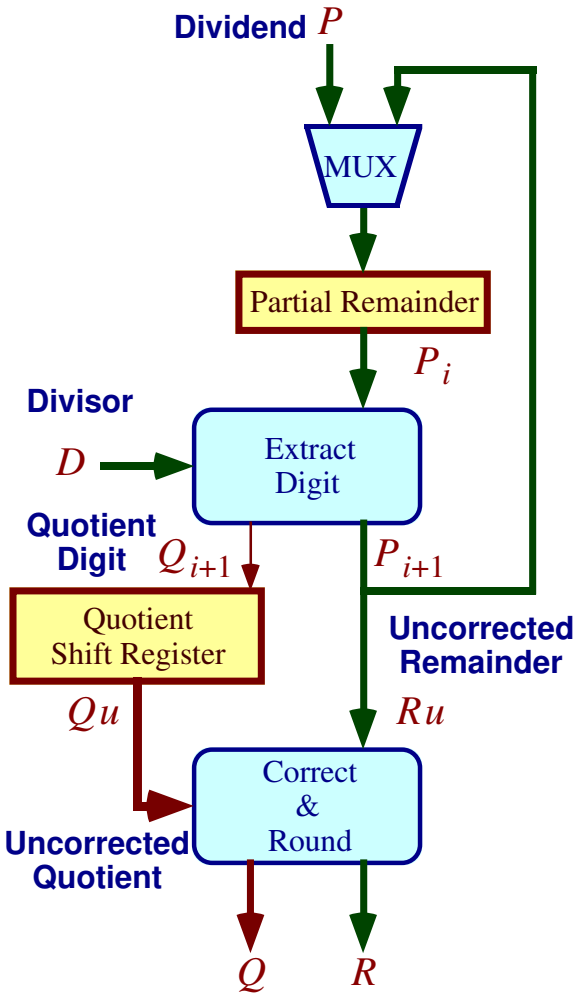
Select

- **Quotient Digit** q_{i+1}
  - By table lookup
  - Using truncated values P and D
- **Compute** $p_{i+1} = 4\ [p_i - q_{i+1}\ d\ ]$

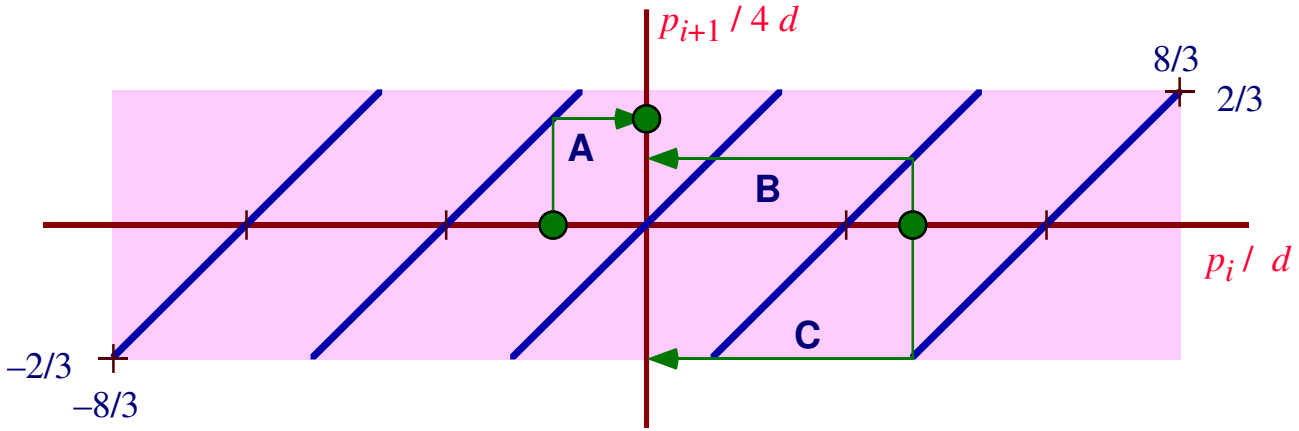
SRT Divider Circuit

Registers

- **Hold partial remainder**
  - Initially loaded with dividend
- **Divisor (not shown)**
  - Unchanged for entire computation
- **Quotient shift register**
  - Accumulates digits from iterations



Quotient Digit Selection



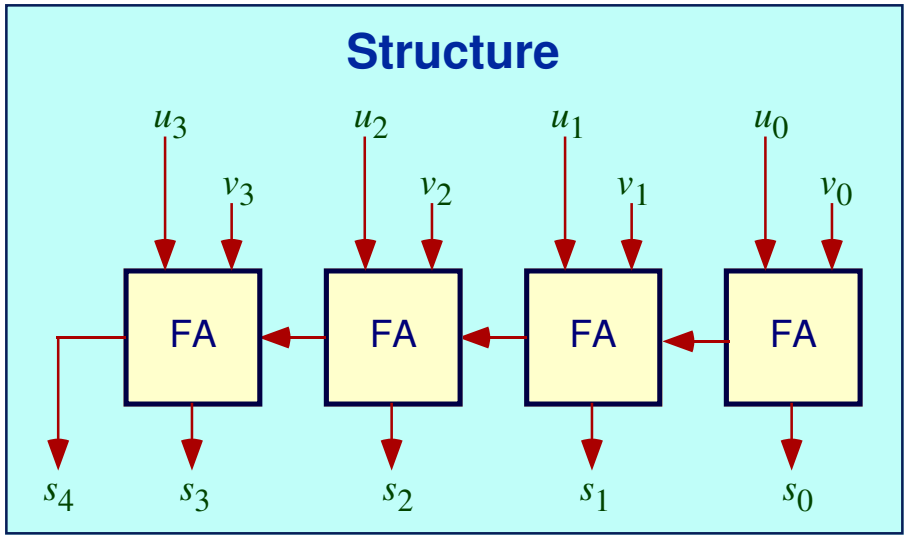
Examples

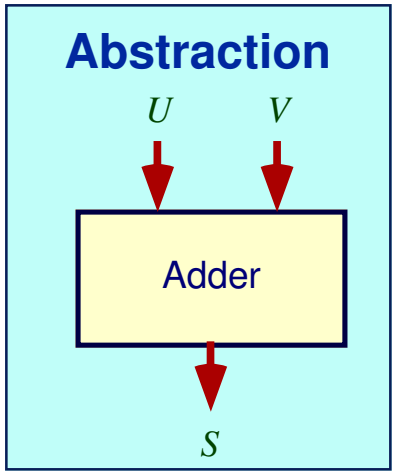
	p_i	q_{i+1}	p_{i+1}	
A	–7/15 d	–1	4 [8/15] d	= 32/15 d
B	4/3 d	+1	4 [1/3] d	= 4/3 d
C	4/3 d	+2	4 [–2/3] d	= –8/3 d

Invariant Preserved

$$-8/3\ d \leq p_{i+1} \leq 8/3\ d$$

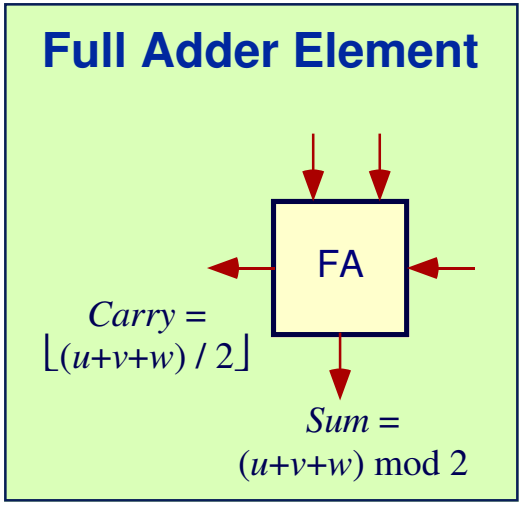
Conventional Adder Design



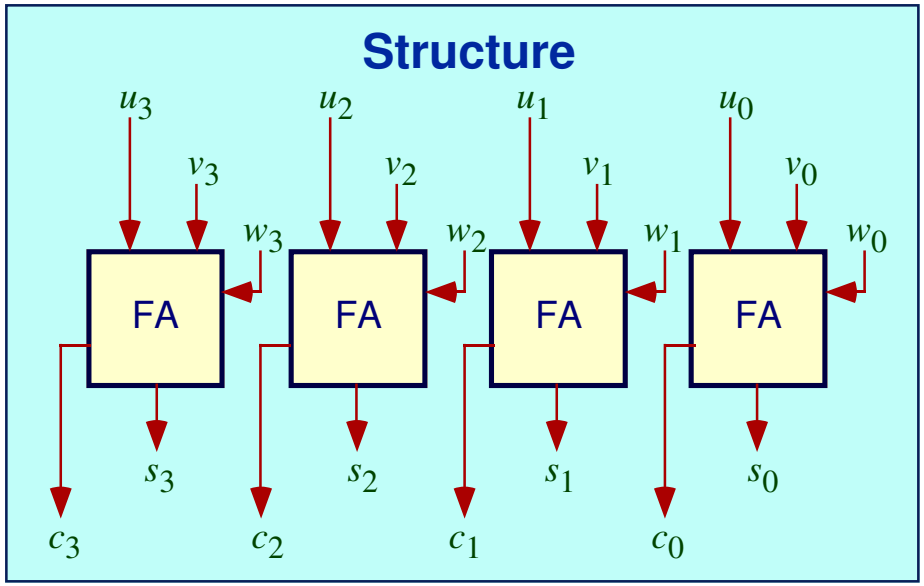


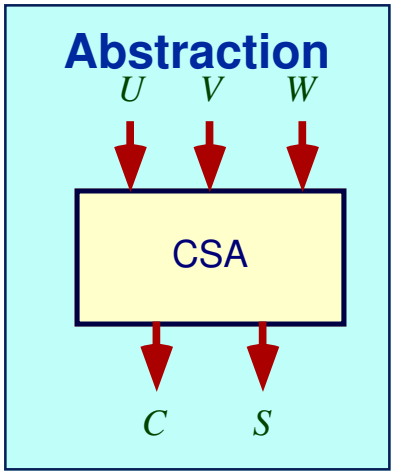
Shortcoming

- Must propagate carries across all cells
- Can improve with more costly hardware



Carry Save Adders





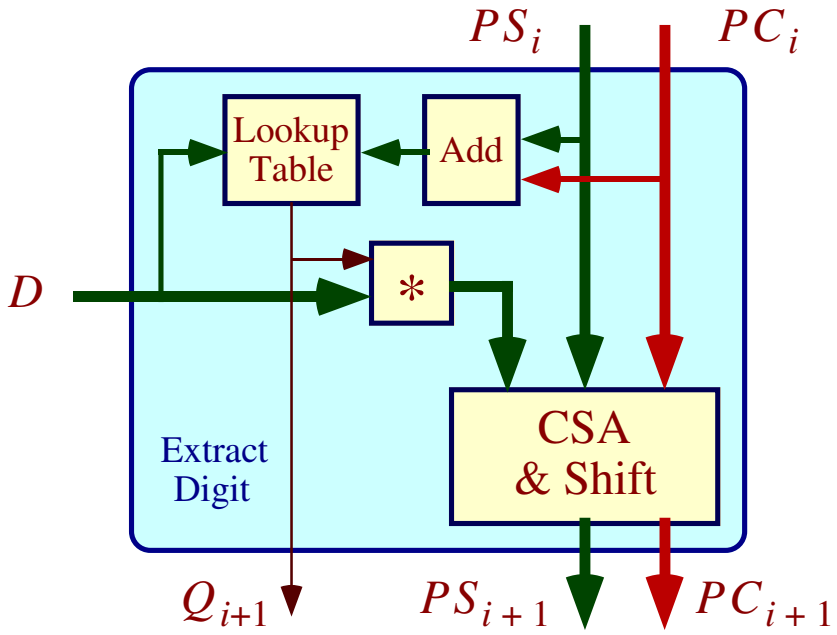
$$S + 2C = U + V + W$$

- Rearrange elements to eliminate carry chain
- Three input words
- Two output words
- 3 to 2 reducer

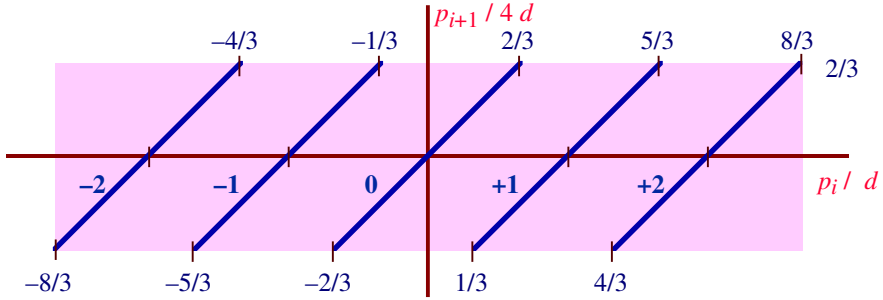
SRT Division Step

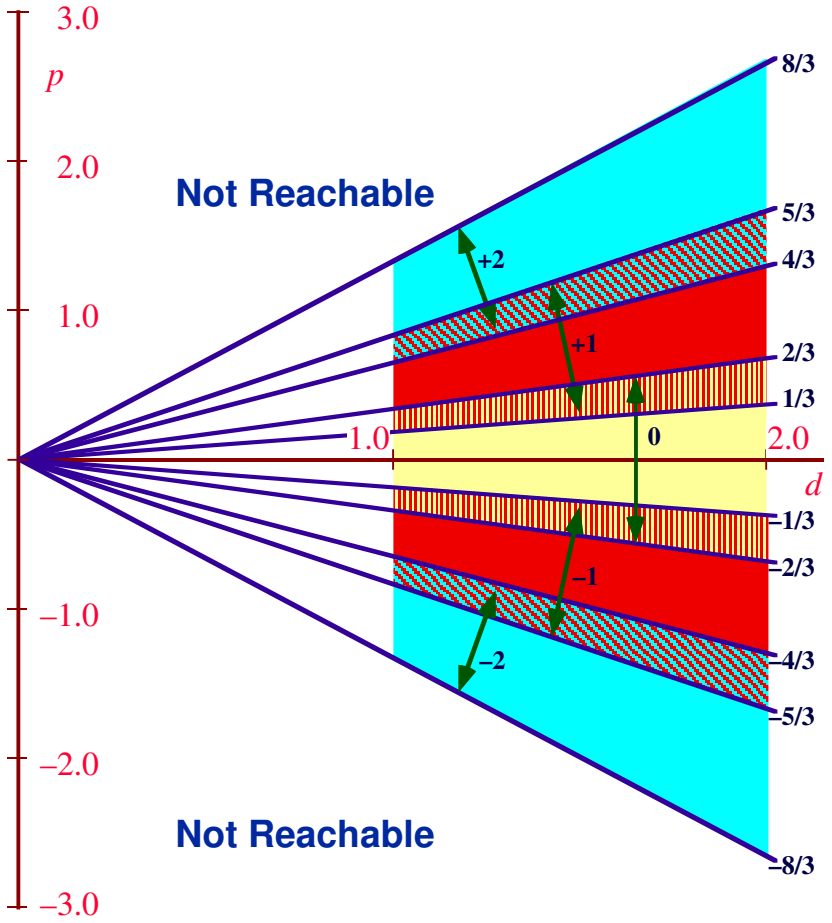
Elements

- **Carry Save Adder to subtract weighted divisor**
- **7-bit adder to get estimate of partial remainder**
  - High order bits
- **Lookup table to determine quotient digit**
  - 4 “interesting” bits of divisor
    - » Leading bit always 1
  - Implemented as PLA
  - Where Intel made mistake
- **Shift/complementer to weight divisor**
  - Multiply by quotient digit



Lookup Table Design





Digit Selection

- Depends on ratio of d and p
- Redundancy leads to overlapping regions
  - May choose either digit

Discretization of P & D

Values

- **Least Resolvable Unit (LRU)**
  - Weight of least significant bit
- **Partial Remainder** p_i
  - Approximate by P
  - Potentially underestimates by two LRUs
  - One each from pc and ps
- **Divisor** d
  - Approximate by D
  - Potentially underestimates by one LRU

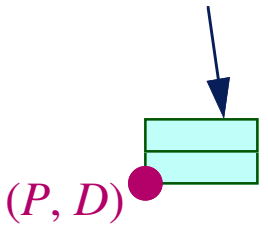
P

`sxxx.xxxxxx ...`

D

`1.xxxxxx ...`

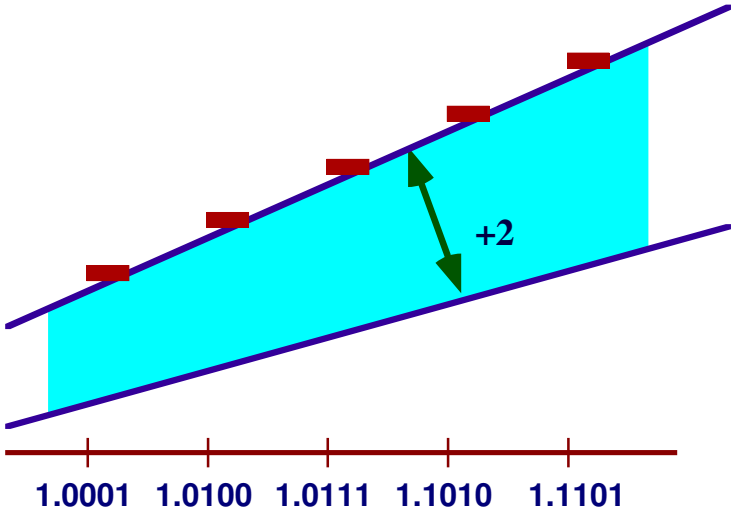
Range of Values for (p_i, d)



Compensating for Inaccuracy

- **Redundancy enables valid digit selection for all cases**
  - As long as have enough bits of p_i and d

Intel's Table Errors

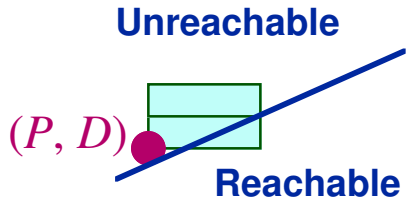


Actual Bug

- Erroneous entries for 5 cases
- Table generates 0 instead of +2

Occurs Only under Marginal Conditions

- (P, D) appear to be out of range
- D must under-estimate d
- P must closely estimate p_i
  - Unlikely with carry-save format



Example of Error

Correct Behavior

p_0	0100.111000	q_1	+2
$+-q_1 d$	1100.010010		
	0001.001010		
p_1	0100.101000		

Incorrect Behavior

p_0	0100.111000	q_1	0
$+-q_1 d$	0000.000000		
	0100.111000		
p_1	0011.100000		

Leading digits drop off end

Divisor	d	
X	1	0001.110111
X	2	0011.101110
X	-1	1110.001001
X	-2	1100.010010

- **Once hit bad table entry, cannot recover**
- **Contrary to some statements in press**
  - Not “Self Correcting” !

When Can Error Occur?

Requires at Least 7 Iterations

- Hard to get to bad positions
- Worst case error 6×10^{-5}

Only for "At Risk" Divisors

- Stay in single column for entire division
- Remaining part of divisor should have lots of 1's
  - To ensure that D underestimates d
- Coe's Example
  - $d = 3145727_{10}$ `10111111111111111111`

At Risk!

  - Correct result: 1.3338204491362410 0
  - Pentium's result: 1.3337390689020375 9
- Nicely's Example
  - $d = 824633702441_{10}$ `10111111111111111111011100000101001`

Table Realization

Programmed Logic Array

- Encodes sum-of-products logic expression
- Coding generated automatically
  - Given complete table
  - With ESPRESSO program
- Mask patterns generated automatically

Likely Source of Error

- Specified entries as "Don't Cares"
  - Since appear to be out of range
- PLA optimizer chose to assign 0's

Table

u	*v*	*c*	*Carry*
0	0	0	0
0	0	1	0
0	1	0	0
0	1	1	1
1	0	0	0
1	0	1	1
1	1	0	1
1	1	1	1

PLA

u	*v*	*c*	*Carry*
–	1	1	1
1	–	1	1
1	1	–	1

How Serious is the Error?

Intel's Claims

- **Most applications don't do much division**
  - 1000 per day
- **Many applications can tolerate occasional errors**
  - E.g., image generation
- **Maximum error fairly small**
  - Once every 1.5 X 10^9 divides
- **Statistical likelihood remote**
  - Once every 27,000 years

IBM's Counterclaims

- **Even spreadsheet users do lots of divides**
  - Up to 4.2 Million per day
- **Error more likely for numbers just below integer**
  - Up to once every 10^8 divides

Other Concerns

Error is not Random

- Get same result every time on every Pentium

Numbers Used in Practice NOT Uniformly Distributed

- E.g., `4.999999 / 14.999999`
  - gives `0.33332922` instead of `0.33333329`
  - Vaughan Pratt's "bruised integers"

Error is Hard to Work Around

- Can shut off floating point
  - Machine then runs slower than 486
- Can recompile with workaround divide subroutine
  - But most users only have binaries

Bad Numerical Properties

- E.g, `4.999999 / 15.0 > 4.999999 / 14.999999`
  - Problem for iterative methods

Who is Affected?

Average PC User

- **Not likely**

Heavy Users of Numerical Software

- **Significant subset of Pentium customers**
- **Concern for numerical accuracy very high**
  - Single inaccurate result can be magnified by later steps
- **Ethical/legal responsibilities**
  - Negligent to knowingly use flawed system
  - Would you buy a bridge from a civil engineer who had used a Pentium?

Why Didn't Intel Discover it?

Standard Steps in Verifying Design

- **Simulate many cases on high-level software model**
  - Probably had correct P-D table entries
- **Simulate/emulate final logic design**
  - Hardware emulators costing $Millions
  - Run complete chip model at ~ 100Hz
    - » < 10^{-6} X real time
  - Not clear which version of table was used
- **Run tests on initial production chips**
  - Feasible to run billions of tests
  - Should have caught error here

Observations

- **Hard to test all aspects of such a complex system**
  - But this is a weak excuse

What about Formal Verification?

Currently Used Tools

- **Most based on Ordered Binary Decision Diagrams (OBDDs)**
- **Check transistor circuit design against low-level software model**
- **Compare two logic networks for equivalence**
  - E.g., pre- and post- optimization

Other Alternatives

- **Sequential verification by symbolic model checking**
  - Used on protocols and small sequential circuits
- **Tools based on automatic theorem provers**
  - Unpopular with industry

What About Dividers?

- **Some have been done with theorem prover, but messy**
- **BDD-based tools cannot handle complete algorithm**
- **Our own research shows promise**

Verifying Single Step

Specification

- **Define**

  $P_i = PS_i + PC_i$

  $P_{i+1} = PS_{i+1} + PC_{i+1}$

- **Input Constraint**

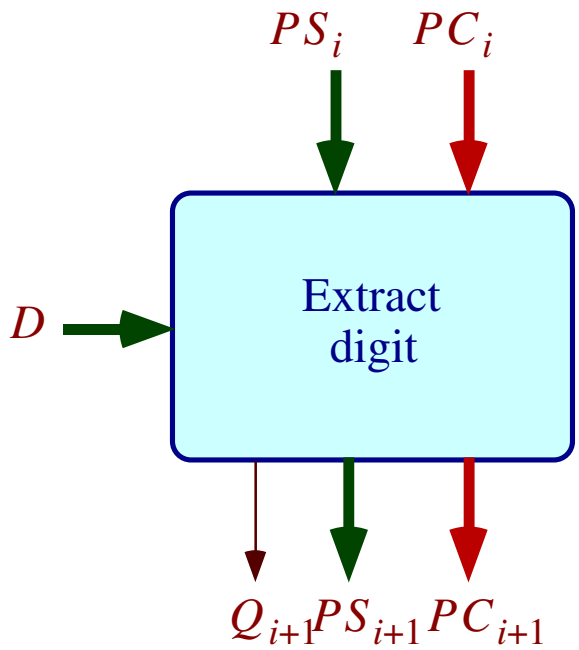
  $|P_i| \leq 8/3\ D$

- **I/O Relation**

  $P_{i+1} = 4\ [P_i - Q_{i+1} D]$

- **Output Constraint**

  $|P_{i+1}| \leq 8/3\ D$



Verification

- **Can do with OBDDs**
- **Create “checker circuits”**
- **Would uncover Intel’s problem**

System Considerations

Microprocessor Complexity Increasing at Rapid Pace

- **Pentium has features historically found in high-end mainframes**
  - Hardware support for multiplication, division, square root, and transcendental functions
  - Sophisticated instruction pipeline
- **Exercising all possible system behaviors especially difficult**
- **Future generations even more complex**
  - Speculative execution

Must Get it Right First Time

- **Cannot send field service to replace boards**
- **Typically have more people working on verification than on design**

Ubiquitous Systems of Unprecedented Complexity

- **Industry's headaches caused by own successes**

Impact on Intel

Short Term

- **Embarassing to make mistake**
- **Bad PR due to poor crisis management**
- **$475 Million is a lot of money**
  - Still had very profitable year, including $372 Million for 4Q94

Long Term

- **Intel still way ahead of competition**
  - No one has cloned Pentium yet
  - Intel has announced next generation processor
  - 75% of $11 Billion microprocessor market
- **Everyone will be more careful in the future**
  - Good opportunities for research on formal verification
- **Intel benefits even from this publicity**
  - as playing key role in computer industry

Impact on Society

Reminded of Importance of Computing

- **Have come to expect ever faster & cheaper machines**
- **Rely heavily on correctness of results**

The Power of the Internet

- **Created *ad-hoc*, international group of collaborators**
  - U.S., Germany, Norway, Canada
  - University, industry
  - No external control or authority
- **Rapid dissemination of information and results**
- **Caught Intel by surprise**
  - Had never dealt with force of this kind
- **System does not scale**
  - A few gems among the drivel