MegaMol – Sustainable Visualization Software for Research and Education

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image source: MegaMol developer team
What is MegaMol?

- Visualization Framework
  - Primarily for scientific visualization
  - Focus on extensibility and adaptability
- First version from 2007
  - In development ever since

Brief summary of DFG sustainability project follows
- Some details about revised decisions and lessons learned
Open-Source Platform

• Status quo ante:
  • Core components, plugins, and support libraries in different, self-hosted SVN repositories

• Goals:
  • Easy access and dissemination
  • Modern development workflow

• Steps taken:
  • Merging of different code bases
  • Migration to git and public GitHub repository

• Result:
  • Software gained visibility, easier to contribute
  • “Statement” about openness
  • Pre-requisite for subsequent sustainability steps
Status quo ante:
- Copy content of different repositories together
- Specialized tools & scripts; platform-dependent build workflows

Goals:
- "One click" experience (collaborators!)
- Use well-known tools for automation, easier integration of external libraries and maintenance

Steps taken:
- Completely new CMake-based build environment
- Externals (43) via vcpkg (CMake & C++)

Lessons learned/Open challenges:
- Disregard minor issues and personal opinions about de-facto standards!
- First from-scratch build very expensive, needs dependency caching
Portability

- Status quo ante:
  - Executable with different functionality depending on shipped (plugin-) DLLs (prone to pollution)
  - Narrow deployment options
  - "Out of the ordinary" builds can cause disruptions
- Goals:
  - More deployment options
  - Eliminating possibilities of failure
- Steps taken:
  - Refactoring of front end for simplicity & flexibility
  - A single, integrated executable; functionality dependent on build options
- Open challenges:
  - OS-independent solutions; Docker/Singularity; virtualization in general
Continuous Integration / Tests

- Status quo ante:
  - Local builds, manual releases, no regression
- Goals:
  - Always compiling and working main branch
  - Merge only compiling feature branches
- Steps taken:
  - CI on local resources via Azure DevOps
  - "Visual" regression tests
- Lessons learned/Open challenges:
  - Anything else is even more "expensive" for expanding code/user base
  - Thorough testing too expensive to do continuously (15’ for tiny coverage)
  - No GPU worker nodes yet – centralized resources desirable
User Experience

• Status quo ante:
  • Separate executables to configure visualization pipeline and run it

• Goals:
  • Streamlined UX
  • Manipulation of visualization pipeline

• Steps taken:
  • Single executable
  • Complete rework of the user-facing front end
  • Better widgets plus direct manipulation

• Open challenges:
  • Portable (multi-modality) UI
  • Performance decoupling / remote UI
Status quo ante:
- Pre-C++11 code; touched by many, understood by few

Goals:
- Better extensibility; Literal code

Steps taken:
- Removal of opaque implicit automatisms
- Deduplication of code; consolidation of functionality

Lessons learned:
- Make sure a problem is solved at the correct abstraction level
  - Do not be afraid to introduce that abstraction level – you will do it in 2 years anyway
- You *think* you are solving a different problem, so you write specialized code
  - Often you are not!
  - At least one person needs to see the big picture
Community and Outreach

- Status quo ante:
  - No extensive dissemination
  - Hidden gem, invite only vibes
- Goals:
  - Attract new users
  - Attract broader support
- Steps taken:
  - Active engagement on GitHub, better documentation, …
  - Leveraging science/industry cooperation projects
- Lessons learned/Open challenges:
  - Entering wide spectrum between “in-house tool” and “actual product”
    - Puts strain and responsibility on people not paid, trained, rewarded for the tasks
    - Investigations on their own: Shonan / VisGap workshop series with impressive resonance
Conclusion

- MegaMol continuously strives to improve its FAIRness
  - Development is open & public
  - Improved build & usage experience
  - Improving platform support, improving data ingestion
  - Mission statement: replacing one-shot prototypes by reusable software

- Opaque implicit convenience for specific use cases is not desirable
  - Have an abstraction that allows for concise explicit formulation instead!

- Do not put off refactoring, especially when it reduces code (complexity)
  - Cascade effect (both ways!)
Thank you for your attention

Many thanks go to the main MegaMol contributors (by #commits)

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Backup & Details
How large is MegaMol?

- 2022-09-15 10:00 494 KLOC @ master
- 2017-09-15 10:00 455 KLOC @ master
- >300 modules
- 15 services

„Good“ commits nearly remove as much code as they add ;)

* cloc --include-lang=C++,"C/C++ Header",CMake,C,CUDA,GLSL,Python
Examples: You are not solving a different problem

• System state: XML
• Remote / Syncing: binary protocol
• Scripting for convenience and automation: Lua
  → Everything is Lua, also correct abstraction for template/example visualizations per data type

• Sync state for remote
• Sync state from GUI
• Get state for reproducibility
  → No graph walkers, change callbacks!
Some examples for implicity functionality

- Auto-loading of known formats via graphs deposited in the source code
- Self-configuring MegaMol based on available dlls