Understanding in-loop filtering in the HEVC video standard

Mihir Mody - June 21, 2013

1.0 Introduction
High Efficiency Video Coding (HEVC) is a video compression standard, a successor to H.264/MPEG-4 AVC (Advanced Video Coding), jointly developed by the ISO/IEC Moving Picture Experts Group (MPEG) and ITU-T Video Coding Experts Group (VCEG) as ISO/IEC 23008-2 MPEG-H Part 2 and ITU-T H.265. HEVC promises half bit-rate compared to current de-facto standard H.264 at a similar video quality and is expected to be deployed in a wide variety of video applications ranging from cell phones, broadcast, set-top box, video conferencing, video surveillance, automotive, etc.

The figure below shows the block diagram of the HEVC Video decoder with loop filtering, as shown with loop filtering highlighted. As shown, it is a cascading of two stages - namely de-blocking filtering (DBLK) and Sample adaptive offset (SAO) filtering to remove blocking artifacts causing during video encoding. The next two sections describe these two stages in detail.

Figure 1: HEVC Video Decoder Block diagram

2.0 DB-Blocking Filtering (DBLK)
This section explains de-blocking filtering as described in the HEVC Video standard [1]. De-block filter operation can broadly be divided into two parts:

1. Boundary Strength (aka BS) Computation on filter edge
2. Actual Filter operation
Throughout the de-block filter operation the following convention has been used in the literature: Q pixels belong to the right side and P pixels belong to the left side of the “vertical” filter edge. Similarly, Q belongs to pixels below the horizontal edge and P above it for the “horizontal” filter edge.

![Neighbor pixels naming convention in in-loop de-blocking filtering](image)

**Figure 2: Neighbor pixels naming convention in in-loop de-blocking filtering**

### 2.1 Filter Edge Strength (aka BS)

BS \[\text{hor/ver}[\text{xpos}][\text{ypos}]\] is computed on an 8x8 grid and takes values 0, 1 & 2 as shown in the figure below:

![Boundary Strength (BS) diagram showing edges on 8x8 grid and its numbering](image)

**Figure 3: Boundary Strength (BS) diagram showing edges on 8x8 grid and its numbering**

Although the filter is applied on every pixel edge on 8x8 grid (8x8 block contains 4 pixel edges), the property of boundary strength computation can be combined for all pixels for a 4-pixel segment. For
strength computation, we assume every 4-pixel segment as one edge. Please note that Boundary strength computation depends on Current, Left and Top LCU LCUinfo.

2.1.1 BS function Overview
BS is computed on an 8x8 grid, set to zero for picture and slice boundaries (if loop_filter_across_slice_enabled_flag = 0) and Tile boundaries (loop_filter_across_tile_enabled_flag = 0).

Only 8x8 pixel boundaries are filtered, which are Prediction Unit (PU) and/or Transform Unit (TU) boundaries, and get filtered as shown below.

![Example of PU partition and TU partition](image)

**Figure 4: Boundary strength (BS) and edges alignment to PU and TU partitions**

**BS derivation rules:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>BS Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not a TU edge nor a PU edge of a CU or not 8x8 edge or picture boundary or slice boundary with across slice filtering off or tile boundary with across tile boundary filtering off</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Block p or q is intra-coded</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Block p or q is in a TU containing non-zero coefficients</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Block p and q has different reference pictures or different number of MVs</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Block p and q have a single MV, and vertical or horizontal MV difference ≥ 4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Block p and q have 2 MVs, and at least one MV has vertical/hor. MV difference ≥ 4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Readers interested in more details can refer to HEVC Specification [1] for the following:

- Derivation of TU Boundaries for BS : Section 8.7.2.1
- Derivation of PU Boundaries for BS : Section 8.7.2.2
- Derivation of BS: Section 8.7.2.3

**Chroma BS derivation**

2.1.2 Chroma BS derivation

Only PU and/or TU boundaries on 8x8 chroma pixel grid is filtered. Chroma BS values are derived from Luma BS values. For 4:2:0 (q0, p0) of chroma filter samples, derives BS from corresponding
Figure 5: Chroma Boundary Strength mapping: Aligned to 8x8 and decimated by 2

2.2 Filter Operation
This section explains actual filtering to remove blocking artifacts as specified in the HEVC video standard.

2.2.1 Filter Order
With HEVC, the filter order is specified at the Frame level (not LCU level) as below:

- H filtering is performed across all block vertical edges in the entire processing frame
- V filtering is performed across all block horizontal edges in the entire processing frame

Filtering is fully independent from one 8x8 filtering segment to the next as shown in Figure 6:
The filtering for deciding the need for Luma/Chroma (on/off decision), level of filtering (weak/strong), and finally actual filtering operations are described in the sections below.

### 2.2.2 Luma Filter ON/OFF and Weak/Strong decision

![Diagram](image)

**Figure 7: Pixels usage in filtering on/off and strength decision in de-blocking**
Filter on/off decision and Luma strong/weak decision are performed on four columns/lines segment as shown in the above diagram.

If BS is not equal to zero, the following ordered steps apply

- $qPL = ((QPP+Q PQ+1)>>1)$, QPPand QPQ are luma QPs
- $\beta = \text{BETA\_TABLE}[\text{Clip3}(0,51,qPL+(\text{beta\_offset\_div2}<<1)) ]$
- $tc = \text{TC\_TABLE}[\text{Clip3}(0,53,qPL+2*(bs-1)+(tc\_offset\_div2<<1)) ]$
- $dp0 = |p2,0-2*p1,0+p0,0| ; dp3 = |p2,3-2*p1,3+p0,3|$
- $dq0 = |q2,0-2*q1,0+q0,0| ; dq3 = |q2,3-2*q1,3+q0,3|$
- $dpq0 = dp0+dq0 ; dpq3 = dp3+dq3$
- $dp = dp0+dp3 ; dq = dq0+dq3$
- $dE = dEp = dEq = 0$
- If ($dpq0 + dpq3 < \beta$) // filter on/off decision
  - If ($2*dpq0 < (\beta>>2)$) && ($|p3,0- p0,0| + |q3,0- q0,0| < (\beta>>3)$) && ($|p0,0- q0,0| < ((5*tc+1)>>1)$) $dSam0 = 1$
  - If ($2*dpq3 < (\beta>>2)$) && ($|p3,3- p0,3| + |q3,3- q0,3| < (\beta>>3)$) && ($|p0,3- q0,3| < ((5*tc+1)>>1)$) $dSam3 = 1$
  - If ($dSam0 == 1$ && $dSam3 == 1$) $dE = 2$ (strong filter); else $dE = 1$ (weak filter);
  - If ($dp < (((\beta+ (\beta>>1))>>3))$) $dEp = 1$ // number of filtered samples for weak filter
  - If ($dq < (((\beta+ (\beta>>1))>>3))$) $dEq = 1$ // number of filtered samples for weak filter

### Table 1: Relationship between qp, tc and $\beta$(BETA\_TABLE and TC\_TABLE)

| Q | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 | 17 | 18 |
| $\beta^*$ | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 6 | 7 | 8 |
| tc | 19 | 20 | 21 | 22 | 23 | 24 | 25 | 26 | 27 | 28 | 29 | 30 | 31 | 32 | 33 | 34 | 35 | 36 | 37 |
| Q | 38 | 39 | 40 | 41 | 42 | 43 | 44 | 45 | 46 | 47 | 48 | 49 | 50 | 51 | 52 | 53 |
| $\beta^*$ | 38 | 40 | 42 | 44 | 46 | 48 | 50 | 52 | 54 | 56 | 58 | 60 | 62 | 64 | - | - | - | - | - |
| tc | 5 | 5 | 6 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 13 | 14 | 16 | 18 | 20 | 22 | 24 |

### Luma Strong & Weak Filtering

#### 2.2.3 Luma Strong & Weak Filtering
Figure 8: Luma DBLK Filtering and usage of pixels around edges

2.2.3.1 Luma Strong Filtering Mechanism

- 4-pixel segment shares the same decision (dE, dEp, dEq)
  - If (dE == 2), strong filter applies to modify three pixels each side
    - p0' = Clip3( p0?2*tc, p0+2*tc, ( p2 + 2*p1 + 2*p0 + 2*q0 + q1 + 4 ) >> 3 )
    - p1' = Clip3( p1?2*tc, p1+2*tc, ( p2 + p1 + p0 + q0 + 2 ) >> 2 )
    - p2' = Clip3( p2?2*tc, p2+2*tc, ( 2*p3 + 3*p2 + p1 + p0 + q0 + 4 ) >> 3 )
    - q0' = Clip3( q0?2*tc, q0+2*tc, ( p1 + 2*p0 + 2*q0 + 2*q1 + q2 + 4 ) >> 3 )
    - q1' = Clip3( q1?2*tc, q1+2*tc, ( p0 + q0 + q1 + q2 + 2 ) >> 2 )
    - q2' = Clip3( q2?2*tc, q2+2*tc, ( p0 + q0 + q1 + 3*q2 + 2*q3 + 4 ) >> 3 )

2.2.3.2 Luma Weak Filtering Mechanism

- 4-pixel segment shares a same decision (dE, dEp, dEq)
  - If (dE == 1), weak filter applies to modify one or two pixels each side
\[ D = (9*(q_0 - p_0)-3*(q_1 - p_1)+8)>>4 \]

If \( \text{abs}(\Delta) < tc*10 \), the following ordered steps apply:

- Filtered sample value \( p_0' \) and \( q_0' \) are specified as:
  \[ \Delta = \text{Clip}3(-tc,tc,\Delta) \]
  \[ p_0' = \text{Clip}1Y(p_0 + \Delta) \]
  \[ q_0' = \text{Clip}1Y(q_0 - \Delta) \]

- If \( dE_p \) is equal to 1, the filtered sample value \( p_1' \) is specified as follows:
  \[ \Delta_p = \text{Clip}3(-(tc>>1),tc>>1,((p_2+p_0+1)>>1)-p_1+\Delta)>>1 \]
  \[ p_1' = \text{Clip}1Y(p_1 + \Delta_p) \]

- If \( dE_q \) is equal to 1, the filtered sample value \( q_1' \) is specified as follows:
  \[ \Delta_q = \text{Clip}3(-(tc>>1),tc>>1,((q_2+q_0+1)>>1)-q_1-\Delta)>>1 \]
  \[ q_1' = \text{Clip}1Y(q_1 + \Delta_q) \]

2.2.4 Chroma filtering

![Figure 9: Chroma DBLK Filtering and usage of pixels around edges](image)

- Only PU and/or TU boundaries on 8x8 chroma pixel grid are filtered
- Boundary strength \( bS \) is inherited from luma (factor 2 down-sampling each direction) (Refer to Chroma BS derivation sub-section)
- \( q_{PI} = ( (( QPQ + QPP + 1 ) >> 1 ) + cq_{p\_offset} \), where here \( cq_{p\_offset} \) represents \( pic\_cb\_qp\_offset \) and \( pic\_cr\_qp\_offset \) for components \( Cb/U \) and \( Cr/V \) respectively
- \( qPC \) is converted using \( q_{PI} \) using Table as below

### Table 2: QPc to qPi Conversion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>qPi</th>
<th>&lt;30</th>
<th>30</th>
<th>31</th>
<th>32</th>
<th>33</th>
<th>34</th>
<th>35</th>
<th>36</th>
<th>37</th>
<th>38</th>
<th>39</th>
<th>40</th>
<th>41</th>
<th>42</th>
<th>43</th>
<th>&gt;43</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>QPc</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>-qPi-6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[ tc = \text{TC\_TABLE}[\text{Clip}3(0.53,\text{QPc}+2*(bS-1)+(tc\_offset\_div2<<1))] \]

Chroma filter is carried out when \( bS > 1 \)

\[ \Delta = \text{Clip}3((-tc>>1),tc>>1,((q_0-p_0)<<2)+p_1-q_1+4)>>3 \]

\[ p_0' = \text{Clip}1C(p_0 + \Delta) \]

\[ q_0' = \text{Clip}1C(q_0 - \Delta) \]
2.2.5 Handling of IPCM and TQBypass

In the case of the edge containing IPCM CU with pcm_loop_filter_disable_flag = 0 OR TQBypass (i.e., lossless), pixels (lying inside IPCM/TQBypass) remain unfiltered, while the other half gets filtering. This means the edge is filtered only on one side. This can be done by following two methods:

1. Skipping filtering of one half of pixel
2. Filter on both sides and later replace with Recon pixel back to half containing IPCM/TQBypass CU.

2.3 DBLK syntax element

The following syntax elements affect the DBLK operations and are summarized in the table below with range and description.

Table 3: DBLK Syntax Elements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Granularity</th>
<th>Syntax Element &amp; Range</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SPS</td>
<td>pcm_loop_filter_disable_flag (0/1)</td>
<td>Disable DBLK Filtering in case of CU type = IPCM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PPS</td>
<td>transcquant_bypass_enable_flag (0/1)</td>
<td>Disable DBLK in case of CU type - Lossless (TQbypass)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>tiles_enabled_flag (0/1)</td>
<td>Tiles are present in given frame</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>loop_filter_across_tiles_enabled_flag (0/1)</td>
<td>Across Tiles filtering on/off</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>loop_filter_across_slices_enabled_flag (0/1)</td>
<td>Across Slice on/off</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>deblocking_filter_control_present_flag (0/1)</td>
<td>Presence of Beta &amp; Tc in PPS/SH</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>deblocking_filter_override_enabled_flag (0/1)</td>
<td>Presence of override in SH</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>pps_disable_deblocking_filter_flag (0/1)</td>
<td>Disable DBLK for entire picture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SH</td>
<td>beta_offset_div2 [-6,6]</td>
<td>Used in Filtering (ON/OFF/Weak/Strong Filtering)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>tc_offset_div2 [-6,6]</td>
<td>Used in Filtering (ON/OFF/Weak/Strong Filtering)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>slice_header_disable_deblocking_filter_flag (0/1)</td>
<td>Disable DBLK for all LCU in slice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LCU level</td>
<td>slice_loop_filter_across_slices_enabled_flag (0/1)</td>
<td>Across Slice on/off (Controls Left &amp; top boundary)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SAO-Decoder Filtering

3.0 SAO-Decoder Filtering

This section explains SAO filtering as described in the HEVC Video standard [1]. It is the process of adding offset to De-blocked pixel values according to SAO type - i.e., based on edge direction/shape (Edge Offset aka EO) and pixel level (Band Offset aka BO) or unchanged (OFF).

The offset range has the following characteristics:

- Offset magnitude range is [0, 7] for 8 bpp and [0, 31] for 10 bpp
- In case of BO, sign is signaled for offset with nonzero magnitude
- In case of EO, sign is inferred from edge category (+) for 1 and 2, (-) for 3 and 4
3.1 Edge offset (EO)
There are four types of Edge offset according to edge directions (0, 90, 135, 45 degrees) as shown on the diagram below, respectively.

![EO types diagram]

(a) 0-degree  (b) 90-degree  (c) 135-degree  (d) 45-degree

Figure 10: EO types namely 0, 90, 135 and 45 degree

There are four offsets corresponding to four edge shapes (i.e., categories/edge index) for the selected direction. The edge index is referred to as SAO-subtype for EO. The figure below shows the different types of categories.

![EO categories diagram]

Figure 11: EO categories/edges index and pixel mapping

**Category 1:** $c < 2$ neighboring pixels  
**Category 2:** $c < 1$ neighbor && $c == 1$ neighbor  
**Category 3:** $c > 1$ neighbor && $c == 1$ neighbor  
**Category 4:** $c > 2$ neighbors  
**Category 5:** none of above ($c = either neighbor$)

Figure 12: EO categories selection logic or formula
Offset value is added to each De-blocked pixel value if it belongs in a given EO type and category, otherwise it is not altered.

3.1.1 Band offset (BO)
The whole pixel range (0-255 for 8 bpp) is equally divided into 32 bands as shown in the figure below.

![Figure 13: Bands classification (32 bands for pixel range)](image)

There are four offsets provided for four consecutive bands from the start band. The Start band number is signaled along with four offset values. The start band position is also referred to as the SAO sub-type for BO.

Offset value is added to each De-blocked pixel value if it belongs to the range covered by one of the four bands, otherwise pixel value is not altered.

3.1.2 SAO syntax elements
The syntax elements that affect the SAO-Decoder operations are summarized in the table below along with range and description.

| Table 4: SAO Syntax Elements |
3.1.3 Boundary condition processing
There are three conditions that require conditional processing:

1. Picture boundary (left, right, top & bottom)
2. Slice boundary and slice_loop_filter_across_slices_enabled_flag = 0. The applicability of across slice filtering flag is for left and top edges for given slice boundary (and not all directions)
3. Tile boundary and loop_filter_across_tiles_enabled_flag = 0

In the above scenario, pixels along slice boundary are not processed depending on SAO type.

- For BO, all pixels are processed
- For EO, pixel availability is checked according to SAO type and if pixel is not available in boundary condition it is skipped for processing (i.e., offset of 0)

The below figure depicts boundary condition processing.
3.1.4 Conditional processing
In the following condition the SAO filtering is switched off.

- SAO Type idx = OFF
- CU type = PCM and Loop filter is disabled for PCM type
- CU type = TQBypss (lossless)
- Slice level SAO = OFF

References

The author would like to thank Minhua Zhou, Osamoto Akira and Woo-Shik Kim for suggestion and input provided for this article.

More about Mihir Mody