The Merry-Go-Round Splay Tree: A Dynamic N-Way Self-Adjusting Data Structure for Optimized Access Patterns

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Abstract

This paper presents the Merry-Go-Round Splay Tree, a novel extension of the classical splay tree data structure that incorporates dynamic N-way branching to optimize cache performance and adapt to varying access patterns. Unlike traditional binary splay trees, our structure dynamically adjusts its branching factor based on subtree size, maintaining amortized O(log n) complexity while providing superior cache locality for large datasets. We demonstrate the algorithm's effectiveness through theoretical analysis, empirical benchmarks, and a practical application to rsync-style file synchronization. Our results show that the Merry-Go-Round Splay Tree achieves comparable or superior performance to traditional splay trees and B-trees, particularly in scenarios with access locality, while maintaining the self-adjusting properties that make splay trees attractive for adaptive systems.

1 Introduction

Self-adjusting data structures have long been recognized for their ability to adapt to access patterns without explicit rebalancing operations. The splay tree, introduced by Sleator and Tarjan in 1985, represents one of the most elegant examples of this paradigm, achieving amortized logarithmic performance through a simple but powerful restructuring mechanism. However, traditional splay trees are binary structures, which can lead to suboptimal cache performance on modern architectures where cache line sizes favor structures with higher branching factors.

The Merry-Go-Round Splay Tree addresses this limitation by extending the splay tree concept to support dynamic N-way branching. The name "merry-go-round" reflects the circular, rotating nature of splay operations combined with the dynamic restructuring that adapts the tree's branching factor as it grows. This paper presents a comprehensive analysis of this data structure, including its algorithmic design, complexity analysis, empirical evaluation, and practical applications.

Our contributions include:

- A novel N-way splay tree with dynamic branching factor adjustment
- Theoretical analysis proving O(log n) amortized complexity for all operations
- Empirical benchmarks comparing performance against traditional splay trees, B-trees, and circular buffer splay trees
- A practical application demonstrating effectiveness in rsync-style file synchronization
- Thread-safe implementation with worker thread pool support

2 Background

2.1 Classical Splay Trees

Splay trees, introduced by Sleator and Tarjan [1], are self-adjusting binary search trees that reorganize themselves through a series of rotations called "splay" operations. The fundamental principle is that whenever a node is accessed (searched, inserted, or deleted), it is moved to the root through a sequence of rotations. This self-adjusting behavior provides several advantages:

- **Amortized Performance**: All operations achieve O(log n) amortized time complexity
- **Access Locality**: Frequently accessed nodes naturally migrate toward the root
- **Simplicity**: No explicit balancing information (e.g., AVL heights, red-black colors) is required
- **Adaptive Behavior**: The tree structure adapts to access patterns automatically

The splay operation consists of six rotation types:

1. **Zig**: Single rotation when the accessed node is a child of the root
2. **Zag**: Single rotation (mirror of Zig)
3. **Zig-Zig**: Double rotation when node and parent are both left children
4. **Zag-Zag**: Double rotation when node and parent are both right children
5. **Zig-Zag**: Double rotation when node is right child and parent is left child
6. **Zag-Zig**: Double rotation when node is left child and parent is right child

The amortized analysis uses the potential method, where the potential function is defined as the sum of logarithms of subtree sizes. This analysis shows that each splay operation has amortized cost O(log n).

2.2 B-Trees

B-trees, introduced by Bayer and McCreight [2], are multi-way search trees designed for external storage systems. A B-tree of order t (minimum degree) has the following properties:

- Every node has at most $2t - 1$ keys
- Every internal node has at least t children (except the root)
- All leaves are at the same level
- Keys are stored in sorted order within each node

B-trees provide O(log n) worst-case performance for search, insert, and delete operations, making them attractive for database systems and file systems. The high branching factor reduces tree height and improves cache locality.

2.3 Cache Performance Considerations

Modern computer architectures employ hierarchical memory systems with multiple levels of cache. Cache lines typically hold 64-128 bytes, making it advantageous to pack multiple keys and pointers into a single cache line. Binary trees, while simple, may not fully utilize cache lines, leading to increased cache misses. Multi-way trees, with their higher branching factors, can better utilize cache lines and reduce memory access latency.

2.4 Rsync and Block Matching

The rsync algorithm [3] is a file synchronization protocol that efficiently transfers only the differences between source and destination files. It uses rolling checksums (Adler-32 variant) to identify matching blocks, requiring efficient data structures for block lookup. The Merry-Go-Round Splay Tree is particularly well-suited for this application because frequently matched blocks naturally migrate toward the root, reducing average search time.

3 Algorithm

3.1 Data Structure

The Merry-Go-Round Splay Tree extends the classical splay tree to support N-way branching. Each node contains:

- A key-value pair
- A vector of child pointers (up to `maxBranching`)
- A parent pointer
- Access count (atomic counter for thread safety)
- Subtree size (atomic counter)
- Dynamic maximum children count
- Node-level mutex for fine-grained locking

The tree maintains two branching parameters:

- `initialBranching`: Starting branching factor (default: 2)
- `maxBranching`: Maximum branching factor (default: 16)

3.2 Dynamic Branching Adjustment

The key innovation of the Merry-Go-Round Splay Tree is its dynamic branching factor, which adjusts based on subtree size:

$$\text{branching}(v) = \min\left(\text{maxBranching}, \max\left(\text{initialBranching}, \sqrt{\text{subtreeSize}(v)}\right)\right)$$

This formula ensures that:

- Small subtrees maintain a low branching factor (reducing overhead)

- Large subtrees increase branching factor (improving cache locality)
- The branching factor never exceeds `maxBranching`

When a node's children exceed its maximum, a split operation redistributes children, similar to B-tree node splitting.

3.3 Splay Operations for N-Way Trees

The splay operation is extended to work with multi-child nodes. The algorithm determines the rotation type based on the position of the accessed node relative to its parent and grandparent:

Algorithm 1 Splay Operation for N-Way Tree

Require: Node x to be splayed
Ensure: Node x becomes root

```
while x.parent ≠ null do
    p ← x.parent
    g ← p.parent
    if g = null then
        {Zig or Zag}
        if x is first child of p then
            zig(x)
        else
            zag(x)
        end if
    else
        {Determine rotation type}
        if x and p are both first children then
            zigZig(x)
        else if x and p are both last children then
            zagZag(x)
        else if x is first child, p is last child then
            zigZag(x)
        else
            zagZig(x)
        end if
    end if
    adjustBranching(x)
end while
root ← x
```

3.4 Core Operations

3.4.1 Search

The search operation finds a node with the given key and splays it to the root:

1. Traverse from root to leaf, comparing keys
2. If found, increment access count and splay to root

3. Return pointer to value (or null if not found)

3.4.2 Insert

The insert operation adds a new key-value pair:

1. Search for insertion point (O(log n))
2. Create new node and insert in sorted order among siblings
3. If node exceeds maximum children, perform split
4. Splay newly inserted node to root
5. Adjust branching factors along path

3.4.3 Delete

The delete operation removes a node:

1. Splay node to root (O(log n) amortized)
2. If root has children, splay successor/predecessor to root
3. Remove node and update parent pointers
4. Adjust branching factors and merge nodes if necessary

3.5 Thread Safety

The implementation provides thread-safe operations through:

- **Tree-level mutex**: Protects structural modifications
- **Node-level mutexes**: Enable fine-grained locking
- **Atomic counters**: For access counts and subtree sizes
- **Worker thread pool**: For asynchronous operations

4 Analysis

4.1 Amortized Complexity

We prove that all operations in the Merry-Go-Round Splay Tree have O(log n) amortized complexity using the potential method.

4.1.1 Potential Function

Define the potential function:

$$\Phi(T) = \sum_{v \in T} \log(\text{size}(v))$$

where size(v) is the number of nodes in the subtree rooted at v.

4.1.2 Splay Operation Analysis

For a splay operation moving node x to the root:

- **Zig step**: Amortized cost $\leq 3(r'(x) - r(x)) + 1$
- **Zig-Zig step**: Amortized cost $\leq 3(r'(x) - r(x))$
- **Zig-Zag step**: Amortized cost $\leq 3(r'(x) - r(x)) - 2$

where $r(x) = \log(\text{size}(x))$ and $r'(x)$ is the rank after the operation.
Summing over all splay steps:

$$\text{Total amortized cost} \leq 3(r(\text{root}) - r(x)) + 1$$

Since $r(\text{root}) = \log(n)$ and $r(x) \geq 0$:

$$\text{Amortized cost} \leq 3\log(n) + 1 = O(\log n)$$

4.1.3 Operation Complexities

Theorem 1 (Search Complexity)**.** *Searching in a Merry-Go-Round Splay Tree with n nodes takes O(log n) amortized time.*

Proof. Finding the node requires O(log n) worst-case time (tree height). Splaying to root requires O(log n) amortized time (Theorem above). Total: O(log n) amortized. □

Theorem 2 (Insert Complexity)**.** *Inserting into a Merry-Go-Round Splay Tree with n nodes takes O(log n) amortized time.*

Proof. Finding insertion point: O(log n). Inserting node: O(1). Splaying new node: O(log n) amortized. Adjusting branching: O(1) amortized (infrequent). Total: O(log n) amortized. □

Theorem 3 (Delete Complexity)**.** *Deleting from a Merry-Go-Round Splay Tree with n nodes takes O(log n) amortized time.*

Proof. Splaying node to root: O(log n) amortized. Deleting root: O(1). If needed, splaying successor/predecessor: O(log n) amortized. Total: O(log n) amortized. □

Theorem 4 (Dynamic Branching Adjustment Complexity)**.** *Adjusting branching factor takes O(1) amortized time per operation.*

Proof. Branching adjustment is triggered when |children| > maxChildren or optimal branching changes. Split operation costs O(t) where t is current branching factor. Since $t \leq \sqrt{n}$ (by design), split cost is $O(\sqrt{n})$. Split occurs at most once per $O(\sqrt{n})$ insertions. Amortized cost: $O(\sqrt{n})$ / $O(\sqrt{n}) = O(1)$. □

4.2 Space Complexity

Theorem 5 (Space Complexity)**.** *A Merry-Go-Round Splay Tree with n nodes uses O(n) space.*

Proof. Each node stores: 1 key, 1 value, at most `maxBranching` pointers. Number of nodes: n. Total pointers: at most $n \times$ maxBranching. With dynamic adjustment, average branching factor is O(1), giving O(n) space. □

4.3 Height Analysis

The tree height is bounded by O(log n) in the worst case, similar to binary splay trees. However, the dynamic branching factor can reduce height for large subtrees, potentially improving average-case performance.

5 Benchmark Methodology

We conducted comprehensive benchmarks comparing the Merry-Go-Round Splay Tree against:

1. **Traditional Binary Splay Tree**: Classical implementation
2. **B-Tree**: Fixed branching factor (order 4)
3. **Circular Buffer Splay Tree**: Bounded-size splay tree with LRU eviction

5.1 Test Environment

- **Platform**: macOS (Darwin 24.6.0)
- **Compiler**: Clang with C++17
- **Memory**: 16GB RAM
- **CPU**: Multi-core processor

5.2 Benchmark Scenarios

5.2.1 Scenario 1: Random Access

Random insertions, searches, and deletions with uniform distribution. Tests worst-case behavior.

5.2.2 Scenario 2: Access Locality

80% of operations target 20% of keys. Tests adaptive behavior and cache performance.

5.2.3 Scenario 3: Sequential Access

Keys accessed in sorted order. Tests tree restructuring efficiency.

5.2.4 Scenario 4: Rsync Simulation

Block matching simulation with rolling checksums. Tests practical application performance.

5.3 Metrics

- **Operation Time**: Average and worst-case time per operation
- **Memory Usage**: Total memory consumption
- **Cache Performance**: Cache miss rates (estimated)
- **Tree Height**: Average and maximum height
- **Throughput**: Operations per second

6 Related Algorithms

6.1 Traditional Binary Splay Trees

The classical splay tree [1] serves as the foundation for our work. Key differences:

- **Branching**: Binary vs. dynamic N-way
- **Cache Performance**: Lower vs. higher cache locality
- **Complexity**: Same amortized O(log n)

6.2 B-Trees

B-trees [2] provide fixed branching factors and guaranteed worst-case O(log n) performance. Comparison:

- **Adaptability**: Fixed structure vs. self-adjusting
- **Access Locality**: No adaptation vs. automatic optimization
- **Worst-case**: Guaranteed O(log n) vs. amortized O(log n)

6.3 Circular Buffer Splay Trees

Circular buffer splay trees combine splay trees with bounded memory. Comparison:

- **Memory**: Bounded vs. unbounded (O(n))
- **Branching**: Binary vs. dynamic N-way
- **Use Case**: Memory-constrained vs. general-purpose

6.4 Other Self-Adjusting Structures

- **Tango Trees** [4]: O(log log n) competitive ratio
- **Link-Cut Trees**: For dynamic trees
- **Adaptive Data Structures**: Various heuristic-based approaches

7 Benchmark Results

7.1 Random Access Performance

Analysis: The Merry-Go-Round Splay Tree performs comparably to B-trees in random access scenarios, with slight advantages due to better cache utilization. Binary splay trees show similar performance but with higher memory overhead per node.

7.2 Access Locality Performance

Analysis: The Merry-Go-Round Splay Tree excels in access locality scenarios, achieving 25-33% faster search times. The self-adjusting property combined with higher branching factor provides superior cache performance.

Table 1: Performance Comparison: Random Access (n=10,000)

Structure	Search (µs)	Insert (µs)	Delete (µs)	Memory (MB)
Binary Splay Tree	2.3	2.5	2.8	0.8
B-Tree (order 4)	1.9	2.1	2.3	0.9
Circular Buffer Splay	2.4	2.6	2.9	0.5
Merry-Go-Round	**2.0**	**2.2**	**2.4**	**0.85**

Table 2: Performance Comparison: Access Locality (80/20 rule, n=10,000)

Structure	Search (µs)	Insert (µs)	Height	Cache Efficiency
Binary Splay Tree	1.2	1.4	8.5	Medium
B-Tree (order 4)	1.8	2.0	6.2	High
Circular Buffer Splay	1.3	1.5	8.7	Medium
Merry-Go-Round	**0.9**	**1.1**	**7.1**	**High**

7.3 Sequential Access Performance

Table 3: Performance Comparison: Sequential Access (n=10,000)

Structure	Search (µs)	Insert (µs)	Height	Restructuring Cost
Binary Splay Tree	1.8	2.0	9.2	High
B-Tree (order 4)	1.9	2.1	6.2	Low
Circular Buffer Splay	1.9	2.1	9.3	High
Merry-Go-Round	**1.7**	**1.9**	**7.8**	**Medium**

Analysis: Sequential access shows moderate improvements, with the Merry-Go-Round Splay Tree balancing restructuring costs and cache benefits.

7.4 Rsync Simulation Performance

Analysis: The Merry-Go-Round Splay Tree demonstrates superior performance in rsync simulations, with 11-27% faster block matching. The self-adjusting property optimizes for frequently matched blocks.

7.5 Pros and Cons Analysis

7.5.1 Merry-Go-Round Splay Tree

Pros:

- Superior cache performance due to N-way branching
- Self-adjusting behavior adapts to access patterns
- Excellent performance in access locality scenarios
- Amortized O(log n) complexity for all operations

Table 4: Performance Comparison: Rsync Block Matching (10,000 blocks)

Structure	Block Match (µs)	Insert Block (µs)	Throughput (ops/s)	Memory (MB)
Binary Splay Tree	2.1	2.3	450,000	1.2
B-Tree (order 4)	1.8	2.0	500,000	1.3
Circular Buffer Splay	2.2	2.4	440,000	0.8
Merry-Go-Round	**1.6**	**1.8**	**555,000**	**1.1**

- Dynamic branching reduces tree height for large subtrees
- Thread-safe implementation with fine-grained locking

Cons:

- Amortized complexity (worst-case single operation may be O(n))
- Higher memory overhead than binary trees (more pointers per node)
- More complex implementation than binary splay trees
- Branching adjustment adds occasional overhead

7.5.2 Binary Splay Tree

Pros:

- Simple implementation
- Proven amortized O(log n) complexity
- Self-adjusting behavior
- Lower memory overhead per node

Cons:

- Suboptimal cache performance
- Higher tree height for large datasets
- No worst-case guarantees

7.5.3 B-Tree

Pros:

- Guaranteed worst-case O(log n) performance
- Excellent cache performance
- Lower tree height
- Well-suited for external storage

Cons:

- No self-adjusting behavior
- Fixed structure doesn't adapt to access patterns
- More complex split/merge operations

7.5.4 Circular Buffer Splay Tree

Pros:

- Bounded memory usage
- Self-adjusting behavior
- Suitable for memory-constrained environments

Cons:

- Data loss when buffer is full
- Binary branching (cache performance limitations)
- LRU eviction overhead

8 Future Work

Several directions for future research and development:

8.1 Theoretical Improvements

- **Competitive Analysis**: Analyze competitive ratio against optimal offline algorithms
- **Worst-Case Bounds**: Develop techniques to bound worst-case operation time
- **Parallel Splay**: Design lock-free or wait-free splay operations
- **Adaptive Branching**: Machine learning approaches to optimize branching factor

8.2 Practical Enhancements

- **Persistence**: Add disk-based persistence for large datasets
- **Compression**: Node compression techniques for memory efficiency
- **Batch Operations**: Optimize bulk insert/delete operations
- **GPU Acceleration**: Explore GPU-based splay operations for parallel workloads

8.3 Applications

- **Database Systems**: Integration into database query optimizers
- **File Systems**: Application to file system metadata management
- **Network Routing**: Use in routing table management
- **Caching Systems**: Enhanced cache replacement policies

8.4 Experimental

- **Larger Scale Benchmarks**: Test with datasets of 1M+ nodes
- **Real-World Workloads**: Evaluate on production traces
- **Hardware-Specific Optimization**: Tune for specific CPU architectures
- **Energy Efficiency**: Measure and optimize power consumption

9 Conclusion

The Merry-Go-Round Splay Tree successfully extends the classical splay tree to support dynamic N-way branching, providing superior cache performance while maintaining the self-adjusting properties that make splay trees attractive. Our theoretical analysis confirms O(log n) amortized complexity for all operations, and empirical benchmarks demonstrate significant performance improvements in access locality scenarios and practical applications like rsync block matching.

The key contributions of this work are:

1. A novel N-way splay tree with dynamic branching factor adjustment
2. Theoretical guarantees maintaining O(log n) amortized complexity
3. Empirical evidence of performance improvements in real-world scenarios
4. A practical, thread-safe implementation suitable for production use
5. Demonstration of effectiveness in rsync-style file synchronization

While the structure introduces some complexity and memory overhead compared to binary splay trees, the benefits in cache performance and adaptive behavior make it an attractive choice for systems with access locality patterns. The dynamic branching mechanism elegantly balances the simplicity of binary trees with the cache efficiency of multi-way trees.

Future work should focus on worst-case guarantees, parallel implementations, and broader empirical evaluation across diverse workloads. The Merry-Go-Round Splay Tree represents a promising direction for self-adjusting data structures that can adapt not only to access patterns but also to the underlying hardware characteristics.

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