Unraveling the Quantum Computing Revolution

T. Jeevanandam

Bridging the Gap between Analog and Digital Frontiers

In the vast landscape of computing, the emergence of quantum computing stands as a beacon of revolutionary change. To comprehend the monumental leap that quantum computing represents, it's pivotal to understand its roots and how it diverges from the traditional analog and digital computational paradigms.

The Evolutionary Journey: Analog to Digital

Historically, computing began with analog computers, characterized by their ability to work with continuous physical quantities. These machines leveraged mechanisms like gears, levers, and voltage levels to perform computations. They excelled in solving differential equations and real-time simulations **thanks** to their innate capacity to model physical systems accurately. However, the rise of digital computing marked a significant shift. Digital computers operate with discrete data encoded in binary digits (bits), representing either 0 or 1. This binary language forms the basis for algorithms and software, enabling immense computational power and versatility. Digital machines, using transistors and integrated circuits, brought about an era of rapid calculations, data storage, and manipulation.

My Ph.D. thesis was modeling and control of **"Fluidized Bed Heat Exchanger System"** using Analog and Digital computers. At IIT Delhi, a computer lab that housed an analog machine, a digital machine and the Fluidized bed heat exchanger system was set up in the late seventies! It was called the 'Hybrid Computer Lab'. It was a luxury **for me** to have an exclusive hybrid system for modeling and control of the heat exchanger in those days!

In 1981, the IBM PC was released in the market with Intel 8088 chip and Microsft's DOS operating system. Then, the PC revolution started with Apple releasing its own Mac computers. Now, after decades, we are entering into another revolution.

Quantum Leap: Beyond the Binary

Enter quantum computing - a realm where the laws of quantum mechanics dictate computation. Unlike classical computers that rely on bits, quantum computers utilize quantum bits or qubits. Qubits harness the unique principles of superposition and entanglement, allowing them to exist in multiple states simultaneously and share correlations beyond what classical bits can achieve.

The Fundamental Difference

Analog computers compute through direct representation of physical variables, whereas digital machines process discrete data using bits. Quantum computers, on the other hand, exploit quantum phenomena to process information in ways that defy classical computational boundaries

T Jeevanandam, a native of Pollachi came to Tokyo in 1987. Currently working as Chief Technology Officer in a large Japanese Engineering company. From serving as the editor of ICAT (Indian Community Activities in Tokyo) to leading the coordination of Pongal for the last 33 years, Jeeva-san has been very active in the Indian diaspora in Tokyo. He has regularaly contributed to Pongal Malar on technology topics.

. In a **layman's** language, Current Digital machines are SINGLE LANE Transporters whereas Quantum machines are **MULTI-LANE** Transporters making it possible to achieve enormous speed & capability.

The Power of Quantum Supremacy

One of the most remarkable features of quantum computing is its potential for exponential acceleration in specific problem-solving domains. Tasks that would take **years** for classical computers to solve might be accomplished within feasible timeframes by quantum machines. For instance, complex optimization problems, cryptographic algorithms, drug discovery simulations, and understanding molecular structures could be revolutionized by harnessing quantum supremacy.

The Present Landscape:

Today, several companies such as IBM, Google and research institutions have built small-scale quantum computers with dozens of qubits. These machines are still in their early stages, prone to errors, and not yet capable of outperforming classical computers for most tasks. However, they're starting to demonstrate their potential in specific areas like drug discovery, materials science, and financial modeling.

One noteworthy example is IBM's Quantum Experience platform, which allows anyone with an internet connection to experiment with a few-qubit quantum computers. This democratization of technology is crucial for fostering innovation and accelerating the development of practical applications.

Challenges on the Horizon

Despite the promising prospects, quantum computing faces hurdles such as maintaining qubit stability, error correction, and scalability. The delicate nature of qubits makes them susceptible to de-coherence - the loss of quantum information. Overcoming these challenges is essential for realizing the full potential of quantum computing in practical applications.
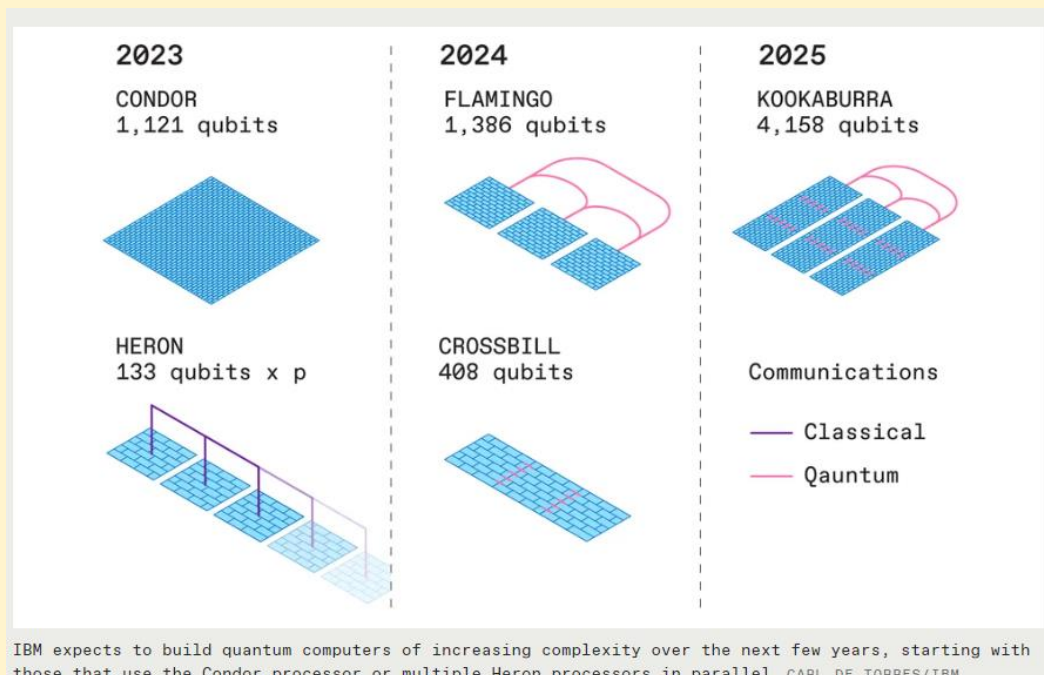
Conclusion

The transition from analog to digital computing marked a **giant step** in human history; and the advent of quantum computing signifies **a quantum leap**. While analog and digital machines revolutionized computation in their respective eras, quantum computing ventures into uncharted territories, promising unparalleled computational prowess. As quantum technologies advance and researchers overcome obstacles, the impact of quantum computing on various fields will be profound, reshaping industries, scientific discoveries, and our understanding of the universe. Quantum computing is not merely an evolution; it is a revolution poised to redefine the boundaries of what we can compute and comprehend.

While there might not be a standard comparison chart that encapsulates all aspects of analog, digital, and quantum machines in a single format due to the complexity and evolving nature of these technologies, I can certainly provide a simplified comparison to highlight some key differences between them:

Aspect	Analog Machines	Digital Machines	Quantum Machines
Representation	Works with continuous variables	Processes discrete binary data	Utilizes quantum bits (qubits)
Basic Unit	Typically uses physical variables	Uses bits (0s and 1s)	Utilizes qubits in superposition and entanglement based on binary logic gates Utilizes quantum algorithms exploiting quantum phenomena
Operation	Solves differential equations and simulations	Executes algorithms and software programs	Leverages quantum properties for specific problem-solving tasks
Information Storage	Utilizes physical mechanisms for data representation	Stores data in digital form (0s and 1s)	Utilizes quantum states for information storage and manipulation
Speed and Efficiency	Effective for specific mathematical models and real-time simulations	calculations and versatile for various applications	Rapid Potential for exponential acceleration in certain computations (quantum supremacy)
Challenges	Less versatile and limited scalability	Vulnerable to errors, scalability challenges	Faces issues related to qubit stability, error correction, and decoherence

This comparison is a simplified overview and doesn't cover all aspects comprehensively. The field of quantum computing is continuously evolving, and the comparison might vary based on specific advancements, algorithms, and technological developments in each domain.

IBM Condor: In December 2023, IBM unveiled the Condor, the first-ever quantum processor with over 1,000 qubits (quantum bits), marking a significant milestone in the field. Now, the quantum journey has started.

IBM expects to build quantum computers of increasing complexity over the next few years, starting with those that use the Condor processor or multiple Heron processors in parallel. CARL DE TORRES/IBM

Source: https://spectrum.ieee.org/ibm-condor