

# GUI Framework Selection for Constrained Embedded Systems

*A Comparative Benchmark Evaluation of TouchGFX, LVGL, and Qt for MCUs on STM32U5*

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## Executive Summary

Modern embedded systems increasingly require graphical user interfaces capable of real-time interaction, animation, and dynamic data visualization within the strict constraints of microcontroller-based platforms where CPU cycles, RAM, and bandwidth are finite resources.

Selecting an appropriate GUI framework is a critical system-level decision. The choice directly determines rendering performance, memory utilization, development velocity, and long-term scalability. This white paper presents a structured technical evaluation of three leading embedded GUI frameworks on TouchGFX, LVGL, and Qt for MCUs using identical UI scenarios executed on the same STM32U5 hardware platform. The approach enables direct, bias-free comparison of runtime behavior, rendering efficiency, and development workflows.

### Key Findings

TouchGFX delivers the lowest CPU utilization and most predictable memory behavior on STM32 hardware through tight DMA2D integration.

LVGL provides the greatest platform flexibility and cost efficiency, with performance highly dependent on developer-level optimization.

Qt for MCUs enables the most sophisticated UI designs with the least frontend development effort, at the cost of higher resource overhead and licensing.

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## 1. Introduction

Embedded GUI systems have transitioned from static display interfaces to sophisticated rendering pipelines that must handle complex concurrent workloads. Industrial HMIs, medical monitors, automotive infotainment clusters, and consumer IoT devices now routinely demand frame-level animation, real-time telemetry overlays, and vector graphics rendering all within the constraints of microcontroller-class hardware.

This white paper addresses a fundamental engineering decision faced by embedded product teams: which GUI framework is most suitable for a given application profile? The answer is non-trivial. Frameworks that appear similar in documentation differ substantially at runtime in how they utilize CPU cycles, how they allocate and reclaim memory, and how effectively they leverage hardware acceleration features such as DMA2D and Chrom-ART.

This evaluation is bounded to three commercially significant frameworks evaluated on a consistent hardware target (STM32U5, ARM Cortex-M33) using a unified benchmark methodology. The analysis is structured around runtime behavior, development workflow, and scalability providing a data-informed basis for framework selection decisions in production embedded system development.

## 2. Acronyms and Abbreviations

Acronym	Description
MCU	Microcontroller Unit
MPU	Microprocessor Unit
DMA2D	Direct Memory Access 2D
FPS	Frames Per Second
QML	Qt Modeling Language

HAL	Hardware Abstraction Layer
RTOS	Real-Time Operating System
SVG	Scalable Vector Graphics

### 3. Detailed Benchmark Demonstration Methodology



#### 3.1 Video Demo Methodology

The video rendering benchmark uses sequential image-frame playback to emulate video streaming workloads. Each framework renders identical frame sequences at fixed timing intervals while CPU load, framebuffer throughput, and render latency are measured. This scenario evaluates memory bandwidth efficiency, framebuffer synchronization, and sustained rendering stability.

#### 3.2 Static Demo Methodology

The static rendering benchmark evaluates rendering quality and idle-state efficiency using layered UI elements, alpha blending, gradients, and transparent objects. Measurements focus on idle CPU utilization, redraw behavior, and memory usage under low-animation conditions.

#### 3.3 2D Animation Demo Methodology

The 2D benchmark includes moving sprites, rotations, scaling operations, and animated transitions running simultaneously. Metrics collected include animation smoothness, render time consistency, and hardware acceleration utilization.

#### 3.4 SVG Demo Methodology

The SVG benchmark evaluates vector rendering efficiency using scalable assets with varying path complexity. The test measures tessellation overhead, anti-aliasing cost, and rendering stability during scaling and animated transformations.

#### 3.5 Text Scroll Demo Methodology

The text scrolling benchmark measures glyph rendering performance, text layout processing, scrolling smoothness, and runtime update overhead under continuously changing textual content.

#### 3.6 Motor Cluster Demo Methodology

The cluster benchmark simulates an automotive dashboard with real-time gauges, warning indicators, RPM meters, battery indicators, and synchronized animations. It evaluates multi-widget synchronization and periodic UI updates.

### 4. Licensing and Cost Comparison

Framework	License Type	Hardware Restriction	Runtime Royalty	Commercial Cost
TouchGFX	ST SLA0048	STM32 Only	No	Free for STM32
LVGL	MIT Open Source	None	No	Free
Qt for MCUs	Commercial	Supported Platforms	Depends on License	Paid License

## 5. Open-Source Benchmark Demo Repositories

TouchGFX Benchmark Repository: <https://github.com/Silicon-Signals/stm32u5g9j-dk2-touchgfx-benchmark.git>

LVGL Benchmark Repository: <https://github.com/Silicon-Signals/stm32u5g9j-dk2-lvgl-benchmark.git>

Qt for MCUs Benchmark Repository: <https://github.com/Silicon-Signals/stm32u5g9j-dk2-qt-benchmark.git>

## 6. Implementation-Level Workflow Details

TouchGFX workflow follows STM32CubeIDE integration with automatic code generation through TouchGFX Designer. LVGL requires manual display-driver integration, framebuffer management, and explicit optimization for DMA2D acceleration.

Qt for MCUs uses QML-based UI development where QML assets are compiled into optimized C++ code during build time.

Each framework was benchmarked using identical framebuffer configurations, synchronized timing intervals, identical graphical assets, and FreeRTOS task scheduling to maintain fairness in runtime evaluation.

## 7. Problem Description: Increasing Demands on Embedded GUI Systems

Embedded GUI systems have evolved from static display interfaces to dynamic rendering systems that must handle complex real-world workloads simultaneously. Contemporary embedded UI requirements commonly include:

- Continuous frame updates video-like sustained throughput workloads
- Multiple concurrent animations rotation, translation, and composition
- Alpha blending and transparency layered compositing with real-time performance
- Vector graphics (SVG) rendering scalable content requiring computational geometry
- Real-time data updates and UI state transitions sensor feeds driving live display changes

These requirements introduce several technical challenges that demand careful framework evaluation:

Challenge	Technical Impact	Business Risk
Limited framebuffer memory	Constrains resolution, color depth, and double-buffering	Display artifacts, screen tearing
CPU-bound rendering	Degrades background task execution, increases latency	System instability, missed real-time deadlines
Partial redraw complexity	Complex dirty-region tracking required	Increased development effort and defect risk

Challenge	Technical Impact	Business Risk
UI/system synchronization	Race conditions between UI updates and sensor tasks	Data inconsistency, display glitches
Framework portability	Hardware-specific code accumulates over product lifetime	High migration cost across hardware generations

Table 1: Key embedded GUI engineering challenges and their system-level implications

## 8. Framework Architecture Overview

### 8.1 TouchGFX

TouchGFX is designed exclusively for STM32 microcontrollers. Its architecture leverages STM32-specific hardware acceleration features, particularly DMA2D (Direct Memory Access 2D) and Chrom-ART enabling efficient pixel operations with minimal CPU involvement. The rendering model is based on framebuffer strategies with partial update support, and memory allocation is entirely static, providing deterministic behavior suitable for safety-critical and real-time applications.

Architecture Profile: TouchGFX  
 Rendering: Framebuffer-based with partial updates  
 GPU Integration: Tight coupling with DMA2D and Chrom-ART  
 Memory Model: Static allocation, fully deterministic behavior  
 Portability: Limited to STM32 platform ecosystem

### 8.2 LVGL

LVGL (Light and Versatile Graphics Library) is a platform-independent graphics library with highly configurable rendering behavior. It provides high flexibility across hardware platforms and gives developers fine-grained control over memory usage and rendering pipeline configuration. This flexibility comes at a cost: optimal performance requires explicit developer-level optimization and deep embedded systems knowledge.

Architecture Profile: LVGL  
 Rendering: Configurable, single, double, or partial framebuffer modes  
 GPU Integration: Software-based by default; optional hardware acceleration  
 Memory Model: Manual control over rendering pipeline and buffer management  
 Portability: Highly portable across MCU and MPU platforms

### 8.3 Qt for MCUs

Qt for MCUs applies a declarative UI model using QML, with higher-level abstractions that enable rapid UI development and iteration. QML-based UI definitions compile to C++, and the framework integrates an animation engine capable of complex motion sequences with relatively low developer effort. This abstraction comes at the

cost of higher memory footprint and more complex integration requirements compared to lightweight alternatives.

Architecture Profile: Qt for MCUs  
 Rendering: Event-driven model via QML engine  
 GPU Integration: Integrated animation framework with optional hardware paths  
 Memory Model: Higher footprint; less deterministic than static models  
 Portability: Scalable toward full Qt desktop environments

## 9. Benchmark Methodology

### 9.1 Hardware Platform

All frameworks were evaluated on a consistent hardware platform to ensure comparable and reproducible results:

- STM32U5 series microcontroller (ARM Cortex-M33)
- Integrated DMA2D (Chrom-ART) and GPU acceleration
- 800 × 480 TFT display with capacitive touch interface
- FreeRTOS-based runtime environment

### 9.2 Benchmark Implementation Approach

A unified benchmark application was implemented across all frameworks using identical UI structure, the same graphical assets, equivalent animation behavior, and consistent timing and execution flow. This methodology ensures that observed performance differences are attributable to framework behavior rather than implementation variance, a critical requirement for objective comparative analysis.

### 9.3 Test Scenarios

Scenario	Description	Primary Metric
Video Rendering	Continuous frame updates via sequential image rendering. Measures sustained frame throughput and stability.	FPS, CPU %
2D Animation	Rotation and translation of multiple images simultaneously. Evaluates transformation efficiency and motion smoothness.	FPS, Render Time
Static Rendering	Shape rendering with color transitions and alpha blending. Tests fill rate and blending pipeline efficiency.	CPU %, RAM
SVG Rendering	Vector graphic rendering and animation. Evaluates scalability and computational load of vector pipelines.	CPU %, Flash

Scenario	Description	Primary Metric
Text Scrolling	Rendering and smooth scrolling of large text blocks. Measures text engine efficiency and update handling.	FPS, CPU %

Table 2: Benchmark test scenarios applied across all three frameworks

### 9.4 Measured Metrics

The following runtime metrics were collected for each framework across all test scenarios:

- Frames Per Second (FPS): rendering throughput and visual smoothness
- CPU Utilization (%): processing load imposed on the Cortex-M33 core
- RAM Usage: framebuffer and runtime object memory consumption
- Flash Usage: code and asset storage requirements
- Render Time per Frame: end-to-end time from draw call to display commit

## 10. Benchmark Observations & Technical Analysis

### 10.1 Rendering Stability

Frameworks with tight hardware acceleration integration demonstrated significantly more stable frame rates under sustained rendering workloads. TouchGFX, leveraging DMA2D offload for pixel fill and blending operations, maintained consistent frame timing across all test scenarios. LVGL, operating in software-rendering mode without explicit DMA configuration, exhibited frame-rate variance that increased proportionally with scene complexity. Qt for MCUs demonstrated stable performance in animation-heavy scenarios due to its integrated animation engine, though baseline CPU overhead was consistently higher.

[Click Here to Watch](#)

### 10.2 CPU Utilization Analysis

CPU utilization is the most critical metric for constrained embedded systems, as excessive UI rendering load directly reduces available cycles for application logic, communication stacks, and safety-critical tasks.

TouchGFX demonstrated the lowest CPU utilization across all test scenarios, consistently offloading pixel operations to DMA2D. LVGL's CPU load was moderate and highly sensitive to rendering configuration, developers who implemented partial framebuffer strategies and optional DMA hooks achieved performance approaching TouchGFX levels, but this required significant optimization effort. Qt for MCUs showed the highest baseline CPU utilization across all scenarios, attributable to QML engine overhead and object lifecycle management.

### 10.3 SVG Rendering Behavior

Vector rendering performance diverged substantially across frameworks. SVG operations increased CPU load significantly in software-driven pipelines, making hardware acceleration particularly valuable for vector-heavy UI designs. TouchGFX's GPU-accelerated path handled vector transformations with minimal CPU impact. LVGL's software vector engine required careful workload management to avoid CPU saturation during complex SVG

operations. Qt for MCUs demonstrated the smoothest SVG animation behavior due to its integrated vector engine, though at the cost of higher overall resource consumption.

### 10.4 Memory and Resource Trade-offs

Static memory allocation models (TouchGFX) provided fully predictable behavior, a requirement for safety-critical and hard real-time applications. Dynamic and configurable systems (LVGL, Qt for MCUs) offer greater flexibility but require careful tuning to avoid memory fragmentation and runtime allocation failures.

Framework	RAM Profile	Flash Profile	Allocation Model
TouchGFX	Low - deterministic	Moderate	Static - no heap allocation
LVGL	Configurable - developer-controlled	Low	Configurable - heap or static
Qt for MCUs	Higher - QML engine overhead	Higher	Dynamic - QML object lifecycle

Table 3: Memory profile comparison across evaluated frameworks

### 10.5 TouchGFX Performance Matrices

The following table presents measured performance metrics from the TouchGFX benchmark application executed on the STM32U5G9J-DK2 development board. Metrics cover CPU utilization and render time per demo scenario, alongside global memory figures for the complete application.

Frameworks	TouchGFX						
	Parameter	Static demo	2D demo	SVG demo	Video demo	Text Scroll demo	Cluster demo
<b>CPU (%)</b>	6–8	7	23–26	4	59–62	10	
<b>Render Time (ms)</b>	0–1	3	7–9	4	20–22	1–2	
<b>RAM usage (KB)</b>	Application	95 KB					
	Frame buffers	1500 KB					
	Stencil buffer	380 KB					
	<b>Total</b>	<b>1975 KB</b>					
<b>Internal Flash (KB)</b>	426 KB						
<b>External Flash (MB)</b>	44 MB						

Table 4: TouchGFX benchmark performance matrices (STM32U5G9J-DK2, March 2026)

### 10.6 LVGL Performance Matrices

The following table presents measured performance metrics from the LVGL benchmark application. TSC6 image compression (a lossy format supported by the NeoChrom GPU) was used for asset storage, which contributes to the reduced external flash footprint compared to other frameworks.

Frameworks	LVGL							
	Parameter	Static demo	2D demo	SVG demo	Video demo	Text Scroll demo	Cluster demo	
CPU (%)	2	30–33	15–16	5–6	4–5	12		
Render Time (ms)	1–3	3–4	9–12	5–6	23–28	8		
RAM usage (KB)	Application	289 KB						
	Frame buffers	1500 KB						
	Stencil buffer	375 KB						
	<b>Total</b>	<b>2164 KB</b>						
Internal Flash (KB)	559 KB							
External Flash (MB)	24 MB							

Table 5: LVGL benchmark performance matrices (STM32U5G9J-DK2, March 2026). Note: TSC6 image compression used — lossy format supported by NeoChrom GPU.

### 10.7 Qt for MCUs Performance Matrices

The following table presents measured performance metrics from the Qt for MCUs benchmark application. Note that Qt for MCUs does not support runtime SVG rendering: SVG assets are pre-processed at compile time and converted to bitmap data embedded in the binary. SVG-scenario values are therefore marked with \* to reflect this compile-time preprocessing behavior.

Frameworks	Qt for MCUs							
	Parameter	Static demo	2D demo	SVG demo *	Video demo	Text Scroll demo	Cluster demo	
CPU (%)	< 1	5–6	14–15 *	< 1	2	2–3		
Render Time (ms)	3	8–9	6 *	5	9–10	8–9		
RAM usage (KB)	Application	219 KB						
	Frame buffers	1500 KB						
	Stencil buffer	0 KB						
	<b>Total</b>	<b>1719 KB</b>						
Internal Flash (KB)	519 KB							
External Flash (MB)	80 MB							

Table 6: Qt for MCUs benchmark performance matrices (STM32U5G9J-DK2, March 2026). \* SVG scenario uses pre-rendered bitmap data compiled at build time; values reflect bitmap rendering, not runtime SVG parsing.

## 11. Development Workflow & Engineering Effort

### 11.1 TouchGFX

TouchGFX integrates tightly with STM32CubeIDE and the TouchGFX Designer tool. Auto-generated UI code and a structured drag-and-drop workflow reduce the manual integration effort significantly. Engineers with STM32 experience can reach functional UI prototypes quickly. However, the workflow is tightly coupled to the STM32 ecosystem porting to other hardware requires complete framework replacement.

### 11.2 LVGL

LVGL requires manual integration of display and input drivers, and the rendering pipeline must be explicitly configured. This demands deeper embedded systems expertise than TouchGFX's IDE-driven workflow. The payoff is complete control over system-level behavior, experienced developers can tune LVGL to achieve near-optimal performance on virtually any hardware target. The learning curve is steeper, and the initial integration effort is higher, but long-term flexibility is unmatched.

### 11.3 Qt for MCUs

Qt for MCUs enables UI development through QML and Qt Design Studio, providing a clean separation between UI layer and application logic. The declarative model allows frontend developers without deep embedded experience to implement complex UI behaviors efficiently. Integration overhead is higher than TouchGFX but the development velocity advantage is significant for complex, design-heavy applications. Commercial licensing costs must be factored into total cost of ownership.

Dimension	TouchGFX	LVGL	Qt for MCUs
Primary IDE	STM32CubeIDE + Designer	Any editor / Eclipse / VS Code	Qt Design Studio
Code Generation	Auto-generated via Designer	Manual implementation	QML compiler to C++
Driver Integration	Auto-configured for STM32	Manual display + input drivers	Platform-specific HAL layer
Debug / Profiling	Integrated STM32 toolchain	Custom instrumentation	Qt tooling
Time to Prototype	Low	High	Low–Moderate
Required Expertise	STM32 + embedded C++	Deep embedded systems	QML + embedded C++

Table 4: Development workflow comparison across frameworks

## 12. Scalability & Portability Analysis

Framework portability directly impacts long-term product evolution and the effort required to migrate across hardware generations. This is a frequently underweighted factor during initial framework selection but becomes a significant engineering liability as product lines expand.

Framework	Portability	Scalability Path	Migration Effort
TouchGFX	Low - STM32 ecosystem only	Limited to ST hardware roadmap	High - complete framework replacement for non-STM32
LVGL	High - any MCU or MPU	Broad cross-platform evolution	Low - HAL abstraction layer supports re-targeting
Qt for MCUs	Moderate - selected platforms	Scales toward full Qt desktop environments	Moderate - platform ports available for major MCU families

Table 5: Portability and scalability comparison

## 13. Framework Selection Guidelines

Framework selection should be driven by system constraints, product goals, and long-term scalability requirements. No single framework is optimal for all use cases. The following matrix maps common engineering scenarios to the most suitable framework choice, based on the benchmark evaluation and architectural analysis presented in this paper.

Evaluation Criterion	TouchGFX	LVGL	Qt for MCUs
Target Hardware	STM32 MCUs only	Any MCU / MPU	Selected MCU / MPU
Licensing Model	Free (STM32 only)	Open-source (MIT)	Commercial license
Rendering Approach	HW-accel (DMA2D/GPU)	SW-driven, opt. HW	QML engine layer
Memory Strategy	Static (deterministic)	Configurable	Higher footprint
CPU Utilization	Low	Medium	Higher
Animation Capability	HW-assisted	Flexible, manual	Advanced built-in
Developer Effort	Moderate	High	Low–Moderate
UI Complexity Support	Medium–High	Medium	High
Portability	Low	High	Moderate
Best Fit Use Case	STM32-based industrial / real-time	Cost-sensitive, cross-platform	Premium UI, design-heavy apps

Table 6: Framework Selection Matrix: Silicon Signals Benchmark Evaluation, March 2026

## 14. Practical Implications & Use Cases

### 14.1 Industrial HMI: Process Control Panel

An industrial controller HMI requires hard real-time response to sensor inputs, predictable memory behavior for safety certification, and sustained rendering of live telemetry data. CPU availability for PLC-style background tasks is critical. TouchGFX is the preferred choice: its DMA2D-accelerated rendering frees the CPU for process control logic, and its static memory model supports safety-critical certification requirements.

### 14.2 Medical Monitor: Patient Bedside Display

A patient monitoring device must display continuous waveform updates, alarm states, and trend graphs on a resource-limited MCU with strict regulatory constraints. LVGL provides the flexibility to optimize memory usage for certification compliance and supports cross-platform development if the hardware platform changes across product generations. Its open-source MIT license eliminates IP concerns in regulated environments.

### 14.3 Consumer IoT: Premium Smart Home Device

A premium smart home controller with animated UI, gesture-driven navigation, and design-forward aesthetics requires sophisticated visual behavior that is difficult to achieve with low-level frameworks. Qt for MCUs enables rapid iteration on complex UI designs through QML, with a clean separation between design and application logic, allowing parallel development tracks for UI and firmware teams. The commercial license cost is acceptable within a consumer device business model.

#### 14.4 Cross-Platform Embedded Product Family

A product line spanning multiple MCU families (STM32, NXP i.MX RT, Raspberry Pi RP2040) requires a portable GUI solution that avoids hardware-specific lock-in. LVGL's hardware abstraction layer and MIT license make it the most practical choice, a single codebase can be retargeted across the product family with HAL-level driver changes, protecting the GUI investment across hardware generations.

## 15. Conclusion

GUI framework selection is a system-level decision with measurable consequences for rendering performance, memory utilization, development velocity, and long-term product scalability. This evaluation demonstrates that no single framework is universally optimal, the right choice depends on a structured analysis of hardware platform, UI complexity requirements, team expertise, licensing model, and portability needs.

TouchGFX delivers the best performance characteristics on STM32 hardware through tight hardware integration, making it the preferred choice for industrial and real-time applications where predictability is paramount. LVGL offers the greatest flexibility and portability for cost-sensitive or multi-platform products, but performance is contingent on developer-level optimization. Qt for MCUs enables the most sophisticated UI development workflows and supports complex visual designs with lower frontend development effort, at the cost of higher resource overhead and commercial licensing.

A benchmark-driven, hardware-specific evaluation methodology as applied in this paper provides the most reliable basis for framework selection decisions. Teams that defer this analysis to late-stage development often encounter performance or memory constraints that require costly architectural changes.

### Framework Recommendation Summary

Use TouchGFX for STM32-based industrial and real-time products requiring predictable performance and static memory behavior.

Choose LVGL for cost-sensitive, cross-platform products where developer control and portability are paramount.

Select Qt for MCUs when UI sophistication and design quality are the primary product differentiators.

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## 17. Appendices

### Appendix A: Hardware Platform Specifications

Parameter	Specification
Microcontroller	STM32U595RIT6Q (ARM Cortex-M33, 160 MHz)
Flash Memory	4 MB internal flash
SRAM	786 KB internal SRAM
Display Interface	16-bit parallel RGB + LTDC
Display Resolution	800 × 480 pixels, 16-bit color
Touch Controller	Capacitive multitouch, I2C interface
GPU Acceleration	Chrom-ART Accelerator (DMA2D)
RTOS	FreeRTOS v10.5.1
Toolchain	STM32CubeIDE 1.14 / GCC-ARM 12.2

Table A1: Benchmark hardware platform specifications

### Appendix B: Benchmark Asset Specifications

Asset Type	Specification	Notes
Background Images	800×480, RGB565	Identical across all frameworks
Animation Sprites	64×64 to 256×256, ARGB8888	Pre-multiplied alpha where supported
SVG Assets	Scalable, path complexity: 50–200 nodes	Identical source files
Font Assets	Calibri 12/16/20/24pt	Pre-rasterized for TouchGFX/LVGL

Asset Type	Specification	Notes
Color Depth	16-bit (RGB565) baseline	32-bit where framework default
Framebuffer Config	Double buffer where available	Consistent across frameworks

Table B1: Benchmark asset and configuration specifications

## About Silicon Signals

Silicon Signals specializes in embedded systems, vision solutions, and performance-driven product engineering. With deep expertise in low-level system design, hardware-software integration, and performance validation, Silicon Signals enables development of efficient, scalable, and certification-ready embedded products.

Areas of practice include embedded GUI development and optimization, real-time system architecture, hardware-accelerated image processing, RTOS integration and tuning, and cross-platform firmware engineering.



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