

USING SPREADSHEETS TO TEACH COMPUTER ARCHITECTURE

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Abstract: In this paper, we introduce a new tool dedicated to computer architecture learning. Based on spreadsheets, it is simple to use and widely portable. It provides a set of spreadsheets with examples to run and analyse and gives the opportunity to users to build their own basic circuits from transistors and basic gates to logic and clocked blocks. Users can also use the provided machine spreadsheet to write their assembly code, execute it and even enhance the instructions set by adding new instructions and their associated microcode to the microcode table. The results are very promising considering the speed and the level of the understang of the students following the computer architecture design course since the introduction of this tool.

1 INTRODUCTION

Computer architecture: binary coding, circuits design and assembly programming are not obvious to understand for a complete neophyte in the area. It makes this subject very difficult to teach and needs some pedagogic and simple to use tools to make this task easier, in which the beginner who has never programmed in his life should acquire very easily and by himself the full knowledge of the different tools as well as the skill of testing his own modifications in order to fully understand the underlying ideas.

For more advanced and more convinced users, a digital design may be specified by its behavioral or structural description and tested after some compilation (using VHDL, Verilog or other programming languages as Java, C, C++, SystemC).

In order to fit with the competences of our students the only possible ways to interface with the computer were either the video game like approach, which in our point of view does not fix knowledge (yet another game), or spreadsheet like formulas in which they are obliged to understand and describe the relationship between signals. We have introduced a new method for teaching the bases of logic design and computer architecture for beginners three years ago, and since then we are using it for undergraduate students. Our method is based on a series of simulators realized using classical spreadsheets, progressively modified by the students without any kind of classical programming (in terms of high level language).

2 RELATED WORK

Many tools have been used in order to help computer architecture teaching. They are usually either full non portable CAD commercial and non commercial applications, very rich but needing quite a lot of time for tool learning. Another portable way is the Java based applets concept (Hades and the related frameworks (Hendrich, 2000), (Hendrich, 2002) and (Ferreira et al., 2005), as well as *Opar* (Guyot, 2005) for instance). The trouble with this kind of tools in a teaching approach is that: "While eye catching animations easily impress one-time users, it is much more difficult to make them really helpful for teaching", at least for the beginner (Hendrich, 2000).

We have used the *Diglog* module (Lazzaro, 2000) dedicated to circuit and logic simulation which is a part of chipmunk, developed by J.Lazzaro from Berkeley University-CA. This software provides electronic computer aided design tools for Schematic capture, circuit and logic simulation, VLSI layout and LVS, data viewing and drawing¹. It provides a rich gates and basic circuits library but we noticed that the design of logic blocks and the connection between them became quickly a laborious task, due to the lack of ways to connect simply parallel busses. (In fact, connexions, inputs and outputs are made only at the bit level). Building the simplest machine needs a hard work, error prone and very difficult to achieve in a

¹It can be downloaded at: www.cs.berkeley.edu/~lazzaro/biblio/software.html

very limited time.

A very few experiments have been done using spreadsheets (A.El-Hajj et al., 2000; Smith, 2007; Seila, 2004) in which very often the spreadsheets are used primarily as a way of displaying preprogrammed blocks written in Visual Basic or its equivalent.

The proposed approach requires only a basic understanding of spreadsheets formulas use which is considered as well known by all the students. The main objective is to provide on each spreadsheet all the elements necessary to understand the working of each part by a direct access to the formula. A student can access to everything, verify, modify and test each part or the whole of a simulation. The main idea is that absolutely nothing is hidden. Every component being described by a visible function or by a few functions, a misunderstanding can only be a misreading of a function.

3 COURSE AND TOOL ROADMAP

The content of the course is based on the classical hierarchy of any computer architecture course. The practical (lab.) works use our simulators realized using spreadsheets with no programming (at the VBA or other level).

At least, one spreadsheet is dedicated to every chapter and allows to construct, check and validate a piece of hardware related to the chapter. The course covers the following chapters :

1. **From the transistor to the gate** provides a spreadsheet with a bunch of transistor based circuits for basic gates and the possibility to change their input values or parameters to observe and analyze the analog and digital signals.
2. **Making functional blocks with gates and registers** provides a spreadsheet containing gates, some digital circuits examples which will be used to construct functional blocks.
3. **The Von Neuman computer approach, the data and the control paths** are detailed and illustrated by a basic operational machine on a spreadsheet.
4. **Study of a first simplistic microcoded machine** provided with both a simple code in memory and the details of the microcode. The students can use it to launch an execution at a micro instruction level.
5. **Enhancing the microcode** by defining new instructions and their associated micro instructions

sets inspired by the initial instruction set microcode.

6. **Assembly coding** for simple problems, to load and execute on the provided machine spreadsheet. For this purpose we use both a manual assembly method and an external C written assembler.
7. **New addressing modes** as indirect and indexed are developed
8. **Subroutines : making a software stack** a branch and link instruction is detailed, as well as the way of handling a software stack.
9. **I/O handling and interrupts** A simple interrupt logic is created and is associated to direct I/Os.

4 DEVELOPING MACHINE SIMULATORS USING SPREADSHEETS

The use of spreadsheets to make logic simulations or CPU simulations is not new and we can cite (A.El-Hajj et al., 2000) and (Seila, 2004) as two good examples of what can be done, by the use of a VBA programming. Nevertheless, this type of realization has two drawbacks: it is hardly portable from a spreadsheet to another (for instance from EXCEL to Open Office Calc) and the fact that macros hide a lot of informations to the students.

We believe that using only formulas which are visible at anytime is much more educative even if the work is a little bit harder to prepare. In this tool, each input or output of an element (transistor, resistor, gate or logic block) is associated with a cell. The interconnects between elements are done at two levels: the component functional level and the components interconnection level. At the component functional level, the input of every element needs the address of the output of the previous one to ensure a correct execution of the implemented function by using the right parameters. At the components interconnection level, lines representing physical links can be implemented either by hand drawing, or by the use of the "trace precedent" function which exists at least in Excel and OpenOffice. It draws automatically a straight line from the input to the previous output. Using such a method, the student can simulate a circuit the level he wishes (analog, binary or digital bus value for instance).

4.1 The Analog and Digital Points of View

During many years of logic and architecture teaching, we have understood that the students have a real problem to see the link between an analog signal and a digital one. The first part of the course is intended to show how simple is a NOT and a NOR gate behavior. This is achieved assuming simple transistor models at a static level. The analog and digital views of some gates are shown by testing and modifying the different parameters of the electronic circuit as charge resistors, number of inputs etc.. in order to show for example what should be a level margin and to what extent a noise can be harmful to a circuit.

The simulator is based on the Ohm law which has been very easily transposed on a spreadsheet. The students have a clear view of the different intensities and voltages, and are allowed to modify the charge resistors, the transistors characteristics and so on.

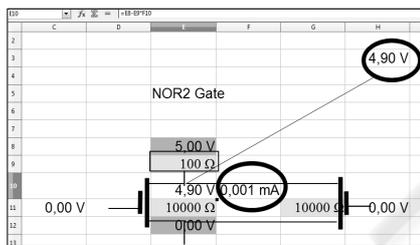


Figure 1: Simulation of simple gates using transistors.

4.2 Gates Realization

The second step is dedicated to the realization of other gates, and of small combinatorial logical blocks. We assume in this step that the inside of the gate has been understood and that we can work now at the logic level. During the associated lecture, Boolean algebra and Boolean identities are explained, and a few examples of Karnaugh optimizations are illustrated by some basic examples as the one bit full adder.

A spreadsheet containing switches, leds and many classical gates is given. The students can duplicate and move the gates and leds and are able to assess their logical equations by simulation. In order to make the spreadsheet operational for this kind of simulation, it is compulsory to let the spreadsheet to be recursive. In fact, the order of the calculations applied to the different cells is not needed but it is very important to keep the spreadsheet portable.

The very first exercises is dedicated to the verification of the first De Morgan's law. Typical practical circuits as a four bit adder and a two input multiplexer

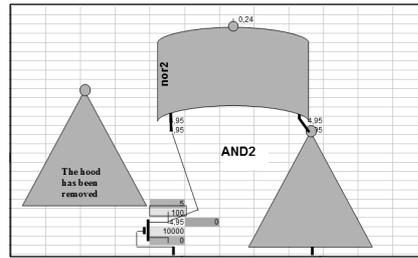


Figure 2: Under the hood : The AND2 gate.

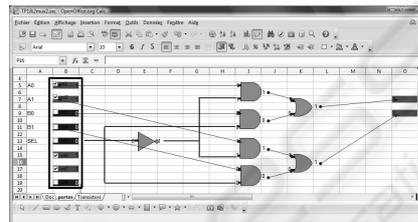


Figure 3: Example of a 2bits 2 inputs multiplexer.

(see figure 3) are built and checked. Next, we introduce on another sheet the use of clocked logic: this is simulated by a phased clock.

4.3 Simulation of Clocked Components

In our following models, all the combinatorial parts are simulated during one phase, while all clocked elements (registers, memories during the writing phase, counters etc.) change their internal values only during another phase. This is fully explained in the tutorial. The first typical example given is a loadable counter. Its circuit is composed of an adder, a multiplexer and a register, all of them previously explained. The inputs of this counter are A (a loadable value), Clear (asynchronous input), IN (mode selection load/increment), and ck (the clock). The output of the counter is called Output, the output of the adder is called SADD, the output of the multiplexer SMUX, and the internal value of the register Reg.

This leads to the following set of equations (see figure 4):

$$Reg = if(Clear = 0; if(ck = 1; SMUX; Reg); 0) \quad (1)$$

which is applied to cell G7

$$SMUX = if(IN = 1; A; SADD) \quad (2)$$

which is applied to cell E7

$$Output = if(ck = 0; Reg; Output) \quad (3)$$

applied to cell H7

$$SADD = Output + 1 \quad (4)$$

exercises can be built. The architecture is then slightly modified in order to show by simulation a very simple interrupt system. (Use of an interrupt flip flop and its commands, and of an interrupt vector address).

5 CRITICAL DISCUSSION

The use of other hardware CAD tools needs quite a long training (at least 20 hours for people already acquainted with at least one programming language). The proposed use of spreadsheets needs only a training of a few minutes for students used to formulas in spreadsheets. Nevertheless, the hardware which can be simply tested by this method is restricted to small machines, whose entire microcode and circuits could be contained in one or two sheets. This is fully sufficient for undergraduate courses, but limits its use. Another criticism is that although the first realizations were very simple and very fast to achieve. Only one author made the first version of a Von Neuman machine in one week end. It has been more difficult to make it portable between different versions of EXCEL, and even more to be also compatible with OpenOffice Calc. The evaluated cost for the whole methodology development including a parametrized assembler is of about three men months.

6 CONCLUSIONS

This methodology of teaching seems to be very efficient: at every step of a hardware component design, it mixes deductive approaches with inductive approaches. The student is given laws, for instance Ohm law, from which he derives the understanding of a simple gate. This method has been experimented now for 3 years on about 400 students and gives very good results. The time allocated to practical works is very short (12 or 18 hours). At the end, every student has at least fully understood a data path, a control path and different addressing modes. The result is much better than what we got with the same lab's time, from Diglog for instance, where the students spent all their time in connecting the wires, and where only one third of them were able to fulfill and test a very simple machine.

This first course in computer architecture has demonstrated that it greatly simplifies the learning of both C language, operating systems and compiling techniques. As a future extension, a book on the methodology including exercises is being written and will be available soon at Hermann Editor.

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