

Digital Systems: Functional Units & their Interconnections

COMPUTER: Common Operating Machine Particularly/Purposely Used for Technological/Trade, Educational and Research.

Types of Computers:

- Embedded computers
- Personal computers
- Servers and Enterprise systems
- Supercomputers and Grid computers

Embedded computers: They are integrated into a larger device or system in order to automatically monitor and control a physical process or environment. They are used for a specific purpose rather than for general processing tasks. Typical applications include industrial and home automation, appliances, telecommunication products, and vehicles. Users may not even be aware of the role that computers play in such systems.

Personal computers: They have achieved widespread use in homes, educational institutions, and business and engineering office settings, primarily for dedicated individual use. They support a variety of applications such as general computation, document preparation, computer-aided design, audiovisual entertainment, interpersonal communication, and Internet browsing. A number of classifications are used for personal computers. Desktop computers serve general needs and fit within a typical personal workspace. Workstation computers offer higher computational capacity and more powerful graphical display capabilities for engineering and scientific work. Finally, Portable and Notebook computers provide the basic features of a personal computer in a smaller lightweight package. They can operate on batteries to provide mobility.

Servers and Enterprise systems: They are large computers that are meant to be shared by a potentially large number of users who access them from some form of personal computer over a public or private network. Such computers may host large databases and provide information processing for a government agency or a commercial organization.

Supercomputers and Grid computers: normally offer the highest performance. They are the most expensive and physically the largest category of computers. Supercomputers are used for the highly demanding computations needed in weather forecasting, engineering design and simulation, and scientific work. They have a high cost. Grid computers provide a more cost-effective alternative. They combine a large number of personal computers and disk storage units in a physically distributed high-speed network, called a grid, which is managed as a coordinated computing resource. By evenly distributing the computational workload across the grid, it is possible to achieve high performance on large applications ranging from numerical computation to information searching.

Functional Units & Interconnections: A computer consists of five functionally independent main parts: input, memory, arithmetic and logic, output, and control units, as shown in Figure below. The input unit accepts coded information from human operators using devices such as keyboards, or from other computers over digital communication lines. The information received is stored in the computer's memory, either for later use or to be processed immediately by the arithmetic and logic unit. The processing steps are specified by a program that is also stored in the memory. Finally, the results are sent back to the outside world through the output unit. All of these actions are coordinated by the control unit. An interconnection network provides the means for the functional units to exchange information and coordinate their actions.

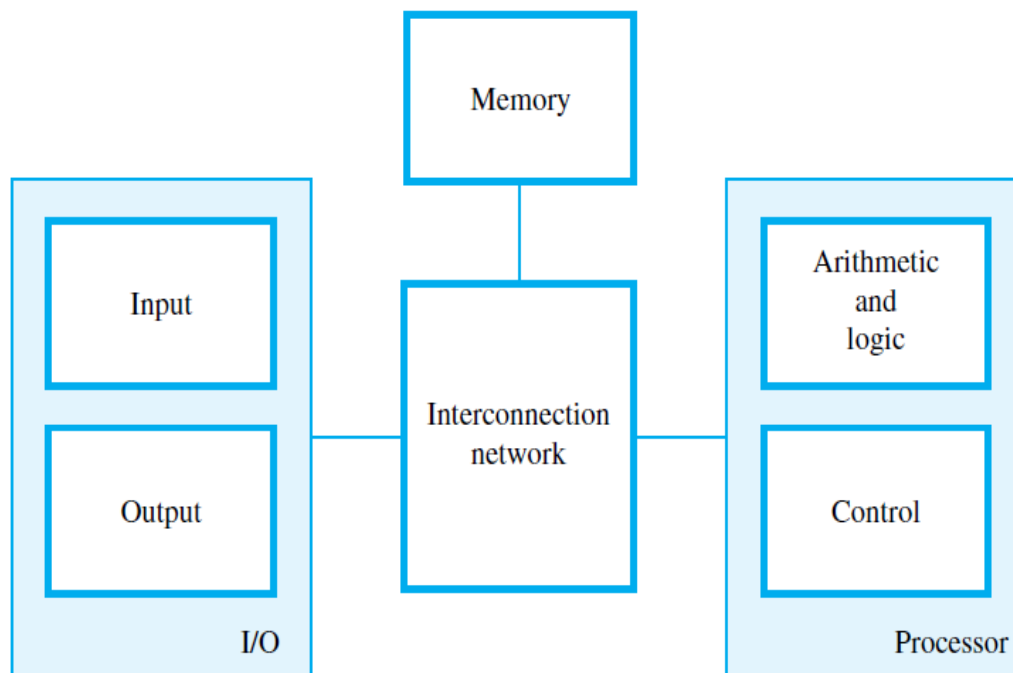


Fig: Basic Functional Units of a Computer

Input Unit: Computers accept coded information through input units. The most common input device is the keyboard. Whenever a key is pressed, the corresponding letter or digit is automatically translated into its corresponding binary code and transmitted to the processor. Many other kinds of input devices for human-computer interaction are available, including the touchpad, mouse, joystick, and trackball. These are often used as graphic input devices in conjunction with displays. Microphones can be used to capture audio input which is then sampled and converted into digital codes for storage and processing. Similarly, cameras can be used to capture video input.

Output Unit:

The output unit is the counterpart of the input unit. Its function is to send processed results to the outside world. A familiar example of such a device is a printer. Most printers employ either photocopying techniques, as in laser printers, or ink jet streams. Such printers may generate output at speeds of 20 or more pages per minute. However, printers are mechanical devices, and as such are quite slow compared to the electronic speed of a processor. Some units, such as graphic displays, provide both an output function, showing text and graphics, and an input function, through touchscreen capability. The dual role of such units is the reason for using the single name input/output (I/O) unit in many cases.

Memory Unit: The function of the memory unit is to store programs and data. There are two classes of storage, called primary and secondary.

Primary Memory

Primary memory, also called main memory, is a fast memory that operates at electronic speeds. Programs must be stored in this memory while they are being executed. The memory consists of a large number of semiconductor storage cells, each capable of storing one bit of information. These cells are rarely read or written individually. Instead, they are handled in groups of fixed size called words. The memory is organized so that one word can be stored or retrieved in one basic operation. The number of bits in each word is referred to as the word length of the computer, typically 16, 32, or 64 bits. To provide easy access to any word in the memory, a distinct address is associated with each word location. Addresses are consecutive numbers, starting from 0, that identify successive locations. A particular word is accessed by specifying its address and issuing a control command to the memory that starts the storage or retrieval process. Instructions and data can be written into or read from the memory under the control of the processor. It is essential to be able to access any word location in the memory as quickly as possible. A memory in which any location can be accessed in a short and fixed amount of time after specifying its address is called a random-access memory (RAM). The time required to access one word is called the memory access time. This time is independent of the location of the word being accessed. It typically ranges from a few nanoseconds (ns) to about 100 ns for current RAM units.

Cache Memory

As an adjunct to the main memory, a smaller, faster RAM unit, called a cache, is used to hold sections of a program that are currently being executed, along with any associated data. The cache is tightly coupled with the processor and is usually contained on the same integrated-circuit chip. The purpose of the cache is to facilitate high instruction execution rates. At the start of program execution, the cache is empty. All program instructions and any required data are stored in the main memory. As execution proceeds, instructions are fetched into the processor chip, and a copy of each is placed in the cache. When the execution of an instruction requires data located in the main memory, the data are fetched and copies are also placed in the cache. Now, suppose a number of instructions are executed repeatedly as happens in a program loop. If these instructions are available in the cache, they can be fetched quickly during the period of repeated use. Similarly, if the same data locations are accessed repeatedly while copies of their contents are available in the cache, they can be fetched quickly.

Secondary Storage: Although primary memory is essential, it tends to be expensive and does not retain information when power is turned off. Thus additional, less expensive, permanent secondary storage is used when large amounts of data and many programs have to be stored, particularly for information that is accessed infrequently. Access times for secondary storage are longer than for primary memory. A wide selection of secondary storage devices is available, including magnetic disks, optical disks (DVD and CD), and flash memory devices.

Arithmetic and Logic Unit:

Most computer operations are executed in the arithmetic and logic unit (ALU) of the processor. Any arithmetic or logic operation, such as addition, subtraction, multiplication, division, or comparison of numbers, is initiated by bringing the required operands into the processor, where the operation is performed by the ALU. For example, if two numbers located in the memory are to be added, they are brought into the processor, and the addition is carried out by the ALU. The sum may then be stored in the memory or retained in the processor for immediate use.

Control Unit:

The memory, arithmetic and logic, and I/O units store and process information and perform input and output operations. The operation of these units must be coordinated in some way. This is the responsibility of the control unit. The control unit is effectively the nerve center that sends control signals to other units and senses their states. I/O transfers, consisting of input and output operations, are controlled by program instructions that identify the devices involved and the information to be transferred. Control circuits are responsible for generating the timing signals that govern the transfers and determine when a given action is to take place. Data transfers between the processor and the memory are also managed by the control unit through timing signals.

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