QNICE - a nice 16 bit architecture

Bernd Ulmann

August 23, 2015

Goal 1.1 Goal

Why a new 16 bit processor architecture? Why not stay with commodity products and a wider bus width?

- First of all, there is nothing like developing your own CPU from scratch nothing!
- The QNICE architecture was developed during 2006 with its 32 bit predecessor NICE (cf. [2] and [3]) in mind.
- The 16 bit data bus width was chosen to ease an actual implementation of the processor either using TTL chips as in many other homebrew CPU projects¹ or using more modern FPGAs with a bit of surrounding circuitry.
- Thanks to Mirko Holzer the project was revived in 2015, first with an AVR-implementation and then with a FPGA-version of this processor.

2/29 Bernd Ulmann August 23, 2015

¹Most notably Bill Buzbee's Magic, cf [1].

Basics 1.2 Basics

- 16 bit data and address bus width (little endian!)
- Rather fixed instruction format every instruction occupies one 16 bit machine word
- 16 general purpose registers divided into two banks of eight registers each
- The register bank containing registers 0...7 is actually a window to a high speed RAM so in fact there are $256 \cdot 8 + 8 = 2056$ registers all in all
- moving the register window is accomplished in a single operation making push/pop operations virtually unnecessary
- Very small instruction set (18 instructions)
- 4 addressing modes

3/29 Bernd Ulmann August 23, 2015

■ At any moment of a program run there are 16 general purpose registers visible to the program:

DΛ	 D7	ро	R13	D1/I	D15
110	 17.1	110	 ILIS	1714	ILIO

■ Some registers serve a special function in the processor:

R13: Normally used as a stack pointer – especially the subroutine call instructions use this register as a stack pointer

R14: Statusregister (sr for short)

R15: Program counter

■ The upper eight registers R8...R15 are always the same while the lower set of eight registers is a window into a 256 · 8 register bank of 16 bit bus width.

The status register is divided into two parts: The lower 8 bits are the status bits reflecting the current processor state while the upper 8 bits (rbank) are used to control the register bank circuitry:

rbank	M	I	V	N	Z	С	Х	1
-------	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---

1: Always set to 1

X: 1 if the last result was 0xFFFF

C: Carry flag

Z: 1 if the last result was 0x0000

N: 1 if the last result was negative

V: 1 if the last operation caused an overflow

I: 1 if an interrupt occured

M: If set to 1, maskable interrupts are allowed

- As already mentioned, the upper 8 bits of R14, called rbank, control the register bank circuitry.
- Since there are 256 times 8 registers available as R0...R7, the eight bits of rbank suffice to specify one out of these 256 pages as the actual register page to be used.
- To switch between register pages it is only necessary to change the contents of rbank normally this will be accomplished by a simple ADD or SUB instruction.
- The multiple register banks are very handy in programming subroutines since they remove the necessity of saving lots of registers on entry and restoring them on exit of a subroutine.

- All input/output operations of QNICE take place through a memory mapped I/O system, so there are no special I/O instructions as some other processors feature.
- The upper 1k word of memory is reserved for I/O controllers which can be easily accessed using normal instructions with addressing modes referring to memory cells.

- QNICE utilizes 18 basic instructions, all of which (apart from HALT, which takes no operands) are two operand instructions.
- Instructions like ADD RO, R1 will actually perform an operation like R1 := R1 + R0 the only exceptions being
 - the two shift instructions SHL and SHR where the first operand specifies the number of places to be shifted and
 - the four jump and branch instructions ABRA, ASUB, RBRA and RSUB which only take a a destination and a condition code.
- All operands, apart from the condition code of a jump or branch instruction, of course, can be specified using one out of four possible addressing modes (Rxx, @Rxx, @Rxx++ and @--Rxx).

Most of QNICE's instructions feature a single instruction format, the only exceptions are the four branch and jump instructions:

4 bit	4 bit	2 bit	4 bit	2 bit	
opcode	src rxx	src mode	dst rxx	dst mode	

The four jump and branch instructions use the following instruction format:

4 bit	4 bit	2 bit	2 bit	1 bit	3 bit
				negate	select
opcode	src rxx	src mode	mode	condition	condition

■ The four jumps and branches ABRA, ASUB, RBRA and RSUB have the corresponding mode bits 00, 01, 10 and 11 respectively.

Орс	Instr	Operands	Effect
0	MOVE	src, dst	dst := src
1	ADD	src, dst	dst := dst + src
2	ADDC	src, dst	dst := dst + src + C
3	SUB	src, dst	dst := dst - src
4	SUBC	src, dst	dst := dst - src - C
5	SHL	src, dst	dst << src, fill with X, shift to C
6	SHR	src, dst	dst >> src, fill with C, shift to X
7	SWAP	src, dst	dst := ((src << 8) & 0xFF00)
			((src >> 8) & 0xFF)

Орс	Instr	Operands	Effect
8	NOT	src, dst	dst := !src
9	AND	src, dst	dst := dst & src
Α	OR	src, dst	dst := dst src
В	XOR	src, dst	dst := dst ^ src
C	CMP	src, dst	compare src with dst
D			reserved
E	HALT		Halt the processor
D	ABRA	dest, [!]cond	Absolute branch
D	ASUB	dest, [!]cond	Absolut subroutine call
D	RBRA	dest, [!]cond	Relative branch
D	RSUB	dest, [!]cond	Relative subroutine call

The four branch and call instructions need some clarification:

- There are absolute and relative branches and subroutine calls. Absolute branches and jumps will transfer the program execution to an absolute address specified by the destination operand of the instruction. Relative instructions will transfer the program execution to the address which is the result of the sum of the current program counter R15 and the destination operand (using two's complement implements backward jumps).
- The difference between branches and subroutine calls is that branches just change the program counter, while subroutine calls will push the current program counter to a stack before performing the actual jump.

- All branches and subroutine calls are conditional jumps they will be executed only if a certain condition is met.
- All conditions are specified in respect to the lower eight bits of the status register R14. A branch like

will only be taken if the C bit of R14 is set.

■ To simplify programming it is possible to negate the status register bit used as the control condition prior to its use (this will only affect the evaluation of the condition).

will only branch when the C bit is not set.

To allow unconditional jumps, the LSB of the status register is always set! All src and dst operands may be specified using one out of four possible addressing modes. In particular these are the following:

Mode bits	Notation	Description
00	Rxx	Use Rxx as operand
01	@Rxx	Use the memory cell addressed by
		the contents of Rxx as operand
10	@Rxx++	Use the memory cell addressed by
		the contents of Rxx as operand and
		then increment Rxx
11	@Rxx	Decrement Rxx and then use the
		memory cell addressed by Rxx as
		operand

Although there is no explicit addressing mode to specify the usage of a constant as an operand, this can be realized by using R15 as the address register as the following example shows:

■ Set RO the the fixed value 0x1234 using MOVE:

This assumes that the memory cell following the MOVE instruction will contain the value 0x1234. Using the QNICE assembler an instruction like this can be specified as

and the assembler will take care of filling the following memory cell with the proper value.

■ Move the contents of R0 to R1:

■ Move the contents of R0 to the memory cell addressed by the contents of R1:

Using R1 as a stack pointer, push the contents of R0 to the stack:

Using R1 as a stack pointer again, read the contents of the top of stack back into R0:

■ Perform an absolute jump to a subroutine at location 0x1234:

- This absolute subroutine call will take place unconditionally since the 1 bit of R14 is always set.
- In addition to this the contents of the program counter R15 will be pushed to a stack using R13 as the stack pointer.
- To return from this subroutine it is only necessary to read the old contents of R15, which have been pushed to the stack, back into R15:

The following examples may help in understanding the binary representation of QNICE instructions:

Instruction	Binary r	epresent	ation			Hex
MOVE @R13, R15	0000	1101	11	1111	10	0x0DFC
ADD RO, @R1	0001	0000	00	0001	01	0x1005
ASUB 0x1234, 1	1111	1111	10	01	000	0xFF90
	0001	0010	0011	0100		0x1234

000001					.ORG	0x0000
000002	0000	B000			XOR	RO, RO
000003	0001	0F84	1000		MOVE	0x1000, R1
000004	0003	1100		LOOP	ADD	R1, R0
000005	0004	3F84	0001		SUB	0x0001, R1
000006	0006	FF8B	0003		ABRA	LOOP, !Z
000007	8000	E000			HALT	

- Most processors require the explicit backup of register contents at the begin of a subroutine as well as a corresponding restore at the end of the routine. This normally involves the use of a stack which is time consuming due to the necessary memory references.
- QNICE simplifies the backup and restore of registers by utilizing the 256 register bank entries corresponding to the lower eight registers R0...R7.
- A normal subroutine for QNICE will use R13 as stack pointer for storing the return address, R14 to control the register bank, R8...R12 for passing arguments to the routine and R0...R7 as working registers for the subrouine itself.

```
MOVE ..., R8 ! Setup subroutine parameters ...

RSUB ROUTINE, 1 ! Unconditionally jump to the subroutine ... ! Continue with main program

ROUTINE: ADD 0x0100, R14 ! Incr. the register bank pointer ... ! Perform subroutine operations

SUB 0x0100, R14 ! Restore the register bank

MOVE @R13++, R15 ! Return to the calling program
```

- The development suite for QNICE is available at http://qnice.sf.net. It consists of an assembler and an emulator.
- The sources for Mirko Holzer's FPGA-implementation of QNICE can be found at https://github.com/sy2002/QNICE-FPGA. This repository also contains a copy of the necessary QNICE software development utilities.

- The emulator is quite capable and not only implements the CPU but also some IO-devices such as a basic UART and an IDE-interface.
- It features a rich command set (CB, DEBUG, DIS, DUMP, HELP, LOAD, QUIT, RESET, RDUMP, RUN, SET, SAVE, SB, STAT, STEP, VERBOSE) and extensive statistical features which proved rather useful during the design and development of the instruction set and addressing modes.

Load and disassemble the summation program:

```
Q> load sum.bin
Q> dis 0,9
Disassembled contents of memory locations 0000 - 0009:
0000: B000 XOR.
                   R00, R00
0001: 0F84 MOVE
                   0x1000. R01
0002: 1000
0003: 1100 ADD
                   R01, R00
                    0x0001, R01
0004: 3F84 SUB
0005: 0001
0006: FF8B ABRA
                   0x0003, !Z
0007: 0003
0008: E000 HALT
0009: 0000 MOVE
                   R00, R00
```

Show the register contents:

```
Q> rdump
```

Register dump: BANK = 00, SR = ____1

R00-R04: 0000 0000 0000 0000 R04-R08: 0000 0000 0000 0000 R08-R0c: 0000 0000 0000 0000 R0c-R10: 0000 0000 0001 0000

Run the program and repeat the register dump:

```
Q> run
Q> rdump
Register dump: BANK = 00, SR = ___Z_1

R00-R03: 0800 0000 0000 0000
R04-R07: 0000 0000 0000 0000
R08-R11: 0000 0000 0000 0000
R12-R15: 0000 0000 0009 0009
```

Print the statistics of this run:

@rx++: 8193 (28.57%)

0 (0.00%)

@--rx:

```
Q> stat
20484 memory reads, 0 memory writes and
12291 instructions have been executed so far:
INSTR ABSOLUTE RELATIVE INSTR ABSOLUTE RELATIVE
MOVE:
           1 ( 0.01%) ADD :
                              4096 (33.33%)
                           4096 (33.33%)
ADDC:
           0 ( 0.00%) SUB :
           0 (0.00%) SHL:
                                 0 (0.00%)
SUBC:
                               0 ( 0.00%)
SHR :
           0 ( 0.00%) SWAP:
                               0 ( 0.00%)
NOT ·
           O ( 0.00%) AND :
                              1 ( 0.01%)
OR :
           O ( 0.00%) XOR :
CMP :
           0 (0.00%)
                                0 (0.00%)
                           4096 (33.33%)
HAT.T.
           1 ( 0.01%) ABRA:
           0 (0.00%) RBRA:
                                 0 (0.00%)
ASUR:
RSUB:
           0 (0.00%)
    READ ACCESSES
                                 WRITE ACCESSES
      ABSOLUTE RELATIVE
                       MODE
                                   ABSOLUTE RELATIVE
MODE
       12290 (42.86%) rx : 8194 (28.57%)
ry :
       0 (0.00%) @rx : 0 (0.00%)
@rx :
                                   0 ( 0.00%)
```

@rx++:

@--rx: 0 (0.00%)

- As of now (AUG-2015) three QNICE implementations exist: The emulator, an AVR-implementation and Mirko Holzer's FPGA-implementation.
- The next step is to develop a useful monitor program, maybe in conjunction with a Forth interpreter.
- Next, a system controller will be designed which implements an interrupt controller and a simple MMU.
- With these prerequisites a UNIX-like operating system for QNICE should be possible.

- Bill Buzbee's Magic Processor has been described extensively at http://www.homebrewcpu.com
- Bernd Ulmann, NICE an elegant and powerful 32-bit architecture, Computer Architecture News, OCT-1997.
- Bernd Ulmann, The NICE Processor Pages, http://www.vaxman.de/projects/nice/nice.html