**Nano8 General Purpose Computer**

by Jakob Flocke (TheCodeCurrents)

updated 02.04.2025

**User Manual**

Welcome to the Nano8 General-Purpose Computer Project. The goal of this project is to create a general-purpose computer that is simple enough for beginners to understand while maintaining strong performance. Currently, the project is still in its early stages, so this user manual serves more as a progress report—written as if the product were already complete.

The project aims to encompass a wide range of components, including:

* A custom CPU core
* Various computer designs built around the core
* A fully functional operating system
* An assembler and assembly language
* A simple programming language providing some assembly abstractions
* Multiple OS programs and applications
* A simple GPU for graphical applications

It will be implemented as an FPGA soft-core SoC, an emulator, and using TTL logic chips.

Ultimately, this project aims to be both an educational resource and just an enjoyable experience.

**Table of Contents**

[CPU Architecture 3](#_Toc1)

[Data Section 3](#_Toc2)

[Arithmetic Section 4](#_Toc3)

[Inputs & Outputs 4](#_Toc4)

[Operations 4](#_Toc5)

[Control Unit 6](#_Toc6)

[Instruction 6](#_Toc7)

[Instruction Set Architecture 7](#_Toc8)

[Instructions 7](#_Toc9)

[Instruction Formats 8](#_Toc10)

[C-Type (Custom) 8](#_Toc11)

[R-Type (Register) 8](#_Toc12)

[B-Type (Branch) 8](#_Toc13)

[I-Type (Immediate) 8](#_Toc14)

[M-Type (Memory) 9](#_Toc15)

[U-Types (Unary) 9](#_Toc16)

[Instruction Formats 10](#_Toc17)

[C-Types 10](#_Toc18)

[M-Type 10](#_Toc19)

[B-Type 11](#_Toc20)

[A-Type 12](#_Toc21)

[S-Type 13](#_Toc22)

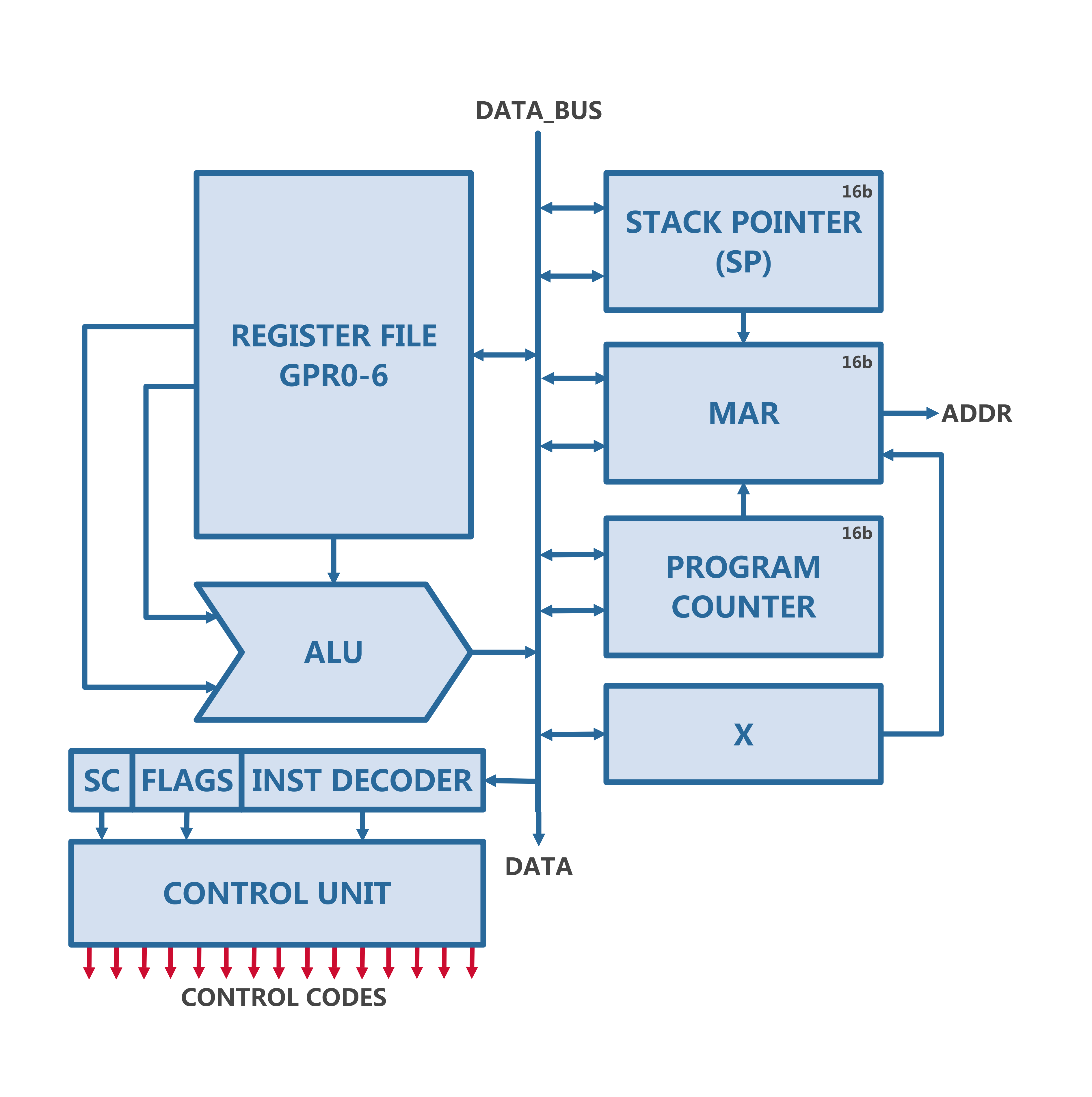
[R-Type 14](#_Toc23)

[Appendix 15](#_Toc24)

[List of Tables 15](#_Toc25)

# **CPU Architecture**

This section covers the CPU architecture, from a high level overview down to the function of each module.



On a top level the CPU is made up of four individual sections:

* Data section
  + 7 general purpose registers (GPR)
* Arithmetic section
  + ALU implementing 16 operations and carry variants
* Address section
  + stack pointer (SP), program counter (PC) and memory address register (MAR) and X register
* Control section
  + Flags register, step counter (SC), instruction decoder and the control unit (CU)

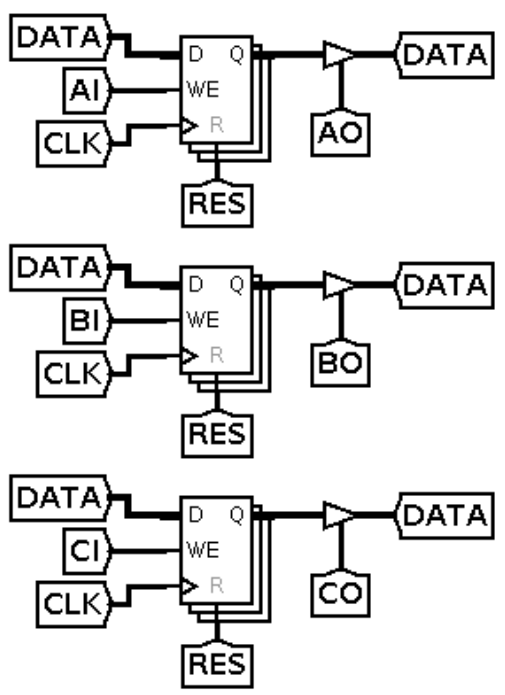
Table 1: CPU Block Diagram

Note: The clock signal needs to be provided.

## Data Section

The Data Section is the most simple one, it consists of seven 8-bit registers, which are connected to the Data BUS both on the input and on the output. Additionally they all have two control signals each, one for taking data in and the other for outputting the data onto the bus. Once a reset pulse is sent they all reset to their default value 0x00.

Figure 2: CPU Data Section (Logisim)



The behaviour of the registers is simple, they just store a single 8 bit value as long as they are not reset. When the IN control signal of a register is high, the registers will read the data from the bus on the rising edge of the clock. When the OUT control signal is high, the value will be outputted to the bus unrelated to the clock signal.

The only instructions that could be done with only the data section (if control signals are controlled manually) are basics like a move operation, where a value is moved from one register to the other or a switch operation, where a third register is used as a buffer to switch the values of two registers.

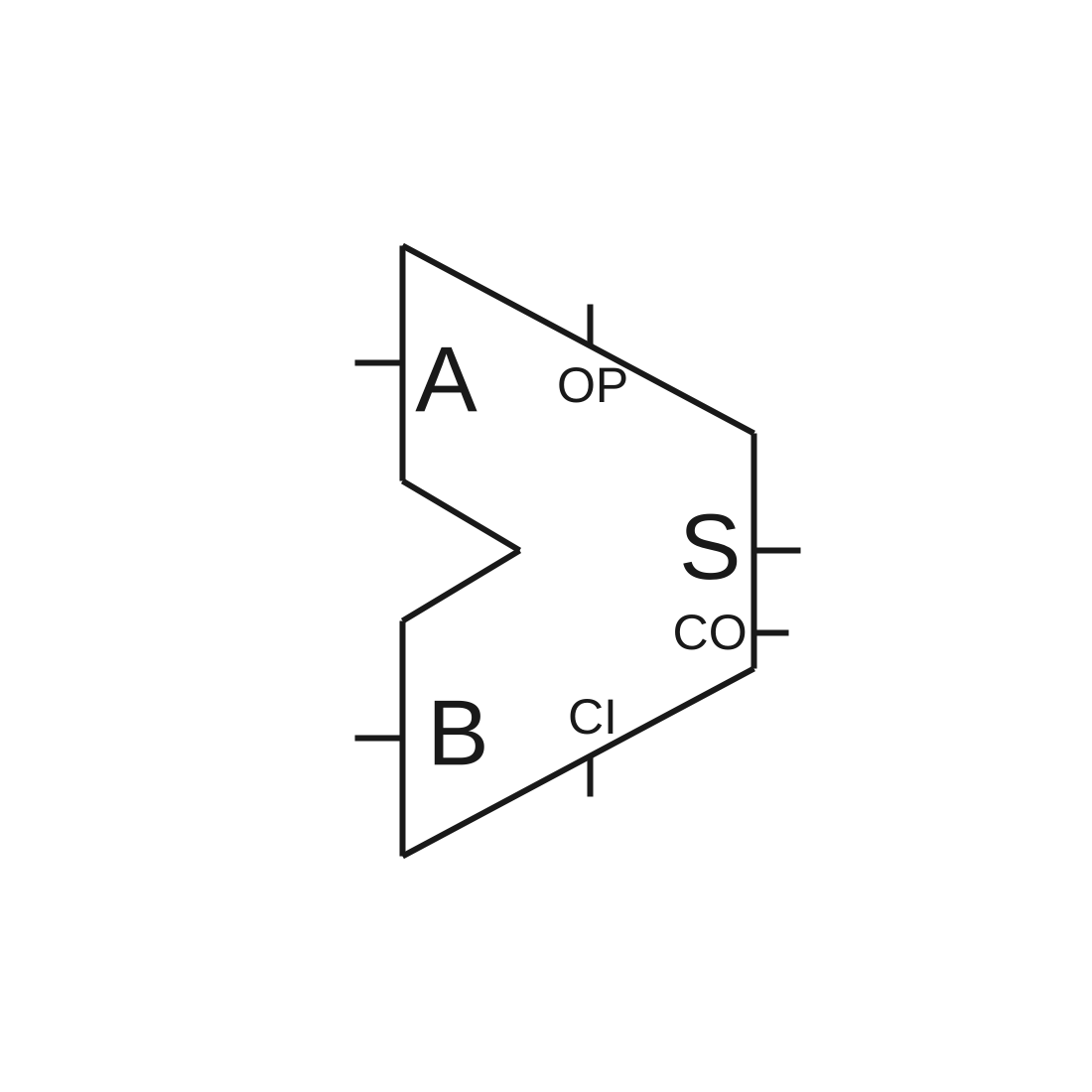
## Arithmetic Section

The Arithmetic Logic Unit (ALU) is a single but essential component in the arithmetic section of a CPU. It is responsible for executing all mathematical and logical operations such as addition, subtraction, logical shifts, and bitwise operations. Despite being just one unit, the ALU can be considered the core of the CPU, as it directly impacts the state of the machine. Without it, the CPU wouldn't be able to perform computations or make decisions, making the ALU integral to the functioning of the processor.

Within the ALU, there are several submodules or units responsible for different tasks:

1. **Adder / Subtractor:** This module is responsible for adding and subtracting numbers. It uses two’s compliment for negative values, ensuring that both positive and negative values get treated correctly.
2. **Shifter:** This unit performs bit-shifting operations, it can do both logical and arithmetic shifts, depending on whether the sign of the number preserved.
3. **Comparator:** The comparator is responsible for every comparison such as equality, greater than or less then.
4. **Logical:** The logical unit implements logical operators like in boolean algebra on a bit level. An example of a bitwise and would be 0001 & 0101 = 0001. Besides the and operation there are also or, xor and the not operation.

### Inputs & Outputs



The ALU has main in- and outputs of the ALU are A, B and S, they are all 8-bit wide and are the two inputs and the output. An Addition would be S = A + B. Additionally there are three other connections, called CI (carry in), CO (carry out) and OP (operation). An addition wit carry in high would look like this: S = A + B + 1.

Figure 3: ALU Block

### Operations

Since the OP signal is 4 bit wide, the ALU could theoretically perform 16 logic functions, but only 15 are used. This way the ALU doesn’t need an additional enable signal, when it’s not used the OP is just 0 and when it is used the OP is set to whatever operation should be executed. Additionally the carry in signal is important for the differentiation of the functions.

Hint: The table below only shows what the ALU itself is capable of, not every one of those operations is supported by every ISA. Therefore the Operations are not linked to instructions.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  | **CI = 0** | | **CI = 1** | |
| **#** | **Binary** | **Operation** | **S** | **Operation** | **S** |
| 0 | 0000 | ADD | A + B | ADDC | A + B + C |
| 1 | 0001 | SUB | A - B | SUBC | A – B - C |
| 2 | 0010 | AND | A & B |  |  |
| 3 | 0011 | OR | A | B |  |  |
| 4 | 0100 | XOR | A ^ B |  |  |
| 5 | 0101 | CMP | ? |  |  |
| 6 | 0110 | SET | A |= (1 << B) |  |  |
| 7 | 0111 | CLR | A &= ~(1 << B) |  |  |
| 8 | 1000 | TGL | A ^= (1 << B) |  |  |
| 9 | 1001 | NOT | ~ A | NEG | ~ A - 1 |
| A | 1010 | INC | A + 1 | INC2 | A + C |
| B | 1011 | DEC | A - 1 | DEC2 | A - C |
| C | 1100 | SHL | A << 1 | SHLC |  |
| D | 1101 | SHR | A >> 1 | SHRC |  |
| E | 1110 | ASL | A << 1 | ASLC |  |
| F | 1111 | ASR | A >> 1 | ASRC |  |

# Control Unit

As the name suggests the control unit is responsible for controlling the processor. It reads the instructions (like commands for the CPU) from memory in the first clock cycle of every execution and then starts to orchestrate everything that needs to happen to execute a specific instruction.

## Instruction

The control unit works based on instructions, there are a total of 16 instructions in the instruction set of the Nano8v1. Every instruction is made up of the opcode and parameters, that vary based on the opcode. For example the ALU instruction has a 4-bit opcode that specifies the specific operation that will be executed. In the Nano8v1 ISA (instruction set architecture) an instruction is at least 16 bit long. Some also have additional parameters that get used directly, that way some instructions can reach 3 or even four bytes in length.

# Instruction Set Architecture

A common problem for 8-bit processors is that the ISA is often a trade-off, between a nice design with enough features and efficiency, because it’s hard to include much information inside an 8bit instruction and a 16-bit instruction takes double the time to fetch. Of course there are solutions like caching the instructions, pipe-lining and more, but they are often disregarded because of their complexity. Because of that most hobbyist 8-bit computers use a trick, that is a little dirty, they don’t really have an ISA at all and just use the 8bit instruction as an address for a memory chip, that has all the control signals for an instruction hardcoded. This provides a lot of benefits, as you now have 256 instructions, that can do what every you like them to do, white-out any constraints. However, the approach is a bit inelegant and not teasable for many implementations. For example on FPGA’s for example that would be a big waste of LUTs and for a real chip that would be much wasted silicon.

For the Nano8v1 I decided not to use such ROM to decode instructions, but to have a decoder that fetches an 8bit instruction and then based on the opcode decides if it needs to fetch a second byte into the 16 bit instruction register. This way an instruction can be 8- bits, 16-bits or longer. The instruction register itself is only 16bit long, but additional 1 or two byte long parameters can be used directly from memory without being fetched into the decoder.

## Instructions

As the ISA focuses on versatility over design simplicity, there are many different instructions, based on the formatting types discussed previously. There are many register manipulation operations, memory operations with different addressing modes, branches with different conditions and addressing modes, many ALU operations and some other ones.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **OP** | | **Instruction** | | **Description** | **Operands** | **Length** |
| FID | OP[0] | Class | Mne |  |  | Cycles |
| 0 | 0 | SYS | NOP | Does nothing | - | 1 |
| 0 | 0 | SYS | HLT | Halts the CPU until manually released | - | ? |
| 0 | 0 | SYS | RES | Resets the entire CPU | - | 1 |
| 0 | 0 | SYS | INT |  | - |  |
| 0 | 0 | SYS | IRET |  | - |  |
| 1 | 0 | ALU | ADD |  | SR, DR |  |
| 1 | 0 | ALU | SUB |  | SR, DR |  |
| 1 | 0 | ALU | AND |  | SR, DR |  |
| 1 | 0 | ALU | OR |  | SR, DR |  |
| 1 | 0 | ALU | XOR |  | SR, DR |  |
| 1 | 0 | ALU | NOT |  | SR, DR |  |
| 1 | 0 | ALU | SHL |  | SR, DR |  |
| 1 | 0 | ALU | SHR |  | SR, DR |  |
| 1 | 0 | ALU |  |  |  |  |
| 1 | 0 | ALU |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |

## Instruction Formats

Obviously different instructions need different information to work, some need a register and an address, while others need two registers and an ALU operation. Therefore there are multiple different formats, that the instructions can be in. The shortest are one byte long, while the longest are two bytes long. As discussed previously the length of the instruction dictates how many cycles the fetch takes, but immediate values and addresses don’t increase the fetch cycles, because they can be read when needed. (That doesn’t necessarily mean that they don’t cause a delay)

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Format** | **Use Case** | **Layout Example** |
| C-Types | Custom | OP[8] / ID[3] META[5] |
| M-Type | Load and Store | OP[3] AD[4] REG[3] (OFF[8] / ADDR[16]) |
| B-Type | Branches and Jumps | OP[3] COND[2] AD[2] RES [1] (OFF[8] / ADDR[16]) |
| A-Type | ALU | OP[3] CI[1] ALU[4] DES[4] SRC[4] |
| S-Type | Stack | See S-Type |
| R-Type | Register-Memory | OP[3] T[1] REG[3] IMM[8] |

### C-Types

The C-Types (custom) is a collection of instructions, that didn’t fit into the other categories. These will likely be decoded using a small ROM to store the custom microcodes for up to 8 (or maybe 4) steps. These include core instructions like NOP, HLT and RST.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **0** | **1** | **2** | **3** | **4** | **5** | **6** | **7** |
| **op [3]** | | | **meta op [5]** | | | | |

### M-Type

The memory type instructions have the codes 001 (Load) and 010 (Store) and take a 2 bit addressing mode.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **0** | **1** | **2** | **3** | **4** | **5** | **6** | **7** |  | **8 - F** | **10 - 1F** |
| **op [3]** | | | **ad [2]** | | **reg [3]** | | | **imm [8] | null | addr [8]** | **addr [8]** |
| 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | reg [3] | | | imm [8] | / |
| 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | reg [3] | | | addr [8] | addr [8] |
| 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | reg [3] | | | imm [8] | / |
| 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | reg [3] | | | addr [8] | addr [8] |
| 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | reg [3] | | | imm [8] | / |
| 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | reg [3] | | | addr [8] | addr [8] |
| 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | reg [3] | | | imm [8] | / |
| 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | reg [3] | | | addr [8] | addr [8] |

Table 2: M-Type Instructions

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **ad** | **Mode** | **Length** |
| 01 | Absolute | 3 |
| 10 | Relative (1 byte + X as HB) | 2 |
| 11 | Indirect (pointer) | 3 |
| 11 | Skip next | 1 |

Table 3: M-Type addressing modes

## B-Type

For the branches there is only a single opcode (011), followed by two bits for the condition field and two bits for the addressing mode, followed by the inv bit, that can invert the condition. Optionally (depending on the ad bits), the next two bytes contain an 8bit immediate value or a 16 bit address.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **0** | **1** | **2** | **3** | **4** | **5** | **6** | **7** |  | **8 - F** | **10 - 1F** |
| **op [3]** | | | **cond [2]** | | **ad [2]** | | **inv** | **imm [8] | null | addr [8]** | **addr [8]** |
| 0 | 1 | 1 | x | x | 0 | 0 | 0 | imm [8] | / |
| 0 | 1 | 1 | x | x | 0 | 1 | 0 | addr [8] | addr [8] |
| 0 | 1 | 1 | x | x | 1 | 0 | 0 | imm [8] | / |
| 0 | 1 | 1 | x | x | 1 | 1 | 0 | addr [8] | addr [8] |
| 0 | 1 | 1 | x | x | x | x | 1 | none | none |

Table 4: B-Type Instructions

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **#** | **Condition** | **Used in** |
| 00 | None | JMP |
| 01 | Zero | BEQ |
| 10 | Negative | BIN |
| 11 | Carry | BCS |

Table 5: B-Type Conditions

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **#** | **Mode** | **Length** |
| 00 | Immediate (1 byte) | 2 |
| 01 | Absolute | 3 |
| 10 | Relative (1 byte + X as HB) | 2 |
| 11 | Indirect (pointer) | 3 |

Table 6: B-Type addressing modes

### A-Type

There are 16 possible ALU operations, which could all have a CI variant, for instructions where a carry in isn’t logical, the CI signal can act like a 5th OP signal. Originally the msb of the OP signals determined if the operation used one or two operands, which could theoretically reduce the cycles per fetch. Sadly I didn’t manage to find an elegant way to incorporate this.

The ALU instruction allows the use of 4bit register addresses, which should be used with caution. I will dive a bit deeper into this in the R-Type instruction section. If you only want to use the normal 3bit addresses you can use them just like normal.

100 + CI + ALU [4] + DES[4] + SRC[4]

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **OP** | **Operation** | **Effect** | **With Carry In** | **Effect** |
| 0000 | ADD | A + B | ADDC | A + B + C |
| 0001 | SUB | A - B | SUBC | A – B - C |
| 0010 | AND | A & B |  |  |
| 0011 | OR | A | B |  |  |
| 0100 | XOR | A ^ B |  |  |
| 0101 | CMP | ? |  |  |
| 0110 | SET | A |= (1 << B) |  |  |
| 0111 | CLR | A &= ~(1 << B) |  |  |
| 1000 | TGL | A ^= (1 << B) |  |  |
| 1001 | NOT | ~ A | NEG | ~ A - 1 |
| 1010 | INC | A + 1 | INC2 | A + C |
| 1011 | DEC | A - 1 | DEC2 | A - C |
| 1100 | SHL | A << 1 | SHLC |  |
| 1101 | SHR | A >> 1 | SHRC |  |
| 1110 | ASL | A << 1 | ASLC |  |
| 1111 | ASR | A >> 1 | ASRC |  |

### S-Type

PUSH (101)

op [3] ad [2] (r[3] | res[3]) (imm[8] | addr[16] | null)

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **ad** | **Mode** | **Length** |
| 00 | register | 1 |
| 01 | 8 bit immediate | 2 |
| 10 | Signed 16bit offset (using X as MSB) | 2 |
| 11 | PC | 3 |

Table 7: S-Type PUSH addressing

POP (110)

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **0** | **1** | **2** | **3** | **4** | **5** | **6** | **7** |  | **8** | **9** | **A** | **B** | **C** | **D** | **E** | **F** |
| **op [3]** | | | **pop** | **ad** | **target reg** | | | **imm [8] | null** | | | | | | | |
| 1 | 1 | 0 | x | x | reg | null | | | imm [8] | null | | | | | | | |
| 1 | 1 | 0 | x | 0 | reg | null | | | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 1 | 1 | 0 | x | 1 | reg | null | | | x | x | x | x | x | x | x | x |
| 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | x | reg | | | imm [8] | null | | | | | | | |
| 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | x | null | | | imm [8] | null | | | | | | | |

Table 8: S-Type POP instruction

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **ad** | **Mode** | **Length** |
| 0 | Single byte | 1 |
| 1 | N bytes (imm8 as LSB + X as MSB) | 2 |

Table 9: S-Type POP addressing

Hint: It isn’t possible to combine pop = 0 and ad = 1, as it’s impossible to read multiple bytes into memory.

### R-Type

The R-Type instructions are instructions like MOV or SWI, which operate on two registers. Like the ALU instructions, they use 4bit register addresses instead of 3bit, so that they can directly manipulate the special purpose registers. While this is exciting, it’s also a double edged blade and can cause a huge mess if done wrong, which is why I generally wouldn’t call this a smart design decision, but I had the space and didn’t want to waste it.

The layout of R-Type instructions is pretty simple, it starts as usual, with the 3 bit opcode. The next 5-bit specify the specific R-Type instruction and the second byte contains the 4-bit addresses of the destination and the source registers.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **0** | **1** | **2** | **3** | **4** | **5** | **6** | **7** |  | **8** | **9** | **A** | **B** | **C** | **D** | **E** | **F** |
| **op [3]** | | | **meta [5]** | | | | | **DES [4]** | | | | **SRC [4]** | | | |

# Appendix

## List of Tables

[Table 2: M-Type Instructions 8](#_Toc1)

[Table 3: M-Type addressing modes 8](#_Toc2)

[Table 4: B-Type Instructions 9](#_Toc3)

[Table 5: B-Type Conditions 9](#_Toc4)

[Table 6: B-Type addressing modes 9](#_Toc5)

[Table 7: S-Type PUSH addressing 11](#_Toc6)

[Table 8: S-Type POP instruction 11](#_Toc7)

[Table 9: S-Type POP addressing 11](#_Toc8)