

# Lab 4 Report

## Design and Implementation of a Stack-Based Virtual Machine

Astitwa Saxena  
2025MCS3005

Abhishek Gupta  
2025MCS2963

### 1 Introduction

This report describes the design and implementation of a stack-based virtual machine (VM) along with its assembler. The VM executes a custom instruction set and supports arithmetic computation, control flow, and function calls. The system was validated using multiple assembly programs and benchmarked for performance.

### 2 Architecture of the Virtual Machine

The virtual machine follows a stack-based architecture.

#### 2.1 Program Counter

The Program Counter (PC) stores the address of the next instruction to be executed. It is incremented sequentially and updated explicitly during control flow instructions such as jumps and calls.

#### 2.2 Stack

The stack is used for:

- Arithmetic operations
- Passing arguments to functions
- Storing return addresses and local variables

All ALU operations pop operands from the stack and push results back.

#### 2.3 Memory Model

The VM uses a linear memory array to store instructions and data. Instructions are fetched using the PC, while data memory is accessed via explicit load and store instructions.

### 3 Instruction Dispatch Strategy

Instruction dispatch is implemented using a switch-based execution loop. Each opcode is decoded and executed sequentially. This design prioritizes simplicity and clarity over aggressive optimization. The dispatch loop continues until a HALT instruction is encountered.

## 4 Call Frames and Return Mechanism

Function calls are implemented using explicit CALL and RET instructions.

### 4.1 Call Frames

A call frame consists of:

- Return address
- Function arguments
- Local variables

The return address is pushed onto the stack before transferring control to the function.

### 4.2 Return Mechanism

The RET instruction restores the return address from the stack and updates the PC accordingly. The function result is left on top of the stack for the caller.

## 5 Benchmarking and Performance Evaluation

The performance of the virtual machine was evaluated using a compute-intensive assembly program that calculates the area of a circle. The benchmark focuses on measuring instruction dispatch overhead and stack operation efficiency.

### 5.1 Methodology

The assembly source was first translated into bytecode using the custom assembler. The generated binary was then executed on the virtual machine with varying iteration counts to obtain stable timing measurements. Multiple iterations help amortize fixed overheads such as initialization and instruction decoding.

Benchmarking was performed using the following command:

```
./vm program.bin <iterations>
```

### 5.2 Results

The average execution time per iteration was measured for different iteration counts:

- 10 iterations: 0.6249  $\mu$ s
- 100 iterations: 0.43422  $\mu$ s
- 1000 iterations: 0.420994  $\mu$ s

As the number of iterations increases, the average execution time decreases and stabilizes, indicating that fixed execution overheads are effectively amortized.

### 5.3 Analysis

The observed results demonstrate that the virtual machine has low instruction dispatch overhead and predictable performance. The stabilization of execution time at higher iteration counts suggests efficient stack manipulation and minimal control-flow overhead. Given the switch-based instruction dispatch strategy, the VM performs well for small to medium-sized programs, making it suitable for educational and experimental use.

## 5.4 Benchmark Screenshots

```
ag@LAPTOP-5IOEOS47:/mnt/d/IITD/system concepts/assignment/lab4$ ./asm circle.asm program.bin
Successfully assembled to program.bin
ag@LAPTOP-5IOEOS47:/mnt/d/IITD/system concepts/assignment/lab4$ ./vm program.bin
Final Result: 75
ag@LAPTOP-5IOEOS47:/mnt/d/IITD/system concepts/assignment/lab4$ ./vm program.bin 10
Benchmarking 10 iterations...
Avg time: 0.6249 us
ag@LAPTOP-5IOEOS47:/mnt/d/IITD/system concepts/assignment/lab4$ ./vm program.bin 100
Benchmarking 100 iterations...
Avg time: 0.43422 us
ag@LAPTOP-5IOEOS47:/mnt/d/IITD/system concepts/assignment/lab4$ ./vm program.bin 1000
Benchmarking 1000 iterations...
Avg time: 0.420994 us
```

Figure 1: Benchmark execution and average timing

```
ag@LAPTOP-5IOEOS47:/mnt/d/IITD/system concepts/assignment/lab4$ ./vm program.bin
Final Result: 55
ag@LAPTOP-5IOEOS47:/mnt/d/IITD/system concepts/assignment/lab4$ ./asm factorial.asm program.bin
Successfully assembled to program.bin
ag@LAPTOP-5IOEOS47:/mnt/d/IITD/system concepts/assignment/lab4$ ./vm program.bin
Final Result: 24
ag@LAPTOP-5IOEOS47:/mnt/d/IITD/system concepts/assignment/lab4$ █
```

Figure 2: Program execution result after benchmarking

## 6 Limitations and Possible Enhancements

### 6.1 Limitations

- Switch-based dispatch limits performance scalability
- No support for dynamic memory allocation
- Limited debugging and error reporting
- No register-based optimization

### 6.2 Possible Enhancements

- Implement threaded or JIT-based dispatch
- Add heap memory support
- Improve assembler diagnostics
- Introduce registers for hybrid execution
- Add instruction-level profiling

## 7 Conclusion

The implemented VM demonstrates a clean and functional execution model suitable for educational purposes. Despite its simplicity, it supports non-trivial programs and provides a strong foundation for future extensions.