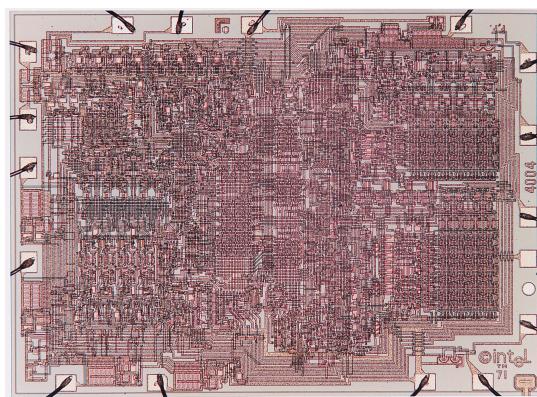


The Science of Computers

A Novel Approach

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20 December 2019



Chapter 1

Blue Flames

In a quiet basement somewhere in Dayton, Ohio, two young students are working into the night on a computer. No, this is not a fancy desktop or laptop computer. It is a simple machine designed to help one of the students learn how to program in assembly language.

Ada is the student who is building the computer, and her friend, Alan, is helping her get the critter running. Ada has managed to come up with a nice case for her machine. The sides of the case are cherry wood which she will finish off later to make things look nice. The actual case is a bent piece of aluminum sheet metal she convinced a local automotive body shop to fabricate for her.

The goal this evening is to power the gadget up. Alan is working on wiring a power supply for the machine that will be bolted inside the case. A switch will be attached to the sheet metal cabinet along with a keypad and an LED dis-

play.

Ada is bolting a small printed circuit board to the bottom of the case. This board comprises a complete 8-bit computer system. It is not fancy, nor is it very powerful, but it will be sufficient for Ada's goal. Alan is wiring up the power supply and the switch. Both of them work together to get everything installed in the case, ready for the first power-up!

The evening wears on, and things are getting close to ready. Another student, Nick, wanders down the stairs into the basement.

"Hey Ada, have you got the thing powered up yet?"

"Just about. Alan is almost finished with the power supply."

Alan puts a screwdriver down on the table.

"Ready for the first test. Ada, you do the honors!"

Ada reaches a nervous hand toward the switch. All three of them hold their breath. Ada flips the switch.

A brief flash of light is seen inside the case, and the lights go out!

In the darkness, Nick mutters "I guess you flunked the Blue Flame test!"

Chapter 2

Atoms

2.1 What is an atom?

If we take anything physical in our world, and start tearing it down into smaller and smaller chunks, eventually we end up looking at a structure we call an "atom". For a long time, humans resisted the idea that there was such a gadget, today, we put a lot of energy into researching what happens if we tear an atom apart to see what it is made up of. We even want to go a bit further and see what those atomic parts are made up of.

Welcome to the world of high-tech physics!

We will not dive smaller than the basic atom. (Real, serious physicists are trying to go much farther!) That will let us look at its most basic parts.

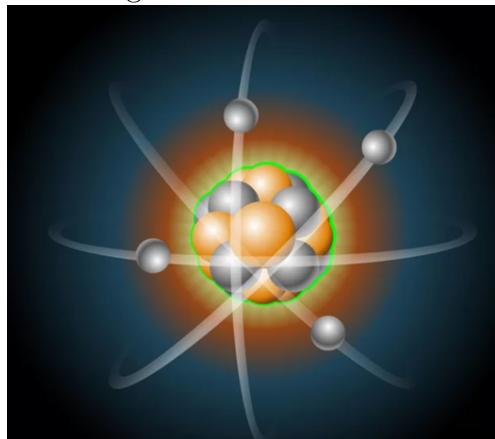
Some of this, you should have learned in your high school

chemistry class!

2.1.1 Basic Atom Structure

An atom is sort of like a tiny solar system. There is something big in the center of this system, and a bunch of smaller things flying around that center in tiny orbits.

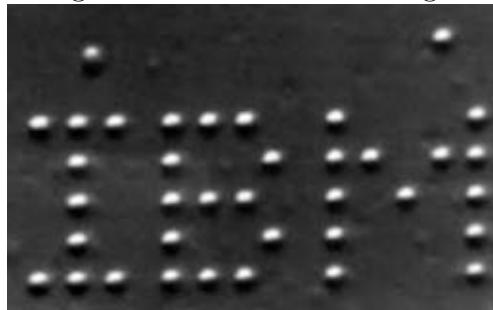
Figure 2.1: The Atom.



Atoms are pretty small. Estimates as to their size depends on the material, but a single atom is as small as 10^{-8} cm in size. That is pretty small. But, amazing as it might seem, we can build machines that can move single atoms. Take a look at this image, created by IBM engineers in 1989. The image was taken using a scanning electronic microscope!

Those bumps are actually single atoms, nudged into place to create this logo. Amazing!

Figure 2.2: IBM's atomic logo.



Electrons

The particles flying around the center are electrons. These particles are tiny! Linus Pauling, a Chemist who won the Nobel Prize for Chemistry in 1954, thought they were on the order of $< 10^{-18} \text{ cm}$ in size. That is pretty small.

These electrons carry a charge (actually a negative charge).

.. note::

Contrary to popular thinking, if something is positively charged, that means it has fewer electrons than it wants to have. If something is negatively charged it has too many electrons than it wants to have. Electrons are attracted to positively charged things, and repelled by other negatively charged things.

So, two electrons hate each other, and want to keep away from each other.

Protons

At the center of our tiny solar system sits a clump called the core. This core is made up of two more tiny elementary particles. One is the proton.

Protons are about 10^{-13} cm in size. That is (1000 times bigger than an electron!)

Protons carry a positive charge. In a single atom, there should be as many protons as there are electrons flying around this atomic core.

As long as this is true, the atom is happy, and the electrons sit there, flying around the core with its pile of protons.

Neutrons

The second particle in the core is called a neutron, which carries no charge. Neutrons are about the same size as protons. Neutrons are not attracted to either electrons or protons. They just sit there, stuck to the protons in that core. What they do is give the atom addition mass (think weight).

2.2 Atomic Numbers

We like to classify things. At the level of atoms, we assign an atomic number to each kind of atom we discover. Those protons and neutrons in the core both act in a similar way. So we lump them together and call them nucleons. The “atomic number is the number of nucleons in the atom. (Where do you think the term nuclear physics came from?)

Ions

Since electrons are always flying around, and the core just sits there, there is the possibility that an electron will get close enough to another atom that it will fly off of the first atom, and join in the mess of electrons flying around the second atom. The atom that the electron left is now left with more protons than electrons and has a net positive charge. It is not happy in this state, but there is not much it can do. The second atom is also "unbalanced". It has more electrons than protons and has a net negative charge. That second atom is also unhappy. We call these "unhappy" atoms ions.

.. note::

We have names for each kind of ion. A positively charged ion is called an cation, and a negatively charged ion is called an anion. Cations are also called "metals", and an anion is called a "non-metal". The terms anode and cathode refer to points in a device where the charge is more positive, or more negative. Makes sense, right?

We can create ions by heating atoms up and firing a stream of electrons at them. Those electrons can knock off other electrons from each atom, setting up this ionized state. The mess at the middle of this action is called a plasma, and it has interesting properties, but we will not explore them here. Plasmas might be interesting if you need to wipe out space aliens!

Stable Ions

Some ions are content with being "unbalanced", but only up to some limit.

For example Sodium is an element with 11 protons in the core, and 11 electrons spinning around. It is happy in this normal state. But, Sodium will tolerate losing an electron, becoming a Sodium ion. The chemical symbol for Sodium is *Na* and the term for the Sodium ion is Na^+ . This ion is positively charged).

Chlorine is another element, this one with 17 protons, and 17 electrons. Chlorine is happy to accept another electron, becoming a Chloride ion. The chemical symbol for Chlorine is *Cl*. The Chloride ion is



. It is negatively charged.

When these two ions get near each other, they "bond". The electron does not move from one to the other, but the attractive force causes them to move close together. This "bond" is pretty strong, and the result is a lattice of atoms we call a crystal. This one is known as "salt"! The chemical symbol for this is



. The original ions are still ions, but they are quite happy being close together.

Metals

We already mentioned the term metal. That term describes an element with a strong willingness to lose an electron, becoming a cation. When many of these atoms get together in a material like copper, they collectively let electrons fly off, forming a sea of electrons that fly around, seemingly at random, surrounding the entire collection of atoms. These electrons are called free-electrons because they have no real home on any single atom. This sea of electrons produces something called conductivity, a willingness of a material to let electrons move easily. New electrons can join into this sea, others can be pulled off.

2.3 Electric Fields

An electric field is a region around a charged particle. The charge at any point in that area around the charge is measured in something we call volts. Voltage is a measure of the electrostatic potential energy available at that point. Near a positive charge, the voltage is high, near a negatively charged particle it is low.

It takes energy to move a point from one voltage to another one. It takes a lot of energy to move a voltage higher, just as it takes energy to lift an object to a higher position above the ground. Once at the high point there is a potential to release that energy by moving the object (or the charge) to a lower point.

The strength of this electric field is measured in something we call volts.

When electrons move, they generate a magnetic field around them, often called an electromagnetic field, since there is a magnetic field and an electric field at work at the same time. All of this is described by Maxwell's Equations, which are the foundation of many technical disciplines, especially radio. Those waves propagate through space, interact with other metals, and induce electrons to move in those metals. (Hey, that is how radio works!)

2.3.1 Electricity

We now have enough background to explain how electricity works (well at least in a (very) simple way!)

I have a cool book called *There are no Electrons, Electronics for Earthlings* [?]. In that book the author describes electrons as "party animals" who need to party. The parties are all at positively charged points. The electrons are attracted to those parties, and work tirelessly to find their way to them! However, they must travel over "conductive" paths. Something like a copper wire will do nicely!

Batteries

There has to be a source of both positive and negative charges in any electrical system. That source is often called a "battery". The battery is a device that can hold both positive and negatively charged particles, but it separates them with a wall, preventing them from getting together. Instead, the battery has two terminals, One will let electrons loose, the other is where the party is.

Now, if we provide a path from the electrons to the party,

those electrons will fly. Actually a stream of electrons will join the sea of free electrons in the metal, and that will cause many of them to seem to move toward the other end. The path is called a "circuit".

.. warning::

It is vitally important that we not allow all the electrons to the party at once. That can cause very harmful side effects, like smoke! That is called a "Short Circuit". Batteries have been known to explode if this happens!

Usually, we put some gadget in the circuit that slows things down. A light bulb will do. The bulb is designed so that it slows the electrons down. They want to move, so they get hot. The heat produces light. Cool! (Well, actually, HOT!)

2.4 Who Cares?

This is a computer architecture text, What does this have to do with Computers?

Well, think about this simple C++ code fragment:

```
1 int main(void) {
2     int x, y=5;
3     x = y;
4 }
```

What needs to happen to make this statement work? How do you think the computer is going to make this actually

happen? The answer is simple. It will launch some of those party animals, and cause them to travel from the place called "y" to the party at the place called x". We design a machine that causes the electrons to carry "data" along as they move to the party!

Wow!

Now, don't panic. You do not need to understand all of the physics in this discussion. It will not appear on a test.

I, on the other hand, and one of those crazy folks who keeps digging, as far down as I can go. It gets more fascinating as you dig deeper.

.. warning::

You can kill a lot of time Googling all of this! You have been warned!