

Computer Architecture - Lab Assignment 1

Nios II/e instruction set architecture and programming

This is an introductory exercise that involves *Altera's Nios II* soft processor and its assembly language. It uses a simple computer system called *DE0-Nano Basic Computer*, which includes the Nios II processor. The system is implemented as a circuit that is downloaded into the FPGA device on the *Terasic DE0-Nano* board, which can be seen in Figure 1 ([1]). This exercise illustrates how programs written in the Nios II assembly language can be executed on the DE0-Nano board. We will use the *Altera Monitor Program* software to compile, load and run the application programs. This document was inspired by document [2].



Figure 1: DE0-Nano board.

To prepare for this exercise you have to know the Altera Nios II Soft Processor architecture and its assembly language ([3]). Additionally, you need to become familiar with the monitor program. A monitor tutorial is included in the Altera Monitor Program package; it can be accessed by selecting **Help > Tutorial** in the monitor window.

Part I

In this part of the lab assignment, we will use the Altera Monitor Program to download the DE0-Nano Basic Computer circuit into the FPGA device and execute a sample program.

Perform the following steps:

1. Turn on the power to the Altera DE0-Nano board.
2. Open the Altera Monitor Program, which leads to the window in Figure 2.

To run an application program it is necessary to create a new project. Select **File > New Project** to reach the window in Figure 3. Give the project a name and indicate the directory for the project;

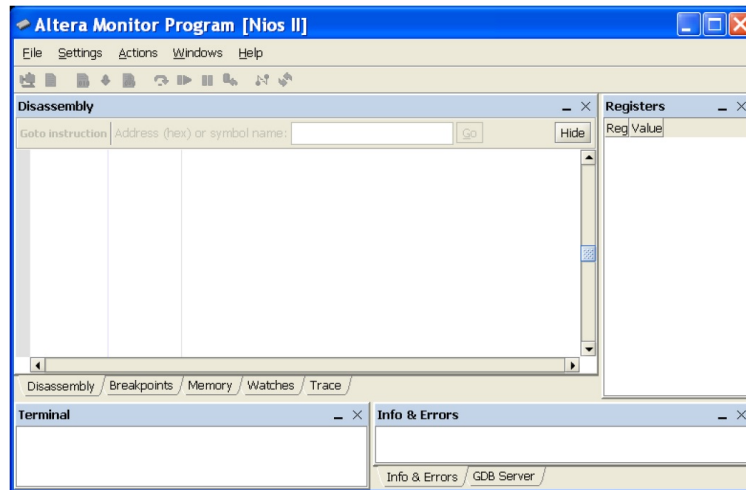


Figure 2: The main window of Altera Monitor Program.

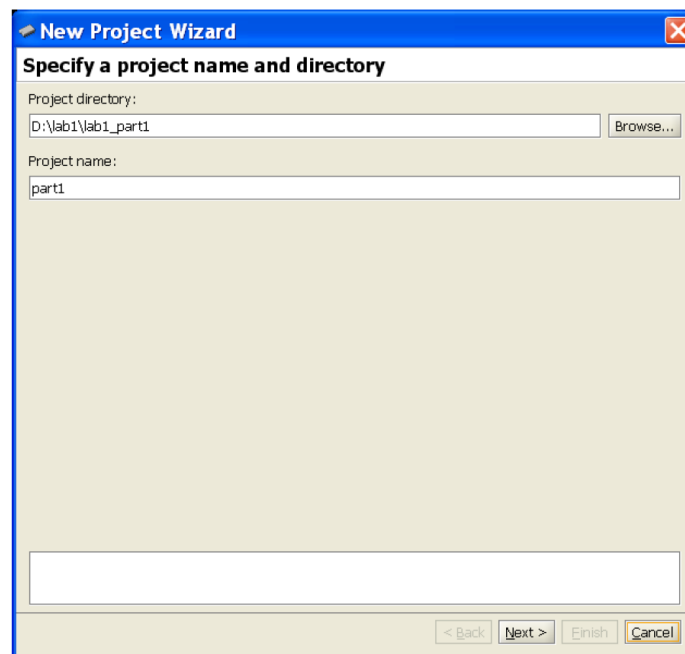


Figure 3: Specify the directory and name of the project.

we have chosen the project name **part1** in the directory **lab1_part1**, as indicated in Figure 3. Click **Next**, to get the window in Figure 4.

3. Now, you can select your own custom system (if you have one) or a predesigned (by Altera) system. Choose the *DE0-Nano Basic Computer* and click **Next**. The display in the window will now show where files that implement the chosen system are located. This is for information purpose only. If you wanted to use a system that you designed by using Altera's Quartus software, you would have to provide such files. Click **Next**.
4. In the window in Figure 5 you can specify the type of application programs that you wish to run. They can be written in either the Nios II assembly language or the C programming language. Specify that an assembly language program will be used. The Altera Monitor Program package contains several sample programs. Select the box: **Include a sample program with the project**. Then, choose the *Getting Started* program, as indicated in Figure 5, and click **Next**.
5. The window in Figure 6 is used to specify the source file(s) that contain the application program(s). Since we have selected the *Getting Started* program, the window indicates the files that are used by

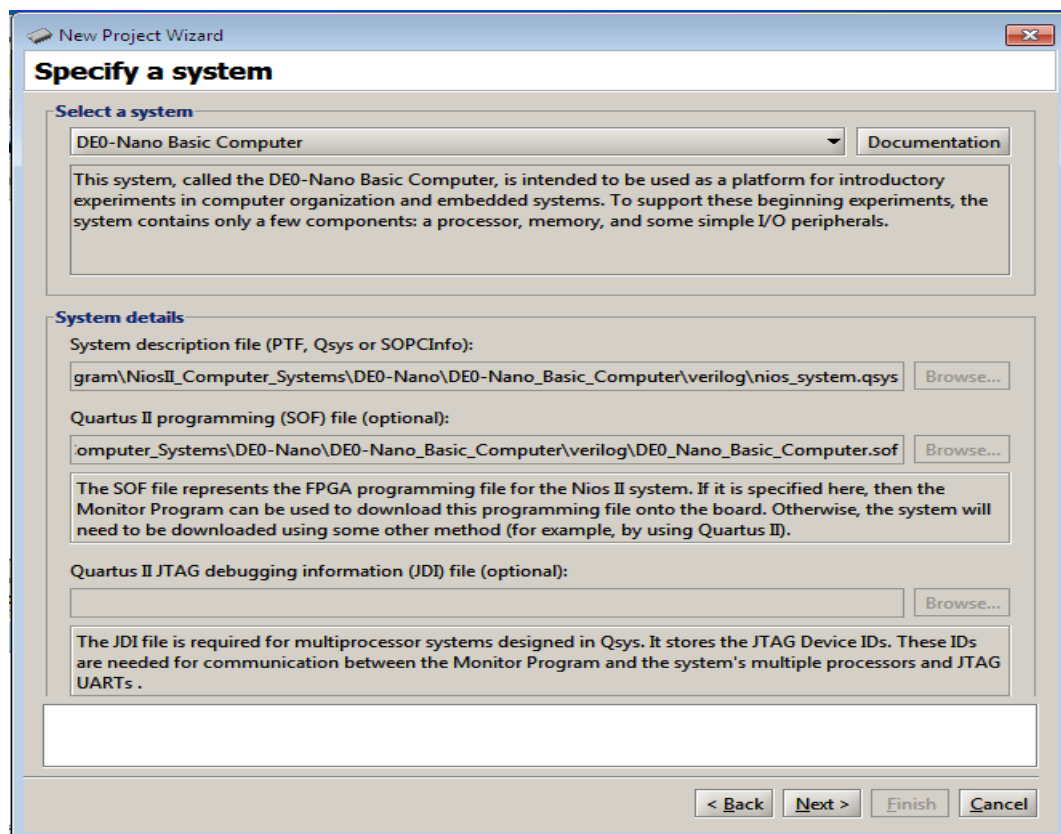


Figure 4: Specification of the computer's hardware system.

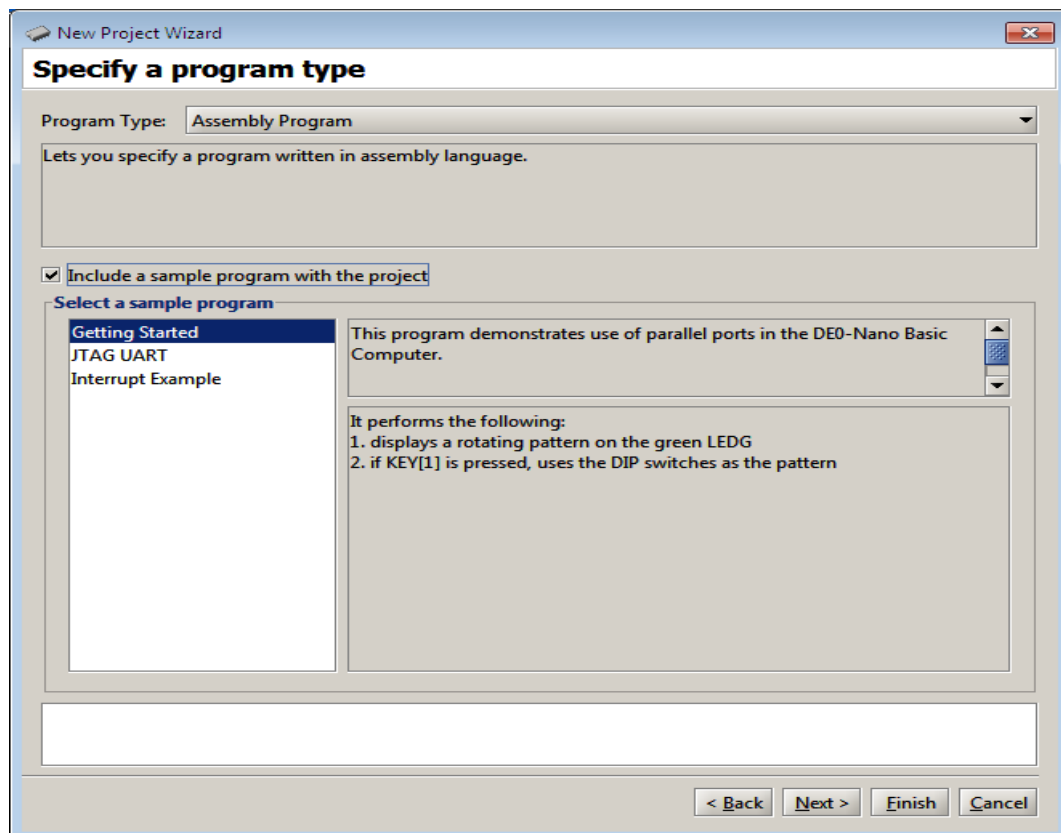


Figure 5: Selection of an application program.

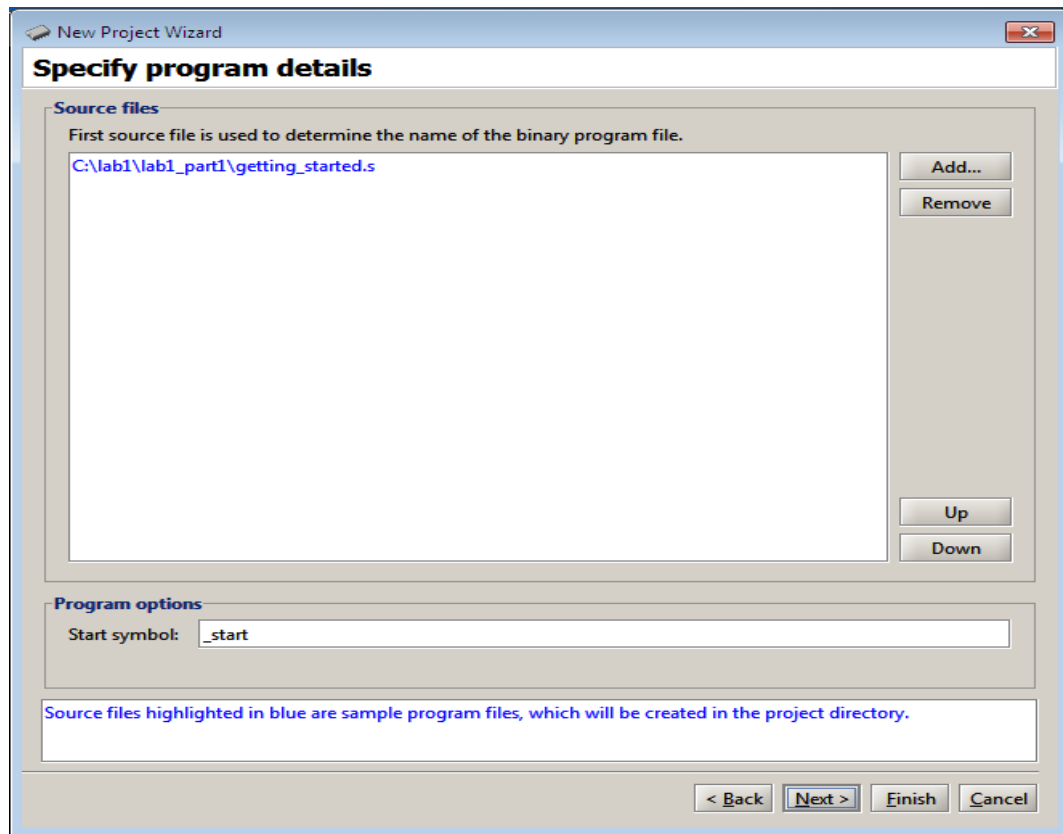





Figure 6: Source files used by the application program.

this program. This window also allows the user to specify the starting point in the selected application program. The default symbol is `_start`, which is used in the selected sample program. Click **Next**.

6. The window in Figure 7 indicates some system parameters. Note that the *USB-Blaster* cable is selected to provide the connection between the DE0-Nano board and the host computer. Click **Next**.
7. The window in Figure 8 displays the preselected components of the DE0-Nano Basic Computer. Observe that the SDRAM is selected as the memory device to be used. The start offset is `0x400`, which means that the application program will be loaded in the memory locations that begin at address 400 in hexadecimal format. Since this choice was made by the designer of the sample program, you cannot change the selection in Figure 8. Click **Finish** to complete the specification of the new project.
8. Since you specified a new project, a pop-up box will appear asking you if you want to download the system associated with this project onto the DE0-Nano board. Make sure that the power to the DE0-Nano board is turned on and click **Yes**. Watch the change in state of the blue LEDs on the DE0-Nano board that correspond to **LOAD** and **GOOD**, which will blink as the circuit is being downloaded. A pop-up box will appear informing you that the circuit has been successfully downloaded. Click **OK**. If the circuit is not successfully downloaded, make sure that the USB connection, through which the USB-Blaster communicates, is established and recognized by the host computer. If there is a problem, a possible remedy may be to unplug the USB cable and then plug it back in.
9. Having downloaded the DE0-Nano Basic Computer into the FPGA chip on the DE0-Nano board, we can now load and run programs on this computer. In the main monitor window, shown in Figure 9, select **Actions > Compile & Load** to load the selected sample program into the FPGA chip. Figure 10 shows the monitor window after the sample program has been loaded.
10. Run the program by selecting **Actions > Continue** or by clicking on the toolbar icon , and observe the test displayed on the LEDs. This test provides an indication that the DE0-Nano board is functioning properly.
11. Stop the execution of the sample program by clicking on the icon , and disconnect from this session by clicking on the icon .

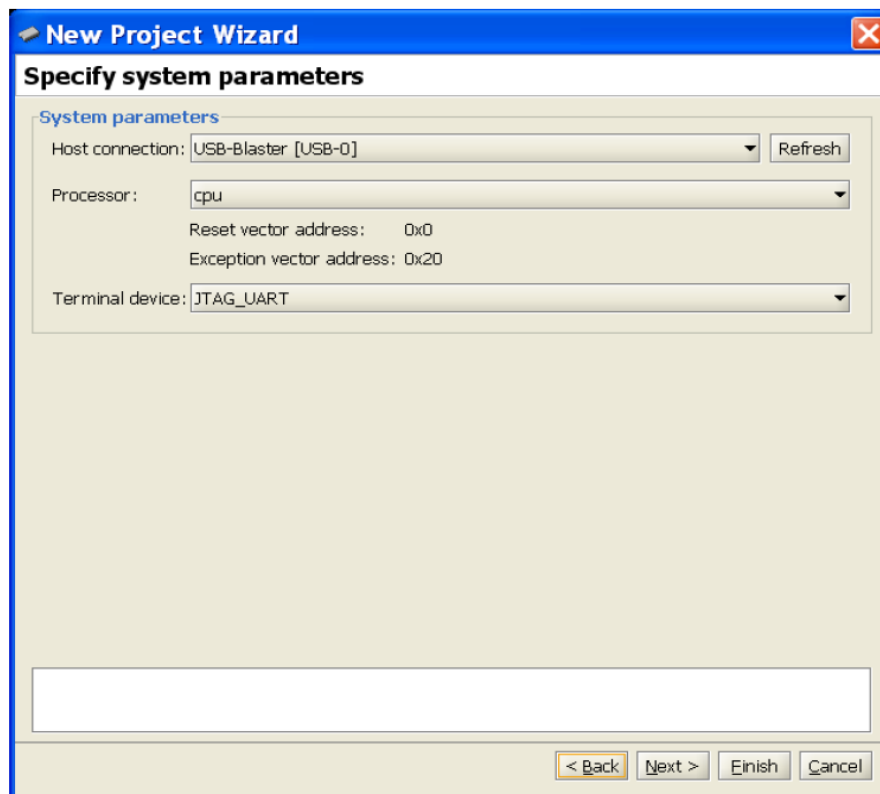


Figure 7: Specify the hardware system parameters.

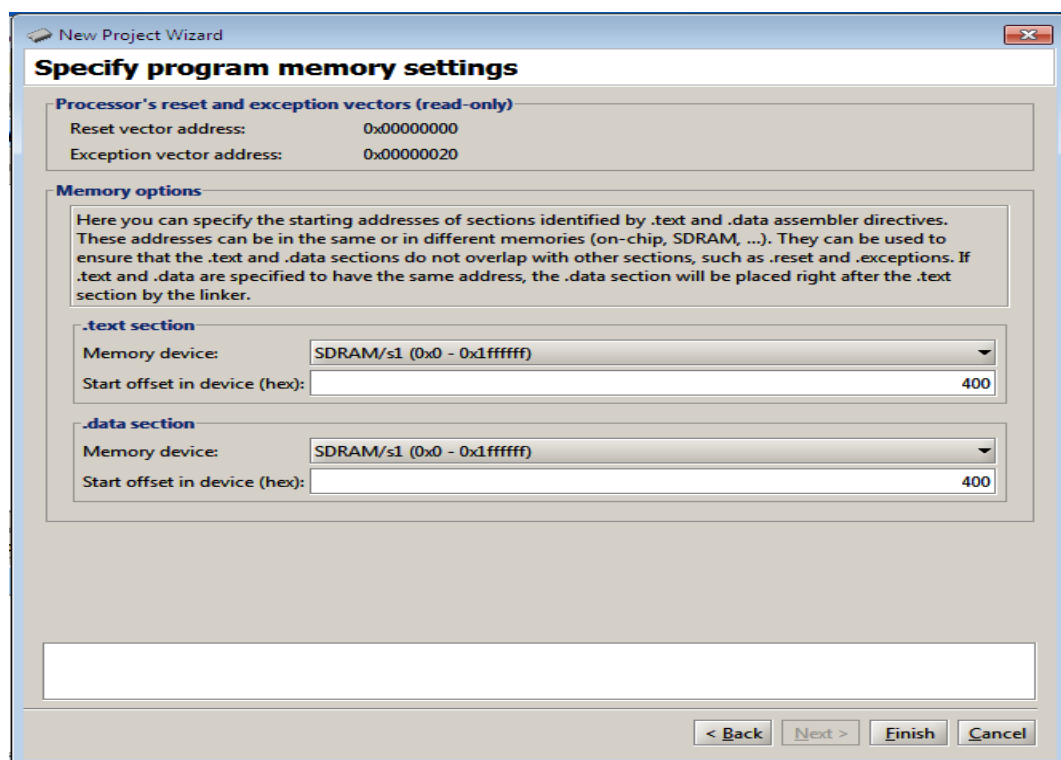


Figure 8: Specify the program memory settings.

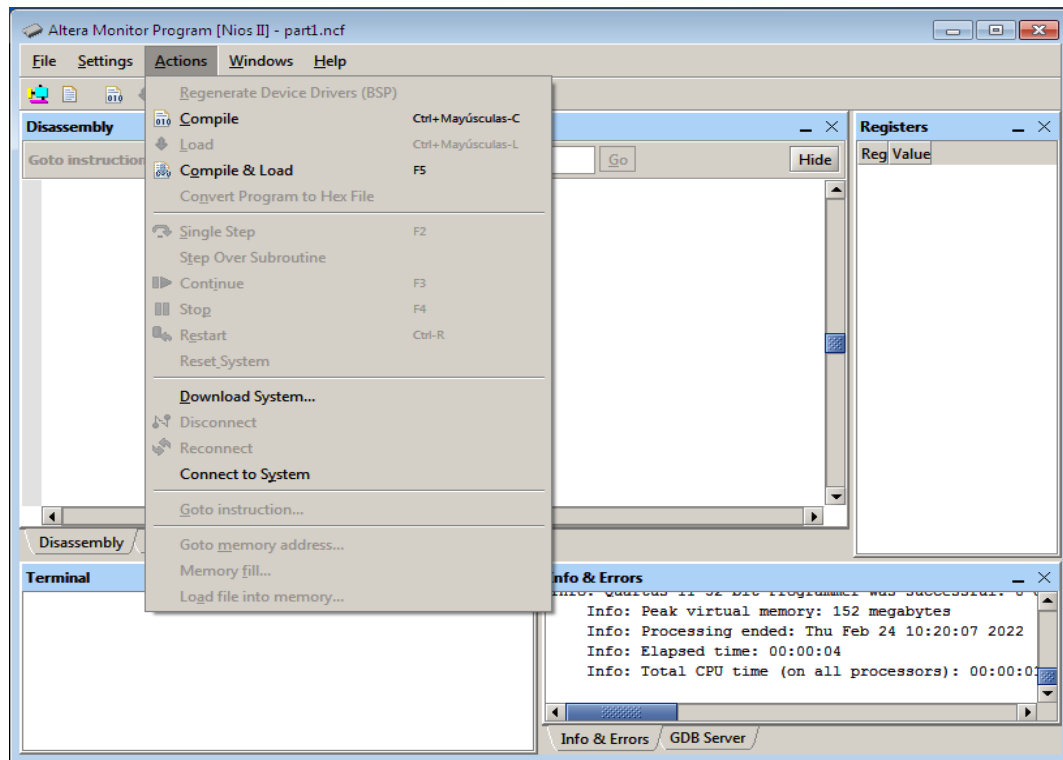



Figure 9: Specify an action in the main window of Altera Monitor Program.

Note: Online students can not see the LEDs. Click on the toolbar icon  to stop the execution and observe which registers contents are in red color in the *Registers* window.

Question 1.

- Why some registers contents are in red and the contents of other registers are in black?
- What is the computing function of the registers with contents shown in red?

Part II

Now, we will explore some features of the Altera Monitor Program by using a simple application program written in the Nios II assembly language. The Nios II instruction word format and a detailed reference of the Nios II instruction set can be found in [4]. For a detailed explanation of the Nios II assembly language instructions see the tutorial *Introduction to the Altera Nios II Soft Processor* ([3]). This document explains how an application program can be assembled, downloaded and executed on a DE0-Nano board.

Consider the program in Figure 11, which finds the largest number in a list of 32-bit integers that is stored in the memory. This program is available in the file `lab1_part2.s`.

Note that some sample data is included in this program. The list starts at hex address `0x500`, as specified by the `.org` assembler directive. The first word (4 bytes) is reserved for storing the result, which will be the largest number found. The next word specifies the number of entries in the list. The words that follow give the actual numbers in the list.

Make sure that you understand the program in Figure 11 and the meaning of each instruction in it. Note the extensive use of comments in the program. You should always include meaningful comments in programs that you will write!

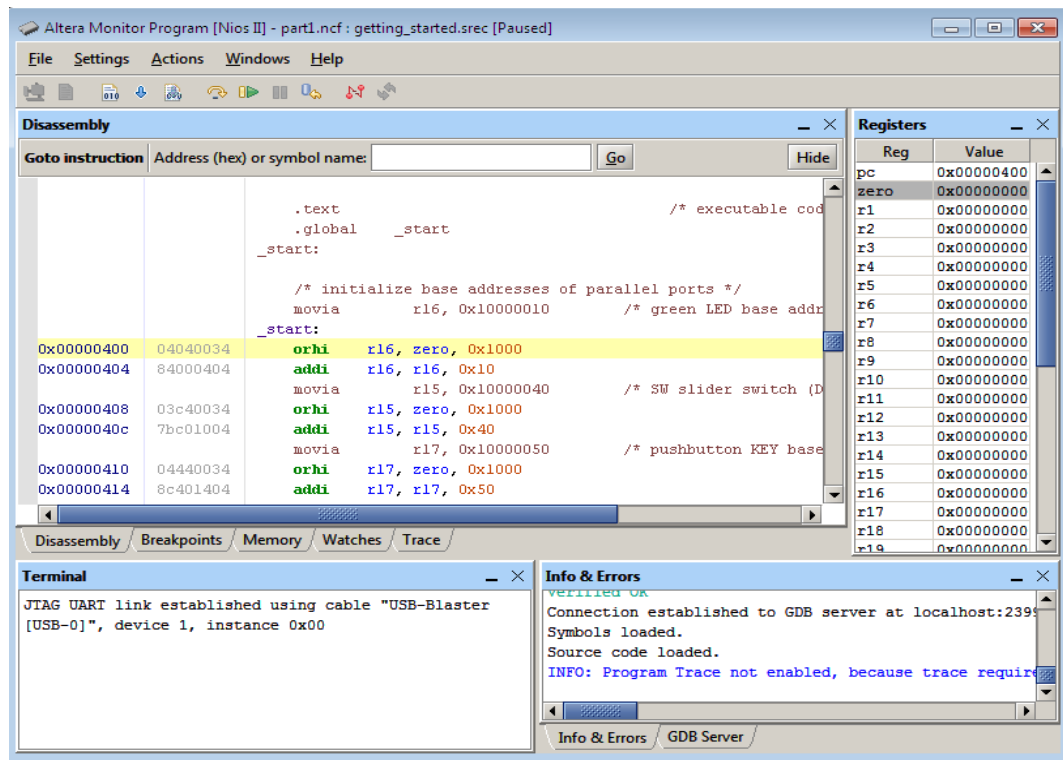


Figure 10: The monitor window called *Disassembly* showing the loaded sample program with disassembled instructions can be seen on the left. The instruction-set architecture register window entitled *Registers* can be seen on the right.

Perform the following steps:

1. Create a new directory. We have chosen the directory name `lab1_part2`. Copy the file `lab1_part2.s` into this directory.
2. Use the Altera Monitor Program to create a new project in this directory. We have chosen the project name `part2`. When you reach the window in Figure 5 choose *Assembly Program* but do not select a sample program, as shown in Figure 12. Click **Next**.
3. Upon reaching the window in Figure 6, you have to specify your program. Click **Add** and in the pop-up box that appears indicate the desired file name, `lab1_part2.s`, and its location. This should lead to the image in Figure 13. Click **Next** to get the window in Figure 7. Again click **Next** to get to the window in Figure 8. Make sure that the SDRAM is selected as the memory device. Note that the *Start offset in device* will be 0, because the program in Figure 11 does not indicate that it should be loaded at a location that is different from the default location 0. Click **Finish**.
4. After clicking **Finish**, a new window is shown (see Figure 14). A message asks for allowing the DE0-Nano board to be reconfigured. Press **Yes** to configure the FPGA device that is integrated on the board. After clicking **Yes**, note in the window called *Info & Errors* that the program `nios2-configure-sof` is automatically executed.
5. Compile and load the program. Note that in the window called *Info & Errors* the assembler program `nios2-elf-as` and linker program `nios2-elf-lld` are automatically executed to compile the program. Additionally, note that the program `nios2-download` is executed to download the `elf` binary file into the DE0-Nano board.
6. The Monitor Program will display the disassembled view of the code loaded in the memory, as indicated in Figure 15. Note that the pseudoinstruction `movia` in the original program has been replaced with two machine instructions, `orhi` and `addi`, which load the 32-bit address `LIST` into register `r4` in two 16-bit parts (because an immediate operand value is restricted to 16 bits). Examine the disassembled code to see the difference in comparison with the original source program. Make sure that you understand the meaning of each instruction. Observe also that your program was loaded into memory locations with


```

/* Program that finds the largest number in a list of integers */
.equ LIST, 0x500          /* Starting address of the list */




.global _start
_start:
    movia    r4, LIST      /* r4 points to the start of the list */
    ldw      r5, 4(r4)     /* r5 is a counter, initialize it with n */
    addi     r6, r4, 8     /* r6 points to the first number */
    ldw      r7, (r6)      /* r7 holds the largest number found so far */
LOOP:
    subi     r5, r5, 1     /* Decrement the counter */
    beq      r5, r0, DONE  /* Finished if r5 is equal to 0 */
    addi     r6, r6, 4     /* Increment the list pointer */
    ldw      r8, (r6)      /* Get the next number */
    bge      r7, r8, LOOP  /* Check if larger number found */
    add      r7, r8, r0    /* Update the largest number found */
    br       LOOP
DONE:
    stw      r7, (r4)      /* Store the largest number into RESULT */
STOP:
    br       STOP         /* Remain here if done */

.org 0x500
RESULT:
.skip 4                  /* Space for the largest number found */
N:
.word 7                  /* Number of entries in the list */
NUMBERS:
.word 4, 5, 3, 6, 1, 8, 2 /* Numbers in the list */
.end

```

Figure 11: Assembly program that finds the largest number in a list.

the starting address **zero**. These addresses correspond to the SDRAM memory, which was selected when specifying the system parameters. The DE0-Nano Basic Computer has two more memories which are the *on-chip memory* (i.e. the memory on the FPGA chip) and the *SRAM chip* on the DE0-Nano board. See the document *Basic Computer System for Altera DE0-Nano Board* ([5]) for full information. This document can be accessed by clicking on the *Documentation* button in Figure 4.

7. Run the program. When the program is running, you will not be able to see any changes such as the contents of registers or memory locations in the monitor windows, because the monitor program cannot communicate with the processor system on the DE0-Nano board. But, if you stop the program the present state of these components will be displayed. Do so and observe that the program has stopped executing at the last branch instruction which is loaded in the memory location 0x34. Note that the largest number found in the sample list is 8 as indicated by the contents of register r7. This value is also stored in the memory location 0x500, which can be seen by opening the *Memory tab* of the monitor window (in Figure 15).
8. Return to the beginning of the program by clicking on the icon . Now, single step through the program by clicking on the icon . Watch how the instructions change the data in the processor's registers.
9. Set the Program Counter to 0. Note that this action has the same effect as clicking on the restart icon .

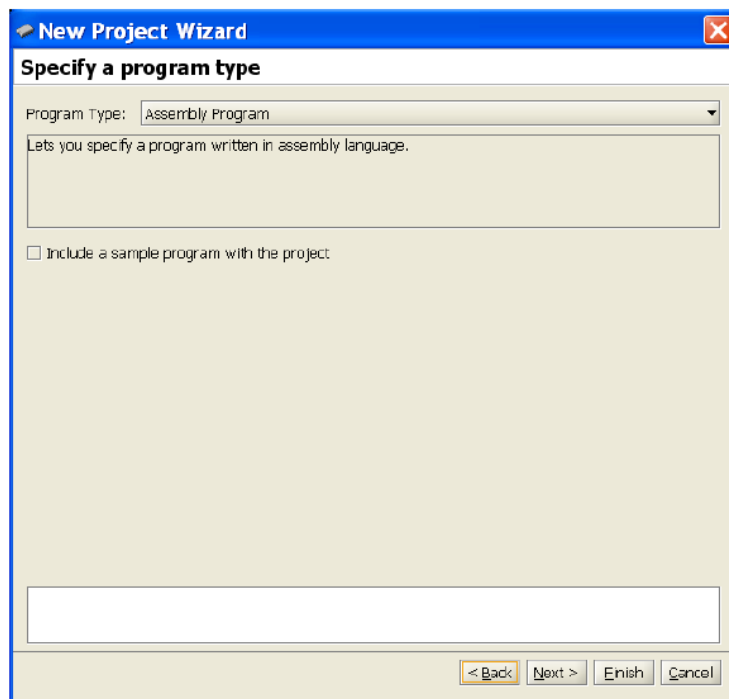


Figure 12: Select an assembly language program.

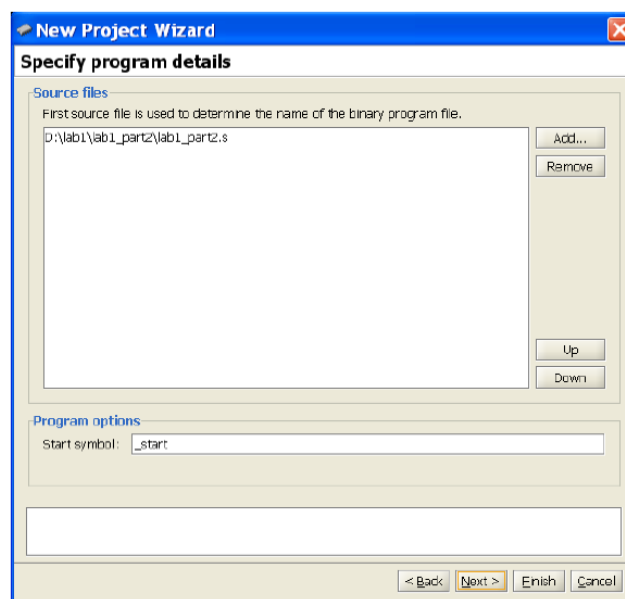


Figure 13: Select your source program.

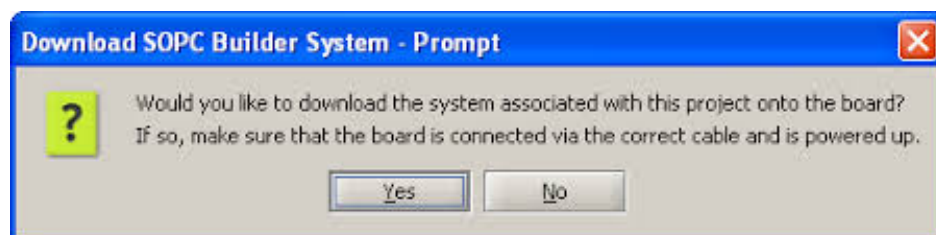


Figure 14: Window with a message asking for downloading the hardware system configuration of the DE0-Nano board.

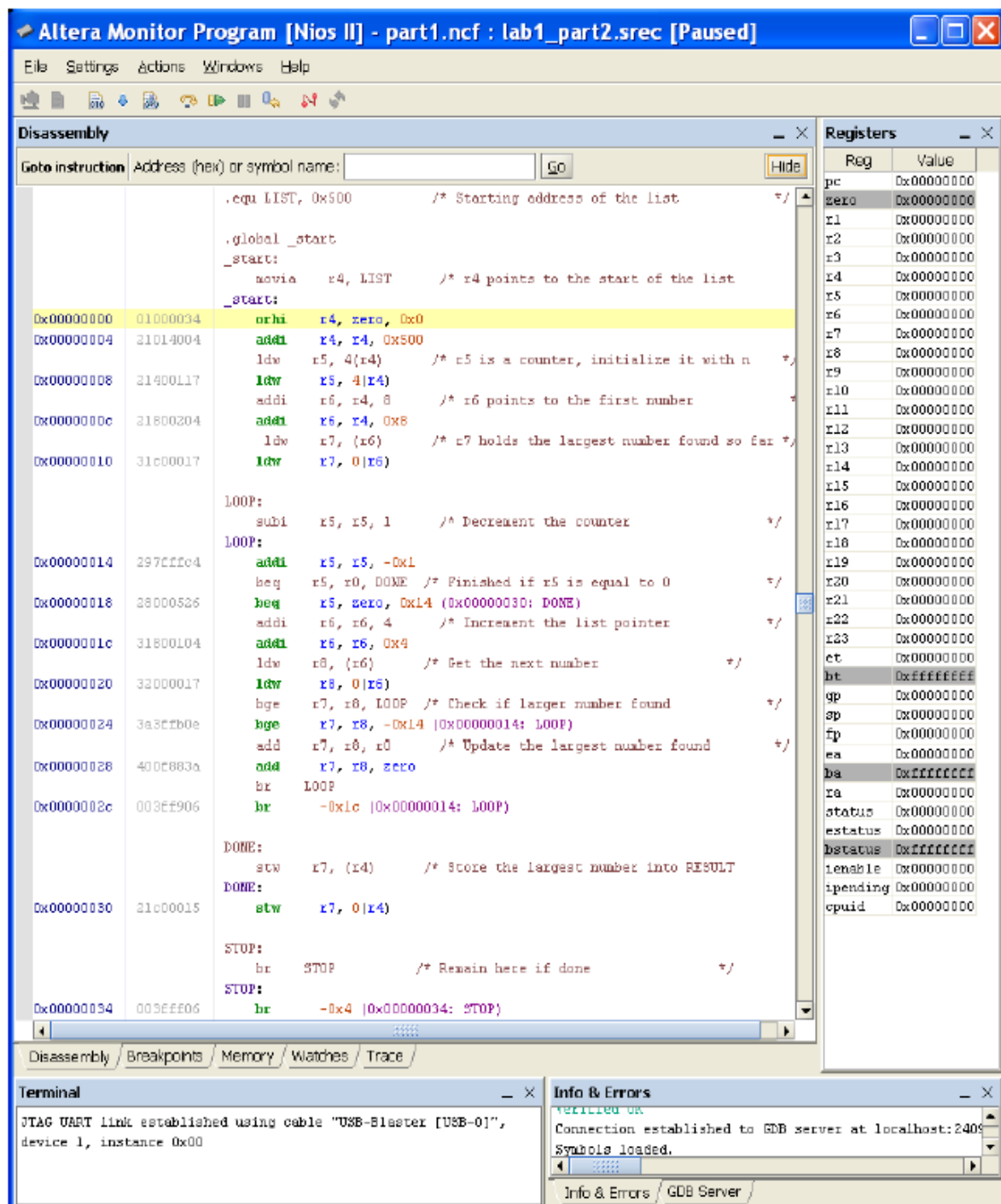



Figure 15: The disassembled view of the program that was shown above in Figure 10.

10. This time add a breakpoint at address 0x28 (by clicking on the gray bar to the left of this address), so that the program will automatically stop executing whenever the branch instruction at this location is about to be executed. Run the program and observe the contents of register r7 each time this breakpoint is reached.
11. Remove the breakpoint by clicking on it. Then, set the Program Counter to 0x8, which will bypass the first two instructions which load the address LIST into register r4. Also, set the value in register r4 to 0x504. Run the program by clicking on the icon .

Question 2.

- What will the result of this execution be?

Part III

Instructions and data are represented as patterns of 1s and 0s. In this part, we will examine how instructions are formed. We will do this by replacing the instruction `bge r7, r8, LOOP` in the program in Figure 11 with the instruction `blt r7, r8, LOOP`. However, instead of replacing this instruction in the source program and then recompiling and loading the altered program, we will load the original program and then make the desired change directly in the program that is already loaded in the memory. To do this it is necessary to derive the machine-code representation of the instruction in question.

Perform the following steps:

1. Derive the machine code representation of the instruction `blt r7, r8, LOOP`. In the *Nios II Processor Reference Handbook* ([6]), we can find that the `blt` instruction has the format shown in Figure 16. Use registers r7 and r8 as registers A and B, respectively, and determine the branch offset needed to branch to the instruction at location LOOP.

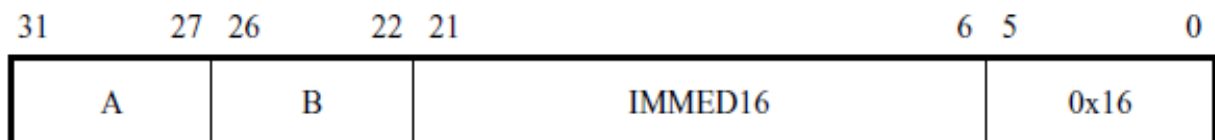


Figure 16: Format for the `blt` instruction.

2. Reload your original program (by selecting **Actions > Load**). Then, execute the program once, stopping at the end.
3. Use the Altera Monitor Program's memory-fill functionality to place the derived `blt` instruction into memory location 0x24. We should note that you will not see the updated instruction in the disassembly view of the Monitor Program. Set the Program Counter to 0x0 and run the program.

Question 3.

1. What is the result provided by the execution of program?
2. What are the values saved in register r7 and memory location 0x500?

Part IV

In this part, you are required to write a Nios II assembly language program that generates the first n numbers of the *Fibonacci* series. In this series, the first two numbers are 0 and 1, and each subsequent number is generated by adding the preceding two numbers. For example, for $n = 8$, the series is

0, 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13

Your programs should store the numbers in successive memory word locations starting at `0x1000`. Place a test value n in location `0xffc`.

Perform the following steps:

1. Create a new directory: `lab1_part4`.
2. Write an assembly language program that computes the desired Fibonacci series, and place the file in the directory `lab1_part4`.
3. Then, use the Monitor Program to create a new project, `part4`, and specify that your program should be run on the DE0-Nano Basic Computer.
4. Run your program.
5. Examine the memory locations starting at `0x1000` to verify that your program is correct.

References

- [1] Terasic. DE0-Nano User Manual, 2013.
- [2] Intel. Laboratory Exercise 1. Using an Intel Nios II System, 2018.
- [3] Altera. Introduction to the Altera Nios II Soft Processor, 2012.
- [4] Altera. Nios II Classic Processor Reference Guide, 2016.
- [5] Altera. Basic Computer System for Altera DE0-Nano Board, 2014.
- [6] Altera. Nios II Processor Reference Handbook, 2006.