

Make everything as simple as possible, but not simpler.
—Albert Einstein (1879–1955)

A computer can be described *constructively*, by laying out its hardware platform and explaining how it is built from low-level chips. A computer can also be described *abstractly*, by specifying and demonstrating its machine language capabilities. And indeed, it is convenient to get acquainted with a new computer system by first seeing some low-level programs written in its machine language. This helps us understand not only how to program the computer to do useful things, but also why its hardware was designed in a certain way. With that in mind, this chapter focuses on low-level programming in machine language. This sets the stage for chapter 5, where we complete the construction of a general-purpose computer designed to run machine language programs. This computer will be constructed from the chip set built in chapters 1–3.

A machine language is an agreed-upon formalism, designed to code low-level programs as series of machine instructions. Using these instructions, the programmer can command the processor to perform arithmetic and logic operations, fetch and store values from and to the memory, move values from one register to another, test Boolean conditions, and so on. As opposed to high-level languages, whose basic design goals are generality and power of expression, the goal of machine language's design is direct execution in, and total control of, a given hardware platform. Of course, generality, power, and elegance are still desired, but only to the extent that they support the basic requirement of direct execution in hardware.

Machine language is the most profound interface in the overall computer enterprise—the fine line where hardware and software meet. This is the point where the abstract thoughts of the programmer, as manifested in symbolic instructions, are turned into physical operations performed in silicon. Thus, machine language can

be construed as both a programming tool and an integral part of the hardware platform. In fact, just as we say that the machine language is designed to exploit a given hardware platform, we can say that the hardware platform is designed to fetch, interpret, and execute instructions written in the given machine language.

The chapter begins with a general introduction to machine language programming. Next, we give a detailed specification of the Hack machine language, covering both its binary and its symbolic assembly versions. The project that ends the chapter engages you in writing a couple of machine language programs. This project offers a hands-on appreciation of low-level programming and prepares you for building the computer itself in the next chapter.

Although most people will never write programs directly in machine language, the study of low-level programming is a prerequisite to a complete understanding of computer architectures. Also, it is rather fascinating to realize how the most sophisticated software systems are, at bottom, long series of elementary instructions, each specifying a very simple and primitive operation on the underlying hardware. As usual, this understanding is best achieved constructively, by writing some low-level code and running it directly on the hardware platform.

4.1 Background

This chapter is language-oriented. Therefore, we can abstract away most of the details of the underlying hardware platform, deferring its description to the next chapter. Indeed, to give a general description of machine languages, it is sufficient to focus on three main abstractions only: a *processor*, a *memory*, and a set of *registers*.

4.1.1 Machines

A *machine language* can be viewed as an agreed-upon formalism, designed to manipulate a *memory* using a *processor* and a set of *registers*.

Memory The term *memory* refers loosely to the collection of hardware devices that store data and instructions in a computer. From the programmer's standpoint, all memories have the same structure: A continuous array of cells of some fixed width, also called *words* or *locations*, each having a unique *address*. Hence, an individual word (representing either a data item or an instruction) is specified by supplying its

address. In what follows we will refer to such individual words using the equivalent notation `Memory[address]`, `RAM[address]`, or `M[address]` for brevity.

Processor The processor, normally called *Central Processing Unit* or *CPU*, is a device capable of performing a fixed set of elementary operations. These typically include arithmetic and logic operations, memory access operations, and control (also called *branching*) operations. The operands of these operations are binary values that come from registers and selected memory locations. Likewise, the results of the operations (the processor's output) can be stored either in registers or in selected memory locations.

Registers Memory access is a relatively slow operation, requiring long instruction formats (an address may require 32 bits). For this reason, most processors are equipped with several registers, each capable of holding a single value. Located in the processor's immediate proximity, the registers serve as a high-speed local memory, allowing the processor to manipulate data and instructions quickly. This setting enables the programmer to minimize the use of memory access commands, thus speeding up the program's execution.

4.1.2 Languages

A machine language program is a series of coded instructions. For example, a typical instruction in a 16-bit computer may be `1010001100011001`. In order to figure out what this instruction means, we have to know the rules of the game, namely, the instruction set of the underlying hardware platform. For example, the language may be such that each instruction consists of four 4-bit fields: The left-most field codes a CPU operation, and the remaining three fields represent the operation's operands. Thus the previous command may code the operation *set R3 to R1 + R9*, depending of course on the hardware specification and the machine language syntax.

Since binary codes are rather cryptic, machine languages are normally specified using both binary codes and symbolic mnemonics (a *mnemonic* is a symbolic label whose name hints at what it stands for—in our case hardware elements and binary operations). For example, the language designer can decide that the operation code `1010` will be represented by the mnemonic `add` and that the registers of the machine will be symbolically referred to using the symbols `R0`, `R1`, `R2`, and so forth. Using these conventions, one can specify machine language instructions either directly, as `1010001100011001`, or symbolically, as, say, `ADD R3, R1, R9`.

Taking this symbolic abstraction one step further, we can allow ourselves not only to *read* symbolic notation, but to actually *write* programs using symbolic commands rather than binary instructions. Next, we can use a text processing program to parse the symbolic commands into their underlying fields (mnemonics and operands), translate each field into its equivalent binary representation, and assemble the resulting codes into binary machine instructions. The symbolic notation is called *assembly language*, or simply *assembly*, and the program that translates from assembly to binary is called *assembler*.

Since different computers vary in terms of CPU operations, number and type of registers, and assembly syntax rules, there is a Tower of Babel of machine languages, each with its own obscure syntax. Yet irrespective of this variety, all machine languages support similar sets of generic commands, which we now describe.

4.1.3 Commands

Arithmetic and Logic Operations Every computer is required to perform basic arithmetic operations like addition and subtraction as well as basic Boolean operations like bit-wise negation, bit shifting, and so forth. Here are some examples, written in typical machine language syntax:

```
ADD R2,R1,R3 // R2←R1+R3 where R1,R2,R3 are registers
ADD R2,R1,foo // R2←R1+foo where foo stands for the
               // value of the memory location pointed
               // at by the user-defined label foo.
AND R1,R1,R2 // R1←bit wise And of R1 and R2
```

Memory Access Memory access commands fall into two categories. First, as we have just seen, arithmetic and logical commands are allowed to operate not only on registers, but also on selected memory locations. Second, all computers feature explicit *load* and *store* commands, designed to move data between registers and memory. These memory access commands may use several types of *addressing modes*—ways of specifying the address of the required memory word. As usual, different computers offer different possibilities and different notations, but the following three memory access modes are almost always supported:

- *Direct addressing* The most common way to address the memory is to express a specific address or use a symbol that refers to a specific address, as follows:

```
LOAD R1,67      // R1←Memory[67]

// Or, assuming that bar refers to memory address 67:

LOAD R1,bar     // R1←Memory[67]
```

■ *Immediate addressing* This form of addressing is used to load constants—namely, load values that appear in the instruction code: Instead of treating the numeric field that appears in the instruction as an address, we simply load the value of the field itself into the register, as follows:

```
LOADI R1,67     // R1←67
```

■ *Indirect addressing* In this addressing mode the address of the required memory location is not hard-coded into the instruction; instead, the instruction specifies a memory location that holds the required address. This addressing mode is used to handle *pointers*. For example, consider the high-level command `x=foo[j]`, where `foo` is an array variable and `x` and `j` are integer variables. What is the machine language equivalent of this command? Well, when the array `foo` is declared and initialized in the high-level program, the compiler allocates a memory segment to hold the array data and makes the symbol `foo` refer to the *base address* of that segment.

Now, when the compiler later encounters references to array cells like `foo[j]`, it translates them as follows. First, note that the *j*th array entry should be physically located in a memory location that is at a displacement *j* from the array’s base address (assuming, for simplicity, that each array element uses a single word). Hence the address corresponding to the expression `foo[j]` can be easily calculated by adding the value of *j* to the value of `foo`. Thus in the C programming language, for example, a command like `x=foo[j]` can be also expressed as `x=*(foo+j)`, where the notation “*n” stands for “the value of `Memory[n]`”. When translated into machine language, such commands typically generate the following code (depending on the assembly language syntax):

```
// Translation of x=foo[j] or x=*(foo+j):
ADD R1,foo,j    // R1←foo+j
LOAD* R2,R1     // R2←Memory[R1]
STR R2,x        // x←R2
```

Flow of Control While programs normally execute in a linear fashion, one command after the other, they also include occasional branches to locations other than the next command. Branching serves several purposes including *repetition* (jump

High-level

```
// A while loop:
while (R1>=0) {
    code segment 1
}
code segment 2
```

Low-level

```
// Typical translation:
beginWhile:
    JNG R1,endWhile // If R1<0 goto endWhile
    // Translation of code segment 1 comes here
    JMP beginWhile // Goto beginWhile
endWhile:
    // Translation of code segment 2 comes here
```

Figure 4.1 High- and low-level branching logic. The syntax of *goto commands* varies from one language to another, but the basic idea is the same.

backward to the beginning of a loop), *conditional execution* (if a Boolean condition is false, jump forward to the location after the “if-then” clause), and *subroutine calling* (jump to the first command of some other code segment). In order to support these programming constructs, every machine language features the means to jump to selected locations in the program, both conditionally and unconditionally. In assembly languages, locations in the program can also be given symbolic names, using some syntax for specifying labels. Figure 4.1 illustrates a typical example.

Unconditional jump commands like `JMP beginWhile` specify only the address of the target location. *Conditional jump* commands like `JNG R1,endWhile` must also specify a Boolean condition, expressed in some way. In some languages the condition is an explicit part of the command, while in others it is a by-product of executing a previous command.

This ends our informal introduction to machine languages and the generic operations that they normally support. The next section gives a formal description of one specific machine language—the native code of the computer that we will build in chapter 5.

4.2 Hack Machine Language Specification

4.2.1 Overview

The Hack computer is a von Neumann platform. It is a 16-bit machine, consisting of a CPU, two separate memory modules serving as instruction memory and data memory, and two memory-mapped I/O devices: a screen and a keyboard.

Memory Address Spaces The Hack programmer is aware of two distinct address spaces: an *instruction memory* and a *data memory*. Both memories are 16-bit wide and have a 15-bit address space, meaning that the maximum addressable size of each memory is 32K 16-bit words.

The CPU can only execute programs that reside in the instruction memory. The instruction memory is a read-only device, and programs are loaded into it using some exogenous means. For example, the instruction memory can be implemented in a ROM chip that is pre-burned with the required program. Loading a new program is done by replacing the entire ROM chip, similar to replacing a cartridge in a game console. In order to simulate this operation, hardware simulators of the Hack platform must provide a means to load the instruction memory from a text file containing a machine language program.

Registers The Hack programmer is aware of two 16-bit registers called D and A. These registers can be manipulated explicitly by arithmetic and logical instructions like $A=D-1$ or $D=!A$ (where “!” means a 16-bit Not operation). While D is used solely to store data values, A doubles as both a data register and an address register. That is to say, depending on the instruction context, the contents of A can be interpreted either as a data value, or as an address in the data memory, or as an address in the instruction memory, as we now explain.

First, the A register can be used to facilitate direct access to the data memory (which, from now on, will be often referred to as “memory”). Since Hack instructions are 16-bit wide, and since addresses are specified using 15 bits, it is impossible to pack both an operation code and an address in one instruction. Thus, the syntax of the Hack language mandates that memory access instructions operate on an implicit memory location labeled “M”, for example, $D=M+1$. In order to resolve this address, the convention is that M always refers to the memory word whose address is the current value of the A register. For example, if we want to effect the operation $D = \text{Memory}[516] - 1$, we have to use one instruction to set the A register to 516, and a subsequent instruction to specify $D=M-1$.

In addition, the hardworking A register is also used to facilitate direct access to the instruction memory. Similar to the memory access convention, Hack jump instructions do not specify a particular address. Instead, the convention is that any jump operation always effects a jump to the instruction located in the memory word addressed by A. Thus, if we want to effect the operation *goto* 35, we use one instruction to set A to 35, and a second instruction to code a *goto* command, without specifying an address. This sequence causes the computer to fetch the instruction located in `InstructionMemory[35]` in the next clock cycle.

C language

```
// Adds 1+...+100.
int i = 1;
int sum = 0;
While (i <= 100){
    sum += i;
    i++;
}
```

Hack machine language

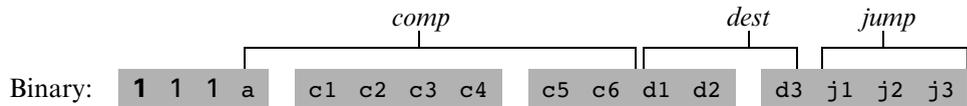
```
// Adds 1+...+100.
    @i      // i refers to some mem. location.
M=1      // i=1
    @sum    // sum refers to some mem. location.
M=0      // sum=0
(LLOOP)
    @i
D=M      // D=i
    @100
D=D-A    // D=i-100
    @END
D;JGT    // If (i-100)>0 goto END
    @i
D=M      // D=i
    @sum
M=D+M    // sum=sum+i
    @i
M=M+1    // i=i+1
    @LOOP
0;JMP    // Goto LOOP
(END)
    @END
0;JMP    // Infinite loop
```

Figure 4.2 C and assembly versions of the same program. The infinite loop at the program's end is our standard way to “terminate” the execution of Hack programs.

4.2.3 The C-Instruction

The *C*-instruction is the programming workhorse of the Hack platform—the instruction that gets almost everything done. The instruction code is a specification that answers three questions: (a) what to compute, (b) where to store the computed value, and (c) what to do next? Along with the *A*-instruction, these specifications determine all the possible operations of the computer.

C-instruction: *dest=comp;jump* // Either the *dest* or *jump* fields may be empty.
 // If *dest* is empty, the “=” is omitted;
 // If *jump* is empty, the “;” is omitted.



The leftmost bit is the *C*-instruction code, which is 1. The next two bits are not used. The remaining bits form three fields that correspond to the three parts of the instruction’s symbolic representation. The overall semantics of the symbolic instruction *dest = comp;jump* is as follows. The *comp* field instructs the ALU what to compute. The *dest* field instructs where to store the computed value (ALU output). The *jump* field specifies a jump condition, namely, which command to fetch and execute next. We now describe the format and semantics of each of the three fields.

The Computation Specification The Hack ALU is designed to compute a fixed set of functions on the D, A, and M registers (where M stands for Memory[A]). The computed function is specified by the *a*-bit and the six *c*-bits comprising the instruction’s *comp* field. This 7-bit pattern can potentially code 128 different functions, of which only the 28 listed in figure 4.3 are documented in the language specification.

Recall that the format of the *C*-instruction is 111a cccc cedd djjj. Suppose we want to have the ALU compute $D-1$, the current value of the D register minus 1. According to figure 4.3, this can be done by issuing the instruction 1110 **0011** 1000 0000 (the 7-bit operation code is in bold). To compute the value of $D \mid M$, we issue the instruction 1111 **0101** 0100 0000. To compute the constant -1 , we issue the instruction 1110 **1110** 1000 0000, and so on.

The Destination Specification The value computed by the *comp* part of the *C*-instruction can be stored in several destinations, as specified by the instruction’s 3-bit

| (when a=0) <i>comp mnemonic</i> | c1 | c2 | c3 | c4 | c5 | c6 | (when a=1) <i>comp mnemonic</i> |
|------------------------------------|----|----|----|----|----|----|------------------------------------|
| 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | |
| 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | |
| -1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | |
| D | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | |
| A | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | M |
| !D | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | |
| !A | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | !M |
| -D | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | |
| -A | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | -M |
| D+1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | |
| A+1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | M+1 |
| D-1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | |
| A-1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | M-1 |
| D+A | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | D+M |
| D-A | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | D-M |
| A-D | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | M-D |
| D&A | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | D&M |
| D A | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | D M |

Figure 4.3 The *compute* field of the *C*-instruction. *D* and *A* are names of registers. *M* refers to the memory location addressed by *A*, namely, to $\text{Memory}[A]$. The symbols $+$ and $-$ denote 16-bit 2's complement addition and subtraction, while $!$, $|$, and $\&$ denote the 16-bit bit-wise Boolean operators Not, Or, and And, respectively. Note the similarity between this instruction set and the ALU specification given in figure 2.6.

dest part (see figure 4.4). The first and second *a*-bits code whether to store the computed value in the *A* register and in the *D* register, respectively. The third *a*-bit codes whether to store the computed value in *M* (i.e., in $\text{Memory}[A]$). One, more than one, or none of these bits may be asserted.

Recall that the format of the *C*-instruction is $111a\ cccc\ ccdd\ djjj$. Suppose we want the computer to increment the value of $\text{Memory}[7]$ by 1 and to also store the result in the *D* register. According to figures 4.3 and 4.4, this can be accomplished by the following instructions:

```
0000 0000 0000 0111    // @7
1111 1101 1101 1000    // MD=M+1
```

| d1 | d2 | d3 | Mnemonic | Destination (where to store the computed value) |
|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------------|--|
| 0 | 0 | 0 | null | The value is not stored anywhere |
| 0 | 0 | 1 | M | Memory[A] (memory register addressed by A) |
| 0 | 1 | 0 | D | D register |
| 0 | 1 | 1 | MD | Memory[A] and D register |
| 1 | 0 | 0 | A | A register |
| 1 | 0 | 1 | AM | A register and Memory[A] |
| 1 | 1 | 0 | AD | A register and D register |
| 1 | 1 | 1 | AMD | A register, Memory[A], and D register |

Figure 4.4 The *dest* field of the *C*-instruction.

The first instruction causes the computer to select the memory register whose address is 7 (the so-called M register). The second instruction computes the value of $M + 1$ and stores the result in both M and D.

The Jump Specification The *jump* field of the *C*-instruction tells the computer what to do next. There are two possibilities: The computer should either fetch and execute the next instruction in the program, which is the default, or it should fetch and execute an instruction located elsewhere in the program. In the latter case, we assume that the A register has been previously set to the address to which we have to jump.

Whether or not a jump should actually materialize depends on the three *j*-bits of the *jump* field and on the ALU output value (computed according to the *comp* field). The first *j*-bit specifies whether to jump in case this value is negative, the second *j*-bit in case the value is zero, and the third *j*-bit in case it is positive. This gives eight possible jump conditions, shown in figure 4.5.

The following example illustrates the jump commands in action:

Logic

```
if Memory[3]=5 then goto 100
else goto 200
```

Implementation

```
@3
D=M // D=Memory[3]
@5
D=D-A // D=D-5
@100
D;JEQ // If D=0 goto 100
@200
0;JMP // Goto 200
```

| j1 (<i>out</i> < 0) | j2 (<i>out</i> = 0) | j3 (<i>out</i> > 0) | Mnemonic | Effect |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------|------------------------|
| 0 | 0 | 0 | nu11 | No jump |
| 0 | 0 | 1 | JGT | If <i>out</i> > 0 jump |
| 0 | 1 | 0 | JEQ | If <i>out</i> = 0 jump |
| 0 | 1 | 1 | JGE | If <i>out</i> ≥ 0 jump |
| 1 | 0 | 0 | JLT | If <i>out</i> < 0 jump |
| 1 | 0 | 1 | JNE | If <i>out</i> ≠ 0 jump |
| 1 | 1 | 0 | JLE | If <i>out</i> ≤ 0 jump |
| 1 | 1 | 1 | JMP | Jump |

Figure 4.5 The *jump* field of the *C*-instruction. *Out* refers to the ALU output (resulting from the instruction’s *comp* part), and *jump* implies “continue execution with the instruction addressed by the A register.”

The last instruction (0;JMP) effects an unconditional jump. Since the *C*-instruction syntax requires that we always effect *some* computation, we instruct the ALU to compute 0 (an arbitrary choice), which is ignored.

Conflicting Uses of the A Register As was just illustrated, the programmer can use the A register to select either a *data memory* location for a subsequent *C*-instruction involving M, or an *instruction memory* location for a subsequent *C*-instruction involving a jump. Thus, to prevent conflicting use of the A register, in well-written programs a *C*-instruction that may cause a jump (i.e., with some non-zero *j* bits) should not contain a reference to M, and vice versa.

4.2.4 Symbols

Assembly commands can refer to memory locations (addresses) using either constants or *symbols*. Symbols are introduced into assembly programs in the following three ways:

- *Predefined symbols:* A special subset of RAM addresses can be referred to by any assembly program using the following predefined symbols:
 - *Virtual registers:* To simplify assembly programming, the symbols R0 to R15 are predefined to refer to RAM addresses 0 to 15, respectively.
 - *Predefined pointers:* The symbols SP, LCL, ARG, THIS, and THAT are predefined to refer to RAM addresses 0 to 4, respectively. Note that each of these memory

locations has two labels. For example, address 2 can be referred to using either `R2` or `ARG`. This syntactic convention will come to play in the implementation of the virtual machine, discussed in chapters 7 and 8.

- *I/O pointers:* The symbols `SCREEN` and `KBD` are predefined to refer to RAM addresses 16384 (0x4000) and 24576 (0x6000), respectively, which are the base addresses of the screen and keyboard memory maps. The use of these I/O devices is explained later.
- *Label symbols:* These user-defined symbols, which serve to label destinations of *goto* commands, are declared by the pseudo-command “(xxx)”. This directive defines the symbol `xxx` to refer to the instruction memory location holding the next command in the program. A label can be defined only once and can be used anywhere in the assembly program, even before the line in which it is defined.
- *Variable symbols:* Any user-defined symbol `xxx` appearing in an assembly program that is not predefined and is not defined elsewhere using the “(xxx)” command is treated as a *variable*, and is assigned a unique memory address by the assembler, starting at RAM address 16 (0x0010).

4.2.5 Input/Output Handling

The Hack platform can be connected to two peripheral devices: a screen and a keyboard. Both devices interact with the computer platform through *memory maps*. This means that drawing pixels on the screen is achieved by writing binary values into a memory segment associated with the screen. Likewise, listening to the keyboard is done by reading a memory location associated with the keyboard. The physical I/O devices and their memory maps are synchronized via continuous refresh loops.

Screen The Hack computer includes a black-and-white screen organized as 256 rows of 512 pixels per row. The screen’s contents are represented by an 8K memory map that starts at RAM address 16384 (0x4000). Each row in the physical screen, starting at the screen’s top left corner, is represented in the RAM by 32 consecutive 16-bit words. Thus the pixel at row r from the top and column c from the left is mapped on the $c\%16$ bit (counting from LSB to MSB) of the word located at $\text{RAM}[16384 + r \cdot 32 + c/16]$. To write or read a pixel of the physical screen, one reads or writes the corresponding bit in the RAM-resident memory map (1 = black, 0 = white). Example:

```
// Draw a single black dot at the screen's top left corner:
@SCREEN // Set the A register to point to the memory
        // word that is mapped to the 16 left-most
        // pixels of the top row of the screen.
M=1     // Blacken the left-most pixel.
```

Keyboard The Hack computer interfaces with the physical keyboard via a single-word memory map located in RAM address 24576 (0x6000). Whenever a key is pressed on the physical keyboard, its 16-bit ASCII code appears in RAM[24576]. When no key is pressed, the code 0 appears in this location. In addition to the usual ASCII codes, the Hack keyboard recognizes the keys shown in figure 4.6.

4.2.6 Syntax Conventions and File Format

Binary Code Files A binary code file is composed of text lines. Each line is a sequence of sixteen “0” and “1” ASCII characters, coding a single machine language instruction. Taken together, all the lines in the file represent a machine language program. The contract is such that when a machine language program is loaded into the computer’s instruction memory, the binary code represented by the file’s n th line is stored in address n of the instruction memory (the count of both program lines and memory addresses starts at 0). By convention, machine language programs are stored in text files with a “hack” extension, for example, `Prog.hack`.

Assembly Language Files By convention, assembly language programs are stored in text files with an “asm” extension, for example, `Prog.asm`. An assembly language

| Key pressed | Code | Key pressed | Code |
|-------------|------|-------------|---------|
| newline | 128 | end | 135 |
| backspace | 129 | page up | 136 |
| left arrow | 130 | page down | 137 |
| up arrow | 131 | insert | 138 |
| right arrow | 132 | delete | 139 |
| down arrow | 133 | esc | 140 |
| home | 134 | f1–f12 | 141–152 |

Figure 4.6 Special keyboard codes in the Hack platform.

file is composed of text lines, each representing either an *instruction* or a *symbol declaration*:

- *Instruction*: an *A*-instruction or a *C*-instruction.
- *(Symbol)*: This pseudo-command causes the assembler to assign the label `Symbol` to the memory location in which the next command of the program will be stored. It is called “pseudo-command” since it generates no machine code.

(The remaining conventions in this section pertain to assembly programs only.)

Constants and Symbols *Constants* must be non-negative and are always written in decimal notation. A user-defined *symbol* can be any sequence of letters, digits, underscore (`_`), dot (`.`), dollar sign (`$`), and colon (`:`) that does not begin with a digit.

Comments Text beginning with two slashes (`//`) and ending at the end of the line is considered a comment and is ignored.

White Space Space characters are ignored. Empty lines are ignored.

Case Conventions All the assembly mnemonics must be written in uppercase. The rest (user-defined labels and variable names) is case sensitive. The convention is to use uppercase for labels and lowercase for variable names.

4.3 Perspective

The Hack machine language is almost as simple as machine languages get. Most computers have more instructions, more data types, more registers, more instruction formats, and more addressing modes. However, any feature not supported by the Hack machine language may still be implemented in software, at a performance cost. For example, the Hack platform does not supply multiplication and division as primitive machine language operations. Since these operations are obviously required by any high-level language, we will later implement them at the operating system level (chapter 12).

In terms of syntax, we have chosen to give Hack a somewhat different look-and-feel than the mechanical nature of most assembly languages. In particular, we have chosen a high-level language-like syntax for the *C*-command, for example, `D=M` and `D=D+M` instead of the more traditional `LOAD` and `ADD` directives. The reader

should note, however, that these are just syntactic details. For example, the + character plays no algebraic role whatsoever in the command `D=D+M`. Rather, the three-character string `D+M`, taken as a whole, is treated as a single assembly mnemonic, designed to code a single ALU operation.

One of the main characteristics that gives machine languages their particular flavor is the number of memory addresses that can appear in a single command. In this respect, Hack may be described as a “ $\frac{1}{2}$ address machine”: Since there is no room to pack both an instruction code and a 15-bit address in the 16-bit instruction format, operations involving memory access will normally be specified in Hack using two instructions: an *A*-instruction to specify the address and a *C*-instruction to specify the operation. In comparison, most machine languages can directly specify at least one address in every machine instruction.

Indeed, Hack assembly code typically ends up being (mostly) an alternating sequence of *A*- and *C*-instructions, for example, `@xxx` followed by `D=D+M`, `@YYY` followed by `0;JMP`, and so on. If you find this coding style tedious or even peculiar, you should note that friendlier *macro commands* like `D=D+M[xxx]` and `GOTO YYY` can easily be introduced into the language, causing Hack assembly code to be more readable as well as about 50 percent shorter. The trick is to have the assembler translate these macro commands into binary code effecting `@xxx` followed by `D=D+M`, `@YYY` followed by `0;JMP`, and so on.

The *assembler*, mentioned several times in this chapter, is the program responsible for translating symbolic assembly programs into executable programs written in binary code. In addition, the assembler is responsible for managing all the system- and user-defined symbols found in the assembly program, and for replacing them with physical memory addresses, as needed. We return to this translation task in chapter 6, in which we build an assembler for the Hack language.

4.4 Project

Objective Get a taste of low-level programming in machine language, and get acquainted with the Hack computer platform. In the process of working on this project, you will also become familiar with the assembly process, and you will appreciate visually how the translated binary code executes on the target hardware.

Resources In this project you will use two tools supplied with the book: An *assembler*, designed to translate Hack assembly programs into binary code, and a *CPU emulator*, designed to run binary programs on a simulated Hack platform.

Contract Write and test the two programs described in what follows. When executed on the CPU emulator, your programs should generate the results mandated by the test scripts supplied in the project directory.

- *Multiplication Program* (`Mult.asm`): The inputs of this program are the current values stored in `R0` and `R1` (i.e., the two top RAM locations). The program computes the product `R0*R1` and stores the result in `R2`. We assume (in this program) that `R0>=0`, `R1>=0`, and `R0*R1<32768`. Your program need not test these conditions, but rather assume that they hold. The supplied `Mult.test` and `Mult.cmp` scripts will test your program on several representative data values.
- *I/O-Handling Program* (`Fill.asm`): This program runs an infinite loop that listens to the keyboard input. When a key is pressed (any key), the program blackens the screen, namely, writes “black” in every pixel. When no key is pressed, the screen should be cleared. You may choose to blacken and clear the screen in any spatial order, as long as pressing a key continuously for long enough will result in a fully blackened screen and not pressing any key for long enough will result in a cleared screen. This program has a test script (`Fill.test`) but no compare file—it should be checked by visibly inspecting the simulated screen.

Steps We recommend proceeding as follows:

0. The assembler and CPU emulator programs needed for this project are available in the `tools` directory of the book’s software suite. Before using them, go through the assembler tutorial and the CPU emulator tutorial.
1. Use a plain text editor to write the first program in assembly, and save it as `projects/04/mult/Mult.asm`.
2. Use the supplied assembler (in either batch or interactive mode) to translate your program. If you get syntax errors, go to step 1. If there are no syntax errors, the assembler will produce a file called `projects/04/mult/Mult.hack`, containing binary machine instructions.
3. Use the supplied CPU emulator to test the resulting `Mult.hack` code. This can be done either interactively, or batch-style using the supplied `Mult.test` script. If you get run-time errors, go to step 1.
4. Repeat stages 1–3 for the second program (`Fill.asm`), using the `projects/04/fill` directory.

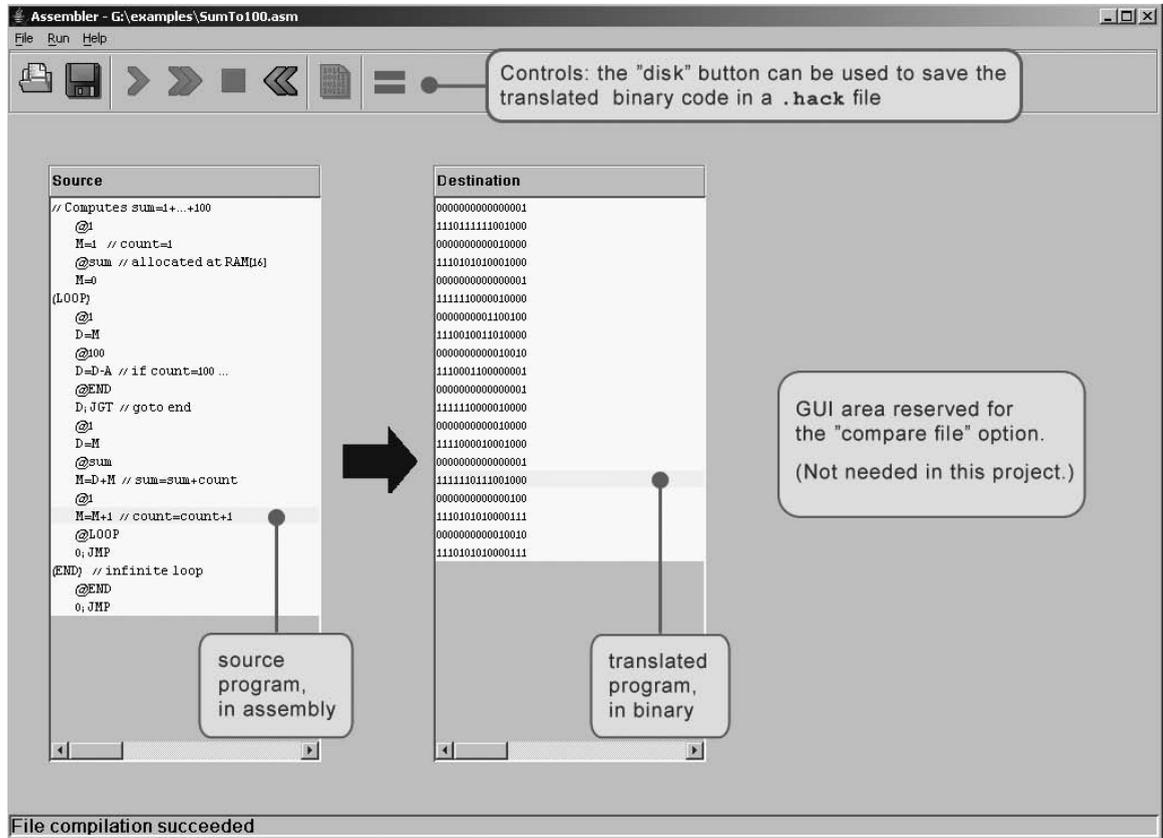


Figure 4.7 The visual assembler supplied with the book.

Debugging Tip The Hack language is case sensitive. A common error occurs when one writes, say, `@foo` and `@Foo` in different parts of the program, thinking that both commands refer to the same variable. In fact, the assembler treats these symbols as two completely different identifiers.

The Supplied Assembler The book's software suite includes a Hack assembler that can be used in either command mode or GUI mode. The latter mode of operation allows observing the translation process in a visual and step-wise fashion, as shown in figure 4.7.

The machine language programs produced by the assembler can be tested in two different ways. First, one can run the `.hack` program in the CPU emulator.

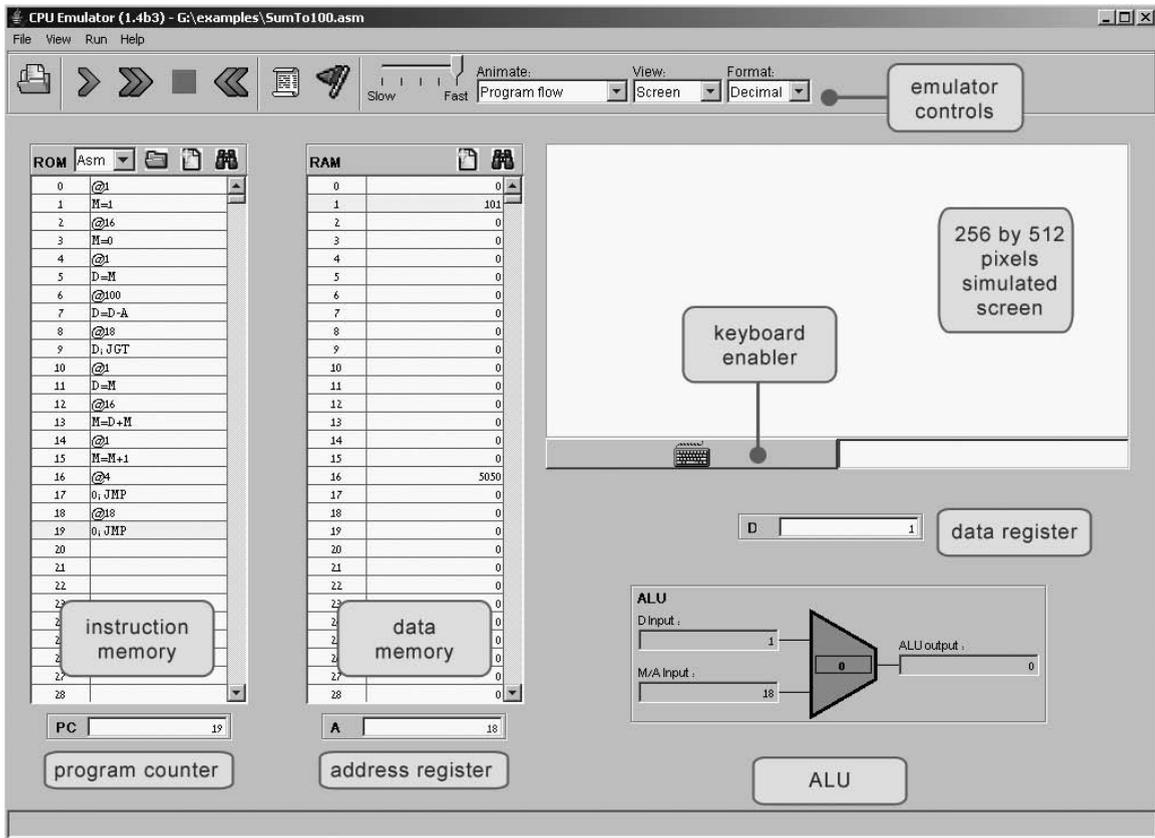


Figure 4.8 The CPU emulator supplied with the book. The loaded program can be displayed either in symbolic notation (as shown in this screen shot) or in binary code. The screen and the keyboard are not used by this particular program.

Alternatively, one can run the same program directly on the hardware, by loading it into the computer's instruction memory using the hardware simulator. Since we will finish building the hardware platform only in the next chapter, the former option makes more sense at this stage.

The Supplied CPU Emulator This program simulates the Hack computer platform. It allows loading a Hack program into the simulated ROM and visually observing its execution on the simulated hardware, as shown in figure 4.8.

For ease of use, the CPU emulator enables loading binary `.hack` files as well as symbolic `.asm` files. In the latter case, the emulator translates the assembly program into binary code on the fly. This utility seems to render the supplied assembler unnecessary, but this is not the case. First, the supplied assembler shows the translation process visually, for instructive purposes. Second, the binary files generated by the assembler can be executed directly on the hardware platform. To do so, load the Computer chip (built in chapter 5's project) into the hardware simulator, then load the `.hack` file generated by the assembler into the computer's ROM chip.

