

WebMIPS: A New Web-Based MIPS Simulation Environment for Computer Architecture Education

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Abstract

We have implemented a MIPS simulation environment called WebMIPS. Our simulator is accessible from the Web and has been successfully used in introductory computer architecture course at Faculty of Information Engineering in Siena, Italy. The advantages of the Web approach are immediate access to the simulator, without installation, and a possible centralized monitoring of students' activity. WebMIPS is capable of uploading and assembling the MIPS code provided by user, simulating a five-stage pipeline step by step or completely, and displaying the values of all registers, input and output data of all pipeline elements.

1. Introduction

The study of computer architecture is a challenging field because of the high complexity involved in any computer system. To ease this complexity, different tools have been developed allowing architectures to be simulated and modified. This approach is beneficial to students approaching computer architecture for the first time, because it allows them to see the execution of actual assembly programs in the architecture. One important step is that the student makes use of simulation tools to understand concepts otherwise difficult to comprehend. Our experience, started with JCachesim cache simulator [1], indicates that Web-based lab exercising is effective, sometimes even more interesting than traditional teaching to our students. We are not alone in trying to make computer architecture education more interesting to students, as can be seen in [5], where the authors used animation for this purpose.

An extensive survey of computer architecture simulators is given in [8]. For computer architecture education, especially interesting is the category of intermediate-level simulators, targeted at students that have some background in computer architecture and need a simulator that covers the principles in more detail, but are not ready for the simulator that

captures all the features of the current state-of-the-art in computer research. The simulators in this category attempt to illustrate and teach two general principles: the instruction set architecture and the micro-architecture.

In many universities, MIPS architecture is studied because it is a RISC architecture that makes understanding abstract concepts of computer design easier. Another advantage of MIPS ISA is that it is used in textbooks [2], [3], which represent a reference material for teaching computer architecture in many universities, which is also the case for our faculty. There are three widely used MIPS architecture simulators: SPIM, WinDLX and MIPSim.

SPIM [4] is an assembly language simulator for the MIPS (R2000/R3000) processor that has both a simple terminal interface and a visual, window-based interface. It implements almost entire MIPS assembler-extended instruction set (detailed SPIM description can be found in [3] with more documentation available online [4]). SPIM was extensively used in our teaching, however it lacks pipeline modeling.

WinDLX [9] and MIPSim [10] are pipeline simulators developed at the Vienna Institute of Technology and were described by authors in [11]. WinDLX models the pipeline of the MIPS-like DLX architecture described in [2]. It allows for displaying and modifying all of the information relevant to the CPU (pipeline, registers, I/O, memory), enabling/disabling pipeline forwarding, changing memory size. MIPSim [10] models the MIPS architecture as in [3], with the possibility of changing memory content, but without hazard detection and forwarding units in the pipeline.

We have decided to make a five stage MIPS pipeline simulator capable of displaying the status of almost all hardware units (more than 25) in the MIPS pipeline model, as well as hazard detection and forwarding in the pipeline. Instead of improving MIPSim, which also would have been a valid alternative for our goal, we decided to create a completely new simulator that can be executed from the Web browser window. Our simulator, called WebMIPS, eases the process of learning assembly coding, mastering pipeline, control, and datapath design. However, its major advantage is the immediate accessibility to students, without any prior installing, and the possibility of monitoring their activity over the Web.

The name WebMIPS indicates that the simulator is designed for Web use, and indeed it is written in ASP language [7] and can be started by opening a simulator Web page [6]. Another advantage of the Web based service is that the user are not required to have any special operating system for accessing this software.

WebMIPS does not support the complete MIPS instruction set; the user that wants to write assembly programs on its own must consult the list of supported instructions in order to simulate the code. Since our intention was not implementing a whole assembler, the simulator supports only the basic set of instructions, which were studied during the introductory computer architecture course.

The user can load (copy/paste) MIPS assembly file or use one of the “load-and-play” (built-in) assembly examples to follow its execution in simulator. WebMIPS is not a real assembler; however, it is able to recognize if there are errors in the provided code, and to display the line with the error. The simulator is also able of displaying the program execution step-by-step or all at once. In step-by-step mode the user can follow advancing of instructions in each stage of the pipeline, and by clicking on the constituting elements of the pipeline can see the corresponding values, input and output signals in every clock cycle. WebMIPS has forwarding always enabled, resolves pipeline hazards and displays the contents of hazard detection and forwarding units in the pipeline.

2. Detailed description of WebMIPS simulator

2.1 General structure

WebMIPS is a Web application and it is executed on remote servers in multiuser mode (users can execute different code at the same time). To avoid blocking of the system in case of infinite loops, erroneous references to memory and other common programming errors, we limited the execution of each uploaded program to 1000 clock cycles. On the server, all simulation parameters can be configured.

When trying to execute unsupported assembly instructions, an error is displayed and WebMIPS indicates the corresponding line number. In standard assembly language the use of directives .text and .globl is allowed, and in this case the first instruction to be executed corresponds to the .globl label. The end of execution is not specified by syscall 10, instead in WebMIPS the execution stops at the last code line.

2.2 Loading of the code

To offer the possibility of loading proprietary code to the users, we made an ASP page section, where it is possible to program in MIPS assembly and to verify whether the code is correct. By clicking on the button “Load/Reload Program” in the upper part of the WebMIPS browser window (Figure 1), the MIPS assembler is activated.

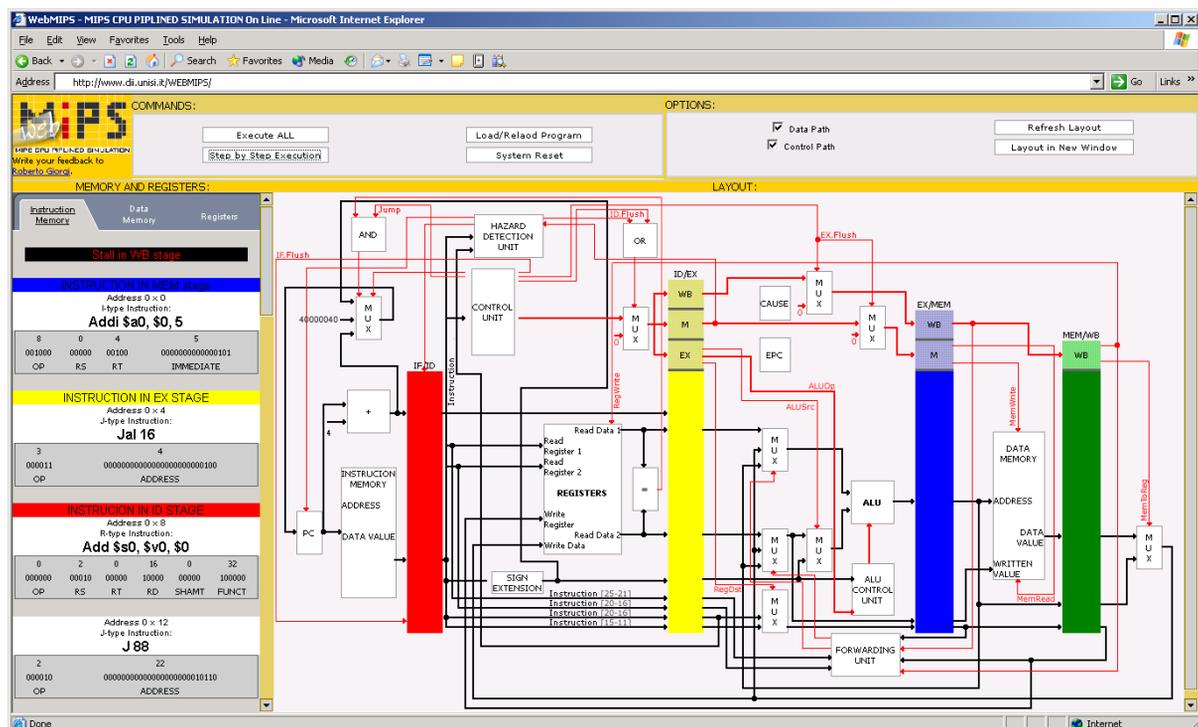


Figure 1. WebMIPS window during execution. Note the Load/Reload Program button in the upper part. The wires can be hidden to have an easier reading of the CPU units.

Not all options of the real assembly were implemented, since our goal was to demonstrate the execution of base instructions explained during our computer architecture course. However, almost all MIPS instructions can be written by combining the implemented instructions. We included a set of simple assembly programs with the scope of demonstrating its execution in MIPS pipeline.

MEMORY AND REGISTERS:				
Instruction Memory		Data Memory		Registers
R.No.	Reg.Id.	Dec.Val	Binary Value (32 bit)	
0	\$zero	0	00000000000000000000000000000000	
1	\$at	0	00000000000000000000000000000000	
2	\$v0	0	00000000000000000000000000000000	
3	\$v1	0	00000000000000000000000000000000	
4	\$a0	5	00000000000000000000000000000000	
5	\$a1	0	00000000000000000000000000000000	
6	\$a2	0	00000000000000000000000000000000	
7	\$a3	0	00000000000000000000000000000000	
8	\$t0	0	00000000000000000000000000000000	
9	\$t1	0	00000000000000000000000000000000	
10	\$t2	0	00000000000000000000000000000000	
11	\$t3	0	00000000000000000000000000000000	
12	\$t4	0	00000000000000000000000000000000	
13	\$t5	0	00000000000000000000000000000000	
14	\$t6	0	00000000000000000000000000000000	
15	\$t7	0	00000000000000000000000000000000	
16	\$s0	0	00000000000000000000000000000000	
17	\$s1	0	00000000000000000000000000000000	
18	\$s2	0	00000000000000000000000000000000	
19	\$s3	0	00000000000000000000000000000000	
20	\$s4	0	00000000000000000000000000000000	
21	\$s5	0	00000000000000000000000000000000	
22	\$s6	0	00000000000000000000000000000000	
23	\$s7	0	00000000000000000000000000000000	
24	\$t8	0	00000000000000000000000000000000	
25	\$t9	0	00000000000000000000000000000000	
26	\$k0	0	00000000000000000000000000000000	
27	\$k1	0	00000000000000000000000000000000	
28	\$gp	0	00000000000000000000000000000000	
29	\$sp	4996	0000000000000000000000001001110000	

Figure 2: Registers during execution.

The functioning of our simulator can be easily understood by using some of the simple built-in (called “load-and-play”) programs. The simulator keeps track of the code in execution and it can be easily modified in any moment by clicking on the “Load/Reload Program” button.

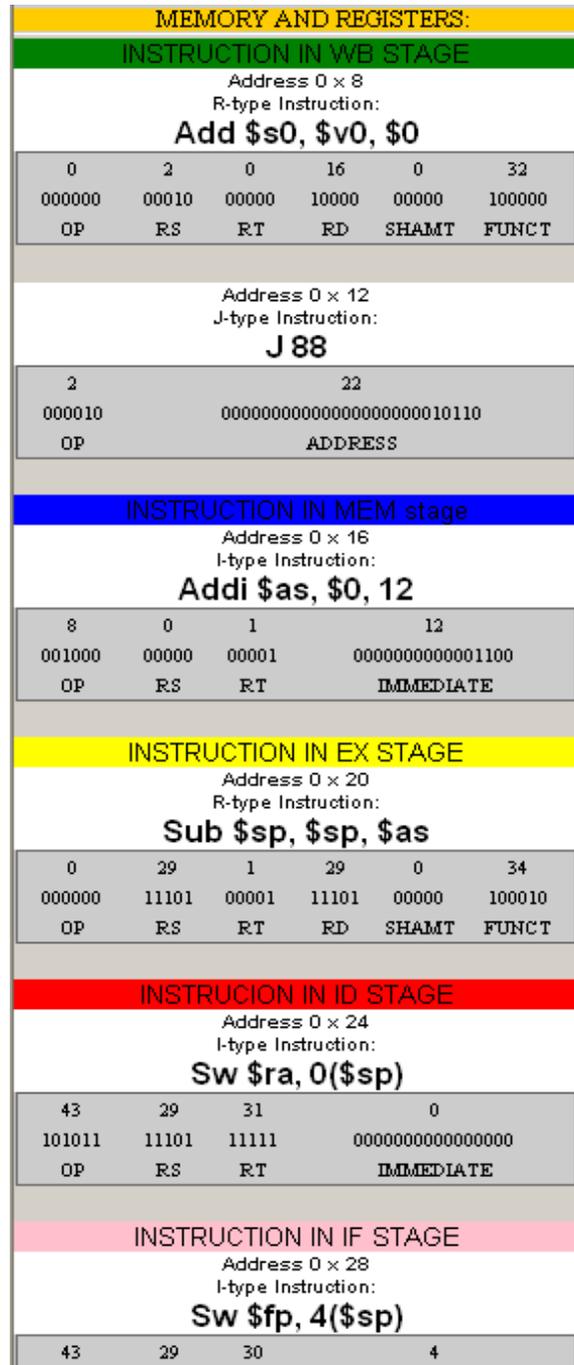


Figure 3: Instruction memory in the middle of execution.

2.2 Program execution

In order to allow users to follow program execution, the left part of the browser window is dedicated to information regarding register file, data and instruction memory. Instruction memory displays the mnemonic, memory address, type, binary translation, symbolic representation, field values and current position in the pipeline for every instruction in execution (Figures 2, 3).

The page displaying data memory can visualize single words, a word interval, or the whole memory contents. The register page demonstrates the binary content of 32 MIPS registers, which can be identified either by register number or their symbolic identifier.

The central part of the browser page is dedicated to five-stage MIPS pipeline. Since the major scope of the simulator was to facilitate understanding of pipeline principles, a user can click on any desired element of the pipeline (for example, ALU, hazard detection unit, or even a simple multiplexer) to show its input and output data. A good feature of WebMIPS is the possibility of tracking every instruction in each pipeline element by simply looking at the central graphical screen. Additionally, displaying of control/data wires can be turned on/off using a corresponding check-box.

Once loaded, a program can be executed in two modes: step-by-step or completely. In step-by-step mode, after each clicking of the “Step-by-Step Execution” the pipeline stages are updated and the user can see the changes in memory and detailed pipeline logic. After the execution has completed, the total number of clock cycles is calculated and displayed in the left-hand menu. Complete execution of the program should be used only for verifying the correctness of the assembly code.

2.3 Analyzing pipeline data hazard and forwarding

In the implementation, branch decision is in the Decode stage of the pipeline to save one cycle. Data hazards created in this way are detected in hazard detection unit, and resolved via forwarding unit, which are shown in graphic representation of the pipeline. Among “load-and-play” programs user can find a simple four-operation calculator; the loading of this example is shown in Figure 4. We will use this simple example to illustrate the functioning of hazard detection and forwarding in the pipeline. The top of the left-hand menu lists the pipeline stages in stall during the execution of the program (Figure 5).

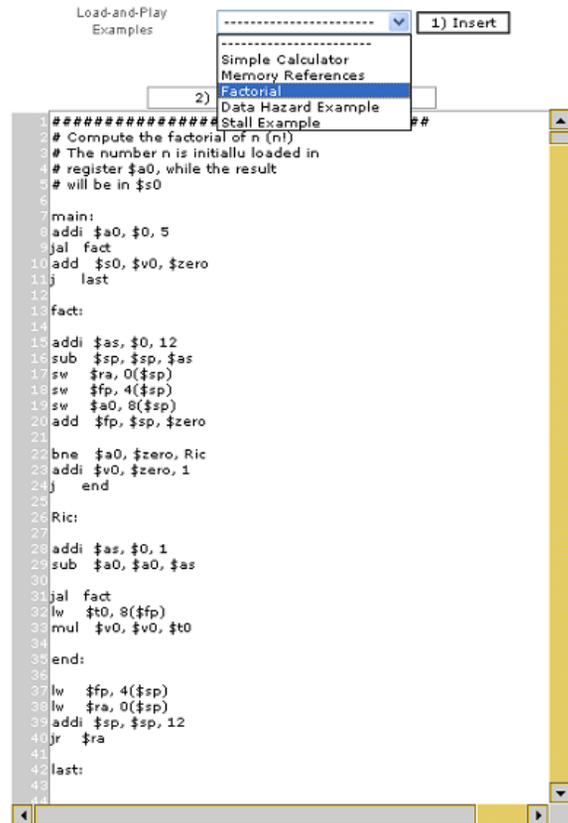


Figure 4: A simple calculator program (among built-in examples) loaded.

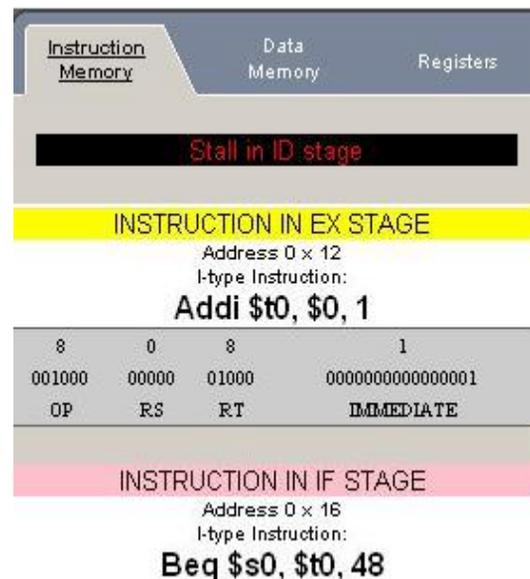


Figure 5: The top of the memory window displays a stage in stall.

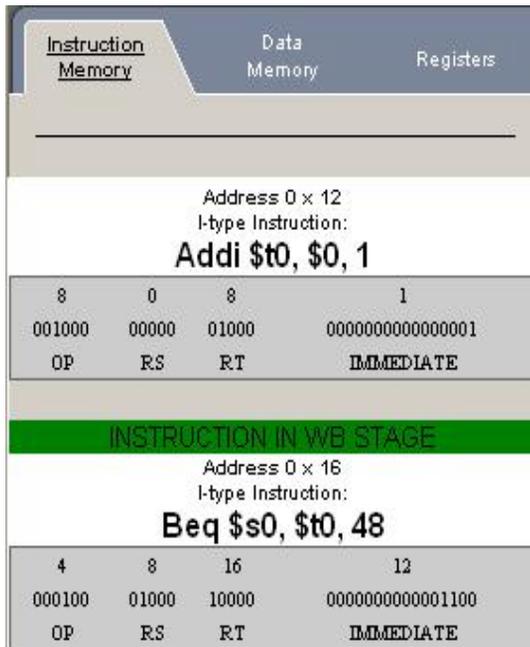


Figure 6: Stall passed through the pipeline.

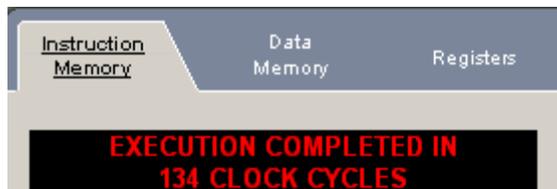


Figure 7: When the execution finishes, the top of the memory window shows the total number of clock cycles.

The pipeline with data hazard resolved is displayed on Figure 6. When the execution of the program finishes, the simulator displays total number of cycles (Figure 7). By clicking on the hazard detection and forwarding units in the pipeline a user can see the corresponding signals and follow the propagation of the stall through the pipeline (Figure 8).

Conclusions

We have implemented a Web-based MIPS pipeline simulator called WebMIPS. Our simulator is publicly accessible and it displays execution in the Web browser window, and is capable of detecting and resolving hazards in the pipeline. The WebMIPS software was used in introductory computer architecture course at University of Siena, Italy as an auxiliary resource for explaining pipeline principles.

We received a good feedback from our students, who also appreciated its availability from any client computer (independently from the installed operating system), the possibility of executing on any Internet-enabled PC without prior installation, and its ease of use. Further plans for WebMIPS development include extending the supported instruction set to include all MIPS (R2000/R3000) instructions.

Acknowledgements

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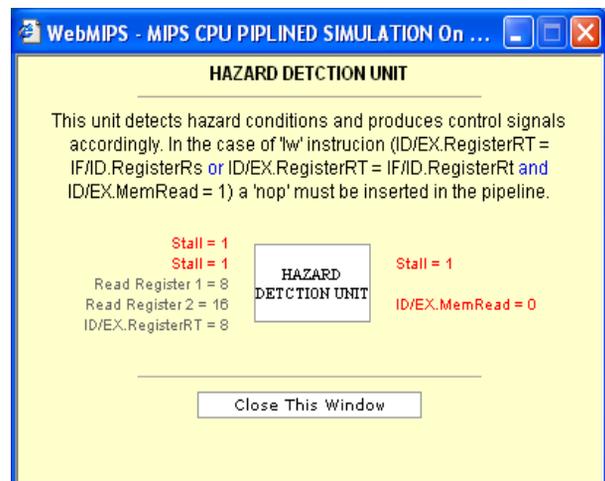
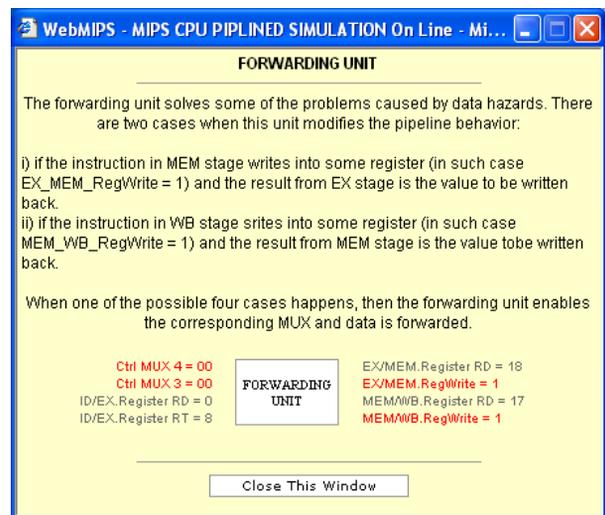


Figure 8: Details on forwarding and hazard detection in the pipeline can be seen by clicking on the corresponding unit.

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