

David B. Gustavson*
Computation Research Group
Stanford Linear Accelerator Center
Stanford, California 94305

ABSTRACT

The current status of standardization efforts proceeding under the IEEE Computer Standards Committee of the IEEE Computer Society is summarized as of May 1979. Names and addresses are listed as sources for further information.

INTRODUCTION

The Computer Standards Committee of the IEEE Computer Society, chaired by Dr. Robert G. Stewart, is involved in several standardization efforts which may be of interest to people working in data acquisition and control. Most of these projects are being carried out by subcommittees of the Microprocessor Standards subcommittee, which was organized in 1977 by Dr. Stewart, and is currently chaired by Gordon Force.

These projects arose out of the frustrations of engineers working in microcomputer applications, initially due to the inadequate specification of the common microcomputer busses, and later expanding to include software aspects. The committee work is mostly carried out by volunteers on their own time, with interested companies contributing peripheral support such as use of duplicating facilities from time to time.

Bus standardization projects include Intel's Multi-bus, National's Microbus, and the S-100 bus. Another bus project, Futurebus, is searching for other busses which will be needed soon, in an effort to head off another round of chaos.

Software related projects include a standard for choosing assembler language mnemonics, a high level language project which is attempting to make existing languages more suitable for use with microprocessors, a joint project with ANSI for the standardization of PASCAL, a committee studying possible extensions of PASCAL, and a project seeking a common standard for relocatable object code.

A project which has both software and hardware implications is the Floating Point Standard project, which is intended to facilitate communication at the hardware level among devices which use floating point, specify computational algorithms for arithmetic operations so that various processors will get the same results for the same calculation, and

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specify behavior under exceptional conditions in a way which maximizes the useful information returned to the programmer.

Because of the desire to get useful standards defined as soon as possible, most of these efforts have relied on small core groups to quickly create a draft document, which is then published as widely as possible for comment, and revised on the basis of the feedback received. Some topics have proved of such wide interest that the committees have grown to larger size and progress has slowed, but it is recognized that this is necessary for controversial subjects.

THE S-100 PROJECT (IEEE Task No. P696)

The S-100 bus was one of the first targets of standardization efforts. Originally the 8080 microcomputer bus used in the MITS Altair 8800, the first digital computer widely sold to hobbyists, the bus was largely defined by a list of signal names and the 8080 timing characteristics. When a large number of manufacturers began supplying boards to plug in to the bus, the name S-100 was generally adopted, meaning the Standard bus with 100 pins.

Because the bus was not well specified, and because of some unfortunate design decisions in the original, compatibility problems soon arose so that some combinations of boards did not work reliably. The arrival of the Z80 and other microprocessors with different timings than the 8080, as well as higher speed versions, made the situation worse. Inadequate grounding caused noise problems, and some control lines which were active high in the TTL bus caused problems during transfers of bus mastership to direct memory access (DMA) controllers. In addition, a new wave of microprocessors with 16-bit words and larger address spaces is about to arrive, calling for standardized extensions to the bus.

These problems have all been addressed in the draft standard. A protocol for DMA has been defined which works reliably, a priority arbitration method for selecting the next master without resorting to off-bus daisy chains has been devised, additional ground lines have been specified, processor independent timings have been specified, and mechanical and electrical specifications have been developed.

In addition, optional expansion of the bus for 16-bit data words, 16-bit I/O port addresses, and 24-bit memory addresses has been accomplished. The original bus had separate 8-bit data-out and data-in busses, which have been converted to a single 16-bit bidirectional bus for 16-bit transfers. This has been done in a way which allows compatibility with old boards and allows intermixing of 8- and 16-bit devices in one system.

The byte addressing within a word (the most significant byte has the lowest or even address) is matched to the new Zilog Z8000 and Motorola 68000 microprocessors, opposite to the convention used by the Intel 8086 or the familiar DEC PDP-11. The address bus was expanded by assigning formerly undefined lines. A few lines of the original bus which were of marginal utility have been reassigned, but most old boards will continue to work in the new system. A few boards may require minor patching, and some will not work at all or will continue to be unreliable in the new system. However, for the most part the boards which will not work in the new system are those which have been having compatibility problems in the old.

An early draft of the new standard was published in the IEEE Computer Society magazine, Computer, in May 1978. A great deal of feedback from the industry was received and considered, and a new draft has been written which is scheduled to appear in the July 1979 issues of Computer and of Interface Age. The new draft differs in many respects from the previous one, but should be quite close to the final standard.

The expanded bus with new DMA mechanism and greater reliability should provide a good base for the next generation or so of microprocessors, and strengthen the position of the S-100 bus as one of the most widely used in the hobby, small business, and industrial application areas. Many manufacturers are working with the draft standard already, so that several products have already benefitted from the clarified definition of the bus and the next wave of new products should be much less chaotic than what has been seen in the past.

For further information, contact George Morrow or Howard Fullmer.

THE "MULTIBUS" PROJECT (Temporary IEEE Task No. P696.2)

The Multibus is Intel's development system bus, with compatible boards available from many other manufacturers as well. The standard is basically a clearer public specification of that bus, with support from Intel and other manufacturers and feedback from the user community.

The original Multibus has been expanded from 16 to 20 address lines, from 8 to 16 data lines (with a mechanism for allowing mixtures of 8- and 16-bit devices to coexist on the bus), and from 8 to 12 I/O address lines. The number of vectored interrupts has been expanded, and timings and usages have been clarified. The number of address lines and the addressing of bytes within words (the most significant byte has the higher or odd address) are matched to the 8086 microprocessor.

The name "Multibus" is to be replaced by a new IEEE number in the eventual standard. A proposal for submission to the IEEE Standards Board is expected to be ready in July.

For further information, contact Bob Garrow.

THE MICROBUS PROJECT (Temporary IEEE Task No. P696.3)

The Microbus is an on-board bus for use between microprocessor and peripheral chips. It was originated by National Semiconductor, and is used by most of their peripheral chips. It describes the signal timings needed for reliable transfer of data over a short 8-bit data path.

Presently applicable to 8080 and Z80 microprocessor families, expansion to include the 8085 family is under consideration, the difficulty being mainly the time of data validity during the write strobe.

Considerable work has been done on a draft standard, and a version for public comment is expected this summer.

For further information, contact Gordon Force.

THE FUTUREBUS PROJECT (Temporary IEEE Task No. P696.4)

This project is trying to identify areas in which bus standards will be needed in the near future, with the hope of avoiding some of the chaos that occurs with multiple incompatible proprietary busses.

Some of the application areas under consideration are: a home control and communications bus, for unifying intercom, telephone, burglar detection, lighting and heating control, audio and possibly video systems; a local network for use in office or industrial systems, perhaps on the order of the Ethernet; a local high speed serial bus for communication between a central processor and its peripherals; and a high speed parallel bus.

So far the committee has been searching for directions which might be profitable, and has not organized into working groups to actually pursue any of these directions in depth. Probably the committee does not have the resources to develop a new bus itself, but might act as a focal point for cooperation when the manufacturers involved see the need for standardization, and it may be useful in drawing attention to areas which need work. At least it could become a clearing house for information related to bus standards and standardization efforts in progress, and a place for people with similar problems to interact. It has already been useful in that regard.

For further information, contact S. Cash Olsen.

THE FLOATING POINT PROJECT (IEEE Task No. P754)

The Floating Point project arose from the recognition that floating point processor chips were going to become available from a variety of sources, and that agreement on a standard floating point format could facilitate the combination of such chips into systems. Even peripheral devices, such as digital voltmeters, can be envisioned using a floating point format if a standard exists.

However, it soon became apparent that the choice of format is not unrelated to the mathematical properties of the floating point arithmetic, and so experts in that field joined in. At that point, even though this is nominally a committee addressing microcomputer problems, minicomputer and even large mainframe manufacturers became involved because they realized that the existence of a really good standard could impact their products' futures.

A draft standard has been written which defines floating point formats for single (32 bit) and double (64 bit) precision. The draft uses a biased exponent, a mantissa between 1 and 2, signed magnitude arithmetic, a hidden bit (the leading 1 in a normalized mantissa is suppressed), gradual underflow so that a number which becomes too small for the exponent range available continues to be represented (as a special unnormalized number), and special numbers like infinity which propagate correctly in subsequent calculations. The double precision format includes a larger exponent range than the single as well as a larger mantissa. Other proposals for the handling of infinities and near-zeroes are still being considered.

The guiding principle has been the provision of mechanisms to protect the user from hidden erroneous results, and the generation of useful answers where at all possible. For some time, the debates have continued largely on technical grounds. Now that a fairly complete draft exists, however, the realities of the marketplace must be considered. If the standard is supported by some major manufacturers, it is much more likely to become widely used. The single precision format is very similar to the format used in DEC's PDP-11 family. DEC would be more likely to implement the arithmetic changes needed for the rest of the standard if the format were made exactly like theirs. Meanwhile, Intel and a number of other manufacturers are believed to be developing chips for the microcomputer industry (to which the standard was originally addressed) which implement the draft standard as is.

It is too soon to tell what compromises will be required for eventual acceptance of the standard, but an important vote on the question of gradual underflow appeared to show block voting, with the mini manufacturer employees solidly opposed (no mini now has gradual underflow arithmetic), chip manufacturers divided, and representatives of the numerical analysis user community solidly in favor. The resulting vote of 20 for to 12 against fell short of the 2/3 majority required for the adoption of gradual underflow.

One possible outcome would be that no standard will result from the committee's work officially, mini manufacturers will go on as they are, and chip manufacturers will produce floating point processors to the draft standard as is. Eventually this would probably result in a de facto standard. Another possibility is that the draft may be compromised in ways which do not seriously degrade its performance, and be supported as a standard by mini and micro manufacturers. It is unlikely that the committee would approve any changes which would significantly degrade the mathematical performance of the standard, as the battles between speed and rigor have

always been won by rigor in this committee in the past, a phenomenon which could never have occurred before the advent of large scale integration.

For further information, contact Richard Delp.

THE ASSEMBLY LANGUAGE MNEMONICS PROJECT (IEEE Task No. 694)

This is a project which arose from the annoying petty difficulties faced by a system implementer when he must switch often from one microcomputer system to another. Petty differences in the assembly language instruction mnemonics, such as LOD versus MOV, cause wasted time and effort correcting mistakes which never should have happened. More subtle are problems such as reversed sequence of operands from one machine to another. This project has resulted in a draft standard specification for assembler language mnemonics and operand conventions which can be used as a guide by the assembler implementer when he is faced with arbitrary design decisions.

Though manufacturers will probably continue to demonstrate their creativity in mnemonic generation (at least one manufacturer actually copyrighted individual mnemonics!), most assemblers are written by software support houses, which may be more willing to produce tools which make the user's job easier and less concerned with locking him into a particular product line.

This draft standard is nearly ready for publication for public comment, and should appear in Computer magazine in early Fall.

For further information, contact Wayne P. Fischer.

THE HIGH LEVEL LANGUAGES PROJECT (IEEE Task No. 755)

This committee has been looking at high level languages which might be suitable for extension for use in the microcomputer environment. The first obvious candidate was PASCAL, which spawned the project described below. The search continues for other candidates.

For further information, contact Bruce Ravenel.

THE PASCAL PROJECT
(IEEE Task No. 770)

A high priority project has been the standardization of PASCAL. Though PASCAL is relatively uncorrupted by variants compared to other languages, due to a fairly complete specification by Jensen and Wirth in the PASCAL User Manual and Report published by Springer Verlag, certain ambiguities in the specification have been discovered which need resolution. The current effort is to cooperate with the International Standards Organization and ANSI's X3J9 in evaluation of a draft standard prepared by a British Standards Institution committee. This should be completed in a few months, allowing further efforts to be applied to the subject of extensions to PASCAL.

Most industrial users of PASCAL agree that certain extensions to the language are needed to allow independent compilation of modules, linking with assembler language modules, control of memory usage, mechanisms which allow handling of I/O through ports or memory mapping, and variable dimensioning of arrays.

However, there is little agreement as to which and how many of these features are really needed, and each implementor chooses his own as he sees fit. Making these changes to the language in a way which preserves the ability of the compiler to detect errors whenever possible and in a way which does not disturb the philosophy of the base language is not easy. The committee will have a difficult job choosing a suitable set of extensions for standardization. Several other efforts are already under way, and this committee will cooperate with them.

For further information, contact Bruce Ravenel.

THE RELOCATABLE OBJECT FORMAT PROJECT
(IEEE Task No. 695)

This project again arose out of the frustrating problems which the typical user of multiple software and hardware systems faces. If one uses one system configuration from one vendor, the problems are minimal. But the typical designer today jumps from one system to another with different memory or I/O configurations and often finds that the software tools he wants to use are not easily applied to the system he is currently working on. Part of this problem is due to the lack of a standard format for relocatable object modules. In fact, many systems in common use today have no relocatable object mechanism at all! A primitive relocation mechanism is essential in systems which support libraries of object modules or which allow combining of modules written in different languages, such as Fortran and Assembler language.

Unfortunately, manufacturers derive some benefit from the current situation, which makes it difficult for their captive customers to start using products from another manufacturer. Therefore cooperation from industry has been very minimal, with the better relocatable object formats being regarded as proprietary or secret. In the face of this opposition to standardization, the committee has been largely stymied and there has been little useful progress.

One possibility would be to devise a new format, and develop, publish and standardize it. Unfortunately, this is a much bigger task than it might at first appear, and does not appear to be a viable possibility at this time. Furthermore, a great deal of supporting software is needed before such a standard would be useful. It would be far more efficient if one of the existing formats could be used, and progress would be much more rapid.

A recent development is the committee's discovery of a machine independent relocatable object format, CUFOM, devised at CERN, the European Nuclear Research Center in Geneva. This format is used by a large family of cross assemblers for various hosts and microcomputers connected in a large network. Most of the software is written in a manner which makes it easy to transport from one machine to another, so it might make a suitable base for standardization. Further study will be needed.

For further information, contact Tom Pittman.

SUMMARY

The IEEE Computer Society Computer Standards Committee and the Microprocessor Standards Committee and their subcommittees have made significant progress on several fronts, with the likelihood of more to follow. Some of the standards which will result from this work are likely to have a significant and lasting beneficial effect on the computer industry.

NAMES AND ADDRESSES FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

Richard H. Delp
Chairman, Floating Point Standard Committee
Signetics Corporation MS 038
811 E. Arques Avenue
Sunnyvale, CA 94086
(408) 739-7700 x6302

Wayne P. Fischer
Chairman, Assembler Language Mnemonics Committee
Kaiser Electronics
82 Shereen Place
Campbell, CA 95008
(415) 494-8411 x225 Kaiser
(408) 374-5405 Home

Gordon Force
Chairman, Microcomputer Standards Committee
Chairman, Microbus Committee
Logical Solutions
1128 Amur Creek Court
San Jose, CA 95120
(408) 268-3692

Howard Fullmer
Co-chairman, S-100 Committee
Parasitic Engineering
5208 Miles Ave
Oakland, CA 94618
(415) 527-6133

Bob Garrow
Chairman, "Multibus" Committee
Intel Corporation
3065 Bowers Avenue
Santa Clara, CA 95051
(408) 987-8409

George Morrow
Chairman, S-100 Committee
Thinker Toys
5221 Central
Richmond, CA 94804
(415) 524-2101

S. Cash Olsen
Chairman, Futurebus Committee
Signetics Corporation MS 026
811 E. Arques Avenue
Sunnyvale, CA 94086
(408) 746-1557

Tom Pittman
Chairman, Relocatable Object Format Committee
Itty Bitty Computers
P. O. Box 23189
San Jose, CA 95153
(408) 578-4944

Bruce Ravenel
Chairman, PASCAL Committee
Chairman, High Level Languages Committee
Language Resources
1307 South Mary Avenue
Sunnyvale, CA 94087
(408) 737-2525
(415) 928-8086

Dr. Robert G. Stewart
Chairman, IEEE Computer Society Standards Committee
Stewart Research Enterprises
1658 Belvoir Drive
Los Altos, CA 94022
(415) 941-6699