High Performance, Low Cost New Printer

By Owen F. Thomas

An electric discharge printer is being offered for sale to the OEM market for \$257 assembled. This could be the output device that the hobby and small systems users have been wishing for. The printer will produce 44 characters in half a second in a 5x7 dot matrix format on paper 6 cm. wide; and it will do that continuously. Software control will produce larger characters for emphasis and will allow graphics to be printed. The low cost is achieved by a simple printing mechanism, limited number of components on the interface board, and software to provide all of the logic control to the printer.

There is no distributor to the hobby market at the present, but the manufacturer will deliver single units from the factory. You must write to Electronic Products Associates, Inc., 1157 Vega Street, San Diego, CA 92110 if you want one at once. Perhaps someone will advertise soon as a distributor to the hobby and small system users.

The printer mechanism comes from a distributor in Germany. Those who wish to try assembling their own system can contact Datamega KA, 8011 Putzbrunn, Munich, Germany. Their catalog lists the printer mechanism only as MP 310/21L for 160 German Marks. I do not know of a source for single units in this country, but anyone wishing to build their own interface from information in this article can try offering the equivalent of 160 German Marks to EPA. A cash offer would probably not be refused. Printed circuit board layout, or wire wrapping, must be done carefully in a homebrew system to keep noise out of the low level signal from a magnetic pickup; the other circuitry is straightforward.

All good things have their problems, right? This printer requires a special aluminum coated paper which is available from EPA at 95¢ per 90 foot roll. One roll will hold about 6,000 lines, or about 250,000 characters. This is not ex-

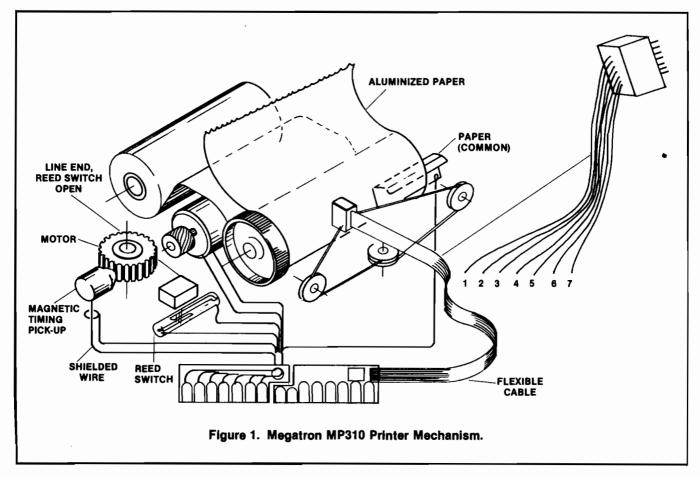




PHOTO 1



РНОТО 2

pensive for systems with video displays which need occasional permanent copies from the screen. The copy is archival, it never fades, and copy machines will work well from the original. So there is some bad news and good news about paper!

HARDWARE DESCRIPTION

The print mechanism from Megatron is a box full of pulleys, cables, gears, motor, reed switch, and magnetic pickup coil for timing pulses. There are fourteen wires from the box to two small paddle boards. One paddle board connects to the motor, reed switch, timing pickup, and paper common electrode. The other paddle board connects via a flexible printed circuit to the seven electrodes on the print head. This makes the print head easy to replace.

A conceptual layout of the functioning parts is shown in Figure 1. The seven printing electrodes are mounted vertically in a small plastic block which is moved in a racetrack path from left to right in contact with the paper and then moved away from the paper for return to start. The reed switch is open for a short space just before the electrodes touch the left edge of the paper. The magnetic pickup generates a periodic voltage from a gear in the drive mechanism while the motor is turning (driven by 24V DC). A carbon roller in contact with the paper provides a common path for the print current when the print electrodes are grounded but limits the current. An automatic line feed ratchet, which is not illustrated, advances the paper one line just after the print head leaves the paper.

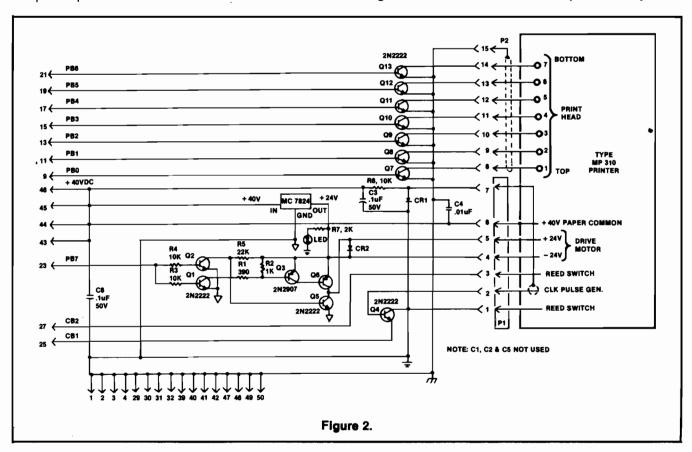
COMPUTER INTERFACE CIRCUIT

A minimum of extra components has been provided to allow computer control of motor and print current and to provide timing marks to the computer. The motor is controlled with one output bit, and the print electrodes are controlled with the other seven bits of an 8-bit output word. The timing marks are provided to the computer as low impedance to ground; they can be used to ground pullup resistors on two computer input lines.

Table 1. Control Signal and Power Supply Description

Signal Deacription	Pin Number	Signal Source	Active Signal
Motor Run Print Electrodes:	23	Computer bit 7	+ 5v., 1 ma.
Print top dot	9	Computer bit 0	1 ma. source
2nd dot	11	Computer bit 1	1 ma. source
3rd dot	13	Computer bit 2	1 ma. source
4th dot	15	Computer bit 3	1 ma. source
5th dot	17	Computer bit 4	1 ma. source
6th dot	19	Computer bit 5	1 ma. source
Bottom dot	21	Computer bit 6	1 ma. source
Line end Character timing Power Power ground	27 25 43,44, 45,46 1,2,3,4	Printer Printer	current sink current sink 40v. 1/4 amp.

A circuit diagram of the interface is illustrated in Figure 2, and a photograph of the printed circuit board holding the printer and interface components is in Photo 2. The positive input voltage is applied directly to the print head common, and each electrode is provided with its own current path to ground through one of the 2N2222 transistors Q7 through Q13 when the base current is turned on by a high bit output. A printer supply of 40 volts will make a very dark mark on the paper; 30 volts will make an acceptable mark. The paper common is also connected to the printer case, so it must not be grounded or connected to metallic parts of the system.



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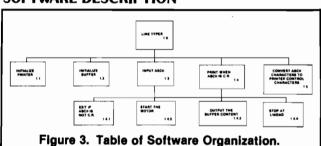
The other computer output bit drives the five transistors Q2 through Q6. This complicated circuit is required to provide dynamic braking to the motor when the output bit is high as well as to pass current to the motor when the bit is low. A voltage regulator is provided to produce the specified 24-volt motor drive regardless of what printing voltage is used.

The reed switch is grounded on one side, and the other side goes direct to the pullup resistor on the computer input line. When the reed switch opens, the bit goes high, and the computer can stop the motor before the next line begins.

The periodic timing marks are only about 0.6 volts peak to peak and require special conditioning for computer input. The pickup coil shield is biased up from ground by one diode drop across CR2, making the base of Q1 the same potential as the emitter when the motor is off. When the motor runs, it will cause the pickup coil to turn Q1 on for a part of each timing period and therefore provide a low impedance to ground for a pullup resistor on the computer input line. This will cause the collector of Q1 to be at a low voltage during part of each timing period to generate a timing signal for use by the computer in determining when to activate the print electrode bits.

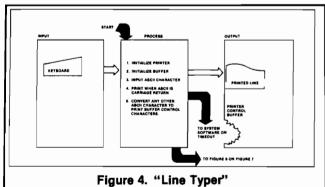
No more interface components are required to allow the computer software to print a 44-column line as the printer head crosses the paper in half a second. The subroutine which controls this interface will be explained in detail in the context of a software package to print a line of characters which are input from an ASCII keyboard. The printer control software is a single subroutine called LINPTR described under software.

SOFTWARE DESCRIPTION



This description uses a set of visual aids to enhance the introduction of data and control concepts before presenting program listings.* Figure 3 shows the organization of software modules to accomplish a line typer task. Each module of the figure has a key number in the lower right corner of its box as a key to the following descriptions.

Overview



The overview of all software is illustrated in Figure 4. This figure is typical of all the module descriptions; it is divided into three boxes, one to show data input to the module, one to show the process performed by the module, and one to



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^{*}The technique is explained in "Systems Design and Documentation" bu Harry Katzan, Jr.

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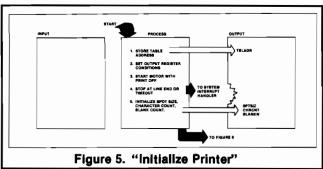
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show the data output by the module. Open arrows show data movement from input box through the process box to the output box. Solid arrows show where the process starts and what process comes next.

The overview diagram shows general features rather than complete detail. This process accepts input from a keyboard, has five steps in the process, and produces a printed line when the ASCII character from the keyboard is a carriage return. Other ASCII characters are converted to printer control words and placed in a control word buffer. When the process is finished, control will be returned to step 2 or 3 of the same process. This module is therefore a closed loop; it will continue to accept keyboard input and pass it to the printer until it is interrupted by a reset or a timeout from a late timing mark. Each step of this process will be expanded in the following figures and descriptions. After all the modules are understood, it will be easy to use them as they are or to adapt the coding for other applications.

Initialization



Printer initialization details are presented in Figure 5. Initialization is performed by a single subroutine called INITPR which is written to be contained in a read-only memory at any location which may be convenient to a system designer who wishes to use the printer. The read-only memory can also contain a table of printer control words; the address of the table is determined by the program and stored in random access read/write memory where it will be referred to by the name TBLADR. The peripheral interface adapter, or an 8-bit output port, is set for all bits to be outputs. The motor is started and allowed to run to the start of a new line. At line end it should set a data bit or generate an interrupt; in the event that this does not occur in a reasonable time, there will be a software interrupt generated. This interrupt can be interpreted by the system operator or system software to start necessary corrective action.

If the printer reaches line end in time, the printer is ready to operate, so default values will be stored in three locations to control the format of the printed line. A line generated by these values will have 44 characters separated by 2/5ths character spacing. The number 1 to control spot size, and therefore character size, is stored and will be referred to by the name SPTSIZ. The number 44 to control number of characters is stored and will be referred to by the name CHRCNT. The number 2 to control space between characters is stored and will be referred to by the name BLANKN. These default values could be modified by other software if desired as long as the product CHRCNT (5+BLANKN) is less than 310.

Line typer software control starts with printer initialization; control passes to buffer initialization when the printer responds or goes to system software when the printer does not respond.

Buffer Initialization

Printer control characters are stored in a buffer in read/write memory until the printer is commanded to print a line. This buffer is initialized by the software illustrated in Figure 6. The software is a single subroutine called CAINIT, and it can be in read-only memory when the system designer

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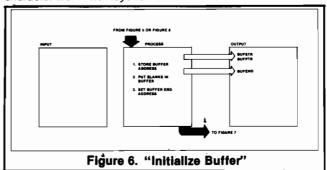
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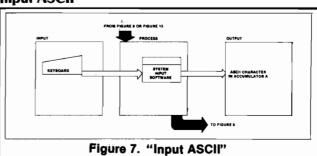
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has established the buffer location and size. The beginning address of the buffer is stored and will be known by the name BUFSTR. The beginning address is also stored in the location called BUFPTR where it will be used as a pointer for the next empty location in the buffer. The Buffer end address is computed and stored in the location called BUFEND. A control word is stored in all buffer locations to cause the motor to run without printing unless the word is changed when a character is input from the keyboard. This has the effect of causing blank lines to be printed when a carriage return is the first character from the keyboard.



Program control comes to this module from printer initialization or from printing a line. Control goes to input an ASCII character from the keyboard.

Input ASCII



The keyboard input is illustrated in Figure 7. All the software for ASCII input from a serial keyboard is provided in the MIKBUG routine at location \$E1AC. When program control is passed to that routine and a key is pressed on a serial ASCII keyboard, the ASCII character will be returned in accumulator A. Another system input routine must be established in systems not using the 6800 microcomputer. Program control comes to this module from initializing the buffer or after converting an ASCII character to printer buffer confrol characters. Control always goes next to print when the ASCII character is a Carriage Return.

Print When . . .

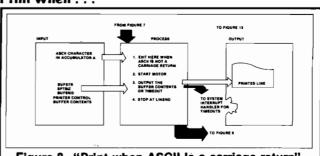


Figure 8. "Print when ASCII Is a carriage return"

The process to print when the ASCII character is a carriage return is illustrated in Figure 8. Step one tests the character and exits for all characters except the carriage return. This test is in read/write memory; all the rest is the LINPTR subroutine and can be in the read-only memory where it can be used as desired by a system designer to print the entire contents of a buffer full of control characters.

The printing process starts the motor and outputs the entire buffer contents under timing controlled by a data input line (or interrupt line) from the timing gear. The motor is then allowed to continue running until the reed switch closes to signal the end of line. If any of the timing signals fail to occur within a reasonable time, an exit will be made to system software to signal a failure. The system operator or system software must then determine what corrective action to take. This timeout facility is provided to prevent the printer program from entering an endless loop in read-only memory—an event which is difficult to diagnose.

This module uses the ASCII character in accumulator A, the buffer start address at BUFSTR, the buffer and address at BUFEND, the spot size control at SPTSIZ, and all the contents of the printer control buffer. The buffer will not have any words to cause printing until control has passed through the module described in Converting to ASCII Characters. A printed line will be output by this module when there are appropriate control characters in the buffer and the input characters in the buffer and the input characters.

acter is a carriage return.

Control comes to this module when an ASCII character has been input. Control goes to convert the character to printer control words when not a carriage return; it goes to the system software when there is a late input from the timing sensor; and it goes to initialize the buffer when a line has been printed successfully.

This module contains the complete interface control software (more detailed description follows in the next four sec-

tions of Software Description).

Exit If ASCII Is Not Carriage Return

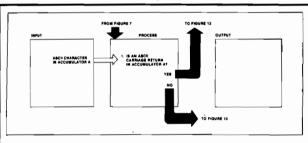
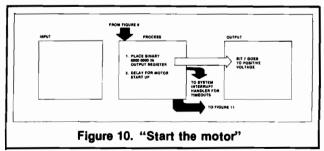


Figure 9. "Exit if ASCII is not a carriage return"

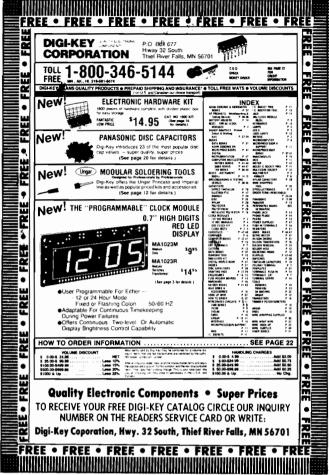
This part of the line typer software is illustrated in Figure 9. The printer control is started when the ASCII character is a carriage return or control goes to convert other characters to printer control words in the buffer.

Start the Motor

This part of the software is illustrated in Figure 10. The coding is part of the LINPTR subroutine which can be in read-only memory.



A binary word 0000 0000 is placed in the output register. This has the effect of moving bit seven to a low voltage in the interface to cause the motor to start. A time delay is necessary to allow the print head to be placed in contact with the paper. The delay is accomplished by waiting until the reed switch closes before proceeding to the next task. An exit is made to the system interrupt handler if the reed switch does not close.



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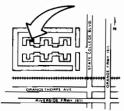
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Output the Buffer Contents

This part of the software controls the print electrode current. The illustration in Figure 11 shows the detail of operation.

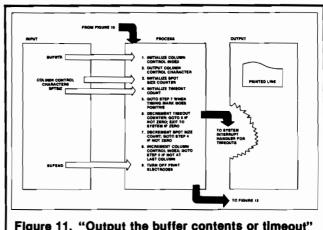


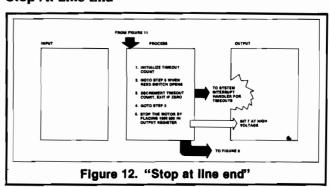
Figure 11. "Output the buffer contents or timeout"

There are three loops in this module. The outer loop starts the column control character index at the start of the buffer as stored in BUFSTR. This loop ends at step 8 where a test is made to see if all column control characters have been output up to the address stored at BUFEND. When all have been output, the print electrodes are turned off and control goes to the next module.

The second loop controls spot size, starting at step 3 and ending at step 7. This loop counts timing marks as specified by SPTSIZ before allowing the column control character to be incremented.

The third loop is at steps 4, 5, and 6, where the timeout counter is decremented while waiting for a timing mark. If the timeout counter reaches zero before a timing mark is received, there will be an exit to the system software.

Stop At Line End



This module is illustrated in Figure 12. It delays until the reed switch opens at line end and then puts a binary 1000 0000 in the output register to turn off the motor and print electrodes. A timeout loop is included to exit to system software in case the reed relay does not open within a reasonable time.

Convert ASCII Characters

The module to convert ASCII characters to printer control words is illustrated in Figure 13. This is a single subroutine called CACTPB in read/write memory. In code for the 6800 computer, the stack pointer is saved in the first step. It is used in transferring words from the conversion table to the print control buffer and is restored at step six to provide correct return to the control program.

Next, the ASCII character is tested to determine if it is in the printable set; nonprintable characters will be ignored. A printable ASCII character will be converted to five words for control of the print electrodes and moved to the buffer location indicated by the buffer storage pointer. Inter-character blank columns will be provided in the buffer by incrementing the buffer

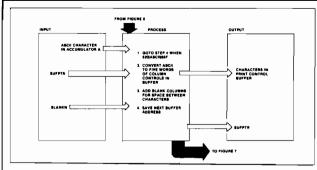


Figure 13. "Convert ASCII character to printer control words"

storage pointer an additional number, as indicated by BLANKN, before storing the pointer for use the next time.

This routine uses the ASCII character in accumulator A, the table of conversion from ASCII to column control words, the buffer storage pointer at BUFPTR, and the spacing control at BLANKN. It updates the buffer control pointer, outputs control words to the buffer, and leaves a value called TBLCHR which points to the character moved from the con-

Control comes to this routine from "print when ASCII is a carriage return" and goes to "input ASCII."

COMPUTER SOURCE CODE FOR THE 6800

Program listings are provided for 6800 computers in Listing 1. The comments consist of references to appropriate sections of the software description for detail of the functions being performed. A lookup table named TABLE provides CACTPB, the bit patterns for conversion of ASCII code to seven bit column control words. The Line Typer starts at address \$3A5B; an additional entry point at \$3A70 will allow entries via the "G" command to the MIKBUG monitor to stop the motor in case of a software interrupt and to restart at the proper address again by another "G" command.

The memory map for this code after assembly is provided in Table 2.

Ta	ble 2. Memory Map for 6800
3FB4	top of 44 character buffer
3E80	beginning of buffer
3DFF	top of table
3CC0	start of table
3C7C	LINPTR
3C4F	INITPR
3C2E	BEQOTO
3C0D	BNEOTO
3C06	XDELAY
3C00	DELAY
3B81	top of auxiliary routines
3 B 70	GSTART
3B5B	TESTPR
3B1F	CACTPB
3B00	CAINIT

SUMMARY

The printer is extremely flexible and works well in just about any system configuration. Although only software for the 6800 was shown, the techniques discussed and demonstrated work with 8080 type machines.

Program Follows

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