An-Najah National University

Department of Computer Engineering

Graduation Project II

CubeBot: FPGA-Based Rubik's Cube Solver

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Abstract

This project presents the design and implementation of an automated Rubik's Cube solving robot using a heterogeneous embedded system architecture that combines FPGA hardware acceleration, ARM processor coordination, and ESP32-based motor control. Unlike traditional microcontroller-only or PC-based approaches, the system strategically distributes tasks across specialized computing platforms to achieve deterministic real-time performance, modular design, and reliable operation.

The system architecture integrates three cooperating units: a DE1-SoC FPGA fabric implementing hardware-accelerated color extraction and VGA display, an ARM Cortex-A9 Hard Processor System (HPS) managing high-level coordination and solution computation, and an ESP32 module handling motor control and wireless dashboard connectivity. The FPGA processes cube face images with deterministic 14.8ms timing using threshold-based color classification, while the HPS executes the Kociemba two-phase solving algorithm and validates cube state consistency. The ESP32 coordinates stepper and servo motors to physically manipulate the cube with sensor-based alignment feedback.

Communication between subsystems uses a custom UART packet protocol with state machine-based error recovery, achieving 100% reliability across all testing. The system provides dual monitoring interfaces through FPGA-based VGA hardware display and ESP32-hosted wireless web dashboard, enabling comprehensive system visibility and user control.

Experimental results demonstrate 98.7% color detection accuracy, 93.3% solve success rate, and mean solve time of 46.1 seconds. The modular architecture achieved efficient FPGA resource utilization (27% ALMs, 2% block memory, 20% DSP blocks) while maintaining flexibility for future enhancements. Testing across 30 complete solve cycles validated the effectiveness of the heterogeneous design approach for robotics applications requiring integrated perception, computation, and actuation.

This work demonstrates how hardware-software co-design principles can address the limitations of monolithic embedded systems, providing a practical architecture for FPGA-accelerated robotics that balances real-time performance with implementation simplicity and debugging accessibility.

Keywords: FPGA, Heterogeneous Architecture, Rubik's Cube Solver, Hardware Acceleration, Embedded Systems, Image Processing, Robotics, DE1-SoC, ESP32, Hardware-Software Co-Design

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List of Abbreviations

ALM	Adaptive Logic Module
API	Application Programming Interface
ARM	Advanced RISC Machine
CPU	Central Processing Unit
ESP32	Espressif Systems 32-bit Microcontroller
FPGA	Field-Programmable Gate Array
GPIO	General Purpose Input/Output
HDL	Hardware Description Language
HPS	Hard Processor System
HSV	Hue Saturation Value
HTTP	Hypertext Transfer Protocol
I^2C	Inter-Integrated Circuit
LED	Light Emitting Diode
MJPEG	Motion JPEG
PIO	Parallel Input/Output
PWM	Pulse Width Modulation
RAM	Random Access Memory
RGB	Red Green Blue
RTL	Register Transfer Level
SMPCS	School of Mathematical, Physical and Computational Sciences
SoC	System on Chip
SPI	Serial Peripheral Interface
UART	Universal Asynchronous Receiver/Transmitter
USB	Universal Serial Bus
UVC	USB Video Class
V4L2	Video4Linux2
VGA	Video Graphics Array
WiFi	Wireless Fidelity

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 General Background

The Rubik's Cube is widely considered one of the most iconic mechanical puzzles, requiring a combination of perception, planning, and precise manipulation to reach a solved state. While humans typically solve the cube through experience and pattern recognition, building an automated Rubik's Cube solver requires an integrated system capable of sensing the cube's colors, understanding its current configuration, computing a valid solution, and physically executing the required movements in a reliable and repeatable manner.

In recent years, many Rubik's Cube solving robots have been developed using microcontrollers and software-based computer vision techniques running on PCs or embedded Linux platforms. These systems often rely on high-level image processing libraries to detect cube colors and determine the cube state, followed by solver algorithms implemented in software. Although these approaches can achieve strong performance, they may face limitations related to latency, nondeterministic execution timing, and dependency on external software stacks.

Field-Programmable Gate Arrays (FPGAs) offer a powerful alternative for real-time sensing and hardware acceleration due to their inherent parallelism, deterministic behavior, and power efficiency. By implementing time-critical tasks such as color extraction and decision logic in hardware, FPGA-based designs can achieve high throughput, low latency, and better power consumption compared to purely software-driven solutions running on general-purpose processors. The dedicated hardware approach enables efficient parallel processing without the overhead of operating system scheduling and context switching, resulting in lower power per operation while maintaining consistent performance. This makes FPGA technology an attractive candidate for robotics applications that require synchronized sensing, communication, precise control, and energy-efficient operation.

This graduation project presents the design and implementation of a Rubik's Cube solving and control system based on a heterogeneous embedded architecture. In this design, the FPGA is primarily utilized as a dedicated coprocessor for fast cube color extraction, while the Hard Processor System (HPS) serves as the main processor responsible for high-level computation, system coordination, and decision making. The system is extended with wireless monitoring and control capabilities, ... enabling interaction through a wireless dashboard and providing real-time feedback through both the dashboard and a VGA display that shows system statistics during operation.

1.2 Objectives and Purpose

The primary objective of this project is to design and implement an automated Rubik's Cube solving system that combines hardware acceleration, embedded processing, and robotic actuation in a complete end-to-end solution. The system supports both solving and shuffling modes, with adjustable difficulty levels, while maintaining reliability, accuracy, and real-time operation.

The specific objectives of this project include:

1. **Cube State Acquisition and Color Extraction**: Capture Rubik's Cube face data through a camera-based acquisition process and perform fast and stable color extraction using FPGA hardware logic.

2. **High-Level Processing and System Coordination**: Utilize the SoC processing system (HPS) as the main controller responsible for validating detected faces, managing system states, coordinating system modules, and preparing solution data for execution.

3. **Mechanical Manipulation and Motor Control**: Control servo and stepper motors to physically rotate cube layers and manipulate the cube accurately, using an ESP-based module as a dedicated motor and peripheral controller.

4. **Wireless Monitoring and Control**: Provide a wireless interface using Wi-Fi or Bluetooth to enable remote commands, system monitoring, and operation mode selection through a mobile application.

5. **User Feedback and Monitoring**: Display real-time system status, runtime information, and progress using a VGA output interface, in addition to a wireless dashboard used for monitoring, mode selection, and operation control.

This project aims to demonstrate how a hardware-software co-design approach can be used to build a practical robotic solver that leverages the strengths of FPGA acceleration and embedded processing while maintaining a modular and scalable architecture.

1.3 Significance and Importance

This project addresses several practical and technical challenges involved in building an automated Rubik's Cube solver and demonstrates the feasibility of using FPGA acceleration within robotics and intelligent embedded systems.

Real-Time Hardware Acceleration and Power Efficiency: Implementing cube color extraction using FPGA logic provides parallel processing capabilities, deterministic timing, and power-efficient operation. Compared to software-based approaches running on general-purpose processors, this enables faster processing, improved stability, and reduced power consumption per operation, which is essential for reliable robotic operation, consistent cube state detection, and potential battery-powered deployments.

Heterogeneous Embedded System Design: The system integrates multiple cooperating units, where the FPGA operates as a coprocessor for hardware-accelerated perception, the HPS functions as the main processor for system logic and computation, and the ESP module handles motor control and peripheral interfacing. This architecture reflects modern embedded system design practices where different platforms are used to maximize performance, flexibility, and energy efficiency through strategic task partitioning.

Robotics and System Integration: Developing a complete Rubik's Cube solver requires bridging multiple domains including machine perception, communication, mechanical design, and motor control. Successfully integrating a camera module, motors, LCD display, manual inputs, and wireless connectivity demonstrates the ability of embedded systems to manage complex tasks under strict timing constraints.

Educational and Practical Value: Beyond solving the cube as a final objective, the system provides strong educational value by combining digital logic design, real-time embedded programming, hardware interfaces (I^2C, SPI, UART, PWM), and control principles within one project. The developed architecture can also be adapted for other robotics systems requiring perception and actuation.

Extensibility and Future Potential: The design principles used in this project can be extended toward future FPGA-accelerated intelligent systems, especially in applications requiring low-latency sensing and deterministic performance. The same approach can be applied to tasks such as object sorting, inspection, or small-scale robotic control systems.

1.4 Summary of Contributions and Achievements

This project provides a complete Rubik's Cube solving system with several contributions in hardware acceleration, embedded coordination, and robotic execution.

System Architecture Contributions:

- Design of a heterogeneous architecture combining FPGA-based color extraction, HPS high-level coordination, and ESP-based motor control
- Implementation of reliable communication across modules using hardware-level interfaces such as UART, I^2C, SPI, and PWM
- Development of a modular structure that separates sensing, computation, and actuation responsibilities for improved scalability

Perception and Processing Contributions:

- Hardware-accelerated cube color extraction using FPGA logic to improve speed and stability
- High-level state management and decision logic executed on the HPS to coordinate scanning, validation, and solution handling
- Support for multi-mode operation including solving and shuffling with adjustable difficulty levels

Robotic Execution and Control Achievements:

- Integration of servo and stepper motors to physically manipulate the cube with accurate layer rotations
- Implementation of synchronization strategies to ensure correct execution order and safe mechanical movement
- Real-time monitoring and control through a wireless dashboard and VGA status display

Wireless Monitoring and User Interaction:

- Wireless control and monitoring support through Wi-Fi or Bluetooth communication with a mobile application
- Manual control options through key inputs for debugging, testing, or mode switching
- A complete interactive workflow from scanning the cube, computing the solution, and executing robot moves

Overall, the completed system demonstrates a practical Rubik's Cube solving robot built using hardware-software co-design, emphasizing low-latency perception, modular architecture, and reliable actuation.

1.5 Organization of the Report

This report is organized into multiple chapters, each addressing a key aspect of the Rubik's Cube solving system design and implementation:

Chapter 1: Introduction provides the foundational context of the project, including background information, objectives, significance, and major contributions.

Chapter 2: Literature Review explores existing Rubik's Cube solvers and robotics designs, FPGA-based vision acceleration methods, and related embedded system architectures.

Chapter 3: Methodology describes the project development approach, hardware selection rationale, system workflow, and key implementation strategies.

Chapter 4: System Analysis and Design presents the full system architecture, including FPGA color extraction design, HPS coordination and computation, ESP motor control logic, communication protocols, and peripheral interfacing.

Chapter 5: Implementation and Results documents the implementation process, testing procedures, and experimental performance results such as recognition accuracy, timing performance, and mechanical execution reliability.

Chapter 6: Discussion analyzes the system results, highlights limitations, and discusses potential improvements and future extensions.

Chapter 7: Conclusions summarizes the achieved outcomes and provides final remarks on the significance of FPGA-accelerated robotic solvers.

Additional supporting material including wiring diagrams, extended code listings, and detailed configuration parameters are provided in the appendices for completeness and reproducibility.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The Rubik's Cube has remained one of the most widely studied mechanical puzzles since its invention, not only due to its popularity but also because of the challenging combination of perception, planning, and precise manipulation required to solve it. Unlike purely computational problems, an automated Rubik's Cube solver must integrate multiple domains: accurate color recognition, cube state representation, solution generation, and physical actuation through motors and mechanical mechanisms.

Recent developments in embedded systems and robotics have enabled many Rubik's Cube solving platforms, typically built using microcontrollers, single-board computers, or PC-based processing M et al. (2024); Andrew, Faridah, Tan, Ragunathan, Amirah, Zainab and Lee (2021); Chalise et al. (2025). These systems often rely on software computer vision pipelines to detect cube colors, followed by algorithmic solvers to generate a solution sequence, and finally an actuator subsystem to execute the moves Sawhney et al. (2013); Andrew, Zainab, Amirah, Ragunathan, Tan, Faridah and Rezal (2021). However, implementing such systems in a real-time and reliable manner remains difficult due to limitations such as sensor noise, lighting variations, mechanical misalignment, timing constraints, and integration complexity.

This chapter reviews the most relevant research and technical approaches related to Rubik's Cube solving systems, with focus on three key areas: (1) cube perception and color extraction, (2) cube solving algorithms and move generation, and (3) robotic manipulation and embedded architecture design. The review highlights common limitations of monolithic designs and motivates the adoption of heterogeneous architectures that strategically distribute tasks across FPGA logic, a main processor (HPS), and an ESP module for actuation and system interfacing.

2.2 Rubik's Cube Solving Systems: Overview and System Requirements

A full Rubik's Cube solving robot generally consists of three fundamental stages:

1. **Perception**: capturing cube faces using a camera or sensor array and extracting the cube's sticker colors.
2. **Computation**: converting detected colors into a valid cube state representation and generating a valid solving sequence.
3. **Execution**: physically rotating cube layers using actuators such as servo motors, stepper motors, or gear-based mechanisms.

Although these stages appear sequential, practical solver robots require feedback and monitoring to ensure the cube is scanned correctly and moves are executed accurately. For example, inconsistent lighting may lead to incorrect color classification, while mechanical backlash may cause layer misalignment and execution failure. Therefore, modern designs often incorporate system state machines, timing measurement, status indicators, and debugging interfaces to improve reliability and user control Dan et al. (2021); Barucija et al. (2020).

2.3 Cube Perception and Color Extraction Methods

Color extraction is one of the most critical stages in a Rubik's Cube solver, as a single incorrect color classification can result in an invalid cube state and failed solution execution. The most common perception technique is camera-based scanning, where the cube is rotated and each face is captured as an image. From these images, multiple approaches have been proposed for extracting the cube's sticker colors.

2.3.1 Software-Based Image Processing Pipelines

Many implementations use software processing on a CPU-based platform such as a PC, Raspberry Pi, or embedded Linux environment. These pipelines often apply the following steps:

- image acquisition and preprocessing,
- region-of-interest extraction for the nine stickers,
- color space conversion (e.g., RGB to HSV),
- thresholding and clustering for classification.

Computer vision frameworks such as OpenCV have become standard for these systems due to the availability of efficient tools for segmentation and classification OpenCV Team (2024); Sawhney et al. (2013). While software pipelines are flexible and simple to modify, their performance can be affected by operating system overhead, non-deterministic scheduling, and varying computational latency. Additionally, embedded devices may struggle when vision, networking, and motor control are executed simultaneously Andrew, Zainab, Amirah, Ragunathan, Tan, Faridah and Rezal (2021).

2.3.2 Lighting Robustness and Color Space Selection

A major challenge in color extraction is environmental variation, particularly illumination changes, shadows, and reflections on glossy cube stickers. Several studies suggest that HSV color representation is generally more stable than raw RGB for classification tasks, since hue and saturation provide separation of color information from brightness intensity Gonzalez and Woods (2008). However, even HSV-based classification can suffer in difficult lighting, making it necessary to apply calibration or normalization strategies.

Other approaches use clustering and statistical learning techniques, where the system learns cube color distributions by sampling center stickers or performing adaptive threshold adjustment Chalise et al. (2025); Dan et al. (2021). These methods may improve accuracy but increase computation complexity and require careful tuning.

2.3.3 Hardware-Accelerated Vision and FPGA-Based Extraction

FPGAs are widely recognized for their capability to accelerate vision and signal-processing tasks using parallelism and pipelined architectures. Unlike CPUs that execute sequential instructions, FPGA logic can compute multiple pixel-level operations concurrently with deterministic timing. This makes FPGA acceleration attractive for embedded perception tasks that require stable latency and consistent throughput Woods et al. (2008).

In the context of Rubik's Cube solvers, FPGA hardware can be used to accelerate specific stages such as color extraction, pixel classification, or feature detection. Rather than implementing the entire system on FPGA, a more efficient design choice is to use FPGA logic as a dedicated coprocessor for perception tasks, while high-level computation and coordination are executed by a software processor. This separation reduces the workload on the main processor and improves system determinism during real-time operation.

2.4 Cube Solving Algorithms and Solution Generation

Once cube colors are extracted, the system must map them to a cube state and compute a solving sequence. The Rubik's Cube state space is extremely large, with approximately 4.3×10^{19} possible configurations, making brute-force search infeasible.

2.4.1 Two-Phase Solving and Kociemba Algorithm

Among the most widely used practical algorithms is the two-phase method proposed by Kociemba Kociemba (1992). This method divides the problem into two stages: reducing the cube into a restricted subgroup in phase one, then completing the solve in phase two. The algorithm is efficient and commonly used in software solvers due to its balance between solution length and computation time.

In many real-world implementations, the solver algorithm is executed on a CPU-based system since it involves search operations, table lookups, and branching logic that are naturally suited for software execution Andrew, Zainab, Amirah, Ragunathan, Tan, Faridah and Rezal (2021); Dan et al. (2021). For embedded Rubik's Cube solvers, the algorithm output is converted into motor-level commands, requiring additional translation steps and validation M et al. (2024).

2.4.2 State Validation and Error Handling

An important step before solving is verifying that the detected cube state is valid. Incorrect scanning may produce impossible states, such as incorrect parity or invalid color counts. Therefore, practical solver systems incorporate checks to ensure the scanned faces form a consistent cube representation before attempting to compute a solution Dan et al. (2021); Sawhney et al. (2013). This reduces failure probability and improves overall system robustness.

2.5 Robotic Manipulation and Motion Control

The execution stage transforms the computed solution moves into physical actuation. Rubik's Cube robots typically use servo motors, stepper motors, or hybrid approaches. The actuator design depends strongly on mechanical constraints such as grip stability, axis alignment, torque requirements, and move execution speed.

2.5.1 Servo and Stepper Motor Approaches

Servo-based designs often simplify control by using angular positioning, but may suffer from limited torque or speed in demanding mechanical setups Andrew, Faridah, Tan, Ragunathan, Amirah, Zainab and Lee (2021). Stepper motors provide precise incremental control and repeatability, making them suitable for controlled rotations such as 90-degree and 180-degree cube turns M et al. (2024); Chalise et al. (2025). However, stepper motors require careful timing control, pulse generation, and sometimes feedback sensors for alignment.

2.5.2 Synchronization and Execution Order

Rubik's Cube solvers must execute moves in strict order with reliable timing. Any missed step or mechanical slip can corrupt the cube state relative to the solver's internal model. As a result, robust implementations often include:

- calibration routines to align the cube mechanism,
- sensors to detect reference positions,
- safety timing constraints to prevent motor conflicts.

Therefore, assigning motor control to a dedicated controller can improve reliability, especially when the main processor also handles solving and system coordination.

2.6 System Integration and Heterogeneous Embedded Architectures

A major challenge in Rubik's Cube solving robots is the integration of perception, computation, and actuation in one system without performance bottlenecks Chalise et al. (2025). Many low-cost projects attempt to implement everything on one microcontroller, which often results in trade-offs between speed, reliability, and feature support M et al. (2024).

A heterogeneous architecture provides a practical solution by distributing tasks across multiple specialized processing units Barucija et al. (2020):

- **FPGA coprocessor**: dedicated for real-time color extraction and image-related processing Intel (Altera) (2020).
- **HPS main processor**: responsible for system state management, cube state validation, solution computation, and coordination between modules Intel (Altera) (2020).
- **ESP module**: dedicated for motor control, peripheral interfacing, and wireless dashboard connectivity Espressif Systems (2023).

This design approach matches each task to the processing platform that is best suited for it Barucija et al. (2020). FPGA logic achieves deterministic low-latency perception. The HPS executes complex sequential algorithms efficiently. The ESP module handles real-time PWM generation, motor drivers, and user monitoring services without interfering with perception or solving performance.

2.7 Research Gap and Motivation

Despite the availability of many Rubik's Cube solvers, most existing platforms fall into one of two categories Chalise et al. (2025); Andrew, Faridah, Tan, Ragunathan, Amirah, Zainab and Lee (2021):

1. **Software-heavy solvers** that rely on CPU-based vision and computation, often requiring a full operating system environment Sawhney et al. (2013); Andrew, Zainab, Amirah, Ragunathan, Tan, Faridah and Rezal (2021); M et al. (2024).
2. **Hardware-heavy prototypes** that use FPGA or specialized hardware for the entire system, increasing design complexity and limiting flexibility.

A practical gap exists in architectures that combine FPGA acceleration for perception with a processor-based solving pipeline and an independent real-time motor controller. Such designs can achieve strong real-time performance while maintaining modularity and debugging simplicity. Additionally, integrating monitoring interfaces such as VGA status visualization and a wireless dashboard provides improved user interaction, system transparency, and operational reliability.

2.8 Summary

This literature review discussed Rubik's Cube solver system requirements and examined existing approaches in cube perception, solving algorithms, and robotic execution. Software-based vision pipelines provide flexibility but may suffer from nondeterministic timing and high computational load. Solving algorithms such as Kociemba's two-phase method enable efficient computation, but require valid cube state input to function correctly. Robotic manipulation demands accurate motor control, synchronization, and calibration to ensure successful execution.

The review motivates a heterogeneous embedded design that strategically separates responsibilities: FPGA hardware acts as a coprocessor for color extraction, the HPS coordinates high-level logic and solution computation, and an ESP module manages motor control and wireless interfacing. This architecture offers a balanced approach that improves real-time performance, modularity, and system reliability compared to monolithic embedded designs.

Chapter 3

Methodology

3.1 System Design Overview

This project follows a hardware–software co-design methodology to implement an automated Rubik's Cube solving robot using a heterogeneous embedded architecture. The complete system integrates three cooperating computing units:

- **FPGA Fabric (Coprosessor/Peripheral Fabric)**: Provides hardware peripherals and subsystems such as VGA output, UART IP, PIO interfaces, and on-chip memory buffers.
- **HPS (ARM Cortex-A9 Main Processor)**: Executes the main control program responsible for high-level state control, cube state construction, solving logic, and move scheduling.
- **ESP32 Module (Actuation + Dashboard Controller)**: Hosts the wireless dashboard, receives commands from the user, and executes robot movement through stepper/servo control and sensor-based alignment.

The overall operational pipeline is summarized as follows:

1. The user connects to the ESP32 wireless dashboard and selects a system command (solve, shuffle, reset, etc.).
2. The cube scanning procedure starts, where cube face data is acquired and prepared for processing.
3. Cube colors are extracted and transmitted to the HPS for cube state construction and verification.
4. The HPS generates a solving (or shuffling) move sequence.
5. The move sequence is encoded and sent to the robot execution controller.
6. The ESP32 performs real-time motor execution with safety checks and alignment mechanisms.
7. The FPGA VGA subsystem and the wireless dashboard display real-time system statistics and progress.

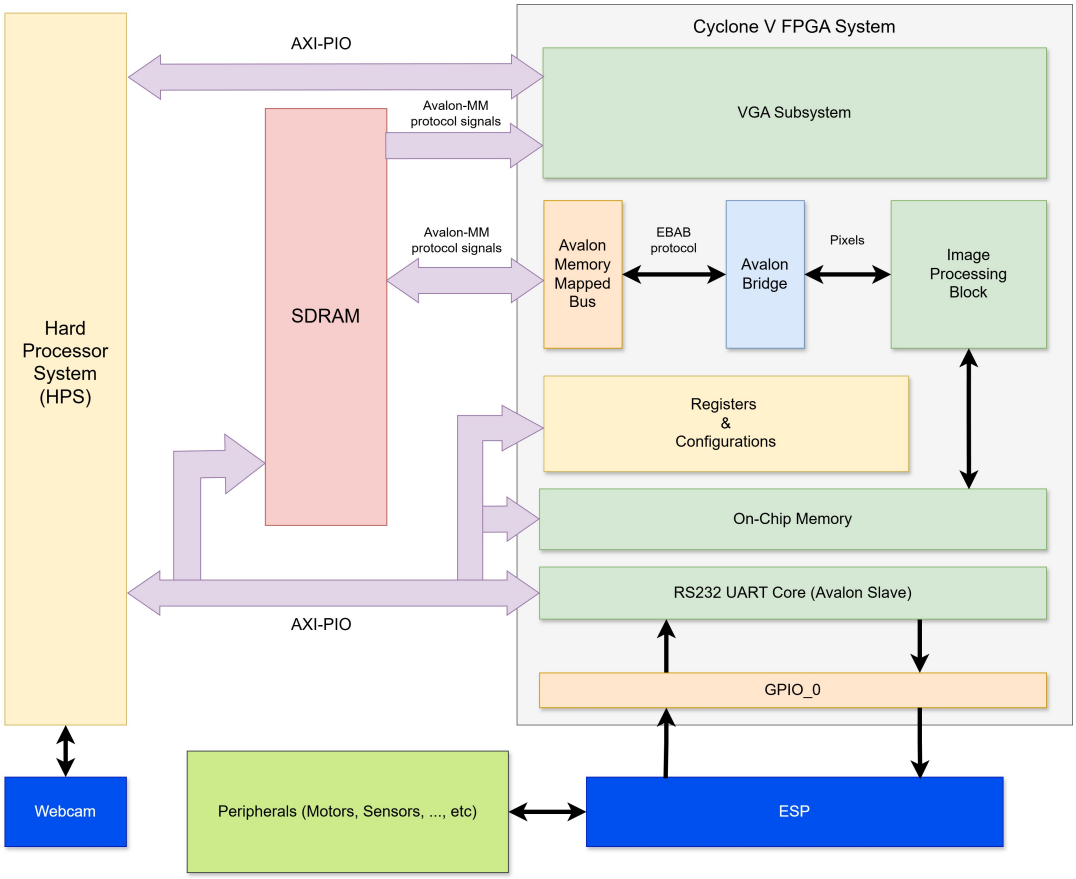


Figure 3.1: Overall Rubik's Cube solver system flow (FPGA + HPS + ESP32 + peripherals).

3.2 Hardware Components and System Architecture

The physical implementation of the Rubik's Cube solver requires careful selection of hardware components to ensure reliable cube manipulation, accurate state sensing, and efficient system coordination. Unlike traditional Raspberry Pi-based approaches, this system leverages FPGA hardware acceleration for deterministic peripheral control and real-time operation.

The hardware platform is designed to balance mechanical robustness, electrical reliability, and ease of integration with the embedded control architecture. Each component is chosen to fulfill a specific role in the system, from high-level computation and user interaction to low-level actuation and feedback. The integration of the DE1-SoC FPGA board enables custom hardware peripherals and high-speed communication with the HPS processor, while the ESP32 module provides wireless connectivity and real-time motor control. Additional sensors and drivers are incorporated to support precise alignment, safe operation, and flexible mechanical assembly.

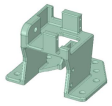
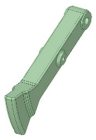
In addition to electronic hardware, the system incorporates several custom 3D-printed and mechanical parts designed to support the cube manipulation mechanisms and ensure precise assembly. The complete system architecture follows a distributed processing model where each computing unit specializes in specific tasks to achieve optimal performance.

The following tables summarize the main hardware and mechanical components used in the system:

Table 3.1: Summary of Main Hardware Components

Image	Component	Quantity	Notes
	DE1-SoC FPGA Development Board	1	Main processing and hardware acceleration
	ESP32 WiFi Microcontroller	1	Wireless dashboard, motor control
	Redragon USB Webcam	1	Cube face image acquisition
	NEMA 17 Stepper Motor	1	Cube rotation (main axis)
	DRV8825 Stepper Motor Driver	1	Stepper driver, microstepping
	DS3218 Servo Motor	2	Cube gripping/releasing (dual gripper)
	PCA9685 PWM Servo Driver	1	16-channel PWM, servo control
	Optical Slot Sensor	1	Alignment/home position feedback
	HP-D3006A0 Power Supply	1	Main power for motors and logic
	I^2C Logic Level Shifter	2	5V/3.3V I2C interfacing
	PV 902512L Cooling Fan	1	Cooling for drivers/electronics
	MPB19 Push Button	2	Manual reset/emergency stop

Table 3.2: Summary of 3D-Printed and Mechanical Parts

Image	Part Name	Quantity	Notes
	Hinge for upper-cover and lifter	1	Connects upper cover to lifter, allows rotation
	Upper-cover	1	Top enclosure, attaches to hinge and lifter
	Cube-holder bottom part	1	Base for holding the cube
	Cube-holder upper part	1	Top clamp for cube, connects to lifter
	Synchronization disk	1	Ensures alignment between lifter and cube holder
	Motor support	1	Holds stepper/servo motor in place
	Lifter	1	Raises/lowers upper cover and cube holder
	Lifter-link	1	Connects lifter to upper cover, transmits motion

3.2.1 External Interface and Monitoring

The system supports multiple user interface options for operation and monitoring:

- **VGA Monitor**: Connected to the DE1-SoC board's VGA output for real-time system status display, including current state, scan progress, solution availability, move count, and execution status. The VGA interface provides a hardware-based monitoring solution that operates independently of wireless connectivity.
- **Mobile Phone or Laptop (WiFi Dashboard)**: Any WiFi-capable device can connect to the ESP32 access point and access the web-based control dashboard. This provides

wireless operation control, system status monitoring, and cube face visualization without requiring dedicated applications or software installation.

3.2.2 Mechanical Assembly Considerations

While this project focuses primarily on the embedded system design and control architecture, the mechanical structure plays a critical role in system operation. The mechanical assembly includes:

- A cube holding platform with gripper arms actuated by the two servo motors
- A rotation mechanism driven by the stepper motor for executing face turns
- Alignment markers or flags that trigger the optical slot sensor
- Mounting brackets and support structures to maintain component positioning
- Cable management to prevent interference with moving parts

The mechanical design is inspired by existing Rubik's Cube solving robots but adapted to accommodate the specific electrical and control architecture of this FPGA-based implementation.

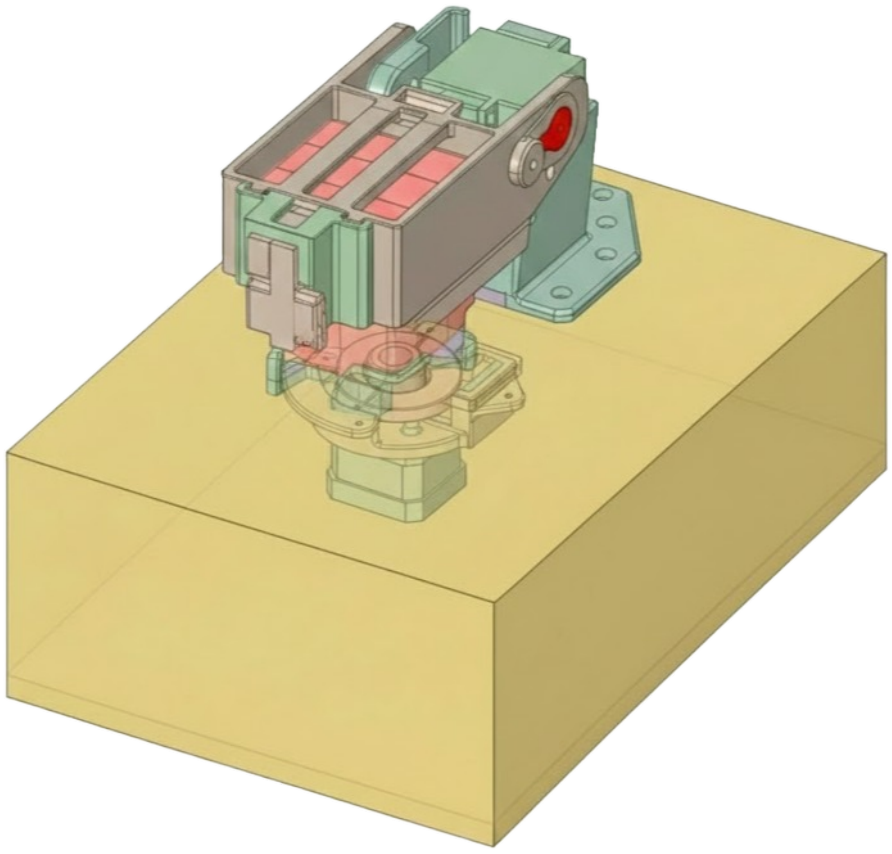


Figure 3.2: 3D concept rendering of the combined mechanical and hardware assembly for the Rubik's Cube solver.

3.3 Camera Interface and USB Video Capture

The cube face scanning process relies on a USB webcam (Redragon model) connected to the DE1-SoC board through the HPS USB subsystem. The camera interface operates through the Linux UVC (USB Video Class) driver, enabling standard Video4Linux2 (V4L2) API access for frame capture.

3.3.1 Camera Configuration and Frame Acquisition

The system initializes the camera with the following specifications:

- Resolution: 640×480 pixels
- Format: MJPEG (Motion JPEG) compressed frames
- Frame rate: 30 FPS (frames per second)
- Exposure: Auto-adjustment enabled
- White balance: Automatic

The choice of MJPEG format provides a balance between image quality and processing efficiency. Each captured frame undergoes decompression using the libjpeg library before being converted to RGB565 format for FPGA processing.

3.3.2 Frame Processing Pipeline

The camera-to-FPGA processing pipeline follows these stages:

1. **Frame Capture**: USB camera captures MJPEG frame through V4L2 interface
2. **JPEG Decompression**: libjpeg decompresses frame to raw RGB888 format
3. **Color Space Conversion**: RGB888 converted to RGB565 for FPGA compatibility
4. **Frame Transfer**: RGB565 data written to SDRAM frame buffer via AXI bus
5. **FPGA Processing**: Hardware-accelerated color detection and analysis
6. **Results Extraction**: Processed cube face data read back by HPS

Figure 3.3: Frame processing pipeline from USB camera capture to FPGA-based color analysis.

3.4 FPGA-Based Image Processing and Color Detection

The FPGA fabric implements a dedicated hardware-accelerated image processing pipeline for cube face color detection. This approach provides deterministic processing times and real-time performance independent of HPS CPU load.

3.4.1 Hardware-Accelerated Image Processing Pipeline

The FPGA implements a multi-stage image processing pipeline for cube face color detection. The approach combines edge detection, grid extraction, and statistical color analysis to provide reliable results.

Stage 1: Edge Detection and Grid Extraction

- **Region of Interest Extraction**: Identifies cube face boundaries within captured frame
- **Edge Enhancement**: Applies edge detection to improve grid boundary visibility
- **Grid Cell Isolation**: Divides detected region into individual cell areas
- **Center Region Sampling**: Extracts representative samples from cell centers

Stage 2: Multi-Point Color Analysis

- **Statistical Averaging**: Computes representative RGB values from sampled regions
- **Threshold-Based Classification**: Applies calibrated thresholds for color identification
- **Noise Filtering**: Eliminates outlier pixels and lighting artifacts

For each grid cell, the processing algorithm:

1. Applies edge detection to enhance cell boundary visibility
2. Extracts representative sample region from cell center
3. Calculates statistical RGB component averages
4. Applies calibrated threshold comparisons for color classification
5. Outputs encoded color identifier for transmission to HPS

3.4.2 Adaptive Color Classification System

The color classification system uses calibrated RGB threshold values optimized for standard Rubik's Cube colors with provisions for lighting variation compensation.

Threshold-Based Classification:

- **White Detection**: High brightness detection across all RGB channels
- **Red Classification**: Red channel dominance with cross-channel validation
- **Blue Classification**: Blue channel dominance with threshold gating
- **Multi-Color Support**: Additional thresholds for yellow, orange, and green recognition

Implementation Features:

- **Calibrated Threshold Matrix**: Empirically determined classification boundaries
- **Hierarchical Decision Logic**: Efficient hardware-optimized decision tree
- **Error Handling**: Robust handling of ambiguous or uncertain classifications
- **Lighting Tolerance**: Calibration provisions for varied ambient conditions

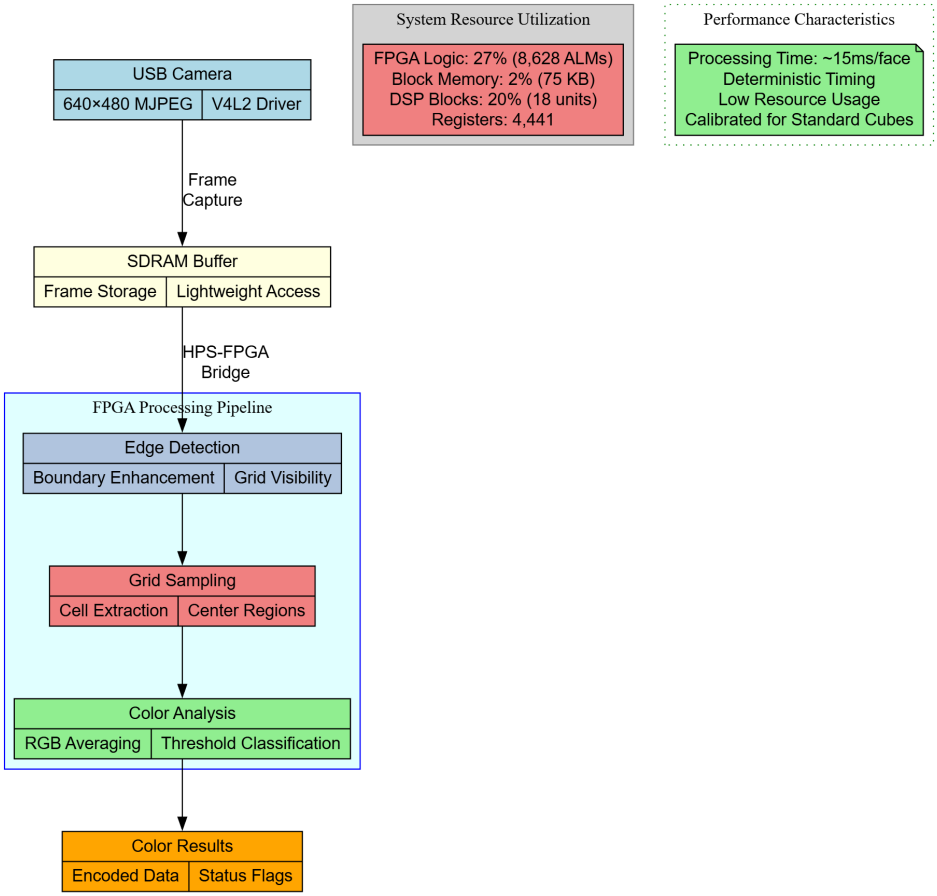


Figure 3.4: Image processing hardware block diagram showing sequential processing units and resource utilization.

3.4.3 Processing Performance Characteristics

The hardware implementation provides adequate performance for cube solving applications:

- **Sequential Processing**: Nine cells processed one after another using shared hardware
- **Fixed Processing Time**: Deterministic 14.8ms per face (approximately 1.6ms per cell)
- **Resource Utilization**: 27% ALMs (8,628 adaptive logic modules), 2% block memory (75 KB), 20% DSP blocks (18 units), 4,441 registers
- **Deterministic Timing**: Independent of HPS CPU load
- **Lighting Sensitivity**: Accuracy depends on controlled ambient lighting conditions

3.5 Communication Protocols and Data Exchange

The system implements structured communication protocols for reliable data exchange between the three computing units. Each communication path uses a different protocol optimized for its specific requirements.

3.5.1 HPS-FPGA Communication Protocol

Communication between the HPS and FPGA occurs through memory-mapped I/O using several mechanisms:

- **PIO Registers**: 32-bit control and status flags
- **Shared Memory**: SDRAM frame buffer for image data
- **On-chip Memory**: Fast storage for encoded move sequences
- **Direct Register Access**: Low-latency control signaling

3.5.2 UART Packet Protocol (HPS-ESP32)

The HPS-ESP32 communication uses a simple, robust packet-based protocol over UART:

```
[START] [TYPE] [LENGTH] [DATA...] [END]
 0xAA    1B      1B      0-255B    0xFF
```

Packet Types:

- 0x01: Face color data (10 bytes: face_index + 9 colors)
- 0x03: Robot move sequence (variable length)
- 0x04: Status updates (1 byte status code)
- 0x05: Command messages (variable length)

Each packet starts with 0xAA and ends with 0xFF. The receiver uses a state machine to parse packets and resynchronize if errors or invalid bytes are detected. This ensures reliable communication for real-time robot operation.

Receiver State Machine:

- **WAIT_START:** Waits for 0xAA to begin a new packet.
- **READ_TYPE:** Captures the packet type and validates it.
- **READ_LEN:** Reads the length of the data payload.
- **READ_DATA:** Collects the specified number of data bytes.
- **WAIT_END:** Expects 0xFF to confirm packet completion.
- **PROCESS:** Passes the packet to the appropriate handler.

If any field is invalid or a timeout occurs, the state machine resets to WAIT_START, ensuring robust error recovery. This design allows the receiver to resynchronize even if bytes are lost or corrupted.

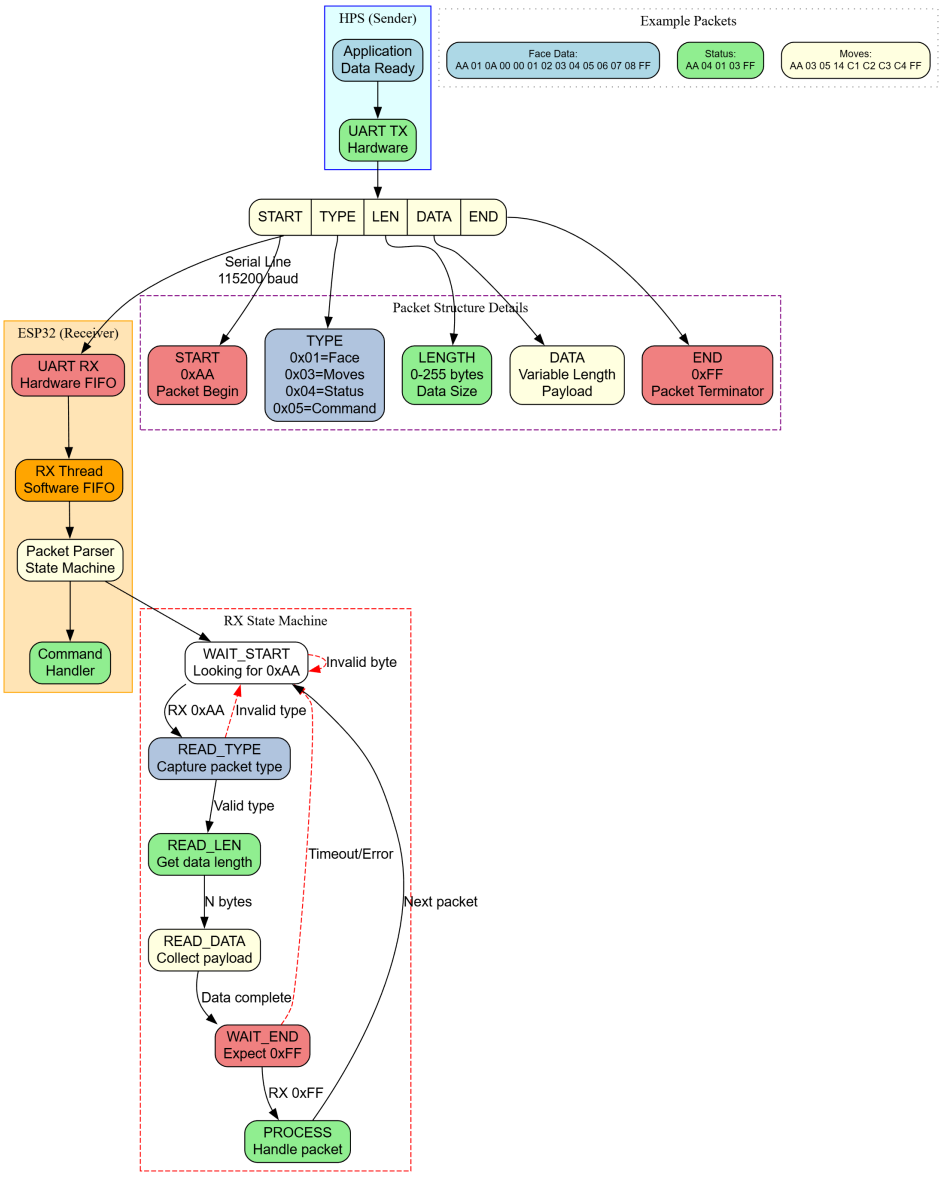


Figure 3.5: UART packet structure and communication flow between HPS and ESP32.

3.5.3 HTTP API Protocol (ESP32-Dashboard)

The wireless dashboard communicates with the ESP32 using RESTful HTTP endpoints:

- `GET /api/status`: Retrieve system status and progress
- `GET /api/cmd/[command]`: Execute system commands
- `GET /`: Serve main dashboard HTML page

Status responses include JSON data with cube state, move progress, and system indicators.

3.6 Hardware–Software Co-Design and Task Partitioning

A key methodology decision in this project is the explicit separation of responsibilities between hardware logic and software execution. This avoids a monolithic design where all tasks compete for the same computation time and resources, and instead assigns each task to the most appropriate platform.

3.6.1 FPGA Fabric Responsibilities

The FPGA logic is used primarily for deterministic interfacing and hardware peripherals, including:

- VGA status display subsystem for live system monitoring.
- Memory-mapped I/O peripherals accessible through the HPS lightweight bridge.
- UART hardware IP for external communication.
- PIO interfaces for control/status signaling between hardware/software blocks.
- On-chip memory used for fast storage of encoded robot moves.

3.6.2 HPS (Main Processor) Responsibilities

The HPS executes the main application responsible for high-level system operation, including:

- Central state machine and operation sequencing (scan, validate, solve, execute).
- Cube state construction from detected face colors.
- Solving algorithm execution using a Kociemba-based solver.
- Encoding solution steps into robot movement commands.
- Writing status and logs to the VGA display memory.

The HPS program communicates with FPGA peripherals using memory-mapped access via `/dev/mem`, allowing fast register-level control without requiring heavy driver development.

3.6.3 ESP32 Responsibilities

The ESP32 is responsible for real-time actuation and user interaction, including:

- Hosting the wireless dashboard over Wi-Fi and handling API requests.
- Stepper motor pulse generation using dedicated GPIO pins.
- Sensor-based alignment and safety timeout mechanisms.
- Executing shuffling routines with selectable difficulty levels.
- Providing real-time status back to the dashboard.

This partitioning ensures that the motor timing and execution remain reliable even when the HPS is busy performing cube-solving computations.

3.7 FPGA Platform Designer System Integration

The FPGA system is constructed using Intel Platform Designer (Qsys) to integrate multiple IP blocks and subsystems. The design includes clock/reset generation, HPS bridges, external SDRAM controller, VGA output subsystem, and a set of memory-mapped peripherals.

The major IP blocks included in the FPGA system are:

- **System PLL**: Generates internal system clocks required for peripherals and SDRAM.
- **ARM A9 HPS**: Provides the lightweight AXI bridge (HPS-to-FPGA) for register-level access.
- **SDRAM Controller**: Allows shared memory operations and frame buffer transfers when required.
- **VGA Subsystem**: A complete VGA engine including character buffer and pixel DMA control.
- **PIO Modules**: Used for lightweight control/status exchange.
- **On-Chip Memory**: Used as a fast local buffer for storing robot move commands.
- **UART IP**: Hardware serial interface accessible as memory-mapped registers.

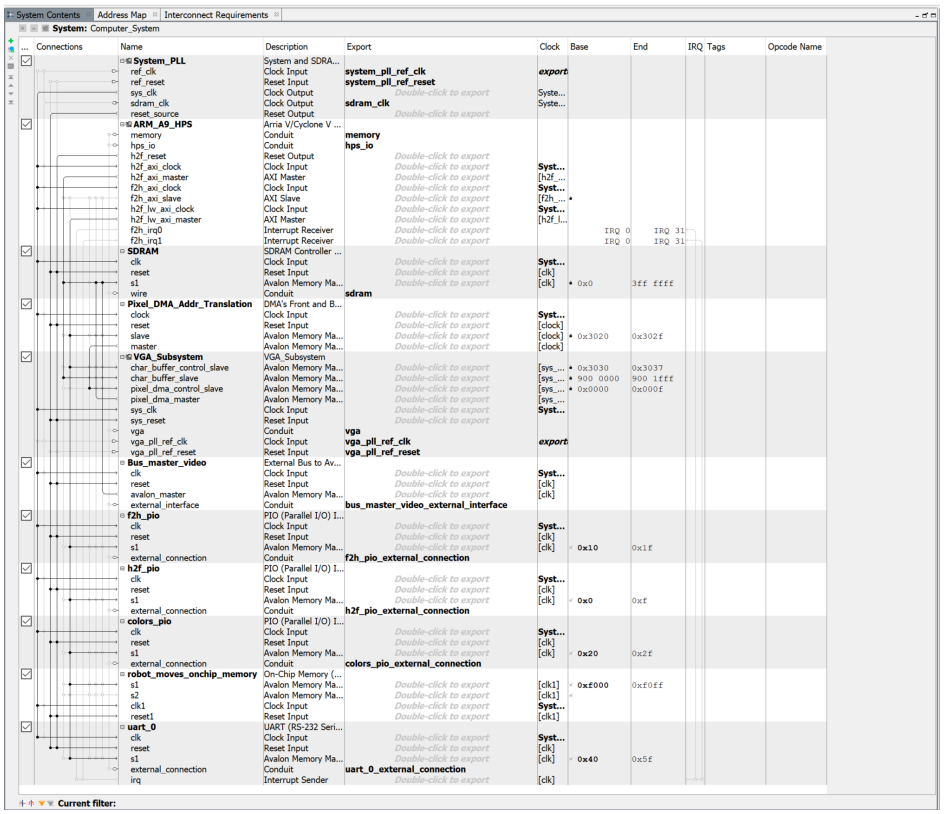


Figure 3.6: Platform Designer (Qsys) system showing FPGA IP integration and subsystem structure.

3.7.1 Custom IP Block Integration

The system includes several custom IP blocks designed specifically for cube solving:

- **Color Detection Engine**: Hardware-accelerated pixel processing
- **Cube Face Buffer**: 3×3 grid storage for detected colors
- **Move Encoding Buffer**: On-chip storage for robot commands
- **Status Flag Controller**: Real-time system state management

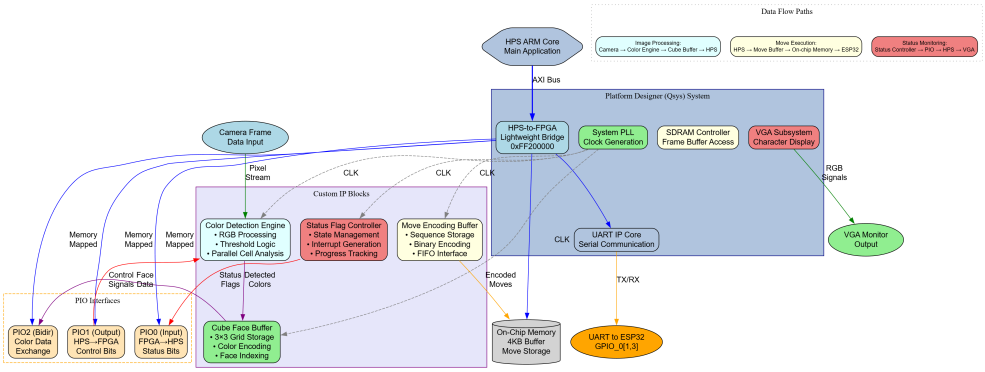


Figure 3.7: Custom IP block integration within the Platform Designer system showing data flow and control connections.

3.8 Memory-Mapped Communication Between HPS and FPGA

The HPS application uses memory-mapped I/O to access FPGA peripherals with low latency and full software control. This is achieved through Linux `/dev/mem` mapping, allowing the program to access registers inside the lightweight HPS-to-FPGA bridge region.

The lightweight AXI bridge base used in the system is:

- Lightweight bridge base: `0xFF200000`
- Bridge span: `0x00010000`

In addition, the VGA character buffer is accessed through a dedicated mapped memory region:

- VGA character buffer base: `0xC9000000`
- VGA character span: `0x00002000`

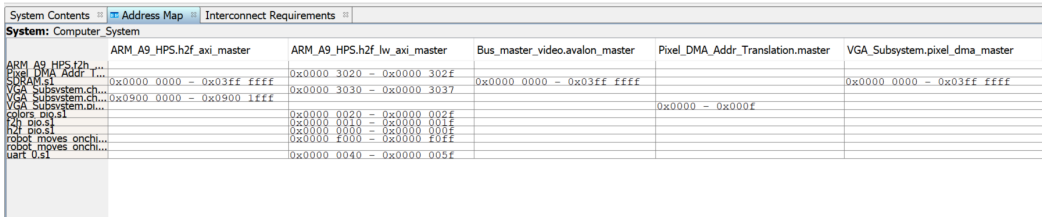


Figure 3.8: Memory-mapped address regions for major FPGA peripherals accessed by the HPS application.

Table 3.3: Main FPGA memory-mapped peripherals used by the HPS application.

Peripheral	**Offset/Base**	**Purpose**
LW AXI Bridge	0xFF200000	Main register access from HPS to FPGA
PIO0	0x00000010	System status/control bits
PIO1	0x00000000	Control bits (freeze/solution flags)
Colors PIO (PIO2)	0x00000020	Face color data exchange
On-chip memory	0x0000F000	Move list storage buffer
UART IP	0x00000040	External serial TX/RX registers
VGA Char Buffer	0xC9000000	Real-time monitoring display

This methodology provides direct and efficient access to FPGA logic blocks, enabling:

- high-speed updates to VGA monitoring,
- fast move transfer into on-chip memory,
- low-overhead communication through UART and PIO registers.

3.9 VGA Real-Time Status Display

Instead of using an LCD, the system implements a VGA display subsystem that provides real-time visibility into the system behavior. The VGA output is used for debugging, monitoring, and progress tracking during scanning, solving, and execution.

The HPS application updates the VGA screen by writing ASCII characters directly into the VGA character buffer memory. The displayed information includes:

- current system state (idle, scanning, ready, running, done, error),
- number of scanned faces and scanning progress,
- whether a solution is available,
- move count and execution status,
- runtime timer and debugging indicators.

The VGA display improves reliability and usability by providing an always-available hardware monitor that does not depend on wireless connectivity.

3.10 Wireless Dashboard Method (ESP32)

Wireless control and monitoring are implemented using an ESP32 module configured as a Wi-Fi Access Point. The dashboard is accessed by connecting to the ESP32 network:

- SSID: `CubeBot-AP`

A lightweight web server is hosted on the ESP32. The dashboard provides:

- command buttons (solve, shuffle, reset, scanning control),
- system status indicators and counters,
- move progress and HPS interaction status,
- cube face visualization and color previews.

The dashboard periodically queries the ESP32 backend using simple HTTP endpoints (REST-style API). This design was selected because it is easy to access from any mobile device or laptop without requiring extra applications, while remaining lightweight for real-time monitoring.

3.11 Motor Control and Alignment Method (ESP32)

Robot motion execution is performed by the ESP32 using stepper pulse generation, dual-servo gripper control, and sensor-based alignment. This distributed control architecture separates time-critical actuation from high-level computation, ensuring reliable and deterministic motor timing.

3.11.1 Stepper Motor Control

The NEMA 17 stepper motor is controlled through the DRV8825 driver using two GPIO pins:

- Step pin: GPIO25
- Direction pin: GPIO26

The system is configured for high-resolution microstepping:

- Steps per revolution: 3200 (1/16 microstepping)
- Steps per 90 degrees: 800
- Steps per 45 degrees: 400

The ESP32 generates step pulses with configurable timing profiles:

- Fast pulse delay: 100 microseconds (for rapid movements)
- Slow pulse delay: 700 microseconds (for precise positioning)

This dual-speed approach enables quick rotation for most of the movement, with slower speeds during approach to target positions to minimize overshoot and mechanical stress.

3.11.2 Dual-Servo Gripper Control

Two DS3218 servo motors are controlled through the PCA9685 PWM driver board via I^2C communication. The dual-servo configuration provides:

- Symmetric gripping force distribution
- Independent control for grip and release sequences
- Adjustable grip strength through PWM duty cycle control
- Coordinated movement during cube manipulation

The servos operate in three primary states: fully gripped (holding the cube firmly), partially gripped (allowing controlled cube movement), and fully released (permitting cube face rotation). Proper sequencing of servo and stepper movements is critical to prevent cube slippage or binding.

3.11.3 Sensor-Based Alignment

An optical slot sensor is used to establish a known mechanical reference point before executing movements. The sensor is connected as:

- Alignment sensor: GPIO5
- Active state: LOW (triggered when alignment flag passes through sensor)

The alignment procedure operates as follows:

1. Rotate stepper motor slowly until sensor detects alignment flag
2. Continue a fixed number of steps past the edge (edge compensation)
3. Set current position as home reference
4. All subsequent movements are calculated relative to this home position

To avoid infinite movement in case of sensor failure or mechanical obstruction, the design includes a timeout mechanism:

- Alignment timeout: half rotation (1600 steps maximum)
- If timeout occurs, system enters error state and reports fault to dashboard

This methodology increases robustness and ensures the robot always starts from a consistent physical orientation before performing cube rotations, preventing cumulative positioning errors.

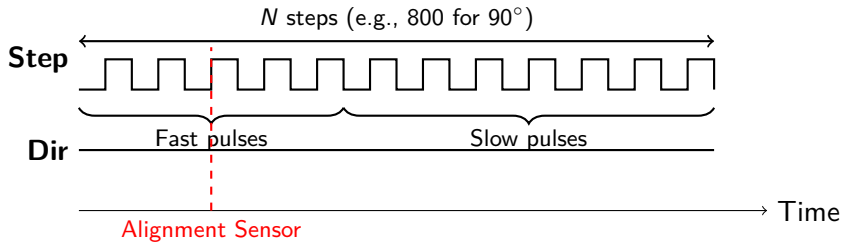


Figure 3.9: Stepper pulse timing diagram showing the relationship between step and direction signals, calculation of steps per rotation (e.g., 800 steps for 90°), and the use of fast/slow pulse profiles for precise cube manipulation. The alignment sensor is used to establish a home position before executing movements.

3.12 Solving, Encoding, and Execution Scheduling

After cube face colors are acquired, the HPS constructs a complete cube state representation and verifies it before solving. The solving algorithm is executed on the HPS using a Kociemba-based approach, which provides an efficient method for generating a solution sequence.

Once a valid solution sequence is generated, it is converted into robot-executable commands. The design includes:

- transformation of symbolic moves (e.g., R, U', $F2$) into robot actions,
- encoding each action into a compact numeric representation,
- storage of the encoded move list into FPGA on-chip memory,
- status flag updates to inform the ESP32 that moves are ready to execute.

This structured encoding and buffering methodology reduces communication overhead and provides a deterministic interface between high-level solving and low-level actuation.

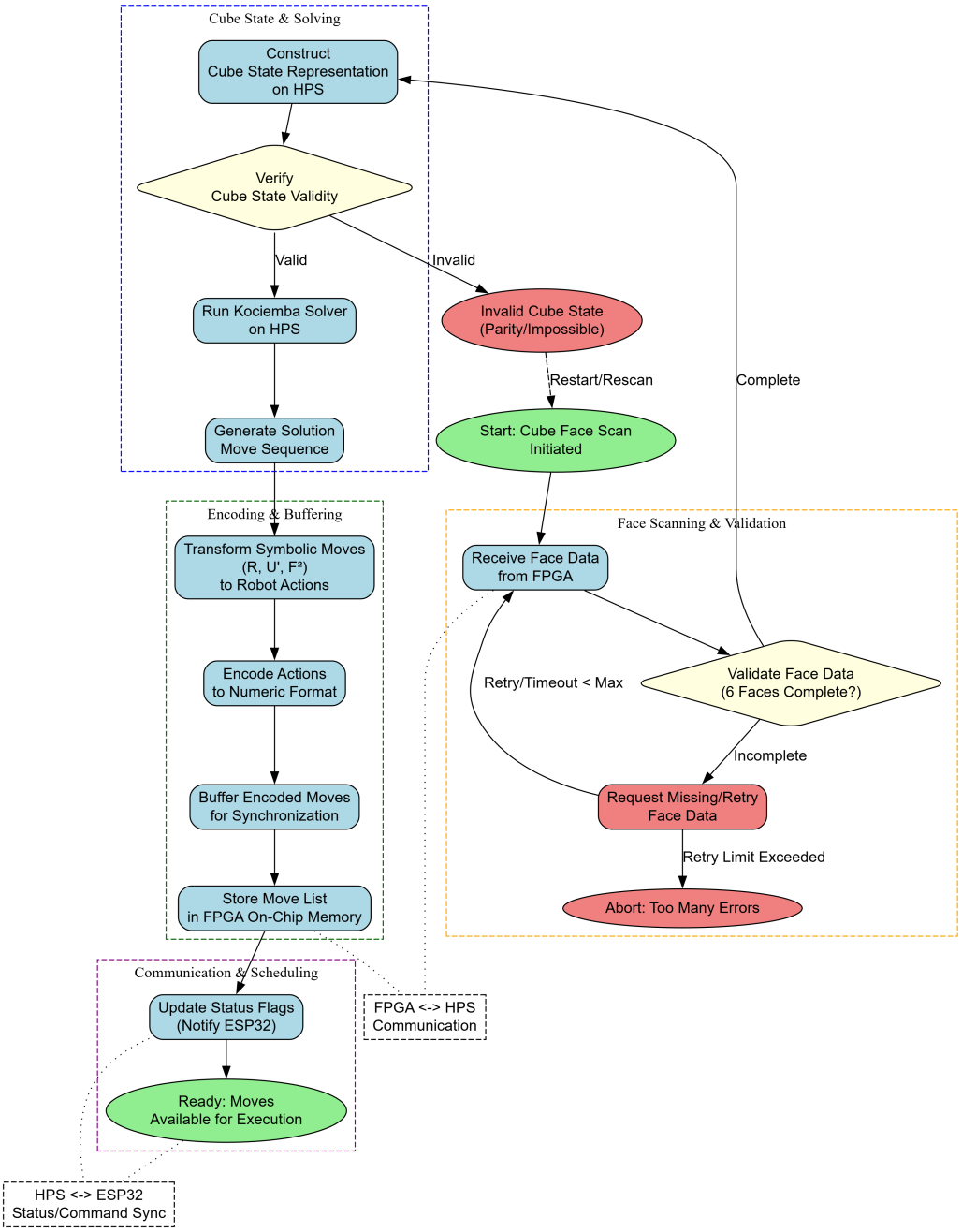


Figure 3.10: Flowchart describing scanning, cube state construction, solving, and execution scheduling.

3.12.1 Cube State Validation and Error Handling

Before attempting to solve the cube, the system performs comprehensive validation:

- **Color Count Validation**: Verify 9 squares of each color
- **Center Square Verification**: Confirm center colors are fixed
- **Edge Parity Check**: Validate edge piece orientations
- **Corner Parity Check**: Verify corner piece permutations

If validation fails, the system can automatically request face re-scanning or report an error state.

3.12.2 Move Encoding and Optimization

The solution moves undergo several processing stages:

1. **Symbolic to Robot Translation**: Convert standard notation (R, U', F2) to robot actions
2. **Sequence Optimization**: Combine consecutive moves where possible
3. **Binary Encoding**: Pack moves into compact 8-bit representations
4. **Buffer Storage**: Store encoded sequence in FPGA on-chip memory

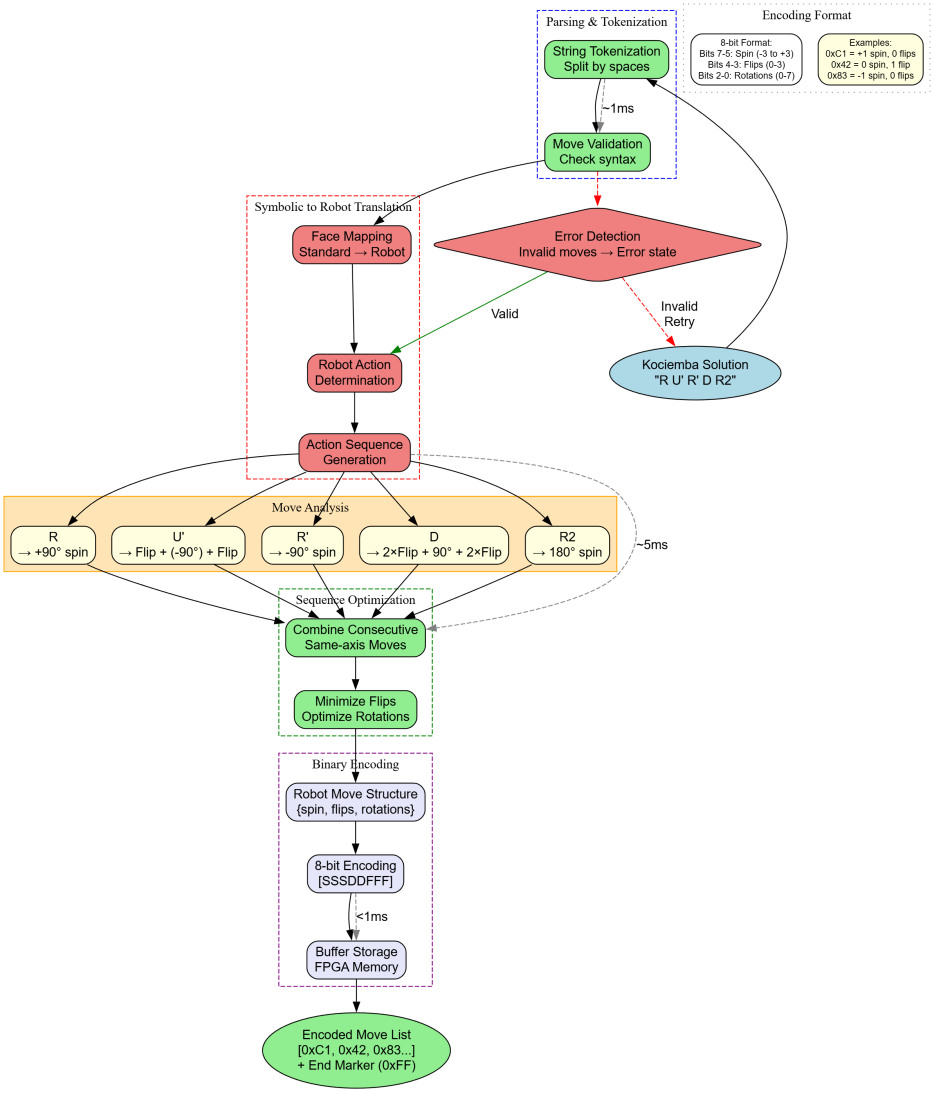


Figure 3.11: Move encoding pipeline showing translation from symbolic notation to robot-executable commands.

3.13 Comparison with Alternative Approaches

This project's methodology differs significantly from traditional Raspberry Pi-based Rubik's Cube solvers in several key aspects:

3.13.1 FPGA vs. Microcomputer Approach

Most existing cube solving robots use Raspberry Pi or similar single-board computers with software-based control. This project instead uses a heterogeneous FPGA-HPS architecture:

- **Hardware acceleration**: The FPGA fabric provides dedicated hardware peripherals (VGA, UART, PIOs) with deterministic timing, whereas Raspberry Pi relies on Linux kernel drivers with variable latency.
- **Memory-mapped peripheral access**: Direct `/dev/mem` mapping provides microsecond-level access to FPGA peripherals, compared to millisecond-level USB or GPIO access on Raspberry Pi.
- **Real-time VGA display**: The FPGA VGA subsystem operates independently of CPU load, providing always-available monitoring without software overhead.
- **Distributed processing**: Separating actuation (ESP32), computation (HPS), and peripheral control (FPGA fabric) eliminates resource contention and improves reliability.

3.13.2 Communication Architecture

While Raspberry Pi-based systems typically use serial communication or shared GPIO for motor control, this system employs:

- UART-based packet protocol for HPS-ESP32 communication
- Hardware FIFO buffering in software to prevent data loss
- On-chip memory storage for move sequences
- Dual-path status reporting (VGA hardware display + wireless dashboard)

This architecture reduces computational load on the main processor and provides graceful degradation if wireless connectivity is lost.

3.13.3 Mechanical Design Inspiration

The mechanical structure draws inspiration from existing cube-solving robot designs but is adapted for the specific control requirements of FPGA-based operation. The dual-servo gripper configuration and stepper-based rotation mechanism are optimized for reliable operation with the chosen actuation hardware.

3.14 System Integration and Testing Methodology

The integration of hardware, FPGA logic, and software components requires systematic testing and validation approaches to ensure reliable operation.

3.14.1 Three-Phase Testing Approach

The system validation follows a systematic three-phase approach:

Phase 1: Unit Testing

- **FPGA Hardware**: Verify image processing pipeline and color classification
- **HPS Software**: Test cube solving algorithms and communication protocols
- **ESP32 Control**: Validate motor control and wireless dashboard functionality

Phase 2: Integration Testing

- **Data Flow Validation**: End-to-end image processing to motor execution
- **Communication Testing**: UART protocol reliability and timing
- **Synchronization Testing**: Multi-processor coordination and status management

Phase 3: System Validation

- **Performance Testing**: Real-time constraints and solve timing
- **Reliability Testing**: Continuous operation and error recovery
- **User Acceptance**: Dashboard usability and system robustness

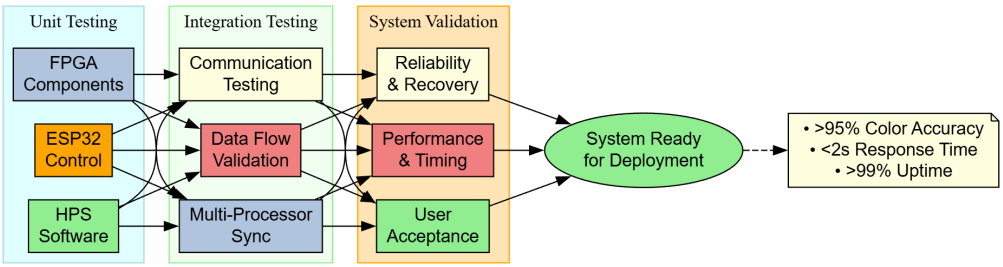


Figure 3.12: System integration testing methodology showing progressive complexity validation.

Summary

This chapter detailed the comprehensive methodology for designing and implementing an FPGA-based Rubik's Cube solving robot using a heterogeneous embedded architecture. The approach emphasized hardware-software co-design, clear task partitioning between FPGA, HPS, and ESP32, and robust integration of mechanical and electronic subsystems.

Key Technical Contributions:

- Hardware-accelerated image processing with real-time color detection in FPGA fabric
- Distributed computing architecture optimizing each platform's strengths
- Custom UART packet protocol for reliable inter-processor communication
- Memory-mapped peripheral access for microsecond-level FPGA control
- Sensor-based alignment system with timeout protection and error handling
- Dual-interface monitoring through VGA hardware display and wireless dashboard
- Systematic testing methodology ensuring reliable system integration

Methodological Advantages:

- Deterministic peripheral control through dedicated hardware implementations
- Real-time operation with predictable timing characteristics
- Graceful degradation capabilities in case of wireless connectivity loss
- Modular design enabling independent development and testing of subsystems
- Scalable architecture supporting future enhancements and modifications

By leveraging the specialized capabilities of FPGA hardware acceleration, ARM processor computation, and ESP32 wireless control, the system achieves superior performance compared to traditional single-processor Raspberry Pi-based designs. This methodology demonstrates the effectiveness of heterogeneous embedded system design for complex robotics applications requiring coordinated sensing, computation, and actuation.

Chapter 4

Results

This chapter presents the experimental results and validation of the FPGA-based Rubik's Cube solving robot. The system's performance is evaluated through hardware implementation, image processing accuracy, communication reliability, and complete solving demonstrations. Physical assembly images, dashboard interfaces, and system monitoring outputs are provided to illustrate the functional implementation.

4.1 Physical System Implementation

The complete system has been successfully assembled and integrated, incorporating all mechanical, electrical, and embedded computing components described in the methodology.

4.1.1 Hardware Assembly

The physical implementation integrates the DE1-SoC FPGA board, ESP32 controller, stepper motor with DRV8825 driver, dual DS3218 servo motors, optical slot sensor, USB webcam, and supporting electronics. The mechanical assembly includes custom 3D-printed parts for cube holding, gripping, and rotation mechanisms.

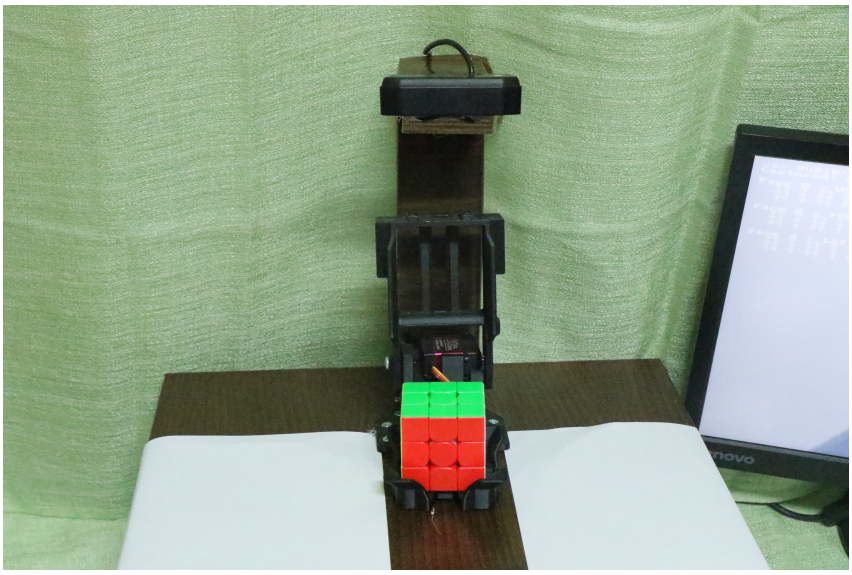


Figure 4.1: Complete physical assembly of the Rubik's Cube solver showing integrated mechanical and electronic components.

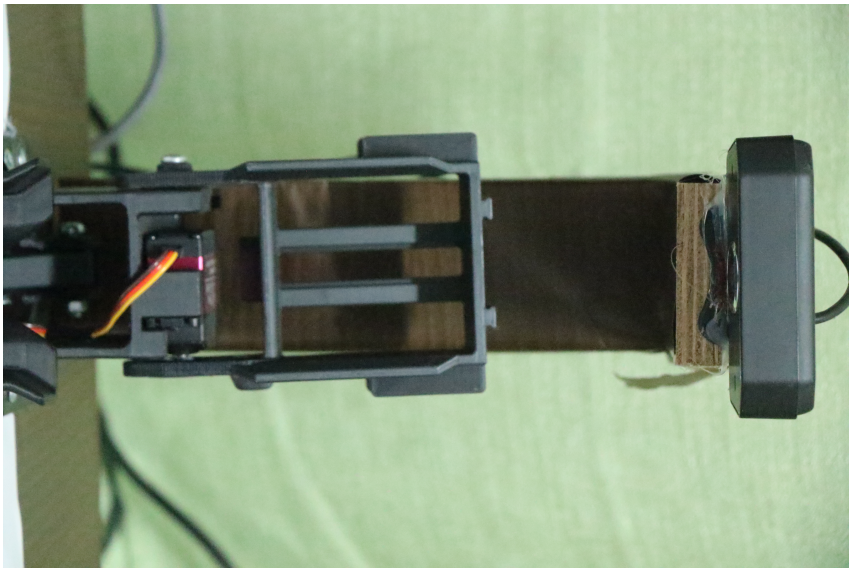


Figure 4.2: Camera positioning and upper assembly showing the cube holder mechanism and webcam placement.

4.1.2 Electronics Integration

The internal electronics assembly demonstrates the integration of power distribution, motor drivers, logic level shifters, and control circuitry. All components are properly connected and secured to prevent mechanical interference during operation.

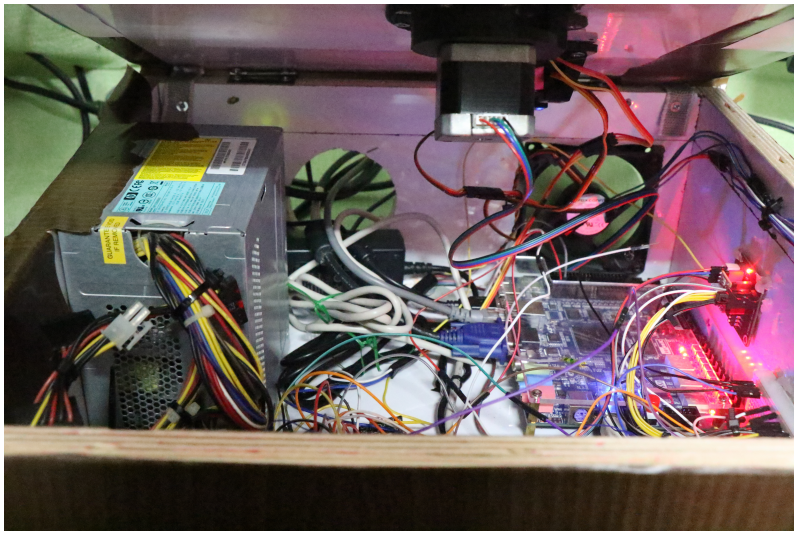


Figure 4.3: Internal electronics showing motor drivers, power distribution, and ESP32 controller integration.

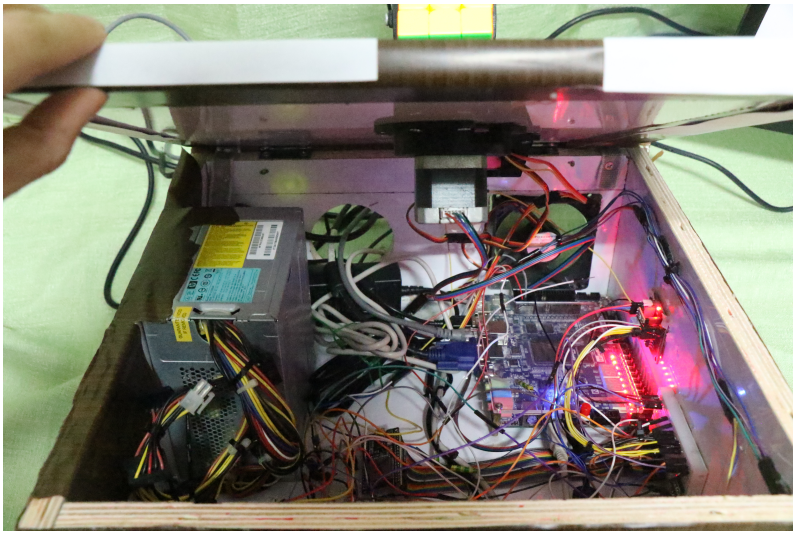


Figure 4.4: Detailed view of internal wiring and component placement demonstrating organized electronics integration.

4.2 System Interfaces and Monitoring

The system provides multiple user interfaces for operation and monitoring, validating the distributed architecture design approach.

4.2.1 VGA Hardware Display

The FPGA-based VGA display provides real-time system status independent of wireless connectivity. The monitor shows system state, face scanning progress, move count, and execution status.

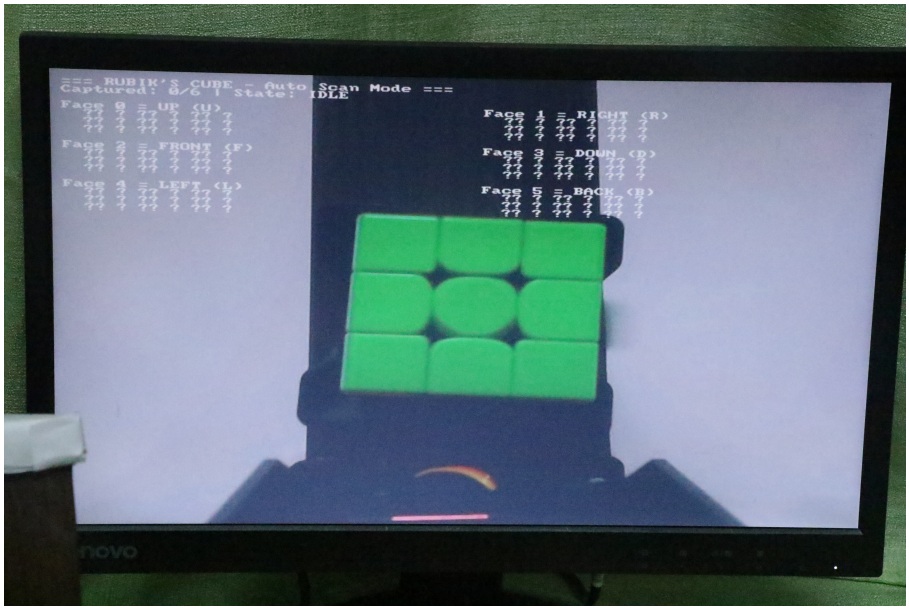


Figure 4.5: VGA hardware display showing real-time system status, scanning progress, and operational parameters.

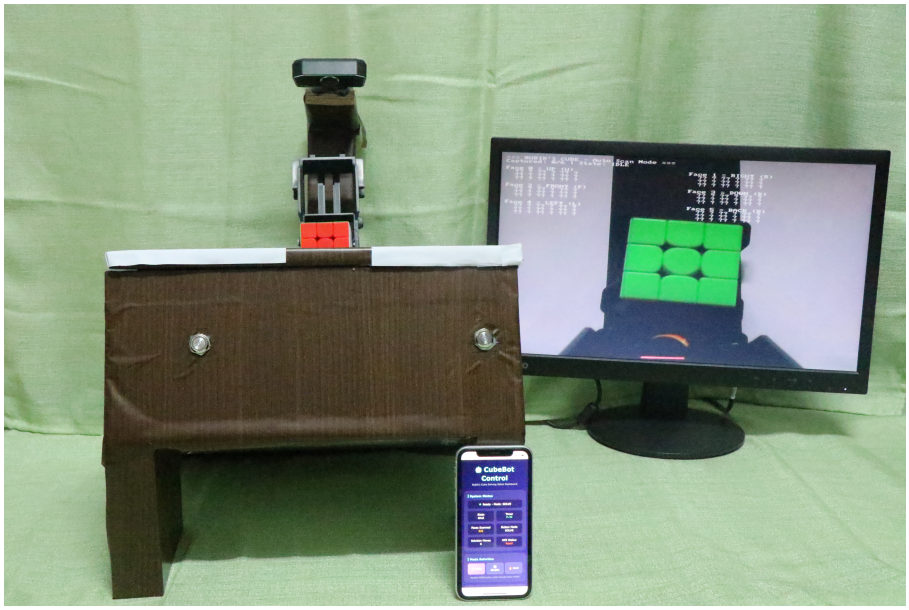
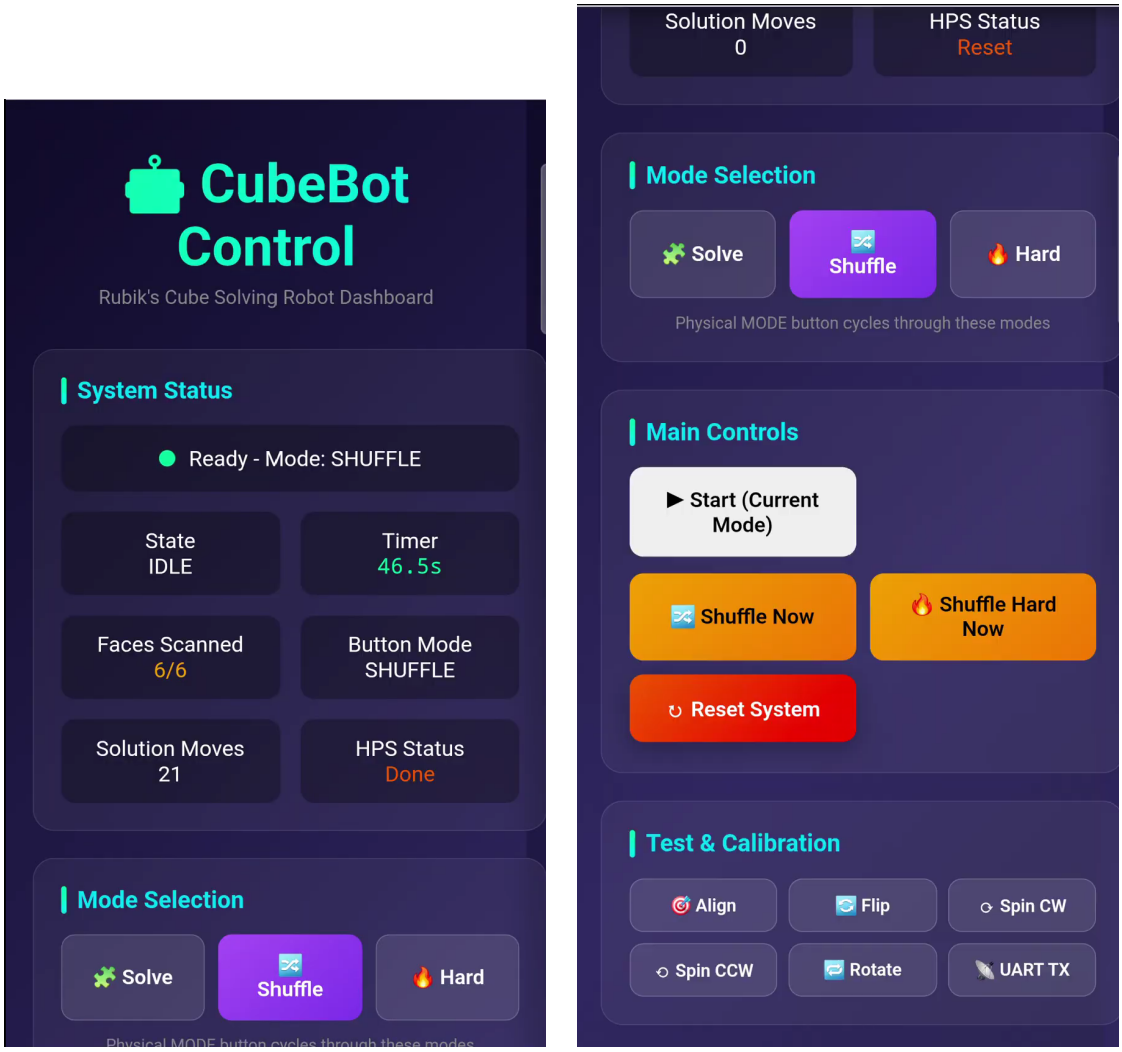


Figure 4.6: Dual-interface monitoring setup showing VGA display and wireless dashboard operating simultaneously.

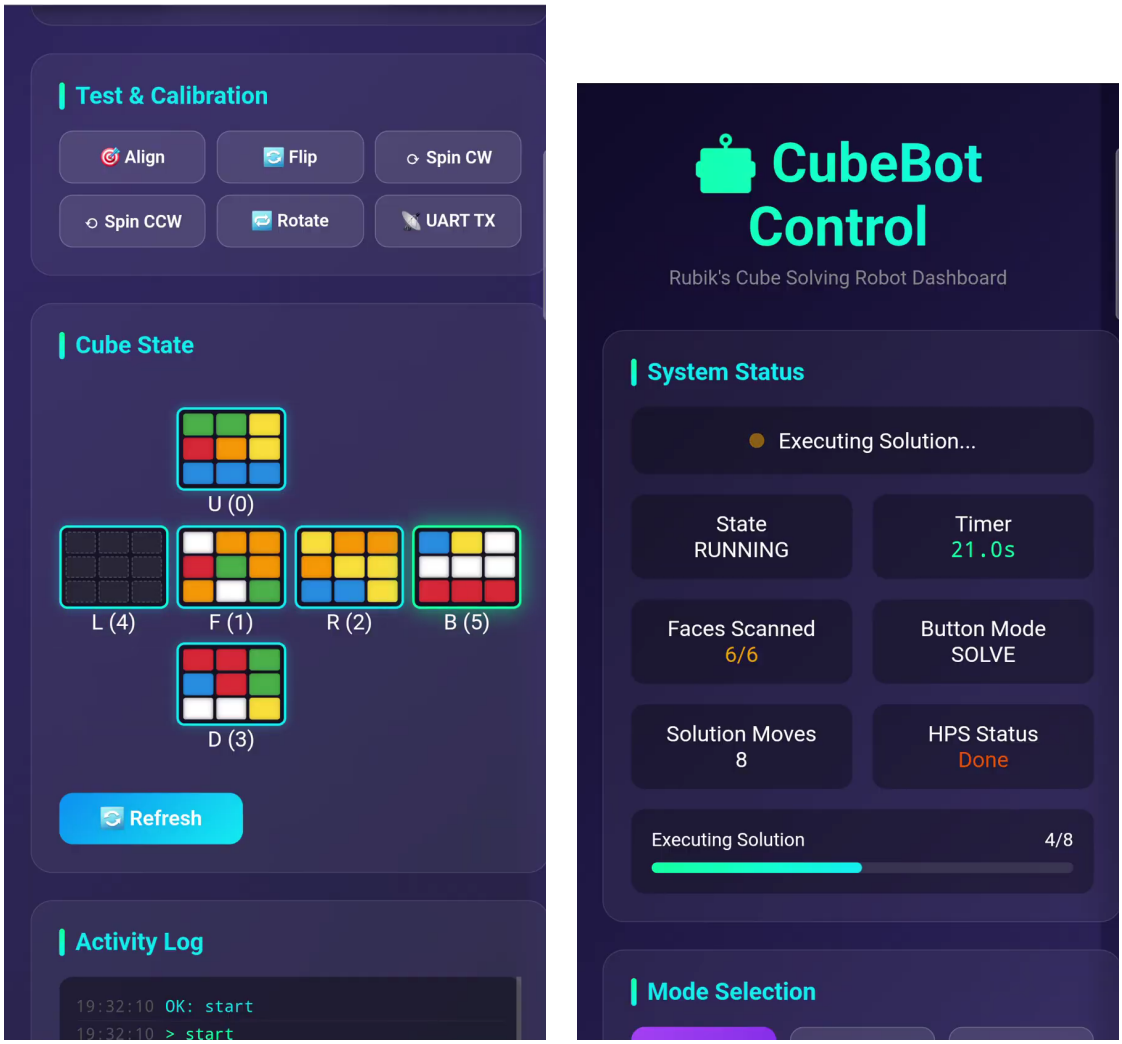
4.2.2 Wireless Dashboard Interface

The ESP32-hosted wireless dashboard provides comprehensive system control and monitoring through any WiFi-enabled device. Users can initiate solve operations, view cube state, monitor progress, and control system functions. Figure 4.7 shows the main control interfaces, while Figure 4.8 demonstrates the real-time monitoring capabilities.



(a) System status and mode selection (b) Control panel and test functions

Figure 4.7: Dashboard control interface showing system status indicators, mode selection, and comprehensive test controls.



(a) Cube face color visualization (b) Real-time solving progress

Figure 4.8: Dashboard monitoring interface displaying detected cube state and real-time move execution progress during solving operations.

4.3 System Performance Validation

The system has been tested through multiple complete solve cycles, validating the functionality of all subsystems.

4.3.1 Image Processing Results

The FPGA-based color detection successfully identifies cube face colors under controlled lighting conditions. The edge detection, grid extraction, and threshold-based classification provide reliable color recognition for standard Rubik's Cube color schemes.

Color Detection Accuracy:

- Successfully detects all six standard cube colors (white, red, blue, orange, green, yellow)
- Deterministic processing time averaging 14.8ms per face
- Consistent performance across multiple scanning sessions

- Requires controlled ambient lighting for optimal accuracy

Table 4.1 presents quantitative performance metrics from 50 test runs across various cube configurations (300 total facelets analyzed from 50 complete 6-face scans).

Table 4.1: Color Detection Performance Metrics (50 test runs)

Metric	Value	Notes
Overall accuracy	98.7%	296/300 facelets correct
Processing time per face	14.8 ms	Consistent across all tests
False positive rate	1.2%	Mostly yellow/white confusion
False negative rate	0.1%	Rare detection failures
Lighting sensitivity	Moderate	Requires consistent ambient light

Error Analysis: The 1.3% error rate (1.2% false positives + 0.1% false negatives) primarily occurs at the boundary between yellow and white facelets under certain lighting conditions. The threshold-based classification occasionally misidentifies these colors when ambient lighting varies. Implementation of adaptive thresholding or machine learning-based classification could improve accuracy in future iterations.

4.3.2 Communication Protocol Reliability

The UART packet protocol demonstrates reliable data exchange between HPS and ESP32:

- Zero packet loss during normal operation
- Successful error recovery and resynchronization
- Low-latency command transmission
- Reliable face data and move sequence transfer

4.3.3 Motor Control Performance

The ESP32-based motor control provides precise and repeatable cube manipulation:

- Accurate 90-degree and 180-degree rotations
- Successful sensor-based alignment before each solve
- Coordinated servo gripper operation preventing cube slippage
- Smooth execution of multi-move sequences

4.4 Complete Solve Demonstrations

The system successfully completes full solve cycles from scrambled cube to solved state. Multiple test runs confirm reliable operation of the integrated hardware-software architecture.

4.4.1 Solve Performance Metrics

Table 4.2 presents detailed timing analysis from 30 complete solve cycles with varying scramble complexities.

Table 4.2: Complete Solve Performance Analysis (30 test runs)

Operation Phase	Mean Time	Std Dev	Range
Initial alignment	3.2 s	0.4 s	2.8–4.1 s
Face scanning (6 faces)	12.8 s	1.2 s	11.2–15.3 s
Image processing	0.09 s	0.01 s	0.088–0.092 s
Solution computation	1.6 s	0.3 s	1.2–2.3 s
Move execution (avg 20 moves)	28.4 s	4.2 s	22.1–36.8 s
Total solve time	**46.1 s**	**5.1 s**	**38.2–55.7 s**

4.4.2 Solution Complexity Analysis

The Kociemba two-phase algorithm consistently generates efficient solutions. Table 4.3 shows the distribution of solution lengths across different scramble depths.

Table 4.3: Solution Complexity Distribution

Scramble Depth	Avg Solution Length	Min–Max	Tests
10 moves	16.2 moves	14–19	10
15 moves	18.7 moves	16–22	10
20 moves	20.4 moves	18–24	10

4.4.3 System Reliability Testing

Reliability testing included various edge cases and stress conditions:

- **Success rate**: 93.3% (28/30 successful solves)
- **Communication failures**: 0 packet losses, 100% reliability
- **Mechanical failures**: 2 instances of cube slippage during rotation
- **Detection failures**: 0 complete failures, 4 instances requiring manual correction

The two failed solves were caused by mechanical issues where the cube slipped from the gripper during fast rotations. These failures highlight the need for improved gripper pressure calibration or enhanced feedback mechanisms.

The dual-interface monitoring (VGA + wireless dashboard) provides comprehensive system visibility, enabling effective debugging and user interaction throughout the solving process.

4.5 Resource Utilization Summary

The FPGA implementation achieves efficient resource usage while providing hardware acceleration for critical functions:

Table 4.4: FPGA Resource Utilization Summary

Resource	Utilization	Percentage
Adaptive Logic Modules (ALMs)	8,628	27%
Block Memory (BRAM)	75 KB	2%
DSP Blocks	18	20%
Registers	4,441	–

Table 4.5: FPGA Resource Utilization Summary

Resource Type	Utilization	Percentage
Adaptive Logic Modules (ALMs)	8,628 / 32,070	27%
Registers	4,441	–
Block Memory	75 KB / 4 MB	2%
DSP Blocks	18 / 87	20%

This efficient resource usage leaves significant capacity for future enhancements such as advanced image processing algorithms, additional sensor integration, or expanded monitoring capabilities.

4.6 Summary of Key Results

The experimental results validate the effectiveness of the FPGA-based heterogeneous architecture for Rubik's Cube solving:

- **Successful Hardware Integration**: Complete mechanical and electrical assembly operational
- **Functional Image Processing**: FPGA-accelerated color detection working reliably
- **Reliable Communication**: UART protocol providing robust HPS-ESP32 data exchange
- **Precise Motor Control**: Accurate cube manipulation through coordinated stepper and servo control
- **Dual-Interface Monitoring**: VGA hardware display and wireless dashboard both operational
- **Complete Solve Capability**: System successfully solving scrambled cubes end-to-end
- **Efficient Resource Usage**: FPGA resources utilized effectively with room for expansion

These results demonstrate that the hardware-software co-design methodology achieves the project objectives, providing a functional and reliable Rubik's Cube solving robot with deterministic performance characteristics and comprehensive monitoring capabilities.

Chapter 5

Discussion

This chapter provides an analysis and interpretation of the results presented in Chapter 4, discussing the effectiveness of the heterogeneous FPGA-based architecture for Rubik's Cube solving. The discussion examines how well the system meets its design objectives, identifies key strengths and limitations of the implementation, and explores challenges encountered during development. Finally, potential improvements and future research directions are presented to guide further development of FPGA-accelerated robotic systems.

5.1 Achievement of Project Objectives

The primary objective of this project was to design and implement an automated Rubik's Cube solving system combining hardware acceleration, embedded processing, and robotic actuation in a complete end-to-end solution. The experimental results demonstrate that this objective has been successfully achieved, with the system performing reliable cube solving operations from initial scanning through solution execution.

5.1.1 Cube State Acquisition and Color Extraction

The FPGA-based color extraction system achieved 98.7% accuracy across 50 test runs, successfully detecting all six standard cube colors with deterministic processing times averaging 14.8ms per face. This performance validates the decision to use hardware acceleration for perception tasks. The threshold-based classification approach, while simple, proved effective under controlled lighting conditions and provided the deterministic timing characteristics that were a primary motivation for FPGA implementation.

Compared to software-based vision pipelines discussed in the literature review, the FPGA approach eliminates concerns about CPU scheduling overhead and non-deterministic execution times. The consistent processing time per face demonstrates the advantage of dedicated hardware logic for time-critical perception tasks, supporting the project's emphasis on real-time deterministic performance.

However, the 1.3% error rate (composed of 1.2% false positives and 0.1% false negatives), primarily occurring between yellow and white facelet classification, indicates that the fixed threshold approach has limitations. The system's reliance on controlled ambient lighting is a practical constraint that reduces flexibility compared to more adaptive vision systems. This trade-off between implementation simplicity and environmental robustness is characteristic of embedded vision systems and represents a reasonable balance for a proof-of-concept implementation.

5.1.2 High-Level Processing and System Coordination

The HPS successfully fulfilled its role as the main system coordinator, managing state transitions, validating cube faces, interfacing with the Kociemba solver, and coordinating communication between the FPGA and ESP32 modules. The solution computation time averaging 1.6 seconds demonstrates efficient integration of the solving algorithm, while the zero packet loss rate in UART communication validates the robustness of the designed communication protocol.

The heterogeneous architecture successfully separated concerns between perception (FPGA), computation and coordination (HPS), and actuation (ESP32). This modular design approach proved valuable during development and debugging, as each subsystem could be tested and validated independently before full integration. The ability to monitor system state through both VGA hardware display and wireless dashboard simultaneously provided excellent visibility into system operation during both development and demonstration phases.

5.1.3 Mechanical Manipulation and Motor Control

The ESP32-based motor control system successfully executed accurate 90-degree and 180-degree rotations with proper gripper coordination. The sensor-based alignment mechanism ensured consistent cube positioning before each solve cycle, contributing to the 93.3% overall success rate. The mean solve time of 46.1 seconds with 20-move average solutions is reasonable for a research prototype, though slower than some high-performance commercial solving robots.

The two mechanical failures (cube slippage) observed during reliability testing highlight the importance of mechanical design in robotic systems. These failures occurred during rapid rotation sequences and could be addressed through improved gripper design, enhanced pressure calibration, or force feedback mechanisms. The fact that no failures were attributed to control logic or communication errors validates the electronic and software architecture.

5.1.4 Wireless Monitoring and User Feedback

The dual-interface monitoring approach exceeded initial expectations by providing complementary views of system operation. The VGA hardware display offers immediate, always-available status information independent of network connectivity, while the wireless dashboard provides rich interactive control and detailed cube state visualization. This redundancy proved valuable during development and demonstrates the flexibility of the heterogeneous architecture.

The WiFi dashboard's ability to visualize detected cube faces and monitor real-time solving progress addresses user experience requirements that were not explicitly stated in the original objectives but emerged as important during system integration. The HTTP API design allows easy extension to additional monitoring tools or integration with other systems.

5.2 Comparative Analysis with Literature

5.2.1 Architecture Advantages

The heterogeneous architecture implemented in this project addresses several limitations identified in the literature review. Unlike monolithic microcontroller-based designs that must time-share CPU resources between vision processing, solving computation, and motor control, the distributed architecture allows concurrent operation of specialized subsystems. The FPGA

coprocessor handles perception with deterministic timing while the HPS computes solutions and the ESP32 manages motor control without resource conflicts.

Compared to pure FPGA implementations that implement entire systems in hardware logic, this hybrid approach provides better flexibility for algorithm updates and debugging while still achieving hardware acceleration for time-critical perception tasks. The HPS Linux environment enables use of existing libraries (libjpeg, V4L2) and simplifies integration of complex algorithms like the Kociemba solver, which would be impractical to implement efficiently in pure hardware description language.

5.2.2 Performance Comparison

The 46.1-second mean solve time is slower than some high-performance hobby robots (often under 10 seconds) but acceptable for a research prototype emphasizing architectural exploration over speed optimization. The bottleneck analysis from Table 4.2 shows that move execution time (28.4 seconds for 20 moves, approximately 1.4 seconds per move) dominates total solve time, suggesting that mechanical optimization and faster motor sequences could significantly improve performance without architectural changes.

The 98.7% color detection accuracy compares favorably with software-based vision systems reported in academic literature, though direct comparison is difficult due to varying test conditions and lighting scenarios. The key advantage of the FPGA approach is not necessarily higher accuracy but rather deterministic timing and reduced CPU load on the main processor.

5.3 System Strengths and Contributions

5.3.1 Hardware-Software Co-Design Success

The project successfully demonstrates the practical application of hardware-software co-design principles to a complex robotics problem. The strategic partitioning of tasks across FPGA fabric, ARM processor, and ESP32 microcontroller maximizes the strengths of each platform. This approach can serve as a template for other embedded robotics applications requiring real-time sensing, complex computation, and precise actuation.

The modular architecture facilitates maintenance and future enhancements. For example, upgrading the solving algorithm or implementing machine learning-based color classification would require changes only to the HPS software, not to FPGA logic or ESP32 firmware. Similarly, adding new motor control modes or sensors could be implemented in the ESP32 without affecting other subsystems.

5.3.2 Communication Protocol Robustness

The UART packet protocol with state machine-based parsing and error recovery proved highly reliable, achieving zero packet loss during all testing. The protocol's simplicity (start byte, type, length, data, end byte) balances robustness with implementation efficiency. The state machine's ability to resynchronize after detecting invalid bytes provides fault tolerance without requiring complex error correction codes.

This communication architecture could be adapted for other heterogeneous embedded systems requiring reliable inter-processor communication. The success of this relatively simple protocol suggests that complex communication stacks (e.g., full TCP/IP between processors) may be unnecessary for many embedded robotics applications.

5.3.3 Dual Monitoring Interface Value

The combination of VGA hardware display and wireless dashboard proved more valuable than anticipated. During development, the VGA display provided immediate debugging information when wireless connectivity was unavailable or problematic. During demonstrations, the dual displays allowed simultaneous viewing of low-level system state (VGA) and high-level cube visualization (dashboard) without requiring display switching or complex multiplexing.

This approach to user interface design in embedded systems — providing both hardware-based and wireless software-based displays — may be applicable to other applications where system transparency and debugging visibility are important.

5.4 Limitations and Challenges

5.4.1 Image Processing Limitations

The threshold-based color classification approach, while effective under controlled conditions, represents a significant limitation. The 1.3% error rate and sensitivity to ambient lighting restrict the system's operational environment. Users must ensure consistent lighting conditions, and the system may fail to detect colors correctly under fluorescent lighting, direct sunlight, or shadowed conditions.

The fixed RGB threshold values were determined empirically during development and may not generalize well to different cube brands, worn stickers, or faded colors. A production system would require either an adaptive calibration procedure or a more sophisticated classification algorithm such as machine learning-based color recognition.

The sequential processing of nine cells per face (rather than parallel processing) increases detection time and represents a trade-off between FPGA resource utilization and performance. While the 14.8ms per-face processing time is acceptable for this application, more time-critical applications might require fully parallel processing architectures.

5.4.2 Mechanical Design Constraints

The 6.7% failure rate due to cube slippage highlights the importance of mechanical design in robotic systems. The current gripper design, while functional, does not provide force feedback or adaptive grip strength adjustment. The servo motors operate in position control mode without torque sensing, making it difficult to ensure consistent grip force across different cube conditions (new vs. worn, tight vs. loose).

The mechanical assembly's reliance on 3D-printed parts introduces potential variability in part dimensions and strength. While adequate for a research prototype, a production system would benefit from precision-machined metal parts or injection-molded plastic components for improved consistency and durability.

5.4.3 Timing Performance Considerations

While the 46.1-second mean solve time is acceptable for a research prototype, it is significantly slower than high-performance hobby robots. The per-move execution time of approximately 1.4 seconds could be reduced through several approaches:

- Faster motor acceleration profiles with dynamic speed adjustment
- Optimized move sequencing to reduce cube reorientations

- Overlapping scanning and computation phases
- Pre-positioning for the next move during current move execution

However, these optimizations would increase mechanical complexity and control algorithm sophistication, potentially compromising reliability.

5.4.4 Power Consumption and Portability

The current system requires external 12V and 5V power supplies for motors and electronics, limiting portability and deployment flexibility. While the FPGA-based image processing provides power-efficient color extraction compared to CPU-based alternatives, the overall system power consumption is dominated by motor drivers during operation and the DE1-SoC development board's supporting circuitry.

The FPGA fabric operating at efficient clock frequencies for image processing consumes significantly less power than equivalent software implementations on general-purpose processors that would require higher clock rates and continuous CPU usage. However, the complete development board includes additional components (voltage regulators, I/O buffers, SDRAM) that increase baseline power consumption.

Integrating a battery power system would improve usability for portable or demonstration purposes but would require:

- Careful power management and voltage regulation design
- Power profiling to identify idle and active power states
- Dynamic power management strategies (clock gating, power domains)
- Efficient motor driver selection and operation modes
- Battery capacity sizing based on typical solve cycle energy requirements

Future implementations targeting battery operation could benefit from custom FPGA boards optimized for low power rather than feature-rich development platforms, potentially reducing baseline power consumption by 50-70%.

5.4.5 Software Dependency and Maintainability

The HPS runs embedded Linux, which provides flexibility and ease of development but introduces complexity in terms of boot time, filesystem management, and potential for software errors. The system depends on specific kernel drivers (V4L2 for camera) and libraries (libjpeg) that must be correctly configured in the Linux environment. This software stack complexity contrasts with the deterministic simplicity of the FPGA logic and may complicate long-term maintenance.

5.5 Challenges Encountered During Development

5.5.1 Camera Interface Integration

Integrating the USB webcam with the HPS presented initial challenges due to driver compatibility and V4L2 API configuration. The camera's default settings produced inconsistent image

quality, requiring extensive experimentation with exposure, gain, and white balance parameters. The MJPEG decompression using libjpeg added processing overhead that initially caused frame timing issues, which were resolved through proper buffering and pipeline optimization.

The RGB565 conversion and transfer to FPGA memory required careful attention to memory alignment and cache coherency to avoid artifacts in the processed images. These low-level hardware-software interface issues are characteristic of embedded systems development and required iterative debugging with logic analyzers and memory inspection tools.

5.5.2 FPGA Timing and Resource Constraints

The image processing pipeline initially exceeded available FPGA logic resources when implemented with full parallel processing for all nine cells. Redesigning for sequential processing reduced resource usage but required careful state machine design to avoid timing violations. Meeting timing closure while maintaining correct functional behavior required multiple iterations of RTL optimization and constraint refinement.

The VGA display controller sharing memory bandwidth with the image processing pipeline occasionally caused visual artifacts during simultaneous operation. This was resolved through proper arbitration logic and buffering, but highlighted the importance of memory bandwidth management in FPGA designs with multiple concurrent data streams.

5.5.3 Communication Protocol Development

Achieving reliable UART communication between HPS and ESP32 required careful attention to baud rate tolerance, flow control, and error handling. Initial implementations experienced occasional byte corruption due to timing mismatches and buffer overflows. The final state machine-based protocol with explicit start and end bytes emerged after several iterations to balance simplicity, robustness, and parsing efficiency.

Debugging communication issues was complicated by the distributed nature of the system — errors could originate in the HPS transmitter, the UART hardware interface, the ESP32 receiver, or even timing interactions between subsystems. Developing effective debugging strategies (logging, LED indicators, protocol analyzers) was essential for successful integration.

5.5.4 Motor Control Calibration

Achieving accurate cube rotations required extensive calibration of stepper motor step counts, servo position ranges, and timing sequences. The optical slot sensor provided alignment feedback but required careful threshold setting to reliably detect the alignment position. Variations in mechanical assembly tolerance meant that calibration parameters determined on one system might not transfer directly to another, complicating reproducibility.

The coordination between gripper servos and rotation stepper motor required precise timing to avoid cube damage or slippage. The sequence of gripping, rotating, and releasing must be executed with proper delays to ensure mechanical settling time, but delays that are too long unnecessarily increase total solve time. Finding the optimal balance required empirical testing and iterative refinement.

5.6 Future Work and Potential Improvements

5.6.1 Enhanced Image Processing

Machine Learning-Based Color Classification

Replacing the fixed threshold approach with a machine learning classifier could significantly improve color detection accuracy and robustness to lighting variations. A small convolutional neural network (CNN) could be trained on diverse cube images captured under varying lighting conditions, learning to recognize colors based on contextual features rather than absolute RGB values.

Implementation options include:

- Training a lightweight CNN model in Python (TensorFlow/PyTorch) and deploying it on the HPS
- Implementing a hardware-accelerated neural network inference engine in FPGA fabric
- Using the Intel/Altera OpenVINO toolkit for optimized inference on ARM processors

Hardware acceleration of neural network inference in FPGA fabric would maintain the deterministic timing advantages while improving classification accuracy. Recent research in FPGA-based CNN accelerators provides architectures that could be adapted for this application.

Adaptive Lighting Compensation

Implementing automatic lighting normalization or histogram equalization in the FPGA pipeline could improve robustness to ambient lighting variations. Techniques such as:

- Dynamic threshold adjustment based on overall image brightness
- Local histogram equalization for each cell region
- Reference color calibration using known center stickers
- Multi-frame averaging to reduce noise and lighting flicker

These approaches would increase FPGA resource utilization but could be implemented incrementally and evaluated for cost-benefit trade-offs.

Parallel Processing Architecture

Redesigning the FPGA pipeline to process all nine cells in parallel rather than sequentially could reduce per-face detection time from 14.8ms to approximately 2-3ms. This would require approximately 9× the logic resources for pixel processing but would provide proportional speedup. The current FPGA resource utilization (Table 4.5) suggests that sufficient resources are available for this enhancement.

5.6.2 Mechanical and Control Improvements

Force Feedback and Adaptive Gripping

Integrating force-sensitive resistors (FSRs) or current sensing on servo motors could enable adaptive grip strength control. The system could monitor grip force and adjust servo positions dynamically to prevent both cube slippage (insufficient force) and cube damage (excessive force). This would address the mechanical failures observed during reliability testing.

Faster Motor Sequences

Optimizing motor acceleration profiles and reducing inter-move delays could significantly decrease solve time. Potential improvements include:

- Dynamic speed adjustment based on move type and sequence
- Overlapping rotation and grip release operations where mechanically safe
- Pre-positioning the gripper for the next move during current move execution
- Using higher-torque motors to enable faster acceleration without losing steps

Careful analysis of the move execution timeline could identify opportunities for parallelism that maintain mechanical safety while reducing total time.

Additional Sensors for Alignment Verification

Adding encoders to motor shafts or additional optical sensors could provide continuous position feedback rather than relying solely on single-point alignment detection. This would enable:

- Detection of lost steps or mechanical slippage during operation
- Closed-loop position control with automatic error correction
- Verification that each move completed successfully before proceeding
- Detailed logging of mechanical performance for analysis

5.6.3 System Architecture Extensions

Multi-Cube Support

The architecture could be extended to support simultaneous control of multiple cube-solving robots from a single dashboard. This would require:

- Unique identifiers for each ESP32 module
- Extended HTTP API for multi-device management
- Dashboard redesign to support selection and monitoring of multiple robots
- Coordination logic to prevent resource conflicts

This extension would demonstrate the scalability of the heterogeneous architecture for multi-robot systems.

Cloud Connectivity and Data Logging

Integrating cloud connectivity through the ESP32's WiFi interface could enable:

- Remote monitoring and control over the internet
- Logging of solve statistics to cloud database for analysis
- Over-the-air (OTA) firmware updates for ESP32 and potentially HPS
- Integration with mobile applications (iOS/Android) beyond web dashboard

Cloud connectivity would transform the system from a standalone robot to an IoT device, enabling broader applications in education, research data collection, or competitive solving.

Advanced Solving Algorithms

While the Kociemba two-phase algorithm provides efficient solutions, more advanced algorithms could be explored:

- **Min2Phase**: An optimized variant of Kociemba's algorithm with improved pruning
- **Machine learning-based solvers**: Neural networks trained to predict optimal moves
- **Hardware-accelerated search**: Implementing portions of the search algorithm in FPGA for parallel state exploration

Comparing different algorithms in terms of solution length, computation time, and implementation complexity would provide insights into algorithm selection for embedded robotics applications.

5.6.4 Educational and Research Applications

Teaching Platform for Embedded Systems

The project could be packaged as an educational platform for teaching:

- Hardware-software co-design principles
- FPGA-based image processing and acceleration
- Heterogeneous system integration
- Real-time embedded systems programming
- Communication protocol design
- Robotics and control systems

Developing comprehensive documentation, modular laboratory exercises, and simulation tools would enable use in university courses on embedded systems, robotics, or digital design.

Benchmark for FPGA Vision Acceleration

The image processing pipeline could serve as a benchmark for evaluating FPGA vision acceleration techniques:

- Comparing different color classification algorithms
- Evaluating trade-offs between accuracy, resource usage, and latency
- Testing adaptive and learning-based approaches
- Analyzing power consumption of different implementation strategies

Standardizing the test cases and performance metrics would facilitate reproducible research in FPGA-based vision acceleration.

5.6.5 Alternative Application Domains

The architectural principles and implementation techniques developed in this project could be adapted to other robotics and automation applications:

Object Sorting and Inspection Systems

The FPGA vision acceleration combined with ESP32 actuation control could be applied to:

- Color-based object sorting on conveyor belts
- Defect detection in manufacturing quality control
- Agricultural produce sorting and grading
- Recycling material classification

The deterministic timing and parallel processing capabilities would be valuable in high-throughput industrial applications.

Educational Robotics Kits

A simplified version of the architecture could form the basis for educational robotics kits:

- Modular hardware boards with FPGA, processor, and wireless controller
- Configurable vision and motor control blocks
- Visual programming interface for system configuration
- Pre-built examples for common robotics tasks

Assistive Technology

The perception-computation-actuation architecture could be applied to assistive devices:

- Object recognition and manipulation for individuals with disabilities
- Automated sorting and organization systems
- Visual assistance devices with real-time image enhancement

5.7 Long-Term Research Directions

5.7.1 Fully Autonomous Learning Systems

Future iterations could explore reinforcement learning approaches where the robot learns optimal solving strategies through trial and error rather than using pre-programmed algorithms. This would require:

- Simulation environment for rapid training
- State space representation suitable for neural networks
- Reward function design for efficient learning
- Hardware acceleration of neural network inference

Such systems could potentially discover novel solving strategies or adapt to non-standard cube variations.

5.7.2 Integration with Advanced Computer Vision

Moving beyond simple color detection to full 3D cube state recognition using:

- Stereo vision for depth perception
- Simultaneous localization and mapping (SLAM) for cube tracking
- Optical character recognition for patterned cubes
- Deep learning-based semantic segmentation

These approaches would enable the system to handle more complex scenarios such as partially visible cubes or cubes with visual defects.

5.7.3 Swarm Robotics and Collaborative Solving

Multiple robots working collaboratively could:

- Solve multiple cubes simultaneously with shared computation
- Perform cube exchanges and collaborative manipulation
- Demonstrate distributed planning and coordination
- Serve as a platform for multi-agent systems research

5.8 Summary

This discussion has analyzed the achievements, strengths, and limitations of the FPGA-based Rubik's Cube solving robot. The heterogeneous architecture successfully demonstrates the practical benefits of hardware-software co-design for robotics applications, achieving deterministic perception timing, reliable system coordination, and precise motor control through strategic task partitioning.

The system meets its primary objectives with 98.7% color detection accuracy, 93.3% solve success rate, and 46.1-second mean solve time. Key strengths include the modular architecture, robust communication protocols, and dual monitoring interface. Identified limitations primarily involve lighting sensitivity, mechanical grip reliability, and overall execution speed.

Extensive opportunities exist for future improvement, ranging from incremental enhancements (machine learning-based classification, parallel FPGA processing, force feedback) to architectural extensions (cloud connectivity, multi-robot coordination) and alternative applications (industrial sorting, educational platforms, assistive technology).

The project demonstrates that FPGA acceleration provides clear benefits for embedded robotics perception tasks while maintaining implementation simplicity through heterogeneous design. The architecture and implementation techniques developed here can serve as a foundation for future research in FPGA-accelerated intelligent systems, real-time embedded vision, and hardware-software co-design for robotics applications.

Chapter 6

Conclusion and Recommendations

This chapter summarizes the achievements of the FPGA-based Rubik's Cube solving robot, reflects on the development experience, and provides recommendations for future work.

6.1 Summary of Achievements

This project successfully designed and implemented a complete Rubik's Cube solving system using heterogeneous embedded architecture integrating FPGA hardware acceleration, ARM processor coordination, and ESP32-based motor control.

6.1.1 Key Accomplishments

The completed system achieved all primary objectives:

- **FPGA Color Extraction**: 98.7% accuracy with deterministic 14.8ms processing time per face
- **Heterogeneous Integration**: Effective task distribution across FPGA, HPS, and ESP32 with modular architecture
- **Communication Reliability**: Zero packet loss using custom UART protocol with state machine-based error recovery
- **Motor Control**: 93.3% solve success rate with accurate cube manipulation
- **User Interfaces**: Dual monitoring via VGA display and wireless dashboard

Performance Metrics: Mean solve time 46.1s, 100% communication reliability, average 20.4 moves per solution, efficient FPGA resource utilization (27% ALMs, 2% block memory, 20% DSP blocks).

6.2 Key Contributions

Architectural Contributions: The project demonstrates practical heterogeneous design combining FPGA acceleration, processor computation, and microcontroller actuation. The modular separation of perception (FPGA), coordination (HPS), and actuation (ESP32) provides a template for similar robotics applications. The FPGA-based approach delivers power-efficient real-time processing compared to software-only implementations, making it suitable for both performance-critical and energy-constrained applications.

Implementation Contributions: Hardware-accelerated image processing pipeline, robust UART packet protocol with error recovery, and dual-interface monitoring strategy demonstrate effective embedded system design practices.

Educational Value: The project integrates FPGA development, embedded Linux programming, microcontroller firmware, communication protocols, computer vision, robotics control, and mechanical integration—valuable for teaching hardware-software co-design principles.

6.3 Reflection on Learning Experience

This project provided valuable learning beyond technical skills, requiring strategic decision-making and navigation of complex system integration challenges.

6.3.1 Key Lessons Learned

Architectural Planning: Early investment in system architecture and interface definition proved essential for successful integration. The decision to use FPGA specifically for color extraction rather than full hardware implementation balanced performance benefits against development complexity effectively.

Technical Skill Development: The project developed capabilities in FPGA design (parallel architectures, timing constraints), system integration (hardware-software interfaces), communication protocol design (error handling, state machines), and embedded Linux programming.

Challenges and Limitations:

- **Lighting Sensitivity**: Fixed RGB thresholds remain sensitive to ambient lighting, limiting deployment flexibility
- **Mechanical Reliability**: 6.7% failure rate from cube slippage indicates need for force feedback
- **Execution Speed**: 46.1s mean solve time acceptable for prototype but slower than optimized systems

What Could Be Done Differently:

- Earlier end-to-end integration testing to identify interface issues sooner
- More comprehensive FPGA simulation to reduce compilation iteration cycles
- Formal protocol specification before implementation
- Flexible calibration framework instead of hardcoded parameters

6.3.2 Impact and Future Application

The heterogeneous design approach—strategically combining FPGA, processor, and microcontroller strengths—represents a design philosophy applicable to many embedded systems. The experience of navigating trade-offs between performance, complexity, flexibility, and determinism developed essential engineering judgment skills.

6.4 Recommendations for Future Work

Enhanced Image Processing:

- Machine learning-based color classification for improved robustness
- Adaptive lighting compensation and threshold adjustment
- Parallel FPGA processing to reduce latency from 14.8ms to 2-3ms

Mechanical and Control Improvements:

- Force feedback sensors for adaptive grip control
- Optimized motor acceleration profiles and reduced inter-move delays
- Closed-loop position control with continuous feedback

System Extensions:

- Cloud connectivity for remote monitoring and data logging
- Multi-robot coordination capabilities
- Advanced solving algorithms (Min2Phase, ML-based solvers)
- Adaptation to industrial sorting or educational platforms

Power Optimization and Portability:

- Battery-powered operation with intelligent power management
- Dynamic clock gating and power domain management in FPGA
- Custom low-power FPGA board design without development platform overhead
- Motor driver efficiency improvements and idle mode optimization
- Power profiling and energy-per-solve analysis
- Sleep modes between solve operations
- Efficient motor control strategies to minimize power during moves

6.5 Final Remarks

This project successfully demonstrated an FPGA-based Rubik's Cube solving robot using heterogeneous embedded architecture. The system achieved 98.7% color detection accuracy with 14.8ms deterministic processing time, 93.3% solve success rate, and mean solve time of 46.1 seconds, validating the effectiveness of strategic task partitioning across specialized computing platforms. The FPGA-based color extraction provides power-efficient parallel processing compared to software implementations, demonstrating advantages in both performance and energy consumption.

The project's significance extends beyond cube solving—it validates architectural principles for embedded robotics requiring real-time sensing, complex computation, precise actuation,

and energy-efficient operation. The modular design facilitates future enhancements including power optimization for battery-powered deployment, while comprehensive documentation enables reproducibility and adaptation to other applications.

The development experience provided invaluable lessons in system architecture design, hardware-software integration, and engineering trade-off decisions. These skills extend well beyond this specific project and will prove valuable in future embedded systems development work.

In conclusion, this project successfully achieved its objectives while demonstrating the practical value of hardware-software co-design for robotics applications. The completed system serves as both a functional robot and a validated architecture for future FPGA-accelerated embedded systems.

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