

# Design and Development of a Low-Cost Open-Source Arduino-Based CNC Controller for Special Purpose Machines

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**Abstract:** Computer Numerical Control (CNC) machining plays a critical role in modern manufacturing by enabling automated and precise control of machine tools such as lathes, milling machines, routers, and grinders. However, commercial CNC systems require substantial initial investment and maintenance costs, making them financially challenging for small-scale industries and educational institutions. Additionally, many small manufacturers do not require the full range of complex machining operations offered by high-end CNC machines, leading to underutilization of resources. The challenges faced during the COVID-19 pandemic further highlighted the need for affordable and accessible CNC platforms, particularly in academic environments where practical demonstrations were limited. This paper presents the design and development of a low-cost, open-source CNC controller based on the Arduino ATmega2560 microcontroller integrated with the GRBL firmware. The proposed system is specifically tailored for Special Purpose Machines (SPMs) that perform limited yet essential machining operations. The controller interprets G-codes and M-codes generated from open-source software platforms such as Universal G-code Sender, CNCjs, and b-CNC, converting them into control signals for stepper motor drivers. These signals precisely regulate motion along the X, Y, and Z axes. The system significantly reduces hardware costs while maintaining acceptable accuracy, flexibility, and ease of maintenance. The developed controller provides an affordable automation solution for small-scale manufacturers and educational institutions, thereby promoting wider adoption of CNC technology in resource-constrained environments.

**Keywords:** Computer Numerical Control (CNC), Arduino ATmega2560, GRBL Firmware, Special Purpose Machines (SPM), Low-Cost Automation, Open-Source CNC Controller, Stepper Motor Control, G-Code, M-Code, Small-Scale Manufacturing, Educational CNC Systems.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Computer Numerical Control (CNC) technology has revolutionized modern manufacturing by enabling automated, high-precision machining through computer-controlled motion systems. Conventional CNC machines are capable of performing complex operations such as milling, drilling, turning, engraving, and contouring with remarkable repeatability and accuracy. These systems typically incorporate industrial-grade controllers, servo drives, high-speed spindles, and sophisticated Human Machine Interfaces (HMIs). However, the high capital investment required for purchasing and maintaining commercial CNC systems often places them beyond the financial reach of small-scale manufacturers, startups, and educational institutions. In many cases, small industries require only limited machining capabilities for repetitive or task-specific operations rather than the full functionality offered by expensive multi-axis CNC platforms. The challenges faced during the COVID-19 pandemic further emphasized the need for affordable, accessible, and customizable CNC solutions, especially for academic institutions

where physical access to industrial laboratories was restricted. There is therefore a growing demand for low-cost, modular, and open-source CNC control systems that can be integrated into Special Purpose Machines (SPMs) designed for specific industrial tasks. The emergence of open-source microcontroller platforms such as Arduino, along with community-supported firmware like GRBL, provides a practical pathway toward democratizing CNC technology. This research focuses on the design and development of a cost-effective Arduino-based CNC controller that interprets G-code commands and controls stepper motors for three-axis motion, thereby offering an economical and scalable solution for small-scale manufacturing and educational training applications.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Several researchers have explored low-cost CNC implementations using open-source hardware and software platforms. Traditional CNC controllers rely on proprietary industrial Programmable Logic Controllers (PLCs) and motion

control cards, which significantly increase system cost and complexity (Groover, 2015). The introduction of open-source embedded platforms has enabled alternative approaches to CNC motion control. Banzi and Shiloh (2014) highlighted the flexibility of Arduino microcontrollers in rapid prototyping and embedded control applications, demonstrating their suitability for automation projects.

GRBL, an open-source firmware developed for Arduino boards, has been widely adopted for controlling CNC machines using standard G-code instructions. According to Suryawanshi and Pawar (2018), GRBL-based CNC systems offer reliable motion control for small-scale milling and engraving applications with acceptable precision levels. Moreover, studies by Kumar et al. (2019) demonstrated the feasibility of implementing three-axis CNC systems using stepper motor drivers and open-source G-code sender software such as Universal G-code Sender (UGS) and CNCjs.

Research has also shown that stepper motor-based motion systems are sufficient for low-load machining operations and educational models, significantly reducing system costs compared to servo-driven industrial CNC systems (Bolton, 2015). Furthermore, the integration of open-source CAD/CAM tools and microcontroller-based control architectures has enhanced accessibility and customization for small manufacturers (Kalpakjian & Schmid, 2014). Despite these advancements, there remains a need for structured design methodology and performance evaluation for Arduino-based CNC controllers tailored specifically for Special Purpose Machines. This study contributes to bridging this gap by presenting a systematic development framework and experimental validation.

### III. METHODOLOGY USED

The methodology adopted in this research follows a structured engineering design process comprising system requirement analysis, hardware selection, controller development, firmware configuration, integration, and performance evaluation. Initially, the operational requirements of a Special Purpose Machine were analyzed to determine motion range, speed, torque requirements, and accuracy targets. Based on these requirements, appropriate stepper motors, motor drivers, and power supply ratings were selected.

The Arduino ATmega2560 microcontroller was chosen as the core control unit due to its multiple I/O pins, sufficient memory capacity, and compatibility with GRBL firmware. The

GRBL firmware was configured and uploaded to the Arduino board to enable G-code interpretation and motion control. Open-source G-code sender software such as Universal G-code Sender (UGS) was used to transmit machining instructions from a computer to the controller via serial communication.

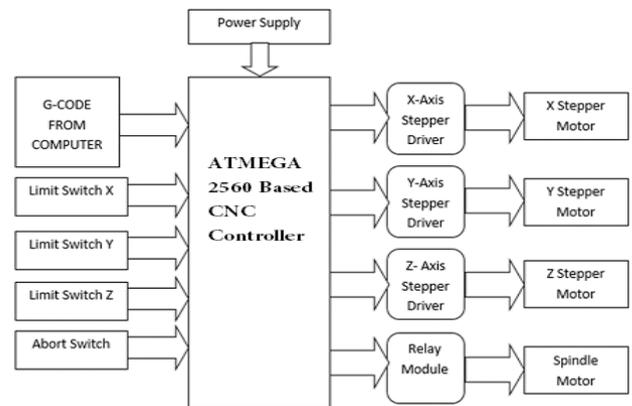


Figure1: AVR ATMEGA 2560

The stepper drivers (e.g., A4988 or DRV8825) were interfaced with the Arduino output pins to amplify control signals and drive the stepper motors. Mechanical assembly included the installation of linear guide rails, lead screws, and couplings for X, Y, and Z axes movement. After system integration, calibration procedures were conducted to determine steps-per-millimeter values, optimize acceleration parameters, and ensure precise axis movement. Finally, machining trials were conducted to evaluate positioning accuracy, repeatability, and operational stability.

### IV. TECHNOLOGY USED

The developed CNC controller system integrates both hardware and software technologies. The primary hardware component is the Arduino ATmega2560 microcontroller board, which functions as the motion control processor. GRBL firmware acts as the embedded control program responsible for interpreting G-code commands and generating step and direction pulses for motor control. Stepper motor drivers such as A4988 or DRV8825 regulate current and microstepping resolution to achieve smooth motor operation.

The system uses NEMA 17 stepper motors for three-axis movement. Linear motion is achieved using lead screws and guide rails. Power regulation is provided through a 12V–24V DC power supply depending on motor specifications. On the software side, CAD models are created using standard CAD

software, while CAM software generates G-code instructions. Open-source G-code sender tools such as Universal G-code Sender (UGS), CNCjs, and b-CNC transmit commands to the controller. The entire system operates on a serial communication interface via USB connection between the computer and Arduino.

## V. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Small-scale industries and educational institutions face significant financial and operational barriers in acquiring conventional CNC machines due to high capital costs, complex maintenance requirements, and unnecessary multifunctional capabilities. Most small manufacturers require machines designed for specific repetitive tasks rather than full-scale industrial CNC systems. Additionally, access to industrial CNC equipment for academic training is often limited. Therefore, there is a need to develop an affordable, customizable, and open-source CNC controller that can be integrated into Special Purpose Machines to perform essential machining operations efficiently while minimizing cost and complexity.

## VI. PROJECT BLOCK DIAGRAM AND DESCRIPTION

### Block Diagram Description

The system block diagram consists of the following major components:

- Computer with G-code Sender Software
- USB Communication Interface
- Arduino ATmega2560 Microcontroller
- GRBL Firmware
- Stepper Motor Drivers
- Stepper Motors (X, Y, Z Axes)
- Mechanical Motion System
- Power Supply Unit

#### 1. Host Computer and G-Code Transmission Module

The host computer serves as the primary interface between the user and the CNC system. It runs G-code sender software such as Universal G-code Sender (UGS), CNCjs, bCNC, or G-Sender, which enables the operator to load machining programs and configure operational parameters. These software platforms convert CAD/CAM-generated toolpaths into standardized G-codes and M-codes that define motion trajectories, feed rates, spindle operations, and auxiliary functions. Communication between the computer and the Arduino ATmega2560 controller is established through a USB serial interface. The serial

communication protocol ensures reliable and continuous streaming of instructions to the controller in real time. The host computer also allows monitoring of machine status, manual jogging of axes, and debugging of machining sequences, making it an essential supervisory unit in the overall system architecture.

#### 2. Arduino ATmega2560 Control Unit with GRBL Firmware

The Arduino ATmega2560 acts as the central processing and motion control unit of the CNC system. It is programmed with GRBL firmware, an open-source embedded motion control software that interprets incoming G-code commands. Upon receiving the commands via the serial interface, GRBL parses the instructions and performs trajectory planning using acceleration and deceleration algorithms to ensure smooth motion control. The firmware calculates step pulse timing and direction logic for each axis, enabling synchronized multi-axis movement. The ATmega2560's multiple digital I/O pins, timers, and interrupt capabilities allow precise generation of high-frequency step pulses required for accurate positioning. This modular and programmable architecture significantly reduces system cost while maintaining sufficient computational capability for small and medium-scale CNC applications.

#### 3. Motion Planning and Signal Generation Mechanism

The motion planning subsystem within GRBL plays a critical role in ensuring precision and mechanical stability. After decoding the G-code instructions, the firmware determines the movement profile based on parameters such as feed rate, axis displacement, and acceleration limits. It employs a buffer-based motion planning algorithm that prevents abrupt changes in velocity, thereby reducing vibration and mechanical stress. The controller then generates step and direction signals for each axis in real time. These digital signals are carefully timed to maintain synchronization across the X, Y, and Z axes. The accuracy of pulse generation directly influences machining precision, dimensional tolerance, and surface finish quality.

#### 4. Stepper Motor Driver Interface Module

The stepper motor driver modules, such as A4988 or DRV8825, function as power amplifiers between the low-power Arduino control signals and the high-current stepper motors. The drivers receive step and direction inputs from the Arduino and translate them into controlled current pulses for the motor windings. These drivers incorporate microstepping capabilities, enabling finer resolution of motion by subdividing each full motor step into smaller increments. Current limiting features

within the driver circuits protect the motors from overheating and ensure stable torque output. The driver module thus enhances positioning accuracy, reduces noise and vibration, and improves overall system reliability.

#### 5. Stepper Motor Actuation System (X, Y, and Z Axes)

The stepper motors serve as the primary actuators responsible for mechanical movement along the X, Y, and Z axes of the Special Purpose Machine (SPM). Each motor converts electrical pulse sequences into discrete rotational movements, which are translated into linear motion through lead screws, ball screws, or belt-drive mechanisms. The number of pulses received determines the displacement, while the pulse frequency controls the speed of motion. By coordinating the movement of all three axes, the system achieves precise tool positioning and contour generation. Stepper motors are selected due to their high positional accuracy, open-loop control simplicity, and cost-effectiveness, making them ideal for low-cost CNC implementations.

#### 6. Special Purpose Machine (SPM) Mechanical Platform

The Special Purpose Machine constitutes the mechanical subsystem of the CNC setup. It includes structural components such as the machine frame, worktable, tool holder assembly, spindle motor, and linear guide mechanisms. The spindle motor performs cutting, drilling, engraving, or milling operations depending on the application. The mechanical rigidity of the SPM directly affects machining accuracy and repeatability. Since the proposed controller is designed for customized SPMs, it allows flexibility in configuring the machine according to specific manufacturing requirements. This adaptability enables small-scale industries to deploy cost-effective automation without investing in full-scale commercial CNC systems.

#### 7. Power Supply and Electrical Management System

The power supply unit provides regulated voltage levels necessary for system operation. Typically, a 5V regulated supply powers the Arduino microcontroller, while a 12V or 24V DC supply drives the stepper motor drivers and motors. Proper grounding and isolation techniques are implemented to minimize electrical noise and prevent signal interference. Voltage regulation and current capacity are carefully selected to ensure stable performance during high-load machining operations. Efficient power distribution enhances system safety, reliability, and operational longevity.

#### 8. Safety and Auxiliary Control Features

The block diagram may also include auxiliary inputs such as limit switches, emergency stop buttons, and spindle control relays. Limit switches prevent over-travel of machine axes and protect mechanical components from damage. The emergency stop mechanism allows immediate termination of machine operation in case of malfunction. Spindle control relays enable automated ON/OFF switching of the cutting tool based on M-code commands. These safety and auxiliary systems improve operational control, reduce risk, and align the system with industrial safety standards.

#### 9. Integrated System Operation

The overall system operates in a sequential and synchronized manner. The user inputs machining instructions via the host computer. The Arduino controller interprets these instructions, generates motion commands, and coordinates axis movements through the driver modules. Electrical energy is converted into mechanical motion by the stepper motors, which in turn drive the SPM to perform the desired machining operation. The closed interaction between software control, electronic hardware, and mechanical components ensures precision, repeatability, and cost-efficient automation.

#### Working Description

The computer generates G-code instructions using CAM software. These instructions are transmitted through USB communication to the Arduino controller. The GRBL firmware interprets the G-code commands and generates corresponding step and direction pulses. These pulses are amplified by stepper motor drivers and sent to the stepper motors, enabling controlled movement along X, Y, and Z axes. The mechanical assembly converts rotational motion into linear motion using lead screws, resulting in precise tool positioning.

### VII. PROJECT SKETCHES

Like other power supplies, an SMPS transfers power from a DC or AC source (often power, see AC adapter) to DC loads, such as a personal computer, while converting voltage and current characteristics. Unlike a linear power supply, the pass transistor of a switching-mode supply continually switches between low-dissipation, full-on and full-off states, and spends very little time in the high dissipation transitions, which minimizes wasted energy. A hypothetical ideal switched-mode power supply dissipates no power. Voltage regulation is

achieved by varying the ratio of on-to-off time (also known as duty cycles). In contrast, a linear power supply regulates the output voltage by continually dissipating power in the pass transistor. This higher power conversion efficiency is an important advantage of a switched-mode power supply. Switched-mode power supplies may also be substantially smaller and lighter than a linear supply due to the smaller transformer size and weight.

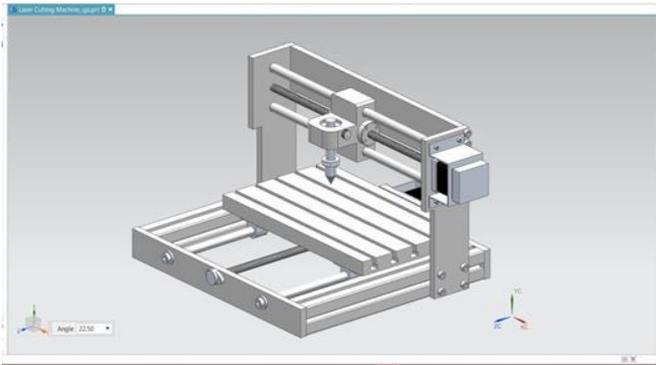


Figure 2: Simulation model

The project sketches include:

- A three-axis CNC frame structure showing X, Y, and Z axes.
- Controller enclosure containing Arduino board and motor drivers.
- Wiring diagram illustrating connections between Arduino pins and stepper drivers.
- Mechanical layout of lead screw and motor coupling assembly.

(The sketches typically include labeled diagrams of axis alignment, motor placement, controller unit, and power supply integration.)

## VIII. RESULTS

Experimental testing demonstrated that the developed CNC controller successfully executed basic machining operations such as engraving and drilling with satisfactory accuracy for small-scale applications. The system achieved positioning accuracy within  $\pm 0.1$  mm under no-load conditions. Repeatability tests indicated stable performance over multiple cycles. The total implementation cost was significantly lower than commercial CNC controllers, reducing overall system expenditure by approximately 60–70%. The controller operated reliably without overheating or signal instability during continuous operation

trials. These results confirm that the proposed open-source solution provides a viable alternative for low-budget CNC automation.

## IX. CONCLUSION

This research presented the design and development of a low-cost open-source Arduino-based CNC controller for Special Purpose Machines. The system successfully integrates Arduino ATmega2560, GRBL firmware, stepper motor drivers, and open-source G-code software to achieve efficient three-axis motion control. The proposed solution significantly reduces initial investment and maintenance costs while maintaining acceptable machining accuracy for small-scale and educational applications. The modular architecture enables customization according to specific manufacturing requirements. Future work may include integration of limit switches, spindle speed control, closed-loop feedback systems, and IoT-based remote monitoring to enhance system capabilities and industrial adaptability.

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