Fast quantum state control of a single trapped neutral atom

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We demonstrate the initialization, readout, and high-speed manipulation of a qubit stored in a single $^{87}\text{Rb}$ atom trapped in a submicrometer-sized optical tweezer. Single-qubit rotations are performed on a time scale below 100 ns using two-photon Raman transitions. Using the spin-echo technique, we measure an irreversible dephasing time of 34 ms. The readout of the single atom qubit is at the quantum projection noise limit when averaging up to 1000 individual events.

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The building block of a quantum computer is a qubit—an isolated two-level quantum system on which one can perform arbitrary single-qubit unitary operations. In the circuit approach to quantum computing [1], single-qubit operations are sequentially combined with two-qubit gates to generate entanglement and realize arbitrary quantum logic operations. In the alternative one-way quantum computing scheme [2], the ensemble of qubits is prepared in a highly entangled cluster state, and computations are performed using single-qubit operations and measurements. A wide range of physical systems are under investigation as potential qubits [1,3,4], including trapped single neutral atoms. In particular, the hyperfine ground states of alkali-metal atoms can be used to make qubits that are readily manipulated using microwave radiation or Raman transitions, with negligible decoherence from spontaneous emission. The usefulness of these techniques has been demonstrated with the realization of a five-qubit quantum register based on microwave addressing of single atoms trapped in an optical lattice [5]. A quantum register could also be formed using arrays of optical tweezers [6], each containing a single atom [7], with each site optically addressed using tightly focused Raman beams [8]. Several detailed proposals for performing two-qubit operations in such a tweezer array have been made, based on controlled collisions [9], dipole-dipole interactions between Rydberg atoms [10,11], and cavity-mediated photon exchange [12]. Alternatively, two-qubit operations could be performed without interactions by using photon emission [13] and quantum interference effects [14]. The recent observations of atom-photon entanglement [15,16] and two-photon interference between single photons emitted by a pair of trapped atoms [17,18] are major steps in this direction.

In this paper we describe how a single $^{87}\text{Rb}$ atom trapped in an optical tweezer can be used to store, manipulate, and measure a quantum bit. The qubit basis states are the $|0\rangle=|F=1,m_F=0\rangle$ and $|1\rangle=|F=2,m_F=0\rangle$ ground-state hyperfine sublevels (Fig. 1). We initialize the system by preparing the atom in the $|0\rangle$ state using optical pumping. Single-qubit operations are performed using two-photon Raman transitions. An unusual feature of our experiment is that we use the tightly focused optical tweezer as one of the Raman beams. In this way we obtain a Rabi frequency of $\Omega=2\pi \times 6.7$ MHz with laser beams detuned by more than $10^3$ linewidths from the nearest atomic transition. We perform a measurement of the state ($|0\rangle$ or $|1\rangle$) of each single atom with near unit efficiency, allowing us to perform projection-noise-limited measurements of the qubit state. Using Ramsey spectroscopy, we measure a dephasing time of 370 $\mu$s. This dephasing can be reversed using the spin-echo technique. In this way we have measured an irreversible dephasing time of 34 ms, which is almost six orders of magnitude longer than the time required to perform a $\pi$ rotation. Due to the very large Rabi frequency, this ratio can approach the state of the art achieved in ion trap systems that have much longer coherence times [19].

We isolate and trap single $^{87}\text{Rb}$ atoms in an optical dipole trap created by a tightly focused far-off-resonant laser beam [20]. A custom-made objective lens with a numerical aper-
tue of 0.7 is used to focus the beam at 810 nm to a
diffraction-limited waist of ≈0.9 μm. With a power of
0.95 mW we obtain a trap at the focus with a depth of
1.2 mK and oscillation frequencies of 125 and 23 kHz in the
radial and axial directions, respectively. The trap is loaded
from an optical molasses. A “collisional blockade” effect
forces the number of atoms in the trap to be either zero or
one. We measure the initial temperature of the atom to be
90 μK. The trap lifetime in the absence of any near-resonant
light is 3 s and the heating rate is 0.021 ± 0.005 μK ms⁻¹.

The presence of an atom in the trap is detected using its
fluorescence from the molasses cooling light. As shown in
Fig. 1, the fluorescence is collected by the same objective
used to make the optical dipole trap, and is separated off
using a dichroic mirror before being imaged onto an ava-
lanche photodiode. When an atom is present in the trap we
detect ≈10,000 photons s⁻¹, compared to a typical back-
ground count rate of 2000 s⁻¹ for an empty trap. By setting a
threshold value for the fluorescence we can unambiguously
detect the presence of an atom within ≈15 ms of its arrival.
This signal is then used to shut off the molasses light
and trigger the experimental sequence.

Once a single atom has been detected in the trap, it is
prepared in the logical state |0⟩ using optical pumping on the
D2 line. For this we use a π-polarized Zeeman pumping
beam resonant with the F=1→F'≡1 transition and a hyper-
fine repumping beam resonant with the F=2→F'=2 transition.
The quantization axis is defined by a 0.36 mT magnetic
field along the x axis. After 200 μs of optical pumping the
atom is prepared in the logical state |0⟩ with 85% efficiency.
We have determined that all of the atoms not prepared in |0⟩
are left in the other F=1 sublevels. These atoms are not
affected by the Raman beams due to the Zeeman shift.

We perform single-qubit rotations by coupling the logical
states |0⟩ and |1⟩ using a two-photon stimulated Raman transi-
tion. Driving the Raman transition requires two phase-
locked laser beams separated by the hyperfine transition fre-
frequency ν_{0f}/2π = 6.8 GHz. In our experiment, the optical
dipole trap forms one of these beams. The trapping light is
produced using a grating-stabilized external cavity diode la-
er. To generate the second Raman beam we use two addi-
tional 810 nm diode lasers as shown in Fig. 1. The frequency
offset is obtained by modulating the current of the bridge
laser at 3.4 GHz, adding two sidebands to its output with the
desired frequency separation. The bridge laser is phase
locked to the dipole trap laser by injection locking on one of
the sidebands [21]. A Mach-Zender interferometer is used to
remove 90% of the carrier power from the output of the
bridge laser, which is then used to injection lock a third slave
laser tuned to the other sideband. An acousto-optic modula-
tor allows intensity control of the Raman beam as well as
fine tuning of the frequency difference between the two
beams. The two beams are sent to the experiment through the
same polarization-maintaining optical fiber. The optical di-
pole trap and the Raman beam have orthogonal linear polar-
izations in the z-y plane in order to drive Δmf=0 transitions.

After the Raman beams have been applied, we measure the
state (|0⟩ or |1⟩) of the atom. A probe laser beam resonant with
the 5 S_{1/2} F=2→5 P_{3/2} F'=3 cycling transition is used to
state-selectively push atoms in state |1⟩ out of the trap by
radiation pressure. During the 100 μs that the probe beam is
applied, the depth of the trap is lowered to 0.4 mK to make
sure that atoms in |1⟩ are rapidly removed from the trap
before they can be pumped into the F=1 hyperfine level by
off-resonant excitation. Atoms that are initially in state |0⟩
are unaffected by this procedure and remain in the trap [22].
We then turn on the molasses cooling light for 10 ms and
determine whether or not the atom is still in the trap. The
states |0⟩ and |1⟩ are therefore mapped onto the presence
(absence) of the atom at the end of the sequence, as was
shown in similar experiments with cesium atoms [5,23].

This technique actually measures whether the atom is in
the F=1 or F=2 hyperfine level at the end of the sequence.
Therefore, atoms that are left in the F=1, m_f=±1 sublevels
after optical pumping also contribute to the signal, leading to
a 15% background on the probability that the atom remains
after the push-out laser is applied. To independently check
how accurately we can determine whether an atom is in the
F=1 or F=2 hyperfine state, we prepare the atom in either
F=1 or F=2 by blocking one of the optical pumping beams.
We measure that the probability that we have incorrectly
assigned the hyperfine level of the atom at the end of a single
sequence is less than 2%.

At the end of a single-qubit operation, the qubit is in
general in a superposition α|0⟩+β|1⟩. In order to measure the
coefficients α and β we repeat each experiment (trapping,
preparation, qubit operation, and readout) 100 times under
identical conditions. In the absence of technical noise, the
statistical error on the mean recapture probability after N
identical experiments should be given by the standard devia-
tion of the binomial distribution σ = √p(1−p)/N where p is
the probability that the atom is in F=1. We have checked
experimentally that this is the case for values of p between
0.005 and 0.95, and for N up to 1000. Our measurements of the
coefficients α and β are therefore limited solely by quan-
turn projection noise.

The combined performance of these techniques was in-
vestigated by performing Rabi rotations between the states
|0⟩ and |1⟩. The results for two different Raman beam intensi-
ities are shown in Fig. 2. At our maximum intensity, we
reach a Rabi frequency of Ω ≈2π × 0.7 MHz, which corre-
sponds to a π/2 rotation time of 37 ns. The 15% background
is due to the imperfect optical pumping discussed above.
At both high and low power the oscillations are strongly
damped, decaying after approximately five complete periods.
We attribute this damping to intensity fluctuations in the Ra-
man beams, due both to technical intensity noise (we mea-
sure ≈2% rms on each beam), and to the time-varying in-
tensity experienced by the atom due to its motion. The latter
is modeled by averaging the Rabi frequency over the motion
of the atom, assumed to be thermal [23]. The solid lines in
Figs. 2(a) and 2(b) are fits using a model that includes both
effects. For both curves the temperature is fixed at 90 μK
and the total technical intensity noise (both beams) is fixed at
2.5%. The initial contrast and the Rabi frequency are the
only adjustable parameters. The model is in good agreement
for both curves, despite the 130 000-fold reduction in the
Raman beam intensity (using neutral density filters) between
the two curves.

We have also investigated the coherence properties of this
FIG. 2. Single-atom Rabi oscillations. We measure the fraction of atoms in \( F=1 \) as a function of the Raman pulse length, at low (a) and high (b) intensity. We observe damped Rabi oscillations between the two qubit states with Rabi frequencies of \( \Omega=2\pi \times 18 \) kHz (a) and \( \Omega=2\pi \times 6.7 \) MHz (b). In (b) we could not observe the first 400 ns due to the response time of the acousto-optic modulator. The error bars correspond to the quantum projection noise.

qubit using Ramsey spectroscopy. We apply two \( \pi/2 \) pulses separated by a variable time \( t \), with a fixed value of the Raman detuning \( \delta \). In the limit \( \delta t \ll 1 \) where \( \tau \) is the \( \pi/2 \) pulse length, the population measured in the \( |1\rangle \) state varies as \( P(t)=\cos^2(\delta t/2) \). The results of this measurement with \( \tau=1.2 \) ms and \( \delta=2\pi \times 20.8 \) kHz are shown in Fig. 3. The contrast of the interference fringes decays as the time between the two \( \pi/2 \) pulses is increased, with a \( 1/e \) decay time of approximately 370 \( \mu s \) due to dephasing of the atomic qubit compared to the Raman beams. The dephasing mechanisms that operate in optical dipole traps have been extensively studied [23]. In our case, the dominant dephasing mechanism arises from the finite temperature of the atoms in the trap.

Due to the 6.8 GHz hyperfine splitting, the detuning of the dipole trap \( \Delta \) is slightly different for the \( |0\rangle \) and \( |1\rangle \) states, which therefore experience slightly different ac Stark shifts. This gives rise to a position dependence of the qubit transition frequency \( \omega(\tau)=\omega_{\text{hf}}+\eta U(\tau)/\hbar \), where the differential ac Stark shift coefficient \( \eta(\omega_{\text{hf}}/\Delta)=7 \times 10^{-4} \) for our trap. Averaged over the motion of the atom in the trap, this effect shifts the detuning \( \delta \) between the atomic resonance and the Raman beams by an amount which is different for each atom in a thermal ensemble, depending on its energy. As shown in [23], this gives rise to a decay of the contrast with a characteristic \( (1/e) \) decay time \( T_2^* = 1.94 \hbar/\eta g |\Delta| \). We measure a dephasing time of \( T_2^*/2 = 370 \mu s \), which is longer than the theoretical value \( T_2^*/2 = 220 \mu s \) that we would expect at 90 \( \mu K \). By varying the temperature we have confirmed that the dephasing is due to the motion of the atom, although this quantitative disagreement remains unexplained.

The dephasing due to the motion of the atoms in the trap can be reversed using the spin-echo technique [23,24]. An additional population-inverting \( \pi \) pulse applied midway between the two \( \pi/2 \) pulses ensures that the phase accumulated during the second period of free evolution is the opposite of that acquired during the first. The echo signals that we obtain are shown in Fig. 4. The echo signal decays due to the decay of the populations \( (T_1 \) processes) and the loss of atoms to other Zeeman states, as well as irreversible dephasing caused by fluctuations in the experimental parameters. To illustrate this, we repeated the spin echo experiments with a reduced
trap depth and a smaller magnetic field. Lowering the trap depth reduces the rate of hyperfine mixing due to spontaneous Raman transitions induced by the optical dipole trap, and reducing the magnetic field reduces the sensitivity of the qubit states to ambient magnetic field fluctuations. As shown in Fig. 4, this resulted in a significant increase in the decay time of the echo signal from 13 to 34 ms.

In conclusion, we have demonstrated that a single rubidium atom trapped at the focal point of a large-numerical-aperture lens is a promising system for encoding a qubit. With improved state preparation and the elimination of technical intensity noise, the fidelity of our single qubit operations will ultimately be limited by the motion of the atom. This effect could be reduced by further laser cooling. As well as their importance for high-speed quantum logic, fast single-qubit operations are also important in many entanglement schemes. Most existing protocols require atoms initialized in $|0\rangle$ to be rotated into a superposition state before the entanglement operation is applied [11,25]. Several proposals for generating entanglement using photon emission also require state rotation between successive photons [25,26]. In our experiment, we can generate single photons at a rate of 5 MHz [17], leaving just 200 ns between successive photon emission events in which to perform a qubit rotation. Here we show that we can perform single-qubit rotations on this time scale, and thus avoid limiting the rate at which entangled pairs can be created and gate operations performed in our system.

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[22] We observe a small (5%) loss due to the reduction in trap depth. This reduces the initial contrast in Fig. 2.