ASYNCHRONOUS CIRCUITS

Digital Very Large Scale Integration (VLSI) circuits are usually classified into synchronous and asynchronous circuits. Synchronous circuits are generally controlled by global synchronization signals provided by a clock. Asynchronous circuits, on the other hand, do not use such global synchronization signals. Between these extremes there are various hybrids. Digital circuits in today's commercial products are almost exclusively synchronous. Despite this big difference in popularity, there are a number of reasons why asynchronous circuits are of interest.

In this article, we present a brief overview of asynchronous circuits. First we address some of the motivations for designing asynchronous circuits. Then, we discuss different classes of asynchronous circuits and briefly explain some asynchronous design methodologies. Finally, we present an asynchronous design in detail.

MOTIVATIONS FOR ASYNCHRONOUS CIRCUITS

Throughout the years researchers have had a number of reasons for studying and building asynchronous circuits. Some of the often mentioned advantages of asynchronous circuits are speed, low energy dissipation, modular design, immunity to metastable behavior, freedom from clock skew, and low generation of and low susceptibility to electromagnetic interference. We elaborate here on some of these potentials and indicate when they have been demonstrated through comparative case studies.

Speed

Speed has always been a motivation for designing asynchronous circuits. The main reasoning behind this advantage is that synchronous circuits exhibit worst-case behavior, whereas asynchronous circuits exhibit average-case behavior. The speed of a synchronous circuit is governed by its clock frequency. The clock period should be large enough to accommodate the worst-case propagation delay in the critical path of the circuit, the maximum clock skew, and a safety factor due to fluctuations in the chip fabrication process, operating temperature, and supply voltage. Thus, synchronous circuits exhibit worst-case performance, in spite of the fact that the worst-case propagation in many circuits, particularly arithmetic units, may be much longer than the average-case propagation.

Many asynchronous circuits are controlled by local communications and are based on the principle of initiating a computation, waiting for its completion, and then initiating the next one. When a computation has completed early, the next computation can start early. For this reason, the speed of asynchronous circuits equipped with completion-detection mechanisms depend on the computation time of the data being processed, not the worst-case timing. Accordingly, such asynchronous circuits exhibit average-case performance. An example of an asynchronous circuit where the average-case potential is nicely exploited is reported in (1), an asynchronous divider that is twice as fast as its synchronous counterpart. Nevertheless, to date, there are few concrete examples demonstrating that the average-case performance of asynchronous circuits is higher than that of synchronous circuits per-

forming similar functions. The reason is that the average-case performance advantage is often counterbalanced by the overhead in control circuitry and completion-detection mechanisms.

Besides demonstrating the average-case potential, there are case studies in which the speed of an asynchronous design is compared to the speed of a corresponding synchronous version. Molnar et al. report a case study (2) of an asynchronous FIFO that is every bit as fast as any synchronous FIFO using the same data latches. Furthermore, the asynchronous FIFO has the additional benefit that it operates under local control and is easily expandable. At the end of this article, we give an example of a FIFO with a different control circuit.

Immunity to Metastable Behavior

Any circuit with a number of stable states also has metastable states. When such a circuit gets into a metastable state, it can remain there for an indefinite period of time before resolving into a stable state (3,4). Metastable behavior occurs, for example, in circuit primitives that realize mutual exclusion between processes, called *arbiters,* and components that synchronize independent signals of a system, called *synchronizers.* Although the probability that metastable behavior lasts longer than period t decreases exponentially with t, it is possible that metastable behavior in a synchronous circuit lasts longer than one clock period. Consequently, when metastable behavior occurs in a synchronous circuit, erroneous data may be sampled at the time of the clock pulses. An asynchronous circuit deals gracefully with metastable behavior by simply delaying the computation until the metastable behavior has disappeared and the element has resolved into a stable state.

Modularity

Modularity in design is an advantage exploited by many asynchronous design styles. The basic idea is that an asynchronous system is composed of functional modules communicating along well-defined interfaces. Composing asynchronous systems is simply a matter of connecting the proper modules with matching interfacial specifications. The interfacial specifications describe only the sequences of events that can take place and do not specify any restrictions on the timing of these events. This characteristic reduces the design time and complexity of an asynchronous circuit, because the designer does not have to worry about the delays incurred in individual modules or the delays inserted by connection wires. Designers of synchronous circuits, on the other hand, often pay considerable attention to satisfying the detailed interfacial timing specifications.

Besides ease of composability, modular design also has the potential for better technology migration, ease of incremental improvement, and reuse of modules (5). Here the idea is that an asynchronous system adapts itself more easily to advances in technology. The obsolete parts of an asynchronous system can be replaced with new parts to improve system performance. Synchronous systems cannot take advantage of new parts as easily, because they must be operated with the old clock frequency or other modules must be redesigned to operate at the new clock frequency.

One of the earliest projects that exploited modularity in designing asynchronous circuits is the Macromodules project (6). Another example where modular design is demonstrated is the TANGRAM compiler developed at Philips Research Laboratories (7).

Low Power

Due to rapid growth in the use of portable equipment and the trend in high-performance processors towards unmanageable power dissipation, energy efficiency has become crucial in VLSI design. Asynchronous circuits are attractive for energy-efficient designs, mainly because the clock is eliminated. In systems with a global clock, all of the latches and registers operate and consume dynamic energy during each clock pulse, in spite of the fact that many of these latches and registers may not have new data to store. There is no such waste of energy in asynchronous circuits, because computations are initiated only when necessary.

Two notable examples that demonstrated the potential of asynchronous circuits in energy-efficient design are the work done at Philips Research Laboratories and at Manchester University. The Philips group designed a fully asynchronous digital compact-cassette (DCC) error detector which consumed 80% less energy than a similar synchronous version (8). The AMULET group at Manchester University successfully implemented an asynchronous version of the ARM microprocessor, one of the most energy-efficient synchronous microprocessors. The asynchronous version achieved a power dissipation comparable to the fourth generation of ARM, around 150 mW (9), in a similar technology.

Recently, power management techniques are being used in synchronous systems to turn the clock on and off conditionally. However, these techniques are only worthwhile implementing at the level of functional units or higher. Besides, the components that monitor the environment for switching the clock continue dissipating energy.

It is also worth mentioning that, unlike synchronous circuits, most asynchronous circuits do not waste energy on *hazards,* which are spurious changes in a signal. Asynchronous circuits are essentially designed to be hazard-free. Hazards can be responsible for up to 40% of energy loss in synchronous circuits (10).

Freedom from Clock Skew

Because asynchronous circuits generally do not have clocks they do not have many of the problems associated with clocks. One such problem is clock skew, the technical term for the maximum difference in clock arrival time at different parts of a circuit. In synchronous circuits, it is crucial that all modules operating with a common clock receive this signal simultaneously, that is, within a tolerable period of time. Minimizing clock skew is a difficult problem for large circuits. Various techniques have been proposed to control clock skew, but generally they are expensive in terms of silicon area and energy dissipation. For instance, the clock distribution network of the DEC Alpha, a 200 MHz microprocessor at a 3.3 V supply, occupies 10% of the chip area and uses 40% of the total chip power consumption (11). Although asynchronous circuits do not have clock skew problems, they have their own set of problems in minimizing the overhead needed for synchronization among the parts.

MODELS AND METHODOLOGIES

There are many models and methodologies for analyzing and designing asynchronous circuits. Asynchronous circuits can be categorized by the following criteria: signaling protocol and data encoding, underlying delay model, mode of operation, and formalism for specifying and designing circuits. This section presents an informal explanation of these criteria.

Signaling Protocols and Data Encodings

Modules in an asynchronous circuit communicate data with some signaling protocol consisting of request and acknowledgment signals. There are two common signaling protocols for communicating data between a sender and a receiver, the four-phase and the two-phase protocol. In addition to the signaling protocol, there are different ways to encode data. The most common encodings are single-rail and dual-rail encoding. We explain the two signaling protocols first and then discuss the data encodings.

If the sender and receiver communicate through a two-phase signaling protocol, then each communication cycle has two distinct phases. The first phase consists of a request initiated by the sender. The second phase consists of an acknowledgment by the receiver. The request and acknowledgment signals are often implemented by voltage transitions on separate wires. No distinction is made between the directions of voltage transitions. Both rising and falling transitions denote a signaling event.

The four-phase signaling protocol consists of four phases, a request followed by an acknowledgment, followed by a second request, and finally a second acknowledgment. If the request and acknowledgment are implemented by voltage transitions, then at the end of every four phases, the signaling wires return to the same voltage levels as at the start of the four phases. Because the initial voltage is usually zero, this type of signaling is also called *return-to-zero signaling*. Other names for two-phase and four-phase signaling are two-cycle and four-cycle signaling, respectively, or transition and level signaling, respectively.

Both signaling protocols are used with single and dual-rail data encodings. In single-rail data encoding each bit is encoded with one wire, whereas in dual-rail encoding, each bit is encoded with two wires.

In single-rail encoding, the value of the bit is represented by the voltage on the data wire. When communicating n data bits with a single-rail encoding during periods where the data wires are guaranteed to remain stable, we say that the data are *valid*. During periods where the data wires are possibly changing, we say the data are *invalid*. A two-phase or four-phase signaling protocol is used to tell the receiver when data are valid or invalid. The sender informs the receiver about the validity of the data through the request signal, and the receiver, in turn, informs the sender of the receipt of the data through the acknowledgment signal. Therefore, to communicate n bits of data, a total number of $(n + 2)$ wires are necessary between the sender and the receiver. The connection pattern for single-rail encoding and two or four-phase signaling is depicted in Fig. 1(a).

Figure 2(a) shows the sequence of events in a two-phase signaling protocol. The events include the times when the data become valid and invalid. The transparent bars indicate the periods when data are valid. During the other periods, data are invalid. Notice that a request signal occurs only after data become valid. This is an important timing restriction associated with these communication protocols, namely, the request signal that indicates that data are valid should always arrive at the receiver *after* all data wires have attained their proper value. The restriction is referred to as the bundling constraint. For this reason the communication protocol is often called the bundled data protocol. Figure 2(b) shows a sequence of events in a four-phase protocol and single-rail data encoding. Other sequences are also applicable for the four-phase protocol.

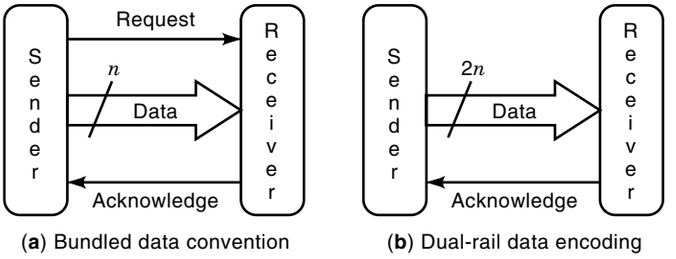

Figure 1. Two different data communication schemes.

The dual-rail encoding scheme uses two wires for every data bit. There are several dual-rail encoding schemes. All combine the data encoding and signaling protocol. There is no explicit request signal, and the dual-rail encoding schemes all require $(2n + 1)$ wires as illustrated in Fig. 1(b). In four-phase signaling, there are several encodings that are used to transmit a data bit. The most common encoding has the following meaning for the four states in which each pair of wires can be, 00 = reset, 10 = valid 0, 01 = valid 1, and 11 is an unused state. Every pair of wires has to go through the reset state before becoming valid again. In the first phase of the four-phase signaling protocol, every pair of wires leaves the reset state for a valid 0 or 1 state. The receiver detects the arrival of a new set of valid data when all pairs of wires have left the reset state. This detection replaces an explicit request signal. The second phase consists of an acknowledgment to inform the sender that data has been consumed. The third phase consists of the reset of all pairs of wires to the reset state, and the fourth phase is the reset of the acknowledgment.

In a two-phase signaling protocol, a different dual-rail encoding is used. An example of an encoding is as follows. Each pair of wires has one wire associated with a 0 and one wire associated with a 1. A transition on the wire associated with 0 represents the communication of a 0, whereas a transition on the other wire represents a communication of a 1. Thus, a transition on one wire of each pair signals the arrival of a new bit value. A transition on both wires is not allowed. In the first phase of the two-phase signaling protocol every pair of wires communicates a 0 or a 1. The second phase is an acknowledgment sent by the receiver.

Of all data encodings and signaling protocols, the most popular are the single-rail encoding and four-phase signaling protocol. The main advantages of these protocols are the small number of connecting wires and the simplicity of the encoding, which allows using conventional techniques for implementing data operations. The disadvantage of these protocols are the bundling constraints that must be satisfied and the extra energy and time wasted in the additional two phases compared with two-phase signaling. Dual-rail data en-

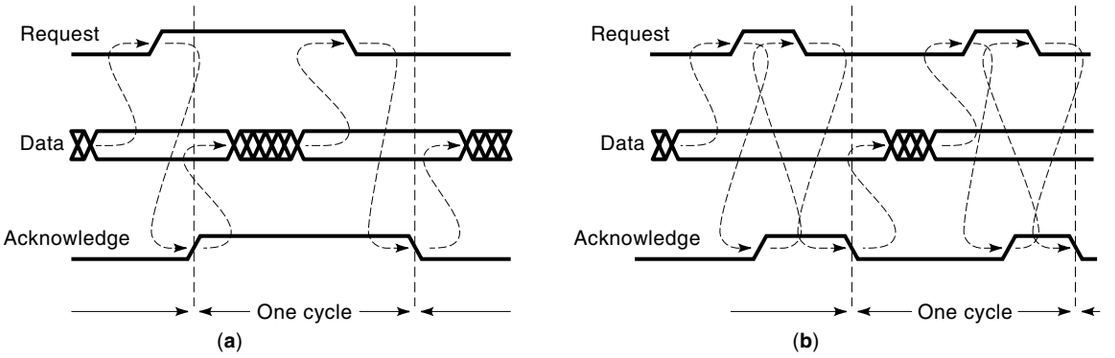

Figure 2. Data transfer in (a) two-phase signaling and (b) four-phase signaling.

codings are used to communicate data in asynchronous circuits free of any timing constraints. Dual-rail encodings, however, are expensive in practice, because of the many interconnecting wires, the extra circuitry to detect completion of a transfer, and the difficulty in data processing.

Delay Models

An important characteristic distinguishing different asynchronous circuit styles is the delay model on which they are based. For each circuit primitive, gate or wire, a *delay model* stipulates the sort of delay it imposes and the range of the delays. Delay models are needed to analyze all possible behavior of a circuit for various correctness conditions, like the absence of hazards.

A circuit is composed of gates and interconnecting wires, all of which impose delays on the signals propagating through them. The delay models are categorized into two classes, pure delay models and inertial delay models. In a pure delay model, the delay associated with a circuit component produces only a time shift in the voltage transitions. In reality, a circuit component may shift the signals and also filter out pulses of small width. Such a delay model is called an *inertial delay* model. Both classes of delay models have several ranges for the delay shifts. We distinguish the *zero-delay, fixed-delay, bounded-delay,* and *unbounded-delay* models. In the zero-delay model, the values of the delays are zero. In the fixed-delay model, the values of the delays are constant, whereas in the bounded-delay model the values of the delays vary within a bounded range. The unbounded-delay model does not impose any restriction on the value of the delays except that they cannot be infinite. Sometimes two different delay models are assumed for the wires and the gates in an asynchronous circuit. For example, the operation of a class of asynchronous circuits is based on the zero-delay model for wires and the unbounded-delay model for gates. Formal definitions of the various delay models are given in (12).

A concept closely related to the delay model of a circuit is its *mode of operation.* The mode of operation characterizes the interaction between a circuit and its environment. Classical asynchronous circuits operate in the fundamental mode (13,14), which assumes that the environment changes only one input signal and waits until the circuit reaches a stable state. Then the environment is allowed to apply the next change to one of the input signals. Many modern asynchronous circuits operate in the input-output mode. In contrast to the fundamental mode, the input-output mode allows input changes immediately after receiving an appropriate response to a previous input change, even if the entire circuit has not yet stabilized. The fundamental mode was introduced in the 1960s to simplify analyzing and designing gate circuits with Boolean algebra. The input-output mode evolved in the eighties from event-based formalisms to describe modular design methods that abstracted from the internal operation of a circuit.

Formalisms

Just as in any other design discipline, designers of asynchronous circuits use various formalisms to master the complexities in designing and analyzing their artifacts. The formalisms used in asynchronous circuit design are categorized into two classes, formalisms based on Boolean algebra and formalisms based on sequences of events. Most design methodologies in asynchronous circuits use some mixture of both formalisms.

The design of many asynchronous circuits is based on Boolean algebra or its derivative switching theory. Such circuits often use the fundamental mode of operation, the bounded-delay model, and have, as primitive elements, gates that correspond to the basic logic functions, like AND, OR, and inversion. These formalisms are convenient for implementing logic functions, analyzing circuits for the presence of hazards, and synthesizing fundamental-mode circuits (12,14).

Event-based formalisms deal with sequences of events rather than binary logic variables. Circuits designed with an event-based formalism operate in the input-output mode, under an unbounded-delay model, and have, as primitive elements, the JOIN, the TOGGLE, and the MERGE, for example. Event-based formalisms are particularly convenient for designing asynchronous circuits when a high degree of concurrency is involved. Several tools have been generated for automatically verifying asynchronous circuits with event-based formalisms (15,16). Examples of event-based formalisms are trace theory (17–19), DI algebra (20), Petri nets, and signal transition graphs (21,22).

DESIGN TECHNIQUES

This section introduces the most popular types of asynchronous circuits and briefly describes some of their design techniques.

TYPES OF ASYNCHRONOUS CIRCUITS

There are special types of asynchronous circuits for which formal and informal specifications have been given. Here are brief informal descriptions of some of them in a historical context.

There are two types of logic circuits, combinational and sequential. The output of a combinational circuit depends only on the current inputs, whereas the output of a sequential circuit depends on the previous sequence of inputs. With this definition of a sequential circuit, almost all asynchronous circuit styles fall into this category. However, the term *asynchronous-sequential* circuits or machines generally refers to those asynchronous circuits based on *finite-state machines* similar to those in synchronous sequential circuits (14,23).

Muller was the first to rigorously formalize a special type of circuit for which he coined the name *speed-independent* circuit. An account of this formalization is given in (24,25). Informally, a speed-independent circuit is a network of gates that satisfies its specification irrespective of any gate delays.

From a design discipline that was developed as part of the Macromodules project (6) at Washington University in St. Louis, the concept of another type of asynchronous circuits evolved, which was given the name *delay-insensitive* circuit, that is, a network of modules that satisfies its specification irrespective of any element *and* wire delays. It was realized that proper formalization of this concept was needed to specify and design such circuits in a well-defined manner. Such a formalization was given by Udding (26).

Another name frequently used in designing asynchronous circuits is *self-timed systems*. This name was introduced by Seitz (27). A self-timed system is described recursively as either a self-timed element or a legal connection of self-timed systems. The idea is that self-timed elements can be implemented with their own timing discipline, and some may even have synchronous implementations. In other words, the elements "keep time to themselves." In composing self-timed systems from self-timed elements, however, no reference to the timing of events is made. Only the sequence of events is relevant.

Some have found that the unbounded gate-and-wire delay assumption, on which the concept of a delay-insensitive circuit is based, is too restrictive in practice. For example, the unbounded gate-and-wire delay assumption implies that a signal sent to multiple recipients by a fork incurs a different unbounded delay for each of the recipients. In (28) it is proposed to relax this delay assumption slightly by using *isochronic forks.* An isochronic fork is a fork whose difference in the delays of its branches is negligible compared with the delays in the element to which it is connected. A delay-insensitive circuit that uses isochronic forks is called a *quasi-delay-insensitive* circuit (17,28). Although isochronic forks give more design freedom in exchange for less delay insensitivity, care has to be taken with their implementation (29).

Asynchronous-Sequential Machines

The design of asynchronous-sequential, finite-state machines was initiated with the pioneering work of Huffman (23). He proposed a structure similar to that of synchronous-sequential circuits consisting of a combinational logic circuit, inputs, outputs, and state variables (14). Huffman circuits, however, store the state variables in feedback loops containing delay elements, instead of in latches or flip-flops, as synchronous-sequential circuits do. The design procedure begins with creating a flow table and reducing it through some state minimization technique. After a state assignment, the procedure obtains the Boolean expressions and implements them in combinational logic with the aid of a logic minimization program. To guarantee a hazard-free operation, Huffman circuits adopt the restrictive single-input-change fundamental mode, that is, the environment changes only one input and waits until the circuit becomes stable before changing another input. This requirement substantially degrades the circuit performance. Hollaar realized this fact and introduced a new structure in which the fundamental mode assumption is relaxed (30). In his implementation, the state variables are stored in NAND latches, so that inputs are allowed to change earlier than the fundamental mode allows. Although Hollaar's method improves the performance, it suffers from the danger of producing hazards. Besides, neither technique is adequate for designing concurrent systems. Models and algorithms for analyzing asynchronous-sequential circuits have been developed by Brzozowski and Seger (12).

The quest for more concurrency, better performance, and hazard-free operation, resulted in the formulation of a new generation of asynchronous-sequential circuits known as burst-mode machines (31,32). A burst-mode circuit does not react until the environment performs a number of input changes called an input burst. The environment, in turn, is not allowed to introduce the next input burst until the circuit produces a number of outputs called an output burst. A state graph is used to specify the transitions caused by the input and output bursts. Two synthesis methods have been proposed and automated for implementing burst-mode circuits. The first method employs a locally generated clock to avoid some hazards (33). The second method uses three-dimensional flow tables and is based on Huffman circuits (34). One limitation of burst mode circuits is that they restrict concurrency within a burst.

Speed-Independent Circuits and STG Synthesis

Speed-independent circuits are usually designed by a form of Petri nets (35). A popular version of Petri nets, signal-transition graphs (STG), was introduced by Chu. He also developed a synthesis technique for transforming STGs into speed-independent circuits (21). Chu's work was extended by Meng, who produced an STG-based tool for synthesizing speed-independent circuits from high-level specifications (36). In this technique, a circuit is composed of computational and interconnecting blocks. Computational blocks range from a simple shifter module to more complicated ones, such as ALUs, RAMs, and ROMs. Interconnecting blocks synchronize the operation of computational blocks by producing appropriate control signals. Computational blocks generate completion signals after their output data becomes valid. The interconnecting blocks use the completion signals to generate four-phase handshake protocols.

Delay-Insensitive Circuits and Compilation

Several researchers have proposed techniques for designing delay-insensitive circuits. Ebergen (37) has developed a synthesis method based on the formalism of trace theory. The

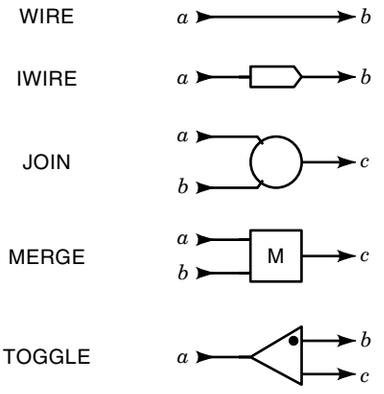

Figure 3. Some primitives in event-based designs.

method consists of specifying a component by a program and then transforming this program into a delay-insensitive network of basic elements (18).

Martin proposes a method (28) that starts with the specification of an asynchronous circuit in a high-level programming language similar to Hoare's *Communicating Sequential Processes* (CSP) (38). An asynchronous circuit is specified as a group of processes communicating over channels. After various transformations, the program is mapped into a network of gates. This method led to the design of an asynchronous microprocessor (39) in 1989. Martin's method yields quasi-delay-insensitive circuits.

Van Berkel (17) designed a compiler based on a high-level language called Tangram. A Tangram program also specifies a set of processes communicating over channels. A Tangram program is first translated into a handshake circuit. Then these handshake circuits are mapped into various target architectures, depending on the data-encoding techniques or standard-cell libraries used. The translation is syntax-directed, which means that every operation occurring in a Tangram program corresponds to a primitive in the translated handshake circuit. This property is exploited by various tools that quickly estimate the area, performance, and energy dissipation of the final design by analyzing the Tangram program. Van Berkel's method also yields quasi-delay-insensitive circuits.

Other translation methods from a CSP-like language to a (quasi-) delay-insensitive circuit are in (40,41).

AN ASYNCHRONOUS DESIGN EXAMPLE

In this section we present a typical asynchronous design, a micropipeline (5). The circuit uses single-rail encoding with the two-phase signaling protocol to communicate data between stages of the pipeline. The control circuit for the pipeline is a delay-insensitive circuit. First we present the primitives for the control circuit, then we present the latches that store the data, and finally we present the complete design.

The Control Primitives

Figure 3 shows a few simple primitives used in event-based design styles. The schematic symbol for each primitive is depicted opposite its name.

The simplest primitive is the WIRE, a two-terminal element that produces an output event on its output terminal b after every input event on its input terminal a. Input and output events in a WIRE must alternate. An input event a must be followed by an output event b before another event a occurs. A WIRE is physically realizable with a wire, and events are implemented by voltage transitions. An initialized WIRE, or IWIRE, is very similar to a WIRE, except that it starts by producing an output event b instead of accepting an input event a. After this, its behavior exactly resembles that of a WIRE.

The primitive for synchronization is the JOIN, also called the RENDEZVOUS (6). A JOIN has two inputs a and b and one output c. The JOIN performs the AND operation of two events a and b. It produces an output event c only after both of its inputs, a and b, receive an event. The inputs can change again after an output is produced. A JOIN can be implemented by a Muller C-element, explained in the next section.

The MERGE component performs the OR operation of two events. If a MERGE component receives an event on either of its inputs, a or b, it produces an output event c. After an input event, there must be an output event. Successive input events are not allowed. A MERGE is implemented by a XOR gate.

The TOGGLE has a single input a and two outputs b and c. After an event on input a, an event occurs on output b. The next event on a results in a transition on output c. An input event must be followed by an output event before another input event can occur. Thus, output events alternate or toggle after each input event. The dot in the TOGGLE schematic indicates the output which produces the first event.

The Muller C-Element

The Muller C-element is named for its inventor D. E. Muller (24). Traditionally, its logical behavior is described as follows. If both inputs are 0 (1), then the output becomes 0 (1). Otherwise the output remains the same. For the proper operation of the C-element, it is also assumed that, once both inputs become 0 (1), they do not change again until the output changes. A state diagram is given in Figure 4. The behavior of the output c of the C-element is expressed in terms of the inputs a and b and the previous state of the output $\hat{c}$ by the following Boolean function:

$$c = [\hat{c} \cdot (a + b)] + (a \cdot b) \tag{1}$$

The C-element is used to implement the JOIN, which has a slightly more restrictive environment behavior in the sense that an input is not allowed to change twice in succession. A

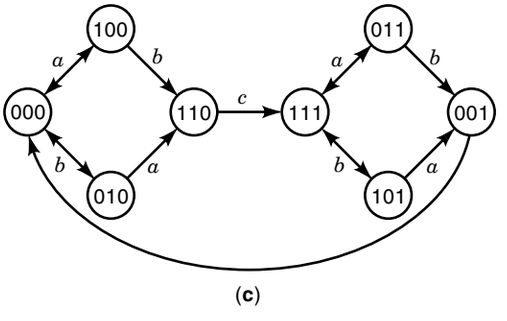

Figure 4. State diagram of the C-element.

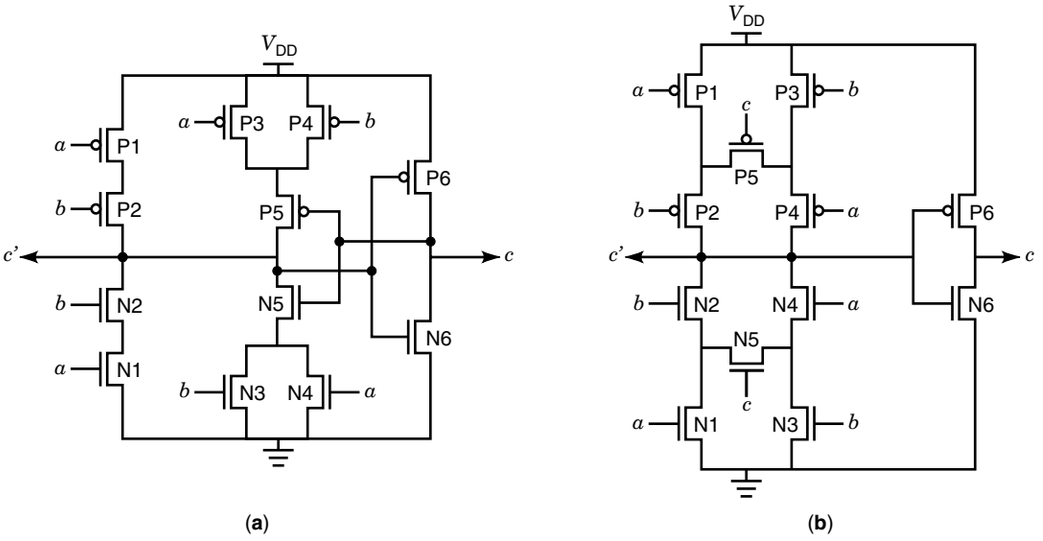

Figure 5. Two CMOS implementations of the C-element: (a) conventional and (b) symmetric.

state graph for the JOIN is produced by replacing the bidirectional arcs by unidirectional arcs.

There are many implementations of the C-element. We have given two popular CMOS implementations in Figure 5. Implementation (a) is a conventional pull-up, pull-down implementation suggested by Sutherland (5). Implementation (b) is suggested by Van Berkel (29). Each implementation has its own characteristics. Implementation (b) is the best choice for speed and energy efficiency (42). There are many variations of the C-element and other elements that are convenient for the design of asynchronous circuits. For some of these variations and their uses, in particular the asymmetric C-element, see Ref. 28.

Storage Primitives

Two event-controlled latches due to Sutherland (5) are depicted in Figure 6. Their operation is managed through two input control signals, capture and pass, labeled c and p, respectively. They also have two output control signals, capture done, cd, and pass done, pd. The input data is labeled D, and the output data is labeled Q. Implementation (a) is composed of three so-called double-throw switches. Implementation (b) includes a MERGE, a TOGGLE, and a level-controlled latch consisting of a double-throw switch and an inverter.

A double-throw switch is schematically represented by an inverter and a switching tail. The tail toggles between two positions based on the logic value of a controlling signal. A double-throw switch, in fact, is a two-input multiplexer that produces an inverted version of its selected input. A CMOS implementation of the double-throw switch is shown in Figure 7 (5). The position of the switch corresponds to the state where c is low.

An event-controlled latch can assume two states, transparent and opaque. In the transparent state no data is latched, but the output replicates the input, because a path of two inverting stages exists between the input and the output. In the opaque state, this path is disconnected so that the input data may change without affecting the output. The current data at the output, however, is latched. Implementations in Figs. 6(a) and 6(b) are both shown in their initial transparent states. The capture and pass signals in an event-controlled latch always alternate. Upon a transition on c, the latch cap-

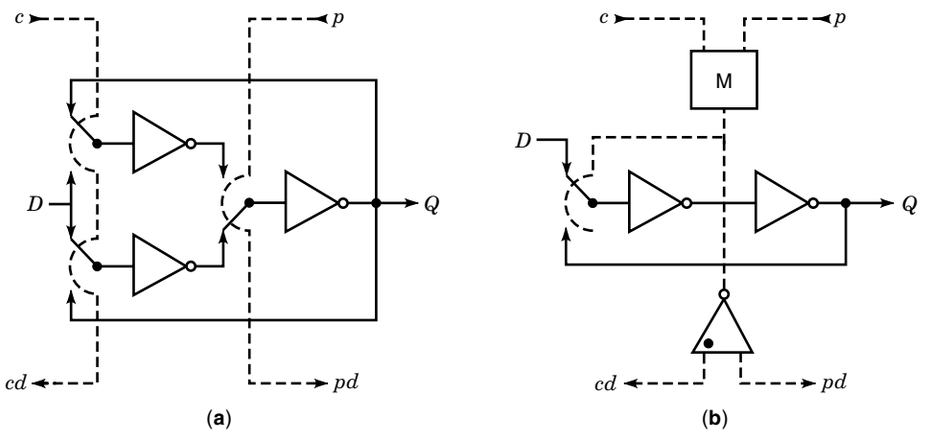

Figure 6. Two event-driven latch implementations.

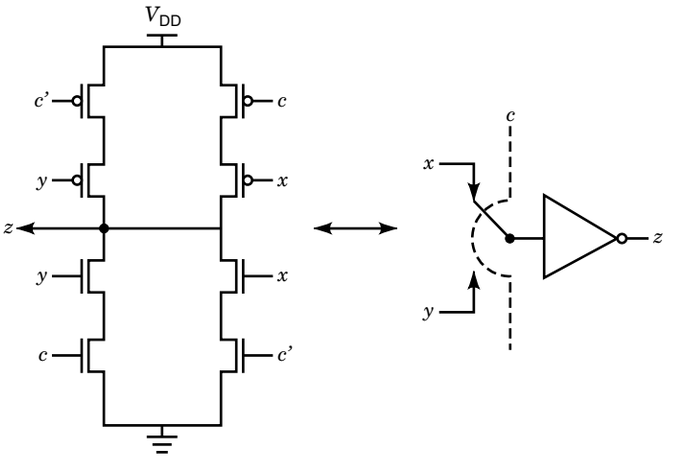

Figure 7. A CMOS implementation of a double-throw switch.

tures the current input data and becomes opaque. The following transition on *cd* is an acknowledgment to the data provider that the current data is captured and that the input data can be changed safely. A subsequent transition on *p* returns the latch to its transparent state to pass the next data to its output. The *p* signal is acknowledged by a transition on *pd*. Notice that in implementation (a) of Fig. 6 signals *cd* and *pd* are merely delayed and possibly amplified versions of *c* and *p*, respectively.

A group of event-controlled latches, similar to implementation (a) of Fig. 6, can be connected, sharing a capture wire and a pass wire, to form an event-controlled register of arbitrary data width. Implementation (b) of Fig. 6 can be generalized similarly into a register by inserting additional level-controlled latches between the MERGE and the TOGGLE. A comparison of different micropipeline latches is reported in (43) and later in (44).

Pipelining

Pipelining is a powerful technique for constructing high-performance processors. Micropipelines are elegant asynchronous circuits that have gained much attention in the asynchronous community. Many VLSI circuits based on micropipelines have been successfully fabricated. The AMULET microprocessor (9) is one example. Although there are many asynchronous implementations of micropipelines, we only show an asynchronous implementation based on two-phase signaling and data bundling, as given in Ref. 5. For other implementations of pipelines involving four-phase signaling, the reader is referred to Ref. 45.

The simplest form of a micropipeline is a First-In-First-Out (FIFO) buffer. A four-stage FIFO is shown in Figure 8. It has a control circuit composed solely of interconnected JOINs and a data path of event-controlled registers. The control signals are indicated by dashed lines. The thick arrows show the direction of data flow. Data is implemented with single-rail encoding, and the data path is as wide as the registers can accommodate. Adjacent stages of the FIFO communicate through a two-phase, bundled-data signaling protocol. This means that a request arrives at the next stage only when the data for that stage becomes valid. A bubble at the input of a JOIN is a shorthand for a JOIN with an IWIRE on that input. It implies that, initially, an event has already occurred on the input with the bubble, and the JOIN produces an output event immediately upon receiving an event on the other input.

Initially, all control wires of the FIFO are at a low voltage and the data in the registers are not valid. The FIFO is activated by a rising transition on R_{in}, which indicates that input data is valid. Subsequently, the first-stage JOIN produces a rising output transition. This signal is a request to the first-stage register to capture the data and become opaque. After capturing the data, the register produces a rising transition on its *cd* output terminal. This causes a transition on A_{in} and a transition on $r1$, which is a request to the second stage of the FIFO. Meanwhile, the data has proceeded to the second-stage register and has arrived there before the transition on $r1$ occurs. If the environment does not send any new data, the first stage remains idle, and the data and the request signals propagate further to the right. Notice that each time the data is captured by a stage, an acknowledgment is sent back to the previous stage which causes its latch to become transparent again. When the data has propagated to the last register, it

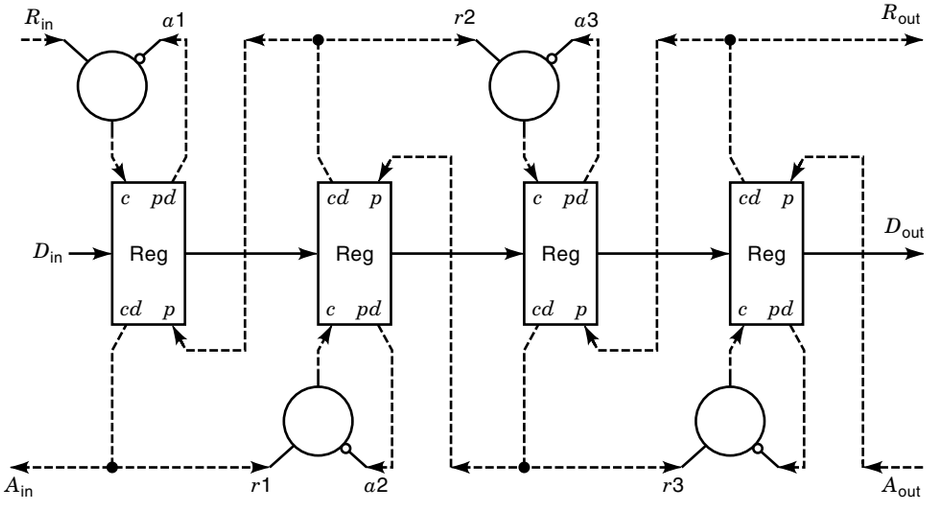

Figure 8. A four-stage micropipeline FIFO structure.

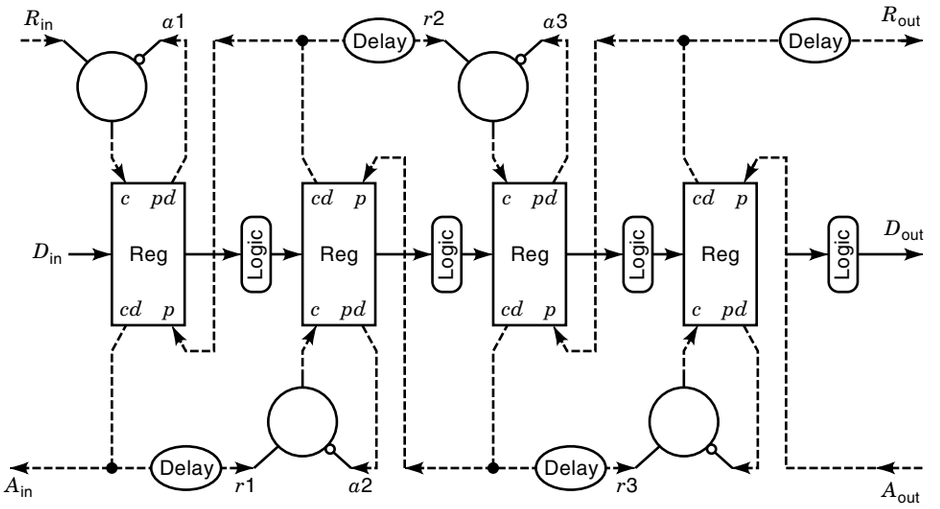

Figure 9. A general four-stage micropipeline structure.

is stored and a request signal R_{out} is forwarded to the consumer of the FIFO. At this point, all control signals are at a high voltage except for A_{out}. If the data is not removed out of the FIFO, that is, A_{out} remains at low voltage, the next data coming from the producer advances only up to the third-stage register, because the fourth-stage JOIN cannot produce an output. Finally, A_{out} also becomes high when the consumer acknowledges receipt of the data. Further data storage and removal follows the same pattern. The operation of each JOIN is interpreted as follows. If the previous stage has sent a request for data capture *and* the present stage is empty, then send a signal to capture the data in the present stage.

The FIFO is modified easily to include data processing. A four-stage micropipeline, in its general form, is illustrated in Figure 9. Now the data path consists of alternately positioned event-driven registers and combinational logic circuits. The event-driven registers store the input and output data of the combinational circuits, and the combinational circuits perform the necessary data processing. To satisfy the data-bundling constraint, delay elements are occasionally required to slow down the propagation of the request signals. A delay element must at least match the delay through its corresponding combinational logic circuit, either by some completion detection mechanism or by inserting a worst-case delay.

A micropipeline FIFO is flexible in the number of data items it buffers. There is no restriction on the rate at which data enter or exit the micropipeline, except for the delays imposed by the circuit elements. That is why this FIFO and micropipelines generally are termed elastic. In contrast, in an ordinary synchronous pipeline, the rates at which data enter and exit the pipeline are the same, dictated by the external clock signal. A micropipeline is also flexible in the amount of energy it dissipates, which is proportional to the number of data movements. A clocked pipeline, however, continuously dissipates energy as if all stages of pipeline capture and pass data all the time. Another attractive feature of a micropipeline is that it automatically shuts off when there is no activity. A clocked pipeline, on the other hand, requires a special clock management mechanism to implement this feature. This sensing mechanism, however, constantly consumes energy because it should never go idle.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

We have touched only on a few topics relevant to asynchronous circuits and omitted many others. Among the topics omitted are the important areas of verifying, testing, and analyzing the performance of asynchronous circuits. We hope, however, that within the scope of these pages we have provided enough information for further reading. For more information on asynchronous circuits, see (12, 46, or 47). A comprehensive bibliography of asynchronous circuits is in (48). Up-to-date information on research in asynchronous circuit design is at (49).

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