

Implementation of an open-source design Flow for nano scale Chip Design/Manufacturing Process at Universidad del Valle de Guatemala

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Abstract—This paper carries out the Tiny Tapeout initiative with 4 verilog designs, with the intention to fully utilize and comprehend this open-source design flow for chip design/manufacturing and to leave proper documentation for future students to take advantage of this new and innovative process to enter in the semiconductor realm. Two students of the Electronics Engineering department at Universidad del Valle De Guatemala were fortunate to attend the "2023 IEEE EDS summer School R9" where the Tiny Tapeout workshop was held and where the first steps of this project were taken. The opportunity to learn from this workshop was invaluable and the knowledge gained was enough to actually carry out the Tiny Tapeout initiative at Universidad del Valle De Guatemala. Four designs were submitted on the September 5th 2023, after taking the necessary steps to get the tools and the design flow working. After submission the necessary verifications were made by the Tiny Tapeout team, on October 10th 2023 our four designs were approved for manufacturing and were sent to efabless for fabrication, the expected date for delivery 15th of February 2024. The final Tiny Tapeout 04 project had 143 submissions from 30 different countries, a total cell count of 82126 cells and a total area of die of 6 mm x 7.4 mm.

Index Terms—Efabless, SkyWater 130nm open-source PDK, Tiny Tapeout implementation, Multiproject wafer, Nano chip fabrication.

I. INTRODUCTION

The semiconductor industry -chip/microchip industry- holds a significant share in the market owing to its rapid strides in technological advancement. Over the years, there has been a noticeable trend of various companies pushing the limits of nanoscale technology, driving innovation within the sector [8]. This remarkable progress has been made possible primarily by two major aspects: on one hand there are super specialised chip manufacturing hardware, that bring to life the digital representation of the chip. On the other hand there are very specialised software tools that are made by very specific software developing companies, who are responsible for making said digital representation of the chip.

Intel, Apple, AMD, Samsung and similar semiconductor industry giants have the financial resources to invest in these specialised tools and software, which are often costly due to their advanced capabilities and precision engineering [7].

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These tools facilitate tasks such as layout design, simulation, verification, and manufacturing of semiconductor chips. By utilising such tools, these companies can explore innovative concepts, test them in virtual as well as physical environments, and fine-tune their designs before misproduction [5].

Additionally, software development companies like Synopsys, Cadence, and Mentor Graphics play a crucial role in shaping the semiconductor landscape [3]. They continuously develop and refine software that cater to the intricate needs of chip designers and manufacturers [11]. These tools streamline workflows, improve design accuracy, and optimise manufacturing processes, ultimately leading to the production of high-quality chips that power a wide array of electronic devices, from smartphones, laptops, autonomous vehicles to sophisticated industrial equipment, all the way to life-critical biomedical equipment, satellites, and space shuttles [2].

However, it's worth acknowledging that while the semiconductor industry thrives on innovation, learning about the intricacies of integrated circuit design and manufacturing processes can be very difficult [1]. This challenge is one of the key hurdles that stems from the gap in access to chip design and manufacturing processes between industry and academia. The tools and resources used by technology giants already mentioned are often proprietary and come with substantial financial barriers. This financing challenge creates a division between the cutting-edge practices employed in the industry and the educational resources available in academic settings [9].

Students and researchers in academia might encounter difficulties in gaining hands-on experience with the most up-to-date tools and techniques used in the semiconductor industry. Moreover, access to advanced fabrication facilities and sophisticated design software can be limited, potentially hindering their ability to fully grasp the complexities of modern chip design. The rapid pace of innovation in the industry can also make it challenging for academic curricula to keep up with the latest developments, further emphasising the disparity between theoretical knowledge and practical application.

Efforts are being made to bridge this gap by fostering collaborations between industry and academia [4]. Some companies offer educational programs, internships, and partnerships with universities, enabling students and researchers to gain exposure to state-of-the-art tools and real-world design challenges [10]. Moreover, open-source initiatives and shared research facilities aim to provide broader access to resources

that were once exclusive to industry giants. By narrowing the division between industry and academia, aspiring chip designers and researchers can better prepare themselves for the demands of the semiconductor landscape [6].

As the semiconductor industry propels forward with innovation, the challenge lies in ensuring that the knowledge and expertise surrounding integrated circuit design and manufacturing are accessible to all. Bridging the gap between the tools and processes utilised in industry and those available in academic settings will be crucial for nurturing the next generation of skilled professionals who can contribute to the ongoing advancements in the semiconductor field. In this work, an open-source environment for a design flow for chip manufacturing will be deployed at Universidad del Valle de Guatemala to shorten the gap between industry and academia.

II. METHODOLOGY

In figure 1, the main steps of this work are portrayed.

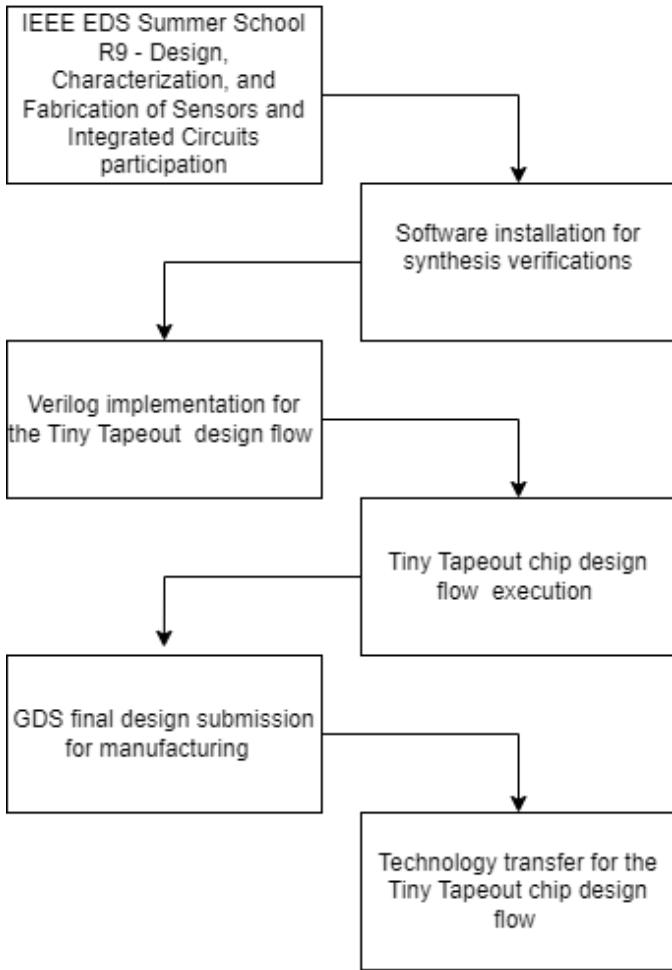


Fig. 1: Experimental Model Blocks

A. IEEE EDS Summer School R9 Design, Characterization, and Fabrication of Sensors and Integrated Circuits participation

In June 2023 two senior students from the Electronics Engineering department at Universidad del Valle de Guatemala

were granted scholarships to attend the “2023 IEEE EDS Summer School R9” in Puebla, Mexico. Throughout this enlightening summer program, a wide array of topics were addressed, ranging from insights of former students who work in the field, to several educational tools provided by one of the industry leaders; Synopsys. A significant message stood out: Nanochip design and fabrication industry is so complex, so dynamic, and so expensive due to infrastructure, human resources, etc. so that it becomes extremely challenging to almost impossible for academia to keep up with it. During the program, the gap between industry capability and academic resources became evident as the alumni shared their experiences. Some of the former students highlighted that they had encountered setbacks in their projects due to challenges in installation or upkeep of some tools within the expansive realm of semiconductor technology. Notably, a few even mentioned that a lack of infrastructure and limited time had led to the unfortunate loss of grants they had secured for their projects. In the program, there were also discussions about new open-source tools such as Wokwi, designed to facilitate learning about logical circuitry. The Efabless initiative was another topic, that was introduced as a private semiconductor fabrication company, but the one that left the most significant impact was Tiny Tapeout because it closes the gap between the complexity behind the chip design and manufacturing in industry and the resources, time, and knowledge typically available in academia. This tool stood out for its adoption is further supported by a multi-purpose wafer and the cost-effectiveness of chip production. Typically, one of the challenges in academia involves acquiring the necessary computing power to run complex design tools. However, Tiny Tapeout has tackled this issue by providing its own cloud computing infrastructure, effectively reducing the demand for high computational resources. On the other hand, the installation of some of the highly advanced programs used in the industry are very complex using authentication servers to secure their tools, however Tiny Tapeout has managed to set their installation tool process very straightforward using only three steps. It's worth mentioning that Tiny Tapeout has its own website where you can consult any doubt its installer might have, and it has several channels of communication. The aim of the Tiny Tapeout initiative is not to take over the semiconductor industry but to give students the knowledge and experience of working in this ample field, moreover, offer students the experience of taking a digital design all the way to semiconductor fabrication.

B. Software installation for synthesis verifications

To verify that both logical and physical synthesis align with the Verilog files, the installation of an open-source integrated circuit design flow called OpenLane was performed. To use it, a virtual machine with Ubuntu 22 was set up, and the necessary prerequisites, including Python 3, git, make, and Docker, were installed. The GitHub repository containing OpenLane was cloned and compiled. It was confirmed that OpenLane operated correctly by synthesizing a 4-bit adder.

C. Verilog implementation for the Tiny Tapeout design flow

This section introduces the Verilog implementation within the framework of Tiny Tapeout, a project dedicated to generating chip layouts from Verilog files. In this context, we will delineate the four distinct designs produced, providing comprehensive descriptions of the modules and their respective behaviors.

1) *Multy stage path for delay measurements:* The core of the module featured an approach to creating a ring oscillator. Although it was initially intended to utilize cascaded NOT gates, it was observed that the synthesizer, under the constraints of the Tiny Tapeout design flow, may replace these gates with buffers. As a result, the oscillatory behavior was expectedly altered. Nevertheless, the module's ring oscillator function was realized through a sequence of logical operations involving AND gates and inverters, forming a feedback loop. The logical signals EN and EN_2 served as inputs to an AND_2 module, generating a waveform represented by W_1. Subsequently, this waveform traversed a series of inverters (tt_prim_inv modules), resulting in the generation of W_2, W_3, and cyclically returning to W_1. While this configuration may not conform precisely to the original design intent, it offers a valuable educational opportunity to explore gate delays and their implications in digital circuitry when compared to theoretical calculations.

2) *ASCII Text Printer Circuit:* A Verilog module was designed to function as a text printing system capable of displaying two distinct texts, which are selected through an external signal. The module employs an internal counter synchronized with the clock to determine the specific ASCII character displayed based on the selection signal and the counter value. The output is provided through the output pins in ASCII format.

3) *Implementation of the Pong game:* The Verilog code, pong_neopixel.v, with the main module "tt_um_pong_neopixel", has been developed with the purpose of implementing a version of the Pong game on a Neopixel pixel matrix. This design has been conceived as an example of an interactive and playful application of programmable digital hardware. The "tt_um_pong_neopixel" module consists of several inputs and outputs intended to control the game, including player input signals, start signals, and outputs to manage the Neopixel matrix, along with clock and reset signals. To ensure the stability of the input signals, "debounce" modules have been implemented. The game logic includes the management of the movement of the players' paddles and the ball, as well as collision detection and game reset when appropriate. In addition, logic has been developed to generate Neopixel signals that control the display on the matrix, allowing player interaction. This design also incorporates counters to track the sending of data to the matrix and appropriately selects whether LEDs should be turned on or off based on the position of the ball and paddles.

4) *Pulse Width Modulation Generator:* The Verilog code, pwm_generator.v, with the main module "tt_um_pwm", is designed to generate a pulse width modulation (PWM) signal controlled by buttons. The module allows the duty cycle of the

PWM signal to be increased or decreased via buttons. To ensure a reliable reading of the buttons, debounce logic is implemented that generates a slow clock signal (slow_clk_enable).

D. Tiny Tapeout chip design flow execution

The execution of the Tiny Tapeout chip design flow begins with a series of essential steps. First it is necessary to fork the example repository provided by the Tiny Tapeout project. Once this step is completed, enabling the repository's capability to perform actions is crucial, as it allows for the automation of subsequent processes. To ensure the project's proper execution, several key tasks must be carried out. First all Verilog files must be located in the "src" folder. Additionally, the "info.yaml" file must be filled out with relevant information, including the Verilog files that constitute the design, the main design module, the authors, a project description, and, if applicable, the clock frequency. These steps are fundamental to ensuring an effective design flow and the correct implementation of chips in Tiny Tapeout.

E. GDS final design submission for manufacturing

In the final submission phase of the GDS design for manufacturing, a series of crucial steps were undertaken to ensure the integrity and accuracy of the delivered information. First a comprehensive review of all relevant repositories was conducted with the aim of identifying and rectifying any errors that may have existed in their execution. Subsequently the provided form by Latin Practice was completed, requiring essential details about the repositories, including author names and direct links to the referred repositories. It is noteworthy that this form-filling process was rigorously carried out before the stipulated deadline, which was September 5th. These steps were taken to ensure the consistency and precision of the information provided in this critical stage of the GDS design project. In figures 2, 3, 4, and 5 the verification process of the four design sent to manufacture is shown to be successful.

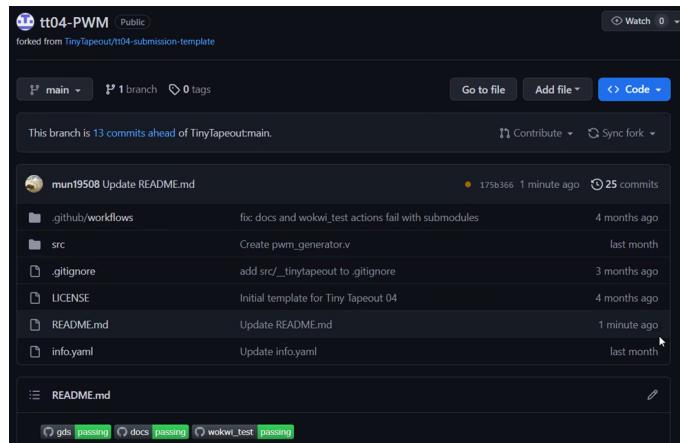


Fig. 2: Verified Pulse Width Modulation Generator Verilog

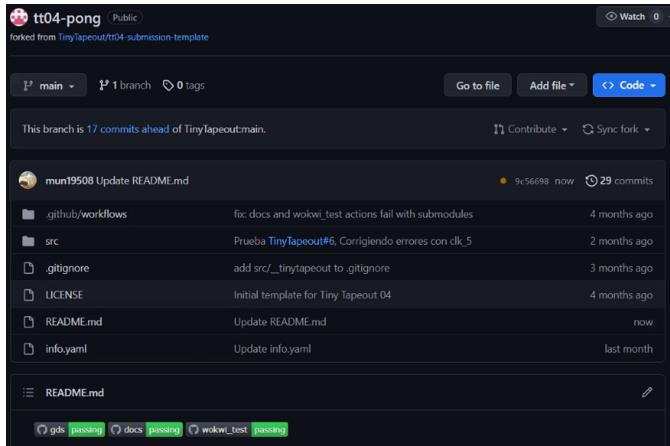


Fig. 3: Verified Pong game Verilog

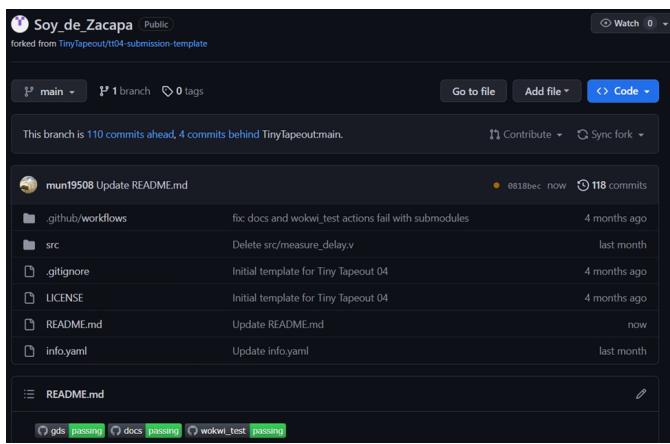


Fig. 4: Verified ASCII Text Printer Circuit Verilog

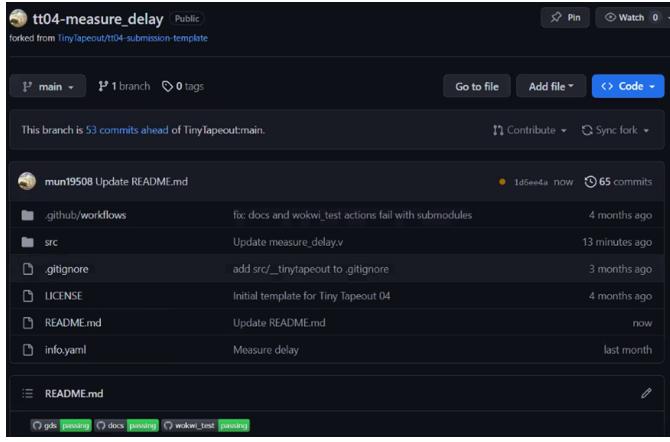


Fig. 5: Verified Multi stage path for delay measurements Verilog

F. Technology transfer for the Tiny Tapeout chip design flow

The true purpose behind this paper is to push the boundaries of understanding the semiconductor fabrication field at Universidad del Valle de Guatemala. The proper documentation of the knowledge acquired by all the members that were involved on this work is essential for future students. Therefore, Video

tutorials and documents were made for students to replicate the Tiny tapeout program to take any design from a fully digital verilog implemented circuit all the way to a physical integrated circuit.

III. RESULTS

Following the submission of the verilog designs on September 5th, 2023, the Tiny Tapeout team began the process of verification. The verification process consisted of a series of proprietary tests to ensure that the designs were correct and that they would be able to be fabricated. Subsequently, the Tiny Tapeout team reached out to confirm the approval for fabrication. The expected delivery date for the fabricated chips is on February 15th, 2024.

The use of Github has allowed the design submission process to become more automated and streamlined. The use of Github has also allowed the Tiny Tapeout team to develop interesting and innovative tools to aid in the intricacies of the designs making process. One of these tools is a 2D viewer that allows the user to view the final layout of the design on the die and a 3D viewer that allows the user to see the different layers of the design to further understand the complexity of what is behind the fabrication of a chip. The 2D and 3D views of each of the design submitted are shown in the figures 6, 7, 8 and 9 were generated on the git repository of the respective git projects for each of the designs.

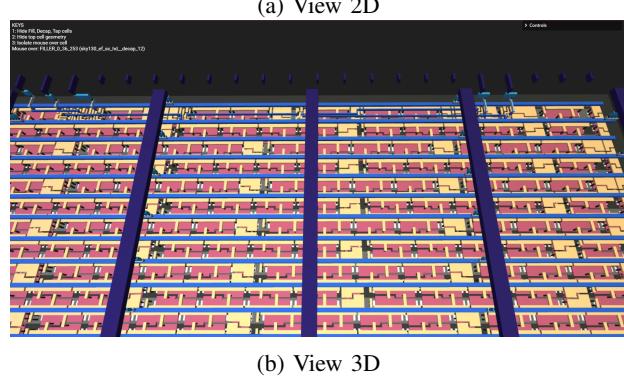
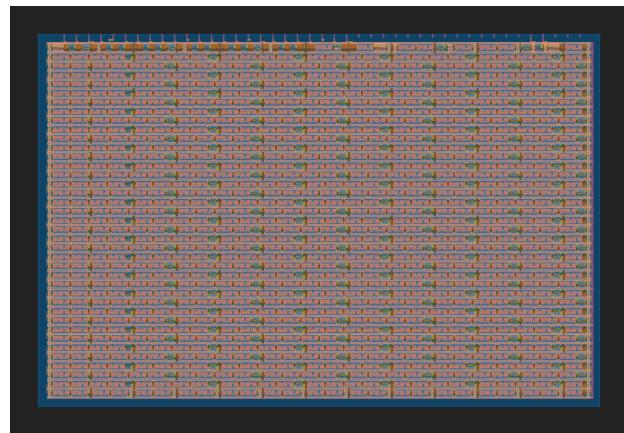
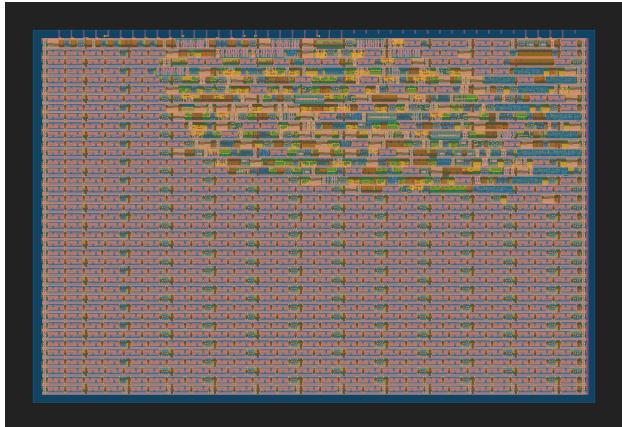


Fig. 6: multistage path for delay measurements layout

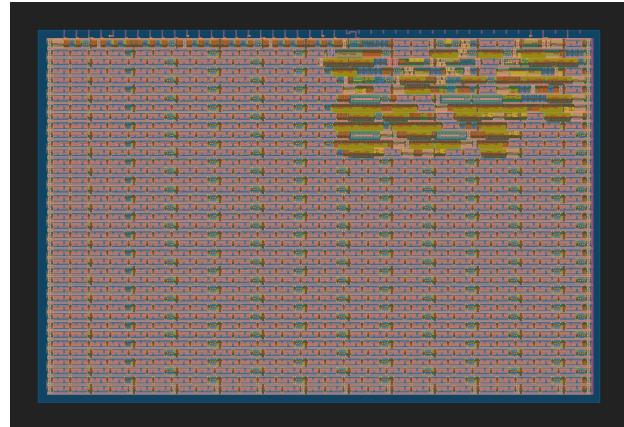


(a) View 2D



(b) View 3D

Fig. 7: ASCII text printer circuit layout

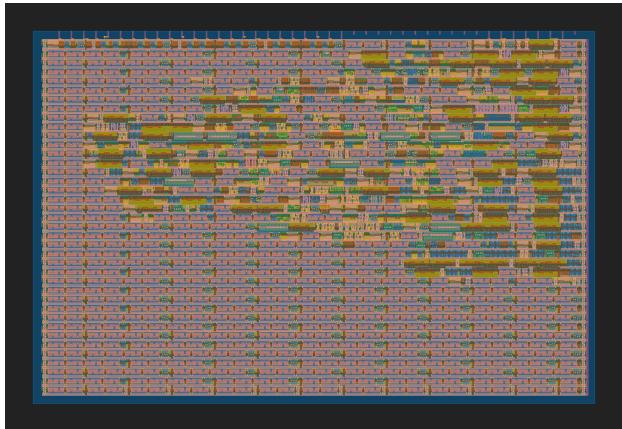


(a) View 2D



(b) View 3D

Fig. 9: Pulse Width Modulation generator layout



(a) View 2D



(b) View 3D

Fig. 8: The Pong game layout

For a more in deep illustration on the complexity of the designs, figure 10 has been included to showcase the different layers of the Pulse Width Modulation generator design. The grey rectangles that can be observed in the figure are the N-wells for the transistors, the diffusion junction are the white rectangles, the pink rectangles are the polysilicon layers, the blue rectangles are the interconnect.



Fig. 10: Pulse Width Modulation generator layout

The Tiny Tapeout initiative has some limitations that are given by the nature of the project, one of the most important limitations to take inconsideration is the size of the die that each of the participants has to work with, due to this initiative

being a multi-project wafer the size of the die is limited to 160um x 100um. This sizes may vary depending on the year of the initiative, due to how many projects are being submitted for fabrication. Table I shows the percentage of the die that was utilized by each of the designs submitted.

Circuit	Percentage utilize(%)
Multy stage path for delay measurements	0.63
ASCII Text Printer Circuit	17.87
Implementation of the Pong game	28.82
Pulse Width Modulation Generator	9.59

TABLE I: Porcentaje utilize in length of waver per circuit

In figure 11 the full render of the die with 143 projects is shown, with a width of 6mm and with a length of 7.4mm this is the final product that will be manufactured and packages for the final delivery of the Tiny Tapeout initiative.

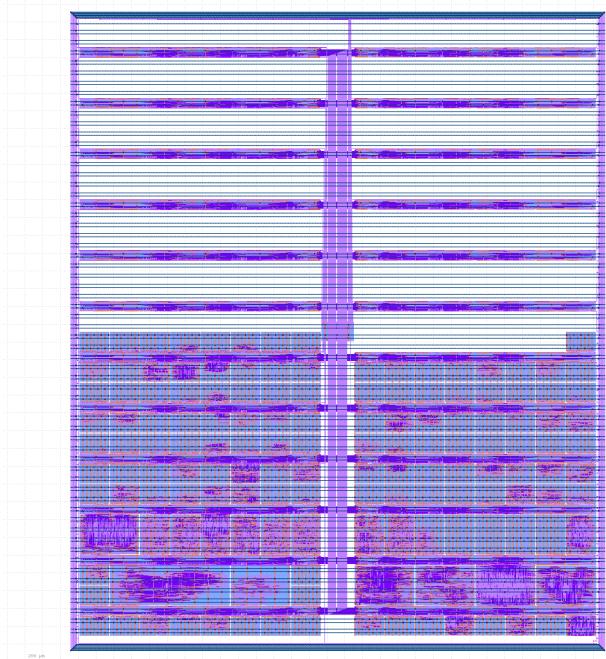


Fig. 11: Full render of the die with 143 project

The final die design have a 55% of utilization.

IV. CONCLUSION

The development of four Verilog designs for Tiny Tapeout 04 submission encompassed a multistage path for delay measurement, an ASCII text printer circuit, the implementation of the Pong game, and a pulse-width modulation generator. Approval for these designs was granted on October 10th, 2023. For the Tiny Tapeout 04 submission, 143 projects were submitted from over 30 countries. The total build time amounted to 8.6 hours, utilizing a total of 82,126 cells. The top 10 tags associated with the projects included testing, timing, experiments, games, clocks, PWM, serial communication, VGA, and music implementation. To comprehensively understand the tool's limitations, additional tests on the physical chip are imperative. The overarching goal of the Tiny Tape Out initiative

is to educate and offer students the opportunity to navigate the entire design process, from creation to manufacturing, with minimal prior knowledge in this field.

APPENDIX A GITHUB REPOSITORY

As said in results section, the links for the repository of the project sended to manufacturing are:

- Multy stage path for delay measurement:
https://github.com/mun19508/tt04-measure_delay.git
- ASCII Text Printer Circuit:
https://github.com/NoelFPB/Soy_de_Zacapa.git
- Implementation of the Pong game:
<https://github.com/Julio18211/tt04-pong.git>
- Pulse Width Modulation Generator:
<https://github.com/gar19085/tt04-PWM.git>

APPENDIX B VIDEOS

As said in the results section, the links for the video are:
<https://youtu.be/GCHuexQQz3c>

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