

Content Addressable Memory (CAM) on a FPGA

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Abstract—We designed a synthesizable module for Content Addressable Memory on a FPGA. The module designed is expandable and uses a very small amount of LUTs. It can also be used as a co-processor for a Von Neumann based CPU machine using serial communication. This type of memory is able to provide constant time complexities for searching, reading and writing by leveraging certain circuitry around each cell of memory.

Index Terms—FPGA, Verilog, CAM

I. INTRODUCTION

Content Addressable Memory (CAM) is an alternate architecture for memory. Unlike Random Access Memory (RAM) which works by performing operations for a word by using a memory address, a CAM is able to select multiple memory addresses based on some information about the words. Furthermore, a CAM can perform operations like multi-writing into and reading from multiple selected cells in constant time. This is the reason CAMs are so useful in routers and bridges as they are a much faster way to search for IP addresses to send packets to.

CAMs are usually available in the form of Application Specific Integrated Chipsets (ASICs) and are used in routers, databases and more. They can be divided into two broad categories, one being Binary CAMs and the other Ternary. Ternary CAMs come with the added flexibility of searching for words with masked bits, which is very similar to the regex for '.'. Of course, this comes with added circuitry to each cell.

The goal of this project was to design a module for an expandable Ternary CAM that is synthesizable on a FPGA using modern HDL tools. We also integrated a finite state machine that encapsulated the T-CAM and a Serial UART module. This enabled the researchers to directly communicate with the T-CAM from a CPU using serial communication. The FSM enabled commands for reading, writing, selecting first as well as searching.

CAMs and CAPPs have potential in graph theory, neural network caching, high-speed indexing, regex computations and a lot more. We hope that an open-source, expandable CAM that can be synthesized on a FPGA can fill the gap for researchers to find new applications using an alternate memory architecture.

II. CONTENT ADDRESSABLE MEMORY

The circuitry of a CAM can be broken down into 3 main parts. The tags, the cells and the search registers. The search registers are the least complex circuits in a CAM. They consist of 2 different registers, the comparand and the mask. The comparand is the word to search for, and the mask contains locations of bits in the word to ignore during the search. For example, if we want to ignore the third character in our search, we would write mask bits [16:23] as high. The design for these are given in figure 1. (TODO)

The second most complex circuitry is found in the tags. Tags are bits for all cells, if the bit of a cell is high after a search, it means that the word in that cell was found in the search. In other words, after a search, the cells with high tag bits are the ones that were found. As all the tag bits of a CAM have to change in constant time (or in parallel), match lines from the search registers go through each cell to create mismatch lines which turn irrelevant tags off whenever the search signal is set. The circuitry also includes logic for manually setting all bits high and selecting the first tag bit that is on. The design for these are given in figure 2.(TODO)

The most complex circuitry is found in the memory cells as it encapsulates the main logic for writing, reading and searching. Each bit of each cell is surrounded by 2 write lines, 2 search lines and 1 read line. The nth bits of all cells share these lines. The value of each bit in each cell is changed to 0 or 1 depending on which write line is set high. Inversely, depending on the 2 search lines and the bit value, a mismatch line that is connected to the tag bit of the cell is set high or low. This allows the CAM to search or write in parallel. The output of all the read lines is the bitwise OR of all cells that have their tag bits on. The circuits as implemented are shown in the figures 3-5 (TODO).

Our design of the CAM is heavily influenced by Caxton Foster's book on the subject [1]. We used System Verilog for our design, along with Next PnR. This placing and routing tool was used because it accommodated factors like timing into place. This was crucial for a clock dependent machine with dense circuitry like a CAM along with the Serial UART module that is used for control. The whole module was

synthesized and tested on a TinyFPGA-Bx and a Python library was written to communicate with it. The FSM that acts as a central command center for the CAM is discussed in the next section.

III. THE FINITE STATE MACHINE

The FSM is the crux of interacting with the CAM and making it carry out complex arbitrary algorithms by exposing commands to carry out different tasks. It has numerous states, some of them are sending or receiving data, loading data into the CAM, selecting first, searching, reading, setting the comparand and mask as well as writing. The base UART module used is from David Things' Github repository. [2] This works on a 48MHz clock cycle. To reduce complexities and avoid additional LUTs usage, we used the same clock speed throughout the project.

As shown in figure 4 (TODO), our FSM acts as a way to carry out procedural tasks while staying under the limit of 21 ns by linking states together. Therefore, a task may trigger several states before it returns to the default state. For example, the algorithm for searching has several steps, it comprises of

- Setting the comparand
- Setting the mask
- Sending the SET signal
- Sending the SEARCH signal

Notice that the first two steps use several clock cycles as only one byte of data flows through the UART each clock cycle. This is due to its pipeline design.

The states transitions for the SET signal is given below:

- SET 1: change SET to high, set delay to 5 clock cycles
- IDLE: wait for delay, go to SET 2
- SET 2: change SET to low, listen for new command

In a very similar manner, all commands needed to operate a CAM were designed, these commands are triggered by sending a specific character to the CAM.

IV. RESULTS

V. CONCLUSION

Hello, here is some text without a meaning. This text should show what a printed text will look like at this place. If you read this text, you will get no information. Really? Is there no information? Is there a difference between this text and some nonsense like "Huardest gefburn"? Kjift – not at all! A blind text like this gives you information about the selected font, how the letters are written and an impression of the look. This text should contain all letters of the alphabet and it should be written in of the original language. There is no need for special content, but the length of words should match the language.

VI. DISCUSSION

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