

# An automated triple modular redundancy EDA flow for Yosys

## *REIT4882 Thesis Draft Project Proposal*

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### **Abstract**

Safety-critical sectors require Application Specific Integrated Circuit (ASIC) designs and Field Programmable Gate Array (FPGA) gateware to be fault-tolerant. In particular, space-fairing computers need to mitigate the effects of Single Event Upsets (SEUs) caused by ionising radiation. One common fault-tolerant design technique is Triple Modular Redundancy (TMR), which mitigates SEUs by triplicating key parts of the design and using voter circuits. Typically, this is manually implemented by designers at the Hardware Description Language (HDL) level, but this is error-prone and time-consuming. Leveraging the power and flexibility of the open-source Yosys Electronic Design Automation (EDA) tool, in this document I will propose TaMaRa: a novel fully automated TMR flow, implemented as a Yosys plugin. I provide a comprehensive review of relevant automated TMR literature, and provide a detailed plan of the TaMaRa project, including its design and verification.

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# 1. Background and introduction

For safety-critical sectors such as aerospace and defence, both Application Specific Integrated Circuits (ASICs) and Field Programmable Gate Array (FPGA) gateware must be designed to be fault tolerant to prevent catastrophic malfunctions. In the context of digital electronics, *fault tolerant* means that the design is able to gracefully recover and continue operating in the event of a fault, or upset. A Single Event Upset (SEU) occurs when ionising radiation strikes a transistor on a digital circuit, causing it to transition from a 1 to a 0, or vice versa. This type of upset is most common in space, where the Earth's atmosphere is not present to dissipate the ionising particles [1]. On an unprotected system, an unlucky SEU may corrupt the system's state to such a severe degree that it may cause destruction or loss of life - particularly important given the safety-critical nature of most space-fairing systems (satellites, crew capsules, missiles, etc). Thus, fault tolerant computing is widely studied and applied for space-based computing systems.

One common fault-tolerant design technique is Triple Modular Redundancy (TMR), which mitigates SEUs by triplicating key parts of the design and using voter circuits to select a non-corrupted result if an SEU occurs. Typically, TMR is manually designed at the Hardware Description Language (HDL) level, for example, by manually instantiating three copies of the target module, designing a voter circuit, and linking them all together. However, this approach is an additional time-consuming and potentially error-prone step in the already complex design pipeline.

## TODO diagram of TMR

Modern digital ICs and FPGAs are described using Hardware Description Languages (HDLs), such as SystemVerilog or VHDL. The process of transforming this high level description into a photolithography mask (for ICs) or bitstream (for FPGAs) is achieved through the use of Electronic Design Automation (EDA) tools. This generally comprises of the following stages:

- **Synthesis:** The transformation of a high-level textual HDL description into a lower level synthesisable netlist.
  - **Elaboration:** Includes the instantiation of HDL modules, resolution of generic parameters and constants. Like compilers, synthesis tools are typically split into frontend/backend, and elaboration could be considered a frontend/language parsing task.
  - **Optimisation:** This includes a multitude of tasks, anywhere from small peephole optimisations, to completely re-coding FSMs. In commercial tools, this is typically timing driven.
  - **Technology mapping:** This involves mapping the technology-independent netlist to the target platform, whether that be FPGA LUTs, or ASIC standard cells.
- **Placement:** The process of optimally placing the netlist onto the target device. For FPGAs, this involves choosing which logic elements to use. For digital ICs, this is much more complex and manual - usually done by dedicated layout engineers who design a *floorplan*.
- **Routing:** The process of optimally connecting all the placed logic elements (FPGAs) or standard cells (ICs).

Due to their enormous complexity and cutting-edge nature, most IC EDA tools are commercial proprietary software sold by the big three vendors: Synopsys, Cadence and Siemens. These are economically infeasible for almost all researchers, and even if they could be licenced, would not be possible to extend to implement custom synthesis passes. The major FPGA vendors, AMD and Intel, also develop their own EDA tools for each of their own devices, which are often cheaper or free. However, these tools are still proprietary software and cannot be modified by researchers. Until recently, there was no freely available, research-grade, open-source EDA tool available for study and improvement. That changed with the introduction of Yosys [2]. Yosys is a capable synthesis tool that can emit optimised netlists for various FPGA families as well as a few silicon process nodes (e.g. Skywater 130nm). Importantly,

for this thesis, Yosys can be modified either by changing the source code or by developing modular plugins that can be dynamically loaded at runtime. Due to specific advice from the Yosys development team [3], TaMaRa will be developed as a loadable C++ plugin.

**TODO diagram of the synthesis flow**

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Fault tolerant computing and redundancy

The application of triple modular redundancy to computer systems was first introduced in academia by [R. Lyons and W. Vanderkul](#) [4]. Like much of computer science, however, the authors trace the original concept back to John von Neumann. In addition to introducing the application of TMR to computer systems, the authors also provide a rigorous Monte-Carlo mathematical analysis of the reliability of TMR. One important takeaway from this is that the only way to make a system reliably redundant is to split it into multiple components, each of which is more reliable than the system as a whole. In the modern FPGA concept, this implies applying TMR at an RTL module level, although as we will soon see, more optimal and finer grained TMR can be applied. Although their Monte Carlo analysis shows that TMR dramatically improves reliability, they importantly show that as the number of modules  $M$  in the computer system increases, the computer will eventually become less reliable. This is due to the fact that the voter circuits may not themselves be perfectly reliable, and is important to note for FPGA and ASIC designs which may instantiate hundreds or potentially thousands of modules.

**TODO more background literature**

### 2.2. Single Event Upsets (SEUs)

**TODO more literature defining probabilities of SEUs on ASICs/FPGAs in space**

**TODO also consider talking about rad-hardened CMOS processes for ASICs**

### 2.3. Post-synthesis automated TMR

Recognising that prior literature focused mostly around manual or theoretical TMR, and the limitations of a manual approach, [J. M. Johnson and M. J. Wirthlin](#) [5] introduced four algorithms for the automatic insertion of TMR voters in a circuit, with a particular focus on timing and area trade-offs. Together with the thesis this paper was based on [6], these two publications form the seminal works on automated TMR for digital EDA. **TODO**

Whilst they provide an excellent design of TMR insertion algorithms, and a very thorough analysis of their area and timing trade-offs, [J. M. Johnson and M. J. Wirthlin](#) [5] do not have a rigorous analysis of the correctness of these algorithms. They produce experimental results demonstrating the timing and area trade-offs of the TMR algorithms on a real Xilinx Virtex 1000 FPGA, up to the point of P&R, but do not run it on a real device. More importantly, they also do not have any formal verification or simulated SEU scenarios to prove that the algorithms both work as intended, and keep the underlying behaviour of the circuit the same. Finally, in his thesis [6], Johnson states that the benchmark designs were synthesised using a combination of the commercial Synopsys Synplify tool, and the *BYU-LANL Triple Modular Redundancy (BL-TMR) Tool*. This Java-based set of tools ingest EDIF-format netlists, perform TMR on them, and write the processed result to a new EDIF netlist, which can be re-ingested by the synthesis program for place and route. This is quite a complex process, and was also designed before Yosys was introduced in 2013. It would be very better if the TMR pass was instead integrated directly into the synthesis tool - which is only possible for Yosys, as Synplify is commercial proprietary software. This is especially important for industry users who often have long and complicated synthesis flows.

It's also worth noting that [D. Skouson, A. Keller, and M. Wirthlin \[7\]](#) (from the same lab as above) introduced SpyDrNet, a Python-based netlist transformation tool that also implements TMR using the same algorithm as above. SpyDrNet is a great general purpose transformation tool for research purposes, but again is a separate tool that is not integrated *directly* into the synthesis process. I instead aim to make a *production* ready tool, with a focus on ease-of-use, correctness and performance.

Using a similar approach, [L. A. C. Benites and F. L. Kastensmidt \[8\]](#), and Benites' thesis [\[9\]](#), introduce an automated TMR approach implemented as a Tcl script for use in Cadence tools. They distinguish between "coarse grained TMR" (which they call "CGTMR"), applied at the RTL module level, and "fine grained TMR" (which they call "FGTMR"), applied at the sub-module (i.e. net) level. Building on that, they develop an approach that replicates both combinatorial and sequential circuits, which they call "fine grain distributed TMR" or "FGDTMR". They split their TMR pipeline into three stages: implementation ("TMRi"), optimisation ("TMRo"), and verification ("TMRv"). The implementation stage works by creating a new design to house the TMR design (which I'll call the "container design"), and instantiating copies of the original circuit in the container design. Depending on which mode the user selects, the authors state that either each "sequential gate" will be replaced by three copies and a voter, or "triplicated voters" will be inserted. What happens in the optimisation stage is not clear as Benites does not elaborate at all, but he does state it's only relevant for ASICs and involves "gate sizing". For verification, Benites uses a combination of fault-injection simulation (where SEUs are intentionally injected into the simulation), and formal verification through equivalence checking. Equivalence checking involves the use of Boolean satisfiability solvers ("SAT solvers") to mathematically prove one circuit is equivalent to another. Benites key verification contribution is identifying a more optimal way to use equivalence checking to verify fine-grained TMR. **TODO**

One of the most important takeaways from these works are related to clock synchronisation. The authors interestingly choose to not replicate clocks or asynchronous reset lines, which they state is due to clock skew and challenges with multiple clock domains created by the redundancy. Due to the clear challenges involved, ignoring clocks and asynchronous resets is a reasonable limitation introduced by the authors, and potentially reasonable for us to introduce as well. Nonetheless, it is a limitation I would like to address in TaMaRa if possible, since leaving these elements unprotected creates a serious hole that would likely preclude its real-world usage. Arguably, the most important takeaway from Benites' work is the use of equivalence checking in the TMR verification stage. This is especially important since Johnson [\[5\]](#) did not formally verify his approach. Benites' usage of formal verification, in particular, equivalence checking, is an excellent starting point to design the verification methodology for TaMaRa.

Although the most commonly cited literature implements automated TMR post-synthesis on the netlist, other authors over time have explored other stages of the ASIC/FPGA synthesis pipeline to insert TMR, both lower level and higher level.

## 2.4. Low-level TMR approaches

On the lower level side, [N. D. Hindman, L. T. Clark, D. W. Patterson, and K. E. Holbert \[10\]](#) introduce an ASIC standard-cell based automated TMR approach. When digital circuits are synthesised into ASICs (i.e. silicon ICs instead of FPGA gateware), they are technology mapped onto standard cells provided by the foundry as part of their Process Design Kit (PDK). For example, SkyWater Technology provides an open-source 130 nm ASIC PDK, which contains standard cells for NAND gates, muxes and more **TODO citation?**. The authors design a TMR flip-flop cell, known as a "Triple Redundant Self Correcting Master-Slave Flip-Flop" (TRSCMSFF), that mitigates SEUs on a process level. Since this is so low level and operates below the entire synthesis/place and route pipeline, their approach has the advantage that *any* design - including proprietary encrypted IP cores that are (unfortunately) common in industry - can be made redundant. Very importantly, the original design need not be aware of the TMR

implementation, so this approach fulfills my goal of making TMR available seamlessly to designers. The authors demonstrate that the TRSCMSFF cell adds minimal overhead to logic speed and power consumption, and even perform a real-life radiation test under a high energy ion beam. Overall, this is an excellent approach for ASICs. However, this approach, being standard-cell specific, cannot be applied to FPGA designs. Rather, the FPGA manufacturers themselves would need to apply this method to make a series of specially rad-hardened devices (note that an FPGA is itself an ASIC<sup>1</sup>). It would also appear that designers would have to port the TRSCMSFF cell to each fab and process node they intend to target. While TaMaRa will have worse power, performance and area (PPA) trade-offs on ASICs than this method, it is also more general in that it can target FPGAs *and* ASICs due to being integrated directly into Yosys. Nevertheless, it would appear that for the specific case of targeting the best PPA trade-offs for TMR on ASICs, the approach described in [10] is the most optimal one available.

## 2.5. High-level TMR approaches

On the opposite (higher level) side, several authors have investigated applying TMR directly to the HDL source code. One of the most notable examples was introduced by S. Kulis [11] through a tool he calls “TMRG”. TMRG operates on Verilog RTL by implementing the majority of a Verilog parser and elaborator from scratch. It takes as input Verilog RTL, as well as a selection of Verilog source comments that act as annotations to guide the tool on its behaviour. In turn, the tool modifies the design code and outputs processed Verilog RTL that implements TMR, as well as Synopsys Design Compiler design constraints. Like the goal of TaMaRa, the TMRG approach is designed to target both FPGAs and ASICs, and for FPGAs, Kulis correctly identifies the issue that not all FPGA blocks can be replicated. For example, a design that instantiates a PLL clock divider on an FPGA that only contains one PLL could not be replicated. Kulis also correctly identifies that optimisation-driven synthesis tools such as Yosys and Synopsys DC will eliminate TMR logic as part of the synthesis pipeline, as the redundancy is, by nature, redundant and subject to removal. In Yosys, this occurs specifically in the `opt_share` and `opt_clean` passes according to specific advice from the development team [3]. However, unlike Synopsys DC, Yosys is not constraint driven, which means that Kulis’ constraint-based approach to preserving TMR logic through optimisation would not work in this case. Finally, since TMRG re-implements the majority of a synthesis tool’s frontend (including the parser and elaborator), it is limited to only supporting Verilog. Yosys natively supports Verilog and some SystemVerilog, with plugins [12] providing more complete SV and VHDL support. Since TaMaRa uses Yosys’ existing frontend, it should be more reliable and useable with many more HDLs.

**TODO The other high level papers**

## 3. Project plan

### 3.1. Aims of the project

This thesis is governed by two overarching aims:

- To design a C++ plugin for the Yosys synthesis tool that, when presented with any Yosys-compatible HDL input, will apply an algorithm to turn the selected HDL module(s) into a triply modular redundant design, suitable for space.
- To design and implement a comprehensive verification process for the above pass, including the use of formal methods, HDL simulation, fuzzing and potential real-life radiation exposure.

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<sup>1</sup>This terminology may be confusing, so, to clarify: ASICs encompass the majority of silicon ICs with an application-specific purpose. This includes devices like GPUs, NPU as well as more domain-specific chips such as video transcoders or RF transceivers. An FPGA is a specific type of ASIC that implements an array of LUTs that can be programmed by SRAM.

Much like designing a pass for a compiler, designing a pass for an EDA tool is no light undertaking. It needs to handle all possible designs the user may provide as input, and provide a high degree of assurance of correctness. This is particularly important given the safety-critical nature of the designs users may provide to TaMaRa. I do not undertake this lightly, and the rigorous verification methodology is a necessity to produce a pass worth using.

These two major aims can be broken down into smaller aims. Under the design pipeline:

- Research the applications of graph theory to **TODO continue**

### 3.2. Engineering requirements

Due to the large and complex nature of the TaMaRa development process, I decided it beneficial to apply the MoSCoW engineering requirements system. I present the requirements and their justifications. The capitalised keywords are to be interpreted according to RFC 2119 [13].

#### TMR pass requirements

Requirement	Justification
TaMaRa SHALL be implemented as a C++ pass for the Yosys synthesis tool	Yosys is certainly going to be the synthesis tool used, and the C++ plugin API is the most stable.
TaMaRa SHALL process the design in such a way that triple modular redundancy (TMR) is applied to the selected HDL module(s), protecting it from SEUs	This is the overarching goal of the thesis.
TaMaRa MAY operate at any desired level of granularity - anywhere from RTL code level, to elaboration, to techmapping - but it SHALL operate on at least one level of granularity	As long as the TMR is implemented correctly, it doesn't matter what level of granularity the algorithm uses. Each level of granularity has different trade-offs which still require research at this stage.
TaMaRa SHOULD compare coarse and fine grained TMR	It would be interesting to see the area and reliability effects of applying TMR in at least two different ways. This is left as a SHOULD in case of serious time constraints.
TaMaRa SHOULD be capable of handling large designs, up to and including picorv32, in reasonable amounts of time and memory	Also supports the overarching goal of the thesis, but left as a SHOULD in case of major unforeseen implementation issues with the performance.
TaMaRa MAY handle FPGA primitives like SRAMs and DSP slices	Most likely will not handle these primitives as there's no reliable way to replicate them across all FPGA vendors supported by Yosys.
TaMaRa MAY make the voters themselves redundant	Could be added for extra assurance, but not typically considered necessary in industry.
TaMaRa SHOULD NOT be timing driven	Timing is best left up to the P&R tool (Nextpnr). Although some EDA synthesis tools are timing driven, Yosys currently is not.
TaMaRa SHOULD have a clean codebase through the use of tools like clang-tidy	Easy to implement and highly desirable but not strictly necessary for correct functioning.
TaMaRa SHALL NOT consider multi-bit upsets	Although multi-bit upsets may occur in practice, this work focuses on SEUs in particular. MBUs



Requirement	Justification
	are much less likely ( <b>TODO citation?</b> ) and require significant area increases due to extra voters ( <b>TODO citation?</b> )

### Verification requirements

Requirement	Justification
Verification simulation SHALL be performed using one or more of: Verilator, Icarus Verilog, cxxrtl	These are the best open-source simulation tools, and each have different trade-offs (e.g. Verilator is fast, but not sub-cycle accurate).
Verification SHOULD involve a complex design (e.g. picorv32 CPU) in a simulated SEU environment	This is an important final test, but is left as a SHOULD requirement in case of major unforeseen issues applying TMR to large designs.
Verification SHALL involve equivalence checking (formally proving that a design acts the same before and after TMR) using <i>SymbiYosys</i> and <i>eqy</i>	Equivalence checking is necessary to formally prove that the TMR pass does not modify the behaviour of the design, only that it adds TMR.
Verification MAY involve fuzzing equivalence checking (generating random RTL modules, applying TMR, and checking they're identical)	It's not clear at the time of writing whether a fully end-to-end, automated fuzzing approach for equivalence checking is possible.
Verification SHALL involve mutation coverage (injecting faults into the design and formally proving that TaMaRa mitigates them) using <i>mcy</i>	Mutation coverage is necessary to formally prove that the TMR pass correctly mitigates SEUs.
Verification MAY involve fuzzing mutation coverage, if such a thing is possible	Early research indicates that the generation of random RTL <i>as well as</i> random testbenches is still under active research in academia.
Verification SHOULD NOT involve a physical, real-life radiation test whereby an FPGA with a TaMaRa bitstream on it is exposed to radiation	UQ does not have the facilities to expose a real-life FPGA to radiation. Even if it did, the risks and challenges created by this verification approach would not be worth its utilisation.

### 3.3. Milestones

**TODO**

### 3.4. Timeline

To design the timeline of the TaMaRa project, I use a Gantt chart, shown below.

**TODO**

### 3.5. Risk assessment

Before it was known that UQ does not have the facilities to expose an FPGA to real-life radiation, it was considered a possibility that TaMaRa would be tested on a real-life device under intense radiation conditions. This would have created a number of risks and challenges. However, now that this verification approach has been discarded, TaMaRa is a pure software/gateway project, and thus carries no significant health and safety risks.

Nonetheless, TaMaRa is not completely risk-free. Due to the fact that it may be deployed on safety-critical systems, its correct functioning is important. Hence, a simple risk assessment has been prepared.

Risk	Potential damage	Rating	Mitigation strategy
TaMaRa implementation is not able to be completed in time	Thesis result is worse, unable to verify results	Medium	Proper project planning including formulation of engineering requirements and research questions. Regular meetings with supervisor. Contact with YosysHQ dev team.
TaMaRa verification is not able to be completed successfully	Thesis result is worse, not able to prove the TMR algorithm works. Unable to differentiate thesis from previous works.	Medium	Research into formal verification and basing work on prior papers. Contact with YosysHQ dev team.
TaMaRa introduces subtle differences in behaviour in the output circuit	Safety-critical systems that TaMaRa is used to design may have unexpected behaviour, potentially leading to severe loss of life or property.	High	Rigorous verification including formal verification and fault-injection simulation.
TaMaRa does not implement TMR correctly	Safety-critical systems that TaMaRa is used to design may fail due to SEUs, causing severe loss of life or property.	High	Rigorous verification including formal verification and fault-injection simulation.

### 3.6. Ethics

TaMaRa may be deployed to design defence systems. This is not considered a significant ethical issue.

## 4. Conclusion

TODO

## 5. References

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