

# Using the SDRAM on Altera's DE2-70 Board with VHDL Designs

#### For Quartus II 13.0

#### 1 Introduction

This tutorial explains how the SDRAM chips on Altera's DE2-70 Development and Education board can be used with a Nios II system implemented by using the Altera Qsys tool. The discussion is based on the assumption that the reader has access to a DE2-70 board and is familiar with the material in the tutorial *Introduction to the Altera Qsys System Integration Tool*.

The screen captures in the tutorial were obtained using the Quartus<sup>®</sup> II version 13.0; if other versions of the software are used, some of the images may be slightly different.

#### **Contents:**

- Example Nios II System
- The SDRAM Interface
- Using the Qsys tool to Generate the Nios II System
- Integration of the Nios II System into the Quartus II Project
- Using the Clock Signals IP Core

#### 2 Background

The introductory tutorial *Introduction to the Altera Qsys System Integration Tool* explains how the memory in the Cyclone II FPGA chip can be used in the context of a simple Nios II system. For practical applications it is necessary to have a much larger memory. The Altera DE2-70 board contains 2 SDRAM chips that can each store 32 Mbytes of data. Each chip is organized as 4M x 16 bits x 4 banks. The SDRAM chips require careful timing control. To provide access to the SDRAM chips, the Qsys tool implements an *SDRAM Controller* circuit. This circuit generates the signals needed to deal with the SDRAM chips.

## 3 Example Nios II System

As an illustrative example, we will add the SDRAM to the Nios II system described in the *Introduction to the Altera Qsys System Integration Tool* tutorial. Figure 1 gives the block diagram of our example system.

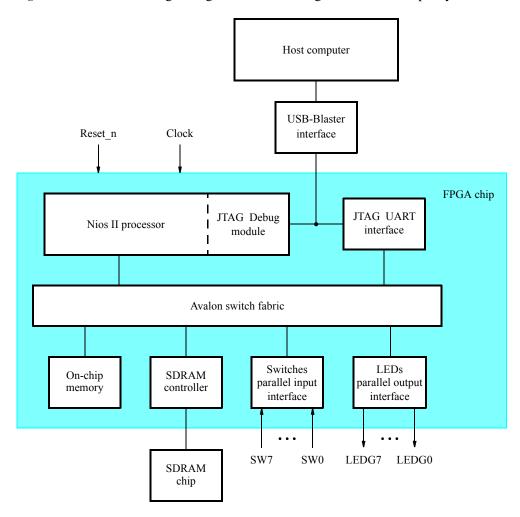


Figure 1. Example Nios II system implemented on the DE2-70 board.

The system realizes a trivial task. Eight toggle switches on the DE2-70 board, SW7-0, are used to turn on or off the eight green LEDs, LEDG7-0. The switches are connected to the Nios II system by means of a parallel I/O interface configured to act as an input port. The LEDs are driven by the signals from another parallel I/O interface configured to act as an output port. To achieve the desired operation, the eight-bit pattern corresponding to the state of the switches has to be sent to the output port to activate the LEDs. This will be done by having the Nios II processor execute an application program. Continuous operation is required, such that as the switches are toggled the lights change accordingly.

The introductory tutorial showed how we can use the Qsys tool to design the hardware needed to implement this task, assuming that the application program which reads the state of the toggle switches and sets the green LEDs accordingly is loaded into a memory block in the FPGA chip. In this tutorial, we will explain how SDRAM chips on the DE2-70 board can be included in the system in Figure 1, so that our application program can be run from the SDRAM rather than from the on-chip memory.

Doing this tutorial, the reader will learn about:

- Using the Qsys tool to include an SDRAM interface for a Nios II-based system
- Timing issues with respect to the SDRAM on the DE2-70 board

#### 4 The SDRAM Interface

The two SDRAM chips on the DE2-70 board each have a capacity of 256 Mbits (32 Mbytes). Each chip is organized as 4M x 16 bits x 4 banks. The signals needed to communicate with a chip are shown in Figure 2. All of the signals, except the clock, can be provided by the SDRAM Controller that can be generated by using the Qsys tool. The clock signal is provided separately. It has to meet the clock-skew requirements as explained in section 7. Note that some signals are active low, which is denoted by the suffix N.

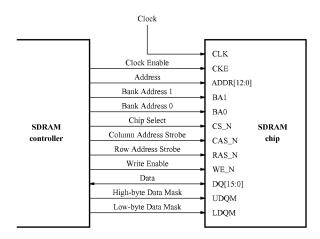


Figure 2. The SDRAM signals.

### 5 Using the Qsys tool to Generate the Nios II System

Our starting point will be the Nios II system discussed in the *Introduction to the Altera Qsys System Integration Tool* tutorial, which we implemented in a project called *lights*. We specified the system shown in Figure 3.

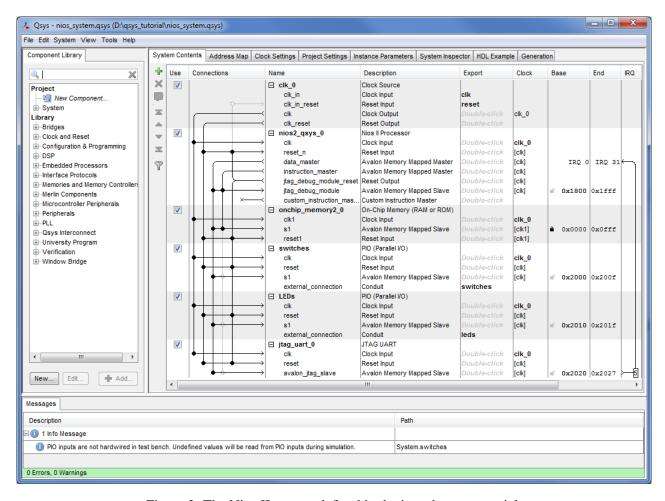


Figure 3. The Nios II system defined in the introductory tutorial.

If you saved the *lights* project, then open this project in the Quartus II software and then open the Qsys tool. Otherwise, you need to create and implement the project, as explained in the introductory tutorial, to obtain the system shown in the figure.

To add the SDRAM, in the window of Figure 3 select Memories and Memory Controllers > External Memory Interfaces > SDRAM Interfaces > SDRAM Controller and click Add. A window depicted in Figure 4 appears. Set the Data Width parameter to 32 bits, the Row Width to 13 bits, the Column Width to 9 bits, and leave the default values for the rest. Since we will not simulate the system in this tutorial, do not select the option Include a functional memory model in the system testbench. Select the *Timing* tab to get to the window in Figure 5. Configure the SDRAM timing parameters by setting the refresh command rate to once every 7.8125 microseconds

and the delay after powerup to 200 microseconds. Click Finish. Now, in the window of Figure 3, there will be an **sdram** module added to the design. Rename this module to *sdram*. Select the command System > Assign Base Addresses to produce the assignment shown in Figure 6. Observe that the Qsys tool assigned the base address 0x08000000 to the SDRAM. To make use of the SDRAM, we need to configure the reset vector and exception vector of the Nios II processor. Right-click on the nios2\_processor and then select Edit to reach the window in Figure 7. Select sdram to be the memory device for both reset vector and exception vector, as shown in the figure. Click Finish to return to the System Contents tab and regenerate the system.

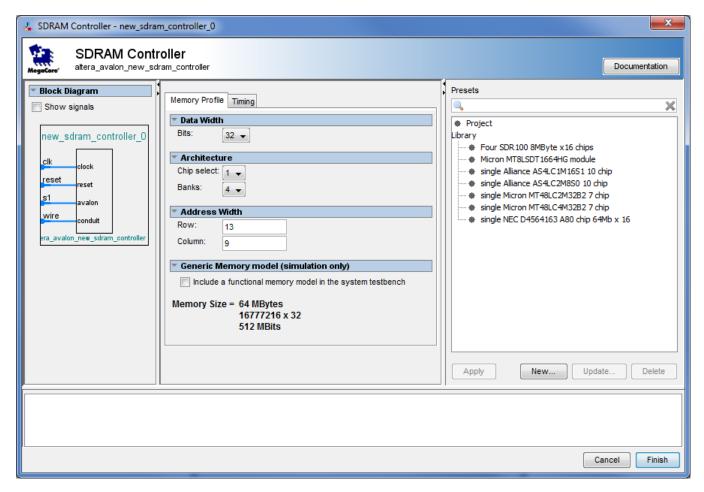


Figure 4. Add the SDRAM Controller.

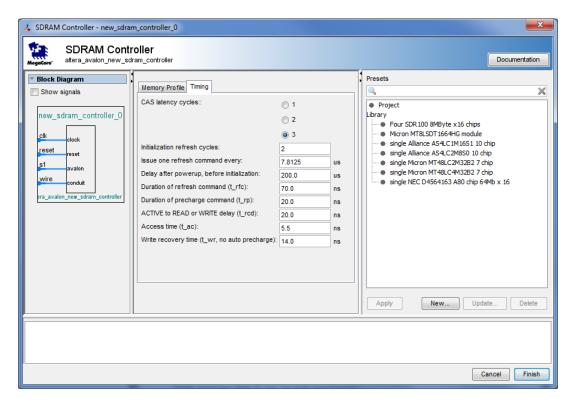


Figure 5. SDRAM Timings

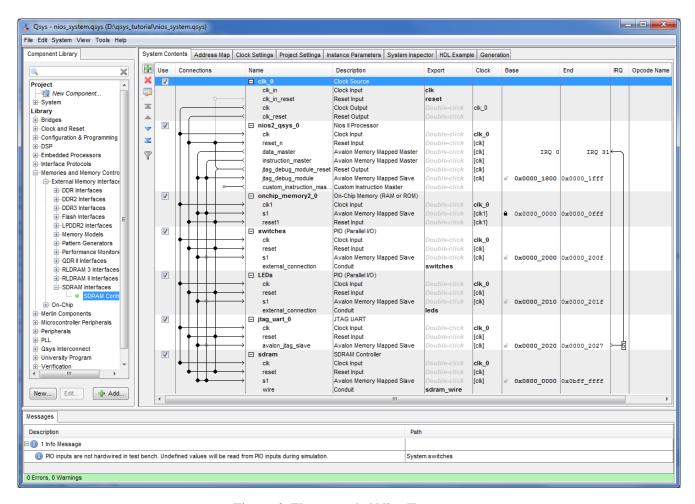


Figure 6. The expanded Nios II system.

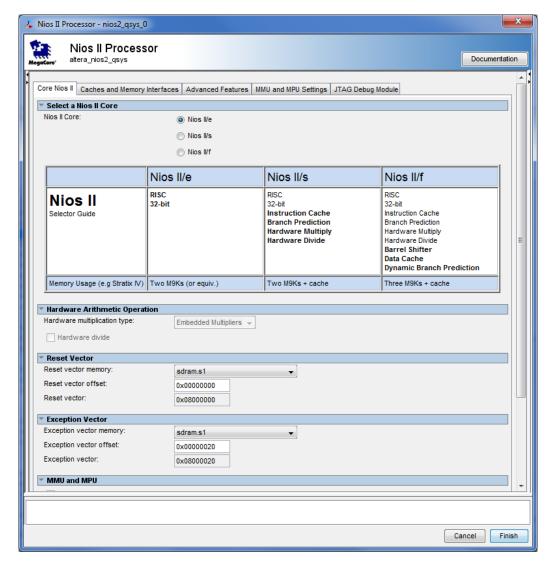


Figure 7. Define the reset vector and the exception vector.

The Qsys tool generates an HDL file for the system, which can then be instantiated in a VHDL file. The augmented Verilog module generated by the Qsys tool is in the file *nios\_system.v* in the nios\_system\synthesis directory of the project. Figure 8 depicts the portion of the code that defines the input and output signals for the module *nios\_system*. As in our initial system that we developed in the introductory tutorial, the 8-bit vector that is the input to the parallel port *Switches* is called *switches\_export*. The 8-bit output vector is called *leds\_export*. The clock and reset signals are called *clk\_clk* and *reset\_reset\_n*, respectively. A new module, called *sdram*, is included. It involves the signals indicated in Figure 2. For example, the address lines are referred to as the **output** vector *sdram\_wire\_addr[12:0]*. The data lines are referred to as the **inout** type because the data lines are bidirectional.

```
module nios_system (
     input wire
                        clk clk,
     input wire
                       reset_reset_n,
                                          //
                                                  reset.reset n
     output wire [7:0] leds_export,
                                          //
                                                  leds.export
     input wire [7:0] switches_export, // switches.export
     output wire [12:0] sdram_wire_addr, // sdram_wire.addr
     output wire [1:0] sdram_wire_ba,
     output wire
                        sdram_wire_cas_n, //
                                                       .cas_n
     output wire
                       sdram_wire_cke,
                                                       .cke
     output wire
                       sdram_wire_cs_n,
                                                      .cs_n
     inout wire [31:0] sdram_wire_dq,
                                          //
                                                       .da
     output wire [3:0] sdram_wire_dqm,
                                         //
                                                      .dqm
     output wire
                       sdram_wire_ras_n, //
                                                       .ras n
     output wire
                        sdram wire we n
                                                       .we n
```

Figure 8. A part of the generated Verilog module.

## 6 Integration of the Nios II System into the Quartus II Project

Now, we have to instantiate the expanded Nios II system in the top-level VHDL entity, as we have done in the tutorial *Introduction to the Altera Qsys System Integration Tool*. The entity is named *lights*, because this is the name of the top-level design entity in our Quartus II project.

A first attempt at creating the new entity is presented in Figure 9. The input and output ports of the entity use the pin names for the 50-MHz clock, *CLOCK\_50*, pushbutton switches, *KEY*, toggle switches, *SW*, and green LEDs, *LEDG*, as used in our original design. They also use the pin names *DRAMO\_CLK*, *DRAMO\_CKE*, *DRAMO\_ADDR*, *DRAMO\_BA\_1*, *DRAMO\_BA\_0*, *DRAMO\_CS\_N*, *DRAMO\_CAS\_N*, *DRAMO\_RAS\_N*, *DRAMO\_WE\_N*, *DRAM\_DQ*, *DRAMO\_UDQM*, and *DRAMO\_LDQM*, which correspond to the SDRAM signals indicated in Figure 2. A similar set of signals are used for the other SDRAM chip. All of these names are those specified in the DE2-70 User Manual, which allows us to make the pin assignments by importing them from the file called *DE2\_70\_pin\_assignments.qsf* in the directory *tutorials\design\_files*, which is included on the CD-ROM that accompanies the DE2-70 board and can also be found on Altera's DE2-70 web page.

Observe that the two *Bank Address* signals are treated by the Qsys tool as a two-bit vector called *sdram\_wire\_ba[1:0]*, as seen in Figure 8. However, in the *DE2\_70\_pin\_assignments.qsf* file these signals are given as separate signals *DRAM0\_BA\_1* and *DRAM0\_BA\_0*. This is accommodated by our VHDL code. Similarly, the vector *sdram\_wire\_dqm[1:0]* corresponds to the signals *(DRAM0\_UDQM* and *DRAM0\_LDQM)*.

Finally, note that we tried an obvious approach of using the 50-MHz system clock, *CLOCK\_50*, as the clock signal for the SDRAM chips. This is specified by the last assignment statement in the code. This approach leads to a potential timing problem caused by the clock skew on the DE2-70 board, which can be fixed as explained in section 7.

```
-- Inputs: SW7-0 are parallel port inputs to the Nios II system.
          CLOCK_50 is the system clock.
          KEY0 is the active-low system reset.
-- Outputs: LEDG7-0 are parallel port outputs from the Nios II system.
          SDRAM ports correspond to the signals in Figure 2; their names are those
          used in the DE2-70 User Manual.
LIBRARY ieee;
USE ieee.std_logic_1164.all;
USE ieee.std logic arith.all;
USE ieee.std_logic_unsigned.all;
ENTITY lights IS
  PORT (
    SW: IN STD_LOGIC_VECTOR(7 DOWNTO 0);
    KEY: IN STD LOGIC VECTOR(0 DOWNTO 0);
    CLOCK 50: IN STD LOGIC:
    LEDG: OUT STD LOGIC VECTOR(7 DOWNTO 0);
    DRAM_DQ: INOUT STD_LOGIC_VECTOR (31 DOWNTO 0);
    DRAM0_ADDR, DRAM1_ADDR: OUT STD_LOGIC_VECTOR (12 DOWNTO 0);
    DRAM0_BA_1, DRAM0_BA_0, DRAM1_BA_1, DRAM1_BA_0 : BUFFER STD_LOGIC;
    DRAMO_CAS_N, DRAMO_RAS_N, DRAMO_CLK: OUT STD_LOGIC;
    DRAMO_CKE, DRAMO_CS_N, DRAMO_WE_N: OUT STD_LOGIC;
    DRAM0_UDQM, DRAM0_LDQM, DRAM1_UDQM, DRAM1_LDQM: BUFFER STD_LOGIC;
    DRAM1_CAS_N, DRAM1_RAS_N, DRAM1_CLK: OUT STD_LOGIC;
    DRAM1_CKE, DRAM1_CS_N, DRAM1_WE_N: OUT STD_LOGIC);
END lights;
ARCHITECTURE Structure OF lights IS
  COMPONENT nios_system
    PORT (
          clk_clk: IN STD_LOGIC;
          reset reset n: IN STD LOGIC;
          leds export: OUT STD LOGIC VECTOR(7 DOWNTO 0);
          switches_export : IN STD_LOGIC_VECTOR(7 DOWNTO 0);
          sdram_wire_addr : OUT STD_LOGIC_VECTOR(12 DOWNTO 0);
          sdram wire ba: BUFFER STD LOGIC VECTOR(1 DOWNTO 0);
          sdram_wire_cas_n : OUT STD_LOGIC;
          sdram_wire_cke : OUT STD_LOGIC;
... continued in Part b
```

Figure 9. A first attempt at instantiating the expanded Nios II system. (Part a)

```
sdram_wire_cs_n : OUT STD_LOGIC;
         sdram_wire_dq : INOUT STD_LOGIC_VECTOR(31 DOWNTO 0);
         sdram_wire_dqm : BUFFER STD_LOGIC_VECTOR(3 DOWNTO 0);
         sdram wire ras n: OUT STD LOGIC;
         sdram_wire_we_n : OUT STD_LOGIC);
  END COMPONENT;
  SIGNAL DQM : STD_LOGIC_VECTOR(3 DOWNTO 0);
  SIGNAL BA: STD_LOGIC_VECTOR(1 DOWNTO 0);
  SIGNAL DRAM_ADDR: STD_LOGIC_VECTOR(12 DOWNTO 0);
  SIGNAL DRAM CAS N: STD LOGIC;
  SIGNAL DRAM RAS N: STD LOGIC;
  SIGNAL DRAM_CLK: STD_LOGIC;
  SIGNAL DRAM CKE: STD LOGIC;
  SIGNAL DRAM CS N: STD LOGIC;
  SIGNAL DRAM WE N: STD LOGIC;
BEGIN
  DRAM0 BA 0 \le BA(0); DRAM0 BA 1 \le BA(1);
  DRAM1_BA_0 \le BA(0); DRAM1_BA_1 \le BA(1);
  DRAM0\_UDQM \le DQM(1); DRAM0\_LDQM \le DQM(0);
  DRAM1 UDOM \leq DOM(3); DRAM1 LDOM \leq DOM(2);
  DRAM0_ADDR <= DRAM_ADDR; DRAM1_ADDR <= DRAM_ADDR;
  DRAMO_CAS_N <= DRAM_CAS_N; DRAM1_CAS_N <= DRAM_CAS_N;
  DRAM0_CKE <= DRAM_CKE; DRAM1_CKE <= DRAM_CKE;
  DRAM0_CLK <= DRAM_CLK; DRAM1_CLK <= DRAM_CLK;
  DRAM0_CS_N \le DRAM_CS_N; DRAM1_CS_N \le DRAM_CS_N;
  DRAMO RAS N <= DRAM RAS N; DRAM1 RAS N <= DRAM RAS N;
  DRAMO WE N <= DRAM WE N; DRAM1 WE N <= DRAM WE N;
-- Instantiate the Nios II system entity generated by the Osys tool.
  NiosII: nios_system
    PORT MAP (
         clk clk => CLOCK 50,
         reset reset n \Rightarrow KEY(0),
         leds export => LEDG,
         switches export => SW,
         sdram_wire_addr => DRAM_ADDR,
         sdram_wire_ba => BA,
         sdram_wire_cas_n => DRAM_CAS_N,
         sdram_wire_cke => DRAM_CKE,
         sdram\_wire\_cs\_n \Rightarrow DRAM\_CS\_N,
         sdram_wire_dq \Rightarrow DRAM_DQ,
         sdram_wire_dqm => DQM,
         sdram_wire_ras_n => DRAM_RAS_N,
         sdram wire we n \Rightarrow DRAM WE N);
    DRAM CLK <= CLOCK 50;
END Structure;
```

Figure 9. A first attempt at instantiating the expanded Nios II system. (Part b).

As an experiment, you can enter the code in Figure 9 into a file called lights.vhd. Add this file and the nios\_system.qip

file produced by the Qsys tool to your Quartus II project. Compile the code and download the design into the Cyclone II FPGA on the DE2-70 board. Use the application program from the tutorial *Introduction to the Altera Qsys System Integration Tool*, which is shown in Figure 10.

```
.include "nios_macros.s"
         Switches, 0x00002000
.equ
.equ
         LEDs, 0x00002010
.global
        _start
_start:
         movia
                 r2, Switches
                 r3, LEDs
         movia
         ldbio
                 r4, 0(r2)
loop:
                 r4, 0(r3)
         stbio
         br
                 loop
```

Figure 10. Assembly language code to control the lights.

Use the Altera Monitor Program, which is described in the tutorial *Altera Monitor Program*, to assemble, download, and run this application program. If successful, the lights on the DE2-70 board will respond to the operation of the toggle switches.

Due to the clock skew problem mentioned above, the Nios II processor may be unable to properly access the SDRAM chip. A possible indication of this may be given by the Altera Monitor Program, which may display the message depicted in Figure 11. To solve the problem, it is necessary to modify the design as indicated in the next section.

```
Using cable "USB-Blaster [USB-0]", device 1, instance 0x00
Resetting and pausing target processor: OK
Initializing CPU cache (if present)
OK

Downloading 04000000 ( 0%)
Downloaded 1KB in 0.0s

Verifying 04000000 ( 0%)
Verify failed between address 0x4000000 and 0x400001B
Leaving target processor paused

Possible causes for the SREC verification failure:

1. Not enough memory in your Nios II system to contain the SREC file.

2. The locations in your SREC file do not correspond to a memory device.

3. You may need a properly configured PLL to access the SDRAM or Flash memory.
```

Figure 11. Error message in the Altera Monitor Program that may be due to the SDRAM clock skew problem.

# 7 Using the Clock Signals IP Core

The clock skew depends on physical characteristics of the DE2-70 board. For proper operation of the SDRAM chip, it is necessary that its clock signal leads the Nios II system clock, *CLOCK\_50*, by 3 nanoseconds. This can be accomplished by using a *phase-locked loop (PLL)* circuit which can be manually created using the *MegaWizard* plug-in. It can also be created automatically using the Clock Signals IP core provided by the Altera University Program. We will use the latter method in this tutorial.

To add the Clock Signals IP core, in the Qsys tool window of Figure 5 select University Program > Clocks Signals for DE-Series Board Peripherals and click Add. A window depicted in Figure 12 appears. Select *DE2-70* from the DE Board drop-down list and uncheck Video and Audio clocks as these peripherals are not used in this tutorial. Click Finish to return to the window in Figure 5.Connect the clock and reset outut of system clock *clk\_0* to the clock and reset inputs of the Clock Signal IP core. All other IP cores (including the SDRAM) should be adjusted to use the *sys\_clk* output of the Clock Signal core instead of the system clock. Rename the Clock Signal core to *clocks* and export the *sdram\_clk* signal under the name *sdram\_clk*. The final system is shown in Figure 13. Click on the System Generation tab and regenerate the system.

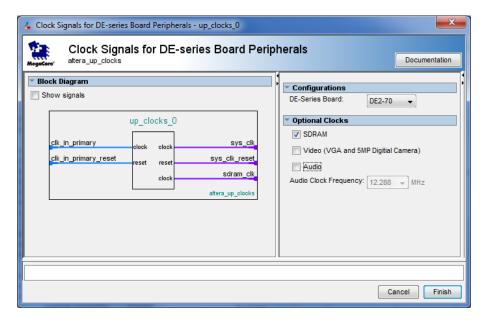


Figure 12. Clock Signals IP Core

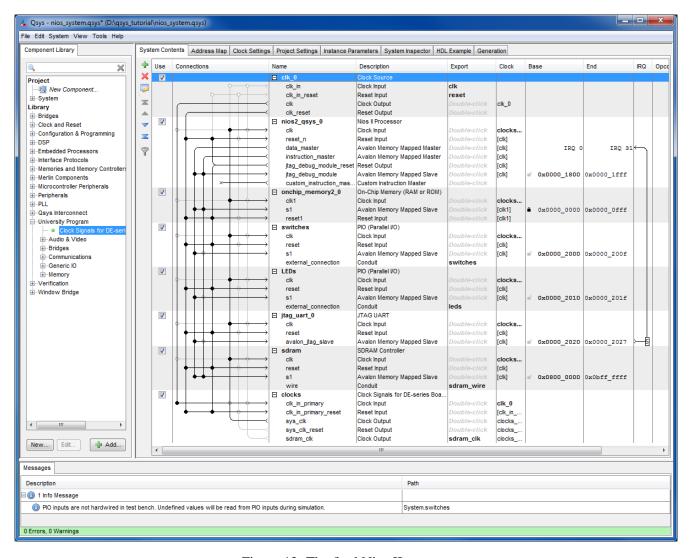


Figure 13. The final Nios II system.

Next, we have to fix the top-level VHDL entity, given in Figure 9, to instantiate the Nios II system with the Clock Signals core included. The desired code is shown in Figure 14. The SDRAM clock signal *sdram\_clk* generated by the Clock Signals core connects to the wire *DRAM\_CLK*.

```
-- Inputs:
          SW7–0 are parallel port inputs to the Nios II system.
          CLOCK_50 is the system clock.
          KEY0 is the active-low system reset.
-- Outputs: LEDG7-0 are parallel port outputs from the Nios II system.
          SDRAM ports correspond to the signals in Figure 2; their names are those
          used in the DE2-70 User Manual.
LIBRARY ieee:
USE ieee.std_logic_1164.all;
USE ieee.std_logic_arith.all;
USE ieee.std logic unsigned.all;
ENTITY lights IS
  PORT (SW: IN STD LOGIC VECTOR(7 DOWNTO 0);
    KEY : IN STD_LOGIC_VECTOR(0 DOWNTO 0);
    CLOCK 50: IN STD LOGIC;
    LEDG: OUT STD LOGIC VECTOR(7 DOWNTO 0);
    DRAM_DQ: INOUT STD_LOGIC_VECTOR (31 DOWNTO 0);
    DRAM0_ADDR, DRAM1_ADDR: OUT STD_LOGIC_VECTOR (12 DOWNTO 0);
    DRAM0_BA_1, DRAM0_BA_0, DRAM1_BA_1, DRAM1_BA_0: BUFFER STD_LOGIC;
    DRAMO_CAS_N, DRAMO_RAS_N, DRAMO_CLK: OUT STD_LOGIC;
    DRAMO_CKE, DRAMO_CS_N, DRAMO_WE_N: OUT STD_LOGIC;
    DRAM0_UDQM, DRAM0_LDQM, DRAM1_UDQM, DRAM1_LDQM: BUFFER STD_LOGIC;
    DRAM1_CAS_N, DRAM1_RAS_N, DRAM1_CLK: OUT STD_LOGIC;
    DRAM1_CKE, DRAM1_CS_N, DRAM1_WE_N: OUT STD_LOGIC);
END lights;
ARCHITECTURE Structure OF lights IS
  COMPONENT nios_system
    PORT (
          clk clk: IN STD LOGIC;
          reset reset n: IN STD LOGIC;
          sdram clk clk: OUT STD LOGIC;
          leds_export : OUT STD_LOGIC_VECTOR(7 DOWNTO 0);
          switches_export : IN STD_LOGIC_VECTOR(7 DOWNTO 0);
          sdram_wire_addr : OUT STD_LOGIC_VECTOR(12 DOWNTO 0);
          sdram_wire_ba: BUFFER STD_LOGIC_VECTOR(1 DOWNTO 0);
          sdram_wire_cas_n : OUT STD_LOGIC;
          sdram_wire_cke : OUT STD_LOGIC;
          sdram_wire_cs_n : OUT STD_LOGIC;
          sdram_wire_dq : INOUT STD_LOGIC_VECTOR(31 DOWNTO 0);
          sdram_wire_dqm: BUFFER STD_LOGIC_VECTOR(3 DOWNTO 0);
          sdram wire ras n: OUT STD LOGIC;
```

Figure 14. Proper instantiation of the expanded Nios II system. (Part a)

... continued in Part b

```
sdram_wire_we_n : OUT STD_LOGIC);
  END COMPONENT:
  SIGNAL DQM : STD_LOGIC_VECTOR(3 DOWNTO 0);
  SIGNAL BA: STD_LOGIC_VECTOR(1 DOWNTO 0);
  SIGNAL DRAM_ADDR: STD_LOGIC_VECTOR(12 DOWNTO 0);
  SIGNAL DRAM_CAS_N, DRAM_RAS_N: STD_LOGIC;
  SIGNAL DRAM_CLK, DRAM_CKE: STD_LOGIC;
  SIGNAL DRAM_CS_N, DRAM_WE_N: STD_LOGIC;
BEGIN
  DRAM0 BA 0 \le BA(0); DRAM0 BA 1 \le BA(1);
  DRAM1_BA_0 \le BA(0); DRAM1_BA_1 \le BA(1);
  DRAM0 UDQM \leq DQM(1); DRAM0 LDQM \leq DQM(0);
  DRAM1\_UDQM \le DQM(3); DRAM1\_LDQM \le DQM(2);
  DRAMO ADDR <= DRAM ADDR; DRAM1 ADDR <= DRAM ADDR;
  DRAMO CAS N <= DRAM CAS N; DRAM1 CAS N <= DRAM CAS N;
  DRAM0_CKE <= DRAM_CKE; DRAM1_CKE <= DRAM_CKE;
  DRAM0_CLK <= DRAM_CLK; DRAM1_CLK <= DRAM_CLK;
  DRAM0_CS_N \le DRAM_CS_N; DRAM1_CS_N \le DRAM_CS_N;
  DRAMO_RAS_N <= DRAM_RAS_N; DRAM1_RAS_N <= DRAM_RAS_N;
  DRAM0_WE_N \le DRAM_WE_N; DRAM1_WE_N \le DRAM_WE_N;
-- Instantiate the Nios II system entity generated by the Qsys tool.
  NiosII: nios_system
    PORT MAP (
         clk clk => CLOCK 50,
         reset reset n => KEY(0),
         sdram_clk_clk => DRAM_CLK,
         leds export => LEDG,
         switches_export => SW,
         sdram_wire_addr => DRAM_ADDR,
         sdram wire ba \Rightarrow BA,
         sdram_wire_cas_n => DRAM_CAS_N,
         sdram_wire_cke => DRAM_CKE,
         sdram_wire_cs_n => DRAM_CS_N,
         sdram_wire_dq => DRAM_DQ,
         sdram_wire_dqm => DQM,
         sdram_wire_ras_n => DRAM_RAS_N,
         sdram_wire_we_n => DRAM_WE_N);
END Structure;
```

Figure 14. Proper instantiation of the expanded Nios II system. (Part b).

Compile the code and download the design into the Cyclone II FPGA on the DE2-70 board. Use the application program in Figure 10 to test the circuit.

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