

VHDL notes

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Abstract

Set of VHDL related notes, written by a developer still learning about FPGAs in general, so any feedback welcome. It addresses topics ranging from coding conventions, verification, synthesis, optimisation, reusability and documentation. Some notes are vague while others are quite specific to language, tools or target platforms. Also, it addresses a wide audience, so some materials may seem obvious to the reader, depending on her background.

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1 Unconstrained types

topics: reusability, documentation, verification

When not explicitly specified by the developer, a type length is deduced during component instantiation. This favors component reusability by letting the user decide of the type length according to its particular needs.

For instance, *count* range is unconstrained in the following component declaration:

```
component my_component
port
(
  ...
  count: in unsigned;
  ...
);
```

The actual range is deduced during instantiation:

```
signal count: unsigned(7 downto 0);

work.my_component
port map
(
  ...
  count => count
  ...
);
```

One important issue with unconstraint types is that a component user may inadvertently use types that are larger than required, possibly leading to unnecessary large resource instantiation. Documentation is a good tool to solve this kind of issue. Also, assertions can be used to check for degenerate cases:

```

component my_component
port
(
    ...
    — WARNING
    — hardware comparator inferred in subsequent logic
    — use appropriate length
    count: in unsigned;
    ...
);
end component;

```

If you want to make sure the length fits within a given range, use assertion in the component entity definition:

```

entity my_component
port
(
    ...
    count: in unsigned;
    ...
);
end my_component;

architecture my_component_rtl of my_component is
begin
    ...
    assert (count'length <= 16)
    report "invalid_counter_length"
    severity failure;
    ...
end my_component_rtl;

```

2 Type attributes

Use type attribute as much as possible, esp. type'length and type'range

3 Generics instead of package constants

topics: reusability

Often, a component parameter can be set either using package constants or generics. Using package constants forces the user to modify the package source code, which is a bad thing considering a package should be reusable without any modification. On the other hand, generics let the user specialize the component without modifying any existing source.

In the following example, the clock frequency (CLK_FREQ) is used by the component called slave. The frequency could be defined as a constant in the package, like this:

```
package abs_enc_pkg is
...
constant CLK_FREQ: integer := 12500000;
...
component slave
port
(
  clk: in std_logic;
  rst: in std_logic;
  ...
);
end component;
...
end package abs_enc_pkg;
```

A user wanting to change CLK_FREQ the clock frequency must change the abs_enc_pkg source file. This can be avoided by defining CLK_FREQ as a component generic:

```
package abs_enc_pkg is  
component slave  
generic  
(  
  CLK_FREQ: integer := 12500000;  
);  
port  
(  
  clk: in std_logic;  
  rst: in std_logic;  
  ...  
);  
end component;  
...  
end package abs_enc_pkg;
```

Since the CLK_FREQ is not globally visible, it must be propagated through the design hierarchy. This might be inconvenient as the generics lists grow larger, but a clear advantage for reusability.

TODO: Global variables may be used to solve this issue, but I do not think their use is encouraged.

4 Per component test benches

topics: simulation

Per component test benches generally requires less code than project wide ones. It makes them easier to maintain, and encourages the developer to write self contained components. Also, it makes simulation run faster.

5 Hardware resource inference

topics: synthesis

Usually, a VHDL developer does not explicitly indicate what hardware resource to use to implement logic. The synthesiser deduces that from its source code understanding (ie. signal netlist and operations). This process is known as inference.

Inference is very sensitive to the way code is written. For instance, the use of an additional signal to reset a shift register may prevent the synthesiser to infer a hardware shift register.

Thus, VHDL developers try as much as possible to write code in a standard way, that is known to be well understood by the synthesiser.

6 Explicit resource instantiation

topics: synthesis

TODO: wip

Non portable but sure to instanciate the right resource.

7 Reset signals

related notes: 11

Avoid reset signals. If not possible, make reset synchronous.

TODO: explain why

8 Shift registers inference

topics: synthesis

TODO: wip

XILINX FPGAs have hardware resources to implement shift registers. Reference here (p.78):
http://www.xilinx.com/support/documentation/sw_manuals/xilinx2014_1/ug901-vivado-synthesis.pdf

9 Assertions

topics: verification

TODO: wip

Use assertion to check data type lengths when unconstraints arrays

10 Test benches as documentation

topics: documentation

A component developer should consider test benches an important part of the documentation since they are used as reference materials by the component user. Thus, test benches should be up to date, clearly written and well documented. If possible, they should cover different use cases, without flooding the user with unrequired contents.

11 Writing synchronous processes

topics: synthesis

There is one standard way of writing synchronous process:

```
process(clk , rst)
begin
  if rising_edge(clk) then
    if rst = '1' then
      else
    end if;
  end if;
end process;
```

Another way which is synthetizable:

```
process
begin
  wait until rising_edge(clk);

  if rst = '1' then
    end if;

end process;
```

Since the **wait** statement must come first, all the signal are synchronous, esp. the reset. Also, this convention results in a somewhat clearer code.

12 Clocking

TODO: wip

Clear convention about how data passed to/from a component are clocked. by default, clocked using the component domain. idem for latching.

13 Appropriate typing

topics: verification, documentation

Use the most specialized types (unsigned, boolean ...) and sizes early in the design hierarchy. It avoids further casting and simplifies the code. It acts as documentation since the reader deduces information from the type itself. For instance, an unsigned counter tells it can not be negative. Typing also improve static time checks.

14 Component directory structure

topics: reusability, documentation

Having a clear, self contained directory structure is helpful for both the user and the developer. I opted for the following one, that simple but fits most of the cases:

```
my_component /
src /
  my_component_pkg.vhd
  my_component_rtl.vhd
  ...
sim /
  common /
    main_tb.vhd
  isim /
    isim.tcl
    isim.prj
    isim.sh
  modelsim /
    ...
syn /
  ise /
    xc7k325t.ucf
    xc7vx485t.ucf
  vivado /
    ...
doc /
  my_component.pdf
```

Providing synthesis files allows the user to synthesise the component for a given platform. It should not synthesise a full working design, only the bare minimum so the user can check its toolchain (esp. version), and investigate what hardware resources are inferred.

15 Use OR for multiplexers

topics: optimization

TODO: check if it really optimize, explain

16 Variable length multiplexers

topics: reusability, optimization

TODO: