

ECE 587 – Hardware/Software Co-Design

Lecture 02 Abstraction Levels and Models

Professor Jia Wang
Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering
Illinois Institute of Technology

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Reading Assignment

- ▶ This lecture: 1, 2
- ▶ Next week (Wed. 1/21, Fri. 1/23): Neural Networks and GEMM

System Design Challenges

Models

An Example Design

The Productivity Gap

- ▶ System complexity increases almost exponentially
 - ▶ Software: more lines of code
 - ▶ Hardware: more transistors to use
- ▶ Designer's ability increases slowly
 - ▶ How many components can you manage in your mind?
- ▶ There is a huge gap between what is available for us to design and what we can manage to design
 - ▶ Increasing team size is not always successful according to software engineering practices, especially when robustness and reliability are of concern.
 - ▶ Commonly accepted solution: raise the level of abstraction in the design process, e.g. hierarchical designs.
- ▶ Can we close the gap with large language models?

Abstraction Levels

- ▶ Abstraction helps to hide details, e.g.
 - ▶ Logic gates vs. transistors for hardware design
 - ▶ Reasonings are easier and more relevant at the higher abstraction level (logic gates) using boolean logic than at the lower one (transistors) using voltages and currents.
 - ▶ There are less components at the higher abstraction level.
- ▶ To close the productivity gap, it is desired to design the system at higher abstraction levels and not to provide any lower level detail at all.
 - ▶ Designers provide *specifications* (descriptions at higher abstraction levels).
 - ▶ Design time is reduced by applying design automation that synthesizes *implementations* (details at lower abstraction levels).
 - ▶ Avoid error prone manual design to improve robustness and reliability

More about Abstraction Levels

- ▶ How to define an abstraction level?
 - ▶ Designers should have consensus on the definition to facilitate communications, e.g. what are logic gates.
 - ▶ The definition should involve some kind of mathematics to make automatic synthesis possible, e.g. boolean logic.
- ▶ At what abstraction level should designers work?
 - ▶ Designers should be able to reason about the system very effectively at such level, as this will help to
 - ▶ Reduce design time by ignoring unnecessary details, e.g. a logic gate can be used directly without any understanding on its implementation.
 - ▶ Improve design quality by eliminating chances to make mistakes, e.g. you will never implement the logic gate the wrong way.

Outline

System Design Challenges

Models

An Example Design

- ▶ To specify a system at certain abstraction levels, *sufficient details* are needed to predict system behavior with *absolute precision*.
- ▶ An intuitive way to specify a system is to specify its subsystems and their interactions.
 - ▶ E.g. hierarchical design
- ▶ Model: defining an abstraction level by defining a method for decomposition
 - ▶ Types of the subsystems
 - ▶ Rules for composing them into the system

Considerations for Models

- ▶ No ambiguity and complete
 - ▶ Help to distinguish abstraction levels with subtle differences
- ▶ Make reasonings about the system easier
 - ▶ Models come from experiences of expert designers.
 - ▶ Modifying a subsystem will also become easier.
- ▶ Make communications easier
 - ▶ System design is a team work.

Examples

- ▶ Logic gates can actually be represented at three abstraction levels.
- ▶ Register-transfer level (RTL)
 - ▶ Boolean expressions consisting of literals and logic operators
- ▶ Netlist
 - ▶ Logic gates and interconnects
- ▶ Standard-cell based designs
 - ▶ Placement of standard cells and routings of wires
- ▶ The above three models are also examples of a typical classification of models.

Typical Classification of Models

- ▶ Behavioral model
 - ▶ A blackbox with description of functionality, i.e. input/output relationship
 - ▶ Implementation, i.e. how to obtain output from input, is *not* specified
- ▶ Structural model
 - ▶ An implementation of interconnected components
 - ▶ Functionality is *not* specified explicitly
- ▶ Physical model
 - ▶ Specify the physical characteristics of components and interconnects
 - ▶ Dimensionality and placement
- ▶ From the perspective of models, modern ASIC design can be summarized as: RTL (behavioral) → Netlist (structural) → standard cells (physical)

Other Examples of Models

- ▶ Finite state machine
 - ▶ Pretty much the synonym of RTL for hardware designs
- ▶ Sequential program
 - ▶ Supported by most programming languages
- ▶ Dataflow
 - ▶ Enable parallelism, e.g. MapReduce
- ▶ It is usually necessary to extend and to compose existing models to specify a complex system.
- ▶ It is usually more rewarding to reason complex functionalities with models instead of separated software and hardware implementations.

From Models to System Specifications

- ▶ Models are somewhat *conceptual*
 - ▶ In designers' mind
 - ▶ On pieces of scratching paper
- ▶ Models need to be captured for further processings
 - ▶ Especially for design automation tools, e.g. for synthesis and verification
- ▶ Specification languages
 - ▶ A formal way to capture models
 - ▶ A model can be captured in many different languages
 - ▶ A language can capture many different models

Natural Languages v.s. Formal Languages

- ▶ Natural languages
 - ▶ Ambiguous: even native speakers may have different explanations
 - ▶ Incomplete: cumbersome to elaborate all possible behaviors
- ▶ Formal languages
 - ▶ Based on math: everyone should understand
 - ▶ No ambiguity and complete
- ▶ Training is required to use both kind of languages effectively.

Outline

System Design Challenges

Models

An Example Design

A System for Summation

Let's design a system to perform summation.

- ▶ What appears in your mind? An adder?

Functional Specification

- ▶ Mathematical model:
Input: n numbers a_1, a_2, \dots, a_n
Output: $\sum_{i=1}^n a_i$
- ▶ More details are necessary to incorporate such model into a system
 - ▶ What is n ?
 - ▶ What is the type of the numbers?
 - ▶ What if overflow/underflow happens?
- ▶ Assumptions
 - ▶ 16 32-bit integers
 - ▶ Ignore overflow/underflow
- ▶ Now the model can be used for simulation without knowing anything about implementation.

Design Constraints: Performance Objectives

- ▶ Latency: complete a summation in 8ns
- ▶ Throughput: complete 1,000,000,000 summations per second

Rough HW/SW Partitioning

- ▶ Hardware
 - ▶ Need at least one two-input adder
- ▶ Software
 - ▶ Coordinate hardware to complete summation by adding two numbers a time
 - ▶ If a higher precision is required later, software can be updated

Design Space Exploration I

- ▶ Assume adders that can add two 32-bit integers in 1ns are available
- ▶ Sequential program
 - ▶ Accumulator: 1 adder and 1 32-bit register
 - ▶ Smallest size
- ▶ What is the latency and the throughput?

Design Space Exploration II

- ▶ Dataflow: a model to capture complex computations.
 - ▶ 15 adders connected in series
 - ▶ 15 adders connected into a tree
- ▶ What are their latency and throughput?
 - ▶ Can you easily change your design to meet those constraints?

Design Space Exploration III

- ▶ What if other adders are available?
 - ▶ Note that until now, we haven't talked about any specific adder design, e.g. carry-ripple and carry-lookahead.
 - ▶ We could also use carry-save adders.
- ▶ Which design will have the minimum cost while still satisfying the performance constraints?
- ▶ What if *weighted* summations are required?
 - ▶ Inner product of a weight vector and an input vector.
- ▶ What about inner products of each pair among multiple weight and input vectors?
 - ▶ GEMM: General Matrix Multiplication
- ▶ Does adding better and more adders always help to improve performance?

Summary

- ▶ Models define abstraction levels.
- ▶ Choose proper models increases designer's productivity.