On the Simulation Performance of Contemporary AMS Hardware Description Languages

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***Abstract*— Mixed-Signal extensions to VHDL, Verilog, and SystemC languages have been developed in order to provide a unifying environment for the modeling and verification of Analog and Mixed Signal (AMS) designs at different levels of abstraction. In this paper, we model the behavior of a set of benchmark designs in VHDL-AMS, Verilog-AMS and SystemC-AMS and compare the simulation performance with HSPICE. The various experimental results observed for the benchmark circuits show the superiority of VHDL-AMS and Verilog-AMS against SystemC-AMS and HSPICE in terms of simulation run-times at lower level of abstraction.**

I. Introduction

Verification of Analog and Mixed Signal (AMS) circuits and systems is a challenging task because it requires both an accurate model of the system and an efficient method of simulation. For a simulator, a tradeoff exists between accuracy of the results and the simulation speed.

Traditionally, circuit simulators are used to simulate and analyze the AMS design described as a netlist in SPICE. Circuit simulators face a bottleneck of long simulation run-times for complex circuits. An alternate approach would be to capture the behavior of AMS designs at higher level of abstraction using AMS hardware description languages (HDLs). This approach brings down the simulation run-times, but is less accurate compared to SPICE simulation. For a tradeoff between accuracy and run-time, designers need to look at modeling AMS designs at appropriate levels of abstraction. This paper compares the performance of different AMS HDLs in terms of simulation run-times. Figure 1 shows the methodology used for comparing the simulation run-times of three contemporary AMS HDLs, namely, VHDL-AMS, Verilog-AMS and SystemC-AMS against HSPICE. During the past few decades, several work in the Computer-aided design (CAD) literature were concerned with studying possible frameworks for the simulation of mixed signal designs. For instance, in [6], the authors discuss a new methodology for the Jiles-Atherton model of ferromagnetic core hysteresis using mixed-domain SystemC and VHDL-AMS implementation to ensure numerically reliable integration of the magnetisation slope. In [1], the authors proposed a SystemC/Simulink co-simulation framework for embedded systems that relies on Simulink for the continuous simulation and SystemC for the discrete simulation based on one or more synchronization model. A single unified simulation framework for the simulation of AMS designs using two parallel stand alone simulators (Xyce for SPICE, SAVANT for VHDL) designed

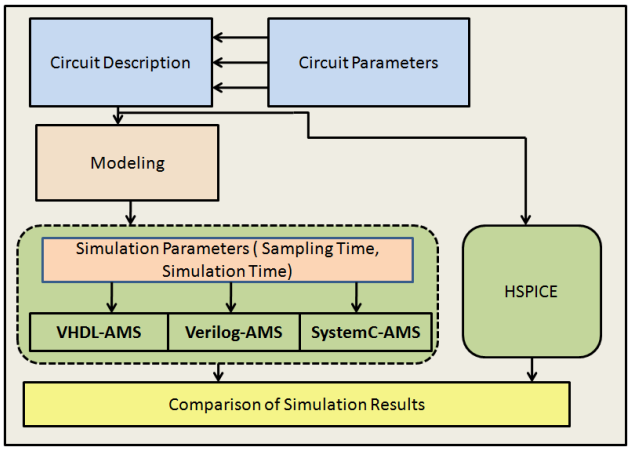

Fig. 1. Modeling and Simulation Environment

for high performance simulation in their respective solution spaces was described in [2]. Another mixed-domain simulation framework was proposed in [3] based on VHDL and ELDO. The commercial tool Nexus-PDK [4] supports co-simulation of cycle accurate C/C++ with SystemC, MATLAB/Simulink, and VHDL/Verilog simulators. In [5], the authors implemented a mixed-signal, functional level simulation framework based on SystemC for system-on-a-chip applications. The framework includes a C++ mixed-signal modules. In [15], the authors present a preliminary approach for the modeling and simulation of a simple but complete Wireless Sensor Network with two nodes using SystemC-AMS. This paper also explains the advantage of SystemC-AMS over other HDL's in modeling and simulation of such network. In [7], the authors focus on commonalities and differences between the two mixed-signal hardware description languages, VHDL-AMS and Verilog-AMS, in the case of modeling heterogeneous or multidiscipline systems.

The above related work focus mainly on combining the discrete-time and continuous-time of an AMS design in a single framework and none compares the performance of the co-design simulation environment in terms of simulation run-time. In this paper, we address the simulation run-time comparison of AMS designs described using different HDLs, namely, VHDL-AMS, Verilog-AMS and SystemC-AMS. We also investigate the effect of design and input stimulus parameters on the simulation run-times.

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The rest of the paper is organized as follows. In Section II, we describe the AMS simulation approaches used in Verilog-AMS, VHDL-AMS and SystemC-AMS with emphasis on the concept of simulation cycle. In Section III, we illustrate and compare the simulation experiments using a set of AMS benchmark circuits [11], before concluding with an outline for future directions in Section IV.

II. AMS Simulation approach

VHDL-AMS, Verilog-AMS and SystemC-AMS allow the modeling of discrete and continuous-time signals, or a combination of both in a single design. Connecting functional and behavioral models is accomplished with the help of terminals and quantities. VHDL-AMS, Verilog-AMS and SystemC-AMS can capture the behavior of AMS designs at higher levels of abstraction, which brings down the simulation time, while preserving the functionality of the design.

A. VHDL-AMS

VHDL-AMS [9] was developed as an extension to VHDL to describe AMS circuits and systems. Systems in both electrical and non-electrical domains can be described and specified at various levels of abstraction.

The VHDL-AMS simulation cycle starts with the initialization phase (Figure 2), which consists of four main steps. The initial values of the driving signals, and quantities defined by attributes are first computed. The processes are then executed once until they suspend. At the end of the processes execution, the simulation time is set to zero. Both Verilog-AMS and SystemC-AMS follow a similar initialization technique. The

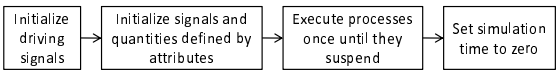

Fig. 2. VHDL-AMS Simulation Cycle- Initialization [9].

actual VHDL-AMS simulation cycle (Figure 3) begins with the computation of analog solution points (arrow 1). This continues until the next digital event is scheduled or an event occurs on the analog and digital interface (arrow 2). To compute a digital evaluation point, signals are updated first. After that, any triggered processes are executed until they settle. If the time for the next digital evaluation T_n is equal to current time T_c, the digital simulator is called again (arrow 3). If T_n is not equal to T_c, the analog solver is called, and the next cycle begins (arrow 4). This continues until the end of simulation is reached (arrow 5).

B. Verilog-AMS

Verilog-AMS HDL [16], [17] allows a designer to capture the behavior of an AMS designs (both discrete and continuous) at different levels of abstraction.

Figure 4, illustrates a typical Verilog-AMS HDL simulation cycle which includes:

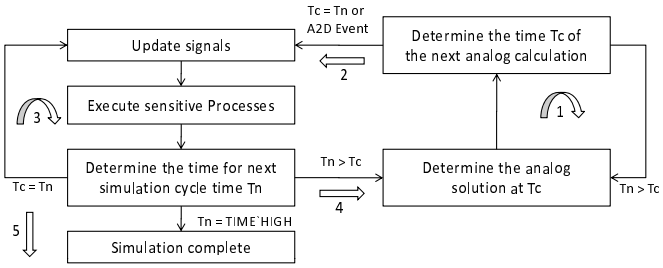

Fig. 3. VHDL-AMS Simulation Cycle- Execution [9].

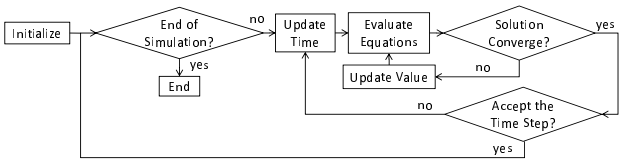

Fig. 4. Verilog-AMS Simulation Cycle [16]

1) *Initialization:* The initialization phase of a transient analysis is the process of initializing the circuit state at time zero.
2) *Synchronisation:* A Verilog-AMS simulation consists of a number of analog and digital processes communicating via events, shared memory and conservative nodes. All conservative nodes (macro process) are represented by matrices and solved jointly.
3) *Evaluation:* The design description consists of differential and non-linear equations which are discretized and solved iteratively.
4) *Update:* Analog processes are sensitive to changes in all variables and digital signals read by the process unless that access is only in statements guarded by event expressions. Upon waking up, the process computes a new solution point, schedules its next wake up event appropriately and then deactivates itself.
5) *Convergence:* In the analog kernel, the behavioral description is evaluated iteratively. On the first iteration, the signal values used in the expressions are approximate. As the iterations progress, the signal values approach the solution. Iterations continue until the difference between two consecutive solutions is less than an absolute tolerance value and the Kirchoff's flow laws are satisfied.

C. SystemC-AMS

SystemC-AMS [13] is an extension of SystemC that uses an open and layered approach [14]. The base layer is the existing SystemC 2.0 kernel as shown in Figure 5. On top of the base layer, two sets of layers are defined: Interface to the existing SystemC layers, (e.g., discrete event channels), and a new set of AMS layers such as the synchronisation layer, the solver layer, and the user layers.

The *user view layer* provides methods to describe the continuous-time models in terms of procedural behavior,

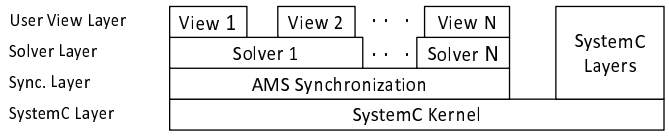

Fig. 5. SystemC-AMS Architecture [13]

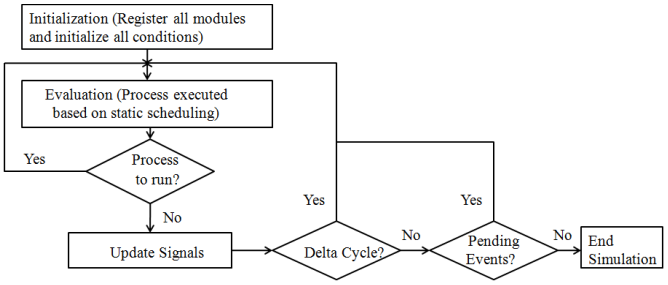

Fig. 6. SystemC-AMS Simulation Cycle [14]

equations, transfer functions, state-space formulations, and as netlists of primitives. Due to its open source architecture, the user can add additional features to the simulator depending on their application. SystemC-AMS uses a Synchronous Data Flow (SDF) [12] model of computation for modeling and simulation [8]. The *solver layer* provides different implementations of solvers (such as linear solver to solve electrical network) that are required to simulate specific AMS descriptions. The *synchronization layer* implements a mechanism to organize the simulation of a SystemC-AMS model that may include different continuous-time and discrete-event parts. SystemC-AMS defines a generic interface for various continuous-time solvers [14] and provides methods to synchronize analog solvers and the discrete kernel of SystemC. The SystemC-AMS simulation cycle [14] is shown in Figure 6 and is summarized below:

1) *Initialization:* The initialization methods registered in SystemC-AMS modules are executed including the initial condition definitions.
2) *Evaluation:* Processes are only executed at delta 0 in the order defined by the static scheduling (delta cycles provide a standard way to emulate concurrency when simulating discrete-event models). The cluster processes will be reactivated, always at delta 0, at every time step defined for the cluster.
3) Repeat step 2 while there are still processes ready to run, else go to step 4.
4) *Update:* Signals are updated with their new values.
5) Go to step 2 if the updated signal generates events with zero delay (delta cycle), else go to step 6.
6) Finish simulation if there are no more pending events, else go to step 7.
7) Advance the time to the earliest pending event.
8) Determine ready to run processes and go to step 2.

III. Comparison and Simulation Results

For the comparison, we have chosen four small to medium sized analog and switch capacitor circuits. We modeled those circuits in VHDL-AMS, Verilog-AMS, SystemC-AMS and in HSPICE and simulated them for transient and AC analysis run-time measurements. HSPICE run-time measurement results are provided as reference since it is still the dominant and widely accepted simulator for analog circuits to-date. We define the simulation run-time as the time taken by a given machine to simulate the design for a specified duration. VHDL-AMS, Verilog-AMS, and HSPICE designs were simulated using Mentor Graphics Tools on an ULTRA SPARC-IIIi machine (177 MHz CPU, 1024 Mbyte memory). The SystemC-AMS design descriptions were also compiled and executed on the same workstation.

The four circuits selected for the simulation are:

1) Continuous-Time State Filter [11].
2) Low Pass Active Filter [10].
3) Leap Frog Filter [11].
4) First Order Switch Capacitor Filter [10].

For all the circuit parameter values and detail simulation results, please refer to [18].

Table I summarises the experimental results. The first and second column represents the circuit and the frequency of operation. The next columns represent the simulation run-times of, respectively, VHDL-AMS, Verilog-AMS, SystemC-AMS and HSPICE in seconds. From the table statistics, we note that for all frequency ranges, the simulation run-times for VHDL-AMS and Verilog-AMS are almost comparable and in some cases negligible. Both VHDL-AMS and Verilog-AMS outperform SystemC-AMS and HSPICE in their simulation run-times. On the other hand, the simulation run-times are comparable for SystemC-AMS and HSPICE with SystemC-AMS performing slightly better in some cases.

For higher frequency inputs the simulation run-time is slightly higher than for low frequency inputs. This is because when the input signal changes at a faster rate (higher frequency) the analog solver requires more iterations to converge to an analog solution point for a given accuracy requirements and hence results in a slight increase in simulation time. This is seen for each circuit described in the VHDL-AMS, Verilog-AMS, SystemC-AMS and HSPICE as one looks at the simulation run-time numbers starting from low frequency to high frequency values.

The circuit simulation times of the first-order switch capacitor filter are larger because of the non-linear switches in the filter circuit, which cause the simulator to iterate more often at the instants of time when the switches change states from ON to OFF or vice-versa. Since the switches are turned ON and OFF a fixed number of times during 10ms, the run-time is independent of the input signal frequency but rather depends on the clock signal frequency used for controlling the switches. A more detailed discussion is available in [18].

TABLE I
EXPERIMENTAL RESULTS FOR 10MS SIMULATION RUNS.

Circuit	Frequency (Hertz)	VHDL-AMS (Seconds)	Verilog-AMS (Seconds)	SystemC-AMS (Seconds)	HSPICE (Seconds)
Low	1k	0.13	0.12	48.24	48.72
Pass	2k	0.17	0.21	48.45	48.73
Active	4k	0.26	0.26	48.16	48.74
Filter	40k	0.96	1.32	48.20	48.75
First	500	6.72	21.04	70.28	184.34
Order	1k	6.84	21.94	70.27	185.65
Switch	2k	6.97	19.98	70.39	186.13
Capacitor	4k	7.06	18.77	70.40	185.38
Continuous	100	0.07	0.09	49.20	57.24
Time	795	0.07	0.07	48.26	56.61
State	1k	0.10	0.13	49.07	56.62
Filter	10k	0.38	0.50	49.71	56.61
	40k	1.34	1.95	49.55	56.66
Leap	1k	0.09	0.22	50.26	66.85
Frog	1.4k	0.12	0.15	50.56	66.89
Filter	10k	0.52	0.82	50.66	66.70
	100k	4.99	6.92	51.27	66.73

IV. Discussion and Conclusion

The simulation of analog and mixed signal circuits is both memory and CPU intensive. The simulation speed depends on the complexity of the circuit, the length of simulation, and the frequency of the input signals. In this paper, we give an overview about the simulation cycles of VHDL-AMS, Verilog-AMS and SystemC-AMS. Four benchmark circuits were described, simulated and their run-times were compared with that of HSPICE simulation.

Our experience can be summarised as follows: First, the results show that for all filter circuits, the simulation run-times increase as the input signal frequency increases. This is again due to the fact that the simulator requires more iterations for each analog solution point if the input signal changes faster as compared to a slowly varying signal for a given time resolution and accuracy requirements. We observe the superiority of VHDL-AMS and Verilog-AMS against SystemC-AMS and HSPICE simulation run-times. However, the HSPICE and SystemC-AMS run-times are comparable for all filter circuits.

Unfortunately, SystemC-AMS is still in its development phase, so there is a lack of available libraries that would have allowed us to explore more complex case studies. We believe that with a growing user and developer community for SystemC-AMS, such library would be available allowing us to conduct more experiments with this language.

Future plans include a detailed investigation about the simulation cycle algorithms and also to tackle larger case studies to get a more indepth knowledge about the quantitative properties of the language simulators.

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