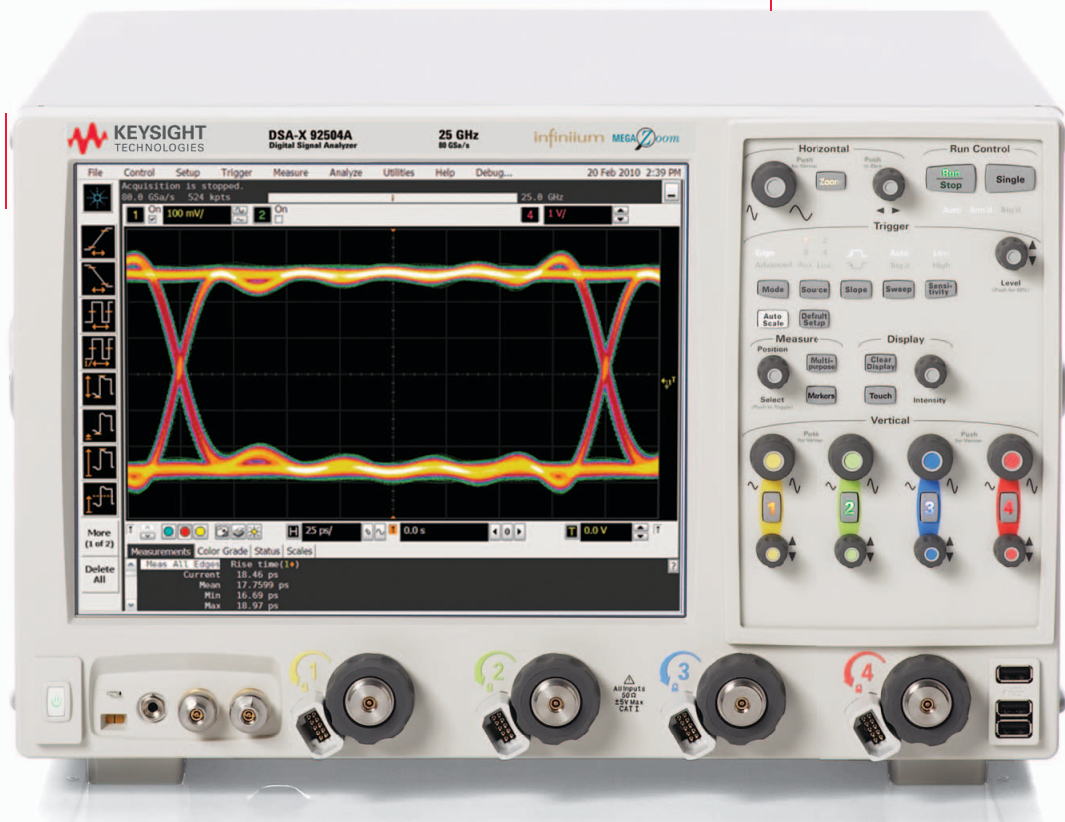


Keysight Technologies Accelerate FPGA Debug using High Bandwidth Mixed Signal Oscilloscopes

Application Note



Abstract

Debug of FPGAs is inherently challenging due to the presence of large numbers of internal logic nodes inaccessible to traditional probing. Limitations on pin count bound a designer's ability to brute force a solution. Innovations such as JTAG and the internal logic analyzer have helped alleviate these problems and route important signals out of the FPGA for analysis. Traditionally, logic analyzers have been used to debug FPGAs. However, more recently mixed signal oscilloscopes (MSO) have become commonly used for their ability to measure both analog and digital signals. In recent years, a new class of applications have placed incredible demands on FPGA transceiver speeds, increasing the need for accurate and high bandwidth analog measurements along with digital analysis in FPGA debug. This article will discuss both digital and analog debug of state-of-the-art FPGAs using a high bandwidth mixed signal oscilloscope.

Introduction

How do you test and debug a device with hundreds of thousands of internal logic cells and transceiver speeds up to 28 Gbps? Such is the challenge facing designers of today's industry-leading FPGAs. From the perspective of digital debug, the biggest challenges arise from the inaccessibility of critical logic nodes and a limitation on the number of available physical pins. Innovations such as internal signal muxing, JTAG communication, and internal logic analyzers have helped alleviate these challenges. However, all of these techniques offer tradeoffs and require the correct test and measurement equipment.

Digital debug of FPGAs has traditionally been the domain of logic analyzers. Offering from 32 to hundreds or even thousands of digital channels, synchronous and asynchronous acquisition, and complex state triggering conditions, the logic analyzer is, by design, a powerful tool for analysis and debug of digital signals. However, for many applications logic analyzers are not the best tool for the job. The mixed signal oscilloscope (MSO), first invented by HP/Keysight Technologies, Inc., is an extremely powerful tool for applications that require both digital and analog measurements. First, having analog channels allows designers to make critical analog measurements on their digital devices; for instance, testing the transceiver on an FPGA. Further, if something in the logic appears incorrect, the designer has correlated analog channels readily available for deeper investigation. MSOs offer broad analog and digital triggering capabilities and deep memory in a familiar and easy-to-use interface. While the MSO is not without its tradeoffs (e.g. typically limited to max channel count of 20 and only capable of asynchronous acquisition based on internal sampling clock), it is a critical tool for designers of mixed signal systems such as an FPGA.

The MSO has traditionally been found on low and medium bandwidth scopes in order to address the heart of the mixed signal market. However, new applications have demanded ever higher data rates, as evidenced by the 28 Gbps transceiver speeds available on today's FPGAs, driving the need for high bandwidth mixed signal oscilloscopes that can handle both logic analysis and the critical signal integrity challenges of high speed serial measurements. In this article we address these challenges in FPGA debug and how a high bandwidth MSO, such as Keysight's MSO 90000 X-Series, can help accomplish these demanding tests.

Digital Debug

Given the challenges due to a lack of internal visibility, different approaches have emerged in FPGA debug. The most common approaches to FPGA debug are: direct routing from logic nodes to pins, muxing out signals to pins, and internal logic analyzers.

1. Direct routing to pins

The simplest way to access internal nodes in an FPGA is to leverage the programmability of the device to route these signals out to physical pins where they can be probed by the digital channels of a mixed signal oscilloscope. A simplified diagram of this approach is shown in figure 1. This method, while effective, comes with significant limitations. First, in many cases designers are limited by the number of physical pins available on the FPGA package. This approach requires the designer make a tradeoff between the number of physical pins available and the number of internal nodes available to probe for test and debug. Further, it is often difficult to predict which nodes will need to be observed while debugging the FPGA logic. This challenge becomes aggravated when directly routing nodes to pins and only 8 or 16 pins are available to dedicate to debug. If new signals need to be probed, the FPGA must be redesigned to route these signals out to the physical pins. This process of manually managing design and node-to-pin routing results in equal (and relatively long) time investment between iterations. Inefficiencies aside, this tried and true debug technique is simple and provides both state and timing modes for thorough analysis of the probed signals.

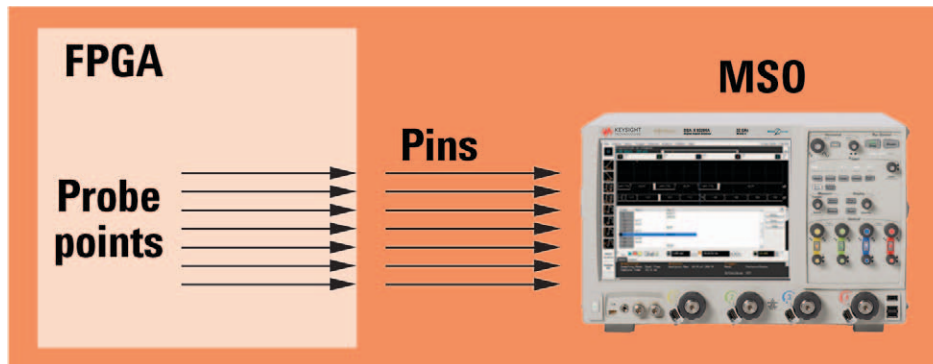


Figure 1: Diagram of FPGA debug using digital channels of Keysight MSO 90000 X-Series. Up to 16 probe points are routed directly to physical pins.

2. Muxing out signals

A variation on direct routing to pins, signals can be muxed out to physical pins on the FPGA, as shown in figure 2. This approach offers many critical benefits. Primarily, the designer is no longer so constrained by physical pins, as the number of internal nodes available to probe is many times the number of physical pins. Using the example shown in figure 2, let's assume the designer has dedicated 16 pins to logic debug. A 16:1 mux allows the designer to route 256 internal nodes to the multiplexer and observe them all using only 16 physical pins. In most implementations, and as shown in figure 2, the mux selection is controlled using the JTAG interface on the FPGA. This flexibility dramatically reduces the need to redesign the FPGA to observe additional nodes and improves the time between iterations. Further, as signals are still being directly observed at the physical pins, both state and timing modes remain available.

Major FPGA vendors, such as Xilinx and Altera, provide tools to enable implementation of this muxing debug technique. However, one of the best such implementations was developed by Keysight in partnership with these two major FPGA vendors. The result is Dynamic Probe for Keysight's Infiniium mixed signal oscilloscopes. Keysight provides both state and timing cores that are integrated into the FPGA programming to route and multiplex internal nodes to physical pins. The software application runs on the Keysight Infiniium MSO and integrates the digital channels and the JTAG instructions to control the muxing out of logic signals.

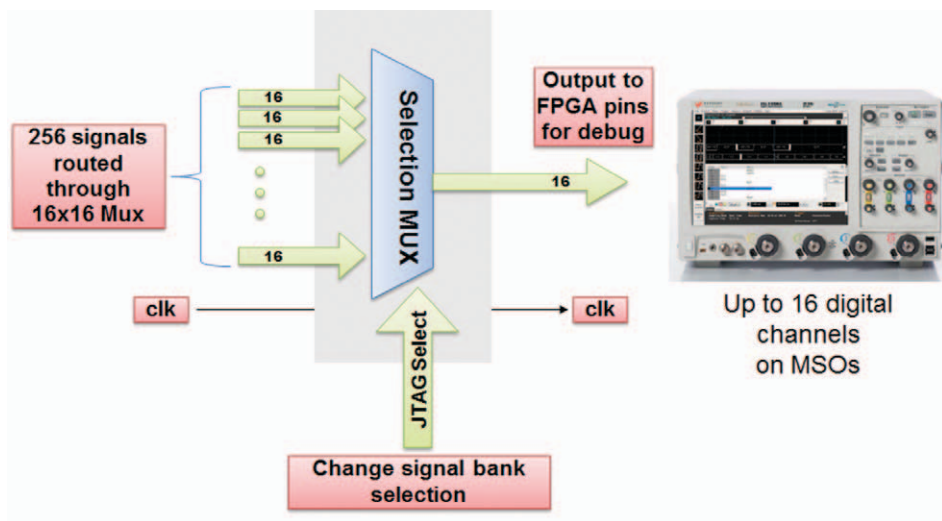


Figure 2: Diagram of FPGA debug using digital channels of Keysight MSO 90000 X-Series. 256 logic nodes are routed out to 16 physical pins through a 16:1 Mux.

3. Internal logic analyzer

In many instances, FPGA vendors provide internal logic analyzers (ILAs) built into their FPGAs to aid debug. The ILA features trigger circuitry and uses the internal memory to store traces. JTAG communication between the FPGA and a PC is used to configure the ILA and read the logic signals it outputs. This setup is shown in figure 3. The convenience of this setup is that no incremental physical pins are needed and only a PC is required for basic logic analysis. However, there are many limitations to this technique. The ILA can be a resource hog, monopolizing FPGA slices and internal memory needed for the working logic. Further, only state mode is available using an ILA (timing mode, which allows designers to observe signals relative to one another and measure asynchronous events, is not supported).

That being said, ILAs are common, and many vendors offer hybrid debug solutions where both an ILA and muxing can be employed for maximum flexibility. In order to remain a truly multipurpose tool, mixed signal oscilloscopes, such as Keysight Infiniium MSOs, offer JTAG decode software so that logic signals output by an ILA can be analyzed directly on the scope.

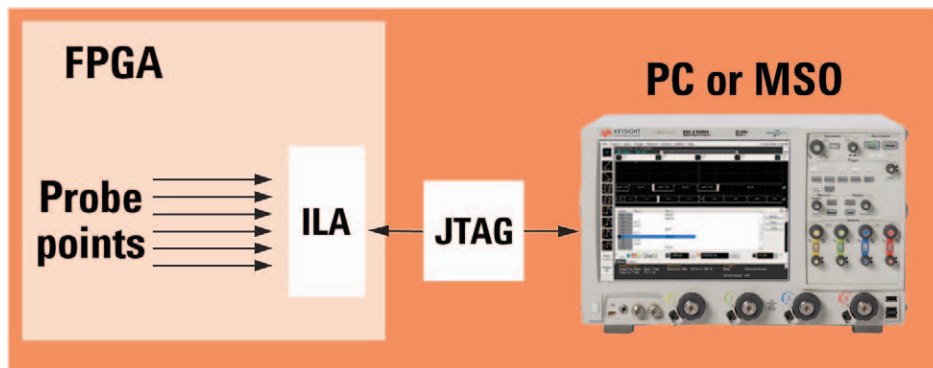


Figure 3: Diagram of FPGA debug using digital channels of Keysight MSO 90000 X-Series. Internal logic analyzer communicates logic information to MSO via JTAG interface.

Analog Measurements

There are certainly many instances where analog measurements can be invaluable to a digital designer. For instance, being able to see the underlying analog signal can clarify anomalous behaviors in the logic. That being said, state of the art FPGA testing represents a class of truly mixed signal applications where the analog and digital challenges can be equally critical to device performance. The latest FPGAs from industry leaders such as Xilinx and Altera offer transceiver speeds up to 28 Gbps. Research and development into ever faster Ethernet speeds, a critical market supported by FPGA makers, has driven the need for these bleeding edge transceiver speeds. Current work on 100 Gb Ethernet has focused on 10 lanes X 10 Gbps implemented in CFP modules. A second generation of 100 GbE is being developed employing a 4 X 25 Gbps architecture to be integrated into CFP2 and ultimately CFP4 modules. The advantages of increasing serial data rates and reducing parallelism are a significant reduction in power dissipation and module size enabling higher densities. In order to support the 25 Gbps serial data lanes demanded by the standard, FPGAs have pushed transceiver speeds out to 28 Gbps. Peering another generation into the future, 400 GbE calls for 16 X 25 Gbps.

Designing and measuring a serial data stream at 28 Gbps is very much an analog problem. Insertion loss, reflections, cross talk, and other analog challenges that can be safely ignored at data rates less than 1 Gbps can be catastrophic at 28 Gbps, often resulting in completely closed eye diagrams. Real-time oscilloscopes, including MSOs, offer signal integrity software that can dramatically improve the quality of analog measurements at these data rates. For example, a lossy channel can be de-embedded from the signal path. This allows the user to observe the signal as it appeared prior to propagation through the channel. Keysight offers excellent examples of powerful and easy to use tools in their InfiniiSim and PrecisionProbe software packages for Infiniium oscilloscopes.

The old adage of needing to see at least the 3rd harmonic would require a measurement system with a minimum of 42 GHz bandwidth to measure a 28 Gbps signal. Up until recently, the highest analog bandwidth available on a mixed signal oscilloscope was 20 GHz on the Tektronix 70000C. Further, this 20 GHz is not true analog bandwidth, rather DSP boosted from the native hardware performance of 16 GHz. For designers unwilling to suffer the dramatic signal integrity degradation of DSP boosting, this 16 GHz is barely able to capture the 1st harmonic on a 28 Gbps signal. While the logic analysis capabilities of this oscilloscope are well regarded, the analog performance and signal integrity are simply not sufficient for the latest FPGA transceiver technologies.

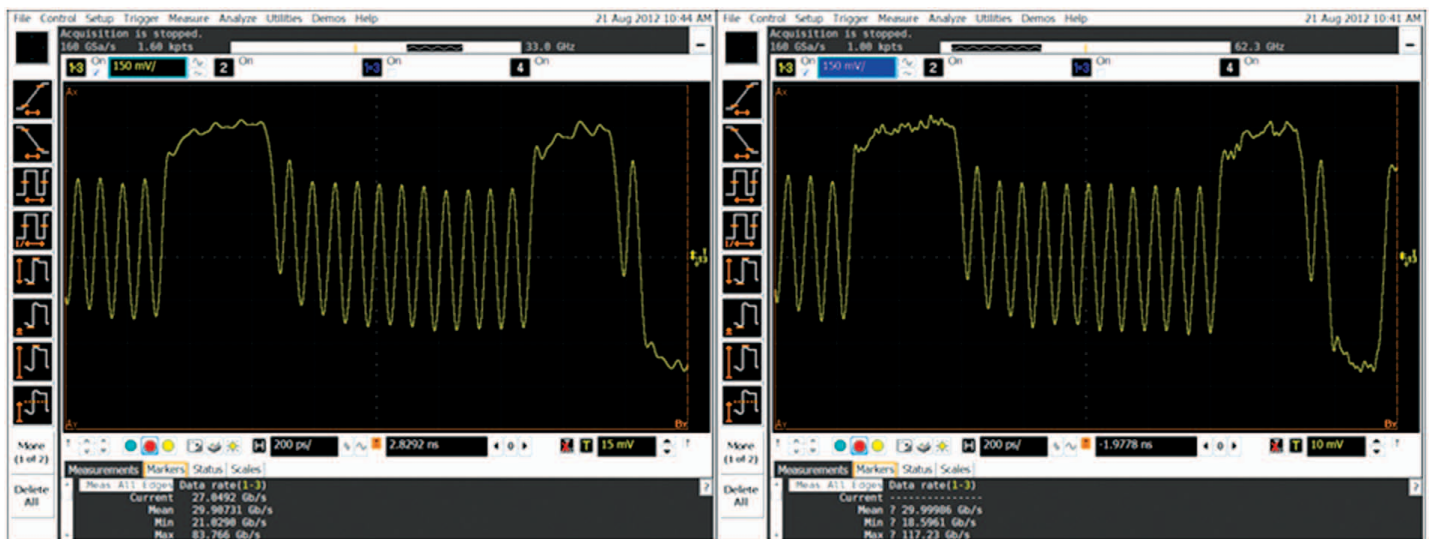
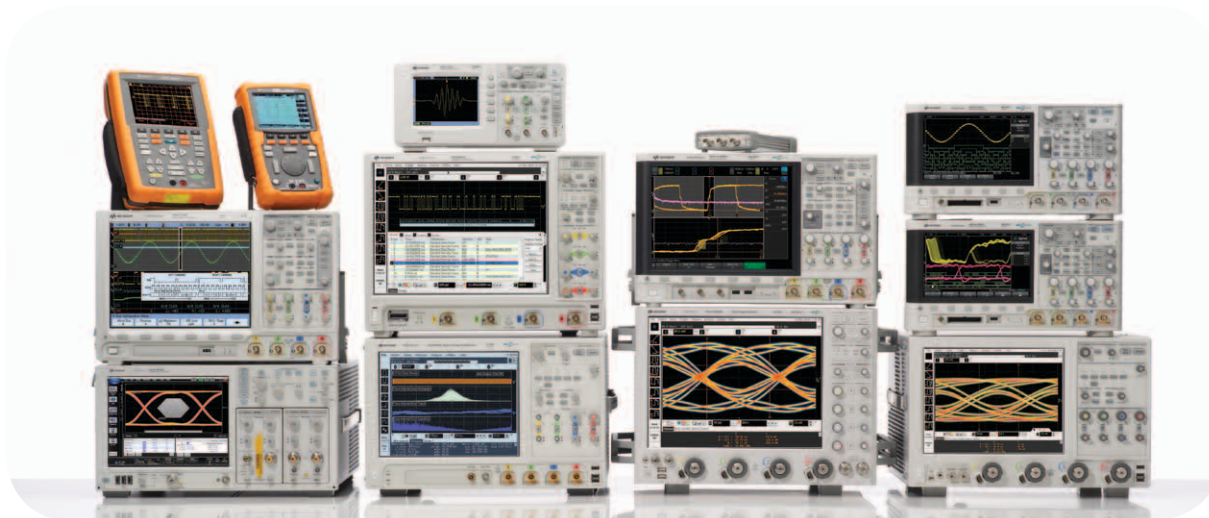


Figure 4: 28 Gbps PRBS⁷ signal measured on Keysight 90000 Q-Series oscilloscope at 33 GHz (left) and 63 GHz (right) acquisition bandwidths. The 3rd harmonic of the signal (at 42 GHz) has too little energy to make a difference in these two acquisitions.

In late 2012 Keysight expanded their award winning 90000 X-Series family of oscilloscopes to include an MSO on all models from 13 GHz to 33 GHz of true analog bandwidth. Providing industry-leading bandwidth and signal integrity to a mixed signal oscilloscope platform gives designers the analog and digital capabilities they need for next generation technology standards. On the surface it would seem that even 33 GHz is not sufficient bandwidth for a 28 Gbps signal. However, at very high data rates the choice of measurement bandwidth often depends on signal rise times and high frequency noise more than harmonics. Figure 4 shows the same 28 Gbps signal measured at 33 GHz and 63 GHz using Keysight's Infiniium 90000 Q-Series real-time oscilloscope. Indeed, an FFT of this signal shows the 3rd harmonic is 30 dB below the fundamental and almost entirely negligible in real world measurements.

Conclusion

There are critical challenges in both digital and analog test and debug of state of the art FPGAs. Digital signals are difficult to access and physical pin count is limited. Meanwhile, transceiver speeds reaching 28 Gbps bring analog non-idealities to the forefront. Making measurements in this challenging environment calls for a high bandwidth mixed signal oscilloscope combining > 30 GHz analog bandwidth, superior signal integrity, and 16 digital channels into one integrated instrument. Until recently, such an instrument didn't exist. However, with Keysight's introduction of an MSO on its Infiniium 90000 X-Series, for the first time ever 33 GHz of true analog bandwidth has met 16 channels of digital analysis.



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