

A Figure of Merit for Oscillator-Based Thin-Film Circuits on Plastic for High-Performance Signaling, Energy Harvesting and Driving of Actuation Circuits

Warren Rieutort-Louis, Liechao Huang, Yingzhe Hu, Josue Sanz-Robinson, Sigurd Wagner, James C. Sturm, Naveen Verma
Princeton University, Department of Electrical Engineering, Princeton, New Jersey, 08544, USA
E-mail: rieutort@princeton.edu, Phone: +1 (609) 858 3750

For even basic sensing and energy-harvesting functions, large-area systems-on-plastic require digital oscillators as a key circuit block [1]. However, their use to generate control signals, or drive actuator/energy-harvesting circuits requires different performance metrics compared to conventional digital circuits. In this abstract we (1) propose a figure of merit for these applications and (2) show experimentally how the dependence of this new metric on the scaling of resistive loads differs from that of the conventional digital circuit metric of power-delay (PD) product [2].

Large output voltage swings are desirable for signal transmission, energy-harvesting or overdriving of a subsequent actuating circuit block. This is in addition to the usual low power and high frequency considerations. Thus we propose the following oscillator design metric: $M_o = (f_{OSC} \times V_{SWING}) / (P_{SUPPLY})$, where f_{OSC} is the oscillator frequency, V_{SWING} is the voltage swing at the oscillator output and P_{SUPPLY} is the power consumption of the oscillator. This metric differs from standard power-delay product analysis ($M_{PD} = f_{OSC}/P_{SUPPLY}$), which simply quantifies the relation between oscillator power consumption and frequency, by now also incorporating a dependence on output voltage swing.

For this analysis, we fabricated 5-stage NMOS ring oscillators based on a-Si TFTs with doped a-Si thin-film integrated pull-up resistors (TFR) on flexible 50 μ m polyimide (Fig. 1). The TFT channel lengths are 6 μ m and mobility is 0.7 cm²/(Vs) (Fig. 2). Resistive load values are chosen as in Fig. 4 to initially maximize the output swing of the oscillator for $C_{LOAD}=10$ pF and are then all scaled by a *resistor scaling factor* (RSF), which is experimentally varied from 0.1 to 5. To enhance the drive capability of a reference (10pF-1nF) capacitive load (C_{LOAD}) whilst minimizing power consumption from the supply (V_{DD}) each inverter stage in the ring oscillator is up-sized from its predecessor by a constant ratio $r=1.6$. Fig. 6 illustrates typical oscillation waveforms at the output node of the oscillators as a function of C_{LOAD} . Measured parameters are similar on plastic and glass substrates, and experimental results were validated with a developed Level 61 a-Si TFT SPICE model.

Power consumption scales inversely with stage load resistances (Fig. 7), dominated by on-state static current. For lower power, larger load resistances are required. Frequency is inversely proportional to the signal propagation delay through the oscillator so with fixed W/L ratios for the driver TFTs, frequency scales down with larger loads due to the larger RC time constants from the pull-up paths (Fig. 8). For decreasing output C_{LOAD} , the frequency increases until the 10pF range when the load capacitance becomes comparable with the gate capacitance of the first oscillator stage. Larger resistors limit the critical output swing as the pull-up paths become weaker (Fig. 9), affecting the high output level. This effect is the same as that seen for large capacitances in Fig. 6. Conversely, with smaller loads, the low output level is degraded which also degrades the output swing. Increasing C_{LOAD} also significantly limits the rise time of the output (Fig. 6) which further degrades the voltage swing.

As a constant V_{DD} is used, the conventional PD product should remain fairly constant with load resistor scaling (Fig. 10), but for large load resistors the metric increases due to reduced swings in the oscillator stages and hence weaker pull-down paths. The new metric M_o shows qualitatively similar behavior for low pull-up resistors, however differs substantially from the inverse power-delay product for large load resistors (large RSF) (Fig. 11). Because of the reduced voltage swing at large resistances (Fig. 9), M_o decreases rather than increases, leading to an optimum load resistor scaling. Maximizing this metric becomes particularly important for C_{LOAD} values comparable to gate capacitances in the oscillator, and an optimum choice of resistor loads is even clearer. A complication not embedded in our metric, however, is that low resistance loads built using the doped TFT a-Si layer, though achievable, require small L/W ratios, so load resistors may significantly dominate the area occupied by the oscillator compared to the driver TFTs.

In conclusion, a design metric for TFT digital oscillators used to drive actuator/sensor/power loads which require large voltage swings has been defined. The optimum load resistance for this metric is different from that for the power-delay product due to reduced voltage swings for large and small load resistive loads.

[1] Liechao Huang, Warren Rieutort-Louis, Yingzhe Hu, Josue Sanz-Robinson, Sigurd Wagner, James C. Sturm, Naveen Verma, "Integrated All-silicon Thin-film Power Electronics on Flexible Sheets For Ubiquitous Wireless Charging Stations based on Solar-energy Harvesting," 2012 Symposia on VLSI Tech. and Circuits (Submitted)
[2] D.B. Thomasson, H. Klauk, D. Gundlach, T. N. Jackson, "Integrated a-Si:H/pentacene inorganic/organic complementary circuits," Electron Devices Meeting, 1998. IEDM '98 Technical Digest., International, vol., no., pp.249-252, 6-9 Dec 1998

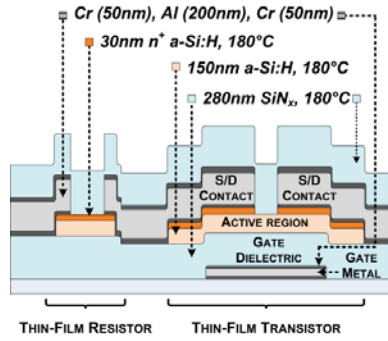


Fig. 1: Schematic cross-section of thin-film devices

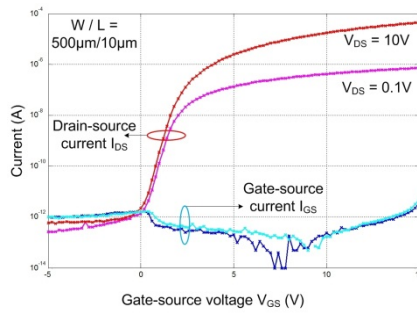


Fig. 2: I-V characteristic of a-Si TFT on 50µm polyimide

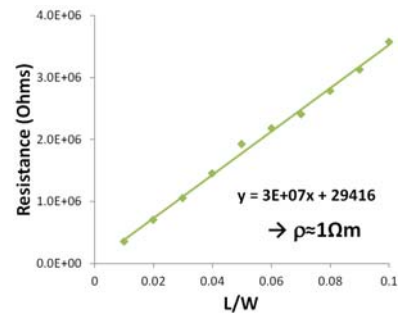


Fig. 3: Resistance characteristics of n-doped a-Si resistors (L=20µm)

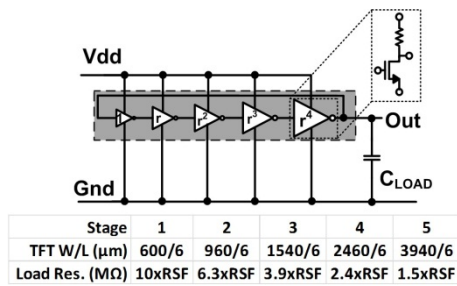


Fig. 4: Ring oscillator TFT and TFR circuit

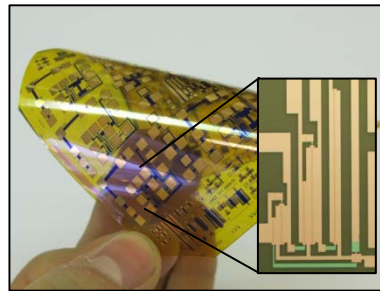


Fig. 5: Flexible oscillator test sample; inset shows ring oscillator TFTs

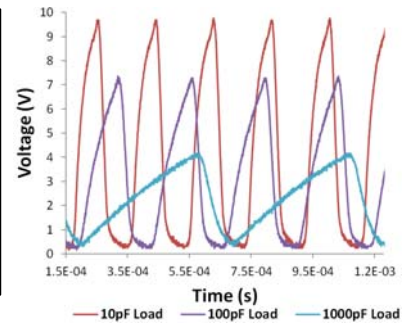


Fig. 6: Ring oscillator waveforms for different output loads (RSF=1)

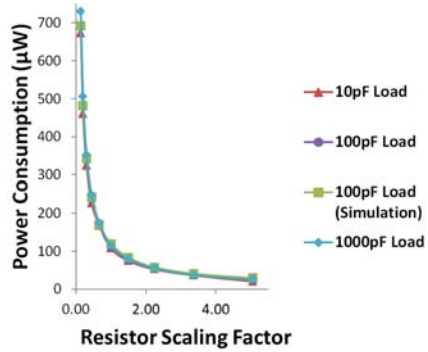


Fig. 7: Load scaling effect: power

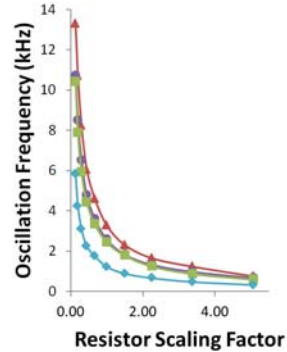


Fig. 8: Load scaling effect: frequency

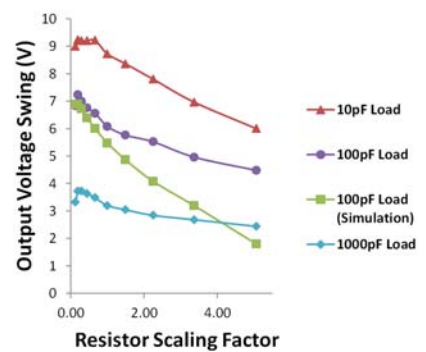


Fig. 9: Load scaling effect: output swing

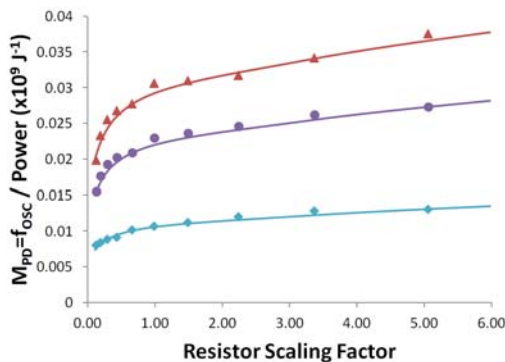


Fig. 10: Optimization of load parameters with (inverse) of conventional power-delay metric M_{PD}

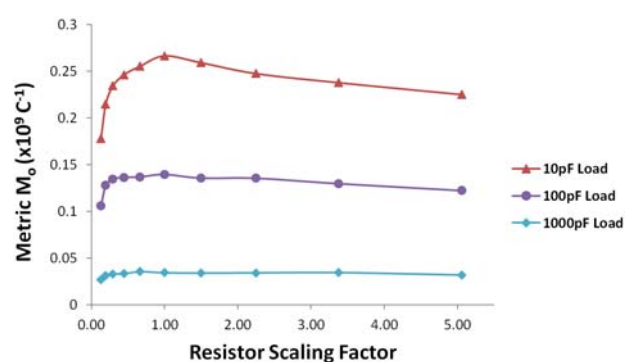


Fig. 11: Optimization of load parameters given proposed metric: $M_o = (f_{OSC} \times V_{SWING}) / (P_{SUPPLY})$