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TABLE OF CONTENTS - EURO ASIC '91

WELCOME	v
COORDINATION COMMITTEE	vi
INTERNATIONAL PROGRAM COMMITTEE	vi
 SESSION: MIXED ANALOG DEVICES I	
CHAIR: E. SCHÜTZ	
Advances in High Speed ECL Technology and Interconnection Techniques	2
<i>K.-I. Ohno</i>	
DBIMOS: The Mix in One Approach	8
<i>E. Teck</i>	
 SESSION: MIXED ANALOG DEVICES II	
CHAIR: J.M. TISSANDIER	
A Versatile Building-Block for High-Speed Current-Mode Analog ICS	14
<i>R.B. Steck, A. Kostka, and K. Lehmann</i>	
DSP-ASIC Based Voltage Feedback Switching Regulator Chip for Electromechanical Contactor	20
<i>P. Solanti, T. Karema, and H. Tenhunen</i>	
A Smart Power IC for High Side Driver Applications	25
<i>Y. Droinet</i>	
Algorithmic ADC for Use in ASIC Design	29
<i>K. Deevy</i>	
 SESSION: DIGITAL SIGNAL PROCESSING ASICs	
CHAIR: C. PITOT	
KISS-16: Realization of a DSP Optimized for Digital Mobile Radio Systems	36
<i>H. Sahm, J. Schuck, H. Ebert, D. Weinsziehr, J. Preissner, and G. Mahlich</i>	
A SIMD Machine for Beamforming on a Chip	41
<i>J.-P. Giacalone and Y. Del Gallo</i>	
VLSI Implementation of a Cochlear Model	45
<i>N. Avellana, F. Garrido, J. Carrabina, E. Valderrama, and P. Gómez</i>	
Single Chip RNS Two-Port Parallel Adaptor for Wave Digital Filters	49
<i>G.C. Cardarilli and F. Sargeni</i>	
A 16/24-Bit DSP-ASIC Coprocessor for AC Motor Modelling	53
<i>S.J. Ovaska, O. Vainio, and J. Pasanen</i>	
 SESSION: CHIP ARCHITECTURE	
CHAIR: A. LORENZI	
Processor Chip Design on Submicron ASICs	58
<i>H. Schletter</i>	
Design and Implementation of a Dedicated Neural Network for Handwritten Digit Recognition	63
<i>P.-Y. Alla, L. Masse-Navette, J. Ouali, G. Saucier, S. Knerr, L. Personnaz, and G. Dreyfus</i>	
SICURE®- A Crypto Chip for Rapid Encipherment	68
<i>H.M. Deppermann, J. Gessner, S. Kösters, and S. Wallstab</i>	

Reduced Voltage Swing, High Speed CMOS Driver, Receiver Techniques for Multiple Chip Set Applications	74
<i>P.D. Ta</i>	

SESSION: HIGH LEVEL LANGUAGES
CHAIR: F. RAMMIG

VHDL in Logic Synthesis—An Applications Perspective	78
<i>W. Ries and K.M. Just</i>	
UDL/I Standardization Effort—Another Approach to HDL Standard	83
<i>O. Karatsu</i>	

SESSION: GRAPHIC APPLICATION AND IMAGE PROCESSING ASICs
CHAIR: R.A. COTTRELL

An Image Decoding ASIC for Space-Based Applications	86
<i>D.B. Kastle and G. DeMicheli</i>	
A Data-Flow Processor for Real-Time Low-Level Image Processing	92
<i>G. Quénot and B. Zavidovique</i>	
A Dedicated Circuit for Real-Time Motion Estimation	96
<i>O. Colavin, A. Artieri, J.-F. Naviner, and R. Pacalet</i>	
CMOS Video Cameras	100
<i>G. Wang, D. Renshaw, P.B. Denyer, and M. Lu</i>	

SESSION: LOGIC SYNTHESIS
CHAIR: G. DUPENLOUP

A New Approach to Timing Driven Partitioning of Combinational Logic	106
<i>N. Wehn and M. Glesner</i>	
Synthesis and Partitioning of Standard Cells for Floorplan Optimization	112
<i>E. Chotin, T. Besson, and G. Saucier</i>	
VLSI-Oriented Asynchronous Controller Synthesis Based on a Flip-Flop Cell Array Structure	117
<i>K.R. Cho, M. Ikeda, and K. Asada</i>	

SESSION: HIGH VOLUME ASICs
CHAIR: T. BAKER

A Mixed-Mode ASIC for Interface Control of Smart-Card Parcmeter	124
<i>E. Compagne and F. Ilie</i>	
A Double-Sourced ASIC for Contactless Badges	128
<i>R. Petigny and P. Cabon</i>	
VLSI ASIC Design for MAC Video Processing Integration in SGS-Thomson Microelectronics Chip Set	131
<i>A. Lorenzi, G. Vanneuville, V. Verfaillie, N. Chaumartin, G. Gerot, and J.M. Troude</i>	

SESSION: LOGIC SYNTHESIS II
CHAIR: G. DE MICHELI

An Efficient Program for Logic Synthesis of Mod-2 Sum Expressions	136
<i>P.W. Besslich and M.W. Riege</i>	
Automatic Synthesis of Boolean Functions on Xilinx and Actel Programmable Devices	142
<i>P. Sicard, M. Crastes, K. Sakouti, and G. Saucier</i>	

Algebraic Decomposition of MCNC Benchmark FSMs for Logic Synthesis . . . . .	.146
<i>T. Müller-Wipperfurth and M. Geiger</i>	

SESSION: ASICs FOR DEDICATED COMPUTATION AND ARCHITECTURES
CHAIR: J. HUERTAS

VLSI Chip Set for Floating Point Vector Processing	154
<i>A. Laudenschlager, M. Glesner, P. Windirsch, J. Plahl, and W. Clemens</i>	
VLSI Design of an 8-Bit Fixed Point Cordic Processor with Extended Operation Set	158
<i>D.E. Metafas, G.A. Krikis, and C.E. Goutis</i>	
Pipeline-Based Design for Numerically Controlled Oscillator . . . . .	.162
<i>L. Ji, D. Li, S. Sheng, and Q. Liang</i>	
Design and Implementation of HRISC2 . . . . .	.166
<i>A. Bouaraoua, Y.I. el-Haffaf, and A. Amari</i>	
Searching Processor . . . . .	.167
<i>J.B. Barbosa, M.B. Calha, and I.C. Teixeira</i>	

SESSION: HIGH LEVEL SYNTHESIS
CHAIR: S. MARZ

Resource Assignment with Different Target Architectures	172
<i>A. Mignotte and M. Crastes de Paulet</i>	
Flexible Datapath Compilation for Phideo	178
<i>A. van der Werf, B.T. McSweeney, J.L. van Meerbergen, P.E.R. Lippens, and W.F.J. Verhaegh</i>	
A New Method for the Minimization of Memory Area in High Level Synthesis . . . . .	.184
<i>B. Rouzeyre and G. Sagnes</i>	

SESSION: SIMULATION
CHAIR: D. AUVERGNE

High Precision SPICE Models for the Simulation of Analogue CMOS Circuits . . . . .	.192
<i>B. Ankele and F. Schrank</i>	
Power Calculation for High Density CMOS Gate Arrays	198
<i>W. Eisenmann and M. Kohl</i>	
ACC: Automatic Cell Characterization	204
<i>K. Anshumali</i>	

SESSION: PLACE AND ROUTE
CHAIR: T. YANAGAWA

Timing Driven Pin Assignment in a Hierarchical Design Environment . . . . .	.212
<i>G. Meixner and G. Zimmermann</i>	
A Genetic Algorithm for the Routing of VLSI Circuits . . . . .	.218
<i>M. Geraci, P. Orlando, G. Vassallo, and F. Sorbello</i>	
A New Graph Theoretical Approach to the Selection of Rip-Ups . . . . .	.224
<i>M. Bartholomeus and M. Raith</i>	
Optimal Module Orientation by Block Rotation and Wire Length Minimisation . . . . .	.230
<i>P.J. Drenth, J.G.G.P. van Gisbergen, and M. Lousberg</i>	

SESSION: ASICs IMPLEMENTED IN EUROCHIP
CHAIR: B. COURTOIS

Implementation of a Linear Array Element for Matrix Multiplication	236
<i>M.A. Morante, L. Saiz de Quevedo, P. Tabuenca, J.I. Martinez, and E. Villar</i>	
Design of a Complex Combinational ASIC with Educational Aims	239
<i>P. Amblard, M. Hollett, S. Audié, E. Bittar, C. Chaudy, P. Coulomb, S. Le Men, O. Ondo, E. Piot, and F. Pogodalla</i>	
Serial Data Interface for Telecommunication Satellites	243
<i>J. Vanneuville, H. Manhaeve, and D. Gevaert</i>	
A Digital CMOS Fully Connected Neural Network with In-Circuit Learning Capability and Automatic Identification of Spurious Attractors	247
<i>J.-D. Gascuel, M. Weinfeld, and S. Chakroun</i>	
An ASIC for Image Dilation and Erosion	251
<i>Y. Tertre, J. Rampon, and M. Baatour</i>	
Real Time Image Processing System: Design of an Area CCD Sensor Driving Integrated Circuit	254
<i>E. Fauvet, M. Paindavoine, J.-F. Kirilenko, M. Robert, D. Deschacht, and D. Auvergne</i>	

SESSION: MULTIPLIER DESIGN
CHAIR: J.C. ROSICHINI

A Fast Data Path Multiplier	260
<i>C. Priol and P. Magarshack</i>	
On the Construction of Very Large Integer Multipliers	266
<i>G. Hotz, P. Molitor, and W. Zimmer</i>	

SESSION: CAD FOR TEST
CHAIR: T. AMBLER

Test Generation Using Cross-Observability Calculations	272
<i>E. Cerny, E.M. Aboulhamid, C. Mauras, and P. Rioux</i>	
Comprehensive CAD Support for Boundary Scan Implementation in ASICs	278
<i>P. Lestrat, R. Leveugle, and P. Magarshack</i>	
Test Generation of Controllers Using the Synthesis Specifications	284
<i>M. Karam, G. Saucier, and C. Jay</i>	

SESSION: ASICs FOR TELECOMMUNICATIONS AND COMMUNICATIONS
CHAIR: C. AUBERT

ASIC Cryptographical Processor Based on DES	292
<i>I. Verbauwhede, F. Hoornaert, J. Vandewalle, and H. De Man</i>	
The Design of the PRI ASIC	296
<i>F.C. Torre</i>	
ASIC Chip Set Development for PCM 2 & 3-ary Group MUX and DEMUX with EIS Project	297
<i>J. Jie</i>	
6 Bits Programmable VHF Amplifier	301
<i>C. Vanhecke</i>	
High-Speed CMOS Operational Amplifier	305
<i>S. Schwehr, T. Fuchs, K. Dzahini, B. Boutherein, and M. Le Helley</i>	

SESSION: DESIGN FOR TEST/QUALITY
CHAIR: R. SEDMAK

High-Quality Physical Designs of CMOS ICs	310
<i>J.J.T. Sousa, F.M. Gonçalves, and J.P. Teixeira</i>	
Design of Highly Reliable VLSI Processors Incorporating Concurrent Error Detection/Correction	316
<i>G. Russell and I.D. Elliott</i>	
Integrating Verification Testing and Logic Synthesis	322
<i>W. Murzyn and A. Krasniewski</i>	

SESSION: TEST MEASUREMENTS TECHNIQUES
CHAIR: M. LE HELLEY

Testing ASICs At-Speed	328
<i>C. Gauthron</i>	
Ultra-High Speed ICs Set for Test System Design	333
<i>A. Balevski, A. Shishkov, R. Elenkova, V. Soliakov, and A. Adamov</i>	
A Temperature and Voltage Measurement Cell for VLSI Circuits	334
<i>G.M. Quénot, N. Paris, and B. Zavidovique</i>	

SESSION: INDUSTRIAL APPLICATIONS
CHAIR: H. VAN NIELEN

Digital Speed Regulation for a Washing Machine Motor	340
<i>C. Ferrer and J.M. Aguirre</i>	
Design of a Robust Analog/Digital ASIC Interface for Hard Industrial Environment	344
<i>J. Suutari, H. Tenhunen, and J. Nikula</i>	
ASIC Design Considerations for Power Management in Laptop Computers	348
<i>Y.A. Dubois and J.J. Farrell III</i>	
An A/D-Chip for Accurate Power Measurement	352
<i>R. Rauscher and V. Grupe</i>	
Using a CMOS ASIC Technology for the Development of an Integrated ISFET Sensor	356
<i>K. Dzahini, F. Gaffiot, and M. Le Helley</i>	

SESSION: LAYOUT SYNTHESIS
CHAIR: J. FREHEL

Evaluation of VLSI Layout Style Implementations for Efficiency	362
<i>M. Robert, J. Traushessec, G. Cathebras, V. Bonzom, N. Azemard, D. Deschacht, and D. Auvergne</i>	
G2L: System for Converting Low-Level Geometrical Designs to a Higher Level Representation	366
<i>E. Pajarre, T. Ritoniemi, and H. Tenhunen</i>	
Branch-Based Digital Cell Libraries	372
<i>J.M. Masgonty</i>	
Datapath Layout Generation with In-the-Cell Routing and Optimal Column Resequencing	373
<i>P.J. Drenth and C. Strolenberg</i>	

SESSION: VERIFICATION
CHAIR: L. CLAESEN

A Review on Formal Methods for Correct VLSI Design	378
<i>O. Coudert and J.C. Madre</i>	
Application Example of Multi-Level Digital Design Verification by the SFG-Tracing Methodology	379
<i>L. Claesen, M. Genoe, E. Verlind, F. Proesmans, and H. De Man</i>	
A Good Input Ordering for Circuit Verification Based on Binary Decision Diagrams	385
<i>G. Saucier and F. Poirot</i>	
AUTHOR INDEX	395

CMOS Video Cameras

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Abstract

A single chip CMOS video camera is presented, along with design technique and characterization results. The chip comprises a 312×287 pixel photodiode array together with all the necessary sensing, addressing and amplifying circuitry, as well as a 1,000 gate logic processor, which implements synchronization timing to deliver a fully-formatted composite video signal and a further 1,000 gate logic processor, which implements automatic exposure control over a wide range. There are also simple solutions for γ correction and test.

1. Introduction

We introduce a new capability that extends the CMOS ASIC marketplace in a sector of high growth rates. This market sector is that of image sensing and processing, covering applications from electronic cameras to 'smart' vision systems.

Camera and vision systems addressed by today's CCD technology appear cumbersome, power-hungry and expensive. The experimental work reported here demonstrates that high-quality image sensors can be implemented entirely in commodity ASIC CMOS technology, operating from single 5v supplies.

The reported chip is a highly-integrated CMOS VLSI camera, shown in Figure 1. Most of the core area is a 312×287 pixel image sensor array, together with the necessary sensing, addressing and amplifying circuitry. The output signal can be either linear or γ corrected. γ correction is achieved by a simple solution which uses the nonlinear I_D - V_{GS} characteristic of an MOS

transistor. The layout of the sensor is custom designed to make it as compact as possible.

At the top (Figure 1) is the 2,000 gate logic processor, laid out using a semi-custom standard-cell compiler. Half of these gates generate synchronization timing, including line-sync and frame-sync signals to format a 625line/50Hz standard composite video output. The other half of the gates are included to electronically control exposure over a wide range (40,000:1), enabling the use of a single fixed-aperture lens. The chip measures $7.58\text{mm} \times 7.56\text{mm}$, using $1.5\text{ }\mu\text{m}$, 2 level metal CMOS technology.

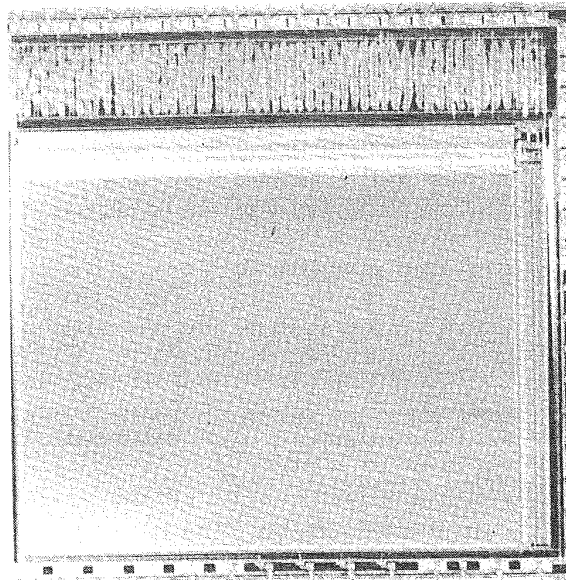


Figure 1. Photo-micrograph of single chip video camera

A video camera has been built using this chip along with a 6 MHz clock source, a 5 volt power supply, plus one bipolar transistor and a small number of resistors and capacitors required to match the line impedance to the monitor and decouple the power supply. The picture quality is subjectively excellent, and compares well with commercially available cameras.

2. Image Sensor Block

The architecture of the image sensor is shown in Figure 2. The light sensing area consists of a 312×287 diode array matrix, schematically indicated by the columns and rows of individual photodiodes. The pixel size is $19.6\mu m \times 16\mu m$, giving a light sensing area of $6.12mm \times 4.59mm$. This corresponds to the standard 1/2" format.

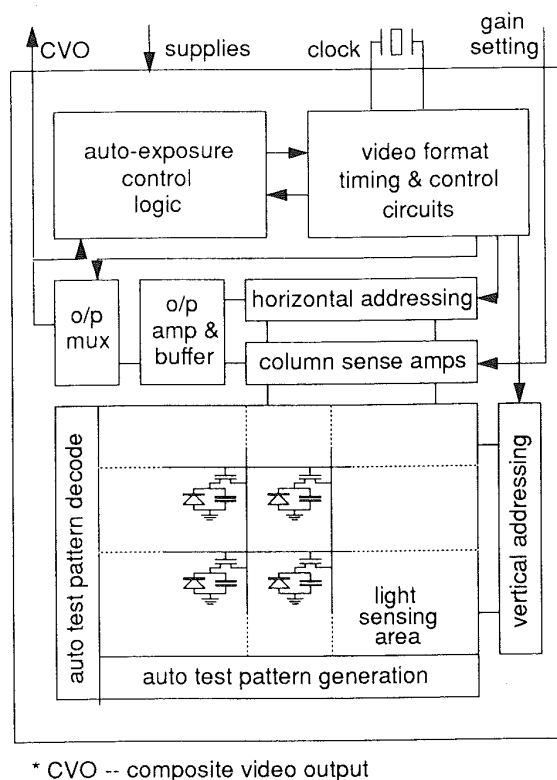


Figure 2. Architecture of the image sensor

The photodiodes are accessed on the basis of sequential selection of each row through a verti-

cal shift register. At the top of each column is a sense amplifier. The sensed information is read out sequentially along the x-direction under control of a horizontal shift register. At the end of the path there is an output amplifier [1,2].

The sense amplifier is a single-ended differential charge integrator. Its performance demands an accurate capacitor, formed by metal1/metal2 and metal1/poly. However, commodity ASIC CMOS technology sometimes can not guarantee the resulting capacitance values. We designed a gain-controllable integrator, shown in Figure. 3, which allows wide range of programmable variation of the capacitance value.

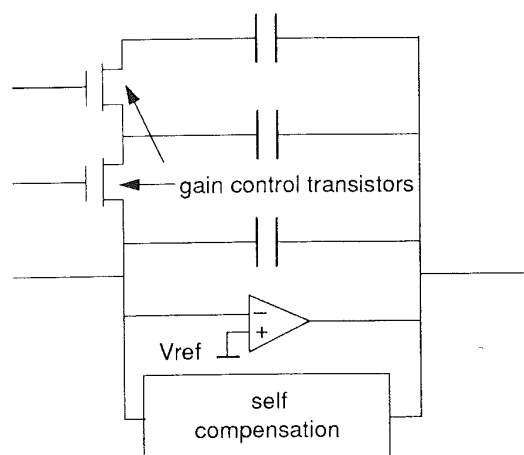


Figure 3. Integrator with programmable gain and self compensation

The main concern in the output stage design is the read-out speed required to achieve high resolution. A 6 MHz clock was chosen for this design; this gives a horizontal resolution of 312 pixels. The resultant picture quality is assured by a two stage output buffer with sample and hold function.

3. Automatic Exposure Control

The device automatically controls its exposure over a range of 40,000:1. Control is achieved by varying the integration time prior to reading each row of pixels. The integration time can be as long as one field, or as short as three cycles of the pixel clock (about 500ns).

The exposure is set by monitoring the video stream and estimating the fractions of each picture which are very white and very black. On the basis of this information, the device decides whether the picture contrast is acceptable, or too white, or too dark. If necessary, the exposure time is then changed, in the appropriate direction.

4. Generation of the Video Format Signal

Figure 4 shows a block diagram for the generation of the video formatted signal. The γ corrected image data is multiplexed with the sync-level and blanking-level, controlled by timing control signals, which are provided from the video timing block. A bipolar transistor (emitter follower) is needed to provide a low impedance output.

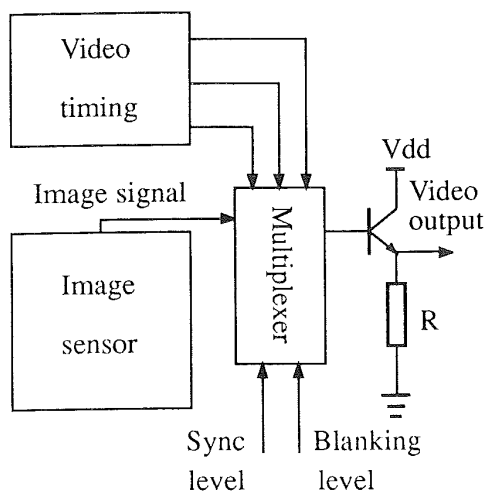


Figure 4. Generation of the video output

5. Simple Solution for γ Correction

The analogue image data needs to be γ corrected, to compensate for the nonlinearity of monitor tubes [3]. This is usually implemented using discrete components e.g. a ladder-network of diodes, resistors and reference voltages. Unfortunately, this is not suitable for integration. In this design γ correction is achieved by a simple solution which uses the nonlinear I_D - V_{GS} characteristic of an MOS FET, as shown

in Figure 5.

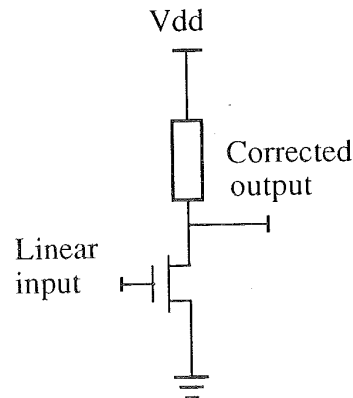


Figure 5. Gamma corrector

SPICE simulation was carried out and a simulation result is shown in Figure 6. A theoretical curve of ideal γ correction ($\gamma = 0.45$) is also shown in Figure 6.

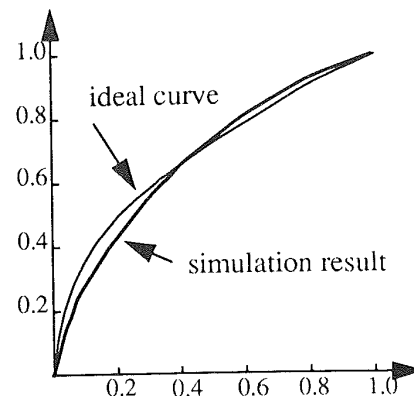


Figure 6. Gamma correction curves

6. Simple Solution for Test

Special consideration has been given to make it possible to carry out digital wafer test which is as complete as possible. The analogue parts are also tested by making them produce digital outputs, so avoiding a requirement for full analogue test. The test includes bit-line tests and word-line tests. Only a 0.78% increase in chip area was required to implement the on chip

hardware necessary for this form of testing (Figure 2). The individual photo pixels may be tested if a sufficiently long vector set is allowable.

The chip can also self-generate a checkerboard pattern which may be displayed on a monitor screen, or captured by a frame grabber. This pattern can be used not only to find defective pixels, but also to check analogue performance parameters, such as read out speed and uniformity.

7. Eliminating Noise

Complete guard rings are put around all analogue parts to minimize interference from the digital parts. Routing is arranged with priority to analogue output and analogue power supplies. Analogue power supplies and digital supplies are separated, and supplies to different analogue parts are divided where necessary.

There are two sources of fixed pattern noise: threshold variation in the MOS pixel access transistors causing speckles, and mismatches between the column sense amplifiers causing vertical stripes. The solution to the pixel threshold variation is to reduce the pixel reset voltage below ($V_{dd}-V_t$) so that the reset voltage is insensitive to the variation of the threshold V_t .

Column fixed pattern noise arises mostly from offset mismatches in the column sense amplifiers. We have successfully eliminated this problem by automatically compensating each amplifier to give zero offset during each line synchronization interval.

8. Characterization

An optical test measurement set-up was used to characterize the camera. The following table summarize the measured results of the performance characterization experiments. The parameters of typical monochrome CCD cameras are also given for comparison.

parameter	CMOS	CCD
operating voltage for camera	5v	12v
power dissipation for chip	50mW	
power dissipation for camera	200mW	1W
s.n.r.	51dB	52dB
exposure range	40,000:1	300:1
saturation level	20lux	20lux
antiblooming factor	100x	100x
dark current*	0.0004	0.005

* as fraction of saturation at room temperature, 20msec integration time

9. Conclusions

We have developed several design techniques to achieve a single chip camera, in unmodified CMOS technology, which matches the performance of CCD cameras. The design has proven that three technical barriers which most greatly influence new product development; cost, power consumption and size, are all dramatically reduced over today's solid-state camera technologies.

10. Acknowledgements

We acknowledge support received from the Science and Engineering Research Council (Grant GR/F 36538 IED2/1/1159).

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