Impact of different transistor arrangements on gate variability

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ABSTRACT

This paper evaluates a set of complex cells with different transistor arrangements that implement the same logic function. These cells were evaluated under nominal conditions and with gate variability at layout level. The purpose is to verify what topology is more appropriate to increase the robustness of cells regarding the process variability issues. Results emphasize the importance of investigating the effects caused by process variability in FinFET technologies, as the electrical characteristics of circuits suffer significant changes. In general, the best choice is to use the network that the transistor in series is as far as possible to the output node. However, a trade-off needs to be done due to performance and power consumption penalties.

1. Process variability on nanotechnologies

For continuing with the technology scaling on sub-22 nm, novel materials and new devices architectures had to be adopted in integrated circuit designs [1]. Multigate devices were introduced with the objective of overcome obstacles encountered in standard Complementary Metal Oxide Semiconductor (CMOS) technologies and keep scaling [2]. FinFETs gained prominence for presenting an excellent short-channel effects (SCE) control, reduced leakage currents, high driving capability, better yield, and the fabrication process compatible to the conventional CMOS [3].

The emerged technologies raised relevant topics related to reliability and robustness that to need to be investigated. The process variability still as one of the most significant challenges in nanometer regime becomes even more meaningful in designs based on FinFET technology. The sub-wavelength lithography introduced difficulties in transferring the small geometric patterns required by the layout of nanometer technologies to the substrate surface [4]. The side effect is that this manufacturing step impacts directly on the transistor threshold voltage (V_{TH}).

FinFET technologies use high-k/metal gate stack to improve the gate control on the channel region [5]. Thereby, the Metal Gate Granularity (MGG) has been identified as a source of statistical variability. The orientation of the grains used in the gate is not considered ideal as a unique metal uniformly aligned. The metal gate having different work-functions (ϕm) randomly aligned that implies in higher work-functions fluctuations (WFF) [4, 6]. Moreover, the imperfections caused by process variations can influence the fin height, fin width, fin-to-fin similarity, and the resistance MOL (Middle of Line).

All these factors can compromise entire blocks of cells because they modify the transistor structure. Therefore, the electrical properties of the circuits also suffer deviations [7]. The impact on performance and power metrics can accelerate the circuit degradation besides introducing errors in the circuit functionality. The consequence is the parameter yield loss leading to a higher cost of fabrication. This emphasizes the importance of creating new design guidelines able to deal with the challenges imposed by the process variability in nanometer technologies.

Many related works studied the challenges and the impact of variability in the circuits and devices at nanometer technologies [6–11]. The influence of the variation of the main geometric parameters on the currents I_{ON} and I_{OFF} of FinFET transistors considering a set of predictive FinFET technologies sub-22 nm was analyzed in [12]. In [13], the impact of Process, Voltage and Temperature (PVT) variations in timing and power on a subset of circuits using a commercial standard cell was studied. Different transistor sizing techniques were applied in FinFET circuits with PVT variations in [14]. However, there are only few approaches in the literature to mitigate the variability effects. The replacement of traditional inverters by Schmitt Triggers (ST) into near-threshold full-adder architecture was proposed by [15] as a process variability mitigation technique. Their results showed a significant reduction in timing and power deviation at 16-nm bulk CMOS technology. The similar analysis was done in [16].

Transistor arrangement optimization is a technique used to design

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faster circuits [17], but also to deal with Bias Temperature Instability (BTI) effects [18] or to improve design robustness against permanent and transient faults. The adoption of complex gates reduces the transistor number that is correlated to the area and also, reduces the delay and power consumption. Some logic cells can be designed using different kinds of transistor networks [19]. It is well known that different transistor combinations, that implement the same logic function, present different electrical and physical characteristics as well as distinct behavior under process variations [18].

In this context, this work evaluates the electrical characteristics of a set of complex gates with different transistor arrangements considering the ideal behavior and a realistic behavior, i.e., with WFF variations. The more suitable topology to process variability mitigation is analyzed. Moreover, gains and penalties regarding performance and power consumption were investigated alongside variability robustness. The set of information provided here helps the designers to choose the most appropriate physical layout depending on the target application.

Section 2 shows the methodology adopted in this work. A review about the 7 nm FinFET technology from ASAP and the layout techniques are presented in Section 3. Sections 4 and 5 propose a discussion of the results and the conclusions.

2. Methodology

This work evaluates the impact of process variability on different transistor arrangements. Fig. 1 shows the design flow adopted in this research. First, a set of six complex gates of 3 to 5-inputs was chosen to perform this analysis. This choice was made due to the cells present serial transistors allowing more than one topology type. All complex cells are designed with symmetric sizing such that NFET and PFET transistors have the number of fins equal to three.

Fig. 2 presents different transistor arrangements for a set of four complex gates. For the gate AO21, in the pull-up network, the serial transistor with the signal *a* on the input can be connected close or far related to the cell output terminal. In other gates, when possible, this work also explores an intermediate place in the middle of the cell, as illustrated on AOI211 and AOI221. As a general rule, AOI gates have the alternative transistor arrangements explored in the pull-up network. On the other hand, the OAI gates explored different pull-down network options, as Fig. 2 demonstrates for the OAI21 function. The complementary networks do not need to be rearranged because the

transistors are associated in parallel.

The purpose of the next stage was dedicated to the development of the schematic and the physical layout for all investigated complex gates. The layouts were submitted to the physical verification flow composed by DRC (Design Rule Check) and LVS (Layout Versus Schematic) steps. Both steps are based on the technology rules of the 7-nm FinFET Predictive Process Design Kit (ASAP7) developed at Arizona State University in partnership with ARM Ltd. [20]. The main parameters of this technology are summarized in Table I. The behavior of each complex gate is verified to certificate that it implements your function correctly. Nominal conditions were used as a reference to the variability evaluation.

After setting the parasitic extraction configurations with the options desired, the parasitic wire capacitances and resistances from the layout were extracted. A new netlist was generated where each net has one subckt with the RC tree structure and the connections between the parasitic networks.

Process variability was taken through 2000 Monte Carlo simulations carried out in HSPICE with the WFF parameter modelled as a Gaussian function with a 3σ deviation of 5% from nominal values [12, 21]. The mean (μ), the standard deviation (σ) and the normalized standard deviation (σ/μ) were analyzed for all complex gates.

The choice of the transistor topology with less impact of variability effects is given observing the deviation, i.e., the σ/μ relation. An arrangement is pointed as the best choice to mitigate the variability impact if it has the lowest value for the σ/μ relation. All complex gates drive a FO4 inverter and this has two inverters used as the load connected to each input.

3. Layout description based on ASAP7

All the complex gates were designed using the ASAP7 Process Design Kit (PDK) that considers a not yet available technology node for academic use. This PDK was chosen because admits realistic design conjectures regarding the lithography step and the current technology competencies [20]. Table II shows some essential layers and the design rules considered in this PDK.

FinFET technologies have a width quantization characteristic [21]. With a 27 nm fin pitch, high-density layout design is achieved with three fins for each PFET and NFET devices [22]. Fig. 3 shows the layout view of the AOI21 complex gate with the serial transistor close to the output. The difference of the far topology is the serial transistor connected to supply voltage. The cell height is set to 7.5 tracks of metal 2 (M2) that correspond to 0.27 μm. The supply/ground rails have a tall approximately equal to 1.22 tracks of M2. The total area of complex cells with three, four and five inputs is 84.78 nm², 101.74 nm² and 118.67 nm², respectively.

This PDK has the manufacturing process composed by front end of line (FEOL), middle of line (MOL) and back end of line (BEOL) as shown the Fig. 3. The layouts were developed with a continuous diffusion layer and every gate must have at least one other gate surrounding the horizontal axis. The fin layer polygons should have an equal length along the X-axis. The Source-Drain Trench (SDT) connects the active area to the LISD layer. The Local-Interconnect Gate (LIG) is used to connect the gate terminal and the Local-Interconnect Source-Drain (LISD) connects the source and drain of the transistors. The function of V0 is to join the LIG and LISD to the BEOL layers. The metal 1 (M1) is used for intra-cell routing and short connections. The power rails are made using M1 and LIG that are connecting at V0 in regular intervals. For obtain success in the LVS verification step is necessary to add a TAP cell in the design of each cell.

4. Investigation of arrangement effects

In this work, the analysis is divided into three main parts. First, a comparison of electrical characteristics of each complex gate with
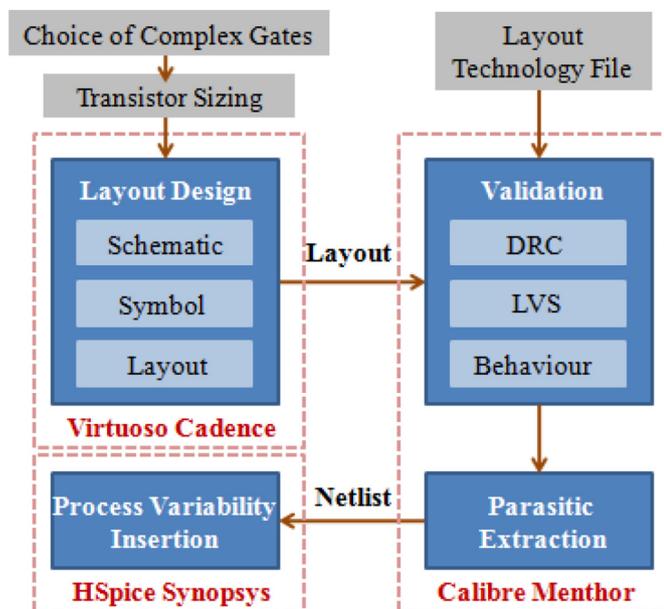

Fig. 1. Design flow of the experiments.