

Memory Design for Centimeter-Scale Organic and Nanometer-Scale Silicon Technologies

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This dissertation is dedicated to my parents and my wife, Lan Huang. Their consistent and unconditional support has equipped me with confidence and courage.

Finally, I dedicate the merit and virtue of my work to all living beings. May all become compassionate and wise.

Abstract

Low power memory is always desired due to its significance in many large-scale applications. It is important to emerging technologies such as organic electronics, since it is an indispensable component to extend the technology towards larger application scope with complicated functionalities. It is also a hot topic in the mature silicon technology because the device scaling makes memory designs challenging with increasing leakage currents and process variations.

Organic electronics deals with conductive polymers and plastics, and is capable of realizing large area flexible applications, which cannot be fulfilled by modern silicon technology. Conventional organic devices require a high operation voltage due to its low carrier mobility. Ion-gel gated OTFTs (gel-OTFTs), however, deliver unusually high gate capacitance through an electrolyte-gated structure, and therefore offer sufficient drive currents under a low voltage. Being an emerging technology, few attempts have been made on organic memory designs. In this dissertation, we first propose an improved design-fabrication-testing flow to significantly facilitate the entire process, which boosts the design efficiency and fabrication yield and thus enables the implementation of complex circuits such as memory array. An organic process design kit (OPDK) with various modeling approaches allows designers to easily design organic circuits in a similar way as that in silicon technology. Various circuit components including logic gates, ring oscillators and a D-flipflop were demonstrated and a general purpose organic dynamic memory cell was proposed for the first time. The cell, known as a DRAM gain

cell, achieves a sub-10nW-per-cell refresh power with a retention time of over 1 minute, which is 5 orders of magnitude longer than that in silicon designs.

The same DRAM gain cell architecture is also found potential as embedded memory in the modern silicon technology, where the prevailing 6T SRAM is suffering from leakage power and poor low voltage margin when devices keep scaling down. In this dissertation we report the first variation-aware performance analysis on the silicon gain cell and reveal that conventional corner simulations are no longer valid in capturing worst cases of gain cells. Insights can be obtained through the various analysis approaches described in the dissertation to benefit future memory design strategy and device optimization.

With innovations in cell structure and peripheral circuitry, the silicon gain cell performance can be further enhanced to compete with the mainstream 6T SRAM. In this dissertation, we for the first time experimentally demonstrate a gain cell design with write-back-free read operations, utilizing its non-destructive read nature to improve the read speed into GHz regime without sacrificing retention time. Various circuit techniques including a local-sense-amplifier architecture are proposed to eliminate the need of a complex current-sensing scheme, and a dual-row-access mode is proposed for further power saving in half-utilization scenarios. The test chip in a 65nm low power process achieves a 23.9% power saving compared to a 6T SRAM at 0.6V retention voltage and an additional 27.8% power saving during cases when only half array is needed.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Low Power Memory

Memory is an essential component in most electrical systems nowadays, providing a low power and low cost solution for data storage and processing. In silicon industry, SRAM and DRAM have been prevailing for years. 6T SRAM has been dominating as a mainstream embedded memory due to its high performance and logic compatibility, while DRAM has been mainly serving as a standalone memory for its high bit-cell density.

Recently, along with the rapid development in electronics technology, there is increasing demand for exploring into novel memory designs. One hot topic is to implement memory in emerging device platforms instead of the mature silicon technology, since innovative device technologies, including organic electronics, are proceeding towards the application-level stage to achieve features that were absent in the traditional silicon technology. Memory, as an indispensable component for any complex systems, is therefore an urgent need. The other topic is to investigate novel low power memory in the current silicon technology. Despite the mature design and fabrication techniques, the silicon industry is now suffering from increasing leakage currents following the scaling trend, which makes low power SRAM challenging in the future.

We focus on these two topics in this dissertation, as the low power memory implementation in an emerging organic device platform, and the emerging circuit

techniques for realizing a low power embedded DRAM (eDRAM) in silicon technology. Although organic and silicon device platforms target at two different application scopes, i.e. large-area & flexible versus small-size high performance applications, low power is always a desired feature in both.

In this dissertation, we will first evaluate and solve the design and fabrication challenges in organic device platform, and demonstrate an organic memory implementation. Then we will extend the low power memory investigation into silicon technology. In both platforms, we find gain cell DRAMs being a promising low power solution.

1.2 Organic Device Platform Overview

Large area flexible electronics technology has been drawing much attention recently as it has the potential of revolutionizing the ways how human society interacts with responsive electronic systems. One can imagine a smart bandage that not only protects your injury but also detects whether infection is occurring somewhere, and thus notifies medical-care personnel. Or one can also wear a dress that brings not only fashion but also physiological monitoring [1]. Research on blast dosimeter is already underway [2], which will be a low-cost, disposable flexible attachment in helmets to monitor pressure, acceleration, and sound, and thus help identify soldiers' traumatic brain injury. Other applications include flexible electronic readers or photo frames that can be folded and rolled like today's newspaper, and low-cost computers that can be folded into pockets or worn around your wrist.

The modern silicon technology, in spite of its impressive performance, mature design and fabrication process, and well-developed circuit techniques, is unable to fulfill the requirements for large area flexible electronics. The rigid crystal lattice and the high temperature involved during fabrication make it incompatible with flexible substrates, while the complicated process steps and expensive masks prevent silicon chips being scaled up in area. Therefore, a novel solution is needed to accommodate the desired properties of large area flexible electronics.

Organic electronics, a branch of electronics dealing with conductive polymers and plastics, serve as a promising candidate. Organic Thin-Film-Transistors (OTFTs) refer to devices primarily built using organic instead of silicon-based materials. They are now drawing increasing attention because of their attractive attributes such as structural flexibility, low temperature processing, large area coverage, and low cost [3]. Printable OTFTs have also been reported [4], which is desired to further lower the cost for large area flexible applications. OTFTs cannot match the performance of silicon-based transistors, but can complement them by enabling flexible electronic systems which don't have to operate at high speed. Although various OTFT devices have been proposed with significantly different characteristics, most of them share the similar electrical behaviors with silicon transistors.

Typical organic applications include passive RFID tags [5] and active display matrixes [6]. Although the introduction of a viable n-type material has been delayed for most proposed organic techniques since existing materials have unstable characteristics, no good contact, and significantly lower mobility than their p-type counterpart, p-type-

only logic has been demonstrated to deliver practical performance in many circuits. Nowadays organic electronics have made rapid progress mainly in digital applications; for instance, most recently an 8-bit organic microprocessor on plastic foil has been reported [7]. Meanwhile, achievements in analog applications have also been presented, including various digital-to-analog converter (DAC) designs [8].

Despite the rapid progress in the organic electronics area, it is still in its research stage. As an emerging interdisciplinary topic spanning electrical engineering and chemical engineering, there are still several practical problems. Few studies have examined the special circuit design strategies needed for organic transistor characteristics, and no efficient design and fabrication flow has ever been reported, even though these are critical aspects that need to be addressed for this emerging technology to take off. It is generally accepted that the most urgent need is to verify the capabilities of numerous OTFT variants and propose the best candidates to lead the flexible electronics area, and in addition, researchers need to find solutions for design and fabrication challenges.

1.3 Ion-Gel Gated OTFT Technique

Organic transistors proposed so far suffer from low carrier mobility, which usually results in a high operation voltage [5][7]. Few attempts have been made on low-voltage, printable and flexible organic transistors. An ion-gel gated OTFT (gel-OTFT), however, is capable of providing sufficient drain current under a low supply voltage by utilizing the high gate capacitance from an electrolyte gated structure [4][9]. Meanwhile, the materials utilized in a gel-OTFT can be printed on flexible substrates like plastic foils. Table 1

compares various recently proposed organic devices regarding the four major desired features. Gel-OTFT achieves most of the features except for the complementary logic, which can be resolved by implementing p-type-only logic circuits.

Table 1. Comparison of recent OTFT techniques on the four most desired features.

Reported Technique	1	2	3	4	5
Complementary Logic			●		
Flexible	●	●		●	●
Printable		●			●
Low Voltage			●		●

1. Philips, JSSC 2007 [5]
2. MIT, ISSCC 2007 [10]
3. Stanford, ISSCC 2010 [11]
4. imec, ISSCC 2011 [7]
5. UMN, ISSCC 2011 (Ion-gel gated OTFT) [3]

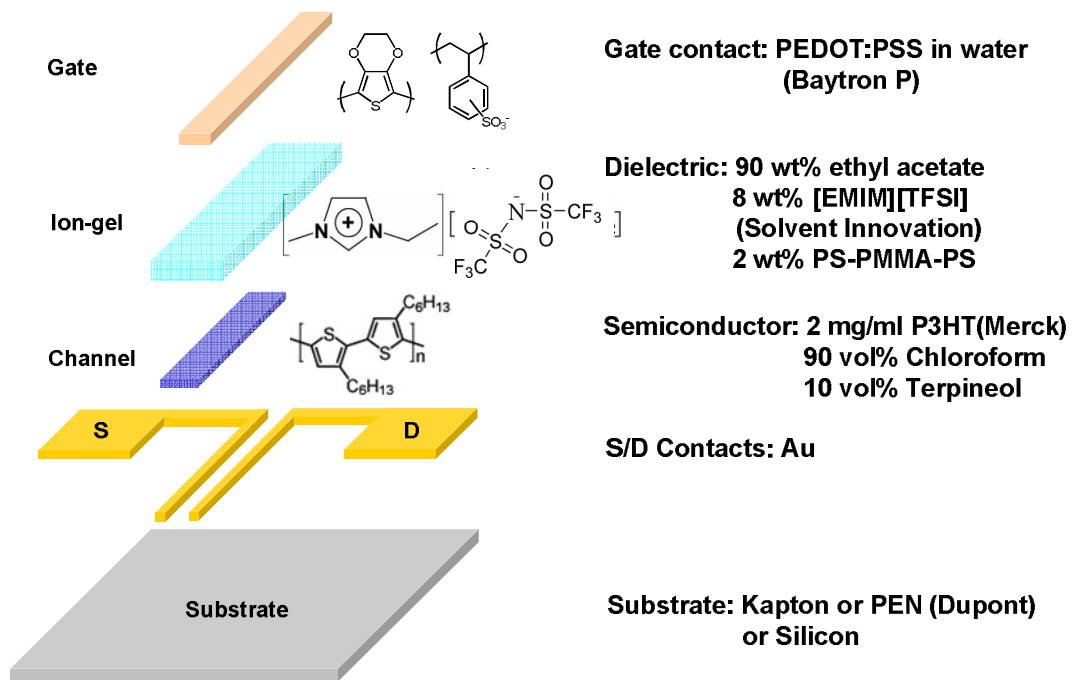


Fig. 1.1. Process layers and materials for a gel-OTFT.

A gel-OTFT [3]-[4][9] is fabricated based on ion-gel dielectric material and the

mechanism of electrolyte, wherein ion-gel refers to an electrolyte formed by gelation of a triblock copolymer in an ionic liquid, acting as the gate dielectric. Fig. 1.1 shows the basic structure and Fig. 1.2 shows the electrolyte mechanism [3]. Poly(3-hexylthiophene) (P3HT) is printed between the two gold electrodes (source and drain) as the channel layer. An ion-gel layer covers the entire channel layer and a conducting polymer poly(3,4-ethylenedioxythiophene) : poly(styrenesulfonate) (PEDOT:PSS) is printed on the top as the gate electrode. Although other materials can be implemented as the channel layer, e.g. carbon-nanotube, in this dissertation we refer to P3HT-channel transistors as gel-OTFTs. Under zero bias, the ions in the ion gel are randomly distributed; when the gate is biased with a negative voltage, the ions are polarized by the electrical field and interfaces are formed near both surfaces of ion gel, creating two equivalent capacitors in serial. Since the distance between charges and ions at each interface is significantly small, the equivalent gate capacitance is high. Moreover, the ions can penetrate into the polymers, e.g. the channel layer, leading to a 3-D capacitor structure, which further boosts the gate capacitance. The resulting gate capacitance is tens of $\mu\text{F}/\text{cm}^2$, which is one or two orders higher than that of a modern silicon transistor (around $1.4\mu\text{F}/\text{cm}^2$ in 65nm CMOS) [9]. Therefore, in spite of the relatively low carrier mobility, the high gate capacitance enables the generation of a considerable current under a low operation voltage. Measurements have shown that the drain current is in the order of mA with a dimension of $W/L = 500\mu\text{m}/25\mu\text{m}$ under 1V supply voltage. Fig. 1.3 [3] shows the current-voltage curve of a sample transistor when sweeping the gate-to-source (V_{GS}) voltage. Moreover, this capacitance is essentially independent of the gel thickness (except

during polarization period), eliminating the challenge of sub-100nm thickness control in printing process [9].

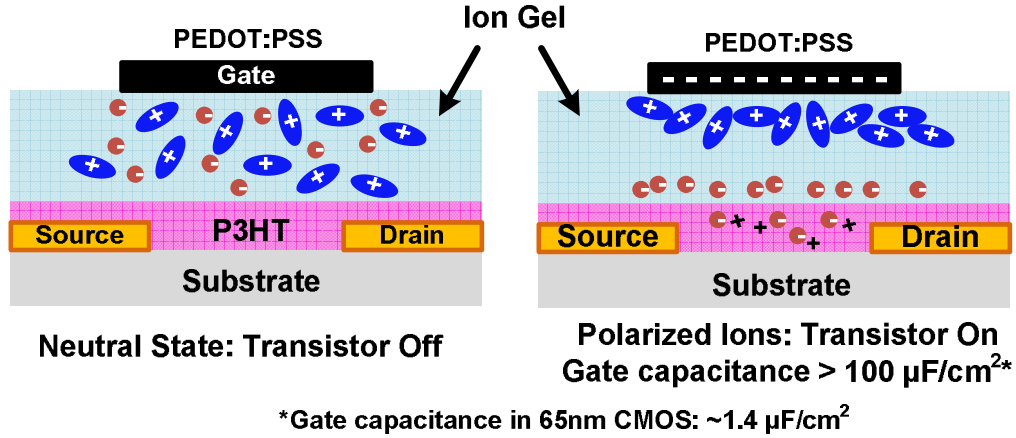


Fig. 1.2. Basic Operations of a gel-OTFT.

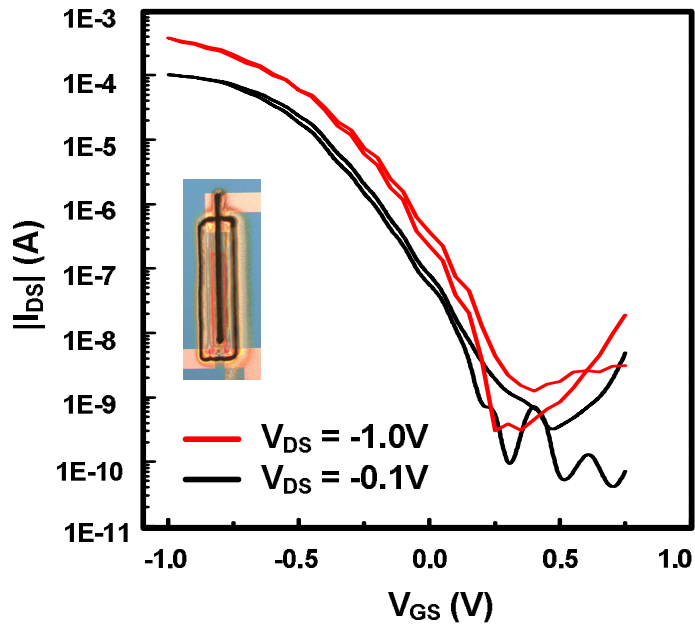


Fig. 1.3. I_{DS} - V_{GS} curve of a sample gel-OTFT ($W=500\mu\text{m}$, $L=25\mu\text{m}$).

The rest of the dissertation is organized as follows. Chapter 2 discusses the issues involved in the current design and fabrication flow of organic electronics, and proposes solutions, mainly involving a specifically developed Organic Process Design Kit

(OPDK), to significantly improve design efficiency and fabrication yield. Chapter 3 demonstrates the successful implementations of various organic circuit components, including an organic D-flipflop. Chapter 4 describes in detail on the design strategies and measurement results for an organic dynamic memory (DRAM) cell, which achieves a sub-10nW-per-cell refresh power. Chapter 5 evaluates the same cell structure in silicon technology, revealing interesting facts in its corner simulation strategy. Chapter 6 proposes a novel silicon DRAM design, which achieves 1GHz random read frequency and lower power consumption compared to 6T SRAM with write-back-free read feature and local-sense-amplifier (LSA) architecture. Chapter 7 concludes the dissertation.

Chapter 2

ORGANIC PROCESS DESIGN KIT (OPDK)

Designs in organic electronics are typically done in a fully-customized manner. However, nowadays an efficient design and fabrication flow is absent. Fig. 2.1 shows the typical flow for gel-OTFT circuit implementations, with several major design and fabrication challenges. First, there was no software kit to improve the overall design efficiency; second, circuit simulation, which is an important step to verify design quality before a real implementation, was not facilitated; third, the examination of pattern (layout) correctness was not guaranteed except for naked-eye checks which easily involve human errors; and finally, the lack of automatic printing prevents the fabrication approach being benefitted from its potential of high throughput. These challenges significantly reduce the overall design quality and delay the research progress towards more complicated systems.

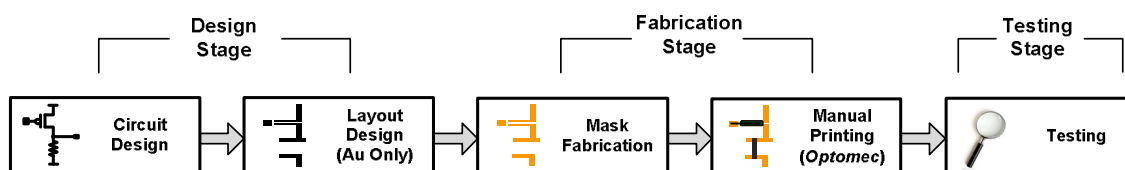


Fig. 2.1. Typical design-fabrication-testing flow of gel-OTFT circuits.

In silicon area, computer-aided-design (CAD) tools have significantly improved the efficiency and yield of designs through performance simulations and various layout examinations. It is critical for organic electronics to incorporate the same strategy in order to scale up in system complexity. Fortunately, sharing a lot in common with silicon transistors, organic thin-film-transistors (OTFTs) are able to adapt these existing

techniques. For example, among the mainstream computer-aided-design (CAD) software, Cadence® [12] Virtuoso design environment is feasible to be utilized for designing both circuits and layouts of OTFTs. Circuit simulation software such as Synopsys® [13] HSPICE is also an excellent candidate to verify the design functionality and predict the performance.

These existing tools, however, cannot be directly utilized since the major characteristics and materials/structures between silicon and organic devices are still quite different. Therefore, Organic Process Design Kit (OPDK) [14] targets at building a design package following the actual properties of OTFT. With the assistance of Cadence® Virtuoso and Synopsys® HSPICE, it enables computer-aided designs on both circuit schematic and layout, significantly reducing the design effort for large-scale systems.

2.1 The New Efficient Design – Fabrication – Testing Flow

In our proposed flow, industry standard Computer-Aided-Design (CAD) tools from Cadence® and Synopsys® are used throughout the circuit design and implementation stages. This approach could facilitate the adoption of organic transistor technology in the future as it will allow chip designers to utilize the existing design environment built around silicon technology for organic transistors. In this dissertation, our discussion focuses on gel-OTFT technology, although the presented flow as well as the methodologies applies to other organic devices or techniques as well. The entire design flow is shown in Fig. 2.2.

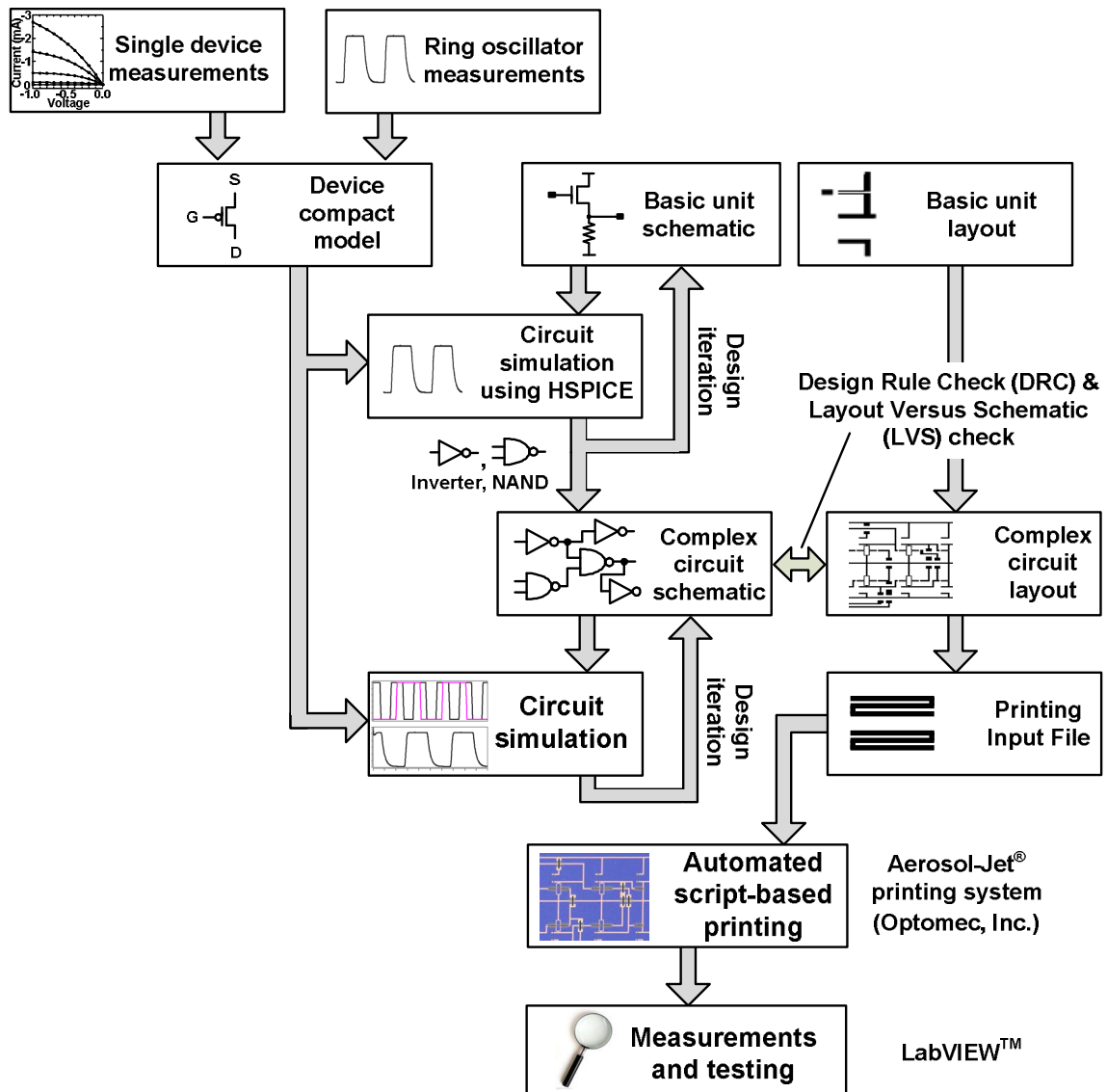


Fig. 2.2. Overall design-fabrication-testing flow for higher design efficiency and yield.

The flow starts from device modeling. A device compact model is developed based on the current-voltage curves obtained from individual devices as well as the measured data from a ring oscillator. Channel mobility and threshold voltage can be extracted from the former results while the capacitance can be estimated from the latter. The HSPICE circuit simulator from Synopsys® is used to replicate the hardware data to ensure the

fidelity of the compact model. Once the compact model has been verified with measured data, we design basic logic gates including inverters and NAND gates, which are the basic components of larger complex integrated circuits such as flip-flops, adders, etc. Such a hierarchical design approach based on a library of basic logic gates is typical in the development of any large-scale digital system. At the schematic level, each logic gate is optimized for speed, output voltage swing, and power consumption by adjusting the dimensions of the device, namely channel length and channel width, as well as the load resistance value. The optimized schematic is then converted to a layout view which is used to create patterns for the actual printing process. Both the schematic and layout designs are performed using Cadence® software which can also automatically check whether the layout meets fabrication constraints and corresponds to the original schematic of the design. This capability is crucial when designing complex circuits as a manual check by the designer will be prone to human errors. Using the basic logic gates and the compact model, schematic and layout of larger circuits can be built in a hierarchical fashion. The final layout of the integrated circuit is then converted to real printing files for automated fabrication. Finally, measurements are performed and results are compared with simulations to ensure the validity of the design flow, where LabVIEW™ [15] is incorporated to facilitate the data collection. It is worth noting that the compact model and the design flow can be further refined to account for any device variation or aging-related degradation. The details of individual steps are described in the following sections.

2.2 Organic Device Modeling

Modeling of organic transistors, as an essential step to perform simulations, has not yet been researched a lot. Here we introduce three modeling methodologies that are easy to incorporate in most organic techniques and can maintain sufficient accuracy in many design scenarios.

2.2.1 Behavior Modeling

An OTFT can be easily modeled via behavior modeling [16], which builds a look-up table with measured current-voltage data. This method requires little modeling effort and provides high accuracy, therefore is most suitable for evaluating new device behaviors. The major issue is that outliers are usually inevitable due to measurement errors, which introduce abruptions in the data curve, involving a risk of convergence failures during circuit simulations. Therefore, data need to be processed in advance through certain averaging algorithms to generate a smooth curve. Also, each device of a different dimension requires one individual model, limiting its flexibility in practical use. The blue plot in Fig. 2.3 (a) displays the behavior modeling of a single transistor after smoothing algorithm is applied.

Capacitances are not involved in behavior modeling; therefore it does not support timing analysis. However, this can be fixed by attaching an additional capacitor at the gate in the device model. This equivalent capacitance can be estimated from the measured frequency of a ring oscillator, as demonstrated in Fig. 2.3 (b). The equivalent capacitance value estimated for a gel-OTFT with a W/L of $500\mu\text{m}/25\mu\text{m}$ is around $1\mu\text{F}$, which includes all the OTFT capacitance components as well as parasitic capacitance.

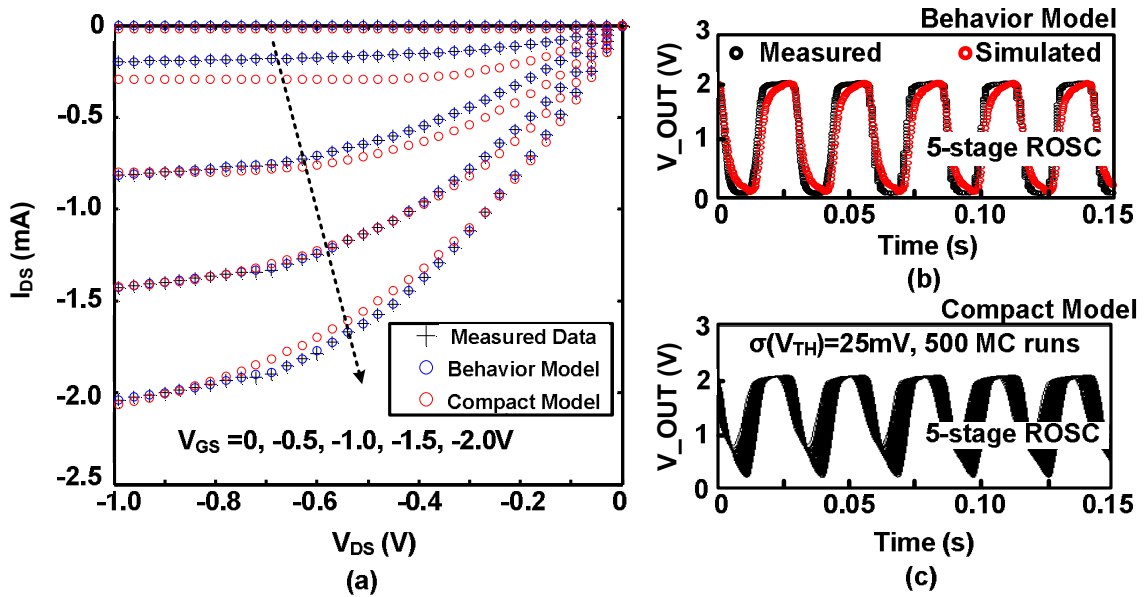


Fig. 2.3. (a) Simulated (behavior and compact modeling) vs. measured current-voltage curves, (b) ring oscillator waveforms at 2.2V supply using behavior modeling, and (c) waveforms showing monte carlo simulation capability using compact modeling.

2.2.2 Compact Modeling

Compact modeling is the most standard solution in silicon industry. A compact model can easily handle transistors with various dimensions. Moreover, the capability of defining capacitance values inside the model allows timing analysis by nature. The flexibility of specifying device parameters also provides capability of analyzing device aging impacts and performing Monte Carlo simulations, which will become more essential with increasing transistor counts in larger-scale designs. Utilizing existing silicon models will save much development work due to the similarity between current-voltage relationships of silicon and organic transistors, and is sufficiently accurate for many designs. However, this method still requires more modeling effort compared to

behavior modeling with a considerable number of data-fitting iterations.

In OPDK, an HSPICE Level-61 amorphous-Silicofortcon Thin-Film-Transistor (TFT) model is utilized to serve as the model prototype, because it shares several critical features with OTFT, including the absence of a body effect and the junction current. The key parameters to modify include the channel mobility, the dielectric thickness, the dielectric constant and the threshold voltage. The red plot in Fig. 2.3 (a) represents the compact modeling of a single transistor and Fig. 2.3(c) shows the simulated ring oscillator output waveform of 500 Monte Carlo runs with a 25mV standard deviation in the threshold voltage.

2.2.3 Advanced Modeling Through Sub-Circuit

More advanced modeling based on behavior or compact modeling can provide even higher accuracy in organic device models. A typical solution is to group the primary model with other active or passive devices. For example, gate leakage current is important in some circuits, such as dynamic random access memory (DRAM) cells. This, however, is not included in the two modeling methods introduced above. A simple solution is to attach a resistor between the gate and the source/drain, creating a leakage path with the measured leakage current. In gel-OTFTs, this resistor is typically in the order of G Ω , and it provided reasonable estimate during the feasibility study of the organic DRAM cell in Chapter 4.

Another example is the hysteresis modeling. Hysteresis was observed in gel-OTFTs during measurements between an increasing and a decreasing V_{GS} . Although the detailed theoretical explanation is still under investigation, such phenomenon may be due to the

ions temporarily trapped in the channel when bias voltages are applied. This hysteresis is important in certain robustness evaluations. To model this behavior, a more complicated sub-circuit modeling approach is adopted. It incorporates a decision circuit [18] to select between two transistor models which represent the two different behaviors due to hysteresis, respectively. A derivative circuit is implemented inside the decision circuit to detect the direction of V_{GS} changing. The overall modeling scheme of a prototype model is shown in Fig.2.6.

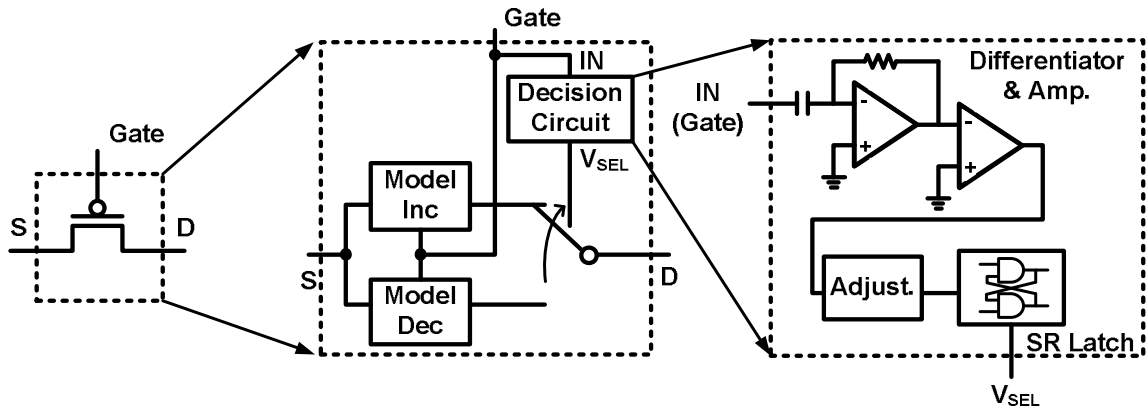


Fig. 2.4. Hysteresis modeling sub-circuit.

The simulated and measured waveforms with hysteresis for a single gel-OTFT and an inverter are shown in Fig. 2.7. The data were extracted from a transient simulation and re-plotted, because a DC sweep cannot incorporate the history impact. Although there is still room for improvement, this prototype serves well for a first-hand performance evaluation.

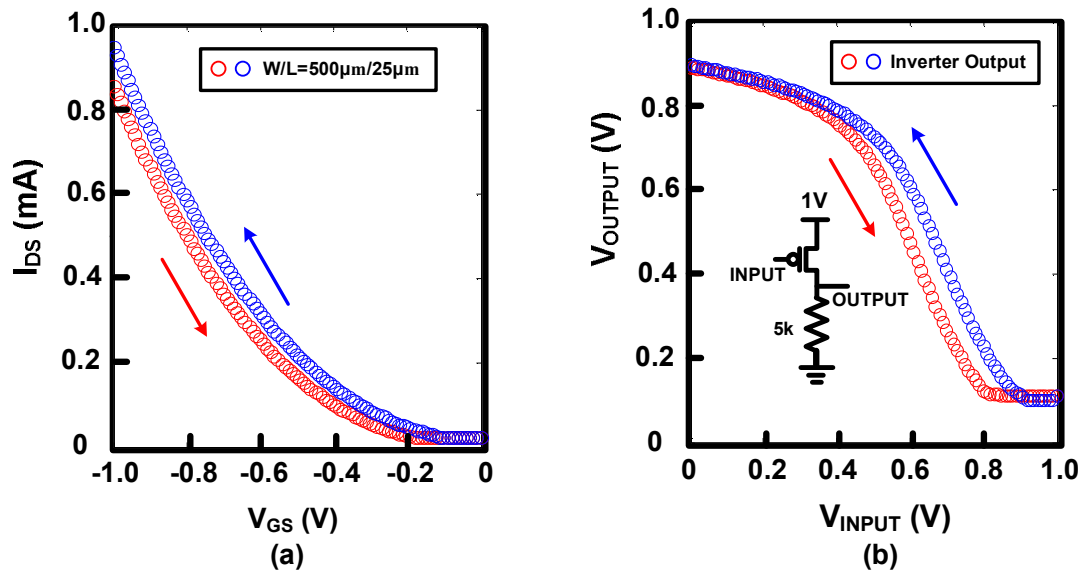


Fig. 2.5. Simulated (a) I_{DS} - V_{GS} curves and (b) inverter transfer curves with hysteresis.

2.3 Organic Process Design Kit (OPDK) in Cadence®

Virtuoso Environment

OPDK, as the core component in the proposed design-fabrication-testing flow, is a design kit developed for OTFT platform based on the framework of NCSU-FreePDK-45nm kit [19]. This is the first reported design kit for organic electronics area. It includes gel-OTFT models described in the previous section for design and simulation purpose, and supports the major built-in functions of Cadence® Virtuoso, e.g. hierarchical schematic design, simulation file generation, etc., to facilitate organic circuit designs. Organic layers are defined for designers to easily draw layouts in the same way as they fabricate, and various examination tools guarantee a high design quality. Although the current OPDK focuses on gel-OTFTs, it can be easily adapted for other organic devices or techniques.

2.3.1 Schematic Design

Schematic views in OPDK display the circuit designs in a straightforward way, and this circuit information can be directly extracted through built-in functions into complete simulation inputs. Similar to that in modern silicon technology, the hierarchical schematic design interface provides a systematic way to design and examine large-scale organic circuits. Circuit design-simulation iterations are therefore facilitated to provide a preliminary evaluation of circuit functionality and performance, which are critical in assuring a higher design efficiency and success rate.

2.3.2 Layout Design

With the absence of a computer-aided tool, organic-circuit designers have to design the layouts manually and examine them by naked eye. This can become significantly inefficient and impractical with a high probability of human errors when the circuit turns into larger-scale or becomes more complex. OPDK provides a complete set of layout resources for gel-OTFT, including the layer definition and layout examination tools. The layout can be designed in exactly the same way as in silicon industry with computer assistance, and can be directly turned into fabrication patterns. The layer definition provides all the layers required for gel-OTFT technique, and is highly extensive to support other organic device techniques. The layout design environment supports hierarchical design and array generation, providing an efficient way to create large-scale layouts with high precision. Various examination tools, including Design Rule Check (DRC) and Layout Versus Schematic (LVS) implemented with Mentor® Calibre [20], establish a key feature of OPDK to perform a complete and efficient examination over

layout designs and thus significantly improve layout quality.

2.3.2.1 Design Rule Check (DRC)

Design Rule Check (DRC) examines whether the layout meets the pre-defined fabrication constraints, including the pattern width, spacing, enclosure and overlapping. It results in a higher yield by avoiding risky layout designs, and guarantees the completeness and correctness of device structures by checking for any missing or misplaced layers. Each layer of the organic device is examined in the similar way as that in silicon technology, with modifications to accommodate the actual fabrication details by employing additional dummy layers. A substrate layer, which is represented by a dummy body contact in the device model and incurs no influence on device properties, provides the future capability of supporting organic transistors with back-gates.

2.3.2.2 Layout Versus Schematic (LVS)

The correctness of the entire circuit layout, including interconnections, is guaranteed by a Layout-Versus-Schematic (LVS) set. The software automatically compares the layout-extracted circuit information with the original design. This technique, widely used in silicon designs, guarantees the exact matching between layout and schematic designs and significantly saves the debugging effort by providing detailed diagnosis report.

The existing LVS toolset for silicon transistors cannot be directly utilized due to the difference between organic and silicon devices. However, thanks to their similarity, LVS in OPDK is achieved by imitating silicon device structure with provided organic layers in the LVS algorithm. Appropriate selection and combination of different layers allow the generation of the correct recognition pattern while the structure completeness

examination is accomplished by the DRC process. Other organic devices, such as capacitors, can be recognized by the LVS algorithm in a similar way, and the same concept can be utilized to support devices of other organic techniques as well.

2.4 Automatic Printing

Printability is a desired feature for large scale flexible circuits because it significantly lowers the fabrication cost compared to other approaches including photolithography. Ink-jet printing has been demonstrated [21] to implement circuits on plastic foils. However, this approach typically allows only low-density material ink. It also suffers from random directionality in the relatively large ink droplets, which makes resolution improvement challenging.

In our work, we utilize the commercial aerosol-jet printing [4] provided by Optomec® Corporation [22]. Inks are first turned into dense aerosol by ultrasonic atomizers and then pushed through the printing nozzle, creating a dense and focused stream as shown in Fig. 2.8. High-density inks are therefore accommodated, and the continuous and tightly focused micro-droplet stream formed through the nozzle generates patterns with high uniformity and a resolution as small as 10 μ m [22]. It also offers an adjustable stand-off, which is the distance between the nozzle and the substrate, allowing even more flexibility in quality control.

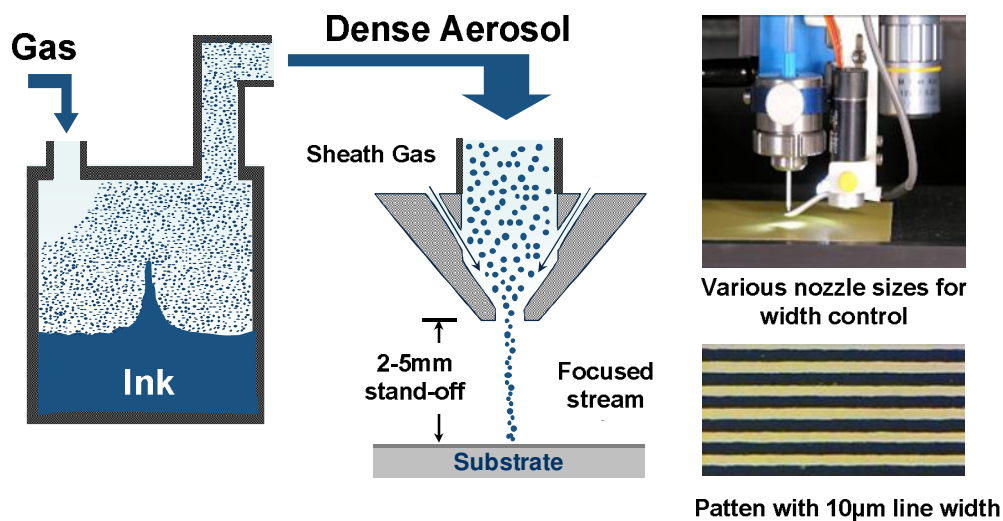


Fig. 2.6. Aerosol-jet printing illustration [22].

Despite the advantages in aerosol-jet printing, the printing condition may still vary through the entire printing process due to environment noises, which introduces variations and degrades circuit performance. Automatic printing is therefore crucial for large-scale organic circuitry fabrication to significantly enhance the fabrication efficiency, lower the cost, and improve the yield. Fortunately, the aerosol-jet printer is able to take and execute computerized instructions with real printing operations, providing the opportunity of printing organic circuits in an automated fashion.

A conversion flow, including scripts and a parsing tool, enables the direct translation from the original Cadence Graphic-Database-System (GDS) file to a complete printing instruction list, which is then recognized by the printer for automatic printing. The fabrication time for each layer in an 8x8 organic DRAM array, to be introduced in Chapter 4 in details, is therefore reduced to minutes. This minimizes the fluctuations in printing conditions and guarantees higher yield as well as significantly smaller device-to-device variations.

2.5 Testing

After circuit fabrication, device characteristics are first examined to evaluate the fabrication quality including current-voltage behaviors, device-to-device variations and stability. The target circuit is then tested to examine the functionality and performance, and the measurement results are compared with the simulated data. The entire testing process is assisted by LabVIEW™ to facilitate the data collection process and minimize human errors.

2.6 Summary

A new design-fabrication-testing flow for organic device platform, involving various modeling approaches and an organic process design kit (OPDK), facilitates the entire implementation of organic circuits and systems. Together with LabVIEW™-equipped test interface, the flow incorporates automated computer support and handles the major challenges for designing and fabricating large-scale gel-OTFT-based systems, namely the design environment, performance simulation, layout examination and printing automation. The same concept and software kit can be extended to benefit other organic techniques without much difficulty. In the next two chapters, we will demonstrate several successful organic circuit implementations, which will be sufficient to verify the feasibility of standard circuit functions.

Chapter 3

BASIC LOGIC CIRCUIT DESIGN

Theoretically, any circuit system, no matter how complicated, can be achieved by combining various basic circuit components. These components include combinational logic such as inverters and NAND gates, sequential logic such as D-flipflops, and special units such as memory bit-cells. In this chapter, we demonstrate these key components successfully implemented in gel-OTFT platform except the memory bit-cell (to be described in the next chapter), delivering practical performance under a low operating voltage.

3.1 Combinational Logic Circuit Design

Combinational logic provides the control functionality and is indispensable in any electrical system. The logic functions of NOT, AND, OR and their numerous combinations deliver the flexibility of achieving major logic expressions. Therefore, a successful demonstration of combinational logic gates is crucial to verify the potential of gel-OTFT technology.

An all-organic inverter was implemented using Poly(3-hexylthiophene) (P3HT) as the channel layer with ion-gel gated structure [9]. Due to the lack of n-type devices, A 20k Ω PEDOT:PSS-based resistor was printed as the pull-down load. It is clearly shown in Fig. 3.1 that the inverter output switches from digital '1' (1.5V) to '0' (0V) when the input sweeps from 0V to 1.5V, and vice versa. The maximum gain during switching is around 7. Although in this sample circuit the trip point is close to VDD (1.5V) due to the weak

pull-down resistor in the p-only logic, it could be effectively moved towards 0V side by reducing the strength ratio between the on-state transistor and the resistor, at the cost of inverter gain.

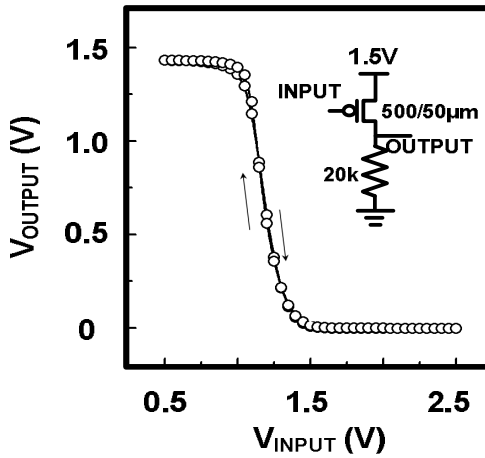


Fig. 3.1. Measured transfer curve of an all organic inverter [9].

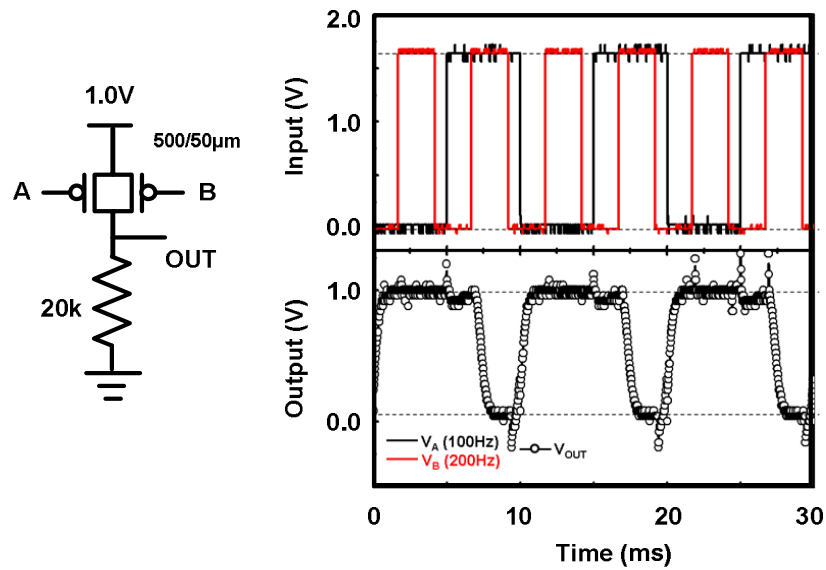


Fig. 3.2. Measured waveforms of a 1.0V NAND gate [9].

Our colleagues also constructed a 1.0V organic NAND gate by printing two identical gel-OTFTs and one 20kΩ resistor. The NAND gate demonstrates good NAND logic

responses with two square-wave inputs switching at 100Hz and 200Hz, respectively, as shown in Fig. 3.2. With inverters and NAND gates successfully implemented, other combinational logic can be achieved through appropriate combinations of these logic units.

3.2 Sequential Logic Circuit Design

Sequential logic circuits are crucial in more complicated circuit systems where clocked operation is involved. It is widely used in state transferring, counting, etc. Ring oscillators were implemented to demonstrate clock generation, and a D-flipflop demonstrates the feasibility of sequential logic functions in ion-gel gated technology [9].

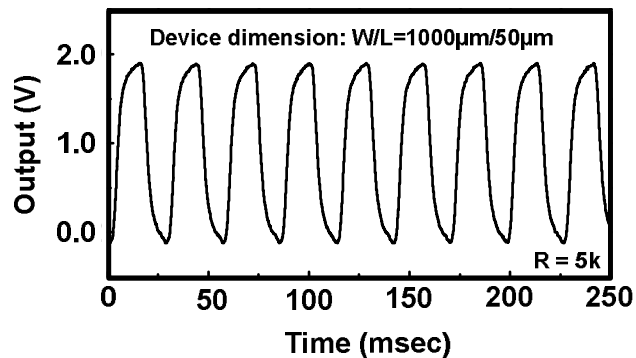


Fig. 3.3. Measured 36Hz 5-stage ring oscillator waveform at 2.2V supply voltage.

A ring oscillator composed of five inverters and one output buffer shows practical oscillation behavior in Fig. 3.3. It achieves an oscillation frequency of 36Hz at 2.2V supply voltage, with a 2.0V output voltage swing. Note that other operation frequencies for the same operation voltage can be realized by changing the stage number and detailed design parameters, including the transistor dimensions and resistor value. At the cost of an additional bias voltage one can also implement the ring oscillator using transistor-loaded inverters [9], which enables tunable frequency, as shown in Fig. 3.4. A maximum

frequency of 150Hz was achieved with an output swing of around 1.4V at 2.0V voltage.

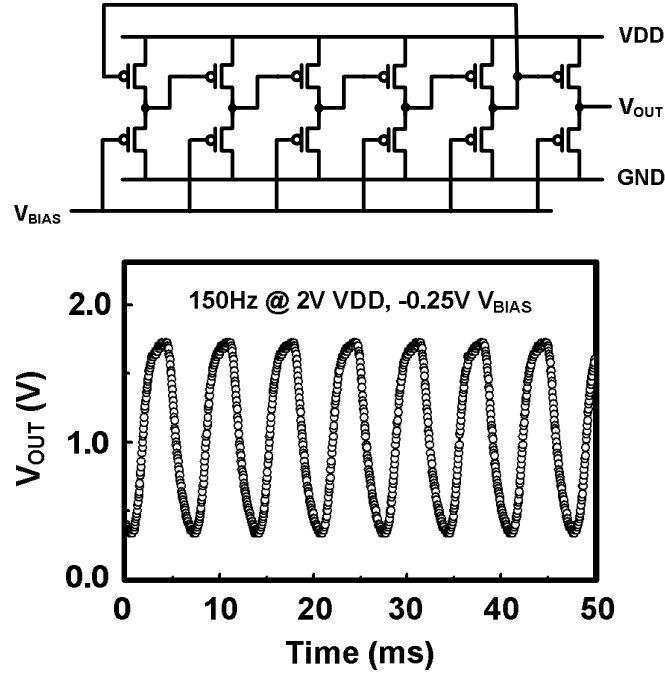


Fig. 3.4. Circuit (above) and measured waveform (below) of a 5-stage transistor-loaded ring oscillator at 2.0V operation voltage [9].

Our colleagues also implemented a D-flipflop, which to our knowledge was the first flipflop reported integrating electrolyte-gated transistors, with gel-OTFTs of W/L=500 μ m/25 μ m and 2k Ω resistors [9]. Fig. 3.5(a) shows the circuit and layout of the D-flipflop. It is composed of eight NAND gates and three inverters, and incorporates an asynchronous reset port [5]. Data is sampled at the falling edge of the clock signal. Assuming that all NAND and inverter gates are identical, the setup time of this D-flipflop is therefore

$$t_{setup-LowToHigh} = 2t_{NAND-fall} + t_{INV-rise}$$

$$t_{setup-HighToLow} = t_{NAND-fall} + t_{NAND-rise} + t_{INV-fall}$$

Where “LowToHigh” and “HighToLow” indicate the data changing direction, and

$t_{NAND-rise}$ and $t_{NAND-fall}$ are the rising and falling delay of NAND gates, respectively; the similar definition is also applied to inverter delays.

The clock-to-output delay (c-to-q) is therefore

$$t_{cToq-LowToHigh} = t_{NAND-rise} + t_{NAND-fall} + t_{latch}$$

$$t_{cToq-HighToLow} = t_{NAND-rise} + t_{NAND-fall} + t_{latch}$$

Where the t_{latch} is the delay for the SR-latch on the rightmost of the circuit schematic, composed of two NAND gates and two inverters, to stabilize.

And the hold time is

$$t_{hold-LowToHigh} = t_{NAND-fall}$$

$$t_{hold-HighToLow} = t_{NAND-rise} + t_{NAND-fall}$$

Fig. 3.5(b) shows the simulated and measured waveforms of the D-flipflop operating at 5Hz clock frequency, with measured setup time and clock-to-output delay both less than 50ms and hold time less than 10ms. The device variations and modeling inaccuracy contributes to the difference of timing parameters between simulation and measurement.

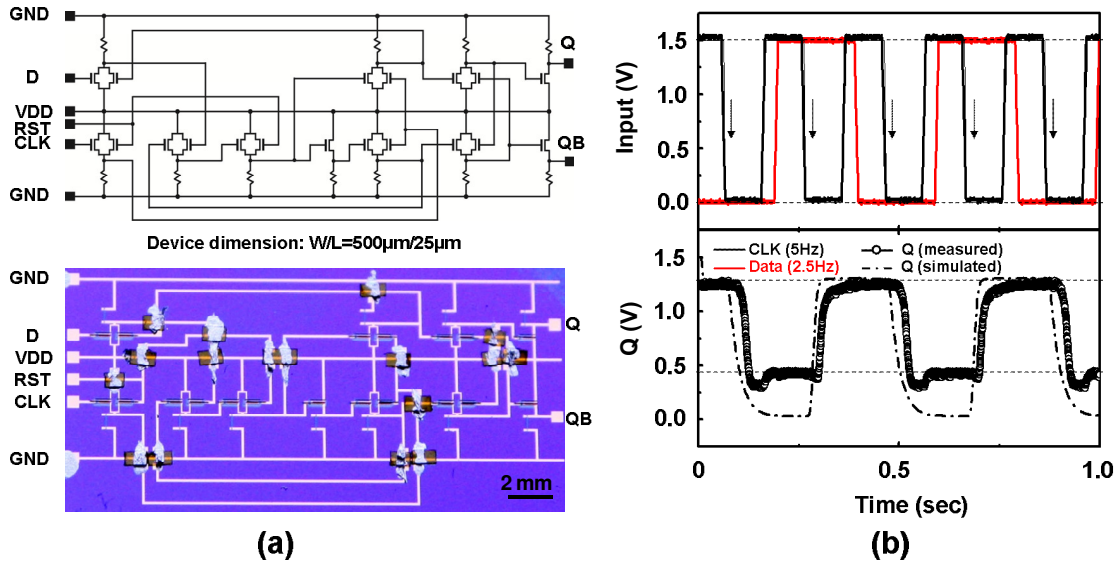


Fig. 3.5. (a) Circuit and layout of a D-flipflop implemented with gel-OTFT and (b) simulated and measured waveforms operating at 5Hz clock frequency under 1.5V [9].

With ring oscillators and D-flipflop, clocked operations are now feasible in the gel-OTFT platform. More advanced sequential functionality, including counters, shift registers, state machines and other flip-flop variants, could be realized by combining D-flipflops with combinational logic. This significantly extends the application scope of the gel-OTFT technique.

3.3 Summary

The successful implementation of basic combinational and sequential logic units has well demonstrated the potential of gel-OTFTs to achieve complicated circuit functionalities for application purpose. Although the operation speed is not comparable with that of modern silicon technology, it is sufficient for many envisioned applications such as RFID tags that require its unique large-area and flexible properties.

Memory circuits, however, present additional design challenges. Appropriate design

strategies are needed to fit the properties of the OTFT platform. In the next chapter, we report the first DRAM cell in a printable, flexible and low-voltage ion-gel gated OTFT technology [1], which has no DC static power and achieves considerable performance improvement at operating voltages below 1V, overcoming the fundamental limitations of OTFT based SRAMs.

Chapter 4

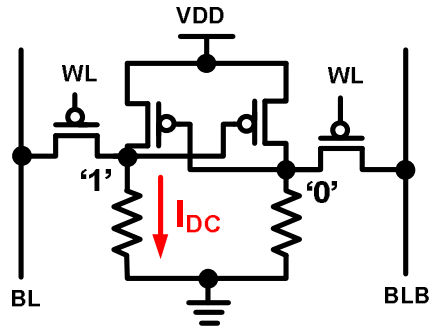
ORGANIC GAIN CELL MEMORY DESIGN

4.1 Memory Design Discussion

Memory is a key component in many OTFT applications but few attempts have been made on building memory circuits suitable for OTFTs [23]-[26]. Non-volatile memory has been the major topic among the few achievements, which, however, usually requires additional process steps or materials, such as floating gates, ferroelectric materials, and fuses [23]-[25]. Volatile memory, on the other hand, serves well for many applications, and can be built using standard transistors with no additional cost and thus is easy to implement. Nevertheless, so far little effort has been made on organic volatile memory designs [26].

SRAM, as the mainstream embedded volatile memory in silicon chips, is no longer a practical low-power memory option in today's OTFT technologies which only allow p-type devices to be fabricated. Although research on n-type OTFTs is currently underway [27], introduction of a viable n-type material has been delayed since existing materials have unstable characteristics, no good contact, and significantly lower mobility than their p-type counterpart. Resistors or diode connected p-type transistors are therefore required to serve as a leaky pull-down network for SRAM functionality, as shown in Fig. 4.1, introducing considerable static power consumption. Moreover, unless the memory read operation can be sacrificed [26], the pull-down network must be strong enough to provide

sufficient read noise margin, preventing any further power saving opportunities using an SRAM cell architecture.



SRAM cell using resistors as pull-down

Fig. 4.1. An SRAM cell in a p-type-only technology suffers from significant static power consumption.

Therefore, novel memory solutions are needed for low power purpose in p-type-only OTFT platforms. Dynamic random access memory (DRAM), which may be implemented with p-type devices without introducing additional leaky paths, is thus a practical candidate.

4.2 Gain Cell DRAM

DRAM is mainly divided into two categories, namely the 1T1C and the gain cell DRAM, respectively. 1T1C DRAM, although prevailing in standalone silicon memory nowadays, is not suitable for current OTFT platform due to the requirement for a dedicated storage capacitor process. Gain cell DRAM, in contrast, can be implemented using three transistors, or even two transistors, in a standard logic process [28]. Despite using a single type of device for the cell, this circuit has no DC static current, making it an ideal memory candidate for OTFT technologies where only p-type devices are

available. The main design challenge for gain-cells is the short retention time, which is typically less than 100 μ sec in the modern silicon platform due to the small gate capacitance used for storing the cell data [28].

Gel-OTFTs serve as an ideal device platform for DRAMs as their gate capacitances can exceed 100 μ F/cm² which is roughly 70x higher compared to that in 65nm CMOS [9]. The unusually high capacitance is derived from the ultra-thin electrical double layers formed upon electrical polarization as discussed in Chapter 1, and can be used to enhance DRAM retention time and simultaneously achieve a much higher drive current at low supply voltages compared to other OTFT devices.

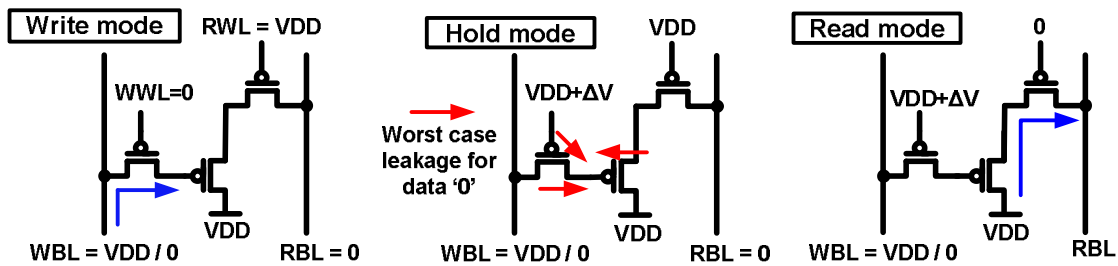


Fig. 4.2. Three operation modes of gain cell DRAM: write, hold and read.

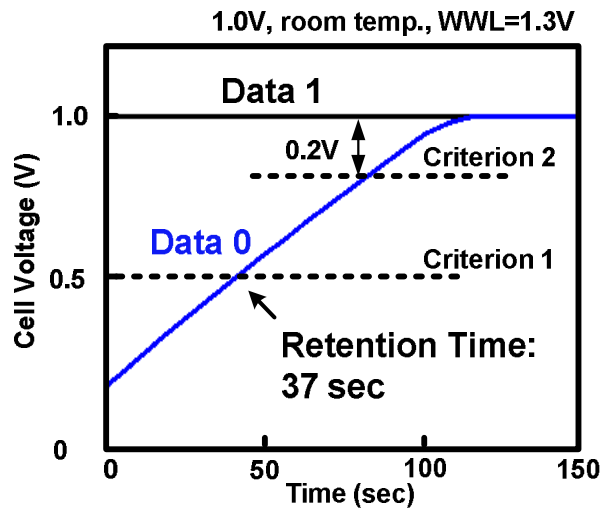


Fig. 4.3. Simulated data retention characteristics showing a retention time of 37 seconds.

Fig. 4.2 shows a gain cell DRAM implemented with three transistors and its three operation modes. The leakage components during hold mode are also illustrated in Fig. 4.2, namely the gate currents of the storage and write devices and the subthreshold leakage of the write device. A boosted write wordline (WWL) is preferred to suppress the subthreshold leakage, which is the common practice in all silicon DRAM designs. This boosted voltage can be efficiently generated using a single-stage charge pump consisting of a p-type gate capacitor and a diode connected p-type device. These leakage currents surrounding the storage node lead to a loss in the cell voltage over time as depicted in Fig. 4.3. Note that for a 3T p-type cell, the retention characteristic of data '0' (D0) is more critical than data '1' (D1) since the storage node is surrounded by high voltages resulting in all leakage currents in the pull up direction. Moreover, the read current for driving the read bitline (RBL) is determined by the data '0' voltage because it is equivalent to the gate overdrive of the p-type read device.

The degradation in the D0 voltage affects the bitline delay so a periodic refresh operation is required to restore the cell voltage, whose frequency and the resulting power consumption are determined by the cell retention time. In general, the following two criterions determine the maximum retention time of a gain cell: (1) the cell node voltage for D0 should be lower than a specified value (or D1 being high enough for an n-type cell) so that a target read speed can be met, and (2) the cell voltage difference between D0 and D1 should be greater than a certain value for sufficient sensing margin. In our case, the first criterion is more stringent and hence determines the overall retention time. Fig. 4.3 shows a simulated retention time of 37 sec based on a criterion of $V_{D0} < 0.5V$ and

$V_{D1}-V_{D0}>0.2V$ as annotated in the figure, thanks to the significant gate capacitance and relatively small leakage currents. Note that although device area also contributes to the high capacitance, merely increasing the device size in a silicon design will not benefit in terms of retention time (typically less than $100\mu s$) because the dominating leakage components, namely the gate and junction leakages, are also proportional to the area. Therefore the retention time in a silicon gain cell, which is essentially determined by the ratio between the capacitance and leakage currents, would remain the same regardless of the size increase.

4.3 Test Vehicle Design Details

An 8×8 DRAM array was fabricated using an aerosol-jet printer to demonstrate the feasibility of gain-cell DRAMs in a p-type only OTFT technology. Automatic printing, as introduced in Chapter 2, significantly reduces fabrication time and enhances yield. Our design philosophy was to implement a general-purpose memory array with full read and write capability that can be utilized for a range of applications including electrochromic displays and/or sensor sheet arrays as shown in Fig. 4.4. The system in vision utilizes logic units demonstrated in Chapter 3 serving as the control module, while memory, which cannot be easily accomplished by combining logic gates, is needed as the core to store data for driving the display pixels, or to collect data from the sensor array.

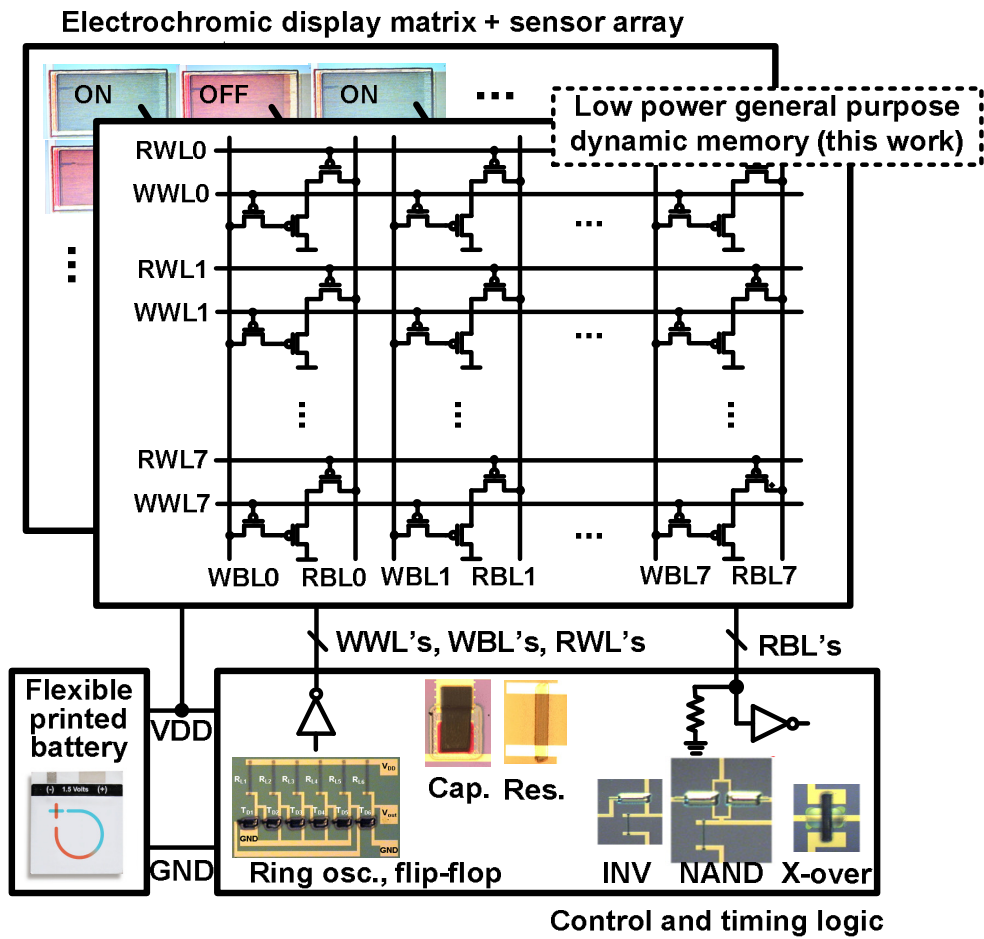


Fig. 4.4. Conceptual diagram of a flexible display and sensor array system.

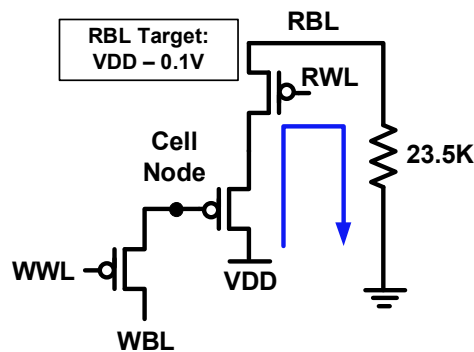


Fig. 4.5. Basic testing structure with the read current indicated in blue.

The basic testing structure for single cells in the 8x8 array is shown in Fig. 4.5. Data is written into the cell by driving WWL low. When read is enabled, a cell storing with

data '0' will have a large pull-up current and drive the RBL high. A pull-down resistor attached to the RBL resets the RBL signal after the read is completed. WBL is kept high after the write access to test for the worst case data '0' retention condition. The steady-state RBL voltage level is used to calculate the voltage stored in the cell at the time of access, based on current-voltage characteristics from sample transistors. We define retention time as the time it takes for the data '0' voltage inside the cell to increase to $0.5 \times V_{DD}$, and the resistor load is therefore selected so that a $0.5 \times V_{DD}$ voltage level in the data storage node translates into an RBL level of $(V_{DD} - 0.1V)$.

4.4 Measurement Results

Measurements were automated with LabVIEW™ software to collect reliable retention time statistics. Measured waveforms in Fig. 4.6 verify full read and write functionality at 1V supply voltage.

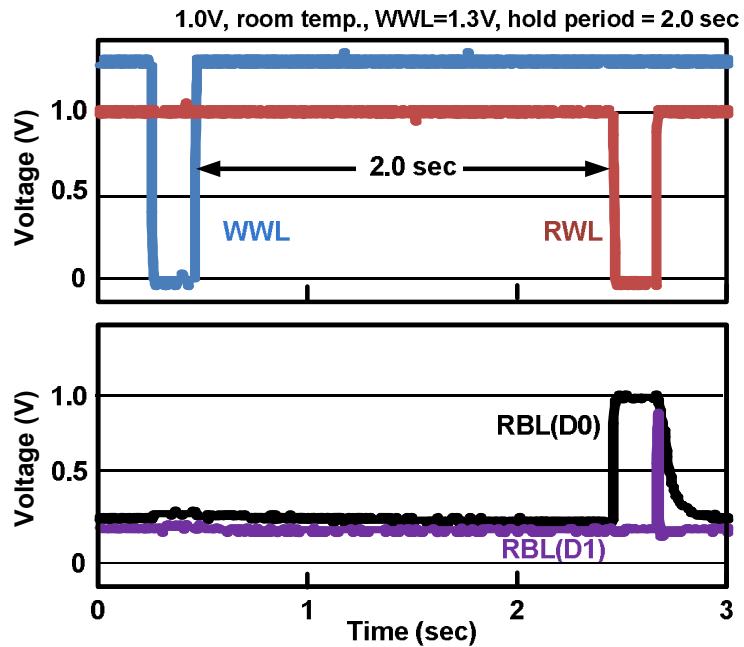


Fig. 4.6. Measured write and read waveforms.

The retention time statistics of the DRAM array at 1V are summarized in Fig. 4.7. With a boosted WWL of 1.25V, the worst case cell has a retention time of 30 seconds while 72% of the cells have retention times longer than a minute. With a slightly higher boosted WWL of 1.30V, all cells in the array have a retention time exceeding one minute. This translates into a 5 orders of magnitude longer retention time compared to a gain-cell design in 65nm CMOS [28], which is sufficiently long even for the slow OTFT circuits to support a periodic refresh operation.

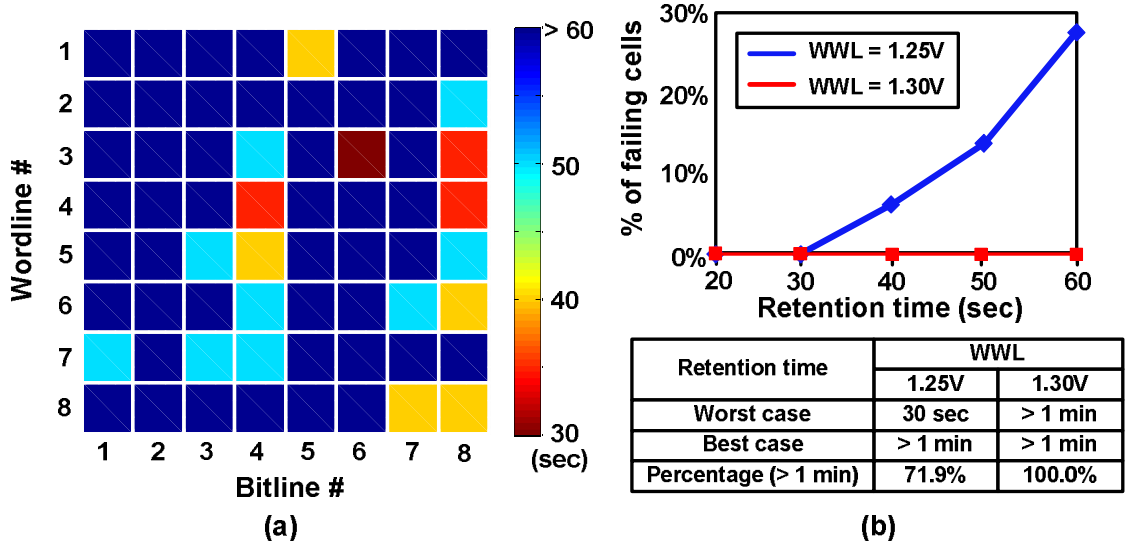


Fig. 4.7. (a) Measured retention time map for WWL=1.25V and (b) percentage of failing cells versus retention time for WWL of 1.25V and 1.30V, respectively.

Fig. 4.8(a) shows the impact of WWL pulse width on retention time indicating that a 20 ms write pulse is needed to achieve a retention time greater than one minute. This can be further improved if a negative WWL voltage is available. The read delay, defined by the 50% rise time of the RBL signal when reading from a data '0' cell, was 12 ms or less. The memory cells show robust read and write operation down to 0.8V, as indicated in Fig. 4.8(b).

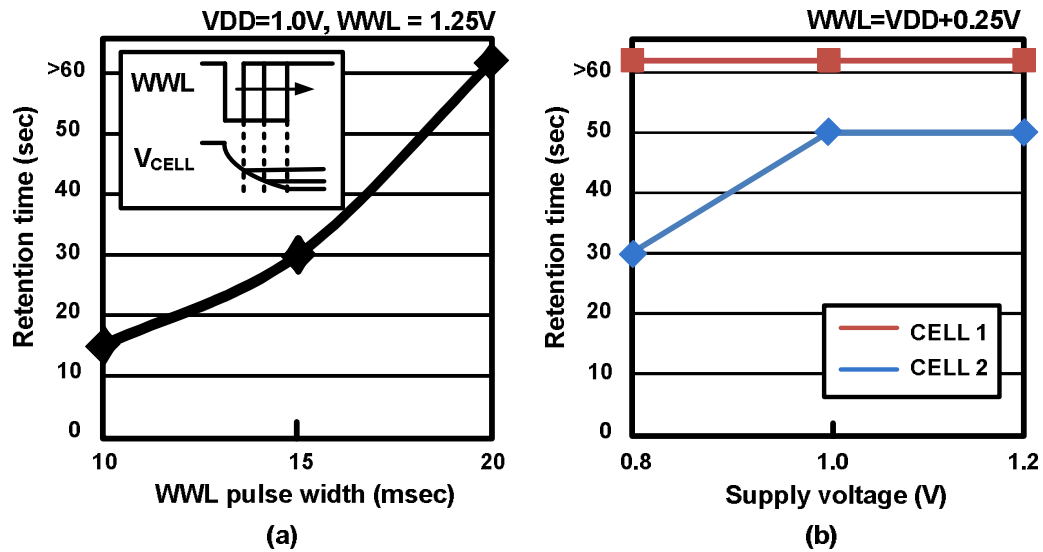


Fig. 4.8. Retention time versus (a) WWL pulse width and (b) supply voltages.

Our printed DRAM design also demonstrates significant potential in the view of power consumption. Due to the extremely long retention time, the refresh power of the proposed memory cell is in the nano-watt order. Fig. 4.9 compares the measured power consumption of an SRAM and a gain-cell DRAM implemented using the same kind of gel-OTFT. Individual SRAM memory structures were tested for this comparison. Results show that the overall power consumption of an OTFT DRAM (including active, static, and refresh power) at a 50Hz working frequency is 12X lower than the static power consumption merely of an OTFT SRAM. In standby mode where all RBLs are left floating except for when the cells are refreshed, the DRAM power consumption per cell is reduced to below 10nW. Fig. 4.10 shows the photograph and performance summary of the organic DRAM chip.

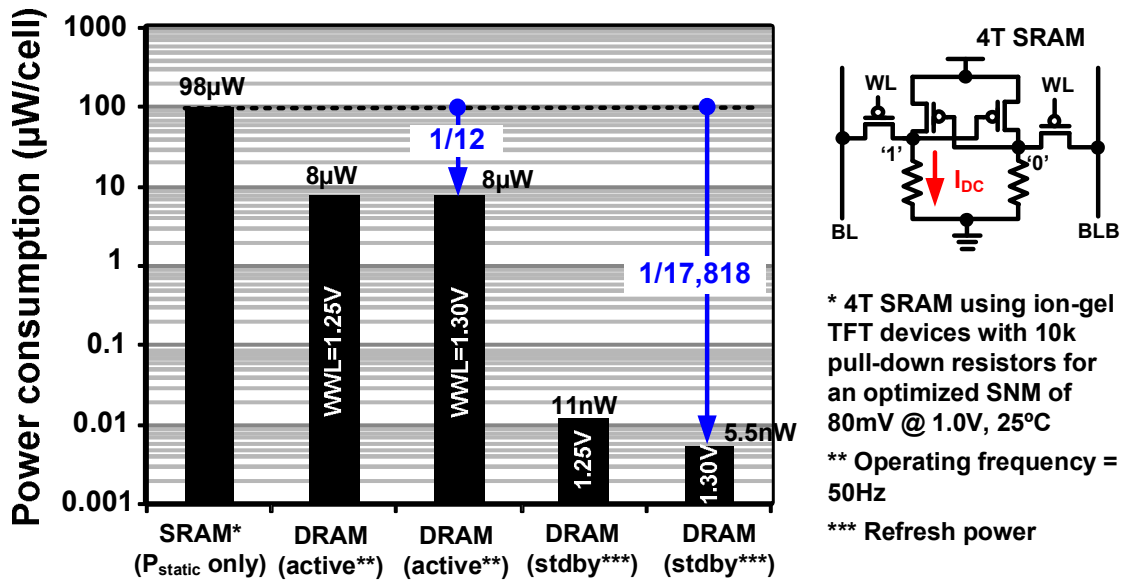


Fig. 4.9. Measured power consumption of an OTFT SRAM (static power only) and an OTFT DRAM for different WWL voltages and different operation scenarios.

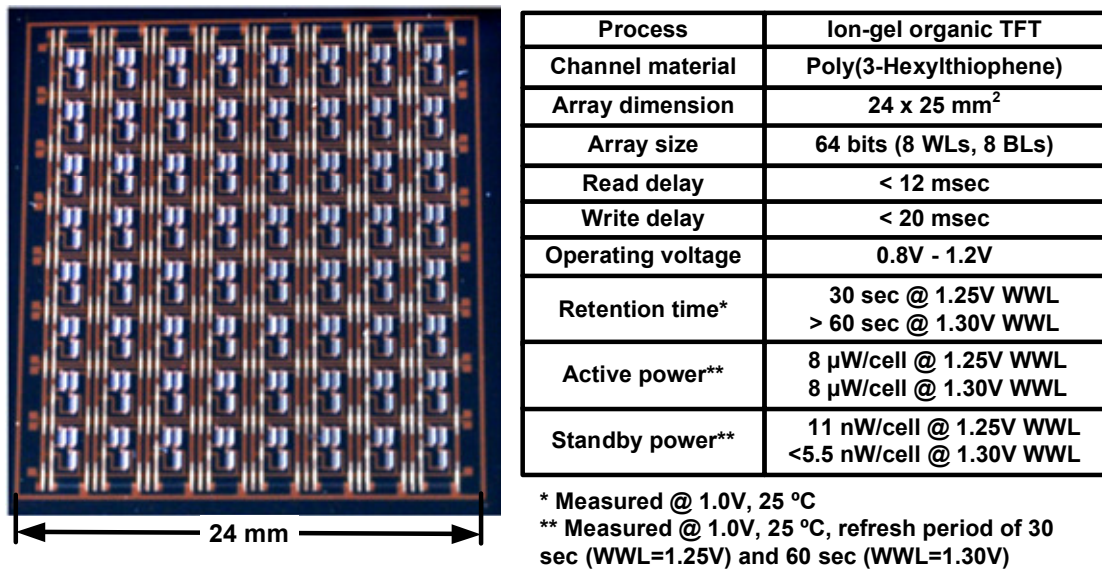


Fig. 4.10. Chip photograph of the 8x8 printed organic DRAM and performance summary.

4.5 Summary

An 8x8 DRAM array was successfully implemented in gel-OTFT platform as the first general-purpose organic DRAM design ever reported. The design delivers practical performance under 1V supply voltage and a retention time being 5 orders of magnitude longer than that in silicon technology, thanks to the significant gate capacitance induced by the electrolyte-gated structure. The retention time is sufficiently long even for low speed OTFT circuits, which results in a significantly lower power consumption compared to an SRAM cell. The gain cell DRAM design therefore serves as a desired low power solution for general purpose memory in the organic device platform.

In the next chapter, we will also explore the potential of gain cell DRAM in silicon platform, which is typically in nanometer-scale in modern industry. Although SRAM and 1T1C DRAM has been dominating in silicon embedded memory area targeting at high speed with practical retention time, technology scaling is making the designs challenging especially for low power purpose. Gain cell DRAMs, with innovated circuit enhancement, may be a promising solution to overcome these design challenges.

Chapter 5

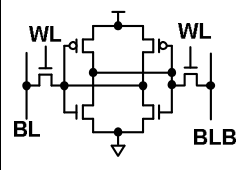
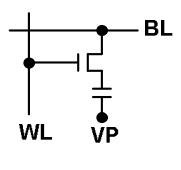
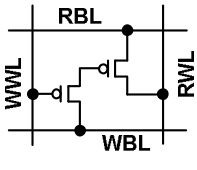
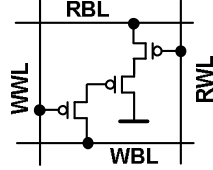
SILICON GAIN CELL MEMORY ANALYSIS

5.1 Introduction

6T SRAM has been the mainstream for embedded memory in silicon industry for its high density and performance. However, the increasing leakages and the contention between read and write paths make it challenging in future technology scaling. In recent years, embedded DRAMs (eDRAMs) have been drawing interest as a potential alternative. 1T1C type eDRAMs have been adopted for last level caches in several high performance server chips, delivering 5X+ higher bit-cell densities and a random cycle time of 2.0nsec [29]-[33]. Nevertheless, despite successful deployment of 1T1C eDRAM in recent server products, the complicated process steps involved in building the storage capacitor and the special access transistor, coupled with the limited signal swing at low supply voltages, make the scaling of this eDRAM technology unfavorable.

Gain cells, which are typically 2X denser than 6T SRAM cells, are logic compatible and have good low voltage margin thanks to the decoupled read and write paths. They also have a read port capable of driving long bitlines, making them competitive at low voltages. Attaining practical retention times of 100's of μ secs and improving the random access speed remain as formidable challenges for future gain cell eDRAM designs. Table 2 compares the circuit parameters of interest for the three types of embedded memory, where the two major categories of gain cell eDRAMs, namely 2T and 3T, are shown separately.

Table 2. Comparison of various embedded memory options.

	6T SRAM [34]	1T1C eDRAM [33]	2T Gain cell eDRAM [35]	3T gain cell eDRAM
Cell Schematic				
⁽¹⁾ Reported cell size (ratio)	0.46x1.24= 0.5704 μm^2 (1X)	0.23x0.55= 0.1265 μm^2 (0.22X)	0.475x0.58= 0.2755 μm^2 (0.48X)	-
⁽²⁾ Redrawn cell size (ratio)	0.575x2.05= 1.179 μm^2 (1X)	0.45x0.545= 0.245 μm^2 (0.21X)	0.48x0.925= 0.444 μm^2 (0.38X)	0.52x1.015 = 0.528 μm^2 (0.45X)
Low-VDD margin	Poor (ratioed)	Poor (destructive read)	Good (non-ratioed, gain function)	Good (non-ratioed, gain function)
Storage cap.	irrelevant	<10fF	~1fF	~1fF
Process	Logic compatible	Trench cap. + thick TOX access TR	Logic compatible	Logic compatible
Retention time	-	40 μs @105°C, 99.99%	10 μs @85°C	~100 μs @85°C (simulation)
Random cycle	1ns ⁽²⁾	2ns	2ns	2-4ns
Static power	1.0X	0.2X	-	-

(1) All designs are in 65nm.

(2) Based on the same 65nm low power CMOS process.

In this chapter, for the first time, we present the general simulation analysis of a conventional 3T gain cell eDRAM with process variations, since the cells with a short retention time (tail cells) determine the array retention time. The actual chip design with innovated circuit techniques to enhance low-power eDRAM performance will be described in the next chapter.

5.2 Silicon Gain Cell EDRAM

Similar to that in Chapter 4, Fig. 5.1(a) shows a conventional gain cell eDRAM implemented with 3 silicon transistors (i.e. WRITE, READ, and STORAGE devices). Note that although complementary logic is supported in silicon platform, a PMOS cell has roughly an order of magnitude lower gate leakage than its NMOS counterpart and

hence improves the data retention time by a factor of 3~4. Fig. 5.1(b) shows the layout of a single cell in an industrial 1.2V, 65nm low power CMOS logic process. The Write WordLine (WWL) of the PMOS gain cell is either driven to a negative voltage (typically around -0.5V) during write access to eliminate the threshold voltage drop, or held at a boosted voltage (typically $V_{DD}+0.5V$) during hold mode to cut off the sub-threshold leakage. Due to the positive and negative out-of-rail voltages, the operating voltage of an eDRAM cell must be carefully determined based on the gate dielectric reliability. The W/L of each device is optimized for minimum cell area, longer retention time, and tolerance against process variation. In this analysis, we use a sizing of 150nm/60nm, 265nm/80nm and 150nm/90nm, for the READ, the STORAGE, and the WRITE devices, respectively.

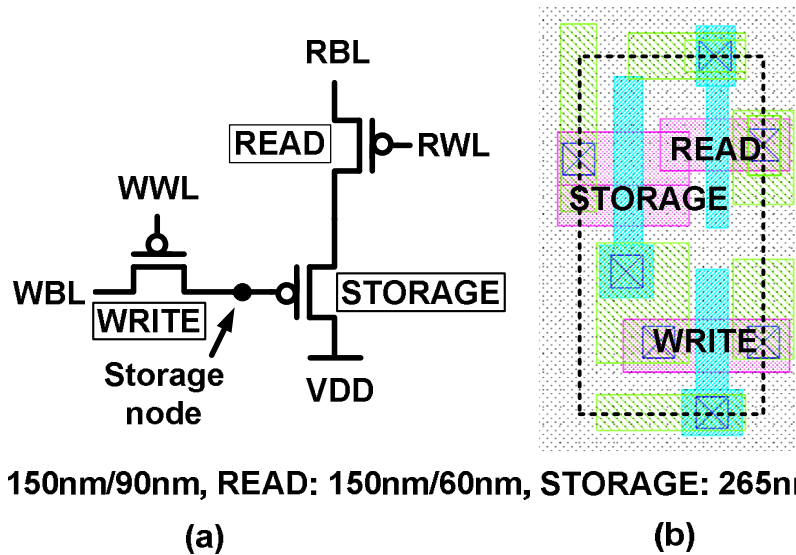


Fig. 5.1. (a) Schematic and (b) layout of a 3T PMOS gain cell. A PMOS cell has roughly an order of magnitude lower gate tunneling leakage than its NMOS counterpart and hence significantly improves the data retention time.

Fig. 5.2 shows the simulated retention characteristics of this silicon gain cell

including the impact of device mismatches. For a 3T PMOS cell, the steady state voltage is close to VDD as most of the leakage currents in a PMOS device are inherently in the pull up direction. Note that data '0' (D0) is again more critical than data '1' (D1), as explained in Chapter 4. In many silicon gain cell designs, the first criterion to determine the cell retention time, namely that the cell node voltage for D0 should be lower than a specified value (or D1 being high enough for an NMOS cell), is more stringent, although this could change depending on the target operating frequency. Fig. 5.2 shows a maximum retention time of around 300 μ sec based on a criterion of $VD0 < 0.6$ and $VD1 - VD0 > 0.2V$ as annotated in the figure, targeting at a 4ns random cycle time.

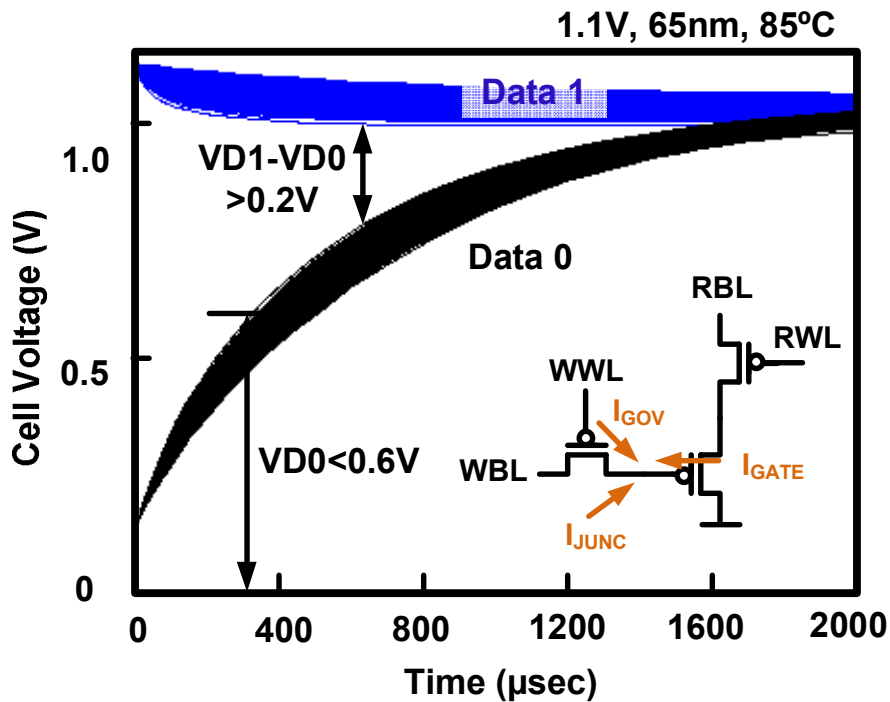


Fig. 5.2. Cell retention characteristics with process variations.

Fig. 5.3 displays the read-writeback timing of a 256 WL x 128 BL 3T gain cell eDRAM array, with more dedicated read/write schemes for high performance compared

to the organic DRAM cell presented in Chapter 4. The bitline voltages are pre-discharged and the RWL is asserted. Depending on the cell data, the bitline voltage either rises (D0) or remains low (D1). Unlike SRAMs, DRAMs do not have a complementary bitline and therefore require a reference bitline voltage for the sense amplifier. A dummy cell produces a reference bitline level that is in between the D1 and D0 bitline levels. A small bitline voltage difference is amplified to a full swing signal by a sense amplifier. This is followed by a write-back operation to restore the cell data. The full read-writeback cycle consists of the precharge delay, the bitline delay, the sense-amplifier delay, and the write-back delay. Among these delay components, the precharge delay, the sense-amplifier delay and the write-back delay are relatively immune to process variations and can be optimized separately. Bitline delay on the other hand, is much more sensitive to process variations as is the case in most memory designs. For this reason, this study will focus on the bitline delay and not the full access cycle. Note that the dummy bitline circuit can be designed to be tolerant to variation through optimal sizing or post-silicon tuning. This is possible due to their limited numbers. Hence, we only consider variation in the accessed cell for our simulations.

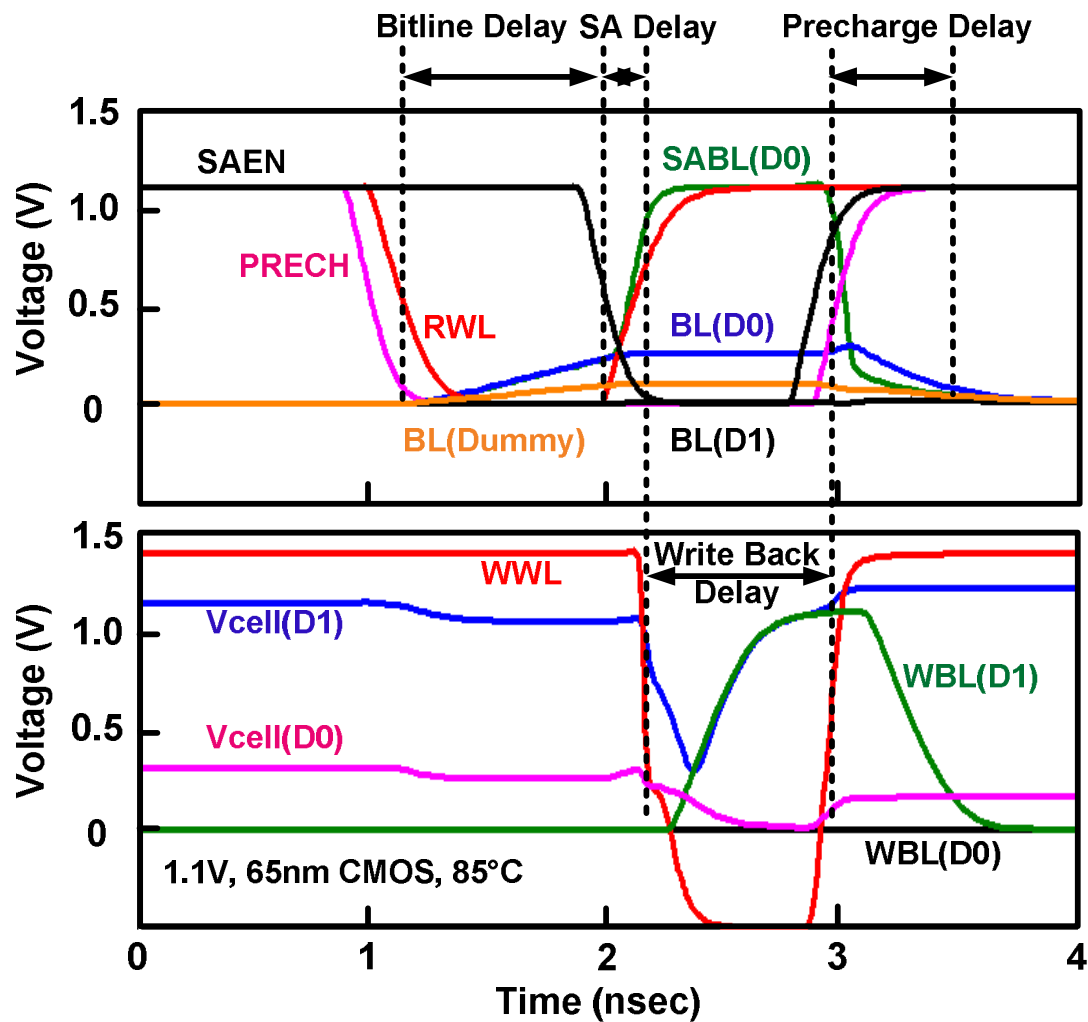


Fig. 5.3. Cell retention characteristics using Monte Carlo simulations. The two criteria for determining the maximum cell retention time are (1) $V_{D0} < 0.6V$ for meeting a target read speed and (2) $V_{D1} - V_{D0} > 0.2V$ to ensure sufficient read current difference.

5.3 Bitline Delay Variation

5.3.1 Corner Simulation Pitfalls

Designers use corner parameters such as SS (slow NMOS, slow PMOS) to estimate worst case circuit performance. To examine whether standard process corners capture the

worst case performance for gain cells, we simulated the bitline delay while varying the TOX and VTH in the same direction for all devices in a 3T gain cell. The $\sigma(V_{TH})$ values were calculated according to the gate areas of each individual device. We used 3σ values of 0.11V, 0.07V and 0.09V, for the VTHs of the READ, STORAGE, and WRITE devices, respectively. 3σ value of TOX was 0.45nm for all three devices. Since we are considering a PMOS cell, we are interested in the read access time for D0 which determines the PMOS drive current and is more vulnerable to process variations due to the leakage in the pull up direction.

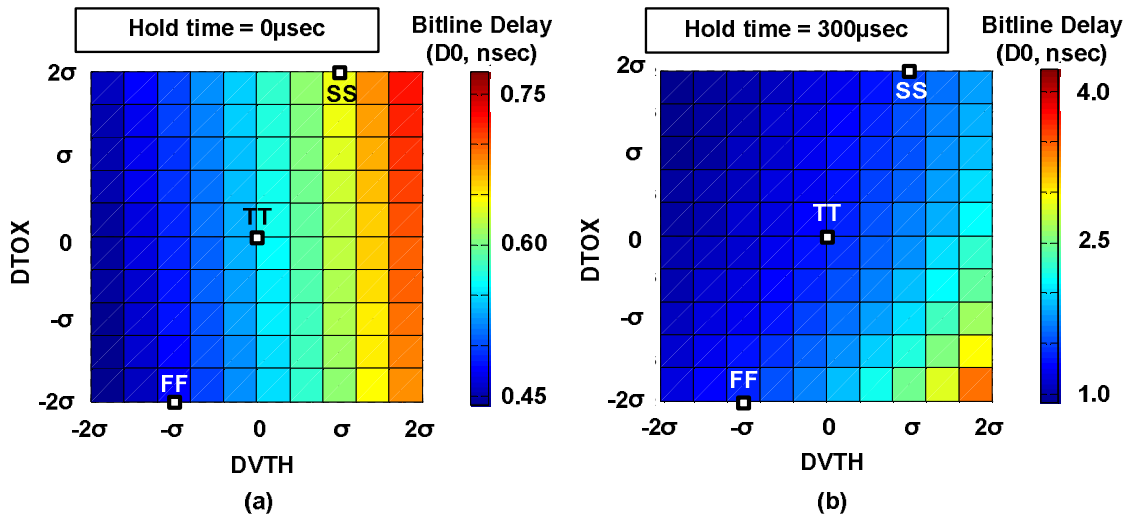


Fig. 5.4. Bitline delay dependency on TOX and VTH after a hold period of (a) 0 μ sec (b) 300 μ sec.

Fig. 5.4(a) shows the bitline delay at a hold time of 0 μ sec, which is equivalent to the cell being read immediately after being written. In this case, the SS and FF corner delays are close to the worst and best case delays. However, after a 300 μ sec hold time, neither process corners captures the worst nor best cases as shown in Fig. 5.4(b). This is due to the fact that a fast corner device has both larger leakage and higher read current, and

therefore, even though the read device is stronger, the larger leakage current makes the cell voltage degrade faster resulting in an overall increase in read delay. Similarly, for the slow corner, the weak read device is “compensated” by the smaller loss in the cell voltage due to the lower leakage current which leads to a non-worst case delay. Fig. 5.4(b) also implies that after a long hold period, a thin TOX high VTH combination will result in the worst case, which is not a standard process corner included in device models. For this reason, it is necessary to examine the impact of TOX and VTH separately.

5.3.2 Cell Node Voltage and Read Path Strength

Bitline delay of a 3T PMOS cell is determined by two circuit parameters: (1) the D0 cell node voltage at the time the cell is accessed, and (2) the read path drive strength. The former is determined by the various leakage components surrounding the storage node, namely the gate tunneling leakage of the STORAGE and WRITE transistors, and the junction leakage of the WRITE transistor. The latter factor (i.e. the read path drive strength) simply depends on the VTH of the STORAGE and READ devices that comprise the read path. Note that the sub-threshold leakage of the WRITE device with a boosted WWL must be negligible compared to the other leakage components. This is imperative for any type of DRAM cell that has to maximize the cell retention time.

Fig. 5.5 shows the D0 cell node voltage, namely VD0, after a 100 μ sec hold period. It indicates that TOX of the STORAGE and WRITE devices have the strongest impact on VD0. Other parameters such as the TOX of the READ device or the VTH of any device have little impact on VD0. On the other hand, the bitline delay at a fixed VD0 voltage in Fig. 5.6 indicates that the VTH of the STORAGE and READ determine the read path

strength. Note that TOX variation in the STORAGE and READ devices does affect the read path drive current through the change in COX but this effect is negligible compared to the VTH effect as shown in Fig. 5.5.

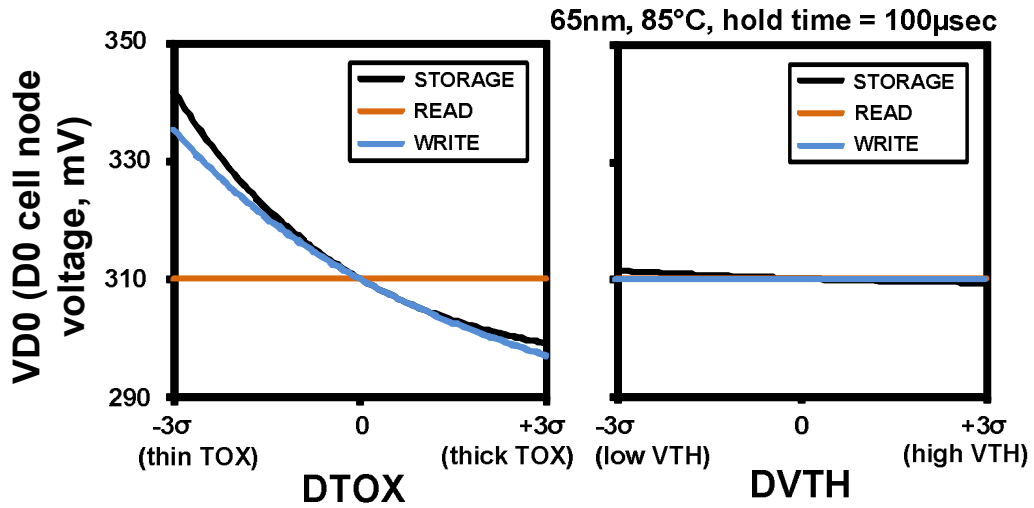


Fig. 5.5. VDO after 100µsecs of hold mode for different (a) TOX and (b) VTH values.

The VDO voltage primarily depends on the TOX of the STORAGE and WRITE devices.

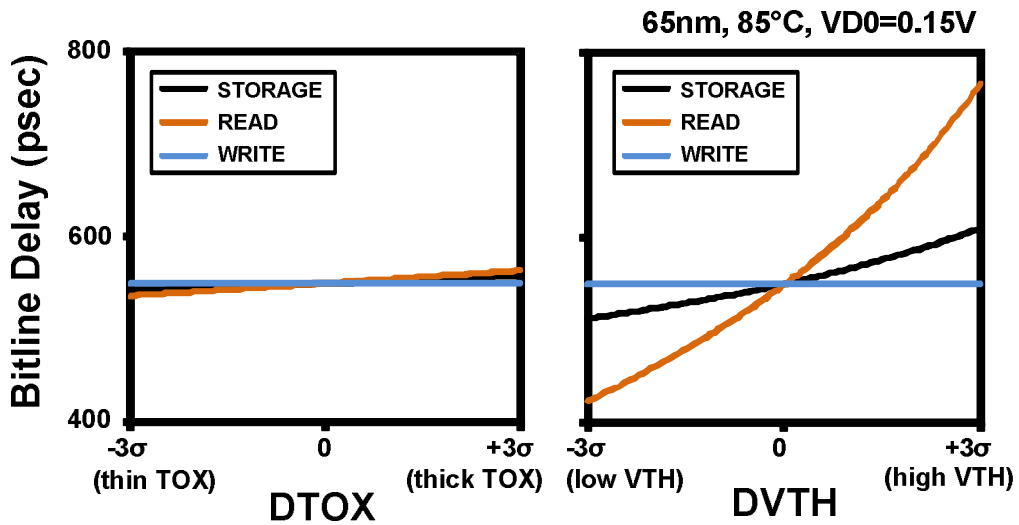


Fig. 5.6. Bitline delay at VDO=0.15V for different (a) TOX and (b) VTH values. Bitline delay at a fixed VDO depends on the VTH of the STORAGE and READ devices.

Table 3 summarizes the findings from Figs. 5.5 and 5.6. TOX affects only the cell node voltage and not the read path strength while VTH affects only the read path strength. This explains why standard corner simulations cannot capture the worst case cells. Since both TOX and VTH are moving in the same direction for standard corners (e.g. FF corner has a thin TOX and low VTH, SS corner has a thick TOX and high VTH, and so on), the TOX and VTH effects compensate each other resulting in a non-worst case delay. In reality however, a device with a thin TOX and high VTH combination gives the worst case delay due to the detrimental effect on both the cell node voltage and the read path strength.

Table 3. Summary of the results from Figs. 5.5 and 5.6.

	TOX Variation	VTH Variation
VD0 @ fixed hold time	WRITE, STORAGE	Negligible impact
Read path strength @ fixed VD0	Negligible impact	READ, STORAGE

5.4 Practical Issues with Monte Carlo Simulations

This section discusses the simulation strategies for analyzing gain cell performance under process variation. The following two strategies (see Fig. 5.7) can be considered when using the standard Monte Carlo features of circuit simulators. Other elaborate simulation strategies can be devised but will not be discussed in this paper as they involve a considerable amount of programming effort.

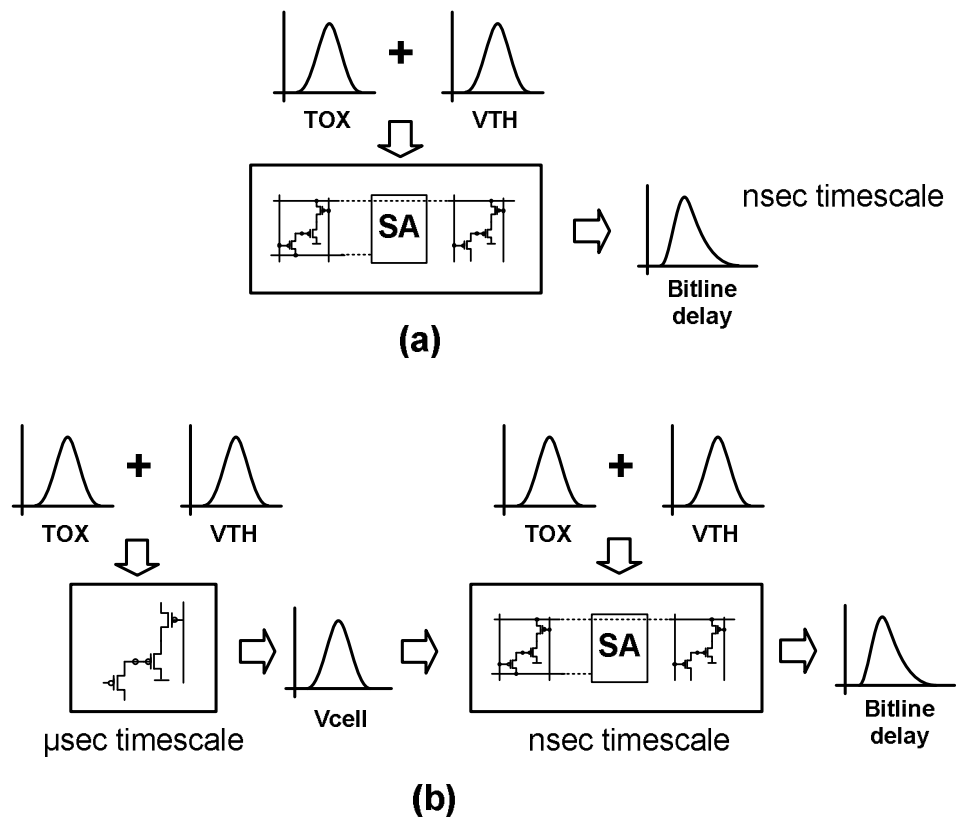


Fig. 5.7. (a) One step and (b) two step Monte Carlo simulation methods for estimating gain cell eDRAM performance using standard circuit simulator features.

- One step Monte Carlo: This straightforward method simulates the entire hold mode and read access sequence for each Monte Carlo parameter set. This can be considered as the golden method which represents the real hardware. The main drawback of this method is that, depending on the type of circuit simulator, the designer may not be able to view the accurate signal waveforms. Such anomalies can occur when running simulations with a discrepancy in time scale. For example, for our studies, the hold mode simulation requires a time frame of 100's of μ secs while the read access requires only a few nsecs.

- Two step Monte Carlo: Here, the hold mode and read access Monte Carlo simulations are run separately. That is, the cell node voltage distribution is obtained in the first Monte Carlo run, and the resultant distribution is fed into the second Monte Carlo in which the read access time is simulated using a fresh set of device parameters. Since the time scale and simulation time steps can be determined separately for the two Monte Carlo runs, the simulator doesn't introduce any anomalies and provides accurate signal waveforms. However, this method uses different parameter sets for the two Monte Carlo runs, which is not realistic. Moreover, the cell voltage distribution from the first Monte Carlo may deviate from a pure Gaussian which could introduce further errors.

Despite the potential inaccuracy in the two step Monte Carlo method, simulation results in Fig. 5.8 indicate that the bitline delay distributions estimated by the two methods are extremely similar with a mean and sigma difference of only 0.00136nsec and 0.0137nsec, respectively (Fig. 5.8(b)). This can be attributed to the fact that the impacts of TOX and VTH variation on bitline delay are independent, as discussed in Section 5.3. In other words, the TOX variation impacts only the first of the two Monte Carlo runs while VTH affects the second run, so the fact that the two Monte Carlo runs use different variation data does not affect the final results. Approximating the cell voltage distribution to an ideal Gaussian did not introduce a noticeable error. Therefore, it can be concluded that the two step Monte Carlo can prevent simulator anomalies at the cost of a minute error compared to the golden method. Although we chose to use the golden method (i.e. one step Monte Carlo) for this work, one can consider using the two step Monte Carlo if the detailed waveforms are needed for further circuit inspection.

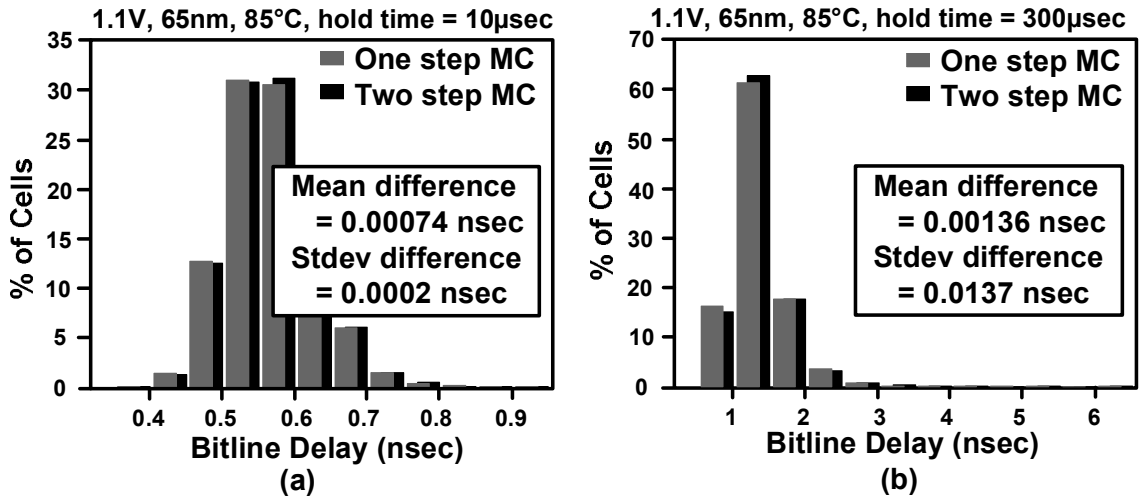


Fig. 5.8. Bitline delay results of the one step and two step Monte Carlo methods at a hold mode time of (a) 10µsec and (b) 300µsec.

5.5 Statistical Simulation Results

Based on the gain cell variation behavior discussed in section 5.3, and using the golden simulation methodology described in section 5.4, this section investigates the statistical performance of gain cell eDRAM. The test vehicle is a 256 WL x 128 BL 3T PMOS gain cell eDRAM array built in a 1.2V, 65nm LP CMOS process but operated at 1.1V to incorporate the potential fluctuation in supply voltage.

5.5.1 Comprehensive Analysis

First we show results from a comprehensive Monte Carlo simulation including both global and local TOX and VTH variations for each device. This method can effectively capture the worst case cells and give an accurate estimate on the amount of redundancy needed for a target yield. The simulation setup incorporates both the systematic and random variation components. We chose a reference bitline level that equalizes the 3σ bitline delays for D0 and D1 which in turn maximizes the 3σ point performance. Care

has been taken to ensure that the simulation setup and the bitline/peripheral delays are in good agreement with real eDRAM systems [35][38]. Even though the cell retention time according to Fig. 5.2 is around $300\mu\text{sec}$, we also evaluate the gain cell performance at shorter hold periods (e.g. $10\mu\text{sec}$) to fully understand the variation effect. Fig. 5.9 shows the simulation results where the correlation between bitline delays at different hold periods are plotted. The bitline delay at $0\mu\text{sec}$ is simply the read path strength since the cell voltage has not degraded, so the x-axes in Figs. 5.9(a) and 5.9(b) are equivalent to the VTH variation of the read path. Results show that after a $300\mu\text{sec}$ hold period, the TOX variation starts to influence the bitline performance. The correlation coefficient between the bitline delay at $300\mu\text{sec}$ and that at $0\mu\text{sec}$ (i.e. Fig. 5.9(b)) is only 0.5073 which is substantially reduced from the value at $10\mu\text{sec}$ (i.e. 0.9993).

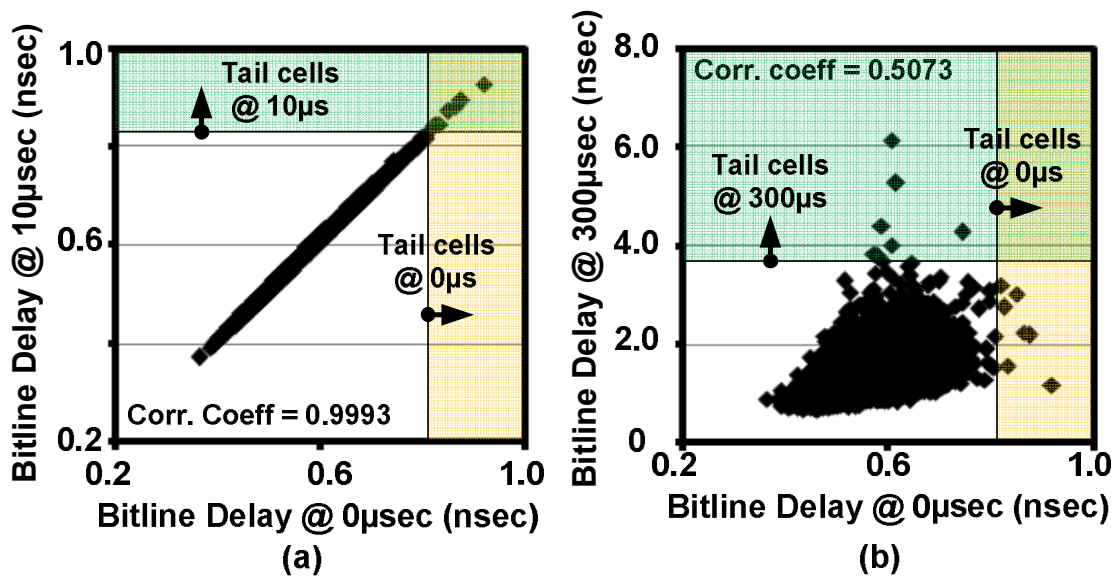


Fig. 5.9. Scatter plot shows the correlation between bitline delays at different hold periods. (a) $10\mu\text{sec}$ vs. $0\mu\text{sec}$ and (b) $300\mu\text{sec}$ vs. $0\mu\text{sec}$.

Tracking the tail cells (i.e. cells with the longest bitline delays) at different hold

periods can give insight into how different process parameters affect the overall chip performance. The data points in the highlighted areas in Fig. 5.9 represent the tail cells. At a hold time of 0 μ sec, cells with a higher VTH become tail cells. The tail cells do not change at 10 μ sec as the hold time is too short to cause any significant degradation in the cell node voltage. However at 300 μ sec, cells with thinner TOX emerge as new tail cells as they suffer more from the gate tunneling leakage during the long hold period. Fig. 5.9(b) suggests that the tail cells switch from the ones with a higher VTH at short hold periods to the ones with thinner TOX at longer hold periods. It is worth noting that although the TOX variation effect becomes more prominent at longer hold times, VTH remains equally influential on bitline delay. This can be seen from the correlation coefficient value of 0.5073 at 300 μ sec.

5.5.2 Contour Plot Analysis

Another way to understand how the influence of TOX and VTH shifts with increasing hold periods is through a contour plot such as the one shown in Fig. 5.10. Equal bitline delay contours (blue curves) and equal probability contours (black concentric circles) are shown in the TOX and VTH space. The figure shows an example for a 300 μ sec hold time. Since we are concerned of the worst case only, and since we would like to be able to plot the contours in a 2D space, it is assumed that TOX or VTH of all three transistors are moving in the same direction.

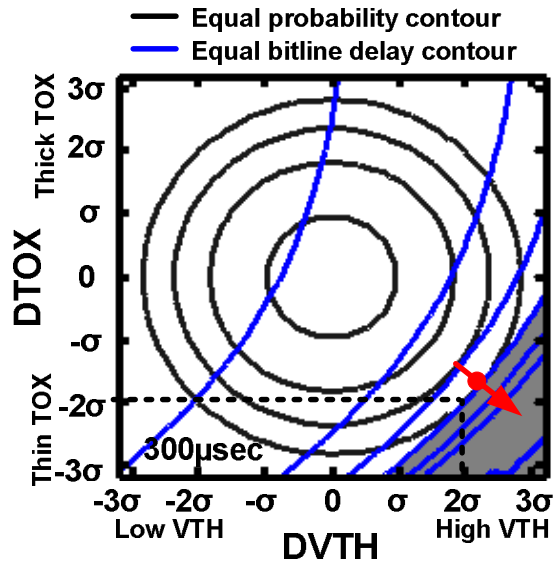


Fig. 5.10. Equal performance contours for a hold period of 300µsec. The cumulative probability of the highlighted area is 0.20%.

In case a more thorough evaluation is needed, for example for studying the random mismatch between the three devices in a gain cell, the same methodology can be extended to an N-dimensional space by independently sweeping the TOX and VTH for each individual device. The blue contours in Fig. 5.10 have a positive slope indicating that the bitline delay is increasing as we move to the high VTH and thin TOX corner. Suppose we consider the concentric circle which passes the (TOX, VTH) = (-2σ, +2σ) point. It can be seen that the red dot has the worst delay out of the possible TOX and VTH combinations. The arrow indicates the direction of maximum bitline delay increase. The cumulative probability of the dark grey area wherein the bitline delay is greater than that of blue contour is 0.20%.

Using the contour plots in Fig. 5.11, we can evaluate how the sensitivity of bitline delay with respect to TOX and VTH changes at different hold times. For example, for a

0 μ sec hold time, the bitline delays are relatively insensitive to the TOX as shown in the vertical contours in Fig. 5.11(a). As the hold time increases, the blue contours gradually exhibit a positive slope. This becomes most apparent in the lower right corners of Figs. 5.11 (c) and (d). For hold times longer than 300 μ sec in which the TOX variation effect is even more severe, it can be anticipated that the red dot will traverse towards the bottom of the outer concentric circle. The contour plot method can be useful in guiding the device optimization for improving performance and predicting the amount of redundancy needed to meet a target yield.

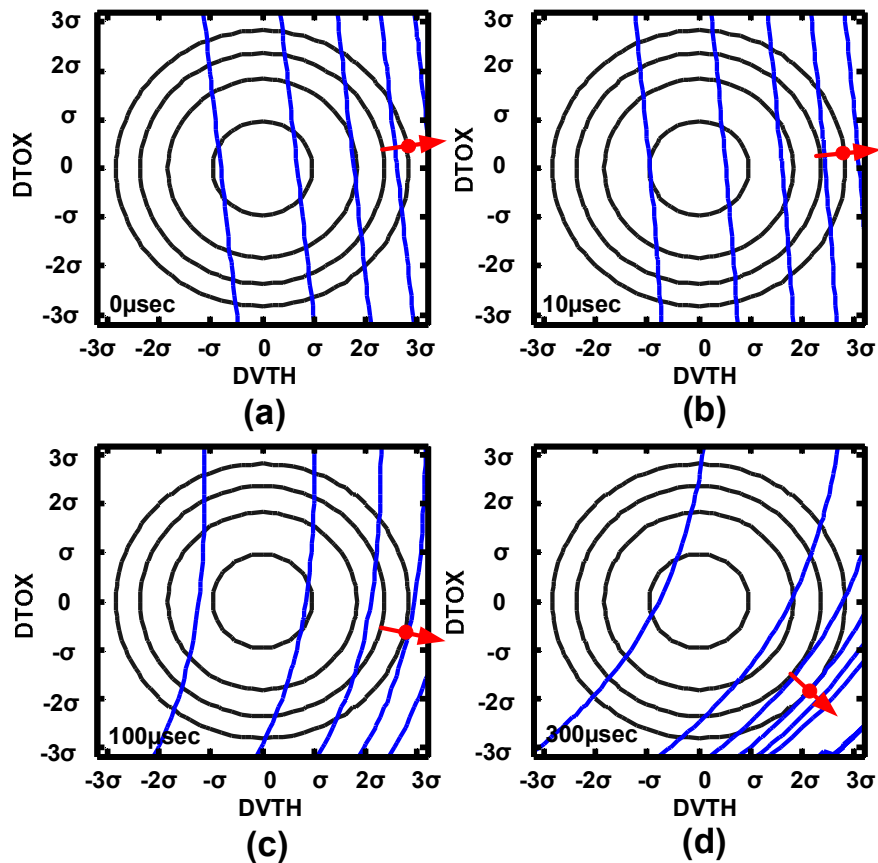


Fig. 5.11. Bitline delay contour plot in the TOX and VTH space for hold times of (a) 0 μ sec (b)10 μ sec (c)100 μ sec and (d) 300 μ sec.

5.6 Summary

Gain cell eDRAMs can be implemented in a generic logic process achieving roughly 2X higher bit cell densities compared to 6T SRAMs. Furthermore, gain cells have a wider read/write margin than 6T SRAMs since there is no contention between the read and write paths. Despite the recent advances in eDRAM circuit technology, there has not been any in-depth study on gain cell retention time or performance considering process variation. In this chapter, we carry out a simple variation study that can offer a better understanding of gain cell eDRAM operation under process variation. The investigation begins on the premise that traditional corner parameters cannot capture the worst case delay and makes the case for a device level statistical simulation framework. Next, we show that TOX variation affects only the cell node voltage while VTH affects only the read path drive strength. As a result, the performance at short hold times is impacted more by the VTH, while at longer hold times, both TOX and VTH have significant impact on performance. Two Monte Carlo simulation strategies are compared for obtaining the eDRAM delay distribution. Finally, we utilize the correlation between bitline delays at different hold times as well as the delay contour plots to explain how the bitline delay's sensitivity to TOX and VTH varies with respect to hold time. These two methods for analyzing eDRAM performance can help optimize the sizing, build circuits and redundancy techniques for variation tolerance, and guide the device optimization process.

In the next chapter, we will move forward to actual chip designs of gain cell eDRAM, targeting at a practical retention time with enhanced performance and robustness.

Chapter 6

SILICON GAIN CELL MEMORY DESIGN

6.1 Introduction

The conventional 3T design discussed in Chapter 5 does not fulfill the requirements in modern silicon industry. The array retention time reduces to less than 100 μ secs for a 2 ns random cycle time, which is not sufficient to compete with the mainstream 6T SRAM in performance or power. Innovations in bit-cells as well as peripheral circuits are required to promote gain cells for industry use.

Several recent gain cell eDRAM designs based on 2T or 3T cells have demonstrated practical retention times beyond 100 μ secs [36]-[38], SRAM-like performance [28][38], and true logic-compatibility by eliminating boosted voltages [38]. Despite the rapid progress, one interesting feature of gain cells that has been largely overlooked in the past is the potential for write-back-free operation by taking advantage of the non-destructive read.

In this chapter, we experimentally demonstrate for the first time, a gain cell eDRAM without write-back operation. By removing the write-back from a read operation, the read access speed can be significantly improved. We also apply a local voltage Sense Amplifier (S/A) scheme to overcome the design complexities and variability issues prevalent in the existing current-sensing schemes used for 2T gain cells. Finally, a low-overhead low-power mode based on a dual-row-access scheme extends cell retention time by 3X to save refresh power during periods when only a fraction of the cache

memory is being used.

6.2 Write-Back-Free Read Operation

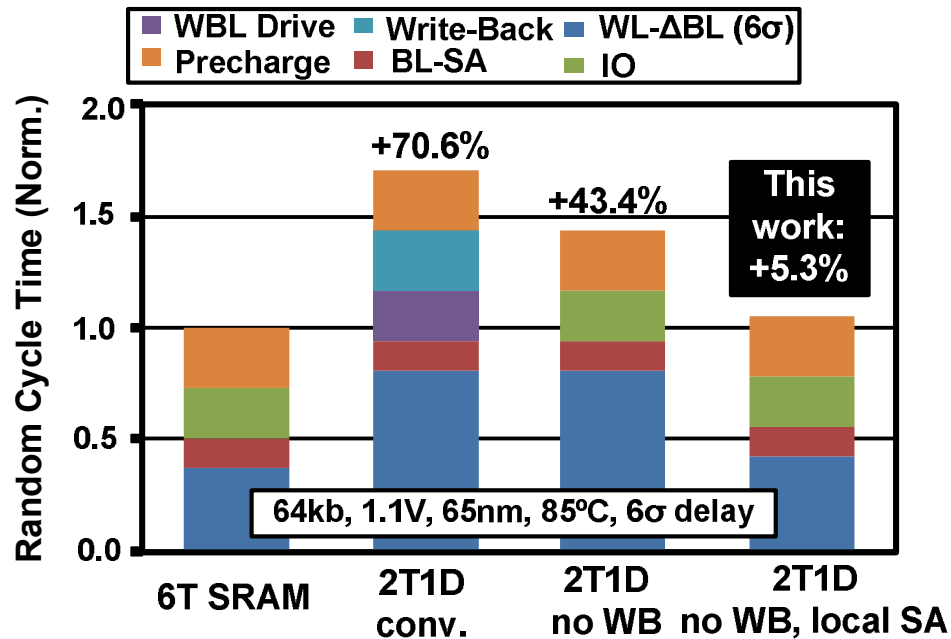


Fig. 6.1. Random cycle time comparison between SRAM and eDRAM.

A write-back-free read operation provides us a system speedup opportunity which has been neglected in previous gain cell designs [28][36]-[38]. In conventional 1T1C eDRAMs, the read operation relies on charge sharing between the storage capacitance and the bitline capacitance. Due to the destructive read nature, a write-back is needed to reinforce the cell data after the charge sharing operation. Gain cells on the other hand, have a non-destructive read, eliminating the need for a write-back. Fig. 6.1 compares the cycle time between a 6T SRAM and various 2T eDRAMs implemented in the same 65nm low-power process. It shows that, by eliminating the write-back delay that accounts for approximately 30% of the read cycle, a significant improvement in both operating frequency and active power can be achieved. Although these benefits are only applicable

to the read cycle, it is sufficient to improve the overall system performance significantly, because in general there are more reads than writes in a processor cache, and a read may stall the system and therefore degrade the system level performance, while a write will not.

A 2T1D cell, shown in Fig. 6.2, was used in this work to demonstrate the write-back-free operation. The gain cell design is different from the previous 2T1C cell [38] in that the P-type coupling device shared between adjacent cells is replaced by a separate N-type diode in each cell. This provides the similar beneficial coupling up effect [36]-[37] during read while minimizing any coupling noise from the adjacent cells. The PCOU signal preferentially couples up the cell node voltage for increased read current and beneficially couples down the cell voltage after sensing to restore the full voltage levels without requiring a boosted negative voltage [38]. Further details on the circuit operation of the 2T1C cell can be found in [38]. Another major difference from [38] is that PCOU switching occurs within a single read cycle to allow consecutive reads without a write-back phase. Even though the write cycle contains a read operation, which is required due to the row-wise write nature of eDRAMs to avoid overwriting the data of unaccessed cells on the same row, we kept the write cycle timing intact so that the beneficial write feature described in [38] can be preserved.

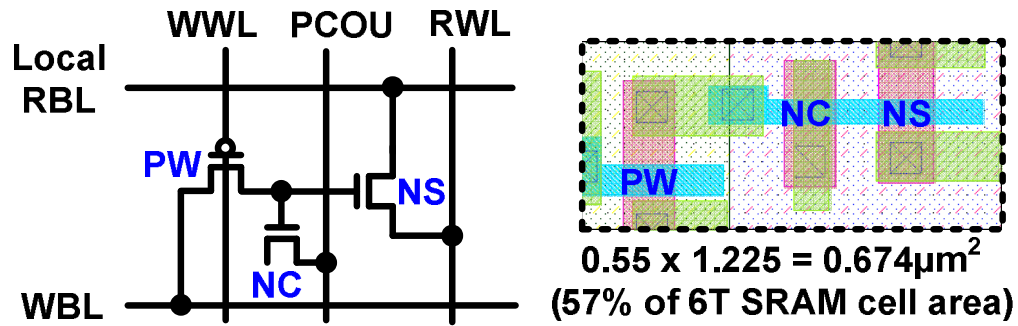


Fig. 6.2. 2T1D gain cell with preferential boosting [38].

Simulation results in Fig. 6.3 examine the impact of write-back-free reads for access rates from 0.01% to 10%. The voltage window between data ‘1’ and data ‘0’ remains unchanged for access rates up to 1%. For access rates greater than 1%, the cell voltage window slightly improves. Although the detailed reasons are still under investigation, this may be due to the minute difference between the couple up and couple down voltages that gets accumulated over a long retention period (e.g. 200 μsec), which compensates for the pull-up leakages in data ‘0’. Another potential reason is that the PCOU coupling temporarily raises the data ‘0’ voltage during a read cycle, which reduces the entire leakage profile and extends the retention time especially in cases with frequent read. Data ‘1’ has the similar behavior; however, the leakage profile change is negligible compared to that in data ‘0’ because the leakage in data ‘1’ cases is significantly smaller.

Fig. 6.4 shows that for practical access rates, getting rid of the write-back does not have an adverse effect on the data ‘1’ and data ‘0’ levels. Our test chip design focuses on experimentally verifying the impact of write-back-free reads on overall eDRAM performance for practical access rates.

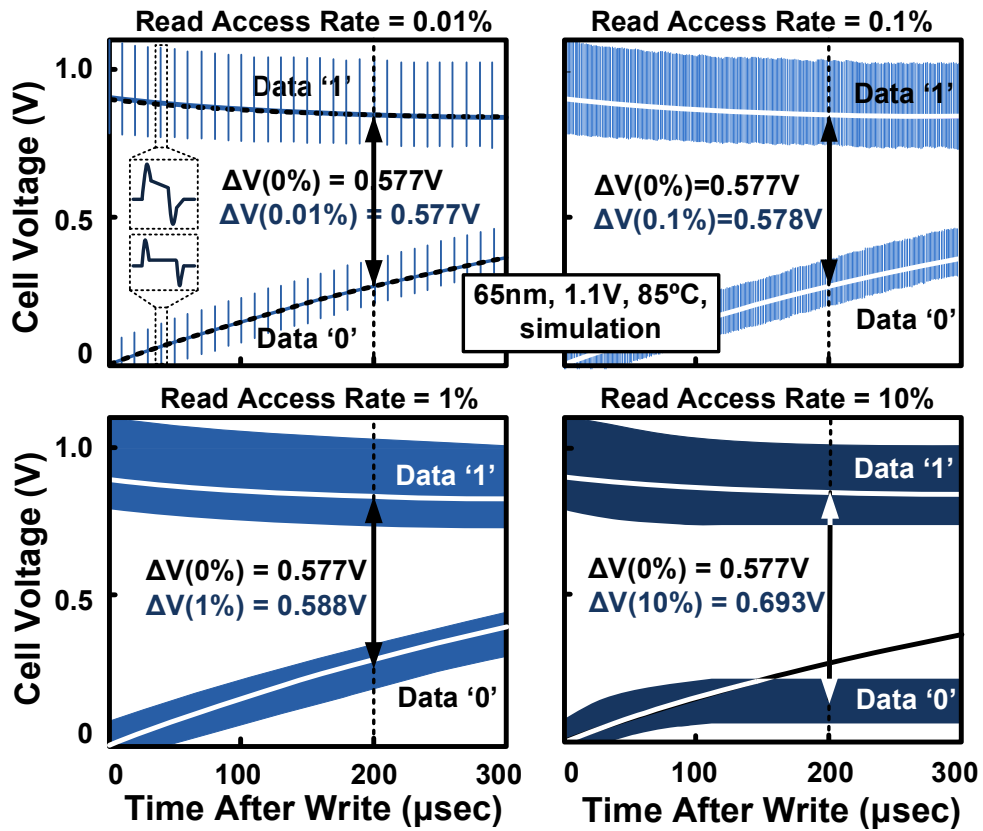


Fig. 6.3. Cell retention characteristics without write-back for different read access rates.

Coupling strength increases with cell voltage.

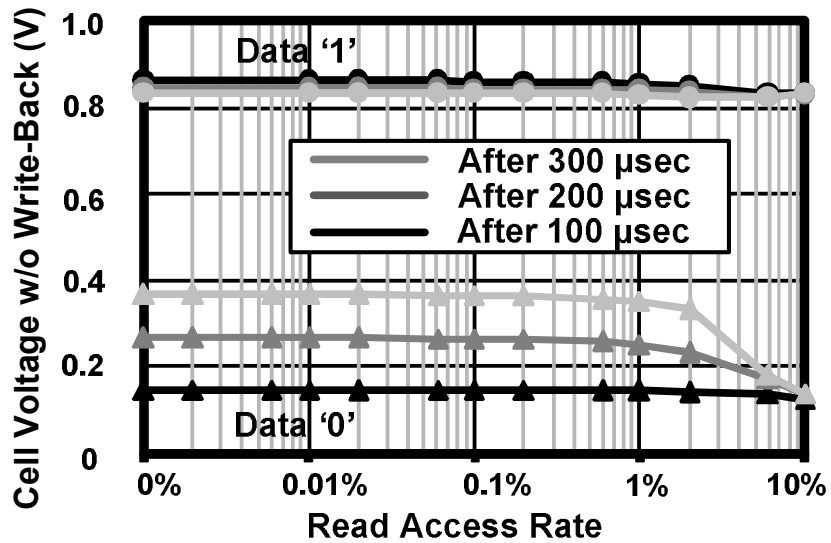


Fig. 6.4. Cell voltage w/o write-back vs. read access rate.

6.3 Voltage Sensing w/ Local Sense-Amplifier Architecture

6.3.1 Read Disturbance Issue

For 2T-based gain cell, despite the fast speed and compact cell size compared to its 3T counterpart, read disturbance has been a common issue [28] as shown in Fig. 6.5 (above). Current from the unselected cells storing with data ‘1’ limits the RBL swing to around 0.2V which is not sufficient for reliable voltage sensing. Common practice has been to implement a current-sensing scheme, which keeps the RBL level close to VDD during read [28][38]. However, a current-sensing scheme suffers from variation issues in the dummy cell due to the single-ended sensing and cannot utilize dummy averaging techniques because of the small input impedance requirement. This will introduce significant design overhead and scalability challenges in future technology nodes.

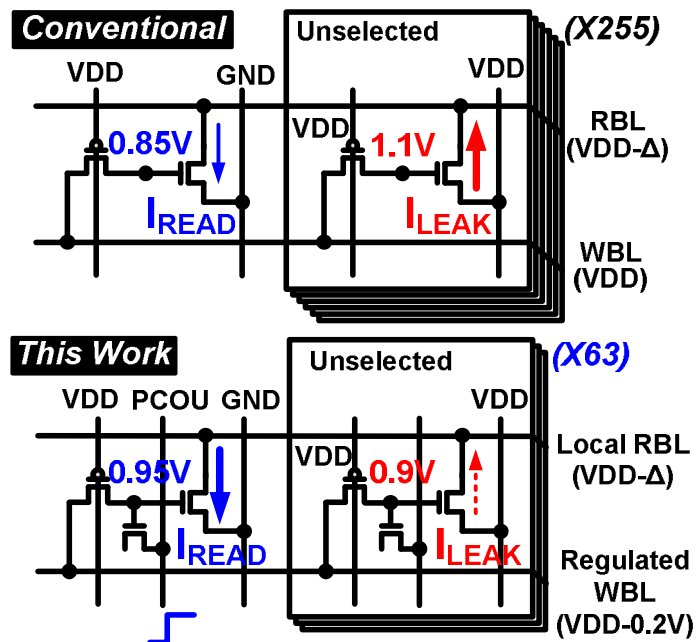


Fig. 6.5. Read disturbance mitigation of 2T1D cell using (i) beneficial PCOU coupling, (ii) regulated WBL, and (iii) short local read bitlines.

To get around this problem, we apply three circuit techniques that allow a more robust voltage-sensing scheme to be used. First, the beneficial PCOU coupling in the accessed 2T1D cell provides stronger pull-down read current. Second, a regulated WBL scheme [36][38] lowers the fresh data ‘1’ voltage by 0.2V (1.1V to 0.9V), significantly reducing the disturbance current. This has proven to have little impact on data retention since data ‘1’ quickly stabilizes to around 0.85V due to the cell leakage profile [28]. Finally, a Local-Sense-Amplifier (LSA) scheme with short read bitlines [32] limits the maximum number of unselected cells to 63 which in turn reduces the worst case read disturbance current and provides a sufficient signal margin for reliable voltage sensing.

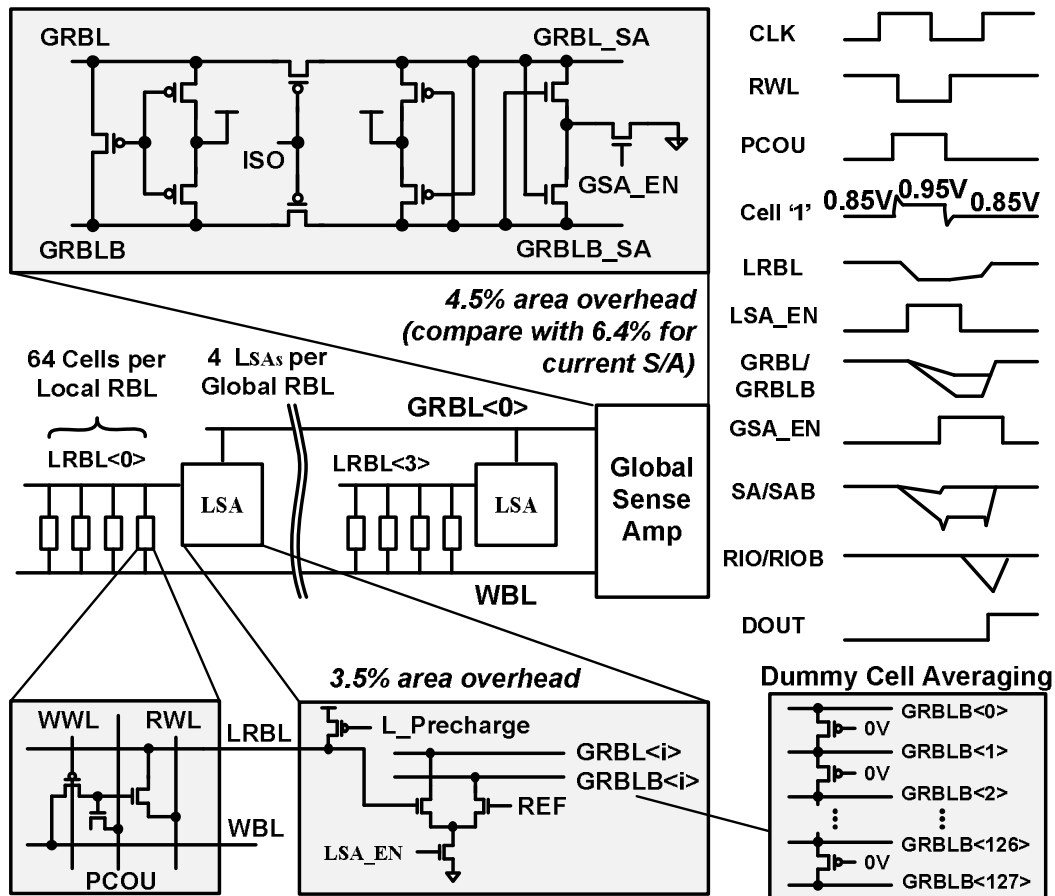


Fig. 6.6. Schematic and timing of local and global sense amplifier architecture.

Fig. 6.6 shows the detailed architecture with local and global voltage S/A's. The reduced load of the local RBLs ensures a fast voltage development while a simple global voltage S/A further speeds up the signal propagation. Dummy cell averaging which was not possible in previous current-sensing schemes, can now be implemented to enhance the robustness under PVT variations. The area overhead compared to a conventional current-sensing scheme is only 1.6% due to the simpler voltage S/A circuit that partially offsets the LSA area overhead.

6.3.2 Effectiveness Evaluation

For the three circuit techniques proposed to allow voltage sensing in 2T-based gain cells, namely the beneficial PCOU coupling, the regulated WBL and the local sense amplifier (LSA) architecture, it is meaningful to evaluate the effectiveness of each technique in mitigating the read disturbance issue.

Tables 4 and 5 summarize the simulated bitline voltage window improvement in the worst read disturbance scenario by incorporating individual schemes. Compared to the conventional scheme [28], the beneficial PCOU coupling contributes around 20mV increase while the regulated WBL provides the most significant improvement of around 180mV. The LSA architecture is examined with various numbers of cells per bitline. Around 30mV improvement is observed for each 2X reduction in cell numbers.

Table 4. Simulated voltage window improvement for PCOU coupling and regulated WBL schemes, respectively.

Scheme	Voltage Window Available	Improvement
Conventional	265mV	-
PCOU Coupling	285mV	PCOU Effectiveness +20mV
Regulated WBL	443mV	Reg. WBL Effectiveness +178mV

Table 5. Simulated voltage window improvement for LSA architecture with different number of cells per read bitline.

Scheme	Voltage Sensing Window	Improvement
PCOU + reg.WBL, 256/RBL	459mV	-
PCOU + reg.WBL, 128/RBL	490mV	2X Cell # Reduction +31mV
PCOU + reg.WBL, 64/RBL	523mV	4X Cell # Reduction +64mV
PCOU + reg.WBL, 32/RBL	560mV	8X Cell # Reduction +101mV

The Log relationship between voltage window and cell number per bitline can be derived by assuming the read current being a constant, because the accessed data ‘1’ cell is typically in its saturation region. At the steady state, the total subthreshold leakage from adjacent unaccessed cells is equal to the read current, as depicted in Fig. 6.5, which therefore determines the available bitline voltage window. Assume there are N cells per (local) read bitline, in the worst case we have:

$$I_{access} = (N - 1)I_{unaccess} \quad (1)$$

Due to the exponential relationship between subthreshold leakage and gate voltage, the equation can be expressed as:

$$I_{access} = (N - 1)C \times \exp(V_{GS}/D) = (N - 1)C \times \exp((0.9 - V_{RBL})/D) \quad (2)$$

Where C and D are constants given by the device characteristics, and 0.9V is the fresh data '1' voltages in unaccessed cells in the worst case. Based on our voltage setup at 1.1V supply, Equation (2) can be rewritten as:

$$\begin{aligned} I_{access} &= (N - 1)C \times \exp((0.9 - (1.1 - V_{WINDOW}))/D) \\ &= (N - 1)C \times \exp((V_{WINDOW} - 0.2)/D) \end{aligned} \quad (3)$$

Where V_{WINDOW} is the available bitline voltage window. From (3) we can get:

$$\begin{aligned} V_{WINDOW} &= -D \ln(N - 1) + D \ln(I_{access}/C) + 0.2 \\ &= -D \ln(N - 1) + const. \\ &\approx -D \ln N + const. \end{aligned} \quad (4)$$

Equation (4) clearly reveals the log relationship between the voltage window (V_{WINDOW}) and the cell number per bitline (N). A more detailed derivation based on the given device subthreshold swing can further provide the estimated slope value. For a subthreshold swing of 100mV/dec,

$$\begin{aligned} I_{unaccess} &= C \times 10E(V_{GS}/100mV) = C \times \exp(\ln 10 \times V_{GS}/100mV) \\ &= C \times \exp(V_{GS}/43.4mV) \end{aligned} \quad (5)$$

Therefore,

$$D = subthreshold_swing / \ln 10 = 43.4mV \quad (6)$$

For a 2X reduction in the cell number per bitline,

$$\Delta V_{WINDOW} = -D \ln(N) - (-D \ln(2N)) = D \ln 2 = 30.1mV \quad (7)$$

This result in (7) matches the simulated value (around 30mV as shown in Table 5) and provides a better understanding in a theoretical view.

6.3.3 Design Conclusion

According to the previous section, the regulated WBL is the most effective in mitigating the read disturbance issue while the PCOU coupling is the least. Although a reduced cell number per bitline is beneficial, it has to be carefully selected due to the trade-off between performance and area overhead.

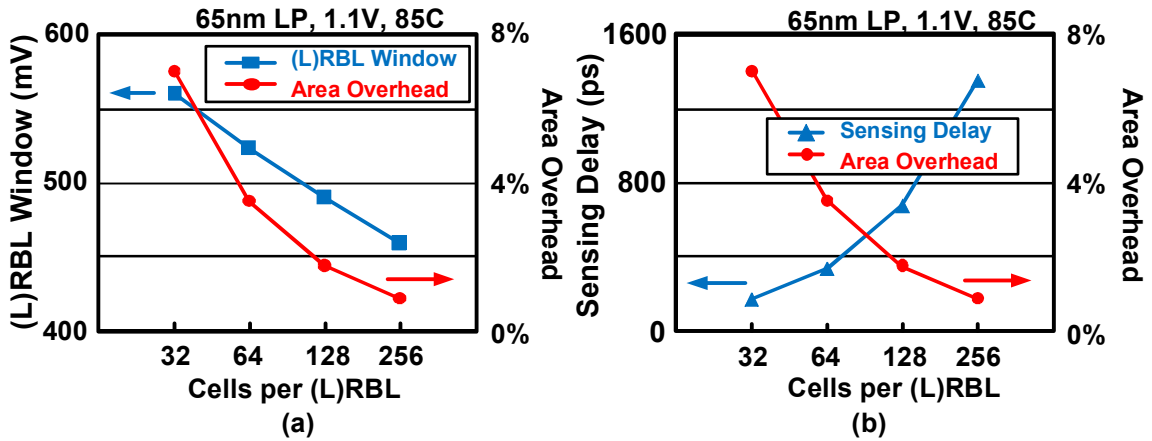


Fig. 6.7. (a) Bitline voltage window and (b) sensing delay versus area overhead.

Fig. 6.7 shows the performance and area overhead with different number of cells per (local) bitline. The number of 32 introduces 7% area overhead and is not preferable; 64 serves as an optimized value with sufficient voltage window and sensing speed at a cost of 3.5% area overhead. Note that this overhead number is reduced to 1.6% considering the simple global voltage S/A compared to a current-sensing solution.

6.4 Dual-Row-Access Low Power Mode

For applications that do not utilize the entire cache memory space, shutting down parts of the array is a practical way to save power. For gain cell eDRAMs, however, activating multiple rows at the same time can yield greater power savings because the

refresh power is determined by the worst case retention time of the tail cells, which can be repaired by enabling additional strong cells at the same time due to spatial randomness.

6.4.1 Multi-Row-Access Analysis

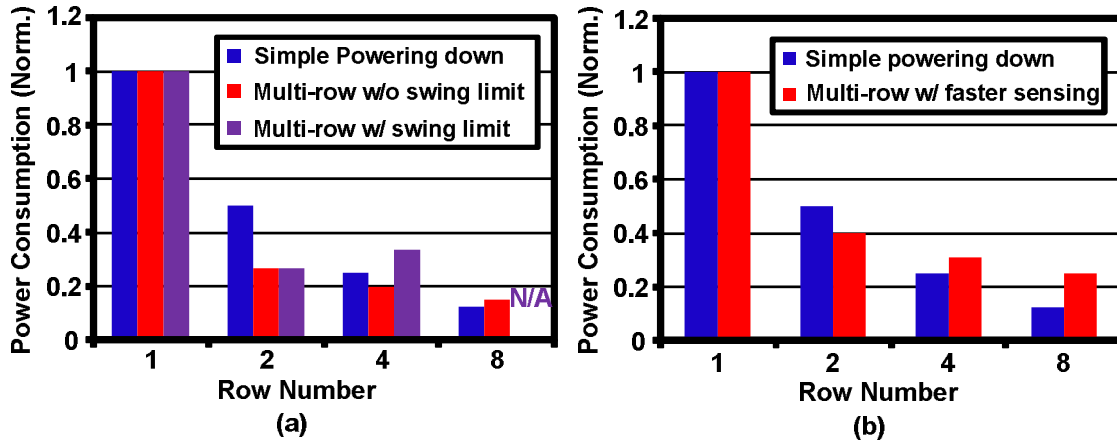


Fig. 6.8. Power comparison for different row numbers (a) without and (b) with additional timing adjustment.

Fig. 6.8(a) compares the power consumption between simple powering down and multi-row-access approaches, with different numbers of rows accessed and no adjustment in timing or reference voltage. By not sharing LSAs, a multi-row access incurs no timing or reference adjustment for local sensing, and meanwhile multiplies the sensing currents to speed up voltage development on the global RBLs, where the voltage swing limit is VDD. By merely calculating the sensing currents regardless of the swing limit, the multi-row-access approach is estimated to be beneficial with up to 4 rows. However, this number is limited to 2 with a 1.1V swing, because the data '0' in the 4- or 8-row case needs to be strong enough to prevent the quickly discharging local read bitline reaching

0V by the time of global sensing.

The swing issue can be resolved by scaling GRBL sensing time accordingly. Nevertheless, in this case the benefit of larger sensing currents is not available, and additional timing adjustment circuitry is required as design overhead. Fig. 6.8(b) indicates that 2 is the beneficial row number while the power saving is smaller than that in Fig. 6.8(a).

Although the actual power savings would vary in real chips, Fig. 6.8 provides a good estimate of the performance trend. Activating more than two rows at a time (e.g. 4-row-access, 8-row-access) has diminishing returns while incurring significant design overhead in forms of dedicated timing and reference circuitry. Therefore, we propose to use a simple dual-row-access mode.

6.4.2 Dual-Row-Access Mode

Fig. 6.9 shows our dual-row-access mode, where two wordlines with respective LSAs are enabled at the same time without any changes in the read reference circuit. The weak cell is thus repaired by a stronger one according to spatial randomness, and in addition, mismatch between the LSAs themselves gets averaged out. Moreover, the effective sensing current of the global read bitline (GRBL) is doubled, which improves the retention time even further under the same sensing window requirement and timing constraints. Therefore, the worst retention time can be improved by more than 2X using a dual-row-access scheme, while a simple powering-down approach may still suffer from the tail cell's retention time.

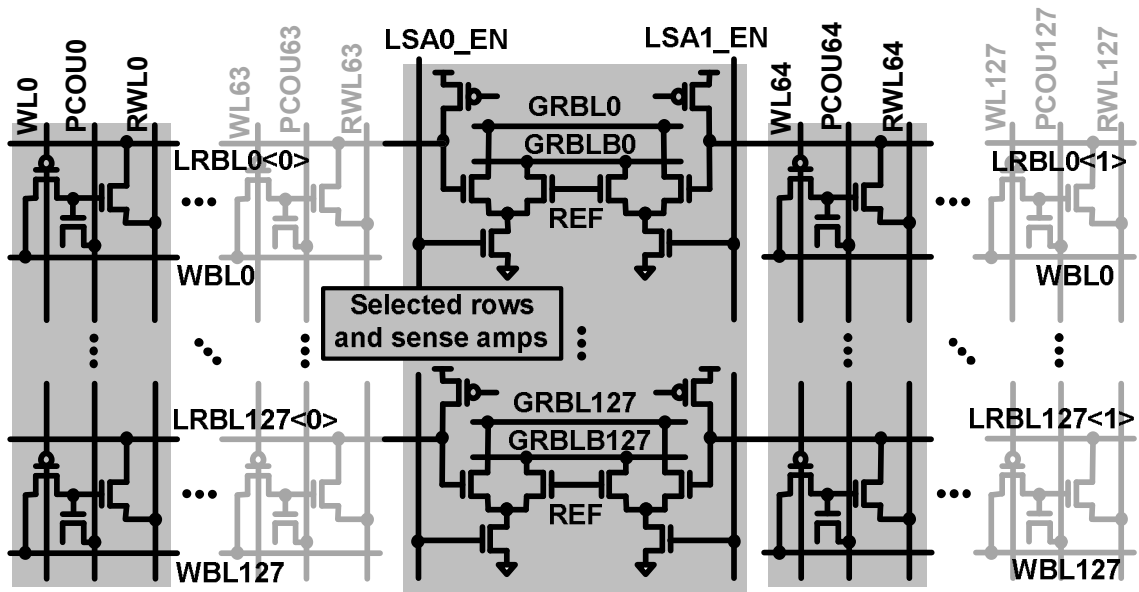


Fig. 6.9. Dual-row access mode illustration (WL0 and WL64 selected).

6.5 Measurement Results

A 64kb eDRAM test chip was implemented in a 1.2V, 65nm logic CMOS process to demonstrate the proposed circuit techniques. The chip achieves a 99.9% retention time of 325 μ sec and a refresh power of 234.1 μ W/Mb at 1.1V, 85°C. Figs. 6.10 and 6.11 show the failure percentile and retention map from a 1kb sub-array, respectively, for a worst case read disturbance pattern and a 1.0 ns read cycle time. No noticeable changes in the retention time were observed across different access rates. Although our measurement setup supports only up to a 1% access rate, this is sufficient for real-world applications as indicated in Fig. 6.4. For a 99.99% bit yield, the extrapolated retention time was 90 μ sec. Due to the dummy averaging feature of our proposed design, the measured retention map in Fig. 6.11 shows no significant signs of bitline dependency in the failure pattern which is in contrast to the results presented in our prior work [38].

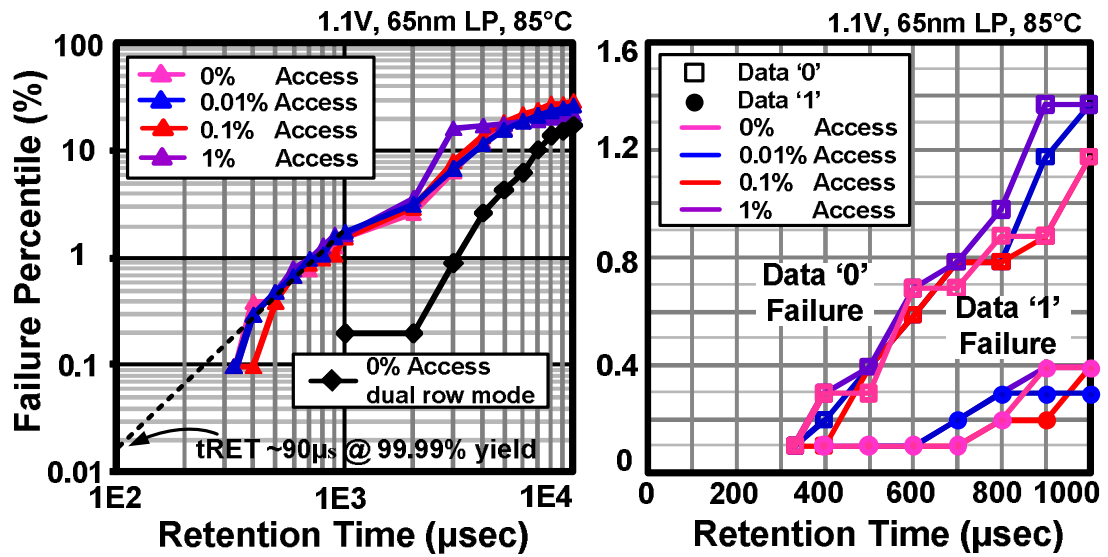


Fig. 6.10. Failure percentiles for a 1kb sub-array (left) and detailed view of tail cells (right).

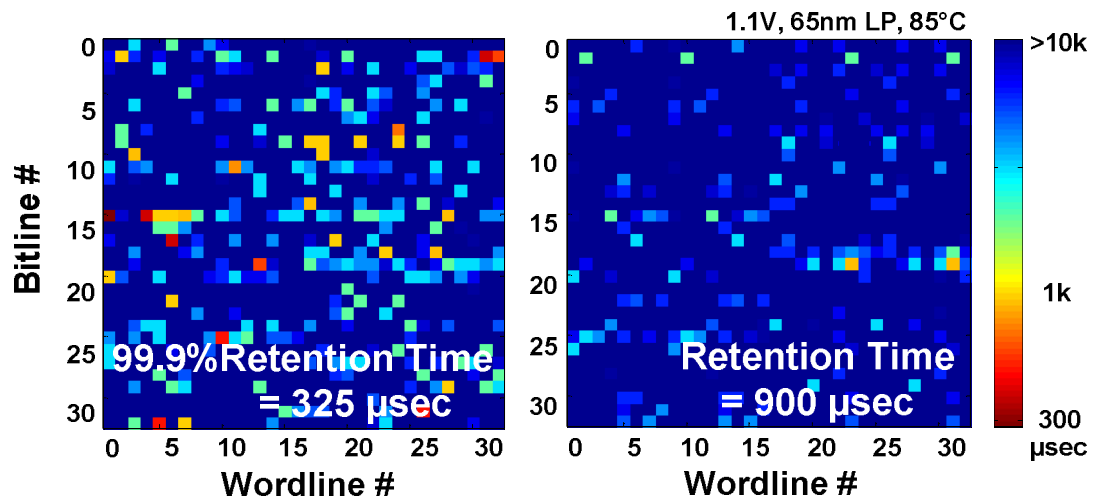


Fig. 6.11. Measured retention maps for single (left) and dual (right) row access modes. No significant bitline dependency is observed in either case.

Fig. 6.11 also shows that the worst case retention time improves from 325 μsec to 900 μsec using the dual-row-access mode. Fig. 6.12 compares the power dissipation of SRAM and various eDRAM configurations. The proposed 2T1D design (single row

access) achieves a 23.9% power saving compared to that of a power gated 6T SRAM with a 0.6V retention voltage. Compared to a simple power down mode where half the eDRAM is unused, a 27.8% power reduction was achieved using the dual-row-access mode.

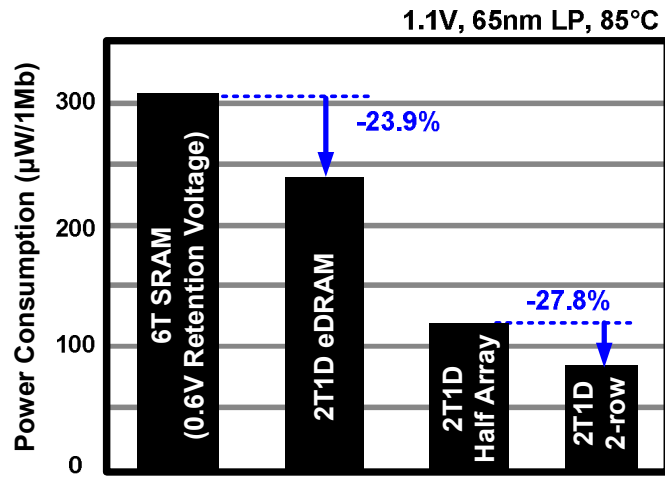


Fig. 6.12. Power consumption comparison between a power gated SRAM with a 0.6V retention voltage and various 2T1D eDRAM power down modes.

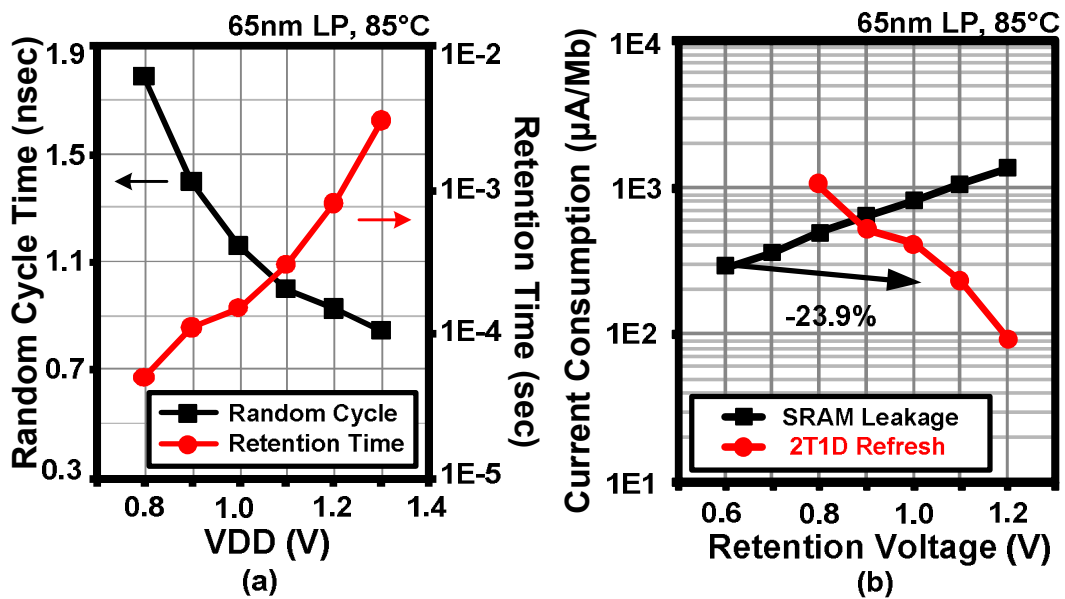


Fig. 6.13. (a) Measured VDD shmoo and (b) static power comparison.

The measured VDD shmoo for retention time and cycle time is plotted in Fig. 6.13(a), and a static power comparison between 6T SRAM and the proposed eDRAM design for different supply voltages is shown in Fig. 6.13(b). The longer retention time at higher supply voltages makes the eDRAM refresh power to be lower than the static power of an SRAM. Note that the optimal supply voltage of an eDRAM is usually higher than that of an SRAM due to the refresh power dominating the overall static power consumption. Fig. 6.14 shows the die microphotograph and summarizes the key features.

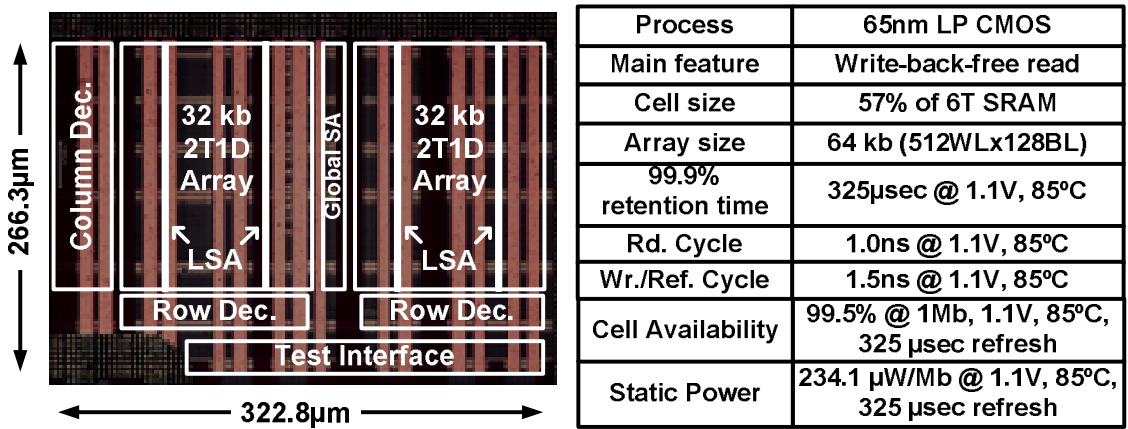


Fig. 6.14. Microphotograph and summary of test chip characteristics.

6.6 Summary

We have presented several circuit techniques to enhance the performance and robustness of gain cell eDRAM. The proposed design was the first to experimentally verify write-back-free read operation in gain cells according to the non-destructive read nature. No noticeable retention time difference was observed across a wide range of access rates. We also proposed various circuit techniques for mitigating read disturbance issues including a local-sense-amplifier scheme. In addition, a dual-row-access low power mode was introduced to further reduce static power in scenarios where less than

half the cache is being utilized. Test chip measurements were presented from a 64kb eDRAM array implemented in a 1.2V, 65nm CMOS process. The resulted power consumption is 23.9% lower than that of an SRAM design, which therefore indicates the potential of gain cell eDRAM as a low power solution for future silicon memory.

Chapter 7

CONCLUSION

Low power memory is indispensable in many large-scale applications, both in organic and silicon platform. Few attempts have been made on memory designs in organic platform, due to the immature techniques including the lack of an n-type device. In silicon platform, although memory is well supported and is equipped with various advanced circuit techniques for higher performance and robustness, technology scaling is making memory design challenging especially for low power purpose. In this dissertation, we find that gain cell DRAMs serve as a promising low power memory candidate in both organic and silicon platforms, with desired properties such as logic-compatibility, decoupled read and write and non-destructive read.

For the organic platform, we utilize printable and flexible ion-gel gated organic thin-film-transistors (gel-OTFTs) with Poly(3-hexylthiophene) (P3HT) channel material. Gel-OTFTs provide unusually high gate capacitance, which is desired for DRAM data storage and meanwhile allows low voltage operation. We presented the first organic process design kit (OPDK), which introduces various computer-aided design (CAD) techniques including a complete set of design examination tools and various modeling strategies, to significantly facilitate the design and fabrication process. This eliminates major design and fabrication challenges such as high error rate in circuit and layout design, long fabrication time, and so on. We then demonstrated several successful circuit implementations, including inverter, NAND gate, ring oscillator and D-flipflop, which verifies the potential of gel-OTFTs for large-scale circuit systems.

With the assistance of OPDK, we successfully demonstrated the first organic DRAM array delivering significantly low power and practical performance. Gain cell DRAMs can be implemented with p-type devices without any penalty and at the same time benefits from the high gate capacitance, which makes gain cell a desired memory cell structure for gel-OTFTs. An 8x8 organic DRAM array was implemented using aerosol jet printing. It achieved a sub-10nW-per-cell refresh power through a practically long retention time (over 30 seconds), which is 5 orders of magnitude longer than that in silicon designs and is sufficient even for the low speed organic circuits to perform a periodical refresh operation.

We then extended our investigation of gain cell DRAMs in silicon platform. Our variation-aware simulation analysis revealed the fact that corner simulations, commonly adopted for worst-case evaluations, are no longer effective to capture the tail cells in silicon gain cell DRAMs. This is due to the relative independence between the two major variation sources, namely the dioxide thickness and threshold voltage. We proposed ways to understand this behavior, which also provide insights for future device optimization as well as simulation strategy improvement.

Finally, we implemented a 64kb gain cell embedded DRAM array in a 1.2V 65nm low power technology. For the first time, we experimentally demonstrated a write-back-free read operation in gain cells, which significantly improves the read speed. We also proposed three circuit techniques including a local sense amplifier (LSA) architecture to allow voltage-sensing in 2T-based gain cell designs. This avoids the challenging current-sensing design and enhances the robustness through dummy averaging. A retention time

of 325 μ s was achieved at 1ns read cycle time. This results in 23.9% power saving compared to a 6T SRAM in 0.6V retention voltage. A dual-row-access mode was proposed to achieve a further 27.8% power reduction in scenarios where only half of the array is needed.

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