

A Low-Power High-Speed Smart Sensor Design for Space Exploration Missions

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ABSTRACT

A low-power high-speed smart sensor system based on a large format active pixel sensor (APS) integrated with a programmable neural processor for space exploration missions is presented. The concept of building an advanced smart sensing system is demonstrated by a system-level microchip design that is composed with an APS sensor, a programmable neural processor, and an embedded microprocessor in a SOI CMOS technology. This ultra-fast smart sensor system-on-a-chip design mimics what is inherent in biological vision systems. Moreover, it is programmable and capable of performing ultra-fast machine vision processing in all levels such as image acquisition, image fusion, image analysis, scene interpretation, and control functions. The system provides about one tera-operation-per-second computing power which is a two order-of-magnitude increase over that of state-of-the-art microcomputers. Its high performance is due to massively parallel computing structures, high data throughput rates, fast learning capabilities, and advanced VLSI system-on-a-chip implementation.

1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper, an ultra-fast low-power smart vision system-on-a-chip design is proposed to provide effective solutions for real time machine vision applications by taking advantages of advances in integrated sensing/processing designs, electronic neural networks, advanced microprocessors, and sub-micron VLSI systems-on-a-chip (SOAC) technology. The proposed smart vision system mimics what is inherent in biological vision systems. Moreover, this vision system is programmable and capable of performing ultra-fast machine vision processing in all levels such as image acquisition, image fusion, image analysis, scene interpretation, and control functions. The system provides about one tera-operation-per-second computing power which is a two order-of-magnitude increase over that of state-of-the-art microcomputers. Its high performance is due to massively parallel computing structures, high data throughput rates, fast learning capabilities, and advanced VLSI system-on-a-chip implementation. This highly integrated smart vision system can be used for various space exploration missions. For example, it can be used as a smart navigation sensor that is required for autonomous rendezvous and docking.

2. SMART VISION PROCESSING ALGORITHM AND ARCHITECTURE

The human visual system provides a demonstration of a versatile and powerful vision system [1]. In general, much of the current machine vision research concerns not only understanding the process of vision but also designing effective vision systems for various real-world applications [2].

The proposed versatile vision system is based on a simplified model of the human visual system as shown in Figure 1 [3]. The ultimate design goal is to build an eye-brain machine which can automatically recognize, localize, and classify point, area and volume objects and phenomena in real-time. In general, the eye-brain machine (EBM) includes two major subsystems: the EBM Eye and the EBM Brain. The EBM Eye is a compact optoelectronic subsystem which integrates a wide range of different sensors with geometric, radiometric, and spectral parameters meeting the actual science and mission requirements. The EBM Brain is a high performance control and data handling subsystem, which provides computing resources to perform various on-board vision tasks.

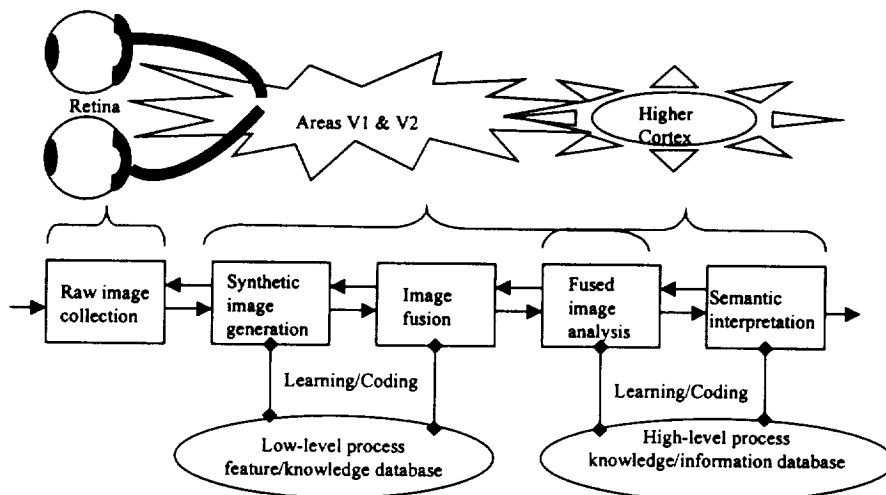


Figure 1. Smart vision processing model based a simplified human visual process flow.

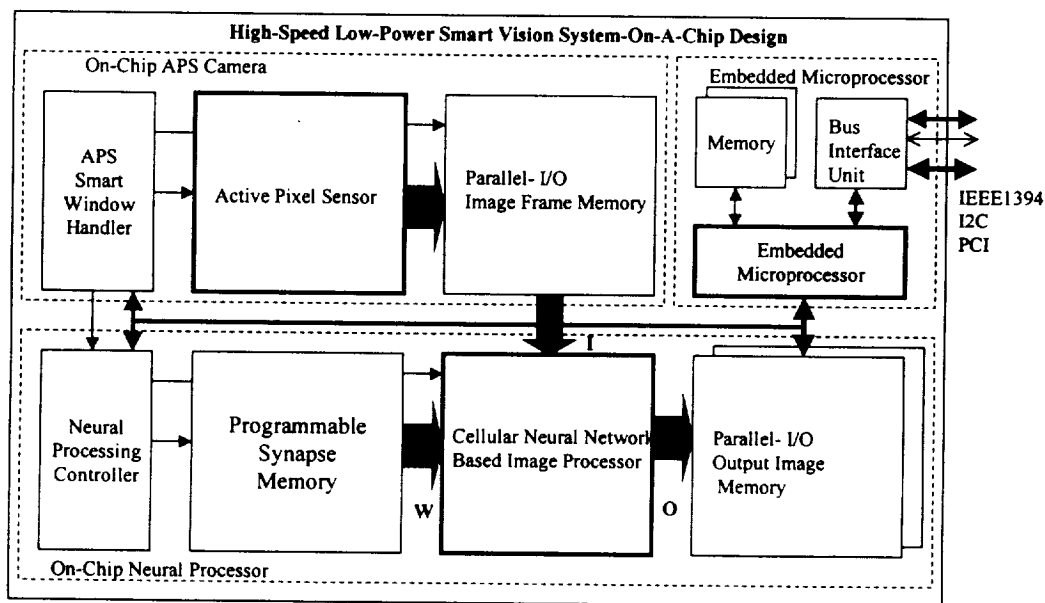


Figure 2. A system diagram of the smart vision system-on-a-chip design.

Figure 2 shows a system diagram of the proposed smart vision system-on-a-chip design. An on-chip row/column-parallel image flow architecture is used to connect all on-chip systems and eliminate

data bandwidth bottlenecks due to conventional bus architectures. The on-chip APS imager is used as the optical sensing array in the system. Windowed image data is fed to the on-chip neural neural processor under the control of a smart window handler. The on-chip neural computer is programmed to perform various early vision tasks in high speed. This tera-operation-per-second neural processor serves as a supercomputing engine for various vision processing tasks due to its massively parallel computing structures and its programmability. The on-chip microcomputer is used to perform command and control of the system operation and scene interpretation. The vision system can work with a remote host system through the bus interface unit.

A system-on-a-chip implementation of this smart vision system is shown to be feasible by integrating the whole system into a 2-cm x 2-cm chip design in a 0.18- μ m SOI CMOS technology [4] (see Table 1). The SOAC-based vision system design has advantages over the COTS-based design such as higher on-chip system integration, 10x improvement in system miniaturization, 10x lower power dissipation, and x10 better performance.

Table 1: Area and power estimates for the smart vision system design in a 0.18- μ m CMOS technology.

Smart Vision Processor	Technology: 0.18- μ m SOI CMOS		Vdd = 0.9 Volt
On-Chip Systems	Building Blocks	Size (mm sq.)	Power (mW)
On-Chip Camera	APS Sensor (1024x1024)	16	30
	Image Frame Memory (1MBytes)	16	50
	Smart Window Handler	9	40
On-Chip Neural Computer	Neural Processor (1024x1024 or 64x64x64)	64	200
	Synapse Memory (1MBytes)	16	50
	Activity Memory (1MBytes)	16	50
	Neural Processing Controller	9	40
On-Chip Microcomputer	Microprocessor	45	200@ 300 MHz
	Memory (32 Mbytes)	144	100
	Bus Interface and Control	16	80
	Total:	335	790

3. ON-CHIP ACTIVE PIXEL SENSOR DESIGN

High performance CMOS active pixel sensor technology has been developed by NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory for electronic image capture [5]. A 1024x1024 CMOS APS prototype chip using 0.5 μ m n-well process was designed and characterized at JPL. It contains a 1024x1024-photogate array and 1024 parallel 10-bit singles-slope ADC. Testing results show that the large format APS with small feature size is capable of excellent imaging performance. A reusable on-chip APS imager based on this prototype APS chip design has been under development in a 0.18 μ m SOI CMOS technology [6].

The on-chip APS imager is based on a row/column/window-parallel data flow architecture. It includes an APS active sensor, a smart window handler, and a parallel-I/O image frame memory. The smart image window handler is designed for the row/column/window-parallel interface between the APS imager and the neural processor to achieve an ultra-fast frame time up to 1000 frames per second.

4. ON-CHIP PROGRAMMABLE NEURAL PROCESSOR DESIGN

An on-chip programmable neural processor design is used as a parallel processor to perform various vision functions at very high speed. Incorporating the neural computer into the proposed vision system offers orders-of-magnitude computing performance enhancements for real-time vision tasks.

The programmable neural processor is based on optimization cellular neural network (OCNN) [7]. The OCNN is an improved version of the Cellular Neural Networks (CNN) [8]. The CNN has been proved to be universal as the Turing machine. The OCNN keeps this highly desired programmability and become a versatile vision processor. Many OCNN functions have been verified via system simulation. These functions include morphological operations, feature extraction, motion detection, path tracking, collision avoidance, etc. The OCNN architecture is a multi-dimensional array of mainly identical cells, which are dynamic systems with continuous state variables and locally connected with their local cells within a finite radius. A prototype chip of the OCNN was designed and tested [7]. An on-chip OCNN neural processor based on this prototype OCNN chip has been under development for the proposed smart vision system. The parallel column/row/window readout capability is also integrated with the OCNN to accommodate the applications that require high-speed parallel image I/O.

5. CONCLUSION

A high-speed low-power smart vision system-on-a-chip design is proposed to provide effective solutions for space exploration missions. A system-on-a-chip implementation of this smart vision system is shown to be feasible by integrating the whole system into a 2-cm x 2-cm chip design in a 0.18- μm CMOS technology. An on-chip row/column-parallel data flow architecture is used to connect all on-chip systems and eliminate data bandwidth bottlenecks due to conventional bus architectures. This highly integrated smart vision system-on-a-chip design can be used on various space exploration missions and other industrial or commercial vision applications.

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