A novel methodology to increase fault tolerance in autonomous FPGA-based systems

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Abstract—Nowadays, Field-Programmable Gate Arrays (FPGAs) are increasingly used in critical applications. In these scenarios fault tolerance techniques are needed to increase system dependability and lifetime.

This paper proposes a novel methodology to achieve autonomous fault tolerance in FPGA-based systems affected by permanent faults. A design flow is defined to help designers to build a system with increased lifetime and availability. The methodology exploits Dynamic Partial Reconfiguration (DPR) to relocate at run-time faulty modules implemented onto the FPGA. A partitioning method is also presented to provide a solution which maximizes the number of permanent faults the system can tolerate.

Experimental results highlight the negligible performance degradation introduced by applying the proposed methodology, and the improvements with respect to state-of-the-art solutions.

I. INTRODUCTION

Field Programmable Gate Arrays (FPGAs) are increasingly used in many application fields. Nowadays, FPGAs are commonly adopted not just for Application Specific Integrated Circuits (ASICs) prototyping, but also for the implementation of embedded systems in critical scenarios (e.g., automotive or aerospace [1][2]) that require high reliability, availability, and long system lifetime. They offer limited Non-Recurent Engineering (NRE) costs, and high flexibility, thanks to their dynamically reconfigurable characteristics.

FPGA dynamic reconfiguration can be effectively exploited to allow remote, or on-site, run-time system maintenance. In fact, when the system availability is a priority, remote repairing/maintenance is not the best solution, since it is slow and not always possible. In this context, systems able to autonomously self-recover are preferred. These systems are called Autonomous Fault-Tolerant Systems (AFTSs). They are of great interest because they offer increased lifetime and availability [3].

SRAM-based FPGAs are subject to two kinds of errors: soft-errors and hard-errors. In general, soft-errors (such as Single Event Upsets (SEUs) and Multiple Bit Upsets (MBUs) [4][5]) are induced by radiations and are temporary. On the other hand, hard-errors are caused by permanent faults and they are induced by device wear-out and aging [6]. In the last years many solutions investigated how to deal with soft-errors [7][8] while just few works were presented to cope with hard-errors [9][10]. Filling this gap is gaining importance as it has been remarked by the International Road Map for Semiconductors [11]. Permanent faults occur more frequently in modern systems as devices and wires have increasingly smaller dimensions and they operate at high temperatures. Furthermore, in those scenarios in which devices are expected to last several years, system lifetime is one of the most relevant aspects of the design. Therefore, aging and wear-out effects must be taken into account.

This paper proposes a design methodology to achieve autonomous fault tolerance in FPGA-based systems affected by permanent faults. A design flow is defined to help designers to build a system with increased lifetime and availability. The methodology exploits the Dynamic Partial Reconfiguration (DPR) feature of modern FPGAs [12] to relocate at run-time faulty modules implemented onto the device. DPR allows fast self-recovery from permanent faults, guaranteeing high availability and increased system lifetime. A partitioning method is also presented to provide a solution which maximizes the number of permanent faults the system can tolerate.

The proposed design methodology improves existing literature solutions by dramatically reducing recovery time and memory space needed to store recovery information. The rest of the paper is organized as follows. Section II briefly overviews existing literature solutions to cope with permanent faults on FPGA-based systems, highlighting the limitations they suffer from. Section III introduces the proposed partitioning and recovery methodology, while, Section IV reports results gathered from two case studies where the proposed methodology is adopted. Eventually, Section V concludes the paper and discusses possible future works.

II. RELATED WORKS

In literature, many solutions have been proposed to detect permanent faults in FPGA-based systems [13] [14], while, only few works address the fault tolerance improvement, or the recovery of this kind of systems from such faults. To increase the fault tolerance of FPGA-based systems two alternative approaches can be exploited. The former exploits the introduction of redundancy, at design-time, allowing system operations without any interruption even in presence of faults. An example of such technique is the Triple Modular Redundancy (TMR), which consists of triplicating the hardware functionality to detect faults which cause errors in the outputs of a module. Nevertheless, this technique incurs in large hardware resources overhead.

The second, more efficient, approach consists of exploiting the dynamically reconfigurable capability of modern FPGAs to recovery from permanent faults, enabling to obtain Autonomous Fault-Tolerant Systems (AFTS) [3]. The idea of
exploiting dynamic reconfiguration to cope with permanent faults affecting a system implemented on a SRAM-based FPGA is not new [15][16][17][18]. The main idea is that, when a permanent fault caused by electromigration or device aging [6] affects a portion of the FPGA fabric, making it unusable, a different circuit configuration needs to be loaded, avoiding the usage of the permanently damaged area. This recovery action requires that the corrupted area is identified and delimited.

The most common solution to this problem is the so called relocation: whenever a portion of the FPGA is detected as faulty, the function implemented by that portion is moved to a spare reconfigurable area. The process is usually performed without stopping the portions of the FPGA that are not involved in the relocation so that other functionalities of the system remain available. Relocation consists of loading the proper configuration file, called bitstream, into the FPGA configuration memory. In particular, it is possible to configure the whole device [9][19] or, exploiting Dynamic Partial Reconfiguration (DPR) [12], to configure just a part of it [10]. In [9] and [19], authors present a detection and recovery methodology targetting both transient and permanent faults. Whenever a permanent fault is detected, the proposed recovery strategy consists of reconfiguring the whole FPGA with a pre-computed different bitstream so that the circuit will not use the faulty FPGA resource. However, the number of full bitstream to store increases exponentially with the number of portions in which the design is split in. In this case, large recovery time is expected, since the full FPGA configuration bitstream is composed of several Mbits of data. Moreover, large memories storing all possible bitstreams are needed.

Instead, in [10] authors propose a DPR-based methodology for pipelined circuits. The usage of FPGA partial reconfiguration slightly reduces the recovery time and the memory requirements for bitstreams storing. However, the proposed methodology is not efficient, since even if a single circuit module is targeted as faulty, all the following modules must be also reconfigured. Authors do not address the problem of faults affecting the interconnections among adjacent modules, making the proposed methodology not applicable in real use-cases.

The methodology presented in this paper overcomes the aforementioned limitations exploiting Dynamic Partial Reconfiguration to relocate, at run-time, faulty modules implemented on the FPGA. Fast recovery time is guaranteed since it requires only the faulty module relocation, and the interconnection network update. Faults affecting interconnections between modules are taken into account by introducing spare resources reserved for the recovery of faulty interconnections. Moreover, the proposed methodology requires to store partial bitstreams whose size is dramatically reduced with respect to full FPGA configuration bitstreams.

Finally, an optimal partitioning method is presented to maximize the faults the system can tolerate, considering the free resources in FPGA device. The presented methodology enables to increase the availability and the lifetime of FPGA-based Autonomous Fault-Tolerant Systems.

III. PROPOSED METHODOLOGY

Basically, the proposed recovery strategy consists of runtime relocation of faulty modules in spare FPGA resources.

To support this strategy, an FPGA-based architecture and a partitioning methodology are defined. Run-time relocation is obtained by means of Dynamic Partial Reconfiguration (DPR) [12], model is designed to find a partitioning able to maximize the number of permanent fault the system can tolerate.

A. Proposed architecture

The proposed architecture addresses to the implementation of AFTSs on SRAM-based FPGAs. The designed systems must be able to autonomously detect and recover from faults. For this reason the architecture is composed of three blocks, each of them implementing different functions. As illustrated in Fig. 1, the three main components are:

- an SRAM-based FPGA hosting the hardware functionality, called Application FPGA,
- a Fault Manager which contains the Configuration Controller and the Fault Classifier,
- a Bitstream memory storing the Application FPGA configuration files.

![Figure 1: Proposed system architecture](image)

The Fault Manager monitors faults that occur in the application FPGA and manages the recovery process. In details, the Fault Classifier detects faults and it establishes where they have happened. This task can be accomplished by running periodic tests on the Application FPGA [13][14], or simply collecting error signals generated by fault detection hardware embedded in the Application FPGA modules [20][21].

The Configuration Controller, instead, runs the recovery operations so that the system is restored back to a working state. It is important to notice that recovery operations are managed on the basis of the Fault Classifier diagnosis. For an SRAM-based FPGA system, recovery from permanent faults
means a reconfiguration of the FPGA. As a consequence, the 
Configuration Controller is connected to the Bitstream 
memory, so that a direct access to configurations is always 
guaranteed.
As robustness is of primary importance, both the Configuration 
Controller and the Fault Classifier can be implemented 
exploiting fault tolerance design techniques [22][23]. Moreover, 
the Bitstream memory can implement error detection and 
correction codes to avoid errors while the configuration files 
are read [24]. However, the actual Fault Manager and the 
Bitstream memory implementations are out of the scope of 
this paper.
The Application FPGA hosts the system’s hardware function- 
alities. It is divided into several partitions, called tiles. The 
characteristics of tiles and their partitioning methodology are 
discussed in the following subsection.

B. Partitioning methodology

The Application FPGA provides three kinds of tiles, depend- 
ing on their employment in the final system (Fig. 1). Logic 
tiles host the circuits that perform computation and data 
processing. Recovery tiles are adopted as spare tiles. When 
a permanent error occurs in a logic tile, the functionality 
implemented by the faulty tile is relocated into a recovery 
tile. Finally, interconnection tiles host the wires allowing 
communication among tiles.
During the design phase, the hardware functionality is built 
with a modular approach. The whole circuit is divided into 
basic components, which are interconnected to each other. Each 
basic component is then characterized by a certain 
amount of required FPGA resources (i.e., Slices, BRAMs and 
DSPs [25]) and by the number of connections with the other 
basic components.
Basic components are grouped and organized in logic tiles 
(Fig. 2). To host basic components, a logic tile must satis- 
fy their resource requirements. As a result, logic tiles are 
characterized on the basis of the amount of resources and 
interconnections of the hosted components.

$$n_{\text{conf\_files}} = n_{\text{logic\_tiles}} \times n_{\text{faults}} +$$

$$\sum_{i=0}^{n_{\text{faults}-1}} (n_{\text{logic\_tiles}} - i) \times (n_{\text{faults}} + 1) +$$

$$+ n_{\text{logic\_tiles}}$$

where $n_{\text{logic\_tiles}}$ is the number of logic tiles and $n_{\text{faults}}$ is 
the number of permanent faults the system can tolerate. The 
first contribution is due to relocation of functions implemented 
in logic tiles to recovery tiles. The second contribution is 
due to interconnection tiles. In fact there are $n_{\text{faults}} + 1$ 
interconnection tiles that must provide connection for all the 
possible combinations of logic tiles relocated to recovery tiles. 
Finally, the third term of Eq. 1 takes into account that faulty 
logic tiles must be reconfigured with an empty bitstream. The 
proposed recovery methodology provides two main improve- 
ments with respect to [9]. The first one concerns the recovery 
time. In fact, to recover from a permanent fault affecting a 
tile, partial configuration files have to be loaded, instead of 
reconfiguring the entire FPGA. Secondly, the memory required 
to store configuration files is dramatically reduced as we need 
a certain number of configuration files for interconnection tiles 
whose size is greatly reduced with respect to the ones required 
for the whole FPGA.

For the presented recovery strategy, the way the system is 
partitioned is extremely important. In fact, it influences the 
maximum number of permanent faults the system can tolerate. 
In fact, the largest number of recovery tiles that can be 
accommodated into the applications FPGA depends directly 
on how basic components are grouped and distributed among

![Figure 2: Circuit basic components and tiles organization](image-url)
components \( \Rightarrow \) res

faults

res

\( \Rightarrow \) faults

tolerated

faults

res

tile

tiles

tiles = 1 to

logic

tiles

tiles

toleraed

toleraed

tiles

toleraed

tile

components

faults > max

tiles

toleraed

is obtained by characterizing all the logic tiles by a number

As explained in the previous subsections, a model of the circuit

(see Algorithm 1).

the maximum number of faulty tiles the system can tolerate

Because of the relevance of the partitioning strategy, we

partitioning means changing the number of wires inside the

in a logic tile) requires larger tiles. In addition, changing

granied partitioning (i.e., grouping more than one component

each logic tile) leads to smaller recovery tiles, while a coarse-

partitioning approach (e.g., assigning a basic component to

A fine-grained partitioning approach (e.g., assigning a basic component to each logic tile) leads to smaller recovery tiles, while a coarse-grained partitioning (i.e., grouping more than one component in a logic tile) requires larger tiles. In addition, changing partitioning means changing the number of wires inside the interconnection tiles, and so their area.

Because of the relevance of the partitioning strategy, we propose an algorithm to find a feasible partitioning offering the maximum number of faulty tiles the system can tolerate (see Algorithm 1).

As explained in the previous subsections, a model of the circuit is obtained by characterizing all the logic tiles by a number of resources and connections they require. The resources demanded by each logic tile depends on the basic component circuits it accommodates, while the number of connections is related to the partitioning. It is important to notice that interconnection tiles do not require any resource since they do not perform computation, instead they just need connections.

As a consequence, the delay introduced by interconnection tile is assumed negligible for the most of the applications (as will be shown in Sec. IV) since the critical path is bounded in a basic component.

In Algorithm 1, \( \textit{Rec\_tiles\_res} \) represents the resources needed by a single recovery tile. \( \textit{Interc\_tile\_res} \) is an amount of FPGA slices containing interconnections among all the logic and recovery tiles, while \( \textit{Slack\_res} \) are the spare resources when only logic tiles and one interconnection tile are taken into account.

Starting from the resources available on the target FPGA and the resources required by every basic component, the algorithm finds the best partitioning solution in terms of tolerable faulty tiles. Basic component circuits are partitioned with different granularities. The number of logic tiles ranges from one, a single huge partition which represents the coarsest granularity, to the number of basic components defined in the modular design, the finest granularity. For each iteration all possible basic components grouping combinations are analyzed, and the number of tolerated faulty tiles is computed. To compute the number of tolerated faulty tiles for a given partitioning it is supposed that for each recoverable permanent fault there is one recovery tile and one backup interconnection tile.

As aforementioned, interconnection tiles do not require any computational element. Nevertheless, because of the technology imposed by FPGA vendor, reconfigurable partitions require input/output pins, represented by FPGA Look-Up Tables [12].

The resulting number of tolerated faults, \( \textit{n\_tolerated\_faults} \), is the lowest among the ones computed for every type of resource. When \( \textit{n\_tolerated\_faults} \) is greater than the temporary maximum number of tolerated faults, \( \textit{max\_tolerated\_faults} \), it is saved as the best partitioning.

The proposed algorithm is complex from a computational point of view, that is, it scales badly with the increasing number of \( \textit{n\_logic\_tiles} \). However, since it must be executed just once at design-time, its execution time does not influence the overall performance of the implemented system.

Algorithm 1 Partitioning algorithm

\begin{verbatim}
Const \( \textit{N\_components} \)   \( \triangleright \) # of basic components
Const \( \textit{FPGA\_res} \)      \( \triangleright \) resources of the application FPGA
\( \textit{max\_tolerated\_faults} = 0; \)
for \( \textit{n\_logic\_tiles}=1 \) to \( \textit{N\_components} \) do
    for each possible partitioning composed of \( \textit{n\_logic\_tiles} \) do
        \( \textit{Slack\_res} = \textit{FPGA\_res} - \textit{Logic\_tiles\_res} - \textit{Interc\_tile\_res} \)
        \( \textit{n\_tolerated\_faults} = \frac{\textit{Rec\_tiles\_res} + \textit{Interc\_tile\_res}}{\textit{Slack\_res}} \)
        if \( \textit{n\_tolerated\_faults} > \textit{max\_tolerated\_faults} \) then
            \( \textit{max\_tolerated\_faults} = \textit{n\_tolerated\_faults} \)
            update best partitioning;
        end if
    end for
end for
\end{verbatim}

---

Figure 3: The recovery strategies when a permanent faults occur. Fig 3a illustrates the relocation of the faulty logic tile into a recovery tile and the reconfiguration of the interconnection tile. Fig 3d shows how interconnections are reconfigured when a permanent fault is detected inside the active interconnection tile

logic tiles. The following subsection details the partitioning algorithm that can be used to find the basic components partitioning that maximize the number of tolerable faulty tiles.

C. Partitioning algorithm

Recovery tiles contain the necessary resources to accommodate every logic tile and their size is proportional to the number of slices, BRAM and DSP they offer. A fine-grained partitioning approach (e.g., assigning a basic component to each logic tile) leads to smaller recovery tiles, while a coarse-grained partitioning (i.e., grouping more than one component in a logic tile) requires larger tiles. In addition, changing partitioning means changing the number of wires inside the interconnection tiles, and so their area.

Because of the relevance of the partitioning strategy, we propose an algorithm to find a feasible partitioning offering the maximum number of faulty tiles the system can tolerate (see Algorithm 1).

As explained in the previous subsections, a model of the circuit is obtained by characterizing all the logic tiles by a number

\( \textit{max\_tolerated\_faults} = 0; \)

for \( \textit{n\_logic\_tiles}=1 \) to \( \textit{N\_components} \) do
    for each possible partitioning composed of \( \textit{n\_logic\_tiles} \) do
        \( \textit{Slack\_res} = \textit{FPGA\_res} - \textit{Logic\_tiles\_res} - \textit{Interc\_tile\_res} \)
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        if \( \textit{n\_tolerated\_faults} > \textit{max\_tolerated\_faults} \) then
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        end if
    end for
end for

---

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As aforementioned, interconnection tiles do not require any computational element. Nevertheless, because of the technology imposed by FPGA vendor, reconfigurable partitions require input/output pins, represented by FPGA Look-Up Tables [12].

The resulting number of tolerated faults, \( \textit{n\_tolerated\_faults} \), is the lowest among the ones computed for every type of resource. When \( \textit{n\_tolerated\_faults} \) is greater than the temporary maximum number of tolerated faults, \( \textit{max\_tolerated\_faults} \), it is saved as the best partitioning.

The proposed algorithm is complex from a computational point of view, that is, it scales badly with the increasing number of \( \textit{n\_logic\_tiles} \). However, since it must be executed just once at design-time, its execution time does not influence the overall performance of the implemented system.
IV. EXPERIMENTAL RESULTS

To analyze and measure the performance of the proposed methodology, it has been applied to two case studies. A Xilinx Virtex-4 VSX55 FPGA has been chosen as the target Application FPGA as it provides a large number of slices, BRAMs and DSPs [26]. This FPGA can be dynamically and partially reconfigured by means of the SelectMAP port at a maximum reconfiguration throughput equal to 400MB/s [12].

For both case studies, basic components are characterized by their resource requirements and these values are fed into the proposed partitioning algorithm. The partitioning that maximizes the number of tolerated faulty tiles is chosen for the final system implementation. Performance are analyzed in terms of number of tolerated permanent faulty tiles, system recovery time and bitstream size.

In the first case study the proposed methodology is applied on an IP-core for images feature extraction and matching, called FEMIP [27]. As presented in Fig. 4, FEMIP is composed of five basic components. In Fig. 4, numbers between components represent the interconnection widths. Resources required by each component are reported in Table I.

Table I: Resources requirements for FEMIP basic components

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th># slices</th>
<th># BRAMs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gaussian filter</td>
<td>2560</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Derivative filter</td>
<td>1344</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harris filter</td>
<td>3456</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NMS filter</td>
<td>360</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matcher filter</td>
<td>650</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Taking into account the overall resources available in the target Application FPGA, the maximum number of tolerated faulty tiles, obtained with the proposed partitioning algorithm, is four. Resources requirements for the best partitioning are shown in Table II. The number of recovery tiles and backup interconnection tiles is four. Exploiting Eq. 1, the number of partial bitstreams to store in the Bitstream Memory is equal to 72. Thus, the memory required is 4,192KB, 2,880.8KB for recovery tiles (8 configuration files), 432KB for interconnection tiles (60 configuration files) and 879.2KB for empty logic tiles (4 configuration files in total). As reconfiguration throughput is 400MB/s, the worst case recovery time is equal to 1.82ms (including the reconfigurations of the faulty logic tile with the empty bitstream, the relocated recovery tile, and the interconnection tile).

The introduction of the interconnection tile to allow communications between tiles does not affect timing performance of the system for two reasons. First, the critical path is bounded inside basic components logic. Secondly, the delay introduced by interconnection tiles is 0.2ns, which is negligible with respect to the FEMIP minimum clock period. As a consequence, the maximum operating frequency of FEMIP remains equal to the one obtained without any fault tolerance technique (i.e., 60MHz).

To allow comparison with respect to the methodology presented in [9], the proposed methodology has been applied to an H.264 video encoder. The comparison has been made in terms of number of tolerated faults, bitstreams size, and recovery time. Basic components and relative resources requirements for the H.264 video encoder can be found in [9]. Performance of the partitioning selected by our algorithm are reported in Table III. With the given partitioning it is possible to recover from two permanent faults, as in [9]. For this purpose two recovery tiles and backup interconnection tiles are accommodated in the Application FPGA. For our implementation the total amount of required Bitstream memory is 6434.9KB (75 configuration files in total), 3803KB for the recovery tiles (10 configuration files in total), 1080KB for the interconnection tiles (60 configuration files in total) and 879.2KB for empty logic tiles (5 configuration files in total). Although the number of bitstream is comparable to the one of [9], the memory space required for bitstreams is dramatically reduced. Thanks to dynamic partial reconfiguration, it is almost 35x smaller than 219MB demanded for a recovery strategy consisting in reconfiguring the entire Application FPGA.

Finally, the proposed methodology allows to shorten the recov-
very time since just a part of the implemented circuit is to be configured. In fact, in the worst case, 1.957 ms are required to recover from a permanent fault, leading to a 4x improvement with respect to the 7.5 ms needed when a full reconfiguration of the FPGA is performed (as in [9]).

V. Conclusions

This paper presented a novel methodology to increase availability and lifetime of FPGA-based systems affected by permanent faults. The methodology exploits Dynamic Partial Reconfiguration (DPR) to relocate at run-time faulty modules. A partitioning method is also presented to provide a solution which maximizes the number of permanent faulty modules the system can tolerate.

Experimental results highlight the negligible performance degradation introduced by applying the proposed methodology, and the improvements in terms of both fault recovery time and memory requirements with respect to state-of-the-art solutions. Future works will focus on increasing the relocation efficiency, in order to further decrease the recovery time, and on the development of a framework, which includes FPGA device models, to allow designer to accurately and automatically apply the proposed methodology. In addition, some efforts will address the optimization of the partitioning algorithm to reduce its complexity, e.g., by means of heuristic techniques.

REFERENCES