High-performance processor die temperature monitoring

Introduction

Power management in high-performance processors, such as CPUs, GPUs, ASICs, and FPGAs, is typically complex. With thermal monitoring, these systems can not only initiate a safe system shutdown but also leverage temperature to dynamically adjust performance. To enhance system reliability and maximize performance, it is often desirable to monitor processor temperature. Higher temperature will activate a cooling fan, modify a system clock, or should the processor exceed its thermal threshold, quickly shutdown the system completely.

Figure 1. Motherboard With High Performance Processors Typically Need Heatsink

Design Considerations in Die Temperature Monitoring

For effective temperature monitoring, there are two design considerations for high-performance processors: (i) Temperature accuracy (ii) Sensor Placement. Temperature accuracy of the Processor has a direct correlation to the sensor location.

Processor performance can be maximized to drive overall system to its thermal design limit through high-accuracy temperature monitoring. While most ICs have built-in temperature sensors due to variations across wafers and other various lots, the accuracy is not consistent. High-performance processors include complex circuitry which impact the accuracy of the integrated sensor, in such systems the accuracy would be at 5°C+. Designing systems with such lower accuracy would not be able to maximize the performance of system to its thermal design limit.

Figure 2. Performance of a System Can be Enhanced Though High-Accuracy Thermal Monitoring

Sensor Placement & Accuracy

Thermal behavior of processors is monitored either through an integrated temperature sensor or thermal diode, or alternatively through an external temperature sensor. In some cases both are used to maximize performance and boost reliability of the system.

Integrated Temperature Sensor: BJT

Some high-performance processors include a bipolar transistor (BJT) for temperature sensing. This has a very predictable transfer function that is dependent on temperature. Remote temperature sensors use this principle to measure the die temperature. The most common BJT found in CMOS processes is a PNP.

Figure 3. $\Delta V_{BE}$ Measurement With Two Currents

The design of such systems can be challenging due to the noise and error caused by BJT process variations. Thermal Diode Error Sources could be from Ideality Factor variation, series resistance, noise injection, and Beta Compensation.
Ideality Factor Variation— BJT-thermal-diode characteristics are dependent on process geometry and other process variables. If the ideality factor n is known, n-factor register could be used to correct the n-factor error. Alternatively, software calibration methods can be used to correct this in the desired temperature range.

Series Resistance— Due to the current source, any resistance in the signal path will appear as a voltage offset. Modern remote temperature sensors employ a Series Resistance algorithm that removes temperature error due to resistance up to 1-2kΩ. This enables robust, accurate measurements even when coupled with RC Filters.

Noise Injection— EMI or inductive coupling into the remote junction PCB traces can cause error when diode traces run in parallel with high-frequency signal lines carrying high currents. Tracing remote temperature sensors need to consider this during board design.

Beta Compensation— Thermal Transistors integrated into an FPGA or processor may have Beta < 1. A remote temperature sensor with Beta Compensation is specifically designed to work with these transistors, and to correct temperature measurement errors associated with them. The Beta Compensation feature provides no benefit when used with a typical discrete transistor.

Device Recommendation

TMP421 offers a single channel to monitor the BJT, alternatively there are multi-channel remote temperature sensors that support up to 8 channels to measure temperature locally and remotely. The TMP451 offers high-accuracy (0.0625°C) temperature measurement both locally and remotely. Servers, notebooks and automotive sensor fusion applications can benefit from such multi-channel remote sensors.

External Temperature Sensor

Some processors have built-in temperature sensor. While the location is ideal, the built-in sensors make them less accurate due to variations across the wafers and different lots. Additionally, it is essential to trim the processor based on a reference, this reference is compared with die temperature to adjust the coefficients. Given the complex circuitry the processors incur self-heating which builds an error, this error increases with increase in temperature.

Table 1. Key Collaterals

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