Beyond Software

lowRISC’s Framework for Open Source Silicon Design

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“Practical Technologies: Open Technology Frameworks”
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A brief introduction to lowRISC CIC

lowRISC is a not for profit UK company

Our goal is to help make open source silicon design a reality

We are uniquely positioned:

• Spun-out from the University of Cambridge Computer Lab
• Chaired by Prof Sir Andy Hopper; an early example of his ‘Newlabs’ model
• Attracted sustainable funding from major industry players (e.g., Google), so far without government assistance
• Unconflicted not-for-profit (C.I.C.)
• Breadth of industry partnerships and academic connections
• Full stack engineering capabilities (hardware, software, tooling)

Pedigree of hitting milestones in complex, commercially-funded projects including:

openTitan, LVM, Ibex
Our flagship project: openTitan

The world’s first open source silicon root of trust (RoT) design. Created in partnership with Google, Western Digital, Seagate, ETH Zürich and others.

The root of trust ensures:

• First instruction integrity, independent of O/S
• ‘TPM’ functionality (stores network secrets etc) once booted
• Tamper-evident h/w audit trail
• Cryptographic attestation

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The core problem
Is the success of open source software (!)

Undoubtedly, open source has proven a transformative approach for software:

- Vast majority (>95%) of mainstream smartphones use an open-source-derived kernel (Android, iOS)
- 70% of global mobile subscribers use networks built using ONAP
- 100% of supercomputers use Linux
- 50% of global car shipments supported by OEMs using Automotive Grade Linux
- >1 billion web security certificates issued by Let’s Encrypt (now world's largest certificate authority)
- Many up-stack libraries, apps, and tooling (GCC, LLVM etc) are open-source
- Replacing patents as the dominant social contract around IP

Use of open source software in emerging technologies:

Source: Linux Foundation, August 2021
Source: Red Hat 2021 State of Open Source Report
Most real-world engineering endeavours are more like silicon design than software... there's no direct read across from best practices in open source software to other domains:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Software (typical project)</th>
<th>Silicon design (typical project)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Available skilled engineers</td>
<td>Many</td>
<td>Few</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tooling</td>
<td>Largely free</td>
<td>Mostly proprietary &amp; expensive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Design turnaround</td>
<td>Months</td>
<td>Years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bug fixes after deployment</td>
<td>Straightforward</td>
<td>Often impossible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>End product</td>
<td>Virtual</td>
<td>Physical (mask costs, distribution etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100% open IP for end product</td>
<td>Often possible</td>
<td>Currently impossible</td>
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lowRISC’s core mission — from its foundation in 2014 — has been to address these key differences, taking an approach to open source silicon design that is:

- Credible
- Sustainable, and
- Impactful

It has been a long journey since then, but now, as OpenTitan — our flagship project — nears its first engineering sample tapout, having become:

- the world's largest collaborative open source silicon project, and
- the world's first open source silicon root of trust design

we thought it would be a good time to disseminate some of the concrete implementation insights gained along the way

So, in this short presentation, we'll explore each of the three themes above, and share the key secrets behind our success thus far
Credible
Why a non-profit org is needed

Existing ecosystem players have limited ability to act as the trusted steward of open source silicon design projects, because:

• **Conflict of interest** limits the cooperation and sharing for-profits will engage in.

• **Universities** cannot realistically create high-quality, fully documented, supported IP — it's **not their core mission**.

• **Simple repos of donated IP** suffer from ‘bit rot’.

• **Specifications groups** are often divorced from real-world use cases.

• **Community-led** approaches usually start from the open source software paradigm, then fail due to the differences highlighted earlier (need for up-front, multi-year funding etc).

**lowRISC** was founded on the assumption that a **different approach** was needed.
lowRISC: a credible approach to collaborative silicon design

**lowRISC CIC:**

- **is an engineering** company, with ‘full stack’ competence (we have DD, DV, firmware and tool engineers, PM resource), *not* just a coordinator
- **is a non-profit** (CIC), *unconflicted*, no shareholders so cannot be bought
- **is small**, domain focused, <50 people
- **maintains close contact with universities**
- **acts as the trusted steward** of one or more real-world projects, maintaining neutrality between potentially competing for-profits (such as Western Digital / Seagate), and
- **releases** the **foundational IP** created during the project under a permissive open-source licence, and commits to **maintain** it
Sustainable
Multi-year funding

A non-profit org still needs funding. From where to get it?

- **Governments** are typically reluctant to invest in new paradigms and outside of their ‘innovation comfort zone’ (unis, JVs etc)

- Meaning that **commercial funding** is required (and, given lengthy timelines, this needs to be a multi-year commitment)

But why would any for-profit want to do this? What's in it for them?

Well, **lowRISC CIC** has been funded **exclusively by the private sector** since inception; and we have found the **primary motivator** to be:

- **Safely upstreaming** their **downside differentiators**

With **secondary motivators** being:

- **Improved security** through scrutiny (Kerckhoffs’ principle etc)
- **Optics :)**
- Helping secure a **second source of supply** (rapidly becoming primary)

Let's dive into a few of these points in more detail
Primary funding driver...

...safely upstreaming their downside differentiators?? Let’s unpack this:

• A downside differentiator is something that isn’t (particularly) a USP of your business, unless it goes wrong

  • For example, airworthiness for a plane, security for a server

If the downside is bad enough, companies end up building components critical to these properties in-house, thus tying up valuable engineering resource (opportunity cost); of course, they’d like to buy a CotS replacement, but often feel they can’t do so:

• Safely, as they’re (usually) unable to determine quality etc

An open source approach potentially solves this, allowing them to publish a (clean room designed) version of their own design for maintenance by others (in exchange for that IP being usable by everyone):

• This upstreaming is a unique feature of open source collaboration

  • A reversal of the usual roles of IP producer and consumer

  • Key metric: value to others of IP < in-house maintenance cost
For further details please see my Royal Society talk, “Zero and Everyone”
Upstreaming

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Upstreaming

New release

Upstream
Maintainers of IP A

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Second sourcing

Due to the current silicon squeeze and geopolitical concerns, manufacturers are looking for **diversity of supply**

- With an **OpenTitan**-based design, the **tied elements** (aka ‘mystery meat’) in the design stack are **significantly reduced**, assisting second sourcing

Source: Trend Force, March 2021; CNBC
Besides funding: staffing

Another key driver for sustainability is staffing.

How does a non-profit hire, motivate and retain its staff, in an increasingly tight job market?

There’s no simple answer, but some things we have found useful are:

- Using an annual salary survey to tie base remuneration to industry norms
- Actively supporting ‘braided careers’ with academia
- Having realistic support for flexible working arrangements (3d/2d split for experienced staff, etc)
- Supporting ‘10% time’, to allow staff to contribute more broadly to the open source ecosystem
- Requiring project partner orgs to contribute FTEs, not just funding
- Being flexible about geographic reach (tier 2 visa sponsorship is no longer a luxury, particularly post-Brexit)
Impactful
Moving the needle

So, our approach can help for-profits get what they want, but what about our CIC mission?

The key thing here is dealing (in multiple senses) with boundaries:

• Build IP at **product scope**, so **components** can be reused

• Set (and enforce) **interfaces between devs**: for contributions (coding standards), protocols for review, **RACIs** for design and signoff

• Ditto for the **interface between orgs**: a proper governance structure is vital (PD, SC, TC, standing meetings, annual roadmap etc)

• Explicitly embrace the **project / product split**: realities include embargoed repos, ‘shadow’ components, cert-sensitive flows etc

• Ensure **licensing terms** are clear (non-viral for contributors, certainty of reusability for wider ecosystem — we chose Apache 2.0 with CLA)

• Ensure key **project management tools and flows** (design decision register, top opens, resource maps etc) are agreed and shared
Upstreaming
Recap of the traditional approach

Upstream
Maintainers of IP A

Downstream
Consumers of IP A

= Upstream IP
= Foundational IP
= Innovative IP
= Bug fix
= New feature

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Stewarding
Development phase

Amortized funding from X, Y, Z
Pull requests for bugs/features

Steward of Project P

Maintainers
(some may be contracted FT/Es)

Other downstream can use some or all of this foundational IP in new products

= Upstream IP
= Bug fix
= New feature

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Stewarding
Maintenance phase

Amortized funding from X, Y, Z
Pull requests for bugs/features

Steward of Project P

Maintainers
(some may be contributed FTEs)

Everyone wins and this is lowRISC’s business model

Other downstream can use some or all of this foundational IP in new products

= Upstream IP
= Bug fix
= New feature

lowRISC
Real-world silicon products require use of closed source / restrictively licensed IP. Moreover, there is bidirectional traffic needed between the open and closed source domain. This is quite different from what generally happens in software, and requires explicit handling (legals, governance, firewalls):
lowRISC’s governance structure is integrated with our business model, enabling us to:

• be a participant-funded, unconflicted upstream for real-world project(s)

• publish and maintain the resulting foundational IP artefacts (= logical infrastructure / digital commons)

• bring together potentially competing for-profits, universities, and the broader open-source community; and

• steward (as well as participate in) full project development, from inception
Summary: lowRISC’s business model

- Credible
- Sustainable
- Impactful
Thank you!
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Contact information

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Treasurer and Vice-President of the Royal Society, Professor of Computer Technology, former Head of the University of Cambridge Department of Computer Science and Technology. Research Director of Acorn at the time the ARM processor was created.

Co-founders:

Dr Gavin Ferris  CEO
Uni. of Cam alumnus, co-founder of RadioScape, former software lead at DreamWorks SKG and CIO of Aspect Capital (a multi-billion $ computational hedge fund).

Alex Bradbury  CTO
Uni. of Cam alumnus, former Linux lead developer for Raspberry Pi, code owner and primary author of RISC-V support in the LLVM compiler project.

Dr Rob Mullins  Director
Co-founder of the Raspberry Pi Foundation, Reader in Computer Architecture at University of Cambridge, research focus is hardware accelerators for machine learning and many-core processors.
**Dominic Rizzo**  Director  
OpenTitan project director at Google, previously Project Vault project director and tech lead on a successfully delivered Google FIPS Security Key project.

**Dr Ron Minnich**  Director  
Software Engineer at Google. A long time contributor to numerous open-source projects. He started the LinuxBIOS project in 1999, which was renamed to coreboot in 2008 and is now used in tens of millions of Chromebooks.

**Dr Mark Hayter**  Observer  
Sr Engineering Director in the Chrome OS Hardware team at Google. Prior to Google he was involved in systems architecture at several semiconductor companies, being VP of Systems Engineering at P.A. Semi, Inc. (acquired by Apple Inc.), Senior Manager of Hardware Systems Engineering at Broadcom Corporation and System Architect at SiByte, Inc. Earlier, he was at the Digital Equipment Corporation Systems Research Center.

**Prof. Luca Benini**  Director  
Holds the Chair of Digital Circuits and Systems at ETH Zurich and is Full Professor at the Universita di Bologna. He received a PhD from Stanford University. He has been visiting professor at Stanford University, IMEC, EPFL. Between 2009-2012 he served as Chief Architect in STmicroelectronics France.