

PET on stick

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1 Introduction

This was initially a recreation of a Commodore PET into an Lattice ICESTICK board, that later was extended to more capable FPGAs boards. I must remark the original PET replica isn't an accurate one because some parts of the original computer were removed in order to fit it into the restricted space of the board's FPGA. Let's first present the components of that computer (model 2001), that are:

- A 6502 processor.
- 4KB or 8KB of RAM. (up to 32KB on other models)
- 14KB of ROM.
- Monochrome, text mode, video controller with:
 - 40×25 character array.
 - 1KB of video RAM.

- 2KB of ROM for character generation. It includes two sets of 128 characters (PETSCII):
 1. “Graphic” mode: with uppercase letters, numeric digits plus symbols, and 64 graphic characters.
 2. “Business” mode: with lowercase letters, numeric digits plus symbols, uppercase letters, and only 32 graphics characters.
- Inverted video if the bit #7 of characters is set.

- Peripherals:

- PIA #1, 6520: Keyboard, vertical retrace interrupt, cassette, IEEE-488
- PIA #2, 6520: IEEE-488.
- VIA, 6522: User port, cassette, IEEE-488

This computer has no sound, no joysticks, no cartridges, and no expansion connector. Its memory map is:

		Base address	Size (bytes)	address selection mask
RAM		0x0000	4KB / 8KB ¹	000n_nnnn_nnnn_nnnn
video RAM		0x8000	1KB	1000_xxnn_nnnn_nnnn
ROM	BASIC	0xC000	8KB	110n_nnnn_nnnn_nnnn
	Editor	0xE000	2KB	1110_0nnn_nnnn_nnnn
I/O ²	PIA #1	0xE810	4 registers	1110_1xxx_xxx1_xxnn
	PIA #2	0xE820	4 registers	1110_1xxx_xxlx_xxnn
	VIA	0xE840	16 registers	1110_1xxx_xlxx_nnnn
ROM	Kernel	0xF000	4KB	1111_nnnn_nnnn_nnnn

2 Replica details

2.1 Memory

The ICESTICK board just includes an ICE40HX1K FPGA and a 4MB SPI Flash. The FPGA is rather limited, with only 1280 logic cells and 8KB of synchronous RAM. Just the CPU requires about a 60% of the LCs, and the internal memory is barely enough for a 4KB PET replica because some blocks are used in the video generation logic and keyboard (one BRAM block has 512 bytes):

BRAM usage	Blocks
4KB RAM	8
1KB video	2
2KB character ROM	4
Keyboard matrix	1
Unused	1

As we can see in this table, 15 out of the available 16 BRAM blocks are used and the replica ROMs aren’t included yet. The ROM content is going to be stored in the same flash memory as the FPGA bitstream and read through its SPI bus when needed. There, a random byte read takes no less than 40 clock cycles. Therefore, a 48MHz clock was selected as the main clock, and this signal is routed to the SPI clock when reading the flash. All other clocks are derived from the 48MHz signal, and also this clock is the carrier for the RF modulator logic.

¹Max 32KB with custom expansions

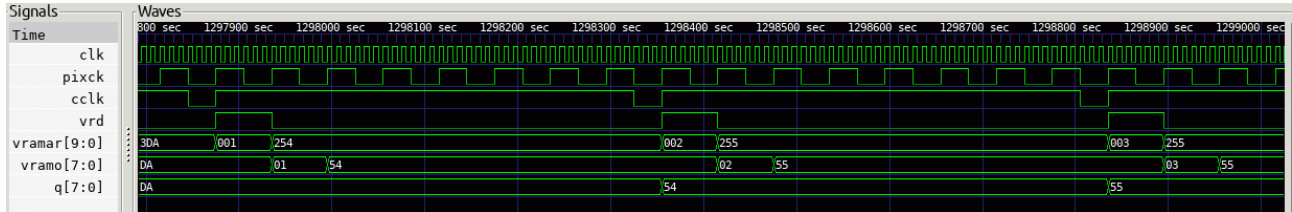
²Notice the incomplete decoding of the peripherals. More than one device could be selected simultaneously.

2.2 Clocks

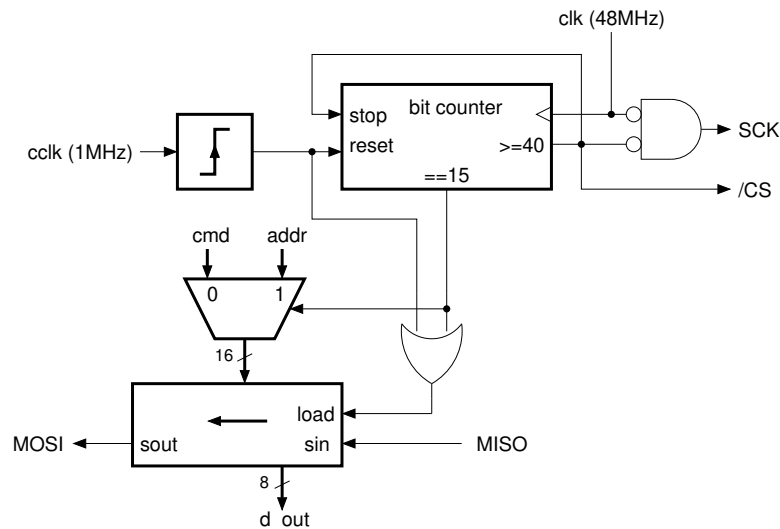
There are several clocks in the replica:

Signal	Frequency	Uses	remarks
clk	48MHz	SPI clock, RF carrier	main clock
pixck	8MHz	Pixel shifting	clk/6
cclk	1MHz	CPU clock	pixclk/8, in phase lock with video reads

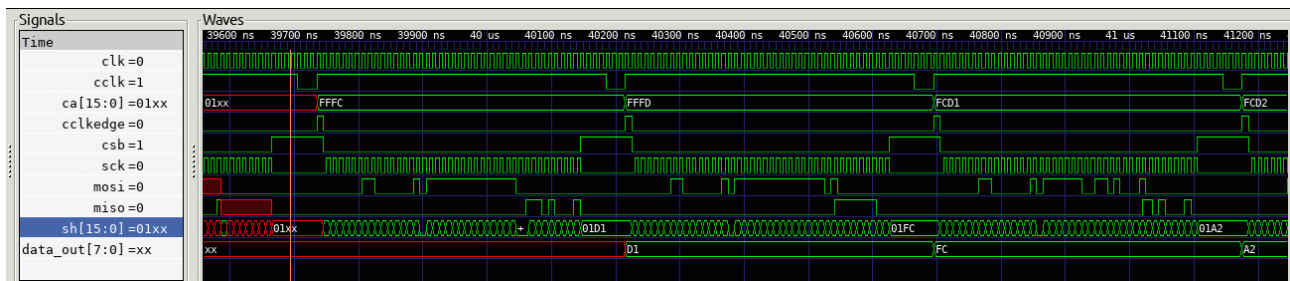
A CPU clock pulse is generated every 8 pixel clock cycles, and this pulse is timed to happen just before a video read. The video data read for the CPU (q[7:0]) is latched at the rising edges of the CPU clock (as it should be for a synchronous memory):



2.3 The SPI ROM



The combined ROMs of the PET are stored into the SPI Flash. The address I chose for this image starts at 0x2C000, at the end of the last 64KB block used for the FPGA configuration bitstream (for the HX4K/8K FPGAs, HX1K have smaller bitstreams). The SPI ROM block basically issues a flash read command (0x03) after every rising edge of the CPU clock by means of a 16-bit shift register that gets loaded with this command and the 8 most significant bits of a 24-bit address (0x0302). This register is loaded again after 16 clock pulses with the remaining bits of the address, and keeps shifting in the bits coming out of the flash memory. After 40 cycles the data is available at the lower 8 bits of the shift register, the SPI clock is held low, and the /CS signal deasserted. Not shown in the previous figure is a latching register for the output data that holds the read value during the whole next cclk cycle. This register is needed because the CPU core (a 6502 equivalent by Arlet Ottens) requires a synchronous memory. The timing details are displayed in the following simulation where the reading of the reset vector of the CPU is shown:

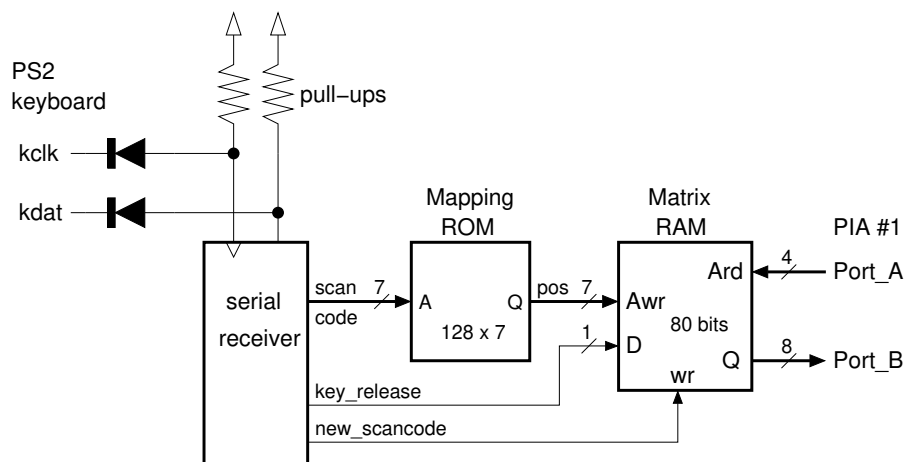


2.4 Peripherals

An early version with “decent” PIA an VIA recreations required about 1750 logic cells, way too much. So, these components were replaced by just a minimal recreation of the PIA #1 that allows the connection of a keyboard matrix emulator and the generation of the retrace interrupts, that are needed for keyboard scanning and cursor blinking. The lack of the second PIA means there is no IEEE-488 bus, not a big deal, but the missing VIA will result in no cassette interface nor hardware timers, and this is a more serious limitation. But, in spite of these missing blocks, the BASIC interpreter runs fine.

2.5 Keyboard

The PET keyboard is a 10×8 array with the columns driven from a BCD decoder connected to the lower 4 bits of the PIA’s Port A, while the rows are connected to the 8 bits of the Port B. This matrix is simulated by using an 80-bit, dual-port, RAM. Single bits are written with '0' when a pressed key scancode is received from the PS2 keyboard interface, and set to one when the corresponding released key scancode is received. On the read side the 4 lower bits of the PIA’s Port A are used as the reading address, and the RAM data is placed on the 8 bits of Port B.



Unfortunately, the symbol to key mapping on the PET is quite different than that of the spanish PS2 keyboard, and some symbols had to be placed on unrelated keys (the hardware is fine, but some keys ought to be relabeled). Otherwise the keyboard works quite well.

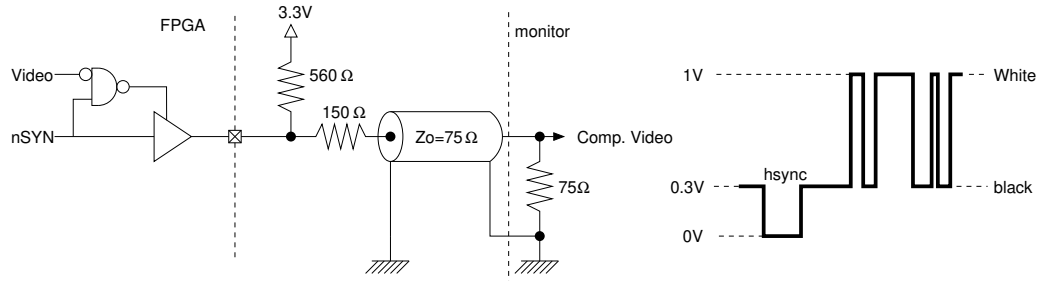
Another problem we have to face is the use of 5V logic in the keyboard. Here two possible solutions are:

1. Connect the keyboard to a 3.3V supply instead of 5V. Some keyboards have no problem running with lower voltages and their signals can be connected to the FPGA pins directly (my case).
2. Put diodes in series with the two PS2 signals. On the FPGA pins the corresponding pull-ups are enabled, so the default logic level is high. When the keyboard drives a signal low, the corresponding diode will also pull the FPGA pin low, but if the keyboard signal is high, at 5V, the diode is reverse biased, isolating the high voltage from the FPGA pin.

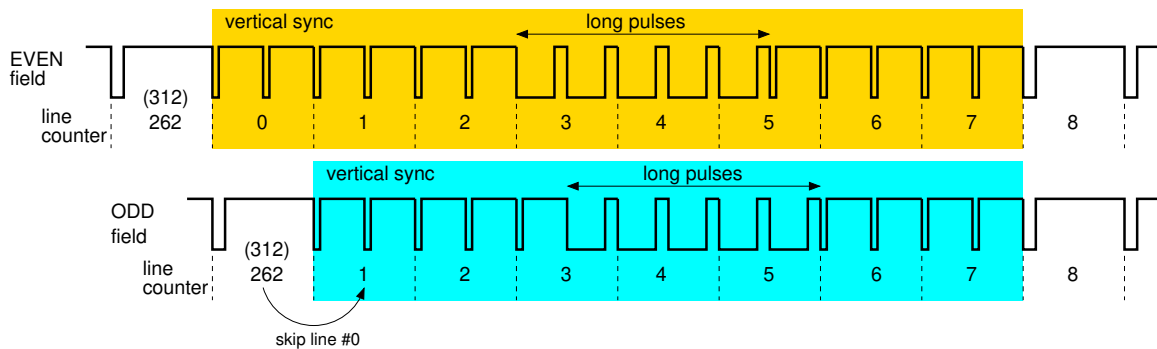
2.6 Video generation

The PET has its own video monitor with separate horizontal and vertical sync pulses, but in our recreation we want to use a monitor with a composite video input instead (a TV set). The composite video output has its own complications that we have to face, mainly the generation of a three-level signal and its weird vertical sync waveform, but fortunately there is no color here.

The three-level video signal is generated using just one FPGA pin along with its tristate control in the following way:



The vertical sync waveform is detailed next. Analog TV video is always interlaced, totalling 525 lines for NTSC or 625 lines for PAL. These lines are split into two frame fields: one for the even lines of the image and the next for the odd lines. 8 or 7 lines are reserved for the vertical sync signal as shown in the figure:



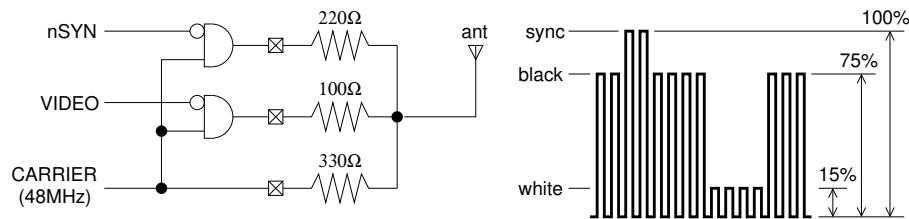
In our recreation the even and odd fields of the image show the same lines. This results in half the vertical resolution, but we only need 200 lines and a full resolution will result in the text being “compressed” vertically at the top of the screen. The displayed lines are placed at the middle of the screen and some top and bottom borders are left around the image.

And with respect to the horizontal resolution, a screen line last $64\mu s$ and its visible time is $48\mu s$. Using the same pixel clock as in the original PET (8 MHz) we can achieve a maximum of 384 pixels per line, but we only need 320 pixels, so, our display time is reduced to $40\mu s$ and some borders are placed at the left and right sides of the screen.

After all the trouble of the sync pulses, the video signal generation is a quite conventional text-mode one, with a 1KB RAM memory for the text and a 2KB ROM for character pixels. The RAM address can come from the CPU or from the vertical and horizontal counters. In this last case the text row ($\text{displayed_vertical_line} / 8$) has to be multiplied by 40 and added to the text column. This multiplication is accomplished using just one adder (40 is 32 plus 8). The output of the video RAM, along with the 3 lower bits of the line counter, is the address input of the character ROM. That ROM is in fact built using BRAMs with a known initial content and write disabled. Well, the bit #7 of the video RAM isn't routed to the ROM address because it is used as a control signal to invert the video output. And also the MSB bit of the character ROM comes from a Graphic/Business input (supposedly controlled by the VIA).

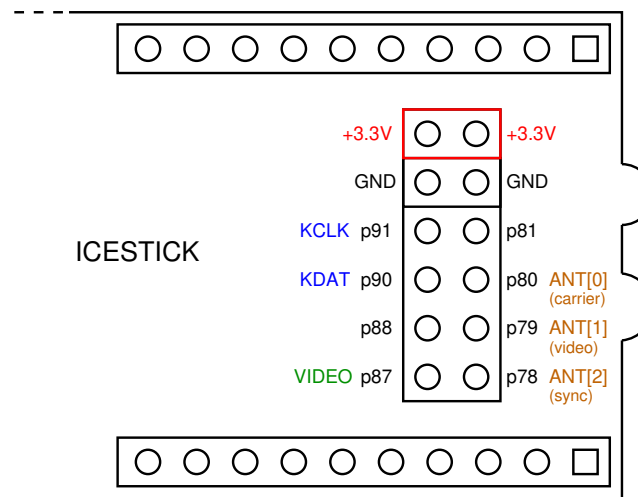
2.7 RF generation

Internally, the video and sync are two separate signals. These signals are combined at the output pin to generate the 3-level composite video, but they can also be used along a carrier signal (48MHz) in order to generate a TV signal for an antenna output in the following way:



TV video is AM modulated, and this is accomplished by a few gates that translates the video and sync signals into a 4-level analog output thanks to a simple resistor DAC. Three FPGA pins are needed in this case. The resistor ratio must be kept constant because it controls the relative amplitude of the various signal parts, but these resistors can be made higher in order to reduce the RF amplitude at the antenna cable if a direct connection to the TV is desired.

2.8 Connections



The signals discussed before are attached to the ICESTICK board pins at the positions shown in the above figure (upper side). A photograph with the board connected to a monitor and a keyboard is included next:



3 A better PET

The presented replica barely fits into the ICE40HX1K FPGA of the ICESTICK board, and only after removing quite a lot of hardware, like the 6522 VIA. Without this chip we have no hardware timers in the PET and there is no way the cassette interface could work at all. But there are also some other boards around using the ICE40HX4K, like Alhambra or ICECREAM, and here we have a lot more logic cells (7680 instead of 1280) and RAM (32 blocks instead of 16). So, here we can do a more realistic replica including decent descriptions of the PIAs and VIA as Verilog modules (code from Thomas Skibo) and we can also replicate a PET with 8KB of RAM instead of only 4KB. And in these replicas we can have a functional cassette interface.

3.1 Cassette interface

Well, the replica is now able to generate an audio waveform with the data to save on the VIA pin PB3, and it can also decode an input waveform in PIA #1 pin CA1 or VIA pin CB1 into some data to load. But we have to route these internal signals into some external hardware, and a real cassette player/recorder is out of question (all rubber belts disintegrated long time ago). Some sort of audio input/output is possible, but I wanted to use a communication channel already at hand on these boards, and I chose a serial port as the cassette adapter. With 115200 bps we can transfer 11520 8-bit samples each second and this is enough audio quality for a cassette data tape.

Therefore, the cassette input interface is just a 115200 baud serial receiver with one of the RX buffer bits attached to the cassette inputs. A logic analyzer capture shows the generated wave is composed of square wave cycles of three different lengths: $346\mu s$, $506\mu s$, and $676\mu s$. With a 11520Hz sampling rate these pulses are

roughly:

	length (μs)	Samples	actual length (μs)	error %
short	346	00 00 ff ff	347.2	+0.3%
medium	506	00 00 00 ff ff ff	520.8	+2.8%
long	676	00 00 00 00 ff ff ff ff	694.4	+2.7%

The relative time errors are small and probably well below the pulse width variations of a real cassette tape. So, the only remaining problem is the generation of the tape samples, but once this is done we can load some programs into the PET by simple typing “LOAD” and then dumping the samples over the serial port:



For tape output I followed a different approach. Instead of a continuous stream of high or low samples the pulse lengths are measured and transmitted over the serial port. The idea is to follow the same encoding used for the tape files of the VICE emulator, where each byte corresponds to a square-wave pulse of a duration:

$$T_{pulse} = \text{bytevalue} \times 8\mu s$$

In this way, not only the data gets compressed with respect to a plain sample stream. Also, if there are no transitions in the cassette output no data is generated at all. And the captured data only needs an header to become a .TAP file that could be used with VICE.

These .TAP files were also the data source for the generation of sample streams for the cassette input, as it was the case of the game shown in the previous photographs.

3.2 Audio

Some later PET models included an speaker connected to the CB2 pin of the VIA, so, sound can be generated by means of loading the shift register of the VIA with a data pattern and then recirculating it at a rate controlled by a hardware timer. This capability was also recreated and an audio signal is routed to an FPGA pin.

3.3 .TAP cassette input

The tape loading using sampled audio through the serial port runs but isn’t very reliable. Well, we can argue the actual tapes were unreliable too, but we don’t expect this for the emulation. It seems the problem lies on the PC side: serial ports, specially USB ones, don’t guarantee a continuous stream of data even at relative low bitrates like 115200 bps, so, something has to be done. It was also desirable to use the same data format for “LOAD” and “SAVE” operations, the same of VICE .TAP files, but without headers. In order to use this data format we have to add a buffer for the received serial bytes and to implement some sort of flow control to avoid having the buffer completely filled and to lost data.

So, now the cassette interface is a quite complex block that includes:

- An UART with receiver and transmitter.

- A 512-byte FIFO memory (1 BRAM) with its associated read and write pointers. Warning pulses are generated when the FIFO is 16 bytes over or under half-full, that results in the sending of XOFF or XON characters through the transmitter.
- A .TAP decoder that translates the FIFO data into square wave pulses with a length proportional to the values read from the FIFO.
- A .TAP encoder that measures the length of cassette write pulses (SAVE command) and sends the resulting data through the serial port.

These blocks are included into a single module with only one clock input plus serial TXD and RXD, and cassette read and write signals. This module is synthesized using 189 logic cells and one BRAM.

And also some programming is needed on the PC side because now we can't just send all the .TAP data to the serial device without any flow control. We have to send the data in small blocks and to check the data the system sends back. When an XOFF character is received we must pause the transmission until an XON character is received later. Well, that was OK with some USB/serial adapters but failed with others (FTDIs), so, at the end I'm using a different approach: Send the data in big blocks in order to be sure the upper FIFO watermark is always reached, and then keep reading the incoming characters until an XON byte is received before sending the next block.

After these changes we can just type "LOAD" on the PET and then send the whole .TAP file through the serial port. The file header just results in a burst of noise at the beginning of the tape image that has no ill effects on the loading, and sure, the reliability is now solid.

3.4 32K PET

The ICECREAM board includes an external SRAM with 128KB of additional memory that can also be used in order to expand our recreated PET. In fact, we have more than enough memory to map the entire 6502 address space into that external memory and this could have simplified the design quite a lot (no SPI ROM, write-only video memory...), but in the real design I'm using the external RAM only for the first 32KB of the PET memory.

A 32K PET could play "The Attack of the PETSCII Robots" (at least if we found a way to put that game into the memory, because a floppy disk emulator is just too much work for this design), probably the only decent game ever written for a PET machine (by David Murray, the "8-Bit Guy"). So, the next addition to the PET is going to be some support for the upload of memory snapshots.

3.5 Loading snapshots

In order to load an snapshot file into the PET memory and to execute it we need the following hardware:

- A serial port.
- Some ROM space for the uploading code.
- Some RAM space for variables.

The serial port is already at hand due to its use for the cassette interface. We only have to make its received data visible to the PET. In order to do this I chose the following addresses for the UART receiver:

Address	Reg	comments
\$E800	RX data	read clears data available flag
\$E801	RX flag	Bit #7: data available

Where, the UART is selected if address lines #4, #5, and #6, are zero, meaning neither the PIAs nor the VIA are selected.

For ROM I initially thought about using some free area in the PET's ROMs for my upload code, but it seems not a single byte of these ROMs are free. Also, for RAM I was planning to use the last 24 bytes of the video RAM that aren't displayed, but these bytes could still have been used by applications. So, at the end I resorted to include in the PET another BRAM with half its space writable and mapped after the video RAM:

address	attr.	use	comments
\$8800 - \$88FF	RO	Upload code.	Call with "SYS 34816"
\$8900 - \$89FF	RW	Variables.	CPU and VIA regs stored here

This hardware addition allows the loading of snapshots files. These files were obtained from VICE emulations, but the native VICE snapshots have too much metadata inside (Should we call it garbage? Why these snapshots are 144KB long when the PET RAM memory is only 33KB?). Also, the actual format of the .VSF snapshots differs from what is stated on the VICE documentation (in particular in the dump of the VIA registers), and some reverse engineering was needed in order to get the correct values. The relevant data was extracted into a much simpler file before sending it through the serial port without any flow-control.

The structure of such files is:

Byte #	Size	Field	comments
0	1	last RAM page (+1)	\$10,\$20,\$40, or \$80 depending on the amount of RAM
1	1	last VRAM page (+1)	\$84 for 40-column text
2	32	Registers	CPU and peripheral registers
34	4K to 32K	RAM dump	
nnnn	1K or 2K	VRAM dump	

The "Registers" field is still under development. It must include the CPU registers for sure, and some registers for the VIA too, but the PIAs aren't yet included as they seem to remain untouched by applications. These are the registers included in the field:

CPU		VIA				—	
offset	reg	offset	reg	offset	reg	offset	reg
0	A	8	ORB	16	T2LL	24	-
1	X	9	ORA	17	T2CH	25	-
2	Y	10	DDRB	18	SR	26	-
3	S	11	DDRA	19	ACR	27	-
4	P	12	T1CL	20	PCR	28	-
5	PCL	13	T1CH	21	IFR	29	-
6	PCH	14	T1LL	22	IER	30	-
7	-	15	T1LH	23	-	31	-

The code that loads and executes the snapshot is listed next:

```

; -----
; Define constants

VARBAS = $8900
REGBAS = VARBAS + 2
ZPBAS  = REGBAS + 32

URXD = $E800
USTA = $E801

; -----
; -----

_start:
    .code
    sei        ; No interrupts
    ; Clear screen
    ldx        #0
    lda        #32
l1:    sta      $8000,x
    sta      $8100,x
    sta      $8200,x
    sta      $8300,x
    inx
    bne        l1
    ; Print message
l2:    lda      msg,x
    beq        l3
    and        #63 ; Uppercase ASCII -> PETSCII
    sta      $8000+494,x
    inx
    bne        l2
l3:    ; start upload
    lda      URXD ; clear UART RX flag
    ldy      #0
    sty      0    ; destination pointer
    sty      1
    ; Save npages, nvpages, regs[32], and first 2 bytes of RAM on SNA RAM area
l4:    bit      USTA    ; UART getchar
    bpl      l4
    lda      URXD
    sta      VARBAS,y
    iny
    cpy      #36      ; total 36 bytes: npages+nvpages+regs(32)+zp[0]+zp[1]
    bne      l4
    ; read Memory blocks
    ldy      #2      ; start at $0002
    ldx      #0      ; block counter: 0=RAM, 1=VRAM
l5:    bit      USTA    ; UART getchar
    bpl      l5
    lda      URXD
    sta      (0),y
    iny
    bne      l5
    inc      1      ; next page
    lda      VARBAS,x ; all pages loaded?
    cmp      1
    bne      l5
    lda      #$80    ; now point to VRAM
    sta      1
    inx
    cpx      #2
    bne      l5

    ; All RAM loaded, now restore register values
    ; Zero page restoration
    lda      ZPBAS    ; restore ZP[0]
    sta      0
    lda      ZPBAS+1 ; restore ZP[1]
    sta      1

```

```

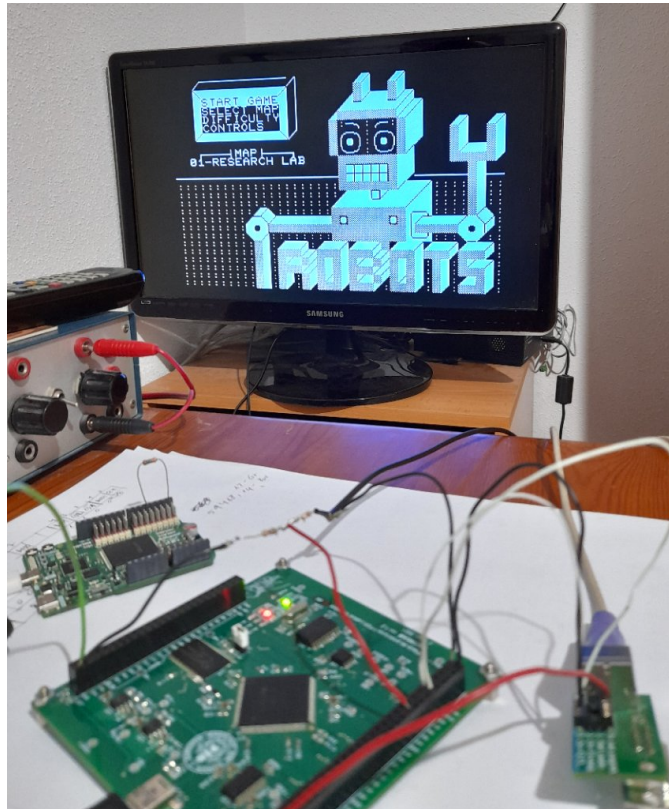
; VIA reg restoration
ldx    #14 ; IER offset
l6:    lda    REGBAS+8,x
      sta    $E840,x
      dex
      bpl    l6
; CPU reg restoration
ldx    REGBAS+3 ; restore S
txs
ldx    REGBAS+1 ; restore X
ldy    REGBAS+2 ; restore Y
lda    REGBAS+4 ; restore flags (through stack)
pha
lda    REGBAS ; restore Acc
plp ; restore flags
jmp    (REGBAS+5) ; restore PC

msg:    .asciiz "UPLOAD SNA"

.export endtxt
endtxt:

```

The snapshot upload allowed to start a game in an emulator, to freeze it into a snapshot file, and to resume its execution on the FPGA PET replica. The uploading only takes 3 seconds for a 32K PET. Here is an example of the PET running a snapshot of the “Attack of the PETSCII Robots” on an ICECREAM board.



The support for uploading snapshots was also included in the “reduced” ICESTICK version of the PET, resulting in all BRAM blocks being occupied and only 5 unused logic cells out of 1280. That’s a tight fit! The same small ICE40HX1K FPGA was also used in an old ICECREAM board but in that board we also get the external RAM. This results in a “reduced” 32K PET that is able to play PETSCII Robots without sound.

4 Some problems

The “reduced” PET recreation always use the “graphic” character set because there is no VIA to control the selection signal, but the “complete” recreation is able to change the character set by means of the following POKEs:

```
POKE 59468,12      for Graphic mode
POKE 59468,14      for Business mode
```

These pokes works as expected, but the PET starts using the “Business” mode after reset and this seems to be wrong. After debugging a little the VIA recreation without finding any problem I tried a different ROM set and it started in “Graphics” mode. Unfortunately, the new ROM set results in a very different keyboard layout, so it was clearly intended for another PET model. So, at the end this is not a problem with the recreation but with the PET firmware itself that defaults to a “Business” character set. After further research I found this is the normal behavior for models with “business” keyboards and Editor ROMs, that is just the kind of matrix I mapped to the PS2 keyboard. I should have selected another Editor ROM and key mapping. Well, I don’t want to redo the boring key mapping again, so, at the end we are dealing with a Business PET.

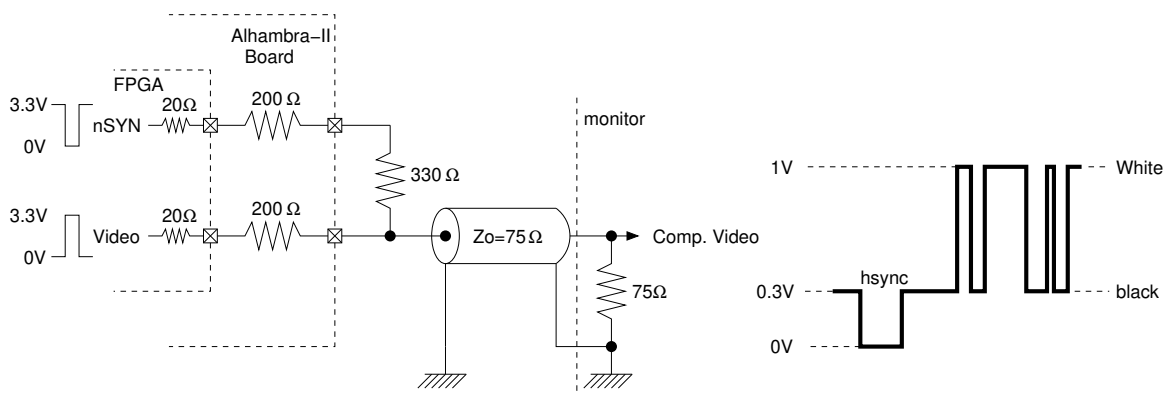
Another possible bug is the cassette motor control signal that starts in an ON state until you execute a “SAVE” or “LOAD” command. In a real cassette player this bug is of little importance because the “Play” key has to be also pressed in order to play or record the tape. It was more annoying when I tried to use this signal as an enable for dumping the cassette data over the serial port after a “SAVE” command. I don’t know if this behavior is the same for later ROM revisions, but considering the cassette tapes were completely replaced by floppies during the early eighties it is quite possible to have this bug in all of them.

I must admit the PET ROM set is a sort of chaos with many different versions around for its various parts (Kernel, Editor, and BASIC), and it’s easy to chose the wrong ones (BTW, the BASIC version includes the famous “WAIT 6502,n” Easter egg). At the end the recreated computer is a sort of FrankensPET, based on a 2001 model hardware but with a slightly modern BASIC version and a “Business” keyboard and Editor ROM.

By the way, the software repository for the Ubuntu version of VICE, the 8-bit Commodore emulator, says the ROMs are still owned by a Low-Countries company and not included in the emulator. I don’t think this is still the case because a recent download of VICE from its web page included all the ROMs, but I wonder why a company wanted to invest into this fossil software (unless that company was also becoming a fossil itself, with no engineers but with lots of lawyers, a sort of “White Dwarf” company).

As another problem to report, I was given an Alhambra-II board and I tried to port the design into it, but my screen remained always black. Soon I found the board has 200Ω resistors in series with the FPGA pins and these resistors were ruining the voltage levels of the video output, so, my 1-pin composite video solution is unsuited for this board. (I got reports of other screens working in spite of the wrong voltage levels, but not my Samsung TV)

But it is still possible to have decent composite video levels if the internal video and sync signals are available at the connectors, and by an strike of luck the series resistors have just the correct value to avoid an extra external resistor. The schematic is:



Video	nSync	Occurence	Level
L	L	Sync pulses	0V
L	H	video black	0.305V
H	L	never happens (grey)	0.762V
H	H	Video white	1.066V

Here the video output is no longer a tristate signal, and only a 330Ω resistor is required along with the two outputs. With this mod the PET screen was also displayed from an Alhambra-II board.

And finally, I want to mention the annoying cursor keys and their workaround. It wasn't until I got the game "Attack of the PETSCII robots" running when I decided to do something about these keys. The PET has only two cursor keys: Right and Down, and, if you want to move the cursor in the opposite directions the Shift key also have to be pressed. Well, compared to the 4 cursor keys of PC keyboards that approach is, lets say it softly, not very user friendly. And, BTW, in the VICE emulator the four cursor keys works as expected, so they are surely emulating two key presses, one of then Shift, when typing on the Left or Up keys. I should do the same in the PS2 keyboard interface, but in that design I only considered single keypresses when writing to the key array RAM. The solution was to include a single extra bit that get set when one of these two cursor keys are pressed and to force a pressed Shift key when reading the array data (bit #6 of column #6) regardless of the Shift key state if this bit is set.

With this last change the four cursor keys of the PS2 keyboard do what they are supposed to do and the "Attack of the PETSCII robots" is finally playable.

5 Summary

These are some tested PET replica variants:

Board	PET RAM	Snap	VIA	Tape	Sound	LCs	BRAMs	Comments
ICESTICK	4K	yes	no	no	no	1275	16	
ICECREAM-1K	32K	yes	no	no	no	1261	8	external RAM
Alhambra-II	8K	yes	yes	yes	yes	1944	25	2-pin video interface
ICECREAM-4K	32K	yes	yes	yes	yes	1892	9	external RAM
SIMRETRO	32K	yes	yes	yes	yes	1909	9	Video DAC