Product Description:

The Matrox ALT-256 Video Board

Gary Ruple Matrox Electronics Systems POB 56 Ahuntsic Sta Montreal Quebec H3L 3N5 CANADA The ALT-256 is an Altair (S-100) bus compatible graphics card that gives a resolution of 256 by 256 dots. This display is useful for professional graphics applications such as computer aided design, simulation, business and educational displays, and plotting curves.

The display memory on the ALT-256 consists of 16 4 K dynamic memory integrated circuits in the 16 pin package. The dynamic memory refresh is handled by the video scan circuitry so that no processor time is required for this function.

Board Addressing

The board is addressed as four contiguous output ports and one input port (IO ports

are built in), selectable by on board address jumpers. The dot addressing is done in X-Yfashion. Output ports 1 and 2 are used as registers for the X and Y positions, respectively, to position the cursor at the selected dot. Output 0 is used to write the intensity of the dot: 00 for black and 01 for white. After the dot intensity is loaded, the ALT-256 will require 3.4 μ s to write the dot in the display memory (ie: to allow for internal synchronization of the wire operation, video read scan and dynamic memory refresh). Since the 8080 processor almost always reguires more than 3.4 μ s to load the next dot address and data, the processor can run at its full speed. Also, there will be no streaks or flashes on the display no matter how fast the





Figure 2: Display coordinate system for video displays (MTX-Graph software).

processor accesses the card since the write operation is internally synchronized.

Output port 3 is used as an erase screen command to either clear the screen or to set it all white according to data bit 0: 0 = black, 1 = white. The erase operation can take up to 33 ms. The status port (INO) has been provided as a means of checking the status of the ALT-256. The following is a description of the status bits:

- Bit 0: When 0 the display is ready. When 1 the display is being erased and should not be accessed.
- Bit 1: When 0 the display scan is in the video portion.

When 1 the display scan is in the vertical blanking period allowing access of the display when not visible. This is useful for dynamic motion and animation synchronization.

The X-Y addressing scheme provides the programmer with a way to address individual dots. A horizontal or vertical line requires only one address to be updated for each new dot. A 45° diagonal requires each address to be incremented or decremented. Using output ports as registers and as a means of addressing the card also conserves memory space, since the 65,536 directly addressable

dots are equivalent to 8 K bytes of memory. (You would also have to keep track of dot position in the byte.)

Theory of Operation

The ALT-256 has four major blocks: the video sync generator, scanning circuitry, cursor and interface electronics, and 65,536 by 1 memory (see figures 1 and 2). The sync generator consists of a crystal oscillator and a divider chain. This divider chain produces all timing signals for the memory scanning as well as horizontal and vertical sync. The video sync generator can be programmed by jumpers for either the European or the American video standard.

The scanning circuitry consists of multiplexers which provide proper address, and read and write signals for the programmable memory.

The cursor consists of two 8 bit latches (the X and Y address registers) which are loaded by the processor. Necessary interface address and timing decoding is accomplished by the Altair (S-100) bus interface logic.

The refresh memory has 16 4 K dynamic memories (IC type 4096) organized as a 65,536 by 1 bit memory.

Power supplies for 5 V, 600 mA; 12 V, 100 mA, and -5 V, 10 mA are generated by on board voltage regulators.

Multiple Boards

The ALT-256 may be used in multiple board systems for color graphics or grey scale applications. Any reasonable number of boards may be used. When more than one is used, one board must be chosen as the master and the others are configured as slaves synchronized to the master. There is an on board jumper allowing use as a master or slave and a socket provided for connecting the sync signals and video between master and slaves. Single or multiple boards may also be slaved to an external sync generator such as a TV camera signal or broadcast video.

Software

MTX Graph, the software package available for the ALT-256, provides all the commonly used low level graphics routines, and is configured as a series of subroutines that occupy hexadecimal memory locations 0104 to 04FF. Multiple boards can be supported by up to a maximum of eight bits of color or grey scale information. Features of the package are described in table 1. Photo 1a.



Photo 2a.



Photo 3a.



Photos 1 to 3: Some examples of grey scale and pseudocolor images produced by the ALT-256 video board. The grey scale photos were produced by feeding the output from a TV camera through a slow scan analog to digital converter. Next, the 3 bit digitized output was processed through three ALT-256 video boards and a digital to analog converter to give an 8 level video signal. The color pictures were produced by feeding the outputs from the video boards directly to the red, blue and green inputs of an RBG color monitor (see figure 3).

Photo 1b.



Photo 2b.



Photo 3b.

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Table 1: Features of MTXGRAPH, a software pack-age available for the ALT-256 graphics board.

- 1. Variable Resolution: The display resolution may be set to 256 by 256, 128 by 128, or 64 by 64 through software control.
- Point Plot: A dot corresponding in size to the resolution selected may be displayed at any arbitrary point by specifying X-Y coordinates.
- 3. Line Vector Graphics: Lines can be drawn from the current cursor position to the endpoint specified by the user.
- Alphanumeric Display: A full ASCII character generation routine is provided. Characters can be positioned anywhere on the screen. Carriage control characters are correctly interpreted. Character size is adjustable.
- Animation Synchronization: This feature is used to synchronize animated display updates with the vertical scan.
- 6. Color Option: The software package supports a 3 card color or grey scale system as described later in this article.

All subroutines use standard Cartesian coordinates with the display occupying the first quadrant. As shown in figure 2, the origin (X = 0, Y = 0) is defined as the bottom left point on the display. X increases in value to a maximum of 255 at the right edge, while Y rises to a maximum of 255 at the top. If the ALT-256 is jumpered for American Standard scan (240 lines displayed), the lowest Y coordinate displayed is 16, and points with coordinates from 0 to 15 cannot be seen.

Grey Scale and Color Applications

In the grey scale configuration, multiple boards provide binary intensity information. All boards have the same address decoding and sync signals. Each board has a dot intensity bit (output port 0) which is normally tied to data bus bit D0. In a typical 3 board color or grey scale system, the intensity bit is changed on two boards to be D1 and D2 (or any other bits you choose), thus writing three binary bits for each write operation. This method allows computation of grey scale and single instruction load of all bits making up a single picture element (often contracted to "pixel" in graphics literature). The TTL video outputs from the three boards are fed to a simple 3 bit digital to analog converter.



RGB (Red Green Blue) Color

In a color scheme, the best results are obtained by directly driving the red, green and blue guns of a color monitor with the video signal from three boards, as in figure 3. An ordinary color TV can be modified to accept separate color inputs. This should not be undertaken by anyone who lacks an understanding of color TV and electronic design. The alternative is to generate an encoded composite color signal. An application note available from Matrox gives details on a color encoder circuit.

Photographs

The photos accompanying this article were generated by feeding a TV camera output through a slow scan analog to digital converter. The 3 bit digitized output was then fed to a 3 card ALT-256 graphics system. The grey scale pictures were produced by feeding the outputs of the three cards to a 3 bit digital to analog converter. The resulting pictures have eight discrete grey levels. The color pictures were produced by feeding the outputs of the three cards to the red, blue and green (RBG) inputs of an RBG color monitor. The resulting eight color pictures are pseudocolored. This means that a different color has been assigned arbitrarily to each grey level in the original picture. Pseudocoloring is used in many industrial and research applications (ie: many NASA space pictures are processed this way).

Conclusion

The Matrox ALT-256 represents one approach to high resolution graphics capabilities for the Altair (S-100) bus. Multiple board systems can be used for medical displays, research applications, pseudocolor imaging, fast animated displays, computer aided design, sophisticated computer games and computer generated art. For the Star Trek freak, now there is available a real (if imaginary) universe to save, rather than a slow printer banging out descriptions. For the artist, a canvas; the researcher, a window; and the kids, an electronic sketch pad.

Note: The completely assembled, tested and burned in ALT-256 board is available for \$395 from Matrox Electronic Systems, POB 56, Ahuntsic Station, Montreal, Quebec H3L 3N5 CANADA. Also available is the ALT-2480, an Altair (S-100) compatible alphanumeric generator board, which can be used in conjunction with the ALT-256 to produce simultaneous graphics and alphanumeric displays.

Figure 3: Connecting an RBG (red green blue) monitor for 8 color operation using three ALT-256 boards.