

Circuit: the μ SCOPE

A poor man's oscilloscope

The oscilloscope is still one of the most important measurement tools of the electronic engineer. With the advent of the often very reasonably priced USB scopes, such an instrument is now within reach of everybody. Twentyfive years ago that was quite a different story. A (good) oscilloscope was then a very expensive instrument available only to a happy few. As a result many electronics hobbyist made their own scope. The popular electronics magazines in the sixties and seventies were full of scope designs almost always based on vacuum tubes. This period was closed in 1975 when the Dutch electronics magazine *Elektuur* (in the rest of the world known as *Elektor*) published their fully transistorised “*Elektorscoop*”. Despite all this, the purchase of a cathode ray tube and Special high voltage transformer remained too expensive for many people.

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In an effort to lower the price for a scope even further, *Elektuur* published in 1978 the “*Videoscope*”. The *Videoscope* sampled the analog input signal and stored the samples in a bucket brigade (CCD) memory. Next the data in the CCD was converted into an ordinary (black and white) video signal which could be displayed on an ordinary TV. In order to view the signal in the normal way the TV had to be put on his side, but nobody minded that. All in all it was still a rather complex design comprising a few dozen of ICs and several printed circuit boards. These days this obviously can be done much simpler. The present generation of microcon-

trollers is so powerful that such a video-scope concept can be realized almost completely in software. Recently I obtained a sample of the 12F675. On examination of the datasheet of this small 8 pins microcontroller from Microchip, it appeared that the small package contained all the components of a miniature videoscope. In short the μ SCOPE project was born, with as main objective the challenge of implementing such a relatively complex task in this small microcontroller. The result summarised in this article is a fully functional (memory)scope that samples the analogue input signal and subsequently displays it on a normal TV (Fig. 1). Un-

fortunately the μ SCOPE works only on 625 line PAL standard TVs. It was never the intention to build a sophisticated measurement instrument. Nevertheless, signals up to a few kHz are reasonably well displayed by this simple circuit that can be build for only a few euro. Hopefully this “poor mans” scope may be of good service to especially the young electronics hobbyist.

The 12F675

The 12F675 is one of the smallest members of the Microchip microcontroller family. In the 8 pin package we find a 14-bit processor core, 1k word FLASH

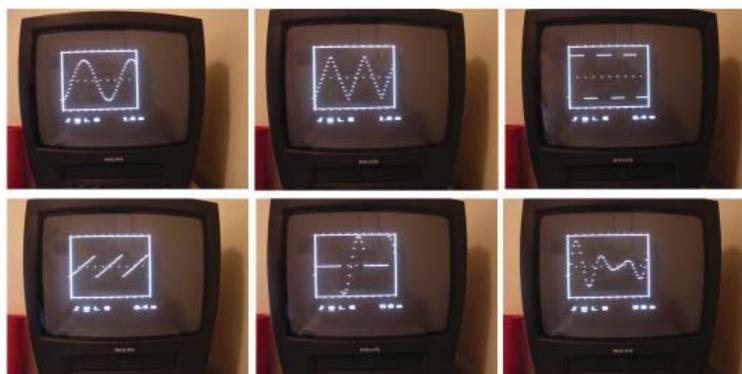


Figure 1. The μ SCOPE in action.

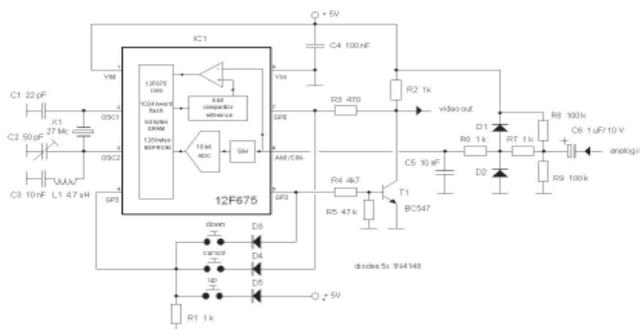


Figure 2. Circuit diagram.

program memory, 64 bytes RAM and 128 bytes data EEPROM. Next to the standard peripherals such as two timers, a watchdog timer etc., the 12F675 is also equipped with a 10-bit AD converter with sample and hold, a comparator and a programmable voltage reference. All these components can be configured under software control, Fig. 2 depicts how this is done for the μ SCOPE. Pin 6 is used as the analogue input. Internally this pin is connected via the sample and hold to the AD converter. Since the supply voltage is used as the reference voltage for the AD converter, the measurement range is exactly from 0 to 5V. Pin 6 is also connected to one of the inputs of the comparator to implement the trigger function of the μ SCOPE. The trigger level is determined by the programmable voltage reference which is connected to the other input of the comparator. Since it is possible to invert the output of the comparator by software, it is possible to trigger on a positive or negative slope.

The input circuit of the μ SCOPE is kept as simple as possible and can be expanded depending on individual wishes. The input signal is first DC decoupled by C6. R8 and R9 set the "zero level" at half the supply voltage. The first line of protection against too high input voltages is provided by R7, D1 and D2. Both diodes limit the input voltage on pin 6 to a voltage between 0 and 5V while R7 limits the current.

Building the video image

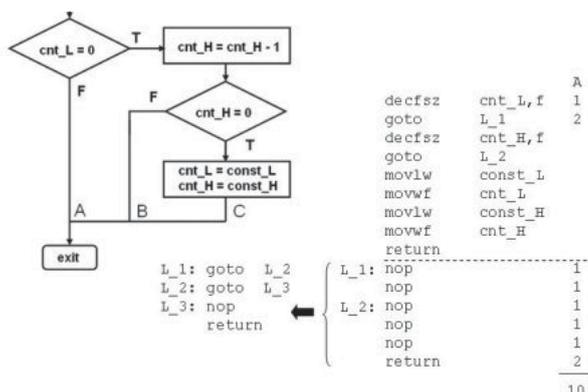
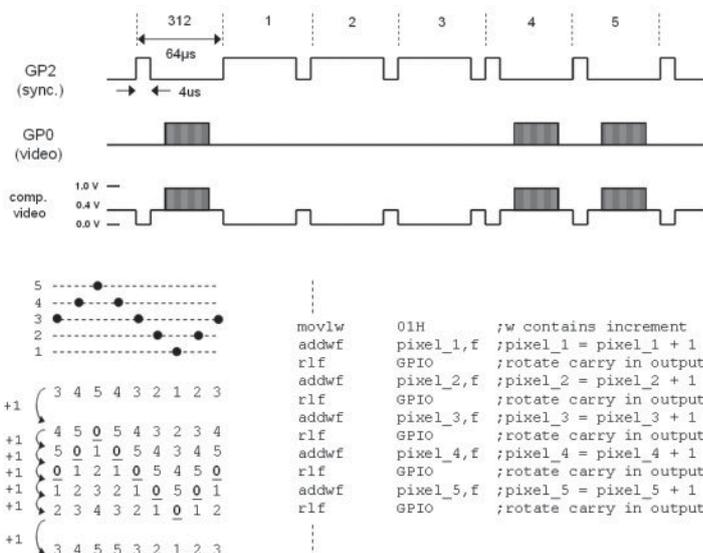
I decided not to use interlining. In this kind of applications interlining results in a flickering image while it needlessly complicates the program. The frame frequency is therefore 50 Hz, with every frame consisting of 312 lines of 64 μ s (Fig. 3). A line synchronisation pulse of 4 μ s indicates the starting of a new line. The frame synchronisation pulse is generated during the first 3 lines of every new frame.

The video and synchronisation signals are combined to a standard composite video signal with a simple circuit consisting of R2-R5 and T1. Resistors R2 and R3 together with the input impedance of the video input of the TV (75 ohms to ground) shift a logical 0 on the video output pin GP0 to 0.3V on the video output (black) and a logical 1 to 1.0V (white). A "1" on the sync. output GP2 will cause T1 to pull the video output signal to 0V (ultra-black) resulting in a synchronisation pulse. This is not possible here. To obtain a high enough speed during the generation of the video signal, data is rotated in the GPIO register. During this operation, GP2 is configured as an input to prevent undesired synchronisation pulses. Transistor T1 prevents an undefined potential at the video output during these moments. GP0 and GP2 have also been used to read the three menu push buttons as can be seen in Fig. 2.

► Figure 3

▼ Figure 4

▲ Figure 5



At a clock frequency of 27 MHz every line of 64 μs takes exactly 432 machine cycles. One cycle longer or shorter results in distortions of the TV image. This means that if a piece of program that is executed during the writing of a line contains branches, every branch needs to be exactly equal in length. Since in general this is obviously not the case, we need to add NOP instructions to the shorter branches until they have the same length as the longest one. How this is done is illustrated by a piece of virtual program in Fig. 4. In this example we find a routine which decrements a double byte counter at every call. When the counter reaches zero, it is initialised again to some preset value. In the flow diagram of Fig. 4 the three branches of the routine have been identified as: A, B and C. The assembler code above the dashed line represents the longest branch C. Next the number of machine cycles is calculated for every branch. It appears that branch C uses 9 cycles. The piece of assembler code underneath the dashed line is needed to increase the length of branches A and B with NOPs so that they also get a length of 9 cycles. If memory is scarce (as for the μSCOPE) then in a final optimisation all double NOP instructions can be replaced by a single GOTO (the execution of GOTO takes two cycles). Undoubtedly there are compilers which are very clever in this kind of program optimisation, but in this case the whole program was written by hand. The assembler code of the program is available for download at www.dos4ever.com. The abundant amount of comments in the code should make it possible for everybody to follow the program.

The largest part of the program is taken up by the synchronous routine which takes care of the generation of the video image (`sync_blk`). In order to split this routine into manageable chunks, the total video image was subdivided into a number of line types. Every line type is generated by a separate subroutine recognizable in

the code by the label "line_XXX". The routine `line_sync` for example generates the frame synchronisation pulse. The routine "line_blank" generates a black line while routine "line_view" displays the actual scope image etc. A "routine dispatcher" calls every line routine at the right moment for a certain number of times, until the total frame consisting of 312 lines is composed.

In order to deal with a number of tasks such as the user interface in an asynchronous way, the synchronous routine is exited during a part of some lines (`line_async`) in the black upper part of the screen. Before the synchronous routine is left however, timer 0 is set so that it will generate an interrupt just before the next data sample is due.

Data acquisition and display

50 of the 64 RAM bytes are reserved for the storage of 50 data samples. Although the AD converter has a 10 bits resolution only the 7 most significant bits have been used. These 7 bits represent 128 voltage levels between 0 and 5 V, corresponding to a part on the TV screen with a height of 128 lines. The routine "get_AD" takes care of the actual data acquisition. This routine is called 4 times every line so that the minimal time between two samples is $64 \mu\text{s}/4 = 16 \mu\text{s}$. The first task of the routine is to take care of the trigger function. Has a trigger already occurred and is the sample memory not yet completely filled, then a new sample is stored. In case a trigger did not yet occur, the routine checks if perhaps in this call a valid trigger occurred. In case the time base is adjusted to a lower sample rate then, depending on the time base setting, only 1 in 2, 1 in 4, 1 in 8 etc. samples will be stored. Advantage of this method is that the trigger function will run at maximum speed independent of the time base setting so that time base jitter will be minimized.

The stored data samples are used by the synchronous part of the program to construct the image on the TV screen. As already mentioned, every one of the 128 possible measurement values corresponds to one of the 128 lines in the scope frame on the screen. The scope signal is constructed by comparing for every pixel on the screen the corresponding sample value with the momentary line number. The pixel is switched on if they are equal and remains dark if not. A straight forward programming of this function would at least cost 5 instructions. Too much for a nice small pixel. A trick is therefore used whereby a cyclic incrementation of the measurement data is used. The principle of this cyclic incrementation is explained in Fig. 5. In the simplified example of Fig. 5 9 data samples have been taken from saw tooth shape signal. There are only 6 possible sample values (0-5). For every new line on the screen all the samples are incremented. A pixel is switched on during this incrementation a carry occurs (transition from 5 to 0). If not the pixel remains dark. Observe that after 6 lines the samples have been restored to their original value. Fig. 5 also gives the assembler code for this procedure. By shifting the carry from the Status register directly into the video output bit (bit 0 of GPIO) the need for time consuming conditional branching is eliminated. We see that for every bit only two instruction (cycles) are needed! Looking at the "line_view" routine in the assembler code it can be seen this was actually too fast and that for every pixel a NOP needed to be added. The only disadvantage of this method is that it consumes relatively a lot of program memory.

Operation of the μSCOPE

A relatively large part of the program deals with the user interface. Control of the μSCOPE is done with the three pushbuttons and a few simple menus underneath the scope image. The generation of the characters in the menu was quite a chal-

lenge in itself. The time between two characters is so short that in this time only a few instructions can be executed. All text therefore has to be ready bit-mapped in memory before we start writing the text lines. Since all the RAM memory was already used for sample storage and the working registers the EEPROM memory was used for this purpose. Although writing in the EEPROM is slow (several ms), reading from it (indirectly) fortunately can be done at full speed. Writing of the bit-mapped characters into the EEPROM is done by the asynchronous part of the program which, as already mentioned, takes care of the user interface. Using a character look-up table the characters are scattered over the EEPROM memory in such a way that the synchronous routine ("line_txt") can read them sequentially at high speed.

Control of the μ SCOPE is very simple. By pushing the cursor button the cursor can be shifted to one of the five menus. Next the selected setting can be changed by pushing the up or down keys. In the left menu a choice can be made between normal operation, freezing of the image, or a hybrid form whereby the input signal is only sampled for a fraction of a second after which the image is frozen. The last function gives a less "nervous" image at higher frequencies. In the second menu a choice can be made for the trigger polarity (pos, neg) it is also possible make the time base free running (-). With the cursor underneath the third menu, the trigger level can be adjusted by pushing the up or down

keys. The trigger level is made visible by a small marker along the left y-axis of the scope image. The fact that only a limited number of trigger levels can be selected is a limitation of the internal voltage reference. By pushing the up (or down) key with the cursor underneath the S all the setting will be stored in EEPROM. If the scope is power-up the next time these setting will be automatically reloaded. In the last menu the time base can be adjusted. The time displayed in the menu is the total time for all 50 samples. Since only 2 characters where available some rounding of the numbers was needed. The exact time base values are: 0.8, 1.6, 3.2, 6.4, 12.8, 25.6, 51.2 and 102.4 ms.

Building your own μ SCOPE

The circuit of the μ SCOPE is so simple that it can easily be build on a piece of test PCB (Fig. 6). Be sure that the contact of the variable capacitor that is connected to the metal "screw" is connected to ground. If you connect it the other way around the oscillator will halt when you adjust the capacitor with a metal screwdriver. For the programming of the 12F675 I use a "Tait style" programmer [1] that is controlled by my PC (an old 286 laptop!) via the printer port. I used the PP06 program [2] running under DOS (I thoroughly detest anything working under WINDOWS). If you would like to use something more advanced then the WISP programmer by Wouter van Ooijen is a good alternative [3,4].

The whole circuit consumes less than 10 mA, so it is very well possible to operate the μ SCOPE from a 4.5 V battery. After the circuit has been checked for any mistakes the video output is connected to the SCART (or AV) input of the TV. After the battery is connected C2 is tuned until a stable image appears. It might be necessary to briefly disconnect the battery to make the oscillator start after C2 has been adjusted. The μ SCOPE is now ready for usage. A simple amplifier may be added at the input if you want to increase the sensitivity. Since we are not dealing with a sophisticated instrument a standard Op-Amp circuit will suffice. A nice extra is the possibility to record the μ SCOPE image on a VCR!

If you get a little bored with the μ SCOPE you might want to try to make your own video-generating program. To lower the threshold to start experimenting in this direction you can use the program EXAMPLE.PIC. This stripped down program just displays a rectangle, a dashed line and a dotted line. It is so simple that it is very easy to follow what is going on, and it allows you to make simple additions and alterations. With some creativity undoubtedly a lot of other fascinating video generating circuits may be created. Hopefully working on it will give you as much pleasure as I have had with the μ SCOPE.

1. www.bobblick.com/techref/projects/picprog/picprog.html
2. pp06.sourceforge.net/pp06.html
3. www.voti.nl/wisp628/index.html
4. www.picbasic.nl/index.html

This circuit and it's source code have been published on the author's web page at www.dos4ever.com/uscope/uscope_e.html.

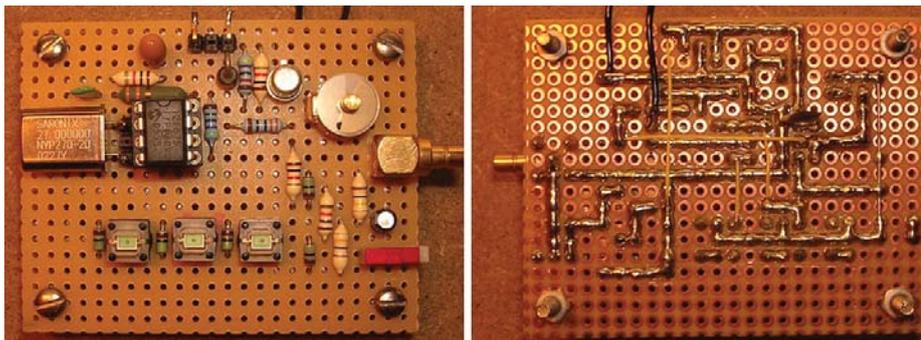


Figure 6. The μ SCOPE on a piece of perfboard.