Low Power Boost Converter for Portable Applications
By Eddy Wells and Mark Jordan

ABSTRACT

The trend in Portable equipment such as Pagers and PDAs is improved performance with reduced real estate, while new features have increased the peak power demands on the battery. This paper describes a compact, integrated boost converter that delivers up to 500mW of peak power from a 1-Volt battery source. Maximum battery utilization is realized by integrating an adaptive current mode control scheme, low on-resistance switches, and synchronous rectification. The converter develops multiple output voltages from a single inductor using a multiplexing technique.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid growth of portable equipment has been fueled by strong customer demand that has resulted from significant advances in digital and RF technologies. Features such as E-mail, Global Positioning Systems (GPS), and two-way communications are making handheld portable instruments more versatile, while many of these new features increase the power demands on the battery. Although battery performance is improving with the introduction of new chemistries, it has not kept pace with the increased functionality found in today's portable equipment. Switch mode power conversion can offer efficiency improvements when compared to linear techniques, increasing battery utilization. Unique challenges exist, however, in implementing a switch mode solution for a battery-powered system. Portable devices have a wide dynamic load range that can vary from a few milliwatts, to hundreds of milliwatts. Many portable devices require the converter to operate off the voltage of a single cell, which depending on the power level of the application can pose a significant challenge.

Battery Selection

The selection of a battery to be used in a portable application will depend upon several factors including initial cost, cell voltage, energy density, and discharge rate. The operating voltage of the battery will influence the choice of converter topology. Energy density and volumetric efficiency will impact the size and weight of the product. In applications where the average discharge rate is high, the initial cost of a rechargeable solution may be justified over the life of the product. Table 1 compares performance parameters for rechargeable battery chemistries commonly used in portable devices.

	Nickel Cadmium	Nickel Metal Hydride	Lithium-Ion
Operating Voltage	1.2 Volts	1.2 Volts	2.5 – 4.2 Volts
Energy density (Wh/kg)	45	55	100
Volumetric efficiency (Wh/liter)	150	180	225
Cost ($/Wh)	0.75-1.5	1.5-3.0	2.5-3.5

Table 1. Rechargeable Battery Chemistry Comparisons

Nickel Cadmium batteries are popular because they have a relatively low cost and offer a mature technology. Nickel Metal Hydride batteries have improved volumetric efficiency and have less environmental concerns than Nickel Cadmium. Lithium-Ion batteries are emerging as a leader in the portable market due to their high energy density. Lithium-Ion batteries have the highest initial cost, however, and their cell voltage decays significantly during discharge.

Disposable Alkaline Cell Performance

For many low power applications, the cost and inconvenience of rechargeable batteries are undesirable. Alkaline is the disposable battery of choice because of a low self discharge (about 5% a year) and a higher energy density than other disposable chemistries. For many applications, such as two-way pagers, the average load on the alkaline battery is low but the peak load can be over 500mW. This can equate to peak currents of more than 500mA from a single cell. Figure 1 shows the voltage of an AA battery dis-

charged at 500mA. Open circuit voltage was measured by removing the load for 10 seconds each minute.
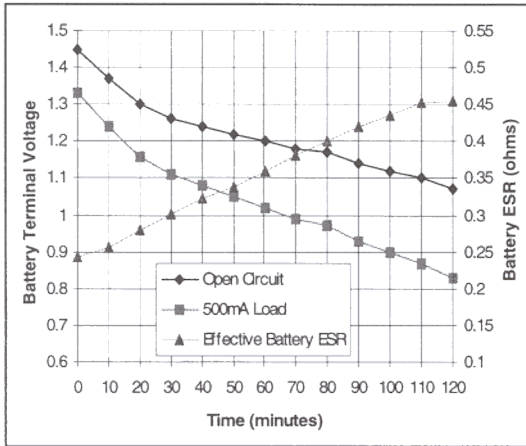

Figure 1. AA Alkaline Battery Voltage at a 500mA Discharge Rate

Battery Equivalent Series Resistance (ESR) is shown in Figure 1 to have a large influence on the actual voltage measured at the terminals. A battery with 1.1 volts at no load, for example, will drop to 0.9 volts with a 500mA load. The power conversion circuitry will need to handle the low voltage droop during these peak power durations. This can often be the limiting factor in the ability to deliver sufficient output power to the application.

ACHIEVING HIGH EFFICIENCY OVER A WIDE DYNAMIC RANGE

Regardless of the battery chemistry selected, the converter efficiency will influence the run time of the device. Portable equipment may require 100's of milliamps when the device is fully functioning. In standby mode, where the device spends a majority of time, the equipment may require less than 1mA. The amount of time the device spends in various modes is heavily dependent upon the user. Because it is difficult to predict how the device will be used, it is important that the converter operates efficiently over a wide dynamic load range.

Discontinuous Mode Efficiency

An analysis of the converter losses can provide insight into determining a control scheme that will operate efficiently. Figure 2 shows a low voltage synchronous boost converter along with the equivalent circuit elements that are major contributors to power loss. Switch capacitance has been reflected to the gate for simplicity.
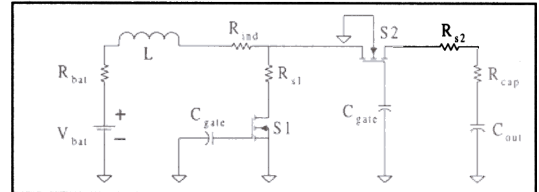

Figure 2. Synchronous Boost Converter and Equivalent Circuit Elements

In order to support a wide dynamic load range with a reasonably small value of inductance, the boost converter needs to operate in discontinuous conduction mode at medium and light loads. Figure 3 shows inductor current in discontinuous conduction mode.
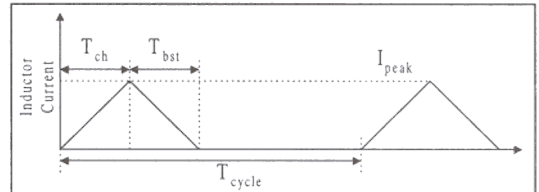

Figure 3. Discontinuous Mode Inductor Current

Discontinuous mode efficiency can be calculated from the input and loss energy for a single conversion cycle. Based of Figures 2 and 3, Table 2 gives approximate energy values and the resulting overall efficiency.

Input Energy	$E_{in} = \frac{1}{2} \cdot I_{peak} \cdot V_{bat}(T_{ch} + T_{bst})$	(1)
Conduction Energy Lost Where:	$E_{conduction} = \frac{I_{peak}^2}{3}(R_{ch}T_{ch} + R_{bst}T_{bst})$ $R_{ch} = R_{bat} + R_{ind} + R_{s1}$ $R_{bst} = R_{bat} + R_{ind} + R_{s2} + R_{cap}$	(2)
Switching Energy Lost	$E_{switch} = 2 \cdot C_{gate} \cdot V_{gate}^2$	(3)
Control Chip Quiescent Current (I_{DD}) Energy Lost	$E_{IDD} = V_{DD} \cdot I_{DD} \cdot T_{cycle}$	(4)
Resulting Efficiency (%)	$Efficiency = 100 \cdot [1 - \frac{(E_{conduction} + E_{switch} + E_{IDD})}{E_{in}}]$	(5)

Table 2. Input and Lost Energy for a single Conversion Cycle in Discontinuous Conduction Mode

These equations can now be used to determine the optimum peak inductor current for the converter in discontinuous conduction mode. Figure 4 shows the losses and overall efficiency versus peak current of an integrated boost converter with a 1.5V input and a 3.3V, 5mA output.
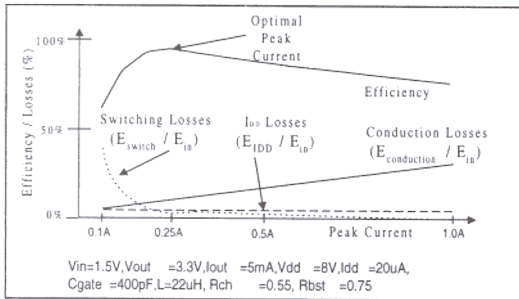

Vin=1.5V,Vout =3.3V,Iout =5mA,Vdd =8V,Idd =20uA,
Cgate =400pF,L=22uH, Rch =0.55, Rbst =0.75

Figure 4. Boost Converter Efficiency -vs- Peak Current for a 5mA Output

As shown in Figure 4, conduction losses dominate with large peak currents, where switching losses dominate with small peak currents. The optimum peak current in this case is around 250mA. It is interesting to note that if the load current is increased to 20mA, or decreased to 1mA, the optimum peak current is still 250mA. In fact, in discontinuous conduction mode, the optimum peak inductor current is independent of load current.

The reason this occurs can be seen by looking at the equations in Table 2 that detail the energy of a single conversion cycle. Input Energy is related to peak current and, for a given value of peak current, is fixed with no dependence on the load current. The conduction energy lost during a single conversion cycle is also fixed for a given peak current regardless of the load. The switching energy lost is only related to gate capacitance and gate drive voltage. The I_{DD} energy lost during a single conversion cycle is affected by the conversion period (T_{cycle}) which is a function of load current. As T_{cycle} increases at light loads, the I_{DD} energy lost will also increase, thereby reducing efficiency. I_{DD} losses (E_{IDD}/E_{IN}) show up as an offset in efficiency however (see Figure 4), which means that I_{DD} will change the efficiency with respect to load current, but not the optimal peak current.

Since discontinuous mode efficiency (for a given converter) is optimized at only one peak current, a control technique that maintains a constant peak current should be selected. With a fixed frequency control technique, the amount of energy delivered to the load is adjusted by keeping the cycle time fixed and controlling the peak current in the inductor. Because peak current is varied, this technique does not offer good efficiency over a wide dynamic load range. With pulsed frequency modulation (PFM) the cycle

time, rather than the peak current, is adjusted to accommodate load variations. This allows an optimal peak current to be chosen that will maximize efficiency in discontinuous conduction mode.

The UCC3941 Synchronous Boost Converter

The UCC3941 is a 500mW boost converter that incorporates a PFM control technique. The part is available in 3 versions, depending on the voltage of the main output: 3.3V, 5V, or adjustable. Figure 5 shows a simplified block diagram of the UCC3941's internal control circuitry along with a typical applications circuit.

All necessary control circuitry is integrated into an 8-pin chip along with synchronous MOSFET switches. Few external components are required, minimizing the board area for the converter. Low quiescent currents are achieved by turning off sections of control circuitry during periods of inactivity. Conduction losses are minimized through the use of low Rdson switches. Equation 6 describes the relationships that determine the Rdson for a MOSFET.

$$R_{DSON} = \frac{1}{(uC_{ox} \cdot \frac{W}{L_{eff}} \cdot (V_{GS} - V_T))} \quad (6)$$

Rdson is inversely proportional to gate drive voltage (V_{GS}) minus the threshold voltage ($V_T = 0.7V$). Other parameters in the equation are fixed for a given switch geometry and silicon process. By generating an 8V supply (V_{GD}) for the gate drive, rather than using the main output voltage (V_{OUT}), conduction losses are lowered by a factor of 2-3. Eight volts achieves the best overall efficiency compromise between switching and conduction losses for the converter. The 8V output can be used to support an additional 10mA of load current for applications requiring an auxiliary output. By lowering conduction losses, the converter can deliver more current to the load at low battery voltages.
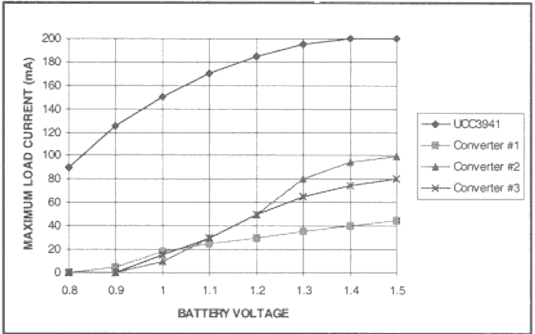

Figure 6. Output Current Capabilities of Boost Converters with 3.3V Outputs

Figure 6 shows the output current capabilities of several low power boost converters with integrated MOSFETs. As the graph indicates, the load current capability of most converters decreases significantly at low battery voltages. Converter number 1 operates
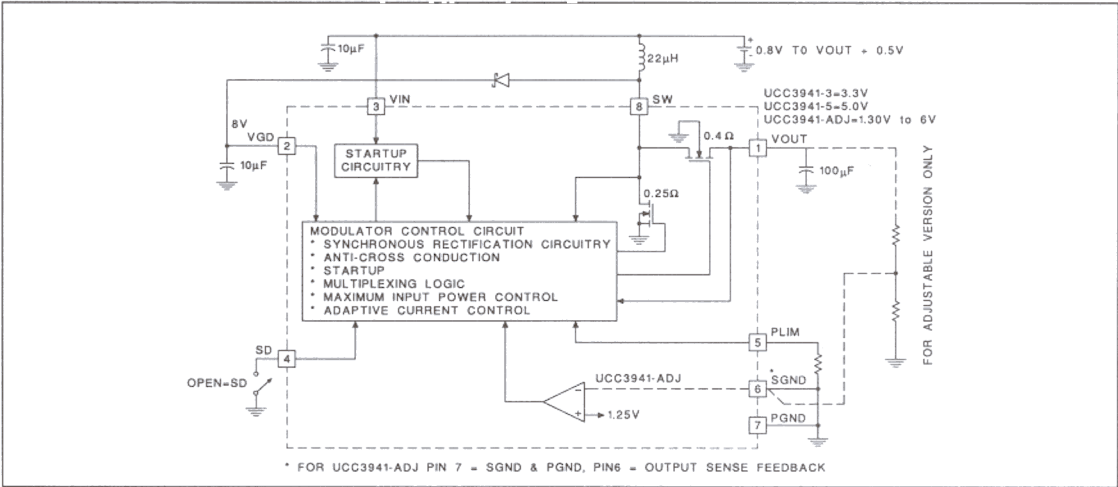

Figure 5. UCC3941 Simplified Block Diagram and Application Circuit

in discontinuous conduction mode and has limited current capabilities. Converters number 2 and 3 increase their output current capabilities with continuous mode operation, but their ability decreases at low input voltages. The UCC3941 achieves improved capability by combining low Rdson switches with continuous mode operation.

Continuous Mode Operation

Discontinuous conduction mode results in a simple control scheme, however, the average load current (reflected to the input) is limited to less than half the peak current. If the peak inductor current is increased, efficiency and the output voltage ripple will suffer. In order to provide increased load current, the UCC3941 is allowed to transition into continuous conduction mode (see Figure 7). In order to keep the control scheme simple, while providing the ability to generate multiple outputs, a pseudo continuous conduction mode is implemented.
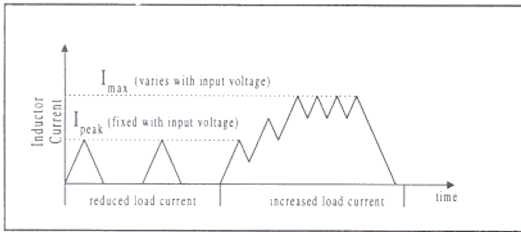

Figure 7. Adaptive Current Mode Control

Referring to Figure 7, if a single discontinuous mode energy pulse is not sufficient to bring the main output into regulation, the current in the inductor is allowed to increase until a maximum current (I_{max}) is reached. The I_{max} level is programmable for the load requirements of the device, so that conduction losses can be minimized. The best continuous mode efficiency is achieved when I_{max} is set just high enough to provide for the peak load current of the particular application. In order to maintain constant input power capability, I_{max} is automatically varied when battery voltage decreases as follows:

$$I_{max} \propto \frac{1}{V_{bat}}$$

(7)

By using a hysteretic control technique, the stability problem of crossing the continu-

ous/discontinuous mode boundary has been eliminated. A detailed description of how the converter transitions between modes and controls the current in the inductor is given in the section titled *"Multiplexed Waveforms"*.

Efficiency Curves

Continuous conduction mode allows increased output power, while discontinuous PFM mode delivers optimal efficiency at light loads. The modes of operation are controlled with an internal state machine that adjusts charge times and current limits. By providing efficient conversion over the usable battery voltage in both modes, operation time is maximized. Figure 8 shows UCC3941 efficiencies over a 200:1 load range.
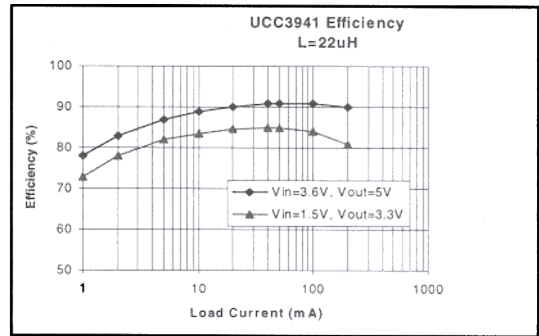

Figure 8. Efficiency as a Function of Load Current, Input and Output Voltage

The upper curve is typical of a Lithium-Ion input and a 5V output. The lower curve is typical of a single cell Alkaline input and a 3.3V output. The converter can deliver 200mA to the load, while maintaining good efficiency down to 1mA.

GENERATING MULTIPLE OUTPUTS

In many portable applications, multiple output voltages are required. The additional voltage may be needed to drive a LCD display, interface logic circuits with a higher voltage driver, provide bias voltage for op-amp circuits, or to generate a trickle charger for a back-up battery. The design challenge is to provide additional outputs without increasing board real estate or compromising efficiency.

Traditional Choices

When multiple output voltages are required from a switching regulator, the circuit designer has tradi-

tionally been limited to a small number of topology choices. A multi tap transformer solution in a forward or flyback configuration can provide multiple positive or negative outputs. This solution generally requires custom magnetics with the associated design, cost, and purchasing headaches. Typically, a single output is chosen for regulation, while the remaining outputs will have some level of cross-regulation dependent upon the loading. If more accurate regulation is required, a magnetic amplifier or post regulator can be used, but the additional board real estate and cost are usually prohibitive for portable applications. A linear regulator is generally employed if regulation on the secondary outputs is required.

At low power levels, charge pump circuits are often utilized to generate additional output voltages. Voltage doublers and triplers, as well as voltage inverters can be implemented with inexpensive diodes and capacitors. Designed with discrete components, parts count can escalate with only a few additional outputs. Efficiency is generally compromised with this technique, due to the presence of large currents during the charge transfer process. If the output voltage is not an integer multiple of the source voltage, some sort of regulation is needed to bring the charge pumped voltage to a desired value. Integrated charge pump solutions exist where the voltage is regulated and the charge current is controlled, thereby improving efficiency, however a separate IC is generally required.

Multiplexed Coil Technique

The UCC3941 incorporates a unique multiplexed coil technique to generate multiple outputs from a single inductor. Energy pulses stored in the inductor are time shared between the outputs depending upon loading. Figure 9 shows a simplified schematic of the basic topology.
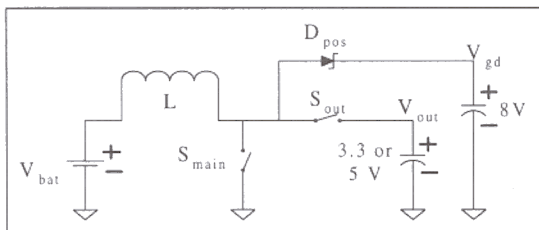
Figure 9. UCC3941 Topology

When either output requires service, S_{main} turns on and current ramps up in the inductor to the discontinuous or continuous peak value. The chip then determines which output will be charged. When V_{out} is charged, S_{out} is closed at the instant S_{main} is opened. When V_{gd} is charged, current is forced through D_{pos} when S_{main} is opened. Due to the presence of large peak currents in the inductor, low ESR capacitors should be used to maintain low ripple voltages on the outputs.

Arbitration

A priority scheme is required to accommodate multiple supply voltages, while providing effective start-up and servicing of the outputs at various load conditions. The arbitration rules for the 3.3V version are as follows:

- If $V_{gd} < 7.6V$, V_{gd} will get priority for service. (start-up)
- If $V_{gd} > 7.6V$ and $V_{out} < 3.3V$, V_{out} will get priority for service.
- If $V_{gd} < 8.7V$ and $V_{out} > 3.3V$, V_{gd} will get priority for service.

In order to guarantee an orderly start-up with input voltages below 1V, the gate drive supply (V_{gd}) is given priority during start-up. Figure 10 shows oscilloscope waveforms of current and voltage during startup.
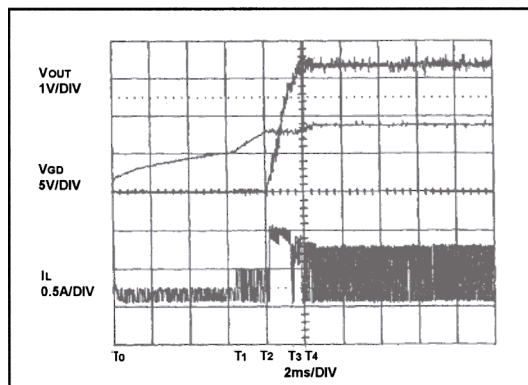
Figure 10. Start-up Waveforms

At time t0, an internal 200kHz oscillator toggles the main switch at 50% duty cycle and V_{gd} starts to rise. V_{gd} gets to a sufficient voltage at time t1 to run the IC in a normal mode. At time t2, V_{gd} has reached

its lower threshold of 7.6V and the arbitration allows V_{OUT} to get started. V_{OUT} has reached 3.3V at time t3, and V_{gd} is allowed to charge to 8.7V. At time t4, both outputs are in regulation and the converter operates normally, servicing the outputs as the load demands.

Multiplexed Waveforms

The UCC3941 converter develops a hysteretic control technique by monitoring the output voltages with comparators. If an output falls below its voltage threshold, the converter will deliver a single or multiple energy pulses to the output until the output comes into regulation. The inductor charge time is controlled by: Ton=12uSec/Vin. In discontinuous conduction mode, this results in a constant peak current, regardless of the input voltage. For a 22uH inductor, the resulting peak current is approximately 500mA. The on time control is maintained, unless the inductor current reaches the I_{max} limit. The inductor discharge time is fixed at Toff=1.7uSec, unless the output rises above its voltage threshold. The short off time allows the inductor current to transition to the I_{max} limit if a single pulse is not adequate. If the output voltage is satisfied after the 1.7uS off time, the charge switch will not be activated, and the inductor current will decay to zero.

Figure 11 depicts typical voltage and current waveforms of the converter servicing two outputs. At time t1, V_{out} drops below its lower threshold, and the inductor is charged for 12uSec/Vin. At time t2, the inductor begins to discharge with a minimum off time of 1.7uS. Under lightly loaded conditions the amount of energy delivered in this single pulse would satisfy the voltage control loop, and the converter would not command any more energy pulses until the output again drops below the lower voltage threshold.

At time t3, the V_{gd} supply has dropped below its lower threshold, but V_{out} is still above its threshold point. This results in an energy pulse to the gate drive supply at t4. However, while the gate drive is being serviced, V_{out} has dropped below its lower threshold, so the state machine commands an energy pulse to V_{out} as soon as the gate drive pulse is completed (time t5).

Time t6, represents a transition between light and heavy loads. A single energy pulse is not sufficient to force the output voltage above its upper threshold before the minimum off time has expired, and a second charge cycle is commanded. Since the inductor does not reach zero current in this case, the peak current is greater than 0.5A at the end of the next charge on time. The result is a ratcheting of inductor current until either the output voltage is satisfied, or the con-
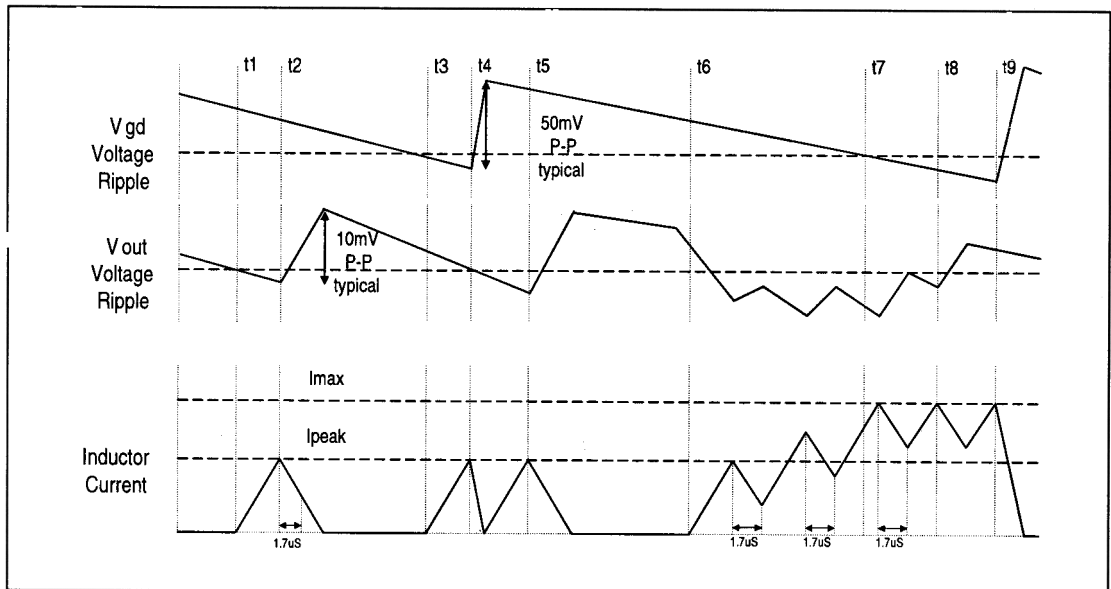

Figure 11. Multiplexed Inductor Servicing Two Outputs

verter reaches its programmed current limit. At time t7, the gate drive voltage has dropped below its threshold but the converter continues to service V_{out} because it has highest priority, unless V_{gd} drops below 7.6V.

Between t7 and t8, the converter reaches its maximum current limit that is determined by the programmed power limit and VIN. Once the limit is reached, the converter operates in continuous mode with approximately 200mA of ripple current. A time t8, the output voltage is satisfied, and the converter can service V_{gd}, which occurs at t9.

Topology Extensions

The multiplexed coil topology can be extended to produce additional outputs. Figure 12 shows a single inductor providing energy to 3 positive outputs and a negative output. The generation of the main output (V_{out}) and gate drive output (V_{gd}) has been explained. The V_{nicd} output is a trickle charger for a Nickel Cadmium battery back-up. In order to produce a fixed, low current, trickle charge the converter delivers low peak current pulses to the V_{nicd} output at fixed intervals of time.

A negative voltage (V_{neg}) is produced by using a fly-back technique with V_{out} and V_{bat}. Negative current is generated by back-charging the inductor through the S_{out} switch. When the inductor current reaches some negative peak, S_{out} is open. Current is then pulled through D_{neg}, charging the V_{neg} output. In order for the flyback technique to operate correctly, the charge stored in the V_{out} capacitor should be several times larger than the charge stored in the V_{neg} capacitor.

CONCLUSION

When selecting a power management solution for a portable application, it is important that the converter operates efficiently over a wide dynamic range. In order to get the most energy from a low voltage power source, the converter should be able to start up and operate below 1V during peak load demands. When additional outputs are required, issues relating to converter efficiency and board real estate can often be critical.
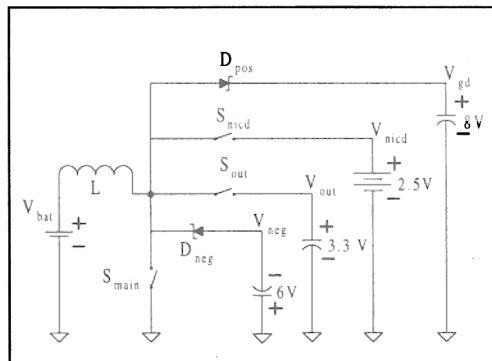

Figure 12. Single Inductor Servicing 4 Outputs

The UCC3941 addresses these issues by incorporating an adaptive control scheme that extends the battery's usable voltage range. High efficiency over a wide dynamic load range is achieved with a constant power continuous current mode and a fixed peak current discontinuous mode. A unique power conversion topology is used, where multiple outputs are generated from a single inductor, resulting in efficient use of board space.

REFERENCES

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[2] "UCC3941 1 Volt Synchronous Boost Converter" Data Sheet, Unitrode Integrated Circuit Corporation.

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