The ReadoutCard userspace driver for the new Alice $O^2$ computing system

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Abstract—The ALICE (A Large Ion Collider Experiment) experiment focuses on the study of the quark-gluon plasma as a product of heavy-ion collisions at the CERN LHC (Large Hadron Collider). During the Long Shutdown 2 of the LHC in 2019-2020, a major upgrade is underway in order to cope with a hundredfold input data rate increase with peaks of up to 3.5 TB/s. This upgrade includes the new Online-Offline computing system called $O^2$.

The $O^2$ readout chain runs on commodity Linux servers equipped with custom PCIe FPGA-based readout cards; the PCIe v3 x16, Intel Arria 10-based CRU (Common Readout Unit) and the PCIe v2 x8, Xilinx Vertex 6-based CRORC (Common Read-Out Receiver Card). Access to the cards is provided through the $O^2$ ReadoutCard userspace driver which handles synchronization and communication for DMA transfers, provides BAR access, and facilitates card configuration and monitoring. The ReadoutCard driver is the lowest-level interface to the readout cards within $O^2$ and is in use by all central systems and detector teams of the ALICE experiment.

This communication presents the architecture of the driver, and the suite of tools used for card configuration and monitoring. It also discusses its interaction with the tangent subsystems within the $O^2$ framework.

Index Terms—Data Acquisition Systems, Drivers, Field Programmable Gate Arrays, Direct Memory Access, Base Address Register

I. INTRODUCTION

ALICE is an experiment at the CERN LHC (Large Hadron Collider) focusing on the study of the quark-gluon plasma - a state of matter which existed shortly after the Big Bang - as a product of heavy-ion collisions. Currently, the second long shutdown (LS2) of the LHC is underway, allowing for preparations for Run3, which will run at significantly higher luminosity. The main physics topics addressed by the upgrade require measurements characterized by a very low signal-over-background ratio, making traditional triggering strategies inefficient. Hence, the Time Projection Chamber (TPC) necessitates the implementation of continuous readout, capable to keep up with an interaction rate of 50kHz \[1\]. During LS2, ALICE is upgrading its detector and software systems to fulfill the above requirements and achieve a higher resolution.

A. The $O^2$ Computing System

The upgrade includes the new Online-Offline computing system which is called $O^2$ \[2\], extending across two major computing slices. The $O^2$/FLP subsystem is comprised of 200 First Level Processors (FLPs) responsible for detector readout. They are equipped with specialized data acquisition cards that interface with the Front-End Electronics (FEE) of the detectors. FLPs are designed to handle triggered and continuous readout operation, without discarding any events. A first-level grouping of the read-out events takes place within the FLPs before the data flow to the next subsystem. $O^2$/FLP also includes the quality control system and services for control, configuration, monitoring, logging and bookkeeping.

The $O^2$/EPN subsystem is comprised of 250 Event Processing Nodes (EPNs) which are responsible for synchronous calibration and reconstruction before the data reaches storage.

For what concerns $O^2$ the data originate from the Readout Cards of the experiment, namely the Common ReadOut Receiver Card (CRORC) and the Common Readout Unit (CRU), which are connected to the Front-End Cards of the detector electronics. In this document we focus on the ReadoutCard userspace driver, which controls and provides a communication interface to the cards of the experiment, serving as the lowest-level interface to them within the $O^2$ framework.

The ReadoutCard package was initially published in \[3\]. Since then the userspace driver has been heavily developed to improve implementation details and extend core functionality. The existing library interfaces have been improved and fragmented to limit their functionality to their expected uses, reducing unnecessary complexity. Moreover, several interfaces have been introduced to facilitate access to new software components. The available tools have been extended to provide a complete suite to configure and monitor the status of the cards. Finally, ReadoutCard has been integrated with the $O^2$ Monitoring \[4\] and $O^2$ Configuration \[5\] components. This paper presents the state of ReadoutCard following these developments.

II. HARDWARE

The readout chain is designed around the two readout cards of the experiments.

A. CRORC

The Common ReadOut Receiver Card \[1\] was used to collect data from the majority of detectors of the ALICE experiment during Run2 \[6\]. It is a PCIe v2 x8 card based on the Xilinx Vertex 6 FPGA, equipped with 12 optical links able to run up to 6 Gb/s each.

The CRORC uses the Detector Data Link (DDL) protocol \[7\]. A big part of its old firmware has been reused and...
extended so that it can address the new needs of the detectors and the O² facility during Run3. This enables the reuse of DDL-enabled hardware from Run2 for a few detectors that would not benefit from higher throughput capabilities.

Fig. 1: CRORC  
Fig. 2: CRU

B. CRU

The Common Readout Unit 2 is the main readout card for the ALICE experiment during Run3. It is based on the PCIe40 hardware designed for LHCb, a PCIe v3 x16 card equipped with the Intel Arria 10 FPGA. Connection to the FEE of the detectors happens via up to 24 optical fibers, which can be used for readout, trigger, timing and/or slow control, depending on individual needs.

The CRU uses the GBT protocol 9 for its readout links and its firmware is under active development 10.

C. FLPs

Following an extensive software and hardware assessment process 11, and a competitive tender, the DELL PowerEdge R740 servers were selected to run the FLP portion of the O² computing facility. The FLPs come in two flavors, silver and gold, depending on computing needs for data processing. Both flavors run CERN CentOS 7 and are equipped with 96GB of DDR4 2666MT/s RAM and a 480GB SSD @ 6 Gbps. The Silver version uses 2 Intel Xeon Silver Cascade-Lake 4210s, each with 10 cores @ 2.2 GHz, whereas the Gold version uses 2 Intel Xeon Gold Cascade-Lake 6230s, each with 20 cores @ 2.1 GHz. A single server may be equipped with up to four CRORCs, or up to three CRUs, depending on detector and FEE topology and configuration.

III. KERNEL DRIVER

The first layer over the PCIe interface to the cards is the PDA (Portable Driver Architecture) UIO (Userspace IO) kernel module 12, developed by the Frankfurt Institute for Advanced Studies (FIAS). PDA also provides a userspace library in C 13 which supports device enumeration and provides a handle to PCIe devices.

Through the PDA handle the following functionality may be exploited:

- Registering DMA memory targets with the IOMMU (Input Output Memory Mapping Unit), which maps the PCIe physical address space to the virtual address space of the CPU. This allows the mapping of separate memory regions to a contiguous memory space, while also preventing invalid memory accesses.
- If the IOMMU component is not physically present in the system or is inactivated, PDA generates DMA scatter-gather lists in order to ensure access to the non-consecutive physical memory spaces of the DMA engine of the device.
- Memory mapping the BAR (Base Address Registers) of the device to a virtual address space. This allows the execution of BAR operations on the process level to be carried out by means of simple memory reads and writes.

IV. USERSPACE DRIVER

ReadoutCard 14 is a C++ userspace driver and library, which wraps around PDA functionality to access and control the cards. Both cards of the experiment, the CRORC and the CRU, are fully supported by the ReadoutCard package, and access is published through a BAR interface as well as a high-level DMA channel interface.

| Table I: CRU/CRORC Access Interfaces |
|-------------------------------------|
| **Card** | **CRU** | **CRORC** |
| Endpoint | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| Link # | 0-11 | 12-23 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| BAR # | 0/2 | 0/2 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| DMA Channel | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

A. Addressing

ReadoutCard accesses the cards on the level of an endpoint, which coincides with a PCIe endpoint.

The CRORC has a total of 6 optical connections, all within a single endpoint, and for each of them a BAR handle can be acquired and a DMA channel opened. In other words, the access granularity level of the CRORC is a link, for all interfaces.

The CRU boasts 24 optical connections, with each physical card separated to two logical endpoints. Each endpoint owns 12 of the 24 links. Contrary to the CRORC, the CRU follows a different scheme to access its links. It publishes 2 BARs per endpoint: BAR 0 publishes DMA related registers and facilitates DMA orchestration on the endpoint level, whereas BAR 2 publishes the rest of the registers, i.e. configuration, monitoring, etc. For what concerns the DMA functionality of the CRUs links, each endpoint orchestrates the DMA transfer through a single DMA channel.

TABLE I summarizes the addressing details that are specific to each card.

ReadoutCard offers multiple ways of addressing an endpoint:

- Using the PCI address comprised of bus, device, and function number assigned to the PCI device (e.g. 3b :00.0).
- Using the Serial ID of the device, a pair of the serial number of the card, which is unique to every physical card, and its endpoint (0 or 1) (e.g. 0233:1).
- Using the Sequence ID of the endpoint, a sequential number assigned by ReadoutCard aiming to simplify development and testing (e.g. #2).
B. Enumeration

For what concerns the PDA driver, PCIe devices are enumerated on kernel module insert. When ReadoutCard requests a handle it receives a handle to a PCI Device, which can, by means of the Vendor and Device ID, be classified as a CRORC or a CRU. Upon receiving the device handle by PDA, ReadoutCard builds upon it to create a RocPciDevice object. This object holds a reference to the PDA device handle, initialized handles to the BAR interface(s) of the device, as well as a CardDescriptor struct. The latter serves as a standalone identifier for a given endpoint, holding addressing information.

The handle acquisition process takes place every time a process requests a device scan, or an interface to a specified device through the ReadoutCard library. Information gathered during the initial stages remains available throughout the lifetime of the process, allowing for an efficient transition between devices and interfaces.

C. Compatibility

The driver is accessing the card at the lowest level through its published registers in the BAR. Between firmware versions the functionality of a given set of registers may change, ranging from a simple shift of control bits to a completely different sub-module. As a result, a firmware incompatibility between what is expected by the driver, and what is used by the device, can lead to an unexpected state within the device or simply faux operations.

To address this, ReadoutCard checks the firmware of the device in question against a list of supported versions. This check is implemented on the level of the DMA interface as well as for the various command line tools which need to be protected. In all cases an option to bypass the check is available, which may be necessary during development and testing in between releases.

D. Synchronization

For its synchronization needs, ReadoutCard employs an internal mutex, which uses an abstract UNIX socket as its underlying locking mechanism, called a SocketLock. The SocketLock attempts to bind to the UNIX socket with the specified name, and if it is successful it keeps the connection open, thus guaranteeing atomic access to the underlying resource, in this case PDA access.

As an example, the PDA library is not thread-safe. It is necessary to ensure that exclusive access is granted whenever a PDA operation is taking place, otherwise the kernel module or the device might end up in an unsafe state, with undefined side-effects.

Even though the SocketLock is not the most performant among modern interprocess synchronization mechanisms (see boost::interprocess [15]), securing access for the needs of ReadoutCard takes a small portion of the execution time which leaves throughput-dependent sections unaffected. Moreover, robustness is much more important, as it is dictated by the large number of users and processes that are active on an FLP at any time. The SocketLock guarantees that in case of a pathological scenario (e.g. a process crash), resources will be automatically released, eliminating the need for any manual intervention.

E. BAR Interface

ReadoutCard utilizes PDA to request a map of the BAR of the device in its virtual memory space. Consequently ReadoutCard implements operations for BAR reads and writes by indexing its BAR-mapped virtual address space. By performing basic BAR limits checks it ensures that only legal BAR accesses are carried out.

BAR accesses are used for all communication with a device, be it data-taking orchestration, configuration, or monitoring. BAR communication needs to be exclusive during data-taking and, depending on the sub-component, during configuration. Atomicity during data-taking is anyway guaranteed as will be discussed in the next section, whereas atomicity during configuration is assured through tangent packages on a case-by-case basis.

As a result the BAR interface does not itself enforce mutual exclusion. This is vital to ensure low-latency and service continuity, as multiple tools and users need to constantly communicate with the cards in a responsive way. The number of concurrent processes accessing the BAR interface of a card is only limited by the resources of the system.

![Fig. 3: BAR class hierarchy](image)

**Implementation**: BAR accesses rely on two interfaces. The RegisterReadWriteInterface defines functions for reading, writing, and modifying a register. The BarInterface defines functions that utilize the BAR and are common between the CRU and the CRORC. The BarInterfaceBase initializes the device if needed, maps the BAR address space to virtual memory, and implements the RegisterReadWriteInterface. The BarInterfaceBase is extended for every card, so as to implement all card-specific operations, resulting in the CruBar and CruBar classes, as seen in figure 3.

F. DMA

DMA is used for data acquisition, which presents the heaviest requirements in terms of throughput. A DMA transfer is facilitated through the use of a DMA channel, which is uniquely opened on the level of an endpoint.

Initializing a DMA channel involves a handshake procedure between the card and the driver, which makes sure that the
card is properly reset and relevant structures on both sides like buffers, FIFOs, and counters are initiated in order to support data-taking. Moreover, a userspace shared memory buffer is registered with PDA as the DMA buffer of the transfer, which is in turn validated by ReadoutCard.

Starting with this process, mutual exclusion needs to be guaranteed, as concurrent actions on the same channel will certainly have unintended consequences, invalidating the conditions of the ongoing transfer and overwriting contended buffer memory, leading to a data-taking halt or corrupted data.

To mitigate this, ReadoutCard once again exploits SocketLock functionality, acquiring the mutex before any hand-shaking takes place, and holding it until the data-taking is finished and relevant buffers have been purged. As a consequence, concurrent attempts to open a DMA channel fail gracefully.

1) Memory Layout: DMA transfers are performed using DMA channel buffers, made up of shared memory, and are comprised of Superpages. A Superpage (usually 1 MiB) is the granularity level on which the driver and the cards communicate. Each Superpage contains DMA pages, which have a variable size of up to 8KiB, even within the same Superpage. Every DMA page includes a header followed by the payload. With regard to its DMA functionality, the driver is agnostic to the content and structure of a Superpage.

2) Communication: As discussed before, DMA channel functionality is always wrapped in a SocketLock acquisition associated with the endpoint in question, which guarantees the mutual exclusion property. It is also necessary to clean up potentially leftover PDA buffers as a result of past process crashes. This action also happens under the protection of a SocketLock, albeit a different one, the one that is tied to PDA communication.

In order to orchestrate the DMA transfer, the DMA channel holds open interfaces to the BAR, or BARs, of the card, and also publishes convenience functions to monitor health metrics of the transaction, such as the number of dropped packets or the FPGA temperature of the card.

On the successful outcome of the above, DMA buffer registration needs to take place. ReadoutCard provides the PDA driver with a pointer to a userspace buffer to be registered for DMA. For performance reasons, this buffer should be as physically contiguous as possible. To address this, ReadoutCard supports hugepage-backed buffers. HugePage support is a Linux kernel feature that enables OS support of memory pages larger than the default (usually 4K). ReadoutCard uses 1GiB hugepages, greatly limiting the number of DMA-related memory pages. As a consequence, memory page swaps to disk and page table entry lookup times are greatly reduced. HugePages have been an asset that was heavily used during development and testing. However, ReadoutCard will accept any shared memory buffer as long as it is contiguous. In any other case the IOMMU needs to be enabled, otherwise an exception will be thrown.

After PDA initializations, DMA buffer registration, and some exchange of information between ReadoutCard and the underlying card have concluded, data-taking may commence. For both CRORC and CRU the underlying mechanism enabling DMA transfers is largely the same and both cards are “superpage aware”. The ReadoutCard functionality with regard to DMA transfers boils down to Superpage address and size information exchange, which is facilitated through the use of two Superpage queues.

The first one is called TransferQueue and manages the “free” Superpages, i.e the Superpages that are empty and which may be populated by the card. When such a Superpage becomes available in the queue, ReadoutCard checks the FIFOs of the enabled links of the card for free slots, and proceeds to push the Superpage, or Superpages, in a round-robin fashion between the links. A Superpage push consists of translating the address of the free Superpage, from the virtual address space of the process to the bus address space, before placing it and its size in the relevant FIFOs and notifying the firmware through the BAR.

When a Superpage is filled, or “ready”, the firmware notifies ReadoutCard by means of an incrementing per-link counter, which will in turn transfer this Superpage to the second queue, the ReadyQueue. Superpages in this queue are already filled.
with data and are ready to be read out by the relevant process.

3) Implementation: The functionality of a DMA channel is dictated by the DmaChannelInterface, which includes interfaces for controlling the DMA state, and interacting with the two Superpage queues and the device.

The DmaChannelBase implements methods that are common between the card-specific classes, takes care of DMA channel locking, and includes the logging facilities.

DMA buffer-related functions are implemented in DmaChannelPdaBase, which also incorporates the high-level DMA start/stop/reset functionality by means of a simple state machine.

Finally, the card-specific DMA Channel classes, i.e. CruDmaChannel and CrocDmaChannel, inherit the above and implement device specific communication, namely the interface to exchange Superpages with the cards.

![DMA class hierarchy](image)

Fig. 6: DMA class hierarchy

V. SOFTWARE

Apart from its userspace driver functionality, the ReadoutCard package also publishes a library which may be primarily used for data-taking through its DMA interface, and control, configuration, and/or monitoring through its BAR interface. Building upon these interfaces, ReadoutCard also provides a set of utilities, the RoC tools, which provide complete solutions for operations that need to be performed on the cards on both development and production contexts.

A. Library

In order to provide adequate support for the needs of the experiment, ReadoutCard provides a number of interfaces with different scopes.

1) DMA: A high-level C++ interface to the DMA channel of the cards, used by processes to perform readout. This is supplied as a well defined API that provides functions to control the DMA state by performing start and stop operations. It also provides functions interfacing the two superpage queues of the driver facilitating the transfer. These functions include operations to push, pop, fill superpages and check the current status of the queues. Moreover the DMA channel offers some convenience functions to get information regarding the underlying card, like its type, PCI address, firmware info, and corresponding NUMA node, as well as to monitor health metrics of the transaction such as the number of dropped packets and the FPGA temperature of the card.

The DMA interface is exploited by $O^2$ Readout [16], the high-level readout process of the experiment, to access the card, initialize, and perform data-taking.

2) BAR: A high-level C++ interface to the BARs of the cards, which is heavily used for the internal needs of the driver and by external tools. External tools normally use an interface that supports only simple BAR operations: read, write, and modify, the RegisterReadWriteInterface. Internally however, ReadoutCard uses a derived interface, the BarInterface, which also defines functions reporting on the status of the cards and facilitating configuration. This offers a complete view of the underlying card for more complex use cases.

Apart from the custom detector solutions utilizing the BAR interface, it also serves as the card communication channel for $O^2$ ALF (Alice Low-level Frontend) [17], the process that publishes interfaces to the cards to DCS (Detector Control System) [18], so that the latter can trigger Slow Control operations through the former.

3) Python BAR: A python wrapper to the BAR interface, used in situations where rapid development cycles are paramount; mainly firmware development and detector teams.

4) CardConfigurator: A C++ interface to a class orchestrating card configuration. The CardConfigurator class is initialized for a specific card with configuration parameters that may be passed programmatically, or parsed from a configuration uri, as facilitated by the $O^2$ Configuration library. It consequently configures all the sub-components of the card in a modular way.

5) Miscellaneous: ReadoutCard also offers a number of interfaces with a more limited scope to publish software component functionality that may be needed by tangent packages. Examples include interfaces to use the Firmware Checker, as described earlier, control the Pattern Player, which controls the pattern player module in the CRU, or header files containing e.g. register addresses.

B. Tools

The CLI tools provide configuration, monitoring, and testing functionality for the readout cards. The ones providing status output have been integrated with the $O^2$ Monitoring facility which takes care of propagating the state to the centrally managed sub-systems. Indicatively:

- roc-list-cards: Lists the available readout cards in the system. Provides addressing options and device information (e.g. firmware version, NUMA node).
- roc-config: Configures the components and links of the cards in a modular fashion. It takes care not to unnecessarily reconfigure modules unless explicitly forced to.
- roc-status: Reports card configuration status, i.e. reports the resulting state of a roc-config execution. It also reports the status of the links, namely if they are UP or DOWN coupled with information regarding the optical connections.
- roc-metrics, roc-pkt-monitor: Report card metrics and packet statistics. These tools differ from
roc-status because they report transient information, specific to the current run state, like the current packet rate.

- roc-bench-dma: Performs readout and extensive error checking. Heavily used to facilitate development and testing cycles, especially in conjunction with the firmware teams.
- roc-reg-read, roc-reg-write, roc-reg-modify Perform the most basic, lowest level, register read, write, and modify operations.

VI. PERFORMANCE

Benchmarks were executed on an FLP, as described in the “Hardware” section, equipped with the Silver version of the CPU and 2 CRUs.

The FLPs are equipped with dual-socket CPUs, forming two areas of locality, where CPUs are directly attached to their own local RAM. In the NUMA (Non-Uniform Memory Access) architecture these are called NUMA nodes. For communication between these two areas, Intel uses the Intel Ultra Path Interconnect (UPI) [19], a low-latency coherent interconnect for scalable multiple-processor systems in a single shared address space.

The readout cards installed on the FLP are connected to one of the two CPU sockets, and thus are part of a single node. In case the process accessing the PCIe endpoint is accessing a NUMA node that is not local to the specific readout card, data will have to flow over the UPI link [?] which for high-throughput DMA transfers, will be a performance bottleneck. It is thus imperative that processes are pinned to the correct NUMA node when running DMA, a requirement which has been addressed by utilizing the numactl utility.

A. DMA Performance

To measure DMA performance, each CRU was configured to use the DDG (DMA Data Generator), an internal module generating packets. In order to maximize throughput 8 optical links were enabled on the endpoint level. The DMA throughput measurements are presented cumulatively with regard to endpoints used and as a function of the superpage size. Moreover, CPU utilization is also measured for the different scenarios. These tests were facilitated by the roc-bench-dma benchmarking tool provided by ReadoutCard. The results can be seen in figure [5].

For a single endpoint, the DMA throughput reaches a stable 53 Gbps, which greatly surpasses the requirement of 8.75 Gbps. In addition, the superpage size does not in any way affect the DMA throughput, which remains stable across the 23KiB to 8 MiB range.

For all 4 endpoints, i.e. the 2 CRUs, concurrently running DMA at full speed, the throughput scales well without any bandwidth losses to give a cumulative 212 Gbps.

Throughput remains unaffected in relation to the superpage size changes for all endpoint layers. The same is not true however for the CPU utilization, for which we see a sharp drop as the superpage size increases. A minimum of 13% of utilization is reached for sizes of 512 KiB to 2 MiB, dictating the optimum size range to be used. Additionally, the low utilization allows for other processes within the FLP to exploit adequate CPU resources for their needs.

B. BAR Performance

BAR performance was measured with the roc-bar-stress tool, which runs a process accessing a single BAR interface and stressing it for a number of operation cycles comprising of sequential read and write operations, at full speed. For the purposes of these benchmarks a process was run for 10 million cycles. The output of this process is equivalent to the total usable bandwidth of a single interface.

For BAR 0 the maximum throughput measured reaches 80 Mbps, or around 2.5 million 32-bit operations per seconds. For BAR 2 the maximum throughput is slightly lower at 70Mbps, which roughly translates to around 2 million 32-bit operations per second. This inconsistency between the two BAR interfaces is due to the fact that they are connected to firmware components which operate on different clocks and thus operate at different speeds. BAR performance is consistently exceeding the operational requirements of the system.

![Fig. 7: NUMA node locality](image)

![Fig. 8: DMA Throughput - Superpage Size - CPU Utilization](image)
BAR 0 is used for DMA, and under normal circumstances should only be accessed by a single process. For BAR 2 on the other hand multiple concurrent processes are expected to run at the FLP at any time, including monitoring daemons as well as user-initiated operations. Consequently, it is important that the bandwidth of the BAR is distributed fairly among all processes and no starvation is observed. This is investigated in \[9\] where increasing the number of instances accessing BAR 2 does not result in a drop of the cumulative throughput of the interface. Moreover, available bandwidth is demonstrably distributed fairly among all actors.

VII. CONCLUSION

ReadoutCard is a userspace driver controlling the two cards of the ALICE $O^2$ computing system. It provides a library with abstract interfaces to access the cards as well as a suite of command-line tools which publish functionality and facilitate development. The ReadoutCard package is the very first layer to access the readout cards within the $O^2$ facility and has been in heavy use by all sub-detectors and sub-systems of the experiment for the last 3 years.

Moving towards operations the ReadoutCard package will continue to adapt to the evolving requirements. Additionally, the suite of tools will be extended to provide more options for debugging both during the detector commissioning phase and production. On the software side, improvements are due with regard to integration with other $O^2$ software components, specifically the ones facilitating Logging \[20\] and Control \[21\]. Lastly, an effort to improve the Continuous Integration for the package is foreseen, which will also cover scenarios for the various detector use cases.

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