

POWER SAVINGS WITH MULTIPLE READOUT CIRCUITS

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

[0001] The invention relates generally to imaging devices, and more particularly to an imager with a multiplexed pixel column architecture having multiple readout chains.

BACKGROUND

[0002] Imaging devices such as complementary metal oxide semiconductor (CMOS) imagers are commonly used in photo-imaging applications.

[0003] A CMOS imager circuit includes a focal plane array of pixel cells, each one of the cells including either a photogate, photoconductor or a photodiode overlying a substrate for accumulating photo-generated charge in the underlying portion of the substrate. A readout circuit is connected to each pixel cell and includes at least an output field effect transistor formed in the substrate and a charge transfer section formed on the substrate adjacent the photogate, photoconductor or photodiode having a sensing node, typically a floating diffusion node, connected to the gate of an output transistor. The imager may include at least one electronic device such as a transistor for transferring charge from the underlying portion of the substrate to the floating diffusion node and one device, also typically a transistor, for resetting the node to a predetermined charge level prior to charge transference.

[0004] In a CMOS imager, the active elements of a pixel cell perform the necessary functions of: (1) photon to charge conversion; (2) accumulation of image charge; (3) transfer of charge to the floating diffusion node accompanied by charge amplification; (4) resetting the floating diffusion node to a known state

before the transfer of charge to it; (5) selection of a pixel for readout; and (6) output and amplification of a signal representing pixel charge. Photo charge may be amplified when it moves from the initial charge accumulation region to the floating diffusion node. The charge at the floating diffusion node is typically converted to a pixel output voltage by a source follower output transistor. The photosensitive element of a CMOS imager pixel is typically either a depleted p-n junction photodiode or a field induced depletion region beneath a photogate. For photodiodes, image lag can be eliminated by completely depleting the photodiode upon readout.

[0005] CMOS imagers of the type discussed above are generally known as discussed, for example, in U.S. Patent No. 6,140,630, U.S. Patent No. 6,376,868, U.S. Patent No. 6,310,366, U.S. Patent No. 6,326,652, U.S. Patent No. 6,204,524 and U.S. Patent No. 6,333,205, assigned to Micron Technology, Inc., which are hereby incorporated by reference in their entirety.

[0006] A typical CMOS imager 10 is illustrated in FIG. 1. The imager 10 includes a pixel array 20 connected to column sample and hold (S/H) circuitry 30. The pixel array 20 comprises a plurality of pixels arranged in a predetermined number of rows and columns (e.g., M rows and N columns). In operation, the pixels of each row in the array 20 are all turned on at the same time by a row select line and the pixels of each column are selectively output by a column select line. A plurality of row and column lines are provided for the entire array 20.

[0007] The row lines are selectively activated by row control circuitry 16 in response to an applied row address. The column select lines are selectively activated by column control circuitry 18 in response to an applied column address. Thus, a row and column address is provided for each pixel. The CMOS imager 10 is operated by the row and column control circuits 16, 18, which

controls the row and column circuitry for selecting the appropriate row and column lines for pixel readout.

[0008] The CMOS imager 10 illustrated in FIG. 1 uses a dual channel readout architecture. That is, the imager 10 includes a first channel ChA and a second channel ChB for pixel image and reset signals (the “pixel signals”) read out of the array 20. Each readout channel ChA, ChB is used to read out half the number of pixels connected to the column S/H circuitry 30. As is known in the art, once read out, the analog reset and pixel signals pass through a readout chain 80, 82 controlled by readout control circuitry 84. Each readout chain 80, 82 may include an amplifier, gain stage and an analog-to-digital converter (ADC), before being processed as digital signals by an image processor. Since each channel ChA, ChB contains its own readout chain 80, 82, there exists an offset and slight gain difference due to process mismatches.

[0009] Many imagers use the Bayer color filter array (CFA) scheme for its pixel arrays. Other imagers may use complementary filters having cyan, magenta, and yellow filters. FIG. 2 illustrates the Bayer scheme for the pixel array 20 illustrated in FIG. 1. Each row of pixels contains two types of CFA's. Row0, for example, contains alternating green 22 (designated as Gr) and red 24 (designated as R) pixels, while Row1 contains alternating blue 26 (designated as B) and green 28 (designated as Gb) pixels. To ensure that the green pixels 22, 28 (Gr, Gb) have the same offset and gain, the signals from the green pixels need to be transferred from the column S/H circuitry 30 to the same channel, e.g., ChA. Further in other aspects, digital correction may be applied to the signals to correct for any remaining offset which would require logic and circuitry not depicted in FIG. 2. Therefore, the first channel ChA will readout the signals from the green pixels 22, 28 (Gr, Gb) while the second channel ChB will readout the signals from the red and blue pixels 24, 26 (R, B).

[0010] FIG. 3 is a circuit diagram of the imager 10 illustrated in FIG. 1. The pixel array 20 comprises M rows and N columns. As can be seen in FIG. 3, the column S/H circuitry 30 comprises multiple column S/H sub-circuits 30_0, 30_1, ... 30_n-1, one for each column in the array 20. Each sub-circuit 30_0, 30_1, ... 30_n-1 is respectively connected to a pixel output line pixout_0, pixout_1, ..., pixout_n-1. The first output channel ChA includes two output lines 70, 72. The second output channel ChB contains two output lines 74, 76. During operation of the imager 10, the pixel output lines pixout_0, pixout_1, ..., pixout_n-1 carry reset and pixel signals from their respective associated pixels in the array 20.

[0011] The column control circuitry 18 provides a column 0 select signal colsel_0, column 0 green pixel select signal colsel0_A, and a column 0 red/blue select signal colsel0_B to the column 0 (first) S/H sub-circuit 30_0. Similarly, the column control circuitry 18 provides a column 1 select signal colsel_1, column 1 green pixel select signal colsel1_A, and a column 1 red/blue select signal colsel1_B to the column 1 (second) S/H sub-circuit 30_1. A global crowbar control signal CB, sample and hold pixel control signal SHS and a sample and hold reset control signal SHR are also provided to the column S/H sub-circuits 30_0, 30_1, ... 30_n-1. The use of these signals CB, SHS, SHR are described below in more detail.

[0012] The global crowbar control signal CB is input into an AND gate 38_0 of the column 0 S/H sub-circuit 30_0. The second input of the AND gate 38_0 is connected to the column 0 select signal colsel_0. The output of the AND gate 38_0 is a crowbar control/select column 0 signal CBsel_0, which is generated only when the colsel_0 and CB signals are activated at the same time.

[0013] The column 0 S/H sub-circuit 30_0 also comprises a biasing transistor 32_0, controlled by a control voltage Vln, that is used to bias its respective pixel output line pixout_0. The pixel output line pixout_0 is also

connected to a first capacitor 42_0 thru a sample and hold pixel signal switch 34_0. The sample and hold pixel signal switch 34_0 is controlled by the sample and hold pixel control signal SHS. In addition, the pixel output line pixout_0 is connected to a second capacitor 44_0 thru a sample and hold reset signal switch 36_0. The sample and hold reset signal switch 36_0 is controlled by the sample and hold reset control signal SHR. The switches 34_0, 36_0 are typically MOSFET transistors, but may also be CMOS switches.

[0014] A second terminal of the first capacitor 42_0 is connected to the first ChB pixel output line 74 via a first column select switch 50_0, which is controlled by the colsel0_B signal. The second terminal of the first capacitor 42_0 is also connected to the first ChA pixel output line 70 via a second column select switch 52_0, which is controlled by the colsel0_A signal. The second terminal of the first capacitor 42_0 is also connected to a clamping voltage VCL via a first clamping switch 60_0.

[0015] The second terminal of the second capacitor 44_0 is further connected to the second ChA pixel output line 72 via a third column select switch 54_0, which is controlled by the colsel0_A signal. The second terminal of the second capacitor 44_0 is also connected to the second ChB pixel output line 76 via a fourth column select switch 56_0, which is controlled by the colsel0_B signal. The second terminal of the second capacitor 44_0 is also connected to the clamping voltage VCL via a second clamping switch 62_0.

[0016] The four column select switches 50_0, 52_0, 54_0, 56_0 are part of a multiplexer 58, the operation of which is described below in more detail. The multiplexer 58 also comprises additional column select switches (e.g., 50_1, 52_1, 54_1, 56_1) from the remaining column S/H sub-circuits 30_1, ..., 30_n-1. The column select switches 50_0, 52_0, 54_0, 56_0, 50_1, 52_1, 54_1, 56_1 are typically MOSFET transistors.

[0017] As is known in the art, the clamping voltage VCL is used to place a charge on the two capacitors 42_0, 44_0 when it is desired to store the pixel and reset signals, respectively from the array 20 (when the appropriate S/H control signals SHS, SHR are also generated).

[0018] Connected between the connection of the first capacitor 42_0 and its sample and hold switch 34_0 and the connection of the second capacitor 44_0 and its sample and hold switch 36_0 is a crowbar switch 40_0. The crowbar switch 40_0 is controlled by the CBsel_0 output from the AND gate 38_0. During readout of column 0, the column 0 S/H sub-circuit 30_0 is selected by the colsel_0 signal, the global crowbar control signal CB is also generated, which causes the CBsel_0 signal to be output from the AND gate 38_0. As such, crowbar switch 40_0 is closed, which shorts the front plates of the two capacitors 42_0, 44_0, driving the respective charges on these capacitors 42_0, 44_0 out to the multiplexer 58.

[0019] Similar to the column 0 S/H sub-circuit 30_0, the global crowbar control signal CB is input into an AND gate 38_1 of the column 1 S/H sub-circuit 30_1. The second input of the AND gate 38_1 is connected to the column 1 select signal colsel_1. The output of the AND gate 38_1 is a crowbar control/select column 1 signal CBsel_1, which is generated only when the colsel_1 and CB signals are activated at the same time. The remainder of the column 1 S/H sub-circuit 30_1 is essentially the same as the column 0 S/H sub-circuit 30_0. Thus, no further description of the column 1 S/H sub-circuit 30_1 is required.

[0020] Assuming that even numbered rows (e.g., Row0, Row2, etc.) have green pixels 22 (Gr) in even numbered columns (e.g., Col0, Col2, etc.) and red pixels 24 in odd numbered columns (e.g., Col1, Col3, etc.), then according to the Bayer CFA pattern, odd rows (e.g., Row1, Row3, etc.) have green pixels 28

(Gb) in the odd numbered columns and blue pixels 26 in the even numbered columns.

[0021] Referring to FIGS. 2 and 3, in operation, the signals from the pixels from Row0 are sampled onto the S/H circuitry 30 first. Even numbered column S/H circuitry (e.g., sub-circuit 30_0) will receive the signals from the green pixels 22 (Gr) from Row0. Odd numbered column S/H circuitry (e.g., sub-circuit 30_1) will receive the signals from the red pixels 24 (R) from Row0. To make sure the signals from the Row0 green pixels 22 go to the first channel ChA, and the signals from the red pixels 24 go to the second channel ChB, the multiplexer 58 described above is included within the column S/H circuitry just prior to the readout lines 70, 72, 74, 76 to the channels ChA, ChB.

[0022] Thus, during the readout operation performed on Row0, the column select switch/transistors 52_0, 54_0 connected to the first channel ChA in each even numbered column (e.g., Col0, Col2, etc.) must be selected in the multiplexer 58. In addition, during the readout operation performed on Row0, the column select switch/transistors 50_1, 56_1 connected to the second channel ChB in each odd numbered column (e.g., Col1, Col3, etc.) must be selected in the multiplexer 58.

[0023] When the Row1 signals are sampled onto the column S/H circuitry 30_0, 30_1, ..., 30_n-1, the even numbered columns (e.g., Col0, Col2, etc.) will have the signals from the blue pixels 26 and the odd numbered columns (e.g., Col1, Col3, etc.) will have the signals received from the green pixels 28 (Gb). Thus, during the readout operation performed on Row1, the column select switch/transistors 52_1, 54_1 connected to the first channel ChA in each odd numbered column (e.g., Col1, Col3, etc.) must be selected in the multiplexer 58. In addition, during the readout operation performed on Row1, the column select switch/transistors 50_0, 56_0 connected to the second

channel ChB in each even numbered column (e.g., Col0, Col2, etc.) must be selected in the multiplexer 58.

[0024] Signals readout onto the first channel ChA are provided to the first readout chain A (e.g., readout chain 80 of FIG. 1) for processing, which, as indicated above may include an amplifier, gain stage and an analog-to-digital converter (ADC), before being processed as digital signals by an image processor (not shown). Similarly, signals readout onto the second channel ChB are provided to the second readout chain B (e.g., readout chain 82 of FIG. 1) for processing, which, as indicated above may include an amplifier, gain stage and an analog-to-digital converter (ADC), before being processed as digital signals by an image processor (not shown). The processing of signals by the first readout chain A is independent of, and can be done in parallel with, the processing of signals by the second readout chain B.

[0025] This use of multiple readout chains decreases the time in which to process all of the signals received from a pixel array. However, this architecture has some drawbacks as each signal readout chain A, B consumes power to process the signals.

[0026] As the demand for higher resolution sensors increases, the power consumption of the imager device also increases. In certain applications, power consumption is an important design consideration. For example, in mobile applications where the supply of power may be limited, power consumption must be limited.

[0027] One approach to limiting power consumption is to provide variable sensing modes. For example, a first sensing mode includes a high resolution mode, where all of the pixels of the imager device are readout and processed. The first sensing mode is used to capture the highest resolution image. A second sensing mode includes a lower resolution mode, where only

some of the pixels of the imager device are readout and processed. The second sensing mode is used for “viewfinder” (e.g., monitor) applications, where a lower resolution may be used.

[0028] However, even though power consumption is decreased by the use of a lower resolution mode, imager devices having multiple readout chains still consume a great deal of power.

[0029] Accordingly, there is a need and desire for a multiple readout chain scheme for an imager having reduced power consumption than prior art multiple readout schemes.

SUMMARY

[0030] The present invention provides a multiple readout chain architecture for an imager having reduced power consumption than currently available readout chain architectures.

[0031] The above and other features and advantages are achieved in various embodiments of the invention by providing an imager that can selectively disable/enable a readout chain and direct signals read from a pixel array to only enabled readout chains. The selective use of readout chains reduces the power consumed by the imager because it allows you to turn off a readout chain. By controlling the enablement and use of readout chains, the imager adjusts the power consumption based on the application. For instance, in a low power consumption mode, only a single readout chain is used to readout signals. Therefore, only one readout chain is enabled, all other readout chains are disabled, and signals are directed to the enabled readout chain for processing.

[0032] In another aspect of the invention, the selective use of readout chains is combined with the selective readout and processing of pixel signals to reduce power consumption.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0033] The foregoing and other advantages and features of the invention will become more apparent from the detailed description of exemplary embodiments provided below with reference to the accompanying drawings in which:

[0034] FIG. 1 is a block diagram of a CMOS imager;

[0035] FIG. 2 illustrates a pixel array that may be used in the imager of FIG. 1;

[0036] FIG. 3 illustrates a circuit diagram of the CMOS imager illustrated in FIG. 1;

[0037] FIG. 4 illustrates a circuit diagram of a CMOS imager constructed in accordance with a first exemplary embodiment of the invention;

[0038] FIG. 5 illustrates a circuit diagram of a CMOS imager constructed in accordance with a second exemplary embodiment of the invention; and

[0039] FIG. 6 shows a processor system incorporating at least one imager device constructed in accordance with an embodiment of the invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

[0040] In the following detailed description, reference is made to the accompanying drawings, which are a part of the specification, and in which is shown by way of illustration various embodiments whereby the invention may be practiced. These embodiments are described in sufficient detail to enable those skilled in the art to make and use the invention. It is to be understood that other embodiments may be utilized, and that structural, logical, and electrical changes,

as well as changes in the materials used, may be made without departing from the spirit and scope of the present invention.

[0041] Now referring to the figures, where like reference numbers designate like elements, FIG. 4 shows a CMOS imager 110 constructed in accordance with a first exemplary embodiment of the invention. The imager 110 includes a pixel array 20, column control circuitry 124, row control circuitry 122, column S/H circuitry 130, readout control circuit 184, readout chain A 80, and readout chain B 82. The pixel signals are output from the column S/H circuitry 130 on either of two output channels ChA, ChB. As described above, each column S/H circuitry 130 selectively outputs a charge accumulated signal and a reset signal to one of either output channel ChA or ChB.

[0042] The pixel array 20 comprises M rows and N columns. The column S/H circuitry 130 comprises multiple column S/H sub-circuits (not shown) similar to those described above with respect to FIGS. 1 to 3.

[0043] The column control circuitry 124 selectively couples a column S/H circuit 130 to one of the readout chains 80, 82 through a respective channel ChA, ChB. More, specifically, the column control circuitry 124 selectively couples a sub-circuit (e.g., sub-circuit 30_0, FIG. 3) of column S/H circuit 130 to a respective channel ChA, ChB through appropriately controlling the multiplexer 58 within the sub-circuit. Further, the use of a multiplexer 58 (FIG. 3) requires minimal changes to the programming of the imager device 110 and is thus easily implemented.

[0044] As seen in FIG. 4, Readout control circuit 184 is connected to readout chains 80, 82. The readout control circuit 184 controls the operation of the readout chains 80, 82, e.g., whether a readout chain is enabled or disabled for use. That is, the readout control circuit 184 controls operation of the circuits within each of the readout chains 80, 82. For example, the readout control

circuit 184 controls an amplifier, gain stage and an analog-to-digital converter (ADC) within the readout chains 80, 82. Further, the readout control circuit 184 controls the status of the readout chain 80, 82 (i.e., whether the readout chain 80, 82 is enabled or disabled for use). For example, in a standard operational mode of the imager device 110, both readout chains 80, 82 are enabled. That is, both readout chains 80, 82 process signals from column sample and hold circuitry 130. In a power saving operational mode of the imager device 110, one of the readout chains 80, 82 is enabled while the other is disabled. That is, only one of the readout chains 80, 82 processes signals from column sample and hold circuitry 130.

[0045] The column control circuit 124 incorporates the status of the readout chains 80, 82 (i.e., standard or power-saving operational mode) into the selection of which channel ChA, ChB a column S/H circuit 130. For example, when the imager device 110 is operating in a standard operational mode, both readout chains 80, 82 are enabled, and signals on channels ChA, ChB are directed to a respective readout chain 80, 82, i.e., signals from column S/H circuitry 130 carried on channel ChA are directed to readout chain 80 and signals from column S/H circuitry 130 carried on channel ChB are directed to readout chain 82.

[0046] When the imager device 110 is operating in a power saving operational mode, one of the readout chains 80, 82 is enabled and the other readout chain is disabled; signals from the column S/H circuitry 130 are coupled to the channel coupled to the active readout chain. That is, if readout chain 80 is enabled and readout chain 82 is disabled, signals from sample and hold circuitry 130 are coupled to channel ChA and provided to readout chain 80. The column control circuitry 124 controls signals such that signals from only one of the channels ChA, ChB are directed to the selected readout chain at a time. Hence, in a power saving operational mode, the column control circuitry 124

controls the multiplexer 58 to alternate between directing signals from sample and hold circuitry 130 carried on channel ChA and on channel ChB to the enabled readout chain 80, 82.

[0047] Thus with the architecture illustrated in FIG. 4, the imager 110 of the invention achieves a benefit over the typical imager 10 illustrated in FIG. 1. For example, the imager device 110 is capable of using multiple readout chains 80, 82 to provide quicker signal processing. In addition, the imager device selectively reduces the power consumption by disabling one readout chain and enabling the other readout chain when desired. This architecture is particularly advantageous in applications where the supply of power is limited and, therefore, desirable that the consumption of power is reduced.

[0048] Now referring to the figures, where like reference numbers designate like elements, FIG. 5 shows a CMOS imager 510 constructed in accordance with a second exemplary embodiment of the invention. The imager 510 includes a pixel array 20, column control circuitry 524, row control circuitry 122, column S/H circuitry 530, readout control circuit 584, readout chain A 580, readout chain B 582, and a switch 598. The pixel signals are output from the column S/H circuitry 530 on either of two output channels ChA, ChB.

[0049] The pixel array 20 comprises M rows and N columns. The column S/H circuitry 530 comprises multiple column S/H sub-circuits (not shown) similar to those described above with respect to FIGS. 1 to 3.

[0050] The switch 598 contains circuitry for selectively connecting the output channels ChA, ChB from the column S/H circuitry 530 to the readout chains 580, 582. In the illustrated embodiment, the first channel ChA is selectively connected through multiplexor switch 595 to readout chain 580 and through multiplexor switch 597 to readout chain 582. Channel ChB is selectively connected through multiplexor switch 595 to readout chain 580 and

through multiplexor switch 597 to readout chain 582. Although shown with two multiplexor switches 595, 597, the number of multiplexor switches is related to the number of readout chains and the number of output channels from the column S/H circuitry 530. Thus, the invention is not limited to two multiplexer switches.

[0051] Readout control circuit 584 is connected to multiplexor switch 595 and controls whether channel ChA or channel ChB is connected to readout chain 580. Further, readout control circuit 584 is connected to multiplexor switch 597 and controls whether channel ChA or channel ChB is connected to readout chain 582. The readout control circuit 584 controls whether a readout chain is enabled or disabled for use. The operation of multiplexor switch 595 and the readout control circuit 584 is described more fully below.

[0052] By placing the switch 598 between the column sample and hold circuitry 530 and the readout chains 580, 582, the imager 510 uses a simple control scheme to connect the channels ChA, ChB to the readout chains 580, 582. Further, the addition of a switch 598 requires minimal changes to the architecture of the imager device 510 and is thus easily implemented.

[0053] The readout control circuit 584 controls the operation of the readout chains 580, 582. That is, the readout control circuit 584 controls operation of the circuits within each of the readout chains 580, 582. For example, the readout control circuit 584 controls an amplifier, gain stage and an analog-to-digital converter (ADC) within the readout chains 580, 582. Further, the readout control circuit 584 controls the status of the readout chain 580, 582 (i.e., whether the readout chain 580, 582 is enabled or disabled for use). For example, in a standard operational mode of the imager device 110, both readout chains 580, 582 are enabled. That is, both readout chains 580, 582 process signals from column sample and hold circuitry 530. In a power saving operational mode of the imager device 510, one of the readout chains 580, 582

is enabled while the other is disabled. That is, only one of the readout chains 580, 582 processes signals from column sample and hold circuitry 530.

[0054] The readout control circuit 584 incorporates the status of the readout chains 580, 582 (i.e., standard or power-saving operational mode) into the control and operation of multiplexor switch 595. For example, when the imager device 510 is operating in a standard operational mode, both readout chains 580, 582 are enabled, and signals on channels ChA, ChB are directed to a respective readout chain 580, 582, i.e., signals from sample and hold circuitry 530 carried on channel ChA are directed to readout chain 580 and signals from sample and hold circuitry 530 carried on channel ChB are directed to readout chain 582.

[0055] When the imager device 510 is operating in a power saving operational mode, one of the readout chains 580, 582 is enabled and the other readout chain is disabled; signals on both channels ChA, ChB are directed to the same readout chain 580, 582. That is, if readout chain 580 is enabled and readout chain 582 is disabled, signals from sample and hold circuitry 530 carried on channel ChA are directed to readout chain 580 and signals from sample and hold circuitry 530 carried on channel ChB are also directed to readout chain 580. The readout control circuit 584 controls the switch 598 such that signals from only one of the channels ChA, ChB are directed to the selected readout chain at a time. Hence, in a power saving operational mode, the switch 598 alternates between directing signals from sample and hold circuitry 530 carried on channel ChA and on channel ChB to the enabled readout chain 580, 582.

[0056] Thus with the architecture illustrated in FIG. 5, the imager 510 of the invention achieves a benefit over the typical imager 10 illustrated in FIG. 1. For example, the imager device 510 is capable of using multiple readout chains 580, 582 to provide quicker signal processing. In addition, the imager device selectively reduces the power consumption by disabling one readout chain and

enabling the other readout chain when desired. This architecture is particularly advantageous in applications where the supply of power is limited and, therefore, desirable that the consumption of power is reduced.

[0057] In another aspect of the invention, power consumption is further reduced by the selective enablement and use of the imager device's readout chains in combination with a selective readout of pixel signals from the pixel array. In a standard readout mode of an imager device having an $M \times N$ pixel array, all, or most, of the pixels are read out. In a selective readout mode, a reduced number of the pixels of the array are readout and processed. That is, in a standard read out m' rows of pixels are readout and processed, where m' is less than, or equal to, M , and in a selective readout mode, m'' rows of pixels are readout and processed, where m'' is less than m' . Further, in a standard read out n' columns of pixels are readout and processed, where n' is less than, or equal to, N , and in a selective readout mode, n'' columns of pixels are readout and processed, where n'' is less than n' .

[0058] In a preferred embodiment, pixels signals are selected in a "skipmode" as is known in the art. A skipmode balances the desire to reduce the number of pixels that are read from the pixel array with the need to provide representative color levels and image pixels. In pixel arrays that use Bayer filters, as described above, pixels in a row of a pixel array are selected as pairs of adjacent pixels that alternate between pairs of adjacent pixels that are not selected. For example, in a pixel array having 12 rows x 12 columns, pixels in columns 1, 2, 5, 6, 9, and 10 are selected for readout and pixels in columns 3, 4, 7, 8, 11, and 12 are not selected for readout. Further, only some of the rows of the pixel array are selected for readout; preferably in alternating pairs of adjacent rows. For example, rows 1, 2, 5, 6, 9, and 10 are selected for readout and pixels in rows 3, 4, 7, 8, 11, and 12 are not selected for readout. Thus, representative pixels are readout from selected columns of selected rows.

[0059] Thus with the architecture illustrated in FIG. 4 or FIG. 5 and selection of a reduced number of pixels to be readout, the imager of the invention achieves a benefit over the typical imager 10 illustrated in FIG. 1. For example, in addition to the imager device selectively reducing power consumption by disabling one readout chain and enabling at least one other readout chain as indicated above, the imager device also reduces power consumption by reading out fewer than all of the pixels of the pixel array. This architecture is particularly advantageous in applications where the supply of power is limited and therefore consumption of power is reduced (e.g., in mobile devices that include imagers having limited battery power).

[0060] FIG. 6 shows system 600, a typical processor based system modified to include an imager device 610 constructed in accordance with an embodiment of the invention. That is, imager device 610 may be the device 110 described above with reference to FIG. 4 or device 510 described above with reference to FIG. 5. Examples of processor based systems, which may employ the imager device 610, include, without limitation, computer systems, camera systems, scanners, machine vision systems, vehicle navigation systems, video telephones, surveillance systems, auto focus systems, star tracker systems, motion detection systems, image stabilization systems, and others.

[0061] System 600 includes a central processing unit (CPU) 602 that communicates with various devices over a bus 620. Some of the devices connected to the bus 620 provide communication into and out of the system 600, illustratively including an input/output (I/O) device 606 and imager device 610. Other devices connected to the bus 620 provide memory, illustratively including a random access memory (RAM) 604, hard drive 612, and one or more peripheral memory devices such as a floppy disk drive 614 and compact disk (CD) drive 616. The imager device 610 may be combined with a

processor, such as a CPU, digital signal processor, or microprocessor, in a single integrated circuit.

[0062] The present invention has been illustrated as having two output channels ChA, ChB. It should be appreciated that the present invention may be used with imagers having more than two channels. Essentially, all that would be required is for the switch 198 to be connected to more columns and column S/H circuitry to accommodate the extra channels. In addition, the present invention may be used with black and white and grayscale imagers having two or more output channels.

[0063] Additionally, the invention may utilize alternative circuitry for controlling/directing signals from disabled readout chains to enabled readout chains and still maintain the spirit of the invention. For example, circuits within the column sample and hold circuitry compensate for readout chains not being enabled, and direct signals on channels to enabled readout chains. Although described in reference to reducing the number of pixels read from the pixel array by utilizing a "skipmode" approach, the invention is not so limited, and alternative approaches may be utilized and still maintain the spirit of the invention.

[0064] The processes and devices described above illustrate preferred methods and typical devices of many that could be used and produced. The above description and drawings illustrate embodiments, which achieve the objects, features, and advantages of the present invention. However, it is not intended that the present invention be strictly limited to the above-described and illustrated embodiments. Any modification, though presently unforeseeable, of the present invention that comes within the spirit and scope of the following claims should be considered part of the present invention.

[0065] What is claimed as new and desired to be protected by Letters Patent of the United States is:

1. An imager device comprising:
 - a pixel array;
 - first and second readout chains; and
 - a switch circuit coupling said pixel array with said first and second readout chains and being operable, in a first mode, to couple said pixel array to said first and second readout chains and being operable, in a second mode, to couple said pixel array to one of said first and second readout chains.
2. The imager device of claim 1, wherein said switch circuit is located with the column sample and hold circuitry.
3. The imager device of claim 1, wherein said switch circuit is located between the column sample and hold circuitry and said first and second readout chains.
4. The imager device of claim 1, wherein said switch circuit further comprises:
 - first and second multiplexer switches for receiving signals from said pixel array and providing said signals to said readout chains.
5. The imager device of claim 1, further comprising a control circuit for controlling said switch circuit to operate in said first and second modes.
6. The imager device of claim 4, further comprising a control circuit for controlling said switch circuit to operate in said first and second modes.

7. The imager device of claim 6, further comprising sample and hold circuitry coupled between said pixel array and said first and second readout chains.
8. The imager device of claim 6, further comprising row control circuitry coupled to said pixel array for controlling row access to said pixel array.
9. The imager device of claim 6, further comprising column control circuitry coupled to sample and hold circuitry for controlling the sample and hold circuitry.
10. The imager device of claim 3, wherein each readout chain comprises an amplifier.
11. The imager device of claim 3, wherein each readout chain comprises an analog-to-digital converter.
12. The imager device of claim 3, wherein each readout chain comprises a gain stage.
13. The imager device of claim 3, wherein each readout chain comprises an amplifier, an analog-to-digital converter, and a gain stage.
14. An imager device comprising:
 - a plurality of pixels arranged in at least a first and second column, each column having a column line to which pixels in the column can be connected;
 - first and second readout chains for reading out signals output from the pixels on said column lines; and

- a multiplexer respectively coupling said column lines of said first and second columns with said first and second readout chains in a first mode, in a second mode, coupling said column lines of said first and second columns to one of said first and second readout chains.
15. The imager device of claim 14, wherein the plurality of pixels comprises an array of complementary metal oxide semiconductor pixels.
16. The imager device of claim 14, wherein said multiplexer is controlled such that signals associated with a first pixel type are read out by said first readout chain and signals of a pixel type different than the first pixel type are read out by said second readout chain.
17. The imager device of claim 16, wherein the first pixel type is a first pixel color and the pixel type other than the first pixel type is at least a second pixel color.
18. The imager device of claim 16, wherein the first pixel type is a first pixel color and the pixel type other than the first pixel type comprises second and third pixel colors.
19. The imager device of claim 14, further comprising:
- a control circuit connected to and supplying control signals to said multiplexer; and
- a column decoder for controlling said multiplexer to operate in said first and second mode.
20. The imager device of claim 19, wherein each readout chain includes at least one readout amplifier.

21. The imager device of claim 14, wherein each readout chain comprises a gain stage circuit.
22. The imager device of claim 21, wherein said gain stage circuit includes at least one gain stage amplifier.
23. The imager device of claim 14, wherein each readout chain comprises an analog to digital converter circuit.
24. The imager of claim 14, wherein each readout chain comprises an amplifier, analog to digital converter circuit, and a gain stage.
25. An imager device comprising:
 - a plurality of pixels arranged in N columns, each column having a respective column line to which the pixels in the column can be connected;
 - a plurality Y of readout chains for reading out signals output from said pixels; and
 - a multiplexing circuit for coupling, in one operating mode, each of said N column lines to one of said Y readout chains and, in another operating mode, coupling each of said N columns to one of X readout chains, wherein said X readout chains are a subset of said plurality Y of readout chains.
26. The imager device of claim 25, wherein in said another operating mode, said Y readout chains not included in said X readout chains are disabled.
27. The imager device of claim 25, wherein the first operating mode is a readout operation in which all of said Y readout chains are enabled and in the another operating mode only X readout chains are enabled.

28. An imager device comprising:
- first and second readout chains for reading out signals output from column lines of a pixel array;
 - a multiplexer coupling said column lines with said first and second readout chains; and
 - a readout control circuit for controlling, enabling and disabling said first and second readout chains based on an operating mode.
29. The imager device of claim 28, wherein said readout control circuit is operable in first mode to enable said first and second readout chains, and is operable in a second mode to enable said first readout chain and disable said second readout chain.
30. The imager device of claim 28, wherein said multiplexer is operable, in a first mode, to respectively couple said column lines to said first and second readout chains
31. The imager device of claim 30, wherein said multiplexer is operable, in a second mode, to couple said first and second column lines to one of said first and second readout chains.
32. An imager device comprising:
- an array of pixels arranged in m columns and n rows, each of said m columns having a respective column line to which pixels in the column can be connected;
 - a row control circuit coupled to and controlling access to said rows;
 - a column control circuit coupled to and controlling access to said columns;

- first and second readout chains for reading out signals output from said array of pixels on said column lines; and
- a multiplexer coupling said column lines with a first and second readout chains and is operable, in first mode, to respectively couple said first and second column lines to said first and second readout chains and is operable, in a second mode, to respectively couple said first and second column lines to one of said first and second readout chains.
33. The device of claim 32, wherein said row control circuit is operable, in said first mode to enable reading from m' rows, and is operable, in said second mode to enable reading from m'' rows, where m'' is less than m' , and where m' is at most m .
34. The device of claim 33, wherein in said second mode, said rows are read in an alternating fashion between reading two adjacent rows and skipping two adjacent rows.
35. The device of claim 32, wherein said column control circuit is operable, in said first mode to enable reading from n' columns, and is operable, in said second mode to enable reading from n'' columns, where n'' is less than n' , where n' is at most n .
36. The device of claim 35, wherein in said second mode, said columns are read in an alternating fashion between reading two adjacent columns and skipping two adjacent columns.
37. The device of claim 33, wherein said column control circuit is operable, in said first mode to enable reading from n' columns, and is operable, in said second mode to enable reading from n'' columns, where n'' is less than n' , where n' is at most n .

38. The device of claim 35, wherein in said second mode, said columns are read in an alternating fashion between reading two adjacent columns and skipping two adjacent columns, and said rows are read in an alternating fashion between reading two adjacent rows and skipping two adjacent rows.
39. The device of claim 32, further comprising a readout control circuit for controlling, enabling and disabling said first and second readout chains, said readout control circuit is operable in said first mode to enable said first and second readout chains, and is operable in said second mode to enable said first readout chain and disable said second readout chain.
40. The device of claim 39, further comprising a readout control circuit for controlling, enabling and disabling said first and second readout chains, said readout control circuit is operable in said first mode to enable said first and second readout chains, and is operable in said second mode to enable said first readout chain and disable said second readout chain.
41. A processor system comprising:
- a processor; and
 - an imager device comprising:
 - a control circuit connected to and supplying control signals to said multiplexer and a column decoder controlling said multiplexer to operate in said first and second mode;

a plurality of pixels arranged in at least a first and second column,
each column having a column line to which pixels in the
column can be connected;

first and second readout chains for reading out signals output from
the pixels on said column lines; and

a multiplexer respectively coupling said column lines of said first and
second columns with said first and second readout chains in a
first mode, in a second mode, coupling said column lines of
said first and second columns to one of said first and second
readout chains.

42. The system of claim 41, wherein the plurality of pixels comprises an
array of complementary metal oxide semiconductor pixels.
43. The system of claim 41, wherein said multiplexer is controlled such that
signals associated with a first pixel type are read out by said first
readout chain and signals of a pixel type different than the first pixel
type are readout by said second readout chain.
44. The system of claim 41, wherein the first pixel type is a first pixel color
and the pixel type other than the first pixel type is at least a second
pixel color.
45. The system of claim 41, wherein the first pixel type is a first pixel color
and the pixel type other than the first pixel type comprises second and
third pixel colors.
46. The system of claim 41, further comprising:

a control circuit connected to and supplying control signals to said
multiplexer, and

- a said column decoder controlling said multiplexer to operate in said first and second mode.
47. The system of claim 41, wherein said first readout chain comprises a readout circuit.
48. The system of claim 47, wherein said readout circuit includes at least one readout amplifier.
49. The system of claim 41, wherein said first readout chain comprises a gain stage circuit.
50. The system of claim 49, wherein said gain stage circuit includes at least one gain stage amplifier.
51. The system of claim 41, wherein said first readout chain comprises an analog to digital conversion circuit.
52. A processor system comprising:
- a processor; and
 - an imager device comprising:
 - a plurality of pixels arranged in N columns, each column having a respective column line to which the pixels in the column can be connected;
 - a plurality Y of readout chains for reading out signals output from said pixels; and
 - a multiplexing circuit for coupling, in one operating mode, each of said N column lines to one of said Y readout chains and, in another operating mode, coupling each of said N columns to one of X readout chains,

wherein said X readout chains are a subset of said plurality Y of readout chains.

53. The processor system of claim 52, wherein in said another operating mode, said Y readout chains not included in said X readout chains are disabled.
54. The processor system of claim 52, wherein the first operating mode is a readout operation in which all of said Y readout chains are enabled and in the another operating mode only X readout chains are enabled.
55. A processor system comprising:
- a processor; and
 - an imager device comprising:
 - first and second readout chains for reading out signals output from column lines of a pixel array;
 - a multiplexer coupling said column lines with said first and second readout chains; and
 - a readout control circuit for controlling, enabling and disabling said first and second readout chains based on an operating mode.
56. The processor system of claim 55, wherein said readout control circuit is operable in first mode to enable said first and second readout chains, and is operable in a second mode to enable said first readout chain and disable said second readout chain.
57. The processor system of claim 55, wherein said multiplexer is operable, in a first mode, to respectively couple said column lines to said first and second readout chains

58. The processor system of claim 57, wherein said multiplexer is operable, in a second mode, to couple said first and second column lines to one of said first and second readout chains.
59. A processor system comprising:
- a processor; and
 - an imager device comprising:
 - an array of pixels arranged in n columns and m rows, each of said m columns having a respective column line to which pixels in the column can be connected;
 - a row control circuit coupled to and controlling access to said rows;
 - a column control circuit coupled to and controlling access to said columns;
 - first and second readout chains for reading out signals output from said array of pixels on said column lines; and
 - a multiplexer coupling said column lines with said first and second readout chains and is operable, in first mode, to respectively couple said first and second column lines to said first and second readout chains and is operable, in a second mode, to couple said first and second column lines to one of said first and second readout chains.
60. The system of claim 59, wherein said row control circuit is operable, in said first mode to enable reading from m' rows, and is operable, in

said second mode to enable reading from m'' rows, where m'' is less than m' , and where m' is at most m .

61. The system of claim 60, wherein in said second mode, said rows are read in an alternating fashion between reading two adjacent rows and skipping two adjacent rows.
62. The system of claim 59, wherein said column control circuit is operable, in said first mode to enable reading from n' columns, and is operable, in said second mode to enable reading from n'' columns, where n'' is less than n' , where n' is at most n .
63. The system of claim 59, wherein in said second mode, said columns are read in an alternating fashion between reading two adjacent columns and skipping two adjacent columns.
64. The system of claim 60, wherein said column control circuit is operable, in said first mode to enable reading from n' columns, and is operable, in said second mode to enable reading from n'' columns, where n'' is less than n' , where n' is at most n .
65. The system of claim 62, wherein in said second mode, said columns are read in an alternating fashion between reading two adjacent columns and skipping two adjacent columns, and said rows are read in an alternating fashion between reading two adjacent rows and skipping two adjacent rows.
66. The system of claim 59, further comprising a readout control circuit for controlling, enabling and disabling said first and second readout chains, said readout control circuit is operable in said first mode to enable said first and second readout chains, and is operable in said

second mode to enable said first readout chain and disable said second readout chain.

67. The system of claim 66, further comprising a readout control circuit for controlling, enabling and disabling said first and second readout chains, said readout control circuit is operable in said first mode to enable said first and second readout chains, and is operable in said second mode to enable said first readout chain and disable said second readout chain.

68. A method of operating an imager device, said method comprising the steps of:

outputting signals associated with a first pixel type associated with a first column of pixels to a first channel;

outputting signals associated with a second pixel type associated with a second column of pixels to a second channel;

in a first mode, directing signals from said first channel to one of a first and second readout chain, directing signals from said second channel to the other of said first and second readout chain; and

in a second mode, directing signals from said first and second channels to one of said first and second readout chains.

69. The method of claim 68, wherein said step of directing in a first mode further comprises coupling said first channel to one of said first and second readout chains, coupling said second channel to the other of said first and second readout chains.

70. The method of 68, wherein said step of directing in a second mode further comprises coupling said first and second channel to one of said first and second readout chains.
71. The method of claim 70, wherein said step of coupling comprises:

determining whether said imager is in a second mode; and

if it is determined that the second mode is true, determining which of said first and second readout chains is enabled.
72. The method of claim 68, further comprising:

storing signals associated with said first pixel type in a first storage device associated with said first column of pixels; and

storing signals associated with a type other than the first pixel type in a second storage device associated with said second column of pixels.
73. A method of operating an imager device, said method comprising the steps of:

in a first mode, reading signals associated with a first group of pixels from a pixel array;

in a second mode, reading signals associated with a second group of pixels from a pixel array, where said second group of pixels is a subset of the said first group of pixels;

outputting signals associated with said first group of pixels to any of a first and second readout chains; and

outputting signals associated with said second group of pixels to one of said first and second readout chains.

74. The method of claim 73, further comprising in a second mode, disabling one of said first and second readout chains.
75. The method of claim 74, wherein said step of outputting signals associated with said second group of pixels further comprises determining which of said first and second readout chains is enabled, directing signals from said second group of pixels to the enabled of said first and second readout chains.
76. The method of claim 73, wherein said step of reading signals associated with said second group of pixels further comprises: reading from pixels of some of the columns of said pixel array.
77. The method of claim 73, wherein said step of reading signals associated with said second group of pixels further comprises: reading from pixels of some of the rows of said pixel array.
78. The method of claim 73, wherein said step of reading signals associated with said second group of pixels further comprises: reading from pixels of alternating adjacent pairs of columns of said pixel array.
79. The method of claim 73, wherein said step of reading signals associated with said second group of pixels further comprises: reading from pixels of alternating adjacent pairs of rows of said pixel array.
80. The method of claim 78, wherein said step of reading signals associated with said second group of pixels further comprises: reading from pixels of alternating adjacent pairs of rows of said pixel array.