Nonideality of Ground

Ground is supposed to be ideal. It should be a black hole for stray currents where the voltage is always zero. Unfortunately, those stray currents travel through some non-superconducting material, so small voltages arise. You may not notice small changes in ground potential, you may, instead, notice surplus noise or instability or other unwanted attributes in your system. We are going to discuss ground. Every circuit is unique and grounding paths are different for every device on your board and in your system. Therefore, we are starting with an intuitive approach to try and give you a feel for the paths currents choose to travel and how that affects the ideal assumption of ground being zero volts.

First, remember that circuits are only complete when current has a complete path to travel (that is why a switch can be placed anywhere along that path to interrupt flow and function). The power supply creates a potential difference, a push, for the current if a path exists for it to travel. Assuming a single-supply system, it’s natural for us to ensure that the positive supply connection is as short and clean as possible. We add bypass capacitors—sometimes multiple values and types of bypass capacitors—to filter the power supply voltage where it enters every critical chip. Then, since there is a ground pin on our IC, we dutifully hook it to a grounded wire or ground plane. For many of us, that’s the last we think about ground... unless there’s a problem.

One of the common methods for tracking down a problem is to probe important nodes in the circuit with a digital multimeter. One of the common methods for tracking down a problem is to probe important nodes in the circuit with a digital multimeter. (If we tried to draw them all on another figure, it would be too cluttered.) Notice how the density of the current spreads. It travels in a wider arc that you might imagine. Now superimpose the paths of signals through every other ground via back to the connector grounds. (If we tried to draw them all on another figure, it would look more like fireworks.) That is how signals from one IC couple to another and how interference signals can couple into every part of your system.

Notice that two characteristics will affect the spreading of the current and the shape of the return path. The first is distance. The drive to make consumer products smaller greatly helps with this aspect. However, as the printed circuit boards get smaller, the devices get closer together. Distance is reduced, but now the multiple ground return paths are closer together. When the fringes of current overlap, the signals intertwine.

What can we do? Careful layout is a must. Keep high frequency circuitry as compact as possible. You might even choose to isolate these devices with metal traces or cuts in ground planes. Figure 3 gives you an example. The return current of input A no longer overlaps with the return current of input B. In this case, knowing the nonideal nature of ground allows us to improve the operation of our system. A full ground “plane” will not work as well as one with cuts to guide the return current. If we had assumed ground was ideal, we would have not have been able to make this improvement.
FIGURE 1. THE LOCATION OF BYPASS CAPACITORS ARE HIGHLIGHTED IN A LAYOUT OF AN OP AMP IN A SOT-23 PACKAGE

FIGURE 2. AN EXAMPLE PRINTED CIRCUIT BOARD LAYOUT WITH TWO INPUTS TO TWO SEPARATE OP AMPS FEEDING A MULTIPLEXER. THE GREEN DASHED LINES SHOW AN EXAMPLE PATH THAT SIGNALS TAKE THROUGH THE GROUND PLANE BACK TO THE GROUND PINS OF THE INPUT CONNECTOR. THE LONGER THE GREEN DASHES, THE HIGHER THE CONCENTRATION OF GROUND CURRENT

FIGURE 3. CUT-OUTS IN THE GROUND PLANE ELIMINATE ANY CROSSTALK BETWEEN THE RETURN GROUND PATHS OF INPUT A AND INPUT B
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