



(19) **United States**

(12) **Patent Application Publication**
Raichle et al.

(10) **Pub. No.: US 2009/0292414 A1**

(43) **Pub. Date: Nov. 26, 2009**

(54) **UNIVERSAL VEHICLE INPUT/OUTPUT
TRANSCIEVER AND METHOD OF
OPERATION THEREOF**

(22) Filed: **May 20, 2008**

Publication Classification

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(51) **Int. Cl.**
G01M 17/00 (2006.01)

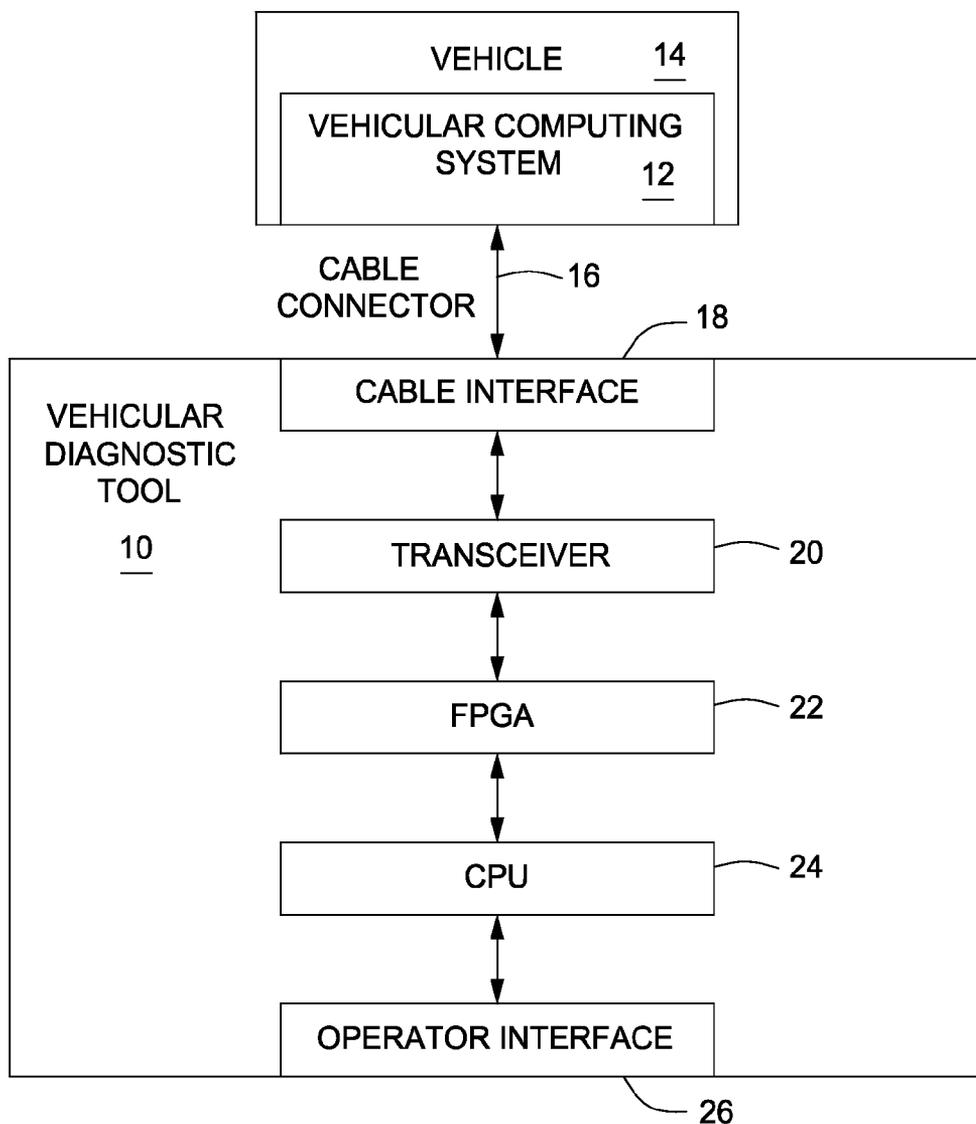
(52) **U.S. Cl.** **701/29**

(57) **ABSTRACT**

A vehicular diagnostic tool configured to interface with a plurality of vehicular computing systems that each utilize a different communications protocol. The tool includes a transceiver that itself includes a voltage threshold controller and a current threshold controller. Also, a method of using a single vehicular diagnostic tool to communicate with a plurality of vehicular computing systems that each utilize a different communications protocol.

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(21) Appl. No.: **12/123,698**



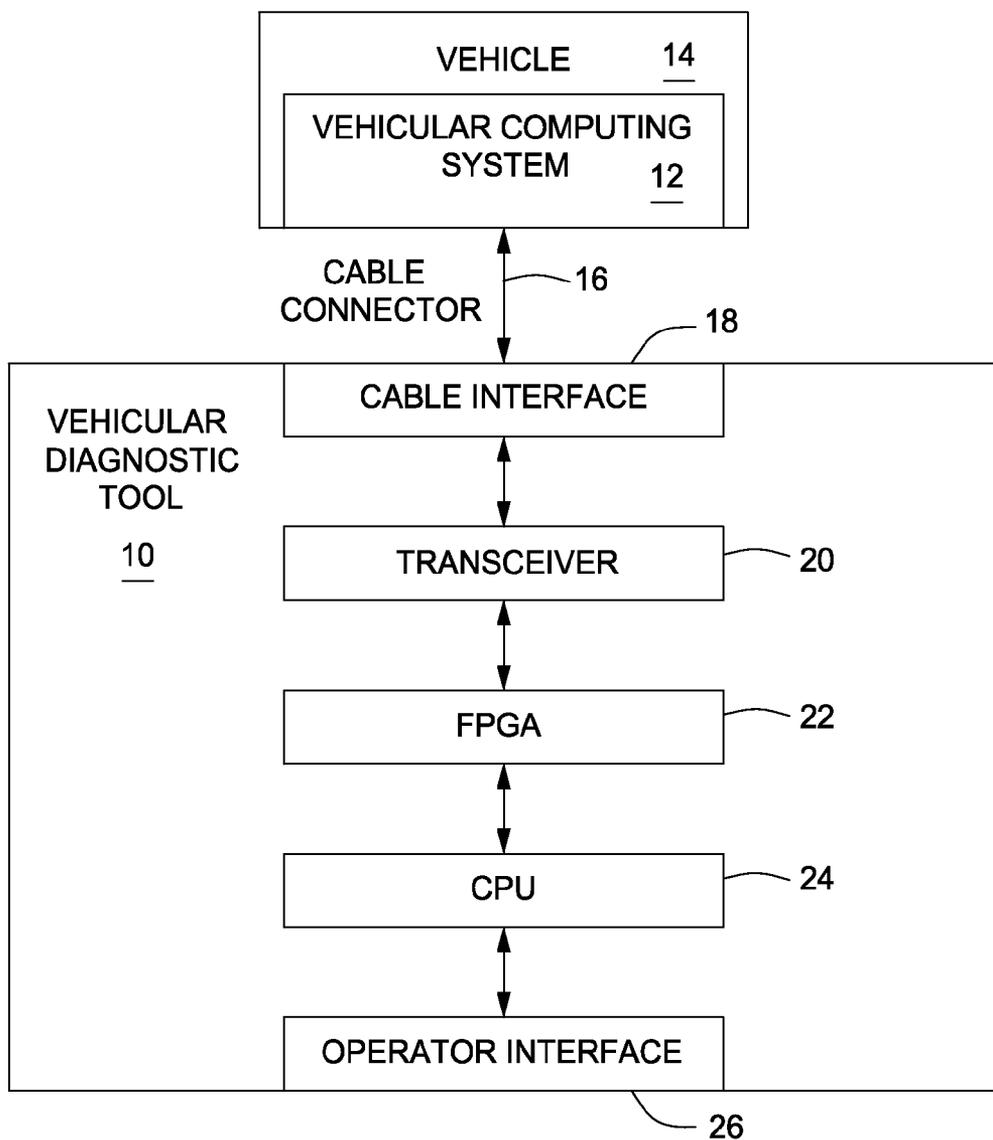


FIG. 1

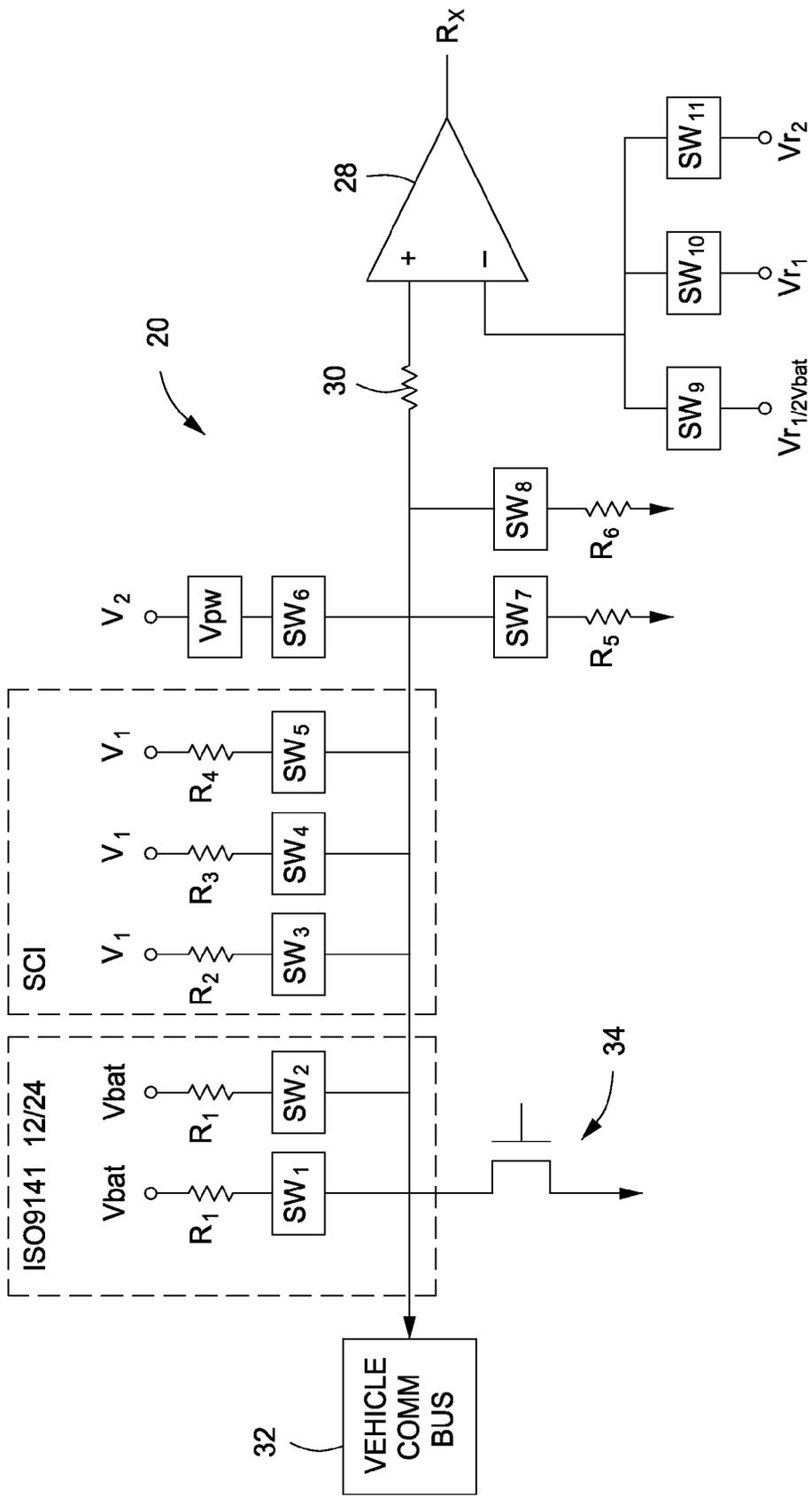


FIG. 2

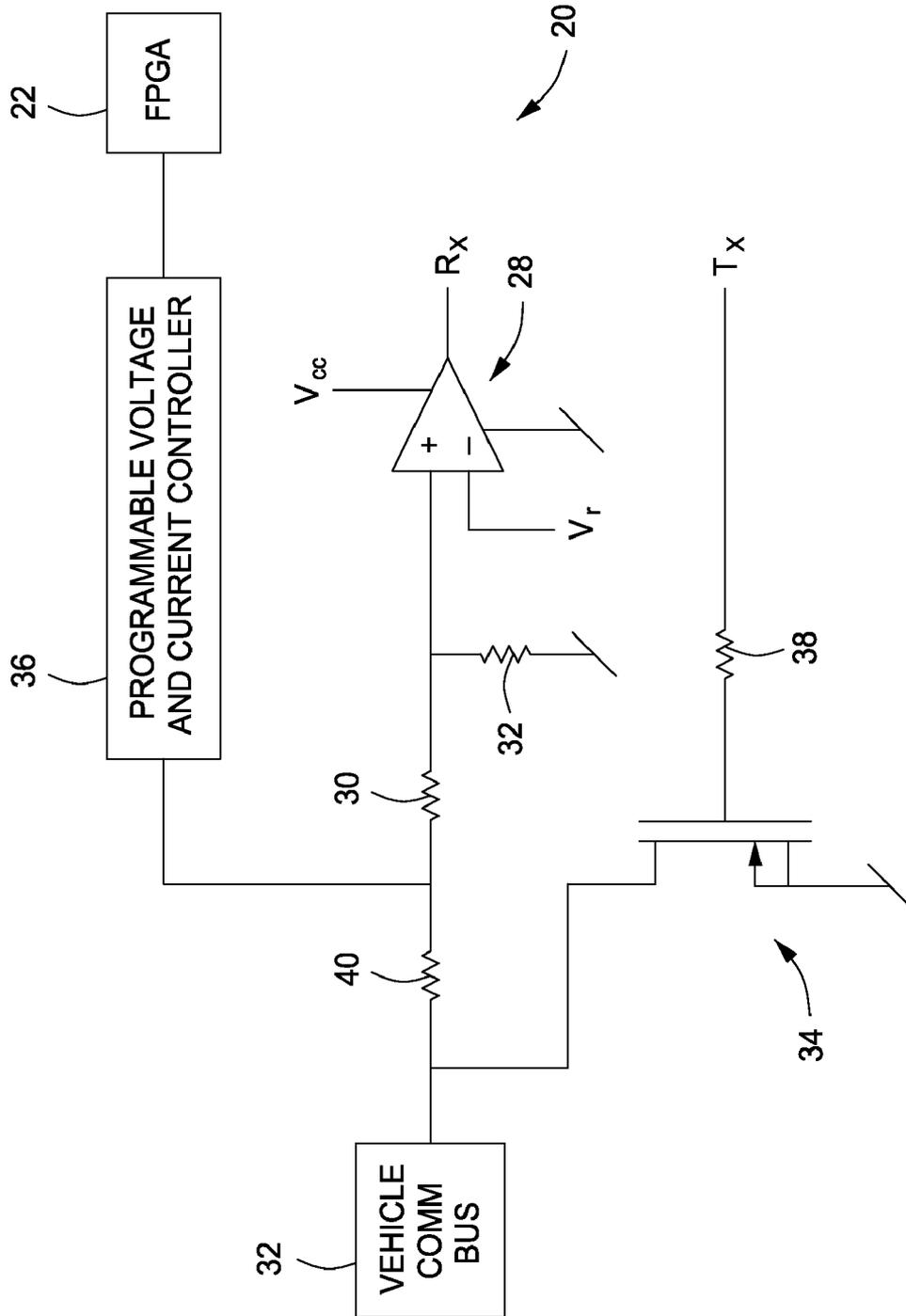


FIG. 3

**UNIVERSAL VEHICLE INPUT/OUTPUT
TRANSCIVER AND METHOD OF
OPERATION THEREOF**

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

[0001] The present invention relates generally to vehicular diagnostic tools and methods for diagnosing vehicles. More particularly, the present invention relates to vehicular diagnostic tools and vehicular diagnostic methods that allow for communication with multiple types of vehicular computing systems.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

[0002] Currently available vehicular diagnostic tools are devices that are designed to communicate with the various computing systems that are included within modern vehicles. During these communications, information about the operation of vehicular systems (e.g., anti-lock braking systems, air conditioning systems, transmissions, steering mechanisms, etc.) is transferred to the tools. Then, mechanics use the information obtained by the tools to determine the repairs that the vehicles need, if any.

[0003] Today's vehicular diagnostic tools are either configured to communicate with vehicular computing systems using a single communications protocol or are configured to accommodate the use of multiple communications protocols through the use of relatively complex and expensive circuitry. As such, a currently available vehicular diagnostic tool that is configured to communicate using the Society of Automotive Engineers (SAE) J 1850 communications protocol is either incapable of communicating with a vehicular computing system that utilizes the ISO 9141 communications protocol or does so by utilizing the above-mentioned relatively complex and expensive circuitry. Therefore, if a mechanic wishes to obtain information from a first vehicular computing system that utilizes the SAE J 1850 communications protocol and also wishes to obtain information from a second vehicular computing system that utilizes the ISO 9141 communications protocol, the mechanic will either have to use two separate tools or a relatively expensive multi-protocol tool.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0004] At least in view of the above, it would be desirable to provide novel apparatuses (e.g., vehicular diagnostic tools) that are configured to communicate with vehicular computing systems using a plurality of communications protocols. It would also be desirable to provide novel methods for communicating with multiple vehicular computing systems using a plurality of communications protocols using a single apparatus. It would further be desirable for each of these novel apparatuses to contain a single transceiver portion, so as to minimize complexity, cost and power requirements.

[0005] The foregoing needs are met, to a great extent, by one or more embodiments of the present invention. According to one such embodiment, a vehicular diagnostic tool is provided. The tool includes an interface configured to be electronically connected to a vehicular computing system. The tool also includes a transceiver electronically connected to the interface. According to certain embodiments of the present invention, the transceiver itself includes a voltage threshold controller.

[0006] In accordance with another embodiment of the present invention, a method of diagnosing a vehicle is pro-

vided. The method includes receiving a first signal from a vehicular electronic system using a diagnostic tool. The method also includes adjusting a voltage threshold within the diagnostic tool. In addition, the method also includes processing the first signal based upon the adjusted voltage threshold.

[0007] In accordance with yet another embodiment of the present invention, another vehicular diagnostic tool is provided. This tool includes means for receiving a first signal from a vehicular electronic system. This tool also includes means for adjusting a voltage threshold of the means for receiving, wherein the means for adjusting is electronically connected to the means for receiving. In addition, this tool includes means for processing the first signal using the adjusted voltage threshold, wherein the means for processing is electronically connected to the means for receiving.

[0008] There has thus been outlined, rather broadly, certain embodiments of the invention in order that the detailed description thereof herein may be better understood, and in order that the present contribution to the art may be better appreciated. There are, of course, additional embodiments of the invention that will be described below and which will form the subject matter of the claims appended hereto.

[0009] In this respect, before explaining at least one embodiment of the invention in detail, it is to be understood that the invention is not limited in its application to the details of construction and to the arrangements of the components set forth in the following description or illustrated in the drawings. The invention is capable of embodiments in addition to those described and of being practiced and carried out in various ways. Also, it is to be understood that the phraseology and terminology employed herein, as well as the abstract, are for the purpose of description and should not be regarded as limiting.

[0010] As such, those skilled in the art will appreciate that the conception upon which this disclosure is based may readily be utilized as a basis for the designing of other structures, methods and systems for carrying out the several purposes of the present invention. It is important, therefore, that the claims be regarded as including such equivalent constructions insofar as they do not depart from the spirit and scope of the present invention.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0011] FIG. 1 is a block diagram illustrating a vehicular diagnostic tool according to an embodiment of the present invention wherein the tool is connected to a vehicular computing system of a vehicle through a cable connector.

[0012] FIG. 2 is a schematic diagram of the transceiver illustrated in FIG. 1 according to an embodiment of the present invention.

[0013] FIG. 3 is a schematic diagram of the transceiver illustrated in FIG. 1 according to another embodiment of the present invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

[0014] The invention will now be described with reference to the drawing figures, in which like reference numerals refer to like parts throughout. FIG. 1 is a block diagram illustrating a vehicular diagnostic tool 10 according to an embodiment of the present invention wherein the tool 10 is connected to a vehicular computing system 12 of a vehicle 14 through a cable connector 16.

[0015] According to certain embodiments of the present invention, the diagnostic tool **10** illustrated in FIG. **1** is hand-held and battery powered (e.g., powered by one or more 9V batteries). However, larger and/or more complex diagnostic tools are also within the scope of the present invention, as are tools that may be plugged in to electrical outlets.

[0016] The vehicle **14** illustrated in FIG. **1** is an automobile and the vehicular computing system **12** is part of the anti-lock braking system of the automobile. However, other vehicles, for example, trucks, boats, planes, helicopters, agricultural vehicles/equipment (e.g., harvesters) and construction vehicles/equipment (e.g., excavators) are also within the scope of the present invention, as are electrical power generators and a variety of other machines that, in the context of the present invention, also fall within the scope of the term "vehicle". Also, other vehicular computing systems such as, for example, computing systems included in air conditioning systems, transmission systems, fuel injection systems, etc., are also within the scope of the present invention.

[0017] The cable connector **16** illustrated in FIG. **1**, on one end thereof, is connected either directly or indirectly (e.g., through a vehicular interface which is not illustrated in FIG. **1**) to the vehicular computing system **12**. On the other end thereof, the cable connector **16** is connected to a cable interface **18** that is included in the diagnostic tool **10**. In operation, the cable connector **16** transfers electronic signals between the vehicle **14** and the diagnostic tool **10**. As such, the cable connector **16** may be any type of cable or interface wiring harness capable of transferring such electronic signals. For example, an SAE standard J1962 connector may be used. However, wireless connections between the vehicular computing system **12** and the diagnostic tool **10** are also within the scope of the present invention. Such wireless connections do not make use of the above-discussed cable connector **16**.

[0018] As illustrated in FIG. **1**, a transceiver **20** is electronically connected to the cable interface **18** within the diagnostic tool **10**. In turn, a Field Programmable Gate Array (FPGA) **22** is electronically connected to the transceiver **20**, a Central Processing Unit (CPU) **24** is electronically connected to the FPGA **22** and an operator interface **26** is electronically connected to the CPU **24**. The operator interface **26** may include, for example, one or more keys or buttons, a graphical interface and/or a touch screen.

[0019] FIG. **2** is a schematic diagram of the transceiver **20** illustrated in FIG. **1** according to an embodiment of the present invention. The transceiver **20** illustrated in FIG. **2** includes an operational amplifier (op-amp) **28** and a safety resistor **30** that is electronically connected to an input of the op-amp **28**. Also electronically connected to the op-amp **28** is a plurality of switches SW_1 - SW_{11} . By appropriately setting the switches SW_1 - SW_{11} , one or more of a plurality of impedances (i.e., resistors R_1 - R_6), a plurality of voltages V_{bat} , V_1 , V_2 and/or a plurality of reference voltages $V_{r1/2bat}$, V_{r1} , V_{r2} that are electronically connected to the switches SW_1 - SW_{11} may be electronically connected to or electronically disconnected from the op-amp **28**. All of the above-listed components, including the op-amp **28**, may also be electronically connected to or disconnected from a vehicular communications bus **32** that is electronically connected to the op-amp **28**. In addition, a transistor **34** is electronically connected to the op-amp **28** and to the communications bus **32**.

[0020] According to certain embodiments of the present invention, during operation of the vehicular diagnostic tool **10** illustrated in FIG. **1**, the switches SW_1 - SW_6 illustrated in

FIG. **2** may be used to: (1) control the voltage level of the communications bus **32**; (2) control the overall load on the communications bus **32**; and (3) regulate the current level in the transceiver **20**. The switches SW_7 - SW_8 may also be used to control the overall load on the bus **32**. However, the switches SW_9 - SW_{11} are typically used to set the threshold voltage for the incoming (i.e., received) signal R_x which is received by the transceiver **20** on the right-hand side of the op-amp **28** illustrated in FIG. **2**.

[0021] The voltage levels V_{bat} , V_1 , V_2 , $V_{r1/2bat}$, V_{r1} and V_{r2} are selected based on the particular communications protocol used by the above-discussed computing system **12**. For example, according to certain embodiments of the present invention, V_{bat} is selected to be approximately 12V or approximately 24V in order to accommodate the ISO9141 protocol, V_1 is selected to be approximately 5V in order to accommodate the serial communication interface (SCI) and the data communications link (DCL) protocols and V_2 is selected to be approximately 12V in order to accommodate the Variable Pulse Width (VPW) protocol. Likewise, according to certain embodiments of the present invention, $V_{r1/2bat}$ is selected to be approximately 6V or approximately 12V and V_{r1} and V_{r2} are selected to be approximately 3.3V and approximately 2.5V, respectively.

[0022] FIG. **3** is a schematic diagram of the transceiver **20** illustrated in FIG. **1** according to another embodiment of the present invention. The transceiver **20** illustrated in FIG. **3** is electronically connected to the FPGA **22** and to the communications bus **32**. In operation, the transceiver **20** receives a signal R_x from the vehicular computing system **12** and/or transmits a signal T_x to the vehicular computing system **12**.

[0023] The switches SW_1 - SW_{11} and the various voltages and resistances electronically connected thereto in FIG. **2** are replaced by a programmable voltage and current controller **36** in FIG. **3**. However, analogously to what is illustrated in FIG. **2**, the received signal R_x illustrated in FIG. **3** is received by an op-amp **28**. Also analogously to what is illustrated in FIG. **2**, FIG. **3** illustrates that a transistor **34** (in this instance, an n-channel MOSFET) is electronically connected to the op-amp **28**, as are a trio of resistors **30**, **32** and **40**.

[0024] Also illustrated in FIG. **3** is a fourth resistor **38** that functions as a safety resistor and that is electronically connected to the transistor **34**. The op-amp **28** illustrated in FIG. **3** is electronically connected to a variable reference voltage V_r and an amplifier supply voltage V_{cc} .

[0025] By appropriately operating the switches SW_1 - SW_{11} illustrated in FIG. **2**, a number of different and discrete voltage, current and/or resistance levels may be obtained within the circuitry of the transceiver **20** illustrated in FIG. **2**. As such, the electronically interconnected switches SW_1 - SW_{11} and the components electronically connected thereto (i.e., voltage sources, resistors, etc.) may be used as a voltage threshold controller and/or a current threshold controller. For example, if switch SW_1 and switch SW_2 are set to electronically connect the two illustrated V_{bat} voltage levels to the remainder of the circuitry in parallel, the effective bus voltage will be $\frac{1}{2}V_{bat}$. According to certain embodiments of the present invention, such use of the physical switches SW_1 - SW_{11} simplifies the overall circuitry of the transceiver **20** and reduces the cost of the production thereof.

[0026] In contrast, by replacing the switches SW_1 - SW_{11} illustrated in FIG. **2** with the programmable voltage and current controller **36** illustrated in FIG. **3**, the voltage and resistance threshold levels obtainable within the circuitry of the

transceiver **20** illustrated in FIG. **3** effectively become continuously variable. As such, a greater number of communications protocols become readable by the above-discussed vehicular diagnostic tool **10** containing the transceiver **20** illustrated in FIG. **3** than the transceiver **20** illustrated in FIG. **2**.

[0027] The transistor **34** illustrated in FIGS. **2** and **3**, according to certain embodiments of the present invention, is a field effect transistor such as, for example, a metal-oxide semiconductor field-effect transistor (MOSFET). The transistor **34**, according to certain embodiments of the present invention, allows for the circuit to be pulled down to a voltage level of substantially zero volts without the use of a switch or the operation of a voltage controller.

[0028] According to certain embodiments of the present invention, methods of diagnosing a vehicle (e.g., the above-discussed vehicle **14**) are provided. According to one such method, a first signal is received from a vehicular computing system (e.g., system **12**) using a diagnostic tool such as, for example, the vehicular diagnostic tool **10** illustrated in FIG. **1**. The received first signal may, for example, be a signal that conforms to the specifications of a communications protocol such as J1850, ISO 9141, etc. Thus, the method typically includes associating the first signal with a communications protocol. In some instances, this associating step and/or a step of distinguishing between this received first signal and a second received signal (e.g., noise or a signal from another vehicular computing system) is based upon a bit pattern included in the first signal.

[0029] Once the first signal has been received and identified, a voltage threshold within the diagnostic tool is typically adjusted to accommodate processing of the received first signal according to the guidelines of the communications protocol in question. When implementing this voltage threshold adjusting step, one or more of the switches SW₁-SW₆ illustrated in FIG. **2** may be switched on or off to provide the appropriate voltage level. In the circuitry illustrated in FIG. **3**, the programmable voltage and current controller **36** may be used to obtain the desired voltage level in the transceiver **20**. According to certain embodiments of the present invention, this voltage threshold adjusting step is implemented using software.

[0030] As mentioned above, the programmable voltage and current controller **36** allows for the voltage threshold to be set at virtually any level (at least between a maximum and a minimum voltage level supported by the controller **36**). However, in order to accommodate several of the more widely used communications protocols, the voltage threshold is commonly set to one of approximately 0.0V, approximately 2.5V, approximately 3.3V, approximately 5.0V, approximately 9.0V or approximately 12.0V.

[0031] According to certain embodiments of the present invention, the above-discussed method of diagnosing a vehicle further includes adjusting a current threshold within the diagnostic tool. Depending on the types of components included in the circuitry of the transceiver in question, one or more switches (e.g., switches SW₁-SW₈) and/or a programmable voltage and current controller (e.g., controller **36**) may be used to adjust the current threshold level. Like the voltage threshold level, the current threshold level is typically adjusted in order to accommodate a particular communications protocol. Also, the current threshold level may be adjusted utilizing software.

[0032] The above-discussed steps relating to adjustment of the voltage and current threshold levels may be automatically implemented once a signal has been received in the diagnostic tool from a vehicle. However, according to certain other embodiments of the present invention, a technician, mechanic or other operator of the diagnostic tool may pre-set the switch configuration or the configuration of the programmable voltage and current controller based upon the vehicle and/or vehicular computing system that is to be analyzed. According to such embodiments, the technician may, for example, enter information about the manufacturer, model, year, etc., of the vehicle into the diagnostic tool before the tool is electronically connected to the vehicle. Then, the tool may use that information to set the appropriate voltage and current levels before being electronically connected to the vehicle.

[0033] According to certain other embodiments of the present invention, the appropriate communications protocol is automatically detected by first adjusting the threshold levels within the diagnostic tool within a predetermined set of configurations (i.e., levels). Then, for each configuration, an attempt is made at passively reading one or more bit patterns from the vehicular computing system until the appropriate protocol is identified and communication is established. Alternatively, active communication with the vehicular computing system may be attempted with each configuration until the appropriate protocol is identified and communication is established.

[0034] In addition to adjusting the threshold voltage and current levels, certain methods according to the present invention also allow for the adjustment of a reference voltage within the diagnostic tool. Again, this adjustment is typically made to accommodate the specifications of a particular communications protocol. Also, this adjustment step may be implemented using either one or more switches (e.g., switches SW₉-SW₁₁ in FIG. **2**) or the above-discussed programmable voltage and current controller. This adjustment step may further be implemented, for example, using software.

[0035] Once the appropriate voltage threshold, current threshold and/or reference voltage levels have been set, the received first signal (e.g., R_x) may then be processed based upon the adjusted levels. Any signals to be transmitted to the vehicle (e.g., T_x) may be similarly processed through substantially the same levels and forwarded to the vehicle. Based on this exchange of signals, a wide variety of vehicular computing systems using a wide variety of communications protocols may be analyzed using a single diagnostic tool.

[0036] The many features and advantages of the invention are apparent from the detailed specification, and thus, it is intended by the appended claims to cover all such features and advantages of the invention which fall within the true spirit and scope of the invention. Further, since numerous modifications and variations will readily occur to those skilled in the art, it is not desired to limit the invention to the exact construction and operation illustrated and described, and accordingly, all suitable modifications and equivalents may be resorted to, falling within the scope of the invention.

What is claimed is:

1. A vehicular diagnostic tool, comprising:
 - an interface configured to be electronically connected to a vehicular computing system; and
 - a transceiver electronically connected to the interface, the transceiver comprising:
 - a voltage threshold controller.

- 2. The tool of claim 1, wherein the transceiver further comprises:
a current threshold controller electronically connected to the voltage threshold controller.
- 3. The tool of claim 1, further comprising:
a field programmable gate array electronically connected to the transceiver.
- 4. The tool of claim 1, further comprising:
a transistor electronically connected to the voltage threshold controller.
- 5. The tool of claim 4, wherein the transistor comprises a field effect transistor.
- 6. The tool of claim 1, further comprising:
an amplifier electronically connected to the voltage threshold controller.
- 7. The tool of claim 1, wherein the voltage threshold controller comprises:
a plurality of switches electronically connected to a plurality of voltage levels.
- 8. The tool of claim 2, wherein the current threshold controller comprises:
a plurality of switches electronically connected to a plurality of impedances.
- 9. The tool of claim 1, wherein the transceiver further comprises:
a plurality of switches electronically connected to a plurality of reference voltages.
- 10. A method of diagnosing a vehicle, the method comprising:
receiving a first signal from a vehicular electronic system using a diagnostic tool;
adjusting a voltage threshold within the diagnostic tool;
and
processing the first signal based upon the adjusted voltage threshold.
- 11. The method of claim 10, further comprising:
associating the first signal with a communications protocol.

- 12. The method of claim 11, further comprising:
setting the voltage threshold based on the protocol.
- 13. The method of claim 10, wherein the adjusting step is implemented using software.
- 14. The method of claim 10, further comprising:
adjusting a current threshold within the diagnostic tool.
- 15. The method of claim 14, wherein the adjusting the current threshold step is implemented using software.
- 16. The method of claim 10, wherein the adjusting step comprises adjusting the voltage threshold to one of approximately 0.0 volts, approximately 2.5 volts, approximately 3.3 volts, approximately 5.0 volts, approximately 9.0 volts and approximately 12.0 volts.
- 17. The method of claim 10, further comprising:
adjusting a reference voltage within the diagnostic tool.
- 18. The method of claim 10, further comprising:
distinguishing between the first signal and a second signal from another system based upon a bit pattern included in the first signal.
- 19. The method of claim 10, wherein the adjusting step is performed prior to the receiving step.
- 20. A vehicular diagnostic tool, comprising:
means for receiving a first signal from a vehicular electronic system;
means for adjusting a voltage threshold of the means for receiving, wherein the means for adjusting is electronically connected to the means for receiving; and
means for processing the first signal using the adjusted voltage threshold, wherein the means for processing is electronically connected to the means for receiving.
- 21. The tool of claim 20, further comprising:
means for transmitting a second signal to the vehicular electronic system, wherein the means for transmitting is electronically connected to the means for processing and wherein the means for adjusting the voltage threshold is also configured to adjust a voltage threshold of the means for transmitting.

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